

A Distributive Aboriginal Political Culture is Alive and Well in Northern Saskatchewan

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ABSTRACT

Many suggest that northern Aboriginal political culture has largely been lost due to political and economic colonization. This paper suggests otherwise. Based on research findings from a northern political engagement study, it argues that northern Aboriginal political culture remains strong despite the pressures of modern life. At a recent meeting, Indigenous Alumni from the Masters in Northern Governance and Development (MNGD) Program went a step further suggesting that while northern Aboriginal culture was resilient, it needed support in many areas including language retention, training, youth education and protection of local knowledge. It was suggested that a formalized network of Northern Aboriginal Scholars could provide significant support. Aboriginal Peoples in northern Saskatchewan developed a distinct 'way of life' in that region blending historical cultural values and a mixed-wage economy. Over 86% of the 37,000 people living in the 45 northern Saskatchewan communities (municipalities, reserves) are Woodland Cree, Dene and Métis peoples. The north is their traditional homeland. Findings from a three-year research study (2010–2013) on northern Aboriginal political engagement illustrated a high desire (96.3%) by Indigenous people to protect their traditional northern ways of life (hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering) and the distributive values associated with it. This and other findings suggest that Aboriginal political culture in northern Saskatchewan is changing but is still alive and well.

INTRODUCTION

The region of 'northern Saskatchewan' is the ancestral home of the Dene, Métis and Woodland Cree People of the Canadian Shield. The northern Aboriginal Peoples share a common political culture that reflect aspects of community history, kinship networks, and distributive value systems associated with a historical way of life that has changed over the years, but is

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still alive and well.¹ Political culture, as discussed here, broadly refers to the “shared norms, attitudes, behavior and values that shape contemporary Aboriginal political life” (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer, Doraty, et al. 2013). The paper draws on findings from a three-year research project on political engagement in northern Saskatchewan (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer, Doraty, et al. 2013). The work drew on extensive surveys of political participation and values, including focus groups with Aboriginal youth. The project revealed important elements in northern political culture, including substantial distrust in provincial and federal politics, stronger commitment to local and First Nations governments, high levels of civil society participation in the communities, and uncertainty about the role of government in Aboriginal life.

The research findings also implied a strong awareness and concern by Aboriginal northerners to protect and maintain their culture and traditional way of life. Emerging northern Aboriginal scholars express similar concerns. At recent meetings, the Northern Keewetinohk Indigenous Scholars, mostly alumni from the Masters in Northern Governance and Development (MNGD) Program, University of Saskatchewan, discussed the resiliency, as well as the pressures, on northern Aboriginal culture and discussed ways to protect it and pass on its values to the younger generations.² Aboriginal northern culture, like so many others, is changing under tremendous internal and external pressures, but it is not lost. It is still sufficiently embedded in a distinct northern land-based way of life or Keewetinohk Pimachesowin (Woodland Cree) with its associated values, knowledge systems and kinship networks. These continue to influence northern Aboriginal Peoples today in varying degrees. The northern Aboriginal Peoples, with their younger populations, are less tolerant of being politically and economically sidelined. Evidence of effective partnerships that produce visible benefits to communities rather than simply engaging them in discussions is therefore favoured. The risks associated with failing to address and balance competing interests can be far more costly.

The paper situates the contextual background of Aboriginal Peoples in Northern Saskatchewan by providing a broader national Aboriginal and provincial profile of the region.³ It then provides a general description of the Northern Aboriginal political culture engagement study (NAPC), its purpose and key findings. This is followed by a discussion on key issues and implications, of which three will be highlighted for further analysis here:

- (a) The Regional political culture is distinct and resilient with strong Aboriginal community cultures (language, land, way of life) despite pressures of modern life but there are concerns about its future.
- (b) Demographic trends consist of a remote region facing serious socio-economic challenges resulting from many factors including high unemployment, housing shortages, poor health status, fast growing youth populations, limited access to

¹ “Aboriginal” refers to the broader Canadian Constitutional definition, “Indian, Métis, Inuit.”

² “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” are used interchangeably here for brevity’s sake, although the term “Indigenous” can often be used in a broader international context.

³ “Aboriginal” is broadly used here in the Constitutional sense of “Indian, Métis and Inuit” Peoples of Canada. Politically, many Treaty First Nations dislike the term, fearing governments could use it to potentially water down their “Treaties.”

relevant education, training and job opportunities, poor infrastructures and under-developed public and recreation services.

