

A Brief Description of Charlottesville City Council Elections, 1960-2011

This summary history of Charlottesville City Council elections from 1960 through 2011 attempts to highlight some of the historical trends and key elements of an important era of Charlottesville's political evolution.

General Data

- Over this fifty year period, 141 candidates sought election for 68 City Council seats.
- Of the 141 candidates, 68 were Democrats, 46 were Republicans, and 27 were Independents.
- Of the elected 68 City Councilors, 57 were Democrats and 11 were Republicans. No Independents have ever been elected.

Civil Rights, McGovern, and the Rise of the Republican Party in the South

Charlottesville has the unfortunate designation as being one of the flash points of “Massive Resistance” in Virginia during the late 1950's. Following the 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education decision, Virginia embarked on a confrontational anti-integration strategy that resulted in the closing of public schools in several localities, including Charlottesville.

As the Civil Rights movement intensified, tensions in Charlottesville and across the country increased as well. As domestic opposition to the Vietnam War crystallized and as anti-war and progressive groups coalesced around the Democratic Party and gained increasing control of its nomination processes, many conservative southern Democrats began abandoning the Democratic Party.

Following the “democratizing” reforms of the McGovern-Fraser Commission (1968-72) a large number of new activists gained increased influence in the nominating processes of the Democratic Party—often at the expense of “old guard” conservative Democratic regulars.

In Virginia, the migration of many conservative Democrats away from the Democratic Party was epitomized by the actions of Senator Harry Byrd, Jr.—who abandoned the Democratic Party in 1970 and became an “independent”—and by Governor Mills Godwin, who was first elected Governor as a Democratic in 1965 but had switched parties to be elected as Governor as a Republican in 1973. Godwin had also managed Byrd's 1970 Senate race and joined “Democrats for Nixon” in 1972.

The strength of the Republican Party in Virginia—and Charlottesville—radically increased, and as the city confronted the social upheaval of the latter 1960's the political tensions increased as well and control of City Council became highly competitive.

Contested Party Control—the Charlottesville “Punic Wars”, 1966-1992

While the epic battle between Rome and Carthage over control of the Mediterranean basin spanned nearly 120 years, Charlottesville's epic—and often bitter--battle for control of council between the Democrats and Republicans spanned barely 20 tumultuous years.

On the heels of the political upheavals and political realignments during the 1960's, the newly transformed Republican Party began to effectively challenge the historic Democratic control of City Council.

The first serious Republican surge occurred in the 1966 and 1968 May council elections. After capturing two seats in each election the Republicans claimed 4 of the 5 council seats and established a 4-1 Republican majority, crowning "Dutch" Vogt as the first Republican mayor of Charlottesville.

The reorganized Democrats regained control of council in 1970 and no Republicans were elected until 1976 when the Democrats barely managed to retain a 3-2 balance due to Democrat Nancy O'Brien's razor-thin 46 vote margin. But the election of Republican Tom Albrow in 1978 tilted the balance back to the Republicans—allowing Lawrence Brunton to become the second (and last) Republican mayor in Charlottesville's history.

Once again the Republican majority only endured for two years and in 1980 the Democrats swept all three seats and reclaimed a 4-1 advantage. The Democrats stretched their advantage to 5-0 in 1982 but in the very turbulent political environment of the early 1980's the Republicans quickly rebounded and captured one seat in both the 1984 and the 1986 election.

In addition to electing Republican Darden Towe by an overwhelming margin in 1986, Republican Margaret Carter came within 38 votes of defeating incumbent Democratic mayor Frank Buck. Following this electoral near-calamity the Democrats were left clinging to a precarious 3-2 edge going into the 1988 elections.

But again the Republican surge was quickly blunted. Despite having Margaret Carter anchoring a strong Republican ticket in 1988, the Democrats managed to sweep all three seats (by the narrowest of margins) and established a solid 4-1 Democratic majority with Bitsy Waters as the new mayor.

The defeat of Republican incumbent Darden Towe in 1990 marked the end of any serious Republican challenge for the next twelve years. Two years later the 1992 election consolidated Democratic control as the Democratic ticket was elected with massive margins.

Following the dominant 1994 Democratic victories the Republicans would only field a full council ticket one time between 1996 and 2011 (2002). In addition, between 1990 and 2011 the Democrats would maintain their 5-0 advantage except for the brief period of 2002-06 when the term of Republican Rob Schilling cut the Democratic margin to 4-1.

Following Schilling's defeat in 2006 and the shift of the municipal elections to November, the Republicans have failed to field a City Council candidate.

Incumbents and their fate

Incumbents have generally fared very well in their bids for re-election—of the 27 City Council incumbents who sought re-election only four lost their bids for an additional term (3 Republicans and 1 Democrat).

Three of the defeated incumbents ("Dutch" Vogt--1970, John Conover—1984, Darden Towe--1990) were defeated by extremely small margins: Vogt, -81; Conover, -22; Towe, -79.

The fourth defeated incumbent, Republican Rob Schilling, was rejected by a resounding -1,285 vote margin in 2006, gaining him the distinction of having suffered the worst electoral defeat by any City Councilor in Charlottesville's history. At the time, Schilling's loss also represented the third-worst defeat of any major party council candidate in the city's history (only Republicans Reineike and Jackson did worse in 2004).

No Republican has ever been successful in seeking a second term while 23 Democratic incumbents have been re-elected to additional terms.

The Role of Independents

While the major parties have exclusively won the seats on City Council, numerous independent candidates have nevertheless mounted (often spirited) challenges over the past fifty years.

Of the 27 independent candidacies, 13 occurred in the 1964-1984 period and the remaining 14 occurred in the 1998-2011 period. During the ten-year span of 1986-1996 no independents were on the ballot. In the three November elections of 2007, 2009, and 2011 a startling nine independent candidacies were mounted, perhaps a response to the absence of any Republican candidates during that same time.

Of the 27 independents only two have lost by less than 800 votes—Henry Floyd Johnson (-155 votes in 1968) and Norman Lushbaugh (-457 votes in 1976). Two independents have lost by margins of -806 and -992, but the vast majority of independents have lost by even more significant margins ranging from -1,373 to -4,238.

Three independents are generally credited (or blamed) with having a significant effect on a particular electoral outcome. Henry Floyd Johnson's strong independent bid in 1968 apparently drew significant votes from the Democratic ticket and permitted the election of two Republicans (giving the Republicans a 3-2 advantage).

Similarly, the rise of the Citizens Party in the early 1980's spawned independent "Citizen Party" council candidates in both 1982 and 1984 (Kate Borland and Margaret Cain). Cain's 1984 effort is often attributed to causing the defeat of Democrat incumbent John Conover (-22 votes).

Finally, the independent candidacy of liberal Stratton Salidis in 2002 arguably contributed to the defeat of Democratic candidate Alexandria Searls and allowed Republican Rob Schilling to gain an 81-vote victory.

Increasing Democratic Margins

Beginning in 2004, Democratic candidates have consistently won with substantial margins. In 2004, all three Democrats won with record margins ranging from 1,401 to 1,683. In 2006, the last May municipal election, the two Democratic candidates again won, this time by margins of 1,285 and 1,487.

With the shift of the municipal elections to November in 2007, Democratic margins increased to unprecedented levels—from a low in 2007 of 1,499 to a high of 2,066 in 2011.

The higher turnout elections of the November cycle—especially the gubernatorial cycle in 2013—generally augur continued high Democratic margins for at least the relative short term.

Race and Gender

In 1968 the city saw its first African American city candidate (Henry Floyd Johnson) and its first women candidates (Democrat Geraldine Meyung and Republican Lois Mothes). None were successful but two years later Democrat Charles Barbour became the first African American elected to council. In 1972, Democrat Jill Rinehart became the first woman elected to city council and Barbour became the city's first African American mayor the same year.

In 1974 the Republicans nominated their first African American council candidate, James Fleming, and nominated their second African American candidate, Ed Brooks, twelve years later in 1990. Their third African American candidate, Kenneth Jackson, ran fourteen years later in 2004. None of the Republican African American candidates were elected.

Democrat Nancy O'Brien became the city's first woman mayor in 1976. Twelve years passed before Democrat Elizabeth "Bitsy" Waters became the city's second woman mayor in 1988.

In 1996 the first women-majority city council was elected when Democrats Virginia Daugherty and Meredith Richards joined Democrat Kay Slaughter on the council. Slaughter became the mayor the same year. In 2011, the council again attained a women-majority balance with the election of Democrats Kathy Galvin and Dede Smith, who joined Democratic incumbent Kristin Szakos on the council.

Regarding women candidates, of the 141 city council candidates since 1960:

- 30 were women (21%)
- Democrats nominated 19 women (63%) and elected 16 of them (84% of Democratic women candidates were elected—4 became mayor)
- Republicans nominated 8 women (27%) but none were elected
- 3 women ran as independents (10%) but none were elected

Regarding African American candidates, of the 141 city council candidates since 1960:

- 18 were African American (13%)
- Democrats nominated 10 African Americans (56%) and elected 9 of them (90% of Democratic African American candidates were elected—2 became mayor)
- Republicans nominated 3 African Americans (16%) but none were elected
- 5 African Americans ran as independents (28%) but none were elected