

# To achieve proper political representation of women in Canada

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Women are significantly under-represented in the House of Commons and in provincial legislatures. This paper proposes a solution to that problem. It also aims to convince readers that the problem has important negative consequences both for women and for society as a whole, and that we have been paying far too little attention to addressing it.

The proposed solution is to apply the principle of Representation by Population to gender, while continuing to apply it to our regions and communities as well. Gender Rep-by-Pop would put women's representation on par with that of men, and would give both women and men the same reliably effective representation that regions and communities already enjoy.

For women, under-representation takes away some of the political power that, in a democracy, they should have. Women's inadequate political power slows our progress toward becoming a truly gender-equal society. It also results in governments' not addressing women's interests as well as they could and should.

For society as a whole, women's under-representation results in political parties' relying too much on traditionally masculine approaches, hurting our governance and our democratic processes.

Our insufficient attention to this issue has resulted in the wasting of several opportunities to address it, most notably two provincial Citizens' Assemblies on Electoral Reform and the federal Special Committee on Electoral Reform. One might have thought that these bodies, specifically mandated to propose improvements to our electoral systems, would make addressing women's under-representation a priority. But in fact none of them gave it much thought at all. This paper discusses possible reasons why they did not.

This paper hopes to provide readers with enough thought-provoking material to spark discussions with friends and colleagues. It also hopes that such discussions will raise the profile of this issue and eventually lead to calls for action. And of course the paper's view is that the most effective action would be to implement Gender Rep-by-Pop.

## Gender Rep-by-Pop

With Gender Rep-by-Pop, in half of the ridings all of the voters would be women, and in the other half of the ridings all voters would be men. For example, Prince Edward Island's four federal ridings would likely be named Women of Western PEI, Women of Eastern PEI, Men of Western PEI, and Men of Eastern PEI. As the names indicate, each women's riding would cover the same ground as a men's riding.

So the women of PEI would elect two MPs and the men two. PEI would still elect four MPs, just as it does now. This pattern would hold for regions within provinces too. For example, Toronto would still elect 24 MPs, with the women of Toronto electing twelve and the men twelve. Nationally, women and men would each elect an equal number of MPs.

Federally, there would also be one riding in which all voters would be gender non-binary people, spanning all of Canada<sup>1</sup>. There would also continue to be a small number of mixed-gender ridings: one in each of the territories, and one in each province that has an odd number of MPs. There might also be some mixed-gender ridings in sparsely populated areas.

Provincially and for the territories, there would not be enough gender non-binary voters to justify a dedicated riding, but it is still possible to give them formal and suitably effective representation. A recommended way of doing that is presented in the Appendix.

Rep-by-pop would continue to be applied to our regions and communities. So, regional representation would not be affected. For example, Toronto would still have 24 MPs. Community representation would be somewhat diminished, because ridings would cover twice as much ground. For example, in Toronto the twelve women's ridings would cover the same ground as the current 24 ridings (and so would the twelve men's ridings). But of course each of these twelve larger areas would still have two MPs, one elected by its women and one by its men.

### **Gender Rep-by-Pop would deliver numerical near-parity with men**

Women's ridings would mostly elect women. To be clear, there would be no requirement that they do that, but they mostly would, just as Calgary ridings, for example, mostly elect Calgarians. The reason is that the parties typically field candidates who are members of their ridings, Calgarians in Calgary ridings, and, with Gender Rep-by-Pop, women in women's ridings<sup>2</sup>.

Women as voters would almost never be faced with having to choose between voting for a woman and voting for their preferred party. Their preferred party would almost always have fielded a woman as its candidate in their riding.

So in most women's ridings almost all serious candidates would be women and a woman would be elected, resulting in numerical near-parity with men.

With numerical near-parity, gender-balanced cabinets would be politically de rigeur, rather than depending on having a feminist Prime Minister or Premier. There would be gender-balanced parliamentary and legislative committees, and gender-balanced party strategy committees. And, we would finally have a woman as Prime Minister about half of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> That riding would have fewer voters than most, but still more than eight of our current federal ridings have.

