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“YOU HAVE TO BE INVOLVED . . . TO PLAY A PART IN IT”

ASSESSING KAINAI ATTITUDES ABOUT VOTING IN CANADIAN ELECTIONS

YALE D. BELANGER

*The question of the right to vote can properly be regarded as an aspect of status and as a determinant of political influence. The general prohibition of voting privileges denied Indians the possession of one of the central symbols of membership in the Canadian political system.*¹

—Harry Hawthorn (1967)

*The October 14 election allows the voices of over 800,000 First Nation citizens across Canada to be heard given the slim margin of victory in over 50 ridings in the last general election. To that end, the Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine has launched “Vote ‘08, Change Can’t Wait!”, a First Nations political participation and public awareness campaign to encourage voting among First Nations voters and to increase the profile of Aboriginal issues in this election. This initiative is also aimed at soliciting a clear and robust Aboriginal platform from each political party.*²

—Assembly of First Nations press release (2008)

Two days prior to the federal election on June 28, 2004, the *Lethbridge Herald* ran an article in which the renowned Cree leader and former Member of Parliament Elijah Harper (Churchill electoral district in Manitoba,

1993-97) publicly implored First Nations people in Canada to participate in the forthcoming vote.³ Citing the recent demographic shift showing a dramatic increase in the number of young First Nations people nationally and their potential ability to influence provincial and federal electoral results, Harper proclaimed that “Native people have a positive role to play in this process.” Referring to the endemic lack of voter turnout in recent elections without offering an explanation for these trends, he cautioned First Nations readers that simply following politics from the comfort of one’s home was meaningless. Complaining about federal and provincial political matters was not an

Key Words: Alberta, First Nations, interviewing, Kainai, voting

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[GPQ 29 (Winter 2009): 29-49]



FIG. 1. NDP MLA (New Democratic Party Member of Legislative Assembly) Elijah Harper sits in the Manitoba legislature holding an eagle feather for spiritual strength as he continues to delay the house debate on the Meech Lake accord in Winnipeg, June 19, 1990. Courtesy of The Canadian Press/Wayne Glowacki.

option, opined Harper, echoing in his concluding comments Michel Foucault's contention that power is contingent and exercised in spatial (political) contexts.⁴ Simply put, "You have to be involved [as a voter] . . . to play a part in it [Canadian politics]."⁵

This study arises in response to Harper's comments and to provide much-needed context to the limited research examining First Nations voting behavior. Although it might seem to be a straightforward question, answering why First Nations individuals resist voting in Canadian elections can be challenging. As the above epigraph suggests, Harry Hawthorn and his colleagues in the 1960s anticipated First Nations one day participating as voters in federal and provincial elections, their electoral participation considered a metric of civic

participation symbolic of the "Indian's" emergent equality. This did not occur as predicted, even if available statistical data show First Nations to be exercising their franchise right at rates higher than during any period since 1960, the year they were granted the vote. Despite climbing participation rates, these numbers lag behind mainstream Canadian society's voter participation rates, which in recent years have witnessed a steady decline. That First Nations eschewed voting in Canadian elections was by no means an epiphany, however. Since the 1980s and early 1990s several researchers have described the low First Nations voter turnout rates as being a significant issue.⁶ In the mid-1990s, Jonathon Malloy and Graham White observed, in an understatement, that "natives do not place a high priority on voting in Canadian elections."⁷

In anticipation of a 2004 federal election call, Elections Canada devoted its entire November 2003 publication, *Electoral Insight*, to First Nations voting behavior in an attempt to expose the issues hindering First Nations electoral participation. A major theme to emerge from the seven essays was the federal and provincial governments' inability to ensure First Nations parliamentary and legislative representation, in turn resulting in limited voter turnout. Similar concerns had been previously expressed by Trevor Knight, Tim Schouls, Will Kymlicka, and Roger Gibbins, all of whom emphasized restructuring federal electoral districts to enhance First Nations parliamentary participation, echoing the recommendations of the 1992 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing and its Committee for Aboriginal Electoral Reform.⁸ The authors provided compelling reasons for implementing strategies they suggested could lead to improved First Nations voter turnout. It was during this period that several scholars began to stress the franchise's potential political influence both federally and provincially and in terms of fortifying First Nations' political resolve in the pursuit of self-government.⁹

The problem, as I see it, was that none of these works probed the underlying reasons

leading to poor First Nations voter turnout. It was not until the publication of Election Canada's special edition in 2003 that specific theories were posited for poor First Nations voting turnout. Unfortunately, the proffered hypotheses took on a life of their own and were generally and uncritically accepted by scholars and public policymakers alike as the key drivers leading to First Nations voter alienation.¹⁰

A close reading of the available literature, of which *Electoral Insight* is the most recent and arguably the most significant contribution, suggests **six key barriers** to First Nations individuals voting in Canadian elections. I propose that these barriers offer scholars both a general conceptual framework to study the issues and an important lens through which to scrutinize more rigorously regional First Nations voting trends. This framework is needed to combat the increasingly prevalent notion that First Nations voter alienation is a universal phenomenon. Failure to acknowledge the cultural and regional forces influencing First Nations voting behavior homogenizes First Nations people and their unique socioeconomic challenges, suggesting that an encompassing corrective to existing conditions, once developed, will become a panacea. However, regional and community-based case studies are desperately needed in order to survey the dynamics of First Nations voting behavior rooted in rational choice, and in order to expand our understanding of why First Nations resist voting in Canadian elections.

The **first barrier** is historical, specifically Canada's failure to grant First Nations the right to vote. One political scientist has suggested that lingering memories of Canada using "enfranchisement as a tool of assimilation" has led First Nations people to avoid participating in federal and provincial elections.¹¹ The **second barrier** is socioeconomic status. It is commonly accepted that First Nations people compose a disproportionate segment of Canada's poor, homeless, and transient, all undergirded by low postsecondary education attainment levels. This suggests that First Nations impoverishment leads to disenfranchisement. The inability to leave the reserve to vote also leads to

disenfranchisement—Elections Canada data show that 296 polling booths were located in Canada's estimated 1,100 inhabited reserves during the 2004 election. The **third barrier** is a lack of effective communication. The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, for example, highlighted "inadequate media coverage, insufficient availability of media, and a failure to provide campaign materials and issues in Aboriginal languages as being among the factors that discourage Aboriginal participation."¹² Geographic dispersion is the **fourth barrier**. As Elections Canada elaborated, "There are very few electoral districts in which Aboriginal people constitute a significant enough percentage of the electorate to wield actual influence in electoral politics."¹³

The **fifth barrier**, which is the most popular explanation for the current lack of First Nations voter participation to date, is "feelings of exclusion . . . a perceived lack of effectiveness, the non-affirmation of group difference by and within electoral politics, and the virtual lack of a group's presence in electoral politics," all of which lead to political disinterest. Accordingly, First Nations individuals tend "to see themselves as distinct from other Canadians and as belonging to 'nations within'; and as nations that are not represented 'within.'"¹⁴ Two subthemes have emerged from this discourse. The nationalism discourse suggests that First Nations choose not to vote in "foreign elections" and to focus their energies on local reserve politics. The political placement discourse suggests that First Nations will choose when and where to exercise their franchise right within the Canadian polity for maximum political effect.

