

February 2008

County Elections – Partisan or Non-Partisan? --State by State, 2007

Do county elected officials run under a party name in their primary and general elections? This question was posed to executives of state association of counties in a recent survey conducted in January 2007. With this survey, the Research Division of the National Association of Counties investigated the state of partisanship in American county elections.

Partisanship refers to whether or not county elected officials run under a party name in the primary and general elections. While candidates for elected office at the national level run with the support of a political party, this is not always true at the local level. **Table 1** (over) shows the numbers of counties with partisan and non-partisan elections state by state.

In actuality, the number of states where counties hold non-partisan elections has risen since 1991, which is surprising given the significance of parties at the national political level. The last survey which recorded this data occurred in 1991, and it showed 36 states where all county elections were partisan. Two of these states had non-partisan elections for judicial positions, but all other county offices were partisan. Five states—Alabama, Montana, Oregon, South Carolina, and Virginia—varied by county; some of their counties' elections were entirely partisan, while others only had certain offices that had partisan elections. Also as of 1991, six states—Alaska, California, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin—had entirely non-partisan elections at the local level. The three remaining states, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Vermont, did not have any county officials.

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From 1991 to 2007, there was a slight shift toward non-partisan elections at the county level. Whereas in 1991 there were 36 states that held partisan elections at the county level, in 2007 the number has decreased to 33. However, this does not show a downward shift overall. Since 1991, Alabama's counties have begun to hold partisan elections. In addition, Vermont, which previously did not have active elected county officials, also holds partisan elections. Virginia previously had a mixture of partisan and non-partisan counties. Now, the state's counties hold partisan elections, although many candidates choose to run as independent. The number of states with a mix of partisan and non-partisan counties has risen from five to eight, which includes Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Montana, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, and Washington. By 2007, the number of states with completely non-partisan elections has risen from six to eight. This now includes Alaska, California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

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The new data show that partisanship is not uniform at the county level. In fact, viewed on a state by state basis, there has been a slight shift in the last decade and a half toward non-partisan elections.

(To view Table 1, turn over→→)

Table 1 – County Elections -- Partisan or Non-Partisan? State by State, 2007

| State | # Counties | | State | # Counties | |
|---------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | with non-partisan elections | with partisan elections | | with non-partisan elections | with partisan elections |
| Alabama | 0 | 67 | Montana | 10 | 46 |
| Alaska | 10 | 0 | Nebraska | 0 | 93 |
| Arizona | 0 | 15 | Nevada | 0 | 17 |
| Arkansas | | 75 | New Hampshire | 0 | 10 |
| California | 58 | 0 | New Jersey | 0 | 21 |
| Colorado | 0 | 64 | New Mexico | 0 | 33 |
| Connecticut | — no county officials | | New York | 0 | 57 + NYC |
| Delaware | 0 | 3 | North Carolina | 0 | 100 |
| Florida | 5 | 62 | North Dakota | 53 | |
| Georgia | 2 | 157 | Ohio | 0 | 88 |
| Hawaii | 4 | 0 | Oklahoma | 0 | 77 |
| Idaho | 0 | 44 | Oregon | 9 (all 7 judges only) | 27 |
| Illinois | 0 | 102 | Pennsylvania | 0 | 67 |
| Indiana | 0 | 92 | Rhode Island | — no county officials | |
| Iowa | 0 | 99 | South Carolina | 0 | 46 |
| Kansas | 2 (blend) | 103 | South Dakota | 66 | 0 |
| Kentucky | | 120 | Tennessee | Some | Some |
| Louisiana | 64 | 0 | Texas | 0 | 254 |
| Maine | 0 | 16 | Utah | 2 | 27 |
| Maryland | 0 | 23 + Baltimore | Vermont | 0 | 14 |
| Massachusetts | 0 | 14 | Virginia | 0 | 95 (most run independent) |
| Michigan | 0 | 83 | Washington | 5 (mixed) | 34 |
| Minnesota | 87 | 0 | West Virginia | 0 | 55 |
| Mississippi | 0 | 82 | Wisconsin | 72 | 0 |
| Missouri | 0 | 114 | Wyoming | 0 | 23 |

To compile this information, the National Association of Counties surveyed executives of state association of counties in January 2007. The National Association of Counties (NACo) is located in Washington D.C.