<sup>2</sup> Because "parachuting" in outsiders costs votes in the riding. With Gender Rep-by-Pop, parachuting more than a very few men into women's ridings would be even more serious, because it would hurt the party's reputation with women in ridings across the country.

### **Gender Rep-by-Pop would deliver reliably effective representation**

Québec has 78 MPs whose formal duty is to represent Quebecers. They are chosen by Quebecers, and by Quebecers alone. They are accountable to Quebecers, and to Quebecers alone. Their fellow MPs and the public accept that they have the authority to represent Quebecers, and expect them to do that. These factors make them reliably effective representatives of Quebecers.

Gender Rep-by-Pop would give both women and men that same reliably effective representation.

### **Gender Rep-by-Pop would be a logical improvement to our democratic tradition**

Our democratic tradition is based on the principle of Representation by Population, applied to provinces, territories, regions and communities. That strictly geographical focus dates from times when women's interests were considered unimportant. Now that our views have progressed, it is only natural that we should expand the application of Rep-by-Pop to gender too. That would be an evolutionary improvement, reflecting the values of our own times, not a revolutionary change.

## **Importance of proper representation**

### **For progress toward becoming a gender-equal society**

Over the last century we have made vast progress toward becoming a gender-equal society. The reason is that a century ago women achieved the right to vote. That gave women a great deal of political power, and that power has driven our progress towards gender equality ever since.

But, because of inadequate representation, women's political power is still far less than it should be. Hence our continued falling short of becoming a gender-equal society.

### **For women's interests**

Women's interests differ from those of men for many reasons. On average women live longer, are paid less, often work in business cultures that remain male-oriented, play a greater role in caring for the very young and the very old, and are more often subjected to discrimination and violence.

Governments are very powerful. They decide what services they will provide or support, and at what levels. They decide what laws and regulations there will be and how conscientiously to enforce them. They set the rules for the Canada Pension Plan and the Quebec Pension Plan. They set and enforce employment standards. They control the criminal code and the police. More generally, they determine the balance between the competing priorities of higher service funding (often better for women) and lower tax rates (often better for men).

Governments could address women's interests much more effectively. Proper representation would increase women's political power enough to insist that they do.

## **For governments' performance and our democratic processes**

Our political parties try to take a traditionally masculine approach - a strong leader directs and inspires a united team to achieve strongly shared goals. But this approach is unsuitable for big-tent political parties. They are not united teams with strongly shared goals. In actual fact, their members have significantly varying values, interests and goals. This unsuitable approach does not work well. It hurts our governments' performance and our democratic processes, and has downsides for the parties themselves.

For opposition parties, it is difficult to maintain the illusion of "unity" because the leader lacks enough power to do that. That problem is especially significant for parties that include strong factions whose goals are unpopular with swing voters. Trying to maintain the illusion of unity while broadening the party's appeal may make the leader seem inconsistent, the party's platform seem confusing, and the party seem to have "hidden agendas". The next election might be partly about whether the party can be trusted to govern.

For governing parties, it is much easier to maintain the illusion of "unity," but only through practices that themselves have negative consequences. The leader has a great deal of power, exercised through the PMO or premier's office. The leader can use that power to control messaging in order to present a united face to the public<sup>3</sup>, and to control the decision-making process to minimize discussion of goals that are not priorities for the leader<sup>4</sup>. These practices, along with the attitudes and decisions that often result, can stoke voter cynicism about politics in general and the governing party in particular. They may make the party seem to be some combination of arrogant, non-transparent, too "political," or just out of touch. The next election might be about "time for a change."

A party with proper representation of women would better recognize the downsides, for the party itself, of the current unsuitable, traditionally masculine, approach. It would make adjustments which would benefit us all. We would have better government decisions, more effective representation by caucus members of their constituents, improved confidence in our politicians, and elections that would more often be about important issues rather than about "not to be trusted" or "time for a change".

## **Why so little focus on women's representation?**

None of the three major electoral reform initiatives of the last two decades gave much thought at all to women's representation. Their focus was instead on considering the adoption of proportional representation. Almost no attention was paid to women's under-representation.

Why was there such indifference to such an important issue?

