

WHAT SWINGS AN ELECTION

BY LOWELL M. LIMPUS

If [Mr. Roosevelt] makes the attempt [for a third term], then he would be defeated, humiliated and discredited — and well deserve to be. He easily might fail of the nomination; he would, in my opinion, certainly be overwhelmingly beaten at the polls. These are rather unequivocal statements; but there are practical, political facts which sustain them. (1938)

If the present effort to secure a fourth term succeeds . . . almost everyone, except the professional Democratic spokesmen, concede that Mr. Roosevelt would have a Congress far more hostile than now — a Congress in which Republicans would control the House and the Republicans and anti-New Deal Democrats the Senate. (1944)

THE same man wrote both the foregoing predictions. He is a widely read and respected political columnist. The second one appeared in his syndicated article of May 15, 1944. The first was published in the January issue of a national magazine, six years earlier.

I do not identify him by name because I have no desire to parade his particular mistakes in public; they are cited merely as an example of the

wishful thinking typical of a whole school of political writers, and Mr. X. (who is usually an efficient, clear-thinking man) happened to be the first one to come to hand. He has plenty of high-toned company, who go on year after year, indulging in predictions that have a habit of turning very sour indeed. The question naturally arises: are they deliberately misleading their readers or are they merely kidding themselves? I think they are kidding themselves.

There's a whole school of them — many with national reputations. They deliver their judgments with pontifical dignity. They sagely discuss "trends" among the voters, analyze "movements" of great blocks of ballots back and forth between the major parties, with ponderous deliberation. But their analyses frequently go haywire at the polls.

This *should* discredit their later predictions, but it never does. They go right on doing business at the same old stand, becoming more and more famous and "authoritative." One rea-

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son may be that they customarily write the kind of thing that their particular readers like to read; and another probably is due to the fact that the memory of those readers never seems to go further back than the day-before-yesterday. Nobody reading the political seers of the *New York Sun* or the *Chicago Tribune* today recalls that most of these same gentry were sensing an overwhelming GOP surge back in 1940 . . . and 1936 . . . and 1932.

II

The hard, cold fact is that there are no recognizable political trends. If you will make a listing of the election returns for the past fifty years for both major parties and the occasional third parties, and examine the figures, you will discover that no major party ever seems to make any big gain at the expense of the other, whatever happens on election day.

Here are some of the election returns:

Year	Democrats	Republicans
1884	4,900,000	4,850,000
1892	5,550,000	5,200,000
1896	6,470,000	7,035,000
1912	6,290,000	7,610,000
1916	9,130,000	8,540,000
1920	9,150,000	16,150,000
1924	8,386,000	15,725,000
1928	15,000,000	21,400,000
1932	22,820,000	15,760,000
1936	27,475,000	16,680,000
1940	27,240,000	22,300,000

These figures (together with those for the omitted years) show that there were 5-6,000,000 Democratic voters from 1884 through 1912, that the total increased to about 9,000,000 from 1916 through 1924, climbed to 15,000,000 in 1928, rose to 23,000,000 in 1932 and has been around 27,000,000 ever since.

The Republican totals average around 5,000,000 from 1884 through 1892, fluctuate around 7-8,000,000 from 1896 through 1916, climb to about 16,000,000 in 1920 and remain thereabouts until 1940, when they soar to 22,000,000. The single exception is 1928, when they reached 21,000,000 — but that turns out to be a special case, all mixed up with 5,000,000 votes that were polled by La-Follette in 1924.

Election after election, neither major party seems to lose any considerable portion of a total vote once gained; apparently the other side changes the balance of power only by bringing out quantities of new voters . . . swarms of people who have never cast a ballot before. And now you begin to realize that when masses of people once decide to support either major party they generally stay with it until they die.

There were big changes in the lineup in certain years — 1904, 1920, 1928 and 1932 for example — but careful inspection reveals that they were caused by floods of new ballots, cast by people who had never voted before. It is evident that hordes of new voters come at recurrent inter-

¹Includes GOP bolters to Progressive Party.

vals and that they are inclined to come in waves. In some years the totals are virtually unchanged and in 1904 there were actually 430,000 fewer ballots cast than in 1900.

Let's glance at another table:

<i>Year</i>	<i>New Ballots (gain over the previous election)</i>	<i>Total Vote Cast</i>
1888	1,350,000	11,380,000
1896	1,770,000	13,815,000
1916	3,500,000	18,530,000
1920	8,180,000	26,700,000
1928	7,860,000	36,880,000
1936	5,830,000	45,650,000
1940	4,170,000	49,815,000

Study of the complete tables shows us that ever since 1892, a big increase in new votes has been reflected in a similar gain by one particular party. Occasionally, it was a third party, as in 1892 when the Populists reaped the gain, or in 1924 when LaFollette garnered the increase. But the Republicans got most of the benefit in 1896, 1920 and 1940, while the Democrats did likewise in 1916, 1928 and 1936.

The big increase doesn't always win the election, however. Willkie apparently got all of the new votes in 1940, but they weren't enough. And Smith was the choice of the largest number of them in 1928, but again they weren't enough, because Hoover was also benefiting from the transfer of the 1924 LaFollette vote.

