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Transition Politics: Vermont, 1940–1952

A short-lived Aiken-Gibson faction, abetted by extraordinary leadership and special circumstances, shattered the historic Republican consensus and reoriented state politics.

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One-party state politics has long fascinated historians and political scientists. The most celebrated analysis of this phenomenon, V. O. Key's *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, first published in 1949, remains the model study.[1] Among Key's conclusions from his research of single-party southern Democratic states was that one-party systems tend to work to the detriment of the disadvantaged elements of society. Key hypothesized that parties existing in very competitive atmospheres will, in the course of searching for new supporters, attempt to attract those who dwell on the fringes of the political system and generally do not vote. Where single-party arrangements persist, society's disadvantaged elements are not encouraged to participate politically; as Key wrote, "The simple truth is that those who gain political advantage by the system do not wish to surrender their vested interest."[2] The result is low voter turnout, as in Virginia, where it was common for only 6 to 8 percent of the voters to take part in primary elections between the 1920s and 1950s.[3]

Duane Lockard employed Key's model in his 1959 study, *New England State Politics*. In states with two competitive parties, such as Connecticut and Massachusetts, Lockard asserted, disadvantaged people profited. Vermont, however, presented Lockard with what he termed a "political paradox": Vermont had the most firmly established one-party system north of the Mason-Dixon line, yet from the 1930s to 1959, the years

Lockard studied the situation, Vermont's system treated its have-nots relatively well. Lockard's explanation was that Vermont's Republican party was divided into two factions, the business-oriented Proctor and the more populist Aiken-Gibson sides. This bifactional arrangement resulted not only in relatively high voting percentages in Republican primaries but also in campaigns that focused on issues, not the personalities of the candidates.[4]

Frank Bryan, analyzing Vermont politics over the same period and using some of the same data, came to different conclusions. Bryan deduced that although there were generally two prevailing attitudes within the Republican elite, "progressive populism and a more or less conservative elitism," no bifactional system existed.[5] In fact, Bryan maintained, those two views were "in no way society based or visible to the electorate." After closely studying election returns, Bryan found that there was no predictable, long-range order to election results. George Aiken, W. Arthur Simpson, and Ernest Gibson, Jr., all members of the same faction in Lockard's model, did not always do well in the same areas or among the same elements of the electorate. Bryan's analysis of election results led him to conclude that localism rather than the ideological appeal of candidates was the major factor in elections. Bryan therefore dismissed the existence of an Aiken-Gibson wing of Vermont's Republican party.

Both Bryan and Lockard were in search of discernible, long-term voting patterns in Vermont. Lockard's research over a twenty-five-year period led him to believe that two factions existed, whereas Bryan's analysis of the same time led him to a different conclusion. A third hypothesis—the one we favor—is that a short-lived Aiken-Gibson faction, abetted by extraordinary leadership and special circumstances, shattered the historic Republican consensus and reoriented state politics.

The Aiken-Gibson faction had its inception in the gubernatorial campaigns of George D. Aiken. Although by the time of his first bid for governor in 1936 Aiken had already begun to stake out his position on the left wing of the Republican party, his views were not sufficiently well known to have attracted an identifiable following that would constitute a faction of the electorate. Over the next decade, however, the appeal of Aiken's policy positions and opinions concerning the future direction of the Republican party gained him a distinct political following within the state, so that by 1944 there were references to an Aiken wing of the Republican party.[6] By 1946 that backing was organized and committed enough that Aiken's friend and ideological colleague Ernest Gibson was able to utilize it successfully in his upset victory over incumbent governor Mortimer Proctor in the Republican primary election. It was from that election that the concept of an Aiken-Gibson wing was

given its greatest force. Within another decade the voting coalition that supported Aiken and Gibson had fragmented beyond repair. Nevertheless, it left a lasting imprint on Vermont politics. The wing both foreshadowed and delayed Vermont's transition to the current two-party system.

The effort to identify an Aiken-Gibson wing suggests a number of questions: How and why did the wing develop, and why did Aiken find it necessary to distance himself from official state and national Republican organizations? What was the ideological foundation for the wing? What were the components that formed the voting coalition that aligned itself behind the Aiken-Gibson wing? What impact did the wing have on Vermont politics during its brief existence? Finally, why did the Aiken-Gibson wing dissolve?

Lockard's "political paradox"–that the disadvantaged elements of Vermont's population profited from the state's political system despite its one-party arrangement–failed to note that Vermont's responsiveness to the disadvantaged was reflected in its politics well before the turn of the century. Since before the Civil War, the state's house of representatives, apportioned on a one-town, one-vote principle, had boasted a majority of delegates from rural towns with declining populations and resources, towns increasingly incapable of financing public works and services. To overcome rural poverty, state representatives anticipated state aid programs by such "equalizing" efforts as redirecting education, highway, and welfare revenues from the urban to the more impoverished agricultural communities. These reforms were achieved earlier and more thoroughly than in the other states of New England.[7]

That a legislative revolution of such magnitude could occur without disrupting Republican dominance illustrates the obvious strengths of the state's political system. But this system was unreceptive to the needs of concentrations of population. In the decades following the Civil War, Vermont became less agricultural. The farming population progressively declined, whereas the number of industrial workers and professionals grew; 28.9 percent of Vermonters were employed by industry in 1930, and 28.1 percent worked in agriculture.[8] Despite this development, the state legislature remained virtually closed to the influence of urban dwellers and industrial workers.[9] By 1930, 15 percent of Vermont's population commanded a majority in the state house of representatives; ten years later the figure stood at 14 percent.[10] State government did not act as benignly toward those newer elements of society as Lockard suggested, and the Republican party was slow in reacting to the changing demographics of the state.

The Vermont Marble Company strike of 1935–1936 in the Rutland area is perhaps the best illustration of both the effect of the state's chang-

ing complexion and the disposition of state government toward its workers. Historian Richard Judd wrote that the strike "had most of the unpleasant characteristics of the major [industrial] conflicts . . . during the 1930's."[11] The company was owned by Vermont's premier political family, the Proctors; newspapers throughout the state were decidedly on the side of management. Although Vermont Marble hired private deputies to break the strike, at the peak of hostilities Governor Charles M. Smith supplied the company with additional deputies at a cost of $1,200 a week to Vermont taxpayers.[12] Nearly a year after it had begun, the strike ended in complete defeat for the workers.

