Institutional Transition to Self-Governance: Linked Census Evidence from Native American Communities*

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Abstract

This paper examines the short-run economic impacts of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act (OIWA) of 1936, focusing on labor market participation and income among Native American communities. Using a novel linked dataset of 190,000 individuals from the 1930 and 1940 U.S. censuses, we analyze wage and salary income across IRA adopters, non-adopters, and OIWA communities. IRA adoption increased the likelihood of earning wage and salary income but was associated with lower wages compared to non-adopters. Access to the IRA's revolving credit fund proved critical: reservations with credit access experienced higher earnings, while those without access faced income gaps. These findings highlight the role of institutional reforms and economic resources in shaping early labor market outcomes.

KEYWORDS: SELF-GOVERNANCE, STRUCTURAL CHANGE, LINKED HISTORICAL DATA

JEL CLASSIFICATION: J15, N32, O43

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1 Introduction

Institutions play a fundamental role in shaping economic development, particularly for historically marginalized populations. The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 and its companion Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act (OIWA) represent landmark efforts by the U.S. government to restore tribal self-governance and provide targeted economic resources to Native American communities. Enacted during the Great Depression, these policies aimed to reverse decades of assimilationist federal policies and support tribal sovereignty while addressing the economic hardships faced by Native American populations. Despite their historical importance, the short-run economic impacts of these policies remain poorly understood.

This paper addresses this gap by constructing a novel linked dataset of Native Americans between the 1930 and 1940 U.S. censuses. Using probabilistic linking methods, we successfully match roughly 40% of individuals across these years, creating a large-scale longitudinal dataset for Native American populations during this critical period. This dataset overcomes key challenges common to studying small and underrepresented populations, including name anglicization, enumeration errors, and inconsistently recorded ages.

A key innovation of this study is the incorporation of geographic data to approximate each individual's reservation of residence in 1930. This geographic linkage enables three significant contributions. First, it enhances the probabilistic linking process by introducing spatial consistency as an additional criterion. Second, it allows us to assign policy exposure based on historical reservation-level implementation of the Indian Reorganization Act and related policies. Finally, the inclusion of reservation information refines reweighting techniques, improving the representativeness of population-level insights. Preliminary results demonstrate that these updated weights substantially alter interpretations of policy impacts, highlighting the methodological contribution of this approach.

Focusing on the immediate years following the IRA's adoption, this study examines

how self-governance and access to revolving credit markets reshaped individual economic trajectories. While prior research has explored long-run reservation-level differences in outcomes by IRA status, this paper shifts the focus to the short run, capturing the early economic adjustments triggered by these policies. Short-run effects are critical for understanding how institutional reforms initially influence economic behavior and establish the conditions for longer-term outcomes. By linking individuals across time, we observe labor force participation, sectoral shifts, and mobility patterns that are often obscured in aggregate studies.

Our findings highlight substantial changes in labor market dynamics during this period. Although wage and salary earnings show limited differences, we observe significant increases in individuals exiting the labor force and evidence of sectoral shifts away from agriculture. These results suggest that the IRA and OIWA may have initiated structural changes in local labor markets, reflecting the complex interplay of self-governance and economic resources.

By addressing the challenges of linking small and minority populations across historical data sources, this paper also contributes to the growing body of research on historical policies aimed at marginalized communities. Native Americans have historically faced underrepresentation in public records due to enumeration errors, name anglicization, and social and economic distress. Our probabilistic linking approach provides a roadmap for addressing these challenges, offering innovations that extend beyond this specific context. Moreover, our integration of individual-level data with policy exposure opens new possibilities for analyzing the immediate and intergenerational effects of historical policies.

This paper makes two key contributions. First, it introduces a methodological advance by constructing a linked individual-level dataset, improving reweighting methods, and enabling detailed analyses of short-run economic effects. Second, it provides new insights into the economic impacts of the IRA and OIWA, highlighting how self-governance and

access to credit shaped labor markets and economic behavior in Native American communities. Together, these contributions illuminate the early stages of institutional reform and their role in shaping economic development for historically marginalized populations.

2 Native Americans in the Historical Census

2.1 Assigning Reservations

The majority of federal Indian policy during the early 20th century was implemented at the reservation level. From land allotment programs to self-governance initiatives, these policies targeted communities defined by their geographic and institutional connection to reservations. As a result, understanding the impacts of these policies requires precise geographic information to determine which individuals lived on or near reservations and how their exposure to federal initiatives varied. This paper builds on recent advancements in linking geographic and census data to improve the assignment of reservation residence and proximity for Native Americans enumerated in historical U.S. censuses.

