

The Third Way in Alaska: A History and Why

A case for Ranked Choice by a lifelong third-party member

By Jonathan Powell-Mark

My primary political experience as an Alaskan has been aligned with parties most of the country consider 'fringe' or commonly in close races- a 'wasted vote'.

Except I live in a state where the fringe gets to win, a state which chose to change to a method of voting that accepts the fringe, and a state that chose to keep that contentious method of voting even when the US president campaigned against it.

"The Wonderful People of Alaska desperately want to restore Free, Fair, and Honest Elections in their Great State, and get rid of their disastrous, and very fraudulent, 'Ranked-Choice Voting'" -Donald J Trump, Twitter (now X)

So, I'm a Libertarian now, but my political journey starts with the Alaskan Independence Party.

In 1986, when I was two years old.

My father was a founding member of the party, he needed someone to watch me so he could go to some show with my mother. So Joe Vogler used me as a prop for the classic plan of 'kissing babies and shaking hands' for about 3 hours.

Joe won over 5% of the vote in the governor's race that year- getting his minority party ballot access without the need for the petition process that used to be used to get anyone on the ballot.

The AIP won the governorship in 1990 by endorsing Wally Hickel, who was having problems with the Republican Party at the time. This is a common theme in Alaskan politics as well- independent voters and the third parties have a distinct preference for main party candidates who couldn't make the cut in closed party primaries.

Most people think it was Lisa Murkowski's write-in upset in 2010 against Joe Miller that precipitated ranked-choice voting and open primaries. I think it stretches all the way back to that 1990 race and the AIP taking one for the team and putting up a candidate that didn't actually endorse their positions. But that third party tendency to prop up candidates comes back later.

The 2010 US Senate race was notable because a write-in candidate won. Lisa Murkowski was appointed by her father and long-time senator turned governor Frank Murkowski. Nobody liked that nepotism, especially not the Alaska Republican Party. They made sure she didn't win her primary. But Lisa did have moderate appeal compared to Joe Miller, and she was already

proving as adept as her father at getting Alaskans that coveted federal pork-barrel. The Democrats basically gave up the fight for two elections to give her a shot and she ran with it.

By the time Joe Miller ran as a Libertarian on the ticket in 2016, I was a registered voter of the party. I wasn't really happy with Joe Miller but I voted for him anyway. He fails at least part of the party meme- 'I support the right of gay married couples to defend their marijuana gardens with AK-47s' but he got the best historical percentage for the Libertarian party in any Senate race- over 29%. And similarly secured the Libertarians guaranteed ballot access in the future.

Before open primaries and ranked choice general elections, the political primary landscape looked like this: you voted on the Republican primary ballot or the Everyone Else ballot (technically it was called the Democratic/Combined). The top Republican on their ballot advanced to the general, and the top result of each party on the combined ballot won their party's spot on the ballot. Except if the state party's leadership committee and the winner gave the seat to someone else. That's how Joe Miller got a (L) next to his name in 2016 after appearing on the wrong primary ballot for that to happen organically.

Bill Walker won the governorship as an independent. He sure isn't popular enough to do that anymore- he's the one who started the appropriation of the dividend. But we have to note his third way success in any historical review of the third way in Alaska.

In 2020, rather than running their own candidate for US Senate the Alaska Democratic Party endorsed Independent Al Gross which got them 41% of the vote- far better results than democrats get in years with third-way politicians actually in the race. They've realized something the Republicans haven't- the biggest party in Alaska is actually non-aligned.

The third way and independent candidates have a better history in the Alaska Legislature. My home region of Fairbanks has sent two Libertarians to the state house- Dick Randolph and Ken Fanning. Dick Randolph was quite important in the repeal of Alaska's old income tax during his run. Kenai also elected Andre Marrou as a Libertarian. Dan Ortiz won in 2014 before Ranked Choice. Now we have a few since ranked choice.

