

TRUMAN AND THE  
PENDERGAST MACHINE:  
A COMMENT

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These papers make important contributions to our understanding of the early political career of Harry S. Truman and Missouri politics in the early 1930's. They demonstrate the pluralistic nature of the political situation in which he operated in those years. They miss, however, the extremely dynamic character of Missouri politics at the time. Although they emphasize the complexity of the situation, they neglect one significant dimension of it.

To develop my disagreement with the papers, a disagreement based upon my own work on a biography of Truman, I will deal with three aspects of them: the Howell case, the Stark case and the Cochran case. The first is an important part of Professor Schmidlein's emphasis upon Truman's personal contributions to his victory in 1934; the others are significant elements in Professor Dorsett's emphasis upon Pendergast's contributions. I have doubts about the interpretations of all three.

First of all, I do not think that the Howell case proves very much. He was an unusually weak Pendergast candidate in 1932. He received only twenty-eight percent of the vote in the primary and carried only four counties outside of Jackson, while, at the same time, another Pendergast candidate, Francis Wilson, received sixty-one percent of the vote and carried eighty-five counties. Howell depended upon Jackson County for nearly sixty percent of his support while Wilson received more than seventy percent of his outside of Pendergast's county.

All that the Howell case proves is that Pendergast could not defeat a strong candidate such as Clark with a weak one in 1932. (Clark received forty-four percent of the vote in a three-cornered race.) The case raises the question as to why Howell was so weak and tells us little or nothing about Truman's personal contributions to his victory in 1934. To be sure, Truman's percent of the total was fourteen points above Howell's, and Truman's total was more than 100,000 higher. Truman, however, had a much stronger organization behind him. Howell had made his bid for the senate before the Democrats had gained control of the state government and thus had not had an army of state officeholders working for him outside of Jackson County. With such help, Truman obtained in outstate Missouri more votes than in Jackson County, nearly as many as Milligan received in the

entire state and close to 14,000 more than Milligan and 29,000 more than Cochran obtained outside of St. Louis City and County and Jackson County. Before moving on, I should object to Schmidlein's belittling of Truman's strength in the bootheel. It surpassed that of earlier Pendergast candidates: Truman received more votes in four of the six counties than Reed had in 1922, Wilson had in 1928 and 1932 and Howell had in 1932.

In addition to the differences in outstate Missouri in the two elections, the differences in Jackson County were also significant. Howell had not received the undivided attention of the Jackson County organization. He had shared the top of the ticket with Wilson who was running for a more important post from the organization's point of view. (A governor controlled much more patronage than a senator did in 1932.) Truman, on the other hand, stood alone at the top of the ticket in 1934.

The voting statistics in Jackson County suggest that the Pendergast organization did not work as hard for Howell as it did for Truman. The former received only slightly more than 100,000 votes there, or eighty-four percent of the total, while Wilson picked up approximately 110,000 votes or ninety percent. For Truman, the total jumped to more than 137,000 and the percentage to ninety-three. Obviously, the boys worked rather hard for him!

The Howell case tells us little about Truman's personal strength in 1934 because the political situation then differed significantly from the one that had faced Howell. Pendergast might have been able to obtain the nomination for Howell in 1934. The Stark case also tells us little about 1934 for he operated in a different political situation in 1935 than Truman had a year earlier. When the latter decided to run and made his campaign, Pendergast's new power had not been tested and the Kansas City boss faced vigorous criticism and challenges. Stark's situation, on the other hand, was shaped significantly by Truman's victory.

In May, 1934, had Stark been thinking of running for office that year, he would not have said that he would not seek support in St. Louis because "half of them will follow Kansas City anyway and several of the boys tell me they will all follow if we get the Kansas City support." He could say this in 1935 because of what Truman had accomplished. He had helped Pendergast defeat two challenges to his power: the challenge from the Democratic organization in St. Louis that Cochran represented and the challenge from Senator Clark that Milligan represented. Truman had also demonstrated that Pendergast's support helped a candidate much more than it hurt him. When Truman ran, there was much talk of the evils of the Pendergast machine. Observers suggested that a Jackson County Democrat could not win because of the hostility to the organization outside of that county. Nevertheless, he defeated two well-known Democrats in the primary. In the general election, the Republicans focused much of their attention upon Truman's connections with Pendergast. Truman's opponent, Senator Roscoe C.

Patterson of Springfield, charged "that in seeking to force the election of its candidate . . . to the United States Senate, this political monster is seeking to lay paralyzing hands upon the Federal machinery in all Missouri." "Pendergast is already in control of the state government and has nothing to fear from that quarter," Patterson maintained. "If in position to control the federal enforcement agencies, crime will not only be rampant, but every interest in the state would have to pay tribute to the most corrupt machine known in the state's history." Despite such charges, Truman achieved a smashing victory, obtaining sixty percent of the vote in November. After this achievement, Stark eagerly sought Pendergast's support.

Involved in my argument at this point are doubts about Dorsett's thesis on Cochran's motives in 1934. My doubts rest in part on doubts about Mr. Foree's competence as a witness on this point. Although he was a rather good prophet, he did lack direct contact with Cochran at the time he made his decision to run in May, 1934. Newspaper accounts at the time do suggest that the St. Louis organization was very fearful of the challenge that Milligan represented. His victory would enable him and his friend and supporter, Senator Clark, to control federal patronage in the state. Newspaper accounts also suggest that the Dickmann-Igoe organization had hoped that Aylward would make the race for they were confident that he could defeat Milligan as well as help their ticket in St. Louis. Only after Aylward's decision not to run did Cochran decide to do so. It appears that the decision was influenced by a lack of confidence among St. Louis Democrats in Truman's strength in St. Louis and also in their own strength there. Thus they had reason to doubt that they could enable Truman to carry the city, especially as Milligan's supporter Clark had received seventy-five percent of the city's vote in the 1932 primary.

What seems clear in all of this is that the chief worry of the St. Louis leaders was that one faction of the party would control federal patronage in the state. This, however, even with the help of the circumstantial evidence offered by Dorsett, does not force us to the conclusion that Cochran ran only to help Truman. The evidence offered by Schmidlein, as well as other evidence, suggests that St. Louis Democrats saw in Pendergast's difficulties in finding a candidate an opportunity to strengthen themselves. In other words, it appears to me that the Dickmann-Igoe-Cochran group represented a real challenge to Pendergast in 1934 and that by agreeing to run and by waging a very vigorous campaign in outstate Missouri Truman helped Pendergast defeat that challenge. I should point out, however, that we need help here. We need a study of the Dickmann-Igoe machine comparable to Dorsett's study of the Pendergast machine.

Although neither author seems to me to appreciate fully just how dynamic the political situation was in Missouri in the first half of the 1930's, this aspect of their work is not nearly as significant as the very large contribution that they have made to our understanding of the relations

between Truman and Pendergast. These historians have effectively refuted over-simplified views of that relationship; they have demonstrated that more than Pendergast was involved in Truman's jump from the court of Jackson County to the Senate of the United States. They have demonstrated that even for Missouri in 1934, when Pendergast's political power was reaching its peak, the pluralistic model of the American political process is the one that works. As a consequence of their investigations, one who is attempting to write a biography of Harry S. Truman can see that one of his important tasks is to answer this question: "How was this person able to function successfully in this complex political situation?"

-- RSK