

Bedrock:
Genesis and Evolution of a Republican Bastion,
Union County, Pennsylvania
by
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Introduction

Union County is well known as one of the most reliably Republican counties in the state. A close examination of its voting patterns reveals that this has been true since the inception of the Republican Party, and that the county was reliably anti-Democratic even before that. This constancy is all the more striking when we consider the national and state contexts, in which the partisan balance has shifted several times since the early nineteenth century. Moreover, when the county's voting patterns are disaggregated to the precinct level, we find that the county's perennial Republicanism conceals significant shifts of Republican support within the county.

The literature on American political parties generally portrays their history as a series of eras, each lasting several decades, in which the balance between the parties nationally, and their regional bases, changed little from one election to the next. These eras were punctuated by critical or realigning elections, or series of elections, in which basic partisan patterns underwent significant change. The major eras are usually considered approximately as follows: (1) the Federalist era (1789-1800); (2) the Jeffersonian era (1800-1824); (3) the Jacksonian era (1828-1856); (4) the Civil War era (1856-1876); (5) Post-Reconstruction (1876-1892); (6) the Republican era (1896-1928); (7) the New Deal era (1932-1980); (8) the Reagan era (1980-2008).

Early Voting Patterns in Union County

With all this change in the partisan balance, however, Union County has stood stolidly solid. Union County has voted Republican for President in every single election since its formation in 1855, except for 1912, when the county went for Teddy Roosevelt on the Progressive line (effectively a Republican splinter). Previous to its split from what became Snyder County to its south, the territory making up the present Union County voted consistently for the Whigs (a conservative, business-oriented party formed to oppose the Jacksonian Democrats) from 1838, when that party became organized, to 1856, when the new county voted Republican. Even in the second decade of the nineteenth century, Old Union County (including present Snyder County) voted consistently against the Democratic-Republicans that remained hegemonic on the national level. By 1840 a pattern is established that persists through the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s: only Mifflinburg retained a Democratic majority, while other townships and boroughs ranged from close to large Whig majorities.

The county was with the Republicans from the inception of the party. Even with native son James Buchanan as the Democratic candidate in 1856, Union was the only county in Central Pennsylvania to vote for Fremont, the Republican candidate, and the Union County vote for Fremont was more than ten percent above the state average. Moreover, all the surrounding counties voted more strongly than the state average for Millard Fillmore on the American Party line (usually known as the Know-Nothings), but Union did not.

The election of 1860, of course, brought Abraham Lincoln to power at the head of the Republican Party. The Democrats were split into several factions by the issues of slavery and secession, so Lincoln was able to win the Electoral College with a minority of the popular vote. However, Lincoln won an absolute majority in Pennsylvania. Union County gave Lincoln over 2/3 of the popular vote, and John Breckinridge, the pro-slavery Democrat, got 30.4 percent, a low vote for the Democrats, to be sure, but significant in light of Breckinridge's Southern sympathies.

Even Mifflinburg voted Republican for Congress in 1860 (though it reverted to its Democratic habits thereafter). Lewisburg and the adjacent

townships of East Buffalo and Kelly remained very strong for the Republicans, while outlying townships such as West Buffalo and Limestone either tipped to the Democrats or became quite competitive. The strong support for Republicans in and around Lewisburg may have been helped by the family connection between Senator Simon Cameron and his brother, Lewisburg banker William Cameron. Senator Cameron swung the votes to assure Lincoln of the Republican nomination, and was appointed Secretary of War. In that capacity he promoted federal compensation to railroads for transportation of troops; William Cameron had extensive investment in railroads and thus profited handsomely.

The rise of Republican hegemony owed something to population shifts in the county. The central and western parts of the county dwarfed the Lewisburg region in 1820, but by 1850 Lewisburg had become the largest population center (as it has remained). By the late twentieth century, Lewisburg had stabilized its population at over 5000, as against Mifflinburg with over 3000 and New Berlin at over 800. East Buffalo and Kelly have both equaled or surpassed Lewisburg, so that the three units together have in excess of 16,000, or nearly 40 percent of the county's population.