Finally, the **sixth barrier** is that the franchise forces "people to surrender their right to participate in politics by reducing the right to the merest gesture, the written mark, the vote . . . deployed as a tool of totalizing power, which everywhere defines itself as democratic and defines democracy by this hollow shell: the vote that establishes 'representative' government."¹⁵ As such, "the vote is an abstraction; it represents the whole political speech and activity

of individual citizens, from whom other forms of political speech and activity are no longer required and, indeed, discouraged."¹⁶

Russel Barsh et al. (1997) developed a comprehensive study to contrast First Nations and non-Native voting behavior in southern Alberta from a list of sixteen general elections and the 1992 Charlottetown constitutional referendum. Many of the hypotheses listed above were reflected in his conclusions. In particular, three principal interpretive themes emerged from the interview data, indicating that (1) First Nations peoples suffered from feelings of exclusion from Canadian society that results in minimal impact in federal and provincial elections; (2) a lack of practical and strategic information not only made learning about candidates difficult but also hampered people in their ability to locate polling stations or electoral lists; and (3) respondents tended to be less optimistic about influencing federal and provincial elections but were confident in their ability to influence band council elections.¹⁷

The aforementioned studies constitute the canon of academic literature exploring why First Nations people resist participating in federal and provincial elections. Noticeably little has changed in the decade since Barsh's rarely cited study. As a result, our understanding of First Nations participation in Canadian electoral politics is at best limited. While government data detailing First Nations voter participation rates are informative, the issue of *why* First Nations people resist voting in federal and provincial elections is of primary concern. With these issues in mind, this exploratory study seeks to help answer the question why Kainai individuals aged twenty to twenty-nine resist voting in provincial and federal elections. While building on previous scholarship, this research is also intended to provide the additional baseline data needed to develop more extensive comparative research into First Nations voting behavior in external and band council elections in southern Alberta.¹⁸ It also identifies several factors that ultimately hinder Kainai voting participation in Canadian elections.

COLLECTING DATA ON FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE

A distinctive feature of this study is that the results are based upon the views and attitudes of First Nations people, specifically members of the Kainai First Nation of southern Alberta. The intention from the beginning was to gain a First Nations perspective on the interests, preferences, and factors that led Kainai individuals to decide on behalf of or against voting in Canadian elections. The Kainai First Nation was chosen for several reasons. One, it was the site of a previous study examining reserve members' electoral participation, thereby permitting comparative analyses. Second, recent band elections demonstrated impressive voter participation rates, trends that appeared to be at odds with circulating anecdotes suggesting that young Kainai individuals altogether eschew voting. Finally, all three research assistants (1 male, 2 females) resided at Kainai and had previous experience working with youths and elders. Two were selected as interviewers to foster internal validity and to guide the project's development and implementation, while the third assisted in developing the literature review and thematic analysis. Informant participation was limited to English-speaking reserve residents in an effort to generate a community-based perspective chronicling why Kainai individuals generally avoid voting in off-reserve elections.

Following University of Lethbridge ethics approval to conduct research with human subjects, the research assistants by word of mouth snowballed a sample of thirty potential project participants who were then interviewed to determine project compatibility (e.g., available for followup interviews; willing to engage the interviewers; thought the issue was important, etc.). A final list of twenty participants was created from the preliminary interview responses. The age group twenty to twenty-nine was selected based on overall age characteristics that showed this group to be one of the largest and fastest growing cohorts amongst the general reserve population. Individuals in this

age group also represent the first generation of students to be taught in community schools controlled and operated exclusively by First Nations. Each of the participants (all grade 12 graduates) had been exposed to the same curriculum and in most cases had been taught by the same teachers.

These individuals were also in the foundational stages of determining, in general, how they would serve the community politically, and specifically, how their political choices could potentially impact their families. The participants also demonstrated little knowledge of Canadian federal and provincial politics. Interestingly, most considered voting an important responsibility even if they did not precisely understand what it represented for them, personally. The cohort's collective employment rates and educational attainment levels reflected general community standards based on data available from Statistics Canada. In all, the cohort of ten men and ten women was considered statistically representative of the Kainai First Nations citizenry aged twenty to twenty-nine.

Subsequent to the selection process, a follow-up interview was conducted to inform each participant of their rights and responsibilities, to build trust, and to collect data such as the participant's age, current home and life situation, and employment and educational status, to name a few fields of inquiry. The personal interview represented the second stage of the data-gathering phase. For this stage the research team agreed that the appropriate research model was the person-centered interview, an exploratory, discussion-based method designed to "clarify the relations of individuality, both as output and input, to its sociocultural context" while eliciting behaviors and attitudes that suggest "hidden or latent dimensions of the organization of persons and of the sociocultural matrix and their interactions."¹⁹ This was an appropriate model, as the participants were comfortable engaging the research assistant(s) in conversation.

The interviews followed a general format whereby the researcher engaged the partici-

pant in a discussion while subtly posing, in no particular order, a number of predetermined questions designed to keep the interviewer attuned to the major themes being investigated while eliciting the participants' stories. Such stories, in this instance, provide insight into personal decision-making.²⁰ Ferrier has argued that "knowledge is constructed by people and groups of people; reality is multiperspectival; truth is grounded in everyday life and social relations; life is a text but thinking is an interpretative act; facts and values are inseparable; and science and all other human activities are value-laden."²¹ The person-centered interview enabled the researchers to become further grounded in the context of social interface that led to the development of both culturally (Kainai) and regionally (reserve) specific meanings for voting.²²

For the research's final phase a thematic analysis was produced to draw themes central to Kainai voting behavior through "careful reading and re-reading of the data."²³ In each section the voices of the participants are utilized to allow those individuals to "tell the story," as it were, of the issues and concerns influencing their voting behavior. The coding process involved identifying an important comment or interview moment prior to proceeding with data interpretation.²⁴ Encoding enabled the organization and categorization of data from which central themes were identified and developed.²⁵ Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously, and transcripts were reread to ensure accuracy and thematic applicability to the original data. To express our appreciation for the time provided and to honor the knowledge made available to us, each participant was provided with a fifty-dollar honorarium.

THE POLITICAL SETTING

Located in southern Alberta, the Kainai First Nation is situated on the Blood Reserve. At 881 square kilometers, it is Canada's largest geographic reserve, boasting a population in excess of 10,000. A member nation of the

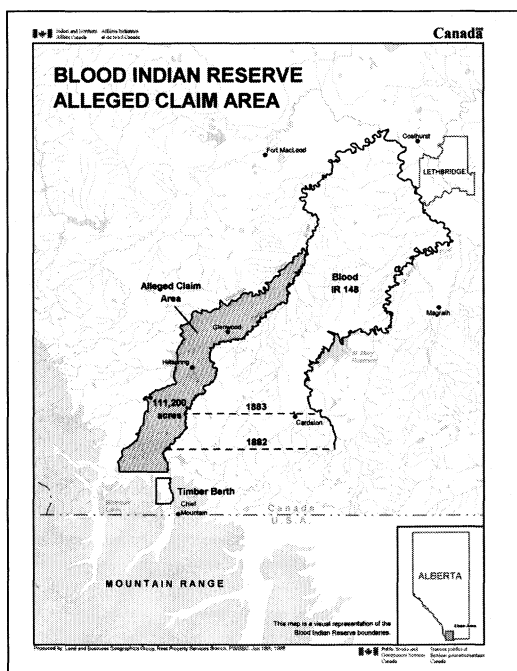


FIG. 2. Map representing historical and actual boundaries of the Blood Indian Reserve in southern Alberta, 1999. Created for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), Negotiations Group, Specific Claims. Courtesy of Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). [http://geoportal-geoportail.aicn-inac.gc.ca/mp-prd/lnd-03_e.html]

Blackfoot Confederacy, the Kainai originally organized into small bands typically no larger than thirty people.²⁶ Prior to their mid-eighteenth-century acquisition of the horse, the Kainai traversed their territory on foot, a period of limited mobility known as the “dog days,” which was followed by the development of more efficient hunting techniques and the expansion of Kainai territorial claims.²⁷ Soon the Kainai were positioned as a preeminent military power in the northwestern region of the Plains.²⁸ Kainai political processes stressed that individuals maintain close relationships in the community. Many political scientists present tribal societies like the Kainai as demonstrating “little or no specialized structure of government” and that with the appearance of

non-Natives, “indigenous cultures were largely exterminated or pushed aside.”²⁹ Countering this position is a growing literature base demonstrating political complexity among North American indigenous cultures, even if the Kainai’s political and social experiences did not permit their leaders to “conceive of authority in European-western terms” prior to European contact.³⁰ Defined communally, all functions of Kainai tribal government were ruled over by the collective. Here, self-interest could not be separated from tribal good—they were inextricably intertwined and virtually identical.³¹ To achieve rank, one needed to gain community respect through reputation building based upon acts of bravery, for wisdom and discretion, by becoming an object of admiration, in sum by interacting closely, positively and often with neighbors and family.

