

Native Visibility Power Project

Findings based on Focus Groups

June 11, 2024



Celinda Lake

Methodology

On behalf of IllumiNative, Lake Research Partners conducted 10 virtual focus groups from October 12 to 25, 2023. Focus group participants were recruited across the following states: Arizona, California, Minnesota, New Mexico, Nevada, New York, and Wisconsin.

Participants were recruited to represent a mix of ages (18 to 26 in the Gen Z groups and 27 to 70 in the rest), educational attainment (more college-educated were recruited for the Independent/Republican suburban moms group), party identification, ideology, employment status, household income, urbanicity and parental status (except the Independent/Republican suburban moms group), and marital status. Participants were screened to be registered voters and were not invited to participate if they were strong Republicans, or very conservative.

Composition

Black women

Gen Z people of color, mixed gender

Asian American/Pacific Islander voters, mixed gender

Black men

White voters who live within 200 miles of a tribal casino, mix of those who gamble and those who don't, mixed gender

Latino voters

White non-college-educated men who frequently watch sports and white non-college-educated women ages 50+

White Gen Z voters, mixed gender

White Independent/Republican suburban moms, lean college-educated

Latina voters



The Big Picture

- After talking to non-Native people about their familiarity with Native peoples and a range of issues that impact Native American individuals, communities, and nations, **the invisibility of contemporary Native Americans still exists**. But largely, focus group participants say that **this invisibility is unacceptable**.
- Throughout the discussions, participants voice a strong thread that **Native peoples were treated wrongly, and it is critical to acknowledge that and teach children and future generations accurate information about Native peoples in the past and present**.
- Participants volunteer **widespread and ubiquitous misconceptions, stereotypes, misinformation, and disinformation about Native peoples** throughout the discussions and across the groups.
- Participants believe that **education and social media can be major avenues for correcting and reshaping non-Natives' perceptions of Native Americans**. They also believe that **we all have a role to play in surmounting and minimizing stereotypes about Native peoples**.



Differences Across Non-Natives

- **We observed some differences by state, and proximity to Native Americans certainly can, but does not always translate to increased bias.** Many participants in Minnesota and the Southwest (Arizona, New Mexico, and Nevada) articulate a more well-rounded and dynamic familiarity with Native individuals and communities. However, white people who live near casinos also have a lot more exposure. They perceive their exposure to Native peoples as positive, but they have some misinformation and negative information that tends to dominate their views.
- **Black men and women and Asian American Pacific Islanders appear to be the best audiences to seek allyship with** as they relate to a lot of the issues and struggles Native Americans face in this country and understand the need for solutions.
- Out of the groups we conducted, **white voters near a tribal casino and white non-college-educated folks need the most moving in their mindset on these topics.**





General Views and Knowledge

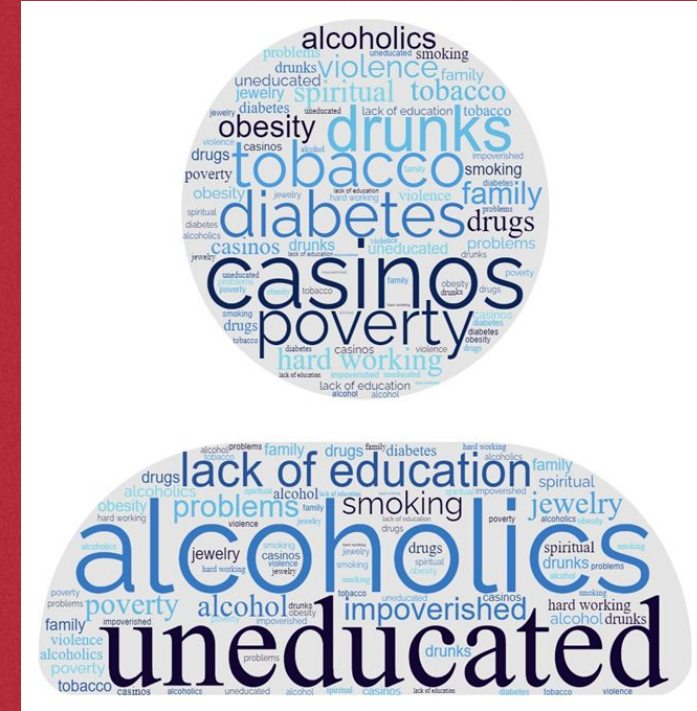
- Participants report hearing a range of amounts of information about Native Americans. **Some say they hear about them often, some say only a little bit, and others say they hear nothing at all.**
 - Notably, a majority of those who live within 200 miles of a tribal casino say they hear about Native Americans often, specifically about gaming laws, the poor conditions Native Americans on reservations live under, and the treaties the state breaks.
- **What they are hearing about Native Americans varies.** They mention hearing about the missing Native American women, concerns around how Native Americans are portrayed in history, poverty on the reservations, reparations, hunting disputes, the casinos, and so on.
- **They are split between saying what they do hear is generally negative versus 50-50 positive and negative.**
 - Latinas say that what they hear about Native Americans is generally positive.
- Across groups, **the facts on Native Americans being one of the fastest growing groups in the country, tribal nations being the 8th largest employer in the country, and Native peoples being required to pay federal taxes,** are the ones that most people wrongly thought were false and the ones they thought were most surprising.

