CAPITOL CRUDE: THE IMPACT OF OIL ON ALASKA POLITICS

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Published by L.A.W. Publishing

Cover art generated with ChatGPT via prompts from the author.

This book is typeset in Times New Roman.

ISBN: 979-8227904553

PCN: 2025919729

Second Edition 2025

Designed by S. Elyard, Todd Communications

Published by: L.A.W. Publishing

https://capitolcrude.com

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DEDICATION

To my parents and my husband.

"Wherever the [oil] industry has functioned, its concentrated economic power, the most massive of any industry in the world, has been forged into political power over the community law, the tax structure, the public bureaucracies, and the political machinery."

Professor Robert Engler, Twentieth Alaska Science Conference, 1969

INTRODUCTION

Alaska is an oil state. Since the 1957 oil and gas find on the Kenai Peninsula in southern Alaska and the 1968 discovery of the massive Prudhoe Bay oil field on the North Slope, oil has seeped into every aspect of Alaskans' lives. Through the decades since the first oil strike, oil revenue funded public education, public safety and the judicial system, health care, the state university, and hundreds of thousands of jobs, both public and private. Oil revenue helped build schools, hospitals, roads, airports, docks and harbors, and community and sport facilities. Oil revenue paid for ferries and plumbing and electric systems serving Alaska's remote communities. And Cook Inlet natural gas provided reasonably priced energy for Southcentral Alaska. It's hard to imagine where the state would be today without its oil and gas resources. However, like most good things, Alaska's dependence on oil came with a price.

The corporations that developed Alaska's abundant oil and gas resources did so with one goal – to profit. Due to the nature of oil and gas production, it takes an enormous amount of expense and effort to be profitable. Oil and gas resources are found in some of the most challenging environments in the world, including barren deserts, deep seas, and freezing Arctic tundra. To get the rights to explore for and develop the resources, oil and gas corporations contend with all types of governments, from democracies to dictatorships. Oil market prices often fluctuate wildly due to a variety of factors, including geopolitical conflicts and national and international economic conditions. To maintain profitability in such a volatile and risky business, oil and gas corporations seek low taxes and a light regulatory regime from their host governments. The problem for Alaska and other oil and gas states is that in their quest for limited taxation and regulation, corporations use their considerable economic power and financial resources to control the host state's political affairs and governing policies, often without regard for the welfare of its citizens.

Even before oil became Alaska's primary commodity, Alaskans knew the power of outside corporations to control their political affairs. For the decades before statehood, outside interests, primarily salmon canneries and mining companies, employed resident lobbyists who successfully influenced enough of Alaska's territorial legislators to thwart any attempts at enacting taxes that would impact their bottom line. The result was a territory rich in resources yet still lacking the funds for its own economic development. This state of affairs began changing in 1949 when, after eight years of effort, territorial Governor Ernest Gruening succeeded in getting the legislature to pass a comprehensive tax system that included an income tax and a general property tax. Until his success in that year's legislative session, Gruening said of his time as governor, "I believed I was governor, but found the chief lobbyist for the canned salmon industry was the actual governor."[1]

Taxation helped Alaska's finances but, as a territory, the federal government controlled development of Alaska's natural resources. Alaskans lacked the political clout needed to influence regulatory decisions made by a distant Congress and federal bureaucrats. The cannery and mining corporations however, had experienced lobbyists in the nation's capital and plenty of economic and political power to sway federal decision-making to benefit corporate interests over Alaskans. Many Alaskans believed that gaining statehood would give them greater control over their own affairs and resources.[2]

In 1955, as part of Alaska's bid for statehood, a constitutional convention of delegates from all around the territory with varying political backgrounds sought to counter corporate control by crafting a state constitution with fundamental principles protective of Alaskans' interests. When it came to natural resources, the delegates adopted provisions requiring that the state's resources be developed for the maximum benefit of the people of the state and consistent with the public interest. Following Alaska's admission into the Union in 1959, the Alaska Constitution's policy and public interest provisions stood as a bulwark against the type of resource exploitation that plagued the Alaska territory since its inception.[3]

Statehood offered Alaskans a chance to do things differently when it came to developing the state's natural resources, especially its oil and gas resources. Recognizing that mineral resources were the main source of potential revenue for Alaska, Congress gave the new state all mineral rights on any federal lands granted to the state. Under the Alaska Statehood Act and the Alaska Constitution, state mineral rights could not be sold, and mineral resources could be developed only with a lease granted by the state.[4]

