



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

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to outline the pattern of visible minority representation in the Canadian House of Commons.<sup>1</sup> 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, 39<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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%).<sup>3</sup> Compared to women who, with just 64 seats, are well below half way to proportional representation in the House of Commons (index of



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.<sup>8</sup> Once nominated by a party, there is no evidence that voters discriminate against visible minority candidates.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

The behaviour of parties—including the creation of ethnic outreach committees, ethnically targeted campaigning, and the



*Partisan differences in substantive representation*

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.<sup>18</sup>

***Constituency composition and ethnic political identity***

While research on the women’s political representation in Canada has some

number of minority candidates elected to office, that is, the descriptive representation of racial minorities.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> Brouard and Tiberj have likewise applied the race utility heuristic to explain the high degree of homogenous voting preferences among Arab origin French citizens.<sup>23</sup> 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,

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<sup>19</sup> 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).

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 810.

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

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



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*Electoral Insight* 8:2 (2006), p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Matheson, "Seeking Inclusion: South Asian Political Representation in Suburban Canada," *Electoral Insight* 8:2 (2006), pp 24-29.

<sup>26</sup> 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.



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



## 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 39<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>a</sup></i>
<i>Visible minority MPs</i>	348	1748	19.9
<i>Non-minority MPs</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• high visible minority ridings</li></ul>	261	2181	12.0
<i>Non-minority MPs</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• low visible minority ridings</li></ul>	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,

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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

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

	<i>Ethnic issue mentions</i>	<i>Number of interventions</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b><i>Visible minority MPs</i></b>			
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
<b><i>Non-minority MPs (high ethnic ridings)</i></b>			
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

**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 <sup>a</sup>	14.4	50	18.8	49	78.6	44
Citizenship and immigration <sup>b</sup>	38.2	133	37.5	98	8.9	5
Cultural diversity, ethnic groups and activities <sup>c</sup>	15.2	53	13.8	36	1.8	1
Discrimination and violence <sup>d</sup>	24.4	85	24.5	64	7.1	4
Socio-economic status <sup>e</sup>	7.8	27	6.5	17	3.6	2
Total		348		261		56



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 39<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> Whatever the source of their attitudes, it is clear that visible minority women, despite their modest numbers, make a substantive difference



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
<b>Non-minorities</b>				
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
<b>Visible minorities</b>				
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