



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Sectionalism and Nebraska: Presidential Politics, 1916 - 1968

Full Citation: James W Lindeen, "Sectionalism and Nebraska: Presidential Politics, 1916-1968," *Nebraska History* 54 (1973): 647-654.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1973Sectionalism.pdf>

Date: 5/18/2011

Article Summary: Sectionalism results from an uneven geographical distribution of factors that influence social life and, subsequently, political behavior. However, the method used to determine Nebraska's sectionalism is brought into question in this analysis.

Cataloging Information:

Tables: Deviation of Republican Percentages of Total Presidential Vote in Vermont, Florida and Nebraska from Republican Percentages Nationally, 1896-1968; Deviation of Republican Percentages of Total Presidential Vote in the Ninety-three Nebraska Counties from Republican Percentages in Nebraska at Large, 1916-1968; Republican Percentages of Total Presidential Vote, 1916-1968; Map, Nebraska Trends in County Sectionalism, 1896-1968; Persistence of Sectionalism and Relative Partisanship

SECTIONALISM AND NEBRASKA: PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS, 1916-1968

By JAMES W. LINDEEN

Sectionalism results from an uneven geographic distribution of the factors that influence social life; it has been an important force in American political behavior. Estimates of the magnitude and persistence of sectionalism invariably depend upon the indexes selected to measure it, however, and different interpretations result from different methodological approaches. For example, a study based upon Republican Party electoral successes before 1972 might have concluded that there was an unbridgeable gulf between the politics of the Plains states and those of the Old South. On the other hand, an examination of the "conservative coalition" that unite congressmen from these areas on votes cast in the United States House of Representatives would have yielded a contrary conclusion.¹

One estimate of the persistence of sectionalism was offered by the late V. O. Key, Jr., who analyzed presidential vote returns for the period 1896 through 1952.² He subtracted the percentage received by the Republican candidate in any election in the nation at large from the candidate's percentage received in selected states. For example, by subtracting the percentage received by William McKinley in 1896 from his percentage in Vermont and Florida it was seen that the former state was 29 percent *more* Republican and the latter 27 percent *less* Republican than the United States in general. The process of calculating these "percentage deviations" was one of simple subtraction. By 1952 Vermont was only 17 percent more Republican than the nation and Florida exactly mirrored the sentiment of the average American voter. Key was a highly regarded observer of American politics and, while not claiming

that past trends necessarily predict future events, he nevertheless concluded that sectionalism in national politics might be undergoing a decline in the 20th century. His findings about the declining sectionalism of Vermont and Florida in particular, together with the situation in Nebraska, are presented in Figure 1.

The validity of the decreasing sectionalism hypothesis is brought into question by Figure 1. Unfortunately, Key reported his empirical findings only for Vermont and Florida—perhaps because those two states best illustrated the point being made in *American State Politics*. It would have been difficult for Vermont to maintain its high levels of Republicanism of the late 19th century; the influx of new voters from the North has altered markedly the political demography of Florida. It is possible also that new trends yielding sectionalist tendencies have been introduced since 1952 (the last election used in Key's analysis), and that this might explain some of the discrepancy between the actual behavior of Nebraska voters and the course of action predicted by the declining sectionalism hypothesis. Then, too, for reasons indicated below, Nebraska's election returns have been recorded in the present study only since 1916—and this also accounts for the variation to some degree.

Nevertheless, under the method which is used here, Nebraska's sectionalism has been increasing. The Cornhusker State was below the national Republican average in three of the first five elections examined here (1916, 1924, and 1932) and has been well above the national mean for the party in every election since 1940. Indeed, it was 16.1 percent above the national average vote for Richard M. Nixon in 1968. Comparative trend studies of other states would be enlightening with regard to clarifying Key's hypothesis, but the evidence is clear that Nebraska's sectionalism, as measured by the percentage deviation approach, has been increasing.

