

# Expanding the Minority Empowerment Literature: American Indians & the U.S. Political System

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## Abstract

The minority empowerment literature has largely overlooked the political participation of American Indians. We argue that American Indians represent a challenge because of their special status in American government as a protected class of citizens. Their ties to the federal government have both undercut their effectiveness as actors in the local and state arenas, and at the same time given them unique tools that empowerment literature fails to assess. We attempt to begin filling the void in the literature by examining two of the dominant theoretical frameworks within the minority empowerment literature: Rodney Hero's two-tiered pluralism from *Latinos in the American Political System* (1991) and the framework from Browning Marshall and Tabb's *Protest Is Not Enough* (1984). Our central question is "How well can these theories explain the socioeconomic position as well as political successes and failures of American Indians in the U.S. across the contemporary era?" Hero's model provides a useful framework for understanding the social, economic, and political position of American Indians. Browning, Marshall, and Tabb's theoretical framework does not as easily explain the experiences of American Indians. We argue that creating a minority empowerment framework that incorporates American Indians and other minority groups is possible, but requires flexibility and might work differently for each minority group.

## Introduction

In 1989, Anne Merline McCulloch examined the dominant theoretical paradigms in political science to determine whether American Indians fit in the pluralist, elitist, Marxist, or institutionalist frameworks. Finding that none of these frameworks adequately captured the political situation for American Indians, McCullough left the door open for future theoretical conceptualization. Since the 1980s, several important contributions have been made to the minority empowerment literature. While our understanding of the political experiences of African Americans, Latinos, and to a lesser extent Asian Americans has benefited as a result of these contributions, this literature has, for the most part, not focused on American Indians.

In this paper we attempt to begin filling this void in the literature by examining two of the dominant theoretical frameworks within the minority politics field: Rodney Hero's theory of two-tiered pluralism put forth in his work *Latinos in the American Political System* (1991) and the framework put forth in Browning Marshall and Tabb's *Protest Is Not Enough* (1984). The two frameworks differ in that Hero's captures, and to some degree explains, the continuing subordinate or second tier position of minorities in American society. In contrast, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb present a framework that seeks to explain how minorities can gain power. Our central question is "How well can these theories explain the socioeconomic position as well as political successes and failures of American Indians in the United States across the contemporary era?" By answering these questions we gain a better understanding of the unique elements of American Indian politics in the U.S. political system and new direction in the development of a more comprehensive theoretical framework for minority empowerment.

This paper begins by briefly reviewing the frameworks developed by Hero and Browning, Marshall, and Tabb and stressing how these frameworks build on, yet are distinctly different from, pluralism. We then apply these two

models to the experiences of American Indians in the contemporary era. Thus, our approach in this paper is theoretical rather than empirical. Overall we find that Hero's model of two-tiered pluralism provides a useful framework for understanding the social, economic, and political position of American Indians. Browning, Marshall, and Tabb's theoretical framework, in contrast, does not as easily expand to explain past and future potential for empowerment among American Indians. From their model we move toward a new theoretical model that can better explain the empowerment of American Indians in the U.S. political system based on their unique political, tribal, and legal status.

We argue that the creation of a minority empowerment framework that fits American Indians and other minority groups is possible, but much like Hero's two-tiered pluralism, would need to be flexible and might work differently for each group. We argue that American Indians represent a challenge because of their special status in American government as a protected class of citizens. Their ties to the federal government have both undercut their effectiveness as actors in the local and state arenas, and at the same time given them unique tools that empowerment literature fails to assess.

### **Review of the Minority Empowerment Literature**

The minority empowerment literature emerged following political mobilization during the 1960s and 1970s by Blacks, Latinos and other racial and ethnic minorities. Much of this literature has focused on these minority empowerment or civil rights movements and has provided systematic analyses of why minorities mobilize, why movements succeed, and ultimately why social movements decline (Lawson 1997; McAdam 1982). As minorities themselves made the transition from protest activities to the electoral arena, an increasing number of studies have examined the public opinion and voting behavior of minority groups and have provided insight into the specific factors shaping minority turnout and vote choice (Cain et al. 1991; de la Garza et al. 1992; DeSipio 1996; Sigelman and Welch 1991; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Tate 1994).

Moreover, studies have examined the impact of minority elected officials once in office. These studies have highlighted the institutional constraints placed on minority elected officials and have provoked important debates about what minority representation actually entails (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984; Hero 1992; Nelson 1990; Singh 1998; Stone 1989; Swain 1995).

