

Locating the Aboriginal Gender Gap:  
The Political Preferences and Participation of Aboriginal Women in Canada

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*Abstract:* Social welfare indicators place Aboriginal women at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, making them one of the most socially marginalized groups in Canada. Aboriginal women's marginal status results from a unique combination of colonialism, racism and gender inequality. These intersecting forms of oppression have led many Aboriginal women to believe that their interests differ substantially from the interests of non-Aboriginal women. Along the same lines, Aboriginal women contend that the Canadian state and Aboriginal institutions are both obstacles to and facilitators for the pursuit of their interests. Yet, little is known about how Aboriginal women participate in such governing institutions, or whether their participation differs fundamentally from non-Aboriginal women. This paper examines how Aboriginal women participate in electoral politics in Canada. What do they share with non-Aboriginal women and how do they differ in their electoral behaviour? Drawing on the gender and politics and Aboriginal politics literatures, we assess the extent to which gender gaps are found between Aboriginal women and men, and compare these to the gender gaps found in the non-Aboriginal population. For the analysis, we draw on the 2004 Canadian Election Study and a unique subsample of Aboriginal people in the 2004 wave of the Equality, Security, Community Survey. While overall turnout levels are lower among both Aboriginal men and women, the evidence suggests that gender gaps among Aboriginal peoples in Canada tend to reproduce trends in gendered electoral participation found in non-Aboriginal populations.

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## Introduction

Since the development of survey research in the mid-twentieth century, political scientists have demonstrated the existence of differences in the political behaviour of men and women. Early research found women to be less politically engaged than men and to vote more often for right-wing parties (Lipset, 1963). Beginning in the 1980s, however, the gender gaps in participation were markedly reduced and the gender gap in vote choice was reversed (Inglehart and Norris, 2000; DeVaus and McAllister, 1989). Today, the concept of gender gaps has become a staple in the literature and is important for understanding the political behaviour of women and men.

Aboriginal peoples represent one segment of the Canadian population that has rarely been the focus of political behaviour scholarship (Harell et al., 2009: 7). As a result, scholars do not know whether gender-based differences characterize the political attitudes and participation of Aboriginal men and women, let alone whether gender-based differences among Aboriginals parallel the ones that divide the overall Canadian population. Put more simply, political behaviour scholars cannot say whether or not there is an Aboriginal gender gap and, if there is, what this gap looks like.

The Aboriginal politics literature complicates the issue. While not directly addressing the question, scholarship on the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state provides reasons both to credit and to doubt the idea of an Aboriginal gender gap. On the one hand, the literature illustrates the many ways in which gender oppression structures the life experiences of Aboriginal women, just as it impacts non-Aboriginal women, lending credence to the idea that an Aboriginal gender gap may exist. On the other hand, the literature also highlights the central role colonialism plays in shaping the lives of *all* Aboriginals. The distinctive experience of colonialism suggests that, at the very least, scholars should be cautious in generalizing conclusions drawn from general – and largely non-Aboriginal -- population samples to the particular circumstances of Aboriginal men and women.

In this paper we begin to fill in this “gap” in the gender gap literature. The analysis draws on data from two surveys – the 2004 Canadian Election Study (CES) and the Aboriginal subsample of the 2004 wave of the Equality, Security, Community (ESC) study – and relies on scholarship from the political behaviour and Aboriginal politics literatures. Three questions anchor the analysis: (a) Is there an Aboriginal gender gap? (b) If so, what is the nature and scope of the Aboriginal gender gap? And (c) how might gender oppression and colonialism impact the political behaviour of Aboriginal women?

## Theory

### *Gender Gaps in Electoral Politics*

Gender gaps are a persistent phenomenon in industrialized democracies. While gender gaps in participation have narrowed considerably in recent years (Verba, Scholzman and

Brady, 1995; Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001), interest in gender gaps has broadened to include not only the levels of participation of men and women but also how women's political attitudes differ from those of their male counterparts. One of the primary findings focuses on vote choice. Consistent evidence demonstrates that, beginning in the 1980s, women in industrialized democracies tend to vote more often than men for parties on the left (Studlar et al. 1998; Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Gidengil et al. 2005). This difference in vote choice corresponds with important gaps in attitudes: women are less likely to support the use of force and they tend to care more about social welfare issues than men (Conover, 1988; Conover and Sapiro, 1993; Gidengil, 1995; Everitt, 1998).

Theories about the origins of these gender gaps fall into three main categories: situational, structural and socialization accounts (Welch, 1977). Situational accounts focus on the social roles traditionally occupied by women. Accordingly, situational explanations advance that women who are mothers and care-givers have less time for politics and less access to the politicizing experiences of life outside the home (Tedin, Brady and Vedlitz, 1977; Studlar, McAllistar and Hayes, 1998). While situational accounts rely on women's gender roles, structural accounts focus on how gender roles translate into aggregate differences in the numbers of women in various politicizing institutions, such as the workforce and higher education (Carroll 1988; Everitt, 1998; Schlozman, Burns and Verba, 1999). Socialization accounts of gender gaps focus on socio-psychological factors, such as gendered conceptions of morality (Gilligan, 1982), the acceptance of traditional gender roles (Bennett and Bennett, 1989) or the development of gender-based political consciousnesses (Conover, 1988; Everitt, 1998). While explanations of gender gaps vary, they illustrate the complex set of variables that give rise to and affect gender gaps (Welch, 1977: 712).

### *Gender Inequality*

These three sets of explanations focus on how women's lived experiences, whether in the family, in the workforce, or in a patriarchal society more generally, influence their politics. In Canada, men and women experience very different economic, social and political conditions. For example, on average, women still earn less income than men (Statistics Canada, 2006: 133).<sup>2</sup> Women are overrepresented in short-term contract employment and part-time work, and they are concentrated in particular occupations (Statistics Canada, 2006: 109, 111, 113).<sup>3</sup> Women are at greater risk than men of experiencing sexual assault and criminal harassment (Statistics Canada, 2006: 159). And, as political scientists emphasize, women are underrepresented in legislative bodies and in government at the municipal, provincial and federal levels (Trimble, 2008: 79). These examples – and the many others that could be added to this list – reveal the significant

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<sup>2</sup> According to Statistics Canada women who work full-time earn 71% of what men earn and this “gap between the earnings of women and men has not changed substantially in the past decade” (2006: 139).

