ELECTORAL TURNOUT AND CANADA'S CHANGING CULTURAL MAKEUP:

Interviews with Three Municipal Leaders

ABSTRACT

Using data from the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey, this article paints a portrait of the extent to which immigrants and visible minorities are voting in municipal, provincial and federal elections. It also considers how the intersection of immigrant, visible minority status and youth is linked to electoral participation. It finds that declining youth participation rates are not the only source of turnout decline in Canada, and suggests that more attention needs to be paid to how diversity is incorporated into electoral processes.

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Although declining turnout and the disputed capacity of elections to confer policy mandates on the victors (LeDuc et al. 1991) raise questions about the true meaning of the vote, elections continue to fulfill instrumental and expressive roles in Canadian democracy. They allow citizens to choose their local representatives, to convey general policy preferences, to pass judgment on the incumbents, and to reaffirm their membership in the polity. Ironically, as the extension of the franchise has increased the size of the eligible electorate, fewer citizens are choosing to participate in the low cost act of voting (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). The decline in federal election turnout from 75.3% in 1988 to 60.9% in 2004 has been largely attributed to generational replacement (Blais et al. 2004). Canadians under the age of 30 are less likely to turn out to vote than older Canadians (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003; Blais et al. 2004) and are more likely than older citizens to cite a lack of interest in politics, personal factors, and registration difficulties as the most important reasons for not voting (Pammett and LeDuc).

While the participation rates of 18-21.5 year-old voters appear to have rebounded to 38.7% from 2004, from 25% for 18-24 year-olds in the 2000 election (Kingsley, 2005: 5), the continued decline in overall turnout suggests there may be other groups who are disenfranchising themselves. This study will explore that theme by investigating the electoral participation of immigrant and visible minority Canadians. This analytical focus is warranted because immigrants and visible minorities are increasingly facing unique economic and social challenges that have the potential to reduce their willingness and/or ability to vote. Immigrants arriving in the 1980s to mid-90s experienced lower rates of employment and higher rates of low income (Ruddick, 2003) while visible minority immigrants are more likely to live in poverty than non-visible minorities (Kazemipur and Halli, 2003). In a 2002 survey, 20% of visible minority Canadians reported experiencing discrimination in the previous five years (Statistics Canada, 2001).

Using data drawn from the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS), this article presents a preliminary portrait of the extent to which immigrant and visible minorities are voting in municipal, provincial and federal elections. Given the links between youth and abstentionism, it will also consider how the intersection of several attributes – immigrant status, racial background and age – is linked to electoral participation.

Who Votes?

Studies of the participation of immigrants in elections have considered how variations in their ethnocultural origins, socio-demographic characteristics, length of residency and political experiences might account for differential turnout rates between foreign-born and Canadian-born citizens. In his analysis of 1974 national survey data, Black found that Canadian-born British and the foreign-born non-British voted at significantly lower rates than Canadian-born French (Black, 1982). In a comparison of the turnout rates of British, North European, South European, East European, and West Indian immigrants to Canadian-born British respondents, a 1983 Toronto-area survey found that only the West Indian respondents voted at significantly lower rates than the benchmark group in the most recent federal and provincial elections. These differences held even after controlling for socio-economic status, political attitudes and organizational involvement (Black, 1991). The participation equality enjoyed by most of the immigrants may have been the result of elite mobilization of the immigrant

vote, and an enhanced political consciousness based on perceived discrimination and ethnic sentiments (149).

The impact of the assimilation process on political integration has also been examined. An analysis of survey data on turnout in the 2000 federal election found that respondents who had immigrated within the last ten years were less likely to vote (Blais et al., 2002). EDS data confirmed that immigrant turnout rates were associated with the amount of time spent in Canada. While emigrants who arrived in Canada between 1981 and 2001 voted less frequently than the Canadian-born, the turnout gap distinguishing immigrants and non-immigrants disappears after twenty years of residency (Statistics Canada, 2003).

Early studies of visible minority participation in elections were based on small samples drawn from limited geographic areas. In a survey of Japanese and Chinese Canadians in Lethbridge, Quo found low turnout rates among the Chinese sample, but Japanese participation rates that were similar to the city and national averages. The differences were attributed to the longer time the Japanese had lived in the area (1971). Wood's study of turnout in a Vancouver riding concluded that East Indians were not significantly less likely than non-East Indians to vote in the 1979 federal and provincial elections (1981). Explanations for the East Indian turnout centred on the size of the community, the interaction of community members with non-East Indians, and the mobilization efforts of political elites (198).

