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From Petitions to Preselection

Stories of political participation from culturally diverse Australians

by Trish Prentice

The author

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In a country where voting is compulsory, it may seem moot to explore the issue of political participation. All eligible Australian citizens over 18 years of age are required to register to vote and take part in state and federal elections (and often in local government elections as well). If political participation is compulsory, why should we give this issue a second thought? Most eligible Australians are participating politically. Or are they?

It has long been recognised that there are challenges and barriers to the political participation of those from culturally diverse backgrounds. In 2006, a NSW Parliamentary Library Briefing Paper noted Australian parliaments are "largely unrepresentative of Australia's diverse population."[i] It found there are few elected representatives from non-English speaking countries, not to mention very little presence of Indigenous Australians in policy making institutions.[ii] Since then, little has changed. A 2018 report by the Australian Human Rights Commission noted only approximately four percent of Australian MPs come from a non-European background and only about one percent have an Indigenous background. While efforts have been made to increase diversity in Australia's political landscape, most elected representatives are still "white, male and, on average, over 50".[iii]

These statistics stand in stark contrast to Australia's diverse and multicultural population. The 2016 census found that almost half of Australians were born overseas or had at least one parent who was.[iv] Australians come from nearly every country around the world.[v] Clearly, this diversity is not reflected in our political machinery, at least in terms of direct representation. However, being elected to office is only one measure of political participation and not everyone engages in politics in order to become a politician.

Political participation is a broad concept, spanning from signing a petition, speaking to a local MP and taking part in a protest, to advocating for a local issue or joining a political party.[vi] Do Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds participate politically at a greater level in other spheres?

This question is difficult to answer.

There are no studies that look at this question or organisations who collect this data. However, there are a myriad of examples of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds who are politically engaged, actively influencing the conduct of public affairs through their networks and spheres of influence. This essay tells the stories of some of those individuals and reflects on the factors that encouraged them towards greater participation. It also shares their thoughts on where the barriers lie for other members of their communities. In an election year, it is important to reflect on the issue of political participation and how all Australians can access the spheres where decisions are being made. This essay contributes to this discussion and challenges the view that there is only one form of political pathway.

The activist

Joannie is an organiser for Democracy in Colour, a national "racial and economic justice organisation" created by "people of colour". While she wouldn't necessarily term herself an activist, the work she and Democracy in Colour does aims to change the institutions and systems in Australia that cause racial and economic injustice.[vii] By definition, these activities are at the heart of activism – their vision is to bring about political and social change.

Like many Australians, Joannie's political engagement started with enrolling to vote. She didn't come from a "political family". Growing up in Malaysia, her family spoke about politics at home, behind closed doors, but never really to others. While the country "isn't so bad" compared to some, there was still a risk. Her family were very aware that speaking out or being politically active could be dangerous.

Joannie and her family came to Australia and settled in Adelaide when she was 14. It was some years before her political engagement began, then took a more active direction.

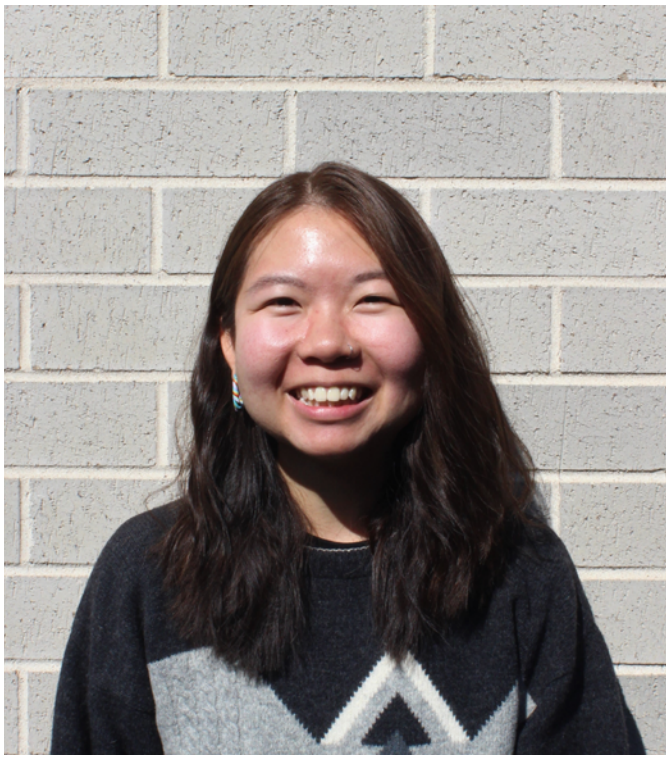
Reflecting back, the turning point for Joannie was joining a women's rights organisation. Growing up in Malaysia she had seen the double standards that applied to women - the assumptions about different levels of household contribution, the expectation that they would be submissive to men. She realised that standards of behaviour in the country were different depending on your gender. This created "a fire" within her, and the anger eventually led to action.

