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William Gillette. *Jersey Blue: Civil War Politics in New Jersey, 1854-1865.* New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995. xi + 389 pp. $48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-2120-6.

Reviewed by Bill Cecil-Fronsman (Washburn University)

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In many ways Jersey Blue is a throwback to an older kind of political history. William Gillette has taken a traditional approach to a subject that has seen dramatic changes in the ways that historians approach it. *Jersey Blue* examines the struggles around the central political issues of the Civil War era as they played out in New Jersey. Its view is from the vantage points of the various political leaders and opinion makers of the era. As a narrative of political events, it stands up well. But because of its traditional approach, there are too many unaddressed questions and missed opportunities for deeper analysis.

The central theme of *Jersey Blue* is that the standard interpretation of Civil War-era New Jersey is wrong. According to Gillette, the conventional wisdom holds that New Jersey was the "Northernmost of the Border States" – a Northern state with Southern sympathies (p. 1). Gillette buries that position with a much more balanced view. Rather than being like Maryland or Kentucky (states on the Southern border), New Jersey was more like Northern border states such as Pennsylvania and Ohio. New Jersey sent seventy-four thousand men into the Union Army. The state funded military recruitment and cooperated with conscription. Although voters elected Democrats to office, they generally chose War Democrats who supported President Lincoln's efforts to defeat the Confederacy. There was a Copperhead presence – even a Copperhead senator for a while. But as a whole, New Jerseyans stood by the Union in its time of trouble.

As long as Gillette sticks to his theme, the book flows along reasonably well. But of course, it does not take nearly 400 pages of text and notes to demonstrate that the Copperhead myth is a caricature. *Jersey Blue* seeks to be a comprehensive political history of New Jersey during the years 1854 to 1865. It is in this respect that there are too many unaddressed questions and missed opportunities. Specifically, Gillette has not drawn on recent studies to help him frame his analysis.

One of the recent trends in the historiography of nineteenth-century American politics is that instead of concentrating on politicians, historians have increasingly studied voters. A central problem with *Jersey Blue* is that it almost exclusively examines the political leadership and pays surprisingly little attention to voters. Gillette has done prodigious research into the comings and goings of the state's political leaders. He has combed through a vast array of newspapers and other sources that will undoubtedly make this the standard work on New Jersey's Civil War-era political leadership for years to come. But Gillette's failure to explain the basis of party loyalties clouds his ability to explain his central theme. One comes away from the book with very little understanding of why New Jersey politics operated differently from politics in other non-border states. We are told little about the reasons that New Jersey's political loyalties were different from those in an upper Northern state like Vermont, other than New Jersey was geographically closer to the South. We are repeatedly reminded that New Jersey was a Northern border state. We are not told why that meant that voters were less likely to support Lincoln and the Republicans' agenda.

Early on, *Jersey Blue* tells the readers that the state was roughly divided on geographical lines: the southern half was Republican, the northern half was Democratic. What it does not tell the readers is why this was the case. It is not clear why north Jerseyans were Democrats and south Jerseyans were Republicans. We are told very little about the specific social or economic characteristics that might have explained why voter loyalties in the two regions were different. In the past several decades historians have invoked enthocultural and class explanations for nineteenth-century voting behavior. Gillette examines neither approach.

One finds an occasional reference to what might be

an enthocultural explanation for voting behavior. When discussing the continued Democratic strength of New Jersey in the late 1850s, Gillette refers to the "increase in the number of urban immigrant voters, mainly Irish and German Catholics[,] who tended to vote Democratic" (pp. 72-73). But there is no sustained examination of which ethic groups tended to vote Democratic and which groups tended to vote Whig, Know-Nothing, Free Soil, or Republican. Alternatively, there is no attempt to suggest that ethnocultural differences are not viable buoys for navigating New Jersey's political waters.

Since there is no discussion of the connection between ethnic make-up and party loyalties, it is difficulty to know exactly how New Jersey was like other Northern border states. Specifically, border states like Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois had substantial southern-born populations. These "butternuts" were critical elements in these states' Democratic Party coalitions. Yet Gillette specifically rejects the notion that the the presence of a southern-born population had much to do with New Jersey's limited support for the Republican Party's agenda (p. 3).

Just as Gillette does not discuss the impact of ethnicity, there is no discussion of the impact of economic change on New Jerseyans' voting behavior. Gillette tells the readers that the state saw a growing manufacturing sector as well as a growing commercial agriculture sector. Other nineteenth-century political historians have linked these trends to the divisions of the Second Party System, with Democrats winning the support of working-class and non-commercial farmers and Whigs and Republicans winning the support of the commercial classes. Gillette does not make an attempt to show whether these economic divisions had any impact on New Jersey politics.