Sectionalism exists also *within* the individual states. The conflict between the hypothesis of declining sectionalism nationally and the observed increasing sectionalism of Nebraska raises the question of whether county-level regionalism within the state itself is increasing or decreasing. Virtually all states have manifested some degree of geographical rivalry internally, and Nebraska does follow the national pattern in this respect. The North Platte *versus* South Platte division was intense during the territorial period and afterward,⁴ and there are those who

FIGURE 1
 DEVIATION OF REPUBLICAN PERCENTAGES OF TOTAL PRESIDENTIAL
 VOTE IN VERMONT, FLORIDA AND NEBRASKA FROM REPUBLICAN
 PERCENTAGES NATIONALLY, 1896-1968

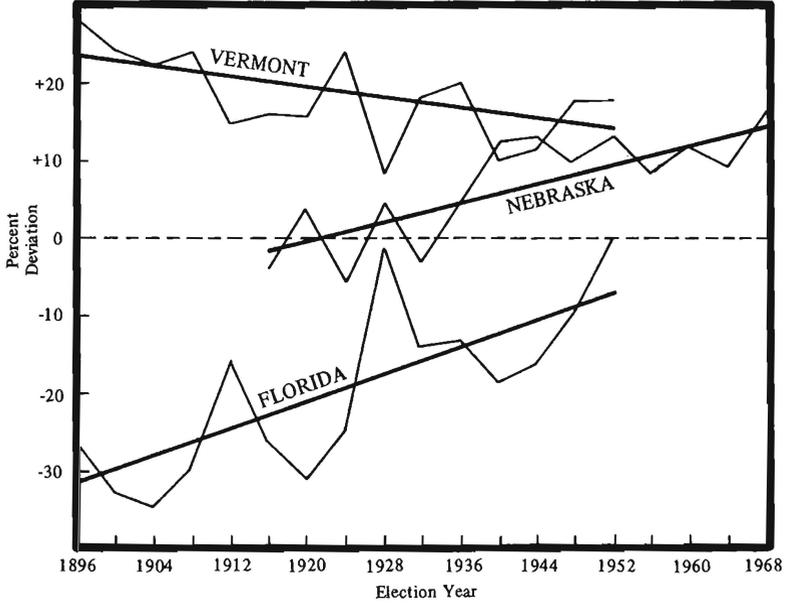
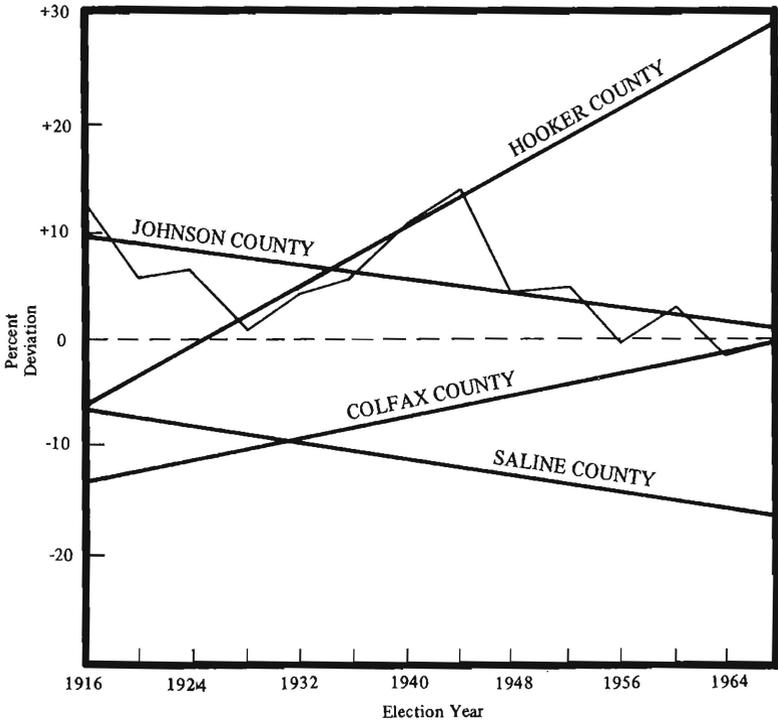


FIGURE 2
 DEVIATION OF REPUBLICAN PERCENTAGES OF TOTAL PRESIDENTIAL VOTE
 IN THE NINETY-THREE NEBRASKA COUNTIES FROM REPUBLICAN
 PERCENTAGES IN NEBRASKA AT LARGE, 1916-1968



see an eastern Nebraska-western Nebraska rivalry in contemporary politics. Have these divisions been lasting ones during the present century, however, and are they increasing or decreasing? If a well-delineated sectionalism does exist, can Key's percentage deviation method be used to clarify it?

