


RESEARCH ARTICLE/ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

Indigenous Political Representation in Canada

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Abstract

Despite long-standing academic interest in Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state, there has been little study of Indigenous elected officials as representational actors. We ask: What are the distinctively Indigenous forms of representation practised by Indigenous elected officials in Canada? And how does clarifying the role of Indigenous elected officials as representatives both contribute to and enhance our overall understanding of Indigenous politics, governance and sovereignty? We draw on the existing literatures on substantive representation as well as original interviews conducted with current and former Indigenous elected officials to develop an original conceptualization of Indigenous representation. These actors differ in their perceptions of themselves and their roles as representatives, the representational behaviours they engage in and the outcomes they seek. Our conceptualization of Indigenous representation engages with four themes: Indigenous perspective, Indigenous advocacy, balance with other imperatives including constituency representation and party discipline, and Indigenous nationhood.

Résumé

Malgré un intérêt théorique de longue date pour les peuples autochtones et l'État canadien, les élus autochtones en tant qu'acteurs de la représentation ont fait l'objet d'un petit nombre d'études. Nous posons les questions suivantes : quelles sont les formes de représentation spécifiquement autochtones pratiquées par les élus autochtones au Canada ? Et comment le fait de clarifier le rôle des élus autochtones en tant que représentants contribue-t-il à notre compréhension globale de la politique, de la gouvernance et de la souveraineté autochtones, tout en l'améliorant ? Nous puisons dans la documentation existante sur la représentation substantielle ainsi que sur la transcription d'entrevues menées auprès des élus autochtones actuels et anciens afin de développer une conceptualisation originale de la représentation autochtone. Ces acteurs diffèrent quant à la perception qu'ils ont d'eux-mêmes et de leur rôle en tant que représentants, quant aux comportements de représentation qu'ils adoptent et quant aux résultats qu'ils recherchent. Notre conceptualisation originale de la représentation autochtone s'articule autour de quatre thèmes : la perspective autochtone, la défense des intérêts autochtones, l'équilibre avec d'autres impératifs, notamment la représentation des électeurs et la discipline de parti, ainsi que la nation autochtone.

Keywords: Indigenous politics; representation; Members of Parliament; Canada

Mots-clés : représentation; politique autochtone; députés; Parlement; Canada

Introduction

Understanding Indigenous peoples and politics is no simple task. Indigenous peoples consist of multiple nations and diverse identities. For example, in Canada there are over 640 First Nations, not including the Métis and Inuit (Belanger, 2014). While there are some shared experiences, Indigenous peoples and nations have diverse political theories and practices (Barsh, 1986; Carrière, 2018). In addition to this diversity, each Indigenous nation has a unique relationship with the state: “treaty,” “self-government” and “unceded” are some of the terms used to describe this relationship. No people in Canada interact with as many complex layers of government and politics as Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, no other people have their relationship with the state defined as Indigenous peoples do. The nation-to-nation conception of Indigenous peoples’ relationship with the Canadian state is unique and gives rise to concerns about Indigenous sovereignty that are not shared by other groups within Canadian society. Some argue that Indigenous politics has existed in a “fourth world,” a space that is simultaneously Indigenous and part of the state (Manuel and Poslun, 1974: 11). One implication of both the heterogeneity of Indigenous peoples and their distinctive relationships and experiences with the Canadian state is that issues related to Indigenous peoples should not be treated in the same way as other “societal cleavages” (Ladner, 2017: 175), as doing so ignores broader themes unique to Indigenous peoples (also see Williams and Schertzer, 2019).

Here, we focus on the experiences of Indigenous peoples directly involved in Canadian politics, specifically current and former Members of Parliament (MPs) or members of provincial and territorial legislatures. We ask: What are the distinctively Indigenous forms of representation practised by these Indigenous elected officials in Canada? And how does clarifying the role of Indigenous elected officials as representatives both contribute to and enhance our overall understanding of Indigenous politics, governance and sovereignty? Other studies have explored how representatives work on behalf of members of groups such as racialized peoples, women or LGBTQ+ Canadians. We draw inspiration from the frameworks developed in these works. But Indigenous representatives differ from these other representatives not only for the reasons noted above but also because these representatives must reconcile their work as elected officials in Canada with the challenge of recognizing and advancing Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood, a problem that does not confront those representing other minority groups. Indigenous political representatives are unique because they exist in two worlds: (1) the colonial democratic institutions they are elected to serve in and (2) the Indigenous nations that are engaged in ongoing struggles for their own sovereignty. Reconciling Indigenous elected officials’ roles within the context of these two worlds is at the heart of Indigenous representation as practised by these elected officials.

These Indigenous elected officials are our entry point for analysis of Indigenous political representation. We draw on semistructured interviews with Indigenous representatives to identify and explore three aspects of Indigenous representation: representatives' perceptions of themselves and their roles as representatives, the representational behaviours they engage in, and the outcomes they seek. We derive four themes from these aspects of Indigenous representation. The first theme that emerged from our interviews is that the *perspective* of Indigenous elected officials—including lived experiences, cultural teachings and Indigenous belief systems—help shape these officials' approaches to being representatives. The second theme is *advocacy*: Indigenous elected officials often advocate directly for the interests of Indigenous peoples and nations, although the ways they do so are shaped and mediated by Canada's colonial institutions. The third theme is that of *balance* with other imperatives: Indigenous elected officials must balance their advocacy for Indigenous peoples and nations with concern for the necessity of maintaining party discipline and re-election. The final theme is *Indigenous nationhood*: unlike other elected officials, Indigenous elected officials must reconcile the task of representation with the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. These four themes—perspective, advocacy, balance and nationhood—make up the distinctive Indigenous forms of representation as practised by Indigenous elected officials in Canada.

