
Visible Minority Candidates in the 2004 Federal Election

by Jerome H. Black and Bruce M. Hicks

This article compares the number of visible minority candidates in the 2004 federal election with the three previous elections. It also considers some of the factors that encourage and discourage visible minority participation in electoral politics. Finally it looks at the situation in each of the political parties and suggests that, despite an increase in the number of visible minorities nominated, this has not yet translated into a major change in the number elected.

While there has been a slowly developing literature focusing on the representational patterns of ethnoracial minorities among elected officials, particularly MPs, there has been comparatively less work undertaken on minorities as candidates.¹ This is an unfortunate state of affairs because office-seeking is itself an important dimension of engagement that is relevant for profiling minorities as elite-level political actors. More plainly, a focus on candidates provides a basis for determining whether the paucity of visible minorities in the House of Commons may be linked, in part at least, to their relative absence among those contesting the election as parliamentary candidates.

The reality of visible minority underrepresentation in Parliament, however, has been particularly well documented for the elections covering the 1993-2000 period. Section "a" of Table 1 displays the relevant figures for these recent elections and provides an update for the 2004 election.² Altogether, the pattern is one of a general growth in the number and percent of visible minority MPs elected, though the increases have been on the modest side and inconsistent in the case of the 2000 election, which actually witnessed fewer of them elected relative to 1997 (a drop from 19 to 17). The 2004 election re-established the upward trend and a record-breaking 22 visible

minorities took their seats as parliamentarians. At the same time, these men and women comprised only 7.1% of the total membership of the House so that election continued to reflect a large representational deficit — one that is particularly evident when the *growing* demographic weight of visible minorities in the Canadian population is taken into account.

Using the first line of the table, which provides census-based estimates of the percentage of the visible minority population at (approximately) the time of each general election, we are able to calculate a "proportionality" ratio by taking this percentage as the denominator and dividing the corresponding MP percentage. A ratio of one would indicate that visible minorities' share of seats in the House of Commons was fully proportional to their incidence in the population, but as can be seen the fraction has typically been below .5, indicating that visible minorities have barely reached the half-way point in eliminating the gap in representation.

What is particularly striking is the lack of change over the 11 years; the two ratios bracketing the period are virtually the same — .47 for 1993, .48 for 2004. In short, while it is true that more visible minority MPs were elected in 2004, the increase in total numbers has only tracked the population increase at the same modest level.

Section "b" of Table 1 demonstrates the plausibility of a link between the incidence of visible minority candidates and MPs. Estimates are shown of the percentage of visible minority candidates who ran for the major parties in each of the four elections. The data reveal both a general and a specific pattern. The broader one is that visible minorities have been underrepresented among the can-

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Table 1: Visible Minority MPs and Candidates, 1993-2004

	1993	1997	2000	2004
Percentage of Visible Minorities in Population	9.4	11.2	13.4	14.9
a) MPs				
Number	13	19	17	22
Percentage	4.4	6.3	5.6	7.1
Ratio to population	.47	.56	.42	.48
b) Candidates				
Percentage	4.1 ^a 3.5 ^b	4.1 ^a	4.7 ^a	8.3 9.3 ^c
Ratio to population	.44 .37	.37	.35	.56 .62

Parties examined for the candidate data in 1993, 1997 and 2000 include the BQ, Liberal, Progressive Conservative, NDP and Reform/Canadian Alliance. In 2004 the parties include the BQ, Conservative, Liberal, NDP and Green (unless specifically excluded).

a - Tossutti & Najem, "Minorities and Elections in Canada's Fourth Party System," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 2002.

b - Black, "Entering the Political Elite in Canada: The Case of Minority Women as Parliamentary Candidates and MPs," *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 2000.

c - Greens excluded.

candidate pool as well. Previous research for the three elections covering the 1993-2000 period has demonstrated that visible minorities comprised only about 4 or 5 percent of all those competing for a parliamentary seat. Moreover, the candidate/population ratios, based on the same census benchmarks and shown in the next line, indicate proportionality ratios generally below .40 for those three elections. The more particular data pattern is that substantially more visible minority candidates competed in 2004 than ever before; numbering 108, they constituted 8.3% of all of the candidates who ran for the larger parties, the Green Party included. With that party removed from the calculation, a stance taken in the earlier studies, the figure rises to 9.3%. Even with this increase, then, the 2004 election continued the pattern of visible minority underrepresentation among candidates. That said, the increase in the proportionality ratio to .62 should not be ignored. In short, the candidate figures do provide evidence that links the limited presence of visible minorities in the House of Commons to their relatively fewer numbers among parliamentary candidates and, as well, they also indicate a bit of a spike in their numbers for 2004.

