Method and Procedures for Metropolitan Area Selection

This study will gather demographic, census, election, and survey research data for 12 of the nation’s largest metropolitan regions. The regions will be defined as they are by the United States Bureau of the Census as Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) or as Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs) in the 1990 Decennial Census Report. The primary local units of analysis within these regions will be the county subdivisions or communities that have the status of Place or Census Defined Place. Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas, or CMSAs, which are comprised of two or more PMSAs, will not be used, principally because the presence of multiple major metropolitan centers within them would make the subsequent categorization and comparative analysis of their municipalities unnecessarily complex. The selection of metropolitan regions for this study produces a final sample that is at once representative of the larger political geography of the nation and provides sufficient numbers of the sorts of communities or places within each selected region amenable to comparative categorical analysis of places and their residents both within and between regions, across time. Within the context of these geographic and internal structural priorities, effort was made to maximize the variety of metropolitan regions as they are distinguished from each other in ways that go beyond their regional location, such as by age, economic foundations, and by other characteristics that will be discussed on a case by case basis. The Bureau of the Census divides the lower 48 states into four geographic regions—Midwest, Northeast, South, and West. Metropolitan areas in each region selected for analysis are as follows: Midwest—Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis; Northeast—Philadelphia, Boston, Pittsburgh; South—Atlanta, Charlotte, Nashville; West—Denver, Phoenix, Portland. The logic behind these selections is discussed below.

Metropolitan selections within the Midwest Region are perhaps the easiest to specify. For historical reasons, the corporation limits of the majority of the region’s central cities were fixed, or all but fixed, in the early decades of the twentieth century. Yet, these metropolitan areas have expanded enormously in the ensuing decades. As a consequence, most of the Midwest’s metropolitan regions contain large numbers of independent local units well distinguished from each other. Chicago, the region’s largest metropolitan area, is an excellent example of this. The region’s 8.2 million persons are spread among nine counties and scores of local places contained within those counties. These places are well differentiated by a variety of spatially aggregated demographic characteristics, including median household income and race. As a consequence, the social, economic, and political diversity that characterizes the region as a whole is distributed reflectively across the places that comprise this region, including the City of Chicago itself. The region’s second largest metropolitan region is defined by the Census as the Detroit PMSA, which in 2000 included nearly 4.5 million persons. Although Detroit and Chicago are regional competitors, and are similar in some general respects, both being very large and situated in analogous locations within the Great Lakes basin, they do not fill the same social and economic niche in the larger regional and national social economy. Whereas both regions contain substantial quantities of industrial production, metropolitan Detroit’s economic base is principally industrial. Chicago, on the other hand, as the nation’s “second city,” has a much broader economic base headed by a number of national and international firms representing pinnacle industries,
including banking and finance, insurance, and marketing, all of which serve the numerous national and international corporate clients that are located there and others from around the nation and the world. Chicago is home also to a number of the nation’s largest and most competitive universities. Detroit’s more exclusive reliance on its manufacturing base is evidenced in the more simple demographic and economic patterns that characterize the geography of Detroit. For instance, whites and blacks as groups, taken both severally and together, comprise smaller proportions of the total population of the Chicago PMSA in comparison to the Detroit PMSA. The Detroit PMSA is more “bi-racial” in its overall demographic makeup, as the region is home to smaller percentages of persons representing other national and racially defined groups in comparison to its more cosmopolitan neighbor to the west, Chicago. Furthermore, regardless of race, a much greater percentage of persons is reported having Hispanic or Latino heritage in 2000 in Chicago than in Detroit.

The fourth largest metropolitan region in the Midwest, as defined by the Bureau of the Census, is the St. Louis MSA, with a population of about 2.6 million persons in 2000. Like Chicago and Detroit, the St. Louis region is characterized by an undersized central city surrounded by dozens of well-defined municipalities or places spread across several counties. The region also straddles the Mississippi River and with it, the boundary between Missouri and Illinois. The racial makeup of St. Louis is similar to that of Detroit. Most residents identified themselves as being either persons who are white, or persons who are black, in 2000. Additionally, only 1.5 percent of the region’s residents reported having Hispanic or Latino heritage in 2000, regardless of their race. These data may say as much about the economy of the region, which has been quite static for several decades, as they do about its interior location.

