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STAFF ACTIVITIES IN THE TEXAS  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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ABSTRACT

In this study multivariate analysis is applied to the allocation of staff time among members of the Texas House of Representatives. Ideology of the representative is found to be an important factor in explaining differences in staff behavior. Chief staffers serving liberal Democrats and Republicans report spending less time on constituency service, and more time on policy research, than do staffers serving conservative Democrats. There are differences between the parties, but not between the ideologies, on time spent with lobbyists. Other variables, such as urban population of the district, and the years a legislator has served in the House, show slight relationships with staff activities.

The study of the attitudes and behavior of legislators has long been one of the staples of political science. In recent years, attention has also begun to focus on the staffs of representatives and committees. In the 1970s, some investigators went so far as to suggest that the activities of the personal staffs of members of Congress are fully as important politically as the behavior of representatives themselves (Fox and Hammond, 1977, pp. 1-2; Malbin, 1980, pp. 4, 27). If this is true, the awakening interest in legislative staffs is justified, and should be expanded.

The research which has so far been conducted on legislative staffs, however, tends to have four weaknesses. First, earlier explorations of legislative staffs, usually showed little concern for the use of quantitative evidence. Until recently, the typical discussion of staff activities included statements about their functions without much effort to measure them (Kofmehl, 1962, pp. 171-179; Price, 1972, pp. 197, 329-331; Redman, 1973, *passim*).

Second, where discussion of staff activity has been quantitative, it has tended to assume the form of what might be termed a "one-variable equation." That is, the amount of time that staffs spend on various tasks has been listed, but not related to outside, independent variables which may account for differences in the observed

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behavior. John Saloma, for example, found that more time was given by Congressional representatives' personal staffs to correspondence than to constituency service, and more time to constituency service than to legislative support, but he did not investigate the background variables that might explain these variations (Saloma, 1969, p. 185). Do the staffs of conservative Republicans pay more attention to constituency service than those of liberal Democrats? Do Northern staffs engage in more policy research than their Southern counterparts? Such variations would provide a clue to patterns of political behavior as important as roll-call voting, but their compilation was not attempted by Saloma. Other studies of staff activity also suffer from this problem (Fox and Hammond, 1977, pp. 186-187; Fenno, 1978, pp. 40-49; Johannes, 1979, pp. 327-344).

One exception to this generalization appears to be an unpublished manuscript by Norman Ornstein, as quoted in a textbook by Lawrence Dodd. Ornstein correlated the amount of time that Congressional staff members spent on legislative activities with background variable of their representatives. He discovered that the more junior, ideologically liberal, and urban-based members used more of their staff resources for legislative purposes (Orstein, 1974, p. 3; Dodd, 1975, p. 25). Another exception is a study in which Bennett and Johnson concluded that liberal United States Senators tend to spend higher percentages of their staff allotment than do conservative Senators (Benett and Johnson, 1981, p. 56). Unfortunately, the authors did not pursue their investigation to determine what sorts of activities the greater allowances are used to fund.

Third, almost all research into legislative staffs has so far been conducted on the United States Congress. If staffs are important in the federal government, they are also important in the states. Such attention that has been focussed on state legislative staffs, however, has been even less systematic than that directed at Congress. That is, scholars have been concerned only with, say, total staffing available to legislators (Robinson, 1970, p. 386), or the activities of staff in a highly general way (Jewell and Patterson, 1977, p. 229), without providing specific information on their behavior.

The fourth difficulty of staff research presents not so much a problem as an opportunity. Clearly, one of the major incentives for studying legislative staffs is to provide us with a method of indirectly observing legislative behavior.

Over the last generation, many scholars have investigated the self-concept (often called "role") of American legislators (Wahlke, et al, 1962, pp. 8-32; Davidson, 1969, pp. 72-142; Jewell and Patterson, 1977; pp. 369-373). In these studies, investigators have attempted to discover whether representatives see themselves as "tribunes," "inventors," or "brokers," as "trustees" or "delegates," in other words, whether they define their functions and purposes in different, identifiable ways. These studies have been rich with data about the attitudes of legislators, and about background variables, but they have, with few exceptions (Jones, 1973), paid little attention to what representatives actually do. If the role assumed by a legislator is important, however, it is because different subjective roles simply different activity within the political system, and hence, different outcomes from the legislative process.

