"BUT FOR OHIO …?"
An Autopsy of Political Rebellion

Ohio and its citizen voters have received a great deal of publicity and notoriety in presidential elections – especially in the 21st century. Part of that attention is merited by the historical fact that Ohio was carried by the candidate who won the presidency in every recent election, beginning in 1948 – 17 consecutive contests. Moreover, the only time since 1892 when Ohio's outcome did not presage the national results was in 1944.

Another dimension has been the frequency in which a narrow margin of popular votes separated the winner from the runner-up.

The final major component earning Ohio notice is the size of our state's population and, thus, the number of electoral votes at stake. Although Ohio's population has declined as a proportion of the nation's in recent decades, its contribution to the Electoral College has consistently been among the top eight states, depending upon the year. In 1944 and 1948 (the elections that are central to this essay), only New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois exceeded Ohio's electoral vote entitlement (which equaled that of California).

The earlier of the two elections was rife with major issues – World War II was at a "tipping point"; tensions were growing among the Big Three (Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin) as they struggled to maintain the Allied coalition; and focusing American industrial might on production of war materiel required pulling women and African Americans into the workforce, thereby challenging established social patterns. (With the benefit of hindsight, the physical movement of Americans, to the South and West for military training prior to deployment and to the Upper Midwest for employment in defense industries was under-recognized, and the social and political implications of that movement were under-appreciated by federal and state governments alike.) Perceptions and fears of the ramifications of these actions for postwar America fueled the political environment.

Tangential to these profound international and domestic issues was FDR himself – his health and his thinly-disguised willingness to stand for a fourth term. Roosevelt's physical incapacities were camouflaged with the undeniable complicity of the working press (including their photographers). Moreover, the combination of a heavy smoking habit, an exercise-inhibiting disability, and aging, added to the rigors of the office (including, especially, the arduous overseas travel during wartime) took their toll. Those factors notwithstanding, Roosevelt's radio voice (which is how most Americans knew him) remained distinctive and relatively strong. His popularity with the electorate remained high, but the isolated grumblings over his unprecedented decision to stand for a third term in 1940 had begun to coalesce into pockets of outright opposition by 1944, especially in certain states of the former Confederacy. Despite the apparent affinity FDR

felt toward southern folk, both black and white, and which they seemed to reciprocate, southern elected officials and state Democratic leaders were feeling increasingly that they were being ignored and their region's "solid" electoral support taken for granted. Their apprehensions were not unfounded.

Four significant developments (three prior to Pearl Harbor and one after American entry into the conflict) altered the political landscape and each marginalized the influence of the South within the national party. The first occurred in 1936 at the national nominating convention when the party abandoned its time-honored requirement that the presidential and vice presidential nominees must receive the support of at least two-thirds of the delegates. (In 1924, the party had required 103 ballots before selecting a nominee, and that divisiveness was seen as greatly disadvantaging the final ticket which was then swamped by Calvin Coolidge. In that election, the only electoral votes won by Democrat John Davis were from the eleven former Confederate states, plus Oklahoma.) In a burst of optimism and ostensible unity borne out of FDR's first term successes, the party lowered the threshold for nomination to a simple majority. This decision, which seemed to have the implicit consent and support of John Nance Garner of Texas (the conservative former Speaker of the House of Representatives and sitting Vice President) effectively removed what was, essentially, a regional veto enjoyed by the South over candidates.

The second development had two phases. Shortly after the second inaugurations of FDR and Garner in early 1937, Garner announced that he and Roosevelt had jointly agreed to forego any attempt at a third term in 1940. This announcement seemed to confirm a chilling of their relationship to the point that Garner (in his capacity as Presiding Officer of the Senate) openly disagreed with selected legislative initiatives proposed by the administration. FDR, for his part, undertook highly visible efforts to enlarge and re-cast the membership of the Supreme Court and, in 1938, he openly urged Democrat voters NOT to re-nominate or re-elect conservative officeholders of his own party; his objectives were not realized in either case, but the conservative Democrats (mostly southern) took sharp notice and had long memories.

