

# Spatial Dimensions of American Politics

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Geography matters—an apt albeit pithy summary of several decades of research into the spatial dimensions of American politics. The exploration of the role of geography and context in American politics is a line of inquiry that has recently evolved in both the theoretic realm and alongside the rapid and exciting advances in geographic information systems (GIS) and in spatial statistics. Indeed, the development of tools and models has spawned interest among political scientists in exploring the spatial dimensions of various social and political phenomena. Several review articles have documented the origin and development of spatial thinking in political science (Cho and Gimpel, 2012; Rodden, 2010; Gleditsch and Weidmann, 2012; McKee, 2016), providing many examples of how spatial methodologies have informed and are applied to study substantive questions in American politics.

We do not intend to provide yet another summary. Rather, we offer a different perspective and propose that these studies go deeper to tap the richer and more nuanced facets of geography. While we also provide some discussion of the literature, our focus is on the path forward. To begin, we first review the political science literature to set the context for our discussion. Next, we switch gears and move to a review of the literature in geography. This foray into another discipline allows us to view the political science literature from a different perspective. We then review the research path in American politics from the lens of a geographer. We see that this vantage point provides new ideas for how to augment and improve our understanding of the role of geography in the study of American politics.

## Contagion, Diffusion, and Flow

We begin with notions of contagion and diffusion where geography often plays a strong and directing role, usually either by shaping the flow of information or by creating fields of bias in the exposure to these information flows. Contagion is the transmission from one agent to a neighboring agent. Diffusion is similar and refers to the spread of some entity more widely within a space. Flow is simply movement, often of information. From a spatial or location perspective, by providing a venue for interactions to occur, geography dictates *where* events can potentially happen. Both contagion and diffusion are mechanisms in which the passing of innovation, culture, norm, idea, practice, religion, or even ideology from one group of people to another, or from one institution to another, happens. Studies have found that through social learning, adaptation, peer pressure, or imitation, individuals' moods, attitudes, as well as behaviors can converge and result in growing interdependence among individuals or institutions. Diffusion of norms and behaviors may be spontaneous, organic, and unorchestrated. Alternatively, this type of diffusion may also occur through external manipulation, inspired, spurred, or created by political campaigns, social movements, or even gang activities, which target residents in certain areas (HoSang, 2010). As a result of such targeting efforts, individuals residing in these specific communities may develop behaviors and attitudes that are different from the larger societal norms.

Contagion effects have been identified in various forms of political participation. One of the central questions in American politics is whether political acts are purely the result of individual calculations or whether they encompass a social component. Numerous studies have found that voting behavior and political acts can be “contagious” within a household or among friends and families (Nickerson, 2008; Bond et al., 2012; Cutts and Fieldhouse, 2009). Even beyond close others, there is evidence that political behavior is subject to contagion effects. Cho (2003) examines the contagion of campaign contributions via spatial analyses of the campaign donations from Asian Americans. Her findings reveal that patterns of campaign donations are geographically clustered and exhibit both neighborhood and regional heterogeneity effects. This clustering goes beyond patterns that can be explained completely by socioeconomic and demographic composition and is related to the behavior in proximate others. She interprets this as evidence that is consistent with a contagion effect where ethnic contribution networks influence and direct funds to their particular candidates. Cho and Rudolph (2008) extend contagion inquiries beyond campaign donations. They examine the spatial structure of several kinds of political participation including signing a petition, attending a political meeting or rally, working on a

community project, and participating in any demonstrations, protests, boycotts, or marches. They also find evidence that political participation is geographically clustered. Again, the clustering cannot be explained entirely by individual-level socio-demographic characteristics, or by particular forms of social interaction, or measures of aggregate-level factors such as mobilization, racial diversity, or income inequality. They conclude that the spatial structure presents evidence of a “diffusion process that begins at a core and spreads or propagates itself to neighboring areas.”

Using Federal Election Commission data, [Gimpel et al. \(2008\)](#) examine the relationship between a congressional candidate and campaign donors who reside inside and outside the candidate’s district. They confirm earlier findings about campaign donations that indicate that the competitiveness of the election is a significant factor. As well, they traced higher levels of donations to areas that are wealthier and highly educated. They highlight that by examining out-of-district donations, they can expose patterns of strategic donations intended to influence party control in Congress. [Sinclair \(2012\)](#) summarizes other similar studies and expands and ties in the role of social networks to those that have been connected to the geographic component.

