

The Jefferson Essays

**ERIE'S MAYORAL RACE:
Analyzing Voter Turnout and Primary
Election Results With A Look Ahead to the
November 7 General Election**

**By
Patrick Cuneo**

FALL 2017
ESSAY V

A Publication of the Jefferson Educational Society



Editorial Board

Ferki Ferati, Ed.D.
Ben Speggen, M.A.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 4

Democratic Primary Analysis 7

Republican Primary Analysis 8

Historical Context 9

Primary Voter Turnout and Makeup of the Electorate 10

Observations for the Fall 12

As Erie Democratic mayoral nominee Joe Schember and Republican nominee John Persinger gear up their campaigns for a Nov. 7 election showdown, an important question lingers. What happened in the primary voting on May 16 that brought us here? Further, how many people voted in the primaries in the effort to succeed three-term Erie Mayor Joe Sinnott? Who were they? How did the turnout compare to past primaries? How does that help inform what might happen in November or, at minimum, underscore the candidates' advantages and disadvantages heading toward the general election?

It should first be pointed out that the focus of this essay is limited principally to the voting results, voter turnout and how they compare to the voting patterns over the last 30 years in particular. The turnout and voter breakdown of the May 2017 primaries tell a story about winners and contenders for the Democratic and Republican nominations. They also reveal some detail about the voters, including who showed up at the polls, by age and other demographics, and who didn't. They also show that the once reliable Erie ethnic voting patterns seem to be eroding. What they don't reveal, however, are the many reasons why Schember and Persinger emerged from a group of nine to compete head-to-head to succeed Mayor Sinnott, such as the ideas, people and money that helped them achieve the nominations.

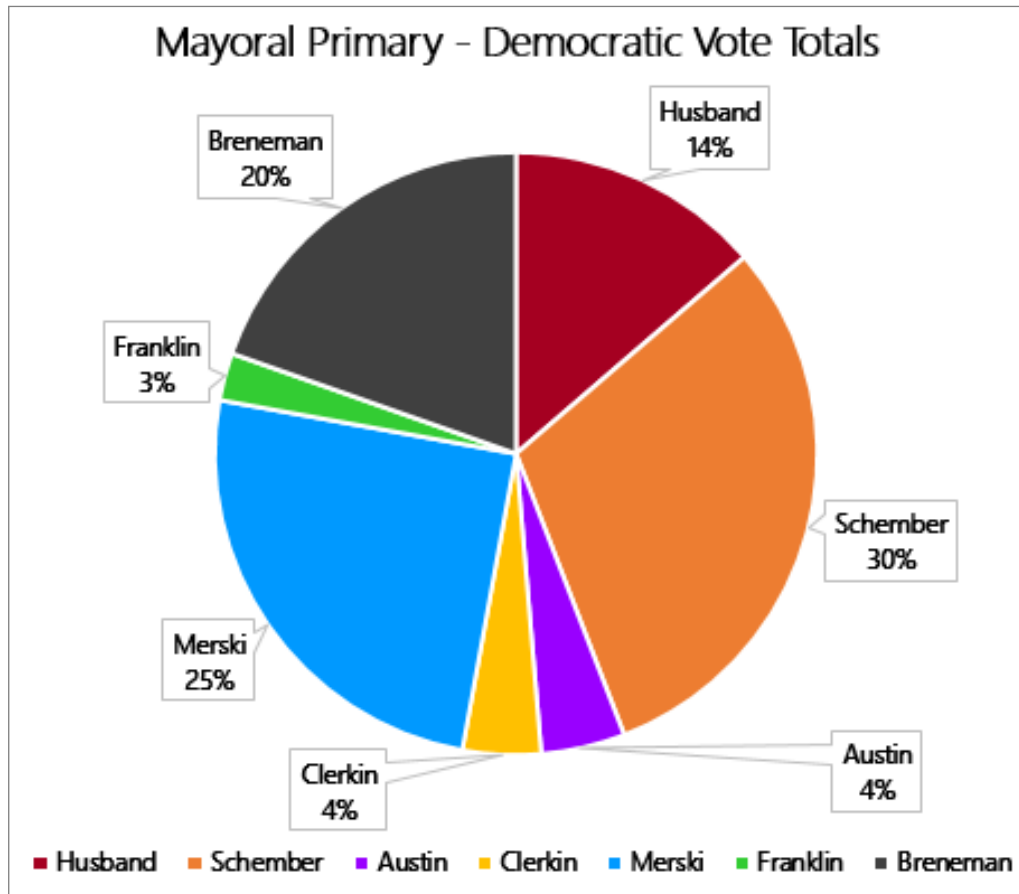
Those factors include all of the things that a voter considers before making his or her decision on who to support: candidates' experience, education, ideas, policies, energy, the ability to run a campaign, form coalitions, show transparency, and, most importantly, exhibit the leadership skills that could serve the community well starting in January 2018.

