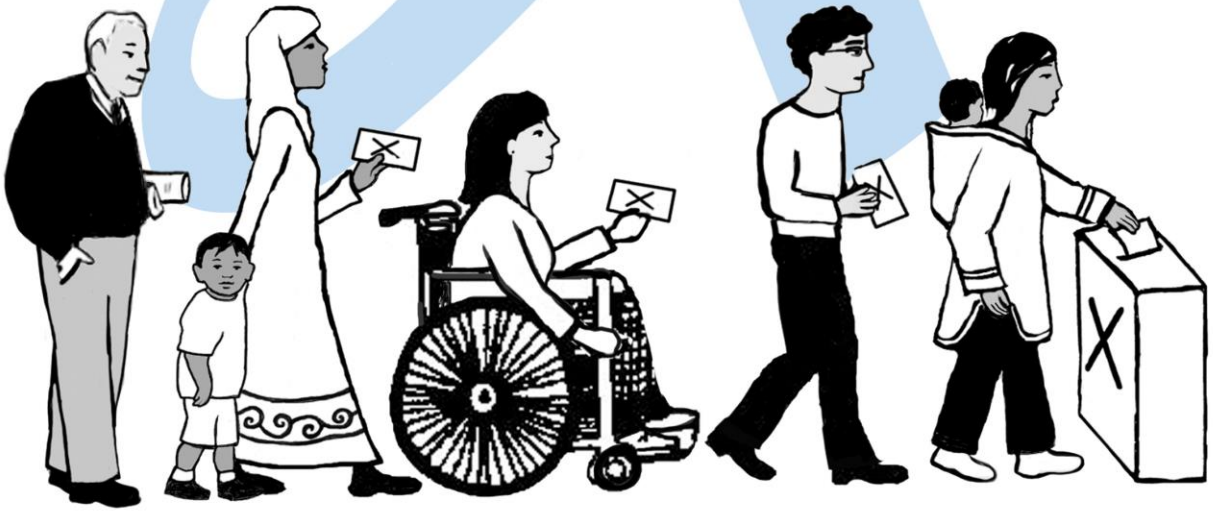
March 2014

Making Votes Count Where We Live

Creating a Culture of Civic Engagement



CELEBRATING 10 Years! CÉLÉBRONS Ans!

CAWI·IVTF

City for All Women Initiative

Initiative: une ville pour toutes les femmes

COALITION OF COMMUNITY HEALTH AND RESOURCE CENTRES OF OTTAWA

COALITION DES CENTRES DE RESSOURCES ET DE SANTÉ COMMUNAUTAIRES D'OTTAWA

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Executive Summary

Voter turnout has been on the decline since the late 1970s. The impact of this trend is especially felt among low-income residents who are less likely to vote than higher income voters. Elected officials are more likely to make decisions in the interest of the people who elect them. This, in turn, contributes to a vicious cycle of disconnectedness and democratic deficit where people experiencing poverty may not see their concerns addressed, and become even less likely to vote.

To turn this trend around in Ottawa, the Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres (CHRC) and City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) have joined together in a three year project to increase voter turnout in low-income neighbourhoods and among people living in poverty, in both urban and rural areas of the city. Making Votes Count Where We Live, funded by Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Catherine Donnelly Foundation, seeks to engage residents, community partners and governments in putting into place strategies to increase voter turnout and long-term civic engagement.

At the community level, this project can contribute to residents and partners in the Community Development Framework reaching their goal of enhancing civic engagement in priority neighbourhoods. At the municipal level, these strategies can help the current Term of Council to work with the community to further fulfill its Term of Council Priority: "*Commit to and develop a democratic, engaging and visible process to maximize input from residents in the work of Council and in policy development, while ensuring that seniors, new Canadians, women and the economically disadvantaged are included.*"

This report is a summary of the participatory action research carried out by women living in low-income neighbourhoods who brought their insights and knowledge to the findings. Research and mentoring teams, comprised of residents and community developers, designed the framework, provided training in community research and supported women in their research. Five teams of women from different parts of Ottawa facilitated 20 focus groups with 202 participants from a diversity of the population. A total of 13 key informant interviews were conducted and a literature review undertaken. Barriers and supports to voting, as well strategies and actions for increasing voter turnout, were identified.

This report is a road map that invites residents, community partners and governments to take action so that Ottawa can benefit from the insights of people living in low-income neighbourhoods and living in poverty, as they actively engage in the electoral process and civic life of our city.

Findings

The majority of participants felt positive about voting. They expressed that voting is a right and a duty, allows them opportunities to have their voices heard and to elect candidates who are accountable to them. Some mentioned that even if they couldn't vote, as they are not yet citizens, they would encourage their family and friends to vote. Some were very proud that by voting, they teach their children the importance of voting. And yet, when asked about barriers to voting for themselves and others living on low-income, they had many barriers to name. See details in full report.

Key Barriers to Voting

(See details in full report)

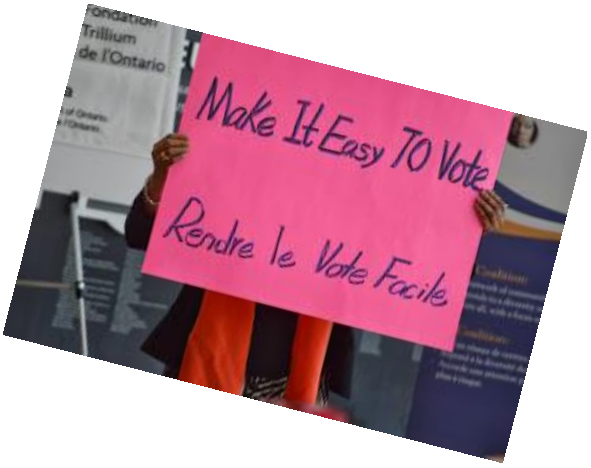
1. **"I question which politicians can be trusted."**
2. **"I don't understand the political process."**
3. **"I find it hard to get to polls."**
4. **"I don't know enough about the candidates."**
5. **"I don't see candidates who represent me."**
6. **"My life is too complicated."**
7. **"My vote doesn't matter."**
8. **"I am not eligible to vote."**
9. **"I don't know how to vote."**
10. **"The candidates don't go to where I am."**

Overarching Strategy:
Create a Culture of Civic Engagement

Increasing voter turnout requires creating a long-term investment in civic engagement in which residents feel the positive impact of their involvement. To reach this overarching strategy, four strategies, with actions for achieving them, were identified.

1. **Make it easy to vote**
2. **Make it fun to vote**
3. **Ignite the passion to make a difference**
4. **Build bridges between candidates and residents**

Strategy 1: Make It Easy to Vote



Residents

- Go door to door to remind people to vote
- Offer rides to neighbours, friends and family
- Share childcare with a neighbour on voting day
- Form neighbourhood teams to get out the vote

Governments working with community

- Promote opportunities to vote in advanced polls
- Recruit people from diverse backgrounds, abilities and languages to work at polls on election day
- Distribute information widely on how and where to vote (e.g. social media, at bumping places, Good Food Markets, community hubs with high traffic areas)
- Provide instructions in different languages on why, when, where, and how to vote
- Ensure the location of polling stations is accessible to people living on low-income areas (e.g. libraries, shopping centres, transit hubs, faith communities, Mosques, community health centres, senior buildings, Aboriginal centres, Ottawa Community Housing)
- Inform people that polls are accessible in keeping with the AODA (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act)
- Invite feedback if residents find polls are not accessible
- Explore feasibility of mobile polls
- Provide reminders to vote (e.g. posters, signs on buses, magnets, social media)
- Promote different ways of voting (e.g. advance polls, mail in special ballot)
- Promote voting among people in long term facilities and people in prisons for the provincial and federal elections
- Ensure polls are near a bus stop
- Provide free transportation (e.g. OC Transpo and Para Transpo) on election day

Community organizations working with residents

- Invite Election Canada to do mock elections
- Create posters with faces and names of candidates in each ward/riding
- Provide supports for homeless to vote
- Offer child care on voting day
- Create materials, including use social media, to provide information on the responsibilities and the elections of the three levels of government
- Explore possibility of permanent residents being granted right to vote in municipal elections as Toronto City Council has proposed to the Ontario government

Candidates and elected officials

- Provide campaign information in different languages
- Go to neighbourhoods to hear people's concerns
- Include their concerns in election platform

Strategy 2: Make It Fun to Vote

Residents

- Vote with a friend or family member
- Bake cookies to celebrate voting
- Organize flash mobs
- Parade, sing and play music to get out the vote
- Use social media to create a chain reaction

Governments working with community

- Design election publicity that grabs attention (e.g. bus ads, social media)
- Create child-friendly spaces at polling stations (e.g. toy area, refreshments, volunteer child-minders)
- Provide food/refreshments at polls

