**Voting in Controversy: A Critical Analysis of the Canadian Arab Youth Vote in the 2015 Federal Election**

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the Canadian Arab youth votes in the federal election of 2015 through the lens of critical race theory and the literature on age-ism and Islamophobia. First, we investigate mainstream academic theories about ethno-cultural youth political decision-making as they pertain to voting, and then investigate how such theories can be critically re-evaluated in light of the literature on constraining structures. We then examine some of the most provocative elements of the 2015 election campaign, and analyze how Canadian Arab youth responded, why, and how their decisions were informed by and informed the greater literature on ethnic minority youth voting. In this process, we ask: what concepts might help us better understand this rising demographic, its political animus, and its significance for Canadian politics? Of great interest in this paper is whether voter apathy historically reported for young people and ethno-cultural communities continued to hold in the 2015 federal election. We critically interrogate what the 2015 federal election meant to Canadian Arab youth, and identify the predominant political priorities for young Arab Canadians through the findings of structured focus groups. Our results indicate that Arab Canadian youth were highly engaged with the election which they felt largely revolved around stereotypes of Canada's Arab and Muslim communities. Due to the perceived efficacy of their vote and an animated defiance of imposing structures, apathy among Arab youth was the exception rather than the norm.

**Keywords:** Canadian Arab youth, ethnic minority youth, youth political participation, youth voting behavior, immigration, xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia, childism, critical race theory.

**Résumé:** Cet article analyse les votes de la jeunesse Arabe Canadienne lors des élections fédérales de 2015 en utilisant la théorie critique des races, ainsi que les littératures sur l'âgisme et l'islamophobie. Premièrement, nous étudions les théories académiques principales sur la prise de décision politique de la jeunesse ethnoculturelle via le vote et nous observons comment ces théories peuvent être réévaluées de manière critique grâce aux études sur les structures contraignantes. Nous examinons ensuite certains des éléments qui ont fait le plus débat pendant la campagne électorale de 2015 et analysons les réactions de la jeunesse Arabe Canadienne. Nous nous basons sur les études portant sur le vote des jeunes de minorité ethnique afin d'étudier les décisions de vote de la jeunesse Arabe Canadienne. De fait, nous posons la question suivante : quels concepts peuvent nous aider à mieux comprendre ce groupe démographique en expansion, sa motivation politique et son importance pour la politique Canadienne? En particulier, cet article examine si l'apathie historique des jeunes électeurs et des communautés ethnoculturelles s'est manifesté pendant l'élection fédérale de 2015. Nous interrogeons de

manière critique ce que l'élection fédérale de 2015 a signifié pour la jeunesse Arabe Canadienne et nous identifions ses priorités politiques grâce aux conclusions tirées de groupes de discussion structurés. Nos résultats indiquent que la jeunesse Arabe Canadienne était très engagée dans l'élection, et que selon elle, cette élection tournait en grande partie sur les stéréotypes des communautés arabes et musulmanes du Canada. L'apathie de la jeunesse Arabe Canadienne était donc l'exception plutôt que la norme car cette jeunesse a perçu l'efficacité de son vote, ce qui lui a permis de défier les structures imposées.

**Mots-clés:** jeunesse Arabe Canadienne, jeunes de minorité ethnique, la participation des jeunes en politiques, le comportement des jeunes aux élections, immigration, xénophobie, racisme, Islamophobie, l'enfantisme, la théorie critique de la race.

**Introduction**

The October 2015 Canadian federal election was an historic national event due in large part to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's polarizing policies. Harper instituted limitations on media access, militarized Canadian foreign policy (shifting Canada's internationalist peace-keeping mandate to a focused hard power mandate in select locales important to the US' War on Terrorism), expanded Canada's anti-terrorism provisions, put stricter constraints on free speech, drastically reduced public funding of scientific inquiry and the arts, and fear mongered prolifically about Islam and the impact of the regional politics of the Middle East on domestic concerns in Canada. A testament to the importance of the 2015 Canadian federal election was the voter turnout, which was the highest since the 1993 federal election, with approximately 17.6 million of 25.6 million (69.49%) registered voters voting (Elections Canada 2015).[1]

Plagued by these and other controversies, the Conservative Party of Canada used fear-based rhetoric to build a campaign platform on security and 'Canadian values' with the goal of securing a fourth mandate. Several old and newly formed political organizations mobilized grassroots support for a country-wide push-back against the Conservatives' divisive policies and rhetoric. Left and right-wing organizations and lobby groups encouraged Canadians of all stripes to exercise their right to vote and, in the process, to revitalize individual and collective political engagement for the sake of the health of Canadian democracy. The election, therefore, became a referendum vote on the Conservative government. Given the galvanizing impact of the campaign's controversies, and the nature of the electoral first-past-the-post system in Canada which threatened to split the center-left vote between the Liberal Party, New Democratic Party, and Green Party, many Canadians voted strategically either for, or against Conservative policies. As a consequence of strategic voting and democratic mobilization among groups such as Leadnow, the Liberal Party of Canada won a majority government mandate.

In the middle of this storm sat Canadian Arab youth who were, at once, marginalized by the political system and simultaneously spotlighted as a core constituency directly affected by the structural racism, age-ism/childism, and Islamophobia that made the Conservative campaign viable in the first place. The combative nature of the Conservative government's policy prescriptions awakened not only the Muslim community writ large, notably evident in the creation of the 'Canadian Muslim Vote' movement, but also the Canadian Arab community, including the youth population.

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a critical analysis of the Canadian Arab youth vote in 2015 by reading their vote through the lens of critical race theory and the literature on age-ism and Islamophobia. We first investigate mainstream academic theories about ethno-cultural youth political decision-making as it pertains to the vote, and then investigate gaps in the analysis of such theories in light of critical literatures. We then examine some of the most provocative elements of the 2015 election campaign and how Canadian Arab youth responded, and why, and how their decisions were informed by and inform the greater literature on ethnic minority youth voting. In this process, we ask: what concepts might help us better understand this rising demographic, its political animus, and its significance for Canadian politics?

