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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics

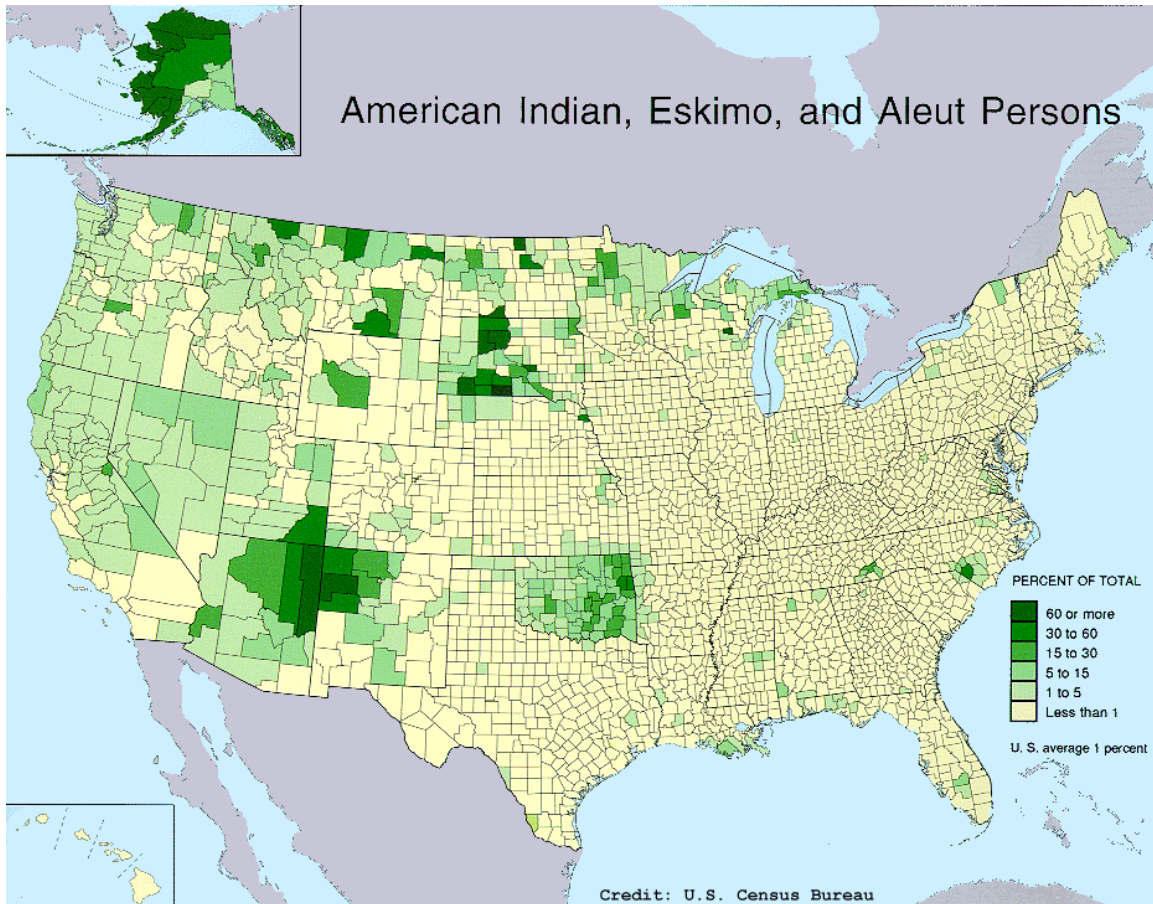
Issue Brief: Native Americans and European Americans

Keywords: Native Americans, European Americans, historical context, self determination, US government and tribal sovereignty, Gaming.

Description: This brief covers the relationship among Native Americans and European, largely white Americans. The development of this relationship and its status at present are implicated in historical events which, over centuries, gradually restricted and then expanded the rights and circumstances of Native Americans in a euro-dominant culture, culminating in the self-determination movement which also influences the issue of Indian-run casinos.

Key Points:

- The relationship between Native Americans and European Americans results from centuries of conflict and reparations.
- A history of dispossession and subjugation continues to contextualize this relationship today.
- Native Americans experienced sweeping changes at the hands of European Americans during the 20th century in the form of land rights, reservation building, and the shift to self determination. The relationship between the two races was heavily influenced by these changes.
- Self determination and tribal sovereignty among the Native American population has reduced hostility between Native Americans and European Americans while precluding political and cultural interaction among them
- In some sense, a negative relationship has resulted from restoration of state sovereignty in terms of non-Indian opposition to casinos as well as perceived inability to alleviate poverty among tribal communities.



