

**'A Very Hostile System in Which to Live':
Aboriginal Electoral
Participation in
Winnipeg's Inner City**

By Jim Silver, Cyril Keeper and Michael MacKenzie

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About the authors:

Jim Silver is Professor of Politics at the University of Winnipeg, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba.

Cyril Keeper lives in Winnipeg's inner city Spence neighbourhood, and is a former

Winnipeg City Councillor and Member of Parliament for the area.

Michael Mackenzie is a recent graduate of the University of Winnipeg Department of Politics, and is currently a graduate student at McGill University.

Table of Contents

iii	Executive Summary
1	Preface
2	Part One: Aboriginal Population by Electoral District in Manitoba and Winnipeg
9	Part Two: Why Should Aboriginal People Vote in Mainstream Elections?
11	Part Three: Aboriginal People and the Vote: The Literature
19	Part Four: The Results of Our Interviews
35	Conclusion
37	References

ABORIGINAL ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN WINNIPEG'S INNER CITY

Executive Summary

Aboriginal people are, on average, less likely than non-Aboriginal people to vote in mainstream—i.e. federal, provincial and municipal—elections, although voter turnout on rural reserves is often high. In this paper we try to determine whether Aboriginal people in Winnipeg's inner city vote in mainstream elections, and if not, why not.

We argue that this is an important question because, particularly in cities like Winnipeg, the Aboriginal population is large and is growing. We provide evidence to show that Aboriginal people constitute a very significant proportion of the population in particular federal, provincial and City of Winnipeg electoral districts, and thus have potential electoral strength.

A review of the relatively small body of existing literature about Aboriginal people and their voting practices suggests to us that there are four broad categories of explanations for the relatively low voter turnout among Aboriginal people in mainstream elections. All four are rooted in Aboriginal peoples' historical experience of deliberate exclusion from the mainstream of Canadian society as the consequence of the process of colonization. One explanation is the 'nationalist' explanation: some Aboriginal people choose not to vote because they see themselves as part of distinctive nations, and seek nation-to-nation relations with Canada, and to vote in Canada would undermine the logic of their position, although they may still vote in band elections. Second, their historical and current experience is such that many Aboriginal people, including many urban Aboriginal people, feel a

strong sense of social exclusion—they feel outside of, and not a part of or even welcome in, the dominant culture and institutions of Canadian society. Many Aboriginal people do not vote in mainstream elections for this reason. Third, the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of Aboriginal people are, on average, consistent with those of non-voters generally. And fourth, there is evidence that the concepts of 'political opportunity' and 'political effort' are important in explaining the relatively low levels of Aboriginal political participation—political parties are not generally open to Aboriginal peoples' involvement, the literature argues, and parties and politicians do not make much effort to involve Aboriginal people. These factors also appear to contribute to relatively low Aboriginal rates of voting in mainstream elections.

We interviewed Aboriginal people in Winnipeg, and particularly in Winnipeg's inner city, to determine whether they vote in mainstream elections, and if not why not. A total of 40 Aboriginal people were interviewed by two Aboriginal interviewers, from November 2003 to April 2004. Although not a random sample, those interviewed include roughly equal numbers of women and men, and a cross-section of ages, educational backgrounds and Aboriginal identities.

What we found in our interviews is not completely consistent with the literature. The nationalist explanation, for example, appears not to be a factor in explaining urban Aboriginal non-voting in mainstream elections, and in fact some respondents argued the opposite case: that in order to protect their Aboriginal rights,

urban Aboriginal people ought to vote in mainstream elections.

The social exclusion explanation, by contrast, was confirmed by our interviews. A majority of our respondents said that the reason so many Aboriginal people do not vote is that they feel outside of the system, they feel excluded or marginalized from the system, and from the mainstream electoral system in particular, and therefore do not vote in that system.

The observation that voting is correlated with age and level of formal education—the third of the four broad explanatory streams that we identified in the literature—was also borne out in our study. For example, a large majority of the interviewees who told us that they always vote were 35 years of age or older and had at least some post-secondary education.

We found that many more urban Aboriginal people would vote if political parties and candidates for office were to make an effort to reach out to them. This was the fourth broad explanatory theme that we identified in the literature, and it too was borne out in our interviews. A majority of respondents told us that politicians and parties need to connect with Aboriginal people, and need to come into Aboriginal neighbourhoods and meet and talk with Aboriginal people in a face-to-face manner. Aboriginal people feel socially excluded in urban centres, they feel marginalized from mainstream non-Aboriginal institutions, and because of their history of colonization, many are reluctant to become involved. But our respondents told us that if urban Aboriginal people

were to be approached by politicians and political parties, and treated with respect, if they were to be treated as equals, they would become involved. Yet far from actively inviting Aboriginal people into the political process in this way, most politicians and political parties, our respondents repeatedly told us, do not even come into Aboriginal neighbourhoods to meet with Aboriginal people.

Finally, the results of our interviews lead us to think that the voting practices of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg could soon change. There is a strong, positive correlation among our interview respondents between level of formal education, and likelihood of voting, and the numbers of Aboriginal people attending post-secondary educational institutions are growing. Perhaps more importantly, many of our respondents made it very clear to us that if they were approached by political parties and asked to vote, they would be likely to do so, and if Aboriginal candidates were to be running for office, they would be even more likely to do so. Given the significance of their numbers in so many electoral districts, it seems to us to be likely—if for no other reason than self-interest—that political parties and politicians will start to court the Aboriginal vote, and that more Aboriginal candidates will be sought and will emerge in particular electoral districts.

Whether this will benefit urban Aboriginal people, and particularly the relatively high proportion of urban Aboriginal people who live in disadvantaged circumstances, remains to be seen.

‘A VERY HOSTILE SYSTEM IN WHICH TO LIVE’: ABORIGINAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN WINNIPEG’S INNER CITY

By Jim Silver, Cyril Keeper and Michael MacKenzie

What little evidence there is suggests that, on average, Aboriginal people are less likely to participate in the mainstream electoral process—and in particular less likely to vote in federal, provincial and municipal elections—than non-Aboriginal people. At the same time, there is evidence that voter turnout rates in many First Nations band elections is relatively high (See, for example, Bedford and Pobihushchy, 1995; Guerin, 2003).

In this paper we examine this issue—the relatively low propensity of Aboriginal people to vote in mainstream elections—to determine whether this is the case in Winnipeg’s inner city, and if so, why. The paper proceeds as follows.

In Part One we examine 2001 Census of Canada data, by electoral district, to determine the extent to which Aboriginal

people in Manitoba and in Winnipeg constitute a significant proportion of potential voters, and we examine existing data on the propensity of Aboriginal people to vote in mainstream elections.

In Part Two we consider the question, ‘why should Aboriginal people vote in mainstream elections?’

In Part Three we examine the existing literature on Aboriginal political participation in an attempt to find explanations for Aboriginal peoples’ relatively low rates of voter turnout in Canadian federal, provincial and municipal elections.

In Part Four we report on the results of interviews with Aboriginal people in Winnipeg’s inner city about their, and other Aboriginal peoples’, participation in mainstream politics.

In Part Five we offer some conclusions.

Part One: Aboriginal Population by Electoral District in Manitoba and Winnipeg

Manitoba has a larger proportion of Aboriginal people than any other province in Canada. According to 2001 Census of Canada data, Aboriginal people—those who self-identify as Aboriginal—make up 13.6 percent of the population of Manitoba. Saskatchewan is close behind with 13.5 percent. Alberta has a population that is 5.3 percent Aboriginal. The Aboriginal population of each other province is less than 5 percent of their total population. Aboriginal people constitute 3.3 percent of Canada’s total population.¹

These figures suggest that in Manitoba, Aboriginal people constitute a potentially significant political force. There are sev-

eral federal ridings in Manitoba in which, based on population numbers alone, this is especially the case. In the constituency of Churchill, as can be seen in Table I, almost two in every three people (64.77 percent) are Aboriginal. In each of Dauphin-Swan River, Selkirk-Interlake, Winnipeg Centre and Winnipeg North, at least one in every six people are Aboriginal. Thus in five of Manitoba’s 14 federal ridings, Aboriginal people are a significant presence in terms of population. In every federal riding in Manitoba the proportion of the population which is Aboriginal exceeds the national average.² These numbers exaggerate somewhat the potential

Table I: Proportion of the Population Which Is Aboriginal, by Federal Electoral District in Manitoba, 2001

Federal Electoral District	Population	Aboriginal Identity	Share (%)
Brandon-Souris	83510	6270	7.51
Charleswood St. James-Assiniboia	81870	3475	4.24
Churchill	73420	47555	64.77
Dauphin-Swan River	77590	16185	20.86
Elmwood-Transocna	78000	6815	8.74
Kildonan-St. Paul	77040	3655	4.74
Portage-Lisgar	83385	5495	6.59
Provencher	81915	6795	8.30
Saint Boniface	81240	5920	7.29
Selkirk-Interlake	86550	14935	17.26
Winnipeg Centre	80930	13340	16.48
Winnipeg North	79415	13255	16.69
Winnipeg South	77080	3005	3.90
Winnipeg South Centre	77635	3340	4.30
Average			13.69
Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census			

1. This figure, based on those who self-identify as Aboriginal, includes all Aboriginal groups (North American Indian, Métis and Inuit), multiple Aboriginal responses and Aboriginal responses not included elsewhere. Statistics Canada, 2001 Census: www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/highlight/Aboriginal/

2. Statistics Canada, 2001 Census: www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/standard/fedprofile/

political clout of Aboriginal people in Manitoba, since the ratios of Aboriginal people to total population in a riding are not equivalent to the ratio of potential Aboriginal voters to total voters in a riding, because a much higher proportion of Aboriginal than of non-Aboriginal people are under the legal voting age of 18 years. Nevertheless, the numbers are significant, and will become more so as more of those who are currently too young reach voting age.

At the provincial level the numbers are similarly, perhaps more, significant. According to the 2001 Census of Canada, in Rupertsland (90.5 percent) and The Pas (69.9 percent) Aboriginal people are a large majority of the population, and in Thompson (49.7 percent) a near majority. In another five provincial electoral districts—Interlake (41.1 percent); Flin Flon (39.4 percent); Swan River (38.2 percent); Point Douglas (34.8 percent) and Ste. Rose (30.1 percent)—Aboriginal people are more than or almost one-third of the population. In another nine provincial electoral districts Aboriginal people constitute between, approximately, one in five and one in six of the total population—Lac du Bonnet (22.6 percent); Wellington (20.8 percent); Burrows (18.1 percent); Portage la Prairie (16.8 percent); Russell (16.7 percent); Selkirk (16.6 percent); Wolseley (16.4 percent); St. Johns (15.8 percent); and Minto (15.4 percent). Thus in 17 of 57 provincial electoral districts, or just under one-third, Aboriginal people constitute at least one in six of the total population. In another six provincial electoral districts Aboriginal people constitute more than 10 percent of the total population. In all but eight provincial electoral districts in Manitoba (Table II, next page), the Aboriginal share of the total population is above the national average.

It is not possible to conduct population projections for areas as small as a Provin-

cial or even a Federal Electoral District. In Manitoba there are eight large tracts used in detailed population projections. Therefore, it is not possible to predict accurately the percentage of Aboriginal people in any one electoral district in the future. But the Aboriginal population in Manitoba as a whole is growing much faster than the non-Aboriginal population. The birth rate for Status Indians continues to be higher than that of the non-Aboriginal population. As large numbers of young women move into their reproductive years the Aboriginal birth rate in Manitoba is guaranteed to continue to grow rapidly for several decades (Hallett 2002: 30). This means that those electoral districts with higher than average Aboriginal populations should be of increasing interest to those who wish to court the Aboriginal vote in the future. Indeed, courting the Aboriginal vote may soon become an important factor in securing political success in these constituencies and ridings.

