

Working Paper Series on  
Electoral Participation and Outreach Practices

# The Electoral Participation of Aboriginal People

Kiera L. Ladner  
and  
Michael McCrossan



## **Working Paper Series on Electoral Participation and Outreach Practices**

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*The Electoral Participation of Aboriginal People*  
by Kiera L. Ladner and Michael McCrossan

*The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities*  
by Livianna Tossutti

*The Electoral Participation of Persons with Special Needs*  
by Michael J. Prince

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by Paul Howe

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## Foreword

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We consider democracy to be the best form of government because it is the only one that recognizes and protects the intrinsic value and equality of each individual. Participating in elections is the essential starting point of any democratic system.

The *Canada Elections Act* provides the Chief Electoral Officer with the authority to implement public education and information programs to make the electoral process better known to the public, particularly to those persons and groups most likely to experience difficulties in exercising their democratic rights. These programs are collectively known as *outreach*.

Elections Canada has developed numerous outreach initiatives to assist electors in exercising their democratic rights. Four target groups – youth, Aboriginal electors, ethnocultural communities and electors with special needs – were identified on the basis of research showing that these groups tend to vote less than the mainstream Canadian population and may experience difficulties in participating in the electoral process.

Elections Canada commissioned four concept papers to refine its outreach strategy and initiatives. The papers studying the participation of youth, ethnocultural communities and electors with special needs were prepared, respectively, by Paul Howe (University of New Brunswick), Livianna Tossutti (Brock University) and Michael J. Prince (University of Victoria).

This paper by Kiera Ladner, Assistant Professor, University of Manitoba, and Michael McCrossan, Ph.D. candidate, Carleton University, examines the participation of Aboriginal electors in Canada. The study analyzes recent voter participation literature and focuses particularly on First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. As well, it reviews “best practices” in elector outreach in various jurisdictions – in Canada and abroad – and applicable lessons learned. The study identifies areas for further research and makes recommendations for outreach to Indigenous communities.

Elections Canada is pleased to publish this study, and I wish to thank Professor Ladner and Mr. McCrossan for their excellent work and their collaboration with us. The observations and conclusions are those of the authors.

I trust that you will find this research study informative and that it will enrich public debate about measures to increase voter participation in federal elections.



Marc Mayrand  
Chief Electoral Officer





## Executive Summary

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This concept paper on Aboriginal electoral participation and elector outreach reviews and analyzes recent literature on Aboriginal voter participation, examines relevant electoral research, reviews “best practices” in elector outreach, identifies gaps in the literature, makes recommendations for Elections Canada and provides a comprehensive bibliography. In so doing, this paper gathers information for Elections Canada and provides (where possible) an Indigenist analysis of the literature in this field.

The paper is organized into five sections. Section 1 briefly examines the history of the Aboriginal franchise. Section 2 proceeds with a brief review of the use of this franchise, focusing on the results of several recent quantitative studies. Together, these sections situate the issue of Aboriginal electoral participation in its historical context. Though Aboriginal people received the right to vote at least 47 years ago, little is known about their participation as there are few data and even fewer studies. However, what exists shows that Aboriginal participation rates are, on average, lower than their Canadian counterparts.

To better understand this phenomenon, Section 3 addresses the existing research that has shaped and defined this field of study, noting areas that remain unexplored and unresolved. This review found that while this small body of literature offers a variety of explanations for the low turnout rates among Aboriginal people, a major shortcoming is that very few studies have actually attempted to account for differing rates of Aboriginal participation. This section also addresses the shortcomings of the existing literature: a lack of empirically based research that explains the electoral orientations and voting behaviours of all Aboriginal people (including Métis and urban Aboriginal people).

Section 4 attempts to expand the scope of this body of literature by examining elector outreach and educational programs in different jurisdictions in Canada and in selected countries. Key findings from this study include the fact that many jurisdictions lack the institutional capacity (in the areas of finance and personnel) and/or political will to engage in dedicated outreach and education programs; and that there is a great need, both domestically and internationally, to better understand the representational desires of Aboriginal people to create the necessary institutional capacity for meaningful change.

The final section of this report offers substantive recommendations for addressing and engaging Aboriginal electoral participation. Organized along four themes – research, partnerships, community outreach and advertising campaigns – these recommendations include holding round tables with community groups; involving high-profile First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in these campaigns (such as showing Phil Fontaine in his “Indians Vote” T-shirt); conducting empirical research in Aboriginal communities to address electoral orientations, attitudes and motivations; and increasing the size and effectiveness (especially in urban areas) of programs such as the Aboriginal Elder and Youth Program and the Aboriginal Community Relations Officer Program.



## Introduction

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It has been said that being born Indian is being born into politics. I believe this to be true; because being born a Mohawk of Kahnawake, I do not remember a time free from the impact of political conflict. (Alfred 1995, 1)

This quote from Gerald Alfred speaks volumes about the reality experienced in most Aboriginal communities and most Aboriginal households. Aboriginal people are born into a political reality defined by jurisdictional conflicts, contested sovereignties and great political drama. Why, then, if they are such political beings, and their communities so dramatically affected by the actions of other governments, do Aboriginal people choose not to participate in large numbers in federal and provincial elections? It is certainly not as though Aboriginal people do not vote; in fact, voter turnout rates in some First Nations communities exceed 95 percent. This discrepancy in rates of participation needs to be explained.

This paper engages the issue of low Aboriginal turnout rates (and its possible reconciliation) by reviewing the literature<sup>1</sup> on Aboriginal electoral participation and examining elector outreach programs in various jurisdictions in Canada and abroad. In doing so, this paper draws attention to fundamental inconsistencies between theory and practice.

We begin by providing an overview of enfranchisement policy in Canada so as to situate the issue of Aboriginal electoral participation in historical context. We then provide a comprehensive review of the existing research that has shaped and defined this field of study, noting areas that remain unexplored and unresolved. Furthermore, we expand the scope of this body of literature by examining elector outreach and educational programs in different domestic and international jurisdictions. Finally, we conclude with substantive recommendations for addressing and engaging Aboriginal electoral participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the literature exists in electronic form. Since the publication of this paper, some URLs may have changed.



# 1. The Vote

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It is most often stated that Aboriginal people received the right to vote in 1960. This statement, however, is incorrect. While most Status Indians received the unconditional right to vote in 1960, the Inuit received the right to vote in 1950, and still other Aboriginal people (such as the Métis and Non-Status Indians) received the vote alongside other Canadians.

## 1.1 Status Indians

Under the terms of the *Indian Act*, Status Indians could obtain the right to vote (subject to federal franchise regulations) at any point so long as they chose to enfranchise – to give up or forfeit their status as Indians and take up the duties and benefits of citizenship. The federal government extended the franchise to status Indians on several occasions:

- In 1885, the federal franchise was provided to Status Indians in Eastern Canada who met the existing requirements for exercising the franchise. This was revoked in 1898 (Tobias 1991).
- The franchise was extended to Status Indian servicemen in both world wars. During the First World War, however, veterans lost their right to vote when they returned to the reserve. This was remedied in 1920, when the franchise was extended to all veterans. In 1944, the franchise was provided to both veterans and their spouses, regardless of whether they were living on or off reserves (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Vol. 1, 9.12).
- In 1950, the federal franchise was again extended to any Status Indians in exchange for their tax exemption status.
- In 1960, the franchise was extended to all Status Indians without any qualification or any need to enfranchise.

It should be noted that unlike other groups that were excluded from the franchise (women and some ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Chinese and the Mennonites), there was no mass lobbying effort to obtain the franchise. The provincial franchise was extended on an ad hoc basis. By and large, when they were finally granted the right to vote (see Table 1), Status Indians did not cheer.

**Table 1 – Granting the Franchise to Status Indians**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Jurisdiction</b>
1885	Nova Scotia
1949	British Columbia
1949	Newfoundland (as a requirement of joining Confederation)
1952	Manitoba
1954	Ontario
1960	Canada
1960	Saskatchewan
1963	New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island
1965	Alberta
1969	Quebec

Note: Enfranchisement data for the territories was not found.

Source: Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Vol. 1, 9.12.

For Status Indian women, the history of the vote is far more complex. Until 1951, they were excluded from participating in band council elections. Indian women, however, were not universally excluded from the federal franchise. Until 1985, the status of women was unequivocally tied to the husband. If a man chose to enfranchise, his wife and children were automatically enfranchised. Status Indian women who married Non-Status men (Indian or not) lost their status, while Non-Status women who married status men gained status. Thus, as a result of marriage, many non-Indian women lost their franchise, while many Indian women gained the right to vote alongside other women in 1918.

