

Turnout for Presidential Elections in Lancaster and York Counties: 1876-1960

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Since the present Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania went into effect in 1874, the electorates of the United States, the Commonwealth, and York and Lancaster counties have undergone various changes and have been subjected to numerous pressures. As later data will show, the forces that have come to bear on the voters of York and Lancaster counties seem to have been quite similar over the broad sweep of history, and one would suspect that these forces were very similar to those coming to bear on the nation as a whole. Although this judgment is an impressionistic one, it seems reasonable. Therefore, one might gain insights into the national electorate by studying the voting behavior of citizens of these two counties.

Furthermore, one can eliminate to a large extent the influence of changing electoral requirements by concentrating on the period since the adoption of the Constitution of 1874. The Pennsylvania Constitution, although much amended in other respects, has changed relatively little in so far as voting requirements are concerned.¹ Requirements remained as originally drafted until 1933, at which time a requirement that voters have paid a state or county tax within a specified time before the election was rescinded. Of course, the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States enfranchised female citizens of the Commonwealth in 1920, but this nation-wide phenomenon can not be eliminated from a study of this type since it affected the entire country.² Since 1874, then, Pennsylvania has had, for all practical purposes, universal manhood suffrage, and since 1920 universal suffrage. In the decade following 1949, Pennsylvania voters approved constitutional amendments that did make easier the casting of a ballot in the state by providing for limited absentee voting and easing slightly the residence requirements.³ These changes, however, are not so great as to influence the turnout in the state to any considerable extent. Thus Pennsylvania under its present constitution provides a fruitful ground for comparative study of turnout over a long period of time.

York and Lancaster counties further provide an excellent opportunity to make such a study even more microscopic. Granted that these two counties have changed so much since 1874 as to be enormously different.

But so has the country as a whole. And these two counties have not changed so much as has a county such as Bucks, which has been invaded by the mushrooming suburbs of Philadelphia. (Table 1 presents certain population data for the two counties for the period 1870-1960. Throughout the period under consideration more than ninety per cent of the residents of each of these two counties have been native-born white persons. Furthermore, the great majority of these persons have been children of native-born parents. There are certain minor differences with regard to

TABLE 1
SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POPULATION OF
YORK AND LANCASTER COUNTIES
1870 - 1960

Year	Total	21 years and over	% urban	% native born white	% foreign- born white	% col- ored
YORK COUNTY:						
1870	76,134	18,029*	NA	93.8†	4.6	1.6
1880	87,841	21,027*	NA	95.2	3.3	1.5
1890	99,489	25,295*	NA	95.8	2.6	1.6
1900	116,413	31,030*	33.5	96.6	1.9	1.4
1910	136,405	38,304*	38.0	96.5	2.0	1.5
1920	144,521	85,393	43.4	97.2	1.4	1.4
1930	167,135	101,196	47.9	97.0	1.2	1.8
1940	178,022	114,620	46.7	97.4	0.9	1.7
1950	202,737	133,952	43.5	97.1	1.0	1.9
1960	238,336	147,768	54.1	96.6	1.1	2.3
LANCASTER COUNTY						
1870	121,340	28,569*	NA	91.4	6.2	2.4
1880	139,447	34,945*	NA	92.9	5.1	2.0
1890	149,095	39,359*	NA	93.7	4.5	1.8
1900	159,241	43,349*	33.8	94.7	3.8	1.6
1910	167,029	47,360*	38.6	95.2	3.4	1.4
1920	173,797	105,296	44.6	96.3	2.5	1.2
1930	196,882	119,901	46.1	96.4	2.2	1.3
1940	212,504	135,705	44.7	97.0	1.7	1.2
1950	234,717	142,141	45.1	97.2	1.6	1.2
1960	278,359	168,686	49.5	97.3	1.4	1.3

* Indicates that only males are included, since woman suffrage had not yet been put into effect.

NA Indicates that these data were not available.

† The great majority of native born whites were the children of native-born parents, but the author felt that inclusion of the actual percentages was not justified since the point could be made without use of them.

Source: United States Bureau of the Census.

foreign-born whites and colored residents. These differences may help to account for the slightly lower turnout rates in Lancaster County during the early portion of the period under study, but they do not seem to be important enough to make a study of turnout in these counties invalid.

