# CITIZENSHIP, NEWCOMER INTEGRATION AND VOTER PARTICIPATION: CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGES

JACK JEDWAB

Jack Jedwab is the President of the Association for Canadian Studies and the Metropolis Institute. Holding a PhD in Canadian History from Concordia University, he taught at Université du Québec à Montréal and McGill University. He has taught courses on the history of immigration in Quebec, on ethnic minorities in Quebec, on official language minorities in Canada and on sport in Canada. He has also authored essays for books, journals and newspapers across the country, in addition to being the author of various publications and government reports on issues of immigration, multiculturalism, human rights and official languages.

## INTRODUCTION

Amongst academics and policymakers, the concept of citizenship has taken on an increasingly broader meaning and includes sometimes elaborate discussion about social and political engagement. There is also greater attention being directed at the intersection between citizenship acquisition and identity. In his seminal work on *Citizenship and Immigration*, the German sociologist Christian Joppke (2010) looks at the various dimensions of that relationship from both a theoretical and practical standpoint in North America, Europe and Australia. He points to three key dimensions in that relationship as status, (regarding formal membership in a State), rights (regarding the privileges to which one might be entitled in one's own state or another) and identity (regarding the belief and values citizens of a particular state or society might be expected to espouse).

Canadian policy discourse on immigration makes links between citizenship and newcomer integration. In referring to the rights and responsibilities of newcomers, Canada's official citizenship study guide – *Discover Canada* – mentions obeying the law, taking responsibility for oneself and one's family, and voting in elections. The guide (2021) adds that: "...the right to vote comes with a responsibility to vote in federal, provincial or territorial and local elections." It therefore follows that immigrant voter participation is deemed to be an important indicator of newcomer integration.

Using voter participation as a vital marker of active citizenship and, in turn, a predictor of migrant integration risks constituting too narrow a perspective across multiple and intersecting indicators that make for successful newcomer insertion. In effect, assessing voter participation is perhaps better within the larger perspective of democratic partici-

pation amongst newcomers. An exclusive focus on voting may end up dismissing other key factors that either support or detract from democratic participation on the part of newcomers. Also, the focus on gaps between immigrant and non-immigrant, even with socio-demographic filters and other controls in place, may not sufficiently capture the importance of certain identity markers (age, gender, ethnicity and racial identification) that help explain the gaps. Such analysis is needed to help us better understand the extent to which the gaps represent challenges to newcomer integration or are associated with obstacles to it. That which follows will use survey data to examine whether the emphasis on voter participation can be used as a barometer for measuring successful integration and "active" citizenship.

## INTEGRATION CONCEPTS AND VOTER PARTICIPATION

As noted above, democratic participation has become a key dimension or indicator of citizenship. To that end, European political institutions have stressed the importance of promoting political participation in support of good practices for what they refer to as active citizenship (European Commission, 2012).

They've also established a connection between immigrant integration and voter participation as illustrated in the European Commission's handbook on integration, which notes that: "The political participation of immigrants is one dimension of the integration process: the greater the political participation, the greater the integration in the democratic domain" (European Commission, 2004).

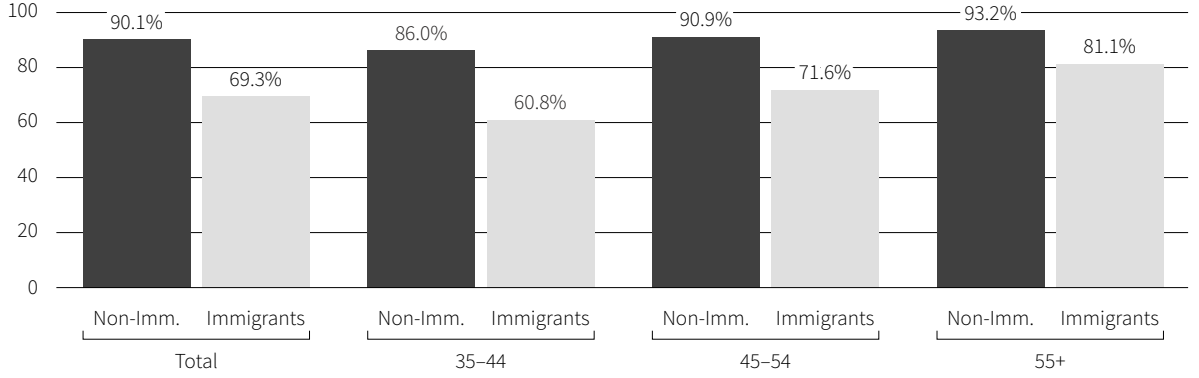
For its part, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has observed that becoming actively involved in the host-country society is essential towards immigrant integration and has implications for immigrant well-being. As it notes, "...by making their voices heard, taking an interest in how their host society works, and participating in the decisions that shape its future, immigrants become an integral part of their new country, this being the very objective of integration" (OECD, 2018). As such, voter participation is described as a fundamental element of immigrants' civic engagement and a sign of integration.

