

## Clark County Board of Freeholders, 2013-14

# Partisan or Nonpartisan Elections

### Considerations

- Whether in the context of executive or legislative positions, America has a long history of partisan elections.
- Elected officials in Washington general law counties run in partisan races with the exception of District and Superior Court judges, whose positions are nonpartisan.
- Election on a nonpartisan basis was central to Progressive era reforms introduced near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Largely, it was a response to the “party machine” systems that had developed in large cities and counties. Reformers aimed to reduce corruption and patronage, increase voter choice, attract more candidates, and improve governmental efficiencies by limiting the power of party bosses to control the ballot. Reformers thought that by removing party cues, voters would more diligently seek other information and become better informed about candidates. Reformers also decried parties as symbols of divisiveness and narrow self-interest.
- The reformers were effective. Today, more than half of races in local U.S. elections are nonpartisan, so a good deal of academic research has been conducted on differences between partisan and nonpartisan. The results show three primary tendencies for nonpartisan races:
  - Voter turnout tends to be an average 10 percent less in nonpartisan elections than partisan elections.
  - Candidates’ party affiliations have less impact on voters in nonpartisan elections.
  - If party identification is not readily available, the impact of incumbency (and its associated name recognition) on voter choice becomes a stronger variable.
- Political science research has consistently shown that in the absence of a widespread crisis or similar galvanizing event, voters tend to be poorly informed and only moderately interested in local politics. Therefore, they are prone to reliance on informational short-cuts such as political party labels.
- Research has not supported the Progressive era idea that removing party labels leads to an increase in voters seeking alternative information about candidates. Instead, voters tend to rely on secondary short-cut cues such as name recognition, despite that those secondary short-cuts may be less informative than party affiliation.

### **Summary**

In politics, partisan refers to an election when a candidate for public office is required to declare his or her political party allegiance, affiliation or affinity, or list “none” as the alternative. An individual is partisan to the extent she or he adheres to the values and perspectives articulated by a particular political party, faction, ideal or cause. The more partisan one is (referred to as “partisanship”), the more likely one is to exhibit uncritical allegiance. Nonpartisan, on the other hand, is an election when no declaration of political party allegiance, affiliation or affinity is allowed by the jurisdiction holding the election.

- Extensive experimentation by Squire and Smith during the 1980s found the percentage of voters without opinions about candidates decreased substantially when voters were given partisan information. Researchers came to two conclusions: in a nonpartisan election voters were generally unaware of candidates' party affiliation, and voters felt less confident in their voting decisions without partisan cues.
- Persons of color tend to participate in political processes at a lower rate than whites. Therefore, when nonpartisan races draw low voter turnout, election results can disproportionately impact people of color.
- The percentage of Americans who prefer not to identify with party membership is increasing. This is particularly true for younger voters. Younger voters are more likely to view partisan elections as a problem that leads to divisiveness rather than a coalescing force that boosts participation in the political system.
- Elective county offices are currently partisan by state law, in accordance with Washington Initiative 872 (I-872), the People's Choice Initiative of 2004. Section 4 of I-872 states as follows: "The following are partisan offices: (3) All county offices except (a) judicial offices and (b) those offices for which a county home rule charter provides otherwise." Thus, it is under the authority of I-872 that county elective offices may be changed to nonpartisan through the home rule charter process.

### **Perspectives**

- Like fans rooting for sports teams, voters can develop psychological attachment to political parties. This attachment can override other considerations and negate voter objectivity. Put differently, when party identification becomes the central motivator for decision making, it decreases the voter's openness to learning about and critically evaluating policy positions, values, and perspectives for all candidates.
- On the other hand, due to psychological attachment, political party identification can motivate people to become more engaged in political processes. Surface evidence of this is shown in studies indicating average voter turnout is about 10 percent higher for partisan vs. nonpartisan elections.
- For politicians, party affiliation and identification can make an important difference in generating campaign financing since party money can augment personal campaign financing.
- Some potential candidates may be discouraged from running for partisan offices when they feel their values/beliefs do not align substantially with positions articulated by the major political parties.
- Some research has shown that nonpartisan elections are more advantageous for incumbents than challengers. When voters lack a party label with which to affiliate their vote, they simply resort to name familiarity and that familiarity is usually stronger with incumbents.
- Given that younger voters tend *not* to favor partisanship, a continuing emphasis on partisan elections could disenchant and disenfranchise younger voters. It is speculated that, over time, such disenchantment could lead to further deterioration in voter turnout.