IMMIGRANT AND MINORITY ELECTORAL GAINS IN SUBURBAN TORONTO

ABSTRACT

In the Toronto area, the suburbs now elect more visible minority politicians than the central city. This pattern is not, however, equally manifest at all levels of government, nor among all large minority communities. This essay explores evidence and explanation behind these trends.

It is fashionable to slag the suburbs. High on the list of alleged transgressions is the charge that suburbia promotes conformity, that its formulaic spatial characteristics reproduce a relentless sameness to all that meets the eye. Yet recent results in the Toronto area's electoral arena paint a very different picture. The most significant electoral gains by immigrant and visible minority candidates are now occurring not in central city, but in suburban constituencies. Could the suburbs be the leading edge in promoting diversity of political representation in Canada?

In this article, we examine this question in the sprawling territory of the Toronto city-region. In the process, the impact of several variables on the ethno-racial profile of elected politicians comes into play. We explore the implications of urban form (suburb or city), immigrant homeland (liberal democratic tradition or not) and level of government (federal, provincial or municipal) on the representation of newcomers and minorities in elected office. Our findings suggest that for the Toronto area, the most significant electoral gains by immigrants and newcomers are occurring in federal and provincial suburban constituencies where candidates of South Asian origin have made impressive electoral breakthroughs.

Toronto in Perspective

Late 20th century global migration has transformed Toronto into "The World in a City" (Anisef and Lanphier, 2003). In 2001, immigrants comprised close to 42% of the Greater Toronto Area's (GTA) population of just over 5 million residents (Statistics Canada, 2001. Unless otherwise noted, all statistics in this paper are derived from the 2001 Canadian census.) More than one in every 3 GTA residents that year belonged to a visible minority community. As of 2001, the Toronto city-region had the highest proportion of foreign-born residents of any metropolitan area in North America.

Spatially, the fastest growing immigrant settlement area in the GTA has not been the central city, but the post-war suburbs within the amalgamated City of Toronto and, most notably, the newer edge-city suburbs on the City's periphery (Siemiatycki and Isin, 1997). Geo-politically, this massive swath of territory is most typically referred to as the Greater Toronto Area, as shown in Figure 1 below. The GTA consists of the amalgamated City of Toronto, and its four surrounding two-tier Regional Municipalities of Durham, York, Peel and Halton. These Regional Municipalities are themselves comprised of a total 24 member municipalities, each with its own local council. To locals,

Figure 1 – The Greater Toronto Area



Map created by and reprinted with permission of Professor Philip Coppack, Department of Geography, Ryerson University.

MYER SIEMIATYCKI AND **IAN ANDREW MATHESON**

Myer Siemiatycki is Director of the M.A. Program in Immigration and Settlement Studies at Ryerson University.

Ian Andrew Matheson is a graduate student in the M.A. Program in Immigration and Settlement Studies at Ryerson University.

the component parts of the GTA are most often distinguished by their telephone area codes: 416 for the City of Toronto, and 905 for the Regional Municipalities. The GTA population in 2001 of 5,043,340 was divided almost equally between the City of Toronto, and the slightly higher number spread across the 905 area.

Immigration settlement in the GTA is especially pronounced in the City of Toronto, Peel and York Regions where immigrants account for 49.4%, 43.1% and 39.1% of total population respectively. More specifically for the City of Toronto, the greatest foreign-born concentrations are in the post-war suburban areas of Scarborough and North York. In Peel Region the standouts are the edge-city suburban municipalities of Mississauga and Brampton, while in York Region immigrant settlement is highest in the similar vintage municipalities of Markham, Richmond Hill and Vaughan (Siemiatycki and Isin, 1997).

By 2001, five GTA municipalities stood out far beyond others for their substantial proportion of visible minority residents. In order they were: Markham (55.5%), City of Toronto (42.8%), Richmond Hill (40.4%) Mississauga (40.3%), and Brampton (40.2%).

Less impressive than the Toronto area's demographic transformation has been our political system's capacity to reflect this diversity in the ranks of elected politicians (Siemiatycki and Saloojee, 2003; Black).

