CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS APPLAUD INTRODUCTION OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 2019

Dear Senator Udall, Congressman Luján, Congresswoman Haaland, Congresswoman Davids, Congressman Gallego, and Congresswoman McCollum:

We, the undersigned individuals and civil rights organizations, who advocate for the equal access of all communities to the political process, applaud you for your leadership in introducing the Native American Voting Rights Act of 2019.

Just last year, we celebrated the seventieth anniversaries of Harrison v. Laveen and Trujillo v. Garley, landmark decisions recognizing the right to vote of the first Americans, our Nation’s indigenous population. Native Americans have made significant progress since those decisions, but much work remains to be done. Led by the Native American Rights Fund, the Native American Voting Rights Coalition last year completed a series of nine field hearings in seven states on the state of voting rights in Indian Country. Approximately 125 witnesses from dozens of tribes in the Lower Forty-Eight testified at the hearings about barriers they face when they try to vote.

Native Americans have unequal opportunities to register to vote because of the absence of in-person registration opportunities on reservations. Election officials do not accept tribal identification cards under strict voter ID laws, or they reject registration applications from Native Americans lacking a physical address. Those who are able to register are confronted by great distances to off-reservation voting locations, often in places like sheriff’s offices where they do not feel welcome.

The few polling places located on reservations may be closed for pretextual reasons. In places where mail-in voting occurs, Native voters may not have the financial means to pay the poll tax in the form of postage to return their ballot, or may be unable to access ballot drop-off sites located several hours away off-reservation. Limited-English proficient Native voters frequently are denied access to voting information that voters receive in English, especially before Election Day.
The Native American Voting Rights Act of 2019 would remove many of these barriers. It will expand in-person registration opportunities by designating federally funded facilities on reservations as voter registration sites under the National Voting Registration Act. It mandates at least one polling place on tribal lands for each voting precinct. In-person registration and voting locations on tribal lands could not be consolidated, moved, or eliminated if doing so is motivated by a discriminatory purpose or would have the effect of limiting voting opportunities for affected voters. Native voters would no longer have to pay to vote by mail and could pick up and drop off their ballots at their local tribal government buildings. Election officials would have to accept identification cards issued by tribal governments or other federal or tribal agencies. Native Americans living in areas where voting information is required in an American Indian or Alaska Native language would be able to receive written translations if requested by their tribal government.

Equally important, the Act would create a grant program to facilitate collaboration between tribes and election officials in making the voting process more accessible for Native Americans. It would make it easier for tribal governments to request federal election observers to prevent discrimination against Native voters. The Attorney General of the United States would be required to consult annually with Indian tribes regarding issues impacting the ability of Native Americans to vote. When necessary, Native voters would be able to pursue litigation in federal court to enforce their rights under the Act.

The undersigned individuals and organizations strongly endorse the Native American Voting Rights Act of 2019. We encourage other Members of Congress to support this legislation.

All of us suffer, and our elected government has less legitimacy, each time anyone, including an American Indian or Alaska Native, is prevented from registering to vote or being turned away at the polls. The Act takes significant steps towards achieving the equal political opportunities for Native Americans envisioned by Frank Harrison and Miguel Trujillo when they bravely sought to exercise their first right of citizenship over seventy years ago.

For more information, please contact James Tucker, Pro Bono Voting Rights Counsel for the Native American Rights Fund (“NARF”), at (702) 727-1246 or james.tucker@wilsonelser.com, or Jacqueline De León, Staff Attorney at the Native American Rights Fund (“NARF”), at (303) 447-8760 or jdeleon@narf.org.

Very truly yours,

John Echohawk
Executive Director
Native American Rights Fund

Jacqueline Pata
Executive Director
National Congress of American Indians

Vanita Gupta
President and CEO
Leadership Conference on Civil & Human Rights
s/ Liz La quen náay Medicine Crow  
President CEO  
First Alaskans Institute

s/ Myrna Perez  
Deputy Director  
Brennan Center for Justice

s/ Nancy G. Abudu  
Deputy Legal Director  
Southern Poverty Law Center  
Voting Rights Practice Group

Todd A. Cox  
Director of Policy  
NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc.

s/ Hilary O. Shelton  
Director  
NAACP Washington Bureau & SVP Advocacy & Policy

Ronald Newman  
National Political Advocacy Director  
ACLU

s/ Maria Dadgar  
Executive Director  
Inter Tribal Association of Arizona

Curt Decker  
Executive Director  
National Disability Rights Network

s/ Chris Carson  
President  
League of Women Voters

OJ Semans Sr.  
Co-Executive Director  
Four Directions

s/ Margaret Fung  
Executive Director  
Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF)

s/ Danielle Lang  
Co-Director, Voting Rights & Redistricting  
Campaign Legal Center

K. Sabeel Rahman  
President  
Demos

Chrissie Castro  
Executive Director  
California Native Vote Project

Robert M. Brandon  
President  
Fair Elections Center

Caroline E. DeWitt  
President & Executive Director  
Rock the Vote

s/ Barbara Arnwine  
Executive Director  
Transformative Justice Coalition and on behalf of the National Commission for Voter Justice and the Voting Rights Alliance

Marc Egan  
Director, Government Relations  
National Education Association
s/ Arturo Vargas
CEO
NALEO Educational Fund

s/ Ramon J. Vasquez
Executive Director
American Indians in Texas-Spanish Colonial Missions

s/ Rabbi Jason Kimelman-Block
Washington Director
Bend the Arc Jewish Action

s/ Reverend Leslie Watson-Malachi
National Director
African American Ministers in Action

s/ Samantha Gladu
Executive Director
Bus Project

s/ Judith LeBlanc
Native Organizers Alliance

s/ Karen Hobert Flynn
President
Common Cause

s/ Corrine Sanchez, PhD
Executive Director
Tewa Women United

Terry Ao Minnis
Director of Census and Voting Programs
Asian Americans Advancing Justice

s/ Patrick Carolan
Executive Director
Franciscan Action Network

s/ Nick Tilsen
President & CEO
NDN Collective

s/ Nancy K. Kaufman
CEO
National Council of Jewish Women

s/ Melvin H. Wilson, MBA, LCSW
Senior Manager,
Office of Social Justice and Human Rights
National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

Marc H. Morial
President and CEO
National Urban League

s/ Robert Weissman
President
Public Citizen

s/ Sandy Sorensen
Director, Washington Office
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

s/ Rev. Jeania Ree V. Moore
Director of Civil and Human Rights
General Board of Church and Society
The United Methodist Church

People for the American Way
s/ Laura Packard
Political Consultant
Voter Rights Action

s/ Patti Hibbeler
Chief Executive Officer
Phoenix Indian Center, Inc.

s/ Laurie Weahkee
Executive Director
Native American Voters Alliance

s/ Jean Reith Schroedel
Professor of Political Science
Claremont Graduate University
(in her personal capacity)

Bryan L. Sells
Voting-rights Attorney
The Law Office of Bryan L. Sells LLC

Patty Ferguson-Bohnee
Arizona State University
Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law (in her personal capacity)

s/ Daniel McCool
Professor Emeritus of Political Science
(in his personal capacity)