GAINING THE POLITICAL SUPPORT OF MINORITIES IN CANADA

ABSTRACT

Goldy Hyder provides insight into the fastest growing demographic in Canada's cities: the minority vote. He examines the impact that the participation of minority communities has had on politics in Canada and explains the various reasons that the Conservative Party as struggled to reach out to these communities. And yet, he argues, the policy interests of minorities are essentially the same as those of mainstream Canadians and include areas in which Conservatives excel. He therefore urges the Conservative Party to better communicate with minority groups, especially those in urban settings.

As you read this article we are either into a federal election or on the verge of one. If polls are any indication, this election is going to be close – real close – and as such every vote counts and to earn it no stone can be left unturned. One group of voters that will be particularly targeted by the mainstream national parties is the visible minority community, which traditionally has been aligned with the Liberal Party of Canada. No matter how hard other parties try to break through the Liberal stronghold, the barrier (or is it the bond?) seems simply too hard to break. Or so we're led to believe. In fact, I sense change is in the air, and opportunities are appearing for other parties to capture the fastest-growing demographic in Canada's cities – the minority vote. If they are to take advantage of these opportunities, however, they must understand what has happened and how the minority community now finds itself on the cusp of being able to tangibly influence and shape the Canadian political landscape.

The journey to relevance and clout for the minority community has not been an easy one. Many lessons can be learned from it. Despite Canada's good intentions, the experience of minorities in Canadian politics has, in fact, not been without difficulties. Minorities have been engaged in the political process for a long time. There has been an 'evolution' of sorts beginning from the times in which they were literally used in a "rack'em-pack'em-stack'em" style of mobilization. This style allowed political parties to take advantage of the ease with which minorities could – in its crudest form – be 'herded together'. However, this is Canada, so we call it 'organized'.

During this phase, which dates from the mid-1970s to the present, the minority population was, and continues to be, heavily active; the proof reflected in their high participation rates. The emergence of 'power brokers' who could 'deliver' their communities was an early reality of the newfound clout of the minority population. But their participation, however good from the altruistic view of 'being involved in one's community' was, nonetheless, undervalued. In fact, the non-minority population frowned upon it. (Apparently, English was a requirement for democracy in Canada. Likewise, the means of transport one took to get to a polling station was also an issue. For some reason, a group of non-English speaking immigrant voters traveling on a bus together was subject to a different standard than a group of local ladies driving to vote after their curling match.)

Another issue widely reported and frowned upon was the act of giving away five or ten dollar party memberships, an action that likely caused more harm than people could have realized. It allowed minorities to become pawns in a political process which, in the early years, demeaned their contributions and involvement. To this day, such practices continue. The fact is, these practices are dead wrong and need to stop. Moving forward the responsibility to have people purchase their memberships must be borne by the communities themselves and the parties.

The mid-70s through to the '80s was a time of struggle for minorities. However, the ill treatment of minority communities was as much their own fault as it was of the parties themselves. For political parties, their motivation was simple: they had found the commodity most wanted in politics – masses of people who are easily mobilized. For those in the minority communities, it was simply a chance to participate.

Over time, the attitude of minorities has evolved from one of 'participate any way, any how' to finding more meaningful ways of contributing, including seeking political office. It did not take long for minority communities to realize that if they could be mobilized to elect a non-minority, they could just as easily be mobilized to elect 'one of their own'.

GOLDY HYDER

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The issue of minorities in politics in Canada is first and foremost an urban phenomenon. The concentration of the minority presence and therefore its impact on the political scene is felt most in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and some select parts of Quebec. That is not to dismiss the rest of Canada, rather it is a simple reflection that politics is a game of numbers and the numbers are where they are. Most obvious evidence is the statistic that 73% of all immigrants settle in the Toronto/GTA area.

