

Unequal Voices: Racialized Communities and the Struggle for Political Equity in Canada

by

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INTRODUCTION

As a settler-colonial entity, the Canadian nation state has a long history of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and nationality enshrined in its social, political, and economic institutions. From slavery to apartheid, to explicit policies of exclusion, to veiled programmes intended to stratify a race/colour/class hierarchy, the country's sordid past, catalyzed by its political and capitalist elite, is useful to understand markers of material progress today – or lack thereof – in any sphere. Among those markers is the realm of political participation and representation in Canadian society by traditionally marginalized groups.

In 1971, the Canadian federal government embarked on a policy of multiculturalism, seeking to recognize and support the contributions of immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities in the country. This inspired broader actions and specific policies to address discrimination and other obstacles that these communities faced and filtered down to the provincial and municipal governments. However, recent elections across jurisdictions illustrate that many challenges remain for immigrants, as well as Indigenous¹, Black, and other racialized groups to achieve meaningful representation in electoral politics or feel included in that space, especially when there continues to be a foregrounding of Whiteness as a “racial signifier in the preservation of systems of domination as a vehicle to reinforce structural inequality.”²

This paper will examine the varying trends of participation for racialized groups in electoral politics, while delving into the factors that tend to influence their engagement. The essay is essentially divided into two sections. The first segment focuses on voting activity by migrant, ethnic, racialized groups in Canada, while assessing factors that may shape their appetite for this kind of commitment to political process. The second part will specifically explore the tenets of underrepresentation for racialized groups aspiring to win elections at each level of government, with a greater focus on the Canadian parliament. At several junctures within the exploration of various themes below, potential recommendations will be listed toward the overarching objective of moving toward more racially inclusive political participation and representation in Canada.

¹ It should be noted that much of the research discussed below does not really delve into the nuances of the experiences of Indigenous people in Canada. This mainly because much of the statistics that the analysis in these research works is drawn from, like Statistics Canada, has not officially subsumed Indigenous people under its visible minority category.

² Frances Henry and Carol Tator, introduction to *The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society* (Toronto: Nelson Thomson, 2009).

BARRIERS TO VOTER PARTICIPATION FOR RACIALIZED GROUPS

Research by Elections Canada and others shows that visible minorities³—particularly recent immigrants, youth, and people from disadvantaged backgrounds—vote at significantly lower rates than their White, Canadian-born counterparts. Some key barriers include: socioeconomic hardship; discrimination and sense of belonging; mistrust in political institutions; and the electoral system in Canada

Many Migrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Groups Face Serious Economic Challenges

Data available on voter participation in Canada suggests that there are barriers in elections for citizens who are either migrants to Canada and/or come from ethnic or racial minority groups – also known as “MER” minorities. For instance, in a working paper for Elections Canada entitled, “The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities”, Livianna Tossutti examines statistics on immigrant groups and Canadian-born voters in the 2000 and 2004 federal elections and finds that racialized newcomers to the country since 1991 voted at rates lower than their Canadian-born counterparts.⁴ Drawing largely on Statistics Canada’s 2002 Ethnic Diversity Study (EDS), and the 2004 Canadian Election Study (CES), she concludes that among these MER minorities, those who are young and/or come from disadvantaged backgrounds show especially concerning trends with respect to future electoral participation. A similar phenomenon was also identified among Canadian-born voters from some ethnocultural communities, particularly from Chinese, South Asian, and Black backgrounds, who voted at markedly lower rates than their non-visible counterparts (primarily of European origin). Tossutti ultimately points to several factors that may negatively impact voting among MER minorities that can be categorized as socio-economic, cultural differences and/or issues of social integration, distrust or misunderstandings of the political system, and discrimination. For example, she asserts that in addition to limited proficiency in an official language, deteriorating economic conditions, unemployment and poverty among racialized people can deter their electoral participation, while lower personal income among immigrants as a whole reduces the likelihood of voting.⁵ With respect to specific social and psychological dynamics like attachment to Canada and perceived discrimination, she finds that a stronger sense of attachment to Canada increases the likelihood of voting, while discrimination can discourage political engagement.⁶ These factors are useful to consider when scrutinizing the dynamics of voter participation and political representation for MER minorities Canadian society.

³ “Visible minorities” is a term used by Statistics Canada, and is therefore repeated by researchers looking at data from its publications. However, “racialized” or “racialized people” was adopted by the federal government several years ago, displacing the term visible minority. Visible minority will be primarily used here for ease of reference when referring to data drawn from Statistics Canada.

⁴ Livianna Tossutti, “The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities.” (Ottawa: Elections Canada: 2007).

⁵ Ibid., 13, 9, 33.

⁶ Ibid., 22, 18.

A closer look at economic success for MER minorities, or lack thereof, does appear to illustrate some measure of marginalization, which may affect their propensity to vote as Tossutti postulates. Statistics Canada data shows that visible minorities generally have much lower household incomes than ethnic groups of European origin.⁷ In fact, in 2001, the poverty rate for racial minorities was 26.6 percent compared to 14.2 percent for the rest of the population.⁸ The economic struggles of recent immigrants could also be counted in that disproportionality, as they registered earnings that were far less than their native-born counterparts. These disparities have not significantly changed in more recent years. For example, in 2016, 21 percent of racialized Canadian residents were deemed low-income compared to 12 percent of non-racialized residents, while the income gap between the two groups increased to 26 percent in that year. The situation in the province of Ontario is particularly stark where 52 percent of Canada's racialized people living in poverty reside. Meanwhile, new immigrants residing throughout the country – those arriving between 2011 and 2016 – had an income gap of 37 percent in contrast to non-immigrants, as well as a low-income rate of 31.4 percent, which was more than twice the rate of 12.5 percent recorded for non-immigrants. In addition, as of 2016, across all MER minority groups in Canada, regardless of whether they were new immigrants, the four ethno-racial groups living in poverty by quite margin over others were Chinese (23.2 percent), South Asian (19.9 percent), Black (18 percent), and Arab (11.9 percent).⁹

Money-making hardships are inevitably tied to inadequate employment. A study published in 2019 notes that racialized people and immigrants in Canada are over-represented in part-time and precarious work “characterized by lower wages, absence of benefits, and job insecurity.”¹⁰ Unemployment rates too speak to the precarity surrounding employment for that group. For example, in Ontario, where 52 percent of Canada's racialized people live in poverty, racialized men are 24 percent more likely to be unemployed than non-racialized men, while racialized women are 43 percent more likely to be unemployed than non-racialized men.¹¹ Moreover, employment difficulties for MER minorities, especially new immigrants, are probably connected to their concentration in major urban areas, where job competition is intense, and the discounting of their work qualifications – including the challenges they face in getting their foreign qualifications recognized in the first place – which likewise affects their

⁷ Jeffrey G. Reitz and Rupa Banerjee, “Racial Inequality, Social Cohesion and Policy Issues in Canada,” *Canada: Institute for Research on Public Policy*, 2007: 4. This statistic is taken from Table 1, Column 2, from census data).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Fact Sheet 6: Racialized Poverty,” *Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change (COP-COC)*, accessed February 12, 2025, <https://colourofpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/cop-coc-fact-sheet-6-racialized-poverty-in-income-social-assistance-1.pdf>.

¹⁰ “Fact Sheet 5: Poverty in Employment,” *COP-COC*, accessed February 13, 2025, <https://colourofpoverty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/cop-coc-fact-sheet-5-racialized-poverty-in-employment-2.pdf>.

¹¹ Ibid.

ability to get jobs that match their skills and experience.¹² Indeed, 41 percent of chronically poor immigrants have degrees.¹³

Discrimination in Canadian Society Affects Sense of Belonging

Another feature of the lived experiences of MER minorities that cannot be understated is discrimination. As Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change notes, in employment, “Multiple studies have demonstrated that employers discriminate against job applicants with African, Asian or Muslim ‘sounding’ names, even when applicants have equivalent education and experience. The same bias gets expressed based on one’s neighbourhood of residence.”¹⁴ The report also asserts that the over-policing of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities reverberates in hiring practices, where the use of background checks by employers entrenches their exclusion from the labour market.¹⁵ Yet, reports of racial discrimination by MER minorities have not only been reported in the employment sector. For instance, in the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS) when asked generally if they had experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly on the basis of “ethnicity, race, skin colour, language, accent, or religion”, whether they felt “uncomfortable or out of place in Canada” because of their race or cultural background, or had concern about becoming a victim of a hate crime, 35.9 percent of visible minorities respondents indicated that they experienced racism, compared with 10.6 percent of Whites. For visible minorities, those perceptions of discrimination were especially high among Blacks (49.6 percent), Chinese (33.2 percent), and South Asians (33.1 percent).¹⁶

It should be underscored that perceptions of discrimination increase for MER minorities the longer they have been in Canada. The EDS shows that among recent immigrants, 33.6 percent of visible minorities report experiencing discrimination, compared to 19.2 percent for their counterparts of White/European origin. For earlier immigrants, that perception rises to 35.5 percent for visible minorities. Yet, it is markedly higher for second generation, or children of visible minority immigrants, with 42.2 percent of visible minorities reporting experiences of discrimination, compared to just 10.9 per cent for the children of White/European immigrants and later generations.¹⁷ Furthermore, perceptions of discrimination based on race specifically for MER minorities widens from 14.4 percent among recent immigrants, to 25.3 percent for earlier immigrants, and 35.3 percent for the children of immigrants.¹⁸

The prevalence of experiences of discrimination, perceived or otherwise, inevitably affects the social integration of MER minorities into Canadian society. Case in point, among second generation immigrants, the EDS reveals that visible minorities had

¹² Reitz and Banerjee, “Racial Inequality, Social Cohesion and Policy Issues in Canada,” 9, 11.

