



How digital technology is changing First Nations participation and governance

Kickoff Meeting

Whitefish River First Nation Referendum

Interview with Nishin Meawasige

Want to be involved?

Dear Current and Prospective Partners:

Welcome to the first edition of the First Nation Digital Democracy Newsletter. Inside you will find an overview of the research project, background on team members, and an update of the project's recent events, activities, and research findings.

The Digital Democracy project is an exciting and unique collaboration between University researchers, First Nations, government, non-government, and industry partners to develop insight and strategies regarding how digital technologies, such as Internet voting, can be used to advance electoral participation and improve the quality of local governance for First Nations communities. The project leverages the collective expertise of partners to assist First Nations in meeting their distinct needs and community goals. The research is funded by the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) through a Partnership Development Grant, and led by Drs. Chelsea Gabel (McMaster University),

Nicole Goodman (Munk School of Global Affairs), and Karen Bird (McMaster University). The project's first year has been a tremendous success and we are proud to share our progress with you. This edition of the newsletter contains articles profiling a number of events and activities including the project's kickoff meeting held at Nipissing University in July 2014 and the recent presentation by our research team at the 2015 Canadian Political Science Association Conference. We also offer a glimpse into some of the initial findings of our research, in particular the recent experiences of one of our partner First Nations, Whitefish River First Nation (WRFN), who adopted Internet voting in the process of ratifying new Matrimonial Real Property (MRP) legislation. The research team travelled to WRFN to observe the MRP vote and learn about the community's experience adopting Internet voting. Specifically, the deployment of Internet voting allowed the community to realize noticeable improvements in electoral administration and take symbolic steps toward self-determination.

Building upon this, we are eager to begin new phases of research and expand the project's network of partners. Our initial findings contribute valuable insights regarding the prospects of Internet voting to improve participation and strengthen governance for First Nations communities. In the coming months we will be organizing a second project meeting with our current partners to further discuss preliminary findings. We also invite First Nations interested in the prospects of digital technologies that are not currently partners in the project to contact us. As a project partner, you can expect to receive benefits such as:

- Custom reports on the unique findings from your community;
- Opportunities for training community members on data analytics; and
- Employment of local youth and elders.

Please accept our sincere thanks for your continued participation and support. We look forward to another year.

Sincerely,
Chelsea Gabel, Nicole Goodman, & Karen Bird

Kickoff Meeting

On July 8, 2014, members of the project came together for an inaugural meeting at Nipissing University. This initial discussion was an invitation-based, full-day event that marked the project's inception and brought together First Nation communities, academics, industry, and non-government partners. The purpose of the meeting was to brainstorm ideas, discuss project goals, and engage in a dialogue about election and participation experiences. Representatives from Nipissing First Nation, Dokis First Nation and the Union of Ontario Indians discussed how elections are run in their respective communities/organizations, methods of consultation, experiences with technology, and how technology might impact their community/organization.

Opening remarks, project scope and presentations were made by Chelsea Gabel, Nicole Goodman, and Karen Bird. These comments emphasized the project goal of addressing gaps in knowledge regarding First Nations use of Internet voting and impacts for community engagement, participation, and

governance. Mr. Dwayne Nashkawa of Nipissing First Nation stated that the project appealed to his community because it allowed collaborating First Nations a deciding voice in their involvement, control, and ownership of research.

First Nations in Canada are at the forefront of experimenting with new forms of self-government and institutional design. As part of these developments, a number of communities are interested to try new digital technologies such as Internet voting. Traditional forms of consultation such as community meetings and discussions in family circles will remain vital. However, it is important to learn whether (and how best) digital technologies might be leveraged to enhance processes of community consultation, and in turn foster greater certainty that decisions are a true reflection of community interests. Building a social license was identified as an important theme at the meeting; this was inclusive of, but not limited to, recruiting technically proficient people, testing technology, finding champions

within, developing trust and confidence with council and learning from trial and error. Motivations for adopting Internet voting included counting efficiency, elimination of mail in ballots, and receiving instant results. The primary barriers to Internet voting adoption include cost, and concerns about the replacement of traditional voting methods. Finally, youth engagement was identified as a key area where Internet voting may yield improvements. The ability for communities to use data collected from this project for their own purposes in future situations was also seen as an important opportunity.

