

research snapshot

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Increasing Voter Turnout Among Aboriginal Peoples Is a Complex Task

What is this research about?

Civic engagement is a key part of any legitimate democracy. Voter turnout – the number of people who vote in an election – can help measure the extent to which citizens are engaged in their community. In recent years, however, voter turnout in Canada has been on the decline, which has led some to try to reform the electoral process. Some groups, like Aboriginal peoples, vote at even lower levels than the rest of the country. Since Confederation, the Canadian government has made it hard for Aboriginal individuals to participate in the political process. Under the Indian Act, First Nations could only take part in federal elections if they gave up treaty rights. They also had to surrender their identities, blend into the larger society, and give up the right to be exempt from paying property tax. In other words, they were forced to assimilate. To this day, many Aboriginal peoples feel alienated from a political system in which they are not adequately represented.

But very little research on First Nations voter turnout exists. In fact, there are no studies on voter turnout in Ontario. Some reports on Aboriginal peoples have argued that voter turnout at the federal level could be improved through changes to the electoral system. It's unclear, however, if these changes would work. It's also unclear if they could be made to work at the provincial level, in Ontario.

What you need to know:

Increasing the voter turnout of First Nations in Ontario requires more than merely changing the electoral system in Ontario. Low voter turnout of Aboriginal peoples isn't simply a matter of voter apathy or alienation, as is often the case among other groups.

What did the researcher do?

Jennifer Dalton, a researcher and visiting scholar at York University, set out to explore the history of voter turnout among First Nations peoples in Ontario. She looked at the policies that have excluded First Nations peoples from voting. She also collected original elections polling data to track First Nations voting patterns in the province. Ultimately, she offered some suggestions that might increase the extent to which First Nations peoples engage with the Canadian political system.

What did the researcher find?

In the 2000, 2004, and 2006, First Nations voter turnout in federal elections gradually increased. This may have been the result of the efforts of Elections Canada and some Aboriginal organizations. In contrast, Elections Ontario has done little to improve the situation. In stark contrast, voter turnout is significantly high for First Nations Band Council

elections. These elections, akin to municipal elections across the country, are administered through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) under the Indian Act. First Nations communities hold Band Council elections to select Chiefs and band councillors. Some research has shown that First Nations turnout for Council elections has been as high as 90%, and Dalton's study presents similar findings. This is striking when one considers that voter turnout rates among the general population in municipal elections are sometimes as low as 30%. Ultimately, First Nations voters in Band Council elections do not appear to be alienated from the political process.

Still, those First Nations who do not participate in elections may not simply be alienated. Their lack of engagement may represent a conscious choice to avoid what may be considered condoning the historical actions of political institutions which sought to oppress and restrict Aboriginal identities. In other words, Aboriginal nationalism seems to have an important impact on First Nations voting.

How can you use this research?

In order to improve voter turnout of First Nations peoples in elections, decision-makers could put some basic mechanisms in place. Increasing the number of First Nations representatives in provincial legislatures could help connect First Nations people to Ontario politics. But this would require the will of major political parties. Other mechanisms that add specific, guaranteed representation to the existing electoral system may be more effective. These wouldn't require major overhauls of the existing system, and might include:

- Guaranteed seats in legislatures
- Affirmative redistricting
- Aboriginal Electoral Districts (AEDs)
- Aboriginal legislatures.

Regardless of the mechanisms that are put in place, First Nations nationalism will continue to play a role in shaping the future of First Nations peoples. First Nations peoples need to be viewed as nations in their own right. Their cultural differences must be respected.

About the Researcher

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