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Explaining Aboriginal Turnout in Federal Elections: Evidence from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba

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Introduction

Widespread and inclusive political participation is a central value for liberal democrats (Dahl 1989). Accordingly, the recent slide—some would say collapse—in voter turnout in Canadian national elections has occasioned much commentary (see, for example, Howe 2004; Blais et al. 2004). Against this backdrop is set the case of turnout among Aboriginal peoples, a group commonly thought to participate at much lower levels than the general electorate (Ladner and McCrossan 2007). For this group, low turnout is an enduring rather than a recent phenomenon. Even so, unlike the case of the broader Canadian electorate, turnout rates among Aboriginal Canadians have rarely been the focus of commentary, much less the focus of sustained empirical investigation.

The present paper aims to fill this gap. The analysis draws on data from the Equality, Security, and Community (ESC) survey, which includes both a general population survey and a sample of self-identified Aboriginals living in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. These data permit us to shed some light on the nature and sources of Aboriginal turnout. They also allow us to address the question of contrasts between Canada's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations as regards the structure of political participation.

Our analysis is motivated by contrasting interpretations of Aboriginal political participation inspired by, on the one hand, the mainstream of research in political behaviour and, on the other hand, the wider literature on Aboriginal politics. The political behaviour interpretation assumes that Aboriginal peoples are, to put it simply, just like other Canadians, at least with regard to the determinants of their political participation. What differs is the level at which Aboriginal peoples are endowed with the various resources (e.g., socio-economic status) that promote voter turnout. The logical consequence of this view is, of course, that if Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals enjoyed equal endowments of "political resources," then Aboriginals would vote at the same rate as other Canadians. The Aboriginal politics interpretation, in contrast, directs our attention to factors and circumstances uniquely affecting Aboriginal peoples that might account for their lower

level of electoral participation, including Aboriginals' diverse, often contentious relations with the Canadian state and the role of involvement in Aboriginal organizations. In this view, then, even if Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals shared a common level of political resources, there would remain a significant turnout gap between them.

Both interpretations find support in our results. The resources that are important to participation among non-Aboriginals are also important for Aboriginals, albeit somewhat less so. At the same time, the political behaviour interpretation leaves much unexplained: after taking account of abiding differences in the resource endowments of Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, a significant gap remains. In this regard, the Aboriginal politics interpretation is instructive. For one thing, the differentiated experiences of Aboriginal peoples (as indexed by language group and band membership) would seem to define varying orientations to political participation. Likewise, involvement in Aboriginal organizations has an important effect on turnout—and, contrary to certain arguments in the literature, in a positive (that is, turnout-inducing) direction. Finally, at least for younger Aboriginals, attitudes and perceptions concerning Aboriginal relations with the Canadian state also appear to be important political mobilizers.

Explaining Aboriginal Participation

The political behaviour literature on electoral participation is extensive, and a host of variables have been found to be important predictors of turnout. As suggested above, at the heart of many of these studies is a view of political participation that is strongly based in the individual-level resources at citizens' disposal (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Standard models of turnout tend to emphasize three sets of factors: socio-economic resources such as education and income (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995); social networks developed through civic involvements and religious attendance (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000); and psychological engagement such as political interest and knowledge (Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). The links between these factors and political participation are multiple and, for the most part, complementary. Critical intervening variables include civic skills (especially cognitive ones), social and political trust, and political recruitment opportunities. At a more general level, scholars of turnout (particularly in Canada) have also emphasized the special significance of age-related differences in turnout—both as a feature of the life cycle and as a reflection of generational changes—and the role of election-specific contextual factors, especially electoral competitiveness (Johnston, Matthews, and Bittner 2007).

Scholars focused on Aboriginal participation in Canadian elections have found that factors cited in the general literature on turnout are also significant variables in their work. For example, a number of studies cite socio-economic status as an

important factor in explaining the level of Aboriginal turnout (Silver, Keeper, and MacKenzie 2006, 109–11). Likewise, demographic factors such as age, location, and social mobility (specifically, the tendency of Aboriginals to move around more than non-Aboriginals) have been identified as important factors affecting the rate of Aboriginal turnout.[1] Along the same lines, factors such as the political opportunity structure (e.g., the electoral system, the party system, and the like) have also been found to shape the level of Aboriginal turnout (Silver, Keeper, and MacKenzie 2006, 111–12; Ladner 2003, 21–26).

Along with these general factors, scholars of Aboriginal turnout have noted important variation across Aboriginal communities. For example, in a study of Aboriginal voting in the Maritimes, Bedford and Pobihushchy (1995) found substantial variation in turnout among Status Indians in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island in both federal and provincial elections. Guérin (2003, 10–15) has similarly pointed to significant variation across provinces, and noted that the geographic dispersion of Northern communities and the concentration of off-reserve Aboriginals in part explain variations across communities.

While empirical studies of Aboriginal turnout have been limited, a rich literature on Aboriginal politics in Canada does point to specific factors that may affect Aboriginal electoral participation. This literature tends to fall into one of two theoretical positions regarding Aboriginal engagement (or non-engagement, as the case may be) with Canadian political institutions.

