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Tundra times

Pollsters are predicting a photo finish for gubernatorial candidates Republican Arliss Sturgulewski and Democrat Steve Cowper. The Bush vote may be a decisive factor in the Nov. 4 election.

Photo by Norris Klesman

'Every village counts'

Candidates court Bush voters

by Sara Townsend
for the Tundra Times

The election ballots of the 75 registered voters on Little Diomedé could decide who spends the next four years in the governor's mansion.

With local pollsters predicting a photo finish between Republican Arliss Sturgulewski and Democrat Steve Cowper when they face off Nov. 4, the gubernatorial hopefuls know that every village counts, even the smallest precinct — the Aleutian community of Nikolski with its 32 registered voters.

The Bush vote may comprise only 12 to 14 percent of the state's 290,808 registered voters, but races have been won and lost by much less. And Cowper's lead in the Bush is far from

Sheffield's near shutout in 1982.

Even with polls showing Cowper the frontrunner among Natives, both camps are continuing to woo rural Alaskans. They remember four years ago when overwhelming Bush support

proved critical to Sheffield's victory over rival Tom Fink.

Sheffield built an early lead, widened the gap and ended up winning 10 to 1 in Bush precincts. That was enough to offset Fink's two-thirds win

in the rest of the state.

A September poll, conducted by Dittman Research Corp. and commissioned by the Native political action committee Ice Block, showed Cowper and Sturgulewski in a dead heat overall, but with Cowper leading the Bush vote 52 percent to Sturgulewski's 29 percent.

A similar telephone survey last week showed the contenders tied and the Bush now favoring Cowper 55 percent over Sturgulewski, who remained at 29 percent.

Ice Block spokesman Willie Hensley predicts the race will be won by a "dribble" of votes.

In addition to leading in areas traditionally Democratic such as the Bush,

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Bush vote 'pivotal'

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"Steve is also keeping his losses to a minimum in Anchorage," Hensley said. "He's doing much better than expected here."

At the same time, he said Republican Sturgulewski is garnering more support in the Bush, usually a Democratic stronghold, than would be expected. She has a reputation for being a hard worker for Native issues.

Cowper also has lost some points with Native leaders because of his position on state involvement in private ventures, Hensley said. While promising to support the Red Dog mine in Northwestern Alaska, Cowper has made it clear he disagrees with the project in principle.

On other issues Cowper fares better with Native voters. In ads proclaiming "Native lands in Native hands," Cowper supports the 1991 amendments as a way to ensure continued Native ownership of Native lands and corporations.

Both candidates are scrambling for votes, whistle-stopping Alaska style from Ketchikan to Barrow.

But even with the airborne blitzes, pollster Marc Hellenthal said he sees the contenders short compared to Sheffield on personal contact with voters in the outlying villages.

"That makes Cowper's lead very fragile," said Hellenthal. "They don't feel they really know him personally."

Bush voters, as all voters, pick people they know more than they vote by party, said Hellenthal.

Despite exposure by electronic media, he said, "that's nothing compared to looking in the eye."

Sturgulewski loyalists include several traditional Native leaders, such as Eskimo leader Eddie Hoffman of Bethel, because of the state legislator's record of "honesty and integrity," said campaign spokesperson Retha Hubbard.

She also has scored well with Natives because of Cowper's "inconsistency" on issues, Hubbard said, pointing to his turn-around on subsistence and the Permanent Fund.

The deciding factor in the race is not who leads, but by how much, according to pollster Dave Dittman. Total percentages don't mean as much as the size of the margins do, he said, pointing to Fink's loss despite winning 2 to 1 in Anchorage.

"If you win two-thirds of the state but lose the remaining third, you could still lose," he said.

The Bush vote is pivotal in statewide elections, he said, because if voters outside Southcentral were to support Cowper in huge numbers, that could offset a modest win for Sturgulewski on home turf.

Fellow pollster Hellenthal looks at

the flip side: "If Cowper's lead were to diminish in the next week, he couldn't offset the lead Arliss has in Southcentral."

Despite his lead in the Bush, Cowper is spending the next week stumping in the Bush and keeping in daily phone contact with campaign village coordinators, said Cowper spokesman David Ramseur. Backing by Sheffield has been a boost, he said.

"The Sheffield endorsement means a lot to rural people — they abide by his word. If Cowper's okay by him they figure he'll be okay by them," Ramseur said.

KAKM political commentator Larry Makinson sees Sturgulewski giving Cowper a "good run" in the Bush because of her record in the Legislature.

"She's not like Fink, who was perceived as an alien being they didn't like," he said.

Without the hotly contested ballot measures that sent record numbers to the polls in 1982, the turnout this year is expected to be more modest.

Hensley, however, predicts a heavy showing from Bush precincts, which usually boast a stronger turnout than other areas.

"The Native community knows it has a lot at stake in who's governor," he said. "But this race isn't black and white."