

# Redefining Ethnic Identity: Politics' Impact on Modifying Congressional Recognize Regulations

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Received: 04-09-2025; Revised: 22-09-2025; Accepted: 13-10-2025; Published: 14-11-2025

## Abstract

*This work of research discusses how the current politics has influenced the changing environment of federal recognition rules of Native American tribes. Federal recognition is one of the most essential tools that tribes have to acquire the right to sovereignty, grant funds, and political immunities. Nevertheless, the process is not fixed and purely administrative but is framed within changing political philosophies, lobbying influence, and politics of government. The paper offers a historical and policy-based perspective of the changes made in recognition criteria and how the political interest that determines how a people is defined, the narratives that drive the history of a people, and administrative discretion have transformed the meaning of a tribal entity being a recognized nation in the U.S. legal lexicon. The paper asserts that tribal recognition is not only a legal status but also a political landscape that is subject to the priority of the federal administration, tribal politics, and overall social and political shift.*

**Keywords:** Federal recognition, tribal sovereignty, Native American tribes, political influence, recognition policy, indigenous governance, U.S. federal policy, administrative law, tribal nationhood, legal status.

## 1.Introduction

The recognition of Native American tribes as sovereign nations by the United States federal government is not merely a bureaucratic procedure it is a complex, politically charged process that intertwines legal precedent, historical narratives, administrative discretion, and evolving national interests. While the federal recognition process appears procedural and standardized through codified rules, its underlying dynamics reflect the shifting tides of political will, ideological leanings of presidential administrations, and strategic priorities of the Department of the Interior (DOI)(1). This transformation of tribal status into federal acknowledgment is not only a legal milestone for indigenous groups but also a strategic tool wielded by governments for various policy objectives. This paper explores how political considerations have continuously reshaped the criteria, mechanisms, and accessibility of federal tribal recognition in the United States.

### The Meaning and Stakes of Federal Recognition

To be federally recognized is to be formally acknowledged as a sovereign entity with a nation-to-nation relationship with the U.S. government. Such a status grants tribes access to federal funding, healthcare, educational resources, land trust conversions, and gaming rights under laws like the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. Recognition also brings legal and political legitimacy to tribal governments, empowering them to engage in self-governance and defend their interests in U.S. courts. However, this pathway is fraught with challenges, particularly for tribes with colonial-era treaties or those whose cultural practices were forced underground due to centuries of systemic oppression. Many tribes remain unrecognized today, not because they lack cultural cohesion or historical continuity, but because the criteria for recognition have been inconsistently interpreted and politically manipulated across different federal administrations.

### Federal Acknowledgment Process: Regulatory Roots and Evolution

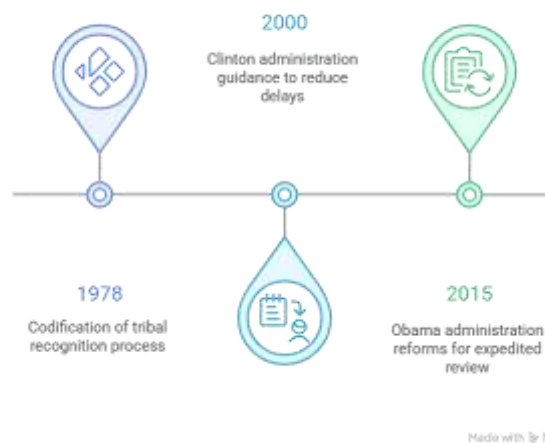
The current regulatory system for tribal recognition codified in 25 C.F.R. Part 83 originated in 1978 under the Carter administration, drawing inspiration from Felix Cohen's legal criteria rooted in case law and administrative practice. Initially, the process required petitioning groups to meet seven mandatory criteria that emphasized political authority, historical continuity, community distinctiveness, and genealogical descent from historic tribes. Over time, however, these criteria have been subject to reinterpretation through guidance documents, administrative memoranda, and internal policy shifts. Instead of formal rulemaking procedures with public oversight, agencies increasingly relied on internal guidance often unpublished and lacking transparency to revise how these criteria were applied, creating barriers for tribes and opportunities for political intervention.

