Aboriginal Communities and the Charlottetown Accord: A Preliminary Analysis of Voting Returns

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Christa Scholtz
McGill University
christa.scholtz@mcgill.ca

Introduction

One may argue that Canada's Charlottetown Accord of 1992 represented the most favourable package of constitutional change in terms of the affirmation and recognition of aboriginal rights ever considered by a settler society. With Ovide Mercredi of the Assembly of First Nations and Rosemary Kuptana of the (then) Inuit Tapirisat among the negotiators of the Accord, aboriginal people had a place at the constitutional table previously denied to them, and their participation did yield results. Even if one believes that the Accord did not go far enough, perhaps one can agree that the Accord represented a step forward from the stymied constitutional discussions between aboriginal people and Canadian governments in the 1980s. The Accord included recognition of an inherent right to self-government. It addressed the implementation of historical and modern treaties. It recognized a third order of government, a separate head of power, for aboriginal people in the Canadian Constitution. It addressed aboriginal representation within the institutions of Canadian government. Despite these provisions and the role of the national aboriginal political leadership in obtaining them, local aboriginal leaders and voters did not uniformly support the Accord. The basic conclusion that has emerged from the Charlottetown Accord referendum was simply that the Inuit supported the Accord, while Canada's First Nations reserve communities did not (Mercredi and Turpel 209).

This paper sets out to look more closely at the aboriginal referendum vote. While the general take-away that "the Inuit voted yes, and the First Nations voted no" is true in terms of overall averages, this blanket conclusion obscures some key issues. First, just as there is diversity across and within aboriginal communities, there is variation across those

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communities' voting decisions. Speaking at the level of global averages does nothing to help us understand whether the First Nations' "No" was either a resounding chorus or a tepid murmur. The first task of this paper is simply to lay out or describe the aboriginal vote, in order to make the extent of the variation clear. From this description of voting returns will emerge issues requiring further study, and some communities whose aggregate voting decisions will stand out in the data. The second task of this paper is to explore correlates of the aboriginal referendum vote. Using data from Elections Canada, Elections Quebec, Statistics Canada, and Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC) aggregated to the community level, I present a simple regression analysis as an opening volley in understanding aboriginal voting during this key moment in Canada's (perhaps ill-fated) quest for constitutional reform.[1] Of the variables included in the model, those with both statistical and substantive significance are turnout and participation in traditional activities, both supporting the yes vote.

Why the Charlottetown Accord?

The Charlottetown Accord and the referendum on its terms stand out as unique opportunities for the study of aboriginal politics internationally. The referendum was a national electoral event directly addressing aboriginal issues within a constitutional change package, unlike the usual federal or provincial election where the questions are predominantly partisan. The negotiation of the Accord and the holding of a referendum also created a unique situation where different aboriginal political organizations had to

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[1] I'd like to acknowledge the research assistance of Nyssa McLeod and Karenna Williams in the first stages of this project.

campaign within their own constituencies on a common set of proposals. Unlike land claim or self-government negotiations where negotiations and subsequent approval over any settlement are conducted on either a community or a tribal council level, the Charlottetown Accord was a unique deal over which all enumerated aboriginal persons could vote. Also importantly, the Accord had the support of Canada's major political parties, and was not the usual electoral competition for partisan votes. For all of these reasons, the Charlottetown referendum represents an important moment in the possible creation of an electorally engaged national aboriginal constituency. Therefore, at a substantive level, this research addresses an important void in our understanding of aboriginal politics in Canada, and especially how constitutional processes and aboriginal politics intersect.

Very little research has been done on aboriginal electoral outcomes generally and on intra-aboriginal comparisons in particular (exceptions include Comrie 2002; Sullivan and Margaritis 2000). This research field is embryonic, partly due to the fact that few of the world's aboriginal populations are electorally integrated. Many aboriginal people refuse to vote, rejecting the electoral processes of what they consider a colonizing government (Ladner 2003). The study of aboriginal vote choice has also been constrained by methodological issues. Firstly, what few aboriginal respondents that are included within established elections studies are there more by accident than design. There is very little in the way of individual-level data on aboriginal voting. Studies which have been undertaken usually rely on aggregate electoral returns or small surveys. These studies usually address issues of aboriginal electoral turn out (Seidle 2003), or address smaller geographical areas (Bedford and Pobihushchy 1996). What aggregate data analysis is

possible is restricted to defined aboriginal communities, as it is currently impossible to ascertain voting patterns among off-reserve or urban aboriginal people. Specially tailored polling data is also scarce to non-existent.[2]

