



GET OUT THE NATIVE VOTE ELECTION OBSERVATIONS OF 2022 TO THE SENATE STATE AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

January 26, 2023

3:30 P.M.

Michelle (Macuar) Sparck
Director of Strategic Initiatives
CITC - Get Out the Native Vote

Chairman Kawasaki and members of the SSAC, we are pleased to have been invited to present our impressions on the 2022 election cycle to you in this hearing. My name is Michelle, and my Cup'ik name is Macuar, I am a member of the Qissunamiut Tribe of Chevak, Alaska, and I grew up in Bethel. I've worked for Senator Ted Stevens, Chairman Don Young of the US House Resources Committee in the 107th Congress, have served on the Alaska Board of Game, was a Legislative Aide for House District 38, helped manage a Presidential, and U.S. Senate candidate races, and a number of Alaska Native organizations. I am now the director of strategic initiatives for Get Out the Native Vote.

GOTNV is a statewide non-partisan 501(c)(3) voter education organization under Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), based in Anchorage. When it began decades ago, GOTNV was a grassroots vehicle for Native entities devoted to civic engagement, and was subsumed by CITC from the ANCSA Regional Association in 2021. It was a labor of love and service to Our People for many years, and the volunteerism and advocacy it promoted year in and out was an inspiration. I am the first Director in its history, and I am grateful for the infrastructure and support services CITC and the GOTNV board provides for the Alaska Native voting public. Alaska Native people help make up 22% of the state's population, and while we all don't vote the same, we could impact as much as a quarter of the vote in any election scenario.

It was a massive undertaking to help prepare and inform the public for three statewide elections in six months, especially with a new election law in place. We witnessed a new gold rush of candidates populating the open primaries, overwhelming voters with dozens and dozens of options for one office alone. We also had our work cut out for us in having to help distinguish the difference between a pick-one primary from a Ranked Choice Voting general ballot.

Alaska voters also saw greater competition under the new rules among the 59 legislative races on the ballot. Twenty-two legislative contests had three or more candidates, with roughly 200 candidates competing for legislative offices at once, and that didn't even factor in the *yes* or *no* decisions over the Constitutional Convention, or a number of seats for Alaskan judges.

Institutional Support

We could not have been very effective in our work were it not for Lt. Governor Meyer and the Division of Elections Director Gail Fenumiai engaging us in their process. Such transparency enabled us to be a partner in troubleshooting problems that often plague the system, and invariably create barriers to voting for Native and rural communities. We'd like to thank public relations manager Tiffany Montemayor, Samantha Mack on compliance for Elections Language Assistance, Elections Supervisor of Region IV, Shannon (Rena) Greene of Nome,

and Melissa Medeiros, the customer relations manager for the Alaska District of the United States Postal Service for helping us understand what we were facing prior to each election last year.

It is important to point out that Alaska's voter registration and ability to vote via absentee is probably one of the most accessible and enviable of all 50 states. The ease of the automatic PFD and State ID or Driver's License voter registration process is a building block rather than a barrier to elections. We sympathize with our Tribal counterparts in other areas of the country, where registration drives take up so much of their resources and often compromise opportunities to educate voters on who or what they may be voting for once they are registered.

With this kind of access, GOTNV was able to work across the spectrum of Alaska Native resources, from Tribal non-profits, Corporations, Tribes, businesses, and other organizations that provide an incredible range of services in the Alaska Native community. Together, we trained trainers and staff, we utilized regional and local communication systems to get the word out, we published materials and utilized social media and post-Census/CARES Act shareholder and Tribal member rolls to maximize outreach with the latest voting timelines and election specific information.

Voter Education

The Division of Elections and Language Assistance made a very visible and vocal effort to educate the public on what voters could expect in the Ranked Choice Voting experience. Groups like GOTNV tried to parse the information in a more regional, culturally appropriate and relatable way. Published timelines and sample ballots were invaluable in all our work in the communities. You simply can't beat being able to walk a voter through their district sample ballot. GOTNV's modest community organizer program and training program for Alaska Native organization staff provided valuable boots on the ground for select communities. Some Tribes, Corporations, and organizations took it upon themselves or worked with us, and several implemented their own long-term voter campaign initiative and incentives.

