OTHERS' LANGUAGES AND VOTING IN CANADA:

Recent Findings on Political Participation and Perception of Non-Official Language Groups

ABSTRACT

What factors contribute to low voter turnout? According to the author, more electoral studies need to focus on non-official language communities, where participation rates tend to be lower than the average. In this article, Dr. Jedwab looks at recent findings on political participation in Canada. He suggests that those who use socio-demographic data to examine immigrant voter participation should also take into account other intersecting factors, such as income for example.

JACK JEDWAB
Jack Jedwab is Executive Director of the Association for Canadian Studies

Defining the responsibilities of citizenship has become the object of increasing attention on the part of scholars and policy-makers in many pluralist democracies. It is widely assumed that immigrants and members of ethnocultural groups participate less in the democratic process as reflected in part by relatively lower voter turnout in elections. Results of the 2004 federal contest may further confirm such hypotheses as it would appear that, on average, immigrants voted less than non-immigrants. As we shall observe, for the most part those ridings with the highest concentrations of immigrants tend to have lower than average rates of voter participation. Few studies have examined the relationship between immigrant status, ethnic identification, language skills and voter participation in Canada. Where immigrants are concentrated, one is often struck by anecdotal evidence of poor turnout contrasted with the sometimes emotional charges of candidate nomination contests being overwhelmed by large concentrations of such individuals.

Reviewing the Literature

Few studies of electoral behaviour have focused directly on non-official language communities. However it is via the body of research on ethnocultural groups and immigrants that observations are made in this regard. Over the years, several analysts have attempted to identify those factors that account for lower turnout amongst immigrants and whether its causes are similar to those found amongst the broader population. To date, the findings from this literature are inconclusive as researchers have reached different conclusions on how politically involved immigrants are compared with non-immigrants. Some writers who believe that immigrants are less involved in politics have emphasized, by way of explanation, that newcomers are less knowledgeable about Canadian political norms and values than native-born Canadians. Bell and Tepperman (1979), for example, argue that native-born Canadians are "tradition carriers who must train the many newcomers in the 'Canadian way'." A relatively large number of immigrants to Canada, in their view, posed serious problems for cultural integration and national unity. Bell and Tepperman did not directly test the proposition that there are immigrant/non-immigrant differences in political activity and voting behaviour. They simply reviewed literature around such issues, much of it non-Canadian.

Much focus has also been directed at the rhythm and process of integration, considered a prerequisite to civic and voter participation. Poor language skills are sometimes cited as a major barrier to participation. Many new Canadians are not comfortable using English or French when dealing with potentially complicated governmental or political matters. Therefore, explaining voter procedures and electoral issues in their mother tongue can facilitate access to a process that some may find confusing. Immigrants may lack social ties in Canada and sufficient capacity in English or French, both of which will help in learning about politics. Some new arrivals will find it difficult to participate politically because of their limited knowledge of their new political environment. The fact that immigrants come from different cultures also may differentially affect their political participation in Canada. They may encounter difficulty in transferring their political experiences in their countries of origin onto the political process in Canada.

Fewer studies have chosen to emphasize "why immigrants vote" as opposed to why they don't vote. In this regard, various dimensions of civic participation are examined, such as the role of minority advocacy groups as providing possible opportunities for better understanding the value of political participation. As Chui et al. (1991) note, research must pay greater attention to the explanatory

mechanisms driving voter turnout in ethnic communities. Advocacy bodies may assist in attracting or recruiting individuals to political campaigns. They add that among immigrant and non-immigrant (i.e. settled) minority individuals, "ties with ethnic leaders encourage political participation."

The political system may fuel disinterest amongst ethnocultural groups and thereby contribute to reduce voter participation amongst a number of communities. The capacity to rally members of the ethnic community is where ethnic representatives have an upper hand over non-ethnic candidates. According to Sayers and Jetha (2002), increased minority representation has been attributed to the numerical concentration of minorities in urban ridings, assertive ethnic communities, party activists who recruited and mobilized new members for nomination battles, and to party initiatives such as ethnic community liaison committees or affirmative action measures.