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<sup>3</sup> The leader's staff provide caucus members with a stream of image-focussed messaging to repeat to their constituents, and anyone who goes seriously off-message is required to recant.

<sup>4</sup> The leader typically takes advice mostly from like-minded advisors and delays consultation with caucus, and perhaps even cabinet, until late in the decision-making process.

Distraction? Although PR advocates deserve credit for creating those opportunities, the focus on PR took all of the oxygen away from discussion of women's representation. This was especially so because one argument for PR was that it would somewhat improve numerical representation. No doubt some women's advocates diverted their energies to strongly supporting PR. Perhaps now, with the distraction of PR off the table, at least for a while, we can pay more attention to the issue of women's representation.

Complacency? We must not let pride in past achievements cause us to lose focus. Those past achievements were made possible by gaining political power through the right to vote, and political power is still inadequate because of poor representation. That is slowing further gains across society. The wasting of three opportunities to fix that suggests that women have indeed lost focus, perhaps especially the women who have benefitted most from past achievements, who might therefore have lost sight of how much more needs to be done. Complacency?

No good path forward? People might have thought that, even with adequate focus on women's representation, those three reform initiatives would not succeed in finding a good path forward. They might have thought that the causes of poor representation are entirely cultural, not addressable by electoral reform. Or they might have thought that any effective solution would, like a hard quota, conflict with our core democratic rights. But Gender Rep-by-Pop is an immediate, complete solution that improves democracy. Still no good path forward?

## **Gender Rep-by-Pop can be done**

Four key ingredients for successful implementation of Gender Rep-by-Pop are present.

1. There is widespread potential support in the population, which needs only to be mobilized. Proper political representation is in the strong interest of women, who make up more than half of the electorate. Many men too would, on reflection, recognize that Gender Rep-by-Pop is also in their interest. Other men might support it for the sake of the women in their lives, or simply because fixing women's poor representation is obviously the fair thing to do.
2. There is a clear objective around which to rally: 50% women MPs and MLAs.
3. Governments have shown that they are willing to seriously consider significant changes to how we do elections, when pressed by activists. They launched the three notable reform initiatives, and two of those initiatives led to referenda. In British Columbia, the Single Transferable Vote form of proportional representation was proposed, and in Ontario the Mixed Member Proportional form was proposed. Those proposed changes were very significant. STV would have introduced multi-member ridings and MMP would have resulted in many MLAs not even being directly elected. Either would have resulted in a change to frequent coalition governments. Adoption of Gender Rep-by-Pop would be far less radical. It would not result in any of those changes. If governments did not balk at PR, they would certainly not balk at, and might even embrace, the much less radical Gender Rep-by-Pop.
4. There is a simple blueprint for reform: Gender Rep-by-Pop.

Those key ingredients for success are present. It can be done.

## **The way forward**

To achieve proper political representation of women, the vital first step is to regain focus on its importance. Without that, women's political power will remain inadequate for a very long time.

It is the hope of this paper that a renewed focus on the issue of representation will lead to enough interest in Gender Rep-by-Pop to draw the attention of opinion leaders and activists. If enough of them decide that Gender Rep-by-Pop is the best solution, then they will mobilize broader support, and press governments to act.

Once persuaded, governments would hold public consultations and possibly there would be a referendum or an election in which Gender Rep-by-Pop was a key issue. After that, implementation would require only a legislative amendment to direct boundaries commissions to create mostly single-gender ridings.

But renewed focus remains the critical, and as yet unmet, prerequisite.

## **An appeal to readers**

If you agree that the issue of women's representation is an important one, please help achieve that renewed focus, by discussing it with friends and colleagues. And please do not dismiss the idea of Gender Rep-by-Pop without careful consideration. It is a complete and easily implemented solution.

## **Appendix**

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### **Representation of gender non-binary voters**

As noted earlier in the paper, there would be one federal riding for gender non-binary people, but for provinces and territories there would not be enough gender non-binary voters to justify a dedicated riding. So instead, the following process is recommended.

After each redistricting, typically after every second election, gender non-binary voters would decide, as groups, which ridings they would vote in. For example, those living in the Alberta provincial ridings Women of Edmonton-South West and Men of Edmonton-South West would choose which of those two ridings ALL of them would vote in. That would give them formal and suitably effective representation through the MLA of the chosen riding. More generally, it would ensure that Gender Rep-by-Pop provides proper political representation of gender non-binary people.

