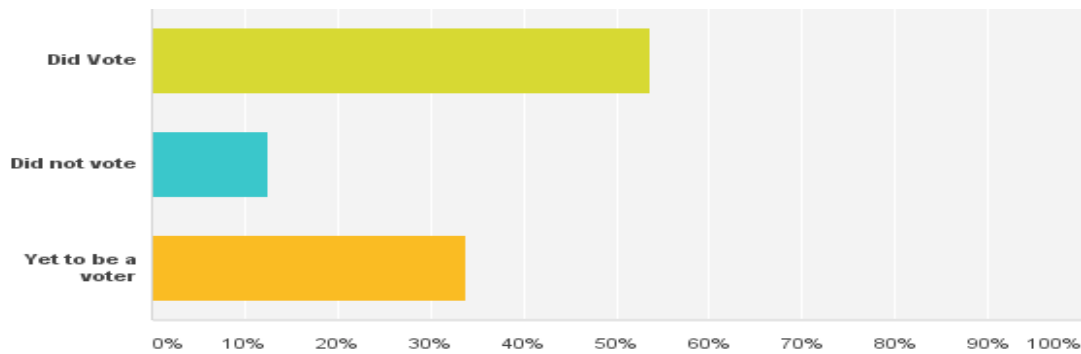


Civic Engagement in Democratic Process: Role of Bangladeshi Communities in the Election Process

The Progressive Action for Community Empowerment (PACE) conducted a rapid survey in the community to understand the status of the civic engagement of Bangladeshi Canadians living in the GTA. The survey was launched prior to Canada’s federal election 2015, in the month of September and October 2015. The survey found that almost 62% Bangladeshi Canadians consider themselves as not at all politically engaged and more than 13% Bangladeshi Canadian citizens did not vote in the last ten years.



Thirteen percent Bangladeshi Canadian did not vote in last ten years.

Background:

Democracy is the only form of government that recognizes and protects the intrinsic values and equalities of individuals, hence could be considered the best form of govt. Canada has systematically accepted immigrants, given them all rights through a process called ‘naturalization’ that is unique and Bangladeshi Community, like others migrant communities, are proud to be part of this unique process. But being proud only does not end their duties and responsibilities towards their country of choice. As a community empowerment organization PACE endeavours to sensitize Bangladeshi Community through various

awareness programmes and workshops under its programme Active Citizens' Thread (ACT). This survey is one approach to know the voter's trend within the specific group. The need to take this specific community based rapid survey generated from the previous targeted studies undertaken by the Election Canada, which showed a trend of lower turnouts in 2008 and 2011 among specific groups, especially the ethno-cultural groups in Federal, Provincial and Municipal elections.ⁱ

Objective of the Survey:

In the above backdrop the main objective of our rapid survey was to know the behaviour pattern of the immigrants coming from south Asian background; especially Bangladeshi Canadians, to sensitize them to engage more into civic participation. The survey was also aimed to know if the community members are aware about their participatory rights as to the formation of the government either at provincial, federal or municipal level. The survey was part of Active Citizens' Thread (ACT), an on-going programme of PACE. The survey (designed in English) result is based on the data collected from the answers to the online questionnaire sent to community members via email, face book and PACE website. It was taken by almost 100 Bangladeshi Canadians living in the GTA.

Education and Motivation:

The survey revealed that among the migrant Bangladeshi population almost 79.55% have Masters or equivalent degrees, 15.91% have graduation level degrees and only 2.27% have mentioned up to high school level education.

Eligibility to Participate:

Unlike the UK Election process, citizens from Commonwealth countries residing in Canada cannot vote in any Canadian electionⁱⁱ unless they become Canadian Citizen first. We wanted to know if the time in becoming a ‘naturalized’ citizen from a permanent resident is too long as that affects a person’s right to participate in any election in Canada and it transpired that for 56.47% it took less than 5 years, for 10.59% it took less than 8 years and a large number, almost 30.59% have not yet become voters.

