

## **NOTES AND EXCHANGES**

## The Early Nationalization of Political News In America

When Alexis de Tocqueville toured America in the 1830s, he found Washington occupying a lowly position in the political life of the country. In a footnote, *Democracy in America* informs the European reader, "America has no great capital city where direct or indirect influence is felt over the whole extent of the country."<sup>1</sup> Throughout the book, he expands on the effects of this decentralization. And we may fairly suspect that as much as any other, this observation led de Tocqueville to concentrate his inquiry on the performance of democracy in communities across the country.

De Tocqueville's antebellum report on the state of public life in Amer-

The research reported here was presented in part in papers delivered at the 1983 Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association and at the 1984 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. Some of the findings were also presented to fellow members of the History of Congress Seminar in 1983. Consequently, I have benefited from more than the usual complement of advice. Much of it I have heeded. I wish especially to thank the following people who helped me improve upon the earlier efforts: Ballard Campbell, whose incisive remarks prompted me to return to the *Annals of Cleveland* to add to my data three years without national elections, 1835, 1845, and 1855; Nelson W. Polsby, who advised me to back up the Cleveland findings with a sample of stories from the *Hartford Daily Courant*; Del Powell, who coded the data with unfailing diligence and care; and Anita Schiller, who discovered and pointed me to the *Annals* and thereby made a systematic study of fifty years of nineteenth-century news reporting a feasible enterprise. I also wish to thank Gary C. Jacobson and Michael Robinson for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, ed. T. P. Mayer (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969), 278.

ica stands in stark contrast to that portrayed in a quite different book, a novel similarly entitled *Democracy*, written anonymously by Henry Adams half a century later. Describing a primal urge that prompts his heroine to abandon the fashionable but dull New York society in favor of the federal city, Adams writes: "What she wished to see, she thought, was the clash of interests, the interests of forty millions of people and a whole continent, centering at Washington; guided, restrained, controlled, or unrestrained and uncontrollable, by men of ordinary mould; the tremendous forces of government, and the machinery of society at work. What she wanted was Power."<sup>2</sup> Clearly, between de Tocqueville's and Adams's *Democracy*, Washington's status had undergone a profound improvement. The city, so desolate early on that one 1820s politician described life there as "splendid torment," was by the century's end fast becoming the political center of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

Recently historians and other students of America's political development have turned their attention to the emergence of a national political community during the late nineteenth century. Whether one approaches the subject by studying the rising demands for federal action, the improving capacity of the federal government to respond, or the policy responses to these demands, the story is much the same. Demands took various forms, from veterans' protest marches in the city to the arrival of a new class of Washington actor, the professional lobbyist.<sup>4</sup> And with increasing frequency, the government responded to these appeals. However deficient its mandate, the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 established a foothold for government regulation of the economy. It was matched by other landmark legislation such as the Pendleton Act of 1883 and the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. Expanding federal expenditures during the 1880s and 1890s also give evidence to the gradual but persistent expansion of federal responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the nationalization of political life shows up in the steadily improving organizational capacity of the federal government. New agencies were formed; old ones were given new mandates; and all became increasingly subject to the standards of the civil service. Even Con-

2. Henry Adams, *Democracy, An American Novel* (New York: Harmony Books, 1981), 10.

3. James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community: 1800–1828* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), chap. 3, esp. 49–64.

4. For the emergence of the professional lobbyist during this era, see Margaret S. Thompson, *The Spider Web: Congress and Lobbying in the Age of Grant* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), and David J. Rothman, *Politics and Power: The United States Senate, 1896–1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966).

5. Morton Keller, *Affairs of State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977).

gress adapted impressively to its growing responsibilities by elaborating committee and subcommittee jurisdictions, evolving a mobility system based on seniority that encouraged specialization and expertise, and streamlining its heretofore cumbersome floor procedures.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars telling various aspects of this story have found the year 1877 a convenient departure point. As America under the Constitution embarked on its second century, national political institutions began their ascent. More significantly, Reconstruction and the hegemony of Radical Republicans ended with the election of Rutherford B. Hayes, clearing the way for new issues to enter the national agenda. And finally, by 1877 the forces reworking America into a highly urban, industrial nation were fast becoming evident, even to contemporaries.

In this essay, I am less interested in retracing the critical developments that elevated Washington to the nation's political center than in considering whether a story that begins in the late 1870s adequately captures the pattern of national political development. Even as dramatic change began to unfold toward century's end, one can find on closer inspection aspects of this process that were well under way, albeit perhaps at a more leisurely pace, earlier in the century. According to this view, the emphasis on quick-paced, late-century development fails to appreciate the great distance traversed over the nineteenth century toward these culminating steps of modernization.<sup>7</sup>

Consider the stark backdrop of American society at midcentury depicted by Robert H. Wiebe as the country enters the 1880s.

Small-town life was America's norm in the mid-seventies. . . . However much they actually relied upon the outside world, they still managed to retain the sense of living largely to themselves. With farms generally fanning around them, these communities moved by the rhythms of agriculture: the pace of the sun's day, the working and watching of the crop months, the cycle of the seasons. Relatively few families lived so far from town that they did not gravitate to some degree into its circle, and there people at least thought they knew all about each other after crossing and recrossing paths over the years. Usually homogeneous, usually Protestant, they enjoyed an inner stability that the coming and going of members seldom shook.<sup>8</sup>

6. Nelson W. Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review* 62 (March 1968): 144-68; and H. Douglas Price, "The Congressional Career—Then and Now," in *Congressional Behavior*, ed. Nelson W. Polsby (New York: Random House, 1971), 14-27.

7. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 2.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28. For an endorsement of this view see Richard L. McCormick, "The Party Period and Public Policy: An Exploratory Hypothesis," *Journal of American History* 66 (September 1979): 293.

National affairs, this imagery suggests, failed to engage members of these "island" communities, except perhaps as a periodic form of entertainment. Wiebe continues:

Partisanship . . . grew out of lives narrowly circumscribed by a community or neighborhood. For those who considered the next town or the next city block alien territory, such refined, deeply felt loyalties served both as a defense against outsiders and as a means of identification within. Appropriately, the only operations of government that roused the same emotions were local ones. Here the struggles over ordinances and appropriations, over what clique or ethnic group held which offices, merely extended the involvements they were expressing through partisanship. But as the process moved beyond their community, interest dwindled rapidly. To the degree that they could still find parochial relevance in state and national affairs, they remained alert. Yet at best that meant haphazard attention and for many none at all.