Community organizations working with residents

- Encourage social and support groups to go to polls together (e.g. senior groups, parent groups, youth groups, exercise groups, Aboriginal groups)
- Celebrate first time voters (e.g. party or recognition)
- Organize a city wide campaign/competition for increasing voter turnout
- Present rewards to neighbourhoods who increases voter turnout
- Organize movie nights or playgroups to enable parents to vote

Strategy 3: Ignite the Passion to Make a Difference

Residents

- Go door to door to bring neighbours, friends and family out to vote
- Generate discussions on elections in home and social settings
- Encourage women and men from diverse communities to run for office
- Volunteer in the campaign of the candidate of your choice
- Engage community leaders to be champions encouraging people to vote
- Spread the word when an elected official does something you support

Governments working with community

- Use multiple methods to reach a diversity of population on the importance of voting (e.g. free newspapers, social media, bus ads, ethno-cultural newspapers, First Nation or Inuit newspapers)
- Reach out to cultural and religious leaders

Community organizations working with residents

- Make visible how each level of government influences people's everyday life
- Create spaces for outreach/dialogue on politics, voting, and why it matters (e.g. kitchen table discussions and community workshops)
- Share stories of when influencing the candidates and the vote made a difference in the lives of low-income people
- Provide community leaders, women and men, from diverse backgrounds with support and skills to run for political office, so that people from a diversity of backgrounds see women and men like themselves among the candidates
- Partner with religious leaders, Aboriginal elders and faith groups to encourage people to vote
- Draw upon people's sense of duty and charity (e.g. Muslim community) to encourage voting
- Provide inspirational quotes on why voting matters from a range of community leaders (e.g. First Nations, Inuit, youth, rural, immigrant – women and men) that inspire people to vote
- Promote education in schools about the political process and impact of voting
- Integrate civic engagement into the immigrant settlement process

Candidates and Elected Officials

- Help residents see connections between decision making and everyday life
- Consult with resident living on low-income and let them know what came of their input
- Let residents know when they make a difference

Strategy 4:
Build Bridges between Elected Officials and Residents

Residents

- Invite candidates to neighbourhood forums to listen to resident concerns
- Invite candidates to meetings and social events
- Join together with neighbours to identify issues to raise
- Invite elected Councillor to neighbourhood

Governments working with community

- Provide clear accessible information on the role of elected officials
- Provide education on how to access candidates and elected officials
- Consult residents in poverty on issues that matter to them

Community organizations working with residents

- Create a list of candidates and their positions on various issues
- Organize groups of low-income residents to visit each candidate, to present an issue or make requests

Candidates and elected officials

- Create opportunities for candidates to share information about themselves
- Keep residents informed of how vote on issues that matter to them

Background

Making Votes Count Where We Live is a three-year project, funded by Ontario Trillium Foundation and Catherine Donnelly Foundation, which seeks to increase voter turnout in low-income neighbourhoods and among people living in poverty. The CHRC, with 13 centres city-wide, plays a key role in the health promotion of low-income residents in the rural, suburban and urban parts of Ottawa. The CHRC has identified increasing long-term civic engagement of residents and increasing voter turnout as a key priority. CAWI has a ten-year history of providing training to enhance the capacity of the full diversity of women to bring their views to city decision makers and engage their communities.

Working in partnership with community agencies and in coordination with the Community Development Framework, CHRC and CAWI hope to implement civic engagement strategies that will increase the influence of low-income neighbourhoods and people living on low-income in the electoral process and decisions made by elected officials. The strategies will positively impact on long-term civic engagement which is key to increasing voter turnout.

At the municipal level, this report can assist the current City Council in fulfilling its Term of Council Priority: Commit to and develop a democratic, engaging and visible process to maximize input from residents in the work of Council and in policy development, while ensuring that seniors, new Canadians, women and the economically disadvantaged are included.

In year one, five teams of women from low-income neighbourhoods have engaged their neighbours in assessing the barriers to voting and identification of strategies for increasing voter turnout. In years two and three, new teams of women will join with women leaders of the previous year to engage their friends, family, and neighbours in the municipal (2014) and federal (2015) elections.

This report is a culmination of the findings from a literature review, focus groups, and key informants interviews.

Methodology

This participatory action research was guided by a community research team comprised of CAWI staff, women in CAWI's network who bring their understanding and experience of poverty, and an OCH community developer with expertise in participatory action research. The team met regularly to guide the research and review findings.

Several methods, including a literature review, focus groups, and key informant interviews, were used to collect information in Ottawa low-income neighbourhoods and among people living in poverty, on voter turnout, barriers and supports to voting, strategies to increase voter turnout, and issues of interest to residents.

Focus groups and key informant interviews

The community research team developed a community research framework (Appendix A) to guide the research. A focus group guide was created with instructions for community women to facilitate focus groups. An information sheet for the community research (Appendix B) was provided for participants to fill in. Key informant interviews were guided by a list of five questions (Appendix A)**.**

CAWI coordinated and facilitated four full-day workshops with 25 community women. During the workshops, they learned how city government works, how to facilitate focus groups and analyze data collected from those groups. In the second workshop, community women participated in two focus groups. The data collected from these groups is also included in the findings.

Community women formed teams to co-facilitate focus groups in their respective communities. The participating centres of the CHRC organized the focus group in their respective programs and with their partners.

In order to ensure a diversity of experiences, the following criteria were used in organizing focus groups:

- Participants live on low-income
- Mix of geographic diversity (urban, rural, suburban)
- Mix of language (francophone, Anglophone)
- Mix of cultural diversity
- Participants with disabilities (mental and physical)
- Mix of age and gender
- Aboriginal

A total of 13 key informant individuals and organizations were interviewed with a total of 62 participants. There were 20 focus groups with a total of 202 participants. A total of 168

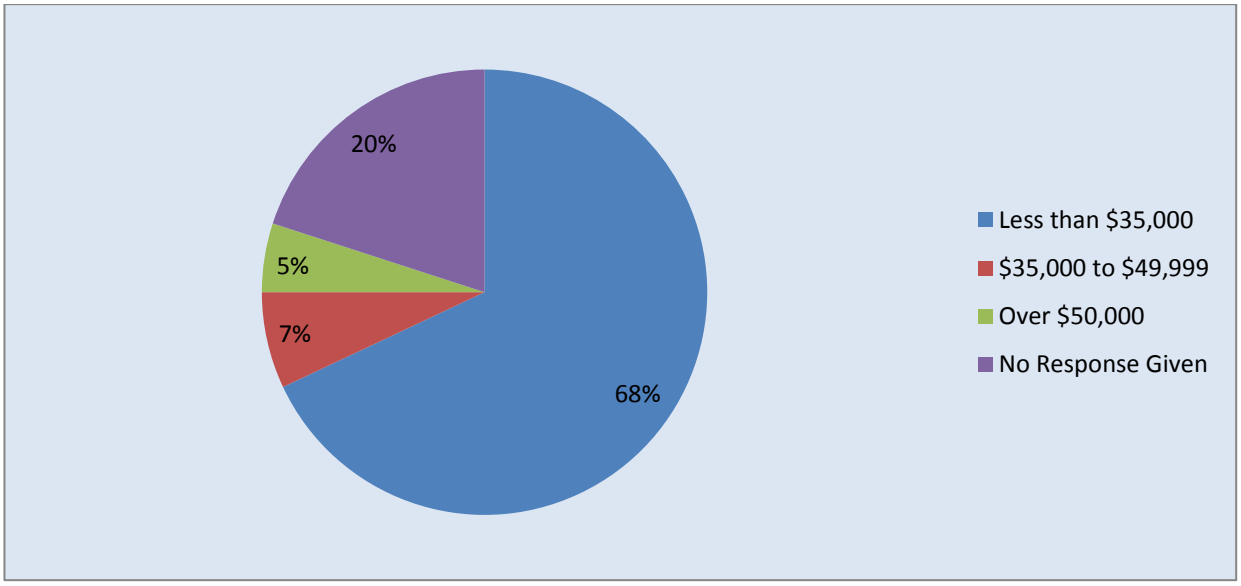
participants filled in self-identification sheets. All participants in focus groups were previously in on-going community programs through community health and resource centres. This meant that they are aware of ways of bringing their issues to the attention of elected officials.

Data from focus groups and interviews was analyzed by community women and the research team using force field analysis and the selective thematic categorization. Through the analysis, barriers and supports to voting and strategies to increase voter turnout were identified.

