

# Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space: Newspaper Opinions about Voting Systems in the 2007 Ontario Provincial Referendum

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## Abstract

*This article seeks to contribute to discussions of deliberative democracy by developing tools to measure the deliberative quality of the media handling of the Ontario referendum debate. To that end, the article will examine elite media discourse over voting systems in the major daily broadsheets in Ontario throughout the referendum campaign period. This will involve examining both the balance of views presented as well as assessing the rhetorical strategies employed in the debate. As will be demonstrated, the results tend to confirm previous negative assessments of media's deliberative performance in referendum contexts, though in this case with more detailed evidence about the specifically deliberative failures.*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On May 15, 2007 the Ontario Citizens' Assembly (OCA) officially announced their support for a mixed member proportional (MMP) form of proportional presentation (PR). The OCA was a collection of 'ordinary citizens', 107 women and men, chosen somewhat randomly from each riding in the province, who were tasked by the provincial government to deliberate about Ontario democracy, specifically the workings of the voting system. They could recommend that Ontario stick with the province's traditional single member plurality (SMP) system or they could recommend a specific alternative. If they chose the latter, their recommendation would go to a referendum – the first in the province since 1924 – that would accompany the province's fixed election date set for October 10, 2007. In the end, the announcement did not come as a surprise. Indeed, media anticipated the decision in reports throughout the spring (Urquart, *Toronto Star*, 22 February 2007; Campbell, *Globe and Mail*, 7 April 2007). But the May 15 announcement made the decision official and effectively moved the discussion out of the university seminar-like setting of the OCA into the realm of public debate and vested political interests. That announcement left Ontario voters just six months to examine the recommendation and come to some conclusions about how to cast a referendum ballot on the issue.

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Citizens Assemblies (CAs) like the ones held in Ontario (2006-07) and BC (2004) have attracted considerable attention from democratic activists and reform-minded academics. Democratic theorists associated with the “deliberative democracy” school have claimed a particular affinity with the projects, which they see as a concrete manifestation of their more theoretical ideas about how to improve conventional democracy (Warren and Pearse 2008). In a nutshell, deliberative democracy advocates believe that electoral democracy is too shallow while calls for more substantive mass participatory democracy are unrealistic. Instead, they argue that conventional representative electoral democracy can be supplemented or augmented by the work of small scale, apolitical citizens’ juries or assemblies (Petit 2004). These groups, if properly selected to represent the diversity of the larger society, could then function as a kind of ‘mini public’ deliberating over matters of public policy in the public interest. More to the point, these bodies enjoy a qualitatively different experience of participation and decision-making because the deliberative model is explicitly motivated by a deep engagement with the subject matter rather than being motivated by partisan interests (Chambers 2003). In the BC and Ontario CAs, members made decisions based on a systematic appraisal of competing expert knowledge and the evidence brought to bear about the workings of different voting systems and their past and potential future outcomes. Thus far, the two Canadian provincial CAs have received rave reviews from both their participants and their academic observers (Macdonald 2005; Warren and Pearse 2008).

However there is less agreement among public commentators and academics as to the precise relationship between these ‘mini publics’ and the larger society that the mini publics are meant to represent. Some say that CAs need not effectively transmit the content of their experience to the larger public; if CAs are representative, the public will accept their recommendations as legitimate (Thompson 2008a: 47-9). Others claim that CAs must connect more directly with the broader public if they are to be viewed as legitimate (Bohman 2007: 15; Baum 2007: 14-15). Some might argue that the CA process cannot simply be about getting a good result for the participants and academic observers. Indeed, given the cost of the process, proponents of the CAs will need to figure out how CAs can connect to the larger public in order that support for this kind of expenditure may continue.

Ontario’s provincial Liberals first floated the idea of critically examining the voting system while in opposition and followed through on the promise as government by establishing the OCA. Though the government repeatedly highlighted that they were committed only to a process for examining the voting system and not to a particular result, they did agree to hold a public referendum on whatever the OCA recommended (Pilon 2007). Thus the government had clearly committed to two rounds of deliberation, one to occur amongst the OCA participants, and then later another (depending on the results of OCA deliberations) that would encompass the citizens of Ontario more broadly. Expert commentators appear to agree that the various recent citizen assembly proceedings have been model deliberative spaces: inclusive, balanced, informed and reasoned in their debates and conclusions (Warren and Pearse 2008; Leduc et al 2008). But less is known about the second, more public, phase of deliberation.

Though there are indications that the issue was debated at various venues in civil society, and groups for and against change were active in the campaign that effectively began after the OCA announced their decision in April 2007, the bulk of the second phase deliberations arguably took place in the mass media. This media dominance means that analysts who want to judge the quality of the public phase of the deliberation process need to investigate how media functioned as a deliberative space.

In practice, the sponsors of the CA process – the provincial governments in BC and Ontario – explicitly stated that conventional media and civil society would link the CA work to the citizenry. In both cases the assumption that this form of communications would exist was echoed by various commentators in civil society and by the media itself. So how well did the media do in linking the two? Or, to put the question more specifically, to what extent did the media create a deliberative space even remotely akin to the ones created in the CAs? If the distinctive value of the CA process is that citizens can make decisions in an informed and systematic way, to what extent does the value of this process *rub off* on the larger public when it is translated through the media? The answer to this question will go some way in addressing the

perceived gap between the undeniable value of CAs as mini-publics and their broader value to society at large. For instance, if it can be demonstrated that media cannot connect the two, then deliberative democracy theorists and activists that support the CA process have a serious – perhaps fatal – deficiency in their model that must be addressed.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the media covering the Ontario referendum described their own efforts at deliberation to be a success. Criticisms of the *Toronto Star's* coverage of the issue, for instance, were brushed aside by the paper's ombudsperson, Kathy English, who defended both the range and scale of views presented (English, *Toronto Star*, October 13, 2007). The *Star's* editorial, following the result, confidently announced that it was 'the people's verdict' while *Star* columnist Ian Urquart claimed that Ontarians had examined the proposed alternative and found it wanting (Editorial, *Toronto Star*, October 12, 2007; Urquart, *Toronto Star*, October 12, 2007). Both implied that sufficient deliberation had occurred amongst 'the people' and that the media had done their part. Despite these protestations, various polls reported consistently low levels of public knowledge about the referendum throughout the campaign (Leduc et al 2008: 31, 41; Perrella et al 2008: 84). Indeed, the *Star* itself had made public ignorance about the referendum a key theme of its coverage – at least until the results were in. Suffice to say, we cannot accept the media's self-assessment of their performance but just how media should be judged as a deliberative space is less clear. Certainly there is critical work on media and referendums, particularly in Canadian context, which could be brought to bear on the question, though neither field makes deliberation, per se, a priority.

A logical home for such an enquiry is in the emerging field of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy theorists provide benchmarks that could be used to assess the quality of deliberation in any given context. Though often accused by critics of being overly theoretical or merely normative in its approach, recently a host of analysts have sought to apply insights from deliberative democracy to empirical enquiry. Specifically a number of studies have attempted to operationalize the various normative concerns animating discussions of deliberative democracy and apply them to contexts as varied as legislative behaviour, policy focus-groups, and larger citizen forums as a way of judging the quality of their deliberations (for an overview of these developments, see Chambers 2003, and for a concrete example, see Steiner et al 2004).

This paper seeks to contribute to these discussions by developing tools to measure the deliberative quality of the media handling of the Ontario referendum debate. To that end, the paper will examine elite media discourse over voting systems in the major daily broadsheets in Ontario throughout the referendum campaign period. This examination will involve both the balance of views presented as well as assessing the rhetorical strategies employed in the debate. As will be demonstrated, the results tend to confirm previous negative assessments of media's deliberative performance in referendum contexts, though in this case with more detailed evidence about the specifically deliberative failures.

## **The deliberative turn: theory meets practice**

The last decade has witnessed an explosion of interest in deliberative democracy, mostly from political theorists (Chambers 2003; Rosenberg 2005; Thompson 2008b). They reject what they characterize as the pragmatic or realist school of democracy where 'democracy' amounts to little more than the aggregation of supposedly fixed preferences of individual voters or a space for bargaining between utility-maximizing interest groups. By contrast, they argue that democracy must be 'talk-centric' rather than just 'voting-centric' because democracy, in their view, cannot be reduced to just winning votes for one side. Rather, a democratic moment must be about creating legitimate results that will be accepted by all, regardless of the vote count (Chambers 2003: 308). To gain this democratic legitimacy, decisions must be justified through a back and forth kind of discussion, one where "the giving, weighing, acceptance or rejection of reasons ... is a public act" (Parkinson 2003, 180). As Chambers notes, "deliberative democracy focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation that precede voting" (Chambers 2003: 308).

In this view, people do not have entirely fixed preferences that merely await aggregation; instead, their preferences may be formed through the collective process of deliberation itself. Furthermore, such a discussion, to be democratic, must be radically inclusive, avoiding both inequalities in access and influence. Thus democratic deliberation theorists argue that the process of democracy – its deliberative quality – should be considered as important as its rules for inclusion and its mode of deciding results (for example: voting rights, majority rule, free and fair election administration, and so forth).

