

DISCONNECTED DEMOCRACY: The Impact of Mail Service on Native American Voter Registration and Mail Balloting

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Residential addressing and home mail delivery are critical issues in the voter registration and mail balloting process. While most households have residential addresses in the familiar city-style formats, some rural areas and especially Native American reservations do not have similar addressing systems or full U.S. Postal Service coverage. Lacking a residential address or access to home mail delivery complicates voter registration, election day voting, and vote by mail (VBM) opportunities. Nonexistent or unreliable mail service disrupts the delivery of timely registration forms and ballots and states often reject registrations from households that do

not have a physical address. Even if voter registration is successful, states sometimes fail to mail VBM ballots to these homes or count VBM ballots returned from these homes. And strict voter ID requirements sometimes disenfranchise voters with non-traditional addresses. These issues systematically suppress Native American participation and are especially harmful in states that significantly rely heavily on VBM. And we already know that Native American turnout is often lower than any other group¹ largely because of systematic barriers to voting.²

This paper explores the relationship between Native American populations and the availability of home mail delivery service using U.S. Census Bureau data to better understand the geographic and demographic dynamics in these areas. We show that areas with more Native Americans are associated with more unreliable mail delivery. This association is stronger for Native Americans than any other racial or ethnic group and applies to both on- and off-reservation areas. However, the pattern is especially strong in states with high numbers of Native Americans living on reservations. In these states, reservation areas are classified by the Census Bureau as having significantly more mail delivery barriers than off-reservation areas. In sum, the more Native Americans there are in an area—whether it is on a reservation or not—the more likely the area has been assessed by the Census Bureau as having unreliable mail delivery.

The Census Bureau is tasked with reaching all residents in the United States when conducting the decennial census and develops logistical plans to meet those goals just like all Secretaries of State must do in election planning and year-round voter registration efforts. While the Census Bureau does not publish data directly related to mail or the information used to make the determinations, they provide meaningful and informative classifications. The Census Bureau classifications show that some areas cannot be effectively serviced by mail. Residential addressing is just one of the many systemic barriers preventing Native Americans from full democratic participation, but it is critical

because it impacts so many of the steps citizens must go through to register and eventually cast a ballot that counts. This research points to states with more severe problems and can serve as a roadmap to addressing these systematic issues. Policies that accommodate voters in homes with non-standard addresses, on reservations and in other rural areas, is not just a logistical necessity but a fundamental step towards achieving electoral equity and empowering Native American voters.

DATA:

Before the 2020 decennial census, the Census Bureau organized all areas of the country into Type of Enumeration Areas (TEAs). These geographic areas were developed to help the Census Bureau with the administration of the 2020 census. TEAs are categorized as one of four categories: Self Response, Update Leave, Update Enumerate, and Remote Alaska.³ Self Response is the most prevalent category, covering over 95.45% of housing units.⁴ Because these areas are judged to have reliable mail service, the Census Bureau either mails questionnaires or mails directions to complete the questionnaires online through the U.S. Postal Service. Update Leave, covering 4.52% of housing units, is the second most prevalent category and is used in areas where “the majority of housing units either do not have mail delivered to the physical location of the housing unit, or the mail delivery information for the housing unit cannot be verified.”⁵ In other words, the Update Leave category is for areas where the Census Bureau estimates most households do not have reliable mail service and thus plans to administer the census in ways that do not rely on U.S. Postal Service mail delivery. The Census Bureau aggregates TEAs at the tract level and releases the number of households per tract that fall within each category.⁶

To better understand the areas that are designated Update Leave, we collected additional Census Bureau data including race, education, income, poverty, and housing occupancy.⁷ We also account for urban areas and federally recognized Native American reservations.⁸ Urban areas should be more likely to have typical addresses and reliable mail service, increasing the percentage of Self Response around cities. We consider cities with a population above 50,000 people as urban. We also created an indicator noting which tracts are on- and off-reservation. This allows us to compare TEA categories on- and off-reservation within states and nationwide.

