



Canadian Study
of Parliament Group

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Racial Minorities and the Representational Deficit

BARRIERS IN THE FEDERAL
CANADIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM

June 2015

The Canadian Study of Parliament Group (CSPG), as part of its efforts to foster knowledge and understanding of Canadian parliamentary institutions, is sponsoring the annual National Essay Competition. College and university undergraduate and graduate students in any discipline across Canada are invited to submit essays on any subject matter broadly related to Parliament, legislatures or legislators. The winning essays are made available free of charge, in both official languages, on the CSPG Web site. The views and opinions contained in these papers are those of the authors and are not necessarily reflective of those of the CSPG.

Introduction

W.E.B Du Bois stated in 1903 that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (1961, p1). We are now in the twenty first century, and several degrees north of where Du Bois once stood, but the legacy of the colour line remains, asserting itself in the structures of Canadian governance and society. Awareness of this structural racism came to the forefront in the *Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*, chaired by Pierre Lortie. While the Lortie Commission, as it was known, focused explicitly on potential reforms to the federal Canadian electoral system, it also brought out the effects that these potential new electoral systems, and that our current system, have and could have on the representation of marginalized groups, women and racial minorities in particular. Twenty years after the commission, both women and racial minorities continue to be under-represented in the House of Commons, though the ratio of their representation relative to their stake in the larger population has increased. The continued ‘representation deficit’, as the Lortie commission termed it (Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991, p96), indicates that there are structural barriers that will need to be removed before Canada is able to achieve appropriate representation for all of its constituent groups. This paper will examine examples of these barriers, in both academia and particularly in federal electoral institutions, as well as the effect that they have on the representation of racialized groups within Canada. This paper will further examine potential solutions to these barriers, as well as the impact they would have on Canadian democracy as a whole. The representational deficit of racial minorities at the federal level is an ongoing concern for a democratic system that is founded on the ideal of providing all citizens with an equal access to participation and representation (Mendelsohn, 2010, p1), but is one that can be resolved through affirmative changes to our democratic institutions.

It must first be acknowledged that ‘race’ is hardly a definitive categorization, and that even when used as a category, the classification and assignment of race serves to perpetuate the power relations that negatively impact racialized groups in the first place (Thompson, 2008, p528). The majority of sources referenced in this essay use the term ‘visible minority’ as defined in the Employment Equity Act, referring to any non-Aboriginal person who is neither categorized as racially Caucasian nor white in colour (Canada, *Employment Equity Act*). Stasiulis, however, claims that the avoidance of the term race is an attempt to avoid racialized issues, including racism (1991 cited in Thompson, 2008, p543). By contrast, race scholars prefer terms like ‘racialized’, in order to better emphasize the all-encompassing process and construction that is race (Essed, 1991 in Thompson, 2008, p543). This paper follows Thompson’s decision to use ‘racial minorities’ to define non-white people in Canada, acknowledging as she does that not all racialized groups experience race and racial discrimination in the same way (Thompson, 2008, p543). The term racial minorities is used in place of visible minorities except in direct quotations. Aboriginal peoples are not included in this examination of political representation in Canada because of their unique relationship with the Canadian state. Aboriginal peoples in Canada certainly face barriers to their participation in the democratic process, but these barriers do exist within and are often the product of the history of colonialization of Aboriginal peoples in North America. While some of the barriers to racial minority representation may certainly also apply to Aboriginal peoples, this paper does not examine Canada’s colonial history and thus cannot fully account for disparities in Aboriginal representation.

Discussions and Dismissals of the Deficit

Barriers to the representation of racial minorities extend even into literature about the subject. That racial minorities do face a serious representation deficit has been dismissed or played down by various authors in discussions of federal Canadian representation, when it is addressed. The Lortie Commission in particular found that the representational deficit of racial minorities was

due in large part to a type of historical lag, and expected that it would eventually end without significant intervention (Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991, p104). By contrast, the issue of women's representation has been accepted as a serious problem both within society and politics, with federal parties making increasingly visible efforts to recruit and elect female candidates. The relatively small pool of academic research regarding the representation of racial minorities (Chiu, 1991, p376; Bird, 2003, p8) can be attributed in part to the nature of the barriers to representation that each group faces. Barriers to women's political representation, for example, are structured at the macro level, and are so easily understood and compared to other regions or countries. Ethnic minorities face micro level barriers in addition to those at the macro level that women face (Bird, 2003, p8), making comparisons and analyses with other countries or regions more difficult. The rapid expansion of the minority population may also have created historical lag within established literature. As the Lortie Commission was conducted, racial minorities accounted for only 6% of the population, and held 2% of seats in the House of Commons (Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991, p95). In the period since the Lortie Commission, however, racial minorities have increased their share of the population to 19.1% (Statistics Canada, 2011), and their share of the House of Commons to 9.1% (Black, 2013, p21), a trend that is projected to continue. The continued efforts of authors like Black to provide meaningful analysis of trends in racial representation after each election is helping to increase the amount of data and research available, and will hopefully encourage others to aid understanding and proposing solutions to this representational deficit.

As previously mentioned, the Lortie Commission believed that the under-representation of racial minorities was due in large part to the historical lag between an immigrant's arrival in Canada and their full integration into Canadian society, including politics (Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991, p104). If true, the representation deficit of racial minorities

would be entirely attributed to the foreign-born population, and would be a self-correcting issue that would not require large structural changes to rectify. Several studies done roughly in tandem with the commission refuted these findings, claiming instead that voter participation varied among different ethnicities (Black, 2001, p10), and that while second generation immigrants were more likely than first wave immigrants to be politically active, this engagement actually declined with subsequent generations (Chui, 1991, p387). That immigrants faced significantly different levels of participation and representation compared to native-born citizens was also called into question, with Chiu pointing to Canada's selective immigration system as reducing in large part any disparities in socio-economic status, and thus in political engagement, between native-born and foreign-born citizens (Chui, 1991, p393). Though immigration and generational differences certainly influence political participation and representation in federal Canadian politics, immigrants as a group tend not to be drastically unengaged in Canadian politics, with Pelletier estimating that as many as 45% of MPs in 1993 were foreign-born (1991, in Black, 2001, p13). An examination of the regions of origin of these MPs would prove interesting, but for now it suffices to remark that while immigrants were well represented in the 35th Canadian Parliament, racial minorities were not, claiming roughly 4% of the vote while comprising roughly 9% of the population (Black, 2011, Table 1). Immigrant or native-born status is then not the cause of the deficit in racial minority representation.

Barriers to Representation in Electoral Systems

Immigration does not account for the under-representation of visible minorities in the House of Commons; Black and Erickson further found that racial minorities do not experience voter bias, receiving as many votes as would be expected of a non-minority candidate (Black and Erickson, 2006, p541). The representational deficit of racial minorities must then come from our electoral structures, including the assignment of seats to provinces and territories, the drawing of federal riding boundaries, parties' candidate selection methods, and the First Past the Post and Single

Member Plurality systems. The Law Commission of Canada found that Canada's federal electoral system as a whole was perceived to be contributing to a lack of fairness, representation, and equality in Canadian democracy (Law Commission of Canada, 2002, p39). Through an examination of the electoral structures outlined above, this essay aims to evaluate this perception of unfairness and inequality. Though this essay is examining structural barriers to racial minority representation, it does not assume that these barriers were implemented in intention of entrenching the power of the racial majority. Rather, these barriers have been erected as a means to correct other problems within Canadian democracy, or were implemented before the representation of racialized minorities was accepted as a valid concern. The essay will further provide suggestions for reforms that would increase the representation of racial minorities, as there are practices in the Canadian electoral system that do not prevent racial minorities from achieving representation, but that could be effectively used to promote such representation.

Electoral and Racial Divisions

The assignment of federal seats to provinces, and the subsequent division of provinces into ridings serves to decrease the weight that votes cast by racial minorities have, while also limiting the number of ridings they are likely to run and be elected in. Canada's electoral system relies heavily on representation by geographic area, rather than by percentage of population or vote. In theory, Members of Parliament are elected to represent a specific riding containing a roughly equal number of people, creating vote parity, in which all votes carry roughly the same weight (Thomas, 2006, p2). In practice, Canada has implemented several exceptions to this practice through the Constitution Act, requiring that provinces have as many seats in the House of Commons as they do in the Senate, and maintaining at minimum that provinces retain the number of seats they had in the 33rd Parliament (Thomas, 2006, p3). Canada attempts to enforce a semblance of vote parity by regulating the number of constituents allowed in a single riding, allowing a 25% deviation as necessary (Pal and