¹³ “Fact Sheet #5: Poverty in Employment,” COP-COC.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Reitz and Banerjee, “Racial Inequality, Social Cohesion and Policy Issues in Canada,” 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

a lower sense of belonging in the country than their White counterparts. The same patterns exist around questions on trust of in others and life satisfaction for second generation visible minorities, particularly for Blacks with respect to the former and Black and Chinese groups in relation to the latter. However, the correlative negative trends with greater experience in Canada for visible minorities is most pronounced on questions of self-identification as Canadian and voting. Moreover, as Rietz and Banerjee observe, the slow integration of MER minorities cannot be explained by low earnings alone. Instead, as they put it “negative trends in integration reflect more pronounced experiences of discrimination and vulnerability, which become, or remain, more pronounced for the second generation.”¹⁹

MER Minorities Mistrust Political Institutions the Longer they Live in Canada

Monica Hwang’s study on the topic of political trust supports those inclinations, as she finds that while visible minorities tend to specifically express a greater degree of trust in the country’s political institutions compared to other Canadians, “it is higher among recent immigrants than among the Canadian-born or longer-term immigrants.”²⁰ She surmises that one of the factors which lead to that perception for newcomers may be the positive view that they have of Canadian institutions, especially if they come from less prosperous countries. Put differently, political institutions in Canada may appear to be more just, efficient, and trustworthy than those in their countries of origin. Hwang also points to the fact that the government has major legislation like the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Multiculturalism Act that explicitly safeguard minority rights, signal to MER minorities that the government actively protects their rights and interests. What’s more, Canada’s relatively open immigration system, which grants citizenship relatively quickly and offers support to refugees, fosters a positive perception of government among recent migrants.²¹ Although Hwang postulates that an alternative explanation could be that immigrants are “hesitant to state negative views about government, so as not to seem ungrateful or to avoid possible backlash,” her research affirms that among racialized people with migrant roots, their political trust diminishes the longer they have been in Canada. Even as it may appear that MER minorities are “simply acculturating to the Canadian norm”, which she suggests as another alternate explanation, reporting from racialized people about experiences of discrimination in various spheres of society and its connection to sense of belonging, denotes that trust in government, including the enthusiasm to vote, probably erodes due to such incidents.²²

¹⁹ Reitz and Banerjee, “Racial Inequality, Social Cohesion and Policy Issues in Canada,” 33.

²⁰ Monica Hwang, “Ethnicity and Political Trust in Canada: Is There a Deepening Divide”, *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 42, no. 1 (2017): 38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/90009688>.

²¹ Monica Hwang, “Ethnicity and Political Trust in Canada,” 40-41.

²² Ibid.

Recommendations

Drawing chiefly on proposals set out in Reitz and Bannerjee, the following is a list of recommendations that may address socioeconomic hardship; discrimination and sense of belonging; and mistrust in political institutions for MER minorities and ensure equal opportunities for all racial groups in Canada:

1. **Comprehensive Policy Coordination:** Establish a centralized unit within the federal government, potentially directed by a cabinet minister, to coordinate immigration-related policies. This unit should address immigrant employment, settlement programs, recognition of immigrant qualifications, bridge training, and employment discrimination.²³
2. **Clear Objectives and Evaluation:** Develop policies with explicit goals and mechanisms for formal evaluation. This would ensure accountability and effectiveness in addressing racial inequality.²⁴
3. **Enhanced Research Base:** Invest in credible research on racial inequality and discrimination to inform policy decisions. Universities, research centers, and public foundations should be supported to conduct large-scale studies on employment equality and discrimination.²⁵
4. **National Advisory Council:** Create a council to address concerns about the impact of immigration on race relations and social cohesion. This council should have independent fact-finding capabilities to explore divisive issues, such as racial discrimination in employment.²⁶
5. **Proactive Measures for Political Representation:** Implement measures to ensure racial minorities have better access to political decision-making. This could fall under the ambit of a National Advisory Council that could oversee initiatives intended to increase minority representation in electoral office.²⁷
6. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Address the gap in perceptions of discrimination by promoting public information campaigns to clarify facts and foster consensus on the need for action.²⁸

The Value of Voting for Racialized Groups Can Be Diminished Through the SMP

²³ Reitz and Banerjee, "Racial Inequality, Social Cohesion and Policy Issues in Canada," 36.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 37.

²⁶ Ibid., 38.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 37.

While socio-economic issues such as rates of poverty, precarity in employment, experiences of discrimination and social integration help to provide important context to understand the civic participation of MER minorities, Canada's political institutions, namely the electoral system, also seem to play a role in their inclinations toward voting.

In Canada, voting for government representatives is based on the single-member-plurality (SMP) system, which is more commonly referred to as "first-past-the-post." Under this electoral paradigm, the candidate who obtains the most votes in the constituency wins for that riding outright. At the provincial and federal levels, the political party with the highest number of elected officials, or seats, will form the government. A major drawback to the SMP system is that it can result in a party governing despite holding an accumulation of seats that do not align with the percentage of the total votes they received. In other words, another party could capture a greater share of the votes amassed and still lose because they did not capture as many districts as the winning party. Moreover, as Jessie Han posits, under the SMP system "the size of constituencies determines the actual value of each vote...the more people that live in a constituency, the less weight each vote."²⁹ For racialized voters who mostly live in large constituencies, this diminishes the importance of their vote, as the setup restricts representation to absolute equality among districts. Put another way, "even a reasonably large minority group may not be sufficiently concentrated in any one district to elect any representatives of its choice."³⁰ This is palpable between provinces, such as the relatively sparsely populated Atlantic provinces and provinces that "have a larger average population per riding due to their rapid population growth" like Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta which is "mostly driven by visible minority immigrants."³¹ That dynamic also plays out within provinces where there is a rural-urban disparity in populations with more inhabitants concentrated in cities. Again, racialized voters are impacted by this as they tend to reside in urban areas. Thus, the inequality in representation that is innate the SMP system could be magnified due to the distribution of electoral districts in Canada.

It should be noted that an alternative to the SMP system is a Proportional representation (PR) system, which is used by many countries in the world in some form at various levels of governance. A PR system is an electoral structure in which political parties gain seats in a legislature based on the percentage of votes they receive in an election. This vote-seat alignment means, for example, that if a party receives 10 percent of the vote, it will secure about 10 percent of the seats. Therefore, under a PR system "minority groups are guaranteed representation as long as their preferred parties pass the minimum electoral threshold."³² Nonetheless, although adopting PR

²⁹ Jessie Han (Jiaxi Han), "Institutional and Social Perspectives on Visible Minority Representation in Canadian Parliament", *Politicus Journal*, 6.1 (2020): 15.

³⁰ Benjamin Forest, "Electoral redistricting and minority political representation in Canada and the United States," *Canadian Geographer* (July 02, 2012): 321, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.2012.00437.x>

³¹ Jessie Han (Jiaxi Han), "Institutional and Social Perspectives on Visible Minority Representation in Canadian Parliament", 16.

³² Benjamin Forest, "Electoral redistricting and minority political representation in Canada and the United States," 321.

has been mentioned by political leaders in Canada as a more democratic form of elections, the SMP system remains.

Attempts have been made federally to make the distribution of seats fairer to achieve a better representation of the population under the SMP, including by increasing the number of seats in the House of Commons. Currently, through a process known as “redistribution”, each province has boundary commissions that are empowered by federal legislation called the Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act (EBRA) to achieve that goal. These three-member commissions are “designed to be insulated from partisan political pressures.”³³ The chair of a commission is a judge appointed by the province’s Chief Justice, while the remaining two members are appointed by the Speaker of the House of Commons. Although boundary commissions have wide discretion in implementing measures, the EBRA requires that they are guided by three rules when adjusting borders. First is the notion of population equality, which is to be attained by ensuring that each riding’s population aligns, as closely as is feasible, with the province’s electoral quota – calculated by dividing the province’s population by its allotted seats. However, commissions may deviate by up to ± 25 percent from this quota without special justification, and larger deviations are permitted if the commission provides further rationale (EBRA Section 15). The second rule aims to restrict the geographical expanse of electoral districts, specifying that when establishing reasonable limits, boundary commissions must account for a “manageable geographic size for districts in sparsely populated, rural, or northern regions of the province” [EBRA Subsection 15(1)bii]. Benjamin Forest remarks that this rule “is justified in part by the practical difficulties created for MPs from physically large ridings with dispersed populations”, and that the two rules together “mean that commissions tolerate considerable intra-provincial population deviations.”³⁴ The third rule that is to be observed by commissions, as explained in the EBRA is “the community of interest or community of identity in or [sic] the historical pattern of an electoral district in the province” [EBRA Subsection 15(1)bi].³⁵ Forest provides insight on this rule as well, explaining that there are two agendas guiding the criterion:

The first is essentially one of incumbency protection by keeping the boundaries of ridings relatively stable. The second is regional representation, or the principle that constituencies are composed of communities rather than simply discrete individuals. It can thus provide a back door for the representation of minorities if these groups are recognized as communities of interest or identity...³⁶

Although on its face the EBRA appears to furnish the tools for redistribution in a way that facilitates more meaningful representation for racialized groups, especially under

³³ Benjamin Forest, “Electoral redistricting and minority political representation in Canada and the United States,” 320.

³⁴ Benjamin Forest, “Electoral redistricting and minority political representation in Canada and the United States,” 324.

³⁵ As quoted in *Ibid.*

³⁶ Benjamin Forest, “Electoral redistricting and minority political representation in Canada and the United States,” 325.

the rubric of communities of interest or identity, there are shortcomings. For example, with variances of up to ± 25 percent, the issue of voters in smaller ridings having disproportionately greater voting power compared to those in larger, overpopulated ridings, or what Forest calls structural malapportionment, may persist, including the rural-urban divide within provinces. Additionally, both Forest and Han underscore that while there is potential to mobilize the community interest and/or identity principle from the EBRA to position racialized people for better representation when allocating communities, “so that these communities’ influence is not diminished,” there has been no “political imperative to use it.”³⁷ Rather, historically it has only been deployed to “justify rural over-representation.”³⁸ Nevertheless, Forest’s article exploring the distinctions between Canada’s approach to redistribution and the United States’s efforts provides intriguing insights.

Like Canada, the United States also has a territorial based, SMP system that determines elections’ winners. This has led to similar historical issues of voter bias and specifically the underrepresentation of racialized groups in that country as is the case in Canada. However, the United States’ approach to redistribution or what it calls “redistricting” is not the same. One difference is that in the United States, redistricting is a highly political process that is controlled by partisan state legislatures. These governing bodies are constrained by the equal-population requirement, which mandates that districts within states must have nearly zero population deviation to ensure equal voting power across districts. This is a clear contrast to what takes place in Canada, where boundary commissions can have population deviations of up to ± 25 percent or more, leading to malapportionment and the dilution of representation for racialized groups.

Another key divergence is the “equal population doctrine”, which is rooted in constitutional principles of individual rights, including construing voting as an autonomous, individual act. It is based on the notion that each individual vote carries equal weight, thereby minimizing voting disparities in voting power caused by population imbalances. Yet, this “individual rights model” becomes more complex when applied to political representation – which often concerns groups rather than individuals – especially when state legislatures have the authority to draw electoral districts.³⁹ In fact, even as there is an equal-population rule, political parties’ influence over the drawing of congressional district boundaries in their favour, which is a practice known as gerrymandering, has the potential to weaken the voting power and/or discriminate against specific groups. Amendments and judicial interpretations of key federal legislation intended to enshrine equal voting rights for all citizens in the country called, The Voting Rights Act, has been used to prohibit discrimination in redistricting and

³⁷ Jessie Han, “Institutional and Social Perspectives on Visible Minority Representation in Canadian Parliament”, 16. Benjamin Forest, “Electoral redistricting and minority political representation in Canada and the United States,” 319.

³⁸ Jessie Han, “Institutional and Social Perspectives on Visible Minority Representation in Canadian Parliament”, 16.

³⁹ Benjamin Forest, “Electoral redistricting and minority political representation in Canada and the United States,” 323.

improve the representation of minority groups. This federal legislation aims to restrict gerrymandering, which can dilute minority voting strength by amassing them into a few districts or spreading them across multiple districts to reduce their influence. In effect then, states must draw districts with nonwhite majorities wherever geographically cohesively minority populations are large enough to form a majority or plurality. At the same time, courts have been hesitant to explicitly endorse group representation, “particularly when the group is defined by racial or ethnic identity.”⁴⁰ Thus, in general, redistricting in the United States presents similar issues with regard to enhancing the reach of racialized people through voting as Canada’s redistribution method.

Recommendations

The recommendations listed below contemplate how the electoral system in Canada can be reformed to enhance the voice of racialized people in the voting process:

1. **Population Equality Standards:** The Canadian government could adopt stricter population equality standards for ridings, similar to the United States, to ensure that racialized people in overpopulated ridings have equal voting power. That may include reducing the variance from 25 percent to 5 or 10 percent. Such a measure should reduce the dilution of minority votes and increase their representation.⁴¹
2. **Creation of Minority-Dominated Districts:** Boundary commissions in Canada could use their flexibility to create more districts with significant proportions of racialized people, namely through the ERBA’s “communities of interest or identity” principle. In the United States, supermajority, majority, or influence districts have been crafted to better reflect minority populations.⁴²
3. **Address Structural “Malapportionment”:** The government could revise its seat allocation formula or increase seats in Parliament to reduce structural biases that favor rural and sparsely populated areas over urban regions where visible minorities are concentrated.
4. **Proportional Representation Systems:** Canada could consider proportional representation systems, which guarantee minority groups representation based on their share of the vote, rather than relying solely on territorial systems.
5. **Targeted Inclusion Strategies:** The government could implement targeted strategies to increase representation for specific minority groups, as seen with

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jessie Han, “Institutional and Social Perspectives on Visible Minority Representation in Canadian Parliament”, 16.

⁴² Forest notes that supermajority districts refer to districts with more than 65 percent minority population, a majority district is more than 50 percent, and an influence district is more than 35 percent. See Benjamin Forest, “Electoral redistricting and minority political representation in Canada and the United States,” 321 at footnote 5.

African Americans and Latinos in the United States and has already been utilized for Francophones in Canada.⁴³

6. Re-imagining Citizenship: The government could shift its multicultural approach that tends to conflate immigrants and racialized people in the country's "political imagination" – thereby conceiving of representation as "a matter of integrating immigrants in the Canadian polity" – to instead view them as integral parts of the political community deserving distinct representation through their vote.⁴⁴

Political Influence Beyond the Power of Voting

Without question, MER minority groups have always resisted the violence and marginalization that they have faced throughout Canada's ignoble settler-colonial history, waging economic, social, and political struggles to assert their humanity. These efforts have led to important gains that have sent ripples throughout the country and illustrate that it is possible, by starting outside the halls of power, to compel the formal structures of society to recognize its shortcomings. The long record of activity by people of African descent in Canada is one such example that can be drawn upon to assess how meaningful representation can be achieved.

In her article, "Racism Versus Culture", Anne-Marie Livingstone traces the twentieth century history of the Black fight for equality in Ontario and Quebec – especially from within its two largest cities, Toronto and Montreal respectively – to measure potential gains and failures of tactics that began to diverge in the 1970's.⁴⁵ She notes that, during that decade, once restrictions on immigration ended, there was an increase in Caribbean and South Asian migrants who "stimulated the growth of Toronto's multi-racial Left," including the founding of the Urban Alliance for Race Relations by "Black, South Asian, and Jewish activists in 1975."⁴⁶ Such formations led to "Black political actors and their allies campaign(ing) relentlessly for legislation against 'institutional racism'," which Livingstone reminds was a concept that could be located within the paradigm of Black radical thought or "Black Power." She explains how the provincial legislature was swayed by their advocacy at a time when evidence of systemic racism was becoming harder to deny and the limits of improving race relations and multi-culturalism were being exposed:

In a 1987 report, the Provincial Advisory Committee on Race Relations criticized multiculturalism for neglecting racism and reinforcing over-simplified depictions of ethnicity and culture (Carrington and Bonnett, 1997). In 1992, the newly elected left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP) created

⁴³ Ibid., 335.