The first Alaska state legislature established a leasing system for oil and gas where companies would have to compete for the privilege of exploring for and producing Alaska's oil and gas resources from state land. Under the leasing system, the state would receive payment of a bonus or fee at the time of the lease sale, rent during the life of the lease, and royalty and taxes once resource production commenced. Unlike during territorial days, Alaskans would finally have the opportunity to benefit economically from the production of its natural resources, and be able to control where, when and how development occurred.[5]

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In 1969, as Alaska embarked on its journey as a major oil state, Robert Engler, a New York political science professor and author of "The Politics of Oil," warned Alaskans of the power of oil corporations to take over and influence their governing institutions. In the years since Engler's message, oil corporations have in fact had a significant impact on Alaska's political affairs and on shaping the policies and institutions that govern theirs and other extractive industries' activities in Alaska.[6]

From campaign donations to outright bribes, oil corporations and their lobbyists persuaded lawmakers to pass laws benefiting oil industry interests. They poured money into campaigns opposing citizen ballot initiatives aimed at fairer oil taxation and natural resource protection. Their employees and former employees held positions of power in the state legislature, the governor's office and state agencies. National and international oil and gas corporations used their control over development and production of North Slope natural gas as a bargaining chip to get tax and regulatory concessions from the state in exchange for vague commitments to build a pipeline for shipping Alaska gas to outside markets.

Starting in the 1980s, oil corporations began influencing Alaska elections through monetary contributions to legislative candidates that supported industry interests. Their contributions went mostly to Republicans because the Republican Party platform best suited the corporations' desire for lower taxes and limited regulation. Following the involvement of oil corporations in its political affairs, Alaska shifted from a Democratic leaning electorate to one that leaned Republican.

The Democratic Party platform was rooted in President Franklin Roosevelt's 1930s' New Deal governing philosophy of using government to help provide for a sound economy and the health and well-being of the nation's people. Democrats sought regulation of businesses to protect consumers and the environment, and taxes from individuals and corporations to fund a basic social safety net and public infrastructure that benefited community interests. In keeping with Democratic principles, Alaska Democrats generally supported higher oil taxes to help pay for public services and infrastructure and more stringent regulation of the industry to protect Alaskans and the state's natural resources. This made Democratic candidates targets for defeat by the oil companies and those who supported the companies' anti-tax, anti-regulatory agenda.

Following the lead of President Ronald Reagan first elected in 1980, the Republican party platform took the position that economic growth and opportunity required cutting taxes and deregulating businesses, and drastic limits to government spending. Republican politicians advocated for tax cuts, theorizing that by reducing the costs of doing business, companies would make more money and as wealth accumulated upward, it would "trickle down" and fuel the economy and provide jobs. Republicans believed that the country would thrive by allowing business owners to run their businesses as they saw fit without interference from the government. The party called for less environmental regulation, instead promoting streamlined resource permitting and quick government approval of development projects with few restrictions. Most Alaska Republican politicians and their supporters embraced this free market version of governance. Since Republicans maintained legislative majorities for most of the years of oil industry domination in the state, their view often prevailed.

The Republican anti-tax, anti-regulatory philosophy melded with an overarching anti-government ideology at the foundation of the national Republican Party platform. In Alaska, this ideology created a disconnect between Alaskans and their representative government, shut out Alaskans and local and tribal governments from natural resource development decisions affecting their communities, and put in place lawmakers who weakened the government's power to improve the quality of Alaskans' lives.

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Capitol Crude: The Impact of Oil on Alaska Politics chronicles how oil corporations' efforts to limit taxation and regulation of their industry influenced and changed Alaska's governance and political ideology. The story covers legislative oil tax battles, fights over control of the 800-mile TransAlaska oil pipeline from the North Slope, and how the unfulfilled quest for a natural gas pipeline contributed to the unlikely national rise of former Governor Sarah Palin. There are tales of legislators standing up to industry pressure and legislators corrupted by the lure of oil money, and how oil company influence led to the silencing of Alaskans' voice in resource development decisions that affected their lives and livelihood.