Participants

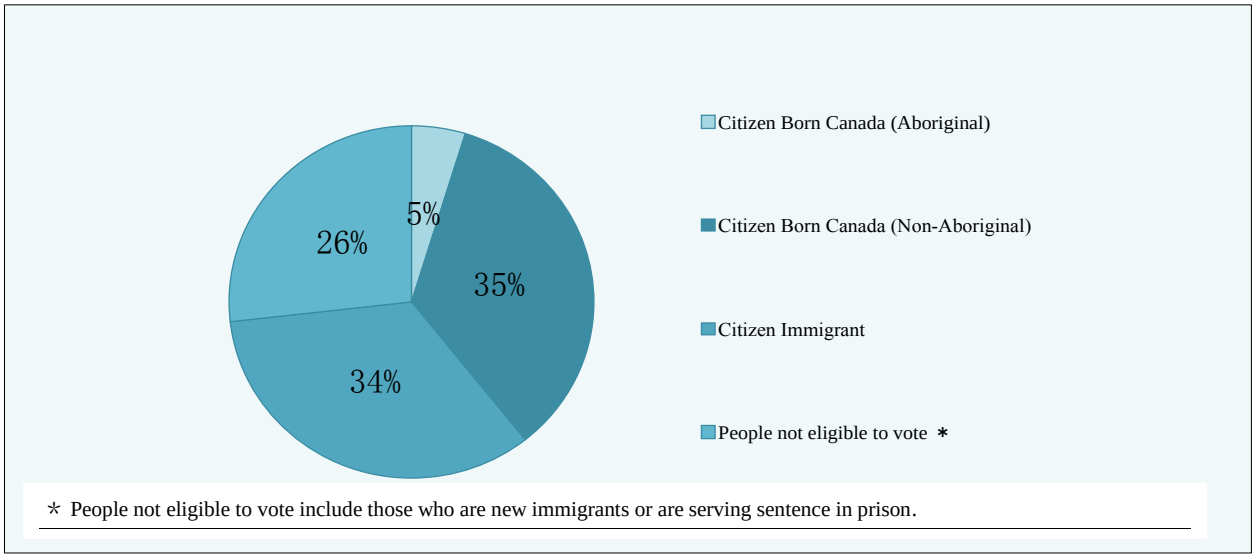
Since this research focused mainly on people living on low-income, 68% of participants in focus groups were living on annual household income of less than $35,000.

Chart 1: Participants' Annual Household Income



Participants were from a diversity of backgrounds, among them, Aboriginal (primarily First Nations), immigrants (primarily Arabic, Chinese, Somali), francophone, GLBT, the homeless, people with disabilities, rural, seniors, and youth.

Chart 2: Participants' Voting Eligibility and Citizenship Status



Focus groups were open to both women and men, but mostly women participated.
There was a small sample of rural participants, as winter weather contributed to cancel meetings.
In order to ensure that voices of youth and Aboriginal residents were heard, key informant interviews with Aboriginal leaders, specifically First Nations, and Youth Community Developers Network were conducted to compliment gaps in findings from focus groups.

Chart 3: Participants' Age Breakdown

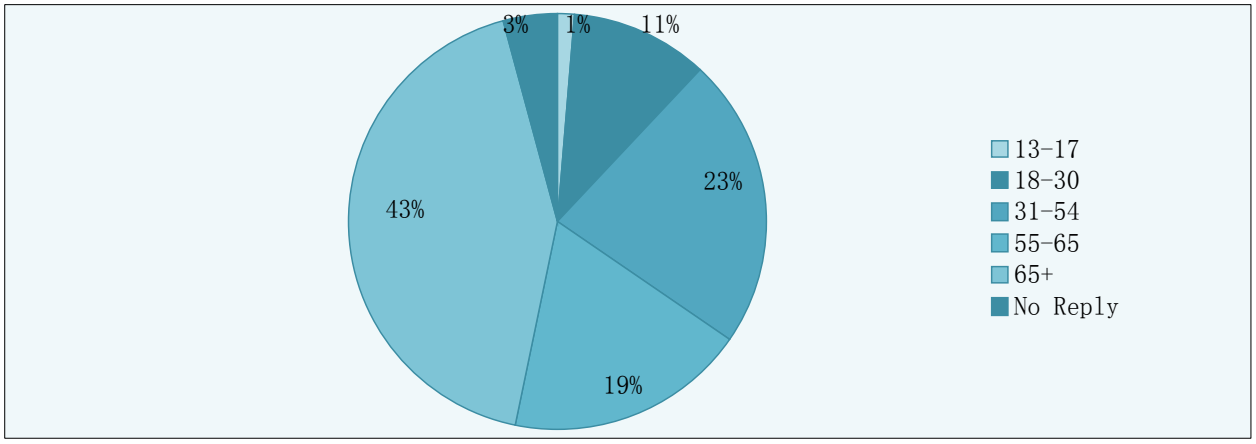
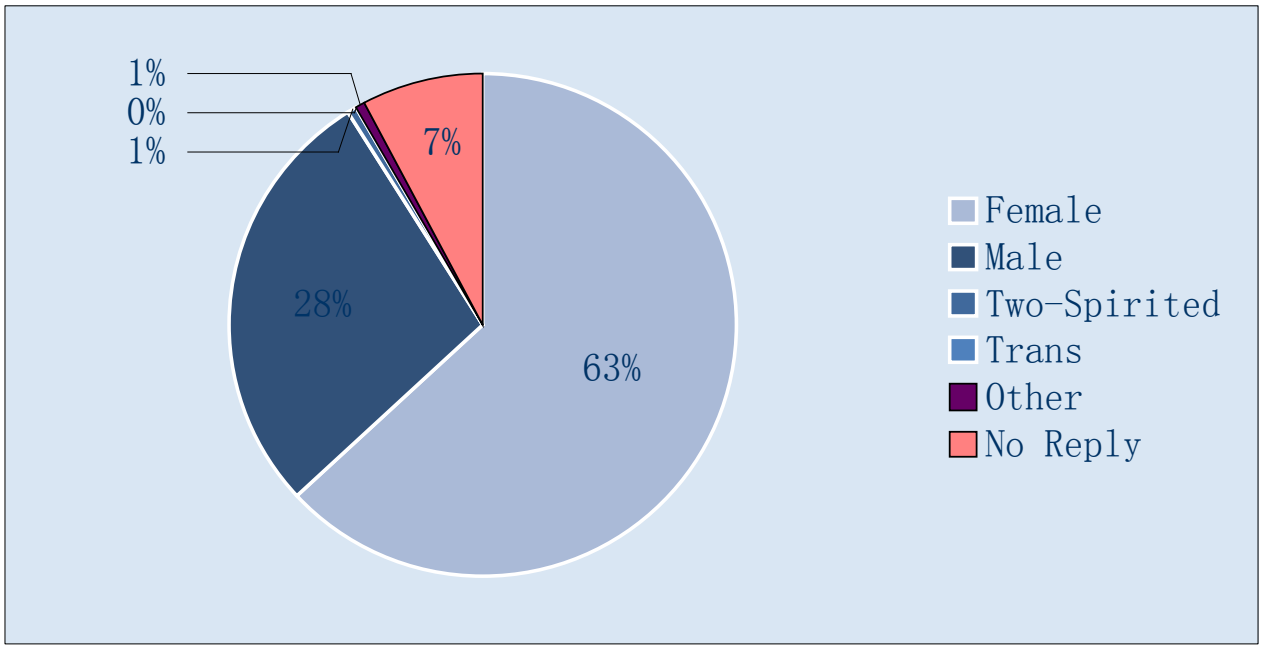


Chart 4: Participants' Gender Breakdown



Review of the Literature

> *This understudied and complex relationship between increasing economic segregation and declining voter turnout among low-income citizens suggests a potentially vicious circle of political behavior and public policy, one in which the capacity of low-income citizens to hold elected representatives accountable and to shape the policy agenda is severely diminished. (*Widestrom, 2008)

Voter turnout has been on the decline since the late 1970s.The impact of this trend is especially felt among low-income residents who are less likely to vote than higher income voters. Elected officials are more likely to make decisions in the interest of the people who elect them. This, in turn, contributes to a vicious cycle of disconnectedness and democratic deficit where people experiencing poverty may not see their concerns addressed, and become even less likely to vote (Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte, Nadeau, 2004).

In the three Canadian federal elections between 1958-1962 voter turnouts nearly reached 80%, while, in 2011 the federal elections had a turnout of only 61.4% of those registered to vote (Statistics Canada, 2012). The challenges of engaging citizens to vote are more exacerbated at the municipal level, where it is estimated that an average of half of the voters at national elections participate in municipal elections (Hajnal & Lewis, 2003). The pattern follows that of national elections where municipal voter turnout is in decline. Ottawa municipal voter turnout dropped from 54% in 2006 to 44% in 2010, while voter turnout hit record low in the 2011 Ontario provincial election with 49.2% of eligible voters going to the polls.

