

The 2015 Federal Election: More Visible Minority Candidates and MPs

The federal election of October 19, 2015 established a high water mark in the representation of racial diversity in Parliament with the election of 45 MPs with visible minority origins. Their relative presence jumped over four percentage points compared to the 2011 general election and their larger number markedly narrowed the population-based gap in representation. As an account of this improvement in the representation of visible minority MPs, the focus here is on aspects of the candidate nomination process, with an approach informed by the supposition that heightened competition among the three largest parties engendered a greater degree of vote-seeking among immigrant and minority communities.

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For the many observers who monitor and, especially, welcome greater visible minority representation in Parliament, the outcome of the federal election held on October 19, 2015 must have been viewed with a considerable degree of satisfaction. No less than 45 individuals with visible minority origins were elected to the House of Commons!¹ Moreover, it constituted a big improvement over the previous record level established in the 2011 election, when 28 visible minority MPs were elected. The increase across these two elections is also apparent in relative (percentage) terms, even as the House was expanded from 308 to 338 seats. While MPs of visible minority origins comprised 9.1 per cent of the House's membership following the 2011 election, they occupied 13.3 per cent of the seats after the 2015 contest.

These two successive record levels are notable for other reasons, as well. Visible minority representation has not followed a pattern of ever increasing numbers (neither in absolute nor percentage terms); rather, starting with the 1993 election, when a noticeable number of visible minorities first entered Parliament, the tendency has been one of little change across most pairings of elections and even decline across several dyads. In this sense, the back-to-back increases in

2011 and 2015 do make the latter election stand out even more. A consideration of the 2015 election result against the backdrop of the entire post-1993 period is also informative because it reveals at least two departures in what had been prevailing trends.

The first interrupted pattern has to do with the level of visible minority representation – or rather under-representation – that characterizes Parliament. One simple way to determine how much that representation is in deficit is to compare the percentage of visible minorities in Parliament with the corresponding percentage in the general population. Over the 1993 to 2011 period, the ratio of these percentages has fluctuated between a low of .39 (in 2008) to a high of .56 (in 1997), meaning that representation was, at best, just about half of what would be required to achieve “full representation.” In 2011, the ratio was also in deficit, at an estimated .48 and, remarkably, at the same level as it was in 1993; in other words, over the 1993 to 2011 period, visible minority MPs were being elected in numbers sufficient to keep up with the growth in the visible minority population at large but insufficiently so as to narrow the representation gap. No doubt, the 2015 election did produce a jump in the level of visible minority representation measured this way. However, it is unclear if a specific ratio can be derived because the only available visible minority population figure, 19.1 per cent, is a survey estimate from the four-year old 2011 National Household Survey (and possibly associated with some response bias). Still, if it can be assumed that the figure is at least roughly indicative

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of the visible minority population and if a couple of percentage points can be added to it to account for subsequent population growth, then the ratio would be closing in on the two-thirds mark, which is a notable improvement in visible minority representation.

The second trend that the 2015 election interrupted was the long-term decline in the number of visible minority MPs affiliated with the Liberal party. In the 1993 election, 92.3 per cent of the visible minorities in the House of Commons caucused with the Liberals, but the ensuing elections witnessed a near constant drop in the party's share of such MPs, from 68.4 per cent in 1997, to 42.9 per cent in 2008, only to be followed by a plunge to 7.1 per cent in 2011 (with the election of only two individuals). The reversal for the Liberals in 2015 was nothing short of stunning. Table 1 has the breakdown of visible minority MPs according to their party association for each election covering the 2004-2015 period. The Liberal majority victory in 2015 was accompanied by the election of 38 visible minorities, who constituted an overwhelming 84.4 per cent of all such MPs. The other side of the coin was the sharp depletion of visible minority MPs among the ranks of the second- and third-place finishers. The Conservative party, which over the 1993-2011 period increasingly challenged the Liberals as the party with the largest share of visible minority MPs, saw its portion drop

from 42.9 per cent (12 MPs) in 2011 to 11.1 per cent (five MPs) in 2015. As the entries in the table also show, only in 2011 did the NDP achieve a large share of the visible minority MPs elected (46.4 per cent or 13 individuals). Four years later, the party was only able to secure the victory of two such MPs (4.4 per cent of all visible minority MPs).