It also should be noted that the late Dr. William P. Garvey, Founding President of the Jefferson, played a key role in helping to analyze the 2017 primary results. Politics, especially local politics, was among his favorite subjects, and Garvey's insights appear throughout this essay.

Let's begin with a look at the Democratic turnout and vote count:

<i>Democratic primary</i>	1st Ward	2nd Ward	3rd Ward	4th Ward	5th Ward	6th Ward	<i>Total</i>
Husband	182	244	86	164	812	203	1691
Schember	213	104	160	475	1502	1310	3764
Austin	51	25	82	116	144	139	557
Clerkin	21	14	39	121	159	164	518
Merski	290	161	193	237	1326	881	3088
Franklin	23	9	32	24	78	148	314
Breneman	161	68	191	376	906	720	2422
Write-in	0	1	2	1	9	2	15
<i>Total</i>	941	626	785	1514	4936	3567	12,369

Schember won the Democratic nomination with 3,764 votes, followed by Bob Merski (3,088), Jay Breneman (2,422), Rubye Jenkins-Husband (1,691), Lisa Austin (557), Almi Clerkin (518), and Steve Franklin (314). The Mayoral Primary – Democratic Vote Totals pie chart illustrates the percentage breakdown:



A word about Erie wards and districts. These geographic boundaries have not been in use since 1914 when representative ward politics ended. However, they give geographic location to a candidate's performance. There are six wards and originally 127 districts within the wards, now condensed to 89 districts.

- First Ward – Eighth Street to Bayfront, State Street east to city limits.
- Second Ward – Eighth to 18th Street, State Street east to city limits.
- Third Ward -- Eighth to 18th Street, State Street west to city limits.
- Fourth Ward -- Eighth Street to Bayfront, State Street west to city limits.
- Fifth Ward – South of 18th Street to city limits, State and Peach streets east to city limits.
- Sixth Ward – South of 18th Street to city limits, State and Peach streets west to city limits.
- The Fifth and Sixth Wards were added after the city's annexation of the Borough of South Erie in 1870. They now contain the vast majority of the city's population.

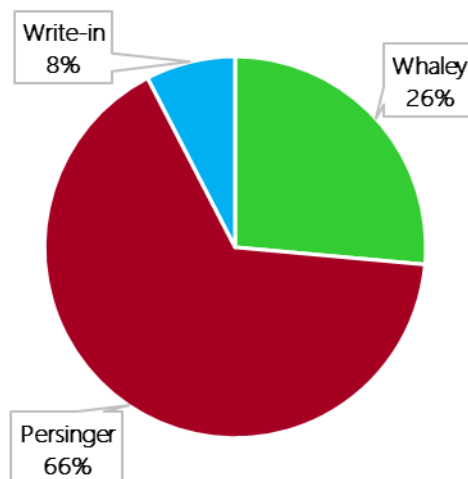
A few other observations about the Democratic vote:

- Turnout was 30.2 percent, or 12,329 voters.
- Schember won the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Wards, including the Fifth by just 176 votes over Merski.
- Merski won the Third Ward by just 2 votes over Breneman.
- Jenkins-Husband won the Second Ward.
- Schember defeated Merski overall by 676 votes.
- Schember's overall margin of victory is also reflected in his Fifth and Sixth Ward victory total over Merski – 605 votes.
- Schember led the pack with wins in three wards and 27 districts.
- Merski won two wards and 18 districts, including two ties.
- Jenkins-Husband won one ward, 14 districts, including 1 tie.
- Breneman won six districts, including 1 tie.
- Though Breneman finished third over fourth-place Jenkins-Husband by 731 votes, her support was more concentrated as reflected in the greater number of ward and district wins.
- No other candidates won a district.

