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Our view: No doubt

State smart to review election, need for any changes in law

(01/03/11 19:17:26)

When federal Judge Ralph Beistline tossed Joe Miller's challenge to Alaska's U.S. Senate election, he granted that Alaska's law could be clearer about the primacy of voter intent.

He was right.

The requirement that a write-in candidate's name be written as it appears in its state-qualified form led to the arguments over spelling and how close voters had to be.

In addition, the state's decision to provide, at voters' request, lists of qualified write-in candidates prompted unsuccessful suits by both the Republican and Democratic parties.

While we disagreed with the Division of Elections on the latter point, state courts upheld their call. And the division ran a straight, fair election.

Lawmakers, however, should revisit the law to make clear that voter intent, not spelling, is the key test in deciding which write-in votes count, and to decide whether write-in lists either will or won't be provided at polling places in the future.

The division did well by Alaskans. But clarity in the law may help keep future elections out of court.

BOTTOM LINE: Election law should leave no room for doubt.

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Politics Print

No 'spelling bee' election in Alaska

Ruth Walker | Christian Science Monitor | Dec 7, 2010

The 2010 elections, the gift that keeps on giving, have imparted new meaning to the phrase "all over but the shouting."

At this writing, Lisa Murkowski looks likely to be headed back to Washington as Alaska's senior senator and into the history books as the first candidate since Strom Thurmond in 1954 to win election to the Senate as a write-in. Her victory, if confirmed, as is now expected, will turn in part on a decision to honor ballots from voters who merely approximated the correct spelling of her name.

How should we feel about that? Are standards slipping irretrievably in the republic?

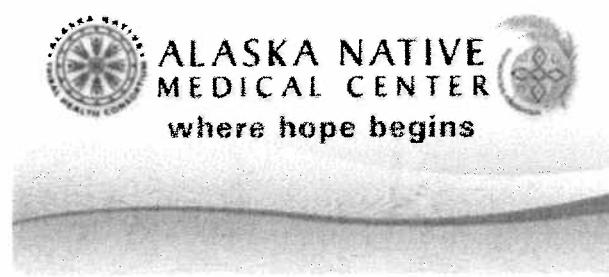
Her Democratic opponent has conceded defeat. But her Republican opponent, Joe Miller, whose own name was easier to spell and was, moreover, actually on the ballot, has had other ideas.

His campaign has challenged all ballots that fall short orthographically. State authorities, on the other hand, have been counting as valid all those who came close to spelling "Murkowski" right.

Alaskan law requires electoral officials to take into account "voter intent" when counting write-in votes. This standard is common across the country, it turns out. The Los Angeles Times quoted Richard Winger, editor of the election law journal Ballot Access News: "I am not aware of any state that says write-ins can't be counted unless the spelling is perfect."

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As a copy editor, I'm with Mr. Miller. What kind of democracy can't spell its leaders' names right? As a student of language, though, I understand that spoken language came first, and that the written form of any word is an approximation of the spoken form; it's not the other way around. After all, there's a reason we call it "language" - from the Latin word for "tongue" - and not "scribblage," or something like that.

The case for a more generous interpretation of what counts as a valid vote for a write-in candidate starts with this primacy of spoken language.

Much of what we recognize as democracy began

with spoken language, conversations, and debates in halls of assembly and the public square. Democracy was then furthered by written communication, especially after the development of the printing press.

More recently, speech has gained a boost from new forms of communication - from FDR's fireside chats to YouTube - that have let us hear, and hear repeatedly, what we otherwise might only have read.

Of course we need both modes: Writing - "print" - allows for rereading, for reflection and the consideration of nuance. Speech, especially live, in-person speech, provides immediacy and the expression of feelings.

[print](#)

Fix the law: Write-in ballot statute needs repair by Legislature

12.30.10 - 11:53 pm

Editorial

Federal Judge Ralph Beistline wrote in his Tuesday ruling dismissing Joe Miller's amended federal lawsuit in the U.S. Senate race that he can understand Mr. Miller's viewpoint regarding the wording of state election law.

