

Political Representation and Population Distribution in Canada

Canada demographic growth is becoming increasingly uneven. Selected regions of the country are experiencing a virtual population explosion while others are facing a near population implosion. This demographic situation is largely the by-product of current patterns of fertility, mortality and migration (both internal and international). As migration in particular tends to be highly selective, with the overwhelming majority of migrants settling in a limited number of destinations, certain regions of the country are facing major challenges in accommodating the rapid social and economic changes associated with population growth or decline.

These changes have all sorts of important implications for individuals, social groups and regions, as well as for governments. For example, the increasingly uneven distribution of Canada's population has important implications for the manner in which Canadians are represented in the Canadian House of Commons. As demonstrated in the current paper, the population size of federal electoral districts has become highly uneven, at least partially driven by this demographic change. In the absence of major political and administrative reform, this situation will in all likelihood worsen as we move further into the 21st century

While there has been a long history of research among political scientists on how the electoral system can be reformed in order to allow "every vote to count" (Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991; Courtney et al., 1992; Courtney, 2001; Milner, 2004), the reality is such that demographic trends are aggravating a situation whereby the "worth of each vote" varies across provinces and regions. While the Federal Government has recently introduced new legislation to change the formula for readjusting seats among provinces in the House of Commons, the current paper demonstrates how major inequities will persist regardless of whether or not this legislation passes. As argued, Canada's current system of electoral boundary adjustment, including the proposed legislation, seems to be somewhat out of touch with many of the country's new demographic realities. As a by-product, the vote is becoming seriously diluted in some of Canada's largest cities, with realistic projections suggesting that this could increasingly be a problem into the future.

As merely suggestive of the sorts of issues involved, Canada's 10 largest federal electoral districts, all located in urban Canada, represent a population of about 1.5 million according to the 2006 Census. At the other end of the spectrum, Canada's 10 least populated federal electoral districts involve a total of about 378,000 residents (roughly 25% of the aforementioned figure). While the most recent set of electoral boundaries were drawn on the basis of the 2001 Census (Elections Canada, 2003), considerable demographic change has occurred since, which only widened the differences observed. For example, the 10 largest districts grew almost a third (30.7 per cent) between the 2001 and 2006 Censuses while the smallest electoral districts, representing rural and remote ridings, experienced negligible growth (0.1% across 5 years). As suggestive of the importance of immigration to Canada's current demographic situation, fully 36.8% of the residents of the 10 largest federal districts were born outside of Canada, which compares with only 3.8% of the 10 smallest. In terms of visible minorities, the 2006 Census reports

corresponding figures of 35.7% and 1.9%, respectively. This all has major consequences for how Canadians (and minorities) are represented in the Federal House of Commons, as Canada comes to increasingly rely upon immigration in maintaining population growth – expected to be responsible for 100% of Canada’s demographic growth within a few decades.

The current paper will begin with a review of Canadian representational debates, including a history of somewhat irregular decisions in deciding upon how electoral districts are defined across geography and population. In so doing, we shall also provide some of the legal and constitutional background responsible for the current formula, as well as provide some context for legislation presently being considered in Ottawa – Bill C-32. Evidence is then presented to demonstrate how demographic change in this context, aggravates inequities in the size of federal electoral districts – particularly across provinces and territories. This will include a comparison of the distribution of seats across provinces with the current formula, the alternative as proposed in Bill C-32, as well as the distribution that theoretically would exist in Canada if equally sized ridings characterized all provinces and territories.

Electoral commissions responsible for the adjustment of boundaries “within provinces” have considered equality in population size as one of the more fundamental factors entering into the establishment of electoral district boundaries.. Yet despite some success, several provinces continue to allow for considerable discretion on the part of commissioners in allowing for departures from provincial averages. This departure from parity often draws from rather unclear principles - including the need to respect “community of interest”, to protect “rural minorities” and to “over represent or protect” the interests of specific provinces and/or regions. The current paper reviews such arguments, suggesting that they are somewhat out of touch with the new Canada that is coming to increasingly rely on immigration in maintaining labour force and population growth.

From here, we shall consider possible reforms in the manner in which electoral districts are drawn, which at a minimum could involve the use of more up to date and accurate demographic data. While Canada’s largest ridings also tend to be its fastest growing, the relative infrequency of boundary adjustments (typically with at least 10 years between adjustments) serves to further dilute the relative influence of Canadians living in its fastest growing provinces, regions and cities. Secondly, as carefully documented by Statistics Canada, the Census has a problem with undercount (or persons completely missed in the enumeration), which again tends to be most problematic in Canada’s fastest growing provinces and regions. Thirdly, this paper argues that Canadian electoral commissions could improve on voter parity within provinces – by merely narrowing and enforcing a range of acceptable variation in population size across ridings (currently set somewhat arbitrarily at +/- 25%). In conclusion, we return to Bill C-32, consider the extent to which it seems to represent partisan and regional interests, and discuss potential implications and lessons learned in this context.