Next, look at the Republican results in a two-man race between victor Persinger (1,943 votes) and runner-up Jon Whaley (779).

<i>GOP primary</i>	1st Ward	2nd Ward	3rd Ward	4th Ward	5th Ward	6th Ward	<i>Total</i>
Whaley	49	21	64	79	291	275	779
Persinger	99	37	90	478	737	502	1943
Write-in	13	8	24	23	81	75	224
Total	161	66	178	580	1109	852	2946

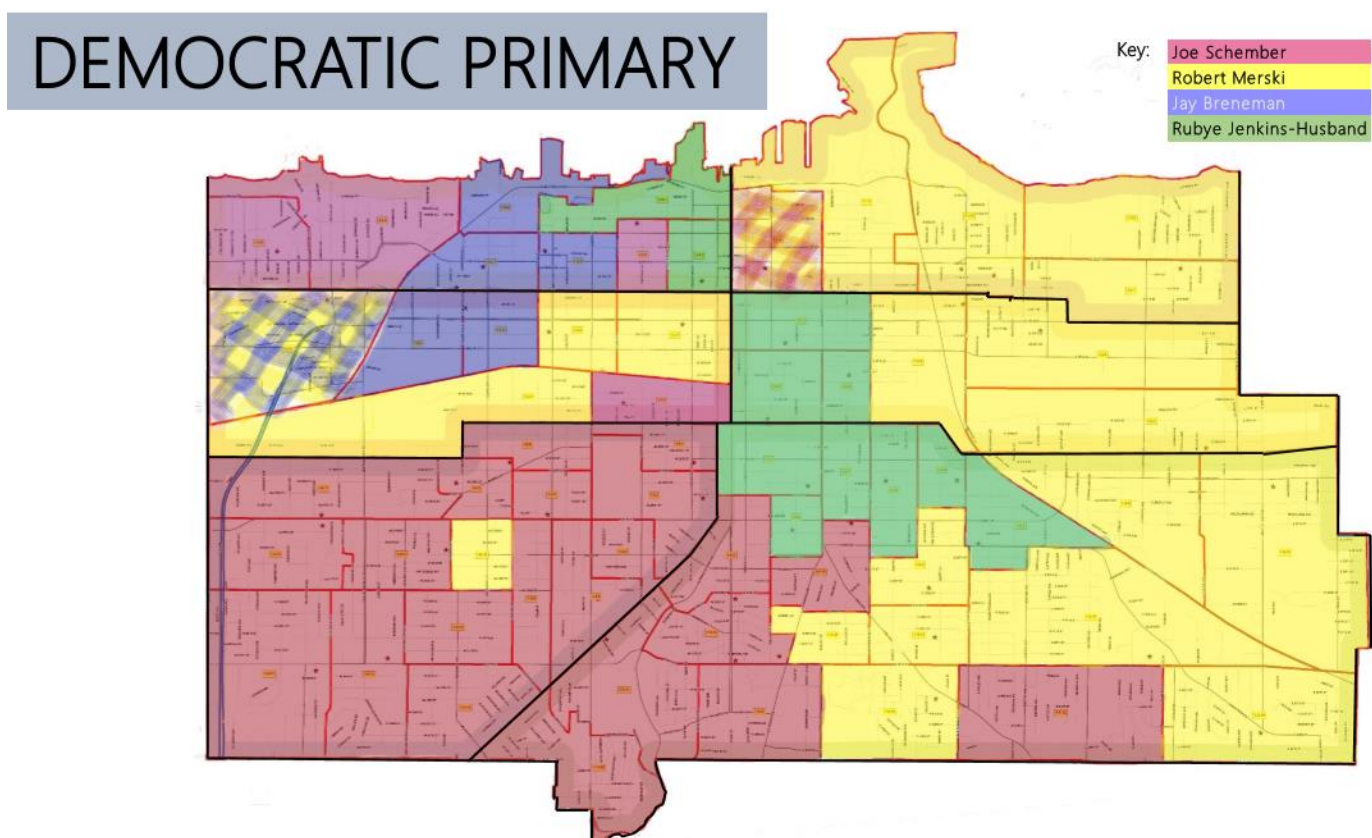
Mayoral Primary - Republican Vote Totals



A few other observations about the Republican vote:

- Republican turnout was 21.1 percent, or 2,946 voters.
- Persinger won all six wards by large margins, such as 478-79 in the Fourth Ward, 737-291 in the Fifth Ward, and 502-275 in the Sixth Ward. Whaley came closest in the Second Ward, 37-21.
- 63.8 percent of Persinger's votes came from the Fifth and Sixth wards.
- Persinger earned three more votes than Schember (in the Democratic Primary) in the Fourth Ward (478 to 475), which is Erie's traditionally most Republican ward. Persinger and Schember live in the same ward and same district.

Democratic Primary Analysis



As indicated in the Democratic Primary chart that colorizes district results, Schember (in red) dominated the Sixth Ward and won clear majorities in the Fifth Ward (over Merski in yellow, and Jenkins-Husband in green) and in the Fourth Ward (over Breneman in blue, and Jenkins-Husband in green).

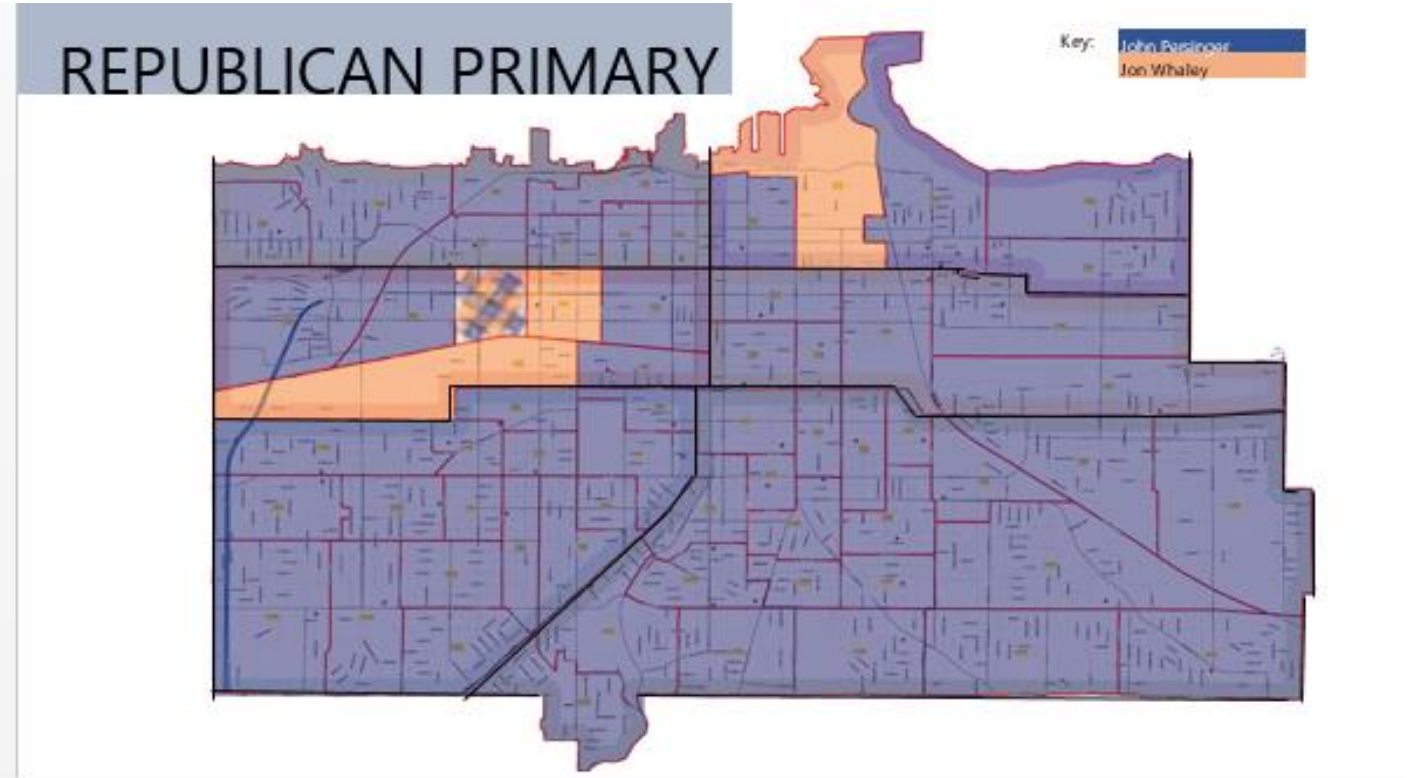
Taken as a whole, however, a number of factors should be noted in Schember's victory, starting with his own strength in the Fifth and Sixth wards, especially. In what appears to be a traditional westside-eastside showdown between Schember (west) and Merski (east), Schember won the westside decisively over nearest rival Merski, 1,310-881, but was also able to post strong numbers in the eastside Fifth (1,502), where Merski finished second (1,326), Breneman third (906) and former City Councilwoman Jenkins-Husband fourth (812). Jenkins-Husband also outrightly won the Second Ward. Her strength in the inner city, in particular, seriously damaged City