RESULTS:

Table 1 shows the results of three linear regression models. The first column has results from a simple *Bivariate Model* between percent Native American⁹ of the citizen voting age population (CVAP) and percent Update Leave at the tract level. The size of the coefficient (ranging from 0 to 1) broadly describes the strength of the relationship between Update Leave and the Native American population within a state. The coefficient for percent Native American of 0.948 shows a nearly one to one relationship between Native American population and housing units classified as Update Leave meaning a one percentage point increase in Native American population in a tract produces a 0.948 percentage point increase in Update Leave. These are very strong and statistically significant results. Based on this model, a tract with 50% Native American population would be nearly 50% Update Leave on average. A tract with 80% Native American would be 78.4% Update Leave on average.

The *Full Model* in the second column of Table 1 incorporates control variables for percent home occupancy, percent college educated, median income, percent poverty, whether the tract is an urban area, and whether the tract is on a reservation. Even controlling for these factors, the result for percent Native American is still extremely strong and statistically significant at 0.794. Tracts on reservations have about 4.1 percentage points higher housing units classified as Update Leave.

The third model, *Full Model with State Fixed Effects*, additionally controls for each state. The results are similar to the *Full Model*, but percent Native American is slightly lower at 0.709 and the effects for reservations are higher at about 6.9

TABLE 1

	Bivariate Model	Full Model	Full Model with State Fixed Effects
% AIAN CVAP	0.948 ***	0.794 ***	0.709 ***
	-0.01	-0.01	-0.011
% House Occupied		-0.472 ***	-0.488 ***
		-0.005	-0.005
% College Educated		-0.020 ***	-0.013 ***
		-0.003	-0.003
% Poverty		-0.037 ***	-0.065 ***
		-0.006	-0.006
Median Income (Logged)		1.133 ***	-0.004
		-0.194	-0.2
Urban		-4.584 ***	-4.288 ***
		-0.093	-0.095
Reservation		4.138 ***	6.934 ***
		-0.357	-0.436
Constant	2.560 ***	36.255 ***	48.467 ***
	-0.046	-2.099	-2.176
State Fixed Effects	No	No	Yes
N	72,368	72,002	72,002
Adjusted R ²	0.11	0.292	0.342
*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.			

percentage points. These results are also statistically significant.

Compared to other models (not presented here), the percent Native American coefficient is positive and significantly larger than the coefficient for any other racial or ethnic group. The next closest group is Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander with a coefficient of 0.153 which is much lower. This means that percent Native American is a significant positive factor in the usage of Update Leave categories in ways other racial and ethnic groups are not. There are notable differences on- and off-reservation, but the differences in Update Leave classifications are not solely explained by reservations. Regression models show that the association between Native American and Update Leave is still larger than for any

other racial group even in off-reservation areas. Similarly, reservations with a higher percentage of Native American have more Update Leave households than reservations with fewer Native American. Generally, when there is a higher proportion of Native Americans, we expect to see more homes designated as Update Leave. This signals that the Census Bureau estimates that areas with more Native American populations are less likely to have home mail delivery.

The regression models also allow us to explore the relationship at the state level. Table 2 shows the results for the percent Native American coefficient in 13 states with significant Native American populations. The first column shows the coefficient for the *Full Model* where we control for reservations. The second column shows the percent Native American coefficient for a model where we do not include a control variable for reservations. California, Nevada, Washington, and Montana have the strongest relationships between percent Native American and Update Leave when controlling for reservations. New Mexico, South Dakota, and Oklahoma on the other hand have weaker relationships. South Dakota, Minnesota, California, Nevada, and North Dakota have the strongest relationships if we do not control for reservations. South Dakota, Minnesota, and New Mexico see large differences depending on the model. The differences in the models indicate that in some states reservations are strongly related to Update Leave and absorb some of the relationship, making percent Native American less impactful. Overall, the results show that Update Leave is more strongly associated with Native populations in some states like Nevada and California compared to other states like Oklahoma and Wisconsin.

