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## POLITICAL TRENDS IN THE 1959 OFF-YEAR ELECTIONS: THE CASE OF KENTUCKIANA

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The political pulse of the Nation will continue to be revealed by the results of poll-taking and the interpretation of political observers until the election of a President is upon us. Mr. George Gallup has again told us that the Democratic Party enjoys the advantage of electoral support from a majority of potential voters.<sup>1</sup> However, for those skeptical of political observers and for those holding that opinion polls are no substitute for a genuine election, the scattered off-year elections of 1959 offer the best means of checking political trends revealed at the polls midway between the Congressional Elections of 1958 and the 1960 Presidential Election.

These 1959 elections were not of a national type since only state or local officials were chosen by the voters involved. But the American Party System includes both national and state parties, and basically the same electorate that voted in the several states holding elections in November, 1959 will cast the vote in these states in the Presidential Election of 1960.

The November, 1959 elections, while scattered geographically, were concentrated in that part of the United States east of the Mississippi River. Voters in several states participated in the election of local officials; while in New Jersey, Kentucky, Virginia, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania state or legislative officers were chosen. In Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Ohio, and Indiana mayoralty races were widespread. The nature of the election prizes considered along with the state's place in the national party system provides a framework for examining political trends.

What then do the 1959 elections tell us, especially in terms of 1960? There are the customary interpretations offered by the national party chairmen. Democratic Chairman Paul Butler said the elections "demonstrate the vigorous good health of the Democratic Party as it prepares for the momentous campaign of 1960." At the same time Republican Chairman Thruston Morton felt that "Republicans have

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<sup>1</sup>St. Louis Post-Dispatch, November 14, 1959. Gallup reports in this poll that the nation's estimated 102,300,000 voters would probably line up in this manner if registered:

Democrats	56,200,000
Republicans	37,600,000
Undecided	8,500,000

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every reason to look forward confidently toward 1960."<sup>2</sup> Party leaders are not expected to give answers other than these; it remains for us to examine the various campaigns, local political environments, and election data to answer our question.

Republican candidate Harold Stassen was defeated for Mayor of Philadelphia by over 200,000 while Democrats won the two Pennsylvania state-wide races for court judges. Republicans claimed gains in Columbus and smaller Ohio cities, while the vote for partisan judges in Cook County (Chicago), Illinois heavily favored local Democrats. Democratic efforts in Connecticut, a state watched for trends, might be described in terms of keeping control of the larger cities by reduced margins in municipal elections. Municipal elections in upstate New York caused little change from the status quo, but caused Republicans to claim support for Governor Nelson Rockefeller's program. Democrats cited advances for their party in New York City. The Democratic-Liberal vote totals in Queens, Bronx, and Richmond counties for local candidates surpassed in many cases the Democratic totals in the 1954 gubernatorial contest won by a Democrat, while 1959 Republican totals here were greatly reduced from 1954. A halting of the state-wide Democratic trend, evident since 1953, was noted in New Jersey legislative races. Democratic Assembly strength dropped eight seats, still leaving the Democrats in control, while a Democratic gain of two Senate seats failed to deliver that body to Democratic control.<sup>3</sup>

In analyzing the vote of these states one must remember that only Pennsylvania had state-wide races, and then only two. When party gains and losses are balanced out it appears that the status quo was generally maintained. It seems advisable to look elsewhere for more definite signs of a political trend. Kentucky and Indiana, the respective homes of Republican National Chairman Thruston Morton (also a United States Senator) and Democratic National Chairman Paul Butler offer this opportunity. The Kentucky election was state-wide with the electorate being offered several ballot choices. There were races for governor, lieutenant governor, other state administrative officers, and state legislators. The Indiana elections were of a different nature as no state officers were elected, but every Indiana city elected a mayor. Local factors influence such municipal elections, but the state party organizations conduct campaigns in such a manner that these municipal elections take on the flavor of an ordinary state-wide campaign. In both Kentucky and Indiana the elections had substance inasmuch as the prizes were considered

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<sup>2</sup>Louisville Courier-Journal, November 5, 1959.

<sup>3</sup>This election information was taken from the New York Times, the Louisville Courier-Journal, and Richard M. Scammon, America Votes (New York, 1956 and 1958), I and II.

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important to the politicians of both states. The Kentucky election, similar to some of the 1958 state elections, saw both parties seeking control of state government and its patronage in anticipation of the 1960 Presidential Election and the local election of a United States Senator. Indiana political leaders were anxious to control city halls and their patronage in anticipation of the 1960 Presidential Election and the election of an entire state ticket headed by a new governor.

