

Ethnoracial Minorities in the House of Commons

by Jerome H. Black

The 35th Parliament (1993-1997) was the first to be subjected to a new methodological approach designed to assess the ethnoracial origins of MPs. In a country that is multicultural both in fact and its official commitment, the reliable classification of origins is a key requisite for an effective understanding of the degree to which Canada's mainstream institutions, including its political structures, reflect the diversity of the country's population. The specific methodology developed to accomplish this task is eclectic in nature as it employs biographical information, last name analysis (aided by surname dictionaries), and, importantly, survey responses directly provided by federal legislators themselves. This article applies that same methodology to the present Parliament.

The 35th Parliament was a particularly appropriate choice for initiating this measurement approach because the 1993 election heralded an unprecedented increase, indeed almost a surge, in the election of MPs of minority (i.e., nonBritish, nonFrench) background.¹ Altogether, 71 such individuals or 24.1% of the House's membership had minority origins,² (while a further 27 had mixed majority-minority ancestry). Not only did traditional ethnic groups of European descent attain a record presence but visible minorities nearly tripled their numbers from the previous election, growing from five to 13. However, the figure still represented only 4.4% of the House's membership compared to an estimated population share of 9.4%, suggesting that visible minorities had not even reached the half-way point in numerical representation (i.e. a "proportionality" index of .47). The same methods

applied to the Parliament produced by the 1997 election revealed further progress for ethnoracial minorities, though the augmentation was of a very modest nature.³ Altogether, minorities came to hold 24.9% of the slightly expanded Commons in the 36th Parliament. For their part, 19 visible minorities were elected that year, a figure that translates into 6.3% of the membership, a percentage still far removed from the 1996 census population estimate of 11.2%.

The November 2000 general election provides an opportunity to extend this investigation further. The section that follows presents the results for the 37th Parliament and, for comparative purposes, juxtaposes the two earlier findings. The subsequent section investigates some of the main characteristics displayed by minority MPs in order to make inferences about their heterogeneity with regard to gender, party affiliation, and region of representation and, as well, their educational and occupational achievements. To do so, the MPs are pooled across the three elections, yielding a working data base of 446 legislators elected in one or more of the last three general elections. This assemblage boosts the number of cases for the various minority categories ex-

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amined and thereby provides for more reliable inferences about the patterns observed.

Diversity in the House of Commons, 1993-2000

The low level of turnover of MPs from 1997 to 2000 effectively meant that there were few MPs whose ethnoracial origins had not already been established in the prior two elections. Indeed, 247 of the 301 incumbents were re-elected and of the 54 new MPs, two had been in the 1993 Parliament. This meant that the ancestry of only 52 Parliamentarians, newly victorious in 2000, needed to be ascertained. Since MPs' first-hand responses are judged to provide the best information on origins, the survey method (by fax) was given the strongest emphasis. An intensive follow-up programme to encourage participation, characterized by repeated telephone contacts (at both Ottawa and constituency offices), turned out to be quite successful, producing a response rate of 75% (39 replies). The ancestral backgrounds of the remaining 13 MPs were reckoned on the basis of biographical material and last name analysis. Validity checks for the two earlier studies have previously indicated that these more "indirect" methods are effective in classifying origins, and a similar test indicated that this was also true for the current analysis.

Table 1 presents the information for the 37th Parliament and reproduces the origin distributions for the two earlier ones. The latest figures are sobering for any expectation that each new election would produce a record-level number of minority MPs. To the contrary, with regard to those with exclusively minority backgrounds, fewer were elected in 2000 (71 MPs) than in 1997 (75 MPs) — amounting to a drop of 1.3% in the share of seats held. While this is a small decline, it is a reduction nevertheless and directly challenges any notion as to the inevitability of increased minority representation in Parliament. Perhaps it might be argued that any change would not, in any event, have been great, given the limited number of new MPs elected. Still, it is important to note that minorities were distinctly underrepresented among the incoming group of 52 MPs. Indeed, they comprised only 15.2% of the newly elected, while they made up 25.6% of those who were reelected and, as well, about a quarter of all of those elected in the two earlier Parliaments. Whatever might be the specifics of the situation, it would seem that, compared to the two previous elections, the process of recruitment of candidates for the election of 2000 produced fewer minority candidates or at least fewer in constituencies with winnable seats.

