

# **Tools To Persuade: Exploring Tribal Engagement and the Politics of Federal Support**

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## Abstract

Private-sector firms and subnational governments frequently engage in lobbying, consultation, and strategic advocacy to secure favorable funding and regulatory outcomes but it remains unclear whether and how federally recognized tribal governments employ similar tactics to influence their financial relationship with the U.S. federal government. In this paper, we examine how and why tribes engage with federal institutions and whether that engagement affects funding outcomes. We develop a theoretical framework that explains variation in tribal engagement as a function of economic need, administrative capacity, and institutional expertise. We collect original data on Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC) participation and lobbying disclosures from 2013–2021 to assess the drivers of tribal engagement and their consequences for federal funding. Using Department of the Interior funding data that includes over 93,000 transactions to tribal governments, we find that tribes participating directly in federal advisory processes receive significantly more federal funding overall, while indirect engagement through lobbying is positively associated with targeted increases in self-determination funding. These results provide evidence of the importance of political engagement in shaping funding outcomes. This study contributes to the broader literature on Indigenous governance, lobbying, and intergovernmental resource allocation.

**Keywords:** Native American, Indian Country, Lobbying, Financial Aid, U.S. Federal Government

Rooted in treaty obligations, trust responsibilities, and a history of political subjugation, the relationship between tribal nations and the U.S. federal government is one of enduring legal and economic connection. Tribal governments must regularly engage with federal agencies to access critical resources, assert their sovereignty, and influence the policies that affect their communities (?). Despite their distinct legal and political status as sovereign nations, tribal governments frequently interact with the U.S. federal government in ways that resemble the behavior of organized interests, both subnational governments and private sector actors (Payson 2021). Tribes hire lobbyists, retain legal counsel, and participate in formal consultation mechanisms to advocate for their priorities and influence federal policy processes. Yet tribal governments vary widely in how they engage with the federal government. Tribes may get involved in federal advisory bodies like the and regular consultations, participate through intermediaries or inter-tribal organizations or they may not interact with federal political processes at all. This variation raises a fundamental question: What explains the differing levels and forms of tribal engagement with the federal government?

This variation in engagement has important implications for the outcomes federal - tribal government outcomes, particularly when it comes to funding. Although a portion of tribal funding is distributed through formula-based allocations, a share of funding — particularly in the form of discretionary or competitive programs and grant — is contingent on tribal initiative and advocacy. Tribes that participate in federal processes may be better positioned to secure additional funding or to shape how those funds are allocated. This raises a second, closely related question: To what extent does tribal engagement affect the federal funding that tribes receive?

Existing research has documented some aspects of tribal interactions with the U.S. federal government, particularly in the context of sovereignty, self-governance, and intergovernmental relations (?). Scholars have examined the evolution of federal Indian policy and the institutional mechanisms — such as consultation requirements and self-governance compacts — that shape tribal-state and tribal-federal dynamics (?). Some studies have also explored how tribal governments navigate legal and administrative frameworks to assert their authority and influence decision-

making processes at the federal level (?). However, while there is a more established body of literature on the formal structures of tribal-federal relations, less attention has been paid to the variation in how tribal governments engage with these structures in practice. We still lack a systematic understanding of the conditions that shape whether and how tribes engage in federal politics at all.

When we turn to thinking about the impact of how tribes engagement shapes political outcomes, we can learn a lot from prior literature examining other types of organized interests. Political scientists have long studied how organized interests seek to influence funding and policy outcomes through strategic engagement with government. Local governments, for example, frequently lobby state and federal officials to secure grants, infrastructure investments, or regulatory flexibility (Payson 2021). Similarly, business interests routinely employ lobbyists and consultants to shape federal budget priorities, navigate bureaucratic processes, and gain access to targeted funding opportunities (?). These actors often succeed not merely because of their economic power, but because they possess the institutional capacity and expertise needed to engage effectively with complex governmental systems (?). This literature suggests that political engagement can yield substantial differences in policy and funding outcomes.

Yet while these dynamics are well-documented in other domains, the literature remains underdeveloped in terms of its applications the case of tribal governments. Although some work has shown that political advocacy, including litigation and participation in national organizations, can yield policy gains for tribes (?), few studies have systematically examined whether and how different forms of tribal engagement shape the distribution and type federal funding. This gap is particularly notable given the significant role that discretionary and programmatic funding plays in supporting tribal governance and development (?). As a result, we know much less about how tribal governments, operating within a unique legal and historical context, may exhibit similar or different patterns of engagement with the US government.

We argue that variation in tribal engagement with the federal government is shaped by a combination of need, resource capacity, and institutional expertise, and that these forms of engagement in turn influence funding outcomes. Tribes that depend heavily on federal funding to provide es-

sential services are more likely to seek additional or more flexible sources of support. However, the ability to engage effectively is conditioned by a tribe's internal capacity—whether it has stable revenue streams, professional staff, or familiarity with federal budgetary and administrative processes. These factors shape both the likelihood and the mode of engagement. Some tribes engage directly with federal agencies through participation in formal consultative mechanisms, including advisory bodies such as the Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC), regular meetings with agency officials, and congressional outreach. Other tribes rely on indirect forms of engagement, such as hiring lobbyists or working through inter-tribal organizations, which require fewer internal resources but may offer less tailored influence. Still others may not engage at all, due to sufficient financial independence or barriers such as geographic isolation, administrative limitations, or historical marginalization.

We further argue that the type of engagement shapes federal funding outcomes in meaningful ways. Direct engagement enables tribes to advocate for specific programs, influence the structure of funding, and secure discretionary or flexible resources aligned with their governance priorities. Indirect engagement may still improve access to broadly available funding opportunities, especially in collective interest areas such as healthcare or education, but is less likely to yield funding tailored to a particular tribe's needs. Non-engagement, by contrast, is associated with a greater reliance on formula-based allocations and missed opportunities for competitive or programmatic funds. In this way, tribal governments act not only as administrative units within a federal framework, but as strategic political actors navigating intergovernmental systems to pursue sovereignty, capacity-building, and community development.

To evaluate our two sets of hypotheses, we use a novel dataset of TIBC participation to measure direct engagement of tribal governments and lobbying data on the DOI from OpenSecrets to measure indirect engagement. We find that indirect engagement is driven by the size of tribal enrollment and reservation populations, the proportion of the reservation population that is low income, reservation geographic characteristics, and size of their casino enterprise. We find that tribes who directly engage through TIBC meetings are also impacted by the size of tribal enroll-

ment and reservation populations, the proportion of the reservation population that is low income, and gaming enterprises, however, geographic characteristics have no significant impact of direct engagement. While some of the drivers of engagement are significant for both types, there are important directional impacts of these variables.

To test the impact of tribal government engagement on federal funding, we analyze data on federal transactions where funds are sent from the Department of the Interior going to tribal government entities spanning the 2013-2021 fiscal years. This includes over 93,913 awards to tribal governments from DIO transactions and over \$17.5 billion in spending during this time period. We find that direct engagement has a positive and significant impact on overall DOI funding but indirect engagement has no significant impact. However, when we look at federal government funding of self-determination to tribal governments, both direct and indirect engagement have a significant impact on increasing funding in this area.