The third element saw Garner honoring his earlier pledge not to stand for re-election as Vice President. Nonetheless, as if to make a point, Garner did not resist having his name advanced as a candidate for the Democrat's presidential nomination. The control of the nominating convention's apparatus by FDR and his lieutenants and advisors made the outcome fore-ordained, but Garner and his supporters had registered their concerns. Also, of course, FDR needed a running mate – ideally, one who shared his progressive views and would be a more reliable emissary to Congress than Garner. Henry A. Wallace of Iowa, Secretary of Agriculture during Roosevelt's first two terms, had become increasingly attractive to those on the left of the party's spectrum. Wallace was bright and regarded as a polished but often dogmatic speaker whose views were forcefully presented, if not always eagerly received. Many historians believe that Roosevelt, despite his control of the convention, could not have secured Wallace's

nomination if the two-thirds rule had still been in place. Thus, the convention of 1940 had seen a challenge to Roosevelt by Garner and other conservatives and the replacement of Garner with Wallace. The shift in tone and direction of the "national" Democratic Party had been made explicit. The Roosevelt/Wallace ticket received another overwhelming victory, but notably, the Republican candidate (Wendell Willkie) polled 5.7 million more popular votes and 74 more electoral votes than his predecessor had attracted in 1936. Moreover, the Republicans lost "only" two seats in the House of Representatives and gained five in the U.S. Senate.

The fourth factor contributing to dissent among the Democrats (and, especially, the southern component of the party) was, to some degree, both a result of the foregoing episodes and, itself, a cause of further weakening of the party's electoral coalition. The issue of civil rights – more explicitly, the quest for equal access to employment and political participation, equal treatment, and equal education – became more effectively articulated by black leaders and responded to more substantively by the Roosevelt administration after Pearl Harbor. But even with the overt advocacy of his wife, Eleanor, FDR was reluctant to act significantly until he was confronted with an ultimatum by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin that they would organize a gigantic March on Washington to protest segregation in the armed forces and, especially, lack of equal employment of African Americans in the national defense industries. Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Commission as a wartime measure intended to calm the domestic scene, remove inequality and racism as a basis for national criticism, and to address the continuing need for manpower, both in uniform and in domestic employment. Time would tell whether these governmental measures were to be seen as transitory and relaxed (or reversed) at war's end.

If FDR and his executive branch had to be pressured to take steps toward racial equality, the judiciary was more forthright. In 1944, prior to the political conventions, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the "white primary," a hallmark of political control in the South. The decision was leveled against practices in Texas specifically, but obviously, it was to apply universally. The white primary, as its label denoted, restricted participation to white voters in the choosing of which candidates would appear on electoral ballots; the traditional argument in behalf of this limitation was that political parties are private organizations within each state and, as such, they are free to set their own rules and procedures insofar as such did not conflict with state law or the U.S. Constitution. Advocates argued that such a mechanism in no way obstructed any citizen's access to the vote in general elections and the "mechanics" of elections were the prerogative of each state, per the 10th Amendment. In protest of the decision, two high-profile actions occurred. First, Democrats in Texas split into two factions; the more conservative group took the name "Regulars" and announced their intention of holding their own meetings and presenting their own slate of nominees for all state offices. The second overt reaction emerged in Mississippi where the state party (already in the control of those opposing change) identified delegates to the forthcoming Democratic national

convention, but made clear that they were "uninstructed". In fact, those delegates were very much instructed to ransom support for Roosevelt in exchange for conciliatory language in the party platform that would alleviate their immediate concerns over the limiting of state control over elections.

