

# *Visible Minority Candidates and MPs*

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*While there is an ongoing need to learn more about the position and experience of visible minorities among the federal legislative elite, one reality is very well understood: they remain underrepresented – both as candidates and, more importantly, as MPs. This paper considers the 2008 federal election as an additional observation and testing point. Its specific aim is to determine whether characterizations about the incidence of visible minority MPs based on studies of elections from 1993 to 2006 still apply when this election is taken into account. The article also discusses visible minorities as candidates in that election. This is in keeping with the focus of previous scholarship on candidacy as a necessary condition for entry into the Commons. This entails not only “counting” them but as well examining which parties they ran for and the competitive status of the constituencies that they contested – all of this in an effort to shed some light on the parties’ depth of commitment to visible minorities as serious contenders for winning Parliamentary seats.*

Visible minorities were first elected to the House of Commons in noticeable numbers in the federal election of 1993 and several studies have tracked their subsequent experiences through to the 2006 election.<sup>1</sup> In the broadest terms, the research reveals that, with the exception of the 2000 election, more visible minorities were able to win seats with each passing election. At the same time, the election-to-election increments have been decidedly on the modest side and, more tellingly, have only kept pace with the growth of visible minorities in the Canadian population at large. Strikingly, for 2006, the ratio of the percentage of visible minority MPs to the percentage of visible minorities in the general population was virtually identical to the ratio for 1993. Put differently, the level of “descriptive representation” has not improved over time.

Table 1 reproduces data from various studies that have covered the five elections over the 1993-2006 period and, as well, offers up the new information for 2008. The first row provides census-based estimates of the visible minority population in Canada for all six

elections and section “a” displays the numbers and percentages of visible minority MPs elected, along with ratios of the MP-to-population percentages. To be clear, the latter comparisons allow for statements about the degree to which visible minorities are present in Parliament relative to their population share (with greater underrepresentation signaled by smaller ratios). The two, already-noted generalities covering the elections from 1993 to 2006 are quite apparent in the first section. To begin with, save for the 1997-2000 pairing, visible minority MPs augmented both their absolute numbers and percentage share of seats from one election to the next, though, again, mostly in small additions. Secondly, the MP-population ratios indicate that the representation deficit has persisted over time; for 1993, it was .47 and for 2006, it was .48. In both years, it would have taken the election of about twice as many visible minorities as those who did win to close the gap.

For its part, the 2008 election did not produce a further improvement in the status of visible minorities in the House of Commons and, in fact, it constituted another case of decline. Twenty-four visible minority MPs had been elected in 2006, but only 21 in 2008, a change that corresponds to a drop from 7.8% to 6.8% of the 308 seats available. On the other side of the ledger, the

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visible minority component of the Canadian population increased from 16.2% to 17.3%.<sup>2</sup> With fewer MPs and a greater population count, a drop in the representation ratio for the 2008 election is to be expected. Even so, the fact that it tumbled down to .39 is striking since it is noticeably lower than the ratio for 1993. Plainly put, five elections on, visible minorities were actually worse off

**Table 1**  
Visible Minority MPs and Candidates, 1993-2008

	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006	2008
% of Visible Minorities in Population	9.4	11.2	13.4	14.9	16.2	17.3
a) MPs						
Number	13	19	17	22	24	21
%	4.4	6.3	5.6	7.1	7.8	6.8
Ratio of % to pop. %	.47	.56	.42	.48	.48	.39
b) Candidates <sup>a</sup>						
%	4.1 3.5	4.1	4.7	9.3	9.0	10.1
Ratio of % to pop. %	.44 .37	.37	.35	.62	.56	.59
<sup>a</sup> Candidate data for 1993-2000 include the BQ, Liberal, Progressive Conservative, NDP, and Reform/Canadian Alliance parties; for 2004-2008, the BQ, Conservative, Liberal, and NDP parties. Source: For 1993-2006 data, see Jerome H. Black, "The 2006 Federal Election and Visible Minority Candidates: More of the Same?", <i>Canadian Parliamentary Review</i> , Vol. 31, No. 3, 2008, pp.30-36. Candidate and MP data for 2008, assembled by author; for the 2008 census estimate, see text.						

in terms of their representation in Parliament.

