



Spatial and Temporal Patterns in Wisconsin's Presidential Elections from 1900-2008

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to find distinct electoral epochs and like-voting regions within the state of Wisconsin's Presidential elections from 1900-2008. Including both time and space within this project helps create a more solid picture of the patterns that occurred during this period. Voting results were collected for each county in each election during this time period from the Wisconsin Blue Book. Factor analysis was then used to determine specific time periods and electoral regions throughout Wisconsin. T-Mode analysis calculated voting epochs and S-Mode analysis found the electoral regions in Wisconsin. In addition to these quantitative results, many qualitative sources from political geography, political science, history and other disciplines were studied to demonstrate electoral patterns through time and space in Wisconsin. The period of 1936-1960 will be emphasized in this presentation because of the important shift that occurred during this timeframe. The results of this study add to the existing literature of how history and geography can be used to understand politics in the Badger State.

Creating Electoral Epochs

Factor analysis is a multivariate statistical technique that reduces large datasets into distinct dimensions or factors. T-mode factor analysis is a common approach in the study of elections. This analysis, also known as time-mode factor analysis, identifies common electoral epochs over an extended period of time. In this analysis, a t-mode approach was conducted for all presidential elections in Wisconsin from 1900 to 2008. Between these twenty-eight elections, four factors were extracted using a varimax rotation identifying distinct electoral epochs for Wisconsin. Extraction of the four variables explained roughly 87% of a variance. Table 1 shows the results for the t-mode analysis. A factor loading of 0.6 or above in each extracted factor (in this case four) identifies a particular electoral epoch. For example, all the elections within the 1936-1960 epoch load highly with one another indicating counties in Wisconsin followed similar electoral trajectories during these years. Only the 1932 election did not have a high enough factor loading and could not be loaded into any of the four identified electoral periods.

Table 1: Election Epochs in Wisconsin's Presidential Elections

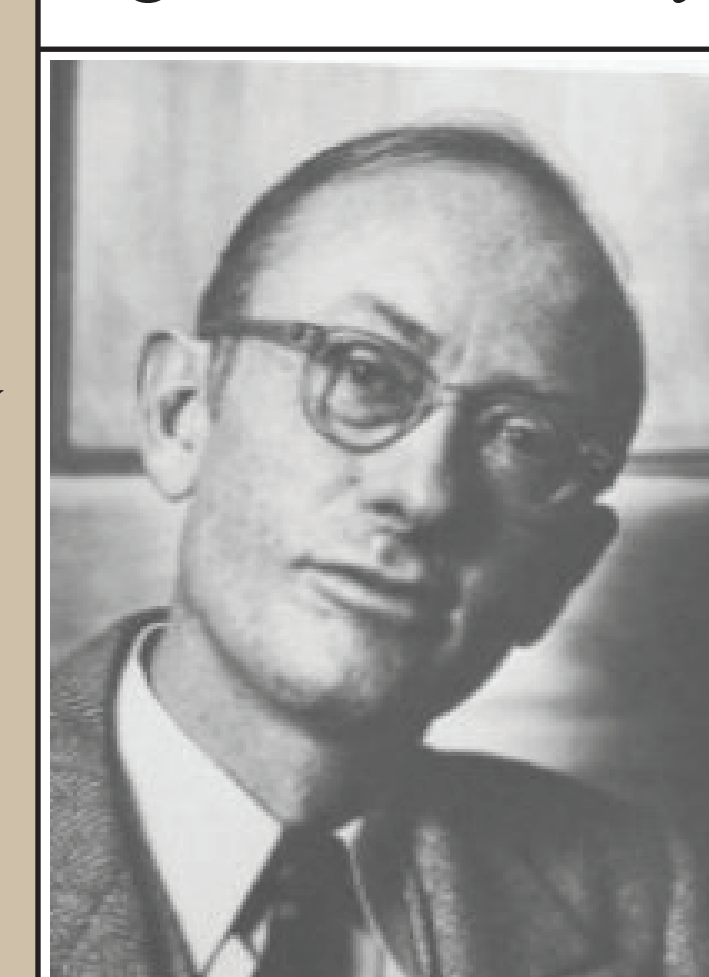
Table with 4 columns representing election epochs: 1908-1928, 1936-1960, 1964-1988, and 1992-2008. Each column contains a grid of factor loadings for various years.

Source: Wisconsin Blue Book, in the State of Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau. 1901-2009. <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/lrb/pubs/bluebook.htm>

Realignment Theory

Realignment theory defines a critical election as a vote that reveals a sharp alternation of the pre-existing cleavage with the electorate. Moreover, the realignment made manifest in the voting in such elections seems to persist for several succeeding election. (Key 1955) When studying any Presidential election, it is extremely difficult to capture the full story without looking at past elections at different levels. A Presidential election is not a single event in time stacked up against a previous election, but rather a continuation of that society's electoral history. Single elections can dramatically change a political scene however, and usher in a new wave of different thought, indicating a critical election. In terms of the nation, the majority of historians and political scientists agree that the election of 1932 realigned the United States towards the Democratic Part. In the 20th century, until the election of 1932, aside from Woodrow Wilson, every Presidential candidate to earn Wisconsin's electoral votes had come from the Republican Party. After Roosevelt's victory in 1932, the Presidency was held by a member of the Democratic Party for 20 years. The results of the t-mode analysis demonstrate that according to voting data, the election of 1932 does not belong within any time period, because the characteristics of voting results do not fall within any t-mode period. While the United States may have encountered a critical election in 1932, this research argues that the state of Wisconsin had a new period starting in 1936.