Following extended contact the Kainai pressured the British Crown for a treaty, a nation-to-nation pact establishing the rules needed to guide both Indian-Crown relations and territory-sharing provisions.³² Specifically, the depletion of the buffalo significantly challenged the Kainai’s regional political and military supremacy, leading to treaty negotiations in September 1877. In return for annuities and the Crown’s promise to protect the last remaining buffalo herds and create sheltered reserves, the Kainai and Treaty 7 signatories ceded 54,000 square kilometers of modern-day southern Alberta to facilitate settler migration. Unbeknownst to Kainai leaders anticipating that previous treaty assurances regarding their continued right to self-govern would be honored, the Crown strictly adhered to an assimilation policy envisioning Indian absorption into Canadian society. Legislation such as the Indian Act (1876) was established to assist implementing assimilation;³³ residential schools were created to instruct First Nations children in Canadian cultural norms;³⁴ and reserves established to segregate First Nations from Canadian society’s ills all the while simultaneously promoting their incorporation into that society.³⁵ In particular, the Indian Act provided for the administration of three

key areas: allocation of reserve lands, defining Indian status, and granting powers of enforcement to the Canadian government. Provisions within the Indian Act forced an end to traditional governance and replaced it with municipal-style models overseen by local Indian agents empowered to enforce provisions outlawing traditional and hereditary leadership selection processes.

The most debilitating challenge to sustaining traditional Kainai governance came in the form of the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), established in 1880, the country's central bureaucracy responsible for the day-to-day activities and political processes of reserve communities. The superintendent general of the DIA, determined to enforce the imposition of the elective band council model (est. 1871), consequently deprived traditional leaders of political recognition by acknowledging only those individuals elected according to the Indian Act criteria. The goal was to transform hereditary leadership models into more palatable municipal-style councils "intended to serve as a pliable instrument that would advance the general aims of federal tutelage and support the particular day-to-day objectives of field officers."³⁶ Presented as a voluntary process, few bands adopted this foreign electoral model, maintaining allegiance to traditional leadership selection procedures. Those who chose the electoral model nevertheless found Canadian officials disinclined to personally interact with their leadership. From a federal perspective, the most direct means available to oppose federal plans was to participate in council meetings and by voting for the candidate believed best suited to deal with federal officials.

First Nations resistance compelled federal officials to implement the Indian Advancement Act (1884) that aggressively championed Indian assimilation by once again conferring certain privileges to bands considered adequately advancing to a more civilized status. The Advancement Act promoted training local leaders for municipal responsibilities and providing those responsible for guiding the elected band council with the authority to

levy taxes. The council was further empowered to manage policing and public health matters. Most reserves refused to comply and the Canadian government again responded. In 1895 the Indian Act was amended, providing Indian agents and DIA officials with the sweeping authority needed to oust traditional leaders who had been elected to band council but who had since been deemed unfit for political office by the Indian agent. Once ousted from power, these individuals were considered ineligible by law to run in future elections or hold band council positions.

Despite what could be considered a questionable federal policy and legislative orientation, the Kainai demonstrated a willingness to engage with and participate in Canadian society. As part of its Treaty 7 obligations to the Crown, the Kainai permitted unfettered access to their traditional lands, thereby fulfilling a promise to open their territory to settlers wishing to share the country with its original inhabitants.³⁷ Following the buffalo hunting economy's failure in 1879, the Kainai quickly and successfully adopted farming and ranching. As part of the regional southern Alberta agrarian economy, reserve farming and ranching flourished into the early 1920s, their ultimate failure tied to bureaucratic ineptitude and malevolence.³⁸ Striking volunteerism in the Great War (1914-18) and World War II (1939-45) occurred. Confirming the Kainai's willingness to assist mainstream Canadian society was the leadership's decision to grant military access to the Blood Reserve in 1941, thereby permitting the Canadian Forces to establish a 50,000-acre bombing and gunnery range that took up approximately one-seventh of the reserve land base.³⁹ In 1956 the community once again chose to negotiate in good faith with Canadian officials, granting access to 1,550 acres of reserve land that enabled the successful expansion of the St. Mary's River Irrigation District and the flow of much-needed water to southern Alberta's drought-stricken farmers and ranchers.⁴⁰

This participation, however, did not extend to voting in Canadian elections, despite John

G. Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservatives granting Indians the franchise in 1960. Indians were previously barred from voting due to a perceived lack of civilized status, privileges such as treaty rights inaccessible to mainstream Canadians, a lack of fee simple landholdings, and sovereign assertions not befitting Canadian citizens.⁴¹ Diefenbaker ensured people that the Indian vote in federal and provincial elections would not compromise their status or make this participation contingent on "complete assimilation into Canadian society."⁴² Despite these assurances, Barsh et al. concluded that voter participation among the Blood (Kainai) and Peigan (Piikuni) of southern Alberta was limited, albeit higher in federal than provincial elections. However, the number of people voting dropped consistently over a fifteen-year period beginning in 1980 that has yet to recover at the Kainai First Nation.⁴³ Outside Barsh's work, little in the way of reliable statistical data articulating southern Alberta First Nations voter participation rates and voting trends exists for the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

National research conducted by Elections Canada showed First Nations voter participation rates in the 2000 federal election ranged from 35.3 percent in Quebec to 66.9 percent in Prince Edward Island, with Alberta listed at 53.9 percent.⁴⁴ The lack of specific data and their reliability can be attributed to what one academic described as the "virtual absence of electoral districts where Aboriginal people represent the majority of voters."⁴⁵ A similar study found First Nations turnout for the Charlottetown referendum in 1992 was 41 percent, with 38 percent and 40 percent participating in the 1993 and 1997 federal elections, respectively. Mainstream voter participation rates of 71.8 percent for the referendum and 69.9 percent and 67 percent for the two elections suggest that the majority of First Nations tend to avoid voting in Canadian elections.⁴⁶

In their research examining status and nonstatus Indian voter turnout for federal, provincial, and band elections in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island between 1962 and 1993, David Bedford and the late

Sidney Pobihushchy discovered substantial voter participation in band council elections in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia between 1972 and 1992 and notably lower participation in federal elections in both provinces during the same time period. Their work revealed First Nations voter participation in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia band council elections (1972-92) hovered in the 90 percent range while participation in federal elections in both provinces ranged from 17.8 and 54 percent, respectively, to 27.6 and 45.2 percent, respectively, for provincial elections.⁴⁷ Bedford later showed New Brunswick First Nations people engaging as voters, with 70 percent participating in the 1962 federal election.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, that number had dropped to 17.7 percent by 1988, with corresponding trends for provincial elections. Finally, he also found Nova Scotia First Nations participation in both provincial and federal elections to remain fairly consistent during the same study period.

Notwithstanding the right to vote, which provides an avenue enabling an individual's civic participation and political influence, First Nations voter participation rates lag. The question as to why this persists is significant, especially in light of three key points. One, the move toward securing treaty rights continues to be undermined by the federal government's limited interpretation of these rights, which arguably limits First Nations political capacity. Two, the disputed Aboriginal self-government process currently proceeds at a snail's pace, with no real end or specific goals in sight, thereby challenging First Nations desires to engage the Canadian government in a nation-to-nation relationship.⁴⁹ Third, current demographic trends highlight the fact that First Nations will comprise an ever-increasing segment of the Canadian population, suggesting that if effectively utilized the vote could be employed in key regions to ensure First Nations political representation and parliamentary influence.⁵⁰ The Kainai voter survey offers insight as to why the vote is viewed with suspicion despite its publicized potential to improve First Nations political participation in Canadian society.

THE KAINAI FIRST NATIONS VOTER SURVEY

Interviewing for this project took place starting in November 2005 prior to the Kainai Band Council election. To provide context, 51 percent of eligible voters in the Kainai First Nation participated in selecting a chief and twelve councillors from a potential field of 115 candidates (one out of every 100 citizens on reserve ran for council). Albeit 4 percent lower than the 2001 elections, band election voter participation far outstripped the 13 percent Kainai First Nation turnout rate in the 2004 federal election and the estimated one-quarter participation in the provincial election.⁵¹ This survey interviewed people at length to determine the thought process leading to their decision to vote or not to vote and to assess the six conceptual barriers to First Nations voting participation previously outlined. As discussed below, the participants at times both validated and contradicted the barriers to voting outlined above while presenting four additional themes/hypothesis detailed below that improve our collective understanding of why Kainai individuals resist voting in Canadian elections.

