DEMOGRAPHY IN ACTION:
The Impact of Future Population Changes On Canadian Parliamentary Institutions

BY Jack Jedwab

FOR MANY, THE RESULTS OF THE FEDERAL ELECTIONS OF NOVEMBER 27TH 2000 REAFFIRMED THE IMPORTANCE OF REGIONALISM IN CANADIAN POLITICS. MUCH LIKE THE OUTCOMES IN 1993 AND IN 1997, THE RECENT LIBERAL VICTORY WAS LARGELY ATTRIBUTABLE TO THE PARTY'S DOMINANCE IN ONTARIO, COMBINED WITH SUPPORT IN THE LARGER URBAN CENTRES OF QUEBEC AND THE ATLANTIC PROVINCES. AS FOR THE REST OF THE COUNTRY, THE CANADIAN ALLIANCE CONTROLLED MUCH OF THE WEST, WHILE THE BLOC QUEBECOIS THAT DOES NOT ASPIRE TO FORM THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT HELD A SLIGHT MAJORITY OF THE SEATS IN QUEBEC.

SHOULD THE RESPECTIVE REGIONAL STRONGHOLDS OF THE THREE PARTIES REMAIN AS SUCH, THE OUTCOME OF FUTURE NATIONAL ELECTIONS WILL BE DETERMINED BY THE CHANGING *DEMOGRAPHIC* IMPORTANCE OF THE REGIONS. THUS, SO LONG AS ONTARIO VOTES OVERWHELMINGLY FOR ONE PARTY, THE CHANCES OF ANOTHER POLITICAL FORMATION BECOMING THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT ESPECIALLY STRONG. THE INTERSECTION OF DEMOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IS A DEMO-POLITICAL SITUATION THAT IS CERTAINLY RELEVANT TO SUCH THINGS AS CABINET FORMATION AND POLITICAL PERSONNEL.

Historically, the geographic representation in the Parliament of Canada has been very sensitive to the distribution of the national population along regional lines. With the vast majority of Canadians living in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec at the time of Confederation, it was clear that for some time they would dominate the new national government. Over the next one hundred years the situation evolved, as the Western provinces of Alberta and British Columbia benefited from interprovincial migration and international immigration. However, their growth has not been such that they approach the size of the provinces of Quebec and Ontario.

Many observers have commented that the history of Canada itself is one of compromises. Certainly, the question of provincial representation in the House of Commons is a case in point. Yet in spite of this, it is fair to say that even today the principle of representation by population remains at the root of the electoral system in Canada, as in many other countries.

THE FEDERATION ON THE MOVE

The overall beneficiaries of the migratory behaviour of the 1990's were the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario. The last two provinces each experienced a 15% increase in their real numbers between July 1991 and January 2000. For its part, the population of British Columbia increased by 20% over the decade. These population changes translated into gains in their respective share of the Canadian population while contributing to decreases in the other provinces.

FUTURE PROJECTIONS

Statistics Canada has been conducting work in projecting the population of Canada and the provinces for the year 2026. Its initial hypotheses were based on strong outflows to the Western part of the country. The medium growth projections for the provinces for the year 2026 provided the results below:

TABLE 1 – CANADIAN POPULATION PROJECTIONS FOR 2026 (000s)

	Population 2001	*% of total*	*Population 2026 (medium growth)*	*% of total*
Canada	30,606	-	36,205	-
Ontario	11,410	38%	14,840	41%
Quebec	7,237	24%	7,558	21%
British Columbia	3,907	13%	5,706	16%
Alberta	2,974	9.9%	3,622	10%
Manitoba	1,119	3,7%	1,159	3,2%
Saskatchewan	978	3,3%	948	2,6%
Nova Scotia	908	3.0%	933	2,6%
New Brunswick	729	2,5%	697	1,9%
Newfoundland	512	1,7%	460	1,3%
P.E.I.	135	0,5%	141	0,4%
Yukon	28	0,1%	31	0,1%
NWT	37	0,1%	60	0,2%
Nunavit	26	0,1%	44	0,1%

Source: Statistics Canada / CANSIM 2001

If these projections are accurate, Ontario's share of the Canadian population will increase to 41%, while B.C.'s will move up to 16%, Alberta's to 10% and Quebec's will decline to about 21%. But changes in the patterns of interprovincial migration in a manner less favorable to the Western part of the country would imply that Ontario's future population may exceed what was initially estimated by Statistics Canada.

DEMO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Representation in the House of Commons is readjusted after each decennial (10-year) census to reflect changes and movements in Canada's population in accordance with the *Constitution Act, 1867*, and the *Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act* (1985, as amended).

On June 13, 1992, following the release of the population figures from the 1991 census, the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada published, in the *Canada Gazette*, the calculations required by the *Constitution Act, 1867*. The result was an increase in the number of seats in the House of Commons from 295 to 301, with four additional seats attributed to Ontario and two additional seats to British Columbia. Federal electoral district boundaries were subsequently revised in all provinces.

The representation order that resulted and that remains in effect allocates 7 seats to Newfoundland, 4 to Prince Edward Island, 11 to Nova Scotia, 10 to New Brunswick, 75 to Quebec, 103 to Ontario, 14 to Manitoba, 14 to Saskatchewan, 26 to Alberta and 34 to British Columbia. The *Constitution Act, 1867* allocates 1 seat to the Yukon Territory, 1 to the Northwest Territories and 1 to Nunavut.

