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Understanding the Electoral Participation Gap: A Study of Racialized Minorities in Canada

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Abstract

Racialized minorities constitute an increasingly substantial segment of modern electorates in Western democracies, in part driven by immigration. Analyzing data from the 2021 Canadian Election Study ($N = 9{,}496$) and yearly Democracy Checkup surveys between 2020 and 2023 ($N = 26{,}908$), we explore the significance of racial identity as a determinant of voter turnout. Our findings reveal stark disparities in electoral participation between the most racialized minority groups in Canada and the White majority. Except for Latino identifiers, Indigenous, Asian, Black, and Arab-identifying respondents all exhibit lower voting rates, with Black voters facing the most significant gap, nearly 16 percentage points below their White counterparts. The gap is particularly prominent among second-generation racialized Canadians, suggesting that newcomers to Canada exhibit relatively high levels of engagement compared to their children. Next, we explore three key individual factors that may contribute to the gap: differences in socioeconomics, psychological engagement, and mobilization and community embeddedness. We employ a linear decomposition technique to assess the contributions of these factors to the majority–minority participation gap. Our analysis underscores the potency of socio-economic and psychological models in explaining minority under-participation in the Canadian context. The mobilization and community embeddedness model, however, exhibits weak explanatory power. Despite these insights, a substantial portion of the participation differentials remains unexplained, suggesting the necessity for novel perspectives to understand gaps in the electoral participation of racialized electors.

Keywords

participation gap; psychological model; racialized minority; socio-economic model; voter turnout

1. Introduction

Electoral participation is a key mechanism in representative democracies. In addition to selecting representatives, they also create incentive structures that hold representatives accountable to their electors (Stimson et al., 1995). Despite their centrality, participation is far from universal in liberal democracies and, even more importantly, gaps exist across groups in participation across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups (Dalton, 2017; Leighley, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995). Various models have been developed that focus both on differential resources across groups as well as group-specific factors that can counteract limited resources. In this article, we draw on a uniquely large series of surveys collected by the Consortium on Electoral Democracy (C-Dem) which allows for large samples of various ethno-racial groups in Canada.

The Canadian context is useful to explore the sources of electoral participation. Canada is a highly diverse country. Almost one in four people are immigrants (either now with citizenship or currently permanent residents) according to the most recent census (Statistics Canada, 2022a). One in four people in Canada are also racialized minorities (referred to as visible minorities in the Canadian context), with about 30% born in Canada. South Asians make up the largest racialized group in Canada (about 7%), followed by Chinese Canadians (5%), and Black Canadians (4%; Statistics Canada, 2022a). Of communities born in Canada, the largest groups are Japanese-origin Canadians and Black Canadians. In addition to these racialized communities, Canada's colonial past also means that there are significant Indigenous communities within Canada's current boundaries, reported at 1.8 million people in the previous census (Statistics Canada, 2022a).

Despite this diversity, there is a limited amount of research that explores the electoral participation of racialized minorities in Canada. Some estimates suggest that racialized minorities were about 6 percentage points less likely than White Canadians to vote in federal elections, though this varied by group (Statistics Canada, 2020). Yet, it is not clear what factors cause these gaps. In this article, we mobilize theories in the larger comparative literature to test the factors that may lead to differential participation levels of various ethnic and racial minorities in Canada.

To do so, we analyze data from the 2021 Canadian Election Study ($N = 9,496$) and yearly Democracy Checkup surveys between 2020 and 2023 ($N = 26,908$). Drawing on a more direct measure of racial identity than has traditionally been asked in Canadian election studies, we show stark disparities in electoral participation between most racialized minority groups in Canada and the White majority. Except for Latino identifiers, Indigenous, Asian, Black, and Arab-identifying respondents all exhibit lower voting rates, with Black voters facing the most significant gap, nearly 16 percentage points below their White counterparts. The gap is particularly prominent among second-generation racialized Canadians, suggesting that newcomers to Canada exhibit relatively high levels of engagement compared to their children. We show that these gaps are largely driven by differential resources and levels of psychological engagement across groups.

2. Literature Review

The electoral participation of racialized minorities has received the most scholarly attention in the US, where persistent turnout gaps have been documented between the White majority and Black, Latino, and Asian voters (see, for example, Fraga, 2018; Leighley & Nagler, 2013; Lien, 2004). These gaps have often been

attributed to lower levels of socio-economic resources among racialized communities. At the same time, models that focus on social resources and group identity, often developed specifically to explain the participation of minoritized communities, often point to a more nuanced explanation, where community-based resources like social networks or group consciousness can counteract a lack of more traditional resources. In this section, we review how socio-economic, psychological, and mobilization and community embeddedness models may contribute to—or counteract—inequalities in electoral participation.

In Canada, there are relatively few studies that examine these differences. In general, research documents lower levels of participation in elections among some racial and ethnic groups, especially for first-generation citizens and more recent immigration groups (Gidengil & Roy, 2016; Harell, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2022b; Tossutti, 2007). Previous studies tend to attribute inequalities in participation largely to differential socio-economic resources (Bevelander & Pendakur, 2009; Tossutti, 2007) as well as time in the country to learn about and integrate into political life (Soroka et al., 2006). At the same time, there is some limited evidence that the effect of economic factors is more muted for immigrants than their native-born counterparts (Tossutti, 2007; White et al., 2006). Finally, Indigenous electors in Canada also have shown a consistent gap in participation in federal elections (Ladner & McCrossan, 2007; see also Soroka et al., 2006). Previous research strongly suggests that economic inequality is a major source of this gap (Harell et al., 2010). Our challenge here is to explore what factors contribute the most to explaining the overall gaps.