One other element required attention at the Democrat's 1944 convention: FDR had seen and experienced what others had feared four years earlier – Vice President Henry Wallace was a "loose cannon". With the war foremost in the minds of Americans and the rest of the world, Wallace had turned his attention and oratory toward international affairs, most particularly urging recognition of the tremendous losses incurred by Soviet troops and, thus, calling for tolerance of (and cooperation with) Joseph Stalin. Given his high office, Wallace's words were often taken as a window onto FDR's views – which they were not. Against the wishes of many, including his wife, Eleanor, Roosevelt acceded (without great dissent, apparently) to the urging of his political advisors that he make a change in running mate. His choice was Harry S Truman, Senator from Missouri.

For their part, the Republicans, drawn in part by the potential of attracting the largest single bloc of electoral votes, nominated the sitting governor of New York, Thomas E. Dewey, as their candidate for the presidency. Dewey was very much a politician thought to be on a rapidly ascending trajectory – based largely on his highly successful and highly publicized tenure as a prosecutor in New York City. Dewey succeeded in bringing Senator John Bricker of Ohio onto the ticket. (As noted previously, Ohio held the fourth largest number of electoral votes.) Dewey anticipated drawing wide support from his region and throughout the Midwest -- even winning California seemed a possibility. Also, the GOP had been heartened by the results of the "off year" or midterm congressional elections of 1942 in which the party gained 46 seats in the House of Representatives and nine in the Senate. Much of the Republican strategy appeared sound, but the GOP candidates faced a major obstacle in trying to defeat a sitting president during wartime. Several pundits wrote that Dewey's campaign rhetoric was filled with highly ambitious promises that, in the context of 1944, seemed unrealistic – even to voters who were otherwise ready for an alternative to Roosevelt.

Compared to previous races against Roosevelt, the Dewey/Bricker ticket ran well; the Republicans did capture Ohio, but Dewey discovered there was still at least one other New Yorker who was a more popular candidate than he. The GOP attracted appreciably higher support in other large states – Pennsylvania, Illinois, and California – but their overall performance was obscured in another landslide for FDR in the Electoral College.

On January 20, 1945 (exactly 70 years ago today), the Roosevelt-Truman administration began. In a consoling gesture, FDR designated the disappointed Henry Wallace as Secretary of Commerce; that gesture would turn out to be futile. Buoyed by his unprecedented victory but fatigued by the campaign and a post-inaugural trip to Yalta,

FDR retreated to Warm Springs, Georgia, in an effort to restore his strength; he died there on April 12.

Within the first four months of his swearing-in as President, Harry Truman, as Commander-in-Chief, oversaw the unconditional surrender of Germany in May, followed by the use of the atomic bombs against Japan which, in turn, prompted their surrender in August. He also had journeyed to Potsdam, Germany, in July for his first meeting with Stalin who, apparently, felt emboldened both by Roosevelt's death and the electoral defeat of Winston Churchill. This very hectic pace and the significance of the military and diplomatic outcomes propelled President Truman to great heights in public opinion..

NOTE: In late 1937, the Gallup Organization began measuring the level (or extent) of "approval" among the citizenry regarding presidential job performance. This polling was undertaken intermittently, but was not conducted with any frequency during Roosevelt's third term nor during the war. Polling was resumed in June 1945, and President Truman received an 87% rating. The same poll has been administered monthly since then; Truman's initial rating is the third highest received by any president in any month to date. While the pollster's question: "Do you approve of the job President _____ is doing?" is vague and general, social scientists and the media have regarded it as a useful and relevant indicator over time and especially so in the few months prior to a federal election.

President Truman faced several challenges that seemed unprecedented – dealing with a chaotic postwar world diplomatically, militarily, and economically; managing what was characterized as the "reconversion" of the U.S. from a wartime footing industrially and socially to a "peacetime" society that could absorb veterans back into the workforce while minimizing disruption. The onset of what became the Cold War with the Soviets emerged quickly and required responses. Fortunately, the wartime dictum that "politics should stop at the water's edge" held true as most Democrats and republicans in Congress worked to minimize dissent over foreign affairs as pursued by the Executive branch.

