

Demographic Change and Representation by Population in the Canadian House of Commons

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Abstract

This paper considers Canadian representational debates, including a brief sketch of how electoral districts are defined across geography and population. Electoral boundary commissions in Canada have long differed in terms of the relative importance to be placed on population in decisions relating to the delineation of boundaries of federal electoral districts. As argued in this paper, the traditional understandings and agreements that have shaped decisions relating to electoral districts are increasingly at odds with Canada's emerging demographic realities. In a nation that is highly reliant on immigration in maintaining its population, the current representational order arguably penalizes regions of the country which are growing most rapidly, and in particular, where new immigrants are most likely to locate. The current paper also considers 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.

Key Words: *Electoral representation; demographic change; electoral reform; population distribution*

Résumé

Cet article examine les débats de représentation au Canada et inclut une ébauche de comment les circonscriptions électorales sont définies aux niveaux géographique et démographique. Les commissions de délimitation des circonscriptions électorales du Canada divergent depuis longtemps au sujet de l'importance placée sur la population dans les décisions reliées aux délimitations des circonscriptions électorales fédérales. Tel que maintenu dans cet article, les ententes et les accords qui ont déterminé les décisions liées aux circonscriptions électorales sont de plus en plus en désaccord avec la réalité démographique émergente. Dans un pays qui dépend fortement sur l'immigration pour maintenir sa population, on peut soutenir que le décret de représentation actuel pénalise les régions du pays qui vivent une plus forte croissance, en particulier dans les régions où les immigrants ont plus tendance à s'installer. L'article considère aussi les possibilités de réformer la manière dont les circonscriptions électorales sont tracées, ce qui au minimum pourrait requérir de s'appuyer sur des données démographiques plus à jour et plus exactes.

Mots clés : *Représentation électorale, change démographique, réforme électorale, distribution démographique*

Introduction

Population growth in Canada 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.

The current paper will consider Canadian representational debates, including a brief sketch of how electoral districts are defined across geography and population. Electoral boundary commissions in Canada have long differed in terms of the relative importance to be placed on population in decisions relating to the delineation of boundaries of federal electoral districts. As argued in the current paper, the traditional understandings and agreements that have shaped decisions relating to electoral districts are increasingly at odds with Canada's emerging demographic realities. In a nation that is highly reliant on immigration in maintaining its population, the current representational order arguably penalizes regions of the country that are growing most rapidly and where new immigrants are most likely to locate.

This paper also considers 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 most populous ridings also tend to be its fastest growing, the infrequency of boundary adjustments (typically with 10-15 years between adjustments) serves to further attenuate 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 (Statistics Canada 2008a). Thirdly, this paper argues that with legislative amendment and revised direction, 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. These comments are made realizing that past compromises and non-demographic concerns have traditionally played a major role in determining Canadian apportionment.

Current Distribution of Seats across Provinces and Territories

Table 1 portrays the current distribution of federal electoral districts by province and territory as introduced with the 2004 apportionment. While the present formula begins by distributing 278 seats on the basis of the 2001 Census counts alone [column 3], the existence of various clauses and protections for slower growing provinces leaves for a further allocation of 27 ridings across provinces and 3 ridings to the territories [column 4]. As a result, there is a departure from equality in the size of ridings across provinces, with specific provinces under represented and others over represented.

Both the Senate Floor rule as introduced in 1915 and a “grandfather clause” as introduced in the 1970s serve to protect the representation of Canada's slower growing provinces (see Courtney 2001, 2008 for a detailed overview of these arrangements.) An additional wrinkle in the system is the

assignment of one seat each for the sparsely populated territories – Yukon, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Briefly, this “grandfather clause” assures that a province’s number of seats on the basis of population alone never falls below what it was in the 33rd Parliament (following the 1976 redistribution), while the Senate Floor assures that a province’s number of seats is never lower than its constitutionally mandated number of senators. As demonstrated here, both of these provisions are to the disadvantage of Canada’s fastest growing provinces and regions..

Table 2 includes, for comparative purposes, an alternative distribution as theoretically obtained if population were the exclusive factor in the allocation of federal electoral districts. This latter distribution, rooted strictly on the basis of population, also begins with more accurate demographic data, moving beyond the use of mere census counts. While Statistics Canada has long generated highly accurate population estimates, Elections Canada continues to rely on unadjusted census counts in applying its representational formulae – despite the fact that there are non-trivial and well documented problems in the census numbers. For example, Statistics Canada estimated with a high level of precision that almost one million persons were missed in the 2001 Census, with almost half a million missed in Ontario alone [column 7]. This adjustment for census coverage error is fundamental to Statistics Canada’s program of providing accurate population estimates to the Federal Government, particularly since undercount varies in important manners across provinces and territories (Statistics Canada, 2008b). The accuracy of these adjustments are very high, with very narrow confidence intervals, to such an extent that all of the provincial governments and the Federal Department of Finance currently use these figures in the allocation of Federal-Provincial transfers and in its distribution of equalization payments (for further information on these estimates, including details on the high level of precision involved, see: Statistics Canada 2008a; Department of Finance, 2008).

