Engaging Native Youth in the COVID-19 Response:
Findings from the Arizona Youth Identity Project

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Purpose of Study

• Our project examines how U.S.-born Latinx, Native American and White young adults perceive their identity and status as Americans in the context of rapidly changing economic, demographic, and political conditions.

• This presentation focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on Native communities and the strength and resolve of Native youth to support and protect their families and communities.
“The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected American Indian and Alaska Native populations across the country. American Indians and Alaska Natives have infection rates over 3.5 times higher than non-Hispanic whites, are over four times more likely to be hospitalized as a result of COVID-19, and have higher rates of mortality at younger ages than non-Hispanic whites. This has highlighted the need for comprehensive, culturally appropriate personal and public health services that are available and accessible to all American Indian and Alaska Native people.”

(https://www.ihs.gov/coronavirus/)
Total COVID-19 Cases in Arizona

Why Arizona?

• Demographic Changes
  • Aging white population
  • Ages 0-17: 61% non-white
  • Accelerated growth of Latinx population

• Second largest Native American Population
  • 22 federally recognized Indian tribes
  • Over ¼ state land designated as Indian Reservation Land

• Political battleground State
  • Laws targeting immigrants
  • Voter suppression of Latinx and Native Americans
  • Battleground/Purple state
Research Methods

- **Wave 1** (Sept./Oct. 2020)
  - Pre-election
  - Online survey
  - Interviews

- **Wave 2** (Nov./Dec. 2020)
  - Post-Election
  - Interviews
  - Photovoice

- **Wave 3** (June 2021)
  - 100-days Post Inauguration
  - Interviews
## Survey Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% Female</th>
<th>% Democrat</th>
<th>% Republican</th>
<th>Age Mean (SD)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native American (alone or in combination)</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>24.6 (5.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(non-Hispanic) white</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>23.8 (5.1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latinx/Hispanic</td>
<td>767</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>23.3 (4.8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>22.3 (3.9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total sample, ages 18-39</td>
<td>2,231</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>23.4 (4.9)</td>
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</table>
Native Americans have been more impacted by COVID-19

"Someone close to me became ill from the coronavirus"

- Native American: 54%
- (non-Hispanic) White: 38%
- Latinx/Hispanic: 47%

"I had trouble paying bills"

- Native American: 43%
- (non-Hispanic) White: 20%
- Latinx/Hispanic: 24%
Native Americans have been more likely to change their behavior due to COVID-19.

"I volunteered to help others deal with the impacts of the coronavirus":
- Native American: 19%
- (non-Hispanic) White: 12%
- Latinx/Hispanic: 9%

"I stopped visiting family or friends":
- Native American: 68%
- (non-Hispanic) White: 57%
- Latinx/Hispanic: 64%
Native Americans are more supportive of government action to mitigate Covid-19

"Many states have enacted policies to slow the spread of the coronavirus (Covid-19). Which of these policies do you support?"

- Requiring social distancing in public spaces
- Requiring face covering/masks in public places
- Limiting the size of public gatherings
- Imposing travel restrictions
- Closing of restaurants and bars
- Issuing "stay-at-home" orders or nightly curfews

Bar chart showing support percentages by Native American, (non-Hispanic) White, and Latinx/Hispanic groups.
Interview Sample

Arizona Resident

U.S.-Born

Latinx, White, Native American

Ages 18-29

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wave 1</th>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3 (ongoing)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>111</td>
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Findings from Interviews

• Impact of COVID
• Government Response
• Civic Engagement
• 2020 Elections
• Innovation and Social Change
Impact on Individuals and Families

It’s definitely put me through a lot of anxiety, a lot of stress, a lot of discomfort, not only for myself, but for my family who lives with me and my family who lives out on the reservation...I haven’t been able to visit my home since March, so that’s definitely been a major impact on me, not being able to go home to see my family...And not only that, but its been a struggle with having to provide...groceries, utilities...putting food on the table because prices have gone up so much on everything. [28 year old Diné woman]

It's really negatively impacting the community. A lot of people are dying. A lot of people are grief stricken from what happened. People are losing their jobs. My family has experienced income trouble also, so I feel like it's just brought us down more than we were trying to come up, but it just... We were a couple steps higher, and we got knocked down 10 steps. [20 year old Diné woman]
Impact on Community and Culture

I did lose a lot of people due to COVID within my tribal community. My tribe, we have our ceremonies during the beginning of this year. And you could really feel that we lost a lot of elders. And so our ceremonies felt a little bit different. And I think that was probably one of the big things for me, like just losing a lot of people during COVID. (24 year old Pascua Yaqui woman)

