

Reading the Numbers in Winsted

Former selectman Barbara Wilkes launched a new program on community access television entitled "Winsted Reviews." Wilkes thought an analysis of the November municipal election results would be useful and wanted someone with experience to review the results and perhaps draw some conclusions.

She also invited me to join her and so I had my capable intern, Kate Townsend from The Gilbert School, obtain the election results from the town clerk's office and compile charts (available on The Journal's Web site, textra.com).

The first thing I noticed was the voter turnout for the nine municipal elections from 1991 to 2007. In 1991, 55 percent of registered voters participated in the municipal election. In 2007, a mere 36 percent of voters cast a ballot in the municipal election. It was stunning to see the steady decline in voter turnout.

One reason for this steady decline and historic low voter turnout could be the demise of local news coverage — a topic to be covered at length in a future column. But suffice it to say that there is no decrease in municipal events: commission meetings, town meetings, selectmen meetings, budget hearings, etc. Yet local news coverage has almost disappeared. You can't care about what you don't know about.

The Hartford Courant no longer covers Winsted at all. The Register Citizen went from multiple pages of local news, with three reporters covering the activities just in Winsted, to one reporter covering multiple towns. The result: one page of local news and one story about Winsted activities. At least The Winsted Journal provides readers broader and in-depth coverage — but only once a week.

It's not for lack of activity, but rather due to the conglomeration mania and focus on the bottom line that has reduced local news coverage, whether in print or television, to an endless stream of entertainment junk news. Not good for democracy.

Wilkes also had Carolanne Curry as her guest. Curry is a 30-year veteran of local, state and national campaigns and elections. In 2007, she worked on the successful mayoral campaign of Bill Finch in Bridgeport. For 12 years, she served as the president and member of the board of directors of the nationally recognized Women's Campaign School at Yale University — a non-partisan campaign training

program — where she taught courses including campaign fundraising and election result analysis.

Curry had a number of observations. Republicans gained board seats on the board but this was not the mandate some have suggested. A mandate is the authority granted by an electorate to act as its representative. Elections are often said to give the newly elected officials a mandate

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to implement certain policies. A mandate tends to be indicated by a lopsided, or landslide, electoral vote.

But in 2007, Republicans received just 46 percent of the vote — well below the 51 percent considered the lowest threshold to be described as a mandate. Furthermore, it was 46 percent of the 36 percent total number of registered voters. Small numbers indeed.

There is no agreement on what percentage represents a mandate. But it is clearly not a mandate when fewer than 50 percent of registered voters have cast a ballot and the winning party receives less than 50 percent of that total.

Curry suggested a more useful way to analyze the results was to look at the specific breakdown. There were 17 candidates representing multiple parties. Voters can cast a ballot for five candidates and the top seven vote getters are elected. So only seven out of 17 candidates could be elected. There are usually just 10 candidates for these seven seats. In 2007, there were 75 percent more candidates than usual.

Republicans received 46 percent of the vote. Democrats received 26 percent. Other parties received 28 percent. She correctly presumed that the other parties were splinters of the Democratic Party and that the candidates in the other parties were more philosophically aligned with the Democrats than with the Republicans. When added together, the Democrats and the other parties received 54 percent of the vote. The conclusion: More votes were cast against the Republicans than in support.

Curry also pointed to the results of the 2005 elections. Republicans received 29 percent of the vote. Democrats received 18 percent. Other

parties received 51 percent. When added together, the Democrats and the other parties received 69 percent of the vote.

Curry suggested that it was obvious that there exist factions in the Democratic Party and that this was not good for citizens in a "winner-take-all" system. She is a proponent of proportional, or full, representation, which is an electoral formula that strives to match the elected officials to the percentage of votes that groups of candidates receive and the percentage of seats they receive in the legislative body. In the winner-take-all system it is important to understand that the more a party splinters, the less likely it is to hold a majority.

A function of a political party is to provide adequate leadership to keep factions together in order to advance its greater policy goals. A clear majority, in terms of numbers of voters in Winsted, regularly vote against the Republican policy agenda — yet the Republican Party is often in the position to advance its policies. It's no wonder turnout is low. The policy concerns of the majority are not being addressed.

In light of the recent history of the Winsted Democratic Party and the inability of the leadership to maintain coalitions within the party, it is no surprise that the Republican Party has, over the past 20 years, held the majority as often as it has. This is the second time Republicans have controlled the board of selectmen by a five-to-two margin (the last time was in 2001). But this does not necessarily demonstrate a mandate by the voters for Republican policies. A more accurate assessment is that the Democratic Party has failed to provide leadership to make possible a cohesive party that reaches out to and speaks for a broader base of Democrats. Until this is accomplished, the current trend will likely continue.

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