Section "b" sets out equivalent information about the incidence of visible minorities as federal candidates. Included in the calculations are only the main political parties, taken here to signify those political formations that were able to win seats in Parliament over the 1993-2008 time span. As can be seen, up until 2000, visible minorities formed a limited and basically unchanging segment of the candidate pool. Even as their general population portion grew from 9.4% to 13.4%, they made up less than 5% of the nominees of the principal parties. A noticeable improvement did occur in 2004 when visible minorities doubled their percentage (to 9.3%), but little changed with the election of 2006 (9%). As for the 2008 election, it did involve a small uptick with visible minorities comprising 10.1% of the four main parties' standard bearers; moreover, the nomination of these 107 individuals is associated with a slight improvement in the candidate-population ratio relative to 2006, from .56 to .59.

The fact that a greater-than-ever number of visible minority candidates ran for office in 2008 while

fewer were ultimately elected does not by itself hold any significance. A host of variables ordinarily intervene between candidate recruitment and selection and subsequent electoral success and, no doubt, idiosyncratic and quite local effects can play a role in electing a few more or a few less visible minority MPs. Still, some insights into why more were not elected are possible through a consideration of two major factors that bear upon visible minority candidate fortunes, party affiliation and competitive viability.

### Visible Minority Candidates and their Parties

Table 2 addresses the party dimension by setting out the percentages of visible minorities among the major parties' nominees. Section "a" includes in its base all candidates, while section "b" includes only new ones, i.e., those who did not compete in the immediately previous election.<sup>3</sup> As can be seen, information from the 2004 and 2006 elections is displayed as well. This helps provide some context for assessing the 2008 election – in part because the same political formations competed against each other in all three elections (following the 2003 merger between the Alliance and Progressive Conservative parties).

Note that the corresponding percentages between the two sections are quite different though this is not particularly surprising since the denominators are different (all candidates versus new ones only). Still, they do form a pattern as indicated by the larger figures for first-time contestants. For instance, in 2004, among the new candidates nominated by the Conservatives, 12% were visible minorities but this translates into 10.7% of their overall pool of candidates. In total, of the 12 pairs of corresponding percentages, in 10 instances, they are larger in connection with candidates who were untested in the previous election.

**Table 2**  
Visible Minority Candidates by Party, 2004-2008

	2004	2006	2008
a) All Candidates (%)			
Bloc Québécois	6.7	7.8	10.7
Conservative	10.7	8.1	9.8
Liberal	8.4	11.0	9.8
NDP	9.4	7.8	10.7
b) New Candidates (%)			
Bloc Québécois	11.1	22.0	12.9
Conservative	12.0	9.2	11.2
Liberal	9.4	13.2	7.8
NDP	9.8	7.3	12.3

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This pattern is noteworthy because the percentages associated with new candidates better reflect the parties' commitment – and the possibility of an enhanced commitment with each new election – to visible minority candidacies. This is the case because they rule out incumbency effects, which ordinarily supersede all other factors when parties choose their nominees. In turn, the characteristics of new contestants at the time of or prior to their selection, including their ethnoracial origins, can be deemed to have more significance. In short, the larger percentages for new candidates suggest that the parties have been generally inclined to nominate more visible minorities as opportunities to do so arise.

Another pattern to note is that the across-election percentages in section "b" are more variable than those in section "a." In part, this is simply due to the fact that with a smaller denominator, a few more or a few less visible minority candidates will alter the percentages considerably. The effect is especially pronounced in the case of the Bloc Québécois, where the starting point for a full candidate base is much smaller (with the party competing only for the 75 seats in Quebec). For instance, the BQ nominated five new visible minorities in 2004 and four in 2006, but because they fielded only 18 new candidates in 2006 to begin with, compared to 45 in 2004, the percentage doubled (from 11.1% to 22.2%).

The data associated with the Conservatives and Liberals, however, have the most relevance, not the least because the two parties continue to offer the greatest potential for larger numbers of visible minorities to enter Parliament. They, too, were up and down with their nominations of visible minorities. While 12% of the Conservatives' new candidates in 2004 were visible minorities, in 2006, only 9.2% were, and yet this drop of nearly three points was followed by an increase, in 2008, to 11.2%. The figures for the Liberals are even more fluid. In 2004, visible minorities constituted 9.4% of the party's first-time contestants while in 2006 they made up 13.2% – a quite significant increase but it was eclipsed by an even greater change in 2008, downward to 7.8%.

