

# IN AMERICA

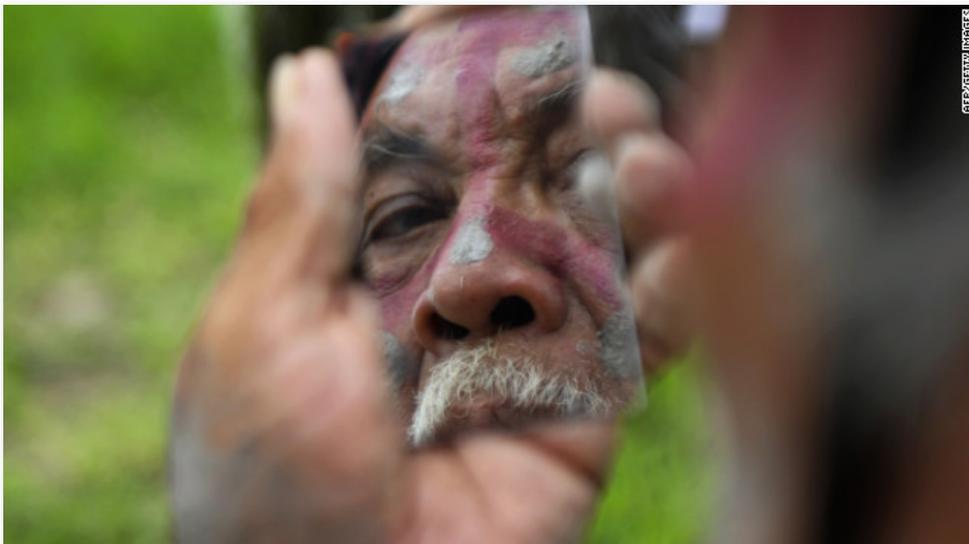
You define America. What defines you?

### Coming up on CNN

Democrats and Republicans battle over tough, new election laws in Florida, and the outcome of the 2012 presidential election may hang in the balance. "Voters in America: Who Counts," 7/15



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ANTHONY IMAGES

Claiming Native American ancestry is one thing, but claiming tribal citizenship is another.

May 14th, 2012

02:07 PM ET

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## Who's a Native American? It's complicated

By **Stephanie Siek**, CNN

(CNN) – The recent **controversy** over Massachusetts congressional candidate Elizabeth Warren's Native American **ancestry**, where the campaign of her opponent for a senate seat **called for her** to release documents claiming her Cherokee ancestry, has caused some to ask: What makes someone "legitimately" Native American? And who gets to make that determination?

"Fundamentally, it's the tribe's right to determine who its citizens are and are not. If we don't know (whether someone is American Indian), we can ask the tribe," said **Julia Good Fox**, professor of American Indian Studies at **Haskell Indian Nations University**.

Good Fox furthermore points out that citizenship is distinct from ancestry. Tribes have the sovereign right to determine who is and isn't a citizen, just as France and the United States have their own rules about citizenship. Anyone can claim ancestry, but those who do so can't always claim citizenship, Good Fox said.

Determining who is and isn't a member of a tribe can be complicated, and the answers don't always come in a binary form of "yes" or "no." Part of the reason such determinations can be controversial is because tribes' own rules for

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establishing membership can vary widely.

Many tribes use parentage as a means of defining membership. Known as **"blood quantum,"** the practice defines tribal membership according to the degree of "pure blood" belonging to that tribe. For example, a person with one grandparent belonging to one tribe and three grandparents not belonging to that tribe would be considered to have a "blood quantum" of one-quarter. The minimum amount of blood quantum required can be as little as **one-thirty-second** (equivalent to one great-great-great-grandparent) or as high as **one-half** (equivalent to one full-blooded tribal parent).

But it hasn't always been that way, says **Renee Holt**, a doctoral student at **Washington State University** who studies cultural studies and social thought in education. Her research of different traditional indigenous tribal practices indicates that most tribes did not use blood quantum as the primary determinant of who was a member and who was not. In the case of the Nez Perce tribe, of which Holt is a member, belonging to the tribe meant you spoke the language and followed cultural practices. One did not necessarily have to be of 100% Nez Perce blood to be part of the tribe – cultural affinity was considered more important.

