

## **The mobilisation of urban Aboriginals in the Canadian electoral process.**

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### **Abstract.**

All the citizens are not equal when it comes to political participation. Aboriginals in Canada systematically vote less than other Canadians during Canadian elections; this leads to a representation deficit. The main goal of this paper is to understand the processes that lead to a mobilisation (or to an absence of mobilisation) of urban Aboriginals at Canadian elections. Political participation is a classic theme in political science. Yet, it has mainly been studied based on micro-level or macro-level explanations. This paper adopts an original meso-level analysis and aims to observe this phenomenon from a new angle, analysing the possible influence of the urban Aboriginal organisations on the mobilisation of their members, during Canadian electoral cycles. Considering the social capital theory of Putnam and the civic voluntarism model of Brady, Schlozman and Verba, it analyses if these organisations develop bridging, political recruitment and information actions, likely to favour the electoral mobilisation of their members. This qualitative research relies on interviews conducted in nine Aboriginal organisations, located in four Albertan cities. The conclusion is that, indeed, these Aboriginal organisations implement these kinds of actions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Voting is the most frequent form of political participation (Brady, Schlozman, Verba 1995; Putnam 2000) and makes the government accountable to population (Dalton 2009). Yet, when it comes to electoral participation, all citizens are not equal. In Canada, even if the electoral turnout among Aboriginals cannot be determined precisely (Ladner 2003), previous studies<sup>1</sup> demonstrate that it is lower than the turnout among non-Aboriginal Canadians<sup>2</sup> (Bedford, Howe 2009; Fournier, Loewen 2011). For instance, a research conducted by Elections Canada among 556 Aboriginals, during the federal election of 2000, highlights that their electoral turnout reaches 48%, which is 16 percentage points lower than the national average. This study has been conducted in 264 reserves, thus excludes urban Aboriginals<sup>3</sup> (Guérin 2003). Urban Aboriginals would be “three times less likely to assure having voted at the federal election of 2000 than on-reserve Aboriginals” (Guérin 2003, p. 14). Since several years now, Elections Canada has implemented various programs aiming to improve the electoral turnout among Aboriginals. It has conducted researches in collaboration with Aboriginal organisations, and has created campaigns directly targeting Aboriginals (Ladner McCrossan 2007). Since 2006, Elections Canada has created new polling stations in cities, in partnership with the National Association of Friendship Centers. Aboriginal organisations have thus become essential allies to promote Aboriginal electoral participation (Ladner, McCrossan 2007).

This paper focuses on the role of Aboriginal organisations in fostering electoral mobilisation of urban Aboriginals. This question has not been studied extensively despite the fact that these organisations have always played an important role across Aboriginal communities, promoting communication and resources sharing, allowing ethnic survival, defending social and political rights of the communities, etc. (Frideres, Gadacz 2008). At the beginning, Aboriginal communities had to mobilise themselves in order to create self-organised organisations, based on their traditions; they were not considered by the Canadian government as able to control their own associations. Still today, there are numerous organisations aiming to respond to Aboriginals’ needs, led by non-Aboriginals. Most of them are considered as inefficient and opportunistic by Aboriginals (Silver 2008). Thus, organisations led by Aboriginals are crucial (Frideres, Gadacz 2008) but a lot of them remain underfunded (Dosman 1972). A lot of Aboriginals consider self-organised organisations as « a critical source of empowerment » (Silver 2008, p. 150). Urban Aboriginals also remain understudied, even if urbanisation of Aboriginal communities is a growing phenomenon (Frideres, Gadacz 2008). Urban Aboriginals are younger, poorer and have a higher unemployed rate than the rest of the urban Canadian population, and they face considerable discrimination (Belanger 2014). There is not much research on the electoral participation of Aboriginals in Canada (Alport, Hill 2010). Among the existing studies, the lower Aboriginal electoral turnout during the Canadian electoral process is most often explained by individual (micro level) and systemic (macro level) factors (Bedford, Howe

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the previous studies have been realized by Elections Canada (independent and non-partisan organisation falling directly under the Canadian Parliament, mandated to conduct elections and referendums-[www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca)).

<sup>2</sup> This paper refers to municipal, provincial, and federal elections indistinctively, except when mentioned otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast with Aboriginals on-reserve, urban Aboriginals or Aboriginals off-reserve correspond to Aboriginal populations « residing in urban agglomerations (either big cities or metropolitan regions of census or urban agglomerations smaller) » (EnviroNics Institute, 2010).

2009; Fournier, Loewen 2011; Guérin 2003; Harell, Panagos, Matthews 2009; Hunter 2003). These studies tend to ignore meso-level factors, or the role of intermediary agents (organisations, political parties, etc.) and social networks (Van Haute 2009).

