FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BY IMMIGRANTS AND NEWCOMERS:

Understanding the Linkages and Posing the Questions

ABSTRACT

Studies in Canada, Europe, and the United-States conclude that newcomers tend to participate less in the immigrant-receiving countries' political processes. Recent research has also shown that there is a positive correlation between formal political participation and the number of ethnic organizations. Given the import of social capital in contemporary societies, and given a growing concern with the escalating democratic deficit in these societies, the authors put forth that both formal and non-formal levels of political participation must be promoted by all levels of government.

There are principally two mechanisms by which citizens seek to effect social and political change. One is through formal electoral participation and the other is through participation in civil society also referred to as non-formal or non-electoral political participation. There is a growing interest in the relationship between these two forms of participation. Is there a mutually reinforcing relationship between formal political participation and participation in community organizations? Daiva Stasiulis notes that a focus on formal political participation can obscure the multiplicity of ways that newcomers and members of minority communities engage politically – within ethnocultural communities, in social and protest movements, in trade unions, "homeland politics" and in a variety of civic organizations at the grass roots level (Stasiulis, 1997: 13). Like Stasiulis, Biles (1998) argues for a broader definition of both political participation (to encompass non-formal participation) and the political arena. He calls for further research on the extent to which formal and non-formal participation by organizations representing the interests of newcomer and immigrant communities can overcome their distance and alienation from the formal institutions of government and can leverage a higher profile for their issues and concerns.

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Understanding the Reasons for Political Participation by Immigrants and Newcomers

A variety of complex reasons are involved in the decisions by immigrants and newcomers to participate actively in civic organizations or in the formal realm of politics. Recent studies from Canada, Europe, Great Britain, the United States, and Israel suggest that in general political participation by newcomers appears to be low in most immigrant-receiving countries (Togeby, 1999, Fennema and Tillie, 1999). Preliminary research suggests a number of factors account this including:

- Their marginal political status;
- Alienation from institutions in the host country (Diel and Blohm, 2001);
- Discrimination and barriers to political participation;
- The lack of a political opportunity structure that actively encourages the participation of immigrants in politics (Bousetta, 2000);
- A time lag (typically into the next generation) from newcomer arrival to settlement, integration and full political participation (Chui et al, 1991); and
- Political parties do not do much to encourage the incorporation of new immigrants into their ranks (Anwar, 2001).

In the Canadian context, Biles (1998) speaks of the disenfranchisement of the communities from formal political structures, Frideres identifies pull factors that draw them into engagement and push factors that act as barriers to their participation (Frideres, 1997) and Jedwab suggests that "The opportunity to participate and having access to the particular arena is a critical factor in civic engagement". He goes further and argues that costs and benefits weigh heavily on the decision making of individual actors. The incentives and disincentives are not monetary rather they include considerations of solidarity, personal satisfaction and making a difference to the community as a whole (Jedwab, 2002).

Several recent studies suggest grounds for optimism, that immigrant and ethno-racial representation

is improving in Canada's electoral system. Thus, Black finds that recent federal elections have returned larger numbers of minority candidates, although some communities – particularly visible minorities – remain significantly under-represented (Black, 2002). Similarly, in studying municipal representation in Montreal, Carolle Simard finds increased numbers of politicians whose origins lie outside the francophone and anglophone communities (Simard, 2003). Conversely, in studying election results in the Toronto area, Siemiatycki and Saloojee find a stall in increased newcomer representation, leaving visible minority communities particularly under-represented in elected office (Siemiatycki and Saloojee, 2003).

The political participation of immigrants in society (in both the formal and non-formal realms) can be seen as part of the process of social and political integration in the new society (Mesch, 2003, forthcoming). Studies of newcomers have dealt extensively with different aspects of their integration in the new society including labour market inclusion and exclusion (Bailey and Waldinger, 1991; Portes and Jensen, 1987; Sanders and Nee, 1987), language proficiency (Espenshade and Fu, 1997) and social exclusion and social integration (Zhou and Logan, 1989). Mesch notes that the extensive literature has been dominated by the "assimilation approach" that emphasizes the role of "socio-economic status attainment and acculturation in the integration of immigrants. According to this model, the improvement in the immigrant socio-economic status allows to him/her to feel part of the mainstream of society and to attain housing and social status in the new society" (Mesch, 2003). Significantly less research has been done on the issue of the political integration of newcomers.

