

Indigenous Nations Struggle Post-Civil War: Erosion of Culture, Language, and Historic Progress

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Abstract

This review paper addressed the impact of the U.S. government's territorial expansion ambition and the assimilation of Indigenous tribes from the end of the Civil War to the mid-20th century. The transformative effects of U.S. policies on Indigenous tribes are analyzed through the cultural, social, and political changes, including the significant loss of land, culture, and autonomy. Key legislations such as the Homestead Act, Pacific Railroad Act, Morrill Land-Grant Act, Indian Appropriations Act, Dawes Act (General Allotment Act), and Curtis Act, and key historical events such as The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo are discussed for changing the social fabric of Indigenous communities and pushing them into reservations at the expense of economic development and the formation of new southern and western states. The study delves into the long-term consequences of forced assimilation programs on the culture, age-old traditions and the extinction of Indigenous languages. The political reforms introduced during and after the depression era, including the Indian Citizenship Act (1924) and the Indian Reorganization Act (1934) and later the Voting Rights Act (1965), the Indian Education Act (1972), the Native American Program Act (1974) and Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act (2006), aimed to restore Indigenous rights, autonomy, culture and language preservation. Current preservation efforts ensure that Indigenous heritage, historical knowledge, and languages are protected, benefiting both Indigenous communities and wider society by safeguarding these vital traditions and cultures for future generations.

Keywords: Assimilation, Cultural erosion, Indigenous, Land appropriation, Treaties

1. Introduction

Prior to European arrival, Indigenous tribes are estimated to have occupied the expanse now known as the United States for at least 20,000 years (Rutherford, 2017). These tribes lived in harmony with the land, acting as its stewards by developing complex societies rooted in rich cultural traditions, conducting spiritual rituals to honor nature, and practicing sustainable methods in hunting, farming, and resource management. Furthermore, they thrived through a combination of agriculture, hunting, and gathering, establishing extensive trade networks and sophisticated governance systems. As described within 'Native American: Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History' at Library of Congress, the arrival of European settlers in the late 15th century marked the beginning of profound changes for these Indigenous tribes, including violent military conflicts, forced displacement, the disruption of traditional ways of life, and cultural erosion due to forced assimilation by the colonial government).

The new nation, founded on principles of liberty and freedom, failed to extend these ideals to Indigenous tribes. The Declaration of Independence in 1776, a document promoting freedom and equality, marked the beginning of a new chapter for European settlers.

The purpose of this research paper was to provide the insight that, after independence, these same ideals and American values were not extended to Indigenous tribes, whose sovereignty and circumstances only worsened

(Germain, 2024). According to an Indigenous author “The greatest object of their lives seems to be to acquire possessions - to be rich. They desire to possess the whole world. Finally we have been driven away from our beautiful country” (Eastman, 1902). Driven by a desire for territorial expansion and economic success, the newly established American government enacted a series of legislations including the Indian Removal Act in 1830 and the first Indian Appropriation Act of 1851 (which created reservation systems) that forced Indigenous tribes from their ancestral lands onto reservations (Burke, 2021). The laws and legislations passed by federal government, designed not only to displace these tribes but to erase their cultural identities and languages. This paper focused on how specific U.S. policies and historical event during and after American Civil war, such as the Homestead Act, Pacific Railroad Act, the Morrill Land-Grant Act, the Indian Appropriation Act, the Dawes Act, and Curtis Act, contributed to the loss of land, culture, and autonomy among Indigenous tribes. This paper provided the understanding of the long-term consequences of forced assimilation that affected every aspect of Indigenous communities. Further, this paper highlighted several restoration efforts to preserve Indigenous heritage, language, and cultures. Studying these historical injustices faced by Indigenous communities is crucial for promoting cultural preservation and ensuring that future generations can learn from and develop a deep respect for Indigenous heritage.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper used primary sources, including various government databases (such as the National Park Services, the National Archives, the Administration of Native American, the Library of Congress), historical sites (for example, the Oklahoma Historical Society) and secondary sources, including journals, research papers, articles and books. Based on all the collected information, timeline figure and data table are created to illustrate historical events, policies, and their impacts. This research was focused on two historical periods in the United States:

- 1862 to 1920, when various national policies, acts and historical events (including wars) had detrimental impact on indigenous tribes.
- 1920s to early 2000, when several laws which supported indigenous tribes' rights and preservation efforts.