The story is set in Juneau, Alaska's capital city. With a population of 30,000 and accessible only by air and water, Juneau nestles under steep coastal mountains on the shores of the Gastineau Channel at the eastern edge of Southeast Alaska's Alexander Archipelago. Behind the mountains is a vast ice field extending over the border into Canada. Every January, legislators from across the state make their way to the capital city by flying through winter storms, taking a ferry across roiling seas, or making a harrowing drive on icy roads through the wilds of western Canada. During each legislative session, legislators, staff, lobbyists, reporters and the public crowd into the ninety-three-year-old six-story brick capitol building sitting halfway between the downtown cruise ship docks and Mount Juneau towering above. In that unassuming building, forty House representatives, twenty senators and the governor write the laws that affect every Alaskan and everyone visiting or doing business in the state.

For decades, oil and gas taxation, regulation and other industry issues dominated legislators' attention. In recent years, declining oil revenue has divided Alaskans between those who would use earnings from the state's oil savings account, the Alaska Permanent Fund, to fund a functioning government to benefit the state population as a whole and those who would cut or underfund public services in exchange for larger Permanent Fund dividends paid to Alaska residents for their individual use. The debate is taking place against the backdrop of a new election system of ranked choice voting and open primaries that shows promise for moderating the impact of the oil industry on Alaska politics and bridging the chasm between partisan governing philosophies. As the North Slope oil fields continue their inevitable decline along with a reduction in oil companies' hold over Alaska politics, the question for Alaskans is, what's next?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I moved to Juneau in April of 1980 for a summer job as a forester with the U.S. Forest Service. I was twenty-four years old with a forestry degree from Southern Illinois University and clueless about politics. After that summer traipsing through Alaska's Southeast rainforest, my career path took an abrupt and opportune turn when I met Representative Sam Cotten, then the Alaska legislature's House Finance Committee chair, at a party in Juneau in March 1981. I mentioned I was looking for a job and Cotten surprised me by offering a one-week trial period as an assistant in his legislative office. When he didn't fire me at the end of the week, I kept coming back.

The jobs that followed, along with a law degree, gave me a front row seat to Alaska oil politics. As a Democratic legislative aide for a total of fourteen legislative sessions and as a state attorney in oil and gas and coastal management, I witnessed and participated in the tumultuous years when the oil industry made its biggest impacts on Alaska politics and policies.

This book draws on my years of experience to develop a comprehensive political history of oil's impact on Alaska. It is my hope that understanding our past will help both Alaskans and others see a path to a healthy and prosperous future.

CHAPTER 1: PRELUDE TO OIL

In 1939, long before commercial oil production began in Alaska, territorial Governor Ernest Gruening found Alaska to be a land of both promise and problems. The promise lay in the people, the land and the territory's abundant natural resources. Among the territory's problems was the lack of any sort of taxation system that would provide revenue from the exploitation of Alaska's natural resources for the improvement and welfare of the territory and its people. For decades, outside corporations mined, logged, fished, and trapped in Alaska without being burdened by much in the way of local regulation or taxation. Gruening thought it time for a comprehensive tax system, one that would attain lasting value from the territory's natural resources. Taxing both individuals and corporations, the governor reasoned, would provide the revenue needed to develop a better quality of life for Alaskans and give the people more control over their political affairs.[7]

Corporate interests, primarily salmon cannery and mining companies, weren't giving up a part of their profits without a fight. Starting in 1940 and for the next nine years, the companies used their considerable influence over territorial lawmakers to defeat every major tax measure that Gruening put forward. In a 1981 interview, Steve McCutcheon, who served as a territorial legislator in the late 1940s, recalled how easy it was to buy a legislator's vote in those days. He recounted how a legislator voted no on tax legislation that would affect the salmon industry in exchange for a case of whisky, an overcoat, a suit of clothes and a ticket to Seattle.[8]

The territory's financial condition deteriorated to the point that bills could not be paid and the University of Alaska was on the brink of collapse. Finally, in 1948, Alaskans voted out most of the sitting legislators, including the staunchest tax opponents. During the 1949 legislative session, the new crop of lawmakers passed a comprehensive tax system that would raise revenue for the territory and help fund needed public services. Gruening praised the legislators, saying they represented the desire of the people to "plow back" the wealth derived from Alaska's resources into the development of Alaska and to making the territory their home.[9]

Major components of Gruening's 1949 tax system were an income tax paid by individuals and corporations and a general property tax. The income tax included a levy on outside corporations and seasonal workers to help the territory retain value from the extraction of its natural resources. The general property tax remedied the situation where businesses and individuals located outside incorporated towns paid no local property tax towards the support of community facilities and services.

