



Unmasking geographic polarization and clustering: A micro-scalar analysis of partisan voting behavior



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ABSTRACT

“Geographic polarization”, the spatial concentration of “like” voting behavior, is a phenomenon closely related to “partisan polarization”, the intensification of diametrically ideological positions, is understudied, and is critical to the understanding of current American electoral behavior. To date, few studies have examined geographic polarization, and those that do have done so at the scales of regions, states, and counties. However, local influences operating within areas smaller than counties influence voting behavior and can produce geographic polarization. To address these scalar and methodological shortcomings, this research focuses on the smallest political units, precincts, using a case study of the Greater Cincinnati Metropolitan Area. Presidential election data from 1976 through 2008 were collected by precincts, analyzed using spatial statistics, and mapped to examine evolving geographic polarization over this 32-year period. The results measured at the precinct-scale, suggest an increased concentration of partisan behavior and emphasize a local residential spatial pattern of geographic polarization.

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Introduction

Electoral geography examines the geographical aspects of the organization, conduct, and results of elections. Geographical electoral analyses within American politics concentrate on electoral results that are primarily visible at various official electoral jurisdictions, such as states, congressional districts, counties, wards, or precincts (Taylor & Johnston, 1979). Traditionally, much of the work involving electoral analyses, particularly within political science, focuses on cleavages in voting, which examine divisions of society into groups sharing similar political attitudes and behaviors. The division of people into partisan identifications and behaviors is most frequently the focus of this research. These divisions, or cleavages, can also be observed in the geography of the voting surface (Johnston, Gregory, & Smith, 1994).

A rich literature within the social sciences examines and interprets the geographic arrangement of voters. Electoral geography was used extensively in early political research. V. O. Key's *Southern*

Politics in State and Nation (1949) is one of the most important studies using electoral geography in American politics. Key (1949) analyzed electoral results and demographic information in the eleven southern states that comprised the former Confederate States of America during the Civil War, and his findings of regional variations in voting behavior, at the county level, pioneered modern spatial analysis in electoral studies. Many at that time agreed that there was a pattern to voting behavior and that “voters cannot be regarded as scattered at random over the various constituencies” (Kendall & Stuart, 1950: 188). However, within the field of political science, electoral geography diminished in importance (Gimpel & Schuknecht, 2006) and was replaced with new methods using survey data and focused on understanding voting cleavages.

The use of electoral districts to examine cleavages in society is relatively common in the literature; a large body of work attempts to identify such divisions using partisan voting and direct democracy voting. The analysis of direct democracy (issue voting) is of particular interest to electoral geographers because of voters' support or opposition of specific policy positions (Toal & Shelley, 2003), can provide a more nuanced examination of voter attitudes in certain spaces, unlike voter support for partisan candidates (Leib & Webster, 2012).

Issue elections focusing on gay rights have prompted considerable attention. Early studies on the electoral divide over gay rights

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concentrated on the cleavage between traditionalists and modernizers (Hunter, 1991; Lubke, 1990; Steinfelds, 1988). Traditionalists are “status quo-oriented, inhabiting small towns, and working in traditional industries” while modernizers are “seen as far more oriented to social and political change, urban-dwellers (and/or newcomers to communities), and better educated” (Brown, Knopp, & Morrill, 2005: 270). These authors also conclude that demographically, modernizers are higher in social economic status, better educated, younger, and generally employed in the service sector, while traditionalists have lower levels of education, work in manufacturing, and live in married households with children (Brown et al., 2005). Other analyses of same sex-marriage elections have come to similar conclusions. In their analysis of the vote on Colorado’s Amendment Two using county election returns, Ormond and Cole (1996) find that socio-economic status was a major predictor of support and opposition to gay rights along a clear rural/urban divide. O’Reilly and Webster (1998), using counties, provide a longitudinal study of Oregon by examining three different statewide votes on gay rights. Their findings also indicate a rural/urban divide on each of the votes and also argue that there is a strong relationship between voting against gay rights and voting for the Republican gubernatorial and presidential candidates in each of the elections. Chapman, Leib, and Webster (2007) examine the same-sex marriage vote in Georgia by first exploring the spatial vote of state house members in deciding whether or not to put same-sex marriage on the ballot; and then secondly, by investigating the actual vote by county. They argue that there is a rural/urban divide but also argue that areas such as Atlanta and Athens with the “creative class” (Florida, 2002) are the best predictors of support for gay rights. Webster, Chapman, and Leib (2010) argue that religious and traditional values, as well as demographic variables related to traditionalists and modernizers, explain the ban of same-sex marriage in Alabama.