Of great interest in this paper is the investigation into whether the voter apathy historically reported for young people and ethno-cultural communities continued to hold in the 2015 federal election. We critically interrogate what the election meant to Canadian Arab youth, and identify the predominant political priorities for young Arab Canadians through the findings of structured focus groups. Our results indicate that Arab Canadian youth were highly engaged with the issues of the election which they felt largely revolved around stereotypes of Canada's Arab and Muslim communities. Due to the perceived efficacy of their vote and an animated defiance of imposing structures, apathy among Arab youth was the exception rather than the norm. Campaign rhetoric pushing Islamophobic and xenophobic ideas and policies had an impact on Canadian Arab youth, who tended to vote strategically as an ethnic minority bloc and tended to see their social and economic futures in Canada and beyond being written by the ascent or diminishment of such ideas and policies. The election was, therefore, important for Arab youth in both identity and economic terms.

**Critical Perspectives on Ethnic Minority Youth Voter Behaviour**

The current literature in Canada points to a number of factors that explain voter behaviour, ranging from socio-demographics, values, issues, candidate evaluations, and campaign effects (Anderson and Stephenson, 2011: 27). Socio-demographic factors, including income, education, and age, are among key explanatory factors to voting behaviour and voting turnout. In Canada, for example, low voter turnout among youth may be at least partially due to the fact that teaching young people about the importance of voting and political participation is not a high priority for secondary or post-secondary public education (Hughes and Sears, 2008); although there are

some indications that this is improving, especially for privileged students with access to community services (Bickmore, 2014).

Research into immigrant voter turnout is mixed. Among new immigrants (those living in in a country for less than 10 years), researchers studying Europe and the United States have found that new immigrants tend to vote less than non-immigrants, and that immigrants of non-European ethnic origin(s) are even more less likely to vote (see Tossuti, 2007: 9). These findings seem to be least partially reflected in Canadian data as well. The existing academic literature on Canadian elections has examined immigrant/ethnic minority voting behaviour by looking at which parties immigrants and minorities tend to vote for, their level of voter turnout and engagement in elections, why immigrants vote, and what motivates them to participate in elections.

Some early studies found that immigrants and Canadian born voters had similar turnout rates (Chui et al. 1991). More recent studies by Elections Canada (2007: 7) on the 2000 and 2004 elections, however, found that new immigrants - particularly those who are young - had lower rates of voter turnout (also see Tossutti 2005; and, Nevitte et al. 2000: 161 for 1997 elections). Among new immigrants, the Canadian literature focuses on factors that made them less likely to vote, including shorter periods of residence in Canada, lower age, lower income levels, lower educational attainment, and lower attachment to Canada (Ibid). Tossutti (2005) found no differences across ethno-cultural communities and concluded that all immigrants, regardless of place of birth, tended to vote less than Canadian-born citizens. Lapp's (1999) study of municipal and provincial elections found the opposite, that there were marked variations among immigrant groups of different backgrounds. Given these differences, the importance of exercising caution in drawing conclusions that immigrants *qua* immigrants are a viable category for the analysis of shared behaviours including voting behaviour is underscored, not least to avoid problematically homogenizing immigrants as singular blocs (see Abu Laban, 2002).

As it stands, however, there is a general consensus in the literature that youth regardless of ethnic background are less likely to vote than their elders (see Rubenson et al. 2004). Anderson and Stephenson, however, argue that it is still unclear why Canadian youth turnout is lower (Anderson and Stephenson, 2011:27). Researchers know even less about the political decision-making of new immigrant voters who are young. Based on assessments of the 2000 and 2004 elections, Tossutti (2007) found that immigrant youth are less likely to vote than Canadian-

born youth. She adds that there can be great variation in political apathy or low voter turnout across different ethno-cultural communities (Tossutti, 2007: 19). White's study (2015: 16) notes that immigrants raised in Canada have no discernible differences to voters who were born in Canada, but that new immigrant voters who arrive as adults do carry vestiges of political socialization from outside Canada. To explain low turnout among youth in Canada (see Rubenson et al. 2004: 416–17) and the UK (see Wattenberg, 2003), researchers have argued that youth are less interested and/or informed about politics and tend to consume less news than older generations. Others contend that youth tune out of politics because of information overload in an era of globalized news and online media (O'Neill, 2004:2-5).

Regardless of the reasons for their low voter turnout/participation, Canadian youth who turn voting age, which from 1867 to 1970 was 21, and is now 18 years of age (Gulliver and Harriot, 2015), are nonetheless expected to participate in the country's political life. Participation in formal politics, in particular, such as exercising the right to vote, is treated as both a political and an ethical duty which helps to protect the spirit of democratic life and a vibrant public sphere in Canada. Yet, it is in this context that double standards emerge: on the one hand, low youth participation in Canadian political life is lamented by researchers as a problem for the health of Canada's democratic future and, on the other hand, low political engagement among youth (and, in particular minority youth, as we will see) is reductionistically regarded as an intrinsic feature of their political subjectivity. Age-ism, which denies children the ability to self-govern until they come of age, thus minimizes youth by questioning their agency to make informed decisions. Under these conditions, those under 18 disappear, and those over 18 have few spaces that encourage them to engage in democratic life.

For Guillver and Herriot (2015), one of the main issues that contributes to this double-standard is how political rights are arbitrarily provided at a certain age, thus keeping those below the cut-off age in a state of liminality and inconsequence:

> [H]istorical and contemporary challenges to the minimum voting age demonstrate how the notion of youth as full participants in formal democracy is continually contested. Much of the argument about youth political participation rights are in fact broader disputes on what traits constitute youth subjectivity. If a central tenet of being young is being apolitical, then granting political participation rights would substantially alter the definition of youth (208).

