



Open Primaries in Alaska Native Communities REPORT

Photo: Alaska Native leaders at the Native Leadership Institute (NLI) training program at the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage in the fall of 2023. Hosted by Advance Native Political Leadership, Native Peoples Action and Get Out the Native Vote. The NLI prepares Native leaders in Alaska and across the country to run for office grounded in Indigenous values.



Open Primaries in Alaska Native Communities

An Analysis of Primary Voter Behavior in Predominantly Alaska Native Communities

- Executive Summary..... 3
 - Introduction..... 3
 - Toplines..... 3
- Background..... 6
 - Research Context..... 6
 - Research Goals..... 7
 - Research Team..... 8
- Methodology..... 9
 - Summary..... 9
 - Data Sources..... 9
 - Identifying Predominantly Alaska Native Communities..... 10
- Findings..... 13
 - Crossover voting..... 13
 - Incomplete Voting..... 17
 - Turnout & Turnover..... 22
- Conclusion..... 26
- Future Research Opportunities..... 27
- Appendix..... 29



Executive Summary

Introduction

In 2022, Alaska became the first state in the country to run a top-four open primary in tandem with a ranked-choice voting general election. Alaska is also the state with the largest proportion of indigenous people in the country. In this report we examine the voting behavior of predominantly Alaska Native communities under the new electoral system. This analysis expands our understanding of how the new electoral system interacts with the voting preferences expressed by Alaska Native voters, particularly in culturally Native communities.

Toplines

We looked at four variables to compare voting behavior in predominantly Alaska Native communities with a statewide baseline. Those variables are:

- ❖ **Crossover Voting:** Voting for candidates that would have been on separate primary ballots in a partisan primary system (i.e. voting for a Republican candidate for U.S. Senate and a Democratic candidate for State House).
- ❖ **Incomplete Voting (Also called bullet voting):** Only ranking one person in a ranked-choice voting general election, declining the option to rank multiple candidates for a single race.
- ❖ **Turnout:** The proportion of registered voters that vote in a given election.
- ❖ **Turnover:** The proportion of a primary's voters that did not vote in the previous primary election.

If Alaska still had a partisan primary system in 2022, **4 in 5 voters** in predominantly Alaska Native communities would have been prevented from fully expressing their candidate preferences.

We found that:

- ❖ **Voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities had significantly higher rates of crossover voting than voters across the rest of the state.**
This suggests that Alaska Native voters are especially well served by an open primary election system, in terms of the voting preferences indicated by voter behavior in predominantly Alaska Native communities. Read all findings [here](#).
- ❖ **Voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities had higher rates of incomplete voting than voters across the rest of the state.** The only exception to this trend was among voters that ranked Kelly Tshibaka first, the largest critic of the open primary, ranked-choice voting system on the ballot in 2022. Among Tshibaka voters, predominantly Alaska Native communities did not incomplete vote at a meaningfully different rate than the rest of the state. These trends in incomplete voting underline unique difficulties in communicating to predominantly Alaska Native communities, from geography to language and trust-building. Read all findings [here](#).
- ❖ **Voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities have consistently had lower turnout than voters across the rest of the state. In 2022, turnout increased relative to 2020 and 2018 for predominantly Alaska Native communities and the rest of the state.** Despite higher turnover, predominantly Alaska Native communities voted at a higher rate in the 2022 open primary than in the 2020 and 2018 partisan primaries. Read more [here](#).
- ❖ **Individual voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities had higher rates of turnover than voters across the rest of the state.** Fewer habitual primary voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities results in less variance in turnout rates compared to the rest of the state. Read more [here](#).

Why this matters:

- ❖ High rates of crossover voting demonstrate that voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities are more likely to support candidates from different parties across different contests than voters across the rest of the state. The previous system prevented these voters from being able to fully express their preferences in the primary election. This suggests that Alaska Native voters were especially poorly served by the partisan primary system.
- ❖ High rates of incomplete voting in predominantly Alaska Native communities underscore the importance of voter education and candidate cues in the implementation of electoral reforms.
- ❖ Some opponents of electoral reform¹ argue that the new system may have inhibited turnout for voters in underserved communities, including Alaska Native voters. Our analysis finds no evidence to support this claim. Primary turnout rates increased in predominantly Alaska Native communities from 2020 to 2022. Historically the turnout rates in these predominantly Alaska Native communities have been more static than the rest of the state.



Background

Research Context

Alaska's 2022 election (the first election under Alaska's new top-4 open primary, ranked-choice voting general election system) resulted in significant progress for Alaska Native candidates, including the first Alaska Native person elected to Congress², as well as the election of Alaska Native candidates at the legislative level like Maxine Dibert³. These candidate outcomes have been well covered by organizations like FairVote⁴, Sightline Institute⁵, and other electoral reform advocates. However, current literature is lacking when it comes to investigating voting behavior in rural and predominantly Alaska Native communities.

Research to date has primarily focused on racial representation coming out of the 2022 election, i.e. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) candidates that were elected under the new system. There is less published research regarding Alaska Native voting behavior in the 2022 election. Misinformation and lack of understanding of voting trends in rural, predominantly Alaska Native communities contributes to unsubstantiated or actively cynical claims that election reforms are “confusing” for communities of color, as seen in the D.C. Democratic Party’s lawsuit to stop RCV⁶.

We hoped to address those gaps by combining existing research on Alaska voting trends with census data from rural areas, in order to better understand voting behavior and the primary electorate in rural, predominantly Alaska Native communities. Specifically, we will look at how rural, Alaska Native voting preferences, as expressed by votes cast in the 2022 primary and general elections, indicated how well or poorly these communities were served by a partisan primary system. We will also look at how open primaries may have affected turnout in these communities.

Research Goals

We started with three guiding questions:

1. Do predominantly Alaska Native communities “crossover vote” (i.e. vote for some candidates who would have been in the Republican primary and some who would have been in the Democratic primary) at higher or lower rates than the rest of the state?
2. How does the rate of incomplete voting in predominantly Alaska Native communities compare to other communities around the state?
3. Is the primary electorate of predominantly Alaska Native communities made up of more habitual, or more intermittent, voters, compared to the rest of the state? Did that change in the 2022 primary and how did that impact overall turnout?

Research Team

Our research was conducted by team members from two Alaska organizations.

Get Out The Native Vote (GOTNV) is a 501(c)3 statewide voter education organization dedicated to increasing Alaska Native turnout and engagement in electoral politics. GOTNV currently works under three planks:

1. To hold governing bodies accountable and lessen the barriers to voting
2. Increase voter education and enable voters to make more informed choices
3. Increase the turnout rate for a more representative government in one of the most diverse states in the country

The organization, a product of Native communities, is uniquely positioned to understand and advocate for rural and Alaska Native precincts and undesignated communities. Prior to this project, GOTNV has led research on turnout in rural Alaska communities and other predominantly Native districts in Southeast Alaska and Kodiak, while working with the US Census Bureau, the US Postal Service, and the Alaska Division of Elections to improve data records and access to voting in rural Alaska. Those involved in this research were:

- ❖ Michelle Sparck, Director of Strategic Initiatives [QUALITATIVE LEAD]

Ship Creek Group (SCG) is an Alaska-based, cross-partisan campaign firm with robust experience in analyzing and reporting on Alaska political data. SCG has previously led research to understand trends around Alaska's unusually high success rates for independent candidates, examining the liabilities faced by the new election system, and modeling the projected impact of variables like incomplete voting under the new system. Those involved in this research were:

- ❖ Burke Croft, Data Manager [QUANTITATIVE LEAD]
- ❖ Nick Crews, Data Engineer
- ❖ Kim Jones, Partner
- ❖ John-Henry Heckendorn, Partner

Methodology

Summary

We used data from the U.S. Census Bureau alongside perspectives from rural Alaska experts to identify a subset of predominantly Alaska Native communities. We then used data from the Alaska Division of Elections to compare the crossover voting, incomplete voting, turnout, and turnover rates of voters in those predominantly Alaska Native communities with voters across the rest of the state.

Data Sources

- ❖ **2020 Decennial Census Data**, published by the U.S. Census Bureau. Contains race and ethnicity data in a hierarchy of geographical units, from state and borough/county (the largest geographies) down to census block (the smallest geography). By aggregating the racial data of the census blocks contained within each precinct, we approximated the racial makeup of all 401 precincts in the state.
- ❖ **The 2022 Cast Vote Record**, published by the Alaska Division of Elections. Contains an anonymized record of the entire ballot cast by every individual voter in the 2022 primary and general elections. The data excludes any personally-identifying information, but includes precinct and ballot type. Early, absentee, and questioned ballots are reported by State House district, not at the precinct level. This new dataset gives us the unprecedented ability to see how individual voters expressed their preferences for different candidates across contests as well as within the same contest. Using this data, we can measure the Crossover and Incomplete Voting rates for all the individual voters casting in-person ballots in a given precinct, plus all the individual voters casting early, absentee, or questioned ballots in a given district.
- ❖ **The State of Alaska Voter File**, purchased from the Alaska Division of Elections in June 2022 and September 2023. Contains every registered voter's full name, precinct, party registration, date of birth, and turnout history (with ballot type) for elections dating back to the 2018 primary. This data shows how frequently individual voters turn out to vote in every precinct.

Identifying Predominantly Alaska Native Communities

Obviously not all Alaska Native people live in rural Alaska. We also cannot connect CVR data to personal records or individual racial demographic data. That is why we focus on understanding the voting behaviors of *predominantly* Alaska Native *communities* rather than making claims about Alaska Native *people* or *individuals*. We used census data on racial makeup of communities and then validated that selection of communities with the team at Get Out the Native Vote to confirm our list of predominantly Alaska Native Communities.

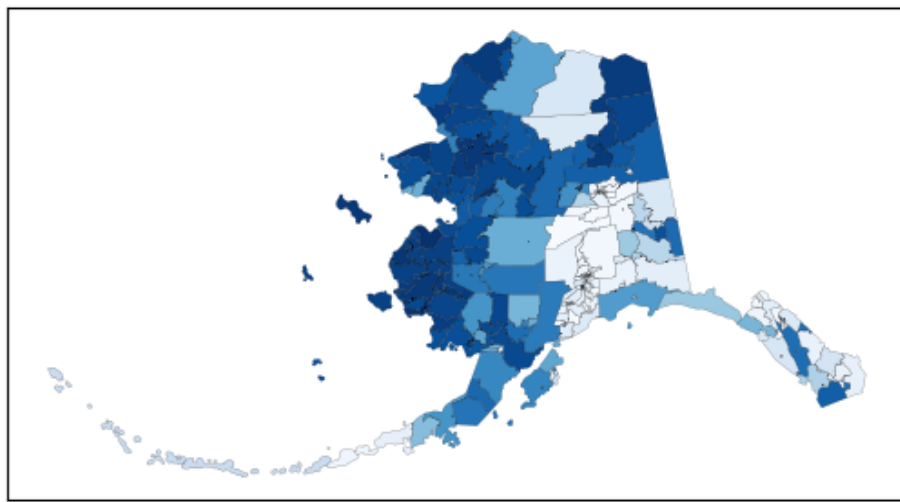


Figure 1: Map of Alaska precincts, colored by the proportion of residents that are American Indian or Alaska Native, alone or in combination with other races. Darker blue represents a larger proportion. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

We aggregated Census race data by precinct and sorted all 401 precincts by the proportion of people who are American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in combination with other races. 94% of all precincts were either above 67% or below 33% Alaska Native, meaning the vast majority of communities were easily categorized quantitatively. For the remaining 23 precincts, we relied on the institutional materials and knowledge of GOTNV, including lists of tribal communities, as identified by Alaska Native organizations. Klawock (43% Alaska Native), Gakona (43%), and Copper Center (42%) were identified as Predominantly Alaska Native communities while Chistochina (39%), Tok (34%), Lemon Creek (38%), and Ship Creek (37%) were identified as non-predominantly Alaska Native Communities. From these qualitative identifications, a 40% Alaska Native threshold emerged: we categorized any precinct with a larger percentage of people who are American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in combination with other races as a “predominantly Alaska Native community” and all others as the “Rest of the State.”