Erie's Mayoral Race

Councilman Merski's ability to hold the eastside vote. Also worth noting is that Erie County Councilman Breneman, who lives on the east side and represents County Council's Fourth District, earned the third-highest vote total in the Fifth Ward.

In addition, while Breneman's "outsider" bid led to solid numbers in the Fifth and Fourth wards, in particular, his effort to win the primary was hurt by other outsider candidates (Jenkins-Husband, Austin, Clerkin, and Franklin). Some argue that Jenkins-Husband was not really an outsider, given her 12-year experience as a three-term councilwoman who had been term-limited. However, Jenkins-Husband had not served in public office since 2009, and did not enter the race until January. Meanwhile, Merski won the First Ward decisively by 77 votes over nearest rival Schember, and the Third Ward narrowly by just two votes over Breneman. Merski also posted solid numbers in the Fifth (1,326) and Sixth (881) wards, but it wasn't enough to counter Schember's strength in those two most populous wards. In the end, Schember's ability to "cross State Street" and win the eastside Fifth Ward proved decisive.

Republican Primary Analysis



As shown in the Republican Primary chart, Persinger's overwhelming win speaks for itself. He won every ward and lost only a handful of districts in the Third and First wards. Persinger credited his campaign's door-to-door efforts and his ability to raise funds, as well as conserving resources in the primary to use in the fall municipal election.

Historical Context

How do these numbers compare historically with other Erie mayoral primaries? To what extent do they follow traditional ethnic voting patterns? And do those patterns matter anymore? Since Lou Tullio's six-term era ended in 1989, each Democratic primary that did not involve an incumbent – with one exception that will be addressed later – featured at least six candidates competing for the Democratic nomination for mayor. This year seven sought the nomination. Let's look at those races.

In spring 1989, City Councilwoman Joyce Savocchio narrowly defeated City Treasurer Skip Cannavino by 447 votes. Savocchio went on to win three terms as mayor, serving a term-limited 12 years. In that 1989 primary, 25,299 Democratic votes were cast – nearly double the number of Democratic votes cast this spring (12,369). Savocchio in 1989 won with 5,855 votes, followed by Cannavino (5,408), Chris Maras (4,242), Pat Cappabianca (4,093), with Pat Liebel and Billy Brabender trailing.

In the next non-incumbent Democratic primary – 2001 – six candidates competed again, with Rick Filippi defeating runnerup Chris Maras by just 281 votes from 17,312 votes cast – a 7,987-vote decrease from 1989. Filippi led the vote with 5,398, followed by Maras (5,117) and three others with almost the same vote – Brenda Pundt (2,204), Cappabianca (2,179), and Mel Witherspoon (2,175).