More Visible Minority Candidates?

Can the considerable increase in the number of visible minority MPs elected in 2015 be attributed to a corresponding bump up in the number of visible minority candidates? Can it be particularly connected to a greater number of visible minority candidates nominated by the winning party in the election, the Liberal party? It is not axiomatic that "more visible minority candidates mean more visible minority MPs," and, indeed, in the 2011 election the uptick in the presence of visible minority MPs (relative to 2008) was actually accompanied by a slight decline in the percentage of candidates. What ultimately contributed most to the increase in visible minority MPs were victories by NDP candidates who were elected following the party's surge in the final stages of the campaign. That said, there may be a basis for anticipating that the 2015 election did witness the parties boost the number of visible minorities that they

Table 1
Visible Minority MPs, 2004-2015

Party	2004	2006	2008	2011	2015
Bloc Québécois	9.1	16.7	14.3	3.6	--
Conservative	31.8	25.0	38.1	42.9	11.1
Liberal	59.1	54.2	42.9	7.1	84.4
NDP	--	4.2	4.8	46.4	4.4
(N)	(22)	(24)	(21)	(28)	(45)

Source: For 2004-2011 data, see Jerome H. Black, "Racial Diversity in the 2011 Federal Election: Visible Minority Candidates and MPs," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2013, pp. 21-26. MP data assembled by author.

ran as candidates. The contest was, after all, marked by a highly competitive race involving all three of the large national parties, thus amplifying the importance of vote-seeking within all segments of Canadian society. In turn, this might have led to the advancement of more diverse candidate teams. Moreover, the parties might well have had more opportunities to recruit new candidates, visible minorities among them, in light of the addition of 30 federal electoral districts that accompanied redistribution, and as well as the decision of many incumbent MPs not to seek re-election.²

That vote competition serves as an incentive to field more visible minority candidates is hardly a novel proposition. Parties have long been mindful of the growing demographic and political weight of visible minorities in Canada's urban centres – their relevance enhanced by continuing high immigration levels and extensive and fairly rapid rates of citizenship acquisition. Looking back over the last few decades, it is also fair to surmise that these trends have more than a little to do with the parties' response to recruit more visible minority candidates, even if, admittedly, the response has been at times uneven. The main point is that in the 2015 election, party competition was taken to a whole new level and likely made vote-solicitation among minority communities all the more imperative. To be more specific, even before the election was called, all three major parties could claim that they had a realistic chance of forming the government (at the very least, in a minority capacity). Never before had the NDP begun a campaign as the official opposition, allowing the party to plausibly declare that it could assume power; indeed, the national polls showed the NDP to be very much in the running from about the spring of 2015 until the end of the following September. The same surveys indicated that the Conservatives, while polling below their previous support levels, also remained very much competitive – in fact, from the beginning of the same year all the way to the late stages of the campaign. For their part, the Liberals' third-place finish in 2011 was well behind them. The party led the national polls throughout 2014 and was quite competitive with the Conservatives in the first quarter of 2015 and then for a while with both the Conservatives and NDP, before it pulled out in front decisively in the last few weeks of the campaign.