Although many authors concerned with minority politics and empowerment have rejected several of the tenets of pluralism (Hero 1992; Reed 1988; Parenti 1970), pluralism remains one of the most influential theories within this literature and forms the basis of the two theories reviewed in this paper. Pluralism, most commonly associated with Dahl's 1961 research on New Haven, argues that the American political system is characterized by openness, where influence is varied and there are multiple points of access into the political system. Individuals have the opportunity to participate regardless of their personal, economic, or political situation. Although resources may vary according to things like financial situation, organizational strength or a cohesive voting block, the system does not discriminate based on such criterion. Pluralism also rests on the assumption that individuals have multiple and somewhat fluid group identities, indicating that individuals may move from one group to another while retaining a connection to the former group. At the heart of pluralism is the idea that each and every interest is capable of organizing and defending itself and that no one group dominates policy outcomes.

Rodney Hero developed his two-tiered pluralism framework in an attempt to construct a theory that could explain the continued disadvantaged position of the Latino community within the U.S. political system despite their attainment of basic legal rights. Hero's two-tiered pluralism is quite different from classical pluralism, which assumes that power and access to influential institutions is essentially dispersed equally. Two-tiered pluralism contends that although all groups in this country now possess basic rights and equalities, these legal and constitutional rights are not enough to bring about substantive

equality. Several factors including past and current discrimination at the hands of the U.S. government and the dominant Anglo society, the socioeconomic inequalities between Latinos and Anglos and the institutional biases of the political and economic system have made equal opportunity an elusive ideal rather than a reality for most Latinos. While Hero is primarily concerned with Latino participation and politics, his framework is very relevant to other political minorities, who despite having equal access in theory, remain marginalized in the U.S. political system.

Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984) worked within the pluralist parameters to identify ways minorities can become significant political forces and achieve substantive gains from local government. By examining the struggles of minority groups in ten California cities for political access and responsive policies, they found that mobilization (protest, electoral participation, or a combination of the two), can lead to minority political incorporation and ultimately policies that are responsive to minority concerns. They emphasize that group resources such as size, concentration, group cohesion, and organizational strength are important prerequisites for minority mobilization and empowerment. However, they also argue that mobilization alone is usually not enough to propel minority groups into political power, but that in order to achieve success minorities need to acquire the support of other minorities and/or liberal whites. In other words, biracial or multiracial coalitions are the best, or at least the most realistic way for Blacks and Latinos to advance politically. Pluralistic ideas underscore their theory in that they assume that the political system is open; when minority groups align themselves with liberal whites they are able to have influence over the political process. Underscoring this argument about the potential effectiveness of coalitions is the assumption that race is just another of the identities that can be transcended.

**The Minority Empowerment Literature and the Experience of American Indians Two-Tiered Pluralism and American Indians**

Rodney Hero's theory of two-tier pluralism captures essential elements of the American Indian political experience. Hero states that "two-tiered pluralism describes a situation in which there is formal legal equality on the one hand, and simultaneously, actual practice that undercuts equality for most members of minority groups" (1992, 190). In other words, his framework nicely captures a seeming paradox in the experience of American Indians (from the pluralist perspective at least): Despite the fact that American Indians have now achieved basic legal and civil rights, they still lag far behind white Americans and many other groups on all other indicators of well-being and, thus, have not actually achieved substantive equality. While it is true that American Indians do not have complete constitutional protections if they remain part of their tribal nation and live within the reservation and possess some unique legal rights, from the perspective of the American government American Indians, regardless of whether they are living on a reservation or not, are full citizens of the United States and possess full voting rights in local, state and national elections.

In his discussion of two-tiered pluralism Hero draws attention to the different class structures of minority groups in comparison to the majority Anglo group. The non-Hispanic white population has a relatively large middle class and smaller upper and lower classes. In contrast, the Black and Latino populations have small upper classes and very sizable lower classes. American Indians mirror the class pattern of Blacks and Hispanics. In fact, data indicate that American Indians have the lowest median family income of all racial and ethnic groups, that American Indian poverty rates are even higher than those of Blacks and Hispanics, and that American Indians rank lower than other ethnic and racial groups in terms of high school graduation rates and college education (McClain and Stewart 1997, 30; Snipp 1993, 364). Approximately one-third of American Indians live in poverty and reservation unemployment rates reach 70% in some areas of the country (Associated Press 2000). Overall, statistics suggest that American Indians are doubly disadvantaged in that they are a group that

composes a very small portion of the U.S. population (less than 1%) and within that relatively small segment they have disproportionately small middle and upper classes.