⁴⁴ Ibid.,

⁴⁵ Anne-Marie Livingstone, "Racism Versus Culture: Competing Interpretations of Racial Inequality in Canadian Public Policy," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 47, no. 6 (2024): 1331, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2248237>.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1332.

the province's first Anti-Racism Secretariat based on recommendations from Black and South Asian activists and anti-fascists (Harney 1996). The administration also conducted an inquiry into criminal justice that unambiguously concluded that anti-black racism was the root cause of racial disparities in law enforcement (Kempthorne 2013). The victories were short-lived, however, as the Conservative Party elected in 1995 swiftly abolished the NDP's reforms.⁴⁷

To be sure, the anti-racist initiatives pursued by the provincial government in the 1980's and 1990's were tied to the determination of outside forces led by racialized people and Black residents in particular. For instance, there were organizations like the National Black Coalition of Canada and Congress of Black Women of Canada that both had Toronto chapters, along with the Black Action Defence Committee (BADC). Those groups did not only participate in committees convened by the government, or draft reports and proposals as part of their campaigns, but they also exhibited their desire for social and political change by engaging in protest actions to shed light on the perils of pervading racism in Canadian society, alongside collaborators like Canadian Jewish Congress, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association and other human rights organizations. Many of them wore political buttons at marches and elsewhere that aligned with the causes they championed like speaking out against racial discrimination in policing locally, or the movement to pressure the provincial and federal governments to boycott, divest, and sanction the South African apartheid government.⁴⁸ Thus, grassroots activism, complete with paraphernalia, helped to foster solidarity among residents who had been marginalized, either because of their status as a MER minority or due to their political views, and also managed to impact elected officials from the outside looking in.

Although Black activist organizers in Ontario employed elements of Black radicalism in agitating for change, those in Quebec appear to have mainly used a different tact in the last five decades or so due to the rise of Francophone nationalismism. Livingstone avers that even as migration from French-speaking countries flowed into Quebec in the 1970's, it left Black and other racialized communities caught in the midst of a "tug-of-war between Quebec nationalism and Canadian federalism," while also casting them as enemies of the nationalist cause.⁴⁹ She adds that a turn somewhat away from separatism by elected officials in the province since the 1990's has still left racialized people as targets for discrimination and "perpetuated a symbolic conflict between the survival of the white Francophone identity and the claims of people of colour and immigrants."⁵⁰ This has meant that, unlike Ontario, anti-racism has not been sincerely grappled with by the provincial government in Quebec. Moreover, Black activists in Quebec have not had the same collaborative support against racism as their counterparts in Ontario, as since the 1980's "Francophone leftists have been allied with

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Norda Majekodunmi, "Talking pieces: Political Buttons and Narratives of Equal Rights Activism in Canada." *Journal of Black Studies*, 47.7 (2016): 753-772.

⁴⁹ Anne-Marie Livingstone, "Racism Versus Culture", 1332.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1333.

Quebec nationalism.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, at the crux of Livingstone’s study is an examination of how the differing contexts of Quebec and Ontario have led to a different level of engagement between Black activists and policymakers in the Ontario’s Youth Opportunities Strategy (YOS) on the one hand, and Quebec’s Street Gang Intervention (SGI) on the other.

Both the YOS and the SGI were strategies undertaken by provincial elected officials in Ontario and Quebec in response to violence and “street gangs” in Black and racialized communities. In Ontario, the government, following a spate of gun shootings in 2005, endeavored to develop a strategy to prevent its proliferation. Yet, as Livingstone explains, the genesis of the youth policy that emerged could be found in grassroots Black organizations push for what was eventually proposed by the government:

Black community organizations in Toronto started mobilizing in 1999, when the Black Action Defense Committee (BADC) grew alarmed by an apparent surge in violent incidents and founded the “Building Hope Coalition” to mount a collective response. The coalition held public forums across Toronto where residents consistently recommended improved educational and employment opportunities for Black youth (Palmer 2001). By 2005, the coalition had expanded to become the African Canadian Coalition of Community Organizations (ACCO), founded by over 30 organizations. In August 2005, the ACCO published a manifesto outlining strategies to curtail racism and racial inequality in Toronto that it planned to discuss with provincial and federal officials (Hepburn 2005).⁵²

Hence, the efforts of dozens of Black organizations were vital in spurring policy change within the provincial legislature. They not only advised politicians on what was ailing their communities in private and public meetings but also pressured them by issuing press releases and publishing editorials.⁵³ This activity was a continuation of the legacy of Black residents using direct action to impress upon the need for government intervention. In contrast, Livingstone observes that in Quebec “Black political actors were notably absent from deliberations over SGI.”⁵⁴ Instead, a top-down method was undertaken between elected officials in the province and police chiefs, with police services overwhelmingly the financial beneficiaries of the strategy.⁵⁵ This approach is connected to another distinction Livingstone identifies in Quebec, which is the notion of cultural nationalism and colour-blindness perpetuated by those in government, as they seek to promulgate “interculturalism” – where citizens are expected to unite around the French language. Therefore, when these officials described the SGI, they noted their concern was that Black youth in the province were imitating urban gangs from the United States, “as if Blackness made them cultural and ethnic outsiders rather than young people whose formative experiences with racism

⁵¹ Ibid., 1343.

⁵² Ibid., 1338.

⁵³ Ibid., 1338-1339.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1339.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

have been on Quebec soil.”⁵⁶ Indeed, that outlook ensured that race-conscious policies such as what was advanced through the YOS in Ontario were absent in the SGI.

Livingstone’s evaluation on the influence of Black grassroots mobilization on government action is instructive, especially as articulated through the lens of the gains that have been won by Black and racialized groups in Ontario since the 1970’s. Although such efforts have been thwarted in Quebec due to a colour-blind slant, coalescing in cultural nationalist ideology pursued by that provincial government, the successes in Ontario illustrate that there is a potential pathway for racialized people to combat racism and affect change in government policy beyond the reach of their vote.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are a guide for how various levels of government in Canada can tackle institutional racism, while also effectively bolstering the participation of racialized residents outside the activity of elections:

1. **Engaging Grassroots Racialized Organizations:** Black and racialized political actors have historically played a critical role in advocating for anti-racism policies and casting a light on socio-economic issues that may disproportionately affect them. Ensuring their representation and influence in policymaking processes is therefore essential.
2. **Addressing Systemic Racism:** Policies should focus on systemic causes of racial inequality rather than isolated incidents, while the public and policymakers alike should be educated about the existence and impact of systemic racism to help overcome ideological resistance and foster support for anti-racism initiatives. Furthermore, policymakers must approach racism as a fundamental issue tied to capitalism, settler colonialism, and white domination, rather than treating it as an isolated problem.⁵⁷
3. **Moving Beyond Multiculturalism and Interculturalism:** While these frameworks aim to promote diversity, they often sidestep systemic racism and reinforce simplified notions of ethnicity and culture. Policies should explicitly address racism and power relations rather than depoliticizing the issue.⁵⁸
4. **Funding Race-Specific Organizations:** Quebec's ban on funding race- and ethnic-specific organizations has limited the ability of Black communities to organize collectively. Ensuring that there is sufficient funding for such groups as a rule in all provinces could strengthen the representation of the interests of racialized groups.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1342.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1342

⁵⁸ Ibid.

UNDERREPRESENTATION OF RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES IN POLITICAL OFFICE

Despite increased candidacy in elections, racialized people remain underrepresented in elected office at all levels. This is not due to a lack of interest or ability, but to structural barriers including bias in party nomination processes, systemic racism in voter behavior, and unequal campaign resources.

Structural Obstacles in Municipal Politics Disadvantage Racialized Candidates

In addition to low rates of voting among MER minorities, their representation in political office also appears to be lacking.

Through a study interrogating the scope of and barriers to diverse representation in local politics, Karen Bird examines municipal elections in the 23 “largest...and most multicultural” cities in Ontario in 2010, through a focus on women and visible minorities.⁵⁹ To ascertain information on candidates she relies on a survey of collected demographic material, including age, country of birth, ethnic origin, and family status, as well as data on candidates' political experience and campaign resources. Among her critical findings are that visible minorities held fewer than 8 percent of council seats in those 23 municipalities “despite comprising over 32 percent of the general population across these cities.”⁶⁰ This underrepresentation is markedly more pronounced than for women and foreign-born individuals at 28 percent and 19.3 percent of council seats respectively, when taking into account their ratio of proportionality relative to their population size.⁶¹

Erin Tolley, a professor of political science at Carleton University who studies diversity in Canadian politics, avers that racialized and immigrant candidates face more hurdles entering municipal politics than they do at the provincial and federal levels. She emphasizes that the lack of party structure in place to support candidates at the local level is a crucial difference. With the “mobilizing function of parties is lost...visible minorities often need to be recruited and persuaded to run.” Tolley states that while White candidates often don't need to be encouraged to run for municipal office, racialized people need encouragement “and if there is a party behind them they will feel more motivated to run.”⁶²

The virtual nonexistence of political parties could be barrier for racialized people trying to get into local politics. Yet, Bird's research shows that in Ontario, they are more

