

Mesa County Elections 1920-2016

The myth that Mesa County has always been a Republican county is nothing more than a myth. After 22 years with Republican control of the County Commission, a significant part of the younger population has seen nothing else, so it is understandable many believe Mesa County always has been Republican. In some minds, that then translates to “Mesa County always will be Republican”. In most of America, counties and municipalities switch back and forth between parties with periods as long as a generation of dominance, then the other party takes over.

An examination of a century’s worth of votes for County Commissioner show periods of dominance for either major party, and periods when control switched back and forth frequently. This study focused on votes for the County Commission, but at times the Commission was controlled by one party and other elective county offices were dominated by the other party. Sometimes local voters selected state or federal officeholders of one party while voting differently locally. More research would be beneficial for understanding political trends.

With Republican control of the County Commission up to 2018 (and probably to 2020), they have reason to feel secure—if nothing changes. But change is normal. From 1929 to 1953 Democrats were in control of the Commission 20 of 24 years. They may have thought they would control things forever. At that time Mesa County was considered Democratic according to contemporary newspaper accounts.

Certainly national politics are in flux, interest in politics is very high as is frustration with politicians and money is flowing into politics in amounts perhaps never seen before. The party that successfully engages the public will benefit and individuals who master contemporary politics will be elected. Republican control of the Commission will continue until 2020 (26 years) unless Democrats win in 2018 and another Commissioner is no longer in office and a Democrat wins a special election.

In 1920, Republicans controlled the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) and continued to do so until 1929. They had only barely retained a majority in the 1926 election when Republican Gus Johnson beat W. D. Week (handwritten name hard to decipher) 4,078 to 3,967. Elections through the 1920’s were close, but in 1929 Democrats gained the majority. Before the Great Depression, times were bleak for agriculturally oriented counties through the 1920’s, and that may have influenced local elections. Democrats controlled the BOCC until 1933. Despite a Democratic landslide on a national scale led by Franklin Roosevelt, Republicans resumed control of the BOCC for two election cycles. The Great Depression, starting in 1929, caused a massive realignment politically to Democrats for more than a generation, but not until 1934 locally. Two Republican Commissioners were elected in 1932 but each only won by little more than a hundred votes.

An influential Democrat during this era was Walter Walker. He arrived in 1903 and eventually came to own the Daily Sentinel. For a few years in the 1920’s, he was a Ku

Klux Klan member, but turned away from the Klan, editorializing against it. As a result he was beaten in the street. At least two local police officers took part in the assault. He was involved in many civic efforts including entertainment venues. Walker was a frequent delegate to the Democratic National Convention from 1924 to 1952 and chair of the state Democratic Committee for one term. He was appointed to the United States Senate in September, 1932, but lost a special election in December. Before the 1960's Civil Rights Era, Democrats were more likely to disfavor civil rights for minorities. Walker may be seen as a populist or progressive, a stance having some local success in that period.

In 1934 Democrat Howard Lambeth was re-elected by a larger majority and in 1936 both Democrats were elected by healthy majorities. Democrats resumed control 3-0. H. Grady Pruett won in 1936, 1940, 1944, and 1948. Oscar Mayne won in 1940, 1944, and 1948. He lost in 1952 as Republicans took over, 3-0. Mesa County voted for a Republican president for the first time in 20 years.

Democrats had controlled the BOCC for 16 straight years and 20 out of 24 years. Republicans dominated for the next several cycles (3-0 majorities after the 1952, 1954 and 1956 elections) until Democrat Art Jens won in 1958 and 1962 by large margins reducing Republican majorities to 2-1. In 1964, both Democrats won, giving them a 3-0 majority. In 1964 the Goldwater/Johnson presidential election resulted in Democrats sweeping nationally and locally. Whether national elections influence local ones is and always will be the subject of endless debate. Politics is not always local and each election is different. But national Democratic ascendancy starting in the 1930's was matched for years locally. The 1964 presidential election did appear to affect local results, though for a much shorter time.

