

## **Natives flex their electoral muscles - Sunday, December 14, 2008**

*By JODI RAVE of the Missoulian*

Gerald Stiffarm worked stubbornly this year to encourage his Fort Belknap Reservation neighbors to vote in the general election, encouraging volunteers to return and knock on doors even if the occupants already said they didn't want to vote.

Ultimately, 93 volunteers with the Snake Butte Voter Coalition “pulled a miracle,” Stiffarm said, particularly after one such voter, an 82-year-old Korean War veteran, voted for the first time.

“We all about fell out of our shoes and some of the women cried when one of our volunteers said, ‘Guess who I got registered to vote?’ ” he said.

This year, Stiffarm stood tall among organizers who helped boost voter turnout on six of the seven reservations across Montana, compared to the 2004 general election. Official general election results for Native precincts show voter turnout gains on the Crow, Blackfeet, Flathead, Northern Cheyenne, Fort Belknap and Fort Peck reservations, respectively.

Voter turnout gains ranged 3 percent to 31 percent, with the Crow and Blackfeet reservations at a virtual tie for delivering the most people to the polls compared to four years ago, according to recently released data from the Montana Democratic Party Native vote committee.

On the Rocky Boy's Reservation, voter turnout was down 1 percent for the same time period - the only drop in participation seen on a Montana reservation.

“A high level of interest and energy was created on our reservations to get the Indian vote out and make it heard throughout Montana,” said state Sen. Carol Juneau, D-Browning, who described large numbers of Native voters as “wonderful.”

But more work is needed, she said.

Native precincts averaged a 65 percent turnout Nov. 4, still trailing the statewide average of 71 percent.

“The non-Indian vote is always a little higher,” said Juneau. “We have to set a goal - we want to vote at an equitable level with our neighbors. Part of who we are as Native people has to be participation in the political process, whether it be tribal or whether it be state or county. We've seen it growing over the years. But we still have a little ways to go.”

The get-out-the-vote effort needs to be “a regular part of what we do,” she said.

At least three groups worked to get out the Native vote in Montana, including the Montana Democratic Party, the Obama-Biden presidential campaign, and nonpartisan volunteers. The Republican Party had little or no presence on reservations in Montana, where the vote for Democratic candidates ranged from 49 percent to 72 percent.

“Though there are known Republicans in the reservation communities, Republicans have yet to actively court Native American voters and openly campaign in these areas,” said Eleanor Yellow Robe, the Montana Democratic Party's Native vote coordinator.

She compiled data showing 21,626 Native people voted in 54 known Native precincts statewide.

Yellow Robe lives on the Rocky Boy's Reservation, which has a 90 percent Democratic voting percentage, the highest of all the reservations. The Blackfeet Reservation has the second highest Democratic voting percentage at 86 percent, followed by Fort Belknap at 82 percent, Northern Cheyenne 81 percent, Crow 80 percent, Fort Peck 71 percent and finally, the Flathead Reservation at 56 percent.

Barack Obama's presidential campaign specifically targeted Native voters in Montana, hoping to shift the Republican-leaning state in his favor. That effort failed to provide the statewide win, but did help produce marked increases in participation among Native voters.

Some reservations did need the extra boost, including rides to polling booths.

“A lot of our people don't have transportation,” said Wanda Small Martinez, a vote organizer on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, where unemployment hovers around 71 percent. She and other volunteers made sure people made it to the polls.

“You have to provide that type of support if you want to get out

the Indian vote. People are mostly looking at how they're going to get to work and feed their kids,” she said.

### **Numbers still being crunched on Native voters**

While Native people were expected to go to the polls in record numbers on Election Day 2008, a national organization representing more than 250 tribes is still compiling numbers showing the Indian turnout.

The National Congress of American Indians targeted 18 states with significant Native populations as part of its Native Vote campaign. But so far, NCAI only has voting results for two states, Montana and New Mexico.

