



## The Blue Tint of Indian Country

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During the 2004 presidential election, Democrats and Republicans heavily courted the most underrepresented group in the country: Native Americans. Although Indians make up less than 1 percent of the U.S. population, many live in swing states and their influence in determining the outcome of state and local elections is growing. Perhaps even more importantly, 95 percent of Indians are Democrats.

Thurston County -- the only county in Nebraska that voted for John Kerry for president -- is home to the Winnebago and Omaha Indian reservations. Kerry won six of Montana's 56 counties, three of which are home to Indian reservations.

"The Democrats, I believe, have taken some of the leading steps forward for Indian country," says Janine Pease, a Crow Indian and vice president for American Indian Affairs at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Mont.

"If you go back and study some of the legislation that's been passed, it's happened under Democratic administrations," Pease points out. "Jimmy Carter signed the law on tribal colleges. Bill Clinton signed the executive order on tribal colleges and on tribal sovereignty. There just isn't any way you can compare legislation under Republican administrations. I spent my entire dissertation looking into civil rights and education acts and the leading pieces of legislation that bring what little has happened in Indian country alive have been Democratic initiatives."

Republicans, on the other hand, have "dismantled Indian country big time," says Pease. "The Reagan administration didn't appropriate any money for programs in Indian country and let them basically starve to death. We had 35 tribal programs that were contracted from federal funds for a whole number of issue areas, from the EPA to abandoned land mines. After Reagan's first term, we were down to five. That is starvation."

Century-old treaties signed between tribes and the United States government guaranteed Indians basic services in exchange for their land. The Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Services were created to provide education and healthcare, respectively. Those promises have not been kept, as proven by extremely high unemployment rates and poor access to healthcare.

Take the Blackfeet Reservation, for instance. Located in Browning, Mont. -- a town that borders Glacier National Park -- the Blackfeet tribe has 15,640 members and a 68 percent unemployment rate. "If you don't work for the tribe, the hospital, the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the school district, then all you've got is the convenience stores and small, part-time, minimum-wage jobs," says Carol Sway-Henderson. "People think we Indians get a check every month and that's not true. Believe me,

Indians want to work, but the jobs don't exist."

The tribe is planning to build a casino to bring in revenue. Every member I met when I visited, however, said they opposed the idea. "I think it's a waste of money," says Cheryl Guardipee. "They (the tribe) could put it into something for the kids. We have nothing here on the reservation for the kids, absolutely nothing. They go to school and they go home. As they get older, they don't go home, they get in trouble."

Guardipee, 53, started voting a few years ago because, "maybe if more people voted, we'd get something done." Guardipee voted for Kerry, but she isn't enthusiastic about the political process. Both the federal government and her tribal government, she says, ignore Indians.

While the majority of the Indians I met are very proud of their heritage and their culture, most were at a loss for words when I asked them for solutions to eradicate widespread poverty and alcoholism. Part of the problem, says Guardipee, is that Indians are disconnected from non-Indians in Montana. In other words, poverty on Indian reservations is invisible, just like poverty in New Orleans was invisible before Katrina. She also says the stereotypes don't help.

Over the course of a month's stay in Montana, I rarely saw Indians mixing with non-Indians. In Northern Montana, I met an Indian woman who was recently hired by the federal government to do a job that requires her to interact with the public on a regular basis. "For the first three months, the locals couldn't believe that an Indian had this job," she says. "They're used to me by now, but so many of them said they've never met an Indian before. For all I knew, they think we all still live in teepees."

After leaving Browning, I stopped in Glasgow, a nearby town, and asked a local about poverty on the Blackfeet Reservation. "You stopped in Browning? I would never go to Browning. It's too dangerous," was the response. I was warned against stopping on Indian reservations by many Montanans over the course of my travels, but what I found were people who simply wanted to share their stories.

My next stop was the Crow reservation, located in south-central Montana and comprised of just under 11,000 members. The poverty practically slaps you in the face on the drive to and from the reservation. Dilapidated trailer homes line the highway, many with no windows and broken doors, surrounded by junk and rusting cars and clotheslines hung with tattered clothes. Sixty-two percent of Crow Indians are unemployed and the 38 percent that are employed are living below the poverty line, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"The problems are so deep here," says Maxine Brown. "The federal government set up a system that gave us no choice but to rely on them. That led to alcohol and drug problems. In order to make a life for myself, I had to literally walk away from my family because the problems are so bad."

Forty percent of Crow adults are addicted to "one form of substance or another," according to Janine Pease. "I think a lot of people in Montana feel that if Indians would just leave the reservation, they would leave their challenges behind them and

partake in the great American dream, but that's not at all the case, not in Montana," she says. "Jobs are often hard to find in big cities and housing is too expensive."

Montana's Indians see a glimmer of hope in Governor Brian Schweitzer, the state's first Democratic governor since 1988. A statement on Schweitzer's website reads, "Montanans need to understand the treaties made between Native Americans and the federal government pre-date the creation of the state of Montana. These treaties state that the reservations are sovereign nations."

Making good on his promise to reach out to Indians, Schweitzer has appointed six Indians to key positions within his administration and another six to state boards and councils. "He's done more for Indian country in a month and a half than the other 23 governors in Montana history," said Democratic Representative Jonathon Windy Boy at one of Schweitzer's inaugural balls held back in February.

Pease anticipates major changes from the governor on down. "Where Indians live, they're in the majority, so we have a number of counties that are Indian majority," she says. "That hasn't always been the case. Fifteen years ago, two counties, Glacier and Big Horn, became Indian and so in those areas we now have county officials and school board members who are tribal members and you wouldn't have seen that 20 years ago. I believe it will slowly make a difference in the quality of life."

If that happens, voter turnout amongst the Indian population will most likely increase. "While it has always been known that Native voters could help determine local election winners and losers, for the first time candidates for statewide and federal offices became plainly aware of the importance of Native constituencies," writes Jackie Johnson, executive director of the National Congress of American Indians in its NativeVote2004 report. While registration and turnout is still low compared to the national average, Native communities saw increases of 50 to 150 percent in their turnout, according to the report.

Native Americans became United States citizens in 1924, but as late as 1948, they were barred from voting in some states. While amendments have been passed to ensure the voting rights of women and African Americans, a Native Americans' right to vote has never been constitutionally secured.

*Rose Aguilar is a San Francisco-based journalist gathering stories from people living in states that voted overwhelmingly for George W. Bush. Track her journey at [Stories in America](#).*

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