

Native Vote woos American Indians

By Elena Cisneros

The first statewide effort to mobilize and record the American Indian vote is under way this year, the 80th anniversary of legislation giving American Indians the right to vote.

In Minnesota, efforts to get American Indians to the polls are growing with a partnership between reservations and National Voice. The Minneapolis-based organization works with nonprofit, nonpartisan community groups to get more people to vote.

Judy Hanks, project development coordinator for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, is the coordinator for Native Vote 2004 at the Mille Lacs reservation.

Native Vote works toward voter registration and mobilization, setting up information booths at pow-wows and informing people how to look at candidates at the local, state and national levels. It has no party affiliation.

"We want to make sure ... that when they go to the polls they are informed," said Hanks, a member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

Native Vote team members set up booths on reservations and use sample ballots to show how voting works. There also are mock election days where the election process is explained.

Hanks says Native Vote has registered more than 100 eligible voters on the Mille Lacs reservation during about three events.

Native Vote uses art and history to show the importance of voting. A billboard featuring a collage of American Indian ancestors is going up along major highways in Minnesota, including U.S. Highway 169 in the Mille Lacs area.

The billboard reads, "80 years ago they couldn't and today you can."

Hanks said the billboards are being paid for with money from the tribal governments participating in Native Vote. She wouldn't release specific dollar amounts.

History

On June 2, 1924, Congress passed the act that granted citizenship and the right to vote to American Indians born in the United States. The right to vote was governed by state law, and until 1948 states such as Maine, Arizona and New Mexico barred American Indians from voting.

"It's only been 80 years," Hanks said. "It's given them a voice in the electoral process. They can put people in office."

Native Vote is working with the Washington-based National Congress of American Indians to create a database of registered American Indian voters this year. NCAI advocates on behalf of American Indian tribes on national issues in Washington.

The database will be used to chart the fluctuation in voter numbers.

In the 2000 presidential election, voter turnout on the Mille Lacs reservation was generally lower than the Minnesota average. For example, in Kathio Township, 525 of the 893 voting-age residents voted. That's a turnout rate of about 59 percent, compared with 69 percent statewide.

Nationwide, reservations are working on voter registration at unprecedented levels, said Alyssa Burhans, organizing director of Native voters with National Voice.

"We are creating a new path for everybody," she said.

Burhans works with American Indian voters nationally. The effort in Minnesota is something Burhans would like to see in all states with large American Indian populations.

Burhans said a large American Indian vote may be the key to deciding the outcome of this year's presidential race.

Hurdles

Efforts to get American Indians out to vote have not been easy. The hurdle of apathy on many reservations keeps many from voting in state and national elections. People on the reservation do not see the connection between tribes and the national government, Hanks said.

Getting American Indians to vote would be easier if candidates have a local issue because voters would see the connection, Burhans said.

"They would see that a lot of decisions that are made by the federal government affect our lives," Burhans said.

Native Vote shows potential voters the relationship outside of their own tribal government by explaining what their representatives are voting for in the U.S. Congress and the relationships between their tribal and U.S. governments.

"We are a sovereign nation who vote for their own tribe, but we are also citizens of the state," Hanks said.

Times reporters Sue Halena and Kirsti Marohn contributed to this report.

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