THE PERSONAL ASPECT OF POLITICS

The Kainai historically embraced a political model characterized by an absence of power relations (coercive, hierarchical, and authoritative).⁵² Maintaining relationships was stressed and aggressive political competition among individuals avoided. Folks were taught to govern their own personal affairs in communities where no individual had the right to govern another. Leadership skills were seen as gifts derived from the Creator and fostered in communities where responsibilities to the community were stressed rather than becoming "a claimant of rights."⁵³ A complex network of relationships evolved that guided all functions of government conducted by the people who were responsible for the day-to-day governance.⁵⁴ Importantly, those considered to be commanding or overbearing were rejected,

making it possible for leaders to achieve rank only by gaining respect through reputation-building based upon acts of bravery, wisdom, and discretion, in essence by becoming an object of admiration.⁵⁵ This check was devised to avoid power becoming concentrated in one or a handful of individuals. In sum, individuals demonstrating knowledge and experience were viewed as leaders in communities where lobbying for leadership positions through structured voting procedures was shunned.

The loss of this previously intimate and personal political process was identified as problematic by all project respondents, in particular the lack of personal interaction with political candidates. All suggested that such behavior reflected a lack of interest in First Nations affairs at best, and at worst the belief that politicians held disdain for First Nations people and their concerns. Leadership selection was presented as an important responsibility not to be taken lightly. One twenty-eight-year-old male concluded, "I see the significance of voting in both [federal and provincial elections] because, you know, I'm getting older and a lot of stuff is going to be affecting me now. It affects everyday life and the people that do get elected in, you know, you've got to know what they stand for."⁵⁶ Federal and provincial candidates' refusal to visit the reserve to speak to one individual about the issues or to engage him as a political equal kept this individual from voting in Canadian elections.⁵⁷ It also forced one twenty-six-year-old male to reference the print media and television for his information. Television in particular was cited by most informants ($n = 16$) as an essential political tool needed to forge a general sense of personal interface with politicians. This was required, as the latter informant suggested, before a voter can "really see and understand politicians." Television was considered the best medium available for participants to scrutinize political candidates and to read their body language, which was considered central in assisting individuals in making an informed decision. Elaborating on this point, a twenty-something female stated "I guess if I see the person and

... go hear them talking ... and if I think they are sincere" simply by watching how they handle themselves in public makes easier the task of selecting a candidate. Interestingly, and reflecting the majority of respondents ($n = 15$), she assumed that politicians "wouldn't lie."⁵⁸

This is not surprising, for historically lying or misrepresenting oneself or your family in a small First Nations community would quickly be discovered and the individual shamed. Regaining the trust of neighbors was an onerous task. Maintaining community balance was the key; hence, lying was objectionable and something that political leaders did not practice.⁵⁹ Although a handful of respondents ($n = 6$) were concerned that certain politicians had been exposed as lying to their constituents, the majority overwhelmingly believed that politicians dealt truthfully with the media. One twenty-eight-year-old male concluded that politicians are like an open book—if they are lying and "you really want to know about them" you can simply "go online and ... just research it." Personally knowing a politician made candidate selection easier, for according to one twenty-two-year-old female, this would allow you to become more familiar with "what kind of job they do, what kind of person they are, what kind of experience they have." She concluded, "If I know their experiences ... that is how I would pick them."⁶⁰ Each individual emphasized the need for interaction with candidates to find out the truth. This, all suggested, could be done by attending political forums and posing tough political questions to the candidates. At that point, adds a twenty-six-year-old male, "you can tell a guy is lying."⁶¹

Personal interface with political candidates was also considered an important educational tool, one that most participants ($n = 15$) claimed would help them surmount a lack of education about the Canadian political system. This was considered the most effective means available to potential voters seeking a quick education about the issues.⁶² In communities that still embrace storytelling to convey social norms and mores, this response should not

be surprising. What are difficult to overcome are the feelings of intimidation associated with voting, which is further exacerbated by a limited knowledge of Canadian federal and provincial politics. This often dissuaded people from exercising the franchise, according to a twenty-seven-year-old male: "I just think that people ... are scared to [get involved]. They don't know what they are like, [they lack] influence." He concluded, "I think just a lot more Natives should be voting and getting into politics."⁶³ One twenty-one-year-old male suggested that some people "don't have enough knowledge on who to vote for, who is who, and they kind of don't really understand. It is kind of hard for them to vote for anybody; what if they vote for the wrong person?"⁶⁴ A twenty-nine-year-old female indicated that the complexity of federal and provincial Indian policies is difficult to discern and that further education would make the act of voting "more meaningful."⁶⁵

A minority ($n = 7$) of the respondents indicated that feelings of political and cultural disassociation resulted, causing one twenty-six-year-old female to conclude, "I just really don't see the relevance of all that, because ... I don't really feel connected," while adding that the lack of communication and personal education makes voting "just a big headache."⁶⁶ Similarly, a twenty-six-year-old male, referring to the Canadian political system, concluded, "I don't understand it and it doesn't really involve me and my family, my kids. It wouldn't be right for me to vote, because I don't understand. I'm not gonna waste any body else's time."

DISCERNING GOSSIP FROM FACT

The Committee for Aboriginal Electoral Reform concluded in 1991 that First Nations lacked the information needed to exercise rational choice, thereby implicitly barring them from effectively participating as voters. However, the recent proliferation of television, radio, and especially the Internet means that folks at the Blood Reserve are impressively connected to nonreserve media sources.⁶⁷ The

issue is not so much whether people are connected, which they are, but rather how people utilize this information to best determine suitable candidates. In this instance two avenues of research were regularly pursued to assist respondents to become more informed about the issues: (1) discussion with family members and friends and (2) employing the media as a reliable agent of fact. Participants employed the two methods in a mutually supporting fashion to acquire knowledge they believed would allow them to make an educated decision about provincial and federal candidates. Word of mouth was most often utilized, given the variety of available media on reserve that frequently offered contradictory commentary. This often-confusing punditry led to increased personal interface with neighbors and relatives that most often took the form of informal face-to-face discussions and e-mail and Internet chat-room debates. Nevertheless, the media, including local and national print media, radio, and television, are considered reliable agents of fact.

When asked how she knew the information she obtained about a particular candidate was accurate a twenty-four-year-old female replied, if the "person said it to a national newspaper . . . and they have the nerve to publish it . . . obviously it's true." Lethbridge residents rely upon media information to help them in the decision-making process in much the same way project participants suggested existing media outlets assist their voting choices. Many informants ($n = 6$) regularly access the *Lethbridge Herald*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *National Post* either online or by purchasing the paper during elections. Many more ($n = 13$) watched the local and national television newscasts or tuned into the local radio station (CFWE 89.9 FM) for news updates. The majority ($n = 13$), including a twenty-four-year-old male, indicated that the mass media assisted them in the decision-making process. He stated, "It kind of makes you think about which party you want to vote for. They state their thing . . . they are telling you what they are going to do, what they are planning, how they are going to try to

campaign to win the votes. It gives you a good idea of who you want to vote for." An interesting tension exists concerning the participants' outright acceptance of media interpretations as truthful statements. For instance, a twenty-eight-year-old male stated that in addition to word of mouth, the Internet is his main source of information: "I try to talk to a lot of people; you try not to take everything as truth. You just have to research for yourself. You trust your friendships as well." With the Internet he was able to read relevant articles and forward them to his friends if he believed the writings "important enough."

Perhaps most telling was the study participants' methodology for separating fact from gossip. While seeking out advice from family members was cited as an important educational tool, a twenty-four-year-old female indicated that she was unable to determine how her family members separated gossip from fact. Despite being inundated with negative campaigning, one informant refused to accept the impossibility of positive outcomes. Alluding to the import of remaining personally connected to political candidates, a twenty-seven-year-old male suggested that differentiating gossip from fact is possible if you take the time to listen to others. A limited majority ($n = 12$) claimed that this was in fact a difficult proposition, made all the more challenging when you consider that "there is always truth behind some things because why would they be talking about it if it's not there? You know that there is something going on but you don't know what it is."⁶⁸ Added a twenty-four-year-old female, "Sometimes I think it's just pretty much all gossip," elaborating that word-of-mouth information does not help her in her decision-making process because "a lot of times you will hear someone say something to somebody and then sometimes you will hear something else and the story's totally changed."

