Introduction: Finding the Boundaries of the American Midwest

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Introduction
Finding the Boundaries of the American Midwest

The founding father of Midwestern history, Frederick Jackson Turner, is popularly remembered for his essay about the influence of the frontier in American history, but his deeper interest was in the regions which developed after the frontier era passed. Writing a century ago, Turner opined that regional “self-consciousness and sensitiveness is likely to be increased as time goes on and crystallized sections feel the full influence of their geographic peculiarities.”¹ The United States was always a nation of varied regions, which is why agreeing to a national constitutional system was so difficult and maintaining it remains similarly complicated. The once-tight divisions between American regions have been eroded by post-Civil War nationalism, mass culture, and the living of seemingly placeless lives in the internet era. But regions are far from gone, as recent survey work sponsored by *Middle West Review* has revealed. Turner was right about their perpetuation. So it is wise to return to Turner’s work on regions and geography and to reverse what Michael Steiner has described as the “stock dismissal of the major portion of our most influential historian’s work.”²

In October of 2023, *Middle West Review* worked with Emerson College Polling to produce the largest ever survey of Midwestern identity. The approach was simple: ask people if they lived in the Midwest and if they considered themselves Midwesterners. In the core of the region in Iowa and Minnesota, an extraordinary 97% of people said they were living in the Midwest. In Wisconsin and Illinois, 94% did; Missouri was 95%; North Dakota 94%; Nebraska 93%; Indiana and South Dakota 92%; Kansas 91%; Michigan 86%. In a bit of a surprise, at least in comparison to the other states surveyed, only 78% of Ohioans said they were living in the Midwest. While the survey revealed that large numbers of people believed they were living in the Midwest, the number who considered themselves Midwesterners was slightly lower. While 94% of people in Wisconsin said they were living in the Midwest, for example, only 86% considered themselves Midwesterners. In Iowa, 97% of people said they lived in the Midwest but only 90% said
they were Midwesterners. The lower numbers for the latter measure can be explained by people from other regions or countries who have moved to Wisconsin and Iowa for work or perhaps by people who are alienated from Midwestern culture in some fashion.

In order to test the perception of Midwestern regional boundaries, our survey could not simply focus on the twelve traditional states of the Midwest. It needed to move into the broader Midwestern rim and survey the states which surround the Midwest in order to have cross-regional data for comparison. The results were a mixture of obvious responses in addition to some surprises of varying intensity. In the former category was Tennessee, in which only 9% of respondents said they were living in the Midwest and which offered a clear contrast to states such as Iowa and Minnesota where the number was 97%. To some diehard Volunteers, 9% might seem high, but given the fluid population of cities such as Nashville, geographical ignorance, and rounding errors and potential sampling problems the number does not seem terribly excessive. In the mildly surprising category were Pennsylvania and Arkansas. Pennsylvania was one of the original thirteen colonies and much of its history, especially in Philadelphia and its environs, is clearly Eastern. But western Pennsylvania, around Pittsburgh and close to the Ohio line, might have included a chunk of people identifying as Midwestern. This was not the case. Only 9% of Pennsylvanians saw themselves as living in the Midwest. Arkansas, bordering on deep Southern states such as Mississippi and Louisiana, could have been fully absorbed into the American South. Instead, a surprisingly elevated 27% of Arkansans said they lived in the Midwest, especially, it seems, near the Missouri border and around the Wal-Mart headquarters zone of Bentonville in the state's northwest corner. In a related and similarly mild surprise, 31% of Kentuckians said they were in the Midwest, but it should be recalled that Kentucky was first considered a Western state and then a border state so its identity is more fluid. Plus its large cities such as Louisville on the Ohio River and the powerful gravitational pull of Cincinnati on a north central salient of the state help to explain the result.