In many cases, systematic restraints youth face reduces their confidence in the efficacy of their vote and/or the practice of voting. Using focus groups and a bottom-up study of first time voters in the UK, Henn et al. (2002) argue that youth in general are very much interested in politics and political issues, but remain 'engaged sceptics' because of their lack of faith in the democratic process, their perceived inability to transform political outcomes, or their low opinion about the quality of options in choosing political representatives. This is consistent with other qualitative studies of youth and political participation that have found that youth do not regard politics as speaking to their interests, and as a consequence, politics has less meaning for them (Bhavnani 1994). It is qualitative analysis that adds critical insight to the nuances of youth political perceptions that would be otherwise inaccessible. As Henn et al. (2002) argue, quantitative studies that solely examine cross comparative data based on attitudinal surveys or voter turnout will fail to capture the nuance of the apparently incontrovertible nature of youth political apathy. A study by Elections Canada in fact asked Canadian youth who did not vote the following question: "It has often been observed that young people are less likely to vote than older people. Why do you think this is?" (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003). Responses tended to fall into two themes: first, the feeling that the political system did not integrate them well; and second, a lack of trust in politics, politicians, and process that leads to apathy (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003).

To be sure, low voter turnout among youth is also caused by the lack of congruency between campaign issues and the lived reality for youth. Many youth also do not feel equipped with the requisite knowledge to make an informed voting decision, which is partly the result of failures within educational institutions (as mentioned above). Youth also face barriers to exercising their vote due to procedural issues, such as where and when the voting is held, how voter cards are acquired for young people moving from residence to residence or region to region (e.g. for work or school), and working in minimum wage jobs (which therefore makes it difficult to miss/leave work) during voting hours. Finally, uninformed youth voters are influenced by candidate popularity and peer pressure (Dudash and Harris 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

It should be noted, however, that youth can also become activated by structural impediments standing in the way of their political involvement, and thus do see activities such as voting as a means to change the way the political system operates (Johnson, 2002). Researchers in the American context have found that efficacy - or the perception among young voters of the

effectiveness of particular political actions, such as voting - can shape whether or not youth will vote (Dudash and Harris, 2011). Political socialization - or how youth describe their voting experiences and how they see their relationship with political processes and politics – also shapes their political engagement with such practices (Dudash and Harris, 2011).

Interest in voting among youth in the study by Dudash and Harris (2011), for example, was shaped by a sense of duty, by the perceived importance of expressing one's views on how government should be run, and by a desire to access and mobilize rights. The researchers found that during the 2000 and 2004 US elections, different generations of voters perceived the vote similarly, but responded in divergent ways to their perceptions. Students aged 18 – 30 and people over 30 years of age expressed a similar lack of efficacy in voting (2011). In this context, however, the young people in their study responded mainly with self-interest, whereas older generations focused on community and getting involved. Youth, therefore, had very little faith in the formal political system and turned inward, and this resulted in a lower voter turnout for this demographic and less engagement with them by political representatives. The US Presidential election in 2008, however, adopted a different narrative and raised interest among younger generations of voters, particularly from ethnic and youth communities who saw an opportunity to elect the first African-American president (Ibid.).

*Ethnic Minority Youth Voters and the Arab Community in Canada*

The political participation of visible and ethnic minorities in Canada has been understudied and undertheorized, and the same can be said of Canadian Arab voting. The Canadian Arab community is part of what Bilodeau and Kanji (2010: 65) label as the "new immigrant voters" in Canadian elections, referring to non-European Canadian immigrants arriving after the 1960s. Moreover, while the Canadian Arab community boasts deep roots in the Prairies and Maritimes, dating back to the early 1900s, the majority of the Arab community has only lived in Canada since the 2000s. The Arab community is, therefore, a relatively young immigrant community, although it is now one of the fastest growing ethnic minority groups coming to Canada. In 2010, immigrants from Arab countries collectively accounted for 12.4% of total migration to Canada, second only to the Philippines (13%), and ahead of China and India (10% each) (CAI, 2013). The 2016 Census found that Arabic language usage in homes has

increased 30% since the 2011 Census, second only in growth to the Tagalog (Filipino) language (Press, 2017).

The Canadian Arab community has only recently shown a latent desire to become a more influential community in Canadian political life. This may soon change, however, due to a higher number of Canadian immigrants coming from source countries in the Arab region undergoing active transition and transformation and, perhaps more importantly, because many political issues in Canada seem to have a direct or indirect impact on the sense of belonging Arab Canadians possess in Canada. Many believe that this raises the stakes for them if they decide not to exercise their right to vote.

Recent studies have, indeed, problematized the assertion that ethnic minorities and immigrants are less active voters. Bevelander and Pendakur (2009) suggest that ethnicity has very little to do with explaining voting behaviour when compared to demographic factors and social capital. Similar studies purport that ethnicity has no impact on voting behaviour (see Jedwab 2006). Conversely, Rubenson et al. (2004: 412) found that in the 2000 election, recent immigrants were more likely to vote than immigrants who had been in the country longer and more than citizens born in Canada (see also Anderson and Black, 2008: 56–57). In some cases, Black (2011) found that the political participation rates of immigrant Canadians exceeded that of other Canadians. Hence, the view that new immigrants are apathetic about politics does not bear out as voter turnout among them appears to be strong, or at least on the rise.

Less frequently addressed in this literature are the structural and institutional impediments imposed on ethnic minority and immigrant youth voters which shape their ability to be politically engaged. These factors include societal assumptions and prejudices towards such young people, first, as minorities, and, second, as youth. Age-ist and childist attitudes (discussed above) result in children and young people being seen as possessions until they come of age; at which point, for Arab youth as well as other minorities, their minimization in the public sphere often becomes justified further (or first) by other –isms, including racism (Young-Bruehl, 2012). Widespread racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia have a profound impact upon the ability of ethnic minority youth in Canada to enact change through their vote. Hence, ethnic minority youth are effectively 'semi-citizens' in Canadian society and are rarely celebrated for their contributions (Cohen 2009; Gulliver and Herriot 2015).

