

Obstacles Persist: According to the Data

Executive Summary

Native Americans face barriers to voting at every stage of the electoral process, and those barriers are not random. They are rooted in decades of exclusion, chronic underinvestment in rural and tribal infrastructure, and election administration systems that were not designed with Indian Country in mind. Geographic isolation, unreliable mail service, nonstandard addressing systems, limited internet access, and inadequate polling resources all combine to make voting harder in heavily Native American counties than anywhere else in the country. The consequences are measurable.

This paper examines the full voting process in Indian Country. Each section follows a stage that voters must successfully navigate, which includes registering, staying on the rolls, choosing a voting method, casting a ballot, and resolving any issues that arise before their ballot is counted. That framing reflects a core premise of the analysis: voting is not a single act. It is a sustained process that places real and recurring demands on voters, and disparities can emerge at any point along the way. Tracking the process end to end makes those disparities visible and connects them to the structural conditions that produce them.

The data powering this analysis come from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) for 2020, 2022, and 2024. The EAVS is the most comprehensive source of election administration data available at the county level, covering everything from registration activity to ballot disposition. Tracking three election cycles across presidential and midterm years allows us to distinguish persistent structural disparities from election-specific variation and to identify where conditions are improving and where they are not. The analysis uses three geographic groupings for comparison. Select Counties are 30 counties where Native Americans constitute more than 25% of the population, and they are the primary unit of analysis. Focus States are the 13 states with the highest overall Native American populations and provide a regional comparison. National figures provide a broader baseline. The highlights below summarize the key findings across each stage of the voting process. Generally, more voting issues arose in 2024 than in previous years, indicating an increase in obstacles to voting in Indian Country. Comprehensive policy recommendations follow the full report.

Key Findings

Registration

1. New voter registrations in Select Counties declined 59% from 2020 to 2024. Nationally, registrations declined 22% over the same period and showed a partial rebound from 2020 to 2024. Select Counties showed no rebound.

2. The typical pattern of higher registrations in presidential election years did not hold in Select Counties. Despite 2024 being a presidential year, registrations fell 53% from 2022 levels.
3. The DMV accounted for roughly half of all new registrations in Select Counties in 2024 but carries a rejection rate above 5% each year, about double the Focus State rate.
4. DMV rejections grew 176.8% as a share of total rejections in Select Counties from 2020 to 2024, while declining as a share nationally and in Focus States.
5. Mail rejections grew 224.4% as a share of total rejections in Select Counties over the same period, while declining nationally and in Focus States.
6. Automatic voter registration produced roughly 3,000 additional registrations per county in adopting states but reached only one of the 30 Select Counties.
7. Regression analysis in Focus States confirms that higher Native American citizen voting age population (CVAP) shares are associated with higher registration rejection rates, a finding that is statistically significant. All else equal, a 100% Native county would have a rejection rate 2.8 percentage points higher than a county with no Native residents, against an average county rejection rate of 1%.

Turnout

8. Turnout in Select Counties ran 4 to 5 percentage points below Focus State averages in presidential years and about 1 percentage point below in the 2022 midterm election.
9. The turnout gap documented here is smaller than in other research, including prior work by the authors. These figures represent the most conservative available estimate of the disparity. Select Counties contain large nonNative populations, which dampens the signal, and county-level turnout data from 30 counties are less effective than surveys, exit polling, or other methodologies at capturing racial group-specific turnout patterns.

Voter Roll

10. Confirmation notices in Select Counties grew 178% from 2020 to 2024, compared to roughly 40% nationally and in Focus States.
11. Ninety percent of confirmation notices in Select Counties went unanswered in 2024, compared to 59% nationally. Successful return rates in Select Counties were about three times lower than national and Focus State averages in 2020 and 2022.
12. In Select Counties, 87% of confirmation notices sent in 2024 were triggered by undeliverable mail. Nationally, undeliverable mail accounted for only 11% of confirmation notices.

Voting Methods

13. Mail voting in Select Counties was lower than national and Focus State rates across all three election cycles, including during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic surge. In-person Election Day voting remained elevated even during the pandemic.

14. Provisional ballot use in Select Counties more than doubled as a share of total votes cast from 2020 to 2024, growing far faster than national trends.

Mail Ballot Rejections

15. Mail ballot rejections grew in Select Counties from 2020 to 2024, despite fewer mail ballots being cast in 2024. The effective rejection rate increased even as mail voting declined.

16. Signature issues, both non-matching and missing, accounted for just over 40% of mail ballot rejections in Select Counties in 2020 and 2022.

Ballot Curling

17. The EAVS tracked ballot curing for the first time in 2024. Of 1,082 ballots entering the curing process in the 10 Select Counties that reported data, 78% were successfully cured, compared to 53% nationally. This finding is heartening because it shows the cure process can be effective in avoiding ballot rejections but deserves caution and follow-up.

18. Provisional ballots in Select Counties more than doubled from 2020 to 2024. Their share of total votes cast more than doubled as well.

Provisional Ballots

19. The provisional ballot rejection rate in Select Counties fell from 65.8% in 2020 to 40.8% in 2024, a meaningful improvement. However, 40.8% remains roughly double the national rate of 24.9%.

20. Only 34.2% of provisional ballots in Select Counties were counted in 2020, rising to 59.2% in 2024, still well below the national counted rate of 74.1% and the Focus State rate of 77.7%.

21. Outdated registration drove roughly 33.1% of provisional ballot use in Select Counties in 2024, with not being registered accounting for another 26.8%. Registration problems drove 60% of provisional ballot use in Select Counties compared to 45% nationwide.

22. Wrong precinct and wrong jurisdiction rejections accounted for 67.5% of provisional ballot rejections in Select Counties in 2022, compared to 19.1% nationally, a gap of 48.4 percentage points.

23. Regression analysis finds that a county with 100% Native American CVAP would have a provisional ballot rejection rate 30 percentage points higher than a county with no Native residents, one of the largest effect sizes in the study.

Total Rejections

24. Total rejections across all types in Select Counties declined from 7,474 in 2020 to 5,176 in 2024, and the combined rejection rate fell from 1.7% to 1.2% of the CVAP.

25. The composition of rejections shifted significantly. Mail and provisional ballot rejections, which occur after voters have already attempted to cast a ballot, grew from 35% of total rejections in 2020 to 67% in 2024.

26. Regression analysis in Focus States confirms that Native American population share has a positive and statistically significant effect on the combined rejection rate. A 100% Native county would have a combined rejection rate 1.4 percentage points higher than a county with no Native residents, nearly twice the average combined rejection rate of 0.57%.