

Prof. Raymond Smith
POLS W3245.001
30 November 2010

Issue Brief:

Native Americans and Political Participation Through Office Holding

Key Words: Native Americans, office-holding, Voting Rights Act, Gender and Multicultural Leadership Survey, tribal affiliation, political participation

Description: This issue brief outlines the way in which the Native American population of the United States participates in, and is represented by, American politics through the medium of holding public office. This issue brief is considered through the lens of the minority's unique circumstances of possessing both US citizenship as well as tribal affiliation, and it also takes into account their unique history in comparison to other minority ethnic and racial groups' treatment within the country.

Key points:

- The effects of the history between Native Americans and their treatment by the federal government still shows longstanding affects on the political participation of Native Americans, seen in the example of participating through public office.
- There is a prevailing idea that there is a lack of significant political participation by the majority of the Native American population due to their sense of dual citizenship and existence as outliers of mainstream American politics, which is reflected in their holding of office.
- Political participation by Native Americans is increasing and expected to continue to do so.
- Native Americans are the smallest racial minority within the US, as they only make up about 1% of the population, and this is/is not reflected within the number of Native Americans who hold political office positions within the country, both on state and national levels.



Ben Nighthorse Campbell: served in Colorado State Legislature 1983-1986, House of Representatives 1987-1993, and Senate 1993-2005

Issue Brief

Within the United States, the population of Native Americans consists of only approximately 0.8% of the population, the smallest racial minority amongst the five major categories (US Census Bureau). However, when it comes to representation in the American political arena through the occupation of public office positions, all minorities appear to be underrepresented, and yet, it must be asked what exactly are the causes and implications of such a lack on Native Americans in particular, and how does this relate to their overall political participation?

Institutions such as the Gender and Multi-cultural Leadership Project (GMCL), attempt to conduct “a national study of America’s political leadership in the 21st century, with a focus on race, ethnicity, and gender,” (GMCL.org) due to the belief that, “The 2000 U.S. Census points to an urgent need to understand the role of gender and race/ethnicity in today’s elected leaders and how this increasingly diversified leadership is becoming incorporated,” (GMCL.org). Such study shows in the House of Representatives, for example, that despite nonwhites consisting of 31% of the overall national population, as of the year 2000, less than 12% of those members within the House were minority members, with 0.1% being Native American (GMCL.org). Yet,

while the same is true, that about 12% of all minority populations are represented in state legislatures, Native Americans are actually more highly represented than other minorities within the state level. Interestingly, “the average percentage of American Indians in American Indian legislators’ districts is 32%, as compared to 8% at the congressional level,” (Lien, Pinderhaughes, Hardy-Fanta, & Sierra, *The Voting Rights Act and the Election of Nonwhite Officials* 490) and in states where there is significant population of Native Americans, they are involved in holding office, contrary to the lack of participation seen on the national level.

There is evidence to support that much of the statistics found and the current state of Native American representation in political office holding, specifically the low level of participation on the national level, is largely a result of their history and treatment by the United States government, similar to other minorities in that they too were “stigmatized, segregated, denied citizenship or, if held legally, its exercise curtailed,” (Lien, Pinderhaughes, Hardy-Fanta, & Sierra, *How Do We Get Along?* 7), but different in that “...while most racial/ethnic groups and women faced a forced exclusion from the American social contract, Indians, since the 1880s, faced a forced inclusion in American society,” (Stubben 184-5). It is considered that, “The disenfranchisement of the American political system by Native Americans is based on a long history of distrust towards government,” (Stubben 168) as Native Americans were coerced into assimilating to a new cultural while their land was being stolen and manipulated from them. There is the idea that Native American political motives and agendas are largely only to “maintain their sovereign integrity and to rest assured that their treaty and trust rights will be protected,” (Stubben 183-4). This is very different from other minorities seeking to change the system from the inside out or attempting to establish more equality.

“The Voting Rights Act (VRA) is one of the most important—if not *the* most important—public policies developed over the last half century to increase access to the U.S. political system for people of color,” (Lien, Pinderhaughes, Hardy-Fanta, & Sierra, *The Voting Rights Act and the Election of Nonwhite Officials* 489), yet Native Americans, although they are US citizens, they are also members of tribal nations and have a two options of arenas in which to engage in and most participate much more within their

tribal affiliations (Stubben 167). Some of the reasons provided for Native Americans lack of political participation in general, and by extension office holding, are:

...the belief that tribal politics affects them more than federal state, or local elections; direct family ties to those running; the desire by some to protect their tribal employment; or the belief that federal, state, and local elections only effect 'non-Indian' government, whereas tribal elections have a direct effect on Native American government. (Stubben 167-8).

However, for all the reason that they do not, there have been many Native Americans that have held public offices, and this is expected to increase: "Native Americans...appear to view state, county, and local politics as more important than they did in the past, especially as more and more...seeks offices at the nonfederal levels of government," (Stubben 169). This is seen in the Democrats 50 State Plan in 2008 (High Country News) and in , which encouraged Native Americans to seek office, as well as the numbers indicating the high levels of representation within state legislatures. It is thought that Native Americans greater participation on the state level is due to the same kind of reasoning that keeps many of these minority members participating primarily in tribal politics, which is the idea that these are the levels of government that have more pertinence and influence over their daily lives.