It is also possible that this reversal in the trend line is, in part at least, bound up with the increase in MPs of mixed majority-minority heritage. Note that while 24 such indi-

| Ethnoracial Origin | 1993 | | 1997 | | 2000 | |
|--|-------|------|-------|------|-------|------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Majority ^a | 193 | 65.4 | 194 | 64.5 | 190 | 63.1 |
| Majority-Minority ^b | 27 | 9.2 | 24 | 8.0 | 34 | 11.3 |
| Minority | 71 | 24.1 | 75 | 24.9 | 71 | 23.6 |
| <i>European</i> | 53 | 18.0 | 52 | 17.3 | 49 | 16.3 |
| <i>Jewish</i> ^c | 4 | 1.4 | 4 | 1.3 | 5 | 1.7 |
| <i>Visible Minorities</i> ^d | 13 | 4.4 | 19 | 6.3 | 17 | 5.6 |
| <i>Other</i> ^e | 1 | .3 | — | — | — | — |
| Aboriginal ^f | 4 | 1.4 | 7 | 2.3 | 5 | 1.7 |
| Other ^g | — | — | 1 | .3 | 1 | .3 |
| (N) | (295) | | (301) | | (301) | |

a) Includes single British origins and British-only multiples, all French origins, and British-French multiples.

b) Includes British and/or French and European multiples.

c) For 1997 and 2000, one Jewish visible minority individual is counted once in the visible minority category only.

d) Follows Statistics Canada origins classifications: Chinese, South Asians, Blacks, Arabs and West Asians, Filipinos, Southeast Asians, Latin American (except Chileans and Argentinians), Japanese, Korean, and Pacific Islanders.

e) Chilean.

f) Includes aboriginal and aboriginal-nonaboriginal references.

g) No further classification possible beyond British or German.

viduals were elected in 1997, 34 gained office in the contest three years later (and, indeed, 11 or 21.2% of the newly elected MPs had mixed origins⁴). Still, this does not affect the fact that there was a drop, for the first time in several elections, in the number and percentage of visible minorities elected. Only 17 won in 2000, two less than in 1997. With such numbers, they had come to constitute 5.6% of the House's membership, down from 6.3% three years earlier. Not only did visible minorities lose ground relative to other groups within the House, they also did so vis-à-vis their population share.

A 1995 projection-oriented study produced for Statistics Canada estimated that racial minorities would comprise between 14.0% and 14.2% of the population by 2001⁵. Taking the lower figure for the denominator produces a proportionality index of .40, implying that the current representation gap has actually widened beyond the level seen for 1993.

The Backgrounds of Minority MPs

Investigating the background of minority MPs allows for richer characterizations about the kinds of individuals who win office and some of the circumstances that impinge upon their status as office-holders. One straightforward but important perspective considers how much minorities differ from one another with regard to certain standard indicators, and how they compare with MPs taken as a whole. Table 2 presents information on gender, party affiliation, and region of representation for three categories of minorities as well as for all 446 MPs. Two European descent or ethnic categories are represented, one referencing Northern and Western European origins, the other pertaining to those associated with Eastern and Southern European and Jewish backgrounds. The former grouping brackets the more "established" origin groups that historically have had an easier

time integrating into the Canadian mainstream and indeed the use of the minority label might reasonably be disputed for such individuals. The appellation does clearly apply, however, for the latter category, which collects together those who have faced, certainly in the past, more difficult circumstances being accepted into Canadian society. The third category is comprised of visible minorities who as racial groups have had and continue to have the most distinctive experiences as outgroups.

The continuing situation of women being the most underrepresented group in Parliament is clearly evident in the table; only 19.5% of the 446 MPs elected during the last three general elections were women. Interestingly, the sharpest distinction involves the two European categories, where women were most represented among those with either Eastern or Southern European or Jewish origins (29.4%) and least represented among those with Western or Northern European backgrounds (9.1%). As for visible minorities, women had a presence (19.0%) within that category that was similar to the overall figure. With regard to party affiliation, the fact that 52.9% of the 446 MPs were elected as Liberals naturally reflects the party's majority victories in the last three elections (successes, of course, boosted by the electoral system). The widespread sense of a strong connection between the party and many minority communities is also borne out. Among individuals with a Southern or an Eastern European or Jewish background, eight in ten (80.4%) were elected as Liberals. The level of association of visible minorities with the party is somewhat less but is still a very substantial 71.4%. The contrast is sharpest between the two European groupings. Only 22.7% of those with a Western or Northern European background had ties to the party, a percentage well below that seen for the other ethnic category or MPs as a whole. Rather, individuals within this more established European origin category were substantially affiliated with the Reform/Alliance party: 54.5% of these Europeans were elected as either Reformers or Alliance adherents, whereas only 20.2% of all 446 won under these banners. The well-known affiliation of a small group of visible minority individuals is also indicated; indeed, after the Liberals, visible minorities were most frequently associated with Reform/Alliance (23.8%).