Many commentators – proponents and critics alike – agree that the substantive process promised by deliberative democracy sounds attractive but they nonetheless worry that such a talk-centric model may, in the end, amount to little more than just talk. Some critics argue that deliberative democracy is just a normative wish list, with little purchase – other than critique – on the practical workings of contemporary functioning democracies (Macedo 1999, specifically contributions by Schauer, Shapiro and Walzer). Others criticize deliberative democracy for over-focusing on theoretical developments of the ideas rather than applying or testing them in more empirical contexts (Mutz 2008). Proponents too have worried about the gap between deliberative democracy's theory and practice. For some, deliberative democracy embodies a contradiction to the extent that its promise of maximal inclusion and effective deliberation tend to be mutually exclusive in practice. John Parkinson refers to this point as the 'scale problem': "deliberative decisions appear to be illegitimate for those left outside the forum, while bringing more than a few people in would quickly turn the event into speech-making, not deliberation" (Parkinson 2003: 181). In another vein, Simone Chambers highlights how concrete instances of public deliberation, like referendums, appear to lack public involvement if the traditional political forces – the very ones identified by deliberative democracy theorists as a barrier to effective deliberation – are not involved (Chambers 2007: 10). Still others fear that any practical form of deliberation in a mass society would mean a key role for the mass media, with the attendant concerns about the quality of deliberation that would be produced (Jenkins and Mendelsohn 2001; Parkinson 2003: 181).

Yet, for others, these are challenges to be overcome or opportunities to be taken up rather than fatal flaws in the deliberative democracy project. Indeed, some argue that a considerable amount of practical and empirical work on deliberative democracy is already underway (Dryzek 2007; Thompson 2008b). Chambers has demonstrated how deliberative democratic theory is being applied to concrete problems in a host of fields, including public law, international relations and public policy. She characterizes this recent work as involving both investigations of the "quality, substance, and rationality of the arguments and reasons brought to defend policy and law" and evaluations of the "institutions, forums, venues, and public spaces available for deliberative justification and accountability" (Chambers 2003: 309). Thus, such an approach could embrace both a critique of existing institutions as well as explorations of possible alternative arrangements.

The recent spate of citizens' assemblies which have focused on voting systems in BC, Ontario, and the Netherlands would appear to be a good example of insights from deliberative democracy theory being brought to bear in just this way. In all cases, there has been both a critical deliberation over the existing electoral institutions and an informed debate about possible alternative arrangements, with two CAs calling for change and one opting to stick with the status quo. Deliberative democracy theorists analyzing these CAs have been impressed with the quality of their deliberations (Chambers 2007; Warren and Pearse 2008) but these concrete examples of deliberation also embody many of the contradictions associated with the deliberative democracy project, particularly the scale problem. As a 'mini-public' operating for a larger 'maxi-public' the CAs can be seen as a deliberative success. It is less clear what deliberative benefits are reaching the larger public as a result of the considerable public investment in these CAs. Indeed, initial work seems to suggest very little benefit is reaching the larger public, if public knowledge, engagement with the issue, and reports of how public discussions have proceeded are anything to go by (Cutler and Fournier 2008; Ratner 2008: 161-2). However, at present, these assessments shed little light on the dynamic at work in the mass deliberation phase. A more systematic investigation – like an examination of the quality of deliberation provided by Ontario's media in the 2007

referendum campaign – could clearly further our understanding of large-scale opportunities for deliberation and help apply deliberative democracy theory to practice.

## Operationalizing deliberation in the media

When the Ontario Citizens' Assembly (OCA) officially announced their support for MMP as their recommendation to the people of the province on May 15, 2007, the second, more public phase of deliberation over voting system reform officially began. With six months before the referendum date, the public needed to become informed about a number of things: that a referendum would be held in concert with the provincial general election; that the referendum would comprise a choice between Ontario's traditional single member plurality system and the proportional MMP proposal; and information about the nature and importance of the referendum. In other words, the public needed to discover just what was at stake in making such a decision. For instance, what were the arguments in favour of or opposed to either of the choices? What kind of evidence might support any of the claims that could be made for each system? And so on. While the Ontario government set aside 6.8 million dollars for public education, and Elections Ontario did run ads and mount a website about the referendum, the main source of information about the referendum options for the public would undoubtedly come from the media. As a result, we need to understand how well or how poorly the media functioned as a deliberative space in this second phase.

As a starting point, it should be underlined that the relevant academic literature on both media and referendums does not paint a promising portrait of the media's deliberative potential. Media, though central to modern mass communication, are not typically driven by public needs in providing content. Indeed, some might argue that it is neither the role nor the responsibility of the media to foment deliberation. Instead, they would argue, media are primarily interested in audiences that they can sell to advertisers and content that is designed to attract those particular audiences rather than the general public as a whole (Gunther and Mughan 2000; Taras 2001; Nesbitt-Larking 2001). This economic dynamic contributes to a media dominated by entertainment and 'news as spectacle' rather than a media prepared to countenance a deep engagement with complex issues associated with the public good (Bohman 2000: 48; Chambers 2007: 11). Of course, those who argue that media in modern societies should be held to a high standard of public service, even if they fail to meet it on most occasions, would contest the view that media can or should be considered just another profit-driven enterprise (Taras 2001; Schudson 2003).

Referendums also pose serious challenges in fostering a deliberative public realm, despite what might appear to be a built-in deliberative design. Though referendums are styled as an opportunity for the public to directly choose between policy options, the actual practice of referendums suggests that voters have difficulty gaining the necessary information to make an informed choice (Chambers 2007: 11; Leduc 2003: 174-6; Qvortrup 2005: 62-3). In a content analysis of media coverage of the 1995 Quebec referendum, Jenkins and Mendelsohn (2001) found that media focused on questions of "leadership, tactical motivations, and the horserace" rather than engage in substantive debate on the issues animating the referendum choice. Essentially, media framed the referendum like it was an election campaign, despite the fact that voters needed very different information to make a judgment about the referendum question than they did to choose or identify a party choice (Jenkins and Mendelsohn 2001, 214-15). Emerging work on Ontario's voting system referendum also suggests media failed to explore the issues effectively, though the specific nature of the problems were different than those described by Jenkins and Mendelsohn (Leduc et al 2008; Hoff 2008).

Jenkins and Mendelsohn's content analysis of media coverage sheds considerable light on the quality of deliberation offered by conventional media by focusing attention on the *substance* of meaning conveyed by different media sources (as does the emerging work on the Ontario referendum by Leduc et al 2008). Like most media analysts, they utilize a content analysis of the words or phrases used by media to 'frame'

or give meaning to the substance of what is being reported (Scheufele 1999; Gillespie and Toynebee 2006; Chong and Druckman 2007). Another way to assess the quality of deliberation is to focus on the *manner* in which the information is conveyed. As John Dryzek notes, a “deliberative forum should produce a *particular kind of communication*” (Dryzek 2007: 241). Jenkins and Mendelsohn certainly address the ‘kind of communication’ with their focus on horse-race reporting etc. but give less attention to the process-oriented concerns highlighted by many deliberative democracy theorists. To address this, we need to think about how to operationalize what ‘deliberative democracy’ could or should look like as channeled through the mass media. As such, we will focus a content analysis on the *way* meaning is produced rather than focus on *what* is being framed in terms of meaning.

The first step in operationalizing deliberative democracy involves clarifying what the applicable concepts will be. As deliberative democracy theorists do not agree on all of the points here and the theoretical ideals of deliberative democracy baldly-stated cannot be unproblematically introduced (for example, completely equal participation), getting from the theory of deliberative democracy to a practical application will involve some modification and necessary limiting of the theoretical ideals. For instance, in creating their deliberative quality index, Steiner et al (2004) extended Habermas’ general notion of ‘validity claims’ into a four-fold distinction of the ‘levels of justification’ utilized by legislators in making speeches in their respective parliaments, breaking them down into: no justification, inferior justification, qualified justification and sophisticated justification (the distinctions amongst these different justifications were then set out in more detail accompanied by concrete examples) (Steiner et al 2004: 57-8). Of course their approach represents just one way to develop Habermas’ insights: the notion of what constitutes ‘validity claims’ could be very different in a different context. So the second step, after settling on the applicable concepts, involves defining how these concepts will be applied in a specific context.

Deliberative democracy is broad field of enquiry, with many important contributors, any of whom could be marshaled here. However, in attempting to operationalize how to assess the deliberative quality of the media treatment of Ontario’s voting system referendum, I have decided to follow Steiner et al (2004) in adopting Habermas’ distinctive conceptual contributions to the theory of democratic deliberation. Habermas begins with a thought experiment about what might constitute an ‘ideal speech situation’. For him, such an ‘emancipated discourse’ would be characterized by (1) broad inclusion and equality in terms of participation, and (2) an interactive dynamic where the assumptions or facts under-girding the discussion could be called into question. In regard to the latter, Habermas highlights four different kinds of validity claims that could arise and contribute to an effective deliberative process. These would include claims about meaning (clarifying what statements mean), factual knowledge (challenging statements to produce or defend supporting facts), appropriateness (challenging the speaker’s ability to make the kind of statements they are making), and sincerity (challenging whether speakers really mean what they say) (Habermas, as discussed in Ratner 2008: 147-8; and Steiner et al 2004: 19-25). But, for Habermas, deliberation does not simply mean that challenges can be lodged, there must be a space for genuine interaction. As Robert Goodin (2000) notes, “There must also be uptake and engagement – other people must hear or read, internalize and respond – for that public-sphere activity to count as remotely deliberative” (91).

Concretizing these insights from Habermas to assess the deliberation conducted by media does present some challenges. For instance, media reporting tends to internalize a form of balance (‘getting both sides of the story’) that actually works against the sort of dialogue Habermas has in mind. After all, in the end, it is the reporter’s single view of the different sides that ultimately appears in the news story rather than a genuine exchange of views between the different people themselves. This challenge of reporter influence can be overcome by focusing on opinion pieces – editorials, columnists, op/ed contributions – as the key arena of deliberation. Such opinion pieces more closely resemble Habermas’ idealized participants in that opinion pieces typically represent one view and have the space to make reasoned appeals in support of them (for an interesting discussion of the value of this ‘opinion’ approach, see Greenberg 2000). As such, they also offer researchers a clear unit of analysis to which to apply the deliberative criteria. These choices also mean that the study will focus on print media rather than radio or TV. Clearly, any

conclusions drawn from such sources must be partial and qualified when we recognize that other avenues of deliberation exist and are not explored here. However, given that broadsheet newspapers market themselves as the “quality press” and most media analysts would recognize them as the public space that can engage issues with some depth, the performance of these participants may reasonably stand as an important indicator of the take up of the deliberative opportunity offered by Ontario’s 2007 referendum.

