

# **ON-RESERVE STATUS INDIAN VOTER PARTICIPATION IN THE MARITIMES<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract / Resume**

The authors examined voter turnout for federal, provincial and Band elections in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Significant discrepancies were found between on-Reserve Status Indian voter turnout and other voting turnouts. The authors suggest some reconsideration of the relationship between non-Aboriginal states and Aboriginal Nations in this region.

Les auteurs ont étudié le taux de participation aux élections fédérales, provinciales et dans la réserve au Nouveau-Brunswick, en Nouvelle-Ecosse et à l'Île du Prince Edward. Ils ont trouvé des divergences de grande portée entre le taux de participation des Indiens qui vivent dans la réserve et les autres taux de participation. Les auteurs suggèrent un nouvel examen du rapport entre les états allogènes et les nations autochtones dans cette région.

## Introduction

This paper presents the findings of our study on Aboriginal voter turnout in Federal, Provincial and Band elections in the Maritime Provinces. Using data from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) and Elections Canada we were able to compile a reasonably exhaustive profile of trends in voter turnout among Status Indians living on-Reserve. While we expected to find differences in voting patterns between on-Reserve Status Indians and the wider, largely non-Aboriginal, immigrant society, we were unprepared for the extent of the divergence. This led us in two complementary directions.

First, we had to critically re-evaluate the corpus of literature on voter turnout. We found it quite simply inadequate to the task of explaining the data we compiled. Second, we were forced to look at the dynamics of Reserve communities, their culture and the colonial relationship that exists between Reserve communities and the Canadian state in our effort to generate an explanation for the data. This latter task, the preliminary results of which are found in the Discussion, is as yet unfinished. We do offer tentative explanations but we are very well aware of their incompleteness. Much more must be learned before we can fully understand voting on Reserves. However, we are motivated in pursuing our investigations by the sentiment of V.O. Key who wrote in 1966 that

Examination of popular participation in the political process may suggest crucial insights into the nature of the political order. Variations in the act of voting may serve as indicators of fundamental characteristics of the state as may quantitative differences in voting. An extremely small turnout may reflect lack of faith in the democratic process among those who stay at home. It may also result from a widespread belief that affairs are proceeding so well that people need not be deeply concerned (1966:757).<sup>2</sup>

Data on voter participation by Aboriginal persons are almost non-existent. We are currently expanding our research to include on-Reserve Status Indians from the rest of Canada. This will later be expanded to include off-Reserve and non-Status Indians and Inuit.

It is common knowledge that the Canadian state allowed those persons with Indian status to vote in Federal elections in 1960. The Diefenbaker emphasis on rights coincided with a desire to normalize the status of Indians and this led to the right to vote which was first exercised in the 1962 Federal election. Less well known is the fact that Status Indians briefly had the right to vote in Federal elections in the late 1800s. Male Indians living on Reserves were first granted the right to vote in 1885 under Sir John A.

Macdonald's Conservative government with the introduction of the first Federal legislation governing elections. Prior to 1885 Federal voting was determined by Provincial legislation. This right to vote in Federal Elections was removed with the repeal of the *Electoral Franchise Act* in 1898 by Laurier's Liberals. The Liberals argued that Indians should not be permitted to vote because as wards of the state they could not exercise the franchise independently. Malcolm Montgomery has argued, however, that the real reason was that Indians had voted for the Conservative Party in large numbers and that they had thus "committed the crime of not voting the right way" (1965:25). The situation in the three Maritime Provinces is more complicated. Subject to the widespread exception that those Indians who left their Reserve and signed away their legal claims and rights as Indians could be enfranchised, Indians could not vote in Provincial elections in New Brunswick or Prince Edward Island until 1963. Indians in Nova Scotia were permitted to vote in Provincial elections a century earlier beginning in 1863. However, a property qualification effectively disenfranchised most Indians living on-Reserve.

Although Indians have had the franchise for over thirty years very little attention is paid to their participation in elections. The literature on voting in Canada very rarely makes mention of Status Indians or Aboriginal people. Age, income, education, sex, even ethnic origin and religion are all variables that have been examined. The distinction between the non-Aboriginal society and Aboriginal peoples, though, remains largely unexplored. One exception is the study of Métis voting that Pocklington reported in Alberta. Using a small sample<sup>3</sup> and only one election Pocklington found that Métis participation in Federal and Provincial elections was lower than the Alberta average, but similar to the turnout generally in North-Central Alberta (1991: Chapter 7). As important a first step as this study is, it is only of marginal use to our project. Métis culture and legal status differ significantly from those that characterize Status Indians. If, as we will argue, one cannot generalize theoretical conclusions on voting patterns across cultures, studies of Métis voting are not much more relevant than are voting studies among the non-Aboriginal immigrant society.