This paper therefore investigates to what extent the action of social urban Aboriginal organisations<sup>4</sup> is likely to promote, or not, the electoral mobilisation<sup>5</sup> of their members at Canadian elections. It relies on the social capital theory of Putnam and the civic voluntarism theory of Brady, Schlozman and Verba. In terms of method, it mobilises data from semi-directive interviews carried out with workers of nine Albertan social urban Aboriginal organisations, situated in Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, and Lethbridge. This analysis starts with a state of the art and the development of the chosen theoretical framework. It then shifts to an explanation of the data and methods, and then continues with the presentation of the findings. To finish, the paper formulates conclusions and recommendations for future research.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **a. Electoral participation**

Most of the explanations of electoral participation of Aboriginals, and of the general population, focus on systemic (macro level) factors and individual (micro level) explanations.

From a macro point of view, some authors highlight the impact of the national political context (Hansen, Rosenstone 2003), the level of election (Ladner 2003) or the specific context of an election on the electoral turnout (Brady, Schlozman, Verba 1995). More importantly, the presence of Aboriginal candidates, or holding debates on Aboriginal issues, would increase the participation of these communities (Guérin 2003). The ethnic factor remains crucial to understand the electoral behaviour of some citizens (Featherman 1983). Indeed, the “ethnic vote” is the fact that an elector from an ethnic minority casts a vote for a candidate from the same minority. Supporters of the empowerment theory state that ethnic minorities represented in the political arenas vote more often than those who are not (Rocha *et al.* 2010). Other factors seem to promote the ethnic vote, such as socio-economic status (Wolfinger 1965), linguistic difference and residential segregation (Thomas, Zingher 2012) or the impact of public politics (Filer, Kenny, Morton 1991). For some aspects, these theories support the analyses towards Aboriginal electoral participation in Canada. Following the empowerment theory, Hunter affirms that a bigger Aboriginal representativeness within Canadian institutions would improve their electoral turnout (Hunter 2003).

Still at the macro level, historical-institutional factors have also been put forward: “historically, Aboriginal people have been excluded from the mainstream Canadian political process. This exclusion was an important part and a consequence of the process of colonization” (Silver, Keeper and McKenzie 2006: 105). In this context, it is easily understandable that the participation of Aboriginal Peoples in the Canadian institutions is a

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<sup>4</sup> Social organisations are defined as organisations providing professional services (run by few qualified persons, without involving their members; for example organisations providing medical assistance) and social services (such as sport or cultural activities, involving their members) (Bailer, Schulz 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The concept of mobilisation can be understood as “the process by which candidates, parties, activists and groups induce other people to participate” (Hansen, Rosenstone 2003, p. 25).

complex issue. The “nationalist thesis” states that Aboriginals perceive their relation with the Canadian state as a Nation-to-Nation relation; thus, Canadian institutions are not the adequate place to express their political claims. For its part, the “post-colonialist thesis” argues that institutions that served to colonise Aboriginal Peoples is not a tolerable political frame for the future; as a consequence, Aboriginals should avoid to get involved with these institutions that carry on colonialism (Harell, Panagos, Matthews 2009). Nowadays, the impact of colonisation is still obvious for Aboriginal Peoples. The adequacy of Aboriginal political mobilisation within the Canadian institutions has often been questioned (Murphy 2008). Yet, the participation of Aboriginal Peoples in these institutions can be understood as a tool for their empowerment and self-determination (Murphy 2008, Williams 2004). Since Aboriginals have to live in the Canadian institutional frame, it could be beneficial to them to actively participate in it (Cairns 2003). In this paper, the Aboriginal electoral participation within the Canadian political frame is considered as a mean to promote self-determination, keeping in mind that, to be the most efficient, it has to be coupled with mobilisations through autonomous governments, social movements and protests (Murphy 2008).

At the micro level, there are three dominant theories in the literature, regarding electoral participation: the rational choice model that considers electors as rational actors (Brady, Schlozman, Verba 1995), the resources model, which focuses on individual sociodemographic variables (Kimball, Niemi 2011), and the socio-psychological model, which supports that some attitudes promote electoral participation (Hansen, Rosenstone 2003). The resources model has often been used to explain the low Aboriginal electoral turnout in Canada, referring to three sociodemographic factors:

- age- electoral participation increases with age (Inglehart 1977), and the median age of Aboriginals (26) is younger than the rest of the Canadian population (40)<sup>6</sup> ;
- income- electoral participation increases with income (Hansen, Rosenstone 2003), and the Aboriginal population has an average annual income lower than the rest of the Canadian population (in 2005, respectively 22,366 CAD and 33,394 CAD<sup>7</sup>);
- education- electoral participation increases with education (Dalton 2009), and Aboriginals have on average a lower level of education than non-Aboriginal Canadians (in 2011, 29% of Aboriginals between 25 and 64 years old did not have any diploma, compared to 12% of non-Aboriginal Canadians of same age<sup>8</sup>).

