

New England State Reports

The Reflections and Musings of a First-Year Political Scientist in Vermont: The Relevance of Identity in Sub-National Entities

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Introduction

In May 2006, I was offered and accepted a tenure-track position as the political scientist in the social sciences department at Lyndon State College in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom (NEK). As with all newly hired faculty members, I wanted to make the transition, successfully, from graduate to professional by effectively wearing the "three hats" associated with professorship: pedagogy, administration/community service, and research. I went to graduate school as a former high school teacher with a strong interest in education so the 4/4 teaching load was a good fit. In the spring session (although *winter* would be the more appropriate term), I was scheduled to teach Vermont Politics. Being an international relations and comparative specialist with a limited state and local background, I quickly began to read and absorb as much as I could about Vermont politics in preparation for the course.¹ My investigation began with a simple question: What makes Vermont unique within the landscape of the United States? I soon found out that Vermont was quite a bit more than the simplistic portrayal often expressed by the national media.

The following discussion is a qualitative review of what I uncovered about Vermont from an outsider's perspective. What I found was a state that

¹ I am deeply indebted to my colleague and author of *The Two Vermonts*, Paul Searls, for his aid and guidance in the process.

was much more than a Norman Rockwell painting or some sort of Marxist bastion within the United States. In my research, I uncovered a vibrant and diverse state (at least politically diverse) with a distinctive character that belied what many outsiders have to say. It soon became apparent to me that Vermont has an identity and was, therefore, an appropriate place to apply identity theory.

After reviewing many of my surprises and revelations, therefore, I briefly discuss identity theory and utilize it to outline what this newcomer sees as fundamental dimensions of Vermont identity. I argue that Vermont's political behavior is significantly affected by four interrelated characteristics of Vermont identity: wariness of outsiders, independence of thought, the freedom and unity mosaic, and rural relevance. Obviously, sage observers of Vermont politics may have disagreements with my points of emphasis and potential omissions. Such is to be expected in any academic adventure, let alone one set forth by a "newbie." In this paper, I do not claim to have solved the Vermont riddle. What is offered are the views of a recent outsider with the hope of shedding light on what those with more experience may take for granted or no longer see. Moreover, this paper seeks to explore the relevance of identity within sub-national entities. In the case of Vermont, the findings suggest that as with politics, identity is local.

A Newcomer/Outsider's Perspectives

One of the first things one learns when they move to Vermont is that they can never be a "true" Vermonter.² Some suggest that Vermonter status can be achieved through weathering *n* number of winters in Vermont, but to the hardcore traditionalist one must be able to go back seven generations to be a real

² In e-mail correspondence with noted Vermont political scientist Frank Bryan, he indicated that, despite spending virtually his entire life in Vermont, he was born in New Hampshire and, therefore, could never be a Vermonter. Likewise, the editor of this journal, himself a Vermont political scientist (though living in self-described "economic exile" in Chicago), has challenged his own status as a native Vermonter by noting that he was born in Burlington, which, he claims, is only "arguably" part of the "real" Vermont.

Vermonters. Where did this intense pride come from? Even having lived in Pennsylvania most of my life, a state that I would argue possesses a particular outlook on life, I had never witnessed such intensity. Perhaps one can trace it to the fact that Vermont was *not* one of the original thirteen colonies and was an independent state until 1791.³ Texans, who also come from a state that was independent for a short period of time, certainly are sure the world begins in Amarillo and ends at the Rio Grande. Vermonters, on the other hand, are more reserved about their affection for their place of residence. They do not wear their love of state on their sleeve the way Texans do. Yet, from my experience, Vermonters feelings are equally intense.

Maybe this pride is due to a moral certitude that comes from a history of anti-slavery as embodied by the Vermont constitution and enlivened by a powerful abolition movement.⁴ This is a past that all could agree is something to be proud of, but is it the parsimonious explanation theorists seek? Another potential could be that Vermont, until relatively recently, maintained a rural, agricultural culture that imbued Vermonters with a strong sense of self. The nostalgia and sense of loss regarding the decline of the dairy industry speaks to a yearning for a more traditional and *better* way of life. So does the quiet disdain for “flatlanders”, the phrase used to describe people who moved to Vermont and settled on the flats (the early settlers staked out plots on mountains), who came with foreign ways and ideas (see Searls, 2006).⁵ Moreover, Vermont did not experience massive urbanization and industrialization and therefore largely avoided urban decay and environmental degradation.

³ This is a fact of which many Americans are not aware.

