



# The Evolution of Vermont's Democratic Party

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Laidlaw Undergraduate Research Fellowship

## Introduction

Partisan polarization over “culture war” issues has become a defining feature of American politics, but this was not always the case. Through much of the twentieth century, abortion was not clearly divided along party lines. Recent research traces the origins of this partisan divide to 1970–72, before Roe v. Wade, when Democratic state parties adopted structural reforms that opened caucuses and conventions to new participants. These changes empowered young people, women, and other activists to influence party platforms. This project uses Vermont as a case study to examine how those reforms reshaped a state party and contributed to emerging partisan divisions.

## Political History of Vermont

While Vermont today is solidly Democratic in most elections, that alignment had not yet emerged by the late 1960s. At the time, Vermont was one of the most Republican states in the union. Democrat Philip Hoff's election as governor in 1962 disrupted that political order; he was Vermont's first Democratic governor since 1854, and in 1964, Vermont voted Democratic for president for the first time, supporting Lyndon Johnson. However, Democratic gains remained fragile: Hoff left office in 1968, Republicans won the governorship, Nixon carried the state, and Republicans maintained control of the legislature. Massive Democratic losses in '68 and '70 precipitated the reforms identified in this research.

## Methodology

This research analyzes hundreds of contemporaneous newspaper articles to reconstruct the transformation of Vermont's Democratic Party between 1968 and 1972. Articles were organized chronologically and across different regions of the state, tracing local caucuses, party meetings, conventions, elections, and policy debates. Comparing these accounts makes it possible to identify changes in participation, party organization, political conflict, and platform development over time.

## Sourcing

Newspaper articles were collected primarily through *Newspapers.com* from the *Burlington Free Press*, *Times Argus*, *Rutland Daily Herald*, *Bennington Banner*, and *Brattleboro Reformer*. These papers provide broad geographic coverage and make it possible to compare statewide developments with local party activity across Vermont.

## Research Question: How did changes in delegate selection and other reforms reshape Vermont's Democratic Party and its positions on social issues between 1968 and 1972?

Examples of various newsclippings alongside their geographic source:

### Burlington Free Press

Burlington, VT

State Political Parties Develop Platforms  
**Democrats Emphasize Gov. Hoff's Programs**

**Republicans Urge Strong Anti-violence Plank**

**Daley Terms Democratic Platform 'Focus To Future'**

**Democrats Adopt Predictable Platform**

### Rutland Daily Herald

Rutland, VT

**Democratic Resolutions Unready Until Just Now**

**Young Democrats Sniffing Winds for State Takeover**



### Bennington Banner

Bennington, VT

**McCarthy Supporters Organize And They're 'Keen for Gene'**

**'New politics' means youth**

### St. Albans Daily

St. Albans, VT

**Dems' Platform**

By Pete Horton

**Lower Voting Age Measure In Big Trouble**

### Times Argus

Montpelier, VT

**Coalition Unravels Dems' Hierarchy With Resolutions, Move To Dump O'Brien**

**Lady Legislators Split On Abortion**

### Brattleboro Reformer

Brattleboro, VT

**Dem Group Hears Many, Varied Proposals**

**'New politics' means youth**

**Coalition Prevents Kennedy Domination**

## National Results

In *Party Reform and the Origins of Abortion Politics*, the paper that precedes this research, Justin H. Phillips et al. identify the origins of partisan abortion politics. The research analyzes more than 2,000 state party platforms, and shows that by 1972, 18 Democratic state parties called for full abortion legalization, compared with only one Republican state party. This shift did not reflect mass opinion, since Democratic voters and officeholders were often no more supportive of abortion liberalization than Republicans. Instead, McGovern-Fraser reforms intended to rehabilitate a wounded Democratic Party opened Democratic caucuses and conventions to new participants, particularly young people and women. More open state parties implemented these reforms most extensively, helping to solidify positions on social issues, and establishing the foundations of later partisan polarization.

## Conclusions for Vermont

Vermont's state level results closely follow the broader national pattern set forth in Phillips' research. In 1968, the internal procedures of the Democratic Party were inconsistent and gave significant influence to establishment insiders, who were also able to change rules for their own benefit. For instance, local caucuses operated under different rules: while Rutland apportioned delegates proportionally, Burlington voters elected slates of candidates which allowed simple organized majorities to capture nearly every delegate, and some seats were guaranteed to existing officeholders. By 1972, new party rules tied delegate representation more directly to voter preferences, opening opportunities for participants whose voices had previously been marginalized. McGovern supporters gained influence across the state, women assumed a greater role in the process, and Kenneth Dean was elected as a national delegate at just 17.

Organizational changes were accompanied by subsequent changes in policy. While abortion was a contentious issue in Vermont in 1970, it was one that was largely religious rather than political, and a Young Democrat proposal for reform failed to make it into the party platform. By 1972, however, the Vermont Democrats approved a resolution supporting broader abortion access, despite resistance from establishment leaders. The September 1972 platform also demanded more accessible party structures and more decision making power for women. Altogether, Vermont provides a strong case study in support of the national finding that procedural reforms changed who participated, resulting in fundamental changes in the party's platform on social issues.

## Timeline: Vermont 1968 - 1972

In 1968, Vermont Democrats were split between who to support for president: Humphrey, Kennedy, or McCarthy? Local caucuses selected delegates for a contentious state convention, an inconsistent and somewhat corrupt process which left many voters and delegates feeling cheated. After the national convention, Vermont Democrats adopted a cautious platform with out serious social reforms; In November, Republicans swept the state, winning the governorship, legislature, and U.S. presidential delegates.

In 1970, abortion emerged as a major political issue in Vermont, though divisions though divisions fell largely along religious rather than partisan lines. Young Democrats pushed for greater influence and proposed a youth platform including abortion-law repeal and a lower voting age, which was rejected. The party remained fractured, however, and Republicans won every major statewide race that November.

In 1972, new party reforms transformed Vermont's Democratic caucus and convention system. Organized McGovern supporters, especially younger activists and women, overwhelmed party insiders and dominated the May state convention, adopting liberal new proposals which included unrestricted abortion access. These proposals provoked sharp resistance from party leaders and demonstrated how dramatically the party's internal balance had shifted since '68.

1971 was a transition year. Nationally, Democrats implemented McGovern-Fraser reforms intended to revive the party, and the 26th Amendment expanded the young electorate. In Vermont, Young Democrats still struggled to infiltrate the party establishment, though progress was beginning. Bernie Sanders also joined the Liberty Union Party—a new leftwing party emblematic of the Democratic Party's stagnation—and was later nominated for Vermont's 1972 U.S. Senate special election.

After major losses, Vermont Democrats entered 1969 divided, financially strained, and with no clear leadership. Reform efforts began almost immediately: Democrats created a 50-person advisory committee, hired a full-time organizer, and increasingly emphasized youth participation. Regional party meetings also reflected growing interest in making the party more responsive to the grassroots.



Philip H. Hoff  
Vermont's Democratic governor 1963–69



George McGovern  
Candidate for President in 1972