In addition, York and Lancaster counties afford an opportunity to isolate the variable of party strength. Throughout this period Lancaster County has been heavily committed to the Republican Party, while York County has been more nearly balanced in its division of the vote between the parties. Table 2 shows the percentage of the vote the Democratic Party has won in each of the two counties in each presidential election since 1876. The Republicans have carried Lancaster County in every election.

FIGURE 1 Democrat Percentage Of Total Vote 1876-1960

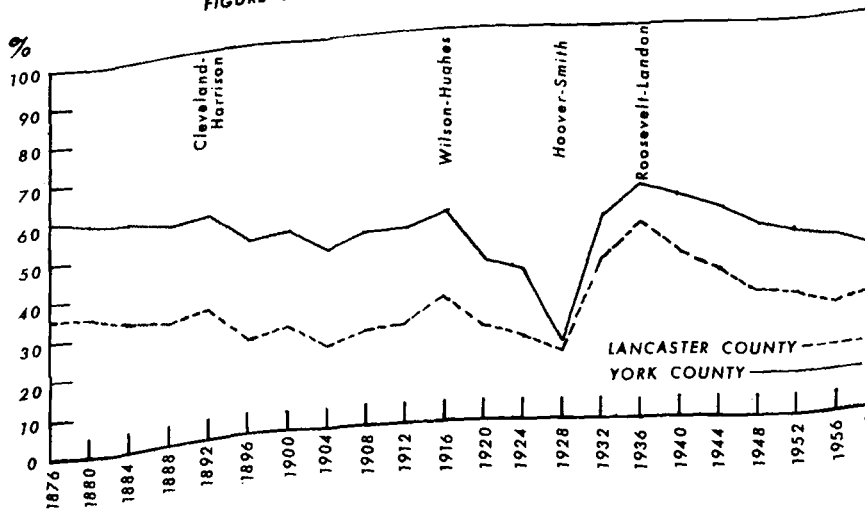
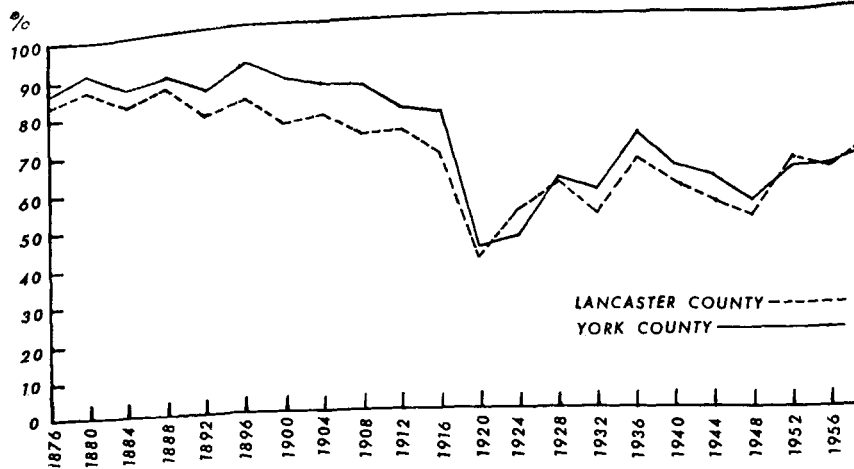


FIGURE 2 - Turnout In Presidential Elections 1876-1960



In York County the Democrats have carried the county in fifteen out of twenty-two elections. However, in only three cases has the Democratic percentage of the total vote been less than forty per cent or more than sixty per cent; thus, a consistently competitive situation has existed. In Lancaster County the Democrats have won more than forty per cent of the vote only three times in this period, and those during the New Deal era. Figure 1 shows clearly the difference in the Democratic percentage of the total vote between the two counties.

