

# Aboriginal Policy Research Conference



## Aboriginal Electoral Participation (Elections Canada)

Presented by: Tonio Sadik

The observations and conclusions are those of the author

March 12, 2009

# Introduction

- It was very interesting to have an advance opportunity to review the three papers presented here today:
  - Jacobs (York)
  - Harell, Matthews and Panagos (Queen's and RMC)
  - Howe and Bedford (UNB)
- My approach will be to spend a few minutes describing some of the work that the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) has been doing jointly with Elections Canada (EC) to increase voter turnout among First Nations (FNs), and to reflect on it in light of the presentations here today.

## Introduction (cont.)

- Each of these papers was very interesting. The paper by Jacobs makes important new inroads into the theorization of Aboriginal electoral participation, while the papers by Harell et al. and Howe and Bedford provide new quantitative insights into Aboriginal voting patterns and determinants.

## AFN's "Get Out the Vote" Initiative

- Phase 2 of the AFN's "get out the vote" initiative began in 2006, on the heels of an election in January of that year.
- As is noted in the Howe and Bedford paper, the AFN, under the leadership of National Chief Phil Fontaine, has been quite vocal in its support of participation by FNs in federal elections.

## AFN's "Get Out the Vote" Initiative (cont.)

- The AFN's focus has been on providing basic information to FNs in the form of a voter information handbook, as well as a wider campaign through Aboriginal and other media.
- Much of this work was based on research and analysis that we carried out that included focus groups, a youth forum, and a statistical analysis of voter participation rates across each of Canada's 308 electoral districts.

# Research

- The papers presented here today help to make an important contribution to the limited body of research that exists with respect to Aboriginal voter participation.
- There is, however, still a serious lack of available data about Aboriginal voter participation rates in Canada.
- Much of the information – be it from the General Social Survey or the Equality, Security and Community survey – is gathered at a very high level; so high that we are at a loss when it comes to addressing serious concerns with the electoral process.

## Research (cont.)

- For example, a serious issue arose for First Nations at the most recent election (October 14, 2008):
  - The *Canada Elections Act* had been amended in 2007 making it mandatory for electors to prove their identity and address at the polling station.
- These requirements could be met by:
  - providing one original piece of ID issued by a government or government agency containing the elector's photo, name, and civic address;

## Research (cont.)

- providing two original pieces of ID authorized by the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada, both containing the elector's name and one containing his or her civic address; or
- swearing an oath and being vouched for by an elector who is on the list of electors in the same polling division and has acceptable ID.
- In fact, and ironically, there is no single piece of ID issued by the federal government that meets all of the requirements set by the new federal legislation – not even a passport.



# Voter Identification

- While showing ID may seem commonplace to many, anecdotally, we know that the new requirements created significant problems at the ground level, particularly for rural Aboriginal electors.
- The issue is that many Aboriginal electors simply do not have the identification now required under the *Canada Elections Act*.

## Voter Identification (cont.)

- More specifically, many people living rurally do not receive their mail at home and therefore do not have a civic (or “home”) address on their ID – they have a PO box or general delivery address.
  - Such identification (e.g. a utility bill showing a PO box) does NOT meet the address requirements of acceptable identification at a polling station.
- Despite the fact that the *Canada Elections Act* was amended to provide more flexibility in proving the elector's address, it still represents a challenge for Aboriginal electors.

## Voter Identification (cont.)

- The challenge, however, reflecting back on our presentations, is that we do not in fact have adequate data to measure the impact this legislative change had on voter participation rates during the last election.
- Not only are we not sure how many potential electors did not vote at the polling stations, we do not know how many people opted not to vote because they did not understand the voting requirements or knew they could not meet them.

## Voter Identification (cont.)

- Drawing on Jacobs' reference to the Supreme Court of Canada's *Sauvé* decision, "universal franchise has become... an essential part of democracy" (p. 7) – what does this say about these legislative amendments?
  - We would suggest the situation – for the moment – is quite dire.

## AFN Call Centre

- Our anecdotal findings are based on an initiative that was jointly conceived with Elections Canada, and involved attempting to phone every band office north of latitude 55 and in seven other electoral districts with significant rural populations during the election period of 36 days.
- As you can imagine, this was an intensive and haphazard means of assessing and addressing the situation, but we felt it was a necessary part of distributing information pertaining to the new identification requirements.

## AFN Call Centre (cont.)

- From a total of 349 calls made, 262 succeeded in making contact with a band official.
- As you might expect, a very large majority of persons contacted were not aware of the change; and even more important, when they were aware, may not have had sufficient acceptable ID to meet the Act's new requirements.
- This takes me back to our presentations today.

## Papers and Presentations

- Jacobs' examination of the "legal consciousness" of Aboriginal electors provides a useful theoretical backdrop for the more practical application of solutions for lower rates of voting.
  - Indeed, it may be in carrying out such "mapping" that we get to an important question posed by Howe and Bedford: "...how much of the voting gap is distinctively 'Aboriginal' and how much is simply a reflection of more generic socio-demographic variables..."? (p. 31)
  - This was also an issue for Harell et al., where their work raised questions about the meaning of Aboriginal alienation and resistance, particularly among youth, and what is more generally defined in the literature as new social movements.

## Papers and Presentations (cont.)

- Coincidentally, the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples met on March 11, 2009, to examine the very issues of this session and one senator spoke of the “cultural inappropriateness” of asking people in small rural FN communities to show ID when they have lived side-by-side all their lives:
  - What might this say about people’s “legal consciousness” given the new legislation and the requirements it imposes?



## Papers and Presentations (cont.)

- If we recognize that demographic factors like age have an impact on voter participation, as do practical factors like mobility (Howe and Bedford p. 28), it seems that we must now bring a more multifaceted focus to bear on what Jacobs examines in the form of “rights mobilization” (p. 8).
  - What might the architecture of such a research methodology look like?
- All of the authors recognized – and we wish to re-affirm – the need to account for not only broad cultural and regional differences between Aboriginal groups, but also the unique experiences and aspirations within the sub-groupings evidenced, for example, by Harell et al.'s interesting finding with respect to voting patterns between the Blackfoot and Cree speaking FNs (p. 20).

## Conclusion

- While what we know from our presenters today, including that age and education, in particular, are important variables relating to Aboriginal voter participation;
  - we do NOT know how some very practical problems – such as the non-availability of acceptable ID – will impact Aboriginal voter participation in the future.
- It is the AFN's hope (and we have already begun discussions with EC) that in addition to learning more about why Aboriginal peoples generally vote at a lower rate in federal elections than other Canadians;

## Conclusion (cont.)

- that we can also continue to seek remedial strategies to reduce the negative impacts of the recent legislative changes on increasing the participation of Aboriginal voters in federal elections.
- Jacobs has suggested that the focus of such initiatives could include talking about the history of Aboriginal voting rights in Canada – and next year's 50th anniversary of the Aboriginal franchise might offer that opportunity.
- The AFN looks forward to further collaboration with EC and has already begun preliminary discussions toward this end.
- Thank you.