## Results

Table 1 shows the rate of voter turnout among Indians in Federal elections in New Brunswick. Table 2 presents the data for New Brunswick Provincial elections. Tables 3 and 4 present the data for voter turnout among Indians in Nova Scotia in Federal and Provincial elections respectively. Tables 5 and 6 similarly present the data for Prince Edward Island.

**Table 1: Rate of Aboriginal Voter Turnout in Federal Election  
in New Brunswick  
1962-1988**

<b>Year</b>	<b>% Participation Rate</b>	<b>Number of Eligible Voters About Whom Information Was Available*</b>
1962	70.0	271
1963	63.1	577
1965	66.8	542
1968	53.2	594
1972	60.4	748
1974	56.7	803
1979	38.0	960
1980	40.3	992
1954	44.0	985
1988	17.8	1312

\* The data presented here are a census of all polls that were wholly included within a Reserve. In the 1960s there were few polls that were so included. The number of polls wholly on Reserves over the years as Elections Canada and the Provincial elections offices tried to draw poll boundaries to coincide with Reserve boundaries.

**Table 2: Rate of Aboriginal Voter Turnout in New Brunswick Provincial  
Elections  
1967-1991**

<b>Year</b>	<b>% Participation Rate*</b>	<b>Number of Eligible Voters About Whom Information Was Available</b>
1967	64.4	908
1970	62.0	988
1974	61.2	1511
1978	37.7	1502
1982	46.9	1749
1987	32.1	2060
1991	27.6	2340

**Table 3: Rate of Aboriginal Voter Turnout in Federal Elections  
in Nova Scotia  
1962-1988**

Year	% Participation Rate	Number of Eligible Voters About Whom Information Was Available
1962	89.3	689
1963	87.4	728
1965	82.8	795
1967		
(by-election-1 riding)*	33.5	176
1968	72.5	790
1972	72.6	1155
1974	61.3	1218
1978		
(by-election-1 riding)	25.8	287
1979	49.5	1508
1980	51.9	1478
1983		
(by-election-1 riding)	59.1	115
1984	53.4	1552
1988	54.0	2244

\*Riding means electoral district.

The data we were able to uncover are not complete. In some cases the boundaries of polling stations are not wholly contained within the boundaries of Reserves. In these cases, the data from the polling stations include Indian and non-Aboriginal persons, and so we could not use these results. Likewise, we could not determine the rate of electoral participation of Aboriginal persons (with or without status) living off-Reserve who were not enumerated at a Reserve address. Despite these difficulties we were able to compile enough data so that the results are highly significant.

The figures for participation rates give the percentage of those who voted against the total number of eligible, ie. registered, voters. All data are taken from Elections Canada's published poll by poll election results. We only included data from polls whose boundaries were entirely within the boundaries of a Reserve. While this method meant that we could not get

**Table 4: Rate of Aboriginal Voter Turnout in Nova Scotia  
Provincial Elections  
1963-1993**

Year	% Participation Rate	Number of Eligible Voters About Whom Information Was Available
1963	52.0	661
1963 (by-election-2 ridings)*	78.2	252
1967	67.2	987
1970	70.1	1188
1974	65.4	1401
1978	57.9	1758
1980 (by-election-1 riding)	50.0	98
1981	60.1	2150
1984	59.8	2304
1988	54.8	2840
1993	45.2	3127

\*Riding means electoral district.

data on all Reserves it does insure that all data we used contain almost conclusively information on Indians, as few non-Indians reside on Reserves. We were unable to determine the percentage of adults who refused or did not bother to be enumerated. Conversation with Aboriginal persons and with various persons who worked for Elections Canada make us very suspicious that the number of Indians who were not enumerated, especially the number who actively resisted being enumerated, is very high.

Conversations with various returning officers and enumerators indicated to us that Reserves are particularly difficult to enumerate. There is a higher number of persons refusing to be enumerated than one would find among the non-Aboriginal population. Robert Wright has concluded that enumerators for the 1986 Census were "refused entry to 136 Indian Reserves and Settlements" (1993:303). This is indicative of the degree of refusal to participate in the processes of the Canadian State. Actual voter participation rates are lower, therefore, than our data indicate.