3. Development of United States West with Homestead Act, Pacific Railroad Act and Morrill Land Grant Act

During Lincoln’s administration in 1862, three laws (Homestead Act, Morrill Land Act, and Pacific Railway Act) were passed, which eventually led to the development of the western part of the United States. The Homestead Act of 1862 gave away tremendous amounts of public land to American citizens. Per National Archives, as a result of this act about 270 million acres of land (approximately 10% of the United States territory) were bestowed upon private citizens.

The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 permitted the creation of public colleges funded by selling federal land grants. Approximately 10 million acres of Indigenous land were used for these grants and taken away from these tribes without their permission [details are provided in Morrill Act (1862) in National Archives]. Public colleges expanded access to education for individuals with limited prior learning, including farmers and workers, equipping them with valuable skills and providing them with more career opportunities.

In 1862, Congress passed the Pacific Railway Act, facilitating the construction of a transcontinental railroad connecting the east and west coasts of the United States. This act also supported the development of a telegraph line, a crucial form of communication in the late 19th century, stretching from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean. By establishing the Central Pacific Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad, the act spurred economic growth, granting these companies public land and government assistance to finance the railroad construction (as mentioned in the ‘Research Guides: Pacific Railway Act: Primary Documents in American History’ published at Library of Congress).

These acts resulted westward expansion, economic and infrastructural growth, education opportunity by redistributing Indigenous land and resources by undermining Indigenous people interest.

4. Resistance of Indigenous Nations Against Land Appropriation, Treaties, and Battles

Based on the National Archives, initially from 1774 to 1832 and later 1832 to 1871, treaties between individual sovereign Indigenous Nations and the United States were negotiated first to establish borders and then Indigenous autonomy on reservation lands. Numerous treaties were breached, and some were implemented without engaging Indigenous Nations, leading to subsequent conflicts and wars. Example, in the 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, between the United States and Mexico (established without consulting Indigenous nations), helped conclude the US-Mexico war. Mexico lost half of their land to the United States, and this territory was later developed into states such as California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, most of Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). After this treaty, the United States fought and relocate Indigenous tribe initially residing in Northern Mexico onto reservations. Further, after discovery of gold in California in 1849, white settlers moved into regions initially inhabited by the Chiricahua, Coyotero, and Apaches (Bowers, 2021). These led to series of conflicts known as Apache wars led by leaders including Cochise and later Geronimo. They continued to resist the United States and Mexico and resulting one of the longest US conflicts in history lasting from 1861-1886 (Shaw 2023). Geronimo and his followers escaped on numerous occasions and eventually were sent back to the reservation in Florida. The Apache grew weaker over time and finally surrendered, after resisting for more than 30 years until 1886. Geronimo was able to negotiate an agreement with the United States government and surrendered as Prisoners of War (POW) instead of being classified as criminals to prevent execution (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, p. 150).

Further, during 1866, the US Government discovered gold in Montana within Sioux territory. This intensified tensions, culminating in violent clashes such as the Fetterman Massacre. During this ambush, eighty troops under Captain William Fetterman's leadership were killed by Lakota warriors (Smith, 2014). In response to these conflicts, the US General William Tecumseh Sherman met with the Indigenous leaders to negotiate an agreement and sought peace. This led to the Sioux Treaty of 1868 (also known as the Treaty of Fort Laramie), which granted Sioux Indigenous tribes' ownership of the Black Hills—a deeply sacred area in the Dakota Territory. In 1873, General Custer crossed this prohibited Sioux territory as his troops attempted to search for gold which completely violated the treaty (National Archives, 2021). This led to major confrontations, notably 'The Battle of Rosebud' and 'The Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876'. Indigenous tribes responded with strong resistance to the American troop attacks. Their formidable resistance allowed them to successfully drive out American military and forced their retreat (as described in the article 'Native American score victory at the battle of the Rosebud' in History.com).

