

# Community Forum: Civic & Political Engagement of Immigrants to Canada

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# The starting point of the study

- Evidence that turnout among foreign born is lower than native born (Turgeon and Bilodeau, 2015 report for Elections Canada)
- Gap closes as people spend more time in Canada but remains significant (different for different groups, see for instance Soroka, Johnston and Banting 2007)
- Descriptive representation of immigrants does not match their proportion to the Canadian population (esp at municipal level, see Siemiatycky 2011)

# Collaborative study UBC Migration and SUCCESS

- Study took place between Dec 2018 and July 2019 – over 30 in depth interviews
- Recruitment in multiple languages, through community connections, online recruitment, snowballing

# Collaborative study UBC Migration and SUCCESS

- SUCCESS enabler but not in charge of data collection/analysis
- Interviews and interview analysis (ongoing) by myself with assistant interviewers/interpreters (English and other languages), and one transcriber

# Questions that inform the study

- How do immigrants experience politics in Canada? What elements shape their motivation to participate?
- Multiculturalism as “identity politics”: does this drive interest and participation in politics?
- What would work in terms of increasing opportunities and motivations to participate? (UX policy design)

# Interviews with politicians

- 8 interviews (between 1 and 2 hrs)
- Motivations and mechanisms of running for office
- Recruiting constituents inside and outside immigrant group: what works and what does not?
- Multiculturalism policy

# Interviews with community organizers

- Combination of self identification and referral
- 5 interviews (between 2 and 3 hrs)
- Motivations and background
- Community involvement and political participation
- Organizing within and outside of “own” immigrant group

# Interviews with immigrants and newcomers

- 18 life history interviews (between 3 and 4 hrs)
- Learning about politics
- Civic engagement
- Assessing quality and trustworthiness of political institutions



# Findings

- Very rich material (around 20 pages, single-spaced for each interview transcription)
- Focus on politicians' interview, with reference to community organizers and immigrants
- Removed names and parties

# Findings

- Getting into politics
- Culture, multiculturalism, adaptation and social integration
- Possible interventions

# GETTING INTO POLITICS

# The idea of “getting into” politics

- **Politicians:** Different pathways (activism, business, government or journalism) but decision to run for office only happened because **someone asked;**
- Narrative about motivation to run is **intrinsically linked to immigrant experience**

# Running for office

- *"Yea, in my mid 20s, and people [asked] so I just flat out said no, I said I'm not interested. And then over time people kept on coming to try to persuade me...I thought, oh well alright, let me go, you know that's your choice, you can either just scream and shout from the outside and complain about it, or try to get on the inside and do something. And so then I did." (Politician 7)*

# Running for office

- *“I said to myself, I said this is crazy. Remember this is 1989. There was a huge backlash of Chinese immigration. There were [...] campaigns and keep those Chinese out of our Shaughnessy area and those kinds of things....This would be crazy if he [the then Mayor] was out there defending us, nobody from our own community was willing to stand up to help. What message are we sending?” (Politician 1)*

# Running for office

- *“That’s why I worked so hard. And I want to prove to the world that [party leader] did not pick a wrong person from a visible minority, from a women. So that’s why I decided to run again because I felt that I can I have done so much that I still have things to do. Too bad that we could not become the government, but blessing in disguise that now I can spend more time in the riding.” (Politician 6)*

# Community organizers and politics

- **Service to the community** as not political/partisan
- *“Church and politics is separate. And we are very neutral, and we don’t give priority to any political parties. We don’t bring them, we don’t promote, we don’t do at all. We don’t do at all. Like we have a request one time, I think that was a kind of election going on, and there was somebody wanting to sponsor our community meal. Then sponsor community meal, then talk about their politics. Then I said, we don’t allow this. If you want to sponsor meal that’s fine, you can because you are doing for the community, but you cannot come and talk about your party”.* (Community organizer 5)



# Community organizers and politics

- Community organizations as **conduit to raise issues**
- *“For example, in [our organization’s] job we are doing like the marijuana, like the federal government wants the marijuana legalized, we kind of oppose it. We invite the minister to come over to [our organization] ...We try to let [our community] know that we should go out to be a politician, to serve the country, then our voice would be heard and listened”. (Community organizer 4)*

