

How Many Council Members?

R.A. Schrack 20 July 2012

Rockville now has four council members. There has been some interest in raising the number of council members to six. This paper examines some of the factors that should be considered. If you go to the internet and ask “how many councilmembers are best”, you will find that cities are considering reducing the number of council members, not expanding them. The average number of council members is five, which means that most councils have either four or six members because an odd number including the mayor is desired to avoid tie votes. City population is not generally correlated with council size except for very large cities. Larger councils are correlated with time consuming debate and in some cases larger budgets where council members are eager to support projects for their constituents. These general observations are not too much help in deciding what is best for Rockville.

The number of candidates running and the number of seats to be filled has a very clear mathematical relationship to the votes required to win. The following table shows the percentage of total votes required to win for different numbers of candidates, for the cases of four council seats and six council seats. The top row is the number of candidates running for election and the next two rows show the percentage of the vote required to win for four or six seats.

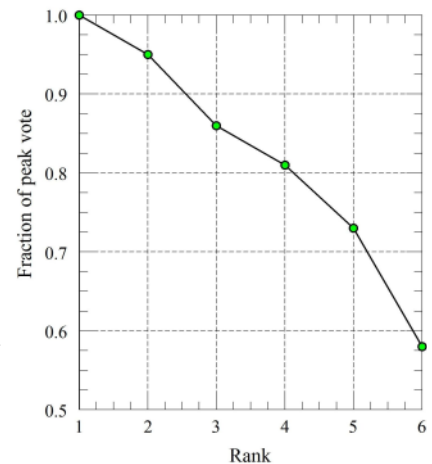
	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
4	100.	80	66	57	50	44	40	36	33	31	29	27	25
6			100.	86	75	66	60	55	50	46	43	40	38

This table assumes that all voters vote a full ballot. Note that this does not indicate the difficulty of winning. If there are four seats to fill and only four candidates, then there is no contest and everybody wins, even though it requires 100% of the vote to win. It is normal to think that if you get a majority of the votes, you win - but this is only the case if there are twice as many candidates (or more) as seats to fill.

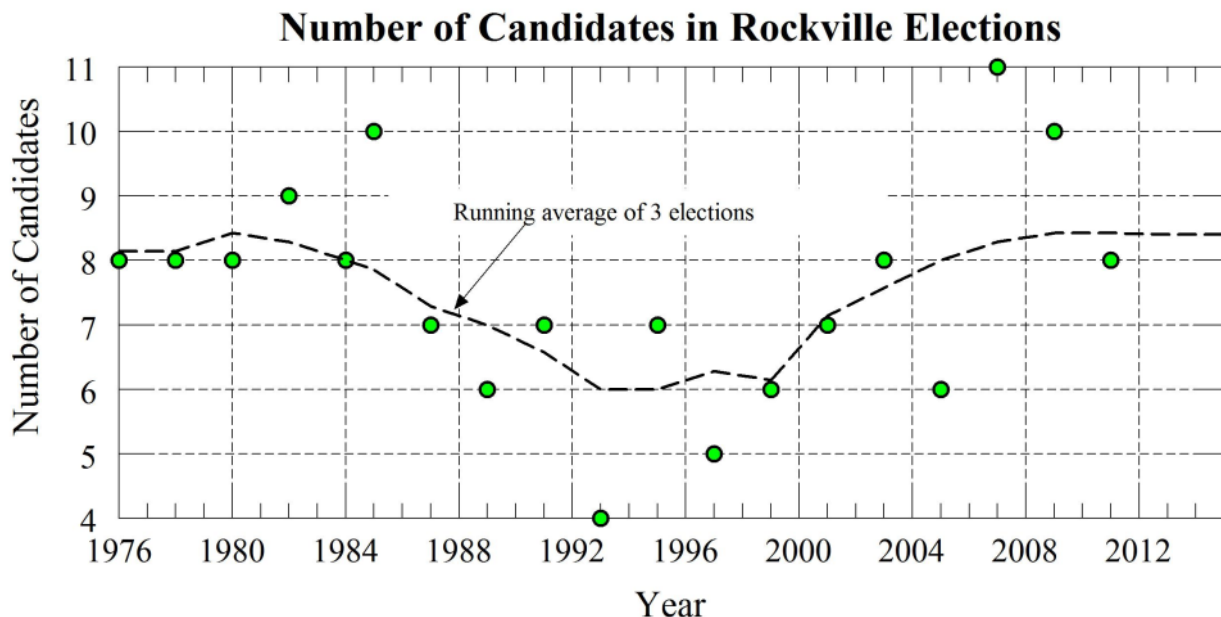
The following table shows what happened in the last five elections. The third row shows the percentage of the total vote by the top vote getter. The fourth row shows the percentage for the lowest winning candidate with the present four seat council. The last row shows the percentage for the lowest winning candidate if the was a six seat council. In some elections there is a considerable gap between the last two rows, in 2011 there was very little gap.

Year	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011
# of Candidates	8	6	11	10	8
% of top Cand.	66	81	51	53	65
% of LWC (4)	57	70	41	41	48
% of LWC (6)	26	44	32	35	45

The graph on the right shows the average for the five elections of the percentage of votes received as a function of rank. The highest vote getter is 1. Second has an average of 0.95 compared to the top and so on. Note that on average the top two vote getters are within 5% of each other while by the time we get to the lowest winning candidate the relative vote on a four person council has about 20% fewer votes. If we consider who the winners would be on a six member council, the lowest winning candidate would have more than 40% fewer votes than the top vote getter. Expanding the number of seats on the council means that those extra council members you get will have quite a bit less public support than you have for the top ranking four members of the council.



The graph below shows the number of candidates in the last 19 city elections.



There is a correlation between number of candidates and participation in an election for example in 1985 the participation was very high when there were three mayoral candidates and 10 council candidates the number of ballots cast was 6,565 out of an over 18 population of 31,000 or 21.2% of the possible voters. This should be compared to 1993 when there was no competition for Mayor or Council seats and the number of ballots cast was 1449 out of an over 18 population of 34,000 or 4.3 % of the possible voters.

Thus competition is important in motivating voters but even more important is that competition gives voters a choice. The above graph shows that on average, voters had an average of 8 candidates or less over the last 19 elections. It would seem that having each race competitive has been more or less the expected for our four person council races. But what if the city had a six member council? To have competitive races would then require 12 council candidates for each election. The political history of the city does not give encouragement to the idea that 12 qualified candidates could be found to keep Rockville elections competitive. ■