Using data from the 1974 Canadian National Election Study, Jerome Black compared the participation rates of Canadian-born British, French and "others" as well as foreign-born British and Non-British. He found significantly lower rates of turnout for the Canadian-born British in his sample (Black, 1982) thus illustrating the need for exercising caution when making assertions about immigrant versus non-immigrant voting behaviour. Black found that British immigrants, non-British immigrants and the native-born were not very different in their levels of political participation. A subsequent study by Black (1988) used a 1983 Toronto-area survey of immigrants of five different ethnic origins to argue that most of them were able to transfer past political experiences to the new Canadian system. British immigrants did not enjoy advantages in terms of transferability, and each type of immigrant resembled native Canadians in participation levels. Immigrants' political interest in the country of origin also had a significant positive impact on interest in Canadian politics.

In a 1991 study on voter turnout Black measured the relative impact of ethnicity and nativity on turnout. Controlling for socio-economic status, age, political attitudes and organizational involvement he finds that only the West Indian respondents (all of whom were foreign-born) vote significantly less than the reference group (Canadian-born British). It is interesting to note that controlling for length of residence in Canada weakens, but does not eliminate, the West Indian vote differential (Black, 1991).

Some studies have pointed to problems associated with studying the effects of immigrant background upon political involvement by comparing only Canadian-born and foreign-born. The native-born, like the foreign-born, appear to be heterogeneous group, and this complexity should be taken into account. The diverse character of voting behaviour is illustrated in a study on the perceptions of Montreal ethnic community leaders regarding voter participation. Miriam Lapp (1999) note that amongst some ethnic groups, voter turnout is higher than it is for the entire population. She finds this to be true for the Greek community, though not the case in the Chinese and Jewish communities. In the case of the Italian and Portuguese, group rates of voter participation were on par with those of the broader population. Lapp points out that variations occur despite controls for citizenship, period of immigration and home language. In effect, turnout is not merely a function of length of time spent in Canada. Consequently, she concludes that assimilation alone is not the best predictor of voter participation.

Lapp (1999) points out that ethnic community leaders tended to offer different explanations for low voter turnout. In the case of Montreal's Chinese community leaders felt it was generally quite difficult to convince people to vote and expected low turnout by community members in all three elections. The most frequently cited reason for low voter turnout was lack of interest in politics. On the other hand, leaders in the Greek community cited a strong interest in politics as the primary reason for high turnout in their community.

Traditional arguments insisting that integration or assimilation are preconditions for greater political participation have rarely defined what they imply in using these notions. In fact, at times their arguments have a 'chicken and egg' character where one is tempted to ask whether low participation is assessed at the front or end of the integration process. A popular assumption arising from the integrationist argument is that immigrants from non-democratic countries (NDCs) are less likely to participate in elections – an idea recently debunked in a study by Antoine Bilodeau and Neil Nevitte (2003). According to a special immigrant sample of the World Values Survey the vast majority of immigrants from NDCs say that they have a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in political institutions of Canada. About 78% of immigrants who have been in Canada for 5 years or less say they have a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the government in Ottawa; 81% supply the same answer when asked about the civil service, and 71% for the parliament. The political parties seem to suffer from lower levels of confidence from the immigrant population socialized in a non-democratic environment.

Immigrants from NDCs are almost twice as likely as people born in Canada to say that they have a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence for each of the political institutions mentioned above: 78 vs. 39% for the government in Ottawa, 81 vs. 47% for the civil service, 71 vs. 38% for the parliament, and finally, 39 vs. 22% for political parties. Though the opinions of immigrants from NDCs change substantially over time their levels of confidence remain significantly higher than those found in the Canadian-born population.

Bilodeau and Nevitte (2003) contend that upon arrival in Canada immigrants from NDCs bring with them a 'reservoir' of diffuse support that is independent of how well or poorly the regime performs. Contrary to findings on the role of knowledge in the formation of public opinion, Nevitte et al. contend that factual knowledge about the host environment plays no significant role in immigrants' process of developing political trust in the host political institutions. Immigrants who knew more about the host democratic environment did not exhibit higher or lower levels of confidence than those who knew little. That said, Bilodeau and Nevitte remark that the 'honeymoon' does not last. After a decade in the host country, there are no significant differences between levels of confidence in political institution of immigrants from NDCs and people born in Canada. Paradoxically one might conclude that adaptation

to Canada's political reality breeds greater skepticism with institutions than growing attachment to them.

