

Native American Protest Politics

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May 3, 2010

Key Words (4-6)

- 1) American Indian Movement
- 2) "Red Power"
- 3) Sovereignty
- 4) Federal government
- 5) Indian gaming
- 6) Poverty

Description (1-2 sentences)

Protest politics is the movement of a distinct group from a position of complacent subjugation to an active opposition of majority policies. Mostly peaceful with rare exception, the general protests by Native Americans – American Indians – has shifted from issues of sovereignty and religious practices to more secular needs.

Key Points (4-6)

- 1) Early political participation was, due to hunting and climate patterns, left to direct democracy among small groups that often formed larger unions such as the Iroquois Confederacy.
- 2) A great emphasis was placed on the betterment of the group. In modern times this is more difficult to achieve since Indian Nations are diverse, urbanized, and often widely dispersed among the country.
- 3) Protest politics began with an influence from the civil rights movement and was in line with the tendency of American Indians to act based on the rule of law as this rule is essential to their existence through the hundreds of treaties with the federal government.
- 4) The Indian nations however, have participated to a high degree in American politics as this is seen as one of the most important ways to preserve their way of life. This has largely been done through lobbying as nations the American Congress.
- 5) Modern political protests, like that at Wounded Knee, represent the continued struggle to maintain sovereign control by American Indians over their land, culture, religion and representation.
- 6) Most recent protests by American Indians have centered on the use of iconography that inaccurately or offensively depicts American Indians within collegiate and professional sports.

Images (2-4)



Source: <http://www.bluecorncomics.com/pics/honordud.jpg> A major issue of protest is the use of mascots in professional sports. This image represents the warped perception of arguments commonly made in favor of keeping these offensive depictions.

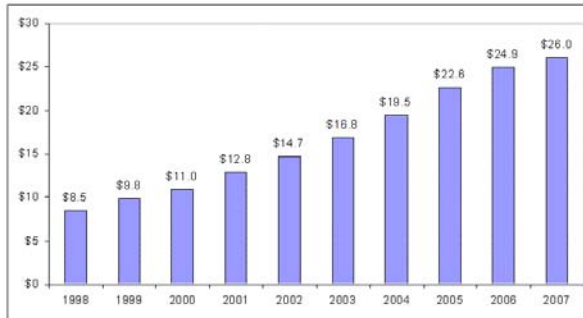


Source: Steve Kelley, San Diego Union-Tribune

American Indians find themselves ignored during present political fights despite their supposed sovereign status. This image demonstrates the difficult tension encapsulated in current "government-to-government" policies.



Growth in Gaming Revenues (in billions)



Source: National Indian Gaming Commission 2007 Report on Indian Gaming. The National Indian Gaming Commission regulates gaming on American Indian Lands, a contentious point considering the issue of sovereignty.

Brief (500-700 words)

The advent of protest politics during the African American fight for equality in the workplace is significant for the sort of formula that it created for minorities. Absent actual progress to alter the state of discrimination in the workplace through labor unions, management or the Government, African Americans were able to use protest politics on the shop floor to make their point (Bates, 175). For Native Americans however, political participation is more complicated as they are citizens of separate extra-constitutional nations who are joined by their relationship with the American federal government (Wilkins 193). Though it is easy to see these nations as interconnected as a result of their increase in activity culminating with actions through the United Nations, these nations have extremely different cultures. Ultimately however, it is the dependency on treaties with the American government that causes American Indians to rely heavily on each other and the rule of law, particularly in dealing with America that prides itself as ruled by law (Wilkins 193). In this sense, the Civil Rights movement heavily influenced the peaceful activism that has been present in the American Indian community. This activism has manifested itself in increased contributions to American political campaigns (Wilkins 194). These donations come largely from Indian nations that are supported by gaming operations since tribal nations are exempt from individual donor limits (Wilkins 194). According to Wilkins however, the perceptions of Indian Nations as being prosperous is a fallacy – these are often the poorest places in the country (195). These nations however see this sort of political participation as central to maintaining their way of life and defending their people.

Native Americans have many different forms of political activism ranging from intratribal, tribal, intertribal coalitions, broad alliance and extratribal coalitions (Wilkins 213). This creates broad questions of membership and a diverse array of activism, most of it as described by Wilkins including lobbying groups, political action committees and the like that are highly in line with the peaceful and law dependent nature of native communities. It also makes creating broad based movements, like the African American civil rights protests, more difficult, though one group has largely taken the forefront: the

American Indian Movement. Though this group has seen a revival through Bush Sr. and Clinton presidencies according to Wilkins, AIM has been involved in several occupation that are anomalies representing the clearest form of protest by a broad array of Indian Nations.

One of the most important shifts from earlier centuries to the 20th Century for American Indian protest politics was the move away from religious demands to more secular initiatives (Wilkins 229). This was coupled with an increase in participation in national protests during the 1960's according to Wilkins. The most intense case of protest politics must be demonstrated in the events of Wounded Knee. Wounded Knee represents a broader base of protest that contrasts the individual fights of particular nations.

Wounded Knee, through the still highly active American Indian Movement (AIM), brought together 75 nations with a larger number in active support by the end of the protest, over the plight of the Oglala Indians (Stubben, 70-71). During the conflict, the Russell Means, a leader of AIM, demanded an investigation of Government policy regarding American Indians and a Senate review of treaties signed with American Indian groups (Stubben, 71). The scale, broad support throughout different nations and the general demand for a review of the poor treatment of American Indians represents a call echoing the sort of protest politics demonstrated by African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement.

Today protests still occur and largely are centered on issues of sovereignty in the terms of sustainability and accompanying respect. A visit to the website of the National Indian Gaming Commission will reveal a mission of seeking to monitor American Indian gaming to prevent corrupting influences. The Bureau of Indian Affairs website similarly seeks to provide numerous services and oversight of American Indian government. Thus it is not surprising that the main mission of the American Indian Movement centers around freedom from dependence on the American Government.

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- 2) <http://www.bia.gov/>
- 3) <http://honorindians.com/>
- 4) <http://www.nigc.gov/>
- 5) <http://www.aimovement.org/ncrsm/>