

Voter Engagement, Electoral Systems, and Diverse Women's Political Representation: A Brief Review

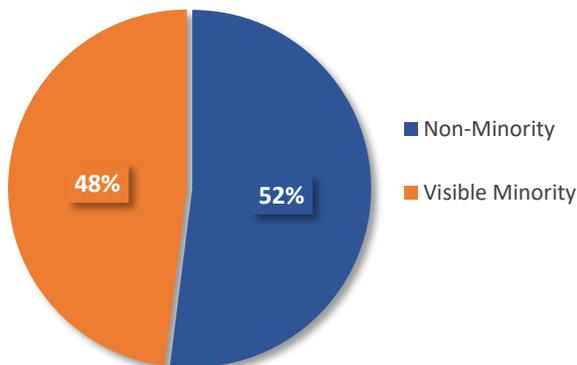
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Prepared by Rebecca Bateman and Negin Khaleghi as part of a project co-sponsored by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, and Women Transforming Cities, and funded by Status of Women Canada

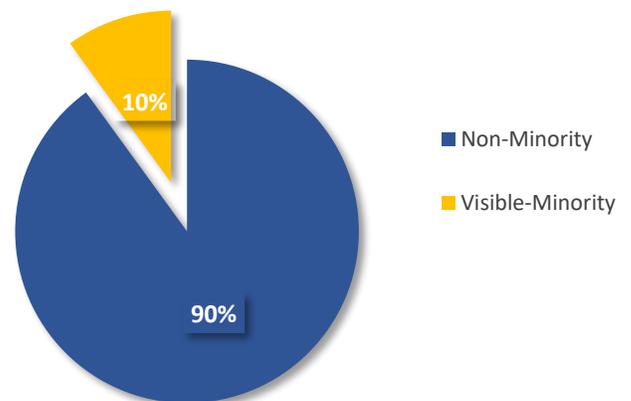
Introduction

The population of the Vancouver census metropolitan area, is roughly 2.5 million people. Census data from [Statistics Canada 2016](#) indicate that around 1.2 million of Vancouverites identify as a visible minority. (This number does not include First Nations, Métis or Inuit persons.) That is 48% of the population who identify as a visible minority. On October 2018, the City of Vancouver elected its “whitest” council since 1986 (Green, 2018). Eight of the thirty-two women running for council (25%), six out of the twenty women running for school board (30%) and two out of the women running for school commissioner (18.2%) won their seats. Of all those elected, only two women, who were elected to school board were non-white.

Vancouver CMA Population by Ethnicity

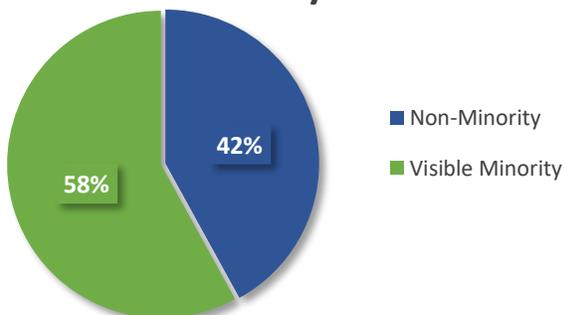


Vancouver City Council 2018 by Ethnicity

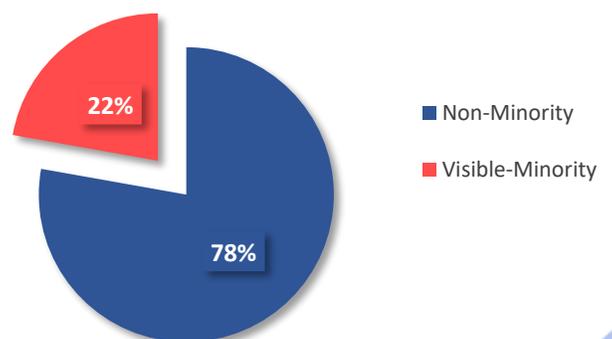


In the City of Surrey, with a population of just over half a million people, where according to [Statistics Canada 2016](#), 58% of people identify as a visible minority, Tom Gill who is a 13-year veteran of city council and of South Asian heritage, lost by about 17,000 votes in the mayoral race against Doug McCallum (Smith, 2018). Of the twenty women who ran for council, only four were elected, all of whom appear to be white. As for the School Trustee election, only one of the 14 women who ran (7.14%) was elected.