The Vermont Marble strike, coupled with a number of earlier strikes, had a significant impact on state residents. Growing industrial strife contradicted the peaceful, agrarian tradition that Vermonters asserted characterized their state.[13] More important in political terms, as the *Nation* wrote during the height of the strike, "Labor stands as the sole force working against the Republican Party in the state," making the marble struggle "a sector on the political . . . front."[14] This was not an especially frightening proposition to Republicans because Vermont's labor movement was so weak at the time. There were, in fact, fewer union members in Vermont in 1936 than there had been a decade earlier, and only in railroads and the granite industry in the Barre region had unions permanently established themselves. In any event, Vermont's Republican party seemed unconcerned with the votes of the state's industrial workers.

The Vermont Democratic party did not capitalize on the Republicans' disinterest in the industrial sector. Although President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal attracted industrial workers throughout the nation, the Democratic party in Vermont failed to do the same. The party's defining characteristic was its weakness, with its leadership more interested in federal patronage than in establishing a strong opposition to the Republicans. The state Democratic party held uncontested primaries and was run by a small number of individuals who rotated nominations among themselves. They were comfortable in defeat; no Democrat had been elected to state office in Vermont since before the Civil War. Nevertheless, there were clear signs that the Democrats were drawing a larger following in the state. As early as 1934, for instance, Democratic candidate Fred Martin nearly defeated Warren Austin in his bid for election to the U.S. Senate,[15] most of Martin's support coming from urban areas. Vermont Democrats, however, made little effort to follow up on this opportunity, and on the eve of the 1936 presidential election even the Democratic national chairman conceded Vermont to the Republicans.[16]

The Republican party remained the only avenue for those in Vermont who were politically ambitious. The Republicans had maintained polit-

ical supremacy in Vermont longer than the Democrats had run any southern state. Furthermore, the "solid South" was by definition a regional voting bloc, yet Vermont remained Republican after the other states in New England became less predictable. Unlike the Democrats, the Republicans conducted competitive primaries, but only among candidates whose eligibility was fixed by geography and prior office. The mountain rule and the succession ladder were the most obvious manifestations of that protocol.[17]

George Aiken, elected governor in 1936, followed the traditional path to office. His principal claims to the governorship were his agricultural background, his residence east of the Green Mountains (which satisfied the mountain rule), and his having ascended every rung of the succession ladder. In the Republican primary, he opposed house speaker Ernest Moore and Burlington publisher H. Nelson Jackson and won with 42 percent of the vote, doing particularly well in the farming communities. He got trounced in the cities, however, winning only 21 percent of the primary vote in Burlington and earning only 29 votes in Winooski, the state's most Democratic city, compared to 609 for Jackson. In the general election, Winooski support for the Republican "organization" candidate was even scarcer; the final tally in Winooski was 154 for Aiken to 1,676 for his Democratic opponent, Burlingtonian Alfred Heininger. Aiken did win a plurality in some of Vermont's larger cities, but those were the state's professional rather than industrial towns, such as Montpelier. There is no reason to assume that in 1936 Aiken would have appealed to urban, normally Democratic voters.

Yet Aiken was a different politician from his predecessors. For one, Aiken was a horticulturist, a small-business man rather than a major employer, professional, or gentleman farmer. More important, Aiken had a Progressive foundation.[18] He wanted Republicans to appeal to sectors of Vermont's electorate that his party had traditionally neglected. Aiken proposed this new direction on both a local and a national scale. His Progressive instincts were in part sparked by the belief that the political system was not responsive enough to the needs of society's disadvantaged. Aiken also feared for the future of the national Republican party. The Roosevelt landslide in 1936 seemed to threaten the Republicans with extinction. In fact, Vermont was one of only two states to support the Republican presidential candidate, and Aiken was one of only two Republicans to win gubernatorial elections that year. It was widely accepted that the party had to revise its positions in order to reverse the growing supremacy of the Democrats. Aiken's beliefs thus existed within the context of a battle between ideological foes for leadership of the Republican party. Aiken was convinced that the Republicans

needed to adopt a more progressive social platform to go along with its traditional conservative fiscal policies. Perhaps most of all, Aiken recognized that the demographics of Vermont were changing and that the state's Republican party was not sufficiently reacting to those changes.

This desire to push the Republicans in a new direction became a major characteristic of Aiken's tenure as governor. A much-cited example of Aiken's campaign to liberalize the Republican party is his speech of February 12, 1938. On that night he spoke over a nationwide radio hookup from New York City. In what was for him a constant refrain in those years, Aiken charged the Republican party with having been "silent too long over the abuses of Wall Street. . . . Too long did [it] turn a pious eye away from the unfair treatment of labor." Aiken declared that the Republicans had to "get themselves a blue collar" and provide labor with "warm, human, understanding" leadership.[19]

In attempting to put this ideal into action, Aiken encountered resistance from the legislature, which continually enacted bills regulating workers and organized labor. Among the new legislation was the nation's first law making sit-down strikes illegal, which was passed in 1937 despite Aiken's opposition. The legislature's antipathy toward unions held firm throughout Aiken's tenure; in 1939 the legislature rejected five union-sponsored bills. The only law beneficial to labor passed in the late 1930s, the Mediation and Arbitration Act of 1939, was Aiken's brainchild. That act was instituted to placate a potentially strife-torn workforce, and it attracted workers to the Republican mantle. It was acceptable to the legislature, however, only because it was neither expensive to the state nor granted unions an advantage in labor negotiations. Under the act, when a strike or lockout was threatened or occurred, either party in the dispute could call for the intervention of the state commissioner of industries. The commissioner would report on the points of difference to the governor, who would then appoint a three-person board to mediate the dispute.[20]