Feeling like she knew absolutely nothing about politics or even where to start, the other members of the women's rights organisation "broke things down" and supported her. They trained Joannie to understand the political system, to speak about women's issues and to engage MPs. They spoke of the importance of being involved and of the power she has as a citizen. It was this period of her life that led to where she is today.

The organisation Joannie is now involved in aims to give people of colour a voice. It offers an outlet for expressing frustration at "the system", as well as a practical means to bring about solutions. As Joannie explains:

It's really important to voice our concerns and to fight for the issues that we are impacted by...a lot of people feel really frustrated. But since there's no outlet for that frustration, what do we do? It's about bringing people together, talking about the issues together... And I think in that moment you realise you're not alone. Together you are stronger. Together we can work something out.

One of the campaigns Joannie has been involved in was a petition sent to former NSW premier Gladys Berejiklian expressing outrage at the lockdown of specific suburbs in Western and Southwest Sydney. For Joannie and others living in those neighbourhoods, the lockdowns felt targeted. Those feelings were only exacerbated when police and military personnel were placed on the streets to enforce the restrictions on movement. Democracy in



Colour managed to gather a thousand signatures for the "Southwest Sydney Needs Pandemic Support, Not Police" petition that was eventually conveyed to the premier's office by email.

While the petition only received an automated response from the premier's office, Joannie still feels it is important to keep doing this work, to channel her frustrations and her desire for change into tangible activity.

It's challenging. I think a lot of us want to continue doing this work but when we don't get listened to or we don't get heard by the people who are supposed to listen to us, it feels very disheartening. But seeing the injustices that are happening, and seeing what's actually being done to the community keeps us going. Because if we don't do anything then it could get worse. Or if we don't do anything it will at least feel a bit worse. So doing something is better than doing nothing. It's really important to voice our concerns and to fight for the issues that we are being impacted by.

Activism provides a concrete way to address the issues Joannie and other likeminded individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds are concerned about. It is something she is passionate about, something that fulfills her.

There are many ways for social change to happen. This is where I see it happening but it might not resonate with some people. You obviously need to find your own comfort point and your own means of putting energy into the change process. For me this is it. This is where I feel the most comfortable. This is the place where I feel the most fuelled.

For others, there may be a different pathway....

The reformer

Walter wouldn't describe himself as a politician. While he served a term on the Wyndham City Council, including as deputy mayor, and has stood for election to the Victorian Upper House, he was never really interested in politics—he was interested in reform. There were certain things he wanted to change, he had certain objectives, so he stood for office to see their fruition. In his heart, Walter desires to serve his community and he has a long history of doing so.

Walter came to Australia from the Philippines in the 1980s. His background was in the military but seeking a better life for his children, Walter and his family migrated to Australia and decided to stay. With a strong professional background, Walter didn't find it too difficult to find work. Yet after a time he felt there was something missing: that he wasn't being recognised for his efforts, that he could do more to contribute to the community. He started volunteering and continued to do so for 25 years. His wife became their breadwinner in that time.

