IDEAL CITIZENS?

Immigrant Voting Patterns in Canadian Elections

ABSTRACT

Do Canadians born elsewhere exhibit the same attitudes and behaviours as other voters? This article reviews recent evidence and explores in particular the extent to which immigrant voters display greater support for the Liberal party. Different hypotheses for this support are evaluated, in an effort to determine whether immigrants display greater support for incumbents, for Liberal values, or whether they act as purposeful insiders. The article argues that immigrant voters may be perceived as ideal citizens for the way they approach political decisions. At a time when interest in politics is low, immigrant Canadians are more likely to take seriously their role as voters.

Those taking the pulse of democratic participation in Canada suggest that the diagnosis is not good. Fewer Canadians are participating in political life, fewer are voting and fewer belong to political parties. Our ability to correctly identify key political players, or to answer key questions about our political scene suggests that Canadians are increasingly out of touch with politics and politicians. This in itself is worrying but we know at the same time that external and internal efficacy is low, as are satisfaction and confidence. It is worth asking, though, whether this malaise similarly affects all Canadians, or whether there are pockets of active citizens within our midst. One group worthy of investigation is immigrant Canadians. It is worth determining whether, for example, they exhibit the same rates of participation as other Canadians, whether they hold similar attitudes and behaviours and whether they are similarly affected by democratic malaise. Our evidence suggests that there are elements of immigrant voting behaviour that could describe this group as ideal citizens.

Much of the literature on immigrant voting behaviour suggests that immigrant Canadians hold different attitudes and behaviours than Canadian-born members of the electorate, although assessments of the extent of the difference and its tenor vary. Research in the 1970s appeared to suggest that there were few fundamental differences among Canadians by place of birth and that their rates of participation in elections were similar (Richmond and Gold 1977). At the same time, there is considerable research noting that immigrants tend to be less involved in politics than other Canadians. Immigrant Canadians are, for example, less likely to vote and less likely to join political parties (Chui, Curtis and Lambert 1991).

Research that seeks to explain these overall differences focuses on a number of rival hypotheses. Immigrant voters appear more likely to favour incumbents, backing the government of the day when they case their ballot (Stasiulis and Abu Laban 1991). Such research also suggests that immigrants are more likely to favour left wing parties, perhaps because of their more favourable attitudes towards immigration, or their approach to social policy. In addition, research by Jerome Black demonstrates that the democratic experiences of immigrants before their arrival in Canadian continues to influence their participation and attitudes upon entry into the Canadian electorate (Black 1987, Black 1991). If this is what we know, why might it warrant further attention? Primarily because of the availability of new data. In 2000 two surveys, the World Values Survey and the Canadian Election Study, contained larger-than-normal samples of immigrant Canadian. With these two data sets we can answer three distinct research questions: first, do immigrant voters exhibit the same attitudes and behaviours as Canadian-born voters; second, why do immigrant voters make the voting decisions that they do, and third, is the process by which immigrant voters arrive at their voting decision different from the process employed by others?

Conducted since 1981, the World Values Survey is now conducted in over 50 countries worldwide and contains a number of questions on economic and social well-being, in addition to attitudes towards the federal government, public institutions, fellow citizens and religion. In the 2000 Canadian portion of the World Values Survey, investigators included a large sample of immigrants, 563 to be exact, so that the attitudes and behaviours of this group could be compared to other Canadians. Also in 2000 the Canadian Election Study completed a survey on political attitudes and

AILSA HENDERSON

Ailsa Henderson, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her research explores the existence of regional political cultures in Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand. She teaches courses on electoral behaviour, research methods and statistics.

behaviours. Conducted since the 1965 Canadian election the Canadian Election Study tracks voter attitudes during and after the election campaign. In 2000 the CES contained 500 immigrants in its sample of over 2000 Canadians. With these two data sources it is possible to paint a more complete picture of immigrant voting patterns than was previously possible.

