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# Jim Simeone and How Earley Settlement Patterns Helped Shape Illinois Politics

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This is Sound Ideas, I'm Charlie Schlenker.

Charlie Schlenker: Illinois settlement patterns did a lot to shape the early politics of the state and remain a force today, according to Illinois Wesleyan University Political Scientist Jim Simeone. Illinois was settled partly from the south in the upland southern movement as people came north along the Mississippi River and up from Kentucky. Later waves came from the east and even from the north down from the Great lakes as Canada and the Yankee East contributed to people to the Illinois country. Simeone talks with GLT ahead of a presentation at the McLean County Museum of History tomorrow about the way settlement informed the politics.

Jim Simeone: Until about 1830, the vast majority of the people were from the upland south. So it was not necessarily a slave state but it was a state with slaves, and it was a state with people who thought as southerners. The vast majority of the population were from Kentucky and Georgia and Tennessee.

Schlenker: How much tension did that create...uh in the 1830s as slavery began to become a...a really touchpoint issue for the national political scene?

Simeone: That's a good way of putting it because in fact, before 1820 uh we didn't have a lot of national conversations about slavery. Uh until the Missouri Compromise sort of opened the cord and...and changed the narrative nationally...uh there weren't very many proslavery advocates. So...uh yes in a sense, that period between 1820 and 1830 was a crucial changing part nationally and Illinois played a part in that, in that, Illinois did have the...uh effort to turn the state into a slave state...uh in 1822, 1823, the famous convention controversy. And in august of 1824, the state voted, you know something like 6,500 to 5,900 to stay free.

Schlenker: That's a pretty close vote.

Simeone: Exactly. And so, a lot of these southerners were antislavery. They left the south precisely to move away from slavery. However, economically, it was difficult for the state to make it without extra hands, extra labor. And that...that's a big part of the story of Frontier Illinois, is how hard it is to, you know, get clear of the land office...uh to be a farmer who settles and is actually able to purchase land...uh that perhaps they have squatted on. So part of the movement to bring slaves into the state was that Missouri in 1820 becomes a state and all the settlers start going to Missouri and the Illinois people are saying 'well gee, we would like to capture some of that immigration, and if we allowed people to have some, what they called limited slavery rights, we'd be able to capture that immigration and then that would allow the markets in...in Illinois to grow and we could sell our surplus corn and that's how we would be able to pay for our land.'

Schlenker: It's kind of a devil's bargain though because once you plunk down the capital investment for a slave then you have to recoup that investment in either producing corn or you produce more saleable people and it...a lot of southern slave owners were in hock up to their eyeballs and had to produce a surplus of slaves so that they could make their debt service payments. In Illinois it's a little different because of the labor shortage, as you said, but how do the economics of slavery...uh effect Illinois in that sense?

Simeone: Your observation is astute, especially for states like Maryland and Virginia where a lot of Illinoisans came from because those lands had been, if you will, worn out...uh by the plantation system. And those states had become, you know, net producers of slaves, selling their slaves to other states: Alabama, Mississippi, Texas. So yes, but of course in the case of Illinois you'd have to change your entire constitution...uh because it came in as a free state. Uh and that was another contentious issue in the 1818 constitution, many of the settlers felt that they would have liked more slavery rights but they couldn't get it past congress. And that sort of feeds into this egalitarian culture that they had where they are the outsider group, they are the poor white farmer...uh who needs to make...make it, you know, clear their land out of the land office and...and the whole world is putting...is put upon them uh so they basically are struggling and are looking for whatever policy they can to make it. And you have to remember too that there were some special exceptions, the French uh had been in Illinois for over a century and they had slavery. The Salines down in uh Galatine county were allowed to bring in indentured servants for one year at a time. So there...there were also slaves brought into the state that way. And in addition, those coming from the south could under the 1818 constitution, indenture their slaves with the county supervisor and often those indentures went for 50, 60, 70, even 90...90 years we have record of. So there was a sort of de facto slavery in Illinois and...and they were happy with that balance but what happened is then, starting in the 1820s, some Yankees started coming in, some English started coming in and they were adamantly antislavery. The other group that was very strong antislavery were the Methodists. You start getting some fear among more proslavery settlers that their way of doing things that they had been doing since...1809 when Illinois became a territory would be changed. And that's where the convention controversy came in.

Schlenker: This is sound ideas, I'm Charlie Schlenker talking with Jim Simeone of Illinois Wesleyan University, who's giving a talk at the McLean County Museum of History about Illinois and it's development as part of the bicentennial celebration. That'll happen uh Tuesday of August 28<sup>th</sup>. He talked about egalitarianism and the state of Illinois...uh is really though the...the idea of the independent reducer something of a myth?

Simeone: Certainly, it is a story that the politicians would tell uh the people and the people would accept it and understand it. And it was a device used to garner votes. Uh what's so interesting, however, is that both the...the democrats and the wigs bought into this story. The other thing I would say, Charlie, is this word egalitarian is one that needs to be clarified...

