Have Attitudes toward American Indians Changed?

by Laura Waterman Wittstock

Conflict with American Indians in Minnesota historically peaked during the period of greatest competition for land and other resources. Once these "Indian wars" and "peace treaties" ended and Indians were less able to compete economically, white attitudes softened, although there has been a somewhat consistent negative view of Indians as uneducated, dirty, and drunk. These views, however, have probably been maintained to keep Indians at a disadvantage, unemployable, and thus noncompetitive.

More recently, in the last decade, there has been a decided upturn in the economic and political power of Indian governments. Far from being universal, the gathering power of tribes has concentrated among those closest to the Twin Cities. The overwhelming majority of 50,000 Indians in Minnesota have no share in the wealth and status of the few rich tribes. And new issues are rising, as Indian people press their claims that treaty rights are guaranteed and in force.

New Conflicts

There have been skirmishes in the courts on treaty questions throughout the century, most of them barely noticed by the public. These cases involved individual Indians who said they were exercising treaty rights when they were arrested by counties for hunting or fishing without a license. In some cases, the arrests were for harvesting wild rice outside of reservation boundaries.

In the 1970s and 80s, with increased efforts by tribes to claim the rights they said were being usurped by counties and the state, the way was paved for violent clashes between sports fishermen and tribes over fishing rights in Minnesota and Wisconsin. The sports fishermen assumed that treaty rights for hunting and fishing were extinguished long ago, or that they should be. This group pressed the state to take an adversarial position against the tribes.

Now, the State of Minnesota has taken the position that early treaty rights for hunting and fishing off the reservation were lost in succeeding treaties. When the state legislature refused to negotiate a settlement in 1994, the case went to federal court, where the state lost. The state is appealing, but Wisconsin tribal governments have now asked to be included, asserting that they have unextinguished rights to hunt and

Members of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe testified in the treaty rights trial in U.S. District Court in June 1994.
fish in Minnesota. The Wisconsin tribes say they were also included in the treaty with the United States that guaranteed such rights in exchange for the forfeiture of vast areas of land which now make up both states. From their point of view, the separation of boundaries between Wisconsin and Minnesota was a happenstance not affecting tribal rights secured before statehood.

Minnesota’s boundaries were permanently set in 1858 with statehood, but the borders did not encompass Indian territorial ranges. Today, many Indian families have relatives north in Canada; west in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska; east in Wisconsin and Michigan; and south in Iowa and Illinois. Before any White settlements, three main groups of Indians had extensive land holdings in what is now Minnesota.

The portion of the United States code known as “Indian law” contains four doctrinal tenets:

- Tribes are independent entities.
- The independence of tribes is only subject to the exceptionally great powers of Congress to regulate and modify.
- Only the federal government may deal with tribes.
- The federal government has the responsibility for the protection of tribes and their properties (including encroachments from states and their citizens).

These are the lenses through which all laws dealing with Indian nations must be viewed.

Now the state is witnessing the spectacular rise of tribal businesses. Paramount among these is casino gambling, begun in Minnesota in 1982 with the opening of the Little Six Bingo Palace on the Shakopee Mdewakanton Reservation. The Mystic Lake and Dakota Country casinos have succeeded in bringing in just over half the state’s telephone exchanges were selected by random digit dialing to answer these and many other questions.

The survey showed that well over half the people of the state (59 percent) have positive views of tribal government. About a third more people think that relations between Indians and Whites are getting better than they are getting worse, but most (44 percent) feel that things are about the same.

These results might be classified as “cautiously optimistic.” Apparently, the strong views held by a few legislators as well as the State of Minnesota, are not so keenly etched in the public mind. There may be a number of reasons for this. It is not unusual for government to be out of front of the people on public issues. And historically, government policy has always led the people on matters pertaining to Indians. Also, it may simply be that in the scheme of things to worry about, relations with Indians are not high on most people’s list. In addition, there is a certain wariness among the white majority when it comes to openly discussing feelings about those who are of a different ethnicity.

A look at the demographic groupings of those responding to these questions shows that those who held positive attitudes toward tribal governments tended to be renters, Democrats or Independents, residents of the Twin Cities, under age thirty-five, college graduates, women, unmarried (either with or without children), and have incomes of $40,000 or less. Those who felt that relations between Indians and Whites were about the same (the largest group answering the second question) had similar characteristics.

When these questions are asked in future polls, more will be revealed about attitudes toward Indians in Minnesota. This was the first time that the Minnesota State Survey included questions about American Indians. Given the flow of events likely to continue as the state wrestles with its own uncertainty on how to deal with Indians, public opinion is likely to become more focused.

*Surveys of this size typically have a sampling error of no more than plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

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The Minnesota Center for Survey Research is a research and service unit of CURA. Its Minnesota State Survey is an omnibus telephone survey conducted each fall. Traditionally, CURA adds some questions which are relevant to public discourse in Minnesota. In 1994 Laura Wittstock was asked to contribute questions for the poll.