Tribes have been visible and active in the political process. There is hardly a politician west of the Mississippi River that could risk ignoring tribal influences. So one must ask, with all of this focus, why more progress is not being made in addressing tribal concerns. It seems that an examination is in order.

Tribal governments are under attack as never before. Politicians at all levels are questioning or challenging tribal sovereign governmental authority on issues as fundamental as land, health, and public safety. The paternalistic doctrine that is embodied in the “trust responsibility” of the federal government has never been so lacking as when it comes to the efforts to find a fix to the abominable Carceiri decision.

Tribal interests continue to fight battles with self-appointed Indian fighters – defending the basic right to provide for tribal citizens. Of course, the words of those so-called Indian fighters are calculated to create images that make the very act of defending proof of the premise. For example, when it is pointed out that resources for some tribes have allowed them to purchase ancestral lands, it is turned on its head and used as proof that tribes are too rich, a threat to the tax base, and cannot be trusted to look out for local concerns. Tribal government gaming has become the rallying call for all Indian fighters in that all tribal land acquisitions may be used for “off reservation” gaming and, therefore, must be opposed or regulation is not tight enough and must be made stronger (another way of squeezing the life out of the industry).

The “trust responsibility” doctrine now allows the decision-making process for land, leases and even the recognition of tribal status to be caught up in the political morass for years, even decades. Many decisions that allow tribal governments to properly function are subject to review and approval under implementation of the doctrine. Because of this the Indian fighters have become adept at using the doctrine and the political quagmire to the detriment of tribes.

Over the past few years, efforts by the current Administration have improved consultation and have moved some antiquated regulations toward reform. Yet, it is the view of many, that progress cannot be measured by increased consultations. Rather, as always, actions are still too slow in coming. It is a fact that for most of Indian Country life is as difficult as ever, suicide rates continue to grow among tribal youth, and real economic development a dream.

What does this have to do with the vote? It seems to be the view of some candidates and political parties that it is okay to accept tribal contributions and otherwise leverage tribal support, but it is not okay to demand action and fundamental fairness for tribal concerns and issues.

Tribes cannot allow their support to be taken for granted. It is true that in some states like Montana, Nevada, South Dakota and Arizona tribal votes can determine election outcomes. Concrete action on issues important to tribes must be the price for tribal votes. Proclamations supporting the doctrine or holding out only a vague outline of something better are no longer adequate. When tribal voices are united and focused there is action and political support.

Action is needed to: (1) protect sovereignty and the authority of tribal governments; (2) provide access to the resources necessary to raise the level of healthcare, education and opportunity for all tribes; and (3) reform the “trust responsibility” doctrine so that the first and only focus is fundamental fairness for tribes.

Joe Valandra is CEO of Great Luck, LLC. He can be reached by calling (202) 888-1736 or email joe.valandra@greatluck.com.