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A-Kii, Bemaadzijik, E-Niigaanwang
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An Indigenous Perspective on Online Voting in Federal Elections: Nipissing First Nation

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Nipissing First Nation Background

The people of Nipissing First Nation (NFN, have lived in the area of Lake Nipissing since time immemorial. Prior to the signing of the Robinson Huron Treaty of 1850, the Nipissings had occupied and enjoyed the lands surrounding the Lake Nipissing watershed for their sustenance and survival through harvesting, trade and other means.

Throughout Canada's colonial history, our people struggled to maintain our ways of making decisions and ensuring the identity and culture of our nation remained intact. Despite many forces that sought to disrupt and destroy our way of life, we retained a strong sense of who we were as a people as times and methods of governance evolved. Today, NFN's vision is to continue to protect our Nation's inherent rights and to empower the membership to work together in a positive, progressive manner to improve well-being and quality of life, to be socially and economically independent, culturally strong and self-governing.

A key element of achieving this vision has been developing governance capacity and tools that ensure decision-making is informed and supported with evidence and information, as well as guided by the values of the community and our traditional teachings. NFN has invested significant time and resources in developing governance tools and mechanisms to engage members in decision making over the past number of years. This includes:

- Development and ratification of the NFN Chi-Naaknigewin (Constitution)
- Development of a Financial Administration Law and System Certification through the First Nation Financial Management Board
- Ongoing implementation of the NFN Strategic Plan based on traditional teachings.
- Development and implementation of Risk Enterprise system for the First Nation.

Nipissing First Nation Experience with Online Voting

In August of 2013, the final draft of the Nipissing First Nation Chi-Naaknigewin (Constitution) was presented and recommended for approval by the Debendaagziwaad (membership) by the NFN Chief and Council. As one means of encouraging people to engage in the process, online voting was added as an option for people to cast their ballots. Council wanted to provide as many access points to vote on what was a complex articulation of principles that many members needed time to digest.

A key concern was that the Chi-Naaknigewin was complex; and if the voting process was also too cumbersome, some members might have chosen not to vote at

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all. Efforts were made to provide online voting as an additional voting option, particularly aimed at off-reserve members living across Canada and the United States, in the hope that a higher voter turnout would result. Many members of NFN have embraced technology and social media as important tools in their everyday lives – particularly in accessing information and communications. NFN wanted to leverage this interest to draw attention to the vote. Another key consideration in using online voting was the immediacy of voting results. Many First Nations find the counting process to be extremely long and onerous using mail in ballots. Very often counting does not finish until the wee hours of the morning. Online voting had significant appeal given the results could be transmitted almost instantly.

Many members find mail in ballots cumbersome given they typically include requirements for attestations to go with them – this usually requires having another person witness the attestation. Online voting was much easier in that it only required four clicks of a mouse and the vote was entered. NFN made the option of voting using mail in ballots to members in addition to voting in person or voting online.

NFN entered into a working relationship with ScytI to deliver online voting for the Chi-Naaknigewin. ScytI provided a secure product that allayed concerns some people initially had with potential voter fraud and manipulation using online voting. Efforts were made to demonstrate the technology at various community forums before the actual vote took place to familiarize members with the technology and its ease of use. ScytI provided:

- project management;
- customized set up of the voting portal;
- deployment of the technology;
- training for staff and training materials
- technical support throughout the process;
- destruction of sensitive data after the election was closed.

NFN was responsible for:

- appointing a project manager to oversee the project locally;
- participating in training
- providing opportunities to familiarize members with the technology
- publishing the results.

The results of the vote were overwhelmingly in favour of adopting the Chi-Naaknigewin.

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And the experiment with online voting was deemed to be a success. The vote breakdown was as follows:

- In-person voting – 114 ballots
- Mail-in voting – 115 ballots
- Online voting – 146 ballots

It is interesting to note that 43 ballots were spoiled through the mail in and in person process. Spoiling ballots was not an issue with mail in voting.

Reflections, Recommendations and Barriers:

Online voting has the potential to be a valuable tool for voter engagement as our nations continue to grow and as our people move between their home communities and other locations.

- The disconnect some individual members experience with the broader community is a barrier to active participation in government activities at all levels. If members feel that voting is more accessible and easier, this may spur further engagement in the process. NFN is currently exploring other online tools to support civic engagement by its members.
- E-voting is only one tool in engaging members more broadly in decision-making. NFN is interested in exploring other online engagement tools that will enable members to engage with other levels of government in addition to the local Chief and Council.
- E-voting is less cumbersome and confusing than the current mail in vote process but cannot replace mail in ballots at this time.
- As members become more comfortable with the technology, NFN expects more people may engage in using online tools.
- Many people use the internet and social media to stay connected and informed about what is happening in their nation. Online voting can be viewed as an extension of that need to feel connected.
- One barrier some expressed at NFN during the Chi-Naaknigewin vote was that E-voting didn't feel like traditional voting – it feels like clicking on a survey after an online newspaper article.
- Many people access the internet and social media exclusively through mobile devices. This platform will have to be used for many people to successfully engage in e-democracy.
- People need to feel that they are connected to other decision-making processes.