



Florida Elections — 2018 Among the Doozies!

Dr. Ed H. Moore **PRESIDENT, ICUF**

Florida politics have always been colorful. From yellow dogs to blue dogs, red waves to blue tides, we have always proven our state to be much more than meets the eye when it comes to both entertainment and unpredictability. The 2018 election is shaping up to be another in a long line of unpredictable events and the ballot, based on the inclusion of thirteen constitutional amendments, a fiery U.S.

Senate race, a hotly contested governor's race, as well as the three cabinet seats, all of the state House seats and more than half of the state Senate seats, plus all of the local elections which are often even more filled with exciting confrontations, will likely result in long lines and complaints of too few polling locations.

Remember that complaints of inadequate polling options are a common refrain every

election, even as Florida allows for fairly unconstrained absentee voting as well as an extended early voting period. Many states still only have a single day of voting and limited absentee options, so if there are long lines in Florida on election day, blame it on two factors: voters waiting until the last minute and a ballot that is just too long!

The history of Florida elections is one of consequential outcomes and even more so as Florida has become one of three or four dominant states in deciding national elections. We are now 18 years removed from the drama and the tension of the presidential election of 2000 which lasted well into December, with the U.S. Supreme Court finally bringing finality to the process but not ending the contention and disagreements that remain to this day. *Bush v. Gore*, the court case that emerged from one of the closest elections in history, was the end of a several-month process that easily could have sent the election to the U.S. House of Representatives. In the end, only 537 votes separated George W. Bush and Albert Gore. It is interesting to look at the actual vote count, with Bush getting 2,912,790 and Gore getting 2,912,253, to get a real sense of the divided Florida electorate in 2000 -- truly marking Florida as a purple state. Bush won 50 counties and Gore only 17, but Gore's strength was in the larger counties of Florida and it was mostly in those larger counties, with Democrat supervisors of election, where all of the drama unfolded. "Hanging chads" became a hot topic and the national news was filled with photo shots of officials examining ballots with magnifying glasses; discarding some and allowing others to stand as legal votes. That same year, a

majority of the members of the Florida House of Representatives were freshman members -- the first real effect of voter-adopted term limits. While Tallahassee was besieged by national news media, with the Capital Courtyard a tangled mess of cables and broadcasters, the Florida House stood poised under the leadership of Speaker Tom Feeney to use the Constitution to name a slate of electors, should the courts fail to rule in favor of Bush being elected by Florida. This was one election that could have taken much longer to resolve had the court not acted. In the end, Bush captured 48.847 percent of the vote to Gore's 48.838 percent. They do not get much closer than that!

But Florida had also played a major deciding role in an earlier, extremely close, presidential election. In 1876, Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden contested for the presidency. It remains the closest and most hotly-disputed election in U.S. history, with the end result of Hayes winning by an electoral vote of 185-184. Four states were in dispute, including Florida that had only four electoral votes at the time. Florida, South Carolina, and Louisiana were the only southern states to go to Hayes, with a total of 19 electoral votes among them. Early results had Tilden ahead 184-165, with Tilden also holding a majority of the popular vote (this was one of only five elections in U.S. history to have the loser have more popular votes). In addition to these three states, Oregon had one vote under dispute. These 20 votes all went to Hayes, although not without a major change in policy -- the end of Civil War Reconstruction being the bait that allowed for Democrats to accept

defeat yet bring about a significant major change in post-Civil War America. In the Compromise of 1877, the Republicans agreed to withdraw federal troops from the South, while the Democrats conceded the election. The withdrawal of troops ended Reconstruction and unfortunately ushered in an era of pervasive official discrimination that lasted until the 1960's, when passage of major reform legislation became possible. The removal of federal troops enabled the Democrat Redeemers to gain control at the state and local levels in states that had caused the Civil War by rebelling in 1860. Ten years of Reconstruction had left deep scars among these states and the policies by these states adopted quickly altered the South and left new scars that remain today.

