



Ballots

& belonging



<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	4
Message from Institute for Canadian Citizenship CEO, Charlie Foran	
Executive summary	
<u>STUDY 101</u>	9
Research methodology	
<u>ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN</u>	13
New citizens and political participation	
Current outreach to new citizens	
<u>AT THE BALLOT BOX</u>	19
General knowledge about voting	
First-time voter experience	
Motivations for voting	
Barriers to voting	
Non-citizen voting	
<u>BEYOND THE BALLOT BOX</u>	29
Civic vs. political engagement	
Attitudes on the Canadian political system	
<u>CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	35
<u>APPENDIX</u>	38
Appendix 1: Online survey questions	
Appendix 2: Focus group questions	
Appendix 3: About the ICC	

Ballots & Belonging – New Citizens on Political Participation is a kind of Democracy 101 about new Canadian citizens. This latest ICC Insights study asks the basic questions. How and why do new citizens participate in the political process, and what does their level of engagement mean? How, too, can we make the process better – for them, and for all of us?

In the summer of 2015, this couldn't be more relevant. The social, cultural, and economic transformation of Canada by newcomers is an established fact. Over 260,000 individuals became new citizens in 2014 alone. Shortly, Canadians, new and old alike, will go to the polls in a federal election.

At the ICC, we work to advance engaged citizenship. We do so through our programs, and by asking, via our ICC Insights program, our more than 150,000 CAP members – past and present – how they feel about their lives here, and what can be done to improve them. What we find is that barriers to inclusion are rarely self-imposed. Generally, they are practical problems that have practical solutions.

Such is the case with political participation. Forget cynicism, apathy, or language deficits as being the cause of any limited engagement. A lack of information or confidence in how to negotiate the electoral system, or even a lack of adequate time off work, are reasons that are more likely to keep new Canadians from voting.

That finding of solvable impediments has led the ICC to create a second dimension to our rollout of *Ballots & Belonging*. We don't just want to share our findings. Nor are we content simply to issue recommendations for consideration. We do make a few, including offering workshops for new citizens and a central online space to compare candidates and their platforms. Longer polling hours on voting day and internet voting would be good as well.

But the ICC also wants to be of direct assistance. To respond to the needs and desires of the new citizens we contacted, we've launched a [microsite](#) to accompany this report. There, new citizens can not only explore the results of the report, they can access a variety of resources to help them become better informed. We'll also launch a get-out-the-vote campaign, aimed at encouraging that trip to the polls.

Voting is essential to the health of a free society. New citizens come to Canada with varied life experiences. Some are equipped to participate right away. Others need a little help. We need to do all we can to ensure that everyone has the tools to get engaged – however they want – when they arrive, and to vote when they become citizens.



Charlie Foran CEO, Institute for Canadian Citizenship

Executive Summary

Ballots & Belonging – New Citizens on Political Participation, is a new report, conducted by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship (ICC), that explores how new Canadian citizens engage in Canada’s political system. Do new citizens know how to navigate the system? What forms of participation do they find most meaningful? What role does this participation play in fostering feelings of inclusion and belonging?

This study was conducted in three phases: an environmental scan; an online survey of new citizens; and ten nationwide focus groups with new citizens. More than 2,300 new citizens responded to the survey and 93 participated in the focus groups.

This study is unique in the following ways:

- We talk to new citizens, generally resident in Canada between five and seven years (on average).
- We explore the range of their experiences, from before they came to Canada, to immediately after their arrival, to now.
- We focus on a broad range of political participation, from participation in formal politics (e.g., voting, holding membership in political parties, donating money to political parties, contacting political leaders with concerns) to forms of civic engagement and activism (e.g., volunteering, donating to charities, participating in protests).
- We go beyond the voter turnout rates and talk to new citizens about their motivations for voting and other forms of participation to probe the links between their participation, belonging, and citizenship.

The following summarizes our findings in three key areas: voting, other forms of political participation, and civic engagement.

VOTING

The majority (61%) of new citizens in this study reported that they had already voted in a Canadian election. Their primary motivations for voting were a belief that voting is generally important as an act of citizenship and the desire to have their voices heard. They are less likely to be drawn to the polls by a particular candidate or issues. Many expressed a sense of duty as new citizens to vote – feeling that they owed it to Canada and their fellow Canadians to participate. When as permanent residents they were not eligible vote, many were disappointed when their fellow Canadians – who were able to vote – did not seem to take their responsibility seriously. While 48% stated that permanent residents should be allowed to vote, it became clear in the focus groups that the federal vote – the one that determines issues of national and international importance – should be left to a country’s citizens.

POLITICS BEYOND THE POLLS

Like other Canadians, new citizens reported limited engagement in formal politics beyond the voting booth. Only 23% reported that, since arriving in Canada, they had emailed or called a political representative about an issue; 7% had volunteered on a political campaign; 6% had become a member of a political party; and 1% had stood for election.

During their first election, the majority of respondents talked about the election with their family and friends, and searched for online information about candidates and platforms, but only 26% personally spoke with a candidate, 12% attended an all-candidates debate/meeting, 10%

put a candidate sign on the front lawn, and 5% donated money to a political party or candidate. When asked about the effectiveness of certain activities to create change, voting was high on the list, but working on political campaigns, holding membership in political parties, and standing for political office came in at the bottom.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & ACTIVISM

New citizens reported that, in the absence of participating directly in the political system, they participate in activities that would be considered civic engagement or activism. Since arriving in Canada, 70% of respondents had donated money to charity, 55% had volunteered for a community organization, and 46% had signed petitions. New citizens in the focus groups expressed that volunteering was more personally satisfying as results were easier to attain. Some also preferred volunteering because they came from countries where corrupt governments were not vehicles for change. While volunteering was satisfying, they also recognized that concrete change couldn't come without policy change. For that, engagement with politicians was acknowledged as necessary.

This study also uncovered some of the barriers to political participation. These barriers are more related to navigating the system as a newcomer, rather than a fundamental cynicism or apathy towards the political system. Some of the most important barriers we identified in the study are as follows:

TIME & CONVENIENCE

Many new citizens told us that voting wasn't as convenient as it could be. While there are advanced polls, voting on election day can be difficult. Polls are near people's homes and with long commutes, it can be difficult to get back home

in time to vote, cook dinner, and deal with the kids. New citizens were surprised in their first election that the polls did not open until 10a.m., making it difficult to vote before heading to work. Furthermore, we heard that some new citizens were hesitant to ask their employers for the time to vote – even though they are legally entitled to it.

THE VOTERS' CARD

Of the respondents who were eligible but had not yet voted in a Canadian election, not getting a voters' card or not knowing if they were on the voters' list was one of the top reasons they gave for not voting. Many assumed that because they did not get a card, they were not on the voters' list and thus not eligible to vote. Many were frustrated that the different levels of government did not share voters' lists – assuming that if they gave their consent to be added to the federal voters' list, as many did during the citizenship application process, they were giving their consent to ALL voters' lists.

LACK OF INFORMATION

The majority of survey respondents reported that they were able to find information on the voting process relatively easily. Where they ran into problems was trying to find information about candidates and their platforms. This proved to be particularly frustrating at the municipal level, often the first time these new citizens experienced the electoral system due to the timing of our report. Trying to wade through dozens of mayoral and council candidates – many of whom did not have an online presence – was frustrating for individuals who did not want to check a box blindly. Sometimes not voting seemed to be the best option. At the federal and provincial levels, campaign platforms are easily available online, but

are long and complex. It is not always an easy task to compare the parties on the range of issues.

ENGAGING NEW CITIZENS

Studying the experiences and views of new citizens provides a fresh perspective on the Canadian political system. The new citizens in our study suggested a number of strategies to facilitate their participation:

- Internet voting, providing that the integrity of the electoral process can be maintained.
- A central online space to compare candidates and their platforms, done by a non-partisan organization.
- Workshops for new citizens that offer more in-depth information on the political system than they learn in the citizenship preparation process.
- Giving out information on the process of voting at all levels during the citizenship ceremony, or just after.
- Better coordination between municipal, provincial, and federal elections agencies – so that electors give their information once to get on all three lists.
- Hold election day on a weekend or make it a holiday.
- Longer poll hours to ensure people can vote before and after work.

Many of these recommendations are not new, but confirm that changes are needed to fully engage all Canadians in the political process. Participation in formal politics has deteriorated over the past few decades. Voting rates have tumbled, and Canadians are increasingly disenchanted with political parties and leaders. Citizen participation in politics is essential to preserve a responsive, transparent, and effective democratic system. What we've learned is that new citizens – those who have chosen to make Canada their permanent home – are eager to have their voices heard, connect with their fellow citizens, and give back to the country that has given them so much. We need to do all we can to ensure that new citizens are welcomed into the political system and have the tools to participate in it effectively.

“I started sobbing. I came out [from voting] and I just burst into tears.” (Focus group participant, Ottawa)

“It’s a symbolic gesture that formalizes that you are Canadian.” (Focus group participant, Vancouver)

“I felt accepted. I felt part of the Canadian fabric that day.” (Focus group participant, Mississauga)

This was how three new Canadian citizens described how it felt to vote for the first time as a Canadian citizen. While many new citizens tell us that they feel Canadian long before they ever take up formal Canadian citizenship, the act of voting can mark the moment at which they feel as if they – and their opinions and concerns – count as much as those of other Canadians.

Canadian citizenship comes with two concrete rights: travelling on a Canadian passport and full participation in the electoral process. As immigration continues to be the driver of population growth in Canada, it is essential to understand how new citizens see themselves in Canada’s political system, and to determine if they know how to navigate the system and if they believe their participation makes a meaningful difference. It is also a chance for Canada to hear from those who come to our system with fresh eyes and different life experiences. Do they have insights that might revitalize our democratic system? Previous studies on immigrants and political integration have been done, but the voices and experiences of new citizens have been largely left out of the conversation.