Indeed, racism and racialization are not confined to the micro-level thoughts and behaviours of individuals, but are central to the status quo maintenance of many political, legal, economic, and social institutional systems (Parker and Lynn, 2012). Ethnic minority youth in Canada (and elsewhere) have impeded access to procedural (e.g. due process) and substantive rights (civil and human) and continue to struggle against the oppression of existing social, political and legal power structures. Core areas of concern for these communities include segregation, ghettoization (e.g. on First Nations reservations), confronting gentrification in their communities, transforming immigration law and the ways that immigration cases are adjudicated, changing how language is regulated, expanding equal opportunity and equity in education, and increasing working conditions and workers' rights (Parker and Lynn, 2002).

Finally, whereas many ethnic minority adults realize the importance of political engagement for their own survival and community advancement often through trial and error, many minority youth face unique challenges arriving at these realizations early on or before election campaigns, or making connections regarding the impact of past campaign effects (Anderson and Stephenson, 2011). In particular, recent campaigns in Canada mobilizing racialized views of society, such as differentiating "Arab-ness" or Islamic self-expression from a constructed Canadian norm, essentially take aim at ethnic minority youth such as Canadian Arab youth. Mix these conditions with youths' frequent lack of familiarity with democratic processes (given, for example, homeland authoritarian reference points) and ethnic youth enfranchisement becomes limited in a concrete sense.

**Contextualizing the 2015 Canadian Federal Election: Open and Hidden Sub-texts of Racism and Islamophobia Capitalized Upon during the Campaign**

The Stephen Harper-led Conservatives advanced a number of policy measures aimed at curbing terrorism and domestic political violence against state and society, and championed secularism, but often in a vein and with a discourse that seemed to target and single out the religion of Islam in the process. During their last term in office, the Conservatives passed a law that allowed the government to unilaterally revoke Canadian citizenship, without any independent review, from people convicted of crimes of terrorism, espionage, and treason when they are born outside of Canada and/or hold citizenship in another country. This bill (Bill C-24 - *Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act*) was made law in June 2014 and came into effect on May 29, 2015. Critics

argued that Bill C-24 effectively created two tiers of citizens: those who, because they were born in Canada, were protected from deportation and exile, and those who could not enjoy such protections because they were born outside of Canada and/or held dual citizenship (Dicks, 2015; Thompson, 2014). The critical issue is that Arabs and Muslims are often immigrants and are more likely to be convicted of terrorism-related offenses compared to people of other races, nationalities, and religions (Kutty 2015). Moreover, Bill C-51, the *Anti-Terrorism Act* (ATA), was enacted on June 18, 2015 and expanded the mandate and power of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) in areas such as intelligence gathering and targeting and undermining potential plots, a role traditionally held by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The ATA also criminalized the use and dissemination of information considered terrorist propaganda. So, broadly defined, it criminalized the promotion of terrorism, which could include the prosecution of sympathizers of militancy, and lowered the legal requirements necessary for CSIS surveillance from 'will carry out' an act of political violence to 'may commit' such an act. The final provision therefore widened the arrest rate, but not necessarily the conviction rate (a problem currently plaguing the UK's Prevent system - see Dodd, 2016).

Four months before the 2015 federal election, also on June 18 2015, the Canadian Parliament passed the *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act*. This law banned practices that were already considered illegal under the Canadian Criminal Code such as forced marriages, so-called 'honour' killings, and polygamy. Given the rhetoric that built support for the Bill and the discourse surrounding its passage through the House of Commons, many observers noted that the Act was meant to be anti-Sharia in form, intent, and effect (Kutty 2015). This law provided the legitimacy for another controversial measure proposed by the Harper Conservatives during the election, a "barbaric cultural practices" telephone hotline that would allow people to report to the police any suspected practice deemed an offense under the new law. This measure was code for the allusion that the hotline would increase prosecution of barbaric practises ostensibly arising from the Muslim community.

On June 19, 2015, a day after the passage of the *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act*, the Conservative Government tabled another bill called the *Oath of Citizenship Act*. The Bill mandated that applicants for Canadian citizenship must reveal their faces during the citizenship oath ceremony. This federal motion was advanced a few days after Bill 62 – the *Religious Neutrality Bill* was introduced in Quebec. This latter bill sought a ban on religious

face-coverings for all public servants and citizens who wanted to access government services in the province of Quebec. The *Oath of Citizenship Act* was seen by many as an attempt to stultify a recent Federal Court of Canada ruling that made it unlawful for the Government to force a citizen to remove her face veil when taking the oath of citizenship. Many within the Arab and Muslim community felt that the federal and provincial policies were explicitly targeting Muslim women wearing the niqab.

It is in this highly-charged and controversial political context that Canadian Arab youth felt that the 2015 election was existential for them. The campaign had been built on threat perceptions based on markers of ethno-cultural identity, mistrust, Islamophobia, and on the questioning of some Canadians' rights to enjoy the core values and principles of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Arab youth became widely politicized and felt that their vote was critical for the maintenance of Canadian values favoring social justice. We discuss these dynamics in turn.

