

Towards an Indigenous Reproductive Justice: Examining Attitudes on Abortion among American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

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Project Description

Reproductive justice is severely limited for American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Defined as the right to have or not have children, parent the children one has, and the ability to parent in a safe, supportive environment (Lauen et al. 2017), reproductive justice has historically been and continues to be a struggle for Indigenous women. Historically, Native women faced forced sterilization and infant separation as tools of settler colonialism. These issues have only shifted over time and now manifest through unequal access to healthcare, adverse maternal health outcomes, reproductive coercion, and cultural erasure (Asher BlackDeer 2022). Social inequities such as poor legal response, rigid gender norms, and anti-Native racism and discrimination all converge to further limit reproductive justice for Native women (Scheeringa & Zeanah 1995).

Reproductive justice is both a theoretical paradigm and activist model that combines human rights and inequality, intersectionality, grounded examinations of the embodied experiences of women, and social and political activism in order to challenge structural inequalities and effect change in oppressive structures (Gurr 2011). This study describes attitudes toward abortion among American Indian and Alaska Native communities in relation to political party affiliation and ideology in order to set the necessary groundwork for reproductive justice advocacy in a post-Roe v. Wade era.

Introduction

INDIGENOUS REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Reproductive justice is severely limited for American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Defined as the right to have or not have children, parent the children one has, and the ability to parent in a safe, supportive environment (Lauen et al. 2017), reproductive justice has historically been and continues to be a struggle for Indigenous women. Historically, Native women faced forced sterilization and infant separation as tools of settler colonialism. Reproductive injustices have only shifted over time and now manifest through unequal access to healthcare, adverse maternal health outcomes, reproductive coercion, and cultural erasure (Asher BlackDeer 2022). Social inequities such as poor legal response, rigid gender norms, and anti-Native racism and

discrimination all converge to further limit reproductive justice for Native women (Scheeringa & Zeanah 1995).

Legislation limiting reproductive rights have a greater impact on Native women than non-Native women. In addition to previously legalized abortion through the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision (Schindler et al. 2002), Native women are also subject to federal policies that limit reproductive justice. While the 1921 Snyder Act stipulated federally funded healthcare through the Indian Health Service (IHS) for federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native Nations, the 1976 Hyde Amendment subjected all IHS facilities to federal jurisdiction on abortion access since they received federal dollars (Arnold 2014).

The Hyde Amendment bans the use of federal funds for abortion services, with exceptions only for pregnancies resulting from rape or incest or those that pose a threat to the mother's life (Arnold 2014). As a result, Native women

are over-represented among women seeking abortion services at non-IHS abortion providers (Schindler et al. 2002). Since IHS is often the sole provider of reproductive health services for Native communities, these federal policies work together to effectively deny Indigenous women reproductive justice by severely limiting access to abortions.

Abortion is a highly politicized issue, primarily due to extreme opposition from right-wing conservative agendas (Fried 2006). Access to abortion has recently come under fire as the Roe v. Wade decision was recently overturned by the Supreme Court, holding that the U.S. Constitution does not confer a right to abortion. In response to this backlash, several white feminists began to propose seeking abortion services on tribal lands as a loophole to this federal decision. However, these sentiments only served to other Indigenous women already struggling for reproductive justice on their own homelands.

Several scholars have argued extensively that the categories of “pro-life” vs “pro-choice” are inadequate to understand reproductive politics among marginalized communities (Theobald 2017). In conjunction with these scholars, many reproductive activists posit that politics surrounding reproductive rights cannot be fully understood outside of the structures of white supremacy (Theobald 2017). Further, it is well understood that present day white supremacy is a manifestation of settler colonialism (Asher BlackDeer 2022).

Empirical research paints a scattered picture of political ideology and views in conjunction with attitudes toward abortion. A 2020 study found that 72% of Native respondents believe that they can hold their own moral views about abortion and still trust a woman and her family to make this decision for themselves (Latino Decisions 2020). Further, over 80% of Native respondents believe that women and families deserve to make their own healthcare decisions without government interference, including 66% of Native Republicans (Latino Decisions 2020).

Reproductive justice is both a theoretical paradigm and activist model that combines human rights and inequality, intersectionality, grounded examinations of the embodied experiences of women, and social and political activism in order to challenge structural inequalities and effect change in oppressive structures (Gurr 2011).

This study describes attitudes toward abortion among American Indian and Alaska Native communities in relation to political party affiliation and ideology in order to set the

necessary groundwork for reproductive justice advocacy in a post-Roe v. Wade era.

Research Questions

1. POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION

What are the trends of political party affiliation (Democrat, Independent, Republican) across generations of American Indian and Alaska Native communities?

2. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

What are the trends of political ideology (liberal, moderate, conservative) across generations of American Indian and Alaska Native communities?

3. PARTY AFFILIATION AND ABORTION ATTITUDES

How is political party affiliation (Democrat, Independent, Republican) related to attitudes on abortion among American Indian and Alaska Native communities?

4. POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND ABORTION ATTITUDES

How is political ideology (liberal, moderate, conservative) related to attitudes on abortion among American Indian and Alaska Native communities?

Methods

This study uses a quantitative, descriptive design to define trends among Indigenous people’s party affiliation, political ideology, and attitudes toward abortion.

THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY

The General Social Survey (GSS) is a nationally representative cross-sectional dataset that has been collected annually since 1972. The purpose of the GSS is to collect data on contemporary American society regarding trends in opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. The GSS is administered by NORC at the University of Chicago and funded by the National Science Foundation. The GSS is typically collected with in-person data; however, more recent versions have begun sampling via online approaches.

The present work utilizes the most recent release of the General Social Survey which includes data collected in 2021. There are a total of 132 American Indian and Alaska Native respondents within this wave of the GSS. To answer RQ1, the researcher will examine political party affiliation and political ideology of Native respondents through a generational perspective. To answer RQ2, the researcher will examine potential associations between

political party affiliation, political ideology, and outcomes of several attitudes toward abortion.

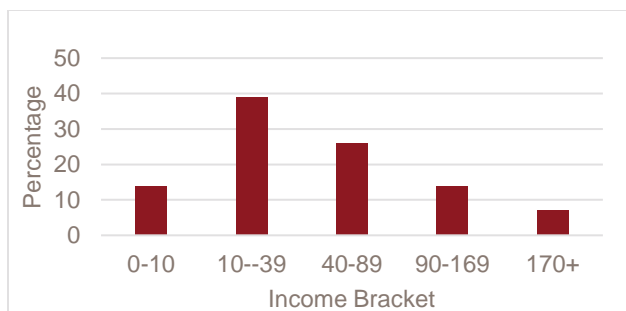
Results

DESCRIPTIVES

There are a total of 132 American Indian and Alaska Native respondents to the 2021 GSS cross-section. Approximately half of the sample reported identifying as female (52%); however, no gender identities beyond male or female were provided within the data. The majority of respondents were not married (66%). Participants' ages ranged between 19 years to 82 years. The majority of respondents (88%) had at least a high school degree; 47% of respondents had a high school diploma or equivalent, and 42% had at least some college experience. Only 11% of respondents had less than a high school degree.

Respondent income was recoded according to 2021 tax brackets. The majority of Native respondents had an annual income ranging between \$10-39.9K. The figure below provides a further breakdown.

Figure 1. 2021 American Indian and Alaska Native Income Brackets.



POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Among the 132 American Indian and Alaska Native respondents in the 2021 wave of the GSS, 26% identified as having a liberal political view, 37% identified as having a moderate political view and 37% identified as having a conservative political view.

POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION

Among the 132 American Indian and Alaska Native respondents in the 2021 wave of the GSS, 40% identified as affiliating with the democratic party, 32% identified as affiliating with an independent party, and 28% identified as affiliating with the republican party.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY X POLITICAL PARTY

Liberal x Democratic. Among the 132 American Indian and Alaska Native respondents in the 2021 wave of the GSS, 85% of respondents who identified as having a liberal political view also reported an affiliation with the Democratic Party.

Moderate x Independent. Among the 132 American Indian and Alaska Native respondents in the 2021 wave of the GSS, 51% of respondents who identified as having a moderate political view also reported their political party affiliation as independent.

Conservative x Republican. Among the 132 American Indian and Alaska Native respondents in the 2021 wave of the GSS, 55% of respondents who identified as having a conservative political view also reported an affiliation with the Republican Party.

INDIGENOUS POLITICAL VIEWS BY GENERATION

RQ1: What are the trends of political party affiliation across generations of American Indian and Alaska Native communities?

- Baby Boomers (1930-1964) – 37%
- Generation X (1965-1980) – 23%
- Millennials (1981-1996) – 33%
- Generation Z (1997-2010) -- 7%

Among Indigenous respondents, trends in viewpoints found that roughly 48% of Baby Boomers and 63% of Gen Z respondents identified as having a conservative political view. Approximately 50% of Gen X respondents and 41% of Millennials identified as having a moderate political view. The most common political view for both the oldest generation and the youngest was identified as conservative. The middle generations both identified as having moderate political views. The full distribution can be seen in Table 1 below.

