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## Franco-Americans and the 1992 Elections

Madeleine Giguère

*University of Southern Maine*

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Madeleine Giguere  
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FRANCO-AMERICANS AND THE 1992 ELECTIONS

1992 marks a full century after the period of heaviest migration of French-Canadians to New England. (Wade, p.388). I have chosen to address two questions related to Franco-Americans and politics over the past hundred years:

1. Did the French in New England have a distinct pattern of political behavior in their early history here?
2. Do Franco-Americans have a distinctive pattern of political behavior to-day?

The French immigrants to New England were familiar with the two-party system in Canada. As parish members, they had participated in the election of parish elders, the "marguilliers" who presided over the temporal affairs of the parish. Some of the immigrants became part of the electoral system early in their American experience. Thus, Joseph Cyr was elected as a Representative to the Maine legislature in 1845, three years after the Madawaska-Aroostook region was confirmed as part of the State of Maine by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. A generation later in 1874, Charles Fontaine was elected to the State legislature in Vermont. In "the late 1890s, Franco-Americans were elected to legislatures in each of the New England states. They gradually began to challenge Yankee and Irish control of local politics in virtually every mill town in the area. By 1907, in New Hampshire, there were 18 Franco-Americans in the state legislature- by far the best political performance in New England" in Normand Sepenuk's judgement.

(Sepenuk, p.215) Others would consider Rhode Island the premier state of Franco-American political success with its three Franco-American Governors (Aram Pothier(R) 1908,1910,1912 and 1924, Emery San Souci,1922 and Philip Noel(D) 1972 and 1974) several congressmen and the first and only U.S. Senator from New England,Felix Hebert in 1928.

Yet, as David Walker said,"the transition from Canadian to American politics was not easy. Political interest and activity was kept to a minimum by the language barrier, intense concern with economic betterment and massive efforts to erect the basic institutions of ethnic identity: the French parish, church, school, press and ethnic societies. Many considered their stay in the States temporary which strengthened their apolitical tendency." (Walker, p.210) The return to Canada of a quarter to a half of the French-Canadian migrants led to great instability in the early Franco-American communities.

The volume of in-migrants was great. Some counties in Quebec saw one-third of their farms lying fallow because of the migration to the States. The Quebec and Canadian Governments became concerned with this loss of people. Both Governments established repatriation programs to persuade the emigrants to return to Canada onto lands to be provided them by the program. Quebec and Canada hired French-Canadians living in the United States to recruit their compatriots to these programs. The best known to-day is Ferdinand Gagnon and his brother-in-law Charles Lalime, one working for the Canadian Government, the other working for the Quebec government. They criss-crossed New England with promises of land and support. However the conditions of the grants were onerous, including the need for the repatriots to have \$150 in funds on hand. The repatriation program failed in its goal of increasing the numbers returning to the homeland, but it did give impetus to the naturalization

movement among the French in New England. Naturalization Clubs were established to support those who wanted to become citizens of the United States. The former agent of repatriation, Ferdinand Gagnon became an advocate of this approach. Yet, strongly committed to the French-Canadian culture he preached naturalization without assimilation. In fact for the reasons cited above (language differences, economic striving, the building of ethnic institutions and the instability of residence), the majority of French immigrants in the nineteenth century did not participate in the naturalization process. The 1910 Census indicates that only 45% of the French Canadian born nationwide had been naturalized; by 1940, 56 per cent were naturalized; but by 1950, 72 per cent of the French-Canadian born were naturalized. The experience of WWII had obviously forged new bonds between the French-Canadian born and their country of residence, the United States. By 1950, the majority of the Francos were native-born Americans and thus the percentage of Francos who were citizens in New England was substantially higher in 1950 than the 72 per cent of naturalized French-Canadians. I estimate that at least 95 per cent of Franco-Americans are citizens, to-day. /In 1970 but thirteen percent of the French-Mother Tongue population was foreign-born/

Did the Francos support one party or another? On the state level, an early pattern of politics among the French can be clearly see. The ethnic antagonists of the French were the Irish and the Yankees. The voting behavior of the Franco's seems to have been a product of how much these rivals were hated and/or feared. "For example, a stronger political position for the Irish Democrats usually nurtured a sizeable French GOP (Republican) vote, as in Rhode Island. A weaker Irish Democratic party and a potent, more nativist Yankee Republican organization helped to produce more Franco-American Democrats, as was the case in Maine and

Vermont (Walker p.203).

