# Vermont Politics: Consistently Contrarian

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At the turn of the 21st century, Vermont's political landscape is a sharp contrast to its appearance a century earlier, when the Republican Party was omnipotent in its power and influence. Today's two-party competition is reflective of substantial changes in Vermont and its politics. But these changes should not be read to be as transformational as they may seem. There are also deep continuities that connect today's political environment with Vermont's historical traditions, reflecting consistencies as well as shifts in political values and behaviors. The 2002 election results, and those of other recent elections, reflect these changes and continuities. In 2002, as much as it was in earlier decades, Vermont remains "Contrary Country,"often marching to a different drummer than the rest of the nation (Hill 1950). Jim Jeffords' departure from the Republican Party, in 2001, and the state's lack of a legal requirement for a balanced budget (in contrast to other states) are in many ways emblematic of the consistent contrarian streak in Vermont politics—not always dominant but ever present. One must consider both the forces of change, and these underlying consistencies, to accurately comprehend the politics of the Green Mountain State in 2002.

Significant changes in Vermont's population level, demographics and culture have had an important effect on its political character. Vermont's population has increased since 1950 and, also, it has experienced profound cultural and socioeconomic shifts. While Vermont's population barely grew

from 344,000 in 1900 to 377,000 in 1950, by 2002, it had grown to 613,000. In addition, the percentage of Vermonters who were born in the state has declined from 71% in 1920 to 53% in 2000, although Vermont remains the "whitest" state in the nation, with only 3.2% of its population being non-white. This change in population level and identity has helped make parts of Vermont more urban in character—particularly the greater Burlington area in Chittenden County, which now has 32% of the state's population and four of its five largest cities and towns. Farmers are, now, a much reduced economic and social group with farmers in the legislature being more a curiosity rather than a commonplace as they were in the last century. The "new Vermonters" have also brought a different set of ideas and values into the population, shifting the state's "political culture" increasingly to the left of the national mainstream.

The effects of this population shift should not be overstated, however, in that Vermont remains one of the smallest (49th in population), most rural and ethnically homogeneous states in the nation. Perhaps more importantly, the economic base of the state has shifted in the last century. In 1900, woolen mills, agriculture, and precision tools dominated the Vermont economy. Now, all of those "industries" have declined or disappeared, replaced by other forms of high technology industries such as IBM. The most important of these shifts is, perhaps, the agricultural decline for this has not only been an occupational change. It has changed the composition of the legislature and the state's landscape and political culture, as well. Politicians are now much more likely to be urban professionals rather than farmers with more cosmopolitan social values.

The deep but often latent divisions between the "old" Vermonters and the "flatlanders" (as recent immigrants to the state are called by some native Vermonters) were brought to the surface and intensified by the 1999-2000 conflict over "civil unions" that legalized unions between same sex couples. In 1999, the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that the Vermont Constitution required the state

to extend to same sex-couples the same privileges and benefits enjoyed by married couples, and directed the Vermont Legislature to consider appropriate legislation to bring this about. Thus, the Vermont Constitution, already radical in the rights it extended in 1777, once again spoke in a voice discordant with prevailing national political and social currents. Chief Justice Jeffrey Amestoy, who handed down the decision, had also served as Vermont Attorney General and received bipartisan ballot listing, another indication of Vermont's relative nonpartisanship in a partisan age.

While the Court's decision provoked wide reaction, the real political battle occurred in the 2000 session of the Vermont Legislature. After extensive consideration, public hearings and debate, the Legislature approved the creation of "civil unions." This was seen as a way to extend the benefits of marriage to same sex couples without endorsing full-fledged same-sex marriage. It became a pivotal issue in many legislative races in the 2000 election, with a number of legislators losing their seats as a result of their support for "civil unions"—enough to shift control of the State House of Representatives from the Democrats to the Republicans for the first time since 1984. Many homes and autos had signs which read "Take Back Vermont," indicating the feelings of many that their state had been taken over by a culture alien to their values—although the actual views on this issue often crosscut the traditional native/flatlander and Democratic/Republican divides.

The population change and decline in agriculture has also affected the physical landscape, with political ramifications. More and more farms have disappeared, replace with new housing developments, businesses, or industrial parks. This has affected Vermont's tourism industry, one of the constants in the last century. For those who "see" Vermont as a place with a certain appearance, this urbanization has been a call for new environmental laws like Act 250, and their application in specific cases. This has led to more "appropriate" signage in

some commercial areas, and some farmland preservation but the commercial development has slowly changed the "face" of Vermont, particularly in Chittenden County. For example, citizens of Williston successfully opposed a 1970's proposal to build a major mall in their town, through years of environmental litigation enabled by Act 250. However, a series of smaller retail complexes were slowly approved and built, followed by a number of "big box" stores that have now transformed the site of the original mall proposal into an equally sprawling commercial hub—development modified but, ultimately, not prevented.