Leaving aside how and why immigrants are a) in Canada, and b) settle where they do (those are clearly different topics) I do want nonetheless to underscore that the concentration of the minority vote has made the community a powerful force in those areas in which it resides in large numbers. Often the ridings with the most party memberships – and this is certainly the case for the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party – are those ridings where the minority population is at its highest. Whether in Vancouver or Calgary or Toronto, the facts speak for themselves.

Clearly, it will get more and more difficult for a party to attain a majority government federally without the support of minorities. Despite the fact that the visible minority population makes up about 13% of the Canadian population, it is concentrated in such a way that it can affect the outcome of up to (and this estimate is admittedly on the high side) a full third of the national seats available.

So what impact have minorities had on politics in Canada? I start proudly with the assertion that due in large part to the significant presence and clout of the minority community, no longer can a right-wing, immigrant bashing party succeed in Canada like they have been able to do in Austria, France and Italy, to name a few. Immigration has also brought about the urbanization of Canada, a trend that is bound to continue.

There's an old adage in politics that there are 'no votes in foreign policy'. However, in minority communities foreign policy does matter. It is certainly a prism through which other policies that the party stands for are viewed. I am not suggesting that it is the vote determiner per se but rather that a party's foreign policy perspective can serve as a barrier to minority communities. On this front the 'middle of the road' approach advanced by the Liberal Party has found favour with the minority communities. Decisions made by the Liberal government to not send Canadian troops to Iraq, or the recent decision to not participate in the missile defence (the latter being a big error in judgment in my opinion) are often supported overwhelmingly by minority communities.

While not necessarily a good thing – at least certainly not in my mind – the minority community in Canada has also been one of the leading forces of 'anti-American' attitudes. There is a high level of skepticism of the US and its foreign policies, though this is clearly an area in which the minority community is not alone in Canada or for that matter abroad.

Immigrants, like converts to a faith, tend to believe more in the whole than in parts. That is to say, minorities are more 'Canadian' than they are regional, which spills over into their views on the way Canada should function. Clearly, immigrants – especially first generation immigrants – continue to believe in the role of a strong federal government. These are signs that this is changing as one looks at second generation immigrants, but for now the perception that Liberals believe in a strong central government and Conservatives believe in more provincial rights is one of the many reasons that the Liberal Party has owned the space of capturing minority votes.

Recently the party took a stab at reaching out to minority communities through the same sex issue, but all indications are that that effort has come up short. Perhaps minorities have realized that the very Charter that would have to be used to deny the rights of same sex couples is the same Charter that offers minorities protection from the majority will.

There are other reasons that Conservatives have struggled. The roots of the modern Conservative Party are based mostly in rural Canada where the minority population is just that – a minority. Beyond its rural base, the party has also suffered from the perceptions of its pro-US, pro-Republican, pro-British, pro-monarchy positions. In addition, more recently the party's positions on the Middle East conflict are less and less balanced and more and more prone to picking a side, representing a departure from the 'accepted' practice in Canada of being an honest broker.

The Conservative Party has also been tarnished with a number of instances of 'racist remarks' made by some extremist elements. (Arguably, BC MP Randy White's comments on videotape – "to heck with the courts, eh" – with less than a week to go in the 2004 federal election may well have turned many minority communities in Toronto/GTA ridings away from voting Conservative, essentially doing what Rt. Hon. Joe Clark described as "voting for the devil you know.") To some extent the Conservative brand has been equally unfairly tarnished by a few bad apples – much like the Muslim community today having its image tarnished by the actions of a small, small minority of extremists.

For Conservatives to be successful in the future they are going to need to break into urban centres and by extension into minority communities. Recently the party took a stab at reaching out to minority communities through the same sex issue, but all indications are that that effort has come up short (it appeals to first generation immigrants but not to the second generation). Perhaps minorities have realized that the very Charter that would have to be used to deny the rights of same sex couples is the same Charter that offers minorities protection from the majority will. For the record, the Party's position is to

allow MPs, including cabinet Ministers, the right to have a free vote as a matter of conscience.

