

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

January 26, 2023

3:31 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

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

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Bill Wielechowski

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): 2022 Elections Recap from the Division of Elections

- HEARD

PRESENTATION(S): Get Out The Native Vote.

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

MICHAELA THOMPSON, Acting Director
Division of Elections
Office of the Lieutenant Governor
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered a presentation recapping the 2022 Elections.

MICHELLE (MACUAR) SPARCK, Director of Strategic Initiatives
Get Out The Native Vote
Bethel, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Delivered the Get Out The Native Vote presentation.

JULIE HUSMANN, Region V Elections Supervisor
Division of Elections
Office of the Lieutenant Governor
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Discussed the issues she experienced during the 2022 election.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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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 Claman, Merrick, Bjorkman, and Chair Kawasaki.

PRESENTATION(S): DIVISION OF ELECTIONS 2022 ELECTIONS RECAP

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CHAIR KAWASAKI announced the presentation from the Division of Elections recapping the 2022 election.

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MICHAELA THOMPSON, Acting Director, Division of Elections, Office of the Lieutenant Governor, Anchorage, Alaska, delivered a presentation recapping the 2022 elections.

MS.THOMPSON displayed slide 2 and reviewed the challenges and successes of the 2022 elections.

- The division successfully conducted four statewide elections
 - The June Special primary election. This was conducted entirely by mail and the division sent out over 500,000 by-mail ballots.
 - The August Special general election and the regular primary election. These two elections were conducted on the same day and on one ballot.
 - The regular November general election
- To administer the 2022 elections, the division:
 - Hired and trained in-office temporary workers
 - Entered high volumes of data including the applications transmitted from the permanent fund dividend automatic voter registration process.
 - Processed absentee ballot application requests
 - Recruited polling place locations and staff and conducted training

- Logic and accuracy tested all election tabulation equipment statewide
 - Organized shipping for the supplies and materials needed in urban and rural locations
 - Monitored the return and organization of election materials
 - Logged absentee and question ballots
 - Supervised the bipartisan Absentee and Question Review Boards
 - Conducted two recounts
- Implemented the May Interim Redistricting Plan
 - Updated voters and the voter database system to the new precinct assignments
 - Created new precinct maps, including an interactive map on the division's website
 - Mailed new voter cards to all registered voters
 - Implemented the nonpartisan pick-one primary system and the Ranked Choice Voting general system

MS. THOMPSON reported that 12 races went to tabulation in the regular general election.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked whether the changes in the 2022 election cycle would be implemented on a long-term basis.

MS.THOMPSON replied that the interim plan for redistricting has the potential to change, but the ranked-choice voting (RCV) and the nonpartisan top-four primary system will be in place for the 2024 elections. The elections will be reviewed and evaluated this year and that may affect future elections.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN asked whether the two recounts were conducted by hand.

MS.THOMPSON answered no, the division used its tabulation system.

SENATOR CLAMAN referenced the requirement to hand count certain precincts within a district to ensure accuracy. He asked whether that same hand-count accuracy check was conducted before a recount.

MS.THOMPSON advised that the hand count was part of the state review process which was separate from a recount.

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MS. THOMPSON displayed slide 3 and reviewed the changes that occurred from 19 AKBE.

- Updated forms to reflect the new ranked-choice voting.
 - Candidacy filing paperwork provided more information about how to display political affiliation on the ballot.
 - DOE created new posters for polling places as required by law.
 - Polling place manuals and handbooks in election offices were updated to include information about the new pick-one primary and RCV.
- The ballot design was updated to include the required language about a candidate's political affiliation. Information was also included about how to vote the RCV grid.
- The election tabulation system was updated to reflect RCV.
- Voter education and outreach were enhanced with in-person training and informational updates on the DOE website and social media. Mock elections were included on the DOE website. In 2022, multiple instructional mailers in English and Alaska Native languages were sent to all households. There were also radio and TV advertisements about RCV, absentee-by-mail voting, and important dates.
- For election results, only the first choices from the ballots were counted and tabulated on election night.
 - DOE waited until the day 15 deadline to receive absentee overseas ballots and then DOE determined which races needed ranked-choice tabulation. The tabulation process was broadcast on KTOO so voters could watch.

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SENATOR BJORKMAN said he understood DOE's reasoning, but the public was very frustrated to have to wait so long to start counting. It didn't make sense to his constituents that DOE waited two weeks to start doing any tabulation when it could have been done as the ballots came in and were scanned into the system. He asked whether he misunderstood the process.

