

Electoral and Political Implications Of a Larger Canadian Parliament

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This article deals with the recent increase in the number of seats in Canada's Parliament from 308 to 338, and how it impacted the outcome of the 2015 federal elections. Although the adjustment was made in 2012 and 2013, it actually came into effect with the 2015 elections. One reason for it is that Canada's population has grown in recent decades. Taking into account 2015 data, I estimated the number of votes per district in each province, as well as the representation of each in terms of population and the number of parliamentary seats. Then I analyzed the implications of this redistribution with regard to the role of the provinces in national political dynamics.

In the process of adjusting the electoral boundary lines in Canada, the following items are of interest:

1. The number of seats in Parliament increased from 308 to 338, or 10 percent, while the country's population rose 14 percent between 1999 and 2012.
2. In this process, the province most benefited was Ontario, which saw the number of its districts go up by 15, from 106 to 121 seats. The province least benefited was Quebec, whose representation in the lower house rose only by 3, from 75 to 78 seats. Alberta and British Columbia each saw an increase of 6 seats, the first going from 28 to 34 and the second, from 36 to 42. The rest of the provinces and territories' representations remained the same: Saskatchewan (14), Manitoba (14), Nova Scotia (11), New Brunswick (10), Prince Edward Island (4), Newfoundland and Labrador (7), and the territories of the Yukon, Nunavut, and Northwest Territories, one seat each.

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3. The assignation of new seats was done under the aegis of an independent commission, in accordance with electoral legislation. However, the determining criterion for the reconfiguration was the population growth in each province and specifically, each district. In addition, district or riding boundary lines were redrawn by different independent electoral commissions (one in each province), thus preventing the federal government or any political party from influencing the process in their favor.
4. Nevertheless, some analysts suggest that the number of seats was increased to favor the then-Prime Minister Harper's Conservative Party. For example, if Canada's 2011 federal elections had been carried out using the newly drawn riding boundary lines, the Conservative Party would have won 22 of the 30 new seats, the New Democratic Party, 6 seats, and the Liberal Party, only 2.¹
5. The implications of this political reorganization for each of Canada's provinces are different. In the first place, the province of Quebec has seen its power and influence decline since its representation in Parliament has dropped with its slow population growth. In the second place, the western provinces have been strengthened, particularly Alberta and British Columbia. In the third place, although the Atlantic and Prairie provinces continue to have the same number of seats, they have lost a slight percentage of their overall representation. Finally, Ontario has extended its power and influence.

MORE SEATS IN PARLIAMENT

The adjustment and redistribution of seats in Parliament have been carried out according to the national census. According to Canada's Constitution, federal electoral districts must be revised every 10 years to take into account changes in the census.² This means that the provinces with the greatest population will have the largest number of seats. However, the senatorial clause of the Constitution Act of 1867 guarantees each province will have at least the same number of members of Parliament as senators, and the "grandfather clause" provides that each will have at least the same number of members as they had in 1985.³ As we will see, this benefits



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the smaller provinces, particularly the Atlantic provinces like Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick.

The most recent federal boundary adjustment process began in 2012 and concluded a year later. It was headed by independent commissions that worked separately in each province to set each district's boundaries. In the case of the

TABLE 1
SEATS IN CANADIAN PARLIAMENT (BY YEAR)

Year of Announcement of Increase in Number of Seats in Lower House	Number of Seats	Population (millions)
2011	338	34.3
2001	308	30.0
1997	301	29.6
1987	295	26.1
1976	282	24.2

Source: Developed by the author using data from Statistics Canada, "Estimated population of Canada, 1605 to present," 2015, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/98-187-x/4151287-eng.htm>, accessed November 20, 2015; Elections Canada, "House of Commons: Seat Allocation by Province," <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=cir/red/allo&document=index&lang=e>, accessed November 5, 2015; and Robert Marleau and Camille Montpetit, *House of Commons: procedure and practice* (Montreal: Chenelière/McGraw-Hill, 2000).

