

Indian get-out-the-vote efforts called a success **Officials cite examples, look to the future**

Sam Lewin 11/4/2004

Indian groups say they succeeded and then some in their effort to mobilize tribal members to hit the polls. National Congress of American Indians President Tex Hall said the culmination of the Native Vote 2004 efforts on election night was deeply satisfying.

"This is truly a historic moment for all of Indian Country. We absolutely proved that we can make our voices heard with the power of the vote," Hall said in a statement. "This campaign mobilized tribal communities all across America - from Arizona to Alaska and Oregon to Oklahoma and Minnesota to New Mexico. Native voters turned out to the election polls in greater numbers for this election day than any other in history."

Anecdotal evidence of the get-out-the-vote effort can be found in many places. Brian Drapeaux, South Dakota Native Vote 2004 coordinator, said more than 60% of reservation voters participated in South Dakota's election.

"Tribes really did their part; they showed up and participated like we had anticipated," Drapeaux said.

Vivian Juan-Saunders, chairwoman Tohono O'odham Nation, said her tribe had 1,000 new voters in the 2004 election, a number that helped propel record numbers of tribal voters to the polls. Judy Hanks, Minnesota Native Vote 2004 coordinator, said more than 50% of the state's Native voters cast their ballot on Tuesday, a figure that more than doubles past figures. Hanks said the high turnout rate is "not just about winning or losing, it is about Native people exercising their fundamental right to vote. We can only get stronger."

The Cherokee Nation was lauded for its efforts. The tribe brought out more than 20,000 new voters since 2000. As the second largest tribe in the country, the Cherokees have more than 250,000 members, including 150,000 living in Oklahoma.

Hall said that the rising political clout will only improve as the Indian voting block forces candidates to address Native concerns by developing platform statements and making campaign promises to Native voters.

"We look forward to working with the candidates elected on Tuesday and we will continue to build on the momentum we built this election year," Hall said. "Through education and voting, another generation of Indian people sees the possibility to affect change in a positive way, and to help shape the political landscape. We have the power not only to improve conditions in our communities today, but also to impact the lives of our children and our grandchildren."

According to the NCAI, other examples of successful Indian voting efforts included:

-The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, located in central Oregon registered almost 450 new voters in two counties. In Jefferson County, there are approximately 800 registered voters from Warm Springs and another 150 in Wasco County

(majority of the reservation is in Jefferson County). Warm Springs Native Vote effort has included: community meetings, education (through flyers, radio, tribal newspaper) and the establishment of drop boxes on the reservation. This year, Warm Springs had 3-drop boxes on the reservation for people to bring their ballots - one in Simnasho (northern end of the reservation) and two in the Agency area. Organizer Fritz Miller said the key to their success has been the personalized touch - community members engaging other community members on the importance of voting.

-Minnesota's statewide Native Vote effort provided a model for other states to look at for future Native Vote efforts. The statewide coalition met monthly to train organizers, collect data, develop messaging, and to share ideas. Their efforts have included media advertising in newspapers across the state, billboards, and Native specific t-shirts and buttons. Their latest report indicated that they had registered 900 new Native Voters – a number that may go up because Minnesota has same day registration.

-In Arizona and New Mexico, the Moving America Forward Foundation (MAFF) registered 20,000 new Native Voters. In Arizona, MAFF registered 11,000 new Native Voters throughout the state and added another 9,000 new Native Voters in New Mexico.

-The Native Vote Election Protection Project trained attorneys and law students to be available on Election Day in 10 states throughout Indian Country (Arizona, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Washington, Wisconsin). These volunteers were monitoring the polling sites to address voting questions and problems. In addition a national toll free help hotline was available in every state.