

The Meaning of Political Participation for Indigenous Youth

Charting the Course for Youth
Civic and Political Participation

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1. *A Group Apart: Young Party Members in Canada* – Lisa Young and William Cross
2. *Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada* – Brenda O'Neill
3. *The Meaning of Political Participation for Indigenous Youth* – Taiaiake Alfred, Brock Pitawanakwat and Jackie Price
4. *Rendre compte et soutenir l'action bénévole des jeunes* – André Thibault, Patrice Albertus and Julie Fortier
5. *The State and Potential of Civic Learning in Canada* – Kristina R. Llewellyn, Sharon Cook, Joel Westheimer, Luz Alison Molina Girón and Karen Suurtamm
6. "What Do You Mean I Can't Have a Say?" *Young Canadians and Their Government* – André Turcotte

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Executive Summary

This paper addresses two central questions on the meaning of political participation among Indigenous youth in Canada:

- What does political engagement mean to Indigenous youth today?
- What are the implications of their attitudes and beliefs regarding political participation for Canadian electoral processes and institutions?

Recognizing the context created by existing research on these subjects, and following the focus and method of Jim Silver's work on Aboriginal voting in Winnipeg, we conducted personal interviews and focus group sessions with a broad sampling of Indigenous youth from a variety of urban and community contexts. These interviews sought out youths' perceptions of political identity, citizenship and political activism, while also exploring their relationship with the state and its electoral processes. The main questions posed to the youth were these:

- What is "politics"?
- What does citizenship mean?
- Which political activities are important and which do you participate in?

Further questions related to participation in state processes such as band councils, school councils, school boards, rural or urban municipalities, and provincial, territorial and/or federal elections.

Our research has found no consistency across regions and nations that would justify the positing of a unified "Indigenous" or "Aboriginal" category, model of participation or even perspective. The views expressed to us reflected particular cultural environments and individual experiences, and they varied substantially based on forms and levels of education possessed by the youth. The research indicated that although some Indigenous youth do participate in electoral processes, other Indigenous youth favour political participation in non-conventional and indirect ways. The youth argued for the need to make space in the discourse and in democratic arenas for their voices. It is apparent that they are seeking means, methods and instruments to generate real effects in their communities to bring back the "action" in politics.

Interestingly, there was also internal incoherence in many of the youths' statements, and overall perspectives, regarding arguments for participating in Canadian electoral processes. These arguments differ from an Indigenous nationhood perspective, which views Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state as mutually exclusive and where a nation-to-nation relationship must be facilitated. Those lacking Indigenous education and exposure to traditional cultures are more likely to follow the normal patterns for Canadian youth in their perspectives on political participation. However, some youth argued for the revitalization of a nation-to-nation relationship and argued strongly for a perspective rooted in Indigenous cultures, communities and experience. These youth expressed interest in strategies to integrate Indigenous traditions into structures of governance and viewed interacting with government as counterproductive to the work they supported in their community.

Our research indicates that the decision to engage in or abstain from the electoral process is based on personal and community experience. The decision to abstain is guided by the sense that the electoral arena is an inappropriate or unresponsive means to advance the priorities of Indigenous youth. We argue that there are no strategic options within the framework of the existing electoral process that can significantly affect this reality. We conclude that the power dynamic experienced by Indigenous youth at the community level and the legal-political relationship between Canada and Indigenous nations must be addressed to achieve and ensure the democratic participation and representation of Indigenous youth.

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The Meaning of Political Participation for Indigenous Youth

Introduction

This paper addresses two questions that are central to understanding the meaning of political participation among Indigenous youth in Canada: What does political engagement mean to young Indigenous people today, and What are the implications of young Indigenous people's attitudes and beliefs regarding political participation for Canadian institutions?

Existing research on Indigenous youth participation in elections is scarce, consisting only in political party briefing materials, a brief section outlining youth perspectives in the 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Royal Commission, 1996: 147-197) and a few conference papers and consultation reports prepared for Elections Canada. In fact, there is not a single scholarly work focusing on Indigenous youth and political participation in any form, either in traditional Indigenous governance or in electoral processes. Treading entirely new ground, our research focus and method was influenced by the only academic work that has some relationship to the issue of Indigenous engagement with electoral politics, the work of Jim Silver and colleagues on Aboriginal voting in Winnipeg. In the book *In Their Own Voices – Building Urban Aboriginal Communities*, Silver dedicates its fourth chapter to “Aboriginal Electoral Participation.” The questions used by Silver's interviewers, Ed and Cyril Keeper included these (Silver et al., 2006: 113):

- What do you think when you hear the word “politics”?
- Do you ever vote in mainstream elections?
- Why or why not?
- Do urban Aboriginal people generally vote in mainstream elections?
- Why or why not?

In Silver's study, 40 people were interviewed; of this 7 were youth between the ages of 18 and 25. It is necessary to note that the youth perspectives are not separated from the total sample. Silver and colleagues actively sought Aboriginal participation by approaching Aboriginal organizations, the University of Winnipeg's Aboriginal Students' Centre, and prior acquaintances and strangers in their homes, on the street and at public events (Silver et al., 2006: 113). Based on the interviews, the authors argue that urban Aboriginals tend not to vote because of social exclusion and a sense that mainstream politicians do not reach out to them (Silver et al., 2006: 122). Participants in the study reported that they would participate if politicians, political parties and their platforms enticed Aboriginal voters (Silver et al., 2006: 124). The authors believe that increased Aboriginal electoral participation is inevitable but acknowledge that its ultimate benefit to the majority of urban Aboriginal people “remains an open question. The result could be just another form of elite politics” (Silver et al., 2006: 132).

