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History Bodes Well for Bullock Reelection

Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

August 17, 2015

Analyzing historical electoral patterns may seem like an exercise for the back rooms of a university political science department. But active practitioners in the political arena dive into history to find patterns that are indicative, if not predictive, of what might happen in current and future election cycles.

While I used to look for such patterns as a political activist involved in the electoral process directly, I now look at them as I prepare for classroom discussion or for historical film making. And a review of Montana election history reveals some patterns that bode well for the reelection of Governor Steve Bullock next year.

Over the last 64 years, Governors running for a second full term always win and also always increase their winning margin, often by a lot. One-term Governors during that period – Democrat Forrest Anderson (1972-76), and Republicans Stan Stephens (1988-92) and Judy Martz (2000-04), all decided on their own not to seek reelection, so they fall out of the analysis. And Tim Babcock's defeat in 1968 by Anderson was unique in that he'd essentially already gotten a second term equivalent in 1964 when running for Governor after assuming the office in 1962 when Republican Governor Donald Nutter perished in the crash of a National Guard airplane.

Setting aside those four Governors, history is an interesting teacher, and the historical pattern here in Montana is strong and consistent. The last Governor to lose a bid for reelection after serving a full first term was John Bonner in 1952, 63 years ago.

Democrat Bonner, of Helena, had been elected in 1948 with 55.7% of the vote, defeating Republican Governor Sam Ford who was running for a third consecutive term. But when Bonner was running for reelection in 1952, he was narrowly defeated by Republican J. Hugo Aronson of Cut Bank, 51% to 49%. Aronson, affectionately known as "The Galloping Swede," was reelected in 1956 in a close race, getting 51.4% of the vote against two-term Democratic Attorney General Arnold Olsen of Butte, a very strong opponent who later served a decade in Congress.

Lieutenant Governor Tom Judge of Helena, defeated Republican legislator Ed Smith of Dagmar for Governor in 1972 with 54.1% of the vote. Then Judge, as Governor, increased his margin in 1976 with 61.7% of the vote over the GOP's Bob Woodahl, who had been Attorney General for eight years.

In 1980, Lieutenant Governor Ted Schwinden, Democrat, originally from Wolf Point, became Governor defeating Republican legislator Jack Ramirez of Billings with 55.4% of the vote. Schwinden then topped that 4 years later when he pasted Republican State Senator Pat Goodover from Great Falls, getting 70.3% of the vote.

Republican Governor Marc Racicot won a narrow victory in 1992 against Democratic State Legislator Dorothy Bradley of Bozeman. Racicot got 51.3% of the vote while Bradley secured 48.7%, a tight race. But four years later in 1996, Racicot had consolidated his strength and topped the Democratic team of State Senators, Chet Blaylock of Laurel, and Judy Jacobson of Butte. Racicot got a record 79.2% of the vote for his second term effort in a race in which he was clearly going to win but was marked by the untimely death of Blaylock on the campaign trail late in the race, putting Jacobson in the unfortunate position of carrying on the difficult race.

In 2004, in an unusual race for Governor in which both candidates came from Whitefish, Democratic farmer/rancher Brian Schweitzer defeated Republican school teacher Bob Brown, getting 50.4% of the vote while Brown got 46%, with 1.9% going to a Libertarian candidate. Four years later in 2008, Schweitzer took on another Brown, Republican Roy Brown of Billings, a State Senator. Going for his second term, Schweitzer doubled Brown's vote, 65.5% to 32.5% with 2% going to the Libertarian.

During this entire 60+ year period, the very clear pattern of Montana Governors succeeding in their second term bids and usually increasing their margins bodes well for Governor Bullock. And Governor Bullock's position is bolstered by overseeing an extremely good economy and getting national recognition for managing state government finances with no tax increases and significant money in the bank.

There is a second interesting historical pattern that also bodes well for the Governor, but I will discuss that in a subsequent commentary.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking about the electoral patterns that make things look good for Governor Bullock in 2016.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 46 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.