Richard Catahan, General Manager of Scytl and a partner in the project, delivered a presentation about the company and its technology and outlined where Internet voting has been used elsewhere. Scytl worked with Nipissing First Nation on a vote to ratify the very first First Nations constitution in Ontario in January 2014.



Project Partners

1. **Nicole Goodman**, Research Director, Centre for E-Democracy, Assistant Professor, Munk School of Global Affairs
2. **Chelsea Gabel**, Assistant Professor, Department of Health, Aging and Society & Indigenous Studies Program, McMaster University
3. **Richard Catahan**, General Manager, Scytl
4. **Mike DeGagné**, President and Vice-Chancellor of Nipissing University
5. **Karen Bird**, Associate Professor, Political Science, McMaster University
6. **Randy Restoule**, Economic Development Officer, Dokis First Nations
7. **Dwayne Nashkawa**, Nipissing First Nation
8. **Harley d'Entremont**, Provost and Vice President Academic and Research, Nipissing University.
9. **Kevin Restoule**, Intergovernmental Affairs Policy Analyst, Anishinabek Nation, Union of Ontario Indians, Nipissing First Nation
10. **Frank Seibel**, (Missing from photo), Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute (KORI)

The Impact of Digital Technology on First Nations Participation and Governance: Project Background

What is this project about?

This project seeks to address how digital technology is impacting electoral participation in band elections and band governance in First Nations communities. It also examines how First Nations members conceive of citizenship today and whether this affects inclinations to take part electorally. While the entire First Nations community will be examined, special focus will be given to young people under the age of 30 given that they participate at lower rates than older First Nations electors.

There are three components to the project:

1. The first part seeks to evaluate the use of Internet voting in First Nations elections and votes in Canada. Quantitative surveys will examine the effects of Internet voting on participation and assess whether these outcomes mirror the effects of Internet voting in other communities in Canada and elsewhere. Communities will have the option of surveying stakeholders such as: Internet voters, paper ballot voters, candidates and electoral administration for the band elections.
2. The second part proposes to examine the impact of technology (e-democracy software) on participation in local governance. The project will assess whether digital and mobile technology foster increased participation and involvement in band politics.
3. Finally, the project will evaluate how First Nations members conceive of citizenship and explore how this might impact and inform their political participation and community involvement. First Nations members typically have lower rates of voter participation and there is a good chance their motivations to participate could be linked to their perceptions of citizenship within their communities and within Canadian society more broadly.

An introduction to who we are:



Chelsea Gabel is an Assistant Professor at McMaster University in the Department of Health, Aging and Society cross-appointed with the Indigenous Studies Program. Dr. Gabel has previous experience working as a policy analyst and researcher with the Assembly of First Nations and Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch. Dr. Gabel is the Applicant for the SSHRC Partnership Development Grant entitled "The Impact of Digital Technology on First Nations Participation and Governance" along with her co-applicants Drs. Nicole Goodman (McMaster University) and Karen Bird (McMaster University). She is also the Applicant for a SSHRC Insight Development Grant entitled "Bridging the Gap: Using Photovoice to generate Southern Labrador Métis-Inuit Elder and youth understandings of the importance of Intergenerational Communication". Dr. Gabel's research interests are in Indigenous health policy, self-determination, governance and community based participatory research.



Nicole Goodman is the Research Director of the Centre for e-Democracy and an Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs. Her current research addresses the concept of e-democracy, especially how digital technology is impacting political participation and the democratic channels that facilitate citizen engagement. Internet voting, in a Canadian context, is one of her subject specialties. Nicole has given presentations on Internet voting domestically and internationally and has coauthored three reports addressing aspects of Internet voting for Elections Canada. She has helped conduct surveys on Internet voting in the Cities of Edmonton, Guelph, and Markham and served as an advisor and expert witness for the Edmonton Citizens' Jury on Internet Voting. Nicole is currently part of two SSHRC funded research projects to understand the impact of Internet voting and e-democracy technology on Canadian municipalities and First Nations communities. Findings from these projects will allow us to learn about the effects of this technology on voting behaviour, and also lead to practical policy recommendations regarding the modernization of elections.



