

Process to redraw Canada's federal electoral map gets underway with commissioners soon to be named



Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole is pictured in the House of Commons in April 2020; the Lower Chamber could see its seat count jump by four in the electoral boundary redistribution process that's getting underway. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

The first step in the redistribution process is forming the 10 boundary commissions, which 'have a lot of discretion' in reshaping the federal electoral map, says the University of Ottawa's Michael Pal.

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happens every 10 years following completion of the census as a way to reflect population changes across the country.

Once the census is done, the federal chief electoral officer applies a formula—found in the Constitution Act 1867 and last updated in 2011—to calculate how many ridings each province gets.

The new ridings come into effect in the first federal election after the process is completed.

This year, that math works out to three new seats for Alberta, bringing it to 37 total; one for British Columbia, bringing it to 43; one for Ontario, bringing it to 122; and for Quebec to lose one seat, dropping it to 77 total. In all, that would bring the House of Commons up from 338 seats to 342.

There's been vocal opposition in Quebec and among the federal Bloc Québécois since Elections Canada released these numbers on Oct. 15. Quebec Minister Sonia LeBel has argued the need for the Quebec to not lose seats in the House, and Bloc Leader Yves-François Blanchet (Beloeil-Chambly, Que.) has called for the formula to be amended to add a "nation clause" to ensure Quebec's seat share never decreases, and instead add a seat for the province to maintain its proportion in the House of Commons.

Whether Quebec will lose a seat in the end is still to be determined. Parliament returns

on Nov. 22, and if there's political will, statutory amendments could be passed to protect its seats.

While only four provinces could see their seat counts change, all will potentially see riding boundaries shifted—whether by kilometres or by a few city streets—and names changed.

Three-member commissions are set up in the 10 provinces—with none established for the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, as each makes up a single riding—and tasked with ensuring that the population size of each riding is "as close as reasonably possible" to a province's "electoral quota" (determined by dividing the total population of a given province by the number of seats allocated to it), has a "manageable" geographic size, and reflects local communities of interest or identity and historic riding boundaries, as stated in the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act.

While the Act sets out that commissions should "make every effort to ensure" that the population of each riding is close to the



Chief Electoral Officer Stéphane Perrault is pictured during a press conference on Aug. 18. *The Hill Times* photograph by Sam Garcia

province's quota, plus or minus 25 per cent, it also provides for exceptions to be made "in circumstances viewed by the commission as being extraordinary."

"The commissions have a lot of discretion," said Prof. Pal. "And so partly it just matters, like, how much do the people appointed to the B.C. commission think ... we should do representation by population? Meaning the same population in every riding to the absolute extent possible. Or are there some other factors that can matter more? And how do you balance them?"

For example, he said past Ontario commissions have decided they didn't want federal ridings to cross municipal boundaries or highways. "They put an emphasis on a lot of different factors that were not in the statute necessarily and had an impact on how many people were in each riding," said Prof. Pal.

The degree of discretion commissions have is something Prof. Pal argues should be reconsidered, as population discrepancies have a real "impact on your voting power." He suggested they should be limited to a five per cent deviation from a province's electoral quota, rather than 25 per cent, except in circumstances where it's "geographically not possible."

Once commissions are properly up and running, with census data in hand—projected to happen by mid-February 2022—they get to work on a first draft of boundary proposals, with Elections Canada's timeline projecting those to be out some time between March and August of next year. Public hearings begin within 30 days of these

proposals being published—the Act only stipulates that at least one public hearing take place in each province, but there are typically several over the course of weeks. Sitting MPs can, and often do, take part in this stage of the process.

How COVID-19 could affect the redistribution process this time around remains to be seen. While Elections Canada provides administrative and technical support to the commissions (things like office setup, website maintenance, and providing a geography technician who puts together map scenarios), the agency said it's up to each commission to decide "meeting schedules and formats," including whether to hold meetings virtually.

If there are virtual public hearings, Prof. Pal suggested that would probably be a "good thing," as "virtual makes it a little bit easier to do more."

This process can result in minor or major changes, with historic evidence of commissions responding to public feedback, said Prof. Courtney, who was part of the 2012 Saskatchewan commission and has published books on the redistribution process. He cited the Quebec commission's efforts to accommodate requests from Inuit in the province's north—Nunavik—during the 1993 redistribution as an example. A proposal was made for Nunavik to receive a seat of its own, which Prof. Courtney said would have had a larger than average population and geographic size, and commissioners "went out of their way to accommodate those requests."

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What's in a name?

Ridings names are up for reconsideration during every redistribution effort. As boundaries shift, new communities can be included and old ones swapped out, or existing communities can make up greater or lesser portions of the riding overall, prompting name changes to better match the riding's new make-up.

"People often are very concerned about name changes," said the University of Ottawa's Michael Pal of input during the public hearings portion of the electoral redistribution process.

"That's one of the things that matters a lot to people, so that often gets a long airing at the hearing."

As a sign of their significance, riding names can also be changed in between redistribution efforts. For example, in 2014, right after the last redistribution process, a bill was passed to amend the names of 31 federal ridings—with the government House leader of the day having initiated the bill, consulting with MPs across the House and getting unanimous consent for its passage. Among those changed were: Sainte-Rose, Que., which became Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, and Western Arctic, which became the Northwest Territories (previously, before the creation of Nunavut, the territory had two ridings; its riding name hadn't been changed since because electoral boundary commissions are only struck for the 10 provinces).

Châteauguay-Lacolle, Que., Liberal MP Brenda Shanahan will no doubt be among those eager to weigh in this time around. She's previously introduced a private member's bill to try to remove "Lacolle" from her riding's name. As she explained in 2018, the municipality of Lacolle is actually part of a neighbouring riding (Saint-Jean), with residents of Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle instead part of her boundaries. Speaking with *The Hill Times* last month, Ms. Shanahan—whose re-election this year was confirmed only after a judicial recount—said she's already read up on the redistribution process and had been prepared to take part as a private citizen before her re-election was confirmed (previously, the Bloc Québécois candidate had been declared the winner).

—by Laura Ryckewaert