

Gathering Others

Frontier Culture: The Roots and Persistence of “Rugged Individualism” in the United States*

Samuel Bazzi[†]
*Boston University
NBER and CEPR*

Martin Fiszbein[‡]
*Boston University
and NBER*

Mesay Gebresilasse[§]
Boston University

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Abstract

The presence of a westward-moving frontier of settlement shaped early U.S. history. In 1893, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously argued that the American frontier fostered individualism. We investigate the Frontier Thesis and identify its long-run implications for culture and politics. We track the frontier throughout the 1790–1890 period and construct a novel, county-level measure of total frontier experience (TFE). Historically, frontier locations had distinctive demographics and greater individualism. Long after the closing of the frontier, counties with greater TFE exhibit more pervasive individualism and opposition to redistribution. This pattern cuts across known divides in the U.S., including urban–rural and north–south. We provide suggestive evidence on the roots of frontier culture: selective migration, an adaptive advantage of self-reliance, and perceived opportunities for upward mobility through effort. Overall, our findings shed new light on the frontier’s persistent legacy of rugged individualism.

Keywords: Culture, Individualism, Preferences for Redistribution, American Frontier, Persistence

JEL Codes: D72, H2, N31, N91, O43, P16

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[†]Department of Economics. 270 Bay State Rd., Boston, MA 02215. Email: sbazzi@bu.edu.

[‡]Department of Economics. 270 Bay State Rd., Boston, MA 02215. Email: fiszbein@bu.edu.

[§]Department of Economics. 270 Bay State Rd., Boston, MA 02215. Email: mmelese@bu.edu.

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[‡]Department of Economics. 270 Bay State Rd., Boston, MA 02215. Email: [fiszbain@bu.edu](mailto:fiszbein@bu.edu).

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“Early stages of settlement were formative for local culture and institutions, so the frontier was bound to leave a long-lasting imprint.”



Thus says the Lord:

**“Keep justice, and do righteousness,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my righteousness be revealed.**

Isaiah 56:1

**Blessed is the man who does this,
and the son of man who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,
and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”**

Isaiah 56:2

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people”; and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”

Isaiah 56:3

For thus says the Lord:

**“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,**

Isaiah 56:4

**I will give in my house and within my walls
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.**

Isaiah 56:5

“And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—

Isaiah 56:6

**these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall
be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”**

Isaiah 56:7

**The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
declares, “I will gather yet others to him
besides those already gathered.”**

Isaiah 56:8

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Matthew 23:37

Jesus Fulfills Isaiah 56

My righteousness revealed (vs 1)

Salvation to come (vs 1)

Son of Man who holds fast (vs 2)

Keeps hands from evil (vs 2)

Holds fast the covenants (vs 6)

Accepted on my altar (vs 7)

Gathering other not yet gathered (vs 8)



