

Voting matters—just ask anyone who understands what it means not to have this fundamental liberty. And yet low voter turn-out rates, especially in municipal elections, suggest that something is amiss. It is easy to chalk low participation up to apathy and blame individual voters for not coming out to the polls. (“If you don’t vote, you can’t complain,” the saying goes.) But while complacency can suggest satisfaction, it can also mean precisely the opposite: non-voters do not feel that political institutions are relevant to their lives or represent their concerns.

Civic engagement not only includes voting in elections, but it also encompasses a broad spectrum of ways to participate in the community. Saanich Mayor Frank Leonard points out that the speaker’s podium at City Hall is a symbol of local democracy.¹ It is only at this level of government that community-members regularly have opportunities to

speaking directly to their political representatives. In many communities, planning processes actively solicit feedback and community members sit on committees in order to contribute their perspectives and expertise to municipal decisions. A shift in local governance is underway across North America from a “vending machine” model which saw elected officials making decisions on our behalf, to a “barn-raising” model in which we expect to participate in our community’s self-determination.²

Exclusion, however, is the shadow of civic engagement. If everyone does not feel entitled to participate, we risk silencing and discouraging the voices of significant portions of our communities. The result is decisions that marginalize people. This SPARC BC Policy Spotlight highlights the importance of engaging diverse communities in civic life—on election day and beyond.

REPRESENTATION

Civic engagement is an umbrella term for a wide range of ways to be involved in a community, including active involvement in neighbourhood affairs and direct involvement in local politics as a candidate or as a voter. In the wake of British Columbia’s recent municipal elections, this Policy Spotlight explores the topic of diversity in civic engagement, beginning with issues of representation and participation in local governance and moving on to strategies to enhance inclusive participation.

Across B.C., the quality of life in communities is intimately connected with the work of local governments. Local government decisions affect you every day, whether you are running the tap for a glass of water, walking down a sidewalk, or visiting a community centre. Once every three years, and occasionally in referendums and by-elections in between, local elections raise the profile of civic participation. Voters elect candidates who they believe will best represent their local priorities. But while voter turnout for municipal elections had generally been increasing in the Lower Mainland over the last decade, turnout declined sharply in the November 19, 2005 elections. For example, less than one fifth of Langley’s eligible voters came out to vote. In Vancouver, the turnout was just under one third.³

Voting patterns demonstrate that non-voting can be read not simply as individual apathy, but also as disaffection

or disconnectedness. Education level, household income, and age correspond closely to voter participation rates. We also see correlations between other markers of identity such as gender and religion and levels of engagement in civic affairs. Among newcomers, cultural traditions around gender-roles and the social position of elders or youth may play a role.⁴ Comfort with official languages may also be a factor. The governance in a newcomer’s country of origin can also have an impact on his or her relationship with voting, contributing in some cases to a sense that important decisions are made elsewhere, and in other cases to a deep commitment to active participation in democratic institutions.

The significant decline in youth voting is well-established with respect to senior levels of government. In federal elections, youth voter turnout has been tapering off over a long period of time. “At the same age, baby boomers were less likely to vote than pre-baby boomers, ‘generation X’ was less likely to vote than baby boomers, and the most recent generation of voters was less likely to vote than ‘generation X.’”⁵ Further, non-voters are not necessarily returning to the polls as they age, raising concerns about the long-term impact of non-voting on democratic institutions.

In addition to those who choose not to vote, some members of our communities are barred from doing so. In order to participate in B.C. municipal elections you must

HIGHLIGHTS

- Voter turnout rates in communities in the Lower Mainland dropped sharply in the November 2005 municipal elections, after a decade of increases; unofficial data from 11 Lower Mainland communities put the average turnout at 28% (the same level as 1993 and 1996). The average turnout rate in those same communities in 1999 and 2002 were 31% and 35%, respectively.
- Some of the recent turnout rates are disturbingly low: only 20% in Langley (and 32% in Vancouver). In contrast, the turnout rate in Langley in 1990 was 44% (and 52% in Vancouver).
- Voting patterns demonstrate that non-voting can be read not simply as individual apathy, but also as disaffection or disconnectedness. Education level, household income, and age correspond closely to voter participation rates. We also see correlations between other markers of identity such as gender and religion and levels of engagement in civic affairs.

be a Canadian citizen, at least 18 years of age, have lived in British Columbia for at least six months prior to the election, and have resided or owned property in the municipality in which you are voting for at least 30 days prior to the election. People under 18 and people who are not Canadian citizens, including newcomers to Canada, landed immigrants—some of whom are long-term residents—and refugees, are excluded from voting.

