



Ethnicity and Democratic Governance
Gouvernance démocratique et ethnicité

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Patterns of Substantive Representation Among Visible Minority MPs: Evidence from Canada's House of Commons

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Immigration, Minorities and Multiculturalism
In Democracies Conference
Ethnicity and Democratic Governance MCRI project
October 25-27, 2007
Montreal, QC, Canada

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline the pattern of visible minority representation in the Canadian House of Commons.¹ The question is whether visible minorities elected to Parliament make a difference in politics and, notably, if they substantively represent ethnic minority issues. Corollary to this is a second question, whether non-minorities elected from constituencies that contain large visible minority populations, also substantively represent minority issues, or whether they act differently than visible minority MPs. The study also assesses whether there are differences in the legislative behaviour of visible minority MPs from different parties, and examines differences between female compared to male visible minority MPs. The data are drawn from legislative debates of the current, 39th Canadian Parliament, which has been seated since February 2006.

Setting the Context: Visible Minority Representation in Canadian Politics

It was in 1957, that Canada saw its very first visible minority MP elected to parliament. Douglas Jung was born in Canada of parents who had immigrated from China. He was elected for the Conservative party and served the riding of Vancouver Centre for two terms. Jung was followed in 1968 by Lincoln Alexander (Canada's first Black MP), and by Pierre De Bané (a Palestinian-born Arab). Research tracking visible minorities in Parliament, has revealed a slow, but fairly steady increase in their numbers in the five elections beginning since 1993.² That election brought 13 visible minorities to Parliament, growing to 19 in 1997, then falling to 17 in 2000, before rising again in 2004 to 22. By 2006, the most recent election, the number of seats held by visible minority MPs had climbed to 24 out of 308. Among these are 11 MPs of South Asian origin, five of Chinese origin, four Blacks, three Arabs, and one of Japanese descent. While it is true that more minorities than ever before have been winning their way into Parliament, they still make up a percentage of the legislature (7.8%) that is much lower than their proportion in the population (13.4%).³ Compared to women who, with just 64 seats, are well below half way to proportional representation in the House of Commons (index of

¹ The term "visible minority" is defined in Canada under the Federal Employment Equity Act of 1986, as persons other than Aboriginal people who are non-Caucasian in race and non-European in origin. The population data on visible minorities are derived from a census question in which people are invited to self-identity with the ethnic or cultural group of their ancestors. These population data become the baseline standard in assessing whether visible minorities are under-represented among employees in federally regulated workplaces. This study applies Statistics Canada's rules in determining whether an MP is counted as having visible minority status.

² Jerome H. Black and Bruce M. Hicks, "Visible Minority Candidates in the 2004 Federal Election," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 29:2 (2006); Jerome H. Black, "Ethnoracial Minorities in the Canadian House of Commons: An Update on the 37th Parliament," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 25 (2002), pp 24-28.

³ Population data are based on the 2001 census.

representative proportionality=0.40), visible minorities are doing relatively well (IRP=0.58).⁴

Canada is a country that should have a good record at including visible minorities among its political elite. First, there is strong support for multiculturalism in Canada and, consequently, an expectation that Parliament should reflect the ethnic diversity of the country. Just as Francophones and Anglophones, with their distinctive identities, require numerical and substantive representation in the political institutions of the country, so too do the polyethnic groups that make up the other portion of Canada's multicultural society. Indeed, it was the Senator Paul Yuzyk, a Saskatchewanian of Ukrainian origin, who, in his parliamentary response to the 1964 Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, reminded the Commission of the significant "third element" of non-French, non-English immigrant origin Canadians. The Commission would go on to produce a revised final report, which incorporated this third element and formed the basis for the multicultural policy framework delivered by Pierre Trudeau in 1971. There are other factors that should also promote the electoral participation and, in turn, the political representation of visible minorities in Canada. Immigrants to Canada can become citizens and acquire voting rights fairly quickly, after three years of residence. While Canada admits large numbers of refugees and family-class migrants, most newcomers are economic immigrants, selected on the basis of their education and employment skills, and expected to move into good-paying jobs relatively quickly. These resources are known to facilitate political participation.⁵

Nevertheless, there remain barriers to visible minority representation in Canadian politics. One of the most important barriers is the incumbency factor. Parties are loathe to replace incumbents or subject them to a nomination challenge, and the less often seats change hands, the less opportunity there is for newcomers (women as well as visible minorities) among candidates.⁶

Another potential barrier lies in the nomination recruitment process. The under-representation of visible minorities and women in the nomination recruitment process is typically blamed on parties, who act as gatekeepers in this process. There is fairly clear evidence in Canada, at least up until the mid-1980s, that party gatekeepers served as a barrier preventing women from winning party nominations in competitive ridings.⁷ The evidence is less clear that parties currently block the route to politics for visible minorities. For example, Black and Hicks show that the percentage of visible minorities among candidates for federal election has grown steadily from 1993 to 2004. Moreover, they show that parties nominated their visible minority candidates with a commitment to

⁴ The index of representative proportionality is, quite simply, the proportion of visible minorities (or women) within the House, divided by their proportion in the population.

⁵ Stephen White, Neil Nevitte, André Blais, Joanna Everitt, Patrick Fournier, and Elisabeth Gidengil, "Making Up for Lost Time: Immigrant Voter Turnout in Canada," *Electoral Insight* 8:2 (2006), pp 10-16.

⁶ On the effects of incumbency on the dearth of female candidates, see Lisa Young, "Legislative Turnover and the Election of Women to the Canadian House of Commons." In Kathy Megverly (ed.), *Women in Canadian Politics: Toward Equity in Representation*. Research Studies for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Toronto: Dundurn, 1991).