We have some evidence that levels of political participation among immigrants are indistinguishable from levels of other Canadians. According to the CES data, self-reported turnout among immigrant voters is identical to self-reported turnout for Canadian-born voters. Both measures are higher than the turnout rate for Canada as a whole, something that is common, as survey respondents appear to recognize the social desirability of indicating that they cast a ballot. We also know that immigrant voters are less likely to belong to political parties than Canadian-born voters. Here the differences are statistically significant.

We also have evidence that immigrant voters are more likely to back the Liberals. Of the World Values Survey sample, 74.3% said that they would back the Liberals in a federal election. This compares to only 45.5% who indicated the same among the non-immigrants sample. Within the 2000 Canadian Election Study, 46% of those not born in Canada said that they backed the Liberals in the 2000 election, compared to only 32% of the Canadian-born voters. Indeed if we look at self-reported voting patterns in the federal election, immigrant voters were far more likely to back the Liberals, and were less likely to back any of the other parties. Here the gap is largest with the Bloc Québécois, where immigrant voters were half as likely to back the sovereignist party.

Immigrant voters were not only more likely to back the Liberals in the 2000 election, but consistently supported the Liberals more than other voters, even in years when the Conservative party won the election. If we examine data from each of the election studies conducted since 1984 we see that immigrants have been more likely to back the Liberals in every election. These dates are not selected arbitrarily, but rather allow us to examine the years for which there was a sufficient number of immigrants respondents included in the sample. This trend of Liberal support is most evident in the 1997 and 2000 elections but is clearly the case in earlier elections. What is clear, then, is that this is not just a case of backing electoral winners. In the 1984 and 1988 elections, immigrant voters were far less likely to back the Conservatives and slightly less likely to back them in 1988.

This suggests that immigrants are backing neither winners nor incumbents. For them to back winners they would have had to support the Conservatives in greater number than the Liberals, or at least demonstrated greater support for the Conservatives than other Canadians. Because they also failed to do so in 1988 also suggests that incumbent parties are not necessarily rewarded for their status.

Such patterns of one-party dominance among immigrants are clear, and are not particularly unusual. In the United Kingdom, data collected by the Council on Race Relations show that 97% of visible minority voters back the Labour party, regardless of whether it holds a reasonable chance at electoral success. In Australia, immigrants tend to prefer the Australian Labour party over the Liberals. For example recent data suggest that 43% of immigrants to Australia back Labour, compared to 33% of other voters. We should, of course, be wary of comparing these numbers to Canadian data. First, visible minority voters are not the same population as immigrant voters. In addition, the electoral strength of these parties varies. The electoral dominance of the Liberal party in Canada far surpasses that of the British Labour party, for example.

Two things are worth questioning, though. First, if immigrants prefer left-wing parties, why not back the NDP, which is clearly to the left of the Liberals. Second, backing the Liberals is not necessarily an anti-incumbent move as the Liberals have been in power for much of the twentieth century. The pattern, then, seems to be of a preference for left-wing parties that stand a chance of winning elections.

What we appear to have, though, is evidence of clear and consistent immigrant preference for one political party within a system, rather than divided support. Traditional analyses of electoral behaviour suggested that immigrants tended to support incumbents. These, and the Canadian data, suggest instead that immigrant voters prefer to back more left-wing parties. Two things are worth questioning, though. First, if immigrants prefer left-wing parties, why not back the NDP, which is clearly to the left of the Liberals. Second, backing the Liberals is not necessarily an anti-incumbent move as the Liberals have been in power for much of the twentieth century. The pattern, then, seems to be of a preference for left-wing parties that stand a chance of winning elections.

What possible explanations, then, might help us to understand immigrant voting patterns in Canada? Three alternative hypotheses present themselves. First is the pro-incumbent argument. This suggests that immigrants are backing the party of government because they are supportive of the system, and do so as a way to feel greater attachment to the system, and thus Canada. A second option suggests that immigrant voters are pro-Liberal, and that they are backing the Liberal party because that party best reflects their own values and beliefs, including support for immigration. A third option, however, is that immigrant voters are behaving as purposeful insiders, backing the Liberals not out of support for government incumbents, but because they want their constituency MPs to be close to the centres of power. This third option is distinct from the first in that it is forward

looking. The pro-incumbent argument suggests that immigrants possess higher levels of satisfaction with the governing system, and so cast their ballots with attention to the recent past. The purposeful insider argument suggests that voters are more attentive to whoever will win the election, regardless of the previous government. It is, essentially, a forward-looking analysis.