With these decisions in mind, applying Habermas’ criteria in judging the deliberative quality to these sources can be accomplished in a fairly straightforward manner. His first theme – inclusion and balance – will be assessed by measuring the number of opinion pieces for or against the OCA’s recommendation. The second theme – testing validity claims – will be accomplished by coding each opinion piece in terms of the rhetorical strategy it employs. Assuming that deliberation involves ‘a particular kind of communication’, distinctions will be made here between opinions that are merely speculative (‘x could happen’) or logical (‘if we believe y, then x could happen’), and opinions that are supported by some kind of evidence (given that we know y happened, then x may happen). Examples of these different rhetorical strategies might include: ‘MMP will lead to a proliferation of parties’ (speculative – no argument or evidence is given); ‘given the low threshold for election, MMP will lead to a proliferation of parties (logical – a logical argument is made but no evidence is provided); ‘the introduction of a lower threshold with MMP in New Zealand led to an increase in the number of elected parties from an average of 3 to an average of 7’ (evidence – facts are supplied to support the claim). For a more extensive discussion of these distinctions and how they were applied in analyzing Ontario media, see Appendix C.

Given that there exists a considerable body of evidence about the use and performance of different voting systems, many academic experts on the topic (particularly in Ontario), and host of countries actually using voting systems that are similar to the one proposed in Ontario (Lijphart 1994; Farrell 2001), it seems to reasonable to assume that newspaper opinions that draw on these various sorts of evidence can be seen to more closely approximate Habermas’ ideal of an “orderly exchange of information and reasons between parties” than newspaper opinions that merely assert their view or construct what amount to logical possibilities (Habermas, as cited in Steiner et al, 2004, 20). In terms of the quality of the deliberative process in a media setting, particularly where the public are not typically directly participating, the presence of evidence gives the public that much more information with which to *make up their own mind*. Thus, the degree to which media can be shown to draw on reputable facts in debating the issue can stand as a proxy for three of Habermas’ four validity claims (that is meaning, factual knowledge and appropriateness). Habermas’ final validity claim, sincerity, will be addressed in a separate section that explores a number of problematic aspects of the media’s discussion of the referendum issue.

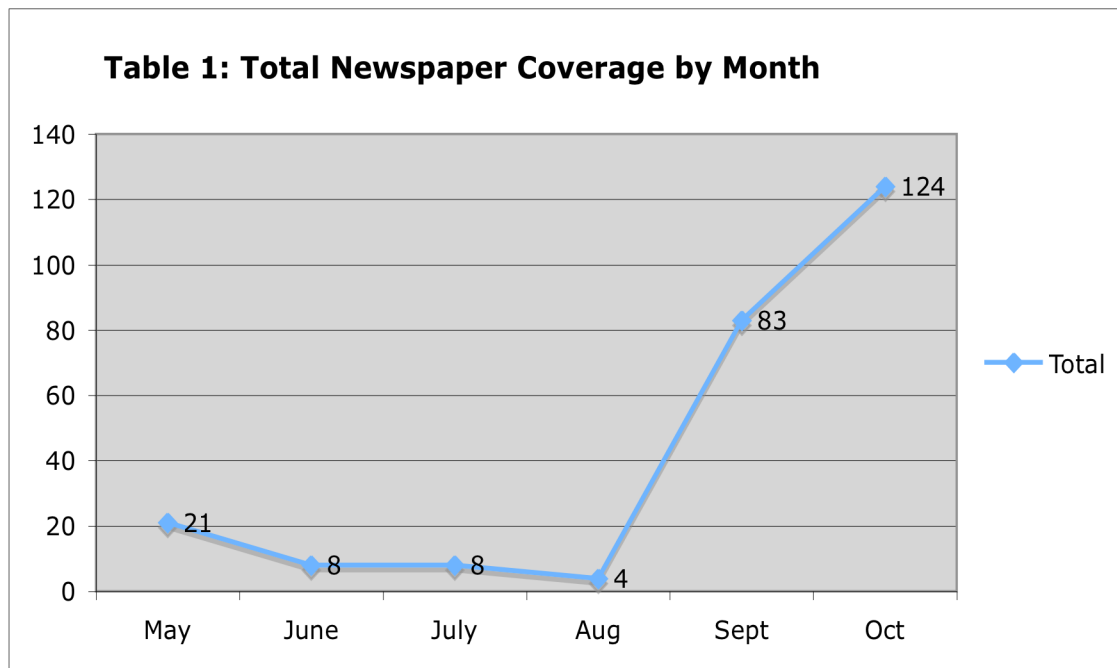
This study of the Ontario media deliberation over the 2007 voting system referendum will focus attention on the opinion pieces featured in the major daily broadsheets in the province throughout the campaign period, occurring roughly from May 15 to October 10, 2007. The papers examined include: the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Hamilton Spectator*. For a more detailed treatment of the methodological issues associated with analysis pursued here, please see Appendix C.

## Analysis

The content analysis of the five daily newspapers produced 185 articles relating to some aspect of voting system reform in the campaign period. While commentators had assured concerned groups on both sides of the issue that the six-month campaign period would be used effectively to educate Ontario about the upcoming referendum, newspaper coverage of the issue was focused mostly in September and October. After an initial burst of attention around the official announcement of the OCA’s recommendation in May 2007, coverage plummeted in June, July and August. In the end, 77% of the coverage on the issue occurred in September and October, with 32% in the ten days that the campaign stretched into October. 62% of the coverage involved reporting, with 38% focused on opinion pieces. If we bracket out the

reporting side of the coverage (115 articles) the remaining 70 pieces can be broken down into 8% editorial, 41% columns, and 47% op/eds. The *Toronto Star* led the group of newspapers with 36% of the total coverage, followed by the *Hamilton Spectator* with 24%, while the other three papers ranged between 12 to 15% of the total. However, the *Spectator's* reporting relied heavily on wire services, which amounted to 51% of their pieces. If we focused simply on material produced by each newspaper's reporting staff, the *Spectator* would fall to the bottom of the papers in terms of coverage. If we compare just opinion coverage, the gap between the papers narrows with the *Toronto Star* leading with 29%, the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* at 24% and 21% respectively, and the *Hamilton Spectator* and *Ottawa Citizen* tied with 13%.

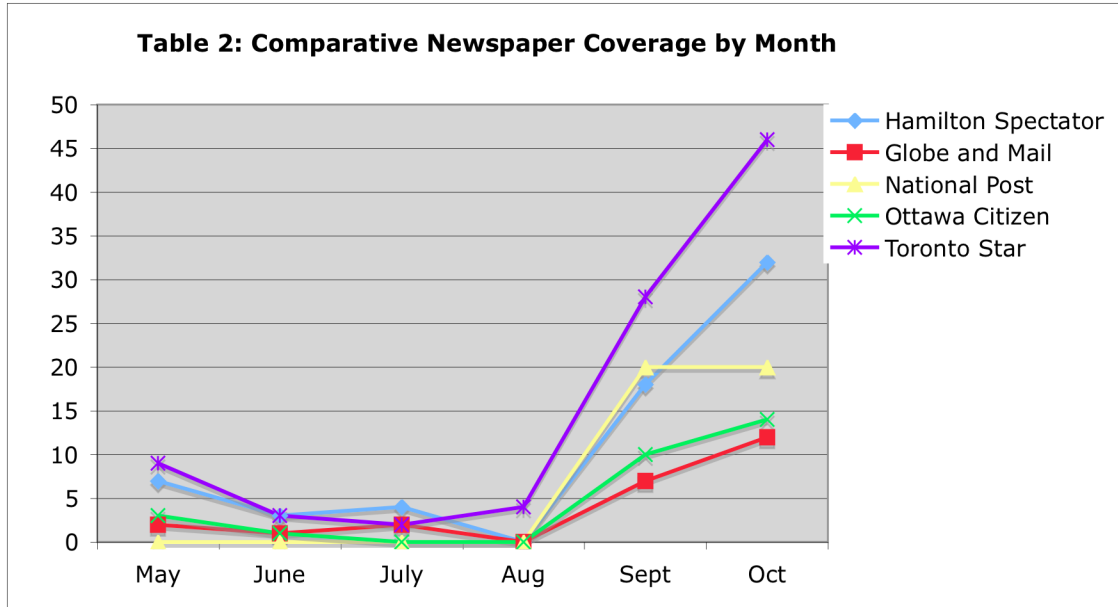
Questions about the adequacy of this coverage – that is to say, did the newspapers give the referendum enough attention – are harder to determine without comparing treatment of this issue with another issue, a task beyond the scope of this paper. However, the *Toronto Star* did provide an illuminating snapshot of comparative issue coverage in a 'media watch' column in mid-September. The breakdown suggested a fairly low level of coverage on electoral reform, compared to other issues – just 3% of election-related stories dealt with the referendum in their sample (*Toronto Star*, 13 September 2007). As another point of reference, in the week following the provincial election the *Ottawa Citizen* featured a multi-page, pull-out section on the new hockey season. Needless to say, it appears that it did not consider the reform of Ontario democracy to be worthy of that degree of coverage.