⁷ For a summary of the literature on women's access to politics, see Lisa Young, "Women (Not) in Politics: Women's Electoral Participation." In James Bickerton and Alain-G. Gagnon, *Canadian Politics*, 4th edition (Peterborough: Broadview, 2004.)

have them elected, running them in competitive ridings (defined as those that the party had either won in the previous election, or lost by no more than 10%) in proportions equal to non-minority candidates.⁸ Once nominated by a party, there is no evidence that voters discriminate against visible minority candidates.⁹ My own preliminary findings from exit polls conducted in 2004 in a handful of Toronto area ridings show that, in highly multicultural ridings, non-minority voters may demonstrate *even stronger* support for the visible minority candidate than voters from the candidate's same ethnic group.¹⁰

While the nomination process is a *potential* barrier, it may also provide an opportunity for well organized and politically engaged ethnic communities to exercise substantial influence in selecting their local candidate. In some hotly contested nominations, parties engage in mass recruitment drives to sign up new members who will support one or another nominee. It is not unusual to see party memberships swell to ten and twenty times their usual number in the lead up to a tight nomination race. These recruitment drives often focus on ethnic communities, where it is easier to mobilize and turn out large numbers of supporters on nomination day. The practice is facilitated by party rules that allow non-citizens to become party members. While ethnic recruitment drives reflect a certain degree of manipulation by local party elites and ethnic power brokers, they also provide an opportunity for visible minority mobilization and influence within parties. Indeed, many newcomer communities have quickly come 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. Undoubtedly, the support of large ethnic communities in the nomination process has been critical for many visible minority nominees.¹¹

The behaviour of parties—including the creation of ethnic outreach committees, ethnically targeted campaigning, and the growing number of visible minority candidates—suggests that party selectorates believe there is much to be *gained* by running visible minority candidates, especially in constituencies where minorities are a large part of the population. This has clearly been a strategy adopted by the Conservative Party of Canada (see below). Whether this strategy reflects a real commitment to the needs and interests of minority communities is one of the questions that this paper will investigate.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is found in literature on political representation, gender and identity politics, as well as in the growing body of research examining the political engagement of particular ethnic and immigrant groups.

In the now classic book, *The Concept of Representation*, Hanna F. Pitkin develops the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation is concerned with representatives' characteristics, focussing "on being

⁸ Black and Hicks, "Visible Minority Candidates in the 2004 Federal Election" (2006).

⁹ Jerome H. Black and Lynda Erickson, "Ethno-racial Origins of Candidates and Electoral Performance," *Party Politics* 12:4 (2006), pp 541-561.

¹⁰ Unpublished findings.

¹¹ Author's interviews with Helen and Gord Flanagan, campaign managers for Liberal MP, Yasmin Ratansi (22 March 2005), and with Raminder Gill, Conservative Party candidate (23 March 2005).

something rather than doing something.”¹² Substantive representation, conversely, is an “acting for” mode of representation. Pitkin argued that an overemphasis on descriptive issues of representation, on who is present in a legislative assembly, diverts attention from more urgent questions of what the representatives actually do. “Think of the legislature as a pictorial representation or a representative sample of the nation, and you will almost certainly concentrate on its composition rather than its activities.”¹³ It was the legislative activities of representatives that mattered most to Pitkin, where representing “means acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them.”¹⁴ For an MP to be deemed representative, “his actions, or his opinions, or both must correspond to or be in accord with the wishes, or needs, or interests, or those for whom he acts, that he must put himself in their place, take their part, act as they would act.”¹⁵ From this “acting for” viewpoint, the nature of the issues, policies and legislation an MP pursues determines whether or not representation occurs.

The descriptive representation perspective presumes that only a member of the descriptive group—be they visible minorities, women, handicapped persons, or any other discernable social group—can stand for that group, and thus concentrates on the need to increase the numerical presence of that group in a legislative assembly, so that the assembly better reflects their proportion in the population. Improving the representation of a politically marginalized group, in this context, is a symbolic issue. It may be intended to correct a perception that members of the group are second-class citizens, to present group role models, or to enhance the legitimacy of a political system that has been overtly monopolized by one group at the expense of others.

On the other hand, the substantive conception of political representation leaves open the possibility that any person can represent such a group, provided that they support the group’s wishes, needs and interests by their opinions and actions. This perspective acknowledges that a descriptive representative of a group will *tend* to share life experiences, values and socialization with other group members, and thus will be more likely to bring the unique perspectives and interests of the group to the political arena. But research on representation in the substantive vein has been more attentive to the relationship between a group’s presence in politics and the attention given to the group’s interests, and to the institutional context that frames and influences the capacity of a descriptive representative to act for group interests.

This idea of substantive political representation has been applied in two broad areas of research that hold relevance for this study: women in politics, and identity or racial politics. In the following sections, these literatures are discussed with emphasis on their implications for visible minority representation in Canada.

¹² Hanna F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 61.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

Partisan differences in substantive representation

There have been numerous studies on women in politics, that have assessed whether and to what extent female politicians substantively represent women. These studies reveal important differences in the opinions and legislative behaviours of political men and women on a number of social issues. In the U.S., for example, research has shown that elected women tend to be more liberal than elected men on issues including the death penalty, the financial intervention of the government in social programs, and the access of women to abortion services. However, the differences between men and women often become less stark once party affiliation is taken into consideration. Thus, in the U.S., Democratic or Republican women are more liberal and feminist than the men of their respective parties, however, male Democrats are sometimes more liberal and feminist than Republican women.

In Canada, these partisan differences appear to be even stronger, such that men from the left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP) have typically demonstrated more liberal and feminist attitudes than women in other parties. On the basis of their investigation of the attitudes of candidates in the 1997 Canadian federal election, Manon Tremblay and Réjean Pelletier thus acknowledge that more women in power is necessarily a good thing for symbolic and justice related reasons. However they argue that, as a strategy for meeting the substantive needs, demands and interests of women in a feminist context, “electing New Democratic men over Reformist or Conservative women is preferable.”¹⁶

Of particular significance for the present study on visible minority representation, the research on women’s representation in Canadian politics points to the important role played by party ideologies in Canada, and to the strong party discipline that characterizes the Canadian parliamentary system. There are good reasons to expect similar partisan differences in the views and behaviours of visible minority MPs.