To evaluate our hypotheses, we draw on a novel dataset combining two key measures of tribal engagement with the federal government. We measure direct engagement using original data on participation in the Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC) and we measure indirect engagement using lobbying disclosures from Open Secrets. We find that both forms of engagement are shaped by several characteristics of tribes. Lobbying is significantly associated with larger tribal enrollment and reservation populations, a higher proportion of low-income residents, certain geographic characteristics, and the presence of large casino enterprises. Direct engagement through TIBC is also positively associated with enrollment and reservation size, but is negatively correlated with population need and size of gaming enterprises. While some predictors overlap, we observe important differences in the direction and magnitude of their effects across the two types of engagement, underscoring the need to distinguish between them empirically and theoretically.

To assess the impact of engagement on federal funding, we analyze transaction-level data from the Department of the Interior (DOI) spanning fiscal years 2013 to 2021. This dataset includes over 93,000 individual awards to tribal governments totaling more than \$17.5 billion. We find that direct engagement has a positive and statistically significant effect on overall DOI funding received

by tribal governments. In contrast, indirect engagement shows no significant relationship with total funding levels. However, when examining a key subset of funding—self-determination and self-governance program support—we find that both direct and indirect engagement are associated with significantly higher funding. These findings suggest that while direct engagement may be more effective in securing overall resources, both forms of engagement can shape the structure and type of funding tribes receive, particularly in areas central to tribal sovereignty and autonomy.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we consider why and how tribes engage with the federal government. Second, we discuss the importance of federal funding to tribes using a case study of the Cherokee Nation. Third, we discuss how engagement with the federal government impacts funding outcomes. Fourth, we describe the data and research design used to test our hypotheses in the previous sections. Fourth, we present the results of our hypothesis tests. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the contributions of this project for research and tribal government and future avenues for scholars to build on our work to better understand the conditions that impact their relationship and interactions with the US federal government.

## **Why Tribal Governments Engage**

Tribal governments vary considerably in their level of engagement with the U.S. federal government. We argue that three primary factors—resource capacity, economic need, and institutional expertise—shape both whether tribes engage and the form that engagement takes. Some tribal governments possess substantial independent revenue streams from gaming operations, natural resource extraction, tourism enterprises, or tribally owned corporations. These resources can reduce the urgency of engaging with the federal government to secure additional funds, particularly if tribes are able to finance core governmental services and long-term development priorities through self-generated income. For these tribes, the opportunity costs of regular engagement with federal agencies—such as time, travel, and administrative burden—may outweigh the perceived benefits, leading to less frequent or more selective participation in federal budget processes.

In contrast, many tribal governments remain highly dependent on federal funding to meet their communities' basic needs. For smaller or geographically isolated tribes, or those lacking sig-

nificant economic enterprises, federal funds are essential for maintaining health care, education, infrastructure, and social services. For example, tribes served primarily by the Indian Health Service (IHS) or those participating in the Indian Housing Block Grant (IHBG) program often rely on federal appropriations to operate core programs. These tribes face a stronger incentive to engage in advocacy efforts aimed at influencing how funding is allocated, structured, and administered. Engagement becomes a necessary effort to secure resources and ensure that federal programs align with tribal priorities.

However, need alone does not determine engagement. Even highly dependent tribes may be unable to engage due to limitations in institutional capacity and administrative expertise. Many tribal governments operate with lean staffing models, limited grant-writing capabilities, and minimal dedicated personnel for intergovernmental affairs. These capacity constraints can make regular and effective participation in federal processes difficult. For instance, attending Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC) meetings requires technical knowledge of federal timelines, reporting requirements, and policy framing. It also demands the ability to maintain relationships with federal officials and to advocate in bureaucratically legible terms. These burdens are particularly difficult for small tribes or those located far from federal administrative hubs like Washington, D.C., where travel and coordination pose additional challenges.

In such contexts, indirect engagement may serve as a more viable strategy. Tribes may hire professional lobbyists, contract legal counsel, or participate in inter-tribal organizations like the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) to represent their interests in federal policy arenas. These intermediaries provide the necessary expertise and access without requiring the same level of internal staffing or policy specialization. For example, a tribe that lacks the capacity to develop and submit formal budget recommendations to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) may instead work through a regional tribal consortium or lobbyist to advocate for shared funding priorities. Indirect engagement thus lowers the threshold for participation and allows even resource-constrained tribes to maintain some voice in federal decision-making.

This dynamic parallels patterns observed in other political contexts, where actors with limited



capacity rely on intermediaries to navigate complex governance systems. Local governments often join municipal associations or contract with state-level lobbyists to secure grants or regulatory concessions when they lack the personnel to engage directly with state legislatures (?). Similarly, business interests frequently turn to professional lobbying firms to advocate for favorable tax treatment, federal contracts, or regulatory exemptions (?). These actors are not passive—they make strategic decisions about how to allocate their limited political capital. Tribal governments operate in a similarly strategic manner, weighing internal resources and external demands to determine whether and how to engage.

At the other end of the spectrum, well-resourced tribes with experienced administrative personnel and policy knowledge may engage directly with federal agencies. They may participate in advisory councils, attend consultation meetings, submit written policy recommendations, and cultivate long-term relationships with federal staff and congressional offices. This form of direct engagement allows tribes to assert community-specific priorities, influence the design of federal programs, and negotiate more flexible or responsive funding arrangements. In these cases, engagement is not only feasible—it becomes a powerful mechanism for shaping the tribal–federal relationship on the tribe’s own terms.

**Hypothesis 1 (Independent Revenue Capacity):** *Tribes with greater independent revenue capacity will be less likely to engage with the federal government directly and more likely to engage indirectly.*

**Hypothesis 2 (Economic Need):** *Tribes with higher levels of economic need will be more likely to engage with the federal government indirectly.*

**Hypothesis 3 (Large Population):** *Tribes with larger populations will be more likely to engage with the federal government, either directly or indirectly.*

**Hypothesis 4 (Geographic Isolation):** *Tribes that are more geographically isolated will be more likely to engage with the federal government indirectly.*

While many tribes engage with the federal government in some form, there are some tribes that do not. Tribal non-engagement likely comes from two distinct groups of tribes. Some tribal governments possess such robust economic resources that they choose not to engage with the federal funding process. These tribes may operate large-scale gaming enterprises, energy developments, or other revenue-generating ventures that allow them to fund services and infrastructure independently. For these tribes, the marginal utility of additional federal funding may be relatively low, particularly when compared to the administrative burden, political uncertainty, or policy constraints that often accompany federal programs. Participating in federal budget processes requires time, travel, compliance with reporting requirements, and alignment with federal priorities that may not match local goals. In some cases, tribes may intentionally avoid engagement to preserve autonomy, avoid red tape, or sidestep the risk of ceding decision-making power to federal agencies. In this way, non-engagement becomes a strategic choice, rooted in financial independence and a desire to insulate tribal governance from federal influence.