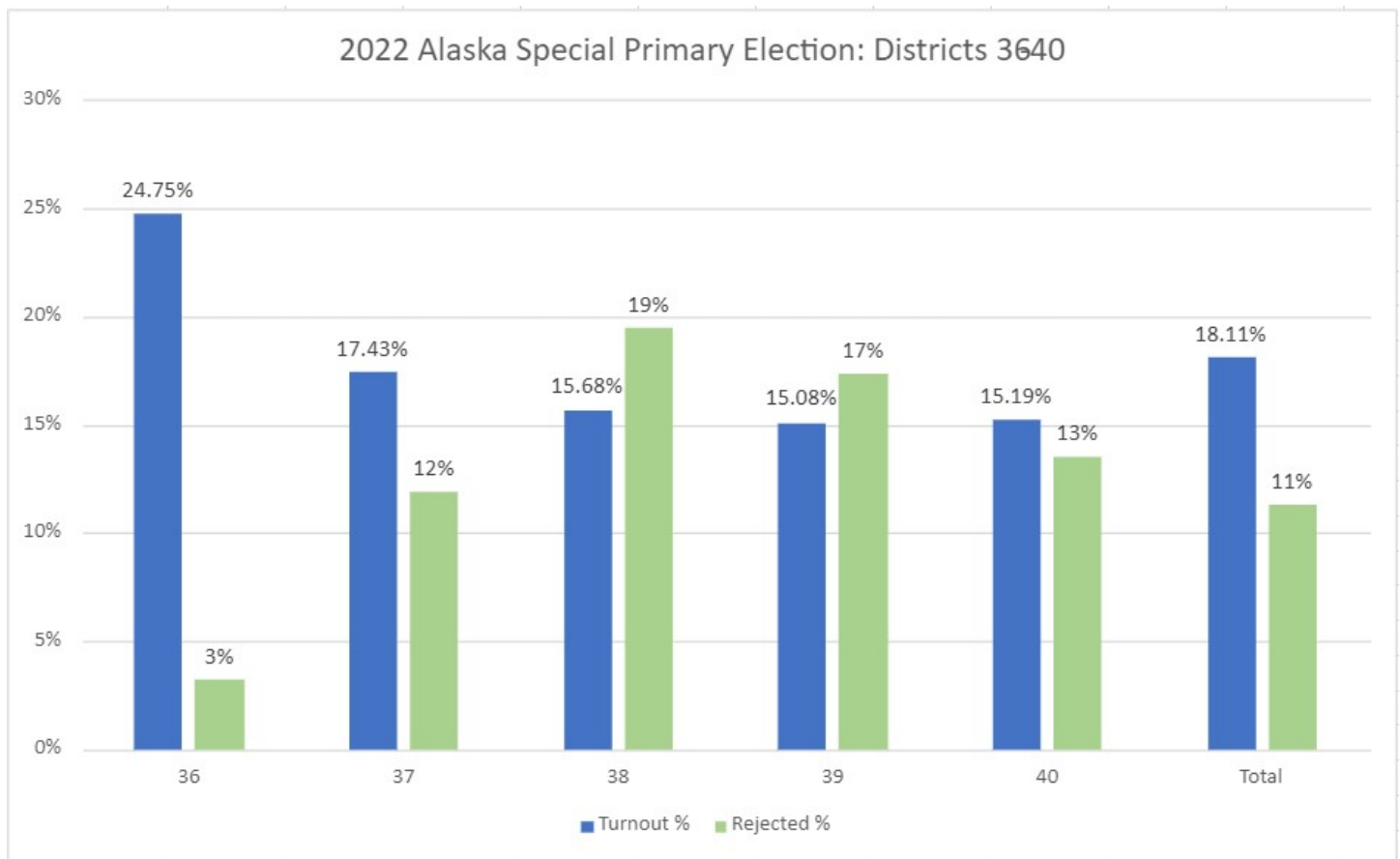
The Special Primary

With the passing of Congressman Don Young in March 2022, the time constraint of a special primary to meet the statute of seating a replacement in the middle of a term was a challenge. The June 11 all mail-in ballot process and election deadline added a measure of confusion for this unanticipated election.

The U.S. Postal Service irrefutably plays an integral role in the election process. Roadless areas of Alaska are at a disadvantage when it comes to voting, as the staffing and training of election workers, translators, and the air transport of election machines and materials can be a daunting undertaking. When there isn't enough resource to personally walk voters through an election—as can often be found through local polling stations—too much gets lost in translation with cultural and language barriers, which can often result in an incomplete or improperly filled out ballot. Statewide, there was a 27.5% voter turnout in this unstructured voting experience with 7,504 rejected ballots, that's a 4.5% rejection rate. The reasons were outlined as such:

- 2724 for having no witness signature
- 1897 for having their ballot postmarked after election day
- 1556 for voters not providing one of many identifiers required

Further, the election deadline was on a Saturday, and many rural communities suffer from unreliable hours of postal operations due to various extenuating circumstances that can disrupt staffing for days, weeks, or even months. Rural, which we typically consider HD districts 36 – 40 (but we observe SE, Kodiak, the CIRI/CITC region and other Tribal community districts as a service too) had a mean turnout of 18.55%. Ballot instructions were wordy, the potential for mistakes were numerous, and cost some 1,194 votes, which means 15.91% of a largely Alaska Native vote didn't count. The graph below illustrates the gravity of the all mail-in ballot experience for Rural Alaska.