Resources are often at the heart of political participation, and they can take many forms. In their now classic civic volunteerism model, Verba et al. (1995) point to three types of resources that can be mobilized to facilitate engagement with politics: time, money, and civic skills. They add to this that it also takes interest, a psychological resource that can motivate action. And finally, they suggest that being embedded within social networks where you are more likely to be asked to participate increases the chances that you will. Their answer as to why some people participate less is that they cannot, because they lack the resources to do it; they do not want to, because they do not care about politics; or because nobody asked them (Verba et al., 1995, pp. 269–270; see also Schlozman et al., 2018). These resources vary across socio-economic groups, but also across ethnic and racial groups. Importantly, as the literature on minority political participation suggests, these resource inequalities can be counteracted by group resources and group identities. In this section, we review these three types of factors, how they are related to gaps in participation across racial and ethnic groups, and then situate the Canadian case in relation to these factors.

2.1. Socio-Economic Factors

Those with time, money, and civic skills are more likely to participate in politics, but these skills are not distributed equally across different socio-economic groups (Brady et al., 1995; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995). Education is a critical resource that provides individuals with the knowledge and cognitive skills necessary for effective political participation (Evans & Hepplewhite, 2022; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Income, property, and employment status also influence political engagement, as they exert an effect on the availability of both time and money to participate (Burns et al., 1997; Xu, 2005; Yoder, 2020). In a meta-analysis of factors promoting turnout, Smets and van Ham (2013, p. 349) conclude that education is one of the factors most often included to explain turnout, and it has one of the most consistent and largest positive effects. Other socio-economic factors had mixed results in their meta-analysis, with income being consistently related to turnout, but occupational status and social class showing less consistent results.

The socio-economic model of voting suggests that racialized minorities often have lower levels of resources due to socio-economic inequalities, especially education and income (Schlozman et al., 2018, p. 92; see also Leighley & Nagler, 2013; Verba et al., 1995). Such differences help explain overall gaps in participation, for example, between Latinos and African Americans, on the one hand, compared to non-Hispanic Whites in the US, on the other hand. These differences largely disappear, however, among similarly resourced people (Schlozman et al., 2018, p. 92). When a racial or ethnic group has overall fewer socio-economic resources, it restricts a group's capacity and willingness to engage in the political process. Such differences are key components that contribute to a participation gap between racialized minority groups and the majority population.

While not a socio-economic resource directly, it is also important to mention that age is a significant factor correlated with voter turnout (Bhatti et al., 2012; Blais, 2000). Young citizens are often less likely to vote due to their vulnerable socio-economic situation as well as a relative lack of political experience during this transitional period of life (Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2019; Pacheco & Plutzer, 2008). We expect, then, that lower voter turnout among racialized minorities compared to the White majority can be attributed to unfavorable socio-economic factors partly attributed to different age compositions of groups.

2.2. Psychological Model

While the socio-economic model focuses more on the ability to vote, the psychological model addresses the issue of motivation to vote. This model emphasizes the role of attitudes and psychological predispositions in explaining voter turnout (Smets & van Ham, 2013). Many studies have demonstrated that individuals who are psychologically engaged in politics are also more likely to participate than those who are less engaged (Mangum, 2003). Key factors such as political interest (Powell, 1986; Prior, 2005), political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), political efficacy (Karp & Banducci, 2008), partisanship (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982), and trust—both political and generalized (Bélanger & Nadeau, 2005; Cox, 2003)—have all been shown positively correlated with voter turnout.

While the Civic Voluntarism model focuses on interest and knowledge about politics, scholars of minority political participation tend to focus on how marginalized social identities structure psychological engagement with politics, as well as how the identities themselves can serve to either mobilize or demobilize. For example, social identity theory (SIT) sees identification with a group as a source of positive self-image. One tends to value those groups to which one belongs, and this can sometimes lead to thinking more negatively about those groups one does not belong, to maintain one's positive self-image (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT has been mobilized by scholars of minority political participation to explain how and when such identities can be mobilized. While effects vary, the most compelling evidence suggests that context matters when identities become salient. For example, Pérez (2015) shows that when strong Latino identifiers in the US are threatened, they become more likely to register to vote. Kranendonk et al. (2018) similarly demonstrate that in contexts where marginalized groups, such as Muslim immigrants in Western Europe, share a sense of common grievances, there is a higher likelihood of voting. However, this effect did not extend to identification with the country of origin, indicating that these processes may differ depending on the group and the type of identity involved.

One possible mechanism is proposed by Pantoja and Segura (2003), who show how politicized racial contexts can promote higher levels of political knowledge among threatened communities. Other research suggests that such processes may lead to lower levels of psychological engagement with politics. Racialized minorities, due to historical and contemporary perceptions and experiences of discrimination and exclusion, may hold a reduced sense of belonging to the national community (Döring, 2007), which happens more often among second-generation racialized groups (Soroka et al., 2006). Potochnick and Stegmaier (2020), for example, find that second-generation Latinos' political participation is as low as non-citizen Latinos. This alienation from mainstream society may not only reduce a sense of self-efficacy (Crocker & Major, 1989) and trust levels (Schildkraut, 2005) but also contribute to political disengagement (Hobbs & Lajevardi, 2019). Moreover, this lack of engagement is further exacerbated by the fact that political issues and campaigns frequently fail to address the specific concerns of these communities, leading to a perception that politics is irrelevant to their lives (Barreto, 2018; Jackman & Spahn, 2021).

