


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “A New and Coherent Strategy?” Presidential attention and rhetoric in the era of Indian self-determination

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## Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of presidential attention and rhetoric on Native issues and peoples during the self-determination era. Using data from all public statements and papers of the presidents from 1969 to 2016, the work analyzes the level of attention and rhetorical frames of each president from Nixon to Obama, with additional comments on Trump. The analysis reveals that most presidents have given relatively little attention to Native issues compared to their overall volume of public statements, with Democratic Presidents Clinton and Obama offering the most attention. In addition, presidents have used very different rhetorical frames to address Native issues and peoples in their public statements. Presidential rhetoric has been characterized by fluctuating attention and frames, and presidents have not consistently supported Nixon’s “new and coherent strategy” throughout the self-determination era.

**Keywords:** presidential rhetoric; Native American; American Indian; self-determination

This special edition of the Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics incorporates research with various approaches for understanding how racial and ethnic politics and the presidency have shaped one another. Several of the works focus on public opinion and support for candidates. Buyuker *et al.* (2020), Jacobsmeier (2020), and Nelson (2021) all find that racial resentment and other discriminatory attitudes, such as xenophobia and sexism, continue to guide public opinions and perceptions of presidents and presidential candidates. Publicly shared attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes can influence perceptions of presidents and candidates, but presidents can also sway public perceptions of racial and ethnic minorities. Presidential attention and language have the potential to inform social and political understandings of issues, policies, and groups. This paper situates and analyzes presidential rhetoric on Native nations and peoples through an analysis of presidents’ public statements in the modern self-determination policy era.

This power of the presidency to shape perceptions can have long-term impacts on policy. In their work, King and Lieberman (2020) propose essential conditions for “Forceful Federalism” and policy transformation under specific aspects of support for civil rights. The contemporary federal policy era of self-determination has some of its origins in the same time period of reform. However, as this paper concludes, limited presidential attention and inconsistent framing of Native peoples and issues may present challenges for coherent federal policy over time.

## Introduction

President Barack Obama visited the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in ND in June 2014, only the eighth time that a sitting president traveled to an Indian country in American history (Trahan, 2014). Obama’s appearance was described by *Indian Country Today*, a Native-oriented media outlet, as one of the most significant story lines of the year for Indian country (ICTMN staff, 2014). Obama reflected on federal Indian policy while there, saying, “...I’m proud that the government-to-government relationship between Washington and tribal nations is stronger than ever.... my administration is determined to partner with tribes, and it’s not something that just happens once in a while. It takes place every day, on just about every issue that touches your lives. And that’s what real nation-to-nation partnerships look like...” (Obama, 2014).<sup>1</sup>

President Obama’s trip to Indian country was noteworthy both for its rarity and because presidents generally do not give a great deal of attention to Native issues in any venue. Obama’s choice of words and his rhetorical support for Native self-determination were also significant for publicly framing Indian policy as a partnership between federal and Native governments. Presidential statements have the potential to shape national conversations and public understandings of groups and issues. Presidential rhetoric may have a particular influence in defining Native political issues because of the historical and legal complexity of federal Indian policy, low levels of public attention, and limited national understanding of Native sovereignty. Obama’s visit, attention, and specific rhetoric signaled the importance of Native issues, called attention to Native sovereignty, and pointed to his support for self-determination.

The U.S. government has formally had a policy of Native self-determination and government-to-government partnership since the 1970s. President Nixon envisioned this new policy era in his “Special Message on Indian Affairs” to Congress when he argued that “the Indian future is determined by Indian acts and Indian decisions.” Nixon contended that this future required both a large-scale change and long-term commitment of the federal government: “We are proposing to break sharply with past approaches to Indian problems. In place of a long series of piecemeal reforms, we suggest a new and coherent strategy...” (Nixon, 1970). During and following Nixon’s administration, major legislation and executive changes supported opportunities for federal-Native partnership and self-determination for Native nations.

Even after 50 years of this overarching policy framework, Obama’s attention and language generated media attention as being notable. Presidents in this modern policy era do not appear to have given much attention to Native issues. Further, ad-hoc

observations from the media and studies of individual presidents suggest variation in their rhetoric on Native policy issues. This project seeks to systematically investigate the volume of attention modern presidents have given to Native peoples and issues in the self-determination era and to identify patterns in the rhetorical frames across their administrations. The work presented here connects a range of literature on presidential rhetoric, race and politics, and Native politics and history. The research offers a quantitative and qualitative analysis of data on all public statements of presidents from Nixon on. Ultimately, the data show that while attention has been limited, there has been variation in both how and how much presidents have publicly discussed Native peoples and issues in the self-determination era. The lack of attention and coherent messages on Native issues can present challenges for national awareness of and commitment to self-determination.

### Presidential rhetoric

There are multiple perspectives on the role of presidential rhetoric. A classic view of the presidents' "power to persuade" through rhetoric is attributed to Neustadt (1980) and his work *Presidential Power*, first published in 1960. Neustadt argued that presidents primarily seek to influence Congress, with additional efforts aimed at the executive branch. Later, Kernell (1997) elaborated on the possibility that presidents could "go public" and influence the general public, not just Congress. This strategy could make future negotiations and compromise with Congress harder, though. Other work has addressed the influence of presidents over the executive branch (Beasley, 2010).

Other research explores the limitations of presidents' power to persuade the public. Canes-Wrone (2006) found that presidents are only likely to appeal to the public in order to pressure Congress when their preferences are already very similar to public opinion. Edwards (2009) argued that presidents cannot change public opinion with their rhetoric, but instead capitalize on existing public support and strategically take advantage of particular opportunities. These works generally refer to salient issues that are well known to the general public and political elites. Presidents can use rhetoric in their efforts to influence Congress, direct the Executive branch, leverage existing public support, and set the national agenda.