Of particular interest to us here are the numbers of Aboriginal people in the City of Winnipeg. Almost 38 percent of Aboriginal people living in Manitoba, or more than one in every three, reside in the City of Winnipeg. It is the largest Aboriginal community in the province, and the largest urban Aboriginal population in Canada. Aboriginal people make up 8.4 percent of the total population of Winnipeg. In specific areas of the city, Aboriginal people constitute a potentially significant political force. As can be seen in Table I, there are two Federal Electoral Districts within Winnipeg that have a sizable minority Aboriginal population. These are Winnipeg Centre and Winnipeg North at 16.7 percent and 16.5 percent respectively. Table II shows that in nine of the 31 Provincial Electoral Districts within the City of Winnipeg, the Aboriginal population is more than ten percent of the total population, and in six of those districts more

**Table II: Proportion of the Population Which is Aboriginal,
By Provincial Electoral District in Manitoba, 2001**

Provincial Electoral Districts	Population	Aboriginal Identity	Share (%)
Arthur-Virden	18,035	1,775	9.84
Assiniboia	19,295	1,170	6.06
Brandon East	18,545	2,465	13.29
Brandon West	20,390	1,260	6.18
Burrows	19,250	3,490	18.13
Carman	18,495	1,695	9.16
Charleswood	19,600	570	2.91
Concordia	19,620	2,335	11.90
Dauphin-Roblin	18,865	2,220	11.77
Elmwood	19,940	2,210	11.08
Emerson	19,545	1,570	8.03
Flin Flon	14,355	5,660	39.43
Fort Garry	20,310	795	3.91
Fort Rouge	20,070	1,440	7.17
Fort Whyte	23,040	635	2.76
Gimli	20,940	1,175	5.61
Inkster	19,150	1,215	6.34
Interlake	18,570	7,630	41.09
Kildonan	19,735	1,030	5.22
Kirkfield Park	19,995	895	4.48
La Verendrye	19,850	1,930	9.72
Lac du Bonnet	20,325	4,595	22.61
Lakeside	19,360	2,220	11.47
Lord Roberts	19,475	1,470	7.55
Minnedosa	17,925	605	3.38
Minto	20,095	3,095	15.40
Morris	20,545	1,330	6.47
Pembina	21,480	170	0.79
Point Douglas	18,455	6,430	34.84
Portage la Prairie	18,080	3,030	16.76
Radisson	20,320	1,205	5.93
Riel	18,705	1,170	6.26
River East	19,320	605	3.13
River Heights	19,360	360	1.86
Rossmere	19,230	1,115	5.80
Rupert'sland	16,640	15,065	90.53
Russell	17,695	2,960	16.73
Seine River	20,985	750	3.57
Selkirk	19,520	3,240	16.60
Southdale	20,975	725	3.46
Springfield	20,240	805	3.98

Table continues next page...

than, or almost, one in every six people is Aboriginal. These are Point Douglas (34.8 percent), Wellington (20.8 percent), Burrows (18.9 percent), Wolseley (16.4 percent), St. Johns (15.8 percent), and Minto (15.4 percent).

Similarly, Aboriginal people in Winnipeg are concentrated in specific municipal wards. Table III (next page) shows that in three of 15 wards in the City of Winnipeg, Aboriginal people are more than, or almost, one in six of the total population. These are Mynarski (23.3 percent), Point Douglas (17.4 percent), and Daniel McIntyre (15.1 percent). In a fourth ward, Elmwood-East Kildonan (11.8 percent), Aboriginal people are more than one in ten of the total population.

The relatively high proportion of Aboriginal people in Manitoba and in Winnipeg presents a special opportunity for Aboriginal voices to be heard politically. There are few places in Canada where Aboriginal

people make up a majority, but in many electoral districts in Manitoba, at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, Aboriginal people make up a potentially politically significant minority. If we consider population numbers alone there is a real incentive for politicians at all three levels to listen to the demands of the Aboriginal community. But politicians do not consider population statistics alone. What really matters is who votes.

Propensity to Vote:

Not a great deal is known about voter turnout rates for federal, provincial and municipal elections among Aboriginal people in Canada. Even less is known about urban Aboriginal voter turnout rates for such elections. Few quantitative and fewer qualitative studies have been undertaken.

Obtaining quantitative data about voter turnout rates for any specific group is made difficult by two primary complica-

Table II: Continued...			
Provincial Electoral Districts	Population	Aboriginal Identity	Share (%)
St. Boniface	18,750	2,100	11.20
St. James	19,580	1,170	5.98
St. Johns	19,735	3,120	15.81
St. Norbert	18,810	970	5.16
St. Vital	19,820	1,690	8.53
Ste. Rose	18,575	5,590	30.09
Steinbach	21,550	580	2.69
Swan River	18,720	7,150	38.19
The Maples	18,555	1,555	8.38
The Pas	19,045	13,305	69.86
Thompson	18,260	9,070	49.67
Transcona	19,015	1,205	6.34
Turtle Mountain	17,685	540	3.05
Tuxedo	19,820	555	2.80
Wellington	19,955	4,150	20.80
Wolseley	19,490	3,190	16.37
Manitoba	1,103,700	150,045	13.59

Source: Statistics Canada. Prepared by the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics
Note: Ridings in Bold are within the City of Winnipeg

tions. First, such data are not collected at polling stations. The ballot is secret. How members of a specific group may have voted cannot generally be traced after votes have been cast. Exit polls would provide an approximation of such information, but we know of none for Aboriginal peoples' voting. Second, studies in which respondents are asked, subsequent to an election, whether or not they voted in that election are not always trustworthy. The proportion of respondents who say they voted is often inflated.

For example, Elections Canada and Ipsos-Reid conducted a survey that targeted Aboriginal people in northern areas of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. The survey included an over sample of 150 Aboriginal people living north of the 60th parallel. Seventy percent of the respondents in this survey said they voted in the 2000 federal election (Elections Canada, 2001, p. 10). This is far higher than poll-by-poll results would suggest. Similar problems

arise in studies that ask whether or not respondents plan to vote in an upcoming election. In many cases the number of people who say that they plan to vote is greater than the number who actually vote.

More generally, surveys of Aboriginal peoples' voting behaviour are made difficult by the fact that Aboriginal people constitute a relatively small percentage of Canada's population. The result is that general Canada-wide surveys reveal little about Aboriginal peoples' voting behaviour, a problem made the worse by such factors as relatively low levels of telephone access, which make traditional survey methodology more difficult for Aboriginal populations. As a result of these and other difficulties we do not know as much as would be desirable about Aboriginal peoples', and particularly urban Aboriginal peoples', voting patterns.

The most reliable data on Aboriginal peoples' voting come from polls found entirely within First Nations reserves, where First Nations people constitute an over-

Table III: Proportion of the Population Which is Aboriginal, by City of Winnipeg Electoral District, 2001

Ward	Population	Aboriginal Identity	Share (%)
Charleswood-Tuxedo	32,470	785	2.42
Daniel McIntyre	43,495	6,580	15.13
Elmwood-East Kildonan	38,640	4,570	11.83
Fort Rouge	47,325	4,235	8.95
Mynarski	39,160	9,125	23.30
North Kildonan	39,190	1,710	4.36
Old Kildonan	41,340	2,360	5.71
Point Douglas	41,915	7,290	17.39
River Hights-Fort Garry	49,560	1,520	3.07
St. Boniface	45,650	3,245	7.11
St. Charles	31,730	1,725	5.44
St. James	29,095	1,935	6.65
St. Norbert	39,090	1,715	4.39
St. Vital	47,780	3,195	6.69
Tanscona	33,245	2,010	6.05

Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census Area Data combined with City of Winnipeg Ward Divisions of 2002

whelming majority. But this means that there are no reliable data on the propensity to vote among Aboriginal people off-reserve. Consequently, we know almost nothing about the voting patterns of urban Aboriginal people.

Despite this lack of data, there is a general consensus that the voter turnout of Aboriginal people in mainstream elections is significantly lower than that of non-Aboriginal people, although there is evidence of significant variations across provinces, communities, Aboriginal nations, and elections. Daniel Guerin (2003) has reported the results of a recent study that examined participation levels of on-reserve Aboriginal people in the 2000 federal election. He found considerable variation in turnout rates across provinces and territories. These rates were highest in PEI and Saskatchewan, where polling stations on First Nations reserves reported average turnout rates of 66.9 percent and 55.0 percent respectively. These rates are close to national turnout rates; indeed, the PEI rate is higher than the national turnout rate. At the other end of the spectrum, polling stations on First Nations reserves in Manitoba and Quebec reported average turnout rates of 36.6 percent and 35.3 percent respectively, much lower than the national turnout. Guerin (2003, pp.12-13) has reported that, in the 2000 federal election: “the turnout rate for all 296 polling stations included in the study was 47.8 percent – 16 percent lower than the turnout among the general population”. In an internal Elections Canada study on First Nations peoples’ political participation in federal elections prior to the 2000 election, Jean-Nicolas Bustros reported the following figures for turnout rates at polls wholly within First Nations communities: 41 percent in the 1992 referendum; 38 percent in the 1993 federal election; and 40 percent in the 1997 federal election (Guerin, 2003, p.11). In short, where it has been

possible to determine Aboriginal peoples’ voter turnout in federal and provincial elections—in most cases First Nations peoples’ voter turnout in their home communities—they vote considerably less, on average, than the overall population. There is evidence that voter turnout in First Nations band elections is higher (Bedford and Pobihushchy, 1995; Guerin, 2003).

For the purposes of this study it is of particular importance to note that the turnout rate at federal polls on First Nations reserves in Manitoba was approximately 27.4 percentage points lower than the national average. This is a considerable gap. It appears that Aboriginal people in Manitoba do not vote in federal elections at rates anywhere near the national or provincial average. This is despite the fact that in many electoral districts Aboriginal people constitute, potentially, a numerically significant political force.

The historical pattern of the voter turnout rate in federal and provincial elections among on-reserve First Nations people in Manitoba has been described by Kinnear (2003). Parts of his table are reproduced here as Table IV (next page), which shows that for on-reserve First Nations people in Manitoba the turnout rate in federal and provincial elections was quite high directly after the extension of the franchise, in the 1960s, and has been declining dramatically ever since. In the most recent provincial election, in 2003, the turnout rate on Manitoba reserves reached an all-time low of 26.7 percent, less than one-half of the overall voter turnout in that election.

A similar pattern of decline was reported in a pioneering study conducted by Bedford and Pobihushchy (1995). The voter turnout in federal elections at polling stations on First Nations reserves in New

Brunswick fell from 70 percent in 1962 to 17.8 percent in 1988. In Nova Scotia the rate fell from 89.3 percent in 1962 to 54.0 percent in 1988. It is unfortunate that we do not have reliable figures on voter turnout rates among Aboriginal people living off-reserve to contrast with these results. All that we have is the previously mentioned Elections Canada/Ipsos-Reid survey, which found that Aboriginal people living in urban areas were three times less likely to have said that they voted

in the 2000 federal election than those living on reserves (reported in Guerin, 2003, p.13). Given that surveys of this nature frequently overestimate the voter turnout rate, it seems reasonable to assume that the voter turnout rate in federal and provincial elections among Aboriginal people living in Winnipeg is likely to be lower than the average turnout rate for Aboriginal people. Further empirical research is needed to determine the true extent of the difference.

Table IV: First Nations Voting on Manitoba Reserves in Federal and Provincial Elections, 1962-2003

Year	Total Votes Cast	Registered Voters	Turnout (%)
1962F	5664	8667	65.35
1963F	6038	9793	61.66
1965F	5334	9511	56.08
1968F	5039	9491	53.09
1969P	6177	11554	53.46
1972F	6627	12205	54.30
1973P	8444	14427	58.53
1974P	6338	12331	51.40
1977P	7738	15631	49.50
1979F	7972	15824	50.38
1980F	9120	16278	56.03
1981P	8770	16894	51.91
1984F	8311	18272	45.48
1986P	8684	19818	43.82
1988F	9512	20141	47.23
1988P	8859	21375	41.45
1990P	10426	24792	42.05
1993F	9914	24988	39.68
1995P	9381	26426	35.50
1997F	8967	27546	32.55
1999P	9990	28030	35.64
2000F	12223	26742	45.71
2003P	7924	29681	26.70

Source: Michael Kinnear 2003: 47 ³
F = Federal Election; P = Provincial

3. All federal data in Kinnear's original come from the poll-by-poll results in the reports of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada published after each election; the provincial election data come from statements of votes published by the Chief Electoral Officer of Manitoba. Kinnear's Note: "The results of the 1963 and 1966 provincial elections are not included due to numerous errors in the official reports."