The selection of metropolitan areas for the Northeast Region is also relatively easy to specify. Here again, the overwhelming majority of urban areas are defined by relatively small central cities and by the large number of distinct local units that have come to surround them. The second largest urban region in the Northeast is defined by the Census as the Philadelphia PMSA. In 2000, this region was home to more than five million persons. The Philadelphia PMSA, which is defined by the coterminous County and City of Philadelphia and by six additional counties that surround Philadelphia, straddles the Delaware River and so also extends beyond the eastern boundary of Pennsylvania into New Jersey. Included therein are scores of well-defined municipalities significantly distinguished by a variety of demographic and environmental characteristics including household income. The region is predominantly comprised of persons who, in 2000, identified themselves as being either white or black. Relatively few residents of this area identified themselves with other racial groups, such as Asian. However, more than five percent of the region’s residents identified themselves as having Hispanic or Latino heritage.

Following Philadelphia is the Boston PMSA, with more than 3.4 million persons in 2000. Like Philadelphia, the Boston metropolitan region is also centered around one of the nation’s oldest central cities. And like the City of Philadelphia, the City of Boston is surrounded by dozens of distinct local units, or places, which together straddle the
boundaries of several counties. More than 84 percent of the region’s residents identified themselves as white in 2000. At the same time, less than 8 percent of the region’s residents identified themselves as black in the same year. Regardless of race, less than 6 percent of the region’s residents identified themselves as having Hispanic or Latino heritage. On the other hand, relatively large percentages of the residents of this area identified themselves as Asians (5.4) or as representing some other racial group. The relatively cosmopolitan composition of Boston’s population may reflect the city’s identity as both a coastal and a university town.

With more than 2.4 million persons in 2000, the Pittsburgh MSA is the Northeast region’s third largest metropolitan region, as defined by the Census. Like Boston and Philadelphia, Pittsburgh is characterized by a relatively small central city surrounded by a proliferation of distinct localities. Together, these sprawl across several counties in southwestern Pennsylvania. The population of the Pittsburgh region is comprised predominantly of persons who are white, constituting almost 90 percent of the region’s total population in 2000. In that year, nearly all of the rest of the region’s residents identified themselves as persons who are black. As Pittsburgh is distinguished from Philadelphia and Boston demographically, it is also distinguished economically and regionally. The economy of the Pittsburgh region historically has been based on extractive resources (principally coal mining) and industrial production. The demographic makeup of the region likely reflects this fact, along with the area’s historical geography as Appalachia’s principal metropolitan region. The Pittsburgh metropolitan region is well suited for inclusion in this study generally. Pittsburgh’s identification with Appalachia, and all that potentially goes with that, recommends its selection. Since the greater New York region comprises so very large a proportion of the Northeast’s urban population it was determined to be too large, unwieldy, and unrepresentative for the study. Los Angeles was not selected in the West for the same reasons.

Of the four regions defined by the Bureau of the Census in 2000, the West presents the greatest number of challenges in selecting metropolitan regions. Most of the urban regions in the West have not been very large for very long. As a consequence, they have developed under substantially different dynamics and circumstances in comparison to many of the major metropolitan regions in the South and to nearly all such areas in the Northeast and Midwest. As a general consequence, it is more difficult to find metropolitan regions in the West that contain large numbers of well defined local units which best serve as the kinds of units of analysis that this study emphasizes. Rather, the municipalities that comprise many Western metropolitan regions tend to be very large, and are frequently comprised either of counties or of exceptionally large portions thereof. The Los Angeles metropolitan region is exceptionally large. Like New York City, the City of Los Angeles lies at the center of a much larger megalopolis that contains a number of other substantial urban centers. As a consequence, the municipalities that comprise this urban region are especially difficult to specify as they are related to their respective urban centers, and to each other. This complication would be sufficient to exclude Los Angeles from this study. However, it is not the only problem associated with the region. The municipalities that comprise this region also tend to be exceptionally large. As a consequence, they tend to display especially high levels of
variation in the distribution of people and activities within them. Unfortunately, this problem is not limited to Los Angeles, but rather characterizes all of California’s larger metropolitan regions. Therefore, no urban regions from California will be included in this study. Excepting San Diego, the next largest metropolitan region in the West is Seattle. In 2000, more than 2.4 million persons lived in the Seattle PMSA. Unfortunately, Seattle presents many of the same challenges that we find in Los Angeles. The larger region has multiple urban centers and exceptionally large municipalities.

