

Federal Voter Turnout in First Nations Reserves (2004–2011)

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Introduction

There has been little research dedicated to federal voter turnout among the Canadian Aboriginal population. One of the reasons for this is that measuring voter participation among specific groups identified by a socio-demographic feature is not an easy task. Elections Canada does not collect any information that would identify Aboriginal electors.

To date, two main approaches have been developed for estimating voter participation among Aboriginal electors. The first one is to conduct surveys and look at self-declared voting among those who identify themselves as Aboriginal people.¹ One of the main advantages of this approach is that it provides individual-based information such as values and attitudes, which allows for more complex analyses on the determinants of voting. A recent study conducted by Patrick Fournier and Peter John Loewen examined these questions using Elections Canada survey data from 2004 to 2011.²

The second approach is to look at official turnout rates in reserves by identifying polling divisions that best correspond to their geographic boundaries. This aggregative analysis is ideal for identifiable geographic clusters like First Nations reserves, but it cannot account for the Aboriginal population distributed

outside of reserves, including the large proportion living in urban centres.³

In 2003, Daniel Guérin examined on-reserve turnout rates using this geographic approach following the 2000 general election.⁴ Building on this analysis, the current research note looks at federal turnout rates on First Nations reserves for the period between the 2004 and 2011 federal general elections.

Methodology

Elections Canada's methodological approach to collecting geographic data for Aboriginal populations has evolved over time. In 2004 and 2006, identifying reserves involved combining data from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), Natural Resources Canada and Statistics Canada. Elections Canada then turned to returning officers to indicate the polling divisions that best correspond to Aboriginal communities.

In 2008, pursuant to the development of computerized geocoding applications, Elections Canada began using actual maps of reserves provided by AANDC, superimposed onto maps of polling divisions.

¹ Elections Canada has been using oversamples of Aboriginal electors living both on and off reserve in its post-election surveys since 2004.

² Fournier, Patrick, and Peter John Loewen. 2011. *Aboriginal Electoral Participation in Canada*. Ottawa: Elections Canada. See

www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/part/abel&document=index&lang=e.

³ As of 2006, 40 percent of the First Nations population lived on reserve. According to Statistics Canada's most recent projections, this proportion is increasing rapidly mainly due to high birth rates.

⁴ See Daniel Guérin. 2003. "Aboriginal Participation in Canadian Federal Elections: Trends and Implications." *Electoral Insight* (November). Ottawa: Elections Canada. See www.elections.ca/res/eim/article_search/article.asp?id=22&lang=e.

The table below provides the number of polls on reserve that have been identified through both methods described above. It appears that the computerized (geocoding) method used in 2008 and 2011 resulted in a more comprehensive database.

Table 1: First Nations On-Reserve Poll Counts and Methodology (2004–2011)

General Election	On-reserve Polls	Data Collection Method
2004	519	Returning officers
2006	602	Returning officers
2008	1352	AANDC/Geocoding
2011	1353	AANDC/Geocoding

It should be noted that, subject to the location and availability of polling sites, reserve boundaries for the purpose of voting do not necessarily form a clean line. For instance:

- Reserve residents may be assigned to vote outside of the reserve.
- People living near a reserve may be directed to vote in the reserve.

Also, while some polling divisions may be completely contained within a reserve, the majority are only partially contained. In 2004 and 2006, returning officers were asked to identify any polling division serving at least 90 percent of Aboriginal electors. With the geocoding approach, all polling divisions that overlapped a reserve, in whole or in part, were kept in the analysis.

In this study, turnout rate is calculated by dividing the number of valid votes by the number of electors on the final lists of electors. However, the number of electors on the list can vary over time, across regions, and also based on certain socio-demographic features. In the case of electors living on reserve, it is important to keep two considerations in mind. First, the vast majority of reserves are located in rural and Northern areas, where registration rates are typically lower. Secondly, the median age in the Aboriginal population is 27 years old, compared to 40 years old for the general population. For a variety of reasons, youth electors are less likely to be registered (around 75 percent among 18- to 24-year-olds, compared to 92 percent and over in older groups).