TABLE 2
CANADA'S POPULATION BY PROVINCE AND TERRITORY (2001-2011)
(THOUSANDS)

	2001	2007	2011	2001-2011 (%)*
Canada	30 007	32 112	34 342	14
Newfoundland and Labrador	512	503	525	3
Prince Edward Island	135	136	144	7
Nova Scotia	908	915	944	4
New Brunswick	729	730	755	4
Quebec	7 237	7 641	8 007	11
Ontario	11 410	12 394	13 263	16
Manitoba	1 119	1 157	1 233	10
Saskatchewan	978	965	1 066	9
Alberta	2 974	3 391	3 790	27
British Columbia	3 907	4 177	4 499	15
Yukon	28	31	35	25
Northwest Territories	37	42	43	16
Nunavut	26	30	34	31

Source: Developed by the author using data from Statistics Canada, "Estimated population of Canada, 1605 to present," 2015, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/98-187-x/4151287-eng.htm>, accessed November 10, 2015.
*Percentages calculated by the author.

TABLE 3
SEATS IN CANADIAN PARLIAMENT BY PROVINCE AND TERRITORY
(2001-2011)

	2001	Increase	2011	2001-2011(%)*
Canada	308	30	338	10
Newfoundland and Labrador	7	0	7	0
Prince Edward Island	4	0	4	0
Nova Scotia	11	0	11	0
New Brunswick	10	0	10	0
Quebec	75	3	78	4
Ontario	106	15	121	14
Manitoba	14	0	14	0
Saskatchewan	14	0	14	0
Alberta	28	6	34	21
British Columbia	36	6	42	17
Yukon	1	0	1	0
Northwest Territories	1	0	1	0
Nunavut	1	0	1	0

Source: Developed by the author using data from Elections Canada, "House of Commons: Seat Allocation by Province," <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=cir/red/allo&document=index&lang=e>, accessed November 5, 2015.
*Percentages calculated by the author.

three territories, no commissions were needed since each has a single seat in Parliament and their inhabitants make up less than one percent of the entire population.

The process not only involved increasing the number of seats for the country's most populated provinces,⁴ but also implied a territorial redistribution of the seats in all the provinces, taking into account population density. In fact, only 44 of the 338 districts were left unchanged following the 2011 elections.⁵

An analysis of recent decades shows the dimensions of the increase in the number of seats in Canada's Parliament. For example, around 1976, the lower house had 282 seats. By 1987, the number had risen to 295; by 1997, to 301; and in 2001, to 308. That is, between 1979 and 2011, the number of seats had increased four times. However, the most recent modification has been the most significant in Canada's history (see Table 5): in 1987, the number of seats rose by 13; in 1997, only by 6; in 2001, by 7; and most recently, by 30 (see Table 1). From 1979 to 2011, Canada's population grew a

little over 40 percent, rising from 24.2 million to 34.3 million, while the number of parliamentary seats expanded only 20 percent, going from 282 to 338.

POPULATION LEVELS AND PROVINCIAL REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT

It is pertinent to contrast the rise in population and the increase in the number of parliamentary seats since the latter depends on the former. The province with the most inhabitants is Ontario, followed by Quebec, British Columbia, and Alberta; then Manitoba and Saskatchewan; the Atlantic provinces, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island, which are among the least populated;

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TABLE 4
SEATS IN CANADIAN PARLIAMENT BY PROVINCE AND TERRITORY (2001-2011)