Surrey Population by Ethnicity



Surrey City Council 2018 by Ethnicity



In Vancouver, many have attempted to assess the reasons why the council makeup has time and again failed to be representative of the diversity of the City it serves. Some have expressed their concern and dismay on social media. Shortly after the election results were shared with the public, the hashtags #CouncilSoWhite and #VancouverSoWhite were trending on social media.

The online discussions inspired Pete Fry, the only person on the council that has mixed-raced heritage, to take to Twitter to explain the complexity of issues of race, diversity, and privilege. He acknowledged that while he is a “half-Trini immigrant” and has experienced racism, he still benefits from the privileges of being a “CIS-male w/ WASP-sounding name & light skin pass”.

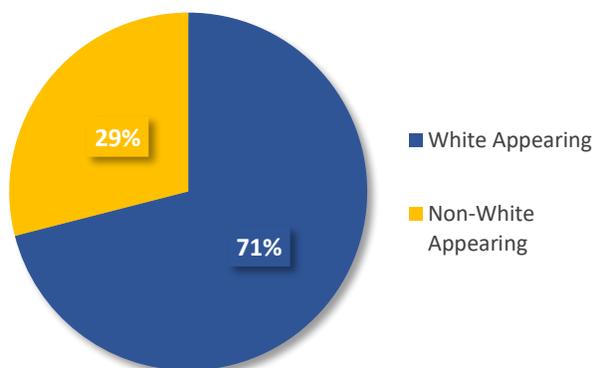
From a broader perspective, most municipalities in Canada are, in fact, governed by councils that are predominantly white. In many cities, those councils are predominantly male, as well. The lack of diverse voices—women, racialized minorities, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ people—means that many groups are excluded from the decision-making process at the municipal level. Many residents may feel underrepresented or ignored, and councils may miss out on important perspectives (Tolley, 2019).

Diversity and intersectionality are complex, and reasons such as media exposure, name recognition, implicit bias and racism, low voter turnout, and Vancouver’s at-large voting system have been investigated since the election as contributing factors to the lack of diversity among the electeds. The issue of lack of diversity is not reflective of a lack of participation of people from diverse backgrounds as candidates. As Tolley (2019) has pointed out for the 2018 municipal election in Mississauga, the issue isn’t that racialized candidates aren’t running: The issue is that voters are not choosing them (p. 3).

A brief look at the individuals running for elected office this election (2018), reveals that people from diverse backgrounds did run, but few were elected.

For the graphs below, we used photos and bios from the Vancouver and Surrey voters’ guides, among other sources (e.g., online searches to determine pronoun use, if candidates spoke about their heritage), to determine the ethnic/racial backgrounds of individuals. We realize the shortcomings of this approach and the potential for errors, but are confident that the graphs are helpful in demonstrating the gap between diversity in candidates and diversity in elected bodies.

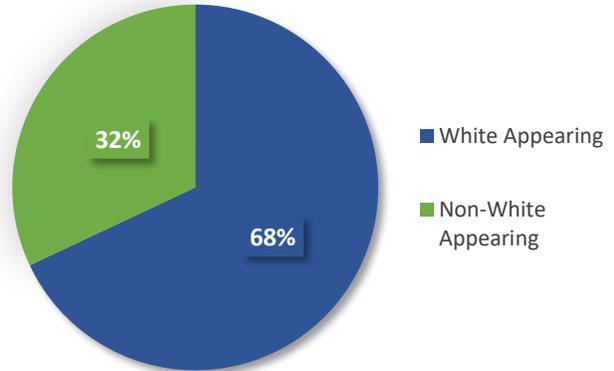
Vancouver Mayoral Candidates



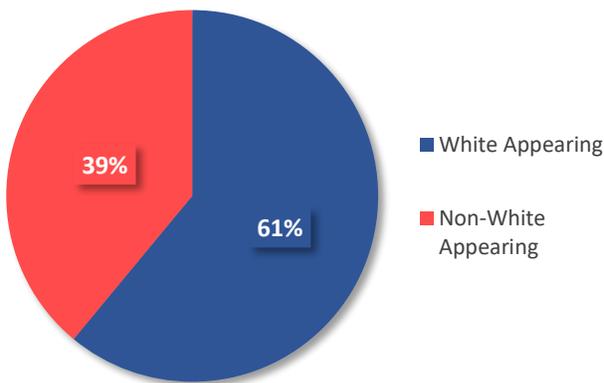
Of the 21 mayoral candidates in 2018, 6 were non-white appearing, 2 of whom were women.