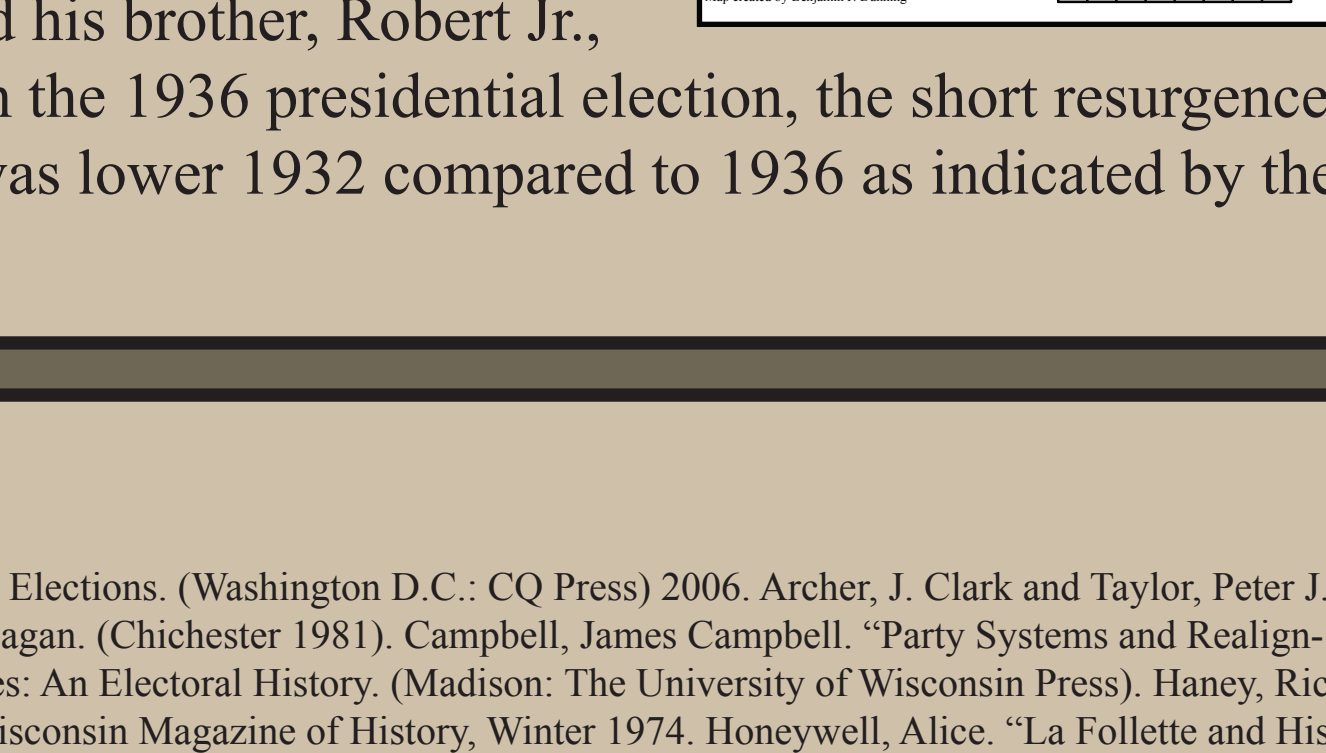
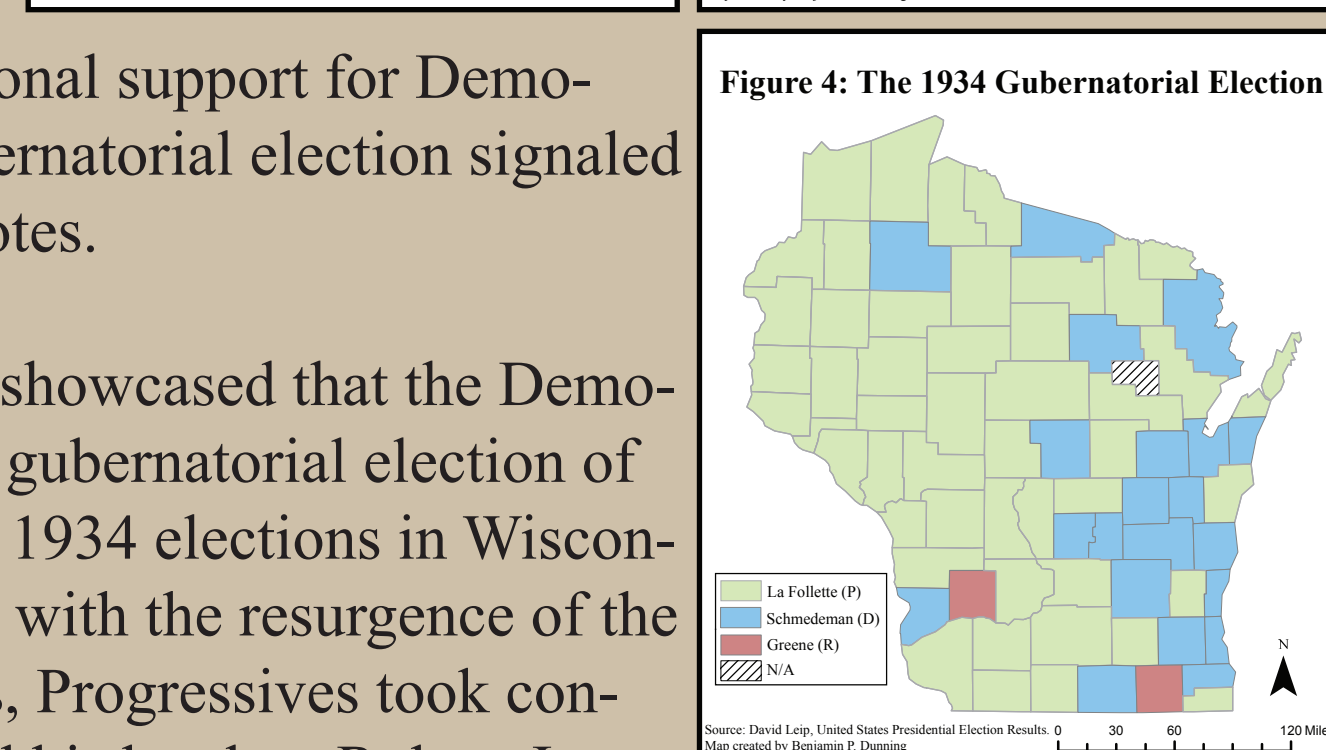
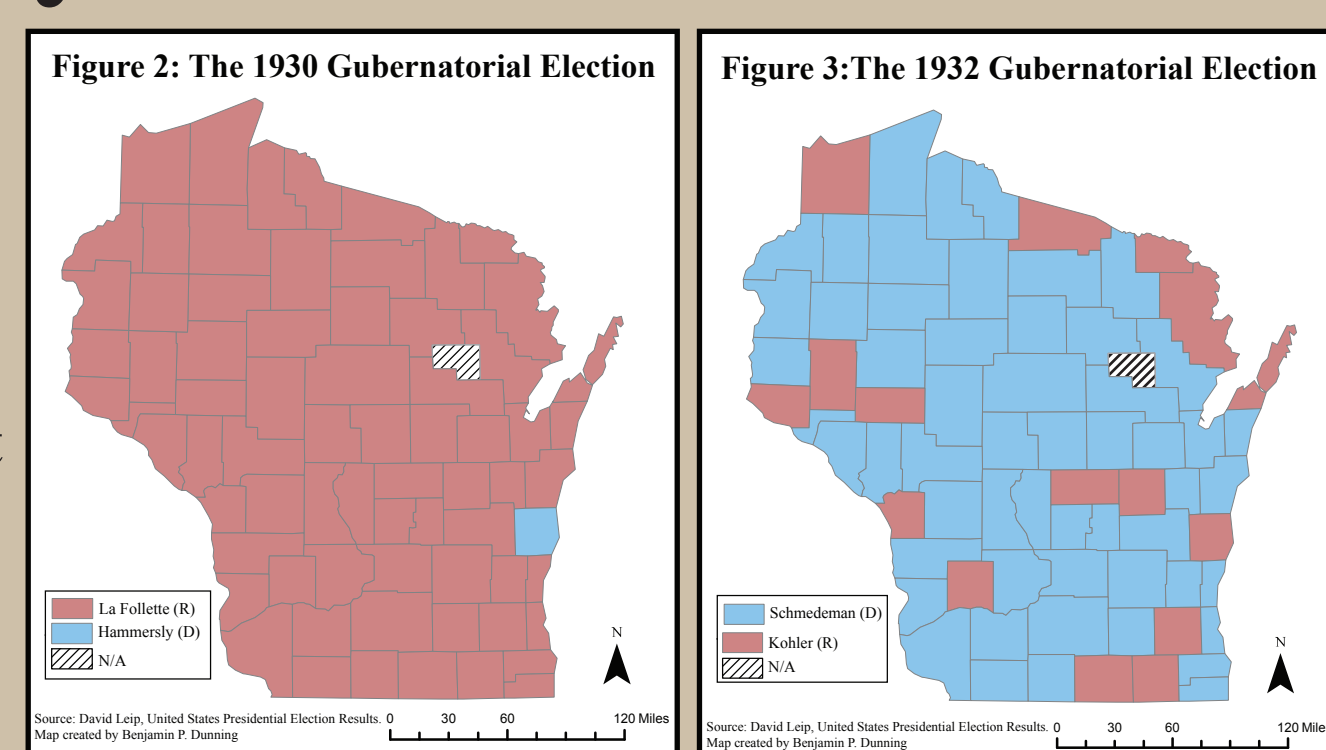
Figure 1: V.O. Key



