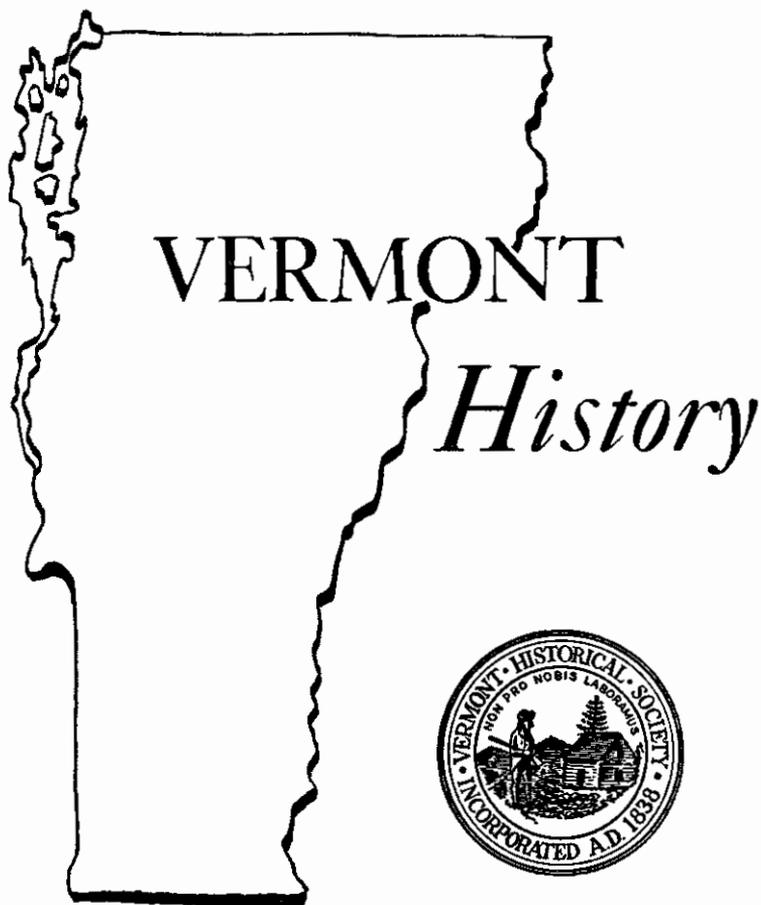


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The Vermont Constitutional Referendum of 1969: An Analysis

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IN June, 1969, the voters of Vermont decisively defeated the series of constitutional questions submitted to them by the legislature for referendum. All of the specific advisory questions—the amending process, reapportionment, judicial reorganization, 4-year terms for State officers, single ticket for governor and lieutenant governor, voter qualifications, and annual legislative sessions—were killed by substantially the same proportions as voted down the basic proposition to convoke a constitutional convention—23,830 no against 14,861 yes, or a ratio of 61 to 39.

Amid the shouts of triumph and the cries of anguish among the opponents and supporters of the Constitutional Convention some striking features of the vote have generally been overlooked. Most reaction has proceeded simply from the better than 3 to 2 margin by which the Con Con proposal was defeated, with some sort of state-wide explanation based on the alarms of its opponents or the campaign of its proponents.

The real significance of the vote appears as soon as it is analyzed by towns, counties, and regions, bearing out the distinctly regional political behavior of Vermonters, despite the relatively small size of the state. Further analysis in terms of the social and economic characteristics of the various parts of the state leads to some pointed conclusions about Vermont's present body politic.¹

To begin with, the north-south differential in the election returns is immediately apparent, ranging from 73.4% yes in Brattleboro and 71.6% yes in Bennington (with 83.1% yes in Norwich) to 81% no in Newport and 100% no in three small towns of the Northeast Kingdom (along with Hubbardton in Rutland County and Searsburg in Benning-

1. This study utilizes only the vote on holding the convention, not the individual items, among which there was not much significant difference. County-by-county data drawn from the 1960 census and 1968 election returns, as well as the Con-Con vote, were subjected to multiple correlation and regression analysis on the IBM 360 computer at the University of Vermont, with the following variables included: Con-Con vote, vote for Governor in the 1968 general election, 1968 Republican gubernatorial primary vote, turnout 1969 as % of 1968, north-south index, population growth 1950-60, rate of migration into county, median family income, % labor force in manufacturing and in white collar occupations, % rural population, % foreign-born, median years of schooling.

ton County). By counties, the north-south variation in the vote is quite consistent (statistical correlation of the yes vote and the north-south scale is .86, indicating a very close relationship).

