

Minority Women in the 35th Parliament

by Jerome H. Black

The election of 53 women in the 1993 general election provided further opportunities for reflection on the significance of gender in elite-level politics. One important perspective, given added significance by the record level of women elected, carries on the tradition of assessing the impact of women in the House, particularly their possible influence in relation to policy matters that are of central concern to many women in Canadian society. Representation is another area for reflection and particularly the fact that women still remain considerably under-represented relative to their population incidence. This article explores an additional, and as yet largely unresearched, dimension associated with elected women, their ethnoracial diversity. Using systematic methods of categorization, it documents the number of minority women in the 35th Parliament. Their election in 1993 in significant and unprecedented numbers is an important justification for such a focus, as is the fact that without explicit attention to their double minority status, as both women and ethnoracial minorities, an understanding of their experiences as candidates and MPs is likely to be incomplete.

A variety of interesting queries suggest themselves as relevant points of departure in looking at minority women. For example, are the hurdles on route to Parliament higher or different for minority women than they are for women and minorities taken separately? Similarly, once inside Parliament, are they confronted with a particular set of constraints linked to their background? Does their approach to parliamentary politics reflect their special background? Is preference given, if at all, to preoccupations reflecting their distinctiveness as women, as minorities, or both?

Adding meaningfulness to the value of answering these and other questions about the implications of

double minority status is the fact that a notable number of women with minority group origins were indeed elected in 1993. Even the most casual inspection provides some sense that something new occurred that year. The unprecedented election of not one but two women of colour, Jean Augustine and Hedy Fry, immediately comes to mind. Other newly elected women as well, particularly Eleni Bakopanos, Maria Minna and Anna Terrana, can be fairly easily identified as having roots in their (Greek and Italian) ethnic communities. Nevertheless, the attention paid to the election of minority women MPs has been largely informal and anecdotal, so that the true dimensions of their presence remain to be documented. Certainly, there has yet to be any rigorous gauging of how the 35th Parliament compares with earlier ones in terms of social diversity.

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The Problem of Categorization

Because ethnoracial origin is a multidimensional phenomenon, and not always easily measured, determining the ancestral backgrounds of parliamentarians is not a simple matter. The impediments have been carefully set out in a recent paper which classified all 295 MPs elected in 1993 along origin lines,¹ but which did not address gender distinctions. A brief summary of the methodological issues dealt with in that essay can serve as an instructive prelude to the categorization results broken down by both origin and gender.

The classification effort in the existing paper on the 35th Parliament was purposefully narrow to emphasize the dimension of objective condition, rather than subjective sentiment. That is, the analysis was directed at determining categorical membership in ethnoracial groups and not at evaluating the nature and extent of felt or expressed attachment to the heritage group. In focusing on minority status as a background characteristic, it was understood that no assumption could be made about particular subjectively based patterns of identity. This would mean in the present context, for instance, that not all women classified as having a minority background necessarily regard their heritage as a significant factor in their personal careers; fewer yet would regard it as salient for their public lives. It was also understood that highlighting the objective dimension did not imply that the study of the subjective side of ethnicity and race is unimportant. Quite the contrary, differences in the kind and degree of expressed ethnoracial identity would, in fact, constitute critical factors for many analytical purposes, such as consideration of the antecedents in support of policies of concern to multicultural communities.

A categorization approach is no less valuable, however. In fact, it is a necessary starting point for incorporation of the subjective dimension, since expressed attachment can only be gauged relative to the category of potential attachment. Moreover, by itself, an objective approach is necessary for allowing judgements about the important issue of the incidence of minority individuals in elite positions relative to their general population numbers, typically framed in terms of the goal of proportionality. The motivating concerns are not only about the statistics and symbolism of representation but as well about the lack of the group's presence in the legislature. Related questions about the legitimacy of the institutions themselves and the distribution of opportunities for access into positions of power also motivate attention.

In other ways, the classification effort was expansionist in design, by allowing for the possibility of categorizing individuals according to more than one ancestral stream. Such a procedure harmonizes with the cumulating census record which has shown increasing numbers of Canadians taking advantage of opportunities to report origins that are multiple in character.

This work also stands out in contrast to the, albeit few, existing studies that have generated single-origin classification results for earlier cohorts of MPs.² The methodology employed for the 35th Parliament further distinguished itself by adopting a multiple measurement strategy in order to maximize reliability in the categorization effort.

The predicament is that while there is much to commend the use of two traditional methods of measurement, biographical research and last name analysis, each is limited by particular problems.

