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Author(s): Frederick Jackson Turner

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GEOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES IN AMERICAN POLITICAL HISTORY*

By FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER
Professor of History, Harvard University.

The frontier¹ and the section² are two of the most fundamental factors in American history. The frontier is a moving section, or rather a form of society, determined by the reactions between the wilderness and the edge of expanding settlement; the section is the outcome of the deeper-seated geographical conditions interacting with the stock which settled the region. Sections are more important than states in shaping the underlying forces of American history.

The economic, political, and social life of the United States, even its literature, psychology, and its religious organizations must be described by sections; there is a geography of public opinion. In spite of similarity of traits and institutions throughout the nation, it is also a congeries of sections. Political leaders usually gain a national position by first convincing their own section, expressing, as well as leading, its ideals and wishes, and then combining it with other sections under political adjustments.

Political sectionalism exhibits itself most obviously:

1. In a group of states contending with other groups, or with the nation, as in the case of North against South, West against East, or the Northeastern group of Federal states against the rest of the nation. Such a grouping by states, however, conceals interior divisions and needs further analysis.

2. A sectionalism by congressional districts, not confined within state lines, is exhibited by mapping votes in Congress, attributing to the district the views of its representative in the House. Such maps of votes show that party voting is often subordinated to sectional voting; the sections reflect the influence of physical geography as well as of other factors. This method of exhibiting geographical influence is limited by the frequency of the cases where the congressman does not fairly represent the mass of his constituents, as well as by the size of the congressional districts, and by the practice of "gerrymandering" the districts in order to gain a party advantage.

3. By mapping presidential and state elections, using towns or counties as the unit, a closer approximation to the geography of political areas is possible. Such maps show more clearly the geographical influence and in greater detail. They disclose the fact that there are both interstate and intrastate party areas persisting in some cases for many decades or even generations and having clear relations to natural geographic factors. But the county itself is too

* Abstract of an address before the joint meeting of the American Geographical Society and the Association of American Geographers in New York on April 4, 1914.

¹ F. J. Turner: Significance of the Frontier in American History, *Report American Historical Association*, 1893, p. 199.

² *id.*: Is Sectionalism in America Dying Away? *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XIII, p. 661. See also the author's articles on "Frontier" and "Sectionalism" in Hart and McLaughlin (editors): *Cyclopedia of American Government* (in press).

large an area to tell the whole story. It often lies athwart diverse geographical areas, and has diverse economic and social groups within it.

4. The final refinement of such mapping would be by election precincts which would be a much more satisfactory mode of exhibiting the relations of voting to soils, resources, position, population, etc. But at present this has been insufficiently carried out.

Limitations of the method must be noted. The existence of a minority is concealed, though the vote may be close. Great political changes may occur where a mere plurality is the test without materially altering the appearance of maps of county units, inasmuch as the size of the plurality is not recorded; the city in one corner of a state may outweigh all the varied sections of the rest of the state; even the bulk of a party vote may theoretically lie in the areas not depicted as the areas of this party. Moreover, parties are held together by combining various issues in order to hold dissenting elements, and by stating issues ambiguously; platform and candidate are also sometimes inconsistent. Thus the issue for which a geographical interpretation is sought may be confused, if the question is one of political opinion rather than of party habit.

The method, therefore, has its special value in revealing the party inertia of geographical areas rather than in its use for the natural history of political parties, as organizations, though it is also useful in this respect. By mapping votes by percentages, as in the presidential election of 1880, mapped in *Scribner's Statistical Atlas*, many of these objections may be met. Such a system, however, confirms the general correctness of the coarser reconnaissance system of mapping by pluralities used in illustration of the present paper. Areas of transition and of political instability are brought out more clearly by percentage mapping but the more durable and pronounced political areas remain substantially the same under both systems. In other respects also the limitations noted in theory are not so important in practice as they might seem.

