



The Maytree Foundation

Maytree Policy in Focus

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Extend the right to vote to non-citizen residents in Canada's diverse cities

- Canada's future depends on the success of its cities. Many of today's city residents are immigrants, and most immigrants are visible minorities.
- But many residents aren't eligible to vote in local elections, because they aren't Canadian citizens yet.
- Issues that are important to recent immigrants and visible minorities may be overlooked because they can't participate in local elections.
- Cities should be empowered, through changes to the relevant provincial act, to extend the right to vote to all residents. This would:
 - signal belonging and participation for newcomers;
 - enhance accountability of municipal leaders because they would represent all the people they serve;
 - encourage the political participation of newcomers early in the settlement process;
 - put issues that are important to newcomers and visible minorities on the political agenda at the municipal level;
 - invigorate and enhance a notion of city citizenship; and
 - strengthen the voice of cities at the provincial and national level because once citizens, newcomers might be more likely to vote in these elections.

Featured Research

SUMMARY

Municipal Franchise and Social Inclusion in Toronto: Policy and Practice

by Myer Siemiatycki
(October 2006)

- Neighbourhoods in Toronto with high numbers of immigrants are much less likely than other neighbourhoods to vote in both municipal and provincial elections.
- In addition to those citizens who choose not to vote, there are about 263,000 residents who live in Toronto but aren't eligible to vote because they are not yet citizens.
- The voices of newcomers and minorities and therefore the voice of Toronto – are muted in the critical realm of government decision-making
- Siemiatycki recommends extending the right to vote to all residents, regardless of citizenship and lowering the voting age to 16. (The topic of this *Maytree Policy in Focus* is extending voting rights to non-citizen residents.)
- Siemiatycki recommends a series of actions to promote voting.

Some newcomers are denied the right to vote in local elections

This *Maytree Policy in Focus* explores one way that local governments can engage city residents – particularly in larger cities that are the cornerstone of Canada’s economic future. It recommends extending voting rights to non-citizen residents at the local level.

Local governments are important because:

- More than 80% of the country’s population live in cities. Nearly half of the country’s population 13.9 million people are living in the regions of Montreal, Vancouver and the Golden Horseshoe in southern Ontario.¹
- Cities are engines of economic growth. In 2005, ten major cities were responsible for 51% of Canada’s GDP.² Canada’s major cities “produce, attract and retain knowledge workers – the people whose ideas and imaginations fuel creative economies.”³
- City services like garbage collection, public transit, and policing have the greatest impact on the everyday lives of citizens.

Municipal elections determine who will lead the city’s government as well as other local institutions, such as the school board, which are close to the everyday lives of Canadians. Despite the importance of cities, interest in local politics as measured by voter turnout is low. According to one analysis⁴ of selected communities from across the country, only 31.7% voted at the municipal level in elections held between 2000 and 2002. In those same communities, 58% voted in federal elections.

The right to vote is a core concept in a democratic society... non-citizens who live in the city can’t vote, even in cities where non-resident property owners can vote.

Who is living in Canada’s cities?

Today’s cities – particularly Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver have significant numbers of both foreign-born residents and visible minorities. In 2001 there were 1.8 million people living in Canada who had immigrated to the country in the previous ten years, 73% were living in Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal, and an additional 21% were living in other census metropolitan areas.⁵ Three-quarters (73%) of immigrants to Canada belonged to a visible minority group.

Who can participate in municipal government?

While participation in the community can take many forms, the right to vote is a core concept in democratic societies. It represents who is included and excluded in society.

Eligibility to vote in municipal elections is determined by provincial election legislation and varies somewhat from province to province. In all provinces, in order to vote in municipal elections, an individual must be at least 18 years old and must be a Canadian citizen. Residency is a requirement to vote in most provinces, but the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan allow non-residents to vote if they are property owners.

Who is living in Canada's cities but can't vote in municipal elections?

There are many people living in Canadian cities who are not eligible to vote in local elections, despite the fact that they live, work, send their children to school and pay taxes in their communities.

There are about 550,000 permanent residents, over the age of 18, who arrived in Canada within the last three years.⁶ As a result of the three-year residency requirement for Canadian citizenship, these newcomers are ineligible to vote in local elections. In addition, there are also likely hundreds of thousands of residents who are eligible to become citizens but have not yet done so.⁷ The majority live in urban areas – especially, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

Non-citizen residents can't vote even in provinces that allow non-resident property owners to vote. Provinces can extend the right to vote in local elections to non-citizen residents. Many countries including Belize, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, The Netherlands, Sweden, and Venezuela have extended the right to vote at the local level to non-citizen residents.

¹ Statistics Canada, Portrait of the Canadian Population in 2006, 2006 Census. (Ottawa: Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 97-550-XIE, 2007).

