



Education and Awareness Campaign — First Nations Voter Turnout

In December 2004, the Chiefs passed Resolution 89/2004 and called on the Assembly of First Nations to pursue a dialogue with the appropriate parties regarding an education or awareness campaign for First Nations people about the significance of voting. To that end, the AFN has initiated discussions with Elections Canada and hosted a discussion forum on First Nations Voter Turnout in Winnipeg on September 20-21, 2005.

The Canadian national political system compels us to find ways to work with national political parties that are interested in political reform and working with us to raise the awareness of First Nations issues.

While there is high voter turnout in First Nations community elections, First Nations people tend not to vote in federal elections. The result of non-involvement, as has been seen most recently in the last federal election, is that First Nations issues and First Nations people are too often ignored by politicians and the media. First Nations are ignored with impunity and far too often this has disastrous effects on First Nations communities, First Nations families and the lives of First Nations people.

Many Canadians have very little exposure to life on a reserve, and often they are not aware of the critical and at times tragic conditions facing First Nations people. This is also true of some First Nations people living in urban areas, and we need to keep all First Nations citizens in mind regardless of where they live when we develop First Nations strategies.

The political voices of First Nations people should be heard. Increasing the participation of First Nations peoples in elections is not simply an end in itself – it is a way to raise political awareness of First Nations issues

and, ideally, to compel progress on First Nations priorities. This is especially important in a minority government situation because the country could be facing an election at any time. Therefore it is critically important that we educate First Nations people about the importance of voting and why their vote can matter.

In general, the political landscape in Canada is changing. There has been a general decline in voter turnout. Canadian youth are not fully engaged in the political process and national political parties are struggling to maintain the attention of all Canadians. This underscores the reason why we must counter this trend with First Nations because there are more than 60 federal ridings where Aboriginal voters count for more than 5% of the vote.

First Nations issues have been generally ignored because we don't exercise our influence. Less than half of eligible First Nations voters actually vote in federal elections. This is in spite of the fact that we use other mainstream institutions like universities, industry, the justice system and sometimes even various political parties.

The AFN, as the national political organization representing First Nations, actively engages with the government of the day and with Parliament in general. The AFN attends and presents evidence to House and Senate committees, makes annual Pre-Budget Submissions, and directly lobbies the Prime Minister and Members of Parliament. Notwithstanding these efforts, there is always more that can be done – for instance, finding ways to elect more First Nation Members of Parliament. First Nations must take advantage of all opportunities to raise the profile of our issues.

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