Immigration and Voter Parity in Canada

Don Kerr & Hugh Mellon

Introduction

Some regions of Canada are characterized by rapid population growth and ethno-cultural diversity. Other regions remain largely outside of this growth, influenced little by immigration and characterized by population stability, and in certain cases, population decline. The current paper considers how some of the existing structures of governance are somewhat at odds with this uneven geography of population growth. More specifically, the traditional understandings and agreements that have shaped how Canada's electoral system is mapped across provinces and regions appear to be at odds with these salient demographic trends. As Canada's population distribution has become increasingly uneven, the current representational order arguably penalizes regions of the country that are growing most rapidly – and by extension, the new Canadians who settle in these areas. Voter parity continues to decline in Canada, with newcomers penalized in a systematic manner. Projections presented here also suggest that in an absence of major reform, this will increasingly be the case into the future.

The uneven geography of population change

Canada receives a large share of the new immigrant arrivals to North America. As of the most recent census in 2006, roughly 1 in 5 residents of Canada were born outside of the country (19.8%), with an additional 16.0% being second generation Canadians, i.e. born in Canada with at least one parent born abroad (Statistics Canada, 2008). With fertility below replacement since the early 1970s, natural increase (births-deaths) continues to decline, such that net international migration now drives population growth - at an estimated 67% of total growth in 2008 (Statistics Canada, 2009). As immigrants tend to settle in some of Canada's largest cities, influenced by housing and employment markets, Canada's population growth is becoming increasingly uneven. These cities provide new arrivals to Canada with access to familiar cultural, religious, and/or ethnic communities.

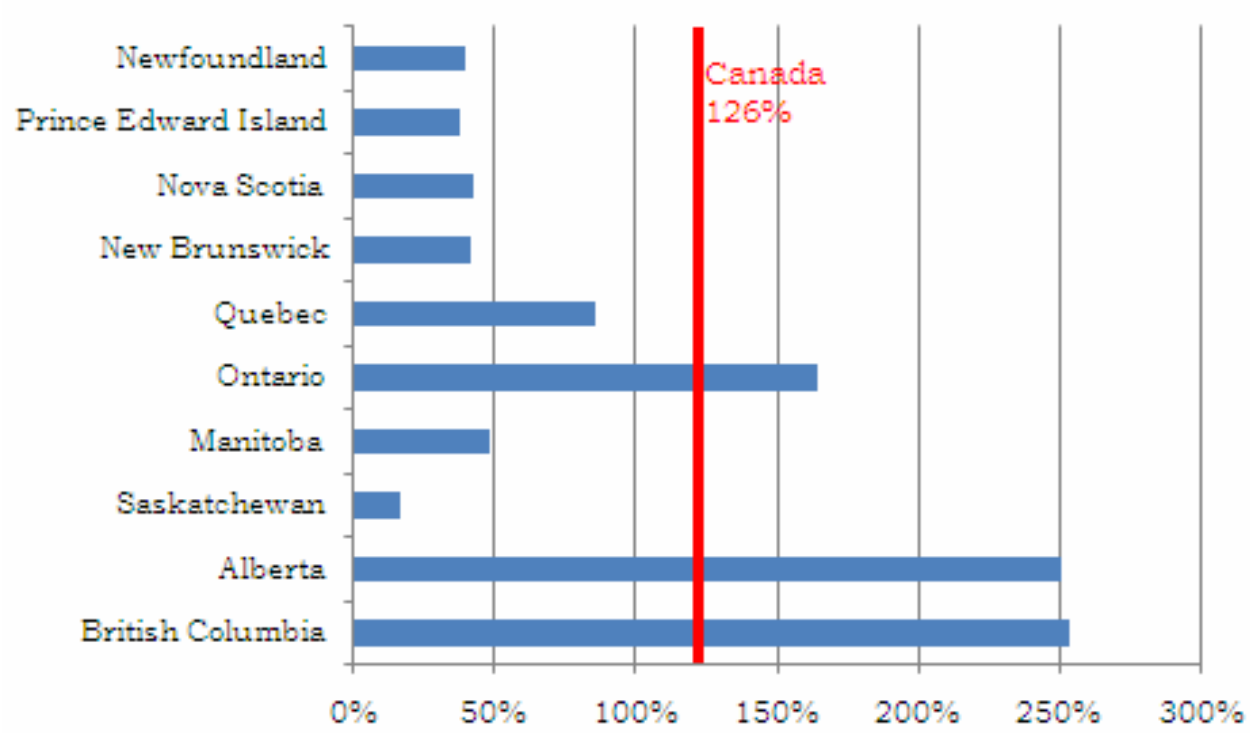
Bourne and Rose (2007) have estimated that as much as 80 percent of Canada's land mass witnessed no population growth whatsoever over the last 20 years, with all of Canada's growth occurring in a limited number of cities and regions. Most of Canada's population outside of its largest cities is sparsely distributed and noted for its cultural homogeneity rather than diversity. Into the future, this unevenness of population growth is expected to increase, as immigration becomes more salient in driving population growth. Without a substantial upturn in fertility, Canada could have more deaths than births by as early as 2020 (Bélanger et al. 2005). Atlantic Canada and northern areas as well as much of rural and small town Canada are expected to continue to lose population through the out-migration of young adults.