American Indian Representation In State Legislatures, 1992

State	Total Number of Legislators	Number of American Indian Legislators	Percentage of American Indian Legislators
Alaska	58	11	19.0%
Arizona	91	5	5.5%
Montana	150	4	2.7%
New Mexico	112	6	5.4%
North Carolina	170	1	0.6%
North Dakota	147	1	0.7%
Oklahoma	149	5	3.4%

South Dakota	105	3	2.9%
Colorado	100	1	1.0%
All States	7424	41	0.6%

Source: Geoff Peterson and Robert Duncan. "American Indian Representation in the 20th and 21st Centuries." (University of Wisconsin-Eua Claire, WI) (Southwestern Oklahoma State University-Weatherford, OK):pp. 11.

American Indian and Alaskan Native State Legislators, 1972-1999

State	Body	Name	Tribe	Party	First year in Office
Arizona	House	Jack Jackson	Navajo	Democrat	1985
		Ben Hamley	Navajo	Democrat	1972
	Senate	James Henderson	Navajo	Democrat	1982
Alaska	House	Irene Nicolal	Athabascan	Democrat	1992
		Bill Williams	Tlingit	Democrat	1980
		Albert Kookesh	Tlingit	Democrat	1996
		Beverly Masek	Athabascan	Republican	1994
		Reggie Joule	Inupiat Eskimo	Democrat	1996
		Ivan Ivan	Yupit	Democrat	1990
	Senate	Lyman Hoffman	Yupic-Eskimo	Democrat	1994
		Al Adams	Inupait	Democrat	1980
		Georgina Lincoln	Athabascan	Democrat	1992
Montana	House	Jay Stovall	Crow	Republican	1993
		George Heavy Runner	Blackfoot	Democrat	1994
		George Pease	Crow	Democrat	1996
		Bill Whitehead	Assiniboine	Democrat	1996
New Mexico	House	Leo Watchman	Navajo	Democrat	1993
		James Madalena	Jemez Pueblo	Democrat	1985
		Lynda Lovejoy	Navajo	Republican	1996
	Senate	John Pinto	Navajo	Democrat	1989
		Leo Tsosie	Navajo	Democrat	1977

North Carolina	House	Ronnie Sutton	Lumbee	Democrat	1993
Oklahoma	Senate	Kelly Haney	Seminole Creek	Democrat	1991
South Dakota	House	Ron Volesky	Standing Rock Sioux	Democrat	1987
		Richard Hagen	Ogala Sioux	Democrat	1980
	Senate	Paul Valandra	Rosebud Sioux	Democrat	1982
North Dakota	Senate	Les FaFountain	Chippewa	Democrat	1990

Source: Paula D. McClain and Joseph Stewart Jr. "Can We All Get Along?" *Racial and Ethnic Minorities in American Politics*, 2d. edition (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1998): pp. 124-5

Works Cited

"Campbell, Ben Nighthorse." *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*. US

Senate Historical Office, n.d. Web. 30 Nov 2010.

<<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000077>>.

"The Gender and Multicultural Leadership Project." *GMCL.org*. N.p., 2007. Web. 30

Nov 2010. <<http://www.gmcl.org/index.htm>>.

McClain, Paula D., and Joseph Stewart Jr. *"Can We All Get Along?" Racial and Ethnic*

Minorities in American Politics. 2nd ed. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, A

Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2002. Print.

"Northern Cheyenne Chief, Judo Olympian, Korean War Veteran Senator Nighthorse

Campbell honors American Indian Servicemembers. Senator Campbell

Endorses McCain Palin." *Combating Moonbat News*. Web. 1 Dec 2010.

<<http://fubarmedia.wordpress.com/2008/10/21/powwow-natives-for-mccain-palin/>>.

Peterson, Geoff, and Robert Duncan. "American Indian Representation in the 20th

and 21st Centuries." N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Nov 2010.

<www.uwec.edu/petersgd/research/iachapter.pdf>

Pinderhughes, Dianne, Pei-te Lien, Christine Sierra, and Carol Hardy-Fanta. "How Do

We Get Along? Linked Fate, Political Allies, and Issue Coalitions." 2009
American Political Science Association Annual Meetings September 2-6, 2009.
Toronto, Canada, 2009. Web. 30 Nov 2010. <<http://gmcl.org/library.htm>>.

Pinderhughes, Dianne, Pei-te Lien, Christine Sierra, and Carol Hardy-Fanta. "The
Voting Rights Act and the Election of Nonwhite officials." (Jul 2007): n. pag.
Web. 30 Nov 2010. <<http://gmcl.org/library.htm>>.

Stubben, Jerry D. *Native Americans and Political Participation: A Reference Handbook.*
Sanata Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2006. Print

Tharp, Francis. "Dems Reach out to Native Americans." *High Country News: For
people who care about the West* (12 Mar 2008): n. pag. Web. 30 Nov 2010.
<<http://www.hcn.org/articles/17590>>.