<sup>3</sup> These occupations include teaching and nursing, sales and the services sectors, clerical and administrative positions (Statistics Canada, 2006: 113). Statistics Canada concludes that “there has been virtually no change in the proportion of women employed in these traditionally female-dominated occupations over the past decade” (2006: 113).

inequality of condition experienced by Canadian women. Indeed, Canada has a long way to go before achieving sex equality.

The obstacles barring women's equal participation in Canadian society are the object of study for all feminist scholars. While feminists approach gender inequality from different theoretical traditions, there is consensus that these obstacles are widespread and omnipresent in the economic, social and political spheres of life. Moreover, these obstacles are not understood simply as the result of individuals acting on their own, but are seen as systemic, embedded in patriarchal institutions, norms and social practices (Pateman 1988; Young 1990). For many feminists, sexism is an expression of the belief, in its simplest form, that women are inferior to men, and its expression in everyday life leads to the gender-based distribution of society's benefits and burdens and, ultimately, to women's oppression (see, for example, Young 1990, Ch. 2).

All of the examples cited above also characterize the position of Aboriginal women in Canada. In fact, Aboriginal women experience these conditions to a greater degree, suffering higher rates of poverty (NWAC, 2009: 6-7), more employment insecurity (NWAC, 2009:6-7), and greater probabilities of being subjected to violence than other women (Statistics Canada, 2006: 163). In short, even though Aboriginal women are not immune from the effects of gender inequality in Canada, they do not experience it in the exact same way as non-Aboriginal women.<sup>4</sup>

Aboriginal women have fought to halt and reverse sexist policies and practices. Two illustrative examples of such campaigns are the successful efforts of Aboriginal women in the 1970s and 1980s to change the provisions of the *Indian Act* regarding the determination of Indian status,<sup>5</sup> and Aboriginal women's unsuccessful efforts to be included in the constitutional negotiations that led to the Meech Lake Accord.<sup>6</sup> These

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a recurring critique of feminist theory has been that it views women as a universal category, ignoring the other, intersecting forms of oppression experienced by women of color, colonized peoples, GLBT women, and the like (Mahonty 2003; Young 1990; Razack 1998).

<sup>5</sup> The provisions in the *Indian Act* regarding the determination of Indian status are prime examples of sexism. Before the *Indian Act* was amended by Bill C-31, women who "married out" (that is, married non-status men) lost Indian status, even if their spouses were Aboriginal. Loss of Indian status is important because this status was necessary in order to reside on reserves and participate in First Nations governments, as well as a requirement for certain government programs and benefits. Men with Indian status who married out, on the other hand, did not lose their status and could even pass it on to their spouses (even if their wives were not Aboriginal). For many scholars, these sexist provisions in the *Indian Act* were justified by patriarchal conceptions of the family that held that the legal status of women and children should be determined by their husbands and fathers (Lawrence, 2004; Barker, 2006; Kirk, 2002). After intense campaigning by Aboriginal women, the federal government changed these provisions in 1985. After 1985, status Aboriginal women who married non-status men would no longer lose their status. However, the legislative changes have not rendered the rules and regulations regarding the determination of Indian status free of sex discrimination. Provisions in the Act about passing on status to future generations and the severing of Indian status from band membership negatively impact Aboriginal women to a far greater degree than Aboriginal men (Lawrence, 2004; Day and Green, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Various national organizations (e.g. the AFN) representing Aboriginal peoples were invited to participate in the Meech Lake round of constitutional negotiations. While these organizations are mandated to represent all of their Aboriginal constituents they were (and still are) run predominantly by men. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) and the National Métis Women of Canada, the national

cases are of import here because in both instances Aboriginal women were not only challenging sexist policies that were created by Canadian governments, they were simultaneously challenging policies that were supported by (some) First Nations governments and Aboriginal organizations. Stated somewhat more plainly, in these battles for sexual equality many Aboriginal women and Aboriginal men were on different sides (Green, 1993; Barker, 2006). This situation leads Green to conclude that “[i]n Canada, to be female and Aboriginal is to be disempowered by the state. Too often, it is also a good predictor of disempowerment by band governments” (2001: 725).

Thus, just like other women in Canada, Aboriginal women continue to confront the effects of gender inequality. Gender inequality is a central feature of life for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. While they may experience it in different ways, patriarchal practices affect all women. This shared axis of oppression may provide the bases for similar political preferences among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. There may be, in other words, an Aboriginal gender gap that in many ways parallels gender gaps found among non-Aboriginals.

### *Colonialism*

For the most part, the progress towards sex equality achieved thus far in Canada is the product of the work of feminists and their organizations. Yet, Aboriginal women have not always felt at home in these organizations. According to Green, until the early 1990s very few Aboriginal women self-identified as feminists (1993: 111). While the number of Aboriginal feminists may have increased over the years, Udel contends that many politically active Aboriginal women “articulate a reluctance to affiliate with white feminist movements” (2001: 43). She argues that Aboriginal women believe that their agenda is quite different from the one pursued by feminist organizations (Udel, 2001: 43). Importantly, for a number of Aboriginal women and scholars, the issue dividing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal supporters of sex equality is not simply one of tactics or organizational politics; rather, it is feminism itself. Feminism, it is argued, is a political philosophy made by – and for – white middle class women. For example, Mayer asserts that “feminism [i]s about asserting one’s right to be like white men” (2007:23).

While shared experiences of gender inequality may bring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women together, the Aboriginal politics literature raises the question of whether the feminist movement effectively promotes the interests of Aboriginal women. Furthermore, there is doubt that feminism is sufficiently robust theoretically to encompass Aboriginal issues, as well as a demonstrated reluctance on the part of some Aboriginal women to associate with either feminism or feminist organizations.

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organizations representing Aboriginal women, were excluded from these constitutional conferences. These organizations campaigned unsuccessfully to have a seat at the constitutional table. NWAC’s efforts were blocked by the federal government and the male-run Aboriginal organizations. According to Green, “[t]he single most influential factor determining the exclusion of NWAC from the constitutional arena was the collective refusal to see Aboriginal women’s concerns (or, for that matter, other women’s concerns) as distinct from and equally legitimate with Aboriginal men’s concerns; and to see ‘male-stream’ organizations as precisely that” (1993: 118).

