

Are runoff results predetermined?

Leader in first go-round consistently wins the runoff

By Carolyn Sackariason – The Aspen Times, May 10, 2007

ASPEN — If history does repeat itself, then the results of the upcoming city runoff election are already a done deal. Since Aspen instituted runoffs in 2001, the majority of voters have selected the same candidates in both elections. "The runoff positions have not changed the May positions," said City Clerk Kathryn Koch. There have been three runoff city elections in the past eight years, all of which have generated the same outcomes of the prior votes. In 2001, Helen Klanderud got 850 votes in the mayoral election, and Rachel Richards received 658. In the runoff, Klanderud won. In May 2003, Torre got 566 votes in the race for City Council, and Tony Hershey received 542. Torre won the runoff. In May 2005, Jack Johnson received 823 votes for council, and Dee Malone got 671 votes. Johnson won in the runoff.

Where it began

The impetus for runoffs was born out of the 1999 mayoral race between Richards and Klanderud - with Richards winning by 14 votes. Some felt it wasn't a clear enough mandate, so City Council posed a charter amendment to the voters in the fall of 2000. Voters approved runoff elections by a margin of 3-to-1, Koch said.

Before the charter amendment, whoever had the most votes won. It was called a "plurality" election. The runoff system is part of a "majority" election in which a mayoral candidate must win with 50 percent of the vote, plus one, and City Council candidates must win by 45 percent, plus one vote.

Koch estimates that the runoff elections have cost taxpayers more than \$21,000. "That doesn't include man-hours," she added.

What's more, history has shown that fewer people make it to the polls in runoff elections.

In May 2001, 2,003 people voted; in the June runoff, it was 1,810. In May 2003, 1,903 people voted; in June, 1,566 cast ballots. May 2005 drew 2,318 voters, and the next month attracted 986.

'It helps'

Toni Kronberg is the only current candidate who supports runoff elections - she benefited from the majority election Tuesday. She inched into the runoff by placing third with 487 votes. She'll go up against Steve Skadron, who placed second with 862 votes. Dwayne Romero won a City Council seat outright by placing first with 1,126 votes.

"It helps because it ensures that the person gets the majority," Kronberg said, adding that it's difficult for voters to differentiate among candidates, especially in a field of eight like in Tuesday's election. Kronberg said that because of the runoff, she has a second opportunity to reach more voters with her message. In order for Kronberg to win, she'll have to get most of the 800 votes that went to other candidates.

"Is it a daunting task? I don't think it is," she said. "It's doable."

The other three candidates all support some sort of election reform that would either do away with runoff elections altogether or implement an instant voting system, where voters would note their second and third choices on the ballot.

"This whole runoff thing, I don't see how the community benefits waiting a whole month," Skadron said, adding he only needed 28 votes to win on Tuesday. "My total was almost double [Kronberg's]." Mayoral candidates Mick Ireland and Tim Semrau will face off June 5 as well. Ireland, who garnered 1,036 votes, needed 57 more votes to beat Semrau, who brought in 747. Ireland favors moving the municipal election to a time when more people are in town, particularly because the economy has shifted in town, and summer attracts high numbers of residents.

"Instant voting is worth looking at and so is having the election at the end of June," Ireland said.

Problems and solutions

Many candidates have complained over the years that low voter turnout hurt their chances because the elections take place in the height of offseason, when people leave town for extended vacations.

A citizen initiative posed a ballot question in 1989 asking to move the municipal election to the general election in November. It passed, 1,041 to 932. But then a little more than a year later, another citizen initiative prompted a special election in July 1990 asking to repeal the earlier vote. It was approved, 342-175, moving the municipal election back to May. City residents never had a chance to vote on municipal matters in November, another offseason month when fewer people are in town.

Councilman Johnson in July 2006 convinced his colleagues to pursue possible changes to the election system, which ultimately would require voter approval. Koch did some initial research on instant voting, finally determining that it would be nearly impossible with multiple candidates vying for more than one seat up for election on a single ballot, as is the case in the council race. As a result, the effort lost momentum.

State Rep. John Kefalas, D-Larimer, introduced a bill to the state Legislature earlier this year that would create a study group to investigate this summer "advanced voting methods," which includes instant voting and other processes that would allow voters to express preferences on multiple candidates. Lawmakers rejected a proposed pilot project, but the study group is still pursuing the endeavor, said Jenny Flanagan, executive director of Colorado Common Cause, a Denver-based nonprofit that supports instant voting. Flanagan recognizes that there are challenges to instant voting, similar to what Koch has pointed out, but she said she is confident solutions can be found.

Common Cause believes instant voting elects public officials with higher voter turnout and encourages candidates to run campaigns that are less negative.

"Instant runoffs would save municipalities a lot of money, as well as the candidates," she said. "We're hopeful more municipalities pursue advanced voting methods."