Wiebe's cracker-barrel America entering the 1880s does not appear much different from that discovered by de Tocqueville four decades earlier. It offers a compelling image of society and polity resting in a functional harmony quite at odds with the reconstituted nation that would emerge by the end of Wiebe's story.

Others who have studied the nationalizing tendencies of American politics during this era have sounded a similar theme. On discovering that congressional elections around the country began to follow national trends near the turn of the century, Donald Stokes places these emerging trends against a small-town backdrop similar to the one depicted by Wiebe:

In many ways . . . these historical series can be linked to more general processes of nationalization in American society. Probably one of the most important has to do with the changing structure of mass communications. In all eras of our politics, those contesting the congressional seat have had to compete for the attention of their electors. The quest for the voter's interest in the congressional district has never been easy, but in a day when the dissemination of news was controlled by local editors, abetted by the face-to-face communication networks of the American small town, it may have been a good deal easier.<sup>9</sup>

In these and other accounts of the premodern era, the community's lack of awareness or interest in events beyond its borders has been identified as a critical, even defining, feature of its insular character. If, in fact, community members were well-informed about politics in state and

9. Donald E. Stokes, "Parties and the Nationalization of Electoral Forces," in *The American Party Systems*, ed. Walter Nisbet Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 196–97.

nation, the rationale for the inwardness attributed to the American community would be seriously compromised. In this article, we shall examine evidence that, in fact, raises serious questions about the insularity of America's hinterland communities at midcentury. After examining the growth in the volume of national news during the "premodern" era, I shall suggest how the finding of the early nationalization of the news can be squared with the "island" image of American society.

In addressing the changing character of political information in America for over half a century, one necessarily brings limited data to bear on a large subject. Moreover, we are entering a research field where method weighs heavily upon the results. We begin, then, by examining the strengths and limitations of our data and method.

#### DATA AND METHOD

Assessing the relative volume of national, state, and local politics in newspapers during the middle decades of the nineteenth century poses formidable problems for content analysis. Unlike most other research topics that involve examination of newspapers, it does not suffice here to inspect just headlines or even first-page stories. In an era in which the format of the paper as much as its content might vary greatly from one editor to the next, we cannot assume that the front page will adequately reveal the content of the paper. Clearly, in analyzing the distribution of political news across levels of government, we must assess the entire paper.

There is another thorny problem that concerns a newspaper's representativeness. Up to the mid-1850s, before wire services began sending standardized news to subscriber papers throughout the country and before more than a handful of papers had correspondents in Washington, the distribution of national, state, and local coverage, one suspects, might vary substantially from one newspaper to the next depending upon the sporadic availability of national stories and the editor's diligence in rooting out such stories to reprint from other newspapers. Given the haphazard nature of news collection prior to the 1850s, no one paper can be assumed to represent the industry. Obviously, generalizable findings necessitate an examination of a variety of papers. In sum, the ideal research design for studying the emerging newsworthiness of the national government involves the exhaustive analysis of numerous papers over a substantial time period. To the extent that the data presented below fall short of these exacting requirements, the findings should be taken as suggestive rather than definitive.

Thanks to a remarkable resource, the *Annals of Cleveland*, the data

reported below satisfy the criteria of exhaustively representing the day's news.<sup>10</sup> The *Annals* is a multivolume collection of newspaper synopses published by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. During the Depression, Ohio's division of the WPA undertook several large-scale archival projects to preserve information about various aspects of daily life of Cleveland, "a typical midwestern city." Among other activities, WPA teams composed of unemployed schoolteachers, clerks, and newspaper editors were directed by historians at Western Reserve University to catalogue court records, compile directories of local public officials, and produce summaries of local English and foreign-language

Table 1. The Configuration of Elections and Data

Year	Election Type <sup>a</sup>	Number of Articles	Column Inches
1820	P,C,S	43	320
1830	C,S	73	490
1835	—	134	871
1840	P,C,S	164	1,123
1845	—	232	1,688
1850	C,S	693	8,252
1855	S	289	2,854
1860	P,C,S	765	5,861
1870	C	419 <sup>b</sup>	2,860 <sup>b</sup>
1876	P,C	523 <sup>b</sup>	3,718 <sup>b</sup>
		(N = 3,335)	(N = 28,037)

<sup>a</sup>P = Presidential; C = Congressional; S = State.

<sup>b</sup>These numbers represent ½ of total entries for 1870 and ⅓ for 1876.

newspapers. The *Annals of Cleveland* began with the goal of summarizing every story published in each daily paper for the years 1818 to 1933. For unknown reasons the project was abandoned with the completion of the 1876 volume. Nonetheless, the researchers managed to summarize and classify, from 1818 through 1876, every story in each day's issue of the newspaper that currently enjoyed the largest circulation. (See the appendix for a description of these papers and a fuller discussion of the methodological issues raised below.) In addition to a detailed summary of each news story, editorial, advertisement, and announcement, the *Annals* classifies each article by type (for example, advertisement) and identifies its location in the paper and length in column inches.

10. Works Progress Administration of Ohio, *Annals of Cleveland, 1818–[1876]* (Cleveland: WPA of Ohio, District Four, 1936–39).

Ten different years over the fifty-seven-year period were selected for the present analysis. As shown in table 1, these years provide a variety of electoral settings at different levels of government. All of a year's entries were coded except for 1870 and 1876, for which half and a fifth of the political stories, respectively, were sampled. In sum, the data set includes 3,335 articles consuming 28,037 column inches of newspaper space.

Not to ignore the issue of generalizability altogether, I also coded by level of government a limited sample of issues of the *Hartford Daily Courant* from 1840 to 1876.<sup>11</sup> The results of this supplementary analysis are reported below.