http://www.mem.edu/newsite/web/academics/ssr/political_science/key_center.htm

Wisconsin's Evolving Party System in the 1930s

While it is clear that 1932 played a pivotal role in the nation's political history, it was a precursor to the proposed voing epoch of 1936-1960 for Wisconsin. During its early history, Wisconsin was a state that frequently elected politicians from the Republican Party. In 1928, Herbert Hoover, a Republican, became the President of the United States. One of the most pressing issues his administration faced was the Great Depression. While his handling of these events helped strengthen the National Democratic Party in the elections of 1930, that was not the case in the state of Wisconsin. The 1930 Wisconsin gubernatorial race saw Republican Phillip La Follette win every county but one (See Figure 2). Yet, with the ever deepening Depression and a growing national support for Democratic Presidential candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 1932 gubernatorial election signaled a shift with Democrat Albert G. Schmedeman collecting 52% of the votes.



Coupled with the gubernatorial race in 1932, the Presidential Election showcased that the Democratic Party was gaining support in Wisconsin. Figure 3 illustrates the gubernatorial election of 1932 where the Democrat swept nearly all of the state's counties. The 1934 elections in Wisconsin saw yet another shift away from Republicans as well as Democrats with the resurgence of the Progressive Party (See Figure 4). Backed by Robert La Follette's sons, Progressives took control of Wisconsin with Phil La Follette winning the governor's seat and his brother, Robert Jr., winning a Senate seat. While the 1934 elections had little influence on the 1936 presidential election, the short resurgence of the Progressives provides evidence as to why Democratic support was lower 1932 compared to 1936 as indicated by the t-mode analysis.

References

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S-Mode Analysis Applied to Wisconsin Elections

S-Mode analysis is similar to a t-mode analysis in that it has the ability to group large datasets into smaller factors or dimensions, but instead of identifying electoral epochs over time, s-mode analysis (also called space-mode analysis) identifies regions with similar voting trajectories. Based on the identified electoral epochs in Wisconsin between 1900 and 2008, Figures 5 and 7-9 illustrate the results of the s-mode analysis.