In that regard, the prior candidacies of Willkie in 1940 and Dewey in 1944 marked a victory of sorts among Republicans for a broader international perspective that paralleled FDR's and Truman's worldviews. But the GOP was in strong disagreement with the thrust and philosophical underpinnings of the programs and initiatives that comprised the New Deal, and they were especially wary of the extraordinary growth and cost of the governmental superstructure which arose to implement and manage them. Economists often point out that it was the mobilization for WWII that truly pulled the nation out of the Depression in terms of productivity, employment, and standard of living. But in mobilizing, the New Deal programs and agencies were not attenuated or dissolved; they were actually reinforced and, in some cases, enlarged. Even if the Republicans grudgingly acknowledged the power of FDR's political persona, they hoped that the dominant presence of the federal government in so many facets of the lives of

Americans would decline now that the grave military and economic emergencies were behind them. Importantly, a growing number of Democrats (especially in the South) seemed to feel similarly.

President Truman accepted his task of protecting both the legacy and the philosophy of the New Deal generally and that of FDR specifically. To accomplish this, Truman had none of the charisma and oratorical skills of his predecessor, and the general public could be excused for being either ignorant of his talents or for questioning the circumstances of his being in the position to become President. Henry Wallace and his supporters felt alienated, and not only did they fail to embrace the new President, they began immediately to second-guess his decisions and priorities. This dissension reached a point in 1946 when Truman was compelled to dismiss Wallace from his Cabinet post because Wallace would not quiet his views on relations with the Soviets; Wallace left the administration and moved his pulpit to the editorship of NEW REPUBLIC magazine.

In the midterm elections of 1946, The Republicans scored a victory of seismic proportions by regaining control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This 80th Congress immediately took aim at one of the hallmarks of the New Deal – the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. Their solution was passage of the Labor-Management Relations (aka Taft-Hartley) Act which rolled back several provisions of the earlier law and earned a sharp veto from President Truman; that veto was overridden (with significant support from Democrats) in mid-1947.

Following Wallace's departure and the Republican electoral victories, President Truman in December 1946 had announced the formation of a "blue ribbon" Committee on Civil Rights. Truman noted that he did so because he had witnessed the racial animosities following on the heels of demobilization after WWI and wanted no cause for repetition of the turmoil. Certain southerners, especially Fielding Wright, Governor of Mississippi, immediately seized on Truman's announcement and called for vociferous opposition to what he labeled as unwarranted and unconstitutional intrusion onto the purview of the individual states. Interestingly, at the time, no other southern governor or member of Congress saw this committee's formation, as much more than "window dressing" aimed at countering Wallace's appeals for far-reaching federal laws defining and enforcing civil rights.

Indeed, in early October 1947, a fresh political face who was less than one year into his tenure as Governor of South Carolina, participated in a discussion broadcast from Louisville, Kentucky, around the theme "Let's Look at 1948", He opened his remarks by asserting, "The Democratic Party has its candidate for 1948 and ill re-nominate him without delay". J. Strom Thurmond was regarded then as one of the South's new breed of reform-minded political leaders who emphasized improvements in education and employment opportunity for his citizenry – albeit within the social fabric of the time. He argued that the 50-year old Plessy decision which enshrined "separate but equal" also

imposed a responsibility on each state to equalize the quality and availability of education for black and white students alike.

Shortly after Thurmond's remarks, the President's Committee published its report. The document, entitled TO SECURE THESE RIGHTS, called for a broad expansion of federal law and guarantees of civil rights as well as enforcement mechanisms in the federal Department of Justice. At the press conference where the report was unveiled, the President was ambiguous about how, whether, or when he planned to respond, noting that the recommendations were only that, but that they could find their way into a future address.

