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Politics and Policy in the Western United States

Abstract: This article examines the politics and policies of the western region. To provide a clearer understanding of the region, we begin with a section on US political culture that shows the distinctions between the regions of the US as well as the nuances within the western region, particularly between the coastal and Rocky Mountain states. Building upon this understanding, we delve more deeply into the political culture of the West as it relates to public policy. Much of what is important, in terms of public policy, to the western states and its residents is tied to the land, including availability of water and the amount of federal land owned in the region. We then provide a summary of legislation passed during the 2013 legislative season. As we note, the western states grappled with many of the same policy issues that other states did last year; however, a couple of issues that are particular to the West are explored here. We conclude the article with a discussion of elections in the West.

Keywords: culture; elections; public policy; values; West; western US.

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The western region of the US is often thought of as a monolithic entity that looks altogether like Monument Valley in legacy John Wayne movies with vast open areas, sparse populations and long, dusty roads. But the West, like any other region is diverse in many aspects, including its geography. There are wide open spaces, especially in Big Sky country in the north of the region with majestic mountains topped with gleaming glaciers. In the southern part of the region are the arid, beautiful deserts, canyons, and arches cut out of red and tan sandstone. The Northwest rainforests and California coast are as picturesque as they were when settlers discovered gold in 1849. Still rugged Alaska and paradisiacal Hawaii are unique among all states. Today, there are great cities, with diverse and vibrant economies that include Silicon Valley, international trade centers, and major corporations that are the foundation of the West's modern economy.

Politically, the West is as diverse as any other region of the US and, like other regions, there are uniquely regional threads that run through the political fabric. Some neighboring states like Nevada and Utah could not be more different in some cultural aspects, but both states are very concerned about water issues

and public lands where most of the land within their boundaries is owned by the federal government. There are significant political differences between the western states. The coastal states of California, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii have voted Democrat in recent presidential elections while the Intermountain West states have voted Republican. Alaska is the exception among coastal states, consistently voting Republican, and the states of New Mexico and Colorado have voted Democratic in recent elections. Even where these interstate differences occur there are still common issues in the West related to their shared history, geography, and culture.

Politics are driven by interests and values. Political interests of the western states are formed by a complex mix of factors including geography, climate, demography, and the economies of each state. Values are formed by the history and experiences of the people who live in the unique environment of the western states. The geography and climate of the West have produced a largely arid land where water is scarce and where populations concentrate where water is more available and the land can be cultivated. The result is major cities like Denver, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Boise, and Albuquerque placed at substantial distances from each other each supporting an economic region and surrounded by lands mostly owned by the federal government. These conditions foster uniquely political interests including water development, transportation funding, and the use of public lands.

This article examines the politics and policies of the western region. To provide a clearer understanding of the region, we begin with a section on US political culture that shows the distinctions between the regions of the US as well as the nuances within the western region, particularly between the coastal and Rocky Mountain states. Building upon this understanding, we delve more deeply into the political culture of the West as it relates to public policy. Much of what is important, in terms of public policy, to the western states and its residents is tied to the land, including availability of water and the amount of federal land owned in the region. We then provide a summary of legislation passed during the 2013 legislative season. As we note, the western states grappled with many of the same policy issues that other states did last year; however, a couple of issues that are particular to the West are explored here. We conclude the article with a discussion of elections in the West.

1 Political Culture in the US

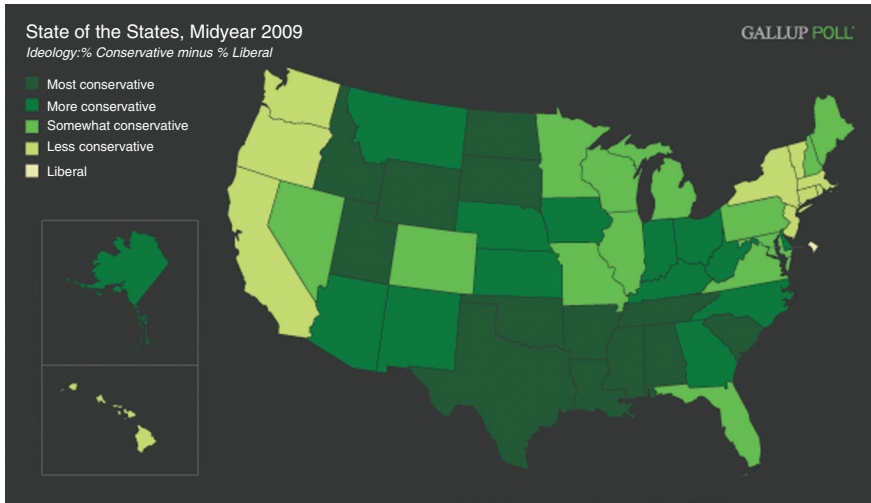
Political culture has been described as “patterns of thought and behavior that are widely held in a society and that define the relationship of citizens to their government and to each other in matters affecting politics and public affairs”

