

# The Influence of Economics on Newspaper Election Coverage in 1870s Montana

Nathan Parmeter<sup>1</sup>

As America wrapped up celebrations of its centennial in 1876, attention shifted to the presidential election between Democrat Samuel Tilden and Republican Rutherford Hayes for the White House.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the country, the election was heavily watched and followed, as a variety of national issues were at stake for American citizens regardless of their choice for president. The Helena, Montana Territory newspaper, *The Helena Weekly Herald* was no exception to the amount of coverage given prior to the election. Once it became clear that the 1876 election would be the closest and most controversial race ever, the *Weekly Herald* jumped on the issue, sometimes dedicating half of its weekly edition to the national election. At first glance, it seems surprising that a small town newspaper (Helena only had around 5,000 residents in 1876<sup>3</sup>) would dedicate a large amount of coverage to the election for several consecutive weeks because of the fact that Montana residents weren't voting in it due to Montana's then-status as a territory.<sup>4</sup> The intense and heavily biased coverage of the 1876 election in Helena can be attributed to the platforms of the Republican Party and the fact that their platform of direct economic and infrastructural development would have helped Montana connect economically to the rest of the country, attract more settlers and eventually gain statehood. Other minor aspects of the *Weekly Herald's* coverage during the weeks before and after the election reveal insights into national political issues prevalent in Montana Territory and how local coverage of such issues furthered the agenda of the newspaper.

In order to understand why a newspaper in a small town in a thinly populated territory would cover the 1876 presidential election controversy with such depth, exposure and bias, an understanding of the national and regional context of the election needs to be explored. By this point in American history, the Civil War had been over for more than a decade, and the nation was industrializing in the north and economically advancing in the Midwest and West.<sup>5</sup> Montana Territory was formed in 1864 out of the Idaho Territory, and much of the economy at this point was based on mining.<sup>6</sup> The town of Helena was founded in 1863 by a group of pioneers and ex-

---

<sup>1</sup> The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

2. Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote : the Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), i.

3. R.E. Fisk., "Notes from Montana", *The Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Montana), Dec. 21, 1876.

4. Clark C. Spence., *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana, 1864-89* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 1.

5. Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A new History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 191.

California miners who were prospecting in the nearby gold seams, which remained active during the 1876 election.<sup>7</sup> From then on, gold mining expanded throughout the region surrounding Helena and the Montana Territory. Between 1863 and 1876, the gold mines throughout Montana Territory had produced almost \$70 million worth of gold, making it an important part of the local and territorial economy.<sup>6</sup> Politically, Montana was a very divided territory since its inception; during the 1860s, huge factions of Southern and Anti-War Democrats lived in the territory while factions of Republicans kept the local political debate competitive at the time.<sup>8</sup> But while it may seem that Montana was cut off from the rest of the Union with its own political system and culture, it shared many of the same political characteristics found in the East and Midwest, such as mass corruption and political dominance by business interests.<sup>9</sup> Despite being geographically, culturally and politically distinct from the American nation, near and far, the territory needed to connect to the East and Midwest if it wanted to turn into an economic power, expand, and attract additional settlers to the territory.<sup>8</sup> How to finance infrastructure and promote economic growth in the region became a contentious political issue in the 1870s and can be attributed to the *Helena Weekly Herald's* coverage of the 1876 presidential election.

Even before the election began, the *Weekly Herald* showed signs of pro-Republican bias in its pre-election editions. For example, in the November 2, 1876 edition (Released days before the election) is an advertisement for the Hayes and Wheeler (Republican) tickets for the presidency.<sup>10</sup> That edition of the *Weekly Herald* had no advertisements concerning the campaigns of any local, territorial or national Democratic candidates,<sup>11</sup> which indicates political bias on the part of the newspaper on behalf of the Republican Party, as a truly neutral newspaper would feature both parties' election tickets. Meanwhile, in their projections of the election, the newspaper highlights the extent of fraud on behalf of the Democratic Party, claiming that such fraud spoils the election results and tips the scales towards the Democrats:

We verily believe, if an honest vote could be had to-day, both South and North, in which each man could be left alone to vote his honest sentiments without any interference or influence from anyone else, Hayes and Wheeler would receive two-thirds of all votes cast.<sup>12</sup>

While Democrats are blasted throughout the November 2<sup>nd</sup> edition for their electoral fraud

---

6. Clark C. Spence., *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana, 1864-89* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 4-8.

7. R.E. Fisk., "Notes from Montana", *The Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Montana), Dec. 21, 1876.

8. Clark C. Spence., *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana, 1864-89* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 20-22.

9. *Ibid*, 310.

10. R.E. Fisk., "Republican National Ticket", *The Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Montana), Nov. 2, 1876.

11. *Ibid*, Nov. 2, 1876.