Of the 71 candidates for city council, 23 were non-white appearing, but only one male candidate of colour was elected.

Vancouver Councillor Candidates



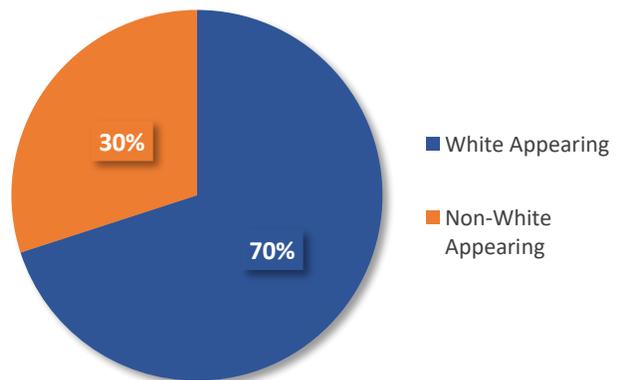
Vancouver School Board Trustee Candidates



Of the 33 candidates for school board, 13 were non-white appearing, 3 were elected, 2 of whom were women of colour.

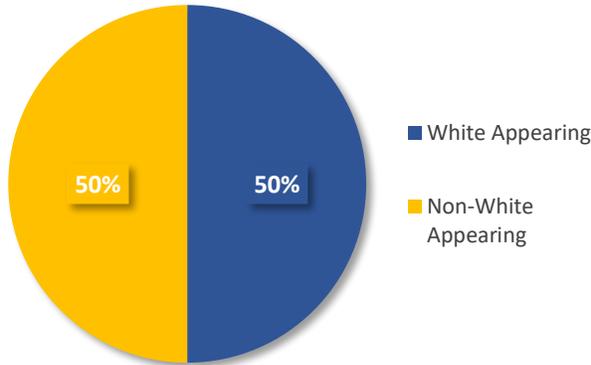
Of the 33 candidates for park commissioner, 10 were non-white appearing, none of whom were elected.

Vancouver Park Commissioner Candidates



The City of Surrey, with a population of 58% identifying as a visible minority and candidates running from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, still failed to elect candidates who are representative of the community they serve:

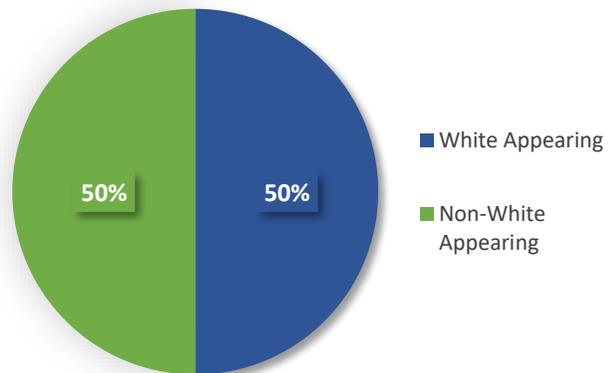
Surrey Mayoral Candidates



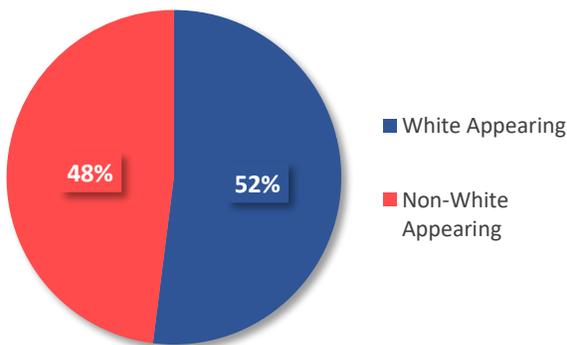
Of the 8 mayoral candidates in 2018, 4 were non-white appearing of which one was a woman.

Of the 48 candidates running for city council, 24 were non-white appearing, 12 of whom were women. Four white-appearing women were elected. Only 2 people of colour were elected, both South Asian men.

Surrey Councillor Candidates



Surrey School Board Trustee Candidates



Of the 27 candidates running for the office of school trustee, 13 were non-white appearing, 8 of whom were women. Two white women were re-elected. One South Asian man was re-elected. The School Board is now made up of five men and two women.