(Jillson 1999, p. 103). Patterns of thought and behavior as they relate to government have been generalized for defined geographical areas from nations to city blocks in order to understand political behavior or predict future results (Elazar 1966, 1998; Kinkaid 1982; Weakliem and Biggert 1999). For many years, scholars have demonstrated intrastate differences in political culture between regions of a single state (Key and Munger 1959; Nardulli 1989; Alm et al. 2004). Others have demonstrated a consistent political culture that crosses state boundaries to include several states or geographical regions formed from sections of different states (Elazar 1998; Thomas 1991).

Political attitudes, tolerances, and preferences vary across states and regions of the US. A Gallup survey from 2009 listed the most conservative and most liberal states describing the regional distinctions between states (Gallup 2009). As shown in the Gallup Poll map, the South and Intermountain regions are the most conservative while the Northeast and West Coast are most liberal (see Map 1). In the West, there are sharp differences between the Intermountain states and the coastal states. Three of the ten most conservative states (Utah #3, Idaho #9, and Wyoming #10) were in the Mountain West while four of the most liberal states (Oregon #4 Washington #5, California #8, and Hawaii #9) were part of the west coast region.

Two bell-weather issues, attitudes about abortion and gay marriage, also demonstrate the distinct differences between regions. A study conducted in 2012 by the Pew Research Center for the People and Press found a regional divide on the issue of abortion (Pew Research Center 2013). New England residents were the most likely to favor legalizing abortion, with 75% of survey respondents saying abortions should be legal in all or most cases. By contrast, in the South Central region only 40% of residents support the legalization of abortion. The two western regions also expressed a preference for legalizing abortion; 65% in favor in the Pacific Coast region and 59% said abortion should be legalized in the Mountain West region.¹ The study also found that the gap between regions on the abortion issue had widened since 1996. In that year, the difference between the region with the largest percent favoring legalization abortion and the region with the lowest percent was 18 points (New England 70%, South Central 52%). By 2012, that gap had opened to 35 points (New England 75%, South Central 40%).

¹ The 2012 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press grouped the states into the following eight regions: **New England** – CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT; **Pacific Coast** – AK, CA, HI, OR, WA; **Mid-Atlantic** – DC, DE, MD, NY, NJ, PA; **Mountain West** – AZ, CO, ID, MT, NM, NV, UT, WY; **Great Lakes** – IL, IN, MI, OH, WI; **South Atlantic** – FL, GA, NC, SC, VA, WV; **Midwest** – IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD; and **South Central** – AL, AR, KY, LA, MS, OK, TN, TX.



Map 1: State of the States, Midyear 2009.

A similar division between US regions has also been found regarding attitudes about gay marriage. A 2012 study on the issue of gay marriage demonstrated that the New England region and South Central region were again the furthest apart (Pew Research Center 2012). In the New England region, 62% of survey respondents supported gay marriage compared to only 35% in the South Central region. Only small majorities favored gay marriage in the two western regions; 56% in the Pacific Coast region and 51% in the Mountain West. Unlike the trend related to the abortion issue, the gap between the region with the highest favorable rating and the region with the lowest rating favoring gay marriage remained the same since 2003 while all regions saw significant increases in the percent of respondents favoring gay marriage (11% in the Mountain West region and 19% increase in the Mid-Atlantic region).