Between the 2001 and 2006 Canadian censuses, 97 per cent of immigrants settled in Canada's metropolitan areas, with well over two thirds settling in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. While Toronto is now one of the largest metropolitan areas in North America (EST. POP. 5,531,300 in 2008; growing at about 2% annually), it is also very multi-ethnic in character. For example, almost 1 in 2 residents of the Toronto metropolitan area are born abroad, while at least 7 out of 10 residents are either first or second generation. According to the UN (2004), there is only one other city of any size in the Americas that matches Toronto in terms of its multiculturalism (Miami), while metropolitan Vancouver on Canada's west coast is not far behind. Logically we can anticipate a continuation of past growth patterns as immigrants settle in the largest cities, following job prospects and already established social support networks of family and friends. Chain migrations are encouraging the migration of new immigrants into a limited number of Canadian metropolitan areas, a situation not expected to change anytime soon (Bourne and Rose, 2007).

In terms of Canadian provinces, Ontario has acted as the most powerful magnet for immigrants, with over half of all new arrivals over recent years. Similarly British Columbia and Alberta, two of Canada's more prosperous western provinces, have attracted their share of migrants, albeit both begin with smaller populations. Growth rates across provinces are portrayed in Figure 1, with a few provinces growing appreciably faster than the national average (Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario) while others lag far behind (most notably, in Atlantic Canada: Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia). While admittedly there is some uncertainty as to Canada's demographic future, most demographers are not anticipating a substantial departure or reversal of recent trends (Beach, Green and Reitz, 2003). Most expect a continuation of this highly uneven pattern of demographic growth and this tendency

of migrants to settle in metropolitan areas (Trovato, 2009; Beaujot and Kerr, 2004).

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



Source: Statistics Canada, 2007.

Internal to provinces, the two most predominant trends over recent decades have been continued urbanization and suburbanization, with a persistent rural exodus of young adults. For example, while only one in two Canadians lived in urban areas roughly a half century back, the 2006 census reports over four out of five Canadians doing so (Statistics Canada, 2007). With this urbanization, the suburbs surrounding Canada's largest cities continue to lead in the country in terms of growth, while regions outside of metropolitan Canada are experiencing relative stability, and even depopulation. In terms of the apportionment of Canada's electoral map, it is precisely those regions that are growing most rapidly that are most penalized in the allocation of ridings (electoral districts) – i.e. the metropolitan and suburban regions of Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia.