⁴ “The record of Vermont as a resolute champion of individual freedom, as a true interpreter of our fundamental law, as a defender of religious faith, as an unselfish but independent and uncompromising commonwealth of liberty-loving patriots, is not only unsurpassed, but unmatched by any other state in the Union,” George Harvey, Ambassador to Great Britain, 1921 (quoted from Doyle 1999, cover page).

⁵ I have noticed a strong tendency towards avoiding change and maintaining “the way we do things around here.”

The natural beauty of the place, which has drawn artists and writers along with other less-desirable flatlanders, may explain the satisfaction Vermonters feel about their home. I often joke with new people that I meet that I like Vermont, but it would be better if it was not so “ugly.” Perhaps state pride is developed through the endurance of long and tough winters. This badge of courage can be readily seen when people from colder climates bemoan the ease of the seasons (if they have them at all) in more temperate environments. At the end of the day, all these factors help contribute to a sense of pride Vermonters feel about their home. One thing that is clearly tangible to the newcomer, however, is that such feelings run strong and deep.

In spite of the self-respect gleaned from their locale, a gratification some would inappropriately demean as parochial, Vermonters are not arrogant. I have found people to be friendly and quite helpful when advice was required. This was certainly the case as I prepared for teaching Vermont politics. My colleague at Lyndon State, Vermont historian Paul Searls, was quick to provide direction for this babe-in-the-woods. We agreed to center the course on the tradition of town meeting and selected the books to be used in class. He suggested a list of people to contact to bring in speakers for the course. This is when I realized the significance of state size, i.e. small states have more intimate and available networks. I was able to set up presentations with Secretary of State Greg Sanford, legal expert Paul Gillies, and ground-zero for town meeting, Frank Bryan.⁶ I could not help thinking that I would probably have been lucky to get an e-mail in response to such queries if I had been in Pennsylvania. Maybe it is state size and the intimacy of political contacts that explains Vermont political behavior. Yet another variable had to be added to the hopper.

In my studies, it was readily obvious that a dedicated corps of Vermont historians and political scientists had created a significant body of literature on Vermont. I was exposed to the political ramifications of apportionment and

⁶ I should also mention that Paul Searls also presented in my class.

reapportionment, slavery, Republican dominance, railroads, the battle between the old guard and the young Turks in the Republican party, the phoenix-like rise of the democrats, highway building, the ski industry, hippies, environmental protection, and Ben-and-Jerry's. This list is not exhaustive and all these items require more space than this brief essay to elaborate. Let me share with you, however, some of my revelations.

First, Vermont is not the bastion of Marxist/Leninism as some suggest. Comparatively, taxes are not that high; there are variations in people's wages; there are many churches and a lot of people attend them; venture capital is welcome; the wealthy are sometimes disliked, but largely because they moved from out of state and they want to make Vermont like the state they came from; and Vermonter's have died and continue to die serving in the US armed forces. Vermont did, however, have a long period of one-party rule/hegemony, but that party was the *Republican* Party (for discussion, see, among others, Doyle 1999; Hand 2002, Sherman 2004). Vermont was a late bloomer in terms of bureaucratizing state services. Heck, Howard Dean is not nearly as liberal as the right-wing spinners would have you believe and is actually closer to the NRA on gun policy than some Republicans. Apparently implementing "Dr. Dinosaur" (universal healthcare for *children*) is enough to be considered a dangerous and subversive "socialist."

Secondly, there are not that many hippies. In fact, many of the communes did not make it through their first winter in the 1970s (Sherman 2000). I have not seen that many sets of dreadlocks or heard the grateful dead blasting from passing cars. Yes, Ben and Jerry's and Phish are from Vermont but Ben and Jerry's was bought out by a multinational corporation and Phish broke up. Simply put, Vermont is not quite the hippy hub some say it is.

Third, I have gained an appreciation for the strained relations between traditionalists and flatlanders. With the carpetbagger implications of the term becoming less relevant, the phrase has come to represent all outsiders (i.e. those

who have not lived through enough winters or do not go back seven generation...you make the choice) who reside in the state. These people tend to hold more liberal views than traditionalists. They are more likely to be urban in orientation (in their past or in their current lives in Vermont) and believe that change is a good thing. Traditionalism is represented by the "Take Back Vermont" campaign against gay civil unions because it was about much more than simply gay marriage. In many ways it was a yearning to go back to a *better* past, a sympathy endemic to conservatism in general.⁷

The traditionalist/flatlander dichotomy in part represents a fourth dynamic, namely the urban/rural split. It does not take long in Vermont to see this cleavage even though, to an outsider, there are not any true cities (with Burlington being considered a big, small town). It is exemplified by dress, attitudes, and behavioral preferences. The strength of traditionalism rests on the fact that the state is by-and-large a rural state with an extensive network of dirt roads.⁸ Reapportionment has clearly altered the playing field but it is shocking that it was only a little over forty years ago that one-town, one-vote still existed. Two generations still live that grew up in that environment. I would say, however, that the urban/rural dichotomy is not as polarized a division as in many places in the world and I believe the answer to that lies in Vermont history.