Judge Beistline also said he can easily see the state's view when it comes to the law governing how a write-in candidate's name must appear on the ballot in order to be considered a valid vote.

The judge ultimately deferred to the Alaska Supreme Court, which ruled in Mr. Miller's state lawsuit that the name of Sen. Lisa Murkowski didn't have to be spelled correctly. Mr. Miller argued, in both state and federal court, that Alaska law required a precise spelling.

But Judge Beistline found the Alaska Supreme Court "did not make a finding clearly contrary to the face of the statute and its findings were entirely consistent with the state's past practice of making voter intent a priority."

But the judge, in his ruling, pointedly noted a problem:

"This is not to say that Miller's technical arguments are frivolous, for it is easy to understand his view ...

"What we have before us is a poorly drafted state statute. Wisdom would suggest the Alaska Legislature act to clarify it to avoid similar disputes in the future. For now we have to work with what we have and that is what the Alaska Supreme Court has done."

Judge Beistline's message is clear and sound: The Legislature should clarify the law. It should do so this coming session while the subject is fresh.

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Supreme Court takes reasonable approach in election challenge

by Dermot Cole / cole@newsminer.com

Dec 22, 2010 | 757 views | 0 | 5 |

FAIRBANKS — The Alaska Supreme Court said it relied on principles applied consistently during the past 50 years to reject Joe Miller's court case and approve the state's approach to counting ballots.

The decision Wednesday helps clear the way for Sen. Lisa Murkowski's re-election to be certified before the next Congress. Miller may pursue a federal court fight, however.

This unanimous ruling is not surprising, given the numerous decisions the court has made in contested elections over the years. The ruling also is reasonable.

The court declared that Miller is dead wrong in claiming state law requires the names of write-in candidates be spelled correctly.

"Our prior decisions clearly hold that a voter's intention is paramount," the four justices said. "In light of our strong and consistently applied policy of construing statutes in order to effectuate voter intent, we hold that abbreviations, misspellings or other minor variations in the form of the name of a candidate will be disregarded in determining the validity of the ballot, so long as the intention of the voter can be ascertained."

The court rejected Miller's argument that anything less than his point of view, supporting correct spelling, would threaten the integrity of the election process.

"But it is Miller's interpretation of the statute that would erode the integrity of the election system, because it would result in disenfranchisement of some voters and ultimately rejection of election results that constitute the will of the people," the judges said. "We have consistently construed election statutes in favor of voter enfranchisement."

The court also found its interpretation of state law is consistent with federal and state rules allowing misspellings on the federal write-in absentee ballot for military voters and civilians overseas.

"Miller's proposed construction of the statute would require us to impose a different, and more rigorous, voting standard on domestic Alaskans than on those who are serving in the military or living abroad," the court said.

Other states use the same approach as Alaska in counting ballots and "we see no basis for Miller to argue that the application of the standard in this election violates equal protection under either the state or federal constitution."

The portion of state law Miller said requires perfect spelling really applies to pseudonyms, the court said.