These propositions do not address the possibility that voters are backing the Liberals because it was Liberal administrations that facilitated their entry to Canada. In part, testing such a hypothesis is made difficult by the comparatively smaller numbers of immigrants who entered the country during Conservative administrations. Although the total number of immigrants arriving in Canada during Conservative administrations is not small, it is comparatively smaller, and less likely to be present in survey samples. This inhibits any potential analysis with immigrants admitted during Liberal administrations

How, then, might we test these various hypotheses? For the first, pro-incumbent, explanation to hold, we would expect immigrants to be more supportive of the system as a whole, more satisfied with democracy, feel a greater sense of deference, feel greater pride in Canada, be more likely to vote and more likely to belong to a political party. For the pro-Liberal argument to hold, immigrants would have to associate the Liberal party with values and behaviours that they hold dear. Examples could include greater perceived support for immigration, for redistributive politics, or for equal opportunities. For the purposeful insider hypothesis to hold we would expect to see immigrant voters back the winning party in their own constituency, or vote for the winning party at the provincial level. In addition, we would expect to find that the likelihood of voting Liberal increases as the margin of victory increases. In other words, immigrants would be more likely to vote Liberal if they receive cues that a particular party is likely to win the constituency contest.

In order to test which of these three hypotheses best explains immigrant voting patterns, we have produced a multivariate model of voting. Against a binary dependent variable, coded as 1 if the respondent backed the Liberals and 0 if they supported another party, we have included four blocks of independent variables. The first block includes standard demographic information such as province of residence, gender, income, age and whether the respondent holds a university degree. The second block includes variables that would help us to test the pro-incumbent model. These include satisfaction with democracy, attachment to Canada, interest in politics and the frequency with which the respondent discusses politics. The third block allows us to test pro-Liberal attitudes. These include centrist ideology and attachment to the Liberals. The fully-specified model includes an additional block of variables that test for the hypothesis of purposeful insiders. This includes evidence of insider calculations such as the size of the Liberal margin of victory and whether the respondent lives in a constituency where the Liberals won.

The results in Table 1 provide the statistically significant logistic regression coefficients for two groups, immigrant voters and Canadian-born voters. In the first block of variables, only Ontario as a province of residence was a significant predictor of voting. When we add in variables that help to test the pro-incumbent hypothesis, we find that satisfaction with democracy serves as a positive predictor for both immigrant and Canadian-born voters. Attachment to Canada, however, is only a predictor for Canadian-born voters. When we include additional pro-Liberal variables, we see striking differences between the behaviour of immigrant and Canadian-born voters. Immigrants are more likely to be influenced by their ideology, while Canadian-born voters are more likely to vote for the Liberals if they are satisfied with democracy and attached to Canada. Last, in the fully-specified model we find that none of the purposeful insider variables can explain immigrant voting. They are, however, positive predictors of Liberal support among other voters.

Table 1 – Reported Voting in Federal, Provincial and Municipal Elections and reported high levels of attachment to Canada, 2002

	Immigrant voters	Canadian-born voters
Block 1		
Ontario	+ve***	+ve***
Block 2		
Ontario	+ve**	+ve***
Satisfaction with democracy	+ve	+ve**
Attachment to Canada		+ve***
Block 3		
Ontario	+ve**	+ve***
Satisfaction with democracy		+ve**
Attachment to Canada		+ve***
Centrist ideology	+ve*	
Block 4		
Ontario	+ve*	
Satisfaction with democracy		+ve***
Attachment to Canada		+ve***
Centrist ideology	+ve*	
Liberal constituency		+ve**
Margin of victory		+ve*
Pseudo R2	.235	.182