Next to age, income and education, other factors have been identified as unfavourable to the electoral participation of Aboriginals: family structure (Bedford, Howe 2009), residential mobility (Harell, Panagos, Matthews 2009), geographic disparity (Hunter 2003), or linguistic difference (Guérin 2003, Hunter 2003). What these individual-level studies show is that if Aboriginals do not vote, it is because they cannot – they lack the necessary

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<sup>6</sup> « Population ayant une identité autochtone selon les groupes d'âge, l'âge médian et le sexe, chiffres de 2006 », internet website of Statistique Canada, <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/hlt/97-558/pages/page.cfm?Lang=F&Geo=PR&Code=01&Table=1&Data=Count&Sex=1&Age=10&StartRec=1&Sort=2&Display=Page> (consulted August 7, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> « Revenu total médian en 2005, selon l'identité autochtone, population âgée de 25 à 54 ans », internet website of Statistique Canada, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-645-x/2010001/c-g/c-g011-fra.htm> (consulted August 7, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> « Le niveau de scolarité des peuples autochtones au Canada », internet website of Statistique Canada, [http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011003\\_3-fra.cfm](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011003_3-fra.cfm) (consulted August 7, 2014).

resources. Following these findings, a qualitative study based on focus groups realised with 29 Australian Aboriginal women demonstrates that these women want to be involved in the Australian political life but lack resources. According to them, a better political education and representation of their People is necessary. For example, they do not often know how to complete a valid ballot (Alport, Hill 2010).

The socio-psychological model has also been used to explain the low Aboriginal electoral turnout at Canadian elections. Some Aboriginals do not consider non-Aboriginals as being able to represent their interests and they consider the Canadian government as illegitimate (Ladner, McCrossan 2007). The Aboriginals' feelings of "mistrust" and "alienation" towards the Canadian state have also been evoked (Cairns 2003; Fournier, Loewen 2011). A qualitative study conducted in Winnipeg (Canada) with 40 Aboriginals emphasises that most of them would like to participate in the Canadian political life and think that it is the best way to protect their identity. However, they do not participate because they feel excluded from the Canadian political system. Interestingly, they say that if political information programs were developed, they would get part of it because, nowadays, they do not know much about Canadian politics. They say that if someone from their communities would ask them to participate in politics, they would do it (Silver 2008). These last aspects highlight the potential role of intermediary organisations in fostering electoral mobilisation. Yet, this type of explanation is much less developed in the literature, which is why it is put at the very center of this paper.

## **b. Non-political organisations as politicising arenas**

Non-political organisations are powerful agents able to politicise their members, to politically mobilise them, or to influence their partisan choice (Bellucci, Maraffi, Segatti 2007). Members of organisations are more likely to participate in politics (Hibbing, Theiss-More 2005), independently of their social status (Teorell 2003). Organisations provide political information to their members, develop politically relevant skills and attitudes (Bellucci, Maraffi, Segatti 2007). Tocqueville stated that civil society's organisations are acting as schools of democracy (Bailer, Schulz 2012). This paper mobilises two theories from this framework.

First, the analysis is based on the social capital theory of Putnam (2000). Social capital represents the relations between individuals, their social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust developed. It carries "civic virtue", leading people to become active citizens in their democracies. Putnam makes a difference between bridging social capital (when individuals have heterogeneous social networks, it favours reciprocity and trust in the whole society) and bonding social capital (when individuals have homogenous social networks, it reinforces identities within a particular group). Information sharing is easier within a large and heterogeneous network (Putnam 2000). Plus, weak ties allow individuals to meet more people and to have more chance to be recruited for a political action (Teorell 2003). By interacting with heterogeneous persons, citizens would develop tolerance as well as trust towards others and government. By contrast, homogenous networks would not develop these traits (Hibbing, Theiss-More 2005).

Second, the analysis relies on the civic voluntarism theory developed by Brady, Scholzman and Verba (1995). According to these authors, citizens learn the capacities and the motivations to participate in politics in the institutions where they are involved during

their entire life. While involved in non-political organisations (such as school, family, work place, church or sport club), citizens develop politically relevant attitudes (social trust, sense of civic duty, political interest, etc.), resources necessary to political participation (political knowledge, speaking in public, reading, etc.) and face political recruitment opportunities. According to Brady, Scholzman and Verba, these elements would counterbalance the three causes of abstention: the fact that individuals do not want to vote, cannot vote or that nobody asked them to do it. Nonetheless, according to them, partisan identification, political interest and political knowledge are the most important factors fostering electoral participation (Brady, Scholzman, Verba 1995).

The politicising effect of non-political organisations on their members has some limitations. First, citizens joining an organisation are generally quite similar, from a sociodemographic point of view, which limits the beneficial impact on members' political mobilisation. Second, civic participation can divert individuals from politics; when services usually offered by government are offered by communitarian organisations, it can lead to a decrease in citizens' interest in government. Third, some organisations such as groups founded on non-democratic values, do not promote political participation as a goal (Hibbing, Theiss-More 2005). Doubts have also been formulated concerning the causal mechanisms at stake: is it the fact to be engaged in civic life that lead individuals to vote, or vice-versa? (Brady, Scholzman, Verba 1995; Putnam 2000). Plus, there is a self-selection bias: people active in organisations are generally more educated and wealthier citizens (Stolle 1998).

