

Exploration of the Meaning of Power as it relates to American County Characteristics

Episode 2: Findings on County Shapes and Sizes

Greetings and welcome back to the second episode of Research on American Counties! Thanks so much for tuning in to the show, it really means a lot to me! So, kinda like what I was saying last time, this episode will dive into what the sizes and shapes of counties are as well as why they have those characteristics. However, before I continue with this specific topic, I would like to illustrate why counties are important in the first place. Prior to carrying out this project I believed that counties were essentially meaningless constructs but listening to some very smart men I have been able to learn that counties, at least in the US, are actually very important. I was fortunate enough to be able to interview some very knowledgeable men for this project one of which was Kurt Knierim, my high school history teacher at Rocky Mountain High School in Fort Collins, Colorado, Larimer County Commissioner John Kefalas, and Professor Fred Shelley of the University of Oklahoma.

The following are some clips I took from my interviews with them that I recorded on the voice memos app where they describe the importance of counties in the US, aside from their place as voting districts. I do apologize in advance for the quietness of the recordings so each time I introduce a snippet from the interviews I advise you to turn it up so you can better hear the sound bite. The first one is from Professor Shelley (Wright 1A 1:23-2:10, 10:20-11:12). This next clip is from Mr. Knierim (Wright 1C 00:18-00:46). This last one is from Commissioner Kefalas (Wright 1B 00:37-1:38, 4:08-4:41). Shelley also mentioned how especially in the 19th century how people's primary interaction with the government was the county for carrying out things like paying taxes (Wright 1A 6:14-6:30). Commissioner Kefalas was also able to add some solid information in his responses (Wright 1B 2:08-3:34, 7:01-7:39, 21:07-21:35). In addition to all of this, I recently went to Texas to attend a wedding, at which I was the best man,

so I was asked to witness the singing of the marriage license, and this also happens to be a function of the county. There was an article that was shared with me and written by Dr. Gerald Webster, a retired professor from the University of Wyoming, where in a paper of his he notes that counties have “been historically the primary division of local government in the United States.... The majority of these counties were formed in an agrarian and less technologically advanced time to render services quite different from those they provide today. (14)” Webster also adds that counties play a key financial role in the context of the state they reside in as well as the communities they host and providing the service of law enforcement for ex the county sheriff (14).

As I was conducting research on this specific subject, I came across a video that did a nice job of depicting the development of counties in the US on YouTube titled “US Historical County/State Boundaries”. For the record, I do recognize the irony of me talking about a video on a podcast, but in all seriousness the clip hits the nail on the head of what I am talking about (AtlasHCBP). The video is about 30 seconds long and starts in the year 1630 with Massachusetts (AtlasHCBP). Prior to jumping into the meat of this podcast and to avoid confusion, I would like to explain the lenses of which I will be viewing the US in terms of how it is broken up in regions. I understand this can be a contentious issue because when I was growing up, I would have light-hearted, but nonetheless intense debates about what region my home state of Colorado resided in. Personally, I used to advocate for it being in the Southwest which was where it was relegated to in the TV show I loved to watch, “How the States got their Shapes” (Stein; “How the...IMDB”; “How the...Wiki”). My opposition would argue that it was either in the Midwest, because, as they were so fond of saying, it was in the middle of the west, cue my eyeroll, or they would say it was in the west. Anyway, that is beside the point because for this project I have selected what I

consider to be a very fair way of breaking up the US into regions in the 2010 US Census Bureau regions map of the US (US Census Bureau).

What I like about this map is that it breaks the US up into major regions and sub-regions that are based on major natural features as well as widely accepted cultural boundaries (US Census Bureau). When describing this I'll move from the west to east with the West region that is broken up into the Pacific subregion that includes the states on the west coast including Alaska and Hawaii (US Census Bureau). Then there is the Mountain subregion that includes New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona (US Census Bureau). From there is the Midwest which is divided into the West North Central and east north central subregions (US Census Bureau). The former of which features the states of Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri whereas the latter has Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin (US Census Bureau). To the south there is, the South region that is split into the three subregions of the west south central, east south central, and south Atlantic (US Census Bureau). The first of these has the states of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana (US Census Bureau). The second of these has Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama (US Census Bureau). The last of these is a group of Florida, the Virginias, the Carolinas, Georgia, Maryland, and Delaware, more content on the last of these to come so stay tuned (US Census Bureau)! But I digress as the region to the north, the Northeast region has the New England subregion as well as the Middle Atlantic subregion (US Census Bureau). The first of these includes the states of Main, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island while the second has New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey (US Census Bureau). Ok so that was a bit of a mouthful, but I think you will find it to be extremely useful, especially for this episode (US Census Bureau).