Perhaps one of the reasons that little research has been done on the actual behavior of legislators is that, except for the acquisition of roll-call records, keeping track of so large and active a group of people would require a huge, expensive and obtrusive research project. Much of this difficulty could be avoided, however, by recording the activity of staff members, rather than the representatives themselves. The staff exists to further the aims of the representative. It therefore seems plausible to suppose that a compilation of the amount of time that staff members devote to various categories of activity is a good indication of the quantity of resources the representative wishes to expend on different tasks. We do not argue that the staff is a perfect substitute for the legislator in terms of activity. Individuals representatives may wish to divide labor with their staffs, delegating some tasks and reserving others for themselves. Still, the staff is the chief instrument of the representative, and as such presents us with a good proxy for his or her own behavior. Such, at any rate, is the assumption here.

With the acquisition of records of staff time and background variables on the representative, the opportunity arises to explore the links between the social forces impinging on the legislator, and his or her response in terms of staff activity.

The present investigation is an attempt to advance the study of legislative staffs by applying multivariate analysis to the behavior of personal staff members of the Texas House of Representatives. Estimates by chief staff members of the amount of time they spend daily on legislative support activities are related to background variables pertaining to legislators' personal characteristics and constituencies. Although the variations uncovered are not large, some independent variables do have an effect on reported staff activities, and to an extent large enough to suggest the desirability of further research. Notably, the ideology of representatives seems to play a significant part in determining the behavior of the chief staffer.

#### Methodology

During the course of the regular session of the 66th Texas legislature in 1979, all of the chief personal staffers to House members were contacted. One hundred eleven of the one hundred fifty agreed to be interviewed, and to fill out a "diary" of the average amount of time they spent each day on legislative support activities. Printed on the diary form were instructions designed to clarify the categories into which each activity fell. During the interview, care was given to making each respondent aware of the requirements of the questionnaire. Categories of activity were the following.

1. Helping people in the district (constituency service). We made clear to them that this category included casework and correspondence, but not contact with representatives from interest groups, even if those were from the legislator's district.
2. Policy research. The activities that fell under this category were listed as "checking on the status of bills, researching and drafting legislation." It was defined so as not to include time spent in committee hearings.
3. Time spent with members of other staffs. We specified that this could be either by phone or through personal contact.

4. Time with lobbyists. So as to avoid the pejorative connotations of the word "lobbyist," on the diaries these were called "representatives from interest groups." Respondents were instructed to include both office visits from lobbyists, and attendance at evening functions sponsored by the various groups.
5. Time with the legislator.
6. The average length of the staff member's day.

This information is of course not completely reliable, because it consists of estimations. We attempted to impress upon our respondents the need for accuracy in filling out the questionnaires, but we could not supply an independent check on the results. Self-report is of course a common and accepted form of social research, but the reader would be aware of the "recall" nature of our data anyway.

Additionally, we obtained information on the legislator for whom each chief staffer worked.

Each representative was assigned an "ideology" rating, based on data supplied by the Texas Conservative Union. Like the ratings of more nationally-oriented groups such as the Americans for Democratic Action and the Americans for Constitutional Action, these were based on the conformity of a representative's vote on twenty-two selected bills to TCU recommendations. Three examples of such bills are those to establish pilot service centers for displaced homemakers (TCU: no), reduce state welfare appropriations for A. F. D. C. (TCU: yes), and create a state agency to implement affirmative action (TCU: no).

Moreover, information was gathered as to the representative's party, length of service in the House, the rural, urban, or metropolitan character of his or her district, and the region of the state in which it was found. Coding information on all these variables can be found in the appendix.

The analysis to follow consists of a discussion of the relationship between variations in reported chief staff behavior, as measured by our diaries, and variations in characteristics of the representatives who employed them.

The one hundred eleven chief staffers who supplied usable data serve seventy-four percent of the representatives in the Texas House. Republicans, conservatives, and representatives from metropolitan districts are slightly over-represented in our sample, legislators from districts in the western half of the state somewhat under-represented. None of the differences are great enough to skew our results seriously.

