POLITICAL PARTIES AND ETHNIC PARTICIPATION:

A Question of Access

ABSTRACT

Canada is a plural society and is likely to become more socially diverse due to continuing demographic changes, especially in regards to newer immigrant communities which are visible minorities. Within Canada, a key route to integration into the "dominant society" is through the political system. Entry into the political process is controlled by those who organize the selection process – that is political parties. Participation in electoral politics can serve as indicator of the integration of visible minorities into the political system.

In 1991, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Lortie Commission) documented the "persistent under representation of certain groups" and linked this to "the practices of national political parties, particularly their local associations, which function as gatekeepers of access to their candidacy, but whose relative autonomy constitutes a barrier to change." (Final Report, 1991: 115) The Lortie Commission addressed the representational deficits of women, Aboriginal peoples and visible minorities, and made several recommendations which proposed structural changes that focused on encouraging greater access to candidacy. Changing recruitment structures may have significant effects on the social composition of legislatures, the way they function, the policy process and political representation. Entry to the political process is controlled by those who organize the selection process – that is, the political parties. One of the most critical functions of political parties is to recruit, select and nominate candidates. The right of citizens to be candidates can be exercised effectively only to the extent that the nomination process of political parties provides fair access. This article will seek to examine the issue of diversity as it relates to visible minorities, particularly Asian Canadians and South Asian Canadians, in the Greater Vancouver area of British Columbia. The dynamics of ethnicity, immigration and access to candidacy within political parties in Canada will all enrich the understanding in Canadian Politics on political participation and new immigrants.

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Immigration and Political Integration

Canada is a plural society and is likely to become more socially diverse due to continuing demographic changes. Within Canada, a key route to integration into "the dominant society" is through the political system. Participation in electoral politics in particular serves as an important indicator of the emergence of recent immigrants from "social isolation into the mainstream of Canadian political life" (Wood 1981: 178). Issues such as the democratic political institutions and traditions in place from the country of departure, time of arrival, existing length of time in Canada, can all affect the patterns of ethnic political participation. Some of the barriers to participation that are associated with immigrant status in the new country disappear of grow smaller for second and further generations after an adaptation period.

Although immigrants' share of the total population has remained relatively stable over the years, their cultural and socio-economic characteristics have changed considerably. The 1962 and 1967 changes in the Immigration Act have allowed for a more open and nondiscriminatory immigration policy. There have generated changes in the composition of the immigrant population of Canada. A shift in immigration away from European to non-European sources has ensured that Canadian society has increasingly become not only ethnically diverse, but also relatively recently, racially diverse. As well "metropolitan ethnicity" has emerged as a demographic reality, with the majority of new immigrants going to Canada's largest cities (Wilson 1993: 647).

Visible Minorities in Canada

The federal government's Employment Equity legislation states "visible minorities are persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-white in colour or non-Caucasian in race." Visible minorities, comprised 6.3% of the Canadian population in 1986, 9.1% in 1991, and 11.2% in 1996. Among the adult visible minority population, more than three out of four were immigrants (78%)

and approximately 15% were born in Canada, with approximately 7% being non-permanent residents (Synnott and Howes 1996: 138). The concept of "visible minority" was coined in the early 1970s. It is now widely used in Canadian public discourse, and the term has been entrenched in affirmative action, employment equity, and multiculturalism legislation, including the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

There are variations in the levels of citizenship status, unemployment, education, income and occupational distribution of visible minority populations. There are variations in political participation and community maturation both between and within groups, as well as variations in regional and constituency concentration. Synnott and Howes criticize the use of "visibility" as a social category. They see it as inappropriate because "it homogenizes specificities," ignoring differences in power, status, history, culture and even visibility (1996: 145).

Canadian Political Science and Ethnicity

The opening up of access in political institutions to the growing numbers of visible minorities in the Canadian population is an important topic. Yet, it is not immediately obvious how to address this topic. There has been a surprising negligence in the literature, of how particular social groups have been politically incorporated. Jerome Black (1997) comments that the current literature on the intersection of citizenship, immigration and political engagement is a nascent one with many gaps, largely characterized by uneven theoretical development and limited empirical examination. These gaps in our knowledge provide the opportunities to contribute to an underdeveloped academic area – the topic of political participation of newcomers and minorities in Canada.

