

ENSURING A STRONG CENSUS RESPONSE AND VOTER TURNOUT IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Key Points:

- A legislative extension of statutory census deadlines is necessary to ensure the Census Bureau (Bureau) has enough time to complete an accurate AI/AN count.
- Congress should consider and pass H.R. 1694, the Native American Voting Rights Act of 2019, which addresses key issues impacting AI/AN voting rights.
- Congress should consider the unique issues facing AI/AN voters in light of COVID-19 and include tribe-specific provisions in any COVID-19 relief bill addressing voting issues for the 2020 general election.

BACKGROUND

CENSUS:

Accurate AI/AN census data is critical for representation, reapportionment, federal funding formulas, and tribal government planning and service delivery. Tribal communities are traditionally hard to count for the decennial census due to their often rural and remote locations.

The Bureau estimates AI/ANs living on tribal lands were undercounted by approximately 4.9 percent in the 2010 Census. Despite this data, the Bureau recently announced it is accelerating its 2020 operations, thereby shortening the enumeration timeline. This proposed shift in the Bureau's approach will likely result in severe undercounting of AI/AN people. It will also force the Bureau to rush data processing, which is critical to ensuring the quality of reported data.

VOTING:

While AI/ANs represent approximately two percent of the United States population, their concentration in certain states, such as Alaska, Arizona, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin, for instance, underscores the impact of the Native vote and the need for appropriate mechanisms to protect AI/AN voting rights.

AI/AN face many barriers to casting a ballot, such as geographic isolation, struggling reservation economies and infrastructure, high rates of on-reservation homelessness, lack of standardized street addresses, difficulties obtaining required identification or registering to vote, language barriers, and long distances to polling places, among others. Congress should act to address such barriers, because a strong Native vote is critical to a strong democracy.

TRIBAL CENSUS PRIORITIES

Extend the statutory deadlines for the delivery of Census 2020 apportionment data and redistricting files. The Bureau initially sought a statutory extension to the apportionment reporting window until April 30, 2021, in order to account for COVID-19 impacts. A statutory extension for the delivery deadlines and an extension of deadlines in order to continue in-person enumeration would offer the Bureau appropriate time to conduct enumeration given the current public health crisis and allow for sufficient back-end data processing to ensure the counts are accurate.



TRIBAL VOTING PRIORITIES

Consider and pass H.R. 1694, the Native American Voting Rights Act (NAVRA) to address key voting issues impacting AI/AN civic engagement. If passed, NAVRA would allow tribal nations to request polling sites or early voting sites more convenient for on-reservation voters, require states and other jurisdictions to accept tribal identification for voting purposes, prohibit purposeful discrimination, help address language barriers with the provision of translated election materials, and provide other critical resources to help combat barriers to the Native vote.

Consider tribal concerns in any COVID-19 relief bill that addresses voting issues for the 2020 general election. As Congress identifies the needs of Americans during the current pandemic and drafts legislation to address those needs, much attention has focused on the right to suffrage and whether legislation is needed to ensure the sanctity of the election process in light of COVID-19. NCAI urges Congress to include Native voting concerns, such as those addressed in NAVRA, in any provisions affecting voting rights.

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