Notwithstanding the importance placed on engaging neighbours and relatives, Kainai society was and remains a highly individualistic environment where individuals are encouraged to formulate decisions upon acquiring

the requisite information. This helps those who have difficulty discerning gossip from fact. For instance, a twenty-two-year-old male suggested that "everyone has their own opinion" and that he "can't really decide" what is gossip. He did admit though that referencing numerous information sites assisted him in his decision-making process.⁶⁹ Stressing the need to establish interactive relationships with political candidates, a twenty-eight-year-old male suggested that separating gossip from fact would be easier if federal and provincial politicians visited the reserve in order to speak with community members, "because it's not like they are at your fingertips, you can't really go to a person and say, 'What do you believe?'" He explained that by accepting word-of-mouth information uncritically is "kind of like feeding the monster." He added that "you hear it all the time. The parents say this guy did that, and this guy did this. You hear it all the time." However, a female informant indicated that she tried to separate herself from that process "because they say bad things about people [and] I kind of wonder what their motivation is. Is it to do something for themselves or to do something good for the community?"⁷⁰ Yet she wondered whether this benefited her candidate selection process. "I look at the kinds of jobs they have and what their status is in the community and how they are actively involved," which "makes it easier for me. As long as they're educated and you know they are not just doing it for themselves, but for the community." In sum, there exists no bona fide mechanism beyond word of mouth that permits people to discern gossip from accurate assertions of fact.

KAINAI POLITICS TAKE PRECEDENCE

Four distinctive political groups comprised the Blackfoot Confederacy: the South Piikuni, the North Piikuni, the Siksika, and the Kainai. Historically, these four nations would meet annually for the Sun Dance, where ceremonies were performed and family and political ties renewed. Political and economic councils were held where leaders of the four nations

debated regional matters and formulated resolutions. Whereas larger confederacy concerns dominated the debates, Kainai issues were also discussed, as local leaders never lost sight of the importance of resolving their concerns.⁷¹ After the celebration the smaller Kainai bands would disperse to their traditional territories and for the rest of the year would self-govern. The political model was interactive and allowed for Kainai issues to take precedence as opposed to deferring to the larger confederacy structure.⁷² That being said, the Kainai have always demonstrated a proclivity for focusing on internal matters to the detriment of maintaining external alliances.⁷³

Not surprisingly, the participants who were most critical of the federal and provincial governments demonstrated less inclination to vote. These individuals stated that reserve politics were their primary concerns, with all outside political issues remaining peripheral. A twenty-four-year-old male indicated that he had "never known too many people to vote in a Federal election" because they were "more concerned about their own reserve," where life is lived and local decisions are felt and experienced. In his opinion, limited community participation in provincial elections resulted. He further hypothesized that reserve residents would "rather get things straightened out on their own reserve before they move to other things." Supporting this conclusion was a twenty-one-year-old male who stated "with the Native people, we are more focused on our needs, on our reserves for our people, than out in the world . . . off the reserve." A twenty-six-year-old female commented, "I think it's because I live on the reserve, but everything that has to be done out there [affects] me directly because I'm living in a house that needs this done . . . and I'm driving on the roads that need this done."

Reserve residents were inherently more aware of the community's political issues, and voting in reserve elections was thus presented as less imposing than participating in larger Canadian elections due to an improved understanding of the key political issues. It was

also presented as each community member's responsibility. This did not militate against becoming educated about and participating in Canadian elections. A twenty-three-year-old woman, for instance, concluded that while she was "more aware of voting on the reserve than what was going on" provincially and federally, additional education about the issues "being brought up regarding Natives" was needed. In return, "Natives should vote more so their voice could be heard."⁷⁴

Even so, "Our politics are the reserve," one twenty-eight-year-old male concluded, adding that "no one looks outside the reserve because their help is to mainly focus on our reserve." The interviewers, however, sensed that most of the participants were contemplating becoming more informed about and eventually involved in federal and provincial politics. Participating in band elections was considered by several ($n = 6$) to be a gateway to this anticipated participation. Previous experience voting in band elections also provided a handful of others ($n = 4$) with a sense that one person can impact the outcome of an election. As confirmed by a twenty-four-year-old female, any person "could have a deciding vote." The concern of most participants was summed up by a twenty-eight-year-old male: "We don't know what is going on, on the outside [of the reserve]." Another lamented that his family and friends may choose to vote in Canadian elections due to the fact that "people are just growing conscious of the situation that Natives are restricted to," and that casting a ballot was but one of a limited number of options available to reserve residents seeking to foster positive socioeconomic change.⁷⁵ If indeed the vote is seen as a last-ditch effort to improve reserve conditions, this will demand that voters improve their knowledge of political candidates, since these candidates "have our interests [integrated into] their political platform, [and] those are the type of people that I want to vote for."⁷⁶ According to one respondent, this is the means to secure political voice for First Nations people in Canada: "It's our responsibility to do that."⁷⁷ A twenty-four-year-old female proposed establishing a regional,

southern Alberta First Nations party "that has just as much influence as even if it was just the basic Native population. We could have people over there that protect our rights."

Clearly, reserve politics take precedence over other political issues, although it was once again suggested that sending federal and provincial political representatives to the reserve for educational purposes would likely lead to increased voter participation. Two points are highlighted here. First, project participants wanted outside political candidates to become aware of local political issues. Second, the complexity of the Canadian political process was again highlighted; specifically the local (some might say myopic) focus on reserve politics is often to the detriment of understanding regional and national political issues and how they may impact the community. A twenty-six-year-old male indicated that he would be more willing to vote if he was able to learn about Canadian politics while simultaneously teaching political candidates about important reserve issues. One twenty-nine-year-old female went so far as to suggest that she would be willing to seriously consider voting for any party willing to visit the reserve to see firsthand how federal and, to a lesser extent, provincial policy decisions directly impact First Nations people. She added that while it would be overly optimistic to suggest that conditions would straightaway improve, it would nevertheless provide political candidates with a showcase of current living conditions to impress upon them that their efforts in improving their understanding of First Nations people would be rewarded. A twenty-six-year-old male agreed, adding that should politicians visit reserve communities, they could see firsthand what was "happening, and then they could really truly see what the living conditions are, and how the Indians live on the reserve, and see the areas that we actually need help on." Only when they see the "living situations for some people" will federal and provincial politicians and political candidates understand "why some people don't really care about them" and their specific federal and provincial political concerns.⁷⁸

CANADIANS' PERCEPTIONS OF KAINAI FIRST NATION'S NEEDS

The period following the signing of Treaty 7 in September 1877 is characterized by the Kainai as one of hunger and broken promises, exacerbated by government attitudes equating the Blackfoot as little more than obstacles to western expansion.⁷⁹ Following confederation in 1867, the new federal government embarked on an aggressive social program aimed at assimilating the original inhabitants of the land.⁸⁰ This period still resonates with Kainai community members, as confirmed by a recent study examining historic and contemporary Blackfoot participation in the Canadian Forces. One informant, disturbed by what he considered to be "the Canadian government's poor treatment of returning veterans," which included restrictions on voting in Canadian elections, thought that he and his communities were issues of peripheral concern to mainstream society. In his words, they were simply "brushed aside."⁸¹

Several participants ($n = 17$) still harbor resentment toward the Canadian government and are concerned that they have little access to the circuits of power. Yet, interestingly enough, many indicated ($n = 14$) that participating in Canadian politics would lead to a sense of empowerment, thereby providing them with the ability to derail anti-First Nations policies prior to implementation. This unique take on events embraced various strategies such as not voting for a specific party. The latter-day Progressive Conservatives and the modern-day Conservative Party were most often mentioned in this context, leading one twenty-eight-year-old male to conclude, "It is pretty well known that they don't want treaties any more and they have just said things." Party affiliations aside, a twenty-three-year-old female acknowledged the Canadian state's overarching role in First Nations politics, adding that it was incumbent upon all reserve residents to vote in federal and provincial elections in order to shape incoming governments and mitigate the "impact they have on us here . . . on the reserve." A twenty-

seven-year-old male claimed he needed to vote because failure to do so could result in his people's "rights being taken away." Similarly, a twenty-two-year-old female admitted that she would be willing to participate and vote because voting "the wrong guy in there" could result in the government taking "away our [treaty] rights."

