



NATIONAL JOURNAL

AK-SEN

After skiing down a glacier and taking on a grizzly, Gross reaches \$4M for Senate campaign

Gross joins a list of long-shot, well-funded Democratic Senate candidates.



Al Gross skis down a glacier in a campaign video.

Mini Racker

🕒 June 15, 2020, 8 p.m.

It was very quiet. Dr. Al Gross was looking out over the water on a duck-hunting trip with a friend in the Sweetheart flats, near where, as a teenager, he had hunted with his father, former Alaska Attorney General Avrum Gross, and then-Gov. Jay Hammond. He turned around to find a grizzly bear standing four feet away.

“It was one of the scariest moments of my entire life,” Gross recalled in an interview with *National Journal*. “I screamed as loud as I could.”

After the bear had torn up the pair’s chairs and eaten their ducks, it approached them. When it came too close for comfort, he and his hunting partner shot it in self defense.

Gross, a first-time candidate running for Senate in Alaska, mentions the incident in an introductory video he released in July. Both Gross and his opponent, Sen. Dan Sullivan, emphasize the state’s sluggish economy—which is tightly intertwined with its natural resources—as the election’s key issue. Tourism in Alaska, where cruises and [national parks](https://www.ktuu.com/content/news/Alaskan-destinations-among-National-Park-Services-delayed-openings-closures-568978331.html) are favorite attractions, has taken a big hit from the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, the climate crisis is [wreaking havoc on Alaska](https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/dcra/ClimateChange.aspx) (<https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/dcra/ClimateChange.aspx>), depleting hauls for subsistence hunters.

Sullivan’s pitch is that he has been working hard for the past six years to cut red tape that makes it more difficult for Alaskans to earn a living. Gross’s is that his background in medicine, and in less traditional endeavors—buying three boats

before he owned his first car, for instance, or travelling by one from Juneau to Auckland, New Zealand with a young family—demonstrates the work ethic and ambition he will bring to the job.

Within the state, Gross thinks he's getting plenty of eyes—cheap media markets mean that the campaign can put its fundraising to good use. Gross exclusively told *National Journal* that he has raised more than \$4 million, up \$1 million from the last quarterly fundraising deadline at the end of March.

Gross's money seems to be having an impact. On Friday, *The Cook Political Report* made the Senate race's rating more favorable to Democrats, shifting it from [Solid to Likely Republican](https://cookpolitical.com/analysis/senate/alaska-senate/alaska-senate-moves-likely-republican) (<https://cookpolitical.com/analysis/senate/alaska-senate/alaska-senate-moves-likely-republican>). Gross joins a group of well-funded Democratic Senate candidates with compelling stories in states that are unlikely to flip—Kentucky, South Carolina, and Texas—who have consolidated national Democratic support even as they've tried to steer clear of national politics.

Gross has the backing of the state Democratic Party, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and End Citizens United, a group aligned with Democrats. But you won't find the word "Democrat" on his website, let alone any of those endorsements.

The [latest numbers](#)

(<http://www.elections.alaska.gov/statistics/2020/JUN/VOTERS%20BY%20PARTY%20AND%20PRECINCT.htm#STATEWIDE>) in Alaska show that 58 percent of voters are politically unaffiliated. Gross is among them; he registered as an independent when he was 18, influenced by growing up around his Democratic father and Hammond, a Republican who appointed his dad and spent time with the family. Gross's video does not mention his political affiliation either, or his opponent's—only that Sullivan votes with the GOP more than 90 percent of the time.

In his introductory video, Gross stands on a boat with his back to the water and needles the senator: “Out here, if you can’t think for yourself, you won’t survive.”

Sullivan’s campaign manager, Matt Shuckerow, noted that Gross still has to clear a primary featuring 2018 House candidate Christopher Cumings and former Seward Mayor Edgar Blatchford. He also called Sullivan “a very bipartisan senator” and disputed Gross’s independence.

“He’s running on the theme of flipping the Senate blue,” Shuckerow said. “Any candidate that embraces the endorsement of Chuck Schumer is not an independent.”

Find an Alaska politician and you’ll find a candidate who won’t be boxed in by Lower 48 ideas of how to run for office. Sure, you have your doctors and teachers, as well as members of the state’s political dynasties. But on both sides of the aisle, politicians carve out their own brands.

The most obvious example is Sen. Lisa Murkowski. In 2010, she lost the Republican nomination only to win her write-in campaign in the general election. She may face another tough contest in 2022. After voting against repealing Obamacare and confirming Brett Kavanaugh, she admitted this month that she was [wavering](https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/04/politics/lisa-murkowski-mattis-trump-reaction/index.html) on supporting Trump in November. In response, he vowed to campaign against her.

“Get any candidate ready, good or bad, I don’t care, I’m endorsing. If you have a pulse, I’m with you!” the president [tweeted](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1268688014630322177).

Sullivan cuts a different profile from Murkowski. Three weeks ago, he posted a fundraising plea from Donald Trump Jr. It is the only video on his campaign channel uploaded since his last election.

“He’s worked with my father to get great things done for Alaska and the country,” Trump Jr. says in the clip. “Protecting Senator Dan Sullivan and the Alaska seat are critical to keeping our Senate majority.”

Several of the policy achievements Sullivan’s campaign touts have centered on the state’s natural resources. On his campaign website, Sullivan features an article about his bipartisan bill to combat marine debris, which Trump signed in 2018. And in 2017, the Republican tax-reform bill included a provision to permit drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—an allowance for which Alaska Republicans had fought for decades. The plan has upset environmentalists, who want to see the wilderness protected from development.

“We understand that Alaska has earned an almost mythological place in the minds of many Americans,” Sullivan wrote in a 2019 [joint *Wall Street Journal* op-ed](https://www.wsj.com/articles/unlocking-arctic-energy-is-vital-for-alaskaand-america-11568243056) (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/unlocking-arctic-energy-is-vital-for-alaskaand-america-11568243056>) with Murkowski and Young last year. “But we cannot be treated like a snow globe, to be placed on the shelf for viewing pleasure only.”

That “snow globe” quality has made the Alaskan outdoors a popular subject for campaign materials. Alaskan politicians often highlight their connection to the outdoors. The strategy is perhaps most apparent in Gross’s introductory video, as well as in a February ad focused on climate change in which Gross skis down a glacier.

Mark Putnam, who is responsible for the creative decisions behind Gross’s ads, said the video highlighted the ways in which Gross represents what is quintessentially Alaskan, and that it gave the campaign the opportunity to get on the radar of environmental groups while promoting an Alaskan adventure contest, which donors would be automatically entered in.

“There’s something about what people in the lower 48 romanticize about Alaska,” he said. “They’ve never been there, but they want to go.”

Landing pages for the campaigns of all major congressional candidates feature them standing outside, often in front of the state’s marshlands or mountains.

Alyse Galvin, an independent running for the state’s House seat with Democratic support, said that her background as an angler and hunter who fills her freezer every year helps her connect to Alaskans who she is just meeting.

Her opponent, Rep. Don Young, still an outdoorsman at 87, said his experiences in nature have given him “a different perspective” from other politicians who are less aware of the natural resources that the country depends on.

“They don’t even know where meat comes from, or they think it should just come from a vegetable,” Young said.