

## The Montana Voter and the 1972 Constitutional Election

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Why did Montanans vote as they did on the question of the proposed constitution at the June 6, 1972 special election? What effect, if any, did age, sex, party preference, or farm, non-farm status have upon the manner in which they cast their ballots? In search of answers to these and other questions, the Bureau of Government Research undertook an election day voter survey, the results of which are analyzed in this *Report*.

The design of this survey, methods of data collection, and problems arising from interpretation of the data are explained in the concluding section of this article. Here, it will suffice to observe that nearly 1,000 voters, selected by sampling procedures, were interviewed as they left their polling places.<sup>1</sup> Data obtained from these interviews were tabulated, processed and analyzed in an effort to provide answers to the questions raised in the preceding paragraph. The findings are presented not as immutable truth but as representing a substantial step beyond the usual speculative, unsubstantiated comment which characterizes so much writing that passes for election analysis.

To what extent did party affiliation, as measured by choice of primary at the June election,<sup>2</sup> enter into the pattern of voting on the proposed constitution? Table 1 indicates that while both Democrats and Republicans favored the new constitution, Democrats registered a 10 percent greater degree of support. This survey was conducted mainly in urban counties where the proposed constitution received an affirmative vote, so that data concerning partisanship are not available for the less populous, rural counties where the vote was against the proposed constitution.<sup>3</sup> Many of the rural counties which voted against the proposed constitution have had strongly Republican voting patterns in the past. Yet

urban Silver Bow, strongly Democratic in the past, gave the proposed constitution an affirmative vote of only 47 percent.

The evidence presented in the table shows, for example, that those who voted for the proposed constitution (proponents) also were strong supporters of the unicameral legislature, while those opposing the proposed constitution (opponents) decisively rejected a unicameral legislature. The issue of allowing the legislature to authorize gambling did not produce so sharp a contrast in the votes of proponents and opponents of the proposed constitution, although proponents gave approximately nine percent greater support to legalized gambling. While constitutional proponents supported retention of the death penalty by a narrow margin, opponents strongly favored its retention, the spread here being more than 18 percentage points.

TABLE 1

Voting Patterns of Respondent Groups on the Proposed Constitution

| Voting Group | Percent For | Percent Against |
|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Democrats    | 71.9        | 28.1            |
| Republicans  | 61.5        | 38.5            |
| Males        | 68.5        | 31.5            |
| Females      | 66.6        | 33.4            |
| Age 18-29    | 74.6        | 25.4            |
| Age 30-59    | 64.6        | 35.4            |
| Age 60 Plus  | 61.5        | 38.5            |
| Non-Farm     | 69.8        | 30.2            |
| Farm         | 44.1        | 55.9            |

From the data in Table 1 it seems clear that sex made little difference in voting behavior. Male support was an insignificant two percentage points greater than female support. On the other hand, age had a more noticeable impact on the vote. In general the younger the voter, the greater the likelihood that he would support the proposed constitution. The strongest support was registered by the 18-29 age group and the weakest support was shown by the 60-and-over group. The farm vote went heavily against the

<sup>1</sup>The authors wish to acknowledge the helpful assistance of the coordinators who recruited workers in the counties where the survey was conducted: Richard Champoux, William Furdell, James Goetz, Florence Haegan, Dorothy Harper, J.D. Lynch, Dori Nielson, Polly Prchal, Dale Tash and Dick Van Der Pool. Joe Payne programmed the computer and processed the data.

<sup>2</sup>The constitutional referendum and the primary election were held concurrently.

<sup>3</sup>See Ellis Waldron, "Montana's 1972 Constitutional Election," *Montana Public Affairs Report* No. 12, (June, 1972).

proposed constitution. Here there was a significant spread of 25 percentage points. Probably the fact that the sample was obtained largely from urban counties understates the opposition vote by the farm component of the population.

The design of the ballot for the special constitutional election afforded voters the opportunity to express their views on three side issues. Voter response is summarized in Table 2. For the analysis in this table, response on the side issues was associated with the respondent's declared position for or against ratification of the main document.

