Political Development of Alaska Natives


Introduction
During the 20-year period from Alaska statehood in 1959 to 1980, while the U.S. and Alaska were passing into a new political generation, dynamic forces of change were also at work among Alaska’s Native populations. Native organizations and movements developed and evolved through which Alaska’s Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts were able to achieve new levels of self-government—levels hitherto unrealized since Alaska became a U.S. possession. How, why, and to what extent this development occurred is the subject of this new book by University of Alaska political science professors Gerald A. McBeath and Thomas A. Morehouse.

Basically, the book assesses the modern evolution of Alaska Native self-government in the context of American politics. It does this by tracing changes in rural Native Alaska from statehood in 1959 to 1980, a period of great social and economic change in Alaska. In assessing Native self-government, the authors used the following measures:

- The development of Native political, social, and economic structures which pursue Native goals.
- Increased Native participation in local, state, and federal government programs affecting them, and Native influence on program objectives.
- Development of economic security and a capability to protect Native cultural and environmental values.
- Altered Native perceptions of their control over individual and community life.

Although its central theme is self-government of Alaska Natives, the book also devotes attention to three subsidiary themes: (1) the development of Native leadership, (2) the development of the Native land claims movement in Alaska, and (3) the formation and experiences of the North Slope Borough, the only Native-controlled regional government in the United States operating under a state’s constitution and laws. The authors used the North Slope Borough as a limiting case study, for it is currently the most advanced form of regional self-government for Alaska Natives.

However, regional government is not the only way that the Natives can realize self-government. For example, the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 and the national antipoverty campaign of the 1960s provided other vehicles through which Native self-government could be realized—Native regional and village corporations, regional nonprofit associations, Native-controlled school districts, etc. What the authors attempt to show is the origin and evolution of movements and organizations through which Alaska Natives in the 1960s and 1970s were able to achieve some measure of self-government, compared to the absence of such vehicles in previous times.

Organizational Development and Adaptation
Within a decade of statehood, a dozen Native regional associations had formed to protect Native interests in land and had begun to work together in a statewide federation. During the land claims movement, these associations became multifunctional organizations with a broad range of interests.

After attaining the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, these socio-political-economic associations began to divide on the basis of function. ANCSA provided for the formation of twelve in-state Native regional profit corporations and more than 200
village profit corporations. As these Native regional corporations were formed, they in turn helped the villages form their own corporations.

These and other such Native-controlled organizations have undergone explosive development over the past 20 years. Among the major ones are:

The Native Corporations. While economic in form and purpose, the Native regional corporations have also gained new political influence in their regions. They control known and potential resources that are of overwhelming importance to their communities. Thus, the regional corporation has become the premier political organization in nearly all Native regions of the state.

The Nonprofit Associations after ANCSA. Although want of funds endangered their existence after passage of ANCSA, the parent Native associations gained new life when the U.S. Government decentralized administration of Indian programs and allowed the associations to contract directly for federal Indian funds. Also, many of the associations have received grants or other financial help from federal and state agencies, private organizations, and even Native regional profit corporations. These developments have enabled the associations to operate health and social service programs in their regions and exercise political roles as quasi-governments.

REAA. The relatively new Regional Education Attendance Area (REAA) is another Native-controlled sociopolitical structure which commands significant resources and exercises some political functions in Native regions of the Unorganized Borough. Essentially, the twenty-one REAA’s control the public school programs within their regions, but they depend on the state and, to a lesser extent, on the federal government for all of their funding.

The North Slope Borough and Arctic Slope Regional Corporation. The North Slope Natives formed the first Native-controlled (nontribal), regional government in the United States, the North Slope Borough, which is also one of the nation’s richest municipalities. Formation of this borough has resulted in increased Native power at the regional level, and its prospects would be favorable were it not for the limited or uncertain life of the oil-revenue-based economy on which the borough heavily depends. Establishing an economy that will remain viable after the oil is gone presents the borough with its greatest long-term challenge.

Although overshadowed by the North Slope Borough, the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, through interlocking relationships with borough administrators and legislators, is the borough’s partner in Inupiat self-government. Other regional corporations have developed great influence within their regions as well, such as NANA, in collaboration with Maeneluk, the regional nonprofit association.

The Unorganized Borough. Most rural Alaska Natives still reside in the Unorganized Borough. The benefits of borough incorporation are control over education, resource development, and social change in the region. However, the principal costs, taxation and the prospect of jurisdictional conflict among organizations within any given region, seem to outweigh the benefits in the eyes of most rural Native leaders, at least for the near future.

In the Unorganized Borough, REAA’s funded by the state appear to give Natives greater control over education than they have had previously and without having to pay for it locally. And in most areas of the Unorganized Borough, there has not yet been any major development of nonrenewable resources that would either necessitate a strong regional government organization or provide the taxes to support it.

Another factor that may eventually bring some additional form of regional government development in rural Alaska is the growing oil-revenue surpluses of the state. Boroughs may be perceived and eventually used as vehicles for the distribution of state oil wealth to local areas in both urban and rural Alaska.

* * *

In summary, organizational development has burgeoned in rural Native communities since Alaska statehood. These organizations are Native controlled, and they pursue Native goals. They represent a regionalization and advancement of Native politics and social life that was unimaginable before statehood.

