

Translating a campaign into votes Candidates don't speak same language

Many build teams of ethnic volunteers

Oct. 16, 2006. 01:00 AM

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Anxious to play a role in local democracy, a young woman volunteered to help Toronto city council candidate Alejandra Bravo by contacting a group of residents. It was supposed to be a fun and rewarding experience, but the volunteer instead came back to Bravo close to tears.

"It was very disheartening. She went through a list of voters and called them but she came back to me and said, 'I can't talk to anybody. None of them speak English.' "

Welcome to the GTA, where candidates for local office face enormous challenges to make themselves understood to a huge variety of ethnic groups. Toronto's remarkable multiculturalism is a blessing, but it's a decided challenge for anyone seeking public office, particularly in areas heavily populated with new immigrants.

Bravo, who was born in Chile, speaks English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. She's reasonably fluent in Italian, and she's learned to introduce herself in Turkish, Farsi and Greek. But there are still thousands of people in her ward with whom she can't communicate. And when you're trying to unseat an incumbent — Ward 17, Davenport, is currently held by Cesar Palacio — that's a problem.

"On any given day, if I go to 10 homes, eight will have people who don't speak English," Bravo said over a cappuccino on St. Clair Ave.W. the other day. "People come

to Toronto, they get involved with their work and deal with people who speak their language. They often work two or three jobs and they don't have time to learn English. So it's a challenge."

Bravo said she'll be crafting election material in English, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Greek, Turkish and Vietnamese in an effort to reach as many voters as she can.

"I have a great volunteer who's trying to help me learn to speak Vietnamese," she said with a laugh, "but my tongue just won't, my mouth just won't do it."

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Alejandra Bravo,
Toronto city council candidate

Politics is all about making personal connections, and that's hard when you don't speak the same language as would-be voters, said Hrach Aynedjian, who's running for a council seat in Ward 41, Scarborough-Rouge River.

"Almost 50 per cent of my ward is Chinese-speaking," he said. "We have five Chinese candidates running in the ward, but they'll have difficulties, too. We have people here who are Tamil, Urdu, Punjabi, as well as Palestinian and Egyptian."

Aynedjian said some women don't want to open their doors to talk to a man on his own. To get around the problem, he tries to have a woman at his side. As much as he can, he also tries to bring along someone who speaks Mandarin or Cantonese.

Toronto Councillor Adam Giambrone (Ward 18, Davenport) said 35 per cent of his ward speaks Portuguese. His office operates in English and French and also has two Portuguese speakers. "We have people who can make calls in 11 languages. I recently had a couple of people volunteer who

are from Bangladesh and Turkey. I'll have them go through the list of voters and tag any names that might be Turkish, for example. We'll start talking to them in English, then switch to Turkish if we have to."

Giambrone said it's hard to translate large chunks of English language copy into a lot of different languages. "But there's a co-op in the ward that's largely Tamil, so we'll have a volunteer produce a newsletter and distribute it to people there. Someone else can do that in Spanish."

Adrian Heaps, a candidate in Ward 35, Scarborough Southwest, says he has a team of volunteers who speak the many languages in his diverse area, including Urdu, Bengali, Farsi, Mandarin and Cantonese. When he goes door-knocking and a resident doesn't speak English, he asks for their phone number. He'll call back to his campaign office and get a volunteer to call back immediately.

But not all candidates go the multicultural route when they campaign. Dalbir Kathuria, who's running for Peel Regional Council, told the *Star* he only uses English.

"If I go to someone's home and they speak Punjabi, I'll talk with them in Punjabi. But I don't feel the need to put out brochures in anything but English. Most people understand it and I want to promote English because we're in Canada."

Putting out brochures in another language is a good idea in many parts of the GTA. But it doesn't always work. Andrew Miller, who's after a Toronto council seat in Ward 23, Willowdale, had someone help him write part of his brochure in Chinese. It was proofed several times and looked fine, but when it came back from the printer the Chinese characters were upside down.