Gruening remained governor until April 10, 1953, long enough to see a cornerstone of his hard-fought victory for a comprehensive tax structure dismantled in the 1953 biennial legislative session.

In 1953, the legislature swung from a Democratic majority to Republican. Many of the newly elected Republicans had campaigned on repeal of the general property tax. True to their campaign promises, the new majority introduced a bill to repeal the property tax on the second day of the legislative session. Rep. Julien Hurley, a Republican from Fairbanks, described the tax as "the most vicious and unjust tax ever imposed in the territory." In the Senate, property tax opponents called it "nefarious, unjust, hastily drawn, unholy, discriminatory, and too costly to collect in the vast spaces of the territory." Property tax supporter, Anchorage Democrat Rep. Wendell Kay, said the repeal was "a bill to soak the poor" and the biggest beneficiaries would be the big canning and mining concerns holding property outside towns. Tax opponents, including Democrats from mining regions, prevailed and the repeal measure passed easily in both the House and Senate.[10]

Governor Gruening made one last attempt to salvage his legacy and vetoed the property tax repeal. The House voted almost immediately to override the veto on a party-line vote of 20 to 4. The Senate soon followed suit, overriding the veto by 11 to 4.[11]

And so, the general property tax was gone. But not forgotten. In two years, the attempted resurrection of the property tax would play a major role in establishing Alaska's first oil and gas production tax.

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The 1954 election reversed political fortunes, taking the territorial legislature from an overwhelming Republican majority to an overwhelming Democratic majority. House Democrats held twenty-one of twenty-four seats, and Senate Democrats held twelve seats of sixteen, leaving a total of seven Republican legislators between both houses. President Eisenhower's appointee for territorial governor, Republican Frank Heintzleman, had assumed the governorship in April 1953, taking over from Democratic Governor Gruening.

Joining the territorial legislature when it convened in January 1955 was Representative Irene Ryan, a Democrat from Anchorage. Ryan grew up in the booming oil fields of Texas, Kansas, and Oklahoma. At the age of eighteen, she reported for the oil section of a small-town Texas newspaper where she witnessed the Texas Railroad Commission's efforts to establish the laws that put an end to the drilling chaos and waste in that state's oil fields. Ryan went on to become the first woman to graduate from the New Mexico School of Mines, the first woman to fly solo in Alaska, and the first female mining engineer and geologist in Alaska. In 1971, Governor Bill Egan appointed Ryan as the commissioner for the Department of Economic Development, making her the first woman to hold a cabinet post. Back in a 1954 interview, Ryan foretold "an oil-producing era in Alaska that would rank with the largest in North America."[12]

Among Ryan's new colleagues was Anchorage Democrat Stanley McCutcheon. During the 1949 territorial legislature, McCutcheon presided as Speaker of the House and helped shepherd Governor Gruening's comprehensive tax package to success. He sat out the 1952 election to serve as Alaska Democratic chairman, regaining his Anchorage House seat in the 1954 election. Upon taking office, McCutcheon made reinstatement of the general property tax a defining issue for the 1955 territorial legislative session. Like Ryan, McCutcheon saw Alaska's potential as an oil state. Among other reasons, McCutcheon, Ryan and most of their Democratic colleagues wanted a property tax in place as a way to tax the oil industry if one developed in Alaska.[13]

When the general property tax measure came before the full House for a vote in 1955, northern Democrats with strong mining interests in their regions joined forces with the three-member House Republican minority to try and prevent its passage. One Fairbanks Democrat declared it would be "deceitful" to enact the tax since it was not in the Democrats' party platform. Speaker of the House, Wendell Kay, retorted, "The Republicans campaigned on their repeal of the property tax and the voters repealed the Republicans." The property tax proponents prevailed and the tax measure passed the House 15 to 9, with six Democrats voting no along with the three Republicans.[14]

