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Questions should be addressed to Mikeal C. Parsons, Professor and Macon Chair in Religion, Religion Department, P.O. Box 97294, Baylor University, Waco TX 76798-7294 (e-mail: Mike_Parsons@baylor.edu). Instructions for contributors may be found at the *PRSt* website: <http://www.baylor.edu/prs>.

Books for review, as well as book reviews, should be addressed to Steven R. Harmon, Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity, 110 N. Main Street, Noel Hall, P.O. Box 7327, Boiling Springs NC 28017 (email: sharmon@gardner-webb.edu).

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Looking at American Politics Through the Prism of Native American Culture and Experience

C. Danielle Vinson

Furman University, Greenville SC 29613

The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, has a prism installation that refracts sunlight in rainbows of color across the museum's atrium. It allows us to see a familiar light in a new way. Fifteen years ago, I found myself on a university committee that vetted proposals and awarded funding to faculty seeking support for undergraduate research assistants. On that committee, I encountered a proposal by my colleague Helen Lee Turner in which she requested funding for a student research assistant to accompany her to the Hopi Reservation, where she was studying Hopi culture and religion. Not long after I read her proposal, I had an opportunity to talk to Helen Lee about her research. We began an ongoing conversation in which she shared with me what she was learning, particularly about Hopi politics in the context of a debate over changes to the Hopi Constitution. In 2015, she invited me to join her in taking students on a three-week trip to Indian Country in Arizona and New Mexico to learn about the religion, culture, and politics of the Southwest Indians. After three weeks and 3,400 miles in a minivan, my eyes opened to a new perspective on American politics as I saw it through the prism of Native American political culture and experiences.

What follows are some of my observations and how they have helped me think and teach differently about American politics. I want to make clear that while I do have expertise in American government, I claim no such expertise in Native American culture and politics. I base my discussion of these topics on what I heard from the Hopi, Navajo, Pueblo, and other people we met during our travels. Some of these folks had formal education in Native American studies, while others were attesting to their own experiences and way of life. I have supplemented their comments with emails and documents related to Hopi politics that Helen Lee has sent me over the years. Instinctively, I found myself processing this information through my lens as a political scientist, focusing on patterns and common themes in what I heard, so that no one person's view stood alone. And I could not help comparing it to what I know about American politics. This process had the effect of refracting American politics to help me see it in ways I had not previously considered, reminding me that zero-sum politics is not the only option, and that stepping out of the polarizing ideological framework that dominates American politics allows us to see our problems more clearly and think more creatively about solutions.

Thinking Differently about American Politics: Political Cultures

The founding documents of American government have always been the starting point in my "Introduction to American Government" course. The political culture

and values laid out in the *Declaration of Independence* are a familiar and relatively noncontroversial place to begin. Although Thomas Jefferson's declaration that "all men are created equal... [and] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," is open to interpretation and was not and has not been universally applied, both political parties typically agree on the broad values of individual liberty, responsibility, and equality espoused in the Declaration. However, in recent years ideological polarization has conscripted even these core values in service to partisan division. Conservatives have emphasized individualism and personal responsibility in their calls for limited government, particularly in the realm of economic policy, while liberals have been more concerned about equality, especially for marginalized groups. The divisions have undermined the sense of shared values traditionally considered central to American identity and have led political science scholars to question whether it is possible to establish a national character in American politics today.¹ Individualism has morphed into identity politics on the left and right, where each side seems determined to advocate for policies that benefit their specific groups without grappling with the effects on others, even when those effects undermine equality or appear blatantly unfair. The resulting debate is often framed as a zero-sum game, where one group's gain is necessarily another group's loss. The tension between individualism and egalitarianism has become increasingly difficult to navigate in American politics, leaving some scholars pessimistic that a shared American political culture can survive.²