To-day in New England state legislatures, members with French surnames are overwhelmingly democratic in Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island, moderately democratic in New Hampshire and marginally democratic in Vermont (See Table 1).

/ Tables will be available for all who might be interested at the end of this session. I would be glad to discuss the tables at that time./

David Walker in his study of presidential voting patterns in 30 Franco-American communities from 1892 to 1924 found no consistent pattern of voting as a unit for either the Republican or Democratic presidential candidates (See Table 2). Having supported the Democrats during the Cleveland years, in 1896 there is realignment of the French toward the republicans reflecting the conservatism of the Francos. Democrat William Jennings Bryan provoked unease among the Francos with his new monetary program. Later there was Republican Theodore Roosevelt's friendliness toward the French as evidenced by consular appointments which helped to draw the French to the republicans. Finally, the disputes with the Irish Catholic hierarchy over churches and schools spilled over into presidential politics with the Democrats who were seen as the voice of the Irish. So the period 1896-1924 is described by many as "leaning republican" Wilson, in 1916, got a small winning margin in the thirty Franco communities. Walker highlights the non-consistent pattern of the Presidential votes in his 30 Franco-American communities rather than their Republican leaning in this period.

In 1928, a new era of political commitment for the Francos begins with the candidacy of Al Smith. The French chose to ignore Smith's Irish origins and to concentrate on his Catholic, urban and immigrant background. Smith lost the

the presidential election but he had brought many French into the democratic party. The economic troubles of the next decade along with the working-class complexion of "la Franco-Americanie" extended the French support for the democrats. Roosevelt's attractive personality and the solidarity experience of WWII intensified the attachment of the Francos to the Democratic party. In Walker's thirty democratic cities only the Eisenhower personality and conservative policies were able to cut into the French commitment to the Democrats in the period 1928-1960.

Again in 1960, the French put away their antipathy to the Irish to support an Irish democratic candidate, Jack Kennedy, especially after his Catholicism became an issue. This late development in the campaign was recognized by Kennedy staff and he ended his election campaign in the early morning hours of election day with a rally in the Lewiston Maine City Park. Later, the City renamed the Park, Kennedy Park. On election day in 1960, JFK carried the Thirty Franco-American communities with 71 percent of the vote and carried Lewiston with 83 percent, the highest ever for Democrats in both the thirty cities and in Lewiston.

If the Francos in the period 1896-1924 could be said to be "leaning republican" then they can be said to be "leaning democratic" in the period 1928-1960. The Franco's were never a bloc of "safe" votes that a party could count on in an electoral campaign.

Francos have not been as successful in politics as one might think. Only in Rhode Island can they said to be successful. They have not elected one of "their own" to state-wide office in Vermont, nor often in Connecticut (Willisam St. Onge), nor in Massachusetts where a one-term Governor, Mr. King was said to be a Roy descendant nor in Maine where Margaret Chase Smith may well have been a Chasse, nor even in New Hampshire where a number of Franco politicians at the state-wide level(

Alphonse Roy, Oliva Huot, Normand D'Amours) have tended to have short political lives.

Josephat Benoit, a long-term Mayor of Manchester, cites eight reasons why Franco-Americans have not been as successful as they might have been in politics: their timidity, lack of perseverance in defeat, prejudice against persons and groups who are aggressive and tenacious, jealousy among themselves and against other political groups, an inclination to hold political grudges, a disposition to verbal violence, a tendency to let their emotional feelings overcome reason and a parsimony in investing work and money in the success of the party and its approved candidates. ( Benoit, 1961, pp 15-16,)

Andrew Greeley, priest and sociologist interested in ethnicity, characterized the French-American political style as being very strong on contacting political representatives, consistent in high levels of voting whatever the educational backgrounds but weak in participating in political campaigns. (Greeley pp.122-155 ) This makes Francos a difficult group to represent and probably contributes to their relative lack of political power,

What has been the pattern of Franco-American presidential votes since 1960? The data from Lewiston, Maine will be used to give some insight into the tendencies of Francos in Presidential elections since 1960.