In the much more surprising category were Oklahoma and some traditionally Western states. Oklahoma clocked in at a whopping 66% Midwestern. This could be explained by the perception that the state is not very Southern oriented (despite its migration history), a weaker than expected Great Plains identity, an understandable compensation for existing next to the warping magnetic force that is Texas, and the state’s unique Native
American history. Perhaps more surprising than Oklahoma, especially for such an obviously Western state, was Wyoming, the “Cowboy State,” where a remarkable 54% of respondents said they lived in the Midwest. So did 42% of Coloradans and 30% of Montanans. The confoundingly high number of Montanans saying they lived in the Midwest sparked the interest of the *Wall Street Journal*, which dispatched reporters to figure out what was happening and, in the end, placed their resulting report on the front page of the newspaper. The *Journal* interviewed people living near the Montana-North Dakota border in the flatter, farm-oriented expanses of the Missouri River valley. These interviews included Lynn Shelmerdine, who lives in Sidney, Montana, ten miles from the North Dakota border (about an hour’s drive southwest of Williston) and insists she is in the Midwest. Shelmerdine, a retired teacher who runs the local Elks Lodge, said “it’s family, family, family and I think that’s what Midwestern people are—family comes first and working hard and providing for your family.” The manager of the county fair and rodeo grounds in Sidney, however, said that “ten miles from here it’s the Midwest, but by God, we’re in the West. I think the line is drawn at the Dakotas.” Shelmerdine responded that the West did not emerge for another hundred miles, near Billings, where the mountains begin.

 Debates such as these caused us to dive deeper. Since the Midwestern identity of places such as Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois seemed firmly settled, we decided to focus an in-depth new survey on the edges of the region. While the October 2023 poll collected responses from roughly 600 people in each of the twenty-two states surveyed, our next effort sought 2,000 responses from four edge states so that the data would be more extensive and allow for more granular analysis. This data was collected in late January of 2024. One of the four states in our second survey was Ohio, which produced surprising results in the first round. I certainly expected more than 78% of people in Ohio to say they were living in the Midwest. The second survey provided a bit of relief when a more extensive data set revealed that 87% of Ohioans thought they were in the Midwest, a result more in alignment with the traditional understanding of Ohio’s role as the first Midwestern state. The second survey also included an important wrinkle. Instead of simply asking “do you live in the Midwest?” and relying on a binary yes/no answer, we asked Ohioans “do you live in the Midwest, Appalachia, or the South?” 4% said the South and these respondents were mostly located down along the Ohio River, across from Kentucky.

 The most important bit of nuance provided by the Ohio data came in
the form of the 9% of respondents who said they lived in Appalachia. These respondents were crowded into the southeastern corner of Ohio in counties that border on West Virginia and which are shaped by rugged Appalachian hills (see cover image). This is coal country. It also was home to the large group of Scotch-Irish immigrants who gave the region a distinct culture and history. Turner pointed out that in “every state of the Union there are geographic regions, chiefly, but not exclusively, those determined by the ancient forces of geology, which divide the state into lesser sections. These subsections within the states often cross state lines and connect with like areas in neighboring states and even in different sections of the larger type.”

While Appalachia stretches across a dozen states, it includes a slice—what Turner called a “subsection”—in Southeastern Ohio that, a century after Turner advanced his theory, still clearly stood out in our polling.

Because of the media-driven debate over Montana and the surprising majoritarian Midwestern leanings of Wyoming in the first poll, we also wanted to test a state on the opposite side of the Midwest from Ohio, out on the Western periphery. We chose Colorado and instead of a binary question about the Midwest we asked Coloradans “do you live in the Midwest, the Great Plains, or the West?” With additional options to choose from, the number of Coloradans who said they lived in the Midwest dropped from 42% in the first poll to 26% in the second. A paltry 8% said they lived on the Great Plains and these respondents were mostly located in the eastern half of the state near Kansas and Nebraska. As one would expect, a strong majority of Coloradans, 65%, said they lived in the West and this percentage was strongest in the Western/Rocky Mountain parts of the state or what is known as the Western Slope. The Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick, who is interviewed about her lifetime of work studying American regions in this issue, notes the frictions between the more liberal cities of the Front Range, nestled up against the Eastern edge of the Rockies, and heavily rural and Westernized Front Range counties in the mountains. The problem, Limerick notes, is that the “agricultural counties of the Eastern Plains barely register” in these frictions and after “decades as the forgotten Coloradans, the residents of the State’s eastern plains have reason to think they’ll get better results by adopting the identity of Midwesterners.”

To get another angle on the Midwest/plains/West boundary, South Dakota was also tested in our polling. A solid 66% of South Dakotans said they lived in the Midwest, but this number was much higher in the farming-heavy Eastern section of the state which abuts the Midwest-centric
states of Iowa and Minnesota. In the center of South Dakota, mostly West of the Missouri River, could be found people who said they lived on the Great Plains. They represented 31% of respondents. One might think that the Black Hills and some ranching counties near Wyoming along with large Indian reservations and a limited amount of oil production would create some Western leanings, but these were miniscule. Only 3% of South Dakotans said they lived in the West, a finding that fit with the Midwestern tilt of Eastern Montana, or the absence of a strong Western identity there, and the beginning of a stronger Western identity where the Rockies begin in Colorado. This is to say that Lynn Shelmerdine of Sidney, Montana might be right—the real West does not begin until one hits the Rockies, at least according to many people in our recent surveys.