## **1.2 Non-Status Indians and Métis**

From the outset, Métis, Indians deemed to be *Indians* under the *Indian Act* (Status Indians) as well as any individuals who became Non-Status through the process of enfranchisement were officially subject to the same duties, rights and privileges as other Canadians. As long as they met the federal and provincial franchise requirements of property and gender, they had the right to vote. Thus, for the Métis of Manitoba, the right to vote dates back to the entrance of Manitoba into Confederation; this right was exercised when the Métis turned out to elect Louis Riel to Parliament in 1873.

However, this does not mean that the franchise was easily or readily exercised. Much can be said about the discriminatory treatment that Aboriginal people have historically faced and about the treatment of all Aboriginal people, regardless of status, as though they were subject to the *Indian Act*.

### **1.3 Inuit**

In 1934, the federal government acted to exclude Inuit from the federal franchise. After the Second World War and with the onset of the Cold War, Canada took several measures to assert and enhance its sovereignty in the Arctic. For example, it relocated individuals, families and communities into the High Arctic in the 1950s and extended the vote and all rights of citizenship in 1950.





## 2. Voter Turnout

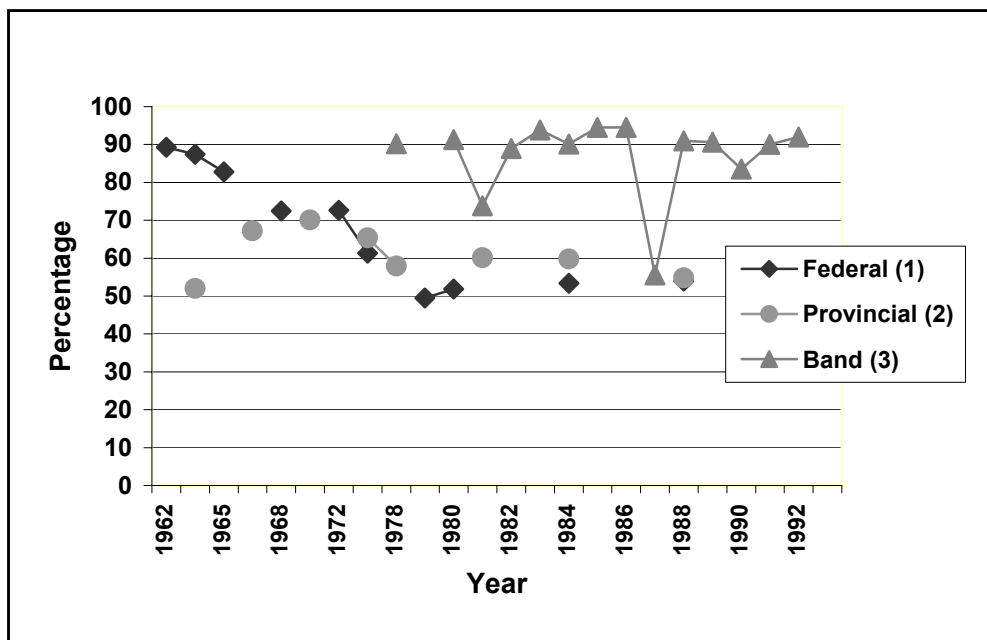
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Though Aboriginal people have had the vote for at least 47 years, little is known about their participation as there are few data and even fewer studies. To further complicate the situation, the data and studies that do exist are not universal in scope, and they have included only those polls located in Aboriginal communities (reserves, Métis settlements and Inuit hamlets) or constituencies where Aboriginal people represent a substantial portion of eligible voters.

However, the existing studies show that Aboriginal participation rates are, on average, lower than their Canadian counterparts. Studies also show that turnout varies dramatically among Aboriginal people and across regions. For example, a public opinion poll conducted by Elections Canada after the June 2004 election provides evidence of differing rates of participation among Aboriginal people. According to the results of the poll, the participation rates of Aboriginal people on reserves was 52 percent, whereas the participation rates of those living off reserves was 67 percent (Elections Canada 2005).

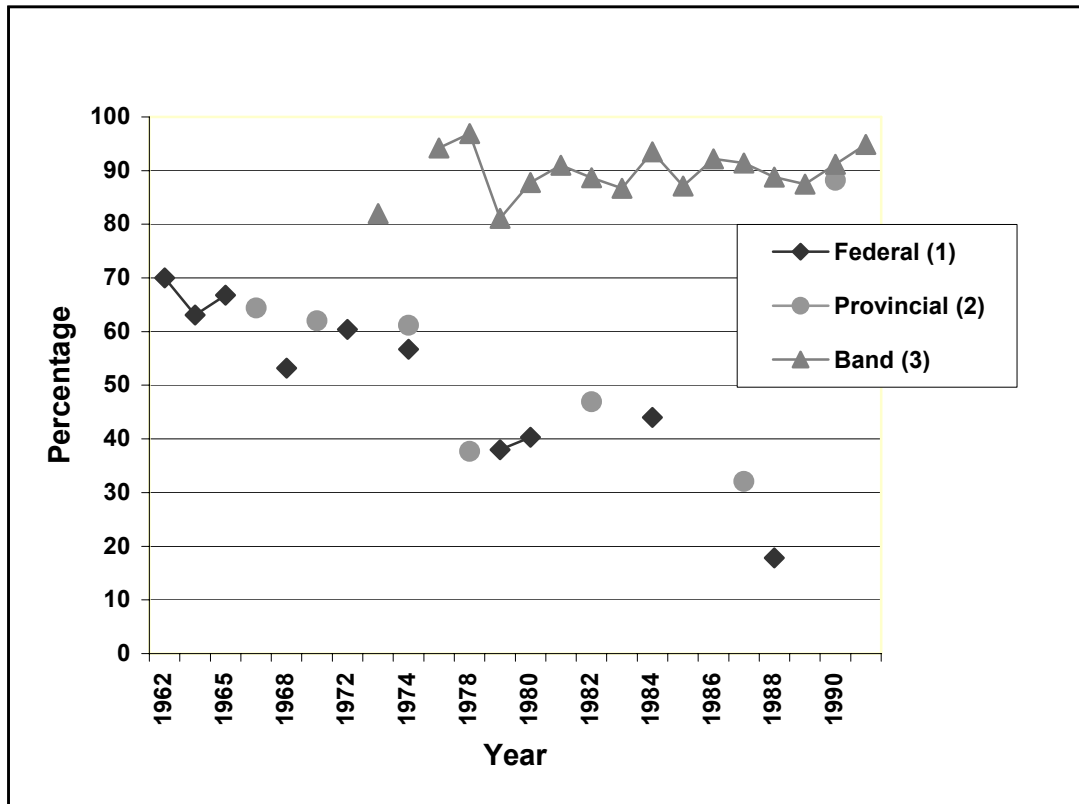
In one of the most extensive studies of voter turnout to date, Bedford and Pobihushchy examined the on-reserve voter participation rates in band, provincial and federal elections between 1962 and 1993 in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Partial results from this study are provided in figures 1 and 2.

**Figure 1 – First Nations Voter Turnout Rates in Federal, Provincial and Band Elections in Nova Scotia, 1962–1993**



Source: Bedford 2003, 16–20.