Demographic Characteristics and Voter Turnout

In 2001, more than five million Canadians reported that the language they first leaned and still understood was neither English nor French, thus representing more than one out of every six Canadians. Of that group approximately 8.3% or one in twelve individuals knew neither English nor French. Though such allophones tend to be present in nearly all federal electoral districts, in 2001 over one-third knowing neither official language resided in some twenty ridings, most of which are in Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec – and especially in the Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal areas. As observed in Table 1, the ridings with highest percentage of allophones that know neither English nor French are the three Vancouver ridings and Trinity-Spadina.

While a poll-by-poll analysis would shed significant light on the degree to which immigrant non-official language groups participated in the 2004 contest, the evidence from ridings with the higher percentages of such individuals suggests generally lower than average turnout in most instances. In the province of Quebec provincial voter turnout was 60.5%, in Ontario it was 61.8% and in British Columbia it was 63.3%. As observed in Table 1, in the 20 ridings with the highest number and percentage of allophones that voter participation tended to hover around the mid-fifties. There were, however, some exceptions in the case of the Ontario riding of Trinity-Spadina and the British Columbia constituencies of Burnaby-Douglas and Newton North Delta.

Again, while a poll-by-poll analysis remains essential, certain communities appear to be less likely to have voted in 2004. With respect to Chinese languages where Cantonese speakers are more prevalent than Mandarin speakers, the ridings in which they are concentrated (in Scarborough, Ontario and Vancouver, British Columbia) all fell below the sixty percent marker.

Though in general it is a more established community, the Ontario ridings with high concentrations of persons of Italian mother tongue also suffered from much lower than average voter turnout. In Vaughan, where more than one-third of constituents were of Italian mother tongue, turnout was 56% and as low as 48.5% in York West where one out of six voters are of Italian mother tongue. In Quebec's Saint-Leonard-Saint-Michel riding, with one-quarter of eligible voters of Italian mother tongue, turnout was at 54.5%. In the case of the mother tongue Portuguese group, the riding of Davenport has the highest concentration (approximately three of ten electors) and in 2004 the turnout rate (52.9%) was quite low.

In the case of ridings with high percentages of persons whose mother tongue is Punjabi there is much variation in voter turnouts and, for example, in the case of Calgary Northeast the low turnout (47.8%) may be attributable to considerations other than the presence of some 10,000 persons with Punjabi mother tongue. In the case of

Table 1 – Mother Tongue neither English nor French, know neither English nor French and Voter Turnout in Selected Ridings, 2001 and Voter Turnout in 2004 Federal Election

	Mother Tongue Other than English or French (Allophones)	Neither English nor French	Voter Turnout in 2004 Federal Election (%)
Vancouver South	72,205	11,635	55.8
Vancouver Kingsway	71,965	13,940	58.0
Scarborough Agincourt	66,755	10,735	56.4
Scarborough Rouge River	65,690	10,580	51.1
Markham Unionville	63,900	8,090	56.1
York Centre	62,640	6,025	56.8
York West	61,945	8,290	48.5
Richmond	58,820	8,180	56.7
York South Weston	56,925	6,195	51.7
Richmond Hill	54,065	4,570	58.2
Etobicoke North	53,365	5,275	51.0
Saint-Leonard-Saint-Michel	52,855	4,875	54.5
Burnaby-New Westminster	52,705	6,100	59.0
Vancouver East	52,390	12,510	58.2
Burnaby-Douglas	51,105	5,155	61.5
Newton-North Delta	48,980	6,760	63.0
Papineau	48,130	6,385	57.1
Trinity-Spadina	47,270	9,370	63.7
Surrey North	43,420	5,470	55.4
Calgary Northeast	34,945	4,360	47.8

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2001

Newton-North Delta and Abbotsford, the overall rates of voter participation (63% and 64.6% respectively) are in line with the provincial average despite the fact that a relatively high percentage of the Punjabi group declares an inability to speak either English or French.

