

A POLICY AND PRACTICE PAPER

The Municipal Franchise and Social Inclusion in Toronto: Policy and Practice

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Disclaimer

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Overview

Thirty years ago, the Royal Commission on Metropolitan Toronto - the most comprehensive public study of how Toronto is governed – declared in its final report: “An effective electoral system is vital to democratic government...Voting is, and should remain, the most direct and universal form of citizen participation in the governmental process”. In 2005, an ambitious study of social inclusion in contemporary Toronto concluded that extending the municipal franchise (right to vote) was essential to advancing democracy and belonging in the City. In particular, the Report of the Toronto Civic Panel of the Inclusive Cities Canada Initiative contended that in order to overcome widespread marginalization from the City’s political processes, the civic voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16, and non-Canadian permanent residents should also have the right to vote.

Over the past three decades, Toronto has emerged as one of the world’s leading cities of diversity. Our demographics are rich with difference, as this ‘World in a City’ has become home to a multi- racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic population. But diversity has also taken the form of increasingly polarized lived circumstances among Torontonians. In recent years the concept of social inclusion has been widely adopted as an analytical lens and policy instrument to address disparities of opportunity and well-being in society.

This paper explores the link between broadened municipal voting rights and enriched experiences of civic engagement and social inclusion. It contends, perhaps contentiously, that there is no automatic carry-over from expanded voting rights to deeper civic democracy. While the case for extending the municipal franchise is strong, there is a need to identify the conditions under which this enlargement of ‘urban citizenship’ could deliver the results its proponents wish would follow. This paper proposes therefore, that a broadened municipal franchise is a necessary – though not sufficient – condition for more equitable political inclusion.

Key Arguments

1. Ever since elected local governments were established in early 19th century Ontario, there have been some urban residents who enjoyed privileged voting rights and others who were denied voting rights. With 200 years of gradual evolution in municipal voting rights behind us, it would be prudent to presume we may not yet have perfected our electoral system.
2. The privileging of property holding through non-resident voting rights should be abolished. The current right of property owners and renters (and their spouses) to vote in a municipality where they do not reside defies democratic norms and exacerbates problems of voter participation in municipal elections.
3. The voting age in Toronto municipal elections should be reduced from 18 to 16, and accompanied with reinvigorated civics education and practice in high schools. This is consistent with several federal and provincial provisions which regard 16 as the age of maturity and responsibility. It is also in keeping with widening campaigns in Britain and the United States to lower the voting age to 16. Based on 2001 census data, this move would add 57,000 sixteen and seventeen year-olds to the Toronto voting list which in 2003 had 1,825,000 eligible electors.
4. Municipal voting rights in Toronto should be extended to non-citizen permanent residents

of the City. This would apply to three distinct sub-sets of Toronto residents currently barred from voting: landed immigrants not yet in the country for 3 years, and hence not eligible for Canadian citizenship; those landed immigrants in Canada over 3 years who have not claimed Canadian citizenship; and non-status residents ineligible for Canadian citizenship. The current total of such persons in Toronto is estimated at 263,000. This is too large a segment of Toronto's population to remain devoid of voice in civic affairs – especially at a time when increasing numbers of countries (26 at present) are extending voting rights to non-citizens. Typically, this has meant giving all non-citizens the right to vote in municipal elections. The most expansive provision of non-citizen voting rights is in New Zealand, where all immigrants (whether N.Z. citizen or not) have municipal and national election voting rights after one year's residency.

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5. In a world of increasing mobility and multiple attachments, the best way to promote immigrant integration and attachment is to create opportunities of engagement. The municipal level is especially well suited for this role, in order to foster a sense of 'urban citizenship' and belonging.
6. The new City of Toronto Act enables Toronto to experiment with more inclusive and participatory modes of governance. Indeed, the language in the Act appears to encourage Toronto to take ownership of its political institutions, and to consider all "inhabitants of its geographic area" as full stakeholders of the City. Significantly, there is no limiting reference to any citizenship or age requirement here. Toronto should therefore tilt towards inclusion by using its newly broadened delegated authority to lower the voting age and enfranchise non-citizen residents.
7. Current patterns of voter turnout clearly indicate that both youths and immigrants who presently do hold the right to vote, have significantly below-average rates of actually voting. Considerable data is presented on immigrant voting in Toronto at both the 2003 municipal and 2003 provincial elections to demonstrate their significant and systemic electoral disengagement. A strong correlation is found between a neighbourhood and constituency's concentration of immigrants, visible minorities, non-English mother tongue residents and low voter turnout.
8. Notable findings related to disparities in voter turnout include:
 - Some Toronto neighbourhoods have more than twice the rate of voter turnout among eligible electors than other neighbourhoods.
 - Of the top 20/140 ranked Toronto neighbourhoods for voter turnout in the 2003 City election, none had above City-average proportion of immigrants or visible minorities.
 - Of the lowest 20/140 ranked Toronto neighbourhoods for voter turnout in the 2003 City election, only 2 had below City-average proportion of immigrants or visible minorities.
 - Low voting neighbourhoods are disproportionately located in the North York, York and Scarborough areas of Toronto.

- Wide variations in municipal voting exist across Toronto's 44 wards.
 - Low voter turnout in Toronto also manifests itself in provincial elections. City of Toronto constituencies cluster among those with the greatest proportion of immigrants in Ontario.
 - In the 2003 Ontario election, only 1 Toronto constituency ranked in the top 30/103 provincial constituencies for voter turnout.
 - In the 2003 Ontario election, 11 Toronto constituencies ranked in the bottom 30/103 provincial constituencies for voter turnout.
9. Extending the franchise to younger Torontonians and non-Canadian Torontonians would remove a barrier to their participation in civic affairs. In itself, however, extending the franchise provides no assurance of its exercise. On the contrary, given the currently low electoral participation rates of youth and immigrant communities, pro-active measures must be taken to foster a culture of participation among these and all other voters in Toronto. The paper proposes a variety of measures to promote voter participation among all 'under-voting' groups, including:
- Active neighbourhood-based campaigns through local libraries and community centres;
 - Tangible neighbourhood incentives to boost voter turn-out. (e.g. The city could commit bonus funds for the 10 neighbourhoods which register the highest voter turn-out each election.);
 - Toronto's diverse communities should organize a "New Voices" assembly charged with establishing a policy platform addressing issues of particular concern to newcomers and racialized minorities in Toronto.
10. Toronto's political leadership and institutions must make a greater commitment to bringing immigrants, visible minorities and youth into the political process. Doing so is good for Toronto. It can overcome marginalization, can allow new experiences and perspectives to shape the political agenda, can maximize Toronto's voice and impact in provincial and federal elections and decision-making, and can serve as a model of inclusive political practices in diverse societies.

The full paper "*The Municipal Franchise and Social Inclusion in Toronto: Policy and Practice*" can be downloaded from <http://www.inclusivecities.ca>