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CHAPTER ONE

The Character and Political Culture of the State

In the 1970s, Eleanore Bushnell gave the title Sagebrush and Neon to a collection of articles on Nevada politics.' The title typifies the outsider's view of a state that is mostly desert and that has an economy heavily dependent on casino gambling. Yet the state contains some of the most spectacular scenery and man-made wonders in the world - from beautiful Lake Tahoe and the snow-capped Sierra Nevada and Ruby Mountains in the north to the brilliant red sandstone of the Valley of Fire, Hoover Dam, and Lake Mead in the south. Since the 1950s, the scenic attractions and gaming (the name Nevadans prefer when speaking of games of chance) have made tourism the dominant industry in the state.

Nevada became a state "before its time" because of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and it remained the smallest-population state from 1864 until the admission of Alaska in 1959. By 1990 Nevada had passed ten other states to rank thirty-ninth in population and was on track to pass four others by the 2000 census. The growth in population in the fifteen years from 1980 to 1995 exceeded the total population of the state in 1970.

INFLUENCE OF GEOGRAPHY

Thousands of forty-niners traversed the area that now constitutes Nevada on their way to California in quest of gold. Modern freeways have increased the number of tourists visiting the state, which continues to serve as a land bridge between the nation's most populated state and the rest of the country.

The politics and economy of Nevada have also been intertwined with its powerful neighbor to the west ever since the late 1850s when the discovery of silver in the fabulous Comstock Lode in the Virginia City area attracted large numbers of prospectors, bankers, and attorneys from northern California. Many of these Californians decided to settle in the new state. From an economic standpoint, money from California banks built most of the mining shafts, tunnels, and mills; in turn, the wealth extracted by the financiers helped build many of the first great mansions of San Francisco. The rush to Washoe, as the area was then called, was responsible for an increase in population sufficient to propel the western part of the Utah Territory toward separate territorial status in 1861 and statehood in 1864.

Geography and the mostly desert terrain of Nevada have also influenced its economic development or lack of same. Less than 1.5 percent of the almost 71 million acres of land in the state is under cultivation. Hence, Nevadans have had to rely heavily on the agricultural production of other states. However, the state has been blessed with an abundance of mineral resources. In addition to the Comstock Lode, the state enjoyed other mining booms in the early decades of the twentieth century with the discovery of gold and silver in the Tonopah and Goldfield region and the uncovering of a

large deposit of copper in White Pine County. The large-scale mining of copper that began in 1900 led to a fifty-year period in which copper became the dominant metal in Nevada. The worldwide rise in the price of gold in the 1970s and the availability of new technology led to a substantial increase in gold mining in northern Nevada in the 1980s.

Geography played an important role in the development of sectional politics in Nevada after World War II, especially as the construction of large hotel-casinos in downtown Las Vegas and then along the famous "Strip" led to a population explosion in the southern part of the state. Las Vegas passed Reno as the largest city in the state during the 1950s, and Clark County's population, which includes the Las Vegas area, exceeded the total population of the rest of the state before the end of the 1960s. The legislative apportionment acts of 1971, 1981, and 1991 gave this one county 55, 57, and 62 percent, respectively, of the seats in each house of the state legislature.

AN INDIVIDUALISTIC POLITICAL CULTURE

In 1966 Daniel J. Elazar, a leading scholar of state politics and federalism, described three types of political cultures or subcultures that exist in the United States.⁴ Of the three types - moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic - he termed Nevada's political culture as highly individualistic. Such a characterization is still true today. Almost all of the features that Elazar notes as being typical of an individualistic state are part of the Nevada political culture.

Elazar notes that in an individualistic political culture, "government is instituted for strictly utilitarian reasons to handle those functions demanded by the people it is created to serve," that "government need not have any direct concern with questions of the 'good' society except insofar as it may be used to advance some common conception of the good society formulated outside the political arena," and that "public officials . . . are normally not willing to initiate new programs or open up new areas of government activity . . . [unless] they perceive an overwhelming public demand for them to act." These statements accurately describe the attitudes of the average Nevadan, as indicated in public opinion polls in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The mining booms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attracted people to the territory and then the state who were motivated primarily by individualistic concerns. The western frontier, cattle ranching, the laissezfaire tradition, and the large amount of gambling activity, whether legal or not, further encouraged individualism. The concept of a limited role for government has been reinforced throughout Nevada's history by a belief in low resident taxation.

