Understanding Political Integration Among Syrian Refugees in Calgary

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ABSTRACT

Newcomers to Canada are essential for the nation's cultural and economic vitality. However, research has primarily focused on immigrant integration, overlooking refugees. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the political integration of Syrian refugees in Calgary, Alberta, based on 21 semi-structured interviews. Specifically, it seeks to answer two main questions. First, what factors facilitate the attitudinal and behavioural political integration of Syrian refugees in Calgary? Second, what is the role of social capital in facilitating the attitudinal and behavioural political integration of refugees? Utilizing deductive thematic analysis, the study uncovers a need for enhanced political education. It also identifies the impact of individual variables like news consumption and political interest. A sense of belonging to Canadian society also emerged as an influential factor in political integration. Moreover, social capital, exemplified through membership in organizations, increased political participation and a sense of belonging. These findings suggest the need for new theories specifically focused on refugee political integration.

Introduction

Immigration has been a key force in shaping Canada's society and culture (Government of Canada, 2021). The Canadian government recognizes that newcomers are a crucial component to the country's continuing success. The Immigration Levels Plan for 2022-2024 seeks to welcome immigrants at a rate of approximately 1% of Canada's population every year, comprising 451,000 permanent residents in 2024 (Government of Canada, 2022). The topic of immigrant integration is especially important today, given that immigrants and refugees are a major source of population replacement since birth rates have declined drastically over the last half-century (Government of Canada, 2022). The economic consequences of immigration appear to be well understood in the literature (Akbari & Haider, 2018). Immigrants help to invigorate ageing labour forces and counterbalance the growing ranks of retirees with pensions in industrial countries (White et al., 2008). Currently, immigration accounts for nearly 100 percent of labour force growth in Canada (Government of Canada, 2022). Whether searching for economic opportunities, rejoining family members, or seeking safety as resettled refugees, newcomers to Canada have been a significant source of continuous prosperity and cultural enrichment Akbari & Haider, 2018; White et al., 2008). One aspect of integration that has received less attention in the literature of resettlement is political integration. Understanding the mechanisms of political integration in Canada seems to be more challenging, perhaps due to large groups of newcomers arriving from nations with drastically different political systems.

After being elected Prime Minister in early November 2015, Justin Trudeau announced as part of his campaign promise that by the end of 2015, Canada will resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees (Hamilton et al., 2020). Since then, over 73,000 Syrian refugees have resettled across Canada (Government of Canada, 2021); most are now Canadian citizens and eligible voters. This research examines refugees' adaptation

to the democratic political environment in Canada using data collected from semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees living in Alberta. Specifically, it aims to answer two main questions. First, what factors facilitate the attitudinal and behavioural political integration of Syrian refugees in Alberta, Canada? Second, what is the role of social capital in facilitating attitudinal and behavioural political integration?

The Syrian Civil War has resulted in the largest refugee crisis since World War II, with with an estimated 16.7 million people requiring humanitarian assistance and more than half of the population still displaced, including more than 7.2 million internally displaced within Syria and over 5.5 million refugees living in other countries (UNHCR, 2024). Canada stands as a major resettlement country, admitting 756 refugees per million residents in 2018, of whom 55% were from Syria and Iraq (Radford & Connor, 2020). While Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) offers services like income support and language training, research shows that refugees in Western Canada often lack adequate information for effective integration (Esses et al., 2013; 2017). Given the forced and abrupt nature of their migration (Hamilton et al., 2020), understanding their political integration into Canadian society is crucial.

Political Integration

Political integration can be defined as "the process of becoming a part of mainstream political debates, practices, and decision making … incorporation is generally achieved when patterns of immigrant participation are comparable to those among the native-born" (O'Neill et al., 2013). While nations that adopt democratic values strongly encourage the political participation of their citizens, countries led by authoritarian regimes restrict political activities and suppress individuals' political participation (Jaggers & Gurr, 1995). Consequently, it is reasonable to suggest that the previous socialization of Syrian refugees in a state ruled by an authoritarian regime might stymie their political integration, which may affect their political participation in their receiving countries (in this case, Canada). This unequal participation can lead to a systematic underrepresentation of the interests of particular groups, which undermines Canadian democracy. Moreover, political participation is a strong indicator of migrants' integration and settlement into host societies, as well as their readiness to engage in and contribute to civic life (Dollman, 2021). The successful integration of refugees into the political systems of their receiving societies benefits systemic integration and therefore contributes to more inclusive societies. Thus, investigating disparities in political integration is essential not only for understanding Syrian refugees' representation in the political process, but also

for the cohesion of society. Further background research will be explored in the following sections to better contextualize these findings within the framework of Canadian society and the specific challenges faced by Syrian refugees.

Dimensions of political integration

Following an influential article by Fennema and Tillie (1999), researchers have extensively studied the determinants of immigrants' political integration across European cities. These studies primarily found that factors such as social capital, political structure of the host country, and immigrants' ethnic backgrounds significantly influence their political integration. The objective was to understand how immigrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds are politically integrated, and to explain variances in political integration across different ethnic groups. While there is consensus that political integration is a multifaceted construct, scholars have not reached agreement on the specific dimensions involved (Tillie, 2004). Multiple frameworks have been developed to categorize the dimensions of political integration, based on immigrants' experiences (Dollman, 2021; Eggert & Giugni, 2010; Martiniello, 2006; Tillie, 2004). These studies underscore the complexity of political integration, indicating it involves factors ranging from individual political efficacy to broader societal acceptance. However, these models are predicated on European contexts and voluntary immigration experiences, posing limitations for their applicability to Syrian refugees in Canada, who have distinct pre-immigration experiences (White et al., 2008).