Methodology

In December 2006, Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) approached us with the invitation to conduct a qualitative study on Indigenous youth participation in elections. Recognizing the visible research gaps in this field, our research team took lessons from Silver's experience and determined that we needed to actively seek Indigenous youth participation. To accomplish this, our research team drew upon our personal and professional networks to identify potential participants, between January and March 2007, who were willing to discuss their political involvement and perspectives. Our research was conducted through personal interviews and focus group sessions with a broad sampling of Indigenous youth from a variety of urban and community contexts. The interviews sought to engage the youth on their perceptions of political identity, citizenship and political activism, while also exploring their relationship with the state and its electoral processes. The research was conducted entirely through qualitative interviews to assess the beliefs and attitudes of Indigenous youth.

Overall, 29 interviews were held with Indigenous youth ranging in age from 17 to 25. All interviews were conducted in Victoria, Regina or Ottawa, yet the youth themselves came from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario. Youth were also interviewed from the three internal regions of Nunavut, a necessary responsibility as Nunavut's geographical space is large and holds a diverse range of political experiences. In all the interviews, the youth were asked the following questions:

- What is "politics"?
- What does citizenship mean to you?
- Which political activities are important and which do you participate in?

Questions were also asked related to participation in state processes such as band councils, school councils, school boards, rural or urban municipalities, and provincial, territorial and/or federal elections.

The majority of interviews involved youth with whom we had some prior acquaintance, if not held an existing relationship. Most participants were attending one of three post-secondary institutions that our research team members were employed within: First Nations University in Regina, the Indigenous Governance Programs at University of Victoria or the Nunavut Sivuniksavut program in Ottawa. However, five Indigenous youth participants were approached separately: three interviews were conducted with Indigenous youth who were residing in Saskatoon; one interviewee was the son of a First Nations University student in Regina; and one interviewee was a former University of Victoria student who lived on-reserve in British Columbia. Several important segments of Indigenous peoples in Canada were not included: Métis youth and Indigenous youth from several provinces and territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, Quebec, the Maritime provinces, and Newfoundland and Labrador). Therefore, our results are not intended, nor should they be perceived, as representative of Indigenous youth across the country.

The strength of our interview experience is that, throughout these interviews, the youth were generally willing to engage in political discussions and expressed their ability to be critical of their own political situation. They offered their own understanding and experience within political discourse by drawing on their own personal and community experience. Therefore, in following its research design, this paper will also focus on, and privilege, the voices of Indigenous youth.

Our method successfully used opportunity sampling, which draws upon the “knowledge and attributes of the researcher to identify a sample, for example, using a researcher’s local knowledge of an area on which to base a study or using a researcher’s past experiences to contact participants ...” (Brady, 2006: 205). Opportunity sampling is especially useful for research that involves marginalized groups. “Often groups such as these are not collectively identified in society by any agency and therefore no sampling frame exists. In such cases opportunity sampling may be the only viable technique from which to create a sample” (Brady, 2006: 6).

Voices of Indigenous Youth

The interviews revealed a wide spectrum of opinion and experience. Despite differences between Indigenous communities and nations, and in geographical locations, ages and education levels, the youth consistently insisted that they were speaking only to their own experience. With this being said, there was substantial overlap among their statements. We begin with the voice of Chris Standing, who is from the Dakota Nation and is 22 years old.¹ He is exceptional in his strength of tone and clarity, yet his words are representative of the cynicism shared by some of the youth we interviewed.

What does “politics” mean to you?

For me, it does not mean anything (laughter) because the politicians are middle-aged. For Indigenous youth, it does not mean much. Especially when the Canadian government is made up of middle-aged white men. The youth don’t really see results in politics and they don’t really see how it affects them. And then they go to Indian politics and it is kind of the same thing. It’s an old boys’ club of middle-aged Indian men who are our uncles, dads or grandfathers. I think that’s how I am going to answer that question.

What does “citizenship” mean?

I am not sure how good an answer I can give. When I think of citizenship, I think of the word “Aboriginal.” Because I am a Dakota, eh, and I use “Aboriginal” as meaning all lumped into one. It’s like we are not really counted. Sometimes you wonder why they do these studies on citizenship but don’t do anything socially for Indian people or for any oppressed people in Canada. For the word “citizenship,” I’ll say that I am not proud to be from this country.

¹ In agreeing to an interview, each youth signed a consent form. In doing this, the majority of the youth agreed to being quoted publicly, while some did not.

What about “political activities”?

When I was growing up and going to school, we were always informed about what was going on with elections with the Conservatives and Liberals. We were always told who was in power. I think that young people are informed somewhat, but for Native people, not as much. Some of these parties, like the Conservatives, Liberals or the NDP, they have this lip service that they are going to help Aboriginal people in Canada in their platform just to get votes. It doesn't seem that even when they are in power that there is much getting done, especially in the cities. Like here in Regina, there is nothing going on for young people. I think young people need to be more informed about the Canadian government and what can be improved or changed to benefit young people. Those are the things that I think would be good to engage the young people or youth.

Have you ever voted?