## Methodology: Focus Groups

In determining and explaining Canadian Arab youth voter turnout in the 2015 federal election, we conducted select focus groups in major Canadian cities to get more qualitative data on our findings. Focus groups were recruited using Facebook and other social media platforms. We did not advertise the theme of our discussions in order to avoid selection bias of those who are politically engaged. Instead, we advertised the meetings as dinners supporting research-based discussions. To incentivize participants and ensure attendees, we offered dinner and raffled prizes comprised of gift cards to popular retailers. The specific topic was revealed while we gathered participant consent at the start of the discussions. Focus groups were comprised of approximately 8 to 10 youth at a time and a total of 70 participated. Thirty-eight participants were women and 32 participants were men. All focus group attendees were between the ages of 18 and 29 years of age. We were not permitted to find out more demographic information due to constraints imposed by the University of Waterloo's Office for Research Ethics. Census data and the secondary literature confirm that most Canadian Arab youth come from middle-class backgrounds[2] and, compared to the general Canadian population, are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree or higher.[3]

The focus groups were held in Kitchener-Waterloo and Hamilton, two cities in southern Ontario. According to the 2016 Census, the Kitchener-Waterloo area has a combined population of more than 523,894 people (Statistics Canada, 2016b), as well as two universities and a college that attract students from across southern Ontario. Within Kitchener-Waterloo, 6,560 individuals reported that Arabic was a language spoken in the home (which is 1.3% of the total population). This proportion of Arab residents is also reflective of the national average. Canada's population in 2016 was 35 million, with 486,530 (at 1.4%) reporting Arabic as a language spoken in the home. Kitchener-Waterloo residents identify their ethnic ancestry from across the 22 Arab states, but with slightly less North African Arabs, who tend to settle in Quebec. The Kitchener-Waterloo area has both Muslim and Christian Arab communities, as evidenced by the presence of a number of mosques and churches serving the Arab communities.[4]

The 2016 Census reported that 6,295 Hamilton residents spoke Arabic at home (1% of the population). According to the 2011 National Household Survey, there were 7,075 people of Arab descent in Hamilton, out of a total population of 536,719. Most members of this community are of Middle Eastern descent, with Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt being the top three countries of origin (Dajani, 2014b). Canadian Arabs accounted for 8.7% of the visible minority population in Hamilton, after South Asians (21.5%), Chinese (10.6%), Black (20.1%), Filipino (9%) and Latin Americans (9.2%) (StatisticsCanada 2016c). Similar to the Kitchener-Waterloo area, Muslim and Christian Arab communities are well represented in Hamilton.[5]

Our focus groups lasted approximately an hour to an hour and a half for each group. Our questions were designed to uncover potential motivations for voting in the 2015 federal elections. The literature suggests that youth are unlikely to vote because they do not feel elections are a meaningful process that matter to them personally. Hence, our first question was: Canada voted in a federal election in October 2015. What issues were most important to you? Since the literature on voting behaviour tends to focus on identity or ethno-cultural background to explain voting motivations, we sought to discover more about this thesis in the second question: Did your Arab identity shape your views about these election issues? The literature suggests that youth voters are less interested in formal politics like voting, but are politically engaged in other ways, so our third question asked: During the elections, did you do anything to be engaged? Finally, the 2015 election had been seen as a tight race between the three Canadian parties, with last minute voting changes due to strategic voting to remove the incumbent Prime

Minister Harper (See Pammett and Dornan, 2016). To determine young Canadian Arab perceptions about the political issues before and during the campaign, we asked:  Stephen Harper was Prime Minister for ten years. What issues during his tenure were relevant to your generation as Arab-Canadians? Our four questions were as sterile as possible so as to not contain suggestive questions that lead to predictable or partisan answers. At the same time, we could not sustain youth interest if we did not have some focused questions. To standardize the process, we asked the same questions of all 70 youth participants.

**Findings**

Several themes emerged from our focus groups. The vast majority of the participants claimed they voted in the 2015 federal election. Youth who indicated they did not vote in the election emphasized that they did not feel informed enough to vote. As focus group administrators, we sensed a mild level of apathy among the youngest and least informed of the youth participants; however, youth over twenty years of age were either open to being persuaded to vote at the time by family members or peers, or felt that not voting was unconscionable given what they saw as the provocative and divisive Conservative platform.

*Salience of Threat Perceptions*

Beyond debates about voter behaviour or voter turnout of immigrants and youth, a number of studies look at the aspects of campaigns and events that can motivate and energize particular communities and constituencies, such as youth, to participate in elections. Interestingly, Cho, Gimpel, and Wu (2006) illustrate how communities that feel politically threatened can sometimes have higher levels of political engagement. When communities feel threatened, in-group identities and solidarity can strengthen, motivating them to be more politically engaged (see Gump and Kulik 1997; Lowenstein et al. 2001). Consequently, political mobilization is a direct response to the degree of threat and discrimination that a group experiences. In the United States, Suleiman (2006) found that Arab Americans have lower political participation and voting compared to other ethnic groups, and tend to focus on their work, personal lives, family, and religious matters. What was found in this study, however, is that when their interests are threatened, Arab Americans tend to mobilize and engage in politics (Suleiman 2006). Arab Americans are not particularly unique in this regard, and the broader literature on voting

recognizes that voters generally tend to be uninformed and pay less attention to issues than one would expect (see Blais et al. 2009: 256).

The first finding from our study indicates that Arab youth voting behaviour was shaped by visceral and political perceptions of threat. Many participants alluded to the key issue that captured their attention: a sense that their citizenship was being threatened by the Conservative Party's existing and proposed policies, and the perception that if the Conservative Party was to win the 2015 federal election, their lives would be negatively affected. To our surprise, many of the youth were highly engaged with the public debate over the meanings of Canadian citizenship in light of the various bills promoted by the Harper government before and during the election campaign. This sentiment was succinctly captured by one focus group participant who said that the 2015 election centered around differentiating what and who is truly Canadian, and about debating whether a 'real Canadian' has a particular personality or culture. This individual argued that people had turned their loyalties towards the Liberal Party because the Liberals said that a Canadian can be anyone: a Canadian "can be a Muslim from Syria, someone from China…It can be anyone." This sentiment was reiterated across different focus groups.