County sectionalism can be examined in the same manner as state sectionalism in the nation at large. In 1916 Nebraskans cast 41 percent of their votes for Charles Evans Hughes, Republican Party presidential candidate. Hughes carried Burt County with 50.3 percent of the total vote but lost Butler County with 31.8 percent. By subtracting the statewide percentage from that of each of the counties, Burt's percentage deviation from the statewide Republican vote in 1916 was +9.3, while that of Butler was -9.2 percent. Similar subtractions result in positive and negative balances for the ninety-one other counties for the same year. This process of subtraction is repeated for each presidential election through 1968. The subtrahends are the statewide Republican percentages of the total vote indicated in Table 1; the national percentage Republican is listed for comparison and was the basis for the calculations of Figure 1.

TABLE 1
REPUBLICAN PERCENTAGES OF TOTAL
PRESIDENTIAL VOTE, 1916-1968⁵

Year	Nebraska Percent	U.S. Percent	Percentage Deviation	Year	Nebraska Percent	U.S. Percent	Percentage Deviation
1916	41.0	46.2	-5.2	1944	58.6	45.9	12.7
1920	64.7	60.3	4.4	1948	54.2	45.1	9.1
1924	47.1	54.0	-6.9	1952	69.2	55.1	14.1
1928	63.2	58.2	5.0	1956	65.5	57.4	8.1
1932	35.3	39.6	-4.3	1960	62.1	49.5	12.6
1936	40.8	36.5	4.3	1964	47.4	38.5	8.9
1940	57.2	44.8	12.4	1968	59.5	43.4	16.1

Two problems arise in following Key's methodology. The first of these results from the instability of county boundary lines. As indicated previously, it would have been preferable to have begun the present study with the election of 1896 to give

greater comparability with the findings about Vermont, Florida, and the proposed hypothesis, but the last major alterations in county boundaries did not occur until the re-organization of Arthur County in 1913. Only since the election of 1916, then, have the units by which the election returns are reported been relatively stable in their configuration.⁶

The second difficulty concerns the reporting of election returns for 1916, 1920, and for many of the elections in the 19th century as well. Before 1924 Nebraskans voted directly for as many as eight electoral college delegates, rather than for the presidential candidates themselves. Although the usual practice was to vote for all of one party's electoral college nominees, some few individuals would scatter their choices among more than a single party or would fail to use all of the votes at their disposal. As a result, the several candidates of each party invariably received different statewide totals and there was no "official" vote total for any party. In conjunction with common practice, Addison E. Sheldon, in compiling a register of presidential votes from 1868 through 1916 for the 1918 *Bluebook*, recorded the votes received by the first-named candidate in the party column as the total vote received by the national candidates.⁷ Because the first-listed electoral college nominee could run well ahead of or behind his party colleagues, however, the present data are based on the one candidate in each county who received the most votes in each contest. Usually this is the first-listed man—but not always.⁸

Nine outcomes are possible under the method of analysis used, as indicated in Table 2 on page 653.

Three of these outcomes are in agreement with Key's hypothesis of decreasing sectionalism. Sectionalism can be decreasing in counties that are *above* the statewide Republican average in over half of the fourteen presidential elections examined (Adams, Dixon, Fillmore, Gage, Hall, Johnson, Lancaster, Pawnee, Rock, Scotts Bluff, Seward, Thayer, and Webster Counties), *below* that average (Cheyenne, Colfax, Greeley, Howard, Kearney, Lincoln, Platte, Thurston, Washington, and Wheeler Counties), or *evenly divided* by being above and below it on seven presidential elections (Nuckolls County).

