

Community Forum: Civic & Political Engagement of Immigrants to Canada

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The starting point of the study

- Evidence that turnout among foreign born is lower than native born (Turgeon and Bilodeau, 2015 report for Elections Canada)
- Gap closes as people spend more time in Canada but remains significant (different for different groups, see for instance Soroka, Johnston and Banting 2007)
- Descriptive representation of immigrants does not match their proportion to the Canadian population (esp at municipal level, see Siemiatycky 2011)

Collaborative study UBC Migration and SUCCESS

- Study took place between Dec 2018 and July 2019 – over 30 in depth interviews
- Recruitment in multiple languages, through community connections, online recruitment, snowballing

Collaborative study UBC Migration and SUCCESS

- SUCCESS enabler but not in charge of data collection/analysis
- Interviews and interview analysis (ongoing) by myself with assistant interviewers/interpreters (English and other languages), and one transcriber

Questions that inform the study

- How do immigrants experience politics in Canada? What elements shape their motivation to participate?
- Multiculturalism as “identity politics”: does this drive interest and participation in politics?
- What would work in terms of increasing opportunities and motivations to participate? (UX policy design)

Interviews with politicians

- 8 interviews (between 1 and 2 hrs)
- Motivations and mechanisms of running for office
- Recruiting constituents inside and outside immigrant group: what works and what does not?
- Multiculturalism policy

Interviews with community organizers

- Combination of self identification and referral
- 5 interviews (between 2 and 3 hrs)
- Motivations and background
- Community involvement and political participation
- Organizing within and outside of “own” immigrant group

Interviews with immigrants and newcomers

- 18 life history interviews (between 3 and 4 hrs)
- Learning about politics
- Civic engagement
- Assessing quality and trustworthiness of political institutions

Findings

- Very rich material (around 20 pages, single-spaced for each interview transcription)
- Focus on politicians' interview, with reference to community organizers and immigrants
- Removed names and parties

Findings

- Getting into politics
- Culture, multiculturalism, adaptation and social integration
- Possible interventions

GETTING INTO POLITICS

The idea of “getting into” politics

- **Politicians:** Different pathways (activism, business, government or journalism) but decision to run for office only happened because **someone asked;**
- Narrative about motivation to run is **intrinsically linked to immigrant experience**

Running for office

- *"Yea, in my mid 20s, and people [asked] so I just flat out said no, I said I'm not interested. And then over time people kept on coming to try to persuade me...I thought, oh well alright, let me go, you know that's your choice, you can either just scream and shout from the outside and complain about it, or try to get on the inside and do something. And so then I did." (Politician 7)*

Running for office

- *“I said to myself, I said this is crazy. Remember this is 1989. There was a huge backlash of Chinese immigration. There were [...] campaigns and keep those Chinese out of our Shaughnessy area and those kinds of things....This would be crazy if he [the then Mayor] was out there defending us, nobody from our own community was willing to stand up to help. What message are we sending?” (Politician 1)*

Running for office

- *“That’s why I worked so hard. And I want to prove to the world that [party leader] did not pick a wrong person from a visible minority, from a women. So that’s why I decided to run again because I felt that I can I have done so much that I still have things to do. Too bad that we could not become the government, but blessing in disguise that now I can spend more time in the riding.” (Politician 6)*

Community organizers and politics

- **Service to the community** as not political/partisan
- *“Church and politics is separate. And we are very neutral, and we don’t give priority to any political parties. We don’t bring them, we don’t promote, we don’t do at all. We don’t do at all. Like we have a request one time, I think that was a kind of election going on, and there was somebody wanting to sponsor our community meal. Then sponsor community meal, then talk about their politics. Then I said, we don’t allow this. If you want to sponsor meal that’s fine, you can because you are doing for the community, but you cannot come and talk about your party”.* (Community organizer 5)

Community organizers and politics

- Community organizations as **conduit to raise issues**
- *“For example, in [our organization’s] job we are doing like the marijuana, like the federal government wants the marijuana legalized, we kind of oppose it. We invite the minister to come over to [our organization] ...We try to let [our community] know that we should go out to be a politician, to serve the country, then our voice would be heard and listened”. (Community organizer 4)*

Community organizers and politics

- Community organizing as **encouraging “political harm reduction”**
- *“I don’t think I have been doing much at all ...once you get to have some vision about how you can help the community but eventually as you are in the system with the politicians, you get a bit jaded. I have been trying to stay a bit more neutral and people ask... a lot of people ask me, oh so you know politics, you know the different government, what is your view? And I always say that I cannot tell you how to vote, but I said what I do is use a harm reduction approach myself. Whichever party that causes you the least harm, right?” (Community Organizer 1).*