Some scholars account for the uneasy relationship between feminism and Aboriginal women by advancing that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women are actually involved in two different struggles. For these scholars, non-Aboriginal women are struggling for sex equality, while Aboriginal women are struggling for national liberation -- that is, they are struggling to end the colonial relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the state (Jaimes, 1992).<sup>7</sup> From this view, gender is not the proper analytical lens for understanding the political behaviour of Aboriginal women (or Aboriginal men, for that matter). Instead, colonialism is the correct focus for such an analysis.

Colonialism begins with the involuntary incorporation (historically achieved through force or fraud) of one political community into another political community and entails the latter community's exercise of dominion (and/or domination) over the former community.<sup>8</sup> In Canada many First Nations never concluded treaties with the Crown and, even where treaties do exist, many First Nations deny that these treaties entailed the ceding of Aboriginal sovereignty to the Crown (Henderson, 1994).<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, First Nations argue that their ancestors were incorporated into what became the Canadian state without their consent. Furthermore, past and present government policies relating to Aboriginal peoples facilitate the economic, social and political domination of Aboriginal peoples. The *Indian Act*, residential schools, the placement of Aboriginal children in state care, the usurpation of traditional territories (Borrows, 2003: 224), court-defined Aboriginal rights (Panagos, 2007) and the like are all examples of these types of domination. In fact, the consensus among scholars of Aboriginal politics is that the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state was, and still is, a colonial one (Green, 2000; Ladner, 2005; Tully, 1995). Thus, colonialism is a factor in the lives of all Aboriginals.

Moreover, there is an emerging view in the Aboriginal politics scholarship that colonialism, both in its historic and contemporary forms, is very much a gendered process, with gendered outcomes. For scholars who advance this position, hierarchical gender relations in Aboriginal communities were the product of colonial policies,

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<sup>7</sup> For example, in regards to the American context, native activist Lorelei DeCora Means, one of the founders of WARN (Women of All Red Nations), advances the following: "We are American Indian women, in that order. We are oppressed, first and foremost, as American Indians, as people colonized by the United States of America, *not* as women. Our survival, the survival of everyone of us – man, woman, and child – as *Indians* depends on it. Decolonization is the agenda, the whole agenda, and until it is accomplished, it is the *only* agenda that counts for American Indians" (quoted in Jaimes, 1992: 314).

<sup>8</sup> The understanding of colonialism employed in this paper is based on Robert Blauner's work on internal colonialism (that is, colonialism that does not involve overseas colonies but minority or sub-national populations within states). According to Blauner this type of colonialism has four constitutive elements: 1) the colonized group is involuntarily incorporated into a political community; 2) the colonized group is forced to change its cultural and social practices and ways of life; 3) the colonized group is administered and managed (economically and politically) by members of the colonizing group; and 4) racism is used as a justification for dominating the colonized group and racial discrimination is employed as an organizing principle for state institutions and norms (Blauner, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> Areas not covered by historical treaties include most of Quebec and British Columbia, as well as significant parts of the territories (see Indian and Northern Affairs Canada for a detailed map of the landmass covered by historic treaties).

practices and norms created and enforced by French, British and Canadian authorities (Jaimes, 1992; Mayer, 2007: 36). These colonial authorities forcibly changed the existing social, economic and political arrangements in Aboriginal communities by eliminating many of the significant roles traditionally occupied by Aboriginal women.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, even though colonialism seriously impacts all Aboriginals, Aboriginal women bore (and still bear) the brunt of colonialism. The socio-economic vulnerability and political marginality of Aboriginal women today is very much a legacy of the gendered dimensions of colonialism. For scholars such as Annette Jaimes, the gendered dimensions of colonialism explain why Aboriginal women put themselves “at the very center of the fray” in Aboriginal struggles for national liberation (1992: 331). From this view, national liberation – that is, ending the colonial relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the state – is the only way for Aboriginal women to end their colonial oppression, and this entails addressing the gendered dimensions of colonial oppression.

In short, the experience of colonialism is gendered. Further, the absence of colonialism as a factor in the lives of non-Aboriginals is a significant difference between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. There is at least some cause, then, to doubt that conclusions drawn from the general – and largely non-Aboriginal – population could be easily generalized to the particular circumstances of Aboriginal men and women. Moreover, focusing solely on the differences between Aboriginal men and women risks ignoring the very real consequences of colonialism faced by Aboriginal women (and men). It is our contention that the scholarship should not only examine Aboriginal women’s relationship to Aboriginal men, but also to non-Aboriginal men and women. The scholarship should, in other words, bring colonialism into the analysis.

## Data and Methods

In order to assess whether there is in fact an Aboriginal gender gap in political behaviour and, if there is, what this gap entails, this study relies on two surveys. The first is the 2004 CES, a nationally representative sample of Canadians conducted during the 2004 federal election campaign (n=4323).<sup>11</sup> The second is a unique subsample of the ESC study collected in 2004 in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba (n=608).<sup>12</sup> While the ESC Aboriginal subsample is not a nationally representative sample, it provides a solid

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<sup>10</sup> Aboriginal women were not the only subjects of colonial policy. The point advanced here is that colonial policies disproportionately targeted Aboriginal women.

<sup>11</sup> Data from the 2004 and the 2006 Canadian Election Surveys were provided by the Institute for Social Research, York University. The surveys were funded by Elections Canada and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and was completed for the Canadian Election Team of André Blais (Université de Montréal), Joanna Everitt, University of New Brunswick, Patrick Fournier (Université de Montréal), Elisabeth Gidengil (McGill University), and Neil Nevitte (University of Toronto). However, the Institute for Social Research, the SSHRC, Elections Canada and the Canadian Election Survey Team are not responsible for the analyses and interpretations presented here.