The apportionment of federal electoral districts across provinces

Since Confederation in 1867, Canada's federalism has been a dominant feature of its political life. Among its impacts is the

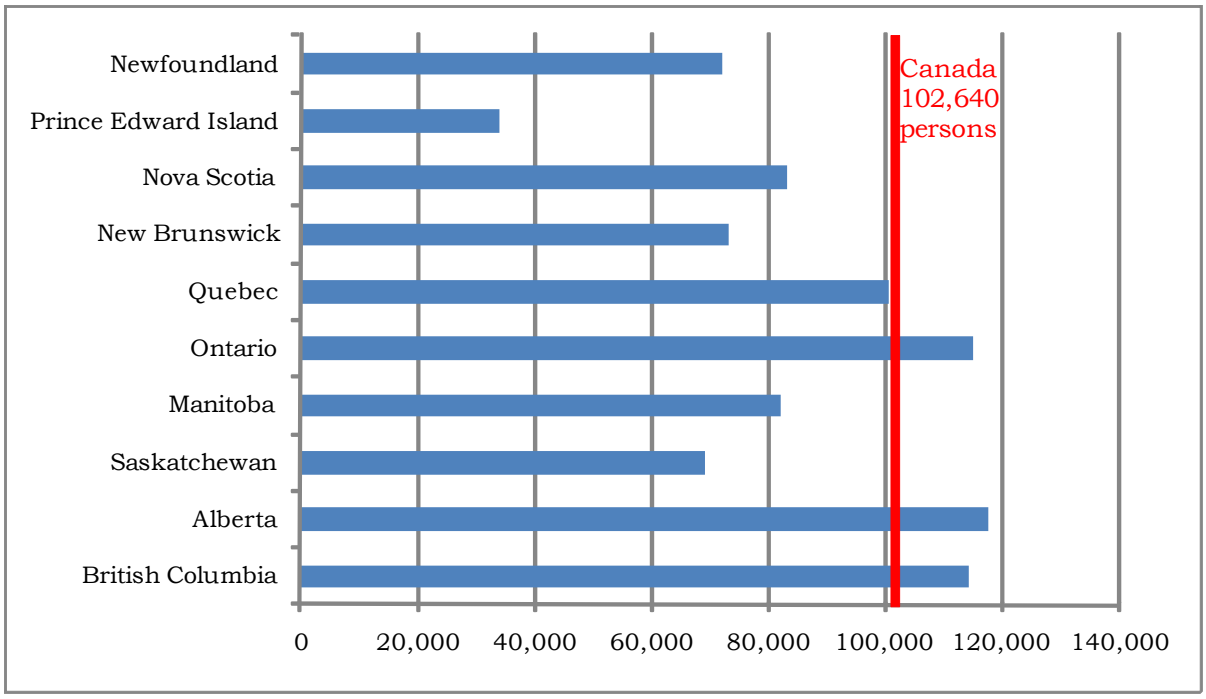
convention that numbers of parliamentary seats in the House of Commons be allocated on a province by province basis. While Confederation was initially based on the idea that seats in the House of Commons be assigned to provinces on the general basis of population (including the motivation that the predominantly French population of Quebec be assured its measure of proportionality), various amendments to the distribution formula have over time served to modify this situation. While the first Parliament in 1867 was based on an agreement that secured proportionate representation in the distribution of seats to Canada's original provinces (Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia), the inclusion of six additional provinces and three territories over a period of roughly a century necessitated various amendments that have compromised this original commitment to proportionality. Consistent with Canadian usage, the current paper considers the terms (seats, constituencies, federal electoral districts and ridings) as synonymous.