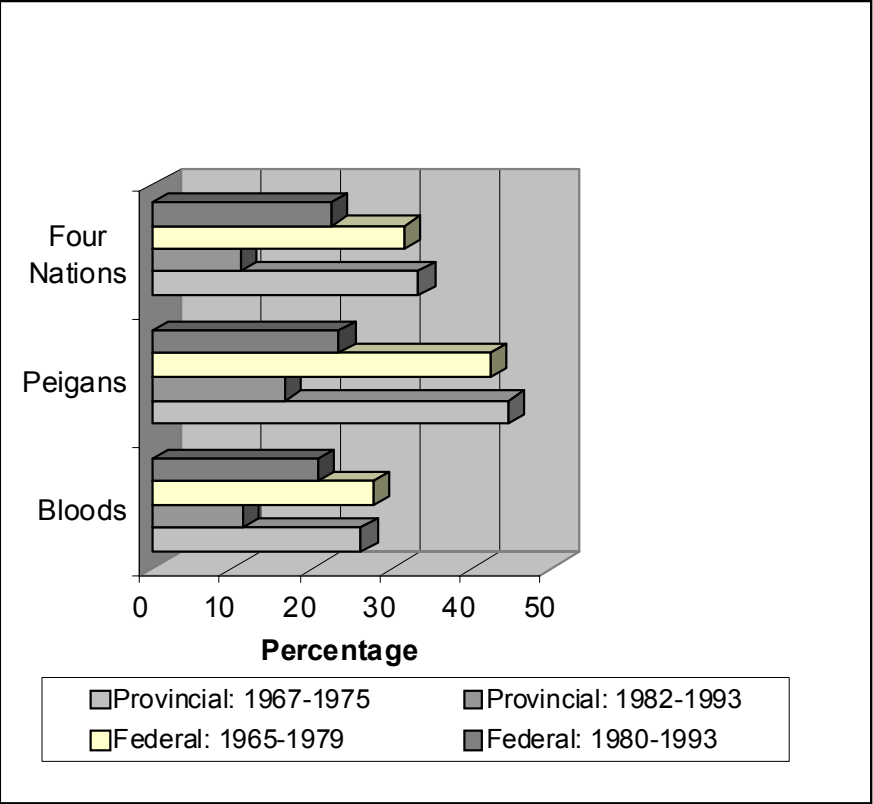
**Figure 2 – First Nations Voter Turnout Rates in Federal, Provincial and Band Elections in New Brunswick, 1962–1991**



Source: Bedford 2003, 16–20.

A much smaller study was conducted by Barsh et al. involving three communities in Alberta (Four Nations, Peigan and Blood). While turnout was drastically different in these three Western communities than in their Eastern counterparts, these results also reveal similar differentiation in turnout among communities, elections and levels of government. Perhaps this is indicative of national or tribal differences in voter turnout, or perhaps this is simply a sign of different levels of discontent in the different communities.

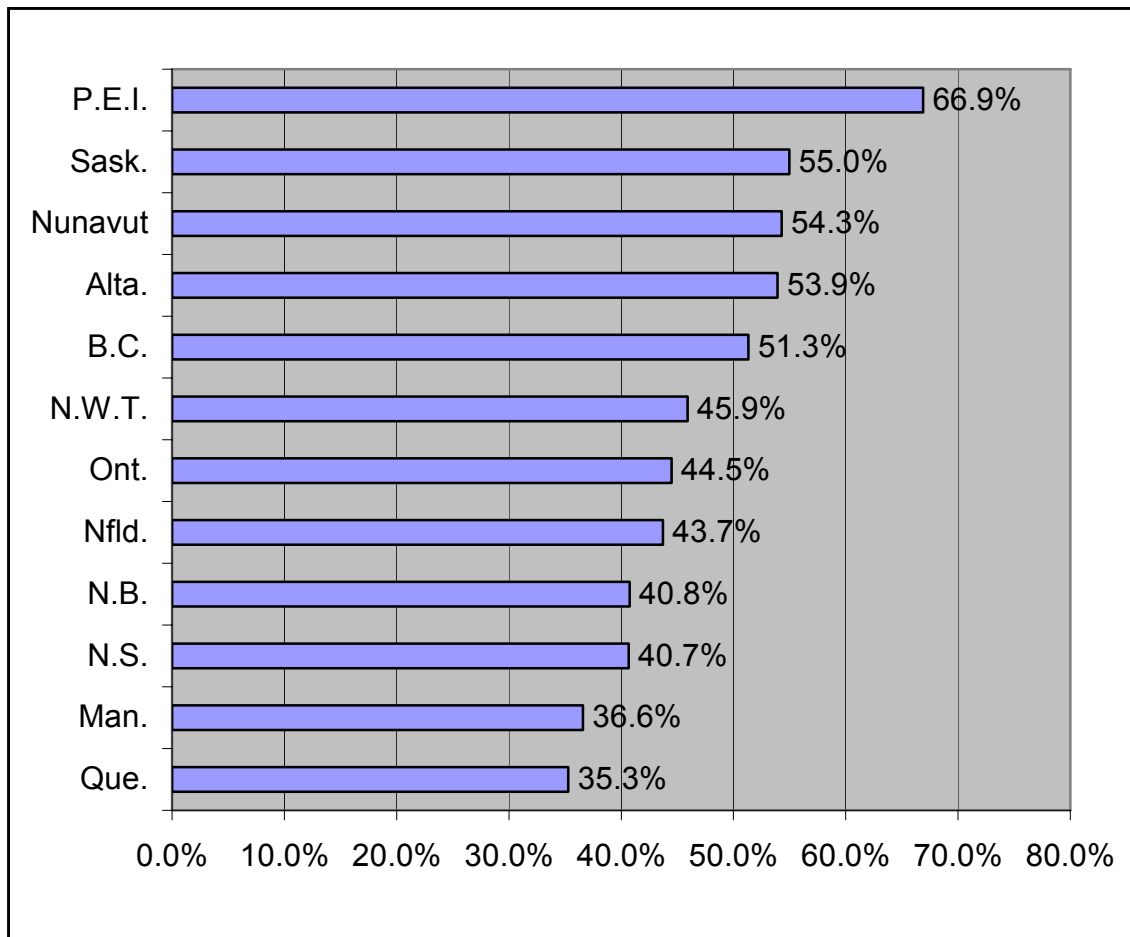
**Figure 3 – First Nations Average Voter Turnout in Alberta, 1967–1993**



Source: Barsh et al. 1997, 3–26.

A more recent nationwide study by Elections Canada seems to suggest that there is indeed a regional dimension to Aboriginal voter turnout.

**Figure 4 – Turnout Rates at Polling Stations on First Nations Reserves  
(2000 Federal General Election)**



N = 296 polling stations.  
Source: Guérin 2003, 13.

Perhaps the differences in Aboriginal voter turnout represent different experiences with colonialism and different relationships with Canada and/or the Crown. Perhaps these disparities indicate regional differences that have little or nothing to do with Aboriginal people. Whatever the case, these studies provide little insight into why turnout is so low.

Further qualitative and quantitative research is necessary. Little is known about actual rates of participation because existing data includes only those polling stations that are located on reserves; it thus excludes First Nations living off the reserve and members of reserves where there are no polling stations. Further, there is little ability to explain the existing data or provide possible “solutions” because few studies have asked Aboriginal people to account for their participation (Barsh 1997; Ladner 2003; Silver, Keeper and MacKenzie 2005).

Aboriginal people have had the vote for at least 46 years, yet little is known about participation rates. What is known is most often incomplete or even unreliable.



### 3. The Factors

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Over the last 15 years, a number of scholars have attempted to explain the low electoral turnout rates observed among Aboriginal people, and a small body of literature has emerged to explain this phenomenon. However, relatively little progress has been made, and the literature continues to orbit the same constellation of issues, questions and concerns. Such circling and re-circling has left many questions unexplored, unexamined and unresolved.

Some scholars have recognized the importance of developing quantitative research models of Aboriginal electoral orientations and behaviour (Bedford and Pobihushchy 1995; Guérin 2003), but very few studies have accounted for differing rates of Aboriginal participation. How do Aboriginal communities view the efficacy of Canada's electoral system? Why do they vote – or not – in federal, provincial or local elections? What contextual factors account for the differing rates of participation exhibited across Aboriginal communities? The literature provides theories and hypotheses but few quantitative studies of Aboriginal participation rates.

#### 3.1 Commissioned Studies

The early literature tended to address and develop theories explaining Aboriginal electoral participation, and it emerged out of studies commissioned by the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (RCERPF). In 1991, RCERPF examined why Aboriginal participation rates were low, and it addressed ways to improve Aboriginal participation and representation within the existing electoral system. These commissioned studies identified, in particular, the lingering effects of history, geographical dispersal and structural impediments embedded in the Canadian electoral system itself.

The historical reasons, as Robert Milen has suggested, arose from the legacy of colonialism and, specifically, the federal government's assimilation-through-enfranchisement policy. Thus, Aboriginals view the electoral system with suspicion (1991b, 46). However, Milen has noted that Aboriginal concerns regarding the franchise were not homogenous:

- Métis organizations consistently advanced proposals for guaranteed representation during the constitutional conferences of the 1980s.
- Various treaty nations have rejected offers of Canadian citizenship and electoral participation on the grounds of sovereignty and nationhood.
- Many treaty nations choose to stay outside the Canadian electoral process because of their nation-to-nation relationship with the Crown (Milen 1991b, 47).