Through his voluntary work Walter found the sense of recognition and belonging in the Australian community that he was seeking, but at the same time this involvement exposed him to his community's

deepest needs. He began to see there were issues that need to be addressed, and, for him, it was frustrating sitting outside the system.

We cannot be activists all the time. You need to get inside and reform. That's what motivated me.

After unsuccessfully standing for office for four years, Walter was elected as a councillor in the City of Wyndham elections in 2016, going on to become deputy mayor in 2017. One of his first projects was to establish a migrant resource centre in Wyndham. Recognising the fast growing and diverse demographics of the local area, Walter wanted to establish a hub and a resource point to support migrant families like his own. As a local resident, he had long petitioned the council for support to establish one but they had always said no. He said to himself, "Well, I'll have to get in and make sure that the future is not going to be the same as what we have now."

Walter spearheaded other projects too, like establishing a business incubator to help small businesses survive and thrive in the community. He was involved in social enterprises and planned an innovation festival where people could compete to pitch their ideas so they could be commercialised. Noting that Wyndham had the lowest tree canopy cover in the Greater Melbourne area, he set up community-owned tree nurseries in a pilot project that came to be replicated in other suburbs. Walter's time on local council was based around identifying community needs and responding to them, especially the needs of Wyndham's thriving migrant community.

Walter hopes his record of service stands as an example to other migrants in the community, that these activities show others a way to increase their sense of belonging and their sense of accomplishment. For Walter, getting into politics was one way to do that. It helped him to "do something" not just talk about it.

He hopes his example will serve as a model for the next generation. That he will create space for others' children, and his own, to step into local government roles, especially in councils that don't fully reflect the cultural diversity of their community.

The population is going to become more multicultural in the future. The birth rate of white Australians is going down while that of migrants is going up. More and more students are becoming permanent residents and citizens, with more migrants also coming in. What are we going to do about preparing for the future? So the current generation of migrants who are here now need to be encouraged to participate more in the community, to become more active citizens and to contribute.

Walter has ideas about how to facilitate this. One way, he suggests, is for culturally diverse communities to create space in their own community organisations for younger generations to come in and take on leadership roles. Rather than keeping older community incumbents in positions of leadership, opportunities could be created for younger generations to take on these roles, with a view to seeing them as preparation for future political participation. Eventually, Walter believes, this will have a flow on effect to other positions of leadership.

It's time to prepare the next generation. For Walter, his work on local council is done, at least for now.

"I feel like I've accomplished what I wanted to accomplish and that was enough."

The political satirist

Greek family dinners rarely conclude without some discussion of politics, and Aggelos's was no exception. As a boy, sitting at the table, he was filled equally with keftedes and spanakopita as with political opinion and philosophy, the great food of the ancients. As he grew, he fed his burgeoning interest in politics with music and satire. Rage Against the Machine provided the lyrics for his frustration at wanting to understand what was happening in the world. The irreverent humour of The Simpsons and South Park spurred deeper questions about the effectiveness of political machinery. Eventually Aggelos found the right medium to explore these issues: art. Events with both local and international significance found their way onto the page. The Greek financial crisis, suicide rates, drug use and economic disaster all became subjects of artistic works. Through his pencil, Aggelos asked questions and formed opinions and continued to wrestle.

After concluding high school, Aggelos travelled overseas to spend a year in Greece. He was there during the referendum of 2015 when Greek citizens rejected the austerity measures proposed by European institutions to dig the country out of its debt crisis, only to have them accepted by the government some days later. Returning to Australia full of the frustration of seeing a political system fall down, Aggelos was faced with the question of what to do next. He was passionate about art and wanted to channel his interest in politics in that direction, but he was very aware it would limit his future employment prospects so he decided to study politics. Through his course he picked up a placement at a federal MPs office and, soon after, was offered a job on staff.

The opportunity he was given to work directly within Australia's political machinery caused him to reframe his thinking about the possibilities open to him for political engagement.