In 2005, incumbent Rick Filippi had been badly damaged politically by allegations that he abused his office involving land deals. And even though he was acquitted of all charges in a state trial, Filippi's bid for re-election was hamstrung. In that subsequent primary, first-term Councilman Joe Sinnott defeated political newcomer Barry Grossman (who would go on to become county executive in 2010) by 733 votes. A total of 18,536 Democrats cast votes, led by Sinnott with 5,864, followed by Grossman (5,131), state Assemblywoman Linda Bebko-Jones (3,303), Filippi (3,186), and two minor candidates who together totaled 1,000.

This year, the next "open," non-incumbent election, Joe Schember defeated his top challenger Bob Merski, followed by Jay Breneman, Rubye Jenkins-Husband, and three others.

Again, note that the total vote counts in these elections were 25,000-plus in 1989; 17,000-plus in 2001; 18,500 in 2005; and now just 12,369 votes in 2017. In comparison, Erie's population did not drop as sharply over the period – 108,718 in 1990; 103,659 in 2000; and a census-estimated 98,000 in 2017. Turnout will be addressed shortly, but a few observations first:

- Who is voting? Who is running? To what degree does ethnic makeup play today? While it's too early to determine whether a trend exists, it appears ethnic voting patterns are eroding.
- Which ethnic groups, who by themselves did not have a majority, successfully won election because they built coalitions with other ethnic groups? The Irish, for example, did that from the late 1930s into the mid-1950s (both as Democrats and Republicans) – principally allied with residents of Italian descent and somewhat with residents of Polish and Slovak descent. Mike Cannavino, of southern Italian roots, defeated Lou Tullio, of northern Italian roots, in 1965, with heavy Polish backing. However, Cannavino died just weeks before the general election, and Tullio, who was subsequently named the nominee by the Erie Democratic Party, went on to defeat incumbent Mayor Charles Williamson and eventually served for 24 years.
- The first major change in traditional ethnic voting patterns occurred with Savocchio's win in 1989. Though a councilwoman, Savocchio represented outsider change and narrowly defeated Treasurer Skip Cannavino

Erie's Mayoral Race

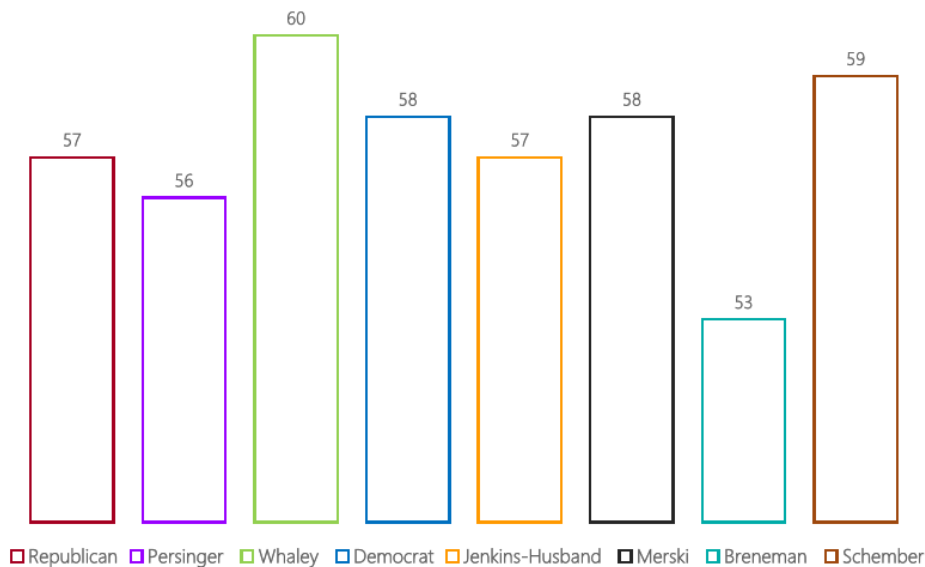
(the nephew of both Mike Cannavino and Lou Tullio), in a large field of very experienced political leaders. It's worth noting that Savocchio, who had a long and respected career in education, also faced a field that had no African-American candidate. She won that demographic, as Rick Fillippi largely did in 2001, though there was some support that year for Mel Witherspoon, the lone African-American candidate. Also, Chris Maras, of Polish descent, finished a strong third in that 1989 race, and then lost by just a few hundred votes to Rick Filippi in 2001. Maras, it should be noted, also enjoyed excellent support from Mike Cannavino's old southern Italian alliance in that 2001 race.