The first point that stands out from the data is the sharp decline in voter participation from 1962 to 1988. Indian participation in Federal elections in

**Table 5: Rate of Aboriginal Voter Turnout in Federal Elections in Prince Edward Island 1962-1988**

Year	% Participation Rate	Number of Eligible Voters About Whom Information Was Available
1962	75.0	80
1963	72.0	82
1965	86.7	90
1968	86.1	79
1972	89.7	97
1974	94.1	85
1979	81.1	106
1980	78.1	105
1984	79.3	116
1988	72.8	136

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**Table 6: Rate of Aboriginal Voter Turnout in Prince Edward Island Provincial Elections 1976-1993**

Year	% Participation Rate Councillor/Assemblyman	Number of Eligible Voters About Whom Information Was Available
1976 (by-election)	80.4 /	107
1978	91.9 (both)	99
1979	80.2 (both)	106
1981 (by-election)	/ 76.5	102
1982	90.3 / 92.2	103
1986	72.0 / 72.8	125
1989	66.4 (both)	134
1993	77.7 / 78.4	148

ew Brunswick declined from a high of 70.0% in 1962 to a low of 17.8% in the 1988 election. Nova Scotia shows a similar, if much less spectacular, decrease in participation rates. Participation declined from a high of 89.3% in 1962 to 54.0% in 1988. Prince Edward Island, with a far smaller Indian population, shows a consistently high participation in Federal elections. The data for various Provincial elections show a similar pattern. Voter turnout declined in both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, with New Brunswick exhibiting a greater decline. As in the case of Federal elections, participation rates in Provincial elections in Prince Edward Island have been consistently high. An explanation of the data will have to account, firstly, for the remarkable drop-off in voter participation in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Secondly, an explanation would have to make sense of consistently high turn-out in Prince Edward Island, and the fact that the degree of decline in participation in Nova Scotia is less than that in New Brunswick.

The data on voter participation in Band elections differ dramatically from those of federal and provincial elections. Bands are the unit for the administration of Indians established by the federal government under the *Indian Act*. Most Status Indians are members of Bands, and each Band has one or more Reserve lands. The affairs of the Band are administered by DIAND through an elected Band Council. The Band members elect a Chief and some number of Band Councillors who administer the programs and, especially, the money that is designated by the Minister for that community. The Band Council administers education programs, welfare, housing etc. The Chief and Councillors control a significant amount of the economic life within Reserve communities. The degree of importance that Band government has in the lives of persons living on Reserve is immeasurably greater than any of the orders of government has for Canadian citizens. This is especially true in communities like those in the Maritimes with high unemployment.

We can see from Tables 7 and 8 which present, respectively, the voter turnout in Band elections in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia that the participation rate in Band elections is both consistent and very high. It is consistently around the 90% mark in both provinces. We were unable to obtain data for the Band elections in Prince Edward Island. The two Bands in Prince Edward Island are permitted by DIAND to hold custom elections. That is, they can use any method they choose to decide upon a Chief and Council. They are only obligated to report the final decision to the Minister. They decided not to participate in our research and refused to divulge the results of their recruitment process.

The Nova Scotia data are marked by three results that vary from the norm: the 1981, 1987 and 1990 Band elections. The 1981 results, a

**Table 7: Rate of Voter Turnout in New Brunswick  
Band Elections  
1972-1992**

<b>Year</b>	<b>% Participation Rate</b>	<b>Number of Eligible Voters About Whom Information Was Available</b>
1972-4	82.0	695
1975-7	94.2	720
1978	96.9	353
1979	81.1	599
1980	87.8	654
1981	91.0	1042
1982	88.7	690
1983	86.7	835
1984	93.5	505
1985	87.1	1307
1986	92.2	606
1987	91.4	1471
1988	88.8	1036
1989	87.5	1269
1990	91.2	1274
1991	88.2	1391
1992	94.9	760

participation rate of 73.8% can be accounted for as an anomaly resulting from the low sample size, 183. The 1987 and 1990 results are skewed because they include data from the custom elections of the Acadia Band. Like the Bands on Prince Edward Island the Acadia and Horton Bands in Nova Scotia also hold custom elections. In 1987 Acadia held a custom election and the turnout was 29.4% of a total eligible voter population of 388. With these figures factored out, the results for the non-custom elections are a voter participation rate of 89.4%. Similarly, in the 1990 elections the Acadia results exhibited a 35.7% participation rate. The participation rate for the remaining, non-custom Bands was 92.8%. The very high participation rates in Band elections thus stands in sharp contrast to the results in federal and provincial elections.

**Table 8: Rate of Voter Turnout in Nova Scotia Band Elections  
1978-1992**

Year	% Participation Rate	Number of Eligible Voters About Whom Information Was Available
1978	90.2	254
1979	--	--
1980	91.3	507
1981	73.8	183
1982	88.9	1427
1983	93.8	128
1984	90.1	1547
1985	94.5	145
1986	94.4	815
1987	55.6	689
1988	91.0	2712
1989	90.6	328
1990	83.5	3363
1991	90.0	489
1992	92.0	3215

## Literature

Voting study literature has traditionally employed two types of explanations: those that fall into the general category of socio-demographic or sociological accounts; and those that are of a social-psychological nature. That is, voting or non-voting is seen as dependent upon either demographic factors such as income, education, gender, or else upon personal psychological predispositions such as apathy or sense of personal control. This categorization of the literature can be found as recently as Elisabeth Gidengil's 1992 retrospective article and in the 1968 study by Lang and Lang.<sup>4</sup> Debates in the literature have centered around the salience of the possible variables that fall into one of these two main categories. Class, for example, has been hotly debated as a possible indicator of voter preference (Gidengil, 1992:225-28). While the literature yields a wide range of possible determining factors, a relatively small number regularly appear as the most likely explanations of voter turnout.