The first position, what we will term "the nationalism thesis," argues that Aboriginal peoples constitute distinctive nations that are in a "nation-to-nation" relationship with the Canadian state (Silver, Keeper, and MacKenzie 2006, 23). From this perspective, Aboriginal governments and organizations are the legitimate voice of Aboriginal nations and members of Aboriginal nations should vet their politics through Aboriginal institutions (Schouls 1996).[2] For scholars such as Cairns, the popularity of the nationalism thesis among Aboriginal peoples explains low levels of Aboriginal turnout. Specifically, the existence of Aboriginal institutions (that is, Aboriginal governments and organizations) that are accorded the authority to speak on behalf of Aboriginal nations encourages disengagement from Pan-Canadian democratic institutions (Cairns 2005, 23–26). Cairns (2003, 6) concludes, "[t]he logical consequence of these rival [that is, Aboriginal] systems of representation is that elections have diminished significance, which reduces the incentives to vote." From this view, the existence of competing systems of representation and the issue of voice are two important Aboriginal-specific factors that help to explain Aboriginal turnout.

The second position, what we will term "the post-colonial thesis," argues that the root cause of Aboriginal subordination and oppression is the Canadian state itself. As Turpel (1992, 580) explains, Aboriginal peoples "find themselves caught in the confines of a subsuming and frequently hostile state political apparatus imposed by an immigrant or settler society." Moreover, Alfred (1995, 7) contends that "Native peoples view non-Native institutions as transitory and superfluous

features of their political existence," going on to conclude that "[t]he structures which have been created to colonize Native nations do not represent an acceptable framework for co-existence between the indigenous and newcomer societies." For Alfred, the state's institutions are instruments of colonization that facilitate Aboriginal subordination and oppression in Canada. As a consequence, adherents of the post-colonial thesis advance that Aboriginal peoples should disengage from the state's institutions and engage in a politics of resistance by actively challenging these institutions. More often than not, young people and "neo-traditionalists" are identified as the supporters of this view of the state and this strategy of resistance—that is, as adherents of the post-colonial thesis.

The implication for electoral participation is that this view of the subordination and oppression of Aboriginal peoples fosters hostility towards Canadian institutions (at the federal, provincial, and band levels), and promotes alternative forms of political action outside the realm of traditional politics, especially among young people.[3] Alfred, Pitawanakwat, and Price (2007, 15), for instance, put forward in their work on Aboriginal youth participation that "Indigenous youth are becoming increasingly alienated from institutions and the state as the locus of their identity." They go on to conclude that some "Indigenous youth favour political participation in non-conventional and indirect ways." For these scholars, the post-colonial view of the state and its strategy of disengagement and resistance explain why certain segments of the Aboriginal population decide not to vote.

Data and Methods

The data used for this study are drawn from two components of the ESC study.[4] In 2000–2001, the ESC study interviewed a nationally representative sample of Canadians (n=5,152) with regard to their well-being, participation in civil society, and attitudes toward the state and each other. In 2004, an additional subsample of Aboriginal respondents was collected in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (n=608). The Aboriginal sample was interviewed using a nearly identical survey instrument, with additional information specific to the Aboriginal experience in Canada gathered as well.[5] By utilizing these two data sets we can conduct an analysis of Aboriginal turnout that is sensitive to what is particular about Aboriginal circumstances, and also make instructive comparisons with the broader Canadian population.

While it would be ideal to have a nationally representative sample of Aboriginals, a focus on Aboriginals living on the Prairies is instructive for several reasons. Outside of the North, Manitoba and Saskatchewan have the highest proportion of Aboriginals (14%) and Alberta has the second highest proportion (5%). Furthermore, unlike much previous research, our sample includes Aboriginals living both on-reserve and off-reserve. Most previous research into the voting behaviour of Aboriginal peoples has been based solely on samples of Status Indians on reserves. In our sample, by contrast, approximately 29% are living off-reserve.[6]

It is also important to note that the ESC Aboriginal sample mimics in significant ways the actual population of the Prairie provinces, especially with respect to the key socio-economic variables in our analysis. **Table 1.1** (page 8) provides a comparison of the ESC Aboriginal sample with the 2006 census for each province in our sample and for the Canadian population. In terms of both educational attainment and income, our sample mirrors the census estimates very closely. In other words, while not strictly representative, our sample does approximate the Aboriginal population with respect to key characteristics.

Where our sample differs significantly is with respect to the communities represented. Most importantly, our sample overrepresents those individuals who self-identified as "North-American Indians" in each province and underrepresents those who identified as "Métis." Also, most of our sample (about 85%) report membership in one of just eight different bands. It is also important to note that a substantial proportion in each province self-categorized as "Other." The ESC survey instrument allowed respondents to self-identify as "Other Aboriginal Identity (e.g., First Nations, Cree, Ojibway, Dene, Blackfoot, etc.)."

The ESC also has a relatively higher proportion claiming that they are either subject to a treaty or registered with the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development; indeed, most of our sample reported this status. Unlike the census, however, we are not able to distinguish between these two categories, suggesting that we may have overestimated the extent of the difference between our sample and the census in this regard. Finally, we also observe a difference in **Table 1.1** between the percentage of our sample that speaks an Aboriginal language at home compared to the general population. Our sample overrepresents this segment of the population to varying degrees depending on the province.

To summarize, while differences between our sample and the broader Aboriginal population prevent us from deriving firm conclusions about Aboriginal turnout, in general, these data shed light on the determinants of turnout among a broad range of Aboriginal peoples. Furthermore, given our intent to contrast traditional, resource-based models with Aboriginal-specific explanations, these data are, arguably, perfectly suitable. Firstly, the similarity between our sample and the Aboriginal population in terms of the distribution of critical socio-economic resources (education and income) permits us to assess the general impact of these factors with some confidence. Secondly, inasmuch as the Aboriginal politics literature has focused on territorially based First Nations communities whose members strongly identify as Aboriginal, the overrepresentation of First Nations communities and of those who speak Aboriginal languages actually gives us significant leverage to examine the implications of the nationalism and post-colonial theses.

