

A SUGGESTED STUDY MODEL FOR AN INTERNAL POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE UNITED STATES

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Research development in any scientific discipline depends to a great extent on the conceptual and operational framework of the discipline. It is by this framework that the research worker may direct his study into productive channels of academic investigation, and from which generalizations may be drawn in the search for principles and laws governing the discipline. The present developmental stage of political geography in this regard is one of concern to geographers who are directly or indirectly involved with the spatial aspects of political phenomena. In political geography a satisfactory framework has not been developed.

It is the purpose of this paper to view briefly the present state of political geography as an area of scientific inquiry, and to then suggest a problem model for a systematic study of United States internal political geography. Final development of an acceptable body of theory in the field must await the tedious labor of thousands of research students; but a study model, conceived and organized in such a manner that the techniques employed, data selected, and results obtained may be readily utilized and compared by other students would decrease by years the final attainment of the goal. It is most important that the efforts of all research students should contribute toward the desired end. With this goal in mind let us proceed to a survey of the present status of political geography.

Political geography is one of the oldest branches of geography, yet it is today one of the less-developed parts of geographic study. Whatever the reason for this atrophy, it is apparent that students of the field have been unable to agree on either an approach to the subject or find a body of political phenomena suitable for geographic study. Much that has been published as political geography has not been aimed at developing a field of scholarship or presenting a body of principles. On the contrary, the intention apparently has been to serve some other purpose, such as understanding international problems.¹ As late as 1954, Richard Hartshorne noted that many political geographers had in mind "... no systematic concept of what topics should be included, or what questions should be posed for which answers are to be sought."² Nor has the situation changed substantially in the last eight years.

In view of this lack of conceptual development it is not surprising that most geographers desire to do their work in more organized fields of study. Especially is the beginning research student dismayed at the prospect of problem statement and research aims in a field with no consensus of opinion concerning aims, concepts, or the phenomena to be studied.

¹ Richard Hartshorne, "Political Geography" in James and Jones (eds.), *American Geography: Inventory and Prospect* (Syracuse, 1954), pp. 169-170.

² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

Granting that "why" is the ultimate question in a geographic study, the question of "what" is of primary concern in formulating a problem in a field where there is no agreement as to the phenomena suitable for geographic study.

If, as is assumed in Hartshorne's definition of the subject, i.e., that political geography is essentially concerned with the spatial distribution of political phenomena,³ and if it is agreed that the voting habits of the American people constitute a political phenomenon, we may conclude that the distribution of voting habits in the United States is a valid subject of study in the field of political geography. In voting habits we have a political phenomenon which may be clearly identified and which shows variation of locational intensity from point to point over the areal surface of the earth. Thus we may not only identify our phenomenon but locate it in space and, consequently, formulate hypotheses in terms of where A, there B, or more exactly, where A, there more or less B.

It has been apparent to political geographers for some time that voting habits in the United States result in patterns of political behavior which show spatial differentiation and tend to remain stable over long periods of time. Such a pattern was first demonstrated in American geographic literature by John J. Wright in 1932,⁴ essentially by two maps showing party dominance over a period of fifty-two years. This study as well as others indicate that political behavior patterns have points of high and low intensity relative to the vote in surrounding areas. Such highs and lows appear to be fixed relative to points in space, perhaps as a result of phenomena at these points which are essentially nonpolitical.

Despite the distribution of phenomena shown by Wright, only scant attention has been paid by geographers to political patterns over the last thirty years. Not more than two such studies were found by Hartshorne in his survey of the field in 1954.⁵ In other areas of the social sciences, especially in political science, voting habits have been investigated with notable success. While patterns of political behaviour frequently emerge in these studies, their occurrence is usually incidental to the purpose of the study. Such studies do demonstrate that political behavior is predictable and that political patterns may be treated as stable political phenomena, thus dispelling a popular notion that caprice and accident play a major role in voting habits. While the political geographer is concerned with areal associations rather than causal relationships, there would still be no use of scientific analysis if an orderly universe were not assumed. If we accept political behavior as a suitable phenomenon for geographic study because, (1) it shows areal differentiation, (2) it may be identified, and (3) it is associated in an orderly manner with other spatially distributed phenomena, we may then proceed to the problem of describing and measuring the phenomenon to be investigated.

³ The definition here accepted describes political geography as ". . . the study of areal differences and similarities in political character as an interrelated part of the total complex of areal differences and similarities." *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴ John J. Wright, "Voting Habits in the United States," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 22 (1932), pp. 666-672.

⁵ Hartshorne, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

In American politics, citizens commonly express political attitudes by voting for one of the major political parties.⁶ In a problem which requires quantification of political behavior, the vote becomes a useful measure. Votes may be used to measure the volume of political activity much as dollars are used to measure economic activities. With the vote expressed as a one-party percentage of the total, we may measure areal variations in voting attitudes and describe precisely the amount of these variations. While there are other theoretical measurements of political behavior, none appears to be more easily obtainable or more simple and precise in character. It is also a convenient measure, in that it may readily be compared with other quantified material. This last quality becomes especially significant when one begins to gather data for analysis. The vote would appear to be a suitable unit of measurement in studies of political variation ranging from the precinct to the national level.