² The Conference Board of Canada, Mission Possible: Successful Canadian Cities. (Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2007), 5.

³ The Conference Board of Canada, Mission Possible, 2.

⁴ These numbers are presented by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in Quality of Life in Canadian Communities: Dynamic Societies and Social Change. Theme Report 2. Annex 8a.

It presents the voter turnout of Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, Winnipeg, Windsor, London, Sudbury, Waterloo, Hamilton, Halton, Peel, York, Toronto, Niagara, Kingston, Ottawa, CMQ, and Halifax.

⁵ Statistics Canada, Canada's Ethnocultural Portrait: The Changing Mosaic, Analysis Series, 2001 Census (Ottawa: Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 96F0030XIE2001008, January 21, 2003).

⁶ According to CIC Facts and Figures 2006 there were 549,338 people who arrived in 2004, 2005, and 2006 who were over 18 years old.

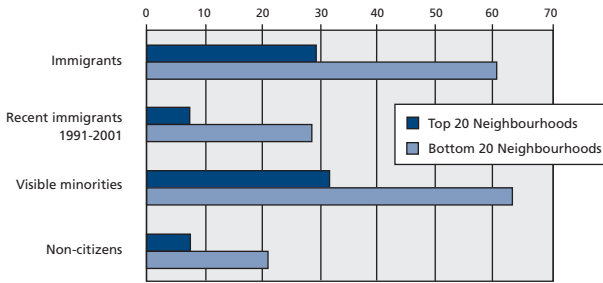
⁷ In 2001, about 16% of eligible immigrants living in Canada had not become citizens. For more information on citizenship acquisition, see: Kelly Tran, Stan Kustec and Tina Chui, "Becoming Canadian: Intent, process and outcome," Canadian Social Trends no. 76, (Spring 2005).

MUNICIPAL FRANCHISE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN TORONTO POLICY AND PRACTICE

Available at: www.inclusivecities.ca

According to an October 2006 report by Myer Siemiatycki, neighbourhoods in Toronto with high numbers of immigrants have much lower voter turnout rates than other neighbourhoods in both municipal and provincial elections. The relationship between low voter turnout and the number of immigrants in the 2003 municipal and provincial elections was so strong it beat out other factors that influence voter turnout like income, home ownership and education.

Percent of Residents in Top 20 and Bottom 20 Voter Turnout Neighbourhoods



In addition to those citizens who choose not to vote, there are about 263,000 residents who live in Toronto but aren't eligible to vote. Almost half are immigrants to Toronto who are not yet eligible because of a three-year residency requirement to become a Canadian citizen.

The combination of low voter turnouts and ineligibility, leads to a situation where “the voice of newcomers and minorities and therefore the voice of Toronto – is muted in the critical realm of [government] decision-making.”⁸

Siemiatycki says that the city may be able to interpret the City of Toronto Act – which enables the city to “provide any service or thing that the City considers necessary or desirable to the public” – to expand the vote to all city residents regardless of citizenship status.

⁸ Myer Siemiatycki, *The Municipal Franchise and Social Inclusion in Toronto: Policy and Practice* (Toronto: Inclusive Cities Canada, 2006), 17.

Municipal voting rights for all city residents

Extending the vote to non-citizens would have several benefits. Siemiatycki says it would:

1. Give voice to thousands of residents and taxpayers.
2. Make local government more accountable to residents who are directly affected by municipal services such as garbage pick up and policing.
3. Promote the integration and attachment of newcomers to Toronto and civic institutions more generally.
4. Promote the importance of issues affecting newcomers such as credential recognition and English-language learning.
5. Promote respect and recognition of immigrants in Toronto.

One of the key objections to allowing non-citizens to vote, is that newcomers should “earn” the right to vote by becoming Canadian citizens and therefore demonstrating loyalty to Canada. Siemiatycki makes several arguments to address this criticism – two of which are highlighted here. First, he argues that the notion of citizenship is fluid, and that concepts of citizenship have changed in the past, and will continue to evolve. Today, the notion of citizenship is changing because of increased migration and globalization. For instance many countries, including Canada, now recognize dual citizenship, and a growing number of countries are allowing non-citizen residents to vote, particularly in local elections. Second, as migrants continue to choose cities as their homes the economic and social success of the world’s cities will depend on their ability to maximize new residents’ global experience, knowledge and networks. Excluding residents – particularly in Canada where most newcomers are highly skilled and educated – will undermine the success of these cities and as Canada continues to urbanize, the prosperity of the country.

Support expanded eligibility with actions that promote voter participation

Siemiatycki suggests a number of actions that would encourage non-citizen residents in Toronto to vote, once they become eligible.