As an example, Holt mentions her uncle, who was adopted as a boy by her great-grandmother and raised alongside her aunt. The uncle lived among the tribe throughout his life, spoke Nez Perce fluently, had a traditional tribal name, and participated in ceremonies and rituals. He was white – but his skin color didn't prevent him from being considered a member of the tribe. Upon his death, he was given a traditional funeral.

"I just thought that was amazing. How do you tell somebody like that that they're not Nez Perce?" asked Holt.

Good Fox said that using blood quantum as a criterion for tribal membership is a fairly recent concept.

"Blood quantum was imposed upon the tribes by the United States. We never had blood quantum a thousand years ago," said Good Fox, who is herself a member of the Pawnee tribe.

Some historians believe this was a way of diminishing the number of "actual" Native Americans that the government would then be obligated to count when calculating federal money and land disbursed to the tribes. Among some 19th and early 20th century politicians, there was also the hope that eventually, Native Americans would intermarry and assimilate with whites to the point that they would no longer have the power of a cohesive group – and would no longer have a right to land and monetary payments from the government.

"It seems to me one of the ways of getting rid of the Indian question is just this of intermarriage, and the gradual fading out of the Indian blood; the whole quality and character of the aborigine disappears, they lose all of the traditions of the race; there is no longer any occasion to maintain the tribal relations, and there is then every reason why they shall go and take their place as white people do everywhere," said Anthony Higgins, a U.S. Senator from Delaware, in 1895 congressional testimony.

Many tribes began using blood quantum after the passage of the **1934 Indian Reorganization Act**, which allowed tribes to establish their own governments. But others continued to define membership in other ways- including by lineal descent (being able to prove that you had an ancestor listed as a member of that tribe, regardless of your actual percentage of tribal blood), residence on tribal lands, knowledge of tribal language and culture, or membership in a recognized clan.

It's an issue that Holt is personally invested in – being one-quarter Nez Perce, she's at the **minimum threshold for membership in the Nez Perce tribe** with which she is enrolled, according to current rules. Her children are also one-quarter Nez Perce, and if they marry someone outside the tribe, their children – Holt's grandchildren – would be unable to claim membership despite their connection to Nez Perce culture.

"If my children do not have family with a Nez Perce. I won't have any Nez Perce

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## iReport

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE—BUREAU OF THE CENSUS  
SIXTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1940  
POPULATION SCHEDULE

1, 1945

PERSONS 14 YEARS OR OVER

1. SEX AND AGE: 1. Males  
2. Females

2. RACE: 1. White  
2. Black or Negro  
3. American Indian or Alaska Native  
4. Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

3. HIGHEST GRADE OF SCHOOL ATTENDED: 1. None  
2. Less than high school  
3. High school  
4. College or higher

4. MARITAL STATUS: 1. Never married  
2. Married (including remarried)  
3. Widowed  
4. Divorced

5. OCCUPATION: 1. Unemployed  
2. In the armed forces  
3. In the merchant marine  
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1940s census data is now available online. What can you find out about your family or home?

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Joy, skepticism at immigration policy move

grandchildren," Holt said. "And there's a sadness there, there's a hopeless feeling that it's ending with me; it's going to end with them. I tell my children, 'You must be with a Nez Perce'...When you start thinking like that, you're going crazy."

Good Fox said the popular perception of Native Americans is rooted in stereotypes – the idea that a "real Indian" looks and acts a certain way, and that anyone who doesn't conform to that image is somehow "less Indian." But the truth is more diverse – different tribes can have different physical characteristics, and intermarriage among other ethnic groups mean that Native Americans often have a multiracial background.

"I think people still have this perception that all American Indians look like this image of Plains Indians from the 1800s," said Good Fox. "We don't look like how we would have 200 years ago either, so to expect Indians to look the same (as they did then) makes no sense.

"There's this ignorance about Native American citizenship," said Good Fox. "And what are we learning about American Indians grades K-12? It's all in past-tense, and we don't get a sense of what an Indian today looks like. That can really be confusing to people."

