

Why It Was a Wise Decision To NOT Put Non-Partisan Elections For the County Commission on the Ballot

Submitted by Jim Aikin, Gainesville

1) What is a non-partisan election?

Just to be clear, under the proposed charter amendment, County Commission candidates would not run in closed party primaries as they do now. Instead, all candidates for a given seat would appear on the same ballot, without identification as to their party affiliation, and all qualified voters, regardless of party affiliation, could vote in that election. In other words, it would be the same procedure as is followed for Gainesville City Commission elections.

2) What is the origin of non-partisan elections?

At the time of the Civil War, American politics became a two-party system. After Reconstruction, many areas of the country were so dominated by a single party that the non-dominant party did not even field candidates for elected office. Party primary elections, closed to all but the members of the given party, were the norm.

Non-partisan elections were promoted by the electoral reform movement that had grown out of the women's suffrage movement in the early 20th century, about a hundred years ago.

3) What conditions are non-partisan elections intended to remedy?

The main purpose of non-partisan elections was to allow the members of the non-dominant party the opportunity to vote in the elections that would select their actual government officials, particularly local elected officials.

Other considerations included increasing involvement in elections by allowing all voters to vote, broadening the range of candidates for office since they would not be required to be affiliated with the dominant party, reducing the cost of elections by reducing the number of elections that must be held, and reducing the role of parties and political bosses in local elections,

4) Do any of those conditions apply to Alachua County Commission elections?

In short – not really.

It's true that prior to the 1980's, winning the Democratic primary was tantamount to winning the County Commission seat. But since 1988 that situation has virtually ceased to exist. Alachua County is no longer a "one-party state."

Since 1988 a total of 28 County Commission seats have come up for election. In 20 of those races, the Democratic nominee has faced either a Republican candidate (17 times) or a "no-party" candidate (3 times) in the November general election, when all voters get to vote. In only 8 races was the winner decided in the Democratic primary, and in 2 of those, the Democratic incumbent ran unopposed. All of these 8 races took place in the 1990's. Since 2000 *all* County Commission races have gone to the November general election ballot. The two-party system is alive and well in Alachua County, and no one seems to doubt that it will remain so.

As to the secondary purposes of increasing involvement and broadening the range of candidates:

Voter turnout in fall elections is already at its peak—everyone who's going to vote *does* vote. Other reforms have removed the barriers to third-party and no-party candidates getting on the ballot. There's simply little or no room for improvement on these issues.

As to the secondary purpose of reducing the number, and thereby, the cost of elections:

This does not apply to elections held in the fall of even-numbered years. Even if there are no party primaries for county offices, there will still be party primaries for state and federal offices.

As to the final secondary purpose of reducing the role of parties and political bosses:

First, the era of political bosses determining the outcome of elections is a distant memory, if it ever existed in Alachua County. More importantly, it's simply naive to believe that political parties can be taken out of local elections merely by letting all voters vote on all the candidates and not identifying candidates' party registration on the ballot.

The Democratic and Republican parties will continue to be hugely interested in whether their members are elected to a local "non-partisan" office, for several reasons. Once in office, they're free to display their party affiliation in all their words and actions. In many cases, even when someone is elected in a non-partisan election, they automatically become an official in their party's county executive committee. Furthermore, city and county elected office is often the springboard to higher elected office, which almost always will be a partisan race. All these factors strengthen the political party any victorious candidate belongs to. Making elections "non-partisan" doesn't do anything to make *politicians* non-partisan.

5) Other comments...

"If it's good enough for the City of Gainesville, why isn't it good for Alachua County?"

Several speakers have asked this question rhetorically, as though it doesn't have an answer, but in fact, it does highlight important differences between Gainesville City Commission and Alachua County Commission elections.

Looking at the purposes outlined in Section #3 above:

Gainesville implemented non-partisan races decades ago, when it would have been a solidly "one-party system." That was exactly the type of situation non-partisan elections were intended to remedy. Allowing all voters to vote unquestionably increases the turnout in City Commission spring elections, which are usually the only matters on the ballot. Also, if Gainesville were to switch to partisan elections now, the number of elections necessary would increase by 50% in most years and so would the cost, since City Commission elections are not held in the fall.

Therefore, it's clear that the conditions that *don't* apply to Alachua County Commission races *do* apply to Gainesville City Commission elections.

In conclusion, electing County Commissioners via non-partisan elections is an idea whose time has come and gone. Long gone. And whose time is unlikely to ever return.