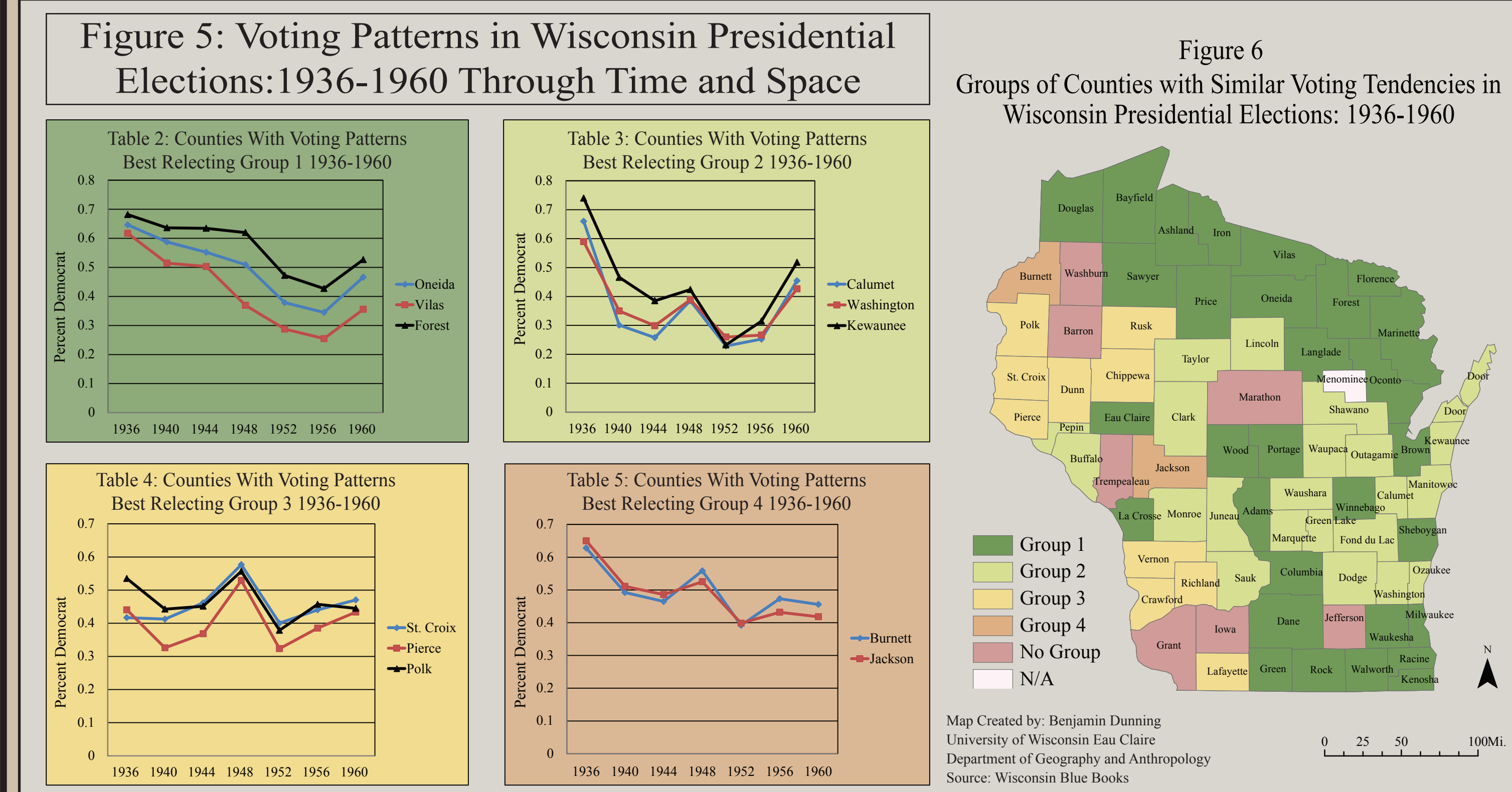
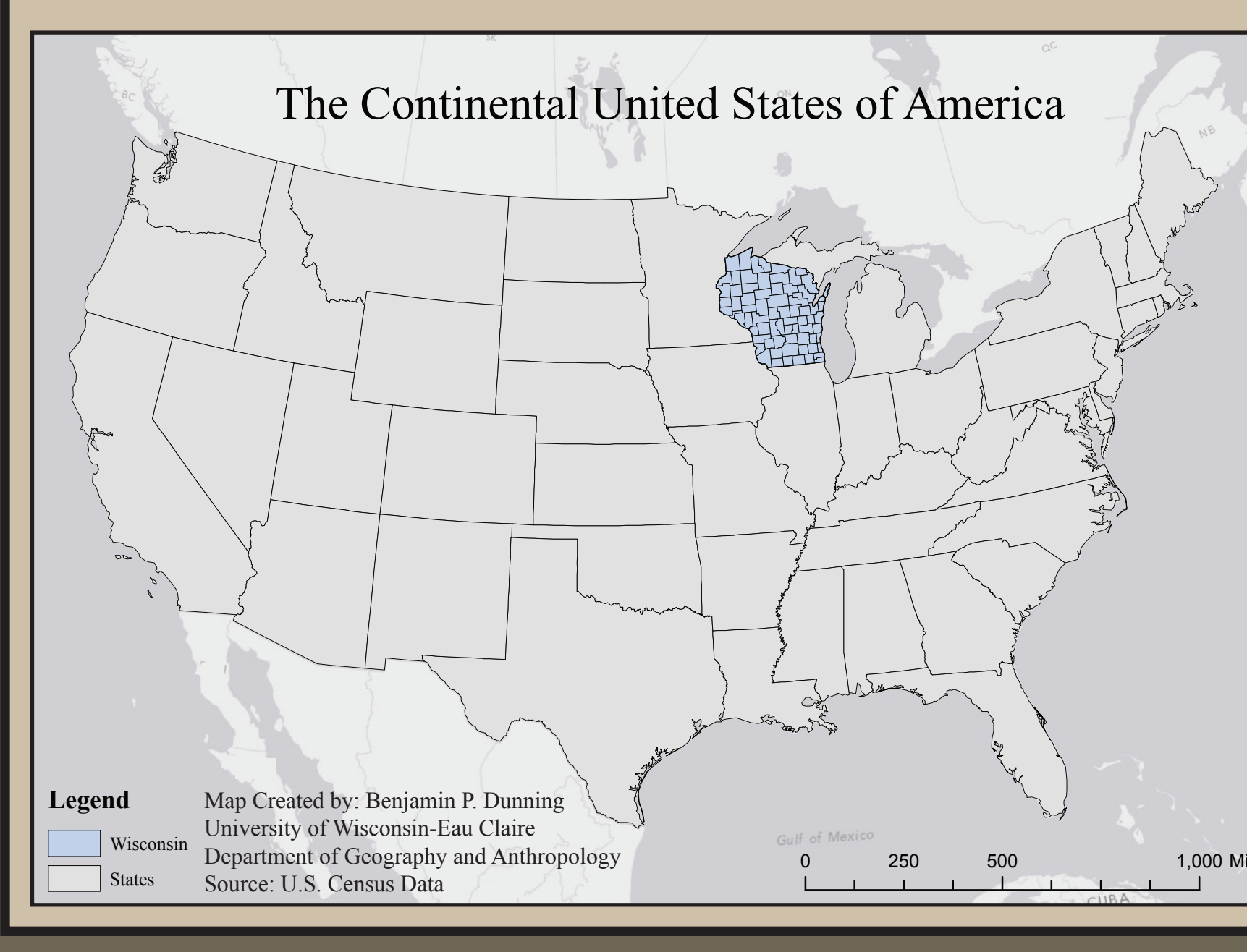


