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Breathless Turning Blue Awaiting Alaska Absentee Ballot Count

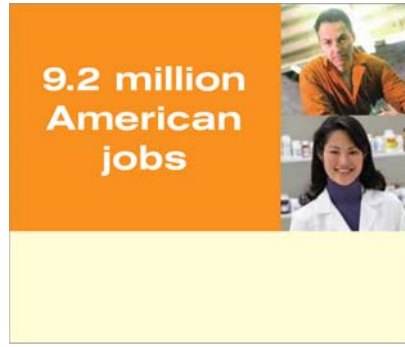
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Ah, Alaska. The fresh air, the rugged frontier, the long wait for mail, the even longer wait to find out who's running for office.

Excitement over the outcome of Tuesday's Republican Senate primary is on hold for now in the 49th State.

That's because the winner is unknown and won't be for a while.

More than 16,000 absentee ballots were sent out in the race and only 7,600 were in the hands of state officials on Wednesday when the vote tally showed incumbent Sen. Lisa Murkowski running just 1,688 votes behind upstart Tea Party favorite Joe Miller.



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But the rest of the ballots have yet to arrive, and according to state law they may be counted beyond Labor Day.

The ballots will count as long as they were postmarked by Tuesday's Election Day. Thing is, it could take up to 10 days after the election to receive them if they were mailed in the United States -- or 15 days if they came from overseas.

Election division mailboxes are being checked daily.

The state's election officials will begin counting the ballots on Tuesday, and they must be finished tallying 15 days after the election. Additional counts are scheduled for Sept. 3 and Sept. 8, the last day to accept overseas ballots.

In the meantime, Murkowski has been trying to tamp down speculation she could make a third-party bid for the U.S. Senate seat she's in danger of losing -- perhaps because she's confident about the ultimate outcome.

"We had a very robust absentee push," said Murkowski spokesman Steve Wackowski. "We're counting on the gap to close. We're optimistic."

But Miller is projecting confidence too, saying he expects many veterans and active military members who vote by absentee ballot will favor him. He also accused national Republicans of sending in the troops to back up the incumbent, when they're supposed to be neutral in primary races.

"You have to be concerned anytime somebody lawyers up and tries to pull an Al Franken, if you will," he said.

The comparison isn't unfair. Minnesota Democrat Al Franken fought a long recount battle to emerge victorious over incumbent Republican Sen. Norm Coleman in the 2008 general election.

Franken won by 312 votes. The contest went all the way to the state Supreme Court as Coleman challenged the state's decision to count 351 disputed absentee ballots. They were included.

Franken's not the only candidate to go to sleep losing on Election Night only to wake up -- months later -- as a winner.

Democratic Rep. Scott Murphy claimed a March 31, 2009, special election victory in New York's 20th District after a month of absentee ballot counting. The lead flipped back and forth as the

1,000 military ballots and slightly fewer than 1,000 overseas ballots were counted. Eventually, Murphy gained and kept the advantage, pulling off a 400-vote margin win.

And of course, George W. Bush waited five weeks in 2000 before it finally was determined that he'd won the state of Florida by 537 votes over Al Gore, a margin of victory that won him the presidency. In that contest, 2,490 ballots from Americans living abroad were counted as legal votes after Election Day. According to a New York Times analysis, four out of five of the 680 disputed but accepted ballots were cast in counties Bush carried.

Candidates who shore up the numbers through absentee ballots are making smart moves that frequently pay off, election analysts say.

"Half or more of the votes cast in some other states are cast by mail or through absentee procedures. Obviously, it makes sense for campaigns to get as many absentee or mail-in ballots as possible," said Michael Barone, senior political analyst for the Washington Examiner and co-author of *The Almanac of American Politics*. "Sometimes you can win an election even before it's held. This requires significant organization work, and some nontrivial expense of money."

"Absentee ballots are money in the bank," said Democratic strategist Mary Anne Marsh. "It is one of the best investments you can make in a campaign if you do it in a smart, targeted fashion."

Alaska does not track how many absentee ballots are sent out for Republicans or Democrats in each election, and it doesn't begin counting until after the polls are closed. Also stashed in its pile are in-person absentee ballots cast on Election Day as well as questionable ballots -- where voter registration information wasn't immediately verified at the polls. Those, too, may be needed by the candidates.

But analysts say the candidates need to have some idea how many absentee ballots are cast, and campaigns build absentee ballot programs, tracking and polling systems.

"By tracking absentee ballots you can establish better benchmarks for Election Day that allow you to adjust your 'get out the vote' plan and know the number you need to hit to win," Marsh said.

The battle playing out in Alaska over the absentee ballots will have to be resolved quickly.

Sept. 17 is the target date to certify the primary election, and Sept. 18 is the deadline created by the MOVE Act to mail out more absentee ballots -- for the general election -- to military voters. Alaska has not applied for a waiver to miss that deadline.

On top of all that impatience to know the winner is the chance that the vote could narrow to within 0.5 percent. If that happens, the defeated candidate can request a recount, which the state will then undertake.

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