Stimulating Aboriginal Electoral Participation: What Can Be Done to Foster the Political Engagement of Aboriginal People?

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“Politicians don’t court our vote because we don’t vote, and we don’t vote because they don’t show interest in us.”
–Wab Kinew, Director of Indigenous Inclusion, University of Winnipeg (Kielburger, 2014)

Introduction/Problem Definition

One of the most crucial challenges for today’s democracies is to properly represent all of their citizens, by diminishing inequalities in political participation. Canada’s colonial history has had lasting effects in marginalizing Aboriginal people, and has resulted in a tremendous underrepresentation of Aboriginals in electoral participation. Low voter turnout rates among Aboriginal people are an enduring phenomenon (Ladner and McCrossan, 2007: 26), exacerbated by the fact that large proportions of this population are socially and geographically isolated and of low socioeconomic status. There are concerns that such underrepresentation threatens the legitimacy of Canada’s electoral system, and “sustains a very tenuous relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians” (Hunter, 2003: elections.ca). Elections Canada has voiced concern that this “disengagement from the democratic process” is unhealthy for the people of our country (Howe and Bedford, 2009: elections.ca); in fact, electoral participation can be seen as a “litmus test” for the validity of the democratic system (Fournier and Loewen, 2011: 9). The goal in prescribing the following policies is to mobilize Aboriginal people to vote in elections, but also to encourage them to become all-round politically active citizens.

Background

Aboriginal people were the target of colonialism, subjugated by a power that ignored their rights, including their rights to self-govern and participate in the electoral process. True universal franchisement was not complete in Canada until 1960, when Prime Minister Diefenbaker passed voting rights legislation, which extended voting rights to all Aboriginals (2010: cbc.ca). More recently, the federal government passed the Fair Elections Act (2014), which will likely hurt Aboriginal turnout, because the bill makes it harder for citizens without complete identification to vote. Many Aboriginals fought the bill, criticizing it for putting up further barriers to participation, wondering whether the real intent of the bill is “to actually limit Aboriginal voting [in future elections]” (Canadian Press, 2014: cbc.ca). Today, “a concerted effort is being made by government agencies to encourage electoral awareness and participation among Aboriginal people” (Ladner and McCrossan, 2007: 31).

Although Aboriginal electoral participation is difficult to measure and the data are quite limited, it is clear that the turnout of Aboriginal people at elections for all levels of government (including municipal) is well below the national average (Guérin and Hunter, 2003: elections.ca). For example, in an analysis of Aboriginal turnout in the 2000 federal election, Elections Canada concluded that Aboriginal
participation was significantly lower than that of the general population (Guérin, 2003: elections.ca). They found a turnout rate of “47.8 percent - 16 percent lower than the turnout among the general population during the same election”, and that certain provinces, including Quebec, had even lower turnout.

Elections Canada also reported lower Aboriginal turnout for the 2000 election and the latest elections at other levels of government (Howe and Bedford, 2009: elections.ca, see figure).

In the 2011 federal elections, which had a national turnout rate of 61 percent, Elections Canada found that “less than 45 percent of eligible First Nations voters on reserves had cast a ballot”; had they voted at the national rate, they allegedly “might have changed the results in as many as 14 ridings” (Kielburger, 2014: weday.com). Other studies confirm that even when controlling for other variables that predict political participation, such as socioeconomic status, there is still a significant gap between the turnout rates of Aboriginals compared to others (Howe and Bedford, 2009: elections.ca).

There are numerous explanations for why Aboriginal people do not vote, including the rational voter model which is the idea that the costs of voting often outweigh the potential benefits, and this is responsible for turnout (Gludovatz, 2014: civicgovernance.ca). Some Aboriginals also identify with their ancestral nationality more than with their country, which can make Canadian elections seem foreign (Howe and Bedford, 2009: 9-10). Feelings of alienation and distrust are often studied as explanatory factors in low turnout.

Many Aboriginal nations see self-government as an inherent right, and feel that electoral participation may be in contradiction with this belief (Howe and Bedford, 2009: 7). This makes all Canadians stakeholders in this problem, as a failure to solve it will likely lead to further calls for Aboriginal self-government and thus threatens a dissolution of the country.
Policy Option 1: Aboriginal Level of Government

Aboriginals are most likely to vote if they are given a government that they can trust, one which will properly represent them and cater to their needs. In 1996, the federal government’s Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples proposed the establishment of a third level of government (RCAP, 1996). This is a solution that some Aboriginals themselves have concluded is the only acceptable option (Inwood, 2013: 170). Although giving Aboriginals certain distinct jurisdictions would incentivize them to vote, it has been called “utterly impossible to implement” (Brean, 2013: nationalpost.com). In addition to the numerous practical challenges of reorganizing the Canadian political system, the Constitution does not allow for it, and our government’s capacity would be severely inhibited by adding another level.

Policy Option 2: Education

A policy that could be expanded upon and improved is educational programming for Aboriginal people, some of which has been put in place by the Canadian government. The government currently facilitates access to university education\(^1\), but there is a need for the government to increase civic education for youth (through formal curriculum and extracurricular activities), to foster democratic attitudes and stress the importance of voting. Education is an important facilitator of political engagement, and is proven to be one of the most determinant factors of political behaviour, but the fact that many of these policies are already in place leads us to believe that education is failing to mobilize Aboriginals. Though it is possible that education will spur political participation beyond just voting, its effects may not be lasting, thus we look for a policy option which can guarantee greater rates of turnout.

Policy Option 3: Incentivizing Aboriginals to Vote

In accordance with the rational voter model, a policy to encourage Aboriginal voting should either increase the benefit or eliminate the costs of voting for them. The government already provides other incentives to Aboriginals to participate in society, (such as incentives to enrol in post-secondary education,) though there are associated costs; non-Aboriginals sometimes perceive unfair generosity towards Aboriginals, which could further alienate them. This policy is unlikely to legitimize the government in the eyes of Aboriginal people. Nonetheless, it may improve trust issues, as it shows that the government does indeed care for them. Though the incentive needs to be somewhat substantial in order to work, making the policy expensive, the same can be said of reorganizing the government, or increasing schooling funds for Aboriginals.

\(^1\) Through programs like the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP, aadnc-aandc.gc.ca)
Policy Option 3: Incentivize Voting

After analyzing each option, it is determined that the government should offer incentives to Aboriginal voters, in the form of either coupons, gift cards, or tax rebates, for which voting receipts can be given at polling stations. Perhaps the greatest aspect of such a policy is that incentivizing voting is almost guaranteed to improve turnout rates. It is found in experiments to work (Carter, 2015: bloombergview.com). For example, an experiment showed that "paying cash rewards of $25 raised turnout in a municipal election from 15 percent to 19 percent", a significant amount. Next, initiatives based on similar logic to encourage political participation have worked in the past, such as tax credits for donating to political parties, and countries fining citizens for not voting (e.g. Australia). As well, unlike this Australian strategy, incentivizing voting does not infringe individual liberty (Somin, 2015: washingtonpost.com). Notable scholars have suggested paying citizens to vote, and a study conducted at Princeton University shows that incentivized voters were not only more likely to participate, but were more likely to be politically informed (Tucker, 2011: prospect.org). In other words, once prospective voters are indeed going to vote, they take the necessary time to make informed decisions. Thus, this policy has the potential to raise interest in politics among Aboriginals, and even spur political participation beyond voting.

Such as Stephen L. Carter, Professor of Law at Yale University (Carter, 2015: bloombergview.com)
References