That 1928 election is the most difficult to analyze, but the figures show that it brought out 7,860,000 new

voters and minority parties lost 4,430,000 ballots to their elder rivals as LaFollette's 1924 vote was split up. This gives us 12,300,000 additional ballots to be distributed between the two old parties, and it is easy to determine how they went. The Democrats got 6,630,000 more than in 1924 and the Republicans 5,580,000. The question is how much of each increase came from LaFollette.

It seems pretty plain that the LaFollette vote went to Hoover, however, both because of the circumstances and the way it acted later. It was concentrated in normally Republican territory in the Mid-West, where the prohibition issue reacted against Smith, and it is almost the same size as the block which didn't stay put four years later. The GOP gained 5,580,000 votes in 1928 and lost 5,630,000 in 1932. But the Democrats held their 1928 gain and increased it four years later.

It thus becomes evident that the Republicans gained a block of vote in 1928, which seems to have included the greatest part of the LaFollette ballots, and lost a similar group four years later, by which time the more liberal Roosevelt appeared a more logical heir of the radical LaFollette than the conservative Hoover. And there's one more bit of evidence.

Roosevelt received 7,805,000 more votes than Smith had gotten four years before. If he picked up the 5,000,000 lost by the GOP on the LaFollette temporary transfer, that leaves 2,

805,000 to be accounted for. However, there were 2,940,000 new ballots cast that year. The 135,000 of them that Roosevelt didn't get show up in increased Socialist and other minority party totals.

Thus the shift appears to be a solid block of independent votes that joined LaFollette in 1924, shifted to Hoover in 1928 and went on to Roosevelt in 1932, and at the end of that transfer, the GOP was just about back where it started, with 15,760,000 votes in 1932 as against 15,725,000 in 1924. Thus no large block of regular voters had shifted from either major party to the other, after all.

Some captious critics may disagree with this analysis of the 1928 ballots, but the fact remains that if you list the third party results separately, election by election, you can generally trace them right into the ranks of one of the two old parties four years later. Such third Party votes do shift about though — but they are the only ones that do — and they have to move on because the third Parties die out. But, unless you have a third Party dividend to distribute (from the preceding election) you needn't even think about trends. The figures show no Republican-Democratic trend, or vice versa.

The trends come with the insurge of new ballots — as in 1920 when woman suffrage increased the total almost 45 per cent, adding 8,180,000 votes to the previous total. It certainly looks as though the ladies swarmed into the dry GOP in a body. The

Democrats registered virtually no gain — only about 20,000 votes over 1916, in fact. The minor parties boosted their total by 550,000. But Harding hit the jackpot, with a Republican gain of 7,610,000, which put his party so far out in front that it was safe even from the opposition increase of 1928.

III

And that's the way it goes. No party *normally* ever falls far below a previously gained total. Which means that the politicians, who make this thing a business, usually know exactly what they can count on before the ballots are cast. And the application for the 1944 election is clear.

The Democrats start out with 27,000,000 votes on which they can count (providing the soldiers and transient war workers are not virtually disfranchised). They can count on them because they have already reached that peak, and only once in the past half century has the party lost more than 2 per cent of the total cast at the preceding election. And the Republicans can count on about 22,000,000 to start with. They can count on them for about the same reasons. Except for that unreliable LaFollette crowd, which deserted Hoover in 1932, *they* have never lost a sizeable block of votes to their Democratic opponents.

Thus the Republicans start out 5,000,000 votes behind. They can win only in two ways, if precedent is any guide. They must either bring at least

5,000,000 new voters to the polls or they must "disfranchise" enough soldiers and transients to give them a net gain of 5,000,000 over the Democrats.

So far, the new voters aren't in sight. Despite all the talk about trends in the mid-term special elections, there was only one Kentucky district which showed any kind of an increase in total ballots cast — and that's pretty feeble evidence on which to base evidence of nation-wide "trends."

Dewey may bring out the new voters needed. If he can register as big a gain as Willkie did — 4,600,000 over the election before — he will be within striking distance of victory. But the chances of this happening seem slim. If it comes it will be reflected in increased registration.

His other chance of victory is, in one way or other, to keep more than

5,000,000 Democrats from voting. To some Washington observers that appeared to be the purpose of the soldier-vote law. But, if he should win that way, it wouldn't be as a result of any trend to the GOP; it would be by the "disfranchisement" of the men in uniform. And the same is true of the millions of factory workers who have changed their voting residences in order to assist in war industries. The same result can be secured by disfranchising a sufficient number of *them*.

The lesson of all this is plain. The current discussion of trends is so much pipe-smoke. There are no inter-party trends in Presidential elections. There never have been. You need to bring out new voters to win; if you can't bring out new voters, you're probably sunk.

This is not a theory. It's a hard, cold fact.



CATTLE AT EVENING

BY MARION DOYLE

SWEET-BREATHED and pensively they stand,
 Patient as the ancient land.
 Their great eyes pools of liquid light
 Beneath the quaintly wrinkled brows,
 They wait the coming on of night
 Under the crooked apple boughs.
 The bells beneath their tawny throats
 Ring little asking silvery notes
 That — for no reason one can find —
 Bring all earth's sorrow to the mind.