Part Two: Why Should Aboriginal People Vote in Mainstream Elections?

Why should Aboriginal people vote in the mainstream political process, i.e., in federal, provincial and municipal elections? Why should Aboriginal people, and Canadians generally, be concerned that Aboriginal people, on average, vote less in such elections than non-Aboriginal people? We believe that there are several reasons.

First, governments are much less likely to respond positively to the demands of those people who do not vote. One of America's most highly-regarded political scientists, V.O. Key, expressed this clearly and emphatically more than a half-century ago: "The blunt truth is that politicians and officials are under no compulsion to pay much heed to classes and groups of citizens that do not vote" (Key, 1949, p. 527). A recent study of women and electoral politics in Canada concluded that: "We can expect parties to respond to the feminist party agenda only when that agenda is espoused by a significant electoral constituency" (Young, 2003, p. 89).

Henry Milner (2002) has developed a wealth of evidence to show that high civic-literacy societies are more participatory, and more participatory societies are more egalitarian. From this finding it follows, we would argue, that Aboriginal peoples' knowledge of and participation in Canadian politics would be likely to contribute to the generation of policies that would accrue to their collective benefit. Milner argues that "...as the data on who votes clearly show, if turnout averages 50 percent in country or period A, and 80 percent in country or period B, then we can reasonably expect that different interests will be aggregated in A than in B: policy choices in A will be skewed more closely to the interests of people at higher levels

of income and wealth" (Milner, 2002, p. 175). Aboriginal people have, on average, lower levels of income and wealth.

C.B. Macpherson, although making the case for a form of participatory democracy that goes beyond simply voting, has observed that "...low participation and social inequality are so bound up with each other that a more equitable and humane society requires a more participatory political system". And in their analysis of the general decline in voter turnout, Leduc and Pammett (2003, p.25) reiterate the pointed observation of V.O. Key: "Politicians and political parties are more likely to respond to the demands of voters than of non-voters". The socio-economic needs of Aboriginal people in Canada are considerable; the likelihood of such needs being positively responded to by governments are reduced by Aboriginal peoples' lower than average propensity to vote in mainstream elections.

Second, there are strong reasons why Aboriginal people would benefit from being represented in legislative bodies by other Aboriginal people. Jane Mansbridge (2000, pp. 99-100) has argued that there are at least three types of situations in which members of disadvantaged groups might benefit from being represented "...by individuals who in their own background 'mirror' the typical experiences and outward manifestations of belonging to the disadvantaged group". First, this kind of representation is important for effective communication between the representative, and members of the disadvantaged group, because "...members of groups embedded in a tradition of domination and subordination often experience faulty communication: the dominant group has not learned to listen and the

subordinate group has learned to distrust". Second, this kind of representation is important in ensuring that issues of particular importance to the disadvantaged group can be effectively raised in the legislature, because "...representatives who are not personally in touch with the typical experiences of their constituents will often not contribute adequately to the deliberation of these issues" (See Tremblay and Trimble, 2003, especially p.18, for the effectiveness of elected women in raising issues of particular significance to women in legislative bodies). And third, proportionate representation of members of a disadvantaged group in a legislative body "...confirms that members of this group are capable of that function and expected to fill it", which then "...increases the de facto legitimacy of the polity for members of these groups".

In short, Mansbridge is arguing not only that voting is important to members of disadvantaged groups if their needs are to be met, but also that *electing* and thus being represented by members of those disadvantaged groups is important if their needs are to be met (for a similar argument see also Williams, 2000).

A non-Aboriginal Member of Parliament from northern Quebec echoed this argument in the House of Commons: "I find it extremely difficult to represent and defend the interests of the Native population for a score of reasons ranging from cultural differences, languages and distances" (quoted in Milen, 1991, p. 39). The Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO), Manitoba's northern Chiefs' organization, has made the same case: "We need members of Parliament who do not have to be taught who we are, what we want, and why we are important to this country.... To be effective, we have to have the capacity to elect our own representatives to the House of Commons" (Milen,

1991, p. 40). Canadian scholars have been leaders in advancing arguments about the necessity and the merits of recognizing difference, and designing political systems in such a way as to affirm both differences and a shared identity (see, for example: Borrows, 2000; Cairns, 2000; Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1992; Tully, 1995; and Young, 1990).

Third, all Canadians should be concerned about the relatively low levels of Aboriginal peoples' voting because their non-voting contributes to the erosion of the legitimacy of the political system. Kymlicka (1995, p.32) argues that "...there is increasing concern that the political process is 'unrepresentative' in the sense that it fails to reflect the diversity of the population. Legislatures in most countries are dominated by middle class, able-bodied, white men". At the same time, relatively few Aboriginal people vote in elections to those Legislatures. Bedford (2003, p. 19) argues that "...the voter turnout data indicate that there is a crisis of legitimacy facing the Canadian state. A significant proportion of a group that makes up four percent of the total population of Canada has serious and deep-seated questions about the legitimate authority of the Canadian state and its control over their lives".

The issue of legitimacy is magnified in Manitoba and in Winnipeg, where Aboriginal people constitute approximately one in ten of the province's and the city's populations. If a group of people of that size is largely excluded from and/or does not participate proportionately in the dominant political system, for whatever reasons, then serious questions arise not only about the ability of the system to hear their concerns and to meet their needs, but also about the legitimacy of such a system.

Part Three: Aboriginal People and the Vote: The Literature

Our reading of the literature on Aboriginal peoples' electoral participation leads us to identify four broad categories of explanation for their relatively low rates of voting in mainstream elections. All four are rooted in Aboriginal peoples' historical experience of deliberate exclusion from the mainstream of Canadian society as the consequence of the process of colonization.

One explanation is the 'nationalist' explanation: some Aboriginal people choose not to vote because they see themselves as part of distinctive nations, and seek nation-to-nation relations with Canada, and to vote in Canada would undermine the logic of their position. Some Aboriginal people do not vote in Canadian federal, provincial or municipal elections for this reason, although they may still vote in band elections.

Second, many Aboriginal people do not vote because they distrust and feel excluded from the Canadian electoral system. Their historical and current experience is such that many Aboriginal people, including many urban Aboriginal people, feel a strong sense of social exclusion—that they are not a part of the dominant culture and institutions of Canadian society. Many Aboriginal people do not vote for this reason.

Third, the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of Aboriginal people are, on average, consistent with those of non-voters generally.

And fourth, there is evidence that the concepts of 'political opportunity' and 'political effort' are important in explaining the relatively low levels of Aboriginal political participation in mainstream politics—political parties are not generally open to

Aboriginal peoples' involvement, the literature argues, and parties and politicians do not make much effort to involve Aboriginal people, and these factors also appear to contribute to relatively low Aboriginal rates of voting.

3.1 *The Impact of Colonization on Aboriginal Voting*

Historically, Aboriginal people have been excluded from participation in the mainstream Canadian political process. Their exclusion was an important part of, and consequence of, the process of colonization. Efforts to act politically in the first half of the 20th century were thwarted by the *Indian Act*. The *Indian Act* of 1876 imposed upon First Nations communities the concept of elected band chiefs and councils, as a means of destroying traditional governmental systems.

As Patricia Monture-Angus has observed: "The *Indian Act* replaced Aboriginal forms of government with non-democratic and hierarchical government institutions which were unfamiliar to the people of our communities. The imposition of the band council governments met the opposition of many communities" (Monture-Angus, 1995, p. 182. See also Boldt, 1993, p. 169). The Indian Agent came to exercise almost total control over the political life of reserves. For example, while band councils might pass bylaws, all band funds were controlled by the Indian Agent, who had the authority to overturn any decisions made by the band.

Why participate in a political process such as this—an imposed and colonial political system—intelligent First Nations people might conclude. Revisions to the *Act* in the 1920s placed restrictions on the right

to assemble, to leave the reserve without the permission of the Indian Agent, and to raise funds other than from government, making political organizing beyond the band level all but impossible from the late 1920s to 1951, when further revisions to the *Indian Act* removed some restrictions (McFarlane, 1993, pp. 29 and 243).

Harold Cardinal has described the impact of the *Indian Act* and the Indian Agent upon political organizing:

“The Indian Agent, dead set against any successful Indian organization, actively worked against the leaders of the day. To the autocratic agent... the development of Indian organizations was a threat to his power and potentially to his job. He had many weapons and never hesitated to use them. Sometimes he openly threatened to punish people who persisted in organizational efforts. More often he used more subtle weapons such as delaying relief payments or rations to show the Indians which way the wind was blowing” (Cardinal, 1969, p. 98).

It was not until the revisions to the *Canada Elections Act* of 1960 that status Indians, male and female, were extended the right to vote in Canadian elections without having to give up their Indian status. Prior to that time First Nations people could vote at the federal level only upon ‘enfranchisement’, which meant giving up their status as Indians.

As Smith (2003, p. 41) has put it, prior to 1960 “...voting rights were a reward for abandoning one’s Aboriginal heritage”. Most Indians were not prepared to do that. They resisted assimilation. This view was expressed in a petition delivered to the King of England in 1926, which concluded by saying: “We do not want enfranchisement, we want to be Indians to the end of the world” (McFarlane, 1993,

pp.28-29). So while the Canadian state enacted measures to prevent First Nations political organizing, First Nations people themselves came to see the vote in particular as a betrayal of their determination to live as Aboriginal people, and a potential threat to their treaty rights.

As a result, there has not developed among Aboriginal people the tradition of participation in the mainstream Canadian electoral process. As Kulchyski has put it: “...by the 1970s Aboriginal people were not interested in their Canadian citizenship for good reason: the State had spent a century trying to enforce citizenship on them at the expense of their rights...” (Kulchyski, 2002, p.191). The protection of those rights—those collective, national rights—came to be the primary focus of Aboriginal political activity.

3.2 *The Nationalist Explanation*

A major part of the explanation for the relatively low levels of participation in the mainstream Canadian political process is this nationalist explanation. Many Aboriginal people see themselves as distinct peoples, as nations. As Cairns has put it:

“Their distrust of the federal and provincial governments is so high, and their sense of difference so profound, that they seek not to be accepted by the majority as individuals on the former’s terms but to achieve institutional and constitutional recognition of a special status that will contribute to their ongoing survival as distinct nations” (Cairns, 1993, p. 210).

Schouls (1996, p.745) says the same, arguing that: “Aboriginal peoples... are less concerned about representative involvement in the governing structures of Canada and more concerned about circumscribing the extension of the Canadian government’s power over their na-

tions". It is likely for this reason that the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP)* devoted only eight pages out of more than 3500 to the issue of Aboriginal peoples' parliamentary representation. The *RCAP* described the "...inherent ineffectiveness of the democratic political relationship as seen by Aboriginal peoples...", and added that "Aboriginal peoples seek nation-to-nation political relations, and these cannot be achieved simply by representation in Canadian political institutions" (quoted in Cairns, 2003, p. 5).

Writing in the journal *Electoral Insight*, in a recent issue dedicated to Aboriginal political participation in elections, Ladner says: "I would argue that a majority of Aboriginal people with strong ties to their communities and their history, traditions and language have explicitly decided not to participate in Canadian elections" (Ladner, 2003, p.24). This refusal to participate in Canada as an alien political system was forcefully articulated by Anishanaabe scholar Leanne Simpson: "I don't vote in elections in France, I don't vote in elections in Ethiopia. Why would I vote in Canada? They are all foreign nations" (quoted in Ladner, 2003, p.24).