Table 3 shows a comparison of TEA categories on- and off-reservation in the same 13 states with significant Native American populations. To create these comparisons, we average tract level percentages for TEA classifications and remove tracts in urban areas, defined as places with greater than 50,000 people, to better compare TEAs across rural

TABLE 2

State	Controlling for Reservations	Not Controlling for Reservations
Alaska	-0.221	-0.409
Arizona	0.78	0.85
California	1.277	1.231
Michigan	0.72	0.661
Minnesota	0.818	1.328
Montana	1.036	0.932
North Dakota	0.818	1.066
New Mexico	0.356	0.759
Nevada	1.231	1.143
Oklahoma	0.254	0.241
South Dakota	0.256	1.338
Washington	1.058	0.882
Wisconsin	0.619	0.495

areas. The first column shows the average Self Response tract percentage in off-reservation areas while the second column shows the average Update Leave percentage for tracts on reservations. We show these two values because they best capture the difference between TEA designations and mail deliverability between on- and off-reservation areas. States with high percentages in both columns have a high difference of mail reliability based on reservations. Table 3 shows high variation of TEA classifications across a few states. These are instances

where the off-reservation tract average is overwhelmingly Self Response while the on-reservation tract average is overwhelmingly Update Leave.

This pattern is apparent in several states such as South Dakota, North Dakota, Arizona, New Mexico, and Minnesota. Figure 1 shows the relationship between Update Leave and percent Native American in North and South Dakota at the tract level.¹⁰ All tracts that

are majority Native American are majority Update Leave. Tracts on reservations are at least 75% Update Leave while only two off-reservation tracts rank as high in Update Leave—with one of the tracts being overwhelmingly Native American. On the other hand, tracts with a low percentage of Native Americans and are off-reservation tend to have low percentages of Update Leave. The on- and off-reservation comparisons help us understand which states have the most pressing addressing and mail deliverability issues according to the Census Bureau. The analysis uses several approaches to show that Update Leave is prevalent in heavily Native American areas and that Update Leave increases as the Native American population increases. Also, there is an exceptionally strong and

TABLE 3

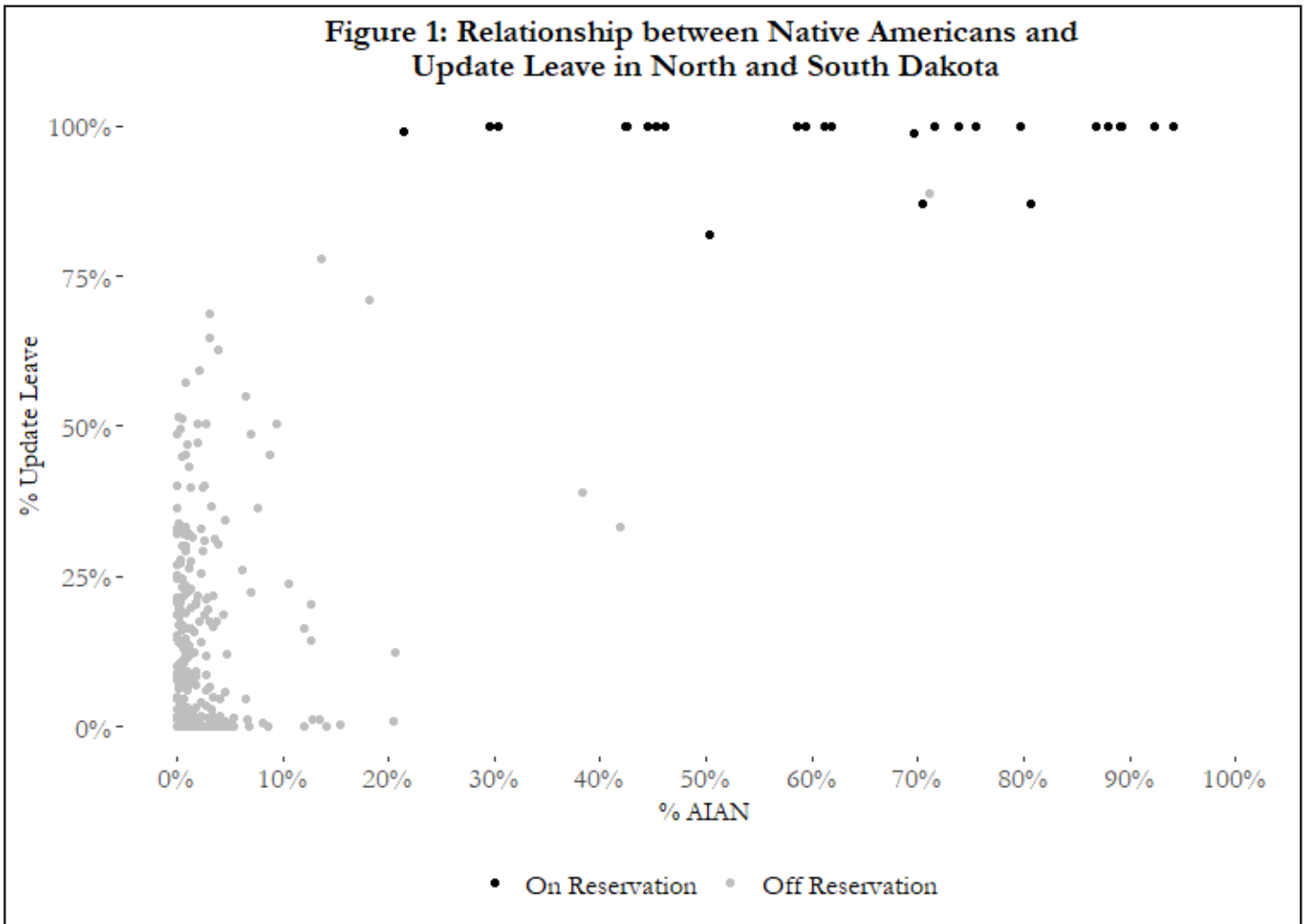
State	Average Off-Reservation	Average On-Reservation
	% Self Response	% Update Leave
Alaska	39.43	70.09
Arizona	81.42	90.09
California	88.03	51.49
Michigan	95.64	0.17
Minnesota	94.93	67.42
Montana	76.76	67.95
New Mexico	75.91	91.47
Nevada	77.42	50.3
North Dakota	86.07	98.25
Oklahoma	85.22	18.55
South Dakota	87.24	98.23
Washington	91.77	19.75
Wisconsin	95.44	26.82