This, in turn, suggests that a full understanding of the evolving situation of visible minorities as office-seekers requires acknowledging the continuing relevance of obstacles that they face and, as well, factors that may be mitigating or offsetting these long-standing constraints. As for explanations that help explain the traditional underrepresentation of visible minorities, a familiar one emphasizes their status as newcomers to Canada and to

Canadian politics.³ This is a perspective that points to how, unlike the earlier-arrived and more established Europeans, visible minorities have yet to complete the necessary period of adjustment and transition required for political action. The underlying assumption is that, with time, individuals from visible minority communities will develop the resources, interest and ambition required to pursue political challenges and opportunities.

Time in the country does not exclude the relevance of other explanations, which, in any event, are probably more determinative.⁴ Some of the most important focus on the role of local parties as gatekeepers in the candidate recruitment process. The kinds of action they take, or fail to take, can make a great difference in how visible minorities are able to gain access to candidacies. For example, some local officials, indifferent to the need for change, may simply continue with practices that have the coincidental effect of excluding new elements. Visible minorities have long complained about the way constituency parties tend to rely on recruitment networks and contacts that do not reach into their communities, nor into the settings where they are most active. Local officials can also be driven by exclusionary and defensive impulses, out of a concern to preserve their hold on power and to limit the competition for valued candidacies. Prominently positioned individuals within the local party can also erect barriers simply because they harbour racist attitudes and are uncomfortable with the idea of visible minorities as the party's standard bearer. Alternatively, they might not, themselves, be necessarily prejudiced but believe that some Canadians might be reluctant to vote for non-

white candidates.⁵ They might also nominate visible minority candidates disproportionately in electorally less attractive seats. The practice of some parties to protect incumbents from re-nomination has also been identified as an impediment. Whether it reflects a norm in some local parties or is the result of national directives, the result is the same, a freezing of access to candidacies that are associated with the best electoral prospects. Finally, insufficient financial resources and biased media coverage have also been cited as obstacles for minorities.

Such impediments are not the whole story. Factors can also be pointed to that operate to facilitate visible minority candidacies and/or they may work to undermine or offset some of the negative effects just identified. Perhaps, as well, they have increased weight in the more recent period that might help account for the larger number of candidacies.

For starters, there is the reality of ethnic mobilization. Minorities can use their origins to their advantage and capture nominations by drawing upon their community connections and the membership votes of their co-ethnics. Also on the facilitative side, some local parties might understandably encourage minority candidates to run because they perceive an electoral advantage in doing so, presumably in constituencies where minorities have a significant presence. Similar strategic concerns are likely to be characteristic of the thinking of those in the upper echelons of the party. Even if the candidate selection process remains mostly in the hands of the constituency parties, regional and national party officials can still be expected to play some role in influencing the process if they believe that there are electoral benefits in doing so. They may make efforts here and there to influence the selection of visible minority candidates in particular areas, but they are also likely to be mindful of broader electoral concerns and the image conveyed by the candidate team as a whole. Having a significant number of visible minority candidates could be helpful in sending a message to voters about the party's inclusiveness.

That many of these voters are themselves visible minorities, who might be swayed by the parties' efforts in this regard, is no minor detail. While their numbers have been substantial and have been relatively concentrated (in urban settings) for quite some time now, the greatly increased immigration intakes of the last ten to fifteen years have added substantially to their numbers and thus their political clout. For instance, between 1991 and 1997 nearly a million immigrants arrived in Canada and the vast majority of these individuals were visible minorities and, importantly, most went on to acquire their Canadian citizenship.