2 Western Culture and Public Policy

We do not intend to argue that the entire western region of the US expresses a common political culture as defined by progressive-conservative political ideology. There are important regional differences between states encompassing the Rocky Mountains and high deserts (Intermountain Region) and those along the Pacific coast including Alaska and Hawaii (West Coastal Region). Even within these regions there are significant interstate differences as evident by comparing the conservative state of Wyoming to its more progressive neighbor, Colorado and

intrastate political differences as residents of northern and southern California would attest. We do believe that the West as a region shares an environment and general experiences that “brings adjacent state, interstate, or even sub-state areas together because of immediate and specific common interests” (Elazar 1998, p. xix).

Several issues have particular importance in the West and have influenced the development of its culture including: demographics, federal-state relationships, water, public lands, energy and natural resource development, and the western tendency to depend on community, volunteerism and nonprofit organizations to address public issues in the new West. Each of these topics is discussed at length in the accompanying articles, but we want to emphasize here how political attitudes and the culture of the West are shaped by historical and modern influences and the environment where western culture has developed.

The population is a complex blend of Native Americans, descendants of settlers, and modern immigrants. The indigenous people experienced waves of newcomers starting with the Spanish from the south, then the Americans from the east and Asians from the Pacific Rim. Today these immigration patterns continue, significantly changing the face of the West.

Even as new populations settled in the western states, the West was shaping them. Populations adjusted to the harsh environment of much of the West. The availability of water in isolated mountain valleys typically determined where settlements could survive. Limited rainfall required irrigation and water storage. Wild rivers were tamed by communities building dams and reservoirs, but the major water projects required federal government funding. Politics have also been the result of the rich and accessible natural resources in the West. Gold in California and Alaska, silver in Nevada and Colorado, uranium and copper in Utah and Arizona, coal in Wyoming and Utah, and lumber in the coastal states of Washington, Oregon and California all brought new waves of prospectors and speculators intent on making a fortune. The West has experienced booms and busts throughout its history as the world has demanded its oil, natural gas, and coal. These cycles continue as extraction industries remain an important part of the economy of the West.

The land provided timber, energy, minerals, and crops for a developing economy, but the federal government was the landlord. Because the federal government controls the vast majority of the land in most western states, conflicts between local and state interests and the national interests of the federal government often arise. The article by Governor Andrus and Marc Johnson describes their first-hand accounts of dealings with the federal government during the Sagebrush Rebellion. The aftermath of the Sagebrush Rebellion is still heard in political circles in discussions of federal land or roads, and spills into western political attitudes regarding the role of the federal government in everything from environmental quality regulations to acceptable standards of healthcare.

It is difficult to comprehend the scale of federal lands in the western US. The state with by far the most federal land is, of course, Alaska with 244 million acres of land owned by the federal government. The entire combined area of 17 eastern and midwestern states including states the size of Virginia, Ohio and Pennsylvania could fit into just the federally-owned land in Alaska (National Wilderness Institute 1995). If Alaska is considered a special case and discounted, the western states with the next largest amount of federal land are Nevada, Utah, and Idaho. The entire state of Kansas would fit into the land owned by the federal government in Nevada with room for Delaware and Connecticut. Utah's federal lands would contain the entire state of Illinois and Idaho's federal land almost exactly equals all of the State of Florida. Because of the magnitude of federal land ownership the federal government is an important player in many policy issues in the West. The federal agencies that own land in the West illustrate the kinds of issues involved in federal-state relations. The Bureau of Land Management owns most of the land others include the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, tribal lands, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and military installations.

The multitude of factors, particularly the history of the region and its geography, has been key in the development of the western culture. It is this culture that continues to bind the region together. However, it is still necessary to recognize that there remain unique differences between the states that comprise the West, particularly related to ideology, public policy decisions, and elections.

3 Political Issues in the West

The vast majority of political issues legislated in the western states are not any different than those found in any region of the country. Issues dealing with governance, education, commerce, law enforcement, public health, human services, transportation, and corrections are common among all states. There are, however, issues that are peculiar to the West, many of which were examined fully in the other articles in this special edition of the *California Journal of Politics and Policy*. In addition to those studies, we examine bills passed during the 2013 legislative session in three western states: Arizona, Colorado, and Oregon. This offers a sample of issues with particular relevance to the West including: water rights, federalism, marijuana regulation, natural resources, firearm protection and regulation, emergency preparedness for earthquakes and tsunamis, and technology development.