Choudhry, 2014, p96). British Columbia has an electoral quota of 108,548, the highest in the country, while PEI's quota is far lower, at 33,824 (Thomas, 2006, Table 1). The discrepancies in these ratios, and the allowed deviation, have served to balance regional and provincial interests in the House of Commons. They have also served to disproportionately increase representation in rural provinces and in rural areas within provinces (Thomas, 2006, p3). The riding population of Mississauga-Cooksville, for example, is more than 13% above Ontario's electoral quota, while Kenora, a rural riding, is almost 44% below the quota (Thomas, 2006, p4). Nearly 85% of racial minorities live in urban ridings, along with 40% of the non-racial minority population (Thomas, 2006, p3), meaning that non-racial minority constituents receive increased representation per capita, as well as increased seats in the House of Commons relative to their share of the population.

Ridings are able to become exempt from the 25% deviation limit through judicial exemption (Pal and Choudhry, 2014, p93), usually in order to protect specific communities deemed to be in need of increased representation. Again, we find here that this practice has overwhelmingly been used to increase representation for non-visible minority rural ridings, to the detriment of urban ridings with significant populations of racial minorities. At the provincial level, an Acadian community in Prince Edward Island was permitted to create a riding with a lower constituent to MP ratio because it was recognized by the courts as a 'community of interest'; similar practices have been implemented across Nova Scotia, also for Acadian communities (Thomas, 2006, p4). Nova Scotia has additionally used deviations from voter parity to increase levels of African-Nova Scotian representation in Preston; it was through these measures that the province was able to see its first African-Nova Scotian representative elected (Thomas, 2006, p4). The use of these measures to increase the representation of ethnic, cultural, or racial minorities at the federal level, however, remains rare. Rural communities and ridings have long been accepted as in need of protection through measures like affirmative districting, but it has only been in recent times that these same

options have been extended to communities of racial minorities (Thomas, 2006, p4). In these situations, the potential for electoral structures to discourage equal representation of minority groups, as well as the necessity of increasing minority representation, has been acknowledged but not implemented. The exception from vote parity extended to rural ridings also comes at a cost to other, urban ridings, who must accept higher ratios of constituents to Members of Parliament in order to accommodate low ratios elsewhere. As the majority of racial minorities live in urban settings, their votes effectively carry less weight than their rural, white counterparts, and there are fewer ridings in which they are likely to stand as candidates or be elected.

Candidate Selection and Election

The methods through which candidates are selected and elected within established ridings can also be barriers to racial minority representation. While any enfranchised Canadian may nominate themselves as a candidate in any riding, the federal party system has all but ensured that only those who run for a party, and for one of the two or three most popular parties, will be elected. Parties thus serve as gatekeepers (Bird, 2003, p26), ultimately allowing or disallowing all candidates who run for office. In this capacity, parties are able to promote the representation of underrepresented groups, like racial minorities and women; they are also able to hold these groups back, preventing them from becoming candidates or failing to recruit them to run. Studies have found that once nominated, racial minorities do not experience voter bias, receiving as many votes as would be expected of a non-minority candidate in a similar political context, without any additional personal credentials (Black and Erickson, 2006, p541). Deficits in the election of racial minority candidates thus stem from their nomination, as well as the ridings in which they are nominated, rather than from wider societal biases against them. High rates of incumbent re-election and historical lag within the electoral system also serve as impediments both to the representation of racial minorities and to any attempts to remove barriers. Additionally, as racial minorities are a vastly

heterogeneous group (Bird, 2003, p9; Andrew et. all, 2008, p6), they are unlikely to form a single voting bloc, making them less likely to be selected and elected within SMP and FPP systems that privilege cohesive voting groups.

