

Improving the representation of women by organizing voters into same-gender ridings

This submission proposes redefining ridings so that half of them consist only of female voters and half consist only of male voters. This would improve women's representation in four ways:

1. Half of the MLAs would be women.
2. Half of the MLAs would have a strong mandate to represent women's interests, unconstrained by accountability to male voters.
3. Women would gain fairer access to leadership roles.
4. Women's votes would have much more electoral impact.

These improvements would result in full and immediate equality of political representation for women, and they are easily achieved, either within the existing electoral system or under Proportional Representation.

The proposal

In order to implement this proposal within the existing electoral system, the Electoral Boundaries Commission would be empowered and expected to create mostly same-gender ridings. For example, the Commission might replace the two existing ridings of North Vancouver-Lonsdale and North Vancouver-Seymour with two new ridings: Women of North Vancouver and Men of North Vancouver. The Commission could still create mixed-gender ridings whenever it considered, based on public hearings, that that would result in better political representation. For example, the Commission might leave the riding of Bulkley Valley-Stikine as a mixed-gender riding because of its sparse population. The number of ridings would not change.

Implementation under Proportional Representation would depend on the desired number of multi-member constituencies. There could be as few as two, which would be Women of British Columbia and Men of British Columbia. Or there could be several, for example, Women of Vancouver, Men of Vancouver, and so on for other regions of the province.

The improvements

1. Half of the MLAs would be women

Under this proposal, half of the ridings would consist of female voters. These ridings would overwhelmingly elect women, just as currently Vancouver ridings

overwhelmingly elect Vancouver residents. The number of female MLAs would be close to 50%. (It could be higher if some male ridings chose to elect women, or lower if some female ridings chose to elect men. It could also vary slightly depending on the gender of the MLAs elected in the few mixed-gender ridings.)

2. Half of the MLAs would have a strong mandate to represent women's interests

Under this proposal, half of the MLAs would represent all-female ridings. Unconstrained by accountability to male voters, they would be able to speak forcefully for women's interests. Currently, by contrast, no MLAs, not even those who are women, have a proper mandate to represent women's interests. Often female MLAs are given an informal mandate by their colleagues to speak for women on a few issues that are recognized as being of special significance to women. But this is a poor substitute for a real accountability-based mandate. Also, it does not normally extend to more general issues where women's interests diverge to some extent from those of men, for example the tradeoff between social services and taxation levels.

3. Women would gain fairer access to leadership roles

This proposal would improve women's access to leadership roles in several ways.

With half of the MLAs being women, there would be a larger pool of female leadership candidates, and stronger caucus advocacy of fair representation of women in leadership roles.

With half of the ridings having mostly female riding associations, half of the riding delegates to leadership conventions would be women, who like the MLAs would have a strong mandate to represent women's interests in selecting a leader. As a result, women would likely be chosen as party leaders about half of the time.

With the ridings organized by gender as well as geography, gender balance would be an important consideration for the Premier in forming the cabinet, just as regional balance is currently an important consideration.

With the ridings organized by gender as well as geography, it would be much easier for women to build political power bases on their appeal to female voters, just as politicians currently often build power bases on their appeal to voters in their region.

4. Women's votes would have much more electoral impact

Under the current system, support for a party among concentrated groups of voters translates very efficiently into seats, and support among dispersed groups translates very inefficiently. This is dramatically illustrated by the results of the

1993 federal election, in which the concentrated Bloc Québécois supporters achieved 54 seats while the more numerous but dispersed Progressive Conservative supporters achieved only two seats. Women are even more dispersed than the 1993 federal Conservative supporters, and so the parties are far less responsive to their interests than their numbers warrant. Under this proposal, they would be even more concentrated than the 1993 Bloc Supporters were, and so the parties would be very responsive to their interests.

Easily achieved

The improvements described above would be easy to achieve. Perhaps all that would be necessary is a simple amendment to the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act to allow for the creation of same-gender ridings.

Public acceptance should also be easy to achieve. The Charter provides for the right to effective political representation, and women's representation is clearly less effective than it should be. This situation presents an extremely strong case for reform. The case for the specific reform proposed by this submission can draw on both a Supreme Court statement about the role of boundaries commissions in enhancing effective representation, and the use by the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for New Brunswick of the "Community of Identity" principle.

The Supreme Court has recognized that the Charter right to effective political representation is enhanced when riding boundaries keep communities together, no doubt because the voters in each community have common interests. Keeping these voters together concentrates their votes, strengthening the mandate of their MLA to represent their common interests, and enhancing their electoral impact. Women too have common interests, and it can be argued that their votes should also be concentrated for the same reasons. The same is true of men. Same-gender ridings would enhance the effective political representation of all voters.

The Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for New Brunswick proposed, based on the "Community of Identity" principle, to include all of New Brunswick's First Nations voters in the Miramichi riding. Although after public hearings it decided not to implement this proposal, it has set a precedent for boundaries commissions to extend the concept of "community" beyond geography, in order to enhance the effectiveness of political representation.

Effect on men

Although under this proposal men would lose some (unfair) advantages built into the political system, there would be offsetting gains for them. Like women, they would have half of the MLAs with a strong mandate to represent their interests. Like women, they would have their votes concentrated for much more electoral impact. Arguably they would be better off having their interests legitimately represented, rather than depending

on unfair advantages that might eventually disappear. Effective political representation is not a zero sum game, and an improvement for women does not imply a corresponding loss for men.

Proportional Representation

This proposal is also valuable under Proportionate Representation, even though Proportionate Representation partially duplicates its benefits. Proportional Representation by itself would likely increase the number of female MLAs. Implementing this proposal in addition would further increase their number to about half, and would also improve women's representation in the other ways described above.

This is NOT a quota

This proposal is not the same as superficially similar proposals that establish a 50% quota for female MLAs, for example by reserving one seat for a woman and one for a man in two-member ridings. While a quota would achieve 50% female MLAs, it would not improve women's representation in the other ways described above.

A quota would also be much less acceptable for implementation, because it would restrict a fundamental democratic right - the right of voters to freely elect their representatives. A quota would also leave female MLAs vulnerable to the suggestion that they were elected not on merit, but only because of the quota. This proposal is not a quota and so avoids these objectionable features.

Conclusion

Our democracy's centuries-long evolution is by no means complete, and it remains far from perfect. Among its most obvious faults is the continuing ineffectiveness of women's political representation relative to men. This gap persists more than 80 years after women got the right to vote, and more than 20 years after the Charter enshrined the right to effective political representation. The Citizen's Assembly process provides a unique opportunity to achieve full and immediate political equality for women in British Columbia, and it would be insufficient to recommend a package consisting of incremental measures, possibly including Proportional Representation, that fell short of that result. I hope you will give serious consideration to this proposal.