1. The city could develop awareness campaigns to inform residents of their voting rights before elections, and of government processes and institutions between elections.
2. City Council could set concrete targets for improving voter turnout and develop strategies to meet them. One strategy could include financial incentives for neighbourhoods that register an increase in voter turnout, another might include electronic voting methods.
3. Toronto’s diverse communities should organize to identify their priorities and concerns, so that they could have something to “vote for” or to ask their elected officials for.

Non-citizens are already voting in other cities around the world

This *Maytree Policy in Focus* has explored one way that local government can reinvigorate itself to better engage its city residents. By featuring Myer Siemyaticki's research, it suggests that governments should extend the right to vote in local elections to non-citizen residents. This would:

- signal belonging and participation for newcomers;
- enhance accountability of municipal leaders because they would represent all of the people they serve;
- encourage the political participation of newcomers early in the settlement process;
- put issues that are important to newcomers and visible minorities on the political agenda at municipal level;
- invigorate and enhance a notion of city citizenship; and,
- strengthen the voice of cities at the provincial and national level because once citizens, newcomers might be more likely to vote in these elections.

By expanding the right to vote, Canada would join many cities around the world that have already granted non-citizen residents local level political rights.

What do other cities do?

Canada lags behind many other countries which extend voting rights to non-citizen city residents. Examples of countries which now grant municipal voting rights to all city residents include Belize, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, The Netherlands, Sweden, and Venezuela.⁹ In Ireland for instance, non-citizens acquire the right to vote in local elections if they are residents at the time the voters list is prepared, which is about nine months before the election. As the Mayor of Dublin has explained, non-citizen residents "like the idea of being asked for their vote. They feel a part of the city, and I think that's important...I suppose they feel they're not being dismissed."¹⁰

Another country goes even further in giving political voice to non-citizen immigrants. New Zealand is unique, as it is the only democracy in the world that allows all non-citizen residents to vote in both local and national elections after only one year of residency.¹¹

⁹ David Earnest, "Noncitizen Voting Rights: A Survey of an Emerging Democratic Norm" (paper delivered at the annual convention of the American

Political Science Association, August 28-31, 2003).

¹⁰ Chris Young, "If you live in Dublin, you can vote there," *The Toronto Star*, April 10, 2005, D10.

¹¹ David Earnest, "Noncitizen Voting Rights," 13.

To consider:

Voting at the municipal level may help to familiarize newcomers with politics more generally. While there is some debate in the literature, data from the Canadian Elections Studies suggests that eventually, immigrants vote at a similar rate to other Canadians in Federal elections. The suggestion is that the longer immigrants are exposed to Canadian politics the more likely they are to vote. Municipal voting could be one way to help newcomers learn about elections faster, particularly if it is part of a broader process of civic engagement.

Selected Annotated Bibliography

Jedwab, Jack. "The "Roots" of Immigrant and Ethnic Voter Participation." *Electoral Insight*, December 2006, www.elections.ca.

Using Statistics Canada data from the Ethnic Diversity Survey, this article explores the voter turnout in federal elections of ethno-cultural and ethnoracial groups to determine whether ethnic attachment influences voter participation. It finds that identifying with an ethnicity does not undercut a newcomers likelihood to vote. Interestingly, the study also finds that visible minorities born in the country are less likely to say they vote than immigrant visible minorities.

White, Susan, Neil Nevitte, Andre Blais, Joanna Everitt, Patrick Fournier, and Elizabeth Gidengil. "Making Up for Lost Time. Immigrant Voter Turnout in Canada." *Electoral Insight*, December 2006, www.elections.ca.

This article uses data from five Canadian Elections Studies to compare the determinants of voter turnout in federal elections of foreign- and native-born Canadians. The study finds that education and income are higher predictors of voter turnout for the Canadian born, than for the foreign-born. The study suggests that the longer immigrants are exposed to Canadian politics the more likely they are to vote.

Earnest, David. "Noncitizen Voting Rights: A Survey of an Emerging Democratic Norm." Paper delivered at the 2003 annual convention of the American Political Science Association, August 28-31, 2003, www.odu.edu/~dearnest/pdfs/earnest_apsa_2003.pdf.

This paper provides an overview of the non-citizen voting rights in 31 democratic countries. It categorizes these rights into discriminatory (those that discriminate based on country of origin) and non-discriminatory practices (those that extend voting rights to all non-citizen residents). It compares the national and international legislative context within which these rights developed.



About Maytree Policy in Focus

Maytree Policy in Focus, a publication of the Maytree Foundation, identifies and shares practical research to help inform policy- and decision-making.

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About The Maytree Foundation

The Maytree Foundation is a private Canadian charitable foundation established in 1982, committed to reducing poverty and inequality in Canada and to building strong civic communities.