<sup>12</sup> Data for the ESC survey were collected by the Institute for Social Research, York University. The ESC project was funded by the SSHRC, grant number 412-97-0003. The survey was carried out under the direction of Richard Johnston (University of British Columbia).

source of data on Aboriginal peoples' political attitudes and activities, including individuals residing in both on and off-reserve communities. Furthermore, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba are important provinces for examining Aboriginal politics in the Canadian context because they contain the highest number of Aboriginals as a proportion of the total provincial populations.<sup>13</sup>

By utilizing these two datasets we can conduct an analysis of gender gaps in Aboriginal turnout and political attitudes in comparison to gender gaps that we observe during the same period among the broader Canadian population.<sup>14</sup> Our analytic approach is two-fold. First, we document the extent of gender gaps within each sample using basic descriptive statistics. Second, we assess the extent to which any observed gaps are the result of resource differences between men and women, as well as between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. An important aspect of this analysis is our ability not only to compare Aboriginal women with Aboriginal men, but also with the broader Canadian population.

We investigate, in particular, three areas where the literature suggests we should find gender-based differences:

- 1) political participation (with women having lower levels of involvement in traditional political organizations than men, but higher levels of social volunteering);
- 2) vote choice (with women being more likely to vote for parties of the left than men); and,
- 3) policy preferences (with women being more supportive of the welfare state than men).

Where differences do emerge, we use multivariate techniques to see how much of these differences can be accounted for by traditional correlates of gender and what role Aboriginal politics may play in explaining Aboriginal women's political preferences and practices.

## Results

### *Participation Gaps*

Do the data reveal any participation gaps? Our expectations for the general population are that we will find similar levels of turnout between men and women, and that outside of the ballot box, men will be more involved in political and "stereotypically-male" activities, while women will be more involved in religious and service-oriented organizations (Lowndes 2000; Harell 2009). In other words, we expect to find an

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<sup>13</sup> In Saskatchewan and Manitoba 14% of the population is Aboriginal. 5% is Aboriginal in Alberta. For a detailed comparison of the ESC Aboriginal sample characteristics compared to the population estimates for these communities based on the Canadian census, see Harell et al. (2009: 11-12).

<sup>14</sup> Given the lack of scholarship on Aboriginal political behaviour, we cast our analytical net quite broadly. We examine both electoral and non-electoral participation, as well as the substantive differences in men's and women's political preferences.



insignificant gender gap in voting but significant gaps in involvement in civic and political organizations. This is precisely the pattern that emerges. Specifically, we find that greater numbers of men are members of political parties and sports clubs, while greater numbers of women are members of community service groups, parents' associations and religious organizations (See Table 1).

A primary question guiding this research is whether we observe similar patterns among Aboriginal women and men. Table 1 indicates some interesting similarities. First, there is no gender gap in turnout between Aboriginal men and women. Second, Aboriginal women are less likely to be involved in explicitly political organizations and sports clubs. Both of these findings mirror the patterns observed for the general population. However, Table 1 also includes some important instances of divergence. For one thing, Aboriginal women do not demonstrate higher levels of participation than Aboriginal men in civic associations.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Aboriginal peoples appear to be more active in civic associations – such as youth-oriented groups, cultural organizations, and recreational groups – than non-Aboriginals.

In sum, in Table 1 we find some gaps in participation consistent with the literature on gender gaps. The larger gaps, however, seem to be between Aboriginal communities and the general population. For example, when it comes to voting in both federal and provincial elections, both Aboriginal men and women are about half as likely to vote as the general population (for more on this, see Harell et al., 2009). There is also a much smaller proportion of Aboriginals (<1%) who say they have been a member of a political party in the last twelve months. While the question in the CES asks about lifetime membership, thus making a direct comparison impossible, formal channels to politics, like the voting booth and political party membership, seem to be either less accessible, or intentionally avoided, by both Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women.

Thus, when it comes to political participation, we see some of the familiar gender gaps emerging in the types of activities performed. However, the differences between Aboriginal peoples and the general population are greater than the gender-based differences within these groups. Nonetheless, gendered differences are present within Aboriginal communities and the direction of these differences is as predicted by the gender and politics literature.

### *Party Choice Gaps*

While gaps in participation (especially at the ballot box) have largely disappeared over time, gender gaps in vote choice persist. Women in Canada, just like in other industrialized democracies, are more likely to vote for parties on the left while men are more likely to vote for parties on the right (Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Gidengil et al., 2003, 2005; Gidengil, 1995; Everitt, 1998).

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<sup>15</sup> While Aboriginal women show higher levels of participation in organizations that help people, this difference is not significant (p=.18).

Table 2 presents vote choice by gender for the CES general sample, the CES data for just Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and the Aboriginal sample.<sup>16</sup> We single out the three prairie provinces because the Aboriginal sample we employ is drawn exclusively from these provinces, and region is an enduring predictor of vote choice in Canada (Gidengil et al., 1999; Blais, 2005).

Our analysis of the CES general sample corresponds with the findings on vote choice contained in the literature, with 22% of women and 18% of men supporting the NDP (see Table 2). However, an examination of vote choice in just the three Western provinces yields a mixed picture. The Liberal Party only garnered 19% of the female vote and 24% of the male vote. The differences between men and women are small and in the expected direction for the NDP. Surprisingly, when compared to men (49%), women appear more likely to select the Conservative Party (56%). However these differences do not reach statistical significance ( $p=.113$ ).

Two important questions come to the fore at this point. Do Aboriginal women also show a greater tendency toward left-leaning parties, as the literature suggests? Or, do Aboriginal women mirror the preferences of their non-Aboriginal counterparts in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba?

What is particularly striking about the Aboriginal sample in Table 2 is the lack of Aboriginal support for the Conservative Party.<sup>17</sup> In this sample, there is substantial Aboriginal support for the NDP. Fifty-nine percent of Aboriginal women and 40% of Aboriginal men report voting for the NDP.<sup>18</sup> The Aboriginal vote choice distribution represents a substantial departure from the patterns observed in the Prairie provinces subsample.

Moreover, the Aboriginal vote choice distribution represents a significant gender gap in Aboriginal support for the NDP – a gender gap that is far larger than the one observed among the general population.<sup>19</sup> The NDP was clearly the choice of Aboriginal women. Aboriginal men, on the other hand, were slightly more likely to favour the Liberal party, with 46% voting Liberal.

