



**AAG**  
Association of American Geographers



**Taylor & Francis**  
Taylor & Francis Group

---

Geographic Sectionalism in American History

Author(s): Frederick Jackson Turner

Source: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Jun., 1926, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Jun., 1926), pp. 85-93

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of the Association of American Geographers

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2560672>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



**JSTOR**

Association of American Geographers and Taylor & Francis, Ltd. are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*

## GEOGRAPHIC SECTIONALISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY

FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

INTRODUCTION.—Sectionalism in American history has been so commonly conceived of by historians as the struggle between North and South over slavery that the much more complicated sectionalism, involving all the various geographic provinces of the United States and the regions within them, and exhibiting itself in economic, political, and cultural fields, has been neglected. But, as it is fundamental to an understanding of America, and of particular interest to the human geographer, I venture to present here some analysis of the subject from the point of view of the historian. As the years go on and the United States becomes a settled nation, regional geography is certain to demand at least the same degree of attention here as in Europe. The United States being practically as large as all of Europe, it must be thought of in continental, and not merely in national terms. Our sections constitute the American analogue of European nations. In their normal relations with each other, economically, politically, and socially, we find startling resemblances to the international processes of European history except for the appeal to arms. But these phenomena have been concealed by the disproportionate attention to federal legislation, to state legislation, and to political parties, without digging beneath the surface.

CONFLICT OF THE POLITICAL MAP AND GEOGRAPHIC REGION.—As soon as we cease to be dominated by the political map, divided into rectangular states, and by the form of the constitution in contrast with the actualities; groups of states and geographic provinces, rather than individual states, press upon the historian's attention. John Taylor of Caroline, Senator from Virginia in the early days of our government, urged state sovereignty as the best means of preventing Congress from becoming an assembly of geographical envoys from the great sections; but in fact there was hardly a case of the serious assertion of state sovereignty except where sectional coöperation gave it force, and there various examples of its collapse as a threat when the section in which the state lay refused concurrence. Before his death, Calhoun, the political philosopher of state sovereignty, learned this lesson by heart. Of course the federal system and the state governments are very real things themselves, and cannot be ignored.

Even in intersectional relations the constitutional structure is influential, in view of the equal representation of states in the Senate and,

in part, in the electoral college and in national party conventions. Inasmuch as this feature of the constitution operates to give certain groups of states a sectional power beyond that to which population or property and income tax payments would entitle them, it has particular significance in the adjustment of balance of power in legislation and in party. Thus the eleven states, large in area, which extend from the western boundary of Michigan across to the Pacific on the northwest, a distance farther than from Paris to Constantinople, have only about fourteen million people, while New York alone has over eleven million, and New York and Pennsylvania together have about twenty and one-half million. Of the taxes levied on personal incomes by the federal government in 1922, New York and Pennsylvania together paid ten times those paid by this Northwestern zone. And yet New York and Pennsylvania have but four members of the Senate, while these eleven states have twenty-two. In view of bills providing for expenditure of revenue in the United States as a whole, and for tax rates, it is obvious that here is a situation certain to create sectional antagonisms. This is emphasized by the difference in interests and in social ideals between the two regions. Owing to the fact that New England frequently acts in conjunction with New York and that the six states of New England have twelve senators, most of them from small states, the sectional disparity is measurably alleviated.

SECTIONALISM IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD.—The larger outlines of the sectional picture may be rapidly drawn. In the Colonial era, in the seventeenth century physiography and the different colonizing peoples, each with distinctive psychological traits, produced the three well known sections, New England, the Middle Region, and the South. Toward the close of that century and especially in the middle of the next, publicists began to speak of the desirability of embodying these sections politically. Indeed, the New England Confederation, and later the "Dominion of New England" illustrate this aspect, though they both had but a brief existence. When the Plan of Union was considered in the Albany Congress of 1754, and again when the Constitutional Convention of 1787 discussed the terms of union, three groups of colonies were seriously considered as factors in a new government or as substitutes for a single government. One of John Jay's ablest papers in the *Federalist* had to do with the dangers that would follow a division into sectional unions, both with regard to foreign interference and in respect to domestic peace. From the first, also, there were subdivisions in these colonial sections, corresponding in considerable measure to the geographic regions of the physiographer, which complicated sectional policy and made the exact boundary between sections

hard to draw. The Middle Region, mixed in its stocks, in its institutions, economic life, religions, just as it was in its geologic provinces, was a bone of contention between the Southern and the Eastern colonies.