statistically significant relationship between percent Native American and Update Leave even when controlling for other demographic factors. Native Americans have the strongest positive relationship as compared to all the other Census Bureau racial and ethnic categories. While Update Leave is more prevalent on reservations, off-reservation areas with Native American populations also have significant levels of Update Leave. State level results of on- and off-reservation comparisons show that South Dakota, North Dakota, New Mexico, and Arizona have large Update Leave differences, and that the association between the percent Native American population and Update Leave is especially strong in California, Nevada, Montana and Washington.

DISCUSSION:

The results show a consistent pattern where the Census Bureau estimates areas with large Native American populations have unreliable or non-existent home mail delivery through the U.S. Postal Service. To support these findings, we did a case study of residential addresses in Arizona comparing official Census Bureau household counts to U.S. Department of Transportation household counts. We found that residents off-reservation are 105 times more likely to have a standard address than residents on reservation. The findings are informative in the context of voter registration, and in-person and VBM voting because unreliable mail service and addressing issues complicate these processes for voters.

The lack of traditional addresses creates barriers to registering, voting in person, voting by mail, and navigating the election system. In lieu of a standard address, Native American registrants may use a descriptive address, but these are more difficult to provide on voter registration forms and IDs, may be rejected by undertrained election staff, or may



result in the voter being placed in the wrong precinct.¹¹ The lack of addresses forces many to rely on post office (P.O.) boxes to receive mail, but boxes are not always available.¹² Voters with a P.O. box outside the jurisdiction in which they are registered are at a heightened risk of having their registrations cancelled because it may appear that they live in a different county or state.¹³ Voter ID requirements to cast a ballot in person create additional complications because the address on an ID typically needs to match voter registration records. The shifting legal landscape around acceptable voter IDs and valid registration addresses in each state further confuses both Native voters and election staff. In some cases, postal officials will only deliver mail to the owner of a P.O. box, which would impact other family members sharing the P.O. box who are expecting to receive mail ballots.¹⁴ In other cases, a voter may request a VBM ballot and try to vote in person when that VBM ballot doesn't arrive in time or at all. But if a voter cannot surrender the VBM ballot, they may be given a provisional ballot. Voters casting provisional ballots due to VBM, ID, residency, registration, or other issues will typically need to contact election officials and provide more information to have their provisional vote counted. Lastly, unreliable mail service further exacerbates all these issues because official correspondence between voters and election administrators, like the status of a registration application or imminent removal from the voting rolls, often depend on timely mail service.

