
Racial Diversity in the 2011 Federal Election: Visible Minority Candidates and MPs

Jerome H. Black

The 2011 federal election was notable in many respects. The Liberal party won the fewest seats ever in its long history. The New Democratic Party elected its largest ever contingent of MPs enabling the party to form the official opposition for the first time. Another development was the first-ever direct election of a Green Party candidate. The election also produced record levels of gender and racial diversity within Parliament. When the votes were finally tallied, 76 women had won their way into the House of Commons, an increase of seven over the number elected in 2008. This article focuses on visible minority representation which also attained a high water mark in the 2011 election.

Altogether, 28 visible minority MPs were elected in 2011,¹ or 9.1% of the chamber's membership of 308, a result that compares favourably with the 21 MPs elected in 2008 (6.8% of all MPs). Table 1 provides some broader context marshalling comparable information dating back to the 1993 election, when visible minority MPs were initially elected in noticeable numbers. Such a longitudinal perspective adds some weight to the significance of the 2011 outcome. Firstly, visible minority MP numbers have not always increased from one election to the next, and, indeed, across two election pairings, 1997-2000 and 2006-2008, they actually declined; thus, the improvement from 2008 to 2011 is noteworthy in and of itself. Secondly, the election of an additional seven visible minority MPs in 2011 deserves attention given the modest increments across some pairings, e.g., an increase of only two MPs from 2004 to 2006.

Another, more tempered perspective on the diversity-related impact of the 2011 election is possible: it did little to alter the fact that visible minorities remain significantly underrepresented in Parliament relative to their incidence in the general population. Table 1 also addresses this important vantage point by indicating (the ever increasing) visible minority

population percentages and, as well, the result of their incorporation into ratios with the MP percentages. As constructed, a ratio of one would indicate a visible minority presence in the House of Commons at a level that corresponds to their population share. A ratio of .5 would signal that representation is only one-half of what it "should be" given the population percentage. As can be seen, the 2011 ratio is close to this mark, at .48;² put differently, it would have taken the election of 59 visible minority MPs to completely eliminate the representation deficit. In addition, the gap did not diminish very much in 2011 compared to earlier elections. While it is less than it was in the 2008 election (with a ratio of .39), it is the same as the deficits for the 2004 and 2006 elections. Most strikingly, the ratio for 2011 is virtually the same as it was in 1993 (.47); six elections on, visible minority representation has not improved.

In short, visible minority representation following the 2011 election has both positive and negative aspects. Broad countervailing forces operate both to push the numbers upwards and to hold them down, so perhaps it is not surprising that change is more incremental than monumental. For instance, numbers may be boosted by heightened competition for the votes of new Canadians, most of whom are visible minorities; this leads parties to consider nominating more visible minorities as candidates. On the other hand, examples of status quo forces include incumbency effects and various forms of residual discrimination.

Jerome H. Black is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at McGill University.

Table 1
Visible Minority MPs, 1993-2011

	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006	2008	2011
All MPs							
Number	13	19	17	22	24	21	28
%	4.4	6.3	5.6	7.1	7.8	6.8	9.1
% of Visible Minorities in population	9.4	11.2	13.4	14.9	16.2	17.3	19.1
ratio MP % to pop. %	.47	.56	.42	.48	.48	.39	.48
By Party*							
BQ	--	--	--	9.1	16.7	14.3	3.6
CPC	7.7	26.3	29.4	31.8	25.0	38.1	42.9
Lib	92.3	68.4	70.6	59.1	54.2	42.9	7.1
NDP	--	5.3	--	--	4.2	4.8	46.4
(N)	(13)	(19)	(17)	(22)	(24)	(21)	(28)

^a Column percentages.

Source: For 1993-2008 data, see Jerome H. Black, "Visible Minority Candidates and MPs: An Update Based on the 2008 Federal Election," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*. Vol. 34, No. 1, 2011, pp. 30-34. MP data for 2011 assembled by author; for the 2011 census estimate, see text.