A further concern is that deficiencies in access to adequate housing, a secure income, education, and employment opportunities also create significant barriers to community participation. Meeting these needs may well be a pre-condition for widespread civic engagement. Further, as incomes across Canada polarize,⁶ and as we can see a correlation between level of income and political engagement, the increase in the proportion of Canadian families living with lower incomes may lead to a further decline in participation rates. The erosion of social security infrastructure in B.C. and across the country thus presents a challenge to community engagement. Political and civic engagement—even if limited to voting day activity—can be linked to factors such as equal access to employment and education as well as equality-seeking income security policies that make a society inclusive or exclusionary.

If some people are too complacent, others too cynical, others not allowed to vote, and still others are too busy trying to meet their basic needs, the absence of their endorsement raises an important question about the legitimacy of local elections. How representative are our representatives? Indeed, the people who run for office tend strongly to be university-educated males of white European heritage and middle to upper class economic status, representative of those who are also proportionally more likely to vote. The composition of municipal governments has not changed to reflect the changing demographic structure of Canada. This points to another reason some people may feel that voting does not have much to offer; a sense that none of the candidates reflects the values potential voters wish to see represented in office. If the system of representation does not ensure diverse perspectives in municipal decision-making, this only increases the importance of seeking out diverse voices through consultation processes between elections.

PARTICIPATION

Civic engagement, including voting, can be understood as an individual's decision to engage or not, but it can also be understood as a process to engage community members. It is a series of "strategies and actions to promote participation of individuals and groups in the full range of civic and community life to enhance social interaction, harmonious neighbourhoods and active citizenship."⁷ Civic engagement means actively inviting community members into the process of local governance. Yet civic engagement—sometimes called civic participation—often caters to the interests, networks, and habits of a middle-class, ethnically homogeneous group. Diversifying civic engagement requires new spaces and approaches that foster inclusion.

Globalization is changing cities. We move far more easily between places, which affects our relationships with our communities. The nature of 'we' is also changing as immigration rapidly increases cultural diversity. The 2001 census showed that just over one quarter of B.C.'s population was born outside of Canada. By far the majority of immigrants to B.C. live in the Lower Mainland and make up well over a third of the area's population.⁸ Many ethno-cultural enclaves are now well-established.

Walton-Roberts suggests that "immigrant concentration in Canada's largest cities has been constructed as a problem partly because of a reaction to a visible racialized transformation at the same time as the success of immigrant economic integration has been diminishing."⁹ She points out that since the 1980s, the incomes of all immigrant groups to Canada have been in decline. This is true despite the immigration process's increased focus on attracting highly skilled immigrants. Meanwhile, funding for settlement supports has been cut back along with other social infrastructure programs. This combination of factors is deeply concerning because economic and social exclusion can lead to social tension.¹⁰

As Mouffe points out, an integral part of the logic of democracy is "drawing a frontier between 'us' and 'them', those who belong to the 'demos' and those who are outside it."¹¹ Language like 'we' and 'they' in civic dialogue not only illuminates assumptions about who is considered to 'belong' in a community, it also

works actively to exclude diverse participation. The idea of being engaged with the community is closely linked with the idea of belonging.

Members of immigrant and ethnic communities have voiced the concern that politicians court them during elections because of their numbers, but then disappear between elections. Yet as Qadeer points out, one size does not fit all. Many areas of municipal planning have a very direct impact on various ethno-cultural groups. Policies on design guidelines, ethnic business areas, housing, community policing, cultural events, and languages for information and service delivery are just some examples. “The overall effect of multiculturalism is to reveal the cultural biases embedded in the so-called universal standards.”¹² New perspectives are bringing attention to ‘norms’ or universal standards that, upon closer inspection, do not make sense to or work for everyone.