Municipal elections are of particular importance for two reasons. First, local politics is the closest, most direct link between the voters and policy makers. Municipal elections focus on local concerns and the impact of decisions made is more likely to be felt by the majority of the local population. Second, lower stakes for elections at the local level can encourage participation by a broader cross section of the community who may get involved in particular campaigns where they have direct personal interest. Municipal elections can serve as a learning opportunity for the democratic experience where citizens learn to trust the process as a whole. This, in turn, emphasizes why voter disengagement at this level is particularly troubling (Hajnal & Lewis, 2003).

What influences voter turnout

While the literature points to low voter turnout among residents living on low-income, there is no singular 'critical factor' that affects participation in elections. It is the reality of living in poverty compounded by multiple factors in the lives of the diversity of the population that increase or decrease the likelihood of voting. Any strategy for increasing voter turnout in Ottawa needs to take into account the diversity of residents living in poverty.

- **Economic status**

  In a 2000 Canadian Election Study, voter turnout was found to be 16 points lower among people with household incomes in the bottom 20% than for people in the top 20% (Blais, 2000). Poverty decreases voter turnout for several reasons. When trying to pay the bills or make a social assistance cheque stretch to the end of the month there is less time and energy for politics. An experience of disenfranchisement may lead to a feeling that they can't make a difference. Finally, as people on low-income are more likely to rent, and therefore, more likely to change addresses, they face extra challenges in having their name on the voter list or even knowing where to vote, or who to vote for (Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte, Nadeau, 2004).

  'It is the experience of poverty itself that always discouraged me from voting. How do I find the time juggling so many concerns, and who will listen to me anyway?'

  At the municipal level, homeowners are more likely to vote than renters, which is usually associated with higher income. In Ontario where municipalities are funded by property taxes, renters often believe municipal politics are less important to them as they do not realize that they indirectly pay property tax through the amount of rent their landlord charges. (Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte, Nadeau, 2004)

  Tindal and Tindal (2008) point to the character of municipal government in Canada and the resulting tenuous link between municipal governments and democracy, and subsequent link between voting and low income. The characteristics they indicate are focus on property not people, a sense of accountability to the provincial government and not to the electorate nor to the population, and finally the view that municipal government is only about effective

management and service delivery and not about political direction. All these factors make it harder for those with less income to feel that municipal government can be important to them.

- **Employment**
  Employed individuals are found to be more likely to vote than the unemployed (66% versus 57%) (Uppal, Sharanjit; LaRochelle-Côté, Sébastien, 2012).

- **Family Status**
  Non-voters cite a busy schedule as a reason for not voting, particularly among 25- to 34-year-olds, who are more likely to be in the early stages of parenthood (Statistics Canada 2011). In the 2011 federal election, in all family types in which children were present there was a lower rate of voting, particularly among single parents. Only 36% of single parents of children under 5 years of age voted compared to 60% of couples with children the same age (Uppal, Sharanjit; LaRochelle-Côté, Sébastien. 2012). In turn, single mothers are more likely to be living in poverty than single fathers or two-parent families.

- **History of voting**
  The highest explanatory factor in voting is whether one voted in the last election, thus making the point about the importance of creating the habit of voting, particularly among the younger voters whose level of voting is particularly low. This fact also emphasizes the role of family in creating the sense of importance of voting (Tindal and Tindal, 2008).

  This speaks to the concerns being raised by Toronto City Council, who voted in June 2013 in favour of asking the Ontario government to grant permanent residents the right to vote in municipal elections (The Star, 2013). As the process for becoming a citizen becomes longer, immigrants live in Canada for a longer period time before having the chance to vote, and may be less likely to then establish the habit of voting in their new country.

- **Youth**
  Canadians under the age of 30, regardless of birthplace or racial origin, are less likely to vote than older Canadians (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003; Biais et al. 2004;Tossutti, Livianna, 2005). They are more likely than older citizens to cite a lack of interest in politics, personal factors, and registration difficulties as the most important reasons for not voting (Pammett and LeDuc). Youth with high levels of education are more likely to vote.

- **Education**
  Those with a university degree tend to vote more than people who are less educated. This has meant that the increasing number of Canadians with university education has likely contributed to a less steep decline in voter turnout (Blais, Gidengil, Nevitte and Nadeau, 2004).

- **Aboriginal (First Nation, Inuit and Metis)**
  The literature referenced in this report speaks specifically to the experience of First Nations. Following an initial high turnout at the polls in 1962 after finally being granted the right to vote in the Canadian system, there has been a steep decline in turnout to vote. This varies

considerably from province to province and community to community. Guerin (2003) cites an Ipsos-Reid survey indicating that the turnout rate for urban Aboriginals is three times lower than for those voting on reserves.

There are two possible reasons for these variations. One, First Nations differ in their political indigenous traditions, sense of nationhood; and perceived legitimacy of electoral participation (Ladner, 2003). Second, the extent to which they see their interest being address will influence voter turnout. For example, the presence of an Aboriginal candidate seems to lead to higher voter turnout rates in northern communities. Or, a focus on an issue of concern can boost turnout.

As for the overall decline in voter turnout, the growing consciousness of Aboriginal people as to the history of assimilation and the Canadian electoral process as being an alien one, along with the call for nation-to-nation relations is clearly a factor. Shifting the focus from negative considerations of why people do not vote to developing positive reasons for Aboriginal people to vote, is one way to turn this around (Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte, Nadeau, 2004).

- ## Gender

In the 2011 federal election, women (59.6%) voted at a slightly higher rate than men (57.3%). This remains the same across all age groups up to age 64, when men start participating more than women. This pattern was the same in the previous election in 2008 (Elections Canada, 2012). Women voting at a higher rate have been attributed to women having a stronger sense of duty to vote than men. A sense of moral obligation seems to be powerful motivator when it comes to voting (Blais,2000). However, women can experience more barriers to voting with child responsibilities and concerns about safety getting to the polls.

- ## Immigrant and racialized communities

Immigrants and racialized people are increasingly facing unique economic and social challenges that have the potential to reduce their willingness and/or ability to vote. Immigrants arriving in the 1980s to mid-90s experienced lower rates of employment and higher rates of low income (Ruddick, 2003) while racialized immigrants are more likely to live in poverty than non-racialized immigrants.

In a study of voter turnout among immigrants in Montreal, ethnic leaders pointed to variations in attitudes about elections. For example, Chinese leaders indicated that electoral participation "was not a significant part of the community's political culture" while Greek community leaders noted "habit, a taste for voting and duty" as the main reasons for relatively high voter participation (Lapp, 1999).

Within racialized communities, immigrants were significantly more likely than Canadian-born respondents from the same racial background to have voted in all three types of elections. This suggests that racialized citizens born outside the country attached more value to electoral participation than Canadian-born citizens from the same community. This may be

due to racialized citizens born in Canada feeling their interests are not represented by elected officials

. Length of time in Canada

It is a popular belief that integration of immigrants, especially those from non-democratic countries (NDC's), is a precondition for greater civic participation. However, this idea was debunked in a study in which immigrants from NDC's say that they have a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in political institutions of Canada. About 78% of immigrants who were in Canada for 5 years or less reported they have a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the government in Ottawa, Bilodeau and Nevitte (2003) conclude that "upon arrival in Canada immigrants from NDCs bring with them a 'reservoir' of diffuse support". However, the 'honeymoon' does not last. After a decade in Canada, there appears to be no significant differences between levels of confidence in political institution of immigrants from NDCs and people born in Canada. Ironically, it appears that adaptation to Canada's political reality breeds greater skepticism with institutions than confidence in them.

'People, who have more money, have more ability to do things but with voting, it's equal… every person, regardless of money, has one vote. One person, one vote!'

- **Religious affiliation**
  Affiliation to religious institutions can promote a sense of civic responsibility and increase voting (Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau, and Nevitte, 2009).

- **Minority community status**
  A group that finds itself a minority, in terms of numbers or power, may feel there are too many political barriers for genuine participation in the political process. However, it was found that a concentration of a minority community in a geographic area or in a political party can encourage voting (Howe and Bedford, 2009).

- **Poor quality of polling stations**
  In one US study a pattern of poorer quality polling stations in low-income districts was considered a barrier to voter turnout. Factors such as low lighting; lack of signage; poorly trained poll station workers; or inadequate parking or close access to bus stops were all possible barriers. Small increases in costs of voting can have an important effect on overall turnout (Barreto, Cohen-Marks and Woods, 2009).

Findings

The following section outlines the findings on voting behaviours, barriers and supports to voting, and ways of obtaining information on voting. Following this, the analysis of the findings is deepened by presenting strategies that increase long-term civic engagement and voter turnout in low-income neighbourhoods.