Coding these stories on the dimensions reported below was not always easy. Reflecting an editor's need to fill space, stories would sometimes meander over topics of the day with little apparent concern with some future historian's efforts to classify them by subject, level of government, or some other criterion. Throughout the analysis, I have taken a conservative approach of assigning borderline entries to their lowest appropriate governmental level. Given the federal character of the party system, this issue arose most frequently on election-related stories. When, for example, local politicians and organizations conducted their party's presidential campaign, as typically occurred, the central actor in such news stories would frequently be a local politician, while the subject and any issues reported on were national. Following the above procedure, such stories were generally classified as local.

## THE FINDINGS

According to the thesis of late development, political coverage during the "premodern" era of 1820 to 1876 should have heavily favored local over state and national affairs. In figure 1, however, we find little evidence of this. Even as early as the 1830s when Cleveland was little more than an outlying hamlet of a thousand inhabitants, national politics occupied a sizable share of political news reported in the leading local paper.<sup>12</sup> Whether measured by the number of articles or by column inches,

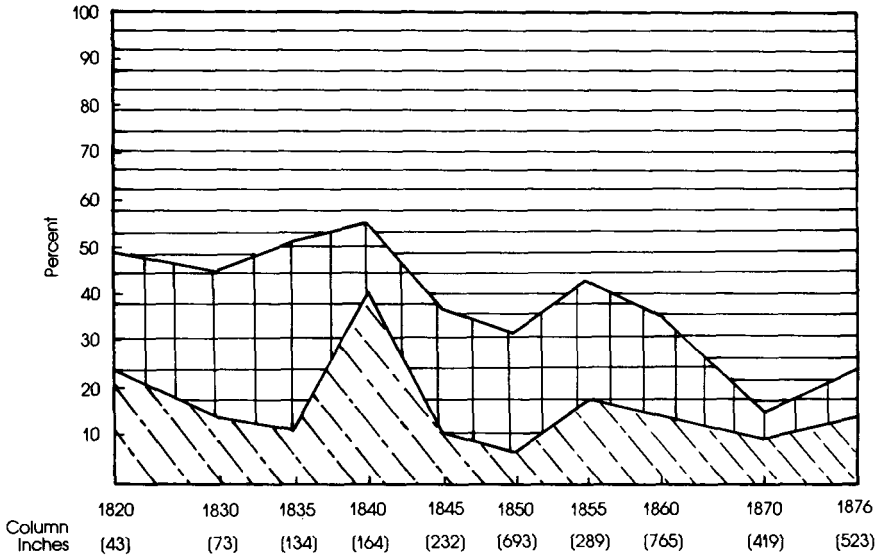
11. The first weeks of April, July, and September were arbitrarily selected for content analysis. Well into the analysis we discovered that the Connecticut legislature adjourned during the last week of June in 1855 and 1860 and some of its new laws were published verbatim, without news or commentary, in the *Daily Courant*; since we did not find similar transcripts in subsequent weeks' papers, these entries were omitted from the percentages.

12. Over the time frame of this study Cleveland grew from a town of 150 individuals to a leading industrial center of 140,000. The following decennial population estimates are taken from Edmund H. Chapman, *Cleveland: Village to Metropolis* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University, 1964): 1820, 150; 1830, 1,075; 1840, 6,071; 1850, 17,034; 1860, 43,417; 1870, 92,829; 1880, 140,000.





a. Number of Articles



b. Column Inches

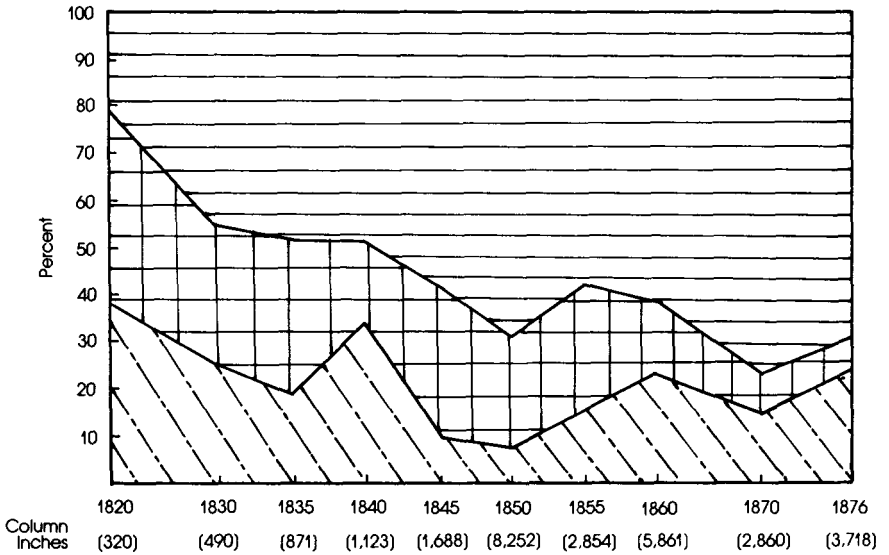


Figure 1. Political Coverage by Level of Government

national stories began to dominate Cleveland's political news in 1860. By 1870, four of every five stories concerned national politics.

From these figures we can also discern which level—state or local—suffered the greatest relative losses in coverage with the growth of national news. Except for 1840, for reasons noted below, local news experienced greater displacement prior to 1855, at which time state news began to diminish sharply relative to national and even local news. By the 1870s, state politics in Ohio was consuming barely 10 percent of all political coverage.

Sampled issues of the *Hartford Daily Courant*, by comparison, exhibit a significantly stronger emphasis on national news during the 1840s, re-

Table 2. Political Coverage in the *Hartford Daily Courant* by Level of Government (Percentage of Column Inches)

Years	Local	State	National	(N)
1840	1%	2%	97%	(546)
1845	2	21	77	(71)
1850	4	37	59	(376)
1855	38	13	49	(301)
1860	18	39	43	(938)
1870	11	42	47	(922)
1876	4	30	66	(1,299)

flecting that paper's preoccupation with national party politics. Consequently, while national politics continued to receive prominent coverage over the next thirty years, one does not find in table 2 the pronounced trend toward nationalization found in the Ohio data. In 1855, as with the Cleveland papers, local news in the *Hartford Daily Courant* began to recover space at the expense of state reporting.