Certainly the development of an Aboriginal political movement with the establishment of the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) in the late 1960s, and its takeoff following the 1969 White Paper, came to be about advancing the collective, national rights of Aboriginal peoples — such that by the early 1980s almost all Aboriginal politics had been effectively subsumed under the 'common Indian philosophy' (McFarlane, 1993, p.8) centred upon the pursuit of Aboriginal rights and self-government, and the winning of sovereignty for First Nations. The centrality of this nationalist definition of Aboriginal politics has largely suppressed — and among at

least some of the Aboriginal leadership made illegitimate — discussion of a politics directed at increasing Aboriginal peoples' political clout, and by this means improving their socio-economic circumstances, by increasing their participation in the mainstream Canadian political process. This is the case *despite* the fact that many of the Aboriginal leadership have developed close relations with the Liberal Party, since this appears to be, as will be argued later, an elite accommodation approach with little attempt to mobilize the vote of the mass of the Aboriginal population.

3.3 *The Social Exclusion Explanation*

Aboriginal people feel excluded from, distanced and distrustful of, the Canadian political system. Writing in the special issue of *Electoral Insight* on Aboriginal political participation, Cairns (2003, p.2) says: "A widespread diffuse alienation from the Canadian constitutional order crops up again and again in the literature dealing with Aboriginal issues and concerns. The leading theme in First Nations discourse, according to the sociologist Rick Ponting, is 'the untrustworthiness of government'". Aboriginal people see the Canadian political system as being one that represents non-Aboriginal interests.

Given their history and their colonization, why would they not? Why would they trust the Canadian political system? As George Erasmus has put it: "Trust us: I mean what do you think we are, forgetful or just plain crazy?" (Cairns, 1993, p.207). Menno Boldt (1993, p.246) has argued that: "A history of Canadian deception, theft, and betrayal has resulted in collective and individual Indian attitude of distrust towards the dominant society. This distrust is translated into a profound reluctance to enter the Canadian social and

economic mainstream". This includes a reluctance to vote in mainstream elections.

Studies of voting generally reveal that many of those people who vote are people who have an attitude of civic duty. Civic duty, Pammett and Leduc (2003, p. 38) argue, is the "...feeling that participation is to be valued for its own sake, or for its contribution to the overall health of the polity". In their analysis of the 2000 federal election, they found that "...there is a strong relationship between having an attitude of civic duty and having voted in the 2000 election... non-voters show a much lower level of civic duty".

Why would Aboriginal people, having been colonized by the Canadian state, have a sense of 'civic duty'? Far from having the sense of civic duty associated with voting, Aboriginal people feel excluded from the Canadian governmental system, and believe—not surprisingly given their experience of being colonized by the Canadian state—that it is a system designed to oppress Aboriginal people and to promote the interests of non-Aboriginal people. "By and large, Aboriginal people continue to see the Canadian political system as an instrument of their domination and oppression" (Ladner, 2003, p.23). They feel "...a profound sense of distance from the mainstream political system" (Hunter, 2003, p.30).

Elijah Harper, former Manitoba MLA and Member of Parliament who is perhaps most famous for his role in the defeat of the Meech Lake Accord, has described his feelings in the Manitoba Legislature: "My first time going into the chamber, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. It was a different kind of feeling than when you go into a chief's meeting—this was not my own". His biographer adds: "He never fit into white politics, despite his

efforts. 'I constantly struggled to be a part of it, whether it was caucus or cabinet. Somehow I was always viewed as an outsider. I could just feel it—even after Meech', he says" (Comeau, 1993, pp. 87 and 207).

He could feel it because Aboriginal people are, in fact, outsiders. They feel that they are excluded from the dominant institutions of society, and that governments are not 'their' governments. By Cairns' definition, they are not likely to feel as if they are 'citizens'. Cairns (1999, p.4) argues that:

"Citizenship has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The former links individuals to the state by reinforcing the idea that it is 'their' state—that they are full members of an ongoing association that is expected to survive the passing generations. Their relation to the state is, accordingly, not narrowly instrumental, but supported by a reservoir of loyalty and patriotism that gives legitimacy to the state. The horizontal relationship, by contrast, is the positive identification of citizens with each other as valued members of the same civic community. Here, citizenship reinforces empathy and sustains solidarity by means of official statements of who is 'one of us'. Citizenship, therefore, is a linking mechanism, which in its most perfect expression binds the citizenry to the state and to each other".

In neither the vertical nor the horizontal sense are Aboriginal people likely to feel as if they are 'citizens'. Far from such positive feelings as loyalty and patriotism toward the state, and empathy and solidarity with Canadians, Aboriginal people are more likely to feel a sense of alienation and distance from the state and from non-Aboriginal Canadians.

In urban areas there is among many Aboriginal people a strong sense of social exclusion, of distance from the people and the institutions of the dominant culture. In a recent study of Aboriginal peoples' relationship to a vibrant inner city community development organization in Winnipeg's inner city, it was found that Aboriginal people living in the neighbourhood were not involved – despite the organization's efforts to involve them – and in fact felt a profound sense of social exclusion from the organization and from urban institutions generally (Silver, Hay and Gorzen, 2003). A study of Aboriginal peoples' relationship to a north end Winnipeg housing project – which also had made significant efforts to involve Aboriginal people – found the same sense of exclusion (Deane, Morrisette, Bosquet and Bruyere, 2002).

Numerous studies of Aboriginal people in rural towns have identified their exclusion from the mainstream of town life. There has been "intense hostility" directed by townspeople at Aboriginal residents and visitors (Peters, 2002, p. 56), to which many Aboriginal people respond by withdrawing in order to avoid "...the indignities of most interactions with white men" (Lithman, 1983, p. 58. See also, among many other examples: Brody, 1971, p. 71; Comeau and Santin, 1990, pp. 39 and 47; Dunning, 1959, p. 172; Stymeist, 1975, especially pp. 68-75). It could be argued that Aboriginal peoples' marginalization from the mainstream electoral system, and the lower rate of voter turnout among Aboriginal people, are but a part of their broader marginalization and social exclusion from the dominant culture generally.

In addition, there is a good deal of empirical evidence that there is a strong correlation between voting and participation in other community institutions, or 'civic

engagement'. Milner (2002, p.25), observes that: "For Tocqueville, it is primarily through interaction in such voluntary organizations that citizens learn the skills of democratic participation and the civic virtues of trust and reciprocity".

Numerous studies of rates of voting among immigrants in European countries have confirmed this observation. Fennema and Tillie (1999, p. 721) found that: "Political participation and political trust is explained by the degree of civic engagement. The more an ethnic group is engaged in their own community's affairs the more it participates in local politics and the more it trusts the political institutions" (see also Diehl and Blohm, 2001, p. 404).

In their major study of the 2000 federal election, Pammett and Leduc (2003, p.43) found a strong correlation between voting and other forms of involvement, and concluded that: "...the consistency of the results leaves little doubt that those people who did not vote in the 2000 election are less likely to be active in other forms of participation.... Non-voters are not making up for their lack of electoral participation by substituting other 'more relevant' political activities. Rather they are distancing themselves from the public sphere in many ways". This appears to be the case for Aboriginal people generally, as described above.

3.4 Socio-Economic and Demographic Explanations

In addition to the nationalist explanation, and the alienation/social exclusion explanation, there are a host of other practical socio-economic and demographic factors that are likely to impede Aboriginal peoples' participation in the electoral process.

For instance, Aboriginal people move more frequently than non-Aboriginal people, and are thus harder to keep registered on the voters' list, and are often not eligible to vote in their district of residence at election time. The 2001 Census of Canada shows that while 14.3 percent of Canadians reported that they had changed their address in the year prior to the Census, 22.0 percent of Aboriginal people had done so.

Also, Aboriginal people have, on average, lower incomes than non-Aboriginal people, and income levels, or socio-economic status, correlates with voter turnout. According to the 2001 Census the average income in Canada was close to \$30,000; the average income for Aboriginal people was just over \$19,000. Among the Canadian population as a whole there was a 34 percent incidence of low income in 2000; for Aboriginal people the incidence of low income was 55.9 percent (see also Luzubski, Silver and Black, 2000).

There is considerable evidence that voter turnout correlates strongly with socio-economic status (Pammett and Leduc, 2003). In his 1996 address to the American Political Science Association, Arend Lijphardt "...noted that the literature on voter turnout has concluded that those who are socio-economically disadvantaged and have a lower overall status in society also have significantly lower rates of voter turnout, exacerbating their general powerlessness to effect outcomes" (quoted in Bedford, 2003, p.16). Milner (2002, p.260) refers to a "...study comparing voters and nonvoters in the 1996 US presidential election [which] found that 33 percent of those with incomes under thirty thousand dollars voted, compared to 60 per cent for those with incomes above that amount". American studies have found that "political involvement in

the United States is highly stratified by socioeconomic status, with high-SES adults and their children participating at greater levels in comparison to members of low-SES families" (McDevitt, Kiouisis, Wu, Losch and Ripley, 2003, p.5; see also Zaff, Malanchuk, Michelsen and Eccles, 2003, p. 23).

The 'socio-economic model of participation' holds that "...participation input is weighted in favour of people with higher socio-economic standing because 'the higher-status individual has a greater stake in politics, he has greater skills, more resources, greater awareness of political matters, he is exposed to more communications about politics, he interacts with others who participate'" (Burt, 2002, p.237). But as has been observed, "many Aboriginal persons move frequently, have low literacy levels, are unemployed, are disconnected from mainstream society and are distanced from the discussion process that attends federal elections" (Cairns, 2003, p.4).

Aboriginal people in Canada are also younger, on average, than non-Aboriginal people, and voting correlates strongly with age (Blais et al, 2003). The older people are, the more likely they are to vote (Milner, 2002, p. 41). Pammett and Leduc

Table V: Decline in Voting Turnout by Age Cohort, 2000 Canadian General Election

Age:	% Who Voted in 2000
68+	83%
58-67	80
48-57	76
38-47	66
30-37	54
25-29	38
21-24	28
18-20	22
Source: (Pammett and Leduc, 2003, p.4)	

have produced a remarkable table showing decline in voting turnout by age cohort in the 2000 Canadian general election (Table V, previous page).

The 2001 Census of Canada shows that while 31 percent of Canadians generally are 24 years of age or younger, approximately 50 percent of Aboriginal people are 24 years of age or younger (Guerin, 2003, p.13). Thus their age structure alone is a factor in Aboriginal peoples' relatively low levels of voter turnout.

Education also correlates strongly with voter turnout: the higher a person's level of formal education, the more likely that person is to vote (Burt, 2002, p. 237; Pammett and Leduc, 2003). Education and age combine to explain a good deal. Andre Blais has shown that "...the two most crucial socio-economic determinants of voting are education and age. The gap between the least and the most educated and between the youngest and the eldest is a huge 20 points" (Blais, 2000, p.52).

On the other hand, young people with higher levels of education tend to vote more—their education offsets their age. Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte and Nadeau (2003, p.10) observe that "...the more education young people have, the more likely they are to vote. Education remains one of the best predictors of turnout because it provides the cognitive skills needed to cope with the complexities of politics and because it seems to foster norms of civic engagement".

The American experience is consistent with the Canadian: youth decline in voter turnout is offset by education. "Among those with a Bachelor's degree or more, the downward trend in youth voter turnout has been reversed..." (Lopez and Kirby, 2003, p. 3). The correlation between levels of formal education and voter turn-

out is significant because Aboriginal people have, on average, lower levels of formal education than non-Aboriginal people, although educational levels among Aboriginal people are improving (Luzubski, Silver and Black, 2000). According to the 2001 Census of Canada, approximately 31 percent of the Canadian population over the age of 15 years had less than a high school education; approximately 48 percent of the Aboriginal population had less than a high school education.

In short, although the fact that large numbers of Aboriginal people feel excluded and alienated from the electoral system due to their experience of colonization is, in our view, a more important causal variable for Aboriginal peoples' relatively low levels of voter turnout in mainstream elections, it is nevertheless important to add that there are also a host of socio-economic and demographic variables—low levels of income, a lower age structure, lower levels of education, higher rates of residential mobility—which correlate generally with voter turnout and which are also likely to play a part in Aboriginal peoples' relatively low levels of voting in mainstream elections. As will be shown later, these correlations were borne out in our interviews of Aboriginal adults in Winnipeg's inner city.

