HOW MINORITY POLITICIANS BUILD ELECTORAL SUPPORT

ABSTRACT

Successful minority politicians must bring together support from three overlapping but somewhat distinct arenas: political parties, cultural communities and their riding community. The authors argue that to do this, they must be able to evidence to a party that they can bring to it new supporters, to their cultural community that they understand how the political process operates, and to these two groups and the wider community, that they are comfortable with membership of multiple communities and competent in managing the resulting social networks.

Given their control of the nomination process and local campaigning, the local associations of Canadian political parties are central to party politics in Canada. Their cyclical existence – springing to life around elections and leadership contests and remaining nearly moribund at other times – makes them relatively permeable, often allowing easy access to new members and aspiring politicians. As such, local party associations may provide immigrants access to the political process and act as a key socialization agent for ethnic politicians. The challenge for aspiring minority politicians is to meld the resources of one or more cultural communities with those available in their party and geographic communities without doing damage to any one source of support.

Direct knowledge of the political process, such as nominating candidates and running local campaigns, is a key political resource that aspiring minority politicians can trade on within the party and in their own cultural and geographic communities. Combining this knowledge with a public profile enhances the appeal of minority candidates in all three arenas and provides the raw material on which to build a political career. To do this minority politicians must be able to evidence to a party that they can *bring to it* new supporters, to their cultural community that they understand how the *political process* operates and can *bring the party to them,* and to these two groups and the wider community, that they are comfortable with membership of *multiple communities* and competent in managing the resulting *social networks.*

Political Parties and Cultural Communities

For most minority politicians, long periods of volunteering in a party preceded their move into electoral politics. Credibility as someone with a history of working for the party is a first step to winning a nomination for many minority politicians.[1] For party members, it is seen as evidence that the person is a good party member. From the perspective of cultural communities, a history of party involvement and access to the party hierarchy is seen as a resource and underpins their appeal for electoral support. They are seen as having special knowledge: an understanding of nomination dynamics and the world of elected officials. Of course, this special status has long been associated with successful politicians:

> *Involvement in party work provides future legislators with opportunities to interact with and observe the behaviour of those relatively few individuals…who have detailed information about the job of being a provincial legislator and/or first-hand knowledge of the role expectations associated with this position.*[2]

This insider knowledge is particularly valued in cultural communities for whom representative politics is a novelty and which have clear political claims arising out of their immigrant experience. In moving from volunteer to candidate, ethnic political insiders are well placed to make use of their links to various ethnic networks to help them succeed in electoral politics.

The enthusiasm with which immigrants engage with politics is often crucial to the success of minority politicians. Many immigrants have experienced exclusion from political participation and take seriously the opportunity to become involved in the political life of their new community. They see involvement as evidence of unity and strength within the community, a precondition for personal and community success, and evidence of the inclusiveness and the democratic process.

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The support of ethnic and cultural communities is usually central to many minority politicians' nomination and campaign strategies. Members of cultural communities usually provide the inner circle of friends, relatives and business contacts that underpin nomination and campaign teams:

> *It is natural to start with acquaintances that are closest to you, and then work your way out…the process for signing up members is similar for every candidate. First you will go to your friends then you go further.[3] Its true that over the years, [the] ethnic communities and ethnic votes can make it or break it at a nomination, especially in ridings that have an ethnic presence… ethnic communities come in flocks…they are political animals.[4]*

The capacity to rally members of the ethnic community provides ethnic representatives with a strategic advantage in nomination have an upper hand over non-ethnic candidates. John Nuraney points out, that he has access to networks that can be used to bring out supporters to party events.[5] Furthermore, the support of cultural communities is an asset that is consistent with democratic politics and Canadian political traditions and part of the broad coalition needed for any candidate to be successful.[6]

Given their importance to both their nomination and election campaigns, minority politicians are aware that they cannot take the support of ethnic communities for granted. Their relationship with these communities needs constant attention:

> *Sometimes you are going to get the backing of certain ethnic groups if the candidate is from their community, but a lot of them are smarter than that, they don't just vote blindly. Some of them do, but a lot of them will actually scrutinize. If you look at the communities that have been here a while, I find that they are becoming more sophisticated. In Art Hanger's nomination fight in Calgary East, [in which he faced-off against members of the local Sikh community] some members of that community who worked for Hangar's opponents actually voted for Hangar.[7]*

Yet there are also dangers to over-reliance on ethnic group mobilization. Gurmant Grewal argues that although "birds of a feather flock together, that should not be the case, it should be based on merit. It is dangerous for democracy for people to vote without understanding the issues." Moreover, this may alienate other party members or voters. A broad understanding of politics was seen as essential to a successful political career. The second part of this strategy requires them to meld ethnic networks with those in the broader community.

The Geographic Constituency

It is unlikely that the support of ethnic voters will itself guarantee electoral success. As with all members of parliament, ethnic politicians must bring together support from many segments of their constituency if they are to be successful. Party supporters, those who agree with the politician's position on a particular issue, swinging voters, personal acquaintances, professional associates, members of ethnic communities are just some of components of a winning electoral coalition.

But given this, being able to evidence the support of cultural communities has important symbolic value. Party organizers see this as an important resource and evidence of the candidate's contacts, organizational abilities, and access to resources. Moreover, if this can be translated into votes, the party may believe its chances of success in a riding are enhanced. On the other hand, a failure to attract ethnic support might well be seen by others as evidence of either incompetence or some difficulty. That is, being seen as an effective organizer and representative of that community may signal political competency. Minority politicians then, hope to leverage this support into wider partisan and community support.

Most minority politicians realize the importance of combining an appeal to their own ethnic group with that to the wider constituency. There is a clear danger of relying too heavily on any one base of support. While it might bring a nomination victory, it could be a handicap in the subsequent electoral contest. In this regard, minority politicians often speak favourably of the value of their connections with the wider community: connections often rooted not in any political agenda, but in efforts to become familiar with the wider society:

> *My dad always encouraged us to take part in the community. I was involved with quite a few organizations in Surrey. All the key community organizations such as the Surrey Chamber of Commerce, I was involved as a member then director, then 2nd vice-president, then 1st vice president, then president. As part of the Rotary club Surrey, I was involved as the first non-European member. Then I was involved as Director, vice president and president. Then I became involved with the Surrey Crime Prevention Society; the first time they had someone as a non-European descent involved as an executive. I was involved as the director there and also as the president. So I have a part in all the community organizations that most people from non-Euro descent were not really involved.[8]*

This is has been true for other ethnic politicians. When running for elected office, Lebanese in the Maritimes portrayed themselves as "islanders" in an attempt to gain the trust and acceptance of the local population, especially given the lack of a influential Lebanese community:

> *Norman Mansour joined just about every social and civic organization in Amherst, Nova Scotia, before being elected mayor and then going on to run for a seat in the provincial legislature. By participating in so many organizations he not only sharpened his political skills, but also demonstrated to the public that he had done so.[9]*

Jabbra argues that this approach is not so important in ridings where "large ethnic groups are densely settled and rely heavily upon ethnic resources."[10] While the threshold for 'large' is difficult to define, we did not find much evidence to support this claim. All our respondents

considered it necessary to develop strong contacts with and knowledge of the broader community.

Even in communities with large ethnic populations, part of the process of attracting support from such communities is to be seen to understand and be taken seriously by the wider community. Political aspirants establish themselves in the mainstream community as part of the mechanism for building trust within their ethnic community and in order to bring more people into their support network.

As with all politicians, certain personal characteristics are important for success in attracting broad support. Jabbra has noted the importance of education in this regard.[11] Of the twelve representatives interviewed in this study, ten have university degrees (including two with a Master's degree), while the remaining two have professional accreditation in fields such as real estate, and accounting. Without these education credentials it would be difficult to imagine that ethnic candidates would be seen as qualified among the mainstream or their own community to seek election.