Those who desire voting privileges often find themselves unable to exercise this right on the reserve. Many, such as one twenty-six-year-old male, believe that there is no access to voting in federal and provincial elections on the reserve, whereas a twenty-eight-year-old male stated that traveling to reserve voting booths is an onerous task due to the geographic disparity of the electorate (the Blood Reserve is 881 square kilometers), poor roads, and the lack of reliable transportation. According to Elections Canada, "If a polling station is entirely comprised of a reserve or is mostly comprised of a reserve, returning officers are instructed to establish polling stations on the reserve, wherever the band council will allow it. In such cases, the polling station is located at the band council office or community centre." In those instances where the band council declines, "the polling station is set up as close as possible to the outside boundary of the reserve. Aboriginal electors living off reserve vote at a regular polling station in the polling division in which they live."⁸²

Recent news reports suggested that no polling booths would be situated at the Kainai First Nation or the neighboring Piikuni First Nation for the 2008 provincial election, which generated negative publicity about a practice condemned by municipal and provincial politicians alike.⁸³ A twenty-eight-year-old male was critical, questioning why more polling booths were not located on the reserve. He also expressed concern that an individual living in neighboring Cardston, for example, could potentially be voted into power without the reserve residents' best interests at heart. He added cryptically that a First Nations political candidate meeting with electoral success would likewise be forced to represent Cardston interests,

TABLE 1
FIRST NATIONS, INUIT, AND MÉTIS SENATORS

Name	Political Affiliation	Province/Territory	Date Appointed [yyyy.mm.dd]	Native Origin
Hardisty, Richard Charles	Conservative	Northwest Territories	1888.02.23	Métis
Boucher, William Albert	Liberal Party of Canada	Saskatchewan	1957.01.03	Métis
Glastone, James	Independent Conservative	Alberta	1958.01.31	First Nations
Williams, Guy R.	Liberal Party of Canada	British Columbia	1971.12.09	First Nations
Adams, Willie	Liberal Party of Canada	Northwest Territories	1977.04.05	Inuit
Watt, Charlie	Liberal Party of Canada	Quebec	1984.01.16	Inuit
Marchand, Leonard Stephen	Liberal Party of Canada	British Columbia	1984.06.29	First Nations
Twinn, Walter Patrick	Progressive Conservative Party	Alberta	1990.09.27	First Nations
St. Germain, Gerry	Progressive Conservative Party	British Columbia	1993.06.23	Métis
Chalifoux, Thelma J.	Liberal Party of Canada	Alberta	1997.11.26	Métis
Gill, Aurélien	Liberal Party of Canada	Quebec	1998.09.17	First Nations
Sibbeston, Nick G.	Liberal Party of Canada	Northwest Territories	1999.09.02	First Nations
Dyck, Lillian Eva	New Democratic Party	Saskatchewan	2005.03.24	First Nations
Lovelace Nicholas, Sandra M.	Liberal Party of Canada	New Brunswick	2005.09.21	First Nations

a group of individuals he framed as having demonstrated disinterest for and antipathy toward the Kainai.

The overwhelming feeling that reserve residents' needs were being ignored led a number of participants ($n = 11$) to conclude that First Nations parliamentary representation is lacking (see Tables 1 and 2). A twenty-two-year-old female echoed these sentiments by suggesting that becoming personally associated "with a lot of the candidates" would make her "more inclined to try and vote if I knew they represent our interests." Another was more negative, characterizing politicians as uncaring due to their refusal to visit the reserve. A twenty-eight-year-old male countered this commentary, suggesting that even though he lacked an in-depth understanding of the Canadian political process, he was convinced that most federal and provincial politicians were pro-First Nations and interested in addressing the issues of most concern to First Nations. With this in mind, he suggested that he would be more interested in Canadian politics "if you

throw in a political party just for Natives." Supporting this view was a twenty-three-year-old female who indicated her willingness to actively participate in federal and provincial politics if there were more First Nations political candidates.⁸⁴ This is needed, according to the majority of participants ($n = 17$), for unless First Nations individuals are situated in the key political chambers where First Nations policies are crafted and implemented, the potential exists for all historic rights to be extinguished, suggesting further that "more representation for the Native people that ran in these elections" would make voting an easier chore.⁸⁵

THE FUTURE OF FIRST NATIONS VOTING

Seven of the study's twenty participants previously voted in a federal or provincial election, or both. Two of the twelve who did not were too young to participate in previous elections but indicated their desire to do so. The remaining eleven participants provided various reasons for not voting which are categorized and

TABLE 2
FIRST NATIONS, INUIT, AND MÉTIS MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Name	Political Affiliation	Constituency	Date Elected [yyyy.mm.dd]	Native Origin
McKay, Angus	Conservative	Marquette, Manitoba	1871.03.02	Métis
Delorme, Pierre	Conservative	Provencher, Manitoba	1871.03.03	Métis
Riel, Louis	Independent	Provencher, Manitoba	1873.10.13	Métis
Boucher, William Albert	Liberal Party of Canada	Rosthern, Saskatchewan	1948.10.25	Métis
Rhéaume, Eugène (Gene)	Progressive Conservative Party	Northwest Territories	1963.04.08	Métis
Marchand, Leonard Stephen	Liberal Party of Canada	Kamloops-Cariboo, British Columbia	1968.06.25	Métis
Firth, Walter (Wally)	New Democratic Party	Northwest Territories	1972.10.30	Métis
Ittinuar, Peter	New Democratic Party	Nunatsiak, Northwest Territories	1979.05.22	Métis
Keeper, Cyril	New Democratic Party	Winnipeg-St. James, Manitoba	1980.02.18	Métis
St. Germain, Gerry	Progressive Conservative Party	Mission-Port Moody, British Columbia	1983.08.29	Métis
Suluk, Thomas	Progressive Conservative Party	Nunatsiak, Northwest Territories	1984.09.04	Inuit
Anawak, Jack Iyerak	Liberal Party of Canada	Nunatsiak, Northwest Territories	1988.11.21	Inuit
Blondin-Andrew, Ethel Dorothy	Liberal Party of Canada	Western Arctic, Northwest Territories	1988.11.21	First Nations
Littlechild, Wilton (Willie)	Progressive Conservative Party	Wetaskiwin, Alberta	1988.11.21	First Nations
DeVillers, Paul	Liberal Party of Canada	Simcoe North, Ontario	1993.10.25	Métis
Harper, Elijah	Liberal Party of Canada	Churchill, Manitoba	1993.10.25	First Nations
O'Brien, Lawrence, D.	Liberal Party of Canada	Labrador, Newfoundland and Labrador	1996.03.25	Métis
Karetak-Lindell, Nancy	Liberal Party of Canada	Nunavut, Northwest Territories	1997.06.02	Inuit
Laliberte, Rick	New Democratic Party	Churchill River, Saskatchewan	1997.06.02	Métis
Cleary, Bernard	Bloc Québécois	Louis-Saint-Laurent, Quebec	2004.06.28	First Nations
Smith, David	Liberal Party of Canada	Pontiac, Quebec	2004.06.28	Métis
Russell, Todd Norman	Liberal Party of Canada	Labrador, Newfoundland and Labrador	2005.05.24	Métis
Bruinooge, Rod	Conservative Party of Canada (2003)	Winnipeg South, Manitoba	2006.01.23	Métis
Keeper, Tina	Liberal Party of Canada	Churchill, Manitoba	2006.01.23	First Nations
Merasty, Gary	Liberal Party of Canada	Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River, Saskatchewan	2006.01.23	First Nations
Clarke, Rob	Conservative Party of Canada (2003)	Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River, Saskatchewan	2008.03.17	First Nations

outlined above. This study has highlighted that among the Kainai an **additional four barriers** to voter participation exist in addition to the six discussed. **First**, a sense of historical injustice tied to previously being barred from voting can indeed serve to motivate participation in Canadian elections in contradiction to the hypothesis suggesting that past mistreatment, specifically being banned from voting, is an explanation for nonparticipation. **Second**, the lack of mainstream Canadian society's attention to First Nations does not invariably lead to First Nations nationalism discourses, as the literature suggests. Rather, a desire to participate in Canadian elections was evident, specifically among participants seeking to situate a candidate amenable to protecting historic and individually acknowledged Aboriginal and treaty rights.