The clustering of similar behavioral patterns may not be so surprising given the behavior of political entities. To be sure, the idea that campaign donations and behavior can and do diffuse geographically is a foundational premise for political campaign strategists for whom thinking geographically is a maximally efficient strategy. Political campaigns geo-target and carefully manage how they tailor their message to specific media markets. Plainly, residents in battleground areas receive more frequent messages than those in nonbattleground areas ([Shaw, 2006](#); [Chen and Reeves, 2011](#); [Gimpel et al., 2007](#)). As such, it is not surprising to find behavior that is similar within geographic areas. Not only does knowledge, information, and norm diffusion occur among proximate individuals, but also this type of process is fostered by political campaigns.

In addition, knowledge and norm diffusion can also occur among organizations and institutions. Studies have tracked how social movements and tactics used in movements diffuse across time and space ([McAdam and Rucht, 1993](#); [Wang and Soule, 2012](#)). For institutions, we have evidence that institutional behaviors, adoption of policies, ideologies, and institutional practices can spread within a country or across the globe ([Vasi, 2006](#); [McMahon-Howard et al., 2009](#); [Durfee, 1999](#); [Nicholson-Crotty, 2009](#)).

Indeed, even if we do not understand the precise mechanisms behind these geographic patterns, these types of geographic patterns have been identified by many and shown to influence the political behavior of individuals, organizations, and institutions. On the individual level, even before the more recent proliferation of research that incorporates geography, the extant research on political participation implied that these patterns might be pervasive. Consider what it means to be a “political being.” Stretching back half a century, scholars, in what is commonly known as the Columbia school of thought, posited that contextual factors influence the development of political attitudes and their manifest behaviors ([Berelson et al., 1954](#)). Similarly, [Putnam \(1995\)](#) highlights the declining social capital in the United States and discusses how this can have an aggregate societal effect as individual attitudes and behaviors are affected. In these works, the role of geography may not have been highlighted and perhaps even explicitly discussed, but the potential influence of geography was evident and followed easily from the theories proffered, which center on social interaction even if these interactions were not discussed with the underlying geography in mind.

## **Territory, Territoriality, and Social Isolation**

Another area in which one would be hard-pressed to not see a geographic connection is in studies that involve territory. In a sense, all studies involve territory, at least implicitly, since all individuals are located in a particular territory. It is clear that geography can be a barrier that either limits accessibility or constrains activities and interactions, especially when the terrain is rough or when it crosses institutional borders. In the United States, different states have different laws, so two individuals living within a city block but on opposite sides of a state border may be affected by different laws. At the institutional level, the large literature in political science on federalism, districting, and gerrymandering attests to the significance of territoriality in organizing both government and elections. At the presidential level, the Electoral College is steeped in geographic traditions. At the lower level, electoral districts are defined geographically, and elections are usually in districts with first-past-the-post electoral rules. Politicians understand geography well and spend countless hours meticulously crafting electoral districts that may restrict electoral choice and increase the relative influence of voters in some places over others elsewhere ([Chen and Rodden, 2013](#)).

[Cho and Nicley \(2008\)](#) examine how political tendencies are moderated by political landscape by looking at data that are plentiful in boundaries as well as socioeconomic attributes. At one level, they expect proximate individuals to display a level of homophily. At another they expect those who are governed by different state laws and who are immersed in difficult state cultures to have similar behavior. These two tendencies give rise to the interesting interplay of territory and context at political borders. A clear result of the Cho and Nicley analysis is that the relationship between the border institution and geographic proximity effects is not reducible to a simple, unidirectional causal link. They posit that there are three distinct categories into which state border effects fall. Borders often divide a place even when there are significant shared social affinities. However, they sometimes fail to materially alter the political similarity between cross-border neighbors. Finally, some borders reinforce a unique “transborder” political identity. These latter types are often related to the actual landscape of the borders (e.g., riparian borders). In short, while proximity matters, geography is not flat or without interesting ripples that moderate what might otherwise be a simple relationship.

