Native Americans Depend on Ballot Collection

Across Indian Country, houses are not marked with an address, mail is not delivered to homes, and a trip to the post office can take hours. Reservation residents too often live in extreme poverty and do not have access to a vehicle or gas money to navigate unpaved roads that can be impassable in the winter. Therefore, thousands of Alaska Native and American Indian voters, especially tribal elders, rely on good-faith assistance to vote.

This assistance includes ballot collection. Friends, family, and get-out-the-vote organizations, pick up and drop off mail collectively, instead of transporting one costly piece of mail at a time. Calls to regulate what is referred to as "ballot harvesting" do not take into account how Native Americans receive and return their ballots.
Let's consider the reality...

IN-PERSON VOTING IS FAR.
Approximately one-third of Native American and Alaska Natives live in remote, rural areas, a legacy of removal and segregation to reservations. Round-trip travel between Native communities and neighboring border towns is regularly 20 to 150 miles. For the Duckwater Reservation, the closest elections office and in-person voting is in Tonopah, Nevada, 140 miles away — a 5-hour round trip. Unreasonable distances to polling places is common and Native voters across the country — such as in South Dakota, Montana, and Nevada — have successfully brought suit to bring polling places closer. With these distances, it makes sense that Native Americans would attempt to vote by mail. However, they encounter obstacles here too...

INACCESSIBLE POST OFFICES.
Where postal services exist, they are often far away from where Native voters live. The Intertribal Council of Arizona has testified that rural post offices are often 20 miles or more away from tribal communities. In Montana, members of the Fort Peck reservation have to travel 68 miles round trip to the closest post office. Roads within reservation communities can be impassible during bad weather, especially during November election season.

LIMITED POSTAL SERVICE.
Mail-services often are limited. Working voters may not even be able to access these services. For example, voters on Yakama Reservation in Washington State must return ballots before their post office closes at 3 p.m. on Election Day, even though voting continues until 7 p.m. for everyone else in the state.

NO RESIDENTIAL MAIL DELIVERY.
Home mail-service does not exist in some parts of Indian Country. In parts of Spirit Lake Nation in North Dakota, Navajo Nation in Arizona, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin, and Blackfeet Indian Reservation (to name a few) homes are unmarked and do not receive regular mail service. They rely entirely on post office boxes.

BALLOT COLLECTION OVERCOMES THESE UNREASONABLE VOTING OBSTACLES.
In fact, recent attempts to regulate ballot collection were found to violate the Montana constitution because the practice must be evaluated through the "lens the cold, hard data . . . about the clear limitations Native American communities in Montana face, and how the costs [of ballot collection restrictions] . . . are simply too high and to[o] burdensome to remain the law." Western Native Voice v. Stapleton, No. DV-2020-377, (D. Mont. September 25, 2020).

MISHANDLING BALLOTS IS ALREADY ILLEGAL.
On the rare times of alleged ballot mishandling—such as in the North Carolina Ninth Congressional race—it is already prohibited under state law. The common-sense response to these violations is to use existing state laws, not to pass unneeded legislation that will disenfranchise Native American voters.

PASS FEDERAL LEGISLATION TO PROTECT BALLOT COLLECTION.
The Native American Voting Rights Act addresses systemic voting discrepancies in Native communities and and protects ballot collection.

Created by Native American Rights Fund | Learn more at vote.narf.org