Twitter Thread by Aaron Astor

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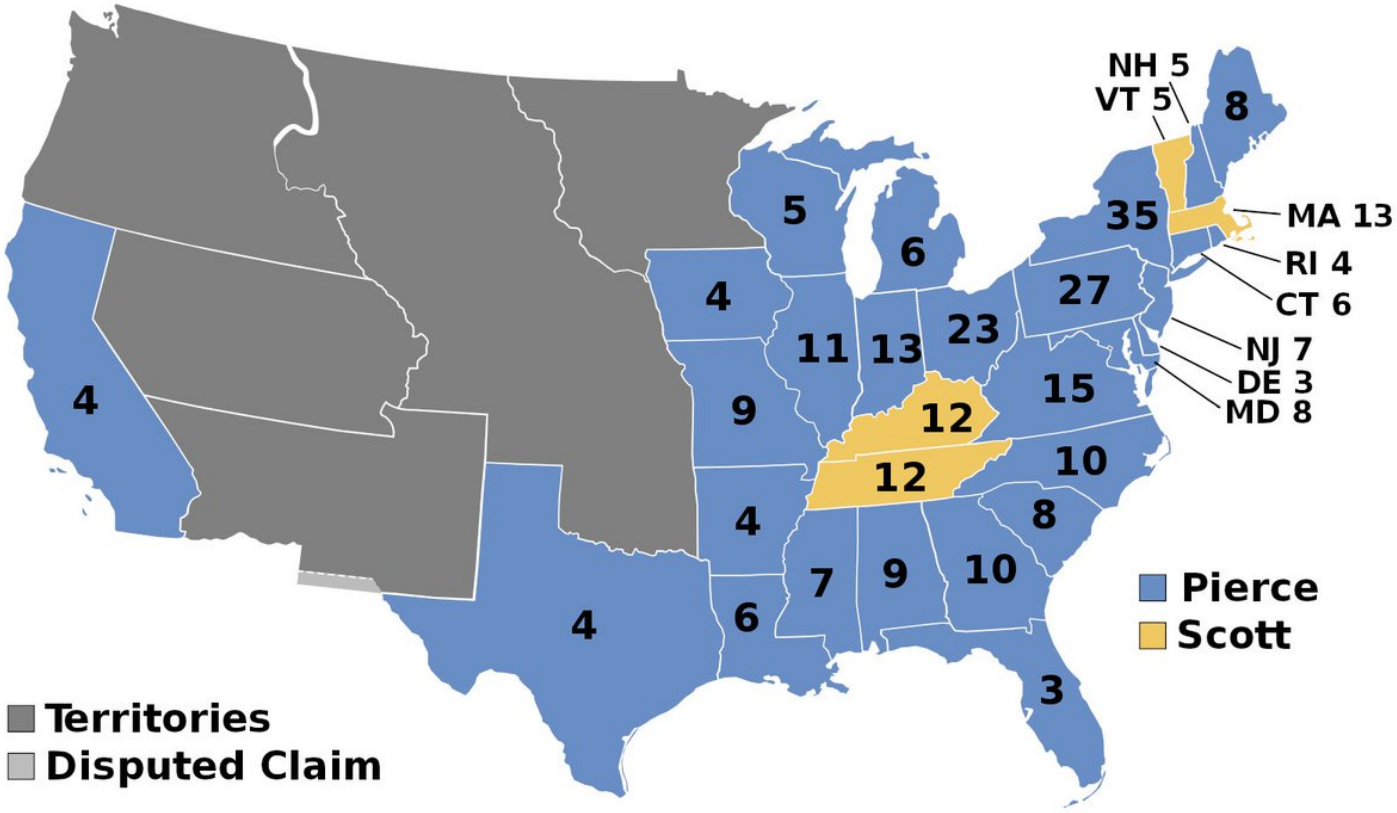
Lamar Alexander is from my home town. There's a lot that's hard to understand about him - a relatively moderate guy who is nonetheless a staunch partisan. But that's actually how the East TN GOP has traditionally gone. Very much party loyalists though not militant ideologues.

> End of an era
>
> via @burgessev https://t.co/qjga3g6UOT
>
> — Marc Caputo (@MarcACaputo) December 4, 2020

I like to draw a line back from Lamar to Hugh Lawson White, the Knoxville Senator who effectively created the Tennessee Whig Party. His supporters were angry that Jackson passed him over for Martin Van Buren as successor. So they formed a militant party bloc of Whigs.



Tennessee politics from the mid-1830s right up to 1861 was remarkably stable and competitive. Whigs held strength through the 1850s even after they changed their name. Notice Tennessee as the rare Whig state in 1852. And the strong Whig counties around Knoxville.

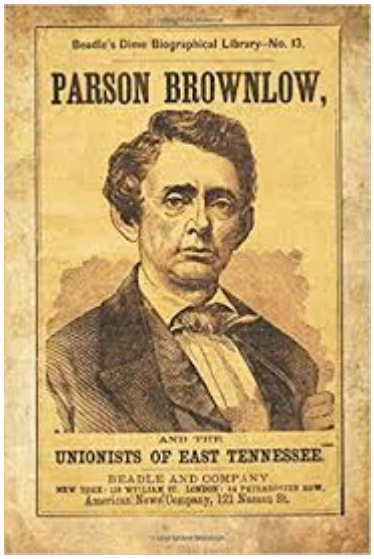


Partisan competition was very strong in TN - much stronger than ideological competition. The three regional "Grand Divisions" (East, Middle, West) made it hard to develop a coherent statewide ideological position, so parties jealously guarded their regional strongholds.

