



# Political Engagement of Indigenous Youth in Québec



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## Context

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According to the 2016 census, 1.2% of Québec's population is indigenous (Page 2017) and 27.3% of that population is between 15 and 34, or the youth (Statistics Canada 2017). So far, Québec has had two indigenous members of government and there are none occupying official chairs nowadays (National Assembly of Québec). There is an issue of underrepresentation that affects the present and future of indigenous youth.

Political engagement, through voting and direct participation in government, are key components for the feeling of representation and belonging. A group that is severely underrepresented in the government will feel like their affairs are being dealt with by people who are ignorant of their realities. Indigenous communities in Québec are underrepresented, leading to a poor and mismatched notion of their issues and needs in the political sphere.

## Issue

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Although a majority of the indigenous youth is politically conscious and involved with their communities, many admit to not having participated in provincial elections. As exemplified in *The Meaning of Political Participation for Indigenous Youth*, someone interviewed related that “Since I became more politically aware a few years ago, I haven’t voted, mostly because I don’t believe in the colonial style of government with elections because elections have been imposed on our people over their own way of governing themselves traditionally through a council of elders, clan mothers, hereditary chiefs.” (Alfred 2007). The study reveals that the colonial roots of politics makes political participation through vote undesirable. Seeing someone that resembles one and one can identify within a position of power is something that would benefit indigenous people (Mckenzie 2020). These two main factors expose a vicious cycle where the lack of representation makes it hard to want to participate and at the same time, more representation is necessary.

For the youth, their future is apparently in the hands of people who are ignorant of their realities.

This can create a sense of distrust in the political system where “The youth argue that the political system is rooted in identifiable and undesirable principles, and do not wish to see themselves as past of that system.” (Alfred 2007, 12). The main obstacles that indigenous youth face when participating politically are poverty, absence of trust in their leaders (Ferguson 2020), lack of confidence and the insufficiency of people to introduce one into politics (McKenzie 2020). Modeste Mckenzie, a member of the We Matter campaign and active participant in the political world, has reinforced during an interview that the underrepresentation of indigenous people in government creates a burn-out effect; being one of the only indigenous members of a party makes many people rely on you to get information on indigenous perspectives, making the job wearing and tiring (Modeste 2020).

The fact that affairs that impact indigenous people are dealt by non-indigenous people is theorized in “ignorance of Aboriginal realities systematically disadvantages Aboriginal peoples, weakening Canadian society and prohibiting the address of their conditions of life in any sustained or coherent way.” (Schaepli and Godlewska 2014). A public apology is not enough if the Minister of Indigenous Affairs does not acknowledge the existence of systemic racism in the province (CBC News 2020). This exemplifies how strategic not-knowing is a colonial form of violence (Schaepli and Godlewska 2014).

## Call for Action

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Youth 4 Youth Québec acknowledges that political underrepresentation of indigenous peoples has had and will continue to have negative consequences to the indigenous youth and community in general. Y4Y believes that actions should be taken by Québec's government to encourage political participation of indigenous youth at the provincial level.

As reinforced by Jennifer Ferguson, political aid for indigenous affairs' official opposition, during an interview, the government has to be thinking about what can be done today in addition to long term



propositions. In her opinion, the technology that has now become widely used because of Covid-19 would be of great benefit for indigenous communities (Ferguson 2020). Online platforms should be used as a form of communication between indigenous youth and Québec's government. It is the government's responsibility to provide the necessary technology to the communities to encourage participation or at least observation.

There should be parliamentary commissions in charge of dealing with indigenous issues (Ferguson 2020). Indigenous youth should be able to feel like they can report their needs to the government at any time and when needed instead of having to wait for a youth assembly or general meeting. The relationship between indigenous people and Québec's government should be more collaborative, indigenous peoples have to feel like they are truly being heard (Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador). Youth 4 Youth believes that the government has the duty to take responsibility for change, to encourage community leaders' political engagement to strengthen community mobilization. Local forms of mobilization can go a long way if given more incentives by the local government.

In conclusion, through a constant check-in routine, trust in the government can start to be built and consequently the real needs of indigenous communities can be addressed. Trust in government will lead to more participation; communication and inclusiveness are the key to understanding and representing indigenous realities and demands.

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