The candidate data do lend some credence to the supposition that enhanced party competition and minority vote-seeking in 2015 led to the fielding of a greater number of visible minority candidates. Shown in the top panel of Table 2 are the percentages of visible minorities among the candidate teams of four³ parties

(the BQ, Conservatives, Liberals, and NDP) for 2015 and, to give some context for their assessment, for the previous four elections as well. As can be seen, in the preceding election of 2011, visible minority candidates (97 individuals) made up 9.7 per cent of all of the contestants nominated by the four parties, a percentage that is actually slightly lower than the corresponding figure for the 2008 election (10.1 per cent). More generally, the 2008 and 2011 figures, along with those for the two earlier elections (9.3 per cent, and 9 per cent, for 2004 and 2006, respectively) depict a period of stasis in the presentation of visible minority candidacies. Juxtaposed against these four elections, the 2015 contest clearly stands apart. The same four parties nominated 152 visible minority candidates or 13.9 per cent of their pooled total (based on, it is worth reiterating, a larger denominator of electoral districts). The increase in visible minority candidates is even more impressive if the BQ's faded electoral performances in 2011 and 2015 are taken into account. That is, if the focus is restricted to the three largest parties, then the tabulation for 2015 works out to 150 visible minority candidates, which amounts to 14.8 per cent of the three-party total. The comparable percentage for 2011 is 9.9 per cent.

The second panel in the table provides answers to party-specific questions that might be raised. Did all three parties run more visible minority candidates in 2015 compared to 2011 (and earlier elections)? Did the Liberal party, with so many visible minority MPs elected, take the lead in nominating visible minority candidates? The percentages shown for the 2004-2011 contests have already been commented upon in the author's earlier studies.⁴ Here, it suffices to note that those data show variability across both parties and elections and, altogether, little in the way of consistent patterns; different parties in different years fielded the largest percentage of visible minority candidates, but the margins were typically small and in no instance do party-specific figures rise monotonically across time.

The percentages for the recent election are, once again, distinctive. In 2015, each of the three parties nominated (relatively) more visible minority candidates than they did in 2011 and, indeed, more than in any other previous election. The increment from 2011 to 2015 is smallest, but still notable, in the case of the NDP. Visible minorities made up 10.4 per cent of the party's candidate team in the earlier election and comprised 13.4 per cent of the party's lineup of contestants this time around. For their part, the Conservatives could point to a four point increase in visible minority candidacies across the 2011-2015

Table 2
Visible Minority Candidates, 2004-2015

	2004	2006	2008	2011	2015
All Candidates (%)	9.3	9.0	10.1	9.7	13.9
By Party (%)					
Conservative	10.7	8.1	9.8	10.1	14.2
Liberal	8.4	11.0	9.8	9.1	16.9
NDP	9.4	7.8	10.7	10.4	13.4
New Candidates (%)					
Conservative	12.0	9.2	11.2	13.4	18.0
Liberal	9.4	13.2	7.8	9.1	17.5
NDP	9.8	7.3	12.3	12.0	14.3

Source: For 2004-2011 data, see Jerome H. Black, "Racial Diversity in the 2011 Federal Election: Visible Minority Candidates and MPs," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2013, pp. 21-26. Candidate data assembled by author.

pairing, from 10.1 per cent to 14.2 per cent. The largest jump, by far, occurred within the ranks of the Liberal party. Visible minority candidates comprised 9.1 per cent of the party's pool of candidates in 2011 but a substantial 16.9 per cent in 2015. About one in six candidates nominated by the party had visible minority origins, almost doubling the number from the previous election. In short, these results are at least consistent with the notion that intensified competition helped to drive the three main parties to nominate more visible minority candidates in 2015, and, as well, are suggestive that the Liberals' large contingent of visible minority candidates played a role in setting a record for the election of visible minority MPs.

More New Visible Minority Candidates?

An examination of *new* candidates – those who did not participate in the previous election – lends even more support to these suppositions. Restricting the analysis to this subset of office-seekers has the advantage of ruling out incumbency effects – in particular, the tendency for previous candidates to be re-nominated – and thus allows for a clearer sense of each party's specific commitment to particular categories of candidates in advance of the upcoming election. It turns out that the parties did make a greater effort than ever before to promote racial diversity in 2015 among their new candidates. While visible minorities made up 14.8 per cent of all of the

candidates recruited by the three main parties, they formed 16.8 per cent of all of the new candidates nominated. Moreover, this figure is more than five points larger than the comparable percentage for 2011 (11.1 per cent).