Our broader goal in articulating this conceptualization of Indigenous representation within Canada's institutions is to expand the dissemination of Indigenous perspectives on representation and its relation to the broader topic of Indigenous politics, governance and sovereignty. Central to the existing literature on Indigenous peoples' engagement with the Canadian state is the realization that the state consistently does not recognize the claims of Indigenous peoples (Coulthard, 2014; Monture-Angus, 1999). Furthermore, even when Indigenous people have engaged with and within the state, they have not exercised substantial influence through the normal channels of electoral politics and political participation (Hunter, 2003: 27; Palmater, 2020). Accordingly, some scholars argue that Indigenous peoples should refuse to participate in state political processes, in part because participation perpetuates the legitimacy of the Canadian state at the expense of Indigenous nationhood (Corntassel and Witmer, 2008; Cowie, 2021; Ladner and McCrossan, 2007: 23–24). “How,” asks Williams (2004: 93–94), “can it be possible to insist upon an inherent right of Aboriginal self-government, grounded in a ‘nation-to-nation’ relationship with the Canadian government, while also laying claim to full participation in that government’s legislative institutions?” Taking the view that these goals cannot be reconciled, Alfred (2005: 268) argues that Indigenous people must instead pursue power through means “outside of the established political structure and paths provided by Canada.” Indeed, Alfred claims Indigenous disengagement from Canada’s formal political institutions is necessary for processes of decolonization to succeed (2009: 57; also see Simpson, 2011).

The ideas informing Indigenous disengagement have led many Indigenous people to reject participation in traditional venues, such as through voting or purchasing memberships in political parties (Manuel and Derrickson, 2015; Palmater, 2019). Thus it may seem counterintuitive to attempt to gain a deeper understanding of Indigenous politics by examining mainstream Canadian politics. But other

scholars argue that Indigenous peoples should not abandon the promise of elective politics. Murphy (2008), for example, argues that policy interdependence between Indigenous communities and the institutions of Canadian government means it is in the continued best interests of Indigenous peoples to pursue power within those institutions.

Indeed, some Indigenous people continue to engage with the Canadian state in a range of ways including, perhaps most notably, by running for and serving as representatives in the Canadian Parliament or one of the provincial or territorial legislatures. But, despite long-standing scholarly interest in the intersection of Indigenous peoples and the institutions and actors of the state (for example, Bruyneel, 2012), there has been little emphasis in this literature on the roles played by Indigenous representatives in Canada's federal and provincial governments. Exploring these roles from the perspectives of Indigenous elected officials themselves, we argue, contributes to our overall understanding of Indigenous politics and government and challenges colonial discourses on the topic of political representation, which has been dominated by non-Indigenous voices.

Review and Context

While the relevant literature provides little direct guidance on how to conceptualize Indigenous representation, there are nevertheless helpful antecedent theoretical and empirical studies. Descriptive representation—the extent to which elected officials resemble and share interests with those they seek to represent (Pitkin, 1967)—has been a major focus of the Canadian literature on the representation of women in politics, with numerous works cataloguing and explaining the election of women at the national, provincial and local levels (for example, Breux et al., 2019; De Geus and Loewen, 2021; Lucas et al., 2021; Trimble et al., 2013), as well as the substantive consequences of increased numbers of elected women (for example, Koop and Conrad, 2021; Tremblay, 1998). The same is true for studies of members of racialized communities (for example, Andrew et al., 2008) and, more recently, LGBTQ+ Canadians (for example, Tremblay, 2019). In contrast, while there are certainly studies of Indigenous politics (Voyageur, 2011) and Indigenous peoples' political participation (Alfred et al., 2007; Berdahl et al., 2012; McMahan and Alcantara, 2019), we are aware of no academic studies of the substantive representation of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Instead, representation as a concept has been analyzed to inform decolonized models of representation (Williams and Schertzer, 2019). While scholars have examined Indigenous forms of political leadership (Fox et al., 2015; Kundoqk, 2013; Venne, 1997), there is a lack of studies that explore Indigenous political representation, especially research that engages directly with the perceptions and behaviours of Indigenous actors themselves.

Some Indigenous elected officials identify with and are concerned with the interests of Indigenous peoples, and they see themselves as playing roles in processes of both reconciliation and resurgence, as well as in the vitality of Indigenous nations. These elected officials often seek to advance the interests of Indigenous peoples both within and outside their constituencies. To use Mansbridge's (2003) framework, these elected officials are engaging in surrogate representation: representation

of group interests that exist outside their elective constituencies. Recent theoretical accounts of representation anticipate this behaviour by taking a broad view of what constitutes representation (for example, Rehfeld, 2006). Saward (2010), for example, argues that representation can be understood as a process of making and receiving claims and that such representative claim-making is not necessarily restricted by geographically defined boundaries.

Nevertheless, Indigenous elected officials in Canada exist within both institutional and elective settings that do not always or often accommodate or reward advocacy for Indigenous peoples, and indeed many of the incentives faced by these officials prod them in quite different directions (see, for example, Caplan et al., 2021). Indeed, work on institutional reform in Canada and elsewhere has sought to address how the interests of Indigenous peoples might be better represented to the state through institutional or procedural reform (for example, Barié, 2022; Corntassel and Witmer, 2008; Fleras, 1985; Flowers, 2017; Htun and Ossa, 2013). Further, the inherent complexity and diversity of Indigenous identity complicates simple notions of surrogate representation, putting Indigenous elected officials in often challenging situations.