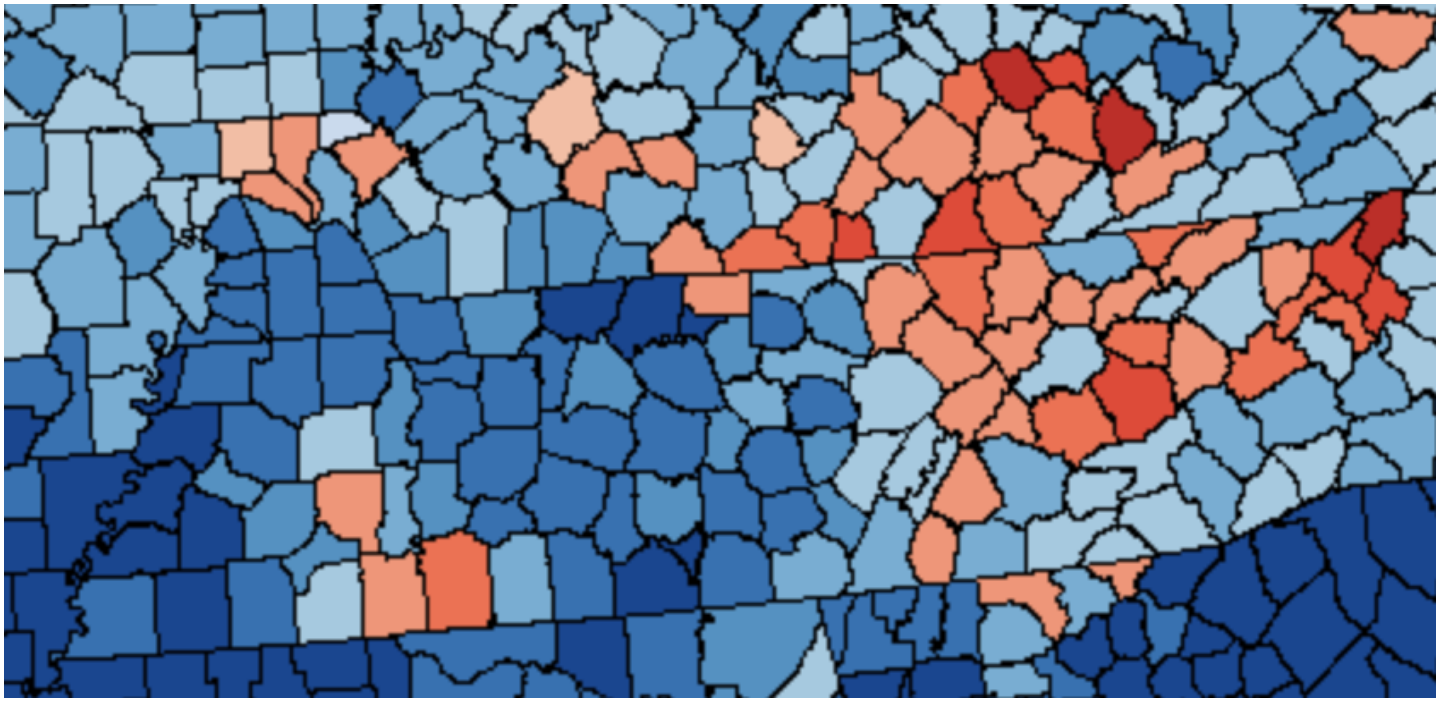


This translated into Civil War loyalties to a large extent. East TN Whigs were the most militantly Unionist. Middle and West TN Dems were the most militantly Confederate. However, Middle/West TN Whigs mostly were Confederate and East TN Dems were mixed bc of Andrew Johnson.

After the Civil War, the Republican Party established a stronghold in East Tennessee. This was based partly on the vituperative Parson Brownlow but also on the lesser known Leonidas Houk.



It was Houk who really established the East TN GOP that eventually produced Lamar Alexander. Tennessee politics settled into a stasis where the GOP firmly controlled East TN and the Democratic Party dominated the more populous Middle and West TN. Check out the red in 1932.



East TN Republicans took pride in their Civil War Unionist roots. Lamar has often mentioned that his ancestors "voted the way they shot" in the Civil War. That meant resisting some of the militancy of the Dixiecrats through most of the 20th century.

That meant relative ideological moderation - think of Howard Baker too. But it also meant staunch partisan GOP loyalty. We remember Baker's comments on Nixon because he stuck with Nixon for so long. Contrast him with NC Dem Sam Ervin, who hit Nixon hard right away.

But Baker was pretty moderate. So was Jimmy Quillen, Rep of the First District. At the county level, the same has been true. Republicans here in Blount County are still somewhat moderate, though certainly challenged by more militant ideologues in primaries.

Lamar Alexander comes from this tradition. He is and has always been a staunch GOP partisan. But he takes pride in reaching across the aisle on occasion - perhaps like Manchin and his Dem roots. Crossing the aisle is fine...as long as you know which side of the aisle you're on.

In that way, he's a throwback to the days of parties having a spectrum of ideological positions but firm in defending his party. So, re: Trump, he knew Trump was guilty in the impeachment case. But he viewed it as a partisan matter in the end - it'll be decided at the ballot box.

And so it was decided at the ballot box. Lamar's brand of Republicanism was taken over by Trumpism right as Trump was defeated. And filling the TNGOP vacuum we have Marsha Blackburn as our Senior Senator now instead of a Lamar, Bill Haslam or Bob Corker.