



Media Advisory

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CONTACT:

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Protecting Native American Voting Rights in Montana Featuring ACLU Voting Rights Project Director Emeritus Laughlin McDonald

MISSOULA, MT — Montana has a troubled history of denying Native Americans the right to vote and of enacting systems that dilute American Indian voting strength. It has taken decades of litigation to remedy many of these problems, yet inequalities remain. Even worse, attempts are being made to further disenfranchise Native American voters and voters as a whole through changes in voting procedures such as Legislative Referendum 126, an issue on the November ballot that seeks to eliminate Election Day voter registration.

ACLU Voting Rights Project Director Emeritus Laughlin McDonald will discuss the history of Native American voting rights in Montana and ongoing challenges Thursday, Sept. 18 at the University of Montana School of Law.

McDonald led the ACLU's voting rights litigation in *Windy Boy v. Big Horn County* in 1986, *Old Person et alia v. Brown* in 1996, and most recently *Jackson et al v. Wolf Point School District* in 2013. All of these cases significantly advanced voting rights for Native Americans in Montana.

The *Windy Boy* case challenged at-large elections for the County Commission of Big Horn County, Montana, as diluting American Indian voting strength, allowing the white majority to control the outcome of elections, and preventing Indian voters from electing representatives of their choice. As a remedy, the court adopted single member districts for the county commission and the school board. At the next election a Native American was elected to the county commission for the first time in Big Horn County's history.

The *Old Person* case challenged Montana legislative districts in 1990 for illegally dividing reservations and Native American populations to dilute Native American voting strength. After the case spent a decade in the courts, new districts were drawn that resulted in eight Native Americans being elected to the Montana Legislature – the most in any state legislature at the time.

Finally, the *Jackson* case was settled this year, fixing unconstitutional Wolf Point School District voting districts which had for years given white voters disproportionate say on the school board than Native American voters.

McDonald, a South Carolina native, received a B.A. degree from Columbia University and an LL.B. from the University of Virginia. He has argued cases before the U.S. Supreme Court and numerous district courts and courts of appeals. He is the author of several books, including *A Voting Rights Odyssey: Black Enfranchisement in Georgia*, and *American Indians and the Fight for Equal Voting Rights*.

WHAT: A Discussion on the history of Native Americans' fight to win equal access to the ballot box and ongoing voting rights challenges.

WHO: Laughlin McDonald, director emeritus of the ACLU Voting Rights project, litigator in numerous Native American voting rights cases and author.

WHEN: Thursday, September 18, 2014
7 p.m.

WHERE: School of Law, Room 101
University of Montana
Missoula, Montana

Laughlin McDonald is available for interviews by phone prior to Thursday, November 18, and in person at the event.

Free and open to the public. More information at www.aclumontana.org