It has often been suggested that turnouts for presidential elections since 1920 have been much smaller than those of the last decade or two of the nineteenth century.⁴ This proposition is clearly supported by electoral participation data from York and Lancaster counties. The percentage of enfranchised voters who cast ballots for presidential candidates hovered consistently around eighty to ninety per cent from 1876 to 1896, after

TABLE 2
DEMOCRATIC PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL VOTE,
STATE AND COUNTY PLURALITIES,
YORK AND LANCASTER COUNTIES
1876 - 1960

Year	Candidates winner listed first	State plur- ality	YORK		LANCASTER	
			plur- ality	% Dem- ocratic	plur- ality	% Dem- ocratic
1876	Hayes-Tilden	R	D	60.4	R	35.6
1880	Garfield-Hancock	R	D	59.8	R	35.5
1884	Cleveland-Blaine	R	D	58.6	R	33.0
1888	Harrison-Cleveland	R	D	56.9	R	31.8
1892	Cleveland-Harrison	R	D	57.5	R	33.1
1896	McKinley-Bryan	R	D	49.5	R	24.3
1900	McKinley-Bryan	R	D	51.6	R	26.1
1904	Roosevelt-Parker	R	R	45.3	R	20.7
1908	Taft-Bryan	R	D	49.3	R	24.6
1912	Wilson-Roosevelt-Taft	Prog.	D	49.6	R	25.0
1916	Wilson-Hughes	R	D	53.3	R	31.3
1920	Harding-Cox	R	R	40.3	R	23.5
1924	Coolidge-Davis	R	R	38.0	R	20.9
1928	Hoover-Smith	R	R	19.5	R	17.8
1932	Roosevelt-Hoover	R	D	51.1	R	40.0
1936	Roosevelt-Landon	D	D	59.5	R	49.7
1940	Roosevelt-Willkie	D	D	56.5	R	41.6
1944	Roosevelt-Dewey	D	D	53.7	R	37.6
1948	Truman-Dewey	R	D	48.5	R	31.1
1952	Eisenhower-Stevenson	R	R	46.8	R	30.3
1956	Eisenhower-Stevenson	R	R	44.5	R	27.7
1960	Kennedy-Nixon	D	R	41.0	R	29.7

Sources: *Pennsylvania Manuals*, *Pennsylvania Legislative Hand Books*.

which it declined slightly but steadily until 1916. In 1920, of course, the percentage of enfranchised voters casting ballots fell off sharply as a result of the extension of the suffrage to women. Since then turnouts have been much more erratic than prior to 1920. The trend, however, has been up. Turnout reached 69.4 per cent in York County and 63.6 per cent in Lancaster County in the important election of 1936. The proportion of enfranchised voters casting ballots then declined steadily through the late Depression, war, and early post-war years, only to turn up again in 1952. In 1960, 66.3 per cent in Lancaster County and 64.6 per cent in York County voted. The complete data for the period under consideration are presented in Table 3, and are shown graphically in Figure 2.

What, then, has caused these trends in voter turnout? The answer to this question is not known. But some attempts at explanation can be made. The crucial fact that women were not enfranchised until 1920 may do much to help us understand the recent developments. After all, it was not until 1941 that women who had lived all their lives in a society in which women had the right to vote began to enter the electorate. And

even women born after 1920 have been exposed to attitudes concerning women in politics that stem from the era of manhood suffrage. This "cultural lag" has meant that the electorate has contained large numbers of people whose perception of their role in politics has been vague. Such people tend to vote only when they regard the outcome of the election to be of great importance, e.g. 1936. It may be, therefore, that the forces unleashed by the Nineteenth Amendment have not yet run their course.⁵

TABLE 3
TURNOUT IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS,
YORK AND LANCASTER COUNTIES,
1876 - 1960

Year	YORK COUNTY			LANCASTER COUNTY		
	Turnout	Enfranchised voters*	% of turnout	Turnout	Enfranchised voters*	% of turnout
1876	17,230	19,829	86.9	27,106	32,397	83.7
1880	19,351	21,027	92.0	30,395	34,945	87.0
1884	19,698	22,735	86.6	30,141	36,709	82.1
1888	21,707	24,443	88.8	33,016	38,473	85.8
1892	22,300	26,443	84.3	31,222	40,157	77.7
1896	26,060	28,739	90.7	33,490	41,753	80.2
1900	26,631	31,030	85.8	32,368	43,349	74.6
1904	28,614	33,938	84.3	34,077	44,953	75.8
1908	30,771	36,846	83.5	32,931	46,557	70.7
1912	30,195	39,012	77.4	34,282	47,988	71.4
1916	30,598	40,428	75.7	31,996	49,244	65.0
1920	35,679	85,393	41.7	40,542	105,296	38.5
1924	40,790	91,713	44.5	57,749	111,136	50.2
1928	57,529	98,033	58.7	68,192	116,976	58.3
1932	57,365	103,880	55.2	61,019	123,061	49.6
1936	75,837	109,248	69.4	82,273	129,381	63.6
1940	69,936	114,620	61.2	77,418	135,705	57.0
1944	71,158	122,352	58.2	72,673	138,281	52.6
1948	68,678	130,084	52.8	68,499	140,857	48.6
1952	84,351	136,716	61.0	92,721	147,337	62.9
1956	87,068	142,244	61.2	95,801	157,729	60.7
1960	95,479	147,768	64.6	111,889	168,686	66.3