Three institutional and party characteristics of Canada's governing and electoral structures both shape and limit the representational opportunities of Indigenous elected officials. First, the single-member plurality electoral system means any individual candidate must be elected and re-elected within a geographically defined constituency. Constituencies differ in their proportion of Indigenous residents, with a small number being heavily Indigenous and others having comparably small numbers. One result of this distribution is there is little electoral incentive for most officials to prioritize the needs of Indigenous peoples, given that they are dispersed across constituencies and thus unable to exercise decisive influence in all but a small number of seats (see, for example, Gibbins, 1991: 155).

Second, Indigenous elected officials, once nominated and elected as party candidates, are subject to party discipline, which both limits their activity as officials and shapes the ways in which they can exercise influence and represent others (Murphy, 2019: 93).

Finally, Indigenous elected officials exist within a multilayered institutional and societal ecosystem within which several sets of political actors may make representative claims, to use Saward's (2010) term, to speak for Indigenous peoples (see, for example, Venne, 1997). This ecosystem includes national Indigenous advocacy organizations, including the Assembly of First Nations and the Métis National Council. It also includes First Nations themselves, in which both hereditary and elected chiefs and council members may play leadership roles. Often the Canadian political system creates tension and conflict between Indigenous peoples and political organizations (Voth, 2016). Thus, the rise of civil society movements committed to decolonization and resurgence, such as Idle No More, has also empowered a new set of Indigenous actors as representatives of Indigenous peoples (Simpson, 2017). Even other representatives in Canada's federal system of governance, such as mayors or municipal councillors, may make representative claims to speak for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous elected officials must function within this complex ecosystem and

may find their claims to represent Indigenous peoples contested by a range of other Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors.

While recognizing that institutions shape the goals and behaviour of elected officials, recent scholarly work has also emphasized the importance of individual representatives' agency in shaping how they approach the role (for example, Koop et al., 2018). This observation applies to Indigenous elected officials. The stories presented here are therefore in part about the constraining effects of Canada's colonial political institutions. But these stories also, following Smith's (2012) challenge to Eurocentric intellectual traditions, both illustrate and celebrate the continued resiliency and activism of Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous representatives, within those institutions.

Cases and Methodology

To date, there have been 49 self-identified Indigenous MPs and 25 self-identified Indigenous members of the Senate (Canada, 2022).¹ Indigenous peoples have served in 11 of 13 provincial and territorial legislatures. However, for several reasons, we cannot draw any definitive conclusions about Indigenous political participation and engagement based on the number of Indigenous peoples elected to these roles. This is for several reasons. First, the identity claims of some Indigenous representatives have been challenged. Second, due to both the Indian Act and the Canada Elections Act, status Indians were not allowed to serve as elected officials until 1960 (Leslie, 1999; Milen, 1991; Venne, 1981). Finally, while the number of Indigenous people serving in these institutions is quite low, these numbers do not include participation in Indigenous communities, including election to First Nation councils (Belanger, 2006; Nickel, 2019).

We were primarily guided by Indigenous methodological principles. First, we believe that research on Indigenous peoples should not be extractive and should instead focus on the empowerment of Indigenous peoples (Gaudry, 2011; Smith, 2012). To that end, we acknowledge our participants, and we centre their voices in the analysis. This approach also aligns with qualitative research practices. Second, the practical aspects of our research and interviews were guided by Indigenous research principles. For example, gifts were exchanged as a symbolic gesture of knowledge transmission, a common practice in Indigenous research (Lavallée, 2009; Stonechild, 2016). This project was approved by our institutional research ethics board, including a specific review for research related to Indigenous peoples.

We acknowledge several limitations related to our decision to focus solely on Indigenous MPs and members of provincial and territorial legislatures. First, the concept of Indigenous representation would be better explored through a wider sample of actors making claims to represent Indigenous peoples, not just the officials we have focused on. Second, if we truly wish to gain an understanding of the diversity of Indigenous forms of representation, we should not be aggregating the Indigenous experience into the homogenous "Indigenous" category; to the contrary, this goal would be better served through individual explorations of representation based on individual Indigenous nations. We intend to pursue these wider goals related to Indigenous research in future research.

In total, we interviewed 11 Indigenous elected officials. As noted, there are no studies of Indigenous MPs' perceptions and behaviours as representatives in Canada, so it was appropriate to use interviews to conduct deep analyses of a small number of cases to generate new theoretical understanding (Kelly, 2010). Qualitative research methods have been used in several classic studies of elected officials' representational perceptions and behaviours, including of traditionally marginalized communities (for example, Fenno, 2003). While the number of interviews for this project is small, this sample reflects the small number of Indigenous people who have been elected to Canada's representative chambers. In the context of Indigenous research methodologies, there are no standard rules to achieve trustworthiness (Carrière, 2018; Chilisa, 2012). Indeed, Indigenous research principles often interpret smaller sample size as both reliable and consistent with Indigenous views of research (Makokis, 2001; Steinhauer-Hill, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

Our interviewees included First Nations, Métis and Inuit respondents; women and men; MPs and members of provincial and territorial legislatures; representatives affiliated with Liberal, New Democratic and Green Parties; and representatives elected in six provinces. Six of the interviewees were former representatives, whereas five were currently serving in their roles. While we cannot claim the results of our small-*n* study are necessarily generalizable, the themes developed here result from deep analyses and are therefore highly suggestive. Furthermore, in the context of Indigenous research, reliance on these key informants is consistent with Indigenous research principles.

In determining whom to approach to interview, we used publicly available sources to determine which current and former MPs and members of provincial and territorial legislatures identified as First Nation, Métis or Inuit. We invited all these public officials for whom we could find contact information. The interviews were audio recorded and semistructured, and they incorporated established Indigenous research principles. The interviews were conducted both over the phone and in person and were on average 44 minutes long. No notes were taken during the interviews, a practice used by the first author as an Indigenous research practice. Participants were told their comments would not be attributed to them and that their identities would remain confidential; however, in line with Indigenous research practices, we provided interviewees with the option to be acknowledged for their participation. The quotations that were used in this article were therefore edited to remove any personal or Indigenous indicators, as the sample of participants is sufficiently small that unedited quotations could potentially identify participants.