#### A Note On Politics In Texas

Although we believe that the political process in Texas is sufficiently similar to that in other states to make comparison useful, it does have its unrepresentative aspects. Two facts are particularly relevant to the present study: Texas' "Southern" tradition of domination by the Democratic party, and its relative lack of a professional, well-equipped state legislature.

Although Texas has in recent years emerged from one-party domination at the level of national offices, it is still overwhelmingly Democratic at the local level. It is not uncommon for the state's voters to elect Republican members of Congress, or to vote for the Republican candidate in Presidential contests. But Bill Clements, elected in 1978 (and defeated in 1982) was the first Republican governor since Reconstruction, and during the course of our study the state legislature was a Democratic domain. In the 1979 House, only fifteen percent of the members represented the minority party.

The traditional pattern of local democratic dominance has meant a balance of political forces within the state that is common in the South but somewhat anomalous elsewhere. The small Republican party is based predominantly in the suburbs of the larger cities. Virtually all Republicans are very conservative. The majority Democratic party is split into two clearly recognizable factions. Democrats from the central portions of the cities tend to be liberal, while their fellow partisans who represent rural, suburban, and small-city districts are conservative (Kraemer and Newell, 1979, pp. 25-41).

The relative position of the parties has consequences for the present analysis. It should be borne in mind that, as members of a marginal party Republicans might not be integrated with Texas' economic/political power the way they would be in a state where they were a viable opposition vehicle. Much of the battling between say, consumer and producer interests, that in another state occurs between the parties, in Texas probably takes place between liberal and conservative wings of the Democrats. The Republican party seems to function more as an ideological gadfly than as a spokesman for a strong and stable coalition of interests.

This interpretation of the position of the Republican party in the legislature is of course a testable proposition, and one purpose of a large-scale study might be to measure differences between the parties. Such a project, however, is made extremely difficult in the present instance by the very fact that makes the Republican party marginal: its small size. Of the one hundred eleven chief staff members who completed our diaries, only twenty served Republicans. This total is too small to permit much meaningful statistical manipulation. We will look for differences between the parties, and, in particular, for differences between the Republicans and conservative Democrats, but the reader should not expect much in the way of statistically significant relationships.

Besides its party composition, the Texas legislature as an institution has aspects worth noting. It is limited Constitutionally to meeting for 140-day sessions, during odd-numbered years only. A legislator's annual salary of \$7200 in 1979 was the least remunerative of any in the ten most populous states, and insured that representatives had to spend such of their time when the House was not in session making a living instead of thinking about public policy (Crain, et al, 1980, pp. 186-187).

An inadequate salary was complemented by inadequate staff allowances. House members received \$3750 per month between sessions and \$4800 per month during sessions for staff salaries and expenses (Crain, p. 190). As a result, there were few educated, experienced staffers in the Texas House. They tended to be young, and many representatives relied on undergraduate volunteers from the nearby University of Texas campus for part-time help. We avoided these part-time workers when conducting our research.

### Constituency Service

Furnishing help to constituents has for decades been recognized as one of the principal activities of American legislators and their staff (Matthews, 1960, pp. 224-228; Olson, 1980, pp. 135-139). Recently there has been speculation in both the political science literature and in the press that the more recently-elected members of Congress tend to concentrate on constituency service to an even greater extent than their predecessors, with balefull results for the political system (Florina, 1977, 1977; Alpern and Hubbard, 1977, pp. 26-27). It would be interesting to see if background variables account for any of the differences in the amount of time invested in constituency service by the staffs of the Texas House. If so, it would suggest hypotheses for research about Congressional behavior.

Table One  
Constituency Service By Ideology

	Less		More		
Liberal	17 36.2	20 42.6	10 21.3	47 42.3	
Conser- vative	15 23.4	25 39.1	24 37.5	64 57.7	
	32 28.8	45 40.5	34 30.6	111	
	gamma = .30		Chi square p = .14		
	r = .19				

As Table One illustrates, there is indeed a relationship between some background variables and reported constituency service. Conservatives tend to give more time to "Helping people in your district" than do liberals. The conservative advantage is even more marked when only Democratic representatives are evaluated, as in Table Two.

This relationship is somewhat diminished, but not eliminated, when length of service and urban/rural variations are controlled. More liberal legislators tend to have served in the House fewer years than their conservative colleagues; they also tend to represent center-city districts. It is therefore possible that the greater tendency of conservatives to assign their chief staff members to work on constituency service is a result not of their ideology but of other factors.

