

Iowa Politics

Iowa Republicans were worried in 1950. The Democratic party had dented their ranks in 1948 by electing Guy M. Gillette as Senator and by carrying the state for President Truman. Political observers were wondering if these successes would be repeated in 1950, thus indicating a break in the state's traditional conservatism and Republicanism.

The top position at stake was that of United States Senator. The candidacy of incumbent Bourke B. Hickenlooper was taken for granted, but Harry B. Thompson of Muscatine was the first candidate to enter the primary race. In 1938 Thompson had defeated Hickenlooper in the primary for the nomination for Lieutenant Governor, but had later withdrawn, and the state convention had then nominated Hickenlooper.

The field of Republican senatorial candidates reached three, with the entrance of Earl F. Wisdom, a Des Moines attorney. Wisdom, a former Iowa public school official and the executive secretary of the Iowa Rural Electric Cooperative, hoped to win support from the farmers.

Meanwhile, the Democrats were busy. The Democratic primary in Iowa is not usually marked

by strong competition, since the candidates face almost certain defeat in the general election. However, an atmosphere of optimism still prevailed from the successes in 1948. By February five candidates had entered the senatorial primary: Alvin P. Meyers, Van Meter; Ernest J. Seeman, Waterloo; E. E. Poston, Corydon; Willis M. Shaw, Newton; and Otha D. Wearin, Hastings. Albert J. Loveland, Under Secretary of Agriculture, entered the primary in March, announcing that he would advocate the passage of the Brannan farm plan. As a result, he was labeled as the candidate put into the race with the blessings of President Truman and Secretary of Agriculture Brannan. Hints of presidential interference in local elections brought unpleasant memories of Roosevelt's "purge" in 1938. Wearin declared that the Democrats of Iowa could "settle this contest themselves," while Poston commented that it appeared to him to be a "plain case of the secretary of agriculture trying to name the senator from Iowa for the Democrats of Iowa."

The "Brannan Plan" was already a subject of heated debate. One of the highlights of the National Farm Institute in Des Moines, in February, had been a bitter clash between Secretary of Agriculture Charles F. Brannan and Allan B. Kline, president of the National Farm Bureau. Kline spoke first, to the alternate booing and cheering of a throng of 4,000; during Brannan's reply, Kline

occupied himself by shelling one of the ears of corn that the Secretary of Agriculture had requested be brought to the platform.

When former Governor Nelson G. Kraschel, "the old campaigner," entered the field in April, the number of Democratic candidates reached seven. Kraschel stated that he wanted to give the Democrats a free choice in a party referendum on the Brannan plan. Two days after the Kraschel announcement, Poston withdrew in an effort to avoid a selection by the state convention.

The second office on the 1950 ticket, that of Governor, was also second in interest. Republican Governor Beardsley was unopposed for the traditional second term. Only two candidates entered the field for the gubernatorial nomination on the Democratic side, but the resulting primary campaign was just as spectacular as that for Senator. Myron J. Bennett, Des Moines public safety commissioner and former radio "disk jockey," switched his party affiliation in January in order to seek the nomination, announcing that he would run as a "liberal, independent Democrat." A month after Bennett opened his campaign the Young Democrats of Polk County passed a resolution stating that they did not "welcome" him as a Democratic candidate, undoubtedly because of his sudden switch from Republican ranks. Bennett protested this action; Jake More, Democratic State Chairman, replied that it was the "privilege"

of the Young Democrats to make such a declaration.

Two months after Bennett's campaign was under way, Lester S. Gillette announced his candidacy, supposedly with the blessing of the Democratic State Central Committee. Although he was not related to Senator Guy M. Gillette, some confusion existed in the minds of the voters because of the similarity of names. However, Lester Gillette was a popular candidate in his own right because of his work in the State Senate and as a member of the State Board of Education.

The primary campaign in the spring of 1950 was lively. Some of the more colorful incidents of the campaign were provided by "Nels" Kraschel, the survivor of the greatest trio of Democratic campaigners that ever stumped the state together (Murphy, Herring, and Kraschel). Kraschel maintained that he was upholding the "integrity of the Democratic party" against the "hitchhiking Brannan farm plan," which he denounced as "one man's dream."

President Truman's "nonpolitical" trip through Iowa in May served to highlight the political campaign. The presidential train crossed the state on May 8, the President's birthday. At the Ottumwa stop, the town turned out in force to welcome the presidential visitor and present him with a huge birthday cake. The thousands of Iowans who greeted the presidential train in Iowa irritated the

Republicans; Robert K. Goodwin, Republican State Chairman, said that the stops were "nothing but political rallies."

Local contests for Congress and for the state legislature completed the primary tickets of both parties. By the final day for filing nomination papers, the number of candidates totaled 392, over thirty more than in 1948, but not close to the record 574 set in 1936. Republicans and Democrats filed for all twenty-one of the seats open in the State Senate. Of the 108 House seats, Republicans sought only 103, while Democrats filed for 105.

On June 5, 1950, Iowa voters went to the polls to decide the issues of this turbulent primary campaign. Over 256,000 votes were cast in the Republican senatorial contest: Senator Hickenlooper received approximately 75.3 per cent of this total, carrying every county in Iowa and receiving 30,000 more votes than all the other Republican and Democratic senatorial candidates combined. Governor Beardsley led the gubernatorial field with 238,686 votes.