Source: CES 2000. Results are signs of logistic regression coefficients significant at the .01, 05 or .1 level. *** = p<.01, ** = p<.05, * = p<.1

How do these results speak to our research questions? First, they show consistent differences between the voting decisions reached by immigrants and those reached by other Canadians. We know that immigrants are more likely to back the Liberals. What these results also demonstrate is that they way they arrive at their voting decision is informed by different variables. Ideology is more important for immigrant voters than it is for others, while living in a Liberal constituency, or one where the margin of victory is largest, are both irrelevant factors. Satisfaction with democracy and attachment to Canada, significant predictors for Canadian-born voters, do not figure in immigrant voting decisions. Second, then, these results show us that the pro-Liberal hypothesis best explains the voting behaviour of immigrants. Indirectly the results also speak to process, our third research question.

Existing research on electoral behaviour tells us that we cast our ballots either because of a thorough evaluation

of the facts or by using information shortcuts. According to the former hypothesis voters are aware of key issues, gather information about those competing in elections, weigh evidence in favour of one party or another and cast their ballot as a result of this process. This is certainly in line with classic democratic theory. For the process to work the electorate must be composed of informed citizenry, willing if not eager to perform their many civic duties. A rival process, though, suggests that our political behaviour is informed more by cues and shortcuts, whether our social identity or group membership, or partisan identification. If these two approaches dictate how we might understand voting behaviour, the results in our datasets suggest that immigrant and Canadian-born voters employ different processes to arrive at their voting decisions.

Data from the Canadian Election Study and the World Values survey show that immigrants are far more likely to pay attention to election news on the radio, TV and in papers than are Canadian-born voters. Immigrant voters are more likely to have watched the leaders' debate, are more likely to seek political and electoral information on the internet and seek that information more frequently than Canadian-born voters. They are also more likely to answer knowledge questions about the political system correctly. Paradoxically, they are also more likely to have made up their minds on how to cast their ballot than are other Canadians. This suggests, then, that immigrant Canadians are not gathering information in order to arrive at a voting decision, but for the sake of gathering information itself. Their behaviour, then, is far more in line with the ideal citizen, one who is engaged, not because of a particular end, but as a matter of course. These results show that immigrant voters are less prone to using cues and more likely to cast their ballots because of personal beliefs than habit. This suggests that immigrant voters use fewer information shortcuts to arrive at their voting decisions than other voters.

Returning to the issue of ideal voters, then, we might consider immigrants to be ideal citizens in two ways. First, immigrant Canadians could be considered ideal because they back the Liberal party. The governing party can thus count on a stable source of support, and know that the immigrants it admits to Canada are more likely to support them than another rival party. This is, perhaps, a craven interpretation of the ideal citizen. Immigrant Canadians can also be considered ideal citizens because they conform to the notions of ideal citizenship in classical democratic theory. Immigrants discharge their duties as citizens with greater investment of time and effort than do other Canadians. At a time when participation rates in politics are dropping, immigrant voters appear to be one group within the electorate that is taking its civic duty seriously.

References

Black, Jerome (1987) "The Practice of Politics in Two Settings: Political Transferability Among Immigrants to Canada" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 20(4): 731-53

Black, Jerome (1991) "Ethnic minorities and mass politics in Canada" *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 3 (Spring): 129-51

Chiu,Tina W.L.James Curtis and Ronald D. Lambert (1991) "Immigrant Background and Political Participation: examining generational patterns" *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 16: 375-97

Richmond, Anthony H. and John Goldlust (1977) *Family and Social Integration in Toronto.* Toronto: Ethnic Research Programme, York University

Satasiulis, Daiva and Yasmeen Abu-Laban (1991) "The House the Parties Built: Ethnic Representation in Canadian Politics" in Kathy Megyery, Ed. *Ethno-Cultural Minorities in Canadian Politics Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing,* Research Studies vol 7. Toronto: Dundurn Press