To address this gap, the current study develops an embedded explanatory model based on existing literature of political integration. An embedded explanatory model integrates multiple theoretical perspectives and variables within a single framework to comprehensively explain a phenomenon (Schommer-Aikins, 2004). In this context, the model is designed to incorporate various factors influencing political integration, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how these elements interact and affect the integration process of Syrian refugees. This model identifies two primary aspects of political integration: attitudinal and behavioral (political participation). The model incorporates determinants from four key categories: social capital, sociodemographic factors, individual difference variables, and sense of belonging

Attitudinal Political Integration

Attitudinal political integration is shaped by two pivotal determinants. The first determinant pertains to trust in governmental and electoral structures. Schol-

ars have emphasized the role of political trust as integral to the process of political integration (Dollman, 2021; Tillie, 2004). Within democratic frameworks, trust serves as a linchpin, connecting citizens to governmental institutions and thereby fostering political participation (Eggert & Giugni, 2010). A deficit in trust is likely to compromise perceptions of the legitimacy of political processes, estrange individuals from the broader political community, and thus, inhibit the integration of Syrian refugees into Canadian political life.

The second determinant involves the assimilation of democratic principles, identified as indispensable for political integration (Tillie, 2004). Migrants skeptical of core Canadian democratic values—ranging from the rule of law to gender equality and the separation of religion and state (Government of Canada, 2020)—may find it challenging to align themselves with the host country's political culture. Attitudinal political integration is thereby considered realized when Syrian refugees exhibit levels of both political trust and commitment to democratic values akin to those of native-born Canadians.

Behavioural Political Integration

Behavioural political integration is characterized by the extent to which migrants engage in political participation, defined as the active facet of citizenship (Martiniello, 2006). Political participation is commonly bifurcated into conventional and unconventional forms (Martiniello, 2005; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2014). Conventional activities include, but are not limited to, voting in provincial and federal elections, running for public office, and party membership, representing formal channels of political engagement. Unconventional activities encompass demonstrations, boycotts, and petitions (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2014). The demarcation between conventional and unconventional forms is subject to scholarly debate, yet many researchers argue it is critical to recognize the differences in behavioural patterns (Martiniello, 2005). The distinction between these forms is critical, particularly in regard to their impact and accessibility for different demographics. For a population such as Syrian refugees, who may encounter barriers to conventional participation due to language difficulties, unfamiliarity with the new country's political system, or past experiences with oppressive regimes, recognizing unconventional activities as legitimate forms of political engagement is essential. This acknowledgement enables a broader understanding of how refugees adapt and contribute to their new societies politically, emphasizing the need for inclusive definition of political integration that reflect the diverse ways individuals can and do participate. Behavioural political integration is considered achieved when the patterns of refugees' participation in both categories are comparable to those among native-born Canadians.

This study posits that attitudinal and behavioural dimensions are distinct but crucial for a comprehensive understanding of refugees' integration process. Successful integration in one dimension does not automatically confer success in the other. For example, a refugee may achieve attitudinal integration by trusting Canadian democratic processes, irrespective of their level of political participation. Conversely, political participation in the Canadian context denotes behavioural integration, regardless of attitudinal alignment with democratic values or trust in institutions.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory plays a pivotal role in this study's framework for political integration, defined as being rooted in social networks (Jacobs & Tillie, 2004). This theory explains variations in political trust and participation (Berger et al., 2004; Fennema & Tillie, 2001), thus impacting both attitudinal and behavioral facets of political integration. Voluntary associations are vital here; Fennema and Tillie (2001) note that denser networks within such associations boost political trust and participation.

Support for this growing theory is robust, as demonstrated by Eggert and Giugni's (2010) survey among Italians, Kosovars, and Turks in Zurich, which found that both ethnic and cross-ethnic affiliations are impactful. However, while behavioral impacts were consistent across groups, attitudinal effects were variable. Berger, Galonska, and Koopmans (2004) examined Berlin migrants and found that while involvement in German organizations positively impacted political integration, the same wasn't as clear for ethnic organizations. This underlines the need to separately evaluate behavioral and attitudinal aspects, as our model aims to do. Significantly, mechanisms underpinning the social capital theory varied among ethnic groups, an important insight given the theory's limited application to Syrian refugees in Canada, who face unique organizational challenges.

Social capital theory isn't limited to minorities; it also holds for majority populations, as evidenced by U.S. studies. Zhang and Chia (2006) discovered in a Tennessee survey that Americans with greater social capital are more politically active than those with less. Similarly, McFarland and Thomas (2006) focused on the impact of youth involvement in voluntary associations, analyzing longitudinal data. They found that youth engagement in organizations like student councils and religious institutions positively influences political participation in adulthood. Specifically, associations aimed at community service and fostering belonging were especially beneficial for future political integration (McFarland & Thomas, 2006).

