



As 2020 Election Heats Up, Indian Country Works to Register Voters

by Ernest L. Stevens, Jr.

The National Indian Gaming Association is undertaking one of its most aggressive voter registration campaigns in years. We are partnering with several of our sister organizations to implement the “My Vote WILL Count” campaign to ensure that all Native Americans exercise their civic duties and flex the right to vote that our ancestors fought and died for.

Indian gaming revenues have enabled tribal governments to improve the lives of not only its citizens, but also the neighbors and regions surrounding tribal nations, for more than four decades now. By law, both tribal and federal, tribal governments must steer Indian gaming revenue back into tribal economies, helping fund essential programs and services to address essential government services such as education, health care, public safety, and infrastructure programs. This additional revenue also allows tribes to exercise their sovereignty and treaty rights in a manner that ensures our voices are heard.

Every citizen of a federally recognized tribe has an obligation to vote and educate their Members of Congress about the federal government’s legal and moral trust obligations to tribal governments and tribal citizens.

As the 12th largest private employer nationwide, Indian Gaming is responsible for more than 350,000 direct jobs and an additional 450,000 indirect jobs for American families. This provides all tribal citizens with a strong mandate for the federal government to address all issues in Indian Country. The only way the federal government will pay attention to these concerns is to exercise our right to vote.

As Chairman of the National Indian Gaming Association, I’ve worked together with NCAI, and our regional gaming associations, to make voter registration one of Indian Country’s top priorities in 2020. We have seen amazing economic growth in many tribal nations and with the phenomenal opportunities tribal members have today that were not available a few decades ago. Despite our significant progress, we all know that much more needs to be done to meet the essential and critical needs of Native people, Indian Country-wide.

To accomplish these goals, it is crucial that we elect federal policy makers who understand Indian Country, respect the status of Indian tribes as separate sovereign governments under the U.S. Constitution, and acknowledge and commit to upholding the federal government’s solemn treaty and trust obligations to Indian tribes.

The country is well into the primary season and headed towards Super Tuesday on March 3rd. Tribal citizens will have a major opportunity to help select the next democratic candidate for President, while also deciding on key Senate and House primaries. This election, like all elections, will have wide-ranging impacts and consequences on our efforts to advance Native communities nationwide.

Our ancestors fought and died securing our inherent rights to self-determination, and a part of that inherent right is to select the leaders we feel best represent our common interests. The right to vote is the most fundamental right and duty we have as American citizens, and is the truest foundation of our government. As citizens, it is our solemn responsibility to exercise our voice – our vote – in helping determine the future of our country.

In Indian Country, exercising our voting rights not only serves to advance our future policy goals, it also serves as an act of honoring those who came before us, making sacrifices to protect tribal sovereignty, and making it possible for us to protect our way of life for future generations.

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Prior to obtaining U.S. Citizenship in 1924, Indian citizens' inability to vote for federal officials that were determining their future led to such policies as assimilation, U.S. government run boarding schools, and termination. The United States approved and implemented these policies all while Native Americans had no voice in the debate and no right to vote.

In spite of these attacks on tribal sovereignty, Native culture and religion, our ancestors persevered. Thanks to their tireless advocacy, Indian Country successfully steered federal Indian policy to one that now respects and fosters Indian self-determination.

Native people have consistently shown that our votes hold the power to make a difference. It is our responsibility to educate Native communities nationwide about the importance of their vote and to believe "My vote will count."

The National Indian Gaming Association's "My Vote WILL Count" campaign is alignment with local tribal voter registration programs. In Washington, tribal leaders have implemented the "REZ-TO REZ" voter registration drive. National Indian Gaming Association Vice-Chairman and Puyallup Chairman, David Bean, is working with Washington

tribal leaders to register a record number of Native Americans in this year's election.

The importance of the Indian Country vote is already at the forefront. Many predict that the Native American electorate could end up being pivotal in major swing states.

As a nonpartisan organization, we continue to encourage the importance of your vote. Whether you are a Republican, Democrat, or Independent, we urge you to educate, develop policy proposals with, and elect candidates who will stand for the best interests of Indian Country and our tribal sovereignty.

Our power at the polls will determine whose voices will ring in the halls of Congress, at the White House, in local, city, county, and state governments. This election year, let's make sure all of our "Votes Will Count" and pledge to register as many tribal citizens we can in 2020. All of Indian Country can and WILL make a difference. ♣

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