Voting behaviours

The majority of participants in focus groups felt positive about voting. They felt happy and fortunate that they have the right to vote. They expressed that voting is a right and a duty as a member of this society, that it allows them opportunities to have their voices heard, to change life for the better, and to elect candidates who are accountable to them. They were excited when candidates they voted for were elected. Some mentioned that even if they couldn't vote now, as they are not yet citizens, they would encourage their family and friends to vote. Some were very proud that by voting, they can set an example and teach their children the importance of voting. And yet, when asked about barriers to voting for themselves and others living on low-income, they had many barriers to name.

> ***'I have a right to vote. I am happy to vote, eligible to vote, and proud!'***

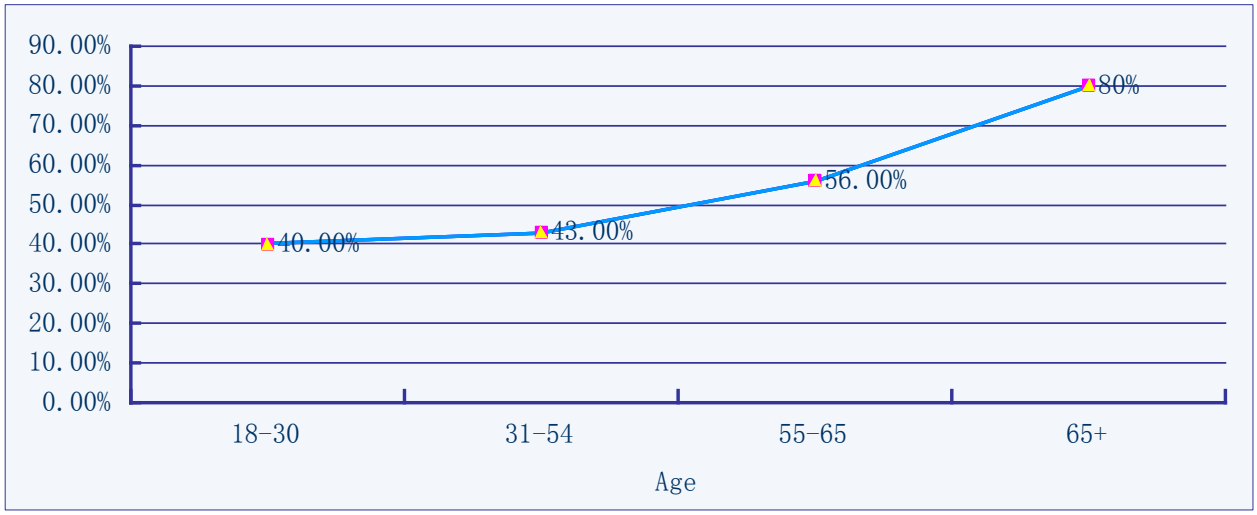
Fifty-eight percent of participants in the focus groups reported that they always vote. This percentage is higher than the 2010 Ottawa municipal election voter turnout of 44%. Given what is known about lower voter turnout among people living in poverty, this high percentage is surprising. This can be explained in two ways. One is that studies on voter turnout typically reveal that people report voting more than they actually do since voting is more socially acceptable (Holbrook and Krosnick, 2010).

Second, the focus groups were offered to people who are already engaged in community programs that encourage people to be active citizens. This meant that the focus groups did not reach the people who are least likely to vote. This may, in turn, reveal that people are more likely to vote if they are engaged and continue to be engaged in community organizations. In order to increase long-term civic engagement and voter turnout, it is important to reach residents in poverty who are isolated and don't engage in community activities and encourage them to play active role in addressing community issues.

Eighty-nine percent of eligible voters whose annual household income is over 50, 000 reported that they always vote, while 57% of the eligible voters whose annual income is less than 35,000 reported that they always vote. Even though there is only 5% of total participants have an annual household income of over 50, 000, it is consistent with the finding in our literature review that "economic disparity is one of influential factors impact voting, where the wealthier are more inclined to vote."

In terms of age, the voting trend in Chart 5 matches what is seen in the literature. Younger voters were least likely to vote, and this increases with age, with those at age 65 the most likely to vote. Given that studies show that people are more likely to vote if they establish a habit of voting at a young age, the chart reveals how important it is to engage youth in order to increase voter turnout in Ottawa's low-income communities.

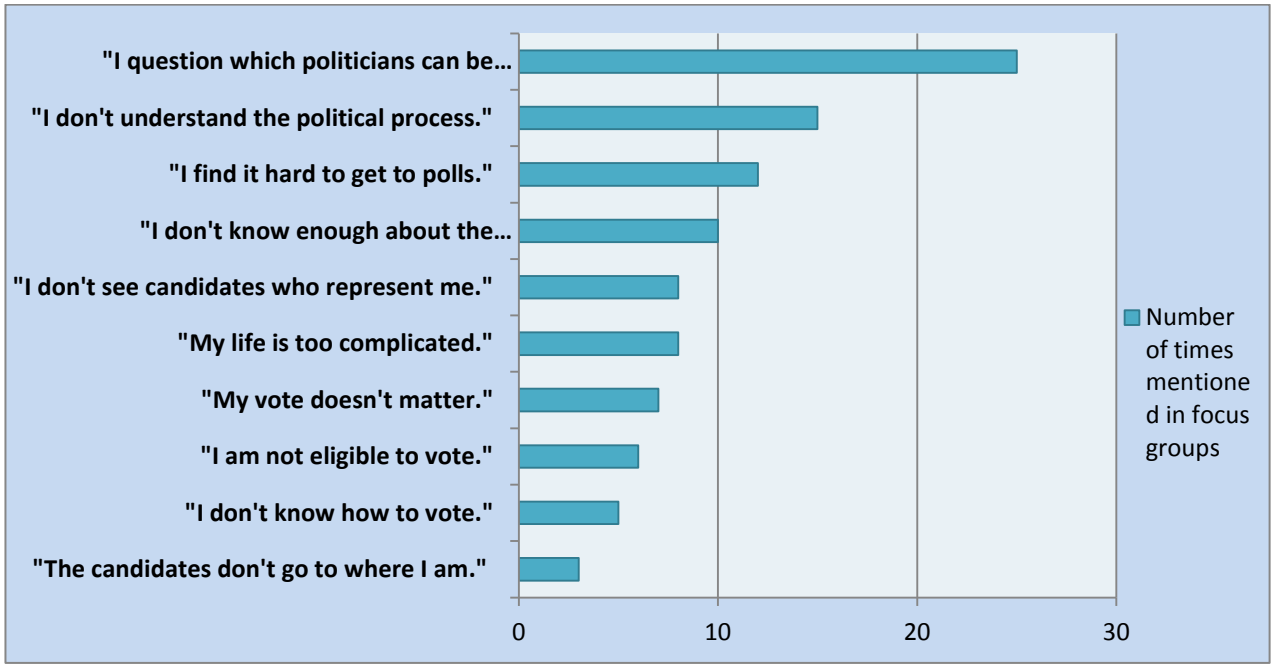
Chart 5: older participants more likely to vote



Barriers that discourage voting

Participants in focus groups and key informant interviews were asked the question: *"What discourages you from voting*?" Based on their response, we have identified 10 key barriers that discourage people living in poverty from voting.

Chart 6: Barriers to Voting



1. "I question which politicians can be trusted."

Not being able to trust all politicians was considered the biggest barrier, as they feel that once elected politicians often break promises made during election campaigns. For some, they felt there was a lack of transparency on how elected officials spent their money and they suspected corruption. It is important to note that these focus groups were held at a time when there was considerable national media regarding corruption of politicians at the municipal and federal level.

2. "I don't understand the political process."

Participants were confused about how the political process works and the responsibilities of different levels of government. Political jargon was confusing. It was particular challenging for New Canadians whose first language is not English to have an understanding of the political process.

It was thought that youth don't have enough education on civic courses in schools. Current civic courses are not effective enough at helping youth to understand the importance of participating in political process.

3. "I find it hard to get to polls."

Participants mentioned that bad weather on Election Day discourages voters, and makes it harder for people with physical disabilities and seniors to go out and vote. Some participants noted there was not a bus near their polling place. While others pointed to the hours of the polls making it more difficult to get there.

Others believed that polling stations were not accessible for seniors and people with mobility issues. Here it is important to note that the City of Ottawa has made significant strides to enhance accessibility of voting polls in keeping with the standards of AODA (*Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*). As compliance with these standards only came into effect following the 2005 passage of AODA, those respondents who mentioned barriers for people with disabilities may have been speaking from past experience. It is important to note that there remains a perception in the community that polls are inaccessible. It is this perception that could be addressed to increase voter turnout.

4. "I don't know enough about the candidates."

Participants felt they don't have information about candidates and what issues they stand for so as to help them make an informed choice.

5. "I don't see candidates who represent me."

