Report

Consensus confusion: the 2019 Northwest Territories election

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Abstract

The 2019 Northwest Territories General Election, held on October 1, represented a decisive juncture in territorial politics, reaffirming recently developed trends and potentially introducing new ones. The election provided a window of opportunity for significant change in the face of territorial politics, with a handful of long-term cabinet ministers opting to retire following the 18th Assembly. The election reaffirmed the trend of declining incumbency first seen in the 2015 election, with several incumbents losing their re-election bids, often in landslide defeats. The 2019 election also saw a breakthrough in the representation of women in the Legislative Assembly. Lastly, in 2019 the territory became the first province or territory in Canada to introduce online voting in general elections.

Résumé

L'Élection Générale Territoriale qui s'est tenue le 1er octobre 2019 dans les Territoires du Nord-Ouest a constitué un tournant décisif dans la politique territoriale en confirmant, d'une part, les tendances récemment enregistrées et, d'une autre part, en introduisant potentiellement de nouvelles donnes. Cette élection a changé d'une façon très significative le paysage de la politique territoriale puisqu'une poignée de ministres bien installés depuis fort longtemps avaient choisi de prendre leur retraite après la 18ème Assemblée. En effet, cette élection a confirmé la tendance à la baisse du nombre de députés réélus pour un nouveau mandat que l'on a observée une première fois lors de l'élection de 2015 lorsque plusieurs députés sortants ont perdu leurs sièges, le plus souvent en se faisant battre à plate couture. L'élection de 2019 a également vu une percée dans la représentativité des femmes au sein de l'Assemblée législative. Pour terminer, il convient de souligner que le territoire est devenu en 2019 la première province ou territoire du Canada à introduire le vote en ligne aux élections générales.

Keywords: Northwest Territories (NWT), 2019 NWT territorial election, representation of women in the NWT Legislative Assembly, online voting system in NWT elections

Mots-clés : Les Territoires du Nord-Ouest (TNO), l'élection territoriale de 2019, le représentation des femmes dans l'Assemblé Législative de TNO, system de vote en ligne en TNO

Introduction

The 2019 election in the Northwest Territories (NWT) saw a large turnover in membership, and a significant increase in the number of female deputies. It also broke Canadian ground by being the first election with on-line voting. That said, all of this occurred in a polity that holds non-partisan elections and operates under consensus government. This article will begin by outlining the NWT's population and political system. Subsequently, the 18th Assembly of the NWT, which directly preceded the 2019 NWT election, will be briefly summarized. The second half of the chapter will cover the 2019 election in greater detail, including issues of representation, campaign finance, and incumbency. The article will conclude with a brief discussion of the start of the 19th Legislative Assembly, specifically the selection of the premier and cabinet.

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The Northwest Territories' political system and demographics

Political development

Non-partisan or consensus government in the NWT is not the product of a single event; rather, it developed organically due to several factors, including Indigenous influences and the quasi-colonial and constantly evolving relationship with Ottawa (Edwards 2015; White 1994: 2). [1] White notes that northerners (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) have simply rejected political parties as "unsuitable to northern needs and conditions" (2001: 85). Consequently, the various attempts to introduce partisan politics in the NWT and Nunavut have all failed, in contrast to Yukon. In the 1999 territorial election, the first after the creation of a separate Nunavut territory, the Western Arctic NDP ran five candidates in Yellowknife ridings, with the most successful of these candidates only finishing third with 20.4% of the vote (Dunbar: 38). Similarly, there was an unsuccessful attempt at creating a 'Northern Party' in the 1980s (White 1994: 9) Additionally, "in the 1987 territorial election, one unsuccessful candidate from Fort Smith ran as an NDP member" (Dickerson 1992: 94).

White has recognized the different demographic composition of Yukon compared to the NWT, along with differences in political development, asserting:

> Yukon, by virtue of its predominantly non-Aboriginal population and its longer and closer association with southern Canada, has a government all but indistinguishable, save in scale, from those of the provinces (White 2001b: 23).

Another distinguishing factor between the NWT and Yukon is the distribution of the territories' population. As noted by White (2016: 199), Yukon's capital city Whitehorse dominates the rest of the territory, with more than 75 percent of the territorial population residing in the capital city and 12 of the 19 seats in the legislature being in Whitehorse. Conversely, about half of the NWT's population is located in Yellowknife, accounting for only 7 of the 19 seats in the legislature.

In terms of political development, it was not until the second half of the 20th century that the NWT began gaining genuine political representation. In 1947 a Northern resident was appointed for the first time to sit on the Council of the Northwest Territories; three years later the *NWT Act* was amended to allow three elected Members from the Mackenzie District, followed by three elected members for the Eastern Arctic in 1966. As noted by Dunbar (2008: 12), the 1950 changes represented the first elected members on the Council since 1905, and the 1966 additions meant that for the first time, elected members on the council outnumbered appointed bureaucrats.

White has argued that once the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) was established in Yellowknife, pressure began building for further political autonomy (White 1994, 8). First, Aboriginal organizations became increasingly politicized, challenging "the very legitimacy of the GNWT as a foreign, colonial institution" (White 1994: 8). Notable groups included the Dene Nation and Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, who often explicitly or implicitly ignored the GNWT in an effort to make the government more sensitive to Indigenous concerns (White 1994: 8). Likewise, non-Indigenous peoples, especially in the Western Arctic, "sought greater democracy and accountability in government" (White 1994: 8).

By 1975, the council was fully elected though not able to exercise most administrative powers, even lacking the authority to make decisions over finances (Dunbar 2008: 12). The

consensus nature of politics in the NWT was in existence even in the nascent stages of elected politics in the territory. As stated by Dunbar, "throughout its entire history, the Territorial Council was operated consensually, and with the entire Council elected in 1975, all Members had been elected as independents" (13). Likewise, the tradition that the political executive is selected by the entire legislature was also the case at this time (13). Further devolution of powers from Ottawa would occur while John H. Parker was the commissioner, during whose time "commissioner-in-council government was transformed to responsible government" (Dickerson 1992: 116; White 1994: 8). As noted by Dickerson (1992: 91), the "commissioner's de facto role declined to the point where, today, it is almost identical to that of a provincial lieutenant governor."