Although he was studying politics, Aggelos felt that working in the system was an opportunity only afforded to some people - the "lawyer's son or daughter" or those with the correct pedigree or the right background. He felt acutely that his working class roots and his overtly Greek name would pose barriers to political employment. His experience proved otherwise:

I just didn't think that normal people were cut out for this type of stuff. I went to a public school, both for primary school and high school. None of my friends are really into politics. I didn't know anyone who was working in politics. So if I was the norm in my world, people like me weren't getting the opportunities to work in these types of environments.

I thought because my name was really Greek I could never really get a job with a resume. I always got work through meeting someone. I was pretty convinced that if I changed my name, I might get a job more easily. But that isn't true. I think that anyone has the chance just by me doing it. I've had people come to me and say 'if you can do it then we can do it too.' And that's been pretty inspiring.

Aggelos works within the MPs office on community engagement. The electorate is large and very diverse and there are a lot of refugees settled there, particularly from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Much of his work revolves around immigration issues, which Aggelos can relate to as someone from a migrant background. He can understand where they are coming from.

A lot of the cases I deal with are going nowhere. And sometimes when the system is harsh or unfair, you just need good people working in the bureaucracy who are just not going to give up on the person. I've found that with perseverance I've achieved almost miracles. If there are people within the hopeless system... people who care... then I think it's hopeful. It makes it possible even for the impossible to be achieved.

However, for Aggelos, the question of what to do long term still remains unresolved. While he wants to keep his "foot in the door" in politics, the art scene still calls to him. He's drawn to the idea of producing political satire through art, in a space where he can combine political engagement and creativity to explore a range of issues. There are advantages to using art as a political medium:

I think sometimes political satire helps people understand really what's going on. People like Jon Stewart helped me growing up to understand some really complicated topics. To simplify the madness a little bit. Art, comedy and satire can just help you understand how crazy it all is.

Regardless of the next step in the journey, it is important to Aggelos that he keeps engaging with the issues. His Greek Australian heritage has given him a sense of what he terms "survivor's guilt". As someone who hasn't been impacted to the extent that his Greek compatriots were during the financial crisis, who hasn't lived through the economic hardship and the failures of the political system that people he knew experienced, he feels particular responsibility to use the opportunities he has been given to engage politically to the fullest extent possible.

Naz feels that too.

The educator

Naz came to Australia in 2008 from Afghanistan with her family on a humanitarian visa and she feels particular responsibility to make use of the opportunities she has been given. Deeply aware of the sacrifices of her parents and of the hardship members of her community have experienced, she carries a sense of "duty" to ensure her gifts, and the opportunities afforded to her, are not going to waste.

I didn't choose this path because it fascinated me. This path was kind of chosen for me because of the lived experience of my people. As someone who is tertiary educated, as someone who has opportunities that my parents and my community sacrificed a lot for, it's not only a passion for me but a responsibility.

Naz's passion is to ensure that people from a migrant or refugee background like her have the ability to be politically active and aware. She does this through education: by ensuring people have access to information, policy making and decision-making processes, and by encouraging political engagement, whether that means going out to vote or direct advocacy. She is determined to counter what she perceives as a reluctance to engage politically, especially among those in the community who fear that taking part in the public discourse might result in their visa being cancelled.

A big part of my passion lies in ensuring that people from migrant or refugee backgrounds have the ability to be politically active and aware. As a migrant woman myself, as a 'person of colour', I often see the discourse around politics as a negative one, especially for refugees when they fear their visas being cancelled. They're more reluctant to become politically active and to participate in public discourses around politics, elections and policy in general. That's something I don't agree with. I think everyone should have the liberty to be politically active, insofar as they feel safe.

I saw there was no work being done for refugees to become more politically active or more empowered, especially women who, even in their home countries like Afghanistan, from a generation before mine, didn't have the political liberty to go out and vote. So for me, it's about shifting that discourse but also allowing people from my community and from communities that are disproportionately impacted to have access to information. To have access to political arenas either by themselves becoming MPs or running for office but also in policy making and decision-making processes.