How does one reconcile the clear dominance of national news with the earlier stated view that "interest dwindled rapidly" as the political process moved beyond the community? It is altogether possible, of course, that local newspapers of the day poorly reflected community sentiment. Prior to the Civil War, many papers throughout the country were little more than organs of political parties.<sup>13</sup> Established and funded by party organizations, these papers viewed readers more as voters to be mobi-

13. That newspapers would be founded as much out of party as business considerations is not limited to the early nineteenth century. Joe Martin, Republican House minority leader during the 1950s, had his political beginnings as editor of a newspaper financed by local Republicans in order to promote their candidates. See Joe Martin, *My First Fifty Years in Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960).

lized than as subscribers whose reading preferences were to be satisfied. Richard L. Rubin argues the case for the partisan inspiration of early press coverage of national affairs:

The overall extension of newspaper distribution, the evolution of a new style of political journalism, and the tight organizational links between press and party, all served to expand the potential reach of the president by permitting broad mobilization of relatively inert citizens into partisan voters. The symbiotic relationship of press, party, and president activated the American population at large, filtering an aroused public opinion through two mediating parties, and firmly institutionalizing popular democracy for the first time in any nation. A newly enlarged decisive public was mobilized, a new scale of political conflict was established, and a new kind of electoral connection was made.<sup>14</sup>

Not uncommonly, towns whose subscription levels could barely support a single paper would enjoy two or three papers campaigning fiercely for their party's advantage. In this respect Cleveland was no exception. During the mid-1820s, in preparation for Andrew Jackson's candidacy, Ohio experienced a profusion of newspapers.<sup>15</sup> Even later, after new production technology in the 1840s ushered in the penny press, a newspaper driven more by circulation than politics, the partisan leanings of a paper generally remained well known.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the national orientation of the early party press established a norm of national reporting that carried over to the more market-oriented penny press.

Although the inspiration of partisanship remains a distinct possibility, a closer examination of the content of news stories suggests that the early national thrust of coverage reflected more than the rantings of party organs. If it were primarily partisanship, for example, we should find national news heavily skewed toward elections, and national political coverage picking up sharply as the presidential election neared. By contrast, news coverage of routine affairs of government should have languished relative to candidate promotion and party boosterism. As we see below in comparing election coverage with other kinds of political reporting, none of these things happened.

### Election News

In figures 2a and 2b, political entries for each level of government have been separated into election (including campaign) and nonelection sto-

14. Richard L. Rubin, *Press, Party, and Presidency* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1981), 53–54.

15. See Osman Castle Hooper, *History of Ohio Journalism, 1793–1932* (Columbus: Spahr and Glenn Co., 1933), and Harry R. Stevens, *The Early Jackson Party in Ohio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1957).

16. On the emergence of the penny press and its role in mid-nineteenth-century American journalism, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

ries.<sup>17</sup> In comparing these figures, note first that election coverage across levels of government was highly sensitive to which offices were on the fall ballot. Clearly, electoral politics were not generating the expanding nationalization of political news displayed in figure 1. Instead, in figure 2*b* with election stories removed, the trend toward the early nationalization of politics is even more striking. National news occupied an unsurprising diminutive status at the outset of our series, with only 15 percent of nonelection stories given to events in Washington. But by 1830, this figure had more than doubled, and beginning in 1845 national news captured well over half of the total space given each year to all nonelection news. As in figure 1, nonelection national news first displaced local news and then, after the 1840s, state-level political coverage.

Two interesting relationships between the electoral calendar and political coverage emerge from figure 2.<sup>18</sup> First, not surprisingly, presidential campaigns generated sharply increased election coverage. In 1840 when the popular Ohioan William Henry Harrison sought the presidency, election stories consumed nearly two-thirds of the paper's space given to politics. And in 1876 with the close and controversial Hayes-Tilden election, about half of all political reporting focused on elections. Electoral coverage in 1835 deviates from this trend but understandably so, since only seats to the lower house of the state legislature and Cleveland's town council were at stake.

Even here, however, national electoral politics captured space with many articles speculating on possible candidates in the next year's presidential election. This also explains the large share of national-level articles in figure 2*a*. Consistent with the relationship, the two off-year elections of 1850 and 1855 received the lowest share of political entries of any of the years in our series. With no more than 10 percent of the paper's political reportage given to elections these years, it is evident that state and local elections were in themselves not especially newsworthy. Other political events of the day arose to displace them in Cleveland's papers. All of this, of course, agrees with the other evidence presented here that national affairs predominated well back into the antebellum era.

The second relationship between news and the electoral calendar concerns the distribution of election stories across levels of government. Not surprisingly, state coverage expands dramatically during nonpresiden-

17. Because the trends for column inches and number of articles closely correspond, I shall give only the former in subsequent tables and figures, except where the cell entries are small.

18. Until the constitutional reform of 1850 governors and state senators were elected biennially on even years. Local offices and the state House of Representatives were elected yearly. Subsequently, state elections were conducted biennially on odd years. At midcentury—the precise date is uncertain—local elections also became biennial.



a. Election Coverage



Year	Column Inches	% of Political Coverage
1820	(48)	15
1830	(138)	28
1835	(371)	43
1840	(718)	64
1845	(287)	17
1850	(692)	8
1855	(795)	10
1860	(2,052)	35
1870	(673)	23
1876	(1,835)	49

b. Nonelection Coverage



Year	Column Inches	% of Political Coverage
1820	(272)	85
1830	(352)	72
1835	(500)	57
1840	(405)	36
1845	(1,401)	83
1850	(7,560)	92
1855	(2,059)	90
1860	(3,809)	65
1870	(2,187)	77
1876	(1,883)	51

Figure 2. Election and Nonelection Coverage by Level of Government (based on column inches)

tial election years. The second highest share of space given to state campaigns occurred in 1855, the one year in our series in which only statewide offices were on the ballot. The highest proportion of state coverage came in the midterm year 1850 when the gubernatorial candidacy of Cleveland's own "wagon boy," Tom Corwin, and a highly charged state constitutional reform measure overrode congressional races in the news.