Consequently, to the extent that registration rates are lower in reserves, the turnout rates presented in this study are likely to be somewhat overestimated.

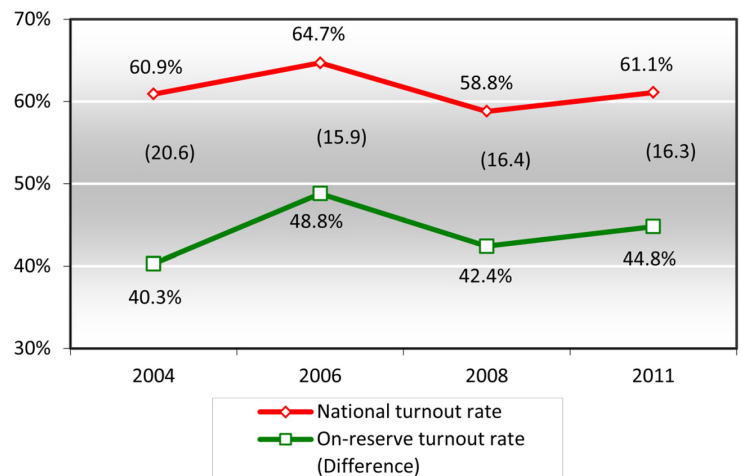
However, relying on the number of registered electors remains the most sensible approach in the absence of official on-reserve population counts.

On-reserve vs. National Turnout Rates

Since 2004, voter turnout⁵ among the Canadian population has remained relatively stable, fluctuating within 3.3 points around an average of 61.4 percent. In contrast, the average turnout rate observed on First Nations reserves is 44.0 percent, which corresponds to a difference of 17.4 percentage points when compared to the national average. From one election to another, the gap is highest in 2004, at 20.5 points, and flatlines at around 16 points from 2006 to 2011.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the turnout trend on reserve closely follows the national trend. The similarities suggest that on-reserve electors are affected in a similar way by the same contextual factors, specific to each election. This assumption is generally supported by Fournier and Loewen (2011)⁶ who, analyzing post-election survey data from 2004 to 2011, concluded that turnout among Aboriginal Canadians is driven by the same factors as in the

Figure 1: Voter Turnout—On-reserve vs. National (2004–2011)



Note: Turnout calculated using the number of electors on the final lists of electors as the denominator.

⁵ Turnout is calculated using the number of electors on the final lists of electors as the denominator. This approach is used to ensure consistency and comparability over time.

⁶ Fournier, Patrick, and Peter John Loewen. 2011. *Aboriginal Electoral Participation in Canada*.

general population. Also of note, the gap of 16 to 21 percent observed between the national turnout rates and on-reserve turnout rates is consistent with the 20-point gap found in surveys (although surveys include off-reserve and urban Aboriginal populations and not only on-reserve populations).

On-reserve Turnout by Province and Territory

The rates of on-reserve turnout by province and territory are presented in Table 2, with the right-hand column showing the pooled results of the last four elections combined.⁷

Table 2: On-reserve Turnout by Province and Territory (2004–2011)

Province/Territory	2004 (%)	2006 (%)	2008 (%)	2011 (%)	Pooled Average (%)
Canada (national)	60.9	64.7	58.8	61.1	61.4
On-reserve polls	40.3	48.8	42.4	44.8	44.0
Newfoundland & Labrador	29.6	45.6	25.8	31.3	34.3
Prince Edward Island	48.9	73.2	63.5	58.2	60.9
Nova Scotia	29.9	44.4	48.4	49.5	46.6
New Brunswick	36.1	45.6	43.6	44.5	43.0
Quebec	26.2	26.6	27.0	30.2	27.8
Ontario	42.3	52.0	42.0	46.3	45.3
Manitoba	36.9	51.5	37.6	37.6	40.3
Saskatchewan	44.6	58.2	39.7	46.4	45.5
Alberta	32.9	45.6	30.8	32.8	34.3
British Columbia	54.2	52.7	48.0	48.6	49.0
Yukon	N/A	50.2	46.8	69.2	57.0
Northwest Territories	47.6	51.6	43.2	46.7	49.3
Nunavut ^a	-	-	-	-	-

^a There are no First Nations reserves identified in Nunavut.