Additionally, this enhanced recruitment effort is evident for each party, but it does noticeably vary, as data in the third panel in Table 2 indicate. Within the NDP, the share of visible minorities among the party's new candidates was 14.3 per cent, which is slightly larger than the total candidate figure of 13.4 per cent. At the same time, the former number is several points larger than the comparable figure for the party's new candidates in 2011 (12.0 per cent). The percentages are more telling for the two other major national parties. Within the Conservative party, visible minorities comprised 14.2 per cent of the party's candidate team, but a decidedly larger 18.0 per cent of their new candidates. Note as well that the latter percentage also compares quite favourably with the 13.4 per cent associated with the party's recruitment of new candidates in 2011. As for the Liberals, visible minorities also formed a larger share of the party's new candidates relative to their portion of the party's candidates as a whole, 17.5 per cent versus 16.9 per cent, respectively. This is only a modest difference but what is really striking is how the 17.5 per cent *represents a near doubling of the Liberal's recruitment effort of new visible minority candidates in 2011* (9.1 per cent). In short, this view of new candidates also suggests that all of the parties, but particularly the Liberals, fostered greater racial inclusiveness among their candidates in the 2015 election.

The Role of Constituency Competitiveness?

Party competitiveness at the *constituency* level provides yet another perspective on the promotion of more visible minority candidates in 2015. Taking account of district-level competitiveness is generally important because it plainly matters whether candidates (in whatever social category being considered) are recruited to contest constituencies where the party has reasonable prospects of winning or are nominated in hard-to-win districts. If larger numbers of visible minorities were put up to run in constituencies with favourable prospects, this would signify some degree of commitment to boosting racial diversity among the candidate team. As well, fairness in the recruitment process would be signaled if similar proportions of visible minority and non-visible minority candidates were recruited to contest electorally viable constituencies.⁵

As parties contemplate how would-be individual candidates might fare in the upcoming election, they are naturally guided and influenced by the immediately previous constituency results. At the same time, they well recognize that past performance will provide only an inexact indication of future prospects – the exercise being subject to the intrusion of dominating national- and subnational-level electoral forces and unexpected campaign developments. The caveat is easily grasped by recalling how many visible minority MPs were elected under the NDP banner in the 2011 election, not because they were nominated in what were expected to be potentially competitive ridings but rather because of the party's unprecedented surge in the latter stages of the campaign. For the NDP in that election, past performance in 2008 in many constituencies proved to be quite unrelated to outcomes in 2011.

There may be similar ambiguity surrounding past constituency performance in connection with the Liberals in 2015. The party's disastrous electoral showing in 2011 meant that there were far fewer districts that ordinarily could have been regarded as being in play for the upcoming 2015 contest. However, most Liberal candidates were nominated throughout a long period when the party was polling fairly strongly at the national level, so some previously lost constituencies might well have been ultimately regarded as winnable. In addition, the Liberals, along with all of the parties, faced some uncertainty when taking past electoral performance into account because of the larger than usual number of open seats, that is, districts without an incumbent running, and the redrawing of constituency boundaries and the addition of new ones (though parties did have access to officially produced transposed vote results – with the 2011 constituency vote appropriately rearranged to fit the new constituencies.) All this said, the parties would continue to especially value those (however many) constituencies where they had fared reasonably well in 2011; so, the question remains if they privileged visible minority candidacies among their pool of new candidates in those districts or at least fairly balanced visible minority with non-visible minority candidacies.