Electoral Participation Among Aboriginals

In **Table 1.2** (page 9), we provide reported turnout for the previous election from the 2000 ESC general sample and for Aboriginals living in the Prairies based on

Table 1.1: Selected Demographic Variables, Provincial and National Estimates, Census* and ESC Parameters

Aboriginal Identity	Alberta		Diff.	Saskatchewan		Diff.	Manitoba		Diff.	Canada		Diff.
	Census	ESC		Census	ESC		Census	ESC		Census	ESC***	
North American Indian	52%	65%	13%	64%	51%	-13%	57%	51%	-6%	60%	55%	-4%
Métis	45%	4%	-41%	34%	12%	-22%	41%	12%	-29%	33%	10%	-24%
Inuit	1%	0%	-1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	-4%
Other	2%	30%	28%	2%	37%	35%	1%	37%	36%	3%	35%	32%
Registered Indian status	49%	97%	48%	64%	93%	29%	58%	92%	34%	53%	94%	41%
Aboriginal language spoken at home	8%	31%	23%	16%	57%	41%	13%	21%	8%	12%	37%	25%
Education**												
Less than high school diploma	44%	43%	-1%	49%	48%	-2%	50%	50%	0%	44%	47%	3%
High school diploma	21%	18%	-3%	22%	24%	2%	21%	26%	6%	22%	23%	1%
Greater than high school diploma	34%	39%	4%	29%	28%	0%	29%	24%	-5%	35%	30%	-5%
Median income (000s)	18	24	6	14	20	6	15	21	5	17	22	5

*Data are from the Community Highlights database, Census 2006, available from Statistics Canada.

**As regards the census figures, note that this is expressed as a share of the Aboriginal identity population aged 15 and over.

***Note that these figures are for the Aboriginal subsample, that is, for Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba only.

Table 1.2: Reported Turnout in Federal Elections

		Turnout	N
National Average, 1997 (ESC) *		74%	5575
Prairies Average, 1997 (ESC)		74%	1273
Aboriginal Turnout (Prairies Only) **		51%	601
	Province		
	Alberta	39%	187
	Saskatchewan	54%	211
	Manitoba	54%	203
	Reserve Status		
	On-Reserve	49%	423
	Off-Reserve	51%	172
	Urban	44%	95
	Rural	58%	77
	Treaty/Registered Indian	49%	277
	Band Number		
	262 - Fort Alexander, Manitoba	56%	54
	269 - Peguis, Manitoba	56%	18
	276 - Cross Lake First Nation, Manitoba	64%	85
	353 - Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan	53%	75
	355 - Peter Ballanntyne Cree Nation, Saskatchewan	56%	96
	435 - Blood, Alberta	38%	138
	458 - Bigstone Cree Nation, Alberta	41%	27
	462 - Saddle Lake, Alberta	0%	1
	Home Language		
	English	45%	331
	Blackfoot	29%	49
	Cree	60%	174
	Ojibway	50%	12
	Other	60%	35

* Data from ESC General Sample, 2000 (weighted).

** Data from the ESC Aboriginal Subsample, 2004.

reported turnout in the 2004 ESC sample of Aboriginal communities. As expected, reported turnout is substantially higher among the general population than among the Aboriginal sample. Reported turnout among the Canadian population for the previous federal election in 1997 was 74%. Respondents in the Prairies mimicked this national average. In contrast, the reported turnout for Aboriginal respondents was over twenty percentage points lower in the 2004 ESC, with a reported turnout of 51%. The 2004 ESC asked about voting in the most recent federal election, which would have been in 2004.

Not surprisingly, reported turnout is higher than actual turnout. Elections Canada reports that official turnout was 61% in 2004, down only six percentage points from 1997. The difference between actual turnout and self-reported turnout is due to unreliability and social desirability effects in surveys, and also due to the fact that people who answer surveys are also more likely to vote. Yet, both self-reported voting and official turnout in the general population are higher than self-reported voting among Aboriginals in the ESC subsample. Note also that the difference between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals corresponds to previous reported turnout differences, which have pegged turnout among on-reserve Aboriginals at around 48% (Guérin 2003, 12). In other words, consistent with previous research, we find evidence of lower turnout among Aboriginal communities.

A closer look at distinctions among Aboriginal respondents provides a more nuanced view of distinctions in turnout. For example, past research has suggested that there is significant variation in turnout among Aboriginals living in different provinces. While there are only three provinces in our Aboriginal sample, the differences that emerge provide support for interprovincial differences in turnout: while Aboriginals in Saskatchewan and Manitoba report 54% turnout, only 39% of Aboriginals surveyed in Alberta said they voted in the last federal election. This is consistent with results for voting for on-reserve Aboriginals in provincial elections reported by Bedford, where First Nations respondents in Alberta were less likely to vote than those in either Manitoba or Saskatchewan (Bedford 2003, 16–20).[7]

Interestingly, we do not find any substantial distinction between Aboriginals on- and off-reserve in our study: 49% of on-reserve and 51% of off-reserve respondents reported voting in the ESC study. Similarly, persons in the "Treaty and Registered" category reported voting at similar levels as other Aboriginals (49%). However, when we look at the urban/rural distinction among off-reserve participants, we do find a significant difference between urban and rural Aboriginals ($p<.10$). Off-reserve Aboriginals living in rural areas reported voting at significantly higher levels (58%) than urban off-reserve Aboriginals (44%). This difference likely results from differences in resources between urban and rural Aboriginals, as Aboriginals living in urban areas tend to be particularly disadvantaged, especially in the Prairie provinces (Peters 2001, 138–44).