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Cairns (1993) remarks that Canadian political science's traditional concentration on the institutional forms of federalism distorts our view of ethnicity by directing our attention to territorially concentrated ethnic or national groups that can be accommodated by "provincehood or a third order of government." Wilson (1993) acknowledges that this bias has led us to pay too little attention to dispersed metropolitan ethnicity, and emerging demographic reality destined to have important implications for Canadian social and political life.

Participation and Immigrant Groups

In their examination of the 1993 House of Commons, Black and Lakhani (1997) comment that while Members of Parliament of the British-only and French-only origins exceeded their proportions of the general population, racial minorities were distinctly underrepresented in Parliament with only 13 elected. In his later study, Black (2001) found that in the 1997 election, 19 visible minority candidates were elected, and after the 2000 election there were only 17 visible minority candidates elected to Parliament. In my own sketch compilation of the results of the 2004 federal election, taking the redistricting and addition of new seats, I came up with total of 21, using party biographies of candidates and a content analysis of newspaper articles.

Vancouver's Asian Canadians, Indo-Canadians and the federal Election 2004

Whereas residents of British heritage made up the majority of Vancouver's population as recently as 1961, in the 1991 census barely 24% acknowledged British origins (Stasiulis 1995: 193). According to the results of the 1996 Census on immigrant numbers, Vancouver had the highest growth rate in its immigrant population of any metropolitan area between 1991 and 1996, moving into second position (34.5%) after Toronto (42%) in terms of the concentration of immigrant populations (Mitchell 1997: A10). Approximately 80% of the immigrants to Vancouver were Asian born (Ibid).

British Columbia's growing visible minority population is proportionately the largest in Canada. In 1991, the census found that 14% of its residents were counted as visible minorities. By 1996, this number was now 18% and in the last census of 2001, their numbers reached 22%. Visible minorities in British Columbia are concentrated in the Lower Mainland, which includes the city of Vancouver, nearby suburbs and the Fraser Valley. In this region, one in every three residents is a member of a visible minority (McMartin 2004: 3). Chinese and South Asians are the top two visible minority groups in this area. Chinese residents represent over nine percent of the total population, and South Asian residents over five percent.

The Asian population at 366,000, numbers greater than Indo-Canadians at 210,000 in B.C. Looking at the federal election of 2004 in particular, one can see that only one Asian-Canadian was elected in the riding of Richmond, B.C. which holds the largest proportion of this group's numbers. Raymond Chan, a Liberal won the riding. He now sits in the federal cabinet of Prime Minister Paul Martin, as well as serving as Minister of state for Multiculturalism.

Of the South Asian members elected (including those with original South Asian heritage), 5 were elected – Conservative members Nina Grewal (the newly created riding of Fleetwood-Port Kells) and her husband, incumbent Gurmant Grewal (Newton-North Delta); and Liberal members Keith Martin (formerly of Canadian Alliance and whose grandmother is of South Asian origin, from the

Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca riding), Hedy Fry and former NDP Premier of B.C. and now federal Health Minister, Ujjal Dosanjh (Vancouver South). These ridings have a high density of the South Asian population. In the 2000 election, 2 Members of Parliament were elected in the Lower Mainland, already mentioned Conservative Gurmant Grewal, and the Liberal Herb Dhaliwal (Vancouver South-Burnaby) who went on to become a cabinet minister (Natural Resources).

There seems to be a tight correlation between the percentage of the riding's population that hail from one of the visible minority groups and the successful candidacy and election of one of their members in the case of South Asians in particular. In its July 26th, 2004, issue, *The Hill Times,* observes that the Punjabi language is now the fourth language in the House of Commons, after English, French and Italian, now that 8 Punjabi-speaking MPs have been elected.

The Candidate Selection Process

The nomination of candidates in Canadian general elections reflects the constituency based character of the electoral system. Parties within ridings determine most of their own rules and practices for choosing their nominee, and practices may vary from constituency to constituency. According to Williams (1981) there are party variations on such questions as who calls and controls the nomination meetings, and who is eligible to vote at these meetings. Qualifications for party membership may be open to local alterations, in terms of membership fees, and cut-off dates for purchasing a membership to be eligible to participate in a nomination contest (p. 89).