Following the theoretical framework developed above, this paper focuses on the role of Aboriginal organisations in fostering electoral mobilisation of urban Aboriginals. It postulates that social urban Aboriginal organisations develop different types of actions likely to promote the electoral mobilisation of their members while Canadian elections:

- Bridging actions- the organisations develop bridging goals and actions, allowing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to get informed and to meet each other;
- Recruitment actions- the organisations are unofficial places of political recruitment;
- Information actions- the organisations develop the electoral capacities of their members, by informing them on the global Canadian political system and working in partnership with Elections Canada.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The analysis was conducted in Alberta where the percentage of Aboriginal residents with respect to the entire population (6%) is close to the national average (4%)<sup>9</sup>. Four cities were selected: two large cities (Calgary and Edmonton, more than 700.000 inhabitants<sup>10</sup>) and two smaller cities (Red Deer and Lethbridge, less than 100.000 inhabitants<sup>11</sup>)<sup>12</sup>. As

<sup>9</sup> « Pourcentage des Autochtones dans la population, 2006 », internet website of Statistique Canada, <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-558/figures/c1-fra.cfm> (consulted July 3, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> « Population history », internet website of *The city of Edmonton*, [http://www.edmonton.ca/city\\_government/facts\\_figures/population-history.aspx](http://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/facts_figures/population-history.aspx) (consulted July 3, 2014); « 2013 civic census results », internet website of *The city of Calgary*, <http://www.calgary.ca/CA/city-clerks/Pages/Election-and-information-services/Civic-Census/2013-Results.aspx> (consulted July 3, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> « Census results », internet website of *The city of Red Deer*, <http://www.reddeer.ca/about-red-deer/population-and-demographics/census/census-results/> (consulted July 3, 2014); « Census results 2013 », internet website of *The city of Lethbridge*, <http://www.lethbridge.ca/City-Government/Census/Pages/Census-Results-2013.aspx> (consulted July 3, 2014).

regards the selection of organisations, I focused on social organisations because those are close to citizens and, given that urban Aboriginals have usually a disadvantaged socioeconomic status, social organisations are very present in these communities. Moreover, I focused on organisations led by Aboriginals, assuming that they are more legitimate in their eyes (see supra).

The sample selected for the analysis is composed of three types of organisations: an organisation targeting youth (from 12 to 29 years old<sup>13</sup>), Friendship Centers, and organisations structured as discussion groups. The organisation targeting youth is interesting because youth vote less than older people. Friendship Centers are significant welcome structures for Aboriginal migrating from reserves to cities; they are part of the oldest organisations led by Aboriginals and are present throughout the country (119 local Friendship Centers are integrated in the National Association of Friendship Centers). The organisations of the last type are discussion places that gather different actors who discuss problems faced by urban Aboriginals. These organisations can be considered as social organisations because they aim to improve services delivered to urban Aboriginals and they inform their members about it. The sample is representative of different existing organisations, from a geographical and structural point of view, and consists of the following organisations:

- Alberta Native Friendship Centers Association (ANFCA), Edmonton.
- The following Friendships Centers (FC): Aboriginal Friendship Center of Calgary, Canadian Native Friendship Center of Edmonton, Red Deer Native Friendship Society and Sik-Ooh-Kotoki Friendship Society of Lethbridge.
- Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative (CUAI).
- Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth (USAY), Calgary.
- Red Deer Urban Aboriginal Voices Society (Red Deer UAVS).
- Aboriginal Council of Lethbridge (ACL).

In order to verify if organisations are developing bridging, recruitment and information actions, likely to promote the electoral mobilisation of their members, I adopted a double strategy.

First, I analysed their websites and their official brochures. Their official goals and programs were identified. Each organisation selected aims to improve the quality of life of urban Aboriginals and give particular attention to cultural reconnection. Plus, they are non-political. Some elements were directly related to my hypothesis. First, selected organisations promote meetings between the different communities and, thus, can be considered as having bridging objectives. Second, each organisation encourages discussions and meetings between their employees and their members. Like so, they are favourable places to information sharing and recruitment. To finish, organisations aim to develop a better understanding between Aboriginals and the Canadian society.

Second, semi-directive interviews were conducted with employees<sup>14</sup> in these nine Aboriginal organisations. Interviews were conducted in March and April 2014, first in

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<sup>12</sup> Appendix 1: information concerning precise numbers of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population in each city studied.

<sup>13</sup> « About USAY », internet website of the *Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth*, <http://www.usay.ca/about> (consulted August 6, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Each employee interviewed held one of these functions in the organisation: executive director, program coordinator, administrator, treasurer, or founder.

Calgary, and then in Edmonton, Red Deer, and Lethbridge<sup>15</sup>. Only selected relevant elements of the interviews were transcribed, and transcriptions range from two to five pages. The final corpus was composed of 27 pages and was analysed using qualitative discourse analysis.

#### **4. ANALYSIS**

##### **a. Bridging actions**

The first part of the analysis aims at testing the first part of the hypothesis: organisations develop bridging goals and actions, allowing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to get informed and to meet each other. Different elements are observed: whether organisations (a) have bridging goals, (b) develop partnerships and activities with non-Aboriginal organisations, and (c) have non-Aboriginal members in their internal structure.

