Political Trust and Native American Electoral Participation: An Analysis of Survey Data from Nevada and South Dakota

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Objective. This research analyzes the impact of political trust on Native American electoral participation, using survey responses from roughly 1,500 Native Americans living in South Dakota and Nevada. *Method*. The in-person survey taking was conducted at locations in Native communities and with the support of tribal leaders, allowing us to overcome many of the methodological issues that have hampered previous studies. *Results*. We found much higher levels of electoral participation in tribal elections than in non-tribal elections. Respondents expressed high levels of distrust in nontribal government and voting methods, and this distrust has a surprisingly powerful impact on the decision to participate in nontribal elections. *Conclusion*. We suggest that historical trauma and ongoing discrimination are the primary causes of distrust among Native Americans and find support for this in the observed differences in levels of trust between South Dakota and Nevada.

Over the past couple decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the quality and quantity of academic research on political participation among racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, but only recently have scholars begun to consider unique factors that impact Native American political engagement. Research (Huyser, Sanchez, and Vargas, 2017; Peterson, 1997) shows that Native Americans' registration and voting rates are lower than other populations, but the turnout gap appears to be declining (Skopek and Garner, 2014). Also, the electoral context matters, with turnout higher in elections that have greater local impact (Huyser, Sanchez, and Vargas, 2017; Native American Voting Rights Coalition, 2018). Finally, Wilkins and Stark (2011) forcefully argue that participation among American Indian/Alaska Native populations is affected by their unique civic status as members of indigenous nations as opposed to being racial minorities. As such, much of their political engagement is directed at protecting treaty and trust rights. A similar point is made by Herrick and Mendez (2019), who suggest that Native group consciousness is "unique" due to "political issues, such as tribal sovereignty."

Differences in group consciousness also are rooted in the historical trauma experienced by Native Americans. Indigenous peoples in the United States experienced nearly 400 years of warfare aimed at seizing control of their ancestral lands and resources, as well as attempts to exterminate them and their cultures (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Treuer, 2016). Given that the last military encounter between the U.S. government and Native

Nations—Posey's War—occurred less than 100 years ago, it is not surprising that historical trauma is still widespread and passed across generations, especially among those in the Plains (Brave Heart and DeBruyn, 1998; Brave Heart, 2000; Hartmann and Gone, 2014, 2016; Hartmann et al., 2019; Sotero, 2006). While there continue to be conflicts between tribes and the national government over treaty rights, many current disputes are with state and local government entities over infrastructure, taxation, land, and water issues (Evans, 2011).

Given the decades of political fights and racial discrimination that have ensued since Native Americans were officially given their citizenship—in 1924—one might be quick to assume that linked fate also plays a role in the political action of tribal members. Linked fate can be defined as a sense of awareness and/or closeness that develops among others who identify with a common group label and that the experiences of the individual members are inextricably linked to the actions of the group (Dawson, 1994; Gay and Tate, 1998; Jaynes and Williams, 1989; Siemien, 2005). According to Siemien (2005), "the cognitive factors underlying linked fate reflect a sense of belonging or conscious loyalty to the group in question." She goes on to say that researchers, such as Tate and Dawson, have described linked fate as arising from "lived experiences, specifically day-to-day encounters with race oppression and class exploitation in public spaces and private domains." While it is certainly true that there is a shared common group label among Native Americans and that there is a common lived experience that is traceable throughout Indian Country, this analysis fails to also note that there are also stark differences among tribes with respect to culture, economy, geography, and politics. What research has been done demonstrates that the impacts of linked fate are as potentially diverse as the tribes and their unique variables are numerous. As a result, the limited work on linked fate and Native American populations remains unclear.

In light of this history, we would expect Native Americans' levels of political trust in nontribal governments to be much lower than the levels toward tribal governments. We would expect this to result in greater engagement in tribal elections than in nontribal elections. Also, we would expect to find a positive relationship between political trust and voting in both tribal and nontribal elections, with individuals evincing higher trust levels participating more. In this, our expectation is different from scholars who argue that political dissatisfaction triggers political engagement in order to effect change (Miller and Krosnick, 2004; Miller et al., 2016). Our reasoning is based on our understanding of historical trauma, which undermines the diffuse reservoir of trust in the system. As such, their degree of alienation goes way beyond unhappiness with particular policies and individuals and, we posit, will lead to their nonparticipation in political actions that give discretion to non-Native government officials.[1] We believe this will translate into greater distrust in forms of voting that give non-Native election officials power to determine whether a person's vote is counted. As such, we expect respondents to evince greater trust in in-person voting at a polling place, where they can personally cast a ballot, as opposed to forms such a vote by mail. Finally, since the Constitution gives states the responsibility for determining the "times, places, and manner of holding elections," we would expect there to be differences among states based on their different histories of interactions with Native populations.

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[1]Although not discussing Native Americans, van der Meer and Zmerli (2017:1) recognized this possibility when they suggested: "Disenchanted citizens may decide to withdraw from politics altogether—resulting in even more disenchantment." White's (2019) recent research on the impact of being charged with a misdemeanor offense resulting in defendants' subsequent levels of political participation shows that racial/ethnic minorities find this form of interaction with government results in electoral demobilization, but there is no effect on white defendants' participation.

In this project, we analyze data from a survey of roughly 1,500 Native Americans living in South Dakota and Nevada. Although both states experienced armed conflicts during the Indian Wars era and have histories of discrimination against indigenous peoples, South Dakota has a particularly egregious history of brutal oppression (Brave Heart, 2000), such that it earned the label "Mississippi of the North" for the depth of its resistance to Native political empowerment (Warm Water, 2005).[2] Further evidence of the difference between the two states can be found in the responses of state and local government officials to Native claims of vote denial, dilution, and suppression. There have been substantially more Native voting rights cases in South Dakota than in any other state.[3] In contrast, there has only been a single case in Nevada and the state changed its laws to increase access for subsequent elections.[4]

The data that we are analyzing were collected in summer 2016 as part of an effort by the Native American Voting Rights Coalition to identify barriers that impinge on Native voting. The effort had strong support from tribal leaders in the two states, which made it possible for surveys to be administered at tribal headquarters, tribal colleges, Indian Health Service clinics, and other Native-affiliated locations. The survey had questions designed to measure levels of political trust with different government entities and forms of voting, as well as histories of electoral engagement and sociodemographic factors. As such, the study is well positioned to make contributions to our understanding of the linkages between political trust and electoral participation, as well as providing the first ever large study of political trust among Native Americans.

