Northern Voices:

A Look Inside Political Attitudes and Behaviours in Northern Saskatchewan

Northern Aboriginal Political Culture Study

International Centre for Northern Governance and Development

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Executive Summary

Supported by funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, over a three-year period, this research project studies how Aboriginal populations in Northern Saskatchewan engage in political processes and the factors that explain these patterns of engagement. Telephone survey data were collected between November 9, 2010 and December 21, 2010. Of the 851 respondents, 505 were Aboriginal. The research team explores Northern Aboriginal involvement in the political process, whether that is through voting in elections, campaigning, sitting on local boards and committees, and so on. The research results were explained in the context of what is often called political culture, that is the shared norms, attitudes, behavior, and values that shape contemporary Aboriginal political life.

It is generally understood that successful economic and social development requires both stable and valued political institutions, as well as active and committed citizens. Lower turnouts in federal and provincial elections suggest that Northern Aboriginal people are politically disengaged, a finding that this study modifies by revealing different forms and levels of political activity. This study outlines the distinctiveness of contemporary Aboriginal political culture and provides a basis for constructing political processes that leads to more effective Aboriginal political participation in a variety of critical venues, including ways to increase Aboriginal participation in "mainstream" Canadian politics (such as elections and political parties). The findings indicate the importance of governments and industry understanding Aboriginal political values and practices, thereby enabling them to bolster efforts to include Aboriginal people in any development that affects their communities and lands.

The strong pressures for resource development in northern Saskatchewan add to the urgency of understanding Aboriginal political culture. Governments and industry are increasingly looking to develop these resources and Aboriginal people seek meaningful and effective mechanisms to participate in decision-making surrounding Northern development, as well as to ensure long term, sustainable benefits from this development. This research shows that current processes are less than satisfactory for government, industry, and Aboriginal communities alike. The current decision-making environment interferes with collaborative and consultative economic development in the North. Northerners clearly have high expectations in terms of duty to consult, but require more community appropriate processes for active political participation.

Executive Summary

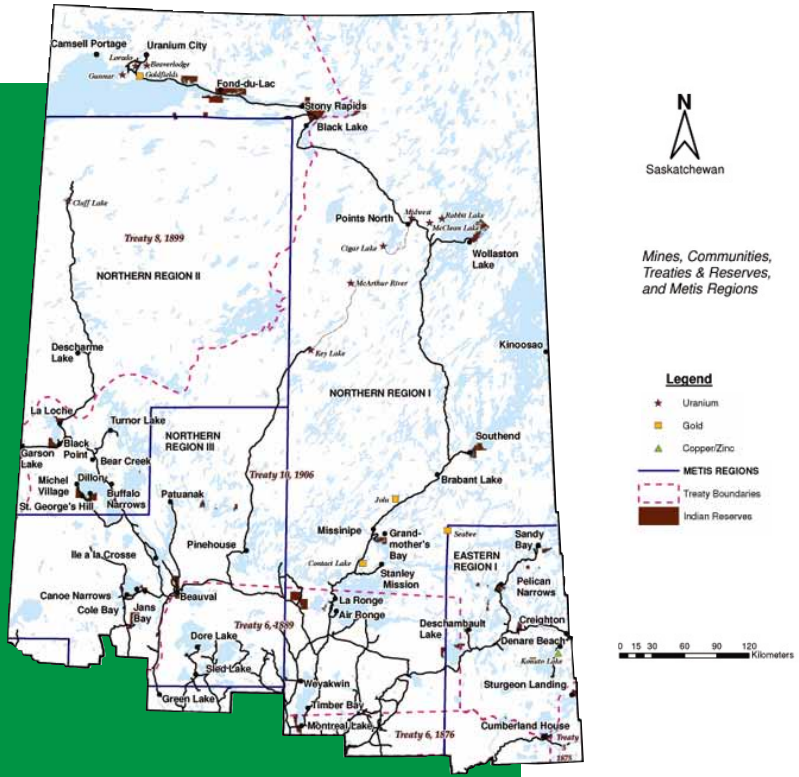
The research offers an unprecedented look at the complex nature of northern Aboriginal political participation, particularly in light of the rapidly growing, youthful Indigenous population, threats to traditional economic and cultural practices, and the many challenges facing most of the northern communities. Northerners made it clear that they are strongly committed to their families and communities, with an evident determination to recast the political process to suit local and regional needs. There are varied levels of participation between men and women, with women playing key roles in community activities and providing care and support to others. Limited engagement by Aboriginal youth is particularly worrying, given the growing importance of this cohort in northern society. The elderly and low-income individuals are likewise under-represented in both voting and volunteer activities. It is also clear that northern Aboriginal people see local government as being both relevant and responsive – and more likely to return direct benefits to them or their families – but view provincial and federal politics as being distant and much less immediate. Overall, the northern political culture is strategic, culturally driven, both local and national in scope, and can be highly effective. While challenged by lower voter turnouts at federal and provincial elections, northern Aboriginal people are nonetheless considerably more active and interested in their communities and regional affairs than standard assumptions would suggest. They may be less engaged in the broader politics, because current political structures are believed to suit national and southern purposes more than northern or Aboriginal needs.

Greater understanding of Aboriginal political culture and engagement will lead to more effective Aboriginal participation in local and mainstream political processes. Northern politicians at the community, provincial, and national level also have to understand the gap between northerners' commitment to their communities and their current level of participation in political processes. More effective Aboriginal participation in Northern development would facilitate an innovative and vibrant economic climate in Northern Saskatchewan. This project provides the most detailed analysis available to date of the key elements in Aboriginal political engagement in the North and offers an optimistic portrait of the opportunity for greater Indigenous participation and more effective community collaboration.

Introduction

The Northern Aboriginal Political Culture Report describes findings from a three-year research project that explored how Aboriginal populations in northern Saskatchewan engage in political processes and the factors that influence those patterns of engagement. Supported by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Strategic Grants Program, the research leads, Bonita Beatty, Loleen Berdahl, Greg Poelzer and collaborator, Evelyn Peters, sought to better understand the cultural context of Aboriginal political engagement in the northern communities, both on-reserve and off-reserve, and to create new knowledge about northern Aboriginal political engagement.

Figure 1: Map of Northern Administrative District



Source: Government of Saskatchewan. 2013

The research methodology consisted of a telephone survey in northern Saskatchewan that was conducted in in Cree, English, and Dené. Telephone survey data were collected between November 9, 2010 and December 21, 2010. Of the 851 respondents, 505 were Aboriginal. This was followed up by youth focus groups in eight northern communities in 2011. The focus groups were intended to balance the under representation of the youth sector in the telephone survey and to allow for more detailed information on youth political attitudes and participation.

The survey questions and focus groups targeted issues relevant to political culture including demographic information, northern cultural lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes, community engagement activities and language use, political activities, political interest, and voting activities.

For the purposes of this report, Northern Saskatchewan is the geographic area included within the recognized boundaries of the Northern Administrative District (NAD). The NAD begins at the 54th parallel, just north the municipalities of Goodsoil, Meadow Lake, Big River, Prince Albert, and Nipawin (see Figure 1). The Saskatchewan government acknowledges the NAD as a distinct region. The NAD is defined in the Province's *Northern Municipalities Act* (1948) and covers an estimated half (46 per cent) of Saskatchewan's land area, but comprises less than four per cent of the province's population (New North, 2011; Northern Affairs, 2011). It has approximately 45 communities including municipalities, settlements, and First Nation Reserves (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013). It has three provincial school divisions (Northern Lights, Île-à-la-Crosse, and Creighton), four health authorities (Mamawetan Churchill River, Keewatin Yathe Health District, Athabasca Health Authority, and Kelsey Trail Health District), and three main post-secondary training institutes (Northlands College, Gabriel Dumont Institute, and Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies) (Northern Labour Market Committee, 2010).

Introduction

The Northern region experienced rapid political and economic changes, particularly after the Second World War, and while residents were building their local communities, they were also being increasingly challenged by external developments that often left them in marginalized advisory roles in government and industry decision-making (Beatty 2008, 2011). As Saskatchewan geographer Robert Bone writes:

> **"Saskatchewan divides neatly into two strikingly different and separate natural and cultural areas. While each has its own set of economic, demographic and social challenges, only one – the Saskatchewan Prairies[1] – is well-recognized across Canada. The North remains a peripheral, forgotten area of Saskatchewan."**
>
> **(Bone, 2009: 33)**

This is changing with the interest generated by the considerable resource development and explorations occurring within the region. Aboriginal communities are playing an increasingly pivotal role in the economic and political developments in the north, but little is known about their political engagement and political culture.

Perceptions suggest that northern Aboriginal people are politically disengaged because of lower Aboriginal electoral participation in federal and provincial elections (Dalton 2007, Bedford 2003, Hunter 2003) and, while this report supports that concern, it also suggests that northern Aboriginal peoples are strongly engaged in their community political systems in different ways by virtue of their history and local context. Land and natural resource issues remain important political factors for consideration since the northern cultural way of life and traditional industries still provide valuable supplemental resources to Aboriginal family households (Beatty 1996; Berdahl, Poelzer, Beatty 2012). Métis and off-reserve First Nations have higher self-reported federal turnout rates than on-reserve First Nations, in part due to socio-demographic differences (age, education, income, gender) and voting resources (Berdahl, Poelzer, Beatty 2012).

The varying subject matter in the Northern Aboriginal Political Culture survey is reflective of the reality of Northern Saskatchewan life: many communities in the North still face a number of interconnected challenges to their stability, prosperity, and growth despite the economic opportunities occurring. Lower rates of high-school attainment suggest that many potential workers will not be qualified for the jobs that are opening. Higher unemployment rates are linked to poverty, which is connected to disengagement from community and political activity. Given that Aboriginal communities have lower voter turnouts at the provincial and federal elections, their needs and interests are perhaps less likely to be appropriately represented to the government. As Northern Saskatchewan experiences a boom in population and economic activity, a window of opportunity is open to make positive changes and growth in Saskatchewan's North, and develop Northern Saskatchewan in a way that most benefits its citizens.

[1] Northern Saskatchewan is geographically distinct from the stereotyped "prairie" of Saskatchewan. The soil is not as fertile and forests and rocks are plentiful. In particular, Saskatchewan's north is considered to be distinctively rich in uranium, gold, copper, iron, zinc and base metals as well as potential oil pools and diamonds (Government of Saskatchewan, no date: http://www.er.gov.sk.ca/mineralresourcemap)

Main Findings

Northern Saskatchewan is home to the northern Woodland Cree, Dené, and Métis people. The Aboriginal governance structures and political practices reflect a blend of northern cultural and western (Band, municipal) elements. The north is also a blended economy where traditional livelihood activities such as commercial fishing, trapping, and hunting activities continue to supplement household resources. There appears to be a strong cooperative nature among family and kinship networks as suggested by the responses to sharing food and income and providing care and visiting supports, and it has been suggested that these are cultural and socio-economic elements that have been passed down from previous generations and continue to survive in a modern world (Beatty 1996).

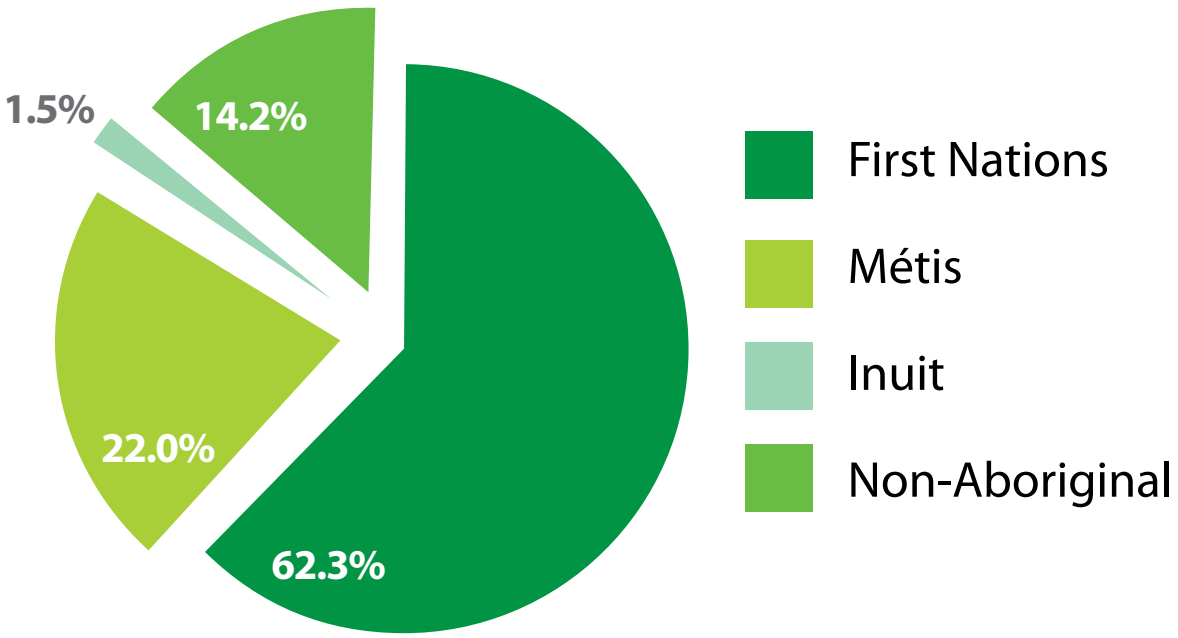
Overall, the Northern Aboriginal Political Culture survey data provides valuable insights. The survey suggests that NAD residents have a strong sense of connection to the land, their families, and community networks. The level of participation reported in outdoor activities like hunting, trapping, fishing, and berry picking was very high. The majority also believe that it is important to protect and maintain their northern way of life, their language, and their culture. Northern Aboriginal peoples have a robust community and political engagement in their region. People generally believe that participation in community events and political activities is important. Political engagement, as illustrated by participation in the more formal political activities (voting, attending meetings, and volunteering) was strongest at the community level and in Band elections and less so in the general federal and provincial elections. The less trust that people had with the political system, the less likely they were to be involved. Factors such as age, income and education had some influence over political attitudes and behaviours. Those in the lower age, income, and education brackets tended to be less inclined to want to engage, but those in the mid to upper levels were more inclined to participate. The results from the youth focus groups suggested that youth would participate more if given opportunities to do so, particularly in activities that were enjoyable and could achieve positive benefits. The survey reveals that NAD residents generally believed that governments in the South were making too many important decisions affecting the North. Finally, the most pressing northern concerns reported overall involved issues related to addressing alcohol and drug addictions, unemployment, and housing.

Demographics of Northern Saskatchewan

The demographics of Saskatchewan's NAD differ substantially from those of the province's southern urban region. The NAD's population was estimated at 35,819 residents in 2010, meaning the region holds just under four per cent of the province's 1,070,477 population (Irvine, 2011: 33). Northern Saskatchewan is young and growing with 32 per cent of the population under the age of 15 in 2010, as well as a birth rate double that of the provincial birth rate (Irvine et al, 2011: 1). Because of the high birth rate and growing economic opportunities that increase migration to the region, estimations place the population of the NAD in 2010 at over 41,000 residents, an 18 per cent increase since 2005 (Irvine, 2011: 31). With the northern population growth steadily increasing for 25 years, it has also been projected that this growth rate will continue and that by 2021 will reach a population size of 45,000 (New North, 2011).

While 14.6 per cent of Saskatchewan residents self-identify as being First Nations, Métis, or Inuit in 2006, 85.8 per cent of the NAD self-identify in such a fashion (Irvine, 2011: 31). Within the NAD, 85 per cent of residents self-identify as Aboriginal people. Of that 85 per cent, 61.5 per cent identify as First Nations, 22 per cent identify as Métis, and one point five per cent as Inuit (Irvine, 2011: 31; see Figure 2). Nearly half (46 per cent) of the Northern Aboriginal population live on-reserve (Irvine, 2011: 8) and a majority of the Aboriginal peoples in Saskatchewan's NAD are of Cree or Dené heritage (Irvine, 2011: 31).

Figure 2: Residents of Northern Administrative District

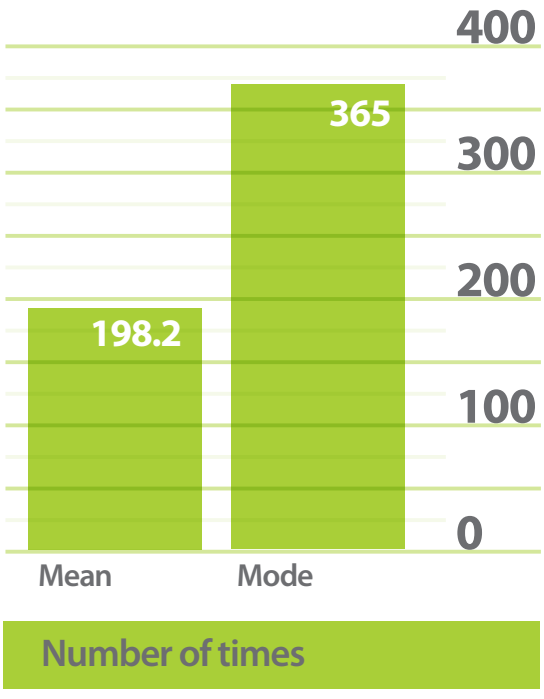


The variety of languages spoken in the NAD reflects the region's diverse population. Although English is commonly spoken in public by younger generations, over 40 per cent of the population spoke Cree, Dené, or Michif at home with their family in 2006 (Irvine, 2011: 74). This number has decreased from 1996, when 48 per cent spoke an Aboriginal language at home (Irvine, 2011:74). Declining linguistic ability is associated with the drop of participation in traditional Northern and Aboriginal activities, decreased cultural awareness and weaker bonds within Aboriginal communities (Crompton, Findlay, and Smith, 2010: 55). Many historical and modernization factors could be contributing to these changes as well, including northern schools, residential schools, the use of English as an official language in Canada, as well as international business, intergeneration transmission of blending languages in the homes, and increasing mobility. The rapid technological advances in communications, such as radios, television and telephones, brought the world into many homes in the northern communities over 50 years ago. Technological advancement has accelerated with the more recent access to the internet, cell phones, tablet computers, and other mass media tools. Technology is ever evolving and the globalization of the world, particularly through internet capacity and satellite television, will surely continue to bring new challenges to Aboriginal language protection and revitalization efforts.

In the past 12 months, approximately how many times have you read, watched or listened to Aboriginal news or programming, such as MBC, APTN or Aboriginal newspapers?

NAPC survey respondents were asked "In the past 12 months, approximately how many times have you read, watched, or listened to Aboriginal news, or programming, such as MBC, APTN or Aboriginal newspapers?" Data analysis shows that the average, or mean, consumption of Aboriginal media in one year is just over 198 occasions, while the most frequent response, was 365 instances per year. While men and women are equally as likely to consume Aboriginal news or programming, it appears women watch or listen in greater frequencies. Non-Aboriginal respondents are less likely to watch or listen when compared to Aboriginals. Those living on-reserve appear to be more likely to take in greater amounts of Aboriginal programming. With respect to education, those with less than a high school education are more likely to watch or listen to such programming in excess of 365 times, while those with a university education are less likely. Those aged 18 to 29 are more likely than those of other age groups to watch or listen to Aboriginal programming in excess of 365 times.

Figure 3: Aboriginal News Consumption



Northern Economies

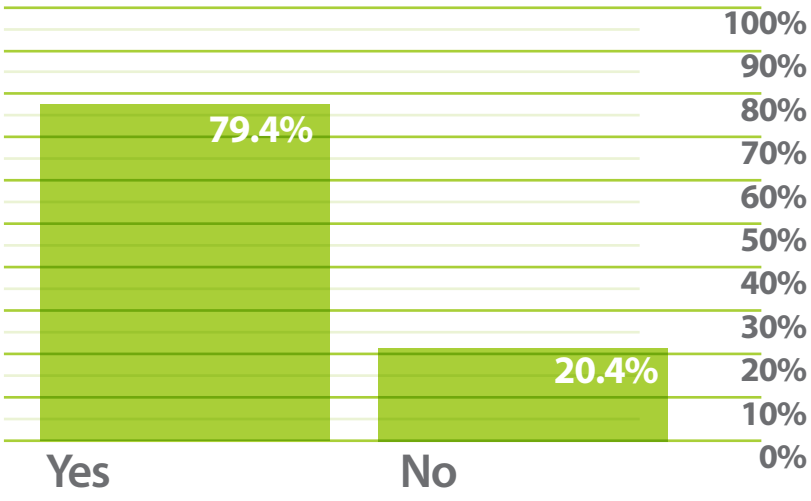
Northern communities use a blended or mixed social economic model where households rely on both subsistence activities and wage labour income and resources to make a living or what the Woodand Cree call "Kiwetinohk Pimachesowin," or the northern way of life (Ballantyne et.al. 1976; Beatty 1996, Natcher 2009). It is a blended economy and includes both commercial wage labour activities and non-commercial subsistence activities, containing both cash and other non-monetary socio-economic transactions. Subsistence activities include hunting, harvesting berries, and gardening. The commercial activities reflect engagement in the Wildrice Aquaculture, trapping, and fishing industries. The traditional engagement includes the family networks that are used in distributing commercial and subsistence goods that are normally described as "sharing" with other individuals (Beatty 1996, Tobias 1993, Colton, 2005). Subsistence and commercial activities reflect a distinct Northern heritage that melds both modern commercial life and preserves cultural traditions.

The NAPC survey sought to better understand the northern way of life and its values. Respondents were asked "In the past 12 months, did you give away or share with others traditional foods such as moose meat or fish?" with response options of yes and no.

Seventy-nine point four per cent of respondents share or give traditional Northern foods. Aboriginal people are more likely to give away or share traditional Northern foods than non-Aboriginal respondents, with those living on-reserve being the most likely. Those aged 18 to 29 are more likely to give away or share such items and those aged 65 or older are less likely. This age difference in sharing of traditional foods is likely due to the health status of the elders as well as the traditional practices that promote that the younger generations help their elderly family members and relatives (Beatty 1996, Tobias 1993, Ballantyne et.al. 1973). It also appears evident that many Northern people enjoy traditional Northern activities not solely for the purpose of subsistence, but for sharing, celebrating, and building community.

Figure 4: Sharing of Traditional Foods

In the past twelve months: did you give away or share with others traditional foods such as moosemeat or fish?



Despite the land's wealth of resources, the people of Northern Saskatchewan tend to fall into lower socio-economic brackets. *The 2011 Northern Saskatchewan Health Indicators Annual Report* identified that the "[m]edian income in 2006 was less than 60 [per cent] of the provincial median income, [and] close to one in four families are considered [to be] low income; this is almost two point five times greater than in the province as a whole" (Irvine et al, 2011: 2). The blended economy in the north that promotes a cooperative behavior in family households can therefore be both a matter of northern Aboriginal culture and an economic necessity. The 2006 Canadian census data for the Northern census district shows that the majority of households in Northern Saskatchewan are low income, with annual household incomes of under $30,000 (see Figure 5).

One factor leading to the prevalence of low-income families is long-term unemployment. The rate of unemployment in the NAD is over four times the provincial rate and growing. The high unemployment rate is the result of the historical lack of regional economic development combined with a lack of education and skilled labour training. Although 80 per cent of Saskatchewan residents complete high school, only 46 per cent of residents in the NAD finish secondary education (Irvine, Quinn and Stockdale, 2011: 2). The 2006 Canadian Census reported on the educational attainment for those aged 25-64 in the Northern Saskatchewan census district. The 2006 Census showed that nearly half of individuals in Northern Saskatchewan are without any certificate, diploma, or degree (see Figure 6).

Figure 5: Household income in the Northern Administrative District, 2006

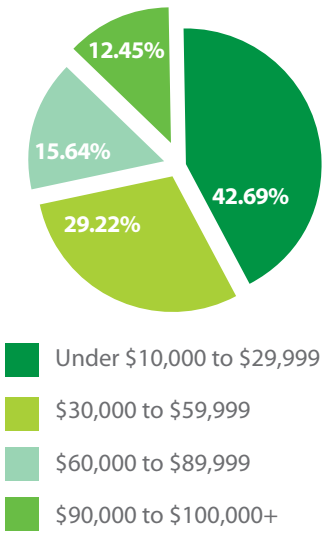
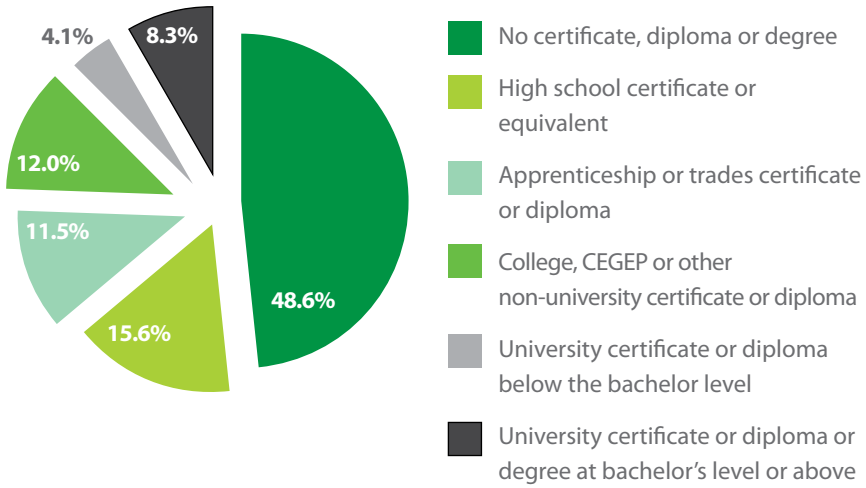


Figure 6: Education Levels in the Northern Administrative District, 2006



While many northern Saskatchewan residents are young, their estimated employment levels are relatively low: 20 per cent of 15-24 year olds are employed, compared to 60 per cent of 15-24 year olds employed in Saskatchewan (New North, 2011). Over half of the northern working age population have less than a high school education and, as a result, might not have the education, skills, or experience required for many jobs. In addition, many industries have higher technologies and computerization, requiring highly skilled workers with technical and professional training (Northern Labour Market Committee, 2010).

Self Reported Health in Northern Saskatchewan

The health status of Aboriginal people in Canada is improving, but remains far below that of the rest of Canada. Health status is linked to many non-medical determinants. The 12 social determinants of health, as summarized by the Public Health Agency of Canada, include education, labour force determinants (employment status), income, personal health practices (nutrition, exercise, alcohol use), health services (access), culture, physical environment (housing, water, sanitation), social support networks, social environments, child development, biology and genetic endowment, and gender (Health Canada 2009). The 2002 Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada recognized the disconnect between larger Canadian society and Aboriginal Canadians in regards to quality and accessibility of health care. The primary concerns the Romanow Commission raised about health inequity were "inadequate access to health care services […and] different cultural and political influences" (Romanow, 2002: 247). Research points to discrepancies and fragmentation in health systems across Canada as well as within the provinces. Some refer to Aboriginal health in Canada as a patchwork of policies and legislation (National Collaborating Centre For Aboriginal Health, 2011). Health Reforms have done little to address fiscal and policy irregularities between First Nation health systems and provincial healthcare systems. Consequently, northern concerns on healthcare are likely to be centered on the loss of funding and services due to jurisdictional fragmentation and lack of access due to geographical location (Robillard, 2008: 14).

The NAPC survey asked NAD residents about their health. When discussing reported health in Northern Saskatchewan, a majority of individuals self-report being in excellent, very good, or good health (see Figure 7). Almost half of individuals in the Saskatchewan North reported getting sick enough to see a doctor or a nurse less than once a month, but at least once a year within the past 12 months (see Figure 8). Due to health professional scarcity in many communities, this finding may indicate a lack of present and attending doctors more than it indicates healthy communities. Those who report their health as poor are more likely to report getting sick enough to see a doctor or nurse at least once a week, or less than once a week, but at least once a month in the last year. Those reporting being in excellent health were more likely to report getting sick enough to see a health professional less than once a year or never, within the last 12 months. As a person's self-reported health goes down, ranging from excellent to poor, they are more likely to report higher frequencies of getting sick enough to see a doctor within the last year.

Figure 7: Self-Reported Health Status in the Northern Administrative District

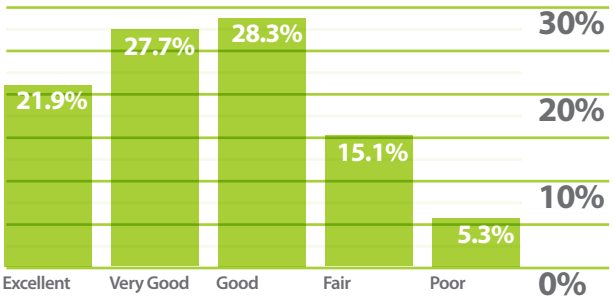
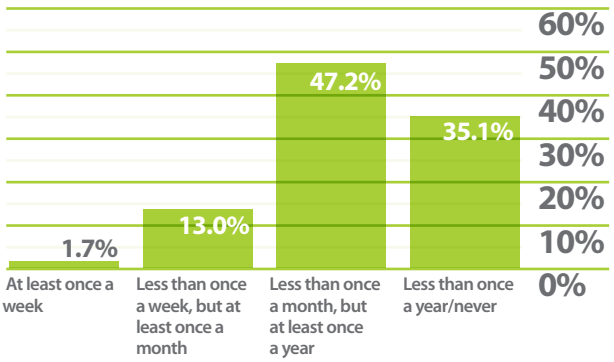


Figure 8: Self-Reported Medical Visits in the Northern Administrative District



Challenges for Northern Saskatchewan Communities

Survey respondents were asked "What would you say is the biggest issue facing your community today?" The most commonly identified social problems in Aboriginal and Northern communities involve substance addictions to alcohol and drugs, according to Health Canada in 2003 (Chansonneuve, 2007: 25). The impact of high addiction rates can be devastating; alcoholism in particular, is linked to spousal and child abuse that can often perpetuate cyclical violence and addiction to future generations (Chansonneuve, 2007: 26). Substance abuse and other heath related problems are intertwined with related issues of high unemployment that many Northern and Aboriginal communities face. Research on the social effects of unemployment found that while lowered socio-economic status was a direct cause of poor living conditions, unemployment also could lead to "feelings of powerlessness and dependency on government" (Frohlich et al, 2006: 136), both of which can discourage self-esteem and positive actions.

The NAPC telephone and youth focus groups data also identified addictions as being common community concerns. The top three issues that Saskatchewan northerners identify are unemployment, housing, and addictions. Twenty-nine point four per cent of individuals consider substance addictions to be the biggest issue. A large number of respondents did not know which issue is the biggest.

A number of socio-demographic differences are found on this question. Addictions to alcohol and drugs are the largest issue for those living in the north, regardless of Aboriginal status. Non-aboriginals and those Aboriginals living off-reserve, as well as non-status, Métis, and Inuit are more likely, than on-reserve Aboriginals to believe unemployment was the biggest issue. On the other hand, on-reserve Aboriginals are more likely than others to believe housing was the largest issue. Both men and women believe addictions are the largest issue. Men are more likely than women to believe unemployment is the biggest issue, while women are more likely than men to believe addictions are the biggest issue. Education also plays a large role in determining perceptions of community issues. Those holding a university degree or some post-secondary schooling are more likely to believe unemployment was the biggest issue when compared to other education levels; those with less than a high school degree are the least likely of the groups. Those with less than a high school education are the most likely of any group to believe housing was the biggest issue.

Although addictions are the most frequently picked issue for all education groups, those with a high school diploma were more likely to pick this issue, and those with a university degree were the least likely. With respect to household income, addiction is the most frequently picked issue by all income categories. Those making under $20,000 per year are more likely than others to believe as such. Persons making between $20,000-29,999 are more likely than other income groups to believe unemployment to be the biggest issue and those making between $40,000-59,999 are more likely than others to believe housing to be the biggest issue. Age also played a large role in the determination of such attitudes. Respondents aged 18 to 29 are more likely to believe addictions to be the largest issue, while those aged 45 to 64 age category are the least likely. Those aged 30 and above are more likely than those under the age of 30 to believe unemployment and housing are the largest issues facing their community.

Addiction and unemployment can negatively challenge the effectiveness of community developments, and the interconnectedness of social and economic issues suggests that strategic and coordinated interagency and intergovernmental approaches are essential. The survey results reveal important patterns in northern Saskatchewan's political culture. They show that income, education, employment, age and other factors shape the way individuals view the present and the future. As a consequence, they will likely determine how and why people engage in regional politics.

Figure 9: Biggest Community Issues in the Northern Administrative District

Community Participation in Northern Saskatchewan

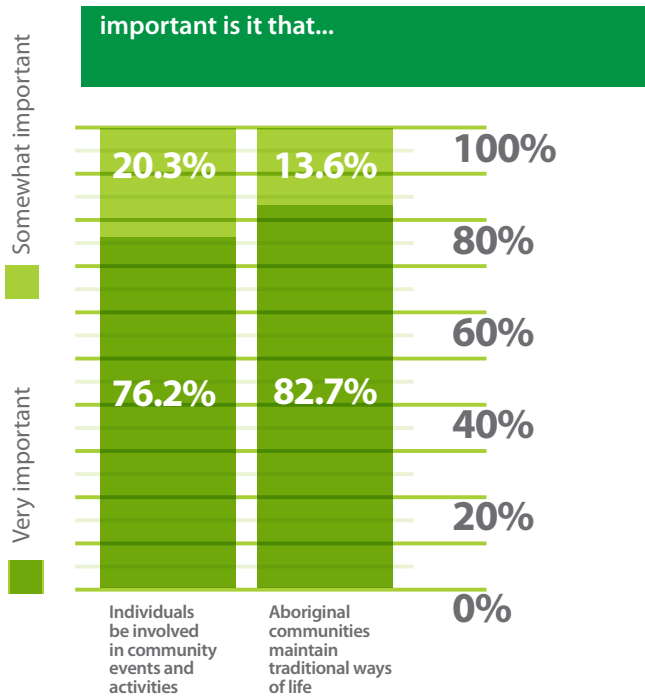
Many Aboriginal cultures place importance on interconnectedness between individuals within their community and believe that "reciprocal affection, healing, sharing, and responsibilities" are central to the success of the individual and their community (Garvey et al, 2004: 573). Most perceive health and wellness as a holistic balance between the emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical aspects of the individual, their family and community. Being on the land, for example, is seen as being fundamental to Aboriginal wellness (Parlee et.al 2007). For this reason, there is a traditional basis for valuing community that extends beyond the noted health benefits of the individual. By prioritizing these traditional values in Aboriginal communities, the community can grow stronger. A series of focus groups conducted in Manitoba confirmed that traditional cultural practices are considered to be important not only as a way of connecting to friends and family in the area, but also as a tool to establish identity through history and ancestry (Silver, 2005: 257).

A similar theme emerged from the NAPC telephone and youth focus group data about the importance of community participation and maintaining traditional ways of life. The youth felt that organized sports and community events were important for mental and physical health and for preventing unhealthy activities that get youth into trouble. Survey respondents were asked "In your opinion, how important is it that individuals be involved in community events and activities?" and "In your opinion, how important is it that Aboriginal communities maintain tradition ways of life". As Figure 10 demonstrates, 96.5 per cent of respondents believe it is somewhat or very important for individuals to be involved in their communities. Women are more likely than men to believe that community involvement is somewhat or very important, and importance placed on community involvement increases as education increases.

Community is found to be important to respondents regardless of heritage or Aboriginal status. Income is also related to how one feels about involvement in community. Those with higher income levels ($40,000 and above) are more likely to believe involvement to be very important, while those with incomes less than $40,000 are less likely to find involvement to be very important. Perceptions of the importance of community involvement are also related to age: those aged 45 to 64 are more likely to believe involvement is very important, and those aged 18 to 29 are less likely to believe it is very important.

It was also found that 96.3 per cent of Aboriginal respondents believe it is somewhat or very important to maintain traditional Aboriginal practices within their communities. Although most age groups felt it was important, those aged 30 to 64 are the most likely to believe it to be very important, and those aged 18 to 29 or over 65 are the least likely to believe it is very important. Similarly to community involvement, women are more likely than men to believe that traditional ways of life are very important.

Figure 10: Community Participation Attitudes in the Northern Administrative District



Community Involvement

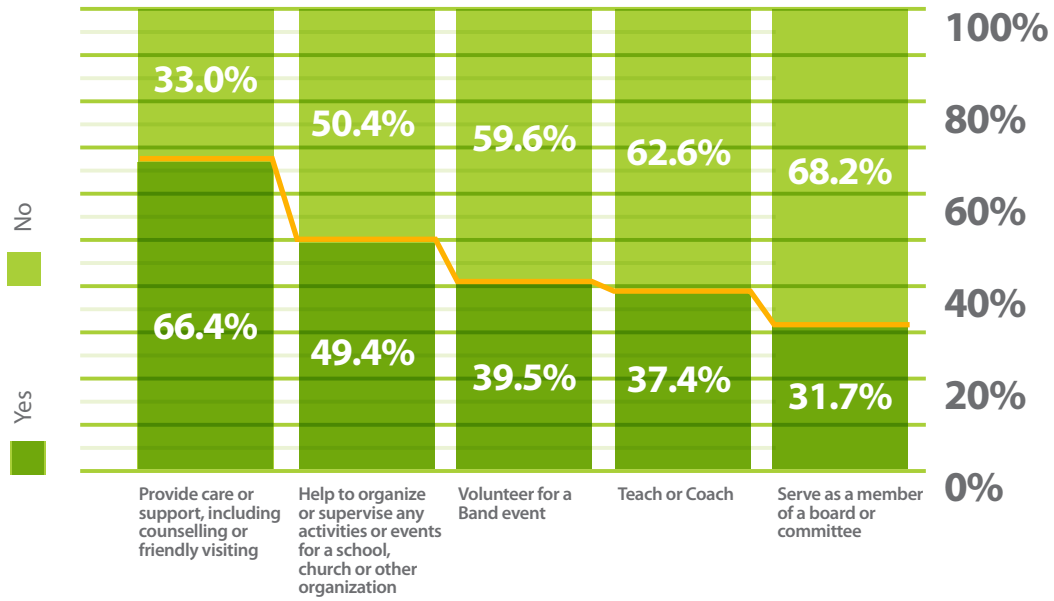
The Conference Board of Canada finds that "strong ties with family, friends and the broader group is [reflective of] the sharing and mutual self-help practices of many Northern towns and villages" (Fournier, 2012: 15). In the Conference Board of Canada's survey of Northern Canadians, respondents confirm that what they appreciate most about where they live is the sense of community experienced and the benefits of having loved ones close by (Fournier, 2012: 15).

Many Aboriginal people do not engage in formal community activity through established institutions, instead preferring to connect organically through informal social networks (Silver, 2005: 255). Informal, person-to-person actions are important because they are often seen as more genuine than an institution's potentially unresponsive agenda (Mignone, 2011: 5). Volunteering, regardless of how much structure is involved, establishes constructive actions of togetherness.

The NAPC data support these assumptions, but also suggest that there is good participation in both formal and informal community activities, with stronger emphasis on informal activities such as sharing traditional foods, providing care and support to others (Berdahl, Beatty, Poelzer, 2011).

Respondents were asked, "In the past 12 months, did you provide care or support, including counseling or friendly visiting?"; "help to organize or supervise any activities or events for a school, church, or other organization?"; "volunteer for a Band event?"; "teach or coach?"; or "serve as a member of a board or committee?" The results show that Northerners participate in their community in a number of ways (see Figure 11). Providing care or support for others and helping to organize or supervise activities or events are the most popular types of participation with 66.4 per cent and 49.4 per cent indicating they had done so in the past year.

Figure 11: Community Engagement in the Northern Administrative District



Community Involvement

A number of socio-demographic differences are found in reported types of community participation. Aboriginals living on-reserve are more likely to provide care or support than non-aboriginals. Women are more likely to report that they have or are providing care or support than men, with 73.4 per cent of women participating in these activities. Women are also more likely than men to help organize or supervise activities or events for a school, church, or other organization. Respondents with a university degree are more likely to organize or supervise events for a school, church, or other organization, while those with less than a high school education are the least likely. Persons making between $40,000 and $59,999 annually are the most likely to organize or supervise such activities and those making less than $20,000 annually are the least likely. Persons with a university degree are more likely to have volunteered for a Band event, while those with less than a high school education are less likely. Those respondents with an annual income of under $20,000 or over $60,000 are less likely to volunteer for Band events, while those making between $20,000-59,999 annually are more likely.

Those with a university degree are more likely to have taught or coached an activity, while those with a high school education or less are less likely to have done so. Respondents with annual incomes under $20,000 are less likely to teach or coach and those with incomes in excess of $40,000 are more likely. Age is also related to teaching or coaching involvement as those aged 30 to 64 are more likely to engage in these behaviours, while those aged 65 or older are less likely.

Non-aboriginals are more likely to have served as a member of a board or a committee, while those living on-reserve are less likely. Education levels are related to board or committee involvement as those with a university degree are more likely to participate and those with a high school education are less likely. Persons with annual incomes in excess of $40,000 are more likely to have served on a board or committee, while those with annual incomes under $20,000 are less likely. Age also associates with participation on a board or committee with respondents aged 18 to 29 being less likely to serve and those aged 45 to 64 being more likely.

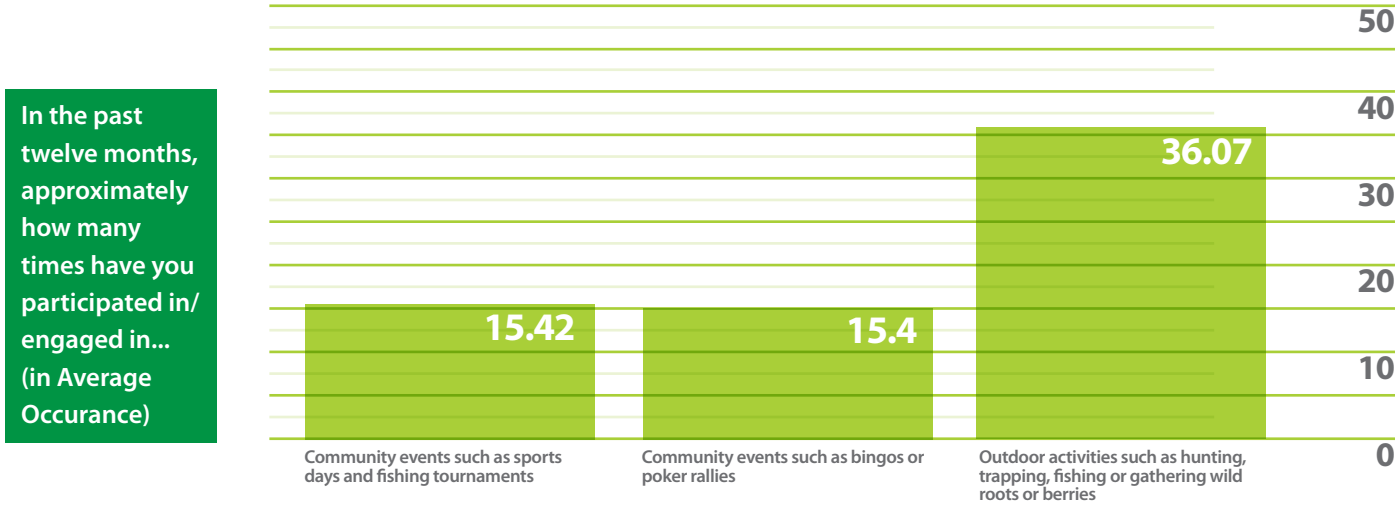
In general, those of lower annual household incomes as well as youth and elderly participants were less likely to be involved in their communities.

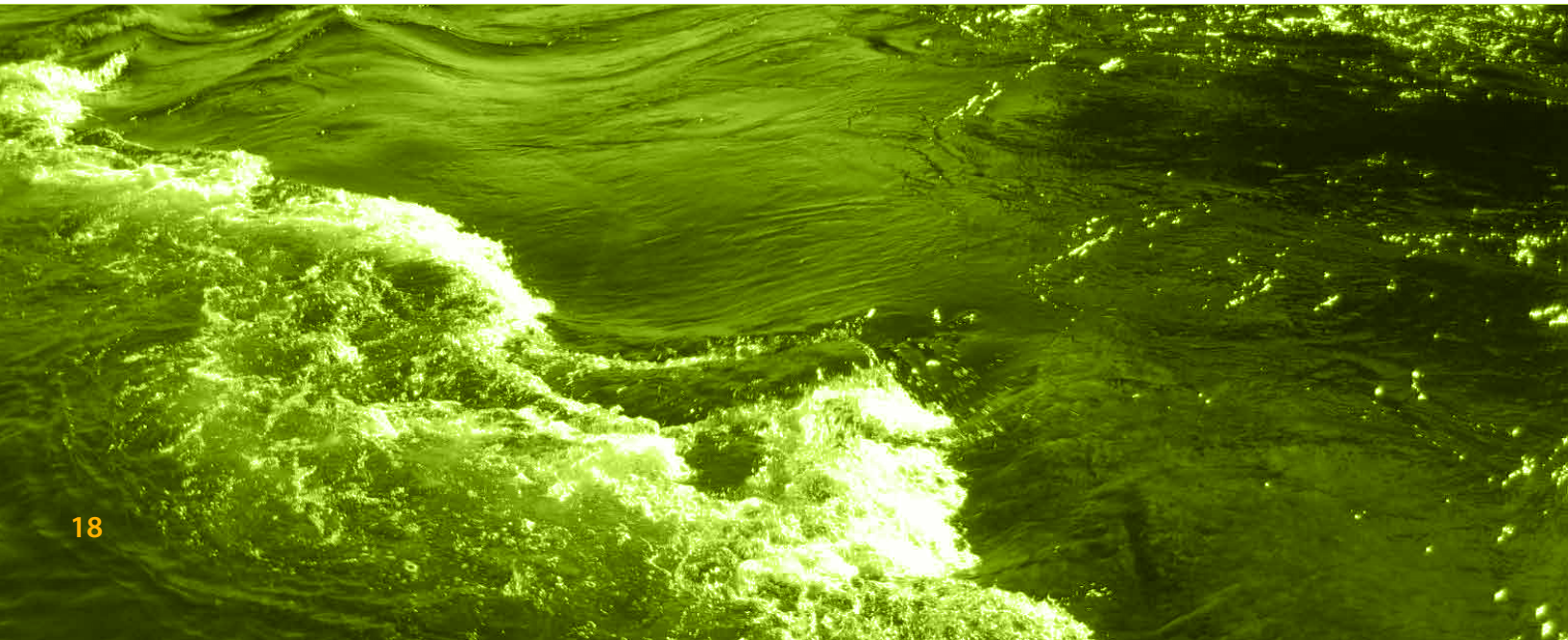
Community Activities

NAPC survey respondents were also asked "In the past 12 months, approximately how many times have you participated in/engaged in community events such as sports days and fishing tournaments?"; "approximately how many times have you participated in/engaged in community events such as bingos and poker rallies?"; and "approximately how many times have you participated in/engaged in outdoor activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing or gathering wild roots or berries"?

The results show that Northerners participate in community events such as sports days and fishing tournaments an average of 15 times per year; however, 39.5 per cent report never engaging in these activities and 81.3 per cent did so ten times or less in the previous year. Some demographic groups are more likely to participate in sports days and fishing tournaments, such as those with either completed or in progress post-secondary education. Other demographic groups, such as those with a high school degree or less, as well as those who are aged 18 to 29 or 65 or older are less likely to participate.

Figure 12: Community Activities in the Northern Administrative District





Community Activities

Other community events, such as bingos and poker rallies hold similar statistics, with an average participation rate of 15 times per year. Forty-eight point five per cent of respondents did not participate at all and 82.6 per cent engaged in such activities on ten occasions or less per year. The demographic groups most likely to participate in bingos and poker rallies are on-reserve Aboriginals, those with a partially completed or completed high school education level, lower income individuals (below $40,000 annually), and those over the age of 30. The demographic groups less likely to participate in bingos and poker rallies are non-aboriginals and individuals between the ages of 18 and 29.

Outdoor activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering wild roots and berries is the most popular community event among Northern residents, with an average participation rate of 36 occasions in the past year and only 18 per cent of respondents not participating at all; though, 59.5 per cent of respondents have engaged in outdoor activities no more than ten times. The demographic groups most likely to participate in outdoor activities are men (and do so at higher rates), those with some post-secondary education or a completed university degree, and those with annual incomes over $40,000. Women, those with a high school diploma or less, those with annual incomes under $20,000 and those between 35 to 44 years of age are the least likely to participate.

Political Participation in Northern Saskatchewan

Northern Saskatchewan has historically been politically limited from empowering itself in both the Saskatchewan Legislature and the Canadian House of Commons, and socially neglected from being recognized as a distinct and important part of Saskatchewan's culture and history. This neglect manifests in many citizens of Saskatchewan's north feeling excluded and ignored by the government (Bedford and Howe, 2009: 10). Other factors such as socio-economic status, socio-economic networks and demographic differences could also influence political participation (Harell, Panagos, Mathews 2009).

When this exclusion combines with high rates of poverty, low education levels, and an overwhelmingly youthful population, all of which are social indicators correlated to lower rates of political participation (Silver, 2005: 253-255), citizens become isolated from and disenchanted with the government. When a group of people do not participate in political processes, their needs are not communicated to the government, resulting in changes or advances in policy that do not reflect a prioritization of the community's needs. By assessing what political behaviours Northern residents engage in most often, political participation can be evaluated to improve the responsiveness of the government and the political involvement of the people.

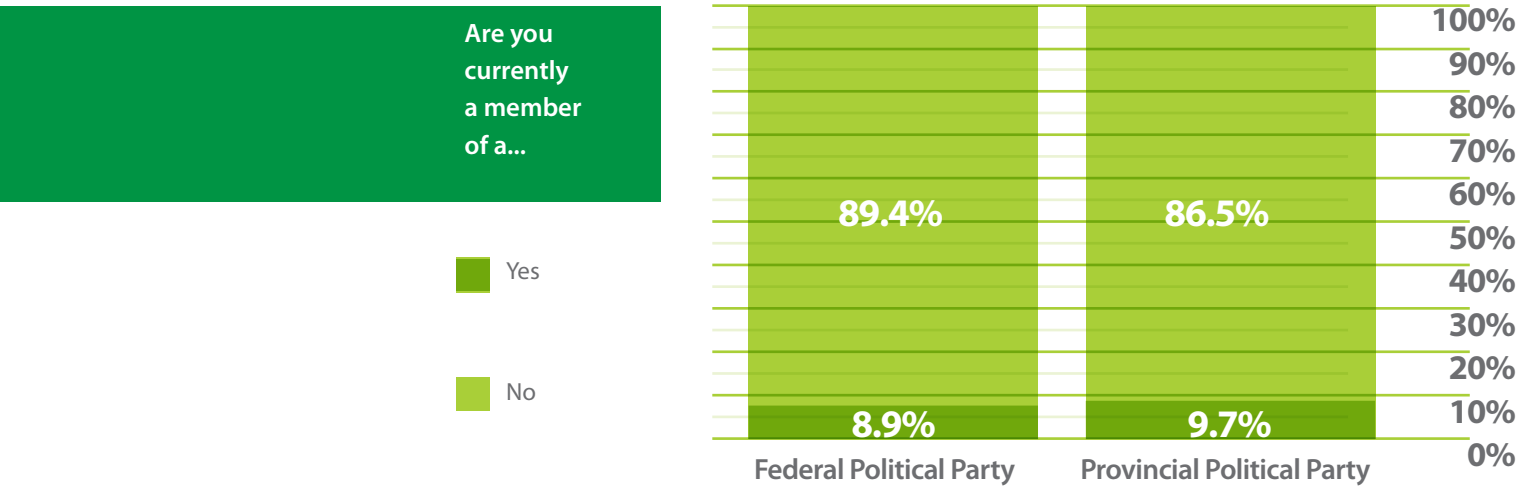
Political Activity

Many Northern communities are facing a decline in their traditional social economies, in favor of the wage labour economy that is rapidly expanding due to modernization and economic growth (Settee, 2011: 74). It is a blended economy (Beatty 1996). Some suggest that the loss of cultural behaviours associated with traditional economies can be linked to a loss of cultural identity that often leads to identity confusion, substance abuse, and social instability (McIvor, 2009: 11). Community and political engagement is often seen as essential towards improvements, particularly among the youth (Bishop, Preiner 2005; Guerin 2003).

The Northern Aboriginal Political Culture survey asked respondents about three more formalized political activities, excluding voting (which is a separate focus). The three activities—holding membership to a political party, contacting an elected official or government office about an issue and attending either a Band or municipal level council meeting—are indicative of individuals using tools that already exist within the political system to address their needs to the government.

The percentage of Canadians who hold membership in a provincial or federal political party is at a historic low of two per cent, and Aboriginal Canadians hold membership at even lower rates (Cross and Young, 2004: 431). As those who hold membership to a party are able to play a role in shaping electoral platforms, it is a valuable tool to address unmet needs and create policy change (Cross and Young, 2004: 441).

Figure 13: Self-Reported Political Party Memberships in the Northern Administrative District

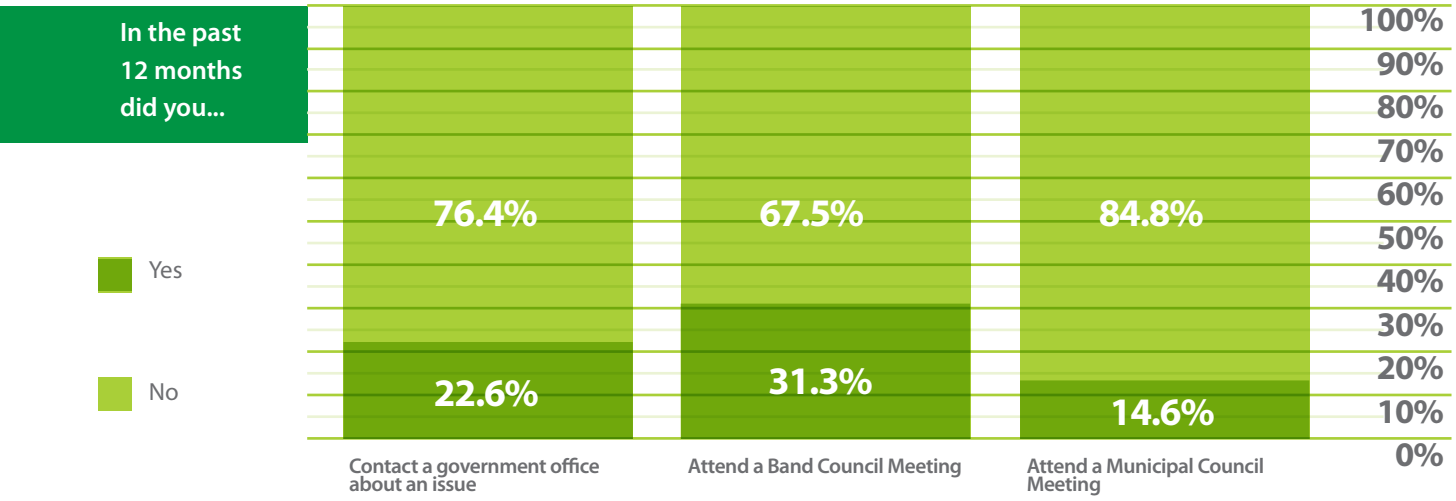


In order to gauge political participation in the North, respondents were asked "Are you currently a member of a federal political party?" The NAPC survey shows that eight point nine per cent of those living in Northern communities report holding memberships in a federal political party. As a Northerner's age increases, so does the likelihood they will hold membership in a federal political party, as those aged 65 or older are more likely to report holding such membership than those of a younger age. Respondents were also asked, "Are you currently a member of a provincial political party?" Of those surveyed, nine point seven per cent indicate that they belong to a provincial political party. Education level, income, and age were all found to affect the likelihood of an individual holding membership to a provincial political party. Those with some post-secondary education or a university degree, those living in a household with an annual income of $60,000 or more, and those aged 45 or older are more likely to hold membership in a provincial political party.

Survey respondents were also asked, "In the past 12 months did you attend a Band council meeting?" Figure 14 shows that 31.3 per cent have attended at least one Band council meeting within the past year. Persons living on-reserve and those with annual household incomes ranging from $20,000–59,999 are more likely to attend Band council meetings. Those with household incomes of under $20,000 or over $60,000 are less likely to attend Band council meetings.

Respondents were also asked, "In the past 12 months did you attend a municipal council meeting?" The data shows that 14.6 per cent of respondents have attended a municipal council during the past year. Attendance at a municipal council meeting is found to be more likely among respondents with household incomes in excess of $20,000 annually, with respondents whose annual household incomes are between $40,000 to $59,000 being the most likely to attend, as were respondents over the age of 45. Respondents under the age of 30 are the least likely to attend.

Figure 14: Self-Reported Formal Political Activities in the Northern Administrative District



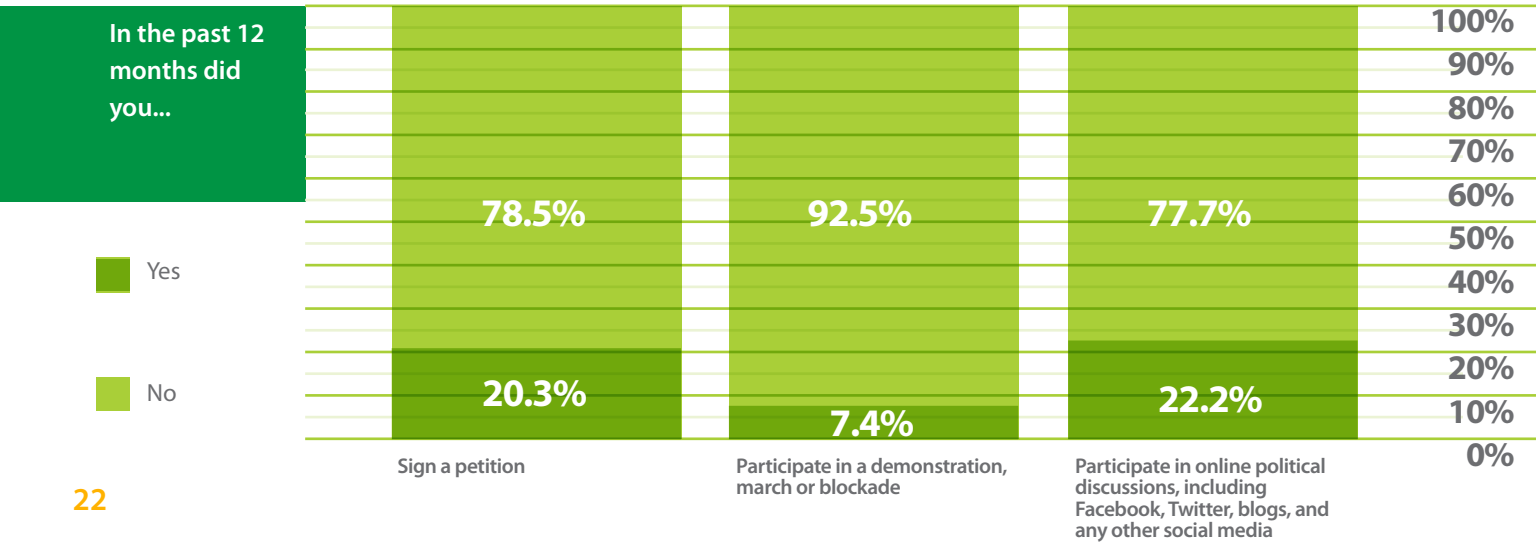
Informal Political Activities

Informal political activity does not actively involve the government's formal processes and can include activities such as protests and demonstrations, signing petitions and engaging in activism, boycotts and discourse (O'Neill, 2007:20). Such activity is more prevalent among younger people and those who perceive themselves as unconnected to the government, making it common to Canada's predominantly youthful Aboriginal populations (O'Neill, 2007: 32).

Northerners participate in informal political activities in a number of different ways. Survey respondents were asked "In the past 12 months did you sign a petition?" Twenty point three per cent reported participating in such an activity in the past year (see Figure 15). Women, non-aboriginals, those with some post-secondary education or a university degree, as well as respondents with annual household incomes of $40,000 or higher, are more likely to have signed a petition in the past 12 months. Men, on-reserve Aboriginals, those with a high school education or less, as well as respondents who have an annual household income of under $20,000 are less likely to sign petitions.

Respondents were also asked "In the past 12 months did you participate in a demonstration, march, or blockade?" Participation through this informal mode is lower, with only seven point four per cent stating they have participated in a demonstration, march, or blockade. Finally, those participating were asked, "In the past 12 months did you participate in online political discussion, including Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and any other social media?" Involvement in online political discussion via social media was the most popular medium of participation, with 22.2 per cent of people stating they had done so in the previous year. The likelihood of political activity through social media is linked to age: respondents aged 18–29 are the most likely to participate and those aged 65 or older are the least likely.

Figure 15: Self-Reported Informal Political Activities in the Northern Administrative District



Voting Behaviours in Northern Saskatchewan

While the right to vote was constitutionally guaranteed to Canada's status Indian citizens in 1960, there are many situational barriers that limit the right of First Nations people to exercise the franchise (Ladner and McCrossan, 2007: 12). Poverty and lack of education, two serious challenges for Aboriginal Canadian communities, limit political engagement and voter turnout (Dool et al, 2011: 22). Lower educational levels are often seen as a factor that leads to poverty as well as lower social and political engagement (Burden, 2009: 5). Additionally, education is a social service that has seen significant inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations within Saskatchewan: the 2012 provincial audit found that while the provincial high-school graduation rate was 72.3 per cent, the graduation rate of Aboriginal Saskatchewanians was less than one third (Lysyk, 2012: 31).

This limits the political knowledge and engagement of Saskatchewan's Aboriginal peoples, resulting in low voter turn-out for such communities at election time. Low voter turn-out limits the ability of predominantly Aboriginal communities, such as those in Northern Saskatchewan, to inform the decisions of politicians and government officials that directly affect that population.

An individual's voting behaviour is influenced by many factors. Personal ideology, life circumstances, the economy, and voting strategy may all affect whether or not someone goes to the polls and what they do with their ballot at the poll if they choose to participate. Voting behaviour is considered to consist of two main choices that face a citizen: the choice to show up to an election poll as a registered voter and the choice of which candidate if any to vote for once the individual has accepted their ballot. The first choice affects the phenomena of voter turn-out, which is measured as a percentage of how many registered voters did accept their ballots at their poll station. The second choice refers to what is known as vote choice and deals with which candidate the vote was cast for.

To understand the voting behaviour of Aboriginal and Northern people, the rationale for voting or not voting must be clarified. Some academics argue in favour of "the nationalism thesis," which states that Aboriginals who view their citizenship as belonging to their respective First Nation Band and not to Canada are likely to only participate in Aboriginal self-governance and vote only in Band elections (Harell, Panagos and Matthews, 2009: 9). This is one rationale for why Aboriginal voter turnout is higher for Band elections than for other levels of government. Many other scholars argue that the higher turnout for Band and municipal elections is due to the personal connection citizens have to local issues, local candidates, and their community as compared to the entire province or country (Bedford, 2003: 2). The NAPC data suggests that Aboriginal groups differ in voter turnout for a variety of reasons including socio-economic differences, non-reporting, local context, and extent of available voting resources (Berdahl, Poelzer, Beatty 2011).

Voting Beliefs

Survey respondents were asked, "In your opinion, how important is it that Band members vote in Band elections?" A large majority of respondents feel it is important, with 69.1 per cent of First Nations respondents feeling that it is very important that Band members vote in Band elections (see Figure 16). The First Nations demographic groups most likely to believe it is very or somewhat important to vote in Band elections include individuals with some post-secondary education or a completed university degree, individuals whose annual household incomes are in excess of $40,000, as well as individuals aged 65 or older. Demographic groups less likely to believe voting in Band elections is important include those with a partial or complete high school education only, individuals with annual household incomes of under $20,000 as well as participants between the ages of 18 and 29.

In a similar respect, all Northerners were asked "In your opinion, how important is it that people vote in general elections?" Results show that placing importance on voting in general elections is a common sentiment, with 61 per cent of respondents believing it is very important (see Figure 17). Perceptions of the importance of voting in general elections vary significantly with respect to a number of factors. Women, non-aboriginals, those with a university degree, persons with annual household incomes in excess of $60,000, as well as those over the age of 45 are more likely to believe it is very important that people vote in general elections. Men, on-reserve Aboriginals, those with less than a high school education, those with annual household incomes of under $20,000, as well as those between the ages of 18 and 29 are less likely to believe voting in general elections to be important.

Figure 16: Perceived Importance of Voting in Band Elections

In your opinion, how important is it that Band members vote in Band elections?