However, some tribes that are very small or under-resourced, may not be able to effectively engage. These tribes may have urgent needs but lack the administrative capacity, expertise, or political access required to participate in consultation meetings, navigate grant application processes, or build relationships with agency officials. Even when these tribes want to engage, the barriers to entry—geographic isolation, lack of broadband access, or limited legal knowledge—may be prohibitive. For these governments, non-engagement is not a choice but a reflection of structural exclusion.

## **Why Federal Funding Matters: A Case Study of the Cherokee Nation**

Understanding why and how tribal governments engage with the federal government is only part of the picture. Engagement is often motivated by pressing fiscal needs and a recognition that federal funding remains essential to the functioning of many tribal governments. Reservations present a number of challenges for private investment, the trust land system perhaps key among

them. A number of studies have found that these challenges have had negative economic consequences for reservations (Anderson and Parker (2008), Wellhausen et al. (2017), Bauer, Feir, and Gregg (2022), Brouwer et al. (2024)). Because private investment is harder to attract for tribes, most reservation economies are based around two sources: transfers from the federal government and tribally owned businesses (Ratté and Anderson 2022). While some tribes may have the financial resources to maintain autonomy, for the majority, federal support is a critical component of governance capacity.

The importance of federal funding is put into stark relief when comparing tribal government revenue sources to the revenue sources of state and local governments. According to the Census Compendium of Government Finance reports from 2018 to 2021, approximately 51-54% of all state and local government revenue came from taxation. While we do not have comprehensive data on tribal finances, the Center for Indian Country surveyed tribal governments in Montana and found that only 2% of tribal government revenue came from taxes (Mohr, Palmer, and Trostle 2024).

Conversely, only about 22-28% of local and state revenue came from federal transfers. On the tribal side it is difficult to estimate exactly what the share of federal funding is, but we can look at one example. The Cherokee Nation is one of only a small handful of tribes that make their legislation and budgets publicly accessible online to non-members. In their budgets, the Nation breaks down its spending by funding source, allowing for a simple comparison of federal to non-federal revenue. However, the Cherokee Nation is the largest tribe by enrollment and operates several successful businesses, many other tribes are much smaller and have fewer economic resources to draw from, making them more reliant on federal funding. Therefore, Cherokee budgets likely represent what federal funding looks like for tribes that rely on it the least.

To illustrate this dynamic, we examine the Cherokee Nation's budgets to underscore how federal funding is not merely supplementary but foundational to the provision of essential services and the exercise of tribal sovereignty. In Figure 1, we plot the share of each Cherokee Nation budget justified using federal sources from fiscal year 2012 to 2023. Despite representing a lower

bound for federal funding need, federal sources accounted for 68-91% of all tribe spending. This share is inflated partially by Indian Health Service (IHS) sources, as most of this funding comes from revenue raised by the different clinics and health services operated by the Cherokee Nation. Removing IHS sources decreases the share of federal funding to 38-86%, still much larger than what we see for state and local governments. Revenue from the DOI accounted for approximately 4-13% of the total Cherokee budget, or an average of around 8% per year. This average is higher than any other federal department except for IHS and the Treasury.

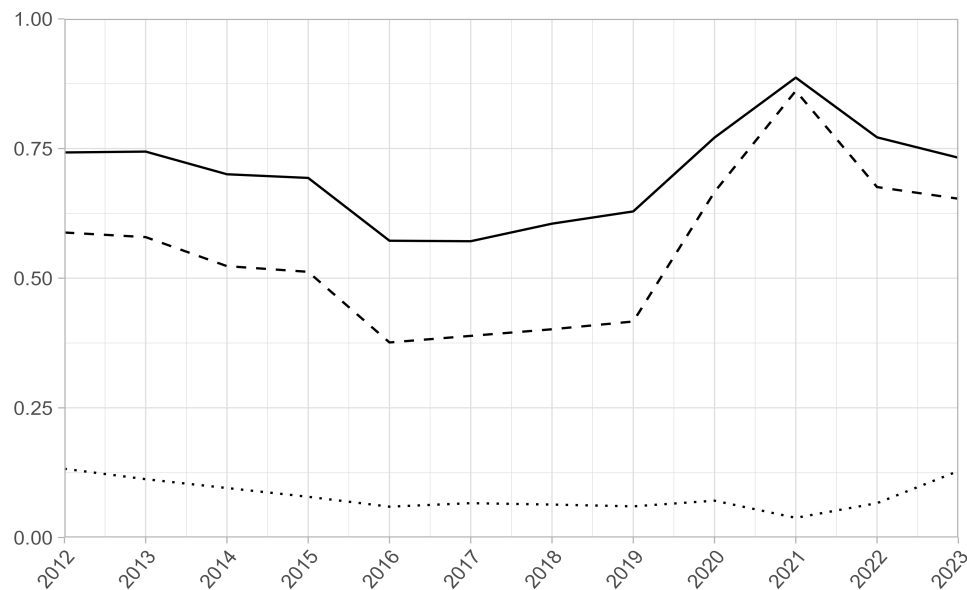


Figure 1: Share of Cherokee total budget (capital and operating) justified through federal sources. The solid black line shows the share of budget justified through federal sources within the entire budget. The dashed line shows the share of the budget justified through federal sources, after removing IHS sources. The dotted line shows the share of the entire budget justified through only the Interior.

Comparing the importance of federal transfers to revenue from tribally-owned businesses is difficult because no systematic data on tribally owned businesses is publicly available. What we can look at is aggregate revenue for one of the most important industries many tribal governments participate in: gambling. The National Indian Gaming Commission (NIGC) reports the total revenue earned by all tribes that operate gaming businesses. From fiscal year 2013 to 2021, gaming revenue rose from \$28 to \$39 billion (National Indian Gaming Commission 2023). Meanwhile, over that same time period, the Interior transferred \$1.1 to \$2.9 billion to tribes involved in gaming,

or approximately 4-7.5% of the size of gaming revenue.

These numbers make Interior funding appear to be a relatively minor feature of tribal budgets, however, there are some caveats. First, a significant number of tribes do not operate a gaming business, so this speaks little to the budgets of those tribes. Second, gaming revenue is not equally distributed. The NIGC reports that in fiscal year 2022, 8% of gaming operations accounted for slightly over 50% of total gaming revenue in that period (National Indian Gaming Commission 2023). The 4-7.5% result presumably overestimates the importance of Interior funding for tribes with lower revenue gaming businesses. Third, the NIGC data is revenue from tribal gaming businesses, not profits going to the tribe. While gaming is undoubtedly a very profitable business for most tribes, there are significant costs to operating a gaming business in a way there is not for federal transfers. Most importantly, state governments and private industry partners may take significant portions of gaming revenue.