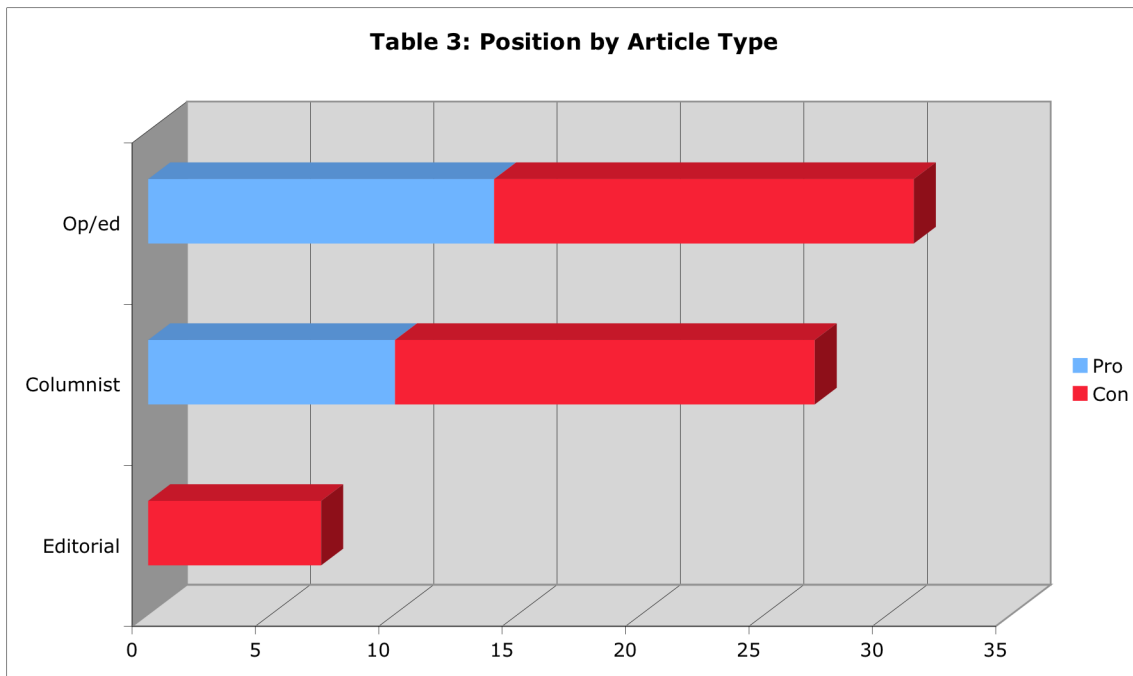
Coding the pool of opinion articles in terms of being pro or con regarding the OCA's recommended MMP voting system produced a lopsided result: 59% were con, 34% were pro, and 7% were unclear or neutral and coded as 'info'. Editorials were the least balanced with 88% con, 0% pro, and 12% info. Columnists offered more diversity but were still unbalanced with 59% con and 34% pro. The most balanced groups were the op/eds, with 52% con and 42% pro; but these totals masked some wide divergences amongst the newspapers in terms of balance. The *Globe and Mail* and the *Hamilton Spectator* were fairly evenly balanced in terms of opinion pieces on the referendum, while the *National Post* and *Ottawa Citizen*, incidentally both part of the CanWest media chain, were much more one-sided. 67% of *National Post* articles and 78% of *Ottawa Citizen* articles were con. Indeed, if not for Andrew Coyne's regular column, the *National Post* would have featured 100% con positions on the referendum, assuming his absence would not have spurred them to find an MMP supporter. The *Toronto Star* coverage was more evenly



distributed by comparison but still unbalanced: 55% of opinion pieces were con compared to just 35% that were pro.



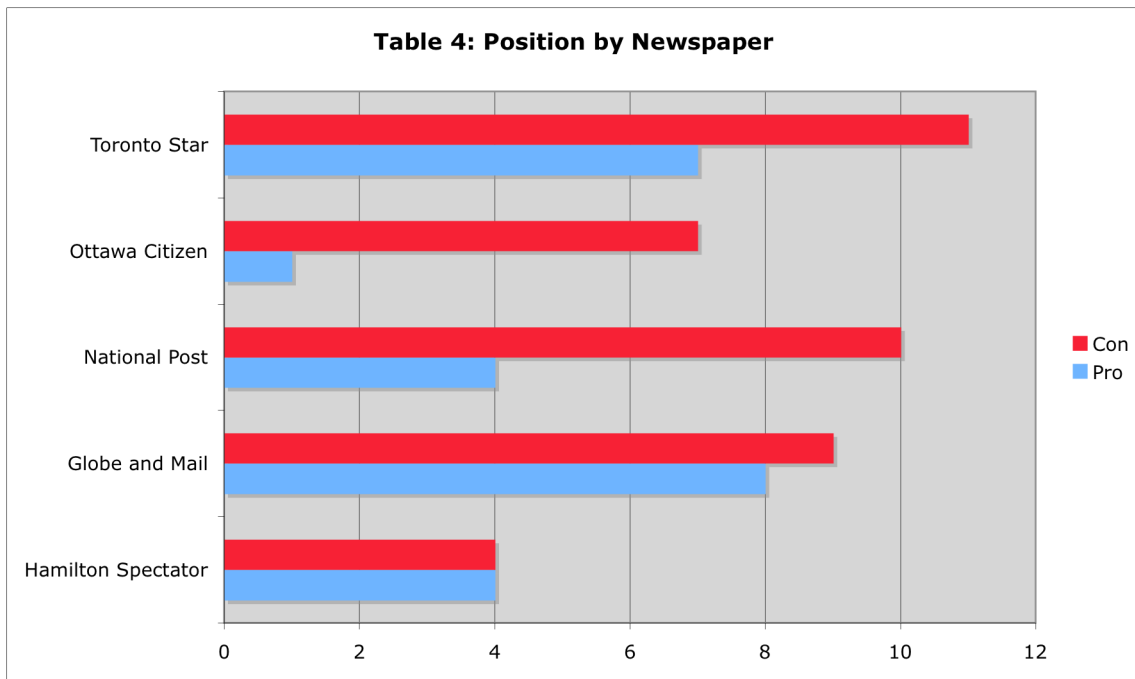
For the purposes of assessing balance, a 50/50 split between pro and con views was assumed to be ideal. However, even if one applies a more liberal 60/40 rule (60% con, 40% pro), the papers still fail in all cases except for the op/ed category.



In sum, the newspaper coverage was unbalanced in all cases in terms of editorial and columnist opinion, which were overwhelming opposed to the MMP proposal. Some papers appeared to attempt to correct for this imbalance by supplying alternative views through op/eds, though others did not. Suffice to say,

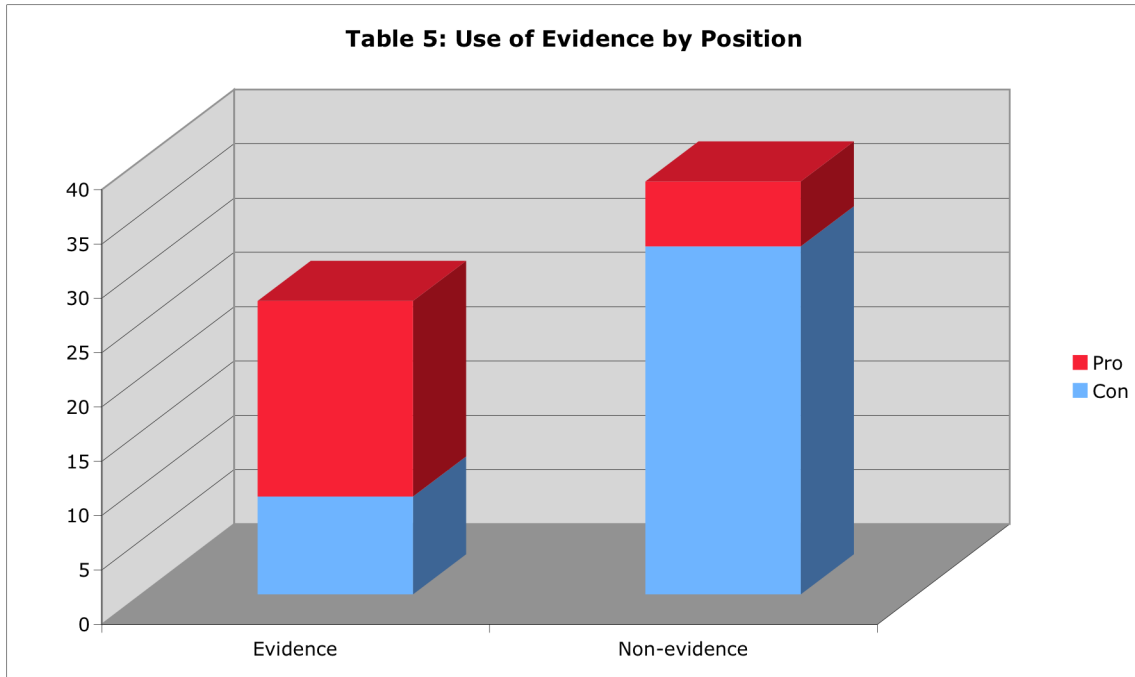
broadly speaking, the evidence suggests that the Ontario print media failed Habermas’ first test of deliberative quality: the balanced inclusion of all relevant, competing views.

Habermas’ second test of deliberative quality involves an assessment of the media’s handling of various ‘validity claims’ involving claims for clarification of meaning, the provision of relevant facts, and the appropriateness of the speaker. For the purposes of this paper, we have reduced these claims to the presence or absence of evidence in supporting the arguments made, pro or con. Here the data suggests that 40% of the articles made some appeal to evidence while 60% did not. In terms of the different kinds of opinion pieces, editorials hardly drew on evidence at all, while columnists and op/ed writers were more evenly split between those relying on assertion and those relying on facts. These totals can then be compared with data on the pro and con positions on the MMP proposal and the newspapers in which they appeared. For more detail on the decision-making process that contributed to matching specific opinion pieces with these categories, including details of various coding reliability tests, please see the discussion in Appendix C.