Post-Civil War

During the Reconstruction era, Republican hegemony gradually deepened, so that no municipality was reliably Democratic by 1876 when Reconstruction ended. However, the Lewisburg region retained its preeminence as the center of Republican dominance. Mifflinburg and a few of the townships continued to have more Democratic strength, though rarely enough to carry an election anymore.

It is important to remember at this point that the Democrats were the party of the South, hence deeply imbued with the racist agenda that would evolve into Jim Crow and the disfranchisement of African Americans toward the turn of the twentieth century. They also were increasingly the party of immigrants in big cities such as New York, with its Tammany Hall Democratic machine. Thus for the majority of Union County voters, the Democrats would have had little appeal. If anything, Union County had more in common with Southern Appalachia, with

its almost wholly white population and concomitant hostility to slavery (but not necessarily sympathy with blacks). It is not an accident that regions such as West Virginia, western North Carolina, and eastern Tennessee were strongholds of Southern Republicanism after the War, and well into the twentieth century.

After Reconstruction ended in 1877, national politics entered a period of closely matched Republican and Democratic coalitions, with the Republicans holding perhaps a slight edge. Pennsylvania tended to vote Republican under the increasing sway of Republican machines in the two big cities, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Union County became an adjunct to the Philadelphia machine for statewide races because of its reliable Republican majority. Donald Baumgartner has documented extensive cooperation between Lewisburg Republican congressman Benjamin Focht and the Philadelphia machine during its heyday in the early twentieth century. But Republicanism in Union County was by no means a creature of the machine: Republican hegemony predated the Philadelphia machine, and outlived it by decades.

The basic pattern persisted over decades: the Lewisburg region remained most strongly Republican, while some of the peripheral townships either went Democratic or at least kept it close. Mifflinburg, however, ceased to be the Democratic stronghold it had been, as the Democratic Party came increasingly to represent Southern and urban interests with little appeal in rural Pennsylvania.

Anomalous Elections and What They Tell Us

The elections of 1912 and 1928 deserve special attention, for different reasons. That of 1912 marked the only instance in the history of the county when the Republican presidential candidate (incumbent President William Howard Taft) was defeated. Notably, the victor in both county and state was not Woodrow Wilson, the Democrat, but Theodore Roosevelt, the insurgent Bull Moose Republican. The Democratic vote was about on target, but the Republican vote split decisively for Roosevelt. In this same election, Congressman Benjamin Focht was defeated by a Democrat; he regained the seat two years later. The same turmoil in the party system in 1914 enlivened the Senate race, with Philadelphia machine candidate Boies Penrose challenged not only by the

Democrats but also by the Progressive Gifford Pinchot. Penrose won handily statewide, but barely squeezed through in Union County. Interestingly, Penrose's strength was not derived from the Republican heartland around Lewisburg, but rather in outlying townships of Hartley, West Buffalo, and Gregg. However, by 1916 voting patterns were returning to normal.

The fact that the county departed from the Republican fold to support a reformer, Teddy Roosevelt, suggests that a conservative political culture is not an adequate interpretation of Union County's otherwise unblemished Republican record. Indeed, strong support for Abraham Lincoln himself could hardly be seen as a conservative stance, since it would have been clear that a Lincoln victory would lead to secession and probably civil war. But a generation later the county clearly found William Jennings Bryan's populism unappealing in 1896. Roosevelt's good government progressivism was one thing; Bryan's rabble-rousing populism was quite another.

The 1928 election illustrates another dividing line that would rouse voters to unusual behavior, this time driving even many Democrats into the Republican fold. The occasion was the Democratic presidential nomination of Governor Al Smith of New York, a Roman Catholic. On a national scale, Herbert Hoover swamped Smith, but most analysts nevertheless see his nomination as important to the recruitment of Catholic immigrants into the Democratic coalition. Statewide, helped by the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh Republican machines, Hoover won two-thirds of the vote. In Union County, however, where Republicans routinely could expect two-thirds, the rout was historic: Hoover received 88.2 percent of the two-party vote (Cox 2006).