The western-based populist and socially conservative Reform Party of Canada (later renamed the Canadian Alliance) was well known for its opposition to group-based identities and for its call to abolish both official bilingualism and multiculturalism policy. The Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), which presently forms a minority government in Canada, was formed out of the 2003 merger of the Canadian Alliance and the more established Progressive Conservative Party (PC), and many of its members and candidates continue to hold strong socially conservative views. Like its Alliance and Reform predecessors, the Conservatives have steadfastly refused to establish multicultural or women’s organizations within the party. The left wing NDP, on the other hand, is known for its emphasis on social justice and egalitarianism. It is the only political party in Canada to apply an affirmative action strategy to increase the number of its own candidates who are visible minorities, women, handicapped, or gay or lesbian.¹⁷ In their survey of candidates in the 2004 federal election, Black and Hicks have produced evidence that candidates’ attitudes on ethnic-related issues are strongly related to partisan

¹⁶ Manon Tremblay and Réjean Pelletier, “More Feminists or More Women? Descriptive and Substantive Representations of Women in the 1997 Canadian Federal Election,” *International Political Science Review* 21:4 (2000), p. 397.

¹⁷ Local riding associations must show the NDP’s Elections Planning Committee that they have made sufficient efforts to attract affirmative action candidates. The NDP also maintains an affirmative action fund to assist candidates from marginalized groups with their election expenses.

affiliation, and less clearly determined by whether or not a candidate is him or herself a visible minority. On two questions—concern over the low number of visible minorities in the House of Commons, and support for quotas or affirmative action to increase visible minority representation—they found the widest gap to lie between Conservative and NDP candidates. Furthermore, among Conservatives, a higher percentage of visible minority (83%) than non-minority candidates (60%) strongly disapproved of affirmative action measures to increase visible minority representation. Likewise, a higher percentage of visible minority (84%) than non-minority (79%) Conservative candidates considered the lack of visible minorities in the House to be “not a very serious problem” or “not a problem at all.” Though based on a very small sample of visible minority candidates, this study provides reason to be attentive to party differences and cautious about monolithic characterizations of visible minority representatives.¹⁸

Constituency composition and ethnic political identity

While research on the women’s political representation in Canada has some relevance to the present study, there are nevertheless two important differences between the dynamics of women’s representation and that of ethnic groups. First, while women generally comprise about half of the voting population, the ethnic composition of electoral districts varies widely. Ethnic groups may indeed constitute a numerical minority and wield little influence over electoral outcomes. Or they may be spatially concentrated within a riding, in some cases even forming what has been referred to in the U.S. context as a “majority-minority” or “concentrated minority” voting district, thereby enabling them to elect the candidate of their choice and to hold that representative accountable to their needs and interests. Second, much more so than women, some ethnic minorities demonstrate strong group identities, which lead them to vote as a cohesive bloc. In close elections, these minorities may have a good deal of influence over outcomes by trading their support in return for policy concessions. In a related vein, a strong group identity may be parlayed into high levels of collective mobilization and political engagement. Especially in contexts where voter participation tends to be low, this can give even very small ethnic groups an influential role in determining electoral outcomes.

The demographic composition of a riding is therefore a critical theme in assessing the substantive representation of visible minorities, whereas this is largely irrelevant to studies of women’s representation in politics. As suggested above, there are two conceptual components to this theme. The first concerns the numerical size of the visible minority, or particular ethnic community within a riding. The second concerns the capacity of an ethnic group to mobilize voter turnout among its members, and to structure vote choice.

Research in the United States on the political representation of African Americans is of some interest here. The political and scholarly debate in this context centres on the construction of majority-minority (most frequently majority-Black) voting districts and whether these help or hurt racial minorities in terms of the substantive representation of their interests within a legislative assembly. These districts certainly do increase the

¹⁸ This study, which was based on sample of 567 candidates (44.1% response rate), included only 36 visible minority candidates. Jerome H. Black and Bruce M. Hicks, “Visible Minorities and Under-Representation: The Views of Candidates,” *Electoral Insight* 8:2 (2006), pp 17-22.

number of minority candidates elected to office, that is, the descriptive representation of racial minorities.¹⁹ However, the overall efficacy of majority-minority districts in advancing Black interests remains disputed. The argument against such districts has been that they create a few safe Black seats, while marginalizing the minority vote elsewhere. The diminution in the size of the Black voting population in neighbouring districts may lead to the election of racially conservative candidates in those areas, thus offsetting the gains in Black representation. Support for minority issues within the legislature may actually be greater if there are fewer safe Black seats and, conversely, more non-minority legislators who recognize and are responsive to substantial pockets of minority voter influence within their districts.²⁰ The literature on majority-minority districts in the U.S. has helped to clarify the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation. As Cameron *et al.* point out, “it is hard to argue that minority voters in Georgia are better served overall when their congressional delegation goes from nine Democrats and one Republican to three black Democrats and eight white Republicans in the span of two years.” They emphasize the “trade-off to be made...between electing minority representatives to office and enacting legislation favored by the minority community.”²¹ This body of research also alerts us that the demographic composition of a riding may be a more important determinant of legislative attention to ethnic minority issues, than the ethnic background of its MP.

However the very distinctive features of U.S. racial politics means that this research has limited relevance for our study of visible minority representation in Canada. Most significantly, as Michael Dawson has shown, race continues to be the decisive factor in the political outlooks and choices of African Americans. Despite growing class stratification within the Black community, upwards of 90 per cent of African American voters continue to support the Democratic Party. Dawson has introduced the concept of the black utility heuristic, which “simply states that as long as African Americans’ life chances are powerfully shaped by race, it is efficient for individual African Americans to use their perceptions of the interests of African Americans as a group as a proxy for their own interests.”²² Brouard and Tiberj have likewise applied the race utility heuristic to explain the high degree of homogenous voting preferences among Arab origin French citizens.²³ However, when we turn to look at visible minorities and immigrant groups who have experienced neither a history of enslavement nor colonization, group identities may be much weaker and play less of a role in the politics of minority groups. Indeed,

¹⁹ The collection of essays in Davidson and Grofman provides clear evidence that increased minority office-holding in Southern states is due almost entirely to the creation of majority Black voting districts. See Chandler Davidson and Bernard Grofman (eds.), *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

²⁰ Charles Cameron, David Epstein and Sharyn O’Halloran, “Do Majority-Minority Districts Maximize Substantive Black Representation in Congress?” *American Political Science Review* 90:4 (1996), pp 794-812.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 810.

²² Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 61.

