

MORE THAN VOTING

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If Canada and Aboriginal people are going to find a common political path to dealing with conflict, the myth of the politically disengaged Aboriginal citizen needs to be expunged.

Pour que le Canada et les peuples autochtones puissent un jour convenir d'une approche de règlement des conflits, il faudra d'abord en finir avec le mythe du citoyen autochtone politiquement désengagé.

ABORIGINAL POLITICS



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One of the enduring myths of Canadian politics is that of the apolitical Aboriginal citizen. This conventional wisdom has arisen from a narrow measurement of political engagement that focuses solely on low Aboriginal voter turnout rates in federal elections. Spread by media reports and repeated by many politicians as gospel, the result is a dangerous misperception among Canadians that Aboriginal people are disengaged and uninterested in politics. And correcting that myth is essential if we are to find common political ground upon which to resolve disputes over natural resource development and the myriad other issues that confront Ottawa and Aboriginal peoples.

A more comprehensive and fairer assessment of Aboriginal political engagement paints a different picture. Political participation does not begin and stop with voting on federal election day. Civic engagement is also about active participation in civil society and includes volunteerism or sharing time and resources within a community. And it includes activities ranging from contacting an elected official or running for office to serving on committees and attending public meetings.

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Our own study, based on an extensive telephone survey conducted in November and December of 2010 across the Northern Administration District of Saskatchewan, as well as on focus groups that later looked at these broader measurements of engagement, found that Aboriginal people are in fact highly politically and civically engaged. In the telephone survey of 851 people that included 505 Aboriginal people, as well as in focus groups with youth across the North, most respondents reported that participation in community events and political activities was important or very important to them. This was underscored by participation in more formal political activities: 23 percent reported contacting a government office about an issue in the past year; 31 percent said they had attended a band council meeting.

These direct participation levels are staggering. It is highly unlikely that one in three Canadians have attended a municipal meeting in the past year. Barely that number even bother to turn out for municipal elections.

Indeed, contrary to the widely held view of low Aboriginal voting turnouts, First Nations people participate heavily in voting. The pattern of voting is simply opposite to that of non-Aboriginal Canadians. Typically, Canadian participation is highest in federal elections (61 percent in the 2011 election) and lowest in municipal elections, with local elections often having turnout rates below 40 percent (for example, just 35 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the 2013 Edmonton municipal election). But in our study of northern Saskatchewan, self-reporting (common in electoral studies, but there is a caveat: people tend to slightly over-report voting as they believe they should vote even if they didn't) for band elections was nearly 77 percent, compared

with turnouts of 45 percent and 38 percent, respectively, in the last provincial and federal elections.

As Robert Putnam's famous *Bowling Alone* showed, active political involvement is a core of social capital, the concept of interaction with others and civic participation that contributes to healthier democracies. By this measure, Aboriginal residents are model citizens. Among our findings:

- close to 80 percent of Aboriginal northerners shared or gave away traditional foods with community members (moose meat and berries);
- 66 percent of the Aboriginal respondents reported providing care or support, including counselling or friendly visiting, in the past year;
- just under half reported helping organize or supervise activities or events for school, church or other organizations in the past year;
- 40 percent reported volunteering for a band event;
- 37 percent reported teaching or coaching; and
- 32 percent reported serving as a member of a board or committee.

These numbers simply do not have parallels in mainstream Canada.

What, then, can explain the lower voter turnout in provincial and, especially, federal elections among a population that is otherwise very political? We believe the answer lies in the degree of affinity to the level of government: the greater the affinity, the higher the election turnout. First Nations and Métis people have strong attachment to their traditional communities, while, for First Nations people, the less trust that people had with the level of government, the less likely they were to vote. The sense of alienation from those levels of government and a perceived lack of efficacy — Aboriginal voters are a small percentage compared with the mainstream — as well as procedural barriers all contributed to lower turnouts.

