

**Improving Equitable Political Participation in the City of Toronto:
Indigenous and Youth Participation**

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Abstract

The City of Toronto ('City') consistently reports low voter participation, with the most recent municipal election in October 2022 reporting a 29% turnout (Warren, 2022). Low political participation translates into a lack of represented interests, inclusivity, and public input that are essential for an equitable and sustainable society. Studies report that improving access to the campaigning and the voting process by strengthening digital infrastructure helps to dismantle barriers in the political process and increases voter participation (Goodman & Stokes, 2020). Given these findings, a jurisdictional scan was conducted alongside a comprehensive literature review to inform policy recommendations to the City to increase Indigenous and youth participation through digital infrastructure and meaningfully contribute to TransformTO's *Engagement and Equitable Implementation* goals. Our study finds that a wider variety of voting methods improves equitable voter turnout and that improved targeting to youth and indigenous demographics through digital spaces improves equitable representation in local politics.

Topic and Scope

At the last municipal election, the voter turnout rate in Toronto was 29% (Warren, 2022). The low voter turnout is reflective of low political participation in the City of Toronto ('City'), particularly amongst Indigenous peoples and youth. Low political participation has implications for individuals and society as a whole, as it reflects a weakness within a democratic state and raises questions about political decision making. Our research recognizes in particular that amongst Indigenous people, there is a history of distrust between political institutions and Indigenous communities. It is important to understand this context in order to understand how to tackle the low voter turnout amongst these groups and how that contributes to a sustainable society.

One key recommendation within our research is the use of technology as a means of achieving multiple goals; the use of digital voting facilitates higher voting rates amongst Indigenous peoples and allows for greater political participation and community engagement in the policy making process. As our research affirms, there is a relationship between demographic representation and sustainable and effective policy implementation. As demonstrated in other international cities, such as through the C40 Cities Group, there is a strong tie between sustainable policy, effective climate change policy and informed resident led action and community engagement (C40 Cities, 2019). The objective of conducting this research is to better understand what methods can be used to improve Indigenous and youth political participation (TransformTO goals 4.6.19-20) and representation and how it contributes to sustainability and Transform TO's goals.

Goals and Objectives of Project

Our research has several objectives with the overarching goal to contribute to Transform TO's net-zero climate strategy. Our research is centered around the pedagogy that sustainability is a holistic concept, relating to ensuring a balance within an equitable society. This concept is reaffirmed through Transform TO's goals of engagement and equitable implementation. Within our research, the term sustainability does not refer purely to environmental sustainability, but to a state of comprehensive stability within society, including humans, governance and the environment.

One of the most consistently recurring themes found in our research is that community engagement in the policy development and implementation process is one of the methods taken to ensure that communities are invested in the outcomes of the policy undertaken by their governments. Regarding environmental policy, community engagement is important as it ensures resident-led action is taken and better implemented (Transform TO goal 4.6.18).

Our research also intends to understand how policy makers can optimize the impact of policy through resident led action. Climate change action is difficult to tackle, particularly as a municipal effort, thus in order to optimize their impact, policy makers should better understand how to bridge the gap between the public and policy and what makes residents respond better to policies that may affect them, such as climate change policy.

Our final objective is to use digital governance and digital voting to improve Indigenous and youth voter turnout through effective community engagement for the purpose of implementing effective, inclusive and equitable climate change policy. Our key findings can be found summarized below:

- Digital voting can help increase resident awareness regarding climate change action
- Proper community engagement makes policy implementation more effective
- Digital voting should be introduced as an alternative voting method, not the sole voting method
- It will be more effective to have community providers of digital infrastructure in order to bridge the trust gap amongst government, technology and different communities
- Youth led programs for political empowerment are good for youth awareness and political participation

Sustainability and Focal Area

Youth Voters

The youth vote is quintessentially connected to sustainability. The jurisdictional scan of youth related political participation revealed the cultural and legal logic behind the youth-led

campaign to lower the official voting age to 16. As pursued in Canada and New Zealand, youth are often allowed to work, pay taxes, contribute meaningfully to their local communities, government, and local civil society, without the right to vote. Lowering voting age campaigns are usually fueled by the crucial democratic idea that citizens should not have taxation without representation; the founding basis on which NZ's MakeIt16 campaign was built on. Though not passed formally into law, the NZ Supreme Court decision to declare the current voting age (18) a violation of age discrimination is substantial evidence enough to demonstrate the importance of representation by voting and youth suffrage in maintaining healthy democratic societies.