²³ Sylvain Brouard and Vincent Tiberj, “Race, Class and Religion: The Political Alignments of the “French Muslims.” Working paper, CEVIPOF, Sciences Po Paris (2005).

there is no ethnic group in Canada that appears to exhibit anything approaching the level of homogeneity in voting preferences demonstrated by African Americans in the U.S. or by Franco-Arabs in France.²⁴

Furthermore, few electoral ridings in Canada are characterized by high concentrations of a single ethnic group, in the manner that they are in the U.S. South, or in the urban peripheries of many European countries. Rather, with a few exceptions, ethnic ridings in Canada are highly multi-ethnic. Fairly typical is the riding of Scarborough-Rouge River. Visible minorities here comprise almost 85 per cent of the population, but include several large ethnic communities including Chinese (34%), South Asians (23%), and Blacks (13%). Even if strong social ties within immigrant communities serve to mobilize turnout and structure vote preference, identifying and understanding this dynamic within one group will take us only so far towards explaining political outcomes for the riding as a whole.

Finally, we still know very little about the political participation and voting patterns of the many ethno-cultural, ethno-racial, and immigrant communities in Canada. Emerging research on political behaviours of particular ethnic groups has pointed to some interesting differences. For example South Asians appear to be highly engaged and politically influential. Their relatively high incomes and education, high levels of residential concentration, as well as dense social networks, appear to endow them with strong capacity for political mobilization. Particularly within the party machinery of candidate selection, South Asians have been able to exercise considerable influence. And they are the one ethnic group that has succeeded in achieving levels of descriptive representation proportional to their presence in the general population.²⁵ Conversely, Chinese Canadians (especially those from mainland China) tend to exhibit relatively low levels of political involvement.²⁶

Canada is an extraordinarily multicultural country, with many urban ridings characterized by exceptionally high levels of ethnic diversity. There are, for instance 38 ridings (12 per cent of the total ridings in the country), where more than one-third of the population are visible minorities. Do visible minority voters in such ridings exercise influence over electoral outcomes, and can they ensure, in turn, that elected MPs serve minority interests both within the legislature and within the constituency office? The expectations are not clear-cut. On the one hand, the category “visible minority” conceals enormous cultural, religious, and socio-economic diversity. Some visible minorities are recent newcomers, while others may trace their family history in Canada back two hundred years. Even within single ethnic groups (for example, Chinese mainlanders compared to Hong Kong Chinese), there is considerable socio-economic class

²⁴ There is a tendency for immigrants as a whole to support the Liberal Party. Data compiled across two decades of Canadian election studies shows that between 48 and 50 per cent of immigrants who arrived in Canada after the age of 12, voted for the Liberal Party. See Stephen White, Neil Nevitte, André Blais, Joanna Everitt, Patrick Fournier, and Elisabeth Gidengil, “Making Up for Lost Time: Immigrant Voter Turnout in Canada,” *Electoral Insight* 8:2 (2006), p. 15.

²⁵ Andrew Matheson, “Seeking Inclusion: South Asian Political Representation in Suburban Canada,” *Electoral Insight* 8:2 (2006), pp 24-29.

²⁶ Shanti Fernando, *Race and the City: Chinese Canadian and Chinese American Political Mobilization* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006); Avvy Go, “Moving Beyond Tokenism,” *Canadian Issues* (Summer 2005), pp 40-42.

stratification. Given this diversity, it is quite unrealistic to speak of any kind of distinguishable and homogenous “ethnic vote” in Canada, even in the most ethnic ridings. On the other hand, it is possible to identify a set of common political issues that hold significance for visible minorities. These include issues of racial discrimination, multiculturalism, immigration, and the socio-economic status of ethnic minorities. It is reasonable to expect that MPs who represent ridings with high visible minority populations would be more attentive to these concerns.

Research Question, Method, and Data

There are two basic questions guiding this research. First, do visible minorities elected to Parliament substantively represent ethnic minority issues? Second, do non-minorities elected from constituencies that contain large visible minority populations, also substantively represent minority issues, or do they act differently than visible minority MPs? It must be qualified that the impact of visible minority MPs remains quite limited from a numerical point of view. Given the small number of visible minorities in Parliament, it is unlikely that they will significantly influence policy outcomes. However, what is interesting here is whether they try, more than their non-minority colleagues, to bring minority issues and interests to the fore.

In order to document the representational contributions of visible minority MPs, I have chosen to examine parliamentary debates within Canada’s second (and most politically important) chamber, the House of Commons. The Senate, whose members are appointed rather than elected, will not be examined. There are many areas of parliamentary activity besides debates where MPs can express themselves. They may introduce private members’ bills and notices of motion. However, private members’ bills are small in number, and thus provide relatively few instances of MP engagement on issues, compared to their interventions in legislative debates. Another important area of parliamentary activity is voting on legislation. However, as opposed to the United States, it is not possible to determine the orientation of MPs on issues by an analysis of their votes in the House of Commons. This is because strong party discipline prevents members from diverging from their party’s position on most issues. A third area of parliamentary activity is committee work. However some committee meetings take place *in camera*, thus denying research access. Furthermore, committee membership is determined by partisan seat share, thus structuring the nature of debate far more than is the case of parliamentary debates.

Parliamentary debates are an ideal source of data for this research for at least two other reasons. First, although Canadian politics is strongly structured by party discipline, MPs nevertheless enjoy a certain autonomy of speech during parliamentary debates. Private members can choose either to speak or not to speak on certain themes and, in choosing to speak, can bring further nuances to these themes in the form of context or examples, without deviating from the party line.²⁷ Second, parliamentary debates—and especially the “Question Period”—are the most public of an MP’s varied parliamentary activities. Beyond local constituency work, it is here that an MP has the greatest

²⁷ In contrast to private members, who may address any issue within the House, ministers normally speak only on matters related to their current portfolio.

opportunity to show his or her constituents what he or she is doing for them on Parliament Hill.

