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Stofferahn: Do Rural North Dakotans Have a Negative Mindset?

Research Notes

Do Rural North Dakotans Have A Negative Mindset?¹

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Introduction

North Dakota residents experienced two memorable events in 1989: the centennial anniversary of statehood and an agonizing debate about the economic future of the state. It was not incidental that these two events were coincident. As we celebrated our past, we also looked into the future. But as we looked into that future, some residents concluded that the future was none too bright.

Indeed, the title of the Vision 2000 Committee's widely disseminated summary report was "Is North Dakota Dying? Will We Stand By and Watch?". Studies commissioned by the Vision 2000 Committee concluded that a major obstacle to the state's economic development was the resident's negative mindset. The purpose of this paper is to assess whether the rural residents of the state exhibit that negative mindset.

Negative

As North Dakotans met in some 40 town hall meetings to discuss the future of the state, they engaged in an agonizing analysis of prospects for the future if present trends continued. What they saw, they did not like. The

Mindset?

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Cordell Fontaine, and Lonny Borgerson, respectively Assistant Director and Graduate Research Assistant in the Social Science Research Institute. They helped in the design of the survey instrument and the collection and analysis of the data.

trends, were nothing new to most North Dakotans: a declining and aging rural population; outmigration; declining employment growth; a boom-and-bust economy dependent upon agriculture and energy; dependence on federal subsidies to agriculture and defense.

Studies commissioned by the Vision 2000 committee found that North Dakotans generally agreed that the economy was headed in the wrong direction, and felt the solutions for turning it around were beyond their control (ND 2000 Committee, 1989; Lyman et al., 1989). They view the state as "just hanging on" and of having an economy that will never be anything but boom or bust. These studies concluded that one of the state's biggest obstacles for turning around the economy was North Dakotan's negative, self-defeating attitudes about their economy. Most do not view their state as an entrepreneurial state. This negative mindset and accompanying poor self-image was seen as a major detriment to competition in the global economy.

The question which the Vision 2000 writers did not address is whether this negative mindset is the result of faulty attitudes or if it is a realistic response to an objective condition - that of the insecurity associated with internal colonial status.

Faulty Attitudes

The Vision 2000's attribution of the causes of North Dakota's lack of economic progress is reminiscent of social psychological theories of modernization, now largely discredited, that prevailed in the 1960's. For social psychological theorists, the desire to achieve was seen as the crucial or determinant factor of development. For example, McClelland (1961) and Hagen (1962) claimed that the level of achievement in a society was expressed in terms of the level of innovation and entrepreneurship. In traditional cultures, both are at a very low level. Economic constraints or limitations could be overcome if individual entrepreneurs had a sufficiently high motivation to do well.

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Lack of development, according to these social psychological theories of modernization, is the "fault" of the state's socioeconomic systems that "create obstacles to modernization and encourage little ambition or incentive among individuals, particularly in their work: they tend to have little interest in commercial production and rationally planned long-term enterprise being content to work only as long as they need to satisfy their immediate demands (Webster, 1984: 55)²

Response to an Objective Condition?

One might consider these conclusions a case of victim blaming: perceived powerlessness may be an accurate reflection of North Dakota's position as an internal colony whose fortunes are determined by corporate and governmental decisions beyond its control. In this case, North Dakotan's "negative mindset" or conservatism may reflect their relative insecurity to fluctuations in income and their exploitation by political and social systems that make their existence so precarious. This conservatism may reflect their attempt to establish some continuity and order in these precarious circumstances (Webster, 1984).

North Dakota has been a classic example of internal dependence since before statehood. The internal dependency perspective asserts that it benefits the metropolitan centers for satellite areas to remain "underdeveloped" (Lovejoy and Krannich, 1980). Rural areas are maintained as dependent satellite areas because economic and political power is concentrated in metropolitan areas. According to this perspective, satellite status is instigated, encouraged, and if necessary forced by the dominant metropolitan centers.

² I will not attempt a critique of social psychological theories of modernization here. These critiques can be found in Webster (1984).

Metropolitan areas encourage the development of a monoecconomy in the satellite rural areas. These areas dominate the internal relations in rural areas while draining off any and all profit generated in the production process. Draining away this profit from rural to metropolitan areas leads to greater economic develop in the later While leaving the satellite rural area in a perpetual state of underdevelopment.

Historically, North Dakota has played the role of an internal Colony to the commercial center of Minneapolis "Wheat produced the wealth of North Dakota and the Twin Cities, the chief market for that product, were inevitably the political and economic nerve center of the state -- the headqu5 of its railroads grain elevators, and banks, as well as the residence of its most influential political leader' (Robinson, 1966:217) North Dakota's economic activity primarily consists of Producing the raw materials for others to refine. Unfortunately Outside forces determine the price for these products to the disadvantage of the North Dakota producer

The state's foremost historian, El'Robinson (1966) asked how these Conditions of existence have influenced North Dakotans' character. Among the Conditions of existence Which have influenced the character of North Dakotan's he identifies cycles of emotionalism experienced as cycles of elation and depression associated with the boom - and- bust nature of existence on the Great Plains. While the cycles of elation and depression were periodic, he identifies other more persistent emotions of which the predominant were feelings of inferiority and dependence Robinson identified these feelings of inferiority and dependence as being "solidly based Upon North Dakota's status as a rural, sparsely settled semiarid plains and prairie state, a colonial hinterland exploited by and dependent upon Outside centers of trade, manufacturing, and culture" (1966: 552).

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Methodology

The North Dakota Rural Life Poll, a project of the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI), was begun in 1989. Questions for the poll were submitted by the Centennial Rural Life Poll Advisory Committee which was composed of those agencies, organizations and offices which provided support for the project. Two separate samples were initially chosen for the poll. Farm operators were randomly chosen from county lists of farm operators enrolled with the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. Small town residents were randomly selected from telephone directories from all counties in the state except for the urban counties of Grand Forks, Cass, Burleigh, Morton, and Ward. When selecting small town residents for the sample, those names with a rural route address were excluded to avoid including farm and nonfarm rural residents in the small town sample.

The survey was sent May 24, 1990 to 1513 farm and 1513 nonfarm residents. A postcard reminder was mailed to all nonrespondents on June 8. On June 21 a replacement survey was sent to 1450 nonrespondents. Of the 3026 surveys mailed out, 1288 were returned completed and 125 were nonparticipants. The overall response rate was 44.4 percent.³

³ The mailed survey followed the procedures recommended by Don Dillman in Total Design Method. While a 44 percent response rate is considered to be low, it does not in any way diminish the significance of the findings. Unless the respondents to the survey differ in any significant way from the non-respondents, then survey results can be assumed to be generalizable to the whole population from which the sample was drawn. Our comparison of the demographic characteristics of the respondents to known population characteristics makes us relatively comfortable in saying that our rural respondents do not differ significantly from the rural population. Based upon the percentages reported and the procedures used, it is estimated that the results are correct within two percent. This means that the percentages reported could be expected to vary no more than two percentage points from the actual figures.

Analysis

Multiple classification analysis, a form of analysis of variance, was used to test for significant differences by residence and geographic area. Multiple classification analysis produces a grand mean of a continuous or interval level dependent variable or variable which assumes an underlying scale and a table of category means for each factor expressed as deviations from the grand mean. The category means expressed as deviations convey the magnitude of the effect of each category within a factor (Andrews et al., 1973).

The data was analyzed for significant differences by residence and by geographic region. For residence, respondents were separated into their respective samples - farm operators and small town residents. For geographic region, Wills' (1972: 116) determination of the three major physical areas of the state was used. These areas are the Red River Valley, the Drift Prairie, and the Missouri Plateau. Robinson (1966:558-559) noted that the values and politics of the people of North Dakota vary by their geographic region. This assumption is also part of North Dakota's conventional political wisdom. Implicit in his observation is an ecological or geographical hypothesis: that the natural environment influences a people's behavior, values, and politics. Research in the upper Great Plains (Lundberg, 1927; Lipset, 1950) and the Midwest (Stofferahn and Korsching, 1986) has supported this hypothesis.

Negative Mindset?

Data from the poll supports the existence of a negative mindset but attributes the cause not to individuals' attitudes but to the locus of decision making. A majority (56 percent) of the respondents to the poll do not believe that they can change the economy because economic decisions that affect them are beyond their control. Other data from the poll suggest this belief is rooted in rural North Dakotans' historic distrust of out-of-state corporations: majorities believed that out-of-state corporations benefit owners at the

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expense of ND workers, consumers, farmers and ranchers (57 percent); and that out-of-state corporation executives think of rural North Dakota as a source of cheap labor (58 percent) or as a source of inexpensive raw materials (60 percent). But rural residents were relatively undecided regarding whether North Dakota will always be exploited by out-of-state corporations (39 percent agreed) or whether out-of-state corporations do not have too much power (35 percent disagreed).

Politicians who profess support for progressive income taxes should take heart in the answers to two questions from the poll. Fifty nine percent agreed the richer were getting richer while the poor were getting poorer, and fifty six percent disagreed that out-of-state corporations and the rich do pay their fair share of North Dakota income taxes. This 'negative mind-set' and perceptions of exploitation and inequality appear to be generally accepted across the state because no significant differences were found by geographic region or residence for these questions.

The responses to these questions were recoded and summed to arrive at an overall measure of economic exploitation and inequality. The higher the score, the greater the perception of exploitation and inequality. The range for this overall measure was five to forty five with twenty five as the midpoint. The average score was 26 which is close to the midpoint which would indicate that overall rural North Dakotans' views are not too extreme. No significant differences were found by region or residence in the overall score.

Summary and Conclusions

Data from the poll supports the existence of a negative mindset but attributes the cause not to individuals' faulty attitudes but to the lack of power that individuals feel about economic decisions that affect them. This negative mindset may be a subjective appraisal of an objective condition. Rural North Dakotans may have assessed their situation as residents of an internal colony

whose fortunes are determined by corporate and governmental decisions beyond its control. In this case, their "negative mindset" may reflect their relative insecurity to fluctuations in income and their exploitation by political and social systems that make their existence so precarious. This negative mindset may be a reflection of their attempt to establish some continuity and order in these precarious circumstances. Rural North Dakotans' self defeating attitudes about their economy may be an accurate assessment of their ability as individual entrepreneurs to compete in an economy where so many factors that condition their success are beyond their control.

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