Ballots and Belonging – New Citizens on Political Participation explores how Canada’s newest citizens – largely those who have lived in Canada between five and seven years – participate in Canada’s political system, before and after attaining citizenship. Through a national online survey with more than 2,300 new citizens and ten focus groups across Canada, this study gives the rest of the country a window into the ways that new citizens intersect – or don’t – with politics. It provides valuable insight into what needs to change in order to create a vibrant and inclusive democratic process.

WHY SHOULD CANADIANS CARE?

Immigration is central to Canada’s future. By 2030, it will account for all of Canada’s net population growth.¹ Approximately 250,000 permanent residents settle in Canada every year, and 85% choose to become Canadian citizens, which is the highest naturalization rate in the world.² Cities across Canada – large and small – are being transformed by immigration. These demographic trends will undoubtedly have an impact on Canadian politics. Newcomers arrive with different experiences in politics. Some are very familiar with a democratic system like Canada’s. Some were politically engaged before emigrating. Others never had the opportunity to vote in a system that offers real choice. Others connect electoral politics and politicians with deeply corrupt, ineffective regimes. Canadians need to make sure that all these new

¹ This is the projection made by [Statistics Canada](#). Approximately 250,000 permanent residents settle in Canada every year and 85% of them will go on to become Canadian citizens - and voters. See <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/140917/dq140917a-eng.htm>

² See Citizenship and Immigration Canada for statistics on permanent residents, released every [October](#). The naturalization rate is based on [Statistics Canada census data](#).

voters have the tools they need to become actively involved in Canadian politics when they arrive and vote when they become citizens.

Research methodology

Ballots and Belonging – New Citizens on Political Participation was guided by the following research questions:

- How do new citizens participate in Canadian politics?
- Are new citizens able to navigate the political system? Are there challenges that are unique to the experience of new citizens?
- What would encourage new citizens to participate in politics to a greater degree?
- Does political participation contribute to the social integration of new citizens?
- Does political participation help cultivate a sense of Canadian identity/belonging to Canada? Does a lack of participation reinforce a sense of exclusion?

These questions were explored over three phases:

- Environmental scan – literature review and internet research;
- National online survey of new citizens; and
- Focus groups with new citizens across Canada.

Phase I: Environmental Scan

The environmental scan for this project included an academic literature review and internet research on resources that are already available for new citizen voters.

Phase 2: Online Survey

Refer to Appendix 1 for the survey questions.

The online survey was sent to new citizens across Canada who participate or have participated in the Institute for Canadian Citizenship’s Cultural Access Pass program.³ The survey was in the field for three weeks in late November and early December 2014; 2,322 new citizens responded to the survey, with 2,005 completing it fully. The analysis in this report includes partial completions. Since the sample is not a random sample of all new citizens, a margin of error cannot be calculated and the results are not statistically representative of all new citizens. Still, the survey offers compelling insights from a substantial number of new citizens across Canada.

This survey (and the study as a whole) focuses on the experiences of *new citizens*, not permanent residents. We use the term *new citizen* deliberately throughout the report. This means participants have been in Canada for at least three years to fulfill their residency requirements before being granted citizenship; 48% of respondents have lived in Canada for five to seven years.⁴ All new citizens who received the survey invitation had received their citizenship between May 2012 and November 2014.

Demographic Highlights

The survey results reveal that the respondents to this survey are a politically engaged group of new citizens and have previous experience with the electoral process. Sixty-two percent (62%) reported that there were elections in their country of origin and that they always voted; only 13% said that there were not elections in their country of origin

³ The [Cultural Access Pass](#) is a program offered by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship to new citizens who are in their first year of citizenship. Members (and up to four of their children under 18) receive a year of free access to more than 1,200 Canadian cultural attractions.

⁴ While a small percentage has been in Canada four years, the rest of the participants have lived in Canada for more than seven years.

or that there were elections, but they were not eligible to vote. Seventy-six percent (76%) reported that before coming to Canada, they were either somewhat or very interested in politics and current events. After arriving in Canada, this interest continued; only 3% reported they were not at all interested in Canadian politics or current events.

Sixty-one percent (61%) of survey respondents said they had voted in a Canadian election, while 15% said there had been an election since they became a citizen, but they hadn't voted. Twenty-four percent (24%) reported there has not yet been an election since they became a Canadian citizen.

The demographic profile of respondents corresponds to the profile of our Cultural Access Pass program and is consistent with other research we have conducted. Fifty-two percent (52%) of respondents are women. The United States, the Philippines, India, England, France, China, Algeria, Pakistan, Mexico, and Colombia are the top ten countries of origin.⁵ We also ran the analysis excluding responses from Americans and Western Europeans, as they do not face the same barriers as new citizens from other countries, to see if a different picture of the results emerged. Generally, the results were consistent.

Survey respondents are highly educated: 67% have the equivalent of a Canadian university education. However, this does not necessarily translate to high income levels. Forty-five percent (45%) reported a combined household income before taxes of less than \$60,000 and 63% a combined household income of less than \$80,000. These results are consistent with other research we have conducted. It is not safe to assume that new citizens are economically settled by the time citizenship is

obtained; many are still trying to find employment that matches their skill set and training.

Phase 3: Focus Groups

Refer to Appendix 2 for the focus group session questions.

In January, February, and March 2015, the Institute for Canadian Citizenship conducted ten focus groups in seven cities across Canada to explore further the themes that arose in the online survey:

- Toronto (three focus groups)
- Mississauga
- Ottawa
- Montreal (two focus groups; one English, one French)
- Calgary
- Vancouver
- Richmond (BC)

The focus groups consisted of six to thirteen participants. They were recruited from the survey wherein respondents were prompted to leave their contact information if they were interested in participating, through promotion in our monthly newsletter, and through direct email invitations. They came from diverse countries of origin, but all had at least some interest in politics. Many were very politically engaged.

⁵ The countries of origin of survey respondents differ slightly from those of permanent residents and our CAP database. The survey attracted a higher proportion of new citizens from the United States and England. Perhaps this reflects the methodology used (a survey that requires respondents to be comfortable with English/French and with online technology).

Ballots and Belonging – New Citizens on Political Participation began with a literature review, as well as online research to identify resources that already exist for new citizen voters. Voting rates in Canada have declined steadily since the 1980s; turnout for the 2011 federal election was 61.1%.⁶ The situation is no better at the provincial and municipal level. In 2014, for example, voter turnout in Ontario rose for the first time in years – but was still only 52.1%.⁷ In 2014, voter turnout increased in Toronto because of a competitive race for mayor and the turbulence in the mayor’s office during the previous year, but turnout was only 60%. Turnouts in other municipal elections in the Greater Toronto Area were as low as 32%.⁸ If high voter turnout is a sign of a healthy democracy, Canadians clearly have work to do to increase citizen engagement in the democratic process.⁹

There are a substantial number of studies on the political participation of new citizens and ethnic or visible minorities. Most have focussed on large data sets related to voter turnout during federal elections. This literature has been thoroughly reviewed in recent years;¹⁰ the goal here is not to

⁶ Before the 1980s, there were isolated dips in the voting rate during federal elections. Since the 1980s, the decline has been steady. See

<http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/pa rt/tud&document=trends&lang=e>.

⁷ The unofficial turnout percentage can be found here:

<http://www.elections.on.ca/en-CA/Media/MediaArchive/2014/2014.htm>.

⁸ “Voter Turnout Rocketed in Toronto, Tepid Around GTA.” *Toronto Star*, 26 October 2014.

⁹ Voter turnout is often used as an indicator of democratic engagement. For examples, see the [Canadian Index of Wellbeing](#) and Samara Canada’s [Democracy 360](#).

¹⁰ See, for example, Daiva K. Stasiulis, “Participation by Immigrants, Ethnocultural/Visible Minorities in the Canadian Political Process,” Second National Metropolis Conference: Immigrants and Civic Participation, Contemporary Policy and Research Issues, November 1997; Jerome Black, “Immigrants and Ethnoracial Minorities in Canada: A Review of their Participation in Federal Electoral Politics,” *Electoral Insight* (January 2001); and Livianna Tossutti, “The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities,” Working Paper

replicate those reviews, but to set the context for this study.

VOTING

Voter turnout is not the only indicator of political engagement, but it is the one that has received the most attention. While there have been a number of studies on new citizen voters in the last few decades, there are few definitive conclusions. Studies in the 1960s and 1970s argued that new citizens voted in much lower numbers than individuals born in Canada.¹¹ Studies since the 1980s have questioned this finding. Researchers now argue that there is no significant difference between the overall voting rates of the two groups.¹² There are, however, factors that influence which new citizens vote and which don’t, as there are for Canadians generally. Immigrants who arrived before 1991 are more likely to vote than those who arrived since 1991.¹³ Stephen White and his coauthors found that age is a more important factor for new citizen voters than Canadian-born voters, and argue that time and exposure to Canadian politics play an important role for new citizen voters. They also found that factors such as education and income play less of a role for new citizens, but they are unsure why. Do new citizens feel a stronger sense of duty vis-à-vis voting? Do they vote because they want to fit in?¹⁴ Other studies have focussed on other factors that

Series on Electoral Participation and Outreach Practices, Elections Canada, 2007.

¹¹ Black, “Immigrants and Ethnoracial Minorities in Canada” (online, page number unavailable).

¹² Furthermore, many question the assumption that the turnout rates for non-immigrant Canadians should be used as the baseline against which the turnout rate of immigrant Canadians is judged.

¹³ Tossutti, “The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities,” pp. 33.

¹⁴ Stephen White, et al., “Making up for Lost Time: Immigrant Voter Turnout in Canada,” *Electoral Insight* (December 2006), pp. 4.

might determine voter turnout, such as the ability of politically-engaged immigrants to transfer their experiences to Canada, and the ability of immigrant community leaders to mobilize voters.¹⁵ Finally, studies have analyzed the impact that ethnicity and race have on turnout rates. Researchers have found that Black Canadians are the least likely to vote, followed by Chinese Canadians.¹⁶ What is clear is that more research is needed to tease out the motivations of new citizen voters.

