



Tribal leaders welcome Holder's voting access plan

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Attorney General Eric Holder said Monday his office will consult with tribes across the country to develop ways to increase voting access for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Holder said the goal is to require state and local election officials to place at least one polling site in a location chosen by tribal governments in parts of the nation that include tribal lands. Barriers to voting, he said, include English-only ballots and inaccessible polling places.

In Alaska, for example, the village of Kasigluk is separated into two parts by a river with no bridge. On election day, people on one side have just a few hours to vote before a ballot machine is taken by boat to the other side. Several other Alaska villages have been designated as permanent absentee voting areas, which is something allowed by regulation, according to Gail Fenumiai, director of the state Division of Elections.

In Montana, a voting rights lawsuit is pending from tribal members on the Crow, Northern Cheyenne and Fort Belknap reservations. They want county officials to set up satellite voting offices to make up for the long distances they must travel to reach courthouses for early voting or late registration.

"These conditions are not only unacceptable, they're outrageous," Holder said. "As a nation, we cannot - and we will not - simply stand by as the voices of Native Americans are shut out of the democratic process."

After consulting with tribal leaders, his office will seek to work with Congress on a potential legislative proposal, Holder said.

Associate Attorney General Tony West discussed the announcement later Monday in Anchorage, during a speech to the National Congress of American Indians.

Despite reforms to strengthen voting rights, there also have been setbacks, West told the crowd. He cited last year's U.S. Supreme Court ruling in favor of Shelby County, Alabama.

The decision effectively stripped the federal government of its most potent tool to stop voting bias - a requirement in the landmark Voting Rights Act that all or parts of 15 states with a history of discrimination in voting, mainly in the South but also Alaska, get Washington's approval before changing the way they hold elections. Now, changes do not have to be submitted, and it is up to the U.S. Justice Department or others who sue to prove changes are discriminatory.

West also pointed to a Justice Department court filing last week that sided with plaintiffs in a voting rights lawsuit filed by several Alaska villages. The lawsuit alleges the state has failed to provide accurate, complete translations of voting materials into Alaska Native languages.

The Justice Department also intervened earlier this year in response to a plan by Cibola County, New Mexico, to eliminate voting-rights coordinators.

Remote geography and the inability to speak English do not free Americans from the obligations and responsibilities of citizenship, West said. Neither should they "impede the rights to which we are all entitled," he said.

American Indian and Alaska Native leaders attending the conference welcomed the announcement.

"I think anything that involves tribes and tribal authority is extremely important," said Dr. Ted Mala, director of traditional healing at the Alaska Native Medical Center and director of tribal relations for an Anchorage-based tribal health services organization.

He said tribes have had more opportunities for such consultations with the federal government under the Obama administration.

"We even meet with the president once a year, and it's a wonderful thing," Mala said.

Carol Schurz is a councilwoman for the Gila River Indian Community in Sacaton, Arizona. She said the community organizes its own elections and consults with state officials on state and federal elections.

Schurz encourages voter registration and said the Justice Department proposal would be well-received. She said it could empower indigenous voters "if we have the opportunity to get all our people engaged."

Schurz added: "I'm engaged in whatever I need to do as an Indian leader, as a community leader, so yes, it is important. Everybody has a right to vote."

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, also applauded the plan.

"Through better communication, obstacles to casting a ballot can be identified and addressed," she said in a written statement. "The right to vote is fundamental, and all Americans must be able to exercise this right."