

Article

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Abstract: *Research to date on Aboriginal electoral participation - and the participation of Métis and off-reserve First Nations in particular - remains quite limited, leaving those policy makers and groups seeking to increase Aboriginal voter turnout to make assumptions about Aboriginal voter turnout that may or may not be valid. Drawing on original quantitative survey data collected in northern Saskatchewan, the authors of this paper demonstrate that Aboriginal groups differ from each other in federal voter turnout; that the federal turnout differences between on-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples (but not on- and off-reserve First Nations) largely reflect socio-demographic differences; and that on-reserve First Nations are less likely to report federal voting than non-Aboriginal peoples, even after other variables are taken into account. The authors suggest that it is important to consider local context and history in addition to socio-demographic and “voting resource” variables in order to understand - and, potentially, to increase - Aboriginal federal turnout levels.*

Introduction

In recent years, Aboriginal leaders have voiced appeals to Aboriginal Canadians to vote in federal and provincial elections. Prior to the 2008 federal election, the National Assembly of First Nations’ national “Vote ’08, Change Can’t Wait!” campaign sought to encourage voting among Canada’s First Nations (Curry 2008). In the 2011 federal election, provincial Aboriginal organizations also became involved in the effort: the Métis Nation–Saskatchewan and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations co-hosted forums to encourage Aboriginal peoples to vote (French 2011); the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs Secretariat encouraged bands to participate more fully in the election (Logan 2011); and the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs held an “I Am First Nations and I Vote” campaign (CBC News 2011).

Aboriginal leaders are not alone in their concerns about low Aboriginal voter turnout. Government agencies, too, have also identified Aboriginal turnout as an area for attention. According to Kiera Ladner and Michael MacCrossin, Canadian governments have made greater efforts to increase Aboriginal voter turnout than either the American or Australian governments (2007, 29). Since the 1990s, Elections Canada has engaged in a number of initiatives “to sensitize Aboriginal people to their right to participate in federal elections and referendums, and to make the electoral process more accessible to them” (Elections Canada 2004; see also Ladner and MacCrossan 2007, 29-31). In March 2009, Elections Canada

hosted a workshop on Aboriginal electoral participation. Furthermore, the Elections Canada website includes a special section entitled “Information for Aboriginal Voters,” which makes information available in eleven Aboriginal languages, and some provincial electoral offices also provide specific informational resources for Aboriginal voters.

One challenge for those wishing to increase Aboriginal voter turnout is that research on Aboriginal electoral participation remains quite limited. While there have been important advances in recent years, data limitations have constrained the ability of scholarly researchers to discuss the electoral participation of Métis and off-reserve First Nations, and to consider the causes of low Aboriginal voter turnout. The limitations placed on research by the lack of data are problematic, as they leave policy makers to make assumptions about Aboriginal voter turnout that may or may not be valid. With an improved understanding of Aboriginal voter turnout, however, policy makers and Aboriginal organizations would be better equipped to design outreach programs to appeal to Aboriginal voters.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the still nascent study of Aboriginal political behaviour by considering the following three research questions:

1. Does federal voter turnout in northern Saskatchewan differ amongst on-reserve First Nations, off-reserve First Nations, and Métis peoples?
2. To what extent do federal voter turnout differences within Aboriginal populations in northern Saskatchewan reflect socio-demographic differences?
3. To what extent does federal voter turnout in northern Saskatchewan differ between each of the Aboriginal population groups and non-Aboriginal peoples?

This study focuses exclusively on self-reported federal voter turnout, and it is not presumed that federal turnout patterns are representative of more local forms of political engagement. We have examined Aboriginal community participation elsewhere (see Berdahl et al. 2011), and plan to look closely at band participation, including turnout in band elections, in future work.

This study uses original quantitative survey data, collected in northern Saskatchewan, to answer these research questions. Northern Saskatchewan serves as an ideal case study for this type of analysis. Saskatchewan’s Northern Administrative District (NAD) is a legislatively and geographically distinct region that comprises the top half of the province. Defined in the Saskatchewan Northern Municipalities Act and home to roughly 37,000 people across 45 communities (including municipalities, reserves, settlements, and adjacent reserve/ municipalities), the NAD presents unique opportunities for Northern and Aboriginal research. Over 80 percent (29,085) of the NAD population is Aboriginal, with strong First Nations (62.3%) and Métis (22%) populations (2006 Census figures, as reported in Northern Labour Market Committee 2010, 11).