To investigate this, transposed vote information was employed to divide constituencies into those that were considered to be relatively non-competitive in 2011, where the party lost by 11 per cent or more, and those that were competitive, where the party won or, if they lost, did so by a margin of 10 per cent or less. Taken together, the three parties were somewhat more likely to favour new visible minority over new non-visible minority candidates in competitive

ridings (33 per cent vs. 26 per cent). Table 3 considers the three parties separately. It also breaks down the competitive category by whether or not an incumbent MP contested the election in 2015, the rationale being that an open constituency would be more valued. As a general rule, each of the parties did promote visible minority candidacies in districts that were judged to be more winnable, and in noteworthy numbers. The Conservatives were most likely to nominate visible minority candidates in winnable constituencies. A very large 53 per cent of their new visible minority candidates ran in previously competitive ridings, including 32 per cent who were placed in open constituencies. The Liberals were next with 27 per cent, divided between 19 per cent and 8 per cent in incumbent-contested and open constituencies, respectively. The NDP followed with 21 per cent (12 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively). At the same time, note that the Conservatives also nominated their non-visible minority candidates in near equal measure, with 49 per cent selected to run in competitive districts and slightly more of them in open ones (37 per cent). A similar comparison for the NDP indicates a bias, albeit a slight one, for non-visible minority, compared to visible minority, candidates: 27 per cent vs. 21 per cent. It is the Liberals that unequivocally privileged visible minority candidacies. The party was three times more likely to nominate visible minorities in competitive ridings compared to their non-visible candidates: 27 per cent versus 9 per cent, and slightly more in the subset of open constituencies, 8 per cent vs. 3 per cent.⁶

The Role of Constituency Diversity?

The promotion of visible minority candidates in racially diverse districts is the final constituency characteristic considered here that possibly ties together competitive pressures and efforts to win minority votes. In fact, a cornerstone of the promotion of racial diversity among the parties' candidate teams is the purposeful concentration of their visible minority candidates in districts with large visible minority populations (even if it can be argued that this approach needlessly limits the promotion of such candidates⁷); indeed, the evidence from past elections has been overwhelming in this regard though, again, the data show fluctuation across elections and parties. For instance, in 2011, visible minority candidates newly recruited by the Liberals competed in districts where the visible minority population averaged 27 per cent, compared to 8 per cent in ridings where their non-visible minority counterparts ran; the comparable percentages for the two other parties show an even wider gap, 47 per cent vs. 12 per cent for

the Conservatives, and 35 per cent vs. 12 per cent for the NDP. For present purposes, the more immediate question is whether in 2015 the parties stepped up their efforts to nominate more visible minority candidates in diversity-rich constituencies (as might be anticipated by the competition thesis). Viewing quite diverse districts, where visible minorities formed 31 per cent or more of the population, the general answer is yes. In 2011, the Conservatives had nominated so many of their new visible minority candidates in such districts (75 per cent) that the drop off in 2015 to 65 per cent in these districts seems less consequential. The NDP is the party that most increased its concentration of new candidates in such constituencies: 50 per cent in 2011 to 77 per cent in 2015. The Liberals, too, accentuated their promotion of new visible minority candidates in these districts, from a surprising low of 28 per cent in 2011 to 53 per cent in 2015.

Summing Up

The federal election of October 19, 2015 established a high water mark in the representation of racial diversity in Parliament with the election of 45 MPs who have visible minority origins. Their relative presence jumped over four percentage points compared to the 2011 general election and their larger number markedly narrowed the population-based gap in representation.

In seeking to provide an account of this improvement in the representation of visible minority MPs, the focus here has been on aspects of the candidate nomination process, with an approach informed by the supposition that heightened competition among the three parties engendered a greater degree of vote-seeking among immigrant and minority communities. The evidence considered here plausibly sustains this presumption (and, to be clear, certainly does not attempt to indicate the degree to which the promotion of visible minority candidacies actually paid off electorally – a task for survey-based research). To sum up, together and individually, the three main national parties nominated a record number of visible minority candidates and as well the largest percentage ever of visible minorities among their new contestants. Moreover the parties appeared to nominate their first-time visible minority candidates in electorally attractive constituencies in a generally fair, and sometimes privileged, manner. Finally, all three parties maintained or accentuated their efforts to run (new) visible minority candidates in districts with large visible minority populations.