Finally, there is one other case to consider when thinking of the importance of Interior funding at a tribe level. While a vast majority of tribes accept funding from the DOI and other federal agencies, there are a handful of tribes that explicitly reject any federal funds, such as the Tuscarora Nation in New York. How exactly the tribal governments function economically is unclear. Unsurprisingly, these tribes tend to be even less transparent in their government activity, so it is difficult to understand what the consequences of rejecting federal funds are for a tribe. Future work on tribal governments may want to examine this counterfactual in greater detail, as it may reveal other details in both how tribal governments function as well as the power of the relationship between a tribe and the federal government.

## **The Impact of Engagement on Federal Funding to Tribes**

The financial relationship between tribal governments and the U.S. federal government is not merely transactional; it is a dynamic and contested process shaped by tribal engagement with federal institutions. While formula-based allocations through agencies like the BIA provide a baseline level of support, these funds often fall short of addressing the full range of tribal needs and priorities. As a result, many tribes actively seek additional or more flexible funding sources

to advance their policy goals and address community needs. We argue that the degree and form of tribal engagement shape the funding received. While structural conditions influence a tribe's initial allocation and potential reliance on federal support, it is tribal agency—expressed through interaction with federal government — that influences access to discretionary resources and the alignment of funding with tribal priorities. Tribal governments, therefore, are not passive recipients but political actors navigating institutional pathways to pursue sovereignty and self-determined development.

Tribal engagement may take two main forms. First, is indirect engagement with the federal government. In this type of engagement tribes may participate through intermediaries, such as lobbyists, legal counsel, or inter-tribal organizations. Indirect engagement allows tribes to advocate for their interests without devoting the same internal resources required for direct participation. While potentially less tailored to a specific tribe's priorities, this mode of engagement can still influence federal funding decisions, particularly in domains where collective interests are aligned. Second, is direct engagement with the federal government. Tribes that engage directly with federal institutions do so through formal consultation mechanisms, participation in federal advisory bodies such as the Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC)<sup>1</sup>, and regular interactions with agency officials and congressional staff. This direct participation allows tribes to assert their unique needs and priorities, request specific programmatic support, and influence funding structures more precisely.

However, not all tribes may engage with the federal government either because they have sub-

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<sup>1</sup>The Tribal-Interior Budget Council (TIBC) functions as a formal mechanism for intergovernmental consultation, allowing tribal leaders and federal officials to collaboratively shape the Bureau of Indian Affairs' annual budget proposals. Beyond its role in budget formulation and advocacy, TIBC also facilitates information-sharing by educating tribal representatives about the federal budget process and providing updates on policy developments relevant to Indian Country. More information is available on the BIA webpage for the TIBC here: <https://www.bia.gov/as-ia/obpm/tibc>

stantial alternative revenue sources—such as gaming enterprises or energy development— or because they face constraints in the capacity that limits their ability to participate. Even when such tribes desire additional funding, lack of staffing, institutional support, or political access may hinder their involvement in federal policymaking processes.

We argue that both direct and indirect forms of engagement may influence both the amount and type of funding tribes receive. First, engagement can lead to increased funding levels by improving access to discretionary or non-recurring resources, including competitive grants and earmarked initiatives. Second, engagement may reshape the composition of funding, allowing tribes to secure more flexible resources rather than narrowly categorized program funds. Further, engagement can promote alignment with tribal priorities, ensuring that funds support culturally relevant governance, economic development, and health systems tailored to specific community needs.

**Hypothesis 5 (Federal Funding):** *Tribal governments that engage with federal institutions will receive higher levels of federal funding compared to tribes that do not engage.*

**Hypothesis 6 (Self-identified Priorities Funding):** *Tribal governments that engage with federal institutions will receive federal funding that is more closely aligned with their self-identified priorities and needs compared to tribes that do not engage.*

## Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we collect three major categories of data: data on tribal lobbying and participation in federal collaborative organizations, data on federal transfers to tribes, and data on important features of tribes that may correlate with participation and funding.

### Tribal Engagement

To empirically assess the impact of tribal engagement on federal funding outcomes, we operationalize two distinct forms of engagement: indirect and direct. Indirect engagement is measured through tribal lobbying activities, while direct engagement is assessed via participation in the Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC).

Tribal lobbying serves as a proxy for indirect engagement with the federal government. By hiring lobbyists or engaging legal counsel, tribes can advocate for their interests in federal policy-making processes without the need for extensive internal administrative resources.<sup>2</sup> To measure tribal lobbying, we pull federal lobbying activity from OpenSecrets.org. While this data tracks total spending and the number of lobbyists hired per reporting period, we simply dichotomize this variable to whether the tribe hired a lobbyist in that year.

Direct engagement is operationalized through tribal participation in the TIBC, a formal advisory body that facilitates government-to-government consultation on budgetary matters between tribes and the Department of the Interior. TBIC is an advisory group where tribe and DOI representatives meet 3-4 times yearly to discuss issues around the federal budget which "allow for the fulfillment of tribes' self-determination, self-governance, sovereignty, and treaty rights, as well as sufficient levels of funding to address the needs of Tribes and their tribal citizens." Participation in TIBC meetings allows tribes to directly influence budget formulation and advocate for funding allocations that align with their specific needs and priorities. TIBC participation records offer a clear and official measure of direct engagement, reflecting active involvement in federal budgetary processes. This measure captures the formal avenues through which tribes can assert their sovereignty and influence funding decisions. However, participation in TIBC may be influenced by factors such as geographic proximity, resource availability, and administrative capacity, potentially biasing the measure toward larger or more resource-rich tribes. We control for these in our analysis.

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<sup>2</sup>There are some drawbacks to using lobbying as an indirect measure of engagement. First, not all lobbying activities are disclosed or easily attributable to specific tribes, potentially leading to underrepresentation of certain engagement efforts. However, this means our current analysis would reflect a minimum effect if significant. Additionally, lobbying data may not capture informal or grassroots advocacy efforts that also constitute significant forms of indirect engagement. Like grassroots lobbying, there are other potential measures but these measures are difficult to collect systematically across tribes if at all.



The TIBC provides a number of important leadership roles for tribal representatives. Heading TIBC are 3 tribal co-chairs. Below these co-chairs there are 2 representatives for each of the 12 BIA regions.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, TIBC includes a number of subcommittees dedicated to specific issues, such as public safety, roads, or education. On these subcommittees, a number of tribal representative sit as chair or as voting members. Using publicly available directories, we code for each tribe whether they had a member of their tribe participating in any of these roles for a TIBC meeting in a given year. This is an imperfect measure of participation in TIBC as members of other tribes do attend TIBC meetings without serving in any formal role. However, attendance to TIBC is not made publicly available.

TIBC	Lobbying	
	0	1
0	131	154
1	13	46

Table 1: Tribal Engagement by Type

In Table 1, we show the number of tribes in our data who ever engaged in lobbying or participated in TIBC. Unsurprisingly, lobbying is much more common. Approximately 58% of tribes lobbied the government at some point between 2013 and 2021, while only about 17% of tribes participated in TIBC leadership. This makes sense given that there are a relatively limited number of TIBC roles for tribes to fill while there is no limit on lobbying and lobbying is more expensive, but requires effort to engage in than participating in TIBC leadership.

## Federal Transfers to Tribal Governments

To measure federal transfers from the Department of the Interior, we pull all transactions where the DOI transferred funds from USAspending.gov. This data includes all transfers of money or in-kind goods to any non-federal entity, but excludes transactions where the federal government is purchasing goods or services. Examining funding from the DOI is particularly valuable in understanding tribal-federal government relationships because the most important bureaucratic agencies

<sup>3</sup>This includes 2 representatives for the Navajo region, which includes only the Navajo Nation. Because of this, there is always a Navajo Nation representative at TIBC.

for federal tribal administration, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), reside in the department. Other agencies in the Interior office also come into frequent contact with tribes, such as the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the National Park Service.

In order to identify transactions where the recipient was a tribal government, we subset the USAspending data to transactions marked as "Tribal Government" for the business type of the recipient. However, this label still contains a number of non-tribal recipients, such as non-tribal universities and grade schools, state and local governments, and private companies. We were only interested in awards going to entities that were either (1) a tribal government, or (2) owned/controlled by a tribal government. Starting in FY 2013, we are able to connect transactions to specific tribes using the federally-assigned Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) numbers for award recipients and their listed parent organizations.<sup>4</sup> This allows us to identify all transactions relevant for our analysis. We also exclude transactions where the required federal funds were equal to zero or less. These transactions may represent adjustments to previous awards or used for other bureaucratic purposes that are not of interest.

One important group of recipients left out of both identification strategies are inter-tribal organizations. Because membership into these groups is not always public, or may have changed over time, we exclude these from our analysis because we cannot directly connect the transaction to specific tribes. This means that tribes that if a tribe receives significant funding from other organizations it is a member of, our data will underestimate their true level of funding. Another limitation in this data is that we cannot distinguish between awards that were based on competitive grants and awards that were given based on previously agreed upon settlements or negotiations. In total, we identify 93,913 awards given to tribal entities out of the total 371,414 DOI transactions.

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<sup>4</sup>Prior to FY 2013, records were too disorganized to identify relevant transactions without significant missingness.

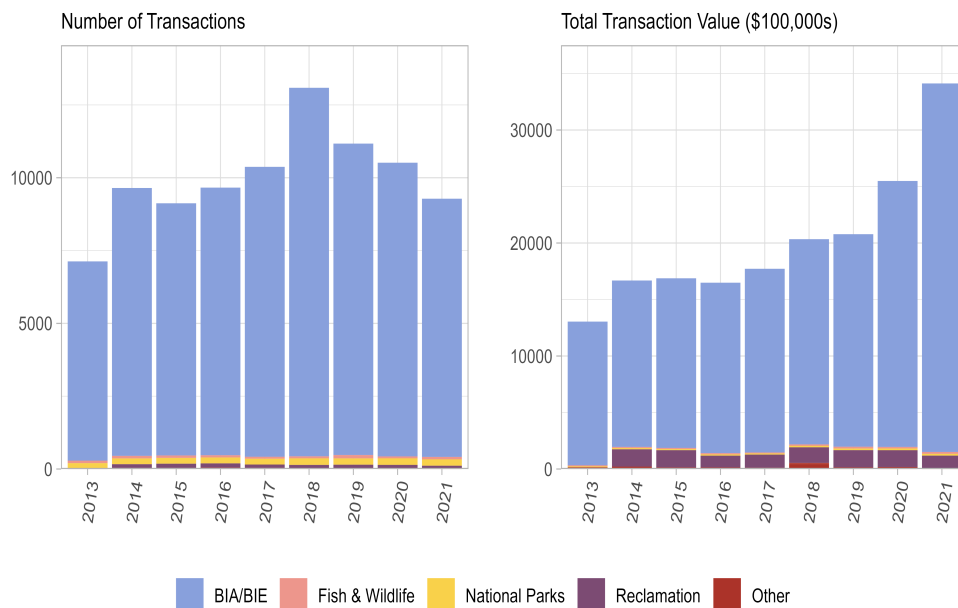


Figure 2: Total number of transactions and average transaction value per fiscal year given by the Department of the Interior to any tribal government entity. Excludes transactions that required zero federal funding or concerned repayment of funds to the federal government.

In Figure 2, we show the total number of transactions and total transaction value each fiscal year, aggregated by awarding agency. The vast majority of transactions, in both volume and value, came from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Education.<sup>5</sup>

Using this data, we calculate the total amount of funding a tribe received from the DOI in a given fiscal year. Because tribes can vary drastically, from small landless tribes to tribes that are larger than some states, the amount of funding they receive from the DOI also varies significantly. To avoid issues with some of the few larger tribes acting as outliers in our analysis, we log this variable in our final analysis.

DOI funding covers many different policy areas. In order to look more specifically at a form of funding of particular interest to scholars of tribal governments, we also calculate the total amount of funding a tribe receives that is broadly related to tribal self-governance. Most transactions in the data lack significant details on what the funding was for, but there are broad codes used that give

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<sup>5</sup>USAspending.gov does not differentiate between these two agencies, so we cannot distinguish transactions between the two.

us some sense of the purpose of the transaction. For self-governance transactions, we only include funding that was a part of tribal self-determination contracts and self-governance compacts, or were related to supporting the functioning of tribal governments. For example, funding for tribal courts, elections, and law enforcement were all included in this sub-category.

## **Tribal Demographics and Characteristics**

Finally, we need to measure covariates that correlate with lobbying and TIBC leadership to see what kinds of tribes are engaging in these activities, as well as to control for factors that influence federal funding outside of lobbying and TIBC leadership. This is particularly important because significant portions of BIA funding are formula-based.

We utilize two measures of population provided by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD): tribal enrollment and service area Indian population. Enrollment is functionally citizenship for tribal nations, it represents the total number of people who officially belong to the tribe. Importantly, enrolled members may or may not live on or near their tribe's land. For many tribes, only a minority of their enrolled membership lives around the reservation. To capture the reservation population, we also include the service area Indian population, which is a count of all AIAN persons who live or or near a tribe's reservation.

Additionally, we also pull from HUD the number of households on the reservation with an income below 30% of median US income. This represents the number of households in extreme poverty, which may also be an important factor for DOI programs targeting the most needy individuals.

Besides population, we also take into consideration reservation size. We measure both the total land area of the reservation, as well as the total water area. A small number of tribes, however, do not have a reservation. To account for those tribes, we also include a binary measure for whether the tribe has a reservation (land base).

Given its dominance in tribal finances, we also include a measure of how invested each tribe is in the gambling industry. We pull data from an online directory of gaming establishments to

measure each year how many total slot machines a tribe operated.<sup>6</sup> This is a more useful measure of gaming than a simple binary measure or a count of the number of gaming locations because those will be less likely to capture the significant variation in gaming investments tribes have made. A tribe could have very large gaming revenues with only a few location, and tribes with many locations could have relatively low revenue. Because slot machines are the major revenue driver for gaming businesses, they may best proxy for gaming revenue.

Finally, the rurality of a tribe's land may also impact its funding and how the forms of participation they engage in. To capture this, we calculate the distance between a tribe's listed headquarters address and a city with a population of at least 100,000 (as of 2010). Ease of travel may also be important particularly for TIBC leadership who are expected to travel to multiple meetings each year. Because of this, we also calculate the distance between the tribe's headquarters and a commercial airport, as well as to Washington D.C., where most TIBC meetings are held.

Given that most of the covariates suffer from significant skew in their measurement, we log all non-binary variables to normalize their distribution. In Table 2, we give the descriptive statistics for all variables we include in our analysis.

## **Model Estimation**

The unit of analysis in this paper is the tribe-fiscal year. If a tribe reported receiving zero funding from the DOI for the entire time period included in this analysis or reported zero enrollment in the HUD IHBG data, they were dropped from the analysis. In total, 3,038 tribe-fiscal years were included in all the following analyses.

We estimate two sets of models. First, we estimate models examining the relationship between each form of participation (lobbying and TIBC leadership) and our tribal level covariates to examine what tribe characteristics are related to either. These models reflect the test of our first four hypotheses. Second, we estimate models examining the relationship between both forms of participation and DOI funding to understand if either form of participation seems to be "paying off" for the tribe. We look at the relationship of participation to both total DOI funding, as well as to

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.gamingdirectory.com>

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max
Total BIA transfers (log)	14.2	2.7	0.0	14.3	19.6
Lobbying	0.4	0.5	0.0	0.0	1.0
TIBC	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	1.0
Enrollment (log)	7.1	1.8	0.0	7.0	12.7
Service Population (log)	6.9	2.0	0.0	7.0	12.2
Poor households (log)	4.2	1.9	0.0	4.4	9.8
Total land (log)	3.8	2.9	0.0	3.5	11.1
Total water (log)	1.1	1.7	0.0	0.0	6.9
Land base	0.9	0.3	0.0	1.0	1.0
Total slots (log)	4.8	3.2	0.0	6.2	10.2
Distance to city (log)	4.4	1.1	0.1	4.6	6.2
Distance to DC (log)	7.8	0.6	4.7	8.1	8.3
Distance to airport (log)	3.8	0.9	0.2	3.9	5.4

DOI self-governance funding. These models reflect the test of our fifth and sixth hypotheses. All models are run with a year fixed effect and have their standard errors clustered by year to account for changes in overall funding environment in different years.

## Results

Table 3 displays the results for the models estimating the effects of our primary tribal explanatory variables on whether a tribe lobbies or participates in TIBC. We find that enrollment and service population positively and significantly impact a tribes likelihood to lobby in a given year ( $p < .1$  and  $p < .01$ , respectively). This suggests that tribes with greater human resources have more capacity to pursue indirect engagement strategies. As the proportion of a tribal members that are low income increases there is a positive and significant impact on whether a tribe lobbies ( $p < .05$ ) which implies that economic need drives tribes to seek additional federal support through advocacy. Having a reservation negatively and weakly significant impact on whether a tribe lobbies. However, when we consider the size of the reservation, as there is an increase in the size of the reservation, there is a strong, significant positive impact on whether a tribe lobbies ( $p < .001$ ). This

may indicate that tribes with expansive land holdings have more at stake in federal policy decisions and thus are more inclined to lobby. However, as there is an increase in the water area covering of a tribal reservation, there is a significant decrease in the likelihood of lobbying ( $p < .001$ ). This is possibly due to the unique challenges and lower economic returns associated with water-covered lands. As the number of slots increases, tribes are significantly more likely to lobby in a given year ( $p < .001$ ). Tribes with substantial gaming operations likely have more financial means to invest in lobbying efforts. As there is an increase in the distance to city or airport there is strong negative and statistically significant impact on the likelihood of lobbying ( $p < .001$  and  $p < .001$ , respectively) which provides some evidence of the logistical challenges remote tribes face in engaging with federal policymakers. However, the distant to DC has no significant impact suggesting that proximity to the nation's capital is less critical, possibly due to the availability of remote communication channels.

Table 3: Regression Estimates of Lobbying and TIBC  
Participation

	Lobbying	TIBC
Enrollment (log)	0.021+ (0.011)	0.022** (0.005)
Service Population (log)	0.027** (0.007)	0.009* (0.003)
Low Income HH (log)	0.017* (0.006)	−0.009* (0.003)
Land Area (log)	0.040*** (0.002)	0.000 (0.005)
Water Area (log)	−0.024***	0.014+

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Table 3: Regression Estimates of Lobbying and TIBC  
Participation (Continued)

	(0.003)	(0.007)
Land Base	−0.041+	−0.005
	(0.019)	(0.017)
Total Slots (log)	0.032***	−0.005**
	(0.002)	(0.001)
Distance to City (log)	−0.031***	0.003
	(0.005)	(0.004)
Distance to DC (log)	−0.042	0.012
	(0.044)	(0.009)
Distance to Airport (log)	−0.046***	−0.003
	(0.004)	(0.003)
Eastern Region	0.336***	−0.016
	(0.029)	(0.014)
East Oklahoma Region	0.066	−0.007
	(0.039)	(0.008)
Midwest Region	0.208***	0.011
	(0.035)	(0.016)
Navajo Region	0.102*	0.557***
	(0.041)	(0.107)
Northwest Region	0.412***	−0.003
	(0.052)	(0.014)

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Table 3: Regression Estimates of Lobbying and TIBC

Participation (Continued)

Pacific Region	0.208**	−0.012
	(0.048)	(0.010)
Rocky Mountain Region	0.072	0.118**
	(0.055)	(0.033)
Southern Plains Region	−0.268***	−0.027*
	(0.034)	(0.011)
Southwest Region	0.094	−0.011
	(0.070)	(0.014)
Western Region	0.157**	−0.023
	(0.042)	(0.015)
Num.Obs.	3038	3038
R2 Adj.	0.272	0.100

+  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ 

All models include year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by year.

Turning to our results for participation in TIBC, we find similar trends that enrollment and service population positively and significantly impact a tribes likelihood to lobby in a given year ( $p < .01$  and  $p < .05$ , respectively) indicating that larger tribes are more engaged in direct consultation processes. In contrast to lobbying, as the proportion of a tribal members that are low income increases there is a negative and significant impact on whether a tribe participates in the TIBC ( $p < .05$ ). This could reflect resource constraints that limit the ability of economically disadvantaged tribes to engage in time-intensive direct consultations. There is no significant impact on whether a tribe has a reservation or the size of that reservation ( $p > .1$  for both). Again, we find

an opposite result where increases in the number of slots has a negative and statistically significant impact on tribes participating in the TIBC ( $p > .1$ ). This may imply that tribes with substantial gaming revenues may prefer indirect engagement methods like lobbying over direct consultation. Finally, there is no significant impact on distance to a city, airport or DC on whether a tribe participates in TIBC ( $p > .1$  for all three coefficients). This may be due to the structured nature of TIBC meetings, which are scheduled and supported by the Department of the Interior, potentially mitigating the impact of geographic barriers.