⁵⁹ Karen Bird, “The Local Diversity Gap: Assessing the Scope and Causes of Visible Minority Under-Representation in Municipal Elections,” 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Tolley is quoted in an article which highlights that while there are currently more visible minorities holding seats in the House of Commons than ever in parliamentary history, it is still not reflective of the racial and ethnic composition of Canada. The article proceeds to profile the experiences of three elected racialized candidates at the federal, provincial and municipal levels. See Naser Mitfari, “The Politics of Diversity: Why Representation Matters,” New Canadian Media: The Pulse of Immigrant Canada (June 10, 2021).

likely than women to run as municipal candidates. However, as the aforementioned statistics on representation between the two groups illustrates, racialized people fall further away from proportionality than women. This suggests that underrepresentation for racialized people in local politics is not solely a lack of candidates from visible minority backgrounds. Furthermore, Bird notes that the electoral success rate for racialized candidates is significantly lower than for other demographic groups, even when controlling for crucial factors like incumbency.⁶³ She considers the role that racialized people running in “colour-coded” electoral districts may play in the decrease in proportionality as they move from the candidacy stage to seats in elected assembly. She describes the tendency and its impact as follows:

This refers to a pattern in which parties nominate visible minority candidates (or such candidates choose to run) disproportionately, and perhaps even exclusively, in constituencies with exceptionally high proportions of visible minority residents. Where this occurs, we would find a persistent pattern of visible minority candidates competing against each other for a single seat. And this could, in part, explain the disproportionate lack of electoral success among visible minority candidates. Simply put, it might be the result of their tendency to all run in the same few wards in any given city.⁶⁴

Yet, Bird posits that since the drop in proportionality for racialized people from candidates to elected members at the local level is much less steep at the provincial and federal legislatures, there may be other reasons for their underrepresentation. She ultimately identifies several barriers, including incumbency, that may impact racialized candidates when they run for office.

In the absence of parties in Ontario municipal politics, incumbency typically proves to be a huge advantage to candidates. For example, Bird shows in her study that the success rate of racialized incumbent candidates in the 2010 elections was 70 percent, while for non-incumbents it was 0.9 percent. Even for non-minorities such disparities were evident, with incumbent and non-incumbent candidates at 79.5 percent and 11.9 percent respectively.⁶⁵ As Bird observes, name recognition combined with incumbency can go a long way for candidates, especially in the context of a reduced flow of information that typically comes with municipal elections as compared to its provincial and federal counterparts. Indeed, the realities of local elections may also enable incumbents to rely on relationships they have developed within the communities they are running in, access resources to aid in their campaigns, point to a track record of achievements that could appeal to voters, and likely get more media coverage that would further boost their visibility compared to their challengers. Incumbency therefore can reasonably be considered to be a serious factor contributing to the underrepresentation of racialized people in Ontario’s council seats.

⁶³ Ibid., 5-7.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 7.

Bird also turns to what she refers to as a “demand-side” explanation to potentially understand the dearth of racialized people within Ontario city councils, namely the likelihood of voter bias. Through an analysis of the results of a Voter Study that was based on experimental findings, including information from South Asian candidate and South Asian voter respondents, and White candidate and White voter respondents, she speculates that ethnic affinity bias was relevant to the outcome of the elections.⁶⁶ In noting that South Asian voters showed a marked preference for South Asian candidates, which was not reciprocated by White voters, who tended to favour White candidates, she surmises that such behaviour is not restricted to a specific ethnic group as “ethnic affinity bias operates in a similar way across all ethnic groups – members of ethnic groups, of whatever stripe, tend to be more positively disposed towards a same ethnic candidate, and more negatively disposed towards a candidate of a different ethnic background.”⁶⁷ She adds that this helps to illuminate why ethnic minorities prefer to run in wards with “exceptionally high proportions of same ethnic voters”, even as concentrations of racialized candidates will have a detrimental impact on racialized representation broadly.⁶⁸ Still, Bird argues that the most salient mechanism that may be responsible for the “extreme diversity gap” in Ontario municipal politics is the low information flow about candidates. In this context, voters’ knowledge about candidate names and platforms are limited, as well as media coverage, which again, tends to give more attention to incumbents. For Bird, when voters have little to go on in deciding who to vote for, they are more likely to gravitate towards the ethnic and sex affinity biases, as she reveals in her article. She postulates that these biases may be “readily overridden in the richer informational context of the national and provincial level.”⁶⁹

Yet, city legislatures in Ontario are not the only spaces that show an underrepresentation of racialized people in Canadian cities. A 2020 study from Toronto Metropolitan University Diversity Institute reveals that relative to their share of the population, Black and racialized people – defined as “non-Caucasian” – are conspicuously missing from boards of “large companies, agencies and commissions, hospitals, educational institutions and the voluntary sector in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, Halifax, Hamilton, London and Ottawa.”⁷⁰ Although racialized

⁶⁶ The study design is discussed at *Ibid.* 7-9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Tara Deschamps, “Black, racialized Canadians lack representation on boards in 8 major cities: study”, *The Canadian Press* (2020), <https://globalnews.ca/news/7254185/black-racialized-canadians-lack-representation-boards/>. The study in question that is reported on by Deschamps article does not appear to be noted on The Toronto Metropolitan University Diversity Institute website as with other publications it has produced, but may have been inspired and/or reflect research from papers/presentations at the 2017 National Metropolis Conference in Montreal, Canada. According to their website, that conference included titles like “Visible Minority Representation in Toronto Leadership and the Business Case” for Diversity Panel, “Representing Canada? Visible minorities’ Representation in Senior Leadership Positions Across Major Canadian Cities Panel”, “Visible Minority Representation in Montreal Leadership”, Panel Session “Representing Canada? Visible Minorities’ Representation in Senior Leadership Positions Across Major Canadian Cities”, and “Engineering Diversity in Entrepreneurship: A study of three municipalities.” See: <https://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/publications/2017/>.

people comprise 28.4 percent of the population across those eight cities, just 10.4 percent of the board positions analyzed were occupied by them. This includes disproportionately lower rates of representation in cities like Toronto and Montreal that numerically outstrip the other cities with respect to its composition of racialized Canadians. The study found that in some cities, even when racialized women outnumbered non-racialized women within the general population, they still hold fewer seats, including in Toronto where racialized women are outnumbered by non-racialized women in corporate leadership boards 12 to 1. Moreover, consistent with Bird's research on municipal elections, women generally fared better in terms of representation than their racialized counterparts.

The rates of disproportion for Black Canadians across the cities that are the subject of the study are particularly stark, as they make up two percent of board positions despite representing 5.6 percent of the population across those major cities. The report states that in Toronto, as many as 3.6 percent of Board seats are held by Black people, but this representation does not appear to be spread out to all sectors. For instance, Black people made up just 0.3 percent of corporate board members, which is 25 times lower than the proportion of Black residents in the Greater Toronto Area. On the other hand, in the Greater Montreal Area, there were no Black board members in the corporate, voluntary, education, or hospital sectors. In Calgary as few as one percent of all board members were Black, while only 0.7 percent of Black people held board positions in total in Vancouver. Meanwhile, the study finds that Indigenous peoples, along with members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, and persons with disabilities are rarely members of boards.

It could be that racialized people selected as board members within the aforementioned influential sectors are similarly affected by low information context that plagues municipal elections leading to the bias purported by Bird. Thus, a look at representation in higher stakes provincial and federal elections may be worthy of consideration.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations that may improve representation of racialized people in municipal office based on the discussion above:

1. Address Voter Bias: Efforts should be made to counteract ethnic affinity biases, which lead voters to prefer candidates of their own ethnicity. This could involve public education campaigns to promote the value of diversity and inclusiveness in political representation, as well as encouraging candidates to run in wards that do not have high proportions of same-ethnic residents.⁷¹

⁷¹ Karen Bird, "The Local Diversity Gap," 21.

2. Reduce Low-Information Contexts and Enhance Visibility: Introducing mechanisms to better inform voters about candidates, such as voter guides or debates, could reduce reliance on heuristics like ethnicity or sex. Furthermore, ensuring fair and balanced media coverage on racialized candidates and their platforms can both help overcome the informational deficit that disadvantages them, as well as mitigate bias.⁷²
3. Support Non-Incumbent Candidates: Providing resources, mentorship, and training for racialized candidates to build their political experience and campaign strategies could improve their chances.
4. Promote Political Parties at the Municipal Level: Introducing political parties could provide racialized candidates with organizational support and voter mobilization strategies.⁷³

Provincial Trends in Representation Show Underrepresentation: B.C. and Ontario

According to the 2016 Census of Population, British Columbia and Ontario contain the highest percentage of visible minorities in Canada at 30.3 percent and 29.3 percent respectively. In their article examining ethno-racial identities and political representation in British Columbia and Ontario, “two of the most ethnoracially diverse provinces in Canada”, Abdoulaye Gueye and Pascale Minani Passy draw on data from provincial election results in 2017 and 2018 to understand how voting patterns may impact the electoral representation of visible minorities.⁷⁴ Through this analysis they demonstrate that nuance is required to appreciate the ascent of racialized people to political office. Underpinning their discussion is how concepts of ethnic affinity and residential concentration can be predictors of voting proclivities, which inevitably impacts representation in provincial legislature.