Karen Bird is an Associate Professor of Political Science at McMaster University. She specializes in comparative politics, with particular focus on gender and ethnic diversity and the political representation of women and ethnic minorities in countries around the world. Among her current research projects is a study examining electoral quotas for ethnic minorities in as many as 30 countries around the world. She is part of an international collaborative project, Pathways to Power, on the political representation of citizens of immigrant origin in seven European democracies. Her most recent book (coedited with Thomas Saalfeld and Andreas Wüst), is *The Political Representation of Immigrants and Minorities: Voters, Parties and Parliaments in Liberal Democracies* (Routledge 2011).

What are some initial findings of the project?

This research is still in the beginning stages, but we have already learnt about what some key impacts might be when these communities adopt Internet voting and other digital technologies in elections and votes, and what future use in these areas could look like.

Building trust

Trust in elections can be an issue for First Nations communities and many local leaders want to ensure trust in the technology and process has been built before introducing Internet voting in binding elections. As a result many are inclined to carry out a first test by asking opinions about a new piece of legislation or feedback on an important community issue. Community leaders are excited about the prospects, but not too eager to rush anything and disrupt what may already be fragile trust in government.

Not a replacement

Communities are not looking at Internet voting and the new participation opportunities digital technologies might allow for as a replacement of traditional engagement methods. There is a belief that these technologies should be used as one part of a suite of policies and tools that help engage community members. One community leader remarked that they are not inclined to have people engaging only as “keyboard warriors.” They want to improve accessibility and offer new possibilities, while maintaining traditional participation options.

More than just participation

Increased participation is an undeniable motivator, but other advantages of Internet voting can be equally appealing. Counting of ballots and the return of results, for example, can often be a long and arduous process in communities, with results sometimes not being tallied until 3:00 am. Using digital platforms to facilitate votes has meant that results are known by 8:00 pm, which allows community members to find out that night instead of having to wait until the next day.

Cost

Cost of introducing the technology could be one of the biggest setbacks for these communities despite interest in using it. Often budgets are tight and wanting to maintain traditional channels can mean offering Internet voting is not financially feasible. Building trust and finding the funds to finance these changes appear to be the biggest barriers to adoption we’ve observed so far.

Building community capacity

Many community leaders see additional opportunities for digital technology in elections. By getting a handle on how to use online voting for elections they hope to be able to adapt online tools in other ways to collect and analyse community-based data. The long-term goal would be to harness the power of data locally, as opposed to relying on consultants or outside actors. In this way, communities can acquire and disseminate their own evidence-based knowledge and build community capacity.

What are the democratic implications of First Nations using Internet voting?

First Nations in Canada are at the forefront of experimenting with new forms of Aboriginal self-government and institutional design. In particular, there is a movement in recent years to reduce the power of the Minister of Indian Affairs in the governance structure of First Nations and to increase the role and influence of members of the community. It is in the context of these changes that First Nations have become increasingly interested to experiment with digital technologies. Traditional forms of consultation such as community meetings and discussions in family circles will remain vital. However, it is important to learn whether (and how best) digital technologies might be leveraged to enhance processes of community consultation, and in turn foster greater certainty that decisions are a true reflection of community interests. In this context of local experimentation, it is especially important to contextualize and compare different strategies and choices in adoption, and to share what we learn across communities. Systematic research in this area will be invaluable to communities who seek to make their own informed decisions about how to best proceed in advancing modern governance structures and processes that are responsive to the needs and interests their people. There will be impacts to participation and governance and we hope to help communities and the broader public understand what these are and how they might be used to benefit First Nations.

The Research Team Travels to Whitefish River First Nation

Whitefish River First Nation implemented Internet voting in an effort to boost referendum participation rates for ratification of its new Matrimonial Real Property Law (MRP). Online voting took place between March 2-5, 2015, along with a paper ballot vote on March 6th. To better understand the voting experience, we surveyed paper voters at the polls on election day. After casting a ballot, voters were invited to complete a short survey about their experience. We hoped to learn more about three specific topics: (1) whether Internet voting increases political participation in First Nation Communities; (2) whether Internet voting improves outreach and inclusion of community members (e.g., youth, off reserve); and (3) the types of barriers or problems communities may encounter while implementing Internet voting.

