

# research snapshot

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## Mass Media Can Be an Unfair Space to Engage Public Debate

### What is this research about?

Deliberative democracy seeks to create a more meaningful electoral system through small-scale citizen assemblies (CA). These “mini publics” act as a forum to consider public policy issues, with the public’s best interest in mind. In Ontario, a CA was held in 2006-2007 to consider the issue of electoral voting. They decided that proportional representation (PR) in our voting system would be useful, through mixed member proportional (MMP) reforms. After Ontario’s CA recommendations, a public campaign began to teach the public about a referendum to accept or reject MMP reforms. Deliberative democracy is meant to function in public spaces when making these choices. But leading up to the referendum, much of this public discussion took place in mass media. Can the media function as a space for deliberative democracy?

### What did the researcher do?

The researcher performed a content analysis on 185 articles from 5 newspapers in Ontario. He focused on newspaper coverage between May and October 2007, leading up to the referendum vote on MMP reforms. The researcher wanted to look at the ways in which meaning about the MMP referendum was produced. What was

### What you need to know:

Mass media, including newspapers, are a popular forum for deliberative democracy. However, there needs to be some caution with the media. They should offer a fair and balanced space for public debate on issues like our electoral system.

the impact on deliberative democracy for the public? He used Jürgen Habermas’ criteria for deliberative democracy to assess the newspapers’ opinion pieces on MMP reform. The researcher looked at:

- Inclusion and balance: Measured by the number of opinion pieces for or against Ontario’s CA recommendations for MMP reforms.
- Validity claims: The presence or absence of evidence in arguments that are made by the opinion pieces.
- Sincerity: How sincere were newspapers’ claims on creating a space for deliberative democracy in their coverage?

### What did the researcher find?

The newspaper coverage on the MMP referendum was not balanced and lacked depth.

Opinion pieces that were against Ontario's CA recommendations accounted for 59% of all the articles reviewed. The researcher also found that only 40% of the opinion pieces made an attempt to include evidence to support their positions on MMP reforms. About 78% of opinion pieces against MMP reforms relied on claims that were undocumented. Thus, there was a lack of public engagement with both sides of the debate before the referendum.

The researcher also found that the newspapers lacked sincerity in their attempt to uphold deliberative democracy in their coverage. A number of patterns were observed that countered the newspapers' attempts at fair and balanced reporting. These included:

- Applying inconsistent standards;
- A lack of full disclosure on the paper's previous views on the topic;
- Unbalanced coverage;
- A lack of commitment to cover the issue.

### How can you use this research?

This research may be useful for local or regional political agents, as well as journalists and other people working with mass media. Citizens or political leaders who engage with the public may find this research useful for its insights on bridging the gap between CA's and the public. It offers a case study that reveals the challenges in having the public engage and access knowledge on policy reforms and legislation. It also provokes thoughts on how to move beyond typical campaign methods to engage public interest with politics. The researcher's methods can also be used by citizens, especially in educational settings, to perform media analysis. This includes studying other elections or referendums, as

researchers in the UK have also done by modelling this study.

Journalists or others who work with mass media may gain insights on the relationship between reporting and public discourse. They may consider re-assessing current standards and practices to ensure that future reporting on referendum events is fair and balanced.

### About the Researcher

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### Keywords

Deliberative democracy, Mass media, Proportional representation, Referendum, Ontario

### Knowledge Mobilization at York

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