Challenges

The issue of lack of diversity among elected officials and ways to mitigate it, is complex and there is no one solution that fits all. In addition, most research done in Canada and the US on voter turnout, voter engagement, and political representation, lacks a gendered intersectional lens (Trounstine and Valdini, 2008). While research has looked at gender and visible minority status and representation, very few academics have delved into the intersections of race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, and others. Where the authors of those studies have made recommendations for the cities or parties, the issue of lack of diversity is addressed as a separate factor from gender or other intersecting identities.

1. Electoral participation: who votes, and why?

Research on voting patterns indicates that the slightest variations in the circumstances of an election, be it high-profile races, publicized and high-impact issues such as taxes or housing, or a wide array of other factors, can lead to either higher or lower voter turnout. As Siemiatycki and Marshal (2014) concede, there is nothing inevitable or pre-determined about who votes in municipal elections.

Based on the evidence we reviewed, voting patterns seem to shift depending on the year, the robustness of the outreach and engagement strategies of individual candidates and parties, and the province where the study has been conducted (Anderson and Stephenson, 2010). While in various other municipalities in Canada factors such as income, ethnic background, and home ownership do not seem to have a direct correlation to voting patterns of the population, in Vancouver, these factors have a strong relationship to voter turnout (Anderson and Stephenson, 2010). Some of the other factors that initially impact voter turnout and political engagement in Vancouver are high profile mayoral races, competitive councillor elections, and robust grass-roots campaigning by candidates and parties (Siemiatycki and Marshal, 2014).

Further research on Vancouver voter patterns conducted by Elections BC (2010) found that Vancouver neighbourhoods that were most likely to vote had:

- higher median income,
- larger proportions of older individuals, and
- a greater proportion of university educated citizens.

Vancouver neighbourhoods with lower turnout rates had:

- higher proportions of individuals moving into the neighbourhood from other parts of B.C. or Canada,
- greater proportions of recent immigrants to Canada,
- a higher unemployment rate, and
- a larger fraction of the population not in the workforce and with children at home

The results of a 2018 post-election survey of 2,038 people conducted by Insights West as part of the City of Vancouver's *Municipal Election Review* reinforce these observations: In sum, voters in the 2018 civic election were much more likely than non-voters to be:

- Caucasian
- Older (55+)
- Male (50% compared to 45% for women)
- Homeowners
- Holders of post-secondary degrees
- Employed full-time, self-employed, or retired

The survey found that visible minority groups and Indigenous people were significantly less likely to vote.

These results suggest strongly that representation on city council was significantly affected by who voted in 2018, and they become very significant when examining some of the research into why certain groups tend to vote more than others, and why certain types of candidates tend to be elected as a result.

Voter engagement and outreach

A number of studies demonstrate a positive correlation between voter engagement and public outreach and the number of immigrants and minorities voting. It appears that although being an immigrant, refugee, or visible minority on its own is not a barrier to voting, factors such as knowledge about the candidates and the political system, previous engagement in the political system of the country of birth, and trust in the system to represent them, are increasingly important factors for minority voters. Familiarizing yourself with the political system and feeling like your voice is valued takes time and without an engagement or outreach program specifically tailored for migrants, this period of familiarization can be prolonged. The very low number of elected visible minority members in city councils may also be impede visible minority participation. A more diverse political leadership in the city could prompt deeper engagement from diverse communities (Siemiatycki and Marshal, 2014).

- **Indigenous representation and outreach**

Across Metro Vancouver, the Indigenous population topped 61,455, according to 2016 census data, and the City of Surrey saw the biggest increase in its Indigenous population, which grew 77 per cent between 2006 and 2016 to 13,460 (*Vancouver Sun*, October 25, 2017). Yet, in the 2018 civic elections, Vancouver had only three Indigenous candidates (two of whom were women, and none was elected), while Surrey had no Indigenous candidates.

The participation of Indigenous people in civic elections has been the subject of research in two cities, Winnipeg and Thunder Bay, both of which have large urban Indigenous populations (Silver, Keeper, and MacKenzie, 2005; Ontario Native Women's Association and Leadership Thunder Bay, 2011). In both cities, Indigenous leaders and organizations worked with policy makers, academics, and community activists to identify challenges and obstacles to the participation of Indigenous voters in local elections, and to develop strategies to address those challenges.