Individual Difference Variables

The study also focuses on two individual variables: interest in politics and news consumption. Political interest is a critical factor in the integration process, varying among immigrants, especially those who are political refugees (Bartram, 2019; Jacobs & Tillie, 2004). Media consumption, including social media, influences political engagement (Skoric et al., 2016; Ulla, 2021). The rise of digital platforms for political expression has modified the nature of engagement (Bennett, 2012), particularly significant for Syrians who have limited access to traditional political venues.

Sense of Belonging

An additional determinant influencing political integration is migrants' 'sense of belonging,' a term signifying their emotional and cognitive connection with the host society. Martiniello (2005) asserted that stronger identification with the host society fosters better political integration. Supporting this, Bertelli (2019) explored migrants' experiences of belonging in Brescia, Italy, and found a mutual reinforcement between the sense of belonging and political participation. Specifi-

cally, migrants with a strong sense of societal belonging were more likely to engage in political activities.

A summary of the dimensions and determinants based on the existing literature on political integration is displayed below in Figure 1.This is a summary model created by the first author to inform the methodology of the current study, including the interview questions.

Methodology

This study investigates the political integration of Syrian refugees in Calgary, specifically addressing the question: What factors facilitate their political integration? Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 21 participants who met the inclusion criteria: Syrian refugees over 18 with Canadian citizenship. Ethical considerations, particularly for research involving refugees, were carefully addressed (Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015). The lead researcher, himself a Syrian refugee and Canadian citizen, is actively engaged with the Syrian Refugee Support Group Calgary (SRSGC) and ensured ethical compliance. The project received approval from the University of Calgary's Research Ethics Board (REB21-1936).

Figure 1. Explanatory Model of Political Integration
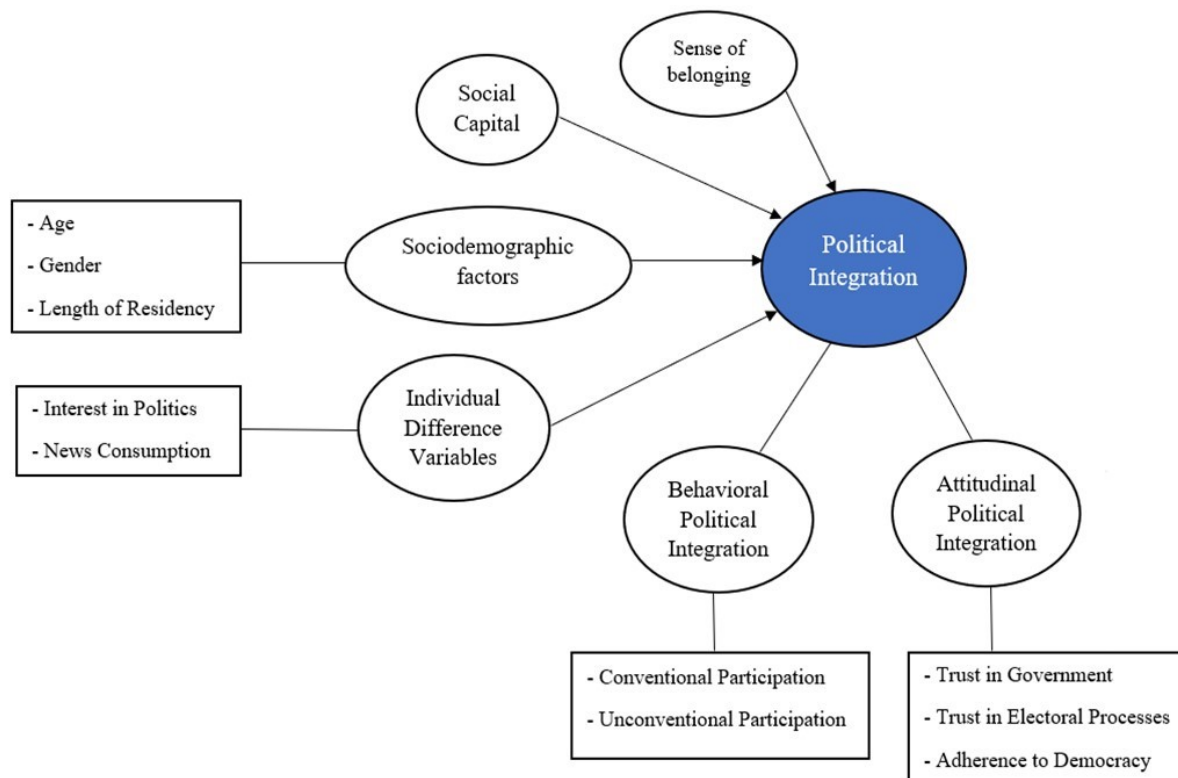
Recruitment

Participants for the study were initially recruited through Instagram, specifically via the student researcher's stories feed. A recruitment poster (Supplementary Material #1) outlining the study's aims and eligibility criteria was posted, and interested individuals were encouraged to email the researcher. After vetting for eligibility, candidates were scheduled for a 45 minute Zoom interview, followed by a 5 minute demographic survey (Supplemental Material #2). Meeting details, including a password-protected link and a consent form, were emailed to participants in advance. Participants were required to sign and return the consent form before the interview, confirming their understanding of the study's voluntary and confidential nature.