As the authors explain, residential concentration hypothesizes that the political representation of racialized groups is influenced by their demographic weight in specific constituencies. This means that racialized candidates are more likely to be elected in areas where their ethnic group forms a significant portion of the population of a respective constituency. Ethnic affinity on the other hand is articulated by Gueye and Passy through two concepts – centripetal ethnic affinity and transversal ethnic affinity. In the electoral context, centripetal ethnic affinity refers to the tendency of members of a given ethnic group to support candidates from within their group rather than those who are not, unless there is “an irreconcilable opposition between the moral convictions of voters and those of their ingroup candidates.”⁷⁵ They point out that there is, for example, strong centripetal ethnic affinity in Ontario among South-Asian Canadians, as

⁷² Ibid., 21, 22

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Abdoulaye Gueye and Pascasie Minani Passy, “Ethnoracial Identities and Political Representation in Ontario and British Columbia,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 42, no 4 (2019).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

evidenced by their political representation. In the 2018 Ontario provincial elections South Asians were overwhelmingly elected in constituencies (9 out of 11) where they were the largest racialized group. Those results also appear to affirm the theory of residential concentration as well as Karen Bird's aforementioned position. Two constituencies from those same elections in which 64.2 percent and 51.7 percent of people respectively identified as Chinese were won by Chinese Canadians, while a third Chinese Canadian elected official won in a constituency where 31 percent of constituents, its largest racialized group, identify as Chinese. Yet, another approach is required to understand ethnic affinity in constituencies where the group that a successful racialized candidate belongs to is not dominant or concentrated.

Transversal ethnic affinity is a broader concept that connotes support for other racialized candidates perceived as allies. It also entails encouraging voting across different racialized groups and/or promoting solidarity and collective representation among minorities. This theory is considered by Gueye and Passy in relation to Black Canadians in Ontario where only two of eight Black elected officials came from constituencies that had Black Canadians comprising the major racialized group, while the remaining six were constituencies where South Asians were the largest racial group. This outcome is a challenge to the residential concentration and centripetal ethnic affinity paradigms. Moreover, it is a contrast to the situation for Chinese Canadian candidates who were only elected to seats where they were the dominant racialized group. At the same time, Gueye and Passy note that Chinese Canadians, despite being one of the largest racialized groups in country had less political representation than their South Asian and Black counterparts in Ontario and British Columbia.

Relative to their population, proportional projections suggest that there should have been 7 Chinese Canadian Members of Parliament Provincial (MPPs) in the 2018 provincial elections in Ontario, yet there were only 3. Contrastingly, Black Canadians were overrepresented in that province, as there were 8 MPPs when proportional projections suggest there should be 6, and South Asian Canadians were proportionately represented with 11 MPPs matching their projections of 11. However, it should be noted that following the recent 2025 provincial elections in Ontario, Chinese Canadian representation of MPPs had increased to 5, South Asian Canadians were down to 10 MPPs, and Black Canadians had just 3 MPPs.⁷⁶ These figures suggest, notwithstanding any significant changes in their population, both Chinese Canadians and Black Canadians are underrepresented in the Ontario provincial legislature today, and to a lesser extent South Asian Canadians. Gueye and Passy also looked at the 2017 elections in British Columbia that also showed Chinese Canadian underrepresentation. Projections relative to their population there suggested that they should have had 10 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in that province, but there were just 4, while South Asian Canadians had 7 MLAs, about the same as their projected figure of 7. Black Canadians did not have any MLAs, but the Chinese

⁷⁶ This is based on a list set out on the Wikipedia page, which names members of parliament at the federal and provincial levels, their riding, when they took office, when they left office, the party they belong(ed) to, and a note about how they identify. See "List of Visible Minority Politicians in Canada", under "Ontario", *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_visible_minority_politicians_in_Canada.

Canadian population in that province was nearly twelve times that of the Black Canadian population. Nonetheless, the 2024 provincial elections in British Columbia revealed an increase across the three racial groups, with the Chinese Canadian representation of MLAs increasing to 8, 13 are South Asian Canadians, and Black Canadians have 2.⁷⁷ Still, improved representation of Canada's three largest racial groups in recent British Columbia elections does not necessarily shift the realities of underrepresentation in other provinces and their cities, as well as federally for them and racialized Canadians as a whole.

Barriers to Representation in Federal Politics Persist Despite More Elected Officials

At the federal level, representation in the Canadian House of Commons for visible minorities has essentially been on an upward trend since 1993. Though uneven, these increases have seen racialized Members of Parliament (MP) go from 13 in 1993 to 53 in 2021, to about 60 in the recently concluded snap elections in 2025.⁷⁸ Yet, as Jerome Black explains, an increase in MPs over the last three decades has not matched their "relative incidence in the population at large." He adds that their "ratio of representation" or "the MPs percentage divided by the population percentage" has only reached at most two-thirds on two occasions – 2015 and 2019.⁷⁹ Therefore, even as racialized people have a noticeable presence in political office at the highest level of government and appear to be keeping pace with their population growth with their increased seats in the House of Commons, as is the case locally and provincially, they remain underrepresented in spaces of governance in the country. On the other hand, White men, who make up a third of Canada's population, occupied 62 percent MP seats in the 2015 and 2019 federal elections.⁸⁰

Black notes that although there is a lagging of visible minority representation in the Canadian Parliament relative to its makeup within the general population, slow progress towards greater representation is typical in Canada and elsewhere where traditionally marginalized groups "typically face challenges gaining access to positions of power, especially beyond token numbers and often only after the passage of a considerable amount of time."⁸¹ For example, he points out that women continue to face underrepresentation with just about 30 percent of them being elected as MPs in 2021 after nearly 100 years since the first woman was elected to Parliament.⁸² At the same time, there has certainly been an uptick in the number of racialized candidates running for political office. For the Liberals, 25 candidates identified as Indigenous and 18 identified as Black, while more than one in five of all candidates identified as racialized

⁷⁷ Ibid. Under the heading "British Columbia". Of the 8 Chinese Canadians, I have included two that are identified on the website as Taiwanese-Canadian, as Taiwan has been deemed to be a province of China by the United Nations since 1971.

⁷⁸ "List of Visible Minority Politicians in Canada", under "House of Commons".

⁷⁹ Jerome Black, "Racial Diversity and the 2021 Election: Visible Minority Candidates and MPs", *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 45, no. 2 (Summer, 2022).

⁸⁰ Valérie Ouellet, Naël Shiab, and Sylvène Gilchrist, "White men make up a third of Canada's population but a majority of MP's – here's why," *Radio Canada* (August 26, 2021).

⁸¹ Jerome Black, "Racial Diversity and the 2021 Election."

⁸² Ibid.

or persons of colour. The Conservatives had six candidates who identified as Métis and two others who identify as indigenous; 14 who identified as Black or African Canadian; 10 who identified as Muslim; and a total of 74 who did not identify as “Caucasian”. The NDP on the other hand had 29 candidates identify as Indigenous and 104 identify as people of colour.⁸³ Black discusses the rationale for this increased participation for visible minorities at the candidate level in federal politics:

...relatively more recent changes in societal values and attitudes, including a greater emphasis on, and promotion of diversity have set up competing narratives. In some quarters, having more diverse political teams may actually be seen as politically advantageous. In addition, visible minorities, in particular, comprise an ever-increasing share of the Canadian population and have become citizens and voters in fairly large numbers. For example, according to the 2016 census, visible minorities formed the majority in fully 41 federal districts (compared to 33 such constituencies in 2011) and, more generally, made up at least a third of the districts in about 20 per cent of all the ridings in Canada. Moreover, they are concentrated in urban settings filled with competitive districts that play a large role in deciding the overall election outcome.

These demographic and political realities, of course, have not gone unnoticed by the political parties: likely, the heightened competition focused on winning over minority voters is a force that has some bearing on increasing the number, however slowly, of visible minority MPs.⁸⁴

Akin to the situation for municipal elections then, there does not appear to be a shortage of visible minority candidates vying for MP seats. Rather, as Black and others have identified, there are barriers that have hampered their chances at electoral success. Some of those hurdles mirror what visible minorities face in local politics, such as the phenomenon of incumbency. Yet, much of what they face emanates from the shortcomings of political parties, which are not a factor at the municipal level. For example, even though the process for selecting a candidate for a riding begins with a nomination contest decided by eligible voters for a party’s local association, MPs who are incumbents usually do not face any serious challenges.⁸⁵ This means that at the federal level too, racialized people will be hard-pressed to be selected as candidates by major political parties in a winner-take-all contest where incumbents have an inherent advantage. Indeed, as the 2015 and 2019 elections illustrate, 65 percent of incumbents were White men.⁸⁶ Incumbents are more likely to have better supported campaigns in

⁸³ The statistics provided for the Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP are based on numbers published in an article for CTV News.ca. See Jeremiah Rodriguez, “Advocates Disappointed by Lack of Racial Diversity among Major Parties’ Candidates” *CTV* (September 2, 2021). That article indicates that those statistics were provided by “the five parties taking part in the debates organized by the Leaders’ Debates Commission were asked to break down the diversity of their candidates across all 338 ridings, including racial identity, if nominees are members of the LBGTQ2S+ community and if they identify as having a disability.”

