



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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“Almanac With Louis Jacobson | OAS Episode 72

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

We are on the line with Louis Jacobson who is a senior correspondent for PolitiFact. Political junkies like myself are familiar with his work over the last 15 years or so for publications like *Governing Magazine*, *Roll Call*, *Congress Now* and the *National Journal*. Lou, thanks so much for joining us on “Our American States.”

Lou: Thank you for having me.

Time Marker (TM): 0:46

Gene: Lou, you’re a senior author for a publication that has just been released called *The 2020 Almanac of American Politics*, and I see where columnist George Will called it the “bible of American politics.”

Lou: Indeed. And by bible, it may in fact be heavier than the actual bible. It’s about 2,000 pages or more. It comes out every two years since ’72, so it’s having its 50th anniversary on the next edition in two years.

And basically the book has profiles of every member of Congress in the House and the Senate as well as 435 congressional district descriptions: profiles of the senators, profiles of the governors and every state, and a whole lot of data about election results, seniority in the House, committee assignments, and that sort of thing.

And my role for the past three books has been to focus on the state overview chapters and the governor overview chapters. Most of the book, maybe 90% of the book, is written by either myself or Rich Cohen who has been involved with a whole bunch of editions of the book. I’ve been involved with about five, and Lou Peck. So, the three of us together combine to write most of it.

Rich does all the congressional districts of the House. I do all of the state overview chapters and the governor chapters, and Lou Peck does the bulk of the senator profiles. And we have a couple other authors who have done smaller bits and pieces as well.

TM: 2:17

Gene: Who is the book designed for, Lou?

Lou: It's really a reference book for anyone who is involved in politics. Actually, it's kind of interesting that the founder, Michael Perone, who wrote the first dozen or so books I guess in the series and who is still a little bit involved, he actually I believe started it because back when it was started in the early 70s, there was a lot of interest in lobbying Congress over the Viet Nam war. And there was no single reference work that really provided the public with the background of their elected officials and the data surrounding them, addresses, phone numbers, that sort of thing.

It's always been useful as a tool for people who study politics, who are involved in politics. One of the best things that I like about doing the state chapters, and this is also true about the district-level chapters, is that it provides a really good kind of overview of the congressional districts, district by district, about the social and economic and cultural influences in those districts.

Those are probably updated a bit more slowly than some of the other aspects of it because things change a little bit more slowly than the members of Congress necessarily. But it's really the only book out there these days that you can look up the 32nd district in California and find out about the member of Congress, about the district that they represent, statistics on how they voted on key votes, where they rank in terms of the liberal/conservative spectrum compared to other members of Congress, and overall state figures about employment and taxation and various other statistics that are included for every state and district.

TM: 4:08

Gene: Okay, I'd like to drill down on a couple of these. State legislators are constantly concerned about federal unfunded mandates. What can they learn about Congress from this book?

Lou: The book has detailed listings of various committee memberships and seniority, so you can really figure out if you have a particular issue you're involved in, you can figure out the committee that it relates to and the Democrats and the Republicans on each side of the committee and their seniority as to who is in charge of the subcommittees.

And then once you have the name of the person you can find out more about their own personal background, their biography, their political career, what their major pieces of legislation have been, and that sort of thing, which can kind of help you better understand the people who you're going to be contacting perhaps on your issue.

TM: 4:58

Gene: And you talked about having district demographic data. I guess this would serve as a pretty good handbook to have to help follow the 2020 elections.

Lou: Yeah, for sure. We have a couple opening essays by Charlie Cook, the political analyst and coauthor of the book, and Rich Cohen, who I mentioned before wrote some of the House chapters. They give a good overview of kind of the state of politics today in a very neutral way, unbiased in a thinking way.

So those are very helpful. And there are also sections in each about the history of that state and the presidential elections, how the state tends to vote historically. And I spent a lot of time as I was putting together the state overview chapters, actually particularly in the 2018 book which covered the aftermath of the 2016 election, I did a lot of research into the election results of the Trump versus Clinton race, and drilled down really to the county level in a lot of states to see where the shifts in the vote came, you know, a lot of suburban districts moving in the Democrats' direction even in 2016; a lot of the rural districts that might have been open to a Democrat became more and more Republican. And so I have that fairly thoroughly written up in each of the chapters.

One sort of interesting thing from the 2018 book, looking at the 2016 election results, is that in most of the states I found that, not too surprisingly, that Clinton did a little bit better than Obama had in a lot of the suburban districts. A lot of suburban voters may have been turned off by Trump. And that was true in a lot of places around the country including some pretty red states like Georgia and Texas.