The youth vote is secondly intertwined with sustainability, in the nature of sustainability itself. Sustainability is an inherently forward-facing discipline, looking to the future to help guide decision-makers of the present. As the inheritors of said future, it is crucial that young people have the representation and avenues to contribute to the decision-making process that will severely impact the rest of their lifetime. This notion is also reflected in TransformTo's Climate Strategy, specifically goals 4.6.22 and 4.6.19, which acknowledges youth participation as an important component in building sustainable and inclusive futures.

As such, protecting, defending, and advancing the human and civic rights of all deserving members of any given democratic society is crucial to building sustainability. It is a core tenet of sustainability and most ESG frameworks (Daily & Ehrlich, 1996; Wilkonson et al, 2010) continue building inclusivity, equity, and diversity in pursuit of holistic sustainability. The youth vote is thus fundamentally connected to sustainability.

Indigenous Communities

Indigenous political participation is critical to successfully implementing the City's Net Zero Strategy as Indigenous community decision-making and strengthening the City's ongoing relationship with the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples is necessary for the long-term sustainable action of the City's goals. As highlighted in the jurisdictional scan and literature review, the participation of Indigenous communities in policy development is highly contextual and requires iteration; developing an equitable approach to engaging with Indigenous communities is important to ensure the sustainability of suggested policies and political decisions.

Canada and New Zealand provide valid examples of how strategies regarding digital voting must emphasize Indigenous engagement, particularly through an equity lens. There are 634 Indigenous communities in Canada (Gabel, C., & Goodman, 2021), however Indigenous voter turnout is particularly low (Gabel, C., & Goodman, 2021). To improve voter turnout and hence political participation, digital voting was implemented in the Indigenous communities discussed in our findings with the use of equitable strategies including community-led workshops on digital voting and service contracts with community-based online platform

providers. This was found to have sustainable effects on long-term community decision-making including improvement to digital infrastructure, increased connectedness with off- and on-reserve community members, and greater political awareness.

Beyond the City of Toronto's Net Zero Strategy, Indigenous communities are essential to the success of Canada's commitment to reconciliation in addition multilateral and national climate goals, particular through the lens of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Canada's commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples is intertwined with the nation's climate plans and targets which emphasize the importance of iterative engagement with Indigenous Peoples (e.g., National Adaption Strategy). To successfully implement the City's Net Zero Strategy, Indigenous political participation is necessary to sustain all its objectives in the long-term.

Findings and TO's Strategy

Literature Review

A literature review of studies, enacted programs and policy recommendations was conducted to help us better understand the correlation between effective community engagement and successful policy implementation. In this section, we highlight the summary of our literature review that is most relevant to our project. We looked at areas with both similarities and differences to Toronto, for example, Sydney, Australia, as it has a higher population than Toronto and has better integrated methods for ensuring Indigenous peoples are well represented and engaged in politics and civic society. One of the goals of the Victoria community study was to improve trust and credibility between citizens and decision makers (Wiseman & Williamson, 2010). This study is premised on the understanding that well coordinated action at various levels (individual, community, national, global etc.) is required to reduce the risks of climate change and that equitable and well-informed approaches are needed to optimise citizen participation in climate change mitigation action (Wiseman & Williamson, 2010, p. 135).

The C40 Cities Group is a coalition of cities from around the globe that aims to tackle climate change and inequality simultaneously. An examination of their executive guide provided guidance to ensure climate change policy is implemented in a sustainable, engaging and inclusive manner. In our context, the considerations provide recommendations for community engagement for policy implementation from start to finish and then for evaluation as well. This is relevant to our project because it ensures that we are not just "consulting" citizens but keeping them engaged throughout the long-term process of climate change action. As the C40 coalition represents over 90 cities from around the world, their literature provides a diverse perspective that is more inclusive than some of the other texts we analysed.

As digital voting is being developed and popularised, we need to consider its many advantages and disadvantages, particularly technological progress in order to maximise the benefits of voting technology and achieve TransformTO's goals. Bokslag and De Vries (2016) outlines the benefits of digital voting, including faster ballot counting, reduced labor intensity, paper saving, and increased accessibility for the physically impaired. Goodman et al. (2018) adds that digital voting could offer more opportunities to minority groups by providing them with easier access to the voting process. These benefits are in line with TransformTO's goals of preserving labor and resources and improving sustainability through equitable representation and community engagement. However, Bokslag and De Vries (2016) and Krimmer (2006) caution that the lack of transparency and any deviation from the original purpose of digital voting can lead to democratic risks and less inclusive outcomes. Krimmer (2006) cites a case in Canada where disadvantaged communities such as Aboriginal and African Nova Scotians were excluded from the voting process, posing a significant threat to TransformTO's goals.