Some legislation not likely found in most other states would include Arizona's SB1139, State Day of the Cowboy and Oregon's SB835, Rodeo Activities and Equine Tripping. Other bills address more serious issues of particular interest to western legislators.

3.1 Water

The importance of water in the development of the western states cannot be overstated. Historically, the availability of water for irrigation has determined the location of cities. Today, the ability of those communities to grow and prosper remains tied to water quantity and quality. Oregon addressed the issue with at least two bills, Water Rights (SB200) and Water Supply Development Account (SB839). Although Oregon's coastal area receives significant rainfall, the central and eastern part of the state is more arid like the Mountain West region. Arizona established the Arizona Water Protection Fund (SB1288) and regulated irrigation districts (SB1251) in 2013. Colorado passed water related legislation enforcing water conservation (SB13-019), regulating water supply agreements (HB13-1130) and clarifying irrigation water rights (SB 13-074).

3.2 Federalism

Federalism, as viewed in the West, is about maintaining states' rights and keeping the federal government out of the affairs of the states. But as evident in two cases, states take differing approaches to their relationship with the federal government. Arizona has a standing committee on "Federalism and Fiscal Responsibility" and passed a senate resolution calling for the rejection of unconstitutional federal actions (SCR 1016). In contrast, Colorado passed a resolution calling on Congress to adopt comprehensive immigration reform (SJM13-003).

3.3 Regulation of Marijuana

Marijuana is becoming an important issue in western states as Colorado and Washington have legalized the use of marijuana for recreational use and other states have passed precautionary bills addressing medicinal marijuana and regulation of marijuana cultivation. The Colorado legislation included: regulation of marijuana by separating commercial marijuana from hemp cultivation (SB13-241); setting standards for marijuana vendors (HB13-1061); establishing standards for inferring intoxication for driving offenses (5 nanograms of THC; HB13-1325); creating a new tax on marijuana sales (HB13-1317, HB13-1318); and setting standards for medicinal marijuana vendors (HB13-1061 and HB13-1238). Arizona set standards for medicinal marijuana research (SB1443), and county zoning for the cultivation of marijuana for medicinal use (SB1098). Oregon passed legislation allowing medicinal marijuana for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (SB281) and

regulating medicinal marijuana dispensaries (HB3460). Oregon also passed legislation lowering the penalties for marijuana possession (SB40).

3.4 Natural Resources

Natural resource regulation or promotion was the focus of legislation regarding wildlife in Oregon. Oregon addressed wildlife issues by providing for a wolf management plan (HB3452); and modifying the prohibition of the use of dogs to hunt black bears and cougars in special cases (HB 2390); and regulating bison as livestock from running at large (HB2025). In 2013, Oregon addressed mineral and geothermal rights (HB2031) and mineral mining (HB2248). Oregon also passed legislation protecting its territorial sea waters calling for mapping of its sea territory (HB2694) and requiring a territorial sea management plan (SB605).

3.5 Firearms

Firearms have played an important role in the history of the West and are still a symbol of independence and perceived “rugged individualism.” Recent irresponsible uses of firearms have motivated calls for new controls on gun ownership and availability. Colorado particularly has experienced several traumatic events related to the use of firearms and passed legislation limiting firearms in that state: HB1043 defined a deadly weapon, SB13-197 limited access to firearms for domestic violence offenders, HB1228 and HB1229 required background check for gun transfers, and HB1224 limits high-capacity ammunition magazines. In contrast to Colorado, Oregon defeated four firearm related bills that would have enabled school districts to exclude firearms from school grounds, allowed retired and off-duty law enforcement personnel to carry firearms in public buildings, required private sellers to run background checks on buyers, and required instructors be physically present at firearm training classes. Arizona passed legislation restricting local governments from acting independently to enact gun control ordinances (HB2326).

3.6 Emergency Preparedness

Emergency preparedness was a major theme during 2013 and reflects the natural hazards endemic to the western states. Wildfire is the most common natural disaster affecting all western states. Colorado passed legislation outlining a prescribed burn program to help remove accumulated forest fuel (SB13-083). The legislature

established a Wildfire Preparedness and Emergency Response Fund (SB13-20) and created the Colorado Firefighters Air Corps (SB13-245) and provided for a wildfire risk reduction grant program (SB13-269). Oregon created a forest land protection fund to help combat wildfire. Other unique natural hazards were also addressed in legislation. Oregon requires large businesses to conduct annual earthquake drills (HB 2183) and schools must conduct fire, earthquake and tsunami drills (HB2789). The state also passed legislation to set up a commission to implement recommendations for earthquake and tsunami preparedness (SB33). Oregon also passed legislation requiring oil spill planning for facilities that export crude oil (HB3103).

3.7 Technology Development

High technology development may not often be associated with western states, but a recent report by the Brookings Institute identified eight of the fifteen US high-tech centers in western states.² State legislatures in the West were active promoting high technology development in recent legislative sessions. Colorado passed the Advanced Industries Acceleration Program (HB13-1001 and HB13-1193). Oregon passed SB241, Commercialization of University-based Research to promote the transfer of research technology to commercial use.

At least one bill shows that legislators in the West have a sense of humor, HB 2352 designated a special day honoring the unofficial sister city relationship between Boring, Oregon and Dull, Scotland. The bill was titled Boring and Dull Day.

4 Red, Blue, and Purple: Elections in the West

The West, once a solidly conservative stronghold, has evolved into a more politically diverse region. The West has states – sometimes neighboring each other – that are among the most conservative states in the nation (Idaho and Utah) and the most liberal (Oregon and California). In our assessment of elections results we find that there is much variability among the states, much of which can be attributed to differences between urban and rural areas.

² The Brookings Report: High Tech Specialization: A Comparison of High Technology Centers identified Atlanta, Austin, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Minneapolis, Phoenix, Portland, Raleigh, Sacramento, Salt Lake City, San Diego, San Jose, Seattle, and Washington, DC as the 15 high-tech centers in the US.

To begin with, we examine presidential election outcomes between 1992 and 2012 for each of the western states. The results show that the majority of the western states have consistently voted for one party or the other for more than two decades (see Table 1). California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington have voted for the Democratic candidate in each presidential election since 1992. All of these states are along the west coast. New Mexico has been fairly consistent in its support of Democratic presidential candidates as well during this same period, with the exception of voting for George W. Bush in 2004. In contrast, Alaska, Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming have been fairly consistent supporters of the Republican candidate during this same time period. Two states, Colorado and Nevada have been swing states in the region for the past two decades.

State level politics also illustrates the variability of political preferences in the swing states (see Table 2). The state of Montana has voted for Republican candidates for president since 1996; however, they have recently elected several Democratic governors. Brian Schweitzer held office from 2005 to 2013 when Steve Bullock, another Democrat, took office. Colorado elected Republican Bill Owens as Governor in 1998 and he held the position until January 2007. However, since 2008, the position has been held by Democrats. Democrats currently have control of the state legislature, yet by very narrow margins after the recall of two democratic state senators, John Morse and Angela Giron in 2013. This has created a narrow majority in the Senate (18 Democrats and 17 Republican). The House also has respectable numbers from both parties (37 Democrats and 28 Republicans).

