

# GOP loses registration majority in Cumberland County: Could the county turn blue?

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Republicans no longer hold a majority of registered voters in Cumberland County, whose residents voted for the GOP in every presidential contest since 1964.

Michael Fedor, a Democratic candidate for county commissioner, heralded the milestone in an email this week trying to drum up campaign donations. But he'd monitored registration even before announcing his run for the board currently made up of two Republicans and one Democrat.

"One of the things you look at to decide whether to run is what's the math for winning," he said. "What's the tipping point?"

In real terms, the change reflects the shifting of several hundred registered voters. The GOP held a slim 50.2 percent majority in November. As of last week, the party slipped to a 49.97 percent plurality.



Michael Fedor

That was driven by an influx of new Democratic and unaffiliated voters, although county Elections Manager Megan Orris noted that registration was up across the board. Between November and July, the GOP added 322 new voters compared to Democrats' 664.

"The registration drives have picked up, especially on college campuses, from what we've noticed," Orris said. "But people are just more politically involved."

The eroding GOP majority hardly makes Cumberland County safe for Democrats but it is another sign of changing demographics that skew increasingly younger and more diverse. Camp Hill has voted increasingly Democratic and the county as a whole voted to reelect Gov. Tom Wolf last year.

"If things don't reverse, those are ominous signs," said Charlie Gerow, a GOP county committeeman and political consultant. "It makes the job of the party faithful increasingly important."



Camp Hill has voted for Democrats in recent elections. Mark Pynes | mpynes@pennlive.com

Gerow raised the specter of what happened in the Philadelphia suburbs, which once reliably voted for Republican candidates up and down the ballot but now consistently elect Democrats. If the current trends continue, he can imagine a similar scenario for Cumberland and Dauphin counties.

“Look at Dauphin County. It’s a Dem county by registration and you begin to wonder when are they going to pick up row offices,” he said. “They asked that question in Montgomery County 25 years ago. Now, [GOP candidates] can’t get any office in Montgomery except jury commissioner and county commissioner.”

Minority party representation, it should be noted, is statutorily assured in those two offices in Montgomery County.

While the GOP only recently lost its voter registration majority in Cumberland County, the downward trend has been more than a decade in the making. In 2000, Republicans accounted for 58 percent of all registered voters. That figure fell to 56.4 percent in 2004; 51.5 percent in 2008; 51.3 percent in 2012; and 51.1 percent in 2016.

Democrats remain in the minority but can make up that deficit, as they did in last year’s gubernatorial race between Tom Wolf and Republican Scott Wagner, by pulling in Republican and unaffiliated voters. As of July 22, Cumberland County had 86,810 Republican voters; 58,599 Democrats; 18,887 with no affiliation and 9,414 who aligned with a third party.

Gerow said the erosion of GOP voter registration is due in part to the complacency of local party leadership.

“The Wolf victory in 2018 was an embarrassment to the party organization there,” he said. “They have new leadership now and folks are hopeful they will turn things around.”

Losing the majority is still a largely symbolic defeat but Gerow said it could have real consequences. It could set off a chain of events: As one Democrat wins office and then another, it could demoralize GOP party faithful and lead to fewer campaign donations, making it even more difficult for GOP candidates. Even relatively small changes in party registration could make all the difference in close elections or low-turnout years with weak candidates.

“It means that if [Democrats] can catch lightning in a bottle, they can win elections,” he said.

Carlisle Mayor Tim Scott said the borough’s recent political history could serve as a roadmap for the rest of the county. When he won election to borough council by a slim margin in 2001, the community was far more conservative than it is today.

“What’s happening in Carlisle is mirroring what’s happening in the rest of the county and that makes me happy,” he said. “It means that Democrats have a fighting chance to offer folks a real advantage.”

In that initial race, Scott said he made a point of knocking on doors and meeting people who may not have ordinarily voted for a Democrat.

“They weren’t used to that,” he said. “The incumbents got complacent. If you had an R by your name, you would win and that was it.”



Tim Scott was sworn in as Carlisle's mayor in 2014. He is the borough's first black mayor and the first Democrat to win a mayoral race in more than three decades.

Demographics may also be playing a role. According to U.S. Census data, the county's population has grown younger, wealthier, more educated and more diverse over time. In 2009, white people accounted for 92.9 percent of residents. By 2017, that had fallen to 88.8 percent. Meanwhile, the percentage of those who were college educated increased from 54 to 59 percent. Median household income also increased from \$60,400 to \$65,544 over the same period.

Fedor himself is an example of how changing demographics could be driving a surge in the county's Democratic voting base. He worked in Elizabethtown and lived in Perry County prior to moving his growing family to Hampden Township in 2010 in search of strong property values and better schools.

But Fedor's not banking on demographics alone. He points to the 1975 election, amid Watergate and other GOP scandals, that ushered in more than a decade of Democratic control of the Cumberland County commission. Those years defied a 2-to-1 GOP registration advantage, he said, and showed that partisanship is less important at the local level.

Beyond that example, the county also voted for New Deal Democrats in the '30s and early '40s and joined in the statewide wave that reelected Democratic Gov. Bob Casey in 1990.

“People will vote for people they know and trust,” Fedor said. “Don't forget that I'm running for an office that's largely not partisan. I'll work across party lines with the other commissioners and Republicans who are township [officials].”

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