Table Two  
Constituency Service By Ideology  
Democrats Only

	Less		More		
Liberal	17 36.2	20 42.6	10 21.3		47 51.6
Conser- vative	8 18.2	16 36.4	20 45.5		44 48.4
	25 27.5	36 39.6	36 33.0		91
	gamma = .43		Chi square p < .05		
	r = .27				

The data, however, do not support such an interpretation. Among all levels of experience, conservative staffers report spending more time working on constituency service than do liberal staffers. Conservatives from three of the four categories of urban constituency (those representing rural, urban, and metropolitan/center city districts) tend to have their staffs spend more time on constituency service. Those from the fourth category (metropolitan/suburban) show no clear pattern.

The ideology interpretation is reinforced by the data in the stepwise multiple regression of Table Three. Using Democrats only, and eliminating one outlier, ideology alone explains fifteen percent of the variance in constituency service, with a steep Beta slope of 1.4. Length of service and urbanity of district add an additional three percent of explanatory power. When Republicans are retained in the equation, the pattern continues, but is weakened.

These relationships are by no means spectacular, but they are steady and consistent. Districts in the more traditional, conservative areas of Texas are represented by more experienced legislators, whose chief staff aides concentrate to a somewhat greater extent than those of other members on servicing the constituents. Regardless of the length of service or type of constituency, however, conservative Democrats tend to concentrate more of their resources on personally serving the people in their districts than do Republicans or liberal Democrats.



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Table Three  
Stepwise Multiple Regression: Constituency Service With  
Ideology, Length of Service and Urbanity; Democrats Only  
(One Outlier Eliminated)

Dependent Variable: Constituency Service

Independent Variable: Ideology

Multiple  $r^2 = .15$      $B = 1.4$

Independent Variable: Length of Service

Multiple  $r^2 = .1774$      $B = 2.75$

Independent Variable: Percent urban of district

Multiple  $r^2 = .1776$      $B = -.60$

Significance of equation:  $p < .001$

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It is clear from this analysis that Republicans and liberal Democrats share important characteristics. Both expend fewer staff resources on constituency service. This is partly, but by no means wholly, attributable to the fact that they both tend to represent metropolitan districts, and have a shorter tenure in the House. It poses a question as to whether it is their more explicitly ideological orientation, or perhaps their position as "outsiders" in Texas politics, that leads them to a lesser concentration on "Helping people in your district." Such a question is beyond the scope of this study, but its answer does not seem impossible with the right research design.

#### Policy Research

If the staffs of liberal representatives tend to do less constituency service, of what do they do more? A partial answer is that they spend slightly more time researching policy issues. Our findings on this subject complement Ornstein's conclusions about Congressional staffs.

There is no distinction between the parties per se in the amount of time that chief staffers report they spend conducting policy research. Once again, the difference is attributable to ideology, as illustrated in Table Four. And again, the difference is most striking within the Democrats, as illustrated by Table Five.

Table Four  
Policy Research By Ideology

	Less		More	
Liberal	5 10.6	16 34.0	26 55.3	47 42.3
Conser- vative	24 37.5	17 26.6	23 35.9	64 57.7
	29 26.1	33 29.7	49 44.1	111
	gamma = -.44		Chi square p < .01	
	r = -.28			

Table Five  
Policy Research By Ideology  
Democrats Only

	Less		More	
Liberal	5 10.6	16 34.0	26 55.3	47 51.6
Conser- vative	19 43.2	12 27.3	13 29.5	44 48.4
	24 26.4	28 30.8	39 42.9	91
	gamma = -.54		Chi square p < .01	
	r = -.36			

Some of this relationship washes out when length of service is controlled; conservatives tend to have served longer and do less research. There remains a considerable difference between the ideologies, however, especially among those with fewer years experience. As Table Six illustrates, liberals of four years or fewer years experience are more likely to devote staff time to policy research, a relationship that is heightened dramatically if Democrats are examined separately, as in Table Seven. Once again, it appears that Republicans, all of whom are conservative, allocate staff resources in a manner more similar to liberal than to conservative Democrats.