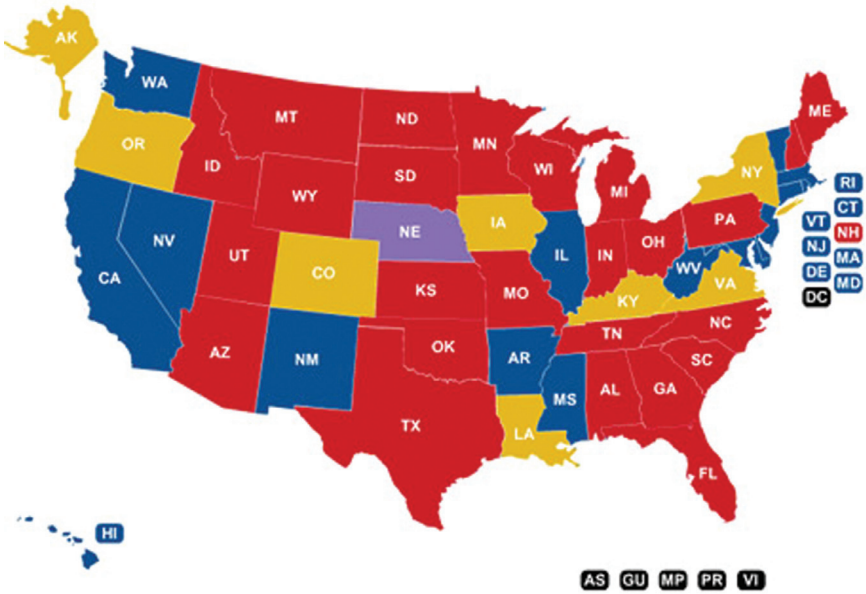
Political party control of state legislatures also shows the nearly bipolar alignment of west coast and intermountain states – and the divide appears to be widening. Map 2 (2011) shows how the west coast states are dominated by Democratic affiliated state legislators except in Alaska and Oregon where control of the legislature was split between political parties. Conversely, the legislatures of the Intermountain states are controlled by Republican legislators except for Colorado (split control) and New Mexico (Democratically controlled). Map 3 (2013) illustrates the same pattern of party control of state legislatures between sub regions in the West except there are no longer split legislatures. Coastal states, except Alaska, are controlled by Democrat legislators and the Intermountain region controlled by Republicans, except for Colorado and New Mexico. These outlying states within sub regions can be explained by another phenomenon in the West, the growth and cultural change in its cities.

The West has become more liberal as shown in presidential, gubernatorial and legislative elections. An analysis of the 2012 presidential election results at the county level shows Republican (red) and Democrat (blue) election outcomes in greater detail. As illustrated in Map 4 (2012), an inland sea of red dominates the West in all states except in urban areas. This is particularly evident along the coastline of the western-most states. Solid blue islands can be collocated with Seattle,

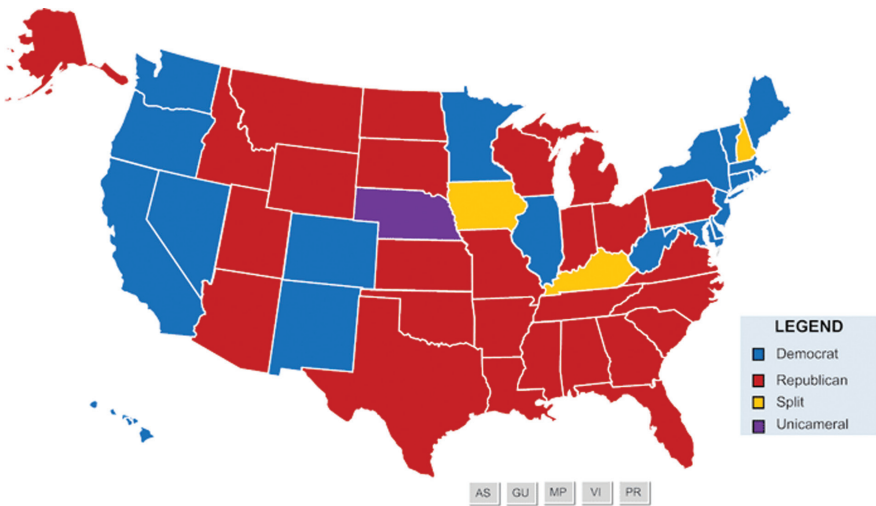
Table 1: Presidential Election Results in the West.

State	2012 Presidential Election	2008 Presidential Election	2004 Presidential Election	2000 Presidential Election	1996 Presidential Election	1992 Presidential Election
Alaska	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican
Arizona	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Democrat	Republican
California	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Colorado	Democrat	Democrat	Republican	Republican	Republican	Democrat
Hawaii	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Idaho	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican
Montana	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Democrat
Nevada	Democrat	Democrat	Republican	Republican	Democrat	Democrat
New Mexico	Democrat	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Oregon	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Utah	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican
Washington	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Wyoming	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican	Republican