Why do Aboriginal women demonstrate such a propensity to vote NDP? Can traditional explanations account for the large gender-based difference in Aboriginal vote choice? The NDP is Canada's social democratic party. Its history is tied to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which had deep roots in the Prairies and strong ties to organized labour. Today, the NDP does particularly well in the Atlantic provinces, among union members, the unmarried, and those with no religious affiliation (Blais et al.,

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<sup>16</sup> We exclude Quebec from the general sample because the BQ is not an electoral option in the provinces where the Aboriginal sample was collected.

<sup>17</sup> 7% of Aboriginal women and 11% of Aboriginal men report voting for the Conservatives (see Table 2).

<sup>18</sup> In previous work, Harell (2010) has found a similarly high level of support among Aboriginal voters in the 2004, 2006, and 2008 pooled Canadian Election Study dataset.

<sup>19</sup> In the general population a small and statistically insignificant gap of 4% separated men and women in the 2004 election.

2002; Nevitte et al., 2000). These socio-demographic factors do not seem to explain why Aboriginal women would be particularly prone to vote NDP.

One possible explanation may be the NDP's policy positions. According to Tremblay and Pelletier, one factor that explains the NDP's success at attracting female voters is its support for social welfare policies (2000). If Aboriginal women are more Left-leaning than both Aboriginal men and their non-Aboriginal counterparts, then this could account for the relatively large Aboriginal gender gap in vote choice.

A variation of this party-policy based explanation focuses not on the NDP's policies regarding the welfare state, but its policies on Aboriginal issues. Beginning with the Liberals' introduction of the 1969 White Paper the federal NDP has been quite supportive of Aboriginal rights (Tester, McNicoll and Forsyth, 1999), including Aboriginal attempts to restructure the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state and Aboriginal nation-building efforts more generally.<sup>20</sup> The NDP, with its consistent and sympathetic stances on many of the issues that are vital to First Nations communities, in many ways represents an obvious choice for Aboriginal voters. In a report released prior to the 2006 election the AFN went so far as to state that "[t]he NDP continue to represent one of the strongest allies of First Nations in Parliament. Their support on all key issues is very strong" (2006: 4).

### *Political Preference Differences*

As past research has indicated (see, for example, Gidengil et al., 2003), women tend to be more supportive of the welfare system and public health care than men, and less supportive of the military and 'get tough' approaches to crime prevention. In Figure 1, we show net spending preferences for men and women in the general population in 2004. We found small but consistent gaps in the policy preferences of men and women. Men tended to be more supportive of defence spending, whereas women showed significantly more support for spending on social housing, education and healthcare (see Figure 1).<sup>21</sup> In other words, using the 2004 data, we observe the expected gender-based differences in the policy preferences of men and women.

The ESC survey focuses on issues of wealth redistribution and the welfare state, making it a valuable tool for examining gender gaps in these domains. In Table 3, we provide the breakdown by gender to one of the questions asked in both the CES and the ESC: a choice between "The government should see to it that everyone has a decent standard of living" or "The government should leave it to people to get ahead on their own". Table 3 provides the percent who selected the former, which represents a supportive stance

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<sup>20</sup> Specifically, Aboriginal organizations and governments seek to transform the current relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the state from a colonial relationship to a nation-to-nation relationship (Panagos, 2008). By Aboriginal nation-building we mean a broad spectrum of social, economic and political initiatives that aim at providing Aboriginal nations with the requisite capabilities to govern, on their own, their populations and territories.

<sup>21</sup> Note:  $p < .05$ .

toward the welfare state. Among both the general sample and the Aboriginal sample, women are about 15 percentage points more likely to choose the supportive answer (see Table 3). In other words, while the levels of support are lower in the Aboriginal sample, the gap between men and women is of approximately the same magnitude.<sup>22</sup>

Figure 2 provides breakdowns in other policy domains in the ESC Aboriginal sample. In every case but one, Aboriginal women are more likely to give the welfare state supportive response, although the difference is only statistically significant for agreement with the statements “Refusing welfare to single parents is unfair to children” and “The government should do more to reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor”.

We have some support, then, that ideological gaps exist among Aboriginal women and men that parallel salient gaps in policy support among the general population. We have also demonstrated a much greater tendency for Aboriginal women to vote NDP, in comparison to both Aboriginal men *and* to women in the general population. Can we find the source of this support in Aboriginal women’s situations or their ideological beliefs? Or does it reflect Aboriginal women’s unique experience as both female and Aboriginal?

#### *Explaining the Aboriginal Gender Gap in Vote Choice*

Table 4 models the NDP vote for Aboriginal women in three steps. First, we examine whether being female increases the likelihood of voting NDP, even after controlling for other demographic characteristics. Second, we add situational<sup>23</sup> factors. Finally, we control for ideology.

In model 1, we see that the gender variable is indeed significant, even after controlling for demographic controls like age, religiosity, and region. We have also included in this base model a control for reserve status. Given the NDP’s support for Aboriginal peoples’ struggle for national liberation and Aboriginal nation-building, we expected that Aboriginal people who live on-reserve would be more likely to support the NDP because on-reserve Aboriginals are likely to be more aware of and mobilized around national liberation issues.<sup>24</sup> We find that this is indeed the case. Reserve status appears to have the largest effect on the odds of voting NDP among Aboriginals. Those living on-reserve have odds almost four and a half times greater of voting NDP than those living off-reserve, controlling for the other variables in the model.

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<sup>22</sup> The lower overall levels of support among Aboriginals likely reflects the fact the “the government” here would be understood as the Canadian government.

<sup>23</sup> Note that there is some overlap in the literature between structural and situational factors. Both focus on women’s roles in the home, and their subsequent lack of roles outside the home (namely, in the workforce and higher education). For simplicity, we treat these all as situational factors that may provide women with important political resources.

<sup>24</sup> By national liberation issues we mean such measures as self-government, nation-to-nation consultations between Aboriginal peoples and the state, and the like.

In model 2, we examine a number of situational variables, namely marital status, university education, low-income status, and employment status. Recall that women's status as homemakers, and their lack of traditional resources like education and employment status, arguably account for (at least part) of observed gender gaps. By controlling for these, we assess whether this reduces the direct effect of gender on vote choice. As expected, being married reduces the odds of voting for the NDP. However, none of the other situational variables have a significant effect. Furthermore, their inclusion in the model has no influence on the gender effect.

