

Unequal Voices: Racial Inequality in Political Participation

Runako Gregg. *Unequal Voices: Racialized Communities and the Struggle for Political Equity in Canada*. (2025). Prepared for the Canadian Network for Equity and Racial Justice (CNERJ). [You can read the full report here.](#)

Canada’s political system continues to marginalize racialized communities through barriers that limit both voter participation and representation in elected office.

Fact: Lower Voter Turnout

Racialized and immigrant Canadians—particularly Black, South Asian, and Chinese populations—vote at significantly lower rates than White Canadians

Persistent barriers to voter participation include the following:

- **Economic inequality:** Racialized residents face higher poverty rates (21% vs. 12% for non-racialized in 2016), leaving them to feel excluded and disconnected from the political process.
- **Mistrust in the system:** Experiences of discrimination and racism are eroding trust in institutions.
- **Lack of integration:** Economic exclusion and racial bias combine to weaken a sense of civic belonging.
- **Language barriers:** Language difficulties can limit confidence as well as lead to misunderstandings about the electoral process in Canada for newcomers.

Fact: Lower Representation in Elected Office

Despite an increase in the number of racialized candidates, racialized groups remain underrepresented in elected office at all levels.

Government Level	Racialized Population General Public	Racialized Elected Officials
Municipal (Ontario 2010 data)	32%	8%
Provincial (Sample: Ontario 2018 & B.C. 2017 data)	~30%	10–15%
Federal (2021 Census/ House of Commons data)	26.5%	18.2%

Persistent barriers to proportional representation in elected office include the following:

- **Electoral system barriers**
 - Single-member plurality (SMP) or first-past-the-post systems reduce vote equity in urban, diverse ridings - thus, racialized populations concentrated in cities have diluted voting power.
 - Redistribution flaws: Canada’s $\pm 25\%$ deviation allowance in riding populations leads to structural malapportionment—rural overrepresentation and urban underrepresentation.
- **Societal barriers:**
 - White men represent 36% of the Canadian population but still represented 52% of all candidates, 65% of all incumbents, and the majority of “safe seats” in 2015 and 2019.
 - Funding inequities in nomination process put candidates without the advantage of private funding (e.g., generational wealth) at a disadvantage; and based on racial income gaps, racialized candidates are less likely to have that support.
- **Social barriers:**
 - Voter bias and racist voter attitudes continue to persist.



Progress achieved through grassroots activism and growing representation has not yet translated into equitable power. Achieving genuine inclusion requires fundamental transformation .

Recommendations

Policy & Governance

- Create a federal racial equity coordination unit** to align all anti-discrimination policies.
- Fund race-specific research and organizations** to inform reforms based on racially disaggregated data.
- Establish a National Advisory Council** on Racial Equity with independent authority to investigate systemic barriers and advise Parliament.
- Run public awareness campaigns to clarify facts and foster consensus on the need for action
- Move beyond multiculturalism** to frameworks explicitly addressing racism, and colonial legacies.

Electoral Reform

- Adopt population equality standards** and reduce riding population variance to <10%.
- Apply the “community of identity” principle** to create minority-majority or influence ridings.
- Address urban vote dilution** by revising its seat allocation formula based on current demographic concentrations.

Political Party Reform

- Implement recruitment targets** or quotas for racialized candidates and tie public funding to outcomes based on racially disaggregated data.
- Reduce nomination contest costs** and support candidates through mentorship, campaign financing, and childcare coverage.
- Create financial incentives** - e.g., tie campaign reimbursements to achieving targets of racialized candidates who are successfully elected.

Community Engagement

- Enhance voter education and media accountability** to reduce bias and increase informed engagement.
- Fund grassroots civic leadership** initiatives and recognize community advocacy as political participation.
- Rebuild trust** through public campaigns that confront discrimination and affirm belonging.