The Alaska Division of Elections reports early, absentee, and questioned ballots by State House district, not precinct. For these votes, we aggregated the precinct demographic data in order to define district-wide racial makeup. Four districts were more than 40% Alaska Native: districts 37, 38, 39, and 40. Early, absentee, and question votes from these districts have been added to the in-person vote from in the total count of votes from predominantly Alaska Native communities. Therefore, the total set of votes analyzed from our identified predominantly Alaska Native communities are:

- In-person, election day votes from 142 precincts
- Early, absentee, and question votes from 4 State House Districts

While our selected region contains the regions with the largest proportion of Alaska Native people, only 39.0% of the state's indigenous population lives in our selected area. The selected regions contain only 10.3% of Alaska's population.

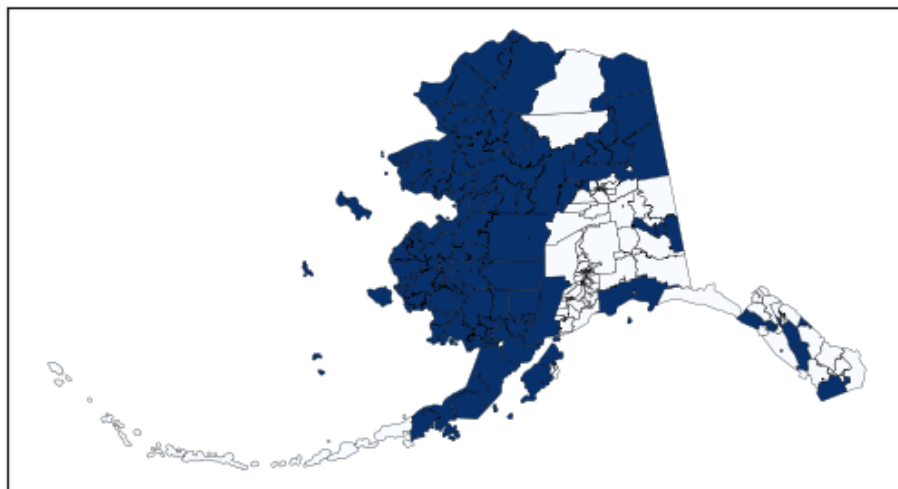


Figure 2: Map of Alaska precincts with predominantly Alaska Native communities shown in blue. These precincts have a proportion of residents that are American Indian or Alaska Native, alone or in combination with other races greater than 40%.

See [Appendix, Table 3](#) for full list of precincts.

Caveats & Challenges

There are several factors that complicate our findings, including some elections administration errors during the 2022 primary election:

- ❖ Four rural precincts did not open polling places on election day⁷:
 - Tununak (97% Alaska Native)
 - Atmautluak (97% Alaska Native)
 - Venetie (93% Alaska Native)
 - Holy Cross (96% Alaska Native)
- ❖ Seven precincts had their in-person ballots sent to Juneau for counting due to technical errors at the local level⁸.
 - Anvik (94% Alaska Native)
 - Diomedede (95% Alaska Native)
 - Grayling (97% Alaska Native)
 - Hooper Bay (97% Alaska Native)
 - Kaktovik (96% Alaska Native)
 - Nightmute (97% Alaska Native)
 - Teller (93% Alaska Native)

None of the in-person votes from these eleven precincts were included in the Cast Vote Record. In six of the nine precincts, no one was marked as voting in-person.

These closures and errors left dozens to hundreds of votes uncounted. Those votes would not have been enough to swing any election or to fundamentally alter our analysis in this report, but they underscore the historic obstacles to voting that exist for rural and predominantly Alaska Native communities. Those obstacles are inherently present in the data we have analyzed. We will discuss these challenges in more detail in the qualitative sections of the report.

Findings

High Crossover voting rates show voting preferences of predominantly Alaska Native communities are disproportionately inhibited under partisan primaries

The new top-4 open primary system in 2022 allowed voters to choose any candidate in the primary, no matter the party affiliation of the voter or the candidate. Voters could vote for candidates of any party affiliation: they could vote for Republicans in some primary contests, while voting for Democrats, third party candidates, and/or independents in other contests, which could not happen previously. With the Cast Vote Record, we identified these “crossover” voters - those whose preferences did not align with partisan primaries but could be expressed in open primaries. High rates of crossover voting suggest predominantly Alaska Native communities are especially poorly served by partisan primaries.

Before the implementation of an open, top-4 primary system, Alaskan candidates had three paths to get onto the general election ballot⁹:

- ❖ Run as a Republican candidate in the Republican Primary.
- ❖ Run as a Democrat, Libertarian, Alaska Independence Party candidate, candidate, or as Nonpartisan or Undeclared candidate on the “Alaska Democratic, Alaska Libertarian and Alaskan Independence Candidate Ballot.” We will refer to this path to the ballot as the “Democratic Primary” from here on, because that is the most commonly used term for this primary ballot.
- ❖ Run as a petition candidate after receiving the required number of signatures.¹⁰

Under the previous system, any voter could choose the Democratic primary ballot. Registered Republican, Nonpartisan, or Undeclared voters could choose the Republican ballot¹¹, while all other voters were blocked from that ballot. Voters were not allowed to choose both ballots. Under the new system, starting in 2022, all candidates were placed on the same ballot.

We define a crossover voter as a voter who, across all contests on their ballot, voted for at least one candidate registered with the Republican party and at least one candidate registered with any non-Republican party or unaffiliated - in other words,

voters that voted for a set of candidates that included some would-be-Republican primary candidates and some would-be-Democratic primary candidates.

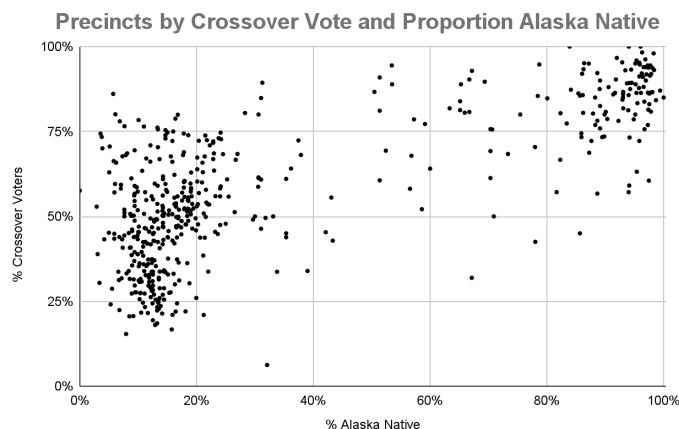


Figure 3: Scatter plot of precincts by proportion American Indian or Alaska Native alone or in combination with other races vs proportion of crossover voters in the 2022 primary.