In 1966, Republican Edwin Lamm won, reducing the Democratic majority to 2-1. Two years later Republicans Lawrence 'Fuzzy' Aubert and Jack Wadlow swept both elections and commanded a 3-0 majority. In the 1970 and 1972 elections the Republican incumbents were re-elected.

Another prominent local Democrat, Wayne Aspinall, arrived in Palisade in 1904, one year after Walker arrived in Mesa County. He served in the state House from 1931 to 1938, serving as Speaker for the last two years. Aspinall then was elected to the Colorado Senate until 1948 when he moved up to the United States House of Representatives. He served there from 1949 to 1973. He was very influential on water projects and environmental issues. Considered a conservative (he would be called a Blue Dog today), he faced aggressive primary challengers in 1970 and 1972. Environmentalists nationally went after his pro-development policies and eventually succeeded. He lost the primary in 1972 and Republicans won the House seat. Although Aspinall supported limited federal involvement in land and water issues, he was responsible for many federally financed water projects. He served in state and national legislatures for 41 years.

Following President Richard Nixon's resignation in August, 1974, Democrat Howard Roland beat incumbent Lamm. The first woman member of the BOCC, Republican Maxine Albers, narrowly won a 112 vote victory out of 19,740 votes cast. Republicans continued to be in the majority, 2-1.

Until 1994, the BOCC majority flipped back and forth. In 1976, Albers, who had been elected in 1974 to fill an unexpired term, crushed her opponent approximately 2-1. However, Democrat Errol Snider won a narrow victory over Fuzzy Aubert and Democrats again held the majority, 2-1.

The majority flipped again in 1978. Rick Enstrom narrowly won Roland's seat. Roland, a Democrat four years earlier, ran as an independent. The Democratic candidate ran slightly behind Roland, but Enstrom was slightly ahead of each as the three candidates closely split 22,195 votes. Republicans were again in the majority, 2-1. Simultaneously there was a recall election against all incumbents, Roland, Snider and Albers—it lost 3-1.

On April 28, 1982, Black Sunday occurred. For several years, the area lost population, jobs and business. The local economic effect was so devastating for many people that Sentinel columnist Robin Brown recently posited that being risk adverse has become part of the local personality. Thus, it would follow if you accept Brown's theory, subsequent elections have been won by those who oppose change, taxes and new projects. That attitude seems to dominate Republican campaigns since.

From the 1980 election, Republicans won four in a row and had a 3-0 majority. During this period, Albers won four elections, serving 14 years. In 1988, things changed again and Democrats John Leane and Doralyn Genova won seats by large margins. Democrats once again controlled the BOCC. The 80's started a trend of more lopsided elections after many years of close votes.

Two years later, Democrat Jim Spehar won narrowly (less than 300 votes, or .9%). The Democratic majority increased to 3-0. Genova won again in 1992, but Leane lost, reducing the Democratic majority to 2-1. Democratic majorities began to shrink. In 1994 Kathy Hall beat Spehar with 59.1% of the vote and Republicans had a 2-1 majority. They have held the majority since.

Genova continued to win, four times in total, but her margins of victory kept getting smaller. Republicans had a 2-1 majority until 2004 when Genova was term limited. She had served 16 years. Since 2004, Republicans have held a 3-0 majority, winning some elections by a two to one majority.

Republicans have controlled the BOCC two thirds of the time since 1920. That is no reason to be confident. For one thing, major national and international events can and do affect local elections. The Great Depression changed national politics for decades, but the Progressive and Populist Era had set the stage for that going back to the 1890's as the Republican ascendancy starting in 1860 was eroded. The inevitable reaction to

Democrat dominance started in the 1960's, was stalled by Richard Nixon's near impeachment and his subsequent resignation. Republicans have dominated Congress nationally for decades, but have lost the presidential popular vote in all but one contest since 2000. Simultaneously, partisanship has increased markedly on both sides.

Locally Republicans have continued to dominate with exceptions. Bernie Buescher, a centrist Democrat, won two terms to the state House in 2004 and 2006. In 2002 Ken Salazar, another moderate, running for state Attorney General, won Mesa County 52% to 41%. Four years earlier he had lost the County.

