

Native Americans turn to ballot box for empowerment

BY BOBBY CAINA CALVAN, ASSOCIATED PRESS *June 25, 2016 at 11:48 AM EDT*

BROWNING, Mont. — Lea Whitford remembers the first time she set foot in Montana’s Capitol in Helena after a four-hour bus ride from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. She and her high school classmates marveled at the ornate rotunda before entering a large office to meet one of the state’s most politically important men, the governor.

They took turns sitting at his desk, and Whitford sensed the power coursing through the grand building and big chair.

Now a state senator, she wants more of her fellow Blackfeet to let go of their indifference and discover the influence of politics — to experience government at work as she did 35 years ago.

“I wish they could feel the opportunity and the empowerment,” she said.

For generations, tribal nations fought to tear down the barriers that kept them from having a voice in the government the U.S. Cavalry imposed upon the western frontier. Now, Native American activists are increasingly turning their focus inward, working to persuade their fellow tribal members to seize the ballot box as a weapon against oppression.

At powwows, advocates fan out with voter registration cards. Across reservations, tribal leaders implore their people to engage in the political process. In classrooms, they lecture their young about making a difference.

The Native vote could be especially crucial in Democrat Denise Juneau's bid to become the first American Indian woman in Congress. Juneau, the state's two-term superintendent of schools, is one of nine Native Americans running for Congress, from North Dakota to Arizona. They include two incumbents: Reps. Tom Cole and Markwayne Mullin, both Republicans from Oklahoma.

By most accounts, Juneau will need strong Native American voter turnout to boost her chances of defeating the incumbent, Rep. Ryan Zinke.

She will need the help of tribal members like Edward Baker, a 54-year-old from the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation who registered to vote for the first time at a recent Missoula powwow.

"I have to set an example for my grandchildren," Baker said amid tribal members in traditional regalia. The sound of drumbeats filled the auditorium.

As Baker spoke about wanting to see more Native Americans in power, Juneau emerged from a crowd and asked for his support. He agreed.

Zinke and other Republicans also have been courting Native Americans, particularly in the state's coal country, where Crow tribal leaders have been more open to pro-coal Republicans.

The Native population is hardly a monolithic group, but many tribal members have been known to align with Democrats.

Others, particularly on poverty-stricken tribal lands, still have a deeply ingrained mistrust of the whole system.

Native Americans weren't given the right to vote until 1924, when the U.S. government granted them citizenship. Even then, states erected obstacles that kept American Indians from the political process. Montana, for one, passed a law decreeing that only property taxpayers could vote. That meant Indians who lived on reservations, and were therefore not subject to state property taxes, had no access to the ballot box. At one time, the state barred polling places on tribal lands.

“Back in the day, there were all these voter suppression laws in place, and now we’re just realizing how important it is for us to vote,” said Dustin Monroe, who is Blackfeet and Assiniboine and founded Native Generational Change, a Missoula-based group that has registered and mobilized scores of new Native voters.

During the 2014 primary, about 30 percent of voters in Glacier County precincts with high concentrations of Native Americans cast ballots, according to data Monroe compiled. As a whole, turnout was 45 percent across the county.

At the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation, east of the Blackfeet reservation, it was even worse: In three predominantly Native precincts, only 81 ballots were cast out of 1,566 — or just 5 percent of registered voters.

Native Americans account for about 8 percent of Montana’s 1 million residents, mostly hailing from the state’s 12 tribal nations. Only Alaska, Oklahoma, South Dakota and New Mexico have higher proportions of Native citizens.

But despite sizeable numbers, Native Americans in Montana are only beginning to exercise their political clout.

“It’s huge — if they activate it, and if that vote consistently votes in a bloc,” said David Parker, a political science professor at Montana State University.

The Native American population is growing faster than the white population. Over time, Parker said, the Native American vote could become even more influential.

But some, like Nathaniel Whitegrass, 28, who is unemployed, remain unconvinced.

“Elections, like voting for governor — it just doesn’t resonate with a lot of us at all,” he said at the Missoula powwow. “We’re just trying to deal with our own stuff. I just stay out of politics and government altogether.”

That frustrates activists like Tom Rodgers, a Washington, D.C., lobbyist who grew up in Blackfeet country.

“We have a substantial enough population that we can control the political outcomes in the

state of Montana,” he said.

Rodgers, a former aide to U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, helped force state officials to establish satellite elections offices across tribal lands as part of a 2014 settlement in a lawsuit filed by Native Americans from three Montana reservations. The lawsuit, brought under the federal Voting Rights Act, claimed the great distances and time needed to travel to elections offices put an undue burden on Native Americans.

Secretary of State Linda McCulloch helped counties establish 13 such offices in the weeks leading up to the June 7 primary. By her account, foot traffic at the offices was relatively slow.

Nevertheless, activists said, the satellite offices helped register scores of new voters.

“Our challenge is to show that what goes on in Helena or Washington does affect their lives,” said Marci McLean, executive director of Western Native Voice, a nonpartisan social justice group.

That could take generations, she acknowledged.

But Whitford, who represents the Blackfeet in the Legislature, believes that day will come.

“If we show up to vote,” she said, “we can make some pretty substantial changes — if we put forth an effort.”