Presidential rhetoric may have a different role with issues that are not salient or well-understood. Native issues are rarely well-known at a national level and do not often connect to pre-existing mainstream public opinions. Native policy questions are not often part of partisan platforms either. Specific issues may sometimes generate larger public or political attention, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, but that is infrequent. Dramatic changes in federal policy over time and the complexity of the status of Native nations as sovereign entities further complicates and confuses public and political understandings and makes the words and attention of the president more influential in this arena.

Presidential rhetoric has the power to bring attention to specific issues, construct and reconstruct terms and ideas, and define political reality (Zarefsky, 1986, 2004; Tulis, 1987). From this perspective, the power of presidential language lies in its potential to bring issues to light and develop collective understandings over time.

The president's capacity to command national attention and offer a single message offers a unique opportunity for leadership and influence over political conversations and direction. For example, there is a growing body of work that explores the role and trends of presidential rhetoric on race and civil rights. Scholars find that while presidents do not talk about racial issues frequently when they do it can shape national agendas, policy outcomes, and public understandings of the issues—even if this change might take place over several administrations (Pauley, 2001; Coe and Schmidt, 2012; Price, 2016; Angelo, 2019; Tillery, 2019).

Still, much of this research concludes that presidents often avoid explicit discussions of racial issues. Some work centers on specific administrations, such as investigations of Obama's racial legacy (Price, 2016; Tillery, 2019). Other scholars offer comparative assessments and trajectories across administrations (Angelo, 2019; Pauley, 2001). Coe and Schmidt (2012) conducted a comprehensive analysis of presidential attention to racial groups and issues in major addresses from 1933 to 2011. They found that only about one-third of these major speeches included a mention of race, and: "...those addresses that do so almost always do so in passing rather than in detail" (621). Presidents often mention race in a list of identity categories, rather than in a meaningful policy statement. Coe and Schmidt (2012, 618) found that Democratic presidents were twice as likely to address issues of race overall.

Studies of presidential rhetoric on race tend to focus on civil rights more broadly and/or African Americans. Specific mentions of Native peoples or issues, by the researchers or by the presidents under review, are rare. Significantly, Coe and Schmidt's (2012, 622) study found that most presidential mentions of racial groups in major addresses were related to the black/white binary, with extremely few references to Latinos, Asian Americans, or American Indians. The existing literature indicates that presidential attention to Native issues will likely be very low, but also points to a need for a systematic analysis.

Presidents' attention to and rhetoric on racial groups and issues shapes national conversations, understandings of identities and issues, and policy decisions and outcomes. When presidents raise issues or mention specific identity groups, it can draw the public's attention; when presidents avoid mentioning groups or issues, it can imply that they are not worthy of attention or resources. The linguistic frames used in presidential rhetoric impact political and social constructions of group identities, specific issues, and policy. Presidential attention can also direct the attention, resources, and direction of federal programs. Presidential rhetoric may be particularly important for issues connected to the unique political situation of Native nations.

### Distinct status of native nations

The concept of "American Indians" or "Native Americans" as a single group is itself a social and political construction. Unlike other minority groups in the United States, Native nations are distinct *nations* and are sovereign, independent political entities (Wilkins and Kiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011, 33). Hundreds of Native nations existed in North America before any European arrival. There was no common understanding of identity among them, but colonial administrators categorized and often treated indigenous groups in common. "By classifying all these many peoples as *Indians*,

whites categorized the variety of cultures and societies as a single entity for the purposes of description and analysis, thereby neglecting or playing down the social and cultural diversity of Native Americans then-and now-for the convenience of simplified understanding” (Berkhofer, 1978, 3). Federal policies have typically been built on this uniform understanding and treatment of Native peoples.

Socially constructed ideas of groups, policies, and problems are created by a wide range of historical, cultural, and political influences (Schneider and Ingram, 1993, 335). The role of presidential rhetoric is one piece of the social and political construction of race, groups, and policy. The broader institutionalization of race and identity has been central in American history, with ideas of “whiteness” and “otherness” justifying the seizure of territory and the dominance of white populations. Conceptions of race and shifting boundaries of whiteness have determined access to specific rights throughout the history of the United States, such as the ability to work, where to live, or ones’ rights in the court system (Omi and Winant, 2015). Social constructions are institutionalized in laws and regulations, but also evolve over time as social and political elites—such as presidents—incorporate new frames and meanings (Schneider and Ingram, 1993, 1997; Yanow, 2003; Omi and Winant, 2015). The historical overview below illustrates how different dominant social and political frames have defined Native nations and issues across different policy eras. The evolving historical constructions of Native identity and federal policy form the basis of familiar stereotypes and rhetorical frames that remain in use through the present day.

In the colonial and revolutionary eras, Native nations were treated as foreign nations. Practical realities meant that the British Empire (and later the United States) made treaties with Native nations to acquire territory and maintain peace (Castille, 2006, 4; Wilkins and Kiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011). These treaties recognized the sovereignty of Native nations and their capacity to enter into government-to-government relationships, although the federal government would later fall back on its agreements. Treaty arrangements form the foundation of the federal trust doctrine under which the federal government is obligated to respect the reserved rights of the Native nations and uphold treaty terms (Wilkins and Kiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011, 33–37; Kauanui, 2018, xvi). Even with treaties, Native nations and peoples were widely stereotyped as inferior, uncivilized, and the opposites of the Christian and deserving white Europeans and Americans (Berkhofer, 1978; Mihesuah, 1996; Bobo and Tuan, 2006; Omi and Winant, 2015).

