

The Shifting Politics of Regionalism

By Jerry Hagstrom

A few years ago, a New York magazine published a cartoon featuring two elderly and prosperous but grumpy old men talking to each other. "Of course, I'm upset," one said to the other. "My son is at Vassar and my daughter is at Yale." With the Republicans taking over the South and President Clinton making California and Nevada part of his coalition of New Democrats, longtime fans of American politics could be forgiven if they feel as grumpy as elderly alumni of the Ivy League and the Seven Sisters about the admission of the opposite sex to their colleges. But the political upsets of the last few years raise a serious question: Does regionalism still matter in American politics?

The continuing evolution of the Old South from solid Democratic to nearly solid Republican territory is the most obvious evidence that differences in geography, history, and demography still matter in this continent-sized nation. But the proof that all politics is still local may be found in subtler differences between other regions, in the American people's constant inclination to create new "regions" in response to new problems, and in the differences between statewide races for the presidency, the governorships, and the US Senate, and the district races for the US House of Representatives.

“With the South firmly in Republican hands and the Northeast the most reliable Democratic region, that leaves the Midwest and the states west of the Mississippi as swing vote territory. With both strong labor unions and strong Catholic and evangelical churches, the Midwestern states remain very competitive between the two parties.”

Some analysts have said that American politics have been “nationalized” because Republicans and Democrats can now compete almost everywhere in the country. But the biggest change in American politics in recent years is that the challenge of keeping together very different voters and officeholders from different regions in a ruling congressional majority is now the job of the Republicans rather than the Democrats. Instead of wondering how the Democrats could maintain a New Deal coalition that ranged from urban liberals to openly racist Southerners, political scientists now try to figure out whether the Republicans can come up with platforms and candidates to satisfy both anti-abortionist Southerners, and environmentalist and trade-minded Northerners and Westerners. In addition, they wonder whether the rather odd collection of states President Clinton put together to achieve his presidential majority was a personal phenomenon or whether it will turn into a New Democrat majority coalition that will extend beyond his terms in office.

The Nuances of Southern Politics

Southerners' preference to vote Republican since the Democratic party moved away from states rights in favor of civil rights, feminism, gay rights, and other liberal causes is fairly straightforward. But some of the nuances of Southern Republicanism are often missed. Southern Republican Senate incumbents, for example, often run TV ads with African-American constituents talking about how pleased they are with the senator's work in finding a lost Social Security or Veteran's benefit check. A media

consultant to southern candidates explains that the senators do not expect to get many African-American votes, but run the ads to assure moderate Southerners that they are “sensitive” to black issues.

The story of southern House races is different. Most southern states now elect a mixture of liberal black Democrats and very conservative white Republicans to the House of Representatives. This situation has arisen because white Democratic state legislators declined to create congressional districts in which black Democrats could get elected, and black Democratic and white Republican legislators made deals to create a mix of heavily black and virtually lily white congressional districts.

The greatest puzzle of southern—and perhaps even national—politics is what kind of candidates, Democratic or Republican, black or white, would run and get elected if the southern districts were more mixed so that candidates would have to appeal to a greater variety of voters. Polls show that Southerners are more conservative than other Americans today, though only slightly more conservative than Midwesterners. A Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll conducted in April 1998 showed that 41% of Southerners considered themselves conservative compared with 34% in the Northeast, 39% in the Midwest, and 35% in the West. A March 1998 Gallup question on Kenneth Starr, the independent counsel investigating President Clinton, showed that 30% of Southerners held a favorable opinion of Starr compared with 25% of Easterners, 27% of Midwesterners, and 27% of Westerners.

These indications of conservatism in the South appear relatively slight compared with other regions, but they also include the opinions of black Southerners. The level of conservatism among white Southerners is probably higher.

Whether they are responding to

their constituents' wishes or following their own ideological inclinations, it's clear that the white southern Republican politicians who now dominate the national party leadership often act much further to the right than Republicans from other regions, especially on social and international issues. In May 1998, for example, when Congress voted on an agricultural research bill that also restored some food stamp benefits to immigrants that were cut in 1996, Texas GOP Senator Phil Gramm and Representatives Joe Barton and Lamar Smith insisted on votes on measures which would have stripped the bill of the food stamp provision. So many Republicans from other regions joined the Democrats in defeating the anti-food stamp measures that the Democrats were delighted and even sensed a potential campaign issue with minority voters. Gramm and the other Republicans who voted to stop food stamp restoration were mostly Southerners who insisted that they were following a matter of principled opposition to rolling back welfare reform.

International economic issues also cause regional conflicts within the Republican party. House Majority Leader Dick Armey, a Texas Republican, has led the opposition to increased funding for the International Monetary Fund. But two Midwestern Republican senators elected in 1996, Pat Roberts of Kansas and Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, who voted for IMF funding, are leading a campaign to keep the Republican Party in the internationalist mode of former President Dwight Eisenhower and former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, both Kansans. If the United States does not remain involved in the world, say Roberts and Hagel, their highly productive farmers will not find markets for their products.

The differences between Armey and Roberts and Hagel on economic policy are equalled by the gulf between southern social conservatives such as Armey and Republican mayors Rudy Giuliani of New York and Richard Riordan of Los Angeles. Both mayors are crime-fighters and supporters of a good business climate, but also strong advocates of civil rights and gay rights. The conflict over social conservatism was seen at its starkest early in 1998 when social conservatives attempted to block Republican Party funding to candidates who did not oppose abortion rights. House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, a staunch conservative from Illinois, acted as mediator and took the position that maintaining a Republican majority in the US House was more important than backing only purist candidates who could not win in some parts of the country.

The Swing Regions

In terms of Democratic strength, the New England and big northeastern states remain their best territory. The Gallup poll showed that 25% of Northeasterners consider themselves liberals compared with 22% in the Midwest, 20% in the South, and 21% in the West. All Massachusetts' US House seats are now in the hands of Democrats, and the Republican bastion of

New Hampshire has elected a Democratic governor. And Republicans who do get elected, such as former Massachusetts Governor William Weld and New Jersey Governor Christie Todd Whitman, are so liberal on social issues that southern politicians such as North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms often object to them rising higher than the state level. With the South firmly in Republican hands and the Northeast the most reliable Democratic region, that leaves the Midwest and the states west of the Mississippi as swing vote territory. With both strong labor unions and strong Catholic and evangelical churches, the Midwestern states remain very competitive between the two parties.

Midwestern Republican governors such as Wisconsin's Tommy Thompson and Michigan's John Engler who have been advocates of welfare reform are popular, but both states voted for Clinton, and a new generation of politicians or an economic downturn could turn the Midwest back toward the Democrats. West of the Mississippi, where Republicans and Democrats disagree relatively little on ideology, the personality and performance of the candidates are still more important factors in elections than in other regions. North and South Dakotans are among the most conservative in the nation, but each state has elected two Democratic senators. They include South Dakota's Tom Daschle, the leader of the Democratic minority in the Senate. Both Daschle and Senator Kent Conrad were elected in 1986 because Dakota voters were dissatisfied with the way Republican senators were responding to the farm crisis.

“ ***If the Democrats do take over the House, all the recent regional trends will come into play. A Democratic-run House looking toward the year 2000 would be a very different place from the pre-1994 House. If Richard Gephardt of Missouri becomes speaker, labor unions will have a powerful voice, but most of the committee chairmanships and leadership positions once held by white Southerners will be taken by Northerners and Westerners and minorities and women.*** ”

The Rocky Mountain states are Republican at this time, but history shows that a new wave of attractive Democratic candidates could change that. In the 1980s, most of the Mountain states had Democratic governors. Environmental issues are never settled in these states where the Republican appeal to the independent spirit is strong but constant population growth sometimes gives the Democrats' inclination toward growth controls and regulation an edge.

The Pacific Northwest is also competitive territory with its own civil war over the future of its forests. In no place is the

States and Regions

issue of personality more important than California, where Republicans have found no one to equal former Governor and President Ronald Reagan and which voted for President Clinton in both 1992 and 1996. In recent years, Californians have elected a Republican governor, Pete Wilson, and two Jewish Democratic women senators from the San Francisco Bay area, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer. In each case, Californians have clearly chosen the candidate they considered best rather than demonstrating a strong party identity. As the most populous state, California may well determine who is president, and the fact that Californians strongly disagree with the Republicans' platform stand against abortion raises real questions about the GOP's ability to elect a presidential candidate until they come up with another strong personality—and best of all a Westerner—who can transcend the issues.

Rural Versus Urban

In the big issue of the 1998 elections—control of the US House of Representatives—these divisions among traditional regions may be less important than how an often forgotten and neglected “region” of America votes: rural America. A 1996 *National Journal* analysis of House races that the Democratic and Republican congressional campaign committees had targeted and that were too close to call two weeks before the election found that 55 of those districts—the vast majority—had rural populations higher than the national average of 25%. Disproportionately rural House districts are scattered throughout the nation, and they have characteristics in common that make them more competitive than either inner-city districts, which usually vote Democratic, or suburban districts, which usually vote Republican. What makes these districts so competitive is the tension between economic needs and social views.

Today's rural districts are a mix of rural and either suburban or small town. They are the products of decades of decline in both rural and inner-city popu-

lations, which have forced the extension of formerly all-urban districts into the suburbs and beyond them into rural areas. Farmers and their families no longer make up a majority of voters in any congressional district, although agriculture is still the backbone of the economy of many of these mixed districts, and farmers still make up a substantial percentage in some of them. Their residents are disproportionately elderly and are poorer than those who live in suburban districts. The 65-and-older population is often 2-3 percentage points higher than the 1990 national average of 13%, and incomes tend to be below the na-

“
In the big issue of the 1998 elections—control of the US House of Representatives—divisions among traditional regions may be less important than how an often forgotten and neglected ‘region’ of America votes: rural America.”

tional median. All these factors favor Democrats who have promoted farm programs, student loans, water and sewer grants, and new highways in rural areas, and have promised to protect Medicare.

But polls show that rural residents are more conservative than residents of metropolitan areas. African-Americans, Latinos, and American Indians make up substantial voting blocs in a few rural districts, but most are overwhelmingly white. Those whites are a much broader mix than in many urban and suburban districts, however. Calvin Beale, the senior demographer at the US Department of Agriculture's Economics Research Service, notes that, “In cities people select themselves out into neighborhoods on the basis of income and occupational status, [but] in rural areas you have much smaller [demographic] ecosystems.” Perhaps equally important, these districts are usually part of inexpensive media markets where House

candidates can better afford to buy television and radio advertising than candidates in big cities and the suburbs. In 1996, the Democrats did not do particularly well in rural districts. Most of the seats the Democrats won back from the Republicans had rural populations below the national average while the districts the Republicans took from Democrats were likely to be above the average.

The Republican showing in rural areas was not surprising. Commodity prices were high, and at the insistence of Pat Roberts, who was then a Kansas congressman serving as chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, the 1996 farm bill was written to pour money into rural districts on the theory that farm program payments would decline in future years. Some Democratic analysts believe that the party's best chances in House races are to take more Northern and Western suburban seats away from Republicans. But both commodity prices and payments to farmers have since declined, improving the prospects for Democrats in rural districts in the 1998 elections.

If the Democrats do take over the House, all the recent regional trends will come into play. A Democratic-run House looking toward the year 2000 would be a very different place from the pre-1994 House. If Richard Gephardt of Missouri becomes speaker, labor unions will have a powerful voice, but most of the committee chairmanships and leadership positions once held by white Southerners will be taken by Northerners and Westerners and minorities and women.



Jerry Hagstrom is contributing editor to the National Journal group of publications