The ESC Aboriginal sample also allows a fine-grained analysis of turnout based on band number and home language. Clearly, different Aboriginal communities have different histories both in their internal politics and in their relationship with

the Canadian government. These differences may well affect the propensity to participate in federal politics in different Aboriginal communities.

For the breakdown by band number, we are obviously dealing with smaller numbers in each category, so the turnout rates should be taken with some caution. That said, the Blood and Bigstone Cree Nation bands appear to report voting at significantly lower levels (38% and 41%, respectively) than other bands in the sample. Both of these bands are found in Alberta, so these low turnout numbers may reflect the long-standing non-competitiveness of federal elections in Alberta. Alternatively, the numbers may reflect the fact that Aboriginal issues may have been less salient in these elections, given the smaller proportion of the population that is Aboriginal in Alberta.[8]

Interesting differences also emerge across reported home language. The three largest language groups in the sample are English, Blackfoot, and Cree. The Aboriginal politics literature leads us to expect that those who speak their ancestral language may participate less than those who have adopted (or have been forced to adopt) English as their everyday language. Yet, our findings suggest a more complicated pattern. As it happens, those who speak Cree at home are substantially more likely to vote (60%) than both Blackfoot speakers (29%) and, surprisingly, English speakers (45%). This is a noteworthy distinction requiring further analysis.

In brief, this initial examination of turnout provides insight into the similarities and differences that emerge between Aboriginal communities and the general population. Consistent with previous research, we find that turnout is lower across Aboriginal communities, both on- and off-reserve. However, among Aboriginal communities, interesting distinctions do emerge. Those living in rural areas are more likely to vote than Aboriginals in urban areas. In addition, certain bands, as well as those who speak Cree at home, appear to be more likely to vote than other Aboriginals.

Explaining Low Turnout

How do we explain lower levels of turnout among Aboriginal communities? Is it the result of a lack of resources in Aboriginal communities, or is there something unique about the experiences of Aboriginal peoples that makes them more likely to turn away from federal politics? In this section, we begin by exploring issues of access that are based in standard resource-based voting models. We then turn to alternative (and perhaps complementary) models that are provided by the Aboriginal politics literature.

Table 1.3 (page 12) presents logistic regression models for three sets of respondents: the general population (column 1), a subset of the general population living on the Prairies (column 2), and the Aboriginal sample (column 3). Each model includes important background variables, including age, urban/rural, gender, and marital status. In addition, three sets of resources are included: socio-economic

Table 1.3: Turnout Based on Standard Predictors

	General Population •			Prairies Only •			Aboriginal Sample ^		
	OR	**(s.e)**	**sign.**	**OR**	**(s.e)**	**sign.**	**OR**	**(s.e)**	**sign.**
Demographics									
Youth	0.11	(.02)	***	0.06	(.02)	***	0.12	(.04)	***
Senior	0.44	(.06)	***	0.26	(.07)	***	0.35	(.10)	***
Urban	1.05	(.11)		1.02	(.23)		0.65	(.18)	a
Female	1.30	(.14)	**	1.91	(.44))	**	1.13	(.24)	
Married or common law	0.72	(.08)	***	0.96	(.21)		0.97	(.21)	
British Columbia	0.95	(.15)							
Prairies	1.22	(.16)	a						
Quebec	2.05	(.30)	***						
East	1.43	(.14)	**						
Socio-economic resources									
Completed high school	1.04	(.16)		1.38	(.40)		1.28	(.34)	
Some post-secondary	1.46	(.22)	**	1.71	(.48)	*	1.74	(.43)	**
Low income	0.69	(.09)	***	0.78	(.20)		0.73	(.17)	
Employed	1.09	(.14)	**	1.11	(.26)		1.44	(.33)	*
Network resources									
Involved in political organization	1.64	(.25)	***	1.83	(.63)	*	1.36	(.47)	
Involved in charitable organization	1.34	(.14)	**	1.13	(.25)		1.42	(.33)	a
Religious attendance	1.20	(.06)	***	1.27	(.13)	**	0.88	(.09)	
Engagement in system									
News consumption	1.10	(.03)	***	1.15	(.07)	**	1.00	(.05)	
Trust in federal government	1.46	(.18)	***	2.10	(.49)	***	1.60	(.35)	**
Pseudo R-squared	0.17			0.25			0.12		
N	4480			1062			467		

*** p < .01; ** p < .0; * p < .10; [a] p < .15

OR = odds ratio, (s.e) = standard error, sign. = significance

• Data from the ESC General Sample, 2000 (weighted).

^ Data from the ESC Aboriginal Subsample, 2004.

resources, network resources, and engagement variables. The models are identical with the exception of the inclusion of regional controls in column 1 to control for variation in voting patterns across Canada.