An interview guide was developed and used in the interviews, but interviewees were given wide latitude to take the interview in new directions unanticipated by the researchers. This decision was made because a lack of pre-existing theoretical understanding meant we could not be sure the questions developed would entirely cover the substantive areas we wished to address, and we therefore left opportunities for the interviewees to expand where necessary (see Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001). The full interview guide can be found in Appendix 1.

The interviews were subsequently transcribed and analyzed in ATLAS.ti. Our thematic analysis consisted of broad coding across all interview transcripts. Several of these codes were then subsequently merged to facilitate analysis.

Patterns in these codes were investigated, identified and discussed at length between the two co-authors, who both reviewed the codes and transcripts (see Braun and Clarke, 2006). The result of this analysis was the development of the four themes that structure our analysis of Indigenous representation in Canada. Appendix 2 lists the themes and the codes that are included within each theme.

Our analysis that draws on these interviews is focused heavily on the use of quotations. Our use of quotations allows Indigenous elected officials to speak through their own stories, since such stories as told by Indigenous peoples and disseminated through academic channels are thought by scholars such as McLeod (2000: 35) to be crucial to counteracting the displacement of authentic Indigenous voices.

Analysis

Our analysis identified four themes related to Indigenous representation that together make up the Indigenous forms of representation as practised by these elected officials: Indigenous perspective, Indigenous advocacy, balance with other imperatives, and Indigenous nationhood.

Indigenous perspective

The first theme we explore is that of Indigenous perspective, or the lived experiences, cultural teachings, and philosophies and belief systems that inform how Indigenous elected officials carry out their roles as representatives. Indigenous elected officials are often keen to link their histories and experiences, as well as those of their families and local communities, to their goals and activities as representatives. This linkage occurs in several ways.

First, these elected officials bring a lived Indigenous perspective to their roles as representatives. Indigenous elected officials often felt that their experiences and histories differed from those of their non-Indigenous colleagues. Past experiences and histories—both individually and as a family or community—often relate to these MPs' current activities as representatives.

Interviewee 8, for example, speaks broadly to the experiences of Indigenous elected officials and their roles within Canadian representative institutions:

As you walk into this place, there's potential to make a difference. But also, a sadness at what that place did to our people. So, you almost have a stronger obligation to right the wrongs of the past, to move forward in a different way, in a better way, in a stronger way, that's inclusive of Indigenous peoples.

This MP works to transform his despondency into constructive outcomes for Indigenous peoples, but this despondency does not mask the alienation Indigenous elected officials may feel toward the institutions of Canadian government and the sense that, despite being elected, they remain outsiders to the processes of colonial government. Interviewee 2 reports that it was difficult for her to shake a feeling of being out of place during her time in Parliament: "As an Indigenous woman, I always feel like that kid who comes to school with everything

wrong as I enter the chamber.” This chronic alienation from the institutions they serve within also relates to the perceived difficulty many Indigenous elected officials associate with bringing about change for Indigenous people.

Many issues that governments confront in relationship to Indigenous peoples remain abstract for settlers. In contrast, the lived experiences of Indigenous elected officials make them personally invested in these issues and allow them to bring unique perspectives. Some Indigenous elected officials seem to instinctively connect pressing public policy issues related to Indigenous peoples to their own experiences or to those of their families or communities.

One interviewee, for example, reports a direct linkage between her own experiences and public policy debates surrounding Indigenous peoples: she connects the debate concerning reconciliation and action to her own family, she connects the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action regarding children in care to her own childhood, and she connects debates about murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls to the experiences of her own friends. In each case, she brings to these debates both a personal and an Indigenous perspective.

The small number of Indigenous representatives elected in Canada means that there is often little firsthand knowledge of the issues related to Indigenous peoples present in governments. Indigenous elected officials, through their own experiences and those of their families and communities, see one aspect of their role as being to bring these perspectives and lived experiences to governments, and the past two MPs illustrate how that is the case.

Indigenous elected officials also refer to their specific cultural teachings and practices that they attempt to integrate into their own work as representatives. As Interviewee 7 notes, “My idea of Indigenous political representation, I think, is borne out of the cultural upbringing that I had.” These elected officials often believe that they bring a unique perspective to Canada’s governing institutions from the cultures they represent. Interviewee 3 agrees but expands this perspective to include Indigenous philosophies and belief systems:

I have a responsibility to bring a different kind of sensibility or a different worldview to the decision-making table than has ever been there before. This is primarily the worldview of the . . . people that I come from, and the stories that we learned and the teachings that we have. Bringing those to the table to not just reflect Indigenous people but also to reflect Indigenous philosophies, Indigenous localized belief systems, and understanding of the world and our relationship to it.

Scholars are increasingly recognizing that representation is both complex and multifaceted and consists of several varying components. For Indigenous elected officials, one such component is the conveyance of Indigenous perspective—experiences, traditions and belief systems—to the state.

Indigenous advocacy

The second theme we explore is Indigenous elected officials’ overt representation of, and advocacy for, the interests and concerns of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Most officials we interviewed stated explicitly that they saw their roles, at least in

part, as a form of advocacy for the interests and welfare of Indigenous peoples. This is advocacy, not, however, a simple matter of surrogacy representation; to the contrary, Indigenous elected officials face conflicts in their roles when representing Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous elected officials advocate for the interests of Indigenous peoples by influencing their parties, the cabinet and first ministers and by playing legislative roles. We identified three distinct ways in which Indigenous elected officials engage in direct advocacy for Indigenous peoples.