The first step in the research method was to identify all visible minority MPs. The term “visible minority,” while contested and controversial in some countries, has a very clear and distinctive meaning in Canada. This study applies Statistics Canada’s definition of visible minority status. To determine who are the MPs with visible minority status, I have examined web-site photographs of all current MPs and, where doubts remained, have consulted printed and on-line biographical materials. Finally, I have verified and corrected my own findings against those of two other researchers who have conducted similar analyses.²⁸ By these methods, I have concluded that the current Parliament includes 24 visible minority MPs.

After identifying visible minority MPs, the next step was to identify non-minority MPs elected from ridings that contain large visible minority populations. I established a cut-off of 35 per cent visible minority population. I have thus included in the analysis 23 MPs with constituent visible minority populations at or above that cut-off. Finally, for purposes of comparison, I have drawn an additional 10 MPs who represent ridings with very low visible minority populations. Choosing those ridings with the very lowest visible minority populations would have drawn in mostly ridings from Quebec, and none from British Columbia, and led to a possible contamination of the results due to distinctive regional politics. To avoid this, I selected visible minority ridings by province, ensuring that the same provinces included among the high visible minority constituencies were also included among the low visible minority constituencies. After excluding cabinet ministers, this procedure produced 54 MPs who are included in the analysis. These MPs are identified in Appendix A.

A content analysis was then conducted upon the parliamentary interventions of these MPs. This analysis was carried out on debates within the current, first session of the 39th Parliament. This Parliament has been seated since February 2006, following the election of a minority Conservative government. The session was not yet completed at the time the analysis was undertaken, and so debates beyond April 27, 2007 have not been examined. This session of Parliament is interesting to study from a minority/immigrant-centred viewpoint. Only this, and the preceding 38th Parliament, includes members elected from the newly formed Conservative Party of Canada. The Conservative party merits analysis because, as mentioned above, it has been resistant in principle to group identity politics and has pointedly avoided recruitment strategies that would formally give preferential treatment to under-represented groups. Nevertheless, because the old Reform/Alliance component of the party was concentrated in the west, the Conservatives party needed to make serious inroads into seat-rich Ontario, and this included the province’s urban—and multicultural—areas.²⁹ The Conservatives have thus taken significant informal steps at soliciting electoral support among ethnic communities. The party established “bridge building committees” to recruit supporters via the personal

²⁸ Personal communications with Jerome Black (29 April 2007) and Andrew Matheson (27 April 2007).

²⁹ Goldy Hyder, “Gaining the Political Support of Minorities in Canada,” *Canadian Issues* (Summer 2005), pp 46-48.

contacts of some of their incumbent visible minority MPs.³⁰ The party also targeted issues where significant portions of the visible minority/immigrant community were thought to hold attitudes congruous with Conservative positions. Three issues—tax relief, opposition to gay marriage, and tax credits to support private religious schools—were addressed through publicity campaigns in the ethnic press. Finally, the party nominated a record number of visible minority candidates in both 2004 and 2006.³¹ Black and Hicks argue that the nomination of so many visible minority candidates by the Conservative Party cannot be reduced to mere electoral optics. Those candidates, they show, were not more likely to be placed in non-winnable ridings. Rather, visible minority Conservative candidates faced competitive circumstances that were generally similar to those confronted by other candidates.³² Nevertheless, one key reason that the Conservatives were able to nominate so many visible minority candidates is that the party had few incumbents. Partly for strategic reasons, the 2004 and 2006 elections clearly saw the nomination and election of more visible minorities than ever before. The extent to which these MPs have drawn greater legislative attention to minority issues in Parliament is yet to be determined.

The second reason for selecting this parliamentary session is a technical one. Beginning with the debates of the 39th Parliament, an on-line electronic search engine has been added to the Parliamentary website that allows researchers to view the interventions of each individual MP, according to subjects that were mentioned. This device facilitated a highly efficient and thorough review of interventions for each of the designated MPs.

In conducting the content analysis, interventions were coded for mentions of issues deemed relevant to ethnic minorities and immigrants. These included citizenship and immigration/refugee issues, multiculturalism and cultural diversity, issues of discrimination and violence against ethnic groups, and the socio-economic status of immigrants and ethnic minorities.³³ It was not necessary to code whether a speech was in favour or opposed to ethnic and multicultural interests because there were, in fact, *no* interventions that could be clearly categorized as antagonistic to those interests. Because I wished to examine whether the representative activity of visible minority women is distinctive from that of visible minority men, I also coded any mentions of women's issues for all MPs.

³⁰ Personal communication with Zubair Chowdry, chair of the Ontario Bridge-Building committee (20 March 2005).

³¹ In 2004, the Conservatives nominated 33 visible minority candidates, compared to 29 for the NDP, and 26 for the Liberals. See Jerome H. Black and Bruce M. Hicks, "Visible Minority Candidates in the 2004 Federal Election," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 29:2 (2006).

³² Black and Hicks, "Visible Minority Candidates in the 2004 Federal Election" (2006).

³³ It may be argued that many foreign affairs are of particular interest to visible minorities. For example, Mahar Arar's arrest by U.S. authorities, and deportation to Syria where he was subjected to torture, was certainly a matter of great concern among Muslim Canadians. The same may be said of Canada's military engagement in Afghanistan, or of the Israeli air raids on Lebanon. Yet these issues were frequently mentioned in a context that could not be distinguished as being specifically ethnic-related. For example, in the case of Mahar Arar, an intervention criticizing the R.C.M.P. for careless intelligence gathering and for failing to notify the U.S. once errors had been recognized, is not clearly an ethnic-related mention. Such an issue *would* be coded as ethnic-related, if it criticized the R.C.M.P. for racial profiling in its investigations of terrorism suspects.

Data Analysis

We begin by addressing the main research question: Are visible minority MPs more likely than other MPs to address issues of importance to ethnic minorities? The short answer is yes, there are distinctive patterns of legislative behaviour with respect to ethnic related issues among our three categories of MPs. Among the 1748 speeches made by visible minority private members within the first session of the 39th Parliament, there were 348 mentions of ethnic minority related issues (19.9% or about one in five speeches included such an issue). This is a higher rate of ethnic related mentions than among non-minorities from high visible minority constituencies: the latter had 261 mentions in 2181 speeches (12%). And that is higher in turn than the rate among non-minority MPs from ridings with the smallest visible minority populations: they made just 56 mentions in 868 speeches (6.5%). Thus it appears that visible minority MPs, on average, are most likely to bring parliamentary attention to ethnic related issues, though non-minority MPs from high visible minority constituencies also demonstrate a fairly high degree of engagement with these issues.

