

Native Americans Forced to Travel Hours, Just to Vote

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Native American groups in Nevada have started legal procedure just to enjoy the same voting privileges that other citizens enjoy.

Two Native American tribes, the Pyramid Lake Paiutes and the Walker River Paiutes, filed a lawsuit against the state of Nevada because they currently have no choice but to endure long travel to ballot boxes compared to white members in the same area.

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“The failure to establish satellite office locations will result in ... tribal members having less opportunity than Anglo citizens to participate in the political process and elect candidates of their choice for federal, state, and county offices,” said the group of plaintiffs in a statement.

The Native American groups are poorer and more isolated than others in the electorate and have less access to transport to voter registration offices and early voting locations. Around 1,700 members from the Pyramid Lake Paiutes tribe need to travel from near Nixon to Reno, almost a 100-mile round trip to vote. More than 1,200 Walker River Paiutes tribal members have to endure a 70-mile round trip from Schurz to Hawthorne.

The tribes say both the Washoe County and Mineral County in Northern Nevada are in violation of the voting rights act and the U.S. constitution's 14th Amendment. The tribes say that the restrictive policy leads to low Native American voter turnouts.

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The tribes had earlier requested satellite election offices, but the request was denied by Republican Nevada Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske, who cited the inconvenient time of the request. Native American groups say that Cegavske would not want to help them given that overall they would be more inclined to vote for Democrats.

“Their inconvenience has nothing to do with the voting rights of Native voters,” said OJ Semans, member of Four Directions, a voting rights group helping the native plaintiffs.

Native Americans are unlikely to have a significant effect on the election results nationally compared to other

demographic groups, as around 5 million Native Americans make up less than 2 percent of the overall U.S. population. But the plaintiffs say the barrier “is an apparent effort to dilute Indian voting strength.” And they could actually make a difference in a tight election in a swing state like Nevada.