For Naz, education is a key foundation for political participation. Without it, people don't have the capacity to participate fully in the decision-making processes that affect them. She recalls feeling ill prepared the first time she voted:

In my first election I was completely blind. I didn't know who I was voting for. I didn't have enough information. There is really no system or organised program that works to this effect or to change this issue, at least to my knowledge. It's often just a matter of voting for the sake of not getting fined or not being politically active for the fear of your visa status or of immigration finding out, or at least that is the perception.

Knowledge of the Australian political system is especially critical for those who come from contexts where there have been few opportunities for political participation or where the political system is structured differently to Australia's. Naz says there are simple things that could be done to make a world of difference for "communities of colour", such as culturally sensitive "cheat sheets" on how to vote and how the political system works, or audio recordings of verbal information in community languages for those of the older generations who have little literacy.

For Naz, it is about ensuring the ideals of Australia's decision-making processes are practiced in reality through pragmatic and practical steps. She believes education will facilitate community voices reaching the places where public discourses are taking place and decisions being made. This, in turn, will lead to greater representation of those voices.

The representative

Tu's political journey has revolved, at least in part, around the issue of representation. Standing for Labor preselection in the lower house seat of Fowler (NSW) in 2021, her desire to formerly represent her community was frustrated by a party decision to move another senator into the seat. For her, this decision sent a message to the local community that political expediencies were more important than what was best for the local community. Yet, positively, it sparked a national conversation about what representation means.

Tu is of Vietnamese background. He parents fled to Australia from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975.[viii] She grew up in Southwest Sydney in a diverse, multicultural community, where she was exposed to different cultures, religions and views about the world. For her, this experience opened her eyes to a world beyond "her little bubble". It also gave her a strong connection to and a deep understanding of the community she aimed to represent.

I think those were my strong suits, as a local person, as someone who's quite embedded in a community and who understands it; who can empathise and has the same lived experiences as local members... At the end of the day, the goal is to represent the diverse views of the community.

Tu believed she was the best person to represent her community because she lived there and because she could be a direct conduit for local residents, with whom she shared much in common.

The conversation that ensued around Tu's sidelining[ix] brought back into the public sphere questions about the number of federal political representatives from culturally diverse backgrounds. Calls were made by some MPs for political parties to introduce diversity quotas to ensure greater cultural representation. While these were ultimately rejected, Tu notes that she was contacted by Vietnamese Australians nationally who expressed disappointment they were still not represented. They said to her, "We've

been here so long, we've contributed so much to this country, yet we are still treated as second class citizens. We still don't have a voice."

While the question of whether representation means having the opportunity to vote for someone from your own cultural community gives rise to different points of view, Tu believes there are advantages to having more "'visual" diversity in parliament:

Those trailblazers actually break down walls and lift up others as well. They elevate others because they have overcome all those barriers to get there. Based on my identity, I'm diverse, I'm a person of colour, a woman of colour... There is a sense, in migrant communities, that Australia is not necessarily our home. We are still guests in this country, so maybe we don't have a right to have a say or we don't have a right to be as politically engaged. I think that's reflected in the engagement and the relationships we have with our representatives. We don't see MPs as serving us.

Tu is concerned about what she sees as lack of political engagement in her community, something she had hoped to improve by standing for office, where she could address the feelings of mistrust in government and the lack of accessibility and approachability of some MPs.

Part of the problem, Tu believes, is a lack of political knowledge among cultural communities. This fosters disengagement, not to mention things like informal voting. She recalls a time when she was down at her local shopping centre having conversations with local residents where people didn't even know who key political leaders were. "Everyone was like, 'who the hell is Anthony Albanese'? They don't even know who the leader of the opposition is." There is also a lot of confusion about Australia's three tier system of government and why it's necessary to vote in more than one election some years.

For newer migrant communities, there are other factors that cause disengagement, Tu believes. Language barriers play a role. Some communities are also still trying to come to terms with the trauma they have brought with them, especially those who have fled situations of war or persecution before coming to Australia. Other communities are just focused on doing what they need to get by: providing for their family, ensuring their kids have a good education. The energy dedicated to these goals leaves very little for engagement politically beyond the struggles of day-to-day life.

