

Diversity and Urban Citizenship in Canadian Cities

With the support of the Simons Foundation, SFU students were invited by the Institute for the Humanities to submit written research proposals that focused on issues related to citizenship. Narcisa Medianu presented the following selected paper on November 15, 2007, at SFU Harbour Centre.

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INTRODUCTION

The unparalleled level of cultural diversity encountered in Canada's largest cities presents a challenge to local urban governance. Faced with the rapidly changing ethnic composition of the cities, citizens and local governments are actively searching for "new ways of living together, new forms of spatial and social belonging" (Sandercock, 2004, p. 7), expanding the spaces of democracy through political participation at the local level. How are Canadian multicultural cities coping with these challenges? This paper identifies three major topics in urban citizenship practices of ethno-cultural minorities: the creation of new spaces for participation and expression of collective identity, political participation, and civic engagement of ethno-cultural minorities. The last part of the paper discusses the differences in patterns of civic and political participation between voters of Caucasian and Chinese ancestry based on exit poll data from the Vancouver 2005 municipal elections.

THE CONCEPT OF CITIZENSHIP

A thorough definition of citizenship is impossible, as the concept has been continuously

redefined to reflect the major transformations taking place at the social and political level. The unfolding of citizenship rights has been inherently political—a "contested process" (Stasiulus, 2002)—reflecting the struggle and accommodation of various groups in the society advancing their claims for inclusion and recognition. Through a continuous process of expansion and erosion (Holston, 1995), the boundaries of citizenship have been expanded and reconfigured to include new groups of citizens and new types of rights. Initially limited to men who owned property, citizenship was expanded to include non-owners, women, visible minorities, and immigrants who qualified for the citizen status. The array of rights associated with citizenship has also increased, as social rights (such as equal access to healthcare and education) were added to the political and civil rights essential for the working of democracy.

The process of transformation has continued with the expansion of individual rights and the debate over the inclusion of group rights. As Ignatieff noted in "The Rights Revolution," Canada has a very distinctive rights culture characterized by a multicultural and social democratic approach to citizenship, which offers recognition to groups previously excluded or marginalised, such as First Nations, women, gays,

children, and so forth. However, the debates surrounding the Charter of Rights and Freedoms speak about the challenge of expanding citizenship rights to include group rights aimed at protecting the cultural and linguistic heritage of ethno-cultural groups. French-speaking Canadians and First Nations have fought hard for the recognition of collective rights, such as self-determination and linguistic rights, which they deemed necessary for the protection of their distinctive cultures. This transformation did not come about without political struggle, as the approach envisioned in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was geared towards the recognition of individual rights with “no privileges for any groups, but equal rights for all . . . no distinct societies or people, but one nation for all” (Ignatieff, 2000, p. 65).

From the sphere of politics, the debate on citizenship has expanded into the realm of anthropology and sociology. The focus of the debate shifted from the formal aspect of citizenship to its substantive dimension rooted in the quality of citizens’ experiences, their participation in and sense of belonging to the community. This change coincided with the erosion of nationstate as the primary site where rights and responsibilities are defined and loyalties are enacted. The role of nationstate citizenship was questioned both from above—due to the increased importance of transnational ties and globalisation processes—and from below—due to the rising profile of cities as sites where citizenship experiences take place. This gave rise to new forms of citizenship such as urban citizenship.

CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE URBAN CITIZENSHIP

Today, cities have become primary settings where ethno-cultural minorities experience citizenship through social and political participation. Between 1991—2001, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver attracted 73% of all immigrants to Canada, with Toronto having the largest

share, at 43% (Siemiatycki, 2006, p. 12). With the overwhelming proportion of newcomers to Canada choosing to settle in Canada’s largest cities, urban cultures have become extremely diverse in terms of cultural and linguistic background. In the Greater Vancouver Region, 39% of the residents have a language other than English as their mother tongue, and 37% identify themselves as visible minorities (B.C. Stats, 2001 census). Similarly, 49% of the City of Toronto’s residents were foreign-born and 37% were visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2001 census). The top three visible minority groups in Toronto were Chinese at 10.6% , South Asian at 10.3% and Black at 8.3% (City of Toronto website).

Cities are becoming increasingly multicultural, and their urban political culture is undergoing a continuous process of redefinition. One of the main challenges confronting Canada’s multicultural cities is how to integrate the immigrant population and create an inclusive political culture (Sandercock, 2004).