The difference between the 2004 apportionment and this alternative distribution based strictly on population, hints at the extent to which selected provinces are either over represented or underrepresented in the Canadian House of Commons. If we were to consider population as our exclusive criterion in the distribution, Ontario would require an additional 12 ridings to obtain parity with other provinces - which implies that its current total be increased by more than 10%. Similarly, Alberta and British Columbia would have proportionally similar adjustments, with an additional 2 and 5 seats respectively. Atlantic Canada (PEI, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick), as a whole would lose a combined total of 10 ridings, for a reduction of almost one third, while Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan would lose 2, 3 and 4 seats respectively. While a failure to adjust for coverage error is partially responsible for these discrepancies (with the 2001 undercount rate highest in Ontario and B.C), the special clauses and constitutional guarantees are

Table 1. Current Representation in House of Commons, Canada: 2001

<i>Current Formula 2004</i>					
Province/Territory	2001 Census (1)	National Quotient (2)	Rounded Result (3) = (1) / (2)	Special Clauses (4)	Current Distribution (5) = (3) + (4)
Nfld.	512,930	107,220	5	2	7
P.E.I.	135,294	107,220	1	3	4
N.S.	908,007	107,220	8	3	11
N.B.	729,498	107,220	7	3	10
Quebec	7,237,479	107,220	68	7	75
Ontario	11,410,046	107,220	106	0	106
Manitoba	1,119,583	107,220	10	4	14
Sask.	978,933	107,220	9	5	14
Alberta	2,974,807	107,220	28	0	28
B.C.	3,907,738	107,220	36	0	36
Yukon	28,674	-	-	1	1
N.W.T.	37,360	-	-	1	1
Nunavut	26,745	-	-	1	1
Total	30,007,094		278	30	308

Note: The national quotient (2) in Table 1 is obtained by dividing the population total across Canada's 10 provinces by 278. Each provincial population total according to the 2001 Census (1) is then divided by this quotient (2) to obtain its allocation in terms of ridings, with all figures rounded (3). Selected provinces/territories then obtain additional seats through the senatorial clause, the guarantee of seats relating to the 33rd parliament as well as the territorial allocation of 1 seat each (4).

Source: 2001 Census of Canada. Authors' calculations.

Table 2. Alternative Distribution based exclusively on 2001 Census Population Share, with Adjustments for Coverage Error (2001 Net Undercount), Canada

Province/Territory	2001 Census (1)	2001 Net Undercount (2)	Corrected Population (3) = (1) / (2)	National Quotient (4)	Rounded Result (5) = (3) + (4)
Nfld.	512,930	9,401	522,331	100,427	5
P.E.I.	135,294	1,325	136,619	100,427	1
N.S.	908,007	24,521	932,528	100,427	9
N.B.	729,498	20,095	749,593	100,427	7
Quebec	7,237,479	140,232	7,377,711	100,427	73
Ontario	11,410,046	436,349	11,846,395	100,427	118
Manitoba	1,119,583	30,903	1,150,486	100,427	11
Sask.	978,933	21,231	1,000,164	100,427	10
Alberta	2,974,807	69,857	3,044,664	100,427	30
B.C.	3,907,738	164,542	4,072,280	100,427	41
Yukon	28,674	1,423	30,097	--	
N.W.T.	37,360	3,295	40,655	100,427	1
Nunavut	26,745	1,256	28,001	--	
Total	30,007,094	924,430	30,931,524		308

Note: In obtaining the alternate distribution based exclusively on population share, the 2001 census (1) is adjusted for net undercount (2), with the corrected population (3) summed across all provinces/territories and divided by 308 to obtain an alternate national quotient (4). For each province/territory the corrected population (3) is then divided by this quotient (4) to obtain the allocation for each province, which is again a rounded figure (5). Yukon and Nunavut included as part of N.W.T. in calculation of the national quotient.

Source: 2001 Census of Canada. Authors' calculations.

particularly important in this context. As will be demonstrated in this paper, the current distribution is unprecedented in the extent to which Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta are underrepresented in Canada's parliament, and with current demographic trends and without reform in Canada's current representational formula, this situation will inevitably worsen into the future.

