

#VancityVotingVan: An Accessible Way to Vote

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Jens Stoltenberg, the Prime Minister of Norway, said that “by voting, we add our voice to the chorus that forms opinions and the basis for actions” (Stoltenberg, 2012). In the 2014 civic election in Vancouver, only 43.4% of citizens came out to vote meaning that the actions that were taken after the election only reflected less than half of the population’s opinions (City of Vancouver, 2014). So, if voting is so crucial to having your voices heard, how can we know that the policy decisions being made in our city are for the best of the people if not everyone votes? Two of the lowest turnout groups in civic elections are youth and low-income households. For this project, we sought to try and overcome the barriers and challenges that low-income citizens and households face in engaging with politics, registering to vote, and actually making it to the polling stations on election day. Our project, in short, is an accessible and mobile voting center called the *Vancity Voting Van*, that during its three-phase rollout strategy, will educate low-income citizens on candidates and voting procedures, register people to vote throughout its execution, and finally, turn into a mobile voting center where people can vote easily near their places of work and living.

Rationale

According to Statistics Canada’s 2016 Census, there is an estimated low-income population of 694,960 (15 percent) (Statistics Canada, 2017). With the gradual influx of low-income citizens in Canada, we now see them as a dominant population capable of changing the outcome of the forthcoming civic election. However, with the low participation rate of low-income citizens in previous civic elections, it inspired us to develop a project that focuses on increasing participation within this group. As mentioned, our project aims to shift the attitudes of low-income citizens towards voting from negative to positive. As of today, they do not feel

included in the political realm and we aim to change that by generating discussion in these neighborhoods. We want to create an atmosphere where low-income citizens can freely state their opinions regarding relevant issues and facilitate group sessions where we discuss the importance of voting in a democratic society. Not only will they have a space to discuss, the Vancity Voting Van will act as a mobile voting booth during elections and advanced voting.

In order to reach our goals, we must overcome the three main barriers for low-income citizens: ease of access to counter opportunity cost, understanding how politicians share their own values, and having the opportunity to understand and engage in civic politics.

The Vancouver Voting Van will address these concerns and barriers that low-income citizens experienced during civic elections. One of largest barriers to voting for low-income voters is the opportunity cost of going out to vote. Our project aims to eliminate this problem by going to the voters as opposed to the voters going to designated voting stations. The Vancity Voting Van will bring mobile voting and educational content to low-income citizen in an engaging atmosphere with free coffee and snacks. We will create an open space where we will have discussion on relevant issues to this demographic. Issues such as high levels of household food insecurity, the pressing need for affordable housing, and the shortage of skills training for low-skilled workers.

Facilitating discussion on these topics will help build support for policies that will help low-income citizens in the future. The overall goal of our project is to increase the participation of low-income citizens and will target the neighborhoods of: Strathcona, Mount Pleasant, Grandview-Woodland, Chinatown, Gastown, and the Downtown Eastside. By generating discussions in the targeted low-income neighborhoods, we hope that it will encourage and inspire them to participate, vote, or engage to ensure that their voices are heard.

In order for us to pursue our project, we will need to consult with City authorities to ensure that we follow proper regulations in relation to privacy (see Strategy). With the help of the City authorities we can implement our Vancity Voting Van project to drastically increase the voter turnout in the forthcoming civic elections. The use of the van and going out to voters will encourage voting in our targeted neighbourhoods. Our Van allows a chance for every eligible person to influence policies that affect them on a daily basis.

Target Audience

In order to greater understand our exact target audience, we must first acknowledge the definition of a low-income household in Vancouver. The city defines a low-income single household as one that makes \$22,133 or less per-year (Statistics Canada, 2016). We also found that 42 per-cent of low-income individuals had dependent children. With this in mind, we used the latest census data provided by StatsCanada to seek out neighborhoods in Vancouver that are home to the highest number of low-income households. Upon taking these factors into consideration, we determined that our target audience primarily resides in the Strathcona, Mount Pleasant, Grandview-Woodland, Chinatown, Gastown, and the Downtown Eastside which is why we have chosen to rollout in these areas.

Members of the low-income bracket experience a number of challenges that make it difficult for them engage in the voting process. Most significantly, low-income individuals often times experience difficulty in finding time to vote, as their opportunity cost for missing work in order to vote is too substantial. These people are already making minimum wage or less, and they do not have the luxury of taking time off work to make their way over to a voting booth. The lines at these booths are also typically quite long, and the voting process can be time demanding. Not only can it be difficult for low-income individuals to take time off work, but they may also have children or other obligations that hinder their ability to participate in the voting

process even during their off days. In addition, members of our target audience are often relatively uneducated and less engaged in the political process. A 2015 Pew Research study showed that financial security is strongly correlated with nearly every measure of political engagement (Keeter, Doherty, & Weisel, 2015). The study explained how 94% of financially secure Americans were registered to vote, while only 54% of the least financially secure were registered. Pre-election estimates from the study suggested that 63% of the most financially secure were “likely voters,” compared with just 20% of the least financially secure. These engagement issues make low-income individuals prime targets for our initiative.

It is important that we engage this target audience for a couple of reasons. For one, the outcome of any political process can have a significant impact on everyone living in the relevant geographic region. Politicians seek to bring about change regarding economic and social policies that can most certainly play a role in shaping the lives in low-income individuals. By bringing awareness to and drawing support from this audience, they can potentially contribute more significantly to the political process, and thus bring about the change that is necessary to positively impact their economic position. Another reason why it is important to engage this audience is because without their voice being heard, then the only the portion of the population that contributes to policy change is the financially secure. Therefore, a never-ending cycle is repeated, whereby a system is designed to generally benefit middle to upper-class individuals. Without engaging in the political process, members of the low-income bracket can never expect to experience the change people in their position may require if they are not active participants in the political process.

In order to attract members of the low-income bracket to the political process, we utilized a number of engagement tactics and research methods. Most importantly, we needed to identify which areas would benefit most from our project. In order to do so, we analyzed database information from Elections BC and StatsCanada. Through Elections BC, we were able to seek out voting districts that are home to the lowest number of registered voters (Elections BC,

2017). In addition, the data from StatsCanada effectively highlighted which neighborhoods in Vancouver experienced the largest number of low-income households (Statistics Canada, 2016). By combining the information from these two critical sources, we were able to devise a network of hotspots that would be most susceptible to our initiative.

Strategy

In general, our project strategy aims to offer accessible voting and political engagement to the citizens of Vancouver in a lower income bracket. To achieve this, our Vancity Voting Van initiative seeks to provide a mobile voting booth during elections and advanced voting, education centers leading up to election time, and a comfortable and safe environment for citizens in target areas to register to vote. By providing these three things we hope to achieve the following: an increase in voter turnout for low-income citizens of 25%, an increase of elections in target areas by 70%, and an increase in voting registration by 25%. By hitting these targets at the end of this project, we hope to create a supportive environment around civic elections and easy access to registration and voting.

The Vancity Voting Van campaign is centered on strategic implementation of a mobile voting booth and education centre. During our three-pronged approach to the project, we expect several challenges which we acknowledge could be weaknesses. First, we believe that although the mobile voting centre is a primary objective of the initiative, it may be the most difficult aspect of our project to carry out. Considering there is not a history in Vancouver currently for allowing “unconventional” voting centres like our van, we may need to consult with City authorities to ensure proper regulations are followed in every step. Currently we are aware that we will need to ensure complete privacy for voters – i.e. any windows will have to be covered and booths will need to be closed off – and that we will need to find a way to have internet connection throughout the voting time.

Although we do recognize these weaknesses, we believe that the Vancity Voting Van project, overall, has many strengths. As mentioned in our rationale, we feel our Van addresses

many of the main concerns and barriers that low-income citizens experience during civic elections. One of the largest barriers to voting for low-income voters is the cost of their time, or the opportunity cost of going out to vote. Our solution to this particular problem is to bring the voting to these citizens, by rolling out our mobile voting unit during the election. We also found that low-income citizens tend to have a hard time identifying with candidates or finding candidates that share their values. This is why we want to focus on pairing our education rollout with the *Plan Your Vote* application from the City of Vancouver, giving people a chance to seek out candidates that share their values. Lastly, low-income families tend to engage with politics less as they may not typically talk about civic politics in their normal day lives. This is why we want to make the environment around the Van as engaging and accessible as possible, by providing coffee and snacks and having a “food truck” appeal.

Overall, we feel by addressing these weaknesses and leveraging how our project responds to barriers to low-income voters we feel the project could be of great value to the community. Paired with the strategies the City of Vancouver has already carried out in the past like Pop-Up City Hall, we feel this project would be a welcomed addition to the city’s engagement plan.

With that in mind, the basic operation of the Vancouver Voting Van is relatively simple. The Van will drive to our focus locations in neighborhoods or parks and operate there for some time before moving on to a different location. The locations and hours of operation will be announced on social media ahead of time, and a rough schedule will be kept on a dedicated website - although the schedule should be altered based on how much traffic the Van receives. For example, we might park the van in front of a Tim Hortons - with permission of the store operators - for a half hour, serving both employees and guests for a brief period of time. In addition, the educational focus of the Van will change as the municipal election draws closer.

The timeline for these changes are as follows:

1. **August 10 - September 10st:** Voter Registration

2. **September 11th - September 21st:** Advanced Voting
3. **September 22nd - 29th:** Candidate Profiles
4. **September 30th - October 10th:** Advanced Voting

Then, between October 11th and October 14th, the Vancouver Voting Van will serve as an actual mobile voting station.

The budget of the Vancouver Voting Van may be split into two categories; the material costs associated with procuring and modifying the vehicle necessary to house the mobile voting station, and the costs associated with operating the vehicle throughout the campaign. The material costs will include the vehicle, wrapping and equipment such as ballot boxes, lighting, and a device to enable Wi-Fi, among other things. Operational costs will include staff wages, fuel, printed materials, parking fees and data plan fees. As a result, the cost of operating a single Van per campaign may range from \$50,000 CAD, to \$90,000 CAD. Some costs may be reduced substantially - for example if we are able to purchase a used vehicle rather than a new one or reuse resources from *Pop Up City Hall* - while other costs may increase - such as if we wish to operate the Van more often, or if we would like to operate more vans at a time.

One additional factor to keep in mind when investing in this project - and designing the mobile voting stations themselves - will be the usefulness of the vans outside of the next municipal election. While the Vancouver Voting Van is envisioned as serving a dual purpose of voter information kiosk and mobile voting station, the applications for such a vehicle are extremely limited outside of the political sphere. For example, we might suggest loaning these mobile voting stations out to secondary schools in order to educate the soon-to-be electorate on how voting works and who the latest incumbents were, but schools should be able to set up their own mock-booths without having to borrow municipal resources. A more effective use of the vans after the Vancouver municipal election ends in October would be to lend them out to other cities - although this would require a 'rebranding' of the vehicles. Ideally the design of

these vans should be robust enough to serve other roles outside of municipal elections, but the niche requirements of a 'mobile voting station' make it difficult to do so.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Vancity Voting Van project is an effective and accessible way to engage with low-income citizens and ease their barriers to access when it comes to voting. Our education phase the months leading up to the elections will help to address issues of low-income citizens not finding the time or need to research candidates and voter information. Our second phase, will help to increase voter registration for the upcoming election for one of the lowest registered demographics. And lastly, our third phase and most important part of the rollout, will eliminate the cost of people's time associated with getting out to vote and hopefully encourage them to vote in the future. Overall, we hope this project is something that can not only respond to challenges faced by low-income citizens, but also be something that could make a long-lasting impact on voter turnout in Vancouver.

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