In the minds of many Canadian Arab youth, Bill C-51 (and the ATA) encouraged Islamophobia and, in doing so, racialized and securitized them. Arab youth considered the introduction and passing of Bill C-51 into the ATA as a direct threat to their ability to invoke citizenship rights, provisions, and protections. One attendee captured this sentiment, saying, "[the] most important thing to me [during the election] was [the issue of] Bill C-51" because it was turning Arab youth into second class citizens, adding that because of it, "I scratched out the Conservatives right away." This threat perception undermined the tendency among this youth demographic to be apathetic. As one participant noted: "This year was my first year voting and I think it was because I was so annoyed with that Bill [C51] passing…[I thought that] this guy [PM Harper] cannot sit in office for another year, I need to vote! I think it was also the first time that on Facebook and social media I was so political…I'm usually never political, but [this time] I was posting all these things about Harper versus NDP or Trudeau." Another participant believed that Bill C-51 was a core issue because "I felt it would directly influence the Muslim and Arab community."

One participant helped to further clarify the reasons Arab youth became mobilized in the 2015 election: "I think the biggest thing was the idea of tolerance, the whole Harper office

seemed to be going in the direction that was a little less tolerant, like a dictatorship in its nature; it's important to have a government that accepts all different groups and doesn't cater to one or the other." Another person perceived a responsibility to blunt the fear created by the Conservative government: "C-51 and all the fear and opportunities [that Prime Minister Harper] gave racists to actually speak against Muslims was scary." Use of 'culture war issues' by the Conservative government and by the Conservative Party during the election caused Arab youth to stringently evaluate Stephen Harper as a candidate for Prime Minister, to reduce their trust in Conservative representatives and the political system under their control, and to be more mobilized by issues (See Pammet and Dornan, 2016).

*Defending Ethno-Cultural Identity*

Following their prevailing belief that election rhetoric was racializing and securitizing them, Canadian Arab youth felt moved to defend their ethno-cultural identity through their vote. Several studies (Bevelander and Pendakur 2009; Jedwab 2006) found that people are not influenced by their ethno-cultural backgrounds during elections, but our findings challenge these conclusions. Our study found that Arab youth were mobilized to be politically active because they thought that there was a negative salience placed on Arabs as ethnic minorities. One focus group participant, for example, argued that many Arab voters sought to protect their ethno-cultural communit(ies) from the racism and prejudice: "I think this election put a spotlight on being Arab…[I felt the] need to do more, to show [the new government] that I want my rights heard." This person noted that controversies about Syrian refugees or the niqab were directly linked to and expanded negative stereotypes about "being Arab."

The apathy that is traditionally reported for ethno-cultural and immigrant communities, especially among those originating from authoritarian political systems, was mitigated among the Canadian Arab youth population during the 2015 election in order to defend people of Arab origin who were perceived to be under direct attack.[6] One focus group attendee said that: "We, as Arabs, I feel, have just discovered how important our vote is, and the importance of our voice and taking part in the election." A different participant affirmed this sentiment, arguing that Arabs generally do not get involved in politics and that the Arab community lacks a critical mass which says: "let's get our voice heard this year." The situation, however, changes when "something happens in the news that really pokes the Arabs or the Muslim community, and then

they get out there." Canadian Arab youth believed that the 2015 federal election was a unique opportunity for Arabs and Arab youth to make their voices heard: "There was a sense," according to one participant, "that the 2015 elections were different and required Arab youth to get involved in ways they had not before." This person also said that the 2015 Election "was a stepping stone" for young Arabs, and expressed pride that the Arab community was becoming more politically engaged, noting that Arab students are taking an interest in studying political science and volunteering more "for the purpose of getting into government and participating."

Indeed, one of the issues that dominated the election and that had discouraged many new immigrant voters from supporting the Harper government was his use of the phrase "old stock Canadians." The euphemism for white privilege was compared starkly and existentially by ethnic minorities to the New Democratic Party and Liberal Party's emphasis on multiculturalism. The latter party may, in fact, have effectively used Harper comments to re-own the issue of multiculturalism policies that Pierre Elliott Trudeau had famously associated with the Liberal Party with decades ago. Our findings confirm the academic literature that demonstrates the importance of campaigns for voter behaviour (Anderson and Stephenson, 2011). One focus group participant noted that being Arab and non-Caucasian made the struggle over election issues all that more relevant: "[in] having an identity, other than just being white, you care more. If I were…a Caucasian Canadian I think it would be important to welcome everyone just for the greater good, but I probably wouldn't be as passionate." The perception that the 2015 election possessed a politically existential dimension was also shared among many focus group discussants. As one person commented: "The difference in how many Arabs voted in the last election versus this time is not because we all of a sudden care about politics but because I see how harmful and detrimental things can be to me…I'm going to vote to protect myself." We found that Canadian Arab youth's attachment to Canada and their need to protect Canadian values, as they saw them, was also crucial in explaining their interest in the election.

*Polarization of Arab Youth Partisanship*

The 2015 Election drove Canadian Arab youth to vote for the Liberal Party, which they perceived as most capable of defeating the Conservative Party. The Liberal Party was valued for the solidarity it seemed to evince for the Arab and Muslim communities. From a Canada-wide survey that we conducted of Canadian Arab youth from 12 major cities (n= 973),[7] we found that

77.9% who were eligible to vote did so in the 2015 Election. Among those who identified with a political party, 60.3% voted Liberal, 10.2% voted NDP, 2% voted Green, 0.2% voted Bloc Quebecois, 7.3% voted Other, and 5.6% voted Conservative. Although this strong commitment to the Liberal Party appears to support findings from other studies about immigrant voting patterns (Blais 2005; Bilodeau and Kanji 2010),[8] as we later describe, many Arab youth voted Liberal strategically, despite preferring the NDP platform.

The galvanizing nature of the Conservative platform was discernable during our focus group discussions. Participants highlighted the need to defy the perceived racialization of the campaign: "We were doing anything to get rid of them [Conservative Party]…[the campaign rhetoric was] out of control." This participant added that, as young people of an important ethnic minority in society, Arab youth felt that they had to "do something" more "than just sit on Facebook and complain about it posting statuses…I felt that our main priority was to take Harper out." It appeared, therefore, that Arab youth were polarized in favor of the Liberals and NDP, in direct response to threat perceptions with the goal to oust Prime Minister Harper from office. Many youths said that even though they preferred the NDP's stances, they strategically voted Liberal because they reasoned that the Liberals were more likely than the NDP to win over the Conservatives.