But there were two states that stuck out: even the urban and suburban areas of two states, North Dakota and South Dakota – they went more in the Trump direction, in the GOP direction, for Trump between 2012 and 2016. That's a break with the pattern of one that I really wouldn't have found, except that I was looking really kind of consistently at each state at those patterns.

TM: 7:03

Gene: You mention that you did the profiles of a number of new governors that came into office across the country in 2018. What have you learned about these women and men and how it has affected their relationships with state legislatures?

Lou: Well, it was fun for me as a specialist in state politics because the 2018 election was a major, major year for gubernatorial races. I like to call it the echo year of the amazing 2002 election where voters throughout the incumbent party in virtually every state that had a competitive race that year, they threw out Democrats, they threw out Republicans.

And that kind of created an 8-year period through 2010 where a lot of states had a governor of the opposite party. And those seats came open in 2010 and changed hands, and those governors elected in 2010... their term limits... in most cases they had term limits... were up in 2018. So, there were a lot of open seats which were kind of ripe for the picking for the out party, particularly the Democrats because 2018 was a very strongly Democratic wave election.

And the Democrats didn't get every seat they wanted. They lost Iowa for instance, even though they came pretty close, and they thought they had a better chance in the State of Ohio and

didn't get it there. But they did flip a bunch of seats and gained I think a net four or five governorships in the process.

So, this kind of presented a book where I had to write from scratch for a lot of these governors who were newly elected in 2018. We always start with the previous book's chapter from two years earlier and then redo it based on new events and rising and falling popularity of the governor or whatever. But in 2018 I had a ton of chapters where there were rookie governors first elected in 2018. I had to start from scratch.

So, a bit more challenging, but kind of fun. I got to track the coverage of the campaign. The folks at Ballotpedia have done our research for the last couple of books and are great at digging out news clips for us to kind of refresh our memory on what happened in the campaign and some in-depth biographies that have been published about each of the candidates.

And so, some of them were complicated chapters to write. I'm thinking of Georgia and Florida as good examples where you had an open seat in both states and you had competitive primaries on both sides, D and R, and then a very competitive general election. So really, I had to write about the sort of back-and-forth in two different primaries and a general election and give a sense of the biography of the winner and some of the losers in this one chapter. That was a fun process and I think it all came together pretty well.

TM: 9:51

Gene: We were talking about earlier, Lou, that you had written a column for Governing Magazine that kind of broke down some of this demographic data across the states.

Lou: I've seen a lot of discussion among political observers that a couple of demographic factors are really shaping how people identify politically and vote. Three of the ones that jumped out as being particularly strong predictors are: race – if you're white or if you're a minority voter; whether you're a resident of a rural area, suburban area or an urban area; and the third factor is educational attainment, so whether you have a college degree, or you don't.

So, I wanted to sort of quantify this and the way I did it was I took data on the percentage of the state population who are white and who are nonwhite; I took the percentage of state residents for all 50 states who have a college degree; and I took the percentage of the state population that is classified as rural, either high or low, and ranked for those three categories each of the states, 1 through 50.

And then I took the rating for each of those states in each of those three categories and averaged them, and then did a sort of composite average of where all the 50 states rank in terms of the more GOP-friendly demographic side of the spectrum and the more Democratic-friendly side of the spectrum.

And so, I put together the ranking of those 50 states and it tended to track pretty well with the kinds of states that we know are solidly Republican and the states that are solidly Democratic, and the ones that are in the middle, more of the swingy states.

There were a couple of outliers in that that I thought were kind of interesting. On the Democratic side there were three states that were actually ranked demographically as pretty favorable towards the GOP: those were Maine, Minnesota and New Hampshire. And on the GOP side, there were four states that I found that ranked on the Democratic-friendly side on demographics, but were in recent years at least tipping red states, and those were: Arizona, Georgia, Florida and Texas.

And those four GOP states are particularly interesting to me because those are kind of increasingly becoming some of the swingier areas and kind of becoming more in reach for Democrats in the past election cycle or two than they've been for a very long time. In Arizona you saw Senator Kristin Sinema win her Senate race last year. The Senate race coming up in 2020 is a very competitive one.

Democrats gained ground in the presidential race and are looking seriously at Arizona as a possible swing state for 2020. Much the same in Texas – you saw Beto O'Rourke come very close to knocking off Ted Cruz in the Senate race. You saw gains up and down the ballot, not quite winning yet for Democrats, but closer than they have in years. And the same is true in Georgia.

Now Florida is a little bit of a different case. There is a consistent inflow of retirees who are generally whiter and conservative who have been flowing into the state in recent years, which has kept the GOP very, very narrowly in command there in Florida, and it will be interesting to see how these four states, which are increasingly becoming kind of evenly balanced, how they'll shake out for 2020 and beyond.

