

National tribal group focuses on voter ID laws; Alaska a top concern

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. - New voter identification laws in a dozen states could negatively affect voter participation in Native American and Alaska Native communities, a tribal advocacy group says.

The National Congress of American Indians released a report Monday that highlights the states, including some where photo identification will be required at the polls on Election Day.

Two of the states - Alaska and Florida - do not list tribal ID cards as acceptable forms of identification at the polls.

Problems with other new voter ID laws include requirements that voters provide their home addresses, since some tribal communities have no street addresses, and the "barriers of cost, logistics and distance to obtaining required IDs," the study says.

NCAI President Jefferson Keel said there are races around the country that could hinge on the Native vote, and he wants to ensure no one is disenfranchised by the new laws. He discussed the report at the group's annual convention being held in Sacramento, Calif.

"People want to label Native voters, put us in one corner or the other," Keel told attendees, according to a copy of his prepared remarks. "On November 6, it doesn't matter who you vote for, it's that we encourage Native people to vote, to protect their sovereignty with their vote."

The report identifies six "states of concern" for Native voter access: Alaska, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, South Dakota and Wisconsin. And it says new ID laws also could disproportionately affect Native voters in Arizona, Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma and Washington.

The National Congress of American Indians has been working on voter registration and education efforts across the nation. Keel said the goal is to close the gap of those Native Americans who are eligible to vote but aren't registered. In 2008, that number stood at more than 1 million.

U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and California Gov. Jerry Brown also addressed the NCAI convention Monday. Salazar touted the Obama administration's work on tribal issues, ranging from developing alternative energy to homeland restoration.