

7/20/1990

Utah County residents don't get much choice

Handwritten note: "The 1st 2/3"

For years, Utah County politics have brought to mind a joke about an automobile ad seen in a Soviet newspaper. The ad supposedly said, "You may choose from this exciting color — black." Utah County voters have been content with a monochrome kaleidoscope offering shades of true-blue Republicanism.

This year's congressional election in the 3rd District will probably be a verification of the results of the Sept. 11 primary between John Harmer and Karl Snow. In any race that doesn't offer sharp ideological contrasts, "housekeeping" issues (such as the tidiness of financial records) predominate. The 3rd District race has threatened to become mired in such minutiae; this would be unfortunate, as there are matters of greater moment to consider.

Proper conservative credentials are de rigueur for 3rd District candidates.

Even the late, unlamented Brent Morris made the proper conservative noises last fall before he was revealed to be a political cross-dresser (a Democrat trapped in the body of a Republican). However, Karl Snow offers himself as a conservative with a difference; "I'm not here to 'out-serve' anybody; I am a reasonable man." Unlike ... ?

Snow describes himself as "The Conservative in this race that can be trusted." By emphasizing his ties to Utah County and his experience in the state legislature, Snow appears to be highlighting character rather than conviction; a less charitable encapsulation of his approach might be, "This race isn't about ideology; it's about competence."

In order to win, Harmer needs to convince Utah County voters that they have had enough of "Trust Me" politics. Harmer could use his candidacy to take a measure of Utah County's conservatism, and by doing so could help to answer this question: Is Utah's widely-acknowledged conservatism a matter of principle or of disposition?

Often it seems that Utah conducts its political affairs by common consent: we elect officials, sustain them from time to time, and trust them that when the Republican party speaks, the thinking has been done. Harmer does not appear to be



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FOR THE SAKE OF ARGUMENT

the party's preferred candidate. His election would give the Utah Republican Party a much needed kick in its complacency.

There is no swifter solvent of principle than political power. Those who are conservative merely by disposition may be content to allow political power to reside with those who utter the proper shibboleths. Those whose conservatism is founded upon tested convictions are disinclined to trust those who have been given political power; they require performance based upon principle. A recent exchange between Gov. Bangertter and the Utah Right-To-Life movement helps illustrate this distinction.

Following the dismissal of the proposed abortion legislation last spring, Right To Life of Utah sent a sharply-worded letter to the governor to express disappointment. The governor sent a boilerplate reply that dismissed the group's objections and described the Right-To-Life letter as "Offensive, inaccurate, unfair, and immature."

Reasonable people may differ with the governor's assessment; furthermore, is the tone of Bangertter's reply one that we should expect from a principled leader addressing a cherished constituency? Or is it the arrogant indifference we could expect from a professional politician who enjoys an effective monopoly?

Utah Right-To-Lifers are driven by conviction, and thus are incomprehensible to Bangertter (whose sole apparent conviction concerns his own suitability for office). The governor can utter the correct words, but words trickle away like water into desert sand or money into syncrete.

The conservatism of disposition has an unflattering synonym: apathy. Those who practice "Trust Me" politics have a vested interest in apathy. Utah has been far too trusting for too long.