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MAY 2012



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soundoff (373 Responses)

### Mows

I know who isn't native American.. Elizabeth Warren.

June 13, 2012 at 9:10 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

### WB651

Answer is simple.... 1/8 if you want any casino money.  
End of debate.

June 13, 2012 at 12:58 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

### Guest

Ima native american  
Been here my whole life

June 13, 2012 at 10:34 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

### David DeForge

My grandfather was a Scotsman, can I claim the family castle?

June 13, 2012 at 9:34 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

### **TWolf in Ohio**

When does an Indian become an Indian....and when does this Indian stop being one?

Questions...debates...arguments. It will never end. My grandfather, till his dying day, denied his Indian blood. The prejudice in his day (and around him) shamed him into hiding, then denying this part of himself. My grandmother used to take my mother into the woods as a child "to gather medicines." Whenever the Indian way of life reared itself, my grandfather squashed it down...and drank it away as a young man to help distance himself further from it. My uncle was much like my grandfather...a mean man when drink in him and staunch anti-Indian. It was the bravery of my mother later in her life to step forward without fear, without shame, to claim out loud and outwardly what the family had denied itself for so long...so terribly long. And because of my uncle's great love and respect and love for my mother, he was able (for the first time in his life) to claim own, and embrace his once denied heritage. He was Indian....and my mother was proud for him. He soon became proud of this fact. Beforehand, calling my uncle "Indian" was a fighting word...an invite to his fist. Now, it became an embrace in one's arms. My mother also helped me reclaim this also for myself. I am proud to call myself Indian. I have lost a great part of my culture due to the denial of my grandfather. I do understand that he was the product of his time...that being called an Indian was worse than being called the "N" word in his day. Indians weren't even considered human. For many, they were even considered less than animals. So, I don't necessarily blame him. But, as his grandson, I will always (for the rest of my life) be at a loss...the culture of my ancestors greatly lost to me. In this, I only have and feel sadness. So, when I think of my grandfather, I think of this sadness...and embrace it. When I think of my mother and her brother, I come to appreciate the gift of hope they made possible. I embrace that also.

June 13, 2012 at 6:58 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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### **NDNntheCupboard**

Wow. This is...wow. Indians hating Indians, whites hating Indians, blacks hating whites, whites hating Asians, liberals hating Democrats...go spend a week on an Arizona Reservation. Take your pick...they're all equally crappy. Forgo the tourist destinations, forgo the rentals, forgo the hotels and motels, and by all means avoid the casinos!!! Visit the hospitals, visit the curios on the side of the roads, visit the Mogollon rim looking out toward San Francisco Peaks by Flagstaff, visit with a family of "Indians". You'll leave with a new respect for us and I'm almost certain be sure that Indians have no buffalo, most hate bead work, most hate silver smithing, we all don't have long hair...and yes we speak English and American history is the same all over.

June 8, 2012 at 1:00 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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### **NDNntheCupboard**

None of you, I take it, have never had the supreme luxury of living on an actual reservation on the ass end of gods now here. Reservations adjacent to cities and metro areas do not apply. None who sit in their air conditioned, post modern office have an inkling of what it takes to be a "First Nations" person living in this ass backward, consumer driven society we call this melting pot. I am personally insulted by all who would call us beggars, handout takers, drunks, and sub human...I can teach you a life's worth of knowledge if you only took the time to listen.

Again, if you sincerely want to appreciate this "life" and learn something worth learning outside of Beiber fever or flesh eating bath salt addicts, I (only after careful review of your sanity and conversing a bit) implore you to contact me directly (@absilom\_az) and I can arrange for you to spend a couple days observing some real indigenous peoples...you'll see our small societies reflects the bigger; showing there are no real differences, other than infrastructure.

June 7, 2012 at 3:41 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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### **dakota2000**

cool. I may take you up on it one day. My sister lived on a reservation for a while in Montana as a volunteer... but never talked about it...