Conceding the limitations of the method, it nevertheless reveals a most significant geographical influence in American political history which needs further study.³ The series of maps illustrating the various modes of mapping described above show that geographical influence exists both in regard to the groups by states, and in groups by lesser units. Refinement of the mapping discloses increasingly the importance of the geographical factor. Groups of states like the New England-New York Federalist group tend to reappear whenever issues reappear affecting the interests of capital, as in the election of 1828, the Bland Allison Act of 1878, and the Gold Democrats of the Chicago

³ The studies of political geography which were begun in the author's seminary in American history with a paper by Orin G. Libby, now professor in the University of North Dakota, in 1894, on "The Distribution of the Vote on the Ratification of the Federal Constitution," have been continued since by my students and myself. More recently the Carnegie Institution has undertaken the publication of an atlas of American history in which the method of mapping votes will be used. The writer has not had the advantage of consulting this work as yet, and the present study is in the nature of a reconnaissance paper. For studies of state sectionalism see lists in Turner: *Essays in American History*, p. 207; A. W. Small: *General Sociology*, pp. 282-3, note; C. A. Beard: *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, p. 5. See also W. E. Dodd: *Fight for the Northwest*, *Am. Historical Review*, Vol. XVI, p. 788, map; Boyd: *Antecedents of the North Carolina Convention of 1885*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, January and April, 1910; J. A. Morgan: *State Aid to Transportation in North Carolina*, *N. C. Booklet*, Jan., 1911; F. H. Giddings: *Conduct of Political Majorities*, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. I, p. 116.

Convention of 1896. The areas mapped by congressional districts also show marked persistence and relationship to lines of communication and centers of capital.

In the mapping of presidential elections by county pluralities from 1836 to the present, the most obvious distribution is into northern and southern political zones, with ragged, intermingling edges. But this fails to reveal fundamental differences between the eastern and the western wings of the various parties, held together by an unstable party alliance. Composite maps exhibiting state elections about 1800 and 1830 indicate the importance of this difference between eastern and western areas at different early periods. It is also clearly shown in recent political history.

The northern area, which tended to be first Federalist, then Whig and then Republican, is broken by groups of opposition counties chiefly in interior regions. The strength of the Whig-Republican area is along such lines of communication and industry as the Great Lakes, the Potomac, and the upper Ohio. It is strongest generally along the routes of capital, commerce, industrial energy, and density of population, with frequent exception of the great cities, where class voting modifies the rule. Even in the city, however, bipartisan organizations tend to make party lines conceal a real identity with the geographic distribution above noted.

This Whig-Republican northern zone was deeply influenced by the distribution of the descendants of New England stock (including the later generations of central and western New York), who occupied the shores of the Great Lakes—particularly in western New York, the “triangle” in northwestern Pennsylvania, the Western Reserve in Ohio, and in parts of Michigan—and the prairie regions of southern Wisconsin, northern Illinois, and part of Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska. Here the persistence of feelings aroused by the issues of the Civil War is also noteworthy.

The Democratic areas in the northern zone give distinct evidence of the location of the southern upland settlers who came to the forested area, before the New York-New England settlers. Here factors of social origin coincided with geographical influences proper. These persistent political groups appear in a series of maps of elections in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois between 1828 and 1908. For example, the counties bounded by the lines of the Western Reserve on Lake Erie normally vote in the same way, year after year. In Indiana the political grouping is in persistent vertical tiers of counties. In Illinois a map of party grouping looks like a map of the original forest and prairie areas, with the glacial lobe extending from Lake Michigan clearly visible.⁴ In eastern Wisconsin and in the Illinois counties adjacent to St. Louis, the German area emerges, in the former as a group of Democratic counties in a Republican region, whenever special issues call it forth; and in the latter regularly as a group of Whig or Republican counties in a Democratic area.

In the lower South from 1836 to about 1850 when the slavery issue blurred the old divisions, the Whig and Democratic areas are strikingly reflective of geological formations. By combining the results of the presidential elections of 1836 to 1848 inclusive to show how pluralities were distributed in three or

⁴ Compare E. B. Greene: Sectional Forces in the History of Illinois, *Transactions of Illinois Historical Society*, 1903, p. 75; H. H. Barrows: Middle Illinois Valley; A. Shaw: Local Government in Illinois; J. P. Goode: Geography of Illinois.

all of these four elections it appears that the Whig area was practically identical with the chief cotton raising counties, and that the most important Whig counties were in the belt where the negro was nearly or quite the majority of the population. Of the counties within the Black Belt (*i. e.*, where the negroes were an actual majority of the population) the Democrats carried but two in Georgia, three in Alabama, and four in Mississippi in three-fourths of these elections. Outside of the chief cotton counties the Whigs carried few counties in the same states. The Democratic counties in the same states for this period were almost entirely in the regions of inferior soils.