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ouellet et al., “White men make up a third of Canada’s population but a majority of MP’s – here’s why.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

terms of both financial and resource supports. Aside from incumbency, Valérie Ouellet, Naël Shiab, and Sylvène Gilchrist also consider “safe seats” or “party strongholds”, which are constituencies where a party has won the two previous elections by a margin of at least 10 percent. They found that whereas White women ran in party strongholds half as often as White men, for racialized men and women it was just one-third of the time, no Indigenous men and women ran in those ridings, compared to 74 percent of White men, who were also 52 percent of all candidates running overall for seats in the 2015 and 2019 elections.⁸⁷

Certainly, the SMP system may disincentivize major political parties from replacing overwhelmingly White candidates who are incumbents or in safe seats in favour of racialized candidates. However, the risks notwithstanding, it is within their purview to make attempts to disrupt the status quo to ameliorate underrepresentation. Jerome Black suggests that one way that the commitment of the Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP to visible racialized candidates can be assessed is by looking at the competitiveness of electoral seats new candidates from those parties are put to run in.⁸⁸ Controlling for incumbency, he observes that, taken together, there is no difference between racialized and non-racialized candidates nominated in competitive seats as compared to non-competitive ridings in the 2021 elections. He notes though that this perspective is misleading as there are differences among the parties. The Liberals had a distinctly higher percentage of racialized candidates in competitive districts than non-racialized candidates as compared to their main adversaries the Conservatives.⁸⁹ In the end, 43 of 53 elected MPs were Liberals. Still, Black underscores that the Liberals, Conservatives and NDP all tend to run their racialized candidates “in constituencies comprised of large minority populations.” He offers some perspective on those decisions:

On the one hand, it may reflect how minority office seekers are able to challenge for the party’s nomination in diverse constituencies by drawing upon the resources and facilitative networks that have developed with the greater integration of their communities in Canadian society. On the other hand, it may also be due to the parties, the local parties especially, purposely seeking out minority candidates who will help attract more votes in heterogenous ridings. Likely both explanations have merit, and, in any event, probably interact with one another, so there is room in the analysis to understand that the nomination of more visible minority candidates may be due, at least in part, to the impact of competition.⁹⁰

Black’s commentary above provides persuasive rationale for why racialized candidates may be disproportionately nominated for ridings with a sizable number of racialized constituents. Further, he points to statistics for new candidates from the major federal parties that reveal a correlation between identity and the racial

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Jerome Black, “Racial Diversity and the 2021 Federal Election.”

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

composition of the constituency they are nominated for. This is prominently underlined through the Conservatives who put forward their newly recruited racialized candidates in ridings where the racialized population averaged 49 percent, while their non-racialized counterparts “ran in districts with minorities comprising of 18 per cent of the population”, but Black remarks that “For the Liberals and the NDP, the spreads are similar.”⁹¹ These patterns illustrate that there may be a paradox between political parties investing in racialized candidates to run in diverse constituencies and those same candidates aspiring to be representatives in districts where they feel most connected to the residents. Nonetheless, that configuration of racialized candidates by political parties may not address underrepresentation of racialized people in a significant way. Not only is there already a greater likelihood that constituencies with substantial racialized populations will have an elected official of a similar background, but a considerable number of them could be competing against each other.

Another challenge that racialized candidates may face within the party structure is receiving adequate funding for their respective campaigns. Even as parties provide much of the financial support to candidates in their efforts to secure a seat, a candidate that has the wherewithal to invest time in their campaign and can secure other sources of money beyond what the party and riding associations can provide will give themselves the best chance of winning. Ouellet et al. highlight the experience of a racialized candidate with an immigrant background that ran for MP in 2019, who stressed that generational wealth could provide the “insurance” or “safety blanket” of financial stability like “having savings or the ability to take a leave from work, or even quit a job,” can make a substantial difference in a successful campaign.⁹² Given the disproportionate rates of poverty among racialized groups in Canada, it would be fair to assume that they are less likely to have such wealth or financial security at their disposal. The authors also stress that campaigning can also be constrained if the candidate is running for office in a less affluent constituency, referencing the predicament of another racialized candidate whose fundraising expectations were shaped by that reality. To be sure, for reasons discussed earlier, many racialized candidates find themselves running in lower-income ridings. Compounding all of this is Ouellet et al. finding that White men who were non-incumbents still received more money and were placed in party strongholds more often than any other group of candidates. Moreover, inequitable funding from the parties they belong to also appears to be an obstacle racialized candidates face, especially compared to White men.

It should be noted that White men also seem to dominate federal politics because of the entrenched historical advantage that they hold over other groups. As Tolley aptly remarks, they are “more encouraged to pursue political careers and to see themselves as fitting within politics – they have role models who they can emulate, and when they look at the House of Commons, they see people who look like themselves, and so they can imagine themselves in that role.”⁹³ Indeed, racialized candidates simply do not have the same sense of privilege, and in some respects, the voting public

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ouellet et al., “White men make up a third of Canada’s population but a majority of MP’s – here’s why.”

⁹³ Ibid.

does not regard them as legitimate representatives. For example, Ouellet et al. reference the experience of Liberal MP elected in 2019 named Emmanuel Dubourg who described his experience campaigning: “When I go door-knocking I choose white volunteers to accompany me and I always do it in the daytime – otherwise people won’t open their doors.” The authors added that in the lead up to the 2019 elections, Dubourg had to “hire a security guard for his campaign office and share a detailed itinerary of his outings with police on election day” and “shut down his social media accounts.” They also noted that in their research that “more than a dozen” former candidates recounted similar experiences of racism and inequality. Jaden Dela Torre, a candidate for a seat in British Columbia under the NDP in the 2019 election: “I had a couple of people tell me to go back home a few times. I’ve had people yell at me. One person told me once that they were surprised that I knew what democracy was because I’m Filipino, and quote-unquote to them, ‘The Philippines doesn’t have democracy.’”⁹⁴ Thus, by virtue of their racial identity alone, racialized people may be deemed unacceptable as political representatives.

Media representation too may play a role in the perception of racialized candidates. For instance, the news media’s framing of stories on racialized people running for political office often centers their identity in ways that diverge in coverage on White candidates, including depictions that reinforce stereotypes. Again, Tolley, who has written on the media coverage of race in Canadian politics⁹⁵ provides helpful commentary:

Its not a question of never commenting on someone’s background or demographics, because obviously, our demographics, our history, that is part of who we are...The problem is those backgrounds are portrayed in the media as though they are only relevant to the stories of people who are seem as “the other”, and so we don’t talk about how whiteness frames the political history of a white candidate or how a history of privilege may have helped inform how that candidate will vote or the types of issues they might prioritize. But for racialized candidates, their background is seen as politically relevant.⁹⁶

In the context of a society constructed on the edifice of Whiteness, it is not far-fetched that media portrayals of racialized candidates gravitate towards their identities and its relevance to their political ambitions. Yet, it is not clear that those representations incur their chance at electoral success.⁹⁷ There is research, however, that points to voters’ feelings about race impacting their choice of candidate.

In his article, “Racial Attitudes and Vote Choice in National Canadian Elections”, Isaac Hale argues, primarily based on his research into support for the New Democratic

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ See, Erin Tolley, *Framed: Media and the Coverage of Race in Canadian Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015).

⁹⁶ Ouellet et al., “White men make up a third of Canada’s population but a majority of MP’s – here’s why.”

⁹⁷ Jessie Han (Jiaxi Han), “Institutional and Social Perspectives on Visible Minority Representation in Canadian Parliament”, 19-20.