The methods employed in this paper extend the approach developed by Dippel and Frye (2022), who use enumeration district descriptions to assign individuals to reservations or adjacent areas. Rural enumeration districts were often large in western states, making it difficult to distinguish whether individuals were inside or outside of a reservation. To address this limitation, we add a complementary set of locations developed by Berkes et al. (2023), which include specific place identifiers for a large fraction of individuals. Despite the extensive geographic coverage, about 2% of cases lack precise location information due to small, difficult to identify geographies.

The initial dataset begins with the complete set of individuals who share a home with an enumerated Native American in the 1930 and 1940 censuses. The starting sample includes 416,000 individuals from the 1930 census, linked to the complete count 1940

census, which includes 392,000 people available for linking. Across both waves, nearly 80% of the sample were enumerated as Native American. The dataset spans a diverse set of over 350 reservation lands and tribal communities. Approximately 70% of individuals in 1930 are identified as living within reservation boundaries, while an additional 23% reside within 25 miles of a reservation. Among those classified as nearby, nearly 75% are located within 10 miles of a reservation boundary.

2.2 Linking

This paper develops a multi-stage probabilistic linking process to connect individuals between the 1930 and 1940 censuses. Linking historical census records for Native Americans poses unique challenges, and our approach builds on standard methods by integrating household structure, geographic proximity, relational consistency, and iterative score thresholds.

The first stage generates a broad set of potential matches. Following Abramitzky et al. (2019), we block on birthplace and sex to reduce the number of comparisons while maintaining flexibility. Within these blocks, we calculate overall similarity scores based on name similarity and birth year differences. To enhance this set, we incorporate high-confidence matches from Buckles et al. (2023) and manually verified links from Dippel and Frye (2021), assigning them high—but not definitive— overall similarity scores. These sources serve as critical anchors for the linking process.

To refine the initial set of potential matches, we incorporate adjustments based on relationship information and shared household members. We evaluate transitions in familial roles across census years and exclude matches that display implausible relationship changes, such as a sibling becoming a spouse. Additionally, we account for household overlap by identifying high-similarity matches common to the households of potential matches. Matches with greater household overlap receive upward adjustments to their overall similarity scores, reflecting the increased likelihood of being accurate links.

We apply a similar adjustment to similarity scores using geographic information. Matches receive upward adjustments if individuals are located within the same reservation or nearby across census years. These refinements leverage the geographic stability of Native American communities during this period, as most individuals lived on or near reservations. After calculating refined similarity scores, we apply a greedy algorithm to identify the best match for each individual, prioritizing those with the highest total scores. Following this, we establish multiple score cutoffs to define an initial set of first-round matches.

In the second stage of the linking process, we focus on individuals who remain unmatched after the first stage. Rather than generating new potential matches for the entire unmatched population, we narrow the search to within households that already feature high-quality matches from the first round. For each unmatched individual in the 1930 census, the algorithm identifies potential matches among unmatched individuals in the 1940 census who share a household with matched household members from the first round. This household-based approach not only preserves relational and structural consistency but also ensures that potential matches are evaluated within the context of established links.

The algorithm further adjusts thresholds for identifying good matches based on the quality of other matches within the household. Households with several members already matched in the first stage have lower name similarity requirements for additional matches, reflecting increased confidence in the relational context of these households. By contrast, households with fewer matched members from the first stage apply stricter thresholds to minimize false positives. Compared to the first stage, the second stage shifts emphasis from overall name similarity to first names, birth year, sex, and recorded household relationships. These refined criteria and household-specific thresholds improve the accuracy of matches while maintaining consistency across household structures.

Before discussing the results of our process it's important to note that our 1930 and 1940 samples include all individuals who shared a household with a Native American

in either census year. As noted earlier, nearly 80% of individuals in both decades are enumerated as Native American. One potential limitation of constructing our dataset in this manner is the risk of missing individuals whose race was enumerated differently in 1930 and 1940. While our process penalizes racial mismatches when calculating similarity scores, it does not preclude matches where race differs across waves. However, we acknowledge that this approach may fail to capture the full universe of potential matches when racial enumeration changes over time.

The Census Tree links provide a valuable tool for assessing the prevalence of this issue in our sample. These links allow for racial differences across census waves, offering a complementary perspective to our process. From our initial samples of 416,000 and 392,000 individuals in 1930 and 1940, respectively, the Census Tree includes 165,000 links that overlap with at least one of these datasets. Among these, 115,000 links are common to both samples, while 50,000 are unique to one sample due to differences in racial enumeration. Notably, most of these 50,000 individuals are from Oklahoma, highlighting the geographic concentration of this issue. Going forward, we are considering how to modify our approach to evaluate and incorporate enumeration differences across waves.

