



**FN** Digital  
Democracy

# Indigenous Experiences with Online Voting

Executive Summary

May 2021



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The purpose of this report is to examine the opportunities and challenges online voting presents for participation and governance in First Nations in Canada. Specifically, the report draws on the experiences of three First Nations: Tsuut'ina Nation, Wasauksing First Nation and Nipissing First Nation. The research for this report was conducted by Dr. Chelsea Gabel (McMaster University) and Dr. Nicole Goodman (Brock University).

Guided by a community-engaged research process, our approach to the project included the following methods: (1) 27 semi-structured interviews and a focus group; (2) a 2016 Online Voting Roundtable; (3) a community-engaged research project entitled First Nations Digital Democracy and d) local employment and capacity building. Significant input was provided by First Nations at every stage of the process, including feedback of the draft report and its recommendations.

Overall, the report finds that online voting is appealing to First Nations as a way to enhance participation, self-determination and governance. In particular, it can serve as a tool to improve voting accessibility and engagement for members living off-reserve. The engagement of off-reserve members is important as communities may require participation and approval thresholds to pass community-based legislation such as Land Code frameworks.<sup>1</sup> In this context, online voting represents a tool for communities to bridge participatory gaps with off-reserve members and increase capacity to ratify legislation. Findings suggest online voting adoption also enhances inclusiveness and the representation of voices in key community decision-making. Benefits aside, there are also important considerations around the cultural appropriateness of online voting and whether adoption of the technology is consistent with community visions of self-determination and local decision-making.

<sup>1</sup> Previously a Land Code had to obtain an approval of 25 percent + 1, however on December 13, 2018 the Framework Agreement on First Nation Land Management was amended to a simple majority or a higher threshold set by the First Nation.

## Good Practices and Recommendations

The report offers eight good practices along with 17 steps that should be considered as part of each good practice. Good practices include: responsiveness and resources from the Government of Canada; community knowledge, engagement, outreach and communication; consultation; building digital capacity; building tools and strategy; clear processes, resources and alignment; a focus on technology and the importance of paying attention to language.

Eight final recommendations are presented, providing concrete, actionable steps forward to enable choice for First Nations interested in using online voting and support for those communities actively deploying it.

### The eight recommendations are:

1. Amend relevant regulations to allow First Nations to have the choice of using alternative voting methods, such as online voting, in their elections and referendums.
2. Increase earmarked core funding provided by the Government of Canada that could be carried over and support deployment of online and other voting methods.
3. Support the development of a National Centre of Excellence (NCE) or expansion of the First Nations Digital Democracy Project.
4. Enhance responsiveness from the Government of Canada and additional support for Indigenous elections and votes.
5. Create a security framework for online voting implementation.
6. Work with community-owned service providers to enhance Internet connectivity and digital literacy in First Nations.
7. Provide additional research support from ISC/CIRNAC and Tri-Council Agencies for community-engaged research with Indigenous communities focusing on technology.
8. Explore the development of online voting technologies.

## Priorities and Next Steps

The first and key priority action is to amend the Indian Band Election Regulations, Indian Referendum Regulations and First Nations Elections Act Regulations to allow for the use of alternative voting methods in First Nations elections and referendums.

The second priority is to move forward with recommendations that have broad support and could be implemented relatively quickly. These recommendations include enhancing the Government of Canada's responsiveness, working with community-owned service providers and undertaking activities to enhance Internet connectivity and digital literacy.

A third priority is to ensure implementation of the report and promote community buy-in and ownership of recommendations, and to maintain momentum and leadership around key recommendations. We propose coordinating an additional meeting or Alternative Voting Workshop to bring community organizations, governments, and leaders together to discuss the report and prioritize recommendations.



## Authors

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**Dr. Chelsea Gabel** is Métis from Rivers, Manitoba and holds a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Well-Being, Community-Engagement and Innovation and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Health, Aging and Society and the Indigenous Studies Program at McMaster University. Dr. Gabel is currently leading multiple Tri-Council grants as Principal Investigator and is involved in a number of research collaborations across Canada that integrate her expertise in community-based participatory research, arts-based research, digital technology, intervention research and Indigenous health and well-being. One of these projects is a multi-year partnership project entitled First Nations Digital Democracy, which is the only project dedicated to learning about the impacts of electronic voting on Indigenous communities in the world. She has published a number of papers and reports from this project.



**Dr. Nicole Goodman** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Brock University where she holds the Chancellor's Chair for Research Excellence. Her research examines the impact of technology on civic participation and democracy. She is an internationally recognized authority on voting technologies. As part of her work on elections and voting with communities, she has led the production of 70+ community reports and has facilitated training programs for post-secondary students and Indigenous youth. Her work is supported by research grants from Tri-Council and non Tri-Council agencies and is frequently consulted by governments, not-for-profit organizations, and parliamentary committees. Goodman represents Canada on International IDEA's Board of Advisers and is co-investigator of the First Nations Digital Democracy project.