At the individual level, places or territories, even without exceptional landscape, can affect social and political behavior by limiting geographic and, subsequently, social mobility. [Massey and Denton \(1993\)](#) compare residential segregation in US cities to an “American apartheid” whereby individuals in hypersegregated neighborhoods are trapped and are subject to a wide array of

social ills. Geographic isolation, in this case, translates into social and economic deprivation. Not only do these residents have lower social mobility, but their children also suffer as they are exposed to negative social conditions such as crime, gangs, high rates of teenage pregnancy, and enormous high-school dropout rates.

Residential segregation may also give rise to a spatial mismatch of residence and jobs. Holzer (1991) and Leonhardt (2013) show that the main barriers for gaining access to jobs from disadvantaged residential communities (absence of public transportation, scale of housing segregation across the metropolis, educational access, etc.) vary considerably across localities and metropolitan areas. At the same time, desegregation causes ethnic groups to collide in both physical and social space. The “realistic conflict theory” or “threat theory” posit that intergroup conflict increases with competition over scarce resources (Sherif et al., 1961). The “contact theory” hypothesizes that conflict increases especially in areas where groups come into rivalry over territory (Allport, 1954). Both are mediated by the residential patterns and geographic realities of the region.

Within American politics, the idea that politics is driven by macroeconomic imperatives mediated by place differences has been most closely associated with the idea of sectionalism. Sectionalism remains attractive as a template for examining trends in electoral politics and the sway of influence in Washington DC between different regional–political constituencies. This literature focuses usually on the spatial-location relationships between regions (or sections). The original idea of dividing the United States up into distinctive “sections” or macroregions can be traced to the historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, in the early twentieth century. It reflected the history of the United States that was based around the competition between the North and the South for control of the federal government and the American West. The areas had two very different economies. One was based on free labor, while the other was steeped in slavery. Though the Civil War had seemingly led to the victory of the North, economic and cultural differences among the three regions persisted. Bense (1984) has used city-hinterland units to explore the long-term history of sectionalism in US national politics from the Civil War to the 1970s. He shows how sectional influences have often trumped party and other factors in gaining lobbying leverage for local industries and obtaining federal spending. Sanders (1986) uses a similar framework to argue for the critical role of sectionalism in the history of US antitrust legislation from 1880 until 1980. Busch and Reinhardt (1999) show the significant impact of different regional economic interests on US foreign-policy making by highlighting a fundamental “manufacturing belt” versus “sun belt” conflict over US trade and other policies.

Indeed, many states retain residual elements of geographical differences that continue to affect political practices, electoral participation, and support for different political parties. Burnham (1982) and, later, Darmofal (2006) show that electoral participation also tends to map onto regional divides with their roots in the history of national integration and the relative disaffection of some places with the national-state project leading to lower electoral turnouts. Familiar terms like rural, urban, and suburban or regional labels like the South or the Midwest, for example, capture some of this type of variability that conditions the working of narrower and more localized channels of social interaction and communication that may be the putative focus of a piece of research. Yet, not all places constitute politics in the same way, even when those places share similar and measurable socioeconomic characteristics. It is important to identify the range of geo-sociological settings that frame how individuals and groups make their choices before drawing broader generalizations. The sociopolitical processes provide an important moderating effect. Much of these processes are deeply rooted in the historical traditions that built and continue to define various regions.

Relatedly, in recent years, some studies have begun switching their theoretical foci from space in the narrow sense of physical place to a broader interpretation of place where place is not just incidental to the location of the expanding industries and economic growth but central to their success through the “external economies” that places provide. Instead of using statistical models to isolate effects in data that include a large number of places, some studies have begun to explore the intricate dynamics where various components come together. Silicon Valley is one example. Its success is driven by a unique combination of factors that includes the presence of a large specialized labor force, venture capitalists, specialized services, adjacency to competing firms, and the like, factors that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere (Moretti, 2012). These studies are less concerned with how individual components relate to economic growth than with providing a more holistic analysis of how spatial factors come together to generate a robust local economy through increasing returns to scale.

