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PRESIDENTIAL VOTING REGIONS OF THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS: NO NEED FOR AN EAST DAKOTA AND WEST DAKOTA

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ABSTRACT—In South Dakota and North Dakota, political pundits, journalists, politicians, academics, and citizens often reduce political questions to an east-west divide. Here we statistically examine whether an east-west divide occurred in presidential voting behavior in the Northern Great Plains over the last century. We found that there were four presidential voting regions in South Dakota and North Dakota. These presidential voting regions reflect the economic, ancestral, and political cultures and landscapes of this area of the Northern Great Plains.

Different voting regions can be discerned at different scales. For example at the scale of the United States, Archer and Taylor (1981) found there were three voting regions: the Northeast, the South, and the West. Yet, by shifting scales and examining county-level voting behavior, Shelley and Archer (1984, 1989) found different voting regions within and across state borders. In addition to examining the scale at which elections should be analyzed, political geographers must question whether economic, political, or cultural contexts should be used to understand regional voting behavior (Agnew 1996; Flint 1996).

The northern Great Plains states of South Dakota and North Dakota are both part of the Western voting region at the scale of the United States (Archer and Taylor 1981). However, when discussing voting behavior at the regional scale, political pundits, journalists, scholars and voters frequently

reduce major political debates to an east-west cleavage within the Dakotas. Reportedly South Dakota State Representative Gordon Pederson, a “west river” resident, remarked that the Dakotas were divided incorrectly at statehood: “It should have been West Dakota and East Dakota” (Johnson 1988: 2). Scholars and journalists cite voting patterns, from presidential elections to referenda votes, in support of the existence of two distinct political regions (Clem 1967; McLaird 1989; Meartz 1990; Krantz 1993; Clem 1995; Pedeliski et al. 1987).

There are economic differences between the eastern and western regions of the Dakotas. The east is generally more urban, industrial and service-oriented, and it is known for voting conservatively. The west is generally rural, agricultural and livestock-oriented, and it is known for voting even more conservatively.

While the political and economic dichotomies are part of the political perception in both states, there are other ways to view the states to understand the citizens’ voting behavior. For example, geographical studies found an east/central/west division to South Dakota politics (Fouberg 1996; Hogan and Fouberg 1998). Additionally, studies of ethnicity found a basis for a central/non-central division to North Dakota politics (Leubke 1977; Shortridge 1988). In this study, we argue to erase the South Dakota/North Dakota political divide, after examining votes in presidential elections (1896 to 1996) in the 115 contiguous counties of South and North Dakota and finding little evidence of an east-west pattern.

Political, Cultural, and Economic Background

The Dakota Territory from 1861 to 1889 included contemporary South Dakota and North Dakota. During this period, the people shared the same executive and legislative government. It was during the later years of this period that sectional strife began to appear in Dakota Territory (Lamar 1956). Debate over the location of the territorial capital helped separate settlers into a northern contingent and a southern contingent. Also, the expanding railroads crossed from east to west through the territory, dividing settlements into northern and southern clusters. When the Dakota Territory was incorporated into the United States in 1889, it was divided into two states, South Dakota and North Dakota. The division was aligned without regard to settlement pattern (Lamar 1956).

Economically, the two new states began statehood at the mercy of external forces. One scholar of North Dakota history likened their situations

to those of colonies (Robinson 1966). The new states were dependent upon investment from the East Coast for development of their economies and for the development and maintenance of their railroads (Danbom 1995). Farmers of South Dakota and North Dakota were essentially producers of raw materials that were processed elsewhere, mainly in the mills of the eastern states. The railroads that transported the grain to the market were owned by easterners and they determined the freight rates (Robinson 1966). Along with these problems, the vagaries of the grain market in the world economy were unpredictable and usually not in the farmer's favor (Robinson 1959). This created a sense of being peripheral to American economics and politics that spurred many third-party movements in this region (Robinson 1959).

The strongest third-party movements in the history of the Dakotas were formed by farmers. In North Dakota, farmers formed the Nonpartisan League in 1915. In the first half of North Dakota statehood, the Nonpartisan League was affiliated with the Republican Party. The Nonpartisan League used the primary system to capture control of the Republican Party and, eventually, the state government. From 1960 on, the league was affiliated with the Democratic Party, and now it is known officially as the Democratic Nonpartisan League (Danbom 1995). The "great socialist experiment," as it is sometimes called (Robinson 1966), enacted policies to end the state's dependency on eastern banking, railroad, and mining interests. Some of these policies are still evident in North Dakota. For example, the State Bank of North Dakota in Bismarck provides special low interest loans to local farmers, and there is still a state-owned mill and grain elevator in Grand Forks.

In South Dakota at the beginning of statehood, the sense of helplessness among farmers was addressed by the Republican Party, under the leadership of progressive Governor Peter Norbeck. Morlan (1955:12) explained that Norbeck:

. . . was bitterly attacking the Leaguers as Socialist agitators for proposing much the same things as he recommended, but he stoutly insisted that he was not a Socialist and that his program did not entail Socialism; it was just sensible cooperation. While he was unwilling to go quite as far as the League, he was quite ready to undertake 'practical' measures of state ownership.

From this progressive movement, a state-owned cement plant was built, a coal mine was purchased in North Dakota, crop insurance was issued, and

loans to farmers and ranchers were provided by the state (Hoover and Emery 1995). Although progressivism came about in different ways in each state, it was driven by the needs of the agricultural sectors.

In addition to the third-party local interests, which were usually represented in the Republican Party, both South Dakota and North Dakota tended to vote Republican in presidential elections (Hoover and Emery 1995). The citizens of the Dakotas have given few electoral college votes to non-Republicans. Prior to World War II, North Dakota provided electoral votes to James Weaver (People's Party) and Grover Cleveland in 1892, Woodrow Wilson in 1912 and 1916, and Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936. South Dakota contributed electoral votes to William Jennings Bryan in 1896, Theodore Roosevelt (Progressive Party) in 1912, and Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936. Since World War II, the only Democrat for whom the citizens of these states voted was Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

In deciding which presidential candidate to support, the citizens of South Dakota and North Dakota have focused on a various range of issues over time. Yet, along with each new concern, agriculture has remained the tantamount issue (Hoover and Emery 1995). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dakotans concerned themselves with progressive politics. In the early mid-twentieth century the focus for Dakotans moved to isolationism. In the later twentieth century, the focus shifted to reducing the size of government. However, each of these issues had a concern for agriculture at its base. Though generally voting for Republican presidents, both states also have sent liberal Democrats to Congress to fight for the farmers (Danbom 1995; Hoover and Emery 1995). Otherwise, Dakotans of both states have remained conservative on the remainder of national issues, and they have voted for presidential candidates who reflect that perspective. Today, these states are considered to be two of the more conservative states of the United States, despite the fact that Democrats have been gaining in recent years (Archer et al. 1985).