3.5 Political Opportunity and Political Effort Explanations

Finally, we believe that the concepts of 'political opportunity structure' and especially 'political effort' can assist in explaining Aboriginal peoples' relatively low voter turnout. Political opportunity structure has been used, for example, in explaining varying rates of immigrant voter turnout in European countries. Togeby (1999, p.667) describes the political oppor-

tunity structure as constituting "...for instance the electoral system, other electoral arrangements, party system, but also the indigenous population's attitudes towards ethnic minorities. So the question is: how open are the receiving country's institutions and culture to including ethnic minorities in the political process".

We could say that historically, the 'political opportunity structure' facing Aboriginal people, and particularly First Nations people, was created by the provisions of the *Indian Act*, which specifically sought to *prevent* First Nations people from participating in the Canadian political process. It closed rather than opened opportunities for them to participate politically.

How much more open is the political opportunity structure for Aboriginal people today? Len Marchand, Canada's first Aboriginal Member of Parliament, observed some years ago that:

"As it stands today, Parliament is the exclusive domain of the settler, a reflection, no doubt, of the fact the electoral system was designed by settlers for settlers and historically developed to exclude Aboriginal peoples.... For the vast majority of Aboriginal Canadians Parliament is seen in the distance but there is no trail to get there. The trails

that do exist are made for the workboots of the settlers. The path has been too sharp and barnacled for the moccasins of our people" (quoted in Milen, 1991, p.42).

Political effort is a related concept: not only, how open are the institutions and cultures to others' participation; but also, do the dominant institutions make an effort to include those now excluded? Do political parties try to get out the vote by informing voters; do they seek out and encourage minority candidates; do they modify their practices to encourage the involvement of those on the outside? (See, for example, Burt, 2002; Milner, 2002).

We know, for example, that political parties play an important role in perpetuating the under-representation of women in politics (Tremblay and Trimble, 2003, p.10). A recent American study found that the voter turnout of Latinos is increased by targeted mobilization efforts, and is particularly increased when door-to-door canvassing during election campaigns involves Latino canvassers speaking to potential Latino voters (Michelsen, 2003, pp. 1 and 3). Yet matters of particular concern to Aboriginal people are typically at the bottom of political parties' priorities, thus confirming in Aboriginal peoples' minds the view that the political process is not relevant to them.

Part Four: The Results of Our Interviews

4.1 Methodology

We interviewed Aboriginal people in Winnipeg, and particularly in Winnipeg's inner city, to find out whether they participate in the political process, and in particular whether they vote in federal, provincial and municipal elections. In conducting interviews we were cognizant of the need to try to overcome both the gap between those who are doing the research and those who are being researched, and the gap between the cultures of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Winnipeg. Accordingly, all interviews were conducted by two Aboriginal interviewers, both of whom are long-time residents of Winnipeg's inner city.

Interviews were conducted in a somewhat open-ended manner, although with the help of an 'interview guide' which directed interviewers to seek responses to certain questions. Interviews started with the interviewers asking, "what do you think of when you hear the word 'politics'?" Respondents were also asked if they ever vote in mainstream elections, and why they do or do not vote, and they were asked whether urban Aboriginal people generally vote in mainstream elections, and why they do or do not vote.

Beyond this, interviewers were instructed to encourage respondents to express whatever opinions they might choose to about urban Aboriginal people and politics, and to probe for further information where they considered it appropriate and potentially fruitful.

All interviews were tape-recorded. In those cases where the interviewers deemed it appropriate, respondents were offered tobacco as a sign of respect for Aboriginal cultural traditions and as an

expression of appreciation for their contribution to the research project.

Seven young Aboriginal people who live in Winnipeg's inner city Spence neighbourhood were interviewed by Ed Keeper, Youth Outreach Worker at the Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA), an energetic inner city community development organization. Of these seven respondents—three women and four men—three were 18 years of age, and one each was 19, 20, 22 and 25 years of age.

All live in the Spence neighbourhood. Ed Keeper knows each of them personally. They were chosen as interviewees for this reason, and because of their direct involvement with youth programs at the Spence Neighbourhood Association. Most of these interviews would not have been possible—i.e., the respondents would not have agreed to be interviewed—had each of them not known Ed personally as a result of his growing up in, and working as a much-respected youth outreach worker in, the neighbourhood.

He interviewed the first respondent in November, 2003. The tape of the interview was reviewed with the lead author, some minor modifications were made, and the rest of the interviews were conducted in December, 2003 and January, 2004. All interviews were conducted at the Spence Neighbourhood Association offices in Winnipeg's inner city. A focus group involving five of the seven respondents, plus Ed Keeper and the lead author, was held at the SNA offices the evening of January 12, 2004. It lasted approximately 90 minutes, and was also tape recorded.

An additional 33 respondents were interviewed by Cyril Keeper. Cyril Keeper has lived in Winnipeg's inner city for much of

his life, is active in community affairs, and as a former City Councillor and Member of Parliament for the area, is well known and respected by Aboriginal people in the community.

Several methods were used to reach these 33 respondents. Roughly equal numbers were reached by: approaching Aboriginal people involved in the SNA and the Inner-City Aboriginal Neighbours (I-CAN), an Aboriginal residents' group in the Spence neighbourhood; going door-to-door on Agnes Street in the Spence neighbourhood; approaching people at a powwow at the Forks in April 2004; approaching people at an inner city Aboriginal church in April 2004; approaching students at the Aboriginal Students' Centre at the University of Winnipeg; and deliberately contacting some particular people specifically on the grounds that they are knowledgeable about the urban Aboriginal experience.

A pre-interview was conducted in October, 2003. The tape of the interview was reviewed with the lead author, some modifications were made, and the remainder of the interviews were conducted between November, 2003 and April, 2004. All interviews were tape recorded.

A total of 40 Aboriginal people were interviewed by the two interviewers. Those interviewed do not constitute a random sample of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg's inner city. However, we have included a fairly broad cross-section of urban Aboriginal people. We sought to interview roughly equal numbers of women and men, and to include at least some young and some older people.

Of our 40 respondents, 21 were women and 19 men. Ten were 25 years of age or younger; seven were 26-35 years of age; 19 were 36-59 years of age; and four were 60 years of age or older. Half of our re-

spondents had grade 12 or less in terms of formal education; of these three had less than grade 10. Seven had some post-secondary education, and 13 had a university degree or community college diploma. This is a considerably higher proportion than the proportion of the total urban Aboriginal population with at least some post-secondary education.

Of our 40 respondents, 26 are renters, two live with their parents, and 12 are homeowners. Again, the proportion of homeowners in our sample is almost certainly higher than for the total Aboriginal population in Winnipeg. Of our 40 respondents, 17 self-identified as Ojibwa or *Saulteaux*; eleven as Cree; nine as Metis; one as Ojicree; one as Dakota; and one is unknown.

4.2 What We Learned From Our Interviews

What we have found in our interviews is not completely consistent with the literature. In particular, it appears as if the nationalist explanation for low levels of Aboriginal voting may not apply in the city. Only one of our respondents mentioned anything like a nationalist explanation. He referred to "...the way the Mohawks and to some extent other groups look at sovereignty, and the fact that voting is in fact an action by which you give consent, and that's been the objection in some cases for some groups". He then added: "... although I don't think that's widely held..." (A male respondent, age 54. Hereafter designated as: M; 54). However, this was the only explicit mention of people consciously and deliberately not voting on the grounds that to do so is to give consent—i.e., the nationalist explanation.

Another respondent made a statement that sounds like a nationalist explanation. She said about voting that: "I think it's a culturally foreign instrument.... They

smashed our political instruments” (F; 51). Yet far from leading to a deliberate rejection of voting, this respondent always votes, and has frequently worked on election campaigns for various candidates for elected office in Winnipeg. It may well be—this is an area for further research—that the nationalist explanation has less resonance in urban areas than in First Nations communities.

In fact, a stronger theme arising from the interviews is, in effect, the inverse of the nationalist explanation—the view that this is the system we now live in, like it or not, and we need to participate in it. One young woman, a university student, responded to the question, ‘Does politics matter to Aboriginal people?’, with:

“Of course it does, yeah. This is the system that we live in, right now, and we really need to get involved if we want to change our standards of living or policies that affect us in a negative way. For Aboriginal people to become a healthier community I think you need to get involved in politics...” (F; 22).

Others said that it was important to be involved in politics precisely in order to protect Aboriginal rights. Those who made this kind of statement were people who are quite knowledgeable about the political system, and who at the same time are involved in the practice and promotion of traditional Aboriginal culture. Their immersion in Aboriginal cultural pursuits did *not* lead to a nationalist argument against voting, but rather led to an argument in favour of voting precisely in order to protect Aboriginal rights.

One 49 year old woman, one of only two of our interviewees actively involved in Aboriginal women’s groups, said: “...if we really want... to protect what’s ours then we have to get involved. We’re not going to protect our treaties and protect what’s

ours unless we get out there and stand up for it...” . Another woman, a grandmother, said: “I think it’s very, very important to vote now, in this day and age, it’s 2004, I think it’s time that people pick up their medicine bundles and come out and start voting”. A young man, a university student, implied that the nationalist explanation was a thing of the past. He said:

“I was raised in a family where Native people always thought of politicians as evil or wicked or they’ll just take away our rights or whatever else, so if we don’t partake in it [voting] that’s just the best way to deal with it, I guess, just not to be there” (M; 28).

However, he now votes, and justifies doing so by saying: “We want to vote for the person who’s least likely to do damage towards First Nations peoples”. Another man in his 40s, active with the Liberal Party, said that “We are a separate people within Canada”, and so we vote “...wherever we see people supporting our ideas and not trying to make drastic change to our rights...”.

It appears, based on our admittedly limited and non-representative sample, that the nationalist argument for refusing to participate in the Canadian electoral process finds relatively little resonance in the city. In fact, for many of those who do vote, they vote precisely in order to protect their Aboriginal rights. Their nationalist feelings, or at least their identification with the notion that Aboriginal people are a separate people, and have rights that need to be defended, and their identification with and pride in their Aboriginal culture, is precisely what leads them to vote. They vote in order to protect their identity as a separate people, and to protect their specifically Aboriginal rights.

While the nationalist explanation for relatively low Aboriginal participation in

the mainstream political process was scarcely mentioned by our respondents, the social exclusion/alienation explanation was very frequently mentioned. A majority of our respondents said that the reason that so many Aboriginal people do not vote is that they feel outside of the system; they feel excluded or alienated or marginalized from the system.⁴ They made comments such as:

"I don't believe they feel they're a part of the rest of society" (F; 47).

"I think Aboriginal people don't feel that they belong" (M; 28).

"...kind of being outside of the mainstream of what's happening" (M; 69).

"...they don't feel like they have anything to do with it, they feel not a part of it" (F; 25).

"...they don't feel connected in any way" (F; 35).

A former Chief, now resident in Winnipeg, told us that:

"First Nations people don't have a sense of ownership of the electoral process. They still think it's the other guys' process, not theirs, so they're more apt to not be involved. It's not our game so they don't get involved".

A significant number of our respondents demonstrated the extent to which Aboriginal people are outside the system by telling us that they themselves, or others that they know, do not vote because they do not know how to vote. For example, a 43 year old man explained his not voting by saying that: "I don't really know where to go". One woman said that:

"A lot of people are isolated and I do mean isolated.... When they come into the city... they feel it's too much, it's overwhelming for them and they do want to get involved but they're very shy because they don't know how..." (F; 55).

A 48 year old woman who is now very politically active described her early years in the city, when she was a young woman: "I just didn't really know where to go... I didn't get enough instructions about where to really go... they should have come to my door". Another woman, also now politically active, said:

"I know some people who have such low self-esteem... who are intimidated... at how to deal with other non-Aboriginal people in the voting system" (F; 41).

Many of the young people that we interviewed seemed particularly outside the electoral system. One 20 year old, when asked by his friend, Ed Keeper, "What do you think of when you hear the word 'politics'?", asked that the tape be stopped in order to ask Ed: "What is politics?". When asked if he ever voted he replied:

"No. There's no need for me to vote, I guess. First of all, I don't even know what's going on with the voting and stuff like that. I don't have no information, so there's no point in voting, I guess".

