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.

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 election 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 2011 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.

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Low federal and provincial turnout rates hinder the ability of Aboriginal peoples to have impact on policy outcomes.

In fundamental ways, the success of Canada’s economic prosperity 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 an 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 and should be 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. According to 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 consultation 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.