Three more outcomes are possible where sectionalism has neither increased nor decreased.⁹ Two counties have been above the statewide Republican average on more than eight occasions

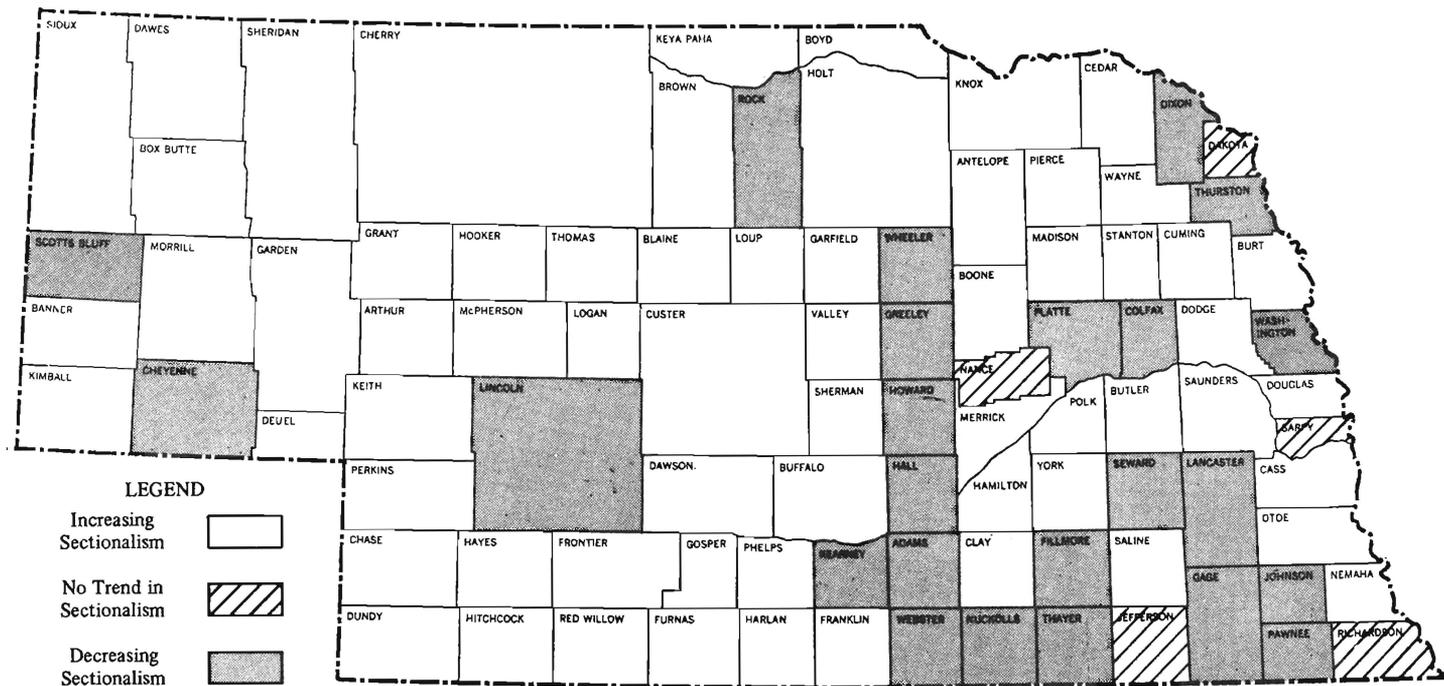


FIGURE 3. NEBRASKA TRENDS IN COUNTY SECTIONALISM—1896-1968

TABLE 2
PERSISTENCE OF SECTIONALISM AND RELATIVE PARTISANSHIP

Relative Partisanship	Partisanship Trends			
	Decreasing Sectionalism	No Trend	Increasing Sectionalism	
Above Statewide Republican Average in Eight or More Elections	13	2	56	(71)
Evenly Divided Between the Two Parties (Seven Victories Each)	1	0	1	(2)
Below Statewide Republican Average in Eight or More Elections	10	3	7	(20)
	(24)	(5)	(64)	(N=93)

(Jefferson and Nance Counties) and three have been below it (Dakota, Richardson, and Sarpy Counties) in a majority of the elections. None of the ninety-three counties has been truly “neutral” in the sense of having been evenly divided on relative partisanship and having demonstrated an absence of partisan trend.