SECTIONALISM AND THE ADVANCING FRONTIER.—Toward the end of the first century of colonial life, this aspect of sectionalism became complicated by the frontier advance. First, by the development of a sectionalism of the coastal area as a whole and of the evolving West. There was in the first half of the eighteenth century the occupation of what I have called the Old West. In interior and northern New England, central and western New York, and Pennsylvania, and in the Piedmont region of the South, the contact with the wilderness produced a frontier society, and later a more developed Western type of society which made a sharp contrast with the East. This became a migratory sectionalism of West against East, the rule of the majority against minority rights in their vested interests, and property; innovation against conservatism; debtors against creditors. It went on until not only the frontier *line*, as mapped by Henry Gannett, could no longer be depicted, but until the frontier *phase* of our history drew to its close. From Bacon's Rebellion to the La Follette revolt, there are almost continuous manifestations of the sectional contests of East and West, of the frontier and the older areas.

But second, for many years the three Eastern sections conceived of the West as merely an emanation from themselves, and regarded it as a battle field in the struggle for power between the original sections, the raw material wherewith political and economic and even religious preponderance could be built up. On the other hand, the West, almost from the beginning, wherever it lay at the time, thought of itself as an entity, a substantial and separate section in the Union, and as destined to rule the nation in the future.

Third, this frontier advance was not into uniform space, but into a series of geographic regions which progressively opened to the pioneer. Potentially they were the equivalents of European nations in area, in variety and in resources. One by one these provisions were discovered, conquered, settled, and exploited or developed. Into these regional areas were poured the various colonizing stocks. The settlers and the eastern capitalists transformed the wilderness, but in the very process they were themselves transformed by the conditions with which they dealt. Whether by adjusting to the environment or by the kind of labor and thought involved in modifying it, the process of pioneering created new societies, new sections. New England in central and western New York was not the New England from which the settlers came. The Yankees of the Middle West were not the Yankees of

their old homeland. The South Central Southerner was not the same as the Tidewater Southerner.

And, fourth, as the frontier advance drew to a close, as these provinces were no longer regions to be crossed, or merely to be exploited, but home-sections of permanent settlers, the final stage was reached. These sections and regions, like the older ones, became self-conscious, in politics, in economic life, in literature. Mural paintings in the newer, as in the older, provinces; sectional historical pageantry; the marking of trails; local color fiction and poetry; the circulation of newspapers; the gathering of sectional societies, in all the fields of human activity,—such indications of self-conscious sections revealed a new era. The nation is now in reality rather a federation of sections than a federation of states. In a sense, therefore, there was compressed into the relatively brief time of two or three centuries in America, something very like that process of nation-building which had occupied ages in Europe. Before the geographer and the historian and the allied social scientists lies the opportunity to study these reactions between nature and man, with ample documentation and with much of the process under our very eyes.

SECTIONALISM TODAY.—Today there are clear evidences that these varied sections are attempting to express themselves institutionally and administratively, that American geography is demanding recognition of itself governmentally.

First I may mention less formal revelations of geographic sectionalism. Votes in Congress reveal a steady trend toward blocs or sectional alliances, made up of a discontented wing of the dominant party with the opposite minority party, such as the farmer's bloc, a combination of the West and North Central States, together with the democratic South. This, however, is far from being a new thing, though it has gained a new name.

SECTIONALISM AND PARTY LINES.—Again and again throughout our political history there has been a breakdown of party voting and these alliances between regional groups regardless of party affiliations. Calhoun's whole political career shows a desire to use a sectional balance of power and to combine the West with the South. Van Buren would have an *entente cordial* between the plain republicans of the middle region and the planters of the South led by Virginia. Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams would join the northern zone of the Ohio Valley and the North Atlantic. Benton wished to hold the West to a position where, as its political power increased with the admission of new states and with the growth of population, it should be "bid for," as he said, by the older sections. All of these statesmen

consciously recognized that a struggle was going on between all sections, and that their task as statesmen was to find a formula which should unite a sufficient number of sections to carry out a program by combination of interests.

Presidents had felt obliged to warn their countrymen against the dangers of geographic sectionalism. Read the Farewell Messages of Washington and Jackson, the utterances of Wilson and Harding for illustrations. In the Whig platform of 1856 appears this plank: "Resolved that the government of the United States was formed by the conjunction in political unity of widespread geographical sections, materially differing not only in climate and products, but in social and domestic institutions; and that any cause that shall permanently array the different sections of the Union in political hostility and organized parties, founded only on geographical distinctions must inevitably prove fatal to a continuance of the national union."

SECTIONAL INTEGRATION TENDENCIES.—But all these historic examples are perhaps less significant of geographic sectionalism than the present day steps toward sectional integration. I may mention the attempts to procure united action of the interior in behalf of the so-called "frustrated seaway" of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence deep water route to the ocean. "Upon a map of economic divides indicated by geography—the Atlantic Seaboard, the Gulf Territory, and the Pacific slope—there is as it were," runs the argument, "an economic desert of a thousand miles east and west, five hundred miles north and south beyond the radius of logical rail haul to either coast." And now this interior sectional complaint, not without implied threats, has won President Coolidge's assent for the project of the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico Waterway. For my purpose it is not necessary to pass upon the economic profitability of such sectional demands. To New England it has seemed like destruction of its industrial power. To New York the choice of the St. Lawrence waterway looks like placing the Great Lake basin at the mercy of England, unless the route runs by way of the Erie canal. To Chicago, as expressed in one of this section's leading dailies, the refusal of Congress and the government to meet the wishes of that metropolis in such matters as the drainage canal seems to demand that the entire Mississippi Valley "rise in revolt against a tyranny which now threatens its very existence." "Our Middle Western agents," is what this paper calls the section's congressmen.

New England shows quite as vigorous sectional tendencies. The Boston press has long been accustomed to urge the section to act as a unit, and to point out that state lines are really artificial and no real barriers.

More recently the papers have announced what one of the periodicals dubs "A League of New England States"—a New England States commission of seventy-two members, twelve from each state, with an annual conference.

Of course the unity of the Pacific Coast is exhibited whenever the Oriental question arises, as is the solidity of the South when the race question in the form of the negro is raised.

But, going farther, there is in progress a movement of legal integration of geographic sections—a possible equipment of new units for federal government in the form of groups of states. Recently the *Yale Law Journal* (May, 1925) published an article by Professor Felix Frankfurter, of the Harvard Law School, which ably sets forth the legal aspects of the application of the Compact Clause of the Constitution as a phase of interstate adjustments. State compacts have included boundary agreements, state debt agreements, compacts over navigable waters, over drainage and irrigation basins, over criminal jurisdiction, control of floods, fishing, tunnels, etc. More recently there are the Colorado River Compact of 1921 between seven states regarding the equitable apportionment of the waters of the Colorado river; the New York-New Jersey ports agreement of the same year; the Columbia River Compact of 1925; and the proposed Delaware River Compact between Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, in which the disposal of sewage, hydraulic construction, and a supervising administrative agency are involved.

As the plans for coordinating hydro-electric power plants within different sections are formulated, the realization becomes increasingly keen that the states must be tied into groups for effective action in this field which may conceivably become an important instrument in reshaping America's legislative and administrative units. Regional solution of problems by use of the compact clause of the constitution, which permits state agreements by consent of Congress will probably be invoked in the development of what has been called super-power systems and electrical giant power combinations. The problem of interstate arrangement regarding power not long ago engaged the correspondence of Governor Smith of New York on behalf of her water power, and Governor Pinchot of Pennsylvania regarding her coal fields. Secretary Hoover, who was influential in procuring the Colorado Compact, believes that the United States will be divided into several power areas: New England and the Mid Atlantic states, the area from the Mississippi river to the Alleghanies, the South Atlantic, the lower South Central, and the North Central States, each with separate prob-

lems, unsuited to federal legislation, either by the actual conditions or by constitutional limitations.

In these important new power developments state machinery can provide for local regulation, and there can be general federal oversight, but there is needed a new sectional, regional, provision for coördination in groups of states, each presenting distinct problems. For such governmental machinery the way is now preparing through sectional councils like that of New England and sectional agreements such as these under the compact clause, with national consent through Congress. A new governmental organization appears to be evolving, not by theory, but by the pressure of solid geographic realities, and by economic interests, peacefully preparing the way for recognition of the geographic section as an integral part of the national machinery. The regional arrangement of the Federal Reserve Bank; the proposed regional consolidation and administration of the railroad systems; the regional analysis of census statistics, all add to the same conclusion.

