

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**SENATE STATE AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 24, 2023

3:31 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Scott Kawasaki, Chair  
Senator Matt Claman, Vice Chair  
Senator Jesse Bjorkman  
Senator Bill Wielechowski  
Senator Kelly Merrick

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION(S): 2022 ELECTIONS RECAP

- HEARD

PRESENTATION(S): ALASKA ELECTIONS 2022

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

JULIE LUCKI, Executive Director  
Alaskans for Better Elections  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented the 2022 Elections Recap.

SCOTT KENDALL, Attorney  
Alaskans for Better Elections  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions about the 2022 elections.

JEANNETTE LEE, Alaska Research Director  
Sightline Institute  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented data on the 2022 Alaska statewide primary elections.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:31:38 PM](#)

**CHAIR SCOTT KAWASAKI** called the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 3:31 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Wielechowski, Merrick, Bjorkman, and Chair Kawasaki. Senator Claman arrived during the introductions.

**INTRODUCTIONS**

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked the members to introduce themselves and talk about their district and their interest in serving on the State Affairs Committee.

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SENATOR MATT CLAMAN, District H, introduced himself and relayed that he was privileged to be in the Senate and pleased to serve on this important committee because of the broad issues it hears such as elections and access to voting.

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SENATOR BILL WIELECHOWSKI, District K, introduced himself and relayed that he chaired this committee about a decade ago. He enjoys State Affairs because of the wide and varied issues that are considered. He expressed particular interest in election issues, campaign finance issues, good government, and how to make it work better.

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SENATOR KELLY MERRICK, District L, introduced herself and said she was looking forward to serving on this committee. She was in the House for four years and served on the Finance Committee but not on any standing committees. She looks forward to serving on this committee which will allow earlier participation in the legislative process.

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SENATOR JESSE BJORKMAN, District D, introduced himself and stated that good government is important to him. He shared that a large accomplishment when he sat on the Kenai Peninsula Borough Assembly was to rewrite the borough's election laws to clarify the processes and assure people that their elections were safe, secure, and reliable. He was eager to engage in the

discussion about elections and other conversations about state government so people can maintain the social fabric connection between themselves as citizens and the government of the great state of Alaska.

CHAIR SCOTT KAWASAKI, District P advised that the Uniform Rules of the legislature describe the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee as follows:

State Affairs (programs and activities of the Office of the Governor and the Departments of Administration, Military and Veterans' Affairs, Corrections, and Public Safety, and programs and activities of the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities relating to public facilities)

**PRESENTATION(S) : 2022 ELECTIONS RECAP**

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CHAIR KAWASAKI stated that the purpose of the meeting was to begin a series of discussions about the election cycle last year and the implementation of Ballot Measure 2. The first presentation will be a recap of the 2022 elections by Alaskans for Better Elections. This is the group that worked to pass Ballot Measure 2 in 2020 and helped to implement the ranked-choice voting (RCV) process. He listed the individuals available online to answer questions and welcomed Julie Lucki to the witness table.

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JULIE LUCKI, Executive Director, Alaskans for Better Elections, Juneau, Alaska, reviewed her professional background and introduced the individuals who were online and available to answer technical and legal questions.

MS. LUCKI began by thanking the legislature for funding the implementation and education process for the 2022 elections. It made the positive results possible.

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MS. LUCKI turned to slide 2 and explained that Ballot Measure 2 passed in 2020. While some dark money provisions were implemented, the 2022 election saw just two main changes that applied to all statewide elections. She paraphrased the following:

**What changed in 2022?**

All statewide elections now follow the same, two-step process:

STEP 1: Nonpartisan "final four" Primary. This is referred to the pick-one primary. The top four vote-getters move forward.

STEP 2: Ranked Choice Voting General election.

MS. LUCKI explained that the process for the special election was changed so that the system for all elections would be the same. This applied to all statewide elections, including the people that districts send to Juneau and the people who are sent to Washington, DC. Ranked-choice voting (RCV) would also be used for the Presidential Election, but not the Primary. The large difference for RCV is that the top four vote-getters move on to the general election, regardless of their party affiliation.

MS. LUCKI described the benefits of the Step 1: Nonpartisan "Final Four" Primary:

**BENEFITS:**

- All voters have access to all candidates in the publicly funded primary. There is no more choosing a ballot and limiting the choices of any voter. In Alaska, 58 percent of registered voters do not affiliate with any party. RCV allows them to select the candidates they like in the different elections, regardless of party affiliation. Likewise, voters who are in a political party are not limited to the candidates in their party. Voters are able to vote for any candidate on the ballot.
- The most competitive candidates proceed to the General election.
- This creates less of a barrier to entry to Alaska's citizen legislature because voters can vote for any candidate on the ballot. This ensures that the candidates who are the people's choice are the ones that move on.
- All candidates, including independents, start on a level playing field.