Crossover voting is highly associated with the proportion of Alaska Native people across Alaska's precincts. Precincts with a low proportion of Alaska Native people had significant variance in crossover voting rates. Some non-Native precincts were composed of primarily partisan voters, who either voted all Republican or all non-Republican; some were more likely to choose a la carte between partisan labels. Alternatively, nearly all predominantly Alaska Native communities had very high rates of crossover voters. Rather than looking by every precinct separately, we can look at all voters who live in predominantly Alaska Native communities and see the crossover rate across the whole population; we can do the same for the rest of the state as well.

	Votes	Crossover	Proportion Crossover
Alaska Native Communities	9,845	7,866	79.9%
Rest of State	182,444	86,450	47.4%
Total Statewide	192,289	94,316	49.0%

Table 1: Total votes cast ("Votes") and votes cast that selected at least one Republican and one non-Republican ("Crossover") in the 2022 primary election, separating out votes from Alaska Native communities and all other voters.

In total, nearly 80% of voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities were crossover voters. The crossover vote rate across the whole state was just under 50%. Predominantly Alaska Native communities voted in ways that cannot be reflected in a partisan primary at a far higher rate than the rest of the state. If Alaska still had a partisan primary system in 2022, 1 in 2 Alaskan voters would not have been able to fully express their candidate preferences; that number rises to 4 in 5 voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities. 80% of voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities voted in ways that would be impossible in a closed primary system - the open primary allowed for these communities to vote the way they want to.

Qualitative Context

Predominantly Alaska Native communities have a long history of crossing party lines to support candidates with higher name recognition, stronger relational ties, and/or records of support in and for rural Alaska. Ted Stevens (R- U.S. Senate, 1968-2009), Don Young (R- U.S. House, 1973-2022), Tony Knowles (D- Governor, 1994-2002), Bill Walker (N- Governor, 2015-2019), and Mark Begich (D- U.S. Senate 2009-2015) all gained widespread levels of support in rural areas that were unusual relative to the partisan baseline of those districts and precincts.

This culture of cross-partisan voting is also reflected in the Bush Caucus in the Alaska Legislature, which has a history of forming coalitions with both Democratic and Republican caucuses in order to be a part of a majority.

An understandable counter argument is that the high rate of crossover voting in predominantly Alaska Native communities was due to the composition of the ballot, rather than the true expression of voters. That argument could take two forms:

- ❖ Just under 90% of voters in rural, predominantly Alaska Native communities did not have the option to vote for a Republican for State House or State Senate. While voters could have chosen to not vote (and about 5% of voters did), this could push conservative voters to still vote for a Democrat, Independent, or third party, thereby making them a crossover voter.
- ❖ Lisa Murkowski (R) was the favored competitive candidate among progressive voters, and she gained a lot of progressive support in predominantly Alaska Native communities. While voters could have chosen Pat Chesbro (D), a candidate with less statewide support, this could skew progressive voters to vote for a moderate Republican, thereby making them a crossover voter.

After removing State House and State Senate contests, and placing Lisa Murkowski in a hypothetical Democratic primary, the crossover voting rate decreases across the state. However, **predominantly Alaska Native communities still have a far higher crossover vote rate - 47.5% compared to 21.5% in the rest of the state, even after controlling for the two factors described above.**

Statewide Contests with Murkowski not in Republican primary		
	Crossover	Proportion Crossover
Alaska Native Communities	4,679	47.5%
Rest of State	39,147	21.5%
Total	43,826	22.8%

Table 2: Votes cast that selected at least one Republican (excluding Lisa Murkowski) and one non-Republican in statewide contests of the 2022 primary election, separating out votes from predominantly Alaska Native communities and all other voters.

We recognize these variables to point out that, even holding additional confounding variables constant, predominantly Alaska Native communities crossover vote at a higher rate than the rest of the state. Furthermore, high crossover voting rates are a result of voter preference, not any other factor, such as ballot composition.

High Incomplete Voting rates demonstrate the difficult information environment of predominantly Alaska Native communities

Incomplete voting, also known as bullet voting, is when voters only rank one candidate in a given race under a ranked-choice voting system, declining the option to rank multiple candidates. In ranked-choice voting tabulation, if a voter's first-choice candidate is eliminated, their vote goes to their second choice. If there is no second choice, their vote is not counted in later rounds.

Incomplete voting was a deciding factor in multiple elections in 2022. Different amounts of exhausted ballots as a result of incomplete voting could have flipped the results in districts like State House District 11, where the second choices of Ross Bieling (R) gave Julie Coulombe (R) the win over Walter Featherly (N), or in State House District 31, where the second choices of Kelly Nash (R) were not enough to put Bart LeBon (R) over Maxine Dibert (D). Meanwhile, second choices of clear front-runners had no impact on the outcome of any election. If a first-choice candidate is never eliminated, their voters' second choices do not come into play.

A voter's likelihood of incomplete voting depends heavily on which candidate the voter has chosen first; a voter that ranks a clear frontrunner first knows their vote will not go to a second choice - so why bother? Therefore, this report will analyze incomplete voting rates by statewide candidates - specifically, where incomplete voting had a meaningful impact on race outcome. That means we looked at candidates who had a sizable support (statewide first-round vote share > 10%) but were not guaranteed to be one of the final two candidates (statewide first-round vote share < 33.33%).

Across the first choice voters for all of these candidates, predominantly Alaska Native communities incomplete voted between 10 and 20 points more than the rest of the state. **Across Democratic, Republican, and Nonpartisan candidates, predominantly Alaska Native communities incomplete voted at a consistently higher rate.**