Regional patterns follow to some extent these partisan ones. For instance, the electoral strength of Reform/Alliance in the west ties in with the disproportionate representation of constituencies in British Columbia and the Prairies by MPs of Western and Northern European background. At the same time, the hegemony of the Liberal party in Ontario is reflected in the fact that over half (58.8%) of the MPs in the other European category represented the province's constituencies (compared to 28% of

Table 2
Gender, Party, and Region Distributions for Minority
MPs and for all MPs
1993-2000 (pooled data; column %)

| | Northern & Western European | Eastern & Southern European, Jewish | Visible Minorities | All |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|--|-----------------------|-------|
| Women | 9.1 | 29.4 | 19.0 | 19.5 |
| Party | | | | |
| Lib. | 22.7 | 80.4 | 71.4 | 52.9 |
| Ref./Alliance | 54.5 | 9.8 | 23.8 | 20.2 |
| B.Q. | -- | -- | -- | 15.9 |
| NDP | 18.2 | 7.8 | 4.8 | 5.8 |
| PC | 4.5 | 1.9 | -- | 4.9 |
| Ind. | -- | -- | -- | .2 |
| Region | | | | |
| B.C. | 22.7 | 2.0 | 28.6 | 10.3 |
| Prairies | 45.5 | 23.5 | 19.0 | 19.7 |
| ON | 18.2 | 58.8 | 28.6 | 28.0 |
| QC | 4.5 | 13.7 | 14.3 | 26.5 |
| Atlantic | 9.1 | 2.0 | 9.5 | 14.1 |
| North | -- | -- | -- | 1.3 |
| (N) | (22) | (51) | (21) | (446) |

all MPs). Furthermore, the intersection of party and region also underpins the fact that visible minorities represented British Columbia constituencies as much as they did Ontario ones (28.6%), since both the Liberals and Reform/Alliance had visible minority individuals elected in the former province.

Finally, it can briefly be noted that an examination of the separate distributions for the three individual Parliaments reveals only modest changes beyond those already documented in a study comparing the 35th and 36th Parliaments.⁶ That report found that between 1993 and 1997 more women were elected in all three minority categories and that Eastern and Southern Europeans and those of Jewish background were slightly less likely to be affiliated with the Liberal party. For their part, visible minorities also became somewhat less associated with the Liberal party and with Ontario constituencies. Between the 36th and 37th Parliaments, there were slightly more women elected among the ranks of Northern and Western Europeans, along with a modest increase in Liberal party affiliation and Ontario representation (with a drop in B.C. association). For the other European category, there was little change besides a slight augmentation in the number of women. In the case of visible minorities, there were no alterations of any consequence.

Two additional indicators, education and occupation, are examined in Table 3. Besides being of descriptive interest, their consideration also provides an opportunity to replicate some earlier work on minority office-seekers. That research, based mostly on the 1993 election, found that both minorities, but especially visible minorities, and women had higher levels of education and occupation relative to their majority and male counterparts. This was interpreted as suggesting that biases in the candidate selection process translated into the "requirement" that these individuals, as relative newcomers to elite politics, be better qualified than their mainstream counterparts; in other words, the inference was that minorities (and women) needed to offset, or "compensate" for, the discrimination (especially negative stereotyping) directed against them.⁷

The pooled information for MPs presented here does reveal differences in educational attainment and occupational status consistent with such an interpretation. In the case of education, while the levels of university training are, as expected, extremely high for the group of Parliamentarians as a whole, they are even higher for visible minority MPs. Altogether, 70.1% of the 446 legislators completed at least a first-level university degree, but 90.5% of visible minority MPs had done so. The difference holds at the very highest levels of education as well: 52.4% of visible minority MPs had obtained advanced degrees compared to 43.8% of all MPs. This does indeed

Table 3
Education and Occupation Distributions for
Minority MPs and for all MPs
1993-2000 (pooled data; column %)

| | Northern & Western European | Eastern & Southern European, Jewish | Visible Minorities | All |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|-----------|
| Education | | | | |
| No Univ. | 45.0 | 18.0 | 9.5 | 20.2 |
| Some Univ. | 5.0 | 6.0 | — | 9.7 |
| 1st Degree | 25.0 | 34.0 | 38.1 | 26.3 |
| 2nd Degree | 25.0 | 42.0 | 52.4 | 43.8 |
| Occupation | | | | |
| Professional | 40.9 | 72.5 | 66.7 | 60.4 |
| Managerial | 9.1 | 7.8 | — | 12.0 |
| Other | 50.0 | 19.6 | 33.3 | 27.7 |
| (N) | (20-22) | (50-51) | (21) | (422-442) |

suggest the relevance of the idea of compensation, that racial minorities need to be better qualified. For Eastern and Southern Europeans and individuals of Jewish background, the pattern is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, their level of postgraduate success (42.0%) is similar to that exhibited by MPs as a whole. On the other hand, they are somewhat more likely to have a university degree (76.0%). Again, the biggest distinction involves Western and Northern Europeans, who, relatively speaking, are least likely to have completed university; only 50% had a degree, while 25% had an advanced degree.

Not surprisingly, given their very high levels of education, MPs overwhelmingly reported professional backgrounds (60.4%). A further 12.0% held management positions before becoming Parliamentarians. Here again, support is found for the compensation hypothesis. Among visible minorities, 66.7% had professional backgrounds, while among those with a more distinctive ethnic background the figure is even higher, a striking 72.5%. Correspondingly, only 7.8% of the latter held management positions, while none of the visible minor-

ity MPs did so (itself perhaps suggestive of ongoing barriers in some occupational fields).

Conclusion

Without doubt, the last three Parliaments have come to reflect the country's ethnic and racial multiplicity as never before. Still, ever-increasing diversity is not inevitable, at least judging by the composition of the 37th Parliament where, in contrast to the two earlier Parliaments, there was actually a decline in the proportion of minority MPs. This is one of the main messages associated with the latest application of the multimethod approach to the determination of origins. Of particular importance is the confirmation of an actual decrease in the number of visible minority MPs elected, even as such individuals continue to comprise an ever-larger share of the Canadian population. The replication of methods for the latest election was also helpful in boosting the number of cases to allow for a more effective analysis of the backgrounds of several different minority categories. The finding of further support for the notion of bias and compensation with regard to the more distinctive minority categories might even provide some clues about what appear to be constraints on the rate of growth of ethnoracial diversity in Parliament.

Notes

1. See Jerome H. Black and Aleem S. Lakhani, "Ethnoracial Diversity in the House of Commons: An Analysis of

Numerical Representation in the 35th Parliament," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 29 (1997), 1-21. See also Jerome H. Black, "Minority Women in the 35th Parliament: A New Dimension of Social Diversity," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1997, pp 17-22.

2. This total excludes individuals of aboriginal background, a different type of minority category not examined here.
3. Jerome H. Black, "Ethnoracial Minorities in the Canadian House of Commons: The Case of the 36th Parliament," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 32 (2000), 105-14.
4. Part of this increase in the mixed category for the election of 2000 might be due to the higher survey response rate achieved, which may have resulted in a more complete capture of the underlying multiple origins.
5. Statistics Canada, Interdepartmental Group on Employment Equity Data, *Projections of Visible Minority Population Groups, Canada, Provinces and Regions, 1991-2016*, Ottawa (1995).
6. Black, "Ethnoracial Minorities in the Canadian House of Commons."
7. The situation for minorities as candidates and MPs is variously characterized in a study more aimed at demonstrating the stronger compensation effects for minority women. See Jerome H. Black, "Entering the Political Elite in Canada: The Case of Minority Women as Parliamentary Candidates and MPs," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 37 (2000), 143-66. For the case of women, see Jerome H. Black and Lynda Erickson, "Similarity, Compensation, or Difference? A Comparison of Female and Male Office-Seekers," *Women & Politics* 21 (2000), 1-38.