# GUESS WHO'S RUNNING FOR OFFICE?

## Visible Minority Representation in the 2004 Canadian Election

**ABSTRACT**

The 2004 election saw more visible minority candidates, and more visible minorities elected, than ever before. This article describes the factors that have contributed to increasing levels of visible minority representation in Canadian national politics. Three factors in particular – the general rules and norms of citizenship, the characteristics and location of particular ethnic groups, and the features of the electoral system – are key to understanding this trend.

For a variety of reasons, visible ethnic minorities have long been absent or notably underrepresented in the legislatures of the world's established democracies. Recently though, things have begun to change. Visible minorities have not yet made spectacular gains towards more equitable political representation, but notable improvements are apparent in many countries. In this article, I outline an analytical model that is useful for understanding patterns of visible minority representation across different political systems. I then apply the model to Canada. I describe the processes that have led to increased levels of minority representation witnessed at the 2004 federal election, and I draw brief comparisons between minority representation within Canada – at both the national and local levels – and other established democracies.

### Political Opportunity Structure for Visible Minority Representation

To assess the capacity for visible minority representation, it is helpful to draw upon the concept of *political opportunity structures.* This concept, initially developed in the context of research on social movements, denotes the degree of openness or accessibility of a given political system for movement initiators. In a very influential study, Herbert Kitschelt describes political opportunity structures as "specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others."[1]

Here, I postulate three broad factors whose configuration is expected to influence political opportunity structures for visible minority representation. The first of these is the particular citizenship regime within a country. For example, in countries where newcomers access voting rights very quickly, and where minorities are encouraged to retain their cultural distinctiveness, they should be more likely to mobilize and achieve political representation as a group. Another important consideration is the principal source of immigration, and the historical relationship between receiving and sending societies. For example, post-colonial minorities may be subject to old colonial stereotypes, and may be viewed by the majority population and by party leaders as less qualified to participate in the task of government. Another important element of a *citizenship regime* is the extent to which it produces equal social and economic rights among all members. Where large portions of the ethnic minority in a country are unemployed and segmented within the labour force and housing market, if they are poor, or lacking in basic educational and health services, they are less likely to enjoy the resources necessary to achieve political representation.

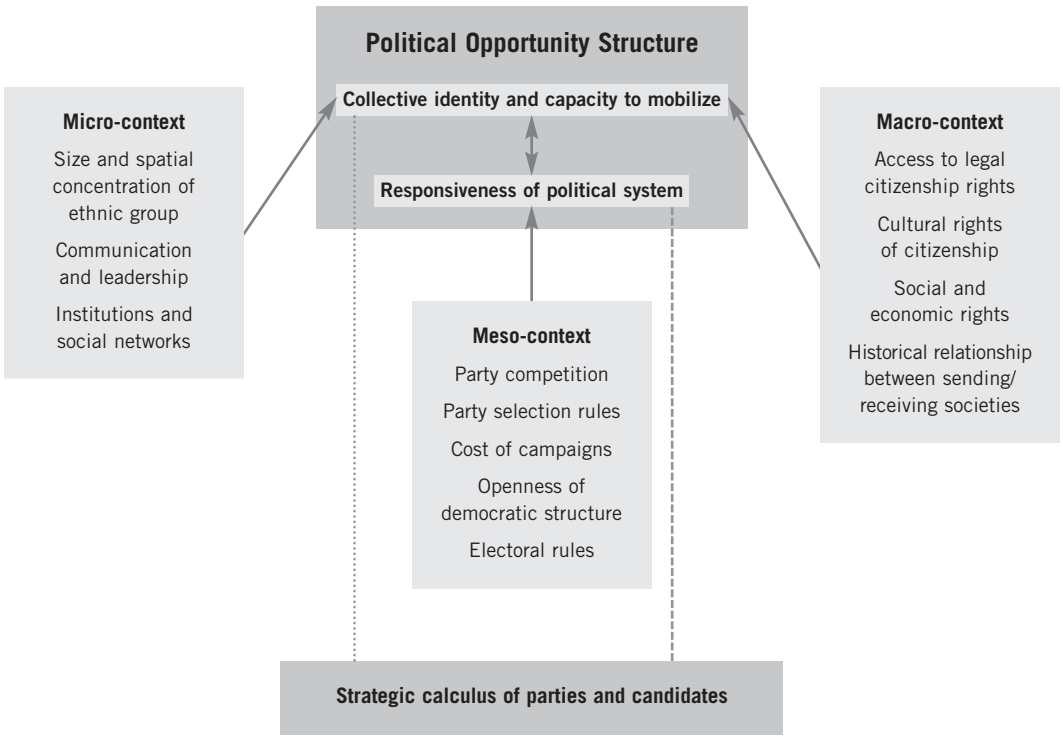
The second element incorporates the different *institutional features* observed across and within countries. Electoral rules, the openness of the candidate nomination process, and the degree of party competition all have significant effects on the level of representation for visible minorities. Finally, the *interest constellations* of ethnic groups from locale to locale play a key role in determining whether ethnic minorities will be selected as candidates in competitive ridings, and whether they will win seats. Ethnic groups may be especially influential if their spatial location corresponds with electoral boundaries, if they have a strong social network and can be mobilized to vote as a bloc, and if they are located in a competitive constituency where they can deliver seats for one party at the expense of another.