Republican hegemony was thus firmly established at the start of the Great Depression in 1929. Women voted for the first time in the 1920s: their impact can be seen in the virtual doubling of the numbers of voters. But electoral outcomes seem to have been unaffected. It is possible that the Republican resurgence of those years owed a great deal to these new voters, but this cannot be proven with aggregate data.

Nationally, the experience of the Depression caused a massive reversal for the Republicans, who not only lost Congress in 1930 and the Presidency in 1932,

but also became the normal minority party after decades of being the normal majority. This was the classic example of a major, long-term electoral realignment. At the state level, the crisis overwhelmed both the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia Republican machines.

How did Union County respond to this massive economic and political crisis? Roosevelt and the Democrats lost the county in both 1932 and 1936, but with strikingly different turnout patterns. Union County held the line as dispirited Republicans who failed to vote in 1932 turned out in large numbers in 1936, more than matching increased Democratic turnout. Beneath this surface stability, the county moved toward the distribution of partisanship that has been typical in subsequent decades: the former Republican heartland around Lewisburg showed signs of more Democratic strength, while the rest of the county tended to become more Republican.

With Republican hegemony now firmly established throughout the county, statewide and national results really had little impact locally until the massive Democratic landslide of 1964. And indeed, Lyndon Johnson did get more votes in Union County than a Democrat might normally expect. He carried the Northern townships of White Deer and Gregg, as well as Lewisburg and New Berlin by very narrow margins. But in the end, Union was one of only four Pennsylvania counties to vote for Goldwater, in a year when Goldwater carried only Arizona and several Deep South states.

How, then, can we interpret Union County conservatism in recent decades, based on these voting patterns? We have the solitary instance of the strong vote for Theodore Roosevelt's progressive insurgency in 1912. We have the overwhelming rejection of the urban Catholic Al Smith in 1928. In that case the county was with the national mood, but in 1960, with the Catholic John F. Kennedy, the county also voted more strongly Republican than usual (78.8 percent), suggesting a lingering anti-Catholic sentiment. In 1964, the county voted for Goldwater, but much more narrowly than its norm. In 1968, with the independent candidacy of Alabama Governor George Wallace, we have a chance to assess directly the strength of a racist conservatism. Ostensibly about "states' rights,"

Wallace's campaign was widely seen as making an implicit racist appeal based on his history as a prominent segregationist governor of Alabama. Wallace got 6.3 percent of the vote, and it seems to have come largely from the Democrats, while the Republican vote was about normal. Wallace's statewide percentage was higher, nearly 8 percent. Thus we cannot reject the idea that there is a small racist minority in the Union County electorate, but at least in 1968, it was more likely Democratic than Republican.

Another opportunity to assess the Union County electorate came in the 1992 election with the conservative independent candidacy of Ross Perot, running against President George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Overall, Perot did much better in the county than Wallace had done in 1968. Perot's candidacy was conservative, but it lacked the racist implications of the Wallace campaign. While we did consider it likely that some significant number of voters in the county voted for Wallace because of that racist appeal, their numbers were small. Perot, if anything, was an echo of the county's enthusiasm for Teddy Roosevelt as a reformist alternative to an unimpressive Republican candidate. Perot didn't come close to TR's popularity, but his appeal seems to have been similar.

Contemporary Voting Patterns

With the turn of the twenty-first century, the county thus remained a Republican bastion, but the party's base had moved from the Lewisburg region to the central and western parts of the county. Demographic change may account for some part of this evolution. Lewisburg and its neighboring townships increasingly drew highly educated residents attracted by the presence of Bucknell University. The university's faculty and staff increased significantly from the 1970s into the twenty-first century. Medical professionals from both Evangelical Community Hospital and Geisinger Medical Center frequently chose the Lewisburg area for their residences. While by no means all such people would have voted Democratic, if they simply voted as such people vote in the nation at large, that would put a significant dent in traditional Republican pluralities.