A study by Campbell *et al.* from the Michigan research group (*The American Voter*) focused on social-psychological factors and found that “sense of political efficacy” and “sense of civic duty” were two factors which correlated very highly with participation rates (1966:105-106).<sup>5</sup> Other possible social-psychological factors which also correlated with turnout included political involvement, interest in the current election campaign, issues, etc.; and concern with election outcome (Campbell *et al.*, 1966:101-103). Two years later in a similar study, i.e., one which also focused on the social-psychological factors affecting voter preference and turnout, Lang and Lang discovered that the key factor in determining participation rate is “the voter’s long-term commitment to participation in the electoral process” (1968:85). This is a factor very similar to the Campbell *et al.* conclusion that sense of civic duty, which they define largely as a belief in the value and importance of voting, correlates highly with turnout. V.O. Key wrote that “[P]erhaps the way to put the matter is that the more closely linked with the life of the community a person is, the more likely it is that he will vote. The more numerous these linkages, the odds are, the stronger the stimuli and the social pressures to which he is subjected” (1966:589). Key identified a number of significant variables in addition to those found in the studies of Campbell *et al.* and Lang and Lang. He argued that among possible demographic factors, “education and income are...most closely associated with electoral participation”. Those persons with higher incomes and more education are more likely to vote than those with less income and education (*Ibid.*:586).

## **Aboriginal Demographic and Social-Psychological Profile**

Before we can begin to make theoretical sense of the very surprising results that we uncovered in our census of on-Reserve voting in the Maritimes we must first create a demographic and social-psychological profile. Only then can we evaluate the validity of the factors affecting turnout that have been identified in the literature. Our question is: are the rates of participation by on-Reserve Status Indians in accord with the expectations of the literature on voting within the non-Aboriginal immigrant society? If not, what could account for the difference?

By virtually all measures that are conventionally used to evaluate the performance of a group in shaping government’s behaviour, Indians appear to have been successful. Governments in liberal societies, as modelled by interest group theorists, are relatively responsive to pressure and function to aggregate overall social interest and distribute public goods. A measure of governmental responsiveness to any one group is to look at outcomes:

who gets what, when, etc. Social demographic data, therefore, are useful not only because higher education and income levels may signal different individual psychological dispositions but also because they (and other such measures) indicate how successful a group has been in its relationship to government. In other words, can we see in the way government has responded to Aboriginal demands a growing sense among Indians that voting is futile because government does not respond?

Life expectancy and mortality rates, as general measures of well-being, have shown dramatic changes. In 1975 life expectancy for Indian males across Canada was 59.2 years and for Indian females it was 65.9 years. By 1990 these had changed to 66.9 years and 74.0 years (*Basic Departmental Data*, 1992:23). Infant mortality declined steadily from a rate of 82.0 deaths per 1000 births to 10.2 in 1990 (*Ibid.*:27). Mortality rates showed a similar decline from 8.8 per 1000 in 1960 to 3.8 in 1990 (*Ibid.*:25). Of course, it is not possible to pinpoint exact causes for these changes in life expectancy and mortality rates but they are powerful indicators that living conditions among Aboriginal persons have improved.

Turning to education, one also finds improvements in the level of education attained by Indians. Post-secondary school enrolment has increased from a total across Canada in 1960 of 60 persons to a 1981 total of 5,464. By 1988 this figure had risen to 15,084 (Hagey *et al.*, 1989:9) While this still leaves Aboriginal persons behind the national average it does signal progress. Similar, if less dramatic, changes exist in school dropout rates in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia (Saigaonkar, 1975:13-14).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, overall government expenditures on Aboriginal persons have risen significantly. Financial support given across Canada to Aboriginal persons for post secondary education has risen from 25.1 million dollars (for 5,467 students) in 1981-82 to 201.3 million dollars (for 21,566 students) in 1991-93 (*Information Sheet #41*, 1993:2).

