



Information versus ideology: Shaping attitudes towards Native American policy

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ABSTRACT

Native American policy is a complex and often poorly understood issue area. Native Americans enjoy a set of rights unique from any other population in the country as established in hundreds of treaties and a right to self-governance that predates the U.S. Constitution. Some scholars believe that American citizens would be more supportive of these policies if they had more information on the rights of tribes. This paper explores the impact of information on individual attitudes and preferences toward Native American policy in the USA. Using an original survey experiment, we test how information concerning the relationship between the U.S. and Native nations influences overall support for tribal sovereign rights and federal Indian programs and services. We find that information increases support for the rights of tribes to self-govern, but political ideology and other individual attributes dominate attitudes toward federally administered programs.

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1. Introduction

Native American policy in the USA is a complex and often poorly understood issue area in the minds of the general public. As part of the historical government-to-government relationship between tribes and the U.S. federal government, Native Americans enjoy a set of rights unique from any other population in the country as established in hundreds of treaties and a right to self-governance that predates the U.S. Constitution (Deloria & Wilkins, 1999; Wilkins & Stark, 2011).¹ In these treaties, the federal government assumed a moral and legal obligation as trustee to provide programs and services such as healthcare

and education to American Indians, while also respecting the sovereign rights of tribes to self-govern (Canby, 2004; Pevar, 2002). The legal and historical framework results in a complicated, often misunderstood relationship between the U.S. government and the many, diverse tribal governments. The complexity of the issues involved in understanding, maintaining, and improving this relationship form the mosaic of federal Indian policy in America.

Despite these long-standing and controversial issues, the general public tends to be largely unaware of this unique historical relationship that drives much of Native American policy (Baylor, 1996). Instead, media stereotypes and passing references in textbooks socially construct the way individuals think and talk about American Indian populations (Hurtado & Iverson, 2001). With little understanding of the legal framework, many individuals may think of American Indians solely as one of many minority groups, without considering issues of sovereignty, treaties, or even fully understanding the political and legal status

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¹ In the following study, we use the term *Native American* and *American Indian* interchangeably to refer to Indigenous peoples in the USA.

of tribes. Some scholars argue that increasing the overall understanding and awareness of American Indian and Alaskan native issues in the general public can have a positive impact on support for federal Indian policies and programs that are important to improving the lives of Native people (Fleming, 2007).

Native American policy also offers an interesting setting in which to test the effects of information given the public's low knowledge of such issues, the poor information environment, the potential for social construction to drive perceptions that Native Americans are like other minority groups, and the multidimensional nature of the issue itself. This area is unique both in substance and in its opportunity to contribute to theory. Most policy issues that have existed for a long period of time have received a substantial amount of media coverage and related issues have reached the general public in various ways. Few Americans know much about the history of American Indians and especially the legal history related to US-tribal policy. Furthermore, we know very little about how the public forms opinions on such issues and to what extent information about the tribal-federal relationship, and tribal rights more generally, can influence attitudes and preferences for particular aspects of federal Indian policy.

The following paper attempts to explore the impact of information on individual attitudes and preferences toward Native American policy in the USA. Using an original survey experiment, we test how information concerning the relationship between the U.S. and Indian tribes influences overall support for tribal sovereign rights and federal Indian programs and services. We test this relationship across two dimensions of Native American policy with the expectation that individuals who receive information will demonstrate higher levels of support for both. Given the interesting complexity of the issue and the general lack of pre-existing knowledge of indigenous issues among the mass public, Indian policy is a ripe area in which to test the relationship between information and individual attitudes.

2. Native policy issues, social construction, and information effects

American Indian populations occupy a unique position in American society that is fundamentally different from the position of other racial and ethnic groups, a distinction that is often not recognized by a majority of the American public (Pevar, 2002). This raises theoretically interesting questions concerning how the public perceives the rights and privileges of American Indians and tribes, especially in light of the diverse multitude of rights tribes possess. For instance, Indian tribes are recognized legally as being self-governing and sovereign, possessing the inherent right to manage the internal affairs of their citizens and govern according to their own laws and customs (Canby, 2004). Such rights predate the signing of the U.S. Constitution or the European "discovery" of the Americas and are argued to be both inherent and firmly grounded in law, as recognized in numerous treaties, Supreme Court decisions, and the Constitution of the USA itself (Wilkins & Stark, 2011).

Additionally, a unique relationship of trust exists between Native nations and the USA that is distinct from

other groups in American society (Deloria, 1996). The **trust relationship**, as originally stated in the Supreme Court case *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* in 1831 and based on numerous treaties, forms the very foundation upon which federal Indian policy operates in the USA and is the basis for the numerous programs and services administered in Indian Country on behalf of the federal government today (Pevar, 2002). Such a relationship of trust resembles that of a trustee-beneficiary relationship wherein the federal government has a legal and moral obligation to provide for the wellbeing of American Indians through the provision of such services as education and healthcare, and to respect the rights of tribes to self-govern (Canby, 2004; Deloria, 1996; Meyer, 2002). Stated differently, the trust relationship, as established in treaties and US court cases, is the agreement made by the US federal government to provide, in perpetuity, social programs to American Indians, in addition to ensuring that tribal governments are sovereign nations.

Taken together, American Indian populations take on a number of "identities" or roles in the USA, straddling being eligible for particular federal programs and services as part of the trust relationship that is different from other minority populations, as well as being part of a group or nation that possesses "inherent" sovereign rights that extend beyond the American political system (Wilkins & Stark, 2011). This complexity substantially affects how American Indians are perceived in the policy environment, or, stated differently, how tribes are socially constructed (Baylor, 1996).

According to social construction theory, the way groups are perceived in society largely influences public policy and public perceptions of target populations. According to Schneider and Ingram (1993), social constructions are "stereotypes about particular groups of people that have been created by politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, and the like" (335). Positive social constructions often lead to benefits for particular groups while negative social constructions can lead to policy burdens (Ingram, Schneider, & DeLeon, 2007; Schneider & Ingram, 1997; Schneider & Sidney, 2009). According to social construction, groups seen as "deserving" by the public typically benefit from public policies, while those constructed as "undeserving" often become the targets of policies that work against their interests (57).

The social construction of American Indian populations in the USA can be seen as a product of both a low-information environment as well as the influence of the media and persisting stereotypes that have largely shaped the way many Americans perceive Native people today (Hurtado & Iverson, 2001). The legal and contemporary position of American Indians and tribes in the USA is an issue that is little understood by most Americans who, according to some scholars, tend to associate American Indian issues with those of other minority populations in the USA (Wilkins & Stark, 2011). Scholars suggest that most Americans are largely unaware of the legal rights that tribes and Native Americans possess (Wilkins & Stark, 2011). For instance, Ashley and Jarratt-Ziemski (1999) argue that the lumping together of American Indian issues in government textbooks with other minority politics has greatly misin-

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