Does this indicate a dissolution of the Union? Are we to become another Europe? Are sections to evolve into nations? I do not think so. (While we are becoming conscious of our sections, Europe is attempting to bind her nations into a league. We have become aware of the reality of the geographic region in our political, as in our economic and cultural life, and Europe is now becoming aware of the need of bringing within a single political organization the interdependent nations that make up that continent. The Pax Americana is not without its influence upon the war-torn continent of the Old World.

Not only is there this world tendency toward integration, with preservation of autonomy, but the United States has found in practice a bond of union which, as yet, Europe does not possess. Rival political parties, national (that is intersectional) in their scope and following, exist here. As yet Europe has not acquired international political parties, continental in their scope, as they would have to be to correspond with those of the United States.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF PARTY PREPONDERANCE.—In this country there is an interesting geography of party preponderance. Too complicated for statement in brief, in general the situation may be described geographically as regional conflicts within the different sections or larger groups of states, such as the South, or the North Central States. The rough country, the least valuable farm lands, the illiterate counties tend, by and large, to be Democratic, as do the principal immigrant populations of the greater cities. The favored soil regions, the least illiterate areas, the most highly capitalized and industrial districts tend to be anti-Democratic, Federal, Whig, Republican, according to the



area. Where there are important exceptions, as along the foothills and ridges of the Carolina mountains, which have been Whig and Republican often, the explanation is usually traceable to historic factors such as the conflict of the slaveholding Whig coast against the upcountry over legislative apportionment, taxation, internal improvement, and slavery. It was a contest of regions, of economic and social ideals. Physical geography, taken simply, was far from dictating the precise way in which the region acted. The Black Belt in Central Georgia and Alabama, and Eastern Mississippi was strongly Whig, with a small degree of white illiteracy, the abode of wealthy aristocrats. But in the mountain counties of the Carolinas among the illiterate poor whites they found political companions in arms. As a rule there were, and are, within each section as classified in the Census Atlas, divergent sub-divisions, geographic regions, sometimes running to neighboring sections, or finding allies in similar though isolated regions in other sections. These sections usually show political preponderances, (taking the county as the unit), of one or the other party. This is a check upon purely sectional parties, or upon exploitive and ruthless action by the section which controls a major political party. Within each section, moreover, partly due to the regional factor, and partly due to the factors of migration and inherited political faiths, the parties are closely divided. To this the South since the Civil War is an exception, but the northern industrial wedge pushed down along the mines, the mills, the hydro-electric powers of the Alleghanies and their foothills constitutes a menace to Southern solidarity. With these regional varieties, with these close party majorities, there are checks to sectional particularism. Its political power is in a state of unstable equilibrium. It stands in danger of disintegration itself, unless its cause overwhelmingly appeals to its people.

National party then has been in America a flexible bond, yielding in extreme cases to sectional insurgency, yielding often in the construction of bills, to sectional demands, and to sectional threats, but always tending to draw sections together toward national adjustments by compromise and bargain. A common language, law, and institutions, absence of sectional concentration of religions and races, absence of historical hatreds, have helped to prevent America from splitting apart and falling into European conditions; but regional geography, *quasi* continental parties, and a national, that is, intersectional (our equivalent of international), congressional organization by which sectionalism could express itself in voting instead of by war—these are important factors in the contrast between European and American ways of settling difficulties, and are important explanations of our continued unity.

CONCLUSION.—What is now needed is coöperation between the geographers who have come from geologic training to an interest in the regional aspect of human geography, the statisticians who have aimed to divide the nation into convenient sections for census data; the politicians, economists, and bankers who have tried to map the federal reserve districts; the railroad experts, business men in general, the historians, the students of literature and of society to make a more adequate survey of what are actually the natural regions in human geography, as shown by human action. Across the provinces as delimited by the geologists and the physiographers flowed the migration of men from the seaboard sections, the later immigrants, the whole flood of social and industrial developments, changing the obvious influences of physiography a glacial invasion of humanity, as it were, modifying but not obliterating the older landscape. We need a mapping by human geographers that shall take account of these factors, in politics, economics, society, literature, in all the social sciences. Until then sectional delimitation can only be in the nature of a reconnoissance, needing refinement.