- (c) Political engagement, as far as voting patterns in the region, appear locally strategic with high local voter turnouts in the communities but less than average turnouts in provincial and federal elections. Regional and cultural alienation or at least perceptions of it are largely attributed to be the leading causes for disengagement. Higher engagement is anticipated during times where Aboriginal northerners feel their way of life and Aboriginal and Treaty Rights are under imminent threat.

The paper argues that weaker Indigenous voter turnouts at provincial and federal elections make it easier for governments and outside interests to overlook the concerns, cultures, and voices of northern Indigenous Peoples and their communities. The ensuing marginalization is not without political, economic and social costs. This is evident just by looking at the generally negative media patterns that give a contrasting picture of northern Saskatchewan with its pristine lakes and forests on the one hand, and its complex social and economic problems on the other. A recent example of this is the La Loche shooting at a school in northern Saskatchewan that recently captured local and international headlines. The NAPC survey findings identified problems associated with addictions, poor health, and high employment that had already been raised for many years by northern Aboriginal and community leaders (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer, Doraty, et al. 2013). One of the factors was that northern Aboriginal Peoples felt marginalized by outside authorities. Over 50.6% respondents in the NAPC survey believed that too many decisions regarding the north were being made outside the region in the government centres of Regina and Ottawa. The findings suggest a sense of alienation from the broader society and governments. Many think that only Aboriginal and Treaty Rights can provide Constitutional protection against unrestricted developments around their traditional lands and resources. Other protective measures, such as the Crown's duty to consult and appropriately accommodate Aboriginal Peoples whose Aboriginal and Treaty Rights may be potentially affected by industry developments, are useful but can also be interpreted so broadly that duty to consult becomes watered down and meaningless. Aboriginal northerners are obviously not against development, having been increasingly engaged in forestry, mining and other developments themselves, but they also have interests and tangible benefits to protect at the same time, such as caring for the environment, supporting local industries (commercial harvesting, hunting and trapping), protecting their cultures and ensuring that development benefits are sustainable and reach the communities. Some mining companies like Cameco have worked better than others with Aboriginal communities for many years by proactive employment strategies and various partnership arrangements (Cameco 2014). It is therefore evident that actively engaging northern Aboriginal Peoples at the start is a more effective process.

Some ideas for Aboriginal engagement include encouraging higher voting turnouts at provincial and federal elections through more public awareness and education about citizen voting rights and election procedures, especially among the youth. The one vote can sometimes be a game-changer in elections so voting matters. Furthermore, a more aware and educated citizen is more likely to vote regardless of the outcome and is more likely to be actively engaged in the overall community life, thus contributing to its development. Strategic engagement opportunities accessible to community people are therefore a necessary

building step, as well as taking the time to understand the broad cultural environment that is the backbone of the north. The paper suggests that meaningful Aboriginal participation can strengthen northern development in general by providing strategic and accessible capacity-building opportunities, relevant training and utilizing communication systems that are culturally responsive to the Aboriginal communities.

CANADIAN CONTEXT

Before we get into the discussion on northern Saskatchewan, it is important to situate northern Aboriginal Peoples within the Canadian context in order to better understand the broader Aboriginal Rights and Land issues that bubble beneath anything to do with northern development. Unfulfilled Treaty and land settlement Agreements, political and economic diversity, and changing demographics are among the key factors affecting Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. The early Treaties were intended to set out the land and jurisdiction relationships between First Nations and the Canadian State, but the bungling interpretations and subsequent actions by successive bureaucracies and governments, along with the cumulative pressures of the modern world, has strained the over 200-year-old Treaty Relationship. It is apparent that the ongoing issues around Treaty Implementation will still continue to dominate the political agenda with First Nations. According to the Assembly of First Nations, “Treaty leadership have been frustrated by the lack of progress made on advancing Treaty Implementation approaches or finding common ground on Treaty Implementation” (Assembly First Nations 2013). Generally speaking, Aboriginal Peoples do not trust Canadian governments and this is consistent with the often frustrated political culture that struggles to maintain its heritage and find ways for sustaining its families and communities.