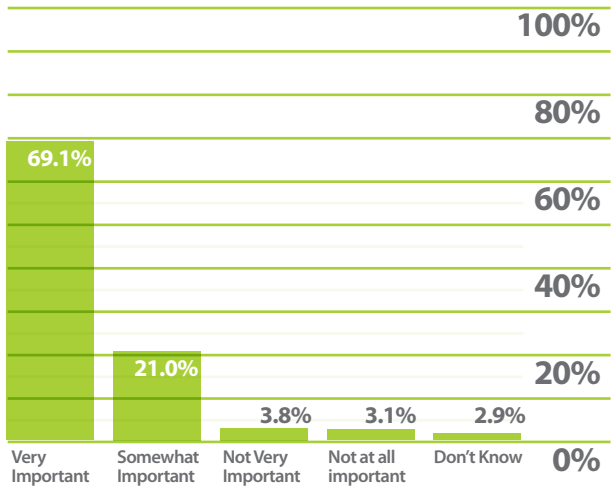
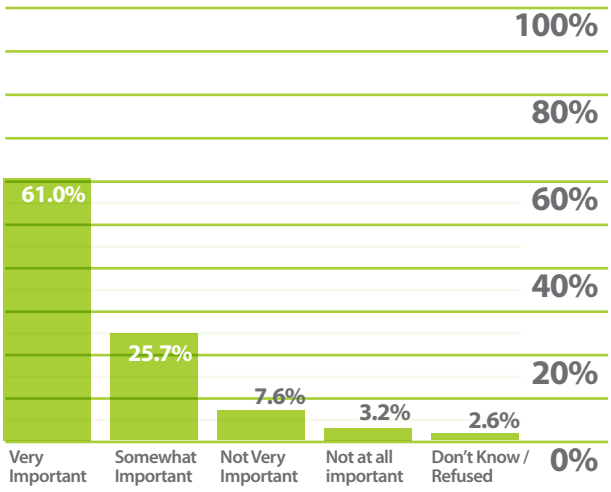


Figure 17: Perceived Importance of Voting in General Elections

In your opinion, how important is it people vote in general elections?



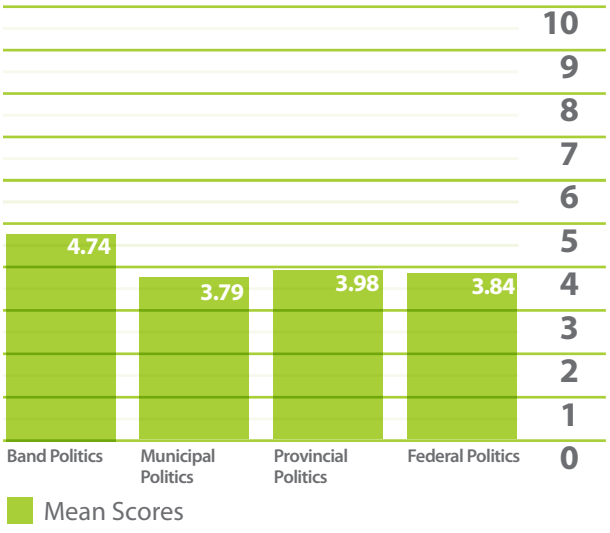
Voting Beliefs

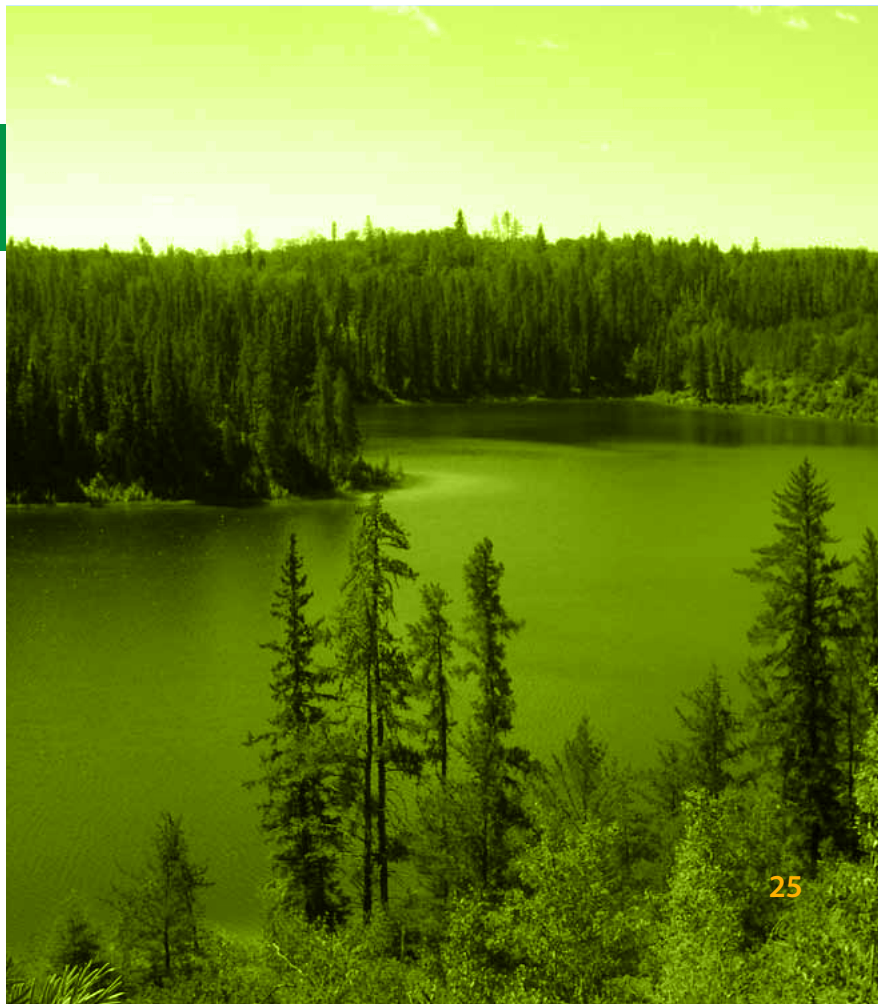
Political interest is another important factor to consider. Aboriginal respondents were asked, "Using a scale of zero to ten, where zero means you have no interest and ten means you have a great deal of interest, how interested are you in Band politics?" On average, respondents rate their interest just less than five out of ten, suggesting a moderate level of interest in Band politics. An individual's interest in Band politics relates to their education, as those with higher education have higher level of interest while those with less education are less interested in Band politics. Annual household income was another factor in predicting interest in Band politics. People with annual household incomes greater than $60,000 are more likely to have no interest in Band politics, while respondents in the $40,000 to $59,000 bracket were likely to have a great deal of interest and those in households earning less than $40,000 annually claiming a moderate level of interest. Lastly, respondents aged 30 to 44 report lower levels of interest in Band politics than those who are 18 to 29 in age, who report a moderate interest. Respondents aged 45 to 65 report the strongest interest.

All survey participants were asked, "Using a scale of zero to ten, where zero means you have no interest and ten means you have a great deal of interest, how interested are you in municipal politics?" Figure 18 shows that respondents have an average score of just less than four out of ten (3.79), indicating moderately-low levels of interest in municipal politics. Interest in municipal politics is significantly affected by Aboriginal status, as non-aboriginals are more likely to express higher levels of interest. Likewise, on-reserve Aboriginals are more likely to have lower levels of interest. Participants with some post-secondary education or a university degree are more likely to have higher levels of interest in municipal politics, while those with lower levels of education are more likely to have lower levels of interest. Annual household income also helped determine respondents' interest in municipal politics. In this regard, those with annual household incomes of less than $20,000 have lower levels of interest, while those with levels greater than $40,000 have moderately higher levels of interest.

Figure 18: Self-Reported Political Interest

Using a scale of 0-10, where 0 means you have no interest and ten means you have a great deal of interest, how interested are you in...



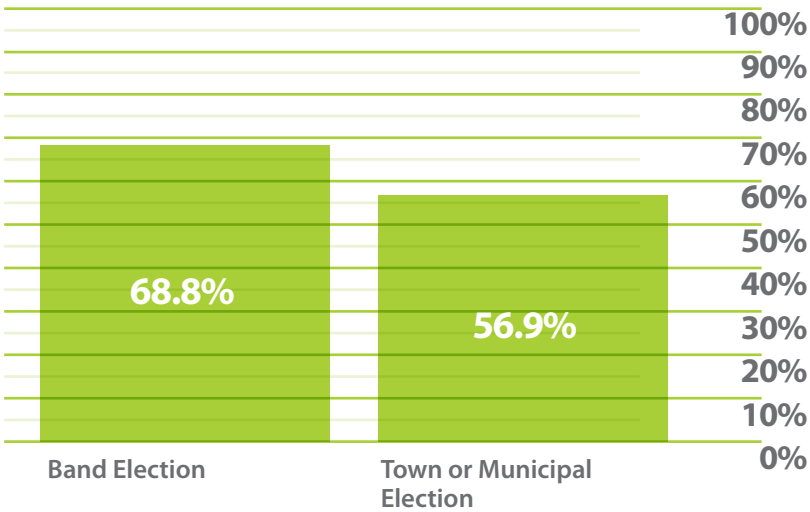


Provincial political interest was also measured by asking participants, "Using a scale of zero to ten, where zero means you have no interest and ten means you have a great deal of interest, how interested are you in provincial politics?" Levels of interest in provincial politics are slightly higher than those at the municipal level with an average score of just under four out of ten (3.98/10). Non-aboriginals are more likely to have higher levels of political interest at this level of government, while Aboriginals living on-reserve are more likely to have lower levels of interest. The probability of having a greater deal of interest increased with levels of education as those with higher levels of education are more likely to have higher levels of interest in political politics, while those with a high school education and below have lower levels of interest. Those with higher annual household income levels ($40,000 and above) are also more likely to have higher levels of interest than those of lower annual household income levels (below $20,000). Those with incomes ranging from $20,000 – $39,999 have moderate levels of interest. Respondents aged 18 to 29 are more likely to have lower levels of interest in provincial politics than those 45 years and older, who show a tendency toward having greater interest in provincial politics.

Finally, survey participants were asked "Using a scale of zero to ten, where zero means you have no interest and ten means you have a great deal of interest, how interested are you in federal politics?" With an average score of about four out of ten (3.84/10), respondents seem to have moderately-low levels of interest—levels similar to those found towards municipal and provincial politics. Differences in interest levels between Aboriginal statuses were evident, as non-aboriginals are more likely to show higher levels of interest in federal politics than Aboriginals living on-reserve. Higher levels of education are also related to interest in federal politics, whereby those who have either some post-secondary schooling or a completed university degree are more likely to show higher levels of interest. Respondents who have completed high school or have less education are more likely to show lower levels of federal political interest. Interest levels also varied across different income categories, as those with an annual household income of $20,000 or less have lower levels of federal political interest than those with an annual household income in excess of $40,000. Respondents' ages relate to their levels of interest in federal politics. More senior respondents, those aged 45 or older, are more likely to have higher levels of interest. More moderate levels of interest are found within the 35 to 44 age category, while persons aged 18 to 29 are more likely to show lower levels of interest in federal political politics.

Figure 19: Self-Reported Voting: Band and Municipal Elections

Percentage of people who voted in their last...



Voting Behaviours

Though voter turnout across Canada is already quite low, it continues to steadily decline in the Aboriginal youth demographic (Ladner and McCrossan, 2007: 35). As the Aboriginal youth demographic is rapidly becoming the dominant demographic in Northern Saskatchewan (Irvine, Quinn and Stockdale, 2011: 30), such declining voter turnout has serious implications for the ability of government to reflect the people's needs. As the following data will demonstrate, voting rates are very low in Northern Saskatchewan.

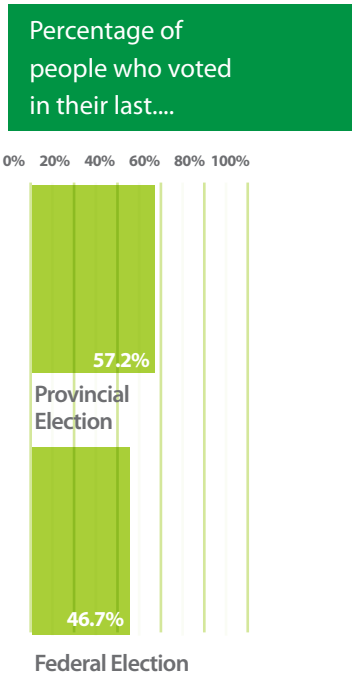
In order to gauge voter Band election turnout in the North, Aboriginal participants were asked "Did you vote in the last Band election?" Responses show that self-reported voter turnout for Band elections is 68.8 per cent (see Figure 19). Women, Aboriginals living on-reserve, those who have completed high school and those with a completed university degree, those living in a household with an annual household income between $20,000 and 39,999, and those aged 65 or older are more likely to report voting in their last Band election. Conversely, men, Aboriginals living off-reserve, those with less than a high school education and those with only some post-secondary education, those living in a household with an annual household income in excess of $60,000, as well as persons aged 18 to 29 are less likely to report voting in their respective, most recent Band election.

Voter turnout at the local level of government was also the subject of inquiry. Participants were asked "Did you vote in the last town or municipal election?" Responses show that voter turn-out for municipal elections is 56.9 per cent (see Figure 19). Demographic groups that are more likely to report voting in their last municipal election include non-aboriginals as well as off-reserve Aboriginals, non-status Indians, Métis and Inuit respondents, those with some post-secondary education or a completed university degree, those with annual household incomes in excess of $40,000 and individuals over the age of 30. Demographic groups that are less likely to report voting in their last municipal election include individuals with only a high school education, annual household incomes of less than $40,000, and those between the ages of 18 and 29.

Elections Canada reported that in the 2000 federal election, voter turnout for polling stations on Saskatchewan reserves was 55 per cent (Ladner and McCrossan, 2007: 20). This is a much lower turnout rate than the general provincial rate of 62 per cent (Pogue, 2004: 23). Survey respondents were asked if they had voted in the last federal election, and in the Saskatchewan provincial election. A majority of those surveyed, 57.2 per cent, said they voted in the last provincial election and a plurality, 46.7 per cent, said they voted in the last federal election (see Figure 20).

The likelihood of reporting voting varies considerably by gender, as men are more likely than women to report voting in both the most recent provincial and federal election. Non-aboriginals and Aboriginals living off-reserve, as well as non-status Indians, Métis and Inuit are more likely than Aboriginals living on-reserve to report voting in the last provincial election and non-aboriginals are more likely to report voting in the last federal election than Aboriginals living on-reserve. Persons with some post-secondary education or a completed university degree are more likely than those with a high school education or less to report voting in the most recent federal and provincial elections. Income is also positively related to one's tendency to vote. Those with lower annual household incomes of less than $20,000 are less likely to report voting in provincial and federal elections than those with higher annual household incomes of $40,000 or more. The higher a respondent's age, the more likely that they are to have reported voting in the most recent of these two elections – those aged 18 to 29 are the least likely to report voting, while those 45 or older are more likely.

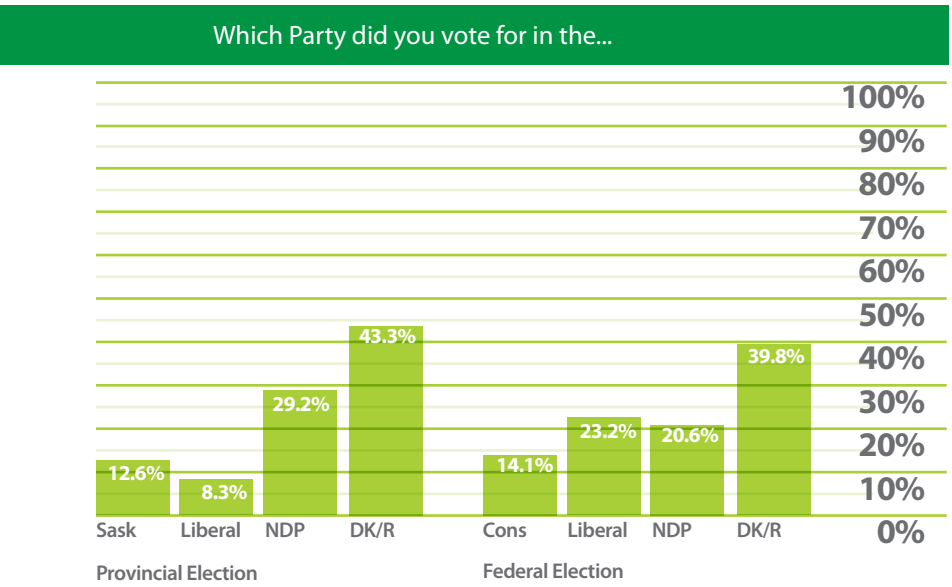
Figure 20: Self-Reported Voting: Provincial and Federal Elections



Vote Choice

NAPC survey respondents who indicated that they had voted in the most recent provincial and federal elections were asked, "Which party did you vote for?" With respect to the provincial election, the New Democratic Party (NDP) was most frequently reported at 29.2 per cent, while the Liberal Party received the most reported support at the federal election with 23.2 per cent.