	Population (2015) (thousands)	Number of Seats	Population per Seat (thousands)	Percentage of the Population	Percentage of Seats in Parliament*
Canada	35 851	338	106	100	100
Newfoundland and Labrador	527	7	75	1	2
Prince Edward Island	146	4	37	0	1
Nova Scotia	943	11	86	3	3
New Brunswick	753	10	75	2	3
Quebec	8 263	78	106	23	23
Ontario	13 792	121	114	38	36
Manitoba	1 293	14	92	4	4
Saskatchewan	1 133	14	81	3	4
Alberta	4 196	34	123	12	10
British Columbia	4 683	42	112	13	12
Yukon	37	1	37	0	0
Northwest Territories	44	1	44	0	0
Nunavut	36	1	36	0	0

Source: Developed by the author using data from Statistics Canada, "Population by Year, by Province and Territory (Number)," 2015, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/101/cst01/demo02a-eng.htm>, accessed November 5, 2015; and Elections Canada, "House of Commons: Seat Allocation by Province," 2015, <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=cir/red/allo&document=index&lang=e>, accessed November 5, 2015.

*Percentages calculated by the author.

TABLE 5
SEATS IN CANADIAN PARLIAMENT (TOTAL AND BY PROVINCE) (1867-2015)

	Canada	Ontario	Quebec	N.S.	N.B.	Manitoba	B.C.	P.E.I.	Sask.	Alberta	Nfld.	NwT	YT	Nun.
1867	181	82	65	19	15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1870	185	82	65	19	15	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1871	191	82	65	19	15	4	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1872	200	88	65	21	16	4	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1873	206	88	65	21	16	4	6	6	-	-	-	-	-	-
1882	211	92	65	21	16	5	6	6	-	-	-	-	-	-
1886	215	92	65	21	16	5	6	6	-	-	-	4	-	-
1892	213	92	65	20	14	7	6	5	-	-	-	4	-	-
1902	214	92	65	20	14	7	6	5	-	-	-	4	1	-
1903	214	86	65	18	13	10	7	4	-	-	-	1	1	-
1905	221	86	65	18	13	10	7	4	10	7	-	-	1	-
1914	234	82	65	16	11	15	13	3	16	12	-	-	1	-
1915	235	82	65	16	11	15	13	4	16	12	-	-	1	-
1924	245	82	65	14	11	17	14	4	21	16	-	-	1	-
1933	245	82	65	12	10	17	16	4	21	17	-	-	1	-
1947	255	83	73	13	10	16	18	4	20	17	-	-	1	-
1949	262	83	73	13	10	16	18	4	20	17	7	-	1	-
1952	265	85	75	12	10	14	22	4	17	17	7	1	1	-
1966	264	88	74	11	10	13	23	4	13	19	7	1	1	-
1975	265	88	74	11	10	13	23	4	13	19	7	2	1	-
1976	282	95	75	11	10	14	28	4	14	21	7	2	1	-
1987	295	99	75	11	10	14	32	4	14	26	7	2	1	-
1997	301	103	75	11	10	14	34	4	14	26	7	2	1	-
1999	301	103	75	11	10	14	34	4	14	26	7	1	1	1
2004	308	106	75	11	10	14	36	4	14	28	7	1	1	1
2015	338	121	78	11	10	14	42	4	14	34	7	1	1	1

Source: Developed by the author using data from Robert Marleau and Camille Montpetit, *House of Commons: procedure and practice* (Montreal: Chenelière/McGraw-Hill, 2000); and Elections Canada, <http://www.elections.ca/home.aspx>.

and finally the three territories, the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, and Nunavut.

Between 2001 and 2011, the pan-Canadian population increased 14 percent. This as an important jump, since in the 1990s, it grew 11 percent. The province with the highest percentage growth was Alberta, with 27 percent; followed by Ontario, with 16 percent, and British Columbia, with 15 percent, both of which were over the 14-percent national average. These were followed by Quebec (11 percent), Manitoba (10 percent), Saskatchewan (9 percent), Prince Edward Island (7 percent), Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (4 percent each),

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and Newfoundland and Labrador (3 percent). That is, the four provinces whose number of seats in Parliament grew were those whose populations grew the most in the period (see Table 2).

