INTRODUCTION

Getting Seats at the Table(s) / Obtenir un siège à la table

For centuries, questions related to participation and inclusion have framed discussions related to democracy and its functioning. Who should participate? How? To what extent? And to what end? Today, those questions remain. Indeed, Canada's legislative framework, including the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act,* requires that we work toward inclusive institutions and full and equitable participation. Our increasing diversity has, in some ways, cast a spotlight on all of this, as people question our institutions, the processes for gauging public opinion, and the ways in which Canadians are involved in the governance of our country in both the electoral and non-electoral spheres.

Reports of increased apathy, decreased volunteerism, a lack of knowledge about our democratic and political system and of a retreat from public and civic life are all too familiar. Our elected bodies do not provide an accurate reflection of Canada's diversity. And yet, while these stories are familiar, and almost tiresome, we lack the information that would allow us to fully understand the complexities of participation, the root of the problem, and the various ways that these challenges manifest themselves.

Cela est particulièrement évident dans les observations et les écrits sur la participation des collectivités de nouveaux arrivants, d'immigrants et de minorités. La recherche dans ces domaines est sous-développée et commence tout juste à apparaître, et, comme le démontrent les contributions dans ce volume, la pensée s'articule principalement autour d'une mythologie assez fermement enracinée à laquelle font appel les observateurs pour bien cerner le comportement de ces collectivités.

Reporting in the lead-up to the 2004 federal election illustrated this quite plainly. Articles on the involvement of ethnic and immigrant communities in nomination contests tended to critique the onslaught of "instant members," "tribalism" and "stacked" selection processes. These types of stories brand immigrants and minorities as a bloc with a homogeneous outlook that astute politicians can mobilize for electoral victory. Go's article takes issue with this, noting that immigrants are frequently only engaged during elections when politicians are "vying for their votes," but their real issues are ignored and only receive lip-service. Hyder notes that parties need to involve minorities in the policy-making process, rather than simply looking to these communities as a source of votes. Other contributors to this volume are more positive and suggest that tightly-woven networks in immigrant and minority communities can be operationalized at election time to support desired candidates – often candidates who are supportive of the needs of newcomers and minorities, or who are members of those communities themselves (see Bird; Hamdani, Bhatti & Munawar; and Sayers & Jetha).

The perception of immigrant and minority communities as a homogenous bloc has been echoed in stories about recent announcements by the federal government, which many have suggested is early electioneering. Some of these announcements, such as reducing the wait-time for citizenship applications or improving the recognition of foreign credentials, are seen as appeals to immigrant communities and have been criticized as "vote-buying" or an attempt to "lure the ethnic vote." These storylines cast immigrant and minority communities as uncritical, immature and easily-led voters, which Henderson suggests is not, in fact, accurate. Her article in this volume argues that voters arrive at electoral decisions by either evaluating the facts or using shortcuts or cues, such as group membership or partisan identification. Her research suggests that these communities are actually more likely than others to follow election news and debates, and they are less likely to use shortcuts to arrive at their electoral decisions, basing their decisions instead on personal beliefs.

One of the aims of this volume is to start to put some facts behind these fictions, to examine participation in the context of diversity, to find out how we are doing and, more specifically, how immigrants and minorities are doing. What story do people tell about the participation of diverse communities? How do newcomers and minorities participate in politics, in community life, in the electoral process? How has that participation changed over time? Does their participation differ from that of other Canadians? What variations can be found, not only between communities, but also within these communities? What are some of the explanations for those variations? What barriers have been identified? How might those be addressed? And where do we lack information and data? This volume also aims to put political participation, electoral representation, and non-electoral involvement on the radar screens of policy-makers who deal with diversity and the various "inclusion" initiatives that are currently being undertaken. Indeed, the federal government's recently announced Anti-Racism Action Plan sets forth several activities to address racism and exclusion in Canadian society, but the focus is quite squarely on the labour market. The absence of initiatives to address racism and exclusion in the political and civic sphere is noteworthy given that we know far too little about how diversity is included.

The articles in this volume suggest, in various ways, that "diversity" is not a homogenous category, and there is a not a "one size fits all" explanation or description of participation in immigrant and minority communities. As several authors point out, there are significant differences between the participation of Chinese Canadians, who tend to be less engaged, and that of South Asian Canadians, who tend to be more active politically and, in suburban Toronto at least, more likely to be found in elected positions (see Bird; Dhillon; Go; Siemiatycki and Matheson; and Tossutti). Many of the

contributors also point to differences in the participation of youth and, in particular, declines in youth participation, a concern that has been voiced for some time (see Bishop; Cyr; and Tossutti). At the same time, there is evidence, as Hamdani, Bhatti and Munawar point out, that Muslims are becoming more active in civic and political affairs, and this is expected to increase. Nonetheless, participation among religious communities varies. Moreover, even within the same community, as Clemenger's article on evangelicals notes, political views and voting preferences are not homogeneous. In short, the idea of securing the "immigrant vote" or mobilizing a "minority voting bloc" may be somewhat misplaced; these communities are heterogeneous and their participation, preferences and issues are similarly heterogeneous.