Identifying the overall class structure of American Indians is critical because it reveals that American Indians have comparatively few of the resources typically viewed as prerequisites for political participation—education and wealth—than the Anglo majority (Verba et al. 1978; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Since political leaders typically come from the middle and upper classes, American Indians are disadvantaged in their opportunities to field candidates and have political influence through their own elected leaders. American Indians compose only 28 of the more than 7,000 state legislators, nationwide (McClain and Stewart 1997, 141). Moreover, studies attempting to assess the voting behavior of American Indians have found that their turnout rate is very low compared to other groups even when controlling for socioeconomic factors (McCool 1985; Peterson 1997). Some Indian tribes have profited greatly from casino and gaming enterprises, which has allowed them to hire lobbyists, make donations and be more active in the political sphere (Claiborne 2001; Michael 1998; Wilkins, forthcoming). As of yet, the economic success of a few tribes has done little to raise the overall socioeconomic status and political position of American Indians as a group. Even on some reservations with profitable casinos, unemployment remains close to 50 percent (Belluck 2000). A continuation and expansion of such profitable enterprises, however, may represent an important resource for future American Indian empowerment.

Besides socioeconomic disadvantage, Hero's framework suggests that part of the reason for the continued second-tier status of American Indians rests with their distinctive historical experiences with oppression and domination at the hands of the United States government. Like other racial and ethnic groups, the relationship between American Indians and the United States has frequently placed Indians in a subordinate position. Although the policy of the U.S.

government towards American Indians has undergone shifts over time from policies geared towards sovereignty to those geared towards assimilation (Nagel 1997), the actual implementation of both of these strategies reinforced or increased the disadvantaged positions of American Indians, economically, socially, and politically. Reservations, one variation of the sovereignty approach, were often placed on poor quality land in remote areas, which dramatically contributed to the economic crises faced by many reservation populations (Bordewich 1996; Fleming 1996). Meanwhile tribal termination, one element of the assimilation policy, contributed to a decline in the social and economic well being for the members of terminated tribes (Nagel 1997). Since the 1970s, the government has pursued a strategy of self-determination, however, this self-determination is under constant assault (Cornell and Kalt 1992) and the legacy of the historical relationship has led to a diminished form of pluralism for American Indians.

Another related reason American Indians have yet to achieve full pluralism, according to Hero's framework, is because they have been constrained by formal and informal discrimination. For the majority of United States history, American Indians were not considered citizens. Citizenship came to American Indians, slowly and in piecemeal fashion. It was not until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 that citizenship was conferred on all American Indian peoples and with that the right to vote. However, there are examples as late as 1957 where American Indians were denied their voting rights in certain states (Deloria and Lytle 1983, 222-227). Even after the removal of formal constraints, however, the political, social, economic, and ideological legacy of those constraints, along with "informal" mechanisms and practices, effectively limited political and social change. One of the most pervasive techniques used for diluting the Indian vote was gerrymandering (McCool 1985). Moreover, Svingen argues that the belief held by some non-Indians that American Indians should not be able to vote

(since they do not pay taxes and because non-Indians cannot vote in tribal elections) acts to limit the full civil rights of American Indians (1987, 281).

Another factor contributing to and reinforcing the dual tier system of pluralism is that the concerns of disadvantaged groups are more likely to be dealt with through mediating institutions whereas dominant groups deal more directly with governments, either through clientele agencies or, quite often, with those at the top (Hero 1992, 193). Most of the interactions between American Indians and the U.S. government are mediated by a sub-cabinet level agency, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Nagel 1998). Although created and designed ideally to represent Indian needs in the government, many agree the BIA has not provided effective solutions to reservation problems and the problems facing American Indians more broadly (Cornell and Kalt 1992; Nelson and Sheley 1985). Lacy (1985) argues that the BIA has not historically represented American Indian policy positions, adequately incorporated them in the BIA bureaucratic structure, or hired Indians who are willing to challenge the political system. The relationship between the BIA and tribes has also been characterized as a “love/hate relationship” because on the one hand the BIA signifies the special status tribes have with the federal government, the agency is also a symbol of “mismanagement, paternalism, and neglect” (O’Brien 1989, 275). Moreover, BIA acts as an additional layer that removes American Indians further from the genuine power and decision making centers of the political arena. As a result, American Indians, similar to others in the second tier, are seldom involved in the critical agenda setting stage of politics. Rather, Minorities are primarily recipients of policies made by others; they are clients rather than active citizens (Hero 1992, 196).

