



Alaska: Embodying “We the People”

How Alaska’s Ballot Measure 2 is Increasing Bipartisanship, Heightening Competition, and Changing American Democracy for the Better

By Rachel Madison, August 10, 2021

We’ve heard it before and I’ll say it again: recently, our democracy has failed us.

In the past year alone, Americans have experienced it all. We witnessed incidents of abusive brutality by those meant to protect and autocratic rulers who incited doubt about the integrity of our electoral processes. We became subject to the overwhelming presence of dark money in politics and backdoor ‘quid pro quo’ deals. Lastly, we watched in horror as a Capitol riot threatened our nation’s core values.

Through it all, one thing became painfully clear: American politics are deteriorating at the cost of citizens.

Over the past decade, our nation’s policies have evolved to protect, benefit, and represent the very people who are elected to represent us.

In short, our country, along with a portion of its elected officials, has lost sight of the “we” in “We the People”.

How did this come about? And what must we do to fix it?

Luckily, American political innovation has led to a wave of recent [initiatives](#) that seek to enhance our democracy, not diminish it. Within these measures, citizens work to rectify our systemic injustices and build a representational system that will better serve all Americans, both in the present and future.

For one of these success stories, we turn to the Northern state of Alaska, which recently passed an ambitious ballot initiative that sought to decrease partisanship, rectify state gridlock, and forever change its voting process.

So far, it's doing just that.

In November of 2020, the State of Alaska approved [Ballot Measure 2, or the Top-Four-Ranked-Choice Voting and Campaign Finance Laws Initiative](#). This bill held three primary objectives: reduce partisanship by implementing an open top-four primary system, end dark money in politics through increased disclosure practices, and employ ranked-choice voting to amplify the true will of voters.

“Ballot Measure 2 included three commonsense election reforms to reduce partisanship and elect leadership committed to moving our state forward after years of gridlock,” said former Independent State Representative [Jason Grenn](#) in an email correspondence in May.

Grenn, the Executive Director of [Alaskan's for Better Elections](#), served as chairperson for the initiative. “Our politics have become hyper-partisan with two sides fighting for power rather than working on solutions,” Grenn explains. “At the same time, our political system requires broad bipartisan support by design.”

“We needed an election system that encourages politicians to work for voters — not parties.”

Independents, like himself, helped move the state forward through bipartisan efforts and dialogues, Grenn says. “Once you have a third side, the fundamentals change...suddenly there is a group inside the legislature that can convene something new, who can innovate.”

And innovate they did.

Ballot Measure 2 takes direct action to overcome common flaws in election systems that threaten the power and impact of the American people. Some of these issues include the spoiler effect, vote splitting, and dark money influence, all of which are possible in the plurality, winner-takes-all and majority-winner processes that form the baseline of U.S. presidential, state and district elections.

The [spoiler effect](#) can occur in any plurality-based system when more than two viable candidates run in a single election. This happens because of [vote splitting](#), in which a party’s base support is fractured among similar competing candidates, drastically reducing the odds of either winning against a common opponent.

The most notable example of this was the [2000 election](#) between Republican candidate George Bush, Vice President Al Gore, and Green Party candidate Ralph Nadar. In this divided election, Gore failed to secure sufficient votes to surpass Bush. Had the liberal platform not been divided, however, and Nadar’s votes been allotted to Gore (likely the voter’s next-best option), the vice president would have won the election.

A similar scenario happened in 2016, when many liberals voted for Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson, along with other independents, instead of

Democrat Hillary Clinton. Had Johnson's [4.5 million](#) votes been allotted to Clinton, she, like Gore 16 years before, would have won the election, beating Donald Trump.

In both cases, and countless others across the country, the spoiler effect led to outcomes in which the winning candidate actually had the least foundational support, defying the very concept of democracy itself.

Ranked-choice and open-four-primary voting would overcome these issues.

“Under an open primary, all eligible voters receive a single ballot listing every candidate for each office, regardless of party,” Grenn describes in an open letter titled “[Ballot Measure 2 Would Improve Our Election Process by Knocking Down Barriers to Competition of Ideas](#),” published in Alaska-based SitNews in October.

“The top four vote-getters for each office advance to the general election, where voters can rank the candidates in order of their preference. The winner in the general election is the first candidate to win a majority — more than 50 percent — of the votes cast,” he writes.

This top-four, ranked-choice system eliminates the possibility of vote splitting and spoilers because citizens rank candidates by preference. This ensures that, by voting for their top choice, they will not end up unwillingly electing their last.

Ballot Measure 2 also works to [terminate “dark money” funding](#) through enhancing election transparency.

Anonymous campaign contributions, often from special interests, corrupt democratic elections by violating voters' rights to transparency. Their undeserving influence thus drowns out the voices of everyday Alaskans participating in their elections fairly.

A 2016 Brennan Center [report](#) found that anonymous funding is especially prevalent in Alaska, where non-transparent and secret campaign spending rose from 6% in 2004 to over 60% by 2014. That's a ten fold increase in just ten years.

Under Ballot Measure 2, politicians will no longer be able to receive unlimited secret funds from wealthy interests. The bill requires disclosure of contributions over \$2,000 and contributions from any group with more than 50% of its funding coming from outside of Alaska.

"Our current system isn't working," Grenn says in response to the question of why citizen ballot initiatives are so necessary.

"We want elections where all eligible voters can participate in our democracy, and that elects winners with the broadest possible support from the community. Ballot Measure two," he concluded, "offers a practical set of reforms to give voters more choice, more voice and more power."

This citizen initiative was ultimately signed by more than 40,000 Alaskans across all districts, far surpassing minimum signature requirements to make the ballot.

It officially [passed](#) on November 3, 2020.

I asked Grenn about how he thinks they were able to achieve such great success.

“We have been working with the State of Alaska, stakeholders from around the state, and many elections experts from around the country, to defend, educate, and implement the policies.”

He then added that the most important aspect was minimizing politicization.

“During the campaign, we were aggressively nonpartisan and bipartisan from our staff to every communication and endorsement we released,” he explains. “Improving democracy is not something that can be owned by one party or the other, but rather by the voters as a whole.”

This is especially important in a place like Alaska, where a around [one third](#) of the population doesn’t affiliate with either Republican or Democratic parties.

While this recent win is cause for celebration, the fight for just elections is far from over.

Organizations like Alaskans for Better Elections must keep active to ensure maintained implementation of the bills they work so hard to pass. This involves proactive educational efforts, combating recent initiatives aiming to [restrict voting access](#), and fighting lawsuits by those who benefitted from the old system.

Despite inevitable pushback, Grenn remains hopeful.

“Watching my neighbors and fellow Alaskans continually rise up when they see an injustice and get involved when they see something that can be improved – not for themselves but those around them — gives me hope,” he says.

This is all made possible by citizen-led ballot initiatives. Alaska is one of the [27 states](#) that currently allows them.

“I am also hopeful because I know that our nation’s founders designed our country to be stronger than this. Over and over again, I see so many great leaders who will put others first over their selfishness any day. We need to find more of those leaders.”

As Alaska’s Ballot Measure 2 has demonstrated, meaningful grassroots change is possible. It is our duty, as citizens, lawmakers, representatives, and voters to fight for voting systems that represent “We the People of the United States”, not only “we the few people who govern it”.

We must, therefore, work together to enact meaningful change as many, like those Alaskans and countless others across the country, have done. Take action to learn about Alaska’s other ballot initiatives and those in your own state through our [democracy website](#).

As Representative Grenn stated so powerfully in our interview, living in any democracy, however challenged, is a gift:

“As Americans, we can all find ways to be part of the solution.”