

## Native American Turnout in the 1990 and 1992 Elections

Geoff Peterson, University of Iowa<sup>1</sup>

Democratic theory holds participation to be fundamental in the political process. An accurate evaluation of a democratic government necessitates an understanding of the behavior of the groups of voters within the government's sphere. If voters in a particular group do not participate, the group will not receive political attention commensurate with its size. If a group is underrepresented in the political arena, the group's members and the democratic process suffer. Native Americans as a group are a substantial community in several states, and need to be considered significant participants in the political process. Although they comprise less than 2% of the voting age population nationwide, there are concentrations in several sparsely populated states large enough to make Native Americans significant players in the political system<sup>2</sup>. To increase our understanding of political participation, Native Americans should be considered as important actors in the process.

In addition to the democratic implications of Native American participation, the investigation of Native American voting behavior can provide a unique perspective on all forms of participation. Research addressing smaller groups can lead to a broader understanding of all groups in the political process. Smaller groups offer a more easily accessible testing ground for initial hypotheses, and the relative homogeneity of many of these communities allows researchers to isolate factors that could potentially wash out in a large-scale analysis.

### Literature and Theory.

The study of Native American political behavior is one of unfulfilled potential. Although many authors have examined the behavior of tribal elites (Ritt 1979), little research has been done

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<sup>2</sup> In comparison, slightly over 2% of the voting population is Jewish, yet there have been several studies investigating Jewish voting and the impact of the Jewish vote on national elections.

on the behavior of the individual voters. There have been attempts to measure turnout (Peterson 1957; Steiner 1967; Rendon 1977; Ritt 1979; McCool 1982; Chaudhuri 1986), and the data tend to show that Native American turnout in national elections is lower than that of the overall population. These studies, however, suffer from many problems, the most prominent of which is a lack of a sufficiently large database from which to draw any substantive conclusions. With the exception of Peterson (1957), all major studies of Native American voting patterns are limited to a single election. A second problem is that many of the studies focus on one tribe rather than Native Americans as a whole. More recent research has applied more advanced techniques<sup>3</sup>, and these studies found a connection between turnout levels and the percentage of the population that was Native American (Doherty 1994; Peterson 1994). While it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions about individual tribes at specific times from these works, we are left with a series of studies that leave many unanswered questions about Native American voting patterns.

Although research on Native Americans is lacking, there is some pertinent information to be gleaned from the work on turnout in general. The work of Campbell et al. (1960) showed that education was an important factor in predicting who votes, with age and economic status also providing substantial predictive power. Campbell et al. also found significant differences in the voting patterns of African-Americans and whites, men and women, and urban and rural voters. The work of Verba and Nie (1972) and Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) supported Campbell et al. in many areas, but they also found that education was less important than previously believed. However, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) challenged this conclusion, finding that when education was isolated from economic status, it was by far the best predictor of who votes. Wolfinger and Rosenstone also confirmed Verba and Nie's conclusion that low African-American turnout was entirely a function of education and income levels.

Several studies of political behavior that include African-Americans (Verba and Nie 1972; Milbrath and Goel 1977; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 1991) found they participated at slightly

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<sup>3</sup> These techniques include ecological regression and systematic sampling procedures.

higher rates when socio-economic and educational variance was controlled. In general, the research indicates that studies of African-American voting behavior do not need to compensate for the historical/cultural influences present within the African-American culture. African-American turnout levels can be explained with the measures used to explain the voting of most other groups, including whites and Latinos (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

If the common variables of income, education, and age can predict turnout across several of the largest voting communities in the United States, why should Native American communities differ? Perhaps Native American turnout is simply a function of income and education levels within the community. There are several reasons to suspect this may be incorrect (Cornell 1986). Most Native American communities have a common history of consistent and often violent conflict with the national government, and this history induces a strong distrust of the national government and its processes. Native American political culture is based on a decentralized tribal system, and many tribes do not adhere to “Western” democratic traditions. The inability of the Bureau for Indian Affairs, the national government's primary contact with Native Americans, to provide effective solutions to reservation problems may also play a role. Although there is no direct way to test whether an element of Native American culture or history has a direct effect on turnout, indirect methods of analysis offer substantial potential.