- But what about today? Though the African-American vote cannot be broken out as a demographic – it is not counted; nor are other ethnic groups, such as Hispanic or refugees or immigrants, counted as groups – it is clear that former three-term Councilwoman Jenkins-Husband, of African-American descent, won the inner-city vote. She captured the Second Ward and produced other high numbers in the Third, Fourth, and inner-city areas of the Fifth Ward. That meddled, it appears, mostly with Merski's strength on the east side, though Breneman was a clear Merski spoiler in the Fifth Ward as well. Jenkins-Husband also had first ballot position, and Schember second. Merski was fifth and Breneman the last of seven. What may have happened if Merski or Breneman topped the ballot is worth considering.

Primary Voter Turnout and Makeup of the Electorate

Low turnout in the Democratic race was more akin to an off-year presidential election (30.2 percent or 12,329 voters) than a typical non-incumbent mayoral primary, but still far surpassed Republican turnout (21.1 percent or 2,946 voters). By registration, Democrats hold a 3-1 margin, up in the last decade from 2½ to 1.

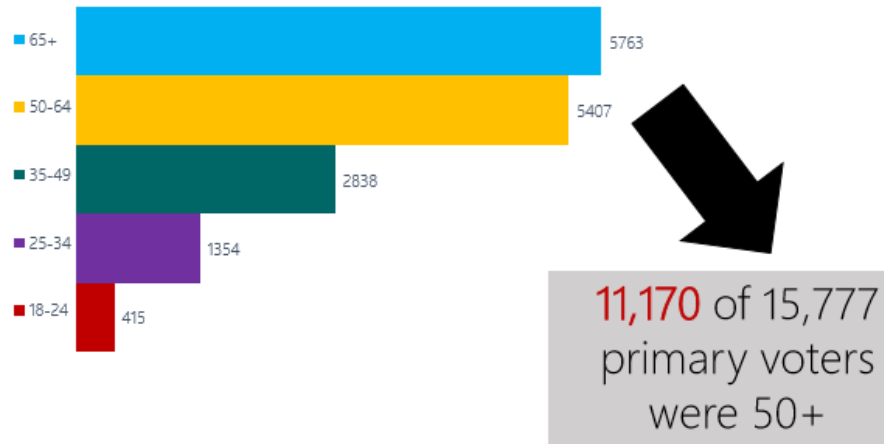
VOTERS' AVERAGE AGE



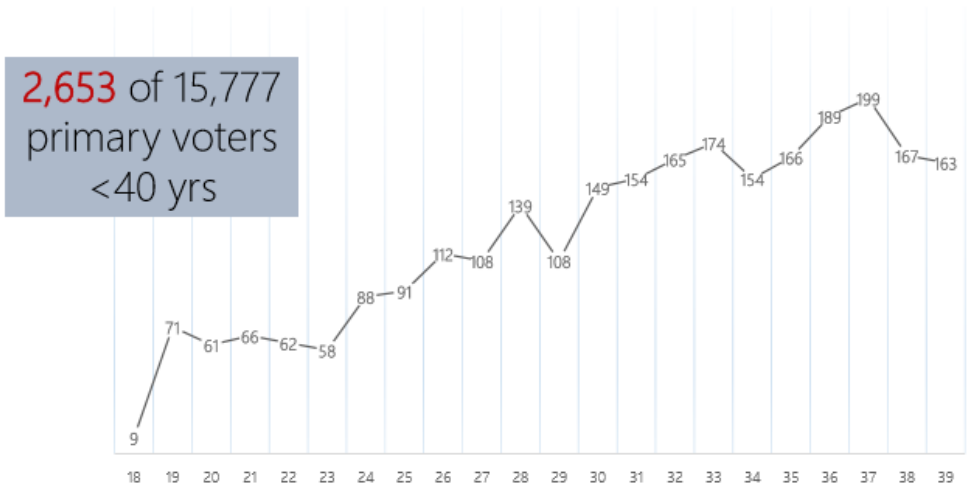
As the Voters' Average Age chart indicates, voters who chose Schember and Persinger had one major factor in common: older age. The average age of Democrats and Republicans who voted in the mayoral primaries was 57. Only Breneman's supporters were substantially younger, but they averaged 53 years old.

