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## Will Democrats Look North to the Future?



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The American presidency will almost certainly be fought and won in the five states that flipped from 2016 to 2020, as well as North Carolina. Third Way has previously written about why the Joe Biden campaign has already started and will continue to spend in North Carolina. That state is the only one that voted for Donald Trump in 2020 that could realistically be on Biden's path to an electoral college majority. Does that mean Biden can't flip others? No.

Much attention, and possibly a lot of outside money, will go to Democrats' white whale of Texas or lost love of Florida. But given how expensive these states are, disparate and piecemeal spending there won't move the needle. Though, there is one state where one dedicated outside spender or a small table could significantly move the needle. The Last Frontier.

### Alaska's Political History

While many view Alaska as a solidly Republican state today, as it hasn't voted Democratic for a president since Lyndon Johnson's 1964 landslide, Alaska was reliably Democratic during its late territorial period. The national Democratic Party adopted a pro-statehood position in 1948, before Republicans did the same in 1952. Once statehood came to pass, Alaska had a Democratic governor, Democratic majorities in both legislative chambers, two Democratic senators, and a Democratic House member. All were elected from November 1958 to January 1959. The 1960 presidential election was fiercely fought with Richard Nixon narrowly edging out John Kennedy 30,953 to 29,809. It should be noted that Nixon campaigned in the state while Kennedy did not. Despite Nixon's victory, Alaska's congressional delegation remained

entirely Democratic during his presidency. During Johnson's 1964 landslide, he won Alaska 66% to 34%, slightly better than his national popular vote margin of 61% to 39%. The 1968 presidential election was also a close one with Nixon barely edging out Hubert Humphrey 45% to 43% with George Wallace taking 12%, which came closest to matching the national popular vote of any state in the union.<sup>1</sup>

Then the bottom fell out for Alaskan Democrats in the 1970s. George McGovern got 35% there while getting 37% nationwide, but Jimmy Carter only did one point better than McGovern despite winning back the White House nationwide. The state's congressional delegation was majority Republican from 1968 to 1971 and then again from 1973 to present. Senator Mike Gravel was able to hold on to his Senate seat in 1974, but he was removed from office following the 1980 primary election. Since then, Republicans have held a monopoly on the congressional delegation from 1981 to 2009.

In the 21st century, Mark Begich, a popular Anchorage mayor and son of a former Congressman, was able to win a Senate election in 2008. Then in 2012, Barack Obama lost the state by double digits. But, he was the first Democratic presidential nominee since Humphrey to break 40% when he got 41%. He was later eclipsed by Joe Biden, who was able to secure 43% of the vote, doing about 0.12 points better than Humphrey, meaning Biden got the highest share of the vote in Alaska since Johnson's landslide.

But what happened next is what has some people finally starting to pay attention. Mary Peltola won back-to-back elections for federal office in August and November 2022, making her the first Democrat to win reelection to federal office in Alaska since the 1970s. Peltola cracked into a formula that reversed the trends from the 1970s that doomed Democrats.

## Alaska's Economy

Why did Alaska shift from a Democratic-leaning swing state in the 1950s to 1960s before becoming solidly Republican in the 1970s and not looking back until seemingly now? Just look at the economy.

Alaska's economy has been referred to as a three-legged stool. The first leg is the petroleum industry. As the national Democratic Party became home to the environmental movement in the 1970s, the Alaskan petroleum industry's business leaders and workers alike ran to the Republican Party. Alaska is a state that wants both extraction and conservation, but extraction pays the bills. While this is technically the smallest of the legs by a hair, the energy industry accounts for more private sector jobs in the state than any other single leg.

The second leg is the federal government. As of fiscal year 2021, federal grants make up 57.2% of Alaska's state revenue, the highest percentage in the country. The federal government owns and manages over 665,000 square miles in Alaska -- about 61% of the land inside the state. This percentage ranks as the fourth highest in the country. Alaska is also home to nine military bases, creating a large active military presence. This leg has been mixed but could be fruitful for Democrats as military members could continue to shift electorally in their direction as they did in 2020.

The third leg is other industries such as fishing and tourism. This has always been the most promising for Democrats due to their commitment to conservation that protects a strong fishing industry and brings tourism dollars into the state.

However, it should be recognized that the energy industry touches every Alaskan resident in a tangible way. Alaska has the only state-owned corporation in the country that pays an annual dividend funded through oil revenues to every resident. Practically speaking, that means every Alaskan resident receives a paycheck from the energy industry. If Democrats cannot solve this concern, they will continue to not be able to compete. But what if they already did?

## Peltola's Big Win

Congresswoman Mary Peltola has a more significant marker than being the first Democrat since “X” to do “Y.” More importantly, she is the first Alaska Native to ever serve the state in Congress. She championed the types of freedoms that both Alaska Natives and immigrants of all other races have become accustomed to in the far northwest -- fishing rights, abortion rights, and land rights.

