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Effort seeks to turn out Indian vote

**NATIVE VOTE:Local Indian voter registration part of national drive.**

**BY STEVE KUCHERA**

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Like many people, Mike Sayers used to be an infrequent voter.

"A lot of people feel, 'I'm not going to vote because just one vote won't make a difference,'" said Sayers, the Duluth urban liaison for the Red Lake Ojibwe Band. "But you get 150,000 or 200,000 people saying the same thing and it can have a drastic effect on an election."

In an attempt to ensure that the American Indian voice is heard at the polls this year, Sayers is part of a nationwide effort to register and encourage Indians to vote. The National Congress of American Indians is helping coordinate the grassroots Native Vote 2004 campaign.

"It's absolutely important to increase American Indian voter turnout," said Cherie Ike, the group's Native Vote coordinator. "When you vote, your voice is heard."

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The congress is modeling its registration efforts in part on earlier Indian voter registration drives in South Dakota.

"As with any slice of the electorate, democracy works best when it's noisy and you have every voice represented," said Brett Healy, executive director of the Four Directions Committee in Rapid City, S.D. "That's hardly been the case in Indian country. Policies implemented by elected officials are determined by who shows up to vote."

The nonprofit, nonpartisan committee undertook a voter-registration drive before South Dakota's primary elections and a special U.S. House election in June. In some counties, the number of Indians voting increased nearly 300 percent over 2002 numbers, Healy said.

"We were able to deliver to the polls just shy of 3,400 native voters," he said.

Fewer than 3,000 votes separated the special election's winner and loser.

Like the Four Directions campaign, Native Vote 2004 won't endorse candidates, Ike said, concentrating instead on voter registration and education.

The Minnesota drive to register more Indian voters will also be nonpartisan, said

Judy Hanks, project development coordinator for the Mille Lacs Band and coordinator for the statewide Get Out The Native Vote campaign.

"Although we won't make endorsements, we will look at candidates to see where they stand on issues important to tribes and put out positions so people can go to polls and make an informed decision," Hanks said.

"We have the potential of approximately 33,000 voters," she said. "And Minnesota is going to be a battleground state."

The Minnesota effort began in May when the heads of the Mille Lacs Band and Prairie Island community invited representatives from the state's 11 reservations -- along with people who work with urban Indians living in Duluth and Twin Cities -- to a training session.

"As of today, we have all the tribes involved in the effort," Hanks said. "We also have teams in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth."

Representatives from Fond du Lac and Sayers have worked to register new voters by setting up booths at powwows, health fairs and other events.

"At each event, we've been registering probably between 50 and 100 voters," Sayers said. "We've put up booths at probably 15 events so far this year. We're going to step up our efforts in the next two months."

Sayers is involved in planning a concert in mid-October as a way to attract more potential voters.

"We will be able to get probably two to three headliners," he said.

The statewide drive plans to launch a billboard campaign soon, reminding people that the U.S. government gave Indians the right to vote just 80 years ago.

"Our message is that 80 short years ago they couldn't vote but you can," Hanks said.

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