



# Power from Powerlessness: Tribal Governments, Institutional Niches, and American Federalism

*Laura E. Evans*

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As American Indian tribes seek to overcome centuries of political and social marginalization, they face daunting obstacles. The successes of some tribal casinos have lured many outside observers into thinking that gambling revenue alone can somehow mend the devastation of culture, community, natural resources, and sacred spaces. The reality is quite different. Most tribal officials operate with meager resources and serve impoverished communities with stark political disadvantages. Yet we find examples of Indian tribes persuading states, localities, and the federal government to pursue policy change that addresses important tribal concerns. How is it that Indian tribes sometimes succeed against very dim prospects?

In *Power from Powerlessness*, Laura Evans looks at the successful policy interventions by a range of American Indian tribal governments and explains how disadvantaged groups can exploit niches in the institutional framework of American federalism to obtain unlikely victories. Tribes have also been adept at building productive relationships with governmental authorities at all levels. Admittedly, many of the tribes' victories are small when viewed on their own: reaching cooperative agreements on trash collection with municipalities and successfully challenging other localities for more control over fisheries and waterway management. However, Evans shows that in combination, their victories are impressive-particularly when considering that the poverty rate among American Indians on reservations is 39 percent. Not simply a book about American Indian politics, *Power from Powerlessness* forces scholars of institutions and inequality to reconsider the commonly held view that the less powerful are in fact powerless.

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