Lewiston is not a typical Franco-American city but it is one with a culturally distinct Franco Population. Among the larger French ancestry cities, it is the one with the largest number and the largest proportion of French speakers not only of the French ancestry population but also of the city as a whole. (Only Manchester and Worcester and Woonsocket have a larger number of French ancestry persons and none of these have as many French speakers in the home as does Lewiston).

/ In social science terms, I am using Lewiston as an "ideal type."/

Lewiston is a Democratic city, it has supported the Democratic nominee since 1924. And even before that it had voted for Wilson in 1916 and 1912 according to Ronald Bissonnette (See Table 4). If we compare the Lewiston Democratic vote for president with that of the thirty Franco-American cities, (Table 4 and 2), we find that the Lewiston Democratic percentage is consistently higher than for the ensemble of Franco-American cities., from 10-16 percentage points higher in the period 1924-1960.

The democratic percentage in the Lewiston 1964 Presidential election was the highest ever, perhaps an effect of the after glow of the Kennedy promise and personality but also a response to the programs which were put in place in the Johnson administration: the Economic Opportunity Act, with its emphasis on work and training, the National Defense Education Act as well as a tax cut. The "Great Society" programs were attractive to a working class which comprises much of the Lewiston Franco-American constituency.

In evaluating Franco-American voters, Michael Guignard distinguishes between Franco-Americans with high ethnic involvement who vote for the Franco-Americans in local election and vote democratic in state and national elections and the less ethnically identified who vote independently of ethnic affiliation at all levels. Guignard links the level of ethnic identification with class. Upward mobility leads to a lower level of ethnic identification and consequently more of a tendency to vote independent of party label. Voting one's middle class or upper class interest tends to induce voting for Republican candidates. On the other hand, a working class orientation leads to higher levels of Democratic voting, not only out of tradition but because the democratic party



better expresses the interests of the working class.

The most democratic precinct in the city of Lewiston, is Ward VI precinct 1. Consistently, it has had higher percentage votes for the democratic presidential candidate than the rest of the city. (See Tables 5 and 6) It is the area of the mills, the extended Petit Canada, what my father called "The Island", because it is bounded by Lewiston's canal system. It is a working-class precinct. It voted over 70 per cent democratic in the Reagan elections when the city as a whole was giving the Democrats a small majority, a bare majority in 1984.

What is striking in 1992 is the substantial vote given to Perot in Lewiston, thirty one percent in the city as a whole which led to the lowest democratic presidential vote since 1920. Perhaps even more surprising is the thirty per cent of the vote of ward VI precinct 1 going to Perot. The Democrats failed to get a majority for the democratic presidential candidate in Lewiston for the first time since 1920. The Democrats carried the traditionally high support Precinct of Ward 6-1 by a small majority (Table 6). By advocating a conservative economic program and projecting an engaging personality, Perot made a substantial impact on the culturally distinct Franco-American community of Lewiston, even on its most working-class precinct.

In summary then, in so far as our data permits, we can say that early in their history from 1896 -1924 Franco-Americans tended to support the Republicans in Presidential elections after having supported the democrats earlier.

Later in their history in New England, i.e. from 1928 to 1960, the French tended to support the Democrats. Yet, they were not and are not block voters for one party or the other. Since 1960, the data from one Franco-American city

suggests that they have tended to remain Democratic, especially those with a working class orientation.

But in 1992, Ross Perot attracted nearly a third of the city-wide vote in the Presidential election in this culturally distinct Franco-American city and nearly a third of the votes in its most highly democratic and working class precinct. Again we see that Franco-Americans are not "safe" party voters.

An "intense individualism" ( Ducharme/Sepenuk, Sepenuk p.219) hovers constantly over the electoral politics of Franco-Americans. Whether in 1892 or in 1992, their individual votes must be won at each and every election!

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