

The Regional Background of Oklahoma's People*

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This paper will demonstrate that the varying origin of the early settlers in different parts of Oklahoma led to the emergence of certain traditions and cultural patterns which align some portions of the State with the Middle West and others with the South. *First*, church membership and voting behavior divide the State into two distinct areas; one settled predominately by people from the Middle West and another by southerners. *Second*, the indications are that the early settlers maintained their dominant regional political and religious ideologies after coming to Oklahoma.¹

ORIGIN OF EARLY SETTLERS

After 1825, various Indian tribes from the southern plains states were moved to Indian Territory; in 1889, the first opening of the Oklahoma Territory brought in thousands of homesteaders.² The 1910 population totaled 1,657,155, with 31 per cent born in the State, 67 per cent in other states, and 2 per cent were foreign-born³. Of the Negroes born outside of Oklahoma, 92 per cent came from southern states. Also, more than half of the Indians were natives of the Southern Region. However, 50 per cent of the white residents were born in the northern states, about 48 per cent in the Southern Region and the other 2 per cent in the Mountain and Pacific Regions, or the state of their birth was unknown.⁴

The Federal Censuses of Population never have reported data on the birthplace of Oklahoma residents born in other states by counties and minor civil divisions. It was necessary, therefore, to utilize county church membership as given in the 1906 *Religious Bodies* and election returns to identify the two major demographic regions of Oklahoma.

DELINEATION OF NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN REGIONS BASED UPON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Probably the most accurate religious index of the origin of the early settlers in each Oklahoma county is the membership in the two distinct branches of the Methodist Church, since it split over the slavery controversy. In 1906, almost 60 per cent of the 75,912 Oklahoma Methodists were members of the three southern denominations, while 40 per cent belonged to the three northern denominations.⁵

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¹ Sources of church membership and election data: *Religious Bodies: 1906, Part I, Bureau of the Census, 1910, pp. 348-49; The Oklahoma Red Book, Vol. II, 1912, pp. 239-96 and 309-10; Directory of the State of Oklahoma, Part 3, 1953, pp. 190-228; and The Daily Oklahoman, Oklahoma City, November 9, 1954, p. 5.*

² Many whites had infiltrated into Indian Territory in eastern Oklahoma from Texas and Arkansas prior to this latter date.

³ *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Volume III, 1910, p. 461.*

⁴ The Northern and Southern Regions are based upon the Census classification of the 48 states. All states located in the Northeast and North Central Census Regions are considered Northern. The Southern Region includes all states in the South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central Census Divisions. Missouri is in the North Central Census Region, but certain sections of the State are Southern.

⁵ The three southern Methodist denominations that reported members in Oklahoma in 1906 were the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and the Methodist Protestant Church. The first mentioned denominations was organized in Maryland in 1840. In 1845, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was organized in Kentucky and it withdrew from the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church over the slavery controversy. The Methodist Protestant Church was organized in Baltimore in 1839.

The three northern denominations were the Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Free Methodist Church. The Methodist Episcopal Church, although it was quite strong in the slave-holding states, was opposed to slavery. The African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in Philadelphia in 1816. The Free Methodist Church was formed in New York in 1840.

Figure 1 shows that northern Methodists were more numerous than southern Methodists in a 24-county irregular U-shaped area extending from Beaver County on the west to Nowata on the east, and south to Caddo County. In 1906, no Methodists were reported in Cimarron County. With only two exceptions, settlers from the northern states predominated in the north central counties of Oklahoma and those from the Southern Region in the other areas of the State. In Coal and Wagoner Counties, 79 per cent of the white Methodists were members of the three southern denominations, while 79 per cent of the Negro Methodists belonged to the northern branch, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. White church membership was perhaps underreported to a greater extent than that of Negroes in these two counties, because both are overwhelmingly southern as to the origin of the white population.

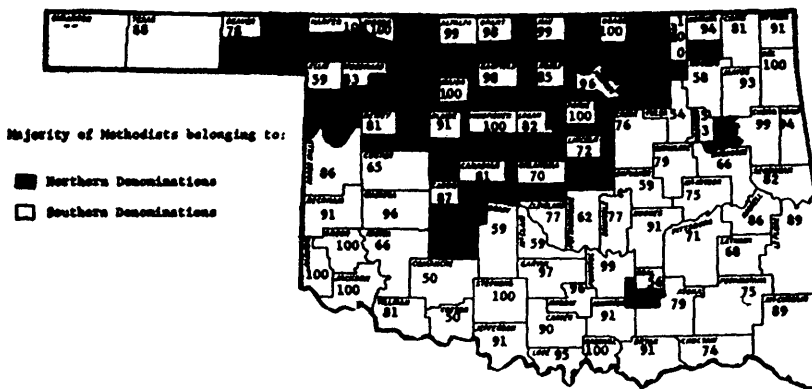


FIG. 1. Percentage of total Methodist membership belonging to northern and southern denominations, 1906, by counties
(Source: *Religious Bodies: 1906*, Part I. Bureau of the Census, 1910, pp. 348-49.)