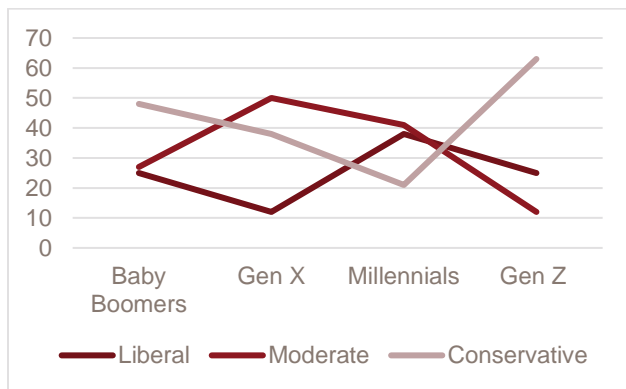
Table 1. Indigenous Political Views by Generation.

	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Millenials	Gen Z
Liberal	25%	12%	38%	25%
Moderate	27%	50%	41%	12%
Conservative	48%	38%	21%	63%

The first research question sought to examine political views from a generational perspective. Over time, it appears that liberal political viewpoints have remained relatively low among Indigenous respondents, from Baby Boomers to Gen Z; however, of the four generational groups surveyed Millennial respondents were most likely to

report liberal political views. Moderate political views appear to have gained popularity from Baby Boomers to Gen X, dropping only slightly for Millennials, but nearly falling off completely with Gen Z. Finally, there appears to be a gradual decline in conservative political views from Baby Boomers to Gen X and on through to Millennials but conservative views appear to be gaining popularity with Gen Z respondents. However, it should be noted that only 8 respondents of the entire Indigenous sample identified as Gen Z (approximately 6% of the sample). These trends across generations can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Indigenous Political Views from a Generational Perspective.



INDIGENOUS POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION BY GENERATION

Among Indigenous respondents, nearly half of all Baby Boomers reported identifying with the Democratic Party (47%). Both Gen X (40%) and Gen Z (57%) most commonly identified their affiliation as independent. The Millennial respondents were evenly split between Democratic Party (41%) and independent (41%) as their most common affiliations. No generational group reported a majority affiliation with the Republican Party.

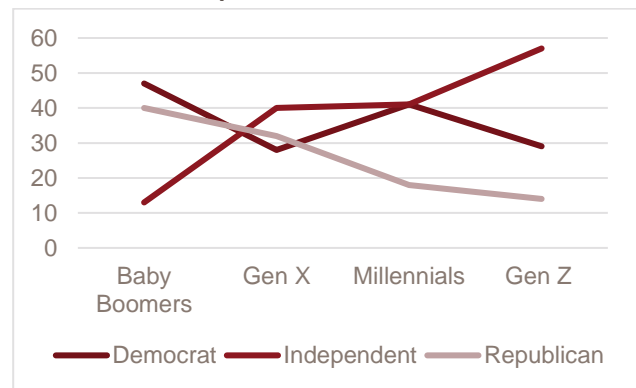
Table 2. Indigenous Political Party Affiliation by Generation.

	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Millenials	Gen Z
Democrat	47%	28%	41%	29%
Independent	13%	40%	41%	57%
Republican	40%	32%	18%	14%

The second research question examines Indigenous political party affiliation from a generational perspective. It appears that independent affiliation is steadily growing across generations, from Baby Boomers to Gen Z. Conversely, affiliation with the Republican Party appears to

be steadily declining across generations. Democratic Party affiliation has wavered across generation, losing favor from Baby Boomers to Gen X, yet rebounding from Gen X to Millennials, and finally falling off again from Millennials to Gen Z. Overall, it appears that independent affiliation is most common across generations in comparison to either Democratic or Republican political parties, as seen in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Indigenous Political Party Affiliation from a Generational Perspective.



ATTITUDES ON ABORTION

Pro-choice (pro-abortion rights). Among the 132 American Indian and Alaska Native respondents in the 2021 wave of the GSS, 51% of respondents indicated “yes” they would consider themselves pro-choice.

Pro-life (anti-abortion rights). Among the 132 American Indian and Alaska Native respondents in the 2021 wave of the GSS, 47% of respondents indicated “yes” they would consider themselves pro-life.

Several items assess whether or not participants think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if...

- There is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby: 71% said yes
- She is married and does not want any more children: 52% said yes
- The woman’s own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy: 90% said yes
- The family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children: 54% said yes
- She becomes pregnant as a result of rape: 80% said yes
- She is not married and does not want to marry the man: 47% said yes
- The woman wants it for any reason: 56% said yes

INDIGENOUS POLITICAL IDEOLOGY, POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION, AND ATTITUDES ON ABORTION

Among Indigenous respondents, 81% of those who identified as having a liberal political view reported they were pro-choice, compared to 49% of moderates and 32% of conservatives. Further, among Indigenous respondents, 70% of those who identified as having a conservative political view reported they were pro-life, compared to 23% of liberals and 43% of moderates. Full breakdown can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Political Ideology x Stance on Abortion.