In its recommendations, RCERPF addressed this issue of competing conceptions of citizenship and nationhood. Nonetheless, suspicion of colonialist assimilation through the franchise hinders Aboriginal participation.

The studies also focused on geographical dispersal and impediments inscribed within the electoral system. For instance, Roger Gibbins notes that since the Aboriginal population was widely dispersed across Canada, its ability to influence the electoral process was severely

limited. This, coupled with the size of the population in Canada's electoral ridings, meant that Aboriginal people's ability to influence electoral outcomes and/or elect representatives from their communities was substantially weakened.<sup>2</sup> Thus, as Gibbins suggests, low electoral participation by Aboriginals results from a sense of futility (Gibbins 1991, 155).

Similarly, through her examination of electoral participation in Yukon and Northwest Territories, Valerie Alia noted that the remoteness of Aboriginal communities made it difficult and costly for both candidates and the media to reach those communities during electoral campaigns, address their local concerns, and mobilize and engage Aboriginal electors. Thus, geography is identified as a hindrance to Aboriginal participation (Alia 1991, 112-114).

A number of options were presented to address these concerns. Alia urged that campaign materials and information on candidates reflect the multiplicity of languages and cultural practices across Aboriginal communities. Alia also suggested that budgetary expenditures for Northern campaigns should be increased to cover transportation and communication costs.

Meanwhile, many researchers suggested implementing separate electoral districts for Aboriginal people. Augie Fleras, for example, assessed New Zealand's model of Aboriginal electoral districts (AEDs) and concluded that they were a viable option that could "enhance Aboriginal participation in the electoral system" (1991, 98; see also Fleras 1985). Since a guaranteed number of Aboriginal legislators would represent Aboriginal people, Fleras argued that such a model could encourage Aboriginal participation by enhancing the appeal of the electoral system. Milen suggested that AEDs "could help encourage a greater and more effective participation in the electoral process on the part of Aboriginal peoples" (1991b, 48-9). AEDs would ensure not only that Aboriginal people were represented in Parliament but also that their values and alternative perspectives were represented.

For its part, RCERPF made some of the same recommendations. However, it rejected the idea of guaranteed or fixed Aboriginal seats, opting instead for a process that would guarantee their creation should certain requirements be met (1991b, 139).<sup>3</sup> It suggested that Aboriginal electoral districts could be created in a province whenever the number of registered Aboriginal voters "met the minimum number of people required for a constituency in accordance with the principle of representation by population" (1991a, 176). Under this scheme, Aboriginal constituencies would be superimposed over, but contained within, the normal electoral boundaries of each province.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Augie Fleras suggests that Aboriginal peoples have been structurally excluded from the electoral system. See "Aboriginal Electoral Districts for Canada: Lessons from New Zealand," in *Aboriginal Peoples and Electoral Reform in Canada*, ed. Robert A. Milen, Research Studies of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, Vol. 9 (Toronto: Dundurn, 1991), pp. 67-103.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that RCAP rejected the notion of Aboriginal electoral districts, recommending instead the creation of a separate Aboriginal parliament existing alongside the Canadian House of Commons and Senate. See Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, Vol. 2: *Restructuring the Relationship* (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The Maritimes are the one exception to this proposal because they have a small Aboriginal population. One Aboriginal electoral district could be created for Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. See Canada, Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, *Final Report: Reforming Electoral Democracy*, Vol. 1 (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1991).



While RCERPF recognized the importance of greater opportunities for democratic inclusion and “effective representation” for Aboriginal people, its main concern was nevertheless enhancing the legitimacy of the existing electoral system. When justifying its “case” for the existence of Aboriginal constituencies, RCERPF argued that Parliament’s “legitimacy [would] be strengthened if, over time, its composition reflect[ed] the importance of the various communities in the polity” (1991a, 174). By providing Aboriginal people with the “freedom to be themselves, careful implementation of the concept would be counted a gain in civilization” (1991a, 175). In the final instance, RCERPF’s central aim was to legitimate the current system through greater Aboriginal participation, but the Commission failed to address why the system is not considered legitimate by Aboriginal people.

### 3.2 “Legitimacy” and Voter Turnout

This question of “legitimacy” resonates throughout the literature on Aboriginal electoral participation. For example, in their examination of Maritime Aboriginal voter turnout in federal, provincial and band elections, Bedford and Pobihushchy suggest that declining rates of participation at the federal and provincial levels indicate that “ ‘Indians’ appear to be saying that they have little confidence in the likelihood of finding a comfortable domicile within the Canadian state” (1995, 275). Similarly, Anna Hunter argues that the “lack of representation of Aboriginal peoples in formal political processes signifies such a high degree of political alienation that it threatens the legitimacy of the Canadian democratic system” (2003, 27).

While a number of scholars<sup>5</sup> frame the “problem” as a loss of legitimacy for the Canadian state, however, they present different explanations for the problem’s origins. Bedford and Pobihushchy hypothesize that a resurgence of Indigenous consciousness has resulted in a shift in identity “from Canadians who are Indians, to members of the Maliseet or Micmac nations” (1995, 269). Drawing on this theme of a fractured sense of citizenship, Tim Schouls suggests that declining rates of participation indicate that Aboriginal people reject the notion that non-Aboriginals can represent their interests and identities because they see themselves as belonging to distinct nations (1996, 732–34; see also Cairns 2003; Ladner 2003). Thus, the issue of legitimacy is central to explaining low Aboriginal turnout.

Addressing this problem, however, is more difficult. Bedford and Pobihushchy, for example, recommend that more research be conducted to confirm or disprove the notion that there has been a resurgence of Indigenous consciousness. In this regard, they suggest that quantitative studies must be conducted to model Aboriginal voters’ “socio-psychological” characteristics and attitudes to ensure that electoral reform addresses and reflects their unique needs and concerns. Similarly, Schouls recognizes the “challenge” that Aboriginal difference poses for developing effective forms of representation, and he argues that differentiated forms must be established to

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<sup>5</sup> For further invocations of “legitimacy,” see Robert A. Milen, “Aboriginal Constitutional and Electoral Reform,” in *Aboriginal Peoples and Electoral Reform in Canada*, ed. Robert A. Milen, Research Studies of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, Vol. 9 (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991), p. 48; David Bedford, “Aboriginal Voter Participation in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick,” *Electoral Insight* 5,3 (2003): p. 19; Alan C. Cairns, “Aboriginal People’s Electoral Participation in the Canadian Community,” *Electoral Insight* 5,3 (2003): p. 6; and Jim Silver, Cyril Keeper and Michael MacKenzie, “A Very Hostile System in Which to Live: Aboriginal Electoral Participation in Winnipeg’s Inner City,” Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2005), p. 10.

recognize “the full range of Aboriginal plurality” (1996, 748; see also Gibbins 1991). However, to begin to map the range of this plurality, the type of quantitative studies as suggested by Bedford and Pobihushchy are needed.

The empirical work of Russel Lawrence Barsh et al. makes great progress toward uncovering the electoral orientations and attitudes of First Nations (1997). By analyzing voting behaviour of the three largest Aboriginal communities in Alberta, the authors uncover the “subjective reasons” among Aboriginal people for either voting or not voting in federal and provincial elections. Using open-ended survey questions and interviews, the authors achieve results that indicate a number of possible reasons for low Aboriginal turnout in Alberta, including a lack of electoral information and personal contact with candidates as well as general feelings of exclusion (1997, 21–22). The study’s results do not indicate that Aboriginal voting behaviour in the three communities is influenced by nationalist sentiments. However, this by no means suggests that these factors are not prevalent in other Aboriginal communities. On the contrary, this work demonstrates the need for further research into the relationship between the re-emergence of an Indigenous consciousness and the attitudes of Aboriginal voters.

The notion of Indigenous consciousness and citizenship continues to be cited as a key variable in the literature on Aboriginal participation (Malloy and White 1997; Bedford 2003; Henderson 2002; Ladner 2003); Alan Cairns’ recommendations, on the other hand, challenge the utility of such a resurgence. While Cairns does recognize the existence of Aboriginal plurality and difference, he ultimately invokes notions of “practicality” and “inevitability” as a way to reduce the salience of that difference. According to Cairns, because Aboriginal people are “inevitably caught up in the consequences of federal, provincial, territorial, and often, municipal politics ... the wiser strategy is full participation in urban, provincial, territorial, and federal politics as voters and candidates” (2003, 8). Consequently, he believes that the possibility of a political solution outside the present electoral structure is not feasible.

