

Televoting for Canadians

by R.K. Carty

This article looks at previous examples of televoting for selecting party leaders and explores something of the reaction of televoters themselves to the process. What was their experience with televoting? What do they think about it? In the end, it is answers to questions like these that are likely to determine whether or not televoting will be acceptable in the wider political system.

On February 28, 1996, the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada sent a report to Parliament calling for a wide-ranging series of amendments to the *Canada Elections Act*. The many proposals reflect the impact of rapid changes transforming both the country's social organization and its evolving democratic norms, as well as the new technologies available for conducting elections. At the same time, the report implicitly points to the organizational rigidities inherent in a system in which detailed electoral procedures must be spelled out in legislation that is, by its nature, not always easy to amend. One recommendation calls for giving the Chief Electoral Officer the power to conduct pilot projects in order to "test new electoral procedures". The intention is obviously to allow the CEO to experiment with rapidly changing technologies and procedures before proposing that they be adopted across the system. The example the report offers is telephone voting.

For many, telephone voting seems almost inevitable, an obvious feature of the electronic democracy that seems to be rushing towards us. Its promoters argue that televoting technology promises real organizational efficiencies and that televotes may be the tool by which a continuous universal franchise becomes a vital aspect of public decision-making. Others, less sanguine, fear that televoting will become one more aspect of an

increasingly alienating and fragmenting electoral process in which the collective, public dimension of politics gives way to a set of individualized, private interactions.

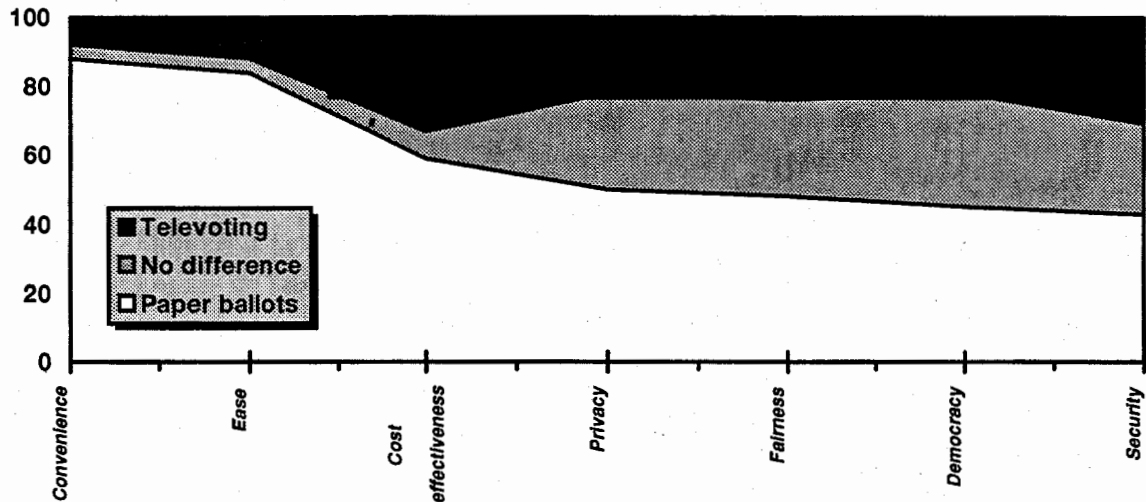
While small scale tests of televoting (perhaps in by-elections as suggested by the CEO) might help to evaluate the broader utility of the technology, the fact is that we already have some important evidence. Since 1992, four Canadian provincial political parties have now used televoting to choose their leader, one of whom has gone on to become a premier.¹ What do the stories of those leadership contests tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of televoting? The analyses done on three of these contests have revealed much about the impact of new processes of leadership selection for the parties and the decisions they made.²

Provincial Party Televotes

The record of the four provincial leadership televotes is mixed. None of them involved very large electorates yet two were beset by technical difficulties. The numbers voting were: Saskatchewan Conservatives 3,298; British Columbia Liberals 6,540; Nova Scotia Liberals 6,998 and Alberta Liberals 11,004. The Nova Scotia Liberal televote, the first to use the new technology, had a system crash and the party was forced to rerun the vote two weeks later; the Alberta Liberal party leadership vote had a number of difficulties and at one point balloting had to be suspended so that the phone lines could be cleared and the process restarted. These experiences, with the two largest of the party electorates, are hardly encouraging. On the other hand, however, it must be noted that the Nova Scotians were ultimately able to use

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Figure 1 Televoting compared to Paper Ballots



1993 BC Liberal televoters

the televote over two successive ballots on the same day and the Albertans did manage to conduct a preferential vote on its second ballot. These were no mean feats for a new and unfamiliar (to the voters and candidates alike) process. By contrast the British Columbian and Saskatchewan televotes went smoothly and were generally regarded a success.