With that in mind, our linking process resulted in over 203,000 links between the 1930 and 1940 censuses, adding more than 38,000 links to the Census Tree dataset. A key strength of our approach lies in its ability to address challenges specific to underrepresented communities, particularly those that retain traditional phonetic names, such as those in the Southwest. Nearly 12,000 of our links are from Arizona and New Mexico, compared to just 17,000 links from these states in the Census Tree dataset. This demonstrates that our process significantly enhances representation in the communities where traditional naming conventions and enumeration challenges have historically limited linkage success.

Moving forward, we focus on 197,000 linked individuals with known locations, enabling us to determine whether they lived on or near a reservation. Among this group,

152,000 reside within 181 different reservations or tribal lands. Many of the tribes in Oklahoma are among the most highly represented, with the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Creek having the largest number of links. Our approach also includes non-federally recognized communities, such as the Lumbee of North Carolina, who rank fourth overall in the number of linked individuals living on tribal lands. Among federally recognized tribes, individuals living on Navajo Nation are the most represented in our links. Additionally, approximately 38,000 linked individuals live outside reservation boundaries but within 25 miles of a reservation or tribal lands, emphasizing the importance of near-reservation populations.

We further evaluate our match quality by examining approximate match rates by assigned reservation. These rates are constructed by calculating the fraction of individuals from 1930 who are linked within each reservation. Many of the larger reservations achieve match rates exceeding 50%, but approximately 15 larger communities (populations over 200) have match rates below 30%. The lowest match rate, 12%, is observed in the Campbell Ranch Community in California. A recurring theme among lower match rate communities is their status as Rancherias or smaller trust land communities, which may be more susceptible to the racial enumeration changes discussed earlier.

3 From Allotment to Self-Governance

The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 marked a transformative shift in U.S. federal policy toward Native American tribes. Aimed at reversing the assimilationist policies of the Dawes Act, the IRA sought to restore tribal self-governance, end the allotment of tribal lands, and support economic development. It established federally supported programs, such as a revolving credit fund for economic development and land reacquisition. However, IRA acceptance varied across tribes, leading to differences in governance and economic trajectories (Frye and Parker, 2021).

Tribes were given 18 months after the IRA's passage to decide whether to organize under its provisions. This decision was determined through referenda held on reservations. Tribal elections often took place under significant logistical challenges, including high levels of voter mobilization by federal officials. In some cases, tribal members had to overcome barriers such as dispersed communities, language differences, and uncertainty about what the IRA would accomplish. Federal officials worked to "get out the vote" by organizing meetings, translating materials into Native languages, and providing explanations of the act's provisions (LeGloahec, 2024). Despite these efforts, confusion about the act's implications—such as its relationship to land ownership and governance—persisted in many communities, contributing to varied outcomes.

Tribes that voted to organize under the IRA could formalize governance structures, often drafting constitutions with assistance from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). While drafting a constitution was optional, tribes that chose to do so received templates and guidance from the BIA, which often introduced governance models that did not always align with traditional tribal systems. Access to key benefits, such as the revolving credit fund, was contingent on IRA adoption, creating incentives for tribes to organize. Reservations that rejected the IRA retained their existing governance structures but were excluded from the associated funding opportunities.

The voting process for the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) was a critical mechanism through which tribes decided whether to organize under its provisions. The recorded vote counts directly determined IRA acceptance, but the outcomes did not always align with broader tribal preferences. In some communities, abstentions were culturally understood as votes against, yet federal tallies only accounted for affirmative and negative votes cast. Additionally, the use of individual ballots often diverged from traditional tribal decision-making practices, which in some cases emphasized consensus or clan-based governance. Despite these cultural variations, the vote tally served as the decisive and permanent mechanism for determining whether a tribe would organize under the

IRA.

Ultimately, 230 communities held IRA elections, with 157 (68%) of places organizing under the IRA by the vote margin. Another 18 communities were automatically enrolled under the IRA either because they did not hold an election or were established on trust land purchased under IRA provisions (Haas, 1947).

The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) encouraged tribes to formalize governance structures through constitutions and business charters. Both IRA and non-IRA adopters could draft constitutions and establish business charters, but only IRA adopters with business charters were eligible for the revolving credit fund. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) supported constitution drafting by providing standardized "boilerplate" templates, which emphasized centralized governance and corporate management. While these templates often conflicted with traditional practices like clan-based or decentralized decision-making, many tribes adopted them to access administrative support and legal benefits. Business charters enabled tribes to engage in economic activities as corporate entities, directly linking governance reforms to economic opportunities. Together, constitutions and business charters laid the groundwork for modern tribal governance while introducing federal oversight into tribal legal and economic structures.