In column 1, the results largely conform to the expectations in the voting behaviour literature. We see a clear curvilinear effect for age, with young people and, to a lesser extent, older Canadians, voting at lower levels than the middle-aged. We find higher voting rates in Quebec and on the East Coast than in Ontario or the West, with the odds of voting in the Prairies compared to Ontario approaching statistical significance at conventional levels. In terms of resources, we find a strong positive effect for post-secondary education and a negative effect for low-income status (defined as an annual personal income below $20,000). Being involved in political and social organizations also has a positive effect on the odds of voting, as does regular religious attendance. Finally, those who read or watch the news more often and who trust the federal government are more likely to vote. These results are largely replicated in the "Prairies only" model.

The real interest, of course, is in the results of the model in the Aboriginal sample. We have suggested that standard predictors of turnout, which largely revolve around socio-economic, network, and psychological resources, may explain, in part, low turnout among Aboriginals. We find some support for this in **Table 1.3**. As expected, young Aboriginals are less likely to vote than those between thirty and fifty years old. Similarly, the odds of older Aboriginals voting are lower than those for their middle-aged counterparts. It is also important to note that the effect of living in urban areas, which we discussed in the previous section, largely disappears when other variables are controlled. This suggests that the urban effect noted in **Table 1.2** largely reflects differences in the age and resource composition of Aboriginals living in urban versus rural areas, rather than something distinctive about the urban (or rural) experience as such.

In terms of resources, similar to the general population models, we find a positive and significant effect for obtaining some post-secondary education. We also find a weak but significant effect for employment status, although no comparable effect for income. It is important to note, however, that 46% of the Aboriginal sample falls into the low-income category (below $20,000). Critically, the survey instrument does not distinguish income categories below $20,000 for some members of the Aboriginal subsample, which compromises our ability to estimate income effects with precision.[9] However, looking just at those respondents for whom fine-grained income reports were ascertained, the pattern is consistent with general population estimates: individuals earning less money are less likely to vote.

In terms of networks and psychological engagement, we find only limited support for the importance of these variables when controlling for socio-economic resources. Involvement in charitable organizations has a positive effect that approaches statistical significance, but neither involvement in a political organization nor religious attendance are significant. Similarly, we find no evidence that news consumption increases the odds of voting. On the other hand, Aborigi-

nals who report trusting the "federal government in Ottawa" have higher odds of voting than those who say they never or almost never trust the federal government in Ottawa. This is a notable finding. Indeed, in view of the fact that trust in the federal government may have unique significance for Aboriginal communities, whose treatment by the federal government has historically been oppressive and, in many instances, continues to be contentious, it is striking that trust effects among Aboriginals parallel the positive and significant effect of trust in the general population.

In sum, it appears that resources, especially socio-economic resources, are part of the explanation for low turnout among Aboriginal communities in Canada. This follows the political behaviour interpretation outlined in the introductory section of the paper. It is well known that Canada's Aboriginal communities are among the most disadvantaged in the country (see, for example, Pendakur and Pendakur 2008). The results here suggest that their collective disadvantage may translate into lower participation in politics. Yet, it is also important to note that the model performs less well than for the general population: pseudo R-squared is lower and, in general, fewer of the model's variables are statistically significant. This suggests that, while resources are part of the story, other factors may play an important role in explaining turnout among Aboriginal peoples.

This assessment is confirmed when we pool the Aboriginal sample with the general population sample of the ESC (not shown).[10] Running a simple model containing only a dummy variable for membership in the Aboriginal sample, we find, as expected, a negative and significant effect (odds ratio of .345). In other words, without controlling for any other variables, the odds of Aboriginals in our sample voting were about two-thirds less than the odds of non-Aboriginals voting. Adding in the three sets of control variables in **Table 1.3**, the dummy variable for Aboriginals remains negative and significant, but the odds of voting for Aboriginals rises to about half the odds of voting for non-Aboriginals. This confirms that our resource model is explaining part—but only part—of the tendency of Aboriginal voters to abstain. There is still a significant difference in the odds of voting between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals that requires exploration.

As we discussed in a previous section, the Aboriginal politics literature provides a rich and nuanced view of Aboriginal participation in federal politics in Canada. The nationalism and post-colonial theses, as we have styled them, both suggest that Aboriginal peoples exist in a unique relationship to the Canadian state, one that is more accurately characterized as a nation-to-nation relationship. Both theses also point out that the federal state has traditionally been a source of oppression for these communities, and that alternative venues of participation are often viewed as more legitimate. Drawing on these literatures, we suggest that, on top of differences in important resources, three additional sets of factors might explain low turnout levels among Aboriginals.

First, Aboriginal peoples in Canada have had varied experiences with the Canadian state, and these experiences can in part be captured by examining

Aboriginals in different circumstances. We might expect that Aboriginal peoples who are more integrated into the dominant societal framework may be more likely to vote in federal elections. Those living on reserves and who continue to speak their ancestral language in their everyday lives, in contrast, may be more likely to see their Aboriginal identity as a national or post-colonial one. However, in the previous section, an examination of the relationship between reserve status and home language provided little evidence in support of this argument: we found little difference in turnout rates between on-reserve and off-reserve Aboriginals. Furthermore, home language had a more nuanced relationship with turnout than expected, with Blackfoot speakers less likely to vote than Cree-speaking Aboriginals, and English-speaking Aboriginals found between these two extremes.

A second, related explanation that is implied by the Aboriginal politics literature is that disengagement in Canadian elections does not reflect apathy from politics, but rather reflects the fact that Aboriginals see community-specific—that is, Aboriginal—organizations as the appropriate sites for political mobilization. In the nationalism literature, such organizations include band governments, whereas the post-colonialist literature points to alternative venues (e.g., social movements and direct action). While we are not able to break down the type of organizational involvement of the respondents in our sample, both the nationalist and post-colonial theses suggest that one might expect Aboriginal peoples to participate in Aboriginal organizations as an alternative to federal politics.

