

## Sectionalism and American Political Development, 1880-1980

ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

"Sectionalism and American Political Development, 1880-1980." *The Annals of Iowa* 49 (1988), 412-414.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9285>

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*Sectionalism and American Political Development, 1880-1980*, by Richard Franklin Bensel. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984. xx, 494 pp. Maps, figures, tables, notes, appendix, index. \$35.00 cloth.

Can you take the pulse of the nation's politics from the Congress of the United States? Can you tease the structure of conflict over policy making during a century of time from one hundred roll call votes in the House of Representatives? Can you explain lawmakers' decisions on these questions by sorting legislative responses according to retail trade districts? Richard Bensel believes you can, but I don't. Readers who agree with me will also concur that this book is an academic fairy tale masquerading as objective analysis.

Bensel holds that sectional economic characteristics governed the course of American political "development." The strength of these contrasting economic interests made political incompatibility between regions "inevitable." In its essential form, Bensel's economic geography pits an industrial "core," centered in the mid-Atlantic states and the upper Mississippi valley (including Iowa), against an agrarian "periphery," whose heart lay in the South and Southwest. Other locations danced in and out of this geographic polarity, which the author portrays as more than just an influence on politics. Bensel's sectional juggernaut sweeps all before it, moving party, ideology, and even the evolution of Congress's internal organization. This author rides roughshod across political history on a monocausal hobby horse.

Are there any glitches in this macroscopic vision of American politics? Well, nothing except its model, method, and historical meaning. Bensel's conception of the American political system is tunnel vision in the extreme. American governance is what happened in Washington. Period. One need look no further than the lower house of the United States Congress, which offers "a composite mirror of the American polity," to find the wellsprings of American politics. A cool political calculus led voters to make their congressional selections and representatives to find their policy positions. Everyone knew their economic interest and acted on it. The complexity of voter and legislative behavior documented by generations of scholars has no place in Bensel's design. His disregard for this storehouse of learning borders on contemptuousness. But Bensel does not need other ideas because he has the inside track on human behavior. Rational appraisal of sectional economic interest determined political positions. Period.

An equally single-minded research strategy generated evidence that reputedly shores up this political stylization. First the author identified "Trade Area" units, which purportedly indexed integrated eco-

nomic networks around the country. The exercise is replicated each decade and rests on different indicators. Rand McNally commercial atlases guide the construction of retail units since 1940. Members of Congress were assigned to their spatially relevant trade area, but the author does not clearly show how congressional districts overlapped commercial territories. Lawmakers, of course, are neither elected in nor legally represent "Trade Areas." Next the author devised an index of "sectional stress." Its purpose was to measure the cohesion of legislative voting within each trade unit and simultaneously to gauge intertrade area voting conflict, expressed as a summary coefficient on each roll call. By definition, the index maximizes sectional voting dissimilarity and minimizes other correlates of voting, such as party affiliation. Finally, Bensel selected the ten roll calls with the highest sectional stress scores in each of ten Congresses that met at ten-year intervals, beginning with 1885. The subject of these votes and their accompanying sectional stress scores became the author's chief evidence of regional determinism. The technique netted an array of issues, from pensions for Union Civil War veterans (49th Cong.) to McNary-Haugen bills (69th Cong.) to civil rights and federal grant legislation in recent decades. Here lie America's most critical policy concerns, we are told.

This strategy prostitutes methodological propriety. Bensel posed a unidimensional model of politics, built an index to maximize its manifestation, picked his principal data according to this criteria, and then asserted that his evidence substantiated his thesis. He did not use an unbiased sampling strategy to select his "cases." He ignored comparative hypotheses (competitive variables), conventional measurement instruments, and controls for spurious relations. Grade him "F" on methodological knowhow.

A judicious research design would have proven embarrassing. It would have shown, for example, that conflict over tariffs in the 1880s was not sectionally based but highly partisan throughout the decade. Bensel's assertion about tariffs in fact rests on an investigation of votes on pension bills!

But rather than pursue this unfolding litany of errors about Congress's history, consider what is left out. Here Iowa comes to mind. Does its history collapse into one-dimensional sectional determinism? What about the epic partisan and cultural battles over the "Demon Rum" and the campaigns to tame the railroads in the late nineteenth century? What conclusion does one draw about the struggles at the statehouse to reform the political process, to protect adults and children from the hazards of the workplace and exploitation by employers, and to apportion highway funds as autos ventured out of the cities and

into the countryside? Can one not be impressed by the transformation of public finance in the Hawkeye state over the past half-century? Where once local property taxes paid for most of Iowa's public goods and services, officials in Des Moines now manage the most lucrative share of a much different revenue regime. Isn't this part of the American system? Iowans from Boies to Branstad would object to erasing their history from our *federal* polity.

The book contains some useful information; 148 tabular and visual displays can't all be bad. But these are flecks of gold locked in a methodological dry gulch. When a pit is veined with fool's gold, the best bet is to cast the findings onto the slag heap.

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*Cities of the Prairie Revisited: The Closing of the Metropolitan Frontier*, by Daniel J. Elazar et al. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. 288 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 cloth.

In 1970 Daniel Elazar and his associates published *Cities of the Prairie: The Metropolitan Frontier and American Politics*, an important study of the social and political changes in ten medium-sized metropolitan areas of the Middle West between 1945 and 1961. An outgrowth of Morton Grodzins's approach to urban development at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, the book explored urban political power in the larger context of economic and sociocultural conditions. Unlike many political scientists in the last two decades, Elazar has a broad humanistic as well as social science perspective rather than a narrow or mechanistic framework. As he notes in the present work, "It is neither possible nor desirable to study local political systems apart from the larger geo-historical, cultural, economic, and political settings" (8). The earlier volume, as well as *Cities of the Prairies Revisited*, are based on the assumption that four decisive forces shaped the American political system: the frontier, migrations of people, sectionalism, and the federal system in the United States. This latest study continues the analysis developed in the 1970 volume, but extends it to the years 1961 to 1976.

The book is divided into two major parts. The first section provides an overview of the four major influences Elazar deems as decisive. In the second section his collaborators illuminate the main themes through detailed case studies, including Champaign-Urbana, Decatur, and Joliet in Illinois, and Pueblo, Colorado.

In his overview Elazar assesses the impact of the four significant influences. He makes much of the influence of the frontier, although

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