In contrast to the primacy of individualism inherent in American political culture, Native American culture is more communitarian. During our trip to Indian Country, we sat with a Native American political scientist in a traditional Navajo hogan as he explained the historical, communal nature of Native American life. Each person in the immediate family had a role to play to accomplish the daily tasks and functioning of the family, and the extended family of aunts and uncles also played central roles in the lives of the children. As we toured various cliff dwellings, it became clear why community came ahead of individual prerogatives. Rugged individualism might sound and look good on television, but surviving on those harsh lands required a group effort. However, the individual's contribution to the community went beyond mere survival; each person bore responsibility for the reputation and honor of the family and community. Today, Native American elders still admonish the children to "act like you have relatives" to remind them of their duty to the family and community. In Native American culture, the sense of linked fates is prevalent and posits quite a contrast to the zero-sum individualism we see in American politics today.

Although some scholars have argued that communal traditions that encourage more collective minded thinking are in direct conflict with American political culture,³ Native Americans' focus on community, and particularly relatedness, do not seem to me necessarily incompatible with American political

¹W. B. Allen and S. F. McGuire, "Liberty and American National Character: A Symposium," *Perspectives on Political Science* 49.4 (2020): 230–232.

²Lawrence M. Mead, "Cultural Change and Political Character," *Perspectives on Political Science* 49.4 (2020): 258–268.

³Mead, "Cultural Change," 258–268.

values. Rather, they offer a new way of thinking about these values. In Native American culture, each person plays an important role in the family and makes a unique contribution to the community, and is, therefore, valued, incorporating both individualism and equality. Furthermore, each person has a responsibility to behave in ways that reflect well on the family and community, which is certainly congruent with personal responsibility and the work ethic long associated with American culture.

In a critique of the American vertical justice system, where two adversaries present cases that are decided by a wise judge who imposes a verdict and penalties, former Navajo Nation Chief Justice Robert Yazzie provides evidence that Navajo culture encompasses many values espoused by American political culture. He explains,

The Navajo legal maxim is “it’s up to him,” meaning that every person is responsible for his or her own actions, and not those of another. As another example [of how the American system is counter to Navajo values], Navajos do not believe in coercion. Coercion is an undeniable aspect of a vertical justice system. However, because coercion tends to be authoritarian, it is thus alien to the Navajo egalitarian system, where the people themselves retain control of a situation and solve their own problems.⁴

In Yazzie’s description of Navajo values, we see individual responsibility, egalitarianism, and limited government authority. One could argue that Native American culture, when translated into a political setting, provides a model of political citizenship that allows for individualism and equality while recognizing a shared responsibility to the community. Indeed, some scholars believe such a sense of civic duty might offer a path back toward a more unified American national character.⁵

At minimum, recognizing our relatedness to others and our role in society certainly has the potential to move us beyond zero-sum politics as we understand how our fortunes are connected, even as we live our own lives and enjoy our freedoms. It also offers a way to move away from the increasing incivility and nastiness of politics. Two examples from Native American politics help illustrate the possibilities.

Reimagining Justice

I noticed one example of how these distinct cultural paths can lead to different political outcomes in a comparison of the American justice system and Native American efforts at restorative justice. Traditionally, the purpose of federal and state criminal justice systems in the United States (US) is punishment. Over the last forty years, the US’s increasing incarceration rates have put more people in

⁴Robert Yazzie, “Hozho Náhasdlii—We Are Now in Good Relations: Navajo Restorative Justice,” *St. Thomas Law Review* 9.1 (Fall 1996): 120.

