Fifty years ago, the first Democrat in a century was elected statewide; today the Green Mountains are solid blue

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The election of 1958, more than fifty years ago now, signaled the start of Vermont’s nearly 180-degree political transformation. Vermont was a solid one-party Republican state for more than a century, and today is the bluest of the blue, with arguably the most progressive delegation in Washington, composed of two liberal Democrats and an Independent socialist. And no Republican.

The election of 2010 gave Vermont a Democratic governor, Peter Shumlin, and that party held onto solid control of both the House and Senate.

Back in 1936 Vermont’s reputation for Republicanism was enhanced when it was one of only two states that stood with Alf Landon while the rest of the nation gave Franklin D. Roosevelt a landslide re-election.

There was an old political truism that had held: “As goes Maine, so goes the nation.” But that year Maine went Republican so the motto had to be modified to say: “As goes Maine, so goes Vermont.”

Vermont’s Republican glacier developed a crack on November 3, 1958, when William H. Meyer, a 43-year-old forester from the tiny village of West Rupert, was elected to Vermont’s only seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. It was the first time a Democrat had been elected to a statewide office in well over one hundred years – in fact, since before the founding of the Republican party.

The glacial fissure of 1958 also included the first-ever need to recount a close election for governor, when Republican Robert T. Stafford of Rutland defeated Democrat Bernard Leddy by only 719 votes. Meyer’s victory over former Governor Harold J. Arthur was earned by more than 3,000 votes. Arthur was an unpopular Republican who had squeaked through in a crowded primary.

Throughout the 1950s Democrats had been showing increasing strength. In 1952, Democrat Robert Larrow gained a then-impressive 39 percent of the vote for governor; and in 1954 and 1956 Frank Branon, a Democratic state senator from Franklin County, ran even stronger races against Republican incumbent Governor Joseph B. Johnson of Springfield.

Bill Meyer served only one term in the U.S. House, but his accomplishment was destined to forecast the future. The Republican glacier calved in 1962 when Philip H. Hoff was elected the first Democratic governor since 1853. Hoff was a member of the Vermont House from Burlington and his victory was doubly significant because it was the first time an incumbent Vermont governor had been defeated in a general election. Hoff’s margin over Governor F. Ray Keyser Jr. was only 1,500 votes, and was assisted by the defection of two Republicans, T. Garry Buckley of Bennington and A. Luke Crispe of Brattleboro, whose impromptu Vermont Independence Party had backed Hoff. The 3,000 VIP votes more than made
the margin of victory. Buckley and Crispe had their own agenda. They were annoyed with Gov. Keyser for letting an out-of-state group manage the new racetrack at Pownal instead of their favored Vermont group.

In the Vermont House of Representatives at this time the balance of power tilted heavily in favor of the many conservative small towns. It was a body of 246 members, each representing one of those towns regardless of population. The most egregious disparity was illustrated by the fact that Hoff, when he represented the state’s largest city, Burlington, with a population of 35,531, had the same vote as the representative from Stratton, where a ski resort was a mere gleam in the eyes of developers and had a population of 24.

After the U.S. Supreme Court required “one man, one vote,” the House in 1966 downsized itself to 150 members, elected from districts of nearly equal population. Thus the power of the progressive cities and larger towns was enhanced.

Ever since Phil Hoff’s three two-year terms as governor, Vermont governors have alternated parties with regularity: Republican Deane C. Davis, Democrat Thomas P. Salmon, Republican Richard A. Snelling, Democrat Madeleine M. Kunin, Republican Snelling again, Democrat Howard Dean, Republican James Douglas, then Democrat Peter Shumlin.

Before Hoff, the previous Democratic governor was John S. Robinson of Bennington in 1853-54. He was the great-grandson of the founding settler of Bennington, Capt. Samuel Robinson. Then the term for governor and other state officials, including legislators, was one year. Starting in 1870 a state constitutional convention changed the term of office to two years – which it remains today. There is much agitation today for Vermont to join the other 48 states (New Hampshire excepted) that have a four-year term, but it would require modifying the constitution, an arduous process in this state.

During the century-plus when Vermont elected only Republicans, a two-party system of sorts developed because elections really took place during Republican primaries. In mid-twentieth century the progressive-conservative split became clear in 1946 when Governor Mortimer Proctor was ousted from office in a primary by
Ernest W. Gibson Jr. Proctor, the third governor of that surname in Vermont’s history, was associated with the conservative – indeed, it was called the Proctor – wing of the Republican party.