But, fear not. Florida's elections have always been interesting, and the controversies have not just been limited to Florida's role in national elections. The ebb and flow of party loyalties and identifications have mattered a lot and mattered little depending upon the era in Florida. For decades, the politics of Florida were driven by what was referred to as "The Pork Chop Gang," a group of rural legislators that controlled Tallahassee and used what could only be referred to as redistricting in a very loosely-defined way. It took multiple court rulings, the adoption of the 1968 state constitution and a few efforts at semi-accurate map drawing to balance the power of Florida so that where you lived wasn't handicapped by how you were represented. Up until that change, a group of about 20 state legislators ruled Florida.

With new maps and political alignments came new candidates from the more urban areas of Florida. The 1968 Constitution

established a state cabinet of six members plus the Governor and many state agencies were under the control of the cabinet, not just the Governor. This created an election bounty, since there were now seven statewide cabinet offices, two U.S. Senate positions elected statewide and a three-member Public Service Commission, also elected statewide. Candidates emerged from every corner of Florida, so ballots included hotly-contested races. Defining what a Democrat or Republican was became an art form. In these early post-'68 years the Democrat party covered a broad philosophical spectrum. Democrats from the Panhandle, other rural counties and a few from Northeast Florida, were considered very conservative. Republicans won few elections and usually held roughly 30 seats in the Florida House of Representatives, truly a minority party. But now and then the Republican minority would join with conservative Democrats to elect Republicans statewide. This usually occurred because of the proclivity for Democrats to squabble and divide, with opposing philosophical views creating deep divisions within the party. In 1966, Claude Kirk was elected governor, the first Republican since Reconstruction in Florida to do so, in large part because of the Democrats' inability to unite after a highly-divisive primary.

In 1966, the Democrat primary was a hotly-contested race between sitting Governor of Florida Hayden Burns, former Jacksonville Mayor Scott Kelly from Orlando and Robert King High, a liberal reform mayor of Miami who was backed by the more liberal wing of the party. High trailed Burns in the primary election, but in those days, Florida had a run-off system. Kelly



backed High initially, but in a more tepid fashion. Burns accused High of “buying off” Kelly, which infuriated Kelly who then more actively campaigned for High, who won the nomination of the Democrats. However, the conservative wing of the party refused to back High, linking him to the liberal Washington elites, including the Kennedys, which resulted in the Kirk victory. An interesting footnote is that High died about ten months after the election. Had King won the race, the president of the senate at that time, Verle Pope from St. Augustine, would have become Governor since there was no Lt. Governor until after

the 1968 Constitution was adopted and Claude Kirk appointed Ray C. Osborne, a state House member, as Lt. Governor.

The modernization of Florida’s government started with the adoption of the 1968 Constitution, but it was the elections of 1972 and ‘74 that fully solidified that business as usual was no more. Oddly, it was a reform-minded Democrat from the Panhandle, Reuben Askew, who brought about changes in both ethics and structure to Florida when he defeated the always-colorful Kirk in 1970. Askew’s victory was secured in part because Kirk had not maintained the coalition he had used to

win in 1966 and because, in a rare instance, another key Republican candidate, Skip Bafalis, refused to endorse Kirk, creating a fissure usually reserved for Democrats. Askew was among the first of the “New South” governors, which included Jimmy Carter, Dale Bumpers, and later Bill Clinton. However, despite the clean image of Askew and his push for open government and strict ethics rules, there was plenty of scandal in Florida. At one point, there were three cabinet officers, a Supreme Court justice, and even Askew’s own Lt. Governor, Tom Adams, under investigation and embroiled in controversy. In 1974, a House committee held hearings concerning land dealings and involved Askew’s chief of staff in those hearings. However, Askew remained outside the scope of all the investigations and was the first Florida governor to serve two full eight-year terms. Since then, there have been only five: Askew, Graham, Chiles, Bush and Scott to do so, with Leroy Collins serving a two and then a four-year term.