As the white settler population and conflict over territory grew, stereotypes of Native peoples shifted to hostile, violent, and savage, reinforcing ideas of whites as superior. Negative frames helped to justify continued federal oppression and dispossession of Native peoples throughout the 1800s (Berkhofer, 1978; Bobo and Tuan, 2006). By the later part of the 19th century, Native nations no longer posed a military threat and many Native peoples were isolated on reservations and subject to federal administration (Castille, 2006). With conflicts and threats diminished, social and political rhetorical frames evolved to characterize Native peoples as conquered and dependent. Federal policy promoted assimilation and an end to federal recognition and resources for tribes (Bobo and Tuan, 2006; Mihesuah, 1996). By the early 1900s, Native peoples were portrayed as part of a historical, “vanishing” race and

the Native population was at an all-time low (Berkhofer, 1978; Mihesuah, 1996; Deloria, 1998; Castille, 2006; O'Brien, 2018).

The federal attempt to eliminate tribes was unsuccessful. The resilience and persistence of Native peoples, despite gross oppression and disadvantage, helped lead to federal policy change and renewed recognition of tribal political status through the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934 which allowed for limited aspects of “home rule” (Castille, 2006, 8). This policy era emphasized federal responsibility toward Native nations. Federal policy shifted in the 1940s toward termination and a goal of ending tribal recognition, but would then change again during the broader civil rights era. By the late 1960s and 1970s, there was renewed federal attention to recognize Native rights thanks to the activism of tribes, organizations, and individuals as well as national and international political trends (Nagel, 1996; Castille, 2006; Johnson, 2009; Wilkins and Kiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011).

The modern policy era, in place since the 1970s, supports self-determination for Native nations. Self-determination policies recognize tribes’ rights to make their own decisions, operate as independent political entities, and administer some federal programs. There are currently 574 Native nations that have a formal relationship with the federal government (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2020). This status, established through treaties or other political processes, recognizes each nation’s distinct political existence and rights and carries certain obligations and services that the federal government must provide to Native nations as part of the trust relationship. However, the federal government’s ongoing commitment, support, and resources for self-determination over the past 50 years have been critiqued as inconsistent (Trafzer, 2009; Wilkins and Kiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011).

Presidential attention and rhetoric are connected to the social construction of Native identities and issues as well as steering federal prioritizations, decision making, and resource allocation. The status of Native nations remains poorly understood by the non-Native public and many politicians due to the “erasure” of Native peoples and contemporary presence in much of American history and education (Kauanui, 2018; O'Brien, 2018). The mainstream media also tends to report simply and negatively on Native issues, focusing on problems like alcoholism, poverty, and gambling, and conflating complex political issues without context or background (Larson, 2006; Flaherty, 2013). The political realities of Native nations and peoples are also obscured when they are referenced as a minority group, as other minority groups do not share the same political status or rights.

Politicians at a national level do not often have a strong incentive to work on, learn about, or even take positions on Native issues. The national Native population is small, only about 2% of the national population, and many Native peoples live on isolated reservations (US Census Bureau, 2019). Voting participation rates vary across different Native nations, but are often low. There is also not a consistent partisan affiliation across the larger Native population (Wilkins and Kiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011). For presidents in the self-determination era, their self-interested focus on election or re-election is therefore not likely to lead to strong attention to Indian policy. Instead, when they do give attention to Indian policy, it is “...often a symbolic gesture, aimed at impressing other, larger constituencies” (Castille, 2006, 57).

The dynamics of rhetoric on Native issues on the national political platform and across history are complicated by dramatic shifts in political and social conceptions over time. The lack of mainstream attention or strong partisan connections in the modern era means that Native issues are unlikely to be well understood by national politicians. Instead, when presidents address Native issues it appears more likely that they will fall on rhetorical frames based on history, such as that of federal responsibility. It is also possible that presidents may avoid frames focused on Native policy at all, but instead incorporate frames that are more symbolic and policy neutral or tied to pleasing other constituent groups.

This lack of motivation to address Native issues might change in the future. Some areas of the country have larger Native populations and Native issues are more salient. There has been a recent increase in Native men and women elected to state and federal offices (Manning, 2018). National changes in voting dynamics raised the prominence of Native issues at the presidential level in 2020 as the Native vote had the potential to influence presidential election results in seven key swing states (Myong, 2019). In August 2019, eight Democratic presidential candidates participated in the first Native American Presidential Forum. This level of attention and interest was a remarkable change from the past. Candidates at the event were "...forced to address things that don't get talked about very much, like treaty rights and the role of the Indian health system and that sort of thing" (Democratic Presidential Candidates Attend Native American Forum 2019).

Despite Nixon's statement 50 years ago, Native policy issues appear to remain "things that don't get talked about very much." Self-determination remains the formal policy frame, but it appears that presidential language may not have emphasized or supported this direction. This project evaluates how much public attention presidents in the modern policy era have actually devoted to Native issues. In addition, rhetorical frames are analyzed to determine what frames are used when presidents do address Native concerns. Presidential attention and language matter because of their power to shape political and social constructions of Native peoples and issues and influence federal policy commitments.

### Hypotheses and methodology

The discussion above leads to two key hypotheses. The first hypothesis predicts that presidential attention to Native issues in public statements is expected to be low, but Democratic presidents are expected to be more likely than Republicans to mention Native issues based on their more overt attention to racial issues overall. Exactly how low is unclear, but it is certainly expected to be far below the one-third of major statements that Coe and Schmidt (2012) found mentioned any minority group. The second hypothesis predicts that when presidents do address Native issues, rather than explicit self-determination language, they are more likely to use policy neutral or symbolic frames or those that fit with their broader platforms.

This project offers an assessment of all public statements by presidents in the self-determination era to test these hypotheses. The data were gathered from the American Presidency Project's (APP) searchable database of all public presidential papers and statements (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>). The APP offers a



consistent and comparable source for all presidents in the period of study, from Nixon to Obama.<sup>2</sup> For reasons addressed below, President Trump is discussed in a separate section. All public statements in the APP were searched from 1969 to 2016. All statements, rather than selected speeches, were used to capture a holistic view of presidential attention. Previous studies have noted how rarely presidents speak about racial issues, much less Native issues, but these studies have often limited the speeches that they analyzed (Coe and Schmidt, 2012; Price, 2016; Angelo, 2019). This broader universe of data will show if presidents are open to mentioning Native issues in minor speeches and statements overall, even if they are reluctant to include them in major addresses.

A qualitative search was conducted based on three key terms and pairings: “American Indian,” “Native American,” or the pairing of “Indian” AND “self-determination.” Positive results incorporated any or all three of these key terms, once or multiple times. Statements were reviewed to ensure that the mention of Native peoples or issues was directly from the President, not from another speaker at the same event. Spurious results were also discarded, such as references to native-born American residents, the state of IN, and Asian Indian issues. Each statement counted as a single unit, even with multiple mentions. When irrelevant documents were discarded and duplicates consolidated, there were 676 relevant independent statements from the 1969 to 2016 period.

Rhetorical frames were also analyzed. Each statement was analyzed and categorized according to a *primary* or dominant rhetorical frame, with the recognition that there might be additional frames in a single statement. The categories for rhetorical frames were synthesized from a range of literature on Native politics and histories, with a focus on the contemporary policy era and likely frames. As Schneider and Ingram wrote, social constructions are created through a dynamic and ongoing process involving “the constant interaction of events, people, media, politics, religion, science, literature, music, and others...” (1997, 106–7). This wide range of influences presented a challenge for crafting encompassing and meaningful categories, but literature on Native history and politics support the synthesis of a number of common stereotypes and political frames for Native issues over time. These rhetorical frames reflect the historical trajectory covered above as well as connecting to literature on presidential rhetoric on race more broadly. The rhetorical frame categories are below:

- *Federal responsibility*: Statements focused on the federal government’s obligation to care for and offer services to Native individuals or nations, emphasized federal administration *of* (not with) tribes, and placed the authority of the federal government *above* that of Native nations (Deloria and Lytle, 1984; Corntassel and Witmer, 2008; Wilkins and Kiwetinesipi Stark, 2011).
- *Gaming*: Statements tied to federal interest in gaming development on reservations after the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act; work in American Indian politics suggests that discussion of (any) Indian policy is frequently tied to Indian gaming after 1988 (Corntassel and Witmer, 2008; Flaherty, 2013).
- *Identity*: (*policy neutral*) Statements included terms American Indian or Native American as an identifier of a group, individual, program, or title with no additional references or policy statements (Coe and Schmidt, 2012).



- *Indigenous: (policy neutral)* Statements referenced the distinction between populations descended from immigrants and indigenous inhabitants of the Americas as a statement of fact, with no additional references or policy statements.
- *Minority:* Statements referred to Native peoples in a list or group of other minority groups, with similar characteristics, needs, or concerns (Skrentny, 2002; Wilkins and Kiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011). Statements may have policy implications or be policy neutral.
- *National heritage/historical: (symbolic/policy neutral)* Statements discussed Native peoples and nations as part of shared (and sometimes appropriated) national heritage and/or culture; presented Native nations as historical artifacts, distanced from contemporary politics (Berkhofer, 1978; Mihesuah, 1996; Deloria, 1998; Kauanui, 2018; O'Brien, 2018).
- *Needs:* Statements identified specific policy needs of Native nations or peoples as unique and specific; policy context might range broadly, e.g. combating sexual violence on reservations or building sustainable reservation economies (Harvard Project on American Indian Development, 2007; Jorgensen, 2007; Wilkins and Kiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011).
- *Self-Determination:* Statements emphasized self-determination, sovereignty, self-government, and/or a government-to-government relationship; referenced Native authority and/or the federal government working *with* tribes as partners (Deloria and Lytle, 1984; Harvard Project on American Indian Development, 2007; Corn tassel and Witmer, 2008; Wilkins and Kiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2011).

As coding progressed, two additional categories were added to account for a small number of unanticipated results, both of which are policy neutral:

- *Exemption:* Statement included legal style notes or disclaimers related to exempting Native lands, actions of tribal governments, specific federal programs, or similar.
- *Other:* Statement did not fit into other categories.

Each statement was coded by the principal researcher and assigned a primary rhetorical frame. Three undergraduate research assistants were assigned samples to independently code. Despite the complexity of the language used and the expectation of a single primary theme, inter-rater reliability ratings were relatively high. There was a 76% inter-rater reliability overall. One of the undergraduates coded almost the entire dataset, with a 78% in agreement rate. The main area of disagreement for the coders was between self-determination and federal responsibility, often because there was language from both frames included in a single statement.

### Presidential attention

The first hypothesis predicted limited presidential attention to Native issues. [Figure 1](#) presents data on presidential statements that mention Native peoples or issues annually.<sup>3</sup> The first measure, with the scale on the left-hand axis, shows the raw

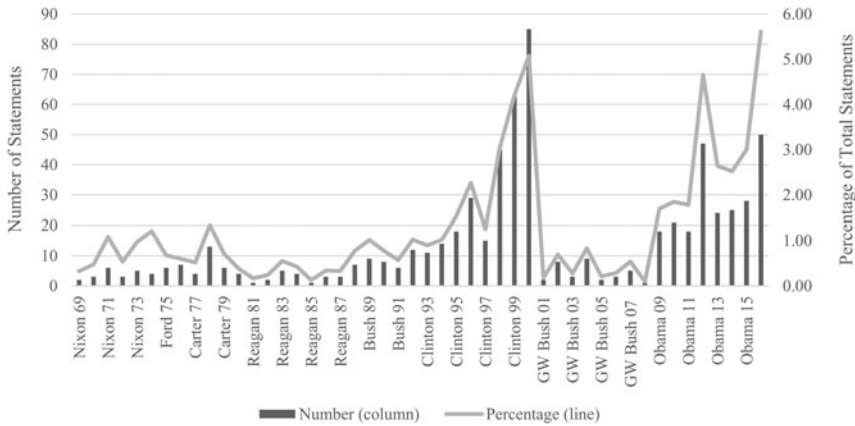


Fig. 1. Presidential statements with mentions of Native peoples or issues, by President and year.

number of statements as a bar for each year. The second measure, the solid gray line measured on the right-hand axis, displays the public statements that mention Native peoples as a percentage of all public statements issued in a given year. The percentage measure ensures that the raw numbers are not misleading due to different volumes of statements per year. For example, Nixon averaged around 575 per year, while Clinton averaged almost 1,350 per year. Both measurements are fairly consistent.

The data in Figure 1 confirms the first hypothesis: presidents offer very low attention to Native issues. In fact, there are 3 years with only a single presidential statement mentioning Native peoples or issues (Reagan in 1981 and 1985, George W. Bush in 2008), and many years with just a handful of statements (Nixon, Carter, Reagan, and George W. Bush). Only two presidents, Clinton and Obama, mention Native issues or peoples at a number and percentage notably higher than their peers. Clinton had the highest number of statements in one year, 85 (2000), and Obama had the highest percentage in one year, 5.61% (2016). No president made Native issues a major focus of their statements, but Figure 1 shows that there is indeed a variation in public attention between presidents. Table 1 displays the average yearly percentage of each president’s statements including Native peoples or issues.

The second component of the first hypothesis was that Democrats would be more likely to address Native issues. Even with a limited number of presidents to evaluate, Table 1 makes it clear that the two most recent Democratic presidents, Clinton and Obama, were more likely to mention Native peoples or issues than any other presidents in the time period. The third Democrat in the study, Carter, rarely mentioned Native issues. His numbers are similar to the Republican presidents’. With the exception of Carter, this aligns with Coe and Schmidt’s (2012, 618) finding that Democratic presidents gave twice the amount of attention to race compared to their Republican counterparts in major addresses. In fact, Clinton and Obama gave triple the volume of attention to Native issues compared to their counterparts.

The number of times presidents mention Native peoples or issues is very low. No president mentions them in more than 3% of public statements and most are far

**Table 1.** Average yearly percentage of total presidential statements with mentions of Native peoples or issues

President	Percentage
Nixon	0.77
Ford	0.64
Carter	0.74
Reagan	0.37
Bush	0.85
Clinton	2.41
GW Bush	0.39
Obama	2.97

below 1%. Presidential rhetoric has the power to raise issues to national attention and conversations, shifting public and political awareness of issues and groups. Not mentioning groups or issues keeps them from becoming a more regularized part of national discussions and awareness. Native issues are not a major part of any modern presidents' agenda, although Clinton and Obama did give significantly more public attention than the others.

### Rhetorical frames

The second hypothesis related to the rhetorical frames that presidents used when discussing Native peoples or issues. Each of the 676 public statements was categorized according to the primary rhetorical frame, as discussed above. [Table 2](#) presents the data by category for each president as a percentage of all statements mentioning Native issues. The gray shaded boxes represent the most commonly used frame(s) for each president.

The data reveal that the eight presidents used different frames for public statements on Native issues. Self-determination is only the most frequent frame for Nixon, and ties for the top two for Reagan along with federal responsibility. Presidents Ford, Bush, and Bush used the symbolic and policy-neutral national heritage frame most often. Carter's top two frames were the minority and federal responsibility. Clinton most often used the frame of needs and Obama's most frequent frame was a minority. Some of the proposed frames, such as gaming and indigenous, were rarely used at all.

Not only have presidents offered very limited attention to Native issues overall, but they have not continued to use language that emphasizes self-determination. Instead, symbolic and policy-neutral frames or connections to other minority groups are more common. Generally, modern presidents are not using their rhetorical platform to emphasize and promote self-determination and Native authority. Nationally, there is already limited attention to and understanding of Native nations and policy issues; this misses an opportunity for a coherent, substantive message. This has implications

**Table 2.** Percentage of statements by each President with mentions of Native peoples or issues, by primary rhetorical frame

	Nixon	Ford	Carter	Reagan	Bush	Clinton	GW Bush	Obama
Exemption						2 (<1%)	2 (6%)	8 (4%)
Federal responsibility	4 (17%)	3 (23%)	<b>7 (26%)</b>	<b>7 (27%)</b>	6 (17%)	28 (10%)	6 (18%)	15 (7%)
Gaming						2 (<1%)		
Identity	4 (17%)		2 (7%)		4 (11%)	26 (9%)	3 (9%)	9 (4%)
Indigenous			3 (11%)			14 (5%)		15 (7%)
Minority	1 (4%)	2 (15%)	<b>7 (26%)</b>	4 (15%)	1 (3%)	23 (8%)	4 (12%)	<b>109 (47%)</b>
National heritage		<b>5 (39%)</b>	4 (15%)	6 (23%)	<b>15 (43%)</b>	33 (11%)	<b>12 (36%)</b>	34 (15%)
Needs	5 (22%)		2 (7%)		4 (11%)	<b>128 (44%)</b>	1 (3%)	26 (11%)
Self-determination	<b>9 (39%)</b>	3 (23%)	2 (7%)	<b>7 (27%)</b>	5 (14%)	22 (8%)	5 (15%)	14 (6%)
Other				2 (8%)		10 (3%)		1 (<1%)
Total	<b>23</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>231</b>

for broader political and social constructions of Native peoples and issues and makes it harder to develop a coherent, consistent federal commitment to self-determination. The next subsections briefly discuss the results for each president along with the broader context of their presidencies.