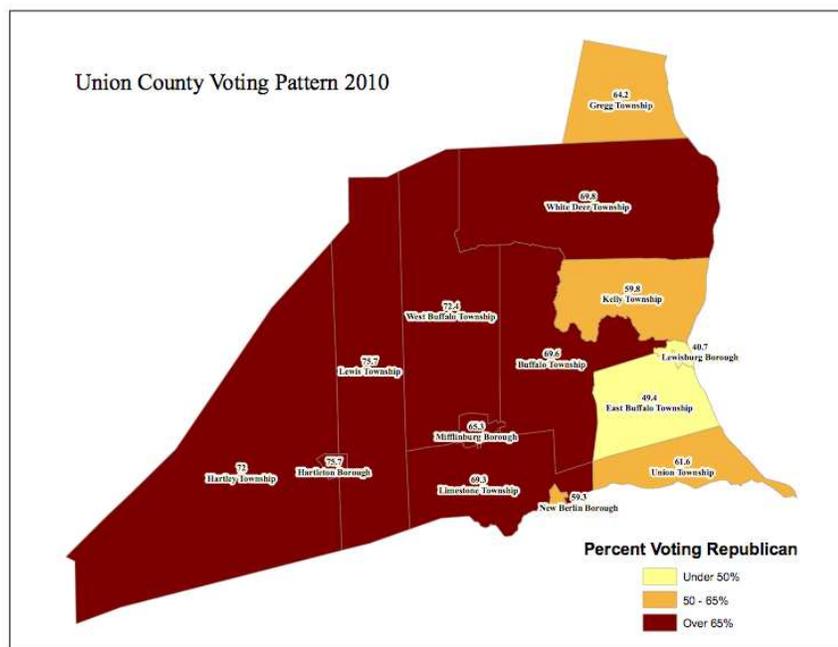
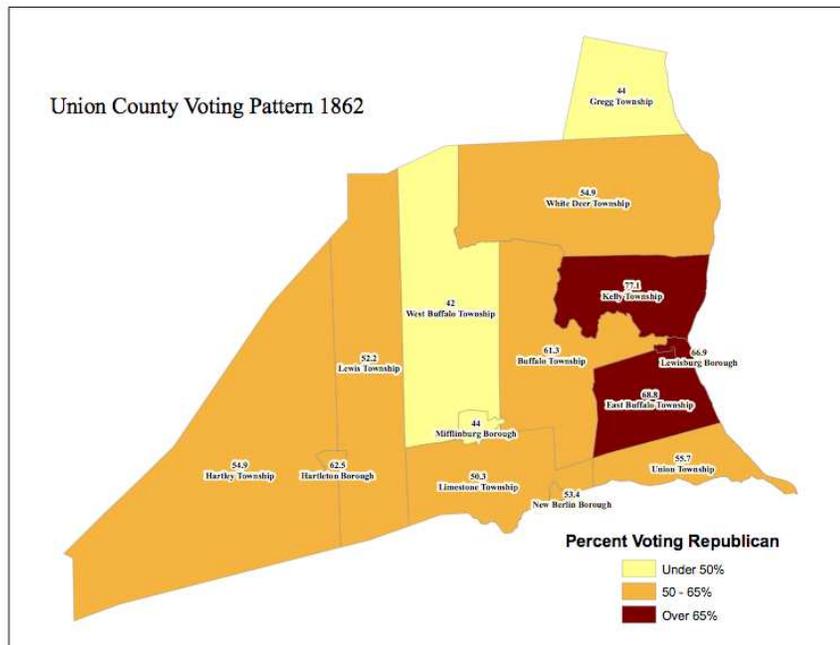
The northern townships (Gregg and White Deer) along with Kelly, have seen a large expansion in federal prisons, beginning with the establishment of the

Federal Prison at Lewisburg (actually in Kelly) in the 1930s. Gregg has several newer federal prisons established in more recent decades. Thus there is a significant population of federal civil servants concentrated in Kelly, Gregg and White Deer. They may not be liberal, but they are rather more likely to be Democrats than Republicans. At a minimum, given extremely high traditional levels of Republican support, any significant in-migration of this sort would be expected to reduce Republican dominance.