Who Gets Elected in Toronto?

Surprisingly little research has been done on ethno-racial identity and electoral representation, in Canada generally and in Toronto particularly. Such local studies that have been conducted have typically focussed on the central City of Toronto and not the outlying suburbs in the rest of the GTA.

Thus, in their study for the period prior to the most recent round of federal, provincial and municipal elections, Siemiatycki and Saloojee found overwhelming disparities between who lived in the City of Toronto and who was elected to public office there. While visible minorities accounted for almost 50% of the City's population, they held only 11% of Toronto City Council seats, and just 4.5% of the City's seats in both the federal and provincial parliaments. Conversely, with under 30% of the City's population, those of British ethnic ancestry accounted for 44% of City Council seats, 59% of provincial and 64% of federal City of Toronto seats (Siemiatycki and Saloojee, 2003).

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Since that study, residents of the GTA have gone to the polls on three separate occasions – sequentially in provincial (2003), municipal (2003) and federal (2004) elections. The results were a striking mix of continuity and change with respect to ethno-racial representation. Our interest here is comparing the outcome of these elections in the City of Toronto and its four outlying edge city suburbs of Brampton, Mississauga, Markham and Richmond Hill.

Four patterns stand out from the results of the most recent elections across these 5 Toronto area municipalities. First is the significant increase in the number of positions won by minority candidates at both the provincial and federal levels. Second is the fact that all these seats were won in suburban, not central city constituencies. Third is the fact that some minorities fared considerably better than others in electing members of their community. Fourth is the lack of progress and continued lag in minority representation at the municipal level.

Suburban Success

As Table 1 reveals, the 5 municipalities under study here contained a total of 31 seats in the 2003 Ontario provincial election, 35 seats in the newly redistributed constituencies of the 2004 federal election, and 88 municipal council seats in the 2003 local election. There are now, as Table 1 indicates, 13 visible minority politicians representing the GTA's 5 most diverse municipalities in the federal and provincial parliament. This is more than double the total from the previous federal and provincial elections. By contrast, the total of 8 local council seats won across our five municipalities in 2003 is actually a drop from the previous municipal vote.

All thirteen visible minority politicians elected to seats in the federal and provincial parliament represent suburban constituencies. As Table 2 shows, 5 are from Brampton, 2 from Mississauga and 1 from Markham. Less evident from the table is the fact that all 5 seats held in the City of Toronto are located in the post-war suburbs that merged with Toronto in 1998. Of these, 2 are in Scarborough, 2 in Etobicoke and 1 in North York. Significantly no visible minority candidates were elected in the original, central City of Toronto which merged with these post-war suburbs. (Elsewhere in the GTA, beyond our five municipalities of study, another visible minority was elected in a mixed suburban/rural constituency – Canada's first MP of Japanese origin.)

Table 1 – Elected Positions Won by Visible Minority Candidates

	Provincial	Federal	Municipal
Total Seats	32	35	88
Seats Held by Visible Minority	7	6	8
% Seats Held by Visible Minority	21.8%	17.1%	9%

Several additional trends stand out from Table 2. First, Brampton is by far the GTA leader in its visible minority success rate in federal and provincial elections. All five of its federal and provincial visible minority politicians are South Asian. Brampton is thus one of the very few places in Canada where a visible minority is overwhelmingly *over-represented* statistically in elected office. With just under 20% of the City's population, South Asians hold 71% of available federal and provincial seats. Second, it is noteworthy that the City of Toronto's success rate electing visible minorities federally and provincially lags significantly behind both Mississauga's and Markham's. Finally, in none of the five municipalities is the success rate at municipal elections as high as their combined federal and provincial rate. This is, on the face of things, at odds with local governments' claims to being closest and most accessible to citizens.

As Table 3 shows, more than half the visible minority politicians elected in the cities under review are of South Asian origin. (Of the 9 South Asians sitting in the federal and provincial parliaments for Toronto area constituencies, 3 were born abroad and 6 in Canada.) The pre-eminence of South Asians is despite the fact that their population across all five cities is barely 15% of the entire visible minority population here. The Table also reveals that close to one in four visible minority politicians at all three levels of government are women, comparable to the rate for non-visible minority politicians.

Explaining the Patterns

The above data raise a number of significant questions about newcomer and visible minority entry into "the political labour market." Why are success rates greater in the suburbs? Why are they greatest for South Asians? Why are they greater now federally and provincially than municipally? We now explore these questions.

It would appear that the opportunity structure for visible minorities to succeed electorally is greater in the suburbs than central city. This has to do with significant socio-political factors in both places. The core of the City of Toronto has a lower concentration of visible minorities than either the post-war or edge-city suburbs. And its visible minority population is generally less affluent than their counterparts in the suburbs. Both numbers and social class therefore constitute relatively greater barriers in the central city. So too may a political culture that places great status on venerable constituencies in the heart of the city.

Meanwhile the suburbs have seen dramatic visible minority population growth in recent years. There is a spatial residential concentration among members of the same community in the suburbs which is not matched in the central city. This creates a greater critical mass able to support a community candidate. Higher suburban rates of homeownership also correlate with prospects of higher voter turn-out among minorities there. Finally, it would appear that political parties in the Toronto area have made a greater priority of attracting visible minority candidates in the suburbs than central city. In large measure this reflects an instrumental recognition of the importance of the 'ethnic vote' in the suburbs. Additionally, political ambitions and machines appear more entrenched in the heart of the city.

The electoral success of South Asian candidates is striking, especially in comparison to the Chinese community. Among the 13 visible minority politicians elected federally and provincially, 9 are South Asian and 1 is Chinese. This is despite the fact that for the total area under review in this essay, the South Asian population of 442,815 is only marginally greater than the Chinese community's size of 392,225. Several factors stand out as hypotheses worthy of further research in explaining the different outcomes. South Asians come from countries of multiple political parties and regular elections. South Asians are more likely to arrive in Canada with facility in English. And then there is the matter of sheer numbers. In Brampton and Mississauga, South Asians are the largest visible minority group totaling far more members than the Chinese hold in Markham and Richmond Hill where they are the largest visible minority group. Taken together, these are some factors that account for dramatically differing political achievement rates by two different visible minority communities.

Lastly, there is municipal lag to be explained. This runs against much research which has argued that municipal government is more accessible to traditionally underrepresented groups such as women, gays and visible minorities (Trimble, 1995; Thomlinson, 1997; Siemiatycki and Saloojee, 2003). It may be that our findings are doubly circumstantial. They may be unique to the Toronto area, and they certainly are here a recent phenomenon of the last round of elections at all three levels of government. Yet even anomalies require explanation.

It is noteworthy, for starters, that incumbency is a far more daunting barrier to newcomers seeking municipal office than federal or provincial positions. Municipal

Table 2 – Seats Held by Visible Minority Candidates by Location & Jurisdiction

	City of Toronto	Brampton	Mississauga	Markham	Richmond Hill
Provincial	3/22	2/3	1/4	1/2	0/1
Federal	2/23	3/4	1/4	0/3	0/1
Municipal	5/45	1/11	0/10	2/13	0/9

Table 3 – Demographics of Elected Visible Minority Politicians

South Asian	Black	Chinese	Korean	Males	Females
11	5	4	1	16	5

politicians hold onto office longer. By way of illustration: across the four edge-city suburbs, the average number of elections won by all federal and provincial incumbents combined was 2.16; for all member of municipal council it was 4. Turnover is thus far more rapid among federal and provincial politicians than among their municipal counterparts. The absence of parliamentary government and political parties locally goes a long way to explaining the difference. It may also be that federal and provincial offices are more compelling draws on the political aspirations of prospective minority candidates.

What Next?

If the experience in the Toronto area is anything to judge by, the suburbs may lead the way in promoting greater electoral equity in Canada. For all the transgressions laid against suburbia by its critics, it would certainly go against the script for suburbs to forge a greater diversity and inclusion in our political system. Yet the geography of political change may well be most robust today in the suburbs. What impact greater numbers of suburban elected officials from newcomer and minority communities will have on public discourse and policy will make for interesting study.

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