Indeed, it is simple to see why scholars have gravitated toward geographic theories and analyses of American politics, especially as the tools for this type of analysis have increased in sophistication. So much of American politics has obvious ties to geography. States devise their own laws and have autonomy in our federalist system of government. Within states, most elections are governed by geographically based electoral districts. Cities, counties, and municipalities, again geographically defined and distinct, define their own systems of local government. Politicians devise geographically based campaign strategies and send political messages that are tailored to the peculiarities of different regionally based media markets. Citizen interactions are furthermore often constrained by geography. In short, it would be unusual to not expect geography to have a significant impact on American politics. Yet, simply claiming that geography has an impact on American politics is unfulfilling; and untangling this impact is complex, multifaceted, and rife with immensely intriguing dynamics.

## What Is Geography?

In the geography literature, there have been two dominant understandings of place (Agnew, 1987, 2002). One notion is clearly familiar to modern social science while the other, not unknown, has been the subject of less discussion. The first conception has only one aspect to it, location. *Location* is the objective geographic area or territory encompassing the settings for social interaction. Via location, we can understand how all places are linked to one another. Another definition of place is more sociological and more

normative. This definition is more nuanced and encompasses two aspects, termed locale and sense of place, which transcend simple location or address. *Locale* refers to the settings for personal social relations, as well as for both formal and institutional relations and activities. *Sense of place* refers to the subjective feeling or identity associated with an area.

Though this broader definition of place is not often the focus, it can richly inform the study of politics. Consider the impact of living in urban areas versus rural areas on vote preference. On the surface, it may appear that the question concerns the impact of location. If one views the question in this way, the researcher would begin by gathering measures on urbanity, perhaps population density, types of land use, or transit network, and then examine how these attributes are related to vote preference. However, these variables are most interesting not in and of themselves but as proxy measures of the underlying features of urban areas. To be sure, the more interesting questions involve place in a broader sense. In essence, a researcher is interested in the interplay of multiple factors: housing market effects; access to jobs in specific industries that have their own patterns of industrial relations; cultural patterns of everyday life that reflect long histories of class, racial, and ethnic exclusion from the wider society; social expectations that are constituted in everyday life in the city; relative access to the political institutions of the wider society; and the degree of collective estrangement from their decisions. All of these factors may affect an individual's vote preference. Without clarifying the concept of place, a researcher can lose sight of the bigger theoretical question. Jerram (2013) has made much the same point about how historians understand "space," failing to distinguish its various meanings, though his terminology differs from ours. He distinguishes space as physical disposition (locale to us), space as location (same as us), and space as place (sense of place to us).

It is relatively easy to show what geographic features might be related to politics in an ontological sense. How geography matters epistemologically is more difficult to measure and, accordingly, more difficult to show. Geography matters in terms of both *what* and *how*. The "what" arises because everybody has a location, and we wonder what the features are of the locations that seem to be associated with behavioral effects. "How" involves demonstrating the precise impact that location or place has on a person's behavior. "How" and "what" are certainly related, but they are nonetheless analytically distinctive in terms of geography's impacts.

Corresponding to the two notions of geography, Agnew (1987, 2002) introduces two perspectives, namely "spatial-location" and "place," to conceptualize how and what features of geography matter. A complete perspective would attempt integration of the two. Indeed the more expansive how perspective implies such an integration. However, when place-based studies remain localized in its conception of effects, they neglect a broader discussion of how the larger "macro" contexts (of institutional, economic, and communication relations over space) resonate to the "micro" contexts. One empirical example serves to illustrate the basic distinction we are drawing. In 1995, Chicago experienced a heat wave that led to at least 750 heat-related deaths in less than a week. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and resulted in nearly 1500 deaths. At first glance, these disasters may appear as textbook cases where geography matters in a manifestly "physical" way. From the strongest version of the spatial-location perspective, typically labeled as environmental determinism, geography appears to play a direct and dominant role in both cases and caused the heavy casualties. From the place perspective, however, what mattered is less the location per se and more how people make, live, and experience the places in question as the environmental pressures descended on them. Careful analysis reveals that deaths as a result of the heat in Chicago were much greater in neighborhoods without supportive local social networks, and the evacuation of many residents happened in some neighborhoods of New Orleans well before the arrival of Hurricane Katrina. Victims in both cases were more likely to be residents clustered in poorer, socially anemic neighborhoods, who were older, poorer, less healthy, and less socially connected. The place perspective provides a more thorough account of how adverse (and unwilling) selection left victims in the path of these seemingly inevitable natural disasters.

