

Community Forum on the Civic & Political Engagement of Immigrants to Canada
October 10, 2019
World Café – Participant Brainstorm/Discussion – Notes

The following are the notes captured during the World Café portion of the Forum, when attendees engaged in small group discussions on three different topics. Attendees included representatives from community organizations and government, members of academia, and other interested community stakeholders.

Topic 1: What are some community-level interventions (bottom up) that would encourage more immigrants to be civically and politically engaged?

- Civic engagement training and mentoring:
 - Training and mentorship could include targeted outreach to influencers who are community leaders.
 - One-to-one meetings or mentorship may be helpful, supporting relationship building.
 - Training in civic engagements could be bundled with language classes, for example in educational environments or community settings. Newcomers deal with time constraints, which could mean that bundling training together would be a way to accommodate their schedules.
 - Civic engagement could be framed as a duty and a responsibility, so that newcomers and community members know that it is valued.
 - Building knowledge about civic engagement is an opportunity.
 - Being asked to be part of learning about civic affairs can provide a strong motivation for individuals to participate in training or mentorship programs.
- Learning about civic engagement is part of the integration process:
 - A program or service could be developed that compares civic and political life to that in newcomers' countries of origin. This may be a way to engage individuals with shared backgrounds, ethnicities, or languages in learning about civic and political life in Canada.
 - Utilizing neighbourhood organizations and contacts in community level interventions will be important.
- Encouraging recent immigrants to take on leadership roles in community organizations:
 - Mentoring will be helpful to engage recent immigrants in decision making and leadership in their local communities.
 - Specialized programs for youth could be developed (see North Shore examples – youth advisory committees and leadership groups can support this, including groups like Fresh Voices and the Vancouver Foundation).
- Role playing and simulations to facilitate teaching and learning about the process of becoming politically engaged (e.g., voting simulations).
- Guidance and supports are needed for community-level interventions:

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- We need to make institutional change to enable community-level interventions. Community-level interventions should be institutional, rather than only relying on immigrants' initiative and labour.
- Person to person relationship building within institutions can be helpful, in addition to digital engagement led by institutions.
- Institutions have multiple points of engagement and intervention in newcomers' lives (e.g., meetings, interviews, etc.) that can be leveraged.
- Potential to enhance what settlement agencies and overseas consulates are already doing.
- Articulating the importance of civic engagement is critical.
- There are accessible grants to support newcomers that can be used for discussion and training on civic engagement and political participation.
- Discouraging groupings.

Topic 2: What are some of the policy interventions (top down) that would encourage more immigrants to be civically and politically engaged?

- Revenue Canada could eliminate the policy that non-profits cannot advocate along political lines.
- Government and political parties may be made more representative of the diverse Canadian population:
 - A quota system may be one way to achieve greater diversity in government.
 - Consider infrastructures elsewhere such as the reservation system in India, which sets aside seats in different institutions for members of underrepresented groups, similar to affirmative action in the United States.
 - There could be issues to investigate with a quota system, as it may provide unfair advantages or disadvantages to some candidates. The fairness of such a system could be highly variable.
- Dual member representation could be a way to work towards greater equity, for example, along gender lines.
- Parties need to get out of their comfort zone in the voters and communities that they typically interact with:
 - Inclusive weighting procedures for outreach in ridings could help with this.
- The "greenlight" process for nomination of candidates by political parties needs to be more transparent:
 - This process is currently shadowy. There should be greater transparency about the reasons why a particular individual is or is not chosen by a party.
 - Making this process more transparent may be a check against discrimination and could help to build trust with voters.
- Rethinking the unequal size of electoral districts across Canada:
 - It may be worthwhile to investigate how districts are divided, considering the ward system.
- Voting rights for permanent residents:

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- Several Canadian cities have put forward proposals for permanent residents to have the right to vote as a way to enable newcomers to have a voice, including Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary and Hamilton.
- Engagement in municipal elections can be a stepping stone to getting involved in provincial and federal elections.
- Citizenship education:
 - The government should provide support for learning and teaching about more diverse aspects of citizenship.
 - Courses on citizenship could focus on participation and involvement in Canadian politics, including practical knowledge about the job of holding office.
 - A national policy strategy for citizenship education could mandate training for newcomers about aspects of civic and political participation beyond what is currently offered on Canadian geography, history, politics, and social life.
- Newcomers' engagement in decision making within community organizations could be expanded through hiring and inclusion policies:
 - Community organizations could be mandated to reach out to diverse populations as part of their hiring and volunteer recruitment.
 - Engagement is challenging, but local organizations and institutions could be doing more to reach out to those not already deeply involved within their communities.
- We need a better understanding of pathways to civic and political participation:
 - How can we learn more about these opportunities through peoples' experiences and stories of becoming involved?
 - Community leaders need to reach out directly to individuals and groups at local levels to encourage their participation.
 - We need to better understand different identities and relationships to Canada and Canadian policy.
- The media's influence on political engagement could be leveraged:
 - The media could support further discussion of political issues beyond election cycles.
 - The media have a responsibility to help citizens develop an awareness of issues and decisions beyond the formal debates held during elections.
- Efforts to engage individuals in civic and political life have to compete with everything else that is demanding individuals' engagement:
 - Within an attention economy, there is so much competition for individuals' time and engagement. We need to understand political engagement in this context.
 - What types of engagement can we create in order to be able to compete with everything else that demands individuals' time and attention?
 - In what ways do individuals use information literacy and digital literacy practices to critically engage in politics? How can digital literacies be supported and developed?
 - How does "digital citizenship" relate to political engagement?

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- Participation in politics should be deepened:
 - Transactional participation (e.g., voting) could be extended to forms of deeper, longer term engagement in political and civic activities.
- Discourse on politics need to be more positive and outcome-oriented in order to highlight citizens' power:
 - It is challenging for people to get involved if they feel they don't have agency and power to make change.
 - How might we design an ecosystem of support for political participation?
 - Citizens can feel empowered through positive framings of individuals' and communities' contributions and opportunities for leadership.
 - A focus on citizen or community action and outcomes can empower citizens, and here the media has a role to play in finding and sharing these narratives.
- Lowering the voting age to 16:
 - Increasing the number of younger voters may be a way for engagement to bubble up through families.
- What is the difference between participation and engagement?
 - How do we define these activities?
 - What are the gaps between them?
 - What links can be made between short term (e.g., voting) and long term involvement in politics?

Topic 3: What are the enabling factors to civic and political participation?

- We can do more to make people feel part of civic and political life:
 - How do people have a stake in civic and political life and a sense of agency?
- Spaces that enable participation:
 - Individuals can leverage their involvement in cultural community centres, sports, clubs, and agricultural cooperatives, for example, in engaging in local, regional, and national issues.
- Experiences of discrimination should be considered.
- We can explore the experiences of permanent residents compared with visitors and tourists with regards to participation.
- We could do more to market the skills and ideas of civic and political engagement among newcomer communities.
- We can consider avenues for contribution of existing skills, expertise (e.g., in health care).
- It is important to prioritize building public supports for participation (e.g., through op eds).
- Joining policy consultations with MLAs and MPs can enable people to get involved.
- At institutional levels, leaders can reach out to new immigrants, and racialized, underrepresented groups:
 - Being asked or invited by leaders, and staff of community groups can be a strong motivator. However, there are perhaps unintended negative consequences that need to be examined.

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- Having allies and mentors who can show how individuals can take steps towards further participation and contribution.
 - Organizations can plan to recruit newcomers for roles as board members in communities.
- It will be important to remove language barriers in order to promote understanding of political participation and systems:
 - Translated documents can facilitate access (e.g., information relating to town halls, political processes, etc.)
 - Facilitators in various languages can provide education about rights, public decision-making processes, and identify needs of community members.
- Educating and nurturing public life:
 - Education on the public sphere is an enabling factor.
 - Opportunities for democratic engagement can be created through neighbourhood houses, town halls, and community cafes.
 - One to one and informal conversations can be an avenue for participation.
 - We need to recognize the quick transition from being a permanent resident to becoming a voting citizen. Further education on civic and social topics can be provided to facilitate this transition.



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