

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Chippewa Tribe awaits results of blood quantum referendum vote**  
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KATHY: Today, Minnesota Chippewa tribal officials are counting the votes in a referendum that could dramatically change who can be an enrolled member of the tribe. The tribe includes six native bands, Mille Lacs, Leech Lake, White Earth, Boise Forte, Grand Portage, and Fond du Lac. MPR reporter, Dan Kraker has been following the story. He's here to give us some details. Hey, Dan.

**DAN KRAKER:** Hey, Kathy, good to be here.

**KATHY:** Likewise, I'm glad you're here. This is a fascinating story, but a little esoteric to many people. What drew you to this story?

**DAN KRAKER:** Well, I've covered Native American issues up here for several years now. And it's always struck me, when I've interviewed people for stories. And I ask them what band they're a member of. And so often, people have answered, well, I'm a descendant of such and such a Band. And it's always struck me as this kind of artificial distinction, when these people are often so deeply connected to the tribal communities that I'm reporting on. So I've always been interested in exploring that. And then, with this vote occurring now within the tribe, it just seemed like the perfect opportunity.

**KATHY:** Now, you had a report that aired this morning on Morning Edition. I want folks to take a listen to that. And then, it kind of sets it up for us. Let's listen.

**DAN KRAKER:** Like a lot of Americans, Sara Egerton House's family is, as she puts it, mixed from all over the place. Her mom's family is from Norway. Her dad is a member of the Fond du Lac band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and so is she. But she also has relatives from the Red Cliff and Bad River Ojibwe bands in Wisconsin and the Muscogee Nation in Oklahoma. And her husband is Filipino.

**SARAH HOWES:** And so, my kids can't be enrolled here. And so what that means for them is that even though they're raised here, they grew up in our culture, that they aren't going to be able to vote or feel a part of our community in the same way.

**DAN KRAKER:** Tribal members have cards that show their certified degree of Indian blood. House's is 25%. But because her kids' dad is non-native, they have only 1/8 Minnesota Chippewa tribe blood. So they can't be enrolled tribal members.

**SARAH HOWES:** Our family, our kids have clans, they have names. And so, I know who they are, and they know who they are. And the only one that doesn't know who they are is the enrollment office.

**DAN KRAKER:** Blood quantum is a relatively new idea, a race-based policy imposed by the federal government. Beginning in the 1930s, the government pressured many tribes into adopting tribal constitutions, including blood quantum, to decide membership. In Minnesota, it was used by white settlers to acquire tribal land. Federal law only allowed Native people who had, quote unquote, mixed blood, to sell their land. Jill Doerfler, chair of the American Indian Studies department at the University of Minnesota Duluth, wrote a book on blood quantum. She says it's a made up construct. There was no way for federal officials to accurately determine what percentage of Native blood someone had.

**JILL DOERFLER:** So they did some scratch tests on people's chests.

**DAN KRAKER:** In which they would look at the color of someone's skin after they scratched it.

**JILL DOERFLER:** They took some hair samples. They did some head measurements. That was the basis for blood quantum. And then, later, even judges would sort of see people before them and say, yes, mixed blood, no full blood.

**DAN KRAKER:** Under pressure from the federal government, the Minnesota Chippewa tribe adopted the 25% blood quantum in the early 1960s. Since then, the tribe's population has slowly dwindled, as tribal members married non-tribal members. Doerfler calls it mathematical termination. Today, out of a total population of around 40,000 among the six bands, fewer than 20% are children.

**CATHY CHAVERS:** If something isn't done, tribes will eventually be gone. The population could dwindle to the point of non-existence.

**DAN KRAKER:** Cathy Chavers is chairwoman of the Boise Forte band of Chippewa. She's also the current president of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. In early June, the tribe sent out ballots to its roughly 33,000 eligible voters. They asked two questions. Should the tribe eliminate the blood quantum? And should the tribe's six-member bands be allowed to determine their own tribal enrollment criteria? The vote is only advisory, but Chavers says it will play a key role in guiding the tribe as it considers reforming its Constitution. Chavers says she often hears from tribal members who want their kids and grandkids to also be enrolled.

**CATHY CHAVERS:** They feel like they're native. They want to be native. Their heart says they're native. But the blood quantum says they're not.