August 16 Statewide Primary and Special Election

In the August 2022 Primary Election, approximately 30,000 more Alaskans turned out to vote when compared to the June election. Voters encountered their second pick-one open primary. In this election, voters could cast their ballots early, absentee, absentee in person, or same day. As a result, only 342 votes were thrown out by election officials because ballots were filled out incorrectly. Ninety-nine of those were from our rural districts, 36-40. Voters also had to turn the ballot over to participate in the special election of the then *three* top vote getters from the June Primary.

GOTNV, GOTNVInterior, the Division, and other advocacy groups like AFN, Native Peoples Action, First Alaskans Institute, Native Movement, the ANCSA Regional Association, the Alaska Native Village Corporation Association, The Alaska Black Caucus, ABE and much more, educated the public about the dual ballot, and how to participate in ranking if they so choose. GOTNV even produced an animated video on Ranked Choice Voting using favored Alaska Native foods, which is discoverable on YouTube and on our website at www.aknativevote.com. We recently received a call from a group in Hawaii, asking if they could use it to get their voting public prepared for RCV trial runs in certain elections.

In the lead up to August 16, GOTNV was fielding requests from the Division of Elections to help staff polling locations in some rural communities. This collaboration is essential to attempt polling in every eligible precinct in the state, but in the end, Holy Cross and Venetie could participate only via absentee, and 251 registered voters in Tununak and Atmautluak were unable to vote at all.

November 8 Mid-Term Election

21,923 voters from Districts 36-40 voted in the Mid-Term Election, an increase of 6,819 more than the August turnout. Trends indicated greater turnout in each new election, so voter fatigue and an anticipated weariness toward RCV did not seem to negatively impact participation.

On Election Day, GOTNV received emergency requests to help staff Nuiqsut and Teller. Through one of our new board members assisting in their home district, we were able to open the polls for a few hours. Nuiqsut may have

had a low turnout, but we helped make it happen, and at a much larger average turnout when factoring the reduced hours of operation. In August, out of 283 registered Nuiqsut voters, 28 voted. This time, 46 people out of 280 voted, giving the community a 16.43% turnout.

In August, the community of Teller had 157 registered voters, and 33 voted, resulting in a 21.02% turnout. In November, 158 of the registered voters had an opportunity to vote, and 37 voted, resulting in a 23.42% turnout.

Weather also hampered activity in a number of coastal communities, such as Newtok and their new village location of Mertarvik, which were buffeted by a storm making passage across open water between the two communities dangerous. This created an obstacle for voters accessing the polling location in Newtok, or the Absentee Polling Station in Mertarvik. Newtok had a 14.43% turnout, with 29 of 201 people voting. Mertarvik also had a delayed opening, with election worker issues.

USPS and Division Disconnect

Unfortunately, Priority and Express services aren't beholden to marketed guarantees in rural Alaska. One example, GOTNV priority mailed voter education materials from Anchorage on October 22 to Savoonga in the lead up to the November election—but it couldn't be picked up at the Post Office by our Community Organizer until November 29, some 38 days later, and after the election.

Concern over timely election machines and ballot delivery prompted us to reach out to the Air Carriers Association through Ryan Air to see what we could do to elevate election awareness and responsiveness in their operations. Weather may not be something any of us can control, but identifying this precious cargo for priority loading and unloading helped us draft a flyer as a visual aid for 200 flight agents throughout rural Alaska. This is a service we intend to pursue every election season.

Unfortunately, six canvas bags containing 259 ballots from St. George, Levelock, Ambler, Kiana, Kobuk and Noorvik had their votes only partially counted. While their first ranked votes were shared with the division on election night, the ballots were not returned to the Division by November 30 for processing. While it would not have changed any election results, it reflects a pattern of access and close-out issues. Add this to the disproportionately large number of ballots from rural Alaska that were rejected in the June by-mail special primary, and the fact that ballots from seven villages failed to reach elections officials in time to be counted for the August Special Election.

