The Three Personalities of America

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A few years ago, Jason Rentfrow, a psychologist at the University of Cambridge, dug into a question that has captivated him for decades: Do different places have different personalities? Do people in Los Angeles, for instance, have measurably different temperaments from the residents of Augusta, Georgia? If so, what does that mean for both places? Rentfrow decided to test these questions on a phenomenon that has captivated all of America lately: the rise of Donald Trump.

Rentfrow had a breakthrough in 2013, when he and others published a study that suggested the U.S. has three “psychological regions.” The first, in the Midwest and parts of the Southeast, is “friendly and conventional.” It has high levels of extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness—three more of the big-five personality traits. “The characteristics of this psychological region suggest a place where traditional values, family, and the status quo are important,” the authors wrote. (The southern United States also tends to be more courageous, according to his research.)