A number of social and economic variables follow the north-south dimension in Vermont; both prosperity (measured by median family income) and education (measured by median years of schooling) improve towards the south (as well as in Chittenden and Washington counties). The correlation of these two factors with the Con-Con vote is striking: Income and yes vote, correlation .85; education and yes vote, correlation .83.

If the counties are grouped into a series of tiers from north to south, as shown in Table I, the north-south progression is very clear:

TABLE I

<i>County</i>	<i>% Yes</i>	<i>Median family income, 1960</i>	<i>Median years education, 1960 (people over 25)</i>
1st tier			
Grand Isle	14.4	\$3638	8.9
Franklin	27.2	4334	9.2
Orleans	15.0	4166	9.1
Essex	19.2	4935	9.1
1 ½ tier			
Lamoille	21.1	4240	10.7
2nd tier			
Chittenden	43.2	5407	11.5
Caledonia	31.9	4503	10.5
2 ½ tier			
Washington	44.1	5176	11.0
3rd tier			
Addison	27.2	4242	10.5
Orange	28.8	4190	11.0
4th tier			
Rutland	46.1	4873	11.1
Windsor	50.2	5189	11.7
5th tier			
Bennington	50.9	5313	10.5
Windham	47.9	5101	11.6
Entire state	39.0	4890	10.9

The implication of this data is that Vermont is divided into two different states, sociologically and politically (when the issue is substantive and not partisan). One Vermont, consisting of the four southern counties plus Chittenden and Washington, is relatively prosperous, educated and liberal. The other Vermont is poor, in part much less well educated, and conservative.² Inquiry directed at other differences in political attitudes beyond the one measured by the vote would probably show similarly striking differences between the two segments of the state. (The questionnaire of the New England Regional Commission on attitudes towards public welfare bears out this difference.)³

Besides reflecting regional differences, the Con-Con vote also indicates a difference in the attitudes of growing and declining areas. For the state as a whole the correlation (by towns) between yes vote and population change 1950 to 1960 was .69. Table II compares towns of equivalent size in each region (see Table II on page 155).

For all the growing towns in the state taken together, the yes percentage was 43.8, while the yes figure for the declining towns was 28.1. Even in such a homogeneous area as Orange County, the three growing towns cast 34.7% yes ballots, as compared with only 26.9% in the surrounding contracting towns. It is particularly noteworthy that over half the margin by which the Con-Con was defeated (5,168 out of 8,969) came from declining towns with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. In this category the yes vote equaled only 2,186 compared with 7,354 for the opposition—a 22.9% level of support. Rural areas experiencing a continued population drain are evidently the strongholds of resistance to governmental change in Vermont.

Other indicators which paralleled the Con-Con yes vote (note that any correlation of .5 or better is quite significant) are percentage of white collar workers (.79) and level of support for James Oakes in the 1968 Republican Gubernatorial primary (.73). Opposition to the Con-Con correlated significantly with both rural population (.69) and percentage foreign born (.53). On the other hand, there is practically no relationship one way or the other between the Con-Con vote and the basic Republican-Democratic division of the state. (There was a negligible .04 correlation between the 1968 Democratic gubernatorial

2. Statistical grouping analysis actually distinguishes three areas: (1) south plus Chittenden; (2) middle type—Addison, Lamoille, Caledonia, Orange; (3) northern tier. Washington County falls between (1) and (2), with its urban areas more like (1). Although (2) and (3) differ in many respects, particularly median educational levels, they are closer to each other than either is to (1).

3. *Burlington Free Press*, August 2, 1969. The finding was contained in a report on welfare needs in Vermont, submitted by the Commission to Governor Davis and based on 70 interviews conducted in the first half of 1969.