Strengths of Native Cultures

- **The thriving culture**
- **Tight-knit community**
- **Resilience**
- **Prioritization of family**
- **Traditions**
- **Spirituality of Native peoples**

Overcoming Stereotypes

- When participants think of the stereotypes they have heard of about Native peoples in our society, **they volunteer stereotypes such as alcohol and drug abuse and misuse, poverty, gambling addiction, and lack of education.**
- Many say these stereotypes **come from the media, like movies and TV shows.** Some say **they come from prejudice passed down in families or are made up and passed from person to person.**
- Across groups, **participants agree that we all have a role to play in overcoming stereotypes.** They believe we can work toward this by starting at home, in conversation with children, and to not remain silent. They believe everyone has a responsibility to uphold this commitment to overcoming stereotypes.



Knowledge of Prominent Native Figures

- **Most across groups could not think of any prominent Native figures off the top of their head.**
- Rotating figures across groups, we tested four prominent Native figures in each group, displaying their picture, name, and profession. **Very rarely is anyone familiar with the prominent Native figures shown.**
- Participants are most familiar with actor Zahn McClarnon, but even high-ranking officials like Deb Haaland register barely any familiarity.
 - **Participants do not have a negative impression** of any of the prominent Native figures they are familiar with.
- They think Native Americans need increased representation in government and media and believe it to be important.



Deb Haaland



Sharice Davids



Zahn McClarnon



Quannah Chasinghorse



Joy Harjo



Lynn Malerba



Notah Begay



Amber Midthunder

Mascots

- **Many know of schools near them that use or have used a Native mascot.**
- People are more compromised about changing local mascots than national teams.
- Many participants feel **indifferent** to the mascots, with **some noting they were under the impression that these mascots honor Native Americans.**
- Others feel that while they may not have a problem with the mascots, **they ultimately defer to the local Native American community about how to address the use of Native mascots.**



Boarding Schools

- Some in each group have heard about the Native American **boarding schools** and are knowledgeable about what happened, a few even live near a shuttered boarding school.
- Across groups, hearing more information* about the boarding schools horrified and disgusted many, **but they are not surprised about their existence, or by the practices employed by these institutions.** What surprised them was that these schools operated as recently as 1969.

“Yeah but wow, the surprised part is that it was up to 1969. That was two years before I was born, wow.” – Latino voter

“It’s just one of those things that where it’s like, of course this managed to happen. It’s discouraging, it’s depressing.”
– Gen Z man of color

*Indian boarding schools were founded to eliminate traditional American Indian ways of life and replace them with mainstream American culture, and the schools were operated by the U.S. federal government and religious institutions. Last year, the U.S. Department of the Interior released a more than 100-page report on the federal Indigenous boarding schools. Between 1819 and 1969, the U.S. ran or supported 408 boarding schools, the department found. Students endured “rampant physical, sexual, and emotional abuse,” and the report recorded more than 500 deaths of Native children—a number set to increase as the department’s investigation of this issue continues.