Expenditures for Band operated schools have gone from 7.0 million dollars in 1971-74 to 177.1 million dollars in 1990-91 (*Information Sheet #5*, 1991:3). Social assistance expenditures have risen (in 1986 constant dollars) from 148 million dollars in 1973-74 to 385 million dollars in 1990-91 (*Basic Departmental Data*, 1992:57). We find similar improvements in housing and so on. Not every statistic, though, shows improvements for Aboriginal persons. Average income for Aboriginal persons across Canada did decline during the recession years of the 1980s. Average income for on-Reserve Indians was 10,000 dollars in 1980. It had dropped (in 1985 constant dollars) to 9,300 by 1985 (Hagey *et al.*, 1989:37).

When one looks at the data for Nova Scotia one finds a similar profile. In 1981, 30.9% of on-Reserve Indians were regularly employed, 38.7% had irregular or seasonal employment while 30.4% were unemployed year

round. This represents an improvement over the 1975 figures of 24.7%, 36.8% and 38.5% respectively. Correspondingly, use of social assistance, i.e. Indian Affairs welfare, while horribly high, declined during this period from 65.0% to 56.3% (Wien, 1986:Chapter 3).

One would expect to find an increase in voter participation, not a decline, given improvements in education, social services, etc. Government has been responsive to Aboriginal demands that more money be spent on their needs. We suspect that there has been an increase in general levels of dissatisfaction with government, of dashed expectations, but this is a pessimism that has developed rather circuitously. What all Aboriginal people, including on-Reserve Status Indians, want is respect: for their culture, for the treaties, for themselves as individuals. In a liberal society government exists within an ideological and economic environment which permits it to respond to pressures in certain definite, prescribed ways. For example, if there are too many suicides, then hire a crisis intervention-officer; if language is being lost, then build a school on the Reserve; if people are poor, then increase the amount of money spent on various social services. What government has not responded to is the real longing of all Aboriginal people to be able to live their culture with dignity and respect.

We can largely discount campaign based, short-term factors such as interest in the campaign and the issues, attractiveness of one or more leaders, closeness of the race, etc. These would be possible explanations if voter turnout fluctuated without any clear long-term pattern. Such contingent, historically specific factors should produce no significant long-term trends, at least not a trend so startling as the one we uncovered. If these short-term factors were affecting the participation rate of Indians so powerfully and if Indians voted or not on the basis of factors similar to that of the immigrant society population, then we would expect to find a similar decline among non-Aboriginal voters. There is no such decline. That left us with social-psychological factors to explain our results. It is very difficult to obtain reliable data on such social-psychological items as "sense of political efficacy" or "sense of civic duty" to correlate with our results on voter turnout. We hope to be able to conduct such research in the future. Doing so, however, presents certain challenges. First of all, it would mean gaining the trust of the people surveyed. Furthermore, we are simply not confident that such political concepts have the same meaning to someone from an Aboriginal culture as they do to us. Therefore, similar responses may not mean the same thing from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents. This is not to say that the general category of social-psychological factors is not important to explaining our data. However, we must try to generate social-psychological profiles that are culturally sensitive. Aboriginal cultural attitudes to politics differ markedly from those held by members

of the immigrant society. In saying this we are aware of the absence of survey data on this subject. There is a pressing need for such data. In its absence we are forced to rely on anecdotal evidence—many conversations with many Aboriginal persons on these matters—and evidence from various secondary sources.<sup>7</sup>

There are two reasons for this. Firstly Aboriginal traditional ways had no politics as we currently understand it. There were no elections. Using the Iroquois Great Law of Peace as an example, leaders were not elected; they were appointed by the clan mothers—elder women of each clan—and held their posts at the pleasure of the clan mothers.<sup>8</sup> The people never ceded sovereignty to their leaders. They maintained the right to remove them, by force if necessary (*The Great Law of Peace*, 1973:Wampum 9). The constitution also set up parallel political and military leaders. The political leaders had no military authority. In fact, they had to give up their office if they wished to take up arms. Instead, war chiefs were also raised up by the clan mothers. Their role was to lead war parties. They also had an internal political function. It was they who would remove the political chiefs on the say of the clan mothers and the people (*Ibid.*:Wampum 37 and 90).

For a people for whom personal independence is so important, decisions were taken by consensus. The Great Law of Peace required that counsel fires be kept burning in every longhouse. This meant, symbolically, that the people were obligated to continually discuss issues (*Ibid.*:Wampum 94-97). Each clan in each village would discuss an issue and arrive at a consensus. Then each village and the whole nation through representatives would discuss and reach consensus. Finally, if the issue were important enough, the whole of the Five (later Six) Nations would meet and discuss. In such a system voting is an anathema. Voting divides people; it separates them into two groups with mutually antagonistic interests. This violated both the spirit of sharing and cooperation and the sense of personal autonomy that permeated Aboriginal societies. It made no sense to be subjected to the will of others, as happens with voting as a decision procedure.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, Aboriginal nations are colonized. Such colonization produces distortions in the social, economic and political fabric of a community as we will see when we examine possible reasons for the very high turnout rate for Band elections. Colonization also produces profound social-psychological consequences in a community and its people. Andrea Bear Nicholas, the foremost scholar of the Maliseet nation and its history, has borrowed from the writings of Paulo Freire and Frantz Fanon to explain the profound sense of self-alienation that Aboriginal peoples have experienced since the arrival of the European immigrant society. Myths, false histories,