Another distinguishing element of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada is their cultural and political diversity that reflects the geographical diversity of the land itself, contrary to a common misperception that assumes that Aboriginal communities are a homogenous group (Burlington and Gulati 2012, p. 7). Aboriginal Peoples share a rather dark colonial history with European and successive Canadian governments that tended to view Aboriginal Peoples as a political ‘problem,’ rather than partners, therefore needing to be managed through legislation, policies and practices. Political marginalization began with the disputed unilateral sale of western lands to Canada by the Hudson Bay Company in 1870, which had ignored the inherent land rights of the Aboriginal Peoples. The post-Treaty government management of Indian Peoples and Reserves through the 1876 *Indian Act* further isolated First Nations to Reserves and disempowered their political and economic authority. This subsequently led to government authorities justifying human rights violations in their jurisdictions, such as the more infamous residential school policies whose negative legacy reverberates to the current day. Similarly, the unilateral transfer of natural resources to the provinces in 1930, without the consent or knowledge of Aboriginal Peoples, also exacerbated their social and economic problems because provincial game laws now regulated their traditional way of life and livelihoods. Things started to turn around in the late 1960s as Aboriginal Peoples got politically organized, educated and in the mid 1980’s, negotiated to get their Aboriginal and Treaty Rights recognized in the Canadian Constitution. Today, Aboriginal Peoples are pushing to develop their local communities, negotiate land claims settlements and invest in business developments, with leaders strategically engaging in regional, provincial and national politics with their own community interests in mind. In that

sense, diversity among community-centric groups has consolidated some political power at the broader provincial and federal levels, but it also continues to challenge political consensus making.

Aboriginal communities and regions are also socio-economically diverse and while conditions are improving for some, many are still struggling and generally poor. According to Statistics Canada, in the recent National Household Survey, an estimated 1.4 Million identified as Aboriginal in Canada, which is a little over 4% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada 2011). This is a fast growing population relative to the Canadian population at large with an estimated growth rate at “20.1% between 2006 and 2011, compared with 5.2% for the non-Aboriginal population” (Statistics Canada 2011). Of this growing Aboriginal population, about 61% are First Nations, 32% Métis, and 4% Inuit (Statistics Canada 2011). The Aboriginal population has a high young population and a much smaller older (65+) sector, which is reflective of an underdeveloped sector. According to the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS), about 28% of the Aboriginal Peoples in Canada were less than 15 years of age compared to the larger population at 17%, and educational attainment is a great concern (Statistics Canada 2015). Saskatchewan has a significant share in that national Aboriginal population, with an estimated 11.3% (157,740) Aboriginal Peoples living in Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada 2011).

Aboriginal economic development is an emerging national priority among Aboriginal leaders, industry and government authorities. A recent report by the National Aboriginal Economic Development Board argues that Aboriginal Canadians are a critical part of Canada’s long-term prosperity and federal strategic government measures and leveraging partnerships are needed to engage them in the national economy. The labour market has yet to successfully capitalize on the fast growing Aboriginal youth population although important training and employment opportunities are developing. The Aboriginal business sector is in a growth mode levered by innovative industry partnerships and land claim settlements (The National Aboriginal Economic Development Board 2012, p. 3). The ongoing high unemployment rates and lack of appropriate training and education in the Aboriginal population, however, require significant interim building steps especially in Aboriginal communities, including developing infrastructure, technical capacity and locally accessible training programs. Statistics Canada estimates that the average unemployment rate in 2009 for Aboriginal Peoples was 13.9% compared to 8.1% for non-Aboriginal Peoples (Statistics Canada 2011a). The 2011 rates are similar with the Aboriginal unemployment rate of 13% effectively doubling the non-Aboriginal rate of 6% (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada 2011). Lagging education attainment rates suggest that 29% of the Aboriginal population have not completed high school compared to 12% of in the non-Aboriginal sector of the same age (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada 2011).

In relation to this national picture, Saskatchewan’s Aboriginal profile is similarly marginalized. The 2006 demographic data report a provincial Aboriginal population of 141,890 at an estimated average growth rate of 2.5% per year. It is a fast growing young population with 55% being less than 25 years of age compared to 31 % for the non-Aboriginal population (Elliot 2009). Almost half (49%) of the 2006 Aboriginal population (15 year of age and older) did not complete high school and only about a third (29%) completed university or technical education (Elliot 2009). There is high unemployment. The off-reserve Aboriginal unemployment rate for 2013 was estimated at 12.2% compared to 15.8% in 2012 (Saskatchewan 2013). Compared to the non-Aboriginal unemployment rates, however, the gap remains significant. According to a 2013 federal Labour Market Report, the 2011 unem-

ployment rate in Saskatchewan for Aboriginal Peoples was 15.5 % compared to 4.1% for non-Aboriginal Peoples, although there was slight improvement from 2006–2011 (Employment and Social Development Canada 2013).⁴ Employment rates for Saskatchewan First Nations on reserve are estimated at 33% suggesting a much higher unemployment rate overall for Aboriginal Peoples in Saskatchewan (Elliot 2009). Recent estimates suggest that First Nations unemployment rates may be nearly five times higher than the non-Aboriginal rate (Senick 2013). What is evident is that much work needs to be done in Saskatchewan, as far as education and training for employability is concerned, although there are likely other factors that affect employment as well.