### **3.3 Socio-Cultural Factors in Voting**

Further studies continue to draw attention to Indigenous difference(s), particularly in regard to socio-cultural and contextual factors. For example, Daniel Gu erin argues that the wide variations observed among Aboriginal participation rates in the 2000 federal election “reflect the fact that Aboriginal participation in federal elections depends largely on cultural and social factors” (2003, 14). Aboriginal participation is affected by contextual factors (such as the presence or absence of Aboriginal candidates and/or salient political issues), geographical dispersal, cultural and linguistic diversity, and lower socio-economic and education levels (2003, 13; see also Barsh 1994). Like Bedford and Pobihushchy, Gu erin argues that more research into Aboriginal orientations toward the electoral system, and cultural and contextual factors specific to each Aboriginal community, is necessary. Moreover, Gu erin suggests that scholars also need to extend their analyses to Aboriginal people living off reserves (2003, 14).

Current research has begun to address this lack of research into Aboriginal voting behaviour in urban areas as well as into electoral participation in the North. In their study of the voting behaviour of Aboriginal people living in Winnipeg, for instance, Silver, Keeper and MacKenzie note that for Aboriginal people living in urban areas, the “nationalist explanation” for low levels

of participation holds little relevance. Urban Aboriginals in Winnipeg are less likely to participate in the electoral process because of feelings of alienation and exclusion rather than a strong identification with Aboriginal nationhood (Silver, Keeper and MacKenzie, 21–22).

Similarly, Ailsa Henderson notes that conventional wisdom in the area of voter turnout does not correspond with the participatory reality in Nunavut. One would expect that because of a lack of media coverage of local issues and politics, and the lack of party politics itself (except in federal elections), Aboriginal electoral participation should be low. However, this is not the case; in fact, turnout is generally higher in Nunavut's territorial elections. Henderson argues that “[w]hatever dampening effect the absence of political parties might have, this appears to be offset by the greater opportunity for political engagement in the territory” (2004, 150). The work of Henderson, as well as that of Silver, Keeper and MacKenzie, is significant because it draws attention to the necessity of developing representational models that fit the specific needs of different communities.

### **3.4 Shifting Toward Substantive Concerns**

Nonetheless, the issues and concerns raised in this body of literature are not unique to Canada. Many of the same concerns have been raised by scholars examining other electoral systems and jurisdictions. For example, the issues of Indigenous alienation (Pitawanakwat 2005; Sanders 2003), differentiated forms of representation (Arthur 2001; Karp and Bowler 2001; Oskal 2001) and state legitimacy (Htun 2003) have all figured prominently in work examining non-Canadian Aboriginal voters.

While Canadian literature tends to focus on the number of representatives – that is, ways to increase Aboriginal electoral participation and representation – the international literature has begun to address more substantive concerns.<sup>6</sup> Given that other countries, such as New Zealand, guarantee the representation of Indigenous people, this focus on substantive concerns is not surprising. Recent work by a team of New Zealand scholars has moved beyond the numerical aspects of representation to focus on the substance of representation itself. In this regard, Banducci, Donovan and Karp provide quantitative data on the relationship between representation by minority legislators and the orientations and behaviour of minority voters. According to their survey results, “Maori who choose to be represented by Maori-electorate MPs are more likely to believe that they have a say than those represented by electorate MPs who are not Maori” (2004, 550).

This shift away from the number of representatives to the question of what happens after increased rates of representation have been achieved by Indigenous people is important to analyze. How effective are Indigenous legislators at substantively representing their constituents? Do the institutional norms of the state affect the ability of Indigenous legislators to effectively represent their constituents? More international and domestic Canadian research is needed to address these questions.

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to suggest that substantive issues have not been addressed in the domestic literature – see Manon Tremblay, “The Participation of Aboriginal Women in Canadian Electoral Democracy,” *Electoral Insight* 5,3 (2003), pp. 34–38 – but only that they are not as well-developed or -explored.

### 3.5 Aboriginal Communities: A Lack of Empirical Research

At the same time, the representational desires of on-reserve Aboriginal people remain unexplored and unexamined. While the fact that Aboriginal people have lower rates of federal and provincial electoral participation than non-Aboriginal people is well-established (Gibbins 1991; Bedford and Pobihushchy 1995; Guérin 2003; Bedford 2003), reasons to explain this phenomenon are sorely lacking.

The literature continues to call on a wide constellation of general theories to explain these declining rates of participation. The most prominent of these include the lingering residue of colonialism, competing concepts of citizenship and structural barriers inscribed in the electoral system itself. However, without community-based research, it is difficult to gauge the reliability or salience of any of these general theories. In other words, we must go back through the literature and return to the original questions of Bedford and Pobihushchy: How do Aboriginal people view the representational effectiveness of the electoral system? To what extent are the voting behaviours of Aboriginal people influenced by alternative understandings of nationhood and citizenship? Only by performing empirically based research in Aboriginal communities will we be able to answer these questions.

However, this by no means suggests that the only knowledge gap left to address is that of the cognitive orientations of on-reserve Aboriginal people. Indeed, we know little about the voting behaviour of urban or off-reserve Aboriginal people or of the Métis. While the work of Silver, Keeper and MacKenzie sheds light on some of the factors influencing urban Aboriginal turnout in Winnipeg, the lack of comparative data and the small sample size of that study leave many questions unanswered. For example:

- Do the electoral orientations and attitudes of urban Aboriginals differ from city to city?
- Does a lack of nationalist sentiment exist for urban Aboriginals outside Winnipeg?
- How does the participation rate of urban Aboriginals differ from that of non-Aboriginals?

No quantitative studies have been performed to address these questions. In particular, no studies have compared the electoral participation rates of the Métis, off-reserve and urban Aboriginal communities. In fact, Métis voter turnout remains entirely unexplored.

While many questions about the socio-psychological characteristics of Aboriginal voters remain unaddressed, further research is needed to explore the relationship between models of representation and democratic inclusion. For example, while RCERPF recommended that the “boundaries of treaty areas should not be overlooked” (1991a, 172) when drawing electoral districts to accommodate Aboriginal interests, the Commission paid little attention to the importance of treaty areas. However, as recent literature indicates, particularistic forms of representation based on respect for nationhood and/or treaty citizenship could encourage “Aboriginal people to participate in Canadian electoral politics as nations and to vote as, and for, citizens of their nations” (Ladner 2003, 25).

In other words, instead of simply noting a relationship between competing understandings of citizenship and low levels of Aboriginal participation (Gibbins 1991; Schouls 1996; Cairns 2003), more research needs to be conducted to determine whether participation could be increased through “recognition of, and respect for, nationhood” and treaty citizenship (Ladner 2003, 25).

Clearly, the research gaps indicate that homogenizing approaches to solving Aboriginal representation are unsustainable. Aboriginal people are more than simply “Canadian counterparts” (Cairns 2003, 8); they are members of distinct nations whose difference(s) must be included in any model designed to increase their representation within the Canadian state.



## 4. Outreach Practices

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As part of our study of Aboriginal electoral participation, we reviewed elector outreach and educational programs being carried out in Canada and abroad. Of the jurisdictions that responded, we found a wide disparity in the amount and types of activities. For example, in jurisdictions such as Canada and New Zealand, a concerted effort is being made by government agencies to encourage electoral awareness and participation among Aboriginal people. In other jurisdictions, such as Australia and the United States, there has been less government involvement in encouraging Aboriginal electoral outreach and education.

### 4.1 In Canada: Federal Elections

Aside from the array of governmental and non-governmental studies that have examined issues of Aboriginal voter turnout and engaged in discussions of ways in which the situation could be improved or even remedied, Elections Canada has been working extremely hard to better understand the situation and improve voter participation. In particular, it has undertaken a number of outreach initiatives to encourage Aboriginal electoral participation.

For instance, the last decade has seen a great push to get Aboriginal people to the polls by addressing issues of accessibility and awareness. Elections Canada has typically used a poster, voter information guide (flyer) and newsletter campaign to remind people about their right to vote. These dedicated educational materials – produced in English, French and Inuktitut – are sent to Aboriginal communities and associations such as friendship centres across the country as well as to Métis and Inuit organizations.

