

# **Shifting County Politics Has Changed the 2014 Election**

By Terry Witt  
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Every candidate running for county office in Levy County this year, at least to this point, is a Republican. All candidates were Democrats at some point in their past.

The number of registered Democrats and Republicans was dead even at 10,437 on Tuesday. But the very fact that the two parties are dead even is a sign of changing times. The lack of a Democrat running for county office is yet another indicator of the shifting politics of the county. Democrats at one time held every county office in Levy County and Republicans were firmly in the back seat in terms of numbers of registered voters.

Democrats outnumbered Republicans in Levy County 10,980 to 2,598 in 1994. The gap between the parties remained big in November of 2008 when registered Democrats totaled 14,070 to Republicans with 7,929.

The Journal chose 1994 because Florida Division of Elections voter registration data goes back to that year. Coincidentally, it was the first year Levy County Supervisor of Elections Tammy Jones worked for the elections office.

Levy County Republicans held a slight edge over Democrats a week ago in terms of registered voters. But the two parties are in a dead heat now. Voter registration rolls are constantly changing.

But the general trend has been for Democrats to switch to Republican.

The roster of former Levy County Democrats running for office as Republicans in 2014 is a sign of the changing times.

Levy County Commissioner Chad Johnson changed from Democrat to Republican when he was appointed by Gov. Rick Scott in 2009 to fill the District 1 seat vacated by indicted former commissioner Tony Parker.

Johnson later switched districts and beat Democrat Nancy Bell for the District 2 seat. Russell "Rock" Meeks, who is challenging Johnson in the District 2 race, changed from Democrat to Republican in 2012.

County Commission Chairman Ryan Bell switched from Democrat to Republican in 2009 and beat then Democrat Lily Rooks for the District 4 seat in 2010. Bell and Rooks will face off in the Republican primary in August. Rooks changed her party affiliation from Democrat to Republican in 2012.

The 2010 race was the first time in county history that Republicans swept the ballot. Not a single Democrat won county office.

Three Levy County School Board members are running for re-election without party affiliation this year. State law requires them to be non-partisan. But all three incumbents were former Democrats who switched to the Republican Party. None has opposition to this point.

School Board member Cameron Asbell switched from Democrat to Republican in October of 2008. School Board member Rick Turner switched from Democrat to Republican in 2012 and School Board member Robert Philpot switched from Democrat to Republican in 2012.

Michelle Finnen, chairwoman of the Levy County Republican Executive Committee, said there is no single reason why voters and candidates are switching from Democrat to Republican.

But she believes in general, people switch when they realize their values don't align with the Democrats.

“There’s been a change because they know they are not in the right party,” she said. “Times are changing in the county.”

She said people are realizing the country doesn’t have a blank check to pay the bills and with the arrival of President Barack Obama on the national stage, a larger debate has sprung forth about states’ rights. Finnen said people are more aware that big government “shouldn’t be involved in your business.” She said she was referring to a person’s personal business as well as individual commercial businesses. She said the economy has been slow to recover because of the regulations imposed by big government on small businesses. She said small businesses have difficulty growing and adding jobs under the weight of government.

Finnen said it is not her place to judge whether there are pretend Republicans that switched from the Democratic Party to the GOP. She hopes they changed because their beliefs aligned better with Republicans.

“If they say they are Republicans, then they should look at our website and determine whether their values and beliefs match up with the Republicans,” she said. The website is [levyrepublicans.com](http://levyrepublicans.com). The site contains a statement of Republican values.

Former Levy County Democratic Executive Committee Chairman Charley King said the Democratic Executive Committee in Levy County is defunct. He said people weren’t showing up for the meetings.

King, who was chairman about a year ago, spoke to the Journal as an individual rather than as a party representative.

He believes many people switched parties because of the marriage issue. The Democratic Party supports gay marriages. He said many people changed party affiliation because of Christianity issues. He said the people standing along the roadside with pro-life signs are 90 percent Republican.

“Democrats aren’t necessarily for abortion, but they think an individual has the right to choose,” he said. “It’s a big factor.”

King said Obama has been another big factor in people switching parties. He said some people won’t vote for a black person; not just here, but in other parts of the country.

“You’ve got these people who won’t vote for him because he’s black,” King said. “All I’m doing is giving you my opinion. It is a factor.”

He said there are voters who won’t cast a ballot for a woman, either, but he said he favors electing women to political office. He said one of the best county commissioners Levy County ever had was former county commissioner Lily Rooks. King said she did more research on the issues and made more trips to Tallahassee on behalf of constituents than anyone else.

“In most cases I would vote for a woman before a man,” King said.

King said politicians from both major parties are guilty of spending taxpayer dollars to further their political careers and remain in office.

But he said there are fundamental differences between Democrats and Republicans that make him a Democrat.

“I have always believed that Democrats are for the lower and middle class and Republicans are for the middle and upper class. That’s why I’m a Democrat,” King said.

### **Facts about 2014 election:**

Primary Election ... Aug. 26

General Election ... Nov. 4

Last day to turn in petitions ... May 19

County qualifying is from noon, June 16 to noon, June 20.

Voter registration books close July 28 for primary election.

Voter registration books close Oct. 6 for general election.

Early voting dates and times for primary election are:

Aug. 11 to Aug. 23 from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.;

General election Oct. 20 to Nov. 1 from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.