Table Six  
Policy Research By Ideology Among  
Representatives With Four or Fewer  
Years of Service

	Less		More		
Liberal	1	9	19		29
	3.4	31.0	65.5		51.6
Conser- vative	10	7	10		27
	37.0	25.9	31.0		48.2
	11	16	29		56
	19.6	28.6	51.8		
	gamma = -.59		Chi square p < .01		
	r = -.40				

Table Seven  
Policy Research By Ideology Among  
Representatives With Four or Fewer  
Years of Service; Democrats Only

	Less		More		
Liberal	1	9	19		29
	3.4	31.0	65.5		64.4
Conser- vative	7	5	4		16
	43.8	31.3	25.0		35.6
	8	14	23		45
	17.8	31.1	51.1		
	gamma = -.73		Chi square p < .01		
	r = -.51				

### Time With Lobbyists

The hypothesis about the general irrelevance of the Republicans in the Texas legislature is underscored by our findings on the amount of time spent with representatives from interest groups. As shown in Table Eight, Democrats tend to devote slightly more time to such activities than do Republicans, which is what we would expect if the minority party is peripheral to the structure of power within the state.

Table Eight  
Time With Lobbyists By Party

	Less		More	
Demo	46	16	29	91
	50.5	17.6	31.9	82.0
Repub	14	4	2	20
	70.0	20.0	10.0	18.0
	60	20	31	111
	54.1	18.0	27.9	
	gamma = -.42		Chi square p < .13	
	r = -.18			

Perhaps surprisingly, however, there is no difference between liberal and conservative representatives on the subject of time with lobbyists when party is controlled. Democratic staffers serving liberals and conservative report spending virtually identical amounts of time meeting with representatives from interest groups. It is possible and even probable, that members of the two ideological camps spend time with lobbyists from different kinds of interests, but our data are not sufficiently subtle to detect such variations.

### Residual Variables

There are no important differences in the relationships between background variables and the time that chief staffers report they spend with members of other staffs and with their own legislator, or in the length of their day. Staffers from rural districts spend slightly more time with other staffs than do staffers from urban or metropolitan districts. Democrats spend slightly more time with their bosses than do Republicans, and report a somewhat longer day. These relationships, however, are not strong enough to justify an extension of the analysis.

### Some Possible Objections

As with all research, the present study may be vulnerable to methodological criticisms, but we wish to forestall some of them by pointing out some potential objections that do not apply.

There is first the possibility that the existence of district offices skews the results. Some Texas legislators keep offices in their districts, as well as in Austin. If requests from constituents for aid are handled in the districts, it could free the Austin staff from such activity, thereby distorting our data.

This fear appears to be groundless, however. During the interviews with staff members, we paid special attention to those whose representatives maintained district offices. They unanimously agreed that constituency service was handled entirely from Austin. Most requests for aid came directly to the capitol anyway, because, while citizens often do not know the location of a local office, most know that the representative works in the state capital. In addition, the standard practice is that even those constituency requests which are made at the local level are immediately channeled to Austin, where they are processed. The local offices are used as campaign information centers. We are therefore confident that the existence of district offices does not weaken our findings.

Second, it is possible that the quantity of resources under the control of a representative may affect the total amount of effort available to his or her staff, and hence the percentage of time devoted to specific activities. Suppose, for example, that liberal legislators had more money, with which they hired more staff. The staff underlings might then be assigned to, say, constituency service, leaving the chief staffer free to concentrate on policy research. Under these conditions the chief staff member of a conservative legislator, with a smaller staff, would have less time to spend on research. Given these circumstances, our findings would be an artifact of having forgotten to include an intervening variable in our analysis.

Such does not appear to be the case, however. We included staff payroll figures from the Texas House's Annual Financial Report in our analysis. The correlation (Pearson  $r$ ) between constituency service and staff payroll is  $-.06$ . The correlation between policy research and staff payroll is  $.10$ . The correlations between the two staff activity variables and the total staff budget (payroll plus phone bills, mailing costs, etc.) are no more impressive. We think these correlations are so low as to allow us to dismiss the possibility that the relationships we found are spurious.

A third potential objection is that our analysis extends only to staff time expended during the 140-day biennial session, and that we ignore staff activities between sessions. We acknowledge this to be true, but we are not claiming to study all possible staff activities at all times. We maintain that an accounting of the way a representative employs his or her staff during the session is of considerable interest. No doubt a much larger investigation of the Texas legislature would include an exhaustive discussion of staffing, but our own goals are modest.