Native Participation in Governmental Programs: Organizational and Individual

Organizational Participation. For much of their history, Alaska Natives have been treated as wards of the federal government and second-class citizens. However, since the beginnings of the land claims movement, there has occurred a great change in direction and intensity of Native group participation. These changes were partly inspired by radical departures from paternalism during the antipoverty campaign of the 1960s and more directly caused by the organization and mobilization of Native leaders and groups to settle land claims. ANCSA did not extinguish all obligations of the federal government to Alaska Natives, but it did engineer a new method of program administration emphasizing self-determination.
The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (PL 93-638) pushed federal paternalism closer to an end. Now, “tribal groups” (any Alaska Native village or regional association) can contract directly for program funds to provide health, education, and social services. Even more significant, regional Native associations can contract for grants that are given on a nondiscriminatory basis, such as in housing and economic development.

Alaska Native organizations have had somewhat less opportunity to participate in state programs. One significant exception noted above was state decentralization of education to RAA’s in the Unorganized Borough. This has permitted homogeneous Native regions to have and control their own school districts without any direct cost to the Native regions concerned.

At the statewide level, however, Natives have been disadvantaged, if only because they are a minority of the state’s population; in 1980, Natives are still twice as likely to reside in rural areas as in cities. However, a “bush caucus” has operated in the state legislature and has developed coalitions with other areas, enabling it to hold its own in state policy matters of special concern to Native interests. When the state legislature is reapportioned after the 1980 census, however, this caucus may lose power to the growing urban areas of the state, particularly to Anchorage.

Thus, participation of Native organizations in local, state, and federal programs has increased. Many federal and state service programs have been decentralized and are now administered at the regional level in rural Alaska by Native associations that have contracted with government agencies to supply health, education, and other social services. However, we should note that these Native associations lack secure resources to this day.

Individual Participation and Native Leadership. As Native leadership has gradually expanded during the past 20 years, the character of leadership has undergone subtle changes. Current Native leaders are better educated, younger, and likely to be more adapted culturally than any previous group. They participate actively in program administration and design and are influential in regional and statewide politics.

Most villagers, on the other hand, seem to have been left behind. For the most part, they have not actively participated in the emerging western style organizations (although many passively participate). The increasing number of such organizations means there is a serious undersupply of active organizational members. Overall increase in Native public participation has not kept up with the growth of organizations and is thus spread very thin.

Economic Security and the Protection of Native Values

ANC SA awarded Alaska Natives close to $1 billion and 44 million acres, promising them an economic opportunity not previously imagined. While inflation has since devalued the monetary part of the settlement, the oil and gas discovery at Prudhoe Bay, resulting oil pipeline construction, and the U.S. energy crisis have substantially increased the value of the land settlement in many parts of rural Alaska. However, delays in obtaining title to these lands may continue to retard Native land and resource development.

Native profit corporations have been the chief vehicle for developing economic security in Native communities. However, some Native regional corporations have so far failed to make profits, and a few have suffered substantial losses; some of the smaller village corporations have been especially vulnerable to financial difficulty.

ANC SA has not made Natives rich and secure, nor is it likely to do so, but it has materially improved the outlook for Native communities which earlier lacked political influence, capital, or jobs. Most rural Alaskans are better off today than they were 20 years ago, in part because of ANCSA. But only the North Slope Inupiat have a “full-employment” community; this has resulted primarily from the borough government’s power to draw on the Prudhoe Bay tax base.

The outlook for the land claims settlement is not entirely auspicious. The Native corporations will hold land and cash in trust for Native shareholders who cannot sell their shares of stock until the 1990s. After that time, the Native corporations will have to compete with large non-Native corporations which have come to increasingly dominate the capital sector in Alaska. Most important, should the Native corporation stockholders support selling their land for short-term capital gains, it might go on the open market to be sold to the highest bidder. If Alaska Natives are to preserve and expand the value of their capital in land, they must now learn to play an entirely new game.

An ambivalent relationship exists between development of economic security and the protection of Native values in their culture and environment.
The corporations possess resources that can be used to protect subsistence values—aboriginal hunting and fishing and the values, norms, and rituals that go with them. Employment in the borough capital improvements program on the North Slope has provided subsistence hunters with the incomes, for instance, to buy new equipment to outfit a whaling crew. But the relationship between economic development for security and the protection of Native values is not in the longer run a direct and positive one: land and resource development in Native areas will ultimately conflict with subsistence resources, lifestyles, and environmental protection. This conflict has already appeared in relations between borough villages and regional corporation on the North Slope.

Native Perceptions of Self and Community Control

Native members of village and regional corporations can now influence the direction of investment and corporation policy in their area. Proxy battles and shareholder participation provide some evidence of this development, as does the increased pattern of Native political participation in local, state, and national elections since statehood. There also seems to have been impressive gains among Native leaders in self-confidence and in optimism about the future. As former Mayor Eben Hopson of the North Slope Borough expressed it:

Local government is, after all, the political foundation of America and is a natural result of frontier resource development. Local government in rural Alaska will be one sure lasting benefit of our national exploitation of Alaska's nonrenewable resources.

Resource exploitation in the north may be a condition of self-government for Alaska Natives elsewhere in the state as well as for the Inupiat of the North Slope. But Native leaders know that the benefits and costs of northern development are not always in balance or justly distributed. Their continuing challenge is to turn such development to the longer-term support of Alaska Native self-government.

Gerald A. McBeth, associate professor of political science, heads the Political Science Department at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Thomas A. Morehouse, professor of political science, is a senior staff member of the University's Institute of Social and Economic Research in Anchorage.

Copies of The Dynamics of Alaska Native Self-Government are available for $7.50 from:

Librarian
Institute of Social and Economic Research
707 A Street, Suite 206
Anchorage, Alaska 99501
Telephone: 278-4621

Copies are also available at most bookstores in Anchorage as well as the University of Alaska bookstore in Fairbanks.