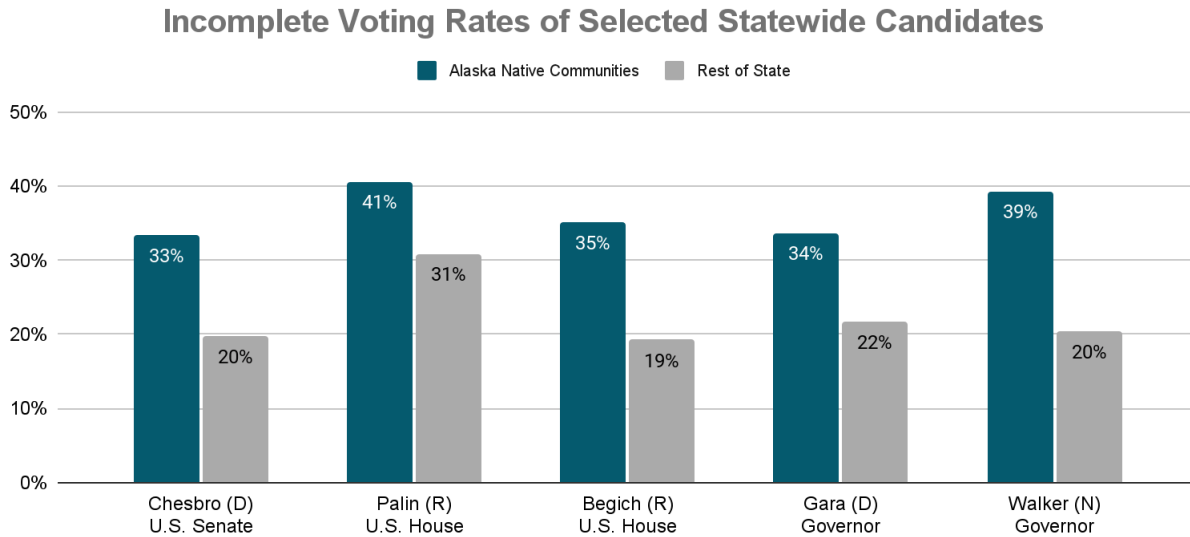


Figure 4: Bar chart of the incomplete voting rates among the voters of 5 statewide candidates, separating the voters within predominantly Alaska Native communities and voters outside of those communities.

There was only one statewide candidate whose first-choice voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities incomplete voted less than her first-choice voters across the rest of the state. This candidate was Kelly Tshibaka, the Trump-backed challenger to Senator Lisa Murkowski (R). Tshibaka has been one of RCV's loudest critics and actively encouraged her supporters to incomplete vote in her race¹². Tshibaka voters in Alaska Native communities did not incomplete vote at a meaningfully different rate than the rest of the state.

Incomplete Voting Rate of Kelly Tshibaka Voters

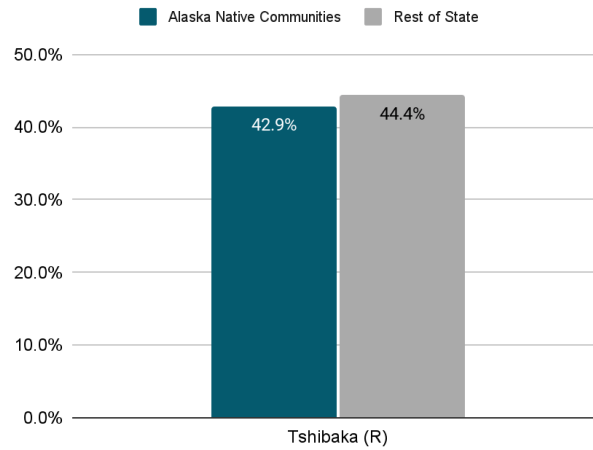


Figure 5: Bar chart of the incomplete voting rates for Kelly Tshibaka's first-choice voters, separating voters within predominantly Alaska Native communities and voters outside of those communities.

Tshibaka's anti-RCV candidate cues clearly affected voter behavior in urban parts of the state but did not have as large of an effect on rural and predominantly Alaska Native voters. **Urban voters, who tended to incomplete vote more than 10 points less than predominantly Alaska Native communities, appeared to be persuaded by Tshibaka's rank-one-and-done candidate cues to incomplete vote at a higher rate.**

Notably, our hypothesis here is not that voter behavior in predominantly Alaska Native communities changed in the Tshibaka example, but rather that Tshibaka's encouragement of incomplete voting pushed her supporters in the rest of the state to an incomplete voting rate comparable to the rate we see across the board for voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities.

Qualitative Context

While incomplete voting does not necessarily indicate a lack of understanding about ranked-choice voting, Alaska Native communities have long been low-information voting environments with difficult headwinds for voter education programs.

Predominantly Alaska Native communities are uniquely difficult to reach and communicate with for many reasons:

- ❖ **Geography:** Alaska Native communities lay primarily off the road system in some of the most rural areas in the world. Our identified predominantly Alaska Native communities have a population density of 0.16 people per square mile (one person for every 6.2 square miles). For reference, the rest of the state is 21 times more densely populated (3.4 pp sq. mi) and the country is 586 times more densely populated (93.8 pp sq. mi)¹³. Just getting from one place to another is a difficult and costly task and almost always requires either scheduled or chartered flights.
- ❖ **Language:** Across our identified predominantly Alaska Native communities, all 4 major Alaska Native language families (Inuit-Aleut, Athabascan-Eyak-Tlingit, Haida, and Tshimshian) are represented, containing up to 20 distinct languages in total, including Inupiaq, Yup'ik, Gwich'in, Tanana, and Eyak.¹⁴ While most people speak English, it is a second language to many.
- ❖ **Trust-building:** In predominantly Alaska Native communities, the messenger is as important as the message. Candidates and organizations that have shown up for rural communities before will be more impactful than outsiders.
- ❖ **Communications:** The options to get messages to constituents are limited in rural Alaska. Statewide news programming is one common form of communication that bridges the rural-urban divide, but public radio and newspapers face the same geographical and language challenges that limit their ability to communicate. High-speed internet is a large barrier to reaching constituents. Data plans are getting better but it is costly and variable across different regions, making rural consumers stingy with their time and attention.

These barriers make it difficult for programs dedicated to nonpartisan voter education, such as the Division of Elections or Alaskans for Better Elections, the

sponsors of the original electoral reform ballot measure in 2020, who took an active role in the system's implementation.

Get Out the Native Vote (GOTNV) was created to fill the space left by these statewide programs. At one point, GOTNV advised Elders (Native language speakers) to just choose one and be done like the former voting experience if they were too thrown by the ranking system. This may have contributed to the higher rates of incomplete voting in these communities.

These barriers to communicate to predominantly Alaska Native communities also exist for candidates in their campaigning. Previous research shows that candidates and parties are some of the most important messengers around ranked-choice voting behavior¹⁵.