⁵Allen and McGuire, “Liberty,” 230–232; Mark Lilla, “Identity and Citizenship,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 49.4 (2020): 233–238; and Colleen A. Sheehan, “Civic Friendship in America: A Madisonian Retrospective,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 49.4 (2020): 248–257.

jail per capita than any other country.⁶ At the same time, studies have shown little connection between incarceration rates and reduced crime rates or improved public safety, and prison has not proven particularly effective in rehabilitating people either, leaving one to conclude that the primary purpose of prison is punishment.⁷ The person is removed from society for a time, and after they have paid for their crime, they are released, often without services that would assist with re-entry into the community.⁸

In the Native American communitarian culture of relatedness, being not just part of something larger than oneself, but also being partly responsible for the well-being and functioning of that community opens the door to reimagining the purpose of a justice system. When our group met with Justice Yazzie, an internationally known proponent of restorative justice, he explained that while American law is concerned with punishing bad behavior, Navajo law is concerned with good relationships. From the Navajo perspective, disputes, including legal ones, are the result of people not being in good relation with each other. Navajo justice, therefore, attempts to look beyond the immediate dispute to the underlying causes and focuses on “healing, integration with the group, and the end goal of nourishing ongoing relationships with the immediate and extended family, relatives, neighbors and community.”⁹ In place of the American adversarial justice system, where one side wins and the other loses, the goal of Navajo justice is to find a solution that benefits all parties—offender, victim, and their families. The offender will face consequences, but in a way that restores him or her to a right relationship with the community, and the victim will be heard and helped.

I was struck by how similar Justice Yazzie’s comments were to those of the Medicine Man we met, who talked about incorporating traditional healing practices into Indian health care systems to focus on restoring people to their family and community when they face physical and mental health challenges. The centrality of relationships not just within a family but also between individuals and community was a recurring theme in many contexts in Indian Country, illustrating the way cultural values shape and explain many aspects of our society. Although American political culture is not communitarian, it does embrace civic duty as part of our personal responsibility, connecting us to our community. However, our relentless emphasis on individualism, often at the expense of our sense of connection to community, influences many aspects of American politics today. We see it in everything from our justice system, which does not consider the wider family and community implications of prison, to our recent conflicts over wearing masks during a pandemic.

⁶Molly Gardner and Michael Weber, eds., *The Ethics of Policing and Imprisonment* (New York: Palgrave, 2018), 1.

⁷See, for example, Todd R. Clear, “The Impacts of Incarceration on Public Safety,” *Social Research* 74.2 (Summer 2007): 613–30.

⁸Eileen Rivers, “Re-entry into society, or back to prison?” *USA Today* (December 29, 2017), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/policing/reentry/column/2017/12/29/reentry-incarceration-corruption-prison-barriers-recidivism-policing-usa/979903001/>.

⁹Robert Yazzie, “Life Comes from It: Navajo Justice Concepts,” *New Mexico Law Review* 24.2 (Spring 1994): 182.

Preserving Civility while Expressing Dissent

A second example of the impact of political culture can be found in the tone of our politics and how we approach dissent. My first epiphany on this topic predated our trip to Indian Country. Helen Lee had been following the debate over a new proposed Hopi Constitution, and she thought I might find the politics interesting. She sent me a number of Hopi news articles and documents from the discussions. In a Hopi Appellate Court ruling related to key aspects of the proposed Constitution, I ran across a discussion about Hopi “traditional ways” in the conduct of political processes. In his decision, the Hopi judge, Robert Clinton, wrote,

At oral argument, this Court was repeatedly reminded that an essential part of the Hopi way is the right to decline to participate, i.e. to abstain, in decisions or actions with which one disagrees. As the Court understands the matter, the right of abstention constitutes an important political part of Hopi customs and traditions. It permits Hopi, whether individual Hopi members or whole Villages, *to preserve harmony and consensus by not outright disruptively casting dissenting votes, while still politely manifesting their disagreement by declining to participate.* It provides a way of preserving political civility while providing an outlet for political dissent—a tradition and custom from which the United States could learn much.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

As someone who studies Congress, I immediately noticed how the Hopi way of registering disagreement stands in stark contrast to the individualism that currently permeates American government. Though such self-restraint may have been a hallmark of senators for much of American history, it certainly does not exist in today’s polarized Congress, with the constant threat of filibusters in the US Senate and politicians making grand public displays of their opposition to policies—even those that enjoy majority support in government and from the public.

