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Now K Street has its own senator: Lisa Murkowski

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Now that she has apparently won re-election without the backing of the Republican Party, Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski is in debt to nobody -- besides the revolving-door K Street lobbyists and government contractors who financed her write-in campaign.

As her write-in votes surpassed the votes for Republican nominee Joe Miller this week, Murkowski asserted her independence from the party.



Murkowski told the press she feels liberated because she won "not because I came as my party's nominee but because a very, very wide range of Alaskans of all political stripes have stepped up and said 'you're the person we want to represent us in Washington.'" The Hill newspaper reported, "Murkowski said her 'backbone is stiffer, straighter'" from winning as a write-in.

And how is Murkowski standing up to the GOP bosses? By rejecting the party's earmark ban and promising to pork up spending bills with parochial, unauthorized pet projects that, no doubt, will help her political allies.

Murkowski has repeatedly said this week she will continue to request earmarks, justifying them because Alaska is a "young" state (a "young state" that takes five dollars in spending for every dollar in taxes it sends to Washington, according to the Cato Institute).

Murkowski points out that the Republican Senate Conference rule banning earmarks has no real enforcement mechanism, and says she'll chose Alaska over the party.

But Murkowski's earmarking shows us that pork isn't about helping out the home state as much as it's about rewarding political donors and greasing the gears of the political patronage machine.

The "Alaska Mafia," as it's known on Capitol Hill, K Street, and in the 49th state, is a network of former aides to Murkowski, her father, Frank, the late Sen. Ted Stevens, and Rep. Don Young -- all Republicans. The aides now populate K Street firms like Van Ness Feldman, BlueWater Strategies, and

Birch & Horton, winning earmarks and special favors for their clients -- Alaska towns and privileged Alaska Native Corporations.

Lobbyist Jack Ferguson, a former aide to Young and Stevens, is regarded as a don of the Alaska Mafia and a maestro at winning earmarks. This is the underappreciated part of earmarks and part of why they are so corrupting: Earmarks don't just transfer wealth from taxpayers in the lower 48 to people of Kenai, Alaska. Along the way, they enrich revolving-door lobbyists who recycle the money back to Murkowski and Young.

And earmarks aren't the only favors passed around the Alaska Mafia. When K Street firm Brown & Rudnick announced Wednesday it had hired Murkowski's former chief of staff and Stevens alumnus George Lowe, the firm touted that its new lobbyist had, as a staffer, "helped pass legislation regarding financial incentives ... for an Alaska gas line project."

Most lucrative for the Murkowski-Stevens-Young crowd, though, are the Alaska Native Corporations. The for-profit businesses are exempt from most competition rules for government contracts, and so they make billions of dollars off of the taxpayers. But the ANCs, which qualify for special minority-business favors, often function as front companies, passing the actual work to well-established contractors who couldn't have received as favorable terms from Uncle Sam.

The ANCs are technically owned by Alaska Natives, but the Natives get a tiny fraction of the companies' revenues -- \$615 per Native annually, according to the office of Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo. Most of the spoils go to the Alaska Mafiosi who run the companies or lobby for them.

When you realize how dependent on federal favors these Alaska-connected corporations, local politicians, and lobbyists are, it's clear why they went to the mat to save Murkowski after she lost the primary in August -- especially because Miller is a limited-government conservative.

If *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court decision allowing corporate spending on politics, affected the outcome of one race this year, it was Murkowski's. Eight ANCs poured \$50,000 to \$140,000 directly from their corporate treasuries into a "Super PAC" called "Alaskans Standing Together," which spent \$920,000 attacking Miller and boosting Murkowski. Because the Natives are the shareholders of the ANCs, this amounted to corporate bosses (the highest paid of whom are non-Native) using Natives' money to elect the woman who would then perpetuate the favor factory for these corporations and their lobbyists.

The media loves political independents and deifies "centrists." But often, centrists of both parties are simply those who lack principal and instead set their political compass according to what is politically expedient or what helps their friends.

Expect Murkowski, as she bucks the GOP over the next six years, to get plenty of adulation. And expect her friends to get plenty of your money.

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