Political Trust

Although it is widely recognized that political systems require a reservoir of public support to ensure stability (Easton, 1965), there are still unresolved questions with respect to political trust. Scholars (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017) agree that political trust implies the existence of a relationship between a party that has a measurable degree of trust in a political object (e.g., persons, regime, political institution, governmental process, etc.). According to Hetherington and Rudolph (2015), political trust is an affective evaluation of government performance, where perceptions of performance are weighed against beliefs about how government should perform. At the same time, political trust provides a reservoir of diverse support for a political regime, which allows for stability even when support for specific officeholders and policies has

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[2]South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation is the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre where soldiers from the 7th Calvary used Hotchkiss machine guns to kill more than 300 nonbelligerent Lakota, most of whom were women and children. Army General Nelson Miles, who visited the site a few days later, subsequently described the incident as "the most abominable criminal military blunder and horrible massacre of women and children" (Woodard, 2019). Over his objections, Congress awarded 20 Medals of Honor to the soldiers responsible for the massacre. Three members of Congress—Deb Haaland (D-NM), Denny Heck (D-WA), and Paul Cook (R-CA)—have introduced legislation to rescind the medals. Rapid City Mayor Steve Allender (2019), who described the Wounded Knee medals as a "festering wound," endorsed the legislation. O.J Semans, a veteran from the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, sent a letter to President Trump, Vice President Pence, and others to support the legislation and "hear the cries of my ancestors from that frozen and bloody landscape" (Semans, 2019; Woodard, 2019), but he received no response.

[3]For more on the many struggles over access to the ballot box in South Dakota, see Schroedel and Aslanian (2017), Schroedel and Aslanian (2015), and Schroedel et al. (2017).

[4]Paiutes from the Pyramid Lake and Walker River Reservations sued Nevada and the counties in order to obtain early voting sites comparable to what existed in many nonreservation locations. After the plaintiffs won the case (*Sanchez v. Cegavske,* 2016), Nevada changed its laws to ensure that all reservations will have early voting sites by the 2020 election.

eroded (Craig, Niemi, and Silver, 1990). As such, measures showing low levels of political trust can either be viewed as reflecting "profound disaffection or more superficial dissatisfaction" (Cook and Gronke, 2005:785).

Over the past 50 years, data from the American National Election Survey and General Social Survey data show a substantial decline in political trust. Although early studies (Craig, 1993; Lipset and Schneider, 1987) expressed deep concern about the growth in political distrust, subsequent research (Citrin and Luks, 2001; Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Cook and Gronke, 2005), using different measures, argues that the decline is due to unhappiness with immediate political and economic issues as opposed to erosion in diffuse support for the political system. However, studies have found that political trust among some racial/ethnic minorities is low, although it is unclear how much of the disaffection goes beyond unhappiness with specific policies and officials. African Americans consistently evince greater levels of political distrust than whites (Aberbach and Walker, 1970; Avery, 2009; Shingles, 1981), but researchers have gotten mixed results from studies of Latinos (Abrajano and Michael Alvarez, 2010a; Abrajano and Michael Alvarez, 2010b; Koch, 2018).

There has been limited research examining political trust levels among Native American populations. In a 1994 survey, Stubben (2006:140–42) asked tribal officials a series of questions designed to measure their levels of political trust in nontribal government entities. Tribal officials registered moderate-low levels of trust in the federal government, but their evaluations of state governments were much less positive.[5] One respondent singled out South Dakota state officials as the most prejudiced in the country (Stubben, 2006:142). While pathbreaking, the number of useable survey responses was fairly low (118 out of 480 randomly selected tribal officials). Another study (Koch, 2018), using NAES data, found levels of political distrust among American Indians/Alaska Natives was higher than among whites, but lower than among other racial minorities. His study, however, utilized data from the NAES' small number of self-identified American Indian/Alaska Native respondents. According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (2016), less than half of those self-identifying as such on Census forms are members of federally recognized tribes.[6]

Data and Methods

As noted above, the data analyzed in this project were collected in late summer 2016 by researchers associated with the Native American Voting Rights Coalition (NAVRC). Funding was provided by the Kellogg Foundation.[7] The survey team included both scholars with experience in survey research and Native peoples from the tribal communities. The survey itself consisted of 43 questions covering a range of topics from voter eligibility, political engagement, registering to vote, to the process of voting, and demographic

[5]The responses of tribal leaders differed significantly from national surveys in terms of their evaluations of federal versus state governments. Wolak and Kelleher (2010:430) traced public support for national, state, and local governments over four decades and found support for state and local governments moved in tandem and consistently were evaluated far more positively than the national government. For more recent data, see Pew (2013).

[6]While many people without membership in federally recognized tribes do have such heritage, there is a significant problem with fraudulent claims. For example, there are three groups that claim to be Cherokee Nations, but have no federal recognition and are viewed as bogus by other Native Nations and experts in the field (Pringle and Elmahrek, 2019).

[7]The Native American Voting Rights Coalition was founded in 2015 with the aim of facilitating cooperation among national and grassroots organizations working to overcome barriers faced by Native Americans in "registering to vote, casting their ballot, and having an equal voice in elections"(NAVRC, 2019).

information. The survey responses were collected on or very near reservation lands at Pyramid Lake, the Reno/Sparks Colony, the Fallon-Paiute Reservation, Yerington, the Washoe Reservation, Duck Valley, the Las Vegas Indian Colony, Elko, and Walker River in Nevada. In South Dakota, responses to the survey were gathered at the Lakota Homes Housing Project in Rapid City and on the Rosebud, Crow Creek Sioux, Yankton Sioux, Lower Burle, and Cheyenne Reservations. Budgetary restrictions and travel time did limit the ability of researchers to gather more responses, but the number gathered is a sufficient sample of the Native American population in each state.

