



NATIVE VOTER IMPACT:

A POTENT BUT UNTAPPED POLITICAL FORCE

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.

A MILLION VOTE OPPORTUNITY

Some Native American voters have the potential to become potent political forces. Only 66 percent of the known eligible Native American voting population is registered to vote.

There are over 1,000,000 eligible Native American voters (18+) in the United States who are not registered.

IMPACT OF NATIVE AMERICAN VOTERS

There are 574 federally recognized Indian tribes, nearly 6.8 million American Indian and Alaskan Natives living in the United States. Of those, approximately 4.7 million are over the age of 18 and eligible to vote.

Native voters have impacted elections for candidates from both major political parties:

- 2002, South Dakota Senator Tim Johnson (D-SD) was re-elected by 500 votes when the final votes were counted on the Pine Ridge Reservation.
- 2010, Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski, (R-AK) credited her victory in large part to mobilized Alaska Native voters that supported her unorthodox win through a write-in election.
- 2012, North Dakota Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) attributed her 1 percent margin win to the Native vote.
- 2006, Montana, Senator John Tester (D-MT) won by the slim margin of 3,562 votes. There are over 50,000 voting-age Native Americans in Montana with more than 17,000 votes coming from the Indian reservations. Tester's 2012 win was also attributed largely to the Native vote.

Michigan had one of the closest margins in the 2016 Presidential Election with a margin of 0.3 percent. With more than 100,000 Native people age 18+ in Michigan, the Native people eligible to vote was 4x more than the margin of victory in that state.

THE WAY FORWARD

In the United States, power is available through participatory democracy. If Native Americans can engage fully in the political system—free from the barriers that currently obstruct them—they can reclaim power and participate in America in a way that is fair and just.

The first critical step is for Congress to pass the Native American Voting Rights Act, or its component pieces in other legislation. This bill will ensure that Native Americans have access to political participation by starting to address the obstacles outlined in this report. For example, mandating polling places on reservations will cut down travel time and allow Native American voters to cast a ballot in a familiar place free from discrimination.

States and state officials should make sure election activities for Native Americans are equitably funded, and adopt Native American task forces to ensure Native American citizens are provided equal access to registration and voting opportunities within their states. States should not require a physical address, or proof of a physical address, to register or cast a ballot.

Local election officials should reach out directly to tribes to consult about placement of vote centers with registration opportunities and polling places within Native communities, and recruit Native American community members to work as poll workers and local election officials.

Tribes should encourage their members to participate in state and federal elections as a way to increase political power, reach out to and work with county officials to increase voter access for their members, and issue voter guides to de-mystify voting processes and ballot initiatives that affect the tribal community. Tribes should make voter registration for state and federal elections available in all tribal buildings and encourage registration at every point of contact with tribal members.

Tribal citizens should register and vote, and encourage their families and friends to register to vote. They should arrange voter registration drives and reach out to their tribal governments expressing enthusiasm for get-out-the-vote efforts.

This is about the well-being of United States citizens. Eradicating barriers to political participation for Native Americans would improve:

- Socio-economic status
- Self-determination
- Land rights
- Water rights
- Health care

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.