

Election saw gender parity and diversity among candidates in Ottawa ridings

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Ottawa Centre candidates Green Party Angela Keller-Herzog, Peoples Party of Canada Merylee Sevilla, Liberal Catherine McKenna, Progressive Conservative Carol Clemenhagen and NDP Emilie R. Taman during a political debate at the Glebe Community Centre Wednesday Sept 25, 2019. *TONY CALDWELL / POSTMEDIA*

Compared with the last federal election, Ottawa ridings saw an uptick in the number of women and visible-minority candidates contesting seats in 2019. They also saw a startling number of racialized candidates running for the People's party.

According to an analysis by this newspaper, female candidates reached parity with their male counterparts across Ottawa's eight ridings this election. The ratio reflects, almost exactly, Ottawa's 51 per cent female population, according to the 2016 census.

It breaks down to 16 women among the 32 candidates nominated by the four largest parties. Four years ago, only nine of 32 candidates were women — 28 per cent of the total.

The percentage of female candidates was higher in Ottawa than it was nationwide this election. Nationally, the four major parties fielded slates that were between 31 per cent women (the Conservatives) and almost 50 per cent women (the NDP).

Stéphanie Plante, an elections expert and executive director of the International Commission of Jurists, pointed out that Ottawa tends to be an outlier when it comes to political behaviour in Canada: living in a capital city, "people are just more hyperaware of politics and the influence of politics on your daily life."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

That can translate into atypically high voter turnout — as is the case in Ottawa — or more women choosing to run as political candidates.

Plante also suggested the relatively short commute between Parliament Hill and Ottawa ridings can reduce a barrier to federal politics for many women. Namely, capital region MPs “can still be sane with their work-family balance,” she said.

Erin Tolley, an associate professor of political science at the University of Toronto, also suggested that the “contagion effect” could help explain the increased presence of local women running in this federal election.

“In Ottawa, there is a history of women candidates running, and there’s also a history of impressive women in positions of power,” she said. “That catches on, the parties think, ‘OK, this is a population that is willing to elect women and therefore running women isn’t a risk.’”

Tolley also pointed out that this phenomenon can affect other women — they see female politicians succeeding, and recognize their chance to do the same.

This newspaper's analysis also found that Ottawa's slate of candidates was marginally more inclusive of visible minorities this year than in the previous federal election. When calculated considering the four major parties active in both 2015 and 2019, the number of non-white candidates in the capital was up by one — a three per cent increase — to 19 per cent of nominated candidates.

According the 2016 census, Ottawa's visible minority population is 26 per cent. That considered, the major parties still have some ground to gain when it comes to being truly representative of Ottawa's ethnic makeup.

And the same goes for the rest of the country: 22 per cent of Canadians identify as visible minorities, while about 15 per cent of the candidates for the six major parties could say the same in 2019. That's an improvement over the years, but Tolley said motivations are muddled.

"I think parties, so far, have largely thought about racial diversity in a strategic sense. How do you attract the so-called ethnic vote? And one of the ways they've tried to do that is have more diverse candidate slates," said Tolley.

It's this sense of tokenism that prompted at least one non-white Ottawa to turn to a new option for political participation in the 2019 federal election.



Orleans PPC candidate Roger Saint-Fleur *JPG*

Roger Saint-Fleur, a black Canadian of Haitian background and part-time professor, said he's tired of political parties that "come to you smiling with happiness, and invite you to support them — and that's it," he said. "They will promise everything they can promise, and then keep you in your minority where you are, as a group of Arabs, group of blacks."

He decided to run for the People's party in Orléans because he said he feels leader Maxime Bernier is authentic and the party "treats every Canadian as a Canadian."

He's not the only non-white candidate to be attracted to the PPC tent. In fact, Bernier's movement had by far the most ethnically-diverse slate of candidates in Ottawa ridings of any major party this election.

This might seem surprising, when one considers the PPC's platform planks — accepting far fewer immigrants and refugees, ending all multiculturalism funding, requiring prospective new Canadians take a

values test — and critics' denouncements of the People's party as racist.

Velma Morgan, the chair of Operation Black Vote Canada, offered one explanation. "I think that party was very active in recruiting different types of people to probably try to demonstrate that they weren't racist," she said. "Maybe to change that narrative of what people perceive them to be."



Ottawa Centre candidate, Peoples Party of Canada, Merylee Sevilla. *TONY CALDWELL / POSTMEDIA*

Tolley suggested some other considerations. There may well be policy affinity between the PPC and some of its racialized candidates that extends even to the immigration file, she said.

"Often there's this idea that the kind of anti-immigrant or nativist sentiment that the People's party expressed, that that's only white Canadians that feel an affinity to that. But, there's some research that suggests that the desire to close the door on immigration — many people

can feel an affinity with that sort of idea," Tolley said.

"One thing we do see is that people who have arrived as immigrants in, for example, the economic class, the skilled workers ... in some cases they will express dissatisfaction with migration groups that they see as less legitimate."

Tolley also offered another possible explanation for the party's ability to attract visible-minority candidates: "A new party represents an opportunity for people who might be left out of the mainstream parties.'

This resonates with Ottawa Centre People's party candidate Merylee Sevilla, herself a person of colour who rejected any assertion the party is racist.

"When you look at the some of the candidates, they're head of a corporation, they're holding seven-figure portfolios," she said. "With the People's party, it was an opportunity for everyday Canadians."

With files from The Canadian Press

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