
Voter Participation in Bryan County, Oklahoma, 1948-1964

J. ALLEN SINGLETON, Southeastern State College of Oklahoma

Bryan County is located in southeastern Oklahoma. It is an agriculturally dependent, low-income area. Durant, with 10,467 of the county's 24,252 population, is the county's only urban area, and is the county seat. The eight other incorporated places in the county vary in population from 68 to 522 persons.¹

¹Demographic characteristics for this report are based on U.S. Bureau of the Census publications. Materials related to voter registration, election returns and precinct structure were obtained from the Bryan County Election Board and the Bryan County Clerk's office. Historical background is to be found in election year copies of the Durant Daily Democrat.

There are 40 voting units in the county, 12 of which are in Durant. Most of the rural precincts are mixed rural non-farm and farm in nature. None are totally rural non-farm.

The county has more rural than urban voters (6,750 to 5,178). This represents about 84% of the potentially eligible voters of the county. Of the county's total of 11,928 registered voters about 60% participate in general elections and primaries involving contests for the more prominent state and national offices. Rural area voters participate at a slightly higher rate than do Durant voters, 61 to 58.8%.

The rural vote consists of 54.8 to 61% of the total Democratic vote and 51.3 to 67.3% of the total Republican vote. The rural percentage of the Republican vote has decreased in each of the last four elections. This may or may not be a valid indicator of a trend in Republican support in the county.

The county's traditional voting pattern has been solidly Democratic. The first Republican majority was recorded in two small precincts for Eisenhower's electors in 1952. Since 1952 Republican support has ranged from a record low of 7.5% to an all time high of 46.4% of the total vote cast. Recent Republican support has generally been 30 to 33% of the total vote in the contests for the governorship, U.S. Senator and Presidential electors.

Voter participation has never been high in Bryan county. The November contest for Presidential electors is the most popular in attracting voters. The median of registered voter participation in this contest is 65% as contrasted to a median of 47% in the gubernatorial race. Both the U.S. Senator and U.S. Representative races have, on occasion, out-drawn the gubernatorial vote. No other state-wide contests attract nearly as many total voters, nor do the county races. The average number of votes cast in these state-wide and local contests is not so large as that in the major contests.

Participation in the Democratic primary is high, while the infrequent Republican primaries draw only negligible participation. This pattern, combined with the presence of Republican support in only the major contests, emphasizes that such support is based largely on personalities and issues other than party affiliation.

The 1958 gubernatorial primary marked the highest rate (72.2%) of voter participation in the county. Interest was apparently high, as record voting occurred in other contests as well. This primary was followed by a general election in which the pre-1952 pattern of Democratic support occurred, and in which the Republicans received only 7.5% of the total vote, instead of their usual 16 to 19%.

A record 37.9% of the total vote was given to the 1962 Republican gubernatorial candidate. The significant thing to note about this election was the lack of support for the Democratic candidate. The Republican total vote was actually below that of 1964, 1956, and 1952, the other years of high Republican vote.

Precinct analysis indicates a base Democratic vote that regularly supports any Democratic candidate in the general election, whatever office he is seeking. There also appears to be a swing and a base Republican vote. Secondary support votes also exist for both parties, i.e., votes which are usually cast only in times of high voter interest. The base Republican vote can be relied upon only in the major state and national contests.

Internally there are great variances among the precincts of the county. There is no pattern of support based on the rural farm/rural non-farm structure of precincts. The support pattern is much more erratic in

Durant than it is in the rural areas. A prominent formative factor creating this apparent instability was the high Republican support in the 1960 presidential election.

The Republican party may hope to carry only those precincts in Bryan county in which the Republican base strength plus all of the swing vote exceeds the Democratic base strength. Usually when Republican victories have occurred, only the base Democratic vote has been cast. In the future the population trend, especially if the voting population of Durant exceeds the total rural voting population, may be an additional factor which will influence the county's voting pattern.
