

Hoosiers, Holcomb and the Landslide: The 2016 Indiana Gubernatorial Results

By Helen Zhang

This research paper assignment on the 2016 Indiana gubernatorial election was done in two parts. The first part (not included) was on predicting the winner of this election. My prediction for the Democratic candidate, John Gregg, was incorrect. This essay is the follow-up analysis (written within two weeks after the election results) of what transpired during the election in relation to my prediction. I argue that the Eric Holcomb win and Gregg loss was due to the larger national Republican victory, a lack of Democratic campaigning power in Indiana, Gregg's (over)emphasis of LGBT rights, his dismay for the RFRA, and Holcomb's optimistic economic plans. Gregg's connection to Mike Pence is also discussed as a defining factor of his win. Demographics of the Indiana exit polls are also considered. While the race was polled, and reported as a toss-up in the weeks before the election, in hindsight, a Republican Governor winning in a largely Republican state is a logical conclusion.

The 51st Governor of Indiana

The Indiana gubernatorial election of 2016 consisted of Republican candidate Eric Holcomb, Democratic candidate John Gregg and a third-party Libertarian candidate, Rex Bell. On November 8th, Holcomb became Governor-elect of Indiana. This means my prediction of a Gregg election was incorrect. This became an open-seat race when the incumbent Republican Governor, Mike Pence, decided to run as vice-president on Donald Trump's ticket. Holcomb is currently serving as the Lieutenant Governor, but only since late March of this year, filling in for the remainder of Sue Ellspermann's term. Pence nominated Holcomb after Ellspermann resigned to become the president of Ivy Tech Community College. Holcomb won on a joint ticket with Suzanne Crouch as the Lieutenant Governor. Gregg was a state representative and served as speaker of the Indiana house of representatives from 1996 to 2002. He was also the Democratic candidate for the 2012 gubernatorial election, in which he was defeated by Pence (although by a smaller margin than the 2016 election). A Democratic win would have ended a 12-year Republican control of the Governor's office, consisting of Mitch Daniels' and Pence's terms. Historically, Indiana has had Democratic Governors, including Evan Bayh, who ran for

the 2016 senate election, but was defeated by Todd Young. Governor-elect Holcomb will take office on January 9th in the upcoming year.

To understand some of the dynamics of my election, you can see the Republican's platform by reading the official website of Indiana. It states that Governor Pence is currently committed to continuing success through "fiscal responsibility, economic development and educational opportunity for every Hoosier child" ("Governor Pence: About"). Accordingly, education was a large aspect of the 2016 gubernatorial election. Noticeably absent from this web-page is anything related to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) and LGBT rights, which is perhaps what he is most known for, as well as a significant piece of Gregg's campaign.

The National Republican Victory

In my prediction paper, I discussed the issues of the RFRA and its implications on LGBT rights, as well as education programs and funding. The national political conversation dealt with issues such as fixing the economy, change (or lack thereof as implied by "make America great again"), and partisanship. Indiana is mainly Republican so Trump echoed many of the state's sentiments. The most obvious connection of this gubernatorial election to the national election is Pence. Pence's decision to abandon his re-election bid means Indiana will have a one-term Governor for the first time since the "state constitution was changed in the 1970s to allow Governors to seek a second consecutive term" (Tribune News Services). Evidently, an incumbency advantage is not rare for Indiana. Although the Governor's seat was not incumbent, Holcomb does have an advantage of the experience being Pence's Lieutenant Governor. Unsurprisingly, Holcomb also has similar policy positions as Pence (which I will discuss later). The Pence dropout also influenced the dynamics of this election by giving Gregg a new opponent who has not yet defeated him. This also meant that Gregg was competing against a candidate that had connections with the potential vice-president of the United States. An overwhelming split between Gregg and Holcomb voters is whether they have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Pence. 80% of Gregg voters see Pence as unfavorable while 80% of Holcomb voters see Pence as favorable ("Exit Polls 2016."). This suggests that Holcomb supporters are satisfied or proud of the connection the national race has with Indiana as *their* Governor is good enough to be in national office.

A gubernatorial election cannot be separated from the presidential election happening simultaneously. In a book about American Governors, David Redlawsk points out that the Indiana Governor is elected during the presidential election cycle, meaning that candidates typically "compete against presidential candidates, senatorial candidates (at least in two out of every three elections), and congressional candidates, to gain attention" (Redlawsk, 17). Various other narratives tend to dominate the discussion before election day. Rather than competing with other races, gubernatorial candidates may attempt to align their campaign with various other ones. Redlawsk states that the Indiana Governor is not alone in "possessing a unique electoral mandate, but shares that distinction with other statewide offices, as well as a number of federally elected officeholders" (Redlawsk, 17). Looking at it this way, it is reasonable that people who voted for Trump would have also voted for Pence's Lieutenant Governor. The gubernatorial race was essentially a toss-up as reported by many polls (pre-election), but the presidential race was always certainly going to Trump. All Hoosiers were voting in a society where many people identify as Republican and agree with Trump's ideas.