Platinum, a community of about 55 people, has "no [USPS] employee on the roles," but the USPS advises that residents can pick up their mail in Goodnews Bay, 11 water miles away. The bay is exposed and subject to open water, freeze-up, rotting ice, storms, and other conditions. Residents don't necessarily have access to safe, appropriate, and affordable transportation for those conditions, be it airplane, boat, or snow machine. As this example demonstrates, the practice of relocating mail services to a "nearby" post office, one that is staffed and is open, actually does little to ensure mail, and in this case ballots, are delivered in a timely fashion.

Rural Voting Stats

Below is the accounting of Rural Districts performance in all three elections of last year. There was increased turnout per cycle, but GOTNV and other invested organizations in the Native community will strive to get us back to levels where it wasn't uncommon to see every community above and even beyond a 50 percent threshold.

HD 36 (Interior) 40 Precincts

	<u>June 11, 2022</u>	<u>August 16, 2022</u>	<u>November 8, 2022</u>
Registered Voters:	15,034	16,078	16,159
Votes Cast:	3,721	5,808	7,952
Turnout:	24.75%	36.12%	49.21%
Absentee Voting	3,720	831	1,635
Early	1	249	494
Questioned		260	259

Highest Turnout: Nikolai 53.42% 39/73 + 50% w/Anvik 27/54 & Hughes 32/64

Lowest Turnout: Circle 10.68% 22/206

HIGHLIGHT

Did Not Participate 8/16: Venetie & Holy Cross

Votes Cast & Turnout for 11/8: Venetie 44/147 29.93% Holy Cross 31/128 24.22%

HD 37 (Bristol Bay Area) 35 Precincts

	<u>June 11, 2022</u>	<u>August 16, 2022</u>	<u>November 8, 2022</u>
Registered Voters:	9,955	10,688	10,666
Votes Cast:	1,735	2,217	3,680
Turnout:	17.43%	20.74%	34.50%
Absentee Voting	1,730	339	759
Early	5	22	73
Questioned		99	89

Highest Turnout: Koliganek 51.82% 57/110

Lowest Turnouts: Chignik 4.39% 10/228 Egegik 5/101 4.95%

HD 38 (Bethel Region) 24 Precincts

	<u>June 11, 2022</u>	<u>August 16, 2022</u>	<u>November 8, 2022</u>
Registered Voters:	11,865	11,024	10,996
Votes Cast:	1,860	2,040	3,763
Turnout:	15.68%	18.51%	34.22%
Absentee Voting	1,856	120	356
Early	4	10	54
Questioned		137	173

Highest Turnout: Mekoryuk 47.41% 64/135 Akiak 46.48% 119/256

Lowest Turnout: Newtok 14.43% 29/201 (*extenuating circumstances w/polling & weather*)

HD 39 (Nome Region) 28 Precincts

	<u>June 11, 2022</u>	<u>August 16, 2022</u>	<u>November 8, 2022</u>
Registered Voters	11,795	10,822	10,808
Votes Cast:	1,779	3,434	3,817
Turnout:	15.08%	22.49%	35.32%
Absentee Voting:	1,759	77	217
Early:	20	55	225
Questioned:		67	89

Highest Turnout: Brevig Mission (*GOTNV Drive2Polls*) 51.02% 125/245
Lowest Turnout: Hooper Bay 22.24% 161/724

HD 40 (Arctic) 20 Precincts

	<u>June 11, 2022</u>	<u>August 16, 2022</u>	<u>November 8, 2022</u>
Registered Voters:	9,763	9,498	9,442
Votes Cast:	1,483	1,605	2,711
Turnout:	15.19%	16.90%	28.71%
Absentee Voting	1,482	107	237
Early	1	13	38
Questioned		93	109

Highest Turnout: Shungnak 42.04% 66/157
Lowest Turnout: Nuiqsut 16.43% 46/280 (8.16 9.89% 28/283)

In Conclusion

We close out this written statement with this: Rural and the greater Native community can play an outsized role in voter education, civic duty, and voter turnout. Being a partner made a difference in this last demanding cycle, and we fully intend to assist the state, while tackling systemic barriers and preventing the emergence of new ones as we gain experience in open Primaries and Ranked Choice Voting scenarios. We welcome the start of the 33rd Legislature, the make-up of the Senate bipartisan coalition, and look forward to protecting, enhancing, and improving programs and policies important to the Alaska Native community. We look forward to working with you, Lt. Governor Dahlstrom, the Division of Elections, and the USPS to help tackle disparities and make elections as fair and equitable as they should be for all Alaskans.

Quyana, thank you for inviting GOTNV to present on this very important and timely matter.