

Researcher proposes new system of ridings for Aboriginals and Francophones outside Quebec

No legal impediment to non-contiguous ridings; they could be implemented tomorrow

A Montreal researcher is proposing to give Aboriginals and Francophones outside Quebec a greater voice in Parliament by creating non-contiguous ridings in which those groups would be dominant or significant.

Mike Medeiros is a PhD candidate and a lecturer in the political science department at the Université de Montréal. In a paper co-authored with Benjamin Forest, professor from the geography department at McGill University, he says there is nothing in Canadian law that says federal ridings have to be contiguous. They could be broken up into little bits that are not geographically connected to one another.

Medeiros, who is presenting at the 2013 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, says Canada should consider creating non-contiguous ridings to boost the representation of two specific groups: Aboriginals and Francophones outside Quebec.

Aboriginals are the fastest-growing segment of Canada's population and are beset by a host of social programs, but they are rarely concentrated enough to form an effective voting bloc. They make up 4.4% of the country's population, he says, but are the majority in only four ridings, which is 1.2% of the total.

Francophones outside Quebec make up 4% of the population, but are the majority in only 2% of the ridings outside Quebec. He says giving them greater electoral prominence would help focus attention on their issues, which are very different from those of Quebec.

Medeiros is focussing on those groups because only Anglophones, Francophones and Aboriginals are recognized by the Constitution as having collective rights.

Medeiros is not specific about certain details of his proposal for non-contiguous ridings. For example, he says a riding could be configured to contain an Aboriginal majority, or it could be configured to a certain percentage of Aboriginal voters. (He says that once 35% of a riding's electorate is of one group, that group becomes impossible to ignore.)

"The thing with this option is that it leaves open many alternatives for riding maps," he says.

But he argues that the beauty of his suggestion is that it could be implemented immediately.

"Proportional representation is a no-go in Canada," he says. "Even major electoral reform is a tough sell."

He says one of the points of his paper is to show that significant changes can be made to Canada's electoral system without major reform.

“We’re not saying a proposal like this one won’t raise eyebrows – but it will be a lot less controversial.”

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For more information, please contact:

Laura Markle
613-282-3489

lmarkle@ideas-idees.ca

Mélanie Béchard
613-894-7635

mbechard@ideas-idees.ca

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