It is interesting to note that three out of nine interviewees spontaneously included the bridging role of the organisation in their general goals (the FC of Calgary, Red Deer and the ACL): “Our role, and our primary role, has always been for CUI to provide that bridging work between the two communities” (CUI). However, the FC of Red Deer, Calgary and the ACL declared that their role is, first of all, to inform the Canadian population about Aboriginals, and not vice-versa. The FC of Lethbridge stated that this information work is particularly important to new immigrants, but it did not speak about the other Canadians. Workers from the CUI and the FC of Edmonton spontaneously used the term “bridging” during the interview. Thus, six organisations spontaneously evoked their intention to put in application bridging actions.

Interviews confirmed that the ANFCA, the CUI, the ACL and the FC of Edmonton, Calgary and Red Deer have official partnerships with non-Aboriginal organisations such as universities, museum, NGO, etc. Several organisations (same as the previous point, except the FC of Calgary) organise events with their non-Aboriginal partners. The FC of Red Deer evoked some activities with new immigrants’ communities, but not with all Canadians. Only the USAY, the Red Deer UAS and the FC of Lethbridge explained not having partnerships with non-Aboriginal organisations. Thus, six out of nine organisations have non-Aboriginal partners and five of them organise events allowing different communities to meet each other. Some organisations include non-Aboriginal members in their internal structure, such as the FC of Calgary, the Red Deer UAS and the CUI. The FC of Calgary is the only FC who stated that non-Aboriginals are seating in its board<sup>16</sup>.

The interviews also exposed another aspect revealing the bridging character of these organisations. Five organisations insisted on the fact that they are open to everyone, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, and that they are inclusive (the FC of Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Red Deer and the CUI): “Anybody can come and use our services, but we’ve designed our services with a cultural perspective, with the culture in mind” (FC of Red Deer).

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<sup>15</sup> Appendix 2: agenda and interviews guide.

<sup>16</sup> Knowing that FC are homogenous structures across Canada, one can wonder if the FC of Calgary is an exception or if other FC just forget to mention that non-Aboriginal people were present in their internal organisational structure.

Table 1 summarises information concerning bridging actions developed by the nine organisations studied. Organisations are considered as bridging (highlighted) if they meet at least two out of the five criteria.

**Table 1-** Bridging actions developed (or not) by organisations

| <b>Organisations</b> | <b>Bridging objectives</b>   | <b>Non-Aboriginal partnerships</b> | <b>Bridging events</b> | <b>Bridging structure</b> | <b>Explicitly inclusive</b> |
|----------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>ANFCA</b>         | no                           | yes                                | yes                    | no                        | no                          |
| <b>FC Edmonton</b>   | yes                          | yes                                | yes                    | no                        | yes                         |
| <b>FC Calgary</b>    | yes (limited <sup>17</sup> ) | yes                                | no                     | yes                       | yes                         |
| <b>FC Red Deer</b>   | yes (limited)                | yes                                | yes                    | no                        | yes                         |
| <b>FC Lethbridge</b> | yes (limited)                | no                                 | no                     | no                        | yes                         |
| <b>CUAI</b>          | yes                          | yes                                | yes                    | yes                       | yes                         |
| <b>USAY</b>          | no                           | no                                 | no                     | no                        | no                          |
| <b>ACL</b>           | yes (limited)                | yes                                | yes                    | no                        | no                          |
| <b>Red Deer UAVS</b> | no                           | no                                 | no                     | yes                       | no                          |

**Note:** Bridging organisations (highlighted in grey)

According to this categorisation, only three out of the nine organisations cannot be considered as bridging: the FC of Lethbridge, the USAY and the Red Deer UAVS. There is no systematic link between the type of organisation studied and their bridging characteristics.

This first step in the analysis confirms that the majority of the organisations develop bridging goals and actions, allowing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to get informed and to meet each other. Nonetheless, two limitations can diminish the positive impact of these actions on the electoral mobilisation of their members. First, the FC of Red Deer and the ACL evoked initiatives promoting meetings and understanding between Aboriginals and new immigrants, but they did not tell anything about the relations between Aboriginals and the whole Canadian society. Second, several organisations seem to deliver mainly information to the Canadian population concerning Aboriginals, and not vice-versa. Thus, their bridging effect could work in only one way.

## **b. Recruitment actions**

The second part of the analysis tests the second part of the hypothesis, i.e. that organisations are unofficial places of political recruitment, where employees may ask members to mobilise during elections, but that it will not be an official action of the organisations. The facts analysed are: whether organisations (a) state having a political function, (b) mobilise directly their members during elections, and (c) implement concrete actions favouring the electoral mobilisation of their members.

Only the FC of Edmonton and Lethbridge answered negatively to the following question: “Do you think that the organisation has any political function, even if it’s a non-political organisation?” The USAY avoided to answer and the ACL and the FC of Calgary and

<sup>17</sup> By “limited”, I mean the fact that an organisation mainly pays attention to inform the Canadian society about Aboriginals, and not vice-versa.

Red Deer affirmed that they play a political function but only in particular situations. The ANFCA, the Red Deer UAVS and the CUIAI stated to play a political function, without reservation.