Politics on the ground

- **Immigrants and newcomers:** distinction between interested/uninterested breaks down
- *“Yea I won’t say... I won’t consider myself to be a person who’s like particularly interested in like the community and volunteering and stuff like that. But I guess it’s just a thing that I do. Yea, a thing that I do”. (Life History 1)*

Politics on the ground

- *“There was never an opportunity that really naturally clicked to trigger me to thinking oh I want to get involved in politics back in school. But recently it did because like I have seen issue rise or the solution be proposed by a particular party wasn’t necessarily you know the optimal like just because they voted to be in the power position doesn’t necessarily means that they have the best solution for you know the majority. [...] I think every individual like including myself have the ability to um to change like the society a little bit. Yea” (Life history 4)*

MULTICULTURALISM AND CANADIAN POLITICS

Multiculturalism: mixed feelings among politicians

- Idea that **multiculturalism is a good idea, but practiced superficially**
- *“I think [...] there are two aspects of culture. One is visible. Touchable. Okay. Food and costume, dance, and so on. But the other [...] is really invisible. I think at the heydays, for example, oh yes we have all these different ethnic dances and all music and food. Fine, great. But if there is no hard work in terms of making people understand behind all of that, you know? You have to understand you know, if nobody is going to explain it to you or make you understand or people have no patience of trying to find out, then it’s lost. So this is why I think that we have not been able to develop the inner side of culture”. (Politician 6)*

Mixed feelings about multiculturalism

- *“ [...] The problem with state policy is our politicians have not evolved. Nobody no one in today’s multicultural world is moving ahead and adopting this new reality of how Canada really is a culture. The people are experiencing it a different way” (Politician 1)*

Immigrants' perspectives on multiculturalism

- Idea that multiculturalism is about “**petty identity politics**”:
- *“I signed up [for this study] because I want to learn how to be more involved but like I find it really, really hard[...]Ok so for the longest time in my life, I was concerned about issues that are very fundamental. So like political issues that are really basic stuff, like freedom of speech, having an independent judiciary, independent elections. Then you come to Canada and people are fighting about bike lanes, gender neutral bathrooms. It’s hard to feel invested in that stuff. In that sense multiculturalism is bad because people like me who aren’t interested in the petty stuff” (Life History 1)*

INTERVENTIONS

Interventions for deeper and better engagement

- Encourage politicians' engagement that is non-partisan and outside election time
- Need to provide mentoring and explaining the job of politics
- Build relationships and advocate for people's issues
- Curb social isolation among immigrants
- Change culture of engagement: from token to "soul searching"

Non-partisan riding level engagement

- *“Well ridings, so what you do in a riding is you know most local MLAS have events but then you know they’re associated with that party. Right? They can have a non-partisan event. I used to do that, I know the current MLA probably does that. The people have breakfast with MLAs and anybody can go. Right? It’s not political, you get there, but MLAS have are the ones that have to do the work”.* (Politician 8)
- *“I think ridings are good but they must come not before election...they come and then four years you don’t see them. Then they show up you can’t trust because they just want the vote”* (Life History 12)

Educating about the job of holding political office

- *“With civic education [...] It’s not so much about participating or not but do you know the job? Understand what the job is about [...] Start local: all three levels of government should be involved. Becoming a councilor is a a stepping stone to the provincial government, stepping stone to other government, right?” (Community Organizer 1)*

Building relationships

- *“People will get engaged when something really moves them. Something has to be personal to make it public. And people have a lot of issues, but sometimes they just don’t know where to go. Right, and that’s another thing that I would say I have found over the years, sometimes they don’t know where to go. Even though there are all these resources, it’s really hard to navigate all those resources, and you always need an advocate”. (Politician 8)*

Curbing social isolation

- *“Even the new immigrants, I don’t know, SUCCESS is doing that or not? When the new immigrants come in, right like how to fit into Canadian culture is kind of mixed now, multicultural, and you have to kind of adapt into different cultures. They don’t know how to make friends with people from different countries, you know? And that becomes a real depression for them. Depression...Everything collapses. So yea. [Social connections] so that’s a big need in the community”. (Community Organizer 3)*

Approach diversity as an “addition”, not tokenism

- *“I would recommend [...] I think for everybody to really do a little bit of hard soul searching [...] The soul searching is easier when the person realize they’re living in the environment that they are being accepted. Then they see that I’m accepted, then I start to think that yes I also want to know why I’m being accepted and how am I going to accept other people?” (Politician 6)*

Q&A