In the Senate, property tax supporters could not muster enough votes to overcome the pressure from salmon cannery and mining interests. McCutcheon accused the Senate of being the "salmon-controlled senate" and that "you could just as well put a salmon on the desk of each senator opposing the property tax." Another representative lamented that he sometimes wondered "if some of the senators have a conscience" and that he was "fighting for the Alaska of today, tomorrow and the future."[15]

After months of bitter debate between the House and Senate, a solution presented itself. The House majority agreed to drop the property tax and instead introduce a stand-alone oil and gas tax proposal crafted by Ryan – a one percent production tax on the gross value of oil produced in the territory. The gross value was determined by measuring production at the wellhead and subtracting transportation costs from the destination sales price. Where a property tax would apply to the resource in the ground, the production tax (also known as a severance tax) applied to the value of produced oil and gas at the point production was measured.[16]

The oil and gas production tax legislation passed the full House on the same day it was introduced on a vote of 17 to 2. The Senate passed it the next day with just three no votes. Three days later, on April 6, 1955, Governor Heintzleman signed the bill into law without comment. With that, Alaska had its first oil and gas production tax.[17]

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For readers of the first edition, here is the Epilogue that was added for the second edition.

EPILOGUE

OCTOBER 2025

The fall of 2025 is a time of unsettled and unsettling politics for Alaska and the country.

Fortunately for Alaskans, the multi-party majorities that took shape following the 2024 election held together through the 2025 legislative session in both the Alaska House and Senate. Passing a balanced budget and increasing education funding emerged as the majorities' top priorities for the session. While legislators were unable to reach agreement on new revenue measures, hard fought compromises between the two bodies and deep cuts to state agencies resulted in the session ending with a balanced budget that included funding for a variety of education related programs and projects, and a much needed boost to the base rate amount of state funds allocated per student.[539]

Defying the almost universal legislative and public support for increased education funding, Governor Dunleavy vetoed the legislation raising the per student base rate. This prompted the rarest of legislative actions – an override of the governor's veto. Even rarer, the forty-six votes for the override featured a mix of Democrats, Republicans, Independents and unaffiliated members. In a House Majority press release, Majority Leader Kopp said of the override vote, "Rejecting an 'all or nothing' gridlock, this is a beginning. Compromise is essential; continued division only hurts our children. It's time for progress over posturing."[540]

Undeterred, Dunleavy vetoed $51 million of the approximately $180 million funding increase from the state's education budget. "Basically, we don't have enough money to pay for all of our obligations," Dunleavy said as justification for the veto. Ironically, at the start of the legislative session, the governor submitted a budget that called for spending $1.5 billion over the amount expected in revenue to the state, most of that due to his insistence that the state distribute a Permanent Fund dividend of almost $4,000 per person based on the optional statutory formula. To bring the budget more in line with what could realistically be spent, the legislature reduced the dividend payout to a more reasonable $1,000 per person.[541]

Though dismayed by Dunleavy's veto, legislative leaders determined it was too risky to call themselves into a special session without knowing for sure they had the necessary votes for an override. That meant waiting until the start of the 2026 regular legislative session in January before a veto override would be considered. Meanwhile, school districts had to figure out how to deal with less funding than they were counting on.[542]

It was Dunleavy himself who opened the door to an earlier opportunity for legislators to vote on a veto override.

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Under the Alaska Constitution, legislators have five days from the start of a regular or special session to take a vote on a governor's vetoes. Should the legislature fail to act on a veto within those five days, that's the end of it – the veto stands with no opportunity for a do-over in the future. A veto override of a revenue or appropriation bill requires an affirmative vote of three-fourths of the membership of the legislature and two-thirds for other legislation. That meant forty-five yes votes would be needed to restore the vetoed education funding. [543]

On July 2, 2025, the governor called for a special session to begin August 2 for consideration of two of his priorities previously rejected by the legislature – the establishment of a Department of Agriculture and proposals to implement his policies on education reform. Some legislators believed that the governor was banking on there being too many legislators busy with other commitments for there to be enough votes for any veto overrides during the first five days of the session. One member of the majority, Senator Forrest Dunbar, D-Anchorage, was deployed with the Alaska Army National Guard in Poland for the summer. It was questionable whether he'd be able to leave his post and return to Alaska.[544]

Not taking any chances, Dunleavy directly asked the nineteen-member House Republican minority to avoid showing up for the first five days of the special session. A spokesman for the governor said, "Governor Dunleavy asked house minority members to not show up for the first five days of session because like any governor, he does not want his vetoes overturned."[545]

Once again, the Alaska legislature bucked the national trend of discord and intransigence. Fifty-nine of sixty legislators convened in Juneau on August 2, 2025. Having secured permission from his commanding general to make the journey to Alaska, Senator Dunbar made it in time for the special session, providing the crucial forty-fifth vote to override Dunleavy's budget veto. The much-needed education funding was secured earlier than anyone anticipated, giving school districts around the state a better start to the coming school year.[546]

But the legislature wasn't done. They had another vote up their sleeve.

