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Q&A with Leaders and Practitioners: Erik Stegman

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Our understanding of the politics of race, indigeneity, and ethnicity is informed not only by the work of scholars, but also by the work of leaders and practitioners. The *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* (*JREP*) is proud to continue our Q&A series with Erik Stegman, executive director of Center for Native American Youth (CNAY) at the Aspen Institute. Our hope is that forums like these will help advance our collective scholarship by better informing our research agendas, validating some of our claims, and building more bridges between the worlds of research, politics, and policy.

Before his involvement with the Center for Native American Youth, Stegman led field outreach and advocacy for the Poverty to Prosperity program at the Center for American Progress. Prior to that, he served as majority Counsel for the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs under the leadership of Sen. Daniel K. Akaka (HI). In that role, he provided expert advice on various issues affecting tribal governments, including economic development, law enforcement, violence against women, tax, education, and telecommunications. He also led the development of the Stand Against Violence and Empower (SAVE) Native Women Act, which was signed into law as part of the Violence Against Women Act Reauthorization of 2013.

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1. What is the Center for Native American Youth? What does it do?

We are a national advocacy organization driven by a network of thousands of Native American youth, 24 and under, who are working to improve their opportunities and strengthen the future of their tribal communities in urban and reservation areas. We build platforms for Native youth to speak and advocate in their own voice about the issues that matter most to them. We do this with policymakers, broader advocacy coalitions, the private sector, and the media. CNAY also develops research and other resources that share what we learn directly from Native youth throughout the year during our community roundtables. For Native youth and those who serve them, we also serve as a national resource exchange. Finally we believe in the power of Native youth to inspire one another, which is why we regularly recognize and lift up positive youth action in tribal communities across the country.

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2. Why is this work important?

Native youth face some of the most daunting challenges in our nation. They often live in communities with the highest rates of poverty, lowest educational outcomes, highest rates of substance abuse, highest rates of incarceration and participation in the foster care system, and the list continues. Most disheartening, they attempt to take their lives at 2.5 times the national rate—an epidemic. But, we know Native youth are truly resilient and possess tremendous strengths that they draw from their cultures, communities, and families.

Our center focuses on their strengths and believes in the power of youth to recognize and inspire one another. Instead of focusing on these daunting challenges, we focus on the action Native youth are taking across the country to tackle these challenges, build new opportunities for one another, and become the next leaders of their Native nations and tribal communities.

3. From your vantage point, how has attention to Native American issues in Washington DC changed over the last two decades? And what do you think has driven those changes?

Simply put: President Barack Obama will go down as one of the greatest champions of tribal governments and Native people of all time.

Since President Nixon helped usher in the self-determination era in his special message to Congress in July, 1970—the policies of the following administrations and congresses have largely focused on restoring tribal control over their own affairs and institutions—some more than others. The self-determination era has thus been an important repudiation of past eras of federal Indian policy that can only be described as paternalistic and culturally-destructive.

President Obama understood on a very personal level the deep and long-standing relationship tribes have with the United States and the duty this country owes to tribal nations through its trust and treaty commitments. He held the White House Tribal Nations Summit every year with tribal leaders and his cabinet, he led the way on crucial legislation like the Tribal Law and Order Act, permanent reauthorization of the Indian Healthcare Improvement Act, the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, and the list goes on. Just as importantly, he worked hard to make sure federal agencies were properly consulting with tribal governments on their actions. And, he

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launched Generation Indigenous—a first-of-its-kind White House initiative focused on improving resources and platforms for Native youth.

I could go on, but the bottom line is that most of us in Indian Country felt that he truly cared about us. He respected us, and he forged a new 21st century model of honoring self-determination in the executive branch.

4. How easy or difficult is it to have Native American groups speak in a unified voice when it comes to policy? (Relatedly, is it necessary to speak with a unified voice, or is it sufficient for individual tribes and groups to negotiate directly with federal and state governments?)

Advocating as a Native person in the United States can be very complicated. On one level, many of us are members of our own sovereign nations that must advocate as governments. On another level, we are a community of color grappling with many of the same challenges as other communities of color in the United States. There are 567 federally recognized tribes in the country—all of whom have their own unique cultures, priorities, challenges, and opportunities. Organizations like the National Congress of American Indians (where I used to work) are vital to bringing those governments together to speak in a unified voice on the key issues that matter to all tribes in our country.

At the same time, many tribes are not federally recognized and the majority of Native people in the United States actually live in urban areas. For those reasons, we are always grappling with the kinds of coalitions we participate in, the consensus we build, etc. One of the things I love about our organization is that we represent *all* Native youth—tribal members, members of state-recognized tribes, urban Natives. For this reason, we speak in all these venues and try to pull seats up to any policy table that affects this wide diversity of Native youth.

