# Oliver Semans

**WHO HE IS**

**Co-executive director of Four Directions, an organization that works to advance voting rights in Indian Country**

**HOW HE'S HELPING**

**With Four Directions, Oliver Semans successfully fought for the creation of satellite election offices in South Dakota aimed at improving accessibility for Native voters and increasing voter registration.**

**CLOSE** elections can turn ordinary citizens into activists, as they realize how a handful of votes can shift national power. For Oliver Semans, an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and a longtime Native voting rights activist, his first encounter with electoral politics came in 2002, during a close race for one of South Dakota's U.S. Senate seats. Tim Johnson, the Democratic incumbent, beat his Republican rival, John Thune, by only 524 votes. "We realized that by tribes and tribal members not being involved, it was basically an economic death wish on our part," he told me.

His wife, Barb, the co-executive director of Four Directions, worked on Native outreach for the Johnson campaign, which proved to be pivotal in the close election. "It was kind of opening our eyes to how we needed to ensure that we were heavily involved in the electoral process," he recalled. The Semans, who had previously been active in tribal governance, founded Four Directions to protect and expand voting rights throughout Indian country. "Our main purpose at that time was just to get out the vote," he told me. But then they started seeing "all kinds of little barriers" that people on reservations faced that everyone else didn't. Most of those barriers are practical: the relative geographic isolation of many reservations, poor roads and internet access, and unreliable postal services. In South Dakota, Semans and Four Directions successfully fought for the creation of satellite election offices that offer all the features of regular state election offices on the reservations, mirroring the ones provided to counties. From there, he and his allies used litigation to press Montana and Nevada to adopt similar systems. When Democrats recently took control of the Nevada legislature, Semans told me, they passed a law that allowed tribal communities in that state to request the offices, effectively enshrining in state law what he had pushed for.

As for so many other voting rights activists over the past decade, there have also been major setbacks. In 2013, the Supreme Court's conservative majority gutted the preclearance system in the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in *Shelby County v. Holder*. The preclearance system, described in Section 5 of the act, had required states and local jurisdictions with histories of discriminatory voting practices to clear any election-law changes with the federal government; now they didn't have to. The two South Dakota counties that cover the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Sioux reservations came under Section 5 after Congress amended the law in 1975.

Most discussions of preclearance revolve around the Southern states that once fell under Section 5 in full. But South Dakota had its own troubled history of unequal voting laws: Native voters living on reservations had to travel to a county assessor's office to register to vote, for example, while non-Native voters were automatically registered when they had their property taxes assessed. Semans, along with a coalition of other Native groups and activists, filed a friend-of-the-court brief in *Shelby County* in support of the VRA, but to no avail. "By the way, that ruling came out on June 25, the anniversary of the Battle of Little Bighorn," he added wryly while recounting the case. "See, I think all in Indian perspective."

The VRA suffered another grievous blow earlier this year after the Supreme Court effectively rewrote a key provision in *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*, narrowing the civil rights law to make it far more burdensome for litigants to challenge racial discrimination in voting laws—and that much easier for states to impose new barriers. "I got a big chuckle out of it because the Supreme Court takes 10 pages to tell you that what you thought equal meant really didn't mean equal," Semans told me. "I looked at it and I go, 'Wow, this is like what a treaty writer would do and they're treating Congress like a treaty tribe now.'"

Semans hopes that Congress will pass a federal voting rights bill this year and fully fund the Help America Vote Act of 2002, adding conditions that make it harder for states to escape their voting rights obligations. Another proposal that he supports is the Native American Voting Rights Act, a bill reintroduced earlier this year that specifically targets some of the most obvious barriers to Native voting access. Unlike other voting rights laws under consideration by Congress, this one already has bipartisan support: Oklahoma Representative Tom Cole, a Republican and an enrolled member of the Chickasaw Nation, co-sponsored the House version of the bill. It would expand the number of polling places, drop-off boxes, and registration sites in precincts on tribal land, as well as provide greater access to mail-in ballots and require that states accept tribal and federal Bureau of Indian Affairs IDs if they have voter-ID laws.

I asked Semans whether, with all his experience, he was more optimistic or pessimistic about the future of voting rights in general, and for Native communities in particular. "I'm optimistic we will find a way to create equality at that ballot box," he replied. "But I'm also old enough and been in it long enough to know that it's still going to be a continued fight to keep it."

PHOTO REFERENCE: COURTESY OF OLIVER SEMANS

# DEMOCRACY'S HEROES

***The assault on voting rights advances full bore. Here are six people who are fighting back.***

**BY MATT FORD**

**BY ONE VIEW,** the 2020 election was an astounding success for American democracy. Despite a devastating global pandemic and spasms of civil unrest, almost 160 million Americans, or roughly 66 percent of the potential electorate, cast a ballot—the highest participation rate in an election cycle since 1900. For an optimist, the election was a stirring reaffirmation of the American ideal of self-government and its ability to overcome nearly any hurdle.

But a darker interpretation of these events is possible. Though the 2020 election saw record turnout levels, it also faced extraordinary challenges to its conduct and integrity. Every credible expert and agency concluded that there was no evidence of significant or serious fraud or misconduct, yet former President Donald Trump spent months impugning the legitimacy of the vote before Election Day and waged a cynical campaign of lies to overturn the results after he lost. On January 6, by inciting a riot to attack Congress during the Electoral College count, Trump broke America's two-century streak of peaceful transfers of power.

Which vision of American democracy will prevail? Was the 2020 election the high-water mark for far-right groups and actors who wish to destabilize our republican systems of government for personal gain? Or was it the last, shining moment for a vision of liberal democracy that came into fruition with the civil rights reforms of the 1960s and has been steadily eroded ever since?

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JOE BIDEN'S V.A. HEADACHE
JASPER CRAVEN

DENVER'S "SUMMER OF VIOLENCE"
LYNNELL HANCOCK

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

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## WHAT IS MICHAEL FLYNN'S LONG GAME?

HE WANTED TO OVERTHROW A PRESIDENT.

NOW, HE MIGHT WANT TO BE ONE.

MATT FARWELL