# Community organizers and politics

- Community organizing as **encouraging “political harm reduction”**
- *“I don’t think I have been doing much at all ...once you get to have some vision about how you can help the community but eventually as you are in the system with the politicians, you get a bit jaded. I have been trying to stay a bit more neutral and people ask... a lot of people ask me, oh so you know politics, you know the different government, what is your view? And I always say that I cannot tell you how to vote, but I said what I do is use a harm reduction approach myself. Whichever party that causes you the least harm, right?” (Community Organizer 1).*

# Politics on the ground

- **Immigrants and newcomers:** distinction between interested/uninterested breaks down
- *“Yea I won’t say... I won’t consider myself to be a person who’s like particularly interested in like the community and volunteering and stuff like that. But I guess it’s just a thing that I do. Yea, a thing that I do”. (Life History 1)*

# Politics on the ground

- *“There was never an opportunity that really naturally clicked to trigger me to thinking oh I want to get involved in politics back in school. But recently it did because like I have seen issue rise or the solution be proposed by a particular party wasn’t necessarily you know the optimal like just because they voted to be in the power position doesn’t necessarily means that they have the best solution for you know the majority. [...] I think every individual like including myself have the ability to um to change like the society a little bit. Yea” (Life history 4)*

# MULTICULTURALISM AND CANADIAN POLITICS

# Multiculturalism: mixed feelings among politicians

- Idea that **multiculturalism is a good idea, but practiced superficially**
- *“I think [...] there are two aspects of culture. One is visible. Touchable. Okay. Food and costume, dance, and so on. But the other [...] is really invisible. I think at the heydays, for example, oh yes we have all these different ethnic dances and all music and food. Fine, great. But if there is no hard work in terms of making people understand behind all of that, you know? You have to understand you know, if nobody is going to explain it to you or make you understand or people have no patience of trying to find out, then it’s lost. So this is why I think that we have not been able to develop the inner side of culture”. (Politician 6)*

# Mixed feelings about multiculturalism

- *“ [...] The problem with state policy is our politicians have not evolved. Nobody no one in today’s multicultural world is moving ahead and adopting this new reality of how Canada really is a culture. The people are experiencing it a different way” (Politician 1)*

# Immigrants' perspectives on multiculturalism

- Idea that multiculturalism is about “**petty identity politics**”:
- *“I signed up [for this study] because I want to learn how to be more involved but like I find it really, really hard[...]Ok so for the longest time in my life, I was concerned about issues that are very fundamental. So like political issues that are really basic stuff, like freedom of speech, having an independent judiciary, independent elections. Then you come to Canada and people are fighting about bike lanes, gender neutral bathrooms. It’s hard to feel invested in that stuff. In that sense multiculturalism is bad because people like me who aren’t interested in the petty stuff” (Life History 1)*



# INTERVENTIONS

# Interventions for deeper and better engagement

- Encourage politicians' engagement that is non-partisan and outside election time
- Need to provide mentoring and explaining the job of politics
- Build relationships and advocate for people's issues
- Curb social isolation among immigrants
- Change culture of engagement: from token to "soul searching"

# Non-partisan riding level engagement

- *“Well ridings, so what you do in a riding is you know most local MLAS have events but then you know they’re associated with that party. Right? They can have a non-partisan event. I used to do that, I know the current MLA probably does that. The people have breakfast with MLAs and anybody can go. Right? It’s not political, you get there, but MLAS have are the ones that have to do the work”.* (Politician 8)
- *“I think ridings are good but they must come not before election...they come and then four years you don’t see them. Then they show up you can’t trust because they just want the vote”* (Life History 12)

# Educating about the job of holding political office

- *“With civic education [...] It’s not so much about participating or not but do you know the job? Understand what the job is about [...] Start local: all three levels of government should be involved. Becoming a councilor is a a stepping stone to the provincial government, stepping stone to other government, right?” (Community Organizer 1)*

# Building relationships

- *“People will get engaged when something really moves them. Something has to be personal to make it public. And people have a lot of issues, but sometimes they just don’t know where to go. Right, and that’s another thing that I would say I have found over the years, sometimes they don’t know where to go. Even though there are all these resources, it’s really hard to navigate all those resources, and you always need an advocate”. (Politician 8)*

# Curbing social isolation

- *“Even the new immigrants, I don’t know, SUCCESS is doing that or not? When the new immigrants come in, right like how to fit into Canadian culture is kind of mixed now, multicultural, and you have to kind of adapt into different cultures. They don’t know how to make friends with people from different countries, you know? And that becomes a real depression for them. Depression...Everything collapses. So yea. [Social connections] so that’s a big need in the community”. (Community Organizer 3)*