Participants reported not seeing candidates who address their issues and that party platforms are not in line with their concerns. They did not see candidates or elected officials that had their same ethno-cultural, religious, language or gender background, so felt they may not be understood.

6. "My life is too complicated."

Some participants found themselves living in very stressful situations. Some have young children or mentally challenged person to take care of; some have to juggle between different jobs; while others have health issues. The reality of living in poverty brought its own challenges that made it difficult to think beyond day to day living.

7. "My vote doesn't matter."

While there were respondents who felt they could make a difference, most felt that a common barrier to voting for people living in poverty is a belief that their voice is not heard and their vote doesn't make a difference.

8. "I am not eligible to vote."

Participants who are non-Citizen landed immigrants are not eligible to vote; and people serving sentence in prisons are not eligible to vote in municipal election.

9. "I don't know how to vote."

Some participants didn't know where to get information about voting, where to, and how to vote.

10. "The candidates don't go to where I am."

Although some elected officials do attend events in neighbourhoods of people living on low-income and places where people on low-income frequent, it was noted that this was more the exception than the rule.

Supports that encourage voting

Participants in focus groups and key informant interviews were asked the question: "*What encourages you to vote*?" Based on their response, key supports to voting were identified. Many of these are already taking place and could be built upon.

1. When polling place is nearby and accessible

When polling stations are close, easy to get to, with a bus stop nearby, and accessible location, people find it easier to vote. Providing polls and advanced polls where people live (e.g. senior long-term facilities and OCH housing) was a key support. Different ways of voting (e.g. mail in ballots for seniors) makes it easier to vote.

2. When I have information about the candidates

Participants believe that accurate information on candidates, their platforms, and issues that they stand for helps them to make an informed choice. Having these materials with a photo of the candidate is very helpful.

3. When candidates are concerned about the issues that matter to me

Participants would like to see candidates talk about and address issues that are related to their lives.

4. When there are reminders to vote

Reminders, such as letters in mailboxes, posters with voting dates, bus ads and fridge magnets support people to vote.

5. When I realize my vote can make a real impact

When people see the elected official they elected taking action to fulfill their promises or make positive change that impacts on the lives of their community, they believe their vote made a difference. As one person said, "*Just my vote can break a tie in an election, and make all the difference.*"

> ***'I vote in municipal elections to vote for my current Councillor because she shows up at our residence. I've seen her effort. She's in the neighbourhood; she's low-key and down to earth. After a reception, she helps to clean the dishes in the kitchen.'***

6. When I recognize voting is both my right and duty

When people realize that voting is both a right and a duty, they are more likely to vote. This was especially true in the Muslim community for whom a sense of duty is a strongly held belief.

7. When there is personal interaction between candidates and me

Participants need to see candidates visit where they live, not only during elections but after they are elected. Having a talk to them and get to know them was key.

8. When there is personal outreach on Election Day

People are more like to vote if someone that is knowledgeable about voting knocks on doors, talks to people about voting, and gets them out to vote. When candidates or elected officials go to people's residents and encourage them to vote, people are more likely to vote. When people in communities get involved on Election Day, or in people's campaigns, it makes a big difference.

9. When there are candidates with whom I can identify

When candidates have the same ethno-cultural background, gender or demonstrated the same beliefs, people felt they could better relate to their lives.

10. When young people know about voting

Taking kids to voting places, encouraging youth to participate in civic engagement will support them to vote when they become eligible voters. Youth can bring discussions on politics to home if they are knowledgeable about voting.

11. When there is childcare support

As many reported not going to the polls because of responsibility with children, when polls can be child friendly or childcare supports are available in the community, more parents with children, especially single parents, will vote.

12. When there are more options for time of voting

To address the problem of lower voter turnout when there is bad weather or conflict of schedules, participants felt that having more days to vote, like advanced polls, makes it easier to vote.

13. When materials in different languages or plain language

Materials in different languages and plain language will help people from diverse cultural backgrounds understand voting.

14. When food is provided

When refreshments are provided such as coffee and cookies at polling stations people are more encouraged to vote.

Ottawa's diverse voices on barriers and supports to voting

Aboriginal

There is a well-established Aboriginal population in Ottawa of professionals and residents who have been in Ottawa for generations. However, for many, especially in First Nations and Inuit new to Ottawa, home is still back on the reserve or up north, so voting locally seems irrelevant. Some may be facing homelessness and culture shock. Many do not know that the services they use on a daily bases are municipal. In general, Aboriginal people are more likely to vote in the federal election as they are familiar with the role of the federal government in Aboriginal affairs.

Aboriginal people are more likely to vote when they are encouraged by their elders and Aboriginal organizations/agencies. When Aboriginal people have a growing sense of home as Ottawa, feel supported and welcomed here, and realize voting is connected to their everyday lives, they are more likely to vote.

Francophone

Francophone participants shared that they were confused about the difference between municipal, provincial, and school board elections. They felt they didn't have enough information in French on candidates to help them make informed choice. Some felt promises made by elected officials were not carried through. Others felt it is difficult to vote because they were busy with their young children. In general, francophone participants noted they would like to see inspiring candidates who they get to know in person and who stand for issues that matter to communities.

Immigrant

While several focus groups were multicultural with immigrants from different countries of origin, the largest ethno-cultural groups represented were Arabic, Somali and Chinese. Muslims were present in many focus groups. Among immigrants who participated in focus groups or key informant interviews, it was noted that there is a wide range of diversity among immigrants according to many factors, including their length of time in Canada, gender, country of origin and previous experience of democracy.

One of the greatest barriers noted was not yet being a citizen. This was noted as a growing problem given the longer wait time to become a citizen, leaving many residents paying taxes without the right to vote for those who represent them. There was concern that an extended period of time in Canada without the right to vote could discourage new Canadians from voting once they become citizens, as they will have developed the habit of not voting. The initiative taken by City of Toronto City Council, June 2013, to call on the Ontario government to grant permanent residents the right to vote in municipal elections, was pointed to as something to further explore.

While many immigrants are very engaged in the community, they cited other factors that discourage them from voting: lack of information on voting and the political process in their first language; lack of presence of candidates where they live; candidates who don't keep promises; and competing priorities in their own lives. Some participants reported that they didn't feel welcome due to the negative attitude of workers at polls. Others didn't see their vote matters.

Participants, most of whom were women, particularly noted that childcare support would support them to vote. They expressed that they are more likely to vote if they know candidates personally, have reminders, and are able to get to polls easily. They felt it would help to get more groups involved in reaching out to people about the importance of voting.

Youth - Somali and Francophone

Somali youth noted they are more likely to vote when friends encouraged them, there is easy access to polling stations and they are knowledgeable about the candidates. Somali youth expressed a feeling that authorities and people don't care about what they say. They felt especially strongly that seeing candidates in their neighbourhoods and getting involved in electoral campaigns encouraged youth to vote.

Francophone youth reported that family encouragement and knowing that candidates are connected to communities encourages them to vote. Francophone youth, with limited English, found it hard to access information in French. Some expressed they felt candidates didn't keep promises made during campaigns.

Senior

Seniors expressed it was hard to get to the polls when the weather is bad, they have no transportation, a bus stop is not nearby and the location is not accessible. They are discouraged from voting when they don't see candidates who represent their issues or that they can trust. In general, immigrant seniors felt that they didn't have enough information on candidates and their platforms in the language they could understand. Some mentioned that they were too busy with family responsibilities to vote.

Multicultural seniors mentioned several factors that would support voting - easy access to polls, a bus stop near the polling station, knowing a candidate in person, realizing voting is a right and duty, and seeing candidates represent their issues. Chinese seniors felt strongly that information on voting in Chinese would help them to understand the Canadian political system, which would increase their interest in voting. Arabic and Muslim seniors felt if people realize that voting is a right and duty, and they can make a difference; they will be more likely to vote. As well, when a candidate has similar moral values and demonstrates a commitment to serving people's needs, they are encouraged to vote. Francophone seniors hoped to choose candidates who have clear ideas and directions.

Rural

Rural participants mentioned that it was discouraging when promises weren't kept by elected officials; they didn't know enough about candidates and the voting process; the feeling their vote would not make a difference and that elected officials make decisions without consulting people. Rural participants felt they were encouraged to vote when there are reminders and there is easy access to polling stations. As well, they were more likely to vote, if candidates appear competent and stand for people's issues.

Ways of obtaining information about voting and candidates

When asked where participants would get information about voting or candidates in focus groups, they reported they tended to talk to friends, read newspapers, and listen to radio. It is important to note that social media was not offered as an option.
When asked what would influence participants to choose a candidate, they mentioned that they were more likely to elect someone who they see in their neighbourhoods and who stands for issues that matter to them and who has ability to relate to people.