2.3. Mobilization and Community Embeddedness

If having the resources and interest to participate is important, so is being embedded within networks that can facilitate participation. The mobilization model of voter turnout views participation as a social behavior influenced by norms and social pressure (Smets & van Ham, 2013). Citizens are more likely to vote when they are part of social networks where voting is the norm or when they are directly encouraged to vote by campaigners (Coulombe, 2023; Gerber & Green, 2000). Research shows that individuals with more extensive social networks (Putnam, 2000), regular attendance at religious services (Campbell, 2013), and membership in organizations (Radcliff & Davis, 2000) are more likely to participate in politics.

This model provides a valuable framework for understanding the electoral under-participation of racialized minority groups. Social networks and organizational involvement are crucial components of the mobilization model. Among racialized minorities, these networks may be less politically active or engaged, especially if minority communities have historically faced barriers to participation or hold a deep-seated distrust of the political system (Evangelist, 2022). At the same time, social networks of those who share one's background can be important sources of mobilization, though again these effects can vary across groups and identities (Kranendonk & Vermeulen, 2019). Community organizations have been a key factor in explaining mobilization among racialized minority communities. Tate (1991), for example, argued that churches and Black political organizations served as an alternative resource for Black Americans, boosting their participation to levels we would not expect, given a comparatively limited number of socio-economic resources at their disposal. She called these "group-based" resources. The importance of Black community groups, especially churches, has been a mainstay in finding Black voter engagement (see, for example, Liu et al., 2009).

Shared group identities can also serve as a group-level resource. In their classic work, Verba and Nie (1972) documented the Black-White participation gap but argued that Black Americans actually participated more than would be expected based on their level of socio-economic resources. They argued this was due to higher levels of group consciousness that could serve as a community resource. Group consciousness develops in part out of perceptions of the discrimination one's group faces as well as involvement within politics for the group (Masuoka, 2006). Conversely, experiencing less discrimination tends to decrease the salience of minority group identities (Chong & Kim, 2006).

Furthermore, political participation is not solely the result of individual attitudes or resources but also depends on targeted mobilization efforts and the context in which racial and ethnic groups find themselves. Racial context can provide strength in numbers while also creating incentives for parties and other actors to mobilize in an area (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Dancygier, 2017; Leighley, 2001). However, research indicates that racialized citizens are often overlooked by mobilization campaigns during election periods (Ramírez et al., 2018). Due to strategic considerations, political parties and candidates often focus their resources on more reliable voters and larger voting blocs. This means that some racialized minority voters, who are often younger and have less voting history, receive less attention from campaign outreach efforts (Barreto, 2018).

2.4. Canadian Case

How do these three types of resources play out in the Canadian case? Evidence from Canada indicates that racialized minorities continue to experience social and economic marginalization at higher rates than the rest of the population (Reitz & Banerjee, 2007; Skuterud, 2010), though this varies importantly across groups. In addition, given that racial diversity in Canada is partly driven by the selective immigration system in Canada, on some measures (like educational attainment), racial minority communities outperform their white counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2022c).

The distribution of key resources (like educational attainment) is not only driven by racial inequalities but intersects with the points-based immigration system driven by entry requirements for first-generation Canadians who prioritize education and other skills. Differential birthrates as well as immigration also lead to a different age structure among racialized minority groups. In Canada, racialized minorities are, on average, about seven years younger than the rest of the population (Statistics Canada, 2019). This younger demographic profile may further contribute to the under-participation of racialized minority groups because socio-economic resources are structured importantly by age.

With respect to psychological engagement in Canada, the evidence is mixed. Levels of interest and engagement tend to vary more by immigration status (Gidengil & Roy, 2016; Tossutti, 2007). Both Bilodeau and Kanji (2006) and Gidengil and Roy (2016) show that immigrants as a group are actually *more* interested and attentive to politics in Canada. Interestingly, Bilodeau and Kanji (2006) show the gap is greatest for those from traditional large European countries but decreases for more recent waves of immigration from countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Gidengil and Roy (2016) similarly show that non-"visible minority" immigrants are the most interested in politics while visible minorities, regardless if they are foreign-born or not, have similar levels of interest as native-born Whites. Furthermore, Bilodeau et al. (2020) show that interest in politics as well as turnout increases as people feel more accepted and have a sense of belonging in their provinces and Canada. This points to the importance of understanding psychological variables in relationship to both racialized experiences but also immigration background. More diverse immigrant waves have spent less time in the country but also may face more systemic barriers that push down their psychological engagement with politics, while second-generation racialized minorities may be less engaged as they have grown up with more (unmet) expectations of equal treatment. We thus expect that the lower voter turnout among racialized minorities compared to the White majority can be attributed to lower levels of psychological engagement in politics.

Finally, in Canada, less is known about any differential effects of community involvement on turnout. Studies of organizational involvement suggest that those of non-European descent are not clearly more or less

engaged than European-descent Canadians, though this varies by gender and ethnic background (Harell, 2017). There is evidence, however, of targeted efforts to mobilize ethnic and racial communities by political parties. As Bird et al. (2011, p. 27) argued, this is especially the case at the beginning of the 21st century as key urban ridings have become more competitive, and the Conservative Party of Canada has made concerted efforts to court this vote. Limited research documents the impact of these campaigns on voter turnout. Recent studies suggest that fielding co-ethnic candidates has minimal effect on turnout (Ie et al., 2023), though it can influence vote choice (Besco, 2019). Our expectations with respect to the effect of mobilization on participation gaps are mixed. On the one hand, racialized minorities' lower overall levels of participation may result from lower levels of mobilization via social networks, or differential embeddedness within Canadian political life due to immigration status. On the other hand, their level of participation may be improved with the importance of racial or ethnic identification.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Data

To investigate the role of racial identity in voter turnout, we draw on two primary data sources: the 2021 Canadian Election Study (Stephenson et al., 2022) and the yearly Democracy Checkup surveys (Harell et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023, 2024) conducted from 2020 to 2023. The 2021 Canadian Election Study comprises two distinct online surveys: a campaign-period rolling cross-section and a post-election follow-up. Our analysis focuses on respondents who participated in both waves, as our dependent variable—voter turnout in the most recent federal election—is measured in the post-election wave. After cleaning the dataset, we retain responses from 9,496 individuals, all of whom are Canadian citizens aged 18 or older.