Native Americans have a particularized relationship with European Americans unique from other minority groups in the United States. Native Americans exert sovereignty over respective tribes, and offer services and form legislation separate from the US Federal government. The political dynamic existing at present is a result of two centuries of complicated policy with regard to Native Americans. Today, the relationship is characterized by issues surrounding reparations, self determination, poverty, and Indian run casinos.

Upon the arrival of colonists from Europe, Native Americans were subject to dispossession, warfare, enslavement, disease, and blanket subjugation. Hostilities among the new and indigenous peoples continued through the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which authorized large scale land exchange and necessitated the large scale relocation of peoples, known as the Trail of Tears, and the death of 4,000 Cherokee Indians. Until

World War II, the relationship between Native Americans and Europeans was defined mostly in terms of a non-relationship, as the indigenous peoples were largely relegated to reservations.

The war necessitated increased interaction among Native and European Americans. By means of a draft or voluntarily, 44,000 Native Americans reported for duty. Two formerly detached races forged comradeships, and the contributions of the Navajo code talkers, whose code based on an indigenous language was never cracked by the Japanese, are widely known. “The war caused the greatest disruption of Native life since the beginning of the reservation era,” explained the U.S. Indian Commissioner in 1945. The course of American policy would have to either pursue the route of termination or self determination. Initially, one hundred tribes were ‘terminated,’ meaning their sovereignty and access to federal assistance was no longer recognized, leaving the government with fewer obligations and, presumably, a means to forcibly assimilate Native Americans into post-war American culture. This was defined as ‘paternalism,’ an effort to absorb Native Americans into the dominant European American culture.

A self determination movement emerged in the 1960s. Under President Nixon, Congress passed several items to improve conditions of Native Americans, the Indian Self-Determination Act the most consequential among them. This act was a gesture to restore trust between the federal government and tribal governments, who were granted sovereignty over their tribal affairs. The federal governments acquiescence to self determination and sovereignty of Native Americans improved the relationship among Native Americans and European Americans.

To some extent, tribal sovereignty limits interaction between Native Americans and European Americans. Tribal governments are the primary source of law enforcement and government services on 56 million acres of land Under the federal policy of self-determination, tribal governments make decisions at the local level and provide many services to reservations themselves.

Interaction between Native and white Americans is limited by the dominance of reservations. For the 550 tribes in the US at present, there are 310 reservations housing 400,000 of 2.1 million Native Americans. Many reservations are either isolated or in

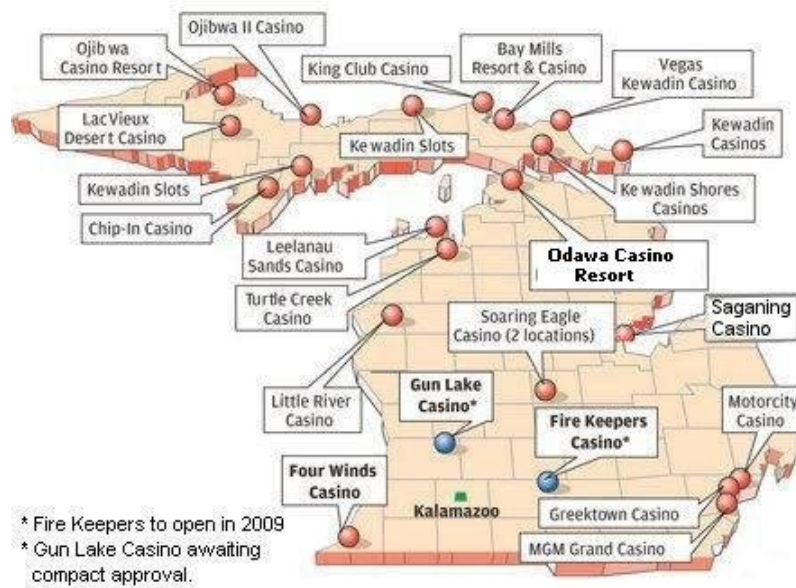
close proximity to one another. In 2007, a Public Agenda organization found that most European Americans rarely encounter Native Americans in their daily live.

A issue of contention among Native Americans and European Americans is the abundance of Native American-run Casinos. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, passed in 1988, allows Native American tribes to set up casinos under state regulation while also exerting tribal sovereignty over some aspects of operation. Casinos improve Indian's economic success without improving their political status and efficacy. Revenue from Indian gaming operations totaled \$19.4 billion in 2004, but not all tribes benefit and non-Indian groups may resist casino-expansion plans. Tax Payers of Michigan Against Casinos fought against the construction of a casino by the Potawatami Indian Tribe for fear of a 'fundamental change in the character of the community,' while in 2004, convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff was paid millions of dollars by tribes seeking to block other tribal casinos. Both incidents strain Native-European American relations in at the local level, and some cases of non-Indians challenging Indian run Casinos have reached the Supreme Court.