With highly uneven population growth, specific provinces expressed concerns relating to their declining share of the national population. As a result, provisions were introduced in order to protect slower growing provinces from losing their influence in Ottawa. Political compromises emerged such that specific provinces were guaranteed more seats than their share of the population might indicate. As merely an example, roughly 90 years ago a "Senate Floor" provision was introduced, that mandated that a province's number of seats never be lower than its constitutionally mandated number of senators. While Canada's upper house of senators has very little real power, the distribution of senators is highly uneven by province, privileging provinces that were first to enter Confederation. Subsequent political compromises in the 1950s and 1970s further protected the numbers of seats in provinces with slowly growing populations by 'grandfathering' and preventing decline in their seat allocations. In addition, Canada's sparsely populated northern territories – the Yukon, Nunavut and Northwest Territories, with 2006 populations of only 30,370, 41,460 and 29,474 - each receive one seat in the House of Commons. The result of all this is that provinces that have grown relatively rapidly over recent decades have been systematically penalized.

Figure 2 demonstrates the resultant range in the average population size of electoral districts across Canada's provinces. According to the 2006 census, Canada's three most rapidly growing provinces (Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia) are all with ridings larger than the national average, with mean populations of 117,513, 114,720 and 114,264 persons, respectively. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the average population size of a riding in Prince Edward Island is only

33,963 persons. In comparing Figure 1 with Figure 2, provinces with relatively low growth over the last several decades currently have the least populous ridings, with populations well below the national average. The relative weight of the vote depends on province of residence in Canada. Despite this fact, there is currently little interest among Canadians over issues relating to electoral reform and the need for greater parity in the weight of the vote across provinces.

Figure 2. Average Population of Federal Electoral Districts, 2006, Canada and the Provinces



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006.

The apportionment of federal electoral districts internal to provinces

This departure from parity is even greater when we consider the apportionment of federal electoral districts internal to provinces. This apportionment of Canadian electoral boundaries remains structured by federalism. Following reforms in the mid 1960s, independent federal boundary commissions were established for each province, with the mandate of drawing up boundaries internal to each province. With these commissions, the federal government provides some guidance as to how the electoral map is to be drawn, although admittedly there remain many vagaries in the system.

For example, boundaries are expected to be set such that the population of each electoral district within a province does not differ from its provincial average by more than plus or minus 25 per cent. It is also stipulated that these commissions carefully consider input from Canadians and local communities as to how the government might best respect local concerns and interests. In the drawings of constituencies, commissioners have been directed to reflect attention to "communities of localized interest". There has been the legislative expectation that these "communities of interest" be preserved and not be carved up between ridings. The unfortunate complication was that there was an "absence of objective standards by which to judge a community's interest(s)" (Courtney, 2001: 213).

Communities of interest have come to be asserted in terms of geography and traditional settlement patterns. These are easily observable considerations but privilege past attachments over modern multicultural networks and suburbanization. Past notions of community are advantaged as historic towns and villages and their community institutions (school or post offices for example) are more readily visible than emerging multicultural and multiethnic settlements patterns of only two or three decades of existence. Protecting traditional settlements contributes to a moving away from proportionality in the population of the various electoral districts.

Table 1 captures this situation with the distribution and range of population sizes of electoral districts as reported with the Canadian census, by province. While the provincial averages range from a low of only 33,963 in Prince Edward Island through to 117,513 in Alberta, within provinces the individual ridings vary in size from only 26,364 in Labrador, Newfoundland, through to 170,422 in Brampton West, Ontario. Specific provinces allow for considerable variation from the provincial average (for example, Ontario, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Ontario and Quebec) while others enforce a relatively narrow range (Prince Edward Island, Manitoba and Saskatchewan). Virtually all of the least populous ridings are located in northern or rural regions of these provinces, while the largest are virtually all in or surrounding Canada's largest cities. Currently there are at least a dozen electoral districts in suburban Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia that are more populous than Prince Edward Island, Canada's smallest province. This latter province has been relatively privileged in terms of its representation due to both an absence of population growth and its early entrance into confederation.