The three outcomes that remain are those that refute the declining sectionalism hypothesis. Only one county in this category has been equally divided between the two parties in the fourteen elections (Red Willow), while seven of them have been under the average (Butler, Cass, Cedar, Douglas, Saline, Saunders, and Sherman). This leaves no less than fifty-six counties that have been above the statewide Republican average eight or more times and that manifest increasing sectional voting patterns. This seems to constitute a strong challenge to the thesis of declining sectionalism at the state level in Nebraska.

Figure 2 follows the format of Figure 1 and allows a comparison of the sectionalism trends of Vermont, Florida, and Nebraska with those of the four most frequent types of outcome within the Cornhusker State. Hooker County is above the Republican average with increasing sectionalism; indeed, it

is the most extreme case of increasing sectionalism. Johnson County is above the Republican average but with decreasing sectionalism. Colfax County is below the statewide average and, with Johnson, exemplifies the twenty-four areas that follow the hypothesis. Saline County also is below the average Republican vote and shows increasing sectionalism. Like Hooker, it is the extreme case in its own category.

Thus far we have used the average statewide Republican presidential vote as a device for estimating sectionalism. But is "percentage deviation" a valid basis for measurement? Is sectionalism really being measured, or merely county-level political party preference? One way to find out is to locate the sixty-four increasingly sectionalist, twenty-four decreasingly sectionalist, and five "neutralist" counties on the map, as in Figure 3.

Sectionalism does seem to be reflected generally by measuring percentage deviations in presidential elections. All but four of the counties in which it is decreasing or at least remaining stable are located either along the west bank of the Missouri River or in the southeastern quadrant of the state. (Wheeler County might not be a southeastern county, but it is contiguous with the column of counties extending southward to the Kansas line and showing decreasing sectionalism.) West of the ninety-ninth meridian, however, only Rock, Lincoln, Cheyenne, and Scotts Bluff counties are exceptions to the sectional pattern.

The calculation of these percentage deviations probably is a function of county population and urbanization, as well as of sectionalism. Although the most populous county does not follow the hypothesis, all of the remaining eight most populous counties do follow the trend. Indeed, two of these are Scotts Bluff and Lincoln counties—two of those four counties west of the ninety-ninth meridian. In the final analysis both sectionalism and urbanization have been powerful underlying factors affecting voting in presidential elections from 1916 to 1968. Further evidence on the trends in state sectionalism might be revealed in election returns for other public officials, in state legislative behavior, in newspaper editorials, and in other data sources.

NOTES

1. Congressional Quarterly Service annually computes "conservative coalition" scores for members of Congress. E.g., see *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, XXVII (November 1, 1968), 2983, for the scores of the 90th Congress.
2. V. O. Key, Jr., *American State Politics: An Introduction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 26-28.
3. *Ibid.*, 27.
4. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 87-88.
5. The Nebraska vote returns are from *Nebraska House Journal, 35th Session, 1917* (York, Nebraska: York Blank Book Company, 1917), chart following p. 10, and *Official Report of the Nebraska State Canvassing Board*, appropriate years. National returns are from Richard B. Morris (ed.), *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), 277; Richard M. Scammon (ed.), *America at the Polls: A Handbook of American Presidential Election Statistics, 1920-1964* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965), *passim*, and *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, XXVII (December 13, 1968), 3278.
6. Olson, 162-163. For changes in the early boundaries see Nebraska State Planning Board, "Creation of County Boundaries in Nebraska, and Chronological Changes, 1854-1929," (Lincoln: Unpublished manuscript, c. 1929).
7. It is cited as a source by Edgar E. Robinson, *The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1934), 389, and by Walter Dean Burnham, *Presidential Ballots, 1832-1896* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955), 929.
8. In 1904 one Xavier Piasecki was listed in the first column but received an average of a thousand votes fewer than his Democratic colleagues with 51,876. *House Journal, 29th Session, 1905* (York, Nebraska: York Times Printing Company, 1905), 54-65.
9. In this case the regression line slope is said to be .00.