Both South Dakota and North Dakota also have unique cultural groups that have played significant roles in presidential politics of the states. Twelve Native American Nations coexist within the borders of South Dakota and North Dakota (Fig. 1). Seven reservations occur in South Dakota, three reservations occur in North Dakota, and two reservations include portions of both South Dakota and North Dakota. The non-Native Americans on the reservations have had the right to vote in presidential elections since statehood in 1889. However, the Native Americans on and off of the reservations were not considered United States citizens at the time of statehood (Wunder

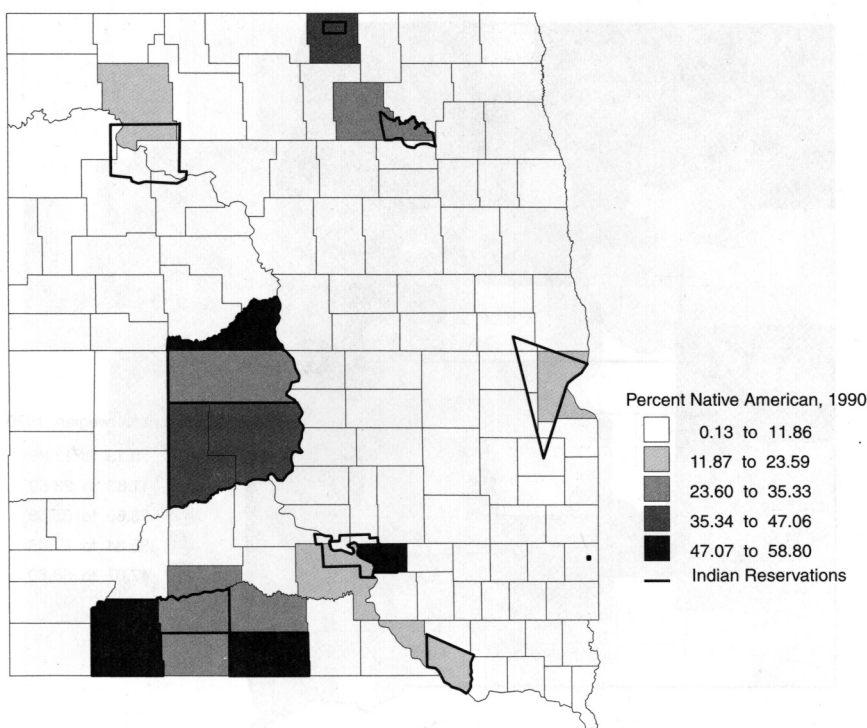


Figure 1. Percent Native American by county. Source: US Census.

1994). During the early twentieth century, the federal government haphazardly granted citizenship and, thus the right to vote in federal elections, to Native Americans on an individual basis (Wunder 1994). The federal government granted citizenship to Native Americans, if they were considered “civilized,” if they had successfully received an allotment, or if he had served in World War I. In 1924, the federal government unilaterally decided to make all Native Americans citizens of the United States. With that action, Native Americans were allowed, in theory, to vote. In practice, they were not (Wunder 1994:50):

Citizenship status theoretically gave Indians the right to vote. But this right was not protected by force or federal statutes, and it was not fully attained until several decades later. Some states, such as Arizona, Maine, North Dakota, and Minnesota successfully pre-

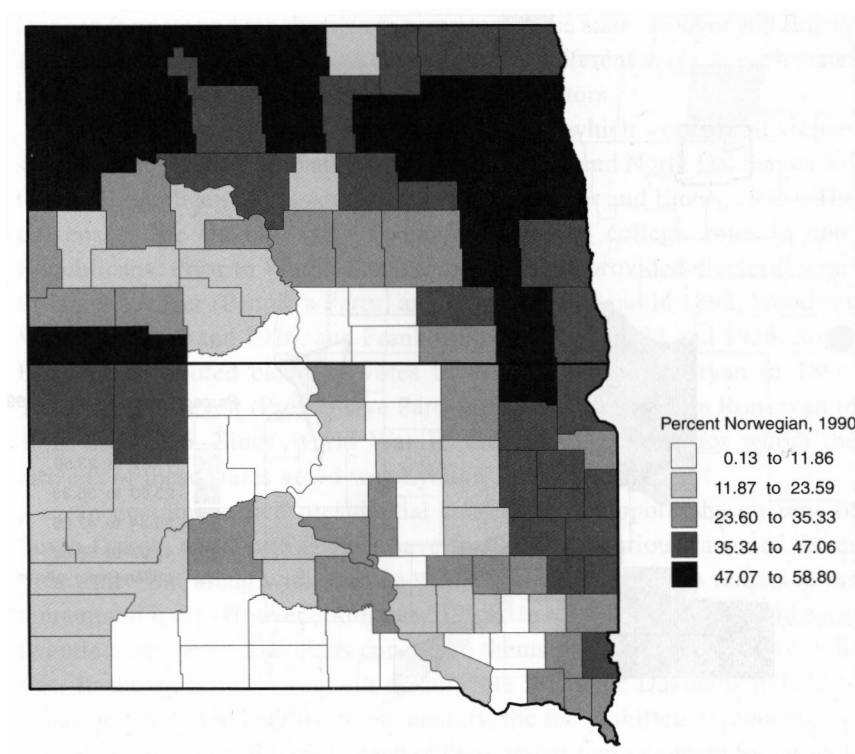


Figure 2. Percent Norwegian Ancestry by county. Source: US Census.

vented the new federal citizens from voting. They argued that the Fifteenth Amendment could be overcome because Indians did not pay state taxes; they were still wards of the federal government, which precluded them from voting; or they were residing on lands that were not a part of the state for voting purposes.

Today, Native Americans in both South Dakota and North Dakota vote in presidential elections. Tribes and tribal governments are playing increasingly important roles in Congressional and Senate campaigns. Unlike the majority of non-Native Americans of these states, most members of the Native Americans populations are registered as Democrats (McCool 1985).