Note also the rise and fall of local election stories across our series with presidential elections. The four years of greatest local campaign coverage are all presidential election years: 1820, 1840, 1860, and 1876. No presidential election fails to generate extensive local news. (Until mid-century, Cleveland held local elections yearly, hence removing any local sources of systematic variation in this series.) With respect to nineteenth-century press reporting, we should reverse the modern-day observation of House Speaker Thomas O'Neill to read, "All local politics is national."

In an age of poor transportation and communication, national campaigns were necessarily waged by local partisans. The emergence of the "ticket system" in the 1830s cemented a functional relationship between national and local party organizations. During presidential campaigns, local activity typically became intense—apparently, at no time more so for our series than in 1840 when the state's popular choice in that election was fellow Ohioan William Henry Harrison. The passage below, from a history of Cleveland as reported by its newspapers, describes the frenetic campaign activities already underway in March and April of that year.

The heated political contest of 1839–40 was the absorbing topic in Cleveland. General William Henry Harrison, of "log cabin and hard cider" fame, was the champion of staunch supporters in the Western Reserve, a stronghold of the Whigs. At the height of the opposition to President Martin Van Buren, the local Whigs organized Tippecanoe clubs, and joined the surging ranks that were rallying behind the slogan, "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too." James A. Briggs, young Cleveland lawyer, is credited by some with having created the famous fighting words.

At a meeting of Whigs in the Court House on March 7, officers of the Tippecanoe Club of Cleveland were elected. . . . On March 9, Ohio City standard-bearers organized under the leadership of F. A. Burrows.

The local clubs made plans to erect "cabins," typifying the log-cabin sentiment, on each side of the river as campaign headquarters. On the evening of March 18, east-side enthusiasts met at the American House, and, led by the Cleveland Grays, they marched to the Ohio City cabin (Detroit and West 25th) for rousing dedication ceremonies.

Neighboring townsmen had been hauling logs into Cleveland as their contribution toward the Whig cabin that was to be the center of the Cleveland political campaign. March 30 was rainy, but early in the morning the citizens

went to work, fortified with frequent visits to the hard-cider barrel. In a short time, they had erected their headquarters building on Superior Street, adjoining the American House. Newburgh's 105-foot log was selected for a pole bearing a flag with the word "Liberty," and another sturdy timber bore a sign reading, "With Tip and Tyler we'll bust Van's biler." The cabin was 35 by 50 feet, large enough to hold several hundred people, the newspapers claimed. . . . Campaigners poured in from miles around on April 3 for the dedication that was marked by brilliant oratory and rousing songs in honor of the "people's" candidates.<sup>19</sup>

When one recalls that events such as these have been coded as local (according to the "level" of the actor), the national orientation of the Cleveland press becomes all the more impressive. And given the continuous replay of colorful events such as those in other election years, the local paper's coverage of national political campaigns appears to have been altogether appropriate.

#### Political Issues

As with present-day political reporting, many of the stories published in these nineteenth-century papers had more to do with personalities than with issues. A favorite son would be extolled; opponents would be villified; a close vote, whether in the legislature or at the ballot box, would be reported as a horse race. There are many ways to cover politics while failing to report the issues at stake. If these papers were virtually free of issue content, one might fairly ask, news for what? Would the steady nationalization of press reporting, however precisely measured, amount to anything?

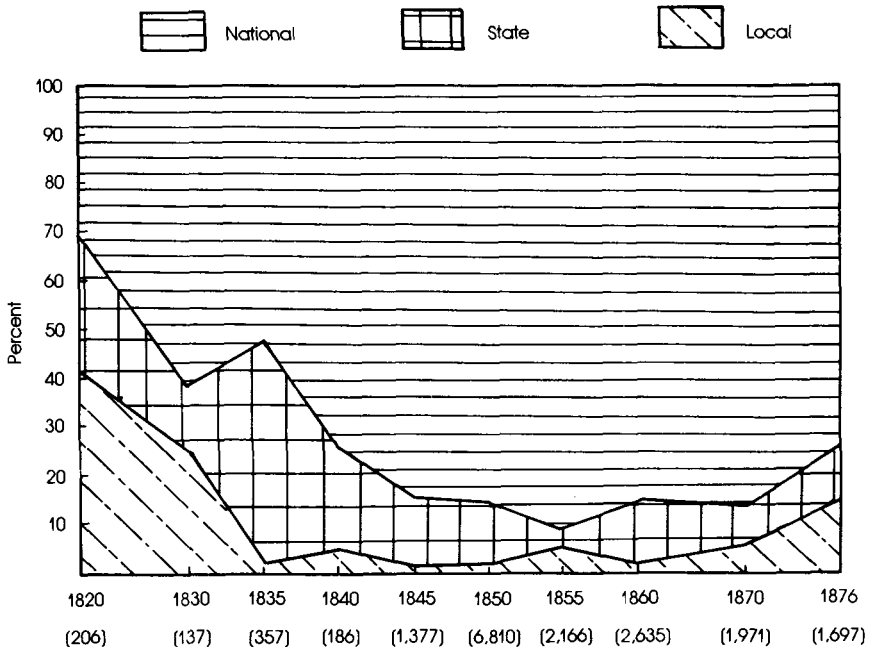
Although unflattering references to political adversaries, innuendos, and editorializing were familiar ingredients of the era's journalism, only infrequently after 1845 did these circulation-oriented papers sling mud in a dedicated way. For the most part the stories coded here were neither the products of party hacks nor, for that matter, of myopic self-righteous editors who might condemn all politics beyond the community's borders. Rather, the midcentury papers reported the news, albeit informally by today's standards and at times liberally laced with editorial opinion. The reader in Cleveland appears in the *Annals* to have been given a fairly accurate portrayal of the day's events and issues.

To assess more precisely the issue content of political news across levels of government, each article was scored by the policy issue, if any were mentioned, receiving the greatest attention. As displayed in figure 3,

19. W. G. Rose, *Cleveland: The Making of a City* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1950), 175–76.

after 1835, stories covering national issues heavily dominated state and local issues in the Cleveland press.

To identify the national topics that attracted press attention, these issues have been further classified in table 3 into six broad areas of policy. No one who has perused antebellum newspapers could fail to be impressed by the passion slavery ignited whenever it became an issue. With the exception of the years 1830 and 1840, each of which represented a temporary hiatus in the slavery debate at the national level, Cleveland's



Note: See appendix for a list of issues at each level.