As the name implies, political opportunity structures emphasize the exogenous conditions for ethnic minority representation, in contrast to actor-centred theories of mobilization and electoral

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**Figure 1** – Political Opportunity Structure for Visible Minority Representation




success.[2] In this study, I extend the model to consider how the actions of individual candidates (whether visible minorities or non-minorities) are shaped by the political opportunity structure, and how their actions may in turn serve to mobilize voters. To some extent, of course, parties use ethnic candidates instrumentally as part of vote-winning strategy. But from an actor-centred perspective, it is clear that candidates themselves use ethnicity in a highly selective and entrepreneurial fashion in mobilizing support from minority and/or majority voters.[3] Within this model, the political opportunity structure shapes the *electoral strategies* of candidates who may themselves be visible minorities, or who are non-minorities running in an area with a large minority population. The model is presented in Figure 1.

### Visible Minority Representation in Canada

Canada is a country of significant immigration, with the world's highest per capita rate of naturalizations: about 6,700 new citizenships per million people each year. In a given year, this means the admission of approximately 200,000 to 250,000 new Canadians. Visible minorities represent more than 80% of all newcomers arriving in Canada. Currently, 18% of the total population of Canada is foreign-born, while approximately 13.4% identify as visible minorities. Statistics Canada projects that by 2017, roughly one in five persons living in Canada will be a visible minority, and in cities like Toronto, the number will be more than one in two.[4] In addition, Canada makes it clear that cultural diversity is welcomed and supported, through funding for cultural activities, maintenance of heritage languages, and significant employment equity standards.

Is all this ethnic diversity reflected in Canada's elected and governing bodies? The answer depends on where we look. Visible minority representation in Canadian national politics has increased steadily over the past two decades. In the current House of Commons, visible minorities occupy 20 of 308 (6.5%) seats, up from five in 1988, 13 in 1993, and 19 in 1997.[5] Two of the visible minorities elected to Parliament serve as cabinet ministers.[6] And Canada's Governor General, Adrienne Clarkson, is a visible minority woman. While still under-represented at this level, visible minorities are doing slightly better (in proportional terms) than women, who account for just 21.1% of members of Parliament while they make up 52% of the population. Foreign-born Canadians are also well represented, holding 14% of seats.[7]

Surprisingly, visible minorities are far less numerous in local politics in Canada. Most notably, this is the case in Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal, Canada's three most multicultural cities. In Toronto, for example, just 11.1% of seats on city council are held by visible minorities, though 36.8% of the population in the metropolitan area identify as visible minorities.[8] A number of world cities do far better than Canadian cities at producing ethnically representative governing councils, including many of the larger cities in Britain, Belgium, and Denmark. The low level of representation of visible minorities in Canada's cities is puzzling. It is generally assumed that local politics is more accessible to groups such as women and minorities. Factors such as smaller electoral districts, cheaper electoral campaigns, a more flexible party structure, and residential concentration among some ethnic groups, are assumed to make it easier for members

of disadvantaged groups to get elected. Yet these features do not appear to have helped visible minorities achieve anything close to proportional representation in Canada's largest immigrant-receiving cities. In fact, the significantly stronger representation of visible minorities in Canadian national politics flies in the face of these arguments.