Since I became more politically aware a few years ago, I haven't voted, mostly because I don't believe in the colonial style of government with elections because elections have been imposed on our people over their own way of governing themselves traditionally through a council of elders, clan mothers, hereditary chiefs. Young people were groomed to be leaders, but the election system seems to me to be ambitious only for yourself and your own family to get higher up. All of these good things they say they would do are only to get somewhere higher in status. I don't vote in Canadian elections, or municipal, civic, territorial elections. I don't participate in Indian Affairs elections on our reserves. I think young people should know about our traditions of how we governed ourselves back in the day according to each territory.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I don't know ... young people know that there is something not right with the way things are going. You see some kids on the street they are using dark clothes. You see people listening to hip-hop; they've been shunned from society. If there was real equality in Canada, there would be people that are against it – in music groups or arts – people who are against government.

Chris articulates the alienation shared by many Indigenous youth from all levels of government, including “Aboriginal” government. This sense of alienation from Canadian and Aboriginal political processes emerged frequently as a theme during our interviews, and this alienation either inspires or deters the youth's participation within the electoral system. The youth often expressed a dismissive attitude toward political leadership at all levels, while simultaneously holding an awareness of flaws in representational claims of government. In response to these feelings and realities, Chris seeks the regeneration of traditional identity and governance.

It is necessary to acknowledge that not all youth came to Chris's conclusion in the same manner. Many youth expressed points similar to Chris in different ways. This is well represented in the discussions surrounding political identities, more specifically in discussions on youth's understanding of citizenship and their relationship with the Canadian identity. The conversations held among the Inuit youth show a general trend, a willingness to identify as Canadian, within the Canadian political context. This trend represents the political reality of Inuit identity, which sits within the political spectrum between Canada and Indigenous identities, both in discourse and perception. The inspiring factors for the Inuit youth were practical, as shared by Jeela Maniapik, an Inuk youth who grew up in various cities outside her home territory of Nunavut:

Canada is my main [identity] because I move around a lot. I mean, I also consider myself from Nunavut but I haven't lived there for a while, so I'm just Canadian.

This practicality was represented in a broader sense, as expressed by Tommy Akulukjuk from Pangnirtung:

I think we just need to feel that we are part of something big, and Canada reaches out to the world, whereas Inuit as a population, we can only reach so far. We all want to be part of something big.

Tommy's point is an important one and speaks to a presence of alienation in another sense – and the active need to socially be identified within the Canadian context. However, when asked to further elaborate on their point, the youth begin to question their own broad claim. In his interview, Tommy went on to argue:

I can't see myself confined within imaginary boundaries or jurisdiction. I can't really imagine myself as so different from the people in NWT or Yukon. I don't think there is so much difference from the people over there – even in Alaska with the Inuit over there. If I was asked what citizenship was now, I would turn it to my native ancestry; I am more a citizen of Inuit. That's kind of weird for us Inuit because we were never asked to be Canadians; out of nowhere we became Canadians.

The youth understand political boundaries and legal definitions of citizenship, but the maintenance of an identity remains solidly within the cultural and historical boundaries of their indigeneity. In other words, the Indigenous nation remains the locus of their personal and political identity. However, the concept of nationhood has been reconstructed or reformed by politics in the modern period. After acknowledging the complexity of situating oneself as a citizen of Canada and an Indigenous person, Tara Williamson, an Anishinaabe/Nehiyow, stated as well: "Nationhood is really important, but ultimately it's about where you are from."

Motivations to Participate in Electoral Politics: Why Vote?

There are Indigenous youth who vote. Their motivations for doing so are consistent with those of mainstream youth in Canada but tend toward issues specific to Indigenous communities. Four young First Nations women, from the Cree, Sauteaux, Dene and Dakota nations, all shared similar motivations for voting in their interviews:

When it comes to my reserve, I think it is really important because you are voting on people who are going to be representing you and leading your community. So, I think it is really important because you want to know that the people you are voting for are educated and have the right background. If you don't vote, then someone who might get in there might mess up a lot of things in the community or not have the same perspective as the community, so voting gives you a bit of a voice as to who will represent you.

Cree, age 25

I think voting is important for people to gain rights, keep rights, control education, health care for a better life way, an equal life way.

Sauteaux, age 23

But recently I learned about how it can affect our treaties. So I tell my friends to vote as well. My friends and I don't really know much about how things run or which parties support certain things. Thinking of my friends too, we don't really have a good understanding of government and politics.

Dene, age 24

You don't want to support the way everything is done because it is in a white way, but at the same time you don't want to not vote. Because if you don't vote, you cannot really change what is happening. Because people you don't want to win the election, if they get in, you didn't do anything about it.

Dakota-Sauteaux, age 18

Twenty-four-year-old Tara Williamson (Anishinaabe and Nehiyow) speaks on the meaning of politics:

That's a very big question, politics, for me being an Indigenous person. It's a lot more complicated than it probably is for non-Indigenous youth because there are so many different levels and intersectionalities of politics for us. There is Canadian politics that goes on, that is very far removed from a lot of our experiences, at least in our connection to them, not necessarily in their everyday effects. There are band politics. There is Indian politics generally, in a broader sense. There is identity politics. I am not sure exactly how to answer that question, but I think it has a lot of different connotations.

I see the Canadian state as being visitors, maybe they have kind of overstayed their welcome but they are visitors nonetheless, and absolutely Indigenous peoples should have a say in what happens on their territory. Absolutely. I mean, if somebody walked into your house and started doing something that you did not want them to do, you would ask them to leave. Now, I am not saying that by voting that I am asking Canadians to leave, but it's a tool that can be used to influence relations that will go on. Ideally, if there were political parties with a platform that would admit the total illegitimacy of violation of the rule of law, I would vote for them and that would be the best solution. But seeing that that is probably not going to happen anytime soon, the incremental step towards that is to pick the visitors you want. These people are the most likely ... even the lesser of two evils, if you want to be cynical about it.