Unlike previous research on Native American political engagement, these in-person surveys were primarily collected at locations where only those belonging to federally recognized tribes visit, such as tribal colleges, Indian Health Service clinics, and tribal offices. Collections were done both on and off reservation, but usually very close to the borders of reservations. They were also done in local urban centers with large native populations, such as Rapid City, SD, or on urban tribal lands, such as the Reno/Sparks Indian Colony. As such, we have a high degree of confidence that the respondents are enrolled members of their self-identified Native Nations. This approach also made it possible to reach populations that would be missed by methods that require respondents to have regular addresses, telephones, computers, and Internet access—which many people on reservations lack— and yet did not ignore urban populations such as the Reno/Sparks Indian Colony.[8]

Tribal leaders publicized that researchers would be at a particular location and encouraged members to participate in the survey and each survey taker was given $15 as compensation.[9] Onsite interviewers were instructed to approach everyone in the immediate area with an invitation to participate. Interested potential respondents were generally lined up to wait for an opportunity to fill out the survey and receive payment. Wait times were generally less than 10 minutes and interviewers stayed at the location until all willing participants had filled out a survey. Most collections lasted three to five hours although some did last longer. Collection protocols were identical in both Nevada and South Dakota. Aside from the sample having more female respondents (66 percent in Nevada and 62 percent in South Dakota) and for skewing slightly toward those with higher education attainment, respondents conformed to the population distribution in each state. There were substantially more Nevada *(n = 1,035)* than South Dakota *(n = 491)* respondents, but the margin of error for each state sample was well within the accepted bounds in order to be considered representative of their respective state Native populations.[10]

In order to answer the previously outlined research questions, we used both simple descriptive statistics, as well as logistic regression. For the latter, weighting procedures were used to enhance the representativeness of the NAVRC survey in two respects. The first weight (w_1) accounts for the unequal chance of selection among South Dakota residents. Given that weighting can also mitigate selection bias (Lavrakas, 2008), a second

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[8]For example, nearly 18 percent of respondents in Nevada and more than one-third of those in South Dakota lacked stable living arrangements. These individuals typically would never be reached using other methods.

[9]One drawback of using tribal leaders to publicize the times and locations of survey taking is that the research team encountered very large numbers of people waiting for them at sites in Nevada, which they visited before going to South Dakota. Tribal leaders and local people would be offended if they were turned away after waiting to participate. This meant a larger number of surveys than expected were gathered in Nevada and the team had to limit in advance the numbers that could be collected in South Dakota. In total, there were 1,554 surveys (1,052 in Nevada and 502 in South Dakota) compiled.

[10]According to Census data (2016), Nevada has approximately 30,500 self-identified American Indians and the NAVRC team surveyed 1,052 for a margin of error of 3.29 percent at the 97 percent confidence interval. South Dakota has approximately 72,000 American Indians and the NAVRC team surveyed 502 individuals, resulting in a 4.83 percent margin of error at the 97 percent confidence interval.

TABLE 1

Comparison of NAVRC Survey and Control Populations

Variable	Control Population $N = 1{,}243$	NAVRC Sample $N = 1{,}554$
Gender		
Female	53% (652)	65% (982)
Male	47% (591)	35% (544)
Missing	0	2% (28)
Age		
18–25	15% (188)	12% (192)
26–35	21% (266)	23% (350)
36–45	16% (200)	16% (252)
46–55	15% (184)	18% (274)
56–65	17% (209)	17% (257)
66–75	11% (134)	7% (115)
76–85	4% (50)	2% (19)
85+	1% (10)	1% (8)
Missing	0.16% (2)	6% (87)
Educational attainment		
HS or less	53% (663)	44% (677)
Some college	28% (350)	32% (489)
Associates	9% (106)	12% (182)
Bachelor	7% (85)	7% (106)
Ggraduate	3% (39)	4% (57)
Missing	0	3% (43)
State		
South Dakota	70%	32% (502)
Nevada	30%	68% (1052)

Note. Control population distributions based on unweighted American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) totals for all American Indian and Alaska Native alone populations.

weighting strategy (w_2) corrects for nonparticipation as a result of participants' demographic characteristics. For instance, it appears males were less likely than females to participate. A stratification weight for each demographic dimension is calculated to address possible gender selection bias in participation.

Using the design weight as a base, an iterative algorithm is utilized to update demographic categories in turn until distributions match the control population along the demographic dimensions of interest. With this procedure, both the design and poststratification weights are combined into a final weight for each case.[11] See Table 1 comparing the control population (obtained from the American Community Survey, 2016 [U.S. Census Bureau, 2016]) demographic features to the unweighted proportions obtained in the NAVRC survey.

An important aspect of our argument contends that distrust in government and in methods of voting are associated with lower levels of electoral participation. Accordingly, the dependent variables of interest are based on binary survey responses to questions about voting behavior in tribal and nontribal elections. Our independent variable of interest is the participants' trust. To assess their levels of trust, the survey included the following question: "Which government do you trust most to protect your rights?" They were told to choose one of the following government bodies: tribal, local (county

[11] See ⟨https://methods.sagepub.com/Reference/encyclopeida-of-survey-research-methods/n632.xml⟩.