### The Role of Presidential Administrations in Reshaping Recognition

## Redefining Ethnic Identity: Politics' Impact on Modifying Congressional Recognize Regulations

Each presidential administration has left its imprint on the federal recognition process, often without altering the core regulatory language. The Reagan and H.W. Bush administrations favored rigid, evidentiary frameworks that emphasized historical documentation, often inaccessible to marginalized or relocated tribes. Clinton's administration attempted to clarify evidentiary standards but maintained high burdens of proof, while issuing guidance in 2000 to reduce delays by discouraging continuous data submission during petition evaluation. The George W. Bush era saw the issuance of stricter internal guidance documents that gave agency reviewers the authority to reject evidence based on professional discretion, effectively raising the standard for approval without public input or legal justification(2).

### The Evolution of Tribal Recognition in the U.S.



**FIGURE 1** The Evolution of Tribal Recognition in the U.S

### Obama Administration and the Push for Reform

Under President Obama, the DOI attempted to streamline and modernize the Federal Acknowledgment Process. It initiated tribal consultations and drafted revised regulations that proposed significant reforms, such as phased reviews, clearer evidentiary standards, and the removal of redundant or discriminatory criteria. Despite pushback, the final 2015 rule maintained several of these changes, allowing tribes residing on state reservations since 1934 or holding trust land to move through an expedited favorable review. Yet, the reform stopped short of dismantling the entrenched practice of using unpublished professional standards that disproportionately impacted petitioners' ability to meet the burden of proof.

### Politics and the Gaming Industry: A New Battleground

The rapid expansion of tribal gaming under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act has added another layer of political sensitivity to the recognition process. Public opposition, state governments, and competing tribes have increasingly intervened in petition evaluations, fearing the economic impact of new casinos. This has led to politically motivated denials, congressional interference, and strategic delays by DOI officials under pressure from lobbyists and non-native constituencies. As a result, recognition is no longer just about history or identity it is often about land value, jurisdiction, and economic control.

### Judicial and Administrative Backlash

Legal scholars and tribal advocates have criticized the increasing reliance on internal, unpublished standards such as "professional judgment" by agency staff to assess evidence of tribal continuity. Courts have generally deferred to agency discretion under the Chevron doctrine, which grants agencies latitude to interpret ambiguous statutes. However, this judicial deference has allowed agencies to bypass procedural safeguards of the Administrative Procedure Act, raising concerns about transparency, fairness, and due process. Tribes are often unaware of the evaluative standards being applied to their petitions, leading to arbitrary decisions and a lack of recourse(3).

### Toward a Depoliticized Future?

While some reforms under recent administrations have attempted to make the process more equitable, the underlying political nature of recognition remains unresolved. Without statutory reform or independent oversight, the federal acknowledgment process will likely continue to be shaped by political priorities rather than consistent

legal standards. Recognition is a powerful instrument one that validates tribal sovereignty, enables resource access, and symbolically affirms a group's survival and resilience. But as long as political expedience trumps procedural fairness, the promise of justice for unrecognized tribes remains elusive.

## 2.The Complex Realities of Tribal Recognition

The federal acknowledgment of Native American tribes is not simply a matter of administrative formality; it serves as the essential gateway to tribal sovereignty in the eyes of the United States government. Recognition bestows not only symbolic legitimacy but also provides access to crucial legal, political, and economic benefits. These include health services through the Indian Health Service, jurisdictional authority over tribal lands, access to federal grants and programs, and the right to conduct regulated gaming operations under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. However, despite the extensive implications of this status, many indigenous groups remain outside the circle of federally recognized entities, unable to access the benefits or protections afforded to their counterparts. The reasons behind this exclusion are deeply embedded in a complex mix of colonial history, bureaucratic obstacles, and a shifting political landscape that has often hindered rather than facilitated the path to federal recognition.

Federal recognition is the legal mechanism through which the U.S. government officially affirms a tribal group's sovereign status and its eligibility for government-to-government relations. This status enables tribes to engage in legal agreements, secure land in trust, and govern their internal affairs. Yet, this gateway to sovereignty is not accessible to all tribal communities. Numerous tribes, despite having maintained strong social cohesion, cultural identity, and ancestral continuity, have been denied recognition for reasons ranging from documentary gaps to political opposition. In many instances, historical injustices and procedural oversights continue to bar communities from achieving federal acknowledgment, even when their qualifications are evident by historical or cultural standards(4).

For example, many tribes along the eastern coast of the United States entered into treaties with European colonial powers before the formation of the U.S. federal system. These early agreements, made with states or foreign empires rather than the United States itself, created legal ambiguities that continue to complicate modern recognition efforts. When the Constitution centralized treaty-making authority in the federal government, earlier agreements were effectively invalidated or ignored, leaving these tribes in legal limbo. Consequently, many of these communities are recognized only at the state level, lacking the formal legal status required to access federal services and protections.

