

An Analysis of Charleston's 2015 Mayoral Election*

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[1] Introduction

November, 2015, was an historic month in the city of Charleston. With Joe Riley declining to run for re-election, Charleston got a new mayor for the first time in 40 years. With seven candidates who were vying for the seat, an outright majority was unlikely in the first round of balloting on November 3rd. And indeed, the official results after the first round showed that John Tecklenburg received 8,957 votes (35.60%) and Leon Stavrinakis received 8,685 votes (34.52%). Total turnout in the first round was 25,158. In the runoff election, Tecklenburg emerged victorious and became Charleston's first new mayor in 40 years. Unofficial results at this time have Tecklenburg receiving 57.5 percent of the vote in the runoff.

[2] Exit Polling

In this paper we analyze a series of exit polls conducted during the first round of balloting on November 3rd, 2015. November 3 was an election day full of rain, but several College of Charleston political science majors and faculty traveled to precincts around the city to conduct exit polling. Our survey was designed to collect information on a mix of political and demographic information of Charleston's voters. All data was minimized to anonymize respondent identity. Important issues, candidate supported, interest in local politics, opinions of Mayor Riley, and self-identified ideology constitute the political variables. We also asked voters about the importance of seven issues facing the City of Charleston. Demographic information came in the form of age, sex, race, and amount of time lived in the Charleston area.

We conducted the exit polls by dispatching students and faculty to a purposive sample of polling places across the city: in Downtown Charleston, West Ashley, and on Daniel Island. Precincts were chosen based on likely turnout and a balance of demographic factors in an attempt to mirror a representative sample (however, it is important to stress that this our sample is not representative of all polling places and voters). Respondents were asked to participate in the survey as they exited the polling place. Our survey took approximately three minutes to complete. We obtained 192 participants, with 18 total null values for candidate

choice. We report the most important results below and the results are presented with little commentary.

[3] Results

Deriving the most important issue for voters was a primary goal of the survey. We found that 35.9 percent of all respondents indicated they cared most about transportation – nearly double the next most frequent response. During the campaign, the candidates focused heavily on various issues related to transportation: from improving the condition of roads and syncing traffic lights to increasing public transportation and competing I-526. Our poll indicated that transportation was indeed the major issue of concern to voters. Education was the paramount issue for 18.2 percent of participant voters and flooding followed closely with 16.7 percent. Development received 10.9 percent, while all other possibilities – affordable housing, cruise ships, race relations, taxes, and “other” – received less than 5%.

Problem

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	1.6	1.6	1.6
Affordable Housing	8	4.2	4.2	5.7
Cruise Ships	2	1.0	1.0	6.8
Development	21	10.9	10.9	17.7
Education	35	18.2	18.2	35.9
Flooding	32	16.7	16.7	52.6
Other	7	3.6	3.6	56.3
Race Relations	8	4.2	4.2	60.4
Taxes	7	3.6	3.6	64.1
Transportation	69	35.9	35.9	100.0
Total	192	100.0	100.0	

Although the participants in our survey are not a representative slice of voters in Charleston, the final ranking of the candidates in our poll mirrors the official election results in the first round of balloting. In our survey, John Tecklenburg garnered the most votes, with 31.3% of the electorate (he received 35.6% in the official results), and Stavrinakis came in second

with 27.6% of the vote (he received 34.5% in the official results). Our poll had Ginny Deerin in third place with 20.3% of the vote (she received 17.49% according to the official results). We had 18 respondents who refused to reveal who they voted for.

Vote

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18	9.4	9.4	9.4
Ginny Deerin	39	20.3	20.3	29.7
John Tecklenburg	60	31.3	31.3	60.9
Leon Stavrinakis	53	27.6	27.6	88.5
Maurice Washington	17	8.9	8.9	97.4
William Dudley Gregory	5	2.6	2.6	100.0
Total	192	100.0	100.0	

We next looked at the relationship between the top four issues of concern to voters-- development, education, flooding, and transportation--and how citizens voted. On the most important issue of transportation, we see that 40.6% voted for Stavrinakis compared to 24.6% for Deerin and 21.7% for Tecklenburg. Before the runoff election we saw this as a challenge facing Tecklenburg’s campaign and one that could hurt him in the runoff. Ginny Deerin’s endorsement of Tecklenburg may have been pivotal in assuaging voters’ concerns about Tecklenburg’s commitment to transportation. On the other hand, although Tecklenburg came in third on the most important issue, transportation, we find that he made up for it on the other three issues, winning development (38.1 percent), education (48.6 percent), and flooding (25.0 percent). In the end, one of our core findings is that Tecklenburg seemed to have a broader base of support across a range of issues.