In this paper, we will demonstrate that northern Saskatchewan’s Aboriginal population groups differ in federal turnout and, specifically, that on-reserve First Nations have lower self-reported federal turnout than do Métis and off-reserve First Nations. Further, we will demonstrate that the federal turnout differences between on-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples in northern Saskatchewan largely reflect socio-demographic differences, but that on-reserve and off-reserve First Nations continue to have significant differences

between on and off-reserve groups in self-reported federal turnout even after controlling for socio-demographic and other relevant variables. Finally, we will demonstrate that on-reserve First Nations in northern Saskatchewan are less likely to report federal voting than are non-Aboriginal peoples, even after socio-demographic and other variables are taken into account.

The results of our analysis suggest that federal turnout may be largely tied to socio-demographic variables in the case of northern Saskatchewan's off-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples. Individuals with lower incomes are less likely to vote federally, and off-reserve First Nations and Métis people tend to have lower incomes than do non-Aboriginal people as a whole. Therefore, the results suggest that policy makers and others should not expect to see significant increases in the federal voter participation of off-reserve First Nations and Métis people without a corresponding increase in socio-economic wellbeing.

Aboriginal Peoples and Voter Turnout: Literature Review

Numerous studies have suggested that Aboriginal voter turnout is lower than non-Aboriginal turnout in Canada. Most of them have focused on on-reserve voter turnout, as it is possible to isolate on-reserve polls within electoral returns data. David Bedford and Sidney Pobihushchy (1995) first used this method to examine on-reserve federal, provincial, and band poll results over time in the three Maritime provinces, and found that voter turnout varied both between provinces and with the type of election. Since then, a number of studies have also used electoral returns data to study on-reserve turnout in federal and provincial elections (Bedford 2003; Guérin 2003; Kinnear 2003; Pitsula 2001; Dalton 2007). Together, the studies suggest that on-reserve voter turnout is lower than that of the general population.

While the electoral returns analyses have provided important insights into on-reserve voter turnout, less is known about off-reserve and Métis turnout for federal and provincial elections. Is on-reserve voter turnout, in fact, representative of broader Aboriginal electoral participation? Munroe Eagles (1991) found that overall voter turnout is lower in ridings that have a higher proportion of Aboriginal peoples in them. However, due to the nature of aggregate data, he was unable to draw the firm conclusion that Aboriginal people are voting less than non-Aboriginal people. Survey research is typically used to study individual-level voter turnout patterns, but political participation surveys rarely include a sufficient sample size of Aboriginal respondents to allow for meaningful analysis. However, two recent works have made important advances in the study of Canadian Aboriginal voter turnout.

Paul Howe and David Bedford (2009) used data from the 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine self-reported voting among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians in the 2000 federal election. The 2003 GSS included 770 respondents who reported a primary Aboriginal ancestry. Howe and Bedford not only confirmed that Aboriginal Canadians report lower federal turnout numbers than non-Aboriginal Canadians do, but that urban Aboriginal peoples reported lower federal turnouts than rural Aboriginal peoples. Due to the manner in which the GSS measured ethnicity, Howe and Bedford's analysis was unable to consider differences between on-reserve and off-reserve populations, and unable to differentiate between First Nations and Métis populations.

Further survey research confirmed the finding that lower Aboriginal voter turnout extends beyond the reserves. Using the 2004 Aboriginal over-sample of the Equality, Security, and Community (ESC) Survey, which included 608 Aboriginal respondents living in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, Alison Harell, Dimitrios Panagos, and J. Scott Matthews (2009) found no difference between on- and off-reserve Aboriginal self-reported voting in the 2004 federal election (their analysis did not consider Métis voters separately). Like Howe and Bedford, Harell et al. noted variations between urban and rural populations, and found turnout differences by band and by Aboriginal language spoken.

To date, then, only one study (Harell et al. 2009) has examined on- and off-reserve differences in self-reported federal turnout, and the question has not yet been answered as to whether Métis voters are equally unlikely to vote federally as are on-reserve and off-reserve populations. For policy makers and Aboriginal organizations, the limited empirical research that exists on Aboriginal population groups constrains their ability to tailor Aboriginal voter turnout strategies to specific audiences.