An additional concern related to the dominant election discourse is Indiana's relation to LGBT rights as seen by the conversations and writings regarding the LGBT community under Trump and Pence. Many people on social media are encouraging people to donate to organizations like *The Trevor Project* (an organization for LGBT suicide-prevention) for those who feel afraid, particularly of Pence's past policies and statements. There has also been a surge in articles covering Pence's apparent anti-LGBT stance. For example, Michelangelo Signorile states that Pence may be one of the most "anti-LGBTQ evangelical Christian political crusaders to serve in Congress and as Governor" (Signorile). Likewise, Liam Stack reports that LGBT leaders were alarmed when Trump chose Pence as his running mate as he has voted for discriminatory bills throughout his political career (Stack).

Analysis of the Indiana Results

Nearly every poll published in the weeks leading up to election day displayed a tie or a Gregg lead. These results were not replicated at the polls. Indiana's election day concluded with Holcomb receiving 51.4% of the total vote. Gregg received 45.4% of the vote, and the remaining percentages went to Bell. Overall, the margin between Holcomb and Gregg consists of 161,891 votes. Gregg collected higher percentages of non-white voters (especially black people) compared to Holcomb. As for other races, the presidential election in Indiana went to Trump. The few counties that voted for Hillary Clinton were Lake, Marion, Monroe, and St. Joseph, all of which went to Gregg also ("Indiana Election Results"). More than half of those who voted for Holcomb are from rural areas. Tony Cook explains that Holcomb was not only strengthened by rural counties, but he also "dominated in the suburban 'doughnut' counties surrounding Indianapolis" (Cook). These were the areas that Gregg underperformed in.

The results from the other state-wide elections allowed Republican power in Indiana to be sustained as they have super-majorities in the legislature and the senate. Republican Todd Young won the senate race, and the positions of attorney general and superintendent of education also went to Republicans. This Republican sweep seen in Indiana can be explained by straight-ticket voting. Harry Enten argues that the straight-ticket voting seen in the 2016 election was "unusual even for the highly polarized era we live in." He explains that during the 2012 elections, Democratic senators won in places that voted for the Republican presidential candidates, including Indiana. In 2016, no states split their vote for senate and president (Enten), this could be extended to governors as well. A dominant theme of the 2016 election is one of division, "growing polarization and partisanship" (Enten), Indiana was not an exception. There are other possible factors to explaining Holcomb's gubernatorial win.

Democratic Campaigning Power

Gregg is Democratic, and unfortunately for him, Democrats do not have much power in Indiana. There have been Democratic Governors in the past, but considering the Trump and Pence electoral college win, Gregg's loss is less surprising. In Gregg's concession speech, he discussed how a Democratic win was tough due to "what happened in the state with the landslide that came across Indiana" (Tribune News Services). Gregg stated on his official Facebook page that "this campaign raised more money than any campaign for Indiana governor in history" ("Friends, Last year"), but despite raising much more money than Holcomb, there was still not much Democratic campaigning power

overall in the state. Clinton made a total of two stops in Indiana since May and her Hoosier supporters received \$500,000 from her campaign. These funds were not for Clinton's presidential support in Indiana, but for the Democrats that were "gaining steam in critical races for Senate and Governor" (Groppe). Nonetheless, this was not enough for the Democrats. People were skeptical of Holcomb's ability to run a campaign in a few short months. Cook states that Holcomb "overcame those hurdles, blitzing the state and banking heavily on the goodwill he had built with GOP activists throughout his career as a behind-the-scenes political operative" (Cook). In his victory speeches, Holcomb acknowledged the critics that said that he would not be able to raise enough money. Yet, with a large enough base, Holcomb's small amount of funds were reconciled. Looking beyond partisanship and fundraising, there are other explanations as to why Gregg may not have been the better candidate in some minds.

LGBT Rights and the RFRA

A primary aspect of Gregg's platform was to protect against LGBT discrimination. His campaign promises regarding LGBT rights were appealing, however it is possible that he fixated *too* much on the topic for those that do not see it as a significant issue or even support a pro-LGBT attitude. Early in Gregg's campaign, he stated that he would challenge Pence once again, only now in opposition to Pence's involvement with the RFRA. Gregg has attempted to re-brand himself as the "LGBT-friendly alternative" to Pence (Cook and Schneider). He saw drawbacks in the RFRA since it attracted national controversy as "many expressed concern over the Act's potential impact on local laws designed to protect LGBT individuals from discrimination" (Katz, 37). Additionally, this controversy drew attention to the fact that Indiana's civil rights laws do not explicitly "ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity" (Katz, 37). Conversely, Holcomb believes that Hoosiers have not suffered any significant harm economically due to the act (Tribune News Services). This fails to acknowledge any emotional impacts the RFRA may have had. Holcomb, as a Republican, is more aligned with Pence's views. Considering a WTHR poll, only 35% of Republicans support an LGBT rights expansion while 56% oppose the measure altogether ("Indiana voters support LGBT rights").

