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# *The 2006 Federal Election and Visible Minority Candidates: More of the Same?*

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by Jerome H. Black

*This article focuses on visible minority candidates who ran in the 2006 federal election. Its immediate purpose is to report on their numbers, both in absolute terms and as well relative to the growing visible minority population at large. A broader objective includes situating the figures through comparisons with earlier elections and especially the 2004 contest, which saw a noticeable increase in the incidence of visible minority candidates. Another larger goal is to gain some understanding of the relationship between the underrepresentation of visible minority candidates and MPs. This is accomplished through a consideration of party distinctions and of the diversity and competitiveness of constituencies contested by visible minority candidates. One of the conclusions is that more visible minority candidates need to be nominated in ridings that are relatively homogeneous in ethnoracial terms.*

In April 2008, Statistics Canada released figures from the 2006 census that measured the country's ethnic and visible minority populations. The numbers provide an important basis for updating judgments about the extent of minority diversity among the political elite through comparisons with the incidence of minorities in the population at large. The data are particularly valuable for gauging the representation of visible minorities, the most distinctive category of minorities. To no one's surprise, given recent Canadian immigration trends, visible minorities significantly increased their numbers in the half-decade since the previous census. In 2001, they numbered a little less than four million and made up 13.4% of the population; five years on, they were more than five million strong and had come to comprise a sizeable 16.2% of the nation's residents. Further, the demographic trajectory for visible minorities is clearly one of continuing growth and an ever-increasing slice of the population pie. In light of such present and future demographic realities, it is all the more important to determine whether changes in the

ethnoracial origins of the political elite reflect what is happening within the general public.

This paper uses the 2006 census data to benchmark candidate figures, specifically, the number of visible minorities who competed as candidates for the five major parties in the 2006 federal election. Candidates are, of course, a natural group to study because they make up the pool from which MPs are elected. This "necessary" condition is particularly significant for traditional "outgroups" since one important way of understanding their limited presence among the ranks of office-holders begins with noting (and ultimately explaining) their underrepresentation among office-seekers. Furthermore, as will be pointed out, the 2006 contest is particularly interesting as a follow-on examination given developments that surrounded the federal election in 2004.

The first section below provides the fundamentals — the number and percentage of candidates of visible minority origins who ran in 2006. It starts out, however, offering wider views by portraying the candidate figures for the elections covering the 1993-2004 interval, and, as well, by providing information on visible minorities elected as MPs. The following section examines how many visible minorities ran in each of the five parties as

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part of their candidate teams. Partisan implications are also pertinent in considering the kinds of ridings that visible minorities contested. The penultimate section, therefore, looks at both constituency diversity and competitiveness. The conclusion provides an opportunity for some reiteration and reflection on the relationship between visible minority candidacies and their underrepresentation in Parliament.

### Visible Minority MPs and Candidates, 1993-2006

In absolute terms, visible minorities have increased their presence in the House of Commons over the course of recent elections, but they have not achieved any corresponding gains when their growing share of the population is taken into account. Section "a" of Table 1 highlights the continuing representational deficit of visible minority MPs by reproducing from earlier studies data for the four general elections over the 1993-2004 period.<sup>1</sup> They serve as a reminder that the general pattern has been one of small increments in the number and percentage of visible minority MPs. By the 2004 election, a record 22 visible minorities had captured 7.1% of the available seats in the 38th Parliament. At the same time, measures of their representation based on population benchmarks — "proportionality ratios" derived from dividing the percentage of visible minority MPs by the percentage of such minorities nation-wide — reveal little

alteration over the eleven-year interval. The ratio stood at .48 in 2004, which was effectively where it was in 1993. With less than two dozen men and women elected in 2004, visible minorities had not quite reached the half-way mark towards full proportionality.