The interviews utilized a semi-structured format, with questions (Supplemental Material #3) designed to explore facets of the participants' political integration, such as their consumption of political news. All interviews were conducted in English, as all participants had passed the Canadian citizenship test, which requires a minimum level of English proficiency. When necessary, the researcher provided clarifications in Arabic. After confirming participants' understanding of the study and obtaining verbal consent, the interviews were audio-recorded using anonymized numerical identifiers to maintain confidentiality. Upon the conclusion of the interviews, participants were invited to fill out a demographic survey and received a $10 Starbucks gift card as a token of appreciation.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai software. This software provided not only transcriptions but also highlighted frequently occurring keywords, offering supplementary context for the data analysis phase. The primary investigator reviewed each transcript for accuracy, making necessary edits. A set of coding rules was established, along with a list of predetermined codes. The data were then independently coded and manually analyzed. Thematic analysis was employed as the qualitative research method for coding and interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). This study utilized a deductive approach to thematic analysis, informed by existing theories and knowledge while remaining open to emergent themes. The coding rules and definitions can be found in Supplemental Material #4, and the subsequent results section will elaborate on how both anticipated and unanticipated themes manifested in the data.

Results

Participants

The study involved 11 men and 10 women, aged between 19 and 56 (M = 35.71 years, SD = 12.46 years). Gender did not significantly impact political integration patterns, but the sample size limits definitive conclusions on this factor. Of the 21 participants, 20 identified their ethnicity as Syrian; one reported being both Syrian and Eritrean. All resided in Calgary, Alberta, with residency in Canada ranging from five to seven years (M = 6.09 years, SD = 0.61 years). Regarding education, five participants held a high school degree and were enrolled in university, 11 had a bachelor's, three completed a master's, and two were specialized doctors who shifted careers due to recertification challenges in Alberta. Participants are referred to by their recruitment number (e.g., "Participant 2").

Major Themes

The analytic approach was a manual process that enabled the primary researcher to go through the data, identify codes based on the model of political integration displayed in Figure 1, and link overarching themes. After analyzing the interviews, emerging codes were grouped into six primary themes that were incorporated in the model of political integration: political knowledge and education, behavioural political integration, attitudinal political integration, sense of belonging, individual difference variables, and social capital. The following sections will discuss these themes in detail.

Political Knowledge and Education

The study identified a significant knowledge gap in political education among participants. While the citizenship test offers some foundational knowledge, it is insufficient for meaningful political participation. Participant 12 noted, "my knowledge on the Canadian electoral process was solely from the test material." This lack of information deterred many from voting. Participant 1 explained that he would be willing to vote if better informed. The general consensus was that robust political education could foster more active engagement, a sentiment echoed by Participant 6 who said, "enhanced understanding of Canadian politics would likely increase future voting participation."

Among older refugees who lack formal Canadian education, the complexity of online political resources presents a barrier. Participant 14 advocated for "streamlined resources like summary charts" to bridge this gap. Participant 17 acknowledged that even those interested in politics find the Canadian system challenging to understand. Resettlement agencies'

focus on immediate needs like finance and language often comes at the expense of political education. Participant 6, who works in a resettlement agency, emphasized the role that government could play. When asked "How can the Canadian government assist refugees in becoming politically integrated?", she said:

> There's a huge gap, especially with government-assisted refugees. Most of us initially focus on financial settling and language learning. Simplifying information, raising awareness, and involving resettlement agencies can help. While our agencies currently focus on rights and responsibilities, adding political orientation could be beneficial, even if not immediately upon arrival, perhaps by the end of the first year to prepare newcomers for political engagement.

Younger participants, all of whom completed high school and are enrolled in Canadian universities, indicated receiving some political education mainly through social studies. However, most felt it was insufficient for full political participation, often citing language barriers in their early years as a contributing factor. Participant 4 reflected: "When I first arrived, language barriers limited my learning about Canadian politics. My understanding improved in high school, but better language skills would have helped."

Moreover, participants criticized the Alberta high school curriculum for lacking practical political education. For example, Participant 2 participated in a high school program featuring mock elections, finding it helpful yet not comprehensive. She felt properly educated only after a university political science course. Participant 13, fluent in English and interested in politics, relied mainly on peer discussions for his political knowledge. The limited political education among participants fluent in English and interested in politics suggests that this gap may extend beyond just the refugee community.

Behavioural Political Integration

Political participation among the 21 participants varied considerably between federal and municipal levels: 13 voted in the 2021 federal elections, while only four did so in the municipal elections. This discrepancy was primarily due to a lack of familiarity with municipal politics, which is often less emphasized in citizenship tests and educational curricula. Moreover, community and media discussions surrounding municipal politics were noted to be scarce.

Despite having a basic understanding of the municipal electoral system, many participants chose not to engage. A prevailing sentiment was the perception that municipal elections were less consequential than federal ones. Participant 2, who did vote in the municipal election, elaborated on her limited engagement by pointing out that the roles and responsibilities of municipal governments seemed restricted by provincial oversight. She felt this limitation made the municipal political debates less compelling and, as a result, was less motivated to invest effort in understanding the municipal political landscape. A majority of the 21 participants showed a stronger inclination toward federal rather than municipal elections. Among those who abstained from voting in the last federal election, reasons ranged from ineligibility due to noncitizenship to scheduling conflicts and illness. However, all participants expressed an intention to participate in future federal elections, and most also planned to engage in municipal ones.