Despite these resistances by western tribes eventually the US government seized land from Indigenous tribes such as the Apache, Kiowa, Sioux, Comanche, and Cheyenne (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Period after civil-war till 1870 reflected complex United States and Indigenous relationships marked by broken promises and resulting conflicts.

5. Formation of Oklahoma State and Loss of Indian Nations Sovereignty

During 1870 to 1900, the Federal Indian policies focused specifically on breaking up reservations and tribal lands by granting land allotments to individual Indigenous people. The goal of such policies were to have the Indigenous people gradually move away from their tribal culture and integrate into the American culture by joining the American settlers (called the American "way of life") and own the American farms culture. In 1871, Congress passed the Indian Appropriation Act under President Ulysses S. Grant. The act declared that Indigenous people were not recognized as an equal nation and prohibited the U.S. government from negotiating treaties with Indigenous tribes (Helfrich et.al., 2021). As a result, the political autonomy of Indigenous tribes was diminished.

On February 8, 1887, Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts introduced the Dawes Act, which was popularly known as the General Allotment Act. The intent of this Act was to divide Indigenous tribe's reservation lands into small allotments for its individual owners (Bickers, 2022). As a result of the Dawes Act, Indigenous people lost millions of acres of land, as small allotments were not suitable for traditional farming or other agricultural purposes (Carlson, 1978). Indigenous nations wrote petition and letter to Federal government with no success. For example, Hopi Nation explained the matriarchal communal society in their petition.

To the Washington Chiefs- During the last two years strangers have looked over our land with spy-glasses and made marks upon it. We want to tell you something about this Hopi land. None of us were asked that it should be measured into separate lots and given to individuals for they would cause confusion. The family, the dwelling house and the field are inseparable, because the woman is the heart of these, and they rest with her. (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, p. 159).

In 1889, the Land Run opened up federal public lands in Oklahoma for settlement (Hayes, 2024). That year, Illinois Representative William Springer amended the Indian Appropriations Act, originally designed to relocate Indigenous peoples to reservations, allowing President Benjamin Harrison to offer two million acres of Indigenous land for American settlement. This led to the opening of more federally owned land to white settlers, with the first event being the Land Run of 1889. Later on, President Benjamin Harrison gave permission for white settlement in other parts of the unassigned lands of Indian territory. These lands were initially reserved for Indigenous people after negotiating and creating treaties with the US government. The Oklahoma Land Run of 1889 later resulted in the foundation of the modern state of Oklahoma through the Organic Act of 1892. This act led to the formation and admission of the 46th US state, Oklahoma, into the Union in 1907 (Hoig, n.d.). The Organic Act of 1892 created a separation between Oklahoma and Indian territories (Everett, n.d.).

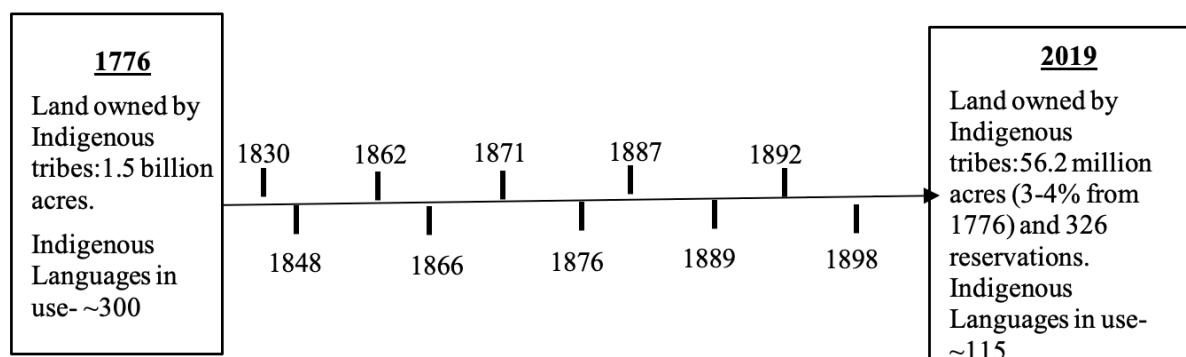
Before 1896, the five Indigenous tribes including Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole and Chickasaw were in charge of determining who was considered a member of the tribe. Kansas Senator Charles Curtis (he was of Indigenous American descent) supported another congressional law (called the Curtis Act, which was an amendment to the Dawes Act) that was passed by Congress on June 28, 1898. This Act gave Congress complete authority over decisions concerning the Indigenous tribe's territory and stripped power from the tribal governments and abolished tribal courts. This meant that tribal laws could no longer be enforced, and any tribal legislation issued after 1898 required the U.S. President's approval. The law transferred tribal authority to the federal government (Estes, 2013).

