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Udall, Senate Democrats Introduce Native American Voting Rights Act

***Landmark legislation to ensure equal access to the ballot box for
Native peoples***

WASHINGTON — Today, **U.S. Senator Tom Udall (D-N.M.)**, vice chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, along with **U.S. Senators Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.), Catherine Cortez Masto (D-Nev.), Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Tina Smith (D-Minn.), Kamala Harris (D-Calif.), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), Jon Tester (D-Mont.), Cory Booker (D-N.J.), and Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii)** are introducing the Native American Voting Rights Act of 2018, landmark legislation to provide the necessary resources and oversight to ensure Native Americans have equal access to the electoral process.

The full text of the bill is available [HERE](#). A summary of the legislation is available [HERE](#).

“For too long, Native Americans have been blocked from exercising their constitutional right to make their voices heard in their democracy,” **Udall said**. “In 1948 – 70 years ago – my grandfather, Levi Udall, served as Chief Justice of the Arizona Supreme Court where he authored the opinion extending the right to vote to Native Americans then living on-reservation. My grandfather wrote, ‘To deny the right to vote... is to do violence to the principles of freedom and equality.’ I wholeheartedly agree. But today, 70 years later, state and local jurisdictions continue to erect insidious new barriers to the ballot box for Native Americans, from the elimination of polling and registration locations to the passage of voter ID laws intentionally designed to prevent Native Americans from voting. These undemocratic barriers have blocked too many Native voters across New Mexico and Indian Country from exercising their franchise. In light of highly destructive recent court decisions like *Shelby County v. Holder*, it is more important than ever that we pass legislation to ensure that the voices of Native communities across Indian Country are heard at the ballot box.”

The legislation would implement key provisions to ensure Native Americans have equal access to the ballot box, including the establishment of a first of its kind Native American Voting Rights Task Force, which would authorize funding for tribal-state consortiums to bolster Native voter registration, education and election participation efforts in tribal communities. The bill would also increase Native access to voter registration sites and polling locations and ensure equal treatment for tribal ID cards for voting purposes. Finally, the bill addresses the devastating effects of *Shelby*

County by prohibiting states from undertaking discriminatory actions without Department of Justice agreement while emphasizing the importance of government-to-government consultation.

“For too long, Native communities have faced major, unfair challenges in exercising their right to vote,” **Warren said**. “The Native Voting Rights Act is an essential step to tearing down many of those obstacles. Native voters should have equal access to the ballot box, and I’m very pleased to join Senator Udall in making a major stride toward this goal by introducing this powerful legislation.”

“Our nation’s democracy is founded on the right to vote and the ability of every citizen to participate in that process equally,” **said Heinrich**. “Unfortunately, there are many obstacles in Indian Country that stand in the way of Native Americans’ ability to vote—from language barriers and burdensome voter ID requirements to the locations of polling places for remote and rural communities. I’m proud to support this legislation to provide resources and oversight to overcome those obstacles and ensure equal access to our democracy.”

“Native communities face unique challenges in our electoral process, and their voices deserve to be heard,” **Heitkamp said**. “Voting should be an accessible, simple, and fair process for every American, but that has not been the case everywhere in Indian Country. Given the number of Native Americans who have served, fought, and died for this country, it is appalling that some people would still try and erect barriers to suppress their ability to vote. Native Americans served in the military before they were even allowed to vote and they continue to serve at the highest rate of any population in this country. We need to put an end to every form of voter discrimination, and our bill would be an important starting point to bring equal access and equal rights to voters in Indian Country and Native Americans around the country.”

“Barriers to voting are far too common in Native communities,” **said Cortez Masto**. “We have a responsibility to ensure that every person with the right to vote can cast a ballot. I’m proud to support this bill to protect Native American voting rights in Nevada and across the country.”

“The right to vote is the foundation of our democracy,” **said Klobuchar**. “We must strengthen voting rights and make it easier for every American to participate in our elections, especially those who have historically been disenfranchised. The Native American Voting Rights Act is an important step in safeguarding that right for Native Americans.”

“The right to vote is fundamental to our democracy, but sadly barriers remain in place that prevent many Native Americans from exercising that right,” **said Feinstein**. “By providing more voter registration opportunities, increasing the number of polling places on tribal lands and expanding voter protections for Native Americans, our bill is a necessary step toward ensuring everyone has equal access to the ballot.”

“Ensuring that all Americans are able to exercise their right to vote is crucial to our democracy. Eliminating the barriers that prevent our Native communities from voting is long overdue, and this legislation will help secure equal voting access to Native voters,” **said Van Hollen**. “I appreciate Senator Udall’s efforts on this issue, and I urge Congress to take up this legislation immediately.”

“Every American deserves to have a say in our democratic process,” **Tester said**. “It is long past time to remove the barriers that keep too many folks from exercising their right to vote. The Native American Voting Rights Act will improve voter access for Native Americans and make sure that tribes have the resources needed to ensure everyone has the opportunity to cast their ballot.”

“Tribal communities are empowered when their voices are heard and their rights and values are respected,” **said New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver.** “The Native Voting Rights Act takes those voices into account and is an important step toward more access to the democratic process and participation among Native Americans. I want to thank Senator Tom Udall for his leadership and for the work he and his staff did with my office and New Mexico’s tribal communities in drafting this important legislation. I’m proud that the work we’ve done in New Mexico with our Native American Voting Taskforce has been influential towards The Act’s goals of boosting voter education on the importance of registration and election participation in tribal communities. I’m heartened to know that The Native Voting Rights Act will help Native Americans overcome these barriers and create more equal access to the ballot box.”

“The Native Voting Rights bill will increase access for Native Americans and provide the necessary voting protections in Indian Country that the Navajo Nation advocates for,” **said Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye.** “Navajo citizens have to drive up to 95 miles one-way to access early voting registration and polling sites, which is a stark contrast to our off-reservation counterparts. This Act will help correct injustices contributing to the low Native voter turnout by providing our communities with equal access to voter registration and polling sites. The Navajo Nation is greatly appreciative of Senator Udall’s efforts to increase voter turnout across Indian Country with the introduction of this legislation.”

Jacqueline De León (Isleta Pueblo of New Mexico), Staff Attorney for the Native American Rights Fund, added, “Our field hearings documented the many challenges that Native Americans face when they try to exercise their fundamental right to vote. From modern day poll taxes, to overt racism and lack of in-person registration and voting opportunities, the hearings show that this legislation is desperately needed.”

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