Issues of concern in municipal election 2014

Participants in focus groups and key informants identified issues that matter to them and their communities in the upcoming 2014 municipal election. Issues varied between specific populations, neighbourhoods and parts of the city. Through a process of analysis with the women conducting the research and community partners, four key issues emerged as being of particular importance to people living on low-income in the

- Affordable housing
- Affordable and safe transit
- Employment, especially for youth and immigrants
- Food for all

While neighbourhoods and specific populations will have other issues they will be raising, these emerged as key city-wide.

Strategies to Increase Voting

Based on the barriers and supports to voting described in this report, key gaps emerge:

- Lack of information on how and where to vote, in multiple languages and formats.
- Lack of information about political process (e.g. how political systems work and relate to people's everyday lives).
- Lacking trust in candidates and elected officials.
- Not feeling that voting matters.
- Ability to access polls easily.
- Length of time that new immigrants must wait before voting.
- Lack of representation of candidates from diverse communities and women.

To address these gaps, people living on low-income need to not only be engaged at election time, but as part of a long-term civic engagement in which they see the impact of their political involvement.

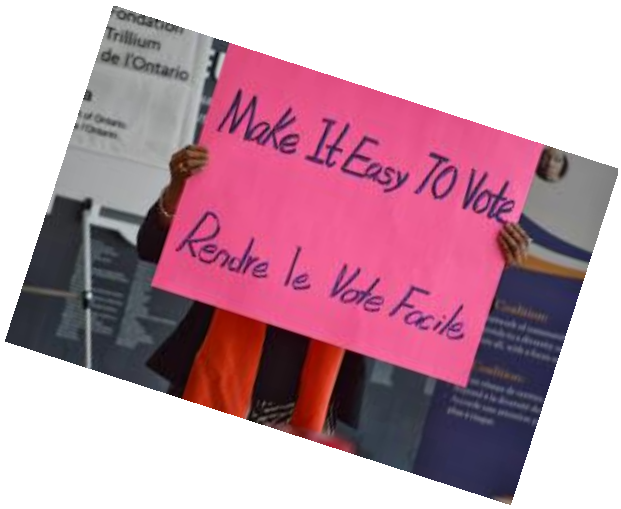
With the overarching strategy to "**Create a Culture of Civic Engagement**", four sub-strategies were identified to make this happen:

Strategy 1: **Make It Easy to Vote**
Strategy 2: **Make It Fun to Vote**
Strategy 3: **Ignite the Passion to Make a Difference**
Strategy 4: **Build Bridges between Elected Officials and Residents**

Under each strategy, actions were identified that be implemented by government working with community, community agencies/organizations, residents and candidates or elected officials themselves. It is as all these parties join together that people living in low-income neighbourhoods and people living poverty in the rural areas, can have a more powerful voice in elections and in the well-beings of their communities.

Overarching Strategy:
Create a Culture of Civic Engagement

Strategy 1: Make It Easy to Vote



Residents

- Go door to door to remind people to vote
- Offer rides to neighbours, friends and family
- Share childcare with a neighbour on voting day
- Form neighbourhood teams to get out the vote

Governments working with community

- Promote opportunities to vote in advanced polls
- Recruit people from diverse backgrounds, abilities and languages to work at polls on election day
- Distribute information widely on how and where to vote (e.g. social media, at bumping places[1], Good Food Markets[2], community hubs with high traffic areas)
- Provide instructions in different languages on why, when, where, and how to vote
- Ensure the location of polling stations is accessible to people living on low-income areas (e.g. libraries, shopping centres, transit hubs, faith communities, Mosques, community health centres, senior buildings, Aboriginal centres, Ottawa Community Housing)
- Inform people that polls are accessible in keeping with the AODA (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act)
- Invite feedback if residents find polls are not accessible
- Explore feasibility of mobile polls[3]
- Provide reminders to vote (e.g. posters, signs on buses, magnets, social media)
- Promote different ways of voting (e.g. advance polls, mail in special ballot)
- Promote voting among people in long term facilities and people in prisons for the provincial and federal elections
- Ensure polls are near a bus stop
- Provide free transportation (e.g. OC Transpo and Para Transpo) on election day

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[1] **Bumping places** - the idea that neighbourhood connections and relationships are created and strengthened when people 'bump' into each other…the more bumps, the stronger the bonds. Corner dairies, schools, walking and bike paths, playgrounds, sports fields….

[2] **Good Food Markets** are community markets that are organized by the Poverty and Hunger Working Group of CHRC and sell a variety of healthy foods at great value.

[3] **Mobile polls** - a pilot project during the Advance Vote in Calgary, an Advance Vote bus will be stationed at some LRT stations across the city from 6:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and from 3:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. weekdays. Eligible electors can vote on the bus with authorized ID at the LRT stations while on their commute.

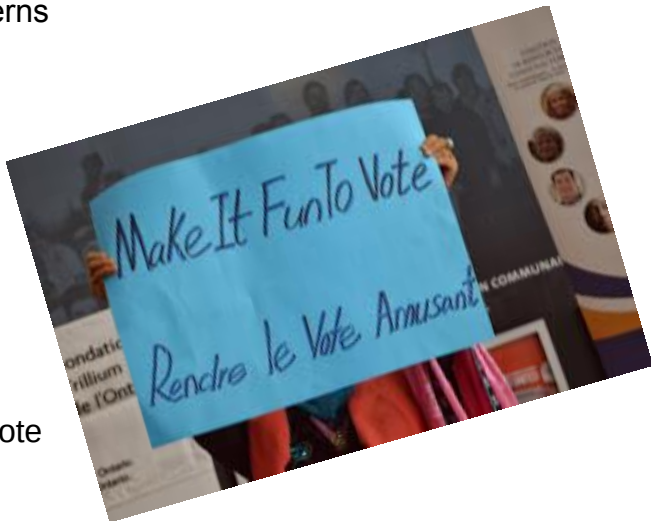
Community organizations working with residents

- Invite Election Canada to do mock elections
- Create posters with faces and names of candidates in each ward/riding
- Provide supports for homeless to vote
- Offer child care on voting day
- Create materials, including use social media, to provide information on the responsibilities and the elections of the three levels of government
- Explore possibility of permanent residents being granted right to vote in municipal elections as Toronto City Council has proposed to the Ontario government

Candidates and elected officials

- Provide campaign information in different languages
- Go to neighbourhoods to hear people's concerns
- Include their concerns in election platform

Strategy 2: Make It Fun to Vote



Residents

- Vote with a friend or family member
- Bake cookies to celebrate voting
- Organize flash mobs
- Parade, sing and play music to get out the vote
- Use social media to create a chain reaction

Governments working with community

- Design election publicity that grabs attention (e.g. bus ads, social media)
- Create child-friendly spaces at polling stations (e.g. toy area, refreshments, volunteer child-minders)
- Provide food/refreshments at polls

Community organizations working with residents

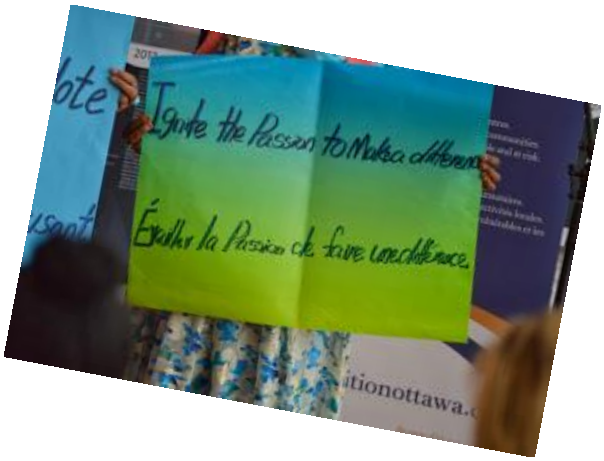
- Encourage social and support groups to go to polls together (e.g. senior groups, parent groups, youth groups, exercise groups, Aboriginal groups)
- Celebrate first time voters (e.g. party or recognition)
- Organize a city wide campaign/competition for increasing voter turnout
- Present rewards to neighbourhoods who increases voter turnout
- Organize movie nights or playgroups to enable parents to vote

Strategy 3: Ignite the Passion to Make a Difference

Residents

- Go door to door to bring neighbours, friends and family out to vote
- Generate discussions on elections in home and social settings
- Encourage women and men from diverse communities to run for office
- Volunteer in the campaign of the candidate of your choice
- Engage community leaders to be champions encouraging people to vote
- Spread the word when an elected official does something you support

Governments working with community



- Use multiple methods to reach a diversity of population on the importance of voting (e.g. free newspapers, social media, bus ads, ethno-cultural newspapers, First Nation or Inuit newspapers)
- Reach out to cultural and religious leaders

