

“What’s Best for Tulsa?”

League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Tulsa 2010 – 2011 Local Study

January 2011 Unit Meeting Study Issue/Questions

Partisan versus Non-Partisan Local Elections

The following document was prepared by the Tucson League of Women Voters in 2001. The city of Tucson is still debating the topic. As of 2004, twenty-one of the thirty largest cities in the United States conducted non-partisan local elections (National League of Cities, 9/2004). The ones who at that time conducted partisan elections includes New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, San Francisco, Baltimore, Washington D. C., Charlotte, North Carolina and Tucson. This list may have changed since 2004. According to David Schleicher, law professor at George Mason University, who has studied municipal elections about 75% of American cities have embraced nonpartisan voting. In Oklahoma Ada, Ardmore, Bartlesville, Claremore, Edmond, Lawton, Midwest City, Oklahoma City, Owasso and Muskogee conduct nonpartisan local elections. Broken Arrow and Tulsa conduct partisan local elections (Tulsa League of Women Voters document).

The arguments included in the Tucson Document for and against non-partisan elections remain relevant to this month’s discussion.

Greater Tucson League of Women Voters

Facts and Issues:

Partisan and Non-Partisan Elections

Nonpartisan elections (elections in which party affiliations are not indicated on ballots) started in the 20th century as a reform movement in an effort to curb existing political party machines that tended to control local governments for their own uses, especially municipalities. Reformers felt that nonpartisanship would take partisan politics out of local governments and restrict local campaigning to local issues thereby eliminating extraneous state issues from local elections. Tucson’s elections have always been partisan (candidates run on a party ticket), and therefore there is no indication in our records that there has been a large movement to change until recently, when The Southern Arizona Leadership Council interested May Walkup and others in the state.

Nonpartisan elections can be conducted in various ways. For instance, candidates can be represented as part of a slate sponsored by an interest group (neighborhood associations, etc.) or as individuals who develop their own campaigns.

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Arguments in favor of nonpartisan

1. Nonpartisan elections encourage more people, not just party members, to run for local office.
2. They encourage people who do not have strong political ambitions, i.e., to be members of Congress, to take part in government at home.
3. More people today who classify themselves as independent don’t want to have to vote only for party members. *(Note: In Tulsa, voters registered as independent cannot vote in primary elections unless an independent candidate is running.)*
4. A political party is only part of the community, not the whole community, and community officials should serve the whole and not be answerable to a party.
5. Most local issues are not partisan type issues: garbage pickup or street bumps, for instance. These issues do not need the expertise or information that parties might provide in wider issues
6. As nonpartisans, Mayor and Council might find it easier to work together, if they do not have party dogmas to consider.
7. People who wish to go to partisan state or national office can continue to do so. Most officials in other cities are nonpartisan and have no problems moving on.
8. Candidates can make their own views clearer without having to take party stands into consideration

Arguments in favor of partisan

1. Once committed to a party it becomes an embarrassment for a party member to reverse and run for an office that is nonpartisan.
2. Parties will continue to operate on the local level to support or oppose candidates, even if the elections are nonpartisan.
3. Some studies have shown that minorities are not necessarily better off under reformed city governments, including those with nonpartisan elections.
4. Without party labels, voters will find it more difficult to distinguish among candidates’ positions on issues and may more readily rely on such things as personality, ethnic identification or place on ballot.
5. Party membership does not determine whether council members can work together well.
6. Factions tend to develop in any case whether they are called parties or not. Like-minded people tend to join together.
7. Partisan local elections help recruit and train candidates for running for higher office.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Would non-partisan elections in Tulsa’s municipal elections encourage larger voter turnout?
2. Would non-partisan elections attract more qualified and diverse candidates?
3. What functions do political parties provide for local elections and who would assume those functions in a non-partisan election?
4. Should the Tulsa League of Women Voters favor or oppose non-partisan local elections?