Table 1. Distribution of the population of federal electoral districts in Canada, by province, 2006

2006 Census with Current Boundaries

Province Territory	Provincial Average	Smallest Riding	Largest Riding
Nfld	72,210	26,364	88,002
P.E.I.	33,963	32,174	35,067
N.S.	83,042	71,968	89,448
N.B.	73,000	53,844	89,334
Quebec	100,615	73,140	122,825
Ontario	114,720	64,291	170,422
Manitoba	82,029	75,103	90,807
Sask.	69,154	60,551	76,273
Alberta	117,513	99,267	138,009
B.C.	114,264	86,811	129,241
Total	102,639	26,364	170,422

Percentage Difference from Provincial Average Plus or Minus

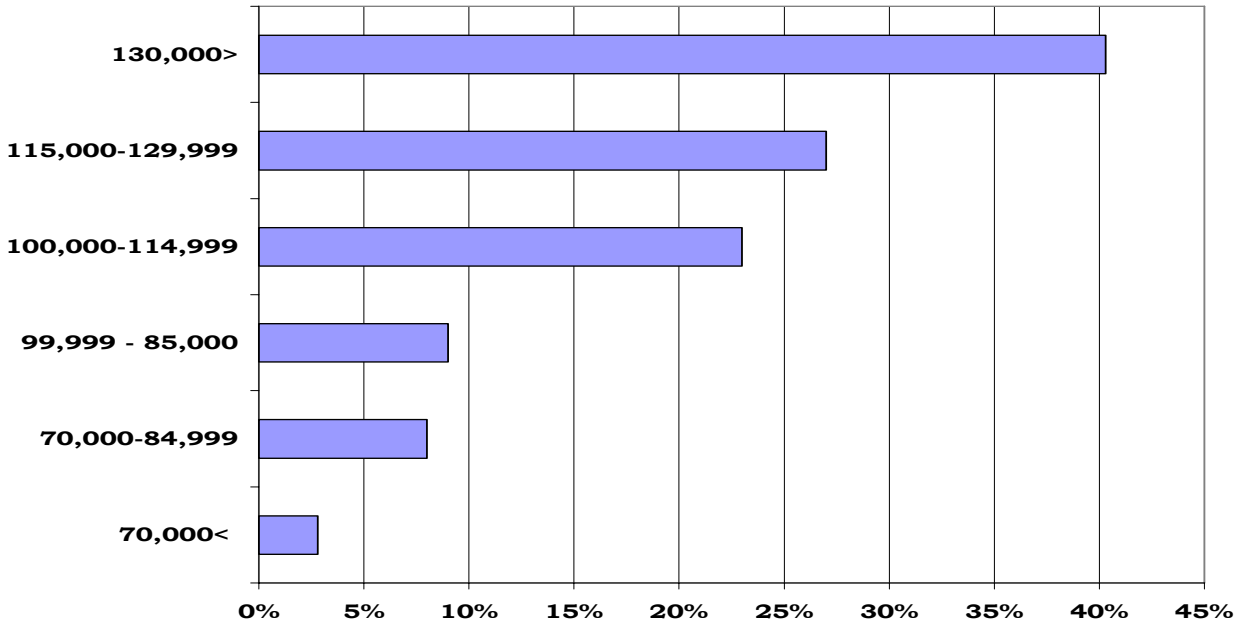
	< 5%	5-10%	10-15%	15-20%	20-25%	25+
Nfld	28.6	14.3	14.3	14.3	14.3	14.3
P.E.I.	75.0	25.0	–	–	–	–
N.S.	36.4	45.5	18.2	–	–	–
N.B.	20.0	20.0	30.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Quebec	50.7	28.0	9.3	8.0	2.7	1.3
Ontario	39.6	24.5	17.0	4.7	4.7	9.4
Manitoba	71.4	21.4	7.1	–	–	–
Sask.	57.1	28.6	14.3	–	–	–
Alberta	35.7	39.3	17.9	7.1	–	–
B.C.	47.2	41.7	2.8	5.6	2.8	–
Total	44.6	29.2	13.1	5.6	3.3	4.3

