

Project Tiwahu: Redefining Tigua Citizenship

Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo

Establishing the criteria for citizenship is an inherent right of national governments around the world. This right determines who can be a citizen and how citizenship is transferred through generations. Yet for Indian nations, history complicates efforts to fully exercise sovereignty. Project Tiwahu –Redefining Tigua Citizenship was an Ysleta del Sur Pueblo wide – initiative to reform and self-determine enrollment as an exercise of tribal sovereignty. Reform efforts addressed the hard questions about belonging and built consensus around a new, more inclusive approach to tribal citizenship.

LOSS OF TRIBAL CITIZENSHIP

Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo, the southernmost Rio Grande pueblo, is a Tigua community with reservation lands located just north of the Mexican border between the cities of El Paso and Socorro, Texas. In the late 1960s, the US government transferred trusteeship of the Pueblo to the state of Texas. A 1987 act of Congress restored the federal trust relationship, but it also established conditions on tribal citizenship. The statute explicitly stated that only individuals listed on the Tribal Membership Roll of 1984 would be considered members and that only those descendants with at least one-eighth degree Ysleta Del Sur blood quantum would be eligible to enroll in the future.

These restrictive rules disenfranchised many descendants and created divisions between those with and without the specified blood quantum. Only enrolled members were eligible for federally funded programs and services, and in an increasing number of cases, some had access to benefits that close relatives did not. This exclusion made many unenrolled descendants feel alienated from the Pueblo and “not Indian enough.” Without citizenship, they drifted away from tribal activities and cultural events. Others remained deeply involved in preserving tribal traditions but were frustrated by their inability to participate formally in the nation’s governance. Most seriously, as fewer and fewer Tigua descendants met the blood quantum requirements, the Pueblo’s population was aging and shrinking. The fact that the Pueblo could not determine its own citizenship criteria threatened its cohesiveness, its Tigua identity, and even its existence.

Over a span of 25 years, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo leaders made several attempts to amend the federal restoration act and remove the restrictive citizenship wording. In 2012, it met with success: Congress passed legislation stating that the Pueblo’s membership consisted of “any person of Tigua Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Indian blood enrolled by the tribe.” The Pueblo’s next significant challenge was to decide what its own, self-determined citizenship rules should be. Some current citizens worried about decreases in benefits and the possibility that a large increase in enrollment could create a tribal budget crisis. Others feared that removing the blood quantum standard could make the Pueblo vulnerable to false claims about its status as an Indian tribe.

A COMMUNITY-WIDE REFORM

Recognizing the complexity and sensitivity of redefining citizenship, the Ysleta del Sur Tribal Council launched a comprehensive initiative called Project Tiwahu. Meaning “Tiwa Person,” the project aimed to conduct research, raise awareness, and engage the tribal community in planning for a new membership ordinance.

The case for reform began with careful groundwork. The Tribal Council appointed an advisory board, consisting of both enrolled members and non-enrolled descendants, to guide all Project Tiwahu activities. Invited outside experts facilitated executive education sessions, which provided tribal leaders with insights from the experiences of other Native nations and helped establish project objectives. The Council initiated a descendant census to better understand how the Pueblo’s population had evolved over time. Pueblo employees reviewed historical documents that dealt with the creation of the original membership roll and researched 1980s efforts to identify Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo members. Pueblo staff also studied the potential financial impacts of alternative citizenship rules. Project Tiwahu then summarized the findings from these projects in a public information guide with sections on Tigua history, the tribe’s population profile, and the possible fiscal impacts of proposed changes.

Over the next two years, the Tribal Council hosted four community meetings to inform members of the project’s progress, answer questions, and obtain comments. Project staff also facilitated four focus groups, each designed to elicit feedback from a specific subset of the population – descendants, elders, employees, and community members at-large. Following these community conversations, the project administered a community citizenship survey in December 2013. More than 70% of potential respondents provided feedback on questions concerning cultural identity, tribal services, tribal finances, and enrollment rules. Survey findings showed overwhelming support for removal of the blood quantum requirement and the enrollment of new members through family relationships. In sum, Project Tiwahu successfully developed consensus for tribal enrollment inclusive of descendants, who had been ineligible for citizenship under the previous federal law.

