

“RECLAIMING Their VOICE: The Native American Vote in New Mexico & Beyond”
2011, Concentric Media DVD. 42 min. info@concentric.org.

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American Democracy is a beacon for equal representation under a fair legal system. So, what happens when certain populations are denied their Constitutional rights to vote? Producer/Director Dorothy Fadiman has reconstructed a picture of Southwestern Native American suffrage from the earliest European contact to 2004. That was the year when Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico challenged questionable practices in the November general election. Fadiman’s rendering honors the Pueblo people in their quest to exert citizens’ influence and uphold democracy in the *Laguna 500 Voters’ Project 2004*.

Narrated by Peter Coyote the story unfolds with a politically correct rendition of European conquest. Southwestern tribes were impacted mostly by the Spanish who launched a genocidal assault.

After nearly two centuries of subjugation tribal freedom fighters mounted the Pueblo Revolt in August 1860. As much as possible every vestige of the invaders’ influence was removed. All things Spanish would have been incinerated, including Catholic religious items and European livestock. Baptisms were ritually nullified and the Pueblos reclaimed their culture. The purge lasted 12 years after which time Spanish leaders attempted a rapprochement. This effort was a sham, and Pueblos again suffered European/Catholic ambitions.

Once establishing this 17th century chronology, the film leaps ahead to Lakota territory, where Albert White Hat professes to the camera that his meditation vision brought a full reenactment of the horrors of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre. His personal quest was to forgive, even with the atrocities vivid in his mind. One can imagine that White Hat’s victory over justifiable hatred serves as a personification of how the Pueblo people might achieve their political freedom from oppression.

We learn next that the voting rights act of 1924 wasn’t effective in assuring Natives’ suffrage. Even veteran soldiers of World War II were prevented from casting ballots in New Mexico until 1948; evidenced by the case of Michael Trujillo who sued the government. Legal wrangling further delayed Trujillo’s chance to register until 1962. Finally, in 1965, another voting rights act secured Natives’ inclusion in elections. All of this political hubbub didn’t fully convince the Pueblo Indians, who remained reluctant to vote. The pueblo was the center for decision-making, not external manifestations of New Mexican or federal governments.

With the *Laguna 500 Voters’ Project 2004* a tribal effort began to encourage, cajole and press the Pueblo people to exercise their voting rights. [2004 was a presidential year with George Bush running for reelection, and New Mexico on the brink of shifting from a “Red” to a “Blue” state.] The next segment of this saga reveals a nefarious underside of politics in the land of the free.

After an intensive seven-month campaign 541 Pueblo people registered for the election. Volunteers had knocked on doors, provided transportation, discussed and convinced those who were suspicious or reluctant. All looked good until Election Day when Laguna Pueblos lined up at the polling station. Mysteriously, however, preregistration documents went missing leaving these first-time voters blocked from casting their ballots. Election officials were unable to provide provisional ballots for the

hundreds of disappointed citizens, and it appeared their right to vote was intentionally hindered. The county clerk, responsible for managing election documentation, claimed that demand exceeded the county's resources. A great number left the polling places disheartened when they learned that provisional ballots were scarce and voting would not be possible. Some stayed to insist that something be done to circumvent the obstruction.

Other impediments interfered with the voters' legitimate rights. Tribal photo IDs were dismissed as unacceptable. Electronic voting machines miscalculated the presidential results in extreme numbers, especially among Native and Latino communities throughout New Mexico. Pueblo people were silenced, again becoming victims of disenfranchisement. This outrage was challenged by federal lawsuits resulting in improved voting district access and elimination of touch screen voting machines. Paper ballots would be reinstated, providing traceable results. Unfortunately, it was too late to reverse the adulterated count in 2004, which may have changed the outcome in the presidential election.

According to the latest census New Mexico is home to Apache, Pueblo, Navajo and other tribal people comprising 9.7% of the population [census figures are notorious for under-counting Native numbers]. Given the chance to exert influence on policy decisions, tribal voters are a dominant minority!

The next point highlights the Sacred Alliance for Grassroots Equality [SAGE] which blocked a commercial road through Petroglyph National Monument. Two young activists describe the sacred nature of the site near Albuquerque, having led a successful effort in 1994. However, powerful property speculators pushed the issue back on the ballot the following year. This time language was intentionally crafted to confuse, and many tribal members believed that by favoring the new bond measure they'd preserve the petroglyphs. In fact, the preservation for which they voted permitted the road's construction.

Despite this despicable setback, the film concludes with a call for more energetic efforts to register and vote. Positive guarantees have been achieved in New Mexico, including paper ballots, interpreters, early voting opportunities in remote communities, and the taste of victory when elections are held fairly for all who participate. Finally, in 2007 The United Nations passed "The Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples" promoting untrammelled opportunity for self-determination. Leaders would now have to be more vigilant in assuring legal, fair conditions irrespective of entitlement or status.

Emotions run deep when viewing this insightful political documentary. The story blends sincere efforts to achieve political clout with unfortunate results that, somehow, do not shut down the hopes of Native voters in New Mexico.

Indian Americans are more apt to vote in tribal elections than they are in state or federal contests. The notion persists that voting for the "outside" issues is futile or irrelevant. Fadiman's film insinuates that early mistreatment at the hands of [Spanish] colonialists and later, by the U. S. military left an indelible distaste for any pro-government involvement. But the truth may be more complex than that.

Every tribal tradition will be somewhat different from the rest. An intriguing example from Montana illustrates how one tribe tackled the lack of turnout for major elections. Northern Cheyennes amended their Constitution in 1996 to hold all elections on the first Tuesday of November; tribal, state and federal. The ease of voting once annually increased the numbers of voters, partly due to the logistics for transporting rural residents to the polls.

Pueblo politics aren't clearly elucidated in the film, raising the question of why the people of Laguna would choose not to vote. Before contact Pueblo peoples [for there

are several groups] had formal methods of placing their leaders. Some Pueblo abided by a patriarchy, while others had neither inheritance nor popular election. Communities selected their public servants by means of a sophisticated combination of social consensus, spiritual preparedness, personal skill and other factors. “One person, one vote” was not in evidence in early Pueblo culture. Perhaps this is part of the quandary making voting a foreign practice.

Because this documentary is not a newsreel, it has a structure that defies chronology. “It is intended to be evocative and provocative” [D. Fadiman. Personal Communication. March 28, 2011]. Viewers will want to follow up and seek a deeper understanding of the Pueblo peoples’ struggle with contemporary politics. RECLAIMING Their VOICE is an insightful addition to pursuing complexities of voters’ rights in Indian country.