The Indigenous youth who did vote argued it was the importance of representation that guided their participation. Indigenous youth voted to support candidates who held similar values and beliefs as they did. Many youth argued that supporting, encouraging and voting in Aboriginal candidates was paramount. Yet, voting was also seen as a preventive strategy – as a means to prevent people with dramatically different values and beliefs from representing them. Finally, youth also argued that voting was a part of the larger political system that they existed within, as expressed by 19-year-old Anguti Johnston from Iglulik: “If you want a pop, you don't have to vote for anyone, but if you want spending on education, you need to vote.”

Some youth who were able to articulate the importance of voting admitted that they did not always cast ballots themselves. These youth offered straightforward reasons for their actions: “I just wasn't interested,” “I didn't think it would make a difference,” “I didn't really care” or “I didn't pay much attention to the campaigns and stuff, so I didn't think I would feel right voting because I wouldn't know what I was voting for.” The link between understanding the role of voting and the actual practice of voting is not always direct. Just like other youth in Canada, Indigenous youth participation rates are low. In Howe's study of the patterns in British Columbia elections among the general population, he calculated that the turnout rate among youth aged 18-24 in the 2001 provincial election was 28% (Howe, 2007: 30). This percentage was based on all eligible voters rather than just registered voters. In the 2005 provincial election, the turnout in this age group remained low, but did increase to 35%.

Reasons for Withholding Participation: Why Not Vote?

Other Indigenous youth expressed deliberate reasons for not participating in Canada's electoral systems at the reserve, municipal, provincial/territorial or federal levels. Some youth chose not to vote because they did not identify as Canadian and withdrew from Canadian electoral processes. Many youth understood their lack of interest and formulated a deeper conceptual argument, highlighting the difference between direct participation in electoral systems and what may be called indirect participation through channels, organizations and modes of decision making that can be described as “traditional governance.”

Both in theory and in practice, many Indigenous youth focus their attention on traditional governance, and most do so to the exclusion of Canadian institutions. Their reasons for rejecting Canadian electoral participation are rooted in historical experiences at the family and community level, as well as philosophical or political understandings based on critical readings of the Indigenous-state relationship. This observation is supported by the results of a 2004 think tank sponsored by the First Nations Governance Centre, which brought together 30 politically engaged youth from across the country (First Nations Governance Centre, 2004). In this forum, and over the course of a two-day session to identify key issues that needed to be addressed in Indigenous politics, the need to discuss representation in the electoral systems was not raised. Yet, the youth did identify traditional governance and the laws of the true hereditary chiefs of the nations as a specific concern.

The following interview with two young Indigenous women displays the attitude and thinking behind their decision to withdraw from Canadian elections and to channel their energy into traditional forms of governance and into direct political action. It shows that, while Indigenous youth may have been active voters, their decision to not vote is the result of their growing distrust of the representative systems. Nineteen-year-old Menetia Elliot from the Saanich Nation and 25-year-old Vanessa Watts from the Anishinaabe Nation speak below:

What do you think politics means to Indigenous youth?

Vanessa: “I think it has become more reactionary now because of our own political leadership – it’s not just about reacting to Canadian leadership or white leadership but also to Indigenous leadership. I think that some of our politics have become complacent, so I think that youth now have the hard task of not only fighting with the white system but also fighting with our own people, with our own leadership, so that we can be on the same page. I think that it is more of a struggle now because our leadership has become so involved in negotiating and compromising that now youth want to undo some of that to create a new kind of Indigenous politics again. So that is the first thing that comes to mind: we are fighting on many more levels than in the 60s when things were just starting and people were just starting to get a voice and it was geared towards white leadership and white power and breaking that down. Now, it’s about breaking down Aboriginal power as well and white power.”

Menetia: “The politics of Indigenous youth? Really, I can only speak from a Saanich point of view. I’m 19, I don’t have much experience, but the way I see it is that it’s starting now within the community. I agree with what Vanessa is saying, that we are not trying to fight the whole entire white government system. We’re picking it apart from inside by what we can do personally. In my community, it is just starting up with the youth. My Dad said to me the other day that his generation sat around and talked about it all their lives but, ‘I can see your generation is going to do something.’ For me, it was kind of scary because that put all the weight on us. But really, we are looking forward to it at the same time.”

Vanessa: “I agree with Menetia when she talks about how we have to start doing it on a personal level and coming back to ourselves first before we start effecting change on a family scale or a community scale. We have to start directing ourselves, be accountable to ourselves and our families, and then that will start to effect real political change, I think, in the communities. Yeah, heck yeah!”

What does “citizenship” mean?

Vanessa: “I think it means being proud of where you come from, your Indigenous nation, your Indigenous community. It also means battling the imposed citizenship that is placed upon you. And I think that by embracing your own citizenship and your own values and cultural beliefs that you are fighting that imposed citizenship. So, again, like you said, starting from the inside, you don’t necessarily have to fight Canada saying, ‘I am not Canadian,’ but if you say, ‘I am Anishinaabe’ or ‘I am Onkwehonwe’ or whatever you are, then that does fight it just by empowering that part of yourself.”

Menetia: “That is one of the craziest things for me to talk about because I don’t know where I really stand on it. When I grew up, I was Saanich, and that was it. To start thinking about how I contribute to that imposed citizenship, taking funding and all that stuff really gets on my nerves, but I still do it. It’s something where I think I am lost right now because when people ask me, I think that I am Saanich and that is it, but how much do I take from the government, the imposed system, you know? People ask me about that and I don’t know because I do contribute from both sides. I do live as a Saanich person because I don’t live any other way ...”

