

Reducing Seats in a Legislature Must Be Looked at in Context

In this article, the author explains why people may not be better served by having fewer elected representatives. She outlines the multifaceted dimensions of constituency work and explains how geography – particularly in rural or northern areas – can challenge a politician’s ability to effectively reach constituents and hear their concerns. She notes that while technological innovations can help build connections with constituents, not all areas have adequate communications networks. The author notes that potential cost savings of having fewer politicians is not as straightforward as it may seem, that backbenchers are not all as underworked as people may believe, and having fewer seats in a legislature won’t necessarily make it easier for parties to run a full slate of candidates. She concludes by contending that changes to the system itself should be where efforts are directed and proposals to reduce or increase the number of representatives in the system should be examined in context.

Lorraine Michael

An elected representative does a lot of work that the public doesn’t see. There is so much more than what occurs in the chamber of the legislative assembly. The public may not be aware of the multifaceted dimensions of constituency work. When someone proposes to reduce the number of seats, the public picture is that there will be fewer politicians. What they miss is the harm that it does for our democracy.

If you lessen the number of parliamentarians, the same amount of work becomes spread among fewer people. Upping their workload is problematic. Members of a legislative committee conduct a lot of background work.

In a small province like Newfoundland and Labrador, private members may not have enough resources to support their advocacy for constituents or to research issues being discussed in the legislature. MHAs have one constituency assistant. There is some



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research support available through the caucus, but that is not available to Independents, and there are times that members have to conduct the research themselves due to a lack of support staff. It is a very different situation in Ottawa where Members of Parliament have many supports.

If a parliamentarian has to represent a larger constituency, the number of people contacting your office increases, and members can become overloaded. It is a problem for the democratic system if constituents complain that their phone calls are not getting returned. The more that citizens feel disconnected from the people who represent them the more they become detached from the system itself. Having fewer representatives ultimately hurts the democratic process.

Larger electoral districts are a serious problem in a country with as much geography as Canada. Some rural ridings span huge distances and include remote areas. As an MHA whose electoral district was five minutes away from the legislature, I often felt badly for colleagues who had to fly home and then drive more than two hours to get to an event. The difference of the needs at one end of a rural district can be quite different than another. One end of a district can have public transit and health care access whereas the other end does not. How can an elected representative figure out what issues to emphasize? The potential lack of district cohesion complicates representation and advocacy. These sorts of variances do not happen in a city. One size does not fit all when it comes to looking at electoral districts.

The argument that representation has improved with changes in communications technology ignores that constituents want personal contact. In some rural and remote areas across Canada, including areas of Newfoundland and Labrador, adequate communications services still do not exist. You cannot travel around Labrador and expect to connect with someone using Wi-Fi on your laptop. There are lots of places across the province where cellphone coverage is spotty. You might have to stop partway up a hill at a specific point so that you can use your phone.

It is true that communications technology has made a big difference. But assumptions about accessibility in a city may not apply to rural and remote areas. Improved communications options mean that you can be better engaged. It shouldn't mean cutting the number of representatives and reducing the quality of engagement with constituents.

Another way that technology has improved the work of parliamentarians is on all-party committees. It can be difficult to get all members to attend a meeting when some of them are in their electoral districts. The meeting can proceed with teleconferencing. That technology doesn't mean that committees should function with fewer members. Rather, it allows for greater inclusion.

Cost savings should not be the basis for a decision about the number of members of a legislative assembly. The bottom line has to be the needs of the people. Parliamentarians are there to ensure that people's needs are being taken care of. They bring that voice

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into ministries and to the legislature. The proposed savings are rarely straightforward. For instance, the large size of a district might determine that there needs to be an additional constituency office. The idea that fewer electoral districts makes it easier to run a full slate of candidates overlooks several factors. We need to do a better job at educating younger people about our political system, such as requiring civic education courses in high school. Young people need

to learn about governance and visualize themselves as citizens who could participate for the good of their community. There are barriers to participation for some people, such as women who require childcare support or lack the financial resources to ensure there is a level playing field among candidates. If party A is promising more than party B, a prospective candidate will run with the better funded party even though it isn't the party they have supported. There are all kinds of systemic aspects that impede people from running in an election. In Ottawa, at least, there is some semblance of trying to ensure that all political parties have greater equality with election finances. Another issue is that fixed date election legislation is not always followed. Snap elections can catch opposition parties off guard; this also has implications for candidate recruitment.

The perception that backbenchers are underworked is more applicable to those on the government side of the House. It is a criticism of how the government is governing rather than an issue of how many politicians there are. The government could convene

the legislature more often to provide members with greater opportunity to examine bills and debate issues. Backbenchers would become more engaged. When we have people just reading from speaking notes prepared by a staff person, rather than having time to study an issue and participate in a real debate, the problem is with the system itself. Changing the system would lead to the media paying more attention to witnesses and committee reports. More informed backbenchers would be less likely to be silent in caucus. In a small opposition caucus you don't know what it is like to have free time. That can be true for anyone in opposition. You aren't sitting around twiddling your thumbs.

The bottom line is that a discussion about the number of members in a legislature should be turned into a discussion about how to better engage all elected members especially those on the government back benches. You cannot make a general statement about numbers. There are various things that would have to be considered. Everything has to be looked at in context.