Local governance is an invaluable forum for civic dialogue and interconnectedness. “As the venue for everyday life, it is the site for face-to-face contact, immediate economic and social relations, immediately shared experience and interests.”¹³ The immediacy of local issues creates the common ground necessary to work in tangible ways to enhance inclusion.

INCLUSION

Civic engagement is an integral element of social inclusion. The Inclusive Cities Canada project highlights the role and importance of inclusion:

“Social inclusion is the capacity and willingness of our society to keep all groups within reach of what we expect as a society—the social commitment and investments necessary to ensure that all people are close to (within reach of) our common aspirations, common life and its common wealth. An inclusive community is one that provides opportunities for the optimal well-being and healthy development of all children, youth and adults. All members of the community potentially gain from social inclusion—those who are vulnerable for reasons of poverty, racism, or fear of difference—as well as the broader community that benefits when everyone is able to participate as a valued and contributing member.”¹⁴

So how can civic participation become more inclusive? Below are four suggestions

drawn from SPARC BC’s research that focus on ways to diversify civic engagement so that they reflect the ‘new Canada’ that is characterized by diversity.

ENSURE DIVERSE CONSULTATION: At the heart of civic government is a range of activities that allow, in theory, for the civic participation of all residents. These include community consultations and charettes, volunteer committees, neighbourhood planning processes, and the opportunity to make presentations to local government. Creating a ‘population matrix’ for consultation can help to ensure that local governments reach out to all segments of the population. Participatory evaluations and ‘audits’ of community services can invite diverse perspectives on how to ensure local institutions are widely relevant. Provide supports that make participation accessible by including language interpretation, assistance with the cost of transportation and child care, and supports for people with disabilities. Further, hiring for diversity increases the likelihood that multiple perspectives will be integrated into the core work of the municipality.

FOSTER CIVIC AWARENESS: Active participation in the public sphere is a learned behaviour. High school courses and materials translated into languages newcomers speak that explain how local governments work, why they are relevant to people’s lives, and how to become involved are one way to facilitate the participation of people who have historically not been involved in civic processes. When a municipal government provides these kinds of materials it can be an invitation to participate, and further provide opportunities for more active and diverse consultation.

FACILITATE INTERACTION BETWEEN CULTURES AND GENERATIONS: Accessible, lively public spaces, programs, and services bring diverse community members into relationships with one another, with the potential for breaking down isolation and stereotypes. Cultural events like festivals can enhance understanding of different cultures. Municipalities can ensure that public spaces are available to facilitate this kind of interaction and provide support to community groups who are working in this area.

EXTEND THE FRANCHISE: Non-citizen voting is one possibility for better engaging people who do not hold Canadian citizenship, but who do pay taxes, rely on municipal services, and, in

ILLUMINATIONS

- Participation is a series of strategies and actions to promote participation of individuals and groups in the full range of civic and community life to enhance social interaction, harmonious neighbourhoods and active citizenship.
- The nature of ‘we’ is also changing as immigration rapidly increases cultural diversity. The 2001 census showed that just over one quarter of B.C.’s population was born outside of Canada. By far the majority of immigrants to B.C. live in the Lower Mainland and make up well over a third of the area’s population. And yet, members of immigrant and ethnic communities have voiced the concern that politicians court them during elections because of their numbers, but then disappear after voting day.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Municipalities interested in diversifying and expanding civic engagement could:
 - Ensure diverse consultation
 - Foster civic awareness
 - Facilitate cultural and generational interaction
 - Extend voting franchise
- This Policy Spotlight builds on the work SPARC BC conducted in conjunction with the Inclusive Cities Canada project. The goals of Inclusive Cities Canada (ICC) are to strengthen the capacity of cities to create and sustain inclusive communities for the mutual benefit of all people, and to ensure that community voices of diversity are recognized as core Canadian ones. For more information visit www.inclusivecities.ca

many cases, are long-term residents. Chicago and Dublin allow all residents of the city over 18 to vote in municipal elections. Such a practice need not dilute citizenship (which is essentially connected with federalism) and would include people, many of whom are working to become citizens, in decision-making processes that affect them. Another possibility is to lower the voting age to 16 in order to foster youth participation in civic life.¹⁵