The last state to receive extra attention in the second poll was Missouri. In the first poll, a robust 95% of Missourians said they were Midwesterners. Believing that Missouri might be slightly more of a mixed state given its early southern migrants and proximity to the South, we re-tested Missourians. But the result was nearly identical, with 94% of Missourians saying they lived in the Midwest. In the second poll, however, we specifically asked “do you live in the Midwest or South?” A de minimis 6% chose the latter and
these respondents were concentrated in the Southeast corner of the state near Tennessee and Arkansas.

The regional identity data also breaks down the views of respondents based upon age, race, education, and party affiliation. In South Dakota, 76% of respondents in the 18–24 age bracket said they were in the Midwest while only 62% of those aged 70 and older said so. Only 18% in the younger bracket said they lived on the Great Plains while 34% of those 70 and older said so. One theory to explain this differential is that more people in the older generation had worked the land and better understood small variations in weather and precipitation between Eastern South Dakota and the central area of the state, which could make a difference between a successful farm and one that dried out. The regional difference can be traced back to the one-armed Midwesterner and Union army veteran John Wesley Powell (he lost an arm to a Minie ball at Shiloh) and the critical line between land that averages twenty inches of rain a year and land that does not, or roughly the 100th meridian, which divides South Dakota.6 Another angle on this theory is that the 18–24 age bracket includes a high number of digital natives, or young people locked into their smart phones, and less connected to space, place, and geography. Still another theory is that Midwestern identity may
be growing stronger, perhaps via messages and stories conveyed by mass media, Twitter, writers, or other avenues. Maybe there has been a bit of a recovery from the post-World War II dip in Midwestern identity, for whatever reason. A rise in the level of Midwestern identity among the young can also be detected in Colorado, where nearly 40% of 18–24 year olds see themselves living in the Midwest while only 47% identify with the West. Among respondents over 70, however, 81% see themselves as Westerners and only 11% as Midwesterners. There is an obvious age-based differential to spatial identification in South Dakota and Colorado that deserves more study, but one conclusion is clear: younger Americans in these states have a greater tendency to embrace Midwestern identity than their elders. In Missouri, on the other hand, the opposite is true: 97% of Missourians 70 or older identify as Midwestern while 87.5% of 18–24-year-olds do. In this younger group, 12.5% also identify as Southern. The same pattern applies in Ohio, where 87% of Ohioans 70 or older identify as Midwestern while 81% of respondents 18–24 do (11% of the younger cohort say they live in Appalachia).

Some racial differences in regional identification were revealed in the data but not in a form that some commentators would likely predict. In Colorado, 40% Hispanics say there are living in the Midwest while only 20% of whites believe that. 49% of Hispanics in Colorado think of themselves as Western while 72% of whites do. In Missouri, 87% of Hispanics identify as Midwestern while 96% of whites and 91% of blacks do. In South Dakota, 68% of Hispanics and 68% of whites believe they are living in the Midwest. More blacks in South Dakota, 74%, identify as Midwestern than whites, 68%. The pattern of blacks having a stronger Midwestern identity holds in other states as well. In Colorado, more blacks, 35%, identified as Midwestern than whites, 21%. In Ohio, 91% of blacks identify as Midwesterners, 3% higher than whites (the Hispanic sample, only 80 respondents, was 78% Midwestern). These numbers cut against the claims of heightened racial animus in the region advanced in recent publications and highlight the need for careful and nuanced treatments of the history of Midwestern race relations and for the recognition of important regional distinctions in such matters.7

The results viewed by education level were mixed. In Colorado, 44% of people with a high school or less level of education thought they were in the Midwest while only 20% of college graduates did. In South Dakota, 72% of people with a high school or less level of education thought they were in the
Midwest while only 62% of college graduates did. In Missouri, 92% of those with an education level of high school or less see themselves as Midwestern while 97% of college graduates do. In Ohio, 83% of those with an education level of high school or less said they were Midwestern while 94% of college graduates did.