To address these issues, Nu'man (2012) and Gilbert et al. (2010) suggest that creating a more inclusive and equitable system within this complex technology is imperative. Building citizens' trust in the system is also key to achieving widespread use and sustainability. Targeting specific groups, Goodman et al. (2018) emphasised that community engagement and a clear process for communication are key factors. Therefore, as suggested by Yu (2019), more investigations and complementary policies should be developed in the voting reform process to increase voter turnout and achieve sustainability goals inclusively. Steve et al. (2012) also mentioned the increase of security online voter authentication mechanisms, which can help mitigate democratic risks. This emphasizes the importance of having a secure online system that ensures the integrity of the voting process.

In conclusion, while digital voting has the potential to contribute to achieving the TransformTO goals of creating a more sustainable and inclusive society, it must be developed and implemented with transparency and inclusivity in mind. By fostering citizens' trust in the system and establishing a more equitable process, digital voting can contribute to achieving these goals. However, further research and policies are needed to ensure that vulnerable communities are not excluded from the democratic process. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the development and implementation of digital voting to achieve sustainability goals inclusively.

Relevance of Literature Review Findings

The literature review first discusses the advantages and disadvantages of digital voting in the context of implementation. In the face of these disadvantages, our additional literature review shows the importance of policy implementation and community engagement, and from these previous articles, we can better understand the importance of digital voting and its relationship with TransformTO.

By examining the advantages and disadvantages of digital voting in the previous implementation, we find that digital-voting's benefits align with the TransformTO goals by creating a more equitable and inclusive society. As reported by TransformTO, over 90 per cent of people believe that climate change is a threat and that everyone must reduce their carbon footprint. However, nearly half of the surveyed residents do not know what they can do to combat climate change (TransformTO, 2021). The introduction of digital voting can help us increase awareness and engagement in climate actions and reflects the priorities and interests of the community, which is the goal of TransformTO in 4.6.22 and 4.6.24. However, the disadvantages of digital-voting further emphasize that a clear and trustful process of digital voting is essential. We need to have a strong commitment to strengthening the relationship between policy implementation and community engagement. As mentioned by TransformTO, to build long-lasting partnerships and trust between Toronto communities committed to advancing climate action, a greater level of engagement and long-term support is required (TransformTO, 2021, page 83). Ensuring a transparent and credible implementation is the key idea in TransformTO goal 4.6.23 that we need to develop equity indicators to be reported out as part of the TransformTO implementation status update.

Jurisdictional Scan

Youth Jurisdictional Scan

A jurisdictional scan was also conducted on case studies of electoral-related digital infrastructure and campaign material in conjunction with youth voting, youth turnout, and youth political participation. One notable case study identified is the youth-related digital infrastructure and trends enacted in New Zealand. The New Zealand General Election (for the national government) saw an increase in youth voter turnout from 50% at 2017 to around 70% in 2020 (Government of NZ, 2020). This spike in turnout is largely attributed to the organization [VMLY&R](#) - a brand building media company that partnered with the New Zealand Government for the first time to produce targeted GOTV campaign content across several digital platforms. This targeted collaboration proved enormously successful in targeting the youth vote and effectively used youth-dominant digital communication and platforms to garner civic responsibility and participation among citizens aged 18-24 (VMLY&R, 2020).

Another notable feature about the case study of New Zealand's youth is their robust enthusiasm for political participation, accompanied by various institutional outlets to express that interest. For example, the New Zealand government regularly hosts programs targeted at youth-engagement such as the New Zealand Youth Parliament (NZYP), and the Youth Voting Initiative (YVI). The NZYP is led by the Minister for Youth and serves as a platform for young New Zealanders to participate in government and represent their interests. In 2022, the NZYP successfully led a court case in the [Supreme Court of New Zealand](#) that declared a voting age of

18 is a case of discrimination on the basis of age (Court of NZ, 2022). Most notably, the NZYP is a youth-led program, supported by adults, where youth-to-youth engagement makes effective use of digital infrastructure (i.e. social media, digital tools, online trends, etc.) to create positive outcomes for youth representation and political participation.

