Engagement in the voluntary sector has been shown to be an important pillar for upholding democracy: it creates social capital, both bridging and bonding; it has been linked to voting behaviour and political participation; and it enhances involvement in local decision making. For immigrants, it is a way to learn about Canadian democracy and feel more connected with the country. Many nonprofit organizations work in and with immigrant communities, but research indicates that there is a lack of minority representation on the boards of nonprofit agencies (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Daley, & Angulo, 1994; Daley & Marciglia, 2001; Fredette et al, 2006). According to statistics collected in the National Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating, most of Canada’s ethnic minorities are volunteering and participating at lower than average rates (Foster et al., 2004).

The purpose of this study is to investigate, both at the community and at the organizational level, the extent to which the various ethnic groups that populate the larger Canadian urban centres are represented in the third sector. This representation can be achieved through participation in ethno-specific organizations, multicultural organizations, or mainstream organizations. Some questions that are explored in this paper are: 1) What are the relative roles of ethno-specific, multicultural or mainstream organizations in providing bridging capital and bonding capital? 2) Is overall participation in Canadian democracy higher in communities densely populated with ethno-specific organizations, indicating a bridging role for these organizations as well as a bonding role, or is it lower, indicating a predominantly bonding role? 3) Are the boards and volunteers of mainstream and multicultural organizations more diverse in communities densely populated with ethno-specific organizations or in those that have fewer ethno-specific organizations, where participation opportunities would be mainly through mainstream organizations?

The literature presents contradictory findings. Some studies suggest that the denser the organizational networks in various ethnic groups, the higher the political participation in the host environment Canadian society (Fennema and Tillie,1999, 2001). On the other hand, immigrant communities in which ethno-specific organizations play an overwhelmingly bonding role, without being counterbalanced by bridging opportunities, are more likely to remain segregated (Leonard & Onyx, 2003, pg. 202). Jacobs, Phalet, and Swyngedouw (2004) found that weaker ethnic networks were associated with higher political participation. However, they did find that higher participation in cross-cultural networks was positively associated with political participation. These contradictory findings point to the importance of determining whether these organizations and organizational networks are bridging or bonding ones. Organizational density and high levels of participation, do not, in and of themselves, guarantee greater participation or integration in the host country.

This paper presents results from a multi-stage study. In the first stage we calculate the organizational density of ethno-specific, multicultural and mainstream organizations in various political ridings of four of the most ethnically diverse communities of Canada: Toronto, Montreal, Calgary and Vancouver. In the second stage, using an on-line questionnaire, we survey a sample of ethno-specific, multicultural and mainstream organizations to determine the composition of their boards, staff and volunteers and the extent of bridging and bonding opportunities they provide their members. In the third stage, we correlate measures of organizational density and levels of ethnic participation in nonprofit organizations with other measures of political, economic and social engagement to determine whether organizational density, and the type of voluntary participation is related to participation in Canadian social political and economic life.

Currently we are implementing stage 2 of the study, and gathering various measures of economic, social and political engagement in the mapped ridings.
References