After the Curtis and the Dawes Acts, there were many occurrences where the Indigenous tribes tried to revolt integration with the European settlers. One of the occurrences when Indigenous tribes revolted against assimilation with white settlers was known as the Crazy Snake Movement. The Seminole's leader, Chitto Harjo with nickname Crazy Snake in the early 1900s led the movement with an attempt by the Indigenous tribes to prevent and resist integration of culture and religion with the US government (Munch, 2011). The Crazy Snake Movement was a series of invasions and attacks committed by the Indigenous people on white settlements, causing the U.S. government to respond. The Indigenous attacks were unsuccessful as some of their leaders, including Chitto Harjo, were imprisoned. The Crazy Snake resistance persisted to make an effort to bring back the tribal rights and continued fighting until 1926, and eventually, the Snake movement collapsed after 25 years of resistance (Jones, n.d.).

The unsuccessful resistance and petition efforts against Federal government legislation resulted loss of land, culture, and autonomy for Indigenous peoples, with enduring negative effects on their communities.

6. Impact of Land Appropriation

Indigenous peoples across the Americas had diverse cultures, social structures, and languages. Since the post-Civil War American society was driven by industrialization and westward expansion, these varied reactions and interactions set the stage for the establishment of policies and programs to marginalize the Indigenous ways of life.



	Year	Policies/Event	Impact
1	1830	The Indian Removal Act	Indigenous tribes forcibly removed from their homeland
2	1848	The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo	US- Mexico War concluded, Mexico lost half of their territory which became California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, most of Colorado
3	1862	The Homestead Act	Approx. 270 million acres of Indigenous land to private citizen
		Morrill Act	10 million Indigenous land for Public colleges expansion
		Pacific Railway Act	Infrastructural development including railroad on Indigenous land
4	1866	Westerward expansion	As a result of gold discovery in Montana within Sioux territory
5	1871	Indian Appropriation Act	The political autonomy of Indigenous tribes taken away
6	1876	The Battle of Little Bighorn	Indigenous tribes war against United States troops
		The Battle of Rosebud	
7	1887	The Dawes Act, also known as The General Allotment Act	Division of communal land holdings of tribes and allocate individual land ownership to Indigenous people. Tribes lost millions of acres of land, and converted to Christianity
8	1889	The Land Run	Two million acres of Indigenous land given to white American settlers
9	1892	The Organic Act	Separation between Oklahoma and Indian territories
10	1898	The Curtis Act	Abolition of tribal court, transferred tribal authority to the federal government

Figure1. Impact of Historical Event and United States policies on Indigenous tribes.

The Figure 1 highlighted the impact of several legislation and policies from 1860 to 1898 on Indigenous land (as now Indigenous communities mostly resides in reservations which is merely 3-4 % of the initial land owned by several Indigenous tribes at the time of US independence), autonomy and language (close to two-third of Indigenous languages are now extinct).

6.1 Shift in Culture, Religious Practices and Social Changes

The assimilation programs implemented by European colonizers and later by the United States government had profound impacts on Indigenous tribes in the Americas as it led to cultural erasure and a loss of indigenous languages. These programs were aimed at integrating and assimilating Indigenous peoples into mainstream Euro-American society, forcing them to alter their cultural identities and languages. These strategies included boarding schools that removed children from their communities, religious/missionary efforts that intended to replace Indigenous spiritual practices with Christianity, and land policies like the Dawes Act that disrupted communal land use.

