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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics

Final Issue Brief

Native American and African American Voting Trends

Key Words: Native American, African American, ethnoracial minority, voting, Democratic Party

Description: This issue brief explores common histories between two culturally distinct ethnoracial groups, Native Americans and African Americans. It then analyzes shared current voting trends in Native American and African American citizens.

Key Points:

- While culturally distinct ethnoracial groups, both African Americans and Native Americans share a history of oppression and discrimination from a white majority
- Both ethnoracial groups historically have lower voter turnout rates than the white majority, perhaps due to higher rates of poverty and unemployment
- Both ethnoracial groups also tend to vote Democratic

Brief:

This issue brief will explore the ways in which shared histories of oppression and discrimination have led to similar voting behaviors in African American and Native American citizens. Although fundamentally different in terms of population, location, values, and culture, both groups have similar histories in terms of voting accessibility and currently tend to vote Democratic, perhaps because of the party's ability to address specific ethnoracial concerns and acknowledge minority struggles that are still present in today's society.

While both African Americans and Native Americans have disparate cultures and histories, both wider groups share a history of oppression, mistreatment, and gross disrespect from the white majority. European expansion into North America led to the destruction of Native American communities (EG). Furthermore, they

were not granted full citizenship until the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924 (EG). Even then, they suffered from blatant institutionalized racism and lacked full protection under the law. Similarly, at the time the constitution was written, African Americans were not considered citizens of the United States. In the late 1860s, federal legislation extended citizenship to African American males, yet states continued to prevent them from gaining basic civil liberties by imposing strict and dehumanizing segregative policies. Overall, historically both Native Americans and African Americans were subject to discriminatory legislation, barring them from basic American civil rights such as serving in the military, participating in government, and voting.

1924



Republicans Passed the Indian Citizenship Act

In 1924, Republican President Calvin Coolidge signed the Indian Citizenship Act, granting citizenship to all Native Americans. The law had been written by Rep. Homer Snyder (R-NY), who had been a delegate to the 1916 and 1920 Republican National Conventions. It was passed by the Republican-controlled 68th Congress.

Then Senate Majority Whip Charles Curtis (R-KS), whose mother was a Native American, would be elected Vice President in 1928.

Source: <http://www.indianz.com/InTheHoop/archive/016996.asp>

Both African Americans and Native Americans benefitted from the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which aimed to extend voting rights beyond the scope of the

individual to historically oppressed groups. It was initially crafted to combat discriminatory voting practices that prevented African Americans from voting, such as literacy tests or grandfather clauses (Library of Congress). However, while usually thought of as an act that only helped African Americans, in practice the act enhanced the basic right to vote for many minority voters, including Native Americans. Before the act was passed in 1965, Native Americans suffered from similar anti-voter mechanisms designed to keep whites in power, and subsequently voted in larger numbers due to the elimination of these barriers (Library of Congress).



Source: <http://therightsmovement.weebly.com/voting-rights-act-of-1965.html>

Although today both Native Americans and African Americans generally have the same right to vote as any citizen, white or not, they tend to vote in lower numbers. Because Native Americans make up less than 1% of the US population, the US Census does not record their voting records as a whole (Ahtone). However, it is

known that Native Americans have the lowest voter turnout rates of any ethnoracial minority (Ahtone). Similarly, with the exception of the 2012 presidential election, African Americans tend to vote at lower rates than whites. There are several possible explanations for why both ethnoracial groups participate less in elections than the white majority. Historically, ethnoracial minorities such as Native Americans and African Americans have been subject to higher rates of poverty and unemployment (Weeks). Low-income citizens are far less likely to vote due to a variety of reasons, including practical barriers like voter ID laws and transportation (Weeks). Since ethnoracial minorities, including Native Americans and African Americans, are more likely to be low-income, this could translate into higher rates of voter disenfranchisement.



Source: <http://www.history.com/topics/native-american-history/native-american-cultures/pictures/native-american-legislation/native-americans-register-to-vote>

When they do vote, both ethnoracial minorities tend to vote Democratic. This is particularly puzzling concerning Native Americans, who often hold more

conservative and traditional values and are more likely to reside in rural areas, where citizens tend to be less liberal (Ahtone). Contrarily, Native Americans vote Democratic at estimated rates of 90-95% (Ahtone). African Americans also overwhelmingly support Democratic candidates, despite the Republican Party's historic achievements of securing civil rights for African Americans (Bump). However, since Democratic President Harry Truman's civil rights efforts in 1948, African Americans have overwhelmingly identified with the Democratic Party.

There is evidence that this is due to the fact that the current Democratic Party values and goals align with the interests of minority citizens more than the Republican Party's. Democratic candidates are more likely to support policies that are in the interest of many minority citizens, such as larger social welfare and affirmative action programs. In fact, over the long term, empirical evidence suggests that Democrats are more beneficial to the economic advancement of minorities than Republicans, even after controlling for external variables (Bouie). Perhaps, both Native Americans and African Americans vote Democratic because they are rational voters and vote according to their self-interests, and have more to personally gain from Democratic representation than Republican.

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