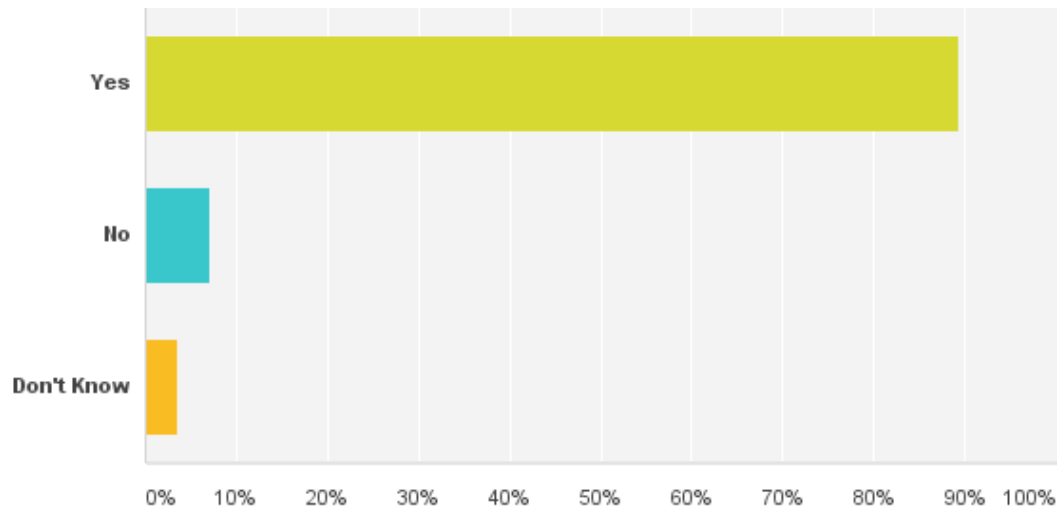
Interest in Politics:

The question about interest in Canadian politics was responded quite well. About 42.35% are moderately interested while 14.12% said that they are extremely interested. 24.71% replied that they were very interested. The level of postgraduate education of Bangladeshi migrants found may have links to such heightened interest in politics.

Policy Influence, contribution to politics and Political Alienation:

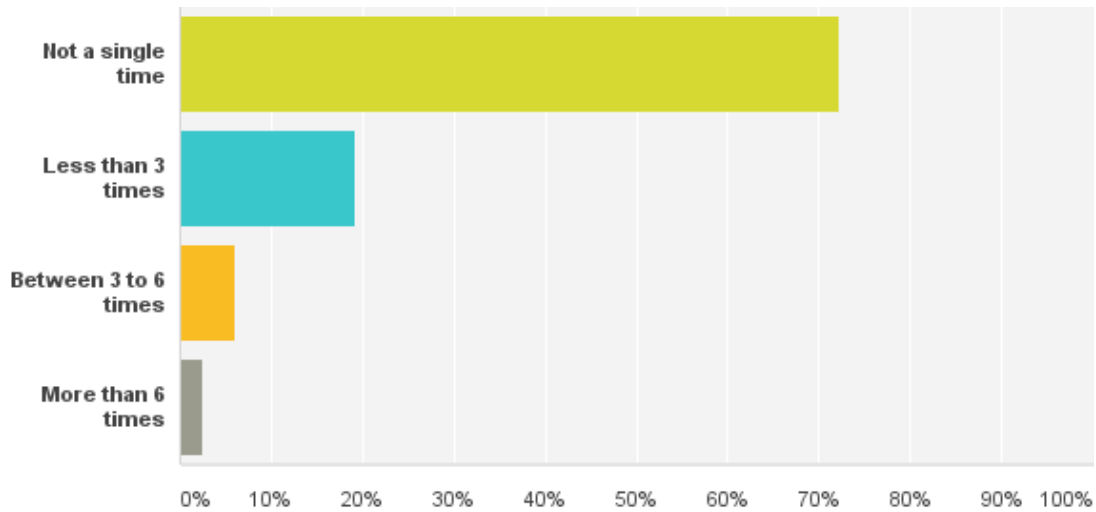
The very notion of democracy is the exercise of the voting rights in a free and fearless environment. Changes in law and policy by any elected government can affect economic, cultural and social life of migrants. 89.29% of the survey respondents think that voting is an effective tool. 92.94% are aware that a particular political party may have policies that can have significant impact on their day-to-day life.