It is apparent the more successful Democrats locally have been described as "conservative", "moderate" or "centrist". The effect of progressive or populist candidates generations ago needs more research. Populists were more rural and small town oriented and had a racist reputation. Progressives were more urban. There was a Farmer Labor Party here in 1920—it would have been either populist or progressive or both. The Klan was powerful in Colorado in the 1920's and was a virulent form of populism.

Volatile politics with at least three "wave elections" since 2006 have not been matched locally. To be successful, one might think a local Democrat with progressive economic views and moderate social views might be a choice. But local elections can be won by other people who are willing to work hard, perhaps for years, are well known and have a personality that appeals to the public. As an example, Jesse Daniels, a relatively unknown and unlikely candidate, did better than any Democratic losing candidate in the most recent Grand Junction City Council election. It was an uphill battle against the inoffensive incumbent mayor, but Daniels persevered and surprised people despite not being a social moderate. Like many things, hard work and preparation are often the key to victory, perhaps after more than one attempt. It seems only fools and dangerously courageous people make predictions, but national politics can affect local elections—another "wave" may arrive in 2018 and it may be time for Democrats to win in Mesa County.

Commissioner election statistics, 1920-2016, follow. It appears the definitive history of Mesa County and Grand Junction is yet to be written. For elections, primary research at the County Clerk's office revealed Commissioner votes. Other sources include the Colorado Year Book and Wikipedia. As noted above, other electoral results should be analyzed to give depth to a local political analysis.

Election Results

Early County Commissioner electoral records are sometimes incomplete or difficult to read. Sometimes party designation is left out. Most can be determined by checking primary information in the same or other years, but sometimes even primaries are not listed by party. Some candidates who are not Democrats or Republicans are designated Independent and others, Unaffiliated. In one case, no designation was included. Unless there was a party named "Independent", "Unaffiliated" is the proper legal term. Handwritten numbers and names are sometimes hard to decipher. I cross checked names when I could. Winners are listed first. Records have improved over the years and in 1986 percentages were included with vote totals.

Electoral results for other offices were obtained either from County records or the Colorado Year Book. Thanks to Amanda Polson of the Clerk's office for making research easy and Clerk Sheila Reiner for her cooperation. The Year Book was published by the state from 1918 to 1964 and contained statistics about the state. Until the 1950's, it came out every two years, but in later years it was published less often. These results are to provide some context to the Commissioner results.

Republicans had a majority 33 times (19 by 3-0, 14 by 2-1) and Democrats had a majority 16 times (10 by 3-0, 6 by 2-1).

Majorities by years:

R: 1920-26
D: 1928-30
R: 1932-34
D: 1936-50
R: 1952-62
D: 1964-66
R: 1968-74
D: 1976
R: 1978-86
D: 1988-92
R: 1994-2016

1920

Charles Wallace	R	3,338
D. Gover Rice	D	2,811
Charles Kirkindall		847
Charles Jones	R	3,499
George Saunderst	D	2,656
Kenneth Hall		727

Kirkindall and Hall did not have a party designation, but the populist Farmer Labor Party had 360 registered voters and “M”, 138.

D. Gover Rice’s middle name can be found elsewhere spelled “Gover” or “Grover”. The latter spelling may have been someone’s effort to “correct” an unusual spelling.

Republican majority

1922

Gus Johnson	R	3,830
James Harris	D	3,514

Republican majority 3-0

1924

Charles Wallace	R	4,342
S. Green	D	4,236

Thomas McKelvie	D	4,976
Charles Jones	R	3,523

Republican majority 2-1

1926

Gus Johnson	R	4,078
W. D. Week (?)	D	3,967

Republican majority 2-1

1928

E. Matthews	D	4,942
Charles Wallace	R	4,564

Thomas McKelvie D 6,756 unopposed

President: Herbert Hoover, R, carried the county over Al Smith, D, 6,446 to 3223

Democratic majority 2-1

1930

Howard Lambeth	D	4,528
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D. Aupperle R 3,219

