

Reinvention and Reinvestment in Regional Separatism: How Rural Conservatives Organize in the Western United States

Throughout the Western United States, regional separatist movements have made efforts to amend state and national borders. Most recently, rural conservatives living in Democrat-controlled states have developed a lineage of regional separatist movements. The Greater Idaho, State of Jefferson, and Liberty State movements compete over the rural counties of Eastern Washington, Southern and Eastern Oregon, and Northern California, each with their own bids for amending state borders along the Pacific Coast. These movements have distinct border proposals with overlapping territorial claims, but they all maintain a focus on sub-state borders—none of them seek total sovereignty.¹ The Greater Idaho movement is the most recent border change effort to emerge. Unlike its competitor movements, which seek to create a 51st state out of rural lands, Greater Idahoans seek to merge aggrieved rural counties with Idaho. This strategy represents an enduring commitment to regional separatism while also innovating on the strategies of older peer movements.

This paper seeks to answer two questions: first, why did the Greater Idaho movement emerge amidst a landscape of competing, mutually exclusive regional separatist movements? Second, what explains the affinity between rural conservatives in the American West and regional separatism as a strategy for political transformation? This dual-question approach nods to two critical lines of inquiry in the social movements literature: first, explaining movement emergence, and second, evaluating movement strategies. It is atypical for a competitor movement to emerge under these conditions (i.e. over-saturation, limited prospects, and mutual exclusivity). Moreover, all of these regional movements have virtually no political or economic feasibility, which begs the question of why new efforts have doubled down on border-change advocacy. In the western United States, rural conservatives seem stuck on regional separation.

Various models have been presented to help explain movement emergence. While there are disagreements as to what causes social movements to form, scholars emphasize factors such as the availability of resources (McCarthy & Zald 1976), political opportunity structures (McAdam 1982), deprivation of constituents (Gurr 1970), and the degree to which a movement's base shares common understandings of their problems and solutions (Snow et al. 1986). While rural conservatives have demonstrated communal frustration with their state governments and see border change as the way to move forward, the material conditions of the movement would not typically lend themselves to successful development. Competitor separatist movements had already consumed a great deal of a limited pool of resources by the time Greater Idaho emerged, and their repeated failure would normally suggest that there were limited opportunities for success at the time. It thus remains unclear as to why the movement emerged when it did and why it chose to follow so closely in the footsteps of its failed peer movements.

When specifically looking at regional separatist movements, the case literature focuses on groups with a stronger sense of national identity (e.g. Quebec, Catalonia, Puerto Rico, Taiwan, etc.). Greater Idaho and its peer movements are distinct from these efforts in obvious ways. The aggrieved group organizes around political and rural identity politics rather than ethnic, linguistic, religious, etc. community. And, while rural conservatives have raised these efforts since the early days of white settlement in the Pacific West, there is no ancestral homeland that Greater Idahoans seek to reclaim. Potentially weaker ties between participants and with the land

¹ Other competitor movements in the region do seek total sovereignty over their territorial bid (e.g. CalExit, Cascadia, the Northwest Imperative, etc.).

distinguish efforts like Greater Idaho from many of the landmark studies of regional separation and nationalism. Even more, Greater Idaho's goal of integration (rather than sovereignty) places its ambitions in a different arena than other efforts. However, this case offers an opportunity to evaluate how issues of weaker community-land connections and reduced scale operate in conversation with the existing literature. Without suggesting that Greater Idaho and any other movement are equivalent, I argue that this set of cases could help develop theories for how more radically local nationalistic movements emerge and proliferate.

The primary data source for this study is the close qualitative analysis of 46 Oregonian town halls on the Greater Idaho proposal from February 2021 to August 2023. The Greater Idaho movement passed ballot measures in 12 Oregonian counties, which require county boards of commissioners to hold town hall discussions with their communities two or three times annually. Recordings of these sessions were accessed through public records requests, transcribed, and qualitatively coded for themes related to the movement's emergence and advocacy approach. Additionally, I reviewed footage from sessions in the Oregon and Idaho state legislatures where the proposal was considered (specifically, Idaho House Joint Memorial 1, 2023 and Oregon Senate Joint Memorial 2, 2023). Finally, I reviewed materials produced by the Greater Idaho movement, including white papers, opinion columns, economic impact reports, and media interviews.