First, Indigenous elected officials use the legislative tools available to them in order to advance Indigenous interests. One crucial tool is the party caucus, where Indigenous representatives can speak directly to the party leadership and introduce Indigenous perspectives to party discussions. The Indigenous elected officials we interviewed felt that their views were both respected and heard in caucus, even if their concerns were not always acted upon. And Indigenous elected officials also emphasize the importance of relationship building and behind-the-scenes networking in support of initiatives they felt would benefit Indigenous people.

As Interviewee 8 notes:

In caucus, you get up and you speak about it . . . and you try to convince them. And you build unity around that issue and that's really what it boils down to. You talk to senators as well. You talk to people who maybe aren't MPs but influence leaders in your party or they're influential in the party and the party apparatus.

Interviewee 10 expands on how he contributes to building support for bills and initiatives that he sees as positive for Indigenous peoples:

And I go, "okay, how can I help?" So, I spend my time giving a speech in the House indicating my support to the government on an issue but also advocating to my other colleagues that these are bills which are very good and need our support. And talking with my Indigenous colleagues and trying to get their support and then making sure that the bills become law.

Support from Indigenous elected officials for legislation and other initiatives that relate to Indigenous peoples can lend credibility and assist the government. Indigenous elected officials understand this process and act accordingly. Interviewee 4, for example, feels that she had "street cred" as an Indigenous elected official speaking out and lending support on certain issues. This support can be particularly valuable for government, parties, and these representatives' colleagues.

Indigenous elected officials also advocate for the interests of Indigenous peoples through the parliamentary and legislative committee systems. These officials report expressing preferences to party leadership to sit on committees where they feel they can best represent the interests of Indigenous peoples. Even when not assigned to certain committees, Indigenous elected officials will attend committee meetings where relevant issues are being examined and, in some cases, will substitute with party colleagues to speak directly to relevant issues.

In representing Indigenous people via legislative means, Indigenous elected officials come together to co-operate in formal and informal ways. This cooperation can take the form, for example, of party caucuses, such as when Indigenous Liberal MPs formed an Indigenous Liberal caucus after the 2015 federal election that was supported by the Liberal Indigenous Peoples' Commission, a party auxiliary group, through initiatives such as the Indigenous Electoral Endowment Fund (Liberal Party of Canada, 2022).

Indigenous caucuses provide a means for co-operation, but Indigenous elected officials also work together and build relationships outside of these structures, including across parties. In discussing these working relationships, Indigenous elected officials emphasize similarities in the backgrounds and traditions of their colleagues. Interviewee 2, for example, emphasizes the importance of community between Indigenous elected officials:

That camaraderie that's there, that teasing of each other, that same sense of humour. You know, making fun of coming from poverty . . . and making fun that you're in this fancy building, sitting with fancy people . . . Of course it's a community, of course we have to work with each other.

Bonds between Indigenous elected officials are sometimes more important than the divisions between parties, and so Indigenous elected officials can co-operate and work together toward representation of Indigenous interests across party lines. "I've been taught how to turn that [partisanship] off and work with everyone and anyone regardless," notes Interviewee 2. "I've had successful conversations with ministers . . . by working with [them] and not being so harsh in Question Period." But others report difficulties in working with representatives across party lines. And these elected officials must ensure that they are not undermining their own parties in working with colleagues from across the aisle.

In addition to working within the normal structures of parliamentary politics, Indigenous elected officials often take specific concerns from Indigenous peoples directly to cabinet ministers or party leadership. This advocacy is like the broad service representation function carried out by many elected officials, where they advocate for their constituents directly to the executive when the situation requires it (see, for example, Searing, 1994: chap. 4). On a range of substantive issues related to Indigenous well-being, Indigenous elected officials will approach leadership seeking solutions.

Finally, Indigenous elected officials advocate directly for Indigenous people by providing counsel to party and government leaders on what is important to Indigenous people and how best to grapple with the concerns of Indigenous communities. In so doing, these elected officials can gently push party leaders or ministers toward outcomes that are favourable to Indigenous peoples. Interviewee 3 provides an example:

One of the things that I encouraged our leader to do when we were at the chiefs summit . . . I said, ". . . the first thing out of your mouth needs to be a recognition that no leaders in our country do more with less on a daily basis than the chiefs that are sitting around the table right now." More

often than not, what those chiefs hear is how great the government is and how wonderful they are and how they're working towards getting rid of the Indian Act or whatever other BS they're talking about. Never do those chiefs hear a leader of a political party . . . stand up and acknowledge the kind of predicament that they've been put in.

In this case, the official pushed his leader to work toward the development of a better relationship with local chiefs.

Indigenous elected officials may see themselves as representatives of Indigenous communities and may seek to advocate for the interests of those communities. However, this involvement is not a straightforward task, and these representatives must address potential conflicts. One is whether elected officials should see themselves as a representative of all Indigenous peoples in Canada or just members of certain communities. If the former position is taken, then Indigenous elected officials confront the possibility that both the traditions and interests of different Indigenous peoples may conflict with one another.

Interviewee 4, for example, struggled with the expectation that she represent all Indigenous people in her role and with the contradictions and difficulties inherent in doing so. In explaining this challenge, she pointed to the diversity in the priorities of different First Nations and to frustration with how settlers had little patience for attempts to recognize and respect this diversity. Interviewee 3 similarly notes diversity in Indigenous communities in Canada:

We've got lots and lots and lots of small, culturally diverse Indigenous groups, so it's very hazardous for me to think that I know anything about anything, to be honest with you. . . . I've learned that the most appropriate thing for me to do is to humble myself and to approach this with great humility because otherwise it's a very hazardous territory for me to be in.

