



## SURGING TURNOUT THROTTLED BY LOW REGISTRATION

# How to Break the Registration Barrier for Native Americans in Nevada

**Native American voters had the highest turnout of any demographic group in Nevada during the 2020 general election. The Native American community recorded a 15-point increase from 2016 turnout levels. Yet, in spite of high turnout among registered Native Americans, registration rates remain extremely low. Despite comprising 1.3% of Nevada's voting age population,<sup>1</sup> Native Americans are only 0.14% of registered voters.<sup>2</sup>**

**Low representation of Native Americans among registered voters, coupled with high rates of participation from those who are registered, is evidence that Nevada officials must do more to guarantee every eligible voter has the freedom to vote.**

Nevada Native voters showed up in the last election but remain underserved by county officials. Prior to 2019, Tribal Governments did not have the option to request a polling place, and in 2016 the Pyramid Lake and Walker River Paiute Tribes had to sue the state of Nevada in order to receive accessible polling locations for their voters.<sup>3</sup> The Native American community has suffered voting disenfranchisement for far too long, and it is past time that election officials do more for this community than the bare minimum. Clerks must remove administrative barriers to better and more equitably serve Indigenous voters, especially in light of Nevada's new voting laws.

Nevada's new voting options helped Native Americans vote. This is impressive, considering that in 2020, there were only 11 polling places and ballot drop boxes located on Nevada reservations.<sup>4</sup> Nearly 70% of Native American voters in Nevada live in rural areas. They overwhelmingly used mail-in voting (56%), while 13% opted to vote in person on Election Day.<sup>2</sup> Out of 25 reservations analyzed, four lacked Election Day polling places within a 30-minute drive, and six lacked an early-voting polling place within a 30-minute drive.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the increased methods of casting a ballot, there have not been increased options to overcome the barriers an estimated 60,000 eligible Native American voters face in registering to vote.<sup>6</sup> Nevadans prefer to register to vote through automatic voter registration or

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey; 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table S2901.

<sup>2</sup> Race and voting method are from a third-party voter file vendor. 2016 data from NV SOS (<https://www.nvsos.gov/sos/home/showdocument?id=4567>). 2020 data from NV SOS (<https://www.nvsos.gov/sos/home/showdocument?id=9054>).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rgj.com/story/news/politics/2016/10/07/tribe-says-they-have-enough-registered-voters-require-polling-site/91733818/>

<sup>4</sup> Overall turnout, percent early, percent mail, and percent Election Day by county reported by NV SOS. <https://www.nvsos.gov/sos/elections/election-day-information>

<sup>5</sup> AVL analysis of reservation locations, voting locations, and travel time

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nativevote.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-Native-Vote-Infographic.pdf>



through the secretary of state's voter registration website.<sup>7</sup> However, it is unnecessarily more difficult for Native Americans to utilize these options for these reasons:

- Over half of households on rural Tribal lands lack internet access, a major barrier in registering to vote when there are so few physical places to register on Tribal lands.<sup>8</sup>
- Nevada Tribal households with internet access who have only a Tribal ID are unable to register to vote online. Tribal IDs are not currently accepted on the secretary of state online voter registration website.

## SOLUTIONS FOR OVERCOMING LOW REGISTRATION

For people with internet access, the secretary of state must include Tribal IDs as an accepted proof of identity when registering to vote on their online voter registration website. Tribal IDs are federally recognized identification cards and a convenient way to verify identity, especially for voters who do not drive.

For those on Tribal lands without internet access, having physical polling locations where they can register to vote is vital. County clerks should be held accountable to work with Tribal Governments within their county to establish polling locations and ballot drop boxes. Additionally, the secretary of state should also keep an updated list of Tribal Governments already eligible for a polling place and add Tribes that apply for polling locations. This list should be kept on the secretary of state's public website to create transparency and accountability to the Nevada Native communities.

Furthermore, the secretary of state should update the Tribal request form. The current polling request form allows Nevada's Tribes to request only an early-voting or Election Day polling location; there is no option to apply for both. Also, there are no guaranteed days given for an early-voting location or the guarantee for a ballot drop box and/or location. This would also allow Tribes and advocates to identify gaps in coverage for rural communities and work to fill them, before it's too late to register.

Increasing voter registration access is essential to ensuring the freedom to vote for all eligible voters. Expanding registration access in the Nevada Native American community would expand the power and voice of the community, which has for too long gone ignored. While voting will not solve every issue, it is the right of every eligible American voter to have accessible access to voter registration and voting. While the community saw historic voter turnout in 2020, Nevada's election officials can increase Native American voting access by taking the actions we have laid out.

<sup>7</sup> <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/automatic-voter-registration-system-adds-thousands-of-new-voters-despite-security-concerns-from-critics>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.kunr.org/post/pandemic-lays-bare-digital-divide-indian-country-senators-prod-fcc#stream/0>

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