The studies found that many Indigenous people feel socially excluded in urban centres, they feel alienated and marginalized from mainstream non-Indigenous institutions, and because of their history of colonization, many are reluctant to become involved. But respondents also told researchers that if

urban Indigenous people were to be approached by politicians and political parties, and treated with respect as equals, they would be more likely to become involved.

In both Winnipeg and Thunder Bay Indigenous residents interviewed indicated that they would be much more likely to vote if:

- Political parties and candidates came to their neighbourhoods and organizations to talk to them about the candidates' policies, especially with relevance to Indigenous concerns
- All-candidates forums were held in neighbourhoods with significant Indigenous populations, and in venues (e.g., Friendship Centres) where local residents felt comfortable and could interact personally with the candidates
- There were more (or any) Indigenous candidates on the ballot
- Voter education and outreach programs were instituted that are culturally appropriate for Indigenous residents and incorporating Indigenous art, storytelling, and other approaches
- Voter engagement initiatives were especially directed toward young Indigenous people
- Information on municipal services, politics, and the functions of City Administration and City Council members were integrated into the curriculum of all levels of education
- Student clubs were encouraged to organize awareness, education, and marketing campaigns around municipal elections and community issues of the day with City involvement
- Information and encouragement were provided on the process for becoming a candidate for City elected positions, and how to run a campaign.

As part of its 2018 pre-election outreach strategy, the City of Vancouver undertook outreach specifically with Indigenous residents. Two Indigenous organizations received funding to conduct outreach to Indigenous peoples living in Vancouver using Indigenous outreach workers (*Municipal Election Review*, 2018).

2. Political representation: who gets elected, and why?

Incumbency

Incumbents enjoy a 9.4-11.2% increased probability of winning over non-incumbents in Canadian Parliament (Kendall and Rekkas, 2012). Since women and minorities are less likely to be incumbents, given their historic and continued underrepresentation on elected bodies, they are thought to be especially disadvantaged by incumbency voting, where voters tend to vote for the person who is already holding an elected official position (Tremblay and Mevellec, 2013). In short, incumbents tend to block the path to elected office by newcomers (Tolley, 2019).

Because the vast majority of councillors are non-minorities (in Toronto as well as Vancouver), in a system where incumbency is so powerful, minority representation and by extension, diverse women's representation becomes an increasingly difficult task (Mcgregor et al, 2017).

Incumbency voting could be challenged with a voting system of proportional representation (discussed further below) since multi-seat constituencies make it more difficult for individuals to claim credit for successful strategies which tends to further reinforce the impression of competency and experience.

Proportional representation systems may also dilute media attention which in turn reduces the advantage of name recognition for incumbents. Incumbents in proportional systems may also face more competition since proportional elections tend to involve multiple parties and individuals rather than one opponent (Redmond and Regan, 2015).

Another possible remedy to the issue of incumbency could be to limit the number of terms that mayors and councillors could serve, though term limits are both practically unheard of and extremely controversial in Canada (Tolley, 2019).

Affinity Voting

The affinity voting theory assumes that voters show preferences for candidates on the basis of shared gender, racial, or other highly visible sociodemographic characteristics, and that this voting strategy will be more prevalent where other information about candidates is scarce (which is typical in municipal-level elections).

Racial affinity voting is characteristic of both minority and non-minority groups—white voters tend to be drawn to white candidates, and minority voters are drawn to minority candidates. However, as mentioned previously, since voter turnout rates are higher among whites than Indigenous people and visible minorities, such a pattern works to systematically disadvantage non-white candidates. As the “glass ceiling” is broken and more women run for office, the presence of diverse women in a race could encourage more minority voter participation (Mcgregor, 2017).

But as with many aspects of research on this topic, there is also research that demonstrates that racial bloc group voting—a type of affinity voting—does not apply to women of colour particularly when men of colour are also running (Trounstine and Valdini, 2008). In these studies, gender stereotypes can play a strong role in determining whether or not a voter will choose a woman candidate over a man from their ethnic or racial community. Comments from women candidates/electeds in Surrey illustrate this mechanism:

For one South Asian woman, systemic sexism concentrates money and power in the hands of men in her community and this can affect the way women vote as well. She recalled running into an “Indian gentleman” after the 2014 election (for school trustee) who told her he did not vote for her:

“...he said, we didn’t vote for you. An educated gentleman...he said we wanted one person of our own and we got him in. And that was a guy who has no experience, knows nothing about education.”