A more positive outlook of Canada and Saskatchewan Aboriginal Peoples is that of a promising, young, fast growing demographic that could have significant positive impact on the national and provincial economy if properly supported and educated. A recent report by Statistics Canada suggests a positive correlation between participation in extracurricular activities (sports — 46%, arts — 25%, clubs — 19%) and high school completion among off-reserve First Nations (Statistics Canada 2015). The messaging is consistent. Industry and governments need to be more engaged in working with Aboriginal communities for their development and training. Tangible positive results in the communities will be the measure of success. Supporting and helping build the skills of children and youth through positive and organized engagement in sports, clubs and arts and other educational opportunities are important steps in the development continuum.

NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN PROFILE

Northern Saskatchewan is a distinct ‘provincial north’ region in Canada’s *North* covering about half of the province (Bone 2012) with an estimated 4% of the Saskatchewan population residing there. It is distinct not only because of its cold subarctic geography and beautiful forests and lakes, but it is also home to a largely Aboriginal population with a distinct northern way of life (*Pimachesowin*) including hunting, trapping, commercial fishing and wild rice harvesting (Beatty, Berdahl, and Poelzer 2013, p. 125). Over 37,000 people live in about 45 northern communities (municipalities, reserves) and over 86% are Aboriginal (Berdahl, Beatty, and Poelzer 2011, p. 92). The region is better identified as the “Northern Administrative District,” an area legislated by the provincial “Northern Administration Act, 1948,” to facilitate the management and development of that region (Government of Saskatchewan 2014; Beatty, Berdahl, and Poelzer 2013, p. 122).

The Northern economy with its abundant natural resources has been experiencing an economic boom of sorts but the benefits have yet to trickle down to the Aboriginal communities in a tangible way, aside from encouraging efforts by some mining companies and government programs to train and employ workers to meet their specialized skill requirements (Berdahl, Beatty, and Poelzer 2011, p. 90). It has a high growth rate and a large youth population (34% under 15 years of age), high youth unemployment, low median income (\$31,007), shortage of housing (18% overcrowding), all of which raise serious infrastructure issues for municipalities (Saskatchewan Association of Northern Communities (SANC) Ser-

⁴ The Labour Market Bulletin excludes the on-reserve population and with unemployment rates higher on most reserves, it is assumed the overall Aboriginal unemployment rate is also higher.

vices Inc. 2011). Some estimates suggest a northern population of 45000 by 2021 (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2013). According to a recent northern training assessment report, over half of the working age population has not finished high school, and Aboriginal unemployment rates are high at 18.9% compared to 7% in southern Saskatchewan (The Northern Labour Market Committee 2011, p. 2).

The potential loss of cultural and economic knowledge also concerns northern Aboriginal Peoples. Aboriginal culture is widely known for its respect for the elders (elderly), but that population (65+) is only 4.5% of the northern population (Irvine, Quinn, and Stockdale 2011, p. 8). This has serious ramifications for traditional knowledge transference and translation. The bush way of life with all its inherent history, culture, economic and associated work values and belief systems are under pressure. It was interesting in the study to find that the majority of northern Aboriginal respondents, including the youth, strongly believed that it was important to protect and sustain the traditional knowledge of the elders. The youth in the focus groups specifically desired more organized opportunities to bond with their elders, go out on the land and learn more about their traditional ways of life and its value systems (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2013, p. 6). The Aboriginal language retention is still fairly strong with over 40% still speaking Cree, Dene or Michif at home, and it is still being passed down to the youth, with nearly 46% survey respondents (ages 18–24) indicating they spoke an Aboriginal language.

The Aboriginal economy is largely a blended economy where many families still supplement their household resources from a variety of sources, including traditional subsistence hunting produce (meat, fish, fowl) and employment revenue from wage income, as well as traditional commercial fishing and trapping enterprises (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2011, p. 10). For instance, over 95% of the commercial fishing industry is localized to northern Saskatchewan and over 89% are Aboriginal (Derek Murray Consulting Associates 2006, p. 76), so it has strong regional impact. The commercial fishing industry in northern Saskatchewan that emerged in the 1950s has continued to be sustained in many respects by the tenacity of local commercial fishing cooperatives, which continue to face troubles with increasing transportation costs, market downturns and pressures from external interests (Stewart 2013). The commercial fishing industry today continues to remain viable with about 700 licensed commercial fishers employing an estimated 1500 seasonal helpers (Saskatchewan Environment 2014). This is consistent with a 2006 Government of Saskatchewan report on the economic value of Saskatchewan commercial fishing, that reported the industry generated new economic activity estimated at \$4.8 Million, including processing, and employing about 613 licensed commercial fishermen, and 270 full-time helpers or an estimated 1200 jobs given the seasonal nature of commercial fishing (Derek Murray Consulting Associates 2006, p. 4). The report noted that about 14% of the northern workforce depends on seasonal employment from commercial fishing and with the average income being lower in northern Saskatchewan, its impact becomes much more significant to northern people's annual incomes. It suggested not having a commercial fishing industry would generate serious social costs, not to mention jeopardizing northern culture and tradition, which it acknowledges, "similar to farming, fishing is a family business that is handed down through generations" (Derek Murray Consulting Associates 2006, p. 9).