In model 3, we include a third potential explanation of the gender gap with a proxy for left-leaning ideology. Surprisingly, there is no evidence that social welfare attitudes impact vote choice. Even with the inclusion of a more robust left-leaning index, no significant effect is apparent (not shown). In other words, gender remains a powerful predictor of NDP vote among Aboriginals, and this support does not seem to be based in either situational or ideological differences between Aboriginal men and women.

If situational, structural and ideological accounts do not explain these findings, the alternative explanation focused on the NDP's policy positions on Aboriginal issues mentioned above may account for the greater likelihood of Aboriginal women and men to vote for the NDP. We turn to our model in order to test this explanation. Now, the power of our models to tease out subtle changes in the likelihood of voting NDP is limited by the small number of cases. What our models can illustrate, however, is the consistent and strong impact of gender on the odds of voting NDP. Our model also reveals a powerful effect related to reserve status. To illustrate the latter, Figure 3 presents the percentage of respondents in the Aboriginal sample who voted NDP, by gender and reserve status. The figure is striking: women both on (61%) and off (54%) reserve tend to vote overwhelmingly NDP. The story among Aboriginal men is quite different. While Aboriginal men living on-reserve are less likely to vote NDP than Aboriginal women on-reserve, they are also significantly more likely to vote NDP than men living off-reserve ( $p=.019$ ). The result is that the gender gap among Aboriginals off-reserve (32% points) is more than double the gender gap among Aboriginals on-reserve (16% points).

A coherent account of these findings emerges if we examine them vis-à-vis the lens of colonialism. The on-reserve/off-reserve difference in Aboriginal support for the NDP may represent the differing levels of Aboriginal participation in anti-colonial struggles. Assuming that Aboriginal peoples on-reserve are more likely than Aboriginals off-reserve to be involved in (or even just aware of) struggles for national liberation, it would make sense that they would be more likely to vote for a party that supports these types of struggles. The AFN's characterization of the NDP's policy positions on Aboriginal issues is evidence that at least some Aboriginals are making this association, although direct evidence remains unavailable. Yet, we find it quite plausible that the on-reserve/off-reserve difference in support for the NDP may be a product of differing levels of involvement in the struggle for national liberation (where the reserve increases the likelihood of such involvement).

The colonial lens also provides a way of explaining the gender-based distribution of vote choice among Aboriginals. Assuming that colonialism has important gender dimensions that result in Aboriginal women bearing the brunt of colonialism, two things would seem to follow: first, Aboriginal women would be more sensitive than Aboriginal men to the effects of colonialism; and second, Aboriginal women would be more likely to engage in anti-colonial struggles than Aboriginal men. Accordingly, the substantial Aboriginal gender gap in support for the NDP may reflect the differing levels of involvement by Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women in anti-colonial struggles – struggles in which the latter are perhaps more likely to be involved than the former. At the very least, the fact that Aboriginal women may be voting based on Aboriginal issues *and* concerns about gender should push them to a larger extent than Aboriginal men toward the NDP.

In summary, Aboriginal support for the NDP may be related to this party's policy positions, but unlike the expectations spelled out in the political behaviour literature, it may be the NDP's support for Aboriginal national liberation, combined with its association with women's issues, that attracts Aboriginal voters – especially Aboriginal female voters.

### **Conclusion**

The findings and analyses presented in this paper give scholars cause to advance that Aboriginal gender gaps do indeed exist, as well as providing them with some preliminary tools for locating these gaps. Vote choice seems to be a very promising place to look for Aboriginal gender gaps. This paper not only found an Aboriginal gender gap in vote choice but also illustrated that this gap differs from non-Aboriginal gender gaps in important ways. For one thing, the Aboriginal gender gap in vote choice is far more pronounced than its non-Aboriginal counterpart. For another, the existing literature on gender gaps seems unable to provide an adequate account for this substantive difference between Aboriginal women, Aboriginal men and non-Aboriginal Canadians when it comes to vote choice.

In general, the political behaviour scholarship tends to focus on women as a collective group in comparison to men. The result is that the differences *among* women are rarely the central focus of analysis (Lien, 1998; Gidengil, 2007). In 2007, Gidengil encouraged scholars to place these differences at the centre of their analyses by focusing on the “intersections of race, class and gender” (2007: 816).

This paper is one attempt to pursue precisely this type of scholarship. It analyzes the political attitudes and activities of Aboriginal women by drawing on theoretical contributions from both the behaviour and Aboriginal politics literatures. In this way, it relies on the former to locate and trace an Aboriginal gender gap in vote choice and the latter to understand how this gap is, at least in part, influenced by colonialism.

## Table and Figures

<b>Table 1: Gender Gaps in Social and Political Participation</b>							
	Aboriginal Sample		General Population				
	Women	Men	Women	Men			
Voted in last federal election	49%	49%	87%	86%			Voted in last federal election
Voted in last provincial election	47%	49%	82%	81%			Voted in last provincial election
Member of a political party	<1%	<1%	17%	22%	***		Ever been a member of a political party
Involved in a service club (such as lions club or meals on wheels)	7%	7%	40%	36%	*		Been active in community service group
Involved in organizations that help people (e.g. cancer society or food bank)	28%	23%					
Involved in a recreational group	34%	43%	22%	31%	***		Been active in sport association
Involved in an organization active on political issues	9%	14%	15%	14%	**		Ever been member of an interest group that worked for change on a particular social or political issue
Involved in a youth-oriented group	32%	36%	17%	13%	**		Been active in parent's group
Involved in organizations providing cultural services	21%	24%	4%	4%			Been active in an ethnic association
Involved in organization linked to place of worship	24%	28%	27%	21%	***		Been active in religious organization

Note: \*\*\* p<.01, \*\* p<.05, \* p<.10

Source: Canadian Election Study, 2004 for the general population and the Aboriginal subsample of the Equality, Community, Security Survey, 2004 for the Aboriginal sample.