Figure 3. Issue Coverage by Level of Government (based on column inches)

papers were clearly preoccupied with this matter. Slavery in this stronghold of abolitionism was tinged with partisanship, with the prewar papers ardently supporting the antislavery platforms of the Free Soil and later the Republican parties.

What is more relevant to us here is the fact that the volume of articles on slavery closely followed the national disposition of the issue. The Compromise of 1850 was a difficult, time-consuming, and, ultimately, temporary resolution of a crisis. Accordingly, slavery dominated the papers that year. For the next decade, politicians' careers would be made



Table 3. National Political Issues

	1820		1830		1835		1840		1845	
	A	L	A	L	A	L	A	L	A	L
Slavery	56%	72%	5%	2%	52%	61%	0%	0%	30%	46%
Tariff	11	5	5	2	0	0	0	0	10	9
Defense/ foreign affairs	11	14	0	0	4	6	7	9	30	20
Govt. services/ patronage	17	6	71	71	39	32	44	42	22	16
Scandal	0	0	10	20	0	1	4	4	1	4
Rights	6	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1
National affairs	0	0	10	5	0	0	44	45	0	3
N =	(18)	(64)	(21)	(85)	(23)	(186)	(27)	(139)	(142)	(1,155)

Note: A = Articles; L = Length (column inches). *Slavery* includes related issues such as Kansas and California admission; *government services* includes rivers and harbors, public lands, postal services, homesteading, veterans' benefits, roads, and general patronage. Among

and unmade according to their posturing on slavery and the Compromise. In 1855, this subject captured 80 percent of the "issue" reporting in the *Cleveland Leader*. During Reconstruction slavery became the "bloody shirt," and continued in this vein to be a prominent topic in this Republican paper.

The life cycle of slavery as a national issue is fully traced in its news coverage in table 3. Its episodic crises early in the century, its heightened politicization and regional polarization during the decade leading up to the Civil War, and afterward, its status as an issue with which the Republican party maintained hegemony are all present. By the admittedly crude indicator of column inches, appearance of the slavery issue in the *Cleveland press* closely follows its status as a national political issue. Events of the day account for the volume of news.

Next to slavery, other national issues pale in significance. When compared with coverage of state and local issues, however, they appear to have been quite prominent. A western state, Ohio turned early to the federal government for internal improvements. Land needed to be distributed to a growing population, postal and military roads opened, waterways improved. According to one historian, these considerations were of such moment, they contributed to the Ohio congressional delegation's decision, along with delegations from other western states, to support John Adams for president in 1824 rather than the far more popular Andrew Jackson.<sup>20</sup> Appropriately, in table 3 we see that early in

20. Stevens, *The Early Jackson Party*.

1850		1855		1860		1870		1876	
A	L	A	L	A	L	A	L	A	L
90%	94%	76%	80%	64%	69%	14%	10%	12%	14%
1	1	1	0	2	1	10	10	6	3
1	.5	16	13	9	9	23	23	7	8
6	3	5	2	11	10	12	9	10	6
2	2	1	1	11	8	7	8	37	35
0	0	1	1	3	2	15	23	6	6
0	0	0	1	1	1	19	17	23	28
(451)	(5,812)	(178)	(1,940)	(301)	(2,249)	(419)	(1,708)	(178)	(1,244)

the prominent *rights* issues were polygamy, naturalization, and suffrage. Finance is the largest component of *national affairs*; this category also includes pardons, territories, Indian relations, and capital administration.

the century federal land disposal, contracts, and jobs were highly newsworthy topics.<sup>21</sup> By the end of our series many of these same issues—especially when they did not favor local interests—were being reported as scandal.

Other national issue categories in table 3 that came close to matching, if they did not in fact do so, the total space given to state and local issues are national affairs in 1840 and 1876, national defense and rights in 1870, and scandal in 1876. Thus, even when the slavery debate was quiescent, the issue agenda remained national. A clear instance of this occurs in 1840 when there were remarkably few slavery articles, and yet

21. Harry N. Scheiber has documented well how Ohio was exceptional in initiating many local improvements on its own—the most prominent being the Ohio canal. See his *Ohio Canal Era* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966). Nonetheless, federal public works remained a vital concern in Ohio as in the other western states. Francis P. Weisenburger related the story of how both John Adams's and Andrew Jackson's forces in Congress in 1827 sought to woo Ohio's support in the next election with internal improvements: "Each group attempted, through its representatives in Congress, to secure a liberal grant to aid Ohio in its canal program. Apparently the Jackson members succeeded in launching their bill first and insuring it prior consideration by the committee. But John Woods, an Administration congressman from Ohio and a member of the House Committee on Roads and Canals, was able to report the Administration measure, providing for a grant of 500,000 acres, first. When the measure was passed the Jackson measure seemed unnecessary. In the Senate, however, the Jacksonians secured the incorporation of their bill as an amendment to the Administration measure, and in this form it became a law. Thus, Ohio received a double grant of public lands, each party claiming the credit." In *The Passing of the Frontier, 1825-1850* (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1941), 230.

national issues still occupied more than twice the space given to state and local issues.

Despite the fact that communication and transportation between Cleveland and Washington at midcentury were measured by days rather than hours or minutes, one would be hard put to maintain in the face of these findings that Clevelanders were much insulated from even the routine affairs of the national government. Rather, measured by the availability of news, the "political distance" was greater to Columbus, or even to city hall. More direct evidence on this score can be seen in the reporting of day-to-day institutional activities across these different governmental levels.

### Political Institutions

I have operationally defined institutional coverage to include two general types of information. First, it obviously refers to the behavior of governments as organizations: judicial pronouncements (from the Supreme Court to the justice of the peace), committee hearings, a veto, treaty ratification, and the election of a senator, to name but a few. Second, I also code as institutional those articles that describe the behavior of an officeholder who is performing in some official capacity. A veto message of a governor would so qualify, whereas a stump speech attacking the legislature would not.

