

# DEMOCRACY IS INDIGENOUS; RECLAIMING OUR VOICE, RECLAIMING OUR POWER.

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**A REPORT ON THE 2020 URBAN NATIVE VOTE + CENSUS**

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Prepared by the National Urban Indian Family Coalition





# CONTENTS

Introduction	4	<b>Engagement Metrics:</b>	10
Overview	4	- Digital Impact	
Urban Indian Organizations & Why They Succeed	5	- In-Person Organizing	
Grantees	6	Success Story >> Phoenix Indian Center	12
Adapting to COVID-19 Pandemic	7	Room for Improvement	13
Project Goals	7	<b>Looking to the Future:</b>	14
<b>Project Highlights:</b>	8	- 2021 Redistricting	
- First Alaskans Institute >> Anchorage, AK		- 2022 Elections	
- Rock the Native Vote >> Oklahoma City, OK		Summary & Closing	15
- Sacred Pipe Resource Center >> Bismarck, ND			

# INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the National Urban Indian Family Coalition (NUIFC) launched a national integrated voter engagement program and Census outreach initiative targeting 18 urban American Indian communities across the country, making up more than 1 million Native American individuals. This ambitious civic engagement endeavor was critical for urban American Indians, who make up over 70% of the total American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) population in the U.S., but who are forgotten in traditional 'Get out the Count' and 'Get out the Vote' campaigns.

The NUIFC invested more than \$2 million directly into 26 Urban Indian organizations in 17 states across the country to build a grassroots movement that centers the needs of urban Indian America. This endeavor marks the most significant civic engagement investment in urban Indian America. These nonprofit community-based organizations have a well-established community presence, giving them a unique cultural cache within the city and serving as a trusted voice in the city to the American Indian population.

# OVERVIEW

**Despite representing a majority of Native people in the United States, American Indians and Alaska Natives residing in urban areas are amongst the most invisibilized populations in the nation.**

This erasure manifests itself in unjust policy, lack of funding, and extreme disparities across all quality of life indicators for a majority of AI/ANs, especially those living in urban communities.

These disparities adversely impact children and family services, education, housing and homelessness, economic development and employment, criminal justice, and health and wellness. These systemic issues

compound themselves because urban Native people tend to have the least access and representation in policymaking, meaning their calls for support are often overlooked or not prioritized. To define a new narrative, the NUIFC and our coalition organized non-stop from 2018 to 2020 to ensure that the urban American Indian voice and its electoral power would be appreciated and heard.



# URBAN INDIAN ORGANIZATIONS & WHY THEY SUCCEED

The indicators described above are all related to and solvable through policy engagement and ensuring that Native voices are reflected in policy discussions. Urban American Indian organizations are the "front line" in providing critical services to the Native community and have often spent decades building trust with their client base. We empirically know that Native people will travel great distances in these cities to receive culturally relevant services from these organizations. These organizations provide critically needed human services and are also fluent and familiar with their own "cultural language" and experiences, thereby serving as trusted advocates, partners, and messengers within these populations. Furthermore, they provide the role as a collective voice of American Indians in their locale with the non-Native community.

Nationally, the AI/AN population is diverse, geographically dispersed, and almost impossible to identify in consistently inaccurate national and state voter databases. Yet, our nationwide network of members

and grantees, all culturally responsive and racially reflective organizations, play a crucial role as civic, social, and cultural centers of their communities. These same organizations are trusted community institutions and play an integral role in identifying, engaging, and activating American Indian voters.

Sadly, it is far too common for these local nonprofits to be overlooked or ignored entirely in larger civic engagement strategies or investments. Historically, this has meant that many of our grantees and members rarely received resources to engage and build their IVE capacity to foster and develop independent political and electoral power. Due to the lack of funding, many are forced to relegate civic engagement efforts to an "if we have time" priority, which often means it does not get done. The deployment of financial resources and technical support to work towards civic and voter engagement was invaluable to shifting the current narrative of invisibilizing the urban Native American population.

