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# Why Canada's political pipeline leaves little room for anyone but white men



By **Sabrina Nanji** Democracy Reporter  
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On paper Che Merzillo was a stellar election candidate, and she was

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On paper, she was a stellar election candidate, and she was certainly no stranger to high-profile politics.

The prominent health and wellness advocate and mother of four has

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FORCES EVEN THIS IN THE FAMILY — HER UNCLE IS OVID JACKSON, A FORMER Liberal MP.

That's part of why the longtime Oakville resident decided to carry the NDP's banner — albeit unsuccessfully — in the 2014 provincial election and again federally in 2015.

But Marville won't be making another bid for public office anytime soon, mirroring a trend among would-be female politicians that a one-of-a-kind research project seeks to analyze with data that suggest as women and racialized minorities chug through the political pipeline — from aspirant to candidate to MP — their prospects narrow, whereas the opposite occurs for white men.

For women, the toughest hurdle is at the nomination level, the first checkpoint into the political realm.

Racialized minorities come up against barriers further along, beginning at the candidate selection stage.

That's according to Erin Tolley, who teaches political science at the University of Toronto.

Tolley is among the first to map the race and gender of more than 800 people vying for a political party's nomination ahead of the 2015 vote in 136 of the country's most diverse ridings, where racialized minorities make up at least 15 per cent of the population, half of which are in Ontario. (Her tally uses Statistics Canada's definition of "visible minority" and therefore does not include Indigenous nomination contestants or candidates.)

Wannabe politicians must first successfully compete for their choice party's nomination in order to become the candidate in an election.

Though Tolley's project is still in the works, early findings suggest political parties aren't doing enough to diversify the pool of candidates.

"The dynamics for women and racialized minorities are different,"

she said. "That's important for parties to know because they therefore need to have different strategies if they want to attract and want to run women or racialized minority candidates."

Women make up 52 per cent of the population, but only accounted for 33 per cent of nomination contestants across those 136 ridings. The proportion of female election candidates ticked up slightly, to 36 per cent, and 31 per cent of elected MPs in those districts were women.

That suggests women are less likely to throw their hat in the ring, but once they do, they fare well.

"Maybe women don't want to run, they don't want to be called 'Barbies,' for example," Tolley said, citing veteran MP Gerry Ritz's [now-deleted and apologized-for recent tweet](#) that referred to Environment Minister Catherine McKenna as "climate Barbie."

Tolley put the onus on political parties.

“Political parties don’t do sufficient work to identify women candidates and encourage them to run,” she said. “Frankly, not enough fingers are pointed at political parties. We don’t need to change the electoral system to get women into politics. All parties need to do is nominate more women. It’s actually pretty simple.”

Racialized minorities don’t experience the same obstacle.

According to the data, minorities declare their candidacy in proportions that match their presence in the population. However, by the time Canadians go to the polls the share of MPs of colour is far below that.

“They want to be nomination contestants, but then the party is less likely to select them, and voters are even less likely to select them,” Tolley said.

Across the 136 ridings, racialized minorities comprised 38 per cent of the population and 37 per cent of nomination contestants. That dwindled to 33 per cent of election candidates, and to 29 per cent of MPs — an eight-point gap between the number of hopeful nominees and those who won a seat on the Hill.

A contributing factor is one Tolley has previously explored — that minority candidates tend to compete against each other in battleground districts.

That’s because racialized minorities are more likely to run, and win, in more diverse ridings, Tolley said. For instance, three candidates of colour may vie for their party’s nomination in an ethnically-rich district, and split the ballot.

“So, you have this big pool of people who are interested, but they’re competing against each other, essentially cancelling each other out — and that’s happening at each level,” she explained.

As for white men, their political possibilities widen.

Thirty-nine per cent of nomination contestants in those diverse ridings were white men, and they comprised 40 per cent of candidates on the ticket. Nearly half, 48.5 per cent, of those who won a seat were white males.

Marville’s aversion to entering the political arena again is to the “corporate mentality” of a campaign. She isn’t hanging up her hat because of back-to-back losses but rather what she considers a “laziness” that is endemic to all major parties and that stifles grassroots democracy, citizen engagement and diverse voices.

“A (political) party’s structure is not designed to really reach as many people as possible. It is designed to reach those who are already engaged and to put forward a brand and to put forward a strategic campaign . . . That doesn’t seem like politics to me,” Marville said.

Marville was acclaimed twice but said she was never naive about her prospects. She ran and lost in Oakville, which has never in its history elected a New Democrat to Queen’s Park or Parliament Hill. Marville said she was asked to run where she may have a better shot, but she refused because she wanted to represent her neighbours and community.

What institutional obstacles may impede women and minorities in politics is what the second phase of Tolley’s research seeks uncover.

On election day, and broken down by the three main political parties in those 136 ridings, 47 per cent of the NDP's candidates were women. The Conservative ticket comprised 24 per cent women, while the Liberal party had 36 per cent female candidates.

Meanwhile, 35 per cent of Tory contenders, 38 per cent of Grit candidates and 27 per cent of NDP contestants had racialized minority backgrounds.

Each party tailors its own recruitment process.

The NDP sets a 50-per-cent target for female election candidates, falling shy of its goal in 2015 with 43 per cent overall, also the highest in the party's history.

But quotas don't automatically translate to proportional representation on the Hill, noted Marit Stiles, president of the federal NDP who is herself running for a provincial seat in Davenport next year.

"When it's a winnable riding, what you see is, largely, a lot of men in powerful positions that want to run there," she said, adding that's something all parties grapple with.

"How do we ensure that we are putting those (diverse) candidates in ridings where they can win, (that) they're not fringe ridings where we don't have a hope in hell," she said.

Anna Gainey, president of the federal Grits, said she doesn't anticipate implementing hard targets for that very concern. Instead, she trumpeted the Liberals' "Invite her to run" initiative.

According to the party, nearly one-quarter of female nomination contestants and candidates said they chose to run in 2015 at least in part because of that campaign, in which average Canadians could nominate women they thought would make good public servants that the party would then reach out to.

The Tories maintain a merit-based approach, said spokesman Cory Hann.

"We of course encourage women and people of all kinds of backgrounds to seek out nominations in our party, but the membership ultimately chooses the candidate they want to represent them — that is democracy," Hann said.

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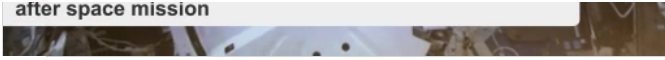
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