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Native Vote 2004: Voters Report to Polls in Force

The National Congress of American Indians spearheaded a groundbreaking campaign to register and turn out a record number of American Indian and Alaska Native voters this election year. NCAI President Tex Hall, said the culmination of the Native Vote 2004 efforts on election night was a resounding moment for tribal governments nationwide, as it empowered Native voters and raised the profile of Native issues in the eyes of politicians.

“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. “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.”

Tribal leaders across the nation echoed Hall’s praise of voter turnout. Bob Chicks, president of the Stockbridge-Munsee Indian Tribe in Wisconsin, said his tribe had “overwhelming response at the polls...the highest we have ever had.” Brian Drapeaux, South Dakota Native Vote 2004 coordinator, said more than 60% of reservation voters participated in South Dakota election. He said “tribes really did their part; they showed up and participated like we had anticipated.” 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.”

Hall said that rising political clout will only grow going forward, as the unified voice of American Indian/Alaska Natives becomes a force for political candidates to address Native concerns by developing platform statements and having campaign promises to Native voters. The power of the vote will put Native issues before elected leaders like never before in history.

“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.”

The 2004 election will be the first time Native votes will be quantified in a way to benchmark the population for future elections. Hall said “the lack of voter information for our community has made it

difficult to gage how the population responded to voter registration and GOTV efforts, but through NV04, we will have a baseline to monitor future elections -- a way to patrol our voting efforts.”

Native Vote 2004 Success stories

- **Minnesota’s statewide Native Vote** effort has provided a model for other states to look at for future Native Vote efforts. The statewide coalition has 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 – however, it is important to note that Minnesota has same day registration so we expect their numbers to increase (Contact: Judy Hanks, nativepr@paulbunyan.net).
- This year, the **Tohono O’odham Nation** registered 967 new voters this year through their Native Vote effort, bringing their total registered voter population to 4,711. The reservation has a total of 17,304 tribal members over the age of 18 in 12 districts on the reservation (Contact: Adam Andrews, 520-383-2028).
- The **Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs**, located in central Oregon has 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 has 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 (Contact: Fritz Miller, 541-554-1161).
- 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 (contact: Kate, MAFF Public Relations: fieldfish@aol.com).
- The **Cherokee Nation** of Oklahoma registered more than 20,000 new voters since 2000. The tribe has more than 250,000 citizens, including 150,000 in Oklahoma. For more Cherokee Nation Get Out the Vote information call the Cherokee Nation’s government relations office at (918) 456-0671, ext. 2675 or Communication Director Mike Miller at (918) 456-0671, Ext. 2210.
- 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. (Contact: Heather Dawn Thompson 202-258-3767)