

### **Introduction and Hypothesis**

While there are countless ways to describe the political culture of a community and these descriptions seem to grow at an unbelievable rate, there are still two very dominant descriptions of political cultures that define American communities. These descriptions are of course, conservative and progressive. This section will serve to describe these two political cultures, the demographics they encompass, and will also specifically identify and hypothesize the political culture of Polk County, Oregon.

While it is necessary to generalize when describing whether a person and in effect a locale, is conservative or progressive, there are certainly commonalities to both descriptors. Conservatives generally live in more rural areas and in the Southern and Midwestern areas of the United States whereas progressives usually live in more urbanized areas, specifically in the East and Northeastern parts of the United States. There are, however, varying areas of inhabitation for both conservatives and progressives and at times, the dominating political culture can change drastically even from county to county. In regards to the age of progressives, they are generally younger whereas conservatives usually encompass older generations. Another generalization that is particularly pertinent to Polk County revolves around race. While whites are relatively diverse and balanced in their voting habits, African-Americans have historically voted much more progressively than conservatively.

Value-wise, those who identify as conservative generally have ideals that line up with those of the Republican party. These include an emphasis on religion, smaller government with a laissez-faire approach to the economy and business, and in general conservatives prefer to do things the way that they have been done historically and by the design of the United States'

founding fathers. Progressives though, usually identify with the Democratic party. Their values often include things such as more government involvement in society, higher taxes, and often times separation of church and state to the point of having no religious impact involved in most activities outside of a church building.

Polk County is certainly a rural community and driving through the county, it is clear that a large portion of the county's economy stems from agriculture. Being part of the Salem Metropolitan Statistical Area, there is also a heavy influence of the city of Salem and Marion County on Polk County. Within Polk County is Western Oregon University (WOU), which is a liberal arts university in Monmouth, Oregon. While college students have a low voter turnout, the presence of WOU certainly impacts the political dynamics of the county in spite of this. There is a diversity of ages in different cities in Polk County. Dallas for example, has a higher percentage of retirees whereas Monmouth, Independence, and West Salem have more families with children. In addition, West Salem has a higher average income as evidenced by their school system, their business culture, and the overall atmosphere within the city.

Based on the average age of Polk County residents, the fact that it is a rural and agricultural community that generally elects Republicans and has a hard time passing things like bond measures, Polk County is a conservative community.

### **Archival Analysis**

According to a report by PiperJaffray published in 2015 for the Dallas School District, the July 1, 2014 population of Polk County was 77,735. This includes residents of the county seat of Dallas, Monmouth, Independence, Falls City and West Salem, as well as a number of much smaller rural communities both incorporated and unincorporated (PiperJaffry 36). Of the total population of Polk County, 23.5% are under 18 years of age and 16.4% are 65 years of age or older, as of 2013

(US Census Bureau). This means that the remaining percentage of residents of Polk County (60.1%) are between the ages of 18 and 65. Given the fact that older generations vote more conservatively, that in Polk County those 65 and older represent 21.4% of the voting age population, and that this age group has one of the highest voter turnout rates, it's clear that Polk County is heavily influenced by conservative voters. Representations of this influence will be shown in the following section.

As referenced in the introduction, the races that comprise the population of Polk County have a tremendous impact on the political culture of the county. According the United States Census Bureau, a mere 0.80% of the citizens of Polk County are African-American with 91.0% being white. This discrepancy clearly impacts election results and the overall political culture in the county and as with the age demographic, representations will be given in the next section of this profile.

Another aspect of Polk County that heavily influences the political culture of the county is the local economy, specifically the types of businesses that are present within the county, what the county exports, and where citizens of the county work. According to the PiperJaffray report, the top commodities in Polk County in 2012 were in order, dairy products, tall fescue, Christmas trees, broilers, and wheat (PiperJaffray 37). Clearly, agriculture plays a huge part in the economy of Polk County and it surely has in impact on the political culture of the county.

### **Political Culture by the Numbers**

In Polk County, there are 43,497 registered voters according to 2015 Oregon Secretary of State data. Of these eligible and registered voters, the Republican party represents the largest proportion at 37.6%. In addition, Democrats represent 32.7%, non-affiliated voters represent 22.8%, and Independents represent 5.2% (Oregon Secretary of State). In the most recent national

election, Republicans in Polk County had the highest voter turnout of all parties at 85.7% (PiperJaffray 39). This statistic shows the general relationship between the older demographic of voters, conservatism, and voter turnout. In relation to the state as a whole, Oregon is comprised of 29.9% Republican, 39.4% Democrat, 24.5% non-affiliated voters, and 5.0% Independent (Oregon Secretary of State). Clearly, Polk County has a relatively high number of registered Republicans.