A broad survey of the research suggests that there are four sets of factors that determine the extent of civic and political participation by members of newcomer and minority communities. The first set is related to individual resources, such as age, marital status, education and income. (Junn, 1999). The second set of factors is related to the trajectory of settlement and integration (Back and Soininen, 1998). These include: length of residence and language proficiency, acquisition of knowledge of the political system, the different political parties and the different tactics being used in the country for political influence (Junn, 1999). This learning process requires the knowledge of the language as a central tool for the understanding of documents, speeches and local laws. A study on immigrants' participation in Danish local elections indicated that voting was positively related to length of stay: the longer the immigrant has been in the country, the greater the likelihood of participation in local politics (Togeby, 1999). A third set of factors that either inhibit or enhance civic and political participation by members of racialized and newcomer communities has to do with the complex interplay between social identity and the persistence and reproduction of exclusion and discrimination (see below). The fourth set of factors relate to the relationship between formal political participation and participation in ethno-specific organizations.

Identifying the Relationship between Civic Engagement and Formal Political Participation

The research of Fennema and Tillie in Holland points to the positive correlation between the formal political participation and the number of ethnic organizations (Fennema and Tillie, 1999, 2000). This network of ethnic organizations represents a form of social capital as groups that were highly organized and interrelated also reported a high degree of trust in the local government and a high level of political interest. Fennema and Tillie found a strong correlation between the number of immigrants' organization and the level of political participation and political trust (Fennema and Tillie 1999). Social capital, information flows and political knowledge which derives from social and organizational networks play an important role in enhancing political participation and political mobilization (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1995).

Another lengthy study on political participation by newcomer communities in Holland found that voting patterns by members of immigrant communities was "ideologically driven", and that there was a strong relationship between participating in elections (as voters and as candidates) and the "civicness" (in Putnam's sense of the term) of ethno-racial organizations. In analyzing the relationship between voter turn out, number of candidates per ethnic group and the number of candidates per ethnic group the researchers concluded that the "The voting turnout of Turks and the high number of Turkish councillors [compared to other newcomer communities] corresponds with a high density of organizations in Amsterdam and a strong network between organizations in the Turkish community. This finding is repeated at the national level. Our results show that ... the general idea that civic community and political participation are interrelated is thus supported" (van Heesum, 2003). This finding was consistent with Putnam's conclusion that a strong and vibrant civic community enhances the functioning of democracy.

In studying patterns of electoral political representation in Toronto, Siemiatycki and Saloojee (2003) identify a 'dual representation' gap for immigrants and ethno-racial minorities in the city. Statistically, visible minorities and recent immigrant communities are badly under-represented in Toronto's electoral politics; and substantively, minority politicians who do hold elected office are generally not regarded by community activists in the non-formal sphere of political life as adequate champions of community interests.

Community-based leaders from 15 ethno-racial organizations in Toronto were surveyed for their assessment of the responsiveness of government in general, and elected minority politicians in particular. The verdict was hardly flattering. While they believed that having Toronto's diverse communities represented on Toronto city council was extremely important in principle, they were largely critical of the record of elected politicians from such minority communities. These minority politicians were typically described by community activists as detached from their community, and more mainstream or 'right wing' than the organizations actively working on behalf of distinct communities. Moreover this assessment came from community leaders with extensive experience in community organization, mobilization and advocacy. This suggests differences of priorities, goals and ideology between representatives of the same community in the formal and non-formal political spheres. Conversely, Black's research on federal politicians suggests that representatives from minority communities tend to be more left wing than their anglophone and francophone counter-parts (Black, 2003).

More generally, community leaders who were surveyed identified a range of obstacles their communities faced in trying to influence municipal government. These included the

lack of representation (in the employment equity sense); language barriers, discriminatory attitudes and practices, insufficient knowledge of how to engage in civic politics and properly access politicians and bureaucrats, inaccessible politicians and bureaucrats and barriers to civic engagement within ethno-racial communities (absence of unity, lack of enthusiasm for politics). These concerns were also expressed by other community based immigrant settlement groups who found that politicians and bureaucrats at all levels of government tended to see them as "service providers to be excluded from the "decision making and active participation in the governance process of the settlement support system". The concerns identified by Siemiatycki and Saloojee were also expressed by agencies involved in settlement and housing issues. These agencies noted that they were not simply service providers "passively and mechanically 'delivering services' to an equally passive and dependent group of helpless people". Rather, even though it was not recognized by elected officials and bureaucrats, they saw themselves as "active participants in decision making, from needs assessment, to program development to policy making" (Integrated, Settlement Planning Research Project: 2000: 69).