### *Nixon (1969–74)*

President Nixon left a complex and sometimes contradictory legacy on many counts, including Indian policy (Champagne, 2009). Scholars have attributed Nixon's interest in Native issues to his Quaker background, his often-mentioned mentor and college football coach, a member of the La Jolla Band of Mission Indians, and/or political pragmatism. In the context of the 1960s, Nixon may have viewed Native nations as a relatively easy and non-threatening "minority" group to support that would be palatable to his white supporters (Castille, 1998; Johnson, 2009).

Nixon publicly rejected the policy of termination in support of self-determination and federal partnership in his 1970 Special Message on Indian Affairs (Nixon, 1970; Champagne, 2009). Despite the challenges of the Watergate scandal, partisan conflict, and somewhat mixed messages in racial (and Native) politics, Nixon's administration oversaw executive actions in support of Native rights, including land rights (Castille, 1998). Under Nixon, Congress passed laws that expanded tribal self-government and the ability to administer their own programs, such as the Indian Education Act (1972) and Indian Financing Act (1974) (Deloria and Lytle, 1984; Castille, 1998).

Nixon alone had a single dominant rhetorical frame of self-determination. This is consistent with his larger goal of major policy change. Nixon is also the only president who directed the major of his statements on Native issues to Congress, which connects to his support for major policy changes that formed the foundations of the self-determination era.<sup>4</sup> Nixon did not have many statements mentioning Native peoples and issues, but when he did it was often to publicly promote self-determination.

### *Ford (1974–76)*

President Ford assumed office upon Nixon's resignation. Ford did not appear to have a strong position on Indian policy. He signed the landmark Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, which formalized tribal administration and control over many government programs, but this "...was obviously not a Ford initiative but a direct policy carry-over from the Nixon administration" (Castille, 1998, 161). Ford offered quiet support for smaller federal actions to expand or return federal Indian land holdings to Native nations (Johnson, 2009). The primary rhetorical theme of Ford's presidency was "national heritage," a symbolic and policy-neutral frame. Ford had the lowest number of statements mentioning Native issues of any president, only 13.

### *Carter (1977–80)*

President Carter offered little substantive or sustained attention to Indian issues, to the frustration of Native leaders and activists, and counter to the hypothesis on

Democratic attention. The data on rhetorical frames shows that he utilized a scattered range of rhetorical language, with no strongly dominant frame. The most common frames were “federal responsibility” and “minority,” but even those together are only one-half of his statements. Carter did not issue any formal message or directive on Indian policy during his tenure as president and did not appear to have a specific agenda (Castille, 2006, 22). The inconsistent use of rhetorical frames may indicate that Carter did not have a strong understanding or interest in supporting self-determination.

Carter’s administration oversaw cuts in spending that negatively impacted tribal programs. Congress passed several bills related to Native nations under Carter, including the Indian Child Welfare Act, Indian Religious Freedom Act, and Tribally Controlled College Assistance Act (all in 1978). There were criticisms from Native peoples that some of this legislation, particularly the Indian Religious Freedom Act, lacked any “teeth” or enforcement capabilities (Johnson, 2009, 197). Despite the hypothesis that Democratic presidents are more likely to give attention to minority peoples and issues, Carter did not. His historical record shows little attention or commitment to self-determination.

### *Reagan (1981–88)*

President Reagan entered office with experience as governor of CA, a state with a large number of federally recognized Indian tribes. Reagan publicly called for support of self-determination and opposed termination (Johnson, 2009). However, Reagan’s push for budget cuts and actions such as the appointment of James Watt (an opponent of tribal sovereignty) as Secretary of the Interior appeared counter to that public support. The dramatic reduction in funding for reservation programs meant a rapid decline in services and an increase in unemployment on reservations during his tenure (Deloria and Lytle, 1984; Cook 1996; Castille, 2006).

The primary rhetorical frames used by Reagan were “federal responsibility” and “self-determination,” connecting to his broader agenda of the devolution of federal programs and powers and cuts to federal spending. For Reagan, self-determination meant tribes finding means of self-funding and a reduction of federal responsibility on reservations. This reduction in resources was soundly criticized by many Native leaders, who saw it as a move away from real partnership and upholding the trust relationship. Under Reagan’s administration, Congress passed Amendments to the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1986) and the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (1988). Reagan still had relatively few statements that mentioned Native issues, but was relatively consistent and substantive when he did.

### *George H.W. Bush (1989–92)*

George H.W. Bush served as Reagan’s Vice President before being elected as President. He had relatively low numbers of statements that mentioned Native issues. Bush’s primary rhetorical frame for Native issues was “national heritage,” a largely symbolic frame that emphasizes Native peoples’ place in American history. Bush largely followed Reagan’s lead in many areas of policy, but quietly reversed some

of the budget cuts of the previous administration that had so deeply impacted the Indian country (Castille, 2006). Congressional actions under Bush included the passage of the National Museum of the American Indian Act (1989), Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), and the Native American Languages Act (1990). In addition, Bush issued the order that established the designation of November as National Indian Heritage Month in 1990. Bush's attention to and action on Native issues focused on historical frames (Castille, 2006; Johnson, 2009).

### *Clinton (1993–2000)*

President Clinton's attention to Native peoples and issues more than tripled that of his predecessors, both in terms of raw numbers and as a percentage of all statements. No prior modern president mentioned Native issues more than 35 times; Clinton did so 288 times. The dominant rhetorical frame of his statements was of the specific policy needs of Native peoples, often with references to economic concerns. This frame resonates with Clinton's overall focus on the economy. Clinton invited all tribal leaders to the White House in 1994—the first time that this had been done since 1822. Importantly, he followed through on several of the specific issues and concerns raised by Native leaders, such as issuing executive orders and directives on sacred sites and the distribution of eagle feathers (Johnson, 2009, 212–15).

Throughout his administration, Clinton issued multiple memorandums and presidential directives to the executive branch on Indian policy measures. Clinton also visited Indian Country to draw attention to the needs of Native peoples, going to both the Pine Ridge Reservation and Shiprock in NM (Trahan, 2014). He supported the passage of legislation, such as amendments to the Indian Self-Determination Act in 1994, which supported self-determination (Johnson, 2009, 216). Under Clinton, Congress also passed the Native American Housing Assistance Act (1996), the Omnibus Indian Advancement Act (2000), and the Indian Tribal Economic Development and Contract Encouragement Act (2000).

Clinton's time in office had several controversies and partisan conflicts. While he was much more likely than his predecessors to give attention to minority issues, his actions have been criticized by some as still being overly symbolic and not offering enough substantive outcomes and changes (Pauley, 2001; Coe and Schmidt, 2012, 623; Omi and Winant, 2015). Still, Clinton's administration brought much greater attention and additional resources after the restrictions of the Reagan and Bush eras. Clinton did not often use the frame of self-determination, but his rhetorical emphasis on policy needs for Native nations connects to the trajectory under his administration.

### *George W. Bush (2001–08)*

President George W. Bush offered limited attention to Native issues. He did not appear to have any particular interest or agenda on Indian policy, and his statements often displayed a poor grasp of the concepts of sovereignty and self-determination (Johnson, 2009). The dominant frame Bush used when addressing Native issues was “national heritage,” reverting to the largely symbolic frame that his father had



also used. Congress also gave limited attention to Indian policy during the Bush administration, but passed the Native American Languages Preservation Act in 2006.

### **Barack Obama (2009–16)**

Even before his election, Obama addressed Native issues, visiting Native nations in MT and SD during the Democratic primary (Johnson, 2009, 220). President Obama mentioned Native peoples and issues in a higher percentage of his statements than any of the other presidents studied. He visited the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation and reinstated Clinton's invitations to bring Native leaders to Washington (Trahan, 2014). As president, Obama sometimes referred to his symbolic adoption by the Crow Nation (Mosk, 2008).

One reporter wrote: "Many tribal leaders say that Obama has done more in six years for Native Americans than all of his predecessors combined" (Zezima, 2014). However, Obama most frequently used the rhetorical frame of "minority" when mentioning Native peoples, often including them in a list of minority groups as framing America as a diverse nation, and one in which success should be race-neutral. His use of the minority frame corresponds to broader trends in his administration as the first minority president. While he has been critiqued for avoiding explicit racial frames in terms of policy, Obama publicly mentioned African Americans more than any other president in the modern era (Price, 2016; Tillery, 2019, 79).

Under Obama, Congress passed the reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Act (2010), the Tribal Law and Order Act (2010), and the renewal of the Violence Against Women Act (2013), all of which supported tribal authority. As the leader of the executive branch, Obama oversaw administrative changes in the Department of Justice that supported tribal governmental authority as well as the settlement of the Cobell litigation, a suit over the gross bureaucratic negligence of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in managing trust monies for Native landholders (Cohen, 2011; Horwitz, 2014). Despite commonly using a broader frame of "minority" issues in his rhetoric on Native issues, Obama showed commitment to supporting Native self-determination and oversaw some substantive outcomes.

### **President Trump**

The analysis above covers the administrations of Nixon through Obama. President Trump was kept separate for multiple reasons. At the time of research and writing, Trump is still serving as president. In addition, Trump's use of social media, particularly Twitter, as a mechanism for policy statements is a dramatic change from his predecessors (Laird, 2017; Johnson, 2018; Elorreaga, 2019). In fact, during the Trump administration, the APP incorporated Twitter for the first time. Finally, while Trump did make multiple statements that fell within the frames used for other presidents, he is also the only president who used the terms of interest as a political attack.

The analysis of President Trump's statements included all statements from January 20, 2017, through October 1, 2020. Trump and his team issued a total of 9,105 public statements during that time, 1,350 of which were compiled Tweets. Using the same

search terms and criteria as above, there were 25 independent statements directly from Trump referring to Native peoples or issues, 5 of which were Tweets. Whether the returns are calculated including Tweets (an average of 0.27%) or without (0.26%), Trump's percentage of all statements directly mentioning Native peoples or issues is the lowest of all presidents analyzed.

Trump's statements did not have a consistent frame. The pattern was somewhat similar to Carter's with the variation in types of languages used. Six statements (24%) fell under the category of needs, five (20%) self-determination, four (16%) national heritage and another four under federal responsibility, three (12%) other, two (8%) identification, and one (4%) exemption. The emphasis on specific policy needs comes from two separate issues. One is the issue of violence on reservations, and particularly violence against women, and ties to the launch of the federal Operation Lady Justice. The second major policy issue in Trump's statements was related to the impact of coronavirus on tribal communities, which have seen a particularly adverse impact.

The three statements under "other" were all unique to Trump, as they were specifically framed as insults at his political rival Elizabeth Warren and her claim to Native heritage. Trump had multiple additional Tweets that also contained similar sentiments toward Warren but were not included in the data, because they used the term "Pocahontas" rather than a more formal term. The use of reference to Native identify primarily as a means of attacking a political rival is unique to President Trump, as are many aspects of his presidential rhetoric overall. Trump did offer scattered references to self-determination in his statements, but it was not a central component of his rhetoric on Native issues.