In low-information environments like rural Alaska, name recognition (and incumbency, by extension) plays an outsized role. A single candidate sign can sway the community - or a visit (which is rare) leaves an imprint. Ted Stevens (R- U.S. Senate, 1968-2009) and Don Young (R- U.S. House, 1973-2022) used to make regular campaign appearances in villages early on in their lengthy careers. In 2022, candidates like Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R), Fmr. Gov. Bill Walker (N), Gov. Mike Dunleavy (R), and Fmr. Gov. Sarah Palin (R) benefited from their name recognition. Mary Peltola (D) ran for State House in rural Alaska under different last names, but her name recognition was still higher than most statewide candidates in predominantly Alaska Native communities. Even Nick Begich (R), relative of Fmr. Congressman Nick Begich I (D) and Fmr. Sen. Mark Begich (D) had more reputation.

Kelly Tshibaka (R) was a candidate without much name recognition in predominantly Alaska Native communities, which could help explain why her campaign's efforts to encourage incomplete voting appeared to have a reduced impact in predominantly Alaska Native communities. It does, however, show how much impact her campaign had on the rest of the state, reinforcing existing research showing candidate cues heavily impact behavior.

The higher incomplete voting rates in predominantly Alaska Native communities are in-line with ongoing challenges in voter education. However, when candidates encouraged incomplete voting, those same barriers demonstrated the impact of candidate cues on ranked-choice voting behavior across the rest of the state.

Historically low primary turnout in predominantly Alaska Native communities increased in 2022

Predominantly Alaska Native communities have had a lower primary turnout rate than the rest of the state over the last 3 cycles (2018, 2020, and 2022). These communities are also less variable when it comes to primary turnout across different election cycles, with smaller swings in turnout percentage than the rest of the state. Turnout in predominantly Alaska Native communities and the rest of the state were in the high teens in 2018; in 2022, the rest of the state's turnout spiked to 33% while predominantly Alaska Native community turnout rose only slightly, to 21%. The 2022 primary—the first open primary under the new system—also had an unusual “special general election” for Alaska’s lone Congressional seat on the same ballot, boosting turnout. Meanwhile, only 21% of registered voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities voted in the 2022 primary.

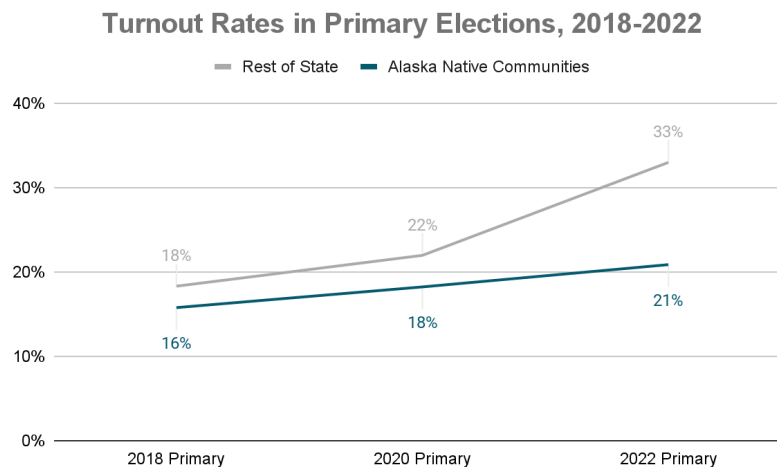


Figure 6: Line chart of turnout in predominantly Alaska Native communities and the rest of the state in the last 3 primary elections. Data from Alaska Voter List and therefore may differ slightly from Election Summary Reports.

However, when we shift to the individual level and look at which individual voters are turning out to vote, predominantly Alaska Native communities had higher turnover in who was voting. Compared to the rest of the state, a higher proportion of votes in the 2022 primary in predominantly Alaska Native communities came from voters that did not vote in the primary two-years prior. The rest of the state had a higher proportion of votes that came from voters that voted in all three of the 2018, 2020, and 2022 primaries.

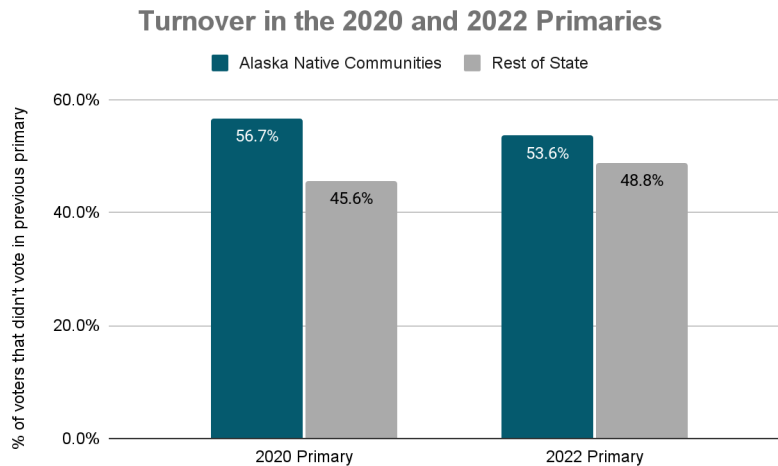


Figure 7: Bar chart showing the turnover for Alaska Native Communities and Rest of State in 2020 and 2022. Turnover is defined as the proportion of a primary's voters who did not vote in the previous primary.

Each primary election had a more distinct makeup of voters in Alaska Native communities than in the rest of the state, because there were fewer supervoters who show up every primary election.

Qualitative Context

Primary elections have highly variable turnout by nature. This is especially true in Alaska, a state with fewer high-profile elected positions than most other states. In 2008, a contentious Republican primary for Alaska's lone Congressional seat drove statewide turnout above 40%, a highwater mark that has not been surpassed since. In 2014, an oil tax ballot initiative with well-funded opposition was on the primary ballot, setting the highest primary election turnout since 2008. When primary turnout spikes in Alaska, it tends to correlate with unusually well-funded campaigns working hard to turn out specific voters. However, predominantly Alaska Native communities are uniquely difficult to reach out to, due to geography, language, trust-building, and communications¹⁶. **Therefore, these spikes in turnout are not as pronounced for predominantly Alaska Native communities. The same can be said for the 2022 primary, where turnout increased from 2020 for predominantly Alaska Native communities, even if it was by a smaller amount than the rest of the state.**

As for the higher turnover rate of predominantly Alaska Native communities, we can understand this trend, in part, as a result of structural barriers to cast a ballot in rural Alaska.