In terms of other forms of political participation, seven participants had signed petitions, and three had made financial contributions to political campaigns. Party affiliation was rare; only two participants had ever joined a political party and neither remained active.

Attitudinal Political Integration

Adherence to Democracy

All participants unanimously viewed Canadian democracy as superior to the Syrian political system, particularly valuing the right to vote freely. Many drew stark comparisons between the political landscapes of the two countries. For instance, Participant 5 highlighted the greater freedoms in Canada, stating, "The democracy here offers more rights and the ability to exercise them, unlike in Syria." Participant 16 called the Syrian electoral process "meaningless," noting that elections were predetermined and lacked transparency. He contrasted this with Canada, where he felt elections were genuine. Despite minor criticisms of the Canadian democratic system, the participants' experiences with a non-democratic Syria have led them to value, and aspire for greater involvement in, Canadian political activities, especially voting.

Trust in the Canadian electoral process

Participants in the study universally trusted Canada's electoral process, both at federal and municipal levels. Most attributed this confidence to Canada's democratic principles. Participant 20 remarked, "I had privacy and everything was well-organized. I felt free and comfortable, something I never experienced back in Syria." However, some refugees, due to their background, experienced initial doubts. Participant 14 encapsulated this sentiment: "Being raised in Syria we're always taught to not trust the electoral process... But

in the end, I would say it's pretty trustworthy and the democratic system is a lot better than back home." The trust in elections, however, did not necessarily extend to a generalized trust in the Canadian government.

Trust in The Canadian Government

Participants displayed a spectrum of trust toward the Canadian government. Many commended its social programs and pandemic response. Participant 5 observed, "Since arriving here, they've had many programs to support Syrian refugees. Their pandemic response also impressed me." However, specific actions and political conduct stirred skepticism. Participant 14 said, "the way the government treated those who protested during COVID made me trust them less." Moreover, Participant 19 criticized the level of political discourse, noting, "That debate was very embarrassing… I did not vote in that federal election because I was very disappointed with all of them." Despite diverging levels of trust, most still participated in federal elections, indicating that trust might not be the primary driver of political engagement.

Sense of Belonging

The feeling of belonging to Canadian society played a crucial role in participants' political integration. While some immediately felt welcomed upon arrival, others took time to develop this sense of belonging. Participant 4 noted how his feeling of belonging has grown stronger over time. Many linked their willingness to vote directly to this sense of belonging; for example, Participant 6 voted "because I feel like I am really Canadian, and my vote matters." Voting not only results from a sense of belonging but also strengthens it. Political engagement helps solidify Canadian identity, as exemplified by Participant 6, who aims to teach her children the importance of voting to instill a stronger sense of belonging in them.

Conversely, some participants reported struggling with a sense of belonging in Canada, feeling they will never be "fully Canadian" despite legal citizenship. Cultural gaps, separation from family, and experiences of discrimination were cited as hindrances. Notably, age was not a significant determinant in the adoption of a Canadian identity; both younger and older participants reported varying degrees of belongingness.

Individual Difference Variables

Interest in Politics and News Consumption

Overall, participants exhibited varied levels of interest in politics: six were highly interested, seven moderately, and eight had low interest. Many developed political interests after arriving in Canada due to the newfound democratic freedoms. While political interest did not correlate with the adoption of democratic values or trust in electoral systems, it did influence engagement in other political activities. Notably, Participant 20 expressed newfound enthusiasm for Canadian elections, citing the freedom to choose.

Conversely, Participant 16, although disinterested in politics, still deemed Canada's system superior to Syria's. Consumption of political news differed among the participants and was primarily sourced from online platforms. Although news consumption did not appear to influence behavioral political integration, it did impact political trust. Intriguingly, participants consuming news via social media exhibited lower trust levels in the Canadian government.

Social Capital

Similar to Berger et al (2004) and Fennema and Tillie (2001), social capital was identified as a facilitator of political participation. Refugees with more memberships in voluntary associations voted more and were more willing to engage in forms of political activity other than voting. Therefore, social capital facilitated behavioural political integration. However, in contrast to Fennema and Tillie (2001), denser networks of voluntary associations did not seem to influence the level of trust in both political processes nor Canadian government, and it also had no impact on refugees' adoption of democratic values. Thus, social capital did not impact attitudinal political integration.

Increased social capital over time also seemed to strengthen refugees' sense of belonging in Canadian society. When asked "To what extent do you feel a sense of belonging in Canadian society?", Participant 5 said: "It was hard to feel you are really a part of it (Canadian society), but since I've worked and studied and volunteered here for a couple of years in my college and high school, I feel a lot more a part of it than before." Both formal and informal interactions increased refugees' sense of belonging. Working, making friends, volunteering, and going to school were all factors that helped increase refugees' adoption of a Canadian identity.

Discussion

Political Education

The findings showed that Syrian refugees in Calgary do not receive sufficient education on Canadian politics, and more practical political knowledge is needed to increase refugees' political participation. Participants believed that having a stronger understanding of Canadian politics will allow them to participate

more actively in political life, especially voting. Educating refugees on the different political parties and what they advocate for, how the electoral process works, and including simple yet practical information on how to engage meaningfully will increase their political awareness, which may in turn increase their willingness to participate politically. Thus, political education helps facilitate the behavioural political integration of Syrian refugees. The relationship between political education and political integration identified in the results is displayed below in Figure 2.

