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VOTERS SUPPORT NATIVE AMERICAN HEALTHCARE AND TREATY RIGHTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Voters support five proposals aimed at improving healthcare in Native American communities. The most popular was increasing funding for the Indian Health Service, which enjoyed a 54-percentage-point margin of support.
- ▶ Voters support holding the federal government legally responsible for failing to uphold treaty obligations with Native American tribes, by a margin of 54 percentage points.
- ▶ Support for all five of these proposals is bipartisan. For example, Republicans support targeting federal aid to hospitals and other essential services used by communities of color and Native American tribes, by a margin of 23 percentage points.

The coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately impacted Native American communities in the United States. The Navajo Nation has been especially devastated; as the *Washington Post* [reported](#), “Nearly 2,700 people had fallen ill, and more than 80 had died, with the 350,000-resident reservation becoming one of the worst-of-the-worst American hot spots.” Aid from the federal government has so far been lacking. According to the Navajo Nation president, Jonathan Nez, “the tribe had not received ‘one cent’ of the \$8 billion that was allocated to Native American communities as part of the Cares Act passed in Washington on March 18.” Urgent action is required to address this. Democratic leaders,

including Rep. Deb Haaland of New Mexico, one of the first two Native American women elected to Congress, and Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts have, in consultation with tribal leaders, proposed various reforms to address these inequities and to provide emergency relief to Native communities.

As part of a May 2020 survey, Data for Progress tested support for five proposals connected to the wellbeing of Native American tribes.

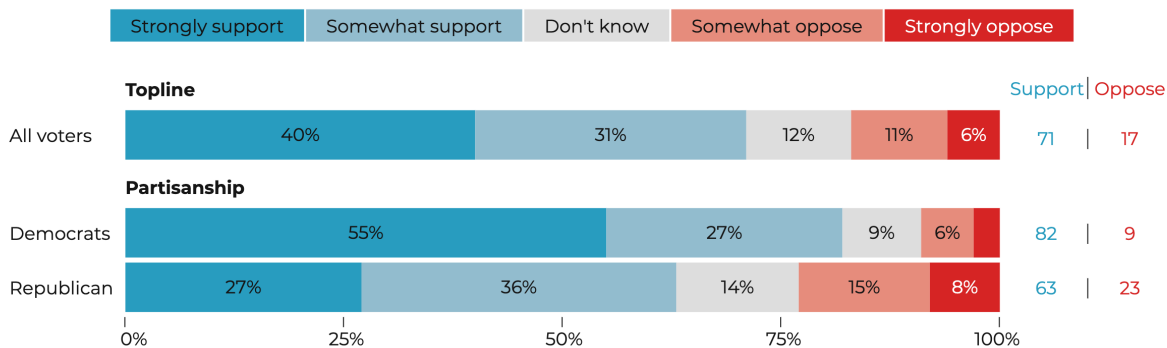
The first question concerned the funding of the Indian Health Service, which provides healthcare to Native Americans. Specifically, we asked voters:

Indian Health Service, the federal agency that provides health care to more than two million Native Americans, has a budget of \$6 billion but health experts say the agency needs a budget of \$34 billion to provide safe and adequate service to patients. Congress is considering increasing funding for the agency amid the coronavirus pandemic: Would you support or oppose a proposal to increase the agency’s budget by \$3 billion to start filling budget shortfalls?

Overall, voters overwhelmingly support increasing funding for the Indian Health Service (71 percent support, 17 percent oppose). This 54-percentage-point margin of support is built upon bipartisan support: Democrats back it by a 73-point margin (82 percent support, 9 percent oppose), and Republicans back it by a 40-point margin (63 percent support, 23 percent oppose).

Voters Support Increasing The Funding For The Indian Health Service

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The government has ratified more than 370 treaties with Native American tribes. Despite the fact that these treaties are legally binding, the United States government has failed to uphold its obligations. The next question we polled concerned whether the US government should be held responsible. Specifically, we asked voters:

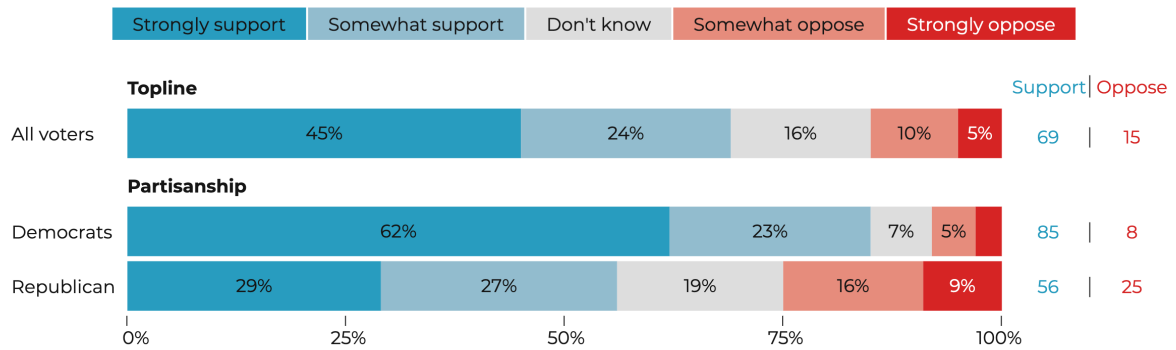
The United States government has signed more than 370 legally binding treaties with American Indian tribes and nations. These treaties, considered the “supreme law of the land” in the United States constitution, guarantee tribal citizens access to health care, education, housing and economic development in exchange for tribal land. A report commissioned by the United States Commission on Civil Rights found that the