A first step in creating an inclusive political culture is to understand the various forms in which ethno-cultural minorities contribute to the political culture of our society. In the past, the research into the civic and political participation of ethnocultural minorities has been scarce. In a literature review of participation studies, Daiva Stasiulus (1997) points out that:

With few exceptions, Canadian political scientists have tended to consider “ethnic politics” almost entirely in terms of “French-English” relations, with an intensified interest in First Nations politics in recent years. The study of immigrant and ethno-cultural/racial minority activity in Canadian politics has thus received scant empirical or theoretical attention, largely reaching tentative, contested, and extremely partial conclusions.

In addition to the dearth of evidence on the topic, Peter Li draws attention to the fact that research on immigration has been implicitly “benchmarking,” by comparing the political behaviour of Canadian-born citizens to the

participation levels of newcomers (Li, 1996). Benchmarking relies on the assumption that members of ethno-cultural minorities will eventually assimilate and integrate politically in the society and differences observed for the first and second generation of immigrants will disappear over time. In this view, citizenship is experienced individually and cultural differences, while fulfilling an important expressive function, are irrelevant in the political sphere.

Another limitation of the research on political participation of ethno-cultural minorities is its individualistic approach to participation: “Research in the area of political participation has tended to focus on the individual characteristics and behaviour of immigrants and ethnic minorities. This individual orientation, consistent with the scientific, empiricist approach to North American politics, has not dealt well with the collective dimensions of migration, settlement and community processes” (Stasiulus, 1997).

STRUGGLES OVER URBAN SPACE

A radically new perspective on the role of ethno-cultural minorities originated in urban planning studies. A central theme of this approach is Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city,” that is the right of social groups, including those previously marginalised, to inhabit and shape the everyday spaces of the city—its neighbourhoods, parks, streets, and buildings. As Holston points out, urban spaces sometimes become “sites of insurgence because they introduce into the city new identities and practices that disturb established histories” (1996, p. 48). For ethno-cultural groups, urban citizenship means “attempts to establish collective cultural expressions of their identity in the form of places of worship, commercial environments, recreational facilities, community centres as well as claims on and the use of public space in everyday life, the ability to transform the built environment in ways that

reflect cultural diversity, and a subjective sense of belonging” (Sandercock, 2003, p. 151).

Place and community are thus seen as key dimensions of participatory practices, which give substance to citizenship by creating a sense of attachment and belonging. The social dimension of participation becomes particularly important in the case of insurgent movements where marginalised groups challenge the status quo definition of citizenship. As Holston and Appadurai stated it, “in terms of rights to the city and rights to political participation, right becomes conceived as an aspect of social relatedness rather than as an inherent and natural property of individuals” (Holston & Appadurai, 1996, p. 197).

There is a growing body of research on urban insurgent movements through which ethno-cultural minorities advance their claims on urban space, participating thus in the political and civic life of the city. Engin Isin and Myer Siemiatycki (2002) have written extensively on the municipal response to minority community claims in Toronto, acknowledging the centrality of struggles over space in the urban citizenship movement of immigrant communities:

The centrality of urban space as a terrain of conflict for immigrant communities was highlighted in a survey conducted by the author in 1997 of senior staff in all 35 (upper and lower tier) municipalities existing in the Greater Toronto Area, prior to amalgamation. Almost half (17) of the municipalities reported they had experienced circumstances of conflict with immigrant communities; and in 14 of the 17 instances, land use zoning was the issue in dispute. Nine municipalities experienced conflict over the location of places of worship for minority religious communities, particularly mosques; five had clashed with the Chinese communities over the construction of Asian-style malls or the location of funeral homes; and two had disputes over the attempt to establish a Jamaican community centre.” (Siemiatycki, 1998)

Vancouver has been the site of similar struggles over the use of urban space. Among the issues of controversy that captured the attention of Vancouverites in the 80s was the “monster home syndrome.” The “monster homes” were houses built by new immigrants from Hong Kong and were disliked by long term residents because they were large in size, with flat roofs (which conformed to the feng shui rules), thick walls, and high hedges. In some cases, which created a lot of controversy, the trees on the lot were removed (for a discussion of the “monster homes” issue see Abu Laban, 1997, and Edgington, 2003). The conflict was solved through a series of by-laws passed by the City which regulated house sizes and lot coverage. The issue continues to be salient today. At the beginning of December, 2006, the Surrey Council passed a law limiting the size of the homes built in neighbourhoods that are mainly populated by Indo-Canadians,

