

The Incumbent Advantage in Twin Cities Mayoral Races: The Economy is Good and Crime May Not Drive Voters

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Mayoral elections in the Twin Cities are generally kind to incumbents. Since the early 1970s, 6 incumbents have run for reelection in St. Paul and **none** have lost. In Minneapolis, the incumbent has won 4 out of the last 5 elections dating back to 1981.

In terms of basic living conditions, there are no major storm clouds threatening to roil voters in the Twin Cities. Overall economic conditions are good. Violent crime is up in both cities but historically this has not been associated with the downfall of incumbents.

The generally favorable economic conditions do not, however, guarantee the re-election of St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly and Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak. Short-term factors like the partisan anger at Mayor Kelly's endorsement of President George W. Bush may also affect the campaigns.

“It's the economy, stupid”

The unemployment rate may prompt voters to reward the incumbent for good times or punish the incumbent for bad times. In Minneapolis, unemployment has historically been a particularly strong predictor of whether incumbents won or lost. In 5 of the last 9 races in which an incumbent stood for re-election, the sitting mayor either won when unemployment declined from the previous year (1997, 1985, and 1977) or lost when it rose over the past year (1973 and 1981). It remained unchanged in two other years (2001 and 1981). In only two years were the outcomes in Minneapolis mayoral elections out of step with changes in the unemployment rate: the unemployment rate rose in 1971 and 1989 and the incumbent still won.

The predictability of unemployment offers good news for the incumbent Mayor Rybak. In Minneapolis, the unemployment rate through August 2005 has fallen to 4.2 percent from 5.1 percent in 2004. Moreover, personal income growth has increased 1.6 percent in the state during the second quarter of 2005. (Data are not yet available for individual cities in 2005.)

Unemployment is a positive omen for St. Paul incumbent, Randy Kelly. In St. Paul, the unemployment rate through August 2005 has fallen to 4.5 percent from 5.4 percent in 2004. Unemployment in St. Paul has been a less consistent predictor of mayoral fate than in Minneapolis; the incumbent George Latimer won three re-election bids in the 1980s even though the unemployment rates rose.

Public Safety Doesn't Win or Lose Elections

Violent crime is up in both St. Paul (13.4%) and Minneapolis (7.4%) during the first half of 2004 compared to the same period in 2004. This should be bad news for the incumbent.

Changes in violent crime, however, have historically had a limited impact on how the incumbent has fared. In Minneapolis, we have go back nearly three decades to the 1977 race to find an incumbent (Charles Stenvig) who lost after the violent crime rate rose (it increased 9.4% over the previous year). Apart from this lone case, 3 races actually saw the incumbent lose even though violent crimes actually **declined** (2001, 1975, and 1973). In 2001, for instance, the incumbent mayor (Sharon Sayles Belton) lost after the annual violent crime rate in Minneapolis plummeted 12.3 percent from its level in 2000; the incumbent in 1975 (Albert Hofstede) also lost after the city's violent crime rate fell by 11.6 percent.

Of potential relevance this year, three Minneapolis mayoral elections were won by incumbents even though violent crime rates **increased** (1989, 1985, and 1971). Only two of the 9 races in which incumbents ran for re-election did good news on public safety lead to the reelection of the incumbent (1997 and 1981).

In St. Paul, the history of modern reelection bids similarly suggests that the recent up tick in violent crime may not be a mortal blow to Mayor Kelly's reelection bid. Mayor Latimer successfully won reelection in 1985 and 1980 even though violent crime increased. (It declined during the other 4 successful incumbent reelection campaigns.)

The double-digit magnitude of the rise in crime in St. Paul could be a problem, though. Only one other incumbent during the past three decades of mayoral elections in the Twin Cities survived a double-digit hike in crime – it rose 36 percent in the 1985 Minneapolis race handily won by the incumbent (Don Fraser).

Minneapolis Mayoral Races When Incumbent Runs

| Year | Winner | Incumbent Rewarded or Punished (win/loss) | Personal Income Growth: Good (up) or Bad (down) | Unemployment Good (down) or Bad (up) | Violent Crime (overall rate) Good (down) or Bad (up) |
|------|--------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| 2005 | To be determined | Unknown | Good: Up 1.6% for State (2 nd Q) | Good (Jan-Aug) | Bad (Jan-Aug) |
| 2001 | R.T. Rybak | Incumbent Lost | Bad | No Change | Good |
| 1997 | Sharon Sayles Belton (I) | Incumbent Wins | Good | Good | Good |
| 1989 | Donald M. Fraser (I) | Incumbent Wins | Good | Bad | Bad |
| 1985 | Donald M. Fraser (I) | Incumbent Wins | Bad | Good | Bad |
| 1981 | Donald M. Fraser (I) | Incumbent Wins | Bad | No Change | Good |
| 1977 | Albert J. Hofstede | Incumbent Lost | Good | Good | Bad |
| 1975 | Charles Stenvig | Incumbent Lost | Bad | Bad | Good |
| 1973 | Albert J. Hofstede | Incumbent Lost | Good | Bad | Good |
| 1971 | Charles Stenvig (I) | Incumbent Wins | Bad | Bad | Bad |

St. Paul Mayoral Races When Incumbent Runs

| Year | Winner | Incumbent Rewarded or Punished (win/loss) | Personal Income Growth: Good (up) or Bad (down) | Unemployment Good (down) or Bad (up) | Violent Crime (overall rate) Good (down) or Bad (up) |
|------|--------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| 2005 | To be determined | Unknown | Good: Up 1.6% for State (2 nd Q) | Good | Bad (Jan-Aug) |
| 1997 | Norm Coleman (I) | Incumbent Wins | Good | Good | Good |
| 1985 | George Latimer (I) | Incumbent Wins | Bad | Good | Bad |
| 1983 | George Latimer (I) | Incumbent Wins | Bad | Bad | Good |
| 1982 | George Latimer (I) | Incumbent Wins | Bad | Bad | Good |
| 1980 | George Latimer (I) | Incumbent Wins | Bad | Bad | Bad |
| 1978 | George Latimer (I) | Incumbent Wins | Good | Good | Good |