Going back to the video I mentioned earlier, some interesting takeaways I found from the video was that in the first half, there were plenty of county size/shape changes as states/territories were being made (AtlasHCBP). In addition to this, the first 15 seconds of the video, up until about 1823, shows the development of counties as the nation expanded westward, with most of that time being concentrated on the East coast (AtlasHCBP). Moreover, there seemed to be an incredible leap in the number of counties after the Revolutionary War (AtlasHCBP). In addition to this, counties from New York to South Carolina seemed to be in much higher concentrations than in states that are farther west, south, and north of them like Maine, Florida, and Michigan (AtlasHCBP). The reason that I would like to focus on these states in particular is because they are just as far east as many of the other states that had a high number of counties like Ohio, Vermont, and North Carolina (AtlasHCBP). Also, I would like to point out that at this point in the video there are no counties west of what today is recognized as the state of Oklahoma, and today, about a two hundred years later, the story is very different (AtlasHCBP). My reasoning for emphasis here is that there has been a considerable amount of expansion and development in terms of the existence of counties in the US over a relatively short period of time (AtlasHCBP).

In the last 15 seconds of the video, the rest of the states west of Kansas get “filled in” with counties where the majority of this work gets completed by 1855 (AtlasHCBP). Simultaneously, there also begins to be development of counties in Texas, on the west coast, and the southern part of the Mountain West region (AtlasHCBP; US Census Bureau). With this last subregion one can notice that county lines are following lines of latitude, which is continuing a trend that was used earlier in the century for states west of the Mississippi River and north of the Red River but was not used in states further east (AtlasHCBP; US Census Bureau). And so, by about 1875 eastern Texas and the states in the eastern part of the West North Central Midwest, or as I like to call it because of its awkward phrasing, the plains subregion of the Midwest, really

start to get filled in with counties with counties getting progressively small as time goes on (AtlasHCBP; US Census Bureau). This is especially the case with states west of Kansas but is not the case with Florida which at this point still has sizable counties in the peninsula part of it (AtlasHCBP; US Census Bureau). Furthermore, I would like to point out the example of Oklahoma which at this point does not have any counties and rather is broken up into three regions (AtlasHCBP; US Census Bureau).

Finally, both the Pacific and Mountain West are now filling themselves out with counties, albeit in a different fashion than their eastern counterparts (AtlasHCBP; US Census Bureau). What I mean is that the county sizes are considerably larger than those to the east of them with some counties being in “hubs” if you will, which can be seen in areas like where I-25 is presently in Colorado, which if you don’t already know is just east of the continental divide. The other hubs are Northern California, Northern Oregon, and Western Montana (AtlasHCBP). This actually was the case for several of the states farther east, but I think it stands out much more in the west because of the county size difference. (AtlasHCBP) One more note is that unlike any other state, Wyoming has what seem to be lines of longitude for its counties (AtlasHCBP).

Ok so once 1929 rolls around counties in terms of their size, shape, and amount are approximately what they are presently (AtlasHCBP). The only amendments from here on are that of a few western states like Nevada and Alaska (AtlasHCBP). The reason that I spent so much time talking about this one video is because it shows the clear union between the development of states and counties (AtlasHCBP). Now as the US expanded Westward so did their counties and now population centers were a driving force in the density of counties (AtlasHCBP). Furthermore, it also highlights how the formation of states, many of which were strongly influenced by natural forces like rivers, impacted county shapes as well (AtlasHCBP).

