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The 'purpling' of Arapahoe County

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Editor's Note: Since 2008, the formerly Republican Arapahoe County has boasted more registered Democrats than Republicans. This is the first in a three-part series on the changing politics of the area.

When Littleton business consultant and actress Linda Newell ran for an open District 26 state Senate seat in 2008, she felt like she was the only person outside her immediate family with any faith in her prospects.

Newell chuckles when she recalls the hubbub — or lack thereof — in Arapahoe County political circles when the novice excitedly declared her dark-horse candidacy.

"Most people just thought, 'Oh, how delightful. Here's a new person on the scene. She might be articulate. She might be bright. But she'll never win,'" the senator recalled with a laugh.

It was not the candidate's appearance, people skills or lack of experience that failed to inspire confidence. It was not even the particulars of her policy agenda.

Newell, attractive and well spoken, might have appeared the perfect candidate. Her perky smile is inevitably accompanied by a friendly handshake and the comforting disposition of a bridge-building moderate.

So what was "wrong" with Linda Newell?

She was a Democrat. And this was Arapahoe County.

As recently as two years ago, a "D" by a candidate's name was almost a scarlet letter in some quarters of Littleton. Old habits die hard in a district where an advantage for Republicans had become as well known as the city's historic downtown and quaint line of shops.

If this first-timer were to somehow eke out a victory over her veteran GOP opponent — former state Rep. Lauri Clapp — Newell would be the first Democrat ever elected to serve District 26.

To some astonishment, Newell won — barely, by 195 votes.

If one followed the money, he would never have found Newell's campaign. With numerous contested seats at play, the Colorado Democratic Party was not prepared to invest in the candidate's arguably quixotic quest to represent District 26, which boasts the historically conservative suburbs of Littleton, Englewood, Sheridan and west Centennial.

Even so, Democrats had been quietly inching up their registrations in Arapahoe County, even as



For years, Littleton was as well known for its Republican majority as for its quaint line of downtown shops. In 2008, state Sen. Linda Newell, D-Littleton, surprised many when she first narrowly won her seat in historically Republican Arapahoe County. Photo by Courtney Kuhlen | ckuhlen@ccnewspapers.com

Newell played the long-shot candidate. Although the change was under the radar of most voters, the numbers in some districts had already become a three-way split among Democrats, Republicans and unaffiliated voters.

By November 2008, the partisan registration contest was no more taut than in District 26, even though old perceptions of the district had hampered Newell's fundraising and led to Clapp's low-key campaign.

Never mind that demographic shifts and an aggressive registration drive by the Obama campaign served to increase Newell's chances of riding the 2008 Democratic sweep that would send Democrats to all levels of government.

"We knew we were registering a lot of people. The numbers started coming back and it was just phenomenal what was happening," said Pat Waak, executive director of the Colorado Democratic Party. "All of a sudden, it was very clear that something significant was changing in Arapahoe County."

The stage had been set for a unpredicted nail-biter. In the 11th hour, the Colorado Democratic Senate Campaign Fund noticed a real contest in District 26 and paid for the final three weeks of Newell's campaign.

"I think Linda proved to be an even better candidate than many people thought she was going to be and that there was a real possibility here," Waak said.

The race turned out to be one of the closest in the 2008 state elections. The Democrat's razor-thin victory amounted to a difference of about two voters per precinct. Newell's slim win barely withstood Colorado's threshold for required recounts, leaving the freshman senator with anything but a mandate for change.

"This is a purple district," the senator said. "In order to do what I need to do as a senator, I have to be moderate. I have to be respectful of the two-thirds of the voters who are not of my persuasion. A more liberal Democrat would have never won — not even close."

According to some Democrats, Newell's surprise victory was a sign of things to come. But others argue that Arapahoe County has become neither Democrat nor Republican, but a competitive battleground for the first time in the history of Colorado's oldest county.

Mike Hamrick, chair of the Arapahoe County Democratic Party calls Newell's victory "a great example of how when someone works hard, Democrats do well."