## Conclusion

As with much research, this investigation has raised more questions than it has answered. It is clear that in one session of the Texas legislature, chief staff members for representatives from the House varied their activities systematically in conjunction with the political situation of the legislator. Ideology was the most important variable associated with these differences. Republicans and liberal democrats were relatively more likely to spend time on policy research, and less likely to spend time on constituency service, than were conservative Democrats.

None of these associations were particularly robust, but the fact that they existed at all suggests other avenues of investigation. It would, for example, be interesting to see if similar patterns prevail the United States Congress. In a recent study of marginal districts, Richard Born found that incumbents elected to that body since 1966 have fortified their electoral margins more efficiently than those elected prior to that year; he avoided investigating whether that fact might be due to their greater emphasis on constituency service (Born, 1979, p. 816). Such would be an interesting topic of investigation. It would also be interesting to see if variations within patterns of constituency service on the part of new members could be attributed to their ideologies.

Secondly, it might prove illuminating to replicate this study in other state legislatures. Other states have different party systems and constitutional settings and different blends of constituency and ideology, but that does not mean that the patterns evident here could not occur elsewhere, perhaps even in sharpened form.

Additionally, this study has implications for thinking about the place of legislators in the American political system. If some of these findings should be generalized, they would present students of the legislative process with problems of interpretation. The reason why a representative's ideological position on policy issues should be associated with his or her allocation of staff time is not immediately clear. We cannot answer the questions raised by the data, only suggest further research to help the thinking about them.

## Appendix: Coding the Data

### I. Staff time

Most members of the Texas House have several full-time and part-time personal staff employees. Some members employed only one staff person; such a situation presented no problems about whose workload to record. When there were several staff employees, an effort was made to identify the "chief of staff," and that person was asked to fill out the diaries. No part-time employees were used in this study.

The diaries consisted of a short, clear set of directions followed by spaces for the staffers to estimate the number of hours and minutes that they spent on various activities per day. Of the 150 members of the House, staff employees of 111 supplied usable data.

Compilation of the diaries yielded the following summary statistics:

<u>Category of activity</u>	<u>Mean minutes/day</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Helping people in district	158.3	98.2
Policy research	137.2	76.5
Time with other staffs	59.1	49.7
Time with lobbyists	82.8	53.4
Time with representative	113.4	79
Length of Day	630.4	156.7

The total number of minutes in the average day, as determined by summing the categories of activity (550.8), does not equal the category "length of day" because one category--miscellaneous activity--has been omitted. Categories of time were recoded into approximate thirds. For "time with lobbyists," for example, 0 through 60 minutes was coded "low," 61 through 119 coded "moderate," and 120 through 240 coded "high."

## II. Background variables

### A. Ideology

The Texas Conservative Union publishes ratings of House and Senate members based on its compilation of "key" roll-call votes. During the 66th legislature, there were twenty-two of these key votes. The mean rating for representatives, on a scale in which zero equals perfect liberalism and one-hundred equals perfect conservatism, was 52.7, with a standard deviation of 28. We recoded so that a TCU score of 0 to 49 made a representative a "liberal," and a score of 50 to 100 made him or her a "conservative."

### B. Years of service

Unlike the U.S. Congress, the Texas House of Representatives is not a place where people typically stay a long time. Mean years of service was 5, with a standard deviation of 4.2. We recoded the data so that 0 to 4 equalled "lowest," 5 to 8 "moderate," and 9 to 27 "highest."

### C. Rural/urban/metropolitan

Most districts were heavily urban. The mean urban percent of population was 82.3, with a standard deviation of 25.6. Recoding was accomplished in the following manner: 0 to 49 percent urban was classified as "rural," and 50 to 99 percent "urban." The numerous districts that were 100 percent urban were located on maps and classified as either "metropolitan/center-city" or "metropolitan/suburban." Since not all the districts fell neatly into an obvious geographic category, this coding is inexact.

### D. Region

Districts were placed into one of four regions of the state based on geography and the historical/cultural background of the area. No regional variations are discussed in the analysis because such differences were too small to warrant serious attention.

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