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Native Americans and Voting Behavior

Keywords (4-6)

Indigenous people, Tribe, Voting Rights Act of 1965, Indian Civil Rights Act

Description (2 sentences)

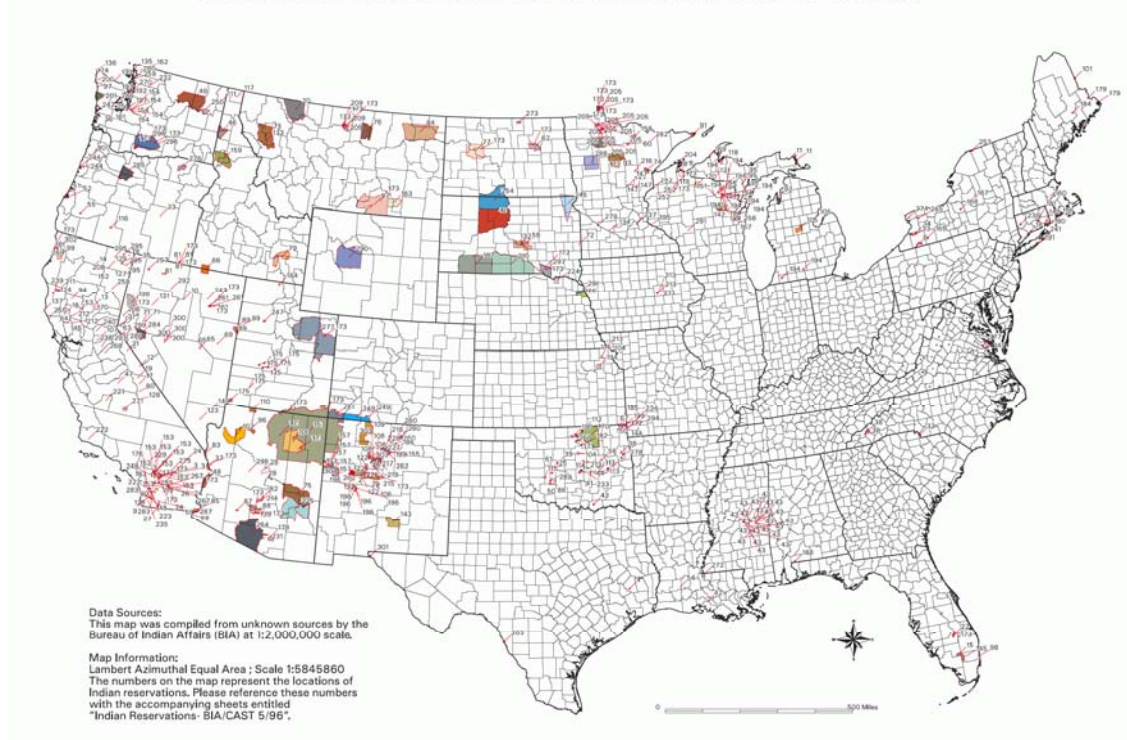
This brief will focus on Native American voting behavior, specifically their newfound increased participation. Furthermore, it will look at how they have voted since then and continuing disenfranchisement issues.

Key Points (4-6)

- Native Americans are the indigenous people of North America within the continental United States and parts of Hawaii and Alaska.
- Native Americans are composed of distinct tribes some of which have reservation lands over which they manage on their own.
- Native Americans officially received civil rights such as sovereignty and due process in 1968 through the Indian Civil Rights Act.
- Native Americans officially garnered the right to vote in the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- There are approximately 74 ongoing cases against states and municipalities that have attempted to disenfranchise American Indians.

Images (2-4)

Indian Reservations in the Continental United States



Bureau of Indian Affairs Reservation Map of Continental United States

Table 1e: Voter Turnout Among Native American, Non-Hispanic Citizens, 1972-2004				
	18-24 Year Olds	25 and Older	18-29 Year Olds	30 and Older
Midterm Election Years				
1990	13.2%	40.4%	13.0%	44.8%
1994	24.6%	39.1%	25.3%	41.4%
1998	11.2%	38.8%	16.6%	42.6%
2004	11.3%	35.5%	14.5%	37.5%
Presidential Election Years				
1992	36.5%	56.0%	35.8%	58.9%
1996	25.0%	49.5%	27.5%	52.8%
2000	30.1%	49.5%	30.2%	52.3%
2004	36.6%	50.8%	35.4%	53.1%