The Democracy Checkup surveys, initiated in 2019 and conducted annually under the administration of C-Dem, provide additional cross-sectional data. For our study, we use data from the 2020–2023 waves, which include a key variable on respondents' ethnic identity. The Democracy Checkup dataset contains 26,908 valid individual observations.

For the subsequent analysis, the Canadian Election Study and Democracy Checkup data are combined, providing a robust dataset for examining voter turnout across different racial and ethnic groups in Canada. As the surveys were executed by the same research network (C-Dem) with many identical survey questions across datasets, we append subsequent cross-sections of respondents into a single dataset. Such alignment is crucial for examining the participation patterns of ethnic minorities, who are frequently underrepresented in surveys. This also ensures an ample minority sample size for a robust statistical analysis. In addition, we also incorporate fixed effects for surveys to account for potential variations arising from different survey contexts and timings, thus focusing our analysis on within-survey variations.

The combined dataset comprises 36,404 respondents, with the White majority representing 86.59%. Among racialized minorities, Asians are the most numerous at 8.99%, followed by Blacks at 1.44%, Indigenous at 1.22%, Arabs at 0.92%, and Latinos at 0.84%.

3.2. Key Variables and Measurement

The dependent variable in our analysis is voter turnout, measured as a binary indicator which captures whether respondents reported having voted in the most recent federal election. The independent variable is ethnic identity, categorized into six groups: White, Indigenous, Asian, Black, Arab, and Latino. Our analysis focuses on respondents who identify with a single ethnic group. Those with multiple identities are excluded from this study.

Additional covariates include socio-economic variables (age, gender, education, marital status, employment status, income, and property ownership), psychological engagement (political interest, political knowledge, partisanship, internal efficacy, external efficacy, institutional trust, and generalized trust), and mobilization and community embeddedness (religiosity, civic engagement, immigration status, Canadian identity, and importance of ethnic identity).

The institutional trust measure represents the level of confidence respondents have in three institutions: the federal government, the provincial government, and the media, consistent across both data sources. This measure comprises three items with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.65, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. In addition, a principal component factor analysis reveals one single underlying factor. Consequently, we construct a summated rating scale for these items. Detailed information about the factor analysis can be found in Table C1 in the Supplementary File.

Religiosity is measured by combining two survey items: religious denomination and the importance of religion. The denomination question is dichotomous, asking respondents whether they adhere to any religion. For those identifying as religious, a follow-up question assesses the importance of religion in their lives. These responses are integrated to form a new *religiosity* variable, which encompasses five categories: *Non-believer*, *Not important at all*, *Not very important*, *Somewhat important*, and *Very important*. The latter four categories distinguish the varying degrees of religious importance among adherents.

All continuous variables are rescheduled from 0 to 1 to facilitate comparison of coefficients. Detailed wording of these variables is provided in Appendix A in the Supplementary File. Summary statistics for all variables can be found in Appendix B in the Supplementary File.

3.3. Methods

To better evaluate the contributions of the socio-economic, psychological, and mobilization and community embeddedness explanations to the voter turnout gap, we apply Gelbach's conditional decomposition method (Gelbach, 2016). This technique, based on the omitted variable bias formula, allows us to disentangle the contribution of each "omitted" variable to changes in the coefficient of the variable of interest.

We estimate a series of linear probability models to predict turnout while incorporating fixed effects for both the surveys and provinces. This approach accounts for potential variations due to different survey contexts and timings, as well as heterogeneity at the provincial level. There is ongoing debate about the optimal linking function for binary dependent variables. While nonlinear models like logit and probit are often used, recent methodological advances suggest they are not always necessary and optimal (Angrist & Pischke,

2009; Gomila, 2021; Hellevik, 2009; Woolridge, 2002). Key issues with linear models include heteroskedasticity, where the variance of error terms is not constant, which could potentially affect the reliability of standard error estimates and hypothesis testing. However, the use of heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors has become prevalent to address this issue (Woolridge, 2002, p. 56). In our study, we apply clustered robust standard errors accounting for both provincial and survey-specific variations. This should enhance the robustness of our findings. In addition, concerns about model fit, particularly predictions outside the [0,1] range, are often overstated (Gomila, 2021). These rare occurrences can still provide meaningful empirical insights. More importantly, in political science, the primary focus is on exploring variable relationships rather than on precise outcome predictions, and the impact of out-of-bound predictions on causal effect estimates is minimal. Given their straightforward estimation and the direct interpretability of coefficients, linear models are highly valuable. We therefore use linear probability models in the main analysis for their simplicity and clarity. However, for robustness considerations, we also include logit models in Table D2 in the Supplementary File. Comparisons between the linear and logit models show consistent results, with only minor discrepancies observed in the full models. Specifically, there is a small difference—approximately 2 percentage points—in the participation gap for Indigenous and Black groups. Such minor differences further validate the robustness and suitability of the linear model for our decomposition analysis.