In the 2014 election for Oregon governor, Polk County residents voted in favor of Republican Dennis Richardson over the winner John Kitzhaber. Polk County residents voted in favor of Richardson at 53.4% compared to 41.5% of support going to Kitzhaber. This is compared to the statewide results in which Kitzhaber won 49.8% to 44.2% (Oregon Live). In relation, in the 2010 Oregon gubernatorial election in which Democrat John Kitzhaber defeated Republican Chris Dudley, Polk County residents chose Dudley 53.8% to 43.2% whereas the statewide race had Kitzhaber winning 49.3% to 47.7% (Oregon Live). Both of these elections show a clear pattern of conservative ideology in the midst of a largely progressive state and is what is expected in a county with the demographics, infrastructure, and economy of Polk County.

Voter turnout is another important aspect of the political culture of Polk County. In 2012, there was a 40.6% voter turnout and in 2014 the county had a 33.1% voter turnout (Oregon Live). This is likely due to the fact that 2014 was not a presidential election, during which voter turnout is the highest. This is also a reflection of the fact that Polk County has a higher population of older generations in that this demographic often times won't vote on local matters regarding bonds, levies, etc. and instead will focus largely on national issues.

## **How Polk County Votes**

The ways in which a county votes on certain issues is clearly very reflective of the political culture of a county. In order to help describe the political cultural of Polk County, the results from three ballot measures will be analyzed. These ballot measures will be Measure 91 from 2014, Measure 92 from 2014, and a local ballot measure involving a public safety levy from November, 2013.

Measure 91 was put before voters in 2014 and was in regards to the legalization of marijuana. In Polk County, the measure failed by a margin of 52.2% to 47.8%. Statewide, the measure passed by a margin of 56% to 44% (Oregon Live). This means that Polk County residents decided that the production and use (with regulations) should remain illegal while the state of Oregon as a whole decided that it was time for the drug to be legalized. As discussed, those that identify as conservatives usually tend to rely on religious-based morality when making decisions and prefer that things remain the way that they are. This certainly holds true in Polk County which went against the grain of the state. As expected, Polk County showed a conservative approach to the issue of marijuana legalization.

The second measure, Measure 92, was very important to residents of Polk County in that it had a direct impact on agriculture. This measure required specific labeling of foods containing GMO's, obviously imposing a cost on the producers of the goods. In Polk County, the measure failed 58.2% to 41.8% whereas in the state of Oregon as a whole, the measure failed by a mere 837 votes (Oregon Live). The debate was very heated state and even countrywide and included some questionable tactics by lobbyists and others. Clearly though, the agricultural roots of Polk County came through and as would be expected, the community voted against the measure. This

again shows the largely conservative approach of the county in addition to the farming-based economy.

Lastly, in November of 2013, a measure went before the voters of Polk County that would allow the county to sell bonds, thus increasing the tax rate. The extra money would fund public safety by supporting the Sheriff including patrol deputies, jail staff, the district attorney's office, and rehabilitation services just to name a few. The residents of Polk County though, chose not to support the measure and it failed by a margin of 58%-42%. While a very complicated measure, a contributing factor in its failure has to do with a unique combination the older demographic among as well as the conservative view. While conservatives generally are very supportive of law enforcement funding and of public safety, Polk County has a high number of low-income and set-income (i.e. retired residents) residents that simply did not believe that they could afford a higher tax rate. This demographic combined with the fact that conservatives generally oppose tax increases combine to give an idea of the political culture of Polk County and explain why, in part, the measure failed.

### **Polk County's Representation**

Not surprisingly for a conservative county, both Polk County's state senator and state representative are Republican. The county's state senator is Brian Boquist and its state representative is Mike Nearman.

Brian Boquist received his MBA from Oregon State University after serving in the U.S. military and he now lives on a farm in Polk County where he runs an ammunition manufacturing business ([oregonlegislature.gov](http://oregonlegislature.gov)). Mike Nearman has held a number of jobs from a dishwasher to a cab driver and lives in Polk County as well. While Brian Boquist has a history in politics, Mike Nearman is relatively new to politics, and this is his first public office ([oregonlegislature.gov](http://oregonlegislature.gov)).

In regards to the issues, Mike Nearman is a prototypical conservative. He supports smaller government with less influence, he supports promoting small businesses, and he votes against tax increases (nearmanfororegon.com). Brian Boquist has spent more time in office and has therefore voted more often, giving him a wider range of positions on certain issues. He does, however, certainly portray exactly what is expected from a conservative. He votes for tax breaks, even being on the tax credits committee, votes to support rights for gun owners and concealed carry permit-holders and supports funding for the U.S. military (Oregon Live). Both senator Boquist and representative Nearman support issues that typical conservatives support, as is expected from a politician from a conservative county such as Polk County.

### **Conclusion**

After looking at the people, economy, voting habits, and political representatives, it is clear that Polk County is a largely conservative community. The way in which the citizens of the county vote and elect their leaders is representative of typical conservative counties. Therefore, the original observations made about the county are now both quantified and qualified and the political culture of the county is conservative, as hypothesized. By voting in both local and state elections in a way that reflect conservatism as well as by supporting candidates that take a similar stand on issues, Polk County has established itself as a conservative community.