### Canada's citizenship regime

Regardless of their country of origin, immigrants to Canada acquire voting rights as soon as they become citizens, after three consecutive years of legal residence in Canada.[9] This makes access to voting rights for newcomers to Canada more open than in any European country, where foreigners may wait as long as 12 years for nationality and national voting rights. While Canada admits a relatively high number of refugees and family-class immigrants, the bulk of newcomers are economic migrants, who have been selected on the basis of their education and employment skills, as well as their competency in at least one of Canada's official languages. These migrants are expected to move into good paying jobs relatively quickly, and are seen as vital to Canada's economic growth. On average, Canada's newcomers enjoy higher levels of employment and wealth compared to newcomers in most European countries, and compared to visible minorities in the United States. These resources can be expected to ease the path to political involvement. In addition, Canada is formally a multicultural polity, where the constitution and various national policies provide special protection for linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity. If an open and welcoming citizenship regime were the key to opportunities for visible minority representation, then Canada should have a strong record at every level. Yet this is not the case.

### The electoral system and strategic incentives for mobilizing ethnic minority voters

There are a number of factors that account for the relatively stronger representation of visible minorities in national, compared to local politics. Where they are densely concentrated, electoral rules and nomination procedures at the national level produce strong incentives for parties and individual candidates to mobilize visible minority voters. This same configuration of incentives is missing at the local level, where parties play a minimal role in the electoral process.

Candidates for national election run in single member districts (SMD), and are typically selected through a local nomination contest, in which members of the party's local riding association cast ballots on who should be the party's candidate for that riding. Incumbents enjoy a strong advantage in these contests, and in most cases face no serious challengers. However, in open ridings the nomination is hotly contested. This candidate selection procedure leads parties to engage in mass recruitment drives to sign up as many new party members as possible, with each wing of a party trying to recruit members to support their nominee. It is common for nominees in these contests to focus on recruiting party members within ethnic communities – especially communities with tightly knit social networks, where it is easier to mobilize and turn out large numbers of supporters on nomination day.

This strategy is facilitated by party rules that allow legally resident non-citizens to become party members, and to vote in the candidate selection process. Party membership levels are usually highest in those ridings with the largest visible minority populations. It is not unusual, in such ridings, to find that 75% or more of new party members signed up by nominees are visible minorities. This is typical in both the Liberal and Conservative parties, and whether or not the nominee him or herself is a visible minority.[10] This candidate selection process provides ample opportunity for visible minority mobilization and influence within political parties. Yet it can also produce a certain degree of manipulation by party elites and ethnic power brokers. Typical practices of nominees include hiring people within the ethnic community to sign up members, delivering busloads of instant party members from mosques, temples and other ethnic/religious centres, and paying the dues of new members. Nomination battles are internal party matters and as such, there has often been little oversight of these practices.

While this open and decentralized candidate selection process tends to facilitate the nomination of visible minority candidates, the very high incumbency factor in Canadian politics remains a significant obstacle to electing visible minorities. The Liberal Party enjoys the strongest incumbency advantage, having formed the government for all but ten of the last forty years.[11] But with a higher proportion of incumbents, the party has tended to nominate fewer visible minorities than the other major parties.[12] At the same time, this incumbency advantage has tended to produce a clientelistic pattern of relationships between Liberal MPs and ethnic leaders. Consequently, the Liberals have done exceptionally well in urban areas with large immigrant and visible minority populations, despite running very few visible minority candidates in those ridings. Consider the nineteen ridings in the Greater Toronto Area with the largest (each has at least 40%) visible minority populations. All went to the Liberals in the 2004 election, yet the party ran a visible minority candidate in just four of these ridings, while the Conservatives and NDP each ran six. Despite making up more than 50% of the population in these ridings, visible minorities are proportionately *less* well represented in the GTA than they are across Canada.[13]

Recognizing the importance of this critical mass of minority voters, the Conservative Party has adopted an ethnic outreach strategy to make inroads into these Liberal strongholds. They have run more visible minority candidates than other parties.[14] They have courted minority voters through publicity campaigns in the ethnic press.[15] On issues like homosexual marriage, a significant portion of the visible minority community holds views that are congruous with Conservative positions. Tax relief is another issue that plays well among many economic migrants and their children. And the Party has made a concerted effort to remind immigrants that many of them arrived in Canada during Brian Mulroney's Conservative reign (1984 to 1993), when immigration to Canada reached historically high levels.

Only one party, the NDP, has stipulated an affirmative action guideline for selecting visible minorities as candidates. The party has established as a target that 50% of all

candidates must be from marginalized groups (including visible minorities, women, handicapped persons, gays and lesbians). Riding associations must show the party's Elections Planning Committee that they have made efforts to attract such candidates. The party also maintains an affirmative action fund that is intended to assist candidates from marginalized groups with their election expenses.[16] The NDP is one of very few parties in the world that have formal guidelines for recruiting more visible minority candidates.