	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Pro-choice (Pro-abortion rights)	81%	49%	32%
Pro-life (Anti-abortion rights)	23%	43%	70%

Ultimately, 81% of Indigenous liberals identified as pro-choice (pro-abortion rights), while 70% of Indigenous conservatives identified as pro-life (anti-abortion rights).

Among Indigenous respondents, 77% of those who identified as Democrats reported they were pro-choice, compared to only 38% of Independents and 29% of Republicans. Further, among Indigenous respondents, 84% of those who identified as Republicans reported they were pro-life, compared to only 29% of Democrats and 38% of Independents.

Table 4. Political Party Affiliation x Stance on Abortion.

	Democrat	Independent	Republican
Pro-choice (Pro-abortion rights)	77%	38%	29%
Pro-life (Anti-abortion rights)	29%	38%	84%

Ultimately, 77% of Indigenous democrats identified as pro-choice (pro-abortion rights), while 84% of Indigenous republicans identified as pro-life (anti-abortion rights).

Limitations

Political party affiliation and views have been critiqued as inadequate in understanding reproductive politics among communities of color (Theobald, 2017). This work is limited by only viewing the dominant political parties within the U.S. as Democrat, independent, Republican, and liberal, moderate, conservative. Future research should investigate more inclusive and representative measures of

these concepts, particularly among Indigenous communities.

Due to small sample size and underweighting, we were not able to conduct multivariate statistical analysis. This instance is an example of a larger issue of Native representation in quantitative data. Future work should intentionally oversample Indigenous communities to address this data disparity.

While American Indian and Alaska Native communities are certainly not a homogenous group, the GSS fails to ask questions related to tribal affiliation or mixed race status. This overgeneralization of a multitude of cultures erases their distinctive characteristics by lumping everyone into a single monolithic group.

Reproductive activists and scholars contend that reproductive politics cannot be disentangled from the structures of white supremacy and capitalism (Theobald 2017) as they have been shaped by an ongoing history of settler colonialism; however, this has yet to be examined among Indigenous communities in particular. The present study is likewise limited in failing to evaluate white supremacy or capitalism within the confines of the GSS. Future work should examine these structural forces in relation to the political landscape of reproductive politics.

Conclusion

The majority of Native voters have historically supported the Democratic Party; however, political ideology is more complex. Over time, exit polls have found that Native communities tend to favor the middle, designating a moderate political view and holding traditional values. The present study confirmed part of this, in that the majority of Indigenous respondents from the Baby Boomer generation identified as Democrats; however, the majority of Gen X and Gen Z identified as Independents, while Millennials were evenly split between Democrat and Independent. Similarly, Indigenous respondents from Gen X and the Millennial Generation most frequently reported a moderate political ideology, but both the youngest (Gen Z) and the oldest (Baby Boomers) Native respondents most frequently identified as conservative. This aligns with both a moderate political view and holding traditional values as conservative. Future work should distinguish between what the U.S. defines as traditional compared to what Indigenous communities categorize as traditional values, especially in relation to Native tradition and culture.

In a post-Roe v. Wade world, it remains to be seen how Native communities will once again navigate barriers imposed by the failures of the federal government. The present work attempted to set necessary groundwork for Indigenous reproductive justice; however, the political ideologies and parties reflected here fail to adequately represent Native communities or characterize their political participation.

- Future work must continue to develop understanding of American Indian and Alaska Native communities' views and participation in federal policy decisions and advocacy, particularly in light of ongoing settler colonialism and present day white supremacy.
- Similarly, as Native Nations are their own sovereign governments, it should also be investigated how political participation in local tribal elections and decisions compare to both state and federal elections and advocacy efforts.
- Lastly, Native Nations are set apart by our commitment to our traditional values and cultures; future work should seek to understand how traditional Indigenous values and cultural congruency influence larger political participation at the tribe, state, and federal levels.

Indigenous communities have a demonstrated history of protecting and advocating for our tribal sovereignty and self-determination. While the Supreme Court may have struck down federal abortion protections, the movement for Indigenous reproductive justice continues.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the NORC Diversity, Racial Equity, and Inclusion Scholars Program (NORC DREI) for this opportunity to have my work on Indigenous Reproductive Justice funded. I am especially grateful for the support of my generous and brilliant cohort, and to all the NORC DREI scholars team, including my mentors Benjamin Schapiro and Dr. Carol Hafford. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Rebecca Berger and Maria Espinoza for their careful coordination, leadership, and guidance throughout the duration of the fellowship. I am honored to be part of the NORC DREI family. Nea'ese!

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