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Project pursues power of Indian vote

"GET OUT THE NATIVE VOTE": Nationwide, groups urge American Indians to cast their ballots.

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Eighty years after the federal government gave American Indians the right to vote, several groups are working to ensure Indians exercise that right and their political muscle.

"In this election, with Minnesota being a battleground state, our Indian vote definitely can make a difference in several races," said Judy Hanks, project development coordinator for the Mille Lacs Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe.

Hanks is also coordinator for the statewide Get Out The Native Vote campaign. The effort began in May and included representatives from the state's 11 reservations along with people who work with urban Indians living in Duluth and the Twin Cities.

"I think the effort was very effective in getting the message out that it's important to vote," Hanks said. "We put out information on the issues that are pertinent to Indian country and the impact of not having a voice."

Get Out The Native Vote is circulating questionnaires to determine how effective it was and to guide future improvements, Hanks said.

The state effort was an outgrowth of the nationwide Native Vote 2004 campaign, coordinated by the National Congress of American Indians.

The congress modeled its effort, in part, on earlier Indian voter registration drives in South Dakota, where the nonprofit, nonpartisan Four Directions Committee undertook a voter-registration drive before primary elections and a special U.S. House election in June. In some counties, the number of Indians voting increased nearly 300 percent over 2002 numbers.

To increase the number of Indians registered to vote in Minnesota, workers knocked on doors and visited powwows, health-care clinics and other events.

"We're pretty pleased with the numbers we got," said Mike Sayers, the Duluth-Red Lake urban liaison for the Red Lake Band. "I had 160 new voters who registered in one week alone."

Sayers estimates the effort registered about 300 new voters in Duluth.

The effort registered about 150 people on the Fond du Lac Reservation, band member and project volunteer Veronica Smith said.

Now, Get Out The Vote workers are busy lining up rides to the polls, reminding people to vote and letting them know they can register at the polls. To do so, Minnesota requires a state-issued driver's license or identification card, a U.S. passport or military identification card or student identification card that includes your name and photograph and an original utility bill. People also can register at the polls if a voter registered in that area attests they live there.

"It's just another obstacle that we have to deal with and set something up for -- to have somebody there at the polling place that can vouch for people so they can vote," Smith said.

The tribes scored a court victory late last week. The American Civil Liberties Union; NCAI; Bonnie Dorr-Charwood, a member of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe; and Richard Smith and Tracy Martineau, members of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, won a temporary restraining order that allows the use of Indian tribal identification cards at polling places -- whether they live on the reservation or not.

The groups had filed a lawsuit in federal district court last week, calling on Minnesota Secretary of State Mary Kiffmeyer to relax voter ID rules and questioning the state statute that allowed only Indians living on reservations to use their tribal IDs to vote.

On Friday, Judge James M. Rosenbaum issued a temporary restraining order against Kiffmeyer that now will allow the use of tribal ID cards.

"We are pleased with this victory," Chuck Samuelson, executive director of the ACLU of Minnesota, said in a news release. "We look forward to a large turnout on Tuesday."

To encourage voting Tuesday, several tribes will organize rallies and feasts, Hanks said.

"We also have some big drawings after people vote" and complete a survey on the program, Smith said. "After they're done with the survey, they'll be entered into a drawing for a 32-inch color TV, 10 \$50 gift certificates or other prizes. It's an incentive to get people out to vote."

Even without Election Day incentives, there's a lot of interest across Indian country, Smith said, in part because of health and education issues, budget cuts and Gov. Tim Pawlenty's demand for a share of Indian gambling profits.

"People are calling me and saying, 'I need to vote. I need to register. Is it too late to

register? Where do I go to vote? What do I do?' "

People also are asking her who they should vote for -- a question she doesn't answer because Native Vote is a nonpartisan effort.

"I say 'Read the papers. Get an idea who's running and where they stand on Indian issues,' " she said.

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