Other media and technologies are also used to reach Aboriginal voters. For example, Elections Canada runs English-language television commercials on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) and CBC North. It also runs commercials on local radio stations, and publishes print announcements in newspapers such as *Windspeaker*, in English, French and Inuktitut. (Elections Canada 1997; 2000; 2004). Transcripts of all publications (posters, newsletters, voter information guides, radio and print ads) are also available on the Elections Canada Web site in these and 10 additional Aboriginal languages.

In 2005, Elections Canada made a sustained effort to address issues of accessibility and awareness by engaging in a targeted Aboriginal advertising campaign and developing youth-oriented programming. For example, Elections Canada worked with an Aboriginal advertising firm to develop messages in English, French and Inuktitut around the campaign theme: “I can choose to make a difference. I can vote” (Elections Canada 2006, 73). These targeted announcements appeared in 42 Aboriginal community newspapers and aired on 50 radio stations, APTN, CBC North and CBC Pacific (Elections Canada 2006). In addition, Elections Canada helped produce a special episode for the youth-oriented television show *Seekers* on the subject of voting among Aboriginal youth. This episode aired on APTN on April 13, 2005 (Elections Canada 2006). A DVD of this episode is available as an educational product from Elections Canada and can be ordered through its Web site.

Public information materials (especially those in Aboriginal languages and/or in Aboriginal media) enhance the accessibility of elector education and outreach programs. So do voter materials available in Aboriginal languages (as was done for the 1992 referendum question).<sup>7</sup> Providing polling stations in Aboriginal communities also increases accessibility by enhancing visibility, using a user-friendly environment and providing ease of use.

During the 2006 campaign, Elections Canada attempted to address issues of accessibility by increasing the number of polling stations across First Nations reserves, Métis settlements and Inuit communities. In addition, Elections Canada made an effort to reach out to the urban Aboriginal community by developing partnerships with the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC). For example, 21 Friendship Centres across Canada hosted 98 ordinary and advance electoral polls (Elections Canada 2006, 80).

Elections Canada has also attempted to enhance accessibility and increase Aboriginal voter turnout through its Aboriginal Community Relations Officer Program and Aboriginal Elder and Youth Program (AEYP). Started in 1997, AEYP (youth were added in 2000) enables communities to enhance accessibility by having an Elder and a youth present at polling stations to assist, and translate for, Aboriginal electors (Elections Canada 2004). In 2000, the Aboriginal Community Relations Officer Program was introduced to address the needs of Aboriginal communities and encourage participation by arranging polling stations in communities, recruiting and training Aboriginal deputy returning officers and acting as a liaison between the community and the returning officer (Elections Canada 2000; 2004).

Both programs have been quite successful. For example, in 2004, 90.5 percent of eligible districts participated in the Aboriginal Community Relations Officer Program. The number of community relations officers increased from 329 in the 2004 general election to 345 in the 2006 election (Elections Canada 2006); of those 345 community relations officers, 157 served Aboriginal communities.

Aside from these elector outreach and education activities, in 1997, Elections Canada and Elections NWT launched its “Choosing Our Mascot” program for use in schools with children ages 5 to 10. Using a simulated election in which children choose a mascot to represent the Canadian North, this program introduces children to elections and voting – including processes such as casting a secret ballot (Elections Canada 1997).

Elections Canada has also engaged in a variety of other initiatives aimed at both enhancing Aboriginal voter participation in Canadian elections and strengthening its own understanding of, and ability to enhance, Aboriginal turnout (Elections Canada 2004). Such initiatives include:

- Consulting with the major national Aboriginal organizations.

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<sup>7</sup> In compliance with referendum legislation, Elections Canada consulted national Aboriginal organizations on communicating widely during the 1992 referendum. As a result, Elections Canada distributed voting information materials in 37 Aboriginal languages and advertised in others, bringing the total Communications program for Aboriginal electors to 45 out of the 53 Aboriginal languages used in Canada (Elections Canada 1994). For federal elections, Elections Canada makes voter information available on its Web site in 11 Aboriginal languages.



- Meeting with youth representatives from national organizations to address voter turnout among Aboriginal youth.
- Hosting a round table with Aboriginal youth to discuss low voter turnout and what can be done to reverse this trend.
- Sponsoring research and promoting information exchange and discussion through publications such as *Electoral Insight*. For instance, the November 2003 edition of this magazine (available in print and on-line) looked at Aboriginal electoral participation.

During the 2006 general election, Elections Canada developed partnerships with Aboriginal organizations in an attempt to enhance voter information for Aboriginal people. For example, Elections Canada and the AFN worked together to develop a voter information and educational package for Aboriginal electors. In addition, the AFN National Chief and the Chief Electoral Officer released a public service announcement stressing the importance of Aboriginal electoral participation. This collaboration between Elections Canada and the AFN not only informed Aboriginal electors about the importance of voting but also helped “develop[ing] knowledge of and trust in the federal electoral process by First Nations electors who participated in the joint activities” (Elections Canada 2006, 82).

Similarly, during this election, Elections Canada formed a communications partnership with the NAFC. This partnership provided all NAFC members with voting information and enabled Elections Canada to more effectively reach out to Aboriginal electors. These collaborative efforts strengthened the ability of Elections Canada to inform Aboriginal electors about the electoral process and made the electoral system itself more accessible to Aboriginal people.

## **4.2 In the Provinces and Territories**

In writing this paper, we contacted all of the provincial and territorial elections offices in Canada. They received a questionnaire requesting details about the level of Aboriginal voter participation in their jurisdictions and what, if any, elector outreach and educational programs they had. Specific information about initiatives was obtained directly from these offices. The programs and services offered by the eight provincial and territorial elections offices that responded to the questionnaire vary substantially. (We did not receive responses from Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Nunavut, Prince Edward Island or Quebec).

### **4.2.1 Alberta**

Elections Alberta provides no targeted voter education or voter outreach programs for Aboriginal people. It does not have a mandate or a budget to actively engage in general voter education or outreach using media campaigns. Voter outreach is limited to providing standard voter information materials. It hires local people to conduct both enumerations and elections (this practice applies to all communities in Alberta), and it makes every effort to hire people familiar with the language and culture of a community. Where possible, it establishes polling stations in Aboriginal communities.

#### **4.2.2 British Columbia**

From November 2004 to May 31, 2005, in preparation for the most recent election, Elections BC hired Aboriginal, Chinese, Indo-Canadian and youth liaison officers to raise awareness of the electoral process and to improve participation rates in these communities and groups. These groups have historically low rates of participation (see Lin 2001). Before undertaking this strategy, Elections BC's general voter education and outreach initiatives had been primarily aimed at adolescents. For example, in 2001, Elections BC launched a Grade 5 education kit, "The Election Tool Kit," and in 2003, it launched its Grade 11 education kit, "Democracy in Action: Understanding and Exercising Your Electoral Rights." These kits were sent to every elementary and secondary school in the province.

#### **4.2.3 Manitoba**

Elections Manitoba provides no targeted voter education or voter outreach programs for Aboriginal people. However, it has developed an education kit that enables students to experience participating in a free and fair election. In addition, upon request, presentations are delivered to Aboriginal groups, usually by persons from the area who have experience in working with Aboriginal people.

#### **4.2.4 New Brunswick**

Elections New Brunswick provides no targeted voter education or voter outreach programs for Aboriginal people. It does not have the mandate, budget or staff to provide organized outreach or education programs to any sector of the population. Its Web site provides neither specific information for community groups nor much general information for voters. However, on request, it will speak to groups and communities, and in the not-too-distant future, it hopes to start offering public outreach programs.

#### **4.2.5 Ontario**

Elections Ontario is in the process of developing targeted outreach and education programs for Aboriginal people. To facilitate this initiative, it has hired an Aboriginal consultant to seek advice from Chiefs throughout the province about how the electoral system can be made more accessible to Aboriginal people. Moreover, it has added an Aboriginal liaison officer to all electoral districts that contain a reserve.

#### **4.2.6 Northwest Territories**

Elections NWT provides no targeted voter education or outreach programs for Aboriginal people. However, when requested, it translates election documents into languages used in the Northwest Territories other than English and French: Chipewyan, Cree, Dogrib (Tlicho), Gwich'in, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, North Slavey and South Slavey. In terms of general voter education and outreach strategies, Elections NWT, in partnership with Elections Canada, launched the "Choosing Our Mascot" voter education program for children ages 5 to 10 in 1997. Additional information on Elections NWT programs and language policies is available in *Modernizing Our Electoral System* (Elections NWT 1999).