Then, membership figures in all other distinctly northern or southern denominations were added to those of the corresponding Methodist denominations.⁶ This identified the northern and southern regions with those presented in Figure 1, with two exceptions. First, both Coal and Wagoner Counties, which had more northern than southern Methodists in 1906, had much larger numbers of southern than of northern church members. Second, Custer and Tulsa Counties had slightly more northern than southern church members.

DELINEATION OF REGIONS BASED UPON ELECTION RETURNS

In the 1908 presidential election, 27 north central and east central counties returned Republican majorities (Figure 2), and only six (Dewey, Caddo, Canadian, Grant, Osage, and Pawnee) in the northern religious region cast Democratic majorities. On the other hand, nine counties (Creek, Okfuskee, Seminole, Okmulgee, McIntosh, Muskogee, Wagoner, Cherokee,

⁶ The northern group of churches included the three northern Methodist denominations, the Congregationalists, Friends (Orthodox), General Conference of Mennonites of North America, Lutheran Synodical Conference, United Brethren in Christ, Disciples of Christ, Seventh Day Adventists, Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., and Free-Will Baptists.

Those classified as southern were the three southern Methodist denominations, Southern and National Baptist Conventions, Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., the Churches of Christ, and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

The churches that are neither exclusively northern or southern were the protestant Episcopal Church, Roman Catholic Church, Jewish Congregations, and Latter-Day Saints (reorganized). Members of these four groups, which accounted for 29 per cent of the 257,166 Oklahoma church members in 1906, were excluded from this analysis.

and Sequoyah), located in the southern religious region in 1906, voted Republican majorities. In the 1907 Oklahoma gubernatorial election the Democratic and Republican majorities coincided with those of the presidential election of 1908 in all except seven counties (Beaver, Kay, Payne, Nowata, Seminole, Okfuskee, and Cherokee).

GENERALIZED NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN REGIONS

The northern and southern regions in Oklahoma were determined as follows: If a border county was in the northern region on both religious indexes and elections, or if it was in the northern region on three of these four indexes, it was placed in the northern region.⁷ However, if a border

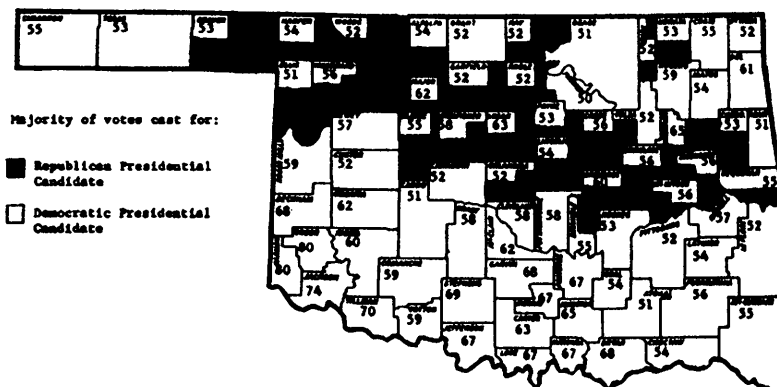


FIG. 2. Percentage of votes cast for Democratic and Republican presidential candidates November 3, 1908, by counties, Socialist votes omitted. (Source: The Oklahoma Red Book, Vol. II, Oklahoma City, Okla., 1912, pp. 309-10.)

county was in the northern region on both religious indexes, but southern in terms of voting behavior in the two elections, it was considered equally northern and southern and as a heterogeneous, or interstitial county.

Dewey, Caddo, Canadian, Pawnee, and Osage Counties were northern on both religious indexes, but voted Democratic in 1907 and 1908. Creek County was southern in both religious indexes, but voted Republican in both elections. These six border counties are, therefore, neither distinctly northern nor southern. Figure 3 shows the generalized northern and southern regions in Oklahoma determined on this basis.

Six nonborder counties are also heterogeneous. Grant County, on the Kansas border, was northern in terms of religion but voted Democratic in 1907 and 1908. Five counties in the southern religious area, Okmulgee, McIntosh, Muskogee, Sequoyah, and Wagoner, voted Republican in both elections. However, none of these six counties is on the periphery of its respective region and, therefore, each is considered as either distinctly northern or southern.