June 8, 2012 at 2:15 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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### **Viviane**

beautiful. I work in a reserve and I never learned so much. Not only about myself but society. Non-Aboriginals should learn more about native customs and traditions. Whites might even be able to save themselves

June 13, 2012 at 12:06 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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### **KG**

All you descendants of claims jumpers, do you have a legitimate right to claim tribal ancestry??? NO! That's the problem with categorizing someone according to 'race'; it says nothing of cultural affinity, which is the definition of being Native American. No white person would have dared affiliated himself with an 'Injun', so let's not get pedantic today. I think any American who says they are Native American without any tribal affiliation only insults these people even more than calling a football team 'Washington Redskins'.

June 5, 2012 at 2:04 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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### **Tim**

Who cares if they are descended from the hunting gathering tribes that Europeans found here hundreds of years ago. Native Americans seem to think that they are the only people in human history who were conquered and had their land taken. Try living in the present with yourself instead of living in the past and thinking about how great it was with your distant relations. This country is a society full of whining "victims"

**Next part.**

So when the door is opened and you lose you know that you ate your own words. I am with you because I have no whinning in me. Good Luck with your DEFENSES.

June 13, 2012 at 1:35 am | [Report abuse](#) |

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**Anisah**

I am sick of people demanding "tribal" affiliation based on a govt imposed ideology of ethnic cleansing! What's worse is that its often Native Americans doing it in an effort to deny the descendants (like myself) of our lineage, just cause they want to see themselves as "exclusively" having rights. A friend of mine is a FEDERTH denied by bigots in her family's tribe to be a tribal member. Yet she watches as non-lineal adopted kids of NO blood get "tribal membership" because their adopted parents are "real" tribal members. Her father died (a tribal member) now two WHITES live in his tribal house and enjoy his life's work. His sole descendant and her children get nothing because they aren't "Tribal"!

WAKE UP!! This "tribal membership" legal wrangling is wiping out the Native peoples just as much as intermarriages with non-Indians and the alcohol and suicide and ethnic cleansing that has gone on historically! Now Indians are doing it to Indians.

Not counting what happens on rezs between clans and families to deny fellow Tribal members when one group has tribal govt power!

Its a slippery slope designed by a long dead racist government and promoted and cultivated by the people of today! I thank God my great-great-grandmother (a victim of boarding schools) does see the results of her victimization and that of thousands of other kids... as their own people deny and victimize the descendants of the Boarding school abductions.

June 13, 2012 at 9:30 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**scarf**

Native American culture ceased to exist when Congress created a profit motive to being "Native American." As a result, one's heritage is no longer what counts when it comes to being a "citizen" of a tribe. What is important is one's political connections. Where I live, the local tribe has dis-enrolled hundreds of previous members, including tribal chairman, because some members wanted a bigger slice of the profits from the tribe's casino. Today, Native American tribes act less like sovereign nations and more like Mafia families.

June 14, 2012 at 3:34 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**F. Daniel Gray**

A lively and courteous discussion? Gee, was it something I said/wrote? Well, I know I don't have to go to the DFRK or Havana to be censored. Hmnnnnnnnnnn

June 3, 2012 at 2:02 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**NDNintheCupboard**

Now, you get a taste of my ironic life. Being a 21st century "Indian" is not so fun.

June 7, 2012 at 3:45 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**Chad**

I am Native American, simply because I and my parents before me were born on this land. I don't care how much Indian blood is possibly in my system I am native to this land and so are my children.

June 3, 2012 at 8:21 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**PAEMT**

Chad,

You took the words right of my mouth. I was born on the same soil as Native American Indians. I am a native American, and proud to point it out.

June 11, 2012 at 12:42 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**Next part.**

You better bark that when the drug war reaches your city. Drug lords so some call them Capitalize just like walmart. Anyone born in America GBA! Is now on your mind of thinking regardless of what you think the line is in the END. -Read more BOOKS! now just be yourself bc if that don't wake you up nothing will.

June 13, 2012 at 1:40 am | [Report abuse](#) |

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**Tahirih**

Nope sorry that does not make you Native American. Being born in America has nothing to do with being Native American. Being Native American is so much more so sad you dont get it

June 16, 2012 at 2:38 am | [Report abuse](#) |

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**ytuque**

It's a tribe's right to determine who its members are, but does that mean the rest of us have to pay for it? Who's for paying higher taxes to support blonde Indians going to university and receiving other benefits?

