

How the American Frontier Shapes Us

Residents of these western areas
more Republican, antitax,
antiregulation / BY RICH BARLOW



Easterners who heeded the 19th-century call to “Go West, young man” (and they *were* mostly men, given the harsh frontier conditions) were proverbial rugged individualists.

THAT’S NOT JUST HISTORY: RESEARCH BY BU economists says those pioneers bequeathed their cultural DNA to Americans who live in the same places today.

Even though the frontier closed almost 130 years ago, the research by Samuel Bazzi and Martin Fiszbein, both College of Arts & Sciences assistant professors of economics, and doctoral student Mesay Gebresilas (GRS’19) found that people who live in American counties that had the longest frontier experience exhibit the most individualism in the 21st century. Residents of those counties tend to vote Republican for president, support lower property taxes and smaller government, and are averse to public spending, redistribution, and regulation of things like guns and pollution.

▲ A family during the Great Western Migration, 1866. The frontier closed 130 years ago, but its individualist ethos continues to incline Americans living in old frontier counties to anti-government, antitax, anti-regulation views, say BU researchers.

Each decade a county was part of the frontier, their paper notes, “is associated with 3.5 percent more votes for Republican candidates in presidential elections since 2000. This association ratchets up over the 2000s as each election exhibits a significantly larger effect.”

And as late as 1940—half a century after 1890, when the US Census Bureau declared the frontier closed and the last time it tracked popular children’s names at the county level—families in longtime frontier counties chose more unusual names for their children, favoring Reuben and Lucinda, for example. “We borrow our names-based measure of individualism from social psychologists, who note that individualistic types are prone to give their children infrequent names, reflecting a desire to stand out,” the paper’s authors write. The paper was posted by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

The upshot for the authors, says Bazzi, is that culture can trump changing economic circumstances, given that the frontier mind-set endures long after roads, homes, and other tendrils of civilization have reached into the old frontier.

“The way that people tell and sustain narratives

about the past oftentimes motivates their reasoning and the way they view current events,” he says. “People come to view themselves as potentially carrying on that tradition.... Culture is sticky, and culture doesn’t change as quickly.” (This applies in other areas of life, according to Bazzi; for example, developmental economics teaches that cultures with big families cling to that practice even when economic circumstances make smaller families more feasible.)

The researchers used census data from 1790 to 1890, defining the frontier line as a point beyond which population density fell below two people per square mile. Counties within 100 kilometers of that line and having fewer than six people per square mile were counted as on the frontier in the research, and the researchers measured how long the counties remained frontier, as the frontier line gradually shifted westward over time.

“It’s individualists who were attracted to the frontier because of those conditions, and then once they’re there, those conditions further amplify the individualism and the importance of self-reliance,” Bazzi says. Those individualists were disproportionately male and in their prime (ages 15 to 49), he says, because “it was easier for men to strike off on their own and thrive in this harsh environment,” which could be crime-ridden and demanded manual labor and trekking over terrain without roads; the pioneers might face and have to fight Native Americans hostile to their encroachment.

This turf made people resent government aid to those whom the pioneers saw as less hardworking than themselves, the researchers found. The sense of Manifest Destiny, the idea that the continent was America’s for the conquering, sired attitudes against curbing pollution and environmental despoliation among today’s dwellers in longtime frontier counties.

“You see the frontier having this sort of lasting imprint on their preferences about things like regulation, even if we account for their partisanship or economic personal circumstances,” Bazzi says.

The researchers studied and cross-referenced such records as census data, election returns, contemporary property tax rates, and opinion surveys measuring people’s attitudes toward public spending and redistribution. They also studied psychological insights into the link between individualism and the frontier, which was noted as far back as 1893, when historian Frederick Jackson Turner suggested that the latter bred the former.

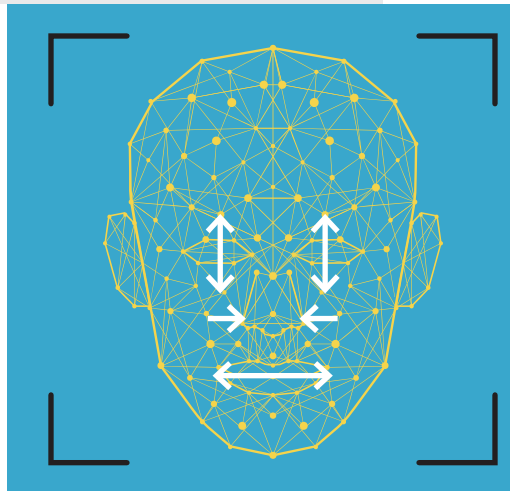
“His notion of individualists settling the frontier is something that social psychologists have extended to thinking about frontiers more generally,” Bazzi says. For example, he says, Japanese psychologist Shinobu Kitayama “documented similar sorts of traits in Japan” among frontier dwellers.

IN PROGRESS

A Growing Unhealthy Body Fixation; Politicians and Promotions; the Opioid Epidemic’s Vulnerable Populations; the Risks of Flavored E-Cigs

“SNAPCHAT DYSMORPHIA” A HEALTH THREAT

Three MED authors wrote a commentary for *JAMA Facial Plastic Surgery* about the growing health threat from “Snapchat dysmorphia,” which “has patients seeking out cosmetic surgery to look like filtered versions of themselves instead, with fuller lips, bigger eyes, or a thinner nose.” It’s a tech-era twist on body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), a long-known impairment that in extreme forms can lead to depression and suicidal thoughts. BDD affects up to 2.4 percent of the population.



WHY SOME POLITICIANS SHUN PROMOTIONS

Fewer than one-fifth of big-city mayors seek higher office, recent BU research found. They are put off by gridlock and partisan knife fights in upper reaches of politics—both in Washington, D.C., and in state capitals. The US House of Representatives, for example, is a comedown for the many mayors whose cities may have more people than a congressional district, according to the study. After being their municipality’s top executive, they would be merely one of 435 House representatives.

MAJOR GRANT TO HELP SSW STUDY OPIOID CRISIS

A School of Social Work team has been working to address one of the opioid epidemic’s most vulnerable populations—children and their mothers. The team received a \$900,000, three-year grant to measure the effectiveness of Project BRIGHT, a therapeutic parent-infant home-based intervention aimed at improving the mother-child relationship by increasing maternal sensitivity and parenting capacities. Mothers with opioid use disorder can be disengaged as parents, leading to possible child maltreatment.



FLAVORED E-CIGS ARE LINKED TO POSSIBLE CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

A laboratory study by MED researchers found that additives used to flavor e-cigarettes can damage the cells that line blood vessels and may reduce the production of nitric oxide, increasing the risk of inflammation and heart disease. The researchers noticed that when the cells that line blood vessels were exposed to flavoring additives, normally released chemicals to promote blood flow were decreased and inflammation increased, indicators of short-term toxicity.