Finally, a third explanation for low turnout focuses on attitudinal disengagement from Canadian politics. If Aboriginals do not identify with the Canadian state, we might expect them to be less inclined to participate in its electoral processes. Similarly, negative views of the Canadian state's relationship with Aboriginal communities may have an impact, as one may be less willing to be part of a process (federal elections) when one's relationship with the broader institution of which that process is a part (the federal government) has been contentious. Such attitudinal disengagement may take the form of replacing a Canadian national identity with an Aboriginal one, as suggested by the nationalism thesis. Or it may be reflected in disengagement from both Canadian and Aboriginal governance structures in favour of a more direct form of participation (as proposed by the post-colonial thesis). In any case, it is clear that a more detailed examination of Aboriginals' views of the Canadian state and its relationship with Aboriginal communities is necessary to understand Aboriginal electoral participation.

We are able to test each of these sets of hypotheses with the ESC Aboriginal sample, and the results of this analysis are presented in **Table 1.4**. In column 1, we present the differentiated experience hypothesis to examine if reserve status and language community assist in distinguishing voters from non-voters. In order to distinguish these effects from the provincial differences noted earlier, we have also included provincial control variables in the model for Alberta and Manitoba, leaving Saskatchewan as the reference category.

Table 1.4: Three Hypotheses for Explaining Aboriginal Turnout

		Differentiated Experience			Alternative Venue			Attitude toward State		
		OR	(s.e)	sign.	OR	(s.e)	sign.	OR	(s.e)	sign
Demographics										
	Youth	0.10	(.04)	***	0.11	(.04)	***	0.08	(.03)	***
	Senior	0.31	(.10)	***	0.29	(.09)	***	0.22	(.08)	***
	Urban	0.72	(.26)		0.65	(.23)		0.64	(.25)	
	Female	1.18	(.27)		1.21	(.28)		1.08	(.27)	
	Married or common law	0.96	(.22)		0.98	(.23)		0.95	(.24)	
	Alberta	0.84	(.28)		1.27	(.35)		0.81	(.30)	
	Manitoba	1.38	(.38)		2.15	(.58)		1.53	(.47)	
Socio-economic resources										
	Completed high school	1.35	(.37)		0.66	(.16)		1.52	(.45)	
	Some post-secondary	2.27	(.60)	***	1.22	(.30)	***	2.29	(.69)	***
	Low income	0.71	(.17)	a	1.12	(.41)	*	0.60	(.16)	**
	Employed	1.35	(.32)		1.22	(.31)		1.27	(.33)	
Network resources										
	Involved in political organization	1.06	(.38)		0.85	(.10)		1.22	(.50)	
	Involved in charitable organization	1.45	(.35)	a	1.05	(.06)		0.94	(.26)	
	Religious attendance	0.89	(.10)		1.63	(.38)		0.93	(.12)	
Engagement in system										
	News consumption	1.07	(.06)		0.83	(.28)		1.03	(.07)	
	Trust in federal government	1.56	(.36)	**	1.39	(.39)	**	1.40	(.37)	
Aboriginal hypotheses										
	On-reserve	0.87	(.26)		0.79	(.25)		0.80	(.26)	
	Home language - Blackfoot	0.44	(.21)	*	0.40	(.20)	*	0.36	(.20)	*
	Home language - Cree	2.82	(.87)	***	3.08	(.96)	***	2.98	(1.02)	***

		Differentiated Experience			Alternative Venue			Attitude toward State		
		OR	(s.e)	sign.	OR	(s.e)	sign.	OR	(s.e)	sign
	Participate in Aboriginal organization				1.71	(.43)	**	1.83	(.49)	**
	Aboriginal identity over Canadian							0.99	(.25)	
	Dissatisfaction scale							0.95	(.08)	
Pseudo R-squared		0.167			0.173			0.193		
N		464			453			410		

*** p < .01; ** p < .0; * p < .10; [a] p < .15

Source: ESC Aboriginal Sample, 2004.

Consistent with our previous discussion, we find no evidence of differences between the turnout rates of Aboriginals on-reserve and those living off-reserve. Interestingly, however, we do continue to find significant differences between language communities. Contrary to the expectation that English speakers would be more integrated into the Canadian political system, we continue to find significant differences between Blackfoot-, English-, and Cree-speaking Aboriginals, with Blackfoot being significantly less likely to vote than those speaking English at home, and Cree being significantly more likely to vote than English speakers. This finding holds despite the inclusion of controls for province of residence (with Blackfoot being concentrated in Alberta in our sample), and it also holds despite controls for demographic and socio-economic differences that may exist between these groups.

Why might this be? We imagine that these differences reflect the experiences that various groups have had with the federal government, but clearly more in-depth investigation into the situation and circumstances of these three groups is necessary. However, the presence of these differences and their resilience to the inclusion of a rigorous set of control variables suggests that these differences are real. Policy-makers interested in promoting turnout among Aboriginal communities may be advised to target their efforts at individual communities, and to examine how their specific circumstances and histories may impact their involvement in federal politics.[11]

However, low turnout would not be as disconcerting if there was evidence that Aboriginal voices are being heard in alternative venues that deliver Aboriginal concerns to federal politicians at the elite level (nationalism thesis) or on the streets (post-colonial thesis). In the second model in **Table 1.4**, we test the hypothesis that Aboriginal peoples are turning away from federal politics and participating in organizations associated with their Aboriginal identity. This

expectation, it should be noted, is in direct contrast to the expectation that would emerge in classic voting behaviour studies, which view involvement as begetting more involvement.

