

Make voting easier for Native Americans on reservations

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(Photo: Courtesy Audrey Hall)

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We have a longstanding belief on the Tribune editorial board that government should make it easier, not more difficult, for people to vote for public office.

That's why we favor efforts by Native American activists to make it more convenient to vote on Montana's Indian reservations, some of which are far-flung and far away from county seats. Northern Cheyenne Indians in southwest Montana face a one-way, 70-mile drive to Forsyth, the county seat in Rosebud County, to register to vote on Election Day.

Providing a satellite office to encourage more Native American voting is not only a good idea, but it's been the subject of a lawsuit that was decided in favor of Native American activists who sued three counties in Montana. U.S. District Judge Malloy gave Montana's secretary of state authority to set up the offices.

Glacier County in northern Montana avoided such unpleasantness by simply providing a satellite voting location in Browning, rather than requiring voters from the Blackfeet Indian

Reservation to drive to Cut Bank to register to vote. County officials there saw a need and agreed with Blackfeet officials that something should be done.

We'd like to see that spirit of cooperation continue in other places in Montana, where there has been some reluctance expressed to providing satellite election offices for mostly Indian voters. We think this is a good opportunity for those counties named earlier in the lawsuit — Rosebud, Blaine and Big Horn — to demonstrate an enlightened approach and, if Indian tribes request a satellite office, to grant the request. Of the three counties, only Big Horn County provided a satellite election location in 2014 on the Crow Reservation. Rosebud and Blaine counties cited late requests from tribes for not setting up the offices.

To be clear, most reservations offer polling places on Election Day, but few provide same-day registration and in-person absentee voting that are offered at county election offices.

Montana Secretary of State Linda McCulloch announced recently it will be up to each reservation to request a satellite office, and for each county to consider each request.

We think it would be wise for each county to give a tribal request serious consideration. In fact, Rosebud County Commissioner Ed Joiner told the Tribune recently his county plans to do just that.

"As for the 2016 election, Rosebud County is prepared to establish the alternative election administration office should the Northern Cheyenne Tribe request one by the established deadline," Joiner wrote. "The most important part of this process is maintaining an open line of communication with the state, county, and tribe so that the implementation of the office goes smoothly." Joiner said he thinks a better term than satellite office is an "alternative election administrative office."

We think that's a positive approach that we hope will be followed by the various Montana counties.

So why would anyone be against encouraging more people to register to vote?

One issue might be cost, although McCulloch said she she hopes her office will have enough money to offer grants to counties that agree to set up satellite offices.

Another could be politics — Native Americans tend to vote Democratic — although the secretary of state is a Democrat, and some Native American activists contend she didn't move swiftly enough to get the satellite offices set up. Giving counties the option to turn down satellite offices also has drawn some criticism.

Meanwhile, a few conservative critics on the Tribune's website asked why Indian voters should gain satellite polling places when other voters not on reservations face similar obstacles. But with particularly high unemployment and low incomes on Montana's reservations, it probably is more difficult for some Native American voters to travel long distances to election offices for same-day registration.

We agree Native American voters should consider using by-mail or permanent absentee voting options in 2016, as all voters should. However, Montana law still mandates that counties provide in-person polling places for certain elections, such as in presidential election years. And same-day registration is provided by state law.

McCulloch, by the way, didn't rule out providing satellite offices, or alternative election administrative offices, for non-reservation voters, giving the example of Seeley Lake area residents who are far from the county seat.

If Montana goes to strictly by-mail elections someday, the problem of traveling long distances to visit county seats should be lessened, if not eliminated. Where to go for same-day registration could remain an issue.

In the meantime, we encourage affected counties to do their best to provide Montana's original residents with convenient ways to vote, and for tribes to meet a tentative Jan. 31 deadline to request an additional office be set up if it's needed.

— *Tribune editorial board*

<http://www.greatfallstribune.com/story/opinion/2015/10/24/voting-easier-native-americans/74340666/>