There are valid reasons to suspect that the turnout levels of on-reserve First Nations, off-reserve First Nations, and Métis peoples will differ in federal elections. There are important socio-economic differences between the three groups: according to the 2006 Census, the median age for Saskatchewan First Nations people was 20 years, while the median age for Saskatchewan Métis was 26 years (Statistics Canada 2008, 44; 33). Within Canada as a whole, on-reserve First Nations populations are younger, with 53 percent of First Nations people under the age of 25, as compared to 48 percent of off-reserve First Nations populations (Statistics Canada 2008, 44). Métis and off-reserve First Nations peoples have a higher median income than on-reserve First Nations peoples do (Wilson and Macdonald 2010, 13), and 47 percent of Métis peoples between 25 and 54 have post-secondary educations, compared to 38 percent of First Nations peoples in the same age cohort (2006 data; Statistics Canada 2010). Within the First Nations community, on-reserve First Nations peoples are less likely than off-reserve First Nations individuals to have post-secondary educations (AFN 2011). In short, then, on-reserve populations are younger, with lower educational attainment and lower income levels than off-reserve and Métis populations; Métis peoples are older, more educated, and have higher income levels than on-reserve and off-reserve First Nations.

Such socio-demographic factors are critical to consider, as general population research demonstrates important differences in voter turnout based on socio-demographic characteristics—specifically, young people, people with lower educational attainments, and people with less income are less likely to vote (Pammet and Leduc 2003; Milan 2005; Blais et al. 2004; Archer and Coletto 2007).² Further, socio-demographic groups can vary in other ways relevant to voting. According to Henry Brady, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman (1995), political participation varies with resources (time, money), psychological engagement with politics (political interest, civic duty, political efficacy), and participation in mobilizing networks. These “voting resources” are often distributed unequally across socio-demographic groups. Given the socio-demographic variations between on-reserve, off-reserve, and Métis populations, it is possible that on-reserve First Nations have fewer “voting resources” than do Métis peoples and off-reserve First Nations.

The second reason to expect variations in federal turnout between on-reserve, off-reserve, and Métis populations is that these population groups have had—and continue to have—different relationships with the Canadian state. The establishment of reserves and band governments, it can be argued, marginalized First Nations people, creating a weaker attachment to the Canadian nation-state and its associated institutions (Comeau and Santin 1995; Poelzer 1996; Soroka et al. 2007, 26). This weaker attachment may result in lower levels of First Nations electoral participation. (The exceptions to this observation include times of perceived threat to Treaty and Aboriginal Rights, as during the 1969 White Paper Policy civil actions.) Furthermore, status First Nations were denied federal and provincial voting rights until the 1960 Bill of Rights while non-status First Nations and Métis people always had the legal right to vote (see Elections Canada 2007; Moss and Garnder-O’Toole 1991).

These “institutional” differences may have relevance to Aboriginal voter turnout rates. First Nations peoples may feel alienated from Canadian federal and provincial governments, or see such governments as foreign (Howe and Bedford 2009, 9–10; Harell et al. 2009, 10; Cairns 2003, 3; Alfred 2009, 12), and the “nationalist hypothesis” suggests that “an emerging nationalist identity as Aboriginal and not Canadian, in which Canadian institutions and political practices are understood as foreign, accounts for the lower rates of participation” (Howe and Bedford 2009, 35). The denial of voting rights to First Nations until 1960 likely had a negative influence on political socialization for on-reserve peoples as well. Research has established that “politically active neighborhoods produce, and reproduce, politically active citizens” (Cho et al. 2006, 156), and clearly First Nations people were not afforded the same opportunity to develop community-level patterns of ongoing voter participation until 1960.

Together, their different socio-economic realities and unique political histories suggest that Aboriginal population groups should differ in voter turnout. Although research has yet to fully explore voter turnout rates within the Aboriginal community, recent research employing survey data has begun to consider why Aboriginal voter turnout is lower than non-Aboriginal turnout. Howe and Bedford find that much of the “turnout gap” can be attributed to socio-demographic differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, a conclusion that “weaken[s] the nationalist hypothesis” (2009, 35). Similarly, Harell et al. find that “the disadvantaged position of Aboriginal communities is an important source of low turnout among Aboriginal peoples” (2009, 25). Our research builds on this previous research to consider the possibility of, and reasons for, federal turnout variations within the Aboriginal community, and is the first study to consider Métis peoples as distinct from on-reserve and off-reserve First Nations. It is also the first study to consider the importance of duty to vote and political interest for Aboriginal voter turnout.

