

COUNTING VOTES IN COLORADO

Forrest Whitman

Colorado has long held a reputation for peaceful and fair elections.. Those who say they have never seen a more contested election than 2022 need only turn back to 1876. That was the year Colorado was a heavy hitter. But still we had no big fights. No one went to the hospital.

1876 was the year congress met 155 times trying to decide which delegates to seat at the electoral college (which decided who would be President). In many places that was the year hospital wagons lined up after torch light marches for either Hayes or Tilden. No one died, but there were plenty of injuries as each side met with fists. The whole thing was a bit complex.

The Presidential election of 1876 pitted Republican Rutherford Hayes against Samuel Tilden, Democrat. Colorado's entrance in the election was a decision maker. Colorado was rushed into the Union in 1876 by the Republicans who controlled the Colorado state senate. Just in time to tie up the Presidential vote we entered the Union.

This move into statehood was popular with our Colorado citizens. That drive to statehood was also just in time to jump us into the fireworks and make us feel important. The people had no vote yet, that would happen after the socialist ideas got popular in the 1880 and 90s. The Presidential vote was decided by the state senate in 1876 (a Republican senate stronghold then). Even though Democrats saw the change as helping the other side they still wanted statehood.

The usual Colorado fight between gold and silver standards was definitely still on. That would muddy the waters more. It mattered a lot if the U. S. dollar was backed by gold or by silver. Those mining interests who favored gold supported Hayes. But there were plenty of silver interests too. They were amazed by the incredible silver production in Leadville and wanted to keep that intact. Tilden was sure that the government could double the production of silver with little effort. Both saw the big election prize as either the Florida, South Carolina, Louisiana or possibly Oregon votes.

These days there are many charges that voter district maps have been fixed "gerrymandered" to exclude minority and poor people. While Hayes did not like that same thing then, he made little headway arguing against it. Those who argued for local control were sometimes only a little bothered that Blacks were excluded. We see the same thing today. Blacks and the poor are excluded in many states, but not Colorado. By 1877 the controversy over who had won was front page, indeed. Three states, Louisiana, South Carolina and Florida all submitted two sets of electors to the electoral college. It was clearly a tie.

In the end Hayes simply gave up. He wanted prosperity for the country and didn't want political fighting to get in the way. He lamented that Blacks and the poor would once again be excluded. But he saw no other possible outcome.

After all those tie votes an oddity, a committee to count the votes, was set up. The Vice President was to announce the outcome. To some extent we live under that strange system today. We can only hope that the outcomes after election day will be accepted. I expect that here. Colorado still has the reputation of holding free and fair elections.

As I walked up to the ballot drop box today I felt good. It seemed to me that the majority of folks working to count my vote were dedicated to an honest counting. Maybe 1876 was an anomaly, an unusual event.

In any event I like the old motto of the Denver Post "tis a privilege to live in Colorado."