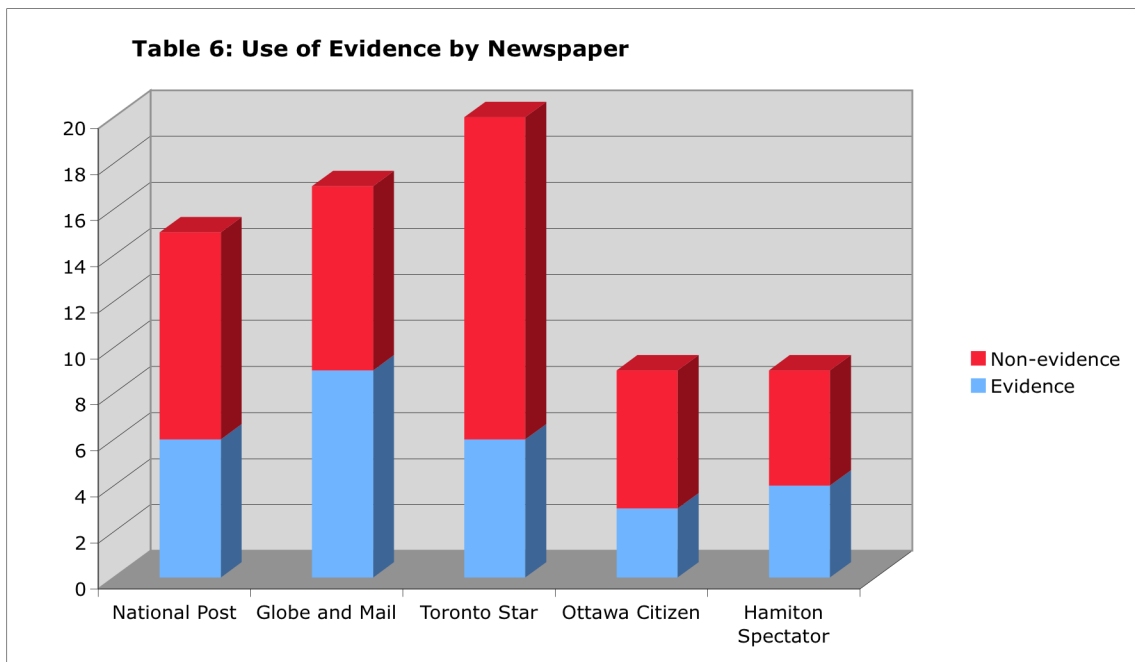


More striking than the imbalance in the use of different argumentative approaches was how these were utilized in very different proportions by the pro and con sides of the date. Con articles relied heavily on undocumented assertions – 78% of the total – with just 22% utilizing any evidence at all. Meanwhile, the pro side of the argument was the inverse of this picture. Cumulatively, 75% of pro arguments featured some kind of evidence to back up their claims. Turning to the newspapers themselves, all but the *Globe and Mail* featured more articles based on speculation and logical assertion rather than evidence. The *Globe and Mail* and the *Hamilton Spectator* featured slightly more and slightly fewer articles, respectively, along these lines while the others were more strongly lopsided in their coverage. The *Toronto Star* was the most unbalanced with 70% of its items relying on speculative and/or logical appeals. For a detailed numeric breakdown of the coding see Appendix B, and for a complete list of the 70 opinion items with their coding, see Appendix A. Analysis of the coding presented here suggests that the newspaper coverage of the MMP referendum on Ontario was both unbalanced and lacked depth. Regular editorial and opinion writers particularly were strongly opposed to the referendum. A majority of the coverage relied solely on speculation or logical argument, avoiding any engagement with evidence about the workings of different

voting systems. As a rule, the newspapers avoided any systematic engagement with evidence or experts that might have shed some light on the topic.



Furthermore, the dramatic imbalance in the use of different rhetorical strategies, particularly the strong reliance of the con forces on speculative or logical arguments, suggests that the media deliberation process failed to create the sufficient “uptake and engagement” where participants would “hear or read, internalize and respond” that Goodin argued was crucial for any “public-sphere activity to count as remotely deliberative” (Goodin 2000: 91).



As such, this evidence seems to support the view that the media did not manage to translate much of the benefit from the OCA process to the citizens of Ontario and therefore largely failed to create a deliberative democratic space of much quality. Obviously, any definitive statement about the quality of deliberation in Ontario's voting system referendum would also require some attention to the many other possible venues that existed: public meetings, television and radio commentary, and some analysis of more conventional newspaper reporting. However, the findings here echo some of the work emerging that has this more broad focus, particularly with regard to newspaper reporting, television and radio (Leduc et al 2008; Hoff 2008).

## The newspapers and their coverage: discussion

Habermas' last validity claim involves the sincerity of the participants, specifically whether they really mean what they say. If it can be demonstrated that participants do not mean what they say, the quality of their deliberative efforts may be called into question. The design of this study does not allow us to assess the sincerity of the many claims made about voting systems by the various papers. Instead, we will restrict our attention to the sincerity of the papers' claims to create an effective deliberative environment for the referendum issue. While some might argue that this is an unfair expectation and that media should not be expected to be deliberative spaces, it was clear in this case that both the government and the media themselves assumed they would perform this role. Indeed, as *Toronto Star* ombudsperson Kathy English declared in her post-election assessment of the paper's performance:

"The heart of democratic politics is public debate of public concerns. During election campaigns, it is the media's role and responsibility to encourage this debate and to provide accurate, unbiased information about politicians, policies and the electoral process so that citizens can cast informed votes." (English, *Toronto Star*, 13 October 2007).

As evidenced in the English quote above and elsewhere, the newspapers covered here claimed both before and after the referendum campaign that they had no agenda and that they were committed to balanced coverage. Yet the evidence marshaled in this study has demonstrated a lack of balance in the print media that is clearly at odds with their claims. The fact that all the major papers eventually came out against voting system reform also tends to reinforce the view that the larger public discussion, as conveyed through the media, was not representative or balanced. After all, given that 37% of the voting public would eventually endorse the MMP option in the referendum, one might have expected at least one major media outlet to side with these views. It could be that this bias was unintentional, the unfortunate product of a lack of oversight combined with the often chaotic imperatives of daily news production. In support of such a view, media analyst John Zaller claims that media have no opinions of their own; instead they are full of 'attributed opinion' as they must rely on competing experts to fill their papers (Zaller 1992). On the other hand, there are media analysts who suggest that media organizations do have their own political objectives, ones they may choose to pursue openly or indirectly under a mask of neutrality and objectivity (Schudson 2002). In the Ontario case, while aspects of the various papers' behaviour point to a less than sincere commitment to a balanced and fair deliberation on the referendum, whatever political objectives may have been motivating their actions is hard to glean from the sources at hand. We can try to infer what may have influenced their opposition to the proposal by recourse to its perceived impact on the kind of the politics the different papers generally advance. However, such an approach is obviously speculative and would require other kinds of additional supporting evidence that has not been pursued here.

There are a number of patterns in the coverage of the referendum by Ontario's newspapers that raise questions about their sincerity in contributing to a fair and balanced public deliberation on the issue, though the patterns varied across the papers. These patterns involved the application of inconsistent standards (*Toronto Star*), lack of full disclosure about past views on the topic (*Toronto Star*; *Globe and*

*Mail*), clearly unbalanced coverage (*National Post*; *Ottawa Citizen*), and a lack of commitment to cover the issue (*Globe and Mail*; *Hamilton Spectator*). Let us review each in turn.

## Toronto Star

On September 8 the *Toronto Star* promised 'high voltage election coverage' of the parties and the issues that would dominate the election, including the electoral reform referendum. The characterization of their approach was one of balance, deliberation and – after assessing the performers and the merits of the issues – leadership in terms of endorsing any politician or referendum choice or not (Kuntz, *Toronto Star*, 8 September 2007). The *Star* presented itself as deliberating over the question of electoral reform right up until their endorsements editorial of October 9 (though a September 30 editorial arguing against the MMP proposal made the coming decision somewhat obvious). Indeed, in defending the *Star's* coverage of the referendum, public affairs editor Kathy English claimed "the *Star's* editorial board, under the direction of Editorial Page Editor Bob Hepburn, was researching and debating electoral reform in order to decide and declare the *Star's* position on this important issue" (English, *Toronto Star*, October 13). Hepburn also characterized the editorial board as engaging in 'debate' on the issue, before coming down against the MMP proposal (Hepburn, *Toronto Star*, October 9).

Yet this portrayal of the paper's behaviour is less convincing when the paper's past positions on voting systems – authored by the same editor and editorial board – are brought to light. In fact, the *Star* had a long history of editorial opposition to any form of proportional representation, vigorously opposing it in various editorials in 2002, 2003, and 2005 (*Toronto Star*, October 27, 2002; December 16, 2003; September 25, 2005). Less than a year before the referendum a *Star* editorial, 'Bad electoral medicine', complained that PR would lead to 'legislative chaos' (*Toronto Star*, February 23, 2007). Aside from Editorial Page editor Hepburn, another influential member of the *Star's* opinion team was Queen's Park political columnist Ian Urquart. He also had a long history of opposition to electoral reform. As early as 2001 Urquart asserted that PR would lead to fringe parties and instability, a theme he continued to expand upon in further columns in 2003, 2004 and 2006 (*Toronto Star*, November 19, 2001; May 27, 2003; November 13, 2004; March 28, 2006). Then, in spring 2007 he stepped up his critical coverage as the OCA appeared closer and closer to endorsing an MMP form of PR (*Toronto Star*, February 22, 2007; March 5, 2007; April 4, 2007).

