



FACILITATING THE ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION OF ETHNOCULTURAL COMMUNITIES AND NEW CITIZENS:

The Role of Electoral Management Bodies

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Outline of Presentation

- The need for facilitating the electoral participation of ethnocultural communities
- Mandate and limitations of Electoral Management Bodies [EMBs]
- Five-pronged outreach framework for EMBs based on Elections Canada's experience
- Political representation
- A case study of the Canadian experience

The Electoral Participation of Immigrants and Ethnocultural Minorities

- Variations exist in voter registration and turnout among foreign-born and native-born electors in western democracies
- Most studies show that naturalized citizens generally vote at lower rates than native born
- Generally speaking, eligible voters from non-European cultural groups are less likely to vote than members of the majority cultural group

The Electoral Participation of Immigrants and Ethnocultural Minorities, cont'd

- Two schools of thought:
 1. **Assimilation:** as immigrants spend more time in a new setting, their political behaviour converges with that of the majority group
 2. **Community mobilization:** ethnic networks and political orientation cause variations in voter turnout between immigrants and native-born electors regardless of length of residence in host country
- There is increasing evidence that does not support the assimilationist perspective, especially in Canada

Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs): Mandate and Limitations

- The mandate and role of EMBs vary - their range of action is largely operational and administrative with components of education and information
- Two EMB tasks that have important implications for targeted outreach: voter registration and voter education
- Limitations: EMBs administer rather than make the legislation that is in place and they must have the necessary resources to carry out outreach activities
- EMBs are only part of the picture - voter engagement is influenced by the electoral system and the broader political environment (especially parties and ethnic organisations)

Outreach to Ethnocultural Electors: A Five-Pronged Approach for EMBs

- 1. Research** – sound, broad-based research to guide policy responses and avoid a “one size fits all” approach
- 2. Partnerships** – with ethnocultural civil society organisations to engage electors and achieve “buy-in”
- 3. Communications** – disseminating voter information in various languages in ethnic media to reflect needs and interests of electors
- 4. Operations** – registration, community liaison and polling day services for ethnocultural electors
- 5. Leadership** – EMBs may lead partnerships with actors and stakeholders in the electoral process

Political Representation

- Generally, strategies aimed at improving voter turnout focus more on the role of electors and less on political candidates
- In certain democracies, under-representation of ethnocultural communities in elected bodies has been recognized as a deterrent to their electoral participation
- Various factors influence the level of representation of ethnic minorities in national legislatures
- EMBs can include information and education programs for potential candidates, especially from under-represented groups, as a part of their overall voter engagement strategy

Voter Turnout among Ethnocultural Communities in Canada

- Elector eligibility: Canadian citizen, 18 years of age
- 18.4% (5.5 million) is foreign born, with visible minorities accounting for some 13% (4 million) in 2001
- Visible minorities predicted to increase to 23% by 2017
- An EC-commissioned study shows that while immigrant status is not a barrier to electoral participation, overall, newcomer status is associated with lower rates of turnout
- Among visible minorities (Chinese, South Asian and Black voters), immigrants tend to vote at higher rates than the Canadian-born members of these communities

Elections Canada's Outreach Initiatives for Ethnocultural Communities

- Concerted effort since 1988 – now being expanded and diversified
- “My future, my vote” – targeted advertising theme of 2004 and 2006 federal election
- Messages in 25 languages placed in ethnic media
- 64 ethnocultural community relations officers hired in 2006
- Voter information guide produced in 26 languages
- Special issue of EC publication *Electoral Insight*



Concluding Remarks

- With increasing levels of migration and transnationalism, the electoral participation of immigrants and ethnocultural communities is of paramount importance to their integration as well as to the maintenance of democracy
- EMBs can play an important role by formulating and implementing outreach strategies to engage these groups of electors
- Elections Canada is making outreach to ethnocultural communities and new citizens a priority by expanding and diversifying its existing programs