TABLE 2

Weighted Summary Statistics Comparison Between the Nevada and South Dakota Samples

	South Dakota	Nevada	Difference of means	Significance ($p <$)
Gender				
Female	51%	56%	5	0.01
Age				
Average	39	44.8	5.8	0.001
Educational attainment				
Average	1.69	1.99	0.30	0.001
Employment				
Fulltime	30%	41%	11	0.001
Housing				
Unstable (friends/family, other)	33%	15%	18	0.001

or city), state, or federal. This question mimicked the one used in the Stubben (2006) survey of tribal leaders, but differed in that it included tribal governments. Despite the instructions to choose only one level of government, 11 percent of respondents selected more than one (most commonly tribal and federal), so we created a dummy variable for each level of government marked, recording each time a level was chosen to avoid losing data.

We fitted logistic regression models; all parameters were estimated using maximum likelihood estimation and the standard errors were estimating using robust estimation. The survey instrument contains items that allow us to control for age, gender, educational attainment, employment status, and stability of living situation—which is a proxy for poverty/homelessness status among survey takers. Educational attainment is coded 1–5 with higher values indicating higher levels of education. Employment status is a dummy variable coded 1 for full-time employment and 0 if they selected any other status (we also ran our models including different coding versions of employment status; results were practically identical). Stability of living situation is another dummy variable, coded 1 for the options that indicate the respondent has no permanent residence (e.g., staying with friends/family and other) and those with more stable living conditions. We also explored including in the models dummy variables for each type of living arrangement and results were robust to such model specification.

Though the survey instrument does not contain items that directly probe interest in politics, an important predictor of voting behavior, it includes questions asking respondents whether they participate in nonelectoral political activities such as signing a petition, attending a rally, or donating to campaigns. A control variable was created as the sum of these nonelectoral behaviors, which also reflects the respondent's level of interest in politics. The more of these discrete activities the respondent engages in, the higher we can infer her interest in political issues.

Table 2 provides a weighted comparison of these control variables between the South Dakota and Nevada samples. It is worthy of note that Nevada residents have a statistically significant higher level of each dimension that predicts higher voting turnout in nontribal elections. South Dakota residents have lower educational attainment, lower levels of full-time employment, and a significantly higher proportion of those without a stable living situation. For instance, rates of unstable housing conditions are twice as high in South

Dakota (33 percent) compared to Nevada (15 percent). State fixed effects were included in our model to account for overall differences between the two samples.

Findings

In the sections that follow, we consider whether the data support our expectations. To review, these are: (1) political trust in nontribal governments will be much lower than in tribal governments, (2) electoral participation will be higher in tribal elections than in nontribal elections, (3) there will be a positive relationship between political trust and voting in tribal and nontribal elections, (4) there will be greater trust in forms of voting that do not give discretion to local election officials to determine whether a vote counts, (5) the greater the degree of trust in the voting method, the greater the likelihood of voting, and (6) respondents in Nevada will evince greater levels of political trust in all areas than those in South Dakota.

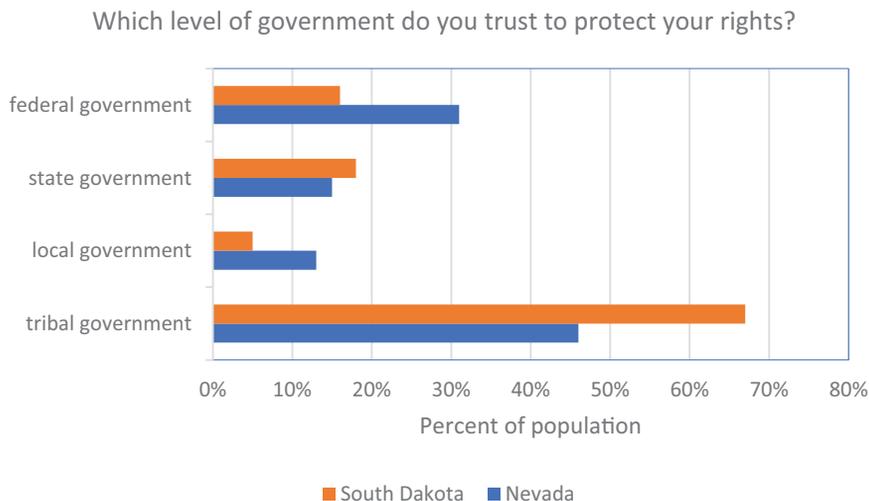### *Trust in Tribal and Nontribal Governments*

Native Americans who hold citizenship in federally recognized tribes are affected by decisions made by their tribal governments, as well as by the federal, state, and local governments. Our first hypothesis is that they will evince higher levels of trust in tribal governments than in federal, state, and local governments. To assess their levels of trust, the survey included the following question: "Which government do you trust most to protect your rights?" They were told to choose one of the following government bodies: tribal, local (county or city), state, or federal. This question mimicked the one used in the Stubben (2006) survey of tribal leaders, but differed in that it included tribal governments. Despite the instructions to choose only one level of government, 11 percent of respondents selected more than one (most commonly tribal and federal), so we created a dummy variable for each level of government marked, recording each time a level was chosen to avoid losing data.

A majority (53 percent) identified tribal government as the most trustworthy, but the other rankings showed how differently Native views are from those of the general public. The federal government was the second most trusted (27 percent), followed by state government at 13 percent and local government at 10 percent. These findings contrast the views of the general public, for whom the federal government is viewed far less favorably than state governments, while local government entities garner the highest favorability ratings (Hendrix, 2019; McCarthy, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2013). Generally, these evaluations are explained in terms of people having more positive views of the government bodies that most closely affect their day-to-day lives as opposed to the federal government in Washington, DC. A similar logic applies to the high evaluations that our respondents give to tribal governments, but it is troubling that they give very low scores to local nontribal governments that also directly impact their lives.

We also found sharp differences between the responses in the two states, although the rank ordering was unchanged. Respondents in South Dakota reported much higher values of trust in tribal governments and far lower in the nontribal governments than did those in Nevada. This is consistent with our expectation that the histories and practices of the non-Native populations in the two states affected their respective trust levels. A comparison of

FIGURE 1

Trust in Levels of Government by State

trust in government levels between the two state samples (all differences are statistically significant at the 0.001 level) is illustrated in Figure 1.

