

ENSURE EVERY CITIZEN CAN PARTICIPATE IN OUR DEMOCRACY

STRENGTHENING MONTANA COMMUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

All Montanans should have equitable access to participate fully within our democracy. To ensure every citizen has equal opportunity take part in all elections and uphold the voting rights of American Indians, Montana should:

- With the consent of tribal nations, establish permanent, full-service satellite voting on tribal reservations;
- Adopt automatic voter registration while Montanans renew their drivers' licenses; and
- Create a tribal voting coordinator within the Office of the Secretary of State.



BIG SKY
Brighter Future

Charting the course for a better Montana.



HOW WE GOT HERE

Despite having lived on this land since time immemorial, the United States denied American Indians citizenship until the passage of the federal Indian Citizenship Act in 1924. After Congress passed this act, state governments, including Montana, still did not welcome American Indians as citizens and intentionally suppressed their voting. After the federal Voting Rights Act passed in 1965, Montana failed to adequately enforce the law in Indian Country.

Distance to polling, registration locations, and the cost of travel are all barriers to voting. The average voter turnout in reservation precincts is 20 percentage points below the average turnout of precincts outside of reservation boundaries. Today, tribal nations continue to fight to ensure citizens adequate access to voting.

“American Indians have had their voices erased throughout history, and voting access for our communities has been repeatedly denied and undocumented.

If our voices were heard, the world will change for the better.”

Ivy, Missoula

In 2014, several tribal citizens sued the state and three counties for the failure to provide satellite voting offices on three reservations and requiring some voters to travel nearly two hours each way in order to cast a ballot. As a result, the Secretary of the State opened limited satellite voting offices on three reservations, with a process to expand satellite offices to all reservations upon request. However, these offices remain limited and are not permanent.

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ON THE HORIZON

1

With the consent of tribal nations, establish permanent, full-service satellite voting on tribal reservations. Permanent, full-service satellite voting would improve voter access and participation because it would cut the distance, cost, and time for voters living on a reservation. With the consent of tribal leaders, state leaders should establish full-service satellite offices 30 days before any primary or general election permitting voters to register and cast a ballot in a single visit. Additionally, if a voter is already registered, they are able to cast an in-person absentee ballot at any time leading up to Election Day.

2

Adopt automatic voter registration while Montanans are renewing their drivers' licenses. Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) removes barriers to registration for eligible voters and has shown to increase the number of voters registered, regardless of the population size or partisan makeup. Montana should enact legislation to allow AVR through the Department of Motor Vehicles, with support for tribal nations to ensure Montana residents with tribally-issued IDs can also be registered to vote. AVR will ensure voters will not have to worry about registration deadlines, and a person is automatically registered unless they opt out. AVR is an effective way to bring more eligible voters into our democracy.

3

Create a tribal voting coordinator within the Office of the Secretary of State. A position within the Office of the Secretary of State would facilitate coordination with tribal nations in Montana to help ensure that American Indian votes are counted and voting is accessible. The current capacity of the Director of the Office Indian Affairs and the State-Tribal Relations Committee are limited to communications between tribal nations, state agencies, and the Legislature. Montana's history of American Indian voter disenfranchisement demonstrates the need for a dedicated position to provide a way for tribal nations to directly communicate concerns about American Indian voting rights.



ABOUT BIG SKY BRIGHTER FUTURE

Big Sky Brighter Future is charting a clear course to rebuild our state. This concrete plan for lawmakers has specific proposals to help families, workers, children, and communities, and creates a tax code that works for everyone. Montana cannot go back to the time when families faced barriers to build their best future. We can move our state forward and make it one where we can all live, work, and enjoy all Big Sky Country has to offer. There's a better Montana on the horizon, and this is how we get there.