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POLITICS

What Can Democrats Learn from Mary Peltola's Win in Red Alaska?

"It's pretty unusual for a Democrat to be hiring Republican staffers," one of her political consultants said.

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Mary Peltola, with a Mary Peltola mask, in November. REUTERS/Kerry Tasker

Mary Peltola, who won Alaska's only House seat on Wednesday, started her race as an underdog. The Democrat beat out not just Sarah Palin and the Republican establishment choice, Nick Begich, but, in a special election over the summer, dozens and dozens of others.

It was, in many ways, an upset. Peltola is the first Alaska Native to represent the state, which had not sent a Democrat to the House in half a century.

With deep roots in rural Alaska, a promise to continue the legacy of her Republican predecessor, and a platform that foregrounded both a unifying local issue (the collapse of salmon populations) and a galvanizing national issue (abortion rights, which are popular in Alaska), Peltola pulled off two consecutive victories in a state that went for Trump by 10 points in 2020. When all the ranked-choice ballots were tabulated today, Peltola beat Palin handily, 55 percent to 45 percent—a margin larger than longtime incumbent Sen. Lisa Murkowski managed to eke out over her challenger.

Alaska politics are famously idiosyncratic, so it's hard to draw any broad conclusions about the national political landscape from Peltola's success. But Democrats should study it closely anyway. Because as more jurisdictions consider ranked-choice election systems—and as Democrats seek out footholds in light-red swing districts—Peltola's rapid rise can be read as a new type of path to Democratic victory. And the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee wrote her off from the start.

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This year, Alaska had to hold two elections for the same House seat, three months apart. The first was a special election held over the summer to replace Republican Don Young, who died in office after serving in Congress for nearly 50 years. The second was the November midterms, which ended, for Alaskans, on Nov. 23.

In the summer special election, Peltola ran against 46 other candidates, all of whom were listed on the same primary ballot. (In Alaska's new ranked-choice voting system, candidates from all parties run in a single primary. Then, the top four vote-getters advance to a ranked-choice general election.) Some candidates, like Palin and a socialist named Santa Claus, were blessed with name recognition. Others were killer fundraisers. Peltola was neither, but she placed fourth, earning herself a spot in the next round of voting.

"I was, frankly, quite surprised that she made it into the top four," said Glenn Wright, a professor of political science at the University of Alaska Southeast. "For a lot of people, even here in Alaska, she was not well known up until this year."

Wright credited Peltola's success to her advocacy for rural Native communities in northern and western Alaska, her long history of leading on fishing issues, "and then, also, a really

good reputation,” he said. “Everybody seems to like Mary Peltola.” A June report from Alaska Public Media came to a similar conclusion: “If she’s pulled herself out of statewide obscurity, it’s likely due to her dominant personality trait: niceness.”

In the second round of the special election, Peltola was up against two extremely well-funded Republicans: Palin, whose campaign was sustained by Donald Trump’s Save America PAC and Rand Paul’s Protect Freedom PAC, and businessman Nick Begich, who had the endorsement of the Alaska GOP and lent his campaign \$650,000 of his own money. (The fourth candidate to advance from the primary, an independent, dropped out.) Unlike her competitors, Peltola didn’t receive any support from independent expenditure groups or PACs, and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee stayed out of the race—a decision Peltola called “bizarre”—leaving the Democrat with a shoestring budget and a tiny staff with which to mount her campaign.

“I’m frustrated that the appeals for support, for whatever reason, weren’t found to be sufficiently credible,” said John-Henry Heckendorn, a political consultant who has been deeply involved in Peltola’s campaign from the beginning.

“On the flip side,” he said, “this felt like a very hard year for Democrats to say, ‘Yeah, let’s go to Alaska!’ when they had so much defense to play.”

But then, Peltola won. Democrats across the country became enthralled by the candidate who—by flipping a seat, defeating Palin, and becoming the first Alaska Native in Congress—had delivered three symbolically satisfying victories in one. As Peltola turned her attention to the November election for the next full term in Congress, the money started rolling in. In the two days after her special-election win, she raised \$1 million; within three weeks, she had raked in more than twice as much as she’d raised in the previous five months. National organizations, Democratic Party leadership—everyone started to pony up. In September, Peltola raised 10 times as much as Palin did. Soon, she had a multimillion-dollar lead, bringing in more money than both of her competitors combined.

Major endorsements began falling into place, too. Many Alaska Native corporations—some of the largest pillars of the state’s economy, which were established in 1971 by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act—had stayed out of the special election altogether or endorsed Republican Tara Sweeney, another prominent Alaska Native politician. After Peltola won the special election, a number of these corporations threw their support behind her.

Beating two Republicans in Alaska “was a big hurdle for a Democrat to cross,” Heckendorn said. “And so, when she proved that she could win once, I think that just created a huge amount of momentum.”

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To some, Peltola’s victory in the special election looked less like a straightforward win for her and more like a failure of the Republican Party, whose base had failed to either rally behind a single candidate or properly use Alaska’s ranked-choice voting system to elect either of the two conservatives in the race.