Electoral Participation in Tribal and Nontribal Elections

The survey included questions that asked respondents to indicate whether they generally voted in tribal and nontribal elections. Our hypothesis is that electoral participation in nontribal elections will be notably lower than in tribal elections, given the greater comparative trust in tribal governments. Also, we expect to find differences between the two states, with the much higher trust in tribal governments among South Dakota respondents resulting in their having higher participation in tribal elections in comparison to Nevada respondents. We are less certain whether the opposite will occur with respect to nontribal elections, however. While Nevada respondents indicated a higher degree of trust in the federal government than the South Dakota respondents, they did not evince much trust in state and local governments, which leaves us unsure whether to expect them to have greater nontribal electoral engagement than the South Dakotans.

As can be seen in Figure 2, voting in both states is higher in tribal elections than in nontribal elections, but the turnout-level difference between South Dakota and Nevada respondents in tribal elections is very large—nearly 20 percentage points higher in South Dakota, a difference that is statistically significant at the 0.001 level. Interestingly, there is only a relatively small and statistically insignificant difference between participation in nontribal elections.

Political Trust and Voting

A key element in any discussion of political trust is whether it has an impact on political participation, particularly voting. While some studies suggest that political dissatisfaction

FIGURE 2

Voter Turnout in Tribal and Nontribal Elections by State

Do you vote in tribal/nontribal elections?
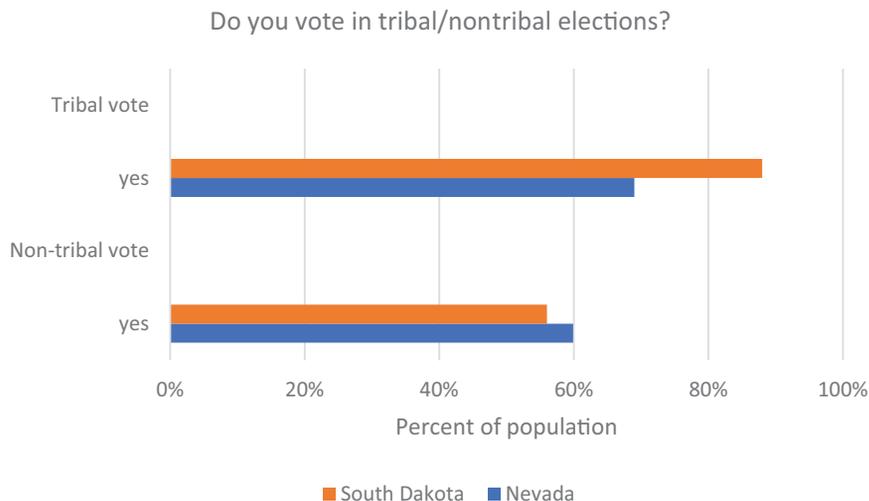
acts to mobilize people into taking political actions, this is true when there still exists a diffuse reservoir of trust in the basic fairness of the political regime. But the data show that many Native Americans, particularly those in South Dakota, do not have such a reservoir of trust. Instead, they have what Cook and Gronke (2005) describe as "profound disaffection" from nontribal governments. We believe this is rooted in the historical trauma Native Nations have experienced and continue experiencing and it depresses nontribal voting more in South Dakota than in Nevada because of that state's history of extreme hostility.

Figures 3 and 4 show the proportion of respondents who report voting in nontribal and tribal elections, when broken down by their choice of most trusted government entity. For nontribal elections, turnout is lowest among those who chose tribal government as the level of government most trusted to protect their rights (Figure 3). This pattern is consistent across both South Dakota and Nevada. Since those selecting tribal government are those with the least trust in nontribal governments, this result confirms the expectation that lack of trust in nontribal government entities is associated with a lower electoral participation. Figure 3 also shows Nevada levels of participation to be higher across all categories of trust (excepting trust in federal government) than those in South Dakota. This difference is statistically significant for those who selected tribal government as the one they trust, also confirming our expectation that the effect of distrust will be more pronounced in South Dakota where historical trauma has been greater compared to Nevada.

One of the more interesting findings is that South Dakota respondents in each group had higher levels of voting in tribal elections than did those in Nevada. This is what one would expect if historical trauma was a major contributor to distrust in nontribal government entities, in that it would lead Native people to feel more closely attached to their tribal governments, perhaps as a bulwark against hostility from the non-Native population.

FIGURE 3

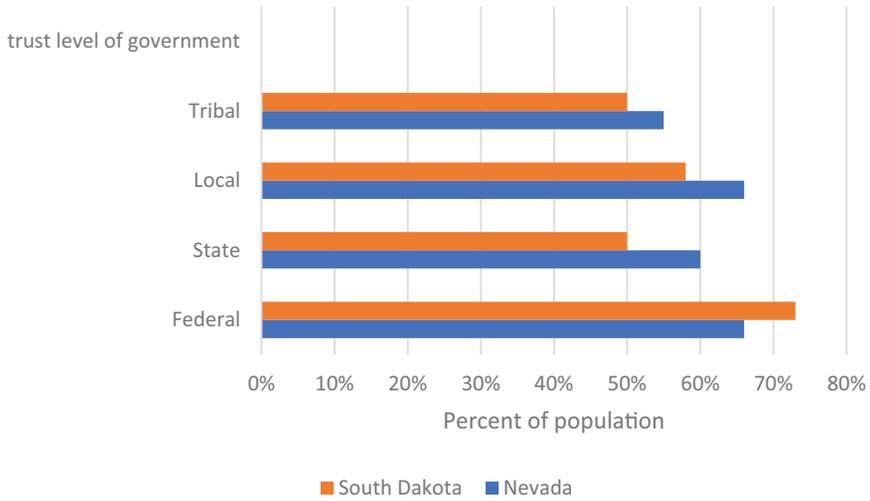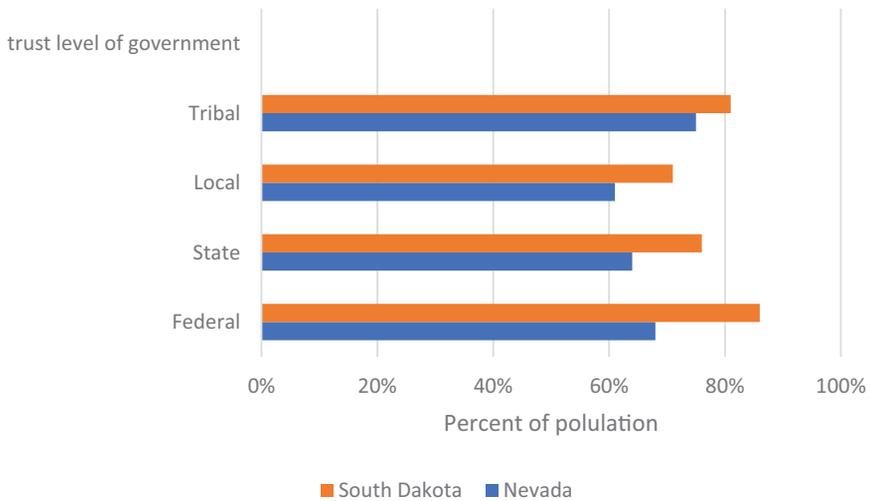Nontribal Election Voting by Trust Across Level of Government