She also indicated that this sexism was the reason she didn’t receive support from her community during either of her campaigns (2011 and 2014). Even her female friends, she recalled, would ask why she bothered to run “because we know there is no support.”

Another former candidate, also from the South Asian community, similarly pointed to the challenge of being a strong woman in a cultural community that expects men to hold more power than women:

“In other communities I don’t see [many barriers] for women, but in the East Indian community I see it big time...men don’t want to see East Indian women to be overriding them.”

At the federal level, she recalled being asked to withdraw her nomination for the Liberal Party. After being told that the party favoured running a “white man” because he was “more Canadian,” the riding ultimately selected a South Asian man. She theorized that since there are few South Asian MPs in the Lower Mainland, her potential success in a prestigious position would have upset the traditional hierarchy in her culture.

3. Political representation and electoral systems

We should say at the outset that there is not a clear or definitive understanding of what electoral systems positively or negatively affect the representation of women and racial and ethnic minorities in local government. Existing scholarship has not been able to determine exactly how systems/institutions and representation are connected largely because researchers have paid insufficient attention to the mechanisms through which district (ward) or at-large systems influence electoral outcomes (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, Trounstein, and Vue, 2015). Having said that, there is some more recent research that has looked at those mechanisms in specific contexts, and we will be using those studies to inform the discussion below.

At-Large versus ward systems

Both Surrey and Vancouver lack a single-member district (or ward) system and instead utilize an at-large electoral system. Whether or not a ward system would help increase the representivity of elected bodies in each city is the subject of on-going debate (e.g., Green, 2018). Successful Vancouver mayoral candidate Kennedy Stewart has spoken out against the current at-large system, and pledged to advocate for the change to a ward system during his term as mayor as a way of increasing the likelihood that candidates from underrepresented communities would be elected (Smith, 2018.)

But would the change to a ward system increase the election of racialized and Indigenous *women* to elected office?

Trounstein and Valdini (2008) point to the assumption underlying most research that the effect of electoral systems on the election of people of colour is constant across gender. However, by looking at the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender, they found some evidence for the contention that the effect of electoral institutions is significantly different for men versus women of colour, and they caution against blanket declarations of the benefit or detriment of institutional settings, especially since race/ethnicity and gender tend to interact to produce different outcomes.

Other research has demonstrated a positive relationship between district/ward systems and the election of women generally, in part because districted seats require fewer campaign resources (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine, 2015). Research also indicates that both women and racial/ethnic minorities are disadvantaged in elections that feature more than two candidates, i.e., at-large systems, mainly because voters faced with many candidates to choose from (and remember that in the 2018 Vancouver election, voters had to choose ten councillors from among 71 candidates) tend to be more likely to fall back on stereotypical characterizations of candidates based on gender and race/ethnicity. More deliberate (rather than intuitive) thinking underlies decisions when only a few candidates for a single position appear on the ballot, as in district/ward systems resulting in a higher probability of electing female and minority candidates (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, Trounstine, and Vue, 2015).

Certainly, women candidates/electeds interviewed for our project expressed their preference for a ward system, especially women in Surrey which is more than three times the size of Vancouver in area. They pointed to the time and financial resources required to cover an area that size in the relatively short campaign period—resources that were already in short supply for many women candidates—and it is likely that the problem of raising adequate financial resources to run an effective campaign through fundraising becomes more extreme as cities increase in population and physical size (Jessica Trounstine, personal communication, May 4, 2019). The women candidates also felt strongly that particular communities within Surrey believed that their voices were not being represented at city council.

Proportional representation

In a large study, Lijphart (2012) compared 36 democracies over 29 years, and found that countries using proportional systems elected women to parliament 8% more often than majoritarian or First-Past-the-Post systems (FPTP). (See also Anderson, 2018.)

While proportional representation has been associated with election of more women, the same cannot be said about election of *diverse* women. The obstacles to fair political representation for women and ethnic minorities are not the same, nor are the conditions and strategies for enhancing the representation of different groups.

