

Drop boxes: essential for safe voting

Written by By Ahtza Dawn Chavez Executive Director of NM Native Vote member of the Diné Nation, born for Kewa Pueblo

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If you told me a global health crisis fueled by ill-advised political leadership would hold American citizens hostage and infringe on basic voting rights a year ago, I wouldn't have believed you.

Sadly, that is the situation we find ourselves in today.

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While that is a truth we Americans must accept, what we don't have to accept is citizen inaction. We can make the best of a bad situation and secure the one aspect that we actually have control over: our vote.

The current administration is threatening to remove letter collection boxes, impose budget cuts to the U.S. Postal Service, and derail vote-in mailing systems as we approach the November election. Unfortunately for them, we have the power to take a stand and protect our rights—and we know the tools that will get us there.

With the USPS still under threat and COVID-19 continuing to claim lives, it's no secret that voting options are limited. Luckily, the simple solution of ballot drop boxes presents a safe, easy and fair solution for voters all across New Mexico.

Drop boxes are monitored: They're completely locked and surveilled either by camera or security guard.

Drop boxes are mobile: They're easily accessible and able to reach even the most remote voters.

Drop boxes are safe: They're composed of quarter inch steel, weighing between 250 and 750 pounds, and cemented to the ground, similar to ATMs.

Lastly, ballots cast via drop box are collected directly by election officials, cutting out the mail system in the middle. Whether you're concerned about the threat of COVID-19, the possibility of your ballot getting lost in the mail, or any number of other factors at play this election, drop boxes provide an outstanding solution for New Mexico voters.

While you'll hear me sing the praises of drop boxes for all Americans, drop boxes are of even greater importance to the people living on New Mexican reservations and tribal lands. According to the New Mexico Department of Health, Native Americans represent a staggering 31 percent

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of the state's coronavirus cases, despite making up just 10 percent of the state's total population. Even before the attack on the U.S. mail system, tribal governments had closed their lands to non-residents to safeguard their communities, and in some areas this interrupted scheduled mail service. While it's critical we get the crisis of this pandemic under control, that can't come at the cost of our right to be heard at the ballot box.

As the executive director of NM Native Vote, I know firsthand that tribal communities are worried about disenfranchisement and how they can safely get out the vote. None of the options available—vote-by-mail, early voting or even in-person options on election day—are free of obstacles or risks, especially for voters in remote areas where the virus has still managed to spread rapidly.

Heather Ferguson, executive director of Common Cause NM, also voiced fears for Native communities on reservations, stating, “this is a huge group of people that we have historically disenfranchised and we’re doing it again.” Between the toll COVID-19 has taken on tribal people, the almost total lockdown we’ve endured since virus clusters continued to surface, and the remote nature of reservations, New Mexicans living there aren’t just in danger of getting sick—they’re in danger of losing their vote.

Through all of the injustices and inequities faced by New Mexico’s Native communities, it’s hard to say that something so simple as drop boxes would be an all-encompassing solution. Still, it’s something so simple as drop boxes that could alleviate voter fears and provide safe, secure and easy access to eligible tribal voters.

If you’re reading this thinking, if drop boxes make access to voting easier for everyone, why not install them everywhere? Well, the current administration has recently filed lawsuits barring the use of drop boxes in some areas, basing their suits on disproved security concerns. Back in reality, experts have proven time and time again that drop boxes don’t come with any sort of security holes or political benefit for one party or another, they simply help eligible voters return their ballots.

The installation of drop boxes on and near reservation communities would protect not just peoples’ lives, but also their right to vote in our democracy. For a community that has been hit disproportionately hard by COVID-19 and disenfranchised throughout American history, installing accessible drop boxes is a small but crucial step election officials can take to ensure the franchise remains intact today. Regardless of party affiliation, I urge county clerks to do

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what is right. Don't make people choose between protecting their lives or protecting their right to vote; install drop boxes and ensure that every American citizen is entitled to both.

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