



The Importance of the Native Vote

by Ernest L. Stevens, Jr.

On January 1, 2020, we knew the importance of the pending election that was more than 10 months away at the time. Back then no one knew what 2020 had in store for us. In a matter of weeks, the first novel coronavirus case in the U.S. was reported in Snohomish County, Washington. Reported cases of COVID-19 slowly mounted throughout the U.S. More than nine months later, COVID has taken more than 211,000 lives, while infecting more than 7.5 million Americans. Tens of millions are unemployed, thousands of businesses have closed their doors, and many American families are struggling to meet the most basic needs.

COVID-19 has inflicted disparate impacts on the health and economies of our Native Nations. The CDC reports that on a per capita basis, Native Americans have the highest infection rates, and are at the highest risk of hospitalization and serious injury

due to the lack of adequate health care and infrastructure.

From an economic standpoint, each of our 450-plus Indian gaming operations ceased operations to prevent spread of the virus in our communities. As a result, it is estimated that tribal government-owned enterprises will sustain 35% revenue losses in 2020 alone – with revenue losses estimated at more than \$30 billion before a full recovery to 2019 revenue levels. These lost government revenues mean that it will be more difficult in the coming years for tribal governments to provide essential education, health, housing and safety to Native citizens.

This brings me back to the importance of the upcoming election, which is now days away. Yes, this year has shaken us to our core, and many feel helpless or worse hopeless. But we have power. Each of us has a voice. Our vote is our voice and our power.

It is up to us as voters to select a candidate who supports and defends tribal sovereignty and understands the economic impact of tribes to our economy. In turn, it is our responsibility in Washington, D.C. to continue to make it our priority to educate and lobby now and after the elections, because many lawmakers do not know or understand sovereignty and our economic impacts.

The National Indian Gaming Association launched the “My Vote WILL Count” campaign in October of 2019. We have worked in partnership with our Member Tribes and sister tribal organizations to educate, empower, and encourage all Native Americans to register to vote and commit to making a plan to vote in 2020, whether it’s voting early in person, by mail or absentee, or showing up at the polls on November 3rd.

Our grassroots efforts were forced to take a different path, because of the ongoing impact and health threats of COVID-19. Many of our regional and national Indian Country events were canceled. However, the “My Vote Will Count” initiative has utilized all aspects of social media and virtual spaces to get the message out Native voters.

To a limited extent, we have made several “My Vote WILL Count” campaign stops throughout Indian Country in the Midwest, and slowly expanded our travel to surrounding states – all social distancing and safety precautions prioritize our efforts to promote the vote.

We know that Native youth are the key to unlocking the full potential of Indian Country’s vote. As part of our “My Vote WILL Count” campaign, we recruited young men and women

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warriors to serve as ambassadors responsible for outreach in their communities, schools, and events to help Native youth realize the importance of their vote and educate them of the historical path paved by our ancestors and the sacrifices they made to secure our rights to go the polls and vote.

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

We are a nonpartisan organization, and the “My Vote WILL Count” campaign is a nonpartisan effort. We have spent the last 18 months, educating and developing policy proposals with candidates, and on November 3rd, each of us will take our power to the polls and vote for the person who we believe best understands Indian Country, tribal sovereignty, and the federal government’s legal and moral treaty and trust obligations to tribal governments and tribal citizens.

Possibly more important, especially in the times we face, our “My Vote WILL Count” campaign has educated Native voters about the power they hold, and their ability to make

a difference in their communities.

This election, like all elections, will have wide-ranging impacts and consequences on our efforts to advance Native communities nationwide. Unlike past elections, the consequences aren’t imaginary, potential, or prospective.

The consequences for Indian Country today, in this election, are real and immediate. From the bottom of the ticket to the very top, we must keep in mind what our communities face in these dire circumstances – and cast our ballot accordingly.

The importance of the Indian Country’s vote has been at the forefront throughout the year. Many predict that the Native American electorate will be pivotal in major swing states. Our power at the polls will determine whose voices will ring in the halls of Congress, at the White House and throughout local tribal and state governments. Indian Country’s Vote WILL count. We can and we WILL make a difference. ♣

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