<b>Table 2: Gender Gaps in Vote Choice</b>			
<b>Aboriginal Sample</b>			
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Gap</i>
Liberal	32%	46%	-14
Conservative	7%	11%	-4
NDP	59%	40%	19
Other	2%	3%	-1
<b>General Population (Outside QC)</b>			
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Gap</i>
Liberal	35%	36%	-1
Conservative	37%	38%	-1
NDP	22%	18%	3
Other	5%	7%	-2
<b>AB, SK, and MB Only</b>			
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Gap</i>
Liberal	19%	24%	-5
Conservative	56%	49%	7
NDP	19%	16%	3
Other	5%	10%	-5
Note: CES data weighted using the national weight (outside Quebec). Estimates corrected for complex sampling design (sampling unit=individual, stata=province).			



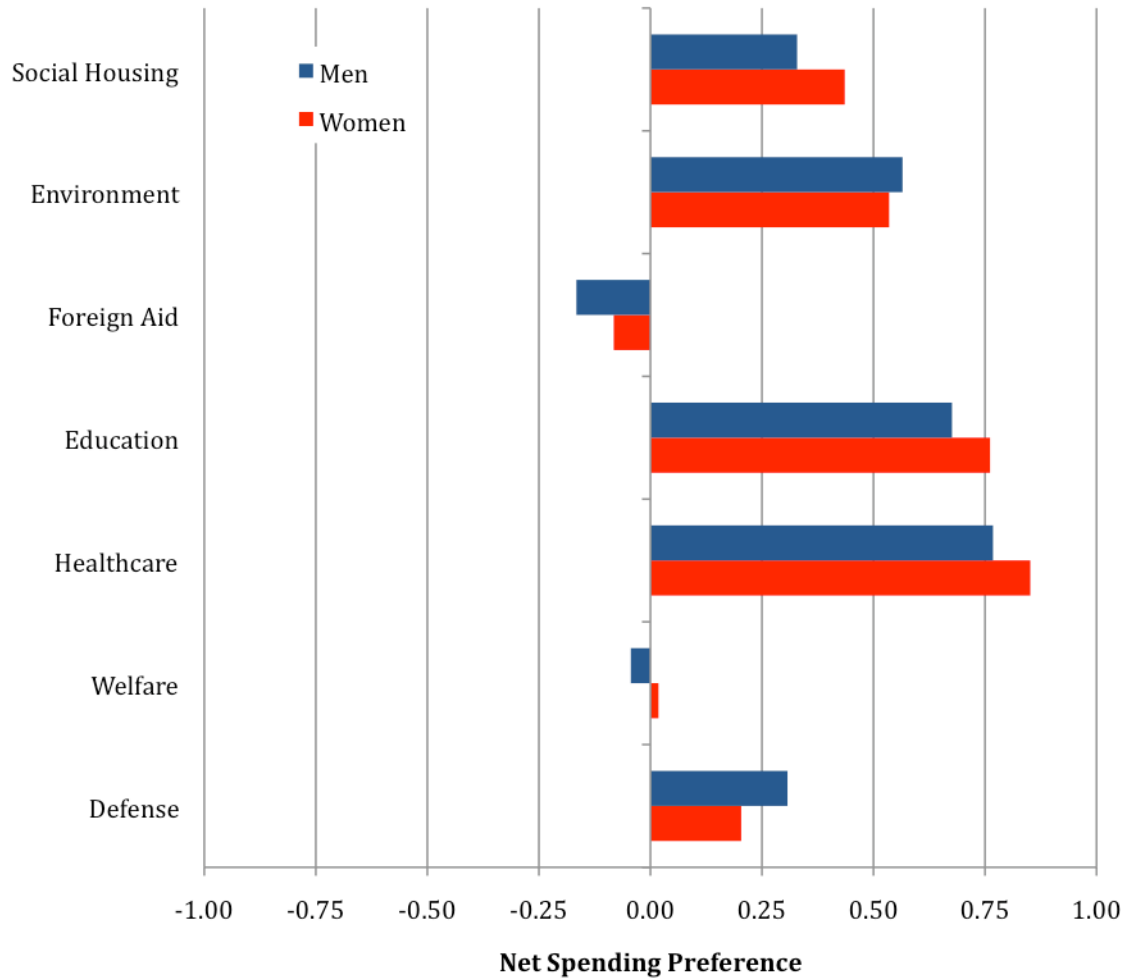
<b>Table 3: Gender Gap in Support for State Assistance to Those in Need</b>			
	Women	Men	
Aboriginal Sample	70%	56%	***
General Population	81%	64%	***

Note: Percentages represent those selecting "The government should see to it that everyone has a decent standard of living" (compared to "the government should leave it to people to get ahead on their own").

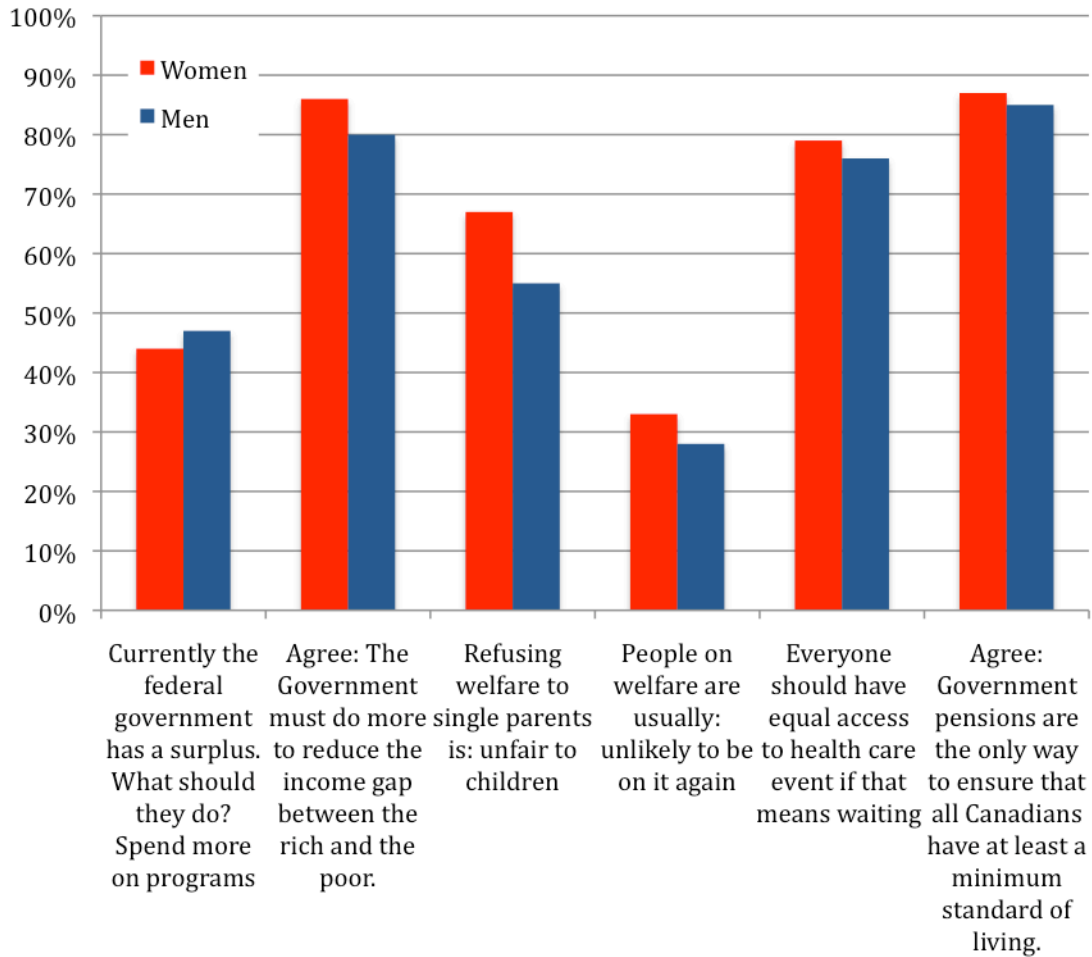
**Table 4: Modeling NDP Vote (Logistic Regression)**