Social Identity and Non Formal Political Participation

All of these studies point to the importance of utilizing a broad definition of both political participation and a broader definition of the political arena – to encompass issues of political advocacy and protest politics (Jedwab, 2002). A study by Junn found that members of historically disadvantaged racialized communities are more likely to be involved in protest and less in voting. On the other side, members of non-disadvantaged communities are more likely to be involved in electoral voting (Junn, 1999). The Junn study, the questions raised by Biles, and the survey by Siemiatycki and Saloojee all point to another set of factors that either inhibit or enhance political participation by members of racialized and newcomer communities – the complex interplay between social identity and social exclusion. What is not clear from the research is whether the under representation of minorities in the structures of formal political institutions actually contributes to greater involvement in non-formal participation and whether it is the antidote to the disenfranchisement referred to by Biles.

One of the consequences of dealing with the effects of exclusion and discrimination is that members of racialized and minority communities and their organizations find other avenues to engage in political activity. Certainly, social identity has a direct bearing on both the form and the extent of political participation. This is the substantive dimension of political participation. Discrimination leads to incomplete citizenship and undervalued participation and undervalued recognition (Saloojee 2003). The recognition of the absence of social inclusion, coupled with the reality of exclusion and discrimination then prompts a reflexive or what Castells calls a "defensive" assertion of identity (Castells, 1997). The assertion of an identity against discrimination and exclusion in turn creates a politics of advocacy and protest through which social actors seek to build a new identity that redefines their position in society and simultaneously challenges the social and political institutions of society to change. It is this challenge that raises interesting issues for the financial well being of many ethno-racial community organizations working in the non-formal realm. They utilize their social capacity to hold states and institutions accountable, they provide immense opportunities for civic engagement, their existence and well being are signs of a healthy civil society, but many are also dependent on the state for financial assistance. Thus as the survey of leaders in the Toronto municipal area found that their advocacy and protest functions are heightened in periods of fiscal restraint – leading some elected officials to further question the wisdom of providing financial support to organizations are critical of the state. How can the social capital developed in diverse communities be harnessed in the interests of promoting increased political participation at both the formal level as well as in civil society? According to Jedwab, "The accumulation of political capital in the non-formal arena is at times viewed as contrary to the growth of social capital. In fact political participation outside the formal arena is an area of civic involvement where government frequently exercises prudence in its otherwise ringing endorsement of voluntarism. Such hesitation on the part of the State becomes more apparent when reviewing the evolving literature on non-formal political participation in Canada." (Jedwab, 2002).

Conclusion

In the sphere of formal political participation, the state has a responsibility to actively encourage the widest possible political participation by members of racialized and newcomer communities. The state, despite the ambivalence cited by Jedwab, should work with community based organizations to reverse the trends towards voter apathy and declining voter turnouts. The state has a responsibility to reverse the perception and the reality of "disenfranchisement" from formal institutions noted by Biles, and ensure the viability of organizations representing the interests of women, gays and lesbians, members of ethno-racial, linguistic, religious and newcomer communities. Federal, provincial and municipal policy makers also have a responsibility to engage in meaningful consultation with civic organizations. The latter is essential to viable substantive political participation. Who comes to the policy table is important. Whose voices are heard around the policy table is critical. Which organizations and which leaders are validated through the consultation process sends powerful signals to policy communities. Within the Canadian context, it is clear that much more research on the relationship between participation in civic organizations and formal political participation is required. Such research would focus on (i) the relationship between healthy, viable and strong community organizations and political participation; (ii) how community organizations currently contribute to political participation; (iii) the various forms of political participation that community organizations currently engage in; (iv) the intersections of immigrant and minority political participation with the engagement and mobilization of women, gays and lesbians, linguistic, religious and other social movements; (v) the role such non-formal activity plays in civic engagement, political mobilization, articulating political interests, and engaging with political parties in the formal political arena. There is much to learn about strengthening democracy in Canada.

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