

Politics tainting coroner's races

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The political shenanigans emerging in county coroner's races around the state this year leave us wondering whether electing these important public servants is the best way to go.

We think state legislators ought to consider putting a question to voters on whether to make coroners appointed positions. It makes sense to have this specialized job filled after a careful evaluation of skills, and the political arena isn't the best place for this assessment to take place.

County coroner elections are low-budget, down-ticket contests that don't get much attention. That they are partisan races also doesn't make sense. Is there such a thing as a Republican or Democratic autopsy?

Just as county attorneys are hired by county commissioners based on specific needs and qualifications, so too should coroners.

We realize this wouldn't be an easy sell to voters, but just because county coroners were ensconced in the state constitution as elected positions more than a century ago doesn't mean that system makes sense today.

Since the 1960s, states around the nation slowly have been switching to a system of appointed medical examiners who are doctors.

Colorado and many other states still have elected coroners. And in Colorado, the statutory qualifications to run for the job are minimal: No felony convictions, a high school diploma and local residency. New coroners are required to take a 40-hour training course.

We aren't suggesting that qualifications be raised to where coroners would have to be doctors. While that may make sense in urban, Front Range counties, it might not in rural counties with only a handful of death investigations a year. In those counties, it might be best to have a seasoned crime scene processor collect evidence and examine the place of death, but ship the body to a forensic pathologist in another county to do the autopsy for a fee. We're not confident the subtleties of those varying circumstances are always being conveyed to voters. And in some situations, the politics are just plain dirty.

In Arapahoe County, respected incumbent Michael Doberson, a forensic pathologist, this week filed a complaint with the state against his challenger.

The challenger, lawyer Jay Ledbetter, distributed campaign literature accusing the coroner's office of manipulating evidence in criminal trials to "convict an innocent person" rather than admit error. Ledbetter later retracted the allegation, saying he had gotten bad information. But the damage is done, and given the low-profile nature of coroner's races, it is anyone's guess as to whether voters will get the real story before casting their ballots.

This is one example of how election politics can distort a coroner's race. We think it's time to consider taking politics out of the process and allow counties to appoint the most qualified professionals as coroners.