

# The Political Clout of Wealthy and Poor American Indian Tribes

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## Abstract

Since the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, casinos on reservations have become lucrative sources of income for not only tribal governments but also state governments. With an increase in wealth, many tribes have increased their lobbying forces to become major political actors in state and federal government. But, while some tribal governments have become financially stable due to gaming others have become physically and economically isolated making some tribal governments extremely poor. Poor tribal governments continue to have problems and when lobbying is not an option grassroots movements such as protests become the most viable source of political clout. By examining the political power of both wealthy and poor tribal governments it can be determined that wealthy tribes are more successful with traditional lobbying while poor tribes are more successful with social movements.

## The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act

The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA), was passed by Congress in 1988, this act set the stage for tribal government-owned gaming facilities (Akee, Spilde, Taylor, 2015). The passage of the IGRA gave many tribes economic sovereignty and the opportunity to establish themselves as self-sufficient nations. Prior to the actual passage of the IGRA federal courts had ruled on several cases between Indian gaming establishments and state governments, the most notable of these cases was *California v. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians* (480 US 202 [1987]). In this case, the US Supreme Court ruled that (p. 203):

The federal interests in Indian self-government, including the goal of encouraging tribal self-sufficiency and economic development, are important, and federal agencies, acting under federal laws, have sought to implement them by promoting and overseeing tribal bingo and gambling enterprises. Such policies and actions are of particular relevance in this case since the tribal games provide the sole source of revenues for the operation of the tribal governments and are the major sources of employment for tribal members.

Thus, the Supreme Court acknowledges that gaming operations are the major source of employment and income for many tribal members. This acknowledgment also promotes Indian self-government, showing that the US policy had shifted towards granting American Indian sovereignty through the economic means of gaming establishments. **But what happens when gaming operations aren't successful on reservations?**

For the basis of this poster, tribes will be categorized into two groups: **poor tribes** (tribes that have not generated considerable revenue from gaming establishments) and **wealthy tribes** (tribes that have generated considerable revenue from gaming establishments).

## Classification

- By using the National Indian Gaming Commission's data on the Gross Gaming Revenue Reports for the 2018 fiscal year, tribes can be divided into categories of poor and wealthy (NIGC, 2019).
- Poor tribes are classified by having their tribal gaming revenue be less than \$25 million per year, because this results in a median income of <\$16,280.
- Wealthy tribes are classified by their tribal gaming revenue by more than \$25 million per year, because this results in a median income of >\$33,580.



Figure 1.1: The majority of tribes in the US are classified as "Poor Tribes," under the previously mentioned gaming revenues criteria. With the total number of tribes in this data (n=501) the majority is classified as being poor tribes (n=287) and the minority being wealthy tribes (n=214). So, according to this data, the majority of American Indian tribes in the US do not generate considerable revenue from gaming revenues.

## The Political Clout of Wealthy American Indian Tribes

When tribal governments become wealthy from gaming revenues they're afforded certain privileges that poorer tribes do not have. But, with these exclusive privileges comes the pressure of maintaining these advantages. In order to hold onto the wealth (and other advantages) created by gaming revenue wealthy tribes have established themselves as significant political actors. Since the success of the IGRA (for some tribal governments), many tribes have used traditional lobbying to increase their political clout. According to William E. Schuler, lobbying "entails a group of individuals or entities with a common affiliation working in concert to achieve a favorable result" (Schuler, 2017). When an Indian tribal government has a connection with lawmakers, via lobbying, it is more likely for political action to occur in favor of that tribal government.

## The Puyallup Tribe of Indians

The Puyallup Tribe is located in western Washington state, they have an enrolled population of 4,000, of which 2,500 live on the reservation (NPAIHB, 2015). The Puyallup tribe is considered a very urban reservation and offers a wide spectrum of services and care for their population, mostly funded from revenue by their casinos, most notably the Emerald Queen Casino. The revenue that has been generated from the Emerald Queen Casino has helped finance many social programs offered on the reservation, but more notably it has given the Puyallup the opportunity to engage in traditional lobbying. From 2019 to 2020 the Puyallup Tribe of Indians spent \$1,464,559 in lobbying (OpenSecrets, 2020). For a tribe with only 4,000 enrolled members that is a lot of money to give to government officials, and it gives those members a very loud political voice.

## The Political Clout of Poor American Indian Tribes

While many tribes have had economic success from the results of the passage of the IGRA, the majority of tribal governments do not generate considerable revenue from gaming. In order to have a political voice in modern times, these poorer tribes can not depend on traditional lobbying, so instead many tribes rely on social movements. Suh Doowon explains that social movements "provide an institutional route to influence state policy-making and allows movement groups to forge political alliances with reformist power elites within polity" (Doowon, 2006). Social movements can take the form of protests, social media campaigns, or even boycotts. Without considerable revenue from gaming poor American Indian Tribes increase their political clout by these types of social movements.

## Standing Rock

The Dakota Access Pipeline (the DAPL) was proposed to carry approximately 450,000 barrels of crude oil per day from the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota down to Illinois—it would stretch 1,134 miles (Privott, 2019). The No Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL) movement began because the Standing Rock Sioux reservation refused to allow that DAPL to cross their tribal land and waterways (Privott). This refusal led to protests which became a much larger social and political movement. Although the DAPL came to fruition the movement that surrounded it became a blueprint for many other poor American Indian Tribes, as a proven method to increase their political clout.

## Conclusion

Since the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, many tribes have expanded their political activity because of an increase in gaming revenue. But the majority of American Indian Tribes are still considered poor. Overall, American Indian Tribes have increased their political clout. Wealthy tribes do this by means of traditional lobbying like that of the Puyallup Tribe of Indians. While poor tribes resort to activist movements like those seen at Standing Rock.



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