

8-1-1935

The Political Scene

William J. Petersen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Petersen, William J. "The Political Scene." *The Palimpsest* 16 (1935), 238-244.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol16/iss8/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The Political Scene

Caught in the maelstrom of the economic depression, it is not surprising that the people of Iowa should have been attracted by the personality and philosophy of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal. The Republicans, complacent in their habitual incumbency, were overwhelmed by defeat in the election of 1932. Apparently the old regime was discredited. The wheel of political fortune was turned in reverse and the Democrats assumed control. In the House of Representatives of the Forty-fifth General Assembly, the ratio of partisanship was changed from seventy Republicans and thirty-eight Democrats to seventy-six Democrats and thirty-two Republicans. Although the term of only half the Senators expired in 1932, the Democrats increased their power by twenty seats, so that the dominance of forty-five Republicans was reduced to a tie with twenty-five.

The influence of the Democratic party upon political events in 1934 is reflected chiefly in the work of the Forty-fifth General Assembly, which met regularly in 1933 and again in extra session from November 6, 1933, to March 12, 1934.

Measures for the relief of debtors, reduction of taxes, control of government expenditures, and sale of beer indicated the character of public problems and the trend of Democratic policy in 1933. More conclusive was the work of the extra session, called by Governor Clyde L. Herring to enact legislation on "tax revision, liquor control, emergency relief, and other matters of vital public interest".

This extra session, the tenth since Iowa became a State, lasted longer than any regular session of the General Assembly and longer than any special session save that of 1923-1924. The most conspicuous accomplishments of the extra session were the levying of new taxes on incomes, sales, and corporations; the establishment of an old age pension system; the assumption of the liquor business by the State; and provisions for extensive poor relief during the depression.

The subject of tax revision evoked heated debate in the regular session of the Forty-fifth General Assembly. With the exception of taxes on inheritances, liquor, motor vehicles, gasoline, and cigarettes, Iowa has depended almost completely upon property as the source of public revenue. It was not surprising that the adoption of new taxes was defeated: people considered taxes already too high. The acute distress of

agriculture and labor, however, required some shifting of the burden. A committee composed of members from both houses was therefore appointed to study taxation and submit a bill for the consideration of the extra session. The result was a measure providing for a personal net income tax, a business tax on corporations, and a retail sales tax, which was finally adopted. It was the greatest change that has ever been made at one time in the tax system of Iowa.

Another product of the extra session of the Forty-fifth General Assembly was the Iowa Old Age Assistance Act, which became operative on November 1, 1934. Any person who had been a citizen of the United States for fifteen years, had resided in Iowa for ten years next preceding the date of his application and in the county two years, if he or she was sixty-five years of age and had an income of less than one dollar per day, might receive a pension of not more than \$25 a month. To provide funds, a poll tax of two dollars a year was imposed upon every resident of Iowa who is a citizen of the United States more than twenty-one years of age. On the day set for payments to begin, Joseph Newt Finney of Waverly, a bachelor seventy years old and a pioneer of Bremer County, received the first old age assistance warrant. It was decided that the

first pension would be granted in Bremer County because that county had the best record of old age assistance tax collection — ninety-one per cent of the assessed amount.

Control of the liquor traffic has been a perennial bugaboo in Iowa politics. At the extra session a new method was authorized — the sale of all intoxicating liquor, except beer, by the State government. The business, being a monopoly, is supposed to yield handsome profits and at the same time encourage temperance. An experienced commission of three men promptly established liquor stores in twenty-six Iowa cities, and before the close of 1934 this number had more than doubled. By the middle of May, Iowans read of the purchase of ten carloads of assorted wines, whiskies, and gin, at a cost of \$88,000 — the first order under the new plan. By July, 19,486 permits to purchase liquor had been issued to individuals, the names of whom are kept secret. Before the year ended, patrons were complaining about the high prices charged, employees in at least one large store had been found untrustworthy, and the Liquor Commission chairman himself had given some State seals to a friend.

A maze of issues confronted the electorate as the elections of 1934 approached. Taxation, economy in government, control of the liquor

traffic, and bureaucracy, were hackneyed problems in comparison with such issues as reduced interest rates, the old age pension, unemployment insurance, and a state highway patrol. The social and economic implications involved in such questions indicate the trend of affairs.

The State primary election was as torrid as the weather. Armed with arguments that often served only to befog the issues, sweating candidates stumped Iowa to plead their cause before microphones in radio stations, before huge crowds with the aid of loud speakers, and at clubs, in churches, and upon every convenient occasion.

The Democratic primary is traditionally quiet in Iowa, because Democratic candidates are usually defeated in the final election. The victory of 1932, however, stimulated political ambition so that three State offices were contested in 1934. Charles J. Zylstra of Hawarden, George Finch of Sioux City, and Clyde L. Herring of Des Moines wanted to head the Democratic State ticket. On the other hand, four Republicans sought nomination for the office of Governor in the primary election — ex-Governor Dan W. Turner, Robert W. Colflesh, Clarence A. Knutson, and Wallace M. Short. Governor Herring easily won the Democratic nomination, but the banner of the Republicans was placed in the hands of Turner only

after a strenuous campaign. Although more than twice as many Republicans as Democrats voted in the primaries, the Republican vote was almost 70,000 less than in the primaries of 1932.

The ensuing campaign was unusually bitter. The Republicans, being out of power, found fault with the way the government was being run, while the Democrats jeered at the Republicans and cheered lustily every time the name of Roosevelt or Herring was mentioned. Recognizing their strategical advantage, the Democrats basked in the popularity of the national administration. They claimed that Iowa had reaped cash and credit benefits amounting to \$354,400,000 through such agencies as the AAA, the HOLC, the CCC, and the FERA. Nor did they shrink from parading their own accomplishments: reduction in the cost of government, tax revision, reorganization of Iowa banks, debt moratorium, refunding of road bonds, the old age pension, and the liquor control system. Meanwhile, Lieutenant-Governor Kraschel compared ex-Governor Turner to Nero who "fiddled in the face of ruin".

The Republicans in turn severely condemned the New Deal, Turner charging Herring with building a gigantic Tammany machine and attempting to ride into office on "Roosevelt's coat tails". Who, queried the Republicans, was to pay

for the millions of dollars the federal government had spent in Iowa? Had not the national debt risen ten billions and actually reached the peak established during the World War? Would not Iowa have to assume its share of the burden in paying this debt? As to reducing taxation, the Democrats had actually added new taxes.

The outcome of the contest was not apparent, even to close students of Iowa politics. In 1932, Herring had received 508,573 votes, or 53,428 more than Turner. But, argued some, the Democrats had been swept in by a Rooseveltian tidal wave and could not hope to win again. During the preceding decade the Republican gubernatorial candidates averaged 471,501 votes compared with 217,632 for Democratic opponents. Would a normally Republican State revert to its traditional partisan allegiance in a campaign uninfluenced by a Presidential election? Were the farmers and other Iowans pleased with the New Deal and the Herring administration?

When the smoke of battle cleared away, the Democrats had won a smashing victory. Herring was reëlected with a majority of over 70,000 in a total vote for the office of Governor that approached 900,000. Apparently Democratic rule had won positive approval. The year 1934 was a crucial test of political policy and partisanship.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN