

“Ayaminaaniwan – Having a Voice” Conference

Executive Summary

Aboriginal people are, on average less likely than non-Aboriginal people to vote in elections at all levels – Municipal, Provincial and Federal although voter turnout on rural reserves is often high.

“Ayaminaaniwan – Having a Voice” was a Round Table event, co-sponsored by Lakehead University and Ontario Native Women’s Association was held to discuss & discover in an interactive forum whether Aboriginal people in Thunder Bay vote in mainstream elections, and if not, why not.

A review of the relatively small body of existing literature about Aboriginal people and their voting practices suggests to us that there are four broad categories of explanation for the relatively low voter turnout among Aboriginal people in mainstream elections. All four are rooted in Aboriginal peoples’ historical experience or deliberate exclusion from the mainstream of Canadian society as the consequence of the process of colonization.

1. One explanation is the ‘nationalist’ explanation: some Aboriginal people choose not to vote because they see themselves as part of distinctive nations, and seek nation-to-nation relations with Canada, and to vote in Canada would undermine the logic of their position, although they may still vote in band elections.
2. Second, their historical and current experience is such that many Aboriginal people, including many urban Aboriginal people, feel strong sense of social exclusion – they feel outside of, and not a part of or even welcome in, the dominant culture and institutions of Canadian society. Many Aboriginal people do not vote in mainstream elections for this reason.
3. Third, the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of Aboriginal people are, on average, consistent with those of non-voters generally.
4. And fourth, there is evidence that the concepts of ‘political opportunity’ and ‘political effort’ are important in explaining the relatively low levels of Aboriginal political participation – political parties are not generally open to Aboriginal peoples involvement and parties/politicians do not make much effort to involve Aboriginal people.

In October 2010, a project was initiated between the Ontario Native Women’s Association (ONWA) and select Leadership Thunder Bay (LTB) class participants, to conduct research on Aboriginal voting participation in the community of Thunder Bay. This project involved a number of research methods and resulted in the *Aboriginal Participation in Municipal Elections: Thunder Bay* report.

The report contains the summarized result of a number of one-on-one interviews, surveys, and focus groups that have been conducted for the purposes of that project. A number of key themes emerged as a result of current and existing research including those noted in the Exec. Summary above – history, racism, poverty and relationships. The report contained a number of recommendations and is directed to the following audiences within the City of Thunder Bay;

- City Council
- City Administration
- Aboriginal Organizations
- Local Education Organizations
- Community
- Local Media

The report attempts to build on a study entitled “*A Very Hostile System in Which to Live*” *Aboriginal Electoral Participation in Winnipeg’s Inner City*, which examines the relatively low proportion of Aboriginal people who vote in mainstream elections in the municipality of Winnipeg, MB. Many of the themes discussed in that report, echo those that emerged from the research in the ONWA/LTB report.

“*Ayaminaaniwan – Having a Voice*” Conference/Round Table Event was held at Lakehead University on October 12, 2011. The purpose of the conference was to examine the issue of *Aboriginal Participation in the Election Process*, and to look at ways to increase Aboriginal participation in elections through culturally relevant and contemporary strategies and recommendations from the participants. This unique event was co-hosted by Lakehead University and the Ontario Native Women’s Association. The report completed by ONWA and LTB was launched at the event as well.

Dr Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, an Aboriginal woman and scholar was the **keynote speaker** for the event. Dr. Esquimaux . Dr. Esquimaux is an Aboriginal woman and a scholar who has enjoyed an accomplished career as professor of Political Science, Canadian History as well as serving as an Assistant Professor in the faculty of Aboriginal Studies at the University of Toronto, and a political candidate herself.

A **panel discussion** was also held on the relevance of elections for Aboriginal Canadians, historical factors as relate to lack of participation, youth engagement, and obstacles related to the voting process itself was held. Members of the panel were all active as Aboriginal politicians, or politically active within the Aboriginal community. Panel members included;

- Betty Kennedy, First Aboriginal Councillor – City of Thunder Bay, Exec. Director of ONWA
- Brent Kelso, Director – Lakehead University Aboriginal Awareness Centre
- Frances Wesley – Thunder Bay Urban Aboriginal Strategy Planner
- Naomi Abotossaway - Confederation College, Negahneewin College of Academic and Community Development
- Tim Michano - Lakehead University student

Each panel member had an opportunity to speak for approx 10 minutes, with an interactive discussion and question period. Each presented to the group their own stories, how they got started, what got them started, bumps along the way, significant lessons learned, what advice they would give to others, etc. The consistent themes that emerged from the panel discussion were that of;

- Each began their political activity within the communities in which they lived, not necessarily their community of origin.
- Each was committed to the idea of public service, and of ‘giving back’ to their communities.

- Each had very ‘humble beginnings’, and were actively involved in their campaigns – and ‘got their hands dirty’.
- Fundraising was a ‘challenge’.
- Each felt that they were ‘passionate’ about what they believed in, and that political activity was the most logical ‘next step’ to express that passion and to share their beliefs.
- Each had ‘mentors’, and were shown the ways of governance – and as a result feel strongly that they believe in mentoring others.

