

VOTING

A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign

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1 THE SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Elmira and the 1948 Election

Counterparts of our test community are found throughout the industrial Northeast and other parts of the United States. In upstate New York or downstate Illinois, outside Boston or Detroit or Cleveland, there are small cities or middle-sized towns that fall between the village and rural area, on the one hand, and the metropolis, on the other. Such towns are familiar to Americans; they are often termed the "grass roots" of the nation. Yet a student of politics in France or Britain might be puzzled about what manner of places they are, where Protestant factory workers often vote for the "right" and devout Catholics for the "left" and where whole communities vote for (or with) regional traditions whose origins most of them have forgotten.

The same is true for our test year: 1948 is "only yesterday" to the literate citizen today, and so is the New Deal and Fair Deal era, of which the 1948 election was the latest—perhaps the last—rally. Yet the political events of that time, in both the broad and the narrow senses, are not so familiar that they are immediately called forth out of memory. Many Americans today have forgotten that the 1948 election was the first in a quarter-century with more than two "major" parties in contention¹ or that in 1947 and in the opening months of 1948 it was still proper to treat the Soviet Union as a respected, recently friendly ally.

While it is therefore necessary to remind ourselves what com-

1. Despite that fact, this report is essentially limited to the Republican and Democratic vote. The Dixiecrats were not in the Elmira picture, of course, and the (Wallace) Progressive party received only five votes in our November sample of 644 voters and 944 people (and a similar trace in the official count).

munities like Elmira and recent years like 1948 were actually like, we wish at the same time to stress that this report is *not* intended as a study of a community or of recent American political history. Quite the opposite, for we should like, ultimately, to have our conclusions independent of the specific time-and-place bounds imposed on them. This is *not* an anthropological or sociological investigation of a community, and, while one could argue that such a study (in the Lynd or the Warner tradition) would enrich our understanding of an activity like politics, the purposes would not be the same as those of this study. Nor is this a current-history survey, as worth while as are the current studies of that type (e.g., in the work of Louis Bean, Samuel Lubell, and Louis Harris). We are, instead, interested in just what the title of the volume states, namely, voting, and we seek to identify, formulate, and test some generalizations on that subject.

But generalizations are based upon particular instances, and the long-term aim for generality must be served by specificity now. Generalizations in the future will depend heavily on replication and comparison in different times and places, and it is an ultimate advantage to pin down each study to a distinct—and not necessarily “typical”—context.² This chapter describes the place and the time of this study—the community of Elmira and the events of 1948.

THE COMMUNITY³

Elmira, New York, is thirty-five miles southwest of Ithaca and eight miles north of the New York–Pennsylvania border. It covers seven and a half square miles in the broad valley of the Chemung River, is surrounded on three sides by rolling wooded hills, and is situated in the heart of a rather poor agricultural region. Miles from any community of comparable size and facilities, Elmira occupies a unique position in this section of New York State and is sometimes called “Queen City of the Southern Tier.”

To anyone who has motored through the middle-sized cities of the

2. It may be, in fact, that national samples for such studies (as used in 1944 and 1952) gain in generality at the cost of blurring specifics. For example, the degree of social differentiation in politics is blurred by nation-wide averaging of data representing quite different patterns of cleavage, e.g., sectional with ethnic and class.

3. This section was prepared by John P. Dean and edited by the authors.

Northeast and Middle West, this “Queen City” label might be puzzling. Elmira in 1948 was an ordinary bustling industrial community and looked it. Railroad tracks run northward and southward through the city, and the Chemung River flows eastward through the middle of town, dividing the North Side from the South Side.

Warehouses, freight depots, and railroad yards cluster in the northeastern section of the town, and factories dot the fringes to the north, east, and south. The downtown section, an area six or eight blocks square that front on the river’s north bank, is undistinguished, even drab, and so are the working-class residential areas to the north and east of it. Trailing east from the business section are several blocks of Elmira’s “skid row,” and several blocks away, at the extreme eastern edge of Elmira’s North Side, semirural slum dwellings line the road for a quarter of a mile. The area a few blocks north and slightly east of the business section is the “patch,” so named because the early Irish settlers of the area formed a “patch” of Irish from County Cork, a “patch” from County Clare, and so on. As the Irish became middle class and moved to more desirable sections, Italians and then Negroes moved in.

