

research snapshot

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Reconciling Aboriginal Peoples with the Rest of Canada Through Engagement

What is this research about?

Since Confederation, it has been hard for Aboriginal peoples to play significant roles in Canadian legal and political institutions. For example, under the Indian Act, First Nations could only take part in electoral politics if they gave up their treaty rights. They also had to surrender their identities and assimilate into the larger society. Much of their land was taken away. To this day, many Aboriginal peoples feel alienated from a political system in which they are not well represented. Similarly, in some instances, Aboriginal peoples' discontent with federal and provincial government handling of some land claims has caused further alienation, ultimately undermining attempts at reconciliation.

Increasing Aboriginal engagement in elections and the settlement of land claims may offer opportunities to heal the rift in Aboriginal-Canada relationships. To what extent do First Nations peoples vote in Canadian elections? Which Canadian governments are more adept at settling land claims? More importantly, how might meaningful engagement lead to healing, restoration, and reconciliation?

What did the researcher do?

Jennifer Dalton, a researcher and visiting scholar at York University, set out to explore Aboriginal engagement as a way to achieve Aboriginal reconciliation. She looked at recent polling data to

What you need to know:

Aboriginal reconciliation is an important goal. But litigation and negotiation are slow, difficult processes. Increasing Aboriginal engagement in voting and land claim negotiations is also a difficult task, but efforts at improving both arguably would help support the larger goal of Aboriginal reconciliation with the rest of Canada.

track First Nations voting patterns across Canada in federal, provincial, and band council elections. She also looked at recent data on land negotiations between Aboriginal peoples and federal and provincial governments.

What did the researcher find?

Ultimately, two significant forces that shape Aboriginal participation in Canadian elections and land negotiations are Aboriginal alienation and Aboriginal nationalism. While many Aboriginal peoples feel alienated from Canadian institutions, they also often self-identify as peoples or nations with distinct identities that are rooted in history. These two forces also tend to be mutually-reinforcing.

As a result, voter turnout among First Nations peoples in Canadian federal and provincial elections tends to be low, a finding that is consistent across

time. But turnout in band council elections – which serve to elect Chiefs and band councillors – has been as high as 90%. In short, First Nations voters don't seem to be alienated from all electoral politics. Instead, it would appear that they care about big decisions in which they have a stake.

Land negotiations in Canada, meanwhile, are a very slow process. Most claims are backlogged at the review stage. But Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta have done a better job of settling claims. In general, the federal government and provincial governments in the West have the most far-reaching and comprehensive policies on Aboriginal land negotiations compared to anywhere else in the country.

How can you use this research?

Engaging Aboriginal peoples in elections and land negotiations arguably offers a novel path to reconciliation. Some possible ways to improve voter turnout include: guaranteed seats in legislatures; affirmative redistricting; Aboriginal electoral districts (AEDs); and Aboriginal legislatures. These options, however, must respect the distinctive identities of Aboriginal peoples and give them an active and substantial voice.

Land negotiations must also recognize Aboriginal cultural difference rather than extinguish their rights. Engaging Aboriginal peoples in land negotiations will only provide a successful path to reconciliation if the multifaceted differences that define Aboriginal peoples are accepted and respected.

Ultimately, the uniqueness of Aboriginal identities needs to be more fully represented through an approach of cultural sensitivity in order to foster greater cooperation, mutual awareness, reciprocity and trust. The quality of Aboriginal engagement in elections and land negotiations is foundational to the successful pursuit of Aboriginal reconciliation.

About the Researcher

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Citation

Dalton, J. E. (2012). *Aboriginal Engagement: Reconciliation Through Electoral Participation and Land Negotiations in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Keywords

First Nations, Reconciliation, Cultural sensitivity, Land negotiations, Alienation, Nationalism

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