Sense of Belonging

Participants' sense of belonging to Canadian society had a reciprocal relationship with their political integration process (shown in Figure 3). Consistent with previous literature (Bertelli, 2019; Martiniello, 2005; Tillie, 2004), political participation and political trust both increased as participants perceived a stronger sense of belonging. The findings also suggest that political participation in turn increased the adoption of a Canadian identity. The political activity of voting was particularly highlighted as an important factor in building a Canadian identity and strengthening feelings of belonging. Participants felt like voting is an important aspect of being a Canadian citizen, and that it is their responsibility as new Canadians to make

their voices heard through voting. Participants who did not feel like they truly belong in Canada did not express the same attitudes regarding engagement in political life.

Individual Difference Variables

The study found that Syrian refugees with a greater interest in Canadian politics were more likely to engage in political activities, aligning with previous research. However, this political interest did not impact their trust in, or adherence to, Canadian democracy—indicating it only facilitated behavioral, not attitudinal, political integration.

In contrast, news consumption had a notable effect on attitudinal political integration but not on political behavior. Contrary to prior studies suggesting news consumption boosts political participation, this was not observed among the Syrian refugees. Moreover, consuming news through social media reduced trust in the Canadian government, possibly due to exposure to negative or controversial issues like the Alberta pipeline, discrimination against Indigenous populations, and others. These government-related negative interactions are often more amplified on social media, potentially reinforcing negative perceptions among refugees. The effects of the individual difference variables on political integration in the findings are shown

Figure 2. The Relationship between Political Education and Political Integration
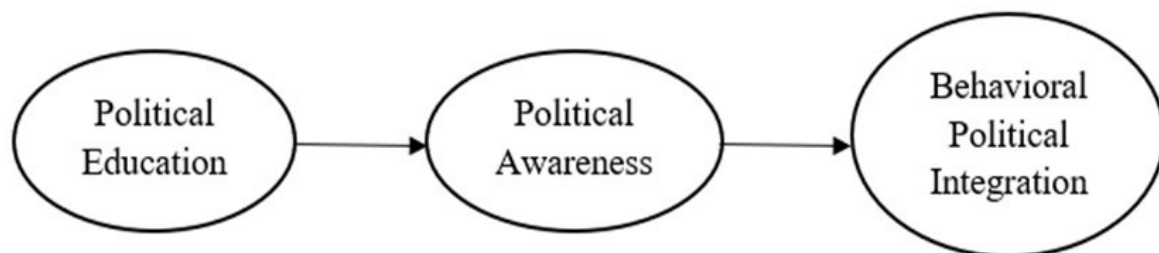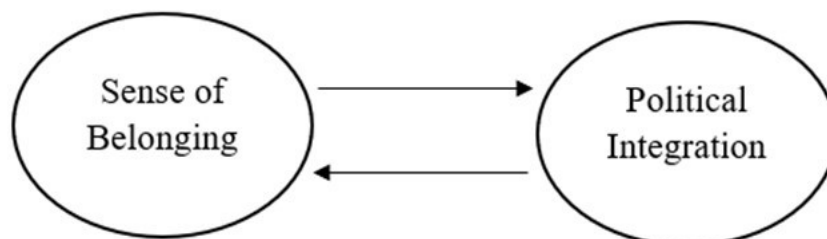

Figure 3. Association between Feelings of Belonginess and Political Integration

below in Figure 4.

Social Capital

Social Capital theory posits that denser networks of voluntary associations correlate with higher political participation and trust in the host society's politics (Berger et al., 2004; Fennema & Tillie, 2001). This study confirms that Syrian refugees in Calgary engaged in more organizations had greater political participation and integration. Moreover, such involve-ment also strengthened their Canadian identity and sense of belonging, further facilitating their political integration behaviorally. These relationships are dis-played in Figure 5.

Some earlier studies on Social Capital Theory often found that immigrants' involvement in voluntary asso-ciations led to increased political trust (Eggert & Giugni, 2010; Fennema & Tillie, 2001). This pattern wasn't observed among Syrian refugees in Calgary; social capital improved political participation but did-n't impact their views on democracy or political trust.