FIGURE 4

Tribal Election Voting and Trust Across Level of Government

Levels of Trust in Methods of Voting

Given the overall low levels of trust in nontribal governments, an important issue is whether there also are high levels of distrust in their administration of elections. This was assessed with a question asking respondents whether they had complete trust, some trust, or no trust in whether their votes would be counted, using different modes of voting. Although there are some differences in the available forms of voting in the two states, each has in-person voting at a polling place on Election Day, voting by mail, and voting

FIGURE 5

Trust in Voting Methods by State
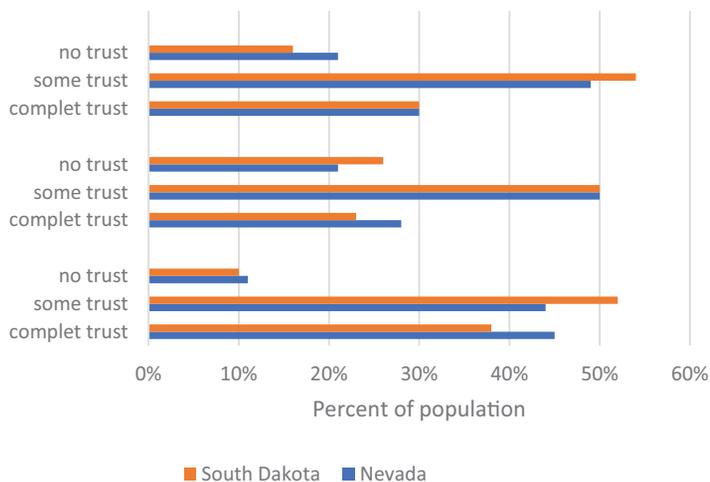
by bringing a ballot to the election official's office as options. Of these choices, only in-person voting at a polling place on Election Day does not give discretion over whether a vote is counted to local election officials. Given that we found low levels of political trust in state and local governments, our expectation is that respondents will express greater trust in their votes counting when they cast a ballot at a polling place on Election Day as opposed to either voting by mail or bringing a ballot to the election official's office.

The responses to these questions are consistent with our expectations and disturbing in terms of what one expects to find in a democratic country. None of the forms of voting generated high levels of trust, although there were marked differences with respect to the voting method and across the two states. As expected, in-person voting on Election Day garnered higher levels of trust than the two forms that give some discretion to local election officials, but even so only a total of 43 percent of all respondents in both Nevada and South Dakota stated they had complete trust their votes would count when they placed them in the ballot box on Election Day. The other two forms, respectively, garnered complete trust scores of 27 percent for voting by mail and 30 percent for dropping the ballot off at the election office. The overall no trust levels for the three forms of voting are as follows: 11 percent for in-person voting on Election Day, 24 percent for voting by mail, and 19 percent for dropping the ballot off at the local election office.[12] And, again, we find much higher levels of distrust among the South Dakota respondents in comparison to those in Nevada, and the difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level for in-person and vote by mail methods. These results are presented in Figure 5.

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[12]We suspect the greater distrust in voting by mail when compared to taking the ballot to the election office is due to the poor mail service on reservations and the possibility of the ballot getting lost in the mail. Stewart (2010) has described voting by mail as a "leaky pipeline" where ballots can get lost throughout the process.

FIGURE 6

Trust in Voting Methods and Voter Turnout in Nontribal Elections

■ South Dakota   ■ Nevada
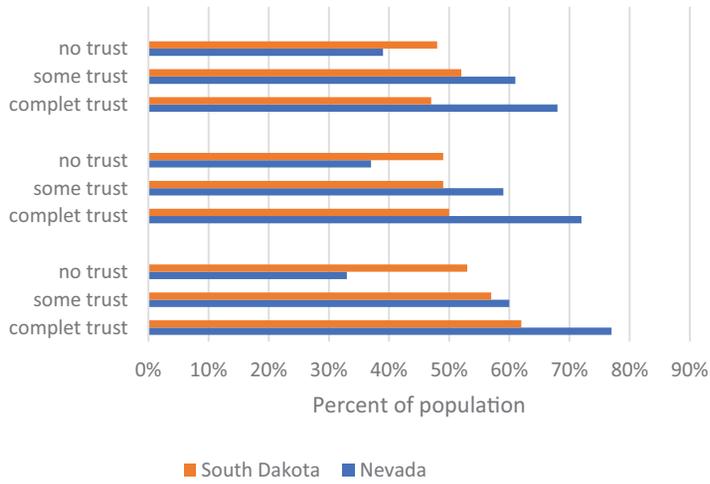
Trust in Voting Method and Electoral Participation