Figure 5 shows the s-mode results for the 1936 to 1960 period. During this electoral epoch 4 factors located four electoral regions using a varimax rotation in the state with factor loadings of 0.6 or higher. This model explained 95% of the variance. Counties with factor loadings that do not exceed 0.6 for any group are labeled "no group" counties. Due to the fact that s-mode factor analysis identifies electoral trajectories for the regions, the three counties with the highest factor loadings in each group indicate elector path taken by voters. Tables 2-5 show the results.

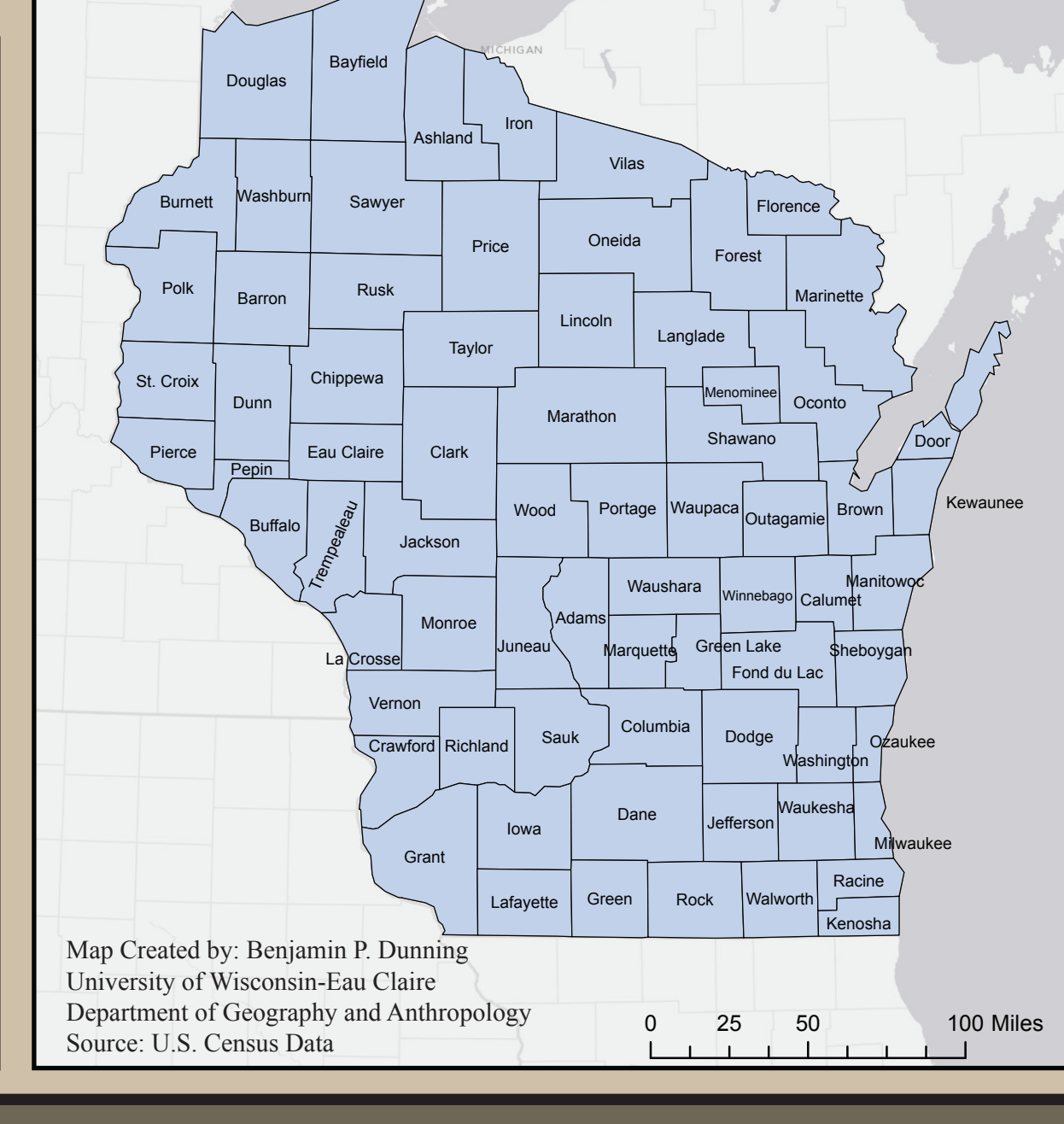
As can be seen, Figure 6 indicates the general patterns of voting throughout the state. Group 1, stretching from the northern counties through middle of the state and along the Illinois border, as indicated by Table 2, shows a sharp decrease in Democratic support between 1936 and 1960, with a slight increase in 1964 when Democrats throughout the state started to gain more power, as discussed in "Wisconsin Politics: Two Parties." Group 2 also saw decreases, but its member counties saw much more subtle decreases during the election period as illustrated in table 3. This group was concentrated throughout the central part of the state. Groups 3 and 4 show similar fluctuating patterns of Democratic support with the group 3 counties of Western Wisconsin illustrating a much larger upswing of support for Harry Truman in 1948 compared to group 4.