In terms of partisan politics and governmental control, the Vermont legislature in 1900 was heavily Republican and rural in its composition. But in the 1950's and 1960's, things began to change. Thanks to an increasing number of migrants to the state, the Democratic Party began to have some success in electing candidates to statewide office, beginning with Congressman William Meyer in 1958 and Governor Phil Hoff in 1962. By 1974, Patrick Leahy was elected to one of Vermont's U.S. Senate seats as Democrat. By 2000, the Legislature was more urban in its membership and orientation, with control closely split between Republicans and Democrats. Republicans in 2000 won control of the State House of Representatives for the first time since 1984, while Democrats maintained control of the State Senate, which they have held for all but 4 years since 1985.

With these changes, however, certain continuities have also persisted. While Vermont's political behavior and ideology may look substantially more liberal than it was in 1900, Vermont has always had a streak of political independence that might not be called liberal but, certainly, has been contrarian to certain prevailing trends. Vermont has not been afraid to go its own way. Examples include the outlawing of slavery, and the provision for universal manhood suffrage, in 1777 (when both ideas were quite radical); the willingness

to turn down a major federal highway project in 1936, and vote for Alf London in the 1936 FDR landslide; the willingness not to follow the full path of McCarthyism in the 1950's (Lockard 1959). Vermont's legacy has been one of political independence, mixed with a varying combination of fiscal conservatism and social liberalism. But until the 1960's, its party control was clearly Republican.

Another notable shift in Vermont's political culture is indicated by the backgrounds of its governors since the 1960's. Since Phil Hoff's election, the only native-born Vermont governor has been Deane Davis, who served from 1969-73. The governors who followed him—Tom Salmon (1973-7), Richard Snelling (1977-85, 1991), Madeleine Kunin (1985-1991), Howard Dean (1991-2003), and Jim Douglas (2003- )—have all been "migrants" to Vermont. This is in contrast to previous governors, who were, virtually, all Vermont natives.

There is less to this shift than one might think, however. Although these governors have been "flatlanders" (in the Vermont vernacular), all have risen to the governorship by working their way up through the political process in the legislature and/or statewide office. They have become part of the state and built political records, demonstrating their abilities in a variety of roles.

For an example of how modern Vermonters respond to a candidate who simply tries to move to the state to run for office with a large bank account, witness the unexpected 1998 Republican Senate primary between Jack McMullen, a wealthy entrepreneur from Massachusetts, and Fred Tuttle, a dairy farmer from Tunbridge, Vermont. Tuttle had been the subject of a locally produced film in 1996, *Man With A Plan*, about a dairy farmer who decides to run for Congress and wins. In a case of life imitating art, Tuttle entered the race in part to publicize the movie—but the contrast between the farmer and the entrepreneur touched a chord in Vermonters and Tuttle became a "real" candidate.

While McMullen had an immense advantage in financing, Tuttle defeated him, thanks in part to Vermont's open primary law that allowed many crossover Democratic votes—another indicator of a longstanding kind of contrarian liberalism. McMullen was one of the most recent in a series of failed candidates whose candidacy was enabled largely by financial resources but little political base. In Vermont, a certain level of "friends and neighbors" politics is important for success, even as campaign techniques have shifted with more urbanized living and values.

Vermont's US Senate seats also indicate one of the continuities of Vermont politics. Vermont has always elected native Vermonters to the Senate and has never defeated an incumbent US Senator, certainly a record of substantial continuity. What this reveals, along with the other political shifts, is that while the friends and neighbors may look different, or come from different places, than they did in 1900, the Vermonters of 2002 still have a kind of "friends and neighbors" expectation where personal contact and local service still matter in politics. A certain political independence still matters, as well, as the generally positive reception of Vermonters to Jim Jeffords' defection from the Republican Party in 2001 indicates.

In light of these changes and continuities, what can the 2002 elections and other recent elections tell us about Vermont politics in the 21st century? Recent elections would indicate that in its current preferences Vermont leans strongly Democratic at the national level. Bill Clinton and Al Gore carried Vermont in the last three presidential elections, a three presidential election Democratic "sweep" never seen before in Vermont—the only other Democratic candidate ever to carry Vermont was Lyndon Johnson in 1964. Many of Vermont's recent Republican Senators (George Aiken, Robert Stafford, James Jeffords) have often voted more liberally than their national party. Vermont's lone House seat has been held since 1990 by Bernie Sanders, a Democratic-leaning Independent

Socialist. The Democratic Party has had substantial control of the state legislature, losing the State House only in 2000 when a number of incumbent legislators were defeated because of their votes to approve "civil unions," as discussed, previously. The Republican Party continues to be a competitive force, despite this recent overall swing towards the Democrats.

The 2002 statewide races were indicative of these trends and continuities. Except for the governorship and lieutenant governorship, Democrats won the major statewide offices:

TREASURER Jeb Spaulding 57%
SECRETARY OF THE STATE Deb Marcowitz 58%
ATTORNEY GENERAL William Sorrell 56%
AUDITOR OF ACCOUNTS Elizabeth Ready 51%

All of the winning candidates were either incumbents or individuals with lengthy records of political activity and accomplishment. In the contests for governor and lieutenant governor, Republicans Jim Douglas (Vermont's incumbent Treasurer) and Brian Dubie emerged as the victors.

