Trump-backed Sarah Palin loses special election for Alaska congressional seat

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Former Alaska governor Sarah Palin was defeated in a special election to fill the vacancy for Alaska's one seat in the US House. The result of the August 16 runoff was announced by state election officials Wednesday afternoon, after they finished tabulating late-arriving mail-in ballots and recalculating vote totals under the new ranked-choice voting system.

Democrat Mary Peltola received 91,206 votes and Palin received 85,987 votes, giving Peltola victory by a margin of 51.5 percent to 48.5 percent. Turnout was heavy for a special election in August. Some 190,000 went to the polls, compared to 281,000 in the last mid-term general election in 2018.

Peltola would have won the seat under the traditional vote counting process, because the Republican vote was split nearly equally between Palin and Nick Begich, a conservative opposed to Trump's claims of a stolen election in 2020. Peltola won about 75,000 first-choice votes, ahead of Palin's 58,000 and Begich's 52,000.

Under the ranked choice system, Begich was eliminated as the third-ranking candidate and his votes redistributed between the two remaining candidates. While a majority of Begich's voters gave their second-choice ballots to Palin, a substantial minority did not, but chose Peltola or declined to make a choice. The result was that Palin closed the gap in the final tabulation, but still fell 5,200 votes short of overtaking the Democrat.

Peltola will occupy the House seat for the remaining four months of the term of Republican Don Young, who died in March at the age of 88. Young held the seat for more than 49 years, the longest term for any Republican congressman in history, and the bulk of Alaska's 60 years as a state with congressional representation.

The same three candidates will appear on the ballot again on November 3, along with a fourth candidate, either another Republican or a Libertarian, in the general election for a full two-year term. The main effort of the Republican Party will be to convince those voting for Palin and Begich to make the other candidate their second choice, so as to take advantage of the ranked-choice system—which Palin and Trump have been denouncing as an illegitimate form of "rigging" the election.

The result showed that Palin's status as the former Republican vice-presidential candidate and a national media celebrity, with access to enormous financial support, was not enough to prevail. She outspent Peltola by 4-1 in the special election. In the general election campaign, however, Begich may be the top spender, with a $750,000 boost from Americans for Prosperity, the political action committee founded by the ultra-right billionaire Koch brothers.

There has been a bitter split within the Republican camp, with Palin denouncing Begich as a "RINO" (Republican in name only) and hosting a rally at which ex-president Trump flew in to endorse Palin and attack Begich and Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski. Murkowski and Trump's anointed Senate challenger Kelly Tshibaka are both on the ballot in November, along with two lesser known Democrats.

The internal Republicans divisions were exacerbated when Palin indicated at one candidate forum that her own second-choice ballot would go to Peltola and not to Begich. Many of Begich's voters evidently decided to return the favor.

Begich, while espousing traditional right-wing Republican views on cutting business taxes and outlawing abortions, bears the name of the most prominent Democratic family in the state. He is a grandson of the Nick Begich, who was the Democratic

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congressman in Alaska until his death in a 1972 plane crash. Former one-term Democratic Senator Mark Begich is an uncle, as is Tom Begich, the current Democratic leader in the state senate.

Peltola highlighted her ancestry—she will be the first Alaska Native elected to Congress—and she has presented many of her policy stances as expressions of her rural indigenous roots. She opposes restrictions on gun ownership and any environmental regulations that clash with native hunting and fishing rights. She has also supported gas and oil development in environmentally sensitive areas like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on Alaska's North Slope.

At the same time, her campaign appealed directly to the upsurge of popular anger over the Supreme Court's decision this summer to repeal *Roe v. Wade* and allow state governments to eliminate abortion rights. The medical procedure is legal in Alaska and unlikely to be outlawed, but Palin has campaigned as a "pro-life" candidate who supports the Supreme Court decision and advocates a state ban.

The result in Alaska is the fifth such special election since the Supreme Court decision in which Democratic congressional candidates in vacant seats have run significantly better than President Joe Biden did in the same districts in 2020. In Nebraska, Minnesota and New York's 23rd Congressional District, Republicans retained seats despite a swing against them ranging from 5 to 10 percent.

In New York's 19th Congressional District, in the Hudson Valley, Democrat Pat Ryan retained a marginal Democratic seat that Trump had carried in 2020. Now in Alaska, the first seat has changed parties in a special election this year, with Peltola taking the seat long held by the Republicans.

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