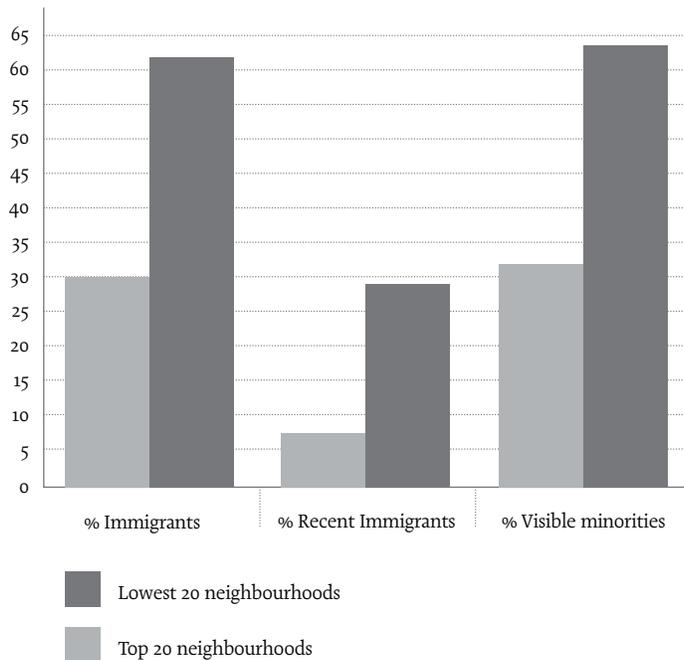
a decision that triggered angry reactions from the Indo-Canadian community. Another controversial issue in the 80s was the development of “Chinese shopping centres” in Richmond (a suburb of Vancouver), where the absence of English signs was protested by long-time residents (Edgington, 2003).

PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL POLITICS TORONTO 2003 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

Ultimately, controversies over the use of urban space lead to the expansion of spaces for participation of minority groups in their search to assert their collective identity. The participation of minorities in the democratic process starts however at the polls, where democracy is experienced directly. Multicultural cities face the challenge of creating an inclusive framework which would encourage members of ethno-cultural minorities to participate in the political processes.

In Toronto, Siemiatycki’s (2006) study of the 2003 municipal election showed “compelling and troubled quantitative evidence of immigrant disengagement from the city’s electoral system” (Siemiatycki, 2006, p. 14). The overall voter turnout in the 2003 civic election was 38%. Of Toronto’s 140 neighbourhoods, the top 20 had an average of 47% turnout while the average for the lowest 20 was only 28%. Neighbourhoods with the lowest turnout vote had the largest number of immigrants, visible minorities and lower income persons (see Figure 1). According to the author, these groups constituted mostly of the “missing voters.” Siemiatycki found a similar pattern of non-participation for the 44 City wards defined for municipal election purposes, with the lowest voter participation wards having a greater proportion of immigrants. A regression analysis of the factors influencing voter turnout in the 44 City wards indicated that immigrant and visible minority status was the most important predictor of voter participation rates, when control-

Figure 1: The top 20 and lowest 20 voter turnout neighbourhoods in Toronto



Source: Adapted from Siemiatycki (2006), data from the 2003 Toronto Civic Election.

ling for ward characteristics such as household income, proportion of residents who were tenants and proportion of residents who held university degrees (Siemiatycki, 2006, p. 17).

**VANCOUVER 2005
MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS**

Evidence from Vancouver suggests that, in the 2005 municipal elections, visible minorities, in particular Vancouver residents of Chinese background were largely underrepresented among voters. According to the 2001 census data, Vancouver residents of Chinese background represent about 26% of Vancouver’s population. According to the results of the exit poll conducted during the civic elections by Simon Fraser University (for the Vancouver Sun), voters of Chinese background represented only 13% of those who voted in the last municipal election.^{1,2,3}

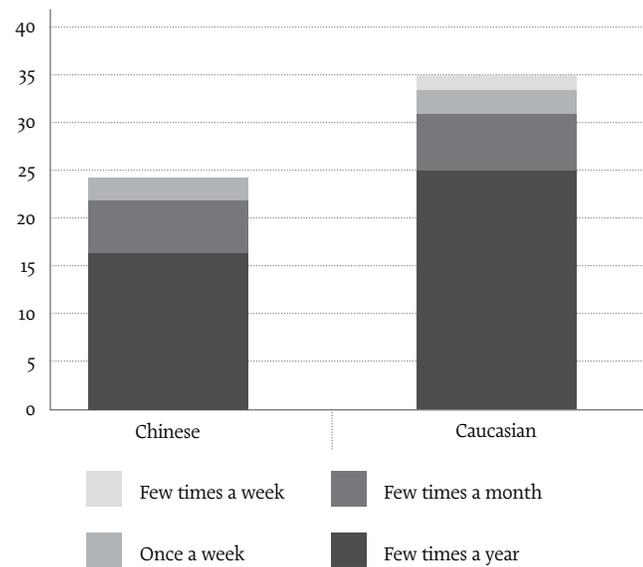
The absence of Chinese voters from the polls appears to be symptomatic of other forms of political participation. When asked how often they interacted with a member of the municipal government or participated in a meeting about a local issue within the last year, respondents of Chinese background reported lower participation rates compared to their Caucasian counterparts (see Figures 2 and 3). While respondents from both groups are rather similar in terms of seeking out information about elections, there

1 The survey allowed voters to identify the ethnic group that best describes their ancestral background from a list of seven categories: Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, South Asian, Southeast Asian, White/Caucasian and Other. Of those who answered the question, 72% identified themselves as having a White/Caucasian background. 13% identified themselves as Chinese (N=99 in the unweighted sample). Each of the other groups listed in the survey made up less than 3% of the sample, with the exception of the “Other” category selected by 8% of respondents.

2 The Chinese and Caucasian voters were similar in terms of gender distribution, education, and age (with the Chinese respondents being slightly younger). Chinese respondents reported lower household incomes, but higher house ownership rate (78% vs 56%). Only 30% of the Chinese respondents were born in Canada compared to 80% of Caucasian respondents.

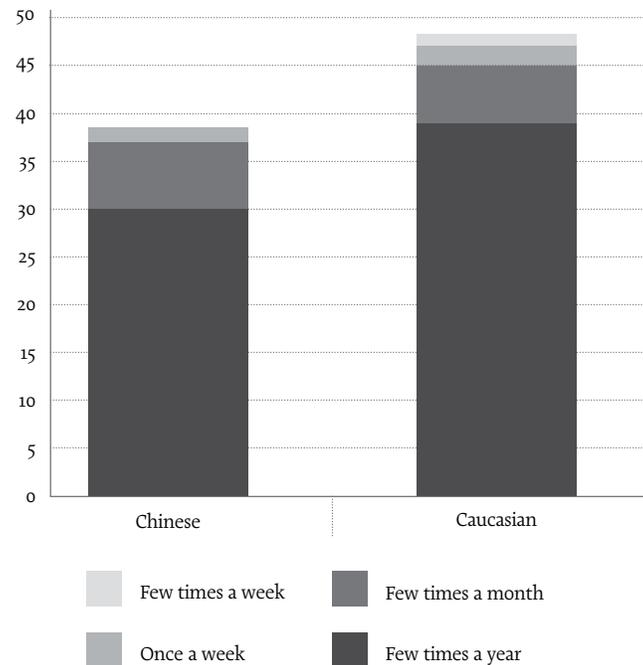
3 For details about the methodology of the exit poll see Maclver, Stewart, & Young 2006.

Figure 2: Interaction with a member of the municipal government in the past year



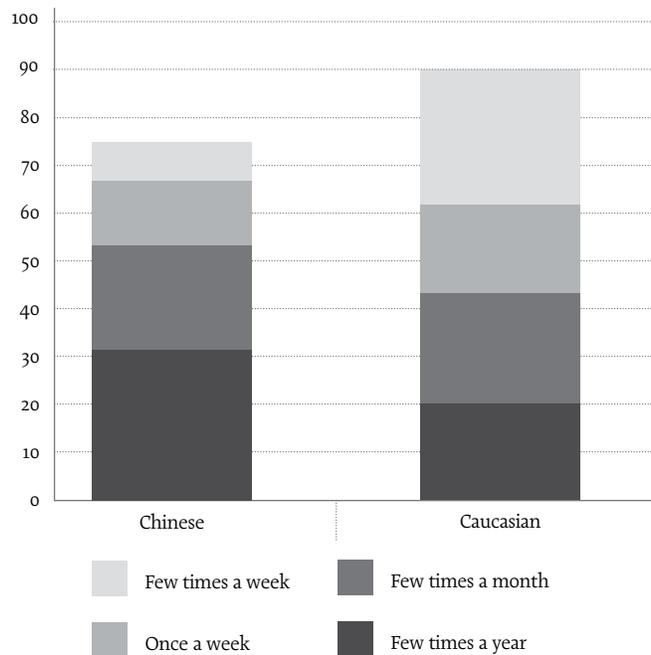
Source: Exit poll data from the 2005 Vancouver Civic Election.

Figure 3: Participation in a meeting about a local issue in the past year



Source: Exit poll data from the 2005 Vancouver Civic Election.

Figure 4: Frequency of interaction with neighbours in the past year



Source: Exit poll data from the 2005 Vancouver Civic Election.

seems to be less of an effort on behalf of politicians to directly engage the Chinese community during the electoral campaign. 36% of Chinese respondents had a candidate or a candidate representative call them or visit their homes compared to 55% of Caucasian respondents (although voters of Chinese background had similar length of residence in Vancouver and a significantly higher house ownership rate).

**INTERPERSONAL TRUST
AND COMMUNITY
PARTICIPATION**

Voter turnout and political participation are related to other forms of social interaction. Interaction with friends, neighbours, membership in associations, and interpersonal trust, commonly grouped together under the label “social capital,” are considered critical for the functioning of democratic institutions. The impact of ethno-cultural diversity on the propensity of people to trust and bond with

each other has been researched extensively. Given that social interactions tend to occur more easily in conditions of cultural homogeneity, diversity tends to favour “fragmented” forms of social capital such as “gendered” or “ethnic” social capital. In this respect, Putnam distinguishes between bridging and bonding social capital in terms of their political implications. Bridging social capital, which “refers to social networks that bring together people of different sorts,” is more likely to create positive externalities. Bonding social capital, on the other hand, “brings together people of a similar sort,” creating networks that are bonding within particular social niches and are less likely to benefit the functioning of democratic institutions (Putnam, 2002).

Finding ways to encourage bridging social capital is one other challenge of urban governance. The concern is that neighbourhoods where ethnic concentration is present are conducive to bonding forms of social capital or interaction within ethnic boundaries. In this respect, the study conducted by Hou (2004) shows that the number of minority neighbourhoods with over 30% of their population from a single visible minority group has increased in number from 6 in 1981 to 77 in 1991 and 254 in 2001 (Hou, 2004, p. 8). Vancouver (111) and Toronto (135) have by far the highest number of visible minority neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhoods are the closest geographical communities where people become involved in decision making through participation in neighbourhood meetings and councils. To what extent are Vancouver neighbourhoods inclusive of members of ethno-cultural communities?

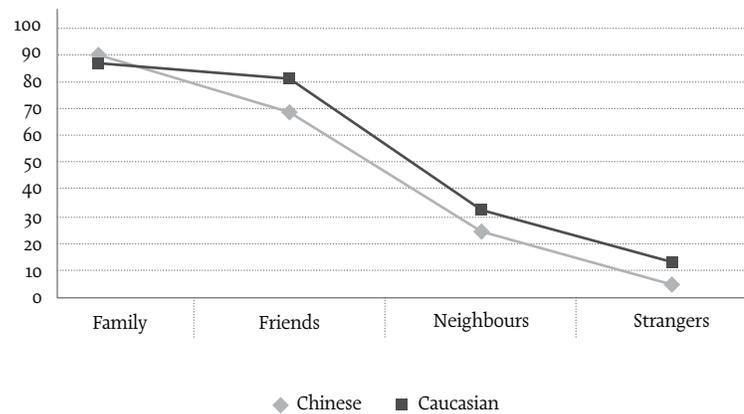
Evidence from the Vancouver municipal elections suggests that visible minority status has an impact on civic engagement. Chinese voters who participated in the survey report lower levels of interaction with neighbours (see Figure 4), although they have a higher home ownership rate. They also report lower levels of willingness to participate in neighbourhood councils, block party, and community consultations

compared to their Caucasian counterparts. However, four in ten Chinese respondents say they would participate in more neighbourhood meetings, block parties or community consultations if they were held in their first language. With language as one of the main barriers for participation, a significant majority of Chinese respondents are in favour of having translation services at community meetings. 76% are in favour of having a translator at community meetings and 65% are in favour of printing the election ballot in other languages. Support for translation services is also high among Caucasian respondents, with about 50% saying they are in favour.