TM: 13:19

Gene: So, that's a good example, Lou, of one of the reasons a lot of us like your columns as you analyze data pretty well, and recently you had a column about voter turnout in the 2018 elections. Can you share with us what you learned combing over that data?

Lou: Yeah, sure. So, actually, this column emerged directly from the research I did for the Almanac and it struck me as I was doing the research – part of the research that I do, like I did those deep dives into the county-by-county results for the 2016 presidential election, I also did that for most of the statewide races in 2018 because it wasn't a presidential race.

I looked at the Senate races and the governors' races and I kept consistently seeing examples in which, particularly Democrats, to a certain extent Republicans, but much more clearly for Democrats, where they notched as many votes or more votes or slightly less in terms of votes in the 2018 statewide races than did Hillary Clinton in 2016, which was interesting because historically turnout in the midterm elections is significantly lower than it is for the presidential election.

For instance, there was 60.1% turnout in the 2016 presidential election overall. In the 2010 midterms it was 41.8%, so a drop by about a third; and 36.7% in 2014, which was even lower. Usually you would expect a statewide candidate to not come anywhere close to where the most recent presidential candidate from their party did two years earlier, but I consistently found that Democratic candidates for Governor and Senator were either exceeding or slightly trailing Clinton's vote totals in those states from two years earlier.

For instance, in four states, Idaho, Kansas, Oklahoma and South Dakota, the Democratic candidate got more than 10% higher than Clinton did. And in six other states, they also increased... sorry, these are Governor candidates in case it wasn't clear... in six other states the Democratic Governor candidate also got more than Clinton, but it wasn't quite 10%. It was a smaller amount than that, and those are Alaska, Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, Nebraska and New Mexico. And then in 11 other states, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate won not quite as many votes, but really not a sharp falloff at all.

And this was true to a certain extent for GOP candidates as well, particularly in states where the GOP ran a fairly moderate candidate in a Democratic-leaning state: in Maryland, Massachusetts and Vermont the GOP gubernatorial candidate got, they got more than 10% more votes in the midterm than Trump did in the presidential year.

But this is a very different pattern. I compared it to the 2010 election, which was a similar midterm. It was the first midterm after Obama came into office, so kind of a similar situation structurally, and almost in no state did you see a 2010 gubernatorial or Senate candidate topping what Senator John McCain or what Senator Obama at the time, what they had achieved just two years earlier.

So, it's an interesting little point about turnout. It doesn't necessarily mean that the Democrats are just like good-to-go for 2020. This does mean that there's a Trump-backing vote that just didn't turn out in 2018; but it could come back in 2020. But it's a good sign for Democrats and it's the kind of thing that they can take some comfort in going into 2020.

TM: 16:46

Gene: And for our listeners, Lou, can you tell us what are some of the state storylines that you're looking for as we approach the 2020 elections?

Lou: The emergence of these new battleground states that I was talking about, you know, Texas and Arizona and Georgia, and then you can also throw in North Carolina, are definitely interesting. I mean, Democrats are making so much progress in the suburbs that these sorts of states are increasingly in reach to a degree that some of the swingier states won by Democrats might not be.

But really in terms of 2020 I'm still banking on the center of gravity being the three key states which switched from Democrats to Trump in 2016, which would be Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, especially Wisconsin I think has the best shot at being kind of a make-or-break state for either side.

So yeah, I mean it's not too different from what a lot of other people are saying, but I think it's definitely true. And I think it's still early. There are still news events that could happen; if there's a recession or if there's a foreign policy issue that becomes really big, things could change. But it's always hard to take out an incumbent. On the other hand, President Trump has a pretty low approval rating historically, and that hasn't been good for people trying to get a second term as president.

So, lots for us to cover in the next 16 months or so.

TM: 18:15

Gene: So, finally Lou, tell us how we can purchase the 2020 Almanac of American Politics.

Lou: Yes, you can order the book directly from the publisher, and that's www.almanacofamericanpolitics.com. And that's almanacofamericanpolitics.com with no spaces in-between. And a special for our readers: if you put in the box for the promotional code, if you put in LOUISANDFRIENDS; that's LOUISANDFRIENDS, all in caps and no spaces, you'll get 10% off. And you can choose between a soft cover, which is a bit cheaper, and the hardcovered version.

Gene: Okay, excellent. We've been talking with Louis Jacobson, a Senior Correspondent for PolitiFact. And Lou, we appreciate you being a guest on "Our American States."

Lou: Great, thanks so much.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.