Our baseline model is specified as:

$$\text{Turnout}_{ijk} = \beta_1^{\text{base}}\text{Asian}_{ijk} + \beta_2^{\text{base}}\text{Indigenous}_{ijk} + \beta_3^{\text{base}}\text{Black}_{ijk} + \beta_4^{\text{base}}\text{Arab}_{ijk} + \beta_5^{\text{base}}\text{Latino}_{ijk} + \alpha_j + \lambda_k + \varepsilon_{ijk}$$

Turnout_{ijk}, the probability that individual i in province j surveyed in survey k votes, is predicted by the six-category Group ID variable represented by five dummy variables. The coefficients β_1^{base} to β_5^{base} represent the baseline participation gap between each racialized minority group and the White majority.

Second, we estimate a full model by incorporating all potential explanations for the participation gap between Whites and racialized minorities. This includes socio-economic factors, psychological factors, and mobilization and community embeddedness factors, which are added to the baseline model:

$$\text{Turnout}_{ijk} = \beta_1^{\text{full}}\text{Asian}_{ijk} + \beta_2^{\text{full}}\text{Indigenous}_{ijk} + \beta_3^{\text{full}}\text{Black}_{ijk} + \beta_4^{\text{full}}\text{Arab}_{ijk} + \beta_5^{\text{full}}\text{Latino}_{ijk}$$
$$+ \beta_6^{\text{full}}\text{Socioeconomic}_{ijk} + \beta_7^{\text{full}}\text{Psych}_{ijk} + \beta_8^{\text{full}}\text{Mobilization}_{ijk} + \delta_j + \phi_k + \eta_{ijk}$$

With this full model, we can observe changes in the estimated coefficients for the Group ID dummies to assess how much the explanatory factors account for the participation gap. For example, the difference between β_1^{base} and β_1^{full} indicates the extent to which all explicators included in the model explain the participation gap between Whites and Asians.

Finally, to better determine the contribution of each explanatory factor, auxiliary models are estimated by regressing each explanatory factor (denoted as A in the equation below) on the Group ID variable:

$$A_{ijk} = \beta_1^{\text{aux}}\text{Asian}_{ijk} + \beta_2^{\text{aux}}\text{Indigenous}_{ijk} + \beta_3^{\text{aux}}\text{Black}_{ijk} + \beta_4^{\text{aux}}\text{Arab}_{ijk} + \beta_5^{\text{aux}}\text{Latino}_{ijk} + \theta_j + \psi_k + \nu_{ijk}$$

The change in the β coefficients of our variable of interest from the baseline model to the full model attributable to factor A can be calculated as $\beta_A^{\text{full}}\beta^{\text{aux}}$. For instance, the change in the participation gap for the Asian minority group relative to the Whites ($\beta_1^{\text{base}} - \beta_1^{\text{full}}$) can be decomposed into contributions from the socioeconomic model ($\beta_6^{\text{full}}\beta_1^{\text{socioeconomic}}$), the psychological model ($\beta_7^{\text{full}}\beta_1^{\text{psych}}$), and the mobilization and

community embeddedness model ($\beta_8^{full}\beta_1^{mobilization}$):

$$\beta_1^{base} - \beta_1^{full} = \beta_6^{full}\beta_1^{socioeconomic} + \beta_7^{full}\beta_1^{psych} + \beta_8^{full}\beta_1^{mobilization}$$

This framework allows us to assess the contribution of each variable conditional on all covariates and compare their individual effects explicitly.

4. Results

Before turning to the formal analysis of factors explaining participation gaps, it is useful to first understand the general patterns of turnout in Canada. Table 1 presents the weighted mean turnout rates and reveals a notable gap between the White majority and various minority groups. First-generation Whites exhibit the highest turnout rate (92.3%), followed by second-generation Whites (91.0%) and non-immigrant Whites (89.8%). In contrast, all racialized groups show lower levels of participation. Particularly striking is the low turnout among second-generation Blacks at 68.7%. Even with a relatively small sample, this is clearly statistically below the estimates for White respondents of every generation. Similarly, non-immigrant Arab/Middle Eastern individuals have a significantly low turnout rate of 65.4%, although the large confidence intervals—due to a small sample size ($N = 13$)—make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about their participation. The small sample size for non-immigrants also reflects the recent immigration waves from Arab/Middle Eastern regions.

When examining immigration status, a clear generational effect emerges within certain racialized groups. Second-generation Asian and Black respondents show a marked decline in turnout compared to their first-generation and non-immigrant counterparts. Among Asians, turnout decreases from 85.4% among first-generation immigrants to 82.5% in the second generation. Similarly, turnout among Blacks declines from 74.4% in the first generation to 68.7% in the second generation. This generational regression suggests that some racialized groups face systemic barriers to political engagement as they integrate into Canadian society. In contrast, turnout among Whites remains relatively stable across generations, with a slight increase from 89.8% among non-immigrants to 91.0% among second-generation Whites and 92.3% for

Table 1. Level of turnout by ethnic group and immigration status.

	White	Asian	Indigenous	Black	Arab/ Middle East	Latino
Non-Immigrant	0.898 [0.894,0.903] $N = 23,286$	0.845 [0.795,0.895] $N = 215$	0.792 [0.743,0.841] $N = 405$	0.798 [0.703,0.893] $N = 80$	0.654 [0.444,0.863] $N = 25$	0.736 [0.437,1.03] $N = 13$
2nd Generation	0.910 [0.901,0.919] $N = 5,695$	0.825 [0.802,0.848] $N = 1,315$	0.627 [0.400,0.855] $N = 34$	0.687 [0.607,0.766] $N = 196$	0.805 [0.716,0.895] $N = 88$	0.913 [0.857,0.970] $N = 100$
1st Generation	0.923 [0.911,0.934] $N = 2,516$	0.854 [0.836,0.871] $N = 1,744$	0.562 [−0.028,1.15] $N = 6$	0.744 [0.680,0.808] $N = 248$	0.851 [0.800,0.901] $N = 221$	0.870 [0.818,0.923] $N = 192$
Total	0.902 [0.899,0.906] $N = 31,497$	0.841 [0.827,0.854] $N = 3,274$	0.774 [0.725,0.824] $N = 445$	0.729 [0.684,0.774] $N = 524$	0.821 [0.777,0.866] $N = 334$	0.880 [0.841,0.919] $N = 305$

Notes: Entries are means; 95% confidence intervals in brackets; weights applied.

first-generation Whites. For the White population, generational status seems to have minimal impact on electoral participation.