In much of the research explored for the purpose of this review, there is a missing link of examining the intersection between women and ethnic minority representation. Immigrants tend to have the lowest participation rate in municipal elections of all population groups. We need to know more about the reasons behind this and whether or not outreach and voter engagement efforts directed toward immigrant communities are effective for both women and men. An intersectional approach to this issue using disaggregated data is required.

Recent, comprehensive studies of representation of women and ethnic minorities in Canadian politics have been done by McGregor (2017) and Bird (2011), but both studies lack an intersectional approach to how women from minority backgrounds have far less access and involvement in the Canadian political process.

Ethnic minorities regardless of their gender, still need to form a substantial enough part of the population to attract attention to compete among traditional political parties or form their own slates. In order to be successful, a group also needs to have a strong collective identity, such that members will

tend to vote as a bloc for candidates that appeal to group identity and interests. The geographic location and concentration of a group are important as well: the likelihood of a traditional party selecting an ethnic candidate is greatest where the party believes that such a candidate can deliver new voter support where the party has historically not performed well (Bird 2011). However, in two forums held in Surrey and Vancouver in 2018 in which diverse women candidates and electeds shared their experiences, panel members stressed that for minority parties or individuals to win an election, they need to garner votes not only from their own ethnic community but also from the rest of the population.

Based on the strategies provided for women and ethnic groups separately, one can hypothesize that with the increased number of women of colour running for office, there is a higher likelihood that their visibility will aid groups of the same ethnic backgrounds to invoke their baseline preference and vote for the said women as affinity voting postulates (but see the caveats discussed above about whether or not gender stereotypes may hold sway). It also means that once they are elected, the incumbency factor will theoretically aid more women from diverse backgrounds to remain in office and inspire other women to run for political office as well.

4. What can cities do to help create greater representivity in local government?

A. Voter engagement/outreach

Vancouver-specific (adapted from Hendren 2018):

- Conduct focus groups with City of Vancouver advisory committees and survey local community organizations ahead of the election to improve engagement and collect recommendations for reducing barriers to voting.
- Hire a team of culturally diverse and multilingual outreach staff to attend community events to register voters; educate residents on the roles and responsibilities of the City of Vancouver and elected officials; promote the City's Plan Your Vote tool; and distribute information on how to vote.
- Work with community organizations to increase election awareness, voter registration, and the distribution of informational materials.
- Conduct targeted outreach to populations with low voter turnout, including young adults (18-34); Indigenous peoples; new citizens; people who do not speak English; people who have low incomes or are homeless; persons with disabilities; renters; and people who are socially isolated.
- Consider paid partnerships with organizations that have experience engaging people in low voting demographics like Civix, Check Your Head, and Samara.
- Pilot service agreements with community organizations to run peer-based outreach programs targeted to communities that are harder to reach through traditional outreach channels due to trust issues, as well as cultural and language barriers.
- Increase outreach in neighbourhoods that had the lowest rates of voter turnout in the 2014 election: Downtown, Renfrew-Collingwood, Victoria-Fraserview, Marpole, Oakridge, and Strathcona.

- Provide accessible and timely election information and services to citizens;
- Increase overall voter turnout by improving engagement with low-voting communities and demographics;
- Reduce barriers for voters with disabilities; and
- Be strategic, data driven, and innovative

For cities, more generally:

- Conduct public education campaigns related to municipal government especially in the months prior to civic elections, delivered across the city in a host of municipal institutions including libraries, schools, and transit hubs, and through outreach in other venues at which people gather, such as community celebrations (e.g., cultural and religious festivals), public parks, and venues at which women gather (e.g., mother's centres).
- Provide city-wide voting information and election promotion advertising prior to elections
- Promote voting among immigrant and racialized communities through such measures as community-based civics education, and multi-lingual election advertising encouraging newcomer citizens to vote.
- Devote outreach resources to non-European ethno-racial groups that vote at lower rates than members of European communities. These can include African-Canadians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Haitians, and Lebanese.
- Develop outreach initiatives appropriate for Indigenous residents in conjunction with Indigenous organizations.
- Use post-election survey methods to gather data on demographic characteristics of voters versus non-voters, and collect these data after each civic election to enable bench-marking of data across elections.

B. Electoral system changes

- Research the establishment of a proportional representation system at the municipal level.
- Explore the establishment of a ward-based political system. Research supports the contention that a ward system could result in the election of more women and visible minorities, and some studies suggest that a districted system would also increase the election opportunities for diverse women.

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