An important phenomenon of the twenty-first century has been an increase in local voting by Bucknell students. Some students had voted in Lewisburg and East Buffalo as far back as the 1970s, with the ratification of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment in 1971, enfranchising those age eighteen and above. But their numbers since 2000 have grown enough to swamp Republicans in Lewisburg 3, and to significantly change the balance in East Buffalo. This is partly a phenomenon of the current younger generation tending toward the Democrats. Back in the 1980s (the Reagan era) a higher proportion of students would have been Republican. But again, the proportion of Republicans in the population from which Bucknell students are drawn is not likely ever to be as high as the proportion of Republicans in the local Union County population.

The most recent tests of Republican dominance in the county came in the series of elections from 2006-2010. In 2006 and 2008, Democrats won big victories nationally and statewide. In 2010, Republicans regained much of the lost ground. The most striking feature of 2006 and 2008 is the massive

Democratic majorities, at levels, from local to presidential, in three of the four Lewisburg wards, and more widespread relative Democratic strength in



the Lewisburg region. In the rest of the county the Democrats were at or below their long-term averages. This polarization between the Lewisburg region and the rest of the county is a pattern that we can see developing as early as 1964, but notably stronger in these most recent elections. The strong Republican vote in outlying townships in 2008 could have had some racial component given the

candidacy of Barack Obama, but it seems more likely that it was primarily just Republican partisanship.

The global result in 2010 shows the county's Republican majority reasserting itself after a pair of elections that didn't go so well for them. But the swing of Lewisburg and its environs toward the Democrats suggests that the Republican majority will see further erosion as the Lewisburg region grows relative to the rest of the county, bringing in more outsiders who will tend to reflect the partisan and ideological perspectives of the country as a whole.

To emphasize the scope of the partisan shifts that have taken place, consult the accompanying two maps.

The very towns and townships—Lewisburg and surrounds—that were the heartland of Republican loyalty in the age of Lincoln are now the beachhead of the Democrats. The towns and townships that were more skeptical of the Republicans during the Civil War—pretty much everywhere else—are now the bedrock of the GOP. And the Republican majorities are much stronger now than they were back then, while the range between top and bottom of the rankings is much wider. The county as a whole has become more partisan, and much less homogeneous.

Conclusions

The county was initially fertile ground for the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians, because of its frontier and rural character. However, Union County did not remain a frontier for long. The advent of the canal and the railroad allowed Lewisburg to grow and develop, with interests more in line with the Whigs and Republicans of Philadelphia. At the same time, the Democrats came to be ever more under the sway of Southern slave-holding interests that would have had little appeal to small farmers and small town voters; those groups gravitated to the Republicans in the Civil War context. The Democrats moved further away from their erstwhile supporters in the county as they became, after the Civil War, the party of the urban immigrants and the machines like Tammany Hall (and still, of course, the party of Southern whites).

The majority of the county still exemplifies strong Republican party loyalty, relatively immune to short term factors such as candidates or issues. Most people vote only for Republicans most of the time. This can be attributed to congruence between the fundamental conservatism of most of the county's population, and the conservative, pro-business stance of the party, at least since Reconstruction. As the party becomes more militant and ideological, however, this congruence could come under strain, for Union County conservatism has tended to be more pragmatic: we like things pretty well as they are; we won't change very much or very fast. Union County will likely remain Republican bedrock for a long time.

The Lewisburg region has gone from the center of Republican support to increasingly strong Democratic sympathies. It has increasingly joined the political culture of the eastern megalopolis. Other parts of the county have gone the other way. The net result has been a county that is even more strongly Republican than before, but with a growing Democratic base in its largest population center.

Both political parties have bedrock constituencies like this, counted upon year upon year to deliver the vote. But bedrock may move.

Further Reading

Walter Dean Burnham 1970. *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton. *This is the classic study of critical elections, and includes extensive treatment of Pennsylvania.*

Harold Cox, ed. 2006. *Pennsylvania Election Statistics, 1682-2006*. <http://staffweb.wilkes.edu/harold.cox/index.html> (December 8, 2010). *This is an invaluable on-line collection of electoral data going as far back as colonial times.*

Charles M. Snyder 1976. *Union County Pennsylvania: A Bicentennial History*. Lewisburg: Colonial Printing. *Snyder's is still the standard history of Union County.*