hierarchies of cultures and beliefs were used “to justify their dominance of Native People, to manipulate them, to keep them passive, and to preserve the status quo” (Nicholas, 1991:15). These myths justified the immigrant society's ways as the only true ones, the immigrant society's values as the truly human ones.

The power of these ideas of the colonizer is that they can become the ideas of the oppressed. Aboriginal people were taught to despise their spirituality as the worship of Satan; to see the respect of women in their culture as a sign of weakness; to replace a reciprocal economy with one based on competition and the maximization of production. They were forbidden to speak their own language and many forgot how to do so as a result.<sup>10</sup> Along with all else from their culture the Micmacs and Maliseets were also forbidden their traditional political ways.

There is much evidence that the process of decolonization, the process of recapturing an almost lost tradition, is under way. There is a renewed interest in learning the language. Reserve communities are beginning to retake control of the education of their children. More and more people are returning to traditional spirituality. All of these steps require that the people break the strongest of all binds of colonialism, the chains that enslave and distort the mind. Although much progress has been made, there are still formidable obstacles in the way. None of these is more powerful than the hold that the Canadian State has on the communities through its agents, the Chiefs and Band Councils. Their influence insures that the most important economic and social relations remain those of the immigrant society and not of the traditional ways. Despite these obstacles, however, the consciousness of themselves as Aboriginals and not Canadians has grown remarkably.

We are proposing that this change in consciousness—from Canadians who are Indians, to members of the Maliseet or Micmac nations—is the most important reason for the decline in voter turnout. Such a decline is, according to our hypothesis, a rejection of the Canadian electoral process as an alien one, a political process of a state which is not their own. In a sense, one could argue that their “sense of civic duty” as Canadians has all but disappeared as they see themselves less and less as Canadians. This hypothesis must remain just that for the time being. As we stated earlier there is no empirical data which could confirm absolutely either a) that such a change has taken place; or b) that it is the only (or most important) social-psychological variable which correlates with turnout. More research is needed; however, we believe that our hypothesis has much circumstantial and anecdotal evidence to support it. Until such time as it is falsified we are convinced that it can serve as the basis for the further research into attitudes that needs to be carried out. The anomalous data on voter participation

clearly warrant more research.

Before moving on to an analysis of the results of the Band elections one point remains to be made. We were puzzled by the discrepancy in the participation rates among the three provinces. While we could dismiss the Prince Edward Island results as being caused by the small numbers involved, the differences between New Brunswick and Nova Scotia proved more stubborn. Our first impression was that there may be an ethnic component. All Status Indians from Nova Scotia are Micmac whereas New Brunswick is divided between Maliseet and Micmac communities. Table 9 presents results from two Micmac communities in New Brunswick. The differences between the two indicate that there is no clear ethnic trend. Although we suspect that the answer to the question of why the difference in turnout between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick lies in the different histories and different degrees of Aboriginal consciousness we have no evidence to support our supposition.

The consistently high participation rates we found in Band elections were as unexpected as the sharp decline in turnout in Federal and Provincial elections. It is standard in the literature that local elections attract far less voter interest than elections in broader jurisdictions. Municipal elections are often paid scant attention by voters with participation rates of 25 or 30% typical. We found participation rates in Band elections to be consistently in the 90% range. The current literature was simply no help to us. Furthermore, the very high and consistent turnout in Band elections undermines any arguments that declining participation in Federal and Provincial elections indicates an overall sense of apathy. These data appear less anomalous when one understands how critical Band Council decisions are for persons living in Reserve communities. Welfare, housing, unemployment insurance, jobs, social and health services and education are very frequently controlled by the Chief and Council. They are responsible for most of the key services that are delivered.