Party (NDP) in the 2019 and 2021 elections, that voters racial attitudes play a crucial role in Canada's national elections.⁹⁸ He compares the backing that the NDP received from voters in 2004-2015 to the period after Jagmeet Singh was named leader of the party in 2017. Singh was the first non-White leader of a nationally competitive federal political party at that time. However, similar to what emerged in the United States with the victory of the Democratic Party's first racialized leader, Barak Obama, Hale finds in his research that voters with the "most" negative feelings toward racial minorities were less likely to support the NDP with Singh at the helm in 2019 and 2021 than in prior elections. The NDP were uniquely affected in this respect, as he finds there was no marked difference among those voters in support of the Liberals and Conservatives for the same period. For Hale that phenomenon can be explained by the ascendancy of Singh, which effectively led to an "electoral penalty" for the NDP.⁹⁹ At the same time, a key finding he makes is that there was decreased support for Liberals and increased support for the Conservative voters in both the 2004-2015 and 2019-2021 election periods among voters with generally "colder feelings towards racial minorities."¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Hale posits that while voters with "very warm" racial attitudes were more likely to vote for the NDP in the last two federal elections, those with a more negative disposition toward race were more likely to vote for the Conservative party. He warns that such tendencies underscore the realities of a polarization in party support among the electorate on the basis of race in Canada.¹⁰¹

Hale's conclusions about the racial attitudes of voters then present another hurdle endemic to the political system in Canada that make it challenging for racialized to become elected representatives into the House of Commons. This includes a scenario where the country's main political parties may be impacted overall if a racialized person is vaulted into leadership of a respective party. Following that assessment, it is probably safe to assume that for provincial elections, which is also party-based, voting may be swayed in a similar fashion. Nonetheless, while those parties may not be able to control media representations of their racialized candidates and voters attitudes towards them, there are reforms that they can undertake within their domain.

Non-Racialized Candidates Generally Feel Less Strongly About Representation

In trying to find solutions to underrepresentation in Canadian electoral politics, getting insight from party candidates is surely a worthwhile exercise. In his article

⁹⁸ Isaac Hale, "Racial Attitudes and Vote Choice in National Canadian Elections" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 56 (2023) 656–680. Hale's study is based on data from the Canadian Election Studies (2004- 2021), namely data pooled from the six surveys within those years. A key variable for Hale from that data is respondent's feelings towards racial minorities. He explains that "In each CES survey, respondents are asked to report their feelings toward racial minorities on a continuous 0–100 scale, with zero corresponding to 'really dislike' and 100 to 'really like.'" Hale uses those measures to form his conclusions, while balancing other variables. See discussion on 661-674.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 675.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 674.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

“Visible Minorities and Under-Representation,” Jerome Black analyzes data from the 2004 Canadian Candidate Survey, which was conducted during and after the 2004 federal elections, to explore perspectives from candidates, including proposed reforms to address that subject.¹⁰² Across participants, most candidates who either identified as racialized or otherwise believed that representation was a very serious problem or a serious one, but “twice as many visible-minority candidates regarded the problem as a very serious one (46% vs. 22%),” leading Black to conclude that for the latter contingent, there was “greater sensitivity to their historic absence from Canadian politics.”¹⁰³ He observes though that there are some differences in outlook based on party affiliation, particularly between non-racialized candidates and racialized candidates. For example, 43 percent of the NDP’s non-racialized candidates regard the “limited presence of visible minorities as a serious problem,” but for racialized candidates in that party the figure is 90 percent who deem it to be a serious problem, compared to 7 percent and 14 percent among the grouping of those candidates among Liberals. In addition, across parties, in response to the statement “too few visible minorities are given opportunities by parties,” it was agreed upon by 63 percent of racialized candidates compared to 55 percent of those who identified themselves differently, with 26 percent of the former in strong agreement and 17 percent for the latter. Therefore, although candidates’ perceptions of the seriousness of underrepresentation and the opportunities afforded to them varied based on their identity, all candidates generally regarded it as an issue.

When it came to questions about whether they approved or disapproved of reforms to address the shortfall in representation through “training programs”, “special financial support”, and “party quota and affirmative action”, there were similarly varying degrees of support based on how the candidate identified. Among these ideas, the biggest differences between racialized people and non-racialized people was “party quota and affirmative action,” which as Black remarks, might be “the most contentious of measures suggested to enlarge visible-minority representation,” the survey indicates that “Fifty-seven percent of visible-minority candidates approved of this approach (20% strongly), while only 37% of other candidates approved (13% strongly).” He again notes differences depending on party affiliation. For both the Liberal and Green parties more non-racialized candidates were opposed to quotas, yet more racialized candidates were strongly opposed. The NDP and the Conservatives on other hand were on opposite sides of the spectrum with respect to their support for this initiative. For the NDP, although their candidates were the most likely to support quotas and affirmative action, racialized candidates were “more supportive (80% vs. 66%) and more intensely in favour (50% strongly approving).” On the other hand, the Conservatives had “virtually all their candidates opposing such proactive measures and the visible-minority candidates being strongest in their opposition (83% strongly disapproving).”¹⁰⁴ Thus,

¹⁰² The survey’s subjects were “the 1,307 candidates from the four federal political parties that ran candidates in all 308 ridings (the Conservative, Green, Liberal and New Democratic parties), and from the Bloc Québécois, which contested all 75 ridings in Quebec...Altogether, 577 candidates completed the questionnaire, which translates into an effective response rate of 44.1%.” See Jerome Black, “Visible Minorities and Under-Representation,” *Electoral Insights* (December 2006).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

while there is evidence of candidates themselves recognizing the need for increase in representation in the Canadian parliament, the intensity of feelings around the matter diverges based on the racial identity of the respective candidate as well as their party affiliations. Ultimately, as these statistics reveal, it is likely that the major parties may not come to a consensus on what electoral reforms should be implemented to augment racialized representation in the country at either the federal or provincial levels.

Recommendations

The proposals below contemplate reforms to improve upon the underrepresentation of racialized people in provincial and federal politics:

1. **Recruitment Practices:** Parties should focus on developing diverse personal networks within riding associations to recruit candidates from underrepresented groups. Furthermore, forging a culture change within parties around diversity and inclusivity that also addresses implicit biases alongside encouraging racialized people to run for office is essential.¹⁰⁵
2. **Nomination Process Reform:** Political parties can address barriers in the nomination process, by reducing costs or restricting the amount of money candidates can spend during nomination contests, increasing transparency, and limiting financial burdens associated with nomination contests. For the latter, this would include funding childcare and related expenses to remove obstacles for racialized and other underrepresented groups.¹⁰⁶
3. **Mandated Targets:** Quotas or affirmative action targets across political parties in the form of specific numbers or percentages of underrepresented groups should improve the representation of racialized candidates.¹⁰⁷
4. **Financial Incentives:** Campaign reimbursements for elections or public funding can be tied to achieving targets of racialized candidates who are successfully elected. Incentivizing diversity in this way may resonate with political parties who may be apprehensive about investing in a racialized candidate.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ The House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE) Committee Report. "Chapter 7. Diversity and Engagement: A Parliament that Mirrors Canada." In *Strengthening Democracy in Canada: Principles, Process, and Public Engagement for Electoral Reform*. December 2016. Jerome Black, "Visible Minorities and Under-Representation." Jerome Black, "Racial Diversity and the 2021 Federal Election."

¹⁰⁶ ERRE Committee Report. "Chapter 7. Diversity and Engagement." Ouellet et al., "White men make up a third of Canada's population but a majority of MP's – here's why."

¹⁰⁷ Jessie Han, "Institutional and Social Perspectives on Visible Minority Representation in Canadian Parliament", 16.

¹⁰⁸ ERRE Committee Report. "Chapter 7. Diversity and Engagement."

5. Electoral System Reform: Transitioning from the current SMP system to a PR system should facilitate diversity in the legislature.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Canada's history as a settler-colonial state has entrenched systemic barriers that continue to hinder the political participation and representation of racialized communities. Despite the adoption of multiculturalism policies in 1971, significant gaps persist in voter engagement and elected representation for Indigenous, Black, and other racialized groups. This paper has examined the multifaceted challenges these communities face, including socioeconomic disparities, experiences of discrimination, mistrust in political institutions, and structural biases within Canada's electoral system.

There are studies which reveal that MER minorities vote at lower rates than their White counterparts due to systemic obstacles such as financial precarity, racial bias, and the dilution of voting power in urban ridings. At the same time, grassroots activism by Black and other racialized groups has historically played a crucial role in pushing for anti-racist policies and greater inclusion, demonstrating that meaningful political influence can extend beyond formal electoral processes. However, systemic reforms remain necessary to dismantle institutional barriers.

Moreover, while there has been an increase in racialized candidates running for office, underrepresentation persists at all levels of government, influenced by party nomination biases, incumbency advantages, and voter discrimination.

The recommendations outlined in this paper – ranging from electoral system changes (e.g., proportional representation, stricter population equality standards for district distribution) to party-level reforms (e.g., recruitment practices, financial incentives for diverse candidates) – offer actionable pathways toward equitable political participation.

Ultimately, achieving true racial inclusivity within Canada's political institutions requires more than symbolic multiculturalism; it demands structural transformation. By addressing systemic inequities in voting accessibility, candidate selection, and political representation overall, the country can move closer to a political landscape that reflects and serves its diverse population. The urgency of these reforms cannot be overstated – without deliberate intervention, the democratic promise of equal participation will remain unfulfilled for racialized communities.

¹⁰⁹ Jerome Black, "Visible Minorities and Under-Representation."

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