The Ysleta del Sur Tribal Council affirmed this consensus in new citizenship rules established by ordinance in November 2015, and as a result, the Pueblo’s enrolled membership doubled, growing from 1,718 to 3,462. Today, new citizens are returning to the community and cultural life is flourishing. Reflecting on these positive changes, one citizen stated, “We are going to keep growing. I feel it. I know we are. I am proud to be Tigua.”

TIGUA CITIZENSHIP REDEFINED

Restrictive blood quantum requirements had been in place at Ysleta del Sur Pueblo for almost 30 years. While there were reasons to change the rules, there was also concern in the community that new enrollment criteria could affect the rights and benefits enjoyed by tribal members. Through Project Tiwahu, the Tribal Council was able to frame the issue as a reclamation of sovereignty – and as a challenge to the colonial mindset, which equated the terms “member” and

“beneficiary” (of payments, programs, and services). Project Tiwahu emphasized that Tigua citizenship should define a distinct community whose members had responsibilities to each other. As a result, conversations about enrollment criteria centered on the ways that new citizenship rules could support the preservation of the Pueblo’s identity and could contribute to the economic and cultural growth of the tribal nation. Members discussed changes to benefits, but they did so within the broader context of the Pueblo’s political, economic, and cultural revival. In other words, Project Tiwahu is an instructive example of how to expand conversations about tribal citizenship to include both individual rights and community consequences.

Recognizing that fundamental institutional and policy change takes time, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo developed a systematic, multi-year process for replacing the federal government’s imposed enrollment rules. Project Tiwahu gave the Pueblo’s members and descendants the opportunity and time needed to educate themselves about citizenship options. Critically, the Pueblo’s leadership sought to develop robust data at all stages of the project and to fully advise the population about the implications of any changes. In fact, Project Tiwahu’s financial analysis found that increasing the population while maintaining the same levels of benefits and services would strain the tribal budget; projections showed that demand for healthcare, human services, and tribal distributions would increase by almost 40%. But, because the process was transparent, community members had confidence that they were well informed. In the end, they decided that the long-term advantages of the new rules outweighed their immediate fiscal drawbacks. Ysleta del Sur Pueblo’s methodical approach through Project Tiwahu is a model for any Native nation seeking to accomplish significant but potentially contentious institutional or policy reform. Each step served to build understanding and to generate the popular support necessary to implement change.

From the beginning, the Tribal Council was conscious that it could not make a decision about enrollment criteria without widespread public involvement. Project Tiwahu used a variety of methods to connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds and engage them in the process. It mobilized the Pueblo’s citizens to learn the history of tribal enrollment, consider the issues, and give individual input on proposed changes. At times, these open discussions caused friction within the community. Yet by addressing unpleasant facts, Project Tiwahu fostered a deeper understanding of the damage created by existing enrollment rules and by federal certification of blood quantum. Ultimately, the high level of community engagement allowed for smooth implementation of the Pueblo’s new citizenship ordinance, strengthened community members’ connections to the tribe, and encouraged more active citizen participation in all aspects of Pueblo life.

BRINGING THE LESSONS HOME

Tribal efforts to change enrollment criteria – tribal citizenship – are a hallmark of self-determination. But the process can raise sensitive questions: Who belongs? How might changes affect the distribution of benefits? What impact has federal Indian blood certification had? How do citizenship rules affect the community overall? Project Tiwahu steered the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo in addressing these issues and reclaiming its inherent right to self determine citizenship criteria

. The resulting and broadly supported reform helps sustain the Pueblo's identity, spirituality, and culture in perpetuity.

Lessons:

- 1) Defining the boundaries of citizenship is fundamental to tribal sovereignty.
- 2) Community engagement, data gathering, and planning are essential ingredients in building and sustaining a strong Native nation.
- 3) Transparent, inclusive, and clearly communicated community engagement processes help generate plans and decisions that a tribal community "owns."