RUNNING FOR POLITICAL OFFICE

A smaller number of studies has analyzed new citizen and visible minority political candidates and membership in political parties. Chui, et al. demonstrated that there is no significant difference in political organization membership between immigrant and Canadian-born individuals.¹⁷ But making the leap to political candidacy may be more difficult. In 2011, 42 of the 307 MPs elected were born outside of Canada.¹⁸ This represents 14% of all MPs, 6% below the proportion of immigrants in the Canadian population as reported in the census.¹⁹ The numbers are more concerning for visible minorities. In 2011, 9.4% of the MPs elected were visible minorities.²⁰ According to Andrew

Matheson, it is important that Canada's Parliament, legislatures, and city halls reflect the diversity of the population in order to bring different perspectives and issues to the table and for individuals from these communities to feel they have equal access to the political system.²¹ Studies have identified a number of challenges that visible minority candidates face, including:

- the difficulty unseating an incumbent, particularly in municipal elections;
- the practice of putting visible minority candidates in unwinnable ridings;
- a nomination process that relies on conventional political networks;
- financial barriers, particularly for those who have arrived more recently;
- discrimination; and
- media bias (for example, blaming "ethnic blocs" for getting candidates through nomination processes).²²

OTHER POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Voting and running for office are certainly not the only ways to participate in Canadian democracy. Working in the political backrooms – in the riding executives or on campaigns – and making one's voice heard through volunteering, donating to charity, participating in political discussions (with family/friends or online), attending protests, or signing petitions are all ways of influencing the debate and getting involved. Erin Tolley has argued

¹⁵ Black, "Immigrants and Ethnoracial Minorities in Canada" (online, page number unavailable).

¹⁶ Tosutti, "The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities," pp. 20.

¹⁷ Tina W.L. Chui, James E. Curtis, and Ronald D. Lambert, "Immigrant Background and Political Participation: Examining Generational Patterns," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1991), pp. 384. The only difference they found was that immigrant Canadians were less likely to contact politicians than Canadians born in Canada.

¹⁸ "Why Embracing Immigrants Works for Conservatives," *The Globe and Mail*, 11 October 2011.

¹⁹ "Canada's Foreign Born Population Soars to 6.8 Million," CBC, 8 May 2013.

²⁰ *Edging Towards Diversity*, Public Policy Forum; for more dated statistics, see Jerome Black, "Visible Minorities and Under-Representation: The Views on Candidates," *Electoral Insight* (December 2006), online version.

²¹ Andrew Matheson, "Seeking Inclusion: South Asian Political Representation in Suburban Canada," *Electoral Insight* (December 2006), online version.

²² Stasiulis, "Participation by Immigrants, Ethnocultural/Visible Minorities in the Canadian Political Process," online version and Quinn Albaugh and F. Leslie Seidle, "Workshop on the Electoral and Civic Involvement of Canada's Immigrant Communities," Institute for Research on Public Policy, October 25, 2013, pp. 6-9. Matheson examined the success of visible minority candidates in suburban Mississauga and Brampton because they do not face these barriers.

that the relationship between formal political engagement and other forms of engagement needs to be better understood; according to Tolley, informal participation can supplement, substitute for, or be a stepping stone to formal participation.²³ We asked about both methods and which new citizens find more effective.

CURRENT OUTREACH TO NEW CITIZENS

The mandate of government election agencies is to administer general elections and by-elections. This mandate includes conducting public education campaigns on the electoral process and ensuring that all Canadians are able to vote in elections, should they choose to do so.²⁴

When one examines the strategic plans of several election agencies, it becomes clear that accessibility,²⁵ particularly for certain groups, is a key concern given the decline in voter turnout over the past few decades. Ensuring effective communication methods to reach all electors, as well as devising innovative ways to run elections and get electors on the voters' list, usually are listed as objectives. Youth and seniors are most often targeted. Elections Manitoba and Elections Saskatchewan are the only agencies that specifically mention new citizens.²⁶

Matheson, "Seeking Inclusion," online version.

²³ Erin Tolley, "Supplement, Substitute or Stepping Stone? Understanding the Electoral and Non-Electoral Participation of Immigrants and Minorities," Presented at the 6th National Metropolis Conference, Edmonton, Alberta, March 2003.

²⁴ The Fair Elections Act will have an impact on the ability of Elections Canada to run ads encouraging Canadians to vote and may have an impact on civic literacy programming for adults. See "[What is the Fair Elections Act?](#)" *The Globe and Mail*, 25 March 2015.

²⁵ Elections Canada, Elections BC, Elections MB, Elections SK, Elections NL, and Elections QC. We were unable to find online strategic plans for the rest of the provinces.

²⁶ Elections Saskatchewan, *A Strategic Plan for Saskatchewan's Election Management Body, 2014-2016*, pp. 8 and Elections

Election agencies also engage in research. Elections Canada publishes *Electoral Insight*, which features articles from academics who study political participation, and many agencies conduct post-election surveys to understand why people did or did not vote and how they can improve communication methods for future elections. Unfortunately, these surveys are unable to analyze by immigration status. However, Elections BC's community liaison officers have reported on the barriers facing the Chinese-Canadian and Indo-Canadian communities that the liaison officers experienced in the course of their community engagement work. These barriers included:

- language;
- the belief that Elections BC is a partisan organization;
- lack of understanding around the election process;
- lack of understanding around the importance of voting;
- the belief that voting is to be avoided; and
- the fact that many are still in survival mode and preoccupied with other concerns (Chinese community).²⁷

For elections agencies, the solutions have largely centred on ensuring that there is material or personnel that can answer questions in all the major languages of a given geographic area, including translated election materials and having multilingual staff at telephone banks. Elections BC, the City of Vancouver, and Elections Canada have hired staff to work directly with cultural communities. Elections Canada and Elections Ontario have used the ethnic media as a conduit for information to new citizen voters.²⁸ On the

Manitoba, *Strategic Plan for the 41st General Election, 2012-2015*, pp. 16.

²⁷ Tossutti, "The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities," pp. 13.

²⁸ Tossutti, "The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities," pp. 26. In their strategic plans, Elections

Elections Nova Scotia website, a page is dedicated to [new Canadian voters](#), with information on the eligibility requirements and a link to find out if they are on the voters' list. Elections Quebec's [workshops](#) provide information about the political system.

There are smatterings of other initiatives that seek to inform new citizens about voting. These include (but are not limited to):

- The [Discover Canada](#) guide, which is read by all new citizens who take the citizenship test, and which includes a page on federal elections explaining the voters' list and card and what to do if you don't get one.
- The City of Newmarket's [online guide](#) for new citizen voters that explains the structure of government at all levels and the process of voting.
- [Settlement.org](#), an online information hub for immigrants settling in Ontario, which has articles on how to vote at all levels.
- [Civics 101](#), an online resource created by TVO, the Maytree Foundation, settlement.org, the Civic Education Network and Jonathan Rose (Queen's University), teaches citizens how the Ontario government works, as well as voting procedures. While not specifically for new citizens, it is a resource that they can draw upon.
- Maytree's [School4Civics](#) program, which trains leaders from diverse communities how to organize political campaigns and run for office.²⁹
- MOSAIC, a settlement organization in British Columbia, which has created a more extensive citizenship education program that not only teaches to the guide and the test, but provides information on how to interact with government and how to get involved in public debate.³⁰

In addition, a number of non-profit organizations work in the civic education, political participation, and voter mobilization spaces. These include (but are not limited to) organizations such as the Maytree Foundation, Samara Canada, Apathy is Boring, and Institut du nouveau monde. Most organizations are focussed on youth voters. Samara has done some work with new Canadians as part of the Democracy Talks program. Recently, Samara released a new report, [Democracy 360](#), which grades the vitality of Canadian democracy by examining a number of indicators under the broad categories of participation, leadership, and communication. The report gave Canada a letter grade of "C" and identified a number of specific reforms that could improve Canadians' engagement in politics. The report, however, did not shed light on how the responses of new citizens might be different from those of Canadian-born citizens.

The Institute for Canadian Citizenship is the only organization to work exclusively with new citizens, thus putting us in a position to make a substantial contribution to the conversation. The following sections present the results of the survey and focus groups, exploring the experience of new citizens at and beyond the ballot box.

Manitoba proposes creating community collaborations to reach underserved communities and Elections Saskatchewan proposes translating materials. See Elections Manitoba, *Strategic Plan*, pp. 16, Elections Saskatchewan, *A Strategic Plan*, pp. 8.

²⁹ Albaugh and Seidle, "Workshop on the Electoral and Civic Involvement of Canada's Immigrant Communities," pp. 9.

³⁰ Albaugh and Seidle, "Workshop on the Electoral and Civic Involvement of Canada's Immigrant Communities," pp. 9.

Ballots and Belonging – New Citizens on Political Participation is an opportunity to hear directly from new citizens about their experiences voting in Canada. As reported earlier, survey respondents are politically engaged – 61% of respondents had already voted in an election in Canada. They bring insight into what it’s like to vote for the first time in Canada. Those who haven’t voted yet – but could have – can shed light on the barriers.

VOTING KNOWLEDGE

The new citizens who responded to the survey are knowledgeable about voting. We asked if they would know how to vote if an election were called tomorrow:

- 81% know what a voters’ card is;
- 75% know how to get their name on the voters’ list;
- 86% know how to find a polling station; and,
- 84% know where to find information if they have questions about voting.

This is not surprising. We know that a substantial proportion of the sample came from countries with similar voting procedures to Canada (e.g., United States, United Kingdom). In addition, if 61% of respondents had already voted, they are likely to report that they know how to do it if an election were held tomorrow. We wanted to find out if the results would be different if we looked at only those who hadn’t yet voted or were from countries outside of the United States, Australia/New Zealand, and Western Europe.