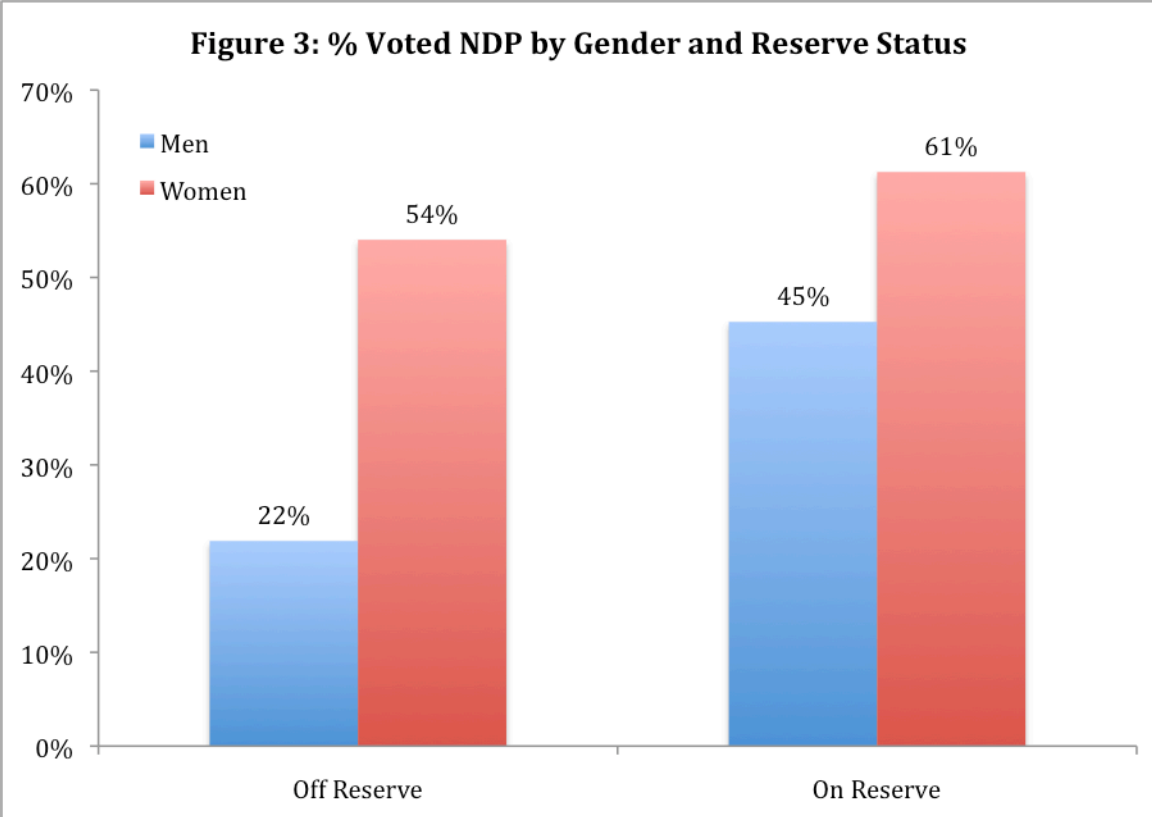
		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		OR	(s.e.)		OR	(s.e.)		OR	(s.e.)	
	Female	3.22	(1.10)	***	3.53	(1.29)	***	3.46	(1.30)	***
<i>Situational Variables</i>										
	Married				0.52	(0.20)	*	0.65	(0.25)	
	University				1.08	(0.41)		1.00	(0.40)	
	Low Income				1.32	(0.52)		1.31	(0.53)	
	Employed				1.28	(0.49)		1.24	(0.48)	
<i>Ideology</i>										
	Gouvernement ensure standard of living							1.13	(0.42)	
<i>Controls</i>										
	Age <30	0.56	(0.28)		0.42	(0.23)		0.48	(0.27)	
	Age >50	0.89	(0.34)		0.88	(0.35)		0.95	(0.40)	
	Atheist	2.93	(1.56)	**	3.07	(1.64)	**	2.68	(1.44)	*
	On-Reserve	4.45	(1.75)	***	5.54	(2.39)	***	5.36	(2.32)	***
	Alberta	0.04	(0.03)	***	0.04	(0.02)	***	0.05	(0.03)	***
	Manitoba	2.18	(0.77)	**	1.95	(0.73)	*	2.08	(0.81)	*
	N	236			222			203		
	Pseudo R2	0.29			0.31			0.29		
	Log Likelihood	-115.61			-106.86			-99.89		

**Figure 1: Gender Gaps in Spending Preferences**



**Figure 2: Attitudinal Gender Gaps in Aboriginal Sample**





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