

Representation Without Replacement

An Indigenous perspective on representative government, sovereignty, and who gets to speak for whom

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The Question

As an Indigenous student living in the United States:

What are the **pros** and **cons** of a representative republican system of government?

The question is whether representative government works.

It is also: **Who is being represented, by whom, and with what authority?**

Two Forms of Political Representation

U.S. representative government

- Members of Congress and elected officials represent constituents as U.S. citizens.
- Citizens participate through voting, organizing, advocacy, and public service.

Tribal government

- Tribal nations have their own governments and citizens.
- Federal law recognizes a government-to-government relationship between federally recognized tribes and the United States.

These forms of representation can coexist. **They are not interchangeable.**

Representation Is Not the Same as Sovereignty

A representative system asks:

“Who speaks for me?”

Sovereignty asks:

“Who has the authority to govern us?”

Being represented in the U.S. government does not replace the political identity or governing authority of an Indigenous nation.

A Strength of Representative Government

Representative government can create meaningful avenues for participation.

Indigenous citizens can:

- Vote and organize
- Advocate for policy
- Run for office
- Build relationships with elected officials
- Participate in national political debates

Representation can give people a voice in decisions that affect their lives.

A Limitation: Representation Can Become Substitution

A Native person having a voice in Congress does not necessarily mean that an Indigenous nation itself has been represented.

When a federal decision affects a tribal nation, is representation through individual voters enough?

Or does meaningful representation also require governments to engage tribal governments as governments?

Why This Matters Today

Today, debates involving tribal sovereignty, land, natural resources, taxation, public safety, education, and federal-tribal relationships continue to raise questions about who has decision-making authority.

A Different Way to Think About Democracy

Maybe democracy does not have to mean one political system replacing every other system.

Could democratic participation also mean allowing different governments and communities to exercise authority over their own affairs?

For Indigenous peoples, self-determination can mean having a meaningful role in the larger political system while maintaining the ability to govern ourselves.

My Perspective

I want Indigenous people to participate in the decisions made by the United States government because those decisions affect our communities.

But I also believe Indigenous nations should be able to speak for themselves, govern their own communities, and determine their own futures.

Being included should not require being absorbed.

Questions I Want to Leave With You

Can we be represented without being absorbed?

Can Indigenous nations participate in a larger republic without surrendering sovereignty?

Can two systems of government coexist without one having to erase the other?

And perhaps most importantly:

What does meaningful representation look like when the people being represented are also citizens of their own nations?

Sources

- Taiaiake Alfred, Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto
- Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States