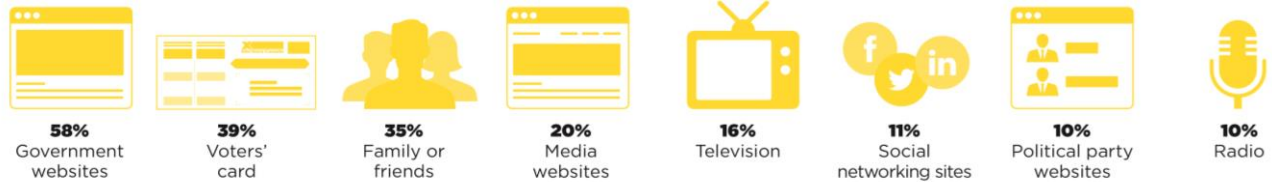
Statement	New citizens excluding US/AUS/W. Europe	New citizens – haven’t yet voted	Full results
I know what a voters’ card is	79%	79%	81%
I know how to get my name on the voters’ list	72%	67%	75%
I know how to find a polling station	84%	78%	86%
I know where to find information if I have questions about voting	84%	81%	84%

Filtering the results did not change the picture dramatically. Those who have not voted yet are perhaps less likely to know how to get their name on the voter’s list or find a polling station, but the difference is not substantial.

FIRST-TIME VOTER EXPERIENCE

Survey respondents who have voted in a Canadian election told us about their first experience voting – in particular, what they did in the lead up to casting their ballot.

First-time voters – sources of information



As noted above, the respondents in this survey reported that they generally are knowledgeable about the voting process. Eighty-four percent (84%) reported they actively looked for information on how to vote before their first election. The internet, not surprisingly, is the primary source of information: 58% reported that they consulted government websites (Elections Canada and its provincial and municipal counterparts), 20% consulted a media website such as CBC, and 11% used social media sites. Other significant sources of information include the voters' card, family and friends or the voters' card of family and friends, and television. Ninety-five (95) % of respondents said the information they consulted was easy to understand.

Almost everyone (91%) reported they did not look for information in languages other than French and English, even though most election agencies now publish information in a variety of languages.

When filtering out respondents from Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand, the results around accessing information did not change dramatically, although a slightly higher proportion needed to consult materials in languages other than English or French:

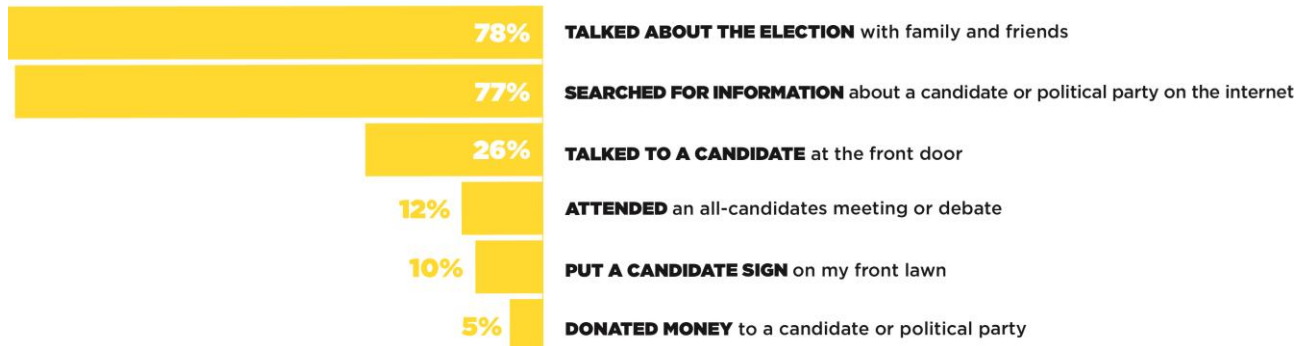
- 85% reported that they actively looked for information prior to voting and government websites were the primary source of information;
- 11% said that they consulted information in languages other than English or French;

- 96% reported that the information they consulted was easy to understand.

These results, however, do not mean that language is not a barrier for other new citizens. As it was an online survey, respondents must be comfortable reading and comprehending English or French to fill it out. But focussing all our efforts on providing information in other languages may not be the only key to increasing new citizen engagement.

While the vast majority of survey respondents report that they voted in a past Canadian election, their political engagement before casting a ballot was limited largely to looking for information on candidates, parties, and party platforms online, and talking about the election with their family and friends. Relatively few talked in person with candidates, went to an election debate, put a sign on their front lawn, or donated money to a candidate or political party.

Activities new citizens did before their first Canadian election



MOTIVATIONS FOR VOTING

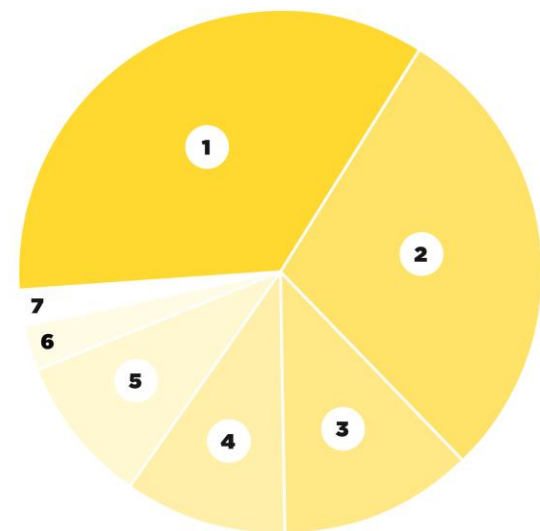
Like many other Canadians, new citizens generally believe that voting is important even if they have critiques of the effectiveness of the political system. The majority (64%) said they wanted to vote in their first election because voting is important and because they wanted to have their voice heard. Voting was less associated with factors connected to a particular election (e.g., particular issues or candidates) or voting out of habit.

The experience of immigrating might make new citizens more keenly feel that sense of duty to vote, as Stephen White and his colleagues wondered. Many in the survey left comments that indicated a strong desire to give back to Canada:

“I felt like I was taking up my responsibility. I felt like I owed it to Canada and its population, my fellow Canadians.”

“I felt proud to be part of the democratic process of Canada. I felt that I owed it to my country and myself.”

Reasons new citizens voted in their first Canadian election



- 1** Thought that voting is important (35%)
- 2** Wanted to have voice heard (29%)
- 3** Was eligible to vote (12%)
- 4** Wanted to support a specific party or candidate (10%)
- 5** Was concerned about a particular issue or issues (9%)
- 6** Wanted to vote against a specific party or other candidate (3%)
- 7** Other (2%)

“Very proud. Even if I have always lived in democratic countries and have voted in my own country, it still meant something to vote for the first time in a country that I have CHOSEN to adopt as my own.”

“I felt that I was doing the right thing for a country that has given me the opportunity to [live] in it.”

For many of the participants, both in the survey and the focus groups, voting was a deeply moving and profound experience. When asked how they felt voting for the first time (an open-ended question), many simply said, “empowered.” They felt that they – and their voice, their opinions, and their experiences – finally mattered in Canada. They also expressed a feeling of belonging to a larger collective, and felt they had a stake in their community. For example, one survey respondent said,

“It was a wonderful feeling because it meant that I took greater ownership of my community and my life by choosing who I felt were the best people to run my municipality.”

Another survey respondent “felt less of an outsider.” Many felt connected not only to a larger collective, but also specifically to Canada and a heightened sense of Canadian identity:

“The physical act of voting made me feel truly Canadian. I was no longer a citizen on paper only. In a very real and tangible manner I am Canadian, doing my civic duty.”

“I finally felt that I was a Canadian citizen. It was even more important to me than to get my Canadian passport... I felt a connection with my fellow citizens, and really at that point felt like I was ‘home.’”

“It made me feel more connected to Canada as a nation. It created a feeling of participation as opposed to [being] only a spectator.”

With voting invested with so much meaning, some of the discussion participants expressed disappointment that their fellow Canadians did not take voting as seriously. When they headed to the polls for the first time, they were surprised to find the polls quiet. They suggested that new citizens did not take voting for granted – like some other Canadians seem to do. For example, one Toronto participant said,

“It is important to me and I would like that to be part of the society, that people feel they should go out and vote... I think the first-time citizens are more passionate about voting as compared to citizens who have been here a very long time.”

Because there was no day off, election day seemed like any other day and she was shocked that many Canadians didn’t even seem to know that an election was happening. Her memories of voting in Africa were totally different:

“it’s a passion. It’s a 90 whatever percent going to vote. So, we wake up to vote. We’re at a voting station sometimes at 5am... But it’s also a

public holiday... So you are expected to go there... your people will mock you... you won't want your neighbours to know you didn't vote."

Many of the participants said that when they couldn't vote while being a permanent resident, they strongly encouraged or badgered their family and friends to go vote.

Finally, we asked focus group participants what sparked their interest in Canadian politics, an interest that usually was present well before they officially became Canadian citizens. For some, having a Canadian-born spouse or family who had immigrated earlier helped them learn about the system. For example, a participant in Montreal told us that his sister recommended he watch Question Period on television. For many others, it was when larger issues intersected with their lives. A participant in Richmond told us he became interested when the university he taught at hit a budget crisis; a participant in Calgary set up a new business and needed to engage with politicians to get new regulations passed; and a participant in Toronto started volunteering for an animal rights organization and realized that it was necessary to engage with politicians to get new laws passed. A couple of individuals said it was having children that motivated them:

"And then since having kids, I really have been having a passion for making change, even if it's small... wanting to do changes for a better future for them and for the future generations to come."