Federal versus Provincial Election Results

It follows that if voter turnout is lower than average for non-official language communities at the federal level than the same would be true for elections at other levels. Table 2 contrasts voter turnouts in like ridings federally and provincially to determine whether low turnout is generic or is somehow related to problems associated at a particular level of government. In British Columbia overall voter turnout in the 2001 provincial election was approximately 71%, more than seven point higher than the federal turnout. By contrast, in Ontario the provincial turnout in 2004 was five points below the federal turnout, while in Quebec the provincial turnout in 2003 was 70.4%, some ten points higher than the federal turnout. As for those ridings in the provinces with the higher percentage of allophones, while turnout is somewhat lower than the average, behaviours tend to conform to what occurs province wide. Thus BC and Quebec ridings with a significant allophone presence appear more likely to vote in provincial than federal contests, while the opposite is true in Ontario in such ridings where federal is stronger than provincial participation.

Table 2 – Voter Turnout in Selected Federal and Provincial Ridings with significant shares of allophones in Most Recent Contests, 2001-2005

	Voter Turnout in 2004 Federal Election	Voter Turnout Ontario Election (2003), BC Election (2001) and Quebec Election (2003)
Vancouver Kingsway	58.0	67.1
Scarborough Agincourt	56.4	52.9
Scarborough Rouge River	51.1	48.1
Markham Unionville	56.1	53.9
York Centre	56.8	49.6
York West	48.5	44.0
Richmond	56.7	69.0
York South Weston	51.7	58.7
Etobicoke North	51.0	47.9
Saint-Leonard-Saint-Michel	54.5	67.7
Burnaby-New Westminster	59.0	71.5
Burnaby-Douglas	61.5	70.0
Newton-North Delta	63.0	72.6
Papineau	57.1	62.8
Trinity Spadina	63.7	52.0
Surrey North	55.4	66.7

Sources: Elections Canada, 2004, Elections BC, 2001, Elections Quebec, 2003 Elections Ontario, 2003

Other Dimensions of Low Voter Turnout

Those who employ socio-demographic data to examine immigrant voter participation ideally need to consider other intersecting factors to offer more precise conclusions around turnout issues. For example, such issues as age, region of residence, generational status, length of residence, income and unemployment are all factors that may in some instances operate in conjunction with language background and ability. Without proper controls for these variables it is difficult to establish causality as regards the economic and socio-demographic considerations influencing voter participation.

Analysts have established strong correlations between age and voter turnout but we do not know whether low participation amongst youth is compounded by ethnolinguistic background. Income is yet another issue that needs to be considered in making observations around the voting behaviour of several non-official language communities in that a number of the communities in the areas of high concentration of allophones also generally possess lower than average incomes. When considering income for example we observe below that those ridings with persons in the highest income bracket tend to participate to a greater than average extent in the 2004 elections. Canada's five highest income ridings in 2004, Don Valley West (66.3), Oakville (69.5%), Thornhill (62.7%), Oak Ridges-Markham (63.4%), and Carleton-Lanark (75.4%) tended to have relatively sound voter turnout rates in the federal election of that year.

As observed in Table 3, ridings with lower income tend to produce lower voter turnout thus suggesting a relationship between personal deficits and democratic ones. It is worth noting that the four poorest ridings have a noteworthy presence of recent immigrants (as does the riding of Vancouver East).

Table 3 – Federal Ridings with Lowest Income in 2001 and voter turnout Rates in 2004

Ridings		Voter Turnout
Winnipeg Centre	34,419	45.1
Hochelaga	36,434	57.8
Bourassa	36,848	57.0
Rosemont-La Petite Patrie	37,052	61.5
Dauphin-Swan River	37,361	58.6
Matapedia-Matane	37,441	54.2
Random-Burin-St. George's	38,152	44.9
Vancouver East	38,347	58.2
Quebec	38,396	60.8
Sydney-Victoria	39,150	60.6

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada 2001 and Elections Canada, results of the 38th general election, 2004

National Identification and Voter Participation

There is little evidence to support the idea that either weak national or strong ethnic attachments result in lower rates of voter participation. The 2003 Ethnic Diversity Survey conducted by Statistics Canada shows little correlation between reported voter turnout rates and attachment to the country. It is worth noting that when asked whether they vote, Canadians tend to overestimate their rate of participation and the EDS survey revealed that such reporting applied to ethnocultural groups.