The pressures on the traditional industries are enormous, as my late dad once told me, "it is going to get worse as the world gets smaller and the population in the north gets bigger and bigger." In other words, the pressures for scarce resources are going to potentially overrun these traditional Aboriginal industries unless they are protected and accommodated

within the new corporate developments — in other words, balanced development with strong conditions negotiated with Aboriginal Peoples. As long as Land, labour and capital are still the tenets of modern capitalism and basic generators in the production of wealth, Aboriginal Peoples in the north will be engaged in imbalanced relationships with wealthier corporate interests and government authorities. Nonetheless, they will still continue to have strong political and economic leverage with their lands and Aboriginal Rights, traditional industries, and strong kinship cultures, as well as their demographics and politically engaged communities. For Aboriginal northerners, political engagement is based on the desire to protect and maintain their traditional lands and way of life and culture, a pattern that others suggest is likely to continue for most First Nations (Slowey 2005, p. 10; Cardinal and Hildebrandt 2000). Those long involved in northern education and training realize how significant partnership networks are towards building effective programs (The Northern Labour Market Committee 2011, p. 2). Common concerns with high unemployment, low education attainment, high youth population, high social problems, and the risk of losing northern cultural values, language and a way of life, especially with a small elderly population, all reflect a region going through hard changes. It was important therefore to try to better understand their contemporary way of life, political culture, political and community engagement and their key concerns.

THE NORTHERN ABORIGINAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT STUDY

The Northern Aboriginal Political Engagement Study took place in northern Saskatchewan. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Strategic Grants Program supported the three-year project. The objective of the study was to better understand the political and economic roles that growing Aboriginal communities played in northern Saskatchewan. It explored how Aboriginal populations in northern Saskatchewan engage in political processes and examine the factors that explain these patterns of engagement.

The project consisted of literature review, a telephone survey in 2010 and a series of youth focus groups in eight communities over a few summers. The youth focus groups were essentially to accommodate the underrepresentation of youth (ages 18–24) in the survey sample. The telephone survey was conducted in Cree, Dene and English to accommodate the main language groups in the region. It was done over a period of two months in 2010 (November–December) and of the 850 people that responded to it, 505 were Aboriginal (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2013). Much coordination and communication with community leaders was carried out before the survey, during the survey and after the survey by research team members. It was particularly helpful to be able to work with a popular northern radio (Misinipi Broadcasting Corporation) to promote the survey to northern households repeatedly over a set time period in English, Cree and Dene. It was also crucial to have graduate students helping with the communication, coordination and research support with community focus groups and other matters. It was a successful study to the extent that it yielded such a good response rate and that it engaged both formal and informal communication systems among the political and community interests.

The thematic areas explored demographic information, community engagement, political engagement (formal and informal), political culture and later added, youth engagement. The findings produced an important picture about the nature of contemporary northern polit-

ical culture, including low levels of reported political engagement in provincial and federal politics compared to the high political engagement and commitment reported towards local governments and communities. The reported community-based engagement illustrated high desire (96.3%) to protect the traditional northern ways of life (hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering) and values associated with it. This was similar with the youth (ages 18–24) findings as well with over 98% believing that the traditional way of life was important. Sharing is a cultural trait. Over 79.4% reported giving away or sharing their traditional food, which is reflective of the Aboriginal kinship system in the north where sharing scarce resources was a necessity of life for generations. It created a distributive mechanism that has sustained Aboriginal life in the north through many internal and external pressures throughout its history and undoubtedly will continue to do so.