A lot of communities were hit pretty hard, and so we had a lot of the things that we were doing going back to our original teachings, growing our own food, making sure that we have things that take care of our elders, taking care of our family and friends, being safe. I guess I guess you call like a mutual aid, definitely helping our communities as much as we can. So I think those are examples of how we go back to our teachings in our ability to be resilient and continue moving forward despite people passing in, families being separated because that is so and not being able to see each other. But I think those are just ways that we kind of navigated through this this pandemic. (27 year old Tohono O'odham man)
Increased Vulnerabilities

I would say a higher risk, just like I have a lot of people that live in my house and...a lot of my community was affected. We have multigenerational households, like...my generation was there, my parents generation, my grandparents generation, and we're all in one house... I did have some of my family members like their whole house got it. Like one person got it and then everyone else tested positive in the house. [24 year old Pascua Yaqui woman]

[W]e don't have the privilege of being able to work from home... whatever jobs that we have, like lower income people have more like working in grocery stores or like doing more like general jobs that are more like face-to-face with people versus like more like I think it's white collar ones that work in offices and stuff. [24 year old Pascua Yaqui woman]
Government Response

I feel like they [federal government] definitely could have done better. Especially at the beginning, you could have like made it mandatory to wear masks, like from the beginning and he could have done like a stay at home policy. If like we would have done that, like right at the beginning, I feel like COVID wouldn't have like lasted that long. And I know on the reservation, they're like starting to do that, like stay at home orders, which I'm not sure if like the numbers have gone down, but I'm going to, I'm pretty sure, I want to assume they have, because they're taking like the necessary things to stop COVID so that like, people can go on like with their lives and stuff. And like, for the closing of places, I feel like that was like a justified thing. Like if it's going to help stop COVID or like slow down the pace, then he definitely did the right thing of doing it. [19 year old Diné woman]
Federal vs Tribal Government Response

I think it's a human thing that we want predictability, and the government hasn't been providing that. Because this is seen as a free country, they want to enforce that freedom and devout individuality, as much as possible, but they're noticing that they can't do it. And so, especially with regards to the indigenous community, the Navajo Community -- COVID looked a lot different there because already there was a lack of access to running water and electricity, and when the [tribe] requested support for COVID assistance, they were sent body bags, and that just really sends the message of, “Oh, it is true, some lives matter more than others,” and I don't think the government's handled it very well. I recognize the things that it has been successful in doing. I appreciate the shelter in place and mask mandates because medical research has proven that those are effective ways to keep us safer, and so anytime that the government reflects what peer-reviewed medical research is suggesting. I think that's the right way to do it. [23 year old Diné woman]
COVID-19 and the 2020 Elections

I made sure everyone in my family was registered to vote...I encouraged them to get registered way in advance...I think being in college, it also highlighted how on my reservation, when it comes to politics, a lot of people can't register to vote or there's kind of that voter...suppression. There's a lot of that where a lot of elders who go to the polls, they only speak Navajo and sometimes there's poll people who can't speak it so they can't be there to help say, "This is what this proposition is," and I think learning about that in college, writing about it, sharing it with others, it did show all of these inequalities on the reservation...So in terms of thinking how politics played an impact this year was just making sure that we had to overcome those barriers. We had to help each other to overcome them. And then once we got our ballot, we just all made sure that we mailed it in. We did the really safe routes of doing so. And then also just becoming informed. Sometimes there was misinformation being spread on social media and a lot of family members stood up to that. They did a lot more work in calling out people, "Hey, this isn't correct. And this is why," or, "I encourage you to read about this because your thinking on this is not the way to be looking at it," I guess. So a lot more work, I think in terms of getting our voices out there, trying to be safe. And also more involvement. A lot more reading, a lot more understanding. I think my information on politics went from here and then within the past year, it just went up. I just kept informing myself because I realized my life and the lives of my loved ones depended on the way these politics are going now. [29 year old Diné woman]
Impact of Native Political Engagement

I feel like the Native community...**did come out and vote** this past election and so Arizona actually flipped from a Republican state to Democratic state. There's actually like a map out there that shows like how much Native people went out and voted. **And without those votes, we wouldn’t have flipped the state and Biden wouldn’t have won this election.** [24 year old Pasqua Yaqui woman]

For me, it was mostly the way he [Trump] handled tribes...And all of his policies undermined Native American sovereignty... As we saw in Arizona, Natives had a really big role in flipping Arizona to blue. Especially indigenous people, when he came out with that proclamation saying this is not indigenous people's day, its Columbus Day and we honor Columbus for discovering America. (21 year old Mojave woman)
I'm a poll worker. I signed up for it back in my own town, so I'm able to reach more of the Native community to get their votes in. I also do a lot of advocating for voting with Native country. Having to vote for Native country is very important, especially in Arizona, since there's a very large, or one of the states that have the most Native population. We make up around four or five percent of Arizona, and having those additional votes is important. I'm just doing a lot of advocating and trying to educate Natives about how to vote, what can you use to vote, where to vote, when's the next one coming up, and especially with COVID, trying to become a ballot collector since on the reservation it's harder to drive to places that have the polls. The nearest place for us is like an hour away from us. (21 year old Mojave woman)
Innovation and Adaptation