MS. THOMPSON confirmed that DOE had to have the images scanned into the system to do any RCV tabulation. Those weren't available on election night for rural precincts. DOE had to wait for those ballots to arrive at the elections offices, particularly for the hand count precincts, and then they're scanned into the system, all of which takes time.

SENATOR BJORKMAN said he understands having to wait for the ballots to come in, but precincts on the road system can scan the ballots. He asked whether it was true that DOE could do RCV tabulation on election night for those precincts on the road system that can scan the ballots. That way the public could see the results based on the ballots DOE had received.

MS. THOMPSON said she wasn't sure that tabulation could be done on election night, but it could be done earlier. It was a new system and the decision to wait was the choice made for the 2022 elections.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked whether that would be a regulation or just a DOE policy decision for the 2022 elections.

MS. THOMPSON said she didn't recall whether it was in regulation but she would follow up with the answer.

CHAIR KAWASAKI made a formal request for the information.

SENATOR CLAMAN asked whether there were any complaints about the new ballot design or lessons learned for the next election.

MS. THOMPSON said the division had not received much feedback but the ballot design was always reevaluated before any election. DOE continually uses outside resources that talk about the readability of ballots and how to make it easier to vote.

SENATOR CLAMAN said he heard accounts of people spoiling their ballots by accidentally filling in the write-in bubble, which might relate to the design. He asked whether she'd heard similar reports.

MS. THOMPSON replied that she hadn't heard those reports, but there were more spoiled ballots than usual, particularly in the regular general election, so DOE would look at that design.

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SENATOR CLAMAN asked what DOE considers a spoiled ballot.

MS. THOMPSON explained that it's generally when a voter makes a mistake and asks for a new ballot. The spoiled ballot is torn up and placed in a spoiled ballot envelope and the voter is given a fresh ballot.

CHAIR KAWASAKI relayed a personal story about a spoiled ballot. He asked whether there was a way to look at the spoiled ballots and determine what might need to be changed for future elections. He observed that analyzing the spoiled ballots from the regular general election might be a good place to start.

MS. THOMPSON said the division would keep the suggestion in mind as it looks for ways to improve the design and instructions going forward.

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MS. THOMPSON turned to slide 4 and reported the following statistics related to voter turnout:

- June 11, 2022 Special Primary
 - Over 500,000 by-mail ballots sent
 - Voter Turnout - 161,773 ballots cast (27.55%)
- August 16, 2022 ,Special General and Regular Primary
 - Voter Turnout - 192,542 ballots cast (32.16%)
- November 8, 2022 ,Regular general election
 - Voter Turnout - 267,047 ballots cast (44.38%)

MS. THOMPSON said there isn't a comparable special primary but the 2018 August special general election and the November general election races for governor do provide one. She reported the following:

- 2018 primary election
 - 115,727 ballots were cast.
 - Voter turnout was 20.24 percent.
- 2018 regular general election
 - 285,009 ballots were cast.
 - Voter turnout was 49.84 percent

SENATOR CLAMAN asked what the turnout was for the presidential election in 2020.

MS. THOMPSON reported that 361,400 ballots were cast in the 2020 general election, which was 60.67 percent.

CHAIR KAWASAKI mentioned the incidence of ballot rejections in the 2022 election cycle because of late postmarks. He noted that the procedure in Fairbanks was to stockpile ballots and then send them in bulk to Anchorage to be postmarked. As it happened, Fairbanks had a disproportionately large number of ballots that were rejected specifically because of late postmarks. He asked whether there was a solution for that.

MS. THOMPSON said one solution was for voters to deliver their ballots in person to the regional office in Fairbanks. Another solution, which was a recommendation before the election, was for voters to take their ballots to the post office and have it hand-canceled by a postal clerk working the counter. Those ballots would still be batched and sent to Anchorage, but they would already have been postmarked with the date the post office received the ballot.

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked about the possibility of having ballot drop boxes like DOE implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

MS. THOMPSON replied that DOE borrowed those drop boxes from the Municipality of Anchorage which is an all-by-mail jurisdiction.

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MS. THOMPSON turned to slide 5 and relayed that voting on Election Day took place at 401 polling places throughout the state. There was also some absentee in-person balloting at regional offices, airports, and other locations throughout the state. She noted that 15 days before the general election DOE opened about 165 absentee and early voting locations.

She asked Julie Husmann, the Region V supervisor, to speak about her experience on Election Day and that night. She explained that regional supervisors oversee the polling locations in their regions. Region V covers the northern Kenai Peninsula Borough, the MatSu Borough, Parks Highway, Valdez, and the Denali Borough.