This revelation is the longstanding effort to balance two antagonisms: freedom and unity. Although one could go back further, I start with the Vermont constitution as it was the product of the enlightened classes of Vermont at its political inception. The constitution outlawed slavery and codified universal male suffrage, both of which were radical moves in their day. Here we see profound expressions of both liberty and equality. It is a respect for

⁷ For discussion see Roskin et al (2006, 96-99).

⁸ In all honesty, I had driven on no more than five dirt roads in my life until I moved to Vermont. And I must say to Joe Sherman (author of *Fast Lane on a Dirt Road: A Contemporary History of Vermont*), whom I have yet to meet but I am sure it is only a matter of time, with all due respect, I have yet to find a fast lane on any of the dirt roads I've been on.

individual liberty and the commons. These decisions represent cultural beliefs borne of experience, but these traditions have continued in many shapes and forms. Town meeting allows the individual to speak within the confines of the community. There is room for hippies, gun-rights supporters, homosexuals, and heterosexuals. Business is welcome, but only under the auspices of Act 250.⁹ You can advertise, but not on billboards. In effect, Vermont has said that the inherent conflict between liberty and equality is not a zero-sum game.

All of these revelations to this newcomer appear to represent a character that is in many ways unique to Vermont. Experience in Vermont provides a lens for understanding political behavior that is a more appropriate fit than the grand simplifications offered by outsiders. It is this experience, as short as it has been, that led me to identity theory. The theoretical implication is that identity is significant even in sub-national entities, in this instance the case of Vermont.

Identity Theory

Identity, usually placed in the constructivist theoretic rubric, is based on the notion that polities develop political perspectives through iterative social interactions. I define identity as how one (individuals and organizations) sees themselves and how one sees themselves in relation to others. Identity shapes one's interests—i.e. what we want. In the constructivist nomenclature, agents (individuals and organizations) develop identities through repetitive social interactions. The interests that grow out of identity shape political structures—i.e. rules, governmental bodies, and images. Experience with these political structures, in turn, shape identity and interests through repeated social interactions. In short, both agents and structures are mutually constitutive or constructed. This dynamic is referred to as *co-constitution*. Over time, the process serves to shape both polities and policies (Rourke and Boyer 2006, 117-120).

⁹ A progressive environmental control law that requires environmental impact assessments before private development can occur. Sherman (200) 93 notes that the law was the “first-in-the-nation.” Doyle (1999, 213) argues, “to this day it is known as a model of sound environmental and social planning.”

This approach to understanding political behavior is usually applied to international relations (e.g. Friedman and Starr 1997; Hopf 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001). I argue here that this approach also can be applied to sub-national entities (particularly in instances when parochial politics) and, therefore policy, significantly diverge from national perspectives.

As one can see, history and the influence of ideas over time are of profound significance from this theoretical approach. My observations and revelations led me to believe that there is such a thing as Vermont identity. This identity consists of at least four interrelated characteristics that help explain Vermont political behavior. I call these dimensions wariness of outsiders, independence of thought, the freedom and unity mosaic, and rural relevance. These categories are not mutually exclusive and taken individually, are not solely unique to Vermont, but together they speak to identity and can serve as guideposts for understanding politics in Vermont.

Wariness of Outsiders

Vermont's long experience with flatlanders and their foreign ways and ideas has led to skepticism of what outsiders believe to be accepted political practices. Vermont was an innovator in terms of gay civil unions when in other places in the Union such views were seen as a political kiss-of-death. Reaction to the Vermont Supreme Court's decision was seen by some as a result of outside influence and, therefore, they were prompted to "Take Back Vermont." Moreover, anti-gun swells in other states did not diffuse to Vermont, a rural, hunting state.