Table 4: Regression Estimates of BIA Funding

	All DOI (log)	DOI Self-Determination (log)
Lobbying	−0.037 (0.066)	0.148*** (0.022)
TIBC Participation	0.233*** (0.033)	0.261*** (0.019)
Enrollment (log)	0.451*** (0.041)	0.203*** (0.025)
Service Population (log)	0.105** (0.022)	0.077*** (0.011)
Low Income HH (log)	−0.018 (0.020)	0.027** (0.007)
Land Area (log)	0.195*** (0.019)	0.069*** (0.004)
Water Area (log)	−0.102** (0.023)	0.050** (0.011)

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Table 4: Regression Estimates of BIA Funding (Continued)

Land Base	0.815**	0.050
	(0.206)	(0.047)
Slot Machines (log)	−0.009	0.006
	(0.014)	(0.004)
Distance to City (log)	0.207***	0.113***
	(0.028)	(0.007)
Distance to DC (log)	0.219*	0.231**
	(0.084)	(0.056)
Distance to Airport (log)	−0.121**	−0.082***
	(0.028)	(0.004)
Eastern Region	1.026***	0.449***
	(0.157)	(0.021)
East Oklahoma Region	−0.222	−0.184***
	(0.122)	(0.031)
Midwest Region	0.826***	0.374***
	(0.140)	(0.043)
Navajo Region	0.325+	1.448***
	(0.165)	(0.122)
Northwest Region	1.039***	0.715***
	(0.178)	(0.085)
Pacific Region	−0.222	−0.335***

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Table 4: Regression Estimates of BIA Funding (Continued)

	(0.174)	(0.064)
Rocky Mountain Region	0.353+	−0.026
	(0.158)	(0.065)
Southern Plains Region	−1.112***	−0.525***
	(0.159)	(0.052)
Southwest Region	−0.112	−0.190+
	(0.158)	(0.092)
Western Region	−0.155	0.050
	(0.205)	(0.051)
Num.Obs.	3030	3030
R2 Adj.	0.378	0.673
Std.Errors	by: Year	by: Year
FE: Year	X	X

+  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

All models include year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered by year.

Table 4 presents the estimated effects of tribal engagement—specifically, lobbying activities and participation in the Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC)—on federal funding allocations. Our analysis focuses on evaluating Hypotheses 5 and 6, which posit that tribal engagement influences both the amount and alignment of federal funding with tribal priorities. We only discuss the main effects that pertain to hypotheses five and six. Lobbying does not have a significant impact on DOI funding, however, TIBC participation has a large, positive and significant impact on overall DOI funding ( $< .001$ ). This suggests that while lobbying may influence specific policy areas, it may not be as effective in securing broad increases in federal funding allocations. Lobbying efforts often focus on particular legislative initiatives or regulatory changes, which may not translate into

substantial changes in overall funding levels. However, the TIBC finding supports the idea that formal, institutionalized engagement mechanisms enable tribes to effectively advocate for increased federal resources. TIBC serves as a forum where tribal leaders and federal officials can develop budget proposals that facilitate the alignment of funding with tribal needs and priorities.

When we subset the DOI funds by type and examine self-determination funding, both lobbying and TIBC participation have strong positive and significant impacts on receiving more funding in this category ( $< .001$ ). This finding indicates the effectiveness of both forms of engagement in securing resources that align closely with tribal self-governance objectives. Self-determination funds are designed to empower tribes to manage programs according to their specific cultural and community needs, and active engagement appears crucial in accessing these resources ?.

## Discussion

This paper has examined the factors that shape tribal governments' engagement with the U.S. federal government and how that engagement affects the distribution of federal funding. We argued that variation in engagement—both direct and indirect—is driven by a combination of need, capacity and expertise. Using original data on Tribal Interior Budget Council (TIBC) participation and lobbying disclosures, we showed that while both forms of engagement are patterned by structural characteristics, they differ in their drivers and outcomes. Our results suggest that tribal governments act as strategic political actors, leveraging different forms of engagement to navigate federal institutions and advocate for their communities. Taken together, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which tribal governments pursue political and fiscal autonomy within the broader intergovernmental landscape.

This research contributes to broader debates on political representation, interest group advocacy, and the institutional politics of resource distribution. Understanding how and why tribal governments engage with the federal government is essential for assessing both the effectiveness of tribal political strategies and the equity of federal policy outcomes in Indian Country. This research makes three major contributions to the scholarly understanding of tribal governments' interactions and financial relationship with the U.S. federal government thus far. First, while re-

cent scholarship has focused on the consequences of federal policy for tribal nations in areas such as health, education, and economic development there has been little systematic attention to how tribal governments themselves shape these outcomes through political engagement. We offer the first comprehensive theoretical account of why some tribes engage with the federal government while others do not, and why tribes adopt different forms of engagement. By distinguishing between direct engagement and indirect engagement, we identify the underlying drivers of these strategies, including economic need, institutional capacity, and administrative expertise. In doing so, we extend broader theories of political advocacy and interest representation to the context of Indigenous governance.

Second, this study introduces a novel empirical analysis of federal funding to tribal governments, using a newly compiled dataset of over financial transactions from the Department of the Interior. This is the most extensive analysis to date of tribal–federal financial flows in the contemporary era. In pairing this data with new measures of tribal engagement—including original data on TIBC participation and federal lobbying records—we provide the first large-scale test of whether and how tribal engagement strategies influence funding outcomes. These results offer a foundation for future work on how tribes navigate complex institutional environments to advance their priorities.

Third, our research contributes new insights to the study of Indigenous self-determination and political behavior. We show that tribal lobbying—whether direct or indirect—can significantly shape both the amount and the composition of federal funding. While direct engagement is associated with higher overall federal support, both forms of engagement are linked to increased funding for self-governance programs, a domain central to tribal autonomy. These findings underscore the political agency of tribal governments and highlight the strategic use of lobbying as a tool for governance and development. By analyzing the conditions under which tribes choose to engage, and the pathways they use to do so, our study shifts the conversation from viewing tribes as passive recipients of federal aid to recognizing them as active institutional actors within American intergovernmental politics.

Moving forward, this study offers an important foundation for understanding the political dynamics that shape the financial relationship between tribal governments and the U.S. federal government. By highlighting how and why tribes engage in different forms of advocacy, this research opens several promising directions for future inquiry. First, future studies should broaden the empirical scope to include federal agencies beyond the Department of the Interior. Tribal governments receive funding and interact with numerous federal entities, and examining engagement patterns and funding allocations across agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, or the Environmental Protection Agency would provide a more comprehensive view of tribal intergovernmental relations and advocacy strategies.

