



March 28, 2021

Rep. Chris Tuck
Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, AK 99801

Dear Rep. Tuck,

We are writing to express our support and appreciation for House Bill 66: Elections, Voting, Ballots. This bill is long overdue and will go a long way toward improving access to voting by removing barriers that impede Alaskans' ability to express their voice in our elections.

Native Peoples Action is a statewide non-profit organization that strives to provide Alaska Native communities and our traditional values with a voice at all levels of policy making. The foundation of our work focuses on advocacy, education and information sharing, supporting local decision-making, and building stronger unity among Indigenous communities to collectively address issues impacting our ways of life.

Alaska has a history of discrimination and high barriers for Alaska Natives to even be allowed to participate in an election. From the 1925 Alaska voter literacy test (explicitly meant to disenfranchise Alaska Natives) to today's insufficient access to polling locations, continued efforts for increased voter ID laws, lack of translation support and lack of accessible voting information in all parts of Alaska, and more, it has not been an easy path to enfranchisement. This has only been compounded by the removal of safeguards in the past decade, through decisions like *Shelby County v. Holder*. Additionally, it has taken more drastic measures of lawsuits to make movement in our state to decrease the barriers to voting for Alaska Native people, such as *Toyukak vs. Mallott*, a landmark case in Alaska's history that emerged when the state failed to provide language assistance in Western Alaska.

During the 2020 elections, additional barriers to voting were brought on by the global pandemic, some of which should have been eased with the help and preparations of the state. Alaskans had to bring multiple lawsuits against the State of Alaska, the Division of Elections, and the Lt. Governor in order to address simple voting reforms to help keep Alaskans safe during COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these reforms included sending out absentee ballot applications to all registered Alaskan voters and removing witness signatures, which were important to protect the health of Alaskans by not making them choose between voting and



getting sick. Adequate safeguards and information on voting during the pandemic were not implemented.

Other systemic barriers disenfranchised voters during this last election cycle including not adequately staffed polling locations, which we have seen over and over again, and each year we continue to hear the need for increased training for poll workers. The residents of [Mertarvik](#) [were denied the opportunity to vote](#) in the 2020 primary election because the Division of Elections failed to send ballots. Additionally, Newtok never received supplies for its election, resulting in only 17 people voting in the primary. In some communities it was up to Tribal and community leaders to pass out and collect ballots from their neighbors to ensure everyone had the opportunity to vote.

Other statements we heard from Alaskans across the state include:

- “Did not receive my requested absentee ballot.” Mail can often take much longer across rural Alaska, this is why both in-person and by-mail voting is needed in each community.
- “Mail-in ballot was rejected with no opportunity to clarify or fix the mistake to ensure my vote could be counted.” Many states across the country offer the opportunity to ‘cure’ their ballot, Alaska does not allow this currently, this needs to be changed to ensure all individuals can have their vote counted.
- Multiple communities Native Peoples Action was in contact with during the 2020 elections requested stamps to be sent to them so individuals could mail back their absentee ballots. Some stated they relied on neighbors for a postage stamp because their post office was closed. Postage-paid return envelopes would solve this problem.
- “Could not access my polling location, the river was not frozen enough to cross to get to my polling location.” Permanent absentee voting is one way to help individuals receive a ballot automatically while working to ensure polling locations are accessible.
- Lock downs were identified as a voting barrier as individuals were not sure whether they were able to leave their home to vote. More messaging from the Division of Elections would have been helpful to communities so everyone knew the rules on how to vote during lockdowns and the pandemic. This was a foreseen issue that was not addressed. Other actions that could have been taken include sending absentee ballot applications to all registered voters and working with communities to ensure ballots were available to those who wanted to vote.
- Voters reported arriving at their polling location and being told they were not registered, despite years of voting at that location. Same-day voter registration would allow these individuals to still be able to vote.



As elections are changing and systemic disenfranchisement continues, the need for voting reforms is clear. Voting is a fundamental right of all individuals. Every Alaskan should have the ability to choose who they want to represent them and know that the state will do whatever it can to ensure every Alaskan can participate in democracy.

House Bill 66 is a step in the right direction with the requirement for election officials to notify a voter if their absentee ballot is rejected and allow the opportunity to correct the mistake on their ballot to ensure their vote is counted, eliminating the witness requirement for absentee ballots, increasing the pay of poll workers to compensate for their time and service to our state and communities, allowing absentee ballots to be counted as they are received instead of waiting until after the polls close on election day, calling for the same early voting locations to be available during every election as long as it's feasible for consistency for the voters, creating an option for permanent absentee voting for individuals that plan to vote by mail in every election, requiring the Division of Elections to provide a postage-paid return envelope with absentee ballots, and clarifying terminology for early voting to remove confusion between early voting and absentee in-person voting. These are all straight-forward reforms that will help increase access to all Alaskans.

We encourage all legislators to support this common-sense legislation. In addition, we hope that this is not the only step, but the first of many, to work towards a system in Alaska that makes voting more accessible for all Alaskans. We look forward to working with the entire legislature to continue to improve our voting system.

We wish you success with this legislation and hope your colleagues will agree this important bill should be passed this year. Thank you for your leadership in this issue. We stand ready to help in any way possible.

Gunalchéesh/Háw'aa/Quyana/Mahsi'/Baasee'/Maasee'/Dogedinh/Thank you,

Kendra Kloster

Kendra Kloster
Executive Director
Native Peoples Action