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006; Author's calculations

This departure from voter parity is likely to widen in upcoming decades

The current representational order penalizes regions of the country that are growing most rapidly – and by extension, the new Canadians who settle in these areas. Systematically, the vote of new Canadians (first and second generation) has come to weigh substantially less than the vote of other Canadians. Similarly, the weight of the vote for all persons residing in metropolitan Canada has come to decline. As Canada's cities grow much more rapidly than elsewhere, the by-product is a very strong association among electoral districts between population size and proportion new to the country (see Figure 3). Among ridings that are greater than 130,000 in population, the average percentage foreign born is roughly 40 percent as of 2006. This contrasts with Canada's least populous ridings (with fewer than 70,000 persons) where only 2-3 percent are foreign born.

Figure 3. Percentage foreign born by size of electoral district, Canada 2006.



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006; author's calculations

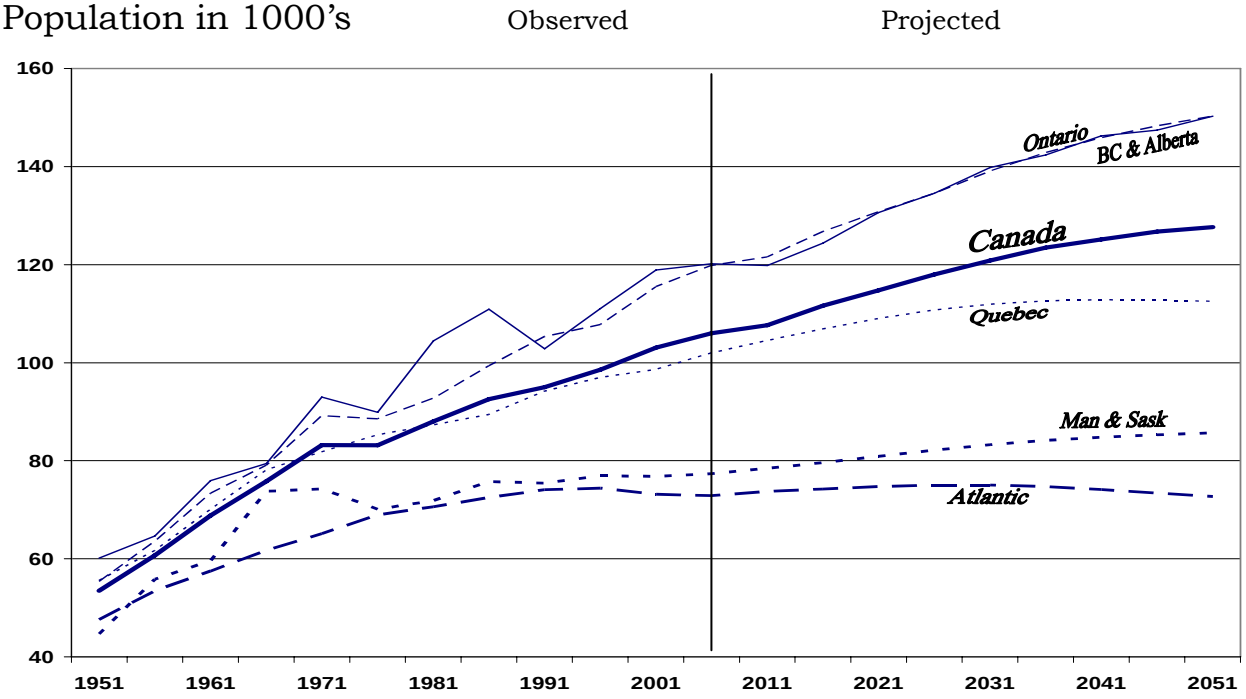
While Canadians vote for candidates across 308 federal electoral districts, the dominant trend has been a continued departure from equality in terms of population size. This has been true historically over the last half century (1951-2006) and will likely continue well into the future. Figure 4 (as presented below) provides evidence to this

effect, in charting both the historical time series on average population size by region, as well as projected population well into the current century (2006-2051). The apportionment formula underlying these projections is merely a continuation of the status quo, whereas the underlying population figures were obtained using a regional cohort component population model. This projection assumes a continuation of recent trends in terms of regional fertility, mortality, immigration and interprovincial migration. These projected averages do not fully capture the expected disparities, as electoral districts within provinces vary to almost the same extent as do ridings across provinces, again to the disadvantage of metropolitan Canada.

