



The Meaning of Political Participation for Indigenous Youth

Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation

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Executive Summary

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This research paper is one of the six papers prepared for CPRN's Democratic Renewal Series, *Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation*. All research papers and CPRN's synthesis report for this project are available on the CPRN Web site at www.cprn.org. The six papers are listed below.

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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The observations and conclusions are those of the author(s).

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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