This pattern of qualified progress is also true of the 2006 election. On the one hand, with two more visible minorities winning their way into the 39th Parliament, another record was set — the resulting 24 individuals comprised 7.8% of the House's membership.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, this accomplishment was still too modest to do more than keep pace with rising visible minority population numbers. Based on the 2006 census figure referenced above (16.2%), it would have taken the election of about 50 visible minorities to achieve a level of representation on par with their population incidence. As it was, the proportionality ratio was exactly where it was when the previous parliament was convened.

Section "b" of Table 1 pertains to candidacies, and it suggests that parliamentary underrepresentation does in a real sense "start" at the candidate level, although the candidate-population deficits are different. Here, too, data for the elections between 1993 and 2004 have been reassembled from previously published material.<sup>3</sup> As is quite evident, visible minorities were thinly represented among the ranks of candidates for the first three elections of that period, typically making up less than 5 percent of

**Table 1 Visible Minority MPs and Candidates, 1993-2006**

	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006
Percentage of Visible Minorities in Population	9.4	11.2	13.4	14.9	16.2
<b>a) MPs</b>					
Number	13	19	17	22	24
Percentage	4.4	6.3	5.6	7.1	7.8
Ratio to population	.47	.56	.42	.48	.48
<b>b) Candidates</b>					
Percentage	4.1 <sup>a</sup> 3.5 <sup>b</sup>	4.1 <sup>a</sup>	4.7 <sup>a</sup>	8.3 <sup>c</sup> 9.3 <sup>d</sup>	7.8 9.0 <sup>d</sup>
Ratio to population	.44 .37	.37	.35	.56 .62	.48 .56

Parties examined for the candidate data in 1993, 1997 and 2000 include the BQ, Liberal, Progressive Conservative, NDP and Reform/Canadian Alliance. In 2004 and 2006, the parties include the BQ, Conservative, Liberal, NDP and Green (unless specifically excluded).

a Livianna S. Tossutti and Tom Pierre Najem, "Minorities and Elections in Canada's Fourth Party System," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2002, pp. 85-112.

b Jerome H. Black, "Entering the Political Elite in Canada: The Case of Minority Women as Parliamentary Candidates and MPs," *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2000, pp. 143-66.

c Jerome H. Black and Bruce M. Hicks, "Visible Minorities in the 2004 Federal Election," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2006, pp. 26-31.

d Excluding Green Party.

those who competed on behalf of the principal parties (and the accompanying proportionality ratios were below even those for visible minority MPs). The 2004 election marked somewhat of a break in that pattern. That election witnessed 108 visible minority candidates, that is, 8.3% of all major party contenders, the Greens included; if that party is set to the side, a stance taken in the earlier studies when the party was virtually non-existent, the respective figures are 93 and 9.3%. Either way, the augmentation is large enough to move the proportionality ratio above what it was in connection with visible minority MPs. The most straightforward interpretation of this increase is that the parties purposefully fielded more minority candidates in a bid to attract more votes in the growing immigrant and minority communities. Such votes, concentrated in the critical urban and suburban centres, mattered more in the enhanced competitive environment that surrounded the 2004 contest, above all in the wake of the unification of the Alliance formation with the old Progressive Conservative party. At the same time, the new Conservative party openly committed itself to wooing minority and immigrant voters in a purposeful effort to draw such voters away from the Liberals.

This line of reasoning could be the basis for presuming that a new record number of visible minorities were nominated for the 2006 election because the chase for minority votes became more urgent in an election that was even more competitive than usual. After all, the minority Liberal government, elected in 2004, had subsequently faced an almost daily threat of defeat over the course of its seventeen-month tenure, and headed into the election with the sponsorship scandal still hanging in the air. Although polls showed the Liberals with a modest lead as the campaign got underway, it was clear to most observers that they were vulnerable and that the Conservatives had a real chance to defeat them.

