

## Executive summary

# A QUESTION OF LACKING ACCESS OR DIVERSIFYING ACTION?

## RESEARCHING THE CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF NEWCOMER LATIN AMERICANS IN TORONTO

### Introduction

This report, by the Community Engagement Program at the Mennonite New Life Centre, reveals how the Latin American community is marginalized by the mainstream definitions of civic and political engagement which are traditionally bound to the electoral realm, as opposed to engaging with socio-economic realities of residents. We argue that the Latin American community has in fact been engaged politically in the informal political sphere and that analysis of this engagement can offer important insights for generating interest in electoral politics. The findings of the research further illustrate the complexities of the migration experience on the political dispositions of immigrant communities by presenting the Latin American community as a case study. Immigrant communities are found to be stigmatized as politically apathetic to which the response is the delivery of well-meaning access-based programs instead of considering the particularities of the political system they are newly encountering from their perspective.

### Conceptual Categories

This study aimed to define conceptual categories to frame the narratives of politics. Civic and Political Engagement (CPE) may be understood as individual and collective actions designed to identify, understand and address issues of public concern. Within this broader category Formal Political Engagement (FPE) is composed of activities that take place within the structure of the political system while Informal Political Engagement (IPE) involves working directly with others who are not public servants.

### Existing Research

Predominant discourses of CPE in Toronto favour interactions with formal political channels and often concentrate on voter turnouts as the essential criterion. By this measure, the Latin American community in Toronto is insufficiently politically engaged. Existing literature attributes low levels of electoral participation by this community to its low socio-economic position.

### Our Approach

Our starting point, at the Mennonite New Life Centre, for this issue has been an anti-oppression perspective which considers CPE as a means of improving the material conditions of marginalized communities in the city, including the Latin American community. Taking an asset-based approach requires recognizing and valuing experiential, non-institutional sources of knowledge and understanding. This also means disagreeing, at face value, that the Latin American community is politically apathetic.

## Main Findings

Seventy-five participants took part in the study. A large majority of the participants migrated to Canada less than six years ago and their experiences show that not only did they traverse two separate geographical contexts but also different ideological landscapes of political engagement. Their ideas of CPE suggest a simultaneous process of internalization occurring in Canada along with retention from the country of emigration. The notions of CPE emerging from this study offer some insight into the dynamic processes of the consolidation of trans-national narratives of political participation.

### Understandings of Civic and Political

**Engagement:** The preferred forms of CPE were those that help people who have common interests to come together, to raise awareness of the causes of social issues and to address concerns collectively. With over half (53%) of the participants living below the poverty line, it is not surprising that economic concerns influenced notions of CPE. According to participants, the substance of CPE is to promote the realization of an equitable society with universal enjoyment of social and economic human rights. It is important to point out that informal political channels are perceived as more compatible with these criteria of CPE than formal political channels.

**Formal Political Channels:** Attitudes of participants towards Formal Political Channels (FPC) ranged from rigid scepticism to cautious optimism. Many participants expressed a complete lack of desire to engage with FPC, believing that formal political channels in the Canadian context are unlikely to be useful in promoting desirable social change.

But almost half (48%) of the participants insisted that they would participate in the upcoming municipal elections if they had the right to vote.

**School Board and Immigration System:** Within the formal political channels, the school board was considered to be the most accessible of the formal political channels. This was because the public school system provides mechanisms for collective engagement of parents and because children's education is considered an uncontroversial issue by many in the Latin American community. The immigration system by contrast is considered to be disempowering and intimidating as a channel for promoting change.

**Civic Engagement Programs:** A recurring complaint of participants was that civic education programs, which are meant to help community members navigate FPC, are usually not available in Spanish (45% stated this as reason for not going) and frequently neglect to make analytical connections between the socio-economic realities of participants and the political structures responsible for them.

## Recommendations

The city of Toronto can contribute to making CPE more inclusive to newcomers in general, and the Latin American community in particular, by changing certain structures that impact this demographic and by facilitating relevant and meaningful capacity building in these communities. As such:

- The city of Toronto's definition of CE should be broadened to explicitly include a commitment to anti-oppression or social justice principles, and the full realization of universal social and economic human rights;
- The city should recognize the engagement of newcomer parents in the public school system and promote their active participation as a way of increasing their civic and political involvement in the decisions affecting their children's education;
- The city of Toronto should lobby the provincial government to make the necessary legislative amendments to grant municipal voting rights to Permanent Residents;
- The city should support the development and implementation of a Civic Education curriculum in the first language of immigrants which is, in this case, tailored to Spanish-speaking Latin-American audience that is relevant to the socio-economic concerns of this community.