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Voting is one of the most important democratic tools we have in this country. Every four years we select the incoming government and have the chance to shape the future of our country. Canadian politics – particularly federal politics – is a passion of mine. Although I voted in the previous two federal elections, I followed this past election more closely.

But federal politics mean something different to many Aboriginal people. Many choose not to engage with federal politics because of a “[lack of meaningful Indigenous contributions to the Canadian political system and party politics](#)”. From Canada’s [colonial past](#), [genocide](#) and [centuries of discrimination by citizens and governments](#) and [abusive social institutions](#) even to the present, it’s no surprise many Aboriginal people have a contentious relationship with Canadian politics.

This election was different. The AFN identified [51 ridings](#) where the Indigenous vote could significantly affect election outcomes. Activist groups and Indigenous leaders made a strong effort to mobilize these communities to increase voter turn-out and voter registration with “get out the vote” campaigns like [Rock the Indigenous Vote](#). It appears October’s election saw exponentially [higher voter turnouts in Aboriginal communities](#) than many past elections. Higher engagement came despite – or perhaps *because* – recent changes to the “[UnFair Elections Act](#)” tightened identification restrictions [particularly effecting Indigenous people](#). Band offices and other institutions held longer office-hours to facilitate [voter registration drives](#) to ensure everyone had the identification they needed to vote.

Despite pre-election registration and education efforts, Indigenous people – particularly those living on a reserve – faced significant challenges casting their ballots. With so many Aboriginal communities facing resistance we need to ask: *was it intentional? Was it preventable?*

Ballot Shortages in 11 Aboriginal Communities

Reports of ballot shortages on reserves and in Aboriginal communities surfaced on October 19th. According to several media reports, **eight** First Nations ran out of ballots, including: [Siksika Nation](#), [Onigaming First Nation](#), [Split Lake First Nation](#),

[Shoal Lake 40 First Nation](#), [Big River First Nation](#), [Moose Cree First Nation](#), [One Arrow First Nation](#), and [Beardy's & Okemasis First Nations](#). In addition, I located **at least three more** First Nations communities that ran out of ballots: *Lac La Croix First Nation*, *Wauzhushk Onigum First Nation*, and *Little Pine First Nation*.

Lac La Croix

[Lac La Croix First Nation](#) in Ontario's Kenora riding was down to 5 ballots around 3:00pm on October 19th. Cory Sky, Deputy Returning Officer for Thunderbay—Rainy River, was surprised his reserve was only given 75 ballots with over 60 registered voters. Sky said he promptly contacted Electoral official Robert Burns and was told to make photocopies. At 3:30pm Sky received a confusing message from Burns to stop, *"I stopped immediately and was told to call. I called him at 3:30 and was told to hold off and to call him every 15 minutes. I called at 3:45 – we'd already used 6 photocopied ballots – and he said just go ahead."* Burns faxed Sky at the local Band office and was told to make 50 photocopied ballots.

Sky was understandably confused by orders to copy, to stop, then to continue. *"A lot of ballots were used at the advanced polls, was the reason given,"* said Sky, *"it left me feeling kind of unsettled. It just doesn't sound right."* He also wondered why an Elections Canada representative didn't drive from Atitkokan to bring him official ballots. *"Most of the places where they ran out of ballots were First Nations and not the general public, right? Why was it only First Nations that were effected with not having enough ballots?"*

Chief Norman Jordan was concerned the photocopied ballots may not have been counted. He also received reports on his reserve of voter cards directing members to the wrong polling station far off reserve. *"Those people didn't vote, they stayed home. It takes a lot of money to go into Thunder Bay and Fort Frances,"* said Band Council Member Curtis Ataise. *"Back in the old days,"* said Chief Jordan, *"[we] used to get voter cards in the mail and they were fine, voting in the reservation, before the Unfair Elections Act."*

Apart from the confusion, both Chief Norman Jordan and Cory Sky were pleased with a turnout of 100 up from 7 in 2011.

Wauzhushk Onigum First Nation

[Wauzhushk Onigum First Nation](#), in Kenora riding, also experienced a ballot shortage. *"The concern was rectified by making a quick call to Elections Canada to put them on notice that Wauzhushk Onigum was going to be short on ballots,"* said Chief Chris Skead, *"the community received additional ballots."* Chief Skead also reported an instance of 1 spoiled, pre-marked ballot.

Little Pine First Nation

A Saskatchewan Tribal Council member was informed of ballot shortages at [Little Pine First Nation](#) in the Battlefords—Lloydminster riding. A member from the Little Pine First Nation who wished to remain anonymous witnessed the ballot shortage, “*I went to the community hall and was told that ballots had run out. Others were told they couldn’t vote and that they had to wait. They didn’t register and said they’d come back and walked out.*” The source witnessed the call to Elections Canada to report the ballot shortage.

Voters Lists and Other Issues

Media sources reported that both polling stations in [Winnipeg Centre](#) and [Ahtahkakoop First Nation](#) had voting delays. Two other First Nations experienced similar problems. In [Sweet Grass First Nation](#) and [Red Pheasant First Nation](#), both in Saskatchewan’s Battlefords—Lloydminster riding, registered voters lists did not arrive at the polling stations until around 10am. June Martell who worked at the Sweet Grass polling station called the delay “a huge setback.”

Voters from the [Ojibways of the Pic River First Nation](#) also experienced significant problems. Chief Duncan Michano, among others, received a voting card directing him to a polling station in the Marathon municipality, a far distance from the community. Michano contacted an Elections Canada representative in Marathon: “*they sat down with me and we went over the voter list to ensure all our people were on the voter list for the poll in our community.*” Michano also reported some issues in the Nation with IDs which were sorted out before the election. “*As far as I’m aware everyone who wanted to vote could vote.*”

Chief Franklin Paibomsai of [Whitefish First Nation](#) also reported a misprint on voter cards with an incorrect street name: “*we had a whole street called Rainbow Valley for voters...a lot of people had to change their addresses to Rainbow Ridge.*”

Impact of ballot shortages on Indigenous Vote Unclear

With only a week’s notice prior to the election it is unclear whether Elections Canada staff was fully aware of the adaptation to allow for photocopied ballots. The confusion and delay at Lac La Croix polling station suggests at least some officials were not informed.

Media reported on these shortages individually, but as far as I know there has been no national, comprehensive investigation into the full extent of Aboriginal people denied, or underhandedly prevented from exercising their democratic right to vote.

It is unclear whether election results in these communities would be different had the staff been better prepared. The failure to account for the total number of Aboriginal communities effected by ballot shortages marginalizes this significant, disturbing democratic failure.

Lauren Boothby is a post-secondary student and aspiring writer. She has a keen interest in Canadian politics, philosophy, art, Seinfeld, and cat memes. She's also addicted to twitter. Follow [@laurby](#) & [@CheekyPostca](#) or visit her [blog](#).

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