It is, of course, possible that class and ethnic divisions did not form the basis for New Jersey's party system. Thirty years ago Richard McCormick wrote of New Jersey's second party system: "There were no jarring antagonisms between classes or sections, or between metropolis and hinterland; no established aristocratic elite capable of monopolizing political power and no self- conscious minority groups chafing under a sense of oppression." McCormick adds that under the second party system "the division was not one of rural against urban areas, or old Federalist counties against old Republican counties, or of North Jersey against South Jersey." Instead, McCormick saw alliances being formed between 1824 and 1828 "at the leadership level, and those identities were adhered to regardless of circumstances for the next two decades." [Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 124, 132.] The problem, of course, is that Gillette does not make an explicit case for this or any position.

Contemporary historians have used quantification to examine nineteenth-century politics. Gillette is clearly not a number- cruncher, nor does he have to be in order to write good political history. Gillette turned over the quantitative component of his study to Professor Lex Renda of the University of Wisconsin. Apparently, Renda prepared eight tables, though only three appear in the book's statistical appendix. The first two tables are simple enough. The first shows the relative percentage of the votes received by the parties in various elections; the second includes abstainers. The third is entitled "Ecological Regression Estimates of New Jersey Voters' Behavior" and attempts to estimate the continuity of voters' support for parties across different elections. On that basis, for example, Renda concludes that 96 percent of the voters who voted Democratic in 1854 Congressional races supported the Democracy in 1856.

There are two basic problems with this approach. The appendix contains no discussion of Renda's methodology. Instead, the reader is directed to the book manuscript deposited in the Rutgers University Library. This is problematic because there is no readily available way to determine exactly what is being examined. Unless one knows what methods of analysis were being used, it is difficult to know what to make of the statistics that are offered. The appendix reports Renda's conclusions from the data without explaining the statistical basis for those conclusions. Normally, one expects to see regression coefficients, standard error of estimates, regression analysis, and the like. We have to take it on faith that his estimates are reliable.

A second set of problems with *Jersey Blue's* approach to statistics is that they are not well-integrated into the narrative, and the narrative does not always draw accurate inferences from them. On occasion Gillette drops a few statistical points into the narrative. But rarely is there any sustained discussion of the statistics. The text contains no tables, charts, graphs, or anything that would make following a statistical argument easier. Moreover, sometimes the narrative draws inaccurate conclusions. For example, Gillette claims that "an estimated 7 percent of the state's Democrats who supported Buchanan in 1856 voted for Lincoln in 1860" (p. 103). The data re-

ported in the statistical appendix show that 7% of the 1856 Buchanan voters regardless of party affiliation voted for Lincoln.

A final area that political historians have been examining in recent studies is ideology. One thinks of Daniel Walker Howe's work on Whig political culture, Eric Foner's work on Republican Party thinking, or Marvin Meyers's and Alexander Saxton's work on the Democrats. *Jersey Blue* operates within an ideological vacuum. There is no clear explanation for what either of the parties stood for. There are some implicit suggestions – Democrats stood for racism, Republicans stood for the Union. But Gillette makes no effort to explain, analyze, or define the parties' images of themselves. There is no sense of how the parties attempted to construct coherent images of themselves in order to sell themselves to the electorate. Gillette reports campaign rhetoric. But he does not put it in an ideological context.

The lack of an ideological framework poses serious problems for those who are trying to understand the intricacies of New Jersey politics. Although most of the book examines the ways that New Jerseyans reacted to the issues of the Civil War, Gillette does spend some time discussing the the political problems wrought by the Camden and Amboy Railroad's monopoly of intercity traffic across central New Jersey. Students of nineteenth-century politics who know little about the details of New Jersey would expect that Whigs and their Republican successors would be the defenders of the railroad monopoly and that Democrats would be its critics. In fact, the opposite was the case. Given the Democrats' reputations as Jacksonian foes of privilege, one might expect to find some discussion of how the party squared its beliefs with its support for the monopoly.

In sum, *Jersey Blue* is a frustrating book. It is all the more frustrating because Gillette has done a thorough job of documenting the battles between the various party leaders and has put to rest the notion that disloyalty was rampant in the state. Had the book been written a few decades ago, it would have been regarded as a good, workmanlike account of state politics. But it is the judgment of this reviewer that political history has taken on new concerns, which *Jersey Blue* does not reflect. Those whose interest in Civil War-era politics goes beyond New Jersey will not find much of interest or help.

RESPONSE TO REVIEW Wed, 31 May 1995 07:22:07 -0500

Response by Lex Renda, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee <Renlex@csd.uwm.edu>

As the author of the statistical appendix in William Gillette's *Jersey Blue*, permit me to respond to Professor Cecil-Fronsman's review by saying that many of the criticisms are right on target, though I believe that the book does have considerable merit nonetheless.

As to the appendix and my statistical methods, I too was frustrated by being forced to truncate what amounted to extremely hard work on my part. With the exception of the 1860 election, New Jersey's electoral returns (on the town level) were not conveniently located in any one place, and I had to comb through many unmicrofilmed newspapers to build my data set. Evidently, the publisher believed that in a book aimed at a lay, as well as an academic, audience, an appendix was undesirable, and only Gillette's persistence allowed even the condensed version to appear. I did explain my methods in the original version deposited at Rutgers University and would be more than happy to send a copy of it to anyone interested.

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