### **Compatibility with other electoral reforms**

Gender Rep-by-Pop can be implemented immediately under our first-past-the-post system, but it does not preclude later adding other reforms.

The Alternative Vote system can be added without further adjustments, because it would be based on the same single-member ridings.

The Mixed Member Proportional system can be added by having two sets of party lists, instead of one, as with regular MMP. Parties would receive representatives from one list based on their overall share of votes in women's ridings, and from the other list based on their overall share of votes in men's ridings.

A government adding the Single Transferable Vote to Gender Rep-by-Pop would have to deal with the issue of significantly diminished local representation. STV by itself already faces this issue. For example, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly recommended ridings of up to seven times their current size<sup>5</sup>, although five-member ridings are typical in other countries using STV. So adding STV to Gender Rep-by-Pop would result in ridings of up to ten or even 14 times their current size. Of course this could be scaled back, but that would reduce the proportionality that is STV's objective. Alternatively, STV could be tweaked: still five-member mixed-gender ridings, but with vote tabulation adjusted so that two candidates are elected by women's votes, two by men's votes, and one by the remaining votes of both women and men.

## **Adoptability by other countries**

Most other countries, states and provinces could easily adopt Gender Rep-by-Pop because they use one of the systems discussed above, or first-past the-post<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, women in other democracies would likely press their countries to adopt Gender-Rep-by-Pop after seeing Canada move from laggard to exemplar. Even for countries that already have reasonably good numeric representation of women, Gender Rep-by-Pop would be a significant improvement because it would additionally give half of the legislators the specific duty to represent women.

The United States could adopt Gender Rep-by-Pop for Senate elections simply by having the women of a state elect one senator and the men the other. It could adopt Gender Rep-by-Pop for presidential elections by having the women of a state elect half of its Electoral College members and the men the other half. Had this been in place in 2016 for the states with close results, Ms. Clinton would likely have won the Presidency, perhaps by as many as 40 electoral votes.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Two to three times current sizes in less densely populated regions, and four to seven times in more densely populated regions. Interestingly, its report discusses the impact of large riding sizes on local representation only by noting that the number of MLAs per region would be unchanged.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the US House of Representatives and US state legislatures. For these, there would be the additional benefit of reduced significance of gerrymandering, because constituencies would depend less on lines drawn on the map.

<sup>7</sup> In most of those close states, Mr. Trump received all of the electoral votes even though it is likely that more women in those states voted for Ms. Clinton.

## **Comparison to other approaches**

Only one other approach to improving representation would result in immediate numerical parity with men: a hard quota. But that approach has all of the drawbacks of quotas in general, and also conflicts with our core democratic rights. It is very unlikely ever to be implemented.

The approach of encouraging more women to run for office and trying to persuade the parties to nominate more women in winnable ridings is improving numerical representation, but only very slowly.

The approach of switching from our first-past-the-post system to proportional representation would likely, based on the experience of other countries, still leave us far from numerical parity. It would also require a very significant and controversial change to our electoral system.

In contrast, Gender Rep-by-Pop would result in immediate numerical near-parity. It would be almost as effective as a hard quota, without the drawbacks, and much more effective than either of the other approaches.

Just as importantly, Gender Rep-by-Pop is the only approach that would give women dedicated MPs and MLAs with a strong duty to represent them effectively.

## **Rep-by-pop for other groups?**

New Zealand applies the principle of Representation by Population for the Maori people. If the First Nations peoples in Canada wanted that, it could be a valuable component of a broader reconciliation.

Rep-by-pop for other groups is unlikely. Those groups might not even want it. Unlike for women, it would not deliver significant political power, because those groups are so much smaller. Also unlike for women, it would have the disadvantage of suggesting their separateness from the rest of society. Even if they did want rep-by-pop, practical issues such as riding sizes would stand in the way. Also, many people would oppose such a fragmentation of our electoral system. Electoral reform is difficult, and, given those considerations, our society is unlikely to agree to such reforms.