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## COURTING THE “ETHNIC VOTE”: PANEL DISCUSSES THE ROLE OF IMMIGRANTS AND MINORITIES IN CANADIAN POLITICS

By Reem Ayad



On Tuesday, September 22, the Munk School of Global Affairs hosted a panel discussion on immigration and multiculturalism in the 2015 federal election. The event was organized in collaboration with the Harney Program in Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies.

The discussion explored the impact that immigrants and racial minorities will have on the federal election that will take place on October 19. Special focus was given to recent research findings about partisan support and voting behaviour among foreign-born versus native-born Canadians, as well as the representation of immigrant and racial minority candidates in the media and the degree of political engagement (or lack thereof) in these communities.

Chris Cochrane, associate professor of political science at the University of Toronto began with a presentation on a series of exit polls conducted by Ipsos that capture voter support for the Conservatives, Liberals, New Democrats and Bloc Quebecois in last three federal elections. Cochrane's analysis allows for comparisons of party support based on immigrant origin, religion and province of residence.

He noted that there has been increased geographical targeting of immigrants by the Conservatives over the past three federal elections. This is illustrated by the Conservative inroads that have been made in immigrant-dense, visible minority-dense regions of the country after Stephen Harper's strategy to create an alliance between rural western Canada and suburban Ontario by tapping into immigrant communities.

According to Cochrane, "The support that the Conservatives received from immigrants propelled them into office," most because of recent shifts in partisan support amongst immigrants from East Asian or European backgrounds and with Jewish or Hindu-Sikh religious affiliations. He noted, however, that immigrants from other regions—including Africa and the Caribbean—as well as Muslim voters have not shifted their support to the Conservatives, thus challenging the conventional wisdom that Conservatives have "captured the ethnic vote." Much of the party's support seems to have come from Ontario where immigrant and non-immigrant voters alike shifted their support to the Conservative Party.

Erin Tolley, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Toronto, presented an analysis of the media's coverage of white and racial minority electoral candidates. She put forward the notion of "racialized media coverage" in which racialized assumptions influence the representation of minorities, finding that minority candidates "tend to be portrayed as products of their sociodemographic characteristics with far more attention given to their backgrounds and cultures," while their white counterparts feature more prominently in stories about pressing election-related issues, like the economy.

She argued that these decisions are "fuelled by assumptions about white being the standard (that is) seen to be naturally compatible with politics," thus garnering arguably more serious attention in political news coverage. This feeds into the "distinction between a perceived 'us' and a threatening 'them' between Canadians with white-Anglo backgrounds and others," said Tolley.

Ratna Omidvar, the executive director and adjunct professor for the Global Diversity Exchange at the Ted Rogers School of Management and the third speaker at the discussion, spoke of the importance of diversity in political leadership. Omidvar argued that since people from different places arrive at issues from different perspectives and using different experiences, "It stands to reason, then, that diversity in general is a natural weapon against groupthink."

She suggested that people who are similar tend to not question each other's judgements as harshly as they should and thus diversity amongst political leaders will "engage us better" and create "a natural foundation for better policies and strategies."

While it may be true that not only immigrant and minority political leaders are capable of representing immigrant and minority interests, a lack of diversity in political representation means that a direct link to the collective experiences of immigrants and minorities, such as displacement, loss and family reunification, is either severed or not present all together, said Omidvar.

Ranjit Bhaskar, a journalist and editor with New Canadian Media, echoed this sentiment and spoke of the importance of a political leader's strategy when trying to appeal to people with difference interests and personal experiences. He argued that the three most prominent issues for immigrant voters are family reunification bills, small business taxes, and the recognition of foreign credentials.

The Executive Director of Samara Canada, Jane Hilderman, also tackled the issue of connecting Canadians to politics, with a focus on political integration of new immigrants and a revisiting of the topic of youth voting. Hilderman critiqued the process by which people are socialized into Canadian politics and noted the disconnect between teaching newcomers about Canadian political institutions without saying how they can actively integrate themselves into the process itself. In addition, while youth voter turnout is comparatively low, youth political engagement has in fact surpassed that of older Canadians when it comes to volunteering, signing petitions, boycotting and donating to charity.

She emphasised the role of community groups and charities in encouraging youth and older Canadians to participate in politics by offering a safe and trustworthy space to learn and engage in political conversation.

Political analysts have predicted that the so-called ethnic vote will have an impact on the 2015 election and, with several ridings featuring immigrant and minority candidates, voters will have candidates running for office "who look like them", as Omidvar noted. In the long run, the political engagement of immigrants and minorities contributes to a more inclusive electoral environment, one that judges minority political entrants less for their cultural backgrounds and more for their political contributions.

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