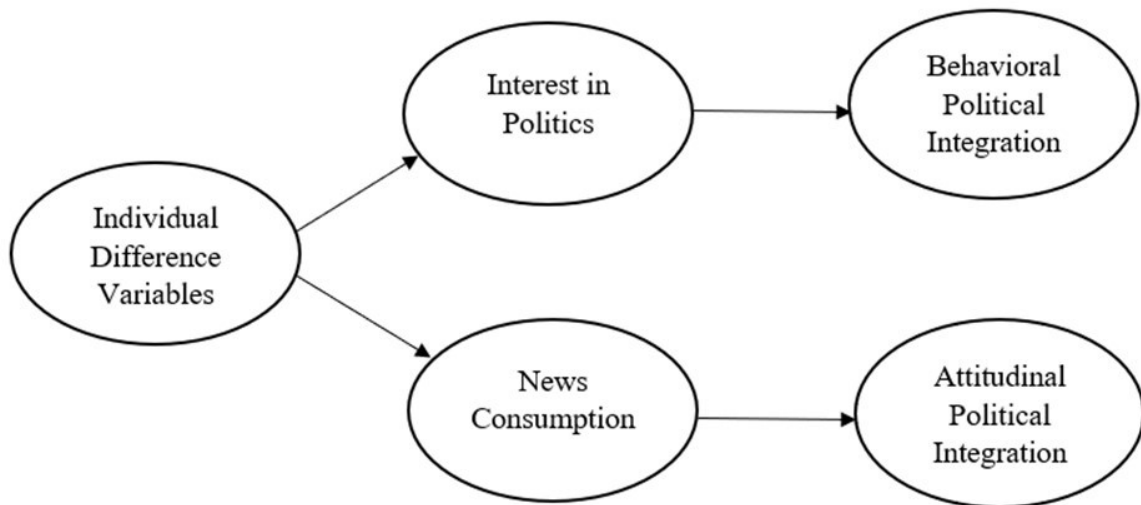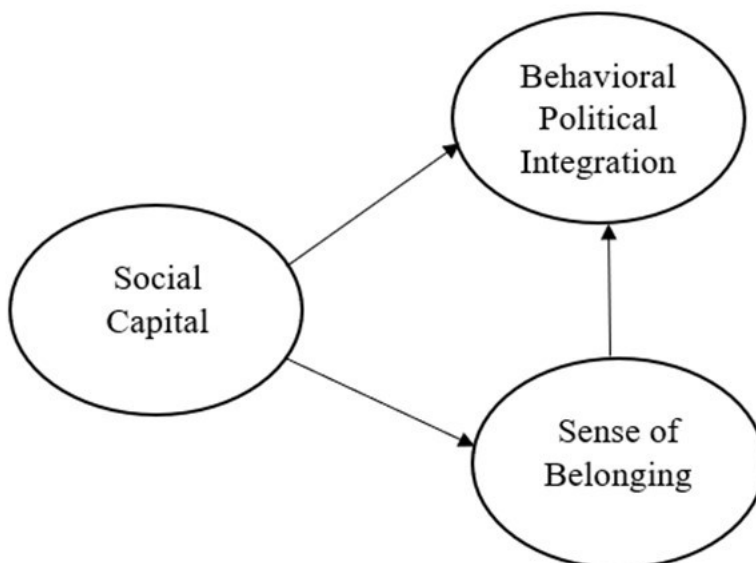**Figure 4.** Individual Difference Variables and Political Integration

Figure 5. The Impact of Social Capital on Political Integration and Canadian Identity

This divergence could be attributed to their experiences in authoritarian Syria, where distrust in political systems may endure post-migration. This aligns with Zurich research showing that associational involvement weakly affects attitudinal dimensions (Berger et al., 2004).

The overarching model of political integration that encompasses all of the relationships and themes identified in the findings is displayed in Figure 6 below.

Implications

The study offers valuable contributions both to academic discourse and to real-world applications concerning the political integration of Syrian refugees in Calgary. From a theoretical standpoint, the findings prompt a reevaluation of current models based on immigrant experiences and underscore the need for more inclusive frameworks that account for the unique challenges faced by refugees. Practically, the findings inform policy and educational initiatives, suggesting that enhancing political integration requires not only tailored interventions, but also a reconsidera-

tion of systemic factors that may inadvertently impede this process.

The feedback from participants in this study underscores a notable concern regarding the complexities of the Canadian system. The findings indicate that the intricacies of navigating the political landscape may act as a substantial barrier to successful integration of refugees. These complexities range from understanding the nuances of the electoral process to grasping the roles and responsibilities of various levels of government. This confusion can serve to alienate rather than integrate, suggesting a misalignment between the system's operation and newcomers' needs. Consequently, there is a pressing need for a critical examination of these systemic operations, with an emphasis on making political structures more accessible and comprehensible. This could involve simplifying the information provided, employing more culturally sensitive communication strategies, and ensuring that political education is inclusive and supportive. Improving how political processes are conveyed to newcomers is paramount to removing these obstacles, thereby facilitating not just comprehension but meaningful engagement and participation within the Canadian democratic framework.