I find that competing beliefs regarding the feasibility of existing movements and disagreements over how advocacy should be carried out led some rural residents to abandon existing state proposals (e.g. the State of Jefferson and Liberty State). Greater Idaho organizers and supporters felt that movements like the State of Jefferson and the Liberty went too far with their territorial bids by seeking statehood. While there is consensus that merging aggrieved rural counties with Idaho is also unlikely to succeed, Greater Idahoans rightfully point out that the political repercussions of such a move would be more limited than those of creating a new, conservative-controlled state. Further, the issue of economic feasibility is lessened under the Greater Idaho proposal as there would be no need to create and fund an entirely new state government. Beyond the feasibility of competitor movements, Greater Idahoans also felt alienated by the extreme performances of their peer movements—declaring independence, supporting armed protests, and generally circumventing the prescribed constitutional process for amending state borders. Greater Idahoans seek to secede from Oregon “the right way.”

Despite ideological disagreements between Greater Idaho and its peer movements, Greater Idaho supporters continue to pursue regional separation because of strongly held beliefs about the relationship between land and political rights; these beliefs are likely held in common with other movements, though this study is limited to conclusions related to Greater Idaho. Greater Idahoans feel entitled to disproportionate political rights due to the size of the land they occupy. In town hall meetings, Greater Idahoans regularly supported non-proportional systems of representation that belie the precedent of one person—one vote. These counter-majoritarian ethics were accompanied by openly nationalistic discussions of population sorting. Believing that borders exist to enclose like groups, Greater Idahoans seek to merge with Idaho so that both Oregon and Idaho may become more homogenous states. And, Idahoan supporters of the border move indicated that infusing their state population with rural conservatives would be an ideal mechanism to dilute the growing proportion of progressives moving to the state from California. Throughout these discussions, it becomes clear that, at least for some, partisanship is a dog whistle for racial sorting. Those living in Oregon's cities and the Californians moving into Idaho are ideologically distinct from rural conservatives, but they are also more racially diverse.

Ultimately, I argue that the Greater Idaho movement *reinvents* regional separatism while still *reinvesting* in the strategy of regional separation. The effort has innovated on earlier strategies of regional separatism through a growing moderation of goals and insistence on politically correct forms of separatism. However, the moderation of the movement is still grounded in far-right nationalistic and authoritarian principles: that land should be bordered to enclose territorially-based groups and that those with more land should have a greater say in policy. Greater Idaho, while moderate in the face of its peers, continues the region's legacy of far-right political extremism.

These empirical findings support an intervention in the theoretical literature on rural political behavior. Rural studies scholars have theorized that rurality is a distinct lens through which rural residents perceive society, politics, and the economy. It has been theorized that, like other social identities, rural residents make sense of the world through their experiences as rural Americans.² Rural Americans perceive themselves to have been cheated by the system (Hochschild 2016), unfairly ignored by metropolitan politics (Cramer 2016 and Wuthnow 2018), and abandoned in the wake of economic transitions away from extractive resource industries (Silva 2019). These theories focus extensively on grievances. What these theories have not yet captured is what rural communities see as the locus of their power when they do organize, even in light of rural decline. I argue that rural communities see their lands as the basis of their political power which can help to explain why rural communities have a history of land-centered conflicts (i.e. corporate and government eminent domain battles, conflicts with the Bureau of Land Management, and regional separatist movements). Understanding how rural communities continually leverage their collective landedness reveals a view of democratic participation based on property rights rather than equal representation.

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² Importantly, rural communities are not a monolith. Much of the literature on rural political organizing has focused on right-wing politics, but there is extensive room to grow in the direction of rural ethnic studies and rural progressive political organizing.