



BARRIERS TO VOTER REGISTRATION

In 2017 and 2018, the Native American Voting Rights Coalition—founded by the Native American Rights Fund—held nine public hearings to better understand how Native Americans are systemically and culturally kept from fully exercising their franchise. More than 120 witnesses testified from dozens of tribes across the country.

The final report, *Obstacles at Every Turn: Barriers to Political Participation of Native American Voters*, provides detailed evidence that Native people face obstacles at every turn in the electoral process: from registering to vote, to casting votes, to having votes counted.

BARRIERS IN REGISTERING TO VOTE FOR NATIVE AMERICANS:

From lack of traditional mailing addresses, voter ID requirements, even before participating in an election, AI/AN communities face numerous challenges in the process of registering to vote.



Lack of Traditional Mailing Addresses

Because Native voters' homes often do not have addresses assigned, or have addresses not recognized by the post office, Native voters often face difficulty filling out registration forms that seemingly require physical addresses.



Homelessness and Housing Instability

Homelessness and near homelessness are pervasive throughout Native American lands, and in urban areas Native Americans are disproportionately homeless. Politicians and elected officials overlook Native voters in urban centers generally, and especially for AI/AN experiencing homelessness. In Native American communities, near homelessness and intergenerational households contribute to barriers in the process of registering to vote where a physical address is seemingly required.



Hard to Obtain Voter ID Requirements

Obtaining a state issued ID is unreasonably difficult for many Native American voters. State run DLS or DMVs are not present on reservation lands. The distances to many of these DMVs are prohibitively and outrageously far. Consequently, Native Americans have to travel off the reservation, upwards of 100 miles roundtrip, in order to obtain a state issued ID. Additionally, the cost of an identification is too expensive for many poverty stricken Native Americans to spend on an ID that is not needed in their everyday lives. Tribal IDs are not readily accepted as qualifying identification, and sometimes the tribal ID lacks required information, like a physical address, which many Native Americans lack.



Unequal Access to Online Registration

While cost savings is touted as a reason for states to shift to all online or predominately online models of voter registration, increasing focus on online voter registration comes at the expense of Native Americans who lack access to it. Over 90 percent of reservations lack access to broadband Internet.



Unequal Access to In-Person Voter Registration

The nearest opportunity for in-person registration can be the nearest county seats, which can be hundreds of miles away. Voters from the Duckwater Reservation have to travel 140 miles to reach the nearest elections officials where they can register. The barriers that geography and distance pose to reaching in-person registration locations limit opportunities for Native Americans to register to vote.



Unequal Funding for Voter Registration Efforts on Tribal Lands

Fraught relationships between states, counties, and reservation communities, where states and counties do not believe reservation communities are entitled to funding, can leave reservation communities out of any funded registration efforts. Both political parties likewise fail to register voters on Native lands, citing unfamiliarity, cost per voter, and distance as barriers to funded voter registration drives.



Restrictions on Access to Voter Registration Forms

Arbitrary state and local limits on the number of voter registration applications that can be obtained or returned by tribes or local advocates is a tactic used to suppress Native voting.



Denial of Voter Registration Opportunities Due to Previous Convictions

Many Native Americans are restricted, or believe they are restricted, from voting. Felony disenfranchisement rules vary widely between states. Native Americans are incarcerated at a rate 38 percent higher than the national average. Widespread confusion about the eligibility of former felons to vote persists throughout Native American communities.



Rejection of Voter Registration Applications

It is commonplace throughout Indian Country for election officials to reject or fail to timely process voter registration applications. For this reason there is widespread distrust of election officials throughout Indian Country. Determination of whether a voter registration application will result in registration often depends on the subjective judgments made by the election officials processing them. Lack of a traditional address also increases the likelihood Native applications will be rejected.



Voter Purges

Even when Native voters with non-traditional mailing addresses are registered, they may still be purged (removal from voter registration lists) because of those addresses. And in places required to provide language assistance under Section 203, information about voter purges typically is not provided in the covered Native language. Voter purging can result in permanent disenfranchisement.



Failure to Offer Registration Opportunities at Polling Places on Election Day

States have wide discretion to determine the cut-off dates for voter registration. Some states have been able to create systems to establish same day voter registration. However, given the lack of reliable internet access on tribal reservations, same day registration implementation may be delayed in Indian Country, creating increased inequity within the system of voter registration.

Read the full report at vote.narf.org and contact vote@narf.org for more information.

ABOUT THE NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS FUND: Since 1970, the Native American Rights Fund (NARF) has provided specialized legal assistance to protect the rights of Native American tribes, organizations, and individuals nationwide. NARF has achieved significant results in hundreds of major cases, addressing fundamental issues like tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, natural resource protection, human rights, Indian education, and voting rights. In 2015, NARF began the Native American Voting Rights Coalition, comprised of national and regional grassroots organizations, academics, and attorneys advocating for equitable access for Native Americans to the political process.