

Native Voters Break Away from Rivers

In one of the more exciting primary elections ever held in the State of Alaska, the race between Rep. Ralph J. Rivers and the State House Speaker, Mike Gravel, turned out to be a dramatic one as far as some of the native people were concerned. In the overall vote of the Alaskans, Gravel came out at the losing end by a mere 1300 votes. The contest also brought out a significant development—a breakaway of sizable percentage of native vote from Rivers, a fact that has not been apparent to any marked degree for a great many years in the past.

The race of the two men generated intense interest among the native people, especially in the Arctic, the Northwestern, and the Southwestern parts of Alaska. These areas are of predominately Eskimo population where Gravel had a distinct advantage of votes over Rivers.

What were the reasons why the native vote broke away from Rivers to Gravel? One of them, of course,

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was the popular appeal of the regional high school concept of which Gravel had a lot to do during the last session of the state legislature. This had an attractive ring to the native voters to whom education has become a very important goal during the last few years and who had cried out for high school facilities closer to home. And, too, there had been some opinion among our people that Rivers had not done much for them during his tenure of office in the many years past:

Another reason disturbing to the native people were remarks made to the Tundra Times by Rivers regarding the land question in Alaska. Last year, Chief Peter John of Minto had requested Rivers' assistance when the people there were making a claim of land around their village. When asked what he thought of Minto's blanket claim, he said he didn't believe in granting such large areas. "What would they do with it?" he asked. "They wouldn't use it. It would just lie there."

Rivers' remarks seemed careless and surprising to the native people. As a result, their ire was aroused. It made them look something less than intelligent.

The combination of the above reasons, as far as our people were concerned, came close to unseating Rivers in the primary. However, the die has been cast for last Tuesday's election. The native people who voted for what they thought was right should be warmly commended although their wishes fell short by a very slim margin of 1,300 votes. The performance was a good sign of things to come politically. The folks in the outlying areas are beginning to vote with firm convictions on issues and in the long run, this manner of using votes should begin to pay them beneficial returns for good efforts in the political picture of our state.

The promising voting performance calls for definite improvement, however. Perhaps an attempt should be made by native leaders and their organizations to affiliate with sister associations so that they can work more closely together. There is a great deal of common ground among some of these groups where such an effort might prove greatly beneficial for all concerned. Perhaps a conference of the organizations might be a good idea, say in October, in which such things might be discussed. If such a thing is attempted, one of themusts should be a discussion on public relations among the groups as well as public relations with the people of Alaska in general.

We are making a good start. We should leave no room for satisfaction at the present time for our fledgling political efforts until they begin to pay us returns in benefits. This can only come when more concerted attempts are made and which are worth a great deal to us in our future. The pooling of strength is needed now so it can help us in our endeavors for self-improvement in days to come.