The research also suggests that federal voter turnout rates differ across Aboriginal groups, and that socio-demographic differences strongly influence voting turnout, especially for First Nations living on reserve. On-reserve First Nations generally self-reported lower federal turnout than the off-reserve First Nations and Métis. Those in the lower age, income and education brackets tended to be less inclined to engage, but those in the middle to up-

per levels were more inclined to participate (not unlike the broader Canadian voting profile). Men were more likely than women to report voting in general elections.

Broadly speaking, on-reserve populations tend to be younger, with lower educational attainment and lower income levels than off-reserve populations. And Aboriginal Canada is young: 46 percent of Aboriginal people are under the age of 25, compared with 29 percent for Canada as a whole. Over 81 percent of respondents aged 18-25 reported not voting in the last provincial election, and 92 percent reported not voting in the last federal election.

These low turnout rates matter. While local political and civic engagement adds to the vitality of Aboriginal communities, low federal and provincial turnout rates hinder the ability of Aboriginal peoples to have impact on policy outcomes. For this reason, increasing engagement in the electoral process at the federal and provincial levels is an important goal.

Aboriginal leaders have taken a large degree of responsibility to encourage higher turnouts in federal and provincial elections. Before the 2008

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federal election, the Assembly of First Nations' national "Vote '08, Change Can't Wait!" campaign sought to get out the vote, and in the 2011 federal election, provincial Aboriginal organizations also became involved. The Métis Nation-Saskatchewan and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations co-hosted forums to encourage Aboriginal peoples to vote. The Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs Secretariat encouraged bands to participate more fully in the election, and the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs held the "I Am First Nations and I Vote" campaign.

Aboriginal engagement at the provincial and federal levels is not limited to voting. An increasing number of Aboriginal people stand as candidates. In 2011, the most recent federal election, Canada elected seven Aboriginal MPs, the highest number in history: five Conservatives and two New Democrats. And over 2011 there were three Aboriginal cabinet ministers, Leona Aglukkaq, Peter Penashue, and Shelly Glover.

It is therefore concerning that some of the proposed changes in the *Fair Elections Act* could increase barriers to Aboriginal participation in federal elections. The requirements for voter identification will almost certainly result in lower voter participation, especially in more remote communities where many people do not have driver's licences, bank accounts or other pieces of identification indicating a street address. The new requirements are poorly tailored for communities where voter fraud through false identification is practically impossible, since everyone knows everyone.

In fundamental ways, the success of Canada's economic future will depend highly on our ability to develop, transport and sell our natural resources and to provide the power and energy to run our industries. Most of Canada's natural resource wealth lies in areas of

high Aboriginal populations and on or adjacent to traditional Aboriginal lands. If Canadians assume that Aboriginal people are not politically engaged and have little interest in broader political processes, there may be a greater inclination to try to resolve disputes by legal action rather than pursuing a process of consultation.

This may also explain some of the differing perceptions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people over the repeated Aboriginal demand for greater "consultation." A belief that Aboriginal peoples are apolitical can lead to a discounting of "consultation" as nothing more than grandstanding — when in fact it may reflect a core element of Aboriginal political engagement.

By contrast, if Canadians assume, as our research suggests, that Aboriginal people are and will be politically engaged, then designing consultation processes in meaningful ways has a greater potential for successful economic futures. Consultation processes can be and have been implemented in ways that accommodate Aboriginal concerns and opportunities. The First Nations Power Authority in Saskatchewan and the co-management boards in the Northwest Territories show how institutionalized engagement of Aboriginal Canadians in the policy process can strengthen resource development. And the youth focus groups that we conducted as part of the research suggested that youth would participate more if given opportunities to do so, particularly in activities that they enjoyed and that might achieve positive benefits, such as youth cultural camps.

All governments — federal, provincial and Aboriginal — need to place greater priority on institutionalizing political processes that tap into the high levels of Aboriginal civic and political engagement. This not only will provide greater economy prosperity for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians alike, but could also strengthen Aboriginal engagement in all levels of government in Canada. The myth of Aboriginal lack of interest in politics is one that needs to be busted. ■