As Table 1 reveals, this inference is not sustained. The parties actually ran fewer visible minority candidates in 2006 than in 2004 — in particular, they nominated six

fewer, that is, 102 instead of 108. With the Greens excluded, the fall-off across the two elections is a bit less, a decline of two. Since the change is not particularly large, however captured, perhaps it is best to emphasize not so much the decrease between the two elections as the lack of (continuing) upward movement.

#### Visible Minority Candidates and Parties, 2004 and 2006

Taken at face value, this suggests that the parties did not exert any additional effort to run more visible minority candidates in the 2006 election. Table 2 addresses the question of whether all of the parties or just some of them failed in this regard. Once again, previously published figures from the 2004 election are displayed to provide a basis for comparison.<sup>4</sup> They are a reminder of the particularly notable fact that it was the new Conservative party that ran the largest number of visible minority candidates in that election — 33 individuals, who made up 10.7% of its candidate team. The Conservatives did not, however, distinguish themselves so in 2006. They ran eight fewer visible minority candidates and these 25 individuals comprised 8.1% of their candidates. Displacing them were the Liberals who were able to reclaim the position as the party that tended to nominate the most visible minorities, though in some cases only by a small margin.<sup>5</sup> They improved upon the 26 who carried the party's banner in the 2004 election by running 34 in 2006. As for the other three parties, the NDP and the Greens nominated fewer and the Bloc nominated more visible minority candidates. It turns out, then, that the overall lack of increase in the number of visible minority candidates from 2004 to 2006 masks some partisan variability. Three of the five parties nominated fewer such individuals. The biggest drop is associated with the Conservative party. On the other side of the ledger, the Liberals ran enough additional visible minority candidates to offset the Conservative decrease.

Table 2 Visible Minority Candidates by Party, 2004 and 2006

		BQ	Cons.	Green	Lib.	NDP
2004	Number	5	33	15	26	29
	Percentage	6.7	10.7	4.9	8.4	9.4
2006	Number	8	25	11	34	24
	Percentage	7.8	8.1	3.6	11.0	7.8

**Table 3 Visible and Non-Visible Minority Candidates by Party Competitiveness, 2006**

	Percent Lost by in 2004			Percent Won by in 2004			(N)
	21+	11-20	0-10	0-10	11-20	21+	
<b>(a) All Candidates</b>							
VM Candidates (%)	60	11	8	11	5	6	(102)
Non-VM Candidates (%)	59	7	10	9	5	11	(1205)
<b>(b) New Candidates Only</b>							
VM Candidates (%)	75	14	8	2	-	2	(64)
Non-VM Candidates (%)	78	8	9	2	1	2	(700)
<b>(c) New Candidates Only</b>							
<b>Bloc Québécois:</b>							
VM Candidates (%)	50	-	50	-	-	-	(4)
Non-VM Candidates (%)	36	14	21	-	7	21	(14)
<b>Conservative:</b>							
VM Candidates (%)	75	19	6	-	-	-	(16)
Non-VM Candidates (%)	63	15	15	3	1	4	(157)
<b>Liberal:</b>							
VM Candidates (%)	60	25	5	5	-	5	(20)
Non-VM Candidates (%)	49	15	25	8	2	2	(132)

Percentages are by row. They may not necessarily add to 100 due to rounding.

### Constituency Diversity and Competitiveness

While the number and percentage of visible minority candidates that a party nominates are straightforward and useful indicators of commitment to candidate diversity, so, too, is the kind of ridings in which they are nominated. The association of visible minority candidates with constituencies that have diverse populations (measured variously by large numbers of visible minorities, immigrants, and/or individuals with non-English, non-French mother tongues) is one that is well-documented.<sup>6</sup> The link might be partially explained by simple “supply” considerations; thus, visible minority individuals might be expected to run for office in ridings in which they reside and, as well, where they would benefit from their minority community and organizationally-relevant connections and resources. But “demand” factors probably also play a role. Thus, some party officials, variously at the local or supra-local level, might search out or encourage visible minority candidates, believing that they attract votes in designated ethnoracially mixed ridings. Some within the upper echelons of the party might also be concerned about sending a more general message to voters about the party’s

inclusiveness, as reflected in the overall diversity of the candidate team.

