Panel Presentation by Senator Vivienne Poy

EU Parliamentary Panel:
Are We Being Served? Minorities at the Decision-making Table

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Thank you for inviting me to discuss the important issue of electoral systems and their impact on minority political participation.

Since this Conference is focused on diversity and inclusion, in my presentation I will use two sets of data to speak about minority representation: the data for foreign born, and the data for visible minorities. According to our last census in 2006, 20% of the Canadian population was foreign born, and fully 16%, more than 1 in 6, self-identified as a visible minority. According to Canada's Employment Equity Act, visible minorities are "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour".

Please note that sometimes the data collected on electoral representation is not as accurate as one might like, because the requirement for self-identification may make it incomplete.

The assumption on this panel is that minority political participation is important, but why? First, because it is a fundamental tenet of democracy that Parliament should be representative of the electorate. It is assumed that this representation will play out in terms of policy outcomes favourable to the group being represented. In reality, the direct correlation between being elected and favourable policy is tenuous because visible minorities and foreign born populations hold quite diverse policy perspectives.

A city like Toronto, where I come from, is considered the most multicultural in the world. We have 200 distinct ethno-cultural groups, about 127 languages, and fully half the population is foreign born, and 47% identify as visible minorities. Therefore, the election of visible minority candidates will provide a diversity of perspectives in the legislature that will more fully represent the population's views. Diversity in leadership in corporations has been shown to produce better outcomes in business terms, and I believe the same is true in terms of democracies.

Canada's Parliament is bicameral, with an elected House of Commons with 308 seats, and a Senate, appointed by the Prime Minister, with 105 seats. Originally, as set out in Canada's Constitution, the Senate was intended to represent the broader regions, with overrepresentation for Canada's smaller provinces. The House of Commons members are elected in ridings, in a first past the post system.

How are we doing in Canada with respect to minority political participation? In reference to visible minorities, from 1993 to 2006, their representation in the House of Commons increased in absolute terms, however, not in relation to the increase in the visible

minority population as a whole. In 2006, the last Census, the visible minority population of Canada stood at more than 1 in 6 Canadian, or over 16%, but only 24 of the 308 seats in the House of Commons were held by visible minorities MPs, not quite 8%, and the same held true for the 2008 election. This lack of representation is exacerbated by the limited number of visible minority candidates who were nominated to run for election. In 2006, it was 1 in 13. Notably, while visible minority politicians see underrepresentation as a problem, few non-visible MPs share their point of view.

As for the Senate, which is supposed to represent the regions as well as minorities in Canada, of the 105 Senators, 12% are foreign born, with almost 8% identifying as visible minorities.

How does our electoral system affect minority political participation? According to a report prepared in 2007 by the University of Toronto, entitled "*Is every ballot equal: visible minority vote dilution in Canada"*, visible minorities are not well served. Most of Canada's visible minorities live in urban centres in 3 of Canada's biggest provinces: Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia.

Technically speaking, seats in the House of Commons are supposed to be assigned relative to the share of the national population. But, in reality, because no province can have fewer MPs than Senators, or fewer MPs than in the 1976 Parliament, our smaller provinces, which are overrepresented in the Senate, are also overrepresented in the House of Commons. Larger provinces like Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia lose out. MPs from these provinces represent, on average, 26,000 more constituents than MPs from other provinces. While Ontario has only 34.8% of the provincial seats, it has 38% of the Canadian population.

The other problem is with how the intra-provincial boundaries are drawn. Determined every 10 years by a boundary commission, boundaries can vary + or – 25% from the provincial average. The result is that the rural vote is worth more than the urban vote. Once again, as with the interprovincial distribution of seats, there is a dilution of the visible minority vote, since the majority live in urban areas in the larger provinces of Ontario, Alberta and B.C.

For example, ridings in my province of Ontario vary from almost 170,000 in Markham, and almost 140,000 in Mississauga, the city with the highest number of visible minorities, to a rural town like Kenora with barely 65,000. In the small Atlantic province, Prince Edward Island, their ridings have an average population of about 30,000 – 35, 000. This grossly distorts our electoral representation, making our deviation from the representation-by-population principal greater than in 4 other federal states, including the US.

The University of Toronto study also found that between 1996 and 2001, the rural vote increased in average worth to 34% more than an urban (visible minority) vote, resulting in the steady dilution of the latter. And when visible minorities who are permanent residents take out citizenship, the vote dilution is even higher.

Electoral reforms are needed. B.C., Alberta, and Ontario need more seats, and the allowable variance in the sizes of different ridings within the provinces needs to be adjusted. These measures would automatically ensure a greater impact of the votes of visible minorities, and likely increase their representation in Parliament as well.

Of course, outright electoral reform of the political system moving from a first past the post system to one with proportional representation would allow minority voices to be heard, but there is no mood in Canada among entrenched political parties to move towards this system. An increase in the number of seats for large urban centres, and the re-distribution of seats between provinces, may be a more realizable goal.

There is currently a Bill before the House of Commons, Bill C-12, which would address at least some of these issues by increasing the number of seats for Ontario, Alberta and B.C., allowing for smaller riding sizes. This will result in an increase in the size of the House of Commons.

As political candidates, visible minorities are also dependent on being nominated as candidates by the political parties, which are still largely dominated by white, middle aged men. Since the parties have not identified visible minority representation as a priority, this situation is unlikely to change anytime soon.

Having said the above, you may wonder how engaged are minorities in Canada in general in the political process? Are they interested in becoming more involved?

According to multiculturalism expert, Prof. Will Kymlicka, in terms of political integration, compared to every other Western democracy, immigrants in Canada are more likely to become citizens. They apply for citizenship at more than double the rate in the United States. They are active voters, party members and even candidates for political office. For example, there were more foreign-born citizens elected to Parliament in Canada than in any other country, both in absolute numbers and in terms of parity with their percentage of the population. Canadian election studies indicate that they also have a greater political knowledge, general political interest, and attention to election information than those born in Canada.

So, there is an appetite by minorities for greater involvement and representation in the electoral process in Canada, but so far, this appetite remains unfulfilled.

Curiously, despite Canada's focus on multiculturalism in both policy and law, the tendency of government, academic, and civil society organizations has been to look at economic integration rather than focus on the larger issue of political integration. This inattention to political involvement has to do with the electoral system in Canada, which diminishes the power of the minority vote.

As we can see, Canada still has a long way to go before the vision of the Canadian Multicultural Act, which calls for the equality of all Canadians in all aspects of society – economic, social, cultural or political, is realized.