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B.C. group aims to raise riding turnout with Chinese immigrants

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Richmond Centre is the B.C. riding with the highest Chinese population, a riding in a city with the highest immigrant population in Canada. But its voter turnout *[http://www.richmond-news.com/federal-election/richmond-centre-lowest-b-c-riding-for-voter-turnout-1.2087669]* in 2013 was the lowest in the province.

A small group of Chinese activists believe that needs to change, saying the first goal is to increase Chinese voters' awareness of the benefits of political participation.

"If you don't vote for the [politicians], how can they pay attention to you?" said Qingcun Kong, co-founder of the Chinese Canadian Society for Political Engagement, a non-profit, non-partisan group with the aim of improving the civic awareness of Chinese-Canadians.

Mr. Kong said evidence of the impact of low Chinese engagement both provincially and federally is obvious: Only seven of 338 Members of Parliament are Chinese. And despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's success in appointing the most diverse cabinet in Canadian history, none of those faces are Chinese.

Mr. Kong said the number of Chinese-Canadian MPs should at least double. The problem is a vicious circle, he said: There are few Chinese in Canadian politics and the result is few Chinese-Canadians feel represented so don't make an effort to have their voices heard.

Getting more Chinese-Canadians out to the polls in the May 9 provincial election is the first task, he said.

Elections BC figures show Richmond Centre – the riding has been split into two for 2017 – had a voter turnout rate of 43.7 per cent in 2013. The average across the province was 52 per cent. The society's goal is to get the turnout rate up by 10 per cent.

Mr. Kong said his group began by launching discussion groups on WeChat *[https://www.wechat.com/en/]*, the most-used social media among Chinese. Within two months, the groups have attracted 2,000 to 3,000 participants. The policy: "no populism, no religion and no discrimination," said Qibo Wang, another founder of the society.

Mr. Wang said the discussion groups not only function as a platform to spread the voting knowledge, but also a place for them to talk about elections and politics.

The social media discussions are bolstered by speaking events hosted in a Richmond café every Saturday. Guest speakers include scholars and B.C. election candidates.

Sharon Ma said it's time "to do something" and "set up a new image" for Chinese in Canada.

"We are not just living here well and seeing our children educated well. Actually, we want to contribute to this society and this country ... We do not just want to obtain or get something. We want to contribute." Ms. Ma said.

The society has trained volunteers to visit locations around the Lower Mainland, in Vancouver, West Vancouver, North Vancouver, Burnaby, Coquitlam, White Rock, Richmond and on Vancouver Island. The volunteers will answer residents' questions and will also drive people in need to their local polling stations.

Elections BC and both major political parties have themselves been aware of the low voter turnout numbers in the immigrant community. Elections BC has implemented several methods to break through language barriers.

Andrew Watson, communications manager at Elections BC, said the agency has provided public information in 16 different languages, and published translated public awareness advertisements in ethnic publications.

Mr. Watson said Elections BC is also partnering with the non-partisan organization Samara to support its Vote PopUp *[http://www.samaracanada.com/samarablog/blog-post/samara-main-blog/2017/03/09/vote-popup-launched-for-bcelxn]* program, a free program that simulates the voting experience by recreating a voting station.