Figure 21: Self-Reported Vote Choice in Most Recent Provincial and Federal Elections



At the provincial level, Aboriginals living on-reserve, persons with completed university degrees, and those aged 45 to 64 are more likely to report voting NDP, while those with household incomes below $20,000 and above $60,000 are more likely to report voting for the Saskatchewan Party. With respect to vote choice in the most recent federal election, persons living on-reserve are more likely to report voting for the Liberal Party, while non-aboriginals are more likely to report voting for the Conservative Party. Federal vote choice varies with household income, as those making less than $20,000 are more likely to report voting NDP, persons making between $20,000 to $39,999 are equally as likely to report voting for the Liberal Party or the NDP, and those making $40,000 to $59,999 are more likely to report voting for the Liberal Party.

Attitudes towards Government in Northern Saskatchewan

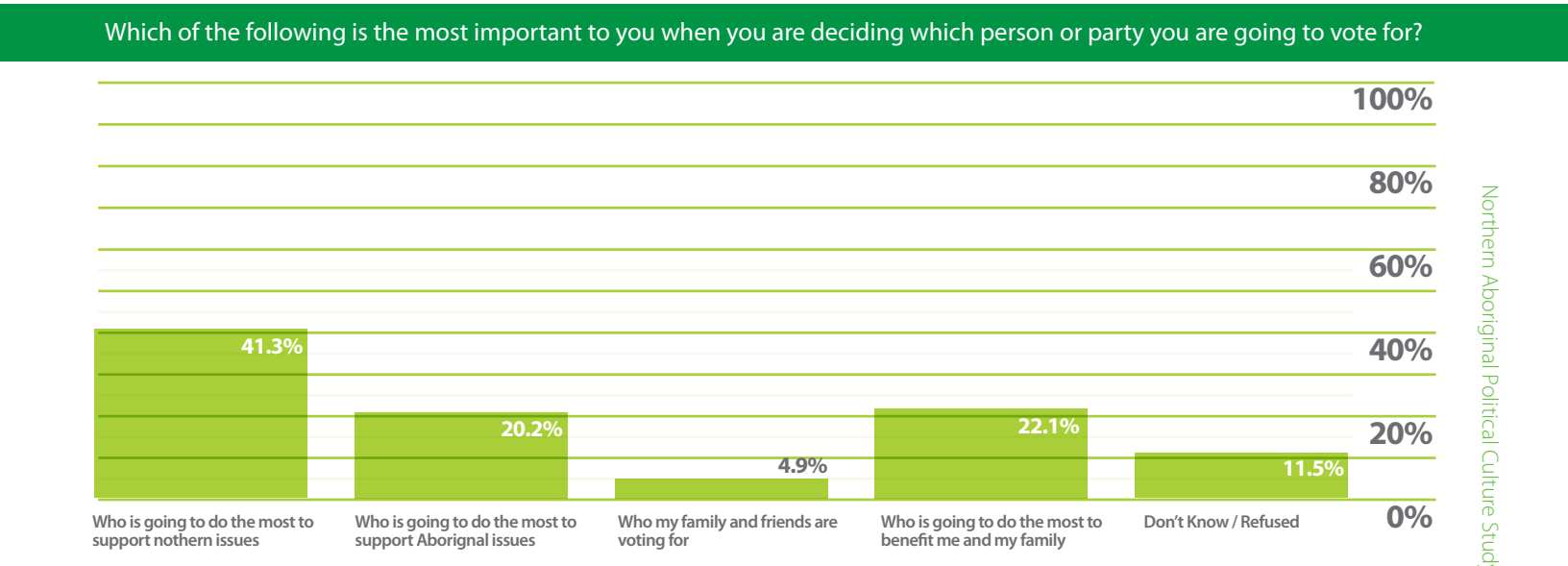
Saskatchewan's NAD faces two types of social exclusion from mainstream government institutions: it is disadvantaged by its predominantly Aboriginal population, which has historically been excluded and exploited, and also by its geographical location. Leading provincial North scholars, Tracy Summerville and Greg Poelzer, suggest that the incorporation and use of "the provincial Norths, and particularly the resources of the communities found there, have been part of the strategy of building … provinces," meaning that Northerners "see their resources and their communities exploited for the development of the large urban centres and their populations" (Summerville and Poelzer, 2005: 110). Some suggest that such feelings of exploitation and separation felt by Aboriginal or Northern citizens in Canada have led to marginalization and "a weaker sense of pride and belonging in Canada as a whole" (Soroka et al. 2007, 26).

Northern Identities

Participants were asked, "Which of the following is the most important to you when you are deciding which person or party you are going to vote for?" They were given the following choices: "who is going to do the most to support northern issues; who is going to do the most to support Aboriginal issues; who my family and friends are voting for; and who is going to do the most benefit to me and my family." A majority of respondents, 41.3 per cent, believe northern issues are the most important when deciding which person or party to vote for (see Figure 22), which supports the research stating that "Northernness" can be more central to an individual's identity than overall Canadian citizenship is. Non-Aboriginal people, non-status Indians living off-reserve, as well as non-status Indians, Métis and Inuit, those with some post-secondary education or a university degree, persons annual household incomes of $60,000 or more , as well as those aged 45 to 64 are more likely to state that northern issues are the most important criteria when deciding how to vote. Aboriginal respondents who live on-reserve are the most likely to choose a candidate or party that who is going to do the most to support Aboriginal issues. Respondents with annual household incomes under $20,000 are more likely to select a candidate that will do the most to benefit themselves and their family.

In order to understand Northerners' attitudes towards government, survey participants were asked to rate their agreement with the statement that, "Too many important decisions affecting the North are being made in Regina and Ottawa rather than in the North." A majority of respondents, 50.6 per cent, strongly agree that too many decisions are not made in the North, while 24.7 per cent somewhat agree (see Figure 23). Aboriginals living off-reserve, as well as non-status Indians, Métis and Inuit people, those with a university degree, persons with a household incomes of $40,000 to $59,999, as well as those aged 30 or older, are more likely to strongly agree. While a majority of those living on-reserve either strongly agree or somewhat agree, they are more likely than non-aboriginals and off-reserve status Indians, as well as non-status Indians, Métis and Inuit to strongly disagree.

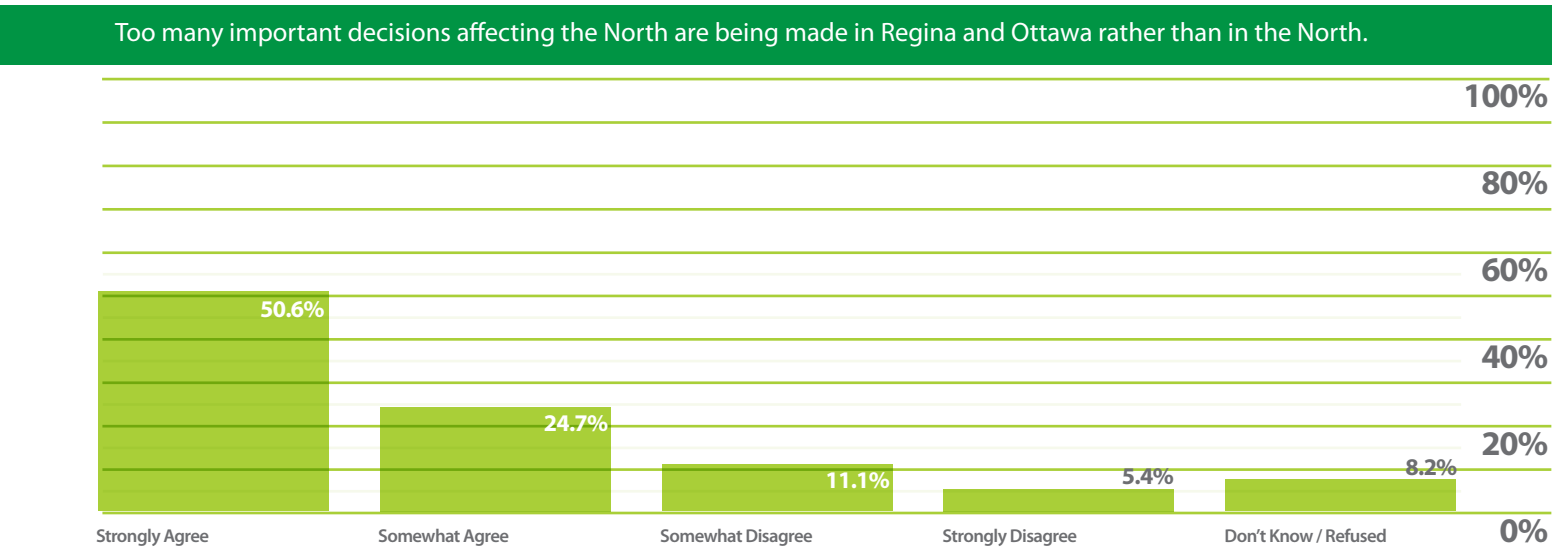
Figure 22: Self-Reported Influences on Vote Choice



Those with less than a high school education are more likely than those with a high school education or more to strongly disagree that too many important decisions are not made in the North. Those with a high school education are more likely to state that they didn't know. In a similar vein, those living in a household making less than $40,000 a year and persons aged 18 to 29 are more likely to either somewhat disagree or strongly disagree when compared to those of other income and age groups.

First Nations people are "increasingly alienated from institutions and the state" as part of their personal identity (Harell et al. 2009: 10). Many First Nations people have "an emerging nationalist identity as Aboriginal and not Canadian, in which Canadian institutions and political practices are understood as foreign" (Howe and Bedford 2009, 35); such identity "accounts for the lower rates of participation" (Howe and Bedford 2009, 35). This may be why Canadians who live in the nation's north are more likely to agree with the statement, "people like me don't have any say about what the government does" (DeWiel, 2005: 79). The connection between a perceived lack of control and a Northern identity leads to disconnection from centers of power in Saskatchewan and Canada.

Figure 23: Perceptions of Decision-Making Affecting the North



Perceived Biases

The political culture of northern Aboriginal people is about the values, beliefs and biases that influence their behavior towards their political systems. It can manifest itself collectively in varying degrees, usually emanating from shared individual and collective histories and political experience. Regional political cultures can have different political attitudes and behaviors that are not necessarily in line with provincial attitudes and behaviors (Henderson 2004). In northern Saskatchewan, the Aboriginal people have a distinct northern way of life and cultural history that has often been marginalized in Canadian history. This contributes to their feelings their feelings of alienation from the provincial and federal systems of government that are making decisions from far away that affect their lives (Wilson and Poelzer 2005; Coates and Morrison 1992).

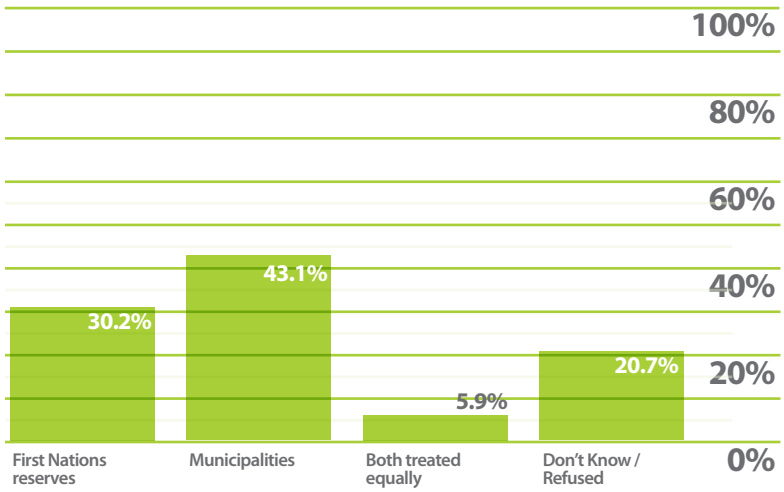
As a region, they share an extensive history with pre-industrial and State colonialism through the fur trade, the Treaty-making era, the establishment of government and natural resource regulations, post war industrial developments, and the opening of the north to external interests (Beatty 1996). These and other factors naturally influence their behavior because they are living and raising their families in that environment. Their personal state and the state of development in their communities, as far as the basic needs of employment, housing, education and health are concerned, can significantly affect their political perceptions towards their local governments, as well as the provincial and federal governments. With the rapid developments in the greater north, southerners are only just starting to acknowledge northern history and the need to consult with the northern Indigenous peoples (Huebert 2008).

Public perceptions are important considerations for any development in the north. Different levels of funding arrangements across government jurisdictions influence perceptions as well. First Nation communities are federally funded, in contrast to the municipalities that are funded by the province. This is not only true for Saskatchewan as one study in British Columbia, examining the relationships between "Native/Provincial/Local" bodies, noted that "Indian Bands have argued that they lack access to the full benefits of provincial financial programs, particularly those directed at local government" (Taylor and Paget, 1995: 301).

NAPC survey respondents were asked, "Which do you think are treated better by the federal and provincial governments: First Nations reserves or municipalities?" A plurality of survey respondents believe municipalities are treated better than First Nations reserves at 43.1 per cent (Figure 24). Men are more likely than women to believe that First Nations reserves are treated better than municipalities by the federal and provincial governments; however, both a plurality of men and women believe that municipalities are treated better. Interestingly, women are more likely to say they didn't know which of the two were treated better. Non-aboriginal respondents are more likely to believe First Nations reserves are treated better, while First Nations living on-reserve and off-reserve, as well as non-status Indians, Métis, and Inuit peoples believe municipalities are treated better by the federal and provincial governments. With respect to age, those aged 18 to 29 and those aged 65 or older are the most likely to believe First Nations reserves are treated better; however, the younger of the two categories is almost as likely to believe municipalities are treated better than reserves. Respondents aged 30 to 64 are more likely to believe the federal and provincial government treat municipalities better than First Nations reserves.

Figure 24: Perceptions of Treatment of Reserves

Which do you think are treated better by the federal and provincial governments: First Nations reserves or municipalities?



Perceived Biases

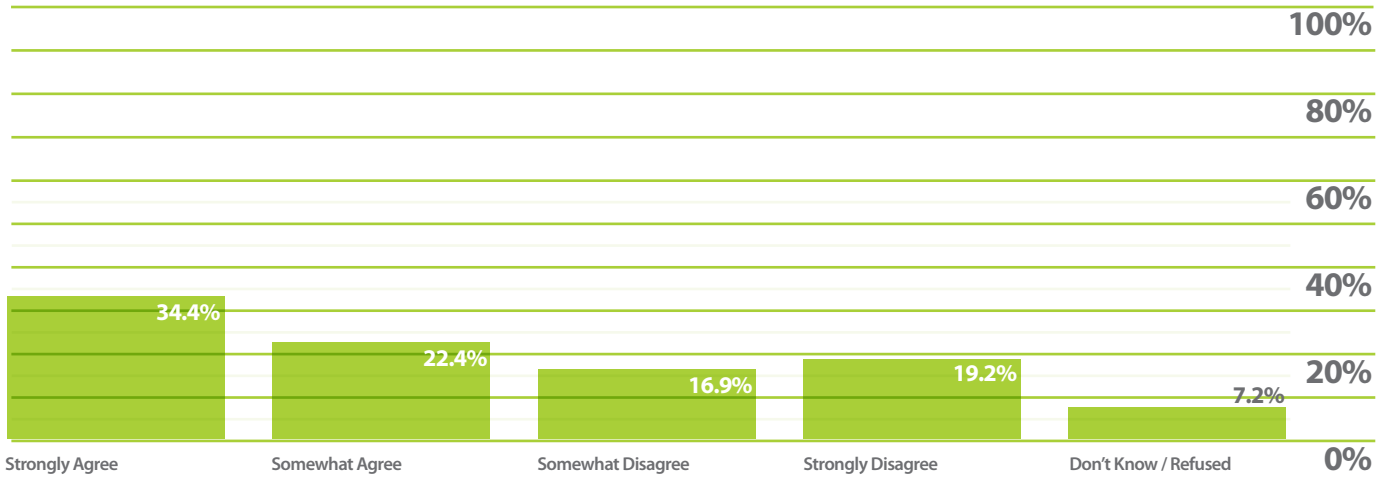
Research conducted on the current political situation in many Aboriginal communities found that under the current electoral system "the candidate from the largest family can be consistently elected, giving that family the power to control resources and make decisions over time" (Chataway, 2002: 78). With elections often won on the basis of family size, "a significant proportion of Band members, then, feel shut out from political processes" (Chataway, 2002: 78). To consider such sentiments, NAPC survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement to the statement, "In your community, if you want something like a job or a new house, it is easier to get these if you are a relative of a member of council." A majority of respondents either strongly agree, 34.4 per cent, or somewhat agree, 22.4 per cent, that having a relative as a member of council makes it easier to receive wanted items or meet needs, such as a job or a house (Figure 25).