Although Charleston’s mayoral election was non-partisan, we see some ideological patterns in the data. Self-described liberals voted 33.9 percent for Deerin, 26.8 percent for Stavrinakis, and 19.6 percent for Tecklenburg. At the other end, 49.0 percent of self-described conservatives voted for Tecklenburg, 21.6 percent for Stavrinakis, and 5.9 percent for Deerin. Moderates were observed to favor Stavrinakis with 34.8 percent. Deerin and Tecklenburg hovered at 26.1 and 19.6 percent (respectively) with moderates.

Vote * Problem Crosstabulation

		Problem				Total
		Development	Education	Flooding	Transportation	
Vote	Count	2	2	4	4	12
	% within Problem	9.5%	5.7%	12.5%	5.8%	7.6%
Ginny Deerin	Count	3	9	5	17	34
	% within Problem	14.3%	25.7%	15.6%	24.6%	21.7%
John Tecklenburg	Count	8	17	8	15	48
	% within Problem	38.1%	48.6%	25.0%	21.7%	30.6%
Leon Stavrinakis	Count	5	4	6	28	43
	% within Problem	23.8%	11.4%	18.8%	40.6%	27.4%
Maurice Washington	Count	2	3	5	5	15
	% within Problem	9.5%	8.6%	15.6%	7.2%	9.6%
William Dudley Gregory	Count	1	0	4	0	5
	% within Problem	4.8%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	3.2%
Total	Count	21	35	32	69	157
	% within Problem	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Vote * Ideology Crosstabulation

		Ideology			Total
		Conservative	Liberal	Moderate	
Vote	Count	7	2	3	12
	% within Ideology	13.7%	3.6%	6.5%	7.8%
Ginny Deerin	Count	3	19	12	34
	% within Ideology	5.9%	33.9%	26.1%	22.2%
John Tecklenburg	Count	25	11	9	45
	% within Ideology	49.0%	19.6%	19.6%	29.4%
Leon Stavrinakis	Count	11	15	16	42
	% within Ideology	21.6%	26.8%	34.8%	27.5%
Maurice Washington	Count	5	7	3	15
	% within Ideology	9.8%	12.5%	6.5%	9.8%
William Dudley Gregory	Count	0	2	3	5
	% within Ideology	0.0%	3.6%	6.5%	3.3%
Total	Count	51	56	46	153
	% within Ideology	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

We also found some clear geographic patterns in the candidates' vote totals. Leon Stavrinakis won 37.5 percent of respondents who said they lived in West Ashley. Tecklenburg and Deerin both received 21.4 percent of West Ashley voters in our poll. John Tecklenburg topped his rivals in Daniel Island, Downtown, and James Island, with 43.6 percent, 28.8 percent, and 37.1 percent (respectively). As he did in the aggregate results, Leon Stavrinakis came in second in each of these areas. Once again, our results suggest that Tecklenburg had a broader base of support compared to his rivals.

