

EMBRACING *Native Traditions*

★ WITH THE RIGHT TO VOTE ★



By Jeanne Farris

the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States, ratified in 1870, removed racial barriers to voting: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

However, American Indians were not covered by this amendment, because they were not considered citizens. They were granted full citizenship and the right to vote in federal elections in 1924, four years after women won the right. American Indians have the highest per capita service in the U.S. military of any population. Safe to say, they have earned the right to participate as policymakers. While in recent years, the first people of this land have increasingly been exercising their rights by voting, running for office, and winning, Native voters are still markedly absent at the California polls.

“The issues for the Native voter have been systemic barriers and voter suppression that most people are completely unaware of,” Jacqueline De Leon (Isleta Pueblo) said. “People would be shocked by the obstacles that face the

realities of all constituents in the rural areas of Indian Country. For example, two hundred voters have to be guaranteed before a ballot box will be installed outside of urban areas.”

De Leon is the Native Voting Rights Fellow and one of nineteen attorneys at the Native American Rights Fund in Colorado. Dedicated to numerous Native causes, NARF conducted field hearings in September 2017 to take voter testimonies in Indian Country. With over one hundred tribes in California, widespread disenfranchisement of urban Native voters is more prevalent than in most states. To address the needs of tribes, separate hearings were held in Northern and Southern California.

“In addition to tribal leaders, California Secretary of State Alex Padilla was present as an opportunity to learn about the Native vote,” De Leon said.

The gubernatorial primary elections this June have particular significance for some Californians because under the Voter’s Choice Act, passed in 2016 and supported by Secretary Padilla, five counties have closed neighborhood polling hubs in favor of centralized voting

centers. Voters in Sacramento County, San Mateo County, Nevada County, Napa County, and Madera County can no longer walk to a local polling place to vote.

“The neglect of tribal voters is a problem on all levels: state, county, etc.,” De Leon said. “Tribal leaders need to engage their members by inviting them to attend voting workshops and informing them of their rights. They need not only to vote in their tribal elections, but in the county, state, and federal. Holding voter guidance workshops helps with understanding how to vote as well.”

Lack of service adds additional hardships beyond just mailing an official voter’s ballot. Despite today’s technological advancements, Native voters drive to polling places from rural, impoverished areas on unpaved, unmarked roads, sometimes eighty miles or more roundtrip in hazardous weather, with limited gas funds. Often there is no access to the internet, the electrical grid, or mailboxes or mail delivery. Families depend on other families for incoming and outgoing mail delivery.

In Los Angeles, cousins Chrissie Castro and Monique Castro (both Navajo) cofounded the nonpartisan nonprofit organization California Native Vote Project (CNVP). “Its sole agenda is to create integrated voter engagement,” Chrissie said.

“We asked, why are there no Native voters at the polls? So in 2016, we registered one thousand new voters for the election through our efforts,” said Monique, a licensed MFT. “Since then, we have grown our member-based votes to four thousand. The results have grown so fast that we have created a program to develop CNVP leaders to go out into the tribal communities and help register more voters. This perpetuation can help with bridging the disenfranchised tribes to unite their votes as well. None of the California indigenous people have tags online. In effect, we are invisible, at the polls and online.”

Chrissie added, “Even today, the Native voters who do make it in person have reported experiencing hostility and prejudice from some county officials... We believe Native voting is one step of many steps to tribal sovereignty. Voting does not dilute tribal political power but ensures that we have a seat at the table. Connecting with policymakers requires integrated voter engagement. Voting is a process historically associated with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Their systematic approach to strategically and geographically separating families and disenfranchising them created logistical challenges in using traditional methods for tribal outreach which is expensive.”

Both trained with their partner, California Calls (CC). The organization states that it is “a growing alliance of thirty-one grassroots, community-based organizations spanning urban, rural, and suburban counties across the

state.” The Castros implemented CC’s concept of “engaging voters who are most impacted by the budget cuts and fiscal crisis—young voters, low-income voters, people of color, and immigrants,” with substantial success.

“We found that Natives were not interested in voting for the president, but when we showed how change could occur by voting on a proposition, Natives were more inclined to vote,” Monique said. “Voting is a way to build political power, and there are a lot of people making decisions for us. And there are some concerned that voting in non-tribal elections conflicts with Native traditions. We look at it as being of dual nations or having dual citizenship.”

A prime example of change comes from the former Montana Superintendent of Public Instruction, Denise Juneau (Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara). The first American Indian woman elected to statewide office in Montana, she rewrote the Native history curriculum, which is now used statewide. This year has seen an unprecedented number of Natives running for Congress, governor’s offices, and seats in state legislatures, including in California.

A tribal chief and spiritual leader, Caleen Sisk (Winnemem Wintu) is on the ballot for California State Assembly. Sisk is a Chico State graduate and public school educator and represents the Democratic party in the 1st District against the incumbent, Republican minority leader Brian Dahle. Sisk is the first American Indian woman from Shasta County to run for State Assembly.

“We decided a fresh approach was what we needed,” Sisk said. “This election is one small step. Even with California being the fifth largest in the world economy, you would never know because we have underground waterways that are still toxic, more and more are homeless, and not everyone has basic health care. *Beedi yaluken.*”

Also on the upcoming ballot is the former chairman of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, James Ramos. He is running as a Democrat for the 40th State Assembly District seat against incumbent Republican Marc Steinorth.

Representing the Green Party, Erik Rydberg (Kashaya Pomo) is running for California Secretary of State against the Democratic incumbent, Alex Padilla. Rydberg, a long-standing political advocate, vehemently opposed the closure of neighborhood polling places.

Embracing Native traditions is not in conflict with the constitutional right to vote. If there is not a seat at the table for tribal leaders, then the table needs to be created. Voting is potentially a modality for healing and empowering the children of California Natives.