Another critical point Hero makes, which contributes greatly to our understanding of American Indian politics, is that in general the demands of minority groups are treated differently than the demands of the dominant Anglo group. Society is generally accepting of government involvement in the

economy when it comes to tax incentives for corporations and tax-breaks from homeowners, programs that disproportionately help non-Hispanic whites. These programs are viewed as natural supports for economic growth. However, most Americans dislike the idea of government involvement in welfare and other redistributive programs, which disproportionately help minorities on the basis that they will undermine incentives to work.

Along these lines, American Indians have sought the ability to expand and have more control over tribal land and resources and pursue profitable economic enterprises on their land. Since the 1980s many Indian communities have established gaming operations and duty free stores exempt from state regulation (Nagel 1997, 53; Snipp 1993, 367). While the public and government officials have accepted similar efforts to seek profit on the part of the Anglo majority, they tend to see these types of economic pursuits on the part of American Indians as unfair and illegitimate. Members of Congress, most notably former Republican Senator Slade Gorton, have responded to tribal economic initiatives by attempting to impose federal taxes on gaming revenues, deny federal assistance to tribes if their income is above a certain level, subject tribes to certain state laws, and curtail the power of the BIA to grant tribes land and approve casinos (Claiborne 2001; Johansen 2000; Wilkins forthcoming, 266). Such actions highlight a critical contradiction; the Republican Party appears to supports lowering taxes and giving more power to local governments except in the case of Indian tribes (Michael 1998).

Moreover, societal and political response, to the demands of American Indians, demonstrates that while dominant groups use the political system to maintain and enhance their power and status, minorities struggle to achieve what is presumed to be a given; equal opportunity. Moreover, this struggle casts them in an unfavorable light. Many of the Anglo groups opposed to Indian sovereignty and development stress that they are simply advocating for “equal rights for whites”, implying that increased political, jurisdictional and economic

power of the tribes infringes on the liberties of the individual American taxpayer (Johansen 2000). The contradictory attitudes and biases held by the non-native public and government officials burdens American Indians and partly for this reason, the political and social opportunity costs for minority groups are substantially higher than those for other groups (Hero 1992, 194; Stone 1986).

As Hero argues, two-tiered pluralism may work differently for different groups and this can be extended to American Indians. One difference in the way two-tiered pluralism may work across groups involves the relationship between the majority population and the minority group. Hero argues that “the relationship between the majority population and Latinos seems bicultural, while that of Blacks to the dominant groups might be called subcultural” (1992, 200). The relationship of American Indians with the larger society is unique, yet has both bicultural and subcultural elements. On the one hand the relationship of Indians to the broader society has been one of oppression and subordination as the American government has repeatedly tried to eradicate American Indians. On the other hand, there is also a bicultural element to the relationship. American Indians have tenaciously held on to their culture despite government programs geared to assimilate them into the mainstream (Nagel 1997).

American Indians retain citizenship in their own tribal nations, as well as in the U.S. Moreover, many American Indians (about 22%) choose to live on reservations, remaining geographically separate. This has fostered perceptions, among the broader American society, that American Indians are choosing not to be “real” Americans, similar to how Latinos choose not to be “real” Americans by retaining their Spanish language and culture and such “choices” are seen as a justification for inequality by the broader society. In the case of American Indians this is compounded by the fact that many Americans are resentful of the fact that Indians on reservations are immune from state and local taxes and are largely immune from state and local laws (Clairborne 2001). In fact, Johansen (2000) has argued that an anti-Indian movement is resurfacing in America in response to

the “special rights” American Indians are perceived to have. Perceptions that American Indians are receiving “special treatment” combined with the perception that American Indians are not true Americans may make American Indians a “less deserving” minority group in the eyes of the majority population (Hero 1992, 200).