Recognizing that the disposition of the legislature remained antilabor, Aiken attempted to employ personal intervention to minimize industrial strife, as in the case of a 1938 Barre granite industry strike, settled within Aiken's office. As a rule, Aiken distrusted any expansion of state or federal government. He accepted many of the objectives but not the methods of the New Deal, putting his faith in citizens' cooperatives rather than federal or state governmental agencies. Aiken applied the cooperative approach to the milk industry and the generation and distribution of electrical power, for example. He extended this belief to the problems of collective bargaining, which he called "the same thing in labor relations as cooperatives in farming."[21] In much the same way, Aiken en-

couraged farm and labor groups to work toward mutually beneficial goals. "Shorter hours and higher wages are on the way," Aiken told an out-of-state newspaper during his first term as governor, "but these can only be accomplished by the cooperation of industry, agriculture and labor, with as little government interference as possible."[22]

Developments in Vermont ripened Aiken's idea to maturity. The Vermont Farm Bureau, under the leadership of Arthur Packard, was rapidly supplanting the Grange as the principal representative of agricultural interests in the state. Into the 1930s the Vermont Grange had maintained a hostile attitude toward organized labor.[23] The Farm Bureau had meanwhile existed as a less influential partner to the Grange. When Packard was named Farm Bureau president in 1928, the number of farmers in the state was clearly diminishing; by 1940 only 24 percent of Vermont's total workforce was engaged in agriculture, a loss of 4 percent in just a decade.[24] The state legislature's apportionment had cushioned the political decline of the agricultural sector, but in the face of Vermont's changing economy, Packard recognized that agriculture's prominence in state affairs was nonetheless threatened. He responded to this challenge in two ways: by encouraging the Farm Bureau's political activity and by searching the state for political alliances.

At the same time, labor in Vermont headed in a new direction. Of particular significance was the rise to prominence of a number of talented and farsighted labor leaders. The most important of these was John Lawson of Barre, the secretary-treasurer of the United Stone and Allied Products Workers Union–CIO. The US&APWU had been an AFL union until 1938, under the name Quarry Workers International Union, but Lawson was a devoted believer in the concept of industrial unionism. The militancy that marked CIO unions in other sections of the United States was not evident in Vermont, however. CIO leaders in the state appreciated the particularly precarious nature of their position and realized that they would have to accommodate their strategy to the realities of Vermont's political system.

Lawson first attempted to make labor an active participant in Republican affairs rather than letting it stand in opposition to it. He recognized, as did other labor leaders, that the might of the Republicans, combined with the ineptitude of Vermont Democrats, dictated organized labor focus its state political efforts on Republicans. This might best be accomplished by supporting friendly candidates in Republican primaries. In George Aiken, organized labor found a candidate worthy and solicitous of its support. Another equally important factor in labor's political strategy was Lawson's search for cooperative relationships with some of the state's other organizations. In particular, Lawson sought an alli-

ance with the state's farm bloc. The desire to build this alliance went beyond satisfying Aiken's pronouncement urging "a working partnership between agriculture and labor."[25] An alliance with representatives of the agricultural sector would both diminish the long-standing enmity farmers felt toward labor and increase the political might of industrial workers. Packard was amenable to Lawson's initial overtures, and an unlikely political relationship was born.

The result was the Vermont Farm-Labor Council, founded in 1939. The council was a manifestation of the flourishing cooperative political dialogue Aiken had encouraged. Its three founders represented three different segments of Vermont: labor's John Lawson; Royce Pitkin, the president of Goddard College, who was an intellectual with a progressive social vision; and W. Gordon Loveless, a highly respected Farm Bureau member and the executive secretary of the farmers' cooperative council.[26] In its early years the Farm-Labor Council was a small organization. Nevertheless, it represented the beginnings of an association that started to heal the traditional rift between labor and agriculture in the state. With the formation of the council, Aiken also had the makings of strong political support. Labor and agriculture had emerged as two integral components of Roosevelt's New Deal voting coalition. In Vermont Aiken began to develop a "New Dealish" coalition of his own. Within that coalition the seeds of the Aiken-Gibson wing germinated.

Both Bryan and Lockard analyzed the 1940 election. Both were correct in looking at the Republican primaries to see if the Aiken-Gibson faction existed. It was the direct strategy of Aiken and those forming his coalition to work in GOP primaries in order to elect the right politicians. In particular, Aiken needed to foster industrial workers' participation in Republican primaries. Bryan and Lockard's analyses were premature; the Aiken coalition was still in its nascent stages. Nevertheless, some elements of the faction were already evident.

Although Aiken succeeded in building his coalition, he alienated the Republican state committee. Resenting his attacks on the national Republican party, the committee also opposed his support of electric cooperatives and organized labor and his receptiveness to some New Deal objectives. Fearing that Aiken would pursue a third term, the old guard took the unprecedented step of endorsing a candidate, William Wills, prior to the Republican primary. The death of Senator Ernest Gibson, Sr., in May provided Aiken with an opportunity to run in a special election for the U.S. Senate. Ernest Gibson, Jr., whom Aiken had appointed interim senator to fill his father's seat until an election was held, actively campaigned on Aiken's behalf.[27] In the Republican primary, where of course the election was to be decided, Aiken faced Ralph Flanders, the

favored candidate of the Republican state committee. Flanders, president of a machine tool company, was regarded as an enlightened business executive who would do well in the state's cities. Aiken's strength was still in the rural areas where his political career had originated.

Flanders applauded the amicable reputation that Vermont's labor sector was gaining but would not support the encouragement of massive workplace organization. To do so would have violated the tenets of his primary source of support, the state's business establishment. Flanders's campaign was equally conservative with regard to agricultural issues. In contrast, Aiken ran a populist campaign that framed the election as a contest between himself and the state's traditional power interests. Aiken did not shy away from being labeled liberal, and his speeches stressed his labor record as he reminded voters that the three strikes that had occurred during his tenure had been settled without physical violence or loss of property and "at a cost of $4.15."[28] Aiken's campaign appeared to be effective; it was widely reported at the time that labor unions were working hard to get out the vote for him. In the meantime he had gained the pivotal support of Arthur Packard and the Farm Bureau.