Progressive Action for Community Empowerment

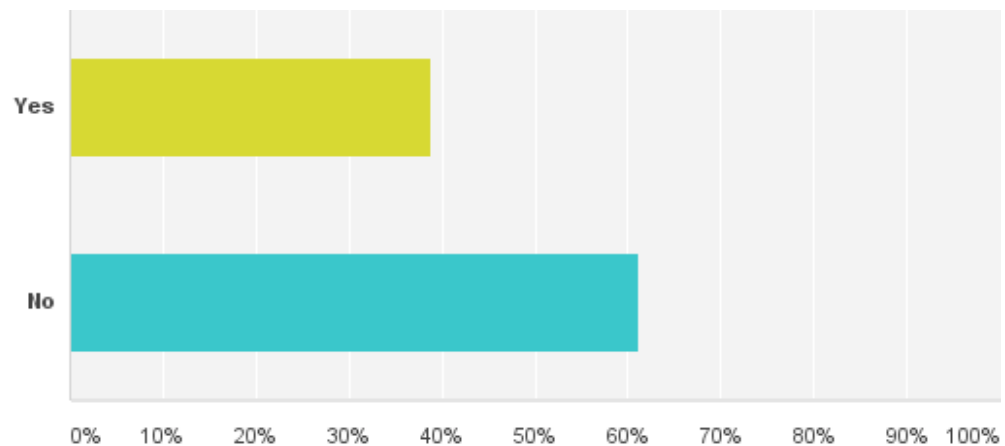


Almost 90% respondents think that voting is an effective tool.

In the past five years 72.29% Bangladeshis have never visited their MP, MPP or local ward councilor regarding any issue and 19.28% have only visited less than three times. On the other hand they are well aware that they can contribute to representative democracy through their votes. Around 75.32% have said that they know they can contribute to policy issues through their votes while 12.99% said that they do not think so and 11.69 % do not know if they can. Almost 62% Bangladeshi Canadians feel that they are not politically engaged. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that 72.29% of them have never visited their public representatives in the past five years. Almost 12.50% Bangladeshi Canadians did not vote in the last election and 53.75% voted while 33.75% are yet to be voters. Lastly, while choosing their representative in any given election Bangladeshi Canadians put the highest priority in the overall agenda of the party. Respondents gave 37, out of 100 points, to the party's overall agenda. They put 29 points to candidate's individual leadership ability and his or her stands on specific issues. However, respondents gave 5 points to the issues related to how others view the candidates.



In the past five years 72% respondents never visited their public representatives.



Almost 62% of respondents do not feel politically engaged

Conclusion:

In the 2015 Federal election we can see a good number of immigrant faces as election candidates but there was almost no candidate from Bangladeshi Canadians.ⁱⁱⁱ Taking this fact into account we find that the survey responses are quite interesting in a way that while almost 90% of them are aware that voting is

an effective tool and 72% feel that they can truly contribute through their voting power, yet almost 62% of respondents do not feel the urge to be politically engaged and 72% have never felt motivated to visit the office of their relevant public representative in the last five years. On top of that there is a good 13%, who did not even vote in the 2011 election. The reasons for such anomaly could be their inertia to be active as citizens, or obsession with partisan politics back home or a lack of motivation and aspiration to bring forward challenging issues, (i.e. economic struggle, linguistic, cultural or social adaptability) to the notice of the mainstream Canadian politics. However, a future larger investigation could enhance our understanding of the issue.

ⁱ Studies commissioned by the Election Canada showed a trend of lower turnout of specific groups in electoral participation, in Federal, Provincial and Municipal elections. According to their studies four target groups – Youth, Aboriginal electors, ethno-cultural communities and electors with special needs – were identified as groups tending to vote less than the mainstream Canadian population and may experience difficultiesⁱ in participating in the electoral process. Various reasons have been identified as applicable to the ethno-cultural communities; such as delays in becoming eligible to vote within the given election period, not interested to take part in democratic process in the migrated country, lower motivation due to less attachment to Canada, social or economic disintegration after coming to Canada, lack of education about Canadian context etc. The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities by Livianna Tossutti
Tossutti http://elections.ca/res/rec/part/paper/ethnocultural/ethnocultural_e.pdf

ⁱⁱ The UK system allows citizens of other qualifying Commonwealth countries and European Union, who are residents in UK to vote in their General Election. These citizens of qualifying commonwealth countries have to register as voters. Bangladeshis who are residing in the UK can actually vote without being a UK citizen.
http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/177884/Who-can-register-to-vote.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ There was only one Bangladesh born candidate from NDP in Calgary.

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