Given the high degree of Native Americans' distrust in the integrity of the electoral systems administered by the state and local governments, we further expect that this will depress their participation in nontribal elections. Figure 6 displays turnout rates in non-tribal elections across the varying categories of trust in the three modes of voting. For Nevada residents, the pattern of low turnout in low trust categories and high turnout in high trust categories is consistent across all three methods of voting. The magnitude of the effect is striking. For instance, those in Nevada with "complete trust" their in-person vote will be counted participate in nontribal elections at a rate of 76.5 percent compared to only a 32.7 percent participation rate for those with "no trust." South Dakota residents exhibit the same pattern for the in-person method of voting alone. Despite these exceptions in South Dakota, the results in general confirm the expectation and evince a strong connection between distrust in voting methods and lack of willingness to participate in nontribal elections among Native Americans.

Thus far, we have explored a series of descriptive statistics and bivariate relationships that have provided evidence supporting our expectations about the role of trust in electoral participation. Observed differences in levels of trust between the states are highly suggestive of the probable causes of distrust: ongoing discrimination and historical trauma. To establish trust, or the lack thereof, as an independent plausible explanation, we employ a logistic regression controlling for possible confounders and gauge the effect of trust above and beyond the other known predictors of voting behavior. We compare estimates (reported in odds ratios) between two models: one predicting voting in nontribal elections and another predicting voting in tribal elections.

This approach allows us to test two of our hypotheses. The first is that political trust is positively associated with the probability of participating in elections. To test this hypothesis, an explanatory variable is constructed using the responses to the survey item asking respondents which level of government (tribal, local, state, or federal) they trust most to protect their rights. It is assumed that those who selected tribal government alone and

not in combination with any other level of nontribal government have a higher level of distrust in nontribal governments than those who selected nontribal governments either alone or in combination. This independent variable of interest is coded 1 for trust in tribal government and 0 otherwise. For predicting participation in nontribal elections, we expect distrust in nontribal government entities to show a negative coefficient; for tribal elections, conversely, it should show a positive coefficient.

The second hypothesis we test is that trust in the integrity of the election administration will be positively associated with voting in nontribal elections, above and beyond all the other predictors of turnout. To test this hypothesis, we include a variable from the survey instrument asking respondents how much trust they have that their in-person vote will be counted if cast at a polling location on Election Day. This variable is coded 0 for "no trust," 1 for "some trust," and 2 for "complete trust." We chose to use the measure of in-person Election Day voting as opposed to the other forms of voting because it is the most common method of voting among Native populations in Nevada and South Dakota.

In Table 3, the logistic regression coefficients are reported as odds ratios—that is, a positive impact will show a coefficient above 1; a negative under 1. Results from Model 1 confirm our expectations: Native Americans who distrust nontribal governments are 39 percent less likely to vote in nontribal elections than those who trust, all else equal. This result is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Conversely, although the estimate does not reach statistical significance, those who distrust the nontribal government are 20 percent more likely to participate in tribal elections than those who trust the nontribal government (Model 2).

All of our previous analysis consistently showed lower levels of trust and voting in nontribal elections among Native respondents in South Dakota compared to those in Nevada. Our third hypothesis, therefore, is that some of our findings will still differ between South Dakota and Nevada. To test this expectation, we created a dichotomous variable where South Dakota is coded as 1 and Nevada is coded as 0. However, we are unsure what will be found when we control for trust levels and economic and sociodemographic factors. Table 3 reports the parameter estimates from our logistic regressions.

Figure 7 visualizes the predicted probabilities for voting in tribal and nontribal elections given the level of distrust in nontribal government. To increase comparability, we used a version of Model 1 with the same set of predictors and sample size of Model 2 (results from the two versions of Model 1 were practically identical). Figure 7 shows that Native Americans vote at higher rates in tribal elections compared to nontribal elections at all levels of distrust, and these differences are all statistically significant at the 0.05 level. However, voting in tribal versus nontribal elections differences are exacerbated among those who distrust nontribal government (with a 64 percent probability of voting in nontribal vs. 77 percent in tribal elections among those who trust, compared to 55 percent and 80 percent, respectively, among those who distrust).

Also, as expected, Table 3 shows that trusting in whether or not one's vote will be counted has a dramatic positive impact on voting in nontribal elections: Model 1 shows that Native Americans reporting "complete trust" are 83 percent more likely to vote in nontribal elections than those reporting "no trust" (the category of reference). This estimate is statistically significant at the 0.1 level and its magnitude is surprisingly large for a factor of American political behavior that has been largely regarded as at best marginal in predicting voter participation.

Aside from establishing the impact of trust, insight can also be gained by comparing the other predictors of voting behavior in tribal versus nontribal elections included in

TABLE 3

Logistic Regression Parameter Estimates (Odds Ratios) for Voting on Tribal and Nontribal Elections

Variables	(1) Vote Nontribal Elections	(2) Vote Tribal Elections
Trust in-person vote counted		
Some trust	1.442	
	(0.473)	
Complete trust	1.833*	
	(.616)	
Distrust in nontribal govt. (local, state, or federal)	.611***	1.202
	(0.112)	(0.222)
State		
South Dakota	1.555***	3.190***
	(0.251)	(0.570)
Age	1.041***	1.036***
	(0.006)	(0.006)
Educational attainment		
Some college	2.083***	1.099
	(0.416)	(0.233)
Associates	2.334***	.931
	(0.671)	(0.314)
Bachelors	4.230***	0.605
	(1.835)	(0.199)
Graduate/professional	3.593**	0.703
	(1.903)	(0.291)
Employment status		
Fulltime	1.608**	1.294
	(0.299)	(0.263)
Housing		
Stability of living situation	0.731	0.603**
	(0.148)	(0.128)
Gender		
Female	1.402*	1.295
	(0.253)	(0.229)
Sum of nonelectoral activities	1.402***	1.084
	(0.0917)	(0.0595)
Constant	0.0547***	0.307***
AIC	1164.2	1116.5
McFadden pseudo R^2	0.206	0.093
Observations	1,252	1,359