Third, there is clearly a desire for First Nations representation in mainstream Canadian institutions; however, from a Kainai perspective this representation can be ensured by visits from politicians and other candidates. Such visits would preserve the personal aspect of political interface that was historically an important aspect of local politics, and remains so. When political candidates fail to engage Kainai residents, the Kainai turn to media coverage of politics and elections as an educational substitute. This, however, undermines the desired face-to-face contact due to an increasing political reliance on the media's ability to "get the word out," as it were. **Finally**, the study demonstrated the majority of residents foresee voting in Canadian elections as a means of improving local socioeconomic conditions. Nonvoting in this instance was not, as the literature has suggested, directly attributable to the limited number of voters, the perceived inability to make a difference, or geographic dispersion.

The interview data suggest mixed results when measuring the six barriers to voting that have been presented to date as the common reasons resulting in First Nations voter alienation. Data collected countered the hypotheses suggesting that First Nations people fail to vote

due to the lingering memory of the franchise being utilized as an assimilation mechanism. The nature of the vote and its ability to alter the political landscape leading to refined and improved Aboriginal policy orientations was not considered to be abstract. Poor socioeconomic conditions on the reserve did not act as a deterrent to voting, even at the Blood Reserve, where more than 30 percent of the citizenry is currently on social assistance of one kind or another. Participants did express a fear of voting, however. In order to exercise the franchise, one had to leave the community to vote in what were presented as hostile environments (i.e., nonreserve communities), suggesting that placing a polling booth at Standoff, the reserve's largest commercial center, would enable people vote in comfortable surroundings.

Several of the six hypotheses were supported in this study. Communication remains an issue, especially when it comes time to determine when and where to vote. The proliferation of televisions and especially the Internet and the availability of home computers and community access sites now enable individuals to conduct quick research and stay abreast of current events. Discerning accurate information from partisan sources remains a concern. Community needs were unanimously presented as more important than regional, provincial, and federal politics. Yet the majority of participants indicated that voting in Canadian elections influences policy creation; therefore, it influences reserve conditions. The nationalism discourse in this case emerges not as an aggressive assertion of sovereignty and/or Aboriginal rights so much as a thinly veiled distrust of the Canadian political system and its potential to harm First Nations people.

Although this study has shed light on individual Kainai voting behavior, little has changed in ten years since Barsh's study of southern Alberta First Nations voting participation. Many of the same barriers to voting remain in place. In that time, additional obstacles have emerged or are being formally articulated. Interestingly, the vote is not viewed with

suspicion so much as its relevance to improving local socioeconomic conditions is questioned. The lack of attention currently being paid to this phenomenon and its potential correctives is troublesome but no more so than the admittedly limited analyses of First Nations voting participation, which can be characterized as a reductive practice situating First Nations people in one of two groups: (1) First Nations nationalists with isolationist tendencies, or (2) disloyal ex-patriots who are characterized in a variety of ways ranging from the colloquial (apples) to the academic (compradors).⁸⁶

Failure to suggest that First Nations people in reserve communities may consider themselves Liberals, Conservatives, or Green Party members willing to discuss their interest in federal and provincial politics while still remaining involved in, or at the very least informed about, First Nations reserve politics hampers our understanding of the First Nations voting experience. A middle ground of choice cannot exist if the literature accurately reflects the dynamics being experienced in First Nations communities nationally. Kainai voter participation, specifically, and First Nations voting behavior, in general, are nuanced phenomena in need of improved academic attention.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author extends a special thank-you to the members of the Blood Reserve/Kainai First Nation who chose to take part in this project. Thanks also to Billy Wadsworth, Tisha Wadsworth, and Pam Blood for their due diligence and excellent research assistance; to Carolyn (CJ) Johnson for providing interview transcriptions; to Dr. David Gregory for his insightful comments; and to the two anonymous reviewers' comments, all of which helped strengthen this paper. This research was facilitated by financial assistance provided by a grant from the University of Lethbridge Research Fund. Any errors in fact and/or interpretation are the sole responsibility of the author.

NOTES

1. Harry B. Hawthorn, *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada*, vol. 1 (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1966), 255.

2. Assembly of First Nations, "AFN National Chief Launches 'Vote 08, Change Can't Wait' Campaign," <http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=4227> (accessed September 21, 2008).

3. The term 'Aboriginal people' indicates any one of the three legally defined culture groups that form what is known as Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Métis, Inuit, and Indian) and who self-identify as such. The term Indian, as used in legislation or policy, will also appear in discussions concerning such legislation or policy. Names of communities in this study are those that were in use during the various periods under study.

4. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

5. Gerald Gauthier, "Harper Urges Natives to Vote," *Lethbridge Herald*, June 24, 2004.

6. See, for example, Roger Gibbins, "Electoral Reform and Canada's Aboriginal Population: An Assessment of Aboriginal Electoral Districts" in *Aboriginal Peoples and Electoral Reform in Canada*, vol. 9 of the *Report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*, ed. R. Milen (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1991); and Russel Lawrence Barsh, "Canada's Aboriginal Peoples: Social Integration or Disintegration?" *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 14, no. 1 (1995): 1-46.

7. Jonathon Malloy and Graham White, "Aboriginal Participation in Canadian Legislatures," in *Fleming's Canadian Legislatures 1997*, 11th ed., ed. R. Fleming and J. E. Glenn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 60, 62.

8. Trevor Knight, "Electoral Justice for Aboriginal People in Canada," *McGill Law Journal* 46 (2001): 1063-1085; Tim Schouls, "Aboriginal People and Electoral Reform in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 24, no. 4 (1996): 729-749; Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Gibbins, "Electoral Reform and Canada's Aboriginal Population."

9. See Russel Lawrence Barsh, Michelle Fraser, Faye Morning Bull, Toby Provost, and Kirby Smith, "The Prairie Indian Vote in Canadian Politics, 1965-1993: A Critical Case Study from Alberta," *Great Plains Research* 7 (Spring 1997): 3-26; and Alan Cairns, "Aboriginal People's Electoral Participation in the Canadian Community," *Electoral Insight* 5, no. 3 (2003): 2-9.

10. Recently one writer, despite a compelling argument aimed at improving First Nations voter turnout in Ontario, unquestioningly employed

several of the six barriers identified in this paper while concluding that "First Nations are significantly alienated from the Canadian political system." See Jennifer Dalton, "Alienation and Nationalism: Is it Possible to Increase First Nations Voter Turnout in Ontario?" *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): 253. Elections Canada in their recent response to improving First Nations voter turnout has also adopted many of these barriers as the key issues in need of resolution.

11. Anna Hunter, "Exploring the Issues of Aboriginal Representation in Federal Elections," *Electoral Insight* 5, no. 3: 30.

12. Quoted in Elections Canada, "Aboriginal People and the Federal Electoral Process: Participation Trends and Elections Canada's Initiatives," *Electoral Law and Policy*, http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=loi&document=abor&lang=e&textonly=false#_edn13 (accessed August 12, 2007).

13. *Ibid.*

14. See Kiera Ladner, "The Alienation of Nation: Understanding Aboriginal Electoral Participation," *Electoral Insight* 5, no. 3 (2003): 22. See also David Bedford and Sidney Pobihushchy, "On-Reserve Status Indian Voter Participation in the Maritimes," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 15, no. 2 (1995): 255-278; and Jim Silver, Cyril Keeper, and Michael MacKenzie, *A Very Hostile System in Which to Live: Aboriginal Electoral Participation in Winnipeg's Inner City* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2005), 12-13.