June 2, 2012 at 10:50 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**Lost**

We are hungry and greatly in need of knowledge about indigenous nations (worldwide). In ancient times, people had invented sustainable ways of existing without polluting the earth. Despite what eurocentric cultures have taught us to believe, woman were a priority, and an important contributing factor to the governing aspect of indigenous nations. Children were revered as vessels of life instead of burdens. What was used up in the environment, was then replaced and replenished.

Today, we need more information about our human past and how our ancestors were able to thrive. History books only serve to teach us of the conquest of humanity.

June 2, 2012 at 10:40 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**Madeline Corey-Thomas**

This issue has plagued me for years. My grandmother is listed on the 1910 Census as Indian along with her brothers and sisters and mother. I am an artist and most of my work is Native American inspired. I am not allowed by law to call my work Native American made because I have been unable to locate her tribal enrollment. However, if a white woman marries an enrolled Native American she becomes enrolled and calls herself Indian. At one time the Smithsonian was interested in my work. However, since I could not provide an enrollment number they would not pursue my work any further even though I could prove my Indian ancestry via the federal Census.

May 31, 2012 at 5:34 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**Next part.**

Ha... Some day I will but only because you let me take over your thoughts. I CANT WAIT :p

June 13, 2012 at 1:50 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**Lou**

I have equal parts Comanche and Tarahumara ancestry. I have indigenous blood, not Native American as defined by any government. I will put my DNA up to anyone's.

May 30, 2012 at 10:25 am | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**taxedmore**

I am offended by all the "Native American" talk. Their ancestors came from Siberia. Mine came from Europe. They are no more "native" than I am

May 27, 2012 at 3:35 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**Keith**

My family have been here over 650 years, I am more American than you are. I am only saying that to make a point. Every family has a story, that story is all we are. When you discount others stories you are saying they are not as valuable as you are.

May 27, 2012 at 4:05 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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**Allen Bair**

That would have put your ancestors' arrival at 1360 or thereabouts. The first Europeans landed in 1492, and then only in the Caribbean. The Native American migrations occurred thousands of years prior. To what migration are you referring?

May 27, 2012 at 4:37 pm | [Report abuse](#) |

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**Keith**

Oh, sorry bad math, I have Cree, Micmac, and Delaware Ancestors pre colonist America, my first European ancestors were Conquistadors, My first Northern European ancestors came to Jamestown and then returned with the Mayflower. I have had Ancestors on both sides of every major battle ever fought in America. I don't put any more value on one over the other, they are all a part of my story. Immigrants are the story of America and I feel fortunate that my family have found husbands and wives with almost every wave of immigration except the Asian ones. Perhaps my children will add them to our story.

May 27, 2012 at 4:49 pm | [Report abuse](#) |

**Allen Bair**

By that logic, no human being is a native of anywhere other than Africa as we are all migrants out of that continent by ancestry tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of years ago. Using the logic that no one is native to the Americas in order to justify discrimination and ethnic cleansing (which, let's face it, is what the 1800s treatment of Native Americans was) is abhorrent.

May 27, 2012 at 4:42 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

**Next part.**

I love people who tell me I could lie and make you brag like you are educated about whatever I say. Enough said kids enjoy what I say is hot.

June 13, 2012 at 1:52 am | [Report abuse](#) |

**Dave**

Do you make the same complaint about history books saying that Columbus discovered America? Why do we even celebrate Columbus Day? It's really insignificant.

May 29, 2012 at 12:33 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

**Buodedd**

Ovis Points are European in origin, which means Europeans came here about the same time as Siberians. The ice shelf was further south in the Atlantic, just as in the Pacific. Mohawks and Cherokee are much more European than Asian.

May 29, 2012 at 1:27 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

**Native Pride**

I am willing to bet the difference is that when your people came over fellow settlers and the government didn't commit genocide on men, women and children or breed/rape the native out your people, until my people who were already living here.

May 31, 2012 at 4:37 pm | [Report abuse](#) | [Reply](#)

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