Exit poll data also reveal different patterns of interpersonal trust for respondents of Chinese and Caucasian background. Trust decreases dramatically the further away one moves from the circle of family and friends (see Figure 6). While the level of trust in family is similar for the two groups, voters of Chinese ancestry fall behind their Caucasian counterparts in terms of trust in friends, neighbours and strangers. Their trust in the municipal government is also lower, but, interestingly, they fare better than Caucasian respondents in their levels of trust in the provincial and federal government (see Figure 6).

The trust gap between Chinese and Caucasian respondents could be attributed to a multitude of socio-economic variables,⁴ among which cultural differences could be one of the many possible explanations. The scope of the survey conducted in 2005 did not allow for testing the underlying factors in explaining group differences. However, the trust gap reinforces the idea that diversity is particularly challenging at the local level where members of ethno-cultural groups have different ways of

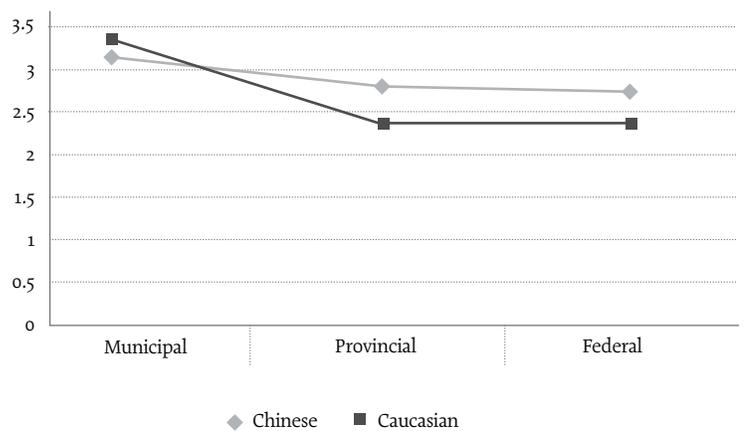
Figure 5: Levels of interpersonal trust



Source: Exit poll data from the 2005 Vancouver Civic Election.

* Trust was measured on a scale from 1 to 6. The values displayed represent the cumulative % for the top 2 categories (5 and 6) for trust in family, friends, and neighbours and the cumulative % for the top 3 categories (4, 5, and 6) for trust in strangers.

Figure 6: Trust in different levels of government



Source: Exit poll data from the 2005 Vancouver Civic Election.

* The values displayed represent the mean value of trust in government (measured on a scale from 1 to 6).

4 However, demographic variables such as household income and age do not appear to be correlated with the level of social trust.

experiencing citizenship and participating in the decision-making processes.

C O N C L U S I O N

The culturally diverse Canadian cities, with their newly emerging hybrid cultures, present one of the biggest challenges for urban governance. Ethnocultural communities are an important part of the equation, contributing immensely to the transformation of urban cultures. Change is often a contested process as urban citizenship studies reveal, and claims to the city advanced by ethno-cultural minorities are not always successful. But nevertheless, they are an exercise in democracy, a step along the path of creating new ways of living together.

There is, however, troublesome evidence from Toronto and Vancouver civic elections showing a tendency of ethno-cultural minorities to become disengaged from the local political process, starting with the presence at the polls. In the case of Vancouver, exit poll data from the 2005 elections point to other related issues such as the gap between voters of Chinese and Caucasian backgrounds in terms of trust in government and frequency of interaction with political candidates. Along with other factors not addressed here (such as the socio-economic status), language appears to be a significant barrier to participation.

A general theme underpinning the lower levels of political participation is that of social capital, in the form of interpersonal trust and civic engagement. While the results indicate lower interpersonal trust outside the family sphere among voters of Chinese background, further research is needed into the forms of bridging and bonding social capital of ethno-cultural minorities. Canadian neighbourhoods are changing at a very rapid pace and it is up to citizens and local governments to create an inclusive and participatory culture where everybody feels welcomed.

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