# GRANTEES



# ADAPTING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

When reviewing 2020, it is impossible not to consider the impact of COVID-19, an unprecedented pandemic the world has not experienced since the Spanish Flu has upended social and cultural norms across our society. As of this writing, the virus has killed more than half a million Americans and forced us to reimagine community organizing and power building to keep people safe in a pandemic environment. This is even more true among AI/AN communities across Indian Country, which have been disproportionately impacted by all aspects of the virus.

To this end, so much of our work needed to be augmented to be safe, with a big emphasis on digital organizing and COVID-19 safe in-person events. One of our strategy's central pillars included in-person community events and gatherings, which needed to be adapted due to the pandemic. As our partner centers always do, they innovated and continued their critical work to meet their communities' needs while ensuring their communities' voices and votes were represented. Throughout this report, you will find examples of how our community-based organizations accomplished their mission of engaging the urban Indian community.



Seattle Indian Health Board First Responders Beginning Their Work With A Blessing

# PROJECT GOALS

- Improve awareness and participation in the 2020 Census among urban Native Americans.
- Increase awareness of the power of the American Indian electorate.
- Continue to develop a peer-to-peer network of community-based nonprofits and help facilitate learning and sharing between culturally-responsive organizations with aligned missions.
- Increase the number of American Indians participating in the 2020 election.
- Address the chronic undercounting of urban Native populations in the 2020 Census.
- Develop strategies and partnerships with other national Indian organizations working on Census and Native Vote work to ensure that every corner of Indian Country was represented in 2020.
- Create linkages and assistance to foster relationships and partnerships between urban Indian community-based organizations (CBOs) with other communities of color at the local level to increase power.
- Heighten national awareness and elevate our members' and grantees' profiles for the invaluable work they do in their communities.

# PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS



**Rock the Native Vote » Oklahoma City, OK.** To celebrate National Voter Registration Day, Rock the Native Vote partnered with Voto Latino to hold a block party in downtown Oklahoma City. The event included traditional Native dancers, food trucks, and a Ferris wheel. Along with this, the mayor of Oklahoma City presented a proclamation establishing September 28th as an official city holiday to cement National Voter Registration Day's importance. The event also featured a partnership with the NBA's Oklahoma City Thunder, who attended and promoted the event on their social media channels. Never satisfied, Rock the Native Vote continuously organized more civic engagement activities leading up to election day.

- Hosted online concerts that talked about the Census and Native Vote
- Purchased billboards and bus signs in prominent local areas that were seen by hundreds of thousands of people.
- Hosted multiple socially distanced candidate forums so the community could meet those running for office.
- Worked with Voto Latino to elect the first-ever Latino to the Oklahoma City Council



**First Alaskans Institute » Anchorage AK.** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the sheer size of the state of Alaska, First Alaskans Institute (FAI) developed one of the most robust digital outreach plans in the country. This was particularly evident with their Census 2020 engagement efforts, which featured a variety of online events.

- 'Coffeetime on the Census' with Senator Lisa Murkowski, an online event to increase awareness around the Census.
- 'Who Wants to be a 'Censusaire,' a Census-focused online game show that reached an audience of 60,000 people in its first live stream.
- FAI's online raffles and giveaways drew thousands of participants from around the state, often from remote villages and communities, and provided education and awareness of the Census.

*"We invented various ways of making the Census about our peoples' humor, ways of life, and other parts of who we are that resonate with our values in a virtual environment. We built an online space that informed and uplifted our community."*

Barbara Blake | **First Alaskans Institute**



**Sacred Pipe Resource Center » Bismarck, ND.** Sacred Pipe Resource Center, Bismarck ND. To help make sure voters felt comfortable and excited to vote, the Sacred Pipe Resource Center (SPRC) organized a unique voter transportation event called 'Native Vote in Style'. Voters were picked up in a Hummer Limousine and taken to the polls for early voting while providing them with masks and hand sanitizer. SPRC also worked in partnership with statewide voter and Census engagement initiatives.

