

## County Commission Update: A Partisan Election System

By Wade Mathews, Public Information Officer

The unfortunate and senseless shootings last month in Tucson, Arizona emphasized some historic constants found in politics: it is full of conflict and strife. There will always be two opposing views, two sides to every story, two equally important opinions. And that's regardless of having a two-party system.

Our nation's Founding Fathers were inspired to create the type of government that exists in the United States. It then was, and still is, the best form of government in the world. But it's not perfect. Political pundits are constantly criticizing a Presidential Administration and Congress for failing to reach across party lines more often.

Closer to home, some people decry partisan politics when it comes to electing our county officials. After the elections, Commissioner Jerry Hurst discussed an idea to eliminate the two-party system for county officials. A recent Transcript Bulletin Editorial supported the idea of making county elections nonpartisan.

Commissioner Hurst followed through with discussions of a possible change to the election process. The County Commission tasked County Attorney Doug Hogan with researching the issue and presenting the options to the Commission.

Attorney Hogan discovered something very interesting. "We learned that it's against the law to abolish the two-party system in county elections," Commissioner Hurst said.

Utah State Code, 17-52-402, regulates plans proposing to change forms of county government. The Code says planned changes after May 1, 2000 may not, among other things, "provide for the nonpartisan election of elected officers..." In other words, state law requires partisan elections for county offices.

However, two of Utah's 29 counties currently do have a non-partisan election process. Morgan and Grand counties both have non-partisan systems which were in place before the law went into effect, thereby "Grandfathering" them in.

Commissioner Hurst says Representative Ronda Menlove will research the idea further for him. "There are pros and cons to both types of elections," Hurst said. "The county caucuses at the capitol would be a good forum for interested citizens to discuss this with their state representatives."

The current state code may be disappointing to some people. But a partisan election process has many benefits for citizens and candidates. It unites people with common principals, ideals and goals. It provides educational resources for people to learn about political issues and candidates. It provides a simple and inexpensive method for refilling a midterm vacancy.

It provides support to a candidate who otherwise may not have the means to run for an office. It provides a network of contacts from state government and political party leadership to local officials and grassroots-level leaders. It also encourages elected officials to keep in line with the constituents' common political leanings.

Finally a two-party election process keeps our county in line with the state election process. It provides for the support of a state government leadership that wants to earn or maintain the electoral support of our county.

I think this issue emphasizes a very important point. Regardless of a candidate's party affiliation or non-affiliation, it's a voter's responsibility to become educated about the people and the issues before voting.

"I think long-time residents vote for the person and not the party because they know the candidates and their merits," said Commissioner Colleen Johnson, Chair of the Tooele County Commission. "New voters may tend to vote straight ticket only because they aren't familiar with the names on the ballot."

What it really comes down to is how elected officials serve the people that elected them to office and how officials relate with and communicate with their constituents. Commissioner Johnson said, "Once you're elected, what's important is how you do your job and how you serve the community."