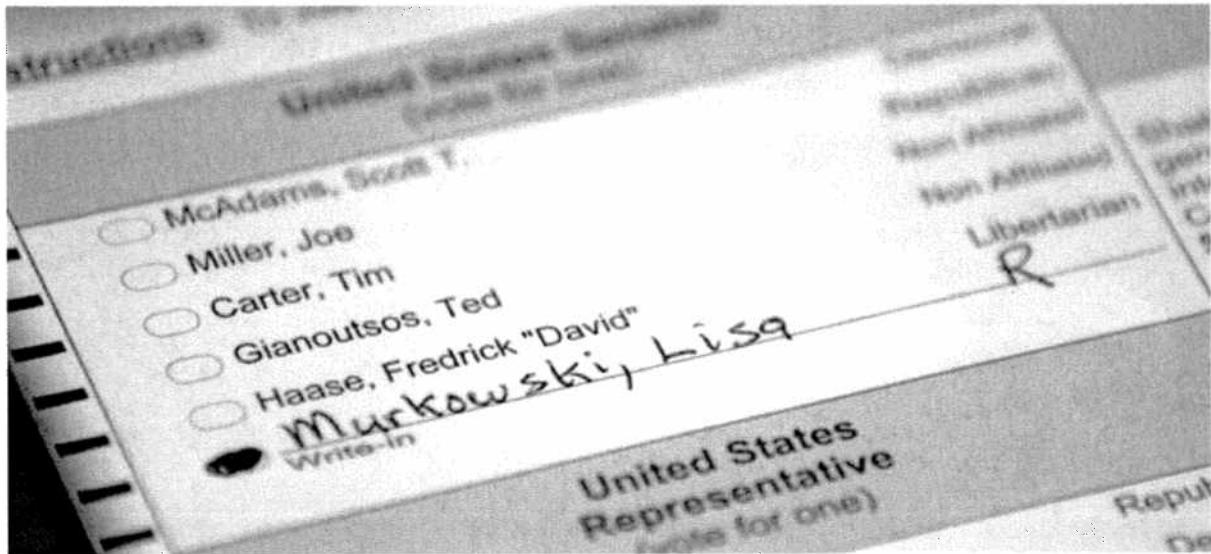
"The 'nickname' field allows a candidate to ensure that his or her pseudonym 'appears on the write-in declaration of candidacy' so that the write-in votes listing that pseudonym will count. Thus, the word 'appears' relates to a pseudonym's possible presence on the ballot, not the particular form of the vote and demonstrates that the statute is inclusive — it is designed to include, rather than exclude, votes."

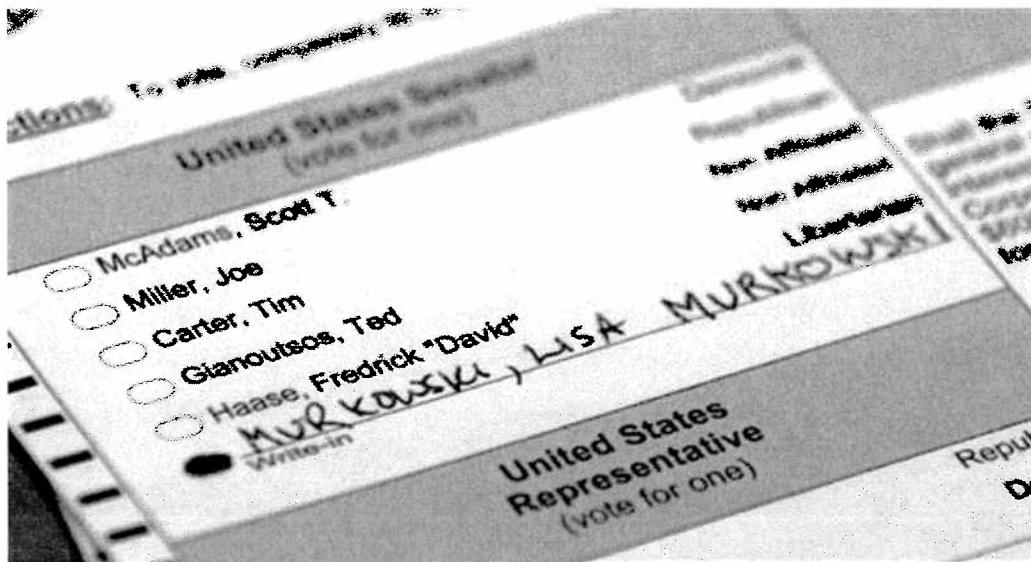
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GIVING THANKS: The Mariutto family wants to pass along thanks to the people of Fairbanks for prayers and support for Sabrina, the Monroe High School student who has been stricken with cancer.

Fabio Mariutto, her father, said he is grateful for the more than \$17,000 raised at a spaghetti feed fundraiser Dec. 12 and for the daily notes, cards, prayers and "all the other little but important things necessary for life."

"For Sabrina's friends, thank you for being there for her despite the distance of thousands of





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<input type="radio"/> Carter, Tim	Non Affiliated
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<input type="radio"/> McAdams, Scott T.	Democrat

No Confidence

Write-in