BARRIERS TO VOTING

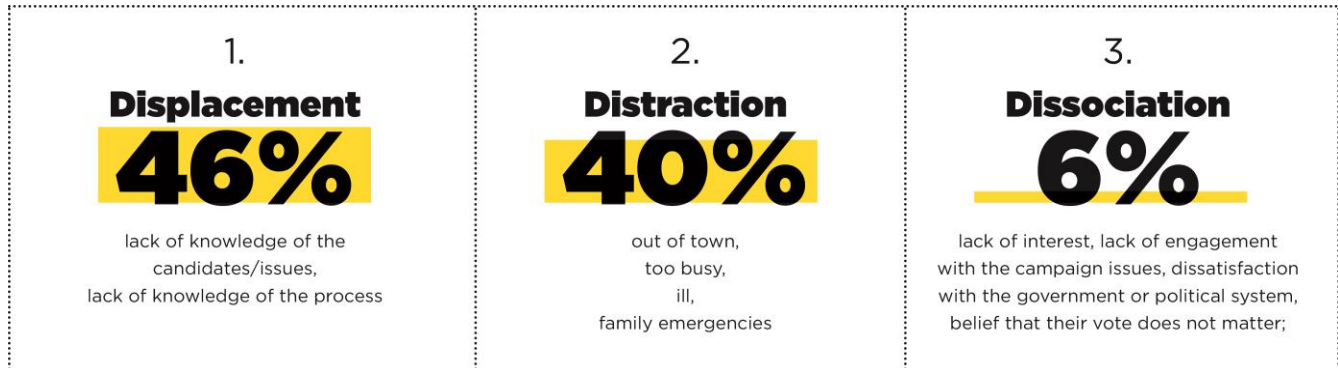
A small number of survey respondents reported that there have been elections since they became a Canadian citizen, but that they did not vote. To analyze their reasons, we adapted the framework that Elections BC used in its [Non-Voters Survey](#). This survey identified three major themes in the decision not to vote:

1. Dissociation – lack of interest, lack of engagement with the campaign issues, dissatisfaction with the government or political system, belief that their vote does not matter;
2. Distraction – out of town, too busy, ill, family emergencies; and
3. Displacement – lack of knowledge of the candidates/issues, lack of knowledge of the process³¹.

The largest number of responses by new citizens related to displacement (46%), followed by distraction (40%) and dissociation (6%):

³¹ BC Stats, Elections BC Non-Voters Survey Final Report, November 2005, p. 8. This framework has been used in other studies, including a 2004 Elections Manitoba report on non-voters. BC Stats used a random-digit dialling program to randomly telephone BC residents. The survey had regional response targets and the data was weighted based on BC Stats population estimates for 2004.

Barriers to the ballot box



In research on voting, it is difficult to talk to non-voters because they tend not to answer surveys about voting. However, our results – while small and preliminary – are interesting. Barriers related to displacement, not distraction, were the most significant. Barriers for the new citizens in this study have more to do with lack of knowledge of the process than cynicism about the political process or lack of time. This is quite different than the results that election agencies have found. Elections BC, for example, found that dissociation

was the most common reason that British Columbians did not vote.³² While the methodology and questions are not comparable, it might make sense that individuals who are relatively new to Canada would have less disdain for the system and more confusion about how the system works.

The voters' list and voters' cards deserve special attention in a discussion about barriers. These two items comprised 35% of responses in the displacement category. If individuals don't get a voters' card, at the very least they simply don't know where to go to cast their ballot. For example, a focus group participant in Toronto did not receive

a voters' card, so she said she went to where she thought she should vote, but when it was the wrong location, she had to hop on her bike and rush to the correct poll, arriving in the nick of time. Others might not have been so persistent. But, as is clear by the comments in the survey, not getting a voters' card can also give them the impression that they were not on the voters' list and therefore not eligible to vote. For example, a survey respondent said, "I didn't get a card with my name on it to invite me to vote." Many individuals were not sure

how to get on the voters' list and were not aware that they could add themselves at the poll on election day. In other instances, they got lost in a bureaucratic system. While they had good interactions with staff at the federal and provincial levels, the municipal level isn't always as responsive. In Montreal, one participant tried to change from voting for the French school board to the English school board, but her request was not dealt with, and she didn't vote.

The fact that election agencies do not share their information was also brought up as a concern. Many of the focus group participants had indicated on their citizenship forms that they wanted to be added to the voters' list. But when a provincial or municipal election came, they were disappointed and frustrated that they did not receive a voters' card in the mail, not realizing they had only joined the federal voters' list. They often did not

³² BC Stats, Elections BC Non-Voters Survey Final Report, November 2005, p. 8. Elections Manitoba found the same results in its' 2004 study. See Prairie Research Associates, *Voter Turnout in the 2011 Provincial Election: A Survey of Voters and Non-Voters*, Prepared for Elections Manitoba, March 29, 2012, p. 13.

understand why the different agencies could not simply have shared the relevant information.

While time and convenience were not the top categories that prevented voting, both are important. While there are advanced voting days on the weekend, many prefer to wait until election day to vote. Polls are near people’s homes, which – particularly in the largest cities where new citizens tend to live – can be a long commute from work and it can be difficult to get home in time to vote. A focus group participant from Coquitlam told us that it was difficult to get back to Coquitlam (from Vancouver) in time to vote, particularly as there were no compelling reasons (e.g., issues, personalities) drawing him to the polls. Many in the survey and focus groups did not understand why the polls opened at 10 a.m., meaning that they could not vote before leaving for work. Furthermore, while employers are required by law to give their employees time off to vote, some people indicated in the comments that they were scared to ask for this time off:

“My employer is very strict about allowing time off. I was given a verbal warning for missing time off previously, even though I provided a doctor’s note. I was afraid to request time off to vote. I believe all citizens should be given time off work to vote.”

Language issues were not a serious barrier for most of the focus group attendees, as most already spoke English or French well by the time they came to Canada. However, the few who had to learn English or French confirmed that language is an essential skill to master to become more politically engaged. As one focus group participant put it, “without language, you couldn’t do anything at all.” But even for new citizens from countries very similar to Canada, there was a period of adjustment. According a new citizen from Great

Britain, the different levels of government in Canada can be confusing, and federal parties are often very different from their provincial counterparts. She said,

“It probably took me a year of listening to the news in the morning to work out what the heck they were talking about.”

Finally, while language was not a serious issue, new citizens were frustrated at the lack of information available about the candidates and their platforms; this was particularly a concern at the municipal level where there were long lists of candidates, many of whom did not have an online presence.

VOTING REFORMS

What would encourage those new citizens who have not yet voted, but were eligible? Making information more available through a central online space and making voting more convenient were the top suggestions from the survey and focus groups, likely the same answers we would get from the general Canadian population.

What changes would encourage new citizens to vote next time

MORE INFORMATION about the candidates, political parties, and issues (56%)

Voting places that are **MORE CONVENIENT** to work/home (34%)

MORE INFORMATION on where and when to vote (33%)

MORE TIME to vote out of election day (31%)

MORE TIME to vote on election day (23%)

BETTER CANDIDATES (20%)

MORE IMPORTANT ISSUES (14%)

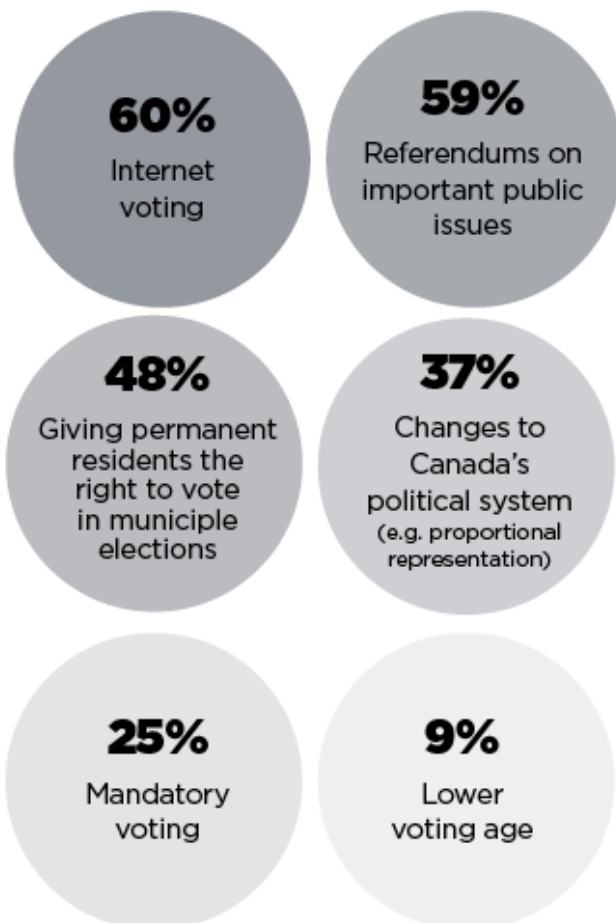
As noted previously, many commented that they would be in favour of not only extending poll hours, particularly in the morning, but also making election day a statutory holiday or holding it on a

weekend as was often the case in the countries from which they emigrated.

In addition to these smaller reforms, we also asked new citizens their opinion on major changes to the electoral system. Declining voter turnout has been a concern for some time and a number of reforms to the system have been discussed to encourage people to vote.

Unsurprisingly, internet voting received strong support.

New citizens' opinions on reforms to the electoral system



While many left comments expressing concern over the potential security issues associated with casting a ballot online, they consistently argued

that the current hours on election day are not long enough. If the security question could be sufficiently addressed, the majority would like the option to vote online. Relatively few supported lowering the voting age or making voting mandatory. While the lack of fairness concerning the first-past-the-post system was brought up during the focus groups, only 37% in the survey supported making a fundamental change to the electoral system, such as adopting proportional representation.