In **Table 1.4**, we find no evidence that involvement in Aboriginal organizations reflects a turning away from federal politics in Canada. In fact, consistent with a resource model of political participation, we find that those who report involvement in an organization connected with their Aboriginal identity have 1.7 times the odds of voting than those who are not involved in such organizations. In other words, we find no evidence that involvement in Aboriginal-based organizations competes with traditional forms of political participation. On the contrary, such organizational involvement seems to foster engagement in federal elections. This is a particularly important finding because in the ESC Aboriginal sample about 35% of respondents reported being involved in an Aboriginal organization. Despite fears among some scholars that such venues compete with federal representative institutions, this suggests that Aboriginal organizations are an important source of mobilization among First Nations communities in federal elections.

Future research should try to tease out more directly the nature of Aboriginal involvement in such organizations. Are these "mainstream" organizations that largely parallel the typical non-Aboriginal organization, or do they reflect more "radical" politics, and so might be expected to promote disengagement from all forms of traditional political participation? It is our view that to more fully test the post-colonial thesis, it would be important to isolate participants in more radical organizations, which we are not able to do with our data. The post-colonial thesis aside, it is important to note that the finding that Aboriginal organizational involvement in general promotes voting does directly challenge the nationalism thesis.

In the final model, we add in an additional set of Aboriginal-specific variables to address the attitudinal hypothesis. Two variables are included. Respondents were asked the following question: "Some Aboriginal people say they are an Aboriginal person first and a Canadian second, while others say they are a Canadian first and an Aboriginal person second. How would you describe yourself?" We have included a dummy variable for those who said they considered themselves Aboriginal first. The second variable is an additive scale of responses to two questions that ask about the level of satisfaction (on a four-point scale) with the federal government's efforts to resolve long-standing (1) Aboriginal attempts to negotiate self-government and (2) Aboriginal land claims. Higher scores on the additive scale indicate greater dissatisfaction. Together, these two variables are an empirical test of claims in both the nationalism and post-colonial literature that suggest that Aboriginals see themselves as separate nations with a contentious relationship with the federal government. Those who identify more strongly with their Aboriginal identity and who are dissatisfied with the federal government's efforts to address Aboriginal claims may be particularly likely to turn away from federal politics.

Despite the prominence of this explanation, we find no evidence that either of these variables affect turnout among Aboriginals on the Prairies.[12] It should also be noted that the inclusion of these variables weakens the effect of trust in the federal government, which loses statistical significance in this model. This is largely driven by the correlation (.39) between trust in the federal government and the dissatisfaction scale. This is consistent with our suggestion that while trust in government impacts both the propensity to vote of the general population and of Aboriginal peoples, trust in the federal government among the latter may well be tied to the colonial relationship in which treaty and land claims play an important role.

All this is not to say that attitudes toward the federal government play no role in involvement in federal elections. Our measures may simply lack the validity to capture the relationship. In addition, the adoption of certain attitudinal dispositions may also be correlated with the demographic and resource variables in the model.

It may also be the case, following the post-colonial thesis, that we should expect to see attitudes toward federal institutions playing a greater role among certain groups of Aboriginals—particularly the younger generation (see discussion above). Alfred and colleagues, for instance, have argued that the trend toward Aboriginal youth disengagement reflects a shift to alternative forms of political participation that reflect more direct action (Alfred, Pitawanakwat, and Price 2007). Such involvement rests on a critique of both the Canadian state and mainstream Aboriginal organizations that is highly critical of traditional politics in both venues. As such, we might expect that Aboriginal identity and dissatisfaction may play a more important role for youth who have grown up surrounded by post-colonial discourses.

To examine this hypothesis, we ran the full model for Aboriginal persons thirty years and younger only, with results presented in **Table 1.5** (community variables have been excluded due to small sample sizes). We find that attitudes toward the state are important among young people, but not in the manner the post-colonial thesis would suggest. Strikingly, we find evidence that dissatisfaction with the federal government's attempts to resolve long-standing land claims and treaties actually mobilizes the youth vote ($p<.10$). Those who express greater dissatisfaction are more likely to report voting in the last federal election. In addition, trust in the federal government in Ottawa is also significant and would seem to have a particularly large effect among young people: the odds of voting among Aboriginal youth who reported some trust in the federal government to "do what is right" are over 3.5 times greater than the odds of voting among Aboriginal youth who reported almost never or never trusting the federal government.