It was during the 1970s and 1980s that the Northwest Territories shifted from being governed as an "internal colony" out of Ottawa, to gaining more autonomy through their own legislatures, cabinets and bureaucracies (White 2001: 23). The decade of the 1970s was marked by a significant shift in the balance of power from unelected bureaucrats to the elected MLAs (Abele 1987: 315). Like elsewhere in Canada, Indigenous groups in the territorial north were galvanized following the federal government's assimilationist 1969 White Paper on Indian Policy, with Indigenous groups across the region forming organizations in the years following. This was demonstrated through organizations such as the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT (later the Dene Nation), which was founded in 1970, along with the Committee for Original Peoples' Entitlement (COPE) in the Beaufort Delta, partly in response to the 1969 White Paper (Sibbeston 2015; Sabin 2016). Seminal events include the "1975 Dene Declaration calling for 'independence and self-determination within the Country of Canada' and the Inuit Tapirisat's 1976 proposal for a separate Inuit homeland" (which would later come to fruition nearly a quarter-century later) (Cameron and White 1995: 50).

Sabin (2016: 15) also acknowledged a new cohort of "radicalized Indigenous leadership [who] emerged in the late 1960s who were schooled in the language and politics of Canada's colonial system and could articulate a powerful critique of that system in Northern Canada." This mobilization of Indigenous groups asserting their rights also manifested itself in territorial politics. In the 1975 general election, there were several successful Dene candidates (Dickerson 1992: 102). However, two of the Dene candidates successfully elected, James Wah-Shee in the riding of Great Slave Lake and George Barnaby in the riding of Mackenzie-Great Bear, would become "disgruntled with the lack of attention paid to Dene issues in the council and resign their seats" (Abel 2012: 259). In response, the territorial government established a new Department of Natural and Cultural Affairs, providing training and grants for the preservation of Indigenous culture (Abel 2012: 259). Following the political developments of the mid-1970s, the Dene Nation recognized that participation in the territorial government's political process was an effective way to make change; James Wah-Shee recognized political realities and the necessity to work within the GNWT, and eventually to control it, to achieve favourable policy outcomes (Abel 2012: 255 and 259; Hamilton 1994: 145).

In 1979 the Dene Nation lifted its boycott of the territorial council, with Richard Nerysoo, Robert Sayine, Nick Sibbeston, and James Wah-Shee all elected (Abel 2012: 259). In total, the 1979 election saw 13 Aboriginal members elected to the 19-seat legislature, albeit

fragmented among Inuit, Dene and Métis interests (Abel 2012: 259; Sibbeston 2015: 145). Nerysoo and Wah-Shee were given senior government positions (Abele 2012: 259). Nick Sibbeston (2015: 144 and 147) asserted that he ran his campaign not to "become part of the government per se, but that I would instead challenge its legitimacy," and thus refused to pursue membership on the executive council and participate in any legislative committees. Sibbeston's (2015: 147) refusal to participate in these institutions was based on the belief that they "were instituting the European model of Government versus Opposition rather than the pure consensus style favoured by Aboriginal people."

Likewise in 1979, Nellie Cournoyea, who was an active member of COPE, was elected to the Legislative Assembly (Dickerson 1992: 102). As noted by Graham White (2019: 38), "COPE leaders decided to focus on electing a member to the territorial legislature." Cournoyea (2012) recognized the importance of working inside the system to facilitate political change and "remove some of the misunderstandings that were creating barriers." She would have a long career in the Assembly (1979-1995), holding several ministerial portfolios, and serving as the territory's first female premier from 1991 to 1995 (Dickerson 1992: 102).

Consensus government in the NWT

The Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly uses a non-partisan form of Westminister parliamentary government known as "consensus government." The consensus model of government is notable for the absence of political parties, with each candidate instead running as an independent. Like every provincial and territorial jurisdiction in Canada nowadays, NWT elections operate on a single-member plurality system. Election dates in the NWT are fixed, with polling occurring on the first Tuesday of October, four years following the previous election. Unlike other jurisdictions, the first minister cannot seek the dissolution of the Assembly and call an early election (Mercer 2015: 3).
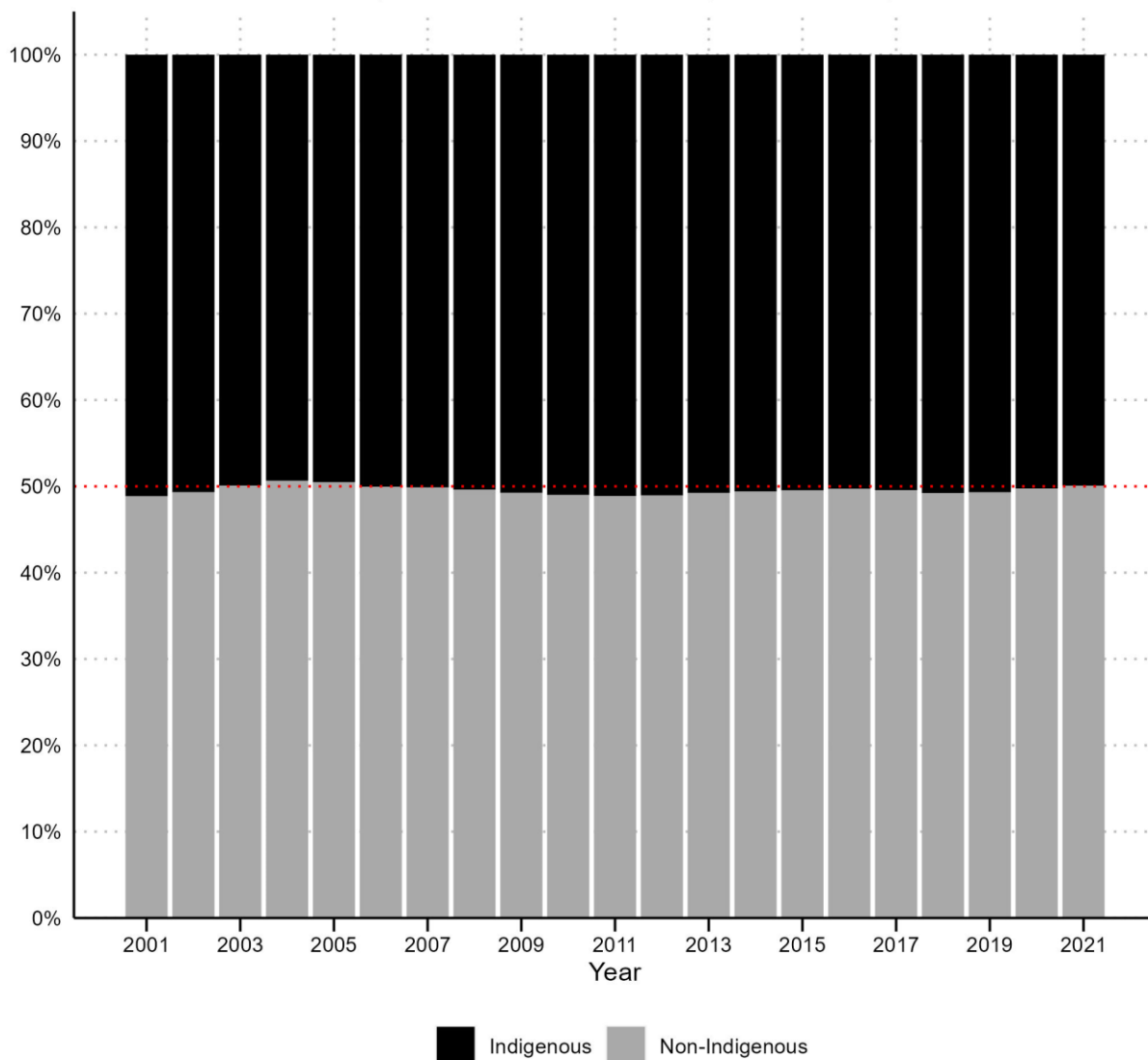
Following a general election in the NWT, the Premier is chosen by all the MLAs via secret ballot in a process that has remained largely unchanged since 1980, albeit with minor tweaks (Mercer 2015: 2). The process, known as the Territorial Leadership Committee (TLC), was first conducted in public in 1991 (Dunbar 2008: 23). While the Premier does not have the power to appoint or remove a minister, they do assign ministerial portfolios, which can be used to reward or punish a minister (White 2001b: 19).