**DAN KRAKER:** But she says members of some tribes that distribute casino revenues to tribal citizens through monthly per capita payments don't want enrollment expanded. And more tribal members could stretch already limited resources even further.

**CATHY CHAVERS:** It'll take away some of the services because more tribal members may be eligible for services. But we don't get increases in funding.

**DAN KRAKER:** According to Sarah Howes from the Fond du Lac band, it's a painful argument that divides families.

**SARAH HOWES:** My thing is like, I think, what would our ancestors think of us if they were looking at us and were saying, oh, we don't include these kids because we're worried about our \$400? I mean, I think they would be ashamed of us.

**DAN KRAKER:** Howes says she would gladly return her per capita payments if it meant her kids could harvest wild rice, spear fish, and exercise treaty rights that her ancestors secured for future generations. Dan Kraker, MPR News, Duluth.

**KATHY:** Wow, so interesting. So, OK, Dan, I'm curious, her kids can't do any of the traditional activities that are open to tribal members. Is that right?

**DAN KRAKER:** Yeah. So when it comes to something like spearing or netting fish, as part of tribe's treaty rights, so those were reserved in treaties fought for in the courts. But that's only open to enrolled tribal members, not to descendants of a tribe.

**KATHY:** It seems like a really high cost.

**DAN KRAKER:** Yeah. I talked with several folks who expressed real hurt over these rules. So one person I want you to meet is Melissa Walls. She's a descendant of the Boise Forte band of Ojibwe. She's not officially a member because she doesn't meet the blood quantum requirement. And here's what she has to say about how it affects her.

**MELISSA WALLS:** What I feel personally, as a non-enrolled descendant who should be enrolled based on our family's story, not based on the government's story, is left out. I feel, sometimes, shameful and ashamed that I'm not an enrolled person. I will have to correct elders in my own community when they say, she's our band member. And I have to say, actually, I'm not enrolled and correct. Them multiple times. And they keep saying it.

I will have community members introduce me to others as a band member. And I have to correct-- and it's horrible. It puts me back into being a little girl being treated like somebody who didn't belong. And it really hurts. I have told people, I don't care about any benefits that white people think we're going to get if I get enrolled or that other community members think I might get. Keep the benefits, just make me a member, because I want to fully belong.

**KATHY:** I know, Dan, that the conversation about changing blood quantum rules has been going on for a while. And not every tribal member wants to change the rules. So what's the argument to keep things the way they are?

**DAN KRAKER:** Yeah, that's a good question. To help answer that, I talked with Jill Doerfler. And she chairs the American Indian Studies department at the University of Minnesota Duluth. She's also written a book on blood quantum. And she's a descendant of the White Earth Nation. And here's what she had to say.

**JILL DOERFLER:** Some people have made choices in their life very specifically for blood quantum. And they might feel some resentment for people who haven't made those choices. And then they say, oh, well, now we're going to let these other people in, whereas I very carefully calculated my blood quantum and calculated the blood quantum of the person I chose to have a child with. There's lots of people who have done that. They did the math. But I think, for a lot of people today, unfortunately, there is an association with resources. The concern is that tribes who have limited resources say, we already have a wait list on housing. If we change enrollment, what's going to happen?

**KATHY:** So, Dan, there was the referendum. And they're counting the votes today. What happens when the results come in?

**DAN KRAKER:** Right. So, again, this is an advisory vote. It's meant to give to guide the tribe as they decide how to move forward. So officials are going to count the ballots today, likely tomorrow, as well. Then the tribe's Constitution Reform Committee will prepare a report that's going to be given to the Tribal Executive Committee. But tribal President Cathy Chavers told me that probably won't happen until their next meeting in October. So it could be a while before we learn the results of the vote and then what action, if any, the tribe takes because of it.

**KATHY:** And I know you'll be following the story.

**DAN KRAKER:** I will be.

**KATHY:** All right, Dan, good job. Thank you so much.

**DAN KRAKER:** I appreciate it.

**KATHY:** Dan Kraker is our reporter based in Duluth. Now, I'll add here that the Red Lake Nation is an Ojibwe band in Minnesota, but not part of the Minnesota Chippewa tribe. In 2019, they changed their blood quantum rules. It was pretty controversial, too. Many opposed it. As a result, more than 1,000 descendants applied to become official tribal citizens at Red Lake.