MS. LUCKI emphasized that parties still play an important role by endorsing and financially supporting candidates. However, RVC leads to more competition at the general election. She cited an example from Senate District 0 that remained a Republican stronghold after redistricting. In the previous two decades, the margin for most races in the district was more than 45 percent.

That changed in 2022 and the General election race became very competitive.

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SENATOR CLAMAN asked where District 0 was located.

MS. LUCKI replied it was Senator Shower's district. She offered to provide information on other districts that saw similar changes.

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MS. LUCKI reviewed the process for ranked-choice voting in the General election:

**PROCESS:**

- Voters rank candidates in order of preference.
- If a candidate receives a majority (50 percent + 1 vote) of first-choice votes, they win. She noted that some candidates did receive a majority in the initial count while others went to tabulation.
- If no candidate receives 50 percent + 1 of first choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and voters that ranked that candidate as their first choice have their second choice vote counted for the next round.
- This process continues until two candidates are left and the one with the most votes wins.

MS. LUCKI relayed that in the 2022 elections, 12 of the 62 elections went to tabulation. The balance (50 candidates) won in round one. She noted that in the statewide races, the same constituency elected a variety of winners. No particular party was favored; people chose the candidate they wanted.

MS. LUCKI reviewed the benefits of ranked-choice voting in the General election:

**BENEFITS**

- Voters can express their preference from among all candidates.
- A candidate needs a majority to win.
  - This encourages candidates to appeal to a larger percentage of their constituency.
  - The candidates who are elected are more accountable to their constituents. Voters select the candidates who are most aligned with their values.

- RCV allows Alaskans to vote their heart without fear of vote-splitting and contributing to their least favorite candidate getting elected. Some evidence of this was seen in previous elections. The three "come from behind" victories in House District 11 demonstrated how RCV eliminates the spoiler effect by providing more choices for voters.

MS. LUCKI relayed that one reason that Alaskans for Better Elections believes that RCV is a voter-centric reform is that it puts more choices before the voters.

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MS. LUCKI stated that the expectation for the 2022 Alaska elections was that there would be a long period of education and implementation followed by the first nonpartisan Primary election in August and finally the first ranked-choice voting in the November General election.

She said what happened was that the implementation was truncated and the education was ongoing from January to the November General election. Much of the education had to occur early so that voters knew how to fill out the RCV ballot for the special nonpartisan Primary election in June. This was also the first statewide all-vote-by-mail election. In August, there was the combination ballot with the nonpartisan Primary election on one side of the ballot and the first RCV Special General election on the other side of the ballot. Those elections were followed by the ranked-choice voting General election in November.

MS. LUCKI said she highlighted the foregoing to emphasize the remarkable job Alaskans did in filling out their ballots correctly and how exemplary the Division of Elections' education and implementation efforts were. The voters knew how to fill out their ballots.

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MS. LUCKI displayed slide 9 and paraphrased the following:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### **Alaskans Understand RCV**

Despite the challenges and the shortened education/implementation timeline, in the first RCV election in August:

- 99.8% of ballots were correctly filled out.

- 73% of voters ranked at least two candidates.
- In exit polling of primary voters:
  - 95% had received instructions of RCV.
  - 85% stated it was "simple."
  - 62% supported the open primary.
- Turnout was the highest in a primary since PFD Voter Registration was established.

MS. LUCKI stated that there were very low error rates; just 342 ballots were rejected for overvotes. She noted that she would talk about the errors that weren't related to RCV later in the presentation. She reiterated that Alaskan voters did a very good job of filling out the RCV ballots correctly.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if she had polling data on whether RCV was confusing because he'd heard people argue that point.

MS. LUCKI answered yes. Of those polled, 85 percent said it wasn't difficult and the proof was the low error rate. This showed that the voters understood how to fill out the ballots.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if there was any polling data to support or refute the argument that RCV is undemocratic.

MS. LUCKI replied that an exit poll question asked about competition and close to 60 percent of people polled said the races were more competitive. She offered to follow up with the complete exit polling data.

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MS. LUCKI displayed slide 10 and paraphrased the following:

[Original punctuation provided.]

