



The Election Isn't Over Until Rural Alaska Sings
Media Release
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Anchorage - Three words swing the balance of this election cycle for Alaska: Rural, Early, and Absentee.

While 228,242 Alaskans cast their votes on Election Day alone (the "100% of precincts reporting" refers to these in-person votes), there are as many as 50,000 ballots yet to be counted by the State Division of Elections in the coming days and weeks, up to 18% of all votes cast.

The number of outstanding ballots – many of which were cast by rural, Alaska Native voters – are certainly enough to impact every office or initiative outcome, by strengthening or weakening how they did on the whole, these outstanding ballots are instrumental in actually determining the final outcome in either direction for the gubernatorial race (where approximately 3,000 votes separate candidates) and the senate race (where approximately 8,000 votes separate the candidates).

Prior to this year, the majority of rural Alaskans had 14 less days and 128 less sites than urban Alaskans to cast absentee-in-person ballots. As a result, Alaska Natives and others living in rural Alaska have had significantly less voting equality in the most fundamental democratic process of this country.

However, this year, through an unprecedented, massive effort by the statewide Get Out The Native Vote (GOTNV) partners and the elbow grease of the Alaska Federation of Natives and the ANCSA Regional Association, 128 new rural, absentee-in-person sites were established, manned by Absentee Voting Officials (AVOs) who made it a priority to learn a complicated voting process in a few short months. The State DOE was then able to help prepare the AVOs in advance of the primaries, and the Alaska Native Policy Center at First Alaskans Institute offered a more detailed webinar training before the early voting opened to reinforce and increase the AVO's comfort level and expertise, troubleshoot issues, and answer questions to help ensure more equitable access.

What we know for sure is that this year's effort resulted in more attention, excitement and turnout for rural, Alaska Native voters, in absentee-in-person voting as well as other voting methods. To what extent, we will not know until every single vote is counted.

Alaskans are very familiar with the unfairness and dismissive nature of calling an election before all votes are counted (like what happens to Alaskans in every US Presidential election). In the case of rural Alaska, to do so reinforces the discriminatory impact that efforts like GOTNV are working hard to countermand.

For the Native community to expend time, energy and financial resources to ensure rural and Native voters have equitable access to voting in Alaska raises an important question about equality and fairness when some people have to pay to have equal access to voting while others get it as a matter of right. As we work to address these types of systemic and institutional inequities that are linked to a lack of voting

infrastructure, antiquated equipment, geographic challenges, and discriminatory disenfranchisement, we are also having to double time the effort to empower Native and rural voters to overcome these barriers.

People are creatures of habit and it will take multiple cycles of building this equity up to help alleviate the entrenched imbalance of the system and those who seek to nullify or negate the rural and Alaska Native vote. When Alaska Natives turn out to vote each ballot adds to a swelling tide to restore equity, giving the community the ability to better elect people who represent its interests and to hold voting officials and politicians accountable.

The election isn't over until "rural Alaska sings," a sentiment shared by an Alaska Native voter on Facebook yesterday. This simple truth is one that all Alaskans must remember, embrace as another unique and cool facet of Alaskan life, and celebrate as a part of our diverse and inclusive society, especially by those running for office.

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