**Table 9**

**Eel Ground**

**Provincial Elections**

Miramichi-Newcastle 29 A (Northumberland in 1967, 1970)

<b>Polling Division</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Eligible Voters</b>	<b>Ballots Cast</b>	<b>Participation Rate</b>	<b>Prov. Average</b>
62	1967	143	111	.78	.79
62	1970	145	105	.72	.81
26	1974	126	97	.77	.77
28	1978	170	131	.77	.76
28	1982	185	125	.67	.82
29	1987	233	189	.81	.82
31	1991	224	96	.43	.80

**Federal Elections**

Northumberland-Miramichi

<b>Polling Division</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Eligible Voters</b>	<b>Ballots Cast</b>	<b>Participation Rate</b>	<b>Prov. Average</b>
54	1963	157	101	.64	.81
54	1965	138	122	.88	.80
62	1968	149	96	.64	.80
79	1972	129	92	.71	.77
79	1974	128	89	.70	.71
94	1979	168	114	.68	.74
94	1980	171	111	.65	.71
95	1984	184	128	.70	.71
100	1988	221	105	.46	.76

Table 9 *continued*

<b>Burnt Church</b>					
<b>Provincial Elections</b>					
Miramichi Bay 28 B (Northumberland in 1967, 1970)					
<b>Polling Division</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Eligible Voters</b>	<b>Ballots Cast</b>	<b>Participation Rate</b>	<b>Prov. Average</b>
19	1967	156	109	.70	.79
19	1970	200	129	.65	.81
7	1974	225	122	.54	.77
8	1978	280	203	.72	.76
10	1982	340	158	.46	.82
10a, 10b	1987	421	151	.36	.85
12, 13	1991	454	89	.19	.80
<b>Federal Elections</b>					
Northumberland-Miramichi (Miramichi in 1988)					
<b>Polling Division</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Eligible Voters</b>	<b>Ballots Cast</b>	<b>Participation Rate</b>	<b>Prov. Average</b>
14a	1963	155	74	.48	.81
14a	1965	164	91	.55	.80
19	1968	161	47	.29	.80
24	1972	207	124	.60	.77
24	1974	258	132	.51	.71
31	1979	284	64	.23	.74
31	1980	292	122	.37	.71
30	1984	418	131	.31	.71
27	1988	403	21	.05	.76

As an explanatory hypothesis—again we must emphasize that what we are proposing is hypothetical at this stage—we propose what we call the politics of dependency. That is, the high rates of voter participation in Band elections are to be explained as a complex function of the legacy of the colonialism experienced by Aboriginal people at the hands of the immigrant society. A political culture and a socio-economic reality of dependency has been created on Reserve communities which expresses itself in the form of (what would be for municipalities in the non-Aboriginal culture) abnormally high turnout. We believe that the only way to explain these striking results is by grounding them in the unique political, economic and social existence that one finds in Reserve communities. Local politics has a different meaning and different consequences for people living in Reserve communities than in other communities, and this difference must be central to any explanation of the vast differences in turnout rates that one finds between local elections on Reserves and in non-Aboriginal communities.

Aldrich's characterization of voting as a "low-cost, low-benefit action" is an apt description of the rationality of voting in municipal elections. It is singularly inapt as a description of the reality of voting in Band elections. To understand why voting is a high-benefit action in Band elections we must understand something of the political economy of Reserve communities in the Maritimes. Unemployment is exceptionally high. A very high percentage of the Indian population on Reserve receive some or all of their income from jobs controlled by the Chief and Band Council—working for the Band Council directly or as educational, health, community service etc. workers—or else from such Federal government funded projects and programs as welfare, unemployment insurance, housing grants, post-secondary education grants and so on. There is very little economic activity that is independent of the local Band political system.

This is so because of the way that the Federal government has established the political system within Reserve communities. The Band Council and especially the Chief has absolute control over who will receive Band jobs. They decide who will work for the Band as educational officer etc. Furthermore, they also control housing. Most housing on Reserves is constructed with Federal money. Very few are privately owned. The Band "owns" the housing and decides who will get a house, who will keep it in the case of divorce and so on. When housing is scarce, this capacity to determine who does or does not receive housing becomes an important power. Welfare payments, payments for education, in short the whole range of Federal monies that are earmarked for Reserve communities, and for individuals, all pass through the hands of the Chief and Band Council, and

are distributed or not as they see fit. For example, in Nova Scotia in 1980, 30.6% of on-Reserve Indians who were employed worked on short term jobs through projects like Canada Works. Another 23.1 % worked directly for the Band Council (Wien, 1986:72). This overwhelming economic power, placed in the hands of the Chief and Band Council by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, gives the political realm an importance that it does not have among the rest of the population.

As democratic politics becomes increasingly significant economically it takes on a different character which, in turn, is reflected in voter turnout. A vastly greater portion of economic activity is directly in the hands of elected politicians in Reserve communities than in Canada or the United States generally. The political stakes are simply too high generally. The political stakes are simply too high on Reserves to permit the relatively disinterested politics that mark Canadian elections.

