

# Local Referenda and Size of Municipality in British Columbia: A Note on Two of Their Interrelationships

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## (i) *Introduction*

One of the useful functions that political science can perform is the specification of the consequences of any public policy decision or public policy proposal.<sup>1</sup> It is the aim of this research note to perform such a function, by trying to ascertain some of the likely consequences of metropolitan reform in British Columbia (the amalgamation of local governments into larger sized units) on that peculiar instrument of direct democracy, the local referendum. Specifically, we shall try to depict two such consequences of larger sized local governments on local referenda, namely the consequences on (a) voter turnout and on (b) the probability of approval of any referendum proposal. It is interesting to note that, although the advantages and disadvantages of both metropolitan reform and of local referenda are hotly debated in British Columbia and the rest of North America,<sup>2</sup> their mutual inter-relationships have never been explored.

<sup>1</sup> This function of political science as a "policy science" has been most fully advocated by Harold D. Lasswell in "The Political Science of Science: An Inquiry into the Possible Reconciliation of Mastery and Freedom," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 50, 1956, pp. 961-79.

<sup>2</sup> The two most useful surveys of these debates being, respectively, those of Robert L. Bish, *The Public Economy of Metropolitan Areas: An Approach Based on the Theory of Externalities, Public Goods and Collective Action*, Institute for Economic Research, University of Washington, 1969, Chapter 7, to be published by Markham Press, 1971; and, Howard D. Hamilton, "Direct Legislation: Some Implications of Open Housing Referenda," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, 1970, pp. 124-37.

Referenda are, in fact, used extensively by all four types of municipality in British Columbia (city, district, town and village).<sup>3</sup> In the years 1964 to 1968, inclusive, some 109 local referenda were held, on issues as disparate as proposals for the fluoridation of the local water supply to the approval of the local school budget.<sup>4</sup> We do not know whether this frequency is typical for the rest of Canada; all we do know is that at least 168 Canadian local governments held referenda between 1955 and 1965.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, local referenda appear to be used more frequently than in British Columbia.<sup>6</sup> In sum, referenda appear to constitute an integral part of the local government policy making process in British Columbia, and afford a vehicle, albeit limited, for popular participation in that process.

(ii) *Method and Findings*

Our universe of referenda were the previously mentioned 109, the total held by the various municipalities of British Columbia, in the years 1964 to 1968. We operationalized "size" as the population of a municipality in the median year (1966) of the time period under scrutiny.<sup>7</sup> Since population is not the only criterion for determining whether a municipality will constitute a city, district, town or village, there is no simple hierarchy of status corresponding to population "size." Data on turnout and approval/disapproval of a referendum proposal,<sup>8</sup> our two dependent variables, were obtained directly from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs in Victoria.

Our evidence shows, in the first place, that the greater the size of a municipality, the lower the turnout in any referenda held (Table I). Of the 56 referenda held in municipalities smaller than 3,000 population in size, over three-quarters (76.8%) of these referenda had a turnout in

<sup>3</sup> In point of law, they are of an advisory nature only unless otherwise decreed by Provincial regulation. (See Province of British Columbia, *Municipal Act*, Queen's Printer, Consolidated 1968, Sections 213, 467.) It seems highly unlikely, however, that any municipality would proceed with any by-law if its electors polled otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> Province of British Columbia, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, unpublished data, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> Harlan Hahn, "Voting in Canadian Communities: A Taxonomy of Referendum Issues," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 1, 1968, pp. 462-69.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton estimates a number of ten to fifteen thousand annually. See Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> The data on "size" was taken from the Dominion Bureau of Statistics figures as reprinted in Province of British Columbia, *Municipal Statistics, 1966*, Queen's Printer, 1967.

<sup>8</sup> Approval requires a 60% majority of those actually voting, unless otherwise stated by Provincial regulation. See *Municipal Act, op. cit.*, section 225.

TABLE I  
Turnout and Size

| Turnout<br>(Voting %) | Size (Population)     |                        |                         | Total<br>Number (%) |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
|                       | 0-3,000<br>Number (%) | 3-12,000<br>Number (%) | 12-60,000<br>Number (%) |                     |
| 0- 40%                | 5 ( 8.9)              | 6 ( 20.7)              | 7 ( 29.2)               | 18 ( 16.5)          |
| 40- 50%               | 8 ( 14.3)             | 7 ( 24.1)              | 10 ( 41.7)              | 25 ( 22.9)          |
| 50- 60%               | 27 ( 48.2)            | 10 ( 34.5)             | 4 ( 16.7)               | 41 ( 37.6)          |
| 60-100%               | 16 ( 28.6)            | 4 ( 20.7)              | 3 ( 12.5)               | 25 ( 22.9)          |
| Total                 | 56 (100. )            | 3 (100. )              | 24 (100. )              | 109 (100. )         |

$X^2 = 16.6274$ ;       $C = 0.3638$ .

excess of 50%. In contrast, at the other end of the scale, the turnout in the 24 referenda held by municipalities varying in size from 12,000 to 60,000, only exceeded 50% on seven occasions (29.2% of the 24 referenda).

Our second finding shows no relationship between size of municipality, on the one hand, and approval or disapproval of any referenda, on the other (Table II). In other words, any proposal was just as likely to be passed in the largest municipality as in the smallest. Interestingly, almost four-fifths of the referenda were approved by the voters.

### (iii) *Conclusions and Implications*

We have shown that turnout in local referenda varies inversely with the size of municipality conducting such referenda in British Columbia, while approval or disapproval shows no such consistent relationship with

TABLE II  
Approval/Disapproval of Referendum and Size

|                  | Size (Population)     |                       |                        |                         |                         | Total<br>Number (%) |
|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
|                  | 0-3,000<br>Number (%) | 3-6,000<br>Number (%) | 6-12,000<br>Number (%) | 12-15,000<br>Number (%) | 15-60,000<br>Number (%) |                     |
| Approval         | 40 (71.4)             | 10 (83.3)             | 14 (82.4)              | 11 (100.)               | 11 (84.6)               | 86 (78.9)           |
| Dis-<br>approval | 16 (28.6)             | 2 (16.7)              | 3 (17.6)               | 0 (0.0)                 | 2 (15.4)                | 23 (21.1)           |
| Total            | 56 (100.)             | 12 (100.)             | 17 (100.)              | 11 (100.)               | 13 (100.)               | 109 (100.)          |

$X^2 = 5.3377$ ;       $C = 0.2161$ .

size. This leads to the tentative implication that proposals to amalgamate various municipalities into larger sized units will make no difference to the fate of any referendum issue placed before the electors of the larger sized unit. It may, of course, affect the predisposition of the local council to place any proposal on the ballot, but we do not have any data to substantiate such an hypothesis. Our conclusions also lead to another implication, namely, that the electors will feel less predisposed to go out and vote on any proposal put forward by a larger sized municipality, than they would for a proposal of a smaller local government. Such an implication would not be a happy one for those who wish to see *both* larger sized municipalities and also greater popular participation in governmental policy making in British Columbia.