

1. ELECTIONS: In Alaska, doubts about climate change rise with a new politician (08/26/2010)

Evan Lehmann, E&E reporter

Alaska's cliffhanger primary is poised to propel a climate skeptic toward the U.S. Senate, observers say, likely bolstering the number of nominations achieved by conservative candidates who challenge manmade global warming.

Republican Joe Miller, a former judge with a Yale law degree, showcased Sen. Lisa Murkowski's past support for climate legislation, among other things, before slipping by her at the voting stations Tuesday to capture a 1,900 vote lead with several thousand absentee ballots still being counted.

Miller believes the scientific findings behind climate change are in "serious question." That position might have benefited him when he dipped into Murkowski's past and tied her efforts to soften cap-and-trade proposals in 2007 with aggressive Democratic climate policies this year.

The attack amounted to "corroboration" for voters that Murkowski is too willing to side with Democrats, says Dave Dittman, a Republican pollster and consultant who worked in the past with Murkowski's father, Frank.

Joe Miller

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Sen. Lisa Murkowski

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"Alaskans by a wide, wide margin do not believe in man-caused global warming," he said, pointing to a recent poll by his firm finding that just 33 percent of state residents believe humans are contributing to climate change. Five percent said the planet is cooling.

Murkowski tried to temper her positions before the race. She edged away from the manmade climate issue, saying this summer that she's unsure to what extent humans are responsible for warming. Instead, she focused on helping villagers and other Alaskans who are already feeling the effects of climate change -- whether it's naturally occurring or not.

The positioning gave Miller another avenue of attack. He put the spotlight on her political swinging. Meanwhile, he staked out the conservative acreage around the climate issue for himself.

"It's not like this is a fringe perspective," Miller said of challenging climate science in an interview this summer. "I don't think anybody's going to

argue that there's cyclical warming patterns. Are these cyclical patterns that we've observed over time, and the pattern that we're in right now, is it the consequence of manmade emissions?"

"And that's not been proven," he added. "I think the jury's well out on that right now."

'Just give me the facts'

That position is finding a home in several races around the country, as conservative candidates tap into voter uncertainty around climate change while defining it as an ideological agenda item for Democrats and their GOP allies.

Sharron Angle, the winner of Nevada's Republican Senate primary, doesn't believe in manmade climate change. She faces Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) in November.

Ron Johnson, who's favored to win Wisconsin's GOP Senate primary next month, says sunspots are more likely the cause of Earth's warming than emissions. Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wis.) is launching a quick counterattack, accusing Johnson of making "pop science embarrassed," according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

In West Virginia, where Republicans hope to capture a long-held Democratic House seat in the first congressional district, Republican primary winner David McKinley says he's unsure if the region's coal contributes to global warming.

"Is this just a natural cyclical occurrence? I don't know," McKinley said of climatic trends in an interview this month. "On one day I'll read this is the coolest winter we've experienced, or the coolest summer. And then others will say, 'No this is the hottest.' Well which is right? They can't both be right. Just give me the facts."

"Could there be ozone depleting emissions? Yes," he added. "What do we do about it? We don't shut off the coal."

Back in Alaska, the winner of the GOP primary for lieutenant governor, Mead Treadwell, also questions whether human activities play a role in climate change.

Murkowski, threatened, didn't fight back

Treadwell resigned as chairman of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission in May. During his nine-year tenure, the Bush appointee helped set the federal government's research agenda for the rapidly evolving region,

which is warming twice as fast as the global average.

"The Arctic is perhaps hurt worst by climate change sped up by emissions from global fossil fuel use," Treadwell wrote in an April 3 op-ed published in the Anchorage Daily News. "Responsible Arctic regions will work hard to advance technologies to make oil use more benign, including carbon capture and sequestration."

But his campaign website contains no mention of climate change. And in a written statement submitted to the Wasilla-based Conservative Patriots Group seeking its endorsement, Treadwell said he is not convinced that carbon dioxide emissions produced by burning fossil fuels are driving climate change.

"I challenge the argument that man made CO2 emissions are causing significant global warming and I will oppose any costly new regulations that would increase unemployment, raise consumer prices and weaken the nation's global competitiveness," he wrote.

Treadwell easily defeated challengers Jay Ramras, Eddie Burke and Bob Lupo, winning 53 percent of the vote with 429 of 438 precincts reporting

The Senate outcome in Alaska might have repercussions for future climate debates.

Murkowski was considered a potential swing vote on cap and trade this year, despite her hardened position. She's the top Republican on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and co-sponsored a cap-and-trade bill in 2007. Her Senate office says she sought to moderate its impact on businesses and ratepayers by seeking to limit the price of carbon allowances at \$12.

But if Murkowski had a story to tell, her message fizzled, several observers say. The senator underestimated Miller, a political no-name, and failed to hit back on attacks launched on radio and television, they said.

"She didn't take the threats seriously enough," said Jerry McBeath, a political science professor at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. "She had all the benefits of incumbency, and she did use them to her advantage."

Alaska Dems hopeful; conservatives cautious

While Miller and the Tea Party were targeting her for failing to tackle Democratic initiatives on healthcare and stimulus spending - both of which

she opposed - Murkowski focused on President Obama.

"She never went negative," said Jennifer Duffy, senior editor of the Cook Political Report. "In an environment like this, you can take nothing for granted."

The final vote count probably won't be done for several days, even a week, as absentee ballots continue to come in. But Murkowski's "overconfidence" almost certainly means the senator lost her seat, Duffy added.

"My sense is that it will be something of a miracle to pull this out," she said.

Miller, meanwhile, accelerated into the race after being endorsed this summer by former Gov. Sarah Palin. The Tea Party Express came to his aid with about \$500,000 in reported advertising funding.

After her endorsement, Palin largely remained in the background. Until the final week, when she recorded a robocall attacking Murkowski, whose father she unseated in a Republican primary for governor in 2006.

"She's waffled on the repeal of Obamacare, co-sponsored cap and trade and voted for TARP," Palin said, referring to the Troubled Asset Relief Program. "Joe Miller has the right ideas for Alaska."

Murkowski's likely defeat has excited Democrats, who believe Miller will be an easier target in November than the senator most people call "Lisa."

"I think we're gonna have our second Senate seat," said Patti Higgins, chairwoman of the Alaska Democratic Party.

But impartial observers believe it's unlikely that Sitka Mayor Scott McAdams, the Democrat, has the name recognition or funding to beat Miller.

And the count isn't over yet. Frank Bettine, an official with Wasilla's Tea Party chapter, which supported Miller, never thought they would come away with the nomination.

"I'll be quite honest, we expected the numbers to be reversed," Bettine said after his morning moose hunt. "But we still got lots of absentee ballots to count. We don't want to be too cocky yet."

Reporter Lauren Morello contributed.