In percentage terms, the new electoral arrangement gave the biggest hike to Alberta (21 percent), followed by British Columbia (17 percent), Ontario (14 percent), and lastly, Quebec

Canadian voter trends in recent elections reveal that their electoral decisions are based more on momentary issues than on their identification with a particular political party.

(4 percent). The rest of the provinces and territories experienced no changes (see Table 3).

On the other hand, recent data from 2015, shows that the representation of the provinces in terms of population corresponds closely to their representation in Parliament, taking into account the number of electoral districts *vis-à-vis* the total. So, Ontario represents 38 percent of the country's total population and has 36 percent of the parliamentary ridings. Quebec represents 23 percent of the population and has the same percentage of parliamentary seats. British Columbia is home to 13 percent of the population and has 12 percent of the seats; Alberta has 12 percent of the population but only 10 percent of the federal ridings. For the rest of the provinces and territories, the percentage of parliamentary seats coincides with their share of the country's population, except for a few relatively sparsely-populated provinces like Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Labrador, and New Brunswick, whose representation in Parliament is slightly greater than their population percentage (see Table 4).

POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL IMPLICATIONS

Some analysts think that the reconfiguration of the electoral districts was supposedly going to favor the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his party.⁶ However, the Liberal Party won the majority of parliamentary seats, putting Justin Trudeau in office as prime minister.

This shows once again that voting in Canada is unpredictable: the results of one federal election do not always define the outcome of the next. The choices of a significant number of voters in Canada cannot be predicted, and, while in 2011 the Conservatives won the majority of Ontario ridings, particularly in the Toronto metropolitan area, in 2015, the Liberal Party won hands down in that same province. A review of Canadian voter trends in recent elections reveals that their electoral decisions are based more on momentary issues than on their identification with a particular political party.

CONCLUSION

Increasing the number and redrawing the lines of Canada's electoral districts is a process that is carried out periodically, based on national census results. As pointed out above, Ontario was the province most favored by the recent expansion of Parliament. Equally, British Columbia and Alberta saw their seats in the lower chamber increase, while Quebec was the least favored and the rest of the provinces did not get any new seats. Based on the data analyzed here, we can underline that the provinces whose populations grew the most were those whose number of seats increased. It is possible that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government did exert a certain amount of influence in redrawing the electoral district boundaries in order to create more districts in areas where he had won in past elections. However, the unpredictability of Canadian voters turned around the results in the 2015 elections, favoring the Liberal Party in places and provinces that had been Conservative Party bastions, particularly under Harper. **MM**

FURTHER READING

- Elections Canada, "House of Commons: Seat Allocation by Province," 2015, <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=cir/red/allo&document=index&lang=e> accessed November 5, 2015.
- Statistics Canada, "Estimated population of Canada, 1605 to present," 2015, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/98-187-x/4151287-eng.htm>, accessed November 1, 2015.

NOTES

- ¹ Chris Hannay, "Tories Stand to Benefit from 2015's New Electoral Map, Elections Canada Data Show," *The Globe and Mail*, Ottawa, January 31, 2014.
- ² Elections Canada, "Canada's Federal Electoral Districts," 2015, <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=cir/list&document=index338&lang=e>, accessed November 18, 2015.
- ³ Robert Marleau and Camille Montpetit, *House of Commons: Procedure and Practice* (Montreal: Chenelière/McGraw-Hill, 2000).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Chris Hannay, *op. cit.*
- ⁶ Ralph Goodale, "Harpers's Strategy for Winning? Manipulating the Election Map," *The Huffington Post Canada*, March 4, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/ralph-goodale/conservatives-gerrymandering-saskatchewan_b_2597976.html, accessed November 1, 2015; and Katie Hyslop, "Timeline: How Tories Changed Canadian Elections," *The Tyee*, October 17, 2015, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2015/10/17/Tories-Changed-Canadian-Elections/>, accessed November 15, 2015.