

Identities and Interests: Race, Ethnicity, and Affinity Voting

Randy Besco, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019, pp. 240.

Maxime Blanchard, McGill University (maxime.blanchard@mail.mcgill.ca)

What is the potential for “rainbow coalitions” of visible minority voters in Canadian elections? This is the main question that Randy Besco’s recent book seeks to answer. Firmly rooted in a social identity framework, the book seeks to move beyond the white/non-white dichotomy toward a more detailed understanding of how visible minority voters of different racial and ethnic backgrounds perceive each other and how such perceptions impact their behaviour during elections. More specifically, the book addresses the issue in a three-step process. First, it examines whether affinity voting (that is, the positive impact of sharing a candidate’s ethnic background on a voter’s likelihood of supporting the candidate) extends beyond situations of shared ethnicity and also applies to racialized candidates of different ethnic backgrounds (4). In other words, does the preference of visible minority voters for candidates of their own ethnic background extend to racialized candidates of other ethnic backgrounds? Second, how can we make sense of such preferences (4)? Finally, how do race and ethnicity structure the self-identity of visible minority Canadians (5)?

The book’s second chapter, where the author develops the theoretical framework that guides the empirical analysis, constitutes its greatest strength. Relying primarily on social identity theory and other important works from social psychology, the author develops a simple yet highly sophisticated theoretical framework to enhance our understanding of visible minority Canadians’ self-identity and its impact on their electoral behaviour. Using a nested identities framework and focusing on the contextual salience of identities, the author theorizes how both ethnic and racialized identities can form part of a voter’s self-definition and, in their own way, influence voting behaviour. The main argument advanced here is that one’s ethnic background should be most central to self-identity, whereas a status as racialized would constitute a higher-order identity with a weaker but non-trivial potential for activation under specific circumstances.

The analysis relies primarily on original survey data collected through a web panel of respondents from all Canadian provinces except Quebec. The full sample of roughly 2,500 respondents includes an oversample of more than 1,500 racialized Canadians, with respondents of Asian background being predominant among the oversample. The key part of the survey, which is used extensively throughout the book, is an experimental manipulation where respondents are asked to evaluate and choose between two fictitious candidates of similar professional backgrounds whose names are manipulated to signal ethnicity. A subset of respondents is assigned to an experimental condition where both candidates are independent, while a second subset of respondents is provided with identical fictitious candidates whose party affiliation (conservative or liberal) is randomly assigned.

The empirical analysis finds strong coethnic affinity and weaker, albeit non-negligible racialized affinity effects. In order to try to understand the mechanism underlying the process of affinity voting, the author tests two rival approaches through regression analyses. The first, focusing on voters’ self-interest, posits that the racial and ethnic background of a candidate operates as a heuristic to infer the candidate’s policy preferences. Using such a cognitive shortcut, racialized voters are claimed to be more likely to support fellow racialized candidates because they assume the latter to be more supportive of policies benefiting visible minority citizens. The second approach asserts that voters are instead motivated by their self-identity and,

either because of an in-group bias or a desire for positive group attributions, will tend to be more supportive of racialized candidates. The main motivation for affinity voting, according to this approach, would be a desire among individuals to contribute to the enhancement of their group's social status.

The results provide strong support for self-identity explanations of coethnic and racialized identity while failing to do so for interest-based explanations. Consistent with the book's sophisticated approach to theorizing self-identity in an electoral context, the empirical analysis moves beyond using simple racial and ethnic identity markers and replaces them with a more appropriate self-identity scale in which respondents themselves express the strength of their ethnic identity. The book's carefulness in distinguishing between group membership and self-identity constitutes its main empirical contribution, with the author convincingly calling for survey researchers to begin measuring visible minorities voters' self-identification rather than assuming it from group membership. The analysis provides strong support for this claim, as the strength of one's self-identity strongly correlates with the presence of an in-group bias expected from common group identity.

The author concludes his book by claiming that the results suggest that there is a potential for "rainbow coalitions," as a racialized group identity appears to exist among visible minority Canadians, with self-identity rather than interest-based explanations proving to be determinant. Unfortunately, the empirical analysis provides mostly suggestive but not conclusive evidence in that regard. Many questions remain about the ability of the analysis to untangle identity and policy, the statistical power of many regression models and the precision with which interest-based explanations are tested.

Nevertheless, Randy Besco offers us a very timely book that contributes to the field of political behaviour's growing concern with specific subgroups of the population rather than broadly encompassing generalizations. It does so by focusing on groups that have traditionally been lumped together, providing a thorough investigation of visible minority Canadians' nested identities and how such identities impact Canadian elections. The book is a must read for anyone interested in Canadian voting behaviour and/or visible minority Canadians' political behaviour.

Neoliberal Parliamentarism: The Decline of Parliament at the Ontario Legislature

Tom McDowell, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021, pp. 264

Dennis Pilon, York University (dpilon@yorku.ca)

Over the past three decades, a considerable body of popular and academic literature has emerged focusing on themes such as the decline of parliament, the dominance of party and government leaders, and a concomitant crisis of democracy, both in Canada and abroad. Yet little of this work has attempted to connect such developments to any broader social and economic changes in a meaningful or substantive way. In *Neoliberal Parliamentarism: The Decline of Parliament at the Ontario Legislature*, Tom McDowell brings together two academic literatures that rarely talk to one another—the study of institutions and critical political economy—to do precisely that. In his study, he argues that in the same way that broader economic changes we have come to label *neoliberalism* have transformed public administration, so too have they reshaped the process of legislative oversight and governance in Ontario over