Across the entire period, the 2004 and 2011 elections are most similar in terms of both national and on-reserve turnout rates. It can be noted that Atlantic Canada had generally lower turnout rates in 2004, while Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and the Prairies all peaked in 2006. When comparing 2008 and 2011 alone, it is worth noting that turnout went up in all provinces and territories except Manitoba, where it remained unchanged, and Prince Edward Island, where it went down by 5.3 points. The greatest increase observed

between 2008 and 2011 was 22.4 percentage points in Yukon.

When looking at the pooled results by province, the turnout rate is much higher for reserves located in Prince Edward Island than for reserves in any other province or territory. At 60.9 percent, it is just one half of a percentage point lower than the national pooled average (61.4 percent). Yukon also comes relatively high at 57.0 percent.

Conversely, reserves located in Quebec obtain the lowest pooled score at 27.8 percent, which is almost 34 points below the national average. Other provinces at the lower end include Newfoundland and Labrador and Alberta (both at 34.3 percent). Together, these

three provinces stand out as having the most pronounced deficits in terms of on-reserve turnout for the entire period. New Brunswick (43.0 percent) and Manitoba (40.3 percent) also show pooled turnout rates that are below the average of 44.0 percent.

⁷ The pooled average was measured by dividing the combined number of votes for all four elections by the combined number of registered electors over the same period.

On-reserve Turnout by Electoral District

Overall, 114 of the 308 electoral districts (37 percent) contained polls on First Nations reserves in 2011. While the previous section looked at provinces and territories as a whole, this section looks at variations within provinces by electoral district. The turnout rates reported are for the 2011 general election and correspond to the on-reserve polls in each riding.

To get a general overview of how turnout rates vary across the country, one option is to look at the standard deviations between ridings in each province, as shown in Table 3. A first observation is that most of the larger provinces show significant variation in on-reserve turnout rates, while smaller provinces tend to have less variation between ridings.

Beyond this general observation, a few provinces draw particular attention. Ontario, which has a relatively high average on-reserve turnout rate (46.3 percent) and a large number of polls on reserve (185), has a relatively low variation (standard deviation of 7.2). In other words, on-reserve turnout rates in Ontario were consistently high in 2011. In New Brunswick, the on-reserve average turnout rate was even higher (56.2 percent) but an exceptionally large variation (standard deviation of 12.6) indicates that the situation

was far from being consistent. The variation is most pronounced among the reserves located in Quebec (standard deviation of 17.5), where turnout rates range from 10.5 percent to 58.4 percent.

There was very little change in standard deviation from 2008 to 2011 (-2.2 in Nova Scotia, -2.0 in Saskatchewan and +1.1 in Manitoba; all others were within ± 1.0).

From 2008 to 2011, turnout went up in 68 of the 114 ridings with polls on reserve (60 percent; average increase of 5.8 points) while it went down in 44 others (39 percent; average decrease of 2.8 points). The change was null in only two electoral districts (Peace River and British Columbia Southern Interior).

As shown in Table 4, 45 percent of all ridings with polls on reserve had an increase above the average increase of 2.3 points, while a small majority (56 percent) remained under the average increase.

It can also be noted that about one in five ridings with polls on reserve (18 percent) turned out in a proportion that remained within a range of plus or minus one percentage point, denoting relative stability.

