

# Research shows online voting could be transformative for Indigenous communities

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New research published on Monday, May 3 shows that online voting could have a significant impact on the democratic process in Indigenous communities.

["Indigenous Experiences with Online Voting"](#) is the result of eight years of research by Chelsea Gabel, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Well-being, Community Engagement and Innovation and an Associate Professor at McMaster University, and Nicole Goodman, Brock University Associate Professor of Political Science and Chancellor's Chair for Research Excellence.

The report and its recommendations are the result of long-standing research collaborations with Indigenous communities as part of the First Nations Digital Democracy Project. The research was carried out with communities, taking their guidance on research design, questions and project outcomes.

Through a community-engaged research approach, Gabel and Goodman found that online voting is appealing to Indigenous communities as a way to enhance participation, self-determination and governance. It can also serve as a tool to improve voting accessibility and engagement for members living off-reserve.

The findings also suggest online voting adoption enhances inclusiveness and the representation of voices in key community decision-making.

"The importance of this report and its recommendations has been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic," says Goodman. "Voting and elections have been affected in many communities and First Nations should be able to choose balloting options that work best for the health and well-being of their community."

She points out that a recent Ipsos poll found that a [majority of Canadians feel holding an election during COVID-19 would be unsafe and unfair.](#)

"Our report on Indigenous experiences with online voting speaks to online ballots as an alternative voting mode that governments could consider to maintain public health and continue with elections," Goodman says.

Gabel, who is Métis from Rivers, Man., said Indigenous communities played a significant role in the research. The report draws on the experiences of three First Nations: Tsuut'ina Nation, Wasauksing First Nation and Nipissing First Nation, and the community was involved at every stage of the process, including providing feedback on the draft report and its recommendations.

"This report is unique because it's directed, driven and led by community," she says. "Through our Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded First Nations Digital Democracy project, we cultivated strong relationships with First Nations partners. It is the only project in the world that combines community engaged scholarship and technology to explore Indigenous experiences with online voting."

Along with a number of good practices and next steps, the report offers eight recommendations:

- 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.

- Increase earmarked core funding provided by the Government of Canada that could be carried over and support deployment of online and other voting methods.
- Support the development of a National Centre of Excellence or expansion of the First Nations Digital Democracy Project.
- Enhance responsiveness from the Government of Canada and additional support for Indigenous elections and votes.
- Create a security framework for online voting implementation.
- Work with community-owned service providers to enhance internet connectivity and digital literacy in First Nations.
- Provide additional research support from Indigenous Services Canada/Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada and Tri-Council Agencies for community-engaged research with Indigenous communities focusing on technology.
- Explore the development of online voting technologies.

Goodman and Gabel say the first key priority 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.

"First Nations should have the opportunity to innovate their [election](#) processes to potentially better reach members," says Gabel. "Given the government's narrative of reconciliation and support for a nation-to-[nation](#) approach to working with Indigenous communities, there is a timely opportunity to reform both the Indian Act and the First Nations Election Act to give First Nations the autonomy to decide for themselves which voting methods work best for their community."

From there, the technology also must be stabilized by working with community-owned service providers and undertaking activities to enhance internet connectivity and digital literacy, and then to work with

Indigenous communities to implement other key steps in the report and promote community buy-in.

"There is an opportunity with these recommendations to more fully support First Nations in their voting and elections through funding and resources," says Goodman.

Provided by Brock University

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