Peltola's biggest win since taking office is working with Alaska's two Republican Senators to get the Biden Administration to approve a modified version of ConocoPhillips' Willow Project in the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska. Environmentalists were rightfully wary of this project, which will release more greenhouse gases as the United States is trying to reduce overall emissions to fight climate change. This project will take place around the Arctic Circle where Alaska Natives make up most of the population. But unlike the Keystone XL pipeline, which was fiercely opposed by nearby indigenous tribes, Alaska Natives were some of the most forceful advocates in favor of the Willow Project. Another major supporter was Alaska's robust organized labor movement. At a bipartisan press conference urging approval of the project, Peltola remarked, “We have a lot of people here who are Inupiaq, from the North Slope region. This is their region. This is their land. This is about their sovereignty and their autonomy to go forward with their economic development, which will help the state of Alaska.”

With the Willow Project approved as a bipartisan endeavor, Biden allies could make a credible argument that Biden helped Alaska create thousands of jobs during construction, hundreds of long-term jobs, and billions in royalties.

Biden allies can also rightfully state that they're slashing America's emissions, thanks to their support for recent, historic investments in carbon-cutting clean energy projects, which will far outweigh the emissions from Willow. The US will need to build an enormous amount of clean energy infrastructure to meet our climate goals. This will require the skill and determination we've seen from federal leaders in Alaska to get large projects approved and completed quickly. The Biden Administration appears to be weighing energy, environmental, and Native priorities in making these decisions. For instance, they also cancelled oil leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a move celebrated by local Alaska Natives.

This is coming at a moment when Peltola is the most forceful advocate in Congress to save Alaska's fishing industry, especially for small operations, and Republicans are pushing for anti-abortion policies nationwide in a post-Dobbs world. Alaska is arguably the most pro-choice state that voted for Donald Trump in 2020.

Alaska isn't on Biden's path to 270 electoral votes, but it is the most interesting and promising state that isn't.

## Alaska's Place in the Modern Political Map

One way to think about Alaska is that it is part of a group of states that are the 27th to 31st most likely to vote for Joe Biden. It is part of a group along with Florida, Iowa, Ohio, and Texas that University of Virginia's Center for Politics rate as “Likely Republican” as of June 2023.

Alaska was the most Republican of the bunch in 2020, but there was significant movement. In 2020, Texas famously shifted towards Democrats, but so did Alaska. None of the other states in this quintet did. From 2016 to 2020, Alaska shifted more towards Democrats than any other in this quintet despite that it was the only one where there was no spending from Biden or outside allies, and it was the only state that neither Biden nor Kamala Harris visited in 2020.

It has also seen the greatest shift over the past 20 years. Despite no investment, Alaska has shifted towards Democrats in every election since 2000 except a small blip in 2016 largely caused by Alaska's independent streak in which third party and write-in candidates combined for 12.2% of the vote.

Why is Alaska moving towards Democrats despite no national investment? Good demographics.

## Alaska's Promising Demographics

It should be noted that demographics are not destiny and can switch in one election cycle. Iowa was a great state for Obama before shifting 15 points in 2016 as non-college White voters in the state were enamored by Trump. But if current coalitions continue, Alaska's demographics are promising.

Alaska is only 58% White, much lower than Iowa and Ohio's percentages. At a time when many fear Latino voters -- especially in South Florida and South Texas -- are ripe for Republican outreach, Alaska has the largest combined Black/Asian/Native population at 35% with Texas next at 21%. Alaska's college attainment rate stands at 33%, the same as Florida and Texas, and a smidge above Iowa and Ohio. And Alaska's union membership rate is the highest of any state in this quintet at 16%, even higher than Ohio's 13%.

## State Demographics, 2020 Census

	White	Latino	Black	Asian	Native	College	Union
Alaska	58%	7%	5%	8%	22%	33%	16%
Florida	52%	27%	17%	4%	0%	33%	5%
Iowa	83%	7%	5%	3%	1%	31%	7%
Ohio	76%	4%	14%	3%	2%	31%	13%
Texas	40%	39%	14%	6%	1%	33%	4%

Source: United States Census Bureau 2020 Census. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/2020-census-main.html>.



The Native American vote is a complicated one to explore. Data from the Cooperative Election Study indicates that Biden lost these voters nationwide by a 37% to 55% margin. However, in key swing states, precinct data indicates he won them overwhelmingly. For instance, Arizona has the third largest Native population in the country, and voting precincts on reservations gave Biden between 60% and 90% of the vote. This was also true in Wisconsin in places with large Native populations like Menominee County. In the most heavily Native parts of Alaska,<sup>2</sup> Biden only averaged

between 50% and 60% of the total vote. In 2022, Congresswoman Peltola averaged between 62% and 84% in these areas. If Biden can come closer to the margins that Peltola also saw, Alaska would be much more competitive.<sup>3</sup>

Also making Alaska more fruitful electoral ground is the fact that it is the least religious of these states. Alaska is the only state here in which the number of people who say they have no religious affiliation outnumber the number of Alaskans who attend church weekly. The majority of Democratic voters are still religious, especially non-White Democrats, but while both major parties fight for religious voters, non-religious voters are shifting more and more to the Democratic Party's values of religious pluralism and tolerance.