Another important facet of the voting behavior in the Dakotas is defined by the large immigrant populations. In North Dakota, the two largest immigrant groups are Norwegians and German-Russians (Sherman

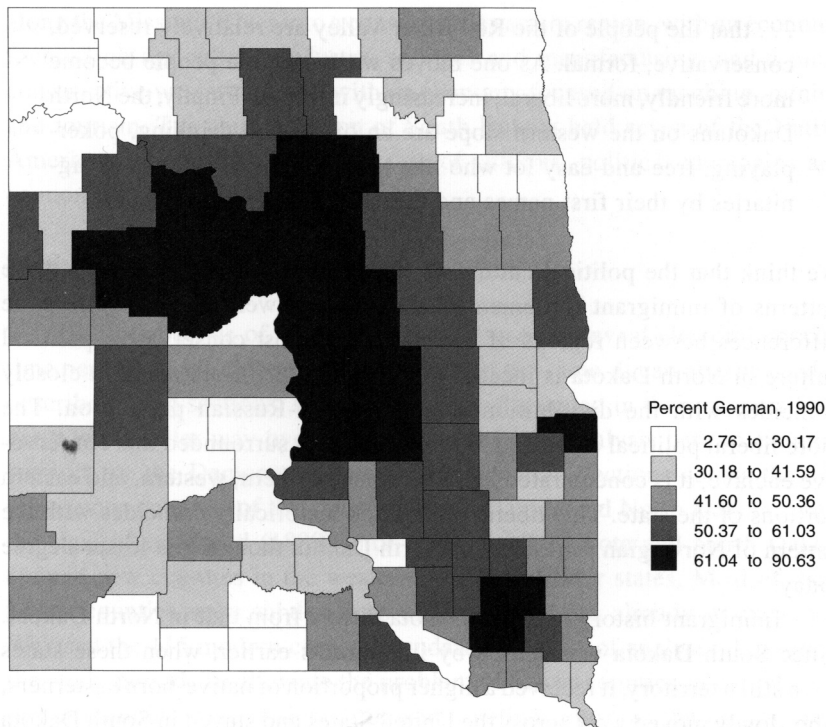


Figure 3. Percent German ancestry by county. Source: US Census. German-Russian was not a category in the US Census. Rather, individuals must choose either German or Russian as their first ancestry. Few in the Dakotas choose Russian as their first ancestry. So, this map uses the German category as a measurement for German-Russian.

and Thorson 1988). The Norwegians came first, and they settled the two tiers of counties along the eastern edge of the state and along the Great Northern Railroad in the northern part of the state (Fig. 2; Robinson 1966). The German-Russians are ethnic Germans who had emigrated to Russia at the invitation of Katherine the Great in 1763. These ethnic Germans lived in Russia for several generations, and then eventually emigrated to the United States and settled the south-central part of North Dakota (Fig. 3; Robinson 1966). The German-Russians tended to be isolationist, conservative and Republican, while the Norwegians tended to be relatively liberal. Pierce (1973:154) paraphrased Robinson's (1966) description of the political landscape of North Dakota by explaining:

... that the people of the Red River Valley are relatively reserved, conservative, formal. As one moves westward, the people become more friendly, more liberal, increasingly informal. Finally, the North Dakotans on the western slope are an often hard-drinking, poker-playing, free-and-easy lot who like to call their ministers and dignitaries by their first names and dress in Western style cloth.

We think that the political culture of North Dakota is influenced by these patterns of immigrant settlement in the state, as well as by the life style differences between regions of the state. The most conservative political culture in North Dakota is located in the center of the state, and it closely coincides with the distribution of the German-Russian population. The more liberal political culture in North Dakota has surrounded this conservative enclave; it is concentrated in the extreme northern, western, and eastern portions of the state. This liberal population historically coincides with the pattern of Norwegian settlement in North Dakota though to a lesser degree today.

Immigrant history in South Dakota differs from that in North Dakota. Since South Dakota was settled by immigrants earlier, when these states were still a territory, it received a higher proportion of native-born easterners, who slowly moved west across the United States and stayed in South Dakota (Schell 1961). In addition, much of the large Scandinavian population in the state immigrated directly to South Dakota. South Dakota also directly received substantial numbers of immigrating German-Russians, Czechs, and Dutch people (Schell 1961). Furthermore, all of western South Dakota was part of the Great Sioux Reservation until the late-1800s, and this area was not open to non-Native American settlement (Milton 1977; Hogan and Fouberg 1998). When the gold rush hit the Black Hills in the 1870s, the federal government unilaterally moved the boundaries of the Great Sioux Reservation (1877), so that the Black Hills would no longer be included in the reservation, and non-Native Americans began to move into western South Dakota in large numbers (Milton 1977; Hogan and Fouberg 1998). In 1889, the remainder of the Great Sioux Reservation was separated into six separate reservations. This action opened a passageway through the center of the state for immigration from the eastern portion of the state into the Black Hills.

Thus, gold, and the taking of the Black Hills to facilitate prospectors, led to non-Native American settlement of the western portion of South Dakota earlier than in the western portion of North Dakota. These immigration patterns helped create a political culture in South Dakota that is divided

along the Missouri River into a conservative eastern region, with an economy focused on agriculture, industry, services and manufacturing, and a more conservative western region, with an economy focused on ranching, mining and tourism. The central region of South Dakota held seven of the Native American reservations and a mixture of cultures, political ideologies and economies.

Study Area and Methodology

Factor analysis of voting data can be used to reveal electoral epochs, time periods in which voting patterns stayed the same. It can also be used to describe voting sections, regions that have fluctuated in their support for a party in a similar way over time. We used factor analysis here to examine support for the Democratic Party in presidential elections across the 115 contiguous counties of the states of South Dakota and North Dakota. From the time of statehood (1889) until 1920, South Dakota and North Dakota created new counties in the western portions of their states. Most of these newer counties were subdivisions of larger counties already in existence. We used the 115 modern county boundaries as units of analysis throughout the study period. To alleviate the problem of newer counties in the data set, newer counties were assigned the same voting return as the county from which they were partitioned.

The methodology employed included both T-mode and S-mode factor analyses. The T-mode method of factor analysis was used to identify electoral epochs and voting trends by examining the correlation among elections over counties. The easiest way to envision T-mode factor analysis is to imagine making a map of the distribution of Democratic support by county for each election year. Then, imagine taking those maps and placing them into piles, where each pile contains maps that look similar. Each pile will compose an electoral epoch, or a series of elections where the voting patterns were spatially similar. A series of elections "which group together on the basis of similar geographic patterns of partisan support" can be considered a normal vote sequence (Shelley and Archer 1989: 239). Statistically, a T-mode analysis will yield factor loadings (numerical values) for each election. This provides a number for each election that tells the statistician how similar that election is to the average profile of elections in pile one, in pile two, and so on.

The concept of the "normal vote" is central to the idea of T-mode factor analysis. Converse (1966), who first introduced the idea of a "normal vote," suggested splitting votes into two parts: the "normal vote" pattern and the

deviations from the normal voting pattern. The "normal vote" is identified as a series of elections that maintained a stable pattern of voting, and each election that is considered part of a "normal vote" has a similar geographic pattern of support for a party (Archer and Shelley 1986). The level of support for a party may be higher overall in some of these elections than in others, but the regions of greatest and lowest support for a party stay in the same places.