In Oklahoma, the IRA's provisions were not directly applied due to the unique legal and historical context of its tribes. Instead, Congress passed the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act (OIWA) in 1936, which offered similar opportunities for tribal organization and governance. Like their IRA counterparts, OIWA adopters were also allowed to develop constitutions and business charters. Additionally, they were eligible for revolving credit funds, providing resources for land reacquisition, agricultural development, and business ventures. However, OIWA adoption did not involve voting referenda, further distinguishing the experiences of Oklahoma tribes from those elsewhere.

4 Comparing IRA, OIWA, and Non-IRA Communities

The empirical strategy leverages variation in IRA adoption and OIWA implementation to examine differences in economic outcomes across three groups: IRA adopters, non-adopters, and OIWA communities. By comparing individuals across these policy regimes, we aim to identify how the introduction of self-governance, revolving credit funds, and associated economic resources shaped early economic conditions. These comparisons rely on the linked dataset that connects individuals across the 1930 and 1940 censuses, enabling a detailed analysis of changes in individual labor market participation and occupational patterns as well as household composition and demographic characteristics.

The regression sample focuses on linked individuals living on or near reservations where IRA votes were held or where the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act (OIWA) was implemented. From the initial sample of approximately 190,000 linked individuals, we exclude 22,000 who fall outside these categories, including nearly half from the non-federally recognized Lumbee community. This results in a final sample of 168,000 individuals. Among these, 33,000 lived in communities that did not adopt the IRA, 69,000 were from IRA-adopting communities, and nearly 66,000 were from communities governed under the OIWA framework.

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of individual characteristics across IRA adopters, OIWA communities, and non-IRA adopters. Several patterns emerge. IRA adopters and non-IRA communities have nearly identical shares of Native American individuals, at 96%, while OIWA communities have a slightly lower proportion at 84%, reflecting the broader inclusion of non-Native individuals in Oklahoma tribal areas. OIWA individuals are slightly younger on average (20.5 years) compared to IRA adopters (22.7 years) and non-IRA communities (21.7 years). All three groups started with similar levels of labor force participation and grew at similar rates between 1930 and 1940. Literacy is notably higher in OIWA communities (62%) compared to IRA adopters (57%) and non-IRA communities (51%). Interestingly, OIWA communities report the highest average wage

and salary income in 1940 ($179.51), while IRA adopters and non-IRA individuals show comparable incomes at $167.37 and $164.59, respectively. Finally, OIWA communities show the highest proportion of individuals living on reservations (97%), while non-IRA adopters and IRA adopters report lower shares (69% and 73%, respectively). These dynamics will be important when considering comparisons between individuals that live on and near reservations.

The primary empirical strategy focuses on estimating the impact of IRA and OIWA adoption on wage and salary income, which is observed only in the 1940 census. As shown in the summary statistics, approximately one-third of the sample earned positive wage and salary income in 1940. The core specification examines relative differences in wage and salary income across the three policy groups—IRA adopters, non-adopters, and OIWA communities—while leveraging neighboring areas. Specifically, we estimate the following equation:

$$y_i r = \beta_1 OnRez_i + \beta_2 IRA_r + \beta_3 OIWA_r + \beta_4 (IRA_r \times OnRez_i) + \beta_5 (OIWA_r \times OnRez_i) + X_i' \delta + \epsilon_i r \tag{1}$$

where $y_i r$ is initially an indicator of whether the individual earned wage and salary income or the log of the wage and salary income. We can observe whether an individual lives within the reservation boundaries, $OnRez_i$. The policy variables, IRA_r and $OIWA_r$, are binary indicators for whether the reservation r is organized under each act. The coefficients of interest are β_4 and β_5, which are interpreted as the difference in the policy outcome. The regression includes fixed-effects in X_i for sex, age, race, literacy, and a broad geographic region, all in 1930. Standard errors are clustered by Reservation and Year.

Table 2 presents the results for two primary outcomes: the probability of earning wage and salary income and log wage and salary income. Columns (1) and (4) report

the baseline estimates from equation (1). Columns (2) and (5) introduce inverse probability weights (IPWs), following the approach of Bailey et al. (2020) but augmented with reservation information in the weighting model. These IPWs adjust for selection bias in outcomes like income and prove particularly important in this context. Columns (3) and (6) restrict the sample to narrowly contested IRA elections, employing optimal bandwidth selection as outlined in Calonico et al. (2014) and definitions from Frye and Parker (2021).