Men are more likely to either strongly or somewhat agree that it is easier to get something if you have a relative on council than women. Those with a high school education are more likely to strongly agree, while those with a university degree are more likely to strongly disagree. Similarly, those living in households with less than an annual income of $20,000 and those in households with an income of $40,000 to $59,999 are more likely to strongly agree that having a relative as a member of council makes it easier to get something you want; those with household incomes in excess of $60,000 are more likely to strongly disagree than the other income groups. Additionally, age is correlated with one's perception on this question, as those aged 18 to 29 are more likely to strongly agree. Although a majority of those aged 30 to 64 either strongly agree or somewhat agree with the statement, they are more likely than the other age groups to strongly disagree.

Other research shows that Aboriginal voters may be disillusioned by their internal politics as two-fifths of respondents "did not feel they had decisive control of their own Band council (Barsh et al, 1997: 22). To consider such attitudes, Aboriginal respondents in the NAPC survey were asked to report their satisfaction with respect to the statement, "On the whole, how satisfied are you that your Chief and Band council make good community decisions?" Respondent's answers seem to be polarized. While a plurality of those surveyed feel somewhat satisfied, 32.3 per cent, a large number feel not at all satisfied at 28.6 per cent (Figure 26). Those with less than a high school education are more likely to be very satisfied that their Chief and Band Council make good community decisions, while those with a high school diploma or a university degree are more likely to be somewhat satisfied.

Figure 25: Perceptions of Fairness of Allocation of Resources

In your community, if you want something like a job or a new house, it is easier to get these if you are a relative of a member of council?



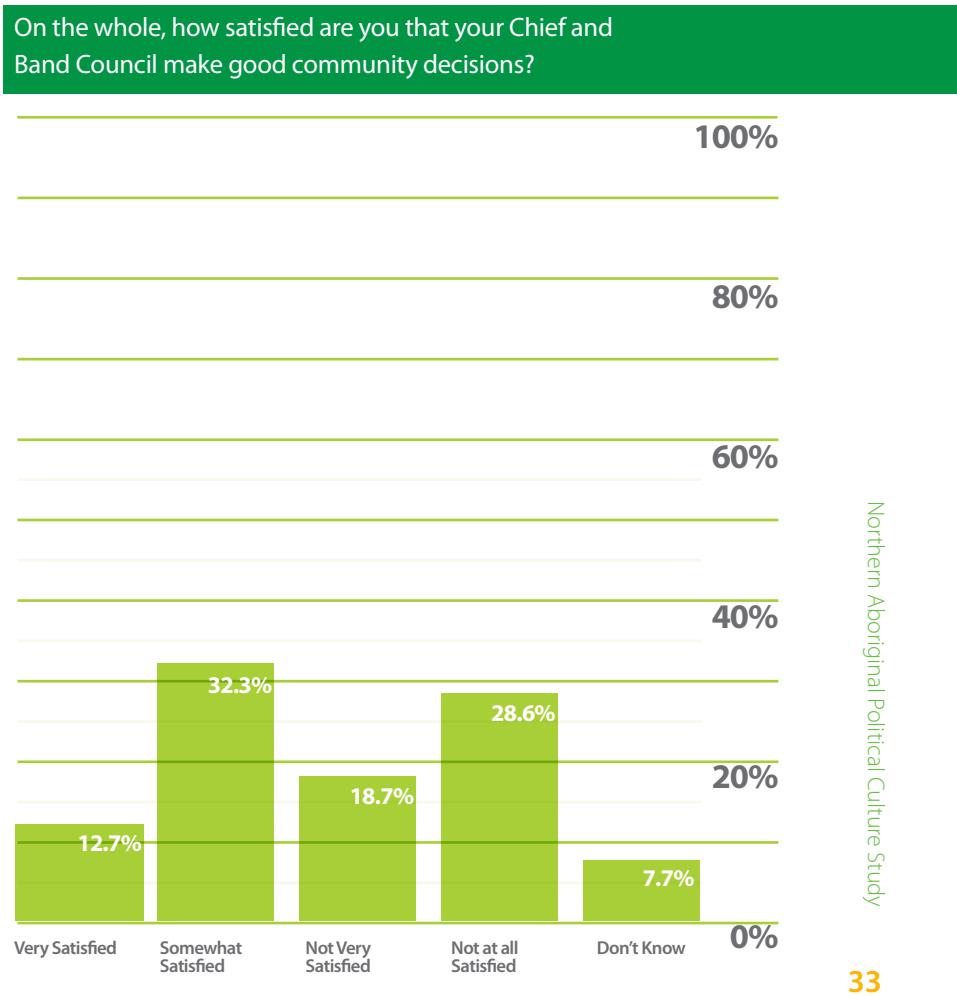
Perceived Biases

Respondents who had either completed some post-secondary education or skills training are more likely to be not at all satisfied that their Chief and Band Council make good decisions for their community. Respondents living in a household making $20,000 to $39,999 a year are more likely to be either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied. Those in a household with an annual income of $40,000 to $59,000 are the most likely of any group to be not at all satisfied that their Chief and Band Council make good decisions. Age also played an important role with respect to perceptions of the actions of their Chief and Band Council. Participants aged 65 or older are more likely to be very satisfied than those of other age groups.

Governments and industry at all levels acknowledge the importance of political culture in varying degrees. Addressing community and individual issues of the electorate can be more immediate for local government at the Reserve and municipal level, because they are more accessible and their actions more visible. The provincial government level is more removed. The historical role of the provincial government has been to pave the way for the development of northern lands and resources that they claim jurisdiction over through the 1930 *Natural Resources Transfer Agreement*. This has been a source of contention with First Nations and Métis who claim inherent, Treaty and Aboriginal rights to the lands they traditionally occupied. Better understanding northern Aboriginal political culture is very significant to northern development interests.

Land issues and developments are both local and Constitutional – so all levels of government are affected. Furthermore, the duty to consult requirements on actions and decisions that could potentially affect Aboriginal and Treaty Rights supports the need to better engage northern Aboriginal people (Beatty 2011; Parlee, O'Neil, Lutsel K'e Dené First Nation 2007). While collective Aboriginal rights and Treaty issues are largely federal issues, some local and regional issues (land and natural resources) can often blur the divide between federal and provincial jurisdiction. The challenge is to find a workable and a just balance between the various levels of government (Chartrand 2007, Hunter 2003) and to find more meaningful inclusive mechanisms for engaging Aboriginal people in decision-making processes to benefit their communities (Beatty 2011), as well as in the electoral processes and institutions of government (Ladner 2003, Schouls 1996).

Figure 26: Satisfaction with Band Decision-Making



The Northern Aboriginal Youth Perspectives[2]

Northern Aboriginal youth, particularly First Nations, make up a large and growing portion of the Northern population, yet their political engagement is largely unknown. This was somewhat illustrated in the telephone survey where it was found that northern Aboriginal youth (18 to 25 years of age) were under-represented. Subsequently, to help address that gap, youth focus groups were conducted in eight northern communities. These focus groups helped to provide additional context on the youth demographic and their perspectives that were not captured in the telephone survey. The combined findings of the telephone survey and focus group sessions below illustrate some of the broad Aboriginal youth perspectives. It should also be noted that terminology and voice might vary to capture the responses in the focus groups (i.e., references to First Nation and status Indian are often used in the same context).

Band Activities: Band Elections

Although a majority of young respondents in the telephone survey agreed (48.85 per cent strongly and 37.2 per cent somewhat) that it is important for Band members to vote in Band elections, a slight majority, 52.1 per cent, of Aboriginal youth respondents reported that they did not vote in their last Band election. In the focus group discussions, those who didn't vote said that they were busy (working, at school, out of town), they don't care, and don't see Band elections as important since elected officials ignore people (especially youth) after elections. There is a perception of unfairness during Band elections, since families tend to vote for their own family members. There is a lot of criticism during elections and many young people would rather not vote since they are closely affiliated to candidates or they know the candidate and don't trust them.

While the telephone survey showed that over half of the respondents did not vote in the recent Band election, a majority of focus group participants indicated they had voted. Their reasons included wanting to see change, wanting to make a difference, and they are tired of seeing nothing happening, and view voting as an organized way of getting their voice out so they don't take it for granted. Some say that small politics inform bigger politics. Others say that the Band needs to be doing its own self-government, because only the people from the Band can know the issues such as Treaty issues.

Band Activities: Contact Band Office

A majority of younger telephone survey respondents, 75.3 per cent, said they had not contacted an elected official in the past 12 months and, of those who did contact an elected official, the most frequented official was their local Band office. This is consistent with findings in the focus groups. According to the youth, those who have contacted the office found themselves discouraged because "there is no point in asking the Band for anything, or when they do it takes a while to get anything done". Others commented that it is hard to get a hold of Chief and Council. Others commented that their Band has financial problems so they can't help even if they asked for it.

[2] Dana Carriere, the graduate student who assisted with the focus groups, Kelton Doraty and Bonita Beatty are the authors of this section of the report.

Band Activities: Attending Band Meetings

The telephone survey showed that 74.4 per cent of young respondents had not attended a Band council meeting in the last 12 months. The focus group research showed that most haven't attended Band meetings because they are too busy or don't care. They do not see a point in attending since they do not see changes in the community, issues are not addressed, and, in some cases, the Band doesn't follow through with what they say they will do. A major concern was age – many felt that they are too young and do not know enough about politics. They felt like they did not have a voice and would rather leave politics to older people. Given the fundamental importance of Band governance in the North, the fact that young people are not familiar with Band meetings and do not appear to value the meetings or the governance processes, young northerners are seemingly not developing an appreciation for or familiarity with crucial Band-level political processes.

Band Activities: Volunteering

A majority of young telephone survey respondents, 62.3 per cent, did not volunteer at a Band event in the last year. Comments from the youth focus groups showed that a lack of organization meant there were not many Band events going on. Of those who volunteered, some cited volunteering as a security guard at a hockey game, helping cook at the youth centre, serving food to elderly at events or helping elders, food preparation at Treaty days, and volunteering at other activities such as culture days and school programs.

Band Activities: Interest In Band Politics

Youth telephone survey respondents' interest in Band politics was relatively low. First Nations were the most likely to be interested, followed by First Nations living off-reserve, and finally by non-status First Nations. The focus groups showed that many are not interested because they view elections and Band politics negatively due to rumors, dishonest people in the system, and broken promises. Those who were interested in Band politics said they like to listen when drug, alcohol, and gang related issues are addressed. They indicated that they wanted to see changes in the way the community is managed. Some are interested because their Band is looking to build a youth centre. Others mentioned that they would like to be more involved in the future. One participant mentioned that Band politics are important. This individual argued that learning from past and present mistakes was important as understanding what had not worked well could help build a better future.

Band Activities: Band Perceptions

Young telephone survey respondents (41.3 per cent), on the whole, were most likely to be somewhat satisfied that their Chief and Band council make good community decisions, while 23.1 per cent were not at all satisfied. Nineteen per cent were very satisfied, while 11.6 per cent were somewhat satisfied. The majority of the focus group participants, however, were not satisfied with Band decisions. Such dissatisfaction was due to financial needs not being met, miscommunication, and the fact that many decisions have been made without community input, perceptions of inequality and equality, and requested changes not being made. Youth did not feel involved and that their concerns were being addressed. Those who identified as satisfied cited the construction of a new baseball diamond in their community.

The telephone survey also showed that 33.1 per cent strongly agreed and 25.8 per cent somewhat agreed that it is easier to get something you want, such as a job or house, if you have a relative on council. Additionally, 45.5 per cent strongly agreed and 28.1 per cent somewhat agreed that elders play an important role in Band decision-making.

Municipal Politics: Municipal Elections

More than one third of young telephone survey respondents (64.8 per cent) report that they did not vote in the most recent municipal election. The focus groups showed that those who voted did so because they wanted to see changes, make a difference, and wanted a good leader who will make the right decisions for the community. Others did not vote because they were busy (out of town), believed it doesn't matter, saw the process as unfair due to inequality, or felt that politics becomes too heated around elections.

Municipal Politics: Interest in Municipal Politics

Young Métis telephone survey respondents had the highest level of interest in municipal politics, while non-status First Nations had the lowest. In between these extremes, status First Nations living off reserve reported scores significantly higher than non-status First Nations. The focus group discussions also showed that most respondents were not interested in municipal politics. Many were not interested because they do not see changes, but would be interested if more issues were addressed and changes with leadership and the local government were evident. Youth in one community were interested because the municipal government supports the community.

Municipal Politics: Satisfaction with Local Government

The focus groups showed that most are not satisfied due to accountability issues, lack of leadership and representation for the community, and lack of information in the area of municipal politics back to the community.

Provincial Politics: Provincial Elections

The telephone survey showed that 80.6 per cent of young respondents report that they did not vote in the last Saskatchewan provincial election, while 15 per cent report that they did vote. Most focus group participants indicated that they did not vote, with several stating they were busy with school or work or they just don't care because no change will take place. Some cited having no interest, while others spoke about not having proper identification or not knowing where to go to vote. There were two communities in which a majority of focus group participants indicated that they voted. These particular participants commented on the importance of provincial government and the support that it provides.

Provincial Politics: Interest in Provincial Politics.

Young telephone survey respondents showed as little interest in provincial politics as they had in Band and municipal politics. Métis respondents were the most interested, status First Nations living full-time on-reserve were second, followed by status First Nations off-reserve and non-status First Nations. Focus group participants stated that many are not interested, most people only care about local politics and elections, they are not worried about "out there" and comment that no change will take place and it will not affect them since nobody comes around. There is lack of information and awareness of provincial elections and politics.

Provincial Politics: Satisfaction with Provincial Government

Focus group participants revealed that most are not satisfied, many do not know much about the provincial government and what it does, and that they do not see changes in their communities. They feel that the provincial government needs to state its intentions more clearly to First Nations so it is understood what the government is trying to do. Many stated that if they felt directly affected then they would go and vote, and others mentioned that if something visible was to happen their community then they would vote in the provincial election. A number of participants also noted that provincial politics were not important. Some believed that it was boring. At least one said that it was "just a bunch of lies." For those who thought provincial politics were important, they believed that it was more important than local issues because provincial issues are bigger than and should come before local issues.

Federal Politics: Federal Elections

A majority of young telephone survey respondents (92 per cent) reported that they did not vote in the last federal election with only three point seven per cent indicating that they voted. Similar results emerged from the focus groups with many of the participants indicating they did not vote. The most common reasons for not voting include: being busy (out of town, at work, or school); not interested or do not care; did not know they could vote; did not have proper identification (registration was a common issue); and many felt that federal elections did not affect their community since First Nations are a minority group. A common sentiment was that "they would not get anything out of it, so why bother voting". Some expressed the opinion that voting was important so that they did not lose their rights. For example, one participant voted because they felt the Federal Gun Registration program violated their Aboriginal rights while another was worried about Treaty rights or the Indian Act being dismantled.

Federal Politics: Interest in Federal Politics

The telephone survey revealed that youth interest in federal politics was the lowest of any level of government. Métis were the most likely to be interested, followed by status First Nation on-reserve and non-status First Nations. Status First Nations living off-reserve were the least likely to be interested. Focus group discussions also showed that most participants are not interested as many either only care about local politics or do not know what is going on with federal politics due to a lack of awareness and education about federal government. Some are interested, and for those who are they would like to know more about federal politics and the effect that the government has on their community. Some mention that their community does not appreciate now how important federal elections and politics are. This person indicated that "they are bigger than Band elections and politics".

Federal Politics: Satisfaction with Federal Government

Focus groups revealed that most youth are not satisfied and feel that the intentions of the federal government need to be clearly stated to First Nations and in a language that is understood by everyone in the community. Some feel that there is not enough education about federal politics. Those who voted and have an interest in federal politics felt that the federal government does not help enough and more resources are needed (jobs, funding, facilities). They also mention that First Nations people are losing more and more every year (trying to take away Treaty rights) and are also being "cut down" since taxes are being raised and they are trying to cut off welfare. More social, economic and cultural opportunities are thought to be needed in the communities—particularly for young people. There was some sentiment that the federal government was responsible for creating these opportunities.

General Politics: Importance of Voting in General Elections

Despite a majority of respondents having indicated that they did not vote, many youth telephone survey respondents believed that it was important to vote in general elections with 37 per cent strongly agreeing and 33.3 per cent somewhat agreeing.