Finally, in his discussion of two-tiered pluralism Hero argues that Latino politics is further complicated by the internal diversity of the group. Such diversity, he argues, decreases the internal cohesion of the group and also makes the group rather easily divided by “outside” influences (1992, 199). Despite the frequency with which American Indians are “lumped” together by the dominant society (Espiritu 1992) there is considerable social, economic, political, linguistic, geographic and cultural diversity among the group. One significant strain within the American Indian population is between reservation and urban Indians, who experience different realities and types of problems. In her research Nagel (1997) found that reservation Indians often expressed concern that their urban (co-ethnics) had lost touch with reservation needs and problems while having more influence than themselves in terms of access to power and influence over national policies dealing with Indian affairs (235). Tribal distinctions represent an even greater source of diversity within the American Indian population. There are differences between pro development and traditionalist Indians as seen in the debates over casino, mining, and oil exploration to name a few. Moreover, Indian groups have often seen each other as competitors for scarce federal funding and federally recognized resources (Nagel 1997) as well as for limited casino revenues. Some of the fiercest opposition to a casino in Wisconsin came from other tribes in Minnesota whose established casinos would face competition from the new one (Wilkins, forthcoming, 266). Competition can become especially bitter when non-recognized groups seek access to federal Indian resources (Nagel 1997, 236).

In summary, Hero's framework of two-tiered pluralism draws attention to the critical combination of the factors that cause and reinforce the second tier status of American Indians despite their attainment of basic civil and constitutional rights. Historical experiences with domination and discrimination as well as current perceptions of American Indians as unwilling to assimilate and having "special privileges" act as obstacles in the path to equal opportunity for American Indians. Moreover, the biases in the economic and political systems towards the dominant Anglo group create comparatively higher opportunity costs for American Indians as they seek political and economic gains.

### **American Indians and Minority Empowerment**

Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984) have asserted that minority group mobilization at the local level can lead to minority incorporation in city government, and this in turn can result in governmental responsiveness to minority residents' concerns. In other words, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb see representation in local and state elective bodies as a necessary but not sufficient condition for minorities to achieve responsive policies and political incorporation. To back up even further, they argue that numbers are a necessary condition for representation. Thus, the first problem with the application of this framework to American Indians is that due to their small numbers American Indians have a small chance of achieving significant incorporation in the first place. In other words, a problem with the framework is its emphasis on group size as a pivotal resource and prerequisite for minority empowerment (Browning Marshall and Tabb 1986, 92; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1997, 8).

Despite experiencing a larger than expected growth in population over the past century (Cornell 1988; Nagel 1997; Snipp 1993; 2000 census figures), American Indians compose less than one percent of the overall United States population. In contrast, other minority groups in the United States are much larger: African Americans and Latinos each account for about 12% of the population while Asian Americans compose approximately 3% of the population

(2000 US Census). Furthermore, unlike other minority groups the future does not seem promising in terms of growth for American Indians; estimates of the American Indian population for the year 2050 show little apparent growth in terms of their percentage of the overall population (Fleming 1996, 244). Even in the parts of the country with the highest concentration of American Indians (Alaska 15.9%, New Mexico 8.9%, Oklahoma 8%) they are hardly enough to make any dramatic impact on state and local elections and are dramatically underrepresented in these state legislatures (Fleming 1996; McClain and Stewart 1999, 37, 124-145).

Thus, it is not that we are arguing that Browning, Marshall, and Tabb's emphasis on size is inaccurate. Size is an important minority group resource. Rather our point is that a framework that relies so heavily on size does not provide much analytical leverage for understanding past successes of American Indians, nor does it provide much hope for the possibility of American Indians ever receiving responsive policies. Indeed, the framework advanced by Browning, Marshall, and Tabb does not hold much explanatory power or hope for minorities of any race or ethnicity who live in areas where they do not compose a significant segment of the population. Thus, in order to better capture the experience of all Blacks and Hispanics, as well as American Indians, an improved framework should look at a wider variety of resources or avenues for empowerment. In the final section, we discuss the fact that legal claims are a potentially important part of any theory of minority politics that seeks to incorporate American Indians.

Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1997, 9) argue that when minority populations compose less than a majority of the population in a local area, which is common, coalitions are necessary in order to achieve policy responsiveness on the issues of greatest concern to the group. The key to success is for minority groups to not just achieve representation within the government, but to become part of the governing coalition. As they point out, substantial minority group

representation per se “might have little or no effect on policy if these members are opposed at every turn by an entrenched and intransigent governing coalition determined to resist” (Browning, Marshall, Tabb 1997, 9). Since American Indians do not compose the majority in any locality, county, or state the need for them to build coalitions appears very high.

On the one hand, there are some examples of American Indians working in coalitions with other racial and ethnic minority groups as well as white liberals to achieve their goals. There have been working coalitions between American Indians and predominantly white Indian aid groups, environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth as well as other racial and ethnic minorities (Cornell 1988; Fleming 1996). Despite these examples, building coalitions is even more problematic for American Indians than other groups for several reasons. First, although there is some overlap on particular issues, the American Indian agenda is distinct from the agendas of other racial and ethnic minorities in terms of its priorities and overarching philosophy (Cornell 1988, 172; McCulloch 1989; Wilkins, forthcoming).