Most elections maintain the "normal vote pattern," but they can be interrupted by a critical election that initiates a new pattern. A critical election is one "in which the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the pre-existing cleavage within the electorate" (Key 1955: 4). The process of establishing a new "normal vote" pattern takes several elections to complete, since an election that has a sharp difference in the voting pattern from the "normal vote" can be a critical election, or it can be a short term deviation. In an election that represents a deviation, the pattern is broken for one election but then returns to the "normal vote" pattern in the following election. Hence, T-mode factor analysis is used to identify electoral epochs or time periods in which there is a "normal vote" pattern as well as unique elections in which the voting pattern changed temporarily.

While T-mode factor analysis searches for electoral epochs, S-mode factor analysis is used to distinguish electoral regions (Archer and Taylor 1981; Archer and Shelley 1986). Through S-mode factor analysis, correlations among counties across multiple elections are analyzed to produce factor loadings (numerical values) for each county. One way to think of this statistical analysis is to imagine creating a graph for each of the 115 counties in South Dakota and North Dakota that shows percent of the population voting Democrat on the Y-axis and the election years on the X-axis. One would see how support for the Democrats in a county increased or decreased over time. Now, imagine putting these graphs into piles so that the most similar graphs were together. Counties with increased or decreased support for the Democratic candidates at the same times would end up in the same pile. Each such pile is considered a factor. A number is calculated for each county (factor loading) that tells the statistician how similar a county is to the pattern for pile 1, for pile 2, and so on. Groups of counties that have behaved similarly over time, e.g., fluctuated in support for the Democratic candidates at the same time, will receive high loading values on the same factor. By mapping these factor loadings, the counties that have "high [values] on the same factor can be regarded as electoral regions, especially when they are contiguous or characterized by economic, cultural, and environmental similarities" (Shelley and Archer 1989: 241).

TABLE 1
IDENTIFICATION OF NORMAL VOTE SEQUENCES (1896-1996)
IN SOUTH DAKOTA AND NORTH DAKOTA

Year	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
1896	0.075	0.929	-0.067	-0.180	-0.072
1900	0.054	0.973	-0.098	-0.071	0.048
1904	-0.125	0.881	0.044	0.102	0.098
1908	-0.047	0.949	0.067	0.060	-0.038
1912	-0.073	0.179	0.062	-0.049	0.662
1916	-0.286	0.041	0.564	-0.037	0.369
1920	0.064	-0.143	0.215	-0.049	0.676
1924	0.101	0.018	-0.204	0.065	0.999
1928	0.136	-0.032	-0.119	0.975	0.073
1932	-0.086	-0.072	0.038	0.826	-0.055
1936	-0.095	0.054	0.762	0.367	-0.041
1940	0.128	-0.002	0.876	-0.155	0.077
1944	0.177	-0.009	0.913	-0.130	-0.029
1948	0.411	0.004	0.587	-0.077	0.248
1952	0.458	-0.001	0.527	-0.087	0.251
1956	0.491	0.035	0.498	-0.016	0.201
1960	0.428	0.074	0.497	0.286	-0.035
1964	0.530	0.118	0.547	0.182	-0.060
1968	0.780	0.079	0.355	-0.046	0.003
1972	0.920	0.129	-0.062	-0.055	0.152
1976	0.806	0.145	0.167	0.145	-0.107
1980	0.946	-0.040	0.007	-0.107	0.029
1984	0.964	-0.101	-0.025	0.045	-0.059
1988	0.960	-0.064	0.000	0.039	-0.002
1992	0.981	-0.056	-0.111	0.030	0.034
1996	0.912	-0.120	-0.009	0.013	0.032

Electoral Epochs for the Dakotas

Five electoral epochs were identified by our T-mode factor analysis. These five epochs accounted for 82.1% of the total variance of votes in the South Dakota and North Dakota presidential elections between 1896 and 1996. Scanning the T-mode factor loadings (Table 1), looking through the columns for sequences of elections with high factor values allows one to determine these normal voting periods. We identified five "normal vote" sequences between 1896 and 1996 in South Dakota and North Dakota (Table 1).

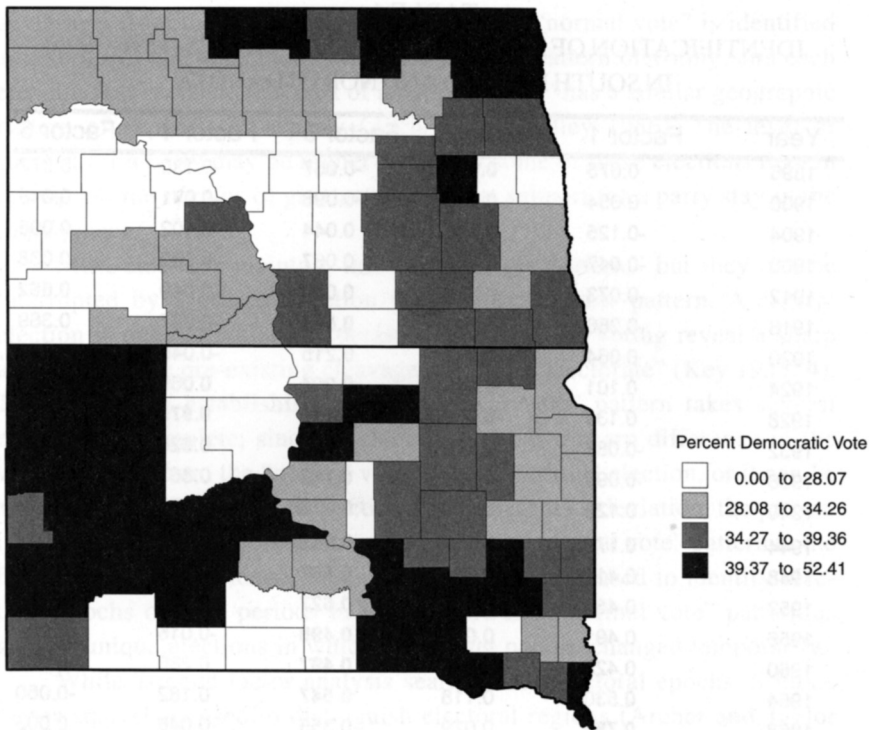


Figure 4. Mean Democratic vote for Republican "normal vote" (Factor 2).