When interviewees were asked if they informed the members of the organisations about political issues, the ANFCA talked directly about electoral mobilisation: “(...) nationally, there has been a lot of push to encourage our members to participate in election and we explain to them why it’s important (...). We are not going to tell people who to vote for, but we can get people to the polls”. Plus, the FC of Calgary and the CUIAI explained that Aboriginal populations do not vote much. It demonstrates that the low Aboriginal electoral turnout is a well-known phenomenon and that organisations pay attention to it.

Then, interviewees were asked if they informed their members about Canadian elections. Four out of nine organisations (the FC of Edmonton and Red Deer, the CUIAI and the USAY) spontaneously spoke about the importance they give to mobilise their members; even the FC of Edmonton and the USAY who, until then, had stated not having any political function, declared that they encourage urban Aboriginals to vote: “That’s usually a pretty big one around election time: it’s engaging urban Aboriginal people to actually get to the polls (...)” (FC of Edmonton), “Each time there is an election, we are always encouraging our clients to go to vote (...). We really encourage people to vote here” (FC of Red Deer). In contrast, some organisations that had declared to have a political function do not encourage their members to go to cast a ballot (the FC of Calgary, the ACL and the Red Deer UAVS).

The discussions also demonstrate that organisations develop concrete recruitment actions: during Canadian elections, the ANFCA, the FC of Red Deer and the USAY organise shuttles to drive members to polling stations. The ANFCA organises baby-sitting services for parents who contemplated to not vote because they had to look after their children. The USAY explained that they used to organise buses to drive members to polling stations but that it did not make any difference in term of electoral mobilisation. These elements are related to individual factors, developed above, such as familial structure, geographic dispersion, etc. However, only three organisations organise this kind of actions, and one of them stated that it did not increase the electoral mobilisation of their members. The FC of Lethbridge and the ANFCA explained that, sometimes, FC are used as polling stations; this reduces the practical constraints to get out and vote.

Table 2 synthetises political recruitment actions developed by organisations during Canadian elections. Organisations considered as recruitment places (underlined) are those stating explicitly that they encourage their members to vote. Political function or shuttles have only been inserted in the table to ease comparisons.

**Table 2-** Recruitment actions developed (or not) by organisations

| <b>Organisations</b> | <b>Political function</b> | <b>Recruitment</b> | <b>Shuttles</b> |
|----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| <u>ANFCA</u>         | yes                       | yes                | yes             |
| <u>FC Edmonton</u>   | no                        | yes                | no              |
| <u>FC Calgary</u>    | yes                       | no                 | no              |
| <u>FC Red Deer</u>   | yes                       | yes                | yes             |
| <u>FC Lethbridge</u> | no                        | no                 | no              |
| <u>CUAI</u>          | yes                       | yes                | no              |
| <u>USAY</u>          | -                         | yes                | yes             |
| <u>ACL</u>           | yes                       | no                 | no              |
| <u>Red Deer UAVS</u> | yes                       | no                 | no              |

**Note:** Bridging organisations (highlighted in grey) / Recruitment places (underlined)

Organisations with political function are not necessarily those that encourage their members to vote. By contrast, each organisation organising shuttle buses also encourages their members to vote. There is no systematic relation between the fact that an organisation develops bridging and recruitment actions. The FC of Lethbridge and the Red Deer UAVS do not develop any of these. The FC of Calgary and the ACL develop bridging actions only. The USAY do not develop bridging actions but is a recruitment place. The ANFCA, the FC of Edmonton and Red Deer and the CUAJ develop bridging and recruitment actions. Again, we cannot establish a systematic relation between the type of organisation and the fact that they develop recruitment actions or not.

More than half of the organisations are recruitment places, which tends to validate the second part of the hypothesis: organisations are unofficial places of political recruitment. Plus, half of the organisations studied spontaneously mentioned political recruitment.

### **c. Information actions**

The last part of this analysis focuses on whether organisations develop the electoral capacities of their members by informing them on the Canadian political system and by working in partnership with Elections Canada. Three aspects are investigated: (a) whether organisations inform their members concerning political issues and the Canadian political system, (b) how organisations share information with their members about politics, and (c) if organisations have partnerships with Elections Canada.

Only the USAY does not inform its members about political issues. For its part, the FC of Edmonton does not answer to the question. All organisations informing their members about political issues clarified that their role is just to relay information. In addition, the FC of Calgary, the Red Deer UAVS and the ACL mentioned the relay of information on Aboriginal political issues, not issues concerning Canadian politics globally. Two organisations added that because they are financed by the Canadian government, they have to be moderate when they speak about politics.

Some organisations inform their members about “technical” aspects of the political process (the FC of Calgary and the CUAJ): “So on the mechanics of politics, sometimes we will become involved but not in the politics” (FC of Calgary), “we’ve had sessions on the proper political process channels: if you are going to advocate for change, what is the best way to do that?” (CUAJ). Several organisations (the FC of Edmonton and Red Deer, the CUAJ,

the USAY, the ACL) give to their members practical information about the vote (where, when, how) and information about candidates and the importance to cast a ballot. The FC of Lethbridge only shares practical information and insisted on the fact that it does not force or encourage members to vote. The USAY and the ACL are referent and inform their members where they can find the information they are looking for.