12. R.E. Fisk., "The Doubt and The Reason for It", *The Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Montana), Nov.2, 1876.

practices, the same edition does not condemn fraud committed by Republican voters and officials<sup>10</sup>, including issues such as Colorado's quick admission and the legislature's rush to appoint three Republican electoral voters without a popular vote.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the electoral bias present in the November 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, projections taken from an Eastern newspaper claimed that the presidential election would be a close race, with New York possibly being the crucial state either way.<sup>14</sup> Unlike other pre-election coverage, this section is slightly more objective and neutral in its reporting. This may indicate that the newspaper wanted to wait and see how the actual election would turn out rather than speculate on the possible results. In addition to the election's various controversies, once Election Day arrived and ballots began to be counted, both coverage and amount of bias within such coverage would increase because of what the election meant to citizens and businessmen of Helena and Montana.

In the eight weeks between November 2 and December 21, 1876, almost every single weekly edition of the *Helena Weekly Herald* was dedicated to the national election, and more specifically the numerous controversies surrounding the election. However, two notable features of the election coverage are the sheer volume of coverage (sometimes up to four out of the eight pages present in each edition) and pro-Republican bias throughout. For instance, November 16<sup>th</sup> edition contains harsh condemnation of fraud on behalf of Democratic voters:

Really the only doubt that hangs over the result in South Carolina, Florida and Louisiana, is whether the Democrats have succeeded in their schemes of force and fraud to rob the colored man of the right to vote as he pleases. Everyone knows that the blacks are in a majority in those States and that not one would voluntarily vote for Tilden.<sup>15</sup>

If the *Weekly Herald* was truly objective and unbiased, a significant fact that would also have to be reported is the fraud and corruption committed by Republican voters and politicians, which is significant because during this period in American history, both major parties and their voters committed widespread fraud and corruption in the electoral process.<sup>16</sup> The unequal condemnation of voter fraud between the parties is reinforced by an article in the December 15<sup>th</sup> edition, in which the newspaper blasts the Democratic party for exposing Republican voting fraud in New York:

Weeding out the hordes and gangs imported from overwhelmingly Democratic States and given a domicile in the large cities for a time sufficient to entitle them to vote, and with an ordinarily fair election in other respects, it is estimated that Hayes' majority in the State would have reached the neighborhood of 50,000. Isn't it about time Democrats quit yelling

---

13. Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote : the Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 31-32.

14. R.E. Fisk, "Presidential Prospects", *The Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Montana), Nov.2, 1876.

15. Ibid, "The Situation"

16. Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote : the Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), xii-xiii.

‘fraud’ as to the three Southern States still honestly held to Republican allegiance? It would seem so.<sup>17</sup>

The author the article was staging a political attack on the Democratic Party, to name and shame them regarding their abuse of the electoral system, while trying to cover up abuses of the party that the newspaper supports. This is significant because it clearly shows the pro-Republican bias of the *Weekly Herald* and thus, a significant political attitude in the Helena region that the newspaper was targeting. When combined with the excessive coverage that the *Weekly Herald* dedicated to covering the election controversies, clearly something was at stake which was economic and infrastructural development, something that would have benefited the people of Helena and Montana Territory should the Republican ticket win the election.

In the era of the 1860s and 1870s, the railroads of the United States expanded in a pattern not seen in the previous decades, stretching from coast-to-coast and connecting existing urban areas to the emerging regions of the West.<sup>18</sup> Montana was not an exception to railroad expansion, and with the state’s booming mining economy, railroads were critical for economic growth, development and migration to the territory.<sup>19</sup> The November 2, 1876 edition of the *Weekly Herald* discussed the contentious issue of whether or not a proposed local railroad should be paid with subsidies through increased taxes, with the controversy settling around whether or not subsidizing the railroad would be economically beneficial to the local population.<sup>20</sup> The opinion piece cites industrial and population growth in Colorado and Utah that resulted from the expansion and construction of railroads in those states, arguing that the same results or better would be replicated in Helena if the Benton-Helena Railroad was to be built with public money.<sup>19</sup> Although the controversy surrounding construction of the railroad does not appear in the edition of the paper for the next seven weeks, the timing was critical as it was meant to inform readers about a relevant political issue. Because railroad subsidies were an important issue in the region during the 1870s, local voters would have wanted to hear information about the issue before selecting public office-holders the following week. But while meant to target the general population, the very same article seems to have political bias in that most of the mentioned benefits relate to industry and mining and those who would have been involved with those industries. Ironically, while the article’s title states “The Burdens and Benefits of the Benton Road Contrasted”,<sup>21</sup> only one of the seven subsections within the article actually argues against subsidizing the railroad, the anti-railroad arguments are downplayed, and counterarguments to the cases of Utah and Colorado are absent.<sup>20</sup> As a result from the rhetoric of the newspaper article, it can be established that the article was politically bias and aimed towards

---

17. R.E. Fisk, “Result in New York”, *The Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Montana), Dec. 14, 1876.

18. Mark Wahlgran Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A new History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 188-189.