- Despite communities being over 200 miles away from one another, SPRC held voter engagement efforts across North Dakota to reach as many voters as possible.
- SPRC staff and volunteers knocked on hundreds of doors to make sure residents knew where and when to register to vote and how to participate in early voting.
- Hosted a 'not voting is scary' drive through Halloween event to keep their community safe and engaged around the election.

In addition to securing and distributing financial support to our members, the NUIFC worked with members to co-create national Census and GOTV campaigns to bolster, promote, and highlight the work happening on the ground in Urban Indian communities across the country.

The NUIFC created and distributed thousands of marketing materials for the 2020 Census and our Native Vote (Democracy Is Indigenous) campaigns, which included informational handouts that included step-by-step directions on how to complete the Census and personalized state information on how to register to vote, request a mail-in ballot, or vote early. We also commissioned Indigenous artists to create culturally relevant artwork that we used as visual themes in our popular series of posters, t-shirts, tote bags, and more. Each of our grantees distributed these campaign materials to bolster their community outreach efforts and build excitement for the upcoming election and Census.



The NUIFC partnered with Comcast, the Urban Indian Health Institute, and the Center for Native American Youth to create a public service announcement focused on Urban Indian communities. The result of this partnership was a culturally targeted, nationally televised PSA that aired in more than 30 Comcast marketplaces.

Due to the NUIFC's collective advocacy and longstanding reputation in partnering with urban Indian America, the organization had new opportunities to work closely with other national organizations to ensure that our members' perspectives, priorities, and concerns were heard and included. Our new partnerships included - When We All Vote, National Voter Registration Day, National League of Cities, Vote at Home Institute, Power to the Polls, and more.

*"We were able to push a positive message out during a period of negative political events that lifted up a brighter day for our community. We were able to connect with people even though COVID-19 made it hard."*

Colleen Chalmers | **Chief Seattle Club**

*"We are a national "identity" that cannot be ignored by the press or politicians because we are ready to shift the values of this country to one that protects our future generations from the reckless path we are currently being taken down by our governments."*

Maximo Anguiano | **American Indians In Texas**

# ENGAGEMENT METRICS

## DIGITAL IMPACT

Digital media has always been a cornerstone of our community organizing work at the local, regional, and national levels. Still, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it quickly became the primary focus of our work. Our coalition quickly scaled up our online infrastructure and used it to increase awareness around our civic engagement campaigns while keeping our communities safe. With coordination and support across the country, our collective digital organizing efforts were unprecedented, shattering our 2018 records of online engagement and creating innovative social media campaigns.

### TOTAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENTS AROUND CENSUS 2020 & NATIVE VOTE

# 16,150,662

### Social Media Campaigns



- ONLINE RALLIES
- SOCIAL MEDIA RAFFLES
- ZOOM TOWN HALLS
- SOCIAL MEDIA GAME SHOWS
- ONLINE BINGO GAMES
- PHOTO CONTESTS
- VIDEO PREMIERES
- BOOSTED SOCIAL MEDIA ADS
- LIVE Q & A CHATS
- ONLINE CONCERTS
- CULTURALLY RELEVANT SOCIAL MEDIA GRAPHICS & MESSAGING
- SOCIAL MEDIA TOWNHALLS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS
- ONLINE CANDIDATE FORUMS AND VOTER EDUCATION EVENTS
- ART COMPETITIONS

## IN-PERSON ORGANIZING

As community-based organizations, each of our grantees' strengths comes from being in the community and organizing voter engagement efforts that would resonate with their respective communities. Due to COVID-19, these efforts needed to adapt to keep staff and attendees safe as they have always done, though our centers innovated to create memorable and safe events for a range of voters.

### Participants attending events and participating in outreach efforts:

# 77,212

These metrics are based upon community participation in the following voter engagements (but not limited to) hosted by grantees in their respective communities.



25,797 INDIVIDUALS REGISTERED TO VOTE OR ASSISTED IN COMPLETING THE CENSUS



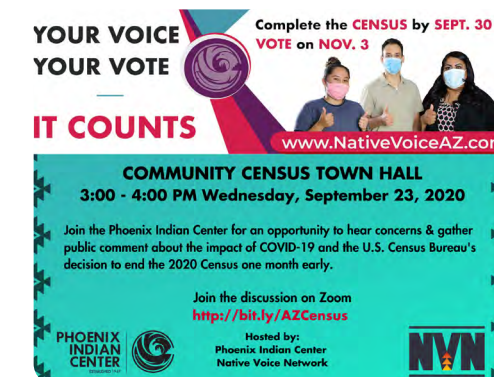
95,000+ PHONE CALLS WERE MADE



321 IN-PERSON COVID-19 SAFE EVENTS HOSTED

### Events Included

GOTV Parades, Outdoor Candidate Forums, Drive-thru Food Events, Coffee Hours, Tabling, Outdoor celebrations, Halloween Events, Community Voter Registration Drives, Rides & Marches to the Polls, Car Parades, Ice Cream Socials.



# SUCCESS STORY



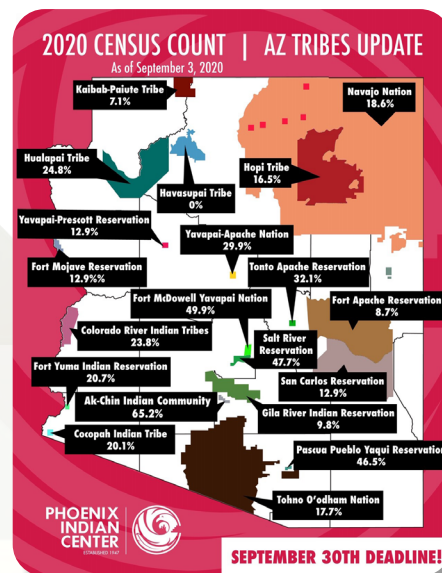
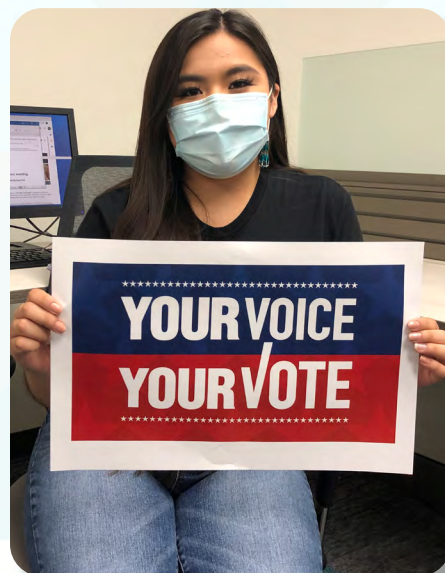
**Phoenix Indian Center >> Phoenix AZ.** As one of the most pivotal states in the 2020 Presidential election, the NUIFC supported the Phoenix Indian Center's voter outreach and engagement efforts to increase the American Indian voter turnout. Their efforts were wildly successful, with many analysts pointing to the increase in turnout from Arizona's Native American population as a critical factor in the electoral victories in this

swing state. The Phoenix Indian Center has been building its civic engagement capacity over the years, and in 2020 they were able to deploy a comprehensive toolbox of civic engagement strategies to increase turnout.

- Handed out thousands of Native Vote 'Goodie Bags' that provided information about registering to vote and creating a voting plan.
- Targeted advertisements about voting in areas with large urban Indian populations were seen by tens of thousands in the lead up to the election.
- Door-to-door canvassing in affordable housing complexes with large Native American populations.
- A competition among community members that focused on doing outreach back to the communities on the reservation to make sure they were planning on voting as we

*"The momentum must continue. Continuing to rally together and staying connected and working together is a great way to build power and continue to grow the understanding around urban Indian America."*

Joyla Kroupa | Phoenix Indian Center



# ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Following our civic engagement work in 2018 and 2020, we have had the opportunity to examine and learn about ways to improve our initiatives. For many of our centers, this was the first time participating in Census engagement work. As such, the NUIFC's member organizations had a steep learning curve around the decennial count, which was only exasperated due to the emergence of COVID-19.