Table 3
Visible Minority Candidates, Parties, and Constituency Competitiveness, 2015
(New Candidates Only)

Party	Non-Competitive Constituencies	Competitive Constituencies		(N)
		Incumbent MP?		
		Yes	No	
Visible Minorities				
Conservative	47	21	32	(34)
Liberal	73	19	8	(48)
NDP	80	12	9	(34)
Non-Visible Minorities				
Conservative	50	12	37	(155)
Liberal	91	6	3	(227)
NDP	72	12	15	(203)

Row percentages.

See text for definition of competitive and non-competitive constituencies.

Of course, it is important that these characterizations particularly hold for the Liberal party given that more than eight of every 10 visible minority MPs elected won under the party's banner. Again, the Liberals did more than any other party to increase their promotion of visible minority candidates from 2011 to 2015, nearly doubling the percentage of such candidates both among their candidate team as a whole and among the subset of their new candidates. They also decidedly favoured (new) visible minority candidates over their non-visible minority counterparts in competitively attractive constituencies in 2015 and, as well, concentrated more visible minority candidates

in diverse constituencies. Within the context of the Liberal national-level sweep, these facts help explain much of the large boost in visible minority MPs elected in 2015. Finally, while the particularly competitive environment in the election likely played a large role in motivating the party to do more to engage minority voters, a concerted effort to re-establish what had been the party's once dominant position within minority and immigrant communities may also have been a factor. Is it possible that this significant step up in the party's promotion of visible minority candidates from 2011 to 2015 is partially a recognition that more could have been done in 2011?

As a final thought, it is not absolutely clear that the increase in visible minority MPs occurred only because of the combination of the Liberals' nomination efforts and the party's subsequent electoral victory. Had the campaign unfolded more to the decided advantage of either the Conservatives or NDP (or, some "mixed" outcome), it is not difficult to imagine scenarios where a record number of visible minority MPs might still have been elected. After all, both parties, though the Conservatives more so, also did a great deal to favour the election of more visible minority candidates. Moreover, 11 of the Conservative's 12 incumbent visible minority MPs contested the election as did nine of the NDP's 13 incumbents, so both parties potentially had a base to build upon as they advanced the cause of visible minority candidacies.

Notes

- 1 This count excludes an individual of Argentinian origin. For some brief background on this reasoning, see Jerome H. Black, "Racial Diversity in the 2011 Federal Election: Visible Minority Candidates and MPs," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2013, pp. 21-26, at footnote 1.
- 2 This discussion is mostly about the "demand" side of the candidate recruitment process, as parties seek out visible minority candidates whom they regard as qualified and having the appropriate characteristics. It is also possible that "supply" side aspects are at play, as visible minority individuals push for elected positions in keeping with their communities' growing integration into Canadian society.
- 3 The table includes only parties that achieved official party status at least once during the 2004-2015 period, and therefore does not report information on the Green Party of Canada. However, it can be noted that with the Greens included, the overall total of visible minority candidates in 2015 diminishes somewhat (from 13.9 per cent to 13.2 per cent); the party, itself, nominated 36 such candidates, 10.9 per cent of its total candidate pool.
- 4 See, for instance, Jerome H. Black, "Racial Diversity in the 2011 Federal Election: Visible Minority Candidates and MPs," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2013, pp. 21-26.
- 5 As a general statement, over the last few elections the parties have been fairly balanced in nominating both visible minority and non-visible minority candidates in electorally winnable ridings, though there has been considerable variation by party and election.
- 6 Not shown in the table is an indication of the limitation of past constituency performance as a predictor of future outcomes, connected, of course, to the Liberals' electoral turnaround from 2011 to 2015. Of the 35 perceived non-competitive constituencies where the Liberals' visible minority candidates competed, nearly half (17) ended up winning. All of their candidates won in constituencies designated as competitive for the party.
- 7 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.