Survey results provide an optimistic forecast for Internet voting use in future

votes. Specifically, 60% of respondents said that they would likely make use of Internet voting in the future. Interestingly, 50% reported being dissatisfied with the paper voting process, suggesting that Internet ballots might provide a way forward to improve voter satisfaction. In terms of more general findings, the Whitefish River experience emphasizes the importance of tailoring the deployment of online voting to the distinctive needs of the community. It also reinforced the importance of ensuring that online ballots are equally accessible and user-friendly for all community members. Perhaps the most important finding of our research suggests that Internet voting assisted the community in achieving its goal of passing the proposed MRP law. This is a significant symbolic and practical step toward achieving self-government and developing local laws independent of the *Indian Act*.



Interview *with* Nishin Meawasige, Band Manager of Whitefish River First Nation

Where are you from?

I currently reside on Manitoulin Island. My home community is Serpent River First Nation.

What did you do before becoming band manager of Whitefish River?

I was employed with Serpent River First Nation as Director of Operations.

What are some of the biggest challenges you face in Whitefish River First Nation?

Probably one of the bigger challenges that WRFN along with other First Nations and northern municipalities is shortage of human capital. Many students leave their home communities after they graduate to pursue postsecondary education and find they have better opportunities in urban centres. The challenge is how can we attract young professionals to return home to work and live in rural areas like WRFN and Manitoulin Island. Investments in information technology infrastructure is one part of the solution.

Is that one of the reasons why you decided to explore Internet voting for the Matrimonial Real Property (MRP) referendum?

Use of technology in referendum processes is important and relevant to First Nation community members, both on-and off-reserve. We are hoping this will lead to increased participation in First Nation referendum processes. Many communities have traditionally used other options like mail-in ballots but with the help of the First Nations Market Housing Fund, WRFN had the opportunity to incorporate an optional electronic voting process for those community members interested. In addition, through the assistance of McMaster University, we were able to survey those individuals utilizing the electronic voting process to determine voter satisfaction and areas for future improvement.

I know the Indian Act has specific rules and regulations for First Nations elections but this MRP Law ratification process falls outside of that. How do you marry that while using emerging

technologies like Internet voting ?

This MRP Law community ratification process was an ideal opportunity to incorporate an electronic voting process alongside a traditional process. ScytI was helpful in establishing a user-friendly process as some of our members are not as familiar with the Internet as some of the younger members. They were the ones that suggested we have a traditional polling station alongside the Internet vote so that we were not disenfranchising anyone who, for whatever reason, could not vote online either due to missed registration deadlines, lack of connectivity or personal preference.

What's next for Whitefish River First Nation?

Improving information technology infrastructure to ensure accessibility to WRFN information and align with technological norms of the emerging youth demographic. Achieving modern connectivity standards in a rural area is a challenge for most northern communities, both First Nations and Municipalities.

The Canadian Political Science Association Conference at the University of Ottawa

Members of the research team traveled to the University of Ottawa from June 1st - 4th 2015 to present their paper "The Impact of Digital Technology on First Nations Participation and Governance in Ontario" and discuss these research findings at the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) Annual Conference. This conference brings together political scientists from across Canada to present and discuss research on a wide-range of topics. The CPSA conference is an important vehicle for knowledge mobilization. It provided an opportunity to present and share this research and also allowed for valuable feedback from members of the broader academic community.

Want to be involved?

We are currently looking for First Nations communities and organizations to partner in our research that have either used digital technology or are considering doing so for elections, other types of votes, or community consultations. There are many benefits to participating in this project. While unique deliverables can be customized for the community, the following are some specific benefits of participation:

- Custom report on the unique findings from your community;
- Copies of other publications from the research;
- Opportunity to coauthor, if desired;
- Opportunities for training of community members on data analytics;
- Employment of local youth and elders;
- Custom presentations of project findings via Webinar;
- Invitation to participate in future discussions regarding policy and Internet voting development.

Please contact us if you would like more information about the project or if you are interested in taking part via email at: info@digitalimpactfn.com or by phone at 905-870-9487. You can also visit our website at:

DigitalImpactFN.com



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada