

Native Americans Win Crucial Races in Utah County

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After decades of gerrymandering and accusations of voter suppression, Native Americans in one Utah county have taken control of local government.

Two Navajo men, Willie Grayeyes and Kenneth Maryboy, won their county commission seats, giving Native Americans a 2-1 advantage on the local governing body for the first time in San Juan County.

The victories came only after court-ordered redistricting, which more evenly distributed the county's Native American population and gave tribal leaders a new shot at a commission that's been dominated by white officials.

Outgoing County Commissioner Phil Lyman, a high-profile Republican who has sparred with tribal leaders in the past, won a seat in the state House.

Even though Native Americans are the majority in this 14,750-person county, slightly edging out whites, county commissioner and school board district lines were drawn in a way that gave white voters disproportionate power for more than three decades.

Many Native Americans across the West are still hamstrung by voter ID laws, polling place closures and voter registration purges. But in San Juan County and many other places, they are fighting back, running for local, state and national offices, and suing jurisdictions that they think are trying to curb their political participation.

The election was being closely watched, and representatives from the ACLU of Utah, the state elections office and the Department of Justice sent staff to observe, The Salt Lake Tribune reported.

The results from last week's election could have a significant impact not only on local infrastructure — which is in dire disrepair on Navajo Nation reservation land — but potentially also on President Donald Trump's decision to shrink Bears Ears National Monument, in San Juan County.

The two Navajo men elected to the commission oppose shrinking the monument, giving the fight against federal action more official strength.

But the challenges for local Native Americans remain, Grayeyes told The Salt Lake Tribune last week.

"The opposition has also been displayed here and there throughout the county," he said. "But changes are already taking place — and it's starting with the redistricting."