What do we know about aboriginal voting that is relevant to the task at hand? Studies are usually limited to the overall question of voter turnout, rather than examining aboriginal choices at the ballot box. However, it is likely that turnout is related to the propensity to vote either for or against the Charlottetown referendum. If someone has a strongly held normative belief that aboriginal nations are and should always be separate sovereignties from Canada, then presumably that person would both be likely to not vote, and even if that person did, would vote against the Accord. Voter turnout in aboriginal communities is therefore an important issue to include in this analysis. What previous work has shown is that aboriginal voter turnout varies significantly across aboriginal communities (Guérin 2003), a finding which is confirmed in the data I present here.

Constructing the Dataset

The analysis I present here is based on a master dataset that brought together a number of existing datasets. The core of the dataset here, the electoral returns, were provided by Elections Canada and Elections Québec. Elections Canada provided me with a list of polling divisions (excluding Québec) located on an aboriginal reserve or aboriginal settlement. This dataset is more extensive than that used in previous work (Guérin 2003), in two important respects. Firstly, this dataset is less restrictive in that it

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[2] In March 2001, Elections Canada commissioned an Ipsos Reid poll on aboriginal participation in the 2000 federal election. Results are not publicly available.

includes aboriginal communities whose legal boundaries corresponded at a rate of 90%

(rather than 100%) with polling division boundaries.[3] Secondly, it included aboriginal

communities that are recognized as being aboriginal but not officially designated as

reserves under the Indian Act. This electoral dataset was developed using information

collected by local returning officers.[4] The chief effect of these changes is to greatly

increase the number of communities under study, while only marginally increasing the

risk that the votes of non-aboriginal individuals would be included in the data.[5] Elections

Québec identified those polling divisions designated as aboriginal communities, using

established census boundaries. For each polling division, the electoral data include the

number of enumerated electors, the total number of ballots cast, the number of ballots

cast for both the yes and the no, and the number of rejected ballots.

In order to conduct any analysis of the vote, linking the vote outcomes to

hypothesized or known correlates of aboriginal voting, the polling division data needed to

be matched to other datasets on a common field. In order to do this, I mapped the polling

division to a census sub-division (CSD) code, primarily using a database of CSD codes

provided by Statistics Canada.[6] I was also greatly aided in linking the polling division

data to the CSD code through the connectivity dataset provided to me and managed by

the Aboriginal Canada Portal (ACP) of INAC. Through the ACP and Statistics Canada

datasets, I was able to link the electoral data to data collected through the census and the

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[3] There is no legal requirement that polling divisions correspond 100% to existing boundaries, as polling division boundaries are determined at the local level by returning officers. However, generally speaking polling divisions do respect existing municipal boundaries, including reserve boundaries. Personal communication with Maurice Bastarache, Senior Director, Geography, Elections Canada, 11 April 2007.
[4] Personal communication with Alain Pelletier, Assistant Director, Corporate and Parliamentary Research, Elections Canada, 12 May 2008.
[5] For my purposes I have excluded Métis communities in this analysis.
[6] In some instances, particularly in British Columbia, I had electoral data that I could not match at the CSD level, but that were identified as linked to a specific Indian band. I opted to assign those data to that band's most populous reserve.

post-censal Aboriginal Peoples Survey of 1991. These linkages provide a first

opportunity to conduct a national level statistical analysis of aggregate aboriginal voting

behaviour in Canada.