Democratic majority 3-0

1932

M. G. Hinshaw R 5,255

Ed Matthews D 5,133

Charles Jones R 5,773

Thomas McKelvie D 5,539

President: Franklin Roosevelt, D, carried the county over Hoover 6,682 to 4,288

Republican majority 2-1

1934

H. Lambeth D 5,182

D. Aupperle R 3,933

Republican majority 2-1

1936

E. Burch D 6,614

M. Hinshaw R 5,547

H. Grady Pruett D 7,178

Charles Jones R 4,436

President: Roosevelt, D, won county 7,824 to 3,654

Democratic majority 3-0

1938

William Perkins D 6,570

Porter Carson R 5,687

Democratic majority 3-0

1940

Oscar Mayne D 7,386

M. G. Hinshaw R 6,982

H. Grady Pruett	D	7,333
George Currier	R	7,011

President: Roosevelt, D, won county 7,694 to 7,049
Democratic majority 3-0

1942

W. F. Perkins	D	3,973
Ernest Sommers	R	3,843

Democratic majority 3-0

1944

Oscar Mayne	D	10,123 unopposed
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H. Grady Pruett	D	7,429
Neal Johnson	R	5,346

President: Roosevelt, D, won county

Democratic majority 3-0

1946

W.F. Perkins	D	5,880
Walter Stout Jr.	R	5,687

Democratic majority 3-0

1948

Oscar C. Mayne	D	8,551
Clyde Fugate	R	6,132

Grady Pruett	D	8,758
William Anderson	R	5,903

Wayne Aspinall, D, won his first election to congress (he had been in the Colorado legislature since 1930)and very . He served 24 years until 1973 and was a powerful conservative Democrat. He lived in Palisade. It does not appear he influenced local elections.

President: Harry Truman, D, won county

Democratic majority 3-0

1950

Walter Stout Jr. R (do not have vote total, but Stout won)

Carl McElvain D

Democratic majority 2-1

1952

Roe Sanders R 9,791

Ascan C. Mayne D 8,520

Henry Tupper R 10,142

Lawrence Ryan D 8,009

President: Dwight D. Eisenhower, R, won county

Republican majority 3-0

1954

Charles Walker R 7,652

R.R. Weimer D 7,003

Henry Tupper R 14,409 unopposed

Republican majority 3-0

1956

Roe Saunders R 10,793

Read Oldham D 8,981

President: Eisenhower, R, won county

Republican majority 3-0

1958

Art Jens D 10,018

Howard Shults R 7,575

Republican majority 2-1

1960

Roe Saunders R 12,978

J.L. "Zeke" Sellars D 8,849

Henry "Bill" Tupper R 16,374 unopposed

President: Richard Nixon, R, won county

Republican majority 2-1

1962

Art Jens D 10,632

Walter Stout R 7,362

Republican majority 2-1

1964

Paul Heidel D 11,616

Roe Saunders R 9,290

Clyde Lowe D 11,200

Bill Tupper R 9,528

Democratic majority 3-0

1966

Edwin Lamm R 10,121

Ray Myers D 7,931

Democratic majority 2-1

1968

Lawrence "Fuzzy" Aubert R 10,671

Paul Heidel D 9,679

Jack Wadlow R 9,681

Clyde Lowe D 8,185

Republican majority 3-0

1970

Edwin Lamm	R	9,331
W. A. Schultz	D	7,973

Republican majority 3-0

1972

“Fuzzy” Aubert	R	10,517
James Gale	D	9,450

Jack Waldlow	R	9,822
Jay Crawford	D	8,999

Republican majority 3-0

1974 (fill vacancy ?)