The connection I had not made until reading Judge Clinton’s comments was between disruptive dissent and the decline in civility in politics. US Senators usually make a show of their civil language even when they engage in obstruction (at least until recent years). However, the Hopi recognize that the very act of disruption opens the door to incivility by straining the relationships of the group. While maintaining civility in one’s rhetoric has merit, uncivil actions couched in polite language are still uncivil. In contrast, the decision to forego all the avenues of dissent available to a person when faced with certain defeat in the interest of maintaining harmony has the potential to create political capital and goodwill, which may be reciprocated by one’s colleagues when differences arise in the future. This approach is quite unlike the spiraling hostilities we observe in the US Senate as each side finds new ways to obstruct the other, further eroding the trust and respect required for civility, even as senators call each other “my dear friend.”

¹⁰Robert N. Clinton, “In the Matter of Village Authority to Remove Tribal Council Members,” Hopi Appellate Court, Appellate Case No. 2008-AP-001 (February 11, 2010): 9.

Understanding the Cultural Cues

The widespread use of these civil acts of disagreement became more apparent during our trip as I heard numerous people talk in different contexts about the practice of shunning as a way to make someone aware of their transgression or shortcoming, ultimately to shame them into changing their behavior. Historically, some tribes refused to send representatives to meetings with US government officials when the government had failed to keep its word. Today, some Hopi villages refuse to send representatives to the central Hopi government. These examples led to a second epiphany for me: for such signals of disapproval to be effective, the recipient must understand them. Within Native American culture, the purpose of abstentions and shunning or refusing to participate is clear. Often, however, American politicians believe that choosing not to participate or show up signifies acceptance, agreement, or perhaps indifference. Therefore, when Native Americans chose not to attend meetings with government officials, those officials assumed they could do what they pleased. It dawned on me that American politicians' indifference to those who do not participate extends beyond those historic decisions that affected Native American tribes. When politicians write off some groups who tend not to vote, they assume these folks just do not care about politics or that they are happy with the way things are. However, if we think about not voting as a form of shunning because the government has not lived up to expectations, it suggests a problem that needs to be addressed.

Thinking Critically about American Politics: Issues Absent Ideology

Americans are often taught, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, that our political system is the best, that our country is exceptional. This socialization can create challenges for critical reflection and can inhibit recognition of our country's inevitable shortcomings and failures. Taken to its extreme, this view perceives any criticism of the US as an attack and evidence of a lack of patriotism. My international students are especially attuned to this American sensitivity, as they often reserve their most pointed critiques of American policies and ways of doing things for private conversations with me rather than raising them during class discussion.

One cannot spend time in Indian Country without being forced to recognize that there is much room for improvement in American government and politics. The failure of the U.S. government to live up to treaty obligations, the stark reality of poverty (not unique to Native Americans), the challenges of American economics in the context of reservations and sustaining Native American culture, and the complex, often conflicting, concept of identity are not abstract ideas in a textbook; they are everyday life in Indian Country. And in Indian Country we generally encountered them without the ideological framework that envelops most debates in American politics, providing an opportunity for more open-minded critical reflection.

Perfecting our union

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well on its way to perfection. It is working pretty well for us. Through the eyes and experiences of our fellow citizens who are Native American, it is easier to see the work that lies ahead. Poverty, healthcare, and education are three issues we saw and heard much about on the reservations. Although these issues are not unique to Native Americans, there are particular challenges in solving these issues on Native American reservations, and the federal government’s role in solving the problems is more explicitly mandated.

Poverty is widespread on the reservations we visited. According to a US Bureau of Labor Statistics report, unemployment among Native Americans was nearly seventy percent higher than that of the overall population in 2018, a pattern that was consistent throughout the economic recovery following the US recession in 2008–09.¹¹ Unemployment exceeds forty percent on some reservations. In the rural reservations and pueblos we visited, there are limited job opportunities, with no major industries or companies within easy driving distance.