Non-citizen voting

We asked new citizens about a significant change: giving permanent residents the right to vote. This has been debated in Toronto for a number of years, but, to our knowledge, this is the first time such a large number of new citizens have been asked their opinion. We were particularly interested in what they had to say because they can draw on the experience both of being eligible and not being eligible to vote in Canada. A number of countries already give the right to vote at the local level to non-citizens, including a number in Europe (e.g., Belgium, Austria, Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, the UK), Chile, New Zealand, and Uruguay. These countries adopted this policy in response to the increasing numbers of immigrants arriving and the challenges they experienced integrating. New Zealand is one of the few countries to allow non-citizen voting at the national level.³³ In Toronto, the Maytree Foundation and academic Myer Siemiatycki have led the charge. Proponents argue that non-citizens work and pay taxes – contributing to the city's economic prosperity. They often have children in the school system and draw upon a host of municipal services that are in part paid for by their taxes. Yet they have no say in how their tax dollars are spent. Extending voting rights can also be a way of telling newcomers that they are welcome – and

³³ See <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrant-voting-rights-receive-more-attention>

belong – in their new community. Arguments that depend on demonstrating loyalty to Canada based on getting citizenship hold less sway given the increasing length of time it takes to get citizenship, and the new reality that contemporary globalization and migration trends pose.³⁴ The Migration Integration Policy Index counts non-citizen voting at the local level as an important integration policy, and Canada’s lack of movement in this area was cited as one of the explanations for Canada’s lower score in the 2015 edition.³⁵

The new citizens who participated in the survey were split equally on the issue – 48% supported giving permanent residents the right to vote at the municipal level. In the focus groups, the majority of participants were comfortable with changing the rules for municipal elections, but not comfortable with allowing permanent residents to vote federally.

The arguments they articulated both for and against non-citizen voting are those heard in the larger public debate. Those who supported it were often politically engaged before arriving in Canada, and found it difficult not to have an official voice for so many years. They argued that they paid taxes and should have a say in how that money is spent. They also pointed out that it may take many years – for a variety of reasons – to get citizenship. By then, they are committed to Canada and know enough to be able to cast a ballot. Those who were resolutely against it appealed to the need to demonstrate a commitment to Canada through citizenship. Otherwise, immigrants might not feel the need to take the final step. They also argued

that the time spent as a permanent resident is needed to acquire the knowledge necessary to participate in the electoral system in a meaningful way.

However, what came through loud and clear – no matter what side of the debate a person fell on – was that *if* the right is given, it should be only for municipal – and perhaps provincial – elections. Only a couple of focus group participants argued that permanent residents should be given the right to vote federally. Most of the participants connected federal politics to making decisions that would determine the course of the country. The right to influence federal and foreign policy should be reserved, in their opinion, to those who are citizens of the country. Voting in municipal politics is more acceptable because it revolves around issues that have an impact on the daily lives of a city’s residents, particularly city services such as transit and garbage collection. Having a say on these matters could prepare permanent residents for having a voice on the larger stage in a few years. But for the time being, determining *Canada’s* future should be left to its citizens.

³⁴ Myer Siemiatycki, *The Municipal Franchise and Social Inclusion in Toronto: Policy and Practice*, Inclusive Cities Canada and the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, pp. 10, 12-13. Also see the Maytree Foundation’s [Policy in Focus](#).

³⁵ MIPEX is an international index that ranks countries based on the strength of their immigrant integration policies across eight areas, including political participation. See Canada’s full 2015 results here: <http://mipex.eu/canada>.

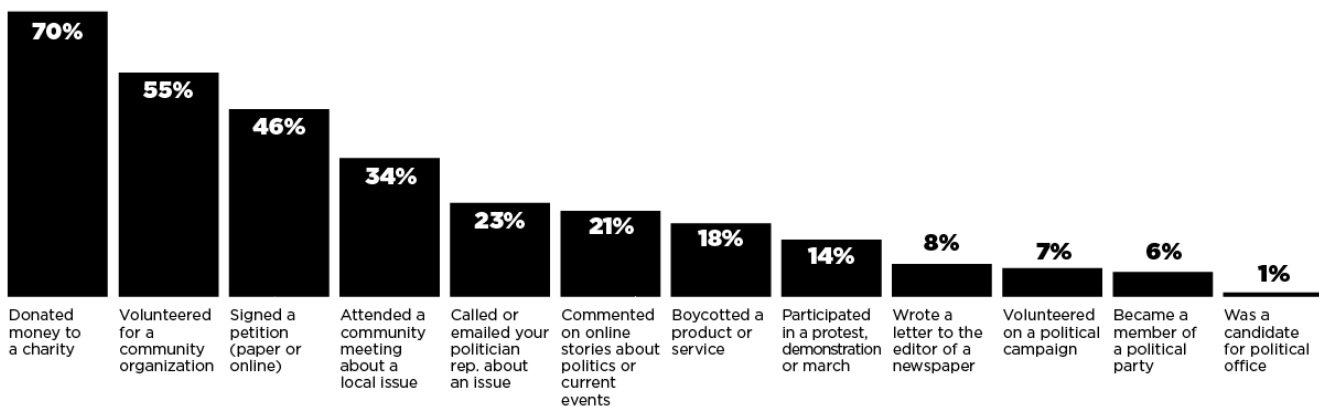
Voting is not the only way Canadians engage in the political system to address the issues they care about. Other ways to engage directly with the political process include running for office, becoming a member of a political party, and bringing issues to the attention of political representatives. Less direct ways for citizens to effect change include volunteering in community organizations, protesting, petitioning, boycotting, and simply keeping informed of the issues.³⁶ Recognizing that the voter turnout has been on the decline, we asked new citizens about other ways to make their voices heard, methods that don't rely on having formal Canadian citizenship.

We asked respondents if they had, since their arrival in Canada, participated in direct and indirect political activities. While they clearly think that voting is important, the other activities associated with formal politics – volunteering on a political campaign, becoming a member of a political party, or being a candidate for political office – came in at the bottom of the list. In addition, while the majority of respondents reported that they follow Canadian politics and current events, only one third reported that they talk about them frequently with family and friends.

Donating to charity and volunteering topped the list of ways new citizens engaged in civic life. This was followed by more activist activities, such as signing petitions (46%), boycotting products (37%), and protesting or demonstrating (22%).

CIVIC VS. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Activities new citizens have done since arriving in Canada



³⁶ Erin Tolley, "Supplement, Substitute or Stepping Stone?: Understanding the Electoral and Non-Electoral Participation of Immigrants and Minorities," Paper presented in Workshop 4G, 6th National Metropolis Conference, March 21-22, 2003, Edmonton, Alberta, Revised May 2003. Samara's [Democracy 360](#) also highlighted other ways that citizens can participate, differentiating between activism (e.g., demonstrating), civic engagement (e.g., volunteering), and political engagement.

Samara Canada’s [Democracy 360](#) provides recent data that we can use to compare the general Canadian population with our sample of new citizens. Generally, new citizens reported lower levels of engagement on all the indicators that were similar in the two studies, with the exception of volunteering³⁷:

Activity	New Citizens	General Population
Contacted an elected official	23%	31%
Became a member of a political party	6%	9%
Volunteered on a political campaign	7%	17%
Signed a petition	46%	64%
Boycotted products	18%	37%
Participated in a protest or demonstration	14%	22%
Donated money to charity	70%	78%
Volunteered (non-political)	55%	53%

³⁷ Samara Canada, *Samara’s Democracy 360: The Numbers*, Samara Canada, Toronto, 2015, pp. 16-21.

We wanted to know not only if they did certain activities, but if they thought these activities were effective, regardless of whether or not they had participated in them.

Activities new citizens think are effective ways to create change



Voting is seen as the most effective activity. Contacting one’s political representative was also relatively high on the list. Yet, only 22% said actually being that representative is effective and only 23% said becoming a member of a political party was effective. While new citizens may not think running for office is an effective way to create change, they do recognize that citizens/community members have to engage with the political system if fundamental change is going to happen.

In the focus groups, we were able to probe the distinction between civic and political participation a bit deeper. In Richmond and Vancouver, participants commented that Canada generally

tends to be more civic minded: “Volunteering is what runs Canada.” Participants across Canada commented that when you volunteer, you see results immediately, and you find a connection with others. In Toronto, one participant said that when you don’t understand the political system after arriving and you aren’t allowed to vote, it’s easier to get involved first in civic organizations. While he said that he understood the importance of political participation (e.g., through voting), he still doesn’t understand how he can make a concrete difference through the political system. Furthermore, a person’s pre-migration experiences can shape his/her experiences in Canada. One participant from Kenya said,

“You don’t make change there working through the political system, so it would not occur to me to do it here.”

However, many also recognized significant interplay between the two. As one participant in Vancouver said, “If you don’t have a policy that goes with it [civic actions], how far can you go, really?” Civic engagement was seen as an important precursor to engaging with the political system; one voice will not instigate change within the political system, but many voices might. While some felt that civic participation is more “pure or more honest, or more transparent,” others had positive experiences working with politicians, largely at the municipal level on issues that had an impact on their daily lives.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS CANADIAN DEMOCRACY

The discussion around civic and political engagement also revealed what new citizens in general think about Canadian democracy. Their activities around political and civic engagement broadly line up with the Canadian population, but

how do their attitudes to Canadian democracy compare?

Evidence indicates that Canadians generally do not have much confidence in the political system. Samara Canada’s focus group discussions with politically disengaged Canadians revealed that they were neither apathetic nor uninformed, but that they saw a difference between what democracy should be and how democracy operates in Canada. They felt that government and politics were irrelevant to them and their needs.³⁸ Democracy 360 also showed that 33% of Canadians were not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with how democracy works.³⁹ The Canadian report of *America’s Barometer* (2012) found that 30% of Canadians have some level of dissatisfaction with Canadian democracy.⁴⁰

We asked new citizens about their satisfaction with the Canadian political system and survey respondents were generally satisfied, perhaps more so than the Canadian population. Only 14% expressed any degree of dissatisfaction with Canada’s system of government.

For those who are dissatisfied, however, the comments in the survey and the focus groups reflect many of the frustrations that other Canadians feel:

³⁸ Samara Canada, *The Real Outsiders: Politically Disengaged Views on Politics and Democracy*, Samara Canada, Toronto, December 7, 2011, pp. 2-4. Samara’s research included new Canadians, but it is difficult to draw conclusions about a distinctive new Canadian voice in their report.

³⁹ Samara Canada, *Democracy 360, The Numbers*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ In international comparisons of confidence in the political system, Canadians show comparable – or slightly higher – levels of confidence to other countries in the western hemisphere. See The Environics Institute, *America’s Barometer: The Public Speaks on Democracy and Governance Across the Americas, Canada 2012 Final Report*, Toronto, 2012, pp. 20-44.