For some time now, it has just been taken as a given that minorities support Liberals – that Liberals are more pro-immigration, pro-multiculturalism than other parties. That rhetoric has served the Liberal Party well but it is a dying myth. As such, despite the challenges that Conservatives have faced in attracting or retaining the minority vote, there continue to be opportunities. Like society, the minority population continues to evolve and so, too, do their issues. Minorities are frankly tired of being patronized. Sure immigration and multiculturalism are important public policies, but they are by no means the ones that are the most important, certainly not to immigrants who have called Canada home for decades.

On the contrary, the policy interests of minorities are the same as so-called mainstream Canadians: health care, education, taxes, infrastructure, environment and investment in cities to name a few. Minority issues are essentially the same ones that are of interest to Mr. and Mrs. Main Street. And herein lies the opportunity for the Conservative Party to build and execute a strategy that actually talks with minority Canadians the same way it talks to the majority of them.

The Conservative brand and the values of the party need to be communicated much better to minority communities. When people first come to Canada their issues tend to be more national in scope, ranging from human rights/Charter to immigration to foreign policy and international trade. These are widely believed to represent the 'strengths' of the Liberal Party. As time passes though, the issues tend to be more personal, from both the economic and social perspective. Thus, issues such as lower taxes, less government regulations, better education and quality health care, combined with more moderate yet traditional viewpoints on the social policy questions of the day, create an opening for the Conservative Party to promote its brand.

The place to start is at the Conservative Party's 'first' policy convention as a 'new' party, to be held mid-March in Montreal. The Conservative Party has a very significant presence of visible minorities in its caucus, from Bev Oda to Deepak Obhrai to Rahim Jaffer and the Grewals to name a few, but it clearly needs to do more – particularly to diversify not only its own policies, but also its membership. It needs to encourage and include minorities in its policy-making process. Up until now, for the most part, political parties have been interested in minority votes but not the ideas advanced by minority communities. This has to change.

Add to the mix the impact of the new campaign finance law, which levels the playing field between 'have' and 'have-not' communities. Money no longer gets the attention of political parties as it once did and this will create even more opportunities for the minority population to play a more significant role in policy-making than it has in the past. In this new reality, human resources trump financial resources.

Another emerging trend appears to be the support that is available to the Conservative Party from second-generation Canadians. As a June 2004 election poll in the *National Post* reported, second generation immigrants are more Conservative in their thinking and inclined to be attracted more to 'right-leaning' economic policies. Yet as the election outcome suggests, it appears that neither the first nor second generations have fully made the move to the Conservative Party, especially in the vote-rich Toronto/GTA area.

Nevertheless, for the reasons I have cited, the future looks better than the past. Under the leadership of Stephen Harper, the Conservative Party has successfully begun reaching out to minority communities. Only recently, it was the Conservative Party that took strong stands on issues such as the need for an inquiry into the Air India tragedy as well as the need to probe the manner in which the Kazemi situation has been handled by our government. While these can be seen as issues for minority communities, they are in fact very much Canadian issues reflecting our values of seeking justice and fairness. For that matter, even the sponsorship scandal is a vote-getter from minority communities. To say that minorities expected better in Canada would not be an understatement.

The votes of minority communities are up for grabs and the party that best adjusts to the modern thinking of minority communities has a lot to gain. To ignore this emerging reality is, simply put, political suicide.

Former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney once said, and I paraphrase, "if you give the Liberals a seventy-five seat head start in Quebec you will lose ten times out of ten." No doubt if Mr. Mulroney were running today he would see the demographic trends and likely add, "and if you concede over a hundred seats to Liberals in urban Canada you're guaranteed to lose ten times out of ten."

This election and the ones to follow will reveal whether in fact the Conservative Party has succeeded in gaining the support of minorities in Canada. Clearly they are on the right track, and breaking the Liberal stronghold with ethnic communities could well be the difference between a minority Conservative government and a majority one.

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