The personal consequences to most individual voters of a victory by the Liberals, the Progressive Conservatives or the New Democratic Party are not that great. Election outcomes are critical on Reserve communities because politics controls so much economic activity. Reserve politics is characterized by shifting alliances and blocks each striving for the rewards of victory. To be a supporter of the victorious alliance often means employment, housing, etc. Defeat frequently means being terminated from Band employment. A recent election at the Kingsclear Reserve in New Brunswick brought about a new Chief and many new Band Councillors. The outgoing Chief fired every Band Council employee before leaving office. This fact of the politics of dependency, we postulate, overwhelms all other factors which normally one would expect to find influencing voter participation. When politics is life or death, sense of civic responsibility, sense of efficacy, interest in campaign all pale to insignificance.

As we have already stated, very little attention has been directed at Indian (or more generally, Aboriginal) voter participation in Canadian politics by students of electoral politics. A definitive account of the variations in turnout which we have identified in this paper awaits more research and data. Survey research data on the socio-psychological characteristics of the Aboriginal voter population are essential if this study is to be pursued to completion. We need to know more about the complex of reasons why people living on Reserves have stopped voting in Provincial and Federal elections. What attitudes and values have changed and why?

Our research findings do suggest, however, that the conventional terms by which we view the relationship between the non-Aboriginal immigrant society and its state, on the one hand and the Aboriginal nations of this land, on the other, are due for serious reconsideration. Our data

suggest that Aboriginal people are not prepared to accept the kind of self-government which their *Indian Act* leadership has been promoting; nor do they see their liberation from the debilitating poverty, hopelessness and despair within the context of the present Canadian constitutional framework. Yes, Aboriginal life expectancy, educational opportunities and even housing have improved over recent decades. At the same time, however, suicide rates have escalated. While the Canadian state has implemented measures to address destitution in Aboriginal communities on the terms of the immigrant society, that destitution has not abated. By their participation rates in Canadian elections “Indians” appear to be saying that they have little confidence in the likelihood of finding a comfortable domicile within the Canadian state.

**Notes**

1. The authors wish to thank Anne Simon, Susan Graham and Tracy Vibert for their role in researching this paper.
2. We are ignoring for the purposes of our study the argument about whether high rates of participation are necessary for a healthy body politic as Key argues (1966:589) or whether apathy is necessary for liberal democracies to function smoothly as W.H. Morris Jones argued (1954:37). We are leaving aside this issue because our concern is first of all to try to determine why Aboriginal voter participation is as it is.
3. Pocklington interviewed a total of 94 people in two communities to determine participation rates. Sixty-three said they usually voted in Federal elections.
4. These two categories of factors are not the only ones found in the literature, although they are the most frequently used. Some, notably Anthony Downs, have argued that nonvoting is rational. John Aldrich has challenged the theory of the rationality of non-voting in his recent article “Rational Choice and Turnout”. Voting is not a good example of the logic of collective action. Instead Aldrich argued that voting is an example of “low-cost, low-benefit action”. As a result, relatively small forces could affect turnout.

5.	Sense Of Political Efficacy	low		high
	Turnout	52%	75%	91%
	Sense Of Civic Duty	low		high
	Turnout	13%	52%	85%

6.

	New Brunswick		Nova Scotia	
	1961-2	1974-5	1961-2	1974-5
Grade 1	107	124	119	163
2	96	125	127	139
3	95	112	224	119
4	115	110	323	129
5	70	113	114	123
6	69	116	93	115
7	46	165	80	123
8	44	117	49	99
9	21	76	30	62
10	8	68	11	43
11	8	35	17	37
12/13	5	17	9	18

7. See, for example, Nicholas (1991, 1993), Boldt and Long (1985), *A Basic Call to Consciousness: The Hau De No Sau Nee Address to the Western World* (1978). As well, we have looked at the numerous addresses, writings and meditations of Aboriginal spiritual leaders and elders such as Tom Porter, Oren Lyons, Jeannette Armstrong and many others closer to home.
8. Wampum 19. Wampum, stringed shells, was the ceremonial writing of the Iroquois. Each "clause" was a separate wampum.
9. Obviously, for our purposes it would be preferable to be able to analyze the traditional political culture of the Wabanaki Confederacy—which included Micmac and Maliseet nations. However, there are no exact records of their political and constitutional arrangements that can rival in detail and precision that of the Iroquois. Much of their history is in the process of being written. While the details no doubt differed there is evidence of common economic practices and political arrangements amongst the various nations in the northeastern region of Turtle Island. See Nicholas (1994) and Leacock (1975). For this reason we feel confident that the basic political cultural attitudes found in the *Great Law of Peace* are applicable to the Maliseet and Micmac peoples.
10. For a moving first hand account of the process of cultural oppression and the struggle to regain identity see Knockwood and Thomas, 1992. The author tells of her experiences, and those of her friends and relatives, at the residential school in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia.

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