When you count Lisa's 2010 win as an independent win and not for the party that hates her but dealt with her since 2010, the average over the last 10 US Senate races is as follows:
Republicans 57%, Democrats 23%, Other 20%

When you get to the governor's race, it gets less secure for the party in power. Republicans 44%, Democrats 35%, Other 21%. This is why hardline Republicans hate ranked choice voting. Which is actually the wrong perspective to have on it.

Why?

The reality of the situation is, when the Republican party breaks down internally the rest of Alaska might want the second choice in the internal party race. The third parties and

independents will take Republican 'trash' and run with it with or without open primaries or ranked-choice.

We did and technically voted for a separatist party to run the state in 1990 because Wally Hicel was popular enough to gloss over the fringe party he ran under. The Libertarians ran on Joe Miller's republican vote-splitting to a party record result in a Senate race. Someone will do it for Lisa if it goes back to the way it was and the Republicans primary her.

Third party strength in Alaska doesn't actually hurt Republican prospects. Republican prospects hurt Republican prospects.

Kelly Tshibaka may have grown up around here- but the AIP crowd smelled 20 years of choosing to live outside- in Washington DC of all places- on her. If she had earned her law degree and came back to Alaska, maybe we could have seen eye to eye.

She worked for the spooks at ODNI- no Libertarian likes that. You don't even want to know what the AIP guys thought of the US intelligence community. If you know the Joe Vogler conspiracy theories you already know the answer and if you don't and want to know- go have fun looking it up.

But when I'm not thinking like a libertarian I go back to my AIP roots- Outsiders bad, Outside stinks and has too many people. Why did you choose to live there? The Corrupt bastards club at least flew back on the federal dime every chance they got. They never forgot where home was.

I voted for Ted Stevens even when he was convicted. I voted for Don Young until he died. This was despite the fact I didn't agree with their politics all the time. I honestly thought they were doing the best for Alaskans they could.

Can't say that for Kelly Tshibaka.

Can't really say that for Ohio Dan Sullivan either.

What's his main contribution to the potential of the Alaskan economy recently? Data centers. Electricity sucking, water polluting Data centers.

That idea is polling real well /end sarcasm

Sure, he's bringing in more soldiers to remote duty stations too. And soldiers find bars and contribute to the local economy and local headaches. The Libertarian in me doesn't really want the level of military readiness the USA tends to go for. Oh and the reason that the US would want to staff those duty stations in Alaska closed since the Cold War is because we're not so friendly with Russia right now and they are planning to fight that battle here again someday..... Maybe. That prospect for Alaska is what got the Alaska Independence Party its popularity in the

first place. The Cold War fears that the Outsiders are just using us as a buffer state to keep the real citizens safe.

Republicans brought Ranked Choice on themselves with questionable candidates, but the real lesson is Alaskan Republicans can pick winners consistently when they pick what Alaskans want, not what the Republican National Convention wants.

Republicans think they want to go back to the way it was before.

Before they lost in 1990 to a party that wanted Alaska to leave the United States. Before they lost to a write-in candidate that stunk of nepotism. Before they let the Libertarians outperform Democrats in a record-breaking race because of internal bickering. Before they lost to an independent who screwed us out of our 'statutory PFD'.

The way it was didn't actually go better for Republicans or Alaskans. I can't say the way it's going is better for Republicans, but I can safely say it's better for Alaskans in my opinion.

You guys made the AIP feel so bad about elections that they gave up last year. Right when we might need them again. Shame on you.

PS: The USA is our source for Spam and Pilot Bread. That's the main reason I'm an Alaskan protectionist and Libertarian now, not a separatist like my father. I have practical concerns he never could explain the answer to. But just because Alaskans are Americans doesn't mean I trust Outsiders or want to pick between their bad choices all the time. You AIP refugees should reform as the Alaskan Protectionist Party- that's a name that's not confusing to 'independent voters'. You'd be my second choice on any ballot.