In November 1992 a University of Nevada opinion poll showed that most Nevadans were willing to support a modest tax increase to fund what they apparently believed to be elements of a "good society": more low-income housing and aid to the elderly, more spending for K-12 education, child care for low-income working mothers, mental health facilities, and law enforcement. However, when the respondents were asked about the type of taxation they preferred, they favored increases in gaming, cigarette, and liquor taxes and the imposition of a new tax on corporate profits. The respondents were thus interested in allowing the tourists and corporations to carry more of the tax load.

In 1990 the voters approved a constitutional amendment initiative prohibiting a state personal income tax by a 3-1 margin. In the poll taken two years later, Nevadans were strongly opposed to increases in the property and sales taxes, both of which would have hit state residents harder.⁷ In the early 1990s, Clark County voters rejected ballot measures that would have provided for more schools, police officers, and parks - proposals that had been supported in the past. The recent large influx of retirees from southern California may have contributed to the defeat of the bond measures.

Elazar stated that because the emphasis in an individualistic political culture is on "the centrality of private concerns," the culture "places a premium on limiting community intervention - whether governmental or nongovernmental - into private activities to the minimum necessary to keep the marketplace in proper working order." This attitude is most visible nationally in the legalization of prostitution in much of Nevada. The "right of privacy" is important, too, to the average Nevadan, for 63 percent of the electorate voted in 1990 to restrict the legislature from making any changes in the 1973 abortion law. The statute basically concurs with the majority opinion in the *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Other features of the individualistic political culture include a "political life . . . based on a system of mutual obligations rooted in personal relationships" and opposition to big government, big business, and big labor.⁹ The chapters on

political history, the legislature, the governor, and interest groups illustrate the important role of personal relationships in Nevada, despite the phenomenal population growth in recent decades. Even conservative Republican Paul Laxalt was quick to attack big business while serving in the U.S. Senate.

Elazar's statements that, in an individualistic political culture, "politicians are interested in office as a means of controlling the distribution of favors or rewards of government rather than as a means of exercising governmental power for programmatic ends" and "since political corruption is not unexpected, there is relatively little popular excitement when any is found unless it is of an extraordinary character" describe the Nevada political scene.¹⁰ The governor's most important impact on government is the apportionment of expenditures in the executive budget. Likewise, the preferred committee assignments in both houses of the legislature are seats on the money panels.

The old adage that "money is the mother's milk" of politics has been true in Nevada from the days of the "bag men" who bought elections to the present, when large campaign donations from the gaming industry guarantee generally favorable treatment in the legislature. A "sting" operation in the mid-1980s did result in one Nevada legislator serving time in federal prison, but other politicians who accepted campaign donations from reputed mobsters in the gaming industry have been able to survive. In Nevada's U.S. Senate races, the contributions of national political action committees (PACS) and party organizations have led to campaign spending of several million dollars in a single campaign.

Because of more reliance on television advertising, the population growth of recent decades has reinforced rather than decreased the importance of the individual as compared to party in "high-profile" elections. Republicans elected governors in 1966 and 1978, despite a huge Democratic registration edge, and the GOP carried the state in six straight presidential elections prior to 1992. Throughout Nevada's history, powerful individuals and interest groups have been more important than parties in determining the outcomes of the political process.

THE SINGLE-INDUSTRY ECONOMY

Through most of its history, Nevada's economic well-being has been tied to a single industry. In the first ninety years of statehood, mining was the major industry, and the accompanying "boom-and-bust" periods resulted in large swings in both the economy and the population of the state. Thus, the "playing out" of the Comstock Lode in the Virginia City area led to economic recession and large losses of population in the last two decades of the nineteenth century; likewise, the discoveries of gold and silver in the first decade of the twentieth century led to boom times and larger populations, followed by later recessions in the 1920s after the closing of most of the mines.

The decline of mining activity was an important consideration in the Nevada legislature's legalization of casino gambling in 1931. With enactment of a state tax on gross gambling revenues in 1945 and the building of large hotel-casinos in the Las Vegas area after World War II, Nevada's economic well-being - both private and public - became tied to a new dominant industry. Although mining revived in the 1970s and 1980s and economic diversification efforts by Governors Richard Bryan and Bob Miller in the 1980s and 1990s had some limited success, gambling and the accompanying tourism continue to dominate Nevada's economy.

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