An 18 year old, when asked if he ever voted, replied: "No, never really heard about it". A 25 year old replied to the question, "What do you think of when you hear the word 'politics'?", with "Ah, don't really care. Do I vote? No, I don't. Because I don't wanna". After some additional

4. We have asked *all* of our respondents why Aboriginal people tend to vote less in the mainstream political process than non-Aboriginal people. It could be argued that only those who do not vote can explain why they do not vote. The responses of Aboriginal people who *do* vote could be seen as mere speculation. However, we hold to the view that urban Aboriginal people—those who do not vote in mainstream elections and those who do—have valuable insights into Aboriginal voting behaviour.

questions, including one about the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, he said in frustration: "What? Am I supposed to know about this stuff? Really? I never even voted, in my life.... I don't care about no Chiefs. I don't. I care about myself, care about my friends... that's all I care about". A 22 year old woman said about many of her friends that: "...they don't really care, they've got other priorities in life, and that is not one of them".

These young people seem to be completely outside of the political process. It is of course important to note that there has been a precipitous drop in voting among all young people, not just young Aboriginal people. And it is interesting to note that a number of our other respondents, including people who are now politically active, told us that when they were young not only did they not vote, but they:

"...didn't have a clue what was going on in the world" (F; 32).

The fact that young people, including young Aboriginal people, are particularly distant from the political process does not necessarily mean that they always will be.

Some said that many Aboriginal people see the system as one designed by and for non-Aboriginal people, and they feel that there is little point in their being involved. They feel a sense of futility:

"I guess I figure it doesn't make a difference... because we're the minority and if we all voted it wouldn't matter because it would be so small" (F; 50).

"I guess because they feel their voice is never going to be heard, it doesn't matter, I won't make a difference" (F; 32).

"I think they don't vote because they think it doesn't make any difference" (M; 76).

"It's because they think, what use, what's the use, you know" (F; 25).

"Hopelessness... what difference?" (M; 50s).

"I think that they feel that their vote is not going to make a difference and just the general apathy toward the whole political process, that the government is not really working for the people" (F; 45).

"It doesn't make any difference to them. They have a crappy life; it's never going to change; and why is my vote gonna count, that's the attitude" (F; 47).

Feelings of futility about voting in a system that is alien and unresponsive are reinforced when Aboriginal people are mistreated when they try to vote. One respondent, experienced in political campaigns, said: "I've been at the polls, I've taken people to the polls, and we've gotten such disrespect from the people, you know, 'who are you?'" She described the campaign of an Aboriginal woman running for City Council in Winnipeg's North End some years ago:

"All of the poll clerks at [an inner city school with a very high Aboriginal population] were White middle class people, and we were taking elders to vote... and they got treated with such derision by the poll clerks, 'Speak English'.... I've been involved in many elections; I've seen it over and over again".

In other cases this manifests itself as feelings of distrust:

"...people don't trust the politicians, the government, eh? We've always been mistrustful. We're still dealing with things like treaties" (F; 49).

A number of our respondents said that they never vote in Winnipeg, but they either do vote or have in the past voted on their home reserves. One 41 year old man said: "I vote for my Chief on the reserve", but when asked whether he votes in the

city said “No, because I have no understanding of voting for them”. A 25 year old man, who does not vote, when asked if he knows anyone who does vote replied yes, on the reserve, but added “I don’t know anybody who votes here, in the city”. A 25 year old woman said: “...I think there is a gaining of interest for people to vote on their First Nation (her emphasis). They’re interested in First Nations politics but when it comes to provincial and federal government politics in regards to elections and political parties I think there is a lot less interest”. This is consistent with the literature, which shows that voter participation rates are higher in many First Nations elections than in provincial or federal elections (Bedford and Pobihushchy, 1995; Guerin, 2003).

Why is this? We think the explanation is that many Aboriginal people do not feel alienated from politics in their home communities, because it is a more face-to-face process in which they personally know the contestants. A former Chief told us that “...in Band elections voter turnout is usually high, and that probably can be attributed to, it’s close to home and it directly affects them”. A current Chief, long involved in Aboriginal politics, said that in First Nations communities:

“They know the person, and they know that they can do something if they want to. And the other thing is that they know that they’re in control, that they can remove this person if they want to, as opposed to provincial or federal, they really don’t have any control”.

A 35 year old woman, herself a very knowledgeable voter, reiterated the view that some Aboriginal people who do vote on their First Nation, do not vote in the city, and explained it by saying:

“...partly it’s they might not be educated necessarily in mainstream politics. It’s

different in quite a few ways to First Nations politics. It operates differently, and it’s like two separate political entities.... for one, First Nations politics is very localized to the First Nations community. A lot of times... it’s a very small community, usually, like on average say 800 people in a First Nation community. So of course you have access to Chief and Council, you see them possibly on a daily basis and you know them better, you grew up with those people, whereas you come to the city and you don’t know the people who are running, and I guess you might feel some sense of intimidation going and trying to make an appointment with them, or find out where they’re located and then going through all the red tape of having some time to spend with them. And you don’t know them on a personal level”.

Those cases in which Aboriginal people vote in their home communities but not in the city in federal, provincial or city elections, seem to confirm the explanation for non-voting that is rooted in urban Aboriginal peoples’ sense of exclusion from the mainstream political system.

At the same time, however, we were told that in some cases it is the experience of Aboriginal politics, both on and off reserve, that has turned some Aboriginal people off politics. Part of the problem is that urban Aboriginal people are largely ignored by Chiefs’ organizations, which see their sole responsibility as being people on reserve, “...although they receive funding for people who don’t live on reserve”, as one woman pointed out. On at least some reserves, Chief and Council do not operate in an open and democratic fashion.

One woman who is active with Aboriginal women’s organizations, said about

Aboriginal NDP MLAs Eric Robinson, Oscar Lathlin and George Hickes: “I have respect for those men.... but I know there’s Chiefs on reserves... they wouldn’t give you the time of day”. A former Chief himself told us that: “I find that our First Nations governments do very little consultation... only the Chief-in-Council and staff know what’s going on”.

Women in particular are excluded—consistent, as one woman told us, with a “...male-oriented society [which] excludes women”. She added that for women, and especially Aboriginal women’s groups, “We’re treated worse than third world countries in our own country here. It’s like White male, White women, and then the minorities, and then somewhere down below there’s the Native women”. Efforts to challenge such exclusion are all too often, we were told, met with hostility and retribution. As one 63 year old respondent told us:

“No, no, most Aboriginal people don’t follow politics... it’s a matter of their experience. Even with the Chiefs’ organizations, very often the Chief that’s in doesn’t always appreciate ‘back-seat drivers’ or people who have a difference of opinion, so usually if you’re quiet and do your own thing you’re better off than if you’re really involved, especially if you’re on the losing side”.

Another respondent, a long-time inner city activist in a host of Aboriginal organizations, said that:

“...time and time again, there’s retribution on the basis of your association, and we’ve seen people taken advantage politically, and those who lose the political fight are dealt with harshly.... a lot of people walk away from that, eh, a lot of Aboriginal people who are exposed to adversarial circumstances such as this simply don’t want to be involved...” (M; 54).

The political experience on reserves is an important contributing factor in shaping Aboriginal peoples’ attitudes about mainstream political participation. Its impact is contradictory. In the case of many whom we interviewed, reserve politics, with its face-to-face character, is a setting in which political involvement is a comfortable experience. Those running for office are well-known to them, the issues have an immediate impact on their daily lives, and the process is one with which they are familiar. They vote or have voted on reserve. But they do not vote in the city. There, the process is anonymous, the political contestants are unknown to them, and the issues are more removed from their daily experience.

In the case of others, reserve politics has left a bad taste in their mouths. They told us that in their experience, Chiefs and Council are removed from the community and secretive in their way of operating, and in some cases punish those who dare to question or speak out against them. As a result, they are disaffected with politics and disinclined to become involved. In either case, the result is non-voting in the city.

In many cases, respondents referred to what we would describe as an ‘informed cynicism’ as the explanation for many Aboriginal people not voting. One 18 year old woman said: “They just never speak about Aboriginal, they’ll say something, then when it comes down to it, they like to get us to vote for them, they’ll just, like, don’t do it, you know, they won’t come through”. An 18 year old man said much the same: “...they don’t hear what Native people have to say, and they just, you know, do their own thing and build their big high-rises or whatever... kind of drift off and forget about Native people....” A 28 year old man who is a university student says about those Aboriginal people who do not vote in mainstream elections:

"...they know they've been screwed over but they don't want to get involved with it". A woman in her 50s adds: "Why should we participate in that stuff?... For Aboriginal people nothing changes, we're still on the bottom of the barrel". A 57 year old man, long involved in Aboriginal and to some extent non-Aboriginal politics, offers the same explanation:

"It's mostly the fact that governments do not seem to be doing anything substantial for Aboriginal people, I think that's the main reason. No government actually enacts policies that really will change the conditions in our communities. That's the experience of most Aboriginal people".

"It's a system that the rich and the powerful control, essentially", concluded a politically experienced 51 year old woman. Her colleague, present at this interview, chipped in with: "I can't be bothered voting because to me it's a waste of my time. Not once in my life have I ever voted" (F; 46).

There is, among many urban Aboriginal people, a profound sense of the futility of voting in mainstream elections. They do not believe that voting will make a difference in their lives. They know that governments are largely controlled by others, by non-Aboriginal people, by "the rich and powerful", and they know that policies are rarely enacted which accrue to their benefit. This is a cynicism that has roots in their real experience.

For many urban Aboriginal people, their focus is strictly on survival, on making it from one day to the next, and the electoral experience and the possibility of voting is completely beyond their daily experience. "The majority of our people are just struggling with day to day life and really don't have the energy or inclination for politics" (M; 60s). Several

women described being single mothers when they were young, and simply not having any connection with politics. A 32 year old woman said:

"I didn't start living until my last child and that was when I was 25.... I've had a kid since I was 15, so ten years I was raising kids and when I turned 25... that's when it started, I started volunteering in the community".

A 47 year old woman offered this assessment:

"...when you feel dis-empowered, you don't feel you're worth anything and you don't feel you're making a contribution to society so you don't participate. Your basic function in life is to survive. A high percentage of Aboriginal people are barely surviving in our society and there are a lot of issues that they're facing on a day-to-day basis such as poverty, suicide, unemployment, addiction, which prevent them from moving forward. And I think when you have a group in society that's like that... and there's no leadership in terms of how to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots, then nothing really happens and the gap widens and as a result of that I believe the community looks at the system as a very hostile system in which to live".

An understanding of politics, and the development of a sense of voting as a public duty, develops to a considerable extent in the family. Many urban Aboriginal people have grown up in circumstances in which politics was never mentioned. Several of those who do vote in mainstream elections, however, mentioned the role of their families as an explanation. One 64 year old man said that the reason he votes is: "Probably because my grandmother and grandfather would turn over in their graves if I didn't". A 63 year old man ex-

plained his voting in mainstream elections by saying: “I was brought up by my father to be interested in politics, I remember he thought it was very important, he said he fought for democracy and it was something he felt was very important and he brought me up that way”.

A 47 year old woman who votes regularly said: “I remember in the 1960s and early 1970s my parents being involved with the NDP and helping to get a person elected... they got all us kids delivering leaflets door to door”. A 22 year old woman said that she frequently talks with people about politics, “...especially my family, that’s where I get most of my knowledge, they’re kind of like my newspaper, they inform me of what’s going on and they give me their opinions....”. She added: “...whereas a lot of families don’t talk about politics as much”:

“I think it’s a part of their upbringing, their culture, it’s not something they grow up surrounded in, like I was, in politics. They haven’t been giving it much thought, they haven’t really been involved in it a lot when they’re young and growing up. I don’t know, I think it’s just a repetitive cycle so they don’t really hear much about it from the parents or get involved and so it just keeps repeating itself. And I mean, also, I mean throughout history the Aboriginal people really haven’t been given the right to vote or be involved in the political system”.

In all of these various ways and for all of these various reasons, a majority of our respondents told us, many Aboriginal people in Winnipeg’s inner city feel excluded from mainstream society generally, and from the electoral system in particular. The social exclusion explanation for lower levels of Aboriginal voting in mainstream elections was a prominent theme in our interviews.

