

Sortition and the Reform of the Canadian Senate: A Proposal

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INTRODUCTION

What is sortition?

Well-known for its use in Athenian democracy, sortition involves the random selection of citizens from the overall population to act as political representatives. Instead of elected representatives, each eligible citizen has an equal chance of serving in political office.

What is the Canadian Senate?

As the upper house of the Canadian Parliament, the Senate currently consists of 105 appointed members, is meant to provide independent sober second thought on proposed legislation, and has full powers to veto or draft legislation, excluding monetary bills.

What does reform look like?

Despite many debates surrounding the issue, the Senate has remained largely unreformed since Confederation. The proposal put forward is one where the Senate is reformed into a randomly selected civilian assembly, and the House of Commons remains an elected house.

PROPOSAL

Composition of the Senate:

Senate reform provides an unprecedented opportunity to restructure and enhance the responsiveness and the democratic and deliberative capacities of the federal government.

After extensive research, I came to the conclusion that the best course of action for Senate reform is to transform the house into a randomly selected citizen assembly, composed of 400 citizens with staggered four year terms, and full power to draft, amend and veto legislation.

Stratified random sampling would ensure proportional representation, citizens would undergo a three-month training program led by high-level policy officials, participation would be voluntary, and the house would be purposefully deliberative, with an emphasis on public participation and the identification of social issues.

DEFINING ISSUES: PROS AND CONS

Pros:

- Political equality
- Mitigation of domination by elites
- Decrease in corruption
- Increased deliberation
- Descriptive representation
- Distributional justice
- Decrease in social damage
- Increased political participation
- Enhanced government responsiveness

Cons:

- Citizen competency
- Less accountability
- Responsiveness of representatives
- Decreased relationship between representative and represented
- Impact on Canadian federalism
- Worries regarding relationship with the House of Commons

Conclusion:

Ultimately, the use of exclusively elected representation cumulates in a lack of political equality, through a deficit of symbolic equality, improper capacity to exercise agency, and unequal opportunity to influence political decisions. Citizen interests get put in unfair jeopardy for arbitrary reasons, including a lack of wealth, a lack of partisan ties, and membership in a minority group or underrepresented region.

The infusion of sortition into the Canadian political landscape provides an opportunity to remedy these consequences. Sortition will increase the equality of citizens in the political arena, particularly in capacity to define the political agenda, the increased responsiveness of government, and diverse interest representation.