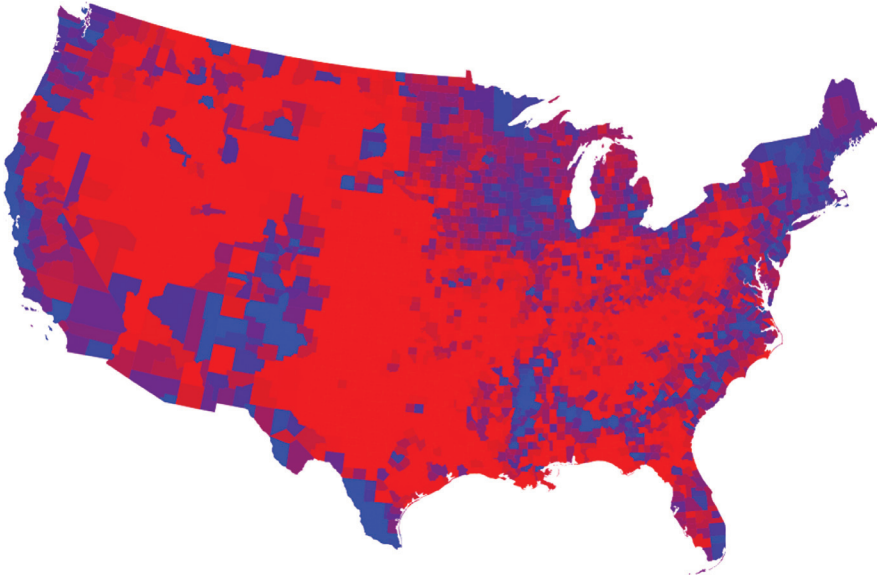
Source: US Electoral College 2013.



Map 2: 2011 State Legislative Party Control.
 Source: National Conference of State Legislatures.
 Note: Red=Republican; Blue=Democrat; Yellow=Split/nonpartisan.



Map 3: 2013 State Legislative Party Control.
 Source: National Conference of State Legislatures 2013.



Map 4: County-level Map of 2012 Presidential Election Results.

Source: Newman 2012.

Table 2: Party Affiliation of Western Governors, 2014.

State	Governor	Political Party
Alaska	Sean Parnell	Republican
Arizona	Jan Brewer	Republican
California	Jerry Brown	Democrat
Colorado	John Hickenlooper	Democrat
Hawaii	Neil Abercrombie	Democrat
Idaho	C.L. Otter	Republican
Montana	Steve Bullock	Democrat
Nevada	Brian Sandoval	Republican
New Mexico	Susana Martinez	Republican
Oregon	John Kitzhaber	Democrat
Utah	Gary Herbert	Republican
Washington	Jay Inslee	Democrat
Wyoming	Matthew Mead	Republican

Source: National Governors' Association 2013. Found at: <http://www.nga.org/cms/governors/bios>.

Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego. While the coastline is dominated by blue, the eastern portions of these states maintain a preference for the Republican Party. Moving inland, the cities of Denver and Albuquerque and Santa Fe are readily identified. Even in the Utah, the third most conservative state in the country, Salt Lake City voted Democratic in the most recent presidential election and is represented by predominantly Democratic legislators. As the populations of major cities have grown in the West, the more liberal preferences of new urban residents have gradually overwhelmed the traditional conservative politics of the West.

5 Conclusion

Every region of the US has unique characteristics and qualities that distinguish it in terms of culture, geography, economy, and politics. The West is the largest region and includes lands that are majestic yet diverse. Its people are also ethnically and culturally diverse representing a dynamic history of migrations and social transformation. The caricature of the West as the rugged cowboy or pioneer still persists in places, but the West today can be more fairly characterized as high technology cities dispersed among a scenic, expansive frontier. Politically, the West is also diverse. Some of the western states come out politically red and some blue in national or statewide elections, but the diversity can be more clearly seen in the differences between the more progressive city populations and conservative countryside.

The western states deal with issues common to all states but because of the particular circumstances of geography, climate, and history there are also many issues unique to the West. Water is of greatest concern to the continued prosperity of western states as it is the lifeblood of the West. Public land use and the related relationship with the federal government is a uniquely western issue that has practical and ideological implications. The dry climate and rugged terrain also present natural disasters of wildfire, earthquakes and tsunamis not experienced in other regions of the country to the degree they are present in the West. There are probably more similarities between regions of the US than there are differences but there are important characteristics that shape a unique political culture that will continue to influence politics into the foreseeable future.

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