## DATA FINDINGS

As observed below, immigrants are less likely than non-immigrants in Canada to say that they've voted in the previous federal election. (Note: It is important to keep in mind that these are self-assessments). The gap is especially affected by age cohorts with the youngest group surveyed (age 25–34) far less likely to say that they voted than persons over the age of 55, where the gap between non-immigrant and immigrant is reduced to just over 10 points (see Figure 1).

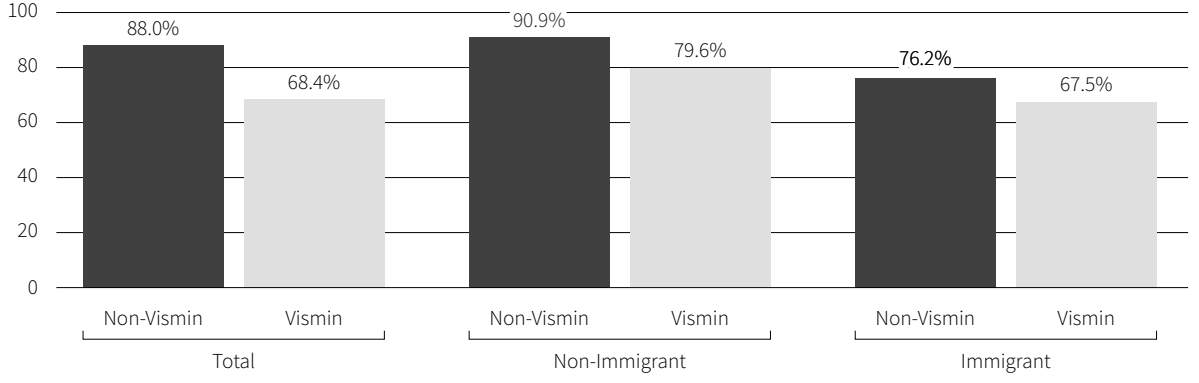
With regards to visible minorities, the chart below points to considerable gaps in voter participation between non-visible minority and visible minority Canadians. There are similar gaps when contrasting non-immigrant visible minority with persons not identifying as visible minority, and immigrant visible minority with immigrants not identifying as a visible minority. Hence visible minority status is a predictor of voter participation independent of whether it pertains or not to immigrant status (see Figure 2).

**FIGURE 1. VOTED IN LAST FEDERAL ELECTION**




Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.

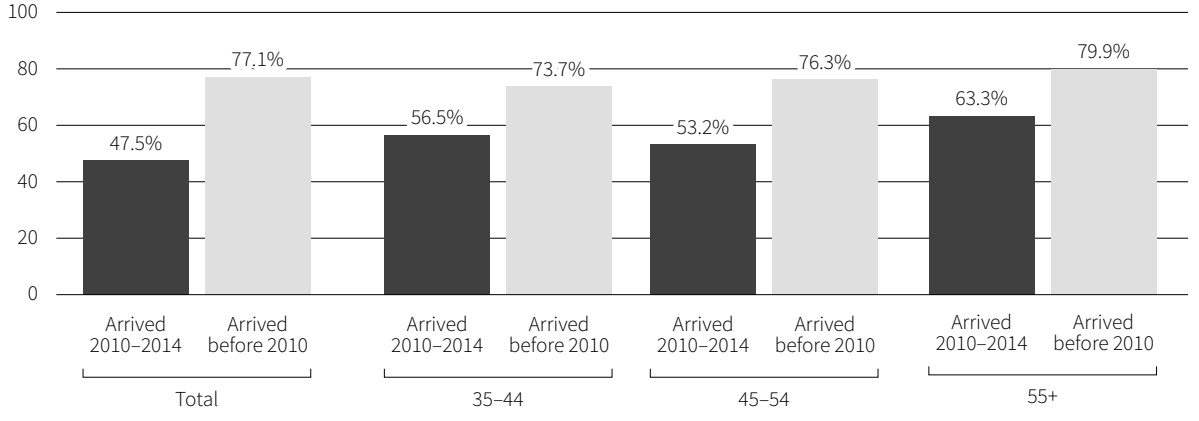
**FIGURE 2. VOTED IN LAST FEDERAL ELECTION**




Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.

Figure 3 considers the intersection of age with immigrant time of arrival and confirms that there is a consistent gap across the age spectrum independent of time of arrival and that the latter is a key predictor of voter participation with the more established immigrants considerably more inclined to say that they've voted in federal elections than those more recently arrived.

**FIGURE 3. IMMIGRANTS WHO VOTED IN THE LAST FEDERAL ELECTION – BY AGE AND ARRIVAL YEAR**




Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.

Yet another socio-demographic factor consideration underlying voter participation is gender, where independent of immigrant status we observe an important gap in the Figure 4 between men and women for both immigrant and non-immigrant alike.

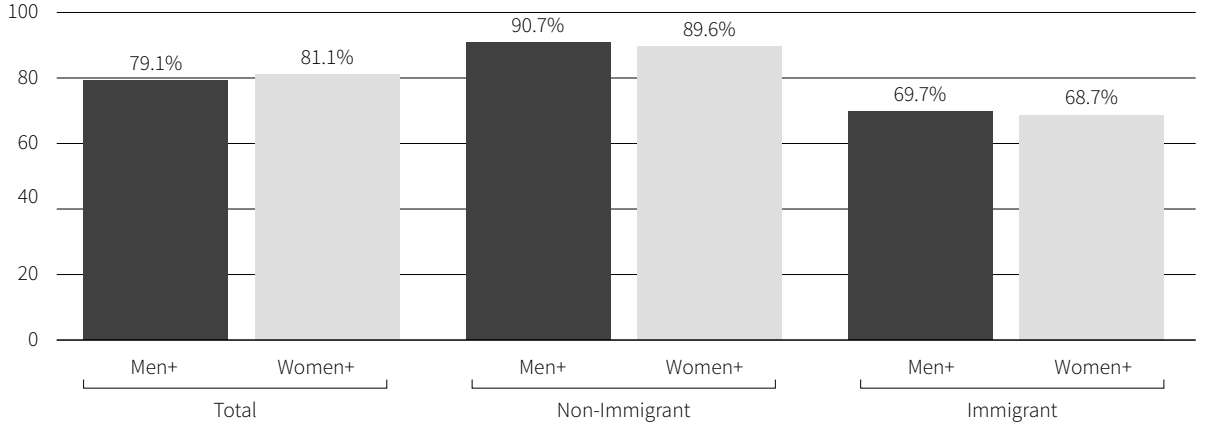
## BEYOND PARTICIPATION

We presented in the charts above a comparison of immigrant and non-immigrant voter participation as it intersects with visible minority status, age and gender. To varying degrees, these socio-demographic and identity markers are clearly significant predictors of participation. What the data doesn't tell us about are the kinds of considerations that account for the gaps and/or what is potentially impeding active citizenship. Associating lower immigrant voter participation with a weakened sense of citizenship requires more investigation to determine why this is the case.

Some of the common explanations for lower rates of voter participation are a lack of interest in and knowledge of political processes, low levels of trust in politicians and growing cynicism toward democratic institutions. We considered selected aspects of democratic engagement through a public opinion survey done by Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies. It looks into the extent to which Canadians closely follow politics, whether they feel that they are better informed about politics than most people, if they believe their vote matters, and finally whether they think the decisions made by politicians have a significant impact on their daily lives. The results point to noteworthy differences in the responses given on the basis of age and gender.

With regards to the degree to which they say they closely follow Canadian politics, the gaps on the basis of gender and across the age spectrum are

**FIGURE 4. VOTED IN THE LAST FEDERAL ELECTION**




Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2020.

far more significant than the gap between persons born inside the country and those born outside the country (see Table 1).

As seen in Table 2, when it comes to the perception around whether one's vote matters, the youngest cohort surveyed (18–34) is less likely than the oldest cohort (55 plus) to feel that their vote matters. When asked about whether they are better informed about politics, men (45%) are considerably more

**TABLE 1.**

| I CLOSELY FOLLOW CANADIAN POLITICS | TOTAL | BORN IN CANADA | BORN OUTSIDE OF CANADA | MALE | FEMALE | 18–34 | 35–54 | 55+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 47% | 49% | 42% | 58% | 37% | 35% | 42% | 60% |
| No | 48% | 48% | 49% | 39% | 56% | 60% | 53% | 36% |
| I don't know / I prefer not to answer | 5% | 4% | 9% | 3% | 7% | 5% | 6% | 4% |

Source: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 25-29, 2023.

**TABLE 2.**

| | TOTAL | BORN IN CANADA | BORN OUTSIDE OF CANADA | MALE | FEMALE | 18–34 | 35–54 | 55+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| My vote matters | 76.6% | 77.9% | 71.6% | 75% | 78% | 69% | 72% | 85% |
| I am better informed about politics than most people | 33.8% | 35.2% | 28.3% | 45% | 23% | 30% | 33% | 37% |

Source: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 25-29, 2023.

likely to think so than are women (23%). Let's bear in mind, of course, that it doesn't mean the men are right in their perception.

## CONCLUSION

Countries with long histories of immigration and/or those with current migrant flows are increasingly acknowledging the need for effective integration policies and measures to evaluate performance. Gaps between immigrants and non-immigrants in various modes of democratic participation offer legitimate indicators for assessing integration outcomes. Yet any such comparisons must take into account identity markers and socio-demographic characteristics to properly establish some degree of causality when drawing conclusions in this regard. This is even more important when making the link between integration and citizenship, as the former is conceptually aligned with forms of mutual accommodation between immigrant and non-immigrant, whereas that might not be the case when such phenomena are seen through the prism of citizenship.

Looking at voter participation as an expression of newcomer integration and/or active citizenship requires a closer examination of social and/or economic factors that may account for those gaps, without which the assessment will be incomplete.

### APPENDIX

Survey Methodology: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, the survey was conducted during the week of September 25th, 2023 for the Association for Canadian Studies via web panel with 1,502 Canadians. A margin of error cannot be associated with a non-probability sample in a panel survey for comparison purposes. A probability sample of 1,502 respondents would have a margin of error of ±2.5%, 19 times out of 20.

## REFERENCES

European Commission, *Handbook on Integration* (2004) First edition. European Commission (Directorate General for Justice, Freedom and Security) Directorate-General. http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home

European Commission, *Political Participation and EU Citizenship: Perceptions and Behaviours of Young People – Evidence from Eurobarometer Surveys*. Report produced by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), 2012. https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/policy/documents/perception-behaviours_en.pdf

Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada. *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, Study Guide, 2021. www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/migration/ircc/english/pdf/pub/discover.pdf

Christian Joppke, *Citizenship and Immigration*, Cambridge, Oxford, Boston, Polity, 2010.

Survey, Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 25-29, 2023.

OECD-European Commission, *Settling in 2018: Indicators of Immigrant Integration*, December 9, 2018. www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/indicators-of-immigrant-integration_67899674-en

Statistics Canada, *General Social Survey*, 2020.