Since the focus of the T-mode factor analysis is upon a single variable through time, temporal arrangement of the factors is a natural aid for interpretation (Archer 1985). By mapping the average Democratic vote for all of the elections with a factor value (loading) over 0.6 on each of the factors, the general geographical pattern of the different "normal votes" can be ascertained. The first pattern to appear in historical sequence, Factor 2 (Table 1), represents the Republican "normal vote." The highest values were on elections where Republican candidates won. The Republican "normal vote" started with William J. Bryan's campaign in 1896 and ran through the election of William Taft in 1908. During this period, the greatest average support for the Democratic Party was in western and southeastern South Dakota and northeastern North Dakota (Fig. 4). For all 115 counties during this period, Democratic candidates had relatively low support. All electoral votes from the Dakotas in these elections, except those of South

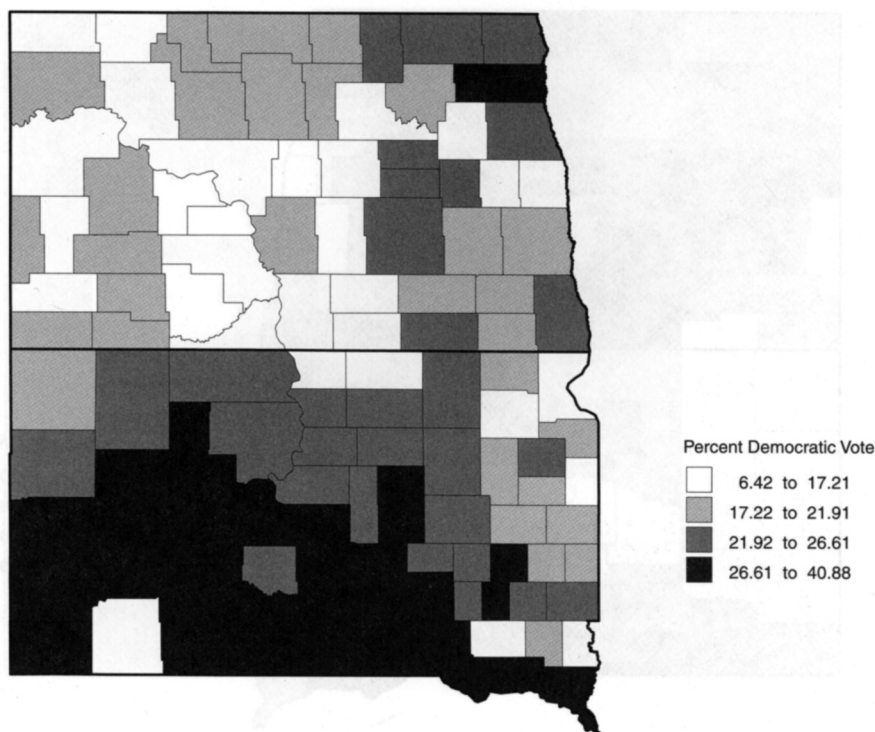


Figure 5. Mean Democratic vote for Progressive “normal vote” (Factor 5).

Dakota for the Democrat William J. Bryan in 1896, went to Republican candidates.

The second factor to appear in historical sequence, Factor 5, (Table 1), best represents the pattern in the 1912, 1920, and 1924 elections, and it can be called the Progressive “normal vote.” The elections in which this factor was strongest each had a viable third party candidate. For example, Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive candidate in 1912, received electoral college votes from South Dakota, while Woodrow Wilson received North Dakota’s electoral college votes in that election. Robert LaFollete, a Progressive candidate, was on the ballot in North Dakota in 1920, and he was the national Progressive Party candidate in 1924. The strongest Democratic support during the Progressive “normal vote” periods was in western and central South Dakota while the weakest was in central North Dakota (Fig. 5).

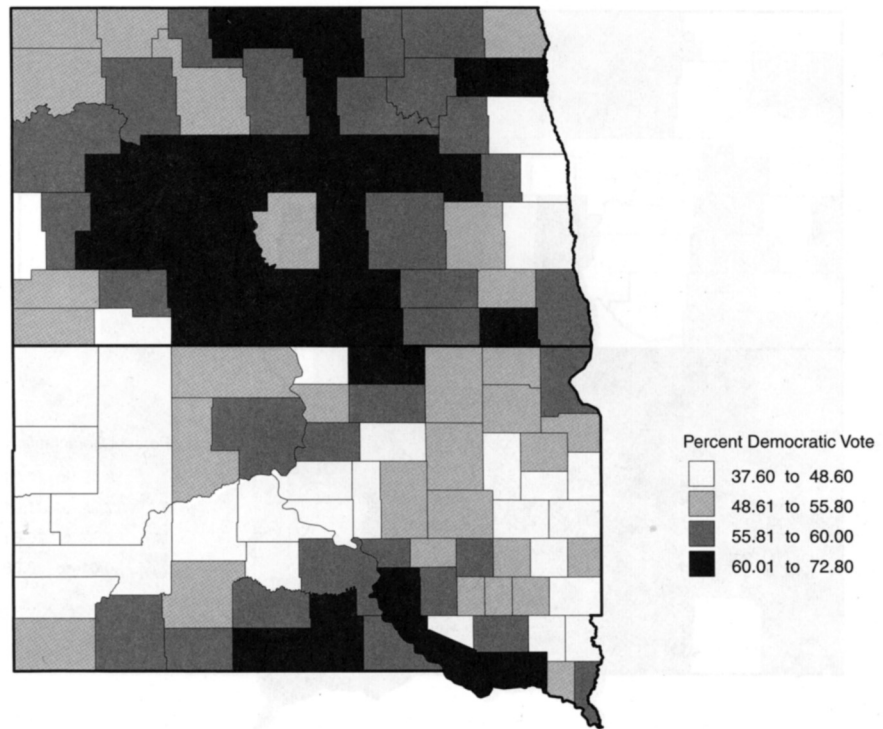


Figure 6. Mean Democratic vote for Smith/Roosevelt "normal vote" (Factor 4).

The third factor to appear in historical sequence, Factor 4, (Table 1), can be called the Smith/Roosevelt "normal vote," because of its high values for the 1928 and 1932 elections. In North Dakota, Alfred Smith (Democrat) received more votes than Calvin Coolidge (Republican) in 1924, and he received strong support in the German-Russian section of central North Dakota. In South Dakota, Alfred Smith also received more votes than did Calvin Coolidge in 1924. Both states resoundingly supported Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. The general geographical pattern of the Smith/Roosevelt "normal vote" shows that the strongest support for the Democrats (the anti-Progressives) was in the German-Russian section of central North Dakota, where counties averaged up to 72.8% in favor of the Democratic Party (Fig. 6, Fig. 3).