In 1951, the range and variance of these averages (in riding population size across provinces) were by today's standards relatively narrow, roughly approximating a situation whereby all votes had roughly equal weight across regions (Figure 4). Yet over the last several decades, this range has widened considerably, such that the inequities inherent in the current distribution are unprecedented. Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta have become increasingly underrepresented in Ottawa. In terms of international migration, Ontario and British Columbia also continue to receive a disproportionate share of international migrants, while Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia all receive more than their share of interprovincial migrants. In applying the current apportionment formula to these population projections, Figure 4 demonstrates a further departure from voter parity into the future.

Overall, Canada's population is expected to climb to perhaps 42 million by 2051. While not presented in Figure 4, this suggests a future House of Commons of 329 MPs by 2051 (or an increase of roughly 7 percent). This compares with the projected growth in population of roughly 30 percent over this same period. As portrayed in Figure 4, average riding size is expected to continue to increase, up to about 128,000 by 2051 using the current formula. If the federal government continues with the status quo, population growth will be accommodated predominantly by both allowing for further growth in the size of electoral districts and to a secondary extent by adding a few additional districts and increasing the size of Canada's Parliament. By 2051, the average riding in Ontario, B.C and Alberta could be twice the average population size as observed for Atlantic Canada.

Figure 4. Average Population size of electoral districts, for Canada and the Provinces, 1951-2006 and projected, 2011 – 2051, using current formula



Source: Statistics Canada, 1951-2006 Federal Electoral District Profiles and author's calculations

An absence of litigation

The right to electoral representation in Canada was recognized in section 3 of the 1982 constitutionally enshrined Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This section guarantees citizens the right to vote and to be able to run for office in the national and/or provincial legislatures. Surprisingly enough voting rights and the above outlined variation in population size by riding has not, to this point, produced much litigation in Canada in marked contrast to the United States. The most noteworthy case was dealt with by the Canadian Supreme Court about two decades ago. At issue was the drawing of provincial boundaries within Saskatchewan and the practice of deviations from strict proportionality in the interests of added representatives for rural and less populated areas. In this western prairie province that has historically been dominated by agriculture, rural ridings generally had fewer people per constituency than their urban counterparts.

The Court asserted that the voting rights clause in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms provided a right to effective representation and not equal voting power. They went on to assert that the presumed added burdens of serving rural constituencies

make it acceptable that such constituencies be markedly less populous. Two arguments were advanced for this disproportionality; one was transportation and communication difficulties in rural locales and second was the Court's belief that rural voters have fewer representative options and must rely more than other voters on their elected representatives (Supreme Court, 1991). Computers and electronic communication advances make the first of these arguments less persuasive with each passing year. Meanwhile the absence of data or detailed explanation for the second of these assumptions makes it of uncertain weight.

That the main Supreme Court case arose in the context of a province historically dominated by agriculture has bequeathed a judicial legacy rooted in preservation of rural life. Elected members serving this kind of population are often called upon to defend rural government and educational offices from closing or to request attention to farm issues. Research comparing the demands of serving these kinds of issues with the work done by urban elected representatives on immigration and refugee caseloads, urban social ills, and promotion of multiculturalism would be helpful to the broader Canadian debate over parliamentary representation and the electoral system. Our contention is that this kind of research is needed as the discrepancy in population size and diversity between urban and rural/small town electoral ridings is growing at a sustained rate.