The observation that voting is correlated with age, level of formal education, and knowledge of political affairs generally – the third of the four broad explanatory streams that we identified in the literature – was borne out in our study. For the women interviewed, seven of the nine who told us that they always vote were 35 years of age or older, and had at least some post-secondary education. For the men, six of the eight who always vote were 35 years of age or older and had at least some post-secondary education. In total, 13 of the 17 (76.5 percent) of the interviewees who told us that they always vote were 35 years of age or older and had at least some post-secondary education.

We interviewed eight university students; six told us that they regularly vote, one does not vote for religious reasons (she is a Jehovah’s Witness), and one 19 year old had only once been eligible to vote and had not voted on that single occasion but intends to in future. One of the students told us that Aboriginal students at the University of Winnipeg talk politics “...all the time. Political subjects are coming up all the time at school, and I don’t think I’ve been more politically aware than since I have been at school”.

4.3 What Could Be Done To Induce More Urban Aboriginal People To Participate in the Mainstream Electoral Process?

Many more urban Aboriginal people would vote if political parties and candidates for office were to make an effort to reach out to them. This was the fourth broad explanatory theme that we identified in the literature, and it was borne out in our interviews. A majority of respondents told us that politicians and parties need to connect with Aboriginal people, need to come into Aboriginal neighbour-

hoods and meet and talk with Aboriginal people in a face-to-face manner:

"I think for my friends, I think they'd get more active if politicians... really tried to connect with the community more..." (F; 22).

"Well, knocking on doors and sitting down with people and talking to them" (F; 45).

"You have to try to find people... harness those votes, on a face-to-face kind of thing" (M; 40s).

"One of the things would be for the politicians to... the more locally involved they are, the more exposure they have to the community, to the people. I think people really warm to that and people don't necessarily warm to seeing someone's face on a billboard and having no connection with them or not being able to speak with them at all" (F; 35).

"...the grassroots people are the people they should be targeting, and being out there and talking to and letting us know who they are" (F; 32).

Aboriginal people feel socially excluded in urban centres, they feel alienated and marginalized from mainstream non-Aboriginal institutions, and because of their history of colonization, many are reluctant to become involved. But our respondents told us that if urban Aboriginal people were to be approached by politicians and political parties, and treated with respect, if they were to be treated as equals, they would become involved.

Aboriginal people need to be treated, one long-time urban resident told us, "...so they feel welcome and involved in political activity". Aboriginal people want to be treated as equals, "...and simply because your skin is brown or you have a funny accent, you need to be accepted as a *complete equal*" (his emphasis) (M; 60s). Another long-time urban resident said much

the same: "If there's perceived caring, if there's perceived interest, then of course people will come out to vote". People feel excluded. "Keep in contact, and let us into the workings of the political process... let us in on some of the political process" (M; 63).

Yet far from letting Aboriginal people into the political process, politicians and political parties, our respondents repeatedly told us, do not even come into Aboriginal communities to meet with Aboriginal people. Referring to politicians, one 32 year old woman—resident in Winnipeg all her life and very knowledgeable about politics—said: "I've never seen anybody [from a political party] in the community". A 49 year old woman, herself politically active, told us that: "The majority of them don't keep in touch with the grassroots people and that's where the voters are.... It's like corporations and big business, it's always them come first". A 41 year old man who has not voted offered an explanation echoed by many of our respondents: "...because nobody comes around to see me at election time".

It is very likely that this is so, at least in part, because of the manner in which political parties organize their election campaigns. The typical electoral strategy is for a party to identify those parts of a constituency in which its candidate got many votes in the previous election, and work to maximize the turnout there, while in those polls in which turnout was relatively low, the typical strategy is to exert little effort. To the extent that this is the case, those neighbourhoods with large Aboriginal populations would be likely to be targeted with little if any political effort.

Yet we were told repeatedly that if they were to be approached, Aboriginal people would participate. If their opinions were to be actively sought on matters of

direct importance to them, Aboriginal people would respond. "If they had town hall meetings on welfare rates, for example, you'd get hundreds of people out. If they had townhall meetings on crime you'd get hundreds of people out...", and the same would be the case if such meetings were to be organized to discuss schools or children, matters of direct concern to urban Aboriginal people (M; 63).

We believe not only that many more Aboriginal people would vote in federal, provincial and municipal elections if they were to be approached by politicians and political parties, but also that significant increases in rates of participation would be achieved if politicians and political parties were to devise different strategies altogether, strategies specifically crafted to reach Aboriginal people. One very knowledgeable 47 year old respondent put it this way:

"Oh yeah... they need to be talking to the grassroots people. And the way you do that isn't the same way you would do it with your average person. I think we need to use a different format in speaking with a group that's disenfranchised".

She works with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and when she meets with Aboriginal people she does so in a sharing circle, and she adds: "...I wouldn't invite them in to tell them what I thought. I would invite them in to hear what they have to say". She uses a different approach, a specifically designed approach, to meet and work with Aboriginal people. In the inner city, Aboriginal people can be mobilized by invitation to collective, cultural events. A long-time inner city activist describes it this way:

"...typically at Friendship Centres having a feast or something or a cultural event or a meal brings people out in great numbers, it just seems to

be that it's legitimate to come out to share in a community experience, and then the voting is something that happens..." (M; 54).

If candidates for political office in constituencies with large Aboriginal populations were to reach out to Aboriginal people in a door-to-door, face-to-face kind of way, Aboriginal people tell us that they would vote. If candidates were to call public meetings to hear Aboriginal peoples' views on matters of importance to them, hundreds of people would turn out, we have been told. And if political parties and candidates were to break from their long-established electoral campaign strategies, and be creative in designing specific strategies to meet and talk with and to hear from Aboriginal people, the results we have been told would be positive.

For example, if a candidate for public office were to organize a meeting of Aboriginal constituents, a meeting which featured a meal and which took place in an Aboriginal cultural context, Aboriginal people would attend. That these things have not been done is evidence that one of the important explanations for the low levels of Aboriginal voting is the lack of 'political effort' by political parties and politicians.

Even more likely to improve the Aboriginal electoral turnout would be the presence of Aboriginal candidates for elected office. Chris Henderson, candidate for Mayor of Winnipeg in 2002, generated considerable Aboriginal involvement. Several respondents told us that they became involved politically because they heard that there was an Aboriginal candidate for Mayor. Henderson himself described the effect on Aboriginal people of his candidacy:

"... I meet young Aboriginal people and they tell me, like, wow; I saw you on TV

or I read about you in the newspaper or I heard you on radio and I was so impressed that, you know, I've never ever voted in my life, I've never had an interest in politics, but as a result of hearing you or seeing you, I went out and voted for you, and I told all my friends to vote for you".

Henderson told us that Aboriginal people will vote, but some targeted effort is needed. A candidate seeking Aboriginal votes should: go door to door; hold neighbourhood barbecues; go to the local bingo hall; and say to Aboriginal people that she/he would "...very much encourage your input and participation".

Even the young people involved in the focus group session at an inner city community centre, most of them almost completely alienated from the dominant culture and from the political process, told us that they were delighted to be asked their opinions during the focus group sessions, and if they were to be asked their opinions by politicians, and especially if Aboriginal politicians were to run for office, they would become involved.

The Liberal Party of Canada is beginning to exert some political effort, although theirs is almost exclusively an elite-based approach; it is not aimed at inner city Aboriginal people. The Liberals have established an Aboriginal Peoples' Commission whose purpose is "...encouraging the active participation of Aboriginal people at all levels within the Party". The Commission was established 13 years ago by Paul Martin, and was called a "...big step forward for us..." by one respondent, who added: "I believe that Paul Martin is very sensitive to our needs".

Although the Commission has been relatively inactive for most of that time, its level of activity has picked up lately. For example, in early November, 2003, an

Aboriginal fund-raiser event was held in Winnipeg for the Liberal Party. It attracted 200 people, most of them Aboriginal, most of them the Aboriginal elite. One respondent active in the Liberal Party described the event, and in so doing revealed much of the Liberal Party strategy for recruiting Aboriginal people:

"...we had the elites out, the elites being of course the current political leaders—very few business people from within the Aboriginal community by the way—but nonetheless political and organizational leaders, and young people, students often, aspiring within that political spectrum... there has been some movement in that regard, I mean, six, eight years ago there wouldn't have been such an event, so there is participation. Whether it has much effect on the overall voter turnout is yet I think to be seen. I expect it will influence it somewhat, but... my guess is that out of the 200 people who purchased tickets for this event, they might influence four to five others who will vote... that's a guess". (M; 54)

This is a traditional Liberal Party strategy, honed over the years in various immigrant communities—target the elite, the leadership within a community, and hope that their influence trickles down to others in that community. Little or no effort has been made by the Liberal Party to mobilize directly the bulk of the inner city Aboriginal population.

The Aboriginal leadership, many of the Chiefs for example—"we have some very strong Liberals in the Chiefs", one Liberal Party respondent told us—have responded to this strategy for purely pragmatic reasons. The Liberals are the party in office at the federal level and the party most likely to continue to be in office. As one respondent told us: "The Liberals are in there and in there to stay". Two other

non-Liberal Party respondents described the Aboriginal leadership affiliation with the Liberals in these terms:

“Well, federally, the NDP will never get into power, unless it’s in a minority situation and I guess most [Aboriginal] people... they expect the Liberals are going to be in power.... It was a calculated strategy... a lot of people running for the Liberals” (M; 57).

“I know there are lots of the Aboriginal leadership that are Liberals but part of it is that it’s not an ideological kind of commitment. It’s a kind of a pragmatic commitment, you know, you have to be in those places where the power is” (F; 51).

A significant component of the Liberal Party’s Aboriginal strategy is its focus on young Aboriginal people currently in or recently graduated from university. For example, the early November fund-raiser was organized by young people, in return for which their \$900 delegate fee to the Liberal Convention was paid. Some 30-35 young Aboriginal people from Manitoba were sent to the Liberal Convention by this method.

Some of our younger interviewees have responded very positively to the Liberal Party strategy. One 32 year old woman attended a Liberal Party function, heard Paul Martin speak, and informed us that: “he hugged me too, shook my hand and hugged me”. She is voting Liberal, even though, as she put it: “As an inner city person I realize NDP’s probably for me but yet I find myself voting for Liberals...”. A female university student told us that she is now supporting the Liberals. Her explanation is that “...because of Paul Martin...” we have hopes “...and I would vote for him because of that, and also because he had an elder, you know, when he was being sworn in as Prime Minister... and it was the first time...”.

We believe that what is happening is that young Aboriginal people, particularly those with post-secondary education, are responding to the fact that they are being treated with respect, that they are being included. Many of our respondents told us that if they were asked to vote, in face-to-face fashion, they would vote. Many told us that they do not vote because nobody reaches out to them.

The Liberal Party appears to be reaching out to a particular stratum of the Aboriginal community – the leadership, and university-educated youth – and many in that stratum are responding positively. They are doing so largely for pragmatic reasons. As one young male university student put it to us: “A lot of [Aboriginal] people are starting to put the pieces together, they’re starting... to see pragmatically how society works”. The Liberal Party, for similarly pragmatic reasons, is starting to see how society works in terms of the potential voting power of a rapidly growing Aboriginal population. “The Liberal Party needs Native people”, said this respondent.

All parties do. The Liberals are having some success because they are exerting some political effort, and because they are seen by pragmatic Aboriginal leaders and youth as the governing party.

Many of our respondents feel very differently about the new Conservative Party. As one female university student put it: “...the Alliance (sic) Party would not be favourable to us, there’s a lot of ‘Cowboy Bobs’ in there”. Another young woman said about the Conservative Party: “...that’s just money; we don’t have money”. Numerous other respondents expressed similar views.

In the early 1980s the provincial NDP government took steps similar to those

the Liberal Party is now taking . They created an Aboriginal Caucus, and many bright young university-educated Aboriginal people became involved. One of those people described what happened this way:

“Yeah, I was part of that, and again, there was some resistance by the Party to that and then they used to water down our resolutions. It died out because of that. Some of the people that were committed just went.... It petered out. There was some resistance by some people in the Party. It’s OK to have gender policies, like women, and labour, but policies on racial grounds, or an Aboriginal caucus, there was resistance to it” (M; 57).