Lapp explored the community mobilization thesis in her ecological analysis of turnout in five ethnic communities in Montreal in the 1993 federal and 1994 provincial and municipal elections. Using enumeration area turnout data, she found that voter participation was higher than that of the general population in the Greek community, lower in the Chinese and Jewish communities, and not significantly different in the Portuguese and Italian communities. In contrast to earlier studies supporting the assimilation thesis, these variations occurred regardless of the length of time spent in Canada (1999). Ethnic leaders who helped interpret the findings pointed to community-based variations in attitudes about elections. Greek community leaders cited "habit, a taste for voting and duty" as the main reasons for relatively high voter participation, while Chinese leaders suggested that electoral participation "was not a significant part of the community's political culture" (35).

These studies have laid important groundwork for research on contemporary patterns of participation, but there were limitations to the survey data upon which they were based. First, since national election studies do not oversample from minority ethnocultural communities, researchers have been limited to remarking upon immigrant/foreign-born patterns of participation, or to classifying respondents into broad ethno-cultural groupings. Second, results from locally-based studies cannot be generalized to other geographic areas. Third, the paucity of surveys featuring questions on turnout in provincial and municipal elections *and* sufficient sample sizes of immigrants and visible minorities has limited our knowledge of their participation in sub-national elections.

Fortunately, the EDS has rectified many of these shortcomings. It is a post-censal, national survey of 42,476 citizens, landed immigrants and temporary residents that was conducted between April and August 2002. It used a two-phase stratified sampling design to target persons aged 15 years and older in two main groups: persons reporting "Canadian" ethnic origin and persons belonging to non-Canadian, non-British or non-French ethnic groups. The sample distribution was established at 1/3 for the first group and 2/3 for the second, ensuring that persons with non-Canadian, non-British, and non-French backgrounds would be well-represented (Statistics Canada, 2002). The unique composition of the sample and the survey's inclusion of items on political participation make it a valuable source of information on how diversity is reflected in the most fundamental acts of democracy.

Immigrant and Visible Minority Participation in Canadian Elections

As with other surveys, the over reporting of electoral participation is evident in the EDS results. Nevertheless, there were no initial, significant differences between the turnout rates of immigrants and Canadian-born respondents in federal and municipal elections. Canadian-born citizens were, more likely to cast a ballot in provincial elections (Table 1).

When the racial backgrounds of the respondents were considered, immigrants were, with one exception, significantly *more* likely than Canadian-born respondents from the same background to have voted in all three types of elections (Table 2). The consistency of these results across different racial groups suggests that citizens born outside the country attached more value to electoral participation than Canadian-born citizens from the same community. Large gaps distinguished the participation rates of foreign-born and Canadian-born Black and South Asian citizens.

It is beyond the scope of this article to fully account for these patterns, but two possible explanations stand out. First, since immigrants must overcome many hurdles to re-establish themselves in a new country, they may be more motivated to exercise their democratic rights in a new setting. The second possibility is that these patterns may be spurious, and that the differences might be explained by variations in characteristics that have been positively associated with political activity. In Canada, these attributes

Table 1 – Turnout in Federal, Provincial and Municipal Elections, by birthplace (column %)

	Canadian-born	Immigrant
Voted in Last Federal Election	79.3	78.6
Voted in Last Provincial Election	78.4	75.6***
Voted in Last Municipal Election	63.9	63.5

Source: Ethnic Diversity Survey
***p≤.001

include age, higher levels of income and education, limited residential mobility, interest in politics and a sense of civic duty (Pammett and LeDuc).

The data in Table 2 also show that regardless of where they were born, visible minorities voted at lower rates than their cohorts who were not visible minorities. The results suggest that alienation from electoral politics is not confined to young Canadians. Multivariate models of turnout that incorporate other factors that have been linked to differential turnout rates would confirm whether these differences are indicative of higher levels of alienation in specific racial communities.

Among foreign-born citizens, the Chinese voted at lower rates than the South Asians and Blacks (Table 2). Previous studies have used political culture arguments to explain lower rates of Chinese turnout. Yet the similarities in turnout rates between Canadian-born Chinese and South Asian respondents suggest that early socialization in this country can mitigate cultural predispositions (if they exist) not to vote.

Immigrant Status, Race and Youth

It was suggested earlier that the immigrant advantage reported in Table 2 might be explained by other factors. Given the crucial links between age and turnout in Canada, the immigrant and Canadian-born respondents in each racial group were further divided into two age groups composed of 20-29 year-olds and individuals aged 30 and over. Finer age distinctions were not drawn so as to ensure sufficiently large sample sizes for each sub-group. Table 3 reports the results of this analysis.