In terms of gender, little difference was in evidence. South Dakota was the outlier with 62% of men in the state believing they are in the Midwest while 71% of women did so. But in other states there was essentially no gender difference in the data. In Colorado, 26% of men said they were in the Midwest while 27% of women did. In Missouri, 95% of men identify as Midwestern and 94% of women do. In Ohio, 88% of women saw themselves as Midwestern while 87% of men did.

The data revealed essentially no differences of opinion based upon a respondents’ political affiliation, but South Dakota was again a slight outlier. 60% of Democrats in South Dakota thought they were in the Midwest while 68% of Republicans did. In other states the differential was much smaller. In Colorado, 27% of Democrats said they were in the Midwest while 25% of Republicans did. In Missouri, 96% of Democrats said they were in the Midwest while 95% of Republicans did. In Ohio, the spread was slightly wider—90% of Democrats said they were Midwestern while 87% of Republicans did.

While the small differences in opinion linked to race, gender, education, political affiliation and other factors are interesting to ponder, it must be kept in mind that these differences are minimal. Much more important to consider is the continuing power of regionality conveyed by the data. Regional identity trumps race, class, gender and other identity markers in terms of a social factor that varies among places. Many people have a strong sense of whether they are Midwestern, Western, Southern, or Appalachian and race, class, gender, and political party do not affect those beliefs very much at all.

All this speaks to the persistent power of place as a form of identity and justifies the elevation of its study in our councils, journals, and academic conclaves. Several lines of inquiry stand out, including the width and depth of the Midwest. The higher-than-expected measures of Midwestern identity in Montana, Oklahoma, and Kentucky indicate that the region is bigger than previously assumed at least in terms of self-identification. A corollary proposition prompted by both surveys is that Great Plains identity is significantly weaker than some experts assert and that those who embrace...
this identity exist in a narrow band of counties West of the one-hundredth meridian (East of this line measures of Midwestern identity are in the 95% range). This zone of transition was first mapped by John Wesley Powell and remains an ever-ripe topic for regionalists. It should be remembered, however, that large numbers of people in this area choose to identify with the Midwest and not the Great Plains. While a deeper-than-expected meta-Midwest identity seems in evidence, we also cannot lose site of sub-regional variation, which might be a useful way of thinking about the drier Western edges of the Midwest which some experts categorize as the Great Plains. Sub-regional variation would also include the North Country, or the upper sections of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, a land of lakes, timber, mining, hockey, and fishing distinct from the corn/hog core of the Midwest. It also includes the Eastern borderlands of the Midwest, down in Southeastern Ohio where the Appalachian foothills begin near the border of West Virginia. The Midwest/Appalachia edge country has been the subject of a prominent recent debate and will be the focus of an edited volume by Kent State University Press now in the works. In all of these studies, time is a critical factor. Regions do not stand still. Many of the miners and mountaineers of Appalachia moved up into the Midwest proper, including Ohio US Senator J.D. Vance’s family, a migration which became the basis of his much-lauded and loathed book. This mid-20th century migration is what turned Akron, Ohio into the “capitol of West Virginia.” Accounting for sub-regions and change-over-time and new migration patterns will be an essential aspect of future regional studies. The power of regional identity revealed in our surveys underscores the need to widen the now-common discussions of human identity in the halls of academe and, in particular, to bring geography back in. Toward that end, we are pleased to announce that our next issue will feature a special symposium on Midwestern geography. The goal is to overcome what Michael Steiner, the great chronicler of Turner’s regional theories, has called the “stubborn spatial amnesia that still afflicts our profession.”

The geographic element and its modern variation known as environmental history, which was the theme of our last issue, should be a major focus of Midwestern studies in the coming decade. In our current issue, as we map out this future research agenda, we offer readers a chance to think about the state of our field by way of several essays which take stock of where we are. This discussion is prompted by the arrival of our tenth year. In 2014, Middle West Review first rolled off the presses with an issue that
included, appropriately enough, an article by the distinguished long-time Midwestern historian John E. Miller which focused on Frederick Jackson Turner’s efforts to promote regional history. Given the persisting intensity of regional affiliation in a fractured country where achieving a 97% level of consensus on any matter is rather stunning, it seems wise to give Turner another hearing and to dust off his old studies of American regions and make them central to our field over our next decade.

Jon K. Lauck
Editor-in-Chief

NOTES
1. Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Section in American History,” Wisconsin Magazine of History vol. 8, no. 3 (March 1925), 274.
8. See Jon K. Lauck, ed., The Interior Borderlands: Regional Identity in the Midwest and Great Plains (Sioux Falls: Center for Western Studies, 2019).