Working Group Discussions included 4 questions which all had an opportunity to provide input, and resulted in the following recommendations. (** denotes most popular suggestions)

1. What is the role of Aboriginal Organizations in supporting Aboriginal people to vote?

- **Educate & inform
- **Mobility & Accessibility (transportation, child care, elder care, translation)
- **Groom potential candidates
- **Voter education – provide the ‘why’ should Aboriginal people vote
- **Provide Space for voter education & training, host meetings and gatherings
- Conduct ‘Post Mortem/find solutions/make recommendations
- Advocacy & Endorsement
- Seek partnerships
- Assist in getting I.D. necessary to vote
- Need to be role models
- Put on seminars/mock elections
- Lobby Elections Ontario and/or Elections Canada to be a designated polling station, and to hire Aboriginal polling clerks.
- Send newsletters, prepare handouts
- Put on webpage, prepare ‘toolkits’
- Ensure that organization staff/volunteers are well informed, re: how to vote, issues, etc.
- Youth outreach
- Allow staff time off to vote
- Showcase the positive aspects of the Aboriginal community; don’t just focus on social issues, violence, etc.

2. Historical Exclusion from Canada’s Democratic Institutions as well as past and present Aboriginal Governments conflicts have made it virtually impossible for Aboriginal people to feel a sense of their own significance within those structures. How do we address the apathy and mistrust which has likely translated into a reluctance to vote?

- ** Education for the Aboriginal Community – there is no ‘intergenerational’ learning about why voting is important, what it hopes to achieve. Provide history of disenfranchisement and enfranchisement.

- **Cultural competency training – awareness of diverse groups – for politicians, electoral officers.
- **Governments need to endorse and implement the United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- Educate Canadians about Aboriginal History. (Saskatchewan cited as ‘best practices’ model- “We are all Treaty People”).
- Messaging and services in Aboriginal languages
- Respect for Aboriginal governance systems. i.e. Haudenosaunee
- Awareness of elements of Aboriginal government that has been adopted by settlers
- Acknowledge and respect for Aboriginal treaty rights.
- Address power imbalance, allocate Aboriginal positions in decision making structures
- Educate on how political systems work, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal
- Role models, those who run for election should be showcased
- Message can come from other Aboriginal role models, sports, entertainers, etc.
- General impact – start educating young Aboriginal students on elections, government systems.
- Engagement ‘between’ elections, not just at the time of an election
- Civic education in schools, broaden participation beyond just voting, mock elections
- Encourage politicians and elected officials to visit schools, remote communities – and assist with I.D. issues
- Monitor politicians & hold politicians accountable
- Acknowledge election fatigue – lengthen time in between Band Elections
- Go back to enumeration and address gaps in registering rural voters
- Accept status cards as legitimate I.D.
- (send the message) awareness that voting does not mean losing status or becoming disenfranchised.
- Have Aboriginal organizations assist in registration for those who don’t have I.D.
- Address media bias and less airtime for politicians and propaganda
- Negotiate ‘Nation to Nation’ agreements that show respect for Aboriginal governments/people
- Acknowledge the regional Aboriginal communities (marketing) in the airport(s)
- All levels of government should commit to funding to raise awareness of the importance of voting for Aboriginal people, and for all people.
- Aboriginal children should have an opportunity to visit/see all levels of government – to make it more real, less abstract.
- Seriously need to revisit how we teach Aboriginal history – tell the truth.
- Schooling or programming for prospective candidates

3. The Role of Government to ensure equal access to Aboriginal people to the Election Process.

- **Provide more information about 'why' people – all people – on the 'WHY' people should vote, not just the 'how' and not just at election time. (Elections Ontario, Elections Canada, governments)
- **Develop partnerships with Aboriginal organizations to 'get out the message'.
- Less ambiguous voter guides
- Elections Ontario/Canada need to *really* get to know their communities – and do their homework. Get to know 'us'.
- Government has an obligation to realize that they need to 're-balance' – and to acknowledge that omitting Aboriginal people (disenfranchising) initially (they weren't really people) has had the result of angry feelings that still exist – and to take into account that the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People was not adopted by Canada until 3 years later than when the declaration was established by the U.N.
- Political equity may be achieved through 'Affirmative Action'. At least one seat on City Council for a councillor to represent the Aboriginal Population. (Thunder Bay).
- Find out via survey, etc – if the message is getting through to Aboriginal population(s)
- Make it easier to obtain relevant I.D.
- Acknowledge that racism exists and that it is pervasive in most communities – and is a barrier to participation.
- Ensure that Elections staff is 'culturally competent'.

4. Strategies to engage Aboriginal Youth in the election process.

- **Education, Education, Education – as early as possible. Incorporate election and politics information into Civics classes in high school; consider providing this info to elementary school aged children. Make the education more relevant with examples such as mock elections, etc.
- Open house for all levels of government, specific to school aged children both elementary and secondary – tour City Hall, etc.
- Student Advisory Committees for City Councils
- Utilize social media (Elections Canada/Ontario) to engage youth 'where they are'. (the online community).
- Mentorship programs – politicians both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal should mentor student councils both elementary and secondary.
- Youth Boards of Directors in Aboriginal organizations.