Vanessa: “This reminds me ... I applied for my passport last month for a trip to the States for a concert, and but I felt weird because now I have to carry this thing around. I felt weird about it and kind of struggled with it, but I am going to this concert, right! And when you are talking about taking funding, I have accepted funding before from different institutions. I think it is how you use that funding – what you are using it for, if you are becoming more educated and taking it back to your community. There’s a way to manipulate things sometimes, and why shouldn’t we be strategic?”

In your view, what political activities do Indigenous youth participate in?

Menetia: “We are getting drawn into direct action because they want to move. We don’t want to waste time. We see our parents’ generation just sit around and wait and wait and wait. So we are at the point now where a lot of the ‘issues’ that we are facing are ones we can see directly in our own lives, like violence. We are trying to fix the things we can see directly.”

Vanessa: “Menetia and I were talking about this the other day. It’s become apparent to me that our artwork has become political, which I think is a really good thing. It’s not the same as direct action, which I agree with, but it does make people question to what extent they are participating, and so I think that art

is a really important way to empower youth. And I think that it's a political activity. Direct action, yeah, I agree with Menetia on that."

Do you ever vote in elections?

Vanessa: (laughter) "That sounds accusatory! Yes, I have voted ever since I was allowed to vote, and always voted for the NDP because I hated the Liberals and really hated the Conservatives. I liked the NDP because I thought they should have more power and they were more on our side. That's how I viewed it for a long time, until a few years ago when I finally stopped voting. I knew that the NDP would never get in, and even if they did get in not much would change. I saw that even if the NDP got in, the status quo may change slightly but not that much because they would not be around very long if they did make some extreme change. So what's the point? I don't want to participate in it – it's not there for us. It's only there for us as far as to tell us what to do. So that's it. But, yeah, I did vote a few times."

What types of elections did you vote in? Municipal, provincial, federal, band council?

Vanessa: "Just provincial and federal. Sometimes I would rally for the Liberals to get people to vote for the Liberals, and then secretly vote NDP – it was some really dumb political strategizing. But I wanted to do anything to beat the Conservatives. Yeah."

Menetia: "I had one lady say to me that she *wants* the Conservatives to get in. She was a native person and she was strong. But she said that because if they get in they will take away everything we have and we will be on our own again and have nothing left to lose. So it all does not even matter in the end anyway."

Vanessa: "That's what happened with the First Nations Governance Act. They tried to ram another Indian Act down the Indians' throats, and everyone went up in arms. It's when something extreme like that is done that people who are usually kind of trying to keep the waters calm, including our own leadership, who half the time are just smiling, actually get pissed off. It's nice to see. But it sucks that it has to come down to that, threats from the Conservative government."

Anything else to add?

Vanessa: "It's not my country. I am not voting. And Ontario is not my province. I don't need to vote in that election. It just seems like a waste of time to me. That's not a type of direct action. Unless you have an overwhelmingly high number of Indians in one province and then vote in some radical. I would be down with that! But that is not the case. I don't vote because it does not effect change."

Menetia: “Yeah, I don’t see the point. So I try to keep myself away from something that just makes me angry. I don’t want to be part of it.”

As expressed in the above interview, Indigenous youth who do not vote may be rooted in understandings transmitted from Indigenous culture and choosing to not participate as a matter of principle. Yet the same interview also shows a pragmatic calculation is being made that the Indigenous vote is unlikely to have an impact “unless you have an overwhelmingly high number of Indians in one province.” However, it is worth highlighting that, although the Inuit participants reside in a territory where Inuit are the majority of the population in the territory, our findings argue that this did not translate to higher participation rates in voting among Inuit youth – Inuit youth were not more likely to vote than the other Indigenous participants we interviewed.

Alienated and disillusioned with existing electoral processes, alternatives for Indigenous youth include traditional governance, radical politics and direct actions. They are actively contemplating their relationship with these systems and consciously rejecting the practices that legitimize Canadian authority over Indigenous peoples.

Criticisms of Government: Canadian and Aboriginal Systems

In explaining her reasons for not participating in the electoral process, Karen Flaherty of Iqaluit argued: “Politicians are people that talk about stuff that I don’t know anything about.” The Indigenous youth interviewed often questioned and criticized the potential and ability of politicians, and their political system, to assist or strengthen Indigenous communities. The youth argued for an overhaul in their relationship with the political systems. We contend that this represents a shift in perspective from previous generations, where engagement and representation of Indigenous interests in the federal/provincial systems was the purpose politics for Indigenous people.

Tommy, speaking about his relationship to various levels of government, shows pragmatism, but it is rooted again in his sense of responsibility to the Inuit:

I always participate in Inuit organizations because I am supposed to be receiving benefits from that 1.4 billion dollars, and I feel I have more of a duty to that than federal or territorial governments. My ancestors signed away our rights, and they weren’t defined, so I am going to protect my rights as much as possible, so I’ll rather vote in these Inuit organizations more than the people they fight with – well not fight with, but disagree with – like territorial government or federals. Inuit organizations always have to defend themselves, so I guess I like that kind of challenge – we always have to fight for something, and I like that idea. So if I am going to vote for someone, I’m going to vote for someone who is fighting for my rights, my sole rights, and that is what Inuit organizations are supposed to do.