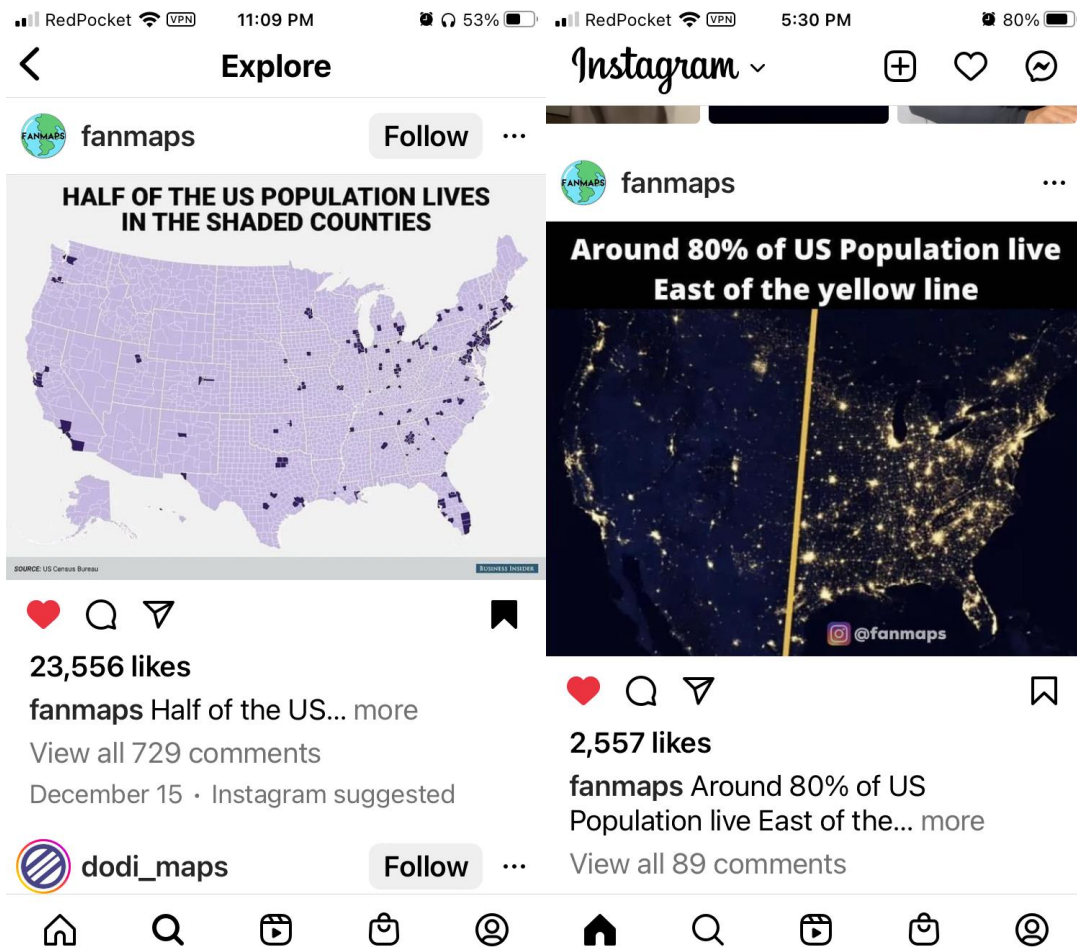
Moving on to changing the focus from the history of county shapes and sizes to their present reality, I found a current county map of the US that does a fantastic job of illustrating this topic (Jones). On this map there is a clear “belt” if you will, from central Texas to New Hampshire where counties are typically very small, of circular or square shape, and are in very high densities (Jones). Specifically, the circular counties are more in the eastern part of the South, so the Atlantic and east south central or as I would rather call it, “deep south” subregions, the east north central or as I prefer to call it the great lakes region of the Midwest, middle Atlantic subregion, and the southern part of the New England subregion (US Census Bureau; Jones). Contrarily, the square-like counties are in the west south central sub-region or “shallow south” which is what I like to call it, the plains part of the Midwest until northern Minnesota (US Census Bureau; Jones). I am making a point to describe these counties because they are all meshed together and differ from places like Maine and Southern Florida where counties are more unique in shape, larger in size, and lower in density (Jones). Speaking of, all of the Western region of the US is very similar to this, including western Texas with a higher density and lower size of counties in areas with higher population densities such as I-25 in Colorado, the San Francisco Bay area in California, and the western coasts of Oregon and Washington (US Census Bureau; Jones). Knierim does a great job elaborating upon boundaries in the US by saying that (Wright 1C 22:51-24:40)