Poverty is compounded by the lack of infrastructure for people living in rural, isolated houses and villages. Many houses lack indoor plumbing, a particular challenge during this year’s coronavirus pandemic, when hand washing and cleaning common areas of houses have been essential to public health. At least thirty percent of those living on the Navajo reservation do not have running water. Some houses lack a reliable source of electricity. Many people live in areas that do not have adequate infrastructure for high-speed internet access, limiting opportunities in education and commerce. In 2019, National Public Radio reported on a poll of rural America that showed “more than a quarter of Native Americans have experienced problems with electricity, the Internet and with the safety of their drinking water.”¹²

Health care and education are also limited on reservations. The first challenge is simply limited access to both. There are few hospitals, and those that exist are often far away. For example, on the Navajo Reservation, the “ratio of hospital beds to population is about a third of the figure for the general population in the United States.”¹³ It is difficult to find doctors, nurses, and staff who are willing to live in remote areas. Reservation schools tend to be a mix of private schools (often sponsored by religious denominations and not financially feasible for many) and federal public schools, which are often underfunded and underperform compared to public schools nationally.

The second challenge is ensuring that the health care and education systems and providers are culturally sensitive. People are unlikely to trust health care providers and follow through with their recommendations if the providers are

¹¹Mary Dorinda Allard and Vernon Brundage Jr., “American Indians and Alaska Natives in the U.S. labor force,” *Monthly Labor Review*, US Bureau of Labor Statistics (November 2019), <https://doi.org/10.21916/mlr.2019.24>.

¹²Laurel Morales, “For Many Navajos, Getting Hooked Up To The Power Grid Can Be Life-Changing,” *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio (May 29, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/05/29/726615238/for-many-navajos-getting-hooked-up-to-the-power-grid-can-be-life-changing>.

¹³Mark Walker, “Pandemic Highlights Deep-Rooted Problems in Indian Health Service,” *New York Times* (September 29, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/politics/coronavirus-indian-health-service.html?smid=em-share>.

dismissive or lack understanding of the culture and customs. Employees at the Hopi Health Care Center talked to our group about the importance of cultural orientation of non-Native health care employees to improve their effectiveness in working with their Native American patients. Similar concerns arise in education. Throughout our trip, the scars that twentieth century American boarding schools left on Native Americans are still evident. Those schools often forced students to abandon their culture, cutting their hair, replacing traditional clothing with uniforms, and forbidding them to speak their native languages. People we met expressed strong interest in schools that would teach not only Native American history but also culture and language. The lack of Native American teachers, doctors, and nurses makes it much harder to provide education and healthcare that is culturally sensitive, which in turn contributes to less desirable outcomes in health and education in the community.

The visibility of poverty and the lack of infrastructure and opportunities on the reservations make it hard to ignore or dismiss these problems as the result of poor life decisions by individuals, as some people do when confronted with poverty in the US. The problems are clearly systemic, and there is no doubt that the US government bears some responsibility for the problems and their solutions. After all, the US government created the reservations and made the treaties in which the federal government promised to provide health care and education among other public services in exchange for American Indian tribes agreeing to move to the reservations and give up claims to other territory.

While there may be room for ideologues and partisans to debate the causes and solutions to individual poverty, poor health, and poor education outcomes, there can be no serious claims that the US government has fulfilled its treaty obligations to Native Americans. The Indian Health Service, a federal agency, has been underfunded historically. "In 2017, the Indian Health Service spent \$3,332 per patient, according to a report by the National Congress of American Indians. By comparison, Medicare spent \$12,829 per patient that year, and Medicaid spent \$7,789 per patient."¹⁴ Likewise, education funding for Native Americans, typically underfunded, has undergone further cuts in recent years.¹⁵ While Americans may find ways to justify the US refusing to pay its dues to the United Nations or live up to commitments to other countries, they find it more challenging to excuse the federal government's neglect of its responsibilities to Native Americans. Pushed out of the comfort of their ideological frames, citizens may be able to open the door a little to thinking critically about their country.