#### **4.2.7 Saskatchewan**

Elections Saskatchewan is in the process of developing targeted outreach and education programs for Aboriginal people. Its *Strategic Plan 2005–2011* acknowledges the declining voter turnout among Aboriginal people – particularly Aboriginal youth – and affirms the need to develop outreach and educational strategies to increase participation among youth, Métis and First Nations.

#### **4.2.8 Yukon**

Elections Yukon provides no targeted voter education or outreach programs for Aboriginal people. However, it does translate voter information materials and advertising into all five First Nations languages spoken in the territory. Furthermore, it provides interpreters at select polling stations to enhance Elder accessibility. It reports that not only is Aboriginal voter turnout quite comparable with that of other voters (ranging from 50 to 87 percent), but participation rates for Aboriginal candidates are also high. Currently, 3 out of 18 members of the Yukon legislature are Aboriginal.

### **4.3 In Selected Countries**

To determine what electoral outreach and educational programs were being undertaken in other countries, we sent out the same questionnaire mentioned earlier to a number of national and sub-national electoral commissions in Australia, New Zealand, India and the United States. (Australia and India did not respond, nor did many American states.) In addition, we conducted a narrowly defined literature search of Web and academic sources on electoral outreach and education directed at Indigenous and/or tribal people in the U.S., Australia, India, New Zealand, Botswana, Mexico, Peru, Colombia and Norway. This search revealed significant information on programs and policies only in Australia and New Zealand; thus, we describe these two jurisdictions here. We have also included the U.S.; the information available was usable for comparative purposes.

### **4.3.1 Australia**

Australia is unique in terms of both its electoral system and the level of participation among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voters (Australia Electoral Commission 2002). Voting is compulsory in all elections (except those for Aboriginal governments); thus, voter turnout rates regularly exceed 95 percent. While no statistics are available for Aboriginal participation in elections, levels of participation seem to be consistent with those of the dominant society.

Compulsory voting was introduced federally in 1924, although it did not apply to Indigenous people because they did not have the right to vote. The federal franchise was extended to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders only in 1967. However, voting was not compulsory, and until the late 1970s, little effort was made to encourage Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders to vote. In 1979, the Commonwealth Electoral Commission (now the Australian Electoral Commission, or AEC) introduced its Aboriginal Electoral Education Program, which sent teams to Aboriginal communities to promote voter education and outreach programs.

In 1984, compulsory voting was introduced for Aboriginal people, and mobile polling stations facilitated participation. In 1993, the Aboriginal Electoral Education Program was renamed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Electoral Information Service. In 1996, the service and all of its educational and outreach programs were abolished when federal funds were withdrawn.

The AEC has also facilitated participation by Aboriginal people in their own state-sponsored federal organizations. In 1973, the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee was created to represent Aboriginal people in the Australian Commonwealth. This organization was replaced in 1990 by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Participation in elections for these organizations has been voluntary rather than compulsory, and the rate of participation has been exceedingly low. For example, the participation rate in the 1999 ATSIC election was approximately 12 percent (Foley 1999). It is interesting that participation in voluntary elections is low, even for Aboriginal organizations charged with administrative authority over Aboriginal people.

It is clear that neither compulsory voting nor a high level of Aboriginal voter turnout is universal. Low turnout cannot be attributed solely to having non-compulsory elections, however, because there is widespread alienation and discontent with the federally created process of state-sponsored Aboriginal organizations representing Aboriginal people within the Australian Commonwealth. Therefore, more research into the area of Aboriginal voting behaviour is needed, as are more Aboriginal voter outreach and educational programs.

### **4.3.2 New Zealand**

Technically, Maori were allowed to vote (as long as they met the requirements of age, gender and property) when the original franchise was granted in 1853. In 1867, the franchise was extended to all Maori men, and a temporary system of dedicated representation was established that guaranteed four Maori seats in Parliament. This temporary system was made permanent in 1876 but was not altered to rectify the inconsistency between representation and population.

Until 1893, dual voting was allowed for those who met the requirements of both systems of representation. After that, only “half-castes” could give up their right to vote in dedicated Maori elections and participate in general elections.

Little attention was paid to Maori elections, and little effort was made to facilitate Maori participation in them. For example, until 1938, voting was oral, and Maori voters were denied the secret ballot (although it had been introduced for others in 1870); electoral rolls were not created until 1948; and polling stations were often inaccessible. After years of neglect, the system was modified in 1967 to allow Maori to choose which electoral roll (dedicated or general) they wished to be on. In 1975, the *Maori electoral option* was introduced, allowing Maori to periodically choose to participate in either the general or the Maori election. This option has dramatically altered political participation (not necessarily voter turnout) as Maori are increasingly elected in general electoral districts.

This electoral system has been the subject of much debate from the outset. It was originally established to keep Maori out of regular seats and to limit their role in Parliament, and New Zealanders have criticized it for creating a political apartheid and for not facilitating Maori assimilation. On the other hand, most Maori were not interested in participating in the “Pakeha Parliament” when these seats were established because they favoured the nation-to-nation relationship and participating in their own political structures. Such sentiments still exist.

New Zealand’s Electoral Commission reported that there are no targeted education or outreach programs for Maori. Standard voter information materials are produced in both Maori and English, and they are also available on the Commission’s Web site. There is no evidence that Maori are disproportionately non-enrolled. Turnout rates for Maori who participate in general elections continue to be lower than for the general population; the turnout in Maori electorates is still significantly lower than in the general electorate, as has been the case for over a decade.

Maori representation has increased substantially since the electoral system changed from first past the post to mixed member proportional as the number of Maori MPs elected from the party lists has increased.

The Electoral Commission also reported that more research into Maori electoral participation is required to fill the knowledge gap and assist the “commission and others in policy development and the planning of outreach and education programs” (Electoral Commission 2006). To fill this gap and better understand “electoral (non)engagement,” the Electoral Commission held a Maori *hui* (facilitated workshop) to discuss existing research, examine reasons for lower Maori participation and establish a research agenda.

New Zealand’s Electoral Commission has framed its research agenda and has requested proposals that address the following questions (Electoral Commission 2006):

1. Amongst Māori, who consistently does not vote? (socio-economic, identity, efficacy)
2. Why are electoral participation levels lower amongst Māori than non-Māori?
3. What are Māori attitudes towards politics, elections and representation?

The proposals should also address the following hypotheses individually or in combination with the above questions (Electoral Commission 2006):

- a. Low levels of participation are not about being Māori, they are about poverty and education levels and the different age profile.
- b. Māori are strongly engaged in iwi and Māori politics, just not in national elections.
- c. Turnout in Māori electorates is lower because Māori on the Māori roll have strong Māori identity and so are more involved in iwi politics and not involved in national politics.
- d. Māori are interested in politics but do not take part because they think their voice is not heard or of value.
- e. Candidates are more important than party to Māori voters.

### 4.3.3 United States

In the United States, elections are a state responsibility, and compliance with Department of Justice regulations is mandatory. Under federal legislation (the *Voting Rights Act* of 1975 and the *Help America Vote Act* of 2002), states are required to provide voter registration and election-related materials in Aboriginal languages in situations where speakers constitute more than 5 percent of all voting citizens, where there are more than 10,000 speakers, where the literacy rate of the group is higher than the national average or on a reservation where speakers exceed more than 5 percent of all residents.

The federal government does not engage in any semblance of elector education or outreach. Though elections fall within a state's jurisdictional authority, from what we can ascertain, no state engages in dedicated voter outreach or elector education for Aboriginal people beyond the above-mentioned federal language regulations.<sup>8</sup>

Two states reported some activity in engaging Aboriginal voters. For example, Hawaii provides voting materials in Ilocano (as well as Japanese and Chinese). Oklahoma responded that "... we make every effort to accommodate that group's needs." Three other states – Maine, South Dakota and Wisconsin – have implemented, or considered ways to enhance, the participation of Aboriginal people in their state legislatures.

In 1823, Maine adopted the practice of having tribal delegates in the state legislature. This practice – institutionalized through treaty negotiations – enables the two largest nations (the Penobscots and Passamaquoddies) to send delegates to the state legislature. The role of such delegates has gradually expanded to enable greater participation in the legislature: whereas they originally held only speaking privileges, they now have the ability to co-sponsor legislation and hold a limited vote (Starbird et al. 2003).

