



Local Matters.

centennial citizen > news

B **Breeding candidates for the 'new' south suburbs**

By **Peter Jones**

Published: 08.16.10

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

Was Obama-mania an anomaly of the post-Bush era? Is it all just cyclical politics? Or have demographic shifts in the landlocked south suburbs brought a permanent change to Arapahoe County's once staunchly Republican body politic?

These are the \$100 million questions that every politico in the county is venturing to answer — some with cautious optimism, others with apparent certainty.

"There's nothing new about Arapahoe County being competitive," insists Dick Wadhams, chairman of the Colorado Republican Party. "Did Republicans do better than Democrats overall during a period of time? Probably so, but it's not like the Democrats had no hold at all. This is part of the myth."

Democrats dispute such claims of longtime competitiveness. They say prior to 2004, party leaders had to draft "paper candidates" to run symbolic campaigns against Arapahoe County Republicans. Contested primaries were the stuff of fiction, Democrats claim.

In 2006, Democrat Pat Noonan was so sure that her "paper candidacy" for county commissioner



Aurora City Councilmember Ryan Frazier is considered a rising star in the Colorado Republican Party. Many Republicans think Frazier, moderate on many social issues, is the kind of candidate who can be successful in the politically evolving county. Frazier, who supported partner benefits for gay Aurora city employees, is running this year in the 7th Congressional District. Photo by Peter Jones

was doomed to the shredder that she did not even bother checking the returns before falling asleep on election night.

"I just went home and went to bed," Noonan said with a laugh. "[The then-county party chair] Karen Middleton called me and woke me up to tell me. She always teases me, 'While you were sleeping, you won!' The Democratic Party never believed this county was competitive."

Democratic leaders say hard work and good candidates will be the keys to avoiding voter complacency and maintaining the party's delicate majority — especially since President Obama's star has faded considerably since his election.

"I think we'll hold on to the county by continually staying in touch with our constituents," Noonan said. "It's not the party leadership that's changed in Arapahoe County. It's the people themselves, and they want the government to be different. I think the Democratic lead is going to continue."

Colorado Democratic Party chair Pat Waak agrees, but she says neither Arapahoe County nor Colorado Democrats will be able to rest on Obama's laurels or on the increased registrations that his candidacy generated.

As the midterm elections approach, most in both parties believe the county's wild card will be its rise in independent voters, who in some precincts rival the numbers of their Democratic and Republican counterparts.

"They pride themselves on not being committed to either party. They are the swing vote," state Rep. Spencer Swalm, R-Centennial, said of the contingency. "The growing presence of unaffiliated voters means things are going to be a lot more volatile and unpredictable."

Many think the Republican message is most likely to resonate this year with independent voters. History shows a lackluster economy puts the party in power on the defensive, creating, in this case, an opportunity for Republicans to take an advantage.

Denver pollster and political analyst Floyd Ciruli also thinks that some of the Democrats' registration lead is likely to dissipate. He notes that during the height of President Clinton's poll numbers, some swing voters temporarily switched their affiliation to Democrat.

Whatever the case, most observers expect Democrats to lose at least some congressional seats this year, perhaps even their majorities in one or both houses. It is part of an almost inevitable cycle of midterm power loss for whatever party happens to occupy the White House.

Regardless of such predictable winds of politics as usual, Ciruli expects Arapahoe County to be a highly competitive arena in the coming election cycles. He thinks the successful candidates will be the ones who understand the changing south metro suburbs.

"You can't win on a hard right or a hard left agenda in Arapahoe County," the pollster said of the evolving political landscape. "The county is now a battleground for people of relatively moderate disposition."

There was no greater evidence of moderate state Sen. Linda Newell's fragile 2008 victory than last year when the Littleton lawmaker was one of five Democrats to cross party lines and kill legislation that would have offered in-state tuition to children of illegal immigrants.

"My district told me no," Newell said. "If 75 percent of the people are telling me no, I can't walk in and be totally blue. That's just not right."

Political futures

Because of more Democrats in their midst and the unpredictability of independent voters, local Republicans are adapting to a changing environment in which conventional GOP talking points may have a diminished resonance.

"It's coming together," Arapahoe County Republican Party chair David Kerber said. "What I see most definitely is a lack of emphasis on the traditional social-value issues. We value our pro-life people and we want to value our pro-choice people too."

According to Republican leaders, the party is refocusing for 2010, 2012 and beyond. Kerber and Wadhams say the GOP must work to re-emphasize its core values of fiscal conservatism, personal responsibility and a strong national defense.

That formula has not found unanimity among Arapahoe County Republicans. Swalm, for one, objects to any effort that would distance the party from conservative positions on social issues, such as abortion and gay marriage.

"We need to be true to our fundamental principles," the state representative said. "I don't think we're going to succeed by subtraction. As Ronald Reagan said, we need to be a big tent."

Charismatic moderate candidates will be part and parcel to Republican successes in the "new" Arapahoe County, says state Sen. Nancy Spence, a Centennial Republican who is moderate to liberal on some social issues, including abortion rights.

"We just have to work harder to get candidates that reflect the changing demographic — who are Republican," Spence said. "Ryan Frazier is a good example. He's a rather moderate Republican, African-American. He can relate very well to people in [Democrat-leaning] Aurora."

Frazier, 32, is considered a rising star in Colorado Republican circles. The Aurora City Council member is the party's nominee in the 7th Congressional District.

Like Spence, Frazier is liberal on some issues. He supported an Aurora city resolution that granted domestic-partnership benefits to unmarried city employees, including gays.

But in a sign of his more traditionally Republican credentials, Frazier was also the co-author of 2008's controversial "right to work" ballot measure. The unsuccessful Amendment 47 would have prohibited mandatory union membership in Colorado.

At a speech last year for the Arapahoe County Republican Men's Club, Frazier discussed his ideas for reshaping the Republican Party during challenging times.

"Ultimately, we have to connect with people on things that matter — on pocketbook issues, safe communities, a government that works, taking care of our children and our seniors and American innovation. When we connect, we win," Frazier told the room.

As Republicans pick and choose their candidates carefully, Democrats insist they can keep Arapahoe County moving in a bluer direction through persistence and by fielding candidates who resonate with the changing values of south metro Denver.

Party leader Waak even has her eyes on the once unthinkable Douglas County. The new "outer suburbs" and rural areas south of Arapahoe County are the next political frontier, according to the state Democratic chair.

Waak will have her work cut out for her. In Douglas, Republicans still hold a greater than 2-to-1 registration lead over Democrats — though Sen. John McCain beat Obama in the county by a disproportionate 18 percentage points in 2008.

Waak sees an opening for Douglas County Democrats to slowly make headway in what has always been considered — like Weld County to the north — an impenetrable Republican stronghold.

"When I first moved to Weld County [in 1993], it had no Democratic elected officials at all," Waak said. "We don't have tons now, but we're beginning to make that very careful transition. In Douglas County, the switchover is going to take a long period of time. But I truly believe the change can take place."

Copyright © 2010 - Colorado Community Newspapers Online