The options for addressing poverty on the reservations also defy traditional partisan solutions. The traditional American ways of accumulating wealth and working one's way out of poverty do not work easily on the reservations. An important limiting condition is property ownership. The reservation land is held in trust by the federal government for the tribe collectively, meaning that no individual can own land on the reservation. That makes it impossible for people to get mortgages to build houses on the reservation, and they cannot sell the land

¹⁴Walker, "Pandemic Highlights."

¹⁵Rebecca Clarren, "How America Is Failing Native American Students," *The Nation* (July 24, 2017), <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/left-behind>.

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even to each other. Some might argue that people should be encouraged to leave the reservations and go where there is more educational and economic opportunity. However, that means giving up their culture. While I can be Christian and observe Easter anywhere with or without other people, one cannot be Hopi apart from the community. Each of the clans carries and passes down a part of the customs and traditions required to practice Hopi religion. We met many people in our travels who had left the reservation to attend college or work, but they returned when they had children so that they could raise them to know their culture. Addressing poverty and its related concerns on the reservations is an opportunity to look beyond partisan talking points and think creatively about these problems.

Conflicting identities

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In a country that has been built largely on waves of immigration, Americans are used to self-identifying in many ways connected to their ethnicity, race, religion, and gender. In recent years, ideology and party have played a more prominent role in how Americans define themselves in a way that often ignores the complexity and nuances of identity and that forces people into two camps—us and them. We see this, for example, as pro-choice Republicans and pro-life Democrats find there is no room for them in their own political parties, or as Republicans view biracial Barack Obama as black while some Democrats question whether he is “black enough.” Pushing people to simplify their own identity may serve political goals, but it does not reflect reality. In Indian Country, the complexity of identity is more readily acknowledged and is refreshingly insulated from the partisan and ideological contexts that inform our thinking about identity in the US. This separation permits a clearer look at the tensions among various group identities and how they might coexist.

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One such complex identity choice is evident in the number of Native Americans who are outspokenly patriotic Americans—that is, they fully identify with their tribe and culture but also embrace being American. During our trip, we repeatedly encountered the reality that Native Americans serve in large numbers with pride and distinction in the US military. We listened to several veterans and saw museum exhibits and public monuments honoring those who had served. People expressed patriotic pride in the freedoms and liberties espoused by the US, and at the same time, they criticized the government’s neglect of Native American tribes. Their patriotism was not blind to the country’s shortcomings; they did not gloss over the enduring racism many of them face. For example, we heard Native Americans in Arizona express frustration about navigating Arizona’s crackdown on immigrants, as some white police officers could not distinguish one brown person from another and demanded the immigration papers of some Native Americans. Although they acknowledged the indignities and criticized government’s role in persistent racism and problems on the reservation, many of the people we met, particularly the veterans, had a hopeful view of the country and supported the ideals espoused in the US’s founding documents. It was a much more nuanced and complex patriotism than we often see expressed between the political parties in American politics, where many conservatives deem criticism of the US as unpatriotic, while many liberals seem ambivalent about outward expressions of

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Gender roles and gender equality are other aspects of identity that play out in complex ways in current Native American experience. Historically, Native Americans were light years ahead of European Americans on gender equality. Many of the tribes are matrilineal, and women own the property. As one man explained to our group: "if my wife decides she wants to divorce me, she can leave my clothes in a bag by the door, and that's all I get to keep; the business [they had built together] and the house and everything in it belong to her." Houses pass from the mother to the daughters. When colonists first arrived in America, Native women played equal roles to men in politics. They participated in councils and meetings between Indians and the colonists, though some tribes moved away from this equality as they tried to adopt European practices that would allow them to interact more effectively with the colonial governments.