For Latinos and African Americans the overriding goal has been the attainment of equal rights and inclusion into mainstream political structures. As Browning, Marshall, and Tabb summarized it, Blacks and Latinos “wanted respect from government, access to it, positions in it, and real influence over policies and programs of special interest to them” (1997, 9). American Indians have also focused on the attainment of civil rights. However, rather than fighting for inclusion, American Indians have fought for their survival as a distinct, autonomous people and the ability to remain apart geographically, politically, and culturally (Cornell 1988, 154; McCulloch 1989; Wilkins, forthcoming, 16). Although according to 1990 census figures only about 22% of American Indians resided on reservations or trust lands (Fleming 1996), much American Indian political activity, even the activity of urban Indians, centers around tribal-oriented goals: to enlarge the exclusive powers of tribal governments, increase

the tribal role in policy making, place control of Indian economic resources fully in Indian hands, and extend federal Indian programs to urban Indians (Cornell 1988, 154; Nagel 1997). To the extent that the agenda of Latinos and African Americans focuses on inclusion and the attainment of individual rights, while American Indians prioritize cultural autonomy and tribal rights, there is limited room for coalition building between the groups. Moreover, to the extent that American Indians push for policies that benefit only American Indians (i.e. Indian land claims, community colleges on Indian reservations; the construction of casinos on Indian trust lands) their ability to find coalition partners among minorities as well as liberal whites is further limited.

A second factor making the construction of multi-racial coalitions difficult for American Indians is the geographic dispersion of the American Indian population in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups. Most minorities are heavily urban and, thus, their interests are heavily intertwined with urban issues. Indeed, to assess whether minority incorporation made governments more responsive Browning, Marshall, and Tabb examine four fundamentally urban issues: the establishment of civilian police review boards, appointment of minority members to city boards and commissions, provisions for minority shares of city contracts, and minority employment in city government (1997, 28). To some extent, these specific issues are concerns that are shared by the American Indian community and some American Indian organizations (Nagel 1997; Fleming 1996; Wilkins, forthcoming) and as the American Indian urban population continues to grow, as trends suggest it will, urban-based issues may form an increasingly likely basis for future multi-racial coalitions. However, at present, the potential of urban issues to be the foundation for a multi-racial coalition is limited.

Although the percentage of urban American Indians has been growing, only about half of American Indians live in areas (McClain and Stewart 1999, 37). In comparison, Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans (86%, 82%, and 95% urban)

all surpass American Indians in their urban concentrations (McClain and Stewart 1999, 37). But because fewer American Indians are urban, issues concerning city governance are less relevant to them than other ethnic and racial groups. Further, scholars have argued that even among urban Indians it appears that tribal concerns predominate. “Even in the cities, where Native American concerns most clearly resemble those of other poor and powerless groups, much of the Indian effort has been directed toward distinguishing themselves from those groups and gaining services from the BIA and other agencies currently reserved to reservation populations” (Cornell 1988, 172). Many Indian organizations, including AIM, were spurred by pivotal events such as the Alcatraz Occupation to widen their agenda to include tribal rights, tribal recognition, and a betterment of the lives of all American Indians and have never since regained their predominantly urban focus (Nagel 1997; Johnson, Champagne, and Nagel 1999).

A third problem with Browning, Marshall, and Tabb’s framework with regard to the inclusion of American Indians, is its focus on local government as the target of minority political activity. Focusing on achieving responsiveness from city government has been and remains less of a concern for American Indians than for Latinos and African Americans. On the one hand, the urban Indian population has been increasing and studies indicate that urban Indians face similar economic and social obstacles that other minority groups face. Thus, the absence of redistributive policies at the local level (Hero 1992, Peterson 1981) also has a disproportionately negative affect on American Indians.

For many of the most central Indian goals, however, the national and, increasingly, state governments are the logical target of action. The federal government has ultimate power over the fate of American Indian Reservations, the funding of the BIA, and the settlement of most Indian land claims (Nagel 1997). State government appears to be an increasingly important political arena for American Indians as there have been a growing number of tribal/state

compacts concerning health care, tax exemptions, and gaming (Corntassel and Witmer 1997). In contrast, local government is not as politically important for American Indians.

