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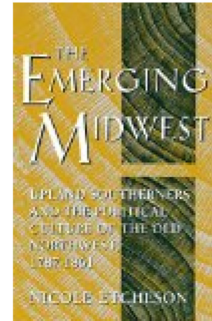
Nicole Etcheson. *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787-1861.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. xiii + 205 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-32994-3.



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In the past two decades, American political historians of the nineteenth century have developed the sub-genre of "political culture." Less concerned with specific issues, party strategy, or even the ideas of elites than traditional historians have been, and not concerned at all with the grass-roots voting behavior that has preoccupied most quantitative historians, students of political culture are primarily interested in the style and symbolism of electoral politics and how the inchoate masses might have interpreted and internalized the rhetoric of party spokesmen. In its most ambitious form, political culture is a tool for understanding what the political process meant to ordinary Americans. With the possible exception of those studies that focus on the relationship between gender and public life in the nineteenth century, political culture is the closest framework historians of the antebellum period have for gaining a deconstructionist insight into past electoral politics. The list of studies of political culture is now quite large, including works that focus on southern planters, Whigs, Democrats, Massachusetts, and Mississippi. Now, with the publication of Nicole Etcheson's book, transplanted southerners in the antebellum Midwest have become subjects of political cultural analysis.

Etcheson's book is different from most earlier studies in that she is interested in the process of regional identification. The Midwest was the first arbitrarily denoted region in the country, and the clash of values between the southerners and Yankees who inhabited Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois shaped its political culture. "Nonetheless," says Etcheson, "the Midwest came to share commonalities of its own, including commitment to free labor, bourgeois middle-class values, and a sense of itself as the most American of regions" (p. xii).

According to Etcheson, the process by which upland southerners came to think of themselves as midwesterners was cyclical. Between the 1810s and 1830s, these migrants retained much of their southern political outlook. The political battles of the Jacksonian period created competing, nonsectional party identities. The sectional crisis of the 1850s and 1860s led upland southerners to reassert their identification with the South. For Etcheson, loyalty to the South had little to do with affinity for the plantation system or slavery, from which most upland southerners had long since been removed. The author concludes that "the Midwest emerged from the war ... shaken but intact" (p. 143), though she never explains how and in what manner these upland southerners reaffirmed their midwestern or transcendent American identity.

Most of the settlers from the South who went to the Midwest, Etcheson tells us, were uplanders–people who had little direct involvement with the slave economy. Still, there were marked cultural differences between them and transplanted Yankees. Everything from the architectural styles of their homes and the manner of food preparation to religious practices and dialect separated southern-born Midwesterners from New England migrants. In terms of politics, these differences became apparent in their attitudes toward the speed at which statehood was attained, masculinity in electoral campaigns, public and private interests, the reality of economic opportunity, and individual liberties.

More than other midwesterners, the southern-born rejected the inherent paternalism of the territorial stage of government. Regardless of whether the governor was a Federalist from Pennsylvania or a Jeffersonian

from Virginia, uplanders fought against the dependency status through which federal officials sought to retain their authority. The bones of contention varied, but heavy-handed gubernatorial actions with regard to taxation, representation in territorial legislatures, the electoral process, and land speculation all reinforced southern distrust of power.

When electing candidates, uplanders distinguished virtuous republicans from aristocrats by applying tenets associated with "Southern honor." Most important, candidates felt compelled to prove their "manliness." Displays of both physical courage and politically risky independence of thought were the most profitable ways for politicians to highlight their masculine qualities. At the same time, a candidate had to be a gentleman without appearing effeminate or lazy. Refined qualities associated with wealth, if wealth was attained from hard work, were acceptable; if acquired through privilege and less than honorable callings, they were disparaged. Whereas masculinity indicated bravery, being a gentleman revealed integrity.

According to Etcheson, "Upland Southerners viewed interest and its close relative, influence, with a deep suspicion that other Midwesterners did not share" (p. 41). In this regard, she follows Kenneth Greenberg, who argues in *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (1985) that southern planter-politicians found political machination unseemly. Uplanders, she argues, spoke highly of the general interest, but unlike southern planters, they eventually came to see political parties as a means to combat the influence of private interests. The issue of internal improvements divided uplanders; some thought the accommodation of all interests could be reconciled with republican self-government; others maintained that government-sponsored projects only invited corruption.

Whereas uplanders disparaged the unequal distribution of wealth, Yankee transplants were less inclined to fear its concentration. Hence uplanders equally deplored wealth wrung out of slaves and wealth expropriated from free workers. Their experiences in the South led uplanders to associate slavery with poverty, serfdom, and degradation. These southerners also opposed the moneyed aristocracy and believed that banks closed opportunities by creating corrupt connections between business and government. Still, the cross-pressures of party led uplanders divided on such issues as the protective tariff and Jackson's veto of the bill rechartering the national bank. The issue of public support for the common schools fissured uplanders far more than it divided the northern-born.

On social issues, however, uplanders were more cohesive in their views. They espoused a libertarian view with regard to squatters' land rights as well as the right to drink alcoholic beverages; they took a narrow view of the rights of African Americans. "Upland Southerners," Etcheson notes, "regarded free blacks in their midst much the same way temperance reformers regarded the bottle" (p. 95). Although they distrusted the motives of the southern elite, uplanders found Republican party goals at least equally, if not more, unpalatable.

Etcheson's argument suffers from methodological shortcomings. As with most case studies of political culture, there is in her book more assertion than demonstration of what separated her subjects from others. Even if we assume that the qualities she describes actually defined uplanders politically, it is not clear that Yankees and other midwesterners did not share those values. Take "manliness," for instance. In *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life: Gender, Politics, and the State in Rural New York, 1870-1930* (1991), Paula Baker found that rural New Yorkers in the late nineteenth century put at least as much emphasis on masculine virtues in their political campaigns as upland southerners put in theirs. I could point out numerous examples from my own study of politics in New Hampshire in the Civil War era, such as when a Republican editor on the eve of the 1856 election told voters that they had to decide whether they "were men of New Hampshire or serfs of South Carolina," where manliness was certainly not eschewed. To be sure, Etcheson often uses the weakening qualifier "tended to" when describing the attitudes of northern settlers, but without making a direct comparison it is difficult to know which southern qualities were unique and which northern ones were mere stereotypes. Surely one can find numerous examples of Yankees distrusting political power and deploring inequalities in wealth.

As to particular issues, the way to determine if northern-born and southern-born midwesterners were inclined to take regionally inspired positions on them is to perform a systematic roll call analysis of voting patterns in state legislatures, constitutional conventions, and Congress. One can then deduce exactly how much impact party and region had on political behavior at different times. Also, a judgment can then be made about their competing influence. Etcheson makes only a passing attempt at this task.

Similarly, if Etcheson wants to argue that midwest-

erners cast ballots along regional lines in the 1820s and 1830s, voted along party lines in the 1840s, and then reverted to voting sectionally in the 1850s, there is one way she could have demonstrated such phenomena. Even if she chose not to do the admittedly drudging research of recreating the census manuscripts to obtain percentages of voters in selected counties who were of various extractions to use as independent variables in ecological regression analysis, she could have compared levels of voter solidarity in the southern counties of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois–before and after the 1840s–and compared such levels to those in the northern counties of those states.

My intent, however, is not to criticize Etcheson for not being a quantifier. None of us can prove every assertion we make or test every proposition in a perfectly controlled manner. But the widening appeal of political cultural analysis does make one pause and question its methodological looseness. Historians of political culture need to be more rigorous in both defining and justifying their methods of selecting evidence and in establishing frameworks of comparison that permit their theses to be judged.

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