Governor-elect Holcomb may have unfavorable implications for LGBT people. Tom Davies suggests that Holcomb's election likely ends "any prospect of state civil rights protections being extended." Furthermore, the Republican House Speaker, Brian Bosma believes that the current state law is appropriate since it allows cities and counties to "adopt local gay-rights ordinances ... Rather than try to shove one heartfelt side's agenda or the other" (Davies, "GOP's Indiana Sweep"). This widely contrasts with what Gregg would have done in office. While Holcomb says that he would have to "wait and see what comes" regarding handling LGBT legislation, his description of the RFRA as "what's done is done" (Cook and Schneider), makes it difficult to imagine that he will progress the extension of rights to the LGBT community. It is plausible to not see the RFRA as discriminatory considering the context of those who live in Indiana. Many Hoosiers chose to view the act as purely religious. For some Hoosiers, LGBT rights can either be a non-issue or one that they agree with state politicians on, making Holcomb the more viable candidate in terms of this social issue. In similar fashion to some Trump supporters, perhaps people are willing to overlook any problematic opinions one may hold, for the sake of focusing on economic policy.

“Revenge of the White Working Class”?

Another prominent piece of discussion in the gubernatorial election is the economy. Ben Casselman states that the main post-election narrative taking place right now is about the “revenge of the white working class over coastal elites” (Casselman). In Indiana, more rich voters chose Holcomb over Gregg. Those that earn over \$50,000 voted for the Republican candidate to a higher degree than the Democratic one. However, 70% of Holcomb voters do say that the financial situation is worse today than compared to four years ago (“Exit Polls 2016”). This may help explain why more wealthy voters chose Holcomb. Hoosiers may still have voted due to being unsatisfied with the economy, but not due to more lower-class concerns like income inequality and losing manufacturing jobs. Voters may find Holcomb’s platform attractive as he states that he will “continue to accelerate annual wage increases” and uses words like growth, support, and expansion (“Official Website of Eric”). This suggests that the main economic problems are about businesses, infrastructure and institutions (such as schools) being inadequate, but not a dire situation that requires “revenge.”

Holcomb’s primary goals are to balance the budget, cut taxes, invest in education and infrastructure, and “work every day to make Indiana the best place to live and do business in the Midwest” (“Eric Holcomb - Ballotpedia”). Holcomb’s ideas fit accordingly with Pence’s budget plan for 2016-2017, which can be found abbreviated on the *IN.gov* website. This budget priority summary begins with “supporting education”, with a plan to increase the funding for K-12, and the pre-K pilot program for example. Pence’s other priorities include serving those in need, economic development and job growth and the bicentennial celebration. It states that their budget must remain honestly balanced and obtain no new debt (“Governor Pence’s Budget”). Pence’s budget included \$300 million to be used for expanding highway capacity. Holcomb plans to follow through with this, stating that he will continue these investments in Indiana’s roads. A plan unique to Holcomb’s campaign is his proposal to spend \$1 billion on an innovation and entrepreneurship plan which would “expand job growth by making smart investments” (“Official Website of Eric”). Holcomb has said that he wants to be more cooperative compared to the education conflicts during previous terms. For example, Pence often “aggressively” blocked the changes that the Democratic superintendent Glenda Ritz had proposed (Elliot). Cooperation should come easier for Holcomb as Ritz was defeated by Jennifer McCormick. Davies discusses various positions Holcomb has stated and what it means for Indiana now that he has won. He describes that Holcomb wants to undertake expensive projects but has not “specified any funding sources” nor “detailed the extent of any expansion” (Davies, “GOP’s Indiana Sweep”). Essentially, his economic plans are vague in how they will be accomplished. Compared to Gregg, Holcomb’s plans can sound enticing, especially to those that feel secure in their finances and want the state to flourish by spending money on a breadth of programs and infrastructure.

Conclusion

It is difficult to determine what Holcomb will do as Governor since his campaign was short and perhaps did not have the time to develop the specifics of his policies. Social and identity issues were pervasive during this year’s elections, and while Holcomb is not explicitly anti-LGBT, he does not see it as an important issue. Holcomb’s economic policy is currently unspecific, but he has the potential to move Indiana in a good direction if he gets funds to the right places while keeping the budget balanced.

The transition is showing that Holcomb is following in Daniels' footsteps more than Pence's. This is not surprising considering he was a part of Daniels' administration too. Holcomb seems to recognize Daniels' state contribution to a greater degree than Pence's, stating that, "Daniels built a foundation. Mike Pence added a couple stories and Suzanne Crouch and I ... take Indiana to the next level" (Tribune News Services). Holcomb probably wants to be compared to Daniels as in 2011, his administration revealed a \$1.2 billion surplus ("Mitch Daniels - Ballotpedia")/ However, this is only impressive if you ignore the budget cuts made to education totalling \$325 million, contradicting Holcomb's proposed dedication to education. Eventually, we will see to what extent he reflects the ideas of the past two Republican Governors. Over the next four years, some issues may not be fully resolved, but with Republicans in federal and state-level offices, Holcomb will not run into as many conflicts as Gregg potentially would have.

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