For Tu, it was a university friend who steered her towards being more politically active. She had always been deeply involved in her local community but political engagement was never a priority. There had been no pathway for it. She didn't know anyone, until that time, who had political or institutional knowledge, who could encourage her in that direction. The friend encouraged her to join the Labor Party, then retiring MP Chris Hayes encouraged her to stand for preselection. While being a politician was never her goal, per se, she sees standing for office as a way to serve her community. For her, there is something attractive about being able to directly influence decision - making processes.

Political participation when you don't have voting rights

Many Australian residents do not have direct access to Australia's political system. Rita is a member of Australia's Pasifika community, a diaspora of New Zealand residents from the islands of the Pacific Ocean. According to the 2016 census, 200,000 people reported having Pacific Island ancestry. However, that number is believed to be widely underreported, as Pasifika community members come to Australia via New Zealand and many denote New Zealand ancestry instead of their Pacific origins on official forms.[x]

Pasifika community members often reside long term in Australia without the right to political participation as there are limited pathways for New Zealanders to gain Australian citizenship. For many Pasifika community members, the lack of opportunity to participate politically creates a despondency that extends into civic life.

"We have a community that just don't want to participate. They don't associate themselves or even identify as Australian."

We can't get permanent residency even though we've been living here for a number of years. We contribute to the economy but don't see ourselves as Australian. So when it comes to civic participation, who wants to be part of a society when they feel they're invisible?

Rita believes this lack of engagement often transfers to the next generation—the children of New Zealand residents who are entitled to Australian citizenship. It influences their connection to school, to other institutions and to the community. Rita suggests, "there is a flow on effect across the board".

While imposing limitations on the right to participate in political affairs is recognised as a legitimate exercise of state authority,[xi] there is undeniably frustration among those excluded from public decision-making processes, especially when they have resided in Australia for an extended period of time and wish to participate. There are many countries around the world that allow non-citizens some form of voting rights.[xii] Australia doesn't, so individuals often find alternative ways to express their views, including by informally influencing the votes of their family members, friends and colleagues.[xiii]

Another way non-citizens can influence policy makers is through community consultation forums. These meetings, popularised during the 1990s and 2000s, particularly at the local government level,[xiv] became a way of addressing some of the perceived shortcomings of the democratic process, allowing for "a closer match between [the] needs and aspirations of communities and the services provided to them".[xv] Typically involving a government representative and either local residents or members of a specific cultural community, they provide a place where people can raise issues or express concerns directly to decision makers.[xvi] For the Pasifika community, these forums are one of the only places where they can speak and be heard, and are a crucial mechanism for potentially impacting public policy.

However, they are not the equivalent of formal political rights. Rita notes there are limitations to the community engagement process, particularly around the issue of representation. One of the most common ways of engaging cultural communities is for MPs to consult with community organisations or designated community leaders as "representatives" of their community. While going to a single point of contact may be an efficient way to engage in dialogue, the consultative process is less effective when those leaders or organisations are not truly representative of the broader community. Rita notes the advisory councils the government turns to when seeking to consult the Pasifika community are not always representative of the breadth of community voices. This impedes full community participation.

What we find is that there are community groups and their leadership is decided by election, but sometimes the wrong people get elected. When you don't have good leadership within these councils, they don't operate in the way they should, then they are not reaching out to their respective communities. When that happens, the people are neglected and then there's distrust.

Lack of recognition of the diversity inherent within the Pasifika community, a diaspora made up of many smaller communities, can also be an obstacle.

Pacific Islanders all get lumped as one but we're all different. You can't work with the Samoans and expect the Niueans to do the same thing. They do things a different way. The Samoans, there's a lot of us here, and we have good leadership. The Tongans, they maybe only listen to two people and there's a massive population. The government needs a very nuanced way of working with each group.