Figure 6. Facilitators of Political Integration
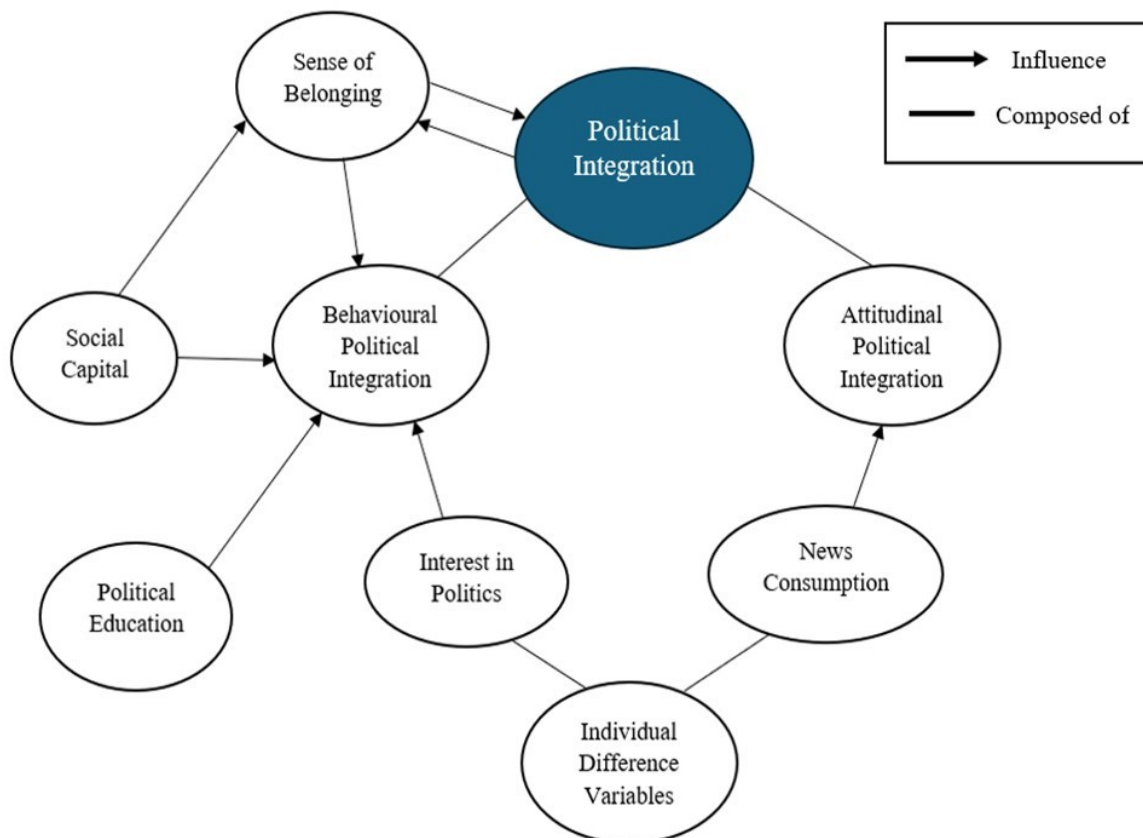
Resettlement services in Calgary, therefore, have the opportunity to incorporate these insights to not only support refugees' civic engagement, but also to advocate for systemic adjustments that facilitate a more integrative environment. Finally, the identified educational gap in Alberta highlights a broader issue affecting not just refugees but potentially all young Canadians, emphasizing the need for educational reforms that better equip young individuals with the practical knowledge necessary for active political participation.

Limitations

The study's exploratory nature and the primary researcher's identity as a Syrian refugee, while offering insider insights, could also potentially introduce personal biases into the interpretation of data. Additionally, with a small sample confined to 21 Syrian refugees from Calgary, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of those in other regions in Canada, where different local political dynamics might affect political integration differently. The study's inability to compare the political perspectives and behaviours of Syrian refugees with the Canadian-born population, due to the small sample size, is another limitation that hampers broader applicability. Furthermore, the inclusion criteria restrictions led to the exclusion of any non-citizen refugees' political attitudes and behaviours, omitting potentially insightful perspectives. Recognizing these limitations is crucial, as they provide critical context for the study's findings and suggest a need for future research to adopt a more expansive and varied methodological approach, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of Syrian refugees' political integration.

Future Research

Future research has multiple avenues for extending this study's findings. One area for further investigation could involve a larger quantitative study to compare Syrian refugees' political participation with Canadian citizens or other cohorts of refugees, illuminating systemic disparities. Additionally, research could explore the extent to which Canada's political structures themselves may act as barriers to integration, as suggested by the participants' feedback. This line of inquiry might involve both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a clearer picture of the impact and interplay of these factors. Researchers could revisit the data for refined thematic analysis or conduct larger quantitative studies comparing the political participation between Syrian refugees and Canadian citizens, thereby highlighting systemic disparities. Additionally, this study reveals a glaring gap in the political education available to Syrian refugees, suggesting an urgent need for research on educational interventions that specifically target this group's political integration.

While the focus has been on facilitation factors, future research should delve into barriers to political integration, such as financial constraints and fears surrounding political involvement. Moreover, a nationwide study incorporating Syrian refugees from various provinces would provide more generalizable insights. Special attention should be given to sociodemographic elements like age and gender, as refugee women often face unique challenges due to cultural and gender norms (Şahin Mencütek & Nashwan, 2021). Drawing on the challenges unique to refugee women could yield important insights for a more nuanced understanding of integration across diverse demographic groups.

Conclusion

Despite Canada's extensive social services for Syrian refugees, the study reveals a gap in initiatives aimed at political integration in Calgary. Most Syrian refugees lack targeted political education, highlighting the need for programs that equip them with the knowledge required for political participation. The study identified key individual difference variables, such as political interest and news consumption, as influential factors for political integration. Notably, participants more engaged in politics demonstrated greater political participation, while those consuming news via social media expressed lower levels of trust in the Canadian government. Additionally, a strong sense of belonging to Canadian society emerged as a significant facilitator for both attitudinal and behavioural political integration. Enhanced social capital also positively impacted political participation and reinforced the sense of belonging. This study endeavored to apply an embedded explanatory model of political integration theories to Syrian refugees in Calgary. While some findings affirmed existing theories related to immigrants, others challenged them, underscoring the need for a revised theoretical framework tailored for refugees.

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