To restate, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb (1984) have asserted that minority group mobilization at the local level can lead to minority incorporation in city government, and this in turn can result in governmental responsiveness to minority residents' concerns. Although Browning, Marshall and Tabb never advocated the framework they constructed as a model for understanding American Indian empowerment, its application to this group is instructive in many ways. We have argued in this section that American Indian mobilization and incorporation are made more challenging due to the small size of the group and the low degree of group cohesion among American Indians compared to other racial and ethnic minority groups (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1997; 22). In addition, coalition building is made difficult (although certainly not impossible) by the unique nature of American Indian concerns in comparison other minorities and white liberals.

Although it has some limitations in its application to American Indians, Browning, Marshall, and Tabb's framework points us towards some potentially fruitful avenues for further research. Although limited in their numbers, it would be very revealing to study the actions and influence of American Indians within state and local government to see whether and with whom they form coalitions and whether or not their presence results in more responsive policies for American Indians. No studies that we are aware of have systematically examined the actions of the few American Indian elected officials at the state and local level to see whether they have changed the policy agenda in ways favorable to American Indian interests. In addition, applying Browning, Marshall, and Tabb's framework to the experience of American Indians helps bring to light some of the necessary elements of an improved minority empowerment framework, which is where we now turn.

### **Toward a New Theoretical Framework for Minority Empowerment**

In this paper we have argued that Hero's model of two-tiered pluralism works very well to explain the politics and continued second-tier status of American Indians in the United States. What is needed, however, is an improved minority empowerment framework, which can build on some of the groundwork established by Browning, Marshall, and Tabb but more adequately capture the empowerment possibilities of American Indians. Any theory of minority empowerment that aspires to include American Indians should at least include the following considerations: recognition of a wider variety of paths to empowerment including legal avenues and financial contributions as well as electoral mobilization; recognition that structural factors can inhibit the policy responsiveness of government even when minorities have achieved substantial representation and incorporation; and that coalitions represent a difficult although not impossible means to achieve policy responsiveness.

One important factor that should be included in any comprehensive minority empowerment framework incorporating Indians is recognition that legal avenues are a path to empowerment for all minority groups and should be considered along with mobilization. Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans have used the courts to end the denial of their constitutional rights, obtain wartime reparations, abolish legal segregation, enforce affirmative action policies and create bi-lingual education programs and ballots. What is unique about American Indians is that in addition to efforts to achieve full civil rights, they have used the courts to enforce treaty rights that are not relevant to other groups, a strategy which has proven very successful for certain tribes (O'Brien 1989, 268). Although the legal rights of American Indians are different from other minority groups, the courts are a potentially empowering force for all these groups.

A very recent phenomenon that is worthy of mention is the ability of some American Indians to influence the political process through financial resources. Certain tribes have profited through casinos, mining, and native corporation

monies (in Alaska). Despite the small number of wealthy tribes, those that are fortunate enough to prosper have gained political influence by financing lawsuits, lobbying, and making contributions to political parties and campaigns. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, tribes that run gaming operations contributed more than \$1.9 million to political campaigns and parties in the 1995-96 election cycle (Michel 1998). This trend towards substantial giving on the national level has continued: vice president Al Gore raised nearly \$1 million dollars from American Indians in California in one day of meetings (Steelye 2000). American Indians are also giving large contributions to state candidates and parties and to support state referendums favorable to their gaming enterprises (Garitty 1998). American Indians raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to defeat incumbent Senator Slade Gorton (RWA) due to his reputation as an Indian opponent (Egan 2000). Access to capital is a new feature in American Indian political participation that provides more influence than their numbers would give them at the polls.

So, whereas voter turnout and other institutionalized methods of political participation are commonly examined with regard to minority political participation, these may not be the best indicators of participation for American Indians. Consequently, we might not see an increase in descriptive representation among American Indians after elections, but the government might start responding to more of their concerns nevertheless, because of their access to financial resources. This feature has been apparent among some in the Asian American community (Espiritu 1992), and could serve as an empowerment thread worthy of consideration in a more encompassing theory of minority politics.

