

Native youth carry the torch of Citizenship Act 100 years later

Upon the act’s cen-
tennial commemora-
tion, Native youth
leaders and activists
say younger genera-
tions must play an ac-
tive role in voting
and voting rights.

The Indian Citizenship
Act of 1924 stands as a piv-
otal thread in the tapestry of
Indigenous civil rights in the
United States. Before its en-
actment, Native Americans
confronted a bewildering le-
gal landscape that systemati-
cally withheld citizenship and
its accompanying rights.

Propelled by the advoca-
cy of U.S. Rep. Homer P.
Snyder and endorsed with
presidential signature by
Calvin Coolidge on June 2,
1924, the Act swept aside
barriers that had long re-
legated Indigenous peoples to
the fringes of citizenship,
extending its mantle to 40
percent of Native Ameri-
cans previously denied this
fundamental status, as re-
corded by the Library of
Congress.

Native people were once
barred from voting. Today,
they are the decisive factor
in some races.

“I think it was a step by
the U.S. government to make
amends for generations of
mistreatment. Native people
have always had the will to
prevail in the face of hard-
ship and we have always had
resiliency in our blood,” said
O’Shay Birdinground, 21,
Crow.

Birdinground is a student
at the University of Monta-
na majoring in political sci-
ence, with a minor in eco-
nomics. Birdinground was
voted Rocky Mountain Rep-



President Calvin Coolidge with Ruth Muskrat and other Citizenship advocates, 1923.

resentative for Montana and
Wyoming at this summer’s
national gathering of UNITY,
or United National Indian
Tribal Youth in Portland.

The 15th amendment of
the U.S. Constitution protects
against voter discrimination
based on race, color, or pre-
vious servitude. This citizen-
ship-granting legislation sym-
bolized a watershed moment
in the quest for equality. Yet,
amidst this hundred-year-late
legislative triumph lay the
shadows of ongoing struggles
for full recognition and tribal
autonomy, setting the stage
for future battles over vot-
ing rights and the broader
movement towards self-de-
termination for Native na-
tions.

Elections decided by the Native vote

Today, with voting access
across Indian Country being
targeted, Birdinground thinks
Native youth need to be in-
volved in all aspects of vot-
ing in their state, whether the
issue on the ballot is voting
rights, health care, economic
development or reproductive
rights.

“In Montana, for instance,
many of our elections have
been decided by the Native

vote, and it’s because of
young Indigenous people who
want to advocate for their
communities that make it hap-
pen,” said Birdinground.

U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, a
Democrat from Montana, is
aiming for his fourth term,
and Birdinground believes the
reason Tester has been re-
elected repeatedly is because
of the outreach and re-
sources he pours into Indig-
enous communities in Mon-
tana.

“The Jon Tester campaign
will help Indigenous people
get to the polls because the
Republican state government
has been working to make it
harder for Indigenous people
to vote, and actually push
polling stations further and
further away from the reser-
vation,” said Birdinground,
noting that some Native vot-
ers along the state’s Hi-Line
have to drive over 100 miles
to the nearest polling station.

Kevin Simmons, president
of the Native American Cau-
cus of the Democratic Party
of Oregon, with roots in the
Muckleshoot Indian Tribe
and Grand Ronde member,
brings a dual perspective to
his roles.

Alongside his political ac-
tivism, Simmons is a fourth-

year doctoral student at Or-
egon State University, where
his research centers on inte-
grating Indigenous cultural
practices into strategies that
positively impact American
Indians and Alaska Native
communities.

Reflecting on the complexi-
ties of historical injustice,
Simmons critiques the his-
torical narrative surrounding
governmental actions: “It’s
ambiguous, this idea that
these government entities
have come over and seized
control of our lands and then
many years later, they’re now
going to provide citizenship
for us.”

In the 1950s and 1960s,
Congress initiated policies
aimed at terminating tribes
across the nation. In 1964,
Simmons’ tribe, Grand
Ronde, was terminated—a
federal-led effort, mirrored in
other regions, aimed at forc-
ibly assimilating tribes into
mainstream American cul-
ture. These policies, Simmons
argues, stripped Indigenous
peoples of their identity, cul-
ture and land.

“It’s tough for me not to
make a connection with vot-
ing rights and termination,”
Simmons said. “We were still
fighting for land, for recog-

nition as Native people. How
does that accurately depict
the right to vote if we
struggled even to be recog-
nized as Native people?”

The Indian Citizenship Act
of 1924 ostensibly granted
voting rights to all Indigenous
people, yet, in practice, many
faced obstacles due to in-
consistent state implementations.

William Miller, govern-
ment affairs manager for the
Native American Youth and
Family Center, or NAYA, Ac-
tion Fund, Blackfeet and
Cherokee, underscores the
enduring impact on Native
communities.

“The intentional historical
erasure and racial integration
of our people demand a col-
lective voice for positive sys-
tems change,” Miller said.

Miller advocates for com-
munity empowerment
through initiatives such as
leadership development and
civic education. In June, he
hosted a webinar to broaden
perspectives on the Indian
Citizenship Act, encouraging
open dialogue on its
intersectionality with tribal
sovereignty and contempo-
rary Native voting rights.

Generations before and after

Corinne Sams, an elected
member of the Board of
Trustees for the Confeder-
ated Tribes of the Umatilla
Indian Reservation and an
appointee to Oregon Gov.
Tina Kotek’s tribal consulta-
tion task force, offered in-
sights during Miller’s webinar,
highlighting Indigenous gov-
ernance systems that predate
European contact.

“We have our order and
roles that manage how we
function as a people and in
our way of life,” Sams said.

Sams critiqued the Act’s
implementation, noting it

needed to be executed in
good faith, and emphasized
the ongoing complexities of
Indigenous sovereignty
within the U.S. legal frame-
work.

“We were treated like
wards of the federal and
state governments,” she said.

Robert Miller, Eastern
Shawnee, is a professor of
law at Arizona State Univer-
sity, former Chief Justice for
the Pascua Yaqui Tribe Court
of Appeals and author of
books including “Native
America, Discovered and
Conquered: Thomas
Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, and
Manifest Destiny.”

Miller reflects on histori-
cal contexts where Indig-
enous peoples’ rights were
tied to their service in
American wars. He points
to post-World War I federal
legislation granting citizen-
ship to Indigenous veterans
but notes ongoing dispari-
ties in citizenship status and
rights.

“I think there’s a low vot-
ing rate among American In-
dians, which may be for
many minority groups and
poverty-stricken groups, you
know, is your vote worth the
time? Is your vote even
counted? And does the state
make it too much trouble,”
said Miller.

Birdinground says his gen-
eration has a critical respon-
sibility when it comes to vot-
ing rights, just as generations
before him did and genera-
tions after him will.

“Generations have come
before us and generations will
come after us because of the
work that our ancestors and
us as generations have done
to make it,” said
Birdinground.

By Aislin Tweedy, Under-
score Native News.



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