Methodology and Data Analysis

Winnipeg-based Probe Research collected original quantitative survey data between 9 November and 21 December 2010 on behalf of the survey team. The survey questionnaire received ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan, and the research team placed considerable emphasis on community awareness of the survey prior to data collection. The research team presented the research plan to northern Aboriginal communities before

conducting the survey and received written support from the Prince Albert Grand Council and Meadow Lake Tribal Council. Northern Aboriginal leaders were given a month's notice prior to start of the actual survey, and were reminded of the project's objectives. Prior to the survey, the principal investigator, Bonita Beatty, was interviewed in Cree and English on MBC Radio (Missinipi Broadcasting Corporation), an Aboriginally owned and operated radio station that broadcasts throughout northern Saskatchewan. Advertisements about the survey in English, Cree, and Dene also ran on MBC Radio from 1 November until 10 December 2010.

The survey was administered in English, Cree, and Dene. A total of 505 Aboriginal respondents were interviewed: 214 identified themselves as Status Indians living on-reserve, 103 as Status Indians living off-reserve, 21 as non-status Indians, 161 as Métis, and 2 as Inuit. Survey results can be expected to be accurate within +/-4.30% for the Aboriginal population in the Northern Administrative District, 19 times out of 20. Data were weighted to match the district's gender, ethnicity, and age profiles. Young people aged 18 to 24, those without a completed high school education, and the non-working population are underrepresented in the sample. This is consistent with the research methodology, as landline telephone survey research is limited in its ability to access individuals who do not have landline telephones (e.g., young people with cell phones and those who cannot afford telephones) and individuals who are often away from their landline telephones (e.g., individuals working on trap lines).

Our analysis considered differences between on-reserve, off-reserve, and Métis populations with respect to self-reported voting in the 2008 federal election, with an awareness that self-reported voter turnout measures are typically overstated (see Anderson and Silver 1986; Blais et al. 2004, 222). For the purposes of this analysis, the Aboriginal population was divided into three categories: on-reserve First Nations (Status Indians living on-reserve); off-reserve First Nations (Status Indians living off-reserve and non-status Indians); and Métis. To measure federal voter turnout, respondents were asked, "Did you vote in the last federal election?"

We found important and statistically significant differences in reported federal turnout (Table 1). Off-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples have a similar self-reported federal turnout: the majority (51.0%) of off-reserve First Nations and a near-majority (48.6%) of Métis peoples reported voting in the last federal election. This is considerably higher than the self-reported federal turnout for on-reserve First Nations (33.7%).

The three Aboriginal population groups also differed from each other with respect to political interest and feeling a duty to vote, two variables that have been found to be important predictors of voter turnout in general population studies. Duty to vote was measured by asking respondents using the question "In your opinion, how important is it that people vote in general elections?" (coded not at all important = 1, very important = 4). Political interest was measured by asking respondents the following question: "Using a scale of 0 to 10, where zero means you have no interest and ten means you have a great deal of interest, how interested are you in federal politics?" First Nations, both on- and off-reserve, were less likely than Métis people to state that voting in general elections is "very important," and on-reserve First Nations reported a lower interest in federal politics than did off-reserve First Nations and Métis people (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: Political Attitudes and Community Participation by Population Groups

| | On-Reserve | Off-Reserve | Métis | Sig |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Federal Turnout | 33.7% yes | 51.0% yes | 48.6% yes | *** |
| Duty to Vote | 53.7% 'very import.' | 54.7% 'very import.' | 68.5% 'very import.' | ** |
| Political Interest | 33.7% 'no interest' Mean: 3.10 | 25.3% 'no interest' Mean: 4.05 | 30.6% 'no interest' Mean: 3.84 | *** |
| Community Involvement | Mean: 3.10 | Mean: 2.86 | Mean: 3.02 | NS |

* $p > .05$, ** $p > .005$, *** $p > .001$

General population research suggests that participation in mobilizing networks is positively related to voter turnout. For our analysis, participation in mobilizing networks was measured by self-reported involvement in six activities of considerable importance to Northern communities: our measure ranged from zero (individuals who reported doing none of the activities) to six (individuals who reported doing all of the activities).³ Here it is notable that the three population groups did not differ significantly in their reported community participation. For each group, respondents reported an average of roughly three types of community participation in the past twelve months.