A sense of the political weight that visible minority voters held in the particular 2004 election can be gained by considering census data on the diversity of constituencies; information from the 2001 census does indicate that visible minorities made up a substantial component of the population in a noticeable number of constituencies. In particular, in 40 (13%) of the 308 ridings that were up for grabs in 2004, visible minorities comprised 31% or more of the total population; in a further 27 (8.8%) ridings, they comprised between 21% and 30% of the population and in another 38 (12.3%) they formed between 11% and 20%. It is hard to imagine that these demographic and electoral realities would not be noticed and acted upon by the parties; an obvious response is, indeed, to have their visible minority candidates contest constituencies characterized by diversity.

The real question is whether the parties magnified their efforts in this regard for 2004, since studies of previous elections have shown a noticeable tendency for visible minority candidates to run in more diverse constituencies.⁶ Table 2 investigates and confirms this expectation, and does suggest that the relationship strengthened in 2004. Among visible minority candidates, a strikingly large 44% contested the election in constituencies where visible minorities made up 31% or more of the population. In contrast, among their non-visible minority counterparts, only 10% ran in ridings where there was such a heavy presence of visible minorities – a sharp difference of 34 points. If to these percentages are added those associated with constituencies

Table 2: Visible Minority Candidates by Constituency Diversity, 2004

Percentage of Visible Minorities in Constituency Population	<u>0-10</u>	<u>11-20</u>	<u>21-30</u>	<u>31+</u>	<u>(N)</u>
Visible Minority Candidates (%)	28	14	15	44	(108)
Non-Visible Minority Candidates (%)	70	12	8	10	(1145)

Percentages are by row. They may not necessarily add to 100 due to rounding.

where racial minorities still made up a substantial 21% to 31% of the population, then the gap is even larger: 59% versus 18%. Equivalent results are obtained (but not shown) when other measures of diversity are employed, such as the percentage of the population of immigrant background or with a language other than English or French as their mother tongue – not surprising given the sharp overlap among such indicators. Finally, the data (not shown in a table) indicate that the visible minority candidacy-constituency diversity connection is very robust and holds for all of the parties. For instance, re-employing visible minority composition as the indicator of constituency diversity leads to the observation that the BQ, Conservatives and Greens nominated 60% of their visible minority candidates in constituencies where visible minorities comprised at least 21% of the population, while the figures are markedly lower for their non-visible minority candidates (9%, 16% and 19%, respectively). The gap is not much smaller for the Liberals (54% vs. 20%) and for the NDP (55% vs. 18%).

Table 3 displays the more fundamental relationship involving visible minority candidacies and the parties; shown are the number and percentage of visible minorities who ran for each of the major parties in 2004. On the one hand, the figures reveal a familiar pattern of underrepresentation, since none of the parties nominated visible minority candidates in numbers approximating their population share (14.9%). On the other hand, there is some modest variation from one party to the next and it turns out that the newly formed Conservative party's candidate team had the largest percentage of visible minority individuals. Of their 308 candidates, 33 or 10.7% were visible minorities. This is just ahead of the

	BQ	Cons.	Green	Lib.	NDP
Number	5	33	15	26	29
Percentage	6.7	10.7	4.9	8.4	9.4

NDP with 29 visible minorities (9.4%) and the Liberals with 26 (8.4%); after that, there is a decline to the Bloc (6.7%) and then to the Greens (4.9%).

What makes these figures perhaps particularly interesting is the fact that the Conservative party has pointedly avoided recruitment measures that would formally give preferential treatment for underrepresented groups. As populist parties, Reform and (then) Alliance had steadfastly refused to establish multicultural or women's organizations within the party, and the

pre-merger Tories eventually followed suit. By contrast the Liberals and the NDP have in place formal structures to represent such groups within their parties; and the two, but especially the NDP, take some proactive measures to recruit minority candidates.⁷

Still, in advance of the 2004 election, the Conservative party did take some informal steps to reach out to minority communities. This included the establishment of what they called a "bridge building committee" and the use of personal contacts by some of their incumbent visible minority MPs. Some of these activities may well have led to the recruitment of a noticeable number of visible minority candidates. Moreover, all of the parties, the Conservatives included, rely on search committees as part of their candidate recruitment processes and it is quite likely that a number of Conservative committees acting on their own and looking for the "best individual" (as the party would have characterized the search) may have decided to promote visible minority candidates.