In other cases, like those of many California tribes, the United States' own actions or inactions directly contributed to the current lack of recognition. Although dozens of California tribes negotiated treaties with federal representatives in the mid-19th century, the U.S. Senate failed to ratify these agreements, and the documents were kept secret for decades. These unratified treaties left the tribes without formal acknowledgment or protection, despite their good faith efforts to enter into lawful relations with the federal government. Over time, these tribes were marginalized, displaced, and in many instances deprived of their traditional lands without compensation or recognition.

Still other tribes made the strategic choice to preserve their cultural identity and social structures by moving their practices underground. In an era when religious ceremonies, language use, and traditional governance were met with criminalization or aggressive assimilation policies, many communities chose secrecy as a method of resistance and survival. While this approach safeguarded elements of their heritage, it also complicated later attempts to provide continuous documentation of political authority and community distinctiveness two of the most critical criteria in the federal acknowledgment process.

This lack of recognition cannot be explained away by claims of tribal fraudulence or extinction. In fact, many unrecognized tribes have robust internal governments, active community engagement, and deep cultural roots. What they lack is the specific kind of historical and administrative documentation demanded by the federal acknowledgment criteria. These criteria, established under 25 C.F.R. Part 83, require a continuous and well-documented demonstration of political authority, descent from a historical tribe, cultural cohesion, and identification as an Indian community by external observers. While seemingly neutral, these requirements often reflect Euro-American standards of record-keeping and legitimacy, which many indigenous communities historically did not prioritize or were actively prevented from developing due to displacement, poverty, and federal neglect.

## **Redefining Ethnic Identity: Politics' Impact on Modifying Congressional Recognize Regulations**

Another key issue lies in the discretionary power of the Department of the Interior, particularly its Office of Federal Acknowledgment (OFA), which oversees the review and decision-making process. The burden of proof lies entirely with the petitioning tribe, which must gather and present extensive historical, genealogical, and anthropological evidence to demonstrate compliance with all seven mandatory criteria. This documentation process can be both costly and time-consuming, often requiring years of research and legal guidance. In many cases, the required evidence such as census records, government correspondences, or church registries is either nonexistent or inaccessible due to historical suppression and neglect(5).

Furthermore, the acknowledgment process has long been criticized for its lack of transparency and susceptibility to political influence. Internal guidance documents, issued without public scrutiny or notice-and-comment procedures, are frequently used to reinterpret or raise the evidentiary threshold. This practice creates an uneven playing field in which petitioners are judged by shifting standards, often without being aware of the changes until a negative finding is issued. The consequence is that legitimate tribes are excluded not for lack of merit but for failing to meet opaque and inconsistently applied benchmarks.

The political ramifications of recognition also affect the decision-making process. Tribes seeking federal acknowledgment often face opposition not only from government bureaucrats but also from local communities, state governments, and even other federally recognized tribes concerned about competition for resources or gaming revenue. Such opposition can delay or derail the acknowledgment process, injecting further layers of politics into what should be a consistent and fair administrative procedure. In the modern context, particularly with the rise of tribal gaming as a major economic force, federal recognition decisions are frequently entangled with economic development and land use disputes, raising the stakes for all involved parties.

In summary, the issue of federal recognition is a reflection of how the U.S. government has historically defined and continues to define indigenous legitimacy. The recognition process, though couched in regulatory language, is anything but impartial. It is informed by centuries of colonial dispossession, evolving bureaucratic standards, and contemporary political pressures. While some tribes have managed to navigate this labyrinth successfully, many others continue to struggle, their legitimacy challenged not by their cultural continuity but by an administrative system that often fails to account for their lived realities. Addressing these systemic flaws requires not only regulatory reform but also a commitment to acknowledging the historical injustices that continue to shape federal Indian policy today.