#### Alaskans Understand RCV

In the November election:

- On average, 99.9% of ballots were correctly filled out, which is on par with traditional, single-choice elections.
- Multiple races and data points showed that voters had a good understanding of RCV. Voters were more likely to rank:
  - In competitive races;
  - In races with multiple candidates; and

- When their first choice wasn't favored to win.

MS. LUCKI clarified that the foregoing was not polling data. It was clear that there was a higher percentage of ranking when ranking would count. She interpreted that to mean that voters were sufficiently sophisticated to understand the mechanics of RCV.

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MS. LUCKI displayed slides 11 and 12 and paraphrased the following:

[Original punctuation provided.]

### **2022 Alaska Elections - Successes**

- More choice for voters:
  - A larger, more diverse candidate pool and more candidates from historically underrepresented groups.
  - Candidates mirrored Alaska: the 48 candidates in the special primary represented a broad range of political ideologies from every corner of Alaska.
- RCV didn't favor one party over another: in the three statewide races, incumbents were favored but the winners represented different points on the political spectrum.
- More competition overall:
  - Voters polled thought races were more competitive.
  - Competitive races moved to the General, where more voters participate.
  - Vote splitting was prevented and candidates had majority support: The three "come from behind" victories show that the system works.
  - Alaskan voters are complex and independent. The system allows them to express that complexity.

MS. LUCKI provided additional data. In the US Senate race, Republican Buzz Kelley was eliminated first and 893 of his voters ranked Democrat Patricia Chesbro as their second choice. In the second round, 2,209 of Patricia Chesbro's voters ranked Republican Kelly Tshibaka next. The research showed that 18

percent of voters crossed party lines in their top two choices. She opined that RVC is a voter-centric system that allows voters to express their preferences. She described RCV as a good and successful reform.

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MS. LUCKI discussed the lessons learned from the 2022 Alaska elections:

- The statute needs to be amended to align the special election candidate replacement timeline with the Division of Elections' (DOE) withdrawal deadlines. She noted that the first RCV only had three candidates to choose from and that was challenged in court.
- Alaskans for Better Elections feels the reforms and system worked fairly well.
- Issuing a sample ballot as part of the education process was very helpful.
- More research is needed to determine why ballots weren't counted and to find solutions for:
  - The witness/signature errors that invalidated thousands of absentee and special needs ballots.
  - The disenfranchisement of 300 rural village voters because their ballots were not received by the deadline and thus were not fully counted.
  - The lack of ballot tracking and curing processes.

MS. LUCKI offered to answer questions.

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SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI asked if anything about the ballot initiative needed to be improved.

MS. LUCKI deferred to Mr. Kendall.

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SCOTT KENDALL, Attorney, Alaskans for Better Elections, Anchorage, Alaska, stated that the one obvious issue was that for the special election, the candidate dropout date didn't align with the candidate replacement date. When nonpartisan Al Gross dropped out of the race, DOE applied the other deadline in statute so Republican Tara Sweeny could not replace him on the ballot. A simple fix would be to amend the election statute to say that in a special election the candidate dropout and replacement dates are the same.

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked if there was a specific reason to have the top four candidates appear on the general election ballot.

MR. KENDALL said he looked at different systems from two to five candidates. The top two didn't provide enough choice and the top five seemed to be the natural ceiling. He was leaning toward the top three candidates for Ballot Measure 2 when some sitting legislators convinced him that Alaskan elections were more complicated than many states and of that reason, four candidates would be the sweet spot. He noted that research has shown that RCV is likely to fail when there are too many choices.

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SENATOR CLAMAN asked Ms. Lucki how many fourth place candidates in the November General election received more than five percent of the votes cast.

MS. LUCKI said she would run the calculation and follow up with the answer.

SENATOR CLAMAN commented that his sense was that not too many fourth place candidates came close to that number.

CHAIR KAWASAKI thanked Ms. Lucki for the presentation.

**PRESENTATION(S): ALASKA 2022 PRIMARY ELECTIONS DATA**

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CHAIR KAWASAKI announced a presentation from Sightline Institute on Alaska 2022 election data from the statewide primaries.

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JEANNETTE LEE, Alaska Research Director, Sightline Institute, Anchorage, Alaska, thanked the legislature and the Division of Elections for ensuring that the 2022 elections ran smoothly. She also thanked the State Affairs Committee for the invitation to review the data.

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MS. LEE stated that Sightline Institute ("Sightline") is an independent, nonpartisan, public policy thinktank that focuses on Alaska and the Pacific Northwest. She briefly reviewed her professional career. She explained that Sightline's Democracy Program evaluates and proposes policy changes that support diversity and expand voter choices in elections. She said her research showed that for statewide races in 2022, open primaries

and ranked-choice voting (RCV) appeared to deliver diversity and choice more effectively than the previous system.

She explained how this was determined. The Sightline team looked at the overall candidate pool in the statewide primary races for governor, lieutenant governor, US House, and US Senate and asked the following questions:

1. Did political diversity increase/decrease?
2. Did significantly more/fewer candidates run for office?
3. How many of the statewide primaries were competitive due to having more than one candidate?
4. Did more/fewer women run for statewide office?

MS. LEE advised that Sightline gathered this data from 2010-2022 and evaluated whether open primaries and RCV played a significant role and what other factors were involved.

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MS. LEE reviewed the chart on slide 3 which shows that political diversity increased starting in 2020. Before then there were no Independent candidates in statewide primaries. In 2018 and earlier, Alaska had particularly high barriers for candidates who did not identify as Democrat or Republican. The Alaska Democratic Party changed its bylaws in 2018 to allow Independents to run in the primary, and in 2020 Independents accounted for more than one-quarter of the total of statewide primary candidates. In 2022, the state's new open primary system allowed candidates to easily opt out of either major party and 48 percent did so. Independent candidates made up 31 percent of the pool and the share of Democratic Party candidates decreased to the lowest level since 2010. The share of third-party and Republican Party candidate showings was unremarkable compared to previous years. She summarized that the share of Independent candidates came closer than in any previous election to mirroring the independent composition of the majority of the Alaska electorate. Greater political diversity in the candidate pool helped increase voters' chances to find candidates that matched their political values.

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SENATOR MERRICK asked if the increase in the number of candidates that ran for Congress had to do with the passing of the late Congressman Young or RCV.

MS. LEE said the next slide will address the question.

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MS. LEE directed attention to the line graph on slide 4 that reflects the number of candidates in the primary elections for governor, lieutenant governor, US House, and US Senate. The interest in running for the state races saw a slight uptick while the interest in running for both congressional seats more than doubled the usual number of participants.

To Senator Merrick's question, she said the absence of a powerful incumbent in the US House race likely gave more candidates hope of success, but there could be a variety of reasons that factor in. Future elections will provide a clearer picture of whether Alaska can expect larger candidate fields.

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MS. LEE turned to the bar graph on slide 5 which shows the percentage of statewide primary races with more than one candidate. She pointed out that the races in 2022 were more competitive than at any time since 2010. Just 4 of the 32 major party candidates did not have any competition. For third-party candidates, more uncompetitive statewide primary races were the norm. She described the statewide primary races as exceedingly competitive since the return of the open primary. After the election reform, voters had more choices.

She acknowledged that including Independents on the Democratic ballot starting in 2020 may have boosted Independent participation in statewide primaries, as indicated on the first slide, but this slide shows it failed to improve competition. For example, in 2020 a single candidate was running unopposed in the Republican primary for US Senate and only the return of the open primary in 2022 brought true competition back across all statewide races.

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MS. LEE displayed the pie charts on slide 6 that show the percentage and count of women candidates in statewide primary elections from 2010 to 2022. In 2022, nearly one-third of statewide primary candidates were women. That is the highest rate in the seven years that were examined. She reported that research shows that nonprofits advocate for reforms that include gender parity in politics. They support women. Ranked-choice elections can help by reducing concerns about vote splitting between women candidates, incentivize more cooperation, and lower the financial barriers for all candidates.

MS. LEE stated that in Alaska there were many factors other than Ballot Measure 2 reforms that may have caused more women to run. These include issues relating to reproductive rights and the nationwide trend for women to move into powerful political roles. In the Alaska primary race for governor last year, eight of the ten male candidates asked women to run as their lieutenant governor. She shared her view that this showed a shift in political culture. She also pointed out that female participation in Alaska statewide primaries has been erratic since 2010 which makes it difficult to say whether the election reform affected women's decision to run.

MS. LEE summarized that with the election reforms, Alaska voters were unconstrained politically and candidates across the spectrum won in the statewide races. However, 2022 was just one election cycle and it will take several more cycles for proof. She concluded her testimony by sharing that Sightline was working on an analysis across time of the Alaska legislature that looks at political diversity, generational representation, gender, and race to see whether any significant changes occurred and/or how much the election system had an effect.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI thanked Ms. Lee for the presentation.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Kawasaki adjourned the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 4:28 p.m.