Phoenix is the West’s next largest metropolitan area after Los Angeles. Defined as the Phoenix MSA, Arizona’s “Valley of the Sun” contained more than 3.2 million residents in 2000. The region’s residents are spread across several local units, each of which is readily distinguishable by a range of relevant demographic and economic characteristics; 77% of the region’s residents identified themselves as persons who are white in 2000. Slightly more than 25% of the region’s residents reported having Hispanic or Latino heritage, regardless of their race. As such, Phoenix will have the highest proportion and number of Hispanic and Latino persons for any metropolitan region included in this study. Denver is the next largest metropolitan region in the West after San Diego and Seattle. In 2000, more than 2.1 million persons lived in the Denver PMSA. Nearly 80% of those persons identified themselves as white; almost 19% of the region’s residents reported having either Hispanic or Latino heritage, regardless of their race. The region includes a significant number of moderately sized local units that are well differentiated from each other by their demographic and economic characteristics. Denver is an older city, by Western standards, and it is historically significant. However, the region has grown rapidly in recent decades. Furthermore, it represents the Rocky Mountains as a significant sub-region of the West.

After Denver, Portland is the next largest metropolitan region in the West. The Portland PMSA had nearly two million residents in 2000. Almost 85% of residents identified themselves as white, while nearly 3.5% identified themselves as having black heritage; 5.7% of the region’s residents claimed Asian roots, and 7.4% of the region’s residents claimed Hispanic or Latino heritage, regardless of their race. These figures, and others, are consistent with the ethnic and racial diversity that is generally associated with most of the cities of the Pacific Northwest. As Portland represents this sub-region exceptionally well, it is distinguished also as home to the nation’s boldest and best-known experiment in metropolitan growth control. The Portland metropolitan area is comprised of a significant number of well differentiated and well-defined local units, and many are quite large, geographically speaking.

The South also presents challenges to the identification of metropolitan regions suitable for inclusion in this study; most of the difficulty stems from the relative importance of counties over cities and other units as the principal units of local government in many southern states. As a consequence, many of the South’s biggest urban regions contain within them only small numbers of very large localities, many of which are either coterminous with entire counties, or constitute half or more of their respective county’s geography. Such disproportionately large municipalities tend to reflect less homogenous
and less distinct local places. This notwithstanding, there are sufficient numbers of metropolitan regions within the South that are suitable for inclusion in this study. Atlanta is the South’s second largest metropolitan region, following Washington. Defined as the Atlanta MSA by the Bureau of the Census, the region had more than four million residents in 2000. Atlanta historically was the largest and most well developed city of the antebellum South. This fact alone recommends its inclusion in this study. Unlike many other large metropolitan regions in the South, Atlanta is structured much like its northern counterparts. It is centered upon an old and undersized central city, surrounded by dozens of well-defined and differentiated suburban units of government that sprawl across several counties. In addition to Atlanta’s long history, more recent decades have brought booming growth to the region, and with that, the interest of many scholars and others seeking to understand the implications of such growth on the social and political orientations and proclivities of residents.

Charlotte is also well suited for this study. In 2000, the Charlotte MSA included about 1.5 million residents, or nearly as many as those who lived in the Norfolk region. But unlike Norfolk, the Charlotte region is comprised of a large number of smaller and well-defined local units, which together surround the historic City of Charlotte. The region sprawls across several counties, one of which is located across the state boundary in South Carolina. The Charlotte metropolitan region is old and historically significant. Further, Charlotte is located within a Southern sub-region that is not otherwise represented within this study. The 10th largest metropolitan region in the South is Nashville. Defined as the Nashville MSA, this region had more than 1.2 million residents in 2000. Nashville is well suited for inclusion in this study. The region is centered by an old and undersized central city surrounded by significant numbers of smaller and well-differentiated suburban municipalities. Nashville’s inclusion contributes to the sub-regional representational nature of this study, as the area represents the “Middle South,” and the region marks a cultural and geographical transition from the southern Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi Basin. A variety of other metropolitan areas including Baltimore and Washington DC as well as cities in Florida and Texas were considered for inclusion but were unsuitable in a number of respects. Washington is the region’s largest metropolitan area. In 2000, the Washington PMSA had nearly five million residents. Although Washington is considered by the Census Bureau to be located in the South, the region is clearly more of a “border town.” Washington also is included in the larger “Northeast Corridor,” which runs from Baltimore and Washington north to Boston and Nashua. This larger megalopolis is already represented in this study by Boston and Philadelphia. The Dallas PMSA had more than 3.5 million