The 1970’s in Florida were ripe with hotly-contested races and party divisions. Both parties suffered defeats in general elections because divisive primaries fractured each party at a time when close elections prevailed and each candidate needed full party support to succeed. While reforms were being enacted, and many would refer to the following period as Florida’s “Golden Era,” there was still plenty of tarnish to go around. A notable example – Gerald Lewis, a former Miami state senator, running against the incumbent Bud Dickinson, effectively targeted Dickinson who was under federal investigation for tax issues. He would do this by holding “empty chair debates” across Florida as

Dickinson stayed low and not very visible. Lewis won easily. Lewis had previously won a primary race for the U.S. Senate in 1972 against Public Service Commissioner Jess Yarbrough, but later lost in the general election to Paula Hawkins, the Republican nominee.

In 1974, there was a heated contest for the other Florida U.S. Senate seat. Eleven candidates ran in the Democrat primary including these sitting Democrat office holders: Secretary of State Dick Stone, former House Speaker Dick Pettigrew, former Senate President Mallory Horne, and Congressman Bill Gunter. The crowd forced a run-off between Gunter, who had been in first place, and Stone, who narrowly won the nomination 51-49 percent. However, the divisiveness of this primary was countered by an equally-contested race on the Republican side where incumbent Ed Gurney had chosen not to seek re-election after being indicted for taking bribes. The highly-successful businessman Jack Eckerd, of the drugstore fame, defeated Paula Hawkins for the Republican nomination. With American Party candidate John Grady earning over 15 percent of the vote, Stone defeated Eckerd. Again, acrimony within parties took its toll on election results. By the end of Stone’s term, in 1980, six Democrats sought to oppose him in the primary including Bill Gunter, who by now had been elected as State Treasurer. Again, Stone and Gunter were forced into a run-off but in the rematch, Gunter prevailed. Again, acrimony and divisive party politics prevailed and Paula Hawkins, running in the heated Reagan-Carter presidential election, defeated Gunter in the general election. Ronald Reagan took over 55 percent of the

Florida vote - his coattails assisted a great deal, and the lingering acrimony didn't help the Democrats in their cause.

Party disagreements have also occurred in several other elections, in part helping the opposing party to win. In 1986, sitting Attorney General Jim Smith, a Democrat, lost the gubernatorial primary to State Representative Steve Pajcic. Smith's supporters, generally more conservative than Pajcic's, then switched their allegiance to Tampa Mayor Bob Martinez, the Republican, who went on to become Florida's second Republican governor since reconstruction. Democrats regained the office with Lawton Chiles winning in 1980, defeating Bob Martinez's reelection effort. Chiles won re-election in 1994, narrowly defeating Jeb Bush, who then won the office in 1998. Republicans have now held the governor's office in Florida since 1998, with Bush, Charlie Crist (who was then a Republican before switching to independent before switching to democrat) and Rick Scott.

Politics does yield strange bedfellows, but it also reveals the underlying philosophical nature of a state. Florida has never leaned philosophically to either end of the spectrum for very long. There has been a conservative dominance over the past 20 years, but even within that dominance we have seen Democrat Bill Nelson easily win his U.S. Senate seat and Alex Sink win the office of State Chief Financial Officer, later losing to Rick Scott in a race for governor that had only a little more than a one percent difference in the final tally, with neither candidate earning a majority. Florida is colorful, but for now it would be correct to call it a deep purple. The 2018 elections should be no different than what history has illustrated. There will be closely-fought primaries for governor and all of the three cabinet offices. There will be a battle royal for the U.S. Senate seat held now by Bill Nelson, but with Rick Scott offering a tough challenge, and there will be many state and local races with victors not knowing until late at night, or perhaps morning, who actually wins. Florida politics is, and always has been, entertaining!