Howard Roland	D	10,388
Edwin Lamm	R	9,371

Maxine Albers	R	9,926
Jay Crawford	D	9,814

Republican majority 2-1

1976

Errol Snider	D	13,877
“Fuzzy” Aubert	R	13,059

Maxine Albers	R	17,104
John Egger	D	8,377

Democratic majority 2-1

1978

Rick Enstrom	R	7,664
John Fowler	D	7,226
Howard Roland	Ind	7,305

Roland was elected in 1974 as a D.
Recall election for all 3 commissioners lost approx. 3-1

Republican majority 2-1

1980

George White	R	18,761
Mike Kelly	D	13,214

Maxine Albers	R	23,405
George Bevan	D	8,881

Republican majority 3-0

1982

Dick Pond	R	18,601
Mick Bilney	D	9,670

Republican majority 3-0

1984

Bob Holmes	R	16,169
Jim Adams	D	15,749

Maxine Albers	R	17,947
Ken Lowell	D	16,195

Republican majority 3-0

1986

Dick Pond	R	16,618	(53.22)
Bill Dunning	D	13,426	(42.99%)

Republican majority 3-0

1988

John Leane	D	20,728	(53.45%)
Bill Pitts	R	14,503	(37.4%)

Doralyn Genova	D	22,663	(55.86%)
John Whiting	R	15,669	(40.40)

Dan Prinster, D, won 55th assembly district three times: 1988, '90, '92.

Democratic majority 2-1

1990

Jim Spehar	D	15,804	(48.6%)
Doug Thompson	R	15,513	(47.7%)

Ben Campbell (D, later changed party as US senator) won 3rd congressional district with 61.6%. Roy Romer, D, won county for governor.

Democratic majority 3-0

1992

Doralyn Genova	D	24,414	(54.2%)
Thomas Logue	R	18,642	(41.4%)

John Crouch	R	25,690	(57.0%)
John Leane	D	16,996	(37.7%)

Democratic majority 2-1

1994

Kathy Hall	R	22,043	(59.1%)
Jim Spehar	D	13,866	(37.2%)

Republican majority 2-1

1996

Jim Baughman	R	30,244	(63.0%)
Howard Scott	D	14,834	(30.9%)

Doralyn Genova	D	23,725	(49.4%)
Harold Hoffman	R	21,162	(44.1%)

Republican majority 2-1

1998

Kathy Hall	R	30,302	(74%). unopposed
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Republican majority 2-1

2000

Jim Baughman	R	27,141	(51.4%)
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Bob McCormick Unaff 20,737 (39.5%)

Doralyn Genova D 24,503 (46.4%)

Alan Farina R 24,295 (46.0%)

Republican majority 2-1

2002

Tillie Bishop R 32,574 (78.44%) unopposed

Republican majority 2-1

2004

Craig Meis R 35,476 (57.09%)

Cindy Enos-Martinez D 23,447 (37.73%)

Janet Rowland R 38,761 (62.37%)

Errol "J.R." Snider D 10,069 (16.20%)

Mac Williams Ind 6,614 (10.64%)

Bernie Buescher, D, won 55th assembly district 18,006 to 14,530

Republican majority 3-0

2006

Steven Acquafresca R 27,198 (57.17%)

Jim Witt D 18,374 (38.62%)

Bernie Buescher, D, won 55th district 13,466 to 11,374, almost exactly same percentage of votes as 2004

Republican majority 3-0

2008

Craig Meis R 39,243 (56.05%)

Dan Robinson D 25,924 (37.03%)

Janet Rowland R 43,563 (62.22%)

Dickie Lewis D 22,042 (31.48%)

Bernie Buescher, D, lost 55th district by narrow margin to Laura Bradford, 17,391 to 17,996.

Republican majority 3-0

2010

Steven Acquafresca	R	39,178	(70.34%)
Stephen Saint	Lib	9,796	(17.59%)

Republican majority 3-0

2012

John Justman	R	40,926	(55.63%)
Jana Gerow	D	15,033	(13.44%)

Rose Pugliese	R	45,471	(61.8%)
David Edwards	D	22,286	(30.29%)

Republican majority 3-0

2014

Scott McInnis	R	38,778	(68.99%)
Mark Williams	D	17,433	(23.82%)

Republican majority 3-0

2016

John Justman	R	42,214	(55.63%)
Mel Muldur	D	20,090	(26.48%)
Jim Doody	Unaff	13,573	(17.89%)

Rose Pugliese	R	47,051	(63.86%)
David Edwards	D	26,631	(36.14%)

Republican majority 3-0