Mapping this information is beneficial because it illustrates the placement of these s-mode groups in order to grasp a better geographic understanding of the types of voters throughout Wisconsin. One region that clearly stands out in the 1936-1960 political period is that the Northern region of Wisconsin is heavily aligned with S-Mode Group One voting types. This is understandable because many of the counties that voted for a Democratic candidate in this time period were not living on farms or lived in urban areas, both of which are proved by the 'Rural Farm Population' map and knowing where Milwaukee, Madison and Green Bay are located within Wisconsin. When looking at the counties with the largest cities in Wisconsin: Milwaukee, Dane, Brown, etc. they voted like S-Mode Group One counties. While these areas were known to vote for Democrats in the early part of this period, the rise of the Republican Party's influence in the latter part of the 1940s and into the 1950s as shown in 'The Decline in Progressives' and 'Wisconsin Politics: Two Parties.' The downward slope of these counties in group one until the election of 1960 confirm the characteristic that even the counties that were often more liberal than conservative began to lean to the right, politically, during that timeframe.

Locator Map



The State of Wisconsin

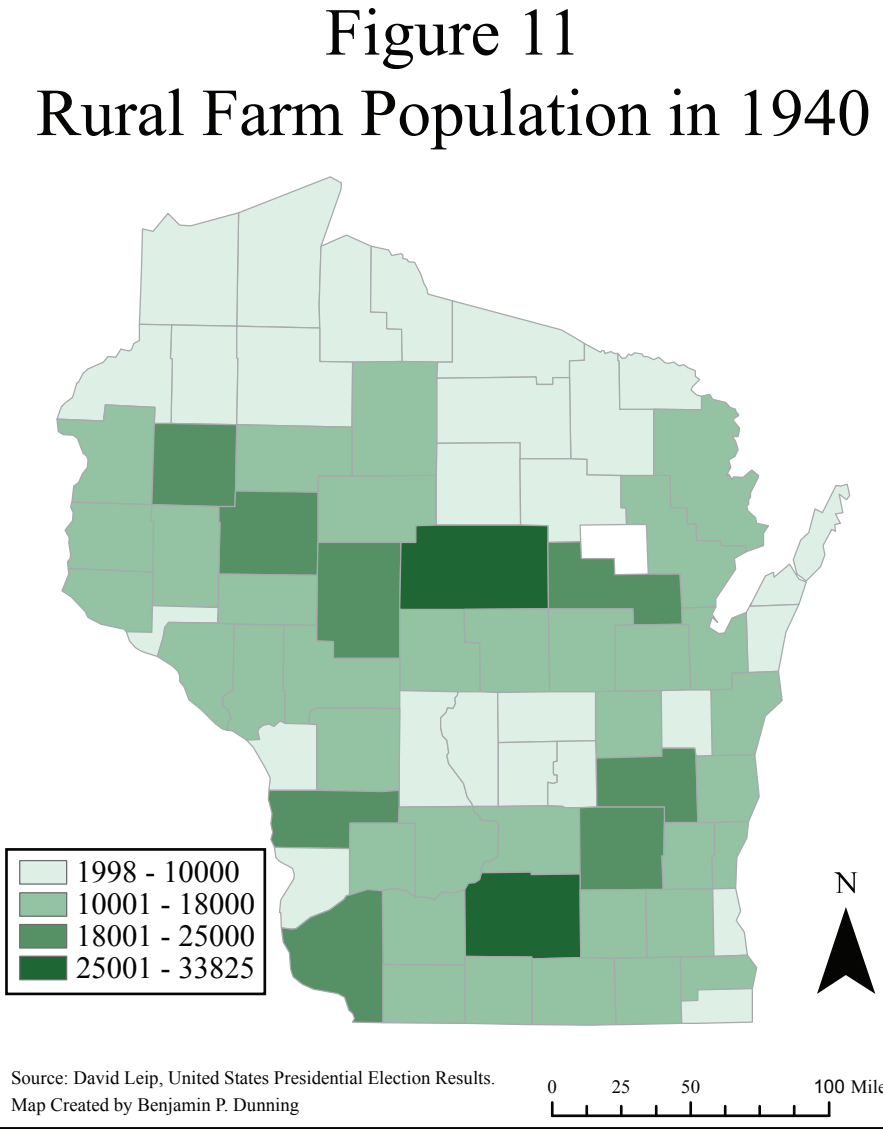
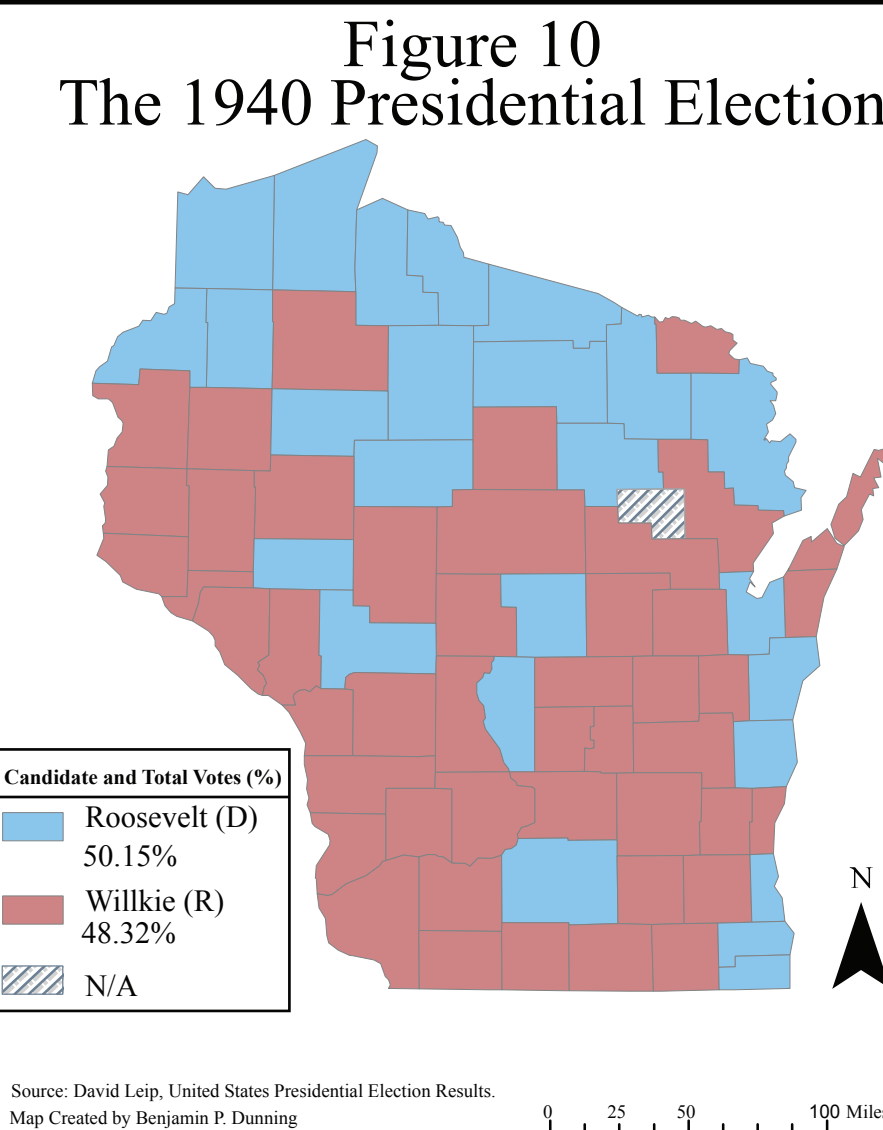
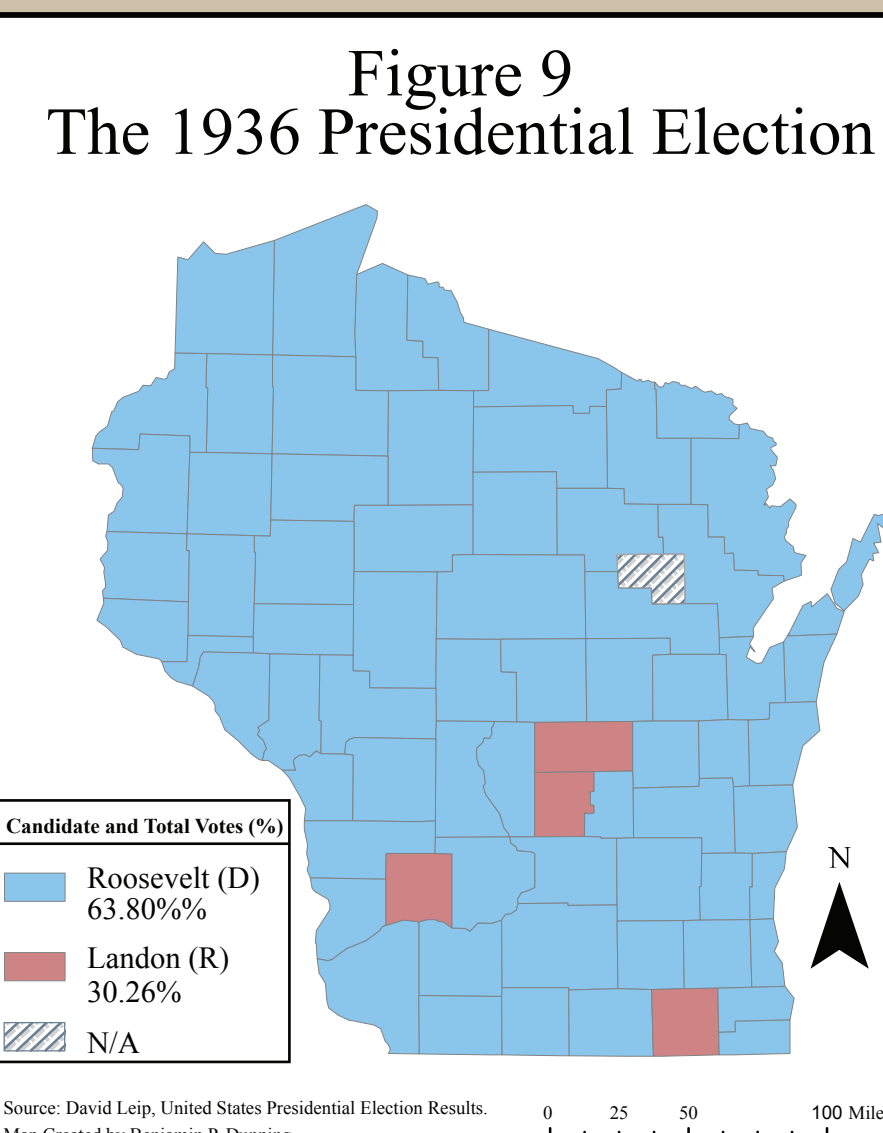


The Decline in Progressives

In 1936, Roosevelt heavily won both the United States and Wisconsin for his first election as the incumbent Presidential candidate. While many Americans remained in poverty throughout Roosevelt's first term, it is clear that the majority of voters trusted his tactics to get the country out of the Great Depression. In Wisconsin, FDR collected 63% of the total vote, creating a landslide victory. At the state level, the Wisconsin Progressive Party remained a very strong entity for its first two elections. In both 1934 and 1936, Wisconsin had a Progressive Party Governor, Senator and sent a majority to the House of Representatives.