Concerns over slow or unreliable mail service in rural reservations have prompted the use of ballot collectors in Native American communities to ease the burden of casting ballots. Many Native American voters use ballot collection to overcome voting barriers due to long distances and inadequate postal coverage in Native American communities, though these efforts face legal restrictions.¹⁵ As with the situations noted above, the lack of reliable mail delivery and addresses results in confusion and additional obstacles for Native American voters.

CLOSING

The disparities highlighted in this report are not only statistically significant but also profoundly damaging. Native American voters face systemic barriers that impede participation at every stage of the voting process – from registration to casting ballots to ensuring those ballots are counted. Many of these barriers arise from or are exacerbated by unreliable mail service. Addressing these barriers is not just a matter of logistics; it is a matter of justice and equity. States must urgently resolve the real and pressing challenges that Native American voters encounter. This report sheds light on just one of these critical issues, underscoring the need for comprehensive policy reforms. We call on all states and advocates to recognize these obstacles and take decisive action to promote fairness, ensure equal access, and foster a vibrant and inclusive democracy. Together, we can work towards an election system where every Native American vote is counted, and every Native American voice is heard.

ENDNOTES

1. Gall, Megan A. and Kevin Stout, *Election Inequalities in Indian Country; Understanding Native American Turnout in Federal Elections*, Native American Rights Fund, 2024.
2. Tucker, James Tomas, Jacqueline De León, and Dan McCool, *Obstacles at Every Turn: Barriers to Political Participation Faced by Native American Voters*, Native American Rights Fund, 2020. <https://vote.narf.org/obstacles-at-every-turn/>. Morelle, Joseph D. *Voting for Native Peoples: Barriers and Policy Solutions*, 118th Congress, Second Session, July 2024. https://democrats-cha.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-cha.house.gov/files/evo-mediadocument/2024_July_Voting%20for%20Native%20Peoples_Report-vm3.pdf.
3. We do not analyze Update Enumerate in this paper because it is rarely used (0.01% of housing units) and is a Census Bureau category that involves enumeration while updating addresses. Remote Alaska is a special case for hard-to-reach areas in Alaska which require additional information gathering and is also rarely used (0.02% of housing units).
4. U.S. Census Bureau. “2020 Census: Type of Enumeration Area (TEA) Viewer.” <https://mtgis-portal.geo.census.gov/arcgis/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=66cb1f187d4e45fd984a1a96fcee505e>
5. Ibid.
6. U.S. Census Bureau. “TEA_PCT_Housing_Tract.xlsx.” <https://www2.census.gov/geo/maps/DC2020/TEA/>.
7. U.S. Census Bureau. “CVAP 2015-2019 5 Year ACS Data.” <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about/voting-rights/cvap.2019.html#list-tab-1518558936>; U.S. Census Bureau. “Educational Attainment.” *American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables*, Table S1501, 2022.; U.S. Census Bureau. “Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2022 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars).” *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables*, Table S1901, 2022.; U.S. Census Bureau. “Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months.” *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables*, Table S1701, 2022.; U.S. Census Bureau. “OCCUPANCY STATUS.” *Decennial Census, DEC Redistricting Data (PL 94-171)*, Table H1, 2020.
8. The urban and reservation are binary variables with 1 noting the tract center is within the area of a city of fifty thousand people or within reservation boundaries and 0 otherwise.
9. Formally, this category is non-Hispanic Native American and Alaska Native, or AIAN.
10. Other states like Montana, California, Nevada, and Wisconsin fall into a more intermediate category where Update Leave is elevated for on-reservation tracts. Washington, Oklahoma, and Michigan differ to a smaller degree across reservation borders and Alaska is an outlier because areas are classified under the Remote Alaska category.
11. Morelle, 45-47.
12. Ibid., 48-51.
13. Tucker et al., 41.
14. Morelle, 55-56.
15. McCool, Dan and Weston McCool. “Ballot Collection and Native American Voters: An Assessment of Benefits and Costs.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (47:2), 2024.



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