Earlier research relied on cultural and contextual factors, rather than institutional or systemic ones, to explain these differences. It was suggested, for example, that we should expect the Chinese to vote less than immigrants from other countries – and especially those countries with an ingrained democratic tradition – because they would be less familiar with democratic processes and active civic participation. The articles in this volume suggest that while political socialization may be one reason that participation varies across immigrant and minority communities, there are other factors at play. Bishop's piece, for example, points to low rates of participation among Aboriginal youth, suggesting that participation may be low even among those who are familiar with democratic traditions.

Ces articles présentent plusieurs explications institutionnelles des variations dans la participation, ainsi que certains des obstacles auxquels peuvent se heurter les collectivités immigrantes et minoritaires. Les ressources financières limitées, les obstacles linguistiques et une méconnaissance du processus et du système politique seraient tous des obstacles potentiels.

Dhillon's article points to the role that political parties can play in facilitating – or limiting – access to political office. Indeed, there was outrage in 2004 when the Liberal Party appointed Bill Cunningham to run under the party banner in the British Columbia riding of Burnaby-Douglas. This occurred despite pleas for an open nomination contest, which came from many, including Tony Kuo, a candidate of Chinese descent who had been organizing in the riding for several months. Some suggested that Cunningham's appointment occurred only after the resignation of Svend Robinson, the popular New Democrat Member of Parliament, when it appeared that the Liberals might be able to win that seat. While the gate-keeper perception is common, many of the contributors in this volume nonetheless characterize Canadian political parties as permeable, open and decentralized and note that this is advantageous for new entrants (see interviews with the party leaders; Bird; Hyder; and Sayers & Jetha).

In terms of potential responses to under-representation and under-participation, contributors point to several. For example, Tanguay and Bittle note that the electoral system may play a role in the representation of minorities in elected office, and they advocate electoral reform as a first step to improving under-representation. Gurnett suggests that education within newcomer communities is important and could lead to increased – and informed – participation. His article points to several initiatives that were undertaken at a community level to raise awareness about elections and educate newcomers about the electoral process. Paul's article also points to education as a possible response, although she suggests targeting candidates and potential public leaders. She argues that training on how to be successful in the public arena may improve the participation of immigrants and minorities not only in electoral politics, but also on boards and commissions.

Même si nombre d'articles de ce volume portent sur la participation électorale formelle, plusieurs articles traitent des liens entre ce genre de participation et la participation à l'extérieur de l'arène électorale. Les articles de Birjandian et de Winnemore soulignent que la participation communautaire, sous ses diverses formes, joue un rôle essentiel dans l'intégration des immigrants, tandis que l'article de Lochhead signale que les réseaux et le capital social créés grâce à la participation à la vie communautaire améliorent l'intégration au marché du travail des immigrants et des minorités. Bref, la question de la participation s'étend bien au-delà de la communauté et de la politique, bien au-delà de l'obtention d'un siège à la table.

In addition to providing evidence for some of our existing hypotheses about patterns of participation, barriers and potential remedies, the articles in this volume provide us with some new directions to explore by challenging familiar perceptions – and sometimes misconceptions – and describing some of the emerging patterns. Bird, for example, suggests that contrary to popular perception, the local level of government may not in fact be more open to diverse candidates than provincial and federal levels of government, a phenomenon that will be explored in a forthcoming volume on electoral representation in 12 Canadian cities, which was spearheaded by the Political Participation Research Network.[1] Siemiatycki and Matheson, in their analysis of diversity among elected officials in suburban Toronto ridings, challenge the assumption that suburban areas are bland bastions of sameness suggesting that this traditional pattern may be changing, while Henderson and Tossutti both suggest that existing assumptions about the voting behaviour of immigrants and minorities may need to be revisited.

This compilation, as well as the ongoing work of the Political Participation Research Network and others, sheds some light on the participation of immigrants and minorities in politics and civic life. This is vital given the dearth of existing research in the area, as well as our democratic and legislative imperatives to construct the public arena in a way that includes all Canadians. There are plenty of seats at the table; we need now to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to take one. Dinner is almost ready, and there is still some work to be done.

Erin Tolley and John Biles
Metropolis Project Team

Notes

Opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Metropolis Project, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, or the Government of Canada.

[1] For information on the Political Participation Research Network, visit http://www.canada.metropolis.net/research-policy/pprn-pub/index.html.