While this consistent opposition to proportional representation from the *Star* might be taken as a mark of sincerity – that the paper really did "mean what it said" on the issue – the *Star* did not make this long-term and consistent opposition clear during the referendum deliberation phase and instead led readers to believe that it had not come to a position on the issue. Denying readers this information allowed the paper to position itself as neutral and open-minded on an issue that its past positions would suggest it already had strong and set opinions about. Indeed, the reasons offered to reject the MMP proposal at the end of September 2007 were very similar to the ones offered in editorials in 2002, 2003, and 2005 (*Toronto Star*, October 27, 2002; December 16, 2003; September 25, 2005).

Another factor that raises questions about the sincerity of the *Star's* deliberative efforts involved what appeared to be an inconsistent application of standards for judging what level of public knowledge should be present to count as consent to a voting system change effected through a referendum. A consistent theme in the *Star's* coverage and discussion of the referendum was that it might pass due to a combination of public ignorance and a general populist rejection of all political institutions associated with status quo politics. A series of editorials, as well as columns by Ian Urquart, urged voters to become informed on the issue, sometimes noting how the strong showing for STV in BC in 2005 occurred despite widespread public ignorance about the details of the proposals and that such a result could be in store for Ontario (*Toronto Star*, April 16, 2007; *Toronto Star*, August 6, 2007; Urquart, *Toronto Star*, May 16, 2007;

Urquart, *Toronto Star*, July 2, 2007). Near the end of the campaign Urquart was still worried, warning that 'MMP could sneak to victory' in manner similar to that in BC, as a kind of uniformed voters' revolt against politics as usual (Urquart, *Toronto Star*, September 26, 2007). So too the editorial board remained concerned about public ignorance about the issue right up to election-day. On September 25 an editorial entitled 'Get message out on referendum' called the lack of public awareness "deeply troubling" complaining that the "referendum is simply too important for people to cast their ballots without really knowing what it is all about" (*Toronto Star*, September 25, 2007). On election day the editorialists reported that "[r]ecent polls have shown a staggering number of Ontarians know little or nothing about the choices before them in the referendum" and they encouraged voters to become informed as the decision was too important to "make blindly" (*Toronto Star*, October 10, 2007).

But any concerns the *Star* had about public levels of knowledge about the referendum seemed to evaporate when the results came in. The *Star's* post-election editorial on the referendum headlined the defeat of the MMP proposal as the "People's verdict on voting reform" (*Toronto Star*, October 12, 2007). The *Star*, which just two days earlier had worried that voters were not well informed enough, now declared that supporters of PR had "had a fair chance to make their case" and that the public had "wisely" rejected reform. So too Ian Urquart, who feared MMP might "sneak to victory" due to public ignorance, now claimed "voters in this province simply judged MMP on its merits and found it too complicated and too unhinged from the familiarity of our current system to warrant support" (Urquart, *Toronto Star*, October 12, 2007).

Ironically, academic survey work that appeared shortly after the election quickly confirmed the *Star's* earlier fears. The survey indicated that even as late as election day, many voters were not aware that a referendum was taking place. Of those that did, few understood the details of the proposals or the possible political implications of choosing one system over another. In fact, the authors uncovered what appeared to be a perverse result. They found that over 60% of respondents claimed they would like to see more proportional results for parties while retaining a local member, the very arrangement the MMP option in the referendum was offering them. Yet when it came to the vote only 37% of voters supported MMP. The authors explained this gap as the product of ignorance: the public simply did not know that the MMP option would do what they said they wanted (Cutler and Fournier, *Globe and Mail*, 25, October 2007). Given that the *Star* had made informed voting on the referendum a key part of their deliberative campaign, one might have expected these findings to register as a problem for the paper. But when complaints about the referendum process were aired as the new legislature met for the first time a month later, the *Star* dismissed the concerns, suggesting that proponents of reform should just "accept the wishes of the voters and resist the urge to harangue Queen's Park until they get the result they want" (*Toronto Star*, November 29, 2007). This inconsistent application of standards for what should merit concern regarding public ignorance on the substance of the referendum question raises doubts about the *Star's* sincerity in staging a fair and balanced deliberative space on the issue.

### **Globe and Mail/Hamilton Spectator**

In an editorial published before the official OCA decision was announced, the *Globe* argued for an effective public deliberation over whatever proposal emerged (*Globe and Mail*, 14 April 2007). But the sincerity of this call for "effective public deliberation" is, however, challenged by their actions. Once the campaign started, the paper's editors appeared to decide to sit on their hands, saying little and contributing little to the campaign by way of journalistic resources. Instead, the *Globe* was largely missing in action during the Ontario campaign on the referendum. The paper's reporting on the issue was weak – they did not even assign a specific reporter to cover the story or run reports from wire services, something every other paper did. Where the *Star* produced 47 distinct stories on the referendum during the campaign period, the *Globe* produced just 7. In terms of opinion, though the paper gives substantial

coverage to Ontario and employs numerous columnists who focus on its provincial affairs, key commentators appeared to have little to say on the issue during the campaign period.

At a glance, the *Globe's* decision not to participate is curious. Alone among the major print media, the *Globe* had actually written positively about PR during the previous decade and half; specifically they recommended an MMP system (using the same name as the proposal Ontario would vote on) as the best option for Canada nationally. This editorial position was announced boldly in 1992 with the headline 'First past the post, last with voters' where the editors claimed that "[r]eform of the electoral system is one of the great untreated issues of the current constitutional round" (*Globe and Mail*, 25 September 1992). From then through editorials in 1997, 2000, 2004, and a four part series published just before BC's STV referendum in 2005, the editorial board made its case for a voting system reform they called MMP that would better represent the regional strengths of the largest parties and allow some new voices to gain representation (*Globe and Mail*, 25 September 1992; 27 January 1997; 13 December 2000; 15 November 2004; 2 May 2005; 3 May 2005; 4 May 2005; 5 May 2005).

The absence of the *Globe* from the public debate could be seen as a blow to the deliberative aspirations of the referendum process. The *Globe* had arguably been the most balanced in terms of showcasing competing views on the issue from their opinion-makers. While the editors seemed keen on MMP, other prominent writers with the paper remained critical. Provincial affairs columnist Murray Campbell, who wrote just one column during the campaign period, had previously opposed PR in series of columns stretching back to 2004 (Campbell, *Globe and Mail*, 16 November 2004). While the OCA was still deliberating he wrote three separate columns arguing that PR would be a recipe for "chaos and extremism" (Campbell, *Globe and Mail*, 7 April, 2007; 17 April 2007; 19 April 2007). Respected national affairs writer Jeffrey Simpson also had previously written negatively about PR back in 1997 following the federal election and again in the debate that accompanied the 2005 BC referendum, complaining that small parties would prevent governments from making 'tough' decisions (Simpson, *Globe and Mail*, 18 June 1997; 20 November 2002; 28 May 2005; 20 September 2005). On the pro side with the editors, John Ibbitson had written positively about PR but was reassigned to cover American politics shortly before the referendum campaign began (Ibbitson, *Globe and Mail*, 7 June 2003; 23 March 2004; 31 December 2004). That left only Rick Salutin to defend the proposed MMP system, with occasional support from the urban columnist John Barber, both of whom had also supported PR for some time (Salutin, *Globe and Mail*, 15 June 2007; 21 September 2007, 5 October 2007; Barber, *Globe and Mail*, 20 November 2001; 5 September 2007).

The result was that the paper that had appeared to endorse an MMP system repeatedly in various editorials over the previous years ultimately failed to give an actual campaign to adopt an MMP system very much coverage. Instead, even before the defeat of the proposed MMP system, the *Globe and Mail* characterized the referendum as 'Ontario's missed opportunity', suggesting it represented a "missed opportunity to improve the province's democracy" and make the province "a fairer place" (*Globe and Mail*, 4 October 2007). They recommended that the reform be defeated. Why the paper did not honour their early commitment to a broad and engaging public debate on the referendum when the proposed reform seemed to be the very one they had long promoted seems at first glance somewhat paradoxical. But, in the end, the confusion surrounding the *Globe's* position appears to have involved matters of terminology. Though the *Globe* often called their proposal PR or MMP, what they really appeared to be supporting was, what political scientists would call, a majoritarian, mixed-member system, one that combines single member ridings with a small and non-compensatory top up list (Farrell 2001). Such a model had regularly been proposed for Canadian national elections since the 1970s and had become a popular hybrid internationally in the 1990s, with adoptions in Japan and Russia (Pilon 2007). Importantly, for the *Globe*, their proposal would not produce fully proportional results.

All in all, the *Globe's* failure to focus much attention on the referendum supports the view that they may be judged as less than sincere in their stated commitment and actual efforts to help create a deliberative

space on the issue. Indeed, as they suggested in an editorial prior to election day, they would prefer to wait for “Ontario’s next government to take a more serious stab at it” (*Globe and Mail*, 4 October 2007).

Unlike the *Globe*, the *Hamilton Spectator* did not announce an editorial position on the referendum. In fact, they were the only paper in the group studied here not to do so. Instead, the *Spectator* began the campaign period calling for all views to be heard and did feature two positive op/eds early on (Elliot, *Hamilton Spectator*, 16 May 2007; Harwood, *Hamilton Spectator*, 15 June 2007; Cooper, *Hamilton Spectator*, 10 July 2007). On the surface, the *Spectator* appeared to fulfill that commitment, continuing to report sporadically on the referendum in the summer months, more so than any other paper but the *Star*. However, much of it comprised wire copy from the Canadian Press. In terms of opinion coverage the *Spectator* produced even less than the other papers, particularly if the focus is on the latter part of the campaign. Between July 11 and mid September the paper failed to provide any column, editorial, or op/ed coverage of the referendum. Then, in the last two weeks of the campaign, the paper first published three negative pieces on MMP followed by two positive op/eds. Some copy from their TorStar chain sister paper also appeared in the *Spectator*, specifically *Star* columnist Ian Urquart’s warning about voters supporting change out of ignorance (Urquart, *Hamilton Spectator*, 26 September 2007). But, for the most part, the paper ignored the referendum question.