Republican leaders threw themselves into the task of voter outreach—working to convince conservatives to rank Begich and Palin in the top two slots of their ballots, instead of only ranking a single candidate, as many had done. (Palin hadn’t helped by explicitly railing against ranked-choice voting and telling supporters to rank her alone.)

That education campaign saw limited success. Only about two-thirds of Begich voters ranked Palin second on their ballot in the November election.

According to Wright, in other countries with ranked-choice voting, like Australia, it is not uncommon for candidates from the same political party to campaign together, almost as a single ticket. With the broader good of the party at heart, they tell voters that no matter which candidate earns their top ranking, the other candidate should get the second slot. But in Alaska, Begich and Palin ran vicious campaigns against one another, vying for the top Republican slot and alienating one another’s supporters in the process.

“What would have made sense in this case would have been a very different, more collegial campaign strategy,” Wright said, referring to the two Republicans in the race. “And instead, we had these two candidates with—their personalities were such that they were more inclined to run a negative campaign.”

Meanwhile, Peltola rose above the fray. She told sweet anecdotes about Palin, and vice versa—the two women had bonded when they were in state government, and pregnant, at the same time—and focused on her own “pro-jobs, pro-choice, pro-fish, pro-families” platform.

“She really made a point of steering away from negative campaigning or criticizing her opponents,” Heckendorn said. “A lot of people just thought that sounded like not how you’re

supposed to do it, and insufficiently aggressive. I think a lot of people confused her focus on relationship-building—and focusing on the positives and on collaboration—with weakness.”

Staying friendly is considered a best practice in ranked-choice races, which incentivize participants to build a broad coalition rather than antagonize other candidates or belittle their opponents’ supporters. Peltola knew that, with three competitors in the November election—Palin, Begich, and a libertarian—it would be difficult to win the more than 50 percent of first-choice votes she’d need to win the contest outright. She needed second-choice votes to win, which meant playing nice with voters who supported her opponents. The Peltola campaign also did dedicated outreach to conservative voters who were profiled as pro-choice, in hopes that they might come around to the one candidate in the race who supported abortion rights.

It wasn’t her only overture to right-leaning voters. Peltola, like a number of Alaska Democrats, takes a moderate stance on guns, and she made it widely known in her campaign. She sent a mailer, billed as a “Voter Guide for Alaska Hunters & Sportsmen,” that depicted the three major candidates as equally supportive of gun rights. (It also featured a very unflattering photo of Begich.) “In Alaska, hunting is about keeping food on the table,” Peltola said in one campaign video, flanked by a bounty of taxidermied animal heads and pelts. “For me, Second Amendment rights are about food security.”

Peltola also took extensive steps to court her Republican predecessor’s supporters. In ads, she said she was running for “Don Young’s seat in Congress” and shared that her mother had campaigned for Young while pregnant with Peltola. (“Don used to joke that I was his youngest volunteer,” she said in one commercial.) Young’s daughters appeared in another ad praising Peltola as the candidate who would carry on their father’s legacy in Congress. Groups of Young’s former staffers and friends held a virtual fundraiser for Peltola, released a letter endorsing her, and dragged Begich in the press for what they saw as backstabbing behavior toward the late congressman.

Peltola even went so far as to hire Young’s chief of staff—a move that telegraphed continuity and stability in a state that had depended on its long-serving congressman to secure massive amounts of federal dollars for Alaska. “It’s pretty unusual for a Democrat to be hiring Republican staffers, so I think *that*, as much as anything, underscored her commitment to a bipartisan, sort of Alaska-first approach,” Heckendorn said.

Another gesture across the aisle—something that would never fly in a state without Alaska’s political peculiarities—was a mutual endorsement between Peltola and the

moderate Republican Murkowski, who fought off a Trump-backed conservative challenger in this month's election.

“Lisa endorsing Mary—that was crazy, you know?” Heckendorn said. “It felt like such a deviation from the national standard that I was sort of like, ‘It sounds like this could happen, but I’ll believe it when I see it.’” In an era of increasing division between political parties—and expectations of loyalty so strict that the Alaska GOP excommunicated Murkowski in 2021 for her votes against Trump—both candidates ended up banking on the notion that, in a state whose electorate is one of least partisan in the country, voters would gravitate toward legislators who aren’t faithful party agents, either.

That strategy is particularly well-suited to Alaska’s new voting system: The open primary takes power away from political parties, and the ranked-choice general election allows voters to register support for candidates from multiple parties if they wish. When Peltola twice failed to get enough first-choice votes to win, it was the Begich voters who ranked her second—in other words, right-leaning voters who nevertheless preferred a Democrat over Palin—who both times put her over the top.

In theory, a Republican Congressional candidate might have succeeded by leading with bipartisanship, too. “If there had been a Republican that had kind of floated to the top in the primary, who was a little bit more of a conventional politician and who could run as an

establishment Republican and as a moderate,” Wright said, “it’s likely that the story would be very, very different.” ┘

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