## Religious Adherence by State

	No Religious Affiliation	Attend Church Weekly
Alaska	31%	30%
Florida	24%	35%
Iowa	21%	36%
Ohio	22%	38%
Texas	18%	42%

Source: Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>.



## Cost to Play in Alaska

If an outside group is considering trying to expand the map for Biden, they could realistically do so in Alaska in a way they couldn't in Florida or Texas. Alaska only has three media markets. Because it doesn't border another American state, no market has spillover waste in another state, and there are not out of state markets that reach into Alaska.

The Anchorage media market accounts for 64.7% of the state's residents and has been heavily Republican but has seen some promising movement. Biden got 94,747 votes in this media market compared to Hillary Clinton's 70,129 four years earlier. Donald Trump got 111,421 votes here in 2016 and 128,422 votes in 2020. Therefore, Biden cut Clinton's 41,292 deficit down to a 33,675 one with no air cover. Biden became the first Democrat to win Anchorage itself since Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

The Fairbanks media market holds 12.2% of residents and is about as Republican as the Anchorage market. Biden got 18,138 votes here compared to Clinton's 13,494. Trump got 22,012 in 2016 and 24,917 in 2020. That means Biden made a small dent from Clinton's deficit of 8,518 to a slightly improved one of 6,779; though, on a percent basis, this is similar to the improvement in the Anchorage media market.

The Juneau media market holds 4.7% of voters and is the most Democratic. Biden got 10,834 votes here up from Clinton's 18,151. Trump got 5,690 in 2016 and 6,210 in 2020. That means Clinton netted 3,044 votes here in 2016, but Biden netted 4,624 in 2020.

That leaves 18.3% of Alaskan residents outside of a designated media market. Like the areas of Alaska in media markets, Biden's performance was better than Clinton's performance in 2016. Trump won these areas 24,264 to 21,053

over Clinton in 2016 for a raw vote margin of 3,211 votes. In 2020, Trump only bested Biden 30,402 to 30,059 for a raw vote margin of 343. However, the parts of Alaska that have Native Alaskan majorities tend to be in this geographic grouping outside of a media market, so they need to be reached outside of traditional television spending.

Outside spenders should look to Alaska because it is cheap. In 2022, non-candidate spenders in Q4 were being charged \$217 per gross rating point (GRP). In Fairbanks, it was \$119, and in Juneau, it was \$75. For comparison, Florida has 10 media markets. The Tampa media market covers 24.6% of the state and in 2022, non-candidate spenders in Q4 were being charged \$1,101 per GRP. The Orlando media market covers 21.3% of the state and was \$1,244 per GRP. The Miami media market covers 18.7% of the state and cost \$1,365 per GRP.

The Anchorage media market by itself makes up the same share of the Alaska market as the Tampa, Orlando, and Miami markets combined but will cost about 1/17 as much as these three Florida markets. In 2022, Peltola and allies were up on television in all three markets for ten weeks for about \$2.9 million. In Florida, Democratic Senate nominee Val Demings alone spent over \$3.0 million in the closing week of the campaign on television in the top five markets.

Texas is its own beast with 20 media markets. Both Dallas at #5 and Houston at #7 are top 10 media markets in the country. In 2022, the Dallas media market got to \$1,022 per GRP. Houston was at \$806 per GRP. And there are 18 media markets to go. It would be impossible for a small organization or table to make a big dent in a place like Florida or Texas, but it wouldn't in Alaska.

## Conclusion

It remains unlikely that the path to Joe Biden receiving 270 electoral votes and thus winning reelection goes outside Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. That is where the Biden campaign is surely to focus. However, an adventurous outside group looking for bang for their buck could not do much better than spending in Alaska. There is a model to replicate in Congresswoman Peltola and a story to sell in Biden's approval of the Willow Project in the state. There are favorable demographics from racial and ethnic composition, college attainment, union membership, and religiosity. And perhaps most importantly, one could make a big difference with just a couple million dollars. This goes beyond scoring three electoral votes for Biden as every state holds two senate seats and moving Alaska's into more competitive territory is critical to the long-term prospects of the Democratic Party.

On election night 2024, most folks will be asleep by the time polls close in Alaska at 1:00 AM ET, but adventurous outside groups shouldn't sleep on Alaska this cycle.

**ENDNOTES**

- 1.** Wallace did best in his native South, but outside the South, his best states tended to be in the Mountain West in states like Nevada, Idaho, and Alaska, possibly due to region's history of skepticism to a strong federal government rather than racial segregation and white supremacy.
- 2.** Defined as the heavily Native state house districts in the Alaskan Bush which were numbered 37-40 in 2020.
- 3.** Trump had a commanding performance in Oklahoma, which has the second highest Native American population in the country and did especially well in Eastern Oklahoma where many Native Americans live. Trump also won big in places like Robeson County, North Carolina, home to a large population of that state's Native population.