ENCOURAGING DEMOCRACY

ABSTRACT

In 2004, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers – a community agency with a wide range of programs and services for immigrants and refugees – undertook an extensive project to have more immigrants vote and to have more non-immigrants make issues relevant to the lives of immigrants part of their voting decisions during three election campaigns. This article outlines the various steps that were taken to this end.

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During the year 2004 Albertans had the opportunity to vote in three elections within a six-month period. Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers was involved in a variety of initiatives to encourage and support immigrant participation in these events. Many newcomers to Canada are people who have been at least deeply interested in politics before migration, and often have been politically active in countries from which they have come. Many also understand how important participation is for democracy to be healthy and they are very interested in Canadian politics, following issues and debates carefully.

A number of obstacles challenge political involvement, however. The pressing economic needs that require working long hours and having limited financial resources are significant barriers. Lack of English proficiency can lead to discomfort taking part in meetings or being able to read materials. Different cultural understanding, even about basic things such as time, can keep immigrants at a distance from political activity. Suspicion about possible implications of being identified as politically active also concerns some newer immigrants. Some are worried that if they are identified as having worked on a campaign for a certain candidate who is unsuccessful they may be "punished" by the winner later. Even distrust about the secrecy of actually voting may discourage some from casting a ballot. And for some, something as basic as not knowing where to get information to determine whether a person is eligible to vote can exclude.

Working in a community agency involved with immigrants, my own varied involvement with democratic activity through partisan politics is known to many. As a result it is a common occurrence for people who are around our locations to want to "talk politics" with me. Our agency has clear policies about partisan politics that all staff know and that mean we do not support or criticize on a partisan basis, but we do strongly encourage democratic participation.

Late in 2003 the certainty of a federal election and the scheduled regular municipal elections meant it was certain there would be at least two elections. Many of us felt a provincial election was also probable. From many conversations it was clear a lot of immigrants were keen to be involved in these elections. As a first step, an open invitation was extended to people who wanted to begin meeting as an informal group to talk about how these elections could be used in a positive way. Four goals were identified through these meetings:

1) Increase the low percentage of immigrants who voted at all,
2) Ensure that as immigrants prepared to vote they did so with good information,
3) Have issues relevant to the lives of immigrants addressed by candidates during the campaign, and
4) Expand the awareness of non-immigrant voters about issues important to immigrants and have them express to candidates that stands on these issues would influence their voting decisions.

These goals created an ambitious agenda but there was a lot of enthusiasm and meetings were attended by people who wanted to see things happen. Having no resources to support activity, difficult decisions had to be made. Early in the spring before the federal election was called, invitations were extended to candidates from the Liberal, Conservative and New Democratic Parties to take part in a forum. David Kilgour (Liberal), Rahim Jaffer (Conservative) and Malcolm Azania (New Democrat) agreed to take part. They were not all candidates in the same riding. Our goal was a forum on the issues that would be of interest to the whole city. These were candidates we felt

had strong public profiles and good understanding of immigrant issues. A date and convenient location were selected, gambling on the probable election date but with the decision to go forward whether we were in an official campaign period or not.

We then worked to develop two different leaflets. One was an introduction to voting written with immigrants in mind. It answered many of the issues leaders from ethnocultural communities felt were common to many people and had phone numbers and websites for many kinds of additional information, including the political parties. The other was a checklist of questions on issues important to immigrants that could be used as a guide to compare and evaluate candidates. These leaflets were provided to many community agencies for distribution in addition to distribution through our own organization, and were available for downloading at our website.

"Issues important to immigrants" was a topic that was much discussed and the decision was to include a range of economic issues such as income and housing that have a disproportionate affect on the lives of many immigrants even though they are not specifically issues related to people just because they are immigrants.

Staff at our organization were encouraged to invite people to think and talk about the election once the campaign got underway. The agency has a range of programs that offer programs in English as a Second Language and employment. In many of the classes taking place teachers brought in articles and material from candidates and discussed it. Some set up sample polling places so people could actually experience what going to vote would be like. Areas were provided at our service locations for pamphlets from any candidate.