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JULIE HUSMANN, Region V Elections Supervisor, Division of Elections, Office of the Lieutenant Governor, Wasilla, Alaska, stated that Election Day 2022 was similar to past election days. The regional office had the same problems it had encountered in past elections. This included precincts that didn't open on time

due to elections officials not showing up; election officials arriving late to set up the polling place; and occasional instances of ballots jamming in the precinct scanner. These issues were all resolved in due course. Field workers were available onsite to resolve ballot jamming issues. She noted that a power outage occurred 15-20 minutes before the polls opened but it came back at 8:05 a.m.

MS. HUSMANN relayed that some Kenai Peninsula precincts encountered people outside the polling place entrance who were gathering signatures for a local petition. The people left quietly when they were informed that they could not gather signatures on site. She said the largest difference in the 2022 election was the number of spoiled ballots. She attributed it to voters being unfamiliar with RCV. She explained that when voters received an error message when they put their ballots into the precinct scanner, they were given the option to cast the ballot or return the spoiled ballot and receive a new one.

MS. HUSMANN opined that overall, Election Day 2022 went well.

CHAIR KAWASAKI thanked her for her work and noted that voters in Fairbanks experienced the same difficulties. His office investigated some complaints but concluded that overall things went fairly smoothly in the Fairbanks region.

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MS. THOMPSON turned to slide 6 to discuss the challenges associated with rural voting. She made the following observations:

- DOE continued to face issues in 2022, particularly related to the logistics of shipping election materials to rural areas of the state and then back to the regional offices and the director's office.
- DOE held weekly meetings in 2022 with the US Postal Service (USPS) to share shipping deadlines and to communicate concerns about certain communities potentially not getting election materials timely.
- USPS sent a list every week that identified the post offices that were either closed for the week or experiencing staffing issues because there wasn't a full-time postmaster at those locations. USPS also identified the locations that would have a substitute postmaster for the week.

- Poll worker recruitment and longevity is an issue statewide but it is particularly problematic in rural areas.

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked whether DOE had considered using regional airlines in locations that routinely have shipping problems.

MS. THOMPSON replied DOE has utilized charter airlines to get materials into certain locations, but that's not a solution when the weather is the issue.

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked whether the division had considered the permanent use of ballot drop boxes on Election Day in rural areas or at least rural hubs.

MS. THOMPSON said that has not been discussed, but she wanted to point out that voters also have the option of taking their by-mail ballot to a polling station on Election Day. Those ballots would be seen as on time.

SENATOR CLAMAN suggested DOE look more carefully at drop box options in rural communities that have problems with post office closures, ballots not being postmarked on time, and language access. He asked whether the division had the flexibility to try that in the next election.

MS. THOMPSON replied that it's something to look into, but the division would need to check with the Department of Law (DOL) to discuss the legality of having drop boxes in those locations. She also pointed out that people in rural locations could drop their ballots off with the absentee voting official in the community. Those ballots would be returned to the division when the voting materials are returned and they would be considered received on time.

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MS. THOMPSON displayed slide 7 and advised that her role in the 2022 election cycle was to oversee the absentee voting process and program. This included overseeing sending out absentee ballots through the US mail and electronic transmission. She explained that all absentee ballots are reviewed by bipartisan absentee review boards in each regional office. These boards review all absentee ballot envelopes to verify voter registration status, eligibility, and that the voter provided the required information on the outside of the envelope. The statute requires voters to sign the envelope, provide an identifier, and have somebody witness absentee-by-mail and

electronic transmission ballots. She provided the following data on rejected ballots for each election:

- For the Special primary election, 7,544 ballots were rejected statewide. The rejection rate was 4.5 percent.
- For the Special general election and Regular Primary, 554 ballots were rejected statewide. The rejection rate was 2 percent.
- For the Regular general election there were 878 ballots rejected statewide. The rejection rate was 1.5 percent.
- Common reasons for rejection included improper or insufficient witnessing, ballot postmarked after Election Day, and voters not signing the envelope.
- DOE reviewed the instructions after the elections and has added more clear instructions.
 - Voters can ask a postal clerk to hand cancel their ballot before it goes into the system.
 - Voters are encouraged to vote and mail their ballots as soon as possible after they receive the ballot.

MS. THOMPSON provided data from the 2018 governor election for comparative purposes.

- For the primary election, 450 ballots were rejected statewide.
- For the general election, 1,204 ballots were rejected statewide.
- Half the number of people participated in the 2018 election than in the 2022 election.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI asked if DOE was able to review the rejected ballots to determine whether the people were qualified to vote and their ballots were rejected on a technicality.