Choosing a voting system involves a host of decisions, big and small, that raise questions ranging from the meaning of the vote as a social as well as an individual act down to a simple matters of organizational capacity and competence.

Adopting televoting for party leadership contests has been one aspect of a general movement away from delegate conventions and towards direct votes by the entire party membership. The intention has been to empower all party members and in doing so weaken the grip over the leadership held by the elite groups which have traditionally dominated conventions. A number of the criticisms of the televote leadership contests have in fact been criticisms of universal membership voting but the two should not be confused. Televoting is but one mechanism for conducting universal votes. While it now appears that universal voting, in one form or another, is going to be adopted by most Canadian political parties,

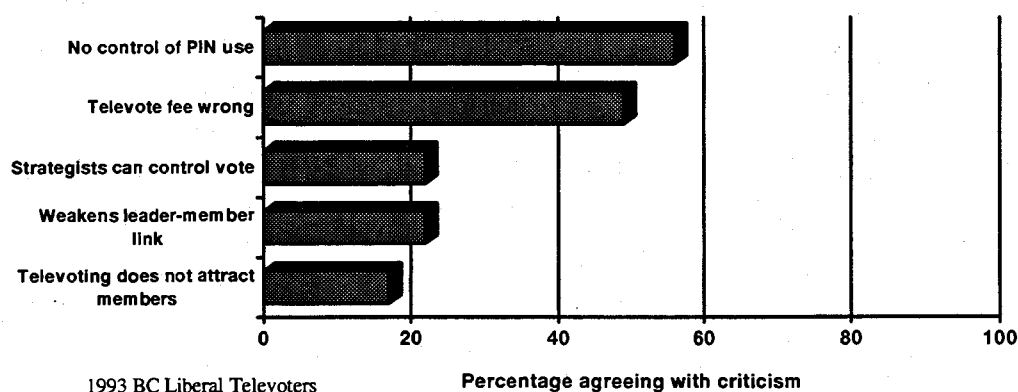
it is not clear whether traditional paper ballots cast in public polling places or televoting from home will be the method of choice. Those technologies are not value free. Each carries its own biases and prompts parties to organize and operate in particular ways.

Given the role election systems play in legitimating democratic decision-making, the attitude of the electors towards the process used is critical. These attitudes are in part determined by principle (such as one-person one-vote or secret ballots), but they are also a function of voters' experience. For instance, most Canadians appear to accept a degree of malapportionment as a workable response to the geographic realities of their country.

Positive Televote Experiences

So what has been party members' experience with televoting? To answer that question we can begin by simply asking those who participated if they think that their party should continue to use the televote technology. The answer, for the three parties for which we have survey data, is clearly yes. Alberta Liberals, whose leadership process was the least positive, are most equivocal: Only thirty-three percent of them chose televoting when asked to indicate the system they wanted to see used the next time their party chose a leader. But that said, televoting was preferred over any of three other options and a majority opted for it rather than a traditional delegate convention. By comparison, British Columbian Liberals are considerably more positive: seventy percent of those who televoted thought that their party should continue to use the system in

Figure 2 Are Televoters Critical of the Process?



leadership contests, and three-quarters of these who had participated in the provincial televote would recommend it for use by the federal party in its next national leadership selection. The first televoters, Nova Scotia Liberals, are apparently the most enthusiastic of all about the new process. Despite the fact that it failed them on the first try, ninety percent said that the party should use it again.

Comparing Televoting with Ballots

This general willingness to endorse televoting, and support its continued use, suggests a good measure of voter satisfaction with the technology and confidence in its ability to organize fair and efficient electoral choice. The consistency with which televoting has won the support of those who have used it is striking. But what is it about this technology that recommends it to those who have employed it in a real election contest? To explore this we can draw upon the results of a detailed survey of British Columbia Liberals conducted soon after their 1993 leadership televote exercise.³ Analyses of the data show that there are a number of regular attitudinal differences between party members who participated in the televote and those who did not. In part those differences reflect other unrelated party divisions, for one of the (unsuccessful) leadership contestants made the adoption of televoting a campaign issue and, sensing defeat, his supporters were less inclined to vote. But the differences may also reflect something of the lessons of experience.

While it is possible to question voters about their experience with a particular process, such questions are

rather abstract. To try and elicit a judgment rooted in experience, BC Liberal televoters were asked to compare televotes with paper ballots (cast either at a polling place or at a party meeting) on seven dimensions. They responded by indicating which of the two processes they believed to be better, or whether they thought there was no difference between the two.

On the two criteria that speak most directly to "user friendliness" – convenience and ease – voters overwhelmingly choose televoting as a better process. That is hardly surprising for the ability to vote from one's home rather than traipse out into Canadian weather is an obvious advantage of televoting. On a related issue, that of cost effectiveness, voters are less positive about televoting although a majority still rate it higher than a traditional paper ballot. This comparatively high support for paper ballots is due to the way in which the BC Liberals financed their leadership vote. It was those who objected to the televote fee that were significantly more likely to rank paper ballots better on the cost effectiveness dimension. Had the leadership vote been paid for in some more indirect fashion many of those voters might easily have come to different conclusions about its cost effectiveness.