Biographical material could be relied upon, and even exclusively, if MPs clearly signalled, in the printed record, what their ancestral origins are. Unfortunately, explicit indications of ethnicity and race are only given infrequently. Consequential reliance on other biographical details such as country of birth can be helpful but, as indirect "markers," they can be misleading and must be used judiciously. One study, for example, wrongly classified Simon de Jong, of Dutch background, as a visible minority apparently because his birthplace was Indonesia.

For their part, etymological approaches which examine the last names of MPs are justified by the often discernible and close association between the nature of surnames and particular ethnocultural and/or areal origins. At the same time, there are both inherent difficulties and procedural practices that constrain the methodology as well. Obviously, when individuals change their family name or, as has happened more in the past, have had their names altered by dominant individuals and groups, surnames no longer serve as indices of ancestry. This decoupling works to underestimate the incidence of minority origins since the change is typically in the direction of the dominant group, with anglicization being especially prevalent. A similar directional bias stems from the practice, which is typical fare, of ignoring the maternal line of ancestry. This can lead to the misclassification of minority women who married across the minority-majority divide and

Table 1
Estimates of the Ethnoracial Origins of MPs in the 35th Parliament, and by Gender

		All MPs	Women MPs	
Ethnoracial Origins*	Percent	Number (A)	Number (B)	B/A
Majority (British and/or French)	65.4	193	33	.17
Majority-Minority	9.2	27	8	.30
Minority	24.1	71	11	.16
Aboriginal	1.4	4	1	.25
	100	295	53	

*Condensed results from Black and Lakhani, "Ethnoracial Diversity in the House of Commons."

assumed their husband's name. Similarly, there is the risk that the partial minority status of MPs, both male and female, who have mothers from minority communities will not be recorded. Other practices, however, may operate to exaggerate the number of minority individuals, including the tendency to rely heavily on British surname dictionaries. This likely occurs because minority origins are assumed if the surname cannot be located in dictionaries referencing British origins.

These concerns were handled through the adoption of a multiple measurement strategy, which entailed not only the employment of both biographical and surname analyses (to offset each other's weaknesses) but the use of survey methodology as an additional and distinctive approach. Each MP was sent a single-item questionnaire which replicated the 1991 census question on ethnic ancestry. Though based on self-report, the question clearly elicited origins as an objective condition and constituted the primary basis for categorization for those 49% who responded. The remaining cases were categorized relying on both multiple biographical information (country of birth, religion, community involvement) supplemented by a visual assessment to help in the determination of visible minority status, and as well a surname analysis carried out on the last names of the MPs and their mothers and fathers (and based on an unusually large number of surname dictionaries covering noncharter as well as charter groups).

In sum, the methodological approach adopted in the classification of ethnoracial origins reflected an eclecticism typically not evident in exercises of this nature. As a result, classification errors have been

greatly minimized; certainly, it is highly unlikely that the broader patterns identified are distorted images of reality. Nevertheless, since it is unrealistic to claim that no errors have been made, some modesty is called for, one indicator of which is frequent reference to the results as estimates.

Ethnoracial Origin and Gender in the 35th Parliament

Table 1 presents the distribution of origin classifications in the current Parliament resulting from the application of this methodology. Briefly, the overall pattern shows that 193 of the MPs elected in 1993 were estimated to have British and/or French origins, while 4 were classified as having aboriginal origins, in full (3) or in part (1). Seventy-one MPs were estimated as having minority origins, about 24% of all Members. Included in this category are 53 individuals with European background, 4 who have Jewish roots, 1 Chilean, and 13 with origins officially regarded (by Statistics Canada) as most likely associated with visible minority status. A further 27 MPs, about 9%, were deemed to have multiple origins which spanned the majority-minority categories (overwhelmingly consisting of British and other, nonFrench, European combinations). If the mixed category is factored into the overall tally, then the number of parliamentarians estimated as having at least "some" minority background reaches 98.

Of more immediacy here, the data corroborate the sense, informally gained, that women with minority backgrounds entered Parliament in 1993 in notable numbers. Altogether, eleven women were categorized as likely having origins exclusively associated with minority communities, that is, nine in addition to

Augustine and Fry (as members of visible minorities). Five of the nine women have origins concentrated in Southern European countries with the remaining four having collectively more diverse backgrounds (Croatian/Norwegian; Hungarian; Jewish; Polish). These women make up about 16% of the minority group as a whole and, except for one, are all Liberals.