The distributive nature of northern Aboriginal culture is also reflected in the relatively high levels of community engagement reported with 66.4% indicating they provided care or support for others, nearly 50% reported helping with school, church and other community events, and nearly 40% reported volunteering in organized community events such as teaching or coaching, and slightly less (31.7%) in participating in Boards or committees (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2013). Not surprisingly, northern community engagement largely consisted of outdoor events, such as sports days and ski-doo rallies, along with the more traditional harvesting activities. Youth also exhibited strong community engagement especially in informal events and activities, including traditional outdoor activities, with over 98% believing it was important to do so. Some of the contextual reasons in the focus groups suggested the reasons for involvement included feeling some sense of accomplishment, acting as role model, having better mental and physical health, and keeping youth out of trouble through recreational activities (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2013).

This northern preference is similarly reflected in the political attitudes toward government with 41.3% reporting that northern issues affect their voting preference in terms of candidates and political parties. Northern regionalism is apparent in the strong perception of alienation from government decisions, with 75.3% reporting they believed governments located in the south and in Ottawa made many important decisions affecting them (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2013). The perceived importance of voting in general elections (86.7%) and voting in local Band elections (90.1%), suggested a high interest in the democratic right to vote. However, the reported voting in general elections was considerably lower (57.2 % in the last provincial election, 46.7% in the last federal election), but much better in the local Band elections with 68.8% Band members indicating they voted (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2013). Youth are dramatically less engaged politically, with nearly 81% youth respondents reporting not voting in the last provincial election and 92% reporting not voting in the last federal election. The contextual reasons reflected in the focus groups for this lack of participation in politics included being too busy, not caring, not believing things will change, improper identification and not knowing where to vote, all of which reflect mistrust towards politics in general and lack of electoral experience and public education (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2013). What is interesting is that notwithstanding their dissatisfaction and low voter turnout, the majority Aboriginal youth (70.3%) still believe that it was important for people to go out and vote in general elections.

Northern Saskatchewan with its majority Aboriginal population voted in a New Democratic Party candidate in the 2015 Federal election, contrary to the rest of the province that went mostly Conservative. It had been a tight race between the three political parties each

represented by Aboriginal candidates. The federal voter turnout in the Desnethe–Mississippi–Churchill River federal riding was at an all time high at 30,192/44,320 (68.12%) compared to the 2011 turnout at 50% (CBC News 2015). While there were many factors, one of the more likely reasons for the high voter turnout and shift was likely the negative feelings against the former Conservative Prime Minister that ran across most of the country. In any event, what was evident that concerted mobilization efforts across the north by all parties and the strategic push by Aboriginal leaders for Aboriginal Peoples to go vote in the federal elections paid off resulting in a noticeable high Aboriginal voter turnout across the country. Estimates suggest that the 27/33 ridings in the 2011 Federal elections with the largest Aboriginal populations showed significant increases in voter turnout higher than the national average (Grenier 2015).

The challenges that Aboriginal northerners face are well known. Both the telephone respondents and youth focus groups reported that they believed the biggest issues in their communities including addictions (alcohol, drugs), housing and unemployment. The youth also added the lack of recreation activities for youth and children, as well as the need for better education (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer et al. 2013). These priority concerns perhaps underlay the main issues regarding development in the north to find ways of addressing the serious addictions and chronic patterns of unemployment and insufficient housing.

The north has faced colonization challenges for many years and has had its share of strong Aboriginal leaders and resilient communities. The northern culture that evolved through the fur-trade in the north followed by State interventions and regulation of natural resources during the post-war era produced resilient community ‘builders’ — those who built the northern infrastructure around organized communities and public services (Beatty, Berdahl, and Poelzer 2013). This demographic of respected elderly leaders is nearly gone replaced by new generations. The demographics today suggest that the youth and children are increasingly outnumbering the household providers, and many are moving out of their communities into cities for various purposes, and at best, will likely remain transient between both worlds. There is concern over the increasing underdevelopment in many communities, fears that it may be building towards a type of perfect storm of pressures for the Aboriginal Peoples of the north, in terms of cultural resilience, community development and traditional environmental stewardship. But it is not there yet, and there are renewed calls to protect the northern culture and its developments.

KEY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The strengths of northern Saskatchewan include a robust regional political culture with strong community allegiances and distinct Aboriginal culture, as reflected in their traditional values, community and political engagement, language retention and northern way of life. Aboriginal northerners have a strong commitment towards maintaining their traditional ways of life, as illustrated in the study where nearly 86% of local respondents reported believing that it was ‘very important’ (Berdahl, Beatty, and Poelzer 2011, p. 96). The older population in the local reserve communities (ages 65+ years) was 100% convinced that it was important to maintain their traditional way of life, compared to 76% of the youth (ages 18–29) who felt the same way (Berdahl, Beatty, and Poelzer 2011, p. 96). This is not unusual considering that most of the post-1980s youth would not have remembered growing up on the traplines and fishing camps like their parents and grandparents. Nonetheless, the youth would still be

familiar with commercial fishing and trapping since many of their households still engage in these to support family incomes and practice their culture, hence the continuing belief towards protecting the traditional ways of life.

Along with the strengths of Northern Aboriginal communities, are worrisome demographic trends, that suggest a region facing some serious social and economic challenges, including a fast growing young population that is largely underemployed, a mixed economy that is pressuring traditional industries in favour of corporate developments, high unemployment in the communities with low education attainment especially among the youth, limited housing and a myriad of social problems emerging largely from poverty conditions, such as alcohol and drug addictions that have yet to be addressed appropriately.

Some positive signs for improvement opportunities lie in improving Aboriginal voting patterns in the region. Northern Aboriginal voting appears strategic with high local voter turnouts in the communities but less than average turnouts in provincial and federal elections. The 2011 Federal election was different in that it was strongly strategic as far as getting the Aboriginal vote out. Regional alienation or at least perceptions of it was an underlying factor in the north, with the broader perceptions that governments in the south were making unilateral decisions that negatively impacted their communities.

Perceptions of regional alienation are challenging for any government since most are located far from the north. Creating opportunities for enhancing political engagement, therefore, could lessen the general political mistrust with provincial and federal governments. More opportunities for political engagement for communities and youth have to still be developed since the current consultation mechanisms and processes are not sufficiently addressing northern concerns. The majority in the survey obviously believed that northerners should vote in general elections, which suggests the interest is there but other factors are creating barriers. Identity, family and extended kinship networks are integrated into a way of life and thinking, so it is necessary to build on these strengths. The assumption behind local development and political and community engagement is that what is good for the individual will ultimately affect the good of the family, the community and region.

Political and Community Engagement can be empowering as people become more involved, educated and experienced. The study suggests that there is a high level of political and community engagement in the communities suggesting a robust social capital that is engaged in building their communities and can respond to external industry and government interests. The ways that political leaders and governments can better engage Aboriginal communities and youth, in particular, is to accommodate communities in developments that concern them and create strategic opportunities for engagement and education.

The barriers to political involvement need to be identified within the region between community leaders and the youth. The youth focus groups identified some common issues that contributed to their dissatisfaction with the governments which included the perceived federal lack of transparency to the Aboriginal communities, the lack of education and awareness in election processes and political parties, the notions that they were not helping the local communities enough (employment, recreation and youth facilities), the perceived attempts to take away their Treaty Rights and the lack of opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful ways in their communities and region.

Northern research can be useful if appropriately done. It can support the self-determination efforts of the north in a way that respects their political culture, on the other hand, it can also raise unrealistic expectations that may not be achievable and cause research fatigue, where people feel researched out and not want to participate. Many years ago, Coates raised

the issue of needing to develop a regional conceptual framework for studying the north rather than using southern paradigms that failed to properly explain the reality and nature of northern life (Coates 1994, p. 15). He was correct but, given the Indigenous demographics, more is needed. An Indigenous framework for studying the north is absolutely necessary for Aboriginal scholars since northern scholarship favours the non-Indigenous paradigms (north and south), which are very different from the indigenous perspectives. In fact, northern frameworks can marginalize the Indigenous realities and the voices of the Indigenous Peoples behind a broader conceptual framework. Coates refers to these different perceptions and expectations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples as “tensions” that can result in disagreements over regional development, and lead to segregation and racism, especially in areas where the majority is non-indigenous (Coates 1994, p. 28).

The Indigenous and non-Indigenous tensions are still evident, but have improved with time, especially in regions where Aboriginal Peoples are more actively engaged in the broader economic and political systems. The northern Aboriginal political culture is still primarily rooted in Indigenous-based value systems that have been challenged but have survived a rather negative colonial history with the non-Aboriginal Peoples that moved into the north changing their lives and power relations through the fur trade, industry, and government systems. One of the helpful ways towards developing better northern understandings and relations is having more northern Aboriginal Peoples attaining graduate degrees and starting to express their distinct perspectives in their papers. Recently, a group of northern Keewetinohk Indigenous Scholars met to explore ways to build northern Indigenous scholarship, most were alumni of the Masters in Northern Governance and Development Program at the University of Saskatchewan. A sense of responsibility to pass on the northern Indigenous knowledge of the communities to the broader academy was a common sentiment as well as exchanging information and knowledge with other northern scholars. The Northern Keewetinohk Indigenous Scholars Network is currently working in collaboration with the International Centre of Northern Governance and Development (ICNGD) as a first step towards building northern Indigenous scholarship in collaborative and distributive ways with others who support indigenous development.

A challenge for further research and education is that it should be relevant to the needs of the communities. The NAPC study made this clear. It confirmed some priority areas that have been raised in northern Saskatchewan for many years. The areas of addictions (alcohol, drugs), housing shortages and unemployment have been a continuing challenge for northern people and communities and the subject of many innovative local efforts. Research can support such local efforts. The NAPC study revealed a robust illustration of indigenous social capital in the northern communities where people were actively engaged in various volunteer activities and providing care or support through informal social networks (79.4% sharing traditional foods, 66.4% counselling and visiting) (Beatty, Berdahl, Poelzer, et al. 2013). Other related issues raised during the course of follow-up community meetings, included the need for targeted research that addresses family violence, education, culture and language loss, environmental concerns with land and water, pressure on the traditional resource industries and northern unity and collaboration.

Relevant research can also serve to raise flags that better informs political leaders and policy makers to better accommodate the continuing importance of the traditional resource harvesting industries (commercial trapping and fishing) to the northern Aboriginal Peoples and their families. Furthermore, it can broaden their perspectives to better appreciate the fact that these local resource industries by their very nature can be very effective monitoring

vehicles to check and balance any potentially harmful excesses of the bigger industrial mining, forestry and hydro developments.

A better understanding of the region's Aboriginal political culture is good for the political system as a whole. It can inform political leaders, governments, and industry to make more informed decisions. It is clear from the NAPC study that northern Aboriginal Peoples want to be more engaged in the decisions affecting their lives and communities. The advisory-type glass ceilings that have been the standard for engagement in the north for many years is no longer sufficient and people are less willing to be tolerant of engaging in advisory committees that do not show tangible benefits. Alienation of a significant group in a potential area of development is usually a recipe for problems. This message was evident in the follow up meetings with northern communities after the NAPC survey was done. One of the common issues identified by community members included the need to appropriately address the environmental impacts by resource developers. Another concern was for the need to develop programs to educate and occupy youth in both contemporary and traditional skills so they become productive parents and citizens.

It was also evident from the follow-up community meetings that maximum utilization and application of research findings and reports should go beyond journals and academic scholarship. People wanted to know how they could use the research. They appreciated user-friendly reports as far as using the data to better inform community proposals, strategies and program planning. For example, in the area of knowledge transference, one example that was identified was to expand the role of elders in all areas to ensure that their traditional knowledge, gained from years of experience, was preserved and transferred to future generations. The protection and sustainability of the Aboriginal Cree, Dene and Michif languages of the north was also raised repeatedly.

These are a few of the areas that Indigenous and other northern scholars can best provide relevant support through research, writing and other policy building initiatives. Research was repeatedly identified as a potentially useful tool for community empowerment. Research should be developed in partnership with the communities and used strategically to develop tools that benefit Aboriginal communities and the north. For example, the need for public awareness and education around the importance of voting in general elections, especially for the Aboriginal youth, was confirmed in both the NAPC survey and focus groups. It was also clear that a distinctive Aboriginal youth strategy was needed to address the lack of political knowledge and to promote engagement. Political parties were also mentioned as playing key roles towards educating the communities about their political platforms and policies regarding the north and the Aboriginal communities.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the northern communities have a fast growing population and are becoming a strong political force in the political and economic development of northern Saskatchewan with their majority Aboriginal population. The NAPC study suggests strong evidence of a robust Indigenous social capital and a sharing political culture in the communities and in the region. Modern life is still embedded in informal social and kinship networks that continue to influence community engagement, even with the youth, who are generally not as engaged. The youth focus groups in the NAPC study suggested that youth would be more engaged if there were more accessible opportunities for them.

Northern Aboriginal Peoples consider the north their homeland and their view of the future is for future generations. They desire accessible opportunities to be strategically developed in their communities, especially for the youth. Relevant education and training was a common theme. Political engagement was another with participants wanting more public education about voting processes and the various positions of the political parties towards northern Aboriginal Peoples and their Indigenous rights. The follow-up community forums also raised the issues of relevant northern Aboriginal research to benefit their communities. There is clearly a need for more strategic research that can benefit and better engage northern communities, not to mention helping inform the political actors towards improved strategic planning and programs for the north. Helping build northern Indigenous scholarship is important. These and other efforts to sustain and protect northern traditional culture and sustainable development in the north is needed and will help support the promotion and protection of the northern Indigenous culture.

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