

## Who Benefits from Alaskan's Binding Caucuses?

We've had many interesting legislative sessions in Alaska this last decade, but these last two years have really highlighted a unique situation we're in. When I say unique, I mean that no other state has a binding caucus in their legislature, and in fact, some have laws against the concept. So what is a binding caucus? A caucus is just a group of legislators that agree on one or more issues who want to work together to help advance those issues. There's certainly nothing wrong with that. The best legislation comes through cooperation. There is usually one large caucus that determines leadership and the direction of each body of the legislature.

However Alaska's type of binding caucus controls the whole body with a built-in commitment that says every member must vote for the capital and operating budget. They must also vote with leadership on every single technical process motion. The caucus is joined because of 'quid pro quo'. The legislators joining the caucus get the benefits of powerful committee positions and extra staff. So what does this all mean?

First, the elected official must agree to vote for bills and motions up-front, up to two years in advance. This is before they've read the bill or heard the motion. Second, they have to vote that way even if it hurts their district and constituents. Third, they must vote that way even if it violates their conscience. Finally, there is punishment for those who don't vote as they are told. They can be thrown out of the caucus, or as we saw this last session, lose most of their staff and their committee positions, which happened to three different Senators.

The main purpose for the binding caucus is to concentrate power in the hands of the leadership. Those who are accepted into leadership have the power to do anything they want. That's how they were able to strip out the COVID stimulus that was voted into the budget. It's how they were able to steal two-thirds of your PFD this year even though the votes were against them. The entire budget in the Senate was determined by the six members of leadership, so most districts had no say in the budget.

Alaska's binding caucus is so much worse than that. The legislative leaders have decided that statute no longer applies to them. So when the Governor called a session in Wasilla in accordance with Alaska statute and Constitution, the Legislative leadership decided that they were above statute and they refused to meet anywhere but Juneau (where all their perks and lobbyists were). What's "funny" is that that was the same statute that they had used a few years before to not meet in Juneau when Governor Walker called a special session and they voted to meet in Anchorage. So yeah, they obey the law when it works for them. After the governor changed his mind and everyone was in Juneau they punished the Senate Majority Leader for obeying the law and stripped her of her position. Remember, every time they choose to go over a 90-day session they are breaking statute, since the people voted in a 90-day session limit that hasn't been revoked.

When I was on the Assembly, if we needed to do something different than what was in code; like waiving Title 16, then we brought forth an ordinance that said that, took public testimony on it, and voted on it publicly. In our Legislature, the leadership of the binding caucus just makes up rules as they go along, being completely unaccountable to the people and even breaking their own uniform rules of conduct.

This whole situation these last two years has really brought the integrity issues of the binding caucus to light, and so many of the Republican primaries around the State are happening because of the dissatisfaction with how our Legislators have been acting or how they have been cowed into inaction. For those in districts with these kind of primaries this is the critical issue that you need to ask your candidates about. It's time to free our legislators to vote with integrity as representatives of the people in their districts. Please hold their feet to the fire.