The backing of the Farm Bureau certainly appears to have been the crucial factor in the outcome. Aiken easily won the primary, receiving 55.4 percent of the votes cast, a result that surprised many who had been impressed by the business and media forces arrayed against him. The candidates' support came from the expected areas: as in 1936, the main body of Aiken's support came from rural areas, whereas Flanders carried all but one of the state's largest cities. The only city Aiken won was Barre, and the significance of that victory was not lost on Aiken. Barre had the longest history of organized labor in the state. Just as important, its residents had been mobilized to vote in larger numbers than in any previous Republican primary. Whereas 203 Republican votes had been cast in Barre Town in the 1936 primary for governor, 383 were cast in the 1940 Senate primary. Aiken won 317 of those votes. The overall increase in voter turnout in Barre City, which Aiken carried by a margin of over 400 votes, was equally dramatic.[29] Those results made it clear that organization in the workplace could be translated into organization in the voting booth.

Although it was obvious that Aiken's political strength lay in Vermont's rural areas, the result from Barre cemented Aiken's ties to John Lawson and reinforced his commitment to boosting the participation of urban voters in Republican primaries. Those voters, considered "traditionally" Democratic, had not previously been encouraged to take part in primaries, as Key's hypothesis of the nature of one-party states would predict. Aiken, in seeking both to strengthen his own political cause and

to attract new constituents to the Republican party, operated in contradiction to that principle. An Aiken wing of the Republican party was indeed developing.

The World War II era was a relatively placid period in Vermont politics. The war put factional, ideological battles in the background. Questions concerning the future course of the Republican party in the nation and particularly in the state became less important. Furthermore, Governor William Wills capitalized on the wartime emphasis on cooperation and was able to maintain support among the competing elements of the Republican party.

Within this calm political atmosphere, the essential pieces needed to strengthen the Aiken wing of the party fell into place. Packard, who remained a committed Aiken supporter, built the Vermont Farm Bureau to the point where it was generally accepted to be "the most powerful political organization in the state."[30] What is more, the ranks of organized labor swelled dramatically during World War II. A great part of that growth can be attributed to the war's stimulation of Vermont's economy and the consequent attention paid to Vermont's low wage scale. Wages in Vermont were, in fact, the lowest in New England: in 1943 the average wage in Vermont was 45.1 cents per hour, compared to 62.3 cents per hour for the rest of New England.[31] In addition, labor leaders continued the strategy of nonconfrontation initiated under Aiken's governorship. During the war there were no work stoppages at all in Vermont, as both the CIO and AFL adhered to their national organizations' no-strike pledges. By acting in this manner, Vermont labor further cultivated positive public opinion and enhanced its reputation as a responsible sector of society. That reputation aided immensely in the wartime drive to organize.

The year 1943 was crucial for labor in Vermont. The largest textile mill in the state, American Woolen Mills in Winooski, had long been a target for union organizers. In the spring of 1943, the state CIO council, which Lawson had built into a robust and potent group, put its full weight into a union drive. With the help of favorable publicity, the support of local clergy, and the state government's policy of nonintervention, the Textile Workers Union of America–CIO won a federally administered election that made Winooski a union city. The events in Winooski served as a stimulus to Vermont unions, and a number of other workplaces in Vermont were organized very quickly thereafter. By the end of the war, labor had become a potentially significant political force in the Republican party; in October 1944 the labor movement in Vermont was a cohesive collection of 25,000 union members, as opposed to the disjointed agglomeration of 15,000 that existed a decade earlier.[32]

Once the war was over, the elements of the faction that Aiken had begun to develop during his gubernatorial tenure and that had grown stronger in the war years came together. As early as 1944, there was recognition of an Aiken faction in the Republican party. During his campaign for reelection to the Senate, Aiken was accused of being soft on labor and attacked for being endorsed by CIO-PAC. Aiken's attitude, as he later expressed it, was that he "wanted all the votes I could get whether they were from labor or whoever."[33] Aiken had thus aggressively sought those votes to counter the faction of his party characterized as the old guard. Furthermore, the elements that had begun to compose Aiken's faction prior to the war picked up where they had left off. Labor resumed pursuit of extragovernmental resolutions to disputes and tried to enhance its reputation as fair. The Farm-Labor Council was reconstituted as the Labor and Farm Council, a larger and more influential organization that hoped to serve as a vehicle for right-thinking candidates in general and Ernest Gibson, Jr., in particular.[34]

Gibson, who returned to Vermont politics in December 1945 after four years of active military duty, had been groomed by Aiken. Emerging from the army as a decorated combat veteran, Gibson, at the urging of both Aiken and Packard, chose to contest Mortimer Proctor in the 1946 gubernatorial primary. Proctor, heir to his family's marble and political fortunes, had ascended the political ladder step-by-step, and tradition demanded he be accorded the customary second term.[35] Gibson's prospects for defeating Proctor were doubtful. As governor, Proctor had established a reasonably liberal record by Vermont standards. Furthermore, no incumbent Vermont governor seeking reelection had ever lost at the polls.

Proctor, however, had equally important forces working against him. Arthur Packard strongly opposed Proctor, in large part because the governor had repelled Aiken-Packard efforts to secure cheap rural electricity. Packard actively recruited people to work for Gibson's campaign; organized labor also granted Gibson vigorous support. Although Aiken himself observed in 1946 that the labor vote alone "isn't enough to elect or defeat anybody," the senator advised Gibson that it was crucial to his candidacy to obtain the endorsements of the state's major labor groups.[36] Gibson found both John Lawson of the CIO and Robert Sinclair of the AFL, who controlled their groups' endorsements, greatly agreeable to the prospects of a Gibson candidacy.[37] The third major labor figure in the state, Sam Miller of the Railroad Brotherhood, refused to back Gibson, possibly because of Gibson's and Aiken's support for the St. Lawrence Seaway. Despite Miller's resistance, a satisfied Gibson wrote Aiken that, with the exception of the railroad workers, "I think that labor will

line up very well."[38] As a veteran, Gibson had the important support of those voters recently returned from the war. A final factor working in Gibson's favor was the popularity of the tone of his campaign, which attacked Vermont's Republican establishment as vigorously as Aiken ever had. Gibson's repudiation of the succession ladder, which he denounced as a device by which "a relatively small group of people choose governors nearly ten years in advance," struck a chord among the populace.