**TABLE 2**  
How Proponents and Opponents of Proposed Constitution Voted on Side Issues

|                                   | Percent For | Percent Against |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| <b>Unicameral Legislature</b>     |             |                 |
| Proponents                        | 62.0        | 38.0            |
| Opponents                         | 36.4        | 63.6            |
| <b>Legalized Gambling</b>         |             |                 |
| Proponents                        | 72.4        | 27.6            |
| Opponents                         | 63.7        | 36.3            |
| <b>Retention of Death Penalty</b> |             |                 |
| Proponents                        | 53.0        | 47.0            |
| Opponents                         | 71.3        | 28.7            |

Support patterns for the proposed constitution and for the side issues varied slightly with geography, as disclosed in Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
Regional Voting Patterns in the Constitutional Election

| Area*                             | Percent For | Percent Against |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| <b>Proposed Constitution</b>      |             |                 |
| Pacific slope                     | 72.2        | 28.8            |
| Northern cropland                 | 66.1        | 33.9            |
| Southern rangeland                | 64.5        | 35.5            |
| <b>Unicameral Legislature</b>     |             |                 |
| Pacific slope                     | 57.2        | 42.8            |
| Northern cropland                 | 49.1        | 50.9            |
| Southern rangeland                | 54.0        | 46.0            |
| <b>Legalized Gambling</b>         |             |                 |
| Pacific slope                     | 75.5        | 24.5            |
| Northern cropland                 | 73.6        | 26.4            |
| Southern rangeland                | 62.5        | 37.5            |
| <b>Retention of Death Penalty</b> |             |                 |
| Pacific slope                     | 52.7        | 47.3            |
| Northern cropland                 | 63.4        | 36.6            |
| Southern rangeland                | 60.6        | 39.4            |

\*Note: The Pacific slope includes those counties in Montana lying west of the Continental Divide; Northern cropland and Southern rangeland counties are east of the Divide.

The differences shown here suggest interesting questions for further exploration. Because of the areas from which the data were obtained, the sharpness of the rural-urban split is blurred.

The survey sought also to determine why Montanans voted for or against the proposed constitution. Voters were asked by interviewers to complete a form in which they were given an opportunity to state their reason or reasons for voting as they did. The majority of those who participated in the survey responded with a single reason although some respondents failed to complete this part of the questionnaire and a few indicated more than one reason for their vote. Among those who voted affirmatively on the proposed constitution, a total of 531 separate responses was received. Fitting these responses into precise categories was a necessary but difficult task in organizing the data. No less than 33 distinct reasons for supporting the proposed constitution were advanced. These, in turn, were grouped somewhat arbitrarily into the seven broad categories which are shown in Table 4. The miscellaneous category includes a diversity of responses that could not be neatly categorized under any more appropriate heading.

**TABLE 4**  
Reasons Given by Voters for Supporting Proposed Constitution

| Reason   | Number of Responses |
|--|---------------------|
| Confidence in work of delegates                                | 51                  |
| Flexibility and ease of amendment                              | 43                  |
| Greater opportunity for choice and participation in government | 29                  |
| Strengthens rights and legislature                             | 27                  |
| Miscellaneous provisions approved                              | 24                  |
| Approval of tax provisions                                     | 19                  |
| General approval   | 328                 |

Well over half of those who responded with reasons for supporting the proposed constitution expressed general approval of the document without voicing approval of any specific feature or section. Significantly, the reason most mentioned for support, other than that of general approval, was a vote of confidence for the work done by the delegates to the convention. Supporters were attracted by the flexibility and ease of amendment of the proposed constitution and by the way in which it opened up the possibility of greater choice and participation by citizens. In sum, those who voted for the proposed constitution seemed on the whole to regard it with confidence but without too much feeling for specific reforms or improvements.

Those who opposed the proposed constitution, by contrast, often objected to specific provisions which they regarded as unacceptable. While only about half as many responses were received from opponents as from proponents (244 all told), there were 57 distinct reasons given for opposing the proposed constitution. Table 5 shows eight broad classes of reasons given by voters who opposed the proposed constitution.