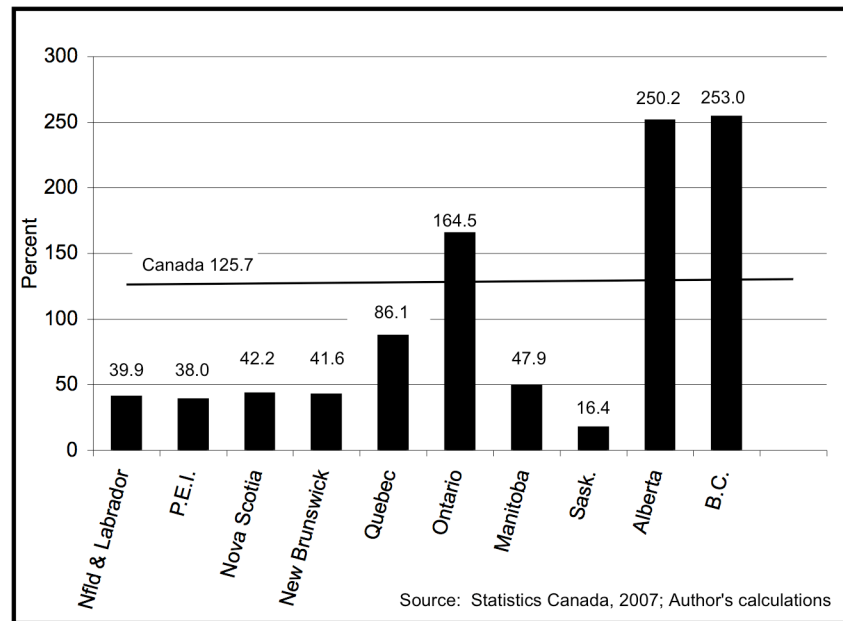
The Demographic Context

Relative to its overall population size, Canada receives a substantial share of all immigrants to North America. Currently, the admission of over 200,000 immigrants annually represents over two thirds of Canada's population growth (Statistics Canada 2008b). On an annual basis, since 1994, net international migration has comprised a larger percentage of total population growth than has natural increase (births-deaths). This situation has contributed to a sizeable share of Canada's population being foreign born – 19.9 percent according to the 2006 Census (Statistics Canada 2008). The comparable figure in the United States is 11.1 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2004) which highlights the relative importance of immigration to Canada's demographic and socio-economic development. In a context of below replacement fertility and declining rates of natural increase, this is fundamental in explaining why Canada's overall population growth and distribution is expected to become increasingly uneven as we move further into the 21st century.

As portrayed in Figure 1, Canada's population growth has been highly uneven over the last several decades, as provinces characteristically grew either noticeably faster or noticeably slower than the national average. For the country as a whole, the population has more than doubled since 1951 (up 126%), but all provinces except Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia had much lower rates of growth. In other words, most provinces are either markedly below or markedly above the national average of growth. This uneven population growth is directly related to the aforementioned importance of immigration to Canada's demographic growth, while to a lesser extent, internal migration has also contributed to this pattern (for a recent summary of these trends, see: Beaujot and Kerr 2004, 2007).

Population growth is expected to become increasingly uneven as Canada becomes progressively more reliant on immigration in maintaining numbers. Over the last 50 years through to the present, Alberta, British Columbia, and to a lesser extent, Ontario, have all grown particularly rapidly, while Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and all of the Atlantic provinces have lagged far behind. As all regions have witnessed a reduction in their rate of natural increase, the highly selective nature of migration has contributed to this pattern. Ontario and British Columbia have managed to attract a sizeable proportion of all newcomers to Canada, while both British Columbia and Alberta have long gained population

Figure 1. Percentage Population Increase for Canada and Provinces: 1951 - 2006



from interprovincial migration. Other provinces, including the Atlantic Provinces, Saskatchewan and Manitoba have received few immigrants and have tended to be regions of net out-migration. As a consequence, the populations of these latter provinces tend to be relatively homogeneous – with smaller proportions new to the country. Similarly, while Quebec has received a considerable number of immigrants, especially to Montreal, it has not always kept its immigrants, and has lost some of its own population with the general westward movement in North America (Dion and Coulombe 2008).

As a result of immigration, both Ontario and British Columbia have a disproportionate share of the foreign born and recent immigrant populations to this country. As reported in the 2006 Census, 38.5% of Canada's population lived in Ontario, while over one-half (54.9 percent) of Canada's foreign-born population and one-half (52.3 percent) of all recent immigrants (arriving since 2001) did so (Statistics Canada 2007). British Columbia is home to 13% of the total population, while 18.1 percent of the foreign born and about 16% of recent immigrants resided within its borders. Quebec with fully 23.8% of Canada's population reported only 13.8 % of the foreign-born population with 17.5 % of recent immigrants. Alberta has had a smaller share of the foreign born than total