To extend awareness we issued press releases explaining what we were doing and there was quite a bit of media interest. A number of stories were done interviewing immigrants about voting, the issues that mattered to them, and related topics. The forum was well covered by media and reached many more people. There was a real sense of excitement in the hall where the forum took place and as soon as the opening comments by each candidate finished there was a long line at the microphone of people eager to ask questions.

The final aspect of our work locally was that on election day several staff used part of their day to drive people to polls who did not have their own transportation. We do not have any way to know how many more people voted than would have voted without these activities, nor how many people might have made more informed decisions or included a candidate's stand on immigration issues as part of their decision on how to vote, but a few people did indicate they had done so.

We also know that a number of people became very interested in politics and made appointments to meet with various candidates and in several cases decided to get involved in various individual campaigns working for different parties. Some even organized small meetings of members of their ethnic communities with a particular candidate in whom they were interested.

Because the municipal election was the most accessible, with many candidates, a number of politically keen people from ethnocultural communities became quite involved in campaigns. In at least two cases, individuals, with their deepened understanding of the process, are already talking about running as school board candidates in the next election. Because many immigrants are finding difficulties with schools for their children this is an aspect of politics where they see a clear need for people in office who understand the issues.

Beyond Edmonton, our agency participated with about 25 other organizations across the country in developing an open letter to all the party leaders on the key issue of internationally-educated professionals and their employment in licensed professions. We also provided our leaflets to immigrant serving agencies in the rest of Alberta through the Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies and to the national website of Citizens for Public Justice. We shared our leaflets and distributed the leaflets of the One Woman One Vote campaign of the YWCA in each election as well.

The day after the election there were people dropping by my office to tell me we needed to get to work on the municipal election. And get to work we did. For the municipal election we again developed two leaflets similar to those from the federal election but with relevant information. Because the municipal elections included mayor, city council and school board, and the boundaries for different offices differed, there was a demand for a lot of assistance from people wanting to determine which candidates they should learn about. We did not host a forum during the municipal election.

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continuing opportunity to bring their perspectives to the development of public policy.

As the municipal campaign was underway a provincial election was called. By this time we were becoming "expert" at what we were doing. We moved quickly to identify candidates for a forum, again looking for candidates with high profiles and some likelihood of knowing issues most relevant to immigrants. The Progressive Conservative participant was a cabinet minister with a long connection to multiculturalism in Alberta, Gene Zwozdesky. The Liberal candidate was the Deputy Leader of the party, representing a constituency with a very diverse demographic, Laurie Blakeman. And the New Democrats were represented by a former leader, Ray Martin.

In seeking to get the participants we wanted we agreed to an afternoon forum and the attendance was poorer than for the federal campaign as a result. Some of the candidates indicated in the brief period of the campaign (provincial campaigns in Alberta are only 28 days) they could not afford to commit to an evening event that did not relate to their own constituency. We also received less media coverage for this forum than had been the case in the federal campaign. We did, however, support some excellent media coverage of the experience of immigrants and the election, including an excellent panel discussion with several immigrant women on the local CBC Radio station.

For the third time we produced companion leaflets, one to focus voter attention on relevant issues and one to support immigrant new voters being familiar with the processes and rules. Distribution was again substantial.

And so, as the year ended, we could look back on having made a small contribution to moving forward with our four goals from the spring. We do not have explicit measures of this contribution – how many more people voted or voted in a more informed way as a result of any of our activities. But we have received a great deal of informal feedback that one or another of our activities was useful to someone. Journalists who covered aspects of our focus on democracy and who spoke with immigrants were impressed at how thoughtful and knowledgeable many new voters were and how clearly they valued and appreciated the opportunity to be politically active. And the stories that presented these things have contributed to people in the dominant culture being better informed and having a more complete understanding of the lives of newcomers.

The success of what we did depended largely on the enthusiasm and commitment of many staff of the agency and of volunteers from ethnic communities who were generous in giving their time. The costs of all we did were quite small in dollars, but we believe we have heard clearly that immigrants want to be involved in Canada's electoral process and will make good use of any opportunities that are provided.