
The character of Alaska’s elections have changed a great deal since statehood, according to a new study published by the University’s Institute of Social and Economic Research. These changes have resulted in a movement from unity in the control of statewide and legislative offices to increasing fragmentation of control.

The study, entitled Alaska’s Elections, 1958-1984, by Thomas A. Morehouse, examines Alaska’s elections beginning with statehood and traces them, their character, and outcomes in relation to the state’s changing demography, campaign methods and election rules.

More Like the Lower U.S.

The unified leadership begun in 1958 under the Democrats (the statehood party) gave way within a decade to a more fragmented and volatile pattern of control of statewide and legislative offices. In the 1970s and 80s, Alaska’s whole electoral pattern became increasingly complex. And as Alaska’s electoral politics have changed, they have become more like those of the other states. Some of the sources of these changes may be found in Alaska’s changing population characteristics. For example, from 1960 to 1980, the ratio of men to women in Alaska evened out somewhat; the age structure became more balanced; and Alaskans became a less transient, more settled people. At the same time, the traditional Alaska small town “friends and neighbors” politics persist, though in diminished form.

Changing Election Campaigns

Three developments have affected campaign methods in Alaska since statehood. First has been the growth of the population and its continued and increasing concentration in and around Anchorage and Fairbanks. Second has been the use of new communications technology and methods, including satellite television, that allows communication with even the most remote parts of the state. Third has been real increases from 200 to 400 percent in the cost of state legislative election campaigns from 1974 to 1984. These changes have meant that impersonal, professionally produced television appeals have increasingly replaced personal contact by candidates for political office, especially in the larger Anchorage and Fairbanks electoral “markets.” Further, these expensive media-centered campaigns are increasingly financed by organized special interests instead of individual contributors acting independently.

Weakening Political Parties

A further development in Alaska that has changed the way candidates communicate with voters has been the continued erosion of the major political party organizations. In Alaska, as elsewhere, weak political parties have resulted in “party-less” campaigning—elections in which individual candidates form personal campaign organizations and make individual appeals, often failing to identify themselves with either major party in their campaign advertising.

Political parties in Alaska have thus become increasingly weak organizers of voters, candidates, and election campaigns. Party weakness in Alaska has also been aggravated by the state’s small population and a corresponding emphasis on candidates’ personalities and their individual appeals to voters. Voter party loyalties are slight or nonexistent. A majority of Alaska voters continues to register as independents and nonparticipants.

Ticket-splitting and Incumbency

Weak party ties are reflected in a widespread and growing tendency toward split-ticket voting—a now familiar pattern throughout the United States. Reinforcing the split ticket vote has been the power of the incumbency. State legislators in particular enjoy lengthening tenure in office, and voters are increasingly inclined to re-elect incumbents, regardless of party. The power of the incumbency is not yet as strong in Alaska as in most other states, but it is growing.

Decreasing Influence of National and State Elections

With fading parties and party loyalties, national electoral trends have decreasing influence on state elections, and similarly, statewide elections have little effect on legislative and other elections within the
state. This too increases Alaska's similarities to the states generally. Neither a president's nor a governor's coat-tails seem sufficiently long to consistently pull other party candidates into supporting offices.

As candidates have become increasingly detached from party organization and programs, so also have electoral races become more insulated from one another. Voters in Alaska, like those elsewhere, tend to vote for individual candidates, not for parties or party programs.

Interparty Competition

Thus, in Alaska as elsewhere, interparty competition does not necessarily refer to vigorous contention between a majority party and its opposition party. Increasingly, it means merely that a fluid and shifting electorate has divided its votes over time in ways that maintain the viability of candidates wearing either party's label. Such "competition" does not necessarily stimulate turnout, as low participation rates in national and other state elections indicate. It is instead the intensity of individual races, the temporary salience of electorally related issues, and the sense of civic duty that motivate voters to go to the polls.

Controversial Issues Fuel Large Turnouts

Recent high turnout rates in Alaska can, in part, be attributed to increases in perceived stakes in elections that have involved unusually controversial issues, including subsistence preference laws, capital move, and the spending of billions of dollars in petroleum revenues. These issues have also aggravated Alaska's traditional regional divisions.

Divided Party Government

One of the most critical outcomes of the electoral dynamics summarized above is the growing incidence of divided party government. As often as not, governors confront legislatures controlled in part or in whole by opposition parties or unfriendly coalitions, and policy leadership and direction become obscured in complex legislative and executive gaming, bargaining, and conflict. This contrasts sharply with the elusive ideal of unified government, which envisions a governor and legislature from the same party cooperatively developing policies consistent with their party's program and then standing before the electorate to account for their collective decisions.

A further departure from the ideal of unified government occurred in Alaska in the early 1980s, when cross-party coalitions formed in both houses of the legislature. This most recent political adaptation occurred largely as a product of interregional and interfactional conflict over the issues of saving, spending, and distributing Alaska's petroleum windfall.