Although the primary centre of decision-making for party nominations in Canada remains localized, national party organizations have begun to assume a larger role in the process, and the system as a whole appears to have become more institutionalized. For example, Erickson (1997) comments that by 1993, a shift in the selectors from local associations to the national leader began occurring in some parties. She found that the greatest interference with local associations' autonomy in selecting candidates in the 1993 campaign occurred in the Liberal Party, whereby the leader, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, appointed 14 candidates of which 10 were women. As well, in 1993, parties were more active overall in determining the supply of prospective candidates, by using nomination committees in constituencies without incumbents. Again, in 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin followed the practices of appointing "star" candidates to run uncontested in particular ridings – Vancouver South being one that was highly criticized.

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Given the comparatively open nature of the nomination meetings, those competing for the nomination could actively recruit supporters to join the party and support them at the selection meeting. Membership recruitment is facilitated by the rules of many local parties. Carty and Erickson (1991) found that less than 20% of local party associations required participants at nomination meetings to have been members for more than one month. "This evidence suggests that, if length of membership is an indicator of party commitment, party rules generally do not restrict participation in the candidate selection process to committed partisans." (341)

They used as an indicator of the mobilization of new members, the rate of growth of a local association's membership between two general elections (in their study 1988), and the time of the constituency nomination meeting. Erickson (1997) criticizes that "if winning a party candidacy is not so much about gaining the support of a group of local party notables as it is about selling enough new party memberships to personal supporters, whether or not these supporters had any commitment to the party, the idea of local party democracy seems compromised." (p. 11) She feels that party democracy would seem to require that most of those involved in the democratic exercises of the party had some commitment to that party.

In his study on parties in the constituencies, Carty (1991) uses visible minorities as a case study of special efforts to increase the participation of previously excluded groups into party affairs. He finds these mobilization efforts to be driven by "cold electoral calculation." (see Carty 1991: 231) Like Wood (1981), he finds that the proportion of constituency associations that are making special efforts to open up and involve visible minorities in their central activities is higher where such groups "exist in significant numbers" and even greater where such groups are perceived to have "become a factor in the constituency association's politics." (Ibid)

During the 1996 British Columbia provincial election campaign, in order to target two of B.C.'s largest ethnic constituencies, for the first time, the NDP included two ethnic group branches – South Asian and Chinese, as part of a concerted mobilization strategy (The Democrat 1996). During the June 1997 federal election, two new ridings in Greater Vancouver – Vancouver-Kingsway and Surrey Central contained high levels of Chinese and South Asian populations respectively. In the case of Vancouver-Kingsway, in what has been called, "British Columbia's most multicultural and the Liberal Party's most safe riding," six out of ten of the various

parties' challengers for the nomination were of Chinese descent (Yaffe 1997: A3). The Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien used special powers to appoint a woman of Chinese descent – Sophia Leung, who eventually won this seat. In the case of Surrey Central (in 2004 divided into Surrey North and Surrey-North Delta), the riding with the largest South Asian population in Canada (about 20%) four South Asian candidates were nomianted, with the Reform Party electing its South Asian candidate (currently Conservative member Gurmant Grewal).

Conclusion

It appears that the access of ethnic groups, in this case, visible minorities, specifically, Asian Canadians and South Asian Canadians, to candidacy depends on the percentage of ethnic groups in the population of a constituency. As well, access of ethnic groups, depends on their political apprenticeship (party membership, running at lower levels of government, interest group involvement, and community associations); however, the speed may vary with the amount of mobilization of the community. There may be differences in community maturation, such as gaps in rates of citizenship acquisition. As the ethnic composition of the electorate changes, parties will modify their recruitment practices. While South Asians appear to making gains in terms of participation in political parties and representation (no longer limited only the Liberal Party of Canada) in the federal House of Commons, Asians are lagging behind but accelerating their participation to political parties as access is slowly improving and representation is being seen of both members of these visible minority communities.

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