Schlenker: unpack it then

Simeone:...unpacked, right, because we generally think of it, I would say in a...in a horizontal dimension...uh equality uh among individuals on a...on a level playing field. But egalitarianism also had a vertical dimension and it had a group dimension. So the group that you were a part of, and this the poor white settler saw itself a raid vertically in a hierarchy with other peoples, other groups. Certainly in Illinois, the big folk, the wealthy uh were considered above the white folks...uh above the poor white settler. There was a sense that if we were going to have democracy, it should be for the down trot, it should be for the group that's been put upon by the world. And so while there was equality at the horizontal level, there was also this vertical dimension which was very important in politics. And so what the Jacksonian democrats would point out, is that the wigs weren't really for the...the group that of the down trot...of the poor. Uh they were for the bankers, they were for the manufacturers, the people who wanted to bring in tariffs, uh which of course would make goods that the farmers buy more expensive

Schlenker: they were for the old settlers who already had their land

Simeone: uh that is a good...uh a...an interesting way of putting it. That would be...I would call that a cross cutting interest...

Schlenker: okay

Simeone: ...such that...that you have a lot of wigs adopting the settler narrative and saying 'yes, we are the settlers too.' You know? In fact I have a great line here from a newspaper in Chicago in 1838 and they're saying: Settlers, free men, citizens of Illinois, will you vote for one who will drive you away from your farms and claims? Answer on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. Vote against Martin Van Buren who stigmatizes you as trespassers and intruders. So the wigs were adopting this populous rhetoric of the squatter and the settler in Illinois which is ironic because they were always being painted as the group who endorsed the wealthy. And so here they...they decide I'm going to play the game of the Jacksonians. I'm going to follow the rules of the independent producer narrative and I'm going to buy into it and I'm going to say I'm the advocate of the independent producer—and by the way this of course is Abraham Lincoln's version of the wig party, which was much more open and inclusive than the old wig party of maybe even worse the national republicans who were in fact very elitist.

Schlenker: Politics really doesn't change. [Simeone laughs] It's always...it's always coopting the other sides rhetoric for your own vote mobilization.

Simeone: Yes

Schlenker: This is Sound Ideas, I'm Charlie Schlenker. Jim Simeone is giving a talk as part of the bicentennial observances in the state of Illinois, Tuesday at the McLean County Museum of History. So let's expand on how Illinois became Jacksonian.

Simeone: That is an interesting story in itself. Um the party system, the two party system, really didn't get entrenched in Illinois until the late 1830s. Uh and it's really fascinating—how did it happen? Basically how it happens just about any place that a...a party works. You need people to get out the vote, you need people to talk up your points, to talk up your candidates, visit with their neighbors and those

people either knew someone that had been hired into a job or were themselves hired in a job, right? And so that transactional side of politics was very important and it's remarkable to see how efficient it was. So, for example, if you look at the poll records in Illinois in the 1920 through 1835 period, people are voting all over the place. You know, they might vote for a wiggish person for governor but they end up voting for a democratish person in...in the general assembly and there's—but by 1835, 1836, the poll books change dramatically and suddenly everyone is voting party line. And this is because, the operatives are out in the field handing out basically the party ballot, and the voters are following the party ballot.

Schlenker: How much of that is also tied to growth in the patronage system through the postal service? I mean, the post master general was like the second most powerful cabinet person in that era at the national level and that was because he had a patronage army with each post office. As Illinois became more settled, there were more post offices, more patronage to hand out.

Simeone: So that's...that's referring to as well the federal layer, and that's why it took so long in Illinois. By the time you get to the 1830s and...and later, you have a lot more development, you have a lot more land offices opening up, you have a lot more post offices.

Schlenker: So did that also contribute to the polarization of...of everybody voting party line?

Simeone: Yes it did. I mean there was an ideological component but there was also this transactional sort of jobs component, if you will. Uh it's just that the federal government wasn't as big as you think, they were sort of the icing on the cake and without a doubt there were these networks and coalitions of US senators and then state politicians. But the truth is the federal level was less influential at that point. It is true we tell the story of Abraham Lincoln getting his first postal appointment from you know, Andrew Jackson. That was in like 1834, 1835. So it did happen that you go appointments from people, but you know there's also a famous story of Illinois being Van Burenized in...in 1827 and that was basically where Elias Kane the US Senator who was an ally of Van Buren began to build...to make ties to the factions within Illinois and they began to build a network. And I would say though that that network was as ideological and revolved around the narrative of the independent producer as much as it was transactional dealing with did you get a job or not.

Schlenker: How has independent producerism continued as a theme in our politics even today?

Simeone: I think...uh you see it in our, many people's reaction to the affordable care act. People when I would finally you know, try to get them to explain to me why they were so opposed to it, many cases it was fear of dependency on the state. Ultimately it was basically...the people were going to lose their independence. Um and...and they would not be ultimately producers anymore. They would become dependent on the state. Now you can argue uh that in fact perhaps providing uh opportunities for health care separate from a job would allow someone to...to leave their...their...their place of employment and try...take a risk and try a new uh opportunity, and you can talk about it that way but that was never very persuasive. Uh and I think that in part because of this old tradition of...of the independent producer and the fear of dependency...of...of becoming dependent on the state...you...you

just don't see the state just providing opportunities for independence. They think of it only as a...as a device for creating dependency.

Schlenker: Professor Jim Simeone teaches Political Theory and Law at Illinois Wesleyan University. He speaks tomorrow evening at 7 at the McLean County Museum of History on how frontier Illinois became the land of the independent producer and why it matters today. He's the author of *Bottomland Republic Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois*.