

Navajo leaders say San Juan County has 25% of tribe listed in wrong political boundaries, weakening their political clout; they seek state's help to fix it

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Navajo leaders say San Juan County voter rolls list about 1 of every 4 tribal members in the wrong political boundaries — so they might receive incorrect ballots despite court-ordered redrawing of them to end political domination of largely Republican whites over Democratic American Indians there.

They are asking the state for help to fix problems quickly before the Nov. 6 election. The requests were made during meetings this week with legislators and the office of Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox, the state's top election official.

But county officials dispute that the problem is that large or serious. They say they are working to resolve some problems created because a quarter of residents use post office boxes instead of street addresses. Some coordinates supplied by Navajos, officials say, are wrong, including locations as far away as Russia.

County officials also note that U.S. District Judge Robert Shelby rejected similar arguments about purported problems earlier this year, and they complain that the tribe is talking to state officials instead now.

“Approximately 85 to 95 percent of the [Navajo] voters are not placed correctly” at their residential coordinates on voter rolls, Leonard Gorman, executive director of the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission, told the Legislature's Native American Legislative Liaison Committee on Wednesday.

The rolls show that “some live in rivers. Some live in ravines, or the canyon walls. This is ridiculous,” he told legislators.

Gorman added that “about 20 to 25 percent” of Navajos “are not in the proper precincts” and may be given improper ballots, according to his commission's review of county voter rolls.

Earlier this year, tribal leaders raised similar concerns in federal court, saying 2,000 tribal voters did not receive or had incorrect ballots for the June 26 countywide primary. However, Shelby refused to reopen the case that had

ordered redistricting, saying the county has “led a pretty vigorous effort” to comply with earlier orders.



FILE - In this Nov. 16, 2017, file photo, Louise Rock, from the Oljato chapter of the Navajo Nation speaks at a hearing in Bluff, Utah. Navajos who once worried they'd have to drive hours to cast their ballots in Utah say a new settlement is a step forward as tribes challenge what they call discriminatory voting practices around the United States. The American Civil Liberties Union of Utah said Thursday, Feb. 22, 2018, the settlement that requires tribal-accessible polling places and Navajo-language help is a victory for voting rights. San Juan County, though, says they're committed to fair elections and took the steps themselves. (Leah Hogsten/The Salt Lake Tribune via AP, File)

Listing tribal members in improper districts could work around the court-ordered new political boundaries by potentially diluting the strength of that voting bloc.

“This, in my opinion, is voter suppression,” Rep. Angela Romero, D-Salt Lake City, said about the Navajos' situation during the legislative committee meeting.

“I am here to seek your help,” Gorman told lawmakers, adding that the San Juan County clerk may need outside help and resources to fix problems before the election.

San Juan County Administrator Kelly Pehrson in an email Thursday called the assertions by the tribe “extremely invalid claims.”

Jesse Trentadue, San Juan County’s attorney in the voting cases, said the tribe is rehashing old claims made and rejected in court. He said some problems do exist

because a quarter of residents in remote areas have no street address and use post office boxes instead.

In the past, he said, the county had them show on a map where they lived in large old precincts. But the redrawn districts use smaller census blocks — so the county often does not know which of those smaller areas they live in. “It’s the responsibility of the voter,” he added, to make the county aware of where he or she lives.

Trentadue said some Navajo leaders have attempted to present information on behalf of others, but the county cannot change registration based on information from a third party. Also, he said, coordinates that some Navajo voters provided were erroneous. “They ended up being in Russia, or the middle of the Pacific Ocean.”

On Thursday, a member of the legislative committee that heard from Navajos — Rep. Mark Wheatley, D-Murray — issued a news release calling for state action, also saying he sees the situation as continued voter suppression.

“It’s the responsibility of San Juan County to make sure everyone is counted,” Wheatley said. “I want to make sure we are holding those responsible accountable for their actions.”

He also called for Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes to look at whether county actions should be prosecuted. That includes removing Willie Grayeyes, a Navajo Democrat, from the ballot — by saying he did not really live in the county — until U.S. District Judge David Nuffer ordered his name to return to it.

Court documents showed that John David Nielson, the county clerk, said in a deposition that he helped falsify and backdate an election complaint to disqualify Grayeyes, a proponent of the now-downsized Bears Ears National Monument opposed by many San Juan officials.

Nuffer wrote: “Aside from soliciting a new voter registration challenge from [candidate Wendy] Black, Defendant Nielson also initiated an outside investigation [by sheriff’s deputies] of Plaintiff Grayeyes’s residence. ... This action is not permitted or authorized by statute” and deprived Grayeyes of due process.

“It seems evident that Mr. Grayeyes’ rights have been violated,” Wheatley said. “As a state, we need to be assisting San Juan County and Native American groups with the resources to reconcile this situation,” he said. “For far too long our Native American brothers and sisters have had their voices suppressed.”

In December, Shelby [adopted new voting district boundaries](#) in San Juan County that give Navajos a significant majority of voters in two of three county commission districts and three of five school board districts. He ordered them to be used in special elections for all commission and school board seats in November.

U.S. Census estimates show that Navajos are a plurality of San Juan County's residents, 49.4 percent of its population, while whites make up 47.4 percent, with other minority groups accounting for the rest. Whites in the county tend to vote Republican, and Navajos tend to be Democratic.