Two observations about the Conservative and Liberal parties seem relevant at this juncture. First of all, for whatever reasons, the parties were out of sync with one another in the promotion of visible minorities. The Conservatives had noticeably more candidates than the Liberals in 2004 and 2008, but the reverse was true in 2006. Thus, in no instance did the parties simultaneously nominate more visible minorities than they had in the previous election. A second observation

is particular to the 2008 election: recruitment of new visible minority candidates by the Liberals was quite weak and this necessarily suppressed the overall visible minority numbers. The party's behaviour in this regard is somewhat surprising given that it has traditionally been associated with immigrant and visible minority communities. Indeed, it is even perplexing in light of the fact that the party has been losing "vote share" to the Conservatives within these ever-growing sectors of Canadian society.

### **Visible Minority Candidates and Competitive Placement**

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A second line of inquiry aimed at understanding why more visible minority MPs were not elected in 2008 brings into focus the competitive placement of candidates. Taking electoral prospects into account provides a strong summary measure of the commitment to the championing of candidacies; simply and obviously, it makes a difference whether parties nominate visible minorities in districts with good as opposed to poor electoral prospects

Previous studies that have examined new candidates (without differentiating by party affiliation) have demonstrated that visible minority candidates are as likely to be nominated in winnable districts as are their mainstream counterparts. The same is true of the 2008 election (data not shown) but important differences and key insights do emerge when the Conservatives and Liberals are separately considered. Table 3 contains the appropriate information. Three categories of competitiveness are employed to index how well the candidate's party fared in the constituency in the immediately previous election – whether the party lost by a fairly wide margin (by 11% or more), lost by a narrow margin (by 10% or less), or won outright. The percentages shown capture the distributions of visible minority candidates and of non-visible minority or white nominees across the three competitive configurations.

What stands out most of all is that the Liberal party is further implicated as having been weak in the backing of new visible minority candidacies. Over the course of the three elections, the party increasingly departed from an even-handed approach. In 2004, the Liberals actually ran a larger percentage of visible minority candidates (29%) than of white contestants (20%) in constituencies that the party had previously won. And, while the reverse was true in those narrow-loss ridings – 11% for visible minorities vs. 17% for white contestants – the overall picture is one of fairness in the placement of visible minorities. In the 2006 election, the Liberals ran about the same percentages of visible and non-visible minority candidates in previously-

won constituencies (10% and 12%, respectively), but were five times less likely to nominate visible minority, compared to white, candidates in the narrow-loss category (5% vs. 25%, respectively). The departure from equity peaked in the 2008 election. It saw the party nominate fewer visible minority than white candidates both in previously-won constituencies (7% vs. 13%, respectively) and, especially, in narrow-loss districts (0% vs. 17%, respectively). The raw numbers are even more dramatic: in the Liberals' 58 potentially winnable – narrow-loss and previously-won – constituencies (again, where new candidates ran), the party nominated only a single visible minority individual.

The Liberals' thin performance in 2008, however, was partially offset by the Conservatives' approach. They nominated nearly equal percentages of visible minority and non-visible minority candidates in previously-won constituencies (11%, 9%, respectively) and actually gave a bit of edge to visible minority candidates in narrow-loss districts (21% vs. 15% for white candidates). Still, the point should not be missed that the Conservatives, themselves, have been somewhat inconsistent over time; they were even-handed in 2004, but not so in 2006. In the earlier election, they ran nearly equal percentages of visible minority and white candidates in previously-won constituencies (20%, 24%, respectively) and the same

percentage in narrow-loss districts (14%); in 2006, however, the Conservatives ran no visible minorities in constituencies where they had been victorious (versus 8% for white candidates) and were less likely to nominate visible minorities in narrow-loss districts (6% vs. 15% for white individuals). This inconsistency may reflect the party's relatively laissez-faire approach to the recruitment of minorities (and women). Lacking a proactive stance, visible minority candidate numbers may simply fluctuate as a result of the vagaries of the many different constituency associations acting independently and without any direction from party higher-ups. This also implies that future elections may not necessarily witness consistent balance in the placement of visible minority candidates.