These elected officials remind us that for Indigenous representatives, the complexity and diversity of Indigenous communities complicates any possibility of surrogate representation.

Indigenous elected officials may feel kinship with other cultural minority elected officials in the need to navigate historic racism and barriers to success that are embedded within Canada's governmental system. But Indigenous elected officials are also implicated in the uniquely Indigenous phenomena of colonization and reconciliation, and they feel obligated to be responsive to Indigenous people within those processes. One Indigenous elected official, for example, felt the need to be responsive and offer guidance and support to Idle No More protesters.

The result of these added responsibilities, according to Indigenous elected officials, is that they perform significantly more work than most other elected officials. "I feel a burden is placed on my shoulders," reports Interviewee 9 when discussing the need to advance Indigenous interests. The perceived need to engage in surrogate representation of Indigenous people outside their constituencies was seen to add significant work to the job descriptions of Indigenous elected officials, further complicating their presence in an often alienating institution.

The imperative of constituency representation and party discipline

Indigenous elected officials work to advance the interests of Indigenous peoples, but in doing so they must balance their surrogacy with other imperatives, notably those of constituency representation and maintaining party discipline. Elected officials see both these imperatives as crucial to their own re-election prospects, and so a prerequisite for any continued effort to advocate for Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous elected officials are elected within single-member constituencies. Elected officials who hope to work to advance the interests of Indigenous peoples must still commit both time and effort to constituency representation. Some Indigenous elected officials clearly prioritize constituency representation over the representation of Indigenous peoples. Interviewee 10 provides an example, defining himself as “the representative for people from [my riding] and my job is to represent everyone who lives there, whether they’re conservative or NDP, or Indigenous or non-Indigenous, or from . . . any community.” Interviewee 11 brings a similar approach to constituency representation: “I represent everybody. It doesn’t matter your race, your religion, your background, where you came from. . . . If you are in the riding and you have a legitimate issue, it’s my job to represent you.” When asked whether he felt obligated to represent Indigenous people outside his constituency, Interviewee 11 responds: “No, definitely not.”

Indigenous elected officials are sometimes concerned about the perception that they are representing the interests of Indigenous people above those of others, especially other residents in their constituencies. “I think there’s also a danger with being pigeonholed as an Indigenous representative, narrowly focused on Indigenous issues or Indigenous people,” argues Interviewee 7. “I haven’t shied away from Indigenous issues. But the vast majority of the topics that I’ve commented on have been on healthcare, on education, on issues that ties everybody in the community.” While elected officials may wish to act as surrogates for the interests of Indigenous peoples, the imperative of re-election within geographically defined constituencies can create obstacles to doing so.

Party discipline both limits and shapes the ways in which Indigenous elected officials can work to advance the interests of Indigenous people. They recognize this issue and explicitly mention the importance of discipline to their own overall success as politicians. “You have to maintain your discipline,” argues Interviewee 1. “You want to be attractive as a party to the mainstream voter. You can be a one-dimensional politician . . . [but] you simply cannot survive. . . . And if you start speaking out in that regard, then of course you don’t have that mainstream appeal.” Interviewee 4 agrees, “I’m not a big fan of partisan politics. But at the end of the day, you have to pick a team.”

Indigenous elected officials also relate discipline to the importance of being in government rather than being in opposition, since the former better enables them to work on behalf of the interests of Indigenous peoples. “It is a really important distinction to make,” argues Interviewee 5, an opposition member who was previously in government. “We don’t have access to cabinet decisions, we don’t have access to Treasury Board funds. We don’t have the ability to make funding decisions or make commitments.” Some degree of discipline is therefore a necessary imperative for elected officials who hope to enter government and work more effectively for outcomes that will favour Indigenous peoples.

The important organizing principle of party discipline reveals itself in another way: while several elected officials were critical of their own parties in our interviews, they rarely if ever express those criticisms publicly. Instead, Indigenous elected officials use the tools described in the last section to pursue their advocacy for Indigenous peoples, and they avoid criticism that would make it difficult for them to continue to do so.

Most elected officials we interviewed spoke in terms of balance between these three roles: Indigenous advocacy, constituency representation, and party discipline. But Indigenous elected officials must further balance these roles with other responsibilities toward both their parties and Parliament. Interviewee 8, for example, summarizes the multidimensional representational approach he feels Indigenous officials tend to take:

I'm overgeneralizing here, but the vast majority of Indigenous people that have occupied a seat in the House of Commons, that have a seat today and may in the future, is they'll look at representing their constituency to the best of their ability and do their duties in the House of Commons, but always with an eye towards how to be better and do better with Indigenous Canadians and then the party.

While Indigenous elected officials seek to represent the interests of Indigenous peoples, both the extent to which and ways in which they do so are shaped by Canada's colonial institutions. "This whole system was not built by Natives or for Natives," observes Interviewee 4 when discussing the limits on her ability to represent Indigenous interests. Indigenous elected officials are constrained by colonial institutions in how they can represent Indigenous peoples, but they also often skilfully manoeuvre through both the opportunities and obstacles built into those institutions.

Indigenous nationhood

The final theme of Indigenous representation is that of Indigenous nationhood. Indigenous elected officials must find ways to reconcile their involvement in colonial institutions with the goal of advancing Indigenous nationhood. Given outside critiques that posit the incompatibility of Indigenous nationhood with participation in Canadian representational politics (Alfred, 2005; Corntassel and Witmer, 2008), we explored Indigenous elected officials' perspectives on these issues. It is not surprising that Indigenous elected officials—who have invested energy into success in mainstream electoral politics—would be skeptical of the view that Indigenous nationhood and participation in politics are incompatible. But they are also familiar with this perspective and shed light on how they reconcile two goals that seem to conflict.