In figure 4 we find much the same trend toward early nationalization in institutional coverage as for elections and issues. The chief difference is that, except for 1850 when Congress rehearsed the Civil War across the front pages of the nation's papers, state government was not severely displaced as news until the 1870s. As late as 1855, governmental decisions and activities in Columbus were still attracting more press attention than those in Washington. News about local government over time followed the familiar pattern of early retrenchment and partial restoration. In 1845 less than 2 percent of the space devoted to institutional stories was given to local government. By the 1870s this figure had grown to a stable 12 percent.

Portrayals of the national government at midcentury are generally unflattering. With historic exceptions, presidents were depicted then as now as weak, passive figures, and by the end of the era they appeared, in the mold of Ulysses Grant, as little more than the manufactured products of political machines. Congress fares little better. The House of Representatives groveled under the weight of antiquated rules and an overbearing Senate. The latter institution was commonly described as having less the capacity than the will to assume the responsibilities of the

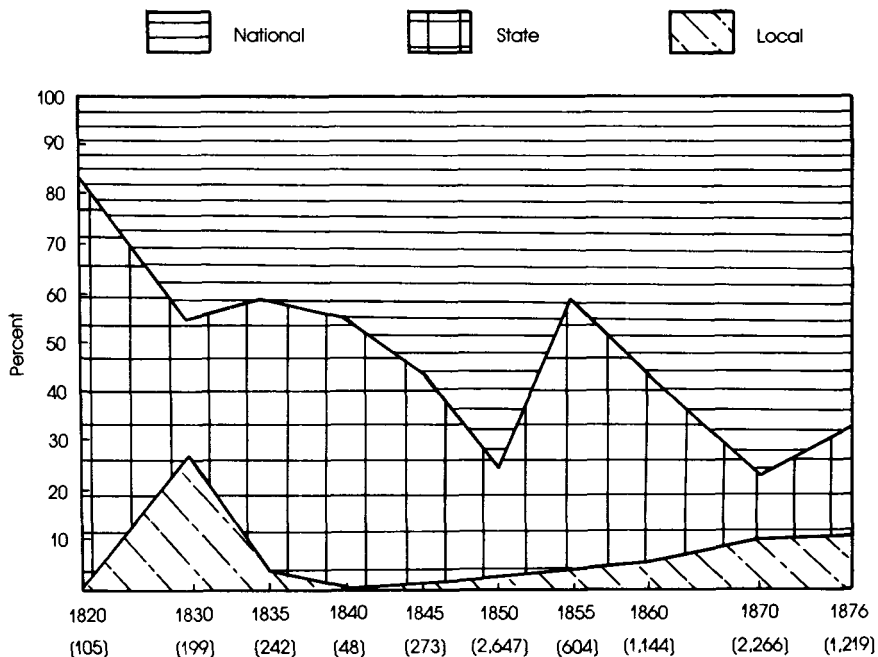


Figure 4. Institutional Coverage by Level of Government (based on column inches)

nation.<sup>22</sup> That such criticisms hit their mark is implicitly accepted by the historical literature that sees national political development as occurring late in the century. Compared to the early growth of national political news documented here, the transformation of governmental institutions is generally agreed to have come much later. These findings suggest that whatever shortcomings in competency or capacity national government at midcentury possessed by modern standards, they were nonetheless institutions to which the country gave its full attention.

#### CONCLUSION: NATIONAL NEWS AND THE ISLAND COMMUNITY

How does one reconcile the notion of an island, or segmented, community with the finding that its sole means of mass communication was as nationally oriented as we have found the Cleveland press to be? The answer depends largely upon what one ascribes to the notion of the is-

22. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1918), 261–62.

land community. One comprehensive meaning of this concept is that of a self-centered society, internally integrated and externally insulated against encroachment from the larger society. Indeed, America in this view may be regarded as little more than an archipelago of island communities.

A careful reading of Wiebe and others finds them frequently adopting what I shall call the bastion view of island communities.<sup>23</sup> It can be found in the vigorous resistance of small-town America to the glacial forces of industrialization and immigration. And when it failed to withstand this onslaught, the results for community members were cataclysmic. Local loyalties and identification gave way to an anomic state Wiebe refers to as “distended society.” It took a new national order emerging around the turn of the twentieth century to relieve the resulting tension.<sup>24</sup>

The presence of a nationally oriented local press poses some serious problems to the bastion point of view. Organizationally, it means that the island communities are not so internally integrated and separate from the outside world as this strong statement of the concept implies. Finding that the local press had its roots elsewhere raises the question whether other local institutions similarly might not be indigenous. Certainly political parties have long been regarded among the most integrative agencies of the early Republic. But even such locally embedded organizations as the church and fraternal societies were associated with national organizations and occasionally buffeted by national movements. To what extent can a community whose institutions are incorporated from and continue to be sustained by the broader society remain separate from that society? Not very, the findings presented here suggest.

Even if the external orientation of the local press was exceptional among community institutions, its preoccupation with national news does, nonetheless, pose a serious challenge to the image of America as island communities. Not only does the sole means of mass communication fail to reinforce localism—largely by ignoring local political affairs—it actively undermines the ethos of self-contained society. Citizens are offered alternative reference groups to those available locally. The farmer, for example, learns from national news that farmers elsewhere face sim-

23. In addition to his *Search for Order*, Robert H. Wiebe elaborates this theme in *Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York: Oxford University Press). Samuel P. Hays offers a similar if somewhat more abstracted version of political transformation. Borrowing from Tonnies the concepts of community and society, he assigns them as endpoints on a continuum, which he then describes America as traversing during the late nineteenth century. See his “Political Parties and the Community-Society Continuum,” in *American Party Systems*, ed. Chambers and Burnham, 152–81.

24. Wiebe, *Search for Order*, 11–43.

ilar problems of profit and credit. His fortunes, he comes to recognize, rest less with the local market and bank than with the vagaries of the national market and economy. Over time, "other farmers" assume greater stature as his "relevant others" and his community less.

One might try to preserve the functional integrity of the island community by depreciating the newspaper's role in local society. The dense network of primary relations that crop up to regulate the behavior of small groups could in this instance mediate the impact of national news. Processes of two-step communication flow would attach local perspectives and prejudices to national news and thereby guarantee that its intrusion would not threaten the community's ethos. Perhaps so, but from the historical evidence available one would be hard put to demonstrate the extraordinary efficiency required of these processes to absorb the daily volume of national news found here.