The combination of those political forces was sufficient to push Gibson to what is still arguably Vermont's most historic electoral upset, as he defeated Proctor with 57 percent of the vote. The Farm Bureau's work for Gibson was crucial, but equally important were the votes of union members and Democrats in Vermont's urban centers. The effects of unionization on the voters of Winooski is indicative: whereas only 368 Winooski residents had voted in the GOP primary in 1940, that number jumped to 841 in 1946. Gibson gained 633 of those votes. In other population centers the numbers increased as well, and Gibson won a convincing majority in all of them with the exception of Rutland, Proctor's home, and Montpelier, the state capital. The *Burlington Free Press* reported immediately after the election that "there is plenty of indication of Democratic votes in the Republican primary." Gibson could not have won in 1946 without the coalition of farmers and Democratic crossovers.[39]

Vermont's election of an explicitly prolabor candidate in 1946 was an exception to the national trend. With many Republican candidates running on antilabor platforms, the party in that year gained majorities in both the U.S. House and Senate for the first time since 1930. When Congress convened in 1947, one of its primary objectives was to amend the Wagner Act to include unfair labor practices, in order to curb the power of unions. Aiken, who sat on the Senate Labor Committee and aspired to the chairmanship, repudiated the notion that the 1946 election results were a mandate to restrict labor. Although rejected for the chairmanship in favor of "Mr. Republican," Robert Taft of Ohio, the independent-minded Aiken fought continuously throughout that spring to soften the antiunion aspects of what became the Taft-Hartley Act. Vermonters on both sides of the issue lobbied him vigorously; in particular, those among his constituents who desired a repeal of most of the Wagner Act excoriated him for his stance. The Taft-Hartley Act turned out to be far harsher than Aiken desired, and he objected to many of its specific sections, including 14b, which allowed states to outlaw the union shop with so-called right-to-work laws. Aiken further predicted that if Congress passed "punitive" labor legislation, the Republicans would be defeated in the 1948 presidential election, though many Republicans were taking a victory for granted. Nevertheless, and despite his reservations, the senator

felt compelled by party loyalty to cast votes both for the final bill and to override President Harry S Truman's veto. In a gesture of reconciliation toward some of his labor supporters, Aiken promised that those aspects of the bill that proved most obnoxious would later be repealed or amended. Despite his vote, Aiken retained the support of organized labor in his state. The Taft-Hartley Act was, however, to have far-reaching consequences for his coalition.[40]

The Gibson-Aiken faction, failing to unite behind a single gubernatorial candidate, split its vote. As a result, the winner of the primary was Lee Emerson, who gained only 43 percent of the vote. Emerson, an instinctive conservative, assumed office during the height of the Korean War, and he reasoned that the costs of a "vastly stepped up military machine" would drain revenues and make it "more difficult at the state level to carry on our government." His solution was to "perfect economies" and "curtail desirable but not absolutely essential activity." His specific proposals included dismantling some Gibson agencies, funding others at lower levels, and rejecting most initiatives to expand the state's social services. Succeeding in cutting spending in health, education, and public assistance, he nonetheless failed to stem the tide of rising state expenditures. The 1951 legislature thwarted his major economic moves and hastily enacted "emergency" income and corporate surtaxes to balance the budget. Soon after the legislature adjourned, it became apparent that everyone had underestimated the economic stimulus the Korean War had given the Vermont economy, for just before the 1952 primaries, the state reported the largest surplus in its history.

In April 1952 Emerson announced that he would seek reelection. Dissident Republicans, smarting from a state surplus more than sufficient to fund the curtailed social services and determined to avoid the fragmentation that marked their 1950 primary efforts, quickly settled on a single opposition candidate, former superior court justice Henry F. Black. Knowledgeable observers noted that the pressure upon Black to enter the gubernatorial contest had come largely from Gibsonites, but this did not prevent the judge from cultivating an image of being above faction. Emerson was in an uphill fight for renomination when on the eve of the filing deadline for the primary, Black withdrew from the race, exhausted from the emotional and physical toil of campaigning. Anti-Emerson forces were unwilling to allow the governor renomination by default, and Gibson unsuccessfully attempted to recruit the candidacy of former Marine Corps general Merritt Edson, who had served as Gibson's commissioner of public safety. Edson, a Rutland native and Medal of Honor winner, declined.[42] Henry Vail, a state senator from Windsor County and a veteran with more modest credentials, entered at the last

moment instead. Despite, or perhaps because of, Vail's relative obscurity and the brevity of his campaign, the anti-Emerson forces were able to carry him to within 2,600 votes of victory. Buoyed by his primary showing, Vail ran as a write-in candidate in the general election.

Emerson was, however, assured a win in the general election: 1952 was a presidential election year, with Eisenhower adherents certain to swell Republican ranks. As expected, the national campaign generated a record voter turnout in the state. For the first time in history, Vermont candidates garnered over 100,000 votes. Eisenhower carried the state by over 60,000 (71 percent), and Ralph Flanders, who was agreeable to a wide spectrum of voters and had gained CIO endorsement in 1946, was reelected to the U.S. Senate by an even larger majority. Emerson was also reelected but managed fewer votes than any other major candidate, less than 52 percent of the gubernatorial total.

The result reflected powerful organized dissatisfaction with Emerson, but Vail barely garnered 8 percent of the popular vote. More significant was the Democratic gubernatorial showing. Candidate Robert Larrow captured almost 40 percent with over 60,000 votes, the most ever for a Democratic gubernatorial candidate up to that time. Larrow campaigned as if he intended to win, and the Democratic organization, still hurting from Truman's appointment of Gibson, had turned the first corner toward electoral success. In 1952, however, that was not yet clear. With unprecedented numbers lured to the polls by Eisenhower, the Democrats elected only eighteen representatives to the Vermont house, the fewest since 1894. The senate stood twenty-seven to three. By 1952 the Aiken-Gibson labor supporters were voting Democratic for governor.