TABLE II

<i>1960 Population of Town</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>% Yes Growing Towns</i>	<i>% Yes Declining Towns</i>
5,000+	I (south, Chittenden urban Washington)	52.1	45.0
	II (rest of state)	30.1	37.9
	IIa—central	51.6	42.4
	IIb—northern tier	24.3	19.0
1,000–5,000	I	47.0	32.9
	II	28.4	20.8
1,000—	I	37.5	29.5
	II	24.3	18.7

TABLE III

Median Yes % of Towns in Each Category

<i>County</i>	<i>County % Yes</i>	<i>% yes in median town</i>			
		<i>Over 5000</i>	<i>1000–5000</i>	<i>500–1000</i>	<i>0–500</i>
1st tier					
Grand Isle	14.4		10.4 (1)*	19.0 (2)	4.6 (2)
Franklin	22.2	32.1 (1)	15.7 (9)	10.8 (4)	26.3 (1)
Orleans	15.0	19.0 (1)	17.7 (4)	8.4 (8)	7.1 (5)
Essex	19.2		29.6 (3)	14.5 (1)	11.1 (9)
1½ tier					
Lamoille	21.1		21.2 (5)	12.8 (1)	7.3 (4)
2nd tier					
Chittenden	43.2	43.8 (4)	35.0 (8)	25.2 (3)	25.2 (2)
Caledonia	31.9	42.4 (1)	17.4 (3)	26.0 (3)	16.5 (8)
2½ tier					
Washington	44.1	48.5 (2)	39.9 (5)	28.7 (8)	24.0 (5)
3rd tier					
Addison	27.2	51.6 (1)	21.2 (3)	21.6 (10)	17.3 (9)
Orange	28.8		35.2 (5)	22.9 (9)	27.2 (3)
4th tier					
Rutland	46.1	52.9 (1)	45.6 (10)	26.0 (3)	20.7 (13)
Windsor	50.2	53.5 (2)	45.3 (10)	43.1 (4)	40.0 (8)
5th tier					
Bennington	50.9	71.6 (1)	36.4 (5)	44.8 (4)	46.7 (6)
Windham	47.9	65.2 (2)	51.7 (3)	34.0 (7)	20.6 (10)

* The figure in parenthesis indicates the number of towns in each category in the given county.

percentage and that for the Con-Con.)

One question that experienced political observers will raise is whether the abnormally low turnout in the referendum affected the meaning of the vote as well as the outcome. What the figures show is surprising: more than a 100% difference in turnout between the low of 15.5% in Bennington County (based on the total vote for governor in 1968) and the high of 33.4% in Lamoille County. There was a fairly pronounced tendency for counties with higher turnouts to be more negative (correlation .5), suggesting that in fact the opponents of the Con-Con in the conservative counties did succeed in exciting their constituents more than the proponents in the liberal counties did.

With the further analysis of the vote by cities and towns, a very obvious urban-rural or large town/small town difference appears, superimposed on the basic north-south division of the counties. (See Table III on page 155.) The progressions from the stronger yes votes in the larger towns to the overwhelming no vote in most of the small towns is quite obvious, along with the north-south differential that is evident in each size category. Small towns in the south tended to vote yes to a greater extent than even the cities in the extreme north. (Ski areas typically turned in much higher yes votes than the adjacent towns.)

Conclusion

The Con-Con vote, though strongly negative as a whole, revealed very significant differences between different parts of Vermont, with a liberal-conservative division cutting across party lines but correlating very strongly with income, education, urbanization and suburban population growth, and more southerly location. Where enough of these factors coincided they were sufficient to give the Con-Con an actual majority.

Excitement at Montpelier's Pavilion Hotel

From The Editorial Column of The Morrisville *Messenger*,
January 8, 1919

"Frank Plumley, Esq., found a pearl in an oyster soup at the Pavilion. This startling fact has created a sensation among all who have ever stopped at that hotel. As Mr. Plumley is an Eden boy, it is nothing strange that he should have made the great discovery which will rank in history with the discovery of one Christopher Columbus, a few years ago."