“Unfortunately, NCAI as well as all of Indian Country, has never had the resources or the investment from anybody to help us develop a good database or good baseline of data around elections and election turnout,” said Jacqueline Johnson-Pata, NCAI executive director. “It's always been a challenge for us. This year we attempted to do the best we could using volunteers to gather the information.”

Data crunchers at NCAI's policy research center are still validating information collected from volunteers. And some states still don't have official election results, said Johnson-Pata. It remains to be seen if Native voter registration numbers rose or fell this year compared to the 2004 general election.

Although states do not gather statistics on Native voters, it is possible to estimate Native turnout by gathering data from precincts within reservation boundaries. But that methodology

excludes urban areas, where more than 60 percent of Native people live.

Sarah Hicks, director of NCAI's Policy Research Center, said staff members would continue to compile data on voting results.

Some volunteers not associated with a national organization, a tribe or a specific campaign gathered and sorted through reservation precinct numbers after the election. They also planned their own grass-roots get-out-the-vote drives.

“We need to organize ourselves in order to advocate for our interests,” said Jodi Archambault Gillette, an election volunteer in North Dakota. “If we do it ourselves, then we have more power to negotiate. We need to do this for our own good.”

Gillette worked with a core group of volunteers during the final six weeks leading up to the Nov. 4 election. The group knocked on doors and urged voters on the Standing Rock Reservation to go to the polls. She called each county office for election results. The reservation ended up with the highest voter turnout in North Dakota.

Preliminary numbers show a 22.4 percent increase in Indian precincts on the northern half of the Standing Rock Reservation, which straddles both North Dakota and South Dakota.

“We're community people,” Gillette said. “It's about finding people who will get things done. I was working for my people. It was beautiful, too.”

The Flathead Reservation outpaced all Montana reservations for voter turnout, with a 74 percent showing, compared to the June primary elections. One St. Ignatius precinct boasted a 97 percent voter turnout, with 69 of 71 registered voters casting ballots.

“Every photograph I've seen from that nation, they had hordes of young people with Obama T-shirts on,” Stiffarm said. “They were mobilized, like they had an army.”

Jason Smith, a vote coordinator on the Flathead Reservation, said he and volunteers went door-to-door and also created awareness across the reservation through radio advertisements. “I had numerous helpers that got involved and believed. It took a lot of educating. Native Americans are really good about when they believe in something, they go all out for it.”

While the Obama campaign's top operatives have since left the state, grass-roots organizers like Stiffarm won't forget the historic election that mobilized a nation.

He and Fort Belknap volunteers traveled to the Crow Reservation in May to meet President-elect Obama, who campaigned there among the Apsaalooke people.

“We got to meet a lot of his (Obama's) people in Crow, and we're not even Crow,” Stiffarm said. “We were seated in the second row behind the Crow Senate. They were all in full regalia - warbonnets and buckskin and beadwork. Us mainstream Assiniboine-Gros Ventres were dressed like tourists. We had all summer clothes on. But they let us in.”

Stiffarm said the Snake Butte Voter Coalition was guided

throughout the campaign by tradition and spiritualism, a much-needed cache considering some obstacles to getting out the vote.

“We could have done better,” he said. “But what we deal with when we go to a lot of these homes is low self-esteem, apathy and the social injustice. We have people who are drunk, people who are high, people who don't trust the system anymore because they have been oppressed for so many generations. We have people saying, ‘I don't want to be involved.’ ”

His group knocked on doors as many as 10 to 12 times. Household members like the 82-year-old veteran would tell them “No,” said Stiffarm. “But, we would go back the 13th time.”

He said the veteran usually had the same answer: “Let the white man run this country. I don't want nothing to do with it.”

“We told him, ‘You need to change your attitude,’ ” said Stiffarm. “If you change your attitude, maybe your grandchildren will vote. You came back wounded from Korea. Our way of telling you ‘thanks’ is we're going to start voting. We're going to be a part of what this is all about.”

“Lord and behold,” said Stiffarm. “He was the first person we took to vote.”

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