In the Democratic senatorial contest Albert J. Loveland won the nomination outright by polling 37.8 per cent of the ballots cast. Conforming to party expectations, Lester Gillette defeated Myron J. Bennett by a margin of three to one.

Within twenty-four hours after the primary, the election campaign was under way. The con-

troversy over the Brannan plan continued. Loveland reaffirmed his support of the issue which had been a decisive factor in his victory, and Hickenlooper pointed up the controversy with his statement: "Loveland is for it, and I am against it." Frank Nye, writing in the Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, commented that it had been several years since the issues in an Iowa senatorial campaign were as "clear cut" as in this one. However, by September the emphasis had shifted to such a marked degree that political writers could call the Brannan plan a "dead duck." Possibly a growing opposition to the plan, indicated in several public opinion polls, led to its decline as a leading issue. Loveland's popularity with the farmers of Iowa could still be a cause for concern, however, since he had been well known over the state as the chief of the triple-A. In addition, the Democrats revived memories of "Herbert Hoover and the depression" — a slogan that had been winning elections for them for eighteen years.

During the campaign Hickenlooper called Loveland the "payroll farmer" and claimed that he was hand-picked because "he would be a rubber stamp for the administration." Loveland retorted that Hickenlooper's record showed a "startling lack of service to the people of Iowa" and that the place for a man with such a record was "back in his law office in Cedar Rapids."

Loveland attacked Hickenlooper on the basis of

his attendance at meetings of the Senate agriculture committee, charging that Hickenlooper had attended only 30 of the 177 meetings of the committee held since the beginning of the year. The strategy backfired when Hickenlooper cited facts from the *Congressional Record*: there were not 177 working days; there were only 34 agriculture committee meetings, 30 of which he had attended.

The appearance in the state of several important "salesmen" of the Democratic party was evidence of the nationwide interest in the senatorial contest. Vice President Alben W. Barkley made speeches at Waterloo and Sioux City, where he praised his party's farm record but avoided any mention of the controversial Brannan plan by name. The crowd roared when Barkley said that Iowa should elect Democratic congressmen because "When you have Republicans down there, that's taxation without representation." In October, Secretary of Agriculture Brannan delivered a speech at Iowa State College on "Agricultural Policy." Secretary of Labor Maurice J. Tobin barnstormed Iowa for Loveland, while Senator Guy M. Gillette made three speeches in which he asked his Republican friends to support Loveland.

Declaring that "honesty in state government is at stake in the present election," Lester S. Gillette centered most of his gubernatorial campaign around two major issues: the liquor control commission and activities within the State Department

of Agriculture. With regard to the liquor control commission, Gillette charged that the Governor had been interfering in commission business. In addition, he asserted that the commission had been conducting its affairs in an unbusinesslike manner and "hoarding" unknown brands of liquor, particularly one known as "Old Hector." Gillette promised, if elected, to operate the Iowa liquor control act as written — "an act to promote temperance in Iowa" — and declared that state liquor stores should not sell to "taverns, bars, and roadhouses." He also demanded that the Governor either call a special session of the legislature to investigate the liquor situation or turn the matter over to the interim committee.

The issue regarding activities within the State Department of Agriculture developed when Secretary Clyde Spry, in overruling chemists of his own staff and of Iowa State College, approved an antifreeze, popularly known as P-60, for sale to the public for field testing purposes. For this action, Gillette demanded the resignation of Spry.

Governor Beardsley restyled his campaign tactics in 1950. While he had a full schedule of speaking engagements, his speeches in the main were of the nonpolitical variety. Beardsley consistently maintained that he was seeking re-election strictly on his record. This approach was a definite contrast to 1948 when he had waged a vigorous campaign.

The outcome of the campaign was closely watched by national observers, since the election of Loveland would have meant a defeat for the conservative Republicans and a go-ahead signal for the reviving of the Brannan plan. But Iowa was safely Republican at mid-century. On November 7, Senator Hickenlooper was re-elected by a majority of over 88,000 votes; he carried all but fifteen counties. His victory, which had been forecast as one of the closest of his career, turned out to be a "normal" one. Governor Beardsley won re-election by over 156,000 votes, a larger majority than he had received in 1948. An entire Republican state ticket, including eight Congressmen, was swept into office. The only place the Democrats could report a gain was in the State Senate, where their membership increased from seven to nine. The nonpartisan issue on the ballot — whether or not a state convention should be called to revise the Constitution of Iowa — was defeated by a three to two margin.

As a result of the election the Republican party became more firmly entrenched at the grass roots — the county offices — than it was in 1930. Solid Republican county slates were installed in 52 counties, with the Republicans electing 563 county officials to 128 for the Democrats. Once again the Republicans were assuming their pre-New Deal position of power in Iowa. Indications of Democratic strength, which had appeared in 1948, had

been dispelled. Republicans now looked forward with optimism to plans for the 1952 campaign with its larger significance. For in 1952 international affairs were likely to be at a boiling point, national politics were creating an ever-increasing interest among Iowans, and the state and local scene had many challenging issues which would inevitably confront the voters.

KENNETH F. MILLSAP