Indigenous elected officials are open to the possibility that participation in mainstream Canadian politics may undermine the advancement of Indigenous nationhood. Interviewee 6, for example, argues that Indigenous elected officials must take steps to ensure they are not doing so in their elected positions: "If you're being a token and you're aware of it and you're happy with it, just receiving your money,

then you will undermine the original issues and original identity.” Interviewee 5 similarly recognizes the potential for conflict but insists this issue is a conflict that individual elected officials must consider and cope with on their own:

I think that it’s complicated work that is very individual in terms of how we reconcile nationhood and the sovereignty of our communities versus participation in a colonial system. It’s a very personal choice that we all have to make, and there’s not really an easy answer about whether it’s right or wrong or good or bad. It’s complicated and its nuanced.

Nevertheless, this elected official had concluded that participation in mainstream politics did not undermine Indigenous nationhood. Indeed, this official concluded that working within “colonial systems of power” was necessary to “reclaim power” to better assert Indigenous nationhood: “There is important work to be done in coming into colonial systems of power and reclaiming power from within that system for the betterment of our communities.”

Indeed, this connection was a common theme among Indigenous elected officials: participation in mainstream politics reinforces and strengthens, rather than undermines, efforts toward reconciliation and Indigenous nationhood. “Indigenous participation—either by voting, being a party member, or volunteering for a campaign—I think it creates empowerment,” claims Interviewee 2. Other Indigenous elected officials are resigned to the presence of the Canadian state and so argue that engagement is preferable to non-engagement. “We can’t wish [settlers] to not exist, that’s not going to happen,” argues Interviewee 3. “So get involved and be part of the change.” In this quote, we detect a resigned agreement with Williams’ (2004) conceptualization of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canada as resting on the notion of a “shared fate.”

Several Indigenous elected officials we interviewed had experience in Indigenous politics, and this prior experience provides them with a valuable perspective on how to approach their roles as federal or provincial representatives. In these cases, Indigenous elected officials emphasize the importance of Indigenous influence within the federal and provincial governments to bringing about the goal of Indigenous nationhood. As Interviewee 8 argues:

Every day as a Chief you’re fighting the government to make changes. One of the ways to make change is to get on the inside and make changes on the inside. You respect the nationhood of the nation that you come from. They want their sovereignty and self-determination. That is critical, that needs to happen. But you’ve got to find ways to make it happen.

Similarly, Interviewee 1 touts his own knowledge of the inner workings of the provincial government as crucial to the overall goal of achieving Indigenous nationhood:

I understand the structures behind the Treasury Board. I understand how budgets are finalized. I understand the role of the deputy minister. I understand the process of cabinet and how cabinet works. I understand the party

structure. So, you gain all that as an Indigenous person by participating in their governance.

For this representative and other Indigenous elected officials, the goals of reconciliation and Indigenous nationhood are aided, not hindered or contradicted, by participation in mainstream politics. This perspective directly challenges accounts that argue Indigenous nationhood is impossible while Indigenous peoples continue to engage with the Canadian state. Compared to other leaders who may make claims to represent Indigenous peoples, Indigenous elected officials are most likely to view engagement with, and participation in, the institutions of the Canadian state as complementary to the goal of Indigenous nationhood. Nevertheless, these elected officials are aware of contrary views and often grapple with them.

Conclusion and Reflections

In this article, we sought to conceptualize Indigenous representation as practised by Indigenous elected officials inductively, using qualitative data to identify the ways that these officials, not theorists removed from the complexities and idiosyncrasies of the challenges of the role, view both themselves and the role of representative. We find that Indigenous representation can be understood via four themes: Indigenous perspective, Indigenous advocacy, balance with other imperatives, and Indigenous nationhood. These four themes help us to understand how Indigenous elected officials approach the challenge of representation. They also allow us to illustrate and better understand nuance and complexity in how Indigenous elected officials do their jobs. The colonial institutions of the Canadian state disincentivize representation of Indigenous peoples and complicate that task for these officials. Despite this tension, Indigenous elected officials are manoeuvring the obstacles in that environment to represent Indigenous peoples, though with significant difference in how they do so.

How do these findings affect our understanding of Indigenous governance, politics and sovereignty? We assumed that Indigenous elected officials would be quick to raise the inherent tensions of their roles and the conflict between them and Indigenous nationhood. Yet as the interviews progressed, we realized these representatives were often less concerned about this tension than they were about performing their roles in a way that could benefit Indigenous peoples. Indigenous elected officials are cognizant of Indigenous sovereignty and the tension between sovereignty and their work as elected representatives within colonial institutions, but they reconcile these tensions by using their roles to represent both their constituents and, often, Indigenous peoples. In so doing, Indigenous elected officials achieve what Williams (2004: 94) presents as seemingly mutually exclusive political views: they allow for the representation of Indigenous interests within Canada's representative institutions while also respecting and working toward the development of autonomous Indigenous nations.

This practice distinguishes Indigenous elected officials from political representatives from other minority communities in Canada. These officials may grapple with surrogacy issues related to communities that exist outside their constituencies; however, they do not grapple with the complex burden of Indigenous sovereignty and

nationhood in the way Indigenous elected officials do. Our analysis reinforces Williams and Schertzer's (2019: 961) argument that Indigenous representation "differs in fundamental ways from ethnic representation."