As regards how organisations share information, a lot of them regularly organise debates between the different candidates running for municipal elections (the FC of Calgary and Red Deer, the CUI and the ACL). The FC of Red Deer is the only one to put up political information on boards in their offices. The FC of Edmonton and the CUI prefer electronic means. Two limitations can be mentioned here. First, organisations sharing information only with electronic means risk to not reach some of their members; this limit is even more important that people with no internet access are often those with the lowest socioeconomic status and, thus, those more likely to not vote. Second, organisations delivering information only in their offices do not share information with members who do not come physically at the organisation. Yet, the more efficient way to deliver information would be to combine several means of sharing.

The last element is about partnerships between the organisations and Elections Canada. Unexpectedly, none of the organisations works in collaboration with Elections Canada, nor knows their will to develop partnerships<sup>18</sup>.

Table 3 sums up the information actions developed by the nine organisations. Organisations considered as developing actively information actions (marked with an asterisk) are those corresponding to at least one of the following criteria: either they share completely information about elections with their members, or they match completely at least two of the four criteria investigated.

Table 3- Information actions developed (or not) by organisations

| Organisations        | General politics             | Elections     | Debates | Elections Canada |
|----------------------|------------------------------|---------------|---------|------------------|
| <b>ANFCA</b>         | yes                          | no            | no      | no               |
| <b>FC Edmonton*</b>  | -                            | yes           | no      | -                |
| <b>FC Calgary*</b>   | yes (limited <sup>19</sup> ) | no            | yes     | no               |
| <b>FC Red Deer*</b>  | yes (limited)                | yes           | yes     | no               |
| <b>FC Lethbridge</b> | yes (limited)                | yes (limited) | no      | -                |
| <b>CUI*</b>          | yes                          | yes           | yes     | no               |
| <b>USAY*</b>         | no                           | yes           | no      | -                |
| <b>ACL*</b>          | yes (limited)                | yes           | yes     | no               |
| <b>Red Deer UAVS</b> | yes (limited)                | no            | no      | -                |

**Note:** Bridging organisations (highlighted in grey) / Recruitment places (underlined) / Organisation developing information actions (marked with an asterisk)

Organisations that do not fully develop information actions are generally those that not develop bridging and recruitment actions either (the Red Deer UAVS and the FC of

<sup>18</sup> During some interviews, the last question hasn't been asked: taking into account previous answers, the answer would have been "no". Plus, five out of nine organisations clearly indicated that they do not have any partnership with Elections Canada and that is sufficient to infirm this part of the hypothesis.

<sup>19</sup> By "limited", I mean either that the organisation informs its members about political issues only if it is directly linked to Aboriginals, or that organisations inform their members only if they ask it, but do not encourage it.

Lethbridge). By opposition, the FC of Red Deer and Edmonton and the CUAL are three organisations that fully develop the three types of actions investigated: bridging, recruitment, and information actions. The ANFCA is the only organisation being bridging and a recruitment place, but that does not actively develop information actions. The FC of Calgary and the ACL are bridging organisations that develop information actions, but not recruitment actions. The USAY is not bridging but organises recruitment and information actions. Again, there is no systematic relation between the type of organisation and the type of action undertaken.

Thus, six out of nine organisations actively put in application information actions for their members. This tends to partially validate the third part of the hypothesis: the organisations develop the electoral capacities of their members (...). The end of the hypothesis has to be infirmed: (...) informing them on the global Canadian political system and working in partnership with Elections Canada. Indeed, organisations mainly inform their members before Canadian elections, concerning practical terms of the vote, candidates or the importance to cast a ballot. Organisations do not have partnerships with Elections Canada. Plus, some organisations share information about politics with their members, but only partially: they inform their members about Canadian political issues only when dealing directly with Aboriginal Peoples.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Aboriginals in Canada vote less than non-Aboriginal Canadians while Canadian elections. Numerous elements have been analysed to explain the low Aboriginal electoral turnout in Canada, but very few meso-level studies have been conducted on this topic. Plus, urban Aboriginals living off-reserve have been less studied than on-reserve Aboriginals. Aiming to fill these gaps in, and following the observation that Aboriginal organisations are particularly important for these communities, this paper investigates to what extent the action of social urban Aboriginal organisations is likely to foster the electoral mobilisation of their members while Canadian elections. Relying on the social capital and the civic voluntarism theories, it analyses different types of actions developed by Aboriginal organisations, likely to foster the electoral mobilisation of their members:

- Bridging actions- the organisations develop bridging goals and actions, allowing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to get informed and to meet each other;
- Recruitment actions- the organisations are unofficial places of political recruitment;
- Information actions- the organisations develop the electoral capacities of their members, by informing them on the global Canadian political system and working in partnership with Elections Canada.

This paper focuses on nine organisations working for, and led by, Aboriginals in four Albertan cities. It relies on the qualitative analysis of semi-directive interviews conducted with employees of these organisations. The results confirm that social urban Aboriginal organisations are likely to favour the electoral mobilisation of their members because they develop bridging and recruitment actions, as described above. These organisations are also likely to promote the electoral mobilisation of their members because they develop information actions. However, they do not inform their members about the global Canadian political system and do not work in partnership with Elections Canada. Instead, they inform them about Canadian elections and their practical terms. This element seems to respond

adequately to the need of Aboriginals revealed in the two qualitative studies mentioned in the theoretical part of the paper.

