

Vermont and the 2008 Election: Continuing a Pattern

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The 2008 election season in Vermont, at both the state and federal level, generally was bereft of surprises. Incumbency remained a powerful force in determining elections at all levels of government. Vermonters also demonstrated a continued proclivity for left-of-center politics at the federal level with overwhelming support for the ticket of Barak Obama and Joseph Biden. Nonetheless, the result provided a source for ongoing contemplation of the electoral patterns that Vermont has experienced during the past few decades, as well as indications of current political inclinations among residents of the Green Mountain State, both internally and in comparison with the rest of the country.

At the federal level, Obama received from Vermont his third highest margin of victory within any state or territory, surpassing even his home state of Illinois and Biden's home state of Delaware and surpassed only by the District of Columbia and Obama's other "home" state of Hawaii. Given the relatively strong presence of left-leaning and other progressive voters within the state, it may have been surprising that Ralph Nader, running as an independent candidate, received only one percent of the total vote in the state. That particular result is especially interesting when it is noted that almost all polls had indicated, well before election day, that Obama already was certain to win the state's three electoral votes—perhaps an indication of excitement and nervousness regarding the Obama campaign. The 67% of the vote for Obama-Biden, in contrast to the 35% of the vote that was attained by McCain-Palin, indicates that the victorious

presidential/vice-presidential team apparently won cross-over support from at least some Vermont Republicans—probably an indication of the circumstances (especially economic ones) that motivated Vermont voters during this current election season.

Nonetheless, a desire for “change” at the presidential level did not translate into a similar desire regarding other contests. Despite Vermonters sharing with the rest of the nation a general sense of strong discontent with the performance of Congress, Peter Welch easily won reelection to the state’s lone seat in the United States House of Representatives. The Republicans did not nominate anyone to run against him; five different independent and third-party candidates (including candidates from the Progressive Party and the perennial Liberty Union Party) received barely 16% of the total vote among them. The fact that it is only Welch’s first bid for reelection appears to indicate a high level of satisfaction with his performance in Congress, especially as his positions (including his early endorsement of Obama for president) have coincided with his constituents—though not always as strongly as some of them would have preferred, such as his resistance to demands that he lend his support to attempts to impeach President Bush. Neither of Vermont’s seats in the United States Senate was scheduled to be contested during this election year, although that chamber was on the minds of many Vermonters, especially given the leadership role of Senator Patrick Leahy among federal Democratic Senators.

At the state level, incumbents also did well. The most notable result was in the race for governor. The Republican incumbent, Jim Douglas, won reelection with nearly 55% of the vote as opposed to independent Anthony Pollina and Democrat Gaye Symington, who each polled just over 21% of the vote. This result reinforced a strategic debate regarding the opposition to the Republicans within the state in terms of accusations that competitive candidates from the Progressive Party (or, in the case of Pollina, progressives who run as

independent candidates) “split” the vote among partisans of the left. In reality, the Progressives seldom field a candidate as popular as Pollina and one result of this contest (which would have been won by the incumbent in any case) might be a further move toward either formal cooperation or, even, a merger of Progressives into the Democratic Party.

That latter result would be consistent with the overall trend of the American two-party system when it has been presented with a viable third-party alternative. Vermont’s recent history with the Progressive Party does represent a different scenario in this respect, especially in terms of the usual peculiarities associated with state-level politics as well as the long-term influence of the “back to the land” movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the migration of “flatlanders” and other professionals, and other demographic shifts that helped to prompt this particular movement. It is the only state legislature in the country that has had a notable third-party presence (with the exception of states that have concurrent major party/third party nominees), consistent with a perception of independent voting attitudes within the state. However, the actual strength of the Progressives and other third-parties within the General Assembly has been, nonetheless, relatively small (no elected officials in the state Senate and only six out of 150 elected officials in the state House of Representatives) and that tendency continued in 2008. Therefore, this dispute concerning the “split vote” may prove to be a relatively inconsequential one in the foreseeable future with the exception of the occasional charismatic candidate such as the Progressive Party Chairman, Anthony Pollina.

The dominance of incumbency was, generally, a repeated pattern in the Vermont General Assembly with Democrats retaining a large majority in both chambers. Incumbents also easily won reelection in various other state offices, including Republican Brian Dubie’s strong victory to retain his position as the state’s Lieutenant Governor. So, despite Republican success within the state’s

executive branch, the legislative strength of the Democrats will require considerable compromise on most policy issues. In particular, state revenues have fallen, sharply, which will require potentially unpopular budget cuts as the state's Emergency Board has downgraded the state's overall revenue forecast.

Other demographic differences are not as apparent as a result of this year's election. Observations regarding a growing gap in income between Native Vermonters and more recent arrivals to the state have not been reflected within voting trends. Overall, although the election results of 2008 are consistent with the general trend of Vermont politics during the past few decades, it also is consistent with a general trend in the country. These results were, therefore, not surprising or as revealing as they might, otherwise, have been. The midterm and gubernatorial election in 2010 could prove to be more intriguing, in that respect, depending upon the reception of policies and other political events that will occur during the interim.