



Indian Health Service Voter Registration

The Problem

A long history of formal disenfranchisement, the legacy of colonization, and present-day racism and hostility continue to prevent many Native Americans from exercising their fundamental right to vote. Ongoing geographic, language, and cultural barriers to the ballot make it harder for Native voters to register to vote and to get to a polling place or receive a ballot by mail. These barriers increase the cost-burden of voting, making the process of participating in our democracy even more stressful and time consuming for people often already struggling to get by.¹

As a result, year after year, Native American voters are registered and vote at rates much lower than those of other communities. Over a third (34%) of the Native American population is not registered to vote, notably higher than the 26.5% of non-Hispanic whites who are eligible but unregistered.² Turnout for Native Americans is also lower than for other communities —13% lower than the national average for all racial and ethnic groups and 17% lower than non-Hispanic white voters.³

A Solution

The 34% of voting age Native Americans that are not registered to vote represent approximately 1.2 million potential new voters. Today, we have a significant opportunity to reduce the role voter registration plays as a barrier to voting for these potential voters by providing voter registration services at federal agencies and offices most utilized by Native communities – top among them, Indian Health Services (IHS).

President Biden's March 2021 Executive Order Promoting Access to Voting⁴ strongly encourages federal agencies to seek and accept designation as voter registration sites under the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA). While such designation is not a pre-requisite for IHS and 638-compacting facilities to offer voter registration, being designated would help both entities provide high quality voter registration services—similar to those provided for decades at DMVs, Medicaid offices, and other state agencies—to the Native people they serve. IHS serves approximately 2.6 million American Indian and Alaska Native people each year, many of whom are not registered to vote and likely would take advantage of the opportunity to register alongside their routine visits to IHS and 638 facilities.

Impact

Because state agencies have been offering voter registration for decades, we know that doing so is both inexpensive and effective. Data from Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services show that the average cost of offering voter registration is a mere \$7,000 per site per year.⁵ What's

more, Demos research finds that, when state agencies comply with their responsibilities under the NVRA, millions of additional people are added to the registration rolls.⁶

A robust body of research demonstrates the relationship between voting and individual and community health.⁷ Integrating voter registration services into IHS facilities can help break down barriers to the ballot box, close persistent registration and turnout gaps, and improve the health and wellbeing of Native American communities.

The Urgency of This Moment

Though seeking NVRA designation is relatively new for IHS facilities, it is already well-supported by the Native American community. In June, the Native Congress of American Indians passed a resolution urging IHS providers to become NVRA designated sites and encouraging Tribal Nations that compact IHS responsibilities to do likewise.⁸ Additionally, other institutions serving Indian Country have also pursued and secured NVRA designation recently, include the Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institute in New Mexico and Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas, in cooperation with the Department of the Interior.⁹

The imperative to build a multiracial, inclusive democracy is as urgent as ever. Native American communities are an integral part of such a democracy, and the federal government has a unique responsibility to break down the barriers experienced by these voters and ensure they have meaningful opportunities to cast ballots that count. By integrating voter registration services into their regular interactions with patients, IHS and 638-compacting facilities can leverage their significant reach and critical role in Indian country to move us closer to a democracy in which all communities are valued and thrive.

¹ Jacqueline De León, James Tucker, and Dan McCool, *Obstacles at Every Turn: Barriers to Political Participation Faced by Native American Voters*, 2020, <https://www.narf.org/obstacles-at-every-turn/>.

² National Conference of State Legislatures, *Voting for All Americans: Native Americans*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voting-for-all-americans-american-indians.aspx>. See also National Conference of American Indians Infographic, https://www.ncai.org/initiatives/campaigns/NCAI_NativeVoteInfographic.pdf.

³ Report of the Interagency Steering Group on Native American Voting Rights, March 2022, page 9, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Tribal-Voting-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

⁴ “Executive Order on Promoting Access to Voting,” The White House, March 7, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/03/07/executive-order-on-promoting-access-to-voting/>.

⁵ Michigan DHHS administers SNAP, Medicaid/CHIP programs. Data obtained via public records requests and represents an average across sites for 2019 and 2020.

⁶ Laura Williamson, Pamela Cataldo, and Brenda Wright, *Toward a More Representative Electorate*, Dēmos, December 21, 2018, 6. <https://www.demos.org/research/toward-more-representative-electorate>.

⁷ Nelson C, Sloan J, Chandra A. *Examining Civic Engagement Links to Health: Findings from the Literature and Implications for a Culture of Health*. RAND Corporation, 2019. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3163.html.

⁸ National Congress of American Indians, *Resolution #ANC -22-038*, 2022. <https://ncai.assetbank-server.com/assetbank-ncai/assetfile/1970.pdf>.

⁹ Department of the Interior, *Interior Department Takes Steps to Increase Voter Registration in Indigenous Communities*, March 24, 2022. <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-department-takes-steps-increase-voter-registration-indigenous-communities>.