## Discussion and conclusions

What presidents say matters. Presidential rhetoric helps to construct political and social realities, set the national agenda, and define and support federal policy priorities. Presidential rhetoric is just one component of social and political constructions of identities and issues, but it is a powerful one. This analysis shows that modern presidents did not often mention Native peoples or issues in public statements. While presidents may be generally unlikely to make statements mentioning any minority groups, statements explicitly mentioning Native issues were rare. For all but two presidents in the self-determination era, Native peoples or issues were mentioned in less than 1% of all statements and for many, it was under 0.5%. Only Presidents Clinton and Obama were more likely to mention Native issues more (an average of 2.41 and 2.97% of their yearly statements, respectively). The results support the hypothesis that Democratic presidents were more likely to mention Native issues, but it was still clearly not a priority for any president. The low level of public mentions keeps Native issues and peoples from being a regular part of political conversations or understanding, perpetuating a lack of national awareness of Native issues and status.

When presidents did mention Native issues in public statements, most of the references were largely symbolic, and few had substantive connections or implications. With the exception of Nixon and Reagan, modern presidents did not use language connecting to self-determination despite the common policy frame throughout the past 50

years. Instead, presidents were more likely to use symbolic rather than substantive rhetorical frames, or to use language connected to larger policy platforms. Overall, several Republican presidents relied on national heritage as a frame and Democrats were more likely to refer to Native peoples in reference to minority groups, but there were a wide range of rhetorical frames used by (and within) different administrations. For some presidents, specifically Reagan, Clinton, and Obama, their attention and dominant rhetorical frames aligned with their broader policy platforms, goals, and messages as presidents. For others, such as Carter or George W. Bush, there did not appear to be a consistent message or understanding of Native issues.

The variation in rhetorical frames and very few references to self-determination matters for national understandings of Native nations and for federal policy. A lack of emphasis on self-determination undermines awareness and support for the “coherent strategy” that Nixon envisioned in 1970. Presidential rhetoric holds power in framing political reality and setting the political agenda, so this runs counter to offering consistent attention, resources, and support for Native self-determination. Native nations’ sovereign status and partnership with the federal government under the self-determination era are often poorly understood by politicians and the general public alike. Presidents have the opportunity to offer a consistent message and language to help frame social and political understandings of groups and policies. The absence of references to support for self-determination, relevant policies, and tribal authority misses this opportunity for presenting public support and a unified understanding of modern Indian policy.

The work presented here contributes to a stronger understanding of presidential rhetoric on Native peoples and issues in the self-determination era. A single policy era implies coherence, but instead, there has been a relative lack of attention combined with rhetorical shifts from administration to administration. This lack of attention and sustained commitment to self-determination is concerning because of the need for partnership and commitment from the federal government to truly support and respect self-determination policies. Perhaps future presidents will offer sustained attention to self-determination, but this has not been true throughout the past 50 years.

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## Notes

**1** This paper incorporates the terms *Native*, *Native nations*, *American Indian*, *Native American*, *Indian policy*, and *Indian country*. It is preferable to use the title that indigenous people call themselves for each individual nation. However, as this work refers to statements and policies aimed at all formally recognized indigenous groups in the United States an encompassing term is needed; listing all recognized nations would be impractical. *Native* is used to indicate indigenous, pre-existing status (Cornstassel and Witmer, 2008; Trazfer, 2009). *Native nations* refer to American Indian political entities as an encompassing term,

rather than tribe because tribe, while collectively commonly used, can have the ethnocentric connotation of being primal and non-white (Nagel, 1996; Cornstassel and Witmer, 2008, xiii – xvii). *Nation* is more appropriate and denotes political sovereignty (Wilkins and Kiwetinopinesik Stark, 2011). *Native peoples* collectively refer to all indigenous political groups in the modern United States. *Native American* and *American Indian* are also commonly used terms, although both are problematic. Indian is a misnomer in its entirety, based on Columbus' error in thinking he had reached India. Native American has at times been used to describe anyone born in present America (Cornstassel and Witmer, 2008, xiii-xiv; Carney and Stuckey, 2015, 167). *American Indian* or *Indian* is the most common federally used identifier and is sometimes used here (e.g. Bureau of Indian Affairs). *Indian policy* denotes federal laws, regulations, and administrative institutions that form the legal and political relationship and obligations between the federal government and Native nations. *Indian country* refers to the territory controlled by the Native nations, often also called reservations (Wilkins and Kiwetinopinesik Stark, 2011). Quotations retain the terminology used by the original author.

2 Some scholars start the self-determination era with President Johnson, but most note its beginning with Nixon. For reference, Johnson used the word "American Indian" 13 times and referenced Indian "self-determination" 5 times during his full administration in public statements.

3 For the purposes of analysis, the data is broken apart by year. The figures and tables do not include partial years. This means that in the partial month of January, outgoing presidents' statements are not evaluated. The two primarily affected are Clinton and Ford. In Clinton's last January, he issued 116 public documents; 8 mentioned Native peoples or issues. Only data for Nixon is included for 1974 (he resigned in August) for the purpose of having one president per year. This leaves out the 4 mentions made by Ford in 1974. Leaving these statements out of the data does not significantly alter the analysis or conclusions.

4 While not fully covered here, the primary audience for each statement was also categorized and cross-coded by the principal research and three undergraduate research assistants, with inter-rater reliability of over 90%. Nixon was the only president whose dominant audience was Congress; for all other presidents the most common audience was the public.

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