### **3.The Development of Federal Acknowledgment Regulations Politically**

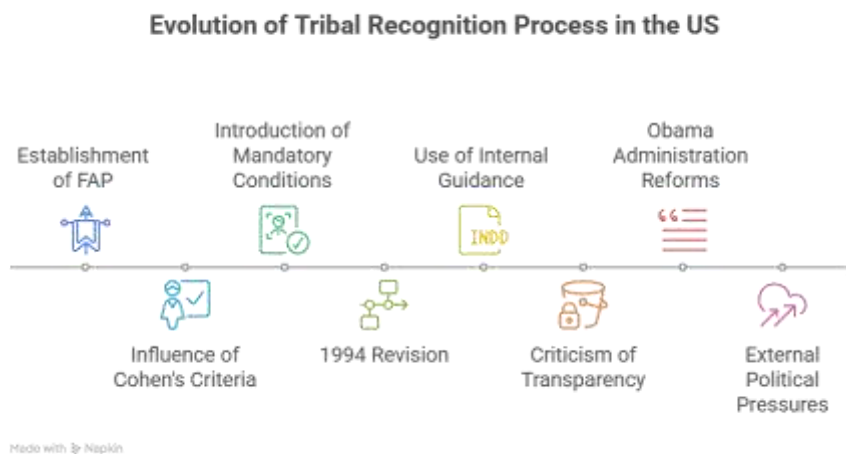
The regulatory scaffolding underlying the United States' process for recognizing Native American tribes has its roots not in a single statute but in a web of administrative authority and historical legal frameworks. Unlike many federal regulations that are firmly grounded in specific legislative mandates, the federal acknowledgment process (FAP), as formalized in 25 C.F.R. Part 83, was implemented using general delegations of authority afforded to the Department of the Interior (DOI). Specifically, it derives power from broadly framed administrative provisions that authorize executive agencies to adopt rules necessary to carry out their organizational duties. This loosely anchored regulatory foundation opened the door for extensive administrative discretion and, critically, made the acknowledgment process susceptible to the political agendas of successive presidential administrations.

The Federal Acknowledgment Process was established in 1978 during a period when the federal government sought to define consistent standards for tribal recognition (6). This initiative was influenced by Felix Cohen's influential legal criteria, developed decades earlier in his Handbook of Federal Indian Law. Cohen's framework originally drawn from legal doctrine, case law, and treaties suggested a tribe could be deemed legitimate if it met one of several criteria: having engaged in treaties with the United States, having been designated as a tribe by an act of Congress or executive order, occupying communal land, exercising political authority over its members, or being treated as a tribe by other recognized tribal governments. These flexible benchmarks laid the groundwork for what became the formalized, and eventually rigid, recognition process.

When the DOI formalized the FAP in 1978, it moved away from Cohen's fluid criteria and instead instituted seven mandatory conditions that tribes were required to meet in full to qualify for federal recognition. These criteria included continuous identification as an Indian entity since historical times, a distinct community, maintained political authority over members, a governing document, descent from a historical tribe, and no prior federal termination. While these rules were introduced under the guise of objectivity and fairness, their application often

reflected the prevailing political climate and internal administrative priorities more than any consistent or universally accepted standard of tribal identity or history.

The 1978 rule was revised only once, in 1994, in an attempt to streamline procedures and address criticisms about inconsistency and opacity. Yet even this revision retained the same fundamental structure and left the seven criteria intact. Over time, as administrations changed, so too did the interpretation of these criteria often without any formal regulatory amendments(7). Instead of going through the public and often contentious rulemaking process dictated by the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), which requires notice, public comment, and congressional oversight, administrations began issuing internal guidance documents to steer the review process. These included memoranda, technical bulletins, and precedent manuals, many of which were unpublished or difficult for petitioning tribes to access. This strategy allowed federal agencies to shift the standards for evaluation without official rule changes, fostering an inconsistent and politically reactive acknowledgment process.



**FIGURE 2** Evolution of Tribal Recognition Process in the US

The reliance on internal guidance created a parallel regulatory regime one in which the officially published rules were often overshadowed by interpretive materials and behind-the-scenes adjustments. This regulatory layering not only complicated the process for tribal petitioners, who had to navigate shifting evidentiary requirements, but also provided a pathway for political appointees and administrative officials to inject partisan goals into what should have been an impartial legal evaluation. For instance, internal guidance could raise the evidentiary bar for demonstrating continuous political authority or redefine what constituted acceptable community documentation decisions with potentially devastating implications for petitioning tribes.

The lack of transparency in the regulatory regime also sparked criticism from legal scholars, tribal leaders, and oversight agencies like the Government Accountability Office. The GAO repeatedly flagged the FAP for being cumbersome, overly burdensome, and inconsistently applied. Tribes were often left unaware of the full scope of documentation required or learned only after submission that previously accepted evidence was no longer sufficient. As a result, the acknowledgment process became both an administrative hurdle and a political chessboard.