As an alternative, one might degrade the press's role directly. Blatantly partisan, especially in the early years, newspapers preached to the converted. Among nonbelievers their messages were heavily discounted. De Tocqueville says as much when he speculates that partisan editors' vulgar efforts to "rouse popular passions . . . carry, so to speak, no weight with the readers," but in the next sentence he concedes that journalists are nonetheless highly influential with the populace because readers look to newspapers for "knowledge of facts," and by "altering and distorting those facts" the journalist influences community opinion. And he concludes from this that "the power of the press is still immense. It makes political life circulate in every corner of the vast land."<sup>25</sup> Without necessarily conceding to de Tocqueville the last word on the matter, it is difficult to incorporate a nationally oriented press into the bastion model of midcentury community life.

There is, however, one other conceptualization of America's island community for which the findings presented here are less threatening. Consider the concept to refer simply to a self-reliant social unit that represents an efficient, and hence highly legitimated, adaptation to a spacious and sparsely populated, preindustrial America. Gone are the internal mechanisms of conformity and barriers to the outside world. Localism becomes a culture bred not so much from organic parochialism but from an enveloping national political and economic order. Rather than bastions, island communities would be understood as the subunits of a na-

25. De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, 185–86. A contemporary chronicler of America's experiment, James Fenimore Cooper, credited the influence of the press to the country's small and distant communities, which contained too few men of "better opinion" to refute the rantings of newspaper editors; *The American Democrat* ([1838] Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).

tional response to a particular environment. As conditions changed, so too did communities. This does not mean that the transition came smoothly. Undoubtedly, for many the loss of local identities was a shattering experience. What it does imply, however, is that one should view these islands not just as resisting change but, when profitable, as taking advantage of the new opportunities created as national society changed. So viewed, the early arrival of national news into America's otherwise isolated communities helped them prepare for and adapt to the subsequent emergence of a more national social and political order.

The tinsel image of Washington politics with its larger-than-life politicians who were consummate in their corruption as well as their incompetence may lead one to wonder how national news could have had these salutary effects. But the press's integrative function depended less on its news content than on the fact that its steady diet of national messages fostered a level of civic awareness that would stand the citizenry of these distant communities in good stead as they turned to the national government to redress their grievances. Perhaps equally important, in reporting news nationally, the press provided a critical mechanism for the coordinated activities of groups and movements across the country that were only loosely connected with one another.

In conclusion, let us return to the midwestern farmer who would in the 1880s become the lifeblood of the Populist party. If he had resided in a truly inward-directed, bastion community, we would be at a loss to explain the alacrity and success with which he and his associates throughout the country organized and pressed their agenda on the nation. Before populism was repudiated in the 1896 election, this movement had already succeeded in extracting from Washington legislation to regulate the railroad industry and, even more extraordinary, it had wrested control of the Democratic party from urban and state machines and southern bourbons. To the extent that these improbable victories rested on a foundation of civic awareness, the early nationalization of political news in America can be given a large measure of credit.

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## APPENDIX

### THE ANNALS OF CLEVELAND

According to the *Lathrop Report on Newspaper Indexes*, the *Annals* was originally intended to be a set of two hundred volumes, covering the years 1818–1935 and including an abstract of every news story that recorded a local

event or expressed a local opinion. (See *Lathrop Report on Newspaper Indexes* [1979]: 1237A. For additional information, see review of microform edition of the *Annals* in *Microform Review* 10 [Fall 1981]: 284–86.) Altogether the various WPA activities were intended to provide exhaustive data in local news. The “main file” from which the data in the present study were drawn was designed to provide a comprehensive compendium of news, while supplementary files, which were not undertaken, were to summarize all local political stories, editorials, and letters not included in the main file.

The *Annals* project abstracted all news, editorial, and advertising entries for the following newspapers.

Name	Dates	Party Orientation of Paper
<i>Herald</i>	1820	Unknown
<i>Herald</i>	1830	Jackson Democrat
<i>Herald</i>	1840, 1845	Whig
<i>Whig</i>	1835	Whig
<i>Daily True Democrat</i>	1850	Free Soil
<i>Leader</i>	1855–1876	Republican

To assess the representativeness of the distribution of news across levels of government for the years 1860, 1870, and 1876, I also coded sample issues of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. The breakdown of coverage in column inches by local, state, and national government was roughly similar to that of the *Leader*. A Democratic paper, the *Plain Dealer* bore out its reputation as a highly partisan source of news. Consequently, it contained significantly more entries that would have been classified by *Annals* coders as editorials than did the *Leader*.

Finally, since many articles that did not exclusively fit into one of our variable's categories were coded according to their preponderant coverage, we independently coded from the original papers over 250 articles abstracted in the *Annals*. The results closely matched those produced from coding the abstracts.

#### Coding Rules

*Levels of government.* Two problem areas quickly arose in classing articles by local, state, and national government. First, many articles cross levels. When approximately equal coverage was given to two or three levels, the level of the article's principal actor was coded. When in doubt, we scored the article at the lowest appropriate level of government. Second, many stories—especially those on slavery and elections—concerned politics in other states. Given the focus of the present study, these were coded as national news.

*Institutional stories.* To be scored as institutional, the article had to involve some actor or collectivity (such as a committee) fulfilling the duties of office.



*Issue coverage.* Issues were classified as local, state, and national according to the subject headings listed in table A.1.

Table A.1. Issues by Level of Government

Local	State	National
appointments, patronage	finance	slavery
temperance	suffrage	tariff
roads, canals, etc.	education	national defense/foreign
finance	corporations, banks	policy
annexation	apportionment	admission of new states
taxation	capital punishment	foreign affairs
police, jails	poll tax	rivers and harbors
education	taxation	postal rates and service
new county creation	railroads	public lands, home-
other local issues	prisons, asylums	steading
	temperance	veterans
	roads, bridges, etc.	finance
	civil liberties, polygamy	federal roads
	manufacturing	civil liberties, polygamy
	police, state militia	apportionment
	race relations	railroads
	private debts	civil service
	cruelty to animals	Indians
	capital location	citizenship,
	patronage	naturalization
	scandal	suffrage
		pardons
		capital locations
		scandal
		patronage