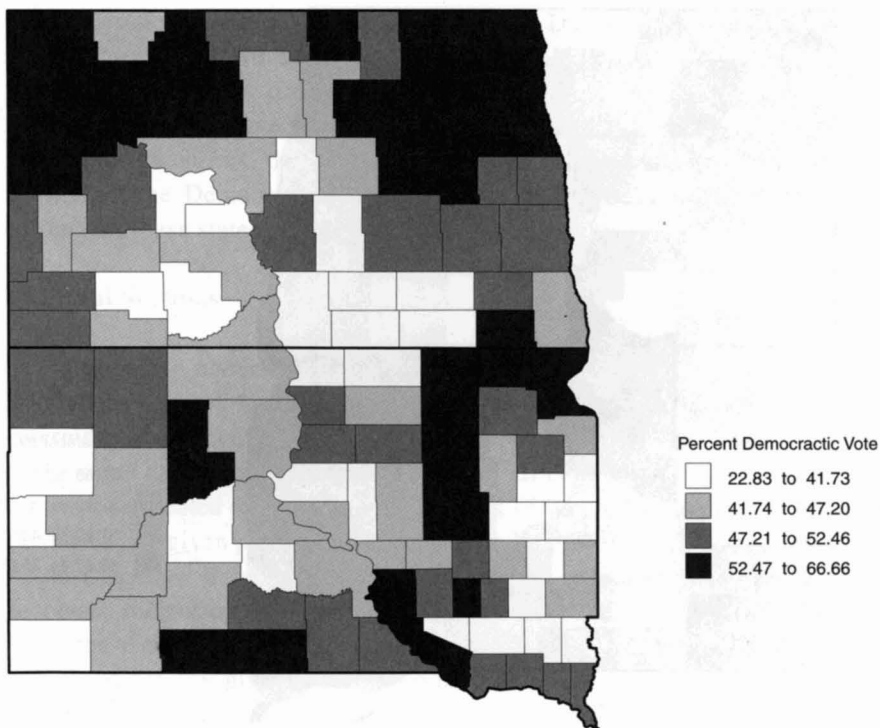


Figure 7. Mean Democratic vote for Late-New Deal “normal vote” (Factor 3).

Next in sequence, Factor 3, (Table 1), represents the Late-New Deal “normal vote,” and it makes its appearance as the fourth electoral epoch in the election of 1936, continuing to the election of 1964. The 1936 election coincided with an erosion of popular support for Franklin Roosevelt’s administration and New Deal policies (Robinson 1966; Schell 1961). Even though Roosevelt won the election of 1936, his popularity dropped 10% in both states from 1932 to 1936. Despite the fact that New Deal policies were a considerable help to the states during the Depression, the state votes remained Republican. After 1936, both states voted Republican until the election of 1964. The support for the Democrats during the late-New Deal “normal vote” was concentrated in northeastern and northwestern North Dakota, mainly in the Norwegian settlement area (Fig. 7, Fig. 2). In South

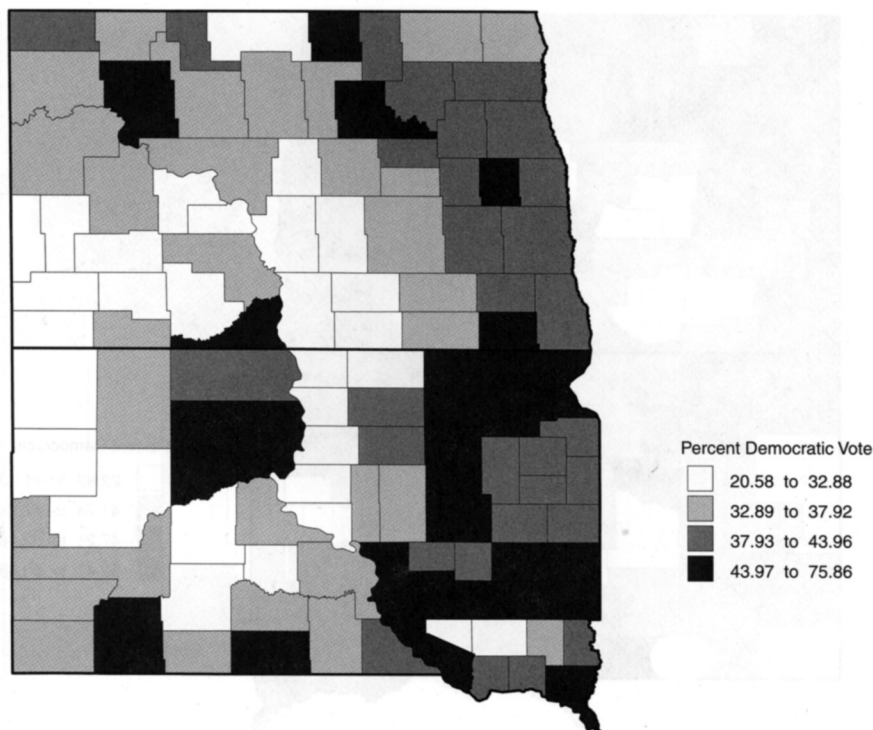


Figure 8. Mean Democratic vote for Conservative "normal vote" (Factor 1).

Dakota, strongest Democratic support was in the eastern and southern tier counties along the Nebraska border, while the weakest was in the German-Russian section in central North Dakota.

The last electoral epoch in the historical sequence, Factor 1, (Table 1), represents the Conservative "normal vote." The Conservative "normal vote" started with the election of 1968 and continued to 1996. The typical geographic pattern during the Conservative "normal vote" period showed that most of the Democratic support was in eastern South Dakota and on the Indian Reservations (Fig. 8). The Standing Rock and Turtle Mountain Reservations are the two most Democratic areas in North Dakota, while the Rosebud, Pine Ridge, Crow Creek, Cheyenne River, and Yankton Reservations are highly Democratic areas within South Dakota. The weakest areas

of Democratic support have been western South Dakota, plus southwestern and south-central North Dakota.

In summary, the presidential elections in South Dakota and North Dakota since 1896, have fit within five different “normal vote” sequences. In each of the epochs, the focus of Democratic support has shifted, based upon what the Democratic candidates have had to offer to the political cultures of these states at each specific time.

Electoral Sections

In order to understand whether there are actual voting regions in the Dakotas as support for Democratic Party candidates shifted, we need to determine whether counties altered their support for Democratic candidates in the same direction at the same time. Not all counties in a given voting region are expected to have the same amount of support for the Democratic candidate in a given presidential election. Rather, from election to election, we need to know if counties in one voting region concurrently increased or decreased their support for the Democratic candidate. For example, while the states of the southeastern United States do not provide the same amount of support for any given Democratic candidate in a specific election, the southeastern states do tend to increase their support for Democratic candidates in the same elections. Thus, the southeastern United States is a strong voting region, since the states tend to shift their support as an electoral group. The S-mode factor analysis method uncovers such electoral groups by looking for consistent and similar shifts by counties in their support over time (Archer and Taylor 1981; Archer and Shelley 1986).

In our study, S-mode factor analysis yielded four main factors that explained 93.4% of the total variation in the Democratic presidential vote for the 115 counties of South Dakota and North Dakota between 1896 and 1996. Counties with high positive values on the same factor can be considered to have similar voting histories over the entire period. And, if these high-value counties are contiguous or have other similar cultural characteristics, the set of counties can be considered a voting region. Furthermore, the county that has the highest factor value for each of the four factors can be regarded as the county that is the most representative of that factor or voting region. These four representative counties are also the most statistically distinct in terms of their voting histories. The remaining 111 counties had voting histories that were similar, to varying degrees, to the four most distinctive counties.

