

**Once Fractured, Twice Politicized: How Immigrant Women From War-Torn Regions Find
Political Agency In Canada**

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Introduction

Canada is home to one of the largest immigrant populations in the world, with over 23% of its population comprising of immigrants as measured by the national census conducted in 2021 (Government of Canada, 2024). In 2023 alone, Canada recorded 169,448 refugees, with a sizeable population from war-torn regions such as Ukraine and Syria (Government of Canada, 2024).

A sense of attachment and social acceptance has been shown to strongly correlate with higher levels of political participation, including political interest, voter turnout, and confidence in legislative institutions (Bilodeau et al., 2019). This study aims to identify how first-generation immigrant women from war-torn regions find political agency in Canada. The study will explore the correlation between political participation and the experience of observing the failure of a political system in the parent state.

Political agency is defined as choices, actions, and strategies that individuals, alone or as part of a larger group, might take in different political spaces (Schulz & Kreft, 2022). For the purposes of this study, I define political agency upon 2 criteria. One, on participation in elections (both municipal and federal); second, on the level of trust immigrants hold in their representative municipal or provincial leaders.

Authors like Bloemraad (2006) argue that political involvement and understandings of citizenship are heavily influenced by the government's reaction to immigration. Subsequently, a secondary goal of the research is to assess whether current settlement, integration, and civic participation frameworks either fail to recognize or support these forms of engagement. This will inform a policy section in the research, which can help provide recommendations on changes required to improve political integration for these communities.

Research Questions

1. Are immigrant women from war-torn areas disenfranchised in integrating into the political system?
2. Is there a prevailing sentiment of distrust among immigrant women from war-torn regions, particularly in communities shaped by prior political failure or violence?
3. Do prior experiences of conflict, state failure, and political repression shape immigrant women's perceptions of political participation in Canada?
4. What structural barriers (legal, informational, linguistic, cultural) constrain immigrant women's political participation?
5. What roles do Canadian institutions (e.g., IRCC, newcomer centres, universities, settlement organizations) currently play in facilitating political participation?
6. How can newcomer services be improved to better support immigrant women's political participation?

Methodology

This study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining focus group-based qualitative interviews with quantitative analysis to examine how immigrant women from war-torn regions in Canada experience and exercise political agency. Given the exploratory nature of political agency and trust, qualitative methods are particularly suited to capturing lived experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making.

The qualitative component will consist of focus group interviews, allowing participants to collectively reflect on and discuss their experiences. These discussions will explore how political agency is shaped in the aftermath of conflict and displacement, the factors influencing political

engagement or disengagement, and the role of community networks and informal practices in navigating political life in Canada.

The quantitative component will draw on secondary data from the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted by Statistics Canada, and the 2021 Canadian Election Study (CES), accessed via the Harvard Dataverse. These datasets will be used to analyze broader patterns in political trust, civic participation, and perceptions of inclusion. Key variables—such as institutional trust and forms of political engagement—will be operationalized and analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation to identify trends and relationships across relevant demographic groups.

Together, these methods will provide both in-depth qualitative insights and broader empirical context for understanding political agency among immigrant women from war-torn regions.

Literature Review

Existing literature highlights how immigrant women in Canada build political agency not just electorally but through relational dynamics in the form of social networks, advocacy, and eventual formal participation. Such political engagements are shaped by legal status, settlement stages, levels of education and discrimination levels (Brettel 2020). This highlights that political agency for immigrants is moulded by both available resources and institutional barriers. Additional scholarship also highlights how pre-existing institutional exposure becomes pivotal in finding political agency, such as Aksoy et al. (2025), who highlighted how previous exposure to corrupt regimes leads to increased trust in host-country civic institutions.

In the Canadian context, immigrant women were not excluded uniformly; participation instead varied on mediums of political activity, although immigrant racialized women were

weakly integrated in conventional political platforms (O'Neill, Gidengil, and Young 2012). This is furthered by intermediary access for immigrant women in the form of access to services and availability of political knowledge, which moulds their ability to enter voting or non-traditional politics (Gidengil and Stolle 2009).

Existing scholarship, however, treats pre-existing security conditions through a monolithic lens. This has resulted in the underexploration of the role trauma plays within women immigrating from war-torn contexts and the influence of covert trauma, survival, and displacement within building political agency. This mixed methods research aims to fill this gap through pattern level evidence and contextualization through lived experiences to understand how women immigrating from conflict zones and into Canada develop political voice, agency, and trust within informal and formal politics.

Ethics review

As this research involves surveys and in-person interviews with human participants who may be victimized, it will require research ethics approval before data collection. I will consult with my research supervisor to confirm the appropriate review pathway, and my supervisor has access to the MRHP portal and can support the ethics application process.

Outcomes, Interdisciplinary, and international focus of your research

This research is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on political science, migrant studies, and gender studies. By combining mixed-method research analysis with policy analysis, the study connects lived experience to institutional practices of political incorporation and civic participation.

The project also has a strong international focus, as participants' political engagement is shaped by transnational experiences of conflict, displacement, and governance failure. By

situating these experiences within Canada's democratic context, the research highlights how global political instability intersects with domestic integration frameworks.

Importantly, the findings aim to inform future policy and practice by identifying gaps in existing newcomer services and civic education initiatives. The research will offer empirically rooted yet inclusive evidence-based recommendations for improving political inclusion strategies for immigrant women, contributing to more resilient, inclusive democratic institutions in an increasingly interconnected and migratory world.

Research Supervisor

Professor Geoff Dancy will serve as the primary research supervisor for this project. As a political science professor with expertise in transitional justice and post-conflict governance, Professor Dancy will provide guidance on research design, theoretical framing, and ethical considerations, particularly in relation to studying populations shaped by conflict and displacement. He will also support the development of interview protocols, qualitative analysis, and the translation of findings into policy-relevant insights.

External organizations, such as newcomer and settlement centres in the Peel Region, may be involved to support participant outreach and contextual understanding of existing civic integration services. These organizations will not collect data but may facilitate access to communities and provide insight into current outreach and programming relevant to the research.

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