Second, further work is needed to unpack how different types of federal funding—such as block grants, formula allocations, competitive grants, or self-governance compacts—respond to different forms of tribal engagement. A more granular understanding of whether and how certain funding streams are more sensitive to population dynamics, lobbying efforts, or geographic characteristics would clarify where tribal engagement is most impactful and where it may be limited by structural constraints.

Third, future research should investigate the federal government’s role in shaping the opportunity structure for tribal engagement. Understanding how shifts in federal policy priorities, agency leadership, and administrative rules influence tribes’ strategic choices can provide critical insight into the evolving nature of the tribal–federal relationship. This could include historical and contemporary analysis of legislative debates, budget negotiations, or changes in consultation protocols that either incentivize or limit tribal participation. Ultimately, expanding the focus beyond funding totals to include the institutional context that shapes engagement opportunities will be key to advancing scholarly and practical understandings of tribal political behavior and federal responsiveness.

While our study is academic in nature, we think it is important to reiterate the real world outcomes that are at play here. There are high stakes for tribal governments and their acceptance of federal funds. On one hand, federal funding provides crucial resources that support essential

services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure development, and social welfare programs within tribal communities. These funds often fill gaps left by inadequate local revenue sources and help address pressing socioeconomic challenges faced by tribes, including high rates of poverty and limited access to basic amenities. However, the acceptance of federal funds can also come with strings attached, influencing tribal governance, decision-making processes, and policy priorities. Federal funding often requires compliance with federal regulations, reporting requirements, and programmatic guidelines, which can limit tribal autonomy in managing their own affairs. This regulatory framework may dictate how funds are allocated, the scope of services provided, and the extent to which tribes can innovate or tailor programs to meet specific community needs. However, there are some more recent policy reforms – like the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 – that have empowered tribes to manage their own resources, negotiate directly with federal agencies, and assert greater control over decision-making processes.

Certainly, tribes face a balancing act of over-reliance on federal funding that can create vulnerabilities for tribes, subjecting them to fluctuations in federal budgets, shifting political priorities, and changes in administrative leadership. Uncertainties in funding levels or program continuity can disrupt long-term planning and stability within tribal governments, hindering efforts to build sustainable economic development and self-sufficiency. Further, there are ongoing challenges and critiques regarding the adequacy, effectiveness, and equity of federal aid to Native American tribes. Issues such as bureaucratic hurdles, inconsistent funding, and the need for greater tribal consultation and autonomy in the use of funds are frequently highlighted by tribal leaders and advocates. Ultimately, the tradeoff between accepting federal funding and preserving autonomy underscores the complexities of tribal governance and the ongoing quest for self-determination. While federal support remains vital for addressing immediate needs and promoting development, tribes continue to navigate a path towards greater sovereignty, seeking to reconcile external assistance with the imperative to shape their own futures within the framework of American governance.



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## Appendix

## Appendix A: Cherokee Budget Federal Funding by Department

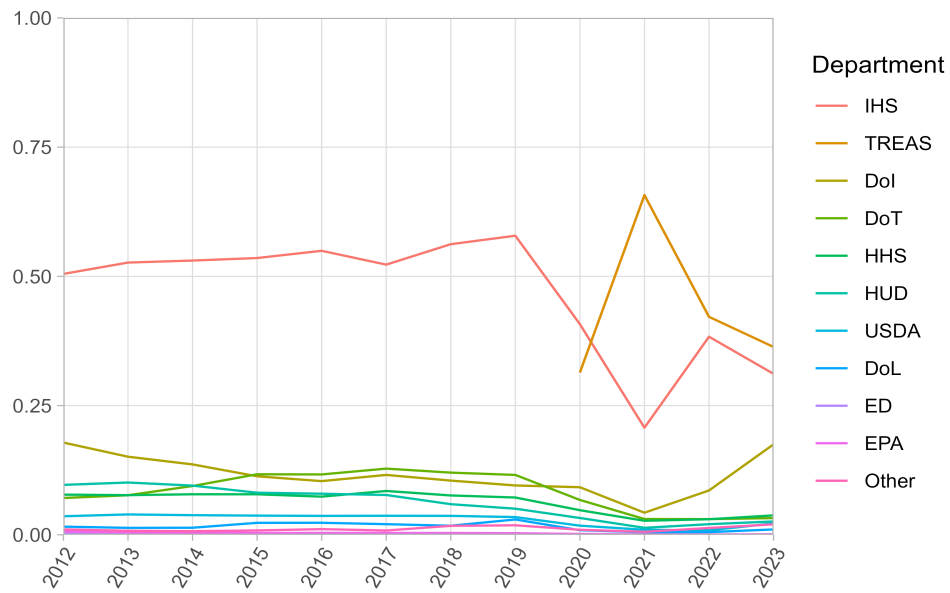


Figure A1: Breakdown of the federally-justified portion of the Cherokee Nation budget by department (includes both the operating and capital budgets).

## Appendix B: Interior Funding to Gaming Tribes as a Percentage of Gaming Revenue

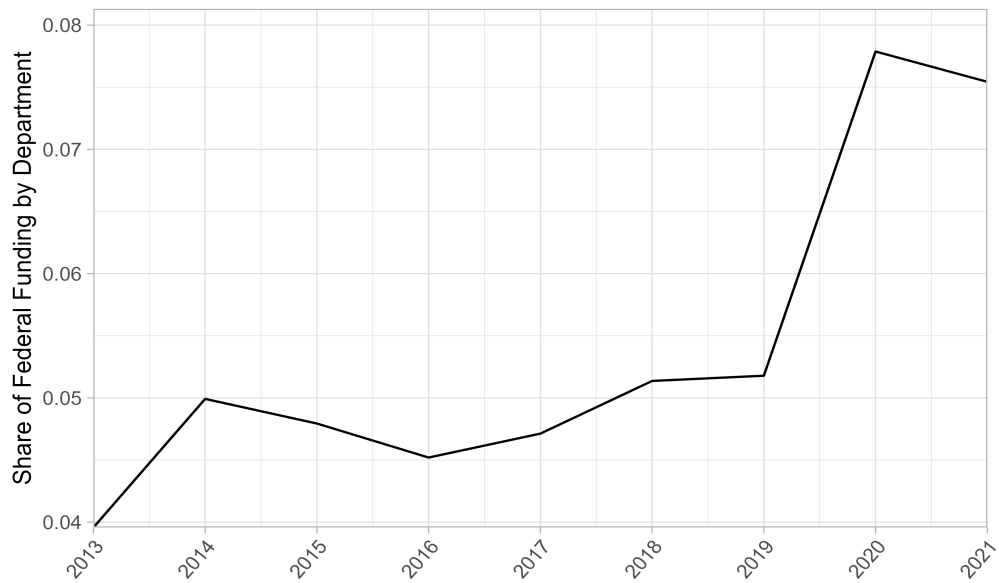


Figure A2: A comparison of Interior funding to all gaming tribes in a fiscal year to the total gaming revenue earned by gaming sites, as reported by the NIGC.