What constitutes adequate representation at a community level is not a new question. Even if government engages in consultation in the community with the best intentions, there are still challenges to getting this right. "Decision-makers can be faced with a variety of groups all making claims to speak for the people of an area, all consulted through different processes. Which voices should be listened to, and which are silent?"[xvii]

For Rita, one solution is to broaden who the government consults with. Instead of turning to the leaders of community councils, often headed up by traditional leaders of the older generation, consultation could be widened to include young professionals. These community members bring with them a whole range of different connections, as well as the ability to "sit at the table and really articulate for the community."

Political participation – what facilitates it and what impedes it?

As these stories reveal, political participation can take a variety of forms. At a very fundamental level political participation occurs through voting, but it can be much broader and it doesn't always mean becoming a politician. Even those without formal political rights have avenues available for participation, even if they are circuitous and, arguably, have significant shortcomings. Yet it is clear that some individuals in our community are more politically engaged than others; that their desire to participate extends beyond periodically completing a ballot paper to significant contributions of time, energy and resources. What are the factors that lead an individual to greater political engagement? This is an important question for politicians and policy makers, especially amid growing political disengagement around the world.[xviii] For democracies like Australia, political participation is key for the functioning and legitimacy of its political institutions.[xix]

For several of the interviewees, civic engagement[xx] led naturally to deeper political engagement.

This makes sense. Embeddedness in one's local community leads to deeper knowledge and greater understanding of community needs. For Walter and Naz, that knowledge could only lead to action in a sphere where change could take place—the political arena. Interestingly, their paths diverged at that point. Walter chose to pursue becoming a decision maker in order to bring about direct change in his community, while Naz chose to remain outside the political system, equipping others to understand it better so they could be empowered to choose their own pathway of participation.

Civic participation provides an important training ground for future political involvement. Along with time and money, it is thought to be one of the most essential precursors to political activity.[xxi] It leads to greater knowledge of the impact of public policies on the lives of individuals and communities[xxii] and provides a place for the development of skills and capabilities that can be translated into the political sphere. For Walter, encouraging and providing opportunity for the younger generation to take on leadership roles in community organisations is a key form of civic engagement that will lead to greater political participation. He sees it as an important stepping stone for increasing cultural diversity and representation in political institutions in the future.

For other individuals, it is the influence of people in their networks that opens doors to further political engagement. For Tu and Joannie, other people served as facilitators, exposing them to new political activities or forums. Joannie recalls how important her network in the women's rights group was for supporting her interest in political engagement:

If the people around you are not talking about it, if you don't have the space to talk about it, then it's hard to be engaged. I was at the point where I was kind of feeling angry about things but no one else was doing anything, so I would just get angry and then kind of move on. I thought, I'll just vote when the election comes. I didn't think there was anything else I could do.

Joannie and Tu's interpersonal relationships brought them into contact with individuals who had greater

knowledge or more experience in the political system, leading them to new opportunities to further their own engagement. From there, their own personal experiences, values and interests led them to take up the opportunities afforded to them.

Given the influence of interpersonal relationships, it is worth reflecting on how those with political experience or knowledge might use it to facilitate greater political engagement in their communities. Naz certainly was doing this: sharing her political knowledge with refugee and migrant women, in particular, in her community networks. Research on role models suggests another pathway. Several international studies show that the political involvement of women, especially as elected representatives, encourages greater "political interest, political efficacy, and trust" among young girls,[xxiii] and that this can lead to more political discussion and participation when they become adults.[xxiv] Such studies have not been replicated among cultural communities in Australia, but as Tu reflected, even seeing culturally diverse 'trailblazers' standing for office can help break down barriers and create a pathway for others. The impact of individuals like Walter or Tu in their communities, sharing their knowledge and experience among their networks, is no doubt an even more powerful facilitating force.

Home country experiences can also have an influence on political participation in Australia, both as an enabling force and as a barrier to political participation. For Aggelos and Naz, exposure to political systems that failed to represent people's interests in their home countries motivated them to make more of the political opportunities afforded to them in Australia. This experience gave Aggelos the desire to understand political processes more deeply and to go on and study them. Naz feels a strong sense of responsibility to make use of the political opportunities given to her in Australia, as they stand in contrast to those of other members of the Afghan community, especially her parents' generation.