### Ethnic constellations, participation and political interests

All ethnic groups are not equally involved or represented in electoral politics. The patterns of political representation among Canada's two largest visible minority groups – Chinese and South Asians – could not be more different. The South Asian community has had an impressive performance in national politics: in the 2004 election, ten South Asian Canadians were elected to parliament.[17] By comparison, there is just one Chinese Member of Parliament. By all accounts, the South Asian community is extraordinarily active politically, and their support tends to be highly sought after through the nomination and campaign process in many ridings. Campaign chairs describe South Asians (Sikhs and Ismaili Muslims, in particular) as "legendary organizers," whose geographic clustering, dense and overlapping networks of religious, social and business memberships, and strong elder-centric culture make them a key community for political mobilization. In addition, they enjoy a tradition of democratic participation in their countries of origin, strong English language skills, and a high degree of economic security – all important resources for political participation that other visible minorities (notably the Chinese) often lack. This brief portrait of South Asian political involvement should help to dispel the traditional notion that visible minorities tend to be politically passive, or that recent immigrants must go through a fairly long transition phase before becoming involved in politics in their new country. In fact, political activism among visible minorities varies widely according to community-linked differences. So, too, do political interests.

### Visible Minority Representation in Other Democracies

Visible minority representation in Canadian national politics is particularly strong when compared to other countries. In France, for example, there are no visible minorities among 527 seats in the national parliament; there are just 12 of 659 in Britain; in Germany there are just five of 603; in Australia just one of 150; and in New Zealand just two of 120. A cursory review of visible minority representation across more than a dozen established democracies suggests that the two necessary conditions for significant visible minority representation – spatial concentration and high levels of political engagement among minority voters – will not produce visible minority candidacies, unless also accompanied a fairly open candidate selection process, and a low incumbency rate. This is clearly the case in France, where visible minorities are highly concentrated and politically engaged (especially within and around the public housing estates of many large urban centres), but where Socialist political domination of those ridings has all but excluded them from local and national politics.

Countries such as Denmark and Belgium have similar concentrations of visible minorities in many urban centres. Like France, both countries also favour the cultural assimilation of migrants and their descendants over the multicultural model. However, the political representation of visible minorities in the latter two countries has approached proportionality, both at the national and local levels. The explanation appears to lie in the candidate selection and election rules used in these countries: proportional representation with preferential voting. Under these rules, voters are able to alter the order of the list of candidates presented for election. Visible minority candidates use this feature to mobilize voter support within minority communities, and are often promoted by their communities to eligible positions within their lists.

### Conclusion

The conceptual framework presented here provides a useful model for understanding visible minority representation in Canada, and in comparative context. Through the case of Canada, this paper has demonstrated how the key elements of this model – the general rules and norms of citizenship, the characteristics and location of particular groups, and the features of the electoral and political system – interact with each other to produce unique effects in terms of the statistical representation of these groups. It is crucial to understand that these effects differ not only across countries, but also within countries, depending on both the electoral rules at each level, and on the characteristics and spatial location of different groups throughout the country.

#### Notes

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1 Herbert Kitschelt, "Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies." *British Journal of Political Science* 16 (1986), pp 57-85.

2 See Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

3 See Mehmet Umit Necef, "Impression Management and Political Entrepreneurship in Denmark," and Thomas Saalfeld, "Representation, Integration and Political Entrepreneurship: Institutions and Strategic Options for Ethnic Minority Elites in Western Europe." Both papers presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Turin, Italy (2002).

4 Statistics Canada, "Study: Canada's Visible Minority Population in 2017." http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/050322/d050322b.htm (March 22, 2005).

5 See Jerome Black, "Minority Representation in the Canadian Parliament following the 1997 Election: Patterns of Continuity and Change." Paper presented at the Fourth National Metropolis Conference, Toronto, 2000.

6 Ujjal Dosanjh is Minister of Health, and Raymond Chan is Secretary of State for Multiculturalism. Dosanjh was formerly Premier of the NDP government in British Columbia.

7 In Canada, it is possible to calculate with relative accuracy a proportionality index for various groups (PI=the proportion of group members within an elected body / the proportion of group members within the general population). A score of 1.00 indicates that a group is represented