Describing the Aboriginal Vote in 1992

Prior to conducting a regression analysis to explore the referendum vote, my first

goal is to set out a description of the vote itself. At issue here is to understand key

variations or patterns in the vote, and to identify aboriginal communities whose aggregate

vote choices stand out as unusual. Ideally, further qualitative study would include an

examination of these outliers to understand the mechanisms underlying their aggregate
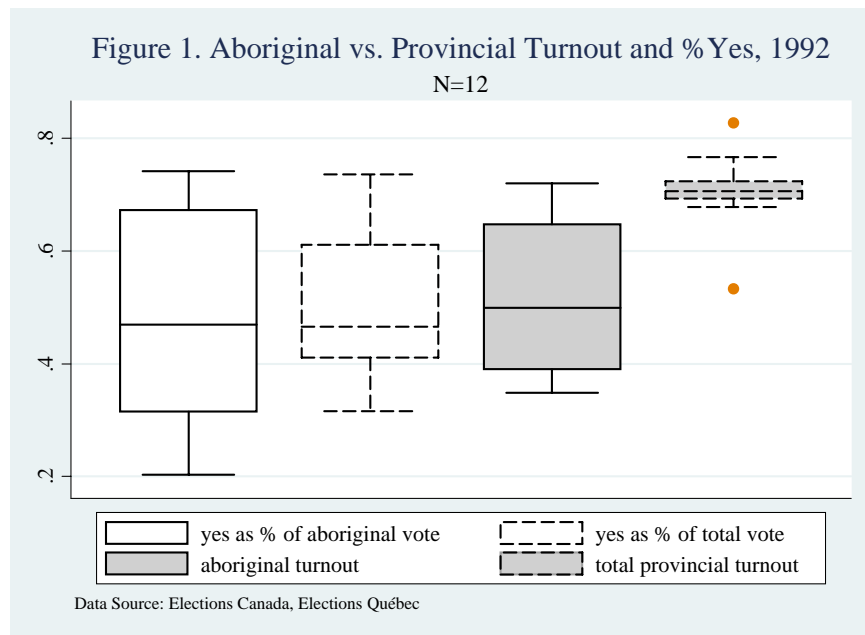
vote choices.