Even the Republican Party has developed a character that is not in keeping with national trends such as in the case of environmentalism¹⁰ or concern for children with special needs (see Senator Jim Jeffords, VT). If you

¹⁰ My colleague, Paul Searls, succinctly captures environmental sentiments when he said to me, "there are two types of environmentalism in Vermont: those who say I am an environmentalist and those who say I am an environmentalist *but...*"

think about it, can you image Jim Jeffords being elected in state primaries in Texas, South Carolina, or Kansas, just to name a few. These deviations have a long lineage in Vermont going back to the constitution. Outsider parlance involved the continuation of slavery and a land-owning requirement for voting, but not in Vermont. Vermonters can rightly ask the question: Who was right about these political decisions? In other words, wariness of outsiders is associated with state pride and identity.

Independence of Thought

Wariness of outsiders has been accompanied with an independence of thought. From the start, abolition and universal male suffrage had currency in Vermont when it did not, elsewhere. The strength of the abolition movement, over time, furthers the point. During the period of the Alien and Seditions Act, truculent Vermonter Matthew Lyons went to jail for his beliefs and was greeted as a hero when released. This pattern is repeated through history in cases such as resistance to the New Deal, Act 250, and gay civil unions. In other words, Vermont is willing to go it alone.¹¹

Freedom and Unity Mosaic

Freedom and Unity was selected as the state motto in 1778. What has occurred since is a balancing act between liberty and equality. Although at times the pendulum has swung a little in either direction, part of the cultural tapestry of Vermont is the effort to secure both the rights of the individual and the community. This is a struggle with which all societies must deal. Vermont has been a leader on both venues. Liberty is exemplified by anti-slavery, the excesses of the Republican old guard, hippy communes, and gun-rights. An emphasis on equality can be seen in universal male suffrage, the rise of the liberal wing of the

¹¹ State pride and a willingness to go it alone can be seen in the current "Vermont Commons" movement which has a primary goal of succeeding from the Union.

Republican Party, Phil Hoff's embrace of the New Frontier, the original intent of Act 60¹², and gay civil unions.

Yet not all these examples are mutually exclusive to either liberty or freedom, which suggests genuine efforts to balance individualism and communitarianism. Act 250, I would argue, surmises the point. Concern for negative impacts to the environment addresses both freedom and unity. Environmental degradation affects both the individual and communities. In other words, although variance of opinion exists, Vermont identity generally consists of a thoughtful concern for both liberty and equality.

Rural Relevance

Even though reapportionment was a sea change and rural political power was severely diminished, one cannot neglect rural concerns in this rural state. For many, many years the geography of Vermont isolated people in rural pockets. This isolation contributed to the development of identity in the form of more traditionalist voters. They did not vanish in 1965 and have remained a part of the political landscape. The limited success of anti-gun groups speaks volumes towards this situation. Moreover, town meeting provides the venue for conservative voices to be heard. In other words, in rural settings, rural points of view can profoundly shape local policy.¹³ As an inhabitant of the NEK, I can say that rural and traditionalist perspectives have a real and tangible presence in every day live.

These interrelated characteristics of Vermont identity provide guidance for interpreting Vermont political behavior. The emphases may shift as one moves from region to region but they help explain a general political perspective that may seem alien to those from other states. Some may argue that significant historic and theoretical omissions undermine my application of identity theory to

¹² An attempt to "equalize tax burdens and the amount spent per student, regardless of whether a town was wealthy or poor" (Sherman 2000) 213.

¹³ For a discussion of the pros and cons of town meeting, including concerns of rustics ruling the roost, see Bryan (2004) 25-56).

Vermont. Such arguments, however, are academically productive and, I would argue, get us closer to the truth as we can understand it, so I welcome debate. Besides, I can always say, "Heck, what do I know? I am new around here."

Conclusion

Often, those that have yet to be indoctrinated in dominant paradigms can offer a set of fresh and unencumbered eyes for investigation. My goal is to share a newcomer's point of view in order to explore Vermont politics. Obviously, this examination is qualitative and somewhat light hearted. Yet, at the very least, these reflections and musings can show how outsiders view Vermont. Identity theory, usually applied in international or comparative fashions, can provide a vehicle for interpreting *sub*-national polities. It offers guidance for adding structure to what I see as the distinctive characteristics of Vermont political culture. I find that Vermonters do, indeed, possess a common identity and this identity can assist in the description and explanation of Vermont political behavior. My contribution is simply to provide an opportunity to reflect on the perceptions and realities of Vermont and how identity offers a lens for interpretation. It is my hope that Vermonters can find value in this approach. If not, you can just write me off as another crazy flatlander.

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