These consequences were not immediately apparent. Gibson was reelected governor in 1948 by the same coalition, beating back in the Republican primary a strong challenge by Lee Emerson, who had served as lieutenant governor under both Proctor and Gibson. Gibson won only 54.4 percent of the vote, and his margin of victory in the state's largest towns more than accounts for that figure; in Democratic Winooski, for example, Gibson won an astounding 952 out of 1,052 votes. Gibson's labor support also carried over into the general election. But in the national election Vermont's still unwavering Republican loyalty did not prevent the defeat of Thomas E. Dewey; as Aiken predicted, the Democratic presidential candidate, Truman, was victorious.

In his two terms in office, Gibson succeeded more than most governors in advancing the specifics of his program. Depicted in the national press as "Vermont's New Dealing Yankee," he was characterized in the leftist *Nation* magazine as the most effective liberal governor of the region.[41] Rejecting the argument that Vermont was too small or too poor

to afford more than the most modest expenditures, Gibson induced the legislature to enact much of his legislative agenda. Vermont raised teacher salaries, established a compulsory teachers' retirement system, converted the state normal schools into teacher colleges, established a state police, expanded welfare benefits, and overcame objections to the extension of federal aid programs. Gibson met the increased cost in government caused by these programs by instituting a more steeply graduated income tax and a rise in corporate assessments.

Not all the governor's programs were adopted. During Gibson's first term, a pet project for mobile public health units was narrowly defeated, despite lamentations that "nearly one out of every two boys of the State called to arms under the Selective Service Act were rejected." It is significant that Lieutenant Governor Lee Emerson cast the tie-breaking vote against the program. During Gibson's second term, his most substantial setback was failure to secure authorization for a Vermont power authority to distribute St. Lawrence River–generated electricity. Shortly after the legislature voted down the public authority, Gibson resigned as governor to accept Truman's appointment as the Vermont federal district judge.

The appointment of a Republican by a Democrat startled the political world. Both parties in Vermont were thrown into disarray. Democrats, distraught at losing their most valuable patronage asset, were put on notice to contest state and national elections more vigorously. For Republicans, the message was more ambiguous. The immediate consequence of Gibson's appointment was that the governor's office was turned over to Lieutenant Governor Harold Arthur, a politician at ideological odds with Gibson and Aiken. Arthur's opponent for lieutenant governor in 1948 had been Winston Prouty, who as house speaker had shepherded Gibson's program through the legislature. Prouty solicited Gibson's support in the primary, but Gibson declined, refusing to oppose a World War II veteran. Gibson's earlier fulminations against any succession ladder further militated against his designating a successor.

With Gibson nominally removed from politics, the 1950 gubernatorial primary was expected to determine whether Vermont's social idealism would continue to prevail over fiscal and institutional conservatism. Yet the question whether to continue along the course Gibson had set was never placed squarely before the electorate. Circumstances and indecision among the Gibsonites conspired to confuse that issue. The Gibsonites originally hoped to support J. Harold Stacy, house speaker during Gibson's second term; Stacy at first refused to run, and Peter Bove, a loyal Aiken-Gibson ally, entered the race. When later Stacy submitted his candidacy, Bove refused to withdraw. That Aiken was himself facing

Attention . . . Vermont Voters

Have You Had Enough of Emersonism?

Some Republicans are not satisfied with Emerson, but are conducting a write-in vote campaign for Vail. Ask them why! Two years ago Emerson was elected because **OPPOSITION WAS SPLIT!**

What Has Emerson Done In Two Years?

Allowed high taxes for his surplus fund. Did not attempt to settle the big strike in Barre. This was an injustice to management - - - labor - - - business. Did not encourage New Industry to come into the state that in return would bring better wages - - - housing - - - living conditions.

Emerson recommended a new prison - - - yet spends $60,000 to patch up the old institution.

Some say no matter how bad things are we shouldn't break with tradition. Is tradition greater than the American way?

Let's show the Nation that we have a freedom of choice in Vermont to vote for the person best qualified, regardless of party.

HAVE YOU HAD ENOUGH VERMONTERS? Then it's time for a change in Montpelier! THINK BEFORE YOU VOTE! VOTE NOVEMBER 4th FOR - - - -

Larrow for Governor

Stevenson for President

Signed: JOHN J. LALOR, Windsor, Vermont

1952

reelection to the U.S. Senate in 1950 and hoped to escape the primaries unopposed inhibited his and Gibson's inclinations to intercede. Aiken was able to avoid opposition, but the luxury might have been denied him had he stimulated intraparty rivalries. The absence of a Senate primary contest opponent, it should be noted, made it less necessary for Aiken to mobilize his farm-labor supporters.

The Taft-Hartley Act struck a heavy blow against the Aiken-Gibson wing and irrevocably altered the complexion of Vermont partisan politics. By 1954 the Aiken-Gibson wing was no longer a factor in Republican primaries. That year Vail, running against Lieutenant Governor Joseph Johnson, a Springfield industrialist, won less than 33 percent of the Republican primary vote. The Democratic gubernatorial candidate in the general election captured over 42 percent and fell only 5,300 votes short of victory. The demise of an Aiken-Gibson faction in the electorate and the rise of the Vermont Democratic party were certainly intertwined.

The inability of the Aiken-Gibson faction to perpetuate itself can be attributed to a host of factors. The repudiation of a succession ladder, Gibson's sudden departure for the court, and the subsequent comic-opera searches for candidates to rally around all contributed to its weakening. A decline in the strength of veterans' organizations, such as those actively supporting Gibson in 1946 and 1948, was also a factor, as was the split of the farm-labor coalition, exemplified in the elevation of Keith Wallace to succeed Arthur Packard as president of the Vermont Farm Bureau.[43]

Wallace was less intimately associated than Packard with either Aiken or Gibson, and he never developed an amiable working relationship with Lawson. Indeed, Wallace repudiated a farm-labor alliance by supporting a Vermont right-to-work law that would prohibit union shops. Section 14b of the Taft-Hartley Act permitted individual states to adopt such an act, and that was only one of numerous ways that Taft-Hartley compounded the problems of the Aiken-Gibson forces.

Aiken had voted for Taft-Hartley, but only reluctantly. His network of values mandated a minimum of state and federal intervention in labor disputes, and a "Vermont way" (as embodied in the state's Mediation and Arbitration Act of 1939) remained his preferred course. For Aiken, the antilabor disposition of Congress in 1947 confirmed his view that mandated government intervention was more likely to sour than sweeten industrial-labor relations. Although Aiken was immune to labor disaffection, Taft-Hartley made it increasingly difficult for organized labor to mobilize resources for Republican candidates.