Regardless of the underlying explanatory factors, the relationship between candidate origin and constituency diversity is exceptionally strong. In the 2004 election, a very substantial 44% of all of visible minority office-seekers ran in ridings where visible minorities had a “heavy” presence — operationalized here as comprising 31% or more of the constituency population. By comparison, only 10% of their non-visible minority counterparts ran in such ridings — a gap of 34 points. The difference is even larger if constituencies where visible minorities comprised 21% to 30% of the population are added to the mix: 59% versus 18%, for a gap of 41 points. For the 2006 election, the data (not shown in a table) indicate that the association was almost as strong.<sup>7</sup> Forty-two percent of visible minority candidate competed where visible minorities comprised 31% or more of the population, which rises to 54% in ridings where they made up 21% or more; this was true of only 10% and 18%, respectively, for their white counterparts (differences of 32 and 36 points, respectively). Moreover, the visible minority candidacy-constituency diversity connection held across all

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parties for the 2006 election, as it had in 2004 (data not shown in table). As in 2004, the Conservatives were most likely to nominate visible minorities in ethnoracially heterogeneous ridings.<sup>8</sup> Sixty percent of their visible minority candidates ran in the most diverse districts in 2006. By comparison, the percentages for the other parties vary from 25% for the Bloc, to 35% and 38% for the Liberals and NDP, respectively, to 46% for the Greens.

Still, by most standards any truly serious commitment to facilitating visible minority access to the political elite would entail ensuring that they have reasonable prospects of getting elected; at the very least, they ought to have the same chance of getting elected as other office-seekers. In the 2004 election, visible minority candidates for the Conservatives and the Liberals were as likely to be nominated in winnable or competitive ridings as their non-visible minority counterparts. Was this equality evident in 2006 as well?

Section "a" of Table 3 lays out the broadest perspective, ignoring for the moment party distinctions by displaying the distributions of visible minority and white candidates across six different competitive circumstances. How the parties fared in the constituencies in 2004 is taken as an index of their relative competitiveness going into the 2006 election. As can be seen, the pattern is more or less one of continuing balance in the placement of visible minority candidates. Twenty-two percent contested ridings where their party had won in 2004 (by one of the three margins shown), a figure that is only slightly below that of their non-visible minority counterparts (25%). After adding in those ridings where the candidates' parties had lost the election by a margin of 10% or less, the relevant figures are 30% and 35% — a gap but not a major one.

Section "b" drills further down into the data by examining the competitive circumstances for new contestants only — that is, men and women who had not competed in 2004. Putting repeat contestants to the side controls for recruitment effects that were bound up with the 2004 election and that would have naturally spilled over into the 2006 election (since candidates who ran in 2004, especially sitting MPs, were likely to be renominated). Such a stance tightens the focus on recruitment that was specific to the 2006 election and provides a better sense of the direction that the parties took in that contest. It turns out that there were 764 candidates for the five parties who had not competed in 2004, and heading into 2006 they overwhelmingly faced less-than-ideal competitive circumstances. Only 34 individuals (or 4.5%) contested constituencies where their party had won in 2004, and a further 71 (or 9.3%) contested ridings where their party had lost by 10% or less. Such widespread poor electoral

placement goes some way to explain why the increase in the number of visible minority MPs was quite minimal in 2006.

It does not, however, speak directly to the question of whether there was any unfairness with regard to the positioning of visible minority candidates. The entries in the table indicate no apparent imbalance between the competitive status of constituencies contested by visible minority candidates and those where white contestants made their challenge. Among the former, 4% ran in ridings won by their party, while among the latter, 5% did so; for potentially winnable ridings (where their party finished 10% or less behind the winner), the percentages are virtually the same (8% and 9%, respectively).

It is only when party affiliation is taken into account that differences between visible minority and white candidates emerge. Section "c" displays the relevant distributions for candidacies within the Bloc, Conservative and Liberal parties. (The Greens had no constituencies where their candidates finished within 21 percentage points of the winner and the NDP had only a handful of open constituencies where the party was even remotely viable.) As can be seen, balance in the placement of visible minority candidates is not indicated for either the Conservative party or the Bloc. Especially striking is how the Conservatives, the party that ran the most visible minority candidates in 2004, had zero new visible minority candidates competing in the 2006 election in ridings that they had previously held, yet they had nominated 8% of their white counterparts in such desirable ridings. Taking note of those potentially winnable districts that had been previously lost by 10% or less also indicates an unfavourable gap for visible minority candidates: 6% ran in such ridings, while 15% of non-visible minorities did so. Altogether the difference is 23% versus 6%. As for the Bloc, while it did marginally increase visible minorities among its candidate team in 2006, none of the four new candidates were positioned in ridings previously won by the party. At the same time, 28% of their new non-visible minority candidates were so placed. Somewhat mitigating this imbalance is the fact that two visible minority candidates were placed in ridings where the party was within 10% of the winner in 2004. In contrast, the Liberal party nominated near equal numbers of visible and non-visible minority candidates in ridings previously won by the party (10% and 12%, respectively). The Liberals did, however, privilege white candidates over visible minority candidates in areas where the party lost but finished within shooting distance of the winner (25% vs. 5%, respectively).

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## Reflections

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According to the 2006 census, a little more than one in six Canadians have origins associated with visible minority categories. At the same time, only about one of every 13 MPs who were elected that same year have such backgrounds. This disparity in representation finds a degree of explanation in the equally limited presence of visible minorities among the candidate pool, also in the order of about one in 13. An examination of the 2006 election also indicates that there is no inevitability that ever-more visible minorities will be nominated by the main parties. The election of 2004 saw a noticeable jump in their numbers, an increase that seemed explicable by their growing strength in the general population and heightened partisan rivalry for their votes. However, no such increment took place over the 2004-2006 interval, even though there was arguably a greater degree of party competition. At best, it can be said that the parties nominated roughly the same number of visible minority candidates. With such little change, it is not surprising that only a couple more visible minority MPs were elected in 2006 compared to 2004. Also very much relevant is the fact that new candidates — both visible and non-visible minority candidates alike — were likely to be nominated in ridings with poor electoral prospects.

Looking at party distinctions with regard to candidates is also helpful in explaining why there was only a modest improvement in visible minority MP representation. Among the five main parties, only the Bloc and the Liberals nominated more visible minority candidates in 2006 than in 2004. The Liberals, in particular, stand out. Not only did they nominate the most visible minorities, but these candidates confronted winnable contests on par with those faced by their white counterparts. This was not the case with the other parties.

Most telling of all, the Conservatives not only ran fewer visible minority candidates this time around, but they also placed nearly all of them in far-from-winnable districts. This was consequential because as the winning party (even in the context of a minority government victory) they afforded the best opportunity for more visible minorities to enter Parliament. Correspondingly, the Liberal party's second-place finish tempered the impact of that party's more favourable approach to visible minority candidacies.

Finally, the fairly strong tendency among the parties to nominate visible minorities in diverse ridings might also play a role in hampering the election of more visible minority MPs. Of course, in many cases visible minorities gain distinctive advantages (both in the nomination process and in the general election) when they compete in

such ridings. The other side of the coin, however, is that such placement appears to diminish significantly the number of competitive ridings in which they might otherwise be nominated.