In late October 1947, on the heels of both Thurmond's assertion and the Committee's report, key political advisors (especially Clark Clifford) handed Truman an extensive memorandum outlining a strategy for his re-election. In part the memo noted, "President Truman will be elected if the administration will successfully concentrate on the traditional Democratic alliance between the South and the West. It is inconceivable that any policies initiated by the Truman administration, no matter how liberal, could so alienate the South in the next year that it would revolt. As always, the South can be considered safely Democratic. And in formulating national policy, it can be safely ignored." The existence and tenor of this memo was not known by historians or the public until several years after Truman left office, but given subsequent actions, clearly it was instrumental in the campaign of 1948 (and, perhaps, in future campaigns).

The final major political event in 1947 was the announcement in December by Henry Wallace that what had been labeled in the early years of the century as the Progressive Party was being reinvigorated, and that he as its leader would compete for the votes of Americans for president in 1948.

As difficult a year as 1947 had been for president Truman, he was in a rather advantageous position entering 1948. Believing that he was dealing with an intractable Congress, he was "free" to make proposals and arguments that would appeal to voters tempted to follow Wallace's lead, all the while knowing that the same Congress would block such legislation. In his State of the Union address on January 5, 1948, He noted that a special message would be forthcoming soon regarding civil rights. On February 2, the nation (and, especially, the South) heard Truman's explicit and far-reaching call for federal attention to delineating and safeguarding civil rights for all Americans. In the minds of southern elected officials, this message was the "last straw", the catalyst for all the other apprehensions that had accumulated across the previous fifteen years. Earnest efforts led by Governor Thurmond to ascertain whether this was extreme rhetoric – but only rhetoric – failed to elicit any conciliatory response from national party leaders or the White House. Almost overnight, Thurmond had transformed from an advocate of President Truman to an aggressive opponent. But, what could Thurmond, Wright, and their ilk reasonably do?

Senior southern senators counseled no extreme action, noting that the filibuster was still available to them even though in the 80th Congress they were now the minority party and lacking key committee chairmanships. Eventually, through a series of meetings, consensus was reached on a few points: silence and inaction were unacceptable; demonstrating opposition at the Democrat's national convention in Philadelphia in July was essential; prompt preparation of next steps was imperative if no relief was forthcoming in July; and wherever possible, these "States Righters" as they called themselves (or "Dixiecrats" as they were dubbed by the Charlotte (NC) NEWS AND OBSERVER) should seek control of their state's Democratic organization (as had already been done in Mississippi a few years previously).

In the Spring of 1948, Governor Thomas Dewey successfully navigated the various Republican primary elections and entered the party's nominating convention (also in Philadelphia) in June as the favorite. He had, though, a protracted struggle with a number of other nominees whose individual followings demanded attention. Dewey was selected on the convention's third ballot after strong support for Ohio Senator Robert A. Taft was registered. Apparently, Dewey and his advisors deduced that his electoral victory in Ohio four years earlier, although a narrow one, was an altogether reasonable basis for deciding that he need not cater to that state as he had in 1944 by choosing Senator Bricker as his running mate. So, Dewey turned his attention to California and its very popular governor, Earl Warren. Even this early in the campaign season, pundits and pollsters were regarding a Dewey-Warren ticket as unbeatable. Interestingly, the Republican platform in 1948 included explicit calls for ending the poll tax, passing an anti-lynching law, and an end to racial segregation, thereby signaling that they were unwilling to yield the civil rights issue to the President and his party.

In July, the Democrats arrived in the "City of Brotherly Love," and the delegations from several southern states came prepared to demand renunciation of President Truman's position on civil rights or, at the least, silence on the subject in their platform. In response, they received a reaffirmation of the president's February 2nd speech as the assembly was riveted by an impassioned speech from the mayor of Minneapolis, Hubert H. Humphrey. The southern confrontational posture was rebuffed; true to their word, the delegations walked out of their convention and immediately developed plans for their own convention in Birmingham, Alabama. Predictably, President Truman was nominated resoundingly, and Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky was chosen as his partner on the ticket.