Examining mobilization at the tribal level through the achievements of tribal governments, as well as examining participation in the federalist system, represents another key factor for any theory that incorporates American Indians. Starting in the 1970s American Indian tribes gained greater representation and

sovereignty over tribal governments. Operation of highly autonomous tribal governments is important, because it provides control of resources as well as development strategies. The sovereignty derived from their status as federally recognized tribes has, at times, provided the legal standing and political power to assert their treaty rights and availed greater opportunities for economic development through casino development and resource management. Cornell and Kalt's study (1992) found that among tribes with greater control over reservation decision making, use of reservation resources, and relations with the outside world, economic development has been the most successful. "In case after case where we see sustained economic development .... tribal-decision making has effectively replaced BIA (as well as other 'outside') decision-making" (Cornell and Kalt 1992, 15). Thus, in this sense, minority incorporation represents a critical step in minority empowerment.

We also believe, however, that a new theory of minority politics needs to be more cognizant of institutions and structural barriers, something that Browning, Marshall and Tabb do not stress in their empowerment framework. Simply gaining greater control over tribal government or gaining incorporation into local government is often not enough by itself to achieve policy responsiveness or economic success. Tribal governments much like city governments are constrained in what they can achieve by larger structural factors such as lack of economic and natural resources, limited or no access to financial capital and low ability to attract businesses, industry and other engines of employment and economic growth. Moreover, the ability of tribal governments, like local governments, to provide policy responsiveness to minorities is constrained by their heavily dependent economic and political relationship with state and national government, a relationship which they can do little to control (Cornell and Kalt 1992).

Finally, an empowerment theory that includes American Indians should be skeptical of the power of coalitions as the key to empowerment. The isolation

of reservations combined with the fact that vast majority of persons on the reservations are American Indians, makes coalition building between reservation Indians and other racial/ethnic groups highly unlikely. For those American Indians who do not reside on reservations, the likelihood of biracial coalitions is also minimal due to their strategy of focusing more on federal and state politics, the hostility that they encounter due to the perception that they receive special treatment, and their unique political status that distinguishes their goals as different from other minority groups. This is not to imply that all other racial and ethnic groups share policy objectives internally or with other minority groups. In fact, scholars have demonstrated that coalitions are very difficult to maintain among different minority groups and even within the same racial and ethnic groups (Rich 1996; Sonnenshein 1997; Keiser 1997; Mollenkopf 1997). Rather, we merely wish to point out that there are unique barriers to coalition building faced by American Indians that must be considered. In the end, all minority groups are united in their broad desire for the government to be responsive to their concerns, even if American Indians are less interested in becoming incorporated into mainstream political structures and processes than others. In addition, similarities across minority groups such as their low socioeconomic status and experiences with discrimination and de facto segregation, could serve as a basis for a broad-based coalition.

To some degree the new minority empowerment framework for which we advocate appears like a step back towards pluralism, the model we began this paper by critiquing. Like Hero, we recognize some utility in the pluralist framework, particularly the idea that there are multiple points of access within the U.S. political system. Similar to what the pluralist perspectives suggests, we argue that there are a broader array of resources and paths to empowerment for American Indians and other minority groups than Browning, Marshall and Tabb consider in their study. Legal challenges, campaign contributions and tribal mobilization along with group size, protest and electoral mobilization are all

plausible avenues towards political responsiveness open to American Indians. Yet where the new framework diverges from pluralism is in the recognition that structural and institutional factors including socioeconomic status, the public opinion of the dominant Anglo class and a group's historical exclusion and subordination constrict the full potential of minority participation and lessens the impact of that participation.

### **Conclusion**

Those working in the minority politics field have played a pivotal role in using the experiences of minorities to expose the weaknesses in some of the dominant theories in political science. The more difficult challenge, however, is creating an improved theory that can more accurately capture the American political system and the experiences of minorities within it. Rodney Hero's theory of two-tiered pluralism with its emphasis on history, institutional bias, and the importance of socioeconomic resources for participation provide a useful framework for understanding the politics of American Indians. Browning, Marshall, and Tabb's theory, while a useful framework for examining the empowerment of urban Latinos and Blacks, provides less analytical leverage for understanding struggles for political empowerment among the less urban American Indian population. As argued in the last section, an improved minority empowerment framework may to include factors such as legal challenges, access financial resources, reservation status, institutional constraints, and the challenges to coalition building in order to incorporate American Indians.

This paper builds upon the work of others (McCulloh 1989) towards bridging the gap between American Indian politics and the minority empowerment literature. Although this paper does not create a new and all-encompassing theory of minority politics, we identify several important factors that may help to develop a more comprehensive theory that includes American Indians. We believe this is a significant and worthwhile project because the

American Indian political experience provides further insights into the overall functioning of our political system and informs other theories beyond those solely devoted to minority politics.

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