

Indian leaders encourage new "voting culture"

By Sara Jean Green

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With the general election just weeks away, national and regional tribal leaders will be addressing hundreds of American Indians, Alaskan Natives and their supporters at a 5 p.m. rally today at the Tacoma Dome, one of dozens of events nationwide aimed at mobilizing Indian voters.

Building on momentum from the 2000 general election that saw the registration of more than 9,000 new Indian voters in Washington, leaders want an even bigger showing at the polls this year. There are an estimated 100,000 eligible American Indian and Alaskan Native voters in the state.

It's been 80 years since the federal government extended citizenship and with it, the right to vote to Indians. But for myriad reasons, American Indians have historically been the least likely ethnic group in the country to vote.

For Native people here, Initiative 892, which would expand electronic slot-machine gaming beyond Indian casinos, and Jim Johnson's run for the state Supreme Court are of particular interest.

Voting power and political contributions, mainly from tribes with lucrative casinos, are increasing tribes' political clout, especially in battleground states with big Native populations. Regardless of the election's outcomes, though, Indian leaders are taking a long view, using newfound political acumen to pursue their interests while working to create a new "voting culture" among urban and reservation Indians.

"We've come a long way and conditions have changed," said Ron Allen, chairman of the Jamestown S'Klallam tribe based in Sequim. "We're rising above the clouds to see the sunshine, and it's only because of our newfound political activism and the political savvy that is emerging among tribal leaders."

Allen is on the roster of prominent leaders who will speak at today's Native Vote 2004 Rally. Coming midway through the 13th annual Iwasil powwow hosted by a Seattle Indian youth organization with the same name the rally is a nonpartisan event.

The event headliner is Tex Hall, president of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), who last year issued a challenge to Indian Country to turn out 1 million Native voters for these elections. NCAI, which represents the country's 562 tribes, has supported grass-roots groups' efforts to reach the goal.

The target of 1 million Native voters may be overly ambitious because it would require 75 to 100 percent participation of the estimated 1 million to 1.5 million Indians and Alaskan Natives eligible.

"But more important than the 1 million number is the empowerment that will come with having an impact on certain races," said Jonodev Chaudhuri, a Muscogee (Creek) attorney helping organize voters in Phoenix.

He pointed to the 2000 defeat of U.S. Sen. Slade Gorton of Washington considered the most powerful "Indian fighter" in Congress as a watershed for Indian Country. Though Gorton's campaign attributed his defeat to being outspent by his millionaire challenger, Democrat Maria Cantwell, Indian leaders here contend their people made the difference in the race Cantwell won by about 2,200 votes.

"After the election in Washington, everyone in Indian Country knew the name Slade Gorton," Chaudhuri said. Two years later, record Indian voting helped decide two close races, one for a U.S. Senate seat in South Dakota, the other for governor of Arizona, he said.

Before 1924, American Indians had to be "naturalized" to participate in U.S. politics, which meant giving up their rights as Indians. Partly as a result of Indian lobbying, and partly in recognition of American Indian military service in World War I, the U.S. government enacted the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act.

Despite Indians' unique status as American citizens and citizens of their Indian nations, many have long scorned the right to vote in nontribal elections. The general attitude has been "it's the white man's government, and after countless decades of broken promises, you just can't trust them," Allen said.

That attitude eventually began to shift. In the '90s, the national political climate was not very Indian-friendly, and tribes worried 20 years worth of U.S. policies aimed at promoting self-determination were going to be reversed, Allen said.

There was a realization "we have to participate in the political process or we'll continue to lose ground, and the federal government will never honor its obligations," he said.

Indians, he said, are learning how to use voting power and money to influence political decisions. "They're now playing both parties, they're hedging their bets and working both ends, just like any other interest group."

Tribes' ability to donate to political campaigns is a recent phenomenon, said Russ Lehman, director of the First American Education Project in Olympia. Lehman published a report last year believed to be the first analysis of Indian political contributions and voting.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, tribes with casinos gave \$144,721 to federal campaigns 81 percent to Democrats, 19 percent to Republicans in 1992. Ten years later, Indian gaming contributions topped \$6.7 million. Even with new federal restrictions on campaign fund raising, Indian casinos this year have given more than \$4.8

million to federal candidates and parties 65 percent to Democrats, 35 percent to Republicans.

Figures for gaming contributions to state races won't be available until after this year's election, Lehman said. But he estimated tribes here have given \$4 million to fight I-892, which would allow slot machines in non-Indian cardrooms, bingo halls, bowling alleys, restaurants and race tracks.

I-892 "would have a terrible impact on tribes who have that economic development opportunity and develop opportunities in other areas" such as education and health care, said Claudia Kauffman, who is Nez Perce and a co-founder of Seattle's Native Action Network.

Also worrisome is Jim Johnson's bid for a spot on the Washington State Supreme Court, she said. Johnson worked with Gorton, when Gorton was state attorney general, in challenging the 1974 Boldt decision. That ruling upheld tribes' treaty rights "to half the salmon in the Sound," Kauffman said. Many Washington Indians, she said, tend to feel "a lot of his focus has been against tribal sovereignty and tribal issues."

Though there's plenty at stake in this election, the nation's Indian activists are looking to the future, hoping Indian parents will teach new voting behavior to the next generation.

"Our elders and our ancestors worked very hard" to secure the right to participate in the U.S. political system, Chaudhuri said. "We have an obligation to treat that duty with honor."

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