

Elections and ethnicity

By RON BANERJEE

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If the last federal election had a heavy ethics/clean government theme, the current contest has a lot to do with ethnics.

Specifically, a strong showing among certain targeted ethnicities in cities can boost Conservative hopes.

The Conservatives have made haphazard attempts at wooing the ethnic vote in the past. One of the more hare-brained schemes involved reaching out to various religious groups to cobble together a socially-conservative coalition to fight gay marriage in 2004.

By contrast, the current basis for rapprochement between certain groups and Tories involves shared affinities in terms of economic policy, immigration, and foreign relations.

It is clear that Harper government foreign policy priorities steer towards stronger relations with democracies which include America, Taiwan, Israel and India.

One would think that ethnic groups with ties to those nations, specifically Jews, Hindus, and some Chinese-Canadians, would be approached and courted by the Tory brain trust.

These groups not only have ethnic ties to friendly nations, but they fit the Conservative "profile" in terms of education, income, and socio-economic status.

Certainly, Conservative outreach to Jewish-Canadians has been unambiguous. Harper's unequivocal support of Israel in the war against the terrorist Hezbollah was a two-for-one hit: It showed his principled stance in favor of democracy and also endeared him to many in the Jewish community.

The situation with Chinese-Canadians is more complex. While well-educated and upscale communities in Markham and Richmond fit the Conservative profile, Harper's opposition to human rights abuses in China are not always received warmly. This summer, Tibetan human rights protests were met with considerable hostility from some Chinese-Canadians, who launched counter-protests.

Relations with this community seem destined to be mixed, with foreign policy as a potential sore point.

The relationship with Indo-Canadians requires the most nuanced policies. India is 82% Hindu and 2% Sikh, but in Canada, Liberal immigration policies have ensured that these two groups are almost equally balanced in numbers. Trade policies are also lop-sided in emphasis.

BEST GOVERNED STATE IN INDIA

This is illustrated by Canada's policy towards Gujarat. This Indian state draws more foreign investment than any other, has a growth rate higher than China's, and was ranked by the Fraser Institute as India's best governed. And yet, Liberal governments shunned trade with Gujarat due to unsubstantiated allegations of state complicity in Hindu-Muslim riots in 2002.

This year, the Conservative government announced the establishment of a trade office in Gujarat.

Last summer, Stephen Harper addressed the opening of the Etobicoke BAPS Hindu temple, built by Gujarati Hindus at a cost of \$20 million, with zero public funding.

"Canada must focus on Indian states which have the best business environment and human capital, and Gujarat fits these parameters," said Tory Jason Kenney.

Proof of the fit between Hindu and Tory values came in the form of a study carried out by Wilfrid Laurier University, which showed that of Jews, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, Hindus had the highest proportion voting for Conservative candidates.

Conservatives have gone far beyond other parties in performing for these communities, but informing voters of these efforts remains the challenge.

Ron Banerjee is a director of the Canadian Hindu Advocacy