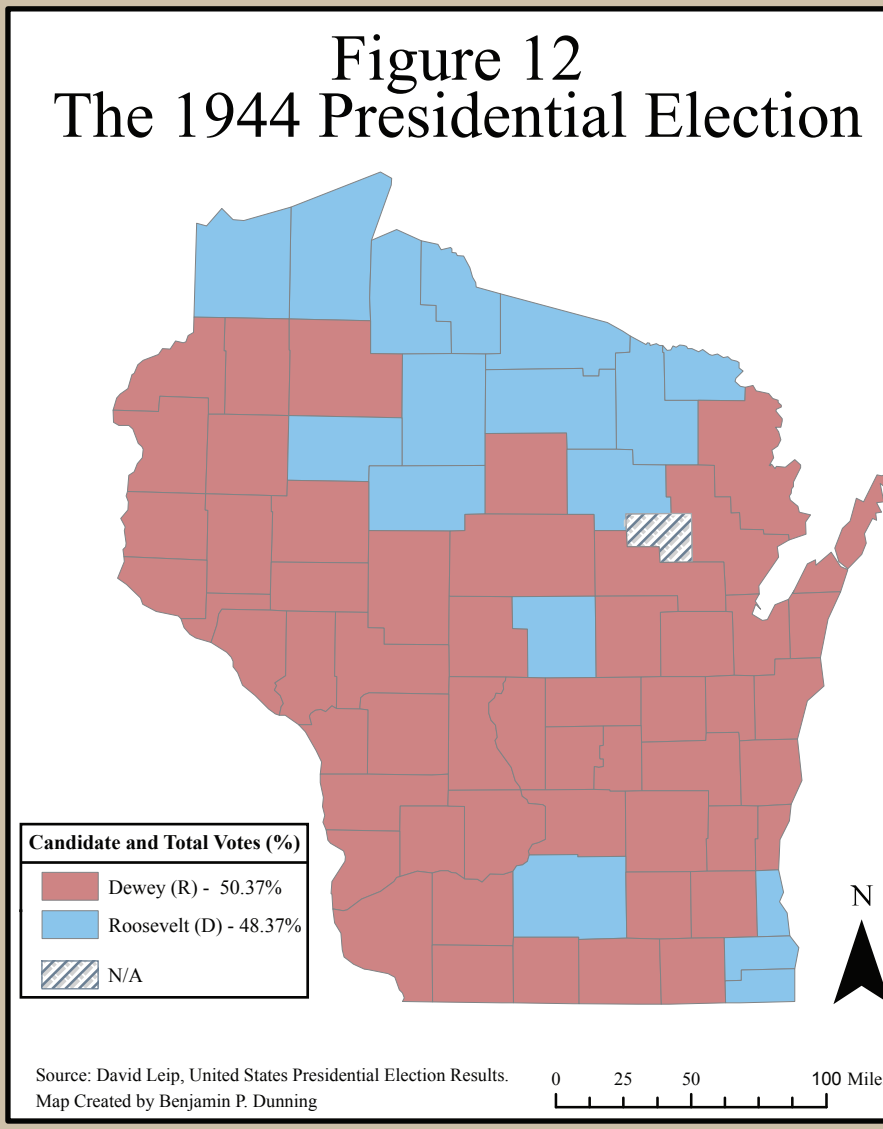
However, 1938 was a much more difficult year for leftist politicians than 1936. During May of 1937 the United States encountered another recession that would last over a year. On a national and state level, many voters started to react to this new recession by voting away from the left. While FDR was able to retain his Presidency, the Progressive Party of Wisconsin's votes dropped dramatically. In the House of Representatives, five of the seven Progressive Party candidates lost their seats to Republicans, who now held a majority in the state and at the gubernatorial level, a Republican, Julius Peter Heil, defeated Phil La Follette. After these defeats, the Progressive Party's presence within Wisconsin would never reach the level it had in the mid-1930s.

The trend of voting more akin to conservative ideals in the state elections in 1938 would continue into the 1940s, especially in Wisconsin. While FDR won his third election, the polls were extremely close, and his dominance of carrying almost every county was no longer present. The largest group of people in Wisconsin to change their support of FDR from 1936 to 1940 was German Americans in rural Wisconsin. This is an explanation for Willke's victory in the number of counties, in that many were rural and not as populated, but his loss in total votes and the election. This occurred mainly because of the assumption that if FDR remained President, the United States would go to war against Germany. Many of these farmers, especially the German ones, which had supported Roosevelt for creating programs that benefited their lives, were now shifting their political priorities to a more right leaning political thought. 'Rural Farm Population' in conjunction with the Presidential election maps of 1936 and 1940 demonstrates that many of the counties with highly populated rural farms made a switch from voting for a Democrat to voting for a Republican. Conversely, the counties in the Northern region of Wisconsin with low numbers of rural farm populations almost exclusively voted Democrat.



Wisconsin Politics: Two Parties

In 1944, during FDR's fourth election for President, the state of Wisconsin voted to elect a Thomas Dewey, see figure 12. After this time the Republican Party of Wisconsin would dominate the political scene at every level, except for the state's nomination for Democrat Harry S. Truman for President in 1948, until the end of the 1950s. As a result of the Progressive Party disbanding in 1946, a realignment occurred for the Democratic party in Wisconsin moving the party leftward in an ideology much more similar to the Democrats of today.



Near the end of the 1950s the Democratic Party started to gain a much higher presence at the state level. In 1960, the Democrats were able to gain two seats in the House of Representatives showcasing an even split amongst parties from Wisconsin as opposed to the seven-three split the year before. Gaylord Nelson, a Democrat, was the first of his party since Schmedeman, to become the Governor of Wisconsin since 1935. At the Presidential level, aside from Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, Republicans were frequently elected to become President until decades later, but the Governor seat was held by a Democrat in the beginning half of the 1960s whereas a Republican held the seat for the rest of the decade. In the senate the Democratic Party would hold both seats of the senate for nearly 20 years starting in the early 1960s. In the House of Representatives, Wisconsin sent an equal or one seat from it amount of both Republicans and Democrats until the end of the 1960s.

Conclusion and Acknowledgements

The state of Wisconsin has an interesting political history because of its swinging support of political parties. One way to calculate these fluctuations in electoral history is to use factor analysis. With factor analysis, voting epochs can be created by using t-mode analysis, and electoral regions can be found using s-mode analysis. While factor analysis is not the final calculation in a research project, it is able to help any researcher find moments in any areas political history that showcase trends of support for one party, critical elections, or regions.

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