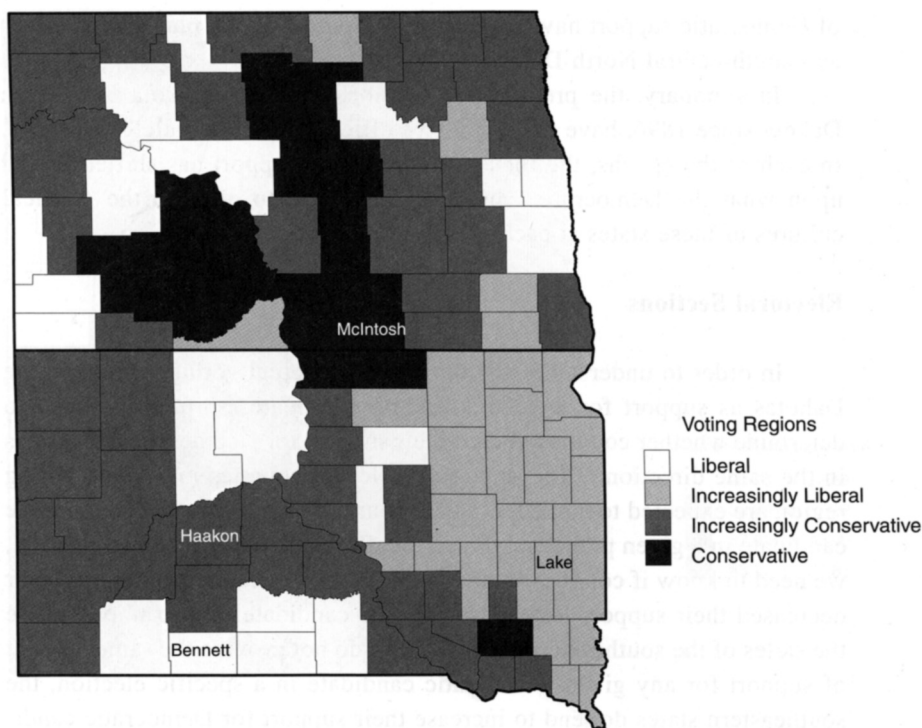


Figure 9. Voting regions identified by S-mode factor analysis.

The S-mode analysis gives a value to each county for each of the four important factors. By determining the factor on which each county ranks highest, one can discern which counties are the most similar to each other in terms of their voting histories (Fig. 9). The county with the highest factor value in the liberal region was Bennett County, South Dakota. Bennett County was once part of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, in southwestern South Dakota along the Nebraska border. The Democratic voting profile for Bennett County (Fig. 10A) shows no voting returns until 1912 because Pine Ridge was closed to non-Native American settlers until 1910. Not all of the Native American residents had the legal right to vote in presidential elections until 1924 (Wunder 1994). Support for the Democratic Party plummeted in 1924, since many non-Native American voters cast ballots for the

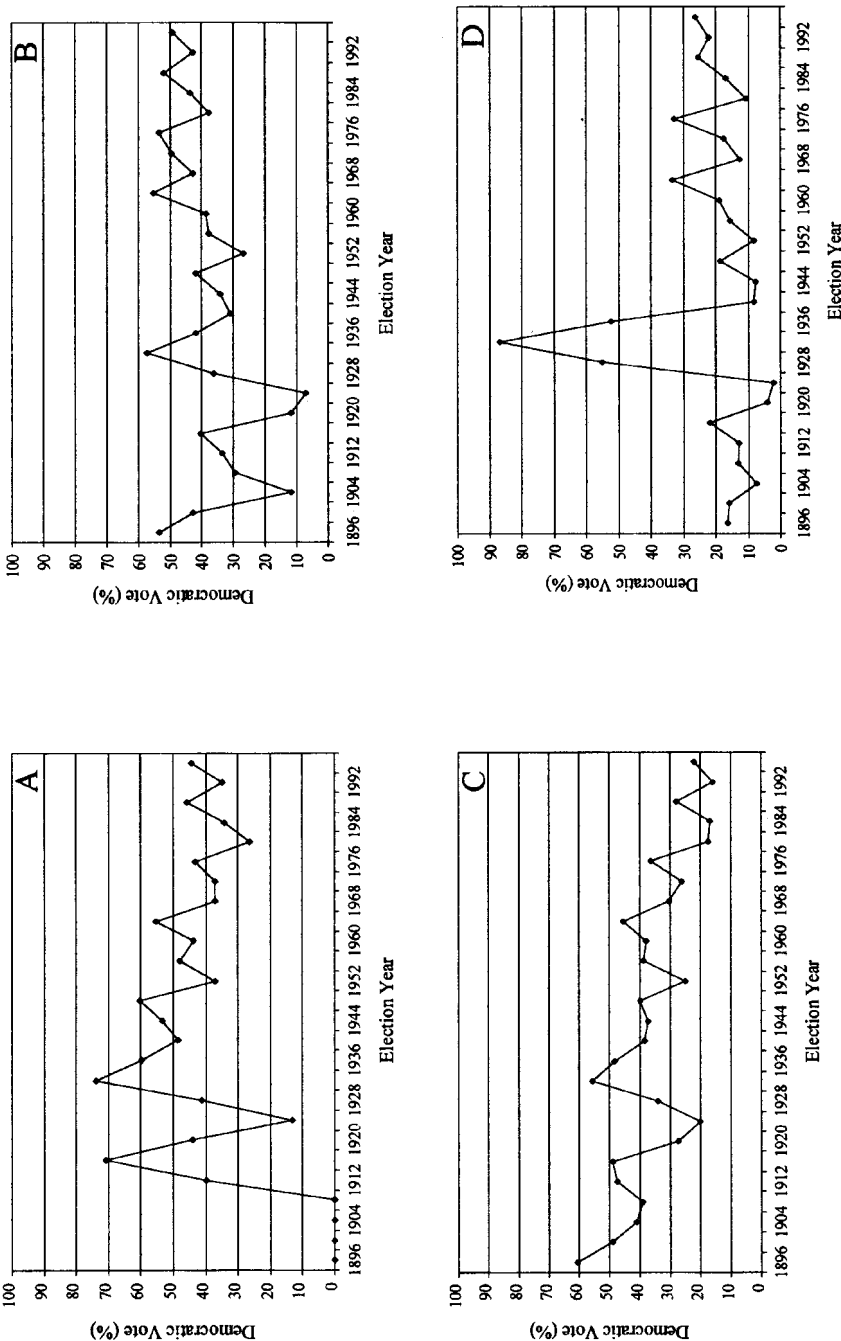


Figure 10. Democratic presidential voting profiles for: (A) Bennett County, South Dakota; (B) Lake County, South Dakota; (C) Haakon County, South Dakota; (D) McIntosh County, North Dakota.