Gibson Jr. was a popular World War II hero with a prominent name; his father had served many years in both U.S. House and Senate. Gibson Jr. thus became the first in a series of progressive – and nationally well-regarded – Republican office holders that included George D. Aiken, Ralph Flanders, Robert T. Stafford, and James M. Jeffords. A climax of sorts was reached in 2001 when Senator Jeffords could no longer accept the neocon Republican policies of George W. Bush and abruptly abandoned the Republican party to become an independent. To a frenzy of national news media, his action returned the U.S. Senate to Democratic control. And for the first time in ages Vermont had no Republican representation in the U.S. Congress.

Of the trend that had been evolving during the 1950s, publisher Robert W. Mitchell of the Rutland Herald analyzed the situation with almost clairvoyant accuracy in an editorial the day after the 1954 election:

George Aiken put new vitality into the Republican party in the thirties, protecting it from Democratic inroads at the height of New Deal strength nationally. [Ernest] Gibson [Jr.] brought the party following up in a new peak of strength in 1946. Neither in the case of Aiken nor Gibson was their help to the party welcomed by the party’s conservative faction, but there isn’t much doubt that the Democratic upsurge of the last two elections would have come much earlier without the Aiken-Gibson influence.

Now that the swing toward the Democrats has gone so far, there may be a change in the complexion of Vermont politics. The rebel Republicans may turn to the Democratic party instead of working within the ranks of GOP. Instead of having closely contested primaries as the main feature of each election year, the real contests may come in the general election if the two party system has actually been restored in the state.

Such a realignment might be a good thing for the state, putting more vitality into state politics than it has been possible to do by having all the real competition within the Republican party.

Bill Meyer’s election more than a half century ago was remarkable not only for its “first” quality but also by the fact that Meyer was such a leftist. Brought up as a Quaker, he had sought status as a conscientious objector during World War II; though he was denied that classification, he failed his physical exam and was rejected, with a 4F draft status. As a candidate in 1958 Meyer opposed the draft, favored the admission of Red China to the United Nations, was an early advocate of nuclear arms control, and worked for the end of atomic testing. These issues were well beyond the leftist limits of mainstream Vermont politics.

While in Congress, Meyer busied himself with all the issues that drove him to run for the office. The index to the Congressional Record during his time offers many references to his efforts to strengthen the United Nations, to seat Red China
and promote a moratorium on nuclear weapons testing, as well as such domestic issues as reducing the agriculture surplus, boosting the appropriation to the Vermont Veterans Home, and improving medical care for the elderly via Social Security.

Meyer’s personality was somewhat ponderous and impassive. He spoke with deliberation, in keeping with his heavyset frame. The twitching of his pencil-thin mustache often gave a clue as to his thinking as much as what he said. As he faced re-election in November 1960, Meyer was the subject of a descriptive and analytical article by Frederick H. Gardner in the Harvard Crimson that seems to encapsulate his personality:

Even his opponents seem awed by his integrity, and are thus forced to pursue the point that Meyer’s very honesty and foresight make him unqualified, on the grounds that a man who essentially speaks his own mind does not speak as a true representative. This allegation causes a smile to work itself slowly across Meyer’s strong face, finally curling his thin mustache: “I’ve taken more polls, done more listening, and solicited more mail than any of my predecessors; I’ve gone up and down the state and I think I know a great deal about what Vermonters want. I aim at articulating their fundamental aspirations. And I think that if a referendum were taken tomorrow and the people were given half a page of facts about the draft, they would vote to abolish it. And on second thought, you can forget about that half-page of facts.”

Meyer speaks slowly, seeming to deliberate over the specific word that will best express each thought. His wry optimism and homey mannerisms have led some to compare him with Lincoln, and his own special synthesis of principle and realism strengthens this impression. “They may call me naïve, but I have my streaks of skepticism and bitterness, you know. Life demands that everybody work out his own compromises and settlements.”

In 1960 Meyer was defeated by 23,000 votes by the popular and invincible Stafford, who went on to serve for the next decade in the U.S. House, then in 1971 was appointed to fill a vacancy in the U.S. Senate on the death of Senator Winston L. Prouty. Stafford remained in the Senate for 17 years, retiring in 1989. Only the year before his death, Prouty had won a narrow victory over Hoff who, after retiring from his third term as governor in 1968, made his only try for federal office. Hoff later represented Chittenden County for several terms in the state Senate.