Community organizations working with residents

- Make visible how each level of government influences people's everyday life
- Create spaces for outreach/dialogue on politics, voting, and why it matters (e.g. kitchen table discussions and community workshops)
- Share stories of when influencing the candidates and the vote made a difference in the lives of low-income people
- Provide community leaders, women and men, from diverse backgrounds with support and skills to run for political office, so that people from a diversity of backgrounds see women and men like themselves among the candidates
- Partner with religious leaders, Aboriginal elders and faith groups to encourage people to vote
- Draw upon people's sense of duty and charity (e.g. Muslim community) to encourage voting
- Provide inspirational quotes on why voting matters from a range of community leaders (e.g. First Nations, Inuit, youth, rural, immigrant – women and men) that inspire people to vote
- Promote education in schools about the political process and impact of voting
- Integrate civic engagement into the immigrant settlement process

Candidates and Elected Officials

- Help residents see connections between decision making and everyday life
- Consult with resident living on low-income and let them know what came of their input
- Let residents know when they make a difference

Strategy 4:
Build Bridges between Elected Officials and Residents

Residents

- Invite candidates to neighbourhood forums to listen to resident concerns
- Invite candidates to meetings and social events
- Join together with neighbours to identify issues to raise
- Invite elected Councillor to neighbourhood

Governments working with community

- Provide clear accessible information on the role of elected officials
- Provide education on how to access candidates and elected officials
- Consult residents in poverty on issues that matter to them

Community organizations working with residents

- Create a list of candidates and their positions on various issues
- Organize groups of low-income residents to visit each candidate, to present an issue or make requests

Candidates and elected officials

- Create opportunities for candidates to share information about themselves
- Keep residents informed of how vote on issues that matter to them

Conclusion

This report is a road map that invites residents, community partners and governments to take action so as to increase voter turnout in low-income neighbourhoods and among people living in poverty in the urban and rural parts of Ottawa. The findings in this participatory action research draw upon the insights of the women who facilitated focus groups and the residents who participated in them, as well as the key informants representing a diversity of the population in Ottawa's low-income communities. By working together to put into action the strategies and actions identified in this report, Ottawa can hope to benefit from the insights of people living in low-income neighbourhoods and living in poverty, as they actively engage in the electoral process and civic life of our city.

Appendix A

Community Research Framework:
Making Votes Count in Our Neighbourhoods

Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres (CHRC)
City for All Women Initiative (CAWI)

Context:
There is lower voter turnout in low-income neighbourhoods. As a result, elected officials are less likely to listen to the concerns of people living those neighbourhoods. If voter turnout can be increased in these neighbourhoods in upcoming municipal, provincial and federal elections, the needs of the residents will be better addressed

Research Objective

- Identify barriers to voting for people living in low-income neighbourhoods.
- Develop strategies for addressing barriers and increasing voter turnout.
- Encourage residents to name the issues that matter most to them in upcoming elections.

What hope to achieve

- More residents engaged with politicians on the issue that matter to them and their neighbourhoods.
- Increase voter turnout by 5%.

Guiding Principles for doing participatory community research:

- Community researchers from neighbourhoods do the research and analyse research findings.
- Community researchers from neighbourhoods generate ideas emerging from the research and strategies for addressing barriers.
- Community researchers are kept informed of how their research contributes to change.
- Respect and create safety for the focus group participants and people interviewed by not sharing outside the group who said what.
- Report back to focus group participants and people interviewed as to the final findings from the research
- Make best use of the research by sharing it with key decision makers and widely in the community.

Research Team: Past graduates of CAWI training, community workers with expertise in community research meet regularly to guide the research and review the findings.

Areas of Interest	Questions	How gather information
Voter turnout	What has been the voter turnout in low-income neighbourhoods in Ottawa?	Literature Review Analysis of voter data
	How has that voter turnout changed over time and between different elections (municipal, provincial, federa)?	-Literature Review -Analysis of voter data
Barriers	What are the barriers to voting that residents experience?	-Literature Review -Focus Group -Key informant interviews
	Do experience of voting in our families and communities where we grew up affect our attitude about voting?	-Literature Review -Focus Group
	How do specific groups of people experience this (i.e. immigrant, Aboriginal, youth, rural)?	-Literature Review -Focus Group
Strategies for increasing voter turn out	How can these barriers be addressed?	-Literature Review -Focus Group -Key informant interviews
	What has been done to increase voter turnout in low-income neighbourhoods? Did it have an impact?	-Literature Review -Focus Group -Key informant interviews
	What have local organizations, agencies and institutions done to increase voter turnout?	-Key informant interviews
	What has government done to increase voter turnout in low-income neighbourhoods (City Clerk's office, Elections Ontario, Elections Canada)?	-Key informant interviews
Issues of interest to residents	What are the issues that residents want to see candidates address?	-Focus Group
	What are the city services that residents would like to see continued or enhanced by an elected City Councillor? In what way?	-Focus Group

Interview questions for key informants: explain the project to them 3 or 4 guiding questions:

1. What encourages and discourages people to vote?
2. What have you done in the past to promote and increase voter turnout? How well did that work?
3. Where are the gaps?
4. Would you participate in the project?
5. What more do you think needs to be done?

Focus Group Methodology

Start with participants' voting experience

1. What do you feel about voting?(pick up faces with different emotions)
2. Is voting important: why or why not?
3. How did your family or friends view voting growing up? What was the attitude towards voting in your family or in the country where you grew up? *(Write down ideas)*
   1) How do you share this experience with your family?
   2) Do you talk about voting with your family and friends?
   3)How do those conversations go?
4. What encourages you to vote? (supports)?

Why and how vote

5. What issues matter to you and your neighbourhood in an election?
6. What discourages you from voting (limits, obstacles):
7. If you vote, how do you decide who to vote for what's it based on(person, issue and party, other) - *(Line-Up Exercise)*

What would like to bring to a candidates attention

8. Here is a list of city services.
   If you were to talk to a candidate for City Council tomorrow, what services would ask them to continue or improve? *(Check the services on your sheet)*

Appendix B

Information for the Community Research

In these focus groups, we hope to learn from a diversity of residents. By sharing this information about yourself, we will know if we have heard from everyone.

Leave blank any that you prefer not to answer.

This information will be kept confidential.

1. Age Category

□ 13-17 □ 31-54 □65+

□ 18-30 □ 55-65

2. What is the language that you first learned at home in childhood?

□ English □ French □ Other (specify): _____

3. In which official language, do you prefer to receive services?

□ English □ French

4. Do you consider yourself to be Aboriginal? □ Yes □ No

If yes: □ First Nations □ Métis □ Inuit

5. Do you consider yourself to have a disability? □ Yes □ No

6. Gender □ Male □ Female □ Trans □Two-spirited □ Other

7. Do you consider yourself to be Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual?

□ Yes □ No

8. Are you a Canadian citizen? □ Yes □ No

9. Did you immigrate to Canada? □ Yes □ No

For how long have you been in Canada? _____

From what country?_____

Are you a Canadian citizen? □ Yes □ No

10. Annual (1 year) Household Income

□ Less than $19,999 □ $35,000-$49,999

□ $20,000-$34,999 □ more than $50,000

Number of people living on this income:_____

12. Have you been employed at some time in the last 2 years? □ Yes □ No

13. How often do you vote?

____ Always ____Sometimes ____ Never

14. For which level of government do you vote?
____Municipal _____Provincial ____Federal ____None

Some questions about voting
During the focus group, we will invite you to record your answers to these questions to hand in this paper at the end of the focus group.

- **What were the attitudes about voting in your family, or community where you grew up? Was voting considered important?** *(Write down your ideas)*

<u>If there were an election tomorrow, and you were eligible to vote:</u>

- **Where would you get your information about voting or the candidates?** *(check as many as apply)*

☐ friends
☐ newspaper
☐ radio
☐ community centre
☐ attend an all candidate's meeting
☐ don't know
☐ other (specify)_____

- **What would influence your choice?** *(choose no more than 3)*

☐ friends recommend the candidate
☐ if I had seen the candidate in the neighbourhood
☐ the issues they stand for
☐ the candidate's ability to relate to people
☐ the candidate's gender
☐ the candidate's ethno-cultural background
☐ their political party (at the federal and provincial level)
☐ other, specify_____

- **If you were to talk to a candidate for City Council, what city services would you ask them to improve?** *(choose no more than 3)*

☐ Housing and shelter
☐ Public health
☐ Employment and financial services
☐ Parks and recreation
☐ Public Libraries
☐ Paramedics
☐ Fire services
☐ Long term care
☐ Police and crime prevention
☐ Community funding
☐ Transit and roads
☐ Childcare
☐ Cultural services
☐ Water and sewage
☐ Garbage/ recycling
☐ Preservation of green spaces and the environment

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