



Spatial scale and the geographical polarization of the American electorate

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ABSTRACT

In the large literature on the growing polarization of the American electorate and its representatives relatively little attention is paid to the spatial polarization of voters for the two parties at presidential elections. Bishop argued this has increased as the result of residential location decisions: Democratic Party supporters have increasingly moved to neighborhoods where others of that persuasion are already congregated, for example. His analyses at the county scale are geographically incommensurate with that argument, however; the lacuna is filled using precinct-level data for the entire United States for the 2008, 2012 and 2016 presidential elections. Multi-level modelling shows polarization at those elections was significantly greater at the precinct than the county, state and division scales. Change over the three elections at the precinct scale was probably associated with redistricting and reduced support from the Democratic Party by some groups.

America is polarized. Our political parties are highly polarized and the American electorate is highly polarized. ... Political divisions in American politics are now deep and real (Campbell, 2016, 1).

Campbell's introductory statement to his *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* summarises a substantial body of recent scholarship focusing on changes over recent decades (for example, Levendusky, 2009). One feature of Campbell's book, however, and of the large literature on which he draws, is that it almost entirely ignores one aspect of the contemporary trend – geographical polarization. His chapters on the empirical evidence sustaining his and others' central claims cover ideological orientations, issue preferences, and behavioural patterns but say nothing about the changing spatial patterning of the American electorate. In marked contrast to a late book (Hopkins, 2017).

There is, however, considerable evidence that the American electorate has also become spatially more polarized in recent decades, with many areas becoming increasingly dominated – if not predominated – by one of the two main parties, notably at the state and county scales (Archer et al., 2014; Brunn et al., 2008; Morrill, Knopp, & Brown, 2011; Watrel et al., 2018). Several possible reasons for such polarization have been explored (initially by electoral geographers in Cox's, 1969, classic paper and followed up in his empirical studies: Johnston & Pattie, 2012.). They include (Johnston & Pattie, 2006): the classic neighbourhood effect, whereby social interaction within an area sees the dominant group there win over converts to its political attitudes and voting preferences; the development of a local political ethos that sustains one party much more than another; the intensity of activity by political parties aimed at mobilizing support and achieving high

turnout of their supporters are elections; and migrant self-selection, whereby individuals and households with particular political persuasions and voting preferences choose to move to areas where similar people already live. All four may interact within an area as, for example, parties seek to realise the potential returns from changing local demographic structures.

Of those processes, considerable recent attention has been given to the role of migration in the geographic sorting of the American electorate with, for example, Cho, Tam, Gimpel, and Hui (2013) identifying relocation patterns that illustrate not only geographic sorting according to neighbourhood characteristics but also the importance of local partisanship as determinants of some movers' chosen destinations – even in situations where that partisanship is not known but various clues suggest its nature (Gimpel & Hui, 2015).

The role of migration as a contributing clause to geographical polarization was brought to wider attention by Bishop (2009) whose book's subtitle – *Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans is Tearing Us Apart* – linked the ideological and behavioural polarization explicated by Campbell and others with an increased spatial segregation of the main groups in the electorate with similar opinions. Republican Party supporters, he argued, are increasingly clustering in places where Republican voters dominate, whereas Democratic Party supporters are increasingly congregating where its voters dominate the local electorate. Bishop's account, which is mainly anecdotal and journalistic in tone although he claims that work by his collaborator, Robert Cushing, a retired professor of sociology, used all of the 'several ways to measure segregation' (Bishop, 2009, 9) to demonstrate increased polarization at

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the county scale, may, as Cho et al. (2013, 857) express it, be ‘sensationalized, it is also believable enough to cause one to take pause ... [and] suggestive of a highly compelling story’ that critiques (such as Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Abrams & Fiorina, 2012) have not gainsaid.

Bishop’s argument contains two main hypotheses: that geographical polarization of the American electorate, as illustrated by voting patterns at presidential elections, has increased over recent decades; and that this polarization has resulted from selective migration patterns. However, as Cho et al. (2013) note, his empirical study of that polarization, designed to test the first of the two hypotheses, was undertaken at the wrong spatial scale. Like other studies of polarization, the smallest spatial unit deployed in the analyses is the county (for example, Lang & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2015; Morrill & Webster, 2015; Scala, Johnson, & Rogers, 2015), and yet Bishop’s (2009, 40) argument regarding selective migration, of people with similar backgrounds and characteristics increasingly clustering together, was that:

The country may be more diverse than ever coast to coast. But look around: our own streets are filled with people who live alike, think alike, and vote alike. This social transformation didn’t happen by accident. We have built a country where everyone can choose the neighborhood (and church and news shows) most compatible with his or her lifestyle and beliefs. And we are living with the consequences of this segregation by way of life: pockets of like-minded citizens that have become so identically inbred that we don’t know, can’t understand and can barely conceive of “those people” who live just a few miles away.