The two perspectives offer a basic guide about how to think about the role of geography in politics. There are two dimensions. On the what-axis is the degree to which there is "real" geographical variability that perhaps reflects differences between locations or places in behaviors. On the how-axis is the extent to which geographical variability is read in terms of geographically channeled processes or is merely coincidental with other directly political, economic, or communicational causes accounting for geographically differentiated outcomes. The spatial-location perspective sees geography as either incidental to or as a surrogate for more profound psychological or political-economic causes. The place perspective views both psychological and political-economic causes of behavior as invariably mediated geographically rather than operating in some separate domain outside of time-space (Walsh, 2012).

### Analyzing Place Versus Space

Quantitative analyses that rely heavily on statistical methodology can sometimes overly focus on the physical aspects of geography and miss the broader spatial conceptualization. Although new spatial statistical techniques can improve the precision of our estimates or allow us to estimate models that were once infeasible, empirical contributions are far richer when they are also accompanied by careful and thoughtful theoretical conceptualizations of *how* and *what* about geography matters. Both quantitative analysis and theoretic development are important and work in tandem. The strength and bias of a quantitative analysis lie in identifying the significant factors contributing to a phenomenon. What factors are interesting about geography, however, is not the same as understanding the underlying mechanisms of how these factors work.

Indeed, geography encompasses more than just physical distance. Without clarifying the distinctiveness of these two conceptions, quantitative studies may constrain the reach of their analysis. The extant literature has already scratched the surface and identified and quantified many areas in American politics where geography has an impact. Many of these studies also seek to shed insight into the underlying mechanisms that manifest themselves through geography. This is a difficult task, however, and the one

that we now discuss. Greater focus on this task will richly add to our theoretical understanding of the spatial dimensions of American politics.

An important key to progress is to not restrict oneself to the simple spatial-location perspective because this can limit not only one's research design but also then the implications of the work. In some cases, geography under this rubric may appear to exert a dominant role when, in fact, it acts merely as a surrogate for unobserved factors or social mechanisms. In other studies, even when geography is not explicitly addressed, the work may still invoke a deep comprehension of geography akin to that of the place perspective as we have defined it above. For instance, the discourse on social contagion and diffusion is often intermingled with the discussion of contextual effects. Contextual effects are about in situ effects rather than ones that operate across space. [Cho and Gimpel \(2012\)](#) argue that contextual analyses can incorporate and analyze how socio-spatial environment can affect individual decision-making process and behavior. Contextual analyses can illuminate the interplay between microbehaviors and macro-conditions. Social contexts cover a broad spectrum of putative influences and this line of inquiry is evident in numerous seminal works in the discipline. Political scientists have examined many social contexts that seem to have a strong spatial component. Neighborhood composition, political institutions, local political organizations, and media markets are some examples where influence potentially operates spatially.

In this realm, one positive direction toward incorporating a richer sense of geography is to combine the literature on social networks and geography ([Sinclair, 2012](#)). Much of this work is under way. Some of the work is directed and dictated by data issues. Often data is more attuned to a certain type of analysis. Social network ties may not be available in the data while geographic identifiers may be. In this case, by necessity, the researcher often defaults to a spatial analysis. However, even without the data on social ties, a researcher can and should discuss the underlying theoretic constructs. In the age of big data, data is not only becoming more readily available, but the data become richer as well. Likely, in the near future, these theoretic constructs can be tested in a rigorous way. Incorporating these theoretic constructs, even now, however, helps a researcher to define and design his or her research as well as spur ideas toward future data collection as well as future research.