- Lack of proportional representation means that your vote doesn't matter if you live in a riding dominated by another political party;
- Politics is dirty – negative attack ads, “bickering” during Question Period;
- Lack of an elected senate;
- Lack of transparency in the wake of recent scandals; and
- Sense that politicians are disconnected from the issues of “real people.”

Many new citizens in the focus groups related their feelings towards Canadian democracy in reference to their lives before coming to Canada. Those who came from countries such as Mexico, Colombia, Ukraine, or Russia commented that while Canadian democracy has its problems, it is much better than in the countries they left. More importantly, Canadians aspire to higher standards, even if they don't always reach them. On the other hand, a couple of participants commented that they had high expectations of Canada before arriving, because they were coming from countries rife with corruption, and have felt disappointed by the reality.

One of the critiques often leveled at Canadian democracy is that it is not representative of its increasingly diverse population. Even though new citizens offered critiques of the Canadian political system, we found little evidence that they found it unwelcoming or discriminatory.⁴¹ As noted earlier, the main barriers tended to revolve around time, convenience, lack of knowledge, and lack of impact, not a feeling that they are not welcome to participate.

We asked new citizens in the survey and the focus groups if they felt that the political system was representative of Canada's increasingly diverse population. Even though the data tells us that

⁴¹ We need to keep in mind that this does not represent all new Canadian citizens.

visible minorities and immigrant-born Canadians, along with other demographic populations, are under-represented in Canada's legislatures and city councils, the survey respondents did not feel that:

- 64% agree or strongly agree that the government represents the population;
- 93% agree or strongly agree that all Canadians have equal opportunity to vote; and,
- 72% agree or strongly agree that all Canadians have equal opportunity to be a political candidate.

We found similar results in the focus group discussions. There were certainly a few who thought that new citizens were under-represented – particularly those who were visible minorities. Others expressed concern that candidates would be elected based on their ethnic or cultural background, not on merit.

Montreal was the only place that we heard anyone recount an experience of discrimination. A French woman, elected to the school commission in Laval, quit after one year because she felt she had no chance to contribute in a meaningful way. As she put it, “c'était extrêmement fermé.”⁴² We were curious as to whether or not the recent debates around “reasonable accommodation”⁴³ in Quebec turned new citizens in Quebec off political discussion and engagement, or made them feel unwelcome to participate.⁴⁴ While by no means speaking for all new citizens in Quebec, the individuals around the table felt that the “reasonable accommodation” debate made them more eager to get involved and help determine the future of their province.

⁴² “It was extremely closed.”

⁴³ Reasonable accommodation refers to the debate in Quebec over the extent to which diverse cultural and religious beliefs should be accommodated in Quebec society.

⁴⁴ This was a spontaneous question that came up during the course of the discussion.



Overall, it seems that the new citizens who participated in this study did not avoid politics because they thought they weren't welcome to participate. While many certainly have criticisms of Canadian democracy, what is clear is that many new citizens are eager to contribute to the discussion and have their voice heard in their new home.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ There is very little research on the link between inclusion, belonging, welcoming communities, and political engagement – an area that could use more research.

Ballots and Belonging – New Citizens on Political Participation is an opportunity to see Canadian democracy through fresh eyes – through the eyes of Canada’s newest citizens, whose diverse life experiences inform what they think about Canadian democracy and how they participate in it. While new citizen voting rates have been studied, what is missing from these studies are the *voices* of new citizens. We hope this study – and the approximately 2,500 new citizens who took the survey and participated in the focus groups – provide insight into what voting and political participation means to them.

We set out to learn how new citizens participate in the political system, about any barriers to participation, and about the connection between participation and belonging.

We learned that although formal citizenship brings with it the right to vote, many new citizens are actively engaged in Canadian democracy well before they get their citizenship. They generally feel welcome to participate. They feel that the system generally is open to anyone who wishes to be part of it. They volunteer in their communities, donate to charitable causes, and some engage in activism and even contact their local political officials with concerns that affect their local communities and neighbourhoods. As with many other Canadians, there is a certain level of disenchantment with many facets of political life (e.g., attack ads, partisan fighting), but perhaps not to the same degree as other Canadians. They also recognize that for change to occur, working with the political system is necessary; one voice won’t be heard, but many will be.

The new citizens who participated in this study are a subset of new citizens – generally, they are well-educated, speak English or French well, and arrived in Canada with a strong interest in politics. As such, they reported that they usually are able to navigate the political system fairly effectively. Still, there are

barriers that they identified, and recommendations that can address those barriers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Centrally Located Information

For new citizens, the barriers around voting seem to have more to do with lack of knowledge and information than about cynicism with the political system. In the survey, 56% reported that having more information on the candidates, political parties, and issues would make them more likely to vote. We heard in the focus groups that it is tough to find information on candidates and their platforms, particularly at the municipal level. Faced with a long list of candidates, some of whom have no online presence, it was very difficult for new citizens who desperately wanted to vote, but did not want simply to choose a name at random.

Recommendations:

- *Central, non-partisan, online space to compare candidates and their platforms;*
- *Workshops offered to new citizens on the political system, more in-depth than what would be learned in the citizenship preparation process; and*
- *More information given out on the process of voting at all levels during the citizenship ceremony, or just after.*

“I Didn’t Get My Voters’ Card!”

New citizens are familiar with the concept of the voters’ card. They learn about it when studying the [Discover Canada](#) guide. Many click the box on their citizenship application that allows the government to add them to the voters’ list. And then we heard about the disappointment they felt when they didn’t receive one for their first election, most

commonly a municipal or provincial election. They didn't understand why the federal government couldn't share this information with the provinces and municipalities to ensure that new citizens – who we have learned are keen to vote – are registered to vote immediately upon becoming a citizen. Among those who didn't vote, 15% were not sure if they were on the voters' list. In the comments, many simply said that they did not get their voters' card, thought that they were not on the list, and thus could not vote.

Recommendation:

- *Better coordination between municipal, provincial, and federal election agencies.*

Voting Can Be Inconvenient

Even if you are a committed voter, the hours and locations of polling stations can be inconvenient, particularly for those who live in the largest municipalities and have long commutes to and from work. Many were shocked when they realized that polls did not open until 10 a.m., and were surprised that election day was a regular weekday. Many came from countries where voting took place on weekends or on a holiday. If security could be properly maintained, 60% would be in favour of online voting.

Recommendations:

- *Hold election day on a weeked or make it a holiday;*
- *Longer poll hours to enable people to vote before and after work; and*
- *Internet voting.*

belonging. Voting day is a significant day for many new citizens. Many told us they shed tears when they came out of the voting booth. For some, it was the first time they have been able to participate in the democratic process. For many, it was the chance to give back to the country they feel has given them and their families so much opportunity. We heard over and over in the survey that voting gave them a feeling of empowerment, the sense that they were no longer an outsider or a spectator, and the feeling that their opinions mattered just as much as those of other Canadians. It solidified their status as a *Canadian* citizen, putting in action the oath they had taken. Ensuring that new citizens have the ability to contribute to their new country – their new home – as soon as possible is clearly one way Canada can build an inclusive society, one in which all new citizens feel they belong.

CONCLUSION

Finally, we learned that there is a connection between voting, political participation, and

[TOP](#)

Appendix I: Online survey questions

17:43 AVERAGE COMPLETION TIME

Why did you choose to become a Canadian citizen?

Voting is a right that comes with Canadian citizenship. We are interested in your general opinions on voting. Please agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Voting is easy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It does not make much difference if I vote or not.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Voting is important.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Voting gives me a connection to Canada and other Canadians.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Voting is a way to make my voice heard on issues I care about.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Some changes have been suggested to increase the number of people who vote. Please indicate if you support any of the following changes. Please check all that apply.

- Giving permanent residents the right to vote in municipal elections.
- Lowering the voting age.
- Making voting mandatory (you pay a fine if you don't vote).

- Internet voting.
- Holding referendums on important public issues.
- Changes to Canada's political system (e.g. implementing a form of proportional representation).

Please explain, or suggest any other changes:

We are interested in your general knowledge of how to vote. If an election were held tomorrow, which of the following statements apply to you? Please check all that apply.

- I know what a voters' card is.
- I know how to get my name on the voters' list.
- I know how to find a polling station.
- I know how to keep my ballot secret.
- I know where to find information if I have questions about voting.

Since you became a Canadian citizen, have you voted in a municipal, provincial or federal election?

- There has been an election and I voted.
- There has been an election, but I did not vote.
- There hasn't been an election since I became a citizen

You indicated that you have voted in a Canadian election. The following questions ask about voting in your FIRST Canadian municipal, provincial or federal election.

How did you feel when you voted for the first time as a Canadian citizen?

Before you voted in your first election as a Canadian citizen, did you look for information on how to vote?

- Yes
- No
- I don't remember

Where did you find information on how to vote? Please check all that apply.

- Television
- Media website (e.g. CBC, CTV, Globe and Mail etc.)
- Government website (e.g. Elections Canada, Elections BC, City of Toronto etc.)
- Family or friends
- Political party website
- Radio
- Social networking sites
- My voters' card
- Other, please specify _____

Did you look for information on how to vote in languages other than English or French?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

If you read information on how to vote, was it easy to understand?

- Yes
- No
- I don't remember

Did you do any of the following activities before you voted? Please check all that apply.

- Searched for information about a candidate or political party on the internet
- Talked to a candidate at your front door
- Attended an all-candidates meeting or debate
- Talked about the election with friends or family
- Put a candidate sign on my front lawn
- Donated money to a candidate or political party

Why did you vote? Please choose the single most important reason.

- I wanted to support a specific party or candidate
- I wanted to vote against a specific party or candidate
- I was concerned about a particular issue or issues raised
- I think voting is important
- I wanted to have my voice heard
- I always vote when I am eligible to vote
- Family or friends persuaded me to vote
- Other, please specify _____

There will be a federal election in 2015. How likely are you to vote?