* Estimated, assuming linear increase in the number of enfranchised voters between decennial censuses.

Sources: Pennsylvania Manuals, Pennsylvania Legislative Hand Books, United States Bureau of the Census.

An alternative, or possibly supplementary, explanation has to do with urbanization. In 1900 roughly one-third of the population in each of the two counties lived in urban areas; in 1960 approximately one-half lived in such areas. This increment in urban population could also increase the proportion of the electorate that is but peripherally interested in politics, although this change does not necessarily follow.

Finally, the introduction of the direct primary and the passing of strong party organization may have had something to do with the declining turnout rates. By 1917 all but four states had adopted the direct primary; Pennsylvania was one of those states that had adopted this electoral innovation. It has been suggested that the direct primary tends to depress party organization.⁶ Since one of the jobs of the party organization is getting out the vote, one would expect that in the absence of strong party organization turnout would tend to fluctuate more widely in response

to differing degrees of interest in various elections. The passing of Boies Penrose in 1921 marked the end of a succession of Republican bosses who had exerted powerful influence over the state since 1865.⁷ Thus it seems reasonable that post-1920 party organizations were less able to marshal the electorate for the march to the polls than earlier party leaders. It is probable that all these factors contributed to the decline and fluctuations in turnout apparent after 1920.

The above discussion does not purport to solve the riddle of recent trends in voter turnout, but only to make some suggestions. Nor does the following discussion purport to answer any questions, but it does tend to lend support to some propositions about the 1896-1932 era offered by E. E. Schattschneider.⁸ The facts to be accounted for are the following. First, as has been pointed out above, turnout declined slightly but steadily from 1896 to 1916. Turnouts of 90.7 per cent (York) and 80.2 per cent (Lancaster) in 1896 dropped to 75.7 per cent (York) and sixty-five per cent (Lancaster) in 1916. Second, in conjunction with this decline, the Democratic percentage of the total vote, which had dropped off considerably in 1896, remained low. In York County the Democrats had regularly won over fifty-five per cent of the vote prior to 1896. The Democratic portion of the vote fell to 49.5 per cent in 1896, and reached fifty per cent only twice between 1896 and the New Deal era. Prior to 1896 the Lancaster County Democrats regularly gained around one-third of the total vote. In 1896 they received 24.3 per cent, and only once between 1896 and 1932 did they win over thirty per cent of the vote.

Post-Civil War sectional politics are often explained in terms of the antagonisms resulting from that conflict. Actually, examinations of county-by-county returns for the elections of 1868 and 1872 do not reveal nearly so sectional an alignment of party strength as do comparable returns for the election of 1896.⁹ Thus it appears that the durable Republican majority of 1896-1928 was unstable until it was firmly established by the first McKinley-Bryan contest. Undoubtedly the panic of 1893 redounded to the credit of the Republicans, since the party in power (the Democrats in this case) seems to be punished for its sins far more regularly than it is rewarded for its virtue.¹⁰ However, Schattschneider attributes the alignment established in 1896 to the threat of the agrarian radicalism of the West symbolized by Bryan. It is beyond question that the pre-Civil War Whigs of the South merged with and captured the Democrats of that section after Reconstruction.¹¹ It also seems that the non-slaveholding areas of the South were the parts of that section most affected by the Populist movement, which invaded the South in the 1880's and 1890's.¹² Schattschneider believes that it was not until 1896 that the "southern Bourbons" (ex-Whigs) captured the leadership of the Democratic Party, and that they did so to protect themselves against agrarian radicalism; according to Schattschneider, the device used to effect the takeover was the specious race issue. In conjunction with this development in the South, the northern Republican industrialists used the panic of 1893 and the bloody shirt to solidify support among northern urban workers and farmers, thus imposing on the country the sectional alignment that affects its politics to this day. In this alignment, the Republican hold on the Northeast insured

