

GOING NATIVE IN STATE CAPITALS

No longer cynical about 'this system,' Indians, Hawaiians and Alaskans have a higher profile than ever in legislatures.

By Sam Howe Verhovek, Times Staff Writer

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HELENA, MONT.—Jonathan Windy Boy was a longtime champion of the international Grass Dance competition, a native event in which the object is to simulate the natural movement of tall prairie grass swaying in the wind.

But, recalled Windy Boy with a laugh, "that was many years and about 40 pounds ago."

Now Windy Boy moves his considerable frame around the House chamber in the state Capitol here, bargaining and cajoling as a leader of the 10-member Native American caucus in Montana's state Legislature.

The caucus has the highest number of Indians ever elected to the 150-member chamber and reflects a broader trend of increased participation by Native Americans in state politics across the country.

When legislatures convened earlier this year, at least 73 Indian, native Alaskan or native Hawaiian lawmakers were sworn in, the highest number in the nation's history, according to the National Congress of American Indians, a tribal advocacy group.

Windy Boy recalled that while he was growing up on a Ojibwa-Cree Indian reservation in north-central Montana, "there was a lot of skepticism, a lot of cynicism about the idea of voting at all."

"Some people didn't vote as a point of pride—defiance, even," he said. "But that's all changed. There's much more of a sense today that we can work within this system."

The Indian vote was an important factor in several state races in 2006, and turnout on the reservations and among urban Indians in Montana was crucial to Democrat Jon Tester's razor-thin victory over incumbent Republican Conrad Burns in the recent U.S. Senate election here.

For now, the Indian vote in Montana is solidly Democratic, and all 10 Indian members of the Montana Legislature belong to the party.

"An Indian voting Republican is like the chicken voting for the colonel," said Gov. Brian Schweitzer, a Democrat.

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Republicans obviously reject that notion, noting that 15 of the 73 native lawmakers belong to the GOP, according to figures from the Denver-based National Conference of State Legislatures. And perhaps the best-known Native American politician of recent years, former Colorado U.S. Sen. Ben Nighthorse-Campbell, a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe, started as a Democrat but switched to Republican in 1995.

Oklahoma has the most native legislators, with 19, while Hawaii and Montana have 10 each, followed by Alaska with eight.

Casino wealth and other development have made Native Americans increasingly politically active as they deal with regulation of their businesses as well as access to state funds for healthcare, tribal policing and other matters.

And though the poverty and unemployment rampant on many reservations leave many disillusioned with politics, others have a sense of optimism about the impact of their vote.

“There’s been a sea change in my lifetime,” said Jefferson Keel, lieutenant governor of the Chickasaw Nation in Oklahoma and a first vice president of the National Congress of American Indians.

“What we have now is a lot of tribal development,” Keel said. “It’s not just casinos. There’s a lot of manufacturing. So people feel a real stake in the system.”

The national Indian congress, a federation of tribes, launched a “Native Vote Campaign” in 2004 to “advance the Native agenda at all levels of decision-making and promote Native candidates to public offices,” according to the group’s literature.

Here in Helena, Rep. Windy Boy said the Indian caucus had succeeded in recent years in gaining state funds for health clinics, water-reclamation projects and cleanup of mining areas.

Indian priorities fared particularly well in the 2005 session because there was a Democrat in the governor’s office and Democratic control in the Legislature, said Windy Boy. (Democrats still control the Senate, 26 to 24, but Republicans have a 50-49 edge in the House, with one other member affiliating with the Constitution Party.)

But, said the 48-year-old Windy Boy—a tall man with a bolo tie and hair that extends almost to his belt buckle—that’s not to say the Democrats should “take us for granted.”

For instance, both he and Margaret Campbell, an Indian who represents an Assiniboine and Sioux reservation in eastern Montana, said they oppose abortion rights and gay marriage, two issues that many Democrats disagree with them on.

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“There are very specific tribal teachings about life and the sanctity of life,” said Campbell, the minority whip in the Legislature. “And I can’t ever imagine being in favor of gay marriage. That would kill me in my district.”

Windy Boy, who during an interview kept bounding up from his chair to greet fellow lawmakers, aides and lobbyists in the chamber offices, said he decided to go into state politics after too many frustrating sessions as an outsider.

As a tribal leader, he would come to Helena to lobby on matters ranging from healthcare to economic incentives to attract industry to the remote reservation.

“It was very aggravating,” he said. “I felt like we were being undermined in a lot of areas, like welfare and health issues. I thought we were victorious, but then the next day you’d realize someone had thrown up a mysterious obstacle to getting it done.

“So basically, I concluded I was on the wrong side of the table,” Windy Boy said. “I just decided that the next time I came back here, I’d come back as a state legislator.”

He won in 2002 and plans eventually, he said, to run for a seat in the state Senate.

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