

*The Allegheny County Inactive Voter Registration Cards:
A Social History Source for Twentieth-Century Research*
By Wilson J. Warren

TRADITIONALLY, written American history consisted of narrative descriptions of the political, intellectual, military, and institutional events of the past. History emphasized the "great men," key political elections, famous (and not so famous) military engagements and other "important" events. All of this history usually shared the common feature of dealing with the elites of American society. Few historians thought the lives of ordinary men and women were worthy of exploration and consequently little was known about the majority of Americans.

Beginning in the 1950s and rapidly accelerating during the 1960s, however, historians began to reshape perceptions of what subjects were worthy of historical analysis. More of the historical profession became concerned with the impact of social and economic changes upon American society as a whole, as well as the contribution of ordinary men and women to fundamental changes in society. This transition in the profession occurred as social science methodologies were adapted to historical research and large untapped sources of social data in archives could be collected and analyzed with the help of computers. The climate of the 1960s civil rights, anti-Vietnam, blacks', and women's movements also spurred research in the new areas. The new sources and computer-aided techniques allowed historians to examine such issues as social mobility, family demographics, immigration and migration within America, the social basis of political parties, the ethnic composition of communities, and the changing class structure of American society.

Much of this "new" social history, as the new subject matter and emphases came to be called, would have been impossible without the data provided in the states' and, particularly, in the federal census bureau records. The United States Constitution mandated the federal census, and beginning in 1790, it has been taken every 10 years. By using the manuscript census, or unpublished records of individual data, as

opposed to the aggregate published data, historians could compile information on various aspects of individuals' lives. With each enumeration the census has asked more questions, but in general one can use the manuscript census to discover names, places of residence, marital and familial relationships, dates and places of birth, residence status, literacy, and (beginning with the 1850 census) occupations. Historians are increasingly aware of the various shortcomings of these records. For example, historian Margo Conk has noted recurrent problems with the competence of the census takers and incomplete collection due to the pressures of time which Congress and the public placed on the census takers. The census tended to report residentially stable and more affluent individuals with more regularity than transient, working class people.¹ Yet overall, the manuscript census is unsurpassed as a social data source because of its geographical completeness and the depth of the information provided.

The most serious problem with the manuscript census is that currently, it is not available after 1910. By law, the detailed information collected in a given census cannot be made available to the public until 72 years after being enumerated. Thus the 1920 manuscript census will not become available until 1992, and this lag time presents serious problems for social historians of America's twentieth century.

What other similarly systematic sources of social data exist for all communities across the United States? A few states continued to conduct censuses after 1910, but even these records are only available for periods through the mid-twentieth century.² Otherwise, demographic and social records with the breadth and depth of the manuscript census are not readily available.

For researchers who study Allegheny County, however, a good social history source is available for much of the period after 1910. Beginning in 1979, the Allegheny County Department of Elections made its initial delivery of inactive voter registration cards to the Archives of Industrial Society in the Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh. Housed in the Library Annex of the university, and numbering in the hundreds of thousands of cards, historians and other researchers can use the data on individuals who lived and registered to vote in Pittsburgh and the rest of Allegheny County between 1934 and 1981.

1 Margo Anderson Conk, *The United States Census and Labor Force Change: A History of Occupation Statistics, 1870-1940* (Ann Arbor: 1980) 2.

2 See Henry J. Dubester, *State Censuses: Annotated Bibliography of Censuses of Population taken after the year 1790 by States and Territories of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: 1948).

Each card includes details on a wide variety of topics, more topics in fact than the census records include. In addition to the type of information found in the manuscript census such as name, date and place of birth, sex, race, literacy, occupation, residence, and the ward in which the individual resided, one can discover the number of rooms occupied, residences from which the individual subsequently voted, and such other voting-related information as the date and place of naturalization, whether or not the person was physically disabled and needed assistance in voting, and, most notably, the political party with which the individual was registered. On cards after 1958, the elections department often included a copy of the individual's forwarding address if they moved out of Allegheny County. The cards include a record of changes in party allegiance and the individual's voting record in primaries and general elections. For general elections, one can only discover if the individual voted, and not the party chosen, as primary election cards show. Height, hair and eye color, marriage date, request for name change, and death notices often also are listed on the cards.

Surnames in alphabetical order are grouped in five periods: 1934-1950, 1950-1958, 1958-1968, 1968-1978, and post-1978. That is, these are the periods in which inactive cards were collected and stored alphabetically by the department of elections. The university archivists have not attempted to refile or reprocess the cards. If an individual did not vote for two consecutive years, her card was pulled from the active files and placed in the inactive files. In fact, one occasionally discovers the cards of individuals who registered before 1934 and whose voting record lapsed after that date. The alphabetical arrangement of the names is advantageous to researchers who are collecting information on members of organizations. But with the cards not sorted by town, the filing arrangement is much less convenient for compiling data on communities. However, by going through the very time-consuming process of pulling *many* cards, it is possible to construct fairly good community samples.

As a social data source, the voter registration cards present the researcher with a notable bias in coverage. Historians have noted that increasingly during the course of the twentieth century, working-class people have been less likely to vote than middle-class people. The unemployed and underemployed working class poor have been even less likely to vote.³ One might then safely assume that transient working

3 See, for example, Paul Kleppner, *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870-1980* (New York: 1982).

class and unemployed people would be less likely to have registered to vote. In this respect, the voter registration cards are similar to the manuscript census in not reporting workers as consistently as they do the middle class. For example, during the 1930s and 1940s unemployed people in Allegheny County joined three major organizations that helped to protect them and promote their interests. These organizations lobbied for greater relief and more jobs while providing members with mutual support services. During a research project on one of these organizations, the Unemployed Citizens' League of Allegheny County, I found information on approximately one-third of the individuals who had been members.⁴

Another problem I discovered in using the cards is that some have been filed slightly out of alphabetical order, either because of carelessness or because of a variation in the spelling of a surname (not surprising, given the many southern and eastern Europeans who settled in the county). One must often second-guess the spelling of a surname or look around the place where a surname should have been filed. In addition, one must also keep in mind that to find an individual who belonged to a particular organization in the 1930s, it may be necessary to look in the 1968-1978 or post-1978 boxes. For example, if the individual never moved, never failed to reregister if they did move, or voted consistently during their lifetime, the individual's card would not have been pulled until he or she died. Be aware that the lighting in the annex is poor and the boxes are heavy, so sometimes a great deal of physical labor is required just to find information on a single individual.

Even with these problems, the cards reveal a great deal about Allegheny County's population in the twentieth century. More so than even with the manuscript census records, it is possible to pour over an individual's card and obtain a strong sense of what that individual's life was like. To date, however, few researchers have taken advantage of the cards. Michael Weber, John Bodnar, and Roger Simon used them for researching *Lives of the Their Own: Blacks, Italians and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (Urbana: 1982).⁵

4 See Wilson J. Warren, "Behind the Radical Veil of an Unemployed Organization: An Examination of Working-Class Consciousness during the Great Depression," unpublished paper, Pittsburgh History Collection, Department of History, University of Pittsburgh.

5 The voter registration cards are also mentioned in Weber, Bodnar, and Simon, "Seven Neighborhoods: Stability and Change in Pittsburgh's Ethnic Community, 1930-1960," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 64 (April 1981): 121-150. This article was adapted from one chapter of the authors' book.

Frank Kurtik, archivist at the Archives of Industrial Society, reports few requests for access to the cards. Two graduate students in the History Department at the University of Pittsburgh are currently using them for research projects. One project concerns the Monongahela River valley towns of Duquesne, McKeesport, and Clairton, and this researcher used the cards to help construct a demographic and political profile of the communities. The other researcher is using them to examine whether working-class suburbanization affected political party affiliation. Two important historiographical issues which the cards would help illuminate include the extent of residential mobility in the county and the ethnocultural and racial correlations to political party affiliation. Persons wishing to use the inactive voter registration cards should contact Frank Kurtik or Frank Zabrosky at the Archives of Industrial Society. ■