### National Post/Ottawa Citizen

A number of studies have argued that the former Southam papers that now form the core of the CanWest newspaper chain lack balance in presenting complex and potentially divisive issues (Greenberg 2000; Hackett and Uzelman 2003; Butovsky 2007). Their concerns are confirmed with the CanWest papers examined here. Neither the *National Post* nor the *Ottawa Citizen* made any pretence of neutrality or objectivity in their opinion coverage of the Ontario voting system referendum. Nearly 100% of their columns and op/eds on the issue were opposed to MMP. The *Citizen* allowed one arguably pro op/ed piece to appear on election day (Eberlein and Rupprecht, *Ottawa Citizen*, 10 October 2007) while the *Post* granted no space for op/eds favouring MMP. No columnists favoured MMP in the *Citizen* and Andrew Coyne was the only one to argue for MMP in the *Post*. Editorialists in both papers argued that voters should reject the MMP proposal (*National Post*, 3 October 2007; *Ottawa Citizen*, 10 October 2007). Nearly all of this critical coverage relied on speculation or logical argument to make its case, rather than employing evidence-based reasoning. Such an unbalanced approach in showcasing different views on the topic strongly suggests that neither paper was sincere in creating a deliberative space for the referendum. Indeed, commentators often had difficulty maintaining even minimum standards of respect for opposing views, with many commentators simply mocking the proposal and those who had developed it (Cosh, *National Post*, 4 October 2007).

Habermas’ fourth validity claim involves assessing the sincerity of the participants, which we have explored here in terms of judging the sincerity of the newspapers to create a genuine deliberative space. Here we examined various patterns of behaviour on the part of different papers that raised questions about their sincerity in fostering a balanced exchange of views. Examples of the use of inconsistent standards, a lack of full disclosure about past views, clearly unbalanced coverage, and an obvious lack of commitment in cover the issue at all lend credibility to the judgment that the papers failed Habermas’ sincerity validity test.

### Conclusion

The performance of the media in creating a deliberative public space preceding Ontario’s historic 2007 referendum on voting system reform provides both a confirmation of the strengths of deliberative democracy theory as a potentially effective critique of the shortcomings of ‘real world’ democratic



practices and a cautionary tale about the apparent limits that face extending projects of democratic deliberation to a mass scale.

On the positive side, this study has confirmed the critical strength of deliberative democracy theory as something that can be fruitfully operationalized for empirical enquiry by using it here to develop concrete measures to judge the quality of the Ontario media's performance as a deliberative public space. Drawing from Habermas' notion of an 'ideal speech situation,' one characterized by broadly inclusive and equalitarian participation and a critical deliberative dynamic, the study operationalized deliberation in media by measuring the inclusion of different views as well as the rhetorical strategies used by different participants to make their arguments. This assessment, focusing on opinion pieces in the five largest provincial broadsheet newspapers, is clearly a partial account and would need to be supplemented by other studies that examined reporting, local newspapers and tabloids, radio and television, as well as activity within civil society, before any definitive evaluation of this deliberative experience could be offered. Having said that, the findings here do roughly mirror those of other studies that have explored a broader range of media and media sources, specifically coverage in reporting (Leduc et al 2008) and radio and TV (Hoff 2008).

With these measures we have discovered that, on the whole, Ontario's broadsheet print media failed to create an effective deliberative space where citizens could gain a critical appreciation of the choices they faced. In fact, the results show that the media failed on all the key themes Habermas highlights as crucial to an effective deliberative process, specifically inclusion and balance, a willingness to deal with and answer questions of fact, honesty in presenting one's own position, and a desire to engage in dialogue. Media coverage of the referendum and its attendant issues was low overall, unbalanced in terms of showcasing the different sides of the debate, and relied predominantly on speculative and/or logical arguments rather than evidence or expert-based ones. Those opposed to MMP were over-represented and relied on speculative and logical arguments to a much greater extent than those supporting MMP, suggesting that media participants, with a few exceptions, were not prepared to deal in facts or genuinely take up or engage opposing views. All this suggests that Ontario's broadsheet newspapers were not really sincere in their claims they would create an environment where all sides on the referendum issue could be deliberated over.

The vindication of deliberative democracy as critical theory comes at the cost of deliberative democracy as a kind of prefigurative practice. The evidence assembled here suggests that the scale problem – translating the benefits of deliberative democracy in small-scale settings like citizens' assemblies to genuinely mass democratic ones like referendums – is real and abiding. If the link is to be media – and government and most commentators have explicitly expected that media would be the link in the recent cases of BC and Ontario – then the evidence provided here challenges whether the proposed link can or will do the job. If deliberative democracy is to be more than just talk, then new thinking will need to be applied to the problem of media failures as a deliberative space.

## Endnotes

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**Appendix A: List of Opinion Articles and Coding**

<b>Author</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Barber, John	Globe and Mail	9/5/07	column	pro	yes
Broadbent, E.; H. Segal	Globe and Mail	5/15/07	op/ed	pro	no
Campbell, Murray	Globe and Mail	9/17/07	column	con	yes
Gibson, Gordon	Globe and Mail	10/8/07	op/ed	con	no
Globe and Mail	Globe and Mail	10/4/07	editorial	con	yes
Holcroft, Christopher	Globe and Mail	7/8/07	op/ed	con	no
Kent, Tom	Globe and Mail	10/3/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Kierans, Tom	Globe and Mail	9/12/07	op/ed	con	no
Leduc, Larry	Globe and Mail	7/26/07	op/ed	pro	yes
MacGregor, Roy	Globe and Mail	10/1/07	column	pro	yes
Monahan, P.; F. Poschmann	Globe and Mail	10/8/07	op/ed	con	no
Reynolds, Neil	Globe and Mail	9/5/07	column	con	no
Salutin, Rick	Globe and Mail	9/21/07	column	pro	no
Salutin, Rick	Globe and Mail	6/15/07	column	pro	yes
Salutin, Rick	Globe and Mail	10/5/07	column	pro	yes
Simpson, Jeffrey	Globe and Mail	5/16/07	column	con	no
Simpson, Jeffrey	Globe and Mail	10/5/07	column	con	yes
Cavanagh, Kevin	Hamilton Spectator	10/9/07	editorial	info	no
Cooke, Terry	Hamilton Spectator	10/6/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Cooper, Tom	Hamilton Spectator	7/10/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Curtis, Vincent	Hamilton Spectator	9/24/07	op/ed	con	no
Dreschel, Andrew	Hamilton Spectator	9/26/07	column	con	no
Elliot, Howard	Hamilton Spectator	5/16/07	editorial	con	no
Harwood, Bob	Hamilton Spectator	6/15/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Little, Joan	Hamilton Spectator	9/25/07	op/ed	con	no
Peters, John	Hamilton Spectator	10/3/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Cosh, Colby	National Post	10/4/07	column	con	no
Coyne, Andrew	National Post	9/29/07	column	pro	yes
Coyne, Andrew	National Post	9/26/07	column	pro	yes
Coyne, Andrew	National Post	9/22/07	column	pro	no
Coyne, Andrew	National Post	10/3/07	column	pro	yes
De Souza, Father Raymond	National Post	9/27/07	column	con	no
Green, Philip	National Post	9/25/07	op/ed	con	no
Gunter, Lorne	National Post	10/9/07	op/ed	con	no
Jonas, George	National Post	9/29/07	column	con	no
Mintz, Jack	National Post	9/27/07	op/ed	con	no
National Post	National Post	10/3/07	editorial	con	no
Pilon, Dennis	National Post	10/2/07	op/ed	info	yes
Radwanski, George	National Post	9/11/07	op/ed	con	yes
Solomon, Lawrence	National Post	10/4/07	op/ed	con	yes
Woolstencroft P. et al	National Post	9/29/07	op/ed	con	no
Denley, Randall	Ottawa Citizen	9/9/07	column	con	no
Denley, Randall	Ottawa Citizen	10/4/07	column	con	no
Eberlein, B.; K. Rupprecht	Ottawa Citizen	10/10/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Gordon, Charles	Ottawa Citizen	9/23/07	column	con	yes
Malloy, Jonathan	Ottawa Citizen	9/26/07	op/ed	con	yes

Ottawa Citizen	Ottawa Citizen	10/10/07	editorial	con	no
Robb, Peter	Ottawa Citizen	5/31/07	column	info	no
Sutcliffe, Mark	Ottawa Citizen	10/6/07	column	con	no
Warren, David	Ottawa Citizen	9/30/07	column	con	no
Cohen, Estella	Toronto Star	9/27/07	op/ed	con	no
Fraser, Garnet	Toronto Star	10/7/07	column	info	no
Gordon, Larry	Toronto Star	10/5/07	op/ed	pro	no
Gwyn, Richard	Toronto Star	5/22/07	column	con	no
Henry, Brian	Toronto Star	10/5/07	op/ed	con	no
McKenna, Peter	Toronto Star	8/27/07	op/ed	info	no
McQuaig, Linda	Toronto Star	9/18/07	column	pro	no
Murray, Joe	Toronto Star	5/3/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Pilon, Dennis	Toronto Star	10/7/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Slinger, Joey	Toronto Star	9/20/07	column	con	no
Smith, Cameron	Toronto Star	9/8/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Speirs, Rosemary	Toronto Star	5/21/07	op/ed	pro	yes
Speirs, Rosemary	Toronto Star	9/14/07	op/ed	pro	no
Taylor, George	Toronto Star	9/14/07	op/ed	con	no
Toronto Star	Toronto Star	8/6/07	editorial	con	no
Toronto Star	Toronto Star	9/30/07	editorial	con	no
Toronto Star	Toronto Star	10/9/07	editorial	con	no
Urquart, Ian	Toronto Star	9/28/07	column	con	yes
Walkom, Thomas	Toronto Star	5/19/07	column	con	yes
Wiseman, Nelson	Toronto Star	9/23/07	op/ed	con	no

