

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Drawing boundaries: Electoral redistribution in Canada

By Kelly Saunders, PhD



Why this research is important

When Canadians think about federal elections, chances are that redistribution, and the drawing of electoral boundaries within and across the provinces, are not issues that first come to mind. Yet redistribution constitutes a fundamental building block of representative democracy. In order to exercise our right to vote in a federal election, electoral districts are necessary since it is through these territorially defined units that votes are translated into representation in the House of Commons. Therefore, how these districts are determined, the principles that guide this process and the individuals tasked with making these decisions are vital to maintaining the integrity of our system of governance. Redistribution and the allocation of

What you need to know

Every ten years, following the national census, federal electoral districts in Canada are reviewed and redrawn to factor in population growth and demographic shifts. This process, known as redistribution, is undertaken by independent, three-person commissions appointed in each province by the Speaker of the House of Commons. In determining what the new electoral map in each province should look like, provincial commissions consider a number of factors as outlined in the constitution and in federal legislation, including voter equity (ensuring that the population numbers in each electoral district are as similar as reasonably possible), geographic size, and communities of interest and identity. While commissions consult with MPs and the general public in drafting their proposals, they have the final say on all electoral boundaries, along with the names assigned to each electoral district. Once the process is completed, the new boundaries take effect in time for the country's next general election.

seats to the provinces can also have a profound effect on which party forms government in Ottawa.

How the research was conducted

Despite the salience of redistribution to Canadian democracy and the electoral process, it remains an

understudied area within Canadian politics and governance. This research aims to fill this gap. My methodology consisted of a scoping review of the existing scholarly literature on redistribution, in addition to interviews conducted with commissioners from electoral boundaries commissions across Canada. In undertaking this project, I drew on my own experiences as a two-time commissioner with the Electoral Boundaries Commission for Manitoba, in 2012 and again in 2022, and the insights and knowledge I gained through these endeavours.

What the researcher found

Electoral redistribution in Canada is not a straightforward task; rather, it involves normative choices regarding the manner in which seats in the House of Commons are allocated to provinces, the criteria used to delineate electoral boundaries within the provinces, and the ways in which these criteria are defined and prioritized by decision-makers. In undertaking their work, electoral boundaries commissions must carefully navigate between two primary yet sometimes conflicting goals: voter equality and pluralism. Voter equality infers that, in a liberal democracy, each vote should carry equal weight. Hence, in a representative system of single-member districts, each of these districts should have roughly the same number of people to ensure that some peoples' votes aren't more valuable than others. Yet, unlike other countries such as the United States—which adheres to strict population standards in its redistricting exercises—Canada has adopted a more flexible approach that balances the goal of voter equality with other considerations. This second goal, which I label pluralism, seeks to shelter regions and provinces in Canada experiencing population declines and protect historic levels of representation for small provinces. Pluralism also involves consideration of other factors, such as geography and communities of interest and identity. How commissions delicately balance these

competing norms of individual rights and community of interest remains a point of contestation in Canadian politics.

How this research can be used

This research project contributes to scholarly research in this area. It will also be of value to policymakers within federal and provincial governments as they consider the mechanisms and guiding principles through which redistribution is conducted in Canada, and the ways in which these processes can be improved.

Additionally, this research will be helpful to future federal electoral boundaries commissions as they undertake their own redistribution exercises, and seek to balance issues related to voter equality, communities of interest, and geography in a country as vast and diverse as ours.

About the researcher

Dr. Kelly Saunders is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Brandon University.

Saundersk@brandonu.ca

Keywords

Voting, redistribution, electoral boundaries

Acknowledgements

Research Connection is a periodical publication intended to provide information about the impact of Brandon University's academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice.

This summary is supported by the Office of Research Services, the Centre for Aboriginal and Rural Education Studies, and the federally funded Research Support Fund.

Editor: Christiane Ramsey Ramseyc@brandonu.ca

<http://www.brandonu.ca/research-connection>

BRANDON UNIVERSITY

Brandon University, founded in 1899, promotes excellence in teaching, research, and scholarship, and educates students so that they can make a meaningful difference as engaged citizens and leaders. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Thank you to ResearchImpact-RéseauImpactRecherche (researchimpact.ca) for their permission to adapt the ResearchSnapshot clear language research summary format.