The Total Voters By Age Range and Total Dispersion of Voters Under 40 charts show an alarmingly few number of younger voters, though comparative numbers from other elections were not available.

TOTAL VOTERS BY AGE RANGE



TOTAL DISPERSION OF VOTERS UNDER 40



Note above that only 2,653 of the 15,777 Democrats and Republicans who voted in the May primaries were under age 40 (16.8 percent). And, remarkably, only nine 18-year-olds voted. Conversely, nearly 71 percent of the vote came from voters 50 and older.

Observations for the Fall

The low turnout and the advanced age of voters who came to the polls are disturbing factors. Despite widespread pre-primary coverage by local television news media, the Erie Times-News, Erie Reader, WQLN, and a number of live debates, voter turnout was uncommonly low for a contested mayoral primary. The main question for Schember and Persinger, then, is how can more people – and younger people – be inspired to go to the polls in November?

Democratic nominee Schember is in a strong position. He has extensive executive experience as a lifelong banker, and political experience on City Council and in several nonprofit groups. Democrats hold a 3-1 advantage in voter registration. Strategically, Schember needs to create a Democratic coalition and get out that vote, and he has secured the public backing of all of the Democratic candidates he defeated in May. The “ground game” to get the vote out will be essential. Voters clearly are also looking for his message, his vision, and how Schember’s policy platform fits that vision.

Republican nominee John Persinger needs registered Democrats to give him serious consideration. Though inexperienced in local politics, Persinger is clearly the best credentialed Republican mayoral candidate in decades. He is a successful lawyer, educated at Harvard University and the University of Notre Dame, and counts as his mentors respected Republicans and Democrats. Like his opponent Schember, Persinger needs to get specific on vision and policy, in addition to addressing a bedeviling question: How would he get things done with a City Council that, at best, will hold a 6-1 Democratic majority, and likely 7 to 0? In addition, the last time a Republican won the mayor’s race was in 1961 – Charles Williamson over incumbent Art Gardner – 56 years ago – when voter turnout was more than 70 percent, and the top followers of Mike Cannavino, who had nearly defeated Gardner in the primary, worked for Williamson. Cannavino had lost to Gardner by 140 votes from 25,616 cast by Democrats in the primary).

Soon, the race for mayor will be in the hands of Erie voters. Dr. Garvey noted in his 2017 book, *Erie, Pennsylvania MAYORS: 150 Years of Political History*, that Erie residents have never wavered in their views about the mayoralty. They wanted to take the leap from being a borough to a city in 1851 because they wanted a thriving community that served businesses and residents alike. Back when the city was born, the public held the view that the Mayor should combine the functionary role of burgess, with the more visionary role of Mayor. The Mayor was not only expected to administer the city but also to propel it forward. That has never changed, and the top government leader to direct Erie’s future will be determined once again, amid those same political stakes, in six weeks, on Nov. 7.

About the author: Pat Cuneo, the Publications Coordinator for the Jefferson Educational Society, coordinated political coverage and election reporting for the Erie Times-News for two decades during his 40-year newspaper career as a reporter, editor and columnist. He joined the Jefferson in February 2016 to work with Dr. William Garvey on his book, Erie, Pennsylvania MAYORS: 150 Years of Political History.

Editor’s note: Libby Mucciarone, who worked as an intern in 2017 for the Jefferson Educational Society, researched political data and created visual presentations for this project. Her collaboration was key to its success.