Yeah, I think. I think really, like social media is like something that a lot of people have been using, especially with COVID going on. I think...its a really good strategy because that's like more like a global perspective, especially you like something that can really help your platform. And I think now people are starting to learn how to use that more as an advantage or like as a tool to help spread different movements like Black Lives Matter. That was like something that social media really helped and really shown, the real perspective on it versus what news outlets have because they do have their own agendas in a way. So just getting the real picture and stuff. [24 year old Pasqua Yaqui woman]
Me and other few [Native] students, we volunteered our own time and our own resources to be able to have these forums for people to be educated in terms of the candidates that were running and allowing them to speak on their platforms or what they wanted to achieve. We reached out to all the candidates and so that was really hard. So we did experience a lot of challenges in terms of getting people on Zoom, because a lot of people had never used Zoom before and we had elderly who may necessarily not have a computer and not have wifi...And this was the first time we'd ever done this before, and it was kind of scary because we could be judged by the community because we're doing these, and people would be like, "Maybe you're doing it to help your favorite candidates." But we were trying to be as non-bipartisan as possible just to allow people to speak. It was really an experience. [24 year old Pasqua Yaqui woman]
Social Change

That was something I wouldn't have thought of with just normal circumstances, because usually take it upon themselves, the candidates, but this year it was an initiative as Native students and wanting to see change in terms of the tribal council and really making sure that people were picking the right candidates versus like in usual circumstances, people just vote for your cousin or your uncle or your auntie or whoever is running... it was kind of surprising because I think we really did influence the vote because we actually saw different people on council this year versus the traditional people you would see run every year and then they win again and again, and now we're actually seeing change within our communities where the new people that are in there, they're actually holding the... more seasoned people accountable for what they're saying. I think that was something that I wouldn't have imagined with the pandemic being able to have that capacity, through online, because society is becoming more online and virtual and stuff, and so I don't think we would have been able to explore it if there wasn't a pandemic happening and being able to be more connected with people and really engaging, not only with the younger crowd. The younger people who are barely starting to vote up to the older people, having them say, "Well, you don't have to continuously repeat the same thing over and over again. We can come up with new ideas and really make change and really have better perspectives." It doesn't have to be so hard. Because for my tribe, everyone's spread out, so if you really wanted to try to get a vote you would have to drive all over the place. But through virtual, you get to stay at home and not only is it safer right now, but you have the opportunity to outreach to more people and hear people's wishes from all over the place versus within your community and that's it. [24 year old Pascua Yaqui woman]
I’m optimistic that things will get better. We’ve learned a lot from this pandemic. We’ve learned that if we put our money, you know, as a country, into something, we can accomplish a lot. We’ve been able to develop and rollout the vaccines pretty quickly, so I’m optimistic that they’ll take that into account and apply it to other areas...I’m optimistic in terms of coming together as a country. I feel like it has opened my mind a little on just how different our country is. And in the future, it will help me learn a little bit more about where every side is coming from and try to understand why they believe certain things. [25 year old Diné man]

Definitely more optimistic...I feel like the path I'm going to in terms of like my academics, I feel like I have a lot of opportunities now. I think another huge thing is probably just the fact that, like, I am a minority and a lot of like tribes are looking for individuals going into public health, especially with the global response and how like, we really struggled at the first half and like the fact that we didn't have this amount of resources and there's like this amount of students like passion and wanting to preserve and like save and protect these individuals...I just I feel very optimistic. They'll have a lot of opportunities in the future. [20 year old Diné woman]
Native Youth and the Pandemic Response

Native youth ...

... are motivated by a desire to protect their elders, many of whom are at higher risk of Covid-19, and the vital cultural knowledge they carry.

... were frustrated by the federal government’s slow response, leading them to mobilize to provide health information, assistance, and supplies to tribal members.

... demonstrated their capacity to lead by engaging in a variety of response efforts, from donation drives to deliver much-needed water and food, to social media campaigns to reach isolated residents, to recruiting medical volunteers to staff clinics.

... were instrumental in mobilizing the Native vote and influencing the outcome of tribal, state and federal elections.

... by embodying the values of self-determination, they created positive change in their communities.
Implications

• In general, youth online activism focuses on youth issues but Native youth engage online to **address community issues**

• Technology enables Native youth to **maintain and strengthen connections** to tribal communities by linking **on- and off-reservation** tribal members

• Pandemic presented an opportunity for youth to engage in the **building of a more democratic tribal society** by using online forums to get more people— from elders to youth—to engage politically, **making space for new voices and new perspectives**

• Potential for expanding **intertribal coalitions** through web-based technology including online forums
Askwali! (thank you)

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