And, on the specific question of representation with the federal system, Tommy recognizes the injustice of the situation of Indigenous people in Canada and the futility of making substantial changes through electoral politics:

There is only one person representing us, and we get to see her every four years to at least one community. How much accountability do we have? Or how much can she bring to one fifth of Canada? Just that idea, man, I have one lady representing one fifth of Canada? It's like playing hockey, and the other team has five players and a goalie, and all I have is a goalie, and all I can do is to protect pucks from getting in the goal. Your simple job is to protect the puck from going in. You can't do much else, you can't have offence, you can't have defence, all you have is a goalie. You can save. Even the goalie is a defence, you are defending something. We never have offence. Once in a while when the players for the other side get tired, maybe our goalie can go up there and get a shot, but what are the chances of a goalie scoring on a net? I think when you put it this way, you really recognize that we are the underdog. And I don't think people think about that enough.

The youth argue that the political system is rooted in identifiable and undesirable principles, and do not wish to see themselves as part of that system, as articulated by Corey Standing:

It's a big popularity contest. It does not really matter what your belief systems are – maybe you will get one or two once in a while that actually believe in something – that actually want to get something done. “If you run I will help you with this and get you this ...” It's all cutting deals and to me it's a lot of bullshit.

This argument is validated by research from Michael Kinnear on the role of parties and the lack of representation of Indigenous interests and issues by mainstream political platforms, etc. (Kinnear, 2003):

The fact that turnout has recently declined across Canada, even more so among Aboriginal electors, raises the question of whether the parties are carrying out this important function to the same degree as they once did. The current atmosphere in Canada of reduced voter interest and turnout among the population as a whole could signal a trend to even lower voter participation among First Nations people. Regardless of the exact causes of the decline, however, one thing is certain: democracy loses when a significant and growing segment of the population, in effect, votes with its feet.

Many Indigenous youth are making the conscious decision to walk away from the electoral process. For youth who do make this decision, it is a response that offers some form of action, as it frees Indigenous youth from the restrictions and limitations of the process and allows them to refocus their political expectation and energy within their communities and nations, to focus on the “politics at home.” (Aaron Tootoosis, Cree, age 25)

How to Empower Indigenous Youth

Indigenous youth are seeking supports and sites for political empowerment. The youth we interviewed were enthusiastic in their discussions on how to encourage and facilitate political participation among Indigenous youth, and they articulated strategies for empowerment. These discussions did not call for electoral or representative reform (i.e. the need for proportional representation) and did not focus on strategies on how to become better voters. The discussions surrounding empowerment were framed in broader terms. Overall, we have found this perspective is largely consistent with the findings for youth overall in the general population, as reflected in the recorded proceedings of the “Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation” Youth Workshop held by CPRN in March 2007 as part of the Democratic Renewal Series research initiative. Youth argued that, to feel empowered individually and culturally, they must be provided with a sense of agency in their lives.

We argue that Indigenous youth are seeking strategies to construct a personal identity that reconciles their indigeneity with their place in Canada, and the world. This goal transcends their personal sphere and impacts their view of politics. Like young people everywhere, Indigenous youth feel frustrated and burdened by the need to resolve what they see as previous generations’ mistakes in terms of cultural choices, political decisions, and actions or non-actions by their elders. This is especially true with respect to the state of their communities and the relationship between Canada and its original peoples. Simply stated, in the wider scope of a youth’s life with the pressures they experience or feel, politics are a turnoff. There is little incentive for youth to think about, much less engage as, political actors in the standard ways government expects citizens to participate.

Indigenous youth face an additional obstacle to engagement relative to youth in the general society in that, for most Indigenous youth – whether in Indigenous communities or urban settings – there is no opportunity for an authentic voice to be reflected within the decision-making processes. The colonial foundation of Canada’s relationship to Indigenous people is acutely felt; youth in all settings are struggling to articulate their awareness of the structure of injustice. The CPRN workshop also indicated a general awareness of the special problem of Indigenous people in democracy. Canadian youth recognize that Indigenous perspectives are not represented in the general culture, media or government and that there are limited opportunities for engagement to counter this lack of representation. This set of observations confirms that young people are clear-eyed in recognizing that Indigenous peoples in Canada are marginalized and misrepresented. But Indigenous youth themselves are keenly aware of the situation’s roots and express an implicit understanding of the loss of land, cultural dislocation and official hostility that have historically been at the core of the Indigenous experience in Canada. While Canadian youth stated that patience was necessary, Indigenous youth are impatient and want action and change. This is indicative of the fact that Indigenous youth are acutely aware of the impacts and consequences of bad decision making and mismanagement. Many youth are able to articulate their own and their communities’ experience in terms of colonialism, and they are beginning to look for action within their own communities.

The Canadian political scientist Alan Cairns has summarized the effect of this colonial awareness upon the perspective and attitude of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Cairns, 2003):

A colonial interpretation of the past, especially when it leads to an anti-colonial nationalism, acts as a barrier to seeing citizenship as an instrument of emancipation. Escape from a colonial past is normally seen as an act of collective empowerment or emancipation of a nation, not as an aggregation of individual citizen memberships in the community that previously kept one's people out as lacking the appropriate credentials. Anti-colonial nationalism increases the social distance between its adherents and non-Aboriginal Canadians. It focuses on the maximum autonomy possible for self-governing Aboriginal nations and deflects attention from the shared rule dimension of federalism. It leads to a weak conception of Canadian citizenship, and to a limited empathy for electoral systems that accord primacy to individual voters ... The nation-to-nation image and a colonial analysis both lead in the same direction – to a relative de-legitimization of Parliament as presently constituted, to antipathy for pan-Canadian citizenship, to a stress on difference and otherness, and to separate goals for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