After his defeat, Meyer took a job as consultant on the technical review staff of the Interior Department but remained active in politics. He was an unsuccessful candidate for the Democratic nomination as U.S. Senator in 1962, 1964, and 1970. He was also a delegate to Vermont State Democratic conventions in 1956, 1960, 1964, and 1968. His last bid for office was in 1972 when he tried to run again for the U.S. House, when the seat was held by Richard W. Mallary of Fairlee, a Republican in the Aiken-Stafford mold. Bill Meyer resided in his home at West Rupert until his death there on December 16, 1983 at the age of 68. His wife, Bertha, remained active with the Bennington County Democratic committee for several years.
On learning of Meyer's death, publisher Mitchell of the Rutland Herald editorialized:

"Politics is an affliction that is like malaria – once you are bitten it never really goes completely away. The bug bit Mr. Meyer very strongly. He enjoyed his term in Washington, enjoyed the rough-and-tumble of House activity, and yearned to go back. It was only in much later years that he was able to agree that his election in 1958 hinged to quite an extent on the nature of his Republican opposition [Harold J. Arthur]."

In the larger picture, what demographics brought about the political transformation of this small New England state? One factor was simply population growth. For some 150 years Vermont's population had stagnated in a range of between 300,000 and 400,000. Only in the census of 1970 did the state finally break through the 400,000 mark – tiny in relation to numbers in most of the other states, admittedly. After all, Vermont is the second-least-populated state in the Union, and small changes in numbers tend to magnify in statistical significance. But these new numbers reflected the completion of Interstate highways 91 and 89, the growth in large ski resorts and the phenomenon of second homes. Newcomers, often mocked as “flatlanders” in this mountainous terrain, brought with them new and more liberal ideas. Most new residents weighed heavily on the “downhill” scales of the dichotomy described by scholar Paul G. Searls in his book Two Vermonts: Geography and Identity 1865-1910. Searls distinguishes between the uphillers, those more rural, tradition-bound, and resistant to change, versus the folks who generally settled in the valleys, the downhillers, who tend to be more urban, more likely to press for change.

Another factor that helped produce leftward change in Vermont politics was the small but determined growth of third parties, notably the Liberty Union party, which began in June 1970 when a group of about 20 progressives gathered in the West Rupert living room of Bill and Bertha Meyer. Their focus was on opposing the war in Vietnam, the militarization of society, problems of the poor, and the desecration of the environment. After it won 5 percent of the statewide vote, the Liberty Union gained “major party” status so it could appear on the ballot. Founders, besides Meyer, included Chittenden artist Richard Clark, former legal-aid lawyer Peter Diamondstone from Brattleboro, and Bernie Sanders from Burlington, then working as a carpenter. The Liberty Union ran candidates for statewide and federal office for many years, helping to nudge the Democrats leftward.

A decade after Liberty Union's founding, Bernie Sanders's political career began to blossom when he won a squeaker of a race as mayor of Burlington in 1981. A Progressive era was launched in Vermont's largest city as Sanders was re-elected to three more terms as mayor. The Progressives achieved major party status in 1999 and since then have succeeded in electing several members to the Vermont House of Representatives as well as placing statewide candidates on the ballot. In 1990, Sanders rose above Liberty Union and Progressive labels when he ran for the U.S. House, officially as an independent. He defeated Republican incumbent Peter
Smith — a rarity, because incumbent Congressmen from Vermont had always assumed re-election as a given. Sanders proceeded to break other records by being returned to seven more terms in the U.S. House, becoming the longest-serving independent Congressman in American history.

Another demographic uptick evolved in Brattleboro, which had gained a reputation in the late 1960s and early 1970s for a counter-culture that attracted communes and “hippies” whose lifestyles challenged New England orthodoxy. The town continued to harbor a significant number of political progressives who are united by — among other traditional issues — opposition to Vermont’s only nuclear power plant in their backyard in Vernon.

One might conclude that the political transformation of Vermont turned a corner when Sanders ran for the U.S. Senate in 2006 to fill an open seat left by Jeffords’s retirement. Sanders’s opponent was businessman Rich Tarrant of Colchester, who hopelessly poured seven million of his own dollars into the race. Whereas Bernie Sanders had achieved something like 2 percent of the statewide vote when he first ran on the Liberty Union ticket in the early 1970s, he won election to the United States Senate in 2006, still an independent, with a resounding 65.4 percent of the vote.

Notes

The best recent book to offer historical perspective on Vermont politics is Paul M. Searls, Two Vermonts: Geography and Identity 1865-1910, published in 2006 by the University Press of New England. The classic history of politics in Vermont is The Vermont Political Tradition and Those Who Helped Make It by William Doyle, who is still serving in the Vermont Senate from Washington County and prepares the Doyle Poll on public issues for the state’s annual town meetings in March. Senator Doyle’s book was self-published in 1984. Quotes in this article from Rutland Herald publisher Robert Mitchell are found in The Bob Mitchell Years: An Anthology of a Half Century of Editorial Writing by the Publisher of the Rutland Herald, edited by Tyler Resch and published by the Herald in 1994, the year of its bicentennial.