# Approach diversity as an “addition”, not tokenism

- *“I would recommend [...] I think for everybody to really do a little bit of hard soul searching [...] The soul searching is easier when the person realize they’re living in the environment that they are being accepted. Then they see that I’m accepted, then I start to think that yes I also want to know why I’m being accepted and how am I going to accept other people?” (Politician 6)*

Q&A



## Community Forum on the Civic & Political Engagement of Immigrants to Canada

October 10, 2019

### World Café – Participant Brainstorm/Discussion – Notes

The following are the notes captured during the World Café portion of the Forum, when attendees engaged in small group discussions on three different topics. Attendees included representatives from community organizations and government, members of academia, and other interested community stakeholders.

#### Topic 1: What are some community-level interventions (bottom up) that would encourage more immigrants to be civically and politically engaged?

- Civic engagement training and mentoring:
  - Training and mentorship could include targeted outreach to influencers who are community leaders.
  - One-to-one meetings or mentorship may be helpful, supporting relationship building.
  - Training in civic engagements could be bundled with language classes, for example in educational environments or community settings. Newcomers deal with time constraints, which could mean that bundling training together would be a way to accommodate their schedules.
  - Civic engagement could be framed as a duty and a responsibility, so that newcomers and community members know that it is valued.
  - Building knowledge about civic engagement is an opportunity.
  - Being asked to be part of learning about civic affairs can provide a strong motivation for individuals to participate in training or mentorship programs.
- Learning about civic engagement is part of the integration process:
  - A program or service could be developed that compares civic and political life to that in newcomers' countries of origin. This may be a way to engage individuals with shared backgrounds, ethnicities, or languages in learning about civic and political life in Canada.
  - Utilizing neighbourhood organizations and contacts in community level interventions will be important.
- Encouraging recent immigrants to take on leadership roles in community organizations:
  - Mentoring will be helpful to engage recent immigrants in decision making and leadership in their local communities.
  - Specialized programs for youth could be developed (see North Shore examples – youth advisory committees and leadership groups can support this, including groups like Fresh Voices and the Vancouver Foundation).
- Role playing and simulations to facilitate teaching and learning about the process of becoming politically engaged (e.g., voting simulations).
- Guidance and supports are needed for community-level interventions:

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- We need to make institutional change to enable community-level interventions. Community-level interventions should be institutional, rather than only relying on immigrants' initiative and labour.
- Person to person relationship building within institutions can be helpful, in addition to digital engagement led by institutions.
- Institutions have multiple points of engagement and intervention in newcomers' lives (e.g., meetings, interviews, etc.) that can be leveraged.
- Potential to enhance what settlement agencies and overseas consulates are already doing.
- Articulating the importance of civic engagement is critical.
- There are accessible grants to support newcomers that can be used for discussion and training on civic engagement and political participation.
- Discouraging groupings.

**Topic 2: What are some of the policy interventions (top down) that would encourage more immigrants to be civically and politically engaged?**

- Revenue Canada could eliminate the policy that non-profits cannot advocate along political lines.
- Government and political parties may be made more representative of the diverse Canadian population:
  - A quota system may be one way to achieve greater diversity in government.
  - Consider infrastructures elsewhere such as the reservation system in India, which sets aside seats in different institutions for members of underrepresented groups, similar to affirmative action in the United States.
  - There could be issues to investigate with a quota system, as it may provide unfair advantages or disadvantages to some candidates. The fairness of such a system could be highly variable.
- Dual member representation could be a way to work towards greater equity, for example, along gender lines.
- Parties need to get out of their comfort zone in the voters and communities that they typically interact with:
  - Inclusive weighting procedures for outreach in ridings could help with this.
- The “greenlight” process for nomination of candidates by political parties needs to be more transparent:
  - This process is currently shadowy. There should be greater transparency about the reasons why a particular individual is or is not chosen by a party.
  - Making this process more transparent may be a check against discrimination and could help to build trust with voters.
- Rethinking the unequal size of electoral districts across Canada:
  - It may be worthwhile to investigate how districts are divided, considering the ward system.
- Voting rights for permanent residents:

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- Several Canadian cities have put forward proposals for permanent residents to have the right to vote as a way to enable newcomers to have a voice, including Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary and Hamilton.
- Engagement in municipal elections can be a stepping stone to getting involved in provincial and federal elections.
- Citizenship education:
  - The government should provide support for learning and teaching about more diverse aspects of citizenship.
  - Courses on citizenship could focus on participation and involvement in Canadian politics, including practical knowledge about the job of holding office.
  - A national policy strategy for citizenship education could mandate training for newcomers about aspects of civic and political participation beyond what is currently offered on Canadian geography, history, politics, and social life.
- Newcomers' engagement in decision making within community organizations could be expanded through hiring and inclusion policies:
  - Community organizations could be mandated to reach out to diverse populations as part of their hiring and volunteer recruitment.
  - Engagement is challenging, but local organizations and institutions could be doing more to reach out to those not already deeply involved within their communities.
- We need a better understanding of pathways to civic and political participation:
  - How can we learn more about these opportunities through peoples' experiences and stories of becoming involved?
  - Community leaders need to reach out directly to individuals and groups at local levels to encourage their participation.
  - We need to better understand different identities and relationships to Canada and Canadian policy.
- The media's influence on political engagement could be leveraged:
  - The media could support further discussion of political issues beyond election cycles.
  - The media have a responsibility to help citizens develop an awareness of issues and decisions beyond the formal debates held during elections.
- Efforts to engage individuals in civic and political life have to compete with everything else that is demanding individuals' engagement:
  - Within an attention economy, there is so much competition for individuals' time and engagement. We need to understand political engagement in this context.
  - What types of engagement can we create in order to be able to compete with everything else that demands individuals' time and attention?
  - In what ways do individuals use information literacy and digital literacy practices to critically engage in politics? How can digital literacies be supported and developed?
  - How does "digital citizenship" relate to political engagement?

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- Participation in politics should be deepened:
  - Transactional participation (e.g., voting) could be extended to forms of deeper, longer term engagement in political and civic activities.
- Discourse on politics need to be more positive and outcome-oriented in order to highlight citizens' power:
  - It is challenging for people to get involved if they feel they don't have agency and power to make change.
  - How might we design an ecosystem of support for political participation?
  - Citizens can feel empowered through positive framings of individuals' and communities' contributions and opportunities for leadership.
  - A focus on citizen or community action and outcomes can empower citizens, and here the media has a role to play in finding and sharing these narratives.
- Lowering the voting age to 16:
  - Increasing the number of younger voters may be a way for engagement to bubble up through families.
- What is the difference between participation and engagement?
  - How do we define these activities?
  - What are the gaps between them?
  - What links can be made between short term (e.g., voting) and long term involvement in politics?

### Topic 3: What are the enabling factors to civic and political participation?

- We can do more to make people feel part of civic and political life:
  - How do people have a stake in civic and political life and a sense of agency?
- Spaces that enable participation:
  - Individuals can leverage their involvement in cultural community centres, sports, clubs, and agricultural cooperatives, for example, in engaging in local, regional, and national issues.
- Experiences of discrimination should be considered.
- We can explore the experiences of permanent residents compared with visitors and tourists with regards to participation.
- We could do more to market the skills and ideas of civic and political engagement among newcomer communities.
- We can consider avenues for contribution of existing skills, expertise (e.g., in health care).
- It is important to prioritize building public supports for participation (e.g., through op eds).
- Joining policy consultations with MLAs and MPs can enable people to get involved.
- At institutional levels, leaders can reach out to new immigrants, and racialized, underrepresented groups:
  - Being asked or invited by leaders, and staff of community groups can be a strong motivator. However, there are perhaps unintended negative consequences that need to be examined.

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- Having allies and mentors who can show how individuals can take steps towards further participation and contribution.
  - Organizations can plan to recruit newcomers for roles as board members in communities.
- It will be important to remove language barriers in order to promote understanding of political participation and systems:
  - Translated documents can facilitate access (e.g., information relating to town halls, political processes, etc.)
  - Facilitators in various languages can provide education about rights, public decision-making processes, and identify needs of community members.
- Educating and nurturing public life:
  - Education on the public sphere is an enabling factor.
  - Opportunities for democratic engagement can be created through neighbourhood houses, town halls, and community cafes.
  - One to one and informal conversations can be an avenue for participation.
  - We need to recognize the quick transition from being a permanent resident to becoming a voting citizen. Further education on civic and social topics can be provided to facilitate this transition.



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