Such arguments are supported within political research. In 2004, Elections Canada held a round table on Aboriginal youth and the federal electoral process (Elections Canada, 2004). From this event, Elections Canada identified and listed the problems raised by youth. The issues raised have been generalized to establish a set of issues around Indigenous youth engagement and to argue for strategies that encourage participation in electoral processes, while acknowledging the practices of traditional governance:

- Denial of political representation and voting rights to Indigenous people until recently
- Anger and disconnect with government institutions
- Lack of trust in political parties and politicians
- Non-acceptance of Canadian citizenship
- Socio-economic marginalization of Indigenous peoples

There is little evidence of any concerted effort by the responsible government agencies to respond to these issues. Instead, the identification of these issues is continually supported in lieu of any concentrated effort for other strategies. Ladner and McCrossan (2007: 3) advocate a concerted effort to get Indigenous people to participate in the electoral process and argue that many jurisdictions lack the institutional capacity, particularly finances and personnel, and/or the political will to engage in dedicated outreach and education programs. They recognize 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.

Yet, Ladner and McCrossan go on to recommend holding round tables with community groups and involving high-profile First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in these campaigns (such as by showing Phil Fontaine in his “Indians Vote” T-shirt). Other recommendations include conducting empirical research in Aboriginal communities to address electoral orientations,

attitudes and motivations, and increasing the size and effectiveness (especially in urban areas) of existing programs.

These are not new strategies, nor are they actively seeking Indigenous perspective and participation. Their goal is limited to increasing the number of Indigenous peoples participating in the electoral system without fundamentally altering how the processes are currently supported. Such strategies do not offer any actions beyond voting, nor do they increase engagement on political issues at the community level. They are recycled public relations campaigns that do not seek to actively engage people in the political system. By not offering new strategies, the status quo of non-activity and apathy is continually supported.

In the same vein of attempting to understand what is necessary to encourage Indigenous participation, Howe's (2007: 5) review of existing outreach programs of the sort advocated by Ladner and McCrossan provides an overview of the efforts under way among the general population in all Canadian provinces and selected countries, with particular focus on the United Kingdom, Australia and British Columbia. These initiatives mirror those already in place at the federal level in Canada with some variation: online registration, national civics curriculum at the secondary school level, elections agencies to support teachers in educating students about electoral processes, and events designed to familiarize students with voting processes and democratic procedures.

Once again, these are not new strategies. Recommending such measures to increase Indigenous youth participation is rooted in the assumption that Indigenous youth need to be educated into participation. A concentrated focus on such education programs further privileges and legitimizes state electoral and representative systems, and argues that it is Indigenous perspective that is limiting Indigenous participation in these processes. This is an incorrect assessment. Howe (2007: 8) differentiates between *intermittent non-voters*, where the aim of reform is to facilitate voting among those who already have a certain motivation to vote, and *habitual non-voters*, where the goal is to motivate voting among those not currently disposed to participate. Clearly, for Indigenous people, it is in the area of motivation – not facilitation – that effort must be made.

If the goal is strictly defined as increasing the voting in Canadian elections, then there is very little anyone can do to change the Indigenous situation because Indigenous youth are becoming increasingly alienated from institutions and the state as the locus of their identity. If the goal, on the other hand, is defined in broader terms as encouraging political engagement and participation in decision-making systems, then the path is clear: decolonizing efforts and supporting the re-establishment of channels for the involvement of Indigenous youth that fits culturally with their sense of identity and their notions of collective identity rooted in their indigeneity.

With this latter goal in mind, strategies have been developed that can encourage political participation in meaningful terms by Indigenous youth. Some of Ladner and McCrossan's (2007: 23) descriptions of the New Zealand Maori experience – drawing on the New Zealand Electoral Commission's research in 2006 – provides insight into viable strategies here in Canada. These four reflect the perspective we have gathered in speaking with Indigenous youth on these questions:

1. Low levels of participation are not about being Indigenous; they are about poverty and education levels and the different age profile.
2. Indigenous people are strongly engaged in traditional governance, just not in national elections.
3. Indigenous voter turnout is lower because they have strong Indigenous identities and so are more involved in Indigenous organizations and traditional governance and not involved in national politics.
4. Indigenous people are interested in politics but do not take part because they think their voice is not heard or of value.

Building up the confidence and identity of Indigenous youth was a major theme in the discussions we had with Indigenous youth. Below is a broad sampling of the recommendations brought forward by the youth themselves. These recommendations, at their core, connect identity, political awareness and education:

I think young people should know about our traditions of how we governed ourselves back in the day according to each territory.

Chris Standing, Dakota-Cree, age 22

I think we need to be given a chance to build an opinion, to not be afraid to speak an opinion, because that's something that took me a long time to build up – to learn how to speak out on what you believe in.

Ceporah Mearns, Pangnirtung, age 20

Maybe in high school there could be a class similar to what we take here, contemporary issues, just to open the eyes of younger people to current events.

Anguti Johnston, Iglulik, age 19

Indigenous youth require opportunities to engage in activities that privilege Indigenous histories and experiences, and they stress the need for these activities to be accessible to Indigenous communities as well as formal education institutions. Also, Indigenous youth are articulating their need to critically assess their relationship with political systems. For this to occur, the colonial relationship between the state and Indigenous nations must be de-constructed, but also, the contemporary reality of this relationship must become more widely and better understood. Doing this will build a critical awareness of the factors influencing the current reality of life in Indigenous communities both on and off-reserve, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. Current education campaigns fail to address this need.