Note. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Statistical significance code: ***$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$.

the models. The current literature on predicting turnout ascribes a central explanatory role to educational attainment. In other words, people who are more educated are more likely to vote. The results obtained here, however, show that education predicts voting in nontribal elections, but not in tribal elections. Also, the trend of association is reversed between voting in nontribal and tribal elections, with higher levels of education associated with higher voting in nontribal elections but lower levels of voting in tribal elections. This result is expected to some extent in that Native American turnout in nontribal elections

FIGURE 7

Predicted Probability of Voting in Tribal and Nontribal Elections and Distrust in Nontribal
Government
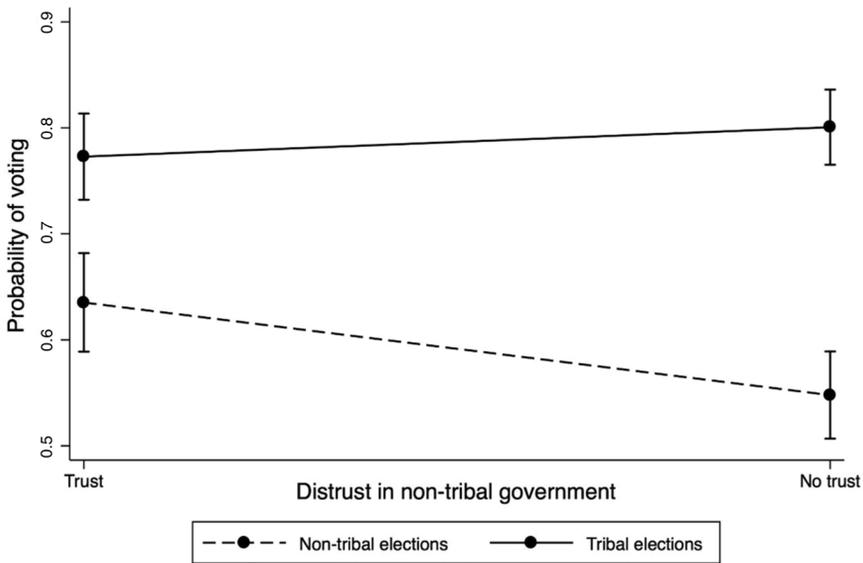
is generally relatively low regardless of educational attainment and rarely fits common patterns demonstrated by other minority voters. Voting research shows that education as a variable plays little to no role in determining turnout among the Native American population in general. Like our finding above, it is counterintuitive to the mainstream of work on voting and education.

Similar patterns hold for other covariates; for example, full-time employment shows to be a powerful predictor of voting in nontribal elections but not so much in tribal elections. Also interesting, the gender gap that shows women voting in nontribal elections at much higher rates than men is not as high (and precisely estimated) in the model predicting tribal voting behavior. This pattern is also manifested for nonelectoral participation. Taken together, these observations indicate that the traditional predictors of voting behavior fall short in explaining the dynamics of voting among Native Americans.

Moreover, we find that political trust or the lack of trust is an extremely important factor in Native voting, and the differences between South Dakota and Nevada serve as a reminder of the diversity among Native populations and the importance of considering different levels of historical trauma and discrimination within states. One of the most interesting results involves the difference between South Dakota and Nevada controlling for trust levels and economic/sociodemographic predictors. The coefficient for the state variable suggests that Native Americans in Nevada vote at lower levels than those in South Dakota, controlling for the other factors that impact electoral participation. This somewhat counterintuitive finding makes more sense considering the South Dakota respondents' much higher rate of participation in tribal elections compared to those in Nevada. What this suggests is that their disaffection with politics is generalized but is specifically tied to the history and off-reservation politics in South Dakota.

Conclusion

We began by positing that historical trauma, combined with the unique civic status of Native Americans, have created a distinctly different political consciousness among Native people in the United States. As Wilkins and Stark (2011:33) argue, "indigenous peoples are nations, not minorities," but as we have shown, less than half of those who regularly self-identify as American Indian/Alaska Native belong to federally recognized tribes. This poses real challenges for researchers. Moreover, there are enormous economic, political, and cultural differences across the 574 federally recognized tribes. All of which means that researchers need to carefully define the populations being studied and avoid broad generalizations. In light of these concerns, we want to reiterate that our findings are specific to populations surveyed by the NAVRC in 2016. The NAVRC worked closely with tribal leaders in South Dakota and Nevada to limit the survey to tribal members, largely Sioux and Paiute. Hard to reach groups, including the very poor and homeless, who comprise a substantial portion of reservation populations, were surveyed. As such, this research may be considered pathbreaking, but also exploratory.

Our analysis uncovered important commonalities in responses from Native peoples in the two states, as well as significant differences. Perhaps most troubling for democratic governance in this country, there does not appear to be a reservoir of diffuse trust in the system that has been found by researchers studying other populations. Native Americans in the two states evinced low levels of political trust in nontribal government entities, especially towards state and local governments that oversee nontribal elections. Trust in the different methods of voting is generally low, especially in regard to those that provide local election officials with discretion over whether votes count. We found a statistically significant relationship between trust levels in nontribal government and trust in in-person voting to be related to voting in nontribal elections, even when controlling for economic and sociodemographic variables. According to our analysis, individuals with low levels of trust in nontribal government do not respond by becoming politically mobilized to effect change; instead, they largely withdraw from nontribal politics. Interestingly, participation in tribal elections is much higher and largely unaffected by the control variables. Finally, there are noteworthy differences between the two states. Voting in tribal elections is much higher in South Dakota than in Nevada. While we cannot definitively attribute the much lower levels of trust and participation in nontribal elections among the South Dakota respondents to the state's very troubled history of oppression against Native Americans, the results certainly suggest this is the case.

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