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For campaigns looking to turn support into seats in Parliament, not all 'ethnic communities' are created equal

By [KEVIN PHILIPUPILLAI](#) AUGUST 3, 2022

'These are groups that are very politically savvy, and they understand their power and they understand the influence that they can have,' says Erin Tolley, Canada Research Chair in gender, race, and inclusive politics.



When Harjit Sajjan, now minister of international development, was first elected in 2015, he was one of four Sikh cabinet ministers and 17 Sikh MPs, highlighting the Sikh community's success in Canada's political landscape. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

The conventional wisdom around the potential for so-called “ethnic voting blocs” to swing elections is often overstated, but “parties make a big mistake when they perceive of immigrant and racialized voters as a passive voting bloc,” says political science professor Erin Tolley.

“These are groups that are very politically savvy, and they understand their power and they understand the influence that they can have,” said Tolley, the Canada Research Chair in gender, race, and inclusive politics at Carleton University. “And when parties don’t repay that support by listening to their preferences or by acting to advance their interests, they take that power and they put it elsewhere.”

As communities like Italian Canadians, Sikh Canadians, and Tamil Canadians have each become more established in the country, Tolley said they have “flexed their political muscles” in order to get what they wanted from political parties, and to enter the political arena themselves.

Political commentator Seher Shafiq, a co-founder of the non-profit group [Canadian Muslim Vote](#), said when Canadian Muslims became more organized and dramatically increased their voter engagement levels in the 2015 elections, “all of a sudden we had politicians engaging way more than before.”

“There’s a definite change of tone that wasn’t there before 2015,” said Shafiq, referring to how politicians “at all levels” now pay attention to hate crimes against Muslims, and even to Muslim holidays. Shafiq credits the grassroots organizing of several groups, including the National Council of Canadian Muslims, with increasing community engagement and with grabbing the attention of political parties.

“There’s something to discuss and maybe something to study about how a community that wasn’t organized in the way that the Sikh community or the Ismaili community is, became organized, and how that coincided with a dramatic shift in tone from government, and even to some extent action,” said Shafiq.



Seher Shafiq, who helped co-found the organization Canadian Muslim Vote in 2015, says Muslim Canadians saw a clear shift from politicians after the community got more organized. *Photograph by Alia Youssef*

Sherry Yu, an associate professor at the University of Toronto who studies multiculturalism, media, and social integration, emphasized the role that so-called ethnic media play in helping new immigrants learn about the Canadian political process, and in boosting civic participation among older immigrants who have been more passive.

Yu told *The Hill Times* that many communities, especially those that are more concentrated in particular regions, have media outlets and community organizations that reinforce each other, with so-called ethnic newspapers being distributed at local shops and grocery stores.

The Conservatives and the Liberals each had periods during the 20th century where one or the other seemed to have the upper hand in terms of support from immigrants, with John Diefenbaker's and Pierre Trudeau's governments each assembling different coalitions of support over the decades. With the Conservatives in the midst of a leadership race, supporters have debated whether the party is doing enough to appeal to a broader voter base and which leadership hopeful can lead the way on that front, with the now-booted Patrick Brown regarded as the candidate who had the strongest ties to cultural and religious minorities.

Tolley said the idea of appealing to immigrant and racialized voters “is not a new idea. It didn’t start with Patrick Brown, it didn’t start with Jason Kenney.”

Under prime minister Stephen Harper and then-immigration minister Jason Kenney, the Conservative Party of Canada made a concerted effort to appeal to communities that had previously been assumed to be steadfastly Liberal out of gratitude for Pierre Trudeau’s policies on immigration and multiculturalism.

The strategy was [reportedly born](#) out of a conversation between Harper and Kenney over a pint at the Royal Oak Pub on Bank Street in Ottawa in 1994, when Kenney tried to convince the future prime minister that Canada’s conservative movement should seek out immigrants who shared its values.

Kenney’s packed schedule of visits to temples, gurdwaras, festivals, and other community events, which began during the party’s first mandate when he was secretary of state for multiculturalism and Canadian identity, earned him [the moniker](#) of “secretary of state for curry in a hurry.”

But Tolley warned against giving too much credence to sweeping narratives about so-called ethnic voting blocs. “Immigrant and ethnic and racialized Canadians have policy preferences just like other Canadians,” she said, “and they vote for a variety of reasons. Their ethnic or immigrant background is not the only reason and it’s often not even the most important one.”

“Community by community, some parties and some leaders have had success, but when you look in the aggregate, what they gain from appealing to one community, they often lose from a separate community.”

Tolley said there is “a bit of urban lore” that tends to oversimplify the Harper Conservatives’ success at reaching out to immigrant and racialized voters. She said the Conservatives saw a boost in their vote share from particular communities, mostly

non-racialized communities such as Ukrainian Canadians, Italian Canadians, and Jewish Canadians, but that they saw very little support from other groups, such as Muslim Canadians.

“And in the aggregate it didn’t really budge the vote share one way or the other when you compare with other parties.”

Drilling down further into the data, Tolley pointed out that the Conservatives under Harper “were quite successful with Cantonese-speaking Chinese Canadians, but less so with Mandarin-speaking Chinese Canadians.”

Political campaigns looking for cohesiveness and geographical concentration



Carleton University political science professor Erin Tolley says former prime minister Stephen Harper used Senate appointments to boost his party’s connection with immigrant communities. *Photograph courtesy of Erin Tolley*

For political campaigns looking for the most efficient way to turn community support into seats in Parliament, not all immigrant or racialized communities are created equal. Political organizers are focused on winning ridings, said Tolley, more so than they are interested in expending finite resources on driving up their party's overall vote count.

“Groups that are larger in number and are cohesive, and who reside together in a district, that's the kind of group that a party is going to find very attractive,” said Tolley, “because that is how elections are won and lost.”

“I think that's why you see parties tapping into Ismaili Muslims or Punjabi Sikhs,” said Tolley, “rather than courting the Black vote.”

“One reason that I think parties have largely ignored Black Canadians is that they don't know how to tap into that community because it is such a diverse community. It is geographically spread out. And that stands in the way of parties figuring out how to effectively organize within that community.”

Shafiq concurred, saying that the fact that much of the Muslim Canadian community is concentrated in key swing ridings in the Greater Toronto Area contributed to creating a perception among political parties “that this is a community they need to engage.”

Sikh Canadians have been elected in ridings where the community forms a substantial segment of the local population, such as Vancouver and Surrey in British Columbia and Brampton and Mississauga in Ontario, with growing populations around Edmonton and Calgary also electing Sikh MPs.

After the 2015 election, *The Globe and Mail* reported there were [17 Sikh Canadians](#) elected to Parliament—16 for the Liberals, including several who made it in

cabinet, like International Development Minister Harjit Sajjan (Vancouver-South, B.C.)—making Punjabi the third-most spoken language in the House of Commons.

The fact that multiple political parties have sent Sikh Canadians to Parliament means those MPs can serve as a pool of knowledge within their community, and an avenue through which the parties can make further connections within the Sikh community. The first waves of Ukrainian Canadian MPs and Italian Canadian MPs filled the same functions in previous decades.

But getting that first generation of leaders elected to Parliament remains a challenge for communities that are less established on the Canadian politician landscape. In these cases, said Tolley, political parties look to other elected bodies, such as school boards, to identify up-and-coming leaders.

As prime minister, Harper also used Senate appointments as a way “to cultivate leadership within the party,” said Tolley, appointing community leaders to generate goodwill and to make inroads into communities that did not yet have representation in the House of Commons.



As Conservative immigration minister, Jason Kenney said he read the so-called ethnic press every morning before reading the mainstream national papers. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

For all the complaints that Harper's government shut out the press during its time in power, it actively sought out and tracked political coverage in the so-called ethnic press. In 2012, [Kenney told Alec Castonguay](#), then chief political reporter for *L'actualité*, that he made it a habit to read translated versions of the ethnic press every morning, before reading the mainstream national papers.

When Kenney was immigration minister, The Canadian Press [reported](#) that the department of citizenship and immigration spent \$745,050 between March 2009 and May 2012 tracking media coverage by so-called ethnic or multicultural outlets, including assessments of campaign events and perceptions of Kenney.

Yu, whose research includes comparisons of the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Vancouver Province* with two local Korean community newspapers, said this media monitoring was an acknowledgement of the significance of ethnic media, but said she was

concerned that the information gathered was not shared with the public.

“Until the release of these documents, we did not know that monitoring was done,” said Yu.

Maturation of a community leads to new demands

As communities become more established in Canada, however, they may no longer be satisfied by a meet and greet with a prominent politician or with a promise that a party will consider a particular policy proposal, said Tolley. “There is definitely evidence of a transformation in political behaviour among community members. Some refer to it as a maturation of one’s political involvement.”

The Tamil community has had several decades to establish itself in the political landscape. It has elected MPs from different parties in ridings in Scarborough, Ont., including Liberal MP Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough-Rouge Park, Ont.), a three-term MP first elected in 2015 [who has served](#) as president of the Canadian Tamils’ Chamber of Commerce. Many Tamil Canadians arrived in Canada in the 1980s, during the civil war in Sri Lanka.



Liberal MP Gary Anandasangaree, former president of the Canadian Tamils’ Chamber of Commerce, was first elected in 2015. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Ken Kandeepan, a member of the advisory board for the non-partisan Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC), told *The Hill Times* that “many people in the Tamil community are

actively involved in politics” and that community members have provided “considerable support” to various parties at the federal level.

But, he added, it was “a pet peeve” of his that once the elections are over, “the quid pro quo is somewhat absent.” As an example, Kandeepan mentioned appointments to directorships for government corporations.

“It is unfortunate that once the elections are over, these kinds of outreach are not made to the Tamil community. In asking them for appropriate candidates and individuals to be appointed to these positions, at least to the best of the knowledge of the CTC.”

“So the attitude seems to be ‘please help us,’ and ‘thank you for your help, and we’ll see you at the next election.’”

Tolley said Kandeepan’s comments are an example of a case where members of a particular community “don’t want to be seen as just a set of votes.”

“They want to be taken seriously, they want to have a voice. They want to be able to run and be successful as candidates supported by parties. And when they are successful, they would like to see themselves in positions of influence. Parties that don’t take that seriously learn pretty quickly that, sure these are potential voting blocs in one’s favour, but they can also shift alliances.”

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