Concurrent with this history of women playing an equal political and economic role, there were and are traditional gender roles. Among the Navajo, women do the weaving, while men typically make the jewelry and the pottery. Among the Hopi, men are the weavers and women the basket makers. We encountered some younger women in our travels who are trying to navigate the traditional gender roles of their tribe while embracing gender equity in the broader American society. They have enjoyed the freedom to work in whatever field they choose, unconstrained by stereotypical views of male and female professions. At the same time, their culture is important to them, and they want to sustain it, but certain aspects of their culture are off limits to them. For some, reconciling the two was not easy. Others seemed to see little conflict between gender equality and clearly defined cultural gender roles. As long as they were treated with respect and had equal voice in family and tribal matters, they did not find the cultural roles limiting.

The complexity of gender roles and Native American women's adjustments to them seemed to be in contrast to these debates in American politics. Our larger debates often force an artificial choice between equality and traditional roles. Any suggestion that a particular cultural role is reserved for one sex often elicits condemnation, particularly from those outside the culture; there is a sense that equality cannot be achieved if any gender roles are preserved. Even the Native American women I met who chafed at some of the gender roles in their culture did not view them as incompatible with equality. It is a reminder that our various cultural backgrounds may not fit neatly with our national political goals or values. Preserving our diverse cultures while striving to be one nation—a more perfect union—requires nuance and an acceptance of complexity and even tension. It requires effort and understanding, and it certainly cannot be reduced to the zero-sum identity politics of our current political environment.

Conclusion

During my three weeks in Indian Country, the culture and issues I encountered did not in themselves surprise me, but the ability to experience these aspects of American politics in a context largely free of ideological polarization had the effect of defamiliarizing them—that is, making me see them in a new light. It is the

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same effect that reading an unfamiliar translation of the Bible can have, as it forces us to confront what familiar verses actually mean. In my case, seeing the role of culture in Native American politics made me look more closely at how American political culture prescribes our political processes and policies. Seeing poverty and its accompanying challenges on the reservation left me thinking more critically about my government and the inadequacies of partisan frameworks for addressing such complex policy problems. Seeing the way that Native Americans in their relational culture navigated identity, not so much as competing views at odds with each other but as pieces of a complex whole, gave me a new perspective on the identity politics that has overtaken American politics.

In response to this trip, I began to incorporate some of what I had seen and learned in Indian Country into my American Government course to help my students think more critically (not necessarily negatively) about American government. My students often see the world and process information through the ideological lens nurtured by their parents and their media choices. Ideology influences how they view new information and specific groups within society. Although I was struck by the absence of ideology in much of what I saw and heard on the reservations, I did not really expect that to carry over in my retelling of these things. To my surprise, I have found that students seem less quick to subject information related to Native Americans to the ideological frameworks, making students less resistant to engaging the issues. In contrast to other groups in the US from other cultures, my American students rarely question the belonging of Native Americans. The thinking seems to be that of course Native Americans are part of America; they were here first. Perhaps students recognize the hypocrisy in suggesting that the first peoples should assimilate to the culture of those who came later. Whatever the reason, I find that there is less political division among my students over the legitimacy of Native American cultural differences than the differences of other groups. That provides an opening to get them to think critically about traditional American values.

Native American culture can serve as a prism that provides an alternative way of thinking about one's place in society and one's government; it allows us to see that zero-sum politics are not the only option. Without the ideological preconceptions about Native Americans, my students, and perhaps people more generally, may be more receptive to critiques of American politics and policy that arise from Native American experience. Acknowledging the criticism creates the opportunity to address the shortcomings. Here too, Native American culture, with its focus on relatedness, may offer creative ideas for framing and solving some of our most intractable problems.

Helen Lee understands this idea that we are all related. She recognized the connections between my own field of political science and what she was studying from the perspective of religion and culture. I am grateful to her for sharing her scholarly interests with me and inviting me to bring my own academic perspectives and tools to our discussions and our travels. Working with her has been one of the most educational and enjoyable professional collaborations of my career.