The mistrust and dissatisfaction expressed by Arab youth towards the Harper government during focus group discussions in February and March 2016, 4-5 months *after* the election, was palpable. Despite our sterile question that painted Stephen Harper as neutrally as possible, the young people continued to talk about the negative policies of Harper and their effects on the Arab Canadian community. One participant argued that the ways that Stephen Harper "dealt with national security and issues in the Middle East subjugated us [Arabs] and put us in a marginalized position." Dissatisfaction with the Conservative Party was also driven by perceptions that because of policy decisions and rhetoric, Stephen Harper and Conservative political representatives had marginalized segments of Canadian society. This was not what Arab youth voters were looking for; they wanted a government with an open-mind who embraced "diversity and [spoke with] political correctness." This view was poignantly summarized in the following way:

> I felt like [Harper] was very close minded…Anything that had to do with the
> Middle East, in general…he wouldn't support [Arabs there, or affirm protections

for Arabs in Canada by saying that:] 'we have so many Arabs in our country and they need to feel safe.' [Instead,] he just condemned what was going on…in the Middle East…It felt like your own government was against you, whereas now [in 2016] it feels like, if something happens, Trudeau says '[Arabs] are still Canadians, they're still your neighbors, and were raised here.' You feel support. I felt unsupported [with Harper] and like the government was against us.

*Islamophobic and Xenophobic Rhetoric and Policies Generate Mistrust Among Youth*

One of the central factors that caused Canadian Arab youth to mistrust the political campaign of the Harper Conservatives was their perceived Islamophobic and xenophobic policies and discourse. Articulated again and again was the sense that the Conservative Party was not willing to embrace diversity and that Stephen Harper was an Islamophobe and xenophobe and, therefore, unfit to lead Canada in all its diversity. Hence, whereas Harper was trying to champion a particular reading of Canadian values by arguing that many foreigners do not abide by such values, Canadian Arab youth argued that Harper's perceived intolerance to differences in cultures and practices among Canadians – in particular Conservative party attempts to paint Arabs and Muslims with a singular broad brush of stereotypes - were antithetical to Canadian values. In fact, for Arab youth, Harper's tenure was not marked by increased security for them, but rather the opposite, by increased fear-mongering of them as ethnic and religious minorities through stark and thinly-veiled Islamophobic language: "[Harper] planted fear in his citizens' hearts. Now people are scared of us."

Arab Canadian youth felt that the Conservative government's divisive policies galvanized the Arab vote against the Conservative Party. According to one participant: "I think a lot of people think that he [PM Harper] wasn't very accepting of a lot of Arabs or Muslims in general. People didn't want that in Canada and wanted a new person leading Canada rather than his one opinion." Another articulated the way that the Conservative Party lost touch with the pulse of the majority of Canadians:

He [Harper] was setting the bar that there is only one correct culture and one correct way of living in Canada…that goes against everything we as Canadians stand for as a diverse community…[such that] each is entitled to their own opinion and freedom of speech and religion. He was taking those basic rights and saying, 'no, you don't have the freedom to wear whatever you want, you don't have the freedom to follow your religion.' He was formulating opinions for others.

This view was further substantiated by the position of another youth: "I feel like he was

subconsciously implementing a prejudice and certain stereotype against Muslims…How can you talk about a religion and say it's a form of oppression when to some it's actually a form of liberation?"

*Voting for Social Justice*

Canadian Arab youth make active connections between social justice for the Arab/Muslim communities and social justice for other marginalized communities. By linking their vote to the expansion or contraction of social justice in Canada, and in seeing voting as a critical political technology that they possess, Canadian Arab youth exhibit emergent political subjectivities that support inclusive understandings of citizenship (Finn and Momani 2017). Arab youth are often acutely aware of how elitism, capitalism, and privilege prevent many people in Canada, Arabs included, from accessing their rights. They are also duly aware of the ways that capitalist structures, in particular, neglect the concerns of the lower and disenfranchised classes. Focus group participants felt that the Liberals were committed to addressing the issues that marginalized people face:

> I think there was a certain hierarchy that he [Prime Minister Harper]…implemented; the one percent wealthy at the top, the white and untouchables, then there's…everyone else that comes after, the middle class, the working class, the immigrants. I think that we are [] going into a phase where a lot of the immigrants are entering the middle class—they're starting to work, they're starting to have a voice. A lot of the tops of the hierarchy don't like the change; I think that's a huge difference we're noticing. It could affect us. We don't really know what's going to happen in the future or how they're going to respond to the change.

One person drew direct empathetic linkages between the observed social justice struggles of friends and similar struggles of other marginalized communities: "[Through] my experience living in Hamilton, I've had friends from all over, and most of them haven't lived in the nicest neighborhoods. So, [after seeing] low income families and the poverty rate of teenagers in Hamilton, the mistreatment of aboriginals, [these issues] were important to me [during the election]."

**Conclusion**

Canadian Arab youth voted for the Liberal Party of Canada (60%) as a strategy to oust the Conservative Party from government. Our study concurs with Bilodeau and Kanji (2010) that the Liberal Party's future fortunes may rest in its appeal to the new immigrant voter, particularly if the party is able to continue to make protecting ethnic tolerance and multiculturalism one of its core values. Our findings also support the argument that 'issue ownership' explains voting behavior (Petrocik 1996).