Regarding the size of the counties in the US, not only do they appear to be larger in the west, but they in fact are also larger in a numerical sense. In fact, while western states, those in the pacific and mountain sub regions, have an average county size of approximately over 5,000 square miles and an average amount of about 33 counties per state; however, in Alaska they are called boroughs (US Census Bureau; TIGER database; Let’s Go LA; Open Data Network; “County Statistics”). On the contrary, counties in every other region are much smaller in size and

greater in number (Let's Go LA). This can be seen in how the South, Midwest, and Northeast combined have an average county size of about 816 square miles and an average number of about 87 counties per state (Let's Go LA). In fact, the top three states with the most counties in them are Texas with 245, Georgia with 159, and Kentucky with 120, all states residing in the southern region (Webster 17). To put it another way, the US has a total of 3,143 counties and just these three states combined make up almost 17% of the counties in the US (Webster 17). Consequently, Kentucky has an average county size of 335 square miles which is the lowest average county size in the US (Webster 17).

With the guys I was able to interview for this project they all emphasized the element of population being a key factor in determining the number of counties as well as their size (Wright 1C; 1B; 1A). The following are instances in the interviews where they mention the key dynamic of population in determining county size and number. The first segments are from Professor Shelley, (Wright 1A 9:30-9:38, 11:32-12:20). These next clips are from Mr. Knierim (Wright 1C 6:00-6:03, 10:12-10:16, 11:20-11:25). Knierim was referring to population being the largest factor in influencing county size (Wright 1C). Then we have some notes from Commissioner Kefalas (Wright 1B 8:57-10:05, 10:38-11:08, 12:30-12:50, 14:14-14:41, 18:00-18:40).

In addition to this I was also fortunate enough to snag some solid maps courtesy of Instagram. One of them shows the counties where half of the US population lives. Spoiler, the vast majority of them are east of the mountain west and they tend to be small in size. Another map shows this in an even clearer way by placing a line that cuts through the middle of Texas and goes northwards with the caption of about 80% of the people in the US live east of this line.



Other factors in county size and shape that were mentioned in the interviews included development of transportation technology, political decisions, and physical features like topography (Wright 1A 2:43-3:30, 4:07-4:13, 5:12-5:55, 8:27-8:39, 14:11-14:30, 14:34-14:47, 19:30-19:58). I can confirm that going to eastern Texas recently for a wedding that the land is notably flat. Knierim also added to this by making notes on the history of the origin of counties in the US as well as other political, physical, and technological factors (Wright 1C 1:15-2:45, 4:45-5:57, 6:38-7:22, 8:37-9:19). Commissioner Kefalas added to the historical and political aspects of this with his responses (Wright 1B 3:38-4:03, 7:44-8:12). The article from Dr. Webster elaborates more upon what Professor Shelley was saying and adds to it: “County sizes were often determined by the distance a citizen could conveniently travel in one day to carry on

business at the county seat. Since the horse and buggy was the principle means of transportation during the period in which many counties were formed, their sizes were frequently kept quite small (Webster 14; Wright 1A)". Webster also mentions a couple of examples how counties have increased in size because of the merging of counties in Tennessee and Georgia (16-17).

In my interview with Commissioner Kefalas, he directed me to a few websites that have an incredible amount of information residing within them (Wright 1B; "COLORADO COUNTIES"; "How much do"; Mountain Cat Media). For example, on naco.org, NACO an acronym for the national association of counties, there is a plethora of data on maps for each county in the US including but not limited to their laws, economics, and demographics. He also mentioned CCI, an acronym for Colorado counties incorporated, which is a nonprofit organization that works to help county commissioners in Colorado to solve issues across the state by informing commissioners on current issues in the state (Wright 1B). A third source that Commissioner Kefalas noted was Counties and Commissioners acting together which is also known as CCAT, which is a group of county commissioners in CO with a very similar purpose to CCI (Wright 1B).

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