TABLE 1

ETHNIC RELATED ISSUES MENTIONED

	<i>Ethnic issue mentions</i>	<i>Number of interventions</i>	<i>Percentage^a</i>
<i>Visible minority MPs</i>	348	1748	19.9
<i>Non-minority MPs</i> • high visible minority ridings	261	2181	12.0
<i>Non-minority MPs</i> • low visible minority ridings	56	868	6.5

a Multiple issues (both ethnic and non-ethnic related) may be mentioned in a single speech. Thus total mentions of all ethnic and non-ethnic mentions, as a percentage of the number of speeches, would exceed 100 per cent.

The next question addressed is whether there are partisan differences in the substantive representation of ethnic minority issues. The results here are presented in two ways. I first examine separately the legislative interventions of each party's visible minority MPs and non-minority MPs from highly ethnic ridings (Table 2). Because of the small number of MPs elected from some parties (the NDP has only one visible minority member, and the BQ has none among the high visible minority ridings), I also produce results that combine both categories of MP (Table 3).

The results are quite surprising. While the normal expectation would be that NDP members would put the most focus on ethnic related issues, it turns out that Conservative and Bloc Québécois members are actually more likely to mention ethnic related issues in

the course of their parliamentary interventions. Specifically, it is *visible minority* Conservatives and Bloc members who put the greatest focus on ethnic related issues, mentioning them almost once in every three speeches. Another interesting finding, though based on very small party sub-samples, is the large difference in the frequency of ethnic mentions between visible minority and non-minority Conservative MPs (32.7% and 6.7% respectively). Taken together, the legislative behaviour of visible minority MPs in the BQ and Conservative parties suggests an interesting pattern. Both parties have been subject to criticism that they are unsympathetic to ethnic minorities. For the Conservatives, this stems from the party's Reform/Alliance roots. For the BQ, it arises out of the difficulty that the Quebec nationalist movement has had in embracing ethnic and linguistic minorities.³⁴ Both parties have been sensitive to these criticisms, and part of their response has been to reach out to ethnic minority communities and to nominate visible minority candidates. Once elected, these MPs appear to bring a distinctive perspective to parliament than that offered by the non-minorities in their parties.

Their substantive interventions on behalf of ethnic minority interests are certainly a sign to visible minority voters that the party can accommodate their needs and issues. Yet the motivations for these visible minority MPs to act for minority interests remain unclear. It may be that, given the lack of attention to ethnic related issues within their caucus, these MPs find it necessary to double their efforts to bring ethnic concerns to the floor. The implication is that visible minority MPs within the BQ and Conservative parties may be using parliamentary debates to subtly and surreptitiously challenge their party on ethnic issues. Alternatively, it may be that these visible minority MPs have been tasked with the "burden" of ethnic representation. That is, though these MPs would not have chosen to act as trustees of ethnic interests, they have nevertheless been designated as such by their party or by their constituents.³⁵ This latter explanation seems more plausible, when we consider Black and Hicks' findings that visible minority Conservative *candidates* demonstrated especially low concern regarding the lack of visible minority representatives in parliament. The implication here is that the Conservative party is marginalizing its visible minority MPs, by tasking them uniquely with ethnic issues that the party itself views as less important. Interviews with these MPs should be carried out to clarify their motivations.

³⁴ Most famously, following the defeat of the Quebec sovereignty referendum in 1995, Parti Québécois Premier Jacques Parizeau blamed the loss on "money and the ethnic vote." More recently, in the context of a spate of incidents concerning ethnic and religious minorities, Mario Dumont, the leader of the provincial party Action Démocratique, has said that Quebec should "quit bending over backwards to accommodate minorities" and "make gestures which reinforce our national identity." Also see Christopher Mason, "Immigrants Reject Quebec's Separatists," *New York Times* (May 20, 2007).

³⁵ Jane Mansbridge has suggested that visible minority representatives (specifically, African Americans in the U.S. Congress) may be seen by minority voters as spokespersons for minority interests, even becoming surrogate representatives for co-ethnic citizens outside of the representative's constituency. See Mansbridge: "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes'," *Journal of Politics* 61 (1999), pp 628-657; and "Rethinking Representation," *American Political Science Review* 97:4 (2003), pp 515-528.

TABLE 2**ETHNIC RELATED ISSUES MENTIONED BY PARTY**

	<i>Ethnic issue mentions</i>	<i>Number of interventions</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Visible minority MPs</i>			
Liberal (n=12)	151	1078	14.0
Conservative (n=5)	69	211	32.7
NDP (n=1)	50	203	24.6
Bloc Québécois (n=4)	78	256	30.5
<i>Non-minority MPs (high ethnic ridings)</i>			
Liberal (n=16)	157	1479	10.6
Conservative (n=2)	3	45	6.7
NDP (n=4)	101	657	15.4
Bloc Québécois (n=0)	-	-	-

TABLE 3**ETHNIC RELATED ISSUES MENTIONED BY PARTY***Visible minority MPs and non-minority MPs from high minority ridings combined*

	<i>Ethnic issue mentions</i>	<i>Number of interventions</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Liberal (n=28)	308	2557	12.0
Conservative (n=7)	68	256	26.6
NDP (n=5)	151	860	17.6
Bloc Québécois (n=4)	78	256	30.5

A further matter to be addressed is the content of ethnic minority issues that are introduced in the course of parliamentary debate. As shown in Table 4, there appear to be no significant differences in the kinds of ethnic related topics addressed by visible minority and non-minority MPs from high visible minority ridings. Among both categories of MP, the most frequently mentioned topics concern citizenship and immigration (approximately 38%), followed by discrimination and violence (approximately 24%). One distinctive trend revealed in this table is the tendency for MPs from low visible minority ridings to speak about Aboriginal issues. This can be explained by the fact that many of these are rural, northern ridings with significant Aboriginal populations. This paper has treated Aboriginals as analytically distinct from visible minorities. Nevertheless, the findings here tend to corroborate our earlier observations concerning non-minority MPs in high visible minority ridings. That is, MPs elected from ridings with significant minority cultural groups will tend to bring the issues of those groups to legislative debate.