A further eight women were estimated to have multiple origins rooted in both majority and minority communities. The fact that they comprise a relatively larger proportion of their particular category (about 30%) may hold some significance worthy of further reflection, but for present purposes it suffices to note that their inclusion bumps to 19 the total number of women with at least some minority aspect in their background. It is British ancestry that is the prevalent majority group component for these women. For five of them, it appears to be twinned with Croatian, Dutch, Ukrainian, German, or Polynesian ancestry. For two other women, British heritage is combined with two minority lines of ancestry, Icelandic/Norwegian and German/Finnish. Finally, for one of them, majority links are to both French and British communities and are combined with German and Italian origins. Here, too, most are Liberals.

It might be appropriate to acknowledge here that the ordinary expectation is for women in this combined majority-minority category to identify less strongly with the minority dimension of their background than women who have a minority-only heritage. Intuitively, a partial majority heritage may work to diminish self-assessment as a minority. That said, it can also be noted that some self-assessment does occur. During the course of interviews with some of these women, it became quite clear that they indeed attributed some relevance to that

part of their background outside of the majority context. Inclusion of such women in the counting exercise is not entirely inappropriate.

Comparisons with Earlier Parliaments

It might be tempting to dismiss or underestimate the significance of the total numbers of minority women and what they mean for indicating added social diversity in the composition of the House. After all, the 19 minority women constitute only about 6% of all MPs. Moreover, the fact they make up about 19% of the entire (broader) minority category (i.e., 19 of 98) –virtually the same percentage of seats held by women as a whole – might be taken as evidence of a rather ordinary state of affairs. Moreover, some of the women in the 35th Parliament who were identified as having minority backgrounds were, of course, incumbents who were first elected in 1988 or even earlier.

Such reservations, are diminished when the makeup of previous Parliaments is brought into consideration. This is evident on the basis of an entirely new classification analysis which was undertaken for women elected to previous Parliaments and which provides the basis for longitudinal tracking.³ See Table 2.

Before the 1980s, the presence of women in the federal legislature registered as little more than a minor blip. Even as their numbers increased noticeably over that decade, their share of the seats lagged far behind the proportion held by men. By 1988, the 39 women in the 34th Parliament still only made up about 13% of the House. With such a low threshold, it did not take much for a new record to be established in 1993.

The argument that the 1993 election was exceptional in producing an unprecedented number of minority

Table 2
Majority and Minority Women in Parliament, 1965-93

	1965	1968	1972	1974	1979	1980	1984	1988	1993
# Women MPs	4	1	5	9	10	14	27	39	53
% Women MPs	1.5	0.4	1.8	3.4	3.6	5.0	9.6	13.2	18.0
Among Women MPs									
% Minority	0	0	0	11.1	10.0	7.1	3.7	5.1	20.8
% Min. and Maj.-Min	0	0	20.0	22.2	20.0	14.2	3.7	7.7	35.9

women MPs is strongly corroborated by the data. Before that election, very few such women had been elected as parliamentarians. Over the entire 1965-88 period, there were apparently eleven instances in which minority women, including those with a mixed background, won seats—which is about 10% of all those held by women. Even these figures slightly overstate the case since two of the women had repeat victories. The first woman with roots exclusively outside of the two charter groups appeared to first enter the federal legislature only in 1974.

In doing so, Simma Holt (of Jewish background) became a colleague of Monique Bégin, who herself was first elected two years earlier, apparently the first woman with a “hybrid” (French and Flemish) background. Over the next four elections little changed. By 1988, it was possible to count only two women MPs with minority origins and as many as three by including the mixed category. This translates into about 5% or 8%, respectively, of the 39 women elected to the 34th Parliament. Five years later, the corresponding percentages were noticeably higher; about 21% for the minority-only category, 36% for the two categories combined.

Differences across the last two elections can be even more dramatically portrayed by comparing percentage changes for the separate categories of women and minorities. For women as a whole, their expansion from 39 to 53 MPs is tantamount to an increase of about 26%. For minorities as a whole, the percentages appear to be much larger, perhaps as high as 46% if the mixed category is excluded, perhaps as high as 102% if it is included.⁴ However, dwarfing these percentages by far is a figure of 550% representing the increase from 2 to 11 minority-only women MPs, or 633% reflecting the change more inclusively considered (from 3 to 19).

Conclusion

While it remains to be seen whether or not subsequent elections will confirm this pattern, it is clear that at this point the presence of minority women in the 35th Parliament constitutes a distinctive feature in the evolution of the legislature’s composition. Understanding both this development and its implications ought to loom large as a study goal. Research on the former dimension will need to acknowledge that three of the minority women were among the nine or so women that Mr. Chrétien, using newly acquired powers of direct appointment, designated as the party’s standard bearers, thus sparing them the necessity of fighting a nomination battle. Still, these designations cannot account for all of the growth in the number of minority women elected in 1993.

Also limiting the explanatory reach of the phenomenon of candidate appointments is the fact that most of the designated women were actually from majority communities (and who, except for Georgette Sheridan in Saskatchewan, were defeated in the election). Further, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Jean Augustine and Maria Minna, designated in Toronto constituencies, were swept into the House in part because of the exceptional Liberal wave and the split in opposition voting. At the time of their appointments, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that they would win. Only Eleni Bakopanos (in Quebec’s Saint-Denis riding) had been selected for a riding that the Liberals had actually won in the previous election.

Since the appointment of women was, in some measure, justified by the acknowledgement that women continue to have a more difficult time winning nomination contests, these designations actually draw more attention to the broader questions of recruitment and access, including the specifics of the nomination process itself. Indeed, one might ask what these designations actually imply about the particular impediments that minority women face. Relatedly, what about those who contested (and won) their nominations? Did they have to overcome greater obstacles? That there is something of value to explore with these, and similar, questions is suggested by a preliminary consideration of responses gathered through interviews with MPs. Some minority women did, in fact, make explicit reference to the double burden they felt they carried and to the discrimination, often subtle, occasionally overt, they faced along both fronts. At times, the constraints imposed by a male world of politics and by an English-French one were viewed as operating in independent and perhaps additive fashion.

However, complaints were also voiced about the men within their very own communities who, it was believed, were reluctant to share power and therefore in their actions constituted additional and distinctive barriers. At the same time, this sentiment did not prevent these women from sympathizing with the problems that their male counterparts faced as minorities. They were especially quick to point out the hypocrisy of those majority politicians who accused minority individuals of mobilizing their ethnic communities to win nominations, when in the past the same mobilization had been undertaken on behalf of the majority politicians.

Such mobilization efforts by themselves do not differentiate between the political approaches adopted by minority men and women; many on both sides of the gender divide regard their community ties as a resource base which, quite naturally, should be brought to bear in the political arena. What may differentiate between the

two groups, however, is the greater importance for minority women of organizational work and office-holding at the community level. Though more work is needed on this notion, there is at least a first-blush sense from the evidence that their access experiences were distinctive in the way they relied more on active community involvement and formal positions as stepping stones towards parliamentary office.

A variety of distinctive experiences and reactions within the parliamentary setting itself was also evident from the interview information. One minority female MP, for example, expressed how difficult it was to know if the slights she has experienced, such as witnessing credit being given to someone for the same idea she had initially expressed, were because of gender or origin. Concerns were also raised by many MPs, including males, that minority women were merely being used in a perfunctory way, as individuals who could provide double token value. On the other hand, a few minority women themselves complained that men, including their co-ethnics, discounted their promotions (as parliamentary secretaries, committee chairs, etc.), claiming they were the product not of hard work but of gender considerations.

Notes

1. 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* (forthcoming).
2. A few, fairly early studies are cited in Black and Lakhani ("Ethnoracial Diversity"), as are two, more recent ones which merit specific mention here. One is R. Ogmundson and J.

McLaughlin, "Trends in the Ethnic Origins of Canadian Elites: the Decline of the BRITS?" *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 29 (1992), 227-41, which classified MPs in the years 1965, 1975, and 1985, but without any detailed specification beyond a broad single-origin "other" (nonBritish, nonFrench) category. More specific classifications of ethnicity and race were provided by Alain Pelletier, covering the entire period from 1965 to 1988. "Politics and Ethnicity: Representation of Ethnic and Visible-Minority Groups in the House of Commons," in Kathy Megyery ed. *Ethno-Cultural Groups and Visible Minorities in Canadian Politics: The Question of Access*. Volume 13, Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (Toronto: Dundurn Press), 1991. Some limitations in Pelletier's analysis are noted in Black and Lakhani ("Ethnoracial Diversity").

3. Of course, it was impractical and, in many cases, impossible to survey past parliamentarians, so the categorization was based on biographical and surname approaches alone. This variation in method, it should be noted, does not appear to compromise judgements about trends. First, the same elaborate versions of the two traditional approaches used for the 35th Parliament were also employed for the earlier Parliaments. Second, there were extra efforts made to gather biographical information from a wider range of sources, including magazine articles and the like. Thanks are owed to Chris Anderson for assistance with this phase of the data collection.
4. The comparison is based on Pelletier's estimate of 48 minority MPs for 1988 ("Politics and Ethnicity"). See Black and Lakhani ("Ethnoracial Diversity") for an argument that Pelletier has probably underestimated the incidence of minority MPs.