MS. THOMPSON explained that when a rejected ballot is returned, elections staff logs the ballot into the system and it's given a count code. In turn, those envelopes go to the Absentee Review Board where they're examined to ensure that the ballot was rejected for a valid reason. The rejected ballots are retained for a scheduled amount of time. DOE prepares reports for each election to show the number of rejected ballots and the reasons.

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked if there was a process to look at whether the person whose ballot was rejected was a qualified voter.

MS. THOMPSON replied that there was no curing process in Alaska statutes.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI noted that the committee might take up the matter of ballot curing.

SENATOR CLAMAN asked whether the ballot rejection percentages were from absentee ballots alone or the total ballots cast statewide.

MS. THOMPSON answered that the percentages are from the total absentee ballots cast statewide.

SENATOR CLAMAN asked whether DOE had drawn any conclusions from the large number of rejected ballots from the all-vote-by-mail special primary election compared to the next two elections.

MS. THOMPSON said she didn't know for sure but the fact that this was the first time many voters had voted an absentee ballot likely was a factor.

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MS. THOMPSON turned to slide 8 to discuss the State Review Board audit process for each election. She explained that a hand count of five percent of the ballots cast from one randomly selected precinct in each House district is conducted for these elections. The precinct scanner is utilized. The board is looking for discrepancies of over one percent. That didn't occur in 2022 or any past election. The materials that were returned from the precincts were verified. Accountability reports were run from the early vote, absentee, and questioned ballots and audited by the bipartisan Audit Review Board in Juneau. The ballot accountability reports from polling place election officials are audited for the number of ballots used and the number of voters that signed the precinct register and then compared to the number of ballots cast on the results tapes. The board then looks at the result reported on election night from the polling place results tapes against those reported to the director's office.

The results from the hand-count precincts are compared to the hand-count results that were entered on election night at the

director's office. The accountability reports from the regional early vote, absentee, and questioned bipartisan review boards are examined and compared against the ballots cast report. Then the result reports from the regional counting boards that scan the absentee, question, and early vote ballots at the regional offices are compared to the results reported to the director's office. After a review of the foregoing, the State Review Board certified the elections.

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MS. THOMPSON advanced to slide 9 and highlighted the language assistance provisions DOE provided for the 2022 election cycle.

- DOE provided language assistance for 10 Alaska Native languages, Spanish, and Tagalog.
- Throughout 2022, DOE maintained a three-member Gwich'in translation panel. Over 4,000 hours were spent translating election materials to the various languages.
 - Translations included instructions and new terms related to RCV.
- DOE advertised its language assistance through public service and radio announcements. This information included candidacy filing deadlines, voter registration deadlines, absentee voting accessibility assistance, and Election Day voting and language assistance. This translated information was also mailed to communities. For the special primary election, the absentee by-mail ballot instructions were translated and mailed. Information on how to fill out and return the ballot was included.
- DOE's voter outreach in 2022 reached approximately 20,174 households with translated content. The typical outreach was expanded to include translated videos and radio interviews.
- DOE opted to directly mail the official 2022 translated election pamphlets to identified census areas. The translated pamphlets were also posted on the DOE website.

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- DOE actively recruited bilingual outreach workers in communities. These individuals provide language assistance to voters before Election Day through small-group and community-wide meetings as well as on an individual basis. The bilingual outreach workers were either recommended by tribal councils or had worked for DOE in previous elections. Recruitment and

retention of bilingual outreach workers was particularly difficult.

- Bilingual poll workers are recruited from within the community to help with language assistance on Election Day. She noted that audio was also available on tablets in the polling places.

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked how DOE decided which households would receive the translated election pamphlets.

MS. THOMPSON explained that census data and the Toyukak settlement indicate where language assistance is needed.

SENATOR CLAMAN asked whether the division was still under federal court supervision regarding language assistance requirements stemming from a lawsuit several years ago.

MS. THOMPSON confirmed that the division still had to meet the stipulations in the [Toyukak v. Dahlstrom] settlement agreement. She noted that the division also prepares court reports for those communities.

SENATOR CLAMAN requested she send the committee a copy of the court report.

MS. THOMPSON agreed.

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MS. THOMPSON displayed slide 10 and discussed same-day voter registration.