Figure 1. Aboriginal vs. Provincial Turnout and %Yes, 1992
N=12

Data Source: Elections Canada, Elections Québec

Figure 1 compares the aboriginal vote in 1992 with the Canadian experience. Figure I shows a series of box plots[7], representing aboriginal and provincial average turnout rates and the average percent of the yes vote. The graphs confirm two things. First, that aboriginal versus non-aboriginal turnout in the Charlottetown referendum are quite different, with average aboriginal turnout rates per province being much lower and much more varied than the Canadian counterpart. This confirms a frequent conclusion that aboriginal electoral participation is affected by different considerations than for other Canadian voters. Second, Figure 1 shows that despite the different turnout story, when aggregated to the provincial level aboriginal and Canadian yes votes are similar in terms of the median (just under 50%). However, again there is more variation to the aboriginal versus general vote when one looks at the provincial breakdowns. In British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and the Yukon, the aboriginal and general population's average yes votes are reasonably similar, with the aboriginal yes vote within 10% of the general population's vote. However, in Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario, the average aboriginal yes vote was smaller than the general population vote by approximately half. In Quebec and the Northwest Territories, the aboriginal yes vote was strikingly more positive than that of the general population (64% and 38% respectively). This is the first indication of the important support of the Inuit for the yes side.
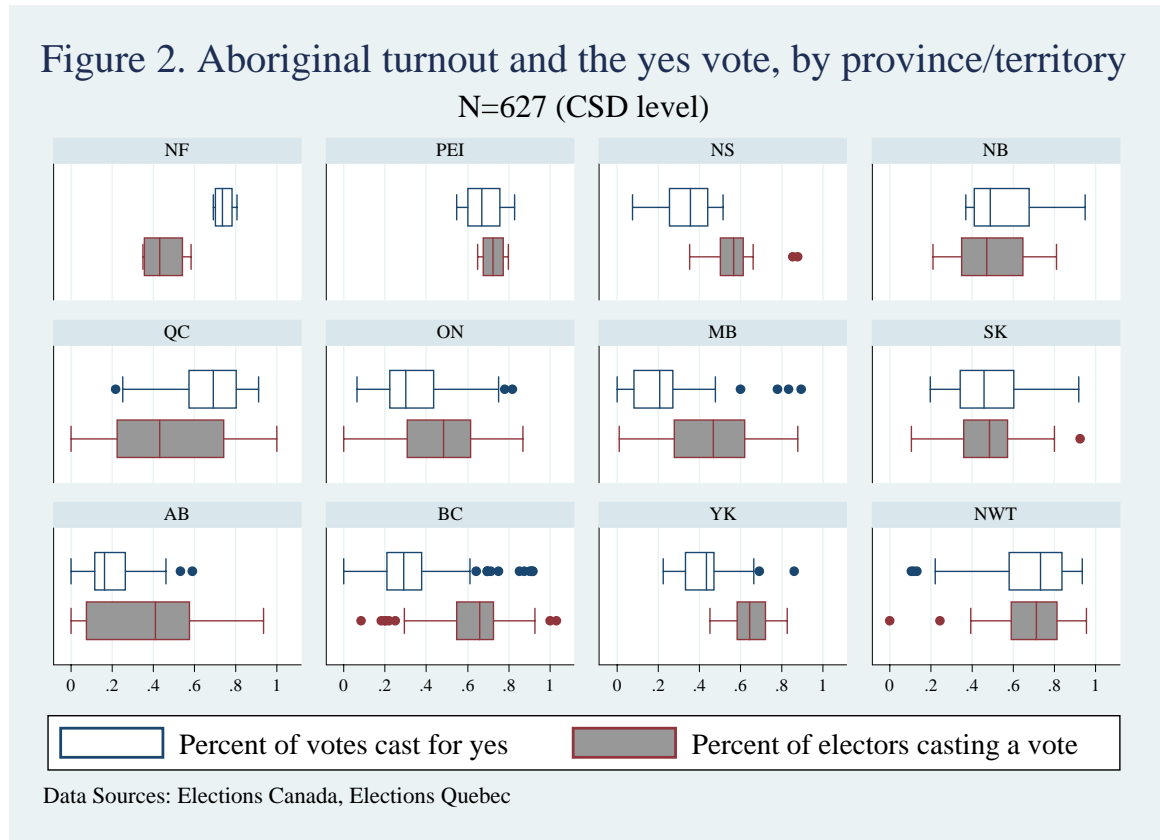
Figure 2 provides a closer look at possible relationships between turnout and the aboriginal vote for the yes, pointing to perhaps different stories about mobilization of either the yes or the no vote. Figure two shows a series of box plots by jurisdiction

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[7] In a box and whisper graph, the box indicates the interquartile range, or in other words the range that contains the middle 50% of the distribution. The line in the box marks the median observation (50th percentile). Observations that fall more than 1.5 times the length of the box from either end of the box are designated as outliers and marked with a dot.

pairing aboriginal yes votes as a percentage of ballots cast and the percentage of electors who cast a ballot (ie. turnout).

Figure 2. Aboriginal turnout and the yes vote, by province/territory
N=627 (CSD level)

Percent of votes cast for yes   Percent of electors casting a vote

Data Sources: Elections Canada, Elections Quebec

This graph shows a couple of interesting things. First, it shows that in some constituencies (New Brunswick, NWT, PEI, Saskatchewan, Alberta), turnout and the yes vote are reasonably correlated –giving credence to the idea that those who showed up to vote were more likely to support the referendum. Other constituencies show a different story (British Columbia, Manitoba). In Manitoba, it seems that relatively reasonable turnout levels yielded more votes for the no. In British Columbia, the turnout across communities was relatively high, with some outliers. However, the yes vote, again with key outliers, was quite low. Further attention to the British Columbia story reveals

interesting information about aboriginal politics and mobilization in the province. There,

the outlier communities who revealed a strong preference for the yes with strong turnout

rates were not random, but came predominantly from two tribal associations: the Nisga'a

Nation, and the Ktunaxa/Kinbasket Tribal Council in the Kootenay region. Just looking at

the aggregate data for British Columbia points to the importance of political factors in

developing a community consensus, either in favour of or in opposition to the Accord.