In both 1948 and 1952, the Democratic national platforms contained

planks advocating repeal of the "inadequate, unworkable, and unfair" act because it tipped "the scales in favor of management against labor." Organized labor, proclaiming Taft-Hartley to be a "slave labor act" that increased the number of labor-management disputes, supported Democratic candidates who favored its repeal.[44] During Vermont's years as a Republican stronghold, labor's best access to the political arena was through the Republican primaries. In the climate engendered by Taft-Hartley, however, Vermont's political waters had become muddied, and union leaders' choices for entering them had also become much less clear.

Indiscriminate antilabor charges were such standard political fare that the 1948 Labor for Gibson Club flyer signed by Lawson as president of the state CIO council and by two AFL counterparts repudiated Emerson's charges that Gibson had supported a "labor coercion bill."[45] By 1952 labor put forward no Republican-for-governor clubs. Vermont labor strategy—staunchly Democratic in national elections, Republican during the state primaries, and on either side, depending on circumstance, in local elections—had become too schizophrenic and dangerous to manage.

By 1954 the window of opportunity that had provided labor its rationale for participating in Republican primaries had closed. Not only had its alliance with the Farm Bureau collapsed, but in 1956 and 1958 the gubernatorial primaries were uncontested, rendering coalition politics irrelevant. Meanwhile, the Democrats continued to show such increased strength with each general election that, as the 1958 elections demonstrated, Republicans could not safely antagonize labor in general elections. That year the Republican gubernatorial candidate, Lieutenant Governor Robert Stafford, was compelled to fight back an element within his party, led by Shelburne industrialist and right-to-work advocate Richard Snelling, advocating that the state implement 14b of Taft-Hartley and outlaw the union shop.[46] Stafford was able to avert this, but the right-to-work movement nonetheless tarred all Republican candidates with an antilabor brush. Stafford squeaked to victory by 519 votes, and for the first time since pre-Civil War days, a Democrat won statewide election as William Meyer was elected to Congress.

In January 1944 the governor of Vermont, William H. Wills, had dedicated his weekly radio broadcast to the question, "Will the Republican party commit suicide?" Wills flaunted Vermont's republicanism as a badge of honor, yet he feared the national party would forgo its most attractive candidates to maintain a misconceived ideological purity. Would candidates be required "to condemn labor because of certain termites in the timbers of labor's house?"[47] Although Wills had not been forced into a primary contest in either of his gubernatorial campaigns, he appreciated the importance of labor's support. Indeed, his administrations,

prodded by the exigencies of war, provided labor with even greater access to the corridors of power than Aiken's had. Whether the Republican electorate was bifactional or otherwise, the party met Duane Lockard's standard of a system so inclusive that it treated have-nots relatively well.

After 1946, however, it became increasingly difficult to retain labor's support for Republican primary candidates. The enactment of Taft-Hartley with Democrats subsequently championing repeal, stigmatized Republican candidates in the eyes of rank-and-file labor. Mobilizing support for Republicans would under the best of circumstances have been an arduous task, but labor leaders were further frustrated by the inability of the Aiken-Gibson forces to unite behind a candidate. The alienation of labor contributed to the growth of the Democratic party, but once the Democratic party became a potentially viable alternative to republicanism, labor and other elements—those Frank Bryan described as proponents of "progressive populism"—became more rapidly and increasingly disaffected.

By 1958, with labor representatives no longer powerful in Republican councils, a wing of the party was able to build a right-to-work plank into the state platform. Stafford, recognizing the danger it presented, rejected the plank as irrelevant to Vermont. This gesture may have saved his own election, but it did not forestall the first defeat of a statewide Republican candidate in over 100 years. One-party politics had receded into Vermont's past.

Notes

[1] V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, new ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984). All page citations are from the 1984 edition.

[2] Ibid., 121.

[3] Ibid., 20.

[4] Duane Lockard, *New England State Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), 44.

[5] Frank Bryan, "Vermont's New Dealing Yankee: Governor Ernest Gibson, Jr., of Brattleboro" (Center for Research in Vermont, 1980, mimeograph), 20.

[6] The *Barre Times*, 25 November 1944, identified the components of the Aiken faction, reporting that Aiken "has always been strong in the rural sections [of Vermont] and obtained the support of those engaged in agriculture, and when the organized labor vote was added to this his majority was enhanced."

[7] Samuel Hand, Jeffrey Marshall, and D. Gregory Sanford, "'Little Republics': The Structure of State Politics in Vermont, 1854-1920," *Vermont History* 53 (Summer 1985): 141-166.

[8] Harold A. Meeks, *Time and Change in Vermont: A Human Geography* (Chester, Conn.: Globe Pequot Press, 1986), 300.

[9] Of the 248 members of the house in 1933, 129 described themselves as farmers of some sort, 102 solely as farmers. One representative was listed as a stonecutter, one as a mill worker, and three as carpenters. Those five, the only representatives who can be interpreted to be industrial workers, number less than half of those who described themselves simply as "merchants." Thus, although industrial workers were more numerous than farmers, there were approximately 2,500 percent more farmers than industrial workers in the house. *Vermont Legislative Directory*, 1933, 512-514.

[10] H. Nicholas Muller III and Samuel B. Hand, eds., *In a State of Nature: Readings in Vermont History* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1982), 406.

[11] Richard Munson Judd, *The New Deal in Vermont: Its Impact and Aftermath* (New York: Garland, 1979), 143.

[12] Ibid.

[13] In 1933 Barre was the site of a sometimes violent strike in the granite industry. Soon after it began in April, strikers clashed with deputies hired by the state to keep order. The hiring of strikebreakers by management led to an atmosphere of high tension throughout the community. Despite calls by the Barre City Council for the withdrawal of the deputies, further clashes in May led to Governor Stanley C. Wilson's ordering the National Guard to Barre. For correspondence suggesting Governor Wilson deliberately favored industry employers, see Correspondence of Stanley C. Wilson, reel S3192, "Barre Granite Strike," Vermont State Archives. In 1934 there were strikes in a number of textile mills in Vermont, including mills in Bennington and Burlington. None of the textile strikes resulted in the granting of the workers' demands.