He described a similar process now taking place in the Liberal Party:

“I know some people who are involved in there and they have the same problems as we did with the Aboriginal Caucus. You have to fight your own Party... fight your way in, and then fight once you get in”.

The Liberal Party, in other words, will have to deliver in policy terms in order to attract growing numbers of Aboriginal supporters. However, there appears not to be much in the Liberal Party approach for urban Aboriginal people, a significant proportion of whom are poor. It is an elite strategy. As one of our respondents, a Liberal Party and inner city activist, put it:

“Our political system is made up of elites, really, elites who participate, elites who stand guard over what governments and what policies and what benefits are decided upon, and many people at the lower end of the income scale who can’t afford the fund-raisers and can’t afford the memberships and the delegate fees and the contributions don’t really have a voice, and frankly are probably

disenchanted by [the fact that] there’s a barrier to participation in the political process” (M; 54).

It appears to be the elite of the Aboriginal community who are being consciously attracted to the Liberal Party.

We draw two conclusions from the Liberal Party Aboriginal strategy and Aboriginal peoples’ response to it. One is that the exertion of ‘political effort’ by a party can succeed in attracting some Aboriginal people into political involvement. Many of our respondents told us of their positive responses to both symbolic and tangible efforts exerted by the Liberals. A second conclusion, however, is that because this strategy is so deliberately elite-focused, it is unlikely to yield much benefit to low-income urban Aboriginal people. For that to happen, ‘political effort’ would need to be targeted not at the Aboriginal elite, but precisely at low-income inner city Aboriginal people. How might this be done?

Several of our respondents suggested the need for educational initiatives that are targeted at low-income inner city Aboriginal people, and that focus on promoting and developing an understanding of politics. For example, one 27 year old woman said: “First of all education... how voting works, not just the logistics of going down on election day and voting, but how it actually works... realistic education about how democracy actually works”. A 25 year old woman advocated the development of:

“...some way for people in the inner city... and Aboriginal people all over Winnipeg that could really benefit from learning about politics... teaching those people about the importance of who is in power.... If there was some way you could get the regular Aboriginal person to learn and be interested it would be very good”.

And there is evidence, we believe, that low-income inner city Aboriginal people would respond positively to such an initiative.

Our focus group session with inner city Aboriginal youth, most of whom are largely unaware of the political process, drew a very positive response. One 18 year old told us that the focus group was the first time he had *ever* talked about political matters, and he enjoyed it. “This I like, what this guy’s [one of the authors who was present at the focus group] doing, it’s a really smart idea”.

To us, this suggests a latent and very significant potential for an imaginatively-designed political education initiative. Similarly, a woman who is a university student described attending the forum at which the City of Winnipeg’s urban Aboriginal strategy was released, a forum attended by large numbers of Aboriginal people, many of whom lined up at two microphones to speak. She said: “It was great and I just wish it could have gone on... for a couple of days... we need more time with that kind of thing”. For many urban Aboriginal people, there is no political space in which to talk about the political issues that interest and affect them.

Similarly, young Aboriginal people respond well to opportunities created in their communities, and, consistent with the literature that finds a strong correlation between young peoples’ community involvement and their propensity to vote, these appear to lead in some cases to increased levels of political interest and awareness.

An 18 year old respondent had been a participant in the Youth Opportunity Project (YOP), an inner city program aimed at getting youth involved and ex-

posing them to job opportunities. This led to her volunteering for Chris Henderson during his Mayoralty campaign: “I heard him speak once and he seemed to really want to help, and that really affected me”.

Another 18 year old got a job with the Youth Advisory Committee associated with the Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA). This caused him to begin to think about neighbourhood issues, and gave him the opportunity to design a youth project and make a presentation to the SNA Board to get approval. He is the 18 year old who liked talking about political issues, which he did for the first time ever, at our focus group session. Again, this suggests to us the very significant potential for increased Aboriginal involvement in the mainstream political process.

If Aboriginal people themselves were to begin to educate and mobilize inner city Aboriginal people around the importance of political involvement, and particularly the importance of voting, we believe—based on the evidence gleaned from our interviews—that inner city Aboriginal people would respond positively. Inner city Aboriginal people are telling us that if somebody reached out to them to invite them directly and personally to participate in the mainstream political process, they would participate. The best way for this to happen is for Aboriginal people themselves to undertake this kind of voter mobilization, much as was done in the voter registration drives of the civil rights movement.

Also, more Aboriginal people would vote if there were more Aboriginal candidates. This came out very clearly in our interviews. One young woman in her early 30s told us that “...last year I voted for someone because he was an Aboriginal person running for Mayor and I thought that was the greatest thing”. A 30 year old

woman told us that if there more Aboriginal candidates, "...then you'd see more people... you look at Chris Henderson... a lot of people came out". A 45 year old woman told us that more Aboriginal people would come out to vote "...if we should be so lucky as to have an Aboriginal person run in our area...".

It is our opinion that the question may soon be, not, 'why do urban Aboriginal people not vote in mainstream elections?', but rather, 'who will they vote for?' Many urban Aboriginal people have told us that they would vote if someone were to ask them to vote. We believe that Aboriginal people themselves should, and could, seize this opportunity to reach out to urban Aboriginal people on a face-to-face basis and engage them around the issues that matter to them.

We believe, in short, that the urban Aboriginal vote can in fact be mobilized with the exertion of some political effort. And to the extent that the proportion of Aboriginal people who go to university continues to grow, the evidence is that the urban Aboriginal vote will correspondingly grow.

University students and those with university educations are much more likely to vote than those who have not attended post-secondary education. We think it likely that urban Aboriginal people are soon going to come bursting into electoral politics as education levels increase, as Aboriginal people begin to organize themselves around political issues, and as political parties and politicians come

to realize that the demographics are such that the Aboriginal vote is significant, and that it can be mobilized if political effort is exerted.

Will Aboriginal people use the political potential available to them to advance the interests of the still very large numbers of urban Aboriginal people whose lives are consumed simply by the struggle to survive? Or will the politics that they engage in take the elite form that many of our respondents told us characterizes all politics, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike?

The political effort exerted by the Liberal Party to date has certainly taken an openly elite form, aimed at attracting those in the Aboriginal community who are economically advantaged and who are university-educated. Nevertheless, there are large numbers of urban Aboriginal people whose objective circumstances are such that a more egalitarian form of politics would be very much to their advantage.

The form that Aboriginal electoral politics takes in the near future-elite-based, or more egalitarian-remains to be seen. Our hypothesis, however, based on the results of our interviews, is that in the very near future, urban Aboriginal people and the urban Aboriginal vote are going to become a significant part of the urban political landscape in cities which, like Winnipeg, have large Aboriginal populations.

Whether this will benefit urban Aboriginal people, and particularly the relatively high proportion of urban Aboriginal people who live in disadvantaged circumstances, is an open question.

Conclusion:

It appears from our interview evidence that Aboriginal people in Winnipeg's inner city, like Aboriginal people in Canada generally, vote less on average than non-Aboriginal people in mainstream elections. It is also the case, however, that Aboriginal people in Winnipeg and in Manitoba have considerable *potential* electoral power. They constitute a majority of the population in two provincial constituencies, and a significant minority — at least one in six — in another 15 provincial constituencies, of which six are in Winnipeg.

This is enough to matter: in six of the last nine provincial elections, the winning party had a majority of three or fewer seats out of 57 (Elections Manitoba data). And Aboriginal people constitute a significant minority in two federal ridings, both in Winnipeg, and three City of Winnipeg wards. If Aboriginal people in Manitoba and in Winnipeg were to begin to vote at the same rate that non-Aboriginal people do, political parties and candidates for federal, provincial and municipal office might find it in their self-interest to offer policy inducements and, potentially, other institutional changes, to secure their vote. The result could be that the socio-economic circumstances of Aboriginal people would improve, and that the political opportunity structure available to Aboriginal people would open up.

It would be a mistake, however, to *overestimate* the likely political benefits to Aboriginal people, and especially low-income Aboriginal people, as the result of increased Aboriginal voting in federal, provincial and municipal elections. Women, for example, vote in significant numbers, and constitute more than one-half of the Canadian population. Yet it could not be said that women are politically powerful, nor that political parties have significantly

changed their structures, forms of practice or agendas to attract women's votes. And women continue to be found disproportionately among the ranks of those in poverty.

That Aboriginal people in Winnipeg's inner city do not now vote in mainstream elections as much as non-Aboriginal people appears to be attributable largely to their sense of being excluded from the dominant culture and institutions of society, the product of the impact of colonization on Aboriginal peoples generally. In addition, it appears from our interview evidence that political parties and politicians exert relatively little effort to attract the Aboriginal vote in Winnipeg's inner city, thus reinforcing Aboriginal peoples' social exclusion.

The results of our interviews, however, lead us to think that the voting practices of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg could soon change. There is a strong, positive correlation among our interview respondents between level of formal education, and likelihood of voting in mainstream elections, and the numbers of Aboriginal people attending post-secondary educational institutions are growing. Perhaps more importantly, many of our respondents made it very clear to us that if they were approached by political parties and asked to vote, they would be likely to do so, and if Aboriginal candidates were to be running for office, they would be even more likely to do so.

Given the significance of their numbers in so many electoral districts, it seems to us to be likely — if for no other reason than self-interest — that political parties and politicians will start to court the Aboriginal vote, and that more Aboriginal candidates will be sought and will emerge in particular electoral districts.

We can expect that Aboriginal people in Winnipeg will *not* vote as a bloc, although our interviews suggest that most are unlikely to vote for right-of-centre political parties. At the federal level this appears to be the case for ideological reasons, while at the provincial level the 1995 vote-rigging scandal is likely to have further turned Aboriginal people against the Conservative Party (Smith, 2003, p.233).

Some Aboriginal people are likely to vote Liberal, and the federal Liberal Party is already exerting some political effort to attract Aboriginal voters, particularly the Aboriginal elite and post-secondary students. Others are likely to vote NDP—at least provincially—on the grounds, our interviews suggest, that the NDP is deemed by some to be the party most likely to respond positively to urban Aboriginal peoples' socio-economic needs.

In Manitoba, Aboriginal parties have been formed—in some cases genuinely arising from the Aboriginal community; in others, being artificially created by non-Aboriginal people to split the Aboriginal vote (Smith, 2003)—but they have so far had little electoral success.

Whichever party Aboriginal people vote for, *if* they begin to vote at a greater rate than is now the case, political parties will find it in their self-interest to vie for their vote. Aboriginal issues are then more likely to rise in importance on parties' agendas for action, and parties may modify their internal practices to reflect and accommodate Aboriginal members. The key is voter turnout—votes are the currency in which political parties trade.

The urban Aboriginal vote in Winnipeg is likely to increase not only because of rising Aboriginal educational levels and increased political effort by parties pursu-

ing their self-interest, but also because there are steps that the Aboriginal community itself could take to increase voter turnout. The inner city Aboriginal community may take these steps because it is in their interests to do so—the evidence strongly suggests that increased political participation leads to greater socio-economic equality.

An educational effort undertaken by the Aboriginal community and aimed at making inner city Aboriginal people more aware of and knowledgeable about the electoral process would be likely to increase the rate of Aboriginal voting. Numerous interview respondents told us, and our focus group with young Aboriginal people made especially clear, that many inner city Aboriginal people would respond positively to initiatives aimed at increasing their knowledge of the electoral process.

It is in the interests of non-Aboriginal people to support efforts leading to increased rates of Aboriginal participation in the mainstream political process. The legitimacy of a political system is likely to be eroded if a distinctive group of people as numerically and proportionately large as the Aboriginal population in Manitoba and in Winnipeg, chooses disproportionately to withhold its vote.

To prevent this erosion of legitimacy will require changes to the current political system that respond to and that reflect and embody, the needs and experiences of Aboriginal people. This is a process that we believe may soon begin in Winnipeg if, as we hypothesize will be the case, urban Aboriginal people soon begin to increase the rate at which they vote in federal, provincial and municipal elections.

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