Moving west from the Patch, the residential climate becomes first respectable, then substantial, then fashionable—culminating in the elite residences of Strathmont Park. West Elmira is the area of new construction for fashionable families wanting to live in the “nice part of town.”

The South Side of town is residential and industrial, mostly lower-middle and working class. This was not always so. A wide, old, shaded street that begins at the south bank of the river and ends at the southern tip of town is lined for several blocks with huge frame mansions, built in the gingerbread style of the 1880’s and 1890’s, that formerly were elite homes but now are boarding- and rooming-houses.

Elmira Heights, just north of the city proper, houses the bulk of Elmira’s Polish and Ukrainian populations as well as certain large industries. It has a one-street business district and block after block of middle-sized frame houses with small, neat lawns. On a hill just west of the Heights, the big brick state reformatory for boys is located, and near by is Woodlawn Cemetery, where Mark Twain is buried. (He lived on a farm just outside Elmira during the late

1870's and early 1880's, at the time he wrote *Tom Sawyer*. The city's leading hotel is named for him.)

Elmira is near one of America's great summer "play" areas, the Finger Lakes region. Apart from that, recreational facilities are few and simple. There is the usual country club for the social elite and subelite, and for the average Elmiran there are an amusement park, a public golf course, a public outdoor swimming pool, an indoor pool at the YMCA, and a fair number of public parks and play areas scattered over the city. The neighboring hills provide the proper up-and-drafts, and Elmira claims to be "the gliding capital of the world." Elmira is an eager baseball town with a Class A minor-league team. There are five movie theaters, an art gallery, and a public library.

In short, Elmira is not much different in most respects from other industrial cities of comparable size in its region. It is "an ordinary American town."

Criteria for Selection

Elmira was not a haphazard choice. The main criteria by which the town was selected were the following (in addition to reasonable accessibility from Cornell University, which conducted a further study of the community after this one): (*a*) moderate size; (*b*) independence from a metropolitan district but not isolated; (*c*) reasonable economic and social stability; (*d*) good communication media and a normal educational and cultural environment; (*e*) balanced industrial and labor situation; (*f*) typical ethnic composition; and (*g*) reasonable political party balance. The sixteen cities of New York State between 25,000 and 100,000 were reviewed on these criteria, and Elmira was chosen.

How well did Elmira meet the criteria?

a) Size.—The 1940 census gives the population of the city of Elmira as 45,106, with a total of 63,228 for the entire urban area. (The urban area includes the incorporated villages of Elmira Heights, Wellsburg, and Horseheads and the unincorporated towns of Elmira, Horseheads, Ashland, Southport, and Big Flats.) In 1948 the Elmira Association of Commerce estimated the city's population at 52,000 and the urban area at 76,000.

b) Independence from metropolitan district.—Elmira is clearly an

"independent" urban community, yet it is not isolated. It is the seat of Chemung County, it has a small suburban area of its own, and it contains enough industry to give it reasonable economic self-sufficiency for a city of its size. It is a railroad center, with four trunk lines (Erie; Delaware, Lackawanna and Western; Pennsylvania; and Lehigh Valley) that offer passenger and freight connections with all parts of the country. Four important state highways converge at Elmira, and the Chemung County Airport is serviced by two national airlines and one state airline. Bus lines connect the city to various near-by points, and thirty-one over-the-road trucking companies serve it.

c) Social and economic stability.—Elmira in 1948 was neither a wartime boom town nor a "recession" town. It was an old community, originally settled in 1783; it had experienced steady economic and population growth ever since, with no startling ups or downs in the recent past. During the depression Elmira suffered a population decline (about 5 per cent in the decade between 1930 and 1940). But a new company, Remington Rand, moved in and helped take up some of the slack in the city's economic base. The record shows a steady economic expansion, with little boom and bust.

d) Communication media and educational environment.—Elmira has two daily papers and a Sunday paper, all three owned and operated by the Gannett Press. In addition, Elmira receives the New York daily and Sunday papers and the Syracuse, Binghamton, and Buffalo papers. There are two local radio stations, one owned and operated by the newspapers and the other independent. The American Federation of Labor Trades and Labor Assembly puts out a small semi-monthly newspaper, and the Association of Commerce publishes a monthly business journal.