Demographics

According to the 2021 Canadian Census, the NWT's population was 41,070, remaining largely stagnant, down from 41,786 in 2016, a 1.7 per cent decrease. It is the most populous of Canada's territories.

Approximately half of the NWT's population identifies as Aboriginal, with 20,040 people identifying as Indigenous in the 2021 census. The percentage of Indigenous residents in the NWT has remained relatively stable since the division of the territories and creation of Nunavut in 1999, with 18,730 of 37,100 (50.5 percent) residents then identifying as Aboriginal. Figure 1 shows the percentage of Indigenous residents in the territory from 2001-2021, demonstrating a steady percentage over the last two decades.

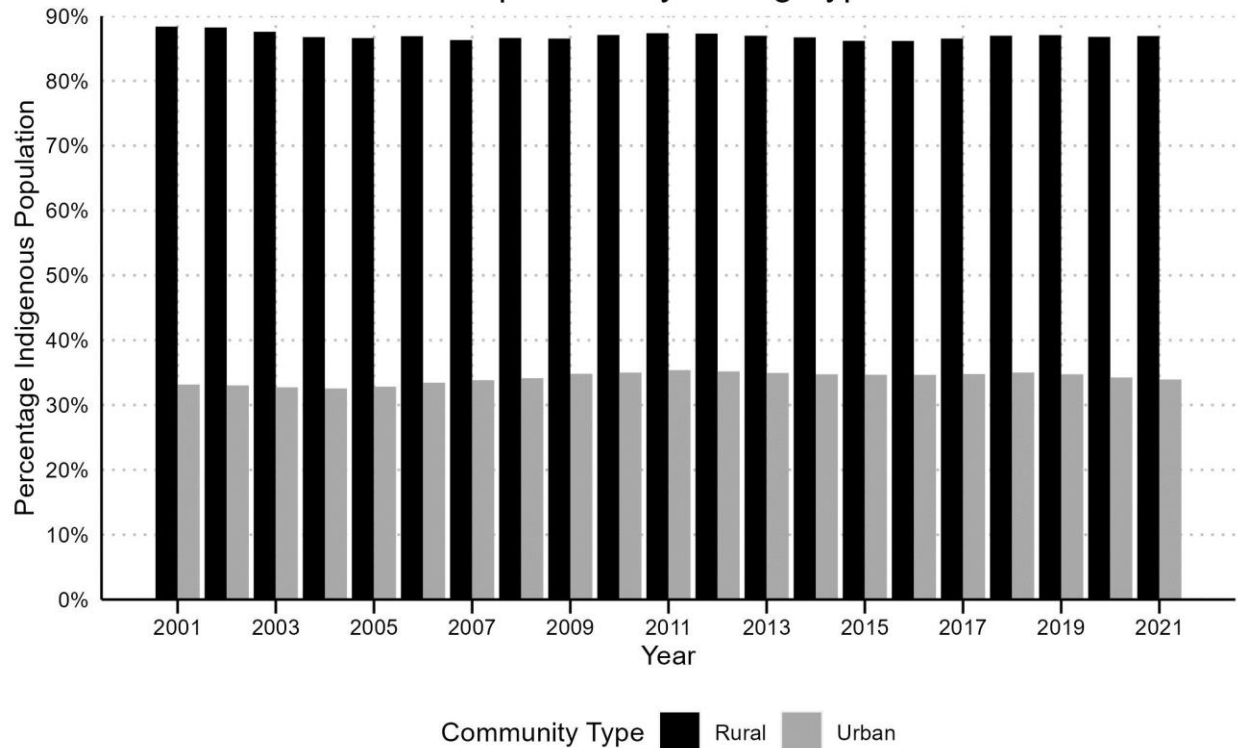Figure 1. Percentage of Indigenous Population in the NWT (2002-2021)

Source: NWT Bureau of Statistics

There are currently 19 electoral districts in the territory; seven are in Yellowknife, two in Hay River, and two in Inuvik (Elections NWT n.d). There are also several remote ridings; for example, the sprawling riding of Nunakput encompasses the northernmost part of the territory, made up of the communities of Tuktoyaktuk, Ulukhaktok, Sachs Harbour, and Paulatuk. Three of the four communities in the riding are not connected by road to the rest of the territory, while the fourth, Tuktoyaktuk, only recently gained year-round highway access. Ridings that are large in area tend to be overwhelmingly Indigenous in population, whereas urban ridings (defined as those using Statistics Canada's definition of a "population

centre") tend to have populations dominated by non-Indigenous peoples (White 2016: 195-96). This rural/urban distinction is shown in Figure 2. Specifically, in the population centres, which Statistics Canada defines as Hay River, Yellowknife, Fort Smith, and Inuvik, the Indigenous population makes up a little over 30 per cent of the population, with very little variation since the division of the territory in 1999. On the other hand, smaller communities are predominantly Indigenous, making up close to 90 per cent of the population, with very little variation over time.

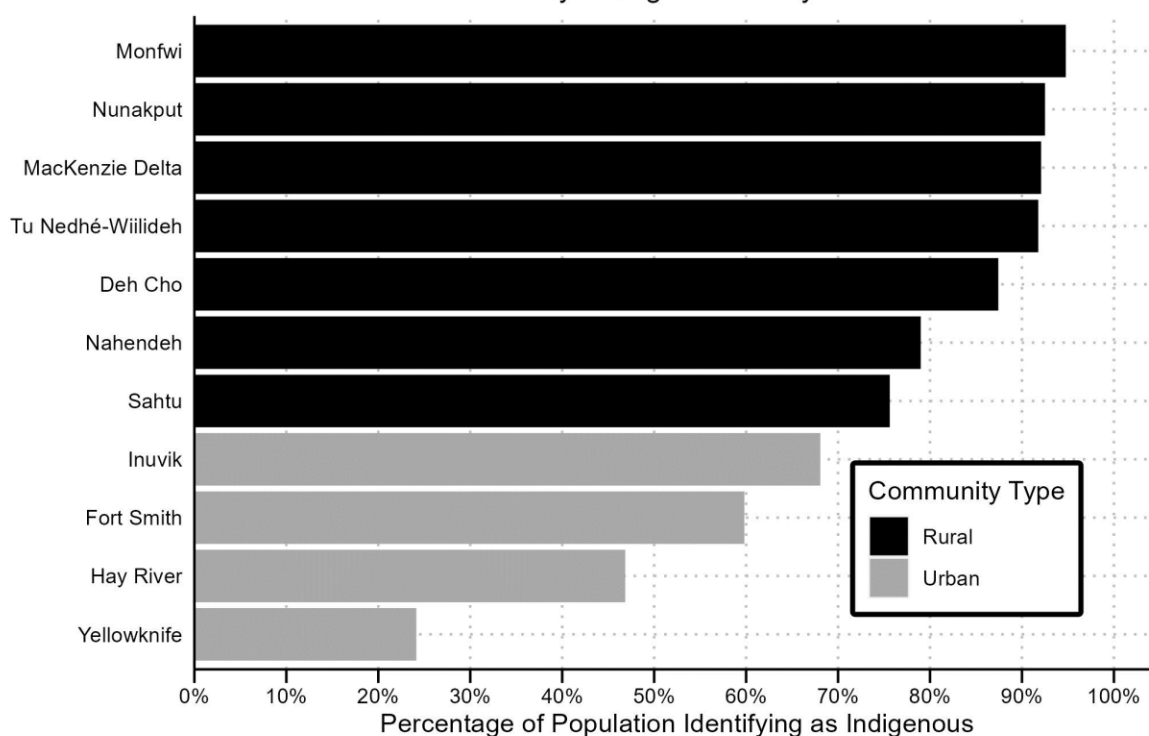Figure 2. Percentage of Indigenous Population by Riding Type

Source: NWT Bureau of Statistics

Of the electoral districts, in 2019 Monfwi had the highest percentage of the population identifying as Indigenous, at 94.8 per cent, with Nunakput (92.5 per cent) and Tu Nedhé-Wiilideh (91.8 per cent) both having over 90 per cent of its population identifying as Indigenous. Within the population centres there is also some variation between the demographic composition; for instance, Yellowknife has a low of 24.1 per cent of its population identifying as Indigenous, compared to 46.9 per cent in Hay River, 59.8 per cent in Fort Smith, and 68.1 per cent in Inuvik. All 7 rural ridings each have over 70 per cent of its population identifying as Indigenous.[2] Figure 3 shows the percentage of Indigenous population by riding; due to lack of data availability, the communities with more than one riding are displayed at a community level.

18th Legislative Assembly

The 2015 Northwest Territories General Election saw an influx of new members elected, with 8 incumbents defeated and 3 retiring. The defeat of incumbents was seen as the electorate demanding change (CBC 2015a). Consequently, in a push for greater accountability, the 18th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories tabled a mandate outlining the priorities of the Assembly, including the introduction of reporting mechanisms (NWT Legislative Assembly, 2016a). Despite this substantial turnover in the Assembly, premier Bob McLeod was re-elected as premier in the TLC, becoming the first NWT premier to serve more than one term.

Figure 3. Proportion of Indigenous Population
By Riding/Community

Source: NWT Bureau of Statistics

One of the first tasks of the Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures was to recommend a process for a mid-term review (Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly 2016b). The mid-term review was intended to provide a review of standing committees, along with the cabinet; however, the Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures' Report on the Review of the Establishment of a Mid-Term Review Process recommended against a review of standing committees, instead suggesting annual internal evaluations (NWT Legislative Assembly 2016b: 9). The mid-term review saw Justice Minister Louis Sebert lose the confidence of the House in a secret ballot, stemming from questions regarding his

portfolios; however, the subsequent motion of revocation failed and he remained on Cabinet (Hwang 2017).

Besides the midterm review, additional motions of revocation of appointment were tabled throughout the 18th Assembly, introduced by regular members when deemed appropriate. For example, the MLA for Nahendeh Shane Thompson tabled a motion in October 2018, calling for the revocation of Health Minister Glen Abernethy from the Cabinet. Simultaneously, Infrastructure Minister Wally Schumann faced a revocation motion, tabled by the MLA for Kam Lake, Kieron Testart. Both motions failed and the ministers remained in Cabinet for the rest of the 18th Assembly.

2019 Northwest Territories election

Retirements

Several notable MLAs decided to retire following the 18th Legislative Assembly, leaving open ridings. Five incumbent MLAs decided to retire, three members of the cabinet and two regular members. Bob McLeod, the NWT's first two-term premier (2011-2019), decided not to run for re-election in the riding of Yellowknife South after serving as an MLA since 2007. Likewise, Health Minister Glen Abernethy opted to not re-offer in his riding of Great Slave, which he had represented since 2007. Abernethy experienced a tumultuous 18th Assembly, facing a motion of revocation in 2018.

Additionally, cabinet ministers Robert C. McLeod and Alfred Moses both opted not to run for re-election. Lastly, former cabinet minister Tom Beaulieu, representing Tu Nedhé-Wiilideh, decided to retire following the conclusion of the 18th Assembly. The five retirements were the most since the NWT's division and the creation of Nunavut, with the only NWT Election with more retirements being 1995 when the Assembly consisted of 24 members.
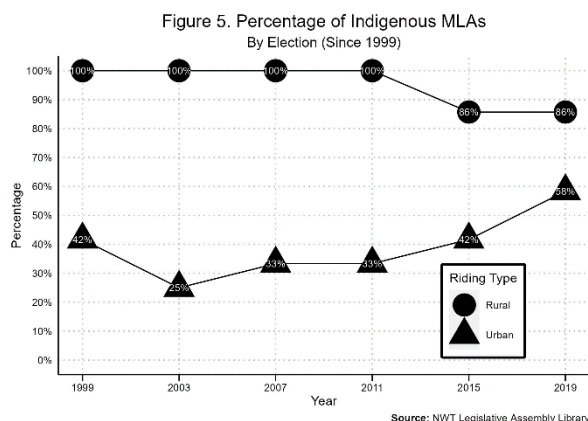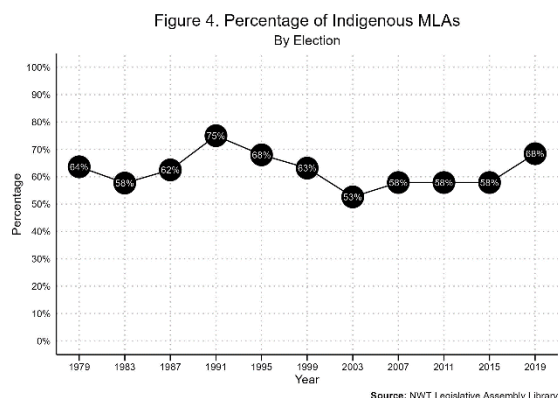
Campaign finance

The costs of campaigning in territorial elections, both in time and money, are relatively low, "since ridings typically have small, geographically concentrated populations" (White 2014: 247). Moreover, the maximum campaign spending limit of $30,000 is seldom reached, especially in smaller communities (White 2014: 247). Campaign spending varies significantly across ridings, with Yellowknife candidates running more financially intensive campaigns; since 2007, elections campaigns outside the capital have cost an average of $5,497 ($7,506 for successful campaigns) (Wasylciw 2020). Conversely, the average campaign cost in Yellowknife is $12,562, with an average of $16,812 spent by winners (Wasylciw 2020). Unlike at the federal level in Canada, campaign contributions are not limited to individuals, with businesses contributing 30% of all funding in the 2019 election (Wasylciw 2020). However, individual donations are capped at $1,500, with the exception being the value of non-monetary contributions of transportation services or the use of office premises. During the 2020 campaign, the average successful candidate in Yellowknife spent $11,384.78 (a median of $11,166.82); the average spent by successful candidates outside of Yellowknife was $12,440.19 (median of $11,935.97).

Indigenous representation

Indigenous MLAs have been present in the Assembly at a level proportionate to the overall territorial population, and this proportion has remained relatively stable over time, as

demonstrated in Figure 4. Since 1979, the majority of elected MLAs in each legislature have been Indigenous, with the 2019 election producing the second largest share.

There is a clear difference between the number of Indigenous MLAs in rural versus rural ridings, as demonstrated by Figure 5.

Figure 4. Percentage of Indigenous MLAs By Election

Source: NWT Legislative Assembly Library

Figure 5. Percentage of Indigenous MLAs By Election (Since 1999)

Source: NWT Legislative Assembly Library

Representation of women

A key theme from the 2019 territorial election was the influx of women who were successfully elected to the Legislative Assembly. Following the 2015 territorial election, only two of nineteen MLAs were women, the lowest proportion of female representation in a Canadian legislature (10.5 percent). The years leading up to the 2019 election helped pave the way for an influx of women MLAs in 2019. The 18th Assembly was committed to improving the representation of women in the assembly, with one of its priorities to "support initiatives designed to increase the number of women running for elected office in the NWT" (NWT Legislative Assembly 2016a: 6). On March 8, 2018 (International Women's Day) the Assembly adopted a motion "establishing a goal of increasing the representation of women in the Legislative Assembly to 20 per cent by 2023 and to 30 per cent by 2027" (NWT Legislative Assembly 2018b: 1).

On May 31, 2018, the Office of the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly published a discussion paper exploring how these goals could be achieved. As a result, the Assembly established the Special Committee to Increase the Representation of Women in the Legislative Assembly on November 1, 2018. The committee was "tasked to gather information and public input into options on how to support the goal of increasing women's representation in the Legislative Assembly to 20 percent by 2023 and 30 percent by 2027" (NWT Legislative Assembly 2019b: 1). One suggestion was the implementation of seats reserved for women if considerable progress was not made towards the representation of women in the 2019 election.

Since 2015 there were several developments in municipal politics, with women being elected mayor in Yellowknife, Inuvik, Fort Smith, and Hay River. Since 2015 and preceding the 2019 election, women achieved milestones in positions of Indigenous government, running notable campaigns for various prominent leadership positions (Lafferty 2019). Moreover, in 2017 Margaret Thom was appointed as the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, becoming the first woman to hold the position in a decade.

In 2019, 24 of the 58 candidates running for MLA were women, with 12 of 19 districts having women on the ballot, including an all-female ballot in the riding of Yellowknife South. As Table 1 shows, the 2019 Election saw a record 9 women elected, with incumbents Caroline Cochrane and Julie Green joined by 7 new women MLAs. These women came from various backgrounds, including a nurse, a lawyer, an engineer, leaders in Indigenous government, and businesswomen.[3]

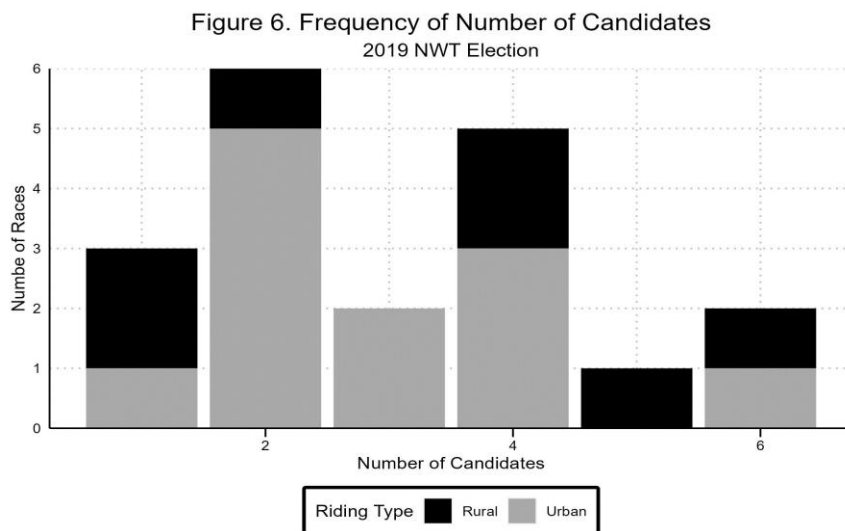**Table 1**. Representation of women in the NWT Legislative Assembly

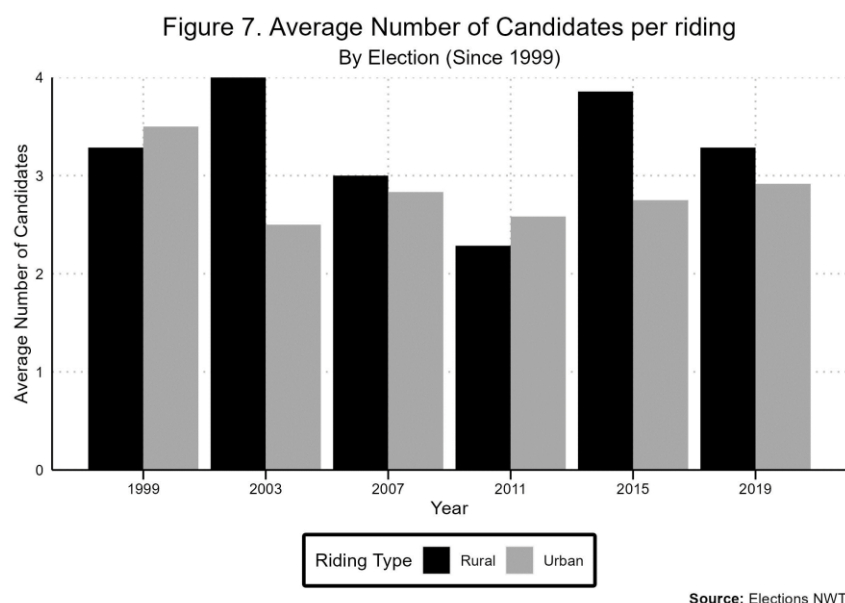| Assembly (Years)	Number of Women MLAs	Percentage
14th (1999-2003)	2	10.53%
15th (2003-2007)	2	10.53%
16th (2007-2011)	3	15.79%
17th (2011-2015)	2	10.53%
18th (2015-2019)	2	10.53%
19th (2019-2023)	9 (10*)	47.37% (52.63%*)

*Following 2021 Monfwi By-Election

Source: Elections NWT

Candidates, incumbency, and acclamations

In total, 58 candidates ran in the 2019 general election, down from 60 in 2015. On average, there were 3.2 candidates running in each riding. Figure 6 shows the frequency of each number of candidates running in a race. The number of candidates running in each race varied considerably, ranging from 6 candidates (in 2 ridings) to three acclamations (which will be discussed later). The ridings of Kam Lake and Nunakput had the most crowded electoral competitions, with 6 candidates in each riding respectively; this resulted in the incumbents, Kieron Testart (Kam Lake) and Herbert Nakimayak (Nunakput) failing to get re-elected after serving a single term as MLAs. It was most common for ridings to be contested by 2 candidates, occurring in 6 races, followed by 4 candidates, with 5 occurrences.

Figure 6. Frequency of Number of Candidates
2019 NWT Election

Source: Elections NWT

Figure 7. Average Number of Candidates per riding
By Election (Since 1999)

Source: Elections NWT

The 12 urban, single-community ridings had 2.9 candidates running on average, compared to 3.3 candidates running on average in the seven rural ridings. For comparison, in 2015 the difference between the number of candidates running in urban and rural ridings was much more noticeable; in 2015, 2.8 candidates ran on average in urban ridings, versus 3.9 candidates on average in rural ridings. Figure 7 shows the average number of candidates running in a riding since 1999, differentiating between urban and rural districts.

There has been a decline in incumbency rates in the previous two territorial elections, with eight incumbents losing their seats in 2015 (CBC 2015a). Similarly, in 2019 only four of 11 incumbents running for re-election with opposing candidates were successful, with three joining through acclamation (CBC 2019a). Many of the defeated incumbents fell victim to vote-splitting, with the single-member plurality electoral system meaning that candidates are often elected with less than a majority of the vote. Of the incumbents defeated in 2019, two faced five challengers, two faced three challengers, one faced 2 challengers, and only two unsuccessful incumbents faced one challenger. Of the seven incumbents returning to the Assembly, two faced two challengers, two faced one challenger, and three were acclaimed. Table 2 below shows how incumbency rates in the NWT have varied from 1999 to 2019.

In the 2019 election, three candidates were acclaimed: Jackson Lafferty, R.J Simpson, and Frederick Blake Jr. Lafferty, the assembly's longest-serving Member (first elected in a 2005 by-election) and the Speaker during the 18th Assembly, was acclaimed for the second-consecutive term. Blake, the Assembly's second-longest serving Member, was first elected in 2011; in 2015, he faced 3 challengers and secured 48% of the vote. Simpson's acclamation came following his first term in office, unseating one-term incumbent Robert Bouchard in 2015, securing 53% of the vote in a three-candidate race.

Table 2. Incumbency in the Northwest Territories

Year	Incumbents Running for Re-election	Incumbents Defeated	Incumbents Re-Elected	Incumbency Rate	Incumbents Acclaimed	Retirements
1999	10	2	8	0.8000000	1	2
2003	15	3	12	0.8000000	5	4
2007	15	2	13	0.8666667	3	4
2011	15	1	14	0.9333333	3	4
2015	15	8	7	0.4666667	1	2
2019	14	7	7	0.5000000	3	5

Source: Elections NWT

Notable races

Several races in the 2019 election stood out for their close results or the defeat of notable incumbents. For example, the riding of Yellowknife North was a tight race with three candidates, incumbent Cory Vanthuyne and challengers Rylund Johnson and Jan Vallillee. Johnson pulled off the upset of Vanthuyne, despite spending considerably less money on the campaign. Following a judicial recount, Johnson emerged victorious receiving 503 votes (36.2%), with Vanthuyne receiving 497 (35.8% votes, and 380 voters casting a ballot for Vallillee (27%).

The riding of Thebacha encapsulates the recent electoral volatility in the Northwest Territories, with incumbents ousted in two consecutive elections. In 2015, Louis Sebert defeated longtime incumbent Michael Miltenberger, who had served in the Assembly from 1995 to 2015. Serving primarily in the role as Justice Minister, Sebert had a difficult term in office, marred by the motion of revocation, which he narrowly survived. Sebert received only 70 votes (6%) in Thebacha, down from 401 votes in 2015 (43%); the drop in vote share of –37% for Sebert from 2015 to 2019 was the largest of any incumbent running for re-election in 2019. This decline in incumbent vote share is the third worst since the Assembly became fully elected in 1975.[4] The successful candidate in Thebacha, Frieda Martselos, had strong name recognition in her own right, serving as the Chief of Salt River First Nation from 2007 to 2019.

Another riding demonstrating the recent electoral volatility in the NWT is Hay River South. In 2015, Wally Schumann defeated longtime MLA Jane Groenewegen, who had served as an MLA since 1995. In the 18th Assembly, Schumann served as a cabinet minister, facing the motion of revocation in 2018. In 2019, Rocky Simpson, the father of MLA for Hay River North, R.J. Simpson, defeated Schumann. Following the election, news broke that Simpson's business owed nearly $2 million to the Business Development and Investment Corporation, a GNWT Crown corporation (McBride 2020). Consequently, the Chief Electoral Officer recommended amending the *Elections Act* to prohibit candidates from running for MLA if they owe money to the territorial government. While similar provision exists in the legislation for NWT's municipal elections, there have been constitutional questions over whether similar restrictions would be allowed in territorial elections (Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly 2021).

There were three races that featured a former MLA attempting to return to the assembly, with only one successful. In the riding of Nunakput, Jackie Jacobson, who represented the riding from

2007 to 2015 (serving as the speaker from 2011 to 2015) was challenging incumbent Herbert Nakimayak, who defeated Jacobson in the 2015 election by 4 votes; in 2019, Jacobson emerged victorious. The race was contested by a total of 6 candidates, tied with Kam Lake for the most candidates contesting a single riding in 2019. The race saw voting down community lines; Nakimayak received the majority of the support in his home community of Paulatuk, receiving 86 of the 150 (57%) votes cast in the community. Conversely, in Tuktoyaktuk, Jacobson secured 136 of the 361 (38%) votes in the community, compared to only 6 received by Nakimayak.

In the riding of Range Lake, former cabinet minister and MLA for Kam Lake from 2003 to 2015, David Ramsay attempted to unseat incumbent Kevin O'Reilly. The two candidates were ideological opposites, with O'Reilly being a supporter of environmental issues, whereas Ramsay was a notable proponent of resource development (McGarry 2019). The race was a true head-to-head showdown, with no additional candidates running. The race was seen as a referendum on the direction of the territory's economy (Last 2019a). Moreover, the two candidates had contrasting visions of their role in the assembly, with O'Reilly envisioning himself as a critic of the cabinet. Conversely, Ramsay was committed to running for a position in the cabinet (Last 2019a). O'Reilly prevailed in a tight race, requiring a judicial recount, securing 357 votes to Ramsay's 346 (Elections NWT 2019: 12).

In Kam Lake, another Yellowknife riding, incumbent Kieron Testart faced five challengers, including former MLA for Yellowknife Centre from 2003 to 2015, Robert Hawkins. In 2015 Testart defeated longtime MLA Dave Ramsay. During the 18th Assembly, Testart positioned himself as a vocal critic of the cabinet (Gleeson 2019a; Hwang 2017). Moreover, in 2019 a document leaked suggesting that Testart was interested in introducing a political party for the upcoming election, although the idea was quickly scrapped (Gleeson 2019b). Both Testart and Hawkins were unsuccessful, with Caitlin Cleveland being elected with 27.43 percent of the vote, compared to 22.80 percent for Testart and 23.46 percent for Hawkins (Elections NWT 2019: 18).

Voter turnout and alternative voting methods

Voter turnout is typically the highest in smaller communities. In Yellowknife ridings, turnout hovered around 50% (from 43% in the riding of Great Slave to 55% in Yellowknife North). Voter turnout in Inuvik and Hay River, the territory's two largest population centres outside of Yellowknife, was similarly poor. The riding of Hay River South saw 53% of eligible electors turning up at the polls. Likewise, 54 and 53 percent of electors in Inuvik Boot Lake and Inuvik Twin Lakes, respectively, cast ballots (Elections NWT 2019). Conversely, the riding of Nunakput saw a voter turnout of 72.9%, while in Tu Nedhé-Wiilideh, 69% of registered voters cast a ballot. (The riding of Thebacha, which encompasses Fort Smith and its surrounding areas, bucked the trend of low voter turnout in larger population centres, with a turnout of 68%). However, in 2019 there was some improvement in turnout, specifically in the riding on Kam Lake, which saw a turnout of 51.19%. The increase of 25.92% is the second largest from one election to another in the NWT since the legislature became fully elected in 1975.

Kam Lake also saw a significant increase in turnout among young voters (18-35-year-olds) at 30%, up from 11% in 2015 (Dapilos 2019). However, Yellowknife's electoral districts were among the worst in terms of youth turnout. Nevertheless, Elections NWT

recognizes that there have been glimpses of potential in Yellowknife, with youth turnout up 12% in the city compared to 2015, outpacing the territory-wide increase. Overall, young voter turnout was up 11% from 2015, with the turnout among the 18 to 35 age group of 31%. The riding of Deh Cho experienced the highest turnout among 18 to 35-year-olds, at 43%, narrowly ahead of Nunakput at 42%. Likewise, Deh Cho was the riding with the greatest increase in youth turnout from 2015 to 2019, increasing by 20% (Dapilos 2019: 6). Nevertheless, it is important to take the voter turnout numbers with a grain of salt. They may either be inflated or deflated due to irregularities in the list of registered voters (Last 2019b).

To remedy low turnout levels, online voting was introduced for the 2019 election through the *Simply Voting* software system, becoming the first Canadian province or territory to offer such a voting option in a general election. The NWT move online aimed to increase voter turnout amongst youth, with only 20% of eligible voters aged 18 to 35 casting a ballot in the 2015 territorial election (Bird 2019; CBC 2019a). The introduction of online voting was lauded by now-MLA for Yellowknife North, Rylund Johnson, who humorously asserted that "I am going to vote for myself online in bed in my pajamas out of principle because I have been saying this should happen for years" (CBC 2019a).

The response to the online voting option was not entirely positive. Transparency advocates fear the system is vulnerable to exploitation, a concern exacerbated by the small margins of victory present in many territorial election races, with many races settled by only a couple dozen votes (Bird 2019). Furthermore, contrary to expectations, online voting had only a modest impact on the mobilization of young voters, with 60% of online voters being 35 and over. However, the overall youth voter turnout did increase in 2019, with 31% (up 11%) of all electors under 35 casting a ballot (Last 2019b). Overall, 3.6% of votes were cast electronically (Pearce 2020a). Despite the limited uptake, Latour considered the multiple options for voting a success, concluding that, "Some people were not that sure. It was a litmus test. Like I said … if it puts ballots in two people's hands or 50 people's hands, that's a success. They were able to access their ballot that way" (Pearce 2020).

Post-election - the 2019 Territorial Leadership Committee

On October 19, 2019, the Territorial Leadership Committee (TLC) met, with Members interested in running for Premier given the opportunity to announce their intentions and deliver a speech of up to twenty minutes. Each other Member was allowed to ask two questions to each nominee following the speeches. On October 24, 2019, the TLC reconvened; the break in between the speeches and voting gave members the ability to consult their constituents.

The meeting began with the selection of the speaker, with MLA for Mackenzie Delta Frederick Blake Jr. being the only nominee for the position and was thus acclaimed as speaker. Subsequently, the premier was selected via a secret ballot vote amongst all the remaining MLAs. Four MLAs put their name forward to be premier: Caroline Cochrane, Jackson Lafferty, Frieda Martselos, and R.J. Simpson. Cochrane would successfully be elected as premier on the third ballot, the first woman premier since Nellie Cournoyea from 1991 to 1995. Cochrane was the lone cabinet minister from the 18th Assembly part of the 19th Assembly, due to retirements and defeats. During the 18th Assembly, Cochrane initially served as the Minister responsible for Housing and Homelessness, along with Municipal and

Community Affairs, before becoming the Minister responsible for Education, Culture, and Employment, following a 2018 cabinet shuffle.

Cochrane was joined in the cabinet by Simpson, Shane Thompson, Diane Archie, Paulie Chinna, Caroline Wawzonek, and Katrina Nokleby. Since 1999, the selection of the cabinet has followed the 2-2-2 convention, whereby two cabinet ministers are selected from Yellowknife and two each from the southern and northern districts (Dunbar 2008, 22).

Conclusion

The 2019 Northwest Territories General Election was a milestone election in the territory, continuing trends first developed in the 2015 election. The trend of declining incumbency rates persisted, which in conjunction with a handful of retirements meant an influx of new members in the House. This was especially relevant for the representation of women in the assembly, with nine of the 19 incoming members being women, a significant increase from the 18th Assembly, which had two female members. The focus on voter turnout was another notable aspect of the 2019 election, as demonstrated by the adoption of online voting, becoming the first province or territory to implement online voting in a general election.

About the author

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[1] The electoral failure of parties in the territory was also discussed by Dunbar (2008: 38).

[2] It is important to note that when using community-level demographic data in the Northwest Territories these estimates are not exact, because in smaller communities, data is often omitted. In the case of the 2019 data, data from three communities has been omitted, all of which have populations under 100 people: Sambaa K'e and Jean Marie River (both located in the riding of Nahendeh), Kakisa (Deh Cho).

[3] "On the historical underrepresentation of women in NWT politics and the Legislative Assembly, see Yurris, Christopher The Non-Partisan Paradox: Overcoming Gender Disparity in the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly. *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 44(3), 19-24. https://www.canlii.org/en/commentary/doc/2021CanLIIDocs13012#!fragment/zoupio-_Toc2Page21-Page30/BQCwhgziBcwMYgK4DsDWszIQewE4BUBTADwBdoAvbRABwEtsBaAfX2zgCYAFMAc0I4BGRj34Bm AAwBKADTJspQhACKiQrgCe0AOTaZEQmFwJV6rbv2HjIAMp5SAIS0AlAKIAZVwDUAggDkAYVcZUjAAI2hSdi kpIA

[4] Since the NWT Legislative Assembly became fully-elected in 1975 there have been 259 races contested including by-elections, of these 141 featured an incumbent running against at least one other challenger.

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