More particularly the Whig counties occupied the best cotton soils of eastern and central Georgia, (the majorities becoming weaker or vanishing in the Pine Hills strip running through the Cotton Belt). They were located in that part of Alabama known as the Inner Lowlands, bounded on the south by the cuesta (especially by the Chunnemugga Ridge), and on the north by the Pine Hills and the Tuscaloosa strata. The Whig belt, resting on this intermediate strip of calcareous black prairie, swings northwestwardly into the closely divided Whig and Democratic counties at the eastern edge of Mississippi. The alluvial belts along some of the rivers and the limestone area of the Tennessee in northern Alabama supplement this central cotton belt, but in northern Alabama the Democratic influence is the stronger. In Mississippi the Whig counties are largely confined to the alluvial zone adjacent to the Mississippi River and adjacent counties. Tennessee's three natural geographical areas find marked reflections in the political map of these four elections, the Whig areas being the cotton counties of the west, adjacent to the Mississippi, the limestone island of middle Tennessee, and the counties in the fertile valleys of eastern Tennessee. The Democratic counties, with rare exceptions, were the less fertile, rocky soils bounding these Whig areas. The geographical influence becomes clearer the farther this analysis is refined in each of these main areas.

These divisions of the Lower South,⁵ obliterated in large measure in the era of civil war and reconstruction and in the later solid South under the influence of the negro problem, still tend to reveal their outlines when tested by mapping minorities and by primary elections in which the negro issue is eliminated. This distribution has also its social aspect, inasmuch as when the area was settled, in the bidding for the best cotton lands the wealthier slave holder excluded the non-slaveholding white, whom economic considerations, and in part his tendencies as a pioneer farmer, turned to the up country and the sand barrens. The Whig aristocracy naturally supported the banking policy of its party, inasmuch as property and the credit needed in their cotton planting were basal in their economy. In Kentucky conditions existed comparable to those in Tennessee, and a similar analysis is possible for other parts of the South.

In the Southern Appalachian area similar composite maps for both the Whig and the Republican period from 1836 to 1908 show that the Whig area was strongest on the lines of communication, and in the bottom lands, while the Democrats were strongest in the upper country. The Republican area shows continuous extension along the Southern Appalachians, becoming a wedge thrust down into the south from Pennsylvania. It is made up only in part of former Whig areas, for it tends to include normally the "white"

⁵ See also U. B. Phillips: *Southern Whigs*, in Turner: *Essays in American History*, pp. 209, 214-215.

counties above the thousand foot contour as well as the lines of communication.

Many minor geographical aspects might be noted, such as the tendency of the area of the Dismal Swamp canal to go with the northern parties; the persistent trough of Federalists and Whigs running to the interior of North Carolina diagonally from the coast; the efforts of the Tennessee River to assert its presence again and again by showing Whig and, later, Republican counties along its whole course.

In recent political struggles between West and East, the relations of Grangers to the prairie, wheat raising areas, and of the Populists to the later wheat and silver producing areas, are significant. The factors of declining prices of crops, mortgaged farms, appreciating gold and declining silver values as the silver mines were exploited, coincide with transportation problems to produce significant reactions between geography and political history; and these factors are significantly emphasized both by the study of the section made up of groups of states and by the closer analysis of counties.⁶

Perhaps the most fundamental generalization is that there are areas influenced or controlled by geological factors wherein capitalistic considerations are strongest, and that such areas tend to be Whig and later Republican. These capitalistic basins and the conduits of communication between them show increasing tendency to gain at the expense of the intermediate regions less favored by geographical advantages.

Such a generalization is subject to exceptions; there is not absolute geographical control; social or psychological considerations sometimes reverse the result. But there is in each state a normal antagonism between certain sections, on whichever side they take their party stand. As a further consideration it is important to repeat that interstate migration has tended to distribute such groups of settlers as those of New England ancestry and those of southern upland ancestry in special geological provinces. Party inertia is as fundamental as any one factor in determining the result.

The problem resembles that of a complex geological area and demands the use of the multiple hypothesis. Where there are so many possible factors for use in interpretation it is possible to select with unconscious prejudice and so reach unscientific conclusions.

But, whatever the difficulties of interpretation, the main thesis that there is a geography of American politics and that the relation between geography and political history becomes clearer the farther the method of investigation is refined, seems established. The facts demand combined investigation by geographer and historian.

⁶ See for example O. G. Libby: Study of the Greenback Movement, *Wisconsin Academy Transactions*, Vol. XII, p. 530; C. O. Ruggles: Economic Basis of the Greenback Movement, *Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association*, 1912-1913, p. 143; S. J. Buck: Granger Movement (maps); E. E. Robinson: Recent Manifestations of Sectionalism, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XIX, p. 446.