

Rosenwald, Michael S. 2013. "Secession fights rage on across US: Siskiyou County latest to join the movement," *The Washington Post Eureka Times Standard*, September 13.

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The push by 50 western Virginia counties to secede in 1863, forming West Virginia at the height of the Civil War, was led by a charismatic store-clerk-turned-lawyer who famously urged his supporters: "Cut the knot now! Cut it now! Apply the knife."

West Virginia was the last state to break off from another. Now, 150 years later, a 49-year-old information technology consultant wants to apply the knife to Maryland's five western counties. "The people are the sovereign," says Scott Strzelczyk, leader of the fledgling Western Maryland Initiative, and the western sovereigns are fed up with Annapolis's liberal majority, elected by the state's other sovereigns.

"If you think you have a long list of grievances and it's been going on for decades, and you can't get it resolved, ultimately this is what you have to do," says Strzelczyk, who lives in New Windsor, a historic town of 1,400 people in Carroll County. "Otherwise you are trapped."

Strzelczyk's effort is one of several across the country to separate significant portions of states from, as he puts it, "the dominant ruling class." Nearly a dozen northern Colorado counties are the furthest along, with nonbinding referendums set for November ballots. The Upper Peninsula of Michigan is making a move to join with parts of Wisconsin. Northern California counties want to form a state called Jefferson.

Historians, political scientists and the leaders of the movements say secession efforts are being fueled by irreconcilable differences on issues such as gun control, taxes, energy policy, gay marriage and immigration -- all subjects of recent legislative efforts at state and federal levels. The notion of compromise is a non-starter. With secessionists, the term "final straw" comes up a lot.

"You don't have to be a student of the details to know that people are just disgusted with what goes on these days," says Kit Wellman, a political philosopher who studies secession at Washington University in St. Louis. "These people figure they are better off on their own if they could just be with like-minded folks."

Secession is a difficult political fight to win. The U.S. Constitution allows regions to separate only with the approval of the state legislature and Congress, and over the years there have been hundreds of quixotic and unsuccessful efforts, according to Michael Trinklein, the author of "Lost States: True Stories of Texlahoma, Transylvania, and Other States that Never Made It."

In the 1950s, Northern California tried to form the state of Shasta, to protect its fresh water. The builders of Mount Rushmore also wanted it to sit in a new state: Absaroka, a reference to a subrange of the Rocky Mountains. Eastern Shore residents pushed for the state of Chesapeake in the 1970s to retain tourist tax dollars.

What's different now is how the secession efforts illuminate a hard truth about the country: The rural-urban divide is increasingly a point of political conflict. The population boom in urban areas such as Baltimore

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and the Maryland suburbs near the District of Columbia, the Boulder-Denver areas in Colorado, and in Detroit have filled state legislatures with liberal policymakers pushing progressive agendas out of sync with rural residents, who feel increasingly isolated and marginalized.

In Maryland, the five western counties -- Garrett, Allegany, Washington, Frederick and Carroll -- represent just 11 percent of Maryland's population, according to 2010 Census figures. They earn less than the people who live in more urban areas. They vote overwhelmingly for Republicans in a deeply Democratic state. Nearly 90 percent of the residents are white, compared with 51 percent elsewhere. About 60 percent were born in Maryland vs. 46 percent in other parts of the state.

"If you don't belong in their party," Strzelczyk says of Democrats, "you'll never have your views represented" in Maryland. "If we have more states," he says, "we can all go live in states that best represent us, and then we can get along."

Strzelczyk concedes that he could move to another state more in line with his values, but he grew up in Maryland, his parents are here and he doesn't want to upend his family. He launched the initiative with a Facebook page in July, trying to solicit support from other frustrated Marylanders.

The Facebook page has drawn more than 2,200 likes, with residents from western counties chiming in with ideas and offers to help. Suzanne Reisig Olden, a Carroll County paralegal, offered her services pro bono.

"The state quite honestly disgusts me," Olden said in an interview. "Those that we elect in the House of Delegates or in the Senate who are conservative are either ignored or just told to shut up. My voice does not count." She adds: "In a new state, my vote could count, my values would be valued. So I like the idea."

Olden's views are generally not the same as those that dominate Maryland's urban centers. She is against gay marriage. She is against what she describes as "the horrible encroachment on Second Amendment rights." She opposes abortion.

She is fed up with taxes, and was particularly galled by the "rain tax" -- a stormwater management fee -- approved during the last legislative session.

"Taxing the friggin' rain?" she says. "The next thing they tax will be the air we breathe."

Although he grew up a Democrat, Strzelczyk became increasingly frustrated with politics in the past decade, and Barack Obama's election in 2008 sent him over the edge.

He spoke at tea party rallies, started helping with a weekly radio show called "Forgotten Men" and began reading up on the Constitution. He says he has read thousands of books and articles on the subject. He became fed up with Republicans, too, and now considers himself a Constitutionalist, writing essays for the Tenth Amendment Center, American Thinker and his own blog, "A Citizen's View."

He wants to live in a smaller state, he says, with more "personal liberty, less government intrusion, less federal entanglements." He wants the right to carry a gun. He would abolish the U.S. Department of Education. Although he thinks the government shouldn't be involved with marriage, he'd put the question of gay marriage to a vote. Medical marijuana would be just fine, he says. There would be lots of liberty.

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Strzelczyk knows that breaking up is hard to do. He needs help forming a political non-profit organization to push the measure, which is where people like Olden could come in. He needs an official website. He needs to sway county commissioners to put the question to voters to get attention from lawmakers in Annapolis, who would need to pass legislation for Congress to approve. Offers are coming in.

"I'm a finance geek, so I may be able to help," Bryan Smith writes on Facebook.

And then there are the matters of statehood. Would it be called Western Maryland? West Maryland? On Facebook, Chad Maroney offered this thought: “The new state should be called Augusta. That was George Washington's name for the Appalachian region.”

Where will the water come from? What would the state code look like? What happens to home deeds? How will the state be funded? What about the state prisons in Western Maryland? Will there be a state police force? What about the portion of state debt the region is responsible for? Where's the capital? (To offset any shifts in U.S. Senate power, some ponder giving the District the statehood it has long desired.)

”We are not dumb people,” Strzelczyk says. “We get that this is hard to do.”

Hard is probably understating the challenge. Political experts and historians say the efforts at new statehood around the country will be nearly impossible to pull off, though they could spread virally through social media, attracting mainstream attention.

”As a legal matter, it will be incredibly difficult, and it's probably not going to happen,” says Wellman, the secession expert at Washington University. “But as a moral matter, I'm on the opposite side of insane.” He noted the country's formation was its secession from England. “We said, 'You're not going to govern us.' And there are very few people who don't think we were entitled to do so.”

The best case scenario, experts say, is that the threat of walking out somehow gets people back to the table. (Comparisons to marriage counseling come to mind.) In Colorado, Gov. John Hickenlooper, D, has said that he doesn't agree with the secession movement there, but his public comments on the issue suggest that the efforts are at least seen as real.

And in the end, just having their voices heard could, perhaps, soothe the situation for frustrated voters like Olden.

”Best case scenario: It works. Worst case: Nothing changes,” she says. “But if it doesn't work, maybe they will finally see that the populous really is fed up.”