To further explore the generation gaps within the Asian and Black communities, we run a series of linear regressions reported in Table E1 in the Supplementary File. The results show that the decline in participation among second-generation Asians is not statistically significant. However, second-generation Black individuals show a substantial reduction in participation rates—8.5 percentage points lower than first-generation Blacks. The gap widens to 10.7 percentage points when comparing second-generation Black individuals to non-immigrant Blacks, although this difference is not statistically significant due to the small number of non-immigrant respondents. To further investigate the factors contributing to the underparticipation of second-generation Black individuals, we also conduct a decomposition analysis (see Section 4.1 for more methodological details), the results of which are detailed in Table E2 in the Supplementary File. The analysis reveals that socioeconomic factors, particularly being younger, and psychological factors, such as lower political interest, reduced political knowledge, weakened party identification, and decreased external efficacy, account for the lower probability of voter turnout among second-generation Black respondents.

4.1. Decomposition Analysis

To gain a better understanding of the variables that contribute to the overall turnout gap between Whites and racialized minorities in Canada, a linear decomposition analysis is conducted. To begin with, Figure 1 presents results from the baseline and full models predicting voter turnout.

In the baseline model, ethnic identity is the sole predictor. Similar to what we found in Table 1, significant turnout gaps between racialized minorities and the White majority are detected. Black respondents exhibit the largest discrepancy, with their probability of turnout being 16.1 percentage points lower than that of White respondents. Indigenous, Arab, and Asian respondents also show significant, albeit smaller, gaps of 10.8, 7.5, and 6.6 percentage points, respectively. Latino respondents do not exhibit a statistically significant difference compared to White respondents. These findings underline substantial disparities in electoral participation among racialized minorities.

The full model incorporates socio-economic, psychological, and mobilization and community embeddedness factors. Younger age negatively impacts turnout, while factors such as education, employment, income, and property ownership correlate positively with higher electoral participation. Political interest, knowledge, and partisanship demonstrate strong positive effects, which highlights the significant role of psychological engagement in electoral participation. Mobilization and community embeddedness factors generally have minimal impact. The only exception is that a stronger sense of Canadian identity substantially contributes to a higher probability of turnout.

The inclusion of these variables reduces the turnout gaps for all racialized groups. The gap for Asian respondents narrows significantly from 6.6 to 2.4 percentage points. The disparity for Indigenous respondents reduces from 10.8 to 5.6 percentage points. The turnout gap for Black respondents decreases from 16.4 to 10.8 percentage points, and for Arab respondents, from 7.5 to 2.7 percentage points. Interestingly, Latino respondents move from a non-significant gap to a slight positive differential.
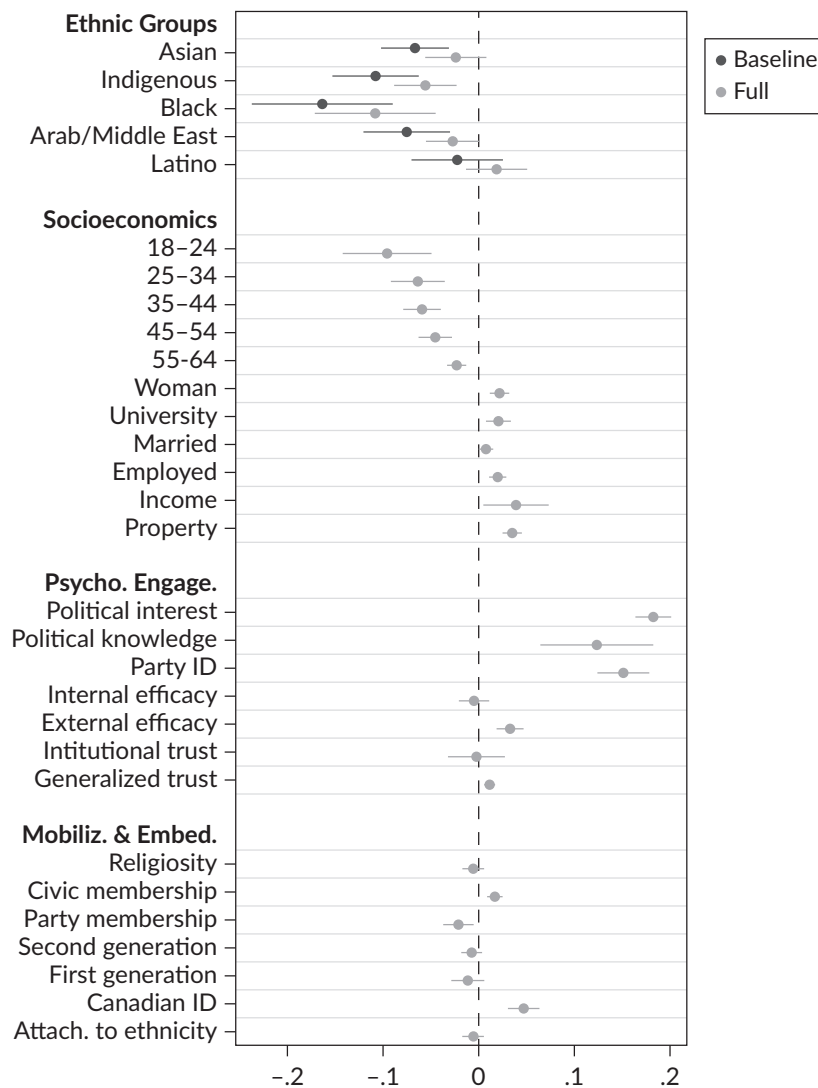
Figure 1. Determinants of turnout. Notes: The figure displays coefficients from the linear probability model along with 95% confidence intervals; the baseline and full models referenced are detailed in Table D1 in the Supplementary File; province and survey fixed effects included.