**Table 4-** Summary (total number of actions studied developed by each organisation)

| <b>Organisations</b> | <b>Bridging actions<br/>(of 5)</b> | <b>Recruitment<br/>actions (of 3)</b> | <b>Information<br/>actions (of 4)</b> | <b>Total (of 12)</b> |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>ANFCA</b>         | 2                                  | 3                                     | 1                                     | <b>6</b>             |
| <b>FC Edmonton</b>   | 4                                  | 1                                     | 1                                     | <b>6</b>             |
| <b>FC Calgary</b>    | 3,5                                | 1                                     | 1,5                                   | <b>6</b>             |
| <b>FC Red Deer</b>   | 3,5                                | 3                                     | 2,5                                   | <b>9</b>             |
| <b>FC Lethbridge</b> | 1,5                                | 0                                     | 1                                     | <b>2,5</b>           |
| <b>CUAI</b>          | 5                                  | 2                                     | 3                                     | <b>10</b>            |
| <b>USAY</b>          | 0                                  | 2                                     | 1                                     | <b>3</b>             |
| <b>ACL</b>           | 2,5                                | 1                                     | 2,5                                   | <b>6</b>             |
| <b>Red Deer UAVS</b> | 1                                  | 1                                     | 0,5                                   | <b>2,5</b>           |

The interviews revealed two potential limits to the positive impact of the organisations' actions on the electoral mobilisation of their members. First, some organisations inform the Canadian society (and sometimes only new immigrants) about Aboriginal Peoples, not vice-versa; this could limit their bridging effect. Second, some organisations share information about Canadian elections only by one of these two means: internet or brochures and posters in their offices. These two ways to inform have a limited significance and it could be interesting to combine them to reach a maximum of the members. As shown in table 4, only 3 out of 9 organisations studied do not appear as mobilising actors: further research should investigate the causes of this element. Moreover, it would be interesting to interview several people (with different functions) working in a same organisation and to interview members of the organisations. Relevant research could be realised in other provinces than Alberta to observe the possible contextual impact on organisations.

As demonstrated in this paper, by their actions, urban Aboriginal organisations are likely to promote the electoral mobilisation of their members. They should be considered by other Canadian actors, such as Elections Canada, as priority partners. Plus, they are important tools to develop the political empowerment of urban Aboriginal communities, and thus support their self-determination.

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## 7. APPENDIX

### a. Appendix 1- Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population in cities studied

| City       | Total population | Aboriginal population* |
|------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Calgary    | 979,480          | 24,425 (2.4%)          |
| Edmonton   | 722,260          | 38,170 (5.2%)          |
| Lethbridge | 73,515           | 3,455 (4.6%)           |
| Red Deer   | 81,370           | 3,600 (4.4%)           |

Source: Internet website of Statistique Canada, data from the 2006 national census, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/>, consulted February 22, 2015.

\*Aboriginal population: includes persons who reported identifying with at least one Aboriginal group, that is, North American Indian, Métis or Inuit, and/or those who reported being a Treaty Indian or a Registered Indian, as defined by the Indian Act of Canada, and/or those who reported they were members of an Indian band or First Nation (Statistique Canada).

## **b. Appendix 2- Interviews proceedings**

### **Agenda**

| <b>Date</b>    | <b>Place</b> | <b>Organisation</b> |
|----------------|--------------|---------------------|
| April 3, 2014  | Edmonton     | ANFCA               |
| April 2, 2014  | Edmonton     | FC Edmonton         |
| April 3, 2014  | Edmonton     | FC Edmonton         |
| March 10, 2014 | Calgary      | FC Calgary          |
| April 7, 2014  | Red Deer     | FC Red Deer         |
| April 10, 2014 | Lethbridge   | FC Lethbridge       |
| March 12, 2014 | Calgary      | CUAI                |
| March 15, 2014 | Calgary      | USAY                |
| April 10, 2014 | Lethbridge   | ACL                 |
| April 7, 2014  | Red Deer     | Red Deer UAVS       |

### **Interviews guide**

- 1) *Could you briefly introduce yourself: How long have you been in the organization and what is your function?*
- 2) *I would like to know a little bit more about the organization itself.*
  - a- What are the main goals and programs of the organization?
  - b- How are you funded?
  - c- What is the organization's structure (different teams, composition of the board of directors, etc.)?
  - a- In your opinion, what is its role to the Natives and to the Canadian society?
  - b- Do you sometimes organize events with non-Aboriginal organizations? Or do some non-Aboriginal people join in your events?
- 3) *As I'm in political science, I would be interested to know more about your « political functions », even if I know that you are a non-political organization.*
  - a- Do you think that the organization has any political functions, even if it is a non-political organization? If you do, which one?
  - b- Do you inform Natives about political issues?
  - c- Do you inform Natives about the Canadian political system?
  - d- Before the Canadian elections, do you inform Natives about it (for example, about the different candidates and their programs but also about how to register and cast a valid ballot)? If you do, how?