

# **Position Paper on Indian Voting by Sterling Fluharty for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the National Indian Youth Council**

## **Background and Recent History:**

The National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), founded in Gallup in 1961, has a history of protecting and promoting civic participation. Native Americans were not made citizens until 1924 and could not vote by law in Arizona and New Mexico until 1948. Literacy tests further prevented voting by Native Americans in these states until the mid-1960s.

There are still many barriers to full political participation as citizens. On a non-partisan basis, the NIYC participates in voter registration and political polling. In the 1970s, the NIYC made its first forays into voter protection and registration. It fought to secure voting rights for the Five Tribes of eastern Oklahoma. It conducted a voter registration campaign in Apache County, Arizona, where 5,000 whites were outvoting 23,500 American Indians. It also received funding from the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project in San Antonio, Texas, to register American Indian voters in Bernalillo County, New Mexico.

In the 1980s, the NIYC expanded its voting programs. It conducted the first ever political opinion poll of Native American voters. It used extensive litigation to force school boards and county commissioners to go from at large voting schemes to single member districts, which are more equitable for Native American populations. It also published a directory of Native American elected officials. Since 1990, the NIYC has surveyed candidates running for office, hosted candidate forums, served as a polling place, and partnered with groups like IMPACT and SAGE Council in getting out the Native vote.

SAGE Council operated from 1996 to 2010. Sonny and Laurie Weahkee founded the organization to oppose road construction through the Petroglyph National Monument in Albuquerque. The Weahkees and their supporters did all they could to stop the desecration of the petroglyphs, which are sacred to local Pueblos. The City of Albuquerque ultimately chose to ignore them and built the road in 2005. SAGE Council learned throughout this experience that organizing Native American voters would be the only way to make governments responsive to their issues. Consequently, the Weahkees created the Native American Voters Alliance (NAVA), a non-partisan organization, to register and mobilize Native American voters in Albuquerque and across the state. During the 2004 election, NAVA identified and targeted 6,000 Native American households that contained 4,200 registered voters within the City of Albuquerque.

During that same presidential election, with a \$200,000 grant from the NoVo Foundation, the Moving America Forward (MAF) organization targeted Latino and Native American voters across New Mexico. MAF registered 27,000 new voters prior to the 2004 campaign, of which 8,000 were American Indians. As a consequence, the voter turnout in McKinley County increased from 18 to 47 percent between the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections.

Since 2006 the work of Indian voter registration and mobilization in New Mexico has been both exciting and challenging. NAVA helped train a new generation of Native voter

activists, who continue to work at Native voter turnout today. The Native American Democratic Caucus (NADC) of New Mexico was founded in 2006, and currently is under the leadership of former New Mexico Secretary of Indian Affairs, Alvin Warren. The NIYC persuaded the Navajo Nation to open a polling place in Albuquerque for its tribal elections. SAGE Council ran out of money and closed its doors in 2010. Political campaigns in New Mexico are now working to hire Native people to work in their own communities to register Indian voters and get out the Native vote. NAVA is working to register 5,000 Indian voters in 2011.

### **Challenges and Solutions:**

Finding and registering voters will be quite a challenge. In the five precincts surrounding Crownpoint, for example, where the adult population averages 95 percent Indian, only 55 percent of the voting-age population is currently registered to vote. In precincts 83, 131, 161, 330, and 346 in Albuquerque, where the adult population averages 16 percent Indian, only 57 percent of the voting-age population is registered to vote as of 2011. So if only 83,000 (56 percent) of the 149,000 Indian adults in New Mexico are currently registered to vote, then another 65,000 in cities and on reservations still need to be registered to vote. If it costs ten dollars to find and register each new voter, considering both inflation and what it cost MAF in 2004, then this phase would require an investment of \$650,000.

The county and state voter rolls in New Mexico do not record the race of voters. VoteBuilder, a program used by Democratic campaigns, does not accurately identify Native American voters. VoteBuilder would have to be adapted or Native Americans would have to create their own database. As such, it is imperative that Native American individuals who know their own communities work to find and identify the 83,000 Native Americans who are already registered to vote. This Native initiative to find and identify Native voters would likely cost about ten dollars per voter. So the cost for this stage would be \$830,000.

Staying in contact with Indian voters will require consistent effort. If 14 percent of all Indian adults in New Mexico change their address in a given year, then about 40 percent change their address at least once between each presidential election. With about 66,000 Native American households in New Mexico, each basic mailer to this population would likely cost \$20,000. It would probably cost a total of \$100,000 to administer these mailers quarterly until the 2012 election and to keep tabs on changed and forwarding addresses.

Producing and distributing an Indian voter guide would definitely be a worthwhile investment. Research, writing, layout, and graphic design would probably cost about \$10,000. Printing costs would cost about \$20,000. Mailing costs could be about \$50,000.

Tribes will probably pick up the costs of redistricting lawsuits for Indian-majority legislative districts on reservations. Native American voting rights organizations would likely have to raise half a million dollars to fight for Indian-majority districts elsewhere. This kinds of lawsuits could arise with the Gallup and Farmington city councils, the Cibola, McKinley, and San Juan county commissions, and the school boards in these counties, if redistricting threatens

to dilute Indian voting power in these regions. Fortunately, though, Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act requires state and local governments to pay the attorney's fees for Native Americans who win these kinds of cases.

Recruiting and training campaign staff and candidates for office is an important goal. It would probably cost about \$100,000 annually for a political leadership training program for Native American candidates. Another \$100,000 would be necessary to provide specialized training to Native Americans who can fill positions such as campaign managers, finance directors, and field organizers. Native American politically-minded individuals should be encouraged to apply for and involve themselves in existing programs through various organizations and campaigns.

Media and the Internet will be indispensable throughout this entire process. The first step would be placing advertisements in radio, television, newspapers, and perhaps movie theaters. A web site and social media for Native voters would have to be launched. Even a newsletter and legislative updates could be distributed by e-mail. This would likely cost a total of \$200,000.

The NIYC, NADC, NAVA, and other organizations might do well to coordinate their efforts. It will take collaboration to raise \$2-2.5 million and to work toward these goals as both partisans and nonpartisans.