

THE TORONTO OBSERVER

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Days away from Toronto's municipal elections, Crescent Town resident Assan Chowdhury recounts what elections were like at his hometown in Bangladesh.

"In South Asian elections, it is mostly like a celebration," he says. Chowdhury recalls seeing politicians parading down main streets in giant floats, sights he saw during visits to other South Asian countries as a former BBC correspondent. It's another version of the Santa Claus parade, he jokes.

But apart from cultural differences in campaigning, he also acknowledges three other prominent reasons for low voter turnout amongst Toronto's ethnic communities: economic, areas of economic, cultural, and trust-building barriers.

For first-generation immigrants like him, Chowdhury says, the goal is to survive economically.

"It's a stressed life, (a) difficult life," he says. "They don't have time to think about politics."

Alina Chatterjee, a Scaddingcourt Community Centre and former Toronto Community Housing (TCH) director, says it isn't uncommon for recent immigrants to feel alienated from the political system.

"The day-to-day struggle makes it really challenging to go out and have your voice heard," Chatterjee says, giving an example of a mom with six kids who couldn't afford going out to the polls because she had to worry about finding childcare.

"It's really hard for people, specially newcomers," she says. "(Politics) doesn't necessarily resonate when you're trying to get food on the table."

A language barrier often doesn't help.

"They think about voting first when they have enough skills in the English language to have a proper discussion," Chowdhury says. "(Immigrants vote) when they're not scared people will stare at them."

The third challenge lies in building trust with immigrant voters.

"It's a very fragile relationship," he says.

At the end of this year's Ramadan celebrations, Councillor Janet Davis arranged an outdoor Eid prayer for her Muslim constituents. Events such as this, Chowdhury says, give new immigrants a chance to communicate with Canadian politicians.

"People bring the memory of their own political system here," he says. "In Asia, if you know a politician, you can ensure some safety, you know you can get something done."

Understanding the need to build trust within communities is valuable in securing the immigrant vote, Chowdhury adds.

"If councillors (here) know that...Bangladeshis would probably be more excited about voting where it makes sense to them."

Chatterjee agrees trust is a big factor in encouraging active civic participation.

"As long as there's honesty and transparency around what is possible and what is not, I think people are more willing to engage," she says.

In the 2006 municipal elections, Chatterjee helped TCH organize an alternative voting system for residents of Lawrence Heights, a high-rise community in northwest Toronto. Voting stations were set up in the lobbies of designated apartment buildings, allowing registered voters to cast their ballot on the way home. It proved an easy, accessible way to get people to vote.

"We need to figure out better ways of capturing people's imaginations around public services and the system that governs that," she says. "It's ironic that municipal voting turn out is so low, given that that's the closest level of government to people. We have to figure out as a society how we deliberately begin to start designing more inclusive processes for engagement."

Immigrants will cast their vote, she adds, if they think there's a possibility that their circumstances can change as a result of voting.

"When you genuinely engage with people and are trying to hear what their concerns are, and genuinely trying to problem solve...that changes the dynamic completely, and people really want to start getting involved."