Missing and Murdered Native Women

- We showed participants a picture and name of two missing murdered women that made news headlines; one white (Gabby Petito) and one Native American (Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind). **Across groups, many were familiar with Gabby Petito and her story, while virtually no one knew about Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind.**
 - They acknowledge that they probably have not heard of her story **because of the media's bias in prioritizing stories about white women.**
 - Participants say this can and should change, and that change is possible through **increasing diversity and representation in the media industry, consuming and reacting more to more diverse/representative media, investing in reparations, raising awareness, and denouncing the practice of ascribing mysticism to Native Americans.**
 - While they made these recommendations in response to the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women, we should consider expanding them to representation broadly.



Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind



Gabby Petito

Climate

- When read a statement* about Native Americans' connection to climate, natural places, and wildlife, participants believe the message is that **they value land and the earth more than others, sustainability is innate in their cultures, and that while corporate America is trying to destroy the earth, Native peoples are on the frontline of protecting it.**
- Some are also shocked to hear that **Indigenous territories hold 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity.**

“Well, me, what I take away from it is, while industry is doing everything to make money and basically destroy the land, that they are on the forefront of trying to use their knowledge to try to preserve the land.” – Black man

“For me it's saying that the Native people they value land and the earth, and they respect it a lot more than others.” – Latina voter

*Native Nations, and Indigenous leaders have been increasingly on the front lines of the fight against new threats like policies that have relaxed federal regulations, endangered waterways, and allowed the fossil fuel industries to extract dirty energy leading to climate change and natural disasters that harm Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike.

Over the last ten years, Native Nations and Indigenous leaders have worked with others to protect critically important natural places like the Florida Everglades, the Grand Canyon, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Bears Ears National Monument, and the Missouri River. Protecting these lands for the future. Indigenous territories that make up about 22 percent of the world's land surface hold 80 percent of the world's remaining biodiversity. And while biodiversity is under threat everywhere, it is declining more slowly in areas managed by Indigenous peoples. Every direction you look, the ways to stop the mass extinction of species are deeply tied to the knowledge and practices of Indigenous peoples.

Addressing Visibility and Tribal Sovereignty

- **Most agree tribal nations should control their land base, oversee youth education, and define their tribal citizenship.** Most think tribal nations already do this.
- Suburban moms have mixed reactions to Land Acknowledgement. In the other groups who responded to Land Acknowledgment, participants **feel this solution does not go far enough**. Some suggest that a statement with no action behind it means nothing.
- **Many are confused about the concept of Land Back and would need more information to decide whether they support it or not.** In the Asian American/Pacific Islander group, they liked the idea of Land Back, but felt it might be met with resistance by others. Gen Z people of color say it sounds like it doesn't really change anything, and most feel it doesn't go far enough.



Statements to Change how People View Native Peoples

Much of what it means to be and live as Americans, we owe to Native people: from our food, to our language, to our sports, to our love of the land, even our system of government.

Statement 1

Many tribes are thriving, growing in numbers, holding on to their culture, and building businesses in parts of the country that need economic development.

Statement 2

Native peoples live the values the world needs: a belief in shared responsibility and interdependence, respect for the earth, equality of all human beings, respect for elders, having a say in the decisions that affect us, and measuring our actions and their effects on generations to come.

Statement 3

Statements to Change how People View Native Peoples

- Overall, participants like the three statements.
 - Latinas and Latinos liked all three statements, but Latinas expressed the most positivity toward the first statement about Native peoples' contributions to American culture because they say it is accurate.
 - The Black men felt the third statement about Natives' values was the most important in changing how people view Native peoples.
 - The white voters near a tribal casino did not particularly like any of the three statements. They felt they were inaccurate and that the third statement felt disingenuous.
 - Black women and Gen Z people of color would like more specifics included. There is some concern around the third statement about values and a perceived implication that Native peoples are better than others when some participants feel that other groups can also live the values that the world needs.
- If they had to write a statement about Native peoples to change how people view them, they would say things like have compassion, tell people to educate themselves, realize what we took from them and how we have wronged them, and talk about the contributions of Native peoples.



President, Lake Research Partners



Celinda Lake

clake@lakeresearch.com

202.776.9066

LakeResearch.com