The spatial scale that he is addressing – of streets, neighborhoods and people who live ‘just a few miles away’ – is smaller than that of the units analysed, counties, some of which have populations in the millions. He established, as have other studies (e.g. Johnston, Manley, & Jones, 2016), that polarization is taking place, but not at the scale at which most people and households make their specific residential location decisions – the neighbourhood.

Firmer tests of his hypotheses therefore require analyses at smaller spatial scales than that of the county. Some case studies – such as Kinsella, McTague, and Raleigh (2015), Myers (2013) and Sussell (2013) – have identified polarization at the neighbourhood level, and McKee concluded (2008, 106) that:

Recent scholarship indicates that as Americans have become more mobile they have consciously chosen to relocate into communities with politically like-minded neighbours. ... This kind of residential sorting reinforces political similarities within communities and as a result accentuates political differences across different communities

and others (e.g. Cho et al., 2013; Gimpel & Hui, 2015; Hood & McKee, 2010) have linked such polarization to migrant movements. But, largely reflecting the absence of data portraying voting patterns at that scale for the country as a whole, there have been no studies establishing the intensity of polarization at the sub-county scale across the United States, let alone whether this has increased at recent elections. Using a recently-developed multi-scale measure of spatial polarization, this paper provides a first assessment of that local-scale polarization.

Hypothesis and data

As noted above, there are two hypotheses – that the American electorate has become geographically more polarized at the neighbourhood scale, and that this has been brought about by selective migration. If the first is falsified, then the second falls, so the goal here is to establish the veracity of the polarization argument. To do that, a bespoke data set has been assembled giving the number of votes for each candidate in each voting precinct within each county within each state at each of the 2008, 2012 and 2016 presidential elections. Given that the United States does not possess a central aggregating agency for precinct-level election data, and nor do many states, collection of

precinct-level results for the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections required contacting the relevant electoral authorities in each state and county as needed. In most cases, state Secretaries of State or Election Boards provided state-wide precinct results, but several states required contacting each county’s electoral authority independently, namely Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. Kansas, Kentucky, Oregon, and West Virginia required county-specific contact for a minority of counties. Most electoral authorities provided results without charge via email or fax, but units such as Utah and many counties in Missouri required fees for access to their data. The Harvard Election Data Archive supplied precinct-level results for the 2008 presidential election.¹ Unfortunately, comparable data are not available for previous elections and longer-term trends cannot be analysed.

The number of precincts varied across the three elections. There were 186,371 in 2008 where at least one vote was cast, with a mean number of 702 votes (standard deviation 612); the maximum was 36,840 and the inter-quartile range 342–869. In 2012 there were 170,277 with a mean of 725, standard deviation 689, maximum 45,667 and an inter-quartile range of 348–886. For 2016 there was a mean of 780 (standard deviation 745) for the 168,023 precincts; the maximum was 44,292 and the inter-quartile range 365–957. For each precinct we calculated the percentage of the two-party (Republican plus Democratic) votes cast for the Democratic candidate to form the variable whose polarization we modelled.²

Using a multilevel measure of spatial segregation/polarization a recent analysis showed that at each presidential election from 1992 on the geography of support for the Democratic Party’s candidates across the country’s nine Census divisions was more polarized at each successive election (Johnston et al., 2016); that within those divisions, Democratic Party support was more polarized across the constituent states at each successive election; and that within states, Democratic Party support was more polarized across the constituent counties at each successive election – with these latter changes being statistically highly significant. That measure of polarization – the Median Odds Ratio (MOR) between the modelled percentages of support for Democratic Party candidates – is deployed here in the first analysis of its extent at the much finer-grained spatial scale of voting precincts, extending that earlier study to a fourth spatial scale.

Using a bespoke data set, therefore, this paper explores the intensity of polarization at recent US presidential elections at a spatial scale commensurate with the processes identified by several authors regarding that change. Although precinct boundaries are not necessarily drawn to correspond with neighborhoods, nevertheless their size is consistent with the local areas within which the polarization is assumed to be occurring. As such, it is the first nation-wide exploration of a hypothesis regarding the intensity of electoral polarization at that scale.

Modelling polarization

A number of different ways of measuring polarization is available of which the most popular is the index of dissimilarity, used in Glaeser and Ward’s (2005) analysis of long-term trends in US electoral geography,³ but because this index confounds systematic with stochastic variation in the allocation of individuals to areas it tends to over-estimate the intensity of polarization/segregation, especially in areas with relatively

¹ <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/eda/home>.

² It is, of course, possible that because of the MAUP issue the results that we obtain with this single realisation of a fine-scale spatial division of counties into precincts are outliers from the general pattern that might result from a large number of different realisations involving the same number of precincts with the same average population. As with a very large number of other studies using spatially-aggregated data we have to accept that risk while recognising that it is very unlikely.

³ Glaeser and Ward (2005) concluded that there was no long-term trend of increased polarization, but inspection of their results shows a clear increase from the mid-1970s on.

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