To better illustrate the origins of the observed differences in electoral participation between racialized minorities and the White majority, Table 2 provides detailed information on each factor's contribution. Socio-economic variables show a consistently negative influence on turnout for all minority groups compared to Whites. Among these groups, Asians are the least disadvantaged. Socio-economic factors contribute to only a 0.9 percentage point difference in their participation compared to Whites. Conversely, these factors alone account for a 2.4 percentage point gap for Black respondents and a 2.2 percentage point gap for Indigenous and Arab respondents.

Regarding individual covariates, age stands out as the most influential socio-economic factor across all groups. It explains a substantial portion of the under-participation: 2.1 percentage points for Asians, 1.1 percentage points for Indigenous, 2.1 percentage points for Blacks, 2.2 percentage points for Arabs, and 1.8 percentage points for Latinos. This suggests that the younger age profile of racialized minorities compared to the White majority is a significant factor in their lower electoral participation.

Table 2. Decomposition of the participation gap.

	Asian	Indigenous	Black	Arab	Latino
Socioeconomics	−0.009***	−0.022***	−0.024***	−0.022***	−0.015***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Age	−0.021***	−0.011***	−0.021***	−0.022***	−0.018***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Woman	0.000	−0.000	0.001	−0.001	−0.001
	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)
University	0.005***	−0.004***	0.001*	0.005***	0.003***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Married	−0.000*	−0.001*	−0.001*	−0.001*	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Employed	0.004***	0.001*	0.004***	0.004***	0.005***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	0.001***	−0.002***	−0.001*	−0.001	−0.000
	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Property	0.001***	−0.005***	−0.006***	−0.006***	−0.004***
	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Psychological engagement	−0.026***	−0.028***	−0.023***	−0.019***	−0.019***
	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Political interest	−0.010***	−0.010***	−0.003	0.000	−0.006*
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Political knowledge	−0.011***	−0.011***	−0.017***	−0.019***	−0.016***
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Party ID	−0.004***	−0.004	−0.001	0.001	0.003
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Internal efficacy	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
External efficacy	0.000	−0.001	0.001	−0.001	0.001*
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Institutional trust	−0.000	0.000	−0.000	−0.000	−0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Generalized trust	−0.001***	−0.002**	−0.003***	−0.002**	−0.002**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Mobilization and embeddedness	−0.008**	−0.003	−0.009**	−0.007*	−0.007*
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Religiosity	−0.000	−0.000	−0.001	−0.001	−0.001
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Civic engagement	−0.001**	−0.000	0.001*	0.001*	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Party membership	0.002***	−0.000	0.000	0.001	0.002**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)
Immigration status	−0.006*	0.002*	−0.005*	−0.007*	−0.007*
	(0.003)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)

Table 2. (Cont.) Decomposition of the participation gap.

	Asian	Indigenous	Black	Arab	Latino
Total effect	−0.042***	−0.052***	−0.056***	−0.048***	−0.041***
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Observations	36404	36404	36404	36404	36404

Notes: This table presents results from Gelbach's conditional decomposition analysis; entries are interpreted as the absolute contribution of each variable to the observed change in the estimated participation gap between each minority group and the White majority from the baseline model to the full model; estimates for *socioeconomics*, *psychological engagement*, and *mobilization and embeddedness* represent the combined contribution of the variables within each respective set of factors; the *total effect* estimates show the overall contribution of all covariates to the participation gap, calculated as the arithmetic difference between the Group ID coefficients in the baseline model and the full model; standard errors are in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

However, there is notable between-group heterogeneity in the contribution of other socio-economic variables. Asians, as the most socio-economically advantaged group, benefit from better education, higher employment rates, and higher income and property ownership than Whites on average. These advantages collectively contribute to a 1.1 percentage point increase in their participation, which partially offsets the overall turnout gap. In stark contrast, Indigenous are significantly disadvantaged by lower levels of income, education, and property ownership. For Blacks, Arabs, and Latinos, education and employment status tend to narrow the participation gap. Property ownership tends to exacerbate the gap. Income has a negligible effect on changing it.

Psychological variables also play a significant role in explaining the participation gap of racialized groups. The overall negative coefficients for psychological engagement suggest that these factors generally contribute to lower turnout among minorities compared to Whites. This is particularly evident for Asian, Indigenous, and Black respondents, where psychological engagement explains a notable portion of the turnout gap—2.6 percentage points for Asians, 2.8 percentage points for Indigenous, and 2.3 percentage points for Blacks.

Among the psychological variables, political knowledge and political interest are especially influential. Political knowledge alone accounts for 1.1—1.9 percentage points of the turnout gap, depending on the specific minority group. This indicates that racialized citizens are less politically informed than their White counterparts, which contributes to their lower levels of electoral participation. Furthermore, political interest significantly explains the gap in relation to Asians, Indigenous, and Latino groups. Interestingly, the contribution of partisanship is minimal across most groups, with the exception of Asian respondents. While party identification is an important predictor of turnout in general (see Figure 1), it does not significantly contribute to the racialized minority turnout gap in Canada. These results suggest that levels of party attachment are comparable between racialized minorities and the White majority. This implies that Canadian political parties may be making concerted efforts to represent and mobilize racialized minority electorates more effectively (Bird, 2005).