We recognize that our selection of only MPs and members of provincial and territorial legislatures is an important limitation that should be addressed in future research on the tensions inherent within the practice of representation by Indigenous peoples. There are many other types of Indigenous elected officials, such as chiefs, council members, and officials in national Indigenous organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations. We suspect that these Indigenous elected officials would both view and practise representation in ways that differ from MPs and members of provincial and territorial legislatures. We also recognize that representation in Indigenous politics is not exclusive to formal elected officials. Idle No More, for example, re-emphasized the importance of grassroots Indigenous representation. Indeed, Voth (2016: 263) argues that Indigenous political mobilization requires a recentring along Indigenous kinship lines.

In exploring and conceptualizing Indigenous representation through the voices of Indigenous elected officials, we challenge dominant colonial discourses about the conduct of democratic politics, which are derived almost entirely from the experiences of non-Indigenous peoples. We do so in two ways. First, our analysis builds understanding of the ways in which politics is both conducted and experienced by Indigenous peoples. The ways in which Indigenous people contest power is structured by treaties, colonial institutions and multiple layers of governance. Politics occurs both in colonial and Indigenous settings. Furthermore, Indigenous politics is informed by both lived experiences and traditions, and it grapples with the question of participation in colonial representative institutions while also recognizing the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. The lived experience of Indigenous politics complicates traditional understandings of democratic politics.

Second, we add an important empirical caveat that is missing from much of the literature on Indigenous politics: Indigenous peoples are diverse, and this shapes theoretical and practical perspectives on both representation and participation. Indigenous peoples are not homogenous, so we should not expect Indigenous perspectives on representation to be either. To the contrary, Indigenous peoples seek a variety of forms of interaction with the Canadian state, ranging from a complete rejection of the colonial system to full participation in state politics. The model of Indigenous political representation we develop succeeds in part because it both grapples with and makes room for the diversity of Indigenous elected officials and Indigenous peoples in general: it accommodates Indigenous political theories and practices while recognizing that a singular Indigenous political entity does not exist.

Positionality Statement. We concur with both Absalom (2020) and Roberts et al. (2020) that it is crucial to establish transparency in how our identities as researchers relate to both the research topic and the identities of the research participants and that this can best be achieved by clarifying where we as researchers are situated relative to the study of Indigenous representatives. Accordingly, Carrière is Cree/Métis from Big Eddy, Cumberland House and Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, and Koop is a settler Canadian.

Acknowledgments. We gratefully acknowledge the meaningful conversations that we had with all participants throughout the research for this article, including but not limited to Jonathan Genest-Jourdain, Wab Kinew, Adam Olsen, Robert-Falcon Oullette and Ellis Ross. We are also grateful to the journal's anonymous reviewers for their critiques of this article. Kinanâskomitinâwâw.

Note

1 Of the 49 Indigenous MPs, 39 (80 per cent) are men and 10 (20 per cent) are women. Of these, 25 (51 per cent) were affiliated with the Liberal Party, 12 (25 per cent) with the Progressive Conservative or Conservative Parties, and 10 (20 per cent) with the New Democratic Party. Twenty-one (43 per cent) of these MPs identified as Métis, 19 (39 per cent) as First Nations, and 8 (16 per cent) as Inuit. Indigenous MPs have represented seats in Manitoba (12 in total), Northwest Territory (8), British Columbia (5), Saskatchewan (5), Quebec (5), Nunavut (4), Ontario (4), Newfoundland and Labrador (4) and Nova Scotia (1).

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Appendix 1. Interview Schedule

1. What does it mean to you to be an Indigenous representative?
2. Does being Indigenous affect how you do your job as a representative? If so, how so?
3. What does it mean to you being an MP?
4. Do you think there's a difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous MPs? If so, what are they?
5. Some people think participation in Canadian politics undermines Indigenous nationhood. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
6. Who do you seek to represent?
7. Do you feel you have to balance Indigenous and Canadian interests? If so, how do you do that?
8. Do you ever find there's a conflict between representing Indigenous and Canadians interests? If so, how do you deal with that?
9. Do you try to represent a particular group or community in your riding? If so, which groups and communities?
10. Do you feel you have an obligation to represent Indigenous people outside your riding? If so, how do you do so?
11. How do you balance constituency needs and the needs of Indigenous people outside your constituency?
12. Do you feel accountable to Indigenous people outside your constituency?
13. As an Indigenous MP, how do you influence the cabinet and prime minister?
Do you feel you're successful in doing so?
14. As an Indigenous MP, how do you influence your party?
Do you feel you're successful in doing so?
15. As an Indigenous MP, how do you influence the legislative process and other MPs?
Do you feel you're successful in doing so?

Appendix 2. Themes and Codes

Table 1 lists the codes that were derived from the interview transcripts, as well as the themes and, in one case, the subthemes that were used to organize these codes.

Table 1 Themes and Codes

Theme	Indigenous perspective		Indigenous advocacy N/A	Balance with other imperatives N/A	Indigenous nationhood N/A
	Indigenous knowledge	Indigenous background			
Subthemes					
Codes	Bring Indigenous perspective Clarify place of Indigenous peoples Indigenous conceptions of representation Perspective of Indigenous MPs	Differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous MPs Distinct background of Indigenous MPs Expertise on Indigenous issues	Advocacy for Indigenous peoples Burden of advocating for Indigenous peoples “Fight” for Indigenous interests Legislative role of MPs Make change on the inside Obligation to advocate for Indigenous peoples Bring about outcomes Surrogate representation Voting in Parliament Work with other MPs	Balance between different roles Balance between Indigenous and other issues Conflict with constituency role Conflict with parliamentary role Conflict with party role Concern to not be pigeonholed Represent all residents of constituency Represent Indigenous interests Represent Indigenous peoples within constituency Representative of the constituency	Nationhood Reconciliation Self-government