Visible Minority MPs and their Parties

It is clear that the NDP's unexpectedly strong performance, popularly characterized as an "orange wave," played the largest role in augmenting visible minority MP numbers. The party almost tripled its overall seat count relative to 2008 and in doing so elected 13 visible minority MPs, the most of any party. Table 1 translates this figure into a percentage: thus of the 28 visible minority MPs elected in 2011, 46.4% won as NDPers. Percentages are also shown for earlier elections and underscore how much of a departure the 2011 contest was for the NDP. In no previous election did the party manage to elect more than one visible minority MP. The Conservatives' performance -- 12 visible minority MPs elected -- also contributed significantly to the overall total. In their case, however, the result continued a trend involving the party (and its various antecedent formations) increasing, almost monotonically, its percentage of all visible minority MPs; across the 1993-2008 period, their portion went from 7.7% to 38.1%. In 2011, the party reached a high point with a share of 42.9%.

Consideration of the Liberals and the BQ raises the question whether their poor performances in 2011 limited what otherwise would have been the election of an even greater number of visible minority MPs.

At one level, the answer would seem to be an easy and obvious "yes." After all, the two parties' fortunes are simply the flip side of the Conservatives and the NDP's success; more to the point, many of their visible minority incumbent MPs were defeated. The Liberals elected only two visible minorities (7.1 % of all such MPs), while in 2008 they had elected nine (42.9%). However, the party's decline is not new. Their share of visible minority MPs has consistently dropped from a high of 92.3% in 1993.³ Still, the subsequent plunge in 2011 is quite sobering. As for the BQ, they elected a handful of visible minority MPs in more recent elections, with shares of 16.7% and 14.3% in the 2006 and 2008 elections (three individuals both times) but only managed to elect one individual in 2011.

Another line of reasoning about the possible role played by Liberal and BQ's losses in limiting visible minority MP numbers may be a bit more informative. If it turned out that the Conservatives and NDP's newly elected visible minorities defeated visible minority incumbents elected in 2008 as Liberals and Bloquistes, then such a "replacement effect" would imply that the two parties' overall electoral setbacks had little impact on the MP total. For the most part, replacement did not occur. Of the 18 visible minorities elected for the first time in 2011, only five won by defeating an incumbent

counterpart. In other words, had the Liberals and BQ fared better, perhaps even modestly better, they may have held onto more seats that included visible minority incumbents, thus adding to visible minority representation.

Visible Minority Candidates and their Parties

The simple truism that the election of more visible minorities requires, in the first instance, their nomination as candidates in greater numbers justifies shifting the focus to the latter. Candidate-level information has always provided insights into understanding visible minority representation and this is no less true for the 2011 election. At the same time, the relationship between candidate and MP numbers is not a straightforward one but rather is mediated by many variables -- some alluded to above -- that help explain why more or less visible minorities end up being elected. Here attention is given to the parties' competitive positions. While the candidates of the more successful parties have better chances of winning, the more precise specification is the competitive status or electoral prospects of the candidates' parties in the particular constituencies where they run. Even if the larger parties will, by definition, have more winnable ridings, the strong regional variations in party support mean that all of the parties have areas of strength and weakness.

In the normal course of events, the previous constituency outcome provides the basis for judgments about a party's prospects in the upcoming election. Certainly, parties recruit and nominate their candidates very much mindful of competitive circumstances, with the expectation of a semblance of a correlation between past performance and the upcoming election result. Of course, it is understood that unexpected

elements will have some bearing on that result, but few anticipated the surprise that was the 2011 election. Many Liberal and BQ candidates went down in defeat in constituencies that ordinarily would have been regarded as competitive, if not safe. On the other side, a very large number of NDP nominees ended up being elected in ridings that the party normally had no realistic prospects of winning. Nowhere is this truer than in Quebec, where a significant number of visible minority MPs were elected in constituencies where the party had trailed badly the 2008 winner. What really mattered for these MPs was not the party's electoral prospects but their simple nomination.

But exactly how many visible minority candidates were nominated by the party and its rivals? And how do the numbers compare with earlier elections? Moreover, what does the information on party competitiveness precisely look like in 2011? Even if electoral margins in 2008 had less relevance for what ultimately happened in 2011, this does not mean that they were completely irrelevant. And, in any event, taking note of competitive placement provides insights about party intentions with regard to promoting visible minorities in electorally viable constituencies. The evidence from previous elections is that the parties, taken as a whole, are as likely to run visible minority candidates as non-visible minority contestants in competitive districts. At the same time, the degree of even-handedness has varied by parties and elections. How does the 2011 election fit in with this characterization?

Answers to these candidate-oriented questions begin with Table 2, which sets out the overall percentage of visible minority candidates nominated by the parties in 2011. Information on the previous three elections is included, again, to provide context. The 2004 contest is an appropriate starting point because it follows the 2003 merger of the Alliance and Progressive Conservative parties, meaning that going forward there is constancy in the major political formations. As well, in 2004 there was a significant ratcheting up in the nomination of visible minorities by the major parties -- up to 9.3%, nearly double what it was in 2000.

It turns out that the percentages have not increased dramatically since. There was a dip to 9% in 2006 and then an increase to 10.1% in 2008; similarly, the underlying raw numbers show the same modest variation -- 93, 90, and 101, respectively. The election of 2011 very much fits into this pattern of little-to-no change: overall, the main parties nominated 97 visible minority candidates or 9.7% of their combined candidate pools. So, at this broad level, the data indicate a situation of essential stasis with regard to

	2004	2006	2008	2011
All Candidates (%)	9.3	9.0	10.1	9.7
By Party (%)				
BQ	6.7	7.8	10.7	8.0
CPC	10.7	8.1	9.8	10.1
Lib	8.4	11.0	9.8	9.1
NDP	9.4	7.8	10.7	10.4

Source: For 2004-2008 data, see Jerome H. Black, "Visible Minority Candidates and MPs: An Update Based on the 2008 Federal Election," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2011, pp. 30-34. Candidate data for 2011 assembled by author.

the advancement of visible minorities as candidates. Certainly, the modest jump in visible minority MP numbers in 2011 is not simply explained by a corresponding increase in visible minority candidacies.

Table 2 also sets out the separate percentages of visible minorities for the four largest parties, revealing the already-implied variation by party and election, and, altogether little in the way of sustained or common patterns. Over the 2004-2008 period, only the BQ nominated more visible minority candidates each time reaching a level of 10.7%; but in 2011, the figure was only 8%. For the Conservatives and NDP, the percentages drop from 2004 to 2006, then increase in 2008, while the opposite is true of the Liberals. As for 2011, for the most part the percentages for the parties are not greatly different from what they were in 2008.

Though informative, these data yield only limited insights into the parties' approach to visible minority candidacies because they include repeat contenders. Incumbents are normally renominated so other recruitment and nomination considerations usually matter less. By viewing only new candidates, more significance can be attached to their characteristics, including their ethnoracial origins, at the time of, or prior to, their selection. The pattern for new candidates also has an up and down quality. In 2004, there were 72 first time visible minority candidates who ran for the four largest parties; the number dropped to 53 in 2006, and then increased to 66 in 2008. In 2011, the same parties nominated 65 visible minorities, so the latest election is hardly an exceptional one in this regard.

Table 3 provides relevant party-specific information for the three largest parties.⁴ The first two lines mark the number of visible minorities nominated and the corresponding percentage among all new candidates. For example, in 2004 the Conservatives nominated 25 visible minorities who made up 12% of the party's new candidates. The third line records what percentage of those visible minority candidates ran in potentially winnable constituencies (where the party, in the previous election, either won or, if they lost, did so by a margin of 10% or less). Along with the fourth line, which reports the corresponding percentage for non-visible minority candidates, this information aids in understanding the extent to which the parties seriously and fairly promoted visible minority candidacies. To continue with the 2004 Conservative example, the party nominated 28% of their visible minority candidates, but 40% of their non-visible minority candidates, in winnable ridings, suggesting a mild bias against the former.

One broad perspective on the 2004-2008 data segment is that the individual parties, judging by nomination numbers and competitive considerations, have been inconsistent in advancing visible minority candidacies. Typically, a stronger promotional effort in one election was followed by a weaker endeavour in the next. This is not to say that this is purposeful. Rather, such see-saw patterns likely reflect the vagaries of the many different constituency parties acting on their own, influenced by various local considerations, and with limited direction from the national party. The net result is somewhat erratic fluctuations in overall visible minority numbers across elections.

Still, this inconsistency does appear to have the consequence of capping visible minority representation at a level less than it might otherwise be. This is because there has been a tendency for the promotional efforts by one or more parties to be offset by the softer efforts of others in the same election. This is especially apparent for the Conservatives and Liberals, which dominated the 2004-2008 election period. In 2004, the Conservatives ran more visible minorities as new candidates than the Liberals (25 versus 16) but the Liberals nominated more of them in winnable ridings (38% compared to 28% for the Conservatives). In the next election, the Liberals held an edge with regard to numbers (20 vs. 16) but both parties only weakly promoted those nominees in winnable ridings. The Conservatives ran only about 6% of their visible minority candidates in such ridings, while the comparable figure for the Liberals is 15%. Moreover, as can be seen, both parties ran more non-visible minority candidates in competitive constituencies. The 2008 election witnessed the Conservatives increase both their numbers of visible minority candidates (up to 19) and their competitive placement (32%, compared with 23% for their non-visible minority candidates.) However, the Liberal effort weakened even further, both in numbers (down to 16) and especially in competitive placement (only 6%).

For its part, the NDP's track record has also been somewhat inconsistent in this time frame. In 2004, they recruited 26 visible minorities among their new candidates (9.8%) but only 13 (7.3%) in the next election; the numbers were back up in 2008 more than doubling to 27 (12.3%). As for winnable constituencies, the NDP's traditional minor party status has greatly limited its ability to run more than a small number of new candidates in such ridings; still, as a general rule, placement has been about even-handed between visible minority and non-visible minority candidates.

Table 3
Visible Minority Candidates, Parties, and Constituency Competitiveness, 2004-2011
(New Candidates Only)

	2004	2006	2008	2011
CPC				
Number of Visible Minorities	25	16	19	20
% of Visible Minorities	12.0	9.2	11.2	13.4
% Visible Minorities in competitive constituencies*	28	6	32	25
% of Non-Visible Minorities in competitive constituencies*	40	22	23	23
Lib				
Number of Visible Minorities	16	20	16	18
% of Visible Minorities	9.4	13.2	7.8	9.1
% Visible Minorities in competitive constituencies*	38	15	6	39
% of Non-Visible Minorities in competitive constituencies*	36	36	30	12
NDP				
Number of Visible Minorities	26	13	27	26
% of Visible Minorities	9.8	7.3	12.3	12.0
% Visible Minorities in competitive constituencies*	4	8	7	8
% of Non-Visible Minorities in competitive constituencies*	2	5	8	5
* Competitive constituencies are defined as those where the party in the immediately previous election, either won or, if they lost, did so by a margin of 10% or less.				

As for the 2011 election, it does not fit the pattern just seen -- none of the three parties weakened their support of visible minority candidacies. The Conservatives and the NDP essentially maintained the same levels of commitment that characterized their efforts in 2008, while the Liberals augmented their approach. The Conservatives nominated one more visible minority than in 2008 (20 vs. 19, with percentages of 13.4% vs. 11.2%). The party did nominate a smaller percentage of visible minorities in electorally attractive ridings in 2011 (25%) than in 2008 (32%) but the difference is not large, and in any event the 2011 figure effectively matches the percentage for non-visible minority candidates (23%). The NDP's promotional efforts in 2011 also held steady. They ran only one less visible minority in 2011 than in 2008 (26 vs. 27) and nominated about the same percentage of visible minorities in their potentially winnable ridings in the two elections.

What does distinguish the two parties, however, is the impact of their endeavours on the final 2011 visible minority MP tally. Of the 20 new visible minority candidates nominated by the Conservatives, only three were elected. By comparison, ten of the NDP's 26 new visible minority contestants were

victorious in their districts, and they made up the bulk of its contingent of visible minority MPs. As for the Liberals, their numbers were all up from 2008 to 2011: 16 to 18 (7.8% to 9.1%) for nominations, with a noteworthy 39% selected to run in winnable ridings (vs. only 6% in 2008). The irony, of course, is that this heightened commitment came at the time when the Liberals were on track to fail electorally. Still, this does not take away from what was a notable improvement in terms of intentions.

Summing Up

The fact that these three parties either maintained or enhanced their efforts in 2011 is one of the few (mildly) positive statements that can be made about the promotion of visible minority candidacies. On the negative side, altogether, the parties nominated fewer visible minorities in 2011 than in 2008, which alone points to an unremarkable election in that regard. Moreover, the modest improvement in visible minority MP numbers in 2011 is incompletely linked to candidate numbers and, especially, competitive circumstances. To be sure, the Conservatives' majority victory allowed seven of their eight visible minority incumbents -- one chose not to run in 2011 -- to be

easily re-elected, and, furthermore, to acquire five additional MPs in diversity-rich districts (four in the Toronto area, one in Vancouver). For the NDP, it was not by virtue of running visible minority candidates in winnable ridings that the party emerged with the most visible minority MPs. Rather, many won riding the party's electoral wave, and, again, the Quebec connection is central. Fully nine of the party's 13 visible minority MPs were elected there, one seat taken away from the Liberals and fully eight captured from the BQ. Nowhere is the NDP's dramatic rise more evident than in those eight constituencies, where the party in 2008 averaged only 13% of the vote and finished well behind the BQ by an average margin of 31 percentage points.⁵ Again, it was the simple nomination of visible minorities in those ridings that ultimately mattered. Moreover, the overall increment in visible minority MPs from 2008 to 2011 can be reasonably tied to the party's performance in Quebec. Had the election taken its more typical, historic form with an NDP fourth-place finish (along with a weak performance in Quebec), it is likely that the change in MP numbers would have been more modest.

In the final analysis, even though the 2011 election did establish a record for racial diversity in Parliament, population-based representation has not improved and is at the same level that it was almost twenty years ago. What is really happening is that visible minority MPs have been elected in numbers that are enough to keep the representation deficit from getting larger, but not enough to reduce it.

Notes

- 1 This count excludes an individual of Chilean background. While Statistics Canada now includes Chileans and Argentinians as part of the Latin American subcategory of visible minorities, the agency did not include them in the past, when the first of the author's minority MP studies was conducted. For consistency sake, therefore, the two Latin American origin groups have not been counted as visible minorities. For the sake of completeness, it can be noted that in 1993 an individual of Chilean origin was elected and one with an Argentinian background in 2004 (and re-elected in 2006 and 2008).
- 2 This 2011 estimate has been taken from Statistics Canada, *2011 National Household Survey*; Catalogue no. 99-004-XWE. Released: May 8, 2013.
- 3 For a discussion, see Jerome H. Black, "The 2006 and 2008 Canadian Federal Elections and Minority MPs," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 41, no.1-2, 2009, pp. 69-93.
- 4 Partial results for the BQ, for the 2004-2008 period, can be found in Jerome H. Black, "Visible Minority Candidates and MPs: An Update Based on the 2008 Federal Election," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 34, No. 1, 2011, pp. 30-34. In 2011, the party nominated only one new visible minority candidate.
- 5 These constituencies also have below average visible minority populations. Generally, the parties nominate visible minority candidates disproportionately in diverse constituencies. For a discussion about the wisdom of running visible minority candidates in relatively homogeneous ridings, 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.