

Native Americans face voting hurdles

Barriers include lack of physical addresses for required documents

Tom Hals
REUTERS

SELLS, Ariz. – When Jennifer Juan went to cast her ballot in Arizona’s state primary in July, she spent an hour rifling through documents to convince poll workers she should be allowed to vote. It’s a common problem for many Native American voters.

A registered voter on the Tohono O’odham Nation reservation, Juan, like many residents of tribal land, lacks a physical address. Instead, voting records provide a rough description of how to find her home – it’s near milepost 7 on Indian Route 19 and hers was the 53rd home built in Cold Fields Village.

But that meant she could not satisfy a requirement to produce documents with that address as some of her other forms of identification listed a P.O. box, which residents on reservations often use to receive mail.

“It was really hard to vote this past primary,” said Juan, 41, who had to cast a provisional ballot, which records a vote when there are questions about a person’s eligibility.

Tohono O’odham Nation reservation, which has about 10,000 residents according to census data, sprawls across a Connecticut-sized area of the Sonoran Desert with its iconic saguaro cactus and mesquite trees. Most streets don’t have names and houses don’t have numbers. Few residents receive postal delivery to their homes and packages are delivered to a gas station.

Native Americans could be an important demographic in the Nov. 5 presidential election that pits Republican Donald Trump against Democrat Kamala Harris. The outcome is expected to be decided by slim margins in swing states like Arizona, which is home to around 400,000 Native Americans according to 2023 census data.

Nationally, there are about 8 million Native Americans of voting age, according to a 2022 report by the Biden administration, but the report also found they had the lowest voter turnout of any ethnic group surveyed by the Census Bureau.

Casting a ballot can be a challenge for Native Americans, especially the 13% who live on reservations where some residents may be over an hour away from the nearest polling place.

Many lack regular postal services, face difficulties obtaining documents and have high rates of disability, according to the Biden administration report. Poverty and a history of discrimination compound those prob-



April Ignacio removes a sign that had promoted her candidacy in a recent election outside a polling place on the Tohono O’odham Nation reservation in Pisinemo, Ariz., on Oct. 22. TOM HALS/REUTERS

lems.

At the Fort Peck Reservation in Montana, Joseph Dolezilek, 38, said many residents want to register to vote but don’t have access to a vehicle to get to the county office, which is more than 20 miles away.

“The bus runs just once a day and you got to wait in the town that you’re not from for the next eight hours,” he said. “That’s pretty hard for some people to do.”

Harris’ running mate, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, visited the Navajo Nation in Arizona last week, and Trump has tapped Oklahoma Republican Sen. Markwayne Mullin, a member of the Cherokee Nation, for outreach to Native American voters.

When President Joe Biden won Arizona in 2020 by about 10,000 votes, his strongholds included tribal lands such as the Tohono O’odham Nation reservation, where he won about 89% of the vote, or about 2,800 votes, according to county records.

Two years later, Arizona Republicans enacted a law that required documented proof of an address and citizenship to register to vote. That prompted the Tohono O’odham Nation to join a lawsuit alleging the move disenfranchised the 40,000 Native Americans in Ari-

zona who lack a formal address.

The state’s Republican Party is committed to making voting easier and more secure for Native American voters, said a statement from Gina Swoboda, the party’s chairman in Arizona.

A judge last year ruled that Arizona voters without a physical address could still register to vote if they had a tribal ID card, even if it listed a P.O. Box or didn’t have an address. Registrants can attest to the location of their home on voter registration forms.

But Native Americans can still run into problems if they present identification with an address that differs from voter records.

Jaynie Parrish, 45, a Navajo Nation member and founder of Arizona Native Vote, said her organization spends a lot of time explaining to voters how to document their address. “The problem is, it’s not easy and it’s not straightforward,” Parrish said.

Voting rights activists play a critical role in turning out Native American voters. Juan said that residents often lack proper identification or feel separated from state and national politics by their tribal status.

“We honestly live in a bubble here,” she said.