

# [***Biden's Letdown of Native Americans Threatens Indigenous People Everywhere | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BYR-9N81-JBR6-9006-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Biden is ignoring the wave of protests by Indigenous people across the U.S. who see their land being destroyed by droughts, pipelines, and mineral mines.

**Body**

When tribal leader [*Verlon Jose*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2024/03/04/tribes-clean-energy-biden-sunzia/) looks across his ancestral lands in the shadow of the majestic Santa Rita mountains in Arizona, he sees bulldozers churning sacred ground for a copper mine that will stretch under a snaking 550-mile power line.

Jose is one of nearly 40,000 members of his tribe—which stretches across southern Arizona and Northern Mexico—who may vote against President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in the devastating wake of his "progressive" climate policies.

It's a huge shift, as four years ago Indigenous people—who vote [*overwhelmingly Democrat*](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-we-might-expect-from-native-american-voters-in-the-upcoming-2022-election/)—turned out at rates [*as high as 90 percent*](https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-2020-election-results/2020/11/13/934591289/how-the-navajo-nation-helped-flip-arizona-for-democrats). In fact, the support of [*young Native American voters*](https://www.npr.org/2024/02/01/1218630008/native-american-arizona-tribe-navajo-voters-election-2024) in Arizona helped Biden become the first Democratic candidate to win the state in more than 20 years.

But there are between four and seven million Indigenous people in the U.S. As America's presidential election in November looms, [*razor-thin margins*](https://www.economist.com/interactive/us-2024-election/trump-biden-polls) will determine whether it's four more years of Biden or a disastrous [*return to Trump*](https://www.carbonbrief.org/drill-baby-drill-the-surprising-history-of-donald-trumps-fossil-fuel-slogan/).

Yet Biden is ignoring the wave of protests by Indigenous people across the U.S. who see their land being destroyed by [*droughts*](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/09/the-us-dammed-us-up-how-drought-is-threatening-navajo-ties-to-ancestral-lands), [*pipelines*](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jun/20/line-3-pipeline-indigenous-environmental-justice), and mineral mines.

Biden is also setting a dangerous global precedent that pits the scramble for mineral domination against the rights of Indigenous groups worldwide—a prominent issue which featured at the [*UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/news/2023/02/unpfii-twenty-second-session-17-28-april-2023/), which I am attended last month in New York.

Among the fiercest demonstrations against Biden's energy plans are the Native American protests over plans for the largest lithium mine in the United States, which will sprawl along sacred lands in Nevada. In their [*mass of demonstrations*](https://apnews.com/article/lithium-water-mining-indigenous-cb2f5b1580c12f8ba1b19223648069b7) and court filings, tribes people and environmental campaigners have outlined how the structure will lay waste to endangered animal habitats and fill the air with pollution.

Biden's refusal to listen to these concerns puts him on a crash course with Indigenous tribes and climate activists.

While the Biden administration [*earmarked $120 million*](https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/biden-harris-administration-announces-120-million-presidents-investing-america-agenda) for Tribal communities to respond to climate-related threats to their homelands, the treasure trove of minerals beneath Native lands are key to meeting growing demand for clean energy technologies aligned with the president's environmental goals.

But if Biden continues his current course, extraction of the lithium, copper, cobalt, nickel, graphite, and manganese vital for a green-energy transition will come at the cost of Indigenous lands and trust.

Given that around [*two percent of workers*](https://www.usenergyjobs.org/#:~:text=Oil%20and%20Gas%20Growth%20Continues,percent)%2C%20totaling%20about%2075%2C500.) in the U.S. fossil fuel industry are American Indian or Alaska Native, it could also cost Biden the election.

While Biden has made some progress in building bridges with Native people—his appointment of [*Deb Haaland*](https://www.npr.org/2021/03/15/977558590/deb-haaland-confirmed-as-first-native-american-interior-secretary) as the first Native American cabinet secretary was heralded as a rectification of historical injustices—many in Indigenous communities perceive such moves as mere tokenism.

Groups such as [*Arizona Native Vote*](https://www.npr.org/2024/02/01/1218630008/native-american-arizona-tribe-navajo-voters-election-2024) say Native people are still waiting to be compensated for the decades spent underrepresented in ***politics***, relegated to reservations, and exploited by oil barons and governments who viewed their land as "terra nullius" (without an owner) and therefore open for environmental corruption.

And they're not alone: [*nearly 70 percent*](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214629622001694) of mineral mining projects worldwide are on or near Indigenous land and communities, including in my home country of Ghana.

This is why it's vital that Indigenous voices be included in the climate debate. I was heartened to see, as a delegate to last year's COP28 UN climate summit, that its organizers held a landmark Indigenous Peoples Day to showcase how Indigenous voices must be integrated into global climate strategies.

At this year's CERAweek conference, [*COP28 president Dr. Sultan Al Jaber*](https://economymiddleeast.com/news/sultan-al-jaber-unveils-cop-troika-vision-to-ensure-parties-deliver-ambitious-climate-plans/) said that COP28 was a success "because of its full inclusivity. Everyone had a seat at the table, everyone was invited to contribute, and everyone did contribute." Indeed, I believe this inclusion of diverse voices was crucial to the summit's historic [*UAE Consensus*](https://impact.economist.com/sustainability/net-zero-and-energy/the-uae-consensus-a-breakthrough-on-fossil-fuels), the first agreement to "transition away" from fossil fuels signed by 197 countries.

If Biden does not enshrine this spirit of inclusivity into his approach to the clean energy transition, it would not only exploit and disenfranchise Indigenous people, it could also derail the transition itself. Around the world millions of people stand to lose their jobs in the move away from fossil fuels—with the coal industry alone facing the loss of [*nearly one million jobs*](https://www.reuters.com/markets/coal-industry-faces-1-million-job-losses-global-energy-transition-research-2023-10-10/) by 2050.

This is why it's vital that Biden embrace strategies ensuring the protection—not exploitation—of Indigenous groups, by having a plan for fossil fuel and mining workers to work in partnership with local tribes.

This means heavily compensating the communities and land that will host and be built around new mining structures.

Equally critical is the equitable distribution of economic benefits derived from mining activities—which should be used to empower Indigenous people by reinvesting it into their communities, as it will be their lands and workers driving the global shift to cleaner energy.

Land restoration laws are also needed to guarantee the reclamation and restoration of Native territories before—and after—mining operations.

America's millions of Indigenous people cannot endure more decades of being put in the eye of the storm in the hunt for energy. But neither can Indigenous peoples in Africa and elsewhere in the global south where U.S. and Western firms are spearheading a new scramble for minerals.

*Chief Dr. Doliwura Zakaria is an indigenous Chief from Ghana. He is also a Traditional Leader & Scholar at Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs, and the Steering Committee Chairman for the Africa Union Commission's Interfaith Dialogue Forum 2023. He attended COP28 as an indigenous representative.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2388451/arizona-copper-mine.jpg)

**Graphic**

Arizona copper mine

Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis/Getty Images

AJO, ARIZONA - APRIL 29: An abandoned copper mine dominates the landscape, April 29, 2021, in Ajo, Arizona.

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