#### Data and Methodology.

The single largest barrier to studying Native American voting patterns is the lack of accurate and available data. While many of the national political behavior surveys include Native Americans, the number is always so small (often fewer than 10) that statistical analysis is impossible (Lewis-Beck 1995). While some surveys have been constructed to examine the behavior of most other minority groups in the United States<sup>4</sup>, Native Americans have not received such attention (Peterson 1994). This lack of survey data has forced previous researchers

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<sup>4</sup> Surveys of minority political behavior have included, among others, Jews, Catholics, Southerners, Latinos, African-Americans, senior citizens, academics, and college students.

to use aggregate data from either the county or census-tract level (Peterson 1994). Using aggregate data to infer individual actions is commonly referred to as the ecological fallacy. Ecological data analysis, common until the advent of vigorous survey methods after World War Two, involves potentially serious validity problems throughout the process of ecological inference (Robinson 1950; Goodman 1959). More recent work (Kramer 1983; Langbein and Lichtman 1978) argues that ecological techniques can outperform individual-level data under certain conditions, but the evidence is mixed at best. The argument surrounding the effectiveness of ecological becomes moot if individual-level data are available.

In order to avoid the problems of ecological inference, the data for this analysis are individual Native Americans. The data for the analysis are drawn from the 1990 and 1992 Current Population Surveys from the United States Bureau of the Census<sup>5</sup>. The CPS routinely interviews 70,000 or more citizens and non-citizens per year<sup>6</sup>. Due to the large sample size, it was possible to find several hundred Native Americans in the overall data pool. Although the data contain limited political information, a large number of demographic characteristics are available.

Due to the sheer size of the data file (over 140,000 cases), it was necessary to limit the number of states in the sample. The seven states with the largest number of Native Americans surveyed were Arizona, Florida, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. There were 674 Native Americans surveyed in these seven states, a large enough sample to allow for statistical analysis.

The dependent variable is whether or not the individual voted in the election in question. The independent variables are: race (Native American/non-Native American); income (in dollars); gender; education level (in years); year (1990 vs. 1992); and dummy variables for the states

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<sup>5</sup> The CPS did not recognize Native Americans as a separate racial category until 1990, limiting the potential data sources to 1990 to the present.

<sup>6</sup> These datasets were acquired from the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research at the University of Michigan.

except Arizona<sup>7</sup>. The independent variables in the model are the most frequently used predictors of voter turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

### Analysis.

The bivariate statistics indicate Native American status may have an impact on voting turnout. The crosstabs of the combined 1990 & 1992 datasets show a significant relationship ( $\chi^2 = 184.86$ ,  $P(\chi^2) = 0.0001$ ) between race and voting, and t-tests demonstrate the same relationship ( $t = 15.18$ ,  $P(t) = 0.0001$ ). When the years are analyzed individually, the results are essentially the same<sup>8</sup>. In all of the bivariate analyses, there is a clear relationship between whether or not someone votes and whether or not they are Native American. The bivariate measures lend credence to the original expectations about the characteristics of the Native American voters. While bivariate statistics provide an initial confirmation of the hypothesis, they fail to take into account a variety of other possible explanations. Clearly, a multivariate explanation is the next logical step.

Although the model indicates a linear (Ordinary Least Squares) regression can be applied, the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable (vote/don't vote) precludes its use. A more appropriate choice is logistic regression (DeMaris 1992; Menard 1995). Logistic regression generates the likelihood the dependent variable will change based on a one-unit change in each of the independent variables individually. The results allow for direct comparison between the various independent variables to ascertain which variables have the greatest impact on the dependent variable.

The results of the combined logistic regression are shown in Table 1. The overall fit of the model is acceptable (pseudo- $R^2 = 0.1316$ ) given the number of cases ( $n = 19925$ ) and the

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<sup>7</sup> The seventh state, Arizona, is the baseline for the model. In other words, all of the state variables indicate increases or decreases in likelihood compared to Arizona.