### Appendix B: News Coverage by Newspaper and Type, May 1 – October 10, 2007

	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Total	Pro	Con	Info
<i>Hamilton Spectator</i>										
Reporting	6	2	3	0	15	9	35			
Editorial	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	1
Columnist	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Op/ed	0	1	1	0	2	2	6	4	2	0
<i>Globe and Mail</i>										
Reporting	0	0	0	0	2	5	7			
Editorial	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
Columnist	1	1	0	0	4	3	9	5	4	0
Op/ed	1	0	2	0	1	3	7	3	4	0
<i>National Post</i>										
Reporting	0	0	0	0	11	2	13			
Editorial	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
Columnist	0	0	0	0	5	2	7	4	3	0
Op/ed	0	0	0	0	4	3	7	0	6	1
<i>Ottawa Citizen</i>										
Reporting	2	1	0	0	6	4	13			

Editorial	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Columnist	1	0	0	0	3	2	6	0	5	1
Op/ed	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	1	0
<i>Toronto Star</i>										
Reporting	5	3	2	2	19	16	47			
Editorial	0	0	0	1	1	1	3	0	3	0
Columnist	2	0	0	0	3	1	6	1	5	0
Op/ed	2	0	0	1	5	3	11	6	4	1
<b>Totals</b>	21	8	8	4	83	59	185	24	42	4

### Appendix C: Methodology

The method employed here draws from qualitative research approaches, despite what might appear to be a quantitative focus on counting and coding various themes. It differs, for instance, from conventional framing analysis in media studies in that the items being coded are not nearly so discrete as specific terms or phrases, which are either found to be present in or absent from a given text. Instead, the coding process here necessarily involves judgment about just which category or categories an item belongs in (Kohlbacher 2006). Some of these judgments are more straightforward than others. For instance, judging whether an item is pro or con toward the proposed MMP system is fairly easy to ascertain. But judging whether an item's rhetorical strategy involves speculation or evidence is more subjective. I have made my decisions based on a fairly liberal interpretation of what might constitute evidence. Nor does this evaluation involve assessing the quality of the evidence provided. The rationales in making these decisions, particularly as concerns what does and does not constitute 'evidence' for the purposes of this analysis, is discussed in more detail below. To assuage concerns about the subjective nature of the coding process the materials have been subjected to two coding reliability tests, which produced a 90% and 80% correspondence with the original coding decisions. More details on the coding tests can also be found below.

The articles examined were culled using the following criteria. First, to achieve depth and breadth, the study focused on mass circulation broadsheet newspapers with a daily circulation in excess of 100,000. This limited the study to articles drawn from the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Hamilton Spectator*. The *Toronto Sun* also met the circulation criteria but was excluded as tabloid. While tabloids obviously serve an important constituency, one often demographically distinct from those served by the 'quality' broadsheets, I am operating on the assumption that if we do not find a deliberative space in the self-proclaimed 'serious' papers, it is unlikely we will find it in the tabloids. Second, the academic database *Canadian Newstand* provided full text searching of all newspapers, excluding the *Hamilton Spectator*, though full text searching of the latter was available on its website. These two sources were then searched using the following terms: 'mixed member proportional', 'MMP', 'referendum', 'proportional representation', 'PR', 'Ontario Citizens' Assembly', and 'electoral reform'.

The search parameters extended from May 1 to October 10, 2007. The choice of this period reflected a number of concerns. First, October 10 was the provincial election date and, as such, offered the last opportunity for media to influence voter intentions. A suitable choice for a starting date of the study was less clear. The OCA made their official announcement about their decisions on May 15, though the decision was actually widely reported by late April. There was also coverage of the OCA and its deliberations and decisions in March and April. The resulting problem was not to confuse coverage of the OCA with coverage of the referendum debate. Thus May 1 was struck upon as a compromise where media attention seemed to shift from a focus on the OCA to a more sustained focus on its recommendation, which became official May 15.

Searches of the various sources produced 180 distinct articles. These articles were then separated into four different types of coverage of the issue: reporting, editorials, columns, and op/eds. As this paper seeks to examine elite *opinion* about the voting system debate, the focus is more on contributions from editorialists, columnists, and op/ed writers than on journalists covering the story as 'news'. However, reporting was counted and used to assess the relative interest of the different elite media sources examined in the paper, both over time (month by month) and in

total. With reporting excluded from the rest of the coding part of the paper, the number of items to be examined was reduced to 83 articles. After an initial reading and coding of all pieces, a number of exclusions were made on the basis that a given item did not focus *enough* on voting system reform (e.g. David's Warren's one line comment on the referendum in his October 6, 2007 column in the *Ottawa Citizen*) or that they did not touch upon the substance of the voting system debate (e.g. Ian Urquart's three columns on referendum communication issues over the campaign period in the *Toronto Star*). This reduced the group of articles under study to 70 items (for a complete list of the opinion items and their coding, see Appendix A).

Given that the presence or absence of 'evidence' is central to the argument of the paper, some discussion of the decision-making process in assessing the articles in these terms is in order. In deciding what would or would not be considered 'evidence', the point was to highlight articles that 'show, not tell'. Ideally, from the point of view of good deliberation, evidence-based arguments should create conditions that allow readers to make their own independent assessment about the issue in question, regardless of the judgment of the writer. Thus, vague allusions to conditions in other countries would not count as evidence whereas linking specific historical or comparative detail to arguments about a voting system would. Nor would evidence that could not be considered germane to the debate at hand be counted as evidence for the purposes of judging the quality of debate over the current or proposed alternative voting system. Having said all this, the threshold for an article to be considered to contain evidence was actually quite low. One specific piece of evidence in an article largely given over to speculation and assertion was enough to count as containing 'evidence'.

Strong examples of the use of evidence would include most of the columns by Andrew Coyne in the *National Post*. In 'Why PR Works' Coyne responded to concerns about how party lists would be constructed by noting that the law in New Zealand required some internal democratic process to exist within parties just for this purpose (Coyne, *National Post*, October 3, 2007). In 'PR: Debunking the fearmongers' he cited specific elections results from New Zealand and Germany to respond to concerns about the potential power of small parties under MMP (Coyne, *National Post*, 29 September 2007). And in 'The case against first-past-the-Post' he provided specific election data to back up his claims about the performance of the current voting system (Coyne, *National Post*, 26 September 2007). On the con side of the debate, Charles Gordon cited the positive benefits of by-elections in our present system, noting a host of specific historical examples to back up his claim (Gordon, *Ottawa Citizen*, 23 September 2007). Weaker, but arguably still counting as a use of evidence, would be Lawrence Solomon's use of the rise of the 'pirate party' in the last Swedish election to sustain his concern about the possible rise of small nuisance parties with the adoption of MMP (Solomon, *National Post*, 4 October 2007). It should be underlined that this analysis is not addressing the quality of evidence presented but simply its presence or absence by this definition. Thus evidence-based arguments are held to be better than speculative or logical arguments in this analysis simply because they offer readers a kind of accountability, i.e. more opportunity for an independent assessment of the information provided.

Examples of arguments that might look like they are sustained by evidence – but are not by this definition – include the *National Post* editorial from 3 October 2007, as well as op/eds from Nelson Wiseman, Tom Kierans, Philip Green, and Woolstencroft et al. The *National Post* editorial tells us that small parties have proliferated under their PR system and notes a few examples but fails to provide any specific data to judge what they mean by 'proliferation'. Without citing any specific elections results or comparative election data over time, readers just have to accept their assertion. By contrast, the op/eds noted above do provide evidence but it is unrelated to the voting system debate. Wiseman cites data on Italian unhappiness with their PR system, which cannot be counted as evidence about how the system works because he provides no information about why Italians are unhappy with their system (Wiseman, *Toronto Star*, 23 September 2007). Kierans cites experts on newcomer integration but has no evidence linking this problem to the use of different voting systems (Kierans, *Globe and Mail*, 12 September 2007). Green complains that a 1970 federal law gives too much influence to party leaders over nominations, which says nothing about either voting system on offer as such a rule is not necessarily intrinsic to either system (Green, *National Post*, 25 September 2007). Woolstencroft et al provide some evidence about how New Zealand's voting system reform process played out, which, while interesting, is irrelevant to the debate about how different voting systems work (Woolstencroft, *National Post*, 29 September 2007).

#### *Coding reliability tests*

As a check on the possibly subjective nature of assessing what might or might not be counted as evidence in the various pieces, both intra and inter-coder reliability tests were performed on the material. Initially all 70 pieces were coded by the author. Then, approximately one year later, all 70 were recoded using the same criteria. This produced 63 similar results to the original coding and 7 deviations, for a correspondence of 90%, well within the acceptable

parameters for content analysis. Then half of the pieces were given to another academic with expertise in politics and content analysis of newspapers. The 35 pieces were randomly selected, though in a way to preserve the proportionate balance of the different newspapers as well as pro and con views. This analyst then recoded them, with instructions on the criteria to be used in making the distinctions. This time the new coding matched 28 of the original 35 codes, with 7 deviations, for a correspondence of 80%.

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