In the 2022 primary, four rural precincts that did not open in-person polling places on election day for the primary¹⁷ and seven rural precincts which were not able to count in-person ballots due to technical errors¹⁸. All eleven of those precincts were more than 90% Alaska Native, per the Decennial Census.

Those barriers were also laid bare in a previous election in 2022. After the death of Alaska's lone Congressperson, there was a special primary held for the seat in June 2022, before the regular primary for all other contests was held in August. The special primary was held completely by-mail, with every registered voter automatically receiving a ballot. As a result, there was a large number of rural (House Districts 36-40) ballot rejections in that race (1,194 votes, or 15.91% of votes cast).

In a vote-by-mail election, other structural underservings appear. There are 75 vacancies in rural United States Postal Service positions, which electoral advocates—such as GOTNV—point to as a reason for the shortcomings in the USPS's involvement in elections.

These barriers make consistent engagement difficult in predominantly Alaska Native communities. Even if voters stay engaged, there is a greater likelihood in these communities that a ballot will be rejected or received too long after election day. One reason predominantly Alaska Native communities have a higher turnover rate is increased difficulty in consistently casting a ballot.

Many of the communities we have analyzed face unique structural barriers to voting, in that precincts are entirely dependent on a chain of custody through the United States Post Office and air carriers. Furthermore, all transportation is subject to curtailing weather conditions. Unique geography and Tribal history shape political priorities specific to the cultures and economies of rural Alaska, and therefore shape a unique relationship between voters in these communities and the political system. In addition, the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945 did not marshal in the Alaska Native right to vote, and barriers to voting are still litigated today. Native language accessibility at the polls was only accommodated 11 years ago under the Voting Rights Act.

Predominantly Alaska Native communities have long embodied a pragmatic and nonpartisan brand of politics, focused around the unique priorities of rural Alaska, and this is seen in their voting behavior. Native voters disproportionately prioritize political attributes that are imperfectly linked to a partisan spectrum, meaning that they hold voting preferences that are impossible to fully express in partisan primaries.

Party engagement and involvement is also more complicated in these communities. For example, the cost and distance to attend party conventions are prohibitive, and as a result these organizations often do not reflect a statewide voting body. The additional effort for a Rural and Alaska Native candidate to break barriers for inclusion in party primaries can be reflected in the fact that four Alaska Natives ran for Congress—and two made the top five vote getters—in Alaska's first open primary under the new system.



Conclusion

There has been an ongoing conversation about the impact and implications of open primary election reform on many different constituencies and demographic groups, including indigenous people. However, this conversation has been underserved by robust academic study, ceding the ground to pundit hot takes and politically-motivated rumor mills.

We set out to address this gap by examining Alaska Native voter behavior under Alaska's new election system. There is no way to access records of individual Alaska Native voting behavior at the statewide level. But because there is a distinct group of predominantly Alaska Native communities in Alaska, we were able to compare the voter behavior in these communities to voter behavior in communities across the rest of the state. This was thanks to the Cast Vote Record, a newly public record that is a byproduct of Alaska's new ranked choice voting system, made accessible thanks to the Alaska Division of Elections.

We found that voters in predominantly Alaska Native communities were *by far* more likely to vote for a slate of candidates in the open primary that would have been impossible under the previous, partisan system. This indicates that Alaska Native voters were more likely than the average voter to support a combination of Republicans plus independents, Democrats, and/or third party candidates. *And* this suggests that Alaska Native voters may be especially well-served by an open primary model.

Our analysis of the data also confirmed what had already been well-established: that there are significant and long-standing barriers to voter education and voter participation that are unique to rural Alaska and these predominantly Alaska Native communities. However, we found no evidence to suggest that reform is contributing to these pre existing and historic challenges, and some indications that it is definitively *not* a contributing factor.

Going forward, we hope that the academic community will continue to study these trends across multiple election cycles in Alaska under this new, open-primary system, including in predominantly Alaska Native communities. This will be critical for validating and refining our collective understanding of the early trends that we have seen emerge out of the 2022 election cycle in Alaska. Most importantly, as this work continues we hope that researchers will continue to rely on the guidance and expertise of Alaska Native leaders who live in and represent these communities.

Future Research Opportunities

Alaska's Division of Elections has drawn attention¹⁹ and litigation²⁰ around the high rate of rejected ballots in the state's 2022 elections, especially in rural areas. Rejected ballots are becoming an increasingly important part of the conversation about electoral representation in rural Alaska. This topic would be a worthy area for further investigation:

- ❖ How do the 75 USPS vacancies in rural Native precincts feed into a systemic barrier?
- ❖ What should be done better within the elections and postal systems to address the systemic barrier?
- ❖ Were ballots from some racial or geographic groups rejected by the DOE at higher rates than from other groups?
- ❖ How can we classify rejected ballots?
- ❖ How are rejected ballots accounted for in the voter file?

This report analyzes just one election cycle. We are excited to understand how the observations from this report may change in future uses of open primaries and ranked-choice voting in Alaska:

- ❖ Does the observed incumbency preference from predominantly Alaska Native communities hold in future elections?
- ❖ Do the trends we have observed in 2022 hold under a presidential electorate?
- ❖ Across House Districts 36-40 in 2022, there was one competitive legislative election and one election with more than 2 candidates.
 - Do the observed trends hold if there are more competitive contests in a rural area? Does it matter if it's between two members of the same party?
 - How would the apparent impact of paid voter education efforts change if there was a competitive race with more than 2 candidates?

The focus of this report was on racial and geographical data. Other qualities of Alaska's populations could add more perspectives to the observations of this report:

- ❖ How does the observed voter behavior change with respect to other demographic variables (income, education, religiosity)?

There are also variations on this report's methodology that could bring additional information to the subject:

- ❖ How much did the observed trends differ between different predominantly Alaska Native communities? Between different regions?
- ❖ We classified all communities into a binary: "predominantly AK native" or "not". Could we use regression analysis or disaggregation to add nuance and gradation? Can this be done without compromising the geographical elements of our analysis?
- ❖ Is there any way to factor in the "Snowbird Effect" to this kind of analysis? Accounting for voters registered to vote in rural areas (affecting voting statistics there), but living outside of them (affecting census demographic statistics there).