Table 4 – Reported Voting in Federal, Provincial and Municipal Elections and reported high levels of attachment to Canada, 2002

	Federal	Provincial	Municipal	Strong Attachment to Canada
Chinese	67	63	49	72
East Indian	77	71	56	81
Filipino	75	74	63	85
Portuguese	74	74	64	85
Italian	82	81	78	70
Russian	77	75	59	82
French Canadian	88	88	70	73
Canadian	79	79	65	80
Irish	82	80	67	85

Source: Ethnic Diversity results Survey, Statistics Canada, 2003

Civic Participation: Non-Electoral Activity

Contentions about lesser degrees of interest in political issues on the part of minority electors are something that to-date have been the object of generalization rather than empirical tests. Recently released data from the 2003 General Social Survey of Statistics Canada (GSS) may provide some insights however partial into how accurate the notion that minority electors show less interest in political matters. The GSS revealed that allophones (22%) were only slightly less inclined than members of official language communities (25.7%) to search for information on a political issue. While allophones (8.3%) were less likely to contact a newspaper or politician than anglophones (15%) they tend to be more so inclined than francophones (7.3%). Signing petitions and attending public meetings are far less common amongst allophones (14%) than they are for francophone (26%) and anglophone Canadians (30%). As to the issue of attending public meetings, this too was more common amongst Canada's anglophones (23.5%) and francophones (18%) than for allophones (14.3%).

Political Interests: Most Common Factors Cited by Canadians for Low Voter Turnout

A recent survey conducted for the Association for Canadian Studies by the firm Environics provides interesting insight into what factors the population believes contribute most to low voter turnout. The survey conducted in the last week of September 2004 reveals that 41% of Canadians think the main reason for not voting is the view that the vote has no impact. On the basis of language spoken at home, such views are most strongly held by English Canadians, with one-third of allophones making the same observation as did 30% of francophones.

Table 5 – In your opinion, what is the main reason so many Canadians choose not to vote in elections?

	Language Spoken at Home		
	English	French	Other
They believe their vote has no impact	45	30	33
They don't like any of the choices	25	22	17
They are just not interested in politics	20	29	34
They do not find the issues relevant	5	13	6
They do not have the time to go vote	2	4	7

Source: Environics-Association for Canadian Studies, September, 2004

On the basis of immigrant origins it is persons of European descent (44%) who tend to believe that people's votes have no impact is contributing to reduced turnout, while non-European immigrants (35%), who have generally arrived more recently, feel somewhat less than way. Paradoxically, those with higher individual income (40,000 dollars or more) tend to believe that voter impact is at the root of low turnout (45%) whereas amongst those with the lowest income (less than 40,000 dollars) some 28% attribute low turnout to believing the vote has no impact.

Observers of the 2004 federal election have pointed to significant degrees of disaffection on the part of the voters to explain yet a further decline in voter turnout. In a survey conducted by the firm Environics for the Association for Canadian Studies in late July-early August, an attempt was made to determine the degree to which interest in federal politics was on the wane. On this issue – following the federal elections – some 73% of respondents felt that there was no change in their attitude. However, amongst the other respondents, more said their interest increased (19%) than said that it declined (8%).

On the basis of mother tongue nearly one out of five anglophones and allophones said they became more interested in politics after the 2004 federal election, while 7% of anglophones and 14% of allophones surveyed said their interest diminished. Some 73% of anglophones reported no change to their attitude while 63% of allophones expressed similar sentiment. As to francophones, slightly more (15%) said their interest rose after the 2004 contest as opposed to diminishing (11%) with nearly three-quarters declaring that nothing had changed. In the case of immigrants they were more likely, on average, to report rising interest and this was particularly true for the more recently arrived non-European immigrants with some 30% indicating greater interest in politics in the aftermath of the 2004 contest, with 60% declaring no change (9% reported a decline in interest).

As to concerns over low voter turnout, the Environics survey revealed that this is much more prevalent amongst Canadians of English mother tongue (44% saying they are very concerned) than francophones (41%) and allophones (29%). Again, language is unlikely to be the dominant consideration in evaluating concern over declining voter turnout as generation appears to be a significant factor where such preoccupation is manifested. Of those surveyed between the age of 18 and 29, some 35% said they were very concerned about declining voter turnout as opposed to 51% of respondents over the age of 60 that indicate similar concern.

References

To view the author's references, please cisit the ACS website at www.acs-aec.ca