There are some noteworthy reasons for the diversity of religious and voting traditions among the early residents of several east central counties. All three distinct ethnic groups there, Indians, Negroes, and whites, came from predominantly southern states. Many of the Indians were slaveholders, and when the Civil War started in 1861, all tribes made treaties with the southern Confederacy, thus severing their relations with the United States. They were punished for this action at the close of the war, and undoubtedly because of this, they voted Democratic.

⁷Wagoner County is the only exception. It was northern in terms of Methodist Church membership because most Negroes were members of the northern Methodist denominations. It also cast more votes for Republican candidates in 1907 and 1908. Both the Negroes and whites are predominately from the South, however.

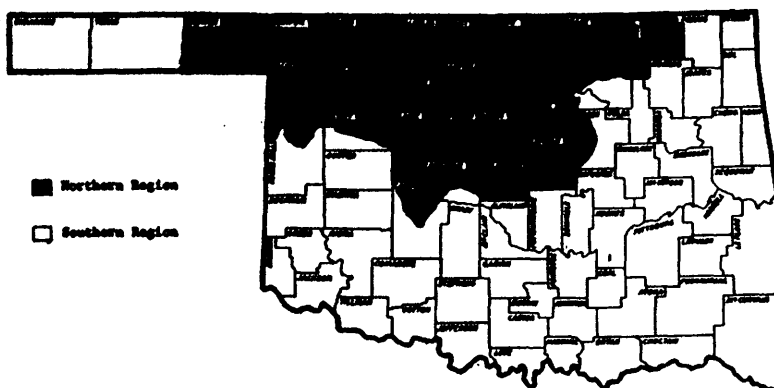


FIG. 3. Generalized areas of northern and southern regions.

As a result of northern church missionary influence and the slavery controversy, most of the southern Negroes who came to Oklahoma were members of northern church denominations, and they were Republicans also. Quite likely, their votes accounted for the Republican majorities in most of the east central counties in 1907 and 1908. In contrast, the southern whites who came to this area of Oklahoma were members of southern church denominations and of the Democratic Party.

PERSISTENCE OF REGIONAL TRADITIONS

The distinct traditions of the Middle West and South have not disappeared during the 50 years of statehood. As for voting behavior, the separate regional traditions have generally become stronger and more

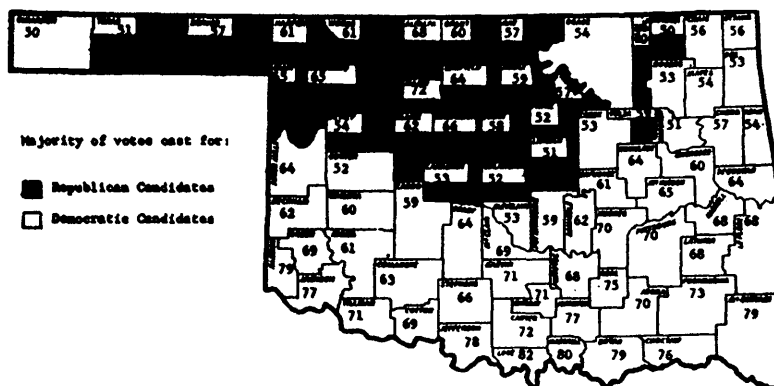


FIG. 4. Percentage of votes cast for Democratic and Republican presidential and gubernatorial candidates, in four recent years, by counties

Gubernatorial election returns were used for the years 1950 and 1954; presidential election returns were used for the years 1948 and 1952. Votes other than Republican or Democratic were omitted.

(Source: *Directory of the State of Oklahoma*, Part 3, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1953, pp. 190-228, and *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, November 9, 1954, p. 5.

pronounced in each area. Figure 4 shows an increase of Republican strength in most north central Oklahoma counties and a consolidation of Democratic strength in most of the counties settled by southern people.

Undoubtedly, some of the religious traditions of the separate regions have persisted, although there are no recent data to support this generalization. On the other hand, some of the regional religious variations have disappeared. For example, three Methodist denominations united in 1939.

SUMMARY

This paper has shown that the early settlers in Oklahoma came from two major regions, the Middle West and the South. Northerners, mostly Republicans and members of northern religious bodies, came into Oklahoma through Kansas and Missouri, bringing northern, or mid-western, traditions rather than north-eastern. The southerners, who were primarily Democrats and members of southern religious denominations, came into Oklahoma through Texas and Arkansas. The southern traditions are both those of the old South and Southwest, with the latter more dominant.

Midwesterners were more numerous than southerners in 19 north central Oklahoma counties. In six interstitial counties, the numbers of midwesterners and southerners were approximately equal. Southerners predominated in the other 52 counties. The study shows also that the early settlers transplanted their political and religious ideologies into the areas of settlement. The distinct regional political traditions have persisted since statehood, although the religious demarcation of areas has become less distinct than it was during earlier years.