The data also show a couple of other communities whose 1992 vote suggest that

further and closer study is warranted. Of all Inuit communities in the dataset, only two

had a yes vote under 50%. That there are only two demonstrates the incredible political

consensus that the Inuit managed to fashion for the Accord. The outlier Inuit

communities are Puvirnituq (Povungnituk) on the Ungava peninsula, and Nanisivik, a

small settlement on the northern tip of Baffin Island. Both communities had high turnout

rates (65% and 75% respectively), so the recorded vote seems a reasonable expression of

the communities' aggregate opinions on the Accord.

Analyzing the Vote: A Preliminary Regression Analysis

Visual inspection of aboriginal communities' aggregate votes is one way of

elucidating patterns in the data. Regression analysis offers another method of ascertaining

or evaluating significant relationships between variables. A key limitation in data

analysis is always whether one has reasonable estimates for key variables, and this study

is no exception. I outline here some of the variables that would ideally be included in a

regression model for aboriginal voting in the Charlottetown referendum, and I lay out what data currently exists and the limitations this necessarily puts on this analysis.

From both visual inspection of the voting data presented earlier and from the aboriginal voting literature, it is likely that turnout and aggregate support for the Accord are correlated. Therefore, turnout is included as a regressor in the model. The complete relationship between turnout and support for the referendum is complicated by the fact that some aboriginal communities, particularly Mohawk but also some Anishnaabe, had a zero turnout rate (eg. Akwesasne, Pikogan) and therefore the yes vote for these communities is undefined. These communities would in effect select themselves out of the dataset, likely for reasons which are also correlated with their underlying but alas unmeasured position on the Accord. Although substantively relevant, the impact on the statistical analysis may be more muted, as only 10 observations fall out of the dataset.

Beyond turnout, other variables are interesting to potentially explain aggregate vote outcomes in 1992. Ladner argues that strong ties to language and traditions have led indigenous people to turn away from Canadian political processes (2003: 24), and it is also possible that these types of ties also had a role in determining aboriginal support for the Accord. Through Statistics Canada's Aboriginal People's Survey aggregated to the CSD level,[8] the regression includes two items. The language item is the percentage of the community's adults reporting and ability to speak or understand their language. The activity item is the percentage of the community's adults that report participating in traditional activities.

What is unavailable in this analysis is an aggregate measure of aboriginal communities' "feeling for Quebec", a factor that was important in explaining Canadians'

[8] Statistics Canada. 1991 Census Community Profiles, Aboriginal Peoples Survey, cat. 89F0020XDB.

vote choices in 1992 (Johnston et al 1996: 161). The only attitudinal measure which may be interesting to tap into support for the Accord is an item on the APS survey which asked the respondents whether they considered self-government to be a solution to their community's problems. It is noted that a strong position for self-government could lead respondents either away from or towards the Accord, depending on whether it was perceived that the Accord would actually deliver on self-government, and so I have no prediction as to whether a coefficient would be negative or positive.

I have also included two variables that have a role to play in electoral choice: education and income. I will address education first. Education is associated with much that is important in voting: electoral participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), the ability to perceive one's interests, the ability to process information, and the ability to make informed electoral decisions. One general take away from voting in the general population in 1992 was that, in individual level data, higher education led to greater support for the Accord by fostering a culture of tolerance and accommodation (Johnston et al, 1996: 247). This regression explores whether education measured at an aggregate level for aboriginal communities has a statistically significant and positive impact on a community's propensity to vote yes. The regression uses the economic well-being scale used as a component of the Community Well-Being Index (CWB) developed by INAC. [9] The education scale is composed of a measure of functional literacy and a measure of higher education (McHardy and O'Sullivan, 2004: 5). The education scale varies from 0 to 100.

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[9] The Community Well-Being Index (CWB) was developed by the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate of INAC. I was given access to the 1991 CWB with the permission of the Director, Dan Beavon. The 1991 CWB and its components were based on data from Statistics Canada's 1991 census micro-data file.

Income is also included here, since another general finding using individual level data from the Canadian population was that economic misfortune and permanent disadvantage worked against the Accord (Johnston et al., 1996: 184). As aboriginal communities are generally speaking more economically disadvantaged, it bears seeing whether a community's economic well-being had a role to play in the aggregate vote choice. I also used the income component of the CWB scale. The community's income score (0-100) is measured using the income of all community members (McHardy and O'Sullivan: 6).