The nomination of racial minority candidates by the four largest parties in the past four elections has generally stagnated (Black, 2013, Table 2), limiting gains in elected representatives to only 2% (Black, 2013, Table 1). Shortly before the 2004 election, Bird found that there were both ‘supply side’ and ‘demand side’ problems within the party system, where insufficient numbers of women and racial minorities would put themselves forwards as candidates, with those who did being less frequently selected to represent their parties (Bird, 2003, p16). An examination of the 2004 federal Canadian election found that parties had effectively recognized this problem, as well as the increasing size (and thus political power) of the racial minority population, and did create an increase in the number of racial minority candidates nominated (Black and Hicks, 2006, p31). That increase has not been replicated, though the racial minority population continues to grow and to face a representational deficit. Black remarks that while Canadian parties have managed to elect just enough racial minority MPs to prevent the representation deficit from growing, they have not been able to elect enough to reduce it (Black, 2013, p26), despite all having nominated more racial minority candidates than not in ‘competitive’ ridings (Black, 2013, Table 3) without incumbents. Given that the nomination of racial minorities has stagnated, while in non-incumbent ridings racial minorities comprise more than half of candidates, it is evident that the extra seats needed to achieve equal representation are occupied by incumbents. Incumbent Members of Parliament are more likely to be re-elected, and are thus less likely to be dislodged by their parties. The institutional memory and relationship with the community that is established when Members of Parliament are re-elected can also be beneficial for constituents, and so incumbency in itself is not necessarily a negative. It is,

however, a clear barrier to racial minority representation, one that should dissipate on its own as increasing numbers of racial minorities are elected and become incumbents in their own right.

Landa et. al found that candidates from a specific ethnic background do attract votes from members of that ethnic group (1995, p441), forming ethnic and racial voting blocs. Under the SMP and FPP systems, this bloc voting behaviour is rewarded, allowing significant minorities to elect their preferred candidates, provided their opposition is sufficiently fractured. In ridings where racial and ethnic minorities approach these significant levels of population composition, minority groups have had success in electing minority members. Provincially, Nova Scotia's first African-Nova Scotian member was elected in a riding with boundaries designed to include a significant African-Nova Scotian population (Thomas, 2006, p4), and both Italians and Jewish people have seen high levels of Italian and Jewish representation in ridings in Toronto where their populations are particularly concentrated (Siemiatycki, 2008, p41). Not all ridings with high levels of racial minorities contain a single dominant group, however, and are often composed of multiple racial minority groups as well as a non-racial minority population. In these circumstances, the bloc voting effect of a single racial minority group would not be large enough to see a racial minority candidate from that group elected on its own. Siemiatycki points out that Anglo-Saxons, the non-racial minority group in this context, "are electable anywhere as a result of their historic identification as the founding, dominant culture" (2008, p40), and thus only benefit from any vote splitting caused by racial-minority candidates. While this essay, and much of the literature on the topic addresses racial minorities as a cohesive group, they do not vote as such. As a collection of fragmented groups in an SMP and FPP system, they are unable to command the proportion of the vote necessary to consistently elect racial minority candidates, or to provide a large enough incentive for parties to aggressively nominate them to the degree required to achieve proportional representation.

Potential Solutions

The barriers that racial minorities face in achieving representation in the House of Commons are far from insurmountable. Nations around the world, particularly in the Commonwealth, have faced similar challenges and have successfully implemented alternate electoral strategies and structures in order to increase their representation of racial minorities. While examining potential solutions in the federal Canadian context, it is important to note that Canadian governance is anchored in two conflicting theories of representation; descriptive, in which representatives are meant to be typical of the groups they represent (Mansbridge, 1999, p629), and trustee, in which representatives are primarily interested in the national, rather than local or personal good (Thomas, 2006, p5). Canada has attempted to balance these two theories, implementing policies like affirmative districting to encourage minority communities to represent themselves and their own interests, focusing on descriptive representation. The current party system supports delegate representation, encouraging constituents to vote for a party, leader, and vision for the nation, rather than for an individual candidate. Descriptive representation necessitates the equal representation of all groups in the House of Commons, while the trustee force exerted on the federal Canadian party system has come close to rendering individual Members of Parliament outside of the Executive redundant. There are solutions to the representation deficit of racial minorities from both sides of this divide, whether they be affirming the importance of descriptive representation through affirmative districting or taking advantage of the changing role of Members of Parliament in their constituencies and appointing them from party lists rather than electing them directly from geographic constituencies¹. The challenge for Canada will be finding a balance between

¹ Leaders of Canadian political parties do already have the ability to ‘parachute’ candidates into ridings, either through direct appointment or by refusing to sign nomination forms for undesired candidates (Koop and Bittner, 2010, p4), but have evidently not been able to use it to achieve proportional representation. Though this practice has been used to nominate racial minorities in greater numbers (Koop and Bittner, 2010, Figure 2), these candidates are so infrequently elected that the use of leader’s appointment power is hardly justified (Koop and Bittner, 2010, p12).

these views while actively pursuing reforms that will increase the representation of racial minorities in the House of Commons.