Elmira's education system serves the usual primary and secondary schooling needs. In 1948 Elmira had twenty-two schools, two of them large public high schools and one a small Catholic high school. There is a small women's college in Elmira, with about three hundred and fifty to four hundred students.

e) Industrial and labor situation.—Elmira is not a one-industry or one-company town or a town where one or two labor unions predominate. It has considerable industrial diversity: variation in size of plants, mixed local and absentee ownership, and differences in

products, industrial processes, and working conditions. And it has a wide range in size and structure of labor unions.

Altogether, Elmira had about seventy-five industries in 1948. They varied in size from a few employees to more than 5,000, and they manufactured a variety of products, from Coca-Cola bottles to structural steel for bridges. There were twenty plants employing 100 people or more. The largest companies were Remington Rand, producing office equipment and employing 4,500–5,000 people; the absentee-owned Eclipse Machine Division, Bendix Corporation, producing automobile and aircraft parts and employing about 2,000; the Thatcher Manufacturing Company, a locally owned industry that produced glass containers and employed about 1,300 people; and the locally owned American La France Foamite Corporation, manufacturing fire-fighting equipment and employing about 1,000 people. Other important industries were the American Bridge Company, locally known as “the bridge works,” a subsidiary of United States Steel, employing about 650 people; the Elmira Foundry of General Electric, employing 900–1,000; Kennedy Valve Manufacturing Company, a local industry manufacturing valves and hydrants, employing about 600; Moore Business Forms, an absentee-owned company producing salesbooks and other business forms, employing about 400; Harding Brothers, Inc., a local plant manufacturing machine tools, employing about 350; Artistic Card Company, a locally owned greeting-card company, employing about 350; Ward La France, a locally owned truck-manufacturing plant, employing about 275; the utilities—New York Telephone Company and New York State Electric and Gas Corporation—each employing between 200 and 500; and the four railroad lines previously mentioned.

In 1948 approximately 86 per cent of Elmira workers eligible for unionization belonged to unions. But Elmira could not be called a “labor town.” With two or three exceptions, the unions were old, well established, settled down, and nonmilitant. Until 1947, when the International Association of Machinists local at Remington Rand struck for ten weeks, there had not been a major strike in Elmira since the 1920’s. The AF of L building trades were solidly entrenched, and so were the printing trades, with locals at the newspaper and at Moore Business Forms. They, together with the railroad brotherhoods, represented the more conservative wing of Elmira labor. At

the other extreme, at least in terms of the position of its international, was the United Electrical Workers local at the Elmira Foundry of General Electric. Somewhere in the middle were the city’s two biggest locals—the IAM (machinists) at Remington Rand and the United Automobile Workers, CIO, at Bendix-Eclipse. There were many other unions in Elmira—Teamsters, Office Employees, Ironworkers, Bartenders, Street Railway Employees, State, County, and Municipal Workers—but in numbers, economic strength, and political action the most important were the building trades, the printing trades, the railroad brotherhoods, IAM, UAW, and UE.

f) Ethnic composition.—Elmira had the usual representation of ethnic minorities, with no unusual proportion from any one group. Elmira’s Negroes were about 2–3 per cent of the population, and there was about the same proportion of Jews. There were Irish-American and Italian-American groups, and smaller Polish, German, and Russian Ukrainian groups; in 1940 the total foreign-born from all these nationality groups was about 7 per cent.

The foreign-extraction groups had exerted liberal political influences in Elmira, partly because of the working-class character of the major immigration waves and partly because some of the groups, notably the Germans and the Jews, brought liberal European ideologies with them. The first group, in point of time as well as influence on the city, were the Irish, who arrived among the first settlers in 1783 and continued to come especially in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. From 1848 until close to the end of the nineteenth century, groups of political refugees of various European nationalities who came in large numbers to the United States also came to Elmira: Germans and Jews following the revolutionary upheaval of 1848; another wave of Germans following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870; Poles and Ukrainians escaping czarist rule in the 1880’s. And during this period came the first group of Negroes on the “Underground Railroad.” The expanding Erie Railroad brought Elmira’s last big foreign group, the Italians, who began to arrive during the 1890’s.

g) Political party balance.—Although upstate New York is heavily Republican by tradition, and Elmira is no exception, the Democratic party has made a better showing there in the past few elections than in most other cities considered for study. In the preceding presiden-

tial election, 1944, the Democrats cast about 40 per cent of the Elmira vote.