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It wouldn't be Alaska without an oil tax issue on the legislative agenda. For the 2025 legislative session, the problem was one of Governor Dunleavy's making.

Under the net profit oil and gas production tax system, taxpayers can deduct certain costs and apply a variety of tax credits in determining how much tax they owe. To ensure taxpayers paid their taxes correctly, the state established an oil and gas tax audit program within the Department of Revenue. Until 2019, the Department published publicly available memos that summarized the total oil and gas tax and interest assessed during each audit cycle. These memos stopped soon after Governor Dunleavy took office.[547]

When it became apparent the memos were no longer being published, the legislature requested the information be made available. The Department of Revenue declined the request claiming the information was confidential. This led to the legislature directing the Division of Legislative

Audit to conduct an audit of the administration's oil and gas tax audit function. As provided by the Alaska Constitution and implementing statutes, the Division of Legislative Audit is authorized to conduct audits of the state oil and gas tax audit process.[548]

The legislature authorized the oil and gas tax audit in 2020. When Legislative Audit began the audit in 2024, the Department of Revenue refused to provide the information needed to conduct the assessment. In 2025, the Legislative Auditor testified to the Senate Rules Committee that the Department's reluctance raised "red flags" from an audit perspective and she wanted "to help determine the reasons behind that reluctance, both for the legislature and the public." At stake was billions of dollars in state oil and gas revenue.[549]

Faced with an intransigent administrative agency, the Senate Rules Committee introduced legislation in April 2025 making it clear that all state agencies must cooperate with the legislature and Division of Legislative Audit and provide the requested information in the form or format requested. The bill easily passed both the House and Senate with just ten House members voting no. Governor Dunleavy vetoed the bill on June 11, 2025, asserting it was likely an "unconstitutional delegation of legislative authority." Expressing her dismay at how the administration stopped cooperating after Dunleavy took office, Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson, D-Anchorage, declared, "It's just crazy, and the issue matters because there could be billions of dollars in potential oil and gas tax revenue that we aren't getting, that we should be getting." Legislators vowed to override the veto when they convened in January 2026.[550]

On August 2, 2025, the legislature took advantage of Dunleavy's call for a special session and overrode his veto of the audit information legislation. With that accomplished along with reinstating education funding, the legislature adjourned without taking up the governor's special session priorities.[551]

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Balancing the budget, passing public interest legislation and overriding governor vetoes during the 2025 regular and special sessions were notable in that legislators of different political persuasions did their job in a way that is not often seen in today's political climate. They disagreed, they debated, they compromised. They did what they could to keep Alaska's economy afloat, maintain public services and fulfill their commitment to Alaska's children's education. They stood together against a governor who put his own dogma above the public good.

Most importantly, Alaska legislators set an example for how to govern as representatives of the people. Alaska is often an outlier when it comes to national politics, swinging right when the country leans left and vice versa. This time, it's Alaska leading the way to a more reasonable governing structure, one that other states and the country would do well to emulate.

VOTING MATTERS

In the Fairbanks October municipal election, voters elected a slate of local candidates considered progressive and ousted the current mayor who came down on the right-wing side of politics. During his term in office, Mayor David Pruhs made disparaging comments towards rural Alaskans and Alaska Natives. In response, the Tanana Chiefs Conference offered the following words of wisdom for Alaskans and anyone wanting to chart a more productive political path for the state and the country:

> When we vote, we shape the kind of leadership we see in our communities. We elect those who reflect our values, who understand our history, who respect the diversity and dignity of our people, and who stand with – not against – the communities they serve. Let this moment be a wake-up call. Let it energize our efforts to register, to show up, and vote for leaders who will uplift, not divide.
>
> Our voice is our power – in council meetings, in public forums, and especially at the ballot box.[552]