

Cutting the size of a parliament: we should consider process and resources not just numbers

 democraticaudit.com/2019/09/10/cutting-the-size-of-a-parliament-we-should-consider-process-and-resources-not-just-numbers/

September 10, 2019

By [Democratic Audit UK](#) 10/09/2019 [Read More](#) →

*When political leaders say we should cut the number of politicians, what are their motives? **Alex Marland** found that the rationale is largely symbolic, rather than grounded in any considered approach to legislature size, and used as a populist framing for more general cost-cutting. A more coherent approach should include attention to the process of cutting, and to overall resources for backbench politicians.*



Assemblée nationale, France. Picture: [Richard Ying et Tangui Morlier/CC BY-SA 3.0/Wikimedia Commons](#)

Shrinking a legislature's membership is a populist phenomenon that arises around the world. In recent years, Conservatives in Britain have urged eliminating 50 seats in the House of Commons and French President Emmanuel Macron has declared a desire to cut the National Assembly by a third. About five years ago, I was intrigued when some of my political science colleagues at Memorial University of Newfoundland got up in arms when the government announced plans to reduce the number of seats in the provincial legislative assembly. The professors' ire contrasted with popular sentiments that an excess of politicians is an unnecessary expense.

Cranky social media activism is one thing. But those professors coordinated a petition that was signed by academics from a variety of social science departments as well as by political scientists elsewhere in Canada. Was it a case of social pressure and slacktivism – or did the signatories know something that I did not? I decided to look deeper into the reasons why politicians eliminate seats in legislative assemblies.

I began by brushing up on academic theories about the strengths and weaknesses of trimming political bloat in legislatures. Training my eye on Canada, I then examined news stories, throne speeches, election campaign platforms and electoral boundary commission reports. In 2017, I interviewed 18 senior politicians and senior political staff who were directly involved with seven seat-reduction events in Canadian provinces. The results were recently published in *The Journal of Legislative Studies* and a user-friendly summary is forthcoming with the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*. For the latter, I also worked with a couple of politicians to procure op-eds from them arguing for and against seat reductions.

So what did I learn? That in a parliamentary system, a first minister's impromptu announcement that seats will be cut is a proxy for a government pursuing an austerity agenda. Reducing the number of politicians can cause serious internal dilemmas for political leaders when members of the caucus realise their jobs are on the line. Their electoral district might be at risk of being phased out and/or they might need to compete in a nomination contest with a colleague. Those members get upset, causing the normal constraints of party discipline to erode. Communities of interest (and yes, academics) can stir dissent, claiming that representation is at stake. No leader wants to contend with allegations of anti-democratic practices or being branded as an authoritarian. So leaders tread carefully. Reducing seats is only pursued when there is political capital to be gained.

I found that a cabinet supports a slimmer legislature as a symbolic move that sets the table for more ambitious government cost cutting and restructuring. Lowering the number of politicians is a populist move on a par with reducing salaries, benefits and perks of office. The austerity symbolises that politicians are sharing in the malaise. Seat reductions help a minister's cause when they announce administrative streamlining and other cost-saving measures. Closing hospitals and schools, laying off public servants and raising taxes is a little easier if the public loses the ability to complain that there are too many politicians.

For this reason, the formula for calculating the number of members of a legislature is more political symbolism than it is mathematical equation. Academic specialists advocate for the cube root formula – that is, the cube root of the population establishes how many elected representatives there should be. The calculation works well for large places. It is less useful for small polities because the result would be a much larger number of politicians than the populace could bear. So, as an example, a population of 100,000 would have around 46 representatives; a population of 1 million would elect 100 representatives. A population of 66 million, like the UK, would have 404 MPs.

Instead, political executives advocating for seat reductions are attracted to metaphoric values. A 10% cut is a catchy sell. Other round numbers might do, such as 10 fewer seats. Or maybe the psychology of a final number of seats that ends in nine is advocated to make it seem like a more drastic reduction. In this environment, deliberations about numbers involve relatively little thought about financial cost or the implications for representative democracy.

However, getting excited about the number of politicians is largely misplaced energy. Whether the number increases or declines matters less than (1) the process used and (2) the resources available to representatives.

On the first point, many advanced democracies (particularly American states) require a multi-stage consultation process. Usually the proposal needs to be endorsed by the lower and upper chambers of a legislature. A referendum may be required. Another mechanism (used in the Canadian province of Ontario in 1995) is for the proposal to appear in a party's campaign platform. This helps to ensure that the topic is discussed during the election. Voter consent is reasonably assumed if that party forms the government.

The least democratic process is what occurred in the Canadian provinces that I studied. There was no mention of seat reductions in general election campaigns. Then, once in office, the governing party suddenly announces plans to eliminate seats. The throne speech is a favourite technique to reveal the government's plans. Sometimes a report is procured from an arms-length and multiparty electoral boundaries commission. Whatever pathway is followed, the decision is ultimately directed by the cabinet. It is an archaic approach to democratic representation that assumes the people's representatives are all-powerful trustees who know best.

The second concern emerged from op-eds written to accompany my research summary in the forthcoming Autumn 2019 edition of the Canadian Parliamentary Review. One is authored by a conservative MP and the other a longtime leader of a social democratic party. They disagree on whether there should be more or fewer politicians. Where they agree is interesting: what is most important is to ensure that backbenchers have the resources they need to perform their jobs. In this light, debate about cutting seats, maintaining the status quo or increasing the number of representatives is a mug's game. At issue is the powerlessness of private members in the parliamentary system where presidentialisation and prime ministerialisation sees power concentrated in central offices.

Backbenchers need staff support to enhance their ability to be strong representatives. Time and again, we hear about how the quality of representation in parliamentary assemblies is compromised by party discipline. Private members on the government side can be mollified with quasi-executive appointments, such as being made a parliamentary secretary. In small legislatures, such as those in Canadian provinces, this results in what has been termed "executive creep." Goodies such as title, stipends and travel opportunities – not to mention the confidence convention – can seriously undermine the willingness of government-side backbenchers to rebuff the party line. Meanwhile on the opposition benches, private members in a large caucus can find that the leader's office interferes with anyone being industrious, such as by managing who gets time to speak or which private members' bills to endorse. In a small caucus, members can be overworked with multiple shadow ministerial assignments. Whatever the final number, private members need access to adequate resources. This pays off in the form of better representation because constituent enquiries can be processed faster and political topics can be independently researched.

So, the next time that someone proposes to change the number of seats in a legislature, perhaps the debate should turn on the process and whether backbenchers have sufficient support to be strong representatives, rather than just anti-politician rhetoric and cost cutting.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position Democratic Audit. It draws on the author's recent article '[Fewer politicians and smaller assemblies: how party elites rationalise reducing the number of seats in a legislature – lessons from Canada](#)', in *The Journal of Legislative Studies*.*

About the author



Alex Marland is a Professor of Political Science at Memorial University of Newfoundland, located in Canada's easternmost province. He recently completed a book manuscript about party discipline in Canada and is leading a research team examining the practice of Canadian legislators crossing the floor to sit with another political party.

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