It bears mentioning which variables are not included in this estimation. Political mobilization indicators such as the positions of community leaders; exposure to campaign messaging about the Accord, and evaluations both of key opponents and proponents of the Accord (especially of Ovide Mercredi) cannot be included in the model. As such, I do not present this regression as a full specification. However, it serves as a stepping-off point for further research.

Table 1. Comparison of main dataset with estimation sample (reporting means and standard deviations of selected variables		
	Main dataset	Estimation Sample
Yes	.40 (.23)	.45 (.26)
Turnout	.53 (.24)	.50 (.22)
Adult Identity Population	271 (267)	381 (287)
N	627	256

Due to Statistics Canada suppression rules that pertain to the CWB indicators, the estimation sample is considerably smaller (N=256) than the full electoral dataset (N=627). Dropped from the electoral dataset are communities with a population under 40, as well as communities with a population under 250 with less than 40 households

(McHardy and O'Sullivan: notes 3 and 4). Table 1 offers a comparison of the two

datasets, indicating that the average community size (measured by the number of adults

identifying themselves as aboriginal) of the estimation dataset is higher. Also, the

average yes vote in the estimation sample is also slightly higher. However, due to these

deletions, the estimation sample's average yes vote is slightly higher than the master

dataset, and average turnout is lower. It still stands, however, as a reasonable sub-sample

of the overall dataset.

Table 2. Results of preliminary regression analysis (N=256)	
Regressors	Coefficient (Standard Error)
Turnout	.285 (.067) **
Income	.019 (.005) **
Income^2	-.0002 (.0000) **
Education	-.002 (.001) **
% Language	.010 (.064)
% Traditional Activity	.232 (.099) **
% Self-government	-1.136 (1.616)
Constant	-.217 (.151)
** denotes significance at .05. R^2=.20, Root MSE = .232	

Table 2 reports the results of the regression analysis, which reports White-corrected

standard errors due to some heteroskedasticity. A few conclusions present themselves.

There is a statistically significant and positive relationship between turnout and an

aboriginal community's support for the yes – in keeping with the general notion

conveyed in the box and whisper plots earlier. This points to the important of political

mobilization in the aboriginal referendum experience, but exactly what kinds of

mobilization strategies mattered requires more extensive qualitative research. Education

is statistically significant, though negative, pointing to a preliminary conclusion that

educational attainment in aboriginal communities favoured the no. Again, this is contrary

to the effect of education on the general population's support for the Accord.   However, the magnitude of the coefficient makes one wonder about education's substantive impact in the aggregate. The regression confirms that income has a non-linear effect on the percentage of the yes vote; however, upon closer examination of the conditional slope coefficients predict that the impact on the yes vote is negative for the extremes of the income scale, while effectively zero, or neutral, for most communities (ie. those communities between the 25th and 75th percentiles).[10]

Of the "traditionalism" items in the regression, only the participation in traditional activity measure shows any significance. However, counter to the prevailing hypothesis, such participation ended up supporting the yes, rather than detracting from it. This points to two issues. First is a need to develop sound and tested measures for aboriginal traditionalism; second is to develop more refined hypotheses about how a commitment to such community values translates into political attitudes about an aboriginal community's proper interaction with the Canadian state. It may be the case that a strong sense of community history and culture provides a necessary grounding for a constitutional future with and within the Canadian state.

Conclusion

The referendum on the Charlottetown Accord was a critical watershed in Canadian constitutional history. It established a precedent that large scale constitutional renewal in Canada requires electoral approbation. It also set the important precedent that

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[10] The maximum value on the income scale for those observations in the estimation sample is 92. The minimum is 10, and the median is 40.

aboriginal peoples are to be at the constitutional negotiating table. As aboriginal and

non-aboriginal people in settler societies such as Canada debate how our respective

political structures should interrelate, it is clear that fundamental political changes cannot

occur in the future without aboriginal communities being on side. And as fundamental

political change increasingly requires electoral approbation, not simply elite bargaining,

aboriginal people may well be called upon again to back their national leadership in an

electoral event. Therefore, understanding aboriginal vote outcomes in 1992 is not merely

an exercise in historical scholarship, but may well have implications for future electoral

events.

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