In sum, Elmira appeared to satisfy the major criteria laid down for the study of voting in a "normal" American community. While there is no such thing as a "normal" American community that can represent, say, New York City, Tuscaloosa, Topeka, and Walla Walla at the same time, nevertheless Elmira contains a sufficiently heterogeneous sample of people and conditions to assure a realistic test of the generalizations advanced in this book.

THE PERIOD

Now let us turn to the *time* location or historical boundaries of the study. In retrospect it is "obvious" that the Truman era was a transitional political period, a time of more or less unstable fluctuation between the parties with lingering resemblance to the Roosevelt era of the 1930's yet foreshadowing the Eisenhower era of the 1950's. At least it is easy to see this "transitional" quality now. But, at the time, the 1948 election almost became the eclipse of Truman and the decisive launching of something quite different—what we would now be calling the "Dewey era"!

Also in retrospect, the Truman administration will be remembered for its international policies and for the emergence of foreign affairs as the dominant concern and issue of the times. It is easy for the historian to assume that this was the will of the electorate in 1948. But, as we shall see, 1948 was a year in which the vote turned on *domestic* concerns of a socioeconomic character. A Republican administration from 1948 to 1952 might have had to do much the same things in foreign affairs as the Democrats. But the fact remains that the slim margin of votes that legitimized the historic Truman policy of containment of Russia through international alliances was gained on the basis of domestic issues affecting labor, consumers, and farmers.

As a final paradox, the 1948 election will always be seen as a great political success for President Truman—which it was—and a parallel defeat for Governor Dewey. Yet, again, what happened afterward colors our perception of what happened then. For no matter how warm the regard of Americans for President Truman in future years, or how cool to Governor Dewey, more or less the

opposite was the case at the time of the 1948 campaign. Dewey was respected as an efficient governmental administrator, and Truman was often disrespected as a "well-meaning man out of his depth."

Our own data warn us, then, against too easy a use of hindsight generalizations. But, at the same time, the data do demand background explanation of three main features of the historical period in which the study was made. One has to do with politics itself, the second with international developments, and the third with the United States economy.

As for American politics of the period, after a decade and a half of Democratic rule, the New Deal party lost both houses of Congress in 1946. President Truman as chief executive was at the center of constant controversy. By midsummer 1948 the "left" in the North had deserted him for Wallace's third party (which, while small nationally, took 13.5 per cent of the vote in New York City); some middle-of-the-road Democrats had tried to draft Eisenhower just prior to the conventions; and, in response to Truman's civil rights program, the "right" in the South threatened to desert on the issue and subsequently did, to form the States Rights (Dixiecrat) party that carried thirty-nine electoral votes in the South. The farm vote for the New Deal of the 1930's had returned to the Republicans. The "New Deal coalition" seemed finally to be realizing what had threatened it since 1938—it was falling apart into the pieces from which it had originally been put together.

In contrast, the Republicans were united on the surface and had a wealth of candidates (Taft, Vandenberg, Stassen) from whom they chose Governor Dewey of New York, who had run a fairly close race against Roosevelt in 1944. In addition to the signs of victory inherent in their earlier winning of Congress, the Republicans' candidate (but not the party) was carrying all the reputable polls. Typical of informed belief toward the end of the campaign was this news statement: "Presidential candidate Thomas E. Dewey rested on his oars last week, riding the groundswell of pro-Republican sentiment." Dewey campaigned for six weeks to Truman's eight; traveled 16,000 miles to Truman's 22,000; gave 170 speeches and talks to Truman's 271. While the voters seemed to enjoy President Truman's more vigorous and down-to-earth campaign, it was generally considered a losing gesture. The political situation in