- Alaska statutes require a voter to be registered for 30 days before Election Day, unless it's a presidential election. In that instance, an individual may vote a questioned ballot. The questioned ballot is returned to the regional office and the Question Ballot Review Board verifies that the voter supplied the required voter registration information. The ballot is counted solely for the presidential race, and the voter information is added to the voter information database for future elections.
- There is no same-day registration available for the midterm elections. If the voter were to vote a questioned ballot, it would go through the question ballot process, but nothing would be counted because the person was not registered 30 days before the election. The individual's information from the

ballot envelope would be entered into the voter registration database for future elections.

MS. THOMPSON highlighted that a registered voter who moves to a different district and fails to update their residence address 30 days before the election may vote a questioned ballot at their new polling location. The Question Ballot Review Board would compare the previous address and the new address to determine which parts of the ballot could be counted. She provided examples.

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SENATOR MERRICK asked who had access to the tapes from the precincts and how they might be leaked because she saw bloggers produce copies of those tapes before the official results were released on the division's website.

MS. THOMPSON answered that poll watchers may request a copy of the tape when the polls close and there was no prohibition against sharing that information.

CHAIR KAWASAKI thanked her for the presentation and advised that the conversation about how to make elections better in the future would continue.

PRESENTATION(S): Get Out The Native Vote.

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CHAIR KAWASAKI announced the presentation Get Out The Native Vote.

[4:27:56 PM](#)

MICHELLE (MACUAR) SPARCK, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Get Out The Native Vote (GOTNV), Bethel, Alaska, advised that she sent her full written testimony to the committee for the record. [The full testimony is posted on BASIS.] It fills gaps and addresses things that were missing in the Division of Elections' presentation.

MS. SPARCK stated that as a baseline, GOTNV applies the term "rural" to House districts 36-40. This is the Interior, Bristol Bay, the Bethel area, the Nome area, and the Arctic area, but GOTNV also studies Southeast, Kodiak, Cook Inlet and CIRI tribes, and any area with a recognized tribe or shareholder base. The area is large but the population is relatively small.

MS. SPARCK paraphrased the following passages of her testimony:

It was a massive undertaking to help prepare and inform the public for three statewide elections in six months, especially with 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.

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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.

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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.

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MS. SPARCK emphasized how difficult the division's special needs ballot was to navigate. She described it as an intimidating docket that would invite mistakes from even a super voter. For House District 38 that has primarily Yupik speakers, 13 special needs ballots were requested and 8 were rejected, which is a 61.5 percent rejection. She acknowledged that it was not intentional but for people with special needs or language barriers, the layer of demands seemed to ensure failure.

MS. SPARCK noted that 4,526 more rural voters participated in the August 16 statewide primary and special election than the June election. She continued to paraphrase from her prepared testimony:

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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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MS. SPARCK advised that her written testimony contained a full accounting of the rural performance in all the 2022 elections. While the data shows that the turnout increased with each cycle, GOTNV and other organizations are committed to increasing voting participation to levels that are above and even beyond the 50 percent threshold.

MS. SPARCK concluded her testimony with the following statement:

While the State of Alaska is impressively open in many respects and recognizes us as voters, there are systemic barriers that invariably taint our access. And in some cases, when we even successfully vote, it can sit in a canvas bag long after the race has been called. Get Out The Native Vote and many of our partners are here to help tackle these truly Alaskan sized issues.

[4:39:28 PM](#)

CHAIR KAWASAKI thanked Ms. Sparck and solicited questions.

SENATOR CLAMAN asked what takeaways the legislature should look at to improve the next election.

[4:40:00 PM](#)

MS. SPARCK suggested the legislature:

- invite the postal service to comment because it is such an important part of the process.
- hold discussions with the division about the potential for using charter airlines.
- look into using the National Guard when foul weather prevents charter airlines from flying.
- discuss the options for using drop boxes.
- look at the cost for voters to mail their ballots because it can be an impediment for some voters.

MS. SPARCK expressed hope that the new division director would continue the open door policy and let GOTNV and other Native organizations help to improve access for all rural and tribal areas and make the state's election process more efficient.

CHAIR KAWASAKI asked Ms. Thomson if she wanted to comment.

[4:42:23 PM](#)

MS. THOMPSON said the testimony from Get Out The Native Vote was helpful. She agreed that including the USPS in the discussions and understanding its processes was key to getting election materials to and from rural areas successfully. She also stated support for maintaining partnerships with Native organizations that have grassroot movements in their areas to improve participation and the voting experience.

CHAIR KAWASAKI stated that he looked forward to the continuing discussion.

[4:45:18 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Kawasaki adjourned the Senate State Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 4:45 p.m.