TABLE 4**ETHNIC RELATED TOPICS, BY VISIBLE MINORITY STATUS**

	<i>Visible Minority MPs</i>		<i>Non-minority MPs (high ethnic ridings)</i>		<i>Non-minority MPs (low ethnic ridings)</i>	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Aboriginals ^a	14.4	50	18.8	49	78.6	44
Citizenship and immigration ^b	38.2	133	37.5	98	8.9	5
Cultural diversity, ethnic groups and activities ^c	15.2	53	13.8	36	1.8	1
Discrimination and violence ^d	24.4	85	24.5	64	7.1	4
Socio-economic status ^e	7.8	27	6.5	17	3.6	2
Total		348		261		56

- a Because Aboriginal issues are not formally part of multicultural policy, any mentions concerning Aboriginals are categorized separately.
- b Includes refugees, deportation, trafficking in persons.
- c Includes ethnic or religious festivals, recognition of ethnic cultural achievements, mentions of specific ethnic groups.
- d Includes persecution and violence against ethnic or religious groups, labour market discrimination, genocide, reparations for and guarantees against discrimination.
- e Foreign credentials, health conditions, quality and safety of neighbourhoods, poverty among ethnic groups or immigrants.

Finally, I turn to compare the legislative behaviours of male and female visible minority MPs. The first noteworthy finding concerns the number of female visible and non-minority MPs. The number of women among visible minority MPs seated in the current Parliament (10 of 24 or 41.7%) is proportionately far higher than the number of women among non-minority MPs (54 of 284 or 19%). There are at least two explanations for this. First, many of the visible minorities elected to Parliament are the product of deliberately open and inclusive recruitment and nomination practices, and these practices are coincidentally equally likely to produce female as male candidates. Beyond this, where a party seeks a visible minority candidate, there may be an added advantage to selecting a woman. Young visible minority women, in particular, may be viewed as especially attractive among non-minorities. They tend to carry—or are thought to carry—less of the cumbersome cultural baggage of their ethnic community. They are often viewed as more moderate, with better interpersonal skills, and as better able to negotiate between the mainstream and minority cultures.

If visible minority women enjoy special access to politics, is there anything distinctive about their parliamentary activities once they get there? Table 6 suggests that visible minority women *are* distinctive among other MPs. First, they pay more attention to gender issues. Visible minority women mention gender issues more than one in four times that they take the floor. In comparison, non-minority women address women's

issues just once in every six speeches. Even more significant is the wide gender gap in concern for women’s issues between visible minority men and women. Indeed, visible minority men almost never mention these issues in Parliament. Visible minority women also mention ethnic related issues more frequently than any other group: at least one in five times that they speak in Parliament.

The pattern of visible minority women’s interventions in Parliament suggests that they have both a heightened ethnic conscience and, especially, a heightened feminist conscience. This may be a consequence of multiple factors, about which we can merely speculate here. Visible minority women seated in the 39th Parliament were somewhat more likely to be members of the Canada’s most socially liberal or left-wing parties, the BQ and NDP. Their particularly feminist bent may be related to the ideologies they share with their parties. But perhaps the most interesting possibility is that these women are especially familiar with both patterns of patriarchy within their cultural communities, and with the structures of racism and prejudice that affect many immigrants and visible minorities. This familiarity may, in turn, strengthen their feminist conscience and their commitment to multicultural equality.³⁶ Whatever the source of their attitudes, it is clear that visible minority women, despite their modest numbers, make a substantive difference in parliamentary debates. Without their presence, there would be far less attention paid to either women’s or ethnic related issues.

TABLE 6

ETHNIC AND WOMEN’S ISSUES, BY VISIBLE MINORITY STATUS AND GENDER

	<i>Visible Minority MPs</i>		<i>Non-minority MPs (high ethnic ridings)</i>	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Ethnic-related mentions	21.6%	18.1%	12.7%	11.8%
	n=198	n=150	n=52	n=209
Women’s issue mentions	25.3%	7.1%	15.6%	13.2%
	n=232	n=59	n=64	n=233

Conclusion

Overall, the results presented here suggest that visible minority members of the House of Commons do make a difference in politics. Specifically, they address ethnic related issues more than non-minority MPs from highly ethnic ridings. And they are far

³⁶ It is also likely that class plays a role here. Female visible minority MPs are likely (as all MPs) to be drawn from the professional and economically privileged classes. Within their ethnic communities, these women may be more likely to have struggled against gender stereotypes and, in turn, to have developed a strong feminist consciousness. For evidence along these lines, see Jane Mansbridge and Katherine Tate, “Race Trumps Gender: The Thomas Nomination in the Black Community,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* (September 1992), pp 488-492.

more concerned with these issues than MPs from Canada's least diverse ridings. Beyond this general trend, the research also revealed a number of surprising differences among visible minority representatives.

The first finding concerns the very distinctive representative behaviour of visible minority MPs from the BQ and Conservative parties. These MPs are distinctive in two respects. They are more likely than visible minorities from other parties to use their time during legislative debates to address ethnic issues. And, in the case of visible minority MPs in the Conservative Party, they are far more likely than non-minority members of their caucus to address these issues. What remains unclear is why these visible minority MPs are engaged in this distinctive representative behaviour. It may be that visible minority MPs in the Conservative and BQ parties are surreptitiously challenging their party on ethnic issues, giving additional attention to these issues because they feel the party pays too scant attention. Alternatively, it may be that these MPs have been designated by their parties as the ethnic spokespersons, and that this "burden" of ethnic representation is not one that they would have themselves chosen. In either case, this pattern of substantive ethnic representation among visible minority BQ and Conservative MPs is compensatory to the relative lack of attention given these issues by other members of their parties.

The second interesting finding concerns the very distinctive role played by female visible minority MPs, who are especially active in drawing attention to both ethnic issues, and women's issues. There is a very large gender gap in attention to women's issues among visible minority MPs. It was speculated that visible minority women may be more likely to confront patriarchic values within their ethnic communities, and in turn feel it especially important to speak out on women's issues.

Ethnic related topics remain, on the whole, fairly minor issues in the course of parliamentary debate. However, it is clear that the presence of more visible minority MPs in the House of Commons promotes greater attention to these topics. It also appears to be the case that heightened electoral competition in Canada—especially in voter rich urban areas—has been beneficial for visible minorities. The Liberal Party, which has long dominated in these cities, has traditionally been viewed as the preferred party of most immigrants. Yet the Liberals have not done a particularly good job of representing visible minorities from these areas, either descriptively or substantively. The Liberals' incumbent advantage in urban areas has led it to nominate fewer visible minorities than other parties. Consider the 22 ridings in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) with the largest visible minority populations (Appendix A). All but one—Olivia Chow's riding in Trinity Spadina—went to the Liberals in the 2006 elections.³⁷ Yet the Liberals ran visible minority candidates in just six of these ridings, fewer than either the Conservatives (with nine) or NDP (who ran eight). Furthermore, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, these Liberal MPs have been relatively *less* concerned by ethnic related issues, than their parliamentary colleagues from the other main parties. While the Conservative Party has been steadfast in its refusal to formally grant distinctive or preferential treatment on the basis of group identity, it has nevertheless pursued an electoral strategy that involved selecting visible minority candidates. In turn, the election of more visible minority MPs under the Conservative banner has brought more ethnic related issues to parliamentary debate

³⁷ A second of these ridings, Mississauga-Streetsville was won by the Liberals, but the MP for that riding, Wajid Khan, later crossed the floor to the Conservatives.

This is good news for ethnic minorities, who have previously become accustomed to receiving the attention of political parties only on voting day in Canada. While ethnic minorities have been engaged in the political process in Canada for a very long time, they were more often than not viewed as masses available for ready mobilization, but denied meaningful opportunities for involvement or contributions to policy debates. This paper suggests that this trend appears to be changing.

APPENDIX A: MPs INCLUDED IN THE ANALYSIS

MP	Gender	Party	Riding	% Visible minorities in riding
Non-minorities				
Alan Tonks	M	Liberal	York South-Weston (GTA)	47.59
Tom Wappel	M	Liberal	Scarborough Southwest (GTA)	43.45
Bryon Wilfert	M	Liberal	Richmond Hill (GTA)	41.43
John Godfrey	M	Liberal	Don Valley West (GTA)	39.44
Bill Graham	M	Liberal	Toronto Centre (GTA)	41.28
Peter Julian	M	NDP	Burnaby-New Westminster	47.23
John Cummins	M	Conservative	Delta-Richmond East	36.3
Art Hanger	M	Conservative	Calgary Northeast	38.34
Bill Siksay	M	NDP	Burnaby-Douglas	46.06
Albina Guarnieri	F	Liberal	Mississauga East-Cooksville (GTA)	44.12
Colleen Beaumier	F	Liberal	Brampton West (GTA)	36.65
Penny Priddy	F	NDP	Surrey North	42.94
Derek Lee	M	Liberal	Scarborough-Rouge River (GTA)	84.58
John Callum	M	Liberal	Markham-Unionville (GTA)	70.74
Roy Cullen	M	Liberal	Etobicoke North (GTA)	63.19
Judy Sgro	F	Liberal	York West (GTA)	62.81
John McKay	M	Liberal	Scarborough-Guildwood (GTA)	54.2
John Cannis	M	Liberal	Scarborough Centre (GTA)	51.78
Jim Peterson	M	Liberal	Willowdale (GTA)	50.77
Libby Davies	F	NDP	Vancouver East	49.05
Stephane Dion	M	Liberal	Saint-Laurent-Cartierville	38.43
Jim Karygiannis	M	Liberal	Scarborough-Agincourt (GTA)	69.27
Visible minorities				
Keith Martin	M	Liberal	Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca	6.76
Paul Zed	M	Liberal	Saint John	3.38
Omar Alghabra	M	Liberal	Mississauga-Erindale (GTA)	40.92
Wajid Khan	M	Conservative	Mississauga-Streetsville (GTA)	37.34
Gurbax Malhi	M	Liberal	Bramalea-Gore-Malton (GTA)	48.47
Navdeep Bains	M	Liberal	Mississauga-Brampton South (GTA)	51.65
Inky Mark	M	Conservative	Dauphin- Swan River-Marquette	0.73
Maka Kotto	M	BQ	Saint-Lambert	9.26
Rahim Jaffer	M	Conservative	Edmonton-Strathcona	10.48
Maria Mourani	F	BQ	Ahuntsic	22.13
Vivian Barbot	F	BQ	Papineau	33.48
Marlene Jennings	F	Liberal	Notre-Dame-de-Grace-Lachine	18.3
Meili Faille	F	BQ	Vaudreuil-Soulanges	1.74
Olivia Chow	F	NDP	Trinity-Spadina (GTA)	35.35
Yasmin Ratansi	F	Liberal	Don Valley East (GTA)	53.73
Raymond Chan	M	Liberal	Richmond	60.67
Sukh Dhaliwal	M	Liberal	Newton-North Delta	48.34
Ujjal Dosanjh	M	Liberal	Vancouver South	70.99
Hedy Fry	F	Liberal	Vancouver Centre	24.88
Nina Grewal	F	Conservative	Fleetwood-Port Kells	37.02
Ruby Dhalla	F	Liberal	Brampton-Springdale (GTA)	41.38
Deepak Obhrai	M	Conservative	Calgary East	23.85

Non-minorities with low visible minorities in riding

Brian Pallister	M	Conservative	Portage- Lisgar	0.79
Brain Storseth	M	Conservative	Westlock-St. Paul	1.35
Jean-Yves LaForest	M	BQ	Saint-Maurice-Champlain	0.22
Michel Gauthier	M	BQ	Roberval	0.29
Jim Abbott	M	Conservative	Kootenay- Columbia	2.22
Jay Hill	M	Conservative	Prince George- Peace River	2.24
Raymond Bonin	M	Liberal	Nickel Belt	0.9
Charlie Angus	M	NDP	Timmins-James Bay	0.91
Yvon Godin	F	NDP	Acadie- Bathurst	0.32