Table 3: Variation of On-reserve Turnout Within Electoral Districts, by Provinces (2011)

Province/Territory	Electoral Districts (n)	On-reserve Polls (n)	Lowest Turnout Rate (%)	Highest Turnout Rate (%)	Average Turnout Rate(%)	Standard Deviation (%)
All EDs with reserves	114	1352	10.5	73.9	44.8	12.6
Newfoundland & Labrador	2	2	30.3	33.3	31.3	1.5
Prince Edward Island	3	6	56.5	59.9	58.2	1.4
Nova Scotia	9	39	37.5	67.2	49.5	8.7
New Brunswick	7	31	19.2	56.2	44.5	12.6
Quebec	15	50	10.5	58.4	30.2	17.5
Ontario	23	185	33.1	56.9	46.3	7.2
Manitoba	6	101	20.6	49.6	37.6	9.0
Saskatchewan	12	210	32.8	73.9	46.4	10.3
Alberta	9	116	27.5	61.9	32.8	10.6
British Columbia	26	607	28.1	58.9	48.6	5.7
Yukon	1	3	69.2	69.2	69.2	-
Northwest Territories	1	2	46.7	46.7	46.7	-
Nunavut ^a	-	-	-	-	-	-

^a There are no First Nations reserves identified in Nunavut.

Table 4: On-reserve Turnout Change by Electoral District (2008–2011)

2008–2011 Turnout Change (percentage points)	-5 or less	From -5 to -1	From -1 to +1	From +1 to +2.3	From +2.3 to +5	From +5 to +10	Over +10
Proportion of electoral districts with on-reserve polls	10%	17%	18%	11%	18%	11%	16%

When looking at the detailed results reported in the appended table, the following ridings had a substantial on-reserve turnout increase:

- Nova Scotia: Cape Breton–Canso (23.7 points)
- Saskatchewan: Saskatoon–Wanuskewin (22.9 points)
- Yukon (22.4 points)

On-reserve increases above the 10-point mark were also noted in the following ridings:

- Quebec: Montmorency–Charlevoix–Haute-Côte-Nord (10.2 points), Manicouagan (10.9 points), Pontiac (14.2 points) and Saint-Maurice–Champlain (10.7 points)
- Ontario: Chatham-Kent–Essex (11.6 points), Nipissing–Timiskaming (11.5 points) and Timmins–James Bay (12.0 points)
- Saskatchewan: Battlefords–Lloydminster (13.7 points)
- British Columbia: South Surrey–White Rock–Cloverdale (13.9 points)

In contrast, the most noticeable decreases on reserves were observed in:

- Ontario: Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry (-7.6 points)
- Manitoba: Selkirk–Interlake (-7.3 points)
- Prince Edward Island: Egmont (-7.2 points)

Lastly, a few provinces have seen declining rates in a majority or all of the ridings with polls on reserve. For instance:

- Prince Edward Island: decline in all three ridings with polls on reserve (despite generally high on-reserve turnout rates)

- New Brunswick: decline in four out of six ridings with polls on reserve
- Manitoba: decline in four out of six ridings with polls on reserve
- British Columbia: decline in 18 out of 25 ridings with polls on reserve

Conclusion

This study examined the trends in federal voter turnout, between 2004 and 2011, in polling divisions located on First Nations reserves. The findings indicate that turnout rates are consistently lower in First Nations reserves when compared to the country as a whole, with an average difference of 17.4 percentage points between on-reserve and general turnout from 2004 to 2011. Over this period, on-reserve turnout followed the same fluctuations as the rest of the country, suggesting that the same factors are at play among electors living on reserve and in the general population.

From 2004 to 2011, on-reserve turnout rates have been the lowest in Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec particularly, and highest in Yukon and Prince Edward Island. However, a breakdown by riding reveals significant variations in most provinces, most notably in Quebec.

This spatial analysis could be leveraged to further assist in determining where enhanced outreach and target revision would be most beneficial and effective in promoting full participation of First Nations electors.

