

Navajos Settle Utah Voting Rights Case Over Mail-In Ballots

Navajos who once worried they'd have to drive hours to cast their ballots in Utah say a new settlement is a step forward as tribes challenge what they call discriminatory voting practices around the United States.

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By LINDSAY WHITEHURST, Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Navajos who once worried they would have to drive hours to cast their ballots in [Utah](#) say a court settlement is a step forward as tribes challenge what they call discriminatory voting practices around the United States.

The agreement that requires tribally accessible polling places and Navajo-language help is a victory for voting rights after a switch to mail-in balloting in southern Utah's San Juan County left behind native voters, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah said Thursday.

County officials, though, said they're committed to fair elections and took the steps themselves without the lawsuit they criticized as a waste of taxpayer money.

San Juan County is also appealing an order to re-draw voting districts that a federal judge found were discriminate against native voters in separate case.

Similar legal clashes have been waged recently over early-voting access in [Nevada](#), native language assistance in [Alaska](#) and voter ID laws in [North Dakota](#).

They come as advocates gather stories from Washington state to [Oklahoma](#), hoping to allow more Native Americans reach ballot boxes and ultimately improve conditions in populations with huge disparities in health, education and economics.

"We're seeing a lot of the same access issues throughout the country," said James Tucker, an attorney for the Native American Rights Fund, part of a coalition holding field hearings nationwide.

The growing push toward mail-in ballots in states around the U.S., for example, can affect voter access in remote native communities where the mail service can be intermittent or unreliable. For older tribal elders who may not speak or read English, the reading of ballots and specific instructions on how to seal and mail them can be particularly challenging, he said.

In Utah, the ALCU and the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission sued southwestern Utah's San Juan County in 2016, after officials closed polling places and switched to a mail-in ballot system. Navajos could vote in person in Monticello, but they said the distance Navajos have to travel is more than twice as far as white residents — a three-hour round-trip drive.

Shortly after the case was filed, San Juan County re-opened three polling places in and around the Navajo Nation, which has its northern tip in Utah and stretches into [Arizona](#) and [New Mexico](#).

San Juan County, for its part, said the 2014 switch to voting by mail increased voter turnout by allowing Navajos who work out of town or go away to college or the military to cast ballots. County officials said in a statement Thursday they decided to open the new polling places themselves, and have taken a number of other steps to ensure equal access, including a Navajo liaison.

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