REPRESENTATION

One of the crucial questions faced by the Fathers of Confederation in 1867 was how to ensure equal representation in the House of Commons of Canada, while at the same time guaranteeing that each region of the country had a fair say in the daily operations of the new federation. The idea of "representation by population" was adopted as a principle wherein each province was extended a number of seats that directly corresponded to its proportion of the total population in relation to that of Quebec. Around this principle a formula was designed for distributing to each province its number of seats in the House of Commons.

From the start, however, there was a recognition of the geographic, cultural, political and demographic diversity of the new provinces, as well as population size and rural and urban characteristics. As more provinces entered Confederation and as some regions grew and developed more than others, the diversity became increasingly apparent and a certain degree of flexibility had to be built into the formula. As a result, the principle of representation by population was adapted to ensure equity between the larger and the smaller provinces. The history of representation is one of seeking a fair voice for all parts of Canada in the House of Commons.

THE PRESENT FORMULA

To hold down a sizeable increase in the number of seats, Parliament passed the *Representation Act, 1985*. Its adoption greatly simplified the formula for calculating representation.

The current formula for representation is applied by carrying out the following four steps:

1. *Allocation to the territories.* Starting with the 282 seats that the House of Commons of Canada had in 1985, one seat is allocated to the Northwest Territories, one to the Yukon Territory and one to Nunavut, leaving 279 seats. This number is used to calculate the electoral quotient.
2. *Calculation of the electoral district average.* The total population of the ten provinces is divided by 279 to obtain the *electoral quota* or quotient, which is used to determine the number of seats for each province.
3. *Distribution of seats to each province.* The theoretical number of seats to be allocated to each province in the House of Commons is calculated by dividing the total population of each province by the quotient obtained in step 2. If the result leaves a remainder higher than 0.50, the number of seats is rounded up to the next whole number.

Under this formula, and using the projections in Table 1, the following would be the new provincial seat allocations in the House of Commons in 2026 (1976 numbers in brackets): Ontario – 114 (95), Quebec – 75 (75), British Columbia – 44 (28), Alberta – 28 (21), Manitoba – 14 (14), Saskatchewan – 14 (14), Nova Scotia – 11 (11), New Brunswick – 10 (10), Newfoundland – 7 (7), PEI – 4 (4).

WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN TO CANADA

If these population changes prove accurate, then at some point the way in which the nation is governed may require rethinking based on the regional demographic shifts. Will demographic pressures be such that decision-makers will at some point in the future feel obliged to propose some new mode of governance for the nation? Or perhaps the status quo will be regarded as untenable to the largest province, and the growing Western provinces may also seek reform. At the same time those provinces with declining populations may seek guarantees to preserve regional, economic and/or cultural interests. Indeed, there has been growing discussion about reforming Canada's electoral system and in some quarters consideration is being given to such ideas as proportional representation and preferential voting. This fall, the Government of Quebec is embarking on a province-wide consultation in advance of an Estates General focused on electoral and institutional reforms.

An opinion survey conducted from June 25, 2002 to July 16, 2002, released by the Association for Canadian Studies and Environics, inquires into the views of Canadians on systems of proportional representation, preferential voting and our current arrangement commonly referred to as 'first-past-the-post'. Generally, the poll revealed that while a majority of Canadians are not dissatisfied with the current system they clearly appear open to alternatives. For example, when asked about proportional representation, some 23% strongly agree with this approach while 39% somewhat agree. While preferential voting garners less interest, some 46% of respondents seem attracted to the idea.

TABLE 2 (CANADA AS A WHOLE)

	Proportional Representation	*Preferential Voting*	*First-Past-the-Post*
Strongly Agree	23%	14%	21%
Somewhat Agree	39%	32%	36%
Somewhat Oppose	17%	20%	24%
Strongly Oppose	14%	30%	16%
DK/NA	7%	4%	3%

Source: Association for Canadian Studies / Environics

On first glance the findings appear contradictory. However, a distinction needs to be made between those who 'somewhat' and those who 'strongly' support each of the three options. The importance of the distinction is revealed when respondents are asked to indicate their preference among the three systems. Canadians tend to favour proportional representation (34%) and first-past-the-post (33%) followed by preferential voting (25%).

On a regional basis, Quebecers are by far the most favourable to the current system, with some 48% expressing a preference for first-past-the-post. Quebec, the Atlantic provinces and Manitoba are the only parts of the country where the current system remains the preferred choice of a plurality of respondents. Elsewhere in Canada it is proportional representation that is the first choice (though again not by a majority of respondents) and support for this system grows west of Manitoba. In British Columbia some 43% of respondents favour proportional representation, 39% in Alberta, 36% in Saskatchewan and 34% in Ontario. In the three westernmost provinces, the current system is the last choice amongst the three options, with approximately one out of five respondents in favour.

Not surprisingly, the strongest desire for change emanates from western Canada. Tom Flanagan has argued that: 'there is a dissatisfaction with the way that our electoral system translates votes into seats and there is a strong regional dimension to this dissatisfaction...' He contends that the Liberals continue to govern through their overwhelming domination of Ontario and adds that for 75 years large numbers of Western voters have shown themselves unwilling to remain with the two old-line parties. Conversely it might be argued that Alberta's near systematic historic rejection of the federal Liberals has meant a relatively perpetual role in the opposition for the officials elected from that part of the country and raising the issue of who must ultimately adopt to whom. It is worth remembering that underlying the desire for changes to the system is the diverse political culture of the Canadian population.

At issue is merely how we as Canadians will be governed in the future. There are already calls for change across much of the country. Canada's shifting demography might just serve to make those calls louder and more frequent.

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