Progressive candidate, Robert LaFollete. From 1928 onward, the counties with the highest values within the liberal region had relatively high support for Democratic candidates, except in 1980 when Jimmy Carter's support fell noticeably throughout the United States. Comparing Figure 1 and Figure 9 shows that the reservations with the highest Native American populations in South Dakota—Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Cheyenne River, and Standing Rock—are part of this liberal region, as are the counties encompassed in the Devil's Lake and Fort Berthold Indian Reservations in North Dakota. Interestingly Cass County in North Dakota, where Fargo is located, also ranks highest on this region. The relatively liberal political culture of nearby Minnesota may influence the political culture there.

The counties ranking highest on the increasingly liberal voting region, where support for the Democratic Party has increased over the years, are nearly all in eastern South Dakota. The cities of Sioux Falls, Aberdeen, Brookings, Watertown, Mitchell, Huron, and Vermillion are found within this region. While there are large Scandinavian populations in this region, there are also sizable Irish and German populations (Schell 1961). So, this voting region is not tied strongly to one ethnicity. Rather, the common bond is likely to be similar economic and political experiences of the people within this region. The county with the highest factor value on this region is Lake County, South Dakota (Fig. 10B). In Lake County, the Democratic candidates received little support in the 1920 and 1924 elections, but Franklin Roosevelt received strong support in 1932. Since 1932, the support for Democratic candidates has fluctuated and generally trended upward, although support went to Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984.

The voting region that has grown more conservative over the last century includes western South Dakota, central South Dakota (aside from the Indian reservations), and much of North Dakota, including the north-western and northeastern border counties. The county with the highest factor value on this region is Haakon County, South Dakota, in the west-central part of the state. The Democratic voting profile of Haakon County reveals relatively strong Democratic support until 1916, followed by low Democratic support until the New Deal era (Fig. 10C). After 1936, Democratic support declined, and Haakon County has had only mild Democratic support since (Fig. 10C). The counties of this voting region encompass some of the most highly Norwegian counties in North Dakota (Robinson 1966; Sherman and Thorson 1988). However, we think that the distribution likely reflects economic interests more than ethnic interests, since most of the region is rural. The rural economies in these counties rely mainly on

ranching and agriculture, groups which have voted traditionally as conservative.

The counties that ranked highest on the conservative voting region are located in central North Dakota. These counties coincide remarkably well with the distribution of German-Russian immigrants (Fig. 2). The county with the highest factor value on this region is McIntosh County, located in south-central North Dakota along the border between South Dakota and North Dakota. McIntosh County has one of the largest German-Russian populations in the state (Robinson 1966; Sherman and Thorson 1988). The Democratic voting profile for McIntosh County has been staunchly Republican, except for the elections of 1928-1936 (Fig. 10D). In 1928 Alfred Smith, who was a Catholic, appealed to many German-Russian Catholics, and the fact that he was an anti-prohibitionist did not hurt (Robinson 1966). Also, McIntosh County showed strong support for Franklin Roosevelt's first term, but the support quickly dropped after 1932, probably related to Franklin Roosevelt's increasing anti-German war policies. From 1932 to 1940, Franklin Roosevelt's popularity dropped from nearly 85% to around 10% (Fig. 10D). Since this period McIntosh County and similar counties, those that ranked highest on this voting region, have been decidedly Republican.

Discussion

In summary, we found that, at the scale of both Dakotas, presidential politics cannot be reduced to a simple east-west dichotomy dividing the region into an "East Dakota" and "West Dakota." Nor can ethnicity alone account for the voting patterns observed in presidential politics. Two of the regions coincided strongly with immigrant origins, whereas the other two regions were more tied to shared economic and political experience.

In South Dakota, although the strong east-west division found in voting regions might be expected, we also found a distinct Native American voting region and a mosaic of counties in central region where all four voting regions were mixed. It is possible that for internal elections, ones that affect only South Dakotans, a distinct central region occurs. For example, an analysis of vote patterns on gaming referenda suggests this conclusion (Fouberg 1996). Additionally, we found that the "west river" region actually starts farther east than the Missouri River, and that the currently perceived political divide of the Missouri River has not always been part of South Dakota presidential elections. Examination of the data for Lake and Haakon Counties in South Dakota (Fig. 10B, Fig. 10C) shows that it was not until

after World War II that the trends east and west of the Missouri River went in opposite directions. Up until that point, the patterns fluctuated in similar directions concurrently.

In North Dakota, voting in presidential elections cannot be reduced to a simple east vs. west pattern. Rather, the core region of German-Russians represents a major conservative voting block. The rest of the state has become more conservative since 1932, tied to the same economic and political experiences of western South Dakota. Additionally, there is a distinctly liberal voting region that encompasses much of Native American country and the urban Fargo area. The historical presence of Norwegian settlers has not created a distinct voting block. Many of the Norwegian counties in North Dakota coincided with the increasingly conservative region. However, it is important to note that these Norwegian counties now only range up to 58% Norwegian, while the German-Russian counties range up to 90% German-Russian (US Census 1990). The ethnic influence of Norwegians is likely diluted by the presence of other ethnic groups and by the shared rural experiences of these counties. The four voting regions identified are based on voting behavior in presidential elections. Such behavior may differ for gubernatorial races, congressional elections, or referenda. So, further research into the consistency of these voting regions in other types of elections is needed. Additionally, shifting scales to study voting trends state-by-state may reveal different voting regions based on details that are missed at our regional scale of analysis.

Conclusions

The distinct voting regions of the Dakotas that we found in our analysis were not apparent when studying presidential elections at the scale of the whole United States. Yet, by shifting scales and studying only the Dakotas, the roles of culture, economics, and politics in the presidential politics of the northern Great Plains could be seen. While the states both tend to vote Republican in presidential elections over the last century, there was variation among counties, with some counties tending to be very conservative and other counties tending to be quite liberal.

The 2000 presidential election is expected to continue the Conservative "normal vote" electoral epoch. This epoch has remained strong since 1968. And, unless the economy changes or the United States position in global politics is altered drastically or a strong national third party candidate runs, this epoch is likely to continue. Also, the four voting regions found

should be apparent in the 2000 vote, as well. However, a strong conservative third party candidate could run well in central North Dakota, if the Republican party candidate is not seen as conservative enough. Similarly, western South Dakota and most of North Dakota will likely cast their ballots for the Republican, although a strong conservative third party candidate could also present a challenge there. The Democratic candidate can rely on the support of Native American-dominated regions unless they differ on issues of importance to Native Americans. Based on our analysis, the same Democratic candidate should run well in eastern South Dakota.

Should the Dakotas have been divided into east and west rather than between south and north? If the decision were based on political regions, no. While there is a strong eastern South Dakota voting region, the most consistent contiguous voting region in North Dakota is centrally-located. The rest of the two states fall into an increasingly conservative region.

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