In other direct democracy elections, the findings echo the trends of same-sex marriage votes. In two votes designed to remove segregationist era sections of the Alabama Constitution, Webster and Quinton (2010) conclude that the vote pits traditionalists against modernizers. In addition, using partisan votes cast in the same election, they are the first to make a connection between traditionalists and Republican voters and modernizers with Democrats. In an analysis of the Mississippi flag referendum, Leib and Webster (2012) argue that the vote is divided between traditionalists and modernizers, but they also introduce a racial component to the results.

Within contemporary American political analysis, electoral geography and contextual analysis have experienced some resurgence (Bishop & Cushing, 2008; Gelman, 2008; Gimpel & Schuknecht, 2002, 2006; McGhee & Krimm, 2009; Myers, 2013). This recent work revolves around the debate over geographic polarization and the sorting of politically like-minded individuals. Sociologists and psychologists refer to the clustering of people with like-mindedness and/or similar backgrounds (sorting) as homophily, or simply that “like attracts like” (Centola, González-Avella, Eguíluz, & San, 2007). The concept of homophily has been explored by political scientists and geographers to explain voting patterns and include major theoretical contributions such as the “neighborhood effect” (Taylor & Johnston, 1979) and “contextual effects” (Agnew, 1996; Books & Prysby, 1991). Our research enters this renewed debate and explores the relationship between the location of politically like-minded voters and residential partisan concentrations that we call “political enclaves”. Enclaves are identified using the smallest unit of political data collection, the precinct. Within the Greater Cincinnati Metropolitan Area, precinct-level data are examined to observe the development of political enclaves and to uncover an intensification of discernible

geographic patterns of polarized partisan voting from 1976 through 2008.

The geography of polarization

Polarization occurs when voters adopt more diametrically ideological positions (Levendusky, 2009). When the electorate increasingly adopts polarized partisan ideologies, those with centrist attitudes diminish in number, producing more voters at the partisan extremes and fewer voters at the center. A significant body of work suggests that growing political polarization is the result of increasing numbers of polarized political opinions of individuals (Abramowitz, 2012; 2011; 2010a; 2010b; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005, 2008; Saunders & Abramowitz, 2007).

Geographic polarization, a closely related phenomenon, suggests that over time those with like-minded political ideologies are increasingly found in geographic concentrations. Recent research is aimed at understanding the nature of geographic polarization and the processes that produce opposing partisans residing in distinctly separate partisan areas. Levendusky (2009) suggests that a strong relationship between partisanship and ideology is indicated if the electorate is spatially sorted based on socio-cultural demographics and ideologies and if partisan concentrations are a result of that sorting. However, if the electorate is unsorted and partisan concentrations are still visible, then little (if any) relationship between partisanship and ideology is indicated. Research identifying geographic polarization either seeks to identify the location and measure the extent of polarization, or it seeks to identify the socio-cultural demographic sorting that accompanies and supports it. Our research seeks to identify and measure the extent and growth of geographic polarization (political enclaves) at the micro-scale.

If geographic polarization increases, it follows that a significant, measurable difference in the spatial patterns of persistent partisan voting behavior could be identified. Two dominant explanations clarify why these patterns emerge: the first focuses on social and economic redistributional population shifts as a result of urbanization processes, and the second concentrates on geographic sorting resulting from socio-cultural demographic population migrations. Geographic sorting, popularized by Bishop and Cushing (2008), and supported by Abramowitz (2011), suggests that geographic polarization is the result of the movement of partisans to areas with other like-minded partisans (sorting), and that this movement has increased since 1976. These authors argue that people, given the choice, will residentially locate near those who are similar to themselves demographically or in lifestyle choices. Specifically, Bishop and Cushing (2008) identify the evolution of partisan landslide counties (counties won by a presidential candidate by twenty percent or more) while Abramowitz (2011) identifies landslide states and uses survey data along with electoral results to explain a new partisan alignment.

Additional related research supports the growing importance of geographic polarization. Gimpel and Schuknecht (2002) analyze regional variations of partisan voting behavior within several states by measuring spatial autocorrelation of political party vote percentages in certain presidential years (both Democrat and Republican vote percentages) and concluding that spatial patterns prevalent in many states reveal the political importance of suburban development alongside the concentration of Democratic dominance in urban cores. They further suggest that political battlegrounds are now within suburbs and smaller cities. In the states they analyzed, Democratic voters are most frequently located in densely populated, urban areas, whereas Republican voters are more frequently dispersed away from urban centers (Gimpel & Schuknecht, 2002, 2006). While their work does suggest geographic polarization within urban regions, their analyses are

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