Source: Authors' Tabulations from the CPS Nov. Voting and Registration supplements, 1972-2004

Issue Brief (500-700 words)

In the United States, there are approximately 2.78 million Native Americans living throughout the country (census.gov). One third of these Native Americans reside in three Western states: California, Arizona, and Oklahoma. Despite being indigenous to the continental United States, Native Americans have not been a staple in the American political community. Slowly, American Indians have made progress in breaking into the American political system. Most notably, in 1965, Native Americans officially garnered the right to vote through the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which ended individual state claims on whether or not Native Americans were allowed to vote through a federal law. Perhaps even more influential and longstanding was the 1968 implementation of the Indian Civil Rights Act, which applies to the Indian tribes of the United States and makes many of the guarantees of the Bill of Rights applicable to tribes such as due process.

The Native American population makes up only one percent of the population and is distributed throughout 562 federally recognized tribes spread about the country (census.gov). Due to this logistical fact coupled with the fact that Native Americans didn't receive the right to vote until 1965, the U.S. Census Bureau doesn't track Native Americans in regards to election data. From what is available, historically, Native Americans have participated at low rates in elections but participate in their own tribal elections approximately two times the rate they participate in national ones. The pervading question is, why? Native Americans have participated more in tribal government affairs primarily because many of those living in tribes believe that the policies and laws that affect them are indeed written by their own tribal governments.

This is not necessarily true as the United States Congress has the most profound affect on Native Americans' everyday lives. Furthermore, due to the sovereign status of their tribal governments, many living on reservations question if participating in elections will actually prove to be an infringement on their sovereignty. In this fashion, Native Americans who do not participate in elections either believe them to be inconsequential or a relinquishment of tribal authority. However, as the above visual suggests, this historic trend has subsided in recent years in presidential elections. Furthermore, on a smaller scale (i.e. on a state level), Native Americans have flexed their political muscle, as they have been instrumental in the election of senators and governors in states such as South Dakota, Oklahoma, Montana, and Washington since the turn of the millennium. There are two pervading reasoning's behind this increased participation. The first is generational. Younger Native Americans tend to be more connected and politicized than their older counterparts, who rely more on face-to-face contact to be politically active. The second is due to casinos. Since the 1990's boom of reservation casinos, many Native Americans tribes established a considerable financial stake in state and federal gambling legislation. From this perspective, voting became a way of protecting tribal interests and sustaining their economic sovereignty.

The next question that arises is when Native Americans do vote, for whom do they vote? On the whole, Native Americans suffer from severe social and economic challenges such as high unemployment rates and one fifth of Native American families living under the poverty line, making them likely to side with the Democratic Party. On the other hand, Native Americans also possess more traditional and conservative values and favor a paternal system of government, which is more in line with the Republican Party. Furthermore, half of the Native American population is expected to live in urban areas while the other half lives in rural areas on or around reservations. With all this said, most Native Americans align with the Democratic Party. A notable exception for this Democratic preference has been John McCain, the senator of Arizona, a state with a rather large Native American population. Beyond where he governs, McCain has garnered Native American support by being former chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and building relationships with tribal leaders both in Arizona and throughout the country. It is also important to note that Native Americans have been attributed with being the reason for marginal political victories in the aforementioned states of South Dakota, Oklahoma, Montana, and Washington, but they have not necessarily had major policy impacts since their increased participation first began.

The final part of this brief will deal with continued disenfranchisement that is affecting Native Americans today. A useful case study to examine for this issue is the state of South Dakota, where battle surrounding Native American voting rights has persisted for thirty years. The most notable disenfranchisement issues in the state stem from the absence of the Lakota langue to explain the voting system to Native American voters, 12 discriminatory laws, and the failure to gain approval of 600 statutes and regulations affecting voting in the state's two most Native American populated counties. In sum, the effects of this persistent disenfranchisement are palpable, as only seven Native Americans have served in the state legislature where Native Americans constitute 8.3% of the population.

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Image Sources

<http://www.nps.gov/nagpra/DOCUMENTS/RESERV.PDF> (map)

http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_04_Minority_vote.pdf (chart)