Our elders still have a huge part in what happens, they always have a say, they are still looked upon for guidance, and their views are very much respected. Maybe elders aren't so much active, but they are looked upon for guidance.

Mishael Gordon, Rankin Inlet, age 24

I remember hearing someone say once that everyone in the resistance movement had canes. And I think that was true because it is like – it comes from the old people. So that's what I mean fundamentally and what that means – hopefully if

it all goes right – it could be any number of activities but as long as it starts there – that means resistance.

Tara Williamson, Anishinaabe and Nehiyow, age 24

Elders are very much respected.

JR Ittimangak, Kugaaruk, age 20

Since I became more politically aware, I haven't voted in a few years. Mostly because I don't believe in the colonial style of government with elections because elections have been imposed on our people over their own way of governing themselves traditionally through a council of elders, clan mothers, hereditary chiefs.

Chris Standing, Dakota-Cree, age 22

Educational opportunities and avenues for political participation must respect the practices and principles of traditional Indigenous governance, which include respecting the role and authorities of elders, clan mothers and hereditary chiefs, as well as the forms of consultation and decision making inherent in traditional systems.

Well, I remember it being suggested to me once at campus – there was not a lot of resistance or things going on – and I remember thinking that I don't think that's true. It's as simple as having a speaker in, having everyone bring their own food and having a feast. I think those things are, because of who we are, become political and are political. It starts there. There is also the more common idea I think from the notions of resistance like blockades and sit-ins. But I think that it starts with a feast and it starts with having a conversation with your peers and asking elders. I think that is the resistance movement.

Tara Williamson, Anishinaabe and Nehiyow, age 24

I think that art is a really important way to empower youth and I think that it's a political activity.

Vanessa Watts, Anishinaabe, age 25

We have to tie our own politics back to our spirituality and healing that huge fracture. Another thing I wanted to add is language. It's important to our politics and our goals toward self-government to exercise our sovereignty as a nation of people. We need to regain our identities, our language, and our self-determination.

Aaron Tootoosis, Cree, age 25

Cultural activities include the people in the community, and it does not include the government. Inuit used to work together before the government started, when qabulunaaq's [white people] started coming up north. It wasn't politics before then with the whole territory because Inuit knew how to take care of themselves, how to live their own way.

Vicki Gibbons, Coral Harbour, age 20

Indigenous youth understand the linkages between cultural life and political life, and that participating in a wide range of cultural and spiritual activities provides young people with means for political expression.

I know there is a lot of politics in the Student Association and finding people who want to represent the students. That gives us an idea of politics right there – just involving the students. It gives an idea of what is important when you are representing people. So when the students sign up to join the SA to be the vice-president or the treasurer, so they have to go up there and represent what they are going to do for us. It gives us an idea of what it means to be involved in politics – how you have to represent other people, having to be a good speaker and to understand different cultures. So I think that ties into politics.

Natasha Gladue, Cree, age 25

I think I was more involved in what happened in the community once I became more involved in the youth committee – I saw a lot of potential for change.

Dianne Iyago, Baker Lake, age 20

Youth-focused groups, student associations and sports groups need to be recognized as important institutions in the structure of young people's social and political lives. These groups build up their confidence and empower them as individuals, connect them to a wider community and, in some cases, are an avenue for cultural regeneration as well. The experience of youth has proven that, if they are involved in such activities, they are more aware and involved in their community realities.

[Inuit] youth need a better understanding of the politics of Nunavut before they are going to understand politics anywhere else.

Misheal Gordon, Rankin Inlet, age 24

I think activities that are grassroots and motivated by Indigenous youth are probably the most empowering and provide the most learning in a lot of ways, at least definitely as a starting point. That's where a lot of us get our first taste of what it means to be involved in the grassroots stuff!

Tara Williamson, Anishinaabe and Nehiyow, age 24

You don't have to vote to be a part of a community, because you can do other things around that don't always have to do with voting and politicians. You can volunteer, or if you work somewhere you still talk to other people, you are still a part of the community in that way.

Karen Flaherty, Iqaluit, age 19

Indigenous youth are searching out spaces where their voices, opinions and experiences will be heard and where they can achieve the power to influence the direction of their lives and that of the communities they live within. From our consultations, it is apparent that Indigenous youth will continue to focus and direct their political energy and enthusiasm at the local level as the main site of their political engagement.

Once again, although we are using the term “Indigenous youth” as a general category, our research has found no absolute consistency across regions and nations that would justify the positing of a unified “Indigenous” or “Aboriginal” category in terms of political perspective or model of participation. This is not surprising, considering that the Indigenous youth we interviewed offered perspectives that reflected their particular cultural environments and individual experiences and varied substantially based on forms and levels of education possessed by the youth. The research indicated that, although some Indigenous youth do participate in electoral processes, other Indigenous youth favour political participation in non-conventional and indirect ways. The youth are seeking their space in public discourse and in democratic arenas. It is apparent that they are seeking means, methods and instruments to generate real effects in their communities to bring back the “action” in politics.

In summary, we believe that there are no strategic options within the existing framework of Canadian electoral processes that can significantly address the concerns raised in our interviews. The situation can, however, be altered by changing the framework of Indigenous political life by addressing the underlying structural causes of Indigenous alienation. We conclude that the overall power dynamic – currently oppressive and reflective of colonial relations– experienced by Indigenous youth at the community level and in the legal-political relationship between Canada and Indigenous nations must be rectified to achieve and ensure the democratic participation and representation of Indigenous youth in Canada.

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