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Nick Coleman: This may be the year the native vote counts

Nick Coleman

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They were the first Americans but the last citizens. Now American Indians are determined to help decide the future of a nation that once tried to consign them to the past.

Congress didn't extend American citizenship to Indians until 1924 (four years after women got the vote). Before that, only a few Indians had been allowed to vote, and only if they were "civilized." One 1917 Minnesota Supreme Court ruling stated that an Indian who wanted to vote must leave the reservation to "pursue the customs and habits of civilization."

Who knows? If Minnesota required voters in Anoka County to demonstrate "habits of civilization," Jesse Ventura might never have been elected. But for decades after the belated granting of citizenship in their native land, Indians often felt unwelcome at the polls.

"A lot of our ancestors didn't even know they could vote, and it was a long time before we knew we had rights as citizens," says Doreen Hagen, a Dakota who is tribal council president on the Prairie Island Indian Reservation in Red Wing. "My grandparents and parents never voted. Nobody ever asked us to vote, and I guess no one ever needed our votes."

"Indians have only had the privilege of voting for the last 80 years," says Melanie Benjamin, tribal chair of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. "And I have friends in their 40s and 50s who have never voted. If you live in Mille Lacs County, it's tough to relate to those (non-Indian) officials. But we are going to change that. We are going to make the state of Minnesota aware of the importance of Indian voters."

Hagen and Benjamin are co-chairs of a Get Out The Vote Campaign that kicks off today with the unveiling of a billboard in downtown Minneapolis urging Minnesota Indians to vote on Nov. 2. Against a backdrop of historical leaders who led the fight for tribal survival in the 19th century is a message about carrying on the fight to the ballot box.

"They Couldn't," the billboard says. "You Can! Your Great Grandparents didn't have a voice in the vote. ... For their memory, for yourself, and for your children, YOU SHOULD."

There are an estimated 33,000 eligible Indian voters in Minnesota, a small slice of the electorate. But as Florida demonstrated in 2000, every vote counts. And with Minnesota a battleground state in the presidential race, the outcome might well be affected by the results on Minnesota's 11 Indian reservations or in the urban precincts where many Indians live.

"Now we know how it operates," Hagen says. "We know our vote counts. Maybe some people don't like the idea that we're voting now, but we have a voice and we know how to make it heard."

The historic disenfranchisement of minorities helps explain how nuclear power plants such as the twin reactors at Prairie Island could be built within a stone's throw of a reservation playground but how all the tax revenues went to Red Wing. Or how the Prairie Island tribe tried to buy advertising time in the late 1980s to oppose expansion of nuclear waste in its back yard, Twin Cities' TV stations refused to sell the tribe any spots.

For decades after they were condescendingly deemed citizens, the nation's Indians were ignored by politicians and left in neglected and isolated communities without power or representation. As late as 1985, the small Dakota Indian tribe at Prior Lake had to go to federal court to force the city of Prior Lake to permit tribal members to vote in city elections.

Suddenly, however, the native vote looms large.

All sides are making huge efforts to get out the vote this year: Everything from recorded phone messages from George W. Bush urging voters to apply for absentee ballots to a concerted overseas effort to make sure that troops in uniform get to exercise their franchise. With a close election and a rising appreciation of the stakes involved, it should be no surprise that Indians are making a nonpartisan but nationally coordinated effort to turn out the vote.

Although participation in tribal elections is always high, Indian voters often have stayed away from federal elections, with only about 20 percent of eligible voters going to the polls. This year, the National Congress of American Indians is sponsoring a Native Vote 2004 Campaign that hopes to get 1 million American Indians and Alaska Natives to turn out. There is plenty of evidence that the native vote can tip the balance in close races.

In Arizona, Navajo Indian voters helped a Democrat win the governor's race in 2002 by just 2,200 votes. That same year, in South Dakota, Democratic Sen. Tim Johnson won a closely fought race for reelection, pushed over the top by votes from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. And politicians who anger Indian voters do so at their peril: Washington's Sen. Slade Gorton was defeated in 2000 after being targeted by the tribes.

Traditionally, many Indians have voted Democratic. The result: Republicans have largely ignored Indian voters while Democrats have taken them for granted. Many Indians don't want to play this game anymore: If you want Indian votes, you will have to earn them.

"That's a horrible perception, that only Democrats should care about our vote," said Benjamin, who recently won a second four-year term as chair of the Mille Lacs Reservation. "If you represent the state of Minnesota, you're supposed to represent *all* the people of Minnesota."

According to Benjamin, Gov. Tim Pawlenty made a recent (and brief) visit to the Mille Lacs Reservation -- the first time a governor has visited the politically important reservation since DFLer Rudy Perpich, who left office in 1991. Pawlenty, a Republican, might be smart to schedule another visit. His threat last winter to bust the tribal casino monopoly has not made the reservations any riper for Republican canvassers, nor did President Bush's recent tongue-tied failure to explain the concept of tribal sovereignty.

But Democrats have vulnerabilities, too. John Kerry opposes a plan to store nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain Nevada, leaving a growing pile of it at Prairie Island. Despite Republican complaints that the campaign to get Indians to vote is a Democratic plot (a charge that is insulting on its face, and is rejected by the National Congress of American Indians), the more you look at the issue, the more it looks like Indians are finally getting some of the respect -- and the attention -- due all voters in a democracy.

At long last, perhaps, American Indians are taking their place at the table, in the halls of government and in the voting halls, too. And there's only one thing you can say:

It's about time.

Nick Coleman is at ncoleman@startribune.com.

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