GOVERNOR
Jim Douglas (R) 44.9%
Doug Racine (D) 42.4%
Cornelius Hogan (I) 9.7%
LT. GOVERNOR
Brian Dubie (R ) 41.2%
Peter Shumlin (D) 32.1%
Anthony Pollina (I) 24.8%

These results are not as anomalous from the rest of the election returns as they appear on the surface. In both cases, the candidates won by a plurality, thanks to the presence in the race of notable and well known third party candidates with track records. The Vermont Constitution, however, requires a majority vote to elect the Governor and the Lieutenant Governor, and mandates that the Legislature shall elect these offices if no candidate receives a majority. While there was some early speculation that the Legislature would vote on a partisan majority basis and ignore the plurality winners, they ultimately elected Douglas and Dubie. Once again, this Vermont nonpartisanship stands in contrast to the increasingly partisan environment in much of the nation; witness the spectacle of Texas Democratic legislators fleeing their state to avoid a vote, enraging the state's Republican governor and Republican Party.

Treasurer Jim Douglas' victory, in a close race with outgoing Lt. Governor Doug Racine, was enabled in part by independent candidate Cornelius Hogan, who had served as a state official in a number of capacities. It is probable that Hogan took more votes from Racine than from Douglas. In the Lt. Governor's race, Anthony Pollina, a progressive political activist who had previously run for governor, garnered nearly 25% of the vote, almost certainly shifting the election from Shumlin to Dubie. It should, also, be noted that Lt. Governor Dubie and, particularly, Governor Douglas, were both "friends and neighbors" with records of service and familiarity to Vermonters. Douglas had served long terms as both Secretary of the State (1981-93) and Treasurer (1995-2003), giving him extensive experience in state executive roles under both Republican and Democratic governors. Governor Douglas, like a number of Vermont Republicans, is generally more moderate in his views than the national Republican Party. In many ways, his election had as much to do with "friends and neighbors" as it did with party affiliation; in his previous races for Treasurer, and a number of his

races for Secretary of The State, Douglas was *both* the Republican and Democratic nominee. Nonpartisanship, once again, made an appearance.

The Governor's race did provide one of the few political surprises in Vermont, in 2002, as Racine had been leading in many pre-election polls until Election Day. Once again, Vermonters were contrary. In the State House Of Representatives, the partisan balance of power remained narrowly Republican (74 Republicans, 69 Democrats, 4 Progressives and 3 Independents), while the State Senate remained in Democratic hands (19 Democrats, 11 Republicans) with a pickup of 3 seats by the Democrats. Notably, a number of Republicans lost in districts won by Governor Douglas, once again revealing that politics in Vermont is, often, as much about individuals and "friends and neighbors" as it is about party labels. In another noteworthy result, Mark McDonald was reelected to the state Senate from Orange County after being defeated, in 2000, over the "civil unions" issue.

On the national level, the only office up for election in 2002 was Vermont's lone U.S. House seat, with Bernie Sanders easily winning his 7th term in office by a 2-1 margin. Despite not being up for election, the rest of Vermont's congressional delegation, as well as its most recent ex-governor, continue to make an impact on national politics, often advocating views contrary to the mainstream or majority. Congressman Sanders continues to be a vocal member of the House Progressive Caucus and a voice against corporate misbehavior. Senators Patrick Leahy and James Jeffords, though now in the Senate minority, continue to contest judicial nominations, environmental policy, and other issues with (bi)partisan vigor. Most notably, former Vermont Governor Howard Dean has become the Democratic presidential hopeful to watch, thanks to his success in using the Internet to gain supporters and raise funds, his rise in the polls, and his willingness to take strong positions such as opposing the war in Iraq.

Through these representatives, Vermont is playing an active part in national political debates and conflicts.

As Vermont enters the 21st century, there are more Vermonters than a century ago and their faces, occupations, and human environment have undergone significant changes since 1900. Vermonters of 1900 would also be shocked at the vitality and influence of the Democratic Party in Vermont in 2002. But these changes should not be mistaken for total transformation in the political realm. A politics where individuals still matter, and where voters support the candidate rather than the party per se in many cases, reflects a continuing environment of "friends and neighbors" politics (even though this has been attenuated, to some degree, by television and urbanization) and a strong vein of civic nonpartisanship. Vermonters also continue to be as willing to be contrarian on issues and policies as they were in past centuries, often in the name of individual rights or environmental preservation. From resisting slavery, to rejecting a federal highway in 1936, to rebuffing McCarthyism, to supporting "civil unions," many Vermonters have, often, taken a different path than the prevailing political mainstream.

Seen in this light, the politics and policies of Vermont in 2002 are not as transformed as they may seem. The state's congressional delegation has repeatedly won election against national political currents, and Leahy, Jeffords, and Sanders have all been willing to fight for unpopular views. Vermont is the only state in the union that does not legally require a balanced budget—yet it is one of only a few states with a budget surplus in 2002. Vermonters, with division and rancor rare for Vermont, have nonetheless adopted and continued the allowance of "civil unions", the only state in the nation to do so at this time. While much change has occurred, Vermont's political culture has remained, consistently, contrary.

## References

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