The practice of affirmative districting, dividing boundaries in such a way to ensure that minority groups form a large portion of constituents, is a practice that has already been implemented in Canada. It has been used to aid in the representation of Acadian and African-Nova Scotian populations, as noted above, in addition to increasing Aboriginal representation in Saskatchewan (Courtney, 2002, p175). It has also been used far more frequently to increase representation for rural communities, at the direct cost of visible minority urban citizens (Pal and Choudhry, 2014, p95). The Court ruling that allowed the deviation from vote parity ruled that effective representation required factors like “geography, community history, community interests and minority representation” (Reference re Prov. Electoral Boundaries, 1991) be considered. The representation of racial minorities certainly seems to fall under these considerations; one of the only reform needed in this case would be to use the existing ruling to the advantage of racial minorities when redistributing ridings. It has also been suggested that Canada could reduce the permitted variance from voter parity, which currently stands at 25%. The United Kingdom reduced its permitted variance to 5% (Pal and Choudhry, 2014, p97), while other countries like Australia have a limit of 10% (Thomas, 2006, p4). A reduction in the permitted variance in Canada would force the redistribution of representation away from overrepresented rural areas and into underrepresented urban areas inhabited by racial minorities, as evidenced by the findings of Pal and Choudhry’s study (2014, Table 6). Encouraging the consideration of racial minority representation when creating exceptions to voter parity, and removing the chronic overrepresentation of rural areas would create ridings with more concentrated racial minority populations, encouraging the election of racial minority representatives across Canada.

Canada's SMP and FPP systems could also be altered in order to increase racial minority representation. Bird found that the Proportional Representation (PR) system, because of its centralized candidate selection and the increased visibility of all candidates, created more incentive for parties to nominate candidates from minority groups (2003, p12). Were Canadian parties to draw up lists of nominees, to be elected in order in accordance with the percentage of the vote received, voters would easily be able to see whether or not parties had selected candidates representing all segments of the population. The imposition of quotas would also be feasible under this system, as the national party leadership would have control over the selection process, as opposed to the fragmented system of candidate selection currently run by each constituency (Archer, 2003, p55). Implemented on its own, this system would violate the representative theory of democracy. If Canada were able to reform its Senate, however, it could implement changes in both houses that would balance the needs of representative theory, proportional representation, and regional representation across the two bodies. Canada could theoretically adopt an elected, PR method of selecting senators, providing guaranteed increases in racial minority representation while implementing other reforms, like a more equitable application of exceptions to vote parity, to increase representation in the House of Commons as well. Canada is also able to simply appoint racial minorities, or other minority groups to the Senate at present, provided geographic requirements are followed. That Canada is unwilling and seemingly unable reform its electoral and elected institutions, and to use the tools it currently has available to it to alleviate the representative deficit of racial minorities is perhaps another barrier to wider racial minority representation.

Conclusion

Racial minorities have never held a proportionate number of seats in the House of Commons relative to their population. As evidenced by the barriers to representation outlined above, there are structural issues inherent in Canadian democracy that discourage racial minority

representation. While these barriers were not instituted with the express intent of preventing racial minority representation in the House of Commons, they have had that effect. The academic discussion surrounding this issue has historically been limited, particularly when compared to the interest taken in issues of women's representation, but has shown promising signs of growth through the work of academics like Black, whose research will hopefully prove helpful should Canada decide to address the representational deficit that racial minorities face head on. The racial minorities who have been elected to the House of Commons have, in general, advocated racially-based issues more strongly than their non-racial minority counterparts, regardless of partisan affiliation (Bird, 2008, p17). Mansbridge concluded in her essay that women should represent women, and racial minorities racial minorities in countries with histories of political subordination (1999); that those elected do better represent their communities than others furthers support her thesis. Racial minorities are their own best advocates in the House of Commons, but getting them there in numbers proportional to their population is challenging within the current system. If Canada truly wishes to extend fair and equitable representation to all peoples, its dominant racial group will have to relinquish the excessive representation they have held for so long and work with racial minorities.

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