The YVI is similarly a program supported by robust digital infrastructure where teachers and schools can sign up to host mock general elections in elementary schools to engender political responsibility and familiarity among youth before voting age. Guidance materials and applications are all available online making youth-targeted programming more accessible to educators and guardians.

A comparative jurisdictional scan conducted in the Canadian context found similar academic grounds for youth participation but little translation into tangible initiatives, programs, and outcomes. For example, similar to the NYZP, many of Canada's provinces have a Youth Parliament. Though unlike NYZP, the Youth Parliaments in Canada are disjointed from one another, cooperate in a fragmented inconsistent manner, and infrequently involve the official Parliaments of their respective provinces (OYP, 2020). In 2020, a Canada wide youth parliament was hosted by the BCYP (British Columbia Youth Parliament) over the video conferencing app Zoom, but included only the fellow Youth Parliaments of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (BCYP, 2021). While this initiative built political responsibility and familiarity among youth, it did so in a fragmented, disjointed manner inconducive to the wider jurisdictional reality of nation-wide political institutions.

Indigenous Jurisdictional Scan

A jurisdictional scan was conducted examining the role and impact of digital infrastructure, particularly digital voting platforms and social media tools, on Indigenous political participation in Indigenous communities in Canada and in New Zealand. The key findings indicate that digital infrastructure increases Indigenous political participation through an improved capacity to self-govern online, improved access to remote community members, and community connectivity. However, key considerations including the integration of Indigenous values, language, and identity in addition to digital literacy and the inclusion of elderly populations must be considered to ensure the long-term sustainability of these findings if implemented in Toronto.

In Canada, three Indigenous communities were examined regarding the effect of digital voting on decision-making regarding land management and community governance: Land Code Act (Wasauksing First Nation and Whitefish River First Nation), and the Gichi-Naaknigewin Constitution (Nipissing First Nation). In each context, digital voting was offered in conjunction with paper ballots and mail-in ballots. All communities partnered with non-Indigenous private

sector vendors (i.e., Vote-Now.com, ScytI) to provide the digital voting technology and administration.

The key findings from the cases indicate that digital voting has an immediate and long-term effect on community engagement and political participation. In the short-term, digital voting increased voter turnout and improved preference toward online voting with educational initiatives on digital voting. In the long-term, digital voting accompanied by the implementation of digital infrastructure (i.e., online database, administrative capacity, etc.) has improved community engagement and political participation beyond the election period by improving digital access to off-reserve members and streamlining administrative resources that were otherwise fragmented.

A jurisdictional scan of New Zealand was conducted to evaluate the role of digital tools such as social media in improving Indigenous political participation, particularly through the lens of the Māori population. Similar to the Indigenous population in Canada, Māori have a lower voter turnout than non-Indigenous populations due to factors including mistrust in elected officials, limited capacity to self-govern, and limited access to Māori communities living off-reserve. The Mana Facebook Group ('Group'), a Facebook page developed by the Māori community, was used as a case study in this scan to analyze the role and impact of Facebook on Indigenous political participation.

The case study suggests that the Group can be used as a model of empowerment, including political empowerment, particularly on points such as sole ownership and control over development of the platform, ability to interact in small networks remotely, increased political awareness and activism opportunities both on- and offline among other factors. The key findings indicate improved political awareness among non-voters, increased youth engagement online and offline, and greater trust in the political process due to the collaborative and bottom-up approach of developing the Facebook page.

The study suggests that for implementation in other jurisdictions, consultation with community stakeholders should be integrated in the development of the social media platform in addition to education focused on digital and cultural literacy. Key risks to consider from this study include the unintended exclusion of elderly populations due to mistrust and or a lack of digital awareness in addition to the risk of misappropriation of Indigenous values and culture due to the Western framework of social media use.

Relevance of Jurisdictional Scan Findings

Our J-scan uses the example from New Zealand to provide more critical suggestions with Canada to create a more inclusive society for Indigenous and youth involvement in climate actions. By including the youth and Indigenous people in our society, we are able to increase

awareness and engagement on climate action at the local level which is aligned with TransformTO goals.

Firstly, the j-scan uses the experience of digital tools among the Māori population to discover how to encourage more minorities to social media, in order to compare with the same situation that happened in Canada. From the experience of New Zealand, we find that the key considerations should include more integration of indigenous values, language and identity, also the digital literacy and inclusion of elderly populations. These ideas from TransformTO 4.6 19, we need to work with indigenous rights holders and urban indigenous communities to share knowledge and learnings. By creating more considerable processes and diverse methods to ensure accessibility to Indigenous communities (TransformTO, 2021).