- Not at all likely
- Not very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely

You indicated that there have been elections since you became a Canadian citizen, but that you haven't voted. We know that there are many reasons why Canadians don't vote. Why haven't you voted? Please choose the most important reason.

- I didn't know where or when to vote.

- I didn't think I was on the voters' list.
- I didn't think my vote would matter to the outcome.
- I didn't know enough about the candidates, the parties, or the issues.
- I didn't like the candidates or parties.
- I wasn't concerned about the issues that were raised.
- Personal circumstances on election day (e.g. illness, family emergency, out of town).
- I didn't think I was eligible to vote.
- I didn't have enough time on election day.
- I just wasn't interested.
- I was scared to vote.
- I didn't speak English or French well enough.
- I don't think any politicians can be trusted.
- Other, please specify: _____

Please explain:

What if, anything, can be done to encourage you to vote? Please check all that apply.

- More information on where and when to vote.
- More information about the candidates, political parties, and issues.
- Voting places that are more convenient to work/home.
- More time to vote on election day.
- More time to vote outside of election day.
- Better candidates.
- More important issues.

Please explain, or suggest any other things that can be done to encourage you to vote:

There will be a federal election in 2015. How likely are you to vote?

- Not at all likely
- Not very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely

There will be a federal election in 2015. How likely are you to vote?

- Not at all likely
- Not very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely

Besides voting, there are a number of ways that people can be involved in their communities and address an issue they care about. Have you done any of the following activities since you arrived in Canada? Please check all that apply.

- Volunteered for a community organization
- Donated money to a charity
- Attended a community meeting about a local issue
- Called or emailed your political representative about an issue
- Volunteered on a political campaign
- Became a member of a political party
- Was a candidate for political office
- Wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper
- Commented on online stories about politics or current events
- Boycotted a product or service

- Signed a petition (on paper or online)
- Participated in a protest, demonstration or march

In your opinion, which of the following are effective ways to create change on issues? Please choose all the activities you think are effective.

- Volunteering for a community organization
- Donating money to a charity
- Contacting your political representative about an issue
- Volunteering on a political campaign
- Becoming a member of a political party
- Being a candidate for political office
- Raising awareness about issues through the internet and social media
- Boycotting a product or service
- Signing a petition (on paper or online)
- Participating in a protest, demonstration or march
- Voting

Please explain

Some Canadians are interested in Canadian politics, and others are not interested. In general, how interested are you in Canadian politics?

- Not at all interested
- Somewhat interested
- Not very interested
- Very interested

In general, how often do you follow Canadian politics and current events on television, the radio, or the internet?

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Frequently

In general, how often do you talk about Canadian politics and current events with friends and family?

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Frequently

We are interested in your opinion on Canada's political system. Please tell us to what degree you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am satisfied with Canada's system of government.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I trust Canada's political parties and politicians.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Canadian governments are generally representative of Canada's diverse population.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel free to express my political views.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

All Canadians have equal opportunity to vote.

All Canadians have equal opportunity to be a political candidate.

You are almost done! The following questions ask more about you so that we can better understand the results.

We are interested in your experiences BEFORE you came to Canada. Please agree or disagree with the following statements

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I felt free to express my political views.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I trusted political parties and politicians.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt that the government was representative of the population.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt that anyone was able to participate in the political system if they wanted to.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Before moving to Canada, how interested in politics and current events were you?

- Not at all interested
- Not very interested
- Somewhat interested
- Very interested

Before you moved to Canada, did you vote in elections?

- There were elections and I usually voted
- There were elections and I sometimes voted
- There were elections, but I didn't vote
- There were elections, but I was not eligible to vote
- There were no elections at all in my country of origin

Do you still follow the political and current events in the country you came from? (For example, on television, the internet or discussions with family and friends).

- Yes
- No

Please explain

What country were you born in? Drop down list of countries:

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| Afghanistan | Jordan |
| Albania | Kazakhstan |
| Algeria | Kenya |
| Antigua | Korea, Republic of |
| Argentina | Kuwait |
| Armenia | Kyrgyzstan |
| Australia | Latvia |
| Austria | Lebanon |
| Azerbaijan | Madagascar |
| Azores | Malaysia |
| Bahamas | Malta |
| Bangladesh | Mauritania |
| Barbados | Mauritius |
| Belarus | Mexico |
| Belgium | Moldova |
| Benin | Mongolia |
| Bolivia | Morocco |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | Myanmar |
| Brazil | Nepal |



Bulgaria	Netherlands
Burkina Faso	New Zealand
Burundi	Northern Ireland
Cambodia	Nigeria
Cameroon	Pakistan
Chad	Palestine
Chile	Panama
China, People's Republic of	Peru
Colombia	Philippines
Congo, Democratic Republic of	Poland
Costa Rica	Portugal
Croatia	Qatar
Cuba	Romania
Cyprus	Russia
Czech Republic	Rwanda
Dominican Republic	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Ecuador	Saint Lucia
Egypt	Saudi Arabia
El Salvador	Scotland
England	Senegal
Eritrea	Serbia
Ethiopia	Sierra Leone
Fiji	Singapore
Finland	Slovakia
France	South Africa
Gabon	Spain
Georgia	Sri Lanka
Germany	Sudan
Ghana	Sweden
Greece	Switzerland
Grenada	Syria
Guatemala	Taiwan
Guinea	Tanzania
Guyana	Thailand
Haiti	Tibet
Honduras	Togo
Hungary	Trinidad and Tobago
India	Tunisia
Indonesia	Turkey
Iran	Turkmenistan
Iraq	Uganda
Ireland	Ukraine
Israel	United Arab Emirates
Italy	United States



Ivory Coast
Jamaica
Japan
Liban
Liberia
Libya
Lithuania
Luxembourg
Macedonia

Uruguay
Uzbekistan
Venezuela
Vietnam
Wales
Yemen
Yugoslavia
Zambia
Zimbabwe
Other, please specify

How many years have you lived in Canada?

- 3 years
- 4 years
- 5 years
- 6 years
- 7 years
- 8 years
- 9 years
- 10 years
- More than 10 years

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

What is the highest level of education you have? Please choose the equivalent Canadian level:

- Less than high school
- High school
- Some college or technical school

- College or technical school diploma
- Some university
- University - Bachelor's
- University - Master's
- University - PhD

What is your combined household income BEFORE taxes? Please include the income of ALL adult members of the household.

- 20,000 - 39,999
- 40,000 - 59,999
- 60,000 - 79,999
- 80,000 - 99,999
- 100,000 - 119,999
- 120,000 - 139,999
- 140,000 - 159,999
- 160,000 - 179,999
- 180,000 - 199,999
- 200,000 +

Which of the following BEST describes your employment situation?

- Employed full time
- Employed part time
- Self-employed
- Searching for work (unemployed)
- Caring for family members at home (e.g. children, elderly relatives)
- Retired
- Student



ICC
Insights...

BALLOTS & BELONGING

Appendix

- Working and attending school
- Other, please specify: _____

[TOP](#)

Appendix 2: Focus group questions

(90 MINUTES)

1. Let's do a quick round of introductions. Please tell us your name, where you emigrated from, the number of years you have been in Canada, what you do for a living, and if you have ever voted in a Canadian election.
2. What makes an active citizen? Think about an issue that is important to you. Let's take a moment to brainstorm the ways in which we can act on that issue and make change in our communities. Just call out the first thing that comes to your mind, and I'll write it on the board.
Followup: Of all the ways listed on the board, which ones are the most effective for making change in your communities or in Canada?
3. In the survey, we found that new citizens were more likely to think that civic participation (volunteering, donating to charity etc.) is more effective than political participation. Based on your own experience, what do you think of this result?
4. Many of you lived in Canada for many years before you formally became a Canadian citizen. How and when did you learn about the Canadian political system (for example, political parties, political leaders, the issues that were important etc.)?
Follow up: Did you feel like you were able to participate in the political system before you got your citizenship (and therefore allowed to vote)?
5. Some people have suggested that Canada allow permanent residents to vote. What do you think of that suggestion?
6. I would like to talk a little bit about how you get information about voting during an election. National elections are run by Elections Canada, provincial elections by Elections Ontario, and municipal elections by the City of Toronto. What are the best ways that these government agencies can communicate with you about elections?
Probe the voters' card if it doesn't come up
7. This is a group of new Canadians. Canada is increasingly diverse but sometimes criticized for not reflecting this diversity in politics. Do you think this is true? Is it important to you – why or why not?
8. What do you think about Canadian politics? What are the first things that come to mind?
9. What makes a healthy democracy? You have a sheet in front of you with a list of qualities. Please circle the three you consider the most important. Why did you choose those three?
Follow up: Do you think those qualities are present in the Canadian system?

10. Did formally becoming a Canadian citizen change or not change your views on getting involved in politics (defined broadly – voting, paying attention to the issues, volunteering etc.)?
11. Some people have told us in the survey that voting for the first time, for example, helps them feel like they belong in Canada. Did you feel that way? Or did you feel something else? Do you still feel the same way now?



Appendix 3: About the Institute for Canadian Citizenship

The Institute for Canadian Citizenship (ICC) is a national, non-profit charity that helps accelerate new citizens' integration into Canadian life through original programs, collaborations and unique volunteer opportunities. While our focus is on encouraging new citizens to take their rightful places in Canada, we want all citizens – new or not – to embrace active citizenship in their daily lives. The ICC is founded and co-chaired by the Rt. Hon. Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul. To learn more about the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, visit www.icc-icc.ca. You can also follow us on Twitter, @ICCICC.

WHAT IS ICC INSIGHTS?

Launched in 2012, ICC Insights explores the experiences of new Canadian citizens to bring their voices to the Canadian mainstream, reframing the national conversation on inclusion, identity and citizenship. Our research is uniquely focused and stands alone in its mission to develop a comprehensive understanding of newcomers' experiences as Canadian citizens beyond immigration and settlement. ICC Insights works with new citizens who are engaged, active and excited to share their stories. This study is our second in a series of conversations with new citizens that we want to bring to light.