



New data: Native voters hit significant roadblocks at every stage of election process

BOULDER, Colo.—Native Americans continue to experience significant, compounding barriers to voting at every step of the election process, from registration to ballot counting, according to a new report from the Native American Rights Fund (NARF) and Blockwell Consulting that analyzes data collected by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission from 2020, '22, and '24.

The numbers illustrate a voting process that is starkly different than what most Americans experience, resulting in higher rejections of voter registrations and ballots cast, and more voters removed from statewide rolls. This comes amid a raft of political efforts this year to restrict voting across the board. At the same time, the systematic dismantling of the Voting Rights Act has effectively removed the main tool voters have to challenge discriminatory practices.

Among the findings in the new [*Obstacles Persist: According to the Data*](#) report:

- **Rejections of voter registration applications by mail and at DMVs skyrocketed in areas with larger Native populations, even as they fell nationally.** Rejections rose by an average of 200% in counties where Native Americans are at least one-quarter of the population.
- **The rejection rate of mail-in ballots rose in areas with larger Native populations, even as actual mail-in voting numbers declined.** Between 2020 and '24, rejections for missed deadlines increased 134% in counties where Native Americans make up more than 25% of the population, compared to a rise of 55% nationally,

strong evidence that USPS network disruptions had a significant impact with Native voters.

- **While the rate of provisional ballots successfully counted in areas with larger Native populations rose between 2020-2024, it was still 15 percent lower than the national counted rate.**

“Voting is not a singular act, it’s a sequential process,” said NARF Senior Staff Attorney Allison Neswood. “It’s a chain of registration, voting, provisional votes, counting, and curing ballots. Even as we celebrate America’s 250th birthday, Native people really only got the practical right to vote with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Decades of racism and systemic failures in Indian Country mean each of the steps involved in voting is precarious, and Native voters face barriers at every one. Full access to the ballot is a matter of sovereignty, self-determination, and equity.”

Obstacles Persist: According to the Data, follows *Obstacles at Every Turn*, which was released in 2020. The original report was based on testimony from 120 witnesses in nine public hearings held across the country. *Obstacles Persist* adds concrete statistical evidence to NARF’s ongoing investigations, based on recent election records.

Researchers examined 30 counties where Native Americans make up more than 25% of the population, as well as the 13 states with the highest number of Native residents. These were compared with national baseline statistics.

The causes for disparities in successful Native voting are sometimes familiar (such as short deadlines for receiving mail-in ballots), but often specific to Indian Country — such as voters being removed from rolls in areas where there is unreliable mail service or poll workers not accepting Tribal identification.

“In Apache County, Arizona, fewer drop ballot boxes are available during presidential elections, when turnout is highest, than during midterm elections, when turnout is lower,” said NARF Senior Staff Attorney Jacqueline De León. “The gap between supply and demand impacts successful voting. There are precincts in Indian Country without a single ballot box. That should be offensive to everyone. You can’t have a voting precinct without a place to vote.”

Obstacles Persist provides two dozen recommendations for ways to increase ballot access and successful voting for Native communities, including expanding automatic and same-day registration to areas with larger Native populations;

better outreach for election notices, ballot curing, and more; as well as expanding polling place access throughout Indian Country.

“For Native Americans, the right to vote has been obstructed, delayed, and denied across two centuries of United States history,” De León said. “Closing that participation gap is not simply a technical problem. It’s a question of whether American democracy is willing to extend its guarantees to all its citizens, including the first peoples of this land.”

ABOUT NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS FUND

Native American Rights Fund (NARF) is a non-profit 501c(3) organization dedicated to defending and asserting the legal rights of Native Americans. Since 1970, NARF has provided specialized legal assistance to Tribal Nations, organizations, and individuals nationwide on the most important issues to Native Americans. In hundreds of major court cases, legislation and inter-governmental agreements, NARF has achieved significant results in critical areas such as Tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, natural resource protection, voting rights, and Indian education.

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