General population studies have found that voter turnout varies with socio-demographic variables, psychological engagement with politics (such as political interest and duty to vote), and participation in mobilizing networks. Is the federal turnout gap between the three Aboriginal population groups simply a reflection of differences in socio-demographic realities and psychological political engagement? To test this possibility, we turned to multivariate analysis, which allowed us to examine differences between the Aboriginal population groups after other variables are controlled. As our dependent variable had only two categories (voted = 1, did not vote = 0), we employed logistic regression analysis to determine if the group differences persisted after socio-demographic differences and differences in other common predictors of voting were controlled.

The analysis was conducted in two stages. In the first model, we controlled for socio-demographic variables, including sex (male=1, female=0); age in years; age-squared (to account for the reported curvilinear relationship between age and turnout); income; and education. In the second model, we included attitudinal variables known to be associated with voter turnout in the general population: duty to vote, political interest, and community involvement. In each model, we included dummy variables for off-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples. The inclusion of these dummy variables allowed us to compare each group with the reference category, on-reserve First Nations. (It is not possible to compare off-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples to each other in these models). If the coefficient for either Aboriginal population group is positive and statistically significant in the model, this would mean that group members are more likely than on-reserve First Nations to report voting in the last federal election, even after other variables were controlled. If the coefficient for either population group is negative and statistically significant, it would mean that group members are less likely than on-reserve First Nations to report voting, even

after other variables were taken into account. Finally, if the coefficient is not statistically significant, it would mean that members of that population group do not differ significantly in federal turnout from on-reserve First Nations after other variables are controlled.

The results of the logistic regression are presented in Table 2. Looking at the first model, which includes only socio-demographic variables, it appears that, after socio-demographic variables are taken into account, Métis peoples do not differ significantly from on-reserve First Nations in self-reported federal turnout. In other words, the voter turnout differences between Métis and on-reserve First Nations in northern Saskatchewan can be entirely attributed to the socio-demographic differences between these two groups. Given the historical differences in the treatment of First Nations and Métis peoples in Canada, this is an intriguing finding.

The first model also reveals that even after socio-demographic differences are controlled, off-reserve First Nations continue to be more likely to report federal voting than on-reserve First Nations. Put another way, the turnout gap between on- and off-reserve First Nations in northern Saskatchewan does not reflect varied socio-demographic realities for the two groups.

Looking beyond the population groups, the first model also shows that federal turnout increases with age and education, which is consistent with voter turnout studies in the general population. However, unlike general population studies, it is found that men are more likely than women to report voting. The Nagelkerke R² value indicates the percentage of variation that is explained by the model as a whole; here it is seen that almost 48 percent of the variation in federal turnout is explained by the socio-demographic variables included in the model.

TABLE 2: Logistic Regression Model of Aboriginal Federal Turnout

| Self-Reported Federal Turnout | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|------|-------------|----------------|------|------------|
| | <i>Model 1</i> | | | <i>Model 2</i> | | |
| | Estimate | S.E. | Odds Ratios | Estimate | S.E. | Odds Ratio |
| Constant | -9.496a | 1.12 | .000 | -13.589a | 1.44 | .000 |
| Age in Years | .257a | .049 | 1.293 | .255a | .052 | 1.290 |
| Age-Squared | -.002a | .001 | .998 | -.002a | .001 | .998 |
| Education | .477a | .120 | 1.612 | .454a | .133 | 1.574 |
| Income | .108 | .109 | 1.115 | .112 | .116 | 1.118 |
| Male | 1.016a | .236 | 2.763 | 1.253a | .268 | 3.501 |
| Off-Reserve ¹ | .737c | .275 | 2.090 | .712c | .311 | 2.037 |
| Métis ¹ | .305 | .283 | 1.357 | .151 | .309 | 1.163 |
| Duty to Vote | | | | .988a | .194 | 2.685 |
| Political Interest | | | | .190a | .040 | 1.210 |
| Community Involvement | | | | -.005 | .080 | .995 |
| Nagelkerke R ² | .479 | | | .579 | | |

Notes: Estimates are logits from a binary regression model; a:p≤.001, b:p≤.005, c:p≤.05. 1- Reference category: On-Reserve First Nations.