Furthermore, the new party had particularly strong incentives to project a more accommodating stance towards minorities. First of all, it needed to deal with an unfavourable legacy associated with its Reform/Alliance component – the widespread perception that the parties, Reform in particular, were indifferent if not antagonistic to minority concerns. While Reform's policies and platform were not explicitly anti-minority, this was an impression conveyed by some of the party's more prominent members and reinforced by the party's opposition to programmes such as multiculturalism.⁸ Sensitivity to accusations of racism was already apparent before 2004 and, over time, Reform and then Alliance did nominate (and elect) modestly more visible minorities.⁹ The need to be even more accommodating of visible minorities took on a new urgency in the context of the logic that drove Alliance and the old Tories together – a merger that was singularly about winning power. This, in turn, placed a premium on accomplishing key electoral objectives, one of the most important being making serious inroads into seat-rich Ontario, and this included the province's urban – and multicultural – areas.

Still, even if the parties, taken together, went about nominating a record number of visible minority candidates, this does not by itself mean that the commitment was a deep one. It is one thing to include a noticeable number of such men and women as part of the overall candidate team, which might be useful from an "optics" point of view. It is quite another matter, entirely, to nominate them in constituencies where they actually have reasonable prospects for winning.

One way to examine the nature of the commitment by the parties is to compare the competitive status of the

constituencies contested by visible minorities with the electoral status of those where their non-visible minority counterparts ran.¹⁰ This can be easily done, following standard practice, by taking the results of the previous (2000) election to indicate each party's prospects in 2004. There were a couple of wrinkles, however, to deal with. First of all, there was a need to take into account the intervening redistribution and the increase in the number of seats from 301 to 308, but this was easily handled using the "transposed results" that Elections Canada produced (which involved mapping the 2000 results onto the new 308 districts). Secondly, it was also necessary to deal with the change in the party system from 2000 to 2004 because of the amalgamation of the Alliance and the Tories. The solution adopted was simply to add the votes of the two parties as the basis for indicating the competitive status of the new Conservative party going into the 2004 election. This, it is recognized, is a somewhat generous interpretation since the new party did not come close to achieving the combined vote total received by its two component parts four years earlier. At the same time, this method does have the attraction of being straightforward — particularly in the absence of any other obvious ways of proceeding. A final prefatory comment is that only non-incumbents were included in the comparisons of the competitive circumstances of visible and non-visible minority candidates. This sharpens the focus consid-

erably: after all, what is really at issue is the degree of commitment to new recruitment as part of a possibly changed approach to the 2004 election.

Table 4 indicates that there is evidence to sustain the view that the commitment to visible minority candidates did extend beyond tokenism. While it is true that visible minority candidates tended to be nominated in the least winnable ridings — those where their party lost by 21 points or more in 2000 — at the other side of the scale, they were also as likely to run in winnable ridings as their non-visible minority counterparts. "Winnable" ridings, as can be seen, include those where the candidates' parties had previously won (and by different margins) but they could also bracket those instances where the last election was lost by a margin of 10 percentage points or less.

In the case of the Liberal party, visible minority candidates were actually more likely than other candidates to contest ridings where the party had won last time (29% vs. 20%) — and the visible minority advantage was actually the greatest (17% vs. 8%) for the safest ridings, where the Liberals had won by a margin of 21% or more. If we take the broadest perspective and add in those constituencies where Liberals lost yet remained within 10% of the winner, then the percentages even out: 40% of the visible minority candidates ran in viable ridings, compared to

Table 4: Visible and Non-Visible Minority Candidates by Party Competitiveness, Non-incumbents only, 2004

	Percent Lost by in 2000:			Percent Won by in 2000:			(N)
	21+	11-20	0-10	0-10	11-20	21+	
Bloc Québécois							
VM Candidates (%)	60	20	20	—	—	—	(5)
Non-VM Candidates (%)	38	7	29	12	12	2	(42)
Conservative							
VM Candidates (%)	59	7	14	10	—	10	(29)
Non-VM Candidates (%)	50	12	14	12	4	8	(214)
Liberal							
VM Candidates (%)	61	—	11	6	6	17	(18)
Non-VM Candidates (%)	46	17	17	7	5	8	(144)
NDP							
VM Candidates (%)	93	3	3	—	—	—	(29)
Non-VM Candidates (%)	95	3	2	—	—	—	(244)

Percentages are by row. They may not necessarily add to 100 due to rounding.