TABLE 5

## Reasons Given by Voters for Opposing Proposed Constitution

| Reason   | Number of Responses |
|--|---------------------|
| Dislike of tax provisions                                    | 71                  |
| Loss of freedom or rights                                    | 31                  |
| Too much power to government                                 | 29                  |
| Procedure of adoption or ratification                        | 24                  |
| Present constitution adequate, or could be amended           | 22                  |
| Lack of knowledge of proposed constitution                   | 18                  |
| General opposition   | 9                   |
| Miscellaneous—objections to a variety of specific provisions | 36                  |

Most frequently cited were objections to provisions dealing with taxation. Twenty-seven feared that under the new constitution there would be no control by people over taxes. Twelve cited removal of the two-mill limit on state property tax levies as a basis for their opposition. Otherwise, areas of principal objection focused either on the excessive amount of power which respondents felt had been granted the government, or upon specific rights which were being lost, with water rights being mentioned most frequently. Eighteen voters mentioned lack of information about the proposed constitution or lack of time to study its provisions as a basis for their opposition.

## Design of Survey

To understand the findings of this study as well as some of the problems encountered in conducting it, the reader may find it helpful to know how the survey was designed and executed. A sampling of 1,000 voters in the June 6 election produced usable responses from 936 voters (respondents). Respondents were selected at random from 50 randomly chosen precincts in 12 of Montana's counties. Respondents were approached by interviewers as they left their polling places after voting and asked if they would be willing to complete a confidential form showing how they voted on the proposed constitution and side issues, as well as why. Respondents were also asked to indicate their approximate age, sex, party preference in the primary, and whether family income was derived principally from farming or ranching operations.

Ten volunteer coordinators recruited interviewers for each of the precincts to be surveyed. Each interviewer was asked to be present at the assigned precinct on election day between noon and 1 p.m. and from 5 p.m. on until 20 responses were secured. Interviewers were compensated for approximately two hours of work.

The twelve counties chosen for the survey contained nearly two-thirds of the registered voters in Montana. Despite this fact, however, their voting populations differed in the following respects from the voting populations in counties which were not included in the survey:

1. The population of the counties from which the sample was derived was more urban in character than that of the state in general. Limited resources necessitated restricting the sample to counties containing the bulk of Montana's population. Consequently, rural counties were under-represented in the survey.

2. In the 12 counties included in the survey, an affirmative vote of 55.8 percent was cast for ratification of the proposed constitution while in the remaining 44 counties, not included in the survey, only 42.4 percent favored ratification of the proposed constitution.

3. The percentage of voters turning out to vote on the proposed constitution was slightly higher in the 44 counties not included in the survey than in the 12 counties which were surveyed. In those 44 counties, 69.1 percent of the registered voters actually voted on the constitutional issue, contrasted with a turnout of 67.9 percent in the 12 counties from which our respondents were selected.

A discrepancy of greater concern was observed in the data taken from the 12 counties surveyed. Official election returns show that 58.04 percent of those voting within the precincts which we surveyed voted for the proposed constitution. By contrast, 66.77 percent of the respondents in our survey reported that they voted for the proposed constitution. Thus a gap of 8.73 percent appeared between the actual vote and the vote reported by our respondents.

Discrepancies of this magnitude are not uncommon in survey research but they are difficult to explain. We offer the following as tentative explanations for the discrepancy:

1. It is possible that opponents of the proposed constitution were more reluctant to participate in the survey than were proponents. Such persons may have been more likely to decline when invited to participate in the survey.

2. Sampling errors are always a possibility. However, the data obtained from the survey is consistent in other respects and falls within the normally expected margin of error generally assumed to exist in polling operations.

3. Other studies of voting behavior have discovered the phenomenon of *overreporting*.<sup>4</sup> Some overreporting may be due to errors in sampling, some due to the faulty memory of the voter, and some is inexplicable. In certain instances the youth of some of our interviewers conceivably might have led to the selection of unrepresentative respondents. We speculate that some, but not all, of the apparent overreporting detected in the survey may have been due to a kind of guilt-feeling that caused individuals who voted against the proposed constitution on their official ballots to attempt partial atonement by indicating their support of the constitution on our survey ballot form.

After giving due recognition to our sampling problems, we believe the survey findings are essentially valid and that they serve as a useful counterweight against the speculative, unsupported observations often made by commentators on the constitutional referendum. The results of the survey are published with the hope that they may help to clarify some aspects of the political process of constitutional ratification in Montana in 1972.

<sup>4</sup>See Angus Campbell, et al., *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1960), pp. 94-96; and Austin Ranney and Leon Epstein, "The Two Electorates: Voters and Non-Voters in a Wisconsin Primary," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 28, (August, 1966) p. 600.

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