federal government has failed to uphold its treaty obligations, grossly underfunding vital health care, education, housing and economic development systems. Do you support or oppose holding the federal government legally responsible for violating tribe’s treaty rights?

By a 54-point margin, overall voters support holding the federal government legally responsible for failing to uphold tribes’ treaty rights (69 percent support, 15 percent oppose). Both Democrats and Republicans support this measure by substantial margins, with Democrats supporting it by a 77-point margin (85 percent support, 8 percent oppose), and Republicans supporting it by a 31-point margin (56 percent support, 25 percent oppose).

Voters Want The Federal Government Held Reponsible For Failing To Uphold Tribe's Treaty Rights

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Though Congress has made federal aid available to Native American tribes and nations, tribal leaders are currently forced to go through state governments to access this emergency funding. Tribal leaders consider this a slight against their sovereign legal status and treaty rights and believe they should interface directly with the federal government. To test support for tribal leaders' position, we asked voters:

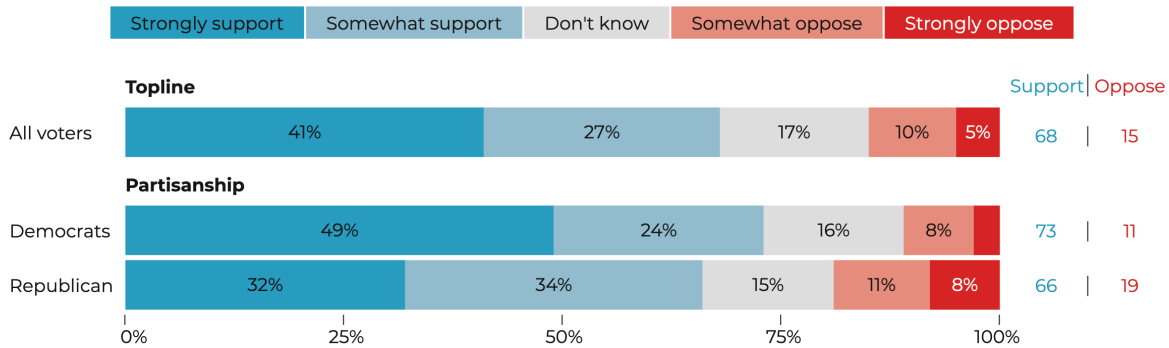
Congress has made federal aid available to American Indian tribes and nations during the coronavirus pandemic, however tribal leaders must go through their state government to access the funding, leading to delays. Tribal leaders say that tribes have

a government-to-government relationship with the federal government and should be allowed to interface directly with federal agencies to access federal aid. Would you support or oppose a proposal to allow tribes to work directly with the federal government to access aid rather than going through the states?

Overall, voters support this proposal by a 53-point margin (68 percent support, 15 percent oppose). Again, support is bipartisan, with Democrats backing it by a 62-point margin, and Republicans backing it by a 47-point margin (66 percent support, 19 percent oppose).

Voters Support Allowing Tribes To Work Directly With The Federal Government

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The federal government has made the Strategic National Stockpile available to Native American tribes and nations. To access this stockpile, however, tribal leaders are forced to go through state governments, delaying the process. Currently, tribal leaders are pushing to change this, so that they can coordinate directly with the federal government. We asked voters, specifically:

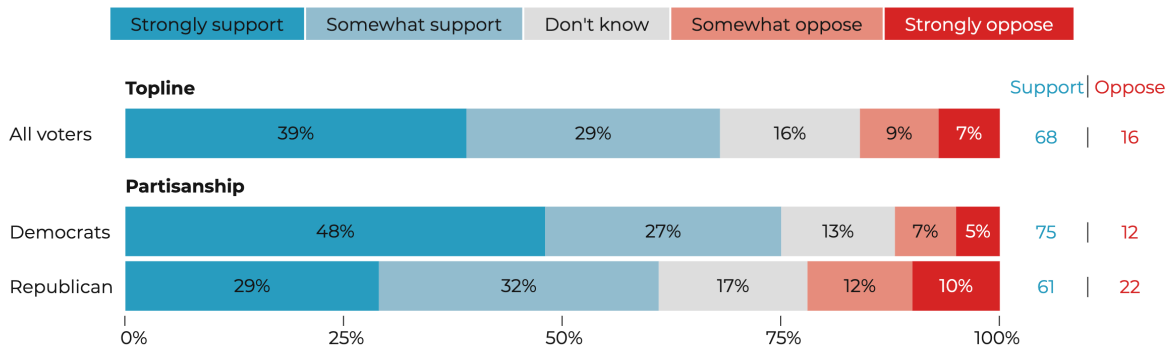
The Federal government has made the strategic national stockpile of personal protective equipment and other critical medical supplies available to American Indian tribes and nations during the coronavirus pandemic, however tribal leaders must go through their state government to access the funding, leading to delays. Tribal Leaders say that tribes have