Indiana is often regarded as a trend state. President Eisenhower received 57.7 per cent of the national two-party vote in 1956 and 60.1 per cent of the two-party vote of Indiana. The Democratic House candidates secured 56.6 per cent of the national two-party vote in 1958 congressional races while Indiana Democratic candidates for the House secured 53.6 per cent of the state two-party vote. Political shifts in Indiana are swift and devastating. President Eisenhower's 60.1 per cent of Indiana's two-party vote in 1956 was approached when the Democratic candidate for the United States Senate captured 57.0 per cent of the Indiana two-party vote in 1958. The Democratic Party gained forty-seven House seats as a result of the 1958 Congressional Elections. Six seats, or 12.8 per cent of this gain came from Indiana.<sup>4</sup>

Both Indiana and Kentucky exhibit characteristics of two-party or modified two-party states. In the past, Kentucky has been more inclined to vote for Democratic presidential candidates, Indiana for Republicans. However, Kentucky does have centers and years of Republican strength, and Indiana Democrats do win elections; although in the case of the latter, electoral success usually depends on a strong national Democratic trend such as in the early 1930's or in 1958.<sup>5</sup>

The states of Kentucky and Indiana with their 1959 elections seem important to a trend analysis for reasons given above. It will be fruitful to see if political trends established in Kentuckiana during the Eisenhower Era were continued or discontinued in 1959.

Indiana municipal elections, while held in non-presidential and non-congressional years, get involved with national issues. The Republican municipal victories of 1951 were viewed locally as a "set back for Trumanism." Chairman Butler and national Republican figures such as House Minority Leader Charles A. Halleck could not have avoided concern with local elections in their home state. During the course of the Indiana municipal campaign city tax rates were

<sup>4</sup>This information was secured from the General Election Report of Indiana and Scammon, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup>In the 15 presidential elections since 1900 Kentucky has gone Republican only three times and Indiana has gone Democratic only three times.

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cited by Republicans to show that Hoosier Democrats, like national Democrats, were "spenders." The Republican Party in Indiana has for the past ten years campaigned against high governmental spending, socialism, and Walter Reuther. In spite of a landslide defeat for the Republicans in 1958 this theme was generally continued in 1959. Republican State Chairman Robert Matthews spoke in Minneapolis, Minnesota in October and described Social Security in terms of "socialism." Later in the same speech he stated that the Republican Party should strive for the "utter destruction of all socialist schemes."<sup>6</sup> Democratic campaign ads then warned voters, "Don't Let Them Take It Away! . . . Top Republican leaders threaten to end Social Security."<sup>7</sup> On the other hand the Republican candidate for Mayor of Indianapolis said in his newspaper ads, "Make Social Security Stronger . . . Vote for Social Security . . . Vote Republican."<sup>8</sup>

The results of the elections showed that the Democrats had one less mayor and the Republicans fifteen more than after the 1955 elections, the total number of cities having increased and some independents being defeated. The final tally was 71-36 in favor of the Democrats who now controlled twenty-five of the twenty-six largest cities in the state, losing one in this class and gaining Fort Wayne and Lafayette over 1955.<sup>9</sup> The city of Evansville, located in Vanderburgh County which has voted for the winning Presidential candidate since 1896, elected a Democratic mayor. Beginning in 1938, the party winning a majority of the cities had lost them in the next city election. The Democrats reversed this trend by winning majorities in both 1955 and 1959. Not since 1947 and 1948 had Democrats won two sweeping elections in succession. For the long run it may be that the municipal victories following the New Deal type landslide of 1958 for the Democrats will spell an important change in the state political picture; the change not being favorable to the Republican Party.

The Kentucky gubernatorial election has its roots far back in time and Democratic factionalism. The first electoral struggle was in the May, 1959 Democratic Primary. The successful Democratic nominee, Judge Bert Combs, smarting from a 1955 primary loss, defeated Lieutenant Governor Harry Lee Waterfield for the nomination by 33,001 votes. Waterfield had the support of Governor Albert B. (Happy) Chandler who had defeated Combs in the 1955 Primary but could not succeed himself in office. In January, 1959, Wilson Wyatt of Louisville withdrew from the gubernatorial race, announced for

<sup>6</sup>Louisville Courier-Journal, November 3, 1959.

<sup>7</sup>Indianapolis News, November 3, 1959.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., November 2, 1959.

<sup>9</sup>Louisville Courier-Journal, November 5, 1959.

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lieutenant governor, and joined the Combs forces. During the primary campaign the Combs-Wyatt ticket was accused of subservience to the "Louisville newspaper monopoly" (Courier-Journal) and to former Senator Earle Clements, then Chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and his "Texas oil millionaire pals." Harry Lee Waterfield was given a new name by the Combs people, "Happy Lee."

After the primary both Chandler and Waterfield promised support for the Combs-Wyatt ticket. However, by general election time both refused to appear at a rally featuring former President Harry Truman because of Combs' presence. Chandler, an announced Presidential candidate, in effect finally said that he would vote the Democratic ticket but that Combs' election might be the worst thing that could happen to Kentucky. Combs was called a "bolter," a "poor little dunce," the "biggest liar I have encountered in thirty years in politics" and a man who would be "a terrible governor if elected" by Governor Chandler.<sup>10</sup> Kentucky Democrats were mindful of the election of two Republican United States Senators in 1956 and the role that Chandler was supposed to have played by voting for, but not supporting the Democratic nominees. Would factionalism hurt the Democratic Party's chances of victory in 1959?

