

Parties back ethnic minority candidates in the race for seats

By Pippa Norris

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Both main parties have high-lighted the issue of race in this election. Michael Howard has accused the Labour government of kowtowing to special interests and political correctness on immigration and asylum. In response, Tony Blair has charged that the Conservatives are playing on people's fears.

But this brouhaha overshadows one striking development: for all Mr Howard's rhetoric, the Conservatives have overtaken the other main parties in the number of ethnic minority parliamentary candidates they have selected.

This is all the more intriguing because of the Conservatives' record. The party does not have a single black or Asian member of parliament; the last was elected in 1992. The Conservatives also lag behind in selecting women.

But will this election produce a House of Commons that more closely reflects the diversity of society? Analysis shows the main parties have made more progress in picking minority candidates than in placing them in winnable seats. The basic numbers are shown in the accompanying table. Although the past parliament included only 13 black or Asian MPs - 12 Labour and one Liberal Democrat - more minority candidates are in the pipeline. Fighting this election are 109 black and Asian candidates: 41 Conservative, 33 Labour and 35 Liberal Democrat.

What are their prospects? In the Conservative party, two ethnic minority candidates have inherited safe seats. Shailesh Vara has been selected in North West Cambridgeshire to replace Sir Brian Mawhinney, the retiring Conservative MP who had a majority of 18.4 per cent in 2001. Mr Vara is well connected in the party, as a vice-chairman, and has worked in the City.

Adam Afriyie, a millionaire businessman, has been selected as the candidate for Windsor to replace Michael Trend, the retiring MP.

Three Tory challengers fighting Labour marginals should be regarded as outside chances: Sandip Verma in Wolverhampton South West, Haroon Rashid in Bradford West, and Ali Miraj in Watford, all in seats with Labour majorities of between 9 per cent and 12 per cent.

The 36 other ethnic minority Tory candidates are gaining valuable experience by standing for election, which may well help their political careers in future contests, but few are in winnable seats.

Labour heads into the election with 11 ethnic minority MPs standing again, down one following the retirement of Paul Boateng. Only two, Parmjit Dhanda in Gloucester and Marsha Singh in Bradford West, are in marginal Labour constituencies with majorities of less than 10 per cent, vulnerable to loss on an anti-Labour tide.

In addition, Labour has picked five black or Asian candidates to replace retiring Labour MPs in safe seats, including Shahid Malik to replace Ann Taylor in Dewsbury and Sadiq Khan to replace Tom Cox in Tooting. The remaining 17 ethnic minority Labour candidates face contests that look largely unwinnable, fighting Conservative or Liberal Democrat incumbents with majorities of 10 per cent or more.

The Liberal Democrats' 35 ethnic minority candidates all face uphill struggles. In the few Labour and Conservative seats where the Liberal Democrat ethnic minority candidates are the main challengers, they face majorities of 20 per cent or more. Their one real hope is Parmjit Singh Gill, elected for Leicester South in the 2004 by-election.

So what will be the outcome on May 5? The most plausible estimate is that the number of ethnic minority MPs at Westminster will probably rise from 13 in 2004 to about 17-19. So progress, of sorts.

But it is still far from a level playing field. The census estimates that the ethnic minority population was 4.6m in 2001, or 7.9 per cent of the UK population. If the election reflected this, there would be 149 candidates for the main parties, not 109, and the next parliament would contain 51 ethnic minority MPs, not 18.

If parties are committed to speeding the pace of change, in subsequent elections they could consider following some of the positive action measures that have proved effective at boosting the number of women in office, exemplified by the use of all-women shortlists within many of Labour's target seats. Similar strategies could be adopted by using all-black candidate shortlists in certain constituencies.

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