There is the situation of Quebec (Canada's only province with a French speaking majority). This province carefully monitors the potential loss of status in central governing institutions to the more populous Ontario, as well as the rapidly growing provinces of British Columbia, and Alberta. Fundamental in this context is the future level of their political influence in a context of declining population share. Similarly, while the issue has distinctive implications for Quebec, there is also concern expressed in some of the slower growing Prairie Provinces (Saskatchewan and Manitoba) and Atlantic Canada (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland). In the context of federalism, the role of provincial governments as guardians of provincial interest continues to hold the potential for loud vocal opposition to reform in the apportionment of electoral districts.

Continued sensitivity to regional interests, and the kinds of diverse factors that provincial boundary commissions accommodate, contributes to a lack of elected representation for new urban realities. The representative cost of less populous rural, small town, and northern ridings is paid by urban areas who have significantly fewer seats than their share of the national population would indicate.

Immigration and institutional change

Awarding voting rights to citizens is understandable, but as Canada receives a substantial number of immigrants, there needs to be some examination of the representation needs of new (first and second generation) Canadians. Yet for the moment, this seems unlikely among Canadian politicians as vested interests and provincial/territorial sensitivities over presumed central Canadian dominance in parliament continue to dominate the limited discussions that currently exist on electoral reform.

With Canada's large flow of in-migrants, perceptions have sometimes been mixed. While many Canadians take pride in the country's multi-ethnic character, others express concern over the pace and character of change. As the major source countries for immigration are no longer European, immigrant groups are often defined by the established population as being "different" or "other" in terms of culture and visible minority status. In this context, high levels of immigration need to be accompanied by successful labour market integration and acculturation. As the logical response to the difficulties immigrants sometimes face in establishing themselves in Canada, there is a tendency to situate in the most socially diverse regions of the country, with the by-product being an unevenness in the geography of population growth.

Roughly 25 years ago, Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms declared "This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians" (Government of Canada, 1982). This principle found further expression in federal government multicultural efforts which highlighted the fundamental recognition that distinct ethnic and religious groups be assigned equitable status, without promotion of any specific ethnic, religious, and/or cultural community values as central. Not only is the vote considered a fundamental right of all citizens, but immigrants to Canada are actively encouraged to learn about Canadian affairs and regard voting as a fundamental "responsibility" accompanying their ultimate citizenship status (CIC, 2005). Yet, the electoral system offers little attentiveness to population equality and representational avenues for the fast-growing areas of the country where most immigrants choose to settle and feel at home. Thus, there remains the issue of appropriate political representation for first and second generation Canadians. The electoral districts with the highest proportions foreign born are overwhelmingly more populous. Vote strength is diluted and demands on elected Members large and diverse.

Where does the issue go from here? Herein lies considerable uncertainty. On the one hand there are pressures to leave the issue of electoral apportionment alone. Canadians suffer from constitutional inertia due to the bruising political battles fought over the last three decades. Electoral reform might well be tarred by the national mood of disdain for major institutional reform. Meanwhile, there is much pride about the country's adherence to multiculturalism. How long the multicultural community will endorse such statements amid electoral inequality makes for an intriguing question. The whole issue also points out the ambiguity with which Canadians regard electoral representation and vote equality. There is great national and academic interest in the pursuit of rights claims through the courts. For some reason, there seems less engagement in the ability of Canada's representative institutions to bridge the multicultural divide. Perhaps this is because ethnic identity is weakened by the divides of partisanship, region, and leadership which accompany electoral politics. The whole topic merits continued attention. Canadians are heading into a condition of increasing vote inequality which will be increasingly evident over future decades.

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Don Kerr,
Population Studies Center, University of Western Ontario
Department of Sociology, Kings University College at the University of Western Ontario
dkerr@uwo.ca

Hugh Mellon,
Department of Political Science, Kings University College at the University of Western Ontario,
hmellon@uwo.ca