15. Peter Kulchyski, *Like the Sound of a Drum: Aboriginal Cultural Politics in Denedeh and Nunavut* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005), 16.

16. *Ibid.*, 59.

17. Barsh et al., "The Prairie Indian Vote in Canadian Politics."

18. *Ibid.*

19. Robert I. Levy and Douglas Hollan, "Person-Centred Interviewing and Observation," in *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. H. Bernard (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1998), 334.

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25. See Jennifer Fereday and Eimear Muir-Cochrane, "Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 1 (March 2006): 3.

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28. Clark Wissler, "Material Culture of the Blackfoot Indians," *Anthropological Papers*, American Museum of Natural History 5, no. 1 (1910).

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37. James (Sakej) Youngblood Henderson, "Implementing the Treaty Order," in *Continuing Poundmaker's and Riel's Quest: Presentations Made at a Conference on Aboriginal Peoples and Justice*, ed. R. Gosse, J. Youngblood Henderson, and R. Carter (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 1994), 52-62.

38. Robert N. Wilson, *Our Betrayed Wards: A Story of Chicanery, Infidelity, and the Prostitution of Trust* (Montreal: Osiris, 1973).

39. For the general discussion on volunteerism, see James Dempsey, *Warriors of the King: Prairie Indians in World War I* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1999); for the reserve bombing range debate, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Battle Grounds: The Canadian Military and Aboriginal Lands* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), in particular, chapter 4.

40. See Library and Archives Canada, Record Group 2, Series A-5-a, vol. 5775, "St. Mary Irrigation Project: proposed diversion of the Belly River; acquisition of right-of-way on Blood Indian Reserve," March 8, 1956.

41. See Committee for Aboriginal Electoral Reform, "The Path to Electoral Equality," in *Report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*, vol. 4 (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1991), 235.

42. J. Rick Ponting, "Historical Overview and Background, Part II: 1970-1996," in *First Nations in Canada: Perspectives on Opportunity, Empowerment, and Self-Determination*, ed. J. Rick Ponting (Toronto: McGraw Ryerson, 1997), 29.

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44. Daniel Guerin, "Aboriginal Participation in Canadian Federal Elections: Trends and Implications," *Electoral Insight* 5, no. 3 (2003): 10-15.

45. Ladner, "The Alienation of Nation," 21.

46. Jean-Nicholas Bustros, *Electoral Participation of Aboriginal People: Summary of Previously Conducted Research and Analysis* (Ottawa: Elections Canada, Legal Services Directorate, 2000).

47. Bedford and Pobihushchy, "On-Reserve Status Indian Voter Participation in the Maritimes."

48. David Bedford, "Aboriginal Voter Participation in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick," *Electoral Insight* 5, no. 3 (2003): 16-20.

49. See, generally, Bradford Morse, "Regaining Recognition of the Inherent Rights to Self-Government," in *Aboriginal Self-Government in Canada: Current Trends and Issues*, 3rd ed., ed. Yale D. Belanger (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2008), 39-68.

50. Andrew Siggner, "An Overview of Demographic and Socio-Economic Conditions of the Aboriginal Population and Their Implications for Emergent Economic and Social Issues" (paper presented at the *Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy: Dialogue Sessions*, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, June 2008).

51. See, generally, Carolyn Boschman, "Blood Election Appeal Dismissed," *Lethbridge Herald*, February 2, 2005; and Dave Mabell, "More than 100 Seek Council Seats on Blood Reserve," *Lethbridge Herald*, November 11, 2004.

52. Kiera Ladner, "Governing within an Ecological Context: Creating an AlterNative Understanding of Blackfoot Governance," *Studies in Political Economy* 70 (Spring 2003): 125.

53. Boldt and Long, "Tribal Philosophies and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms," 166.

54. See Kiera Ladner, "When Buffalo Speaks: Creating an Alternative Understanding of Traditional Blackfoot Governance" (PhD diss., Carleton University, 2001).

55. For an example of this process, see Hugh Dempsey, *Red Crow: Warrior Chief* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishing, 1980), which examined the life of Red Crow and his rise from anonymity to a central leadership role during Treaty 7 negotiations and beyond.

56. Anonymous twenty-eight-year-old male, interview by Billy Wadsworth, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, October 26, 2005.

57. Anonymous twenty-four-year-old male, interview by Billy Wadsworth, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, October 26, 2005.

58. Anonymous twenty-something female (A), interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, December 6, 2005.

59. See Percy Bullchild, *The Sun Came Down: The History of the World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1990), for an extended dialogue examining the importance of remaining truthful and the consequences of duplicity to both community health and individual reputations.

60. Anonymous twenty-two-year-old female, interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, December 6, 2005.

61. Anonymous twenty-six-year-old male, interview by Billy Wadsworth, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, October 27, 2005.

62. Anonymous twenty-four-year-old female, interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, December 6, 2005.

63. Anonymous twenty-seven-year-old male, interview by Billy Wadsworth, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, December 12, 2005.

64. Anonymous twenty-one-year-old male, interview by Billy Wadsworth, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, December 6, 2005.

65. Anonymous twenty-nine-year-old female, interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, January 7, 2006.

66. Anonymous twenty-six-year-old female, interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, January 7, 2006.

67. Committee for Aboriginal Electoral Reform, "The Path to Electoral Equality"; see also Barsh, "Canada's Aboriginal Peoples." For a general discussion of the impact of the Internet's use in improving local communications in First Nations communities, see Yale D. Belanger, "Northern Disconnect: Information Communications Technology Needs Assessment for Aboriginal Communities in Manitoba," *Native Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (2001): 43-69. For an international context see Claire Smith and Graeme K. Ward, eds., *Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).

68. Anonymous 29-year-old female, interview.

69. Anonymous 22-year-old male, interview by Billy Wadsworth, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, December 7, 2005.

70. Anonymous twenty-something female (B), interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, December 15, 2005.

71. For a discussion of this process, see John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 174-84; and briefly, John T. Jackson, *The Piikani Blackfeet: A Culture Under Siege* (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2000), 118.

72. For a brief but useful overview, see Hugh Dempsey, "Blackfoot," in *Plains*, ed. Raymond DeMallie, vol. 13 of *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), 604-28.

73. See Theodore Binnema, *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), particularly his discussion relating the complexity of maintaining alliances with the Cree in the late eighteenth century, specifically the notion that political interface was complicated once groups like the Kainai were confined to smaller territorial enclaves due to the increasingly confining westward expansion of traders and later settlers.

74. Anonymous twenty-three-year-old female, interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, January 2, 2006.

75. Anonymous twenty-seven-year-old male, interview.

76. Anonymous twenty-eight-year-old female (A), interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, January 8, 2006.

77. Anonymous twenty-eight-year-old female (B), interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, November 28, 2005.

78. Anonymous twenty-six-year-old male, interview.

79. For the Blackfoot/Kainai perspective, see Treaty 7 Elders and Tribal Council, *The True Spirit and Intent of Treaty 7*. For the Canadian bureaucratic perspective, see, for example, E. Brian Titley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986) and his *The Frontier World of Edgar Dewdney* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999).

80. For this general history, see J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

81. Yale D. Belanger and Billy Wadsworth, "'It's my duty . . . to be a warrior of the people': Kainai Perceptions of and Participation in the Canadian and American Forces," *Prairie Forum* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 297-322.

82. Elections Canada, "Aboriginal People and the Federal Electoral Process."

83. Dave Mabell, "No Polling Stations Available for Blood, Piikani Reserves," *Lethbridge Herald*, February 28, 2008, A1.

84. Anonymous twenty-three-year-old female (A), interview by Pam Blood, Kainai First Nation, Alberta, January 8, 2006.

85. Anonymous twenty-six-year-old female, interview.

86. William Wuttunee, *Ruffled Feathers: Indians in Canadian Society* (Calgary: Bell Books, 1971), was regularly called an apple due to his support of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's controversial White Paper policy proposal of 1969, and Howard Adams, *A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization* (Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 2002), who coined the term *compradors* to discuss among other issues actions of Métis and First Nations individuals such as Wuttunee's, which he considered destructive to the First Nations and Métis nationalism movements.