One of the most significant assimilation strategies was the establishment of boarding schools for Indigenous children initiated under President Ulysses S. Grant in the 1870s. In the 1870s, Grant's administration endorsed policies promoting the assimilation of Indigenous peoples, which included the establishment of boarding schools. For example, in 1879, Captain Richard Henry Pratt established a boarding school for Indigenous children called the "Carlisle Indian Industrial School." This boarding school was established to integrate Indigenous children with the Americans (Kliewer et al., 2021). The Indigenous students learned extensively about farming, industrial labor, and many other subjects. In these boarding schools, the children were forcibly removed from their families and communities and had to immerse themselves in European-American culture. Furthermore, they were forbidden to speak their Indigenous languages.

Religious missionary efforts were another aspect of assimilation, where European colonizers attempted to convert Indigenous people to Christianity by banning traditional religious practices. This led to the further erosion of the cultural identity of Indigenous people (as published by the Pluralism project from Harvard University in 2020).

According to the article 'The Dawes Act' published by National Park Service, land policies per the Dawes Act intended to break up communal land holdings and allocate individual land ownership to Indigenous people. Indigenous communities were not accustomed to European standardized ranching and farming practices. Thus this policy resulted significant land loss for many tribes and disrupted traditional farming practices using communal land.

6.2 Extinction of Indigenous Languages

The policies and assimilation programs led to a detrimental impact to the cultures and Indigenous languages. The assimilation efforts prompted the loss of many Indigenous languages, as children were discouraged or punished for speaking their native tongues (Keating, 2020, p.7). This interrupted the transmission of languages across generations. Furthermore, it caused a decline in fluent speakers and, in many cases, the extinction of these languages. Cultural erosion occurred as European norms and values replaced Indigenous customs, rituals, and social structures. This decrease of Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and art led to a major loss of cultural heritage. Forced assimilation resulted in a loss of connection to their heritage and led to social and emotional difficulties. Displacement from their lands and changes to their social systems also resulted in economic and social problems for many Indigenous communities.

These impacts of assimilation programs have had long-lasting effects on Indigenous communities. Before colonization, approximately 300 Indigenous languages were spoken in United States (Andrews, 2020). In 1998, 175 Indigenous languages existed in the United States, which have been declining for decades. In 2019, there were 115 languages in use and only a few Indigenous language speakers (Martin, 2019).

6.3 Loss of Centuries Old Tradition and Technological Knowledge

The Indigenous tribes have a rich history marked by advanced practices and social structures. Over the centuries, these tribes gathered significant knowledge of their surroundings and habitat. They developed several dwelling techniques using natural resources adapting different climatic conditions. Their hunting and gathering techniques were highly efficient and sophisticated. They used traps and nets to catch animals, and fished in rivers and lakes. Their farming methods included rotating crops to maintain soil health, allowing them to grow essential food like corn, beans, and squash, often called the “Three Sisters.” Food prepared from these crops were highly nutritious and served as a balanced diet (Ngapo et al., 2021). These tribes also possessed advanced medical knowledge, using plants and herbs to treat various ailments. They utilized different plant parts—roots, branches, sap, leaves, and bark—to create infusions for treating a wide range of conditions (Moerman, 2009).

They invented tools and methods that worked in harmony with nature, ensuring they left minimal impact on their environment. This deep connection to the land allowed them to thrive sustainably for generations and maintain biodiversity for centuries (Akalibey et.al., 2024).

These tribes passed down knowledge of dwelling, hunting, fishing, food preservation, medicine, and other practices through generations using oral tradition. The extinction of Indigenous languages, traditions, and age-old cultural practices results in the loss of advanced knowledge, which could impact modern societies (Luu, 2019).

7. Improvement in Indigenous Tribe Autonomy, Self-governance, Voting Rights and Language Preservation

After the 1920s, multiple bills (such as the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934) were introduced. These acts resulted in greater equality for Indigenous tribes and reduced federal control. In 1924, Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 (also known as the Snyder Act). This act was introduced by the New York Representative Homer P. Snyder under the 30th US President, Calvin Coolidge. It authorized Indigenous tribes (born in the United States) to receive US citizenship (Redbird and Kiel, 2024). On the contrary, voting rights were still not given to Indigenous people after being US citizens.