The scale suggested in this study model is the county unit. This is the division of the state and nation for which political and other comparable data are readily available. However, other political subdivisions for which voting records and related data are available, e.g., the township or the state, are equally acceptable. Observations concerning the county scale could be readily applied to other areal scale units. While it is recognized that considerable variation exists among counties as to areas, populations and total votes, these variations are not considered germane to the problem of the political geographer here, which is concerned with explaining areal variation in party vote, not in explaining variations in the total vote. In a study of the type here considered, the political pattern can be measured and determined by the party percentage of the total vote. This percentage is not dependent in any known way on the size or population of a county, nor can it be used to estimate the size of the vote of that county.⁷

MEASUREMENT OF THE DEGREE OF ASSOCIATION

Because of the multifarious nature of the voting attitudes the areal association of these attitudes and associated variables presents a complex problem. In dealing with such problems in the past the unknown ingredients which result in areal patterns of voting behavior have been of sufficient magnitude to sometimes lead to the conclusion that "chance" factors outweigh all other variables in attempting to explain political variation.⁸ Such conclusions imply that social behavior is not causal and orderly and that scientific analysis of most social problems is impractical if not impossible. If such a conclusion were accepted, there is little left for the political geographer in his study of voting patterns except the description of political patterns. If, however, we assume that man's "free will" is limited by variables which govern his ultimate choice, it would appear that our failure has been the result of inadequate methods rather than unsolvable problems.

⁶ For example see Stuart A. Rice, *Quantitative Methods in Politics* (New York, 1928), p. 93.

⁷ Conceptually the county is considered a point in the state. For a discussion of the significance of county size and weighted averages see McCarty, *op. cit.*, 10 ff.

⁸ See Trenton J. Kostbade, *Geography and Politics in Missouri* (University of Michigan, 1957), unpublished doctoral dissertation.

The philosophical framework suggested here for the study of political behavior patterns is that man's "free will" is limited by variables which govern his ultimate choice. It is realized that political geography is not capable of total prediction of the spatial aspects which determine voting behavior. However, it is anticipated that by the use of certain statistical techniques, hitherto not commonly employed in political geography, significant variables spatially related to the voting pattern may be measured and their effect on the voting pattern precisely stated within the limits of statistical probability theory. Incidentally, the laborious process of mathematical computations which previously placed an immense time burden on the researcher has been largely eliminated by modern computer equipment.

The main statistical methods found useful by the writer are the Pearsonian product-moment coefficient of multiple correlation, and regression analysis. Other techniques equally as valuable may be found. Any such method which adds clarity and preciseness to the statement of problems, analysis of data, and drawing of conclusions is to be desired. The above methods are suggested as a starting point and because they have been demonstrated as sound methodologically in geographic research.⁹

After the independent variables thought to determine the spatial variation of the political pattern have been tested on the dependent variable, the researcher will again evaluate his data and reform his hypotheses along the lines set down by McCarty in 1956.¹⁰ This will entail statistical maps and regression charts in order to locate areas inadequately explained by the hypotheses. Undoubtedly the investigator will be forced to reexamine the literature in a search for new variables which account for the unexplained distribution. The new hypotheses will then be tested and this process will continue until the desired degree of explanation is obtained. In the course of this examination political areas which vary extremely from the norm may occur. In such instances the area may be investigated as part of the study or left for future case study. From such case studies new and significant insight may be gained.¹¹

In conclusion, the study model suggested here will take the form of problem statement in terms of a measurable political phenomenon—the vote. The political variation so described will then be explained by associated phenomena which are found to be related to the political variation. The rationale for the association will be stated and the degree of association tested by the most precise tools available. The search for independent variables which account for the spatial variation of political phenomena will continue until a degree of explanation is reached which satisfies the investigator that further effort can not be justified in terms of personal or social benefit.

Research results should be stated in such a way that the reader can quickly find the precise relationship between the political pattern and all

⁹ H. H. McCarty, et al., *The Measurement of Association in Industrial Geography* (Iowa City, 1956), p. 140.

¹⁰ H. H. McCarty, "Use of Certain Statistical Procedures in Geographic Analysis," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 46 (1956), p. 263.

¹¹ For discussion of deviant-case analysis see Edwin N. Thomas, *Maps of Residuals from Regressions: Their Characteristics and Uses in Geographic Research* (Iowa City, 1960), pp. 25-41.

independent variables considered. Regression equations expressing the generalized nature of the association is one convenient and simple way of recording such results. The coefficient of correlation between the political pattern and each related variable is also a useful expression of the degree of association. With such information, future investigators may improve on the results by applying new techniques to the data used in the original study or by inserting new variables into the original equation. Parallel studies may also be made of similar political areas and results compared directly. By utilizing the results from a number of these studies generalized observations may be made concerning spatial variation of political phenomena from which laws and principles governing political regions would evolve. The extreme residuals from regression isolated in the studies will offer ready subjects of study for micro-political geography of the "case study" type found so profitable in other sciences.

The pattern suggested in this study model would not impose a limitation on political geographers who wish to follow other lines of investigation but would greatly facilitate the work of developing a systematic political geography of the United States. In the pyramiding system of scientific inquiry, new political associations would be brought to light by a number of research people working along similar lines of investigation, stating problems, formulating hypotheses, and recording conclusions in a uniform manner easily utilized by fellow students.