Home country experiences can also serve as a barrier to political participation in Australia. Recent research conducted by Naureen Choudhry on the political participation of 21 Australian women of Pakistani

background found that growing up in Pakistan, these women had been taught that politics was a forum women shouldn't engage in.

All of them had grown up in Pakistan. And it's funny, even though some of them had grown up in the eighties, nineties and two thousands, they were all telling a similar story. The story is that politics is just not something that we are socialised in. It is something we are excluded from in a very conscious way. Society defines women's roles in a very gendered, specific way. Women are told to focus on their education, focus on your household duties.

Naureen found those experiences carried with these women to Australia. They manifested both in terms of prevailing community attitudes that discouraged Pakistani women from engaging in politics and as a reluctance among the women themselves to become politically involved beyond voting. For women like Naureen, who herself stood for office in the 2020 City of Monash council election, greater political participation brings with it the real risk of community backlash.

Women who become politically engaged... I can't remember the word they used but really bad names. They say, 'Oh, this woman is not a good woman because she is not fulfilling her responsibilities as a mother or as a wife'. So that stigma is huge. And who would want to deal with all of that garbage?

As well as home country experiences, lack of knowledge about the Australian political system also poses a barrier to political participation. Tu found this in her constituency; and a lot of the work Naz does centres around ensuring members of her community have sufficient political knowledge to access political arenas or politicians if they should choose to. Naureen's research suggests there may be missed opportunities for political education in the citizenship process. The women she interviewed found that the information provided to them about the Australian political system at the time of citizenship was difficult to digest.

They find the breadth and width of the information too hard to navigate. It's not like a one stop shop where they can get small information in easy, plain English. It's almost like they have to dig through a lot of information to understand a small piece of concept.

For these women, the citizenship booklet was not helpful for breaking down these knowledge gaps. Instead, they needed a "culturally sensitive and targeted approach". For Naureen, this process should begin early in the settlement process, well before citizenship.

We don't even need to wait until the citizenship ceremony. As soon as a person lands in Australia they should be given a trajectory or a pathway on how to build their knowledge about politics.

International studies have found there is an inextricable link between education and participation.[xxv] Knowledge leads to empowerment; it also leads to choice. If individuals are aware of the range of opportunities available to them for engagement, they can, with full agency, choose the pathways of participation that are best suited to them.

Concluding thoughts

Political participation stems from people's right to take part in the conduct of public affairs and it is crucial for effective government. For democratic countries like Australia, whether and how people participate politically has an impact on the country's political health.[xxvi] For a long time we have known that our elected representatives do not reflect the full diversity of the Australian population. Yet political participation can take a variety of different forms, and Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds, like the interviewees, are participating politically in a variety of different ways.

There are barriers to political participation for cultural communities in Australia. They consist of inadequate knowledge of the Australian political system or of the forums available for participation. Language barriers can play a role, as can information presented in a way that is inaccessible or difficult to digest for non-native English speakers. Experiences in home countries present further complexities to political participation in Australia. They can be facilitating factors, providing enthusiasm for engaging in a political system that is more easily accessible or that poses less risk than what they had experienced previously, or they can present real obstacles to full engagement. Cultural understandings of who should have access to political spheres or what political participation should look are real challenges that some Australians have to navigate.

However, for those who have overcome those barriers, who have adequate knowledge of how the Australian political system works or who, perhaps, have been lucky enough to have had others walk with them (or before them) on their political journey, participation has provided a way to channel frustration and to address issues that are important to them or to their community. These individuals have found value in deeper engagement and have been able to take tangible steps toward bringing about change for themselves and for others.

Knowledge leads to empowerment; it also leads to choice. If individuals are aware of the range of opportunities available to them for engagement, they can, with full agency, choose the pathways of participation that are best suited to them.

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