Vote * Location Crosstabulation

		Location					Total
			Daniel Island	Downtown Charleston	James Island	West Ashley	
Vote	Count	1	0	9	2	6	18
	% within Location	33.3%	0.0%	15.3%	5.7%	10.7%	9.4%
Ginny Deerin	Count	1	9	11	6	12	39
	% within Location	33.3%	23.1%	18.6%	17.1%	21.4%	20.3%
John Tecklenburg	Count	1	17	17	13	12	60
	% within Location	33.3%	43.6%	28.8%	37.1%	21.4%	31.3%
Leon Stavrinakis	Count	0	11	12	9	21	53
	% within Location	0.0%	28.2%	20.3%	25.7%	37.5%	27.6%
Maurice Washington	Count	0	2	6	4	5	17
	% within Location	0.0%	5.1%	10.2%	11.4%	8.9%	8.9%
William Dudley Gregory	Count	0	0	4	1	0	5
	% within Location	0.0%	0.0%	6.8%	2.9%	0.0%	2.6%
Total	Count	3	39	59	35	56	192
	% within Location	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Age of respondents was also examined. We found that Tecklenburg did best among those over 45 years of age while Stavrinakis and Deerin split those under age 45. Tecklenburg claimed 36 percent of respondents over 45 years of age compared to Stavrinakis' 27 percent. When looking at younger voters, Stavrinakis won the 44 and under age group with 31 percent to Tecklenburg's 22 percent. Looking at how long voters have lived in Charleston, we find that most report having lived in Charleston for over 20 years at 46.9%. Unlike age, however, this variable did not seem to correlate with a respondent's vote choice.

Vote * Age Crosstabulation

		Age					Total
		18-29	30-44	45-64	65 and older		
Vote	Count	2	2	1	2	11	18
	% within Age	40.0%	10.5%	2.5%	2.8%	19.3%	9.4%
Ginny Deerin	Count	2	2	15	12	8	39
	% within Age	40.0%	10.5%	37.5%	16.9%	14.0%	20.3%
John Tecklenburg	Count	1	4	9	26	20	60
	% within Age	20.0%	21.1%	22.5%	36.6%	35.1%	31.3%
Leon Stavrinakis	Count	0	5	13	21	14	53
	% within Age	0.0%	26.3%	32.5%	29.6%	24.6%	27.6%
Maurice Washington	Count	0	5	2	8	2	17
	% within Age	0.0%	26.3%	5.0%	11.3%	3.5%	8.9%
William Dudley Gregory	Count	0	1	0	2	2	5
	% within Age	0.0%	5.3%	0.0%	2.8%	3.5%	2.6%
Total	Count	5	19	40	71	57	192
	% within Age	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Ascertaining public opinion of former Mayor, Joe Riley, was an additional goal of these exit polls. Not surprisingly, we found that 79.7 percent of respondents had a favorable opinion of Mayor Riley. Just 13.5 percent had a neutral or mixed opinion and just 5.2 percent had an unfavorable opinion of Mayor Riley. We attempted to ascertain whether opinions of Mayor Riley correlate with a respondent's vote choice. We were unable to discern any clear patterns (in part because there is such low variation in support for Riley).

Riley_favor

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2	1.0	1.0	1.0
Favorable	151	78.6	78.6	79.7
Neutral/Mixed	26	13.5	13.5	93.2
No Opinion	10	5.2	5.2	98.4
Unfavorable	3	1.6	1.6	100.0
Total	192	100.0	100.0	

Rounding out the demographics, 81.3 percent of respondents in our survey were white, 14.1 percent were African American, and the remaining 4.1 percent were Latino or "other." 47.4 percent of participants were women, 51.0 percent were men, and 3 values were null. Most

respondents had at least a bachelor's degree: 39.1 percent with only a bachelor's and 34.9 percent with a graduate or professional degree for a total of 75.0 percent. 22.9 percent had some college or an associate's degree, and only 2.1% had a high school degree or less. We did not identify any clear patterns between vote choice and these demographic factors.

[4] Conclusions

Because our exit polls were conducted during the first round of balloting, it is difficult to say with certainty how Tecklenburg defeated Stavrinakis in the runoff election. Given voters' overall concerns about transportation, and given that voters concerned with transportation were more likely to vote for Stavrinakis or Deerin, Tecklenburg would seem to have been at a disadvantage in the runoff election. However, with Deerin's endorsement, and with a broader base of support both geographically and on the other most important issues, it is perhaps not surprising that Tecklenburg prevailed. In the end, the results of our exit polls give us a good picture of what was on the minds of Charlestonians on November 3rd as they bid adieu to Mayor Riley after his 40 years of service.