Appendix

Federal Turnout on First Nations Reserves, by Electoral District (2008–2011)

	2008 (On-reserve Polls)	2008 (On-reserve Turnout)	2011 (On-reserve Polls)	2011 (On-reserve Turnout)	Difference (Percentage Points)
Polls on reserve	1,352	42.4	1,353	44.8	2.3
Newfoundland and Labrador	2	25.8	3	31.3	5.5
Labrador	1	24.9	2	30.3	5.4
Random—Burin—St. George's	1	26.4	1	33.3	6.9
Prince Edward Island	6	63.5	6	58.2	-5.3
Cardigan	3	64.1	3	58.0	-6.1
Egmont	2	63.7	2	56.5	-7.2
Malpeque	1	61.7	1	59.9	-1.8
Nova Scotia	39	48.4	46	49.5	1.1
Cape Breton—Canso	2	31.8	2	55.5	23.7
Central Nova	9	59.3	10	58.5	-0.8
Dartmouth—Cole Harbour	3	59.4	5	55.0	-4.4
Kings—Hants	5	49.1	5	48.7	-0.4
Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley	2	35.8	2	39.4	3.6
Sackville—Eastern Shore	1	64.2	1	67.2	3.0
South Shore—St. Margaret's	6	51.7	7	51.5	-0.2
Sydney—Victoria	7	37.2	10	37.5	0.3
West Nova	4	46.8	4	51.0	4.2
New Brunswick	31	43.6	31	44.5	0.9
Acadie—Bathurst	N/A	N/A	1	56.2	N/A
Beauséjour	4	42.8	4	51.9	9.1
Fredericton	6	35.1	6	34.9	-0.2
Madawaska—Restigouche	4	46.8	4	44.0	-2.8
Miramichi	11	54.3	10	53.7	-0.6
New Brunswick Southwest	1	14.3	1	19.2	4.9
Tobique—Mactaquac	5	33.3	5	32.2	-1.1
Quebec	50	27.0	55	30.7	3.7
Abitibi—Témiscamingue	5	39.1	7	43.6	4.5
Beauharnois—Salaberry	2	19.5	2	15.4	-4.1
Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord	2	48.2	2	58.4	10.2
Châteauguay—Saint-Constant	1	27.9	N/A	N/A	N/A
Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine	3	21.5	3	22.9	1.4
Joliette	1	9.4	1	11.0	1.6
Laurentides—Labelle	2	58.3	1	58.0	-0.3
Louis-Saint-Laurent	5	42.2	9	44.9	2.7
Manicouagan	14	14.2	16	25.1	10.9
Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou	1	12.7	1	10.5	-2.2
Pontiac	2	5.8	3	20.0	14.2
Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour	6	54.2	6	54.4	0.2
Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup	2	52.1	N/A	N/A	N/A
Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean	2	24.3	2	18.9	-5.4
Saint-Maurice—Champlain	2	7.7	2	18.4	10.7
Ontario	185	42.0	185	46.3	4.3
Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking	27	40.4	23	49.8	9.4
Brant	10	31.5	9	33.1	1.6
Chatham-Kent—Essex	1	35.8	1	47.4	11.6
Durham	2	48.3	2	46.2	-2.1
Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound	2	46.1	2	52.9	6.8
Haldimand—Norfolk	N/A	N/A	1	56.9	N/A
Kenora	49	45.1	49	47.6	2.5
Lambton—Kent—Middlesex	9	38.8	10	41.1	2.3
Nickel Belt	5	47.7	5	50.8	3.1
Nipissing—Timiskaming	2	38.1	2	49.6	11.5
Northumberland—Quinte West	1	45.6	1	49.3	3.7
Parry Sound—Muskoka	10	50.5	9	51.6	1.1
Peterborough	4	57.6	4	57.1	-0.5
Prince Edward—Hastings	4	29.2	4	34.5	5.3
Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke	1	36.7	1	34.7	-2.0
Sarnia—Lambton	1	31.1	1	34.4	3.3
Sault Ste. Marie	6	46.9	6	53.9	7.0
Simcoe North	3	46.3	3	53.1	6.8
Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry	4	55.4	5	47.8	-7.6
Thunder Bay—Rainy River	22	47.8	24	48.8	1.0
Thunder Bay—Superior North	10	37.6	11	40.5	2.9
Timmins—James Bay	10	26.4	10	38.4	12.0
York—Simcoe	2	45.5	2	44.3	-1.2

	2008 (On-reserve Polls)	2008 (On-reserve Turnout)	2011 (On-reserve Polls)	2011 (On-reserve Turnout)	Difference (Percentage Points)
Manitoba	101	37.6	97	37.6	0.0
Brandon—Souris	2	21.9	2	20.6	-1.3
Churchill	54	38.4	51	40.3	1.9
Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette	18	30.5	18	29.6	-0.9
Portage—Lisgar	6	36.9	6	32.1	-4.8
Provencher	6	46.6	5	49.6	3.0
Selkirk—Interlake	15	40.7	15	33.4	-7.3
Saskatchewan	210	39.7	201	47.6	7.9
Battlefords—Lloydminster	17	19.1	16	32.8	13.7
Blackstrap	1	64.2	1	59.2	-5.0
Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River	80	37.3	71	44.6	7.3
Cypress Hills—Grasslands	2	45.3	2	49.6	4.3
Palliser	1	57.2	1	66.7	9.5
Prince Albert	6	53.6	6	53.8	0.2
Regina—Qu'Appelle	36	51.0	33	52.8	1.8
Saskatoon—Humboldt	6	45.1	6	53.2	8.1
Saskatoon—Wanuskewin	11	51.0	11	73.9	22.9
Souris—Moose Mountain	26	52.7	27	55.8	3.1
Wascana	1	26.4	N/A	N/A	N/A
Yorkton—Melville	23	41.5	27	49.9	8.4
Alberta	116	30.8	102	32.8	2.0
Fort McMurray—Athabasca	39	33.2	29	36.1	2.9
Edmonton—Spruce Grove	1	24.0	1	27.6	3.6
Lethbridge	1	59.2	1	61.9	2.7
Macleod	19	28.7	16	29.8	1.1
Peace River	19	32.5	19	32.5	0.0
Westlock—St. Paul	11	27.9	13	29.9	2.0
Wetaskiwin	10	26.0	8	27.5	1.5
Wild Rose	5	29.9	4	28.6	-1.3
Yellowhead	11	38.9	11	43.6	4.7
British Columbia	607	48.0	622	48.6	0.6
Abbotsford	4	60.0	5	55.5	-4.5
Cariboo—Prince George	76	33.2	76	41.7	8.5
Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon	172	48.6	173	48.0	-0.6
Delta—Richmond East	5	58.1	5	57.5	-0.6
Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission	3	53.0	3	46.7	-6.3
Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca	10	50.5	11	49.1	-1.4
Fleetwood—Port Kells	1	50.6	1	45.3	-5.3
Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo	18	53.1	19	52.9	-0.2
Kelowna—Lake Country	5	51.2	4	48.8	-2.4
Kootenay—Columbia	10	51.9	9	49.3	-2.6
Langley	4	64.3	4	58.9	-5.4
Nanaimo—Alberni	24	52.1	24	52.6	0.5
Nanaimo—Cowichan	31	50.8	32	50.5	-0.3
New Westminster—Coquitlam	N/A	N/A	1	28.1	N/A
Okanagan—Shuswap	21	53.9	27	51.6	-2.3
North Vancouver	10	52.7	10	46.8	-5.9
Okanagan—Coquihalla	34	48.4	36	48.0	-0.4
Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam	2	54.1	2	47.9	-6.2
Prince George—Peace River	14	42.7	14	44.6	1.9
Saanich—Gulf Islands	10	54.3	11	50.6	-3.7
Skeena—Bulkley Valley	81	47.6	81	49.7	2.1
British Columbia Southern Interior	9	51.3	9	51.3	0.0
South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale	1	38.4	1	52.3	13.9
Vancouver Island North	41	43.4	42	49.8	6.4
Vancouver Quadra	3	44.3	3	44.2	-0.1
West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country	18	48.5	19	45.0	-3.5
Yukon	3	46.8	3	69.2	22.4
Yukon	3	46.8	3	69.2	22.4
Northwest Territories	2	43.2	2	46.7	3.5
Western Arctic	2	43.2	2	46.7	3.5
Nunavut ^a	-	-	-	-	-

^a There are no First Nations reserves identified in Nunavut.