



CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

Tribal Sovereignty

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how “We the People” interact with the government and each other. Let’s help each other expand our civic literacy.



The United States is made up of the federal government, state governments *and* tribal governments. There are **574 federally recognized** tribal nations in the United States. These nations can be **referred** to as: tribes, nations, bands, pueblos, communities and Native villages.

Native American tribes have **sovereignty**, the right to self-govern. This means they have the power to define their citizenship, govern their own tribal citizens, create governing documents, manage their own infrastructure, and coordinate elections for tribal leadership.

"Tribal nations... we are full-fledged, battle-tested governments guided by time-honored cultural principles, and recognized as such in the Northwest Ordinance, the U.S. Constitution, and hundreds upon hundreds of treaties and Supreme Court precedents."

Fawn Sharp, President of the National Congress of American Indians, 2020 [State of Indian Nations address](#)

The power of tribal nations to self-govern has been affirmed through the U.S. Constitution, treaties, **Supreme Court decisions** and laws passed by Congress. **Article 1, Section 8** of the United States Constitution includes tribal governments with the statement: “The Congress shall have Power to regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes...” The federal government’s **responsibility** to these sovereign nations is to protect their tribal lands, resources and right to self-govern.

Most **tribal governments** are democratic. The chief executive is usually called a chairman, chairwoman or chairperson. This person oversees the tribe's legislative and executive branches.

A tribe’s legislative body is usually called a tribal council, village council, or tribal business committee. A tribal council generally acts as any other legislative body - creating laws, authorizing expenditures, appropriating funds, and conducting oversight of activities carried out by the chief executive and tribal government employees. Tribal courts make up their judicial branch. Similar to other judicial branches, their job is to interpret tribal law. Like state governments in the U.S., tribal nation governments cannot declare war, engage in foreign relations or print and issue money.

To Think and To Do: Explore the list of **Federal and State Recognized Tribes** from the National Conference of State Legislatures. Is there a tribal nation near where you live? Research that tribal nation. Learn more about its governing principles and presence in the United States today.

Learn MORE about Tribal Nations. Free registration may be required.

- [State of Indian Nations](#), from National Congress of American Indians
- [Indigenous Peoples Day](#), from National Museum of the American Indian
- [The Indigenous Governance Database](#), from Indian-Ed.org



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