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<sup>8</sup> We received responses from only five state authorities and the federal government, so our findings are incomplete. However, given the great consistency in the responses, and the fact that no information on government Web sites or in scholarly sources suggests otherwise, the results seem to be conclusive.

However, delegates' voting abilities are limited by constitutional considerations. Members of these two nations can also exercise their regular state franchise. Two other tribes (the Aroostook Band of Micmacs and the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians) have not been accorded the same rights of participation. There seems to be disagreement among and within the nations (including those without current representation) about whether this system of delegates impedes or respects their sovereignty as nations (Iorns 2003).

At the moment, "Indian voters in South Dakota have been less active than their counterparts in other regions of the nation" (Humphry 2001). Low turnout has been attributed to considerations of tribal sovereignty, the accessibility of polling stations, linguistic barriers and poverty (Humphry 2001). In 2000, Senator Volesky sponsored a bill that would have allowed each tribe to send a non-voting delegate to the state legislature (Melmer 2000). This bill was defeated.

In 2001, a legislative committee of the Wisconsin state government recommended adopting the Maine model of tribal representation, but its bill was defeated in the legislature (Melmer 2000).

#### **4.4 Lessons from Canada and Selected Countries**

For Canadian jurisdictions seeking to be proactive and to take action immediately to facilitate and increase Aboriginal voter turnout, the lessons that can be drawn from the experiences of the provinces and territories may be limited. However, a number of important learning opportunities can be derived from the experiences of the selected other countries.

Voter turnout among Indigenous people is likely universally lower than that of the general public in settler societies and in situations of internal colonialism (for example, in countries such as Norway). While this lower turnout rate is generally acknowledged, there is a lack of both qualitative and quantitative research that can shed light on actual rates of participation and/or account for them. Furthermore, little research has been carried out to investigate the representational desires of Aboriginal people and what needs to be done to improve turnout.

Thus, there is a great need, both internationally and domestically, to expand this knowledge base to create the institutional capacity (in the areas of finance and personnel) for meaningful change. Many jurisdictions lack this capacity and/or the will to engage in dedicated outreach and educational programs. Yet these programs are critical. Initiatives such as Elections Canada's AEYP, translation services and locating polling stations – or even mobile stations – in Aboriginal communities are necessary to increase accessibility and encourage participation. Where such programs exist, they are not available across all jurisdictions or even within jurisdictions; this is the case in many communities – urban, reserve and otherwise.

Dedicated representation, such as the New Zealand model, or representation by individual delegates, as is the case in Maine, have been shown to positively address participation and create some semblance of legitimacy – for both parties – while avoiding the homogenizing effects of other approaches. For these reasons, dedicated representation has even been considered in two

Australian states where Aboriginal voter turnout is phenomenally high (because it is compulsory). Though dedicated representation does not completely rectify the situation or its causes, such systems must be viewed from the perspective of decolonization and self-determination; they must be seen as addressing something more than political participation (Iorns 2003).



## 5. Recommendations

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After reviewing existing studies as well as recent literature on Aboriginal voter turnout, and having examined elector outreach and education programs being undertaken in Canada and selected countries, we present a number of recommendations in the areas of research, partnerships, community outreach and advertising campaigns.

### 5.1 Research

Research is needed to determine why Aboriginal people have generally low turnout rates and to develop outreach programs and representational models that reflect their unique needs and concerns. Specifically:

- Empirical research must be conducted in Aboriginal communities to investigate electoral orientations, attitudes and motivations.
- Empirical research must also address the extent to which contextual and culturally specific factors affect participation rates in Aboriginal communities (including urban).
- Comparative studies are needed to determine similarities and differences in the voting patterns between and across Aboriginal communities.
- Research is also needed to address the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people vis-à-vis outreach programs and electoral participation (including models and reform).
- Elections Canada should engage in the same research program as was recently outlined by New Zealand's Electoral Commission.

### 5.2 Partnerships

According to Cairns, national organizations hinder the participation rates of Aboriginal people by (re)orienting them away from Parliament. He contends that these organizations undermine the symbolic capacity of Parliament to “speak for” First Nations since their very existence “constitute[s] an admittedly erratic rival system of representation” (2003, 4).

Despite such claims, national organizations have proved to be critical allies in providing voter outreach and education and in facilitating Aboriginal electoral participation. In the 2006 federal election campaign, for example, major national Aboriginal organizations became key proponents of increasing the Aboriginal turnout. Organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Métis National Council (MNC) and Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) effectively used their own organizational capacities and the media to educate Aboriginal voters about such matters as the need to overcome “history and personal convictions” (Dolha 2005), the comparative weight of the Aboriginal vote in numerous ridings (Behm 2006) and even a breakdown of party platforms by matters of importance to Aboriginal people (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples 2006).

Consultations proved to be an effective vehicle for sharing information in the past. However, Elections Canada needs to move beyond the current strategy of consultations and information sharing to develop partnerships with the major national Aboriginal organizations – including the MNC, CAP, National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) and the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC).

Developing partnerships with these organizations is critical. These groups can assist in addressing and enhancing accessibility (for example, by helping to locate polling stations on reserves and in other pertinent locations), promoting voting among their membership and engaging in effective elector education and outreach within their membership.

As we saw during the 2006 general election, Friendship Centres provide a natural entry point through which to expand access to outreach programs into the critical and under-served urban Aboriginal population. Elections Canada is encouraged to continue developing this partnership and to develop partnerships with other Aboriginal organizations in future elections. Elections Canada must include Aboriginal people as their partners and not simply as vehicles for program delivery, legitimation, information gathering and information dissemination.

Facilitating partnership development will be challenging, especially when organizations are already overwhelmed financially, organizationally and professionally. Developing partnerships will take time and require an investment of resources in the partnership processes and products such as research and advertising campaigns.

### **5.3 Community Outreach**

It is also essential that Elections Canada engage Aboriginal people directly, at the community level – urban, reserve, settlement, hamlet or otherwise. Holding round tables with community groups (organized and facilitated by national Aboriginal organizations) will be a useful means of sharing information. They will provide an opportunity for face-to-face discussions to carry out the necessary research and to engage people in conversations about voting and the benefits of increasing turnout. Round tables can also be used to ascertain useful information for enhancing existing programs such as the AEYP. One possible venue for launching these discussions is post-secondary institutions where there is a large Aboriginal student body. This is a vital group to engage in discussions of electoral participation because the Aboriginal population in Canada is very young, and youth are less likely to vote.

One area where it might be easy for Elections Canada to enhance outreach and establish partnerships with communities and organizations (such as the new National Centre for First Nations Governance) is by offering communities its expertise in creating and maintaining electoral systems. Such expertise has been lacking, and many communities are still struggling with post-Corbiere requirements and creating post-*Indian Act* electoral systems. Standardizing the system across jurisdictions may enhance ease of voting and accessibility, and it will likely create goodwill toward and a positive reputation for Elections Canada.

To be more effective, outreach needs to include face-to-face discussions of the issues at both the community and the national level. Aboriginal people need to come to terms with why they do not participate and/or why they should participate, and Elections Canada needs to alter its voter outreach programs to respond to such discussions. The focus of outreach programs should be on creating community awareness of latent potential and empowering communities to make informed choices. Viewed in this light, effective outreach programs could include extending the AEYP and/or the Aboriginal Community Relations Officer Program to allow for community outreach between elections – for example, by hosting community round tables or having an Elder visit a classroom.

#### **5.4 Advertising Campaigns**

Drawing on the campaigns dedicated to increasing youth turnout both in Canada and in the United States, Elections Canada, in partnership with national organizations, should attempt to create a dialogue and promote awareness within communities by involving high-profile First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in advertising campaigns. These campaigns should build on the same community outreach strategy as outlined above and should use a number of media (radio, television, print, the Internet) to create an opportunity for Aboriginal people to engage in a variety of issues around voter turnout. The campaigns would be educational and designed to encourage dialogue and enhance participation.

Whatever the nature of these campaigns, Elections Canada needs to engage a diversity of Aboriginal media and continue to offer advertisements in a variety of languages; this encourages accessibility and creates an Aboriginal-friendly environment. Partnerships will also enhance the status and trustworthiness of such advertisements and thus their ability to increase turnout. Partnerships may also create free placement opportunities, as occurred in the most recent election, when national organizations created their own advertisements to enhance participation or were featured in advertisements as advocates of participation (Behm 2006).



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