The other four comparisons pit televoting against paper ballots on more obviously political qualities: privacy, fairness, democracy and security. On all of these dimensions televoting is not so obviously preferred as it is on the efficiency and economy type dimensions, although on none of them is the traditional ballot rated better. Televoting remains the choice of the largest number but about a third of the respondents do not see

any difference between the two voting methods on these criteria. It is worth noting that those BC Liberals who did not participate in the televote thought paper ballots better on all of these four measures. This difference suggests that experience does teach some lessons: the very process of televoting for the first time appears to have convinced many of its merits. The measure on which televoting does least well among those who have used it is security. This takes us to a consideration of some of the hard criticisms made of televoting and an assessment of what televoters think of them.

Televoters' Criticisms

The BC televoters were asked about a number of criticisms, some of which related to the mechanics of the process as they had experienced it, some which addressed wider political criticisms. One of the sharpest complaints about televoting is that, unlike a traditional process where a voter must appear in person, there is no easy way to ensure that the individuals voting are those entitled to do so. The fear, of course, is that this could allow slick operators to buy up PIN numbers and cast a large number of votes. A PIN is the unique personal identification number that each voter uses to log into the vote system. Given that the abolition of purchased seats and plural voting are generally seen as victories in the evolution of a democratic electorate, this problem with televoting is not insignificant and a majority (53.7%) of the televoters admit the validity of the charge. It is precisely this group of televoters that rate paper ballots significantly better on the security dimension.

The only other criticism that attracts near majority support (48.8%) from televoters is the fact that those participating had to pay a fee. No doubt that practice smacks of long discredited poll taxes. This is hardly a major issue for no election process is without cost and there are many ways in which elections can be funded other than through user fees. While detailed cost benefit analyses remain to be done, it would be surprising if the overall cost of a televote were greater than that of establishing and running traditional staffed polling places.

Televoters are much more dismissive of three more explicit political criticisms. Only about a fifth think that the process strengthens the hand of party strategists in the process, and a somewhat smaller proportion accept the notion that televoting is not attractive to potential participants in the political process. A final criticism of televoting is that as a highly individual (as opposed to social) act it is inherently alienating. BC leadership televoters do not seem to agree for only twenty-two percent of them thought that the process weakened the

connection between them and the candidates in the contest. Thus, except for the real problem of ensuring that it is eligible voters who are actually televoting, there is not much support among these BC Liberals for televote criticisms.

Conclusions

Televoting may seem futuristic to many. No doubt it challenges our very images of democracy which feature citizens coming together at public polling places to cast their ballots. Almost certainly it would lead to unexpected changes in the way we do politics. The concerns that those skeptical of the process raise are important and need to be debated. But it is difficult to believe that televoting will not be on the agenda as more Canadians have some experience of the technology at their workplace or in the market.

The evidence of the leadership televotes held by political parties in three regions of the country suggests that Canadians can easily embrace the technology and when they do so their experience is generally very positive. So much so that they are keen to continue to use it. The principal reservation televoters are left with is a concern that the technology cannot guarantee that only properly qualified electors cast ballots. As this is a version of the problem of equality (allowing only one voter per elector), and thus the integrity of the democratic process, it is not an insignificant issue. Televote advocates will have to find a way to deal with it before their technology can or should find a ready acceptance.

Notes

1. The premier is John Savage of Nova Scotia. Gordon Campbell of British Columbia led his party to the largest vote share in the subsequent provincial election but the vagaries of the electoral system left him as leader of the opposition.
2. Stewart, I. et al. "Pressing the Right Buttons: The Nova Scotia Liberals and Tele-Democracy", in I. Stewart, *Roasting Chestnuts: The Mythology of Maritime Political Culture*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 1994; Blake, D.E. & R.K. Carty, *An Analysis of Televoting in the British Columbia Liberal Party* a report prepared for Maritime Tel. and Tel. of Halifax, N.S. 1994 and available from them pp. 83; Archer, K. & D. Stewart, "Electronic Fiasco? An Examination of the 1994 Liberal Leadership Selection in Alberta" paper prepared for the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, St. Catharines, 1996. See also Leonard Preya, "The 1992 Nova Scotia Liberal Leadership Convention", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 13, (No. 2, 1993) pp. 2-11.
3. This study was conducted with my colleague Don Blake and was supported by M.T. & T. and the Liberal Party of British Columbia. Despite their obvious interest in the study, neither of those organizations sought to influence the research in any way. The data is on deposit at the UBC library and available to researchers under standard terms of access. Blake is not responsible for any of the analysis present here.