The Great Depression of 1921 resulted in significant unemployment and economic hardship around the country. The 32nd US President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, introduced a government program known as the “New Deal” as a response to tackle the financial challenges of the Great Depression. This led to the passing of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934. The IRA had accomplished new changes in government and tribal land. This act was able to promote tribal self-government, prevent the erosion of tribal land by repealing the Dawes Act (General Allotment Act) of 1887, and stopped the allotment of tribal lands, gave the opportunity for Indigenous people to be hired for jobs through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and established a loan program for the Indigenous people (as per the article in Colorado Encyclopedia).

In 1948, the Arizona Supreme Court allowed Indigenous people to vote in government decisions, leading other states to do the same (Krol, 2022). Eventually, in 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed, guaranteeing all citizens, including Indigenous peoples, the right to vote. However, despite this legal protection, Indigenous communities continued to face significant challenges such as a lack of transportation to polling places, and language barriers (Ferguson-Bohnee, 2020).

The United States Congress passed the Indian Education Act of 1972, which empowered Indigenous tribes with the authority and control over their schools and allowed them to teach Indigenous languages. To preserve Indigenous languages and culture, in 1990, Congress passed the Native American Language Act (Andrews, 2020). Currently, there are ongoing efforts to protect the Indigenous groups' heritage, including their languages and cultures, through language revitalization programs, cultural education, and advocacy for land and freedom rights. Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006, which amended the Native American Programs Act of 1974. This act supported Indigenous communities to develop programs to revive Indigenous languages via grants (Administration for Native Americans. Acf.gov, n.d). Table 1 outlines various policies which were introduced since 1920s to improve and restore culture, age-old Indigenous traditions and languages.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, from the mid-19th to mid-20th century, a series of laws and policies significantly influenced the development of the western United States and impacted Indigenous peoples. Acts such as the Homestead Act, the Morrill Land-Grant Act, and the Pacific Railway Act increased economic growth and encouraged settlers to move west. This led to the construction of more crucial federal infrastructures.

However, Indigenous nations faced the consequences of this new expansion as they lost their lands, endured cultural suppression, and experienced displacement. These indigenous tribes resisted land appropriation and forced assimilation, which led to conflicts with the U.S. military (such as those with the Sioux and Apache nations). These battles often ended in losses for Indigenous peoples, with more restrictions on their freedom. Policies such as the Dawes Act and the Curtis Act attempted to integrate Indigenous tribes into American society, however, it resulted in losing more land, culture, and independence. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Indigenous rights continued to decline, especially with the establishment of Oklahoma as a state and the weakening of tribal government. However, the Indigenous people continued to resist, which eventually led to future reforms. Furthermore, acts such as the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, helped restore self-governance and economic stability to these Indigenous tribes. Despite these advances, Indigenous communities continue to face social, economic, and political challenges today, including barriers to voting and full participation in American society.

The struggle for Indigenous rights portrayed the tribes' resilience and determination to seek justice and equality. In the present time, the preservation of Indigenous languages remains a critical issue, as many of these languages are at risk of becoming extinct. Efforts such as the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006 were aimed to revive and restore Indigenous languages. However, the survival of these languages and cultural heritage depends largely on the initiatives of tribal nations themselves, with limited federal support (Martin, 2019). The

Table 1. Restoration Efforts and Legislation by United States Government.

Year	Legislation/ Event	Impact
1924	The Indian Citizenship Act (the Snyder Act)	Indigenous people born in the United States to grant US citizenship
1934	The Indian Reorganization Act	Repealed the Dawes Act (General Allotment Act) of 1887; promoted tribal governance autonomy, job and loan opportunities
1948	Arizona was the first state to allow Indigenous people to vote	Followed by other States
1965	The Voting Rights Act	Permitted and gave rights to Indigenous people across the country to vote
1972	The Indian Education Act	Provided authorities to Indigenous communities to manage their schools and teach Indigenous languages
1990	The Native American Language Act	Supported promoting Indigenous heritage, culture and language preservation efforts
2006	The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act	Supported Indigenous communities to develop programs for language revival through Federal Grants

preservation of thousands of years of Indigenous culture, communal practices, and languages is crucial for maintaining cultural diversity and ensuring that future generations can continue to learn from and honor this rich cultural heritage.

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