In this sense, there is no point to limiting oneself to unimaginative interpretations of spatial measures. The measures are, to be sure, limited in what they can identify. For instance, Moran's *I* is an indicator of global spatial autocorrelation. However, the presence of significant spatial autocorrelation does not necessarily imply that geography has a direct role in the causal process. Similarly, the absence of significant spatial autocorrelation also does not rule out its role in the causal process. It provides a stage for an initial understanding and an impetus to engage in further work. Take the literature on policy adoption for example. Contagion may not adhere simply to physical contiguity between locations. It can occur either contagiously across space or hierarchically, with "leaps" between large cities or between more "powerful" states before spreading out contagiously into city or hinterlands ([Midlarsky, 1978](#); [Midlarsky et al., 1980](#); [Buhaug and Gleditsch, 2008](#); [Horowitz, 2010](#); [Levy, 1982](#)). The tricky dilemma is that, on the one hand, misspecification of the spatial weight matrix simply based on geographic proximity can fail to capture the dynamics and misguide our interpretation, while, on the other hand, if we specify the weight matrix based on the empirical pattern we observe, the result would suffer from endogeneity bias. As with all statistical analyses, the research is best when it is imbued with creativity and thoughtfulness, stretching far beyond rote interpretations of limited statistical constructs.

### The Modifiable Areal Unit Problem

A nice example of taking a real constraint of geographical research and turning it into a creative research endeavor surrounds the well-known modifiable areal unit problem. Indeed, a common challenge that plagues all contextual analyses is determining the best geographic unit of analysis, especially since the spatial unit that is adopted is subject to data availability issues. Most often, convenient administrative units like census blocks, census tracts, or precincts are used because these are the units for which we have data. It is possible, though hard, to see why it would be theoretically likely that behavior aggregated at the level of an administrative unit would necessarily be interesting ([Riva et al., 2008](#); [Cho and Baer, 2011](#)). We would be hard-pressed to find individuals who have any inkling about which census unit they might be part of or who else might be in their census unit. Neighborhoods are more meaningful in that sense, though defining the boundaries of a neighborhood is not simple or constant even among people who live next door to one another. If we are concerned with the organic sociology of place informing electoral choices, media markets might be a better choice. Apart from the theoretic concerns, a methodological concern is that different scales of aggregation can lead to different conclusions about the relationship between two variables ([Openshaw, 1984](#)).

While it is a difficult question, certainly not amenable to our standard statistical toolbox, it is immensely interesting, both substantively and theoretically, to examine how residents in the study area define and conceive of the boundary of their own "neighborhood." According to their experiences, where do social interactions take place? What are the common venues in which residents come into daily contact? And, what are the common "activity spaces" shared by the residents? The *Livehoods* project ([livehoods.org](#)) attempts to track daily activities taken by millions of individuals. The project, developed at the School of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University, examines 18 million check-ins from the Foursquare app. Based on this large corpus of data, they use a clustering approach to identify zones of activity based on the patterns of activity. In essence, instead of using the census tract to define "neighborhood," they obtain a much better measure by actually tracking how and where people live their lives. This is an immensely interesting project that takes a statistical constraint and seeks to develop a new, imaginative, and theoretically attractive measure. The measure is based not on data convenience, but on the premise that we can gain insight into community boundaries through social media data because these data encompass the commonality of many daily paths.

### The Identification Problem

Indeed, the modifiable areal unit problem is a thorny problem that cries out for creative solutions. Another complex and intricate issue that is pervasive in contextual analysis arises when we consider statistical inferences. In particular, despite the large volume of work on contextual influences, skepticism remains about the validity of many of the general findings. In what he calls the “identification problem in social science,” [Manski \(1993\)](#) sums up the main empirical challenge in contextual analyses. When researchers observe that individuals who belong to the same group tend to behave similarly, there are two competing explanations. One explanation is an endogenous effect, or self-selection, where individuals with similar characteristics choose to associate with one another. A second, equally consistent explanation is a correlation effect, where individuals in the same group tend to behave similarly because they face similar environments and thus experience similar pressure to conform to group norms.