<sup>8</sup> For 1990:  $\chi^2 = 46.29$ ,  $P(\chi^2) = 0.0001$ ;  $t = 7.16$ ,  $P(t) = 0.0001$  For 1992:  $\chi^2 = 59.48$ ,  $P(\chi^2) = 0.0001$ ;  $t = 11.75$ ,  $P(t) = 0.0001$

limitations of the data. The model accurately predicted 70.8% of the cases in which the individual voted and 66.5% of the cases where the individual did not vote.

Insert Table 1 Here

The results in the second section of the table show how specific variables influence the likelihood of voting. If the individual was Native American (Race=1), he/she was 51% less likely to vote than an individual who was not Native American (Race=0). For each year of education the individual received, he/she was 13% more likely to vote than a person who did not receive the same year. Each increase of \$3000 in family income raised the likelihood of voting by 6%, and an increase in age of one year increased the likelihood of voting by 3%. Two of the six state variables failed to reach a significance level of  $p < 0.05$  (Oklahoma and New Mexico), but the four that did reach significance showed substantial impacts on the likelihood of voting among both Native Americans and non-Native Americans.

Tables 2 and 3 show the logistic regression results for the separate years 1990 and 1992. The results generally support the findings in the combined analysis, but the 1992 model does a substantially poorer job of predicting non-voters. Overall, the 1992 model only predicted 20.4% of the cases where there was no vote. In both models,

Insert Tables 2 and 3 Here

the model fit was essentially equal to the fit of the combined model (1990:  $R^2 = 0.1423$ ; 1992  $R^2 = 0.1203$ ). In both years, the Native American variable reached significance and was one of the more substantial explanations of turnout.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the socio-economic theory of voter turnout does not accurately explain Native American voting patterns in either election. While it is not clear what makes the Native American voters different from other groups, it is clear that a difference does exist.

### Discussion.

The results clearly demonstrate that Native Americans do not vote at the same levels as other groups even when socio-economic levels are controlled. While the data are limited to two

elections, they do provide an initial assessment of Native American voting patterns. It would be a mistake to claim a substantive understanding of Native American voting behavior at this point. Although the data show a clear relationship between "Native American" status and a decreased probability of voting, the data do not tell us why this occurs. The decrease might be caused by cultural factors, a lack of political knowledge, tribal identities overriding national political identities, or any other of a myriad of possible explanations. The data are also unable to identify the differences between reservations, tribes, or clans. Anecdotal evidence indicates that turnout varies dramatically across reservations, and we need to account for these factors in future analyses. We can demonstrate the relationship exists between Native American status and voting behavior--the next stage is to explain why Native American status decreases turnout.

#### Implications.

The continued inactivity of Native Americans in the political process should be a major cause for concern for all persons who value democratic principles. The concentration of Native American populations in sparsely populated states such as North Dakota and Montana gives them the potential to exert real influence on the political process. Native Americans make up between five and ten percent of the population in four of the seven states in the model, a substantial enough minority to deserve attention from the political system. In states where numbers of Democrats and Republicans are approximately equal (such as Montana), the Native Americans could become the swing voters.

Full participation in the political process is a desirable quality for the maintenance of a democratic government. If communities are underrepresented in the process, the potential for majority dominance increases. If Native Americans want to have their views taken into account in the political process, they need to show themselves to be a force in the electoral arena.

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Table 1. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Vote for Combined Data

N= 19925                       $\chi^2 = 2218.80$      $P(\chi^2) = 0.00001$                       Pseudo  $R^2 = 0.1316$

	Predicted Negative	Predicted Positive
Observed Negative	66.48%	33.52%
Observed Positive	29.20%	70.80%

Positive Predictive Value = 69.58%

Negative Predictive Value = 68.31%

	Coefficient	Odds Ratio	Z-Score	Signif. (Z)	% Change
Race	-0.7168	0.4883	-7.686	0.001	-51%
Sex	-0.0094	0.9906	-0.313	0.755	•••
Education	0.1233	1.1312	19.904	0.001	13%
Income	0.0556	1.0571	11.93	0.001	6%
Age	0.0321	1.0327	35.688	0.001	3%
N. Dakota	0.2258	1.2533	3.691	0.001	25%
S. Dakota	0.2687	1.3083	4.033	0.001	31%
New Mexico	0.0699	1.0724	0.989	0.323	•••
Montana	0.5038	1.6550	7.382	0.001	66%
Oklahoma	0.0321	1.0326	0.464	0.643	•••
Florida	-0.8517	0.8517	-2.883	0.005	-15%
Year	0.0523	1.0537	3.349	0.001	5%

-The coefficient is the raw logistic regression result.