19. Clark C. Spence, *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana, 1864-89* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 3.

20. R.E. Fisk, “The Railroad Question Finished”, *The Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Montana), Nov. 2, 1876.

21. Ibid

pro-Republican supporters, as the Republican Party had previously supported public funding of infrastructure projects such as railroads in addition to supporting and helping big businesses grow and expand.<sup>22</sup> It can be inferred from the one-sided coverage of the railroad funding debate that Republicanism was popular among the business and industrial communities in the Helena region, whose support for building local infrastructure would benefit local interests. From the analysis of railroad funding debate, the *Weekly Herald* published a one-sided view of the issue to promote the interests of Republican voters in the region. Ultimately, the purpose was to rally Republican support among local residents and businessmen to lead to the previously mentioned benefits that would come from a publically-funded railroad.

Despite being removed and distant from sectional tensions, Montana Territory was not completely isolated from national issues. One of the contemporary issues was race and race relations following the Civil War and during Reconstruction. Even though the Civil War had ended at least a decade prior and Reconstruction had been underway since, race, race relations and the status of African-Americans were still major issues in American society and more particularly, in the 1876 election.<sup>23</sup> One of the most prominent controversies in the presidential election was the intimidation of Southern Black voters and whether or not such fraud was depriving Republicans of a fair win in several Southern states.<sup>24</sup> In particular, voter intimidation against African-Americans was not just a Southern issue, as it existed in Montana Territory. The November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1876 issue of the *Weekly Herald* details an African-American man in Montana who was intimidated by White men at the polls while trying to vote for the Republican ticket.<sup>25</sup> The mentioning of voter intimidation of African-Americans in Helena is significant because it shows that the problem of voter intimidation was not just a problem in the South, and was happening in other parts of the United States despite efforts to eliminate it. Like with coverage on the national election, the article regarding voter intimidation in Helena is biased towards the Republican Party and their platform as it only presents the side of the African-American voter and his experience at the polls.<sup>24</sup> Its purpose was to highlight a problem Republican voters would have heavily cared about, as the Republican Party were in support of Black voting rights and Hayes' platform for the 1876 presidential race included protection of Black voting and civil rights.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, the mentioning of the Montanan African-American man who was intimidated for voting Republican was meant to gain pro-Republican support by highlighting the existence of issues in the local community that Republicans (Both at the national and local level) sought to fix, and by associating the Democrats with supporting it.

---

22. Mark Wahlgran Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A new History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 83.

23. Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote: the Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 46.

24. Ibid, 181.

25. R.E. Fisk, "That Election Riot", *The Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Montana), Nov. 23, 1876.

26. Michael F Holt, *By One Vote : the Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 84.

By 1876, the United States was in the process of transition as a variety of changes were occurring, ranging from Westward migration to European immigration to massive industrialization and the growth of major cities.<sup>27</sup> That year, Americans were to elect a new president, and with massive disillusionment with Reconstruction and the previous presidential administration, it seemed as if a power shift would take place.<sup>28</sup> When the election did occur, it would go down as the most controversial until the year 2000, with both parties accusing each other of fraud and other forms of cheating at the polls.<sup>29</sup> Out west in the newly emerging region called Montana Territory, the newspaper of Helena, Montana was covering it with great depth and exposure during the time that the various controversies unraveled. The heavy pro-Republican election coverage in the *Helena Weekly Herald* can be directly linked to the Republican Party's pro-business and pro-industry platform, as well as its commitment to fund infrastructure projects such as railroads that would help economic growth in the region. Ultimately, economic growth and infrastructural improvements would have been a boon to Montana residents as it would have allowed for increased economic investment, population growth and eventually statehood. By connecting to the existing United States through infrastructure and economic development, Montana was hoping to become part of the larger American nation while still maintaining its identity, which explains why both normal residents and businessmen would have cared deeply about the results of an election they weren't even participating in. Like with the Old West in general, mining and industry were important to the local and territorial economy, and the presence of economic links financed directly by pro-Republican politicians would inevitably lead to statehood while maintaining a unique identity.

---

27. Mark Wahlgran Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A new History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 191.

28. Ibid, 9-18.

29. Mark Wahlgran Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A new History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), xi.

## Works Cited

Fisk, R.E., *The Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Montana), Nov. 2, 1876-Dec. 21, 1876.

Holt, Michael F., *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008.

Spence, Clark C., *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana, 1864-89*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1973.

Summers, Mark Wahlgran, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A new History of Reconstruction*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.