

## COMMENTARIES, REPORTS, AND RESEARCH NOTES

## IDENTIFYING THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER: The Libertarian Party's Vote in 1980

### Introduction

Nearly a century has passed since Frederick Jackson Turner read his famous essay on the significance of the frontier in American history at the annual conference of the American Historical Association in Chicago in July, 1893. Turner's basic thesis was: *The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development.* [1 p. 1] The continuous advance of the frontier across the North American continent has decisively influenced the development of American political and economic institutions. This impact continued from the earliest English settlement in the seventeenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, at which time the United States Census Bureau declared that the frontier had been closed.

With the closing of the frontier, American historical development has been understood less in terms of the advancing frontier of Anglo-American settlement than in terms of urbanization, industrialization, centralization of governmental authority, and conflicts among competing ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Once prime agricultural land was no longer available to homesteaders, native-born and immigrant Americans turned increasingly to the cities for social and economic advancement. Yet the frontier's romance and influence have never been extinguished. Despite ample evidence that this idealized romance seldom corresponded with the harsh realities of frontier life, Americans appear ever more eager to return to a simpler and more elemental existence associated with pioneering a yet untamed and unexplored wilderness. During the 1970's and 1980's, their moves to non-metropolitan regions and interest in country-western music, "cowboy" clothing and artifacts, and other folk arts illustrated not only nostalgia but a general yearning for simpler and freer alternatives to the complexity of modern urban culture.

The characteristic American frontier dweller held a highly egalitarian attitude toward the nature of politics and government. Yet the politics of the American frontier were fiercely protective of individual rights and liberties. The political values of the frontier were perhaps best expressed by Turner, who, in an address delivered at a ceremony dedicating the Minnesota State Historical Society in 1918, said:

*These slashers of the forest, these self-sufficing pioneers, raising the corn and livestock for their own need, living scattered and apart, had at first small interest in town life or a share in markets. They were passionately devoted to the ideal of equality, but it was an ideal which assumed that under free conditions in the midst of unlimited resources, the homogeneous society of the pioneers must result in equality. What they objected to was arbitrary obstacles, artificial limitations upon the freedom of each member of this frontier folk to work out his own career without fear or favor.* [11 p. 342]

The political culture or set of prevailing local attitudes concerning the nature of government and politics of the frontier may thus be characterized as minimizing exogenous governmental interference while upholding and protecting the right of each individual to advance as he or she saw fit. It rejects bureaucratic government, yet advocates the maintenance of law and order on a scale sufficient to ensure the orderly progress of civilization.

Since Turner's time, American government has become centralized and greatly

expanded in size, scope, and influence. Yet, at least a portion of the American electorate appears increasingly alienated by centralized and impersonal governmental institutions. To what extent do Americans continue to identify with the frontier political culture as identified by Turner? Can specific areas of the United States that are unusually influenced by the political culture of the frontier be identified and located? This paper argues that the political culture of the frontier is indeed viable in certain regions of the United States. It suggests that these regions can be identified through county-level mapping of votes for the Libertarian Party's 1980 Presidential candidate, Ed Clark. Its purpose is to present and describe this mapping, and to suggest that it illustrates the location of frontier-oriented political values in contemporary America.

### Regional Political Culture in the United States

Frederick Jackson Turner was keenly aware of regional differences within the American polity. In 1908, Turner endeavored to answer the question of the extent to which sectional differences in American politics were beginning to disappear following the closing of the frontier. Many of Turner's contemporaries argued that the completion of frontier settlement and the increasing urbanization and industrialization of the United States would lead to a disappearance of regional differences in American culture. Turner, on the other hand, was inclined to argue that such sectional differences were not diminishing and could not be expected to do so. He reasoned as follows:

*I make the suggestion that, as the nation reaches a more stable equilibrium, a more settled state of society, with denser populations pressing upon the means of existence, with this population no longer migratory, the influence of the diverse physiographic provinces which make up the nation will become more marked. They will exercise sectionalizing influences, tending to mould society to their separate conditions, in spite of all the countervailing tendencies toward national uniformity. National action will be forced to recognize and adjust itself to these conflicting sectional interests.[10]*

To illustrate his points, Turner relied heavily on maps of electoral results. He noticed considerable similarities in electoral behavior over long time periods in large regions, leading him to conceptualize the notion of "political habit." Examining electoral maps of Presidential returns in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio in 1856, 1868, 1888, and 1900, Turner was struck by their base similarities. He concluded: . . . *so deeply seated is political habit that, in election after election, about the same party sections are seen in all these states.* For Turner, maps of election returns served as important indicators of regions with similar political cultures.

Turner's reliance on electoral data to delineate areas of similar political culture stands in sharp contrast with more recent literature which has emphasized non-political surrogates for political culture region identification. Contemporary analysis of American political culture is typified by the work of Elazar [2], who argued that the United States is characterized by three distinct political cultures. Each originated during Colonial times, and each spread westward with established migration patterns. The moralistic political culture, which originated in New England, stresses that the purpose of organized government is to advance the common good. The individualistic political culture, which originated in the Middle Atlantic colonies, stresses the private gains to be realized from political activity. The traditionalistic political culture, which originated in the plantation-based lowland regions of the South, emphasizes the maintenance of a traditional elite and the influence of family ties, religion, and other non-political factors in voting decisions.

Elazar's theory of political culture has inspired scholarship designed to identify the locations of these political cultures more precisely. [4, 7, 3] Yet this literature, in contrast to the work of Turner, has eschewed the use of electoral data and mapping to identify political culture regions. Instead, surrogates such as religion, ethnicity, migration, and

legislative activity are used to identify and classify political culture regions. That major-party voting patterns are seldom used to identify political culture regions is not surprising, considering the pluralistic and heterogeneous nature of the major parties. However, political geographers have made considerable progress in identifying regions of political culture on the basis of cartographic and statistical analyses of electoral data.

The map comparison method of Turner was, in effect, used by Archer and Taylor [1] in their examination of state-by-state percentages of votes for Democratic presidential candidates between 1872 and 1980. Using factor analysis to group states with similar electoral trajectories over time, Archer and Taylor identified three regions whose combined factor loadings explained 93 percent of the variance in the data. Moreover, all but two of the forty-eight contiguous states loaded most highly in contiguous regions: the Northeast, the South westward to New Mexico and Arizona, and the West including the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and Oregon. The use of factor analysis to identify electoral regions over time has also been applied successfully to data from Senatorial and gubernatorial elections [5], county-level electoral data from Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kansas [8], and electoral data from the Netherlands.[6]

Third-party electoral data have also been used to locate political culture regions. Unlike Republican and Democratic candidates, third-party candidates tend to appeal to narrower sectors of the electorate. The distribution of votes for third-party candidates reveals much about local political culture. County-by-county mapping of votes for third-party candidates John Anderson in 1980 and George Wallace in 1968 revealed patterns easily interpreted in terms of the contemporary location of moralistic and traditionalistic political cultures, respectively.[9] Anderson's support was maximal in New England, the Upper Middle West, Colorado, Oregon, northern California, and in university communities across the United States. Wallace's support was most concentrated in the Southeast, particularly his native Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and parts of the Carolinas.

### The Libertarian Party and the Political Culture of the Frontier

On June 17, 1972, the Libertarian Party held its first national convention in Denver, Colorado. Party members were united in arguing that each individual should be able to live as he or she chooses, as long as coercion and fraud are not employed in relationships between individuals. Libertarians believe that the purpose of government should be to protect citizens' liberties by means of law, courts, and police and armed forces. They view their political philosophy as a more consistent version of eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism. The application of the party's philosophy is reflected in its platform, which advocates laissez-faire capitalism, strong civil and political liberties, and foreign relations which stress free trade and military non-interference. The party has attracted activists from both the left and right wings of the traditional American political spectrum.

In 1972, the party's presidential candidate was John Hospers, a California philosophy professor. He was on the ballot only in Colorado and Washington, receiving about 5,000 votes. By 1976, some degree of party organization could be found in most of the states. The national-level party assisted local activists in the arduous task of collecting the hundreds of thousands of signatures required to get their presidential nominee, Roger MacBride, on the ballot. MacBride was on the ballot in thirty-one states, receiving about 172,000 votes. The rising anti-tax fever in 1978 encouraged higher vote percentages for state and local Libertarian candidates, especially in the West. Alaska's Dick Randolph became the first Libertarian to win a state legislature seat, while California's gubernatorial candidate Ed Clark won substantial recognition for his party by surpassing five percent of the vote.

Although the 1980 elections continued their upward trend of recognition, Libertarians were unable to attract yet higher voter percentages in the 1982 state and congressional

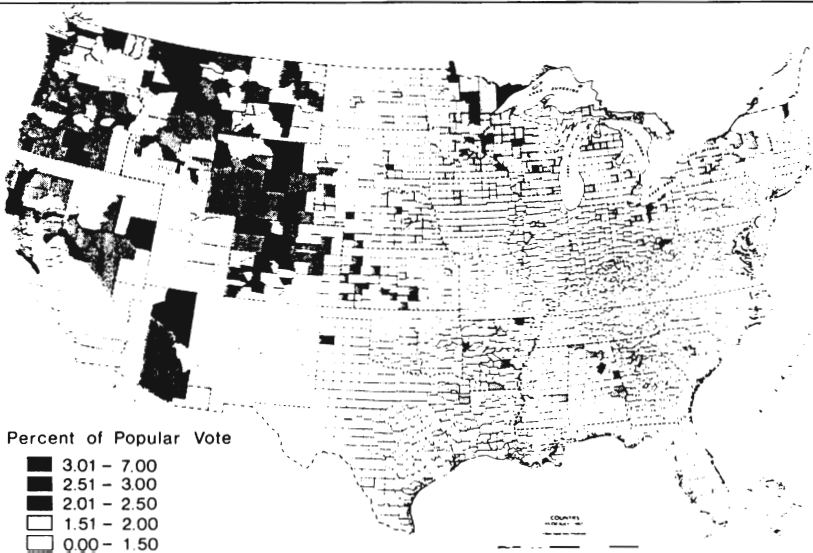
ances. Some of them blamed in part the debt incurred by the national party from the 1980 election. This debt was paid off by early 1984, however, after the party had chosen its 1984 presidential nominee, California lawyer and former party chairman David Bergland.

Although Libertarians share a common ideology, they do not hold identical political positions. They disagree, for example, about some applications of the concept of freedom, including abortion, defense financing, and children's liberties. Perhaps more important is the current ideological division between the "ideological purity" and "pragmatic" wings of the party. The former, exemplified by Bergland, stress ideology and the issue positions in the platform; the latter, exemplified by the Clark campaign, stresses solutions to today's problems which are steps toward the party's eventual goals. Regardless, both wings share a conception of political philosophy which appears reminiscent of Turner's discussion of the political culture of the frontier.

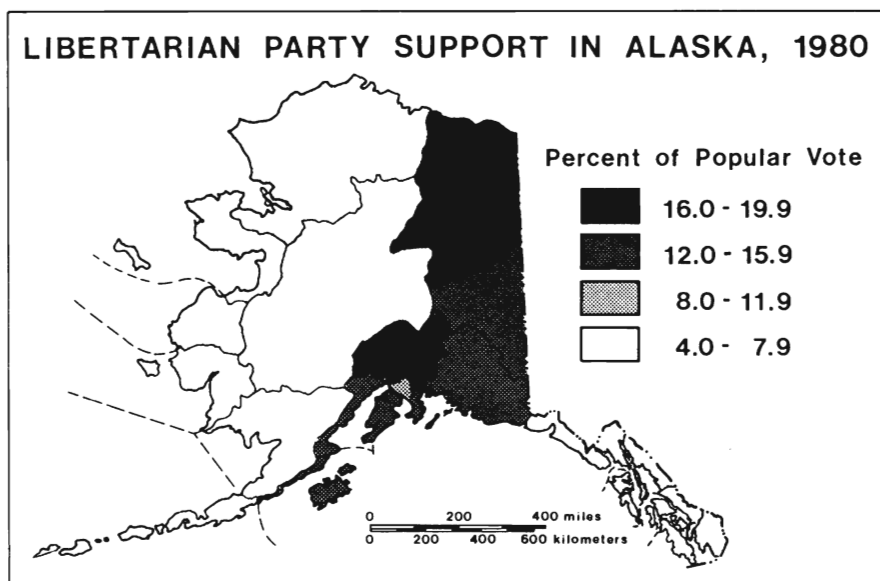
### 1980 Election Results and Their Interpretation

In the 1980 Presidential election, Libertarian candidate Ed Clark polled 919,748 votes, or approximately 1.1% of the votes cast in the election. However, those votes were not distributed uniformly throughout the country. Rather, county-level mapping of returns (*Figure 1*) reveals concentrations of support in the West, notably California, Colorado, and Montana. A major area of support not seen on Figure 1 is in Alaska (*Fig. 2*). Despite the relatively small numbers of votes, the map reveals an orderly, consistent picture of the contemporary American political landscape. Indeed, only two counties in the entire United States—Essex County, Vermont, and Chase County, Nebraska—can be classed as real anomalies in the general trends. The comments in this section suggest the conclusion that the distribution of votes for Clark in 1980 represents an appropriate and effective surrogate for the contemporary location of the political culture of the frontier as described by Turner.

### Libertarian Party Support, 1980



In Alaska, Clark received considerably more support than he did in any other state. Nearly 12% of Alaskans cast their ballots for Clark, as compared with 2.7% in Montana, the next highest state. Alaska's orientation as the "Last Frontier" is well known. That a state so identified with frontier settlement and remote from the power centers of American government should tend to embrace Libertarian principles is perhaps not surprising. The distinct regional cleavages that exist within Alaska support this assessment (*Figure 2*). Clark did best in the Fairbanks area, where he polled nearly twenty percent of the vote, running only 3.5% behind Jimmy Carter. He also did well in the Anchorage area. However, Clark's support dropped off dramatically in the Aleutian Islands, the Alaska Panhandle, Nome, Barrow, and other peripheral areas. In none of these areas did he poll as much as six percent of the vote. Perhaps these regions identify less with the frontier orientation because of the relative absence of exploitable land for expansion, obviating a "wide-open spaces" mindset more characteristic of the rest of the state.



In the "lower 48," the areas showing greatest support for the Libertarian Party also lend credence to the conclusion that its vote distribution illustrates the location of frontier-oriented political culture. Clark's support was minimal in both the Northeast and the South. This is not unexpected, given the Northeast's domination of the nation's industrial economy and the South's association with the traditionalistic political culture. In the Middle West, the frontier's movement during the nineteenth century left in its wake a landscape characterized by continuous settlement by small farmers. Between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, farmers are descendants of settlers who had been enticed by the availability of free land following the enactment of the Homestead Act of 1862. Today, agricultural and urban settlement is continuous in all but the most inhospitable portions of the United States east of the Rockies, and a frontier orientation to politics has disappeared. Interestingly, those areas east of the Rockies in which Clark did receive relatively high levels of support, such as northern Minnesota and Wisconsin and the Ozarks of Arkansas, are areas in which large-scale agriculture has never been practiced.

West of the Continental Divide, agricultural settlement becomes discontinuous. Much of the land is owned by the Federal government, and much is unsuited for agriculture

without irrigation. Local resentment of Federal land policy, typified by the "Sagebrush Rebellion," is among the reasons for the solid, conservative Republican base currently evident in the Rocky Mountains. In particular, free enterprise-oriented Republicans who oppose Federal control of local land resources have proven very popular among Western voters. Such local opposition to Federal land policy, coupled with opposition to land ownership by outside-controlled land development corporations, may help to explain the relatively high levels of Libertarian support in many of the Mountain states.

The political contrast between the agricultural Great Plains and the non-agricultural, mountainous territory to the west is most clearly revealed in Colorado. This contrast illustrates that a frontier orientation to government is more characteristic of the mountain areas than of the Plains. The eastern third of Colorado is part of the agricultural Great Plains; here, the Libertarian Party did not significantly exceed its national totals. In contrast, the mountain areas of Colorado yielded some of the highest percentages in the country. In the Plains, the combination of dependence on an agricultural and resource-based economy, extreme and variable climactic conditions resulting in droughts, blizzards, tornadoes, hailstorms, and floods, and uncertainties regarding agricultural markets have led to the development of a political culture based on the concept of *stabilization*. [3] Here, government is viewed as an active agent compensating for the undesirable effects of an uncertain physical and economic environment. Local government participation and activity is stressed, with decentralized and locally-based solutions to problems preferred to bureaucratic administration. Disagreements with governmental policy in the Great Plains appear to center on the scale of governmental activity rather than on its very existence.

In contrast, the mountain regions, though reliant on non-agricultural economic activities, have developed and retained a frontier orientation to political culture. Increased support for a party which opposes the *amount* and *extent* of government is the result. Regions such as the mountain areas of Colorado are populated by persons who place considerable value on self-reliance and individual resourcefulness. Refugees from the counterculture of the 1960's are also abundant there; many have become devoted to lifestyles which eschew governmental interference. Similar qualities characterize the Missoula Valley of Montana, the Pacific Northwest, and much of northern California — the other areas outside Alaska where Libertarian support was strongest in 1980. The map reveals a contrast between areas characterized by opposition to the *institution* of government, as in Alaska and mountain Colorado, and areas characterized by opposition to the party currently in power, such as the Great Plains.

### Summary and Conclusions

In 1980, nearly one million Americans cast their Presidential ballots for Ed Clark, the candidate of the Libertarian party. The party's platform was reminiscent of Frederick Jackson Turner's description of the political culture of the frontier. For the frontiersman, the purpose of government is seen as protecting individual rights without constraints on individual freedom. Thus, the county-level map of Libertarian support in this paper reveals much about the contemporary location of frontier orientations toward politics and government in the contemporary United States.

The map reveals a strong concentration of support for the Libertarian Party west of the Great Plains. Alaska was the strongest Libertarian state, with additional strong showings recorded in northern California, and parts of the Pacific Northwest, Montana, and Colorado. The party did no do nearly as well in the communally-oriented Mormon culture region, nor did it do very well east of the Rockies except in relatively isolated non-agricultural areas and in a few places where party organization was particularly strong (e.g., Alabama). It can be concluded that areas where the frontier ethic prevails in contemporary politics are those that are isolated and not dependent on commercial

agriculture. To an extent, the Libertarian vote can be interpreted as the most recent expression of continuing political tensions between an urban core and a non-agricultural periphery. The research described in this paper reaffirms the value of examining third-party election returns as a means of identifying local political culture regions in the United States.

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