-The odds ratio is  $e$  to the power of the coefficient for each variable. If the odds ratio is greater than one, the variable has positive impact.

-The Z-score is the measure of statistical significance.

-The significance indicates the probability the result is due to chance, with 1.00 indicating a 100% probability.

-The percentage change shows the percentage change in the likelihood of voting given a one unit change in the independent variable. Variables that did not reach the standard level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ) do not have a percentage change listed.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Vote for 1990 Data

N= 12305                       $\chi^2 = 2427.91$      $P (\chi^2) = 0.00001$                       Pseudo  $R^2 = 0.1423$

	Predicted Negative	Predicted Positive
Observed Negative	67.73%	32.27%
Observed Positive	30.66%	79.34%

Positive Predictive Value = 68.49%

Negative Predictive Value = 68.59%

	Coefficient	Odds Ratio	Z-Score	Signif. (Z)	% Change
Race	-0.2774	0.7577	-2.381	0.017	-24%
Sex	-0.0784	0.9245	-1.956	0.050	-8%
Education	0.1718	1.1875	20.887	0.001	19%
Income	0.0963	1.1011	15.607	0.001	10%
Age	0.0439	1.0448	35.948	0.001	4%
N. Dakota	0.6895	1.9928	7.591	0.001	99%
S. Dakota	0.6728	1.9597	7.553	0.001	96%
New Mexico	0.2117	1.2358	2.264	0.024	25%
Montana	0.8569	2.3558	9.261	0.001	136%
Oklahoma	0.2245	1.2517	2.427	0.015	25%
Florida	-0.1484	0.8621	-1.984	0.047	-14%

-The coefficient is the raw logistic regression result.

-The odds ratio is  $e$  to the power of the coefficient for each variable. If the odds ratio is greater than one, the variable has positive impact.

-The Z-score is the measure of statistical significance.

-The significance indicates the probability the result is due to chance, with 1.00 indicating a 100% probability.

-The percentage change shows the percentage change in the likelihood of voting given a one unit change in the independent variable. Variables that did not reach the standard level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ) do not have a percentage change listed.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Vote for 1992 Data

N= 7620                       $\chi^2 = 338.12$      $P (\chi^2) = 0.00001$       Pseudo  $R^2 = 0.1203$

	Predicted Negative	Predicted Positive
Observed Negative	20.35%	79.65%
Observed Positive	11.17%	88.83%

Positive Predictive Value = 59.63%

Negative Predictive Value = 57.90%

	Coefficient	Odds Ratio	Z-Score	Signif. (Z)	% Change
Race	-1.9046	0.1489	-10.819	0.001	-85%
Sex	0.1337	1.1204	2.386	0.017	12%
Education	0.0419	1.0428	4.105	0.001	4%
Income	-0.0113	0.9888	-1.497	0.134	•••
Age	0.0113	1.0139	9.573	0.001	1%
N. Dakota	-0.4192	0.6576	-3.952	0.001	-34%
S. Dakota	-0.3523	0.7031	-3.357	0.001	-30%
New Mexico	-0.1534	0.8578	-1.337	0.181	•••
Montana	-0.0404	0.9604	-0.383	0.701	•••
Oklahoma	-0.3381	0.7131	-3.111	0.002	-29%
Florida	-0.1409	0.8686	-1.530	0.126	•••

-The coefficient is the raw logistic regression result.

-The odds ratio is  $e$  to the power of the coefficient for each variable. If the odds ratio is greater than one, the variable has positive impact.

-The Z-score is the measure of statistical significance.

-The significance indicates the probability the result is due to chance, with 1.00 indicating a 100% probability.

-The percentage change shows the percentage change in the likelihood of voting given a one unit change in the independent variable. Variables that did not reach the standard level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ) do not have a percentage change listed.