THE FUTURE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Diversifying civic engagement requires the continual creation of opportunities for the open, welcome, and supported participation of all people in civic processes and decision-making. It requires the active engagement of a community's full diversity in civic dialogue and public debate on policy issues. As our cities change, we have opportunities to think about creative new ways to ensure voices of diversity are central to processes of civic engagement—not only on election day, but every day in between.

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- 2 Benest in Hansell, William H. Jr. Fall 1996. "A common vision for the future, the role of local government." *National Civic Review*. 85(3). p. 9.
- 3 Voter turnout calculations for 2005 municipal elections are based on preliminary estimates.
- 4 Smith, Patrick J. and Kennedy Stewart. June, 1998. "Reforming Municipal Electoral Accountability." Institute of Governance Studies Simon Fraser University and Ministry of Municipal Affairs Government of British Columbia. p. 31.
- 5 Canadian Policy Research Network. "Young Canadians and the Voting Age: Should it be Lowered?" *Diversity Gateway*. <<http://www.cprn.com/en/diversity-voting.cfm>>
- 6 Lee, Marc. December, 2004. *New Perspectives on Income Inequality in BC*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. p. 14.
- 7 SPARC BC. 2005. *Inclusive Cities Canada: Vancouver / North Vancouver City Community Voices, Perspectives and Priorities*. p. 3.
- 8 Ministry of Management Services. *2001 Census Fast Facts: B.C. Immigrant Population*. <www.bcstats.gov.ca>
- 9 Walton-Roberts, M. 2005. "Regional immigration and dispersal: Lessons from small and medium sized urban centres in British Columbia." *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. 37(3) p. 27
- 10 Ibid, p. 3.
- 11 Mouffe, Chantal. 2000. *The Democratic Paradox*. p. 4.
- 12 Qadeer, Mohammed A. "Pluralistic Planning for Multicultural Cities." In *Journal of the American Planning Association*. Autumn 1997. Vol. 63. Issue 4. p. 481. p. 13.
- 13 Magnusson, Warren. 1996. *The Search for Political Space*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 51.
- 14 SPARC BC. p. 2.
- 15 Canadian Policy Research Network.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- **Inclusive Cities Canada:** Inclusive Cities Canada's Cross-Canada Civic Initiative "is a unique partnership of community leaders and elected municipal politicians working collaboratively to enhance social inclusion across Canada." The website offers information about ongoing initiatives through this partnership as well as access to a variety of research papers about social inclusion. <www.inclusivecities.ca>
- **Metropolis – Political Participation Research Network:** Metropolis is "an international forum for comparative research and public policy development about population migration, cultural diversity and the challenges of immigrant integration in cities in Canada and around the world." The Political Participation Research Network focuses specifically on issues surrounding diversity and civic engagement. <canada.metropolis.net/research-policy/pprn-pub/>
- **Get Your Vote On:** Get Your Vote On is a non-partisan group that is reaching out to encourage young people in BC to vote. "We are a bunch of people doing the impossible—making voting fun/interesting/worth doing for people like us." They host youth-oriented all-candidates meetings, provide a calendar listing upcoming events related to voting, and provide information about why and how to vote. <www.GetYourVoteOn.ca>
- **The Citizen's Handbook:** A community-building guide that includes suggestions about everything from 'how to get noticed' by the media to how to set up a community kitchen. The handbook offers a wide variety of specific ideas for enhancing civic engagement. <www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/>



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SPARC BC is a non-partisan, independent charitable organization that has, since 1966, conducted public education and research on key social issues, focusing its efforts in the areas of income security, accessibility, and community development.