The Republican candidate for governor, John Robsion, had been defeated for re-election to Congress in 1958 from Kentucky's Third Congressional District (Louisville). A protege of Thruston Morton, Robsion was regarded as a strong candidate in Louisville and in the south-central hill area, his father having once served this section as Congressman. Kentuckians had been known to elect a Republican Governor as a sign of independence such as in 1943.

It would be impossible to assess the efforts that Thruston Morton and Earle Clements put forth to win the Kentucky election. National party spokesmen found their way to the state -- Vice-President Richard Nixon for a National Park dedication in July and former President Harry Truman for a political speech in Paducah, Alben Barkley's home town, towards the close of the campaign. Otherwise the campaign in good Kentucky tradition was colorful but not exactly productive of issue-discussion. Robsion charged that Combs lacked experience, was tied to certain bosses, had no definite program, had made irresponsible fiscal commitments, and would be plagued by party factionalism. Combs replied indirectly by reminding the voters that Robsion had opposed the Kentucky farmer while a Congressman, would give Kentucky divided party government, and would inaugurate a Herbert Hoover type of government by commission as a substitute for government by action.

The election results gave Combs a plurality of 180,093 out of

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<sup>10</sup> Louisville Courier-Journal, October 23, 1959.

853,005 votes cast, the plurality setting a Kentucky record in gubernatorial contests. Wilson Wyatt, former Mayor of Louisville, a founder of Americans for Democratic Action, and a campaign manager for Adlai Stevenson, overcame the prejudices of Kentucky's Bourbon Democracy to secure the biggest plurality ever given a candidate in Kentucky, including Franklin Roosevelt. The Democrats carried all of the other state races and increased their legislative majorities.

Republican National Chairman Morton in his post-election analysis said that in Kentucky "an expected Democratic split did not materialize and the Democrats won the election according to form."<sup>11</sup> However, in 1952 Adlai Stevenson carried Kentucky by only three hundred votes. Then in 1956 Stevenson's percentage of the two-party vote fell to 45.4 and two Republican United States Senators were elected. In the 1959 race for Governor, the next important state-wide election after the 1956 Eisenhower landslide, Combs was able to secure 60.6 per cent of the two-party vote. As a candidate he fared extremely well in traditionally Democratic Western Kentucky (securing 77.9 per cent of the vote in McCracken County for example), and raised the Democratic percentage in Harlan County, a coal-producing area, to an all-time high of 64.6. Combs ran well in the Bluegrass Region, home of Kentucky's Dixiecrats. President Eisenhower captured 61.8 per cent of Fayette County's two-party vote in 1956 while Combs received 57.4 per cent of the vote here in 1959. The larger urban areas of the state, partial to Eisenhower in 1956, were all carried by Combs excepting Jefferson County (Louisville), home of the Republican candidate. The vote shift in these urban counties from 1956 to 1959 was startling. Robsion, the Republican candidate, carried only twenty-seven of one hundred and twenty counties, just holding his own in the Republican Eighth Congressional District. The 1959 state election in Kentucky offered little encouragement to those witnessing a trend in Kentucky politics that was supposed to give the state a "marginal political complexion" with Republicans probably having an advantage in the long run.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from parties and candidates the 1959 elections offer an insight into a national political issue, that of spending. President Eisenhower seized the initiative in 1959 and warned that the Democratic victory of 1958 was not an indication that the people favored the "spenders." Many Democrats in Congress took the President's pronouncement as a true reflection of public opinion. The "spenders"

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<sup>11</sup>Louisville Courier-Journal, November 5, 1959.

<sup>12</sup>These election figures have been taken from Scammon, op. cit., and the Louisville Courier-Journal. For a discussion of the direction of Kentucky politics after the Eisenhower Era see John H. Fenton, Politics In the Border States (New Orleans, 1957),

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label did not hurt Indiana Democrats in 1959 in spite of the traditional attachment of the Hoosier to economy. Also, elsewhere in the country there was widespread support of the electorate for new taxes, the retention of school taxes, and bond issues for the amount of \$1,400,000,000.<sup>13</sup> Kentucky voters approved the financing of a veteran's bonus after being forewarned that a three per cent sales tax would likely follow.

It is difficult to isolate a national political trend in a nation which has a true national vote only when a President is elected. Congressional elections can hardly be described as being national elections since no election district reaches beyond a state's borders. Our party system like our governmental system is federal in nature. Nevertheless, state and national party systems, state and national party organizations, and state and Presidential elections are invariably intertwined. In the seeds of the 1958 and 1959 elections are the victories and defeats of 1960. A look at the total picture, with emphasis placed on Kentucky and Indiana for reasons mentioned, should not discourage Democratic optimism for 1960 nor encourage Republican hopes.

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<sup>13</sup>Louisville Courier-Journal, November 6, 1959.