Furthermore, reservations make up some of the most impoverished regions of the United States, even though they are regarded as the 'ultimate welfare state' relying heavily on Washington for sheer sustenance. Federal spending on Indian programs amounts to about \$11 billion annually, but agencies suggest that aid to reservations has dwindled and not kept up with inflation while the nature of Native American culture is incompatible with capitalism. Currently, Native American's suffer a poverty level of 69 percent and suffer low education, economic achievement, and political status. The perception of the Native American community afflicted with alcoholism and drug use also contributes to the broader contours of Indian-European relations.

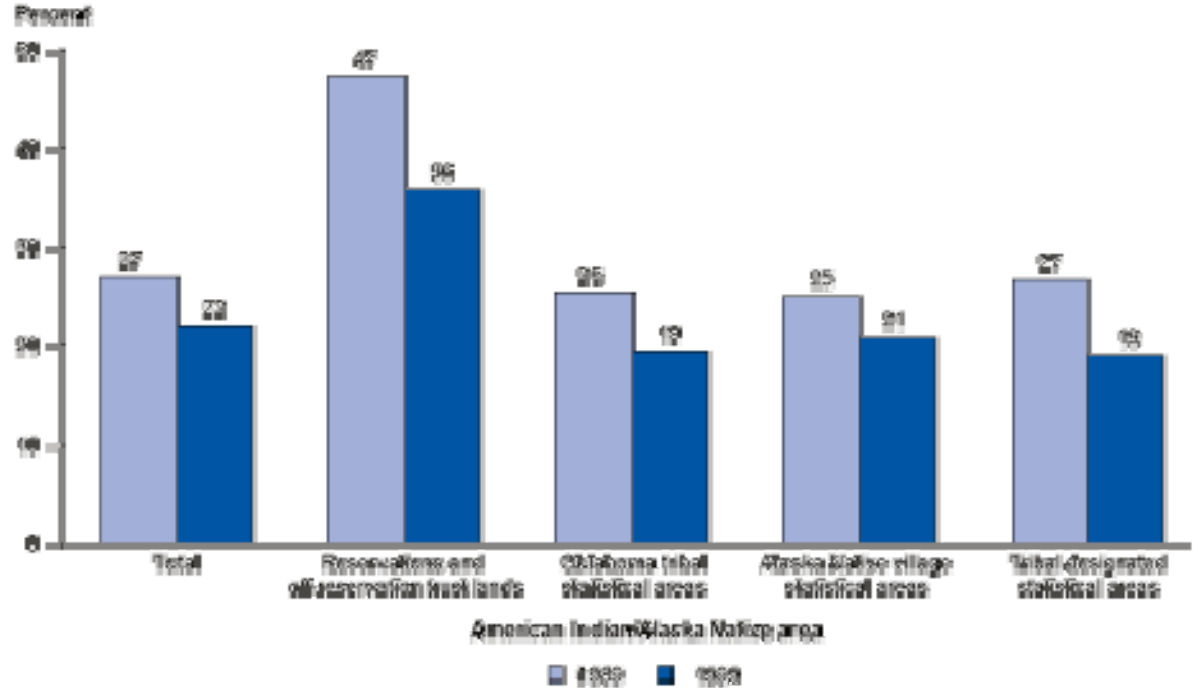
Issues of impoverishment put a strain on the relationship between Indians and non-Indians in the United States, and while some feel federal funding is exorbitant and misguided, others, including Sen. John McCain from Arizona, feel Indians are being neglected and endorse more aid. In any case, considering the historical parameters, this relationship is far more positive and progressive than in decades past, and 2004, three Republicans presented to the Congress a public, state sponsored apology to the Native Americans for the large scale dispossession which occurred during the colonial period.

Map of Tribal Casinos in Michigan



www.michigan.gov

Poverty has alleviated over a decade, but still persists.



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Links:

- Bureau of Indian Affairs- <http://www.doi.gov/bia/>
- National Congress of American Indians- <http://www.ncai.org/>
- Office of Intergovernmental Affairs-Tribal Affairs
<http://www.dhhs.gov/intergovernmental/tribal/index.html>
- The Harvard Project of American Indian Economic Development
<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/hpaied/index.htm>