When researchers observe individuals in the same place behaving similarly, the challenge is to discern the degree to which similarity stems from self-selection or contextual influence. The identification problem is yet another area where we see the limitations of statistical models, especially when they are not coupled with careful reflection. Consider an example from electoral politics. In recent decades, the study of electoral politics has become very much tied to questions of geographical variation in population composition and the sorting of different social groups with different political proclivities into different places. Electoral gaps among city, suburb, and rural areas have gone up over time ([McKee, 2008](#)). Voting patterns also diverge between richer and poorer states ([Gelman, 2009](#)). What explains the geographical variation in voting behaviors and outcomes? From the spatial-location perspective, geographic differences in voting preferences merely reflect underlying variations in demographic characteristics and economic activities. Cities are more likely to attract young people, minorities, and college graduates. They are also more likely to attract folks who are more receptive to cultural diversity, sexual and religious tolerance, as well as other politically liberal values ([Florida, 2002](#)). People vote with their feet and select into communities that reflect their economic attainment and lifestyle preferences. Of course, whether people are always living where they want because of “free choice” is questionable.

The potential consequences of particular residential mobility patterns should not be underestimated. Though identification problems plague this topic, the political and societal implications are important. Consider Bishop’s account (2009) where he laments how the geographic clustering of like-minded individuals breeds narrowness of viewpoint. He argued that heterogeneous communities teach their members to compromise by providing a neighborly forum for opposing opinions, whereas homogeneous communities promote extremism and ideological intensity because different viewpoints are regularly dismissed without discussion or consideration. If we continue on this present course, Bishop admonished, this cultural evolution will foster an increasingly intense intolerance that will tear the country apart at its seams. Although some consider Bishop’s account to be sensationalized and written with a journalist’s mindset, it is also believable enough to cause one to take pause. His story is based on aggregated data, and the implications are not compelled by the limited analysis, though his story does compel further study. [Cho et al. \(2013\)](#) were inspired by the substantive importance and examined the question using individual data. While their analysis was improved with individual data rather than county-level data, the identification issues cannot be completely resolved in this way. It was a step in the right direction and should spur on even further steps, perhaps augmenting with qualitative data, to make additional progress.

### All Politics Is Local

One last area that we would like to highlight centers around a mantra in political science. Namely, all politics is local. This observation stems back to V.O. Key’s seminal work, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, where he connects in-depth ground-level workings of southern political institutions and the role of race to the unification of a region that was deeply divided by socioeconomic disparity. He analyzed factors including social structure and political leadership that gave rise to the one-party control in the South. Following reconstruction, the South sought to disenfranchise the newly freed slaves. The movement toward white supremacy led to white-dominated political institutions that heavily favored Democrats. This work broaches another deeper question about the paradoxical nature of geographical context. On the one hand, places are dynamic. [Johnston \(1991\)](#) notes that places differ not only because of physical environmental variations, but they also differ as the milieu in which people live— influenced by and influencing the physical environment, but neither determined by nor determining it. Thus, places differ because of the influence of its inhabitants; and the context of a place is constantly in flux with a new mix of inhabitants.

Take, for example, migration in the United States. Even though migrants physically live in the United States, their sense of place, including daily routines, media consumption, and lifestyles, can be heavily influenced by their experience growing up in their home countries. Simultaneously, the presence of migrants from other countries can reshape the day-to-day experience of Americans through exposing them to a variety of languages, social norms, and cuisine choices. The interaction between migrants and natives thus not only consistently redefines not only what it means to be “American,” but also the cultural norms affecting political behavior in different places.

Geography can pose a challenge to contextual analyses, especially when researchers aim to make comparisons about “types” of people, social groups, and political institutions across geographic space and time. Quantitative analyses, for example, often presume that a given social or political label has the same significance for behavior irrespective of where those with it happen to live. What does it mean to be a black in different places across the United States? At any given point in time, the meaning of the social group, “African-American,” can carry differing social significance in different parts of the country. Because individuals are always part of social groups that are unevenly distributed across space, their relative densities can affect the ways in which individuals respond to their local environments. As a result, a black person who is born and raised in Montana may develop a

different understanding of racial identity than his or her counterpart in Alabama. At any given place over time, the social meaning of being black may also vary as a result of the relative hostility of the surrounding community, the behavior of police and courts in enforcing the law, the overall quality and access to public goods, etc.

Places can be dynamic and stagnate at the same time. A place can be stagnant in a sense that distinct local norms and cultures can be perpetuated through time. Despite evidence for the constant remaking of places, studies also have pointed to the essential stability of local cultures and norms