The second model (also presented in Table 2) introduces the political attitudes and community participation variables. We see that off-reserve First Nations continue to be more likely than on-reserve First Nations to report federal voting, and so the differences between these two groups is not explained by differences in political interest, duty to vote, or community involvement. Similarly, there is a persistent gender gap in voting. As expected, duty to vote and political interest are significant predictors of voting, but community involvement is not. Finally, the inclusion of political attitudes and community involvement variables increases the predictive accuracy of the model, with 58 percent of variation explained by the model.

To summarize, the data indicate that the differences in federal turnout between on-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples in northern Saskatchewan can be attributed to different socio-economic factors between the two groups. However, off-reserve First Nations remain more likely to vote than on-reserve First Nations, even after socio-demographic and attitudinal variables are controlled.

Previous research studies have demonstrated the federal turnout differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples but, due to data limitations, research to date has yet to examine the turnout gap after controlling for political interest and duty to vote. Given that our survey also included 350 non-Aboriginal respondents (337 who stated they were not Aboriginal and 13 respondents who either refused to state their ancestry or were unable to identify with any ethnic category), it is worth considering whether the Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal turnout gap persists even after “traditional” predictors of voting, such as socio-demographic realities, duty to vote, and political interest, are controlled.

We found that non-Aboriginal peoples are considerably more likely to report voting in the most recent federal election, with a gap of 35 percentage points between non-Aboriginal (76.9%) and Aboriginal (42.0%) respondents, which is consistent with previous studies. We also found that non-Aboriginal respondents report considerably higher interest in federal politics (with a mean score of 5.73 on the zero to ten scale, as compared to 3.55 for the Aboriginal respondents), and report a greater duty to vote (82.6% stated voting in general elections is “very important,” compared to 57.7% for the Aboriginal respondents).

To test whether the Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal federal turnout gap remains after taking into account differences in socio-demographic realities and other known determinants of voting, we turned once more to logistic regression. In this next analysis, we were interested in comparing each of the Aboriginal population groups with non-Aboriginal peoples, and so we included dummy variables for on-reserve First Nations, off-reserve First Nations, and Métis peoples, leaving non-Aboriginal peoples as the reference category. A positive, statistically significant coefficient indicates that group members are more likely than non-Aboriginal peoples to report voting, while a negative, statistically significant coefficient means that group members are less likely than non-Aboriginal peoples to report voting. If the coefficient is not statistically significant, population group members and non-Aboriginal peoples do not differ significantly in federal turnout after other variables are controlled.

The results of the analysis are somewhat surprising. In the first model, we found that once age, education, income, and gender are controlled, non-Aboriginal peoples and off-reserve First Nations in northern Saskatchewan have similar levels of federal turnout. Stated

more simply, the voter turnout differences between these two groups can be attributed to socio-demographic differences. This is not the case for on-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples; both groups continue to be less likely to vote than non-Aboriginals.

The second model reveals that the federal turnout gap between non-Aboriginal and Métis people reflects differences in both socio-demographic variables and duty to vote and political interest. After adding the additional variables to the model, the difference between non-Aboriginal and Métis peoples fails to achieve conventional levels of statistical significance. However, on-reserve First Nations continue to have lower self-reported federal turnout than non-Aboriginal peoples do. This suggests a unique difference between these two groups that is not captured by the survey data. Further, the gender gap in voter turnout identified in the Aboriginal-only analysis persists, suggesting that men in northern Saskatchewan, regardless of Aboriginal status, are more likely to vote than women.