37% of those candidates with non-visible minority origins.

By contrast, the Bloc did not nominate any visible minority candidates in ridings where they had won in 2000, while 25% of their (much larger contingent of) non-visible minority candidates did contest such desirable constituencies. The best that can be said is that one of their five visible minority candidates did stand in a constituency where the party had lost by ten points or less. As for the NDP, the most noteworthy pattern is how few attractive seats were available for non-incumbent candidates, regardless of their origins. They would have been hard pressed to offer any new candidates a serious chance of getting elected.

Finally, and importantly, it can be noted that the new Conservative party also tended to be even-handed in their placement of visible minority candidates. Twenty percent of them contested constituencies where either Alliance or the Tories had won in 2000 (or where their combined vote would have amounted to a victory), while the comparable figure for non-visible minority candidates is 24%. In the case of the "safest" seats, the percentages are effectively the same, 10% vs. 8%. It would seem then that the party not only nominated the largest contingent of visible minority candidates but did so with a degree of commitment to have more of them elected.

In conclusion, there are several observations to make about visible minority candidates in the 2004 election that are noteworthy. Most importantly, there were more of them nominated than ever before. Also, there was a strong tendency for them to contest constituencies characterized by diversity and, moreover, they faced competitive circumstances that were generally similar to those confronted by other candidates. Altogether these patterns do suggest that the accelerating growth in the visible minority population has not gone unnoticed by the political parties; they have apparently responded by nominating a larger number of visible minority candidates. This is the bright spot. Unfortunately, it seems that a much higher threshold of nominations has to be reached in order to assure a substantial increase in the number elected as MPs.

Notes

1. For an important exception to the limited work on candidates, see Livianna S. Tossutti and Tom Pierre Najem, "Minorities and Elections in Canada's Fourth Party System: Macro and Micro Constraints and Opportunities," *Canadian*

Ethnic Studies 34: 2003, 85-112. See also Jerome H. Black, "Representation in the Parliament of Canada: The Case of Ethnoracial Minorities," in Joanna Everitt and Brenda O'Neil, eds., *Citizen Politics: Research and Theory in Canadian Political Behaviour* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2002), 355-85.

2. A discussion of the methods used to categorize the visible minority origins of candidates in the 2004 election, and of those who became MPs, is provided in Jerome H. Black, "Ethnoracial Minorities in the 38th Parliament: Patterns of Change and Continuity," in Caroline Andrew, John Biles, Myer Siemiatycki, Erin Tolley, eds., *Electing a Diverse Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming).
3. See, for example, Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, *Reforming Electoral Democracy*, Vol. 1. (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1991), 101-05.
4. Most of the explanations identified in the text are discussed in Daiva K. Stasiulis and Yasmeen Abu-Laban, "The House the Parties Built: (Re)Constructing Ethnic Representation in Canadian Politics," in Kathy Megyery, ed., *Ethno-Cultural Groups and Visible Minorities in Canadian Politics: The Question of Access* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1991), 3-99 and C. Simard et al., "Visible Minorities and the Canadian Political System," in Megyery, *Ethno-Cultural Groups*, 161-261; see also Jerome H. Black, "Immigrants and Ethnoracial Minorities in Canada: A Review of Their Participation in Federal Electoral Politics," *Electoral Insight* 3: 2001, 8-13.
5. The evidence, at least based on the 1993 election, is that Canadian voters do not discriminate against visible minority candidates. See Jerome H. Black and Lynda Erickson, "The Ethnoracial Origins of Candidates and Electoral Performance: Evidence from Canada," *Party Politics*, forthcoming.
6. Tossutti and Najem, "Minorities and Elections."
7. See, for example, Bill Cross, *Political Parties: Canadian Democratic Audit* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 22-23, 67-73.
8. David Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada: Understanding Reform and the Canadian Alliance* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press).
9. Tossutti and Najem, "Minorities and Elections."
10. Tossutti and Najem examined the 1993, 1997 and 2000 elections and found that there were no significant differences between the competitiveness of the constituencies where visible minority candidates ran and those where non-visible minority candidates ran. "Minorities and Elections," 98-99. For their part, Black and Erickson using different methods to study the 1993 election found that visible minority candidates were disadvantaged. "The Ethnoracial Origins of Candidates."