Although the Obama administration later attempted to overhaul the regulatory structure through formal reform efforts, most prior administrations had merely sidestepped APA constraints by overusing the guidance document model. The 2015 revisions to Part 83 aimed to resolve some of these longstanding issues by clarifying the criteria, creating phased reviews, and offering more objective standards. However, even under Obama, some critics argued that the reforms did not go far enough in limiting agency discretion or undoing years of cumulative administrative layering.

Beyond internal policy, external political pressures also shaped the recognition process. State governments, local constituencies, and even other tribes sometimes opposed acknowledgment petitions due to fears about jurisdictional conflicts, land use, or gaming rights. These stakeholders often lobbied DOI officials or submitted public comments, turning the FAP into a contested political arena rather than a neutral legal procedure. Administrations sensitive to such pressure could issue denials, delay petitions, or introduce subtle procedural

changes to stall recognition actions often cloaked under the guise of administrative oversight but clearly reflective of broader political aims.

### **4. The Fed Identification Process and Electoral Politics**

The trajectory of federal tribal recognition in the United States has not followed a neutral or technocratic path; instead, it has been deeply intertwined with the shifting priorities, political ideologies, and administrative strategies of successive presidential administrations. From the Carter era to the Obama presidency, each administration brought distinct approaches to implementing the Federal Acknowledgment Process (FAP), demonstrating how regulatory frameworks meant to be apolitical tools of justice have often been weaponized or reshaped to serve political agendas (8). By examining how various presidents applied or manipulated the FAP through either direct regulatory actions or backchannel guidance, we can better understand the evolving relationship between indigenous sovereignty and executive policymaking.

The Carter administration played a pivotal foundational role in launching the FAP. Although the proposed rules formalizing tribal recognition procedures were published early in Carter's term, much of the groundwork had been laid during the Ford administration. Carter's version of the process, announced in 1977 and revised in 1978, introduced a formal regulatory infrastructure that emphasized documentary evidence and continuous community existence. This marked the beginning of a federal bureaucratic system that would eventually become both the standard and the stumbling block for unrecognized tribes. The Carter administration issued only one acknowledgment under this new regime, demonstrating both the novelty of the process and the political caution exercised during its early development.

Under President Ronald Reagan, the process grew increasingly bureaucratic and ideologically restrained. The Reagan administration's approach reflected a general skepticism of expansive federal power and was influenced by an administrative philosophy that emphasized self-reliance and limited intervention. During this era, internal policy changes subtly raised the evidentiary thresholds for tribal petitioners, though formal revisions were not made to the regulations. A notable feature of the Reagan years was the emergence of congressional involvement in tribal recognition. Several tribes including the Mashantucket Pequot and Cow Creek Band of Umpqua secured acknowledgment not through the FAP, but by appealing directly to Congress. These legislative acknowledgments often arose from successful land claims, providing political leverage that bypassed the regulatory gauntlet. This trend revealed that legal victories in federal courts could translate into political support, demonstrating that congressional action remained an alternative recognition path when executive channels were unresponsive.

President George H.W. Bush maintained a relatively conservative and proceduralist stance on recognition. His administration advanced only a small number of petitions, preferring to uphold the regulatory status quo. While Bush's presidency did not radically alter the acknowledgment process, it did signal a growing concern within the Department of the Interior regarding the political implications of federal acknowledgment, particularly in the context of expanding tribal gaming opportunities. As tribal casinos became more prominent, the administration encountered increasing resistance from local governments and non-tribal entities opposed to new gaming operations. Though not overtly hostile, the Bush administration's cautious posture limited the number of approvals and slowed the pace of review(9).

The Clinton administration signaled a shift toward modest reform and transparency. In 1994, the administration implemented a major regulatory revision the only such update prior to the Obama era. These changes clarified evidentiary standards, allowed for a broader interpretation of acceptable documentation, and emphasized the need to evaluate petitions with an understanding of historical and archival limitations. One critical change was the introduction of the "reasonable likelihood" standard, which relaxed the evidentiary burden somewhat and acknowledged the difficulties many tribes faced in producing comprehensive colonial-era records. Clinton also sought to professionalize the review process by issuing formal guidance and initiating procedural improvements. However, despite these progressive steps, the administration maintained the seven-point criteria, and many tribes still struggled to meet the burdensome standards due to historical marginalization. Clinton's administration ultimately approved more petitions than any other president up to that point but remained tethered to a system that still heavily favored well-documented tribes over those who had been dispossessed or disrupted by federal policy. The George W. Bush administration marked a regression in transparency and accessibility. While Bush issued executive orders expressing support for tribal sovereignty, his administration also released two internal guidance documents in 2005 and 2008 that undermined tribal efforts at recognition. These unpublished policies allowed