Political Activity: How have youth been politically active?

The youth respondents did not appear to be very politically active in formal politics. A very low rate of young telephone survey respondents indicated that they belong to a political party with three point seven per cent holding membership in a federal political party and three point one per cent holding membership in a provincial political party. Only six point eight per cent of young respondents indicated that they had attended a municipal council meeting in the last year. Additionally, only 20.4 per cent of respondents signed a petition in the last year. Furthermore, only 11.7 per cent indicated that they had participated in a demonstration, march, or blockade in the prior year. The focus groups showed that those who choose to become politically active did so through a number of activities. Only a few have been directly involved in political activities (helped with elections, putting up posters/stakes, handed out posters and pamphlets; or being part of Student Representative Council at school - little Chief and Council). Some indicated participating in the SaskPower blockade and in a strike for higher pay for teachers.

When participating in political activity, young respondents were most likely to do so through participation in online political discussions such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other social media with 44.4 per cent of young telephone survey respondents indicating they had done so in the past 12 months. The focus groups seemed to confirm the popularity of social media for political engagement. Many youth seem to be directly and indirectly involved with politics through Facebook or other means of social media. Facebook is actively used for communication as well as a campaigning tool for candidates. With the gradual shift to social media as a means of communicating and posting information, there is a lot more criticism of politicians since it is easily accessible, affordable, and easier for community members to voice their opinions.

Community Activities: Various Activities

Survey respondents were asked how many times they had participated in community events, such as fishing or sports days, in the previous twelve months (365 days). Analysis showed a mean number of youth community participation of 21.2 days, with status First Nations off-reserve and Métis having rates much higher than status First Nations on-reserve and non-status First Nations. Focus group participants engaged in many community activities, including sports days, cultural days, cultural weeks, culture camps, traplines, summer festivals, dances, school events, and other traditional activities such as snowshoeing and canoeing.

Survey respondents were asked if they had participated in a various number of community activities or volunteer roles in the past 12 months. With respect to canvassing, campaigning, or fundraising, 28.6 per cent of young respondents indicated they had done so in the past year. Similarly, 15.4 per cent of young respondents said they served as a member of a board or committee in the previous year. Many young respondents (44.4 per cent) indicated they helped organize or supervise activities or events for a school, church, or other organization in the last year. Furthermore, 25.3 per cent of respondents taught or coached in the last year, while 68.9 per cent stated they provided care or support, such as counseling or friendly visiting, in the last 12 months. The focus groups also showed that youth were involved in a number of other activities, such as fundraising for sports days and other youth activities.

The survey respondents were asked about involvement in community events, such as bingos or poker rallies, in the previous year. Young respondents had a mean score of 14.1 days involved in such activities in the last 365 days. Status First Nations off the reserve spent an average of 59.1 days, status First Nations on-reserve spent an average of six days, Métis spent an average of five point four days, and non-status First Nations spent an average of three point three days involved in these activities.

Community Activities: Importance of Community Involvement

Young telephone survey respondents indicated that they believe it important that individuals are involved in community events and activities. In fact, none of the Aboriginal youth surveyed disagreed that involvement is important; 65.4 per cent strongly agreed that it is important while 32.7 per cent somewhat agreed that it was important. A similar theme emerged with related questions, with almost all of the youth agreeing that it is important for community members to be involved in the community. The reasons for this, according to focus group participants, included: a sense of accomplishment; feeling better mentally; acting as role models for youth (show and teach); and to foster positive motivation (make the community positive).

Others spoke about: the hazard of being "cooped up" alone (all community members must be involved to make a better community); the importance of community sports like baseball (all members should be involved and work together to keep sports going—also keeps youth out of trouble); the need to be active, to be involved ("to be the best"), and; the need to be active and to be healthy i.e. (decrease diabetes). Focus group participants also spoke about the importance of activities for the youth. Activities are believed to be good for youth because "it gives them something to do and prevents them from being involved in crime or other bad activities". Some respondents expressed concern that there were not enough activities to keep the youth occupied.

Traditional Activities: Hunting, Fishing and Gathering

A majority of young survey respondents, 92.5 per cent, indicated they gave away or shared traditional foods with others, such as moose meats or fish. Young respondents spent 31.2 mean days in the past year engaging in outdoor activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, or gathering wild roots or berries. Métis had a mean score of 45.6 days, non-status at 42.9 days, status First Nations on-reserve at 30.4 days, and status First Nations off-reserve with 12.2 days. The focus groups showed that most youth have hunted for various wild game - moose, deer, caribou, chickens, ducks, rabbits, and other small game - and most youth have gone fishing - angling and derbies (summer-fall, day trips, with family, or alone), ice fishing, commercial fishing (summer-fall-winter, for food, and to sell - some depend on for a living). Most have gone berry picking (cranberries, strawberries, blueberries) and take children berry picking or pick berries for elders; mushrooms; wild roots (herbs, rat root, medicines, tea leaves, mints); mostly elders gather wild roots. Some youth indicated being to the trapline, however, most youth have never lived on a trapline, but visit with family to cabins in spare time - varied responses from two to three days to two to three months at a time (various times of year).

Traditional Activities: Maintaining Traditional Ways of Life

It appears that maintaining traditional ways of life in Aboriginal communities is important for Aboriginal youth with 78.3 per cent of young survey respondents believing it is very important and 19.9 per cent believing it is somewhat important. Focus group respondents revealed very similar results with all youth participants believing it is important. Participants cited many reasons for such importance of traditional activities. Many cited a need to maintain traditional ways so culture isn't lost in the sense that it is a way of life, if you don't maintain it then it is going to disappear.

Many saw traditional ways of life to include social, personal, and ceremonial aspects. Cultural identity is rooted in traditional culture. Individuals noted that maintaining the culture was important to identity. Losing the culture was described as being like losing a part of one's identity. Others commented that youth needed to be involved in traditional ways and involved in song and dance in communities. Some schools used to organize after school activities to teach pow wow dances and square dances, but not so much now. Another emerging theme was the need to pass down traditional ways to next generation and keep culture alive-it was handed down/inherited by grandfathers but is slowly being chipped away at by governments higher up and also by community. Many talked about having a lot of respect for traditional ways of life – "never want to lose it, "we are still here to learn." Furthermore, losing language and traditional way of life with an increase in technology - there is a need for younger generations to relearn the traditional ways of life. Young people indicated, therefore, that they were losing connections with traditional activities but were open to re-learning their culture.

Traditional Activities: Aboriginal Language

A majority of young survey respondents indicated that they spoke an Aboriginal language, with Cree being the most frequently cited, followed by Dené. The focus groups revealed that almost all of the participants could speak an Aboriginal language to some degree (Cree, Cree/Michif, Dené). The telephone survey asked respondents who spoke an Aboriginal language to rate how well they could speak it. Results showed that 34.7 per cent of youth reported that they spoke it very well, while 10.9 per cent spoke it relatively well. "Speak with some effort" was the second most frequent category at 25.2 per cent, while "speak a few words" comprised 25.2 per cent of the responses. Some young survey respondents mentioned that they spoke Cree before they learned English while others said they spoke either Cree or Dené at school.

Comments in the group sessions showed fewer youth still speak and understand their language. The majority of youth can only understand or speak a bit. According to the youth surveyed, there are not many opportunities to learn the language and, consequently, language is starting to die. Young people said that would like to have opportunities to learn the language but say there is no one to teach Cree. The classes there are, are not very advanced and only cover a few grades. Some focus group respondents stated they can speak Cree fluently.

Traditional Activities: Importance of Aboriginal Language

According to the focus groups, many believed that knowing or relearning traditional Aboriginal languages was culturally important. Most youth believe it is important to learn or relearn their Aboriginal language and had varied responses: language is still strong; language is dying and language must be built up since it is a part of cultural identity; language is passed on generation-to-generation and youth need to learn it to keep it; children can understand Cree and are learning; Dené and Cree are spoken more than English for some families and in some communities. Some felt that language is not important: there is no interest to learn it by youth (all speak English); there is a Cree program at school but youth are not interested in learning and don't take it seriously; culture is being lost and everyone speaks English (Aboriginal language will be lost in the future), and; some don't speak Cree because they are embarrassed (made fun of by other children at school).

Northern/ Community Issues

Survey respondents were asked what the largest issue facing their community. At 41.7 percent, addictions such as drugs or alcohol was, by far, the most frequently picked issue by young respondents. Interestingly, the second most frequently picked category was "don't know" at 25.2 per cent. Recreational activities for children and youth followed a distant third at six point seven per cent. The focus groups showed similar findings with violence (gangs, vandalism) and drugs and alcohol being cited as the most common categories.

The findings suggest that Aboriginal youth are engaged in their communities in varying degrees and are interested in political engagement only as long as they perceive it as being helpful, fun and useful in producing positive feedback and visible outcomes in their communities. Perceptions matter in political participation. Band and local level activities dominate First Nation youth's interest in political engagement, with minimal interest overall by Aboriginal youth in municipal, provincial, and federal political processes and elections.

The political implications are clear. Constraints to engagement include perceptions of conflict and not wanting to get involved with the more negative relational politics that can often characterize local political participation. Aboriginal youth communications and political participation are increasingly being done through texting and Facebook. While embracing modern life and technology, Aboriginal youth still value their history, their families, and northern bush life. The majority of the northern youth still speak an Aboriginal language. They still value cultural and land-based livelihood activities, such as going out on the traplines with their families.

When given opportunities, most strongly believed that it was important to continue to engage and protect their ancestral traditional land-based activities and resources, particularly their family traplines, hunting grounds, and commercial fishing areas. Another strong area of concern for the youth was the need for opportunities and support to help with their further education and training in the communities along with healthy activity alternatives—particularly organized sports and sports facilities (Beatty 2011, Settee 2011). When asked about the largest issues facing their communities, over 40 per cent in the telephone survey identified addiction issues with drugs and alcohol, similar to the focus groups who also added violence (gangs, vandalism), community and family problems, lack of funding for housing, education and sports programs, and lack of jobs.

Conclusions

Northern Saskatchewan is at an important point in its political transition. The fast-growing regional population retains its Aboriginal majority in a region famous for its natural resources and beauty. While traditional resource harvesting industries, forestry, and tourism remain critical to the region, it is the burgeoning mining and exploration developments that are attracting outside economic and political interests. This brings new opportunities and challenges. While more employment and corporate opportunities are being created, Aboriginal communities are still realizing only marginal gains. Many continue to struggle with significant socio-cultural problems, while making significant efforts towards overcoming systematic barriers to economic, social, and political participation.

Northern Aboriginal political engagement is strategic, culturally driven, both local and national in scope, and can be highly effective. To a degree that surprises many outsiders, the hamlets, villages, and towns of northern Saskatchewan are vital and dynamic places. Traditional activities, such as trapping, fishing, gathering berries and rice, remain popular, with almost 80 per cent of northerners sharing or gifting traditional food. This reflects the generally understood cooperative nature of northern culture that is sustained by ties to the land, spirituality, and kinship orientations distinct to the Aboriginal way of life.

Women sustain many of the community activities and believe it important to retain traditional culture. They are significantly more engaged than men in care giving, education, religious, and other social endeavors. There are important patterns in community engagement, with less participation by low income residents, the young and the elderly, that are likely due to mobility issues and care giving, disinterest, lack of confidence, and perhaps a desire to avoid getting involved in the often highly personal nature of small community politics. Not surprisingly, individuals with advanced education are more likely to volunteer, serve on boards, and to take leadership, teaching, or coaching roles within their communities.

All across Canada, young people are hesitant to engage politically. Because of the overall youthfulness of the Aboriginal population, regions like northern Saskatchewan suffer from significant shortfalls in electoral political participation. Aboriginal political engagement is a blend of formal and informal political activity. This is due, in part, because of a general lack of enthusiasm for government and a desire to maintain a separation from the political and governance structures in the region. Efforts to engage Aboriginal people in public affairs rely on the success of recruitment campaigns by political parties and strategies to promote engagement with both formal and informal political processes. Without such efforts, which would give Aboriginal people (and particularly Aboriginal youth) a voice at the political tables, ensuring community participation in northern planning processes will be difficult.

Conclusions

Low Aboriginal voter turnout has generally been interpreted to suggest that First Nations communities are politically disengaged, but that is not true. Aboriginal political engagement takes different forms. Aboriginal isolation from the political process largely extends to voting in the federal and provincial elections. Aboriginal people across the country are less likely to vote and, as a consequence, political parties devote less attention than would otherwise be assumed to shaping political platforms and campaigns to attract their support. While voting is a crucial means of ensuring Aboriginal Canadians express their views and priorities, the value of such engagement is not yet clear to many Indigenous people.

They have strong voting turnouts in Band elections compared to provincial and federal elections, largely because candidates, platforms, and local issues are closely identified with the voters' sense of community. Northern Saskatchewan urgently requires a higher voter turnout, because the comparative absence of the youth and Aboriginal vote makes it easier for provincial and national parties to pay less attention to regional concerns. Importantly, even though voting patterns reveal a lack of engagement in the broader political process, many Aboriginal people indicate that voting is actually quite important to them and their communities. Efforts must be made to bridge the gap between the importance that Aboriginal people attach to voting and their actual engagement in political life.

Aboriginal people in Northern Saskatchewan also have strong feelings about regional politics. Respondents implied that distant capitals – Regina and Ottawa – have too much authority over their lives. Some believed municipalities received better treatment than reserves. Respondents were also more likely to vote for someone knowledgeable about northern issues. Better educated and higher income individuals attached the greatest importance to regional understanding among political candidates. Politics for respondents with lower income and lower education was more locally focused, with priority being given to personal and family benefits.

This research on the political culture of northern Saskatchewan produced important results. Northern Aboriginal people are clearly interested in public affairs. Their engagement can be strategic if they feel some significant issue might be getting jeopardized, such as Treaty or Aboriginal Rights. Regional economic wealth, therefore, needs more visibility through community infrastructural developments, recreational facilities and programs for the children and youth, elderly facilities and programs, training programs, and other such services.

Residents retain a strong level of commitment to their communities, but the disengagement of Aboriginal youth and low-income northerners is a matter for region-wide concern. Socio-demographic realities have to be addressed. Standard political and federal approaches to mobilization and empowerment need to better accommodate Aboriginal political culture and facilitate broader positive development in the north. They also have to believe their engagement is meaningful through demonstrable results, not only to individuals but also to their communities. In effect, northern Aboriginal peoples desire to go beyond just being advisors to government and industry and become decision-making partners.

Methodology

The Northern Aboriginal Political Culture Project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and received ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan. The research team presented the research plan to Northern Aboriginal communities before conducting the research and received written support from the Prince Albert Grand Council and Meadow Lake Tribal Council. Northern Aboriginal leaders were given a month's notice prior to the start of the telephone survey and they were reminded of the project's objectives. Prior to the survey, the principal investigator, Bonita Beatty, was interviewed in Cree and English on MBC Radio (Missinipi Broadcasting Corporation), an Aboriginally-owned and operated radio station that broadcasts throughout Northern Saskatchewan. Advertisements about the survey in English, Cree, and Dené ran on MBC Radio from November 1, 2010 until December 10, 2010.

Probe Research collected the survey data between November 9, 2010 and December 21, 2010. The survey was administered in English, Cree, and Dené. A total of 851 respondents were interviewed: 505 Aboriginal respondents (214 identified themselves as status Indians living on-reserve, 103 as status Indians living off-reserve, 21 as non-status Indians, 161 as Métis, and two as Inuit) and 350 non-Aboriginal respondents (337 who stated they were not Aboriginal and 13 respondents who either refused to state their ancestry or were unable to identify with any ethnic category). Survey results can be expected to be accurate within +/-3.30 per cent for the population in the Northern Administration District, 19 times out of 20. Data are weighted to match the NAD's gender, ethnicity, and age profiles. Young people (aged 18-24), those without a completed high school education, and the non-working population are underrepresented in the sample. This is consistent with the research methodology, as land line telephone survey research is limited in its ability to access individuals who do not have land line telephones (e.g., young people with cell phones and those who cannot afford telephones) and individuals who are often away from their land line telephones (e.g., individuals working on traplines). To compensate for the under-represented youth voice, youth focus groups were added.

The youth focus groups, consisting of over 30 participants overall, were held in eight communities across the north in 2011, including one fly-in community. These forums were coordinated with community agencies and graduate students who assisted in the organization through a variety of venues such as posters, telephone, word of mouth, and Facebook.

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