For their part, the Liberals have been more open about a commitment to diversity in their recruitment approach. But given their underwhelming approach towards the promotion of visible minority candidates in 2008, further research is called for to investigate the nature and strength of local party effects and the role that supra-local party officials played (or failed to play) in influencing nominations. Interestingly, one explanation can be put to the side: the possibility that the party did not have enough electorally viable openings in constituencies with sizeable visible minority populations. Visible minorities have traditionally been nominated in such diverse

**Table 3**  
**Visible Minority and Non-Visible Minority Candidates by Party Competitiveness, 2004-2008**  
**(New Candidates Only)**

		Previous Constituency Election Result:			
		Lost by 11% +	Lost by 0-10%	Won	(N)
<b>Conservative</b>					
2004	Visible Minorities	66	14	20	(29)
	Non-Visible Minorities	62	14	24	(214)
2006	Visible Minorities	94	6	0	(16)
	Non-Visible Minorities	78	15	8	(157)
2008	Visible Minorities	69	21	11	(19)
	Non-Visible Minorities	77	15	9	(150)
<b>Liberal</b>					
2004	Visible Minorities	61	11	29	(18)
	Non-Visible Minorities	63	17	20	(144)
2006	Visible Minorities	85	5	10	(20)
	Non-Visible Minorities	64	25	12	(132)
2008	Visible Minorities	94	0	7	(16)
	Non-Visible Minorities	70	17	13	(190)

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

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districts. While an argument can be made that their relegation to such areas is an overly narrow approach,<sup>4</sup> nevertheless, the current reality is that all of the parties, not just the Liberals, have a strong tendency to do so and the 2008 election is no exception (data not shown). The key point here, though, is that the Liberals did, indeed, have a collection of diverse constituencies that were competitive (and where new candidates ran), so opportunities did exist for promoting more visible minorities in the customary manner. In fact, compared to the 2006 election, there were more such constituency “openings” in 2008. In the earlier election, the Liberals had 51 winnable constituencies that involved new candidates, but only six of them had diverse populations where visible minorities made up 21% or more of the district. In 2008, the party had more (58) electorally attractive constituencies available, but more importantly, more than three times as many had similarly diverse populations. Yet, within these 20 competitive and diverse districts, only a single visible minority was nominated. Again, this is surprising behaviour for a party being challenged, and apparently successfully so, for the visible minority and immigrant vote.<sup>5</sup>

### Summing Up

It is clear that the 2008 federal election did not add to visible minority diversity in Parliament. Indeed, it resulted in a step backwards. Only 21 visible minority MPs were elected, compared to 24 in 2006. Nearly all previous elections over the period from 1993 to 2006 had witnessed increases, even if only modest ones, so the 2008 election does stand out as a deviation. Moreover, with fewer visible minorities elected, the MP-population ratio was guaranteed to drop, since disproportionate growth of the visible minority population has become a fixed feature of Canadian demography. Indeed, a recent study by Statistics Canada projects that by the year 2031, visible

minorities will comprise between 29% and 32% of the population.<sup>6</sup> Given that the MP-population ratio was actually lower for 2008 than it was for 1993, it is hard to be optimistic that 20 years from now visible minorities will comprise 30% of the House of Commons.

Answers as to why fewer visible minority MPs were elected in 2008 can not be found simply by counting candidate numbers – which were actually up a bit from their 2006 level. However, some explanations are suggested by party-specific candidate data and key in this regard is the Liberal’s weak record in the backing of visible minority contestants. Not only did the party nominate markedly fewer visible minority candidates in 2008 (relative to both other parties and its behaviour in 2006), it further failed to enhance visible minority success by running them in districts with poor electoral prospects. This compounded effect helps explain the overall limited achievements of visible minority politicians in 2008.

### Notes

1. For the latest of those studies, see Jerome H. Black, “The 2006 Federal Election and Visible Minority Candidates: More of the Same?” *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2008, pp. 30-36.
2. This 2008 estimate has been calculated from Statistics Canada, “Projections of the diversity of the Canadian population, 2006 to 2031,” *The Daily*, March 9, 2010.
3. Of course, it is possible that some of these “new candidates” had contested elections prior to the immediately previous election.
4. Black, *op. cit.*
5. For their part, the Conservatives had fewer competitive and diverse districts where new candidates ran, 10 compared to the Liberals’ 20; but they nominated visible minorities in half of them.
6. Statistics Canada, *op. cit.*