## When surveyed about these projects, the organizations reported on the following issues:

- Lack of understanding of the Census and how to deal with its moving deadlines, mixed messaging, and project changes due to COVID-19.
- Census Bureau failed to work with the Centers on counting the local unsheltered population, which is disproportionately made up of Native Americans.
- Streamlined data sources and universal metrics that all centers should be tracking and recording.
- More emphasis on combined social media campaigns, like the work we did around 'National Voter Registration Day.'
- More resources and support on building digital capabilities, such as a guide on how to hold a successful online event.
- Ideas and support on simple ways to do community outreach, like basic tabling or weekly coffee hours, etc.
- How to best connect with other Communities of Color and other community-based organizations
- Understanding legal requirements around giveaways/raffles/contests around the Census and Get out the Vote, how to do fun competitions but still comply with federal election law.
- More informational guides on how people could vote safely and if it was possible to make centers official ballot return locations etc.
- Universal messaging to discuss COVID-19, its impact on the civic engagement process, and how to best deal with it.

# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE >> REDISTRICTING & MID-TERMS

Following our second successful civic engagement initiative, the NUIFC and our coalition have established a foothold for building long-lasting awareness, power, and electoral influence in urban Indian America. We will continue to use this momentum to advocate for increased investment and resource allocation into these communities to strengthen community-driven civic engagement strategies that resonate and empower their communities. The NUIFC will continue its role as a convener and intermediary focused on funneling resources to our members and offering a platform to elevate and unify our voices to support our members and organizations serving urban American Indian communities.

With the Census completed and a new Congress and administration elected, the NUIFC will begin building our infrastructure to support our national network and collectively strengthen our civic engagement presence and profile across Indian Country.

**Moving forward, the NUIFC will focus its efforts on engaging and supporting our members to play critical roles in the following priorities:**



## 2021 Redistricting

Following every Census is a period of redistricting, where Census data is used to draw new legislative districts that will determine an elected official's constituency. This process is critical to community power-building, as a poorly drawn district can dilute responsibility and accountability from elected officials. This work is even more crucial for our centers and their community because they have often been excluded from the redistricting process and left with inadequate representation because of it.



## 2022 Elections

Following record-breaking turnout and a slate of impressive victories and results from the 2020 elections, our centers must continue this momentum into the midterm elections in 2022. Ensuring that the urban Native Vote remains a political force that decides elections is critical to continue our electorate power building. If our movement falters, we risk losing the ground and power we have already built.

# SUMMARY & CLOSING

Over the past year, the NUIFC and our members conducted an unprecedented and historic civic engagement initiative for Indian Country. Together, we strengthened our network, built new coalitions, secured and directed resources for on-the-ground organizing, developed and launched two national campaigns, engaged with urban Indian community leaders, and convened our members and grantees from each of the 20 cities. This work was done despite an unprecedented (in recent history) global pandemic that disproportionately impacted Indian Country and economically paralyzed American Indian families, just barely making ends meet. Despite all of the unexpected challenges, our members and their communities were resilient and rose to the occasion to make sure their communities were represented and heard.

## An overview of our collective success:

- Over 16 million people engaged through social media and digital organizing.
- Connected with 62,212 individuals at COVID-19 safe in-person civic engagement events.
- Registered 15,711 new voters for the 2020 election.
- Held more than 300 COVID-19 safe Civic Engagement Events
- Hosted various GOTV parades, including a retro car parade down the Las Vegas Strip
- Created a national public service announcement aired in 30+ Comcast marketplaces
- Commissioned and promoted artwork by emerging and renowned American Indian artists for the Census and Native Vote, including t-shirts, posters, and billboards.
- Ten candidate forums were held.
- Over 800 doors were safely knocked on and canvassed.
- Over 95,000 phone calls were made
- Connected with and worked with other communities of color around the country to create long-lasting power-building arrangements.
- Helped elect the most Native Americans to U.S. Congress in history.
- Native Candidates made history in Kansas as the youngest state legislator and the first openly transgender candidate.