Secondly, the j-scan uses the example of the organization VMLY&R in New Zealand, showing how this country proved enormously successful in targeting the youth vote and effectively. Therefore, suggesting that we need to create more institutional outlets and campaigns to increase youth vote and robust enthusiasm for political participation. TransformTO mentioned that youth participation is essential to the development and implementation of the Net-zero Strategy. From an equity perspective, meaningful youth participation is essential, and the strategy also benefits from this group's innovative thinking. That's why we want to support youth-led climate initiatives and inspire more current and future climate action by involving more of them in political participation.

Key Gaps and Challenges

In considering the applicability of this research to TransformTO's goals outlined in this paper's introduction, the key findings must be considered alongside relevant gaps and challenges. Firstly, get-out-the-vote campaigns are notoriously difficult, especially in targeting demographics whose culture inherently distrusts or rejects civil responsibility; which is the case in both indigenous communities mistreated by conventional government, as well as 21st century youth, who lack civic education or duty (Henn & Foard, 2017; Carter & Campbell, 2011). Secondly, studies show that voter turnout does not necessarily always translate immediately into improved citizen outcomes, especially in short-term timeframes; while other methods, outside of difficult-to-change institutions (like grassroots or NGO organizations) are more effective at pushing the envelope for marginalized communities (Cretney et al, 2016).

The effort to create more inclusive governance structures must be acknowledged and operated as a long-term initiative that may not see substantial immediate change in a cemented bureaucracy. This limitation further informs the recommendation for improved outreach programs that extend beyond electoral campaigning and generates community-outreach initiatives that build civic trust and responsibility in marginalized groups.

Lastly, this research recognizes the comparative difficulties produced of a literature and jurisdictional scan where successful strategies of one governance system and political culture,

cannot be imported to another and expected to produce the same successes. More specifically, the indigenous communities highlighted in the New Zealand case study are notably distinct from the indigenous communities in Canada; and their relationship to their government is underscored with a different political history and culture than Canada. While there are certainly lessons to be learned and observations to be made about similarities between the two countries, and how Canada may emulate a similar result; it must be acknowledged that governance systems and their functionalities cannot be directly replicated for exact results.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In summary, the literature review and jurisdictional scan conducted in this paper informs the conclusions that increased avenues of participation (e-voting in addition to traditional voting) lead to improved inclusion, more robust digital infrastructure is likely to improve both the breadth and depth of political participation among marginalized communities, and targeted outreach programs that consider unique stakeholder characteristics are more effective and easier with digital infrastructure. With consideration of the acknowledged gaps and challenges, alongside summarized findings from the outlined jurisdictional scan and literature review, this paper concludes with the following recommendations to improve equity-related TransformTO's climate strategy highlighted in this research project.

First, informed by the first key finding, TransformTO would benefit from expanding avenues of political participation to increase accessibility to political institutions, processes, and structures so that marginalized communities have more opportunities to advocate and represent community interests. As found across case studies where online voting combined with traditional voting increases political participation among marginalized groups, it is important for TransformTO to center access to the political process as a core tenant of equity-building and advocacy goals.

Second, informed by the latter two key findings, TransformTO must recognize the specific traits and behaviours of target-demographics and their unique limitations and qualms with existing infrastructure. Outreach programs designed to reach marginalized communities must be tailored to suit the specific needs of each community and use demographic-specific strategies to generate outcomes. In the example of youth in New Zealand, the youth vote was significantly increased due to a robust and well-funded social media campaign by the NZ government highlighting youth-specific problems (voting age, age rights, etc); a strategy targeted to youth. In the example of Indigenous community engagement, studies revealed that community-based service providers generated the best community engagement alongside existing contextual knowledge of indigenous practice and culture. To target these groups as listed in the TransformTO equity goals; this paper recommends conducting tailoring get-out-the-vote political participation to suit the needs of their target-demographics.

Lastly, according to key findings, the most successful equity-building projects emerge from well funded, constantly reviewed, and strongly supported fiscal plans. This finding informs our final recommendation that TransformTO makes sure to prioritize equity-building processes and inclusive governance as much as technical GHG limitation; reflected in fiscal support and budgeting. The acknowledgement and implementation of the two prior recommendations must essentially be supported by tangible funding, to extend beyond a well-constructed plan and begin the long arduous process of equity-building that generates community-outcomes and represented interests.

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