

Fitial leads in gubernatorial runoff

CNMI election outcome pending absentee votes

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SAIPAN — Incumbent Gov. Benigno R. Fitial is narrowly leading a runoff election to serve a five-year term as governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

The Covenant Party's Fitial leads Republican Rep. Heinz Hofschneider by 501 votes after an initial count votes in Monday's election. But there are still about 1,200 absentee ballots

to be counted, according to The Associated Press.

Monday's runoff was a turnaround from the initial Nov. 7 election, when Hofschneider edged Fitial by just eight votes out of more than 13,500 cast. It was the closest election in the com-



Fitial



Hofschneider

monwealth's history.

The subsequent runoff was necessary because the winner needs to garner most of the votes cast.

Thus far, Fitial is winning by 501 votes and a 52 percent majority, according to preliminary CNMI election results. But Hofschneider is-

n't conceding the race until the remaining absentee ballots are counted Dec. 7, the AP reported.

David Sablan, president of Century Insurance on Saipan, said there were 1,840 absentee ballots sent out, of which about 660 have been counted. But based on the situation two weeks ago, Sablan said a win for Hofschneider is unlikely.

"In order for Heinz to prevail, he needs a vote of about, in my

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Runoff: Big challenges await election winner

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calculation, 800. The indication is that the only thing that is left to be counted (are) the absentee ballots," Sablan said yesterday.

Although Sablan is uncle to both Hofschneider and Fitial, he made it clear that the CNMI could use a change in leadership.

"I went and supported Heinz basically because there is definite need for a change," he said.

And a win by Hofschneider can't be ruled out just yet, according to Samuel McPhetres, social science instructor at the Northern Marianas College.

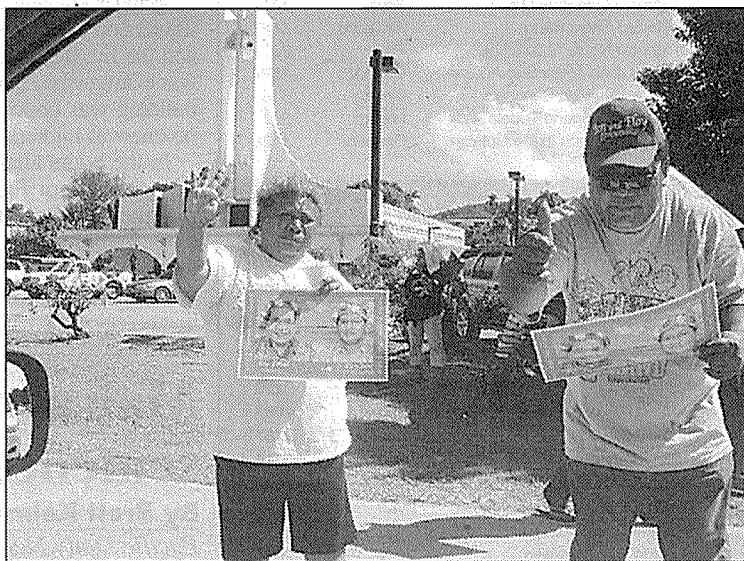
"There are 1,200 votes to win by Dec. 7, and in a long shot, Heinz could conceivably win 51 percent," McPhetres said. "It's a long shot, but it still is a mathematical probability."

Challenges ahead

The first challenge will be in determining the winner of the race in such a close election, McPhetres said. But whoever gets elected into office, several problems await him: McPhetres identified three main challenges for whichever party wins the runoff in December.

First, there's the issue of what many in the CNMI call "federalization." On Nov. 28, U.S. immigration law will be phased in, stripping the local government of its immigration control. Fitial had filed a lawsuit against the U.S. earlier this year challenging the federal move, which Sablan thinks wasn't an appropriate course of action.

"We do have other means by



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Campaign: Gov. Benigno Fitial supporters campaign in Saipan last Saturday before Monday's runoff gubernatorial election between Fitial, of the Covenant Party, and Republican Heinz Hofschneider.

which we can resolve any difference through consultants under Covenant Section 902, which provides for that kind of consultation," Sablan said. "Unfortunately, that avenue was not used for whatever reason."

Yet, on Wednesday, U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia Judge Paul L. Friedman struck down the appeal in Fitial's lawsuit against the U.S., the Saipan Tribune reported.

Furthermore, the new governor will have to revive the commonwealth's ailing economy.

"We're looking at additional employment needed, we need the infusion of investors into the area that

we're not seeing right now," Sablan said. Additionally, the number of the tourist arrivals continues to decline from "every direction, every month," he said.

"After last Friday's disaster, it could very seriously affect our Korean tourism and other Asian tourism," McPhetres added, in reference to the mass shooting in Saipan last week that killed four members of a Saipan family and injured several South Korean tourists. The alleged gunman, a former shooting range employee, killed himself after the carnage.

Sablan and McPhetres agree the new governor will have to work to

balance the commonwealth's budget.

"In my own opinion, the total liability of this government is close to \$500 million," — a sum Sablan doubts Fitial will be able to "cough up."

And that's just a conservative figure, according to McPhetres.

"Who's counting what?" McPhetres said. "It's based on what one government agency owes to another one." He guessed that figure is probably upwards of \$1 billion.

On the other hand, the annual revenue for the CNMI is only about \$150 million, a figure McPhetres suggested was optimistic.

"It's probably closer to \$140 million," he said. Spending continues, he said, "regardless of where the revenue is generated. That's where our problem is."

Sablan added: "How they reconcile that is going to be a tough situation," Sablan added. "That is the biggest concern I have."

With about \$150 million needed to continue to operate and another \$500 million needed to be liquidated, Sablan said CNMI residents have essentially accepted sub-par service from the government as normal.

"I feel people deserve a heck of a lot of a better life than what we are

experiencing today," Sablan said.

Why he's winning

Yet he added that Fitial is probably still winning the race because he is the incumbent, and because his posters and campaigning have been widespread.

Meanwhile, McPhetres said Fitial's pleasant demeanor also has something to do with his success. Students in McPhetres' current issues and American government

classes have conducted polls through his course, and McPhetres said most of his students got a "warm and fuzzy feeling" from Fitial.

"The way he talks and the way he's courteous — they like that compared to the rather abrupt style of Heinz, and traditionally it's safe to say family politics is still alive and well here."

SAMUEL MCPHETRES

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Plus, Fitial has been basing his campaign on pledges to finish what he started, for example, closing the dump, and obtaining the visa waiver for Russian and Chinese visitors, McPhetres said.

Still, he said for now, Covenant Party supporters aren't celebrating because they are still waiting for the completion of the runoff next month.

"I'm putting my bet on Dec. 7," McPhetres said.