Mobilization and community embeddedness factors are not as influential as socio-economic or psychological models, but they still contribute to the participation gap for several groups, particularly Asians, Blacks, Arabs, and Latinos. The negative coefficients for immigration status and Canadian identity among these groups suggest that weaker ties to Canadian society and a lower sense of belonging reduce their likelihood of

voting. However, it is important to note that the effect size is relatively small, with the most substantial impact observed among Blacks, accounting for only about 0.9 percentage points of the turnout gap.

To enhance the robustness of our findings, we performed separate decomposition analyses on the Canadian Election Study and Democracy Checkup datasets. The results, detailed in Tables F1 (Canadian Election Study) and F2 (Democracy Checkup) in the Supplementary File, show that both datasets yield similar findings regarding the explanatory power of the psychological and mobilization and embeddedness models. Specifically, the psychological model significantly contributes to the underparticipation of minorities, while the mobilization and embeddedness model has minimal impact. A significant divergence is noted in the socioeconomic model: the Canadian Election Study analysis shows limited explanatory power, whereas the Democracy Checkup analysis indicates a substantial impact. Upon examining the individual variables within the socioeconomic framework, we find that the disparity primarily stems from age differences among minority respondents. Canadian Election Study minority respondents are similar in age to the White majority, whereas those in the Democracy Checkup dataset are considerably younger.

Canadian Census data show that racialized minorities are, on average, seven years younger than the general population (Statistics Canada, 2019). This demographic trend aligns more closely with the observations from the Democracy Checkup dataset, thereby bolstering our confidence in its results. The Canadian Election Study comprises 9,496 respondents, including 772 self-identified Asians, 142 Indigenous, 114 Blacks, 78 Arabs/Middle Eastern, and 69 Latinos. The relatively small number of minority respondents in the Canadian Election Study challenges the reliability of drawing definitive conclusions about their political behavior. This issue led us to combine all datasets in the main analysis to increase the effective sample size of minority participants.

In summary, while socio-economic and psychological engagement are key drivers of the turnout gap, their impact varies across different racialized groups. Mobilization and community embeddedness factors play a rather modest role. The total effect, which represents the combined contribution of all covariates, indicates that socio-economic, psychological, and mobilization and community embeddedness factors together account for about half of the turnout gap. However, significant gaps in electoral participation persist between racialized minorities and the White majority, especially among Black and Indigenous groups. Further research is needed to explore additional factors, such as structural barriers or experiences of discrimination, that may continue to hinder their voting rates.

5. Discussion

Gaps in electoral participation are important to document—both their relative size and their causes. Gaps in voting can lead to fewer incentives for political representatives to pay attention to the interests of communities that participate less in the electoral process. Using new data sources, we have documented important gaps in participation. By employing decomposition analysis to examine the participation gap between racialized minorities and the White majority in electoral contexts, we provide a novel methodological contribution to the literature. In conventional analyses, researchers typically use a step-by-step block recursive method to progressively add explanatory variables to the model. They then observe changes in the estimated coefficients for the grouping variable to assess the explanatory power of each set of factors. However, this approach can result in misleading interpretations, as the order in which covariates are introduced can influence the observed

effects. As Gelbach (2016) notes, simple comparisons across models may not accurately capture the true contributions of individual factors, as the sequence of inclusion may disproportionately affect the results.

The decomposition technique employed in this study addresses these methodological issues by directly quantifying the contribution of each variable to the participation gap conditional on all covariates, independent of the order of their inclusion. This allows for a more precise determination of how each factor influences the narrowing of the participation gap. Furthermore, decomposition analysis not only clarifies the extent to which factors included in the model account for the explained portion of the gap but also highlights the proportion that remains unexplained.

In our analysis, we observed that a substantial portion of the participation differentials remains unexplained, particularly among Black Canadians, where two-thirds of the gap is not accounted for. This highlights a limitation of our research. Although factors related to mobilization and community embeddedness demonstrate limited explanatory power in our results, this does not necessarily imply that these factors are irrelevant in explaining racialized minorities' turnout in Canada. A key limitation of our study is the availability and adequacy of measures to capture crucial concepts. Our major data sources, notably Democracy Checkup, lack measures that might reflect network complexity or mobilization efforts like campaign-period contact. For instance, variables like union membership, association membership, size of social network, and contact by political parties during campaigns would be highly relevant for a comprehensive analysis of this model in the Canadian context. Similarly, our data rely on an imperfect proxy for group consciousness—a single-item question asking respondents how much they agree that their ethnicity is a crucial part of their identity. This measure may not effectively capture the complexity of group consciousness, which could explain why it does not emerge as a strong predictor of minority political engagement, unlike findings from the US literature (Lien, 1994; Sanchez & Vargas, 2016).

In addition to collecting higher-quality individual-level data, future research could also explore contextual factors beyond individual resources. For instance, cultural barriers may deter political engagement among groups whose traditional values prioritize harmony over conflict (Choi et al., 2007). Moreover, it is useful to examine the political representation of ethnic minorities (Bird, 2005) and to assess how effectively policy discussions address the specific concerns of minority communities (Barreto, 2018). This approach can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the under-participation of racialized groups in electoral processes.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The Canadian Election Studies and Democracy Checkups are publicly accessible data sets. For comprehensive details on survey representativeness and technical specifications, we encourage readers to consult the technical reports and codebooks available online. These resources can be accessed freely on the C-Dem page at Harvard's Dataverse: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/C-Dem

Replication files are available in the Harvard Dataverse (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JZYCOO).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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