a government-to-government relationship with the federal government and should be allowed to interface directly with federal agencies to access the strategic national stockpile. Would you support or oppose a proposal to allow tribes to work directly with the federal government to access the strategic national stockpile rather than going through the states?

Overall, voters support this policy by a 52-point margin. Both Democrats and Republicans back the measure by wide margins, with Democrats supporting it by a 63-point margin (75 percent support, 12 percent oppose), and Republicans supporting it by a 39-point margin (61 percent support, 22 percent oppose).

Voters Support Allowing Tribes To Work Directly With The Federal Government To Access The Strategic National Stockpile

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Long-term exposure to air pollution is associated with a heightened death rate from coronavirus, and this exposure disproportionately impacts communities of color and Native American tribes. One way to address this would be to target federal aid to hospitals and essential services used by these communities. To test support for this, we asked voters:

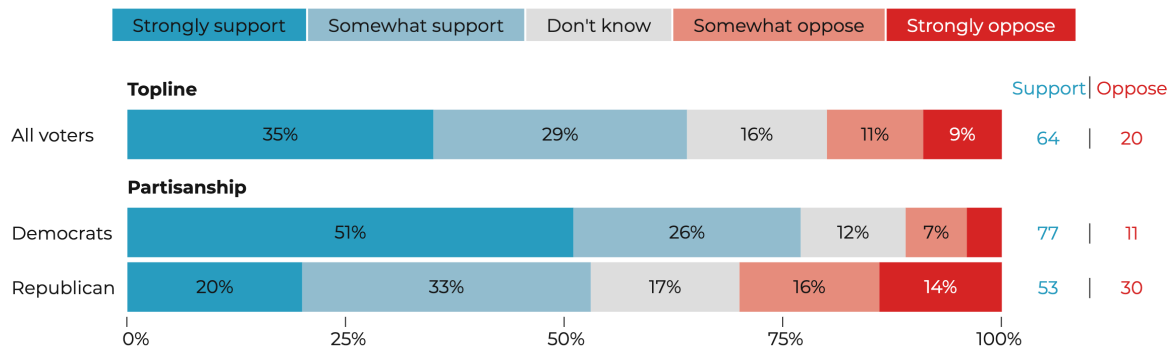
A recent Harvard University study found that long-term exposure to air pollution is associated with heightened death rates from coronavirus. Communities of color and American Indian tribes often live with greater exposure to air pollution than their white communities, increasing their vulnerability amid the coronavirus

pandemic. Would you support or oppose a proposal to prioritize federal aid for hospitals and other essential services used by communities of color and American Indian tribes that are disproportionately impacted by air pollution and the coronavirus?

Overall, voters support this policy by a 44-point margin of support (64 percent support, 20 percent oppose). Both Democrats and Republicans back the proposal, with Democrats supporting it by a 66-point margin (77 percent support, 11 percent oppose), and Republicans supporting it by a 23-point margin of support (53 percent support, 30 percent oppose).

Voters Support Prioritizing Federal Aid For Hospitals And Other Essential Services Used By Communities Of Color And American Indian Tribes

A recent Harvard University study found that long-term exposure to air pollution is associated with heightened death rates from coronavirus. Communities of color and American Indian tribes often live with greater exposure to air pollution than their white communities, increasing their vulnerability amid the coronavirus pandemic. Would you support or oppose a proposal to prioritize federal aid for hospitals and other essential services used by communities of color and American Indian tribes that are disproportionately impacted by air pollution and the coronavirus?



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CONCLUSION

Data for Progress found robust bipartisan support for a number of measures that would provide needed relief as well as legal recompense to tribal communities whose treaty rights and wellbeing have been trampled over by the United States government. We posit that such robust support may stem from the general public's lack of knowledge and formed opinion about Native Americans, who are often conspicuously absent from the American political and cultural scene. Nonetheless, our data indicates that lawmakers can be confident that when they stand up alongside the United States' forgotten First Peoples, voters will stand with them.

METHODOLOGY

On May 4, 2020, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 1,143 likely voters nationally using web-panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, urbanicity, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is ± 2.9 percent.

EDITED BY

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COVER PHOTO

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