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Why do American Indians vote Democratic?



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ABSTRACT

We examine the relationship between a relatively large population of American Indians in eastern Oklahoma and the slow pace of that region's partisan realignment. With a 2012 exit poll, we empirically examine whether American Indians' cultural ties and their socio-economic characteristics affected their vote choices. Because of their greater poverty, American Indians are more economically progressive and vote more Democratic than their white counterparts.

American Indians' socio-economic circumstances play a greater role than their cultural ties in their vote decisions and significantly influence why they are slower to abandon the Democratic Party in eastern Oklahoma.

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between a relatively large population of American Indians in eastern Oklahoma and the slow pace of that region's partisan realignment. To do that, we examine the voting behavior of American Indians in eastern Oklahoma with an exit poll conducted in the 2012 presidential election. Decades of research demonstrates that voting behavior in presidential elections is largely determined by party identification (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Finkel, 1993; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) and retrospective evaluations (Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966; Kinder, Adams, & Gronke, 1989; Lewis-Beck, 1988). The outcomes of presidential elections can be explained by a few variables, such as presidential

approval and economic performance (Kramer, 1971; Markus, 1988). Forecast models have shown that the national popular vote can be predicted using a similar set of variables (Abramowitz, 1988; Campbell, 1992; Erikson & Wlezien, 1999; Holbrook, 1991; Lewis-Beck & Rice, 1992). We will examine whether such variables as party identification, presidential approval, and economic performance also play a significant role in explaining the voting behavior of American Indians in eastern Oklahoma.

Another factor that may influence American Indian voting behavior is their minority status. There are important reasons, however, to distinguish American Indians from other minorities in the United States. Not only are they the original inhabitants of the continent, but American Indian tribes also have special treaty status with the U.S. government as sovereign nations. They are, in effect, nations within a nation. In addition, according to the 2010 census, 44% of those who self-identify as American Indian have a racially mixed background, and 63% are a mixture of American Indian and white. It is, therefore, by no means certain that American Indians will vote according to a pattern that is similar to that of other racial or ethnic minorities.

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Wilkins (1994), for example, argues that equating the American Indian experience with the struggle of other minority groups ignores the unique “government to government” relationship between Indian tribal nations and state and national governments. In fact, Wilkins (2002) goes so far as to title a chapter in his book on American Indian politics, “Indian Peoples Are Nations, Not Minorities.” This is so, but it tells us little about how individual American Indians vote. Peterson (1997) finds that socioeconomic theories of voter turnout do not accurately explain American Indian voting patterns and DeLoria (1985) insists on the uniqueness of American Indian political behavior:

A great deal has been written about the political participation of other minority groups, especially African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. No other voting group voting data is comparable to the Indian experience, however, nor can the same generalizations be made about Indian voting. Indians are unique in many ways and one is the way they vote. (DeLoria, 1985, p. 130)

DeLoria, however, does not empirically test in what way American Indian voting behavior is unique. There is, in fact, a scarcity of empirical studies on American Indian voting behavior. Of those available, focus on turnout (McCool, 1982; Peterson, 1957, 1997; Ritt, 1979) and on party identification. In studies on party identification, more Indians see themselves as Democrats than as Republicans (DeLoria, 1985; Turner, 2002; Wilkins, 2002), although there is some variation between tribes and between reservation and non-reservation Indians (Kunitz & Levy, 1970; McCool, 1982). Some tribes support the Democratic Party because they believe it has taken a more genuine stance in favor of American Indian issues, but many individual American Indians have decided to identify with the Democratic Party because it has placed American Indians within a broader class of disadvantaged Americans that it seeks to aid through federal support (Cooper, 1996). Studies also show that while American Indians are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than are whites, they are less likely to identify with the Democratic Party than are African- or Hispanic-Americans. Similarly, in regard to political attitudes, studies indicate that American Indians are not as liberal as African Americans, but not as conservative as whites (Ritt, 1979).

Other studies find that both American Indian behavior and attitudes are determined by self-interest (Engstrom & Barrilleaux, 1991). In fact, Ritt points out that “[a]lthough perceptive authors such as Vine Deloria have said that Indians have feelings distinct from other Americans, this statement appears to be somewhat exaggerated. . . . It does not appear to be true with regard to their political feelings” (1979, 67). Bahr and Chadwick (1974) show that American Indians and whites possess similar views on certain social and economic issues. Murdock (1983) also finds that, through the political socialization process, American Indian children exhibit an attachment to the national political system that is similar to that of their white counterparts. Cornassel and Witmer II (1997, 2008) argue that issues, rather than cultural ties, are the primary reason that American Indian tribes support particular candidates for

Table 1
Household income distribution by racial groups.

	All	Indian	White
Less than \$25,000	23.6% (288)	28.2% (110)	21.1% (163)
\$25,000–59,999	43.6% (531)	40.8% (159)	44.2% (342)
\$60,000–99,999	23.1% (281)	21.3% (83)	24.6% (190)
More than \$100,000	9.8% (119)	9.7% (38)	10.2% (79)
Total	100% (1,219)	100% (390)	100% (774)

Source: Authors' Data (available from the authors upon request).

federal and state office during primary and general election campaigns. Min and Savage (2012a,b) demonstrate that socio-economic factors, not their unique cultural identity, are the main factor determining the political attitudes of individual American Indians.

We contribute to this question by examining the voting behavior of American Indians in eastern Oklahoma. We argue that American Indians' socio-economic circumstances have a significant effect on their vote decisions. American Indians in the region are populists in the sense that they are religiously conservative and economically liberal. Their economic liberalism makes American Indians more reluctant to abandon the Democratic Party. The 2nd Congressional District is one of the poorest congressional districts in the nation (Min & Savage, 2012a,b). As can be seen in Table 1, within this poor district, American Indians are even poorer than whites and the regional average. Greater poverty levels among American Indians affect their attitudes on economic issues and, thus, they are more supportive of government intervention in the economy. Because the Democratic Party is more supportive of government intervention in the economy, American Indians are more likely than whites to vote Democratic.

1. American Indians and partisan alignment

We investigate whether a relatively large population of American Indians in eastern Oklahoma has affected the slow pace of that region's partisan realignment. There has been a well-documented partisan realignment occurring in the southern states for the past half century (Aistrup, 1996; Black & Black, 2002; Lublin, 2004). The once Democratic “solid south” (Grantham, 1992) has become predominantly Republican (Black, 2004; Knuckey, 2006). As Aistrup (1996) document almost two decades ago, the realignment has proceeded in a top-down secular fashion, with southern voters starting to vote Republican in presidential races long before they began to vote Republican in Congressional elections.² It took even longer for southern voters to start voting Republican in state and local elections.

Since 1972, southern states have, for the most part, supported Republican presidential candidates, but until 1994 most southern members of Congress were still Democrats. After the 1994 mid-term elections, Republicans began to dominate southern Congressional elections, but the

² V.O. Key (1955) originally made the distinction between critical realignments, which occurred quickly in dramatic fashion, perhaps in a single election, and secular realignments, which are gradual and occur over a series of elections.

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