5. What are some of the opportunities and challenges you see in the next decade?

Native Americans are actually one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the nation. Our median age is several years lower than that of the rest of the country. I think this is an incredible opportunity for our young Native leaders across the country as they work on

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programs to build the future workforce, revive and restore language and culture, and become the next generation of tribal leaders. But, they will certainly face serious challenges. I think building economic opportunity for tribes is one of the biggest. Tribes have a lot of tools to grow their economies—natural resources, cultural resources, a young and growing workforce, etc. However, they often suffer from a serious lack of capital investment, complicated legal and jurisdictional issues, and chronic underfunding by the federal government of basic services.

As I work with our young leaders, I have a lot of hope. They are thinking outside the box in a lot of amazing ways that will overcome these challenges and I think they can turn our schools around, attract more business to Indian Country, and strengthen civic participation in their governments. But, we need to give them tools at this stage in their life, so they have what they need to be part of the long-term change.

6. What are the kinds of coalitions and strategies you see as vital to advancing Native American policy concerns?

It goes without saying that we are in a troubling time in America—deeply troubling. Tribal issues have often been fairly bipartisan. We have champions on both sides of the aisle. We are both urban and rural. But, over the last decade, our entire political system has gone through seismic shifts. The last election blew entire world orders out of the water. It is imperative on tribes and Native people—as it is with many other groups in our country—to align our advocacy strategies and political power with this new reality. We cannot build coalitions to try and influence congressional and administrative processes as if we are in the late 1990s. It is a completely different ballgame.

From the standpoint of the work I do with youth, I think the single most important thing we need to do to build coalitions is in relation to civic participation and voting. There are entire states where the Native vote should matter more than it does. In some cases, states have worked actively to make it more difficult for Native people to vote, and in others I think we have our own internal work to do. We must, however, build stronger coalitions with the many other disadvantaged groups in this country who are being impacted by a lack of voter turnout.

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7. How did you first get involved in policy analysis and advocacy? Is it something that you always thought you would do?

Since I was a little kid, I knew I wanted to be a lawyer. I grew up listening to my grandfather talk about how challenging it was when he was a dentist on the Blackfeet reservation (where my mom was born), and the trauma my great-grandfather endured at his Indian boarding school in Saskatchewan, so tribal issues have always meant a great deal to me.

But, it was one issue in Seattle that set me on my career—the Makah whale hunts of the late 1990s. After years of refraining voluntarily from hunting gray whales under their treaty rights due to declining populations, the Makah Tribe in Washington decided to resume traditional hunting of one whale each year. The outcry at the time was immense and I remember watching the nightly news at home in Seattle as high-speed boats driven by non-Native activists were crisscrossing in front of the Makah's canoes doing everything they could to disrupt the hunts. Then came the interviews from non-Native activists on TV paternalistically telling the Makah how they should respect the environment and that hunting whales was against Makah culture. I got mad. Really mad. Here was a community exercising its right to feed its people and continue it cultural traditions after their ancestors were forced to give up so much.

I reflected deeply on what my relatives did to fight for their sovereignty and remain in their homelands with their cultures against all odds. It was at that moment that I wanted to go to law school to learn about federal Indian law and defend tribes. Early in my career, however, I realized that the courts were only one place tribes needed people like me. After spending time in DC and seeing how tribes advocated before Congress and the administration, I decided my research and policy analysis talents were better-suited for a policy and advocacy career.

8. How do you think we can better engage a new generation of Native Americans to get interested in research on politics and policy?

I think giving them as many opportunities to learn about advocacy and policy careers at an early age matter tremendously. Take the protests at Standing Rock. A group of Native youth took off running thousands of miles to Washington, DC to deliver a petition to the Army Corps of Engineers and helped spark a major worldwide movement there. Youth care a lot about this issue. But, what went into the

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decisions at the state level to approve the pipeline? The federal level? How were their tribal leaders pushing back against the pipeline?

These are all critical policy actions and decisions where young Native people could make a critical impact through research and policy. I find that with most passionate young people, they do not have enough exposure to the kind of work we do in the policy space to realize all the different ways they can apply their talents. Internships and real-world policy experience will go a long way.

9. In your opinion, what does it mean for Native Americans to achieve full political equality?

For us, I think it is twofold. First, full political equality means a true nation-to-nation relationship with the U.S. government. This includes fulfilling all of the obligations under the treaties signed with tribal governments—collectively called the trust responsibility. We need our healthcare and education systems funded according to their full need, we need our hunting and fishing rights protected, and the list goes on. Secondly, full political equality means that the U.S. government fully acknowledges the historical trauma brought upon Native communities in the United States, its impact on our health and life outcomes, and that it develops a reconciliation process to heal our communities. Intergenerational trauma affects Native people in many ways and we cannot be equal until we acknowledge it and build a path forward.

10. What can political scientists do to help Native American groups get more policy visibility and political equality?

Listen to the communities. Tribes need a lot of help with data capacity and new research and analysis that will help build their political power. However, tribal communities too often have researchers and others come into their communities with a pre-determined agenda that is not driven by the needs of the community.

Policy researchers should look for opportunities to partner with community members, their governments, and their institutions to build the capacity they need to impact policy that will support them. For political scientists and policy researchers who want to help, reach out to tribal community members, spend time with them in their communities, listen to their elders and their youth, and become a partner.

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