[14] Anita Marburg, "Struggle in Marble," *Nation*, 1 April 1936. For official observations of the strike, see Correspondence of Governor Charles Smith, reel S3194, "Marble Company Strike," Vermont State Archives.

[15] Austin won only 51 percent of the vote, beating Martin by a scant 4,000 votes. *Vermont Legislative Directory*, 1935, 127. The *State Papers of Vermont*, vol. 21: *Vermont Elections, 1789–1989*, edited and compiled by Christie Carter and published in 1989 by the secretary of state, is the most complete single source for primary and general election results. It is the source for all statewide election data cited in this article.

[16] James Farley, *Behind the Ballots* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938), 295.

[17] Vermont's governors in this period were drawn from a cadre of the state's business and professional elite. Of the thirty-one Vermonters who served as governor between 1870 and 1932, eleven were lawyers, sixteen were businessmen, and four described themselves as farmers. The mountain rule dictated that the governor's office should alternate between individuals from the western and eastern sides of the Green Mountains. The rule was adhered to without exception from 1870 until 1944. A further protocol used to limit the candidate pool was a succession ladder that led from an apprenticeship in the state legislature to the speakership of the Vermont house, followed by a term as lieutenant governor before accession to the governorship. Muller and Hand, *In a State of Nature*, 411–413.

[18] Both George Aiken's father, Edward, and Ernest Gibson's father, Ernest, Sr., were active in the Progressive movement.

[19] *New York Times*, 13 February 1938. For Vermont labor's favorable response to the speech, see Frank J. Manning to Aiken, 14 February 1938, Correspondence of Governor George D. Aiken, Vermont State Archives, reel 2, "Labor." Manning was an official of the New England Textile Workers Organizing Committee.

[20] *Burlington Free Press*, 29 December 1945.

[21] Boston *Herald*, 27 February 1938.

[22] Lubbock, Texas, *Morning Avalanche*, 6 May 1938.

[23] Judd, *New Deal*, 131.

[24] Meeks, *Time and Change*, 200.

[25] Speech on the WGY "Farm Forum," Schenectady, New York, 27 January 1939. A transcript of the speech can be found in the George Aiken Papers, crate 50, box 1, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

[26] *New Republic*, 20 October 1947.

[27] Aiken offered Ernest Gibson, Jr., the option to run for the Senate seat, but Gibson declined, saying that he had "no desire to spend my life in Washington – I've seen too much grief it causes." Ernest W. Gibson, Jr., Ms. Diary, 22 June 1940, Ernest W. Gibson Papers, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

[28] Transcript from Aiken campaign radio address, delivered 22 August 1940, Aiken Papers, crate 50, box 1.

[29] *Vermont Legislative Directory*, 1937, 1941.

[30] *Brattleboro Reformer*, 20 April 1943.

[31] *Rutland Herald*, 30 September 1943. Arthur B. Cohn, in the presentation "The Shelburne Shipyard During World War II" (University of Vermont, April 1993), premised that Senator Warren Austin opposed a Shelburne Boat Company war contract because he feared it would raise the prevailing wage rates in the Burlington area. Aiken supported the contract.

[32] *Burlington Daily News*, 4 October 1944.

[33] George D. Aiken Oral History Memoir, 1981, interviews by Charles T. Morrissey and D. Gregory Sanford, Folklore and Oral History Archives, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, 109.

[34] Farm-Labor Council papers are housed at the Vermont Historical Society.

[35] Proctor had generated some opposition in 1944 when he violated the mountain rule to succeed Wills; both Proctor and Wills were from western Vermont. This was not an issue in 1946, although Proctor's transgression suggests a decline in the force of tradition.

[36] George Aiken to H. J. Wilson, 17 June 1946, Aiken Papers, crate 6, box 1.

[37] Lawson was particularly pleased by the prospect of a Gibson campaign for governor. Lawson had long opposed Proctor's political career because of the Proctor family's resistance to unionization at the Vermont Marble Company. Lawson declared in 1943 that "political action . . . is the only way to combat the Vermont Marble Company and other such companies. Some of our state leaders are owners, co-owners and managers of the biggest anti-labor firms in the state." Vermont Marble was, in fact, finally organized in late 1945 by Lawson's own United Stone and Allied Products Workers Union, but that had done little to diminish Lawson's bitterness toward Proctor. *Burlington Daily News*, 30 September 1943.

[38] Ernest W. Gibson, Jr., to George D. Aiken, 9 April 1946, Ernest Gibson Papers, box 1, file 31.

[39] For complete election results, see Election Records, series 1, boxes 23–25, Vermont State Archives.

[40] Paul M. Searls, "George D. Aiken and the Taft-Hartley Act: A Less Undesirable Alternative," *Vermont History* 60 (Summer 1992): 155–166.

[41] William Gilman, "Vermont Goes Radical," *Colliers*, 19 April 1947, 12. See also Melvin Wax, "Vermont's New Dealing Yankee," *Nation* 168 (11 June 1949): 659–660.

[42] Gibson to Edson, 29 September 1952, Edson Papers, Library of Congress. This letter was brought to our attention by Major Jon T. Hoffman, USMCR, who is preparing a biography of Edson.

[43] Wallace succeeded Packard in 1953. See Deacy F. Leonard, comp., *The Vermont Farm Bureau Story, 1915–1985* (Montpelier, Vt.: Farm Bureau, 1985).

[44] Kirk H. Porter and Donald B. Johnson, *National Party Platforms, 1840–1964* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966), 433 and 480–481.

[45] Gibson Papers, box 9, folder 45.

[46] Robert T. Stafford Papers, "1956–1988 Campaigns," Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont. These papers, not yet processed, include an extensive file of newspaper clippings on the 1958 campaign as well as Stafford's speaking notes.

[47] William H. Wills, *Will the Republican Party Commit Suicide in 1944?* (Montpelier, Vt.: N.p., 1944). Copy in Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.