Social mobility is also important to electoral success, as "it is harder to despise the rich than the poor. Power is more accessible with wealth and education."[12] All our respondents had lucrative careers prior to running for election, many operating small businesses in the service sector. It appears that these occupations may teach important people skills and help establish the representative as a fixture within their neighbourhood – a local notable both in the ethnic and riding communities:

> *Then in 1985 I opened up a small business with my wife, which grew to three dry-cleaning stores, while I was working with the city… at the same time I started getting involved into community affairs with whatever free time I had.*[13]

Becoming an provider of jobs and being seen as successful prior to seeking office create the sort of public profile that an aspiring politician can build upon.

Career success provides an aspiring politician with a public profile in their ethnic community, as someone who has successfully adapted to the new society. On the other hand, it also exposes them to political networks in the broader society. As a result, they are well positioned to act as intermediaries between the two groups. Maintaining support in both camps rests in part on how well ethnic politicians present themselves to their various publics.[14] The ethnic community must believe the member has influence in the wider society, and can deliver certain political advantages. The wider community has to be convinced that the member is a reliable spokesperson for his or her cultural group, and can shape minority sentiment on important matters.

Conclusion

Successful ethnic minority politicians must negotiate three political communities: the local political party, ethnic communities and that of the local geographic constituency. While nomination success for minority politicians can often be based on an appeal to one or more ethnic communities in a riding, moving beyond the nomination to electoral success requires a much broader coalition of support. In building such a coalition, they must make use of their profile in the three communities – local party, the riding and minority cultural groups – by presenting themselves as successful in each and reliable intermediaries between the three.

The complexities of this bridging exercise should not be understated. Not only are there differences in organizational and cultural norms, the communities may not easily overlap. In some instances, there may be little contact between local party organizations and immigrant and ethnic communities. Some members of a politician's ethnic community may be spread well outside the riding. Ethnic communities other than that of which the candidate is a member may be important in the riding. Yet to the degree they are seen as particularly sympathetic to the issues confronting immigrants, ethnic politicians may also have special access to ethnic communities other than their own. Finally, the geographic community may have little experience of minority politicians and be relatively unaware of the ethnic communities within its borders.

Elected minority politicians, from both the federal and provincial levels of government, different communities, and a range of parties, tend to exhibit a set of shared characteristics that help them to bridge these groups. While in the broad these characteristics are much the same as for any aspiring politician – an understanding of the dynamics of nominations and campaigns in Canada and a public profile – there is particular content to each of these for such politicians. Work in the party helps the candidate impress upon members that he or she will bring new support and voters *to the party,* not only the party to new supporters and voters. It is a sign to members of his or her cultural community of *understanding of and access to* the political process and the capacity to bring the party *to these voters.* For its part, the public profile must be of the sort that allows the party, cultural community and broader geographic community to see the candidate as successful, and which allows for opportunities to network in and between these communities. Among our respondents a range of occupations from business to social work and social activism provided the necessary proof of successful adaptation to membership of a *multiple communities* – minority and other – and a penchant for building and maintaining *social networks.*

In this way, ethnic minority politicians provide an important link between minority communities and the broader society in Canada. That they can do so is in part of function of the organizational autonomy of local party associations in Canadian political parties and their control of the nomination process.

Notes

To view the author's full notes, please cisit the ACS website at www.acs-aec.ca

1 Patty Sahota, personal interview, 2001.

2 Clarke, Harold D. and Richard D. Price. "Learning to be a Legislator: The Case of Provincial MLAs." *Parliament Policy and Representation.* Eds. Harold Clarke et al. Toronto: Methuen, 1980. 88.

3 Patty Sahota, personal interview, 2001.

4 Moe Amery, personal interview, 2001.