In Birmingham, immediately after their walk-out, the southern dissidents faced another major decision – should they simply work to withhold support from the Truman-Barkley slate or should they construct a competing ticket and actively campaign for votes? The latter course was chosen quickly by acclamation, and Thurmond and Wright

found themselves as the candidates for President and Vice President respectively in behalf of the States Rights Democratic Party.

The southern candidates, together with a small number of earnest supporters from a handful of states fashioned a strategy and logic that reflected their perception of the national political circumstances. Their plan was rational even if certain of their adherents were not. The candidates assumed that the contest between Truman and Dewey would be closer than the pundits were speculating and the pollsters were projecting. Thurmond and Wright were not so much prescient as they were realistic – if Dewey did win in a landslide (as so many were predicting), southern efforts would have little effect, especially in view of elements in the Republican platform. But a defeat of Truman could possibly enable the disgruntled southern Democrats to reclaim their former status within the national party by having demonstrated the electoral impact of their region. What the States Rights Democrats hoped to accomplish was the winning of enough electoral votes to deny either Dewey or Truman an outright majority. Because they succeeded in capturing of the state Democratic machinery in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, their slate was accorded the imprimatur of being the "official" Democratic ticket. Thus, they effectively began their campaign knowing that they already had 38 electoral votes from the aforementioned states. Further, Tennessee was prepared to select 12 "uninstructed" electors who would be free to bargain their support for the best concessions from Dewey or Truman.

The campaign ensued. Dewey, an apparent captive of the conventional wisdom which said that the election was his to lose, ran what was characterized as the most lackluster effort in history. In sharp contrast to his performance in 1944, he literally said almost nothing of substance. Truman, of course, undertook his now-famous "whistle stop" campaign, railing against the "do nothing 80th Congress and energizing what was left of his party's traditional coalition of voters.

On Election Day, Truman polled enough popular votes in the right states to earn 303 electoral votes; 266 were required for victory. Thurmond garnered the 38 electoral votes expected for him from the four states across the deep South. When the Electoral College convened, one elector from Tennessee gave support for the States Rights candidate, raising his total to 39. Dewey, even with Warren's great appeal fell short in California by 18,000 votes out of 4 million cast (0.4%); in Illinois, he also lost narrowly (by 0.8%), and in Ohio, he trailed Truman by only 7,000 votes (0.2%). Winning any two of those three states would have made him victorious. To Dewey's credit, he did carry his home state (New York) as well as Pennsylvania – both of which he lost in 1944. Almost certainly, Dewey was undone by the lack of vigor and vision of his campaign which gave any uncertain voters little reason to give him support or, even, to cast a ballot. In the memorable post-mortem offered by Republican Everett Dirksen of Illinois, Dewey fell short because "… it is very difficult to get a souffle' to rise twice."

An overview of the presidential election of 1948 would reveal that the electorate was either confused or dismayed by their choices at the ballot box – barely 51% of eligible voters participated. The low turnout can be explained, in part, by the persistence of the pundits asserting that Truman's defeat was a foregone conclusion, especially in view of the defections of both the most liberal element of the Democrat coalition to Wallace and the most conservative bloc (i.e., the South) to Thurmond. Dewey's perfunctory campaign did little to encourage participation. Pollsters inadvertently fed this perception by not examining more closely the preferences/leanings of a relatively large group of voters who professed to be "independent" or "undecided". The most-quoted polls simply divided this group equally between Dewey and Truman, but post-election surveys revealed that these voters split 80% - 20% in favor of Truman.

Did the States Rights Democrats embark on a "fool's errand"? Was their strategy fundamentally flawed? The southern defectors had few options, but their decision to create a slate of nominees and their perception that the electoral votes they controlled and denied to Truman just might deny a majority to either him or Dewey was a shrewd one. They could not have foreseen that the low turnout, especially in states where Truman's margin of the popular vote was so very small, would favor the candidate who could (and did) mobilize whatever bases of strength he had. Nowhere was this more true than in Ohio. – both in 1948 and in several succeeding elections.

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