Indeed, the figures are quite dramatic. Going into the 2006 election, there were 133 constituencies where Conservative candidates were "competitive" (defined as ridings that the party had either won or lost by 10% or less in 2004). Yet, relatively few of these districts are ethnoracially diverse; for instance, only 15 had visible minority populations of 21% or more. As for the subset of 35 (competitive) ridings that were contested only by new Conservative candidates, only seven had populations characterized by this level of diversity. Given that the best chances for Conservative candidates were in relatively homogeneous districts, the party's exceptionally strong tendency to run visible minorities in diverse ridings acted as a notable constraint. Of course, it is the Liberal party's long-standing domination of many of the country's urban centres that helps explain why the Conservative party lags behind in such areas. At the same time, and perhaps somewhat ironically, because of that Liberal ascendancy, there are relatively few openings in that party for *additional* visible minority candidates to compete in ridings that are both diverse and winnable. Among the 51 competitive constituencies contested by Liberal candidates who were new in 2006, only six ridings had populations where visible minorities formed 21% or more of the population. So for the Liberals as well, the greatest opportunity for adding more visible minority MPs lay with their nomination in less diverse constituencies.

That being said, the appropriate inference to draw about these patterns is not that there is anything wrong with nominating visible minorities in heterogeneous ridings. As emphasized earlier, in many cases visible minority candidates and their parties benefit from such placement. Moreover, there are major strands of representation theory that posit that social groups can only be effectively or "authentically" represented by group-based legislators (since it is argued only they can truly and uniquely understand and empathize with the needs and aspirations of the group). Put simply, visible minority MPs provide a "closer fit" with their communities within the constituency. The relevant point, however, is that the candidate diversity-constituency diversity pattern should not be the only or even dominant model of representation.<sup>9</sup>

Having visible minorities running and winning in areas comprised predominantly of individuals of majority background would constitute another layer of representation in the Canadian political system.<sup>10</sup> If so inclined,

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such MPs could respond to minority concerns that are more general in nature and extend beyond constituency-specific matters, but at the same time they could defend the particular interests of their geographical constituency — just as currently sitting visible minority MPs do not ignore the concerns of majority individuals in their ethnoracially diverse ridings. Moreover, to the extent that visible minority MPs are also substantially associated with homogeneous constituencies, this would signal that minorities have achieved a higher level of integration into the Canadian political process, a situation to which a multicultural country could point with considerable pride.

### Notes

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1. Jerome H. Black and Bruce M. Hicks, "Visible Minority Candidates in the 2004 Federal Election," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2006, pp. 26-31.
2. Various methods were used to determine those candidates (and MPs) who are visible minorities. A little over one-third of the candidates in 2006 had also contested the 2004 election and thus their origins had already been categorized as part of research into that election; see Black and Hicks, "Visible Minorities in the 2004 Federal Election," for a reference about the specific methods employed. The backgrounds of those newly competing in 2006 were established by three approaches: last name analysis, searches of biographical records and, importantly, an examination of available photos. Candidate, party and election web sites provided the bulk of material for the latter two methods.
3. See Black and Hicks, *op. cit.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Livianna S. Tossutti and Tom Pierre Najem, "Minorities and Elections in Canada's Fourth Party System: Macro and Micro Constraints and Opportunities," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* Vol 34, No. 1, 2002, pp. 85-112.
6. In addition to Black and Hicks, "Visible Minority Candidates in the 2004 Federal Election," see also Tossutti and Najem, "Minorities and Elections in Canada's Fourth Party System."
7. Using immigration or "other" mother tongue speakers as measures of diversity produces results similar to those shown here.
8. See Black and Hicks, *op. cit.*
9. Currently, 15 of the 24 visible minority MPs (63%) represent constituencies where visible minorities make up 21% or more of the population.
10. Helpfully, voter prejudice does not seem to be a factor. The evidence, at least based on the 1993 election, is that mainstream Canadian voters do not discriminate against visible minority candidates. See Jerome H. Black and Lynda Erickson, "The Ethnoracial Origins of Candidates and Electoral Performance: Evidence from Canada," *Party Politics* Vol. 12, No. 4, July 2006, pp. 541-61.