them the presidency, and the dominant Republicans of the North and the dominant Democrats of the South controlled Congress, thus leaving the western radicals to die in isolation. According to this interpretation, the Civil War alignment of American partisan support was not established until 1896, and was a result of events that had little to do with the Civil War. Free Silver and Populism horrified northern industrialists and "southern Bourbons" alike and caused them to react in such a way as to sectionalize the country. The sections established followed the Civil War division of the union because these two groups used specious Civil War issues, in part, to effect the sectionalization.¹³

Therefore, we would expect a noticeable and durable shift away from the Democrats in York and Lancaster counties in 1896 and thereafter. As we have seen, this was the case. Furthermore, since sectionalism tends to foreordain the outcome of elections in states strongly aligned with one party over long periods of time, participation in elections tends to decline in electoral systems aligned sectionally.¹⁴ Thus we would expect turnout to decline in York and Lancaster counties after 1896, which it in fact does, as we have seen.

Schattschneider further states that since 1932 a more nearly national, as opposed to sectional, alignment has been established in the United States.¹⁵ Thus we would expect a more nearly even division of the vote between the two parties in the two counties and an upturn in turnout, with fluctuations as interest in elections varies. The evidence on this proposition is inconclusive. The Democratic percentage of the vote has been between forty and sixty per cent in every election since 1928 in York County, but has fallen into that range only three times in Lancaster County, although the Lancaster County Democrats have received a higher percentage of the vote in every post-1928 election than they did in any 1896-1928 election, with the exception of the 1916 election (31.3 per cent). Turnout data, although revealing a general increase in electoral participation, show that turnout has been influenced by a complex of factors, other than sectionalism (woman suffrage, in particular), and consequently lend no clear support or opposition to Schattschneider's thesis.

The pattern of political participation in York and Lancaster counties since 1874, then, might be summed up as follows: (1) Turnout was high during the somewhat national electoral division of the 1868-1896 period (Other factors contributed to high turnouts in this era, of course.); (2) Turnout declined steadily in the sharply sectional political alignment that existed after 1896; (3) Turnout fell off precipitously in 1920 when women achieved the ballot; (4) Turnout rose in the 1924 and 1928 elections as more women exercised their franchise; (5) Following the 1932 election a more national electoral alignment developed and turnout increased, but increased irregularly because of factors quite apart from the electoral alignment. It should be emphasized once again, however, that these conclusions are more speculative than factual, although available data seem to support them. Conclusions that go beyond discrete facts to general conclusions can be little else, especially when they deal with events lying as far in the past as those with which this study is concerned.

NOTES

1. Pennsylvania, **Constitution**, Art. VIII. This portion of the Constitution deals with voting requirements.
2. U. S., **Constitution**, Art. XIX of Amendment.
3. Pennsylvania, **Constitution**, Art. VIII, secs. 3, 18-19.
4. See, for example, V. O. Key, Jr., **Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups** (4th ed.; New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1958), p. 623.
5. On this point, see Angus Campbell et al., **The American Voter** (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1960), pp. 488-489.
6. See V. O. Key, Jr., **American State Politics** (New York): Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), pp. 118-129.
7. Edward F. Cooke and G. Edward Janosik, **Guide to Pennsylvania Politics** (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1957), pp. 6-10.
8. E. E. Schattschneider, "United States: The Functional Approach to Party Government." In Sigmund Neumann (ed.), **Modern Political Parties** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 194-215. Or, Schattschneider, **The Semi-sovereign People** (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 78-96.
9. See John D. Hicks, **The American Nation** (3rd ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955), pp. 38, 48, 240.
10. Campbell, p. 555.
11. Seymour Martin Lipset, **Political Man** (Garden City, N. Y.): Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), p. 353.
12. **Ibid.**, p. 354.
13. Schattschneider, in Neumann (ed.), **Modern Political Parties**, pp. 201-206.
14. **Ibid.**, p. 204.
15. **Ibid.**, pp. 206-209.

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