These findings suggest that among young Aboriginals, both dissatisfaction with negotiations and trust in the federal government promote involvement in the electoral process. This finding has implications for the post-colonial thesis, which seems to imply that distrust of the federal government and dissatisfaction with its negotiations with First Nations communities should lead people to alternative forms of participation. We find that while distrust in the federal government does

Table 1.5: Youth Model of Turnout

	OR	(s.e)	sign.
Demographics			
Urban	1.09	(.72)	
Female	0.94	(.52)	
Married or common law	0.19	(.12)	**
Alberta	0.21	(.16)	**
Manitoba	0.37	(.24)	a
Socio-economic resources			
Completed high school	5.09	(3.29)	**
Some post-secondary	13.02	(9.94)	**
Low income	0.50	(.28)	
Employed	1.97	(1.13)	
Network resources			
Involved in political organization	3.53	(2.83)	a
Involved in charitable organization	2.29	(1.51)	
Religious attendance	0.82	(.23)	
Engagement in system			
News consumption	0.91	(.14)	
Trust in federal government	3.61	(2.33)	**
Aboriginal hypotheses			
Participate in Aboriginal organization	0.46	(.28)	
Aboriginal identity over Canadian	2.20	(1.30)	
Dissatisfaction scale	1.39	(.27)	
Pseudo R-squared	0.277		
N	123		

*** p < .01; ** p < .0; * p < .10; [a] p < .15

Source: ESC Aboriginal Sample, 2004. Model limited to those who reported being 30 years old or younger.

lead to lower odds of voting, dissatisfaction with the federal government's negotiations with First Nations communities actually mobilizes participation in the very traditional form of voting in federal elections.

Discussion and Conclusions

We set out in this paper to examine the extent to which traditional resource models of turnout explain low levels of electoral participation among First Nations communities in Canada. Along with important age dynamics, we found evidence that resources—especially socio-economic resources like education—play

an important role in explaining who does and does not vote among Aboriginal Canadians.

In addition to the importance of resources, the research we present also points to the importance of Aboriginal-specific variables. A strict application of a resource model to Aboriginal communities ignores the situation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Their unique relationships with the state, and the history of oppression that colours these relationships, cannot be overlooked. Our research suggests that there are important differences across Aboriginal communities in their willingness to vote. We find little evidence of differences between on-reserve and off-reserve Aboriginals, but significant differences across bands and language groups. Furthermore, we find evidence that involvement in Aboriginal organizations is positively associated with turnout. Finally, among young Aboriginals, we also find that attitudes toward the federal government and its negotiations with First Nations communities can motivate them to express themselves at the ballot box.

The policy implications of this research are at least threefold. First and foremost, the disadvantaged position of Aboriginal communities in terms of socio-economic resources is an important source of low turnout among Aboriginal peoples. If Aboriginal voices are valued in the electoral process, then ensuring that these communities have adequate resources to participate in the process is essential. The disproportionate levels of poverty and low education in these communities compared to the general population almost ensure their underrepresentation at the ballot box.

Secondly, our research also points to the importance of promoting participation in Aboriginal organizations. Such organizations should not be viewed as "rival systems of representation" that reduce incentives to participate in Canadian federal institutions (Cairns 2003, 6). Rather, a healthy and vibrant Aboriginal civil society facilitates voice both within these communities and in federal elections.

And finally, our findings among young Aboriginals imply that young people are willing to participate in the process to address their concerns about Aboriginal issues, but that this involvement is fostered by a trust in the federal government. If participation in federal institutions is desired, then it is important that negotiations with First Nations communities to resolve long-standing disputes proceed in good faith. Young Aboriginals who do not trust the federal government to do what is right are much more likely to tune out of federal politics.

Endnotes

1 For a discussion about location, see Ladner and McCrossan (2007, 21). For a discussion about age and mobility, see Silver et al. (2006, 109–11).

2 Schouls (1996, 745) advances that a "significant obstacle to Aboriginal participation within Parliament is the proclivity of many Aboriginal peoples to identify their citizenship exclusively with their Aboriginal nation of origin. The position of Aboriginal peoples so inclined is to view the institutions of Canada's Parliament as ideologically incommensurable with the norms and practices that guide their own political institutions."

3 Band-level governments are included here because segments of the Aboriginal population that adhere to the post-colonial thesis (for example, certain parts of the Warrior and Aboriginal youth movements) advance that these governments are also instruments of colonization and need to be resisted. See Alfred and Lowe (2005).

4 Data from the first wave of the Equality, Security, and Community (ESC) survey were provided by the Institute for Social Research, York University. The ESC project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), grant number 412-97-0003, and Heritage Canada, Project Director Dr. Jonathan R. Kesselman, Public Policy Program, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia. The survey component of the ESC study was completed under the direction of Dr. Richard Johnston, University of British Columbia. Neither the Institute for Social Research, SSHRC, Heritage Canada, nor the ESC research team are responsible for the analyses and interpretations presented here.

5 The various components of the ESC survey were collected by the Institute for Social Research <http://www.isr.yorku.ca>.

6 Current estimates actually place the Aboriginal population living off-reserve at approximately 50%. See Guérin (2003, 13).

7 Note that this is counter to work on turnout among Status Indians for federal elections, which suggests Manitoban Aboriginals are among the least likely to vote in Canada. See Guérin (2003, 12).

8 See Guérin (2003, 13). He notes that the salience of Aboriginal issues can help explain higher levels of turnout in some areas.

9 Income was calculated based on two questions. Those who did not report their exact income were asked to report the range of their personal annual income in a second question. For these respondents, the lowest range was $0–$20,000.

10 Because the Aboriginal sample is not representative, pooling the data means we are not able to use population weights. As such, these models should not be used for population estimates. However, they do allow us to assess the relationship between being Aboriginal and voting.

11 See, for example, Ladner and McCrossan's (2007, 38–41) recommendations for increasing Aboriginal participation in elections. For a critique of these recommendations, see Alfred et al. (2007, 14–15).

12 It should be noted that alternative variables were examined, including pride in being Canadian and rating scales of the federal government. None of these alternative measures provided significant findings (results not shown).

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