However, it is also very clear that campaign effects, socio-economic concerns, educational concerns, trust in politicians and Canada's political system (Anderson and Stephenson, 2011; Pammet and Le Duc, 2003), as well as structural racism, Islamophobia and xenophobia – all of which were exacerbated during Stephen Harper's terms as Prime Minister - played a profound role in determining the directions and strategies that Arab youth took to exercise their right to vote.   Our research supports the view that issue voting can take place in important elections. Moreover, this type of retrospective voting, where voters want to "throw the rascals out" (in this case, incumbent politicians), can be an important insight into Arab Canadian youth voting behaviour (see Anderson and Stephenson, 2011: 5). In particular, many Arab youth were driven by threat perceptions (e.g. those undermining Canadian multiculturalism and tolerance), and by their desire to defend their ethno-cultural identity. Hence, in the process, they expressed emergent and latent forms of political agency and participation (Finn and Momani, 2017).

This study also helps clarify some of the factors that motivate voter behaviour among Arab Canadian youth. Unlike their counterparts in other parts of the western world, Arab youth in Canada are not 'engaged sceptics', and they do not necessarily struggle while trying to integrate into the political system, or to identify with particular politicians and the political process. This demographic admits that when the political system embraces them, they are quick to have faith in it, and see themselves playing productive political roles. Conversely, when Arab youth perceive discrimination, they become politically mobilized in order to preserve and expand their place in society.

Finally, we find that perceived efficacy of the vote (for example, in Arab youth's willingness to vote when they might not otherwise vote) is tied significantly to the drive to initiate change in the formal political system and to protect ethnic minority populations from neglect by the state. The Liberal Party of Canada's conciliatory gestures towards Arabs and

Muslims, though often symbolic rather than substantive before October 2015, helped to galvanize strategic voting in its favour among Arab youth.

This study, however, is limited insofar as it was conducted within months of the election, and thus to some degree likely captures the "honeymoon" period for the Liberal Party as a new government openly and substantively addressing Arab and Muslim political interests (Dudash and Harris, 2011). A future study might find that Arab youth support for the Liberals has declined, or that the strategic vote made is re-evaluated in a new light.

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[1] Voter turnout in 2015 may have been even higher had voting system irregularities not been noted on election day. Many of Canada's First Nations peoples, for example, were unable to exercise their right to vote due to insufficient ballots at, at least, six voting stations: Onigaming First Nation, Shoal Lake, Siksika First Nation, Moose Cree First Nation, Split Lake First Nation, and Desnether-Missinippi-Churchill River (APTN 2015; Lum 2015; Rieger 2015).

[2] Income distribution within the Canadian Arab community peaks in the "Under $5,000" range, with 15% of the Canadian Arab community falling within this income bracket in comparison to 9% of the Canadian population. In general, the Canadian Arab community has higher rates within the lower income brackets, and lower rates within the higher income brackets, when compared to the Canadian average. Canadian Arabs have lower incomes than their Canadian counterparts, despite their higher rates of qualification and education. In 2010, the average annual income within the Canadian Arab community was at $32,653 in comparison with the national average annual income of $40,650 per annum. The only exception to this trend is found among the Egyptian Arab community in Canada, whose annual income averaged $43,521. Somali Arabs had the lowest average annual income ($24,182), among the Arab community. This trend is in accordance with a 2007 study of the Arab community in Canada by Statistics Canada, which stressed that Canadians of Arab descent were twice as likely as other Canadians to have a university degree, and have a lower annual income than other Canadians (average of $26,500 compared to $29,500 in 2000) (Dajani, 2014b; Statistics Canada 2007).

[3] The 2011 census shows that the vast majority (74%) of the Canadian Arab community, aged 25 to 64, has completed postsecondary education, compared to 64% of the general Canadian population. Sixty percent of Canadian Arabs hold university certificates, diplomas, or degrees at bachelor level or above in comparison to 40% of the general Canadian population (Dajani, 2014a).

[4] These include the Muslim Society of Waterloo and Wellington Counties Mosque, Kitchener Muslim Association of Canada Masjid, the Christian Arabic Church of Kitchener, and St. Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church.

[5] As evidenced by the existence of several religious centres such as the Umar Mosque, the Hamilton Downtown Mosque, the Hamilton Islamic Centre, the Muslim Association of Hamilton, the St. Mark's Syriac Orthodox Church, the St. Mina's Coptic Orthodox Church.

[6] We did not differentiate who, among the focus group participants, was born in Canada and who had immigrated to Canada, so we cannot clarify whether apathy was indeed higher among the youth that had immigrated.

[7] For the 2016 survey, we sampled among youth populations by walking around hang-outs, shish bars, cafes, restaurants, Arab supermarkets, and universities frequented by Arab youth by wearing t-shirts that said, "Arab and under 29? Earn $25". This action brought participants to our assistants to fill out the survey. As reimbursement for their time, youth were given a $25 gift certificate. In order to avoid selection biases, we did not approach places of worship. In total, we gathered 973 surveys.

[8] One of the most cited studies on new immigrant voters in Canada is the work of Blais (2005), who demonstrated that new immigrant voters, in addition to Catholics, tended to vote for the Liberal Party. Bilodeau and Kanji (2010) concurred and found that from 1965 to 2004, new immigrant voters were more likely to be loyal Liberal supporters

than Canadian-born voters. The Liberal Party's traditional success in-roads with immigrant communities changed in 2006 however when the Conservative Party courted ethnic voters in an outreach strategy shepherded by Conservative Minister Jason Kenney. As Marwah et al. explain, the Conservative party recognized that it could not win a majority without the increasingly populated urban and sub-urban centres and struck a unique balance of both courting ethnic votes while supporting policies that appealed to them like being tough on crime and supporting socially conservative values (2013:96). Gindengil et al (2009:19) showed how visible minorities (an imperfect proxy for new immigrant voters) had also turned their backs on the Liberal Party in 2004, partly in reaction to the sponsorship scandal. Hence, 'party mobilization' seemed to explain Conservative Party successes from 2004 to 2015 when it courted new immigrant voters (on this topic, see also: Taylor, Triadafilopoulos, and Cochrane, 2012; Bloemraad, 2006).