agency officials to impose stricter interpretations of the criteria, especially regarding political influence and group cohesion. Petitioners were now judged against evolving internal standards, many of which were neither disclosed nor subject to public comment. Bush-era guidance also encouraged expedited denials for “splinter groups” tribal communities that had fractured due to political, geographical, or organizational disagreements. One of the most controversial decisions of the Bush administration was the reversal of a positive final determination regarding the Eastern and Paucatuck Pequot tribes, illustrating the political sensitivities surrounding tribal gaming and land use<sup>(10)</sup>. The Bush administration’s approach epitomized how internal agency practices could be leveraged to restrict recognition, even when tribes met formal regulatory benchmarks.

President Obama’s administration sought to reverse this trend by undertaking the most significant regulatory reform of the FAP since its inception. Rather than relying on interpretive guidance, Obama’s DOI undertook a formal rulemaking process in 2014–2015 to revise 25 C.F.R. Part 83. The new rule introduced phased reviews, lowered certain evidentiary thresholds, and clarified the scope of required documentation particularly benefiting tribes with state-recognized status or those residing on historic lands. The administration’s decision to pursue rulemaking rather than informal guidance represented a departure from its predecessors and reflected a broader commitment to administrative transparency and tribal consultation. Despite criticism that the reforms did not go far enough in addressing systemic bias, the Obama-era changes marked a meaningful attempt to insulate the process from unchecked political interference.

Nonetheless, Obama’s reforms remained vulnerable to reversal by future administrations. Because the recognition process is grounded in executive regulation rather than congressional statute, each new president has the authority to revise, suspend, or reinterpret the rules leaving tribal sovereignty subject to the whims of political leadership. The inconsistency in recognition decisions across administrations reinforces the view that the FAP functions less as a neutral legal test and more as a reflection of presidential priorities. Some administrations, like Reagan’s and W. Bush’s, leaned toward skepticism and restriction, while others such as Clinton’s and Obama’s attempted to expand and clarify access. The net result is a recognition system that oscillates with partisan tides, lacking a consistent or objective framework.

## 5. Conclusion

The evolution of the federal tribal recognition process reveals that it is far more than a technical or bureaucratic undertaking; it is a political, historical, and deeply human enterprise that determines the boundaries of indigenous sovereignty in the United States. What began as a procedural effort to evaluate claims of tribal identity has morphed into a highly politicized and administratively inconsistent system, vulnerable to shifting ideologies, economic interests, and informal guidance mechanisms that often circumvent transparency. Although codified under 25 C.F.R. Part 83, the actual implementation of federal acknowledgment has often departed from the regulation’s text, relying instead on internal memoranda, subjective professional standards, and variable interpretations shaped by the preferences of each presidential administration.

This inconsistency has created a climate in which legitimate tribal communities are forced to defend their existence according to standards they neither created nor have consistent access to. The cost of navigating this process financially, emotionally, and culturally is often prohibitive, with many tribes waiting decades for decisions that may be denied based on opaque criteria or political interference. In turn, unrecognized tribes remain excluded from essential legal protections, healthcare systems, jurisdictional authority, and the federal funding necessary to support self-determined development. Recognition thus becomes not merely a legal status, but a political battleground, with implications for land, identity, and intergovernmental legitimacy.

Efforts such as the Obama administration’s 2015 reforms represent important steps toward procedural fairness and administrative clarity. However, these changes remain subject to reversal unless they are firmly embedded in statute rather than executive discretion. Without a legally binding framework that limits arbitrary interference and demands transparency, tribal communities will continue to face uneven access to justice and recognition. Moreover, any truly equitable solution must acknowledge the historical wrongs that have disenfranchised tribes and must treat recognition not as a favor granted by the federal government, but as the rectification of centuries-long oversights and injustices.

In the end, a recognition system that aspires to fairness must be one that listens to tribes, respects their histories on their own terms, and ensures that sovereignty is not measured solely by bureaucratic standards, but by the living

## **Redefining Ethnic Identity: Politics' Impact on Modifying Congressional Recognize Regulations**

continuity of indigenous nations. Only through such a recalibration rooted in justice, accountability, and partnership can the recognition process genuinely honor the promise of tribal self-determination.

**Acknowledgement:** Nil

### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare

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