Appendix

Table 3: List of precincts with a population of at least 40% American Indian or Alaska Native, alone or in combination with other races, per 2020 Decennial Census

36-106: Koyukuk	40-038: Shungnak	37-750: St. George Island	39-Question	05-840: Ouzinkie
39-918: Kotlik	39-912: Gambell	36-122: Minto	37-718: Ekwok	40-Absentee
38-830: Kwigillingok	39-938: Shishmaref	36-146: Shageluk	39-936: Shaktoolik	40-EarlyVoting
38-826: Kongiganak	38-812: Chefornak	40-034: Point Lay	01-680: Metlakatla	40-Question
38-818: Eek	38-822: Kasigluk	39-914: Golovin	36-010: Allakaket	38-810: Bethel No. 2
38-848: Quinhagak	39-910: Emmonak	39-942: St. Michael	40-022: Kobuk	37-748: South Naknek
38-842: Newtok	38-802: Akiak	36-174: Venetie	37-728: Lake Iliamna No. 2	36-110: Manley
38-856: Tuntutuliak	37-709: Chuathbaluk	37-719: Goodnews Bay	02-725: Hyدابurg	39-926: Nome No. 2
37-731: Lower Kalskag	36-086: Holy Cross	37-730: Levelock	37-746: Sleetmute	37-744: Sand Point
38-846: Nunapitchuk	37-732: Manokotak	39-952: White Mountain	03-340: Klukwan	37-714: Dillingham
39-930: Pilot Station	40-040: Wainwright	36-098: Kaltag	37-742: Port Heiden	37-713: Crooked Creek
39-934: Scammon Bay	36-022: Beaver	36-090: Hughes	37-756: Tyonek	39-924: Nome No. 1
40-036: Selawik	39-940: St. Mary's	39-908: Elim	36-042: Circle	40-010: Browerville
38-828: Kwethluk	39-900: Alakanuk	39-946: Teller	02-730: Kake	05-870: Tatitlek
40-012: Buckland	40-016: Kaktovik	36-142: Ruby	02-700: Angoon	02-720: Hoonah
38-813: Chevak	40-020: Kivalina	37-758: Upper Kalskag	05-835: Old Harbor	40-008: Utqiagvik
39-932: Savoonga	36-018: Arctic Village	39-902: Brevig Mission	36-130: Nikolai	36-114: Mcgrath
39-921: Marshall	38-838: Napakiak	40-006: Atkasuk	39-948: Unalakleet	37-734: Naknek
38-858: Tununak	40-014: Deering	36-066: Fort Yukon	37-708: Chignik	40-030: Nuiqsut
38-824: Kipnuk	38-800: Akiachak	37-752: St. Paul Island	37-726: Lake Iliamna No. 1	05-845: Port Lions
40-028: Noorvik	39-906: Diomedea	40-032: Point Hope	36-162: Tanana	37-740: Pedro Bay
39-928: Nunam Iqua	38-836: Mekoryuk	36-138: Nulato	01-660: Saxman	37-738: Nondalton
39-916: Hooper Bay	36-094: Huslia	39-950: Wales	36-118: Mentasta	02-785: Yakutat
36-082: Grayling	39-920: Koyuk	40-002: Ambler	37-707: Aniak	37-Absentee
38-806: Atmautluak	37-736: New Stuyahok	36-166: Tetlin	37-702: Aleknagik	37-EarlyVoting
38-844: Nightmute	39-922: Mountain Village	38-Absentee	38-808: Bethel No. 1	37-Question
38-840: Napaskiak	36-014: Anvik	38-EarlyVoting	36-134: Northway	37-720: King Cove
38-852: Toksook Bay	37-754: Togiak	38-Question	40-024: Kotzebue	36-070: Gakona
39-931: Russian Mission	39-944: Stebbins	37-710: Clark's Point	37-716: Egegik	02-740: Klawock
38-854: Tuluksak	40-026: Noatak	39-Absentee	36-074: Galena	36-046: Copper Center
37-724: Koliganek	40-018: Kiana	39-EarlyVoting	05-815: Kodiak Island South	

Endnotes

1. <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/ranked-choice-voting-lowers-voter-turnout>
2. <https://alaskapublic.org/2022/09/13/mary-peltola-makes-history-as-first-alaska-native-person-sworn-into-congress/>
3. https://www.newsminer.com/news/local_news/teacher-maxine-dibert-becomes-a-new-legislator-and-student/article_e3e5a0ec-8156-11ed-ac25-3fccba7e8d28.html
4. <https://fairvote.org/alaskas-new-election-system-and-alaska-natives/>
5. <https://www.sightline.org/2023/05/22/a-fairer-election-system-in-alaska-helped-more-independents-win-office/>
6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/08/08/dc-ranked-choice-ballot-measure-open-primaries-lawsuit/>
7. <https://alaskabeacon.com/briefs/two-rural-alaska-communities-failed-to-open-polling-places-on-election-day/>
8. <https://www.adn.com/politics/2022/09/02/alaskas-election-results-are-certified-with-some-ballots-left-uncounted/>
9. <https://www.elections.alaska.gov/doc/forms/H42.pdf>
10. Candidates could also run a write-in campaign. Lisa Murkowski famously won Alaska's U.S. Senate race in 2010 as a write-in candidate. However, these candidates do not show up on the general election ballot and it is exceedingly rare that write-in candidates at the state and federal level are competitive.
11. The Republican primary ballot typically featured a greater number of competitive contests, especially for statewide seats, so often voters were incentivized to choose the Republican ballot to participate in contested races.
12. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/08/us/politics/murkowski-tshibaka-alaska-senate.html>
13. <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/apportionment/population-density-data-table.pdf>
14. <https://www.uaf.edu/anlc/languages-move/languages.php>
15. <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/3889/3889>
16. As mentioned in the [Incomplete Voting Qualitative Context](#)
17. <https://alaskabeacon.com/briefs/two-rural-alaska-communities-failed-to-open-polling-places-on-election-day/>
18. <https://www.adn.com/politics/2022/09/02/alaskas-election-results-are-certified-with-some-ballots-left-uncounted/>
19. <https://alaskapublic.org/2022/06/29/alaska-rejected-more-than-7500-ballots-in-special-primary-election-heres-why/>
20. <https://www.ktoo.org/2022/08/25/civil-rights-groups-sue-state-over-ballots-rejected-in-alaskas-mail-in-primary/>