

Palmyra Historical Society Newsletter

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Palmyra Votes: Picking Winners and Losers.



1848-2012 by Tom Stanley



On November 6, voters in the village and town of Palmyra will join millions of others in Wisconsin and around the country to select our president. Naturally these voters hope that their vote will enable their candidate, Barak Obama or Mitt Romney, to win Wisconsin's ten electoral votes and contribute to the winning candidate's victory.

This is a part of the long tradition of democracy that began with the first presidential election in 1788 and was first exercised in Wisconsin in 1848, just after statehood. How have Badger voters, including those in Palmyra, fared in picking winners in these elections? Or how many times have they lost?

The results of the 39 elections since 1856, the first election with a Republican candidate, yield a few insights.

Wisconsin voters voted for a Republican 23 times, a Democrat 15 times and a Progressive (Robert La Follette of Wisconsin) once, about the same percentage of Republican candidates as national voters. Village voters selected a Republican 33 times and a Democrat six times (Woodrow Wilson in 1916, Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, Lyndon Johnson in 1964, Jimmy Carter in 1976, Michael Dukakis in 1988 and Bill Clinton in 1996). Town voters made it almost unanimous for the G.O.P., 38 Republicans and only one Democrat (Franklin Roosevelt in 1936).

Village and town voters split their vote only six times, all since 1916 when the village first went Democrat, and is the reason why the village has a better winning percentage (71%) than the town (61%). All but one of the village defections from the Republican Party occurred in elections in which the Democrat won the presidency. The outlier was the Dukakis win in 1988. (Because of overwhelming local Republican majorities in the early years, we assumed that state, village and town, both voted for the Republican John C. Fremont who lost to Democrat James Buchanan in 1856).

By contrast, the state has a better winning percentage (76%) than both because voters have selected more winning Democrats (Grover Cleveland in 1892, Wilson in 1912, Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, 1936 and 1940, Harry Truman in 1948, Carter in 1976, Clinton in 1992 and 1996, and Barak Obama in 2008).

The trends look this way: Republicans continue to do well in the town and in the village but a little less reliably so in the village. And, as every resident knows, although the state has become almost evenly polarized in recent years, voters have favored a Democrat in each of the last six presidential elections. Ronald Reagan in 1984 was the last Republican candidate to carry Wisconsin. The Obama/Romney matchup looks to be a tossup.

These statistics should be seen against the backdrop of national, state and local history. Wisconsin's political history reached back to 1785 when congress, still under the Articles of Confederation, established the Northwest Territories that eventually included Wisconsin with the provision that slavery would be banned. Thus Wisconsin began with "free soil" principles that made it fertile ground for the new Republican Party that formed in the 1850's. Republicans' rallying cry was: "No extension of slavery into the territories." When the Civil War broke out, Wisconsin answered the call with a robust military effort that contributed mightily to the Union victory.