TABLE 3: Logistic Regression Model of Voter Turnout

| Self-Reported Federal Turnout | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|------|-------------|----------------|-------|------------|
| | <i>Model 1</i> | | | <i>Model 2</i> | | |
| | Estimate | S.E. | Odds Ratios | Estimate | S.E. | Odds Ratio |
| Constant | -6.571a | .977 | .001 | -10.869 | 1.261 | .000 |
| Age in Years | .202a | .043 | 1.224 | .194a | .045 | 1.214 |
| Age-Squared | -.001a | .000 | .999 | -.001a | .000 | .999 |
| Education | .429a | .109 | 1.536 | .398a | .120 | 1.489 |
| Income | .113 | .101 | 1.120 | .093 | .107 | 1.098 |
| Male | .859a | .213 | 2.361 | 1.053a | .241 | 2.866 |
| On-Reserve ¹ | -1.394a | .371 | .248 | -.923c | .397 | .397 |
| Off-Reserve ¹ | -.726 | .372 | .484 | -.235 | .397 | .791 |
| Métis ¹ | -1.100b | .382 | .333 | -.751 | .400 | .472 |
| Duty to Vote | | | | .950a | .177 | 2.586 |
| Political Interest | | | | .188a | .037 | 1.207 |
| Community Involvement | | | | .014 | .072 | 1.014 |
| Nagelkerke R ² | .465 | | | .564 | | |

Notes: Estimates are logits from a binary regression model; a:p≤.001, b:p≤.005, c:p≤.05. 1- Reference category: Non-Aboriginal.

Discussion

The survey data allow for original and unique insights into Aboriginal federal voting behaviour. Important differences are found between the three northern Saskatchewan Aboriginal population groups with respect to self-reported federal turnout, in that Métis and off-reserve First Nations have higher self-reported federal turnout rates than on-reserve First Nations. The results in this analysis suggest that researchers and policy makers should use caution in extrapolating results from on-reserve electoral returns analyses to

the Aboriginal population as a whole. Research to date has also been unable to examine Aboriginal political interest and duty to vote. The survey results presented in this article find not only that Aboriginal peoples have lower levels of political interest and report a lower sense of duty to vote, but that there are variations between the three population groups with respect to these “voting resources.” Although it cannot be tested by the data available, it is possible that the lower political interest and duty to vote among the First Nations respondents reflects the voting rights history of Canada’s First Nations. As noted earlier, the denial of voting rights to First Nations people until 1960 likely influenced political socialization; further, it may have contributed to a sense of “alienation” from the Canadian state.

The multivariate analysis found that the federal turnout differences between on-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples largely reflect socio-demographic differences. This finding underscores the point that Métis people are not a homogenous group of Aboriginal peoples in terms of their history and identity in Canada. In addition to the particular Métis culture that emerged from the Red River area through First Nations intermarriage with (mainly) French and Scottish fur traders, there is at least one other prairie Métis culture that is quite distinctive: on the Métis settlements in northern Alberta, particularly the four western settlements, there is far less distinction between First Nations and Métis ways of life, culture, and language. In Métis Settlement communities such as Gift Lake, Alberta, the working language is Cree and the neighbouring Atikemeg First Nation is home to many direct relations of residents of Gift Lake. As late as the 1990s, some residents were officially members of both the Métis Settlement and Atikemeg First Nations, and were required to choose between one or the other.

Similarly, most of the municipalities in Saskatchewan’s Northern Administration District are home to Métis and First Nations residents. On the west side of the NAD, the municipalities are overwhelming either Cree–Métis or Dene–Métis communities, and home to particular family kin-groups. A family name will often reveal whether a Métis person is of Dene or Cree heritage, and which community (or communities) they are likely to call home. Moreover, there are no huge distinctions in ways of life, especially traditional ways of life, between Métis and First Nations people in northern Saskatchewan. Underscoring this point is the fact that the current Chief of Clearwater Dene Nation was, at another time, the mayor of the neighbouring Dene–Métis dominated municipality of La Loche. The shared histories of the Métis and on-reserve First Nations in northern Saskatchewan, despite their different legal statuses and relationship with the Canadian state, may have resulted in a shared political culture, included similar political participation norms, between the two groups.

The analysis also found that on-reserve First Nations are less likely to report voting than are non-Aboriginal peoples even after socio-demographic and other variables are taken into account; the voting gap between on-reserve First Nations and non-Aboriginal peoples is not simply reflective of on-reserve socio-demographic realities or lower political interest and duty to vote among on-reserve First Nations. As noted earlier, some analysts have suggested that lower on-reserve voter turnout may actually reflect First Nations nationalism and a desire for First Nations communities to engage “nation to nation” with the federal government, rather than participate in the “foreign” federal government’s