Upon closer examination, we see that those patterns only held for older, nonvisible Canadians in federal and municipal elections (Table 3). Older, foreign-born Blacks were also significantly more likely to vote than Canadian-born Blacks aged 30 and over, but some of these estimates should be regarded with caution due to the small sample sizes upon which they are based (Table 3).

For all South Asians and younger Chinese, the immigrant/non-immigrant distinctions in turnout rates usually became insignificant. For the older Chinese and younger nonvisible respondents, the initial pattern was reversed. Canadian-born respondents voted at significantly *higher* rates than immigrants in all three types of elections (Table 3). In sum, the immigrant advantage in electoral participation exists for older, nonvisible citizens, as well as for older Blacks in federal elections. Once the intersection of racial background and age characteristics was considered, foreign-born citizens voted at lower rates than Canadian-born respondents in certain instances. Of all the survey respondents, younger immigrants from Chinese and nonvisible backgrounds were the least likely to vote.

Table 3 also reveals that the higher incidence of youth abstentionism transcends immigrant status and racial distinctions. Canadian-born Chinese, South Asian and nonvisible respondents voted at lower rates than their older cohorts. Likewise, younger immigrants, regardless of their racial origins, were less likely than older immigrants from the same backgrounds to vote.

It is apparent that the negative effects of generational replacement on electoral turnout have cut across racial boundaries. Nevertheless, this does not mean that race does not matter. Young Chinese, regardless of where they were born, were less likely to turn out to vote than their nonvisible and South Asian cohorts. This means that assimilation explanations related to the time spent in Canada cannot fully account for participation inequalities across different racial communities (Table 3). Multivariate modeling and qualitative research techniques will help illuminate whether these differences can be explained by

Table 2 – Turnout in Federal, Provincial and Municipal Elections, by Immigrant and Visible Minority Status (column %)

	Canadian-born	Immigrant
Non Visible		
Voted in Last Federal Election?	79.8	84.7***
Voted in Last Provincial Election?	78.9	82.6***
Voted in Last Municipal Election?	64.5	71***
Chinese		
Voted in Last Federal Election?	64.3	67
Voted in Last Provincial Election?	57.3	64*
Voted in Last Municipal Election?	41.9	50.5**
South Asian		
Voted in Last Federal Election?	61.2	77.1***
Voted in Last Provincial Election?	56.1	72***
Voted in Last Municipal Election?	41.5	59.3***
Black		
Voted In Last Federal Election?	47.2	77.6***
Voted in Last Provincial Election?	41.6	68.8***
Voted in Last Municipal Election?	32.9	57***

Source: Ethnic Diversity Survey
***p≤.001; **p≤.01; *p≤.05

Table 3 – Turnout by Immigrant Status, Race and Age (column %)

	20-29 Year Olds		30 and over	
	Canadian-born	Foreign-born	Canadian-born	Foreign-born
Non Visible				
Federal	63.4	53**	84.9	87.1***
Provincial	60.8	47.5***	84.5	85.2
Municipal	41.6	33.2*	70.7	73.8***
Chinese				
Federal	56.2	44.8*	84.4	71.7***
Provincial	47.6	44.6	79.6	68.4*
Municipal	26.4	27.1	66.5	55.5*
South Asian				
Federal	63.4	67.6	—	—
Provincial	59.2	54.1	75.8	76.7
Municipal	43	46.3	63.3	63
Black				
Federal	51	41.2[E]	51.5	82.4***
Provincial	49.9	43.4[E]	41.2[E]	72.4***
Municipal	—	—	34.9[E]	61.9***

Source: Ethnic Diversity Survey; ***p≤.001; **p≤.01; *p≤.05
Note: [E] estimate considered "poor"

individual-level demographic or attitudinal attributes, by different community orientations towards the value of elections, or by the mobilization efforts of elites in majority and minority communities.

This article represents a first cut on the subject of how the intersection of one's racial background and age characteristics is associated with rates of Canadian-born and foreign-born participation in elections. Immigrant status was associated with lower participation rates for certain groups even after the introduction of age and race controls. Young Canadians, regardless of their birthplace and racial origins, were usually less likely to vote than their older cohorts in the same race and birthplace categories. For both Canadian-born and foreign-born Chinese and Black respondents, visible minority status was usually associated with participation inequality. These findings point to the need to explore the underlying causes of these community-based differences. They also suggest that race-based differences among Canadian-born respondents do not necessarily disappear with the passage of time. While youth status is linked to higher rates of abstentionism, there are other sources of alienation from electoral processes that merit closer academic inquiry.

Notes

The Research and Analysis are based on data from Statistics Canada and the opinions expressed do not represent the views of Statistics Canada.

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

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