

COMMENT

on ‘Immigration and Voter Parity in Canada’

Ludi Simpson

The authors asked me to comment on their paper and to give it a UK context. They have identified inequality in representation due to different sized electoral constituencies (Canadian ridings). This inequality correlates with immigrant and ethnic status, though it arises from special treatment of rural and small constituencies, to which immigration is relatively rare. The inequality is projected to increase and should be treated as a significant political issue.

This political inequality is additional to those that might arise from restrictions on rights to vote according to criteria of nationality or residence, from unequal registration and voting rates, and from the proportion of the population who become candidates and elected representatives.

These other aspects of inequality related to minorities rooted in recent immigration are reviewed for the UK by Mohammed Anwar (2001), while markedly unequal electoral districts as Don and Hugh show so clearly for Canada do not arise in the UK parliamentary elections or European elections. These are based on constituencies whose electorate size is approximately homogenised when boundaries are redrawn each decade or so.

However, the elected governing bodies of cities have similar numbers of members and for this reason representation varies according to the city’s population. The largest constituencies for local Council elections (as distinct from parliamentary and European elections) are in the largest-population cities, and these are where the immigrant and ethnically black and Asian populations mostly reside (Paul Norman et al., 2007). The city councillors of London, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Leicester, Bradford and Manchester all have many times more residents to represent than rural or small-town councillors. But it is hard to see how this could be avoided without creating other undemocratic impacts of councils that cover a huge rural area or a minor part of each city. Number of electors is not the only, nor the most important criteria for drawing local government electoral boundaries (Kingsley Purdam et al., 2008).

Don and Hugh’s mix of estimates for the past and the future population implicitly raises another issue. The distribution of political

influence through electoral constituencies, and of national public resources to city governments, is usually based on estimates of population in each area in the recent past as in Canada. Would it not be better to base distribution of electoral power and resources on forecasts of population for the years in which the influence and resources will be wielded?

References:

Muhammad Anwar (2001) The participation of ethnic minorities in British politics, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27(3): 533-549.

Kingsley Purdam, Peter John, Stephen Greasley, Paul Norman (2008) How many elected representatives does local government need? A review of evidence from Europe. CCSR Paper 2008-06, University of Manchester.

Paul Norman, Kingsley Purdam, Abdelouahid Tajar and Ludi Simpson (2007) Representation and local democracy: Geographical variations in elector to councillor ratios. *Political Geography*, 26(1), 57-77.

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