electoral processes. While the survey data do not allow us to test this hypothesis, this explanation may be less compelling in northern Saskatchewan. In northern Saskatchewan, the position of First Nations political leaders has been to engage in the mainstream political electoral system at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. Political leaders have not only regularly urged their communities to vote in an effort to increase federal attention to Aboriginal issues, but have also sought and held political office. The former Grand Chief of the Prince Albert Grand Council once held the northern Saskatchewan federal electoral district (representing the Liberals); in 2006, the federal Liberal nomination was contested strongly by a former provincial NDP cabinet minister and member of Peter Ballentyne Cree Nation; and in the 2011 federal election, Aboriginal candidates represented all three major parties for the northern Saskatchewan riding (Desnethé–Missinippi–Churchill River), and the NDP candidate was the past Chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations. While political leadership is not necessarily representative of the broader Aboriginal population, it is notable that political signs for different political parties were displayed on the properties in First Nations communities across northern Saskatchewan during the 2011 election. Simply put, explicit First Nations rejection of the electoral process does not appear to be part of mainstream First Nations political culture in northern Saskatchewan.

Taken together, the results suggest that researchers and policy makers alike must be cautious in assuming uniformity or even similarity across Aboriginal population groups. Aboriginal status and historical context matter considerably with respect to political attitudes and political behaviour, as place, identity, interest, and kinship-based networks remain influencing factors for people's political decisions. For instance, there is sometimes an assumed continuum of on-reserve First Nations to off-reserve First Nations to Métis in terms of degrees similarity and difference with non-Aboriginal Canadians. These data suggests that the pattern is far more complex. Aboriginal identities are complex and evolving—there are distinctions between identities that are defined by being on-reserve or off-reserve, status or non-status, rural or urban, and being from the north or south. Métis identities, as well, differentiate by identifying strongly with Red River culture or by being rooted more closely to Cree or Dene cultures. Future research on Aboriginal political participation should consider the role of context, history, and place, as well as the interaction between political identity and locale, in influencing political behaviour.

This research study also underscores past research that suggests that First Nations on-reserve communities are distinctive political communities within Canada, notwithstanding 135 years of the Indian Act—or, ironically, because of it (Poelzer 1996). Moreover, reserve-based communities remain the principal political community for many First Nations Canadians, particularly in northern regions. In other words, First Nations are here to stay and policy makers, provincially and federal, need to continue to recognize that reality. Significantly, the similarities in electoral participation between on-reserve First Nations and Métis suggest that Métis communities may be principal political communities for Métis people in northern Saskatchewan. If so, we may expect Métis communities are here to stay, too. With Canada increasingly recognizing Métis rights to traditional land uses, such as hunting and fishing, Canadian policy makers need to recognize Métis as being rooted in communities with rich pasts and vibrant futures, rather than as hyphenated Canadians with a unique cultural heritage. Processes such as duty to consult, for instance, may have a political imperative for Métis people—not only First Nations people—in ways that may not be fully appreciated by federal and provincial policy makers.

Conclusion

Aboriginal leaders and Canadian governments have correctly identified Aboriginal voter turnout as a cause for concern. The lower federal turnout rates among Aboriginal peoples, as suggested by the data, is in part reflective of socio-demographic factors: the fact that Aboriginal peoples are, on average, younger, less educated, and have lower incomes, decreases their likelihood of voting. Given this, reducing the income and education gaps between Aboriginal peoples and the general population would go a long way towards addressing the voter turnout gap. However, socio-demographics alone do not capture the full story: Aboriginal peoples have unique patterns of participation that may reflect local histories and engagement patterns, Aboriginal status, and other variables. This reality speaks to the need for policy makers and groups seeking to consider local circumstances as they move forward in their efforts to increase Aboriginal voter turnout at the federal level.

Notes

1. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The authors would like to thank Kirk Clavelle for his research assistance.
2. General population research does not find gender differences in voter turnout (Rubenson et al. 2004, 410; Harell 2009, 2).
3. Survey respondents were asked if they engaged in a number of activities “done as a part of a group or organization, other than your work or employment, in the past 12 months.” These included canvassing, campaigning or fundraising; serving as a member of a board or committee; organizing or supervising any activities or events for a school, church or other organization; teaching or coaching; providing care or support, including counseling or friendly visiting; and sharing traditional foods, such as moose meat or fish, with others. Sharing traditional bush foods is a significant Northern Aboriginal community activity that demonstrates local knowledge and promotes cooperation, collective effort, and respect for the land and its resources (Tobias and Kay 1994, Ballantyne et al. 1976).

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