The results suggest that individuals on IRA reservations were slightly more likely to earn wage and salary income, as shown in Columns (1) through (3). However, conditional on earning income, IRA wage earners appear to have earned lower wages, consistent with findings by Frye and Parker (2019), who document reservation-level income differences between IRA and non-IRA adopters in 1945. This suggests that IRA adoption may have facilitated initial labor market participation but at lower wage levels.

Subsequent analysis highlights the critical role of credit in explaining these patterns. Reservations that accessed the revolving credit fund experienced higher average earnings, while those without access saw significantly lower earnings. This finding underscores the importance of economic resources alongside governance reforms in driving early economic outcomes under the IRA.

5 Figures

6 Tables

Table 1: Differences in Individual Characteristics by Policy Group

	(1) IRA	(2) OIWA	(3) Non-IRA
Age (1930)	22.67	20.48	21.66
	(18.12)	(16.16)	(17.76)
Native American	0.96	0.84	0.96
	(0.19)	(0.37)	(0.20)
Male	0.55	0.53	0.54
	(0.50)	(0.50)	(0.50)
Literate (1930)	0.57	0.62	0.51
	(0.50)	(0.49)	(0.50)
Lives On Reservation (1930)	0.73	0.97	0.69
	(0.44)	(0.16)	(0.46)
Earns Positive Wage and Salary Income	0.37	0.34	0.34
	(0.48)	(0.47)	(0.47)
Wage and Salary Income (1940)	167.37	179.51	164.59
	(352.43)	(431.80)	(382.20)
Change in Occupational Income Score	3.14	2.08	2.73
	(9.49)	(10.26)	(10.00)
In Labor Force (1930)	0.28	0.25	0.29
	(0.45)	(0.43)	(0.45)
In Labor Force (1940)	0.39	0.37	0.41
	(0.49)	(0.48)	(0.49)
Observations	69,320	65,804	33,003

Notes:

Table 2: Earning Wage and Salary Income by Policy Group

	Earns Wage and Salary Income			Ln(Income)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Lived on Res.	-0.080***	-0.096***	-0.099***	-0.067**	-0.028	0.057
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.030)	(0.033)	(0.043)
IRA	0.004	0.010	0.020*	0.043	0.062*	0.321***
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.012)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.044)
IRA × On Res.	0.034***	0.047***	0.041***	-0.005	-0.080**	-0.107**
	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.035)	(0.038)	(0.053)
OIWA	0.011	0.009		0.322***	0.306***	
	(0.014)	(0.016)		(0.056)	(0.055)	
OIWA × On Res.	-0.030**	-0.005		-0.212***	-0.232***	
	(0.014)	(0.016)		(0.053)	(0.054)	
Observations	121,693	121,693	33,277	43,015	43,015	11,038
Population Weights	Unweight	IPW	IPW	Unweight	IPW	IPW
Sample	Full	Full	Vote RD	Full	Full	Vote RD

Notes:

Table 3: Within Person Labor and Occupation Changes by Policy Group

	Enters Labor Force			Finds Work		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
IRA	0.022***	-0.024***	-0.035***	0.016***	-0.022***	-0.038***
	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)
OIWA	0.007	-0.020***		0.008	-0.015***	
	(0.006)	(0.005)		(0.005)	(0.005)	
Observations	184,112	183,978	50,769	186,117	185,984	49,215
Population Weights	Unweight	IPW	IPW	Unweight	IPW	IPW
Sample	Full	Full	Vote RD	Full	Full	Vote RD

Notes:

Table 4: Within Person Labor and Occupation Changes by Policy Group

	(1)	(2)	(3)
IRA	-0.107***	-0.080***	-0.080***
	(0.029)	(0.028)	(0.028)
OIWA	0.109	0.055	0.119***
	(0.122)	(0.034)	(0.036)
IRA × Issued Credit (0/1)	0.112***		
	(0.022)		
OIWA × Issued Credit (0/1)	-0.085		
	(0.119)		
IRA × Total Credit Issued p.c.		0.002***	0.002***
		(0.000)	(0.000)
OIWA × Total Credit Issued p.c.		-0.010***	
		(0.002)	
OIWA × Corp. p.c.			0.000
			(0.002)
OIWA × Credit Unions p.c.			-0.038***
			(0.006)
OIWA × Direct p.c.			-0.012***
			(0.003)
Observations	35,898	35,898	35,898

Notes:

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