Politics of change

Newell was not the only Democrat to buck assumptions in Arapahoe County in 2008. President Obama beat Sen. John McCain by 13 percentage points, marking the first time the county had gone for a Democratic president since Lyndon Johnson was challenged by arch-conservative Sen. Barry Goldwater in 1964.

U.S. Sen. Mark Udall, Rep. Ed Perlmutter and Rep. Diana DeGette took comfortable leads in their races. State Rep. Joe Rice, D-Littleton, safely held onto his historically Republican district after taking it in a surprise victory two years earlier.

Rice, an Army Reserve officer who has served in Iraq, was one in a string of 2006 Democratic successes in Arapahoe County. Doug Milliken became the county's first Democratic treasurer.

More surprising was novice Pat Noonan's upset win over Republican County Commissioner Lynn Myers. Noonan's election marked the first time two Democrats — Noonan and Frank Weddig — served at the same time on the Board of Commissioners.

Although Republicans would hold their own in some of 2008's state and county races, several GOP incumbents experienced contests that were far tighter than many expected.

In Centennial's state House District 37, incumbent Republican Spencer Swalm won a second term by

5 percentage points. The district has become among the most targeted by state Democrats in recent years. In 2006, Swalm won the seat by a 51 percent to 49 percent margin against a first-time Democrat who received no party funding whatsoever.

To increase his odds for re-election in 2008, Swalm's campaign bought large advertising signs at bus stops along Arapahoe Road — a costly tactic that would have been seen as superfluous just a few years ago.

"I didn't take anything for granted," Swalm said. "I raised more than \$100,000. I rang something close to 10,000 doorbells. I worked very hard."

Even when Republicans held onto power in 2008, Democrats were able to find encouragement. Republican county Commissioner Rod Bockenfeld was barely re-elected, winning by a margin of 51 percent to 49 percent.

"If you look at some of these races and look at the cycle over '04, '06 and '08, we saw tremendous gains in all those races in what was considered a historically conservative area," Hamrick said.

County Commissioner Susan Beckman, a longtime civic activist popular across party lines in the Littleton-Englewood area, defeated the low-budget campaign of unknown former union leader Jim Jackman by only 6 percentage points.

The dynamics of Beckman's race were particularly surprising to David Kerber, a member of the Greenwood Village City Council and chair of the Arapahoe County Republican Party. Kerber, who was defeated himself by Rice in 2008's District 38 race, saw Beckman's narrow win as a troubling sign.

"Susan was a Littleton City Council member, a two-term county commissioner. She's a moderate. She's good looking," Kerber said. "I think I saw two signs from Jackman. He didn't even have a sign by his own house."

Kerber thinks Obama's early popularity took hold of the county in a way that defied conventional wisdom — not just about Arapahoe, but about elections in general.

"People were voting Democrat from president to dog catcher," Kerber said. "It usually doesn't work that way. Usually, they get bored after the president and the Senate."

District Attorney Carol Chambers relied on the more steadfast Republican areas south of Arapahoe County to keep her job. Although Democrat Kevin Farrell was resoundingly defeated in his outsider challenge, he beat the controversial prosecutor by 8 percentage points in Arapahoe.

In hindsight, such showings might have been easier to predict. As a result of the registration push, there were slightly more registered Democrats than Republicans in Arapahoe County by Election Day 2008.

In the end, Democrats, fueled by Obama, bested new Republican registrations 2-to-1. At last count, county Democrats held an advantage of more than 8,000 voters over Republicans and about 10,000 registrations over unaffiliated voters.

No one has followed the evolutions in Arapahoe County politics more than Clerk and Recorder Nancy Doty, the elected official who oversees county elections and voter registrations.

Before the 2008 election, as Obama was riding his way to victory, the Republican clerk received a wide range of inquiries from journalists eager to draw parallels between the changing county and the nation's eventual leanings.

"They kept saying, how Arapahoe County goes, there goes the election," Doty said. "I heard that more than once."

Next week: The new politics of suburban sprawl