

## **Taylor Van Why**

### **2024 Frank Harrison and Harry Austin Voting Rights Essay Contest**

Indian voting in Arizona has a complex history marked by various challenges and victories; despite facing such barriers, Indians have persisted in asserting their right to vote. Voting rights were not granted to Indian people in Arizona even after being recognized as U.S. citizens in 1924. In 1928, Peter Porter and Rudolph Johnson were denied registration to vote and sued the Pinal County Recorder, but due to guardianship laws they were unsuccessful in their efforts. In 1948, WWII Veteran Frank Harrison and Tribal Chairman Harry Austin experienced the same fate as Porter and Johnson, they then sued the Maricopa County Recorder, this time with a successful outcome. On July 15th, 1948, the Supreme Court of Arizona unanimously overturned the previous ruling, granting Indians the right to vote. However, voter discrimination practices still occurred as Arizona instituted literacy tests, which prevented 80 - 90% of Indians from voting until such tests were banned in 1970, granting Indians the full right to vote. Today, Indians in Arizona face obstacles accessing the polls because of inherent barriers unique to those living on Tribal lands, burdensome election laws, racism, and neglect on the part of election administrators to ensure that there is equal access to elections.

It is clear that the fight for electoral equality and justice is far from over. There is a need for ongoing advocacy and support to protect Indian voting rights and ensuring equal representation. To safeguard this right, we must advocate for policies that eliminate barriers to voting, such as inadequate access to polling stations on reservations. Additionally, supporting initiatives that increase voter registration and participation among Indian communities is essential. By promoting inclusive voting practices, we can ensure that Native Americans have equal opportunity to have their voices heard in our democratic processes. Through education, advocacy, and policy reform, we can protect and uphold Indian voting rights.

Since I recently got accepted into the Arizona State University – Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law, I plan to participate in various Native American groups and projects, like the Indian Legal Clinic and the Native Vote Project at ASU, for example. The fight for Indian voting rights and Native representation is not over. However, thanks to the efforts of Porter, Johnson, Harrison, and Austin, the Native Vote exists in Arizona and is stronger than ever before.

Something that inspires me to participate in elections, is Gabriella Cázares-Kelly, the current Pima County Recorder. She is the first Native American to hold a countywide seat in Pima County and is a member of the same tribal nation as myself, the Tohono O'odham Nation. She was elected to the exact position of offices that previously denied Porter, Johnson, Harrison, and Austin the ability to register to vote in the 1920s and 1940s. Seeing how far Native Americans have come inspires me daily to make sure their efforts are not taken for granted.

Furthermore, I am inspired to participate in elections because I believe in the power of democracy and my vote's impact on shaping the future of my community, state, and country. By engaging in the electoral process, I exercise my right to have a voice in decision-making but also contribute to holding elected officials accountable and ensuring that policies align with the values and needs of the people. I believe that every vote counts, and even more so, every Native vote counts, and I am motivated to be a part of the democratic process to create a better and more equitable society for all. After learning at a young age about the struggles Native Americans faced, I cannot imagine not participating in elections, a fundamental civil right that Native Americans before me were deprived of for many years.

I plan on utilizing various social media platforms to share voter resources, key election dates, and voting locations. I will also proudly wear my "I Voted" sticker to spark the initiative in other community members to vote. I want to empower community members by emphasizing that their vote matters and can impact policies and decisions that affect their lives. By fostering a culture of civic engagement and highlighting the significance of each vote, I hope to encourage my community to participate in the democratic process during the 2024 elections actively.

It is crucial to continue engaging with elected officials to ensure our voices are heard, especially after election day. I plan to stay involved by attending town hall meetings and staying informed about upcoming legislation and policy decisions. By participating in community events, volunteering for campaigns, or joining advocacy groups, I can make a difference in shaping the policies that affect my community. I believe that civic engagement does not end on Election Day - it is an ongoing process that requires active participation to create positive change.