



The Political Attitudes and Engagement of American Indians

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The year 2018 marks the 45th anniversary of the American Indian Movement's takeover of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Although this siege has largely faded from public consciousness, the anniversary marks a good moment to reflect on the political power of American Indians. In a representative democracy, groups often exert power through the ballot box. But American Indians comprise less than two percent of the U.S. population; their population share reaches double digits only in Alaska, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Like African Americans, moreover, American Indians have seen their electoral potential undercut by gerrymandering and legal barriers to registration and balloting.

Still, American Indians have the potential to exert greater political clout. In contrast to African Americans – whose voter turnout equals and at times surpasses that of whites – American Indians have persistently low turnout. In an effort to better understand, Jeanette Morehouse Mendez and I conducted an opt-in Internet panel survey in early 2016. Since only American Indians were surveyed, they cannot be compared to others. Nevertheless, respondents were asked about a range of matters – including voting, interest in politics, party identifications, and support for American Indian candidates.

Key Findings about Political Engagement

About 27% of our respondents reported not being registered to vote and only 38% reported they nearly always vote. In addition, we found that only 36% reported following politics regularly.

American Indians tend to have social characteristics correlated with low levels of voting. They have less education, lower levels of income, and tend to be younger than most Americans. For example, according to the U.S. census about 29% of American Indians live in poverty compared to 16% for the nation as a whole. Additionally, the average ages are 31.4 and 37.7. Like other Americans, older and more highly educated American Indians are more likely to be registered voters, vote more often, and take an interest in politics.

Comparisons to African Americans are also revealing. Although this minority group also tends to have low levels of socio-economic status, its political engagement tends to be high due to group consciousness and a sense of linked-fate. “Group consciousness” refers to the belief that one’s group is mistreated in society and should take corrective action, while “linked-fate” refers to individuals’ beliefs that their fortunes are affected by those of the entire group. We find, however, that group consciousness and linked-fate do not significantly boost political engagement by American Indians. This makes them unique.

Candidates and Parties

Turning to the content of American Indian politics, we find that 49% of respondents said it was “important” to have American Indian candidates and another 27% said it was “very important.” Only 23% said it was not important. Although group consciousness and linked-fate were not related to levels of political engagement, they did matter to candidate preferences. American Indians who have experienced discrimination, believed discrimination is a significant problem for the group, and share a pan-ethnic identity as American Indian, were more likely to strongly prefer American Indian candidates. Socio-economic status, age, and gender were not related to preferences for co-ethnic candidates.

Although our study does not directly look at vote choice, it finds that about 46% of our American Indian respondents identify as Democrats, 26% as Republicans and 25% as independents. Age and education did not affect party identification. But Democratic identification was more common for respondents who identify as tribal members, grew up on a reservation, believed American Indians faced discrimination and linked

individual fortunes to group fate.

To examine gender gaps, I also used data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey. Compared to their male counterparts, females are more likely to be Democrats, identify more strongly as American Indians, and be more supportive of compassionate and women's issues. But they are not more likely to be liberal. The gender gap in party identification is caused more by gender differences on compassion issues than by gender differences in "American Indian" identification. What is more, living on a reservation increases the likelihood that men become Democrats but has little effect on the party identification of women.

A final set of findings deserves brief mention. American Indians who are tribal members can participate in tribal as well as U.S. elections. In our sample, almost half are not eligible to vote in tribal elections while about a quarter nearly always vote in these elections. We found no clear predictive factors for levels of tribal voting among those who are eligible to participate.

A Continuing Struggle for Political Leverage

In 1973 American Indians were struggling for autonomy and power in the United States – and although some tribes have increased their political clout in large part through gaming that struggle continues today. As a group, American Indians remain poor and their poverty contributes to low levels of political engagement. Our research could not sort out how much of this low engagement is because political elites do little to enhance the engagement of ordinary American Indians, and how much follows from the sheer life realities of low socio-economic status. Clearly, efforts to increase education and economic opportunities for American Indians will enhance their political engagement. Meanwhile, a growing sense of unity bodes well for boosting the political power of American Indians. People from many backgrounds agree that leaders from their pan-ethnic group should represent their interests in the U.S. government. And American Indians are throwing more of their combined clout into solid support for Democrats.

Read more in Rebekah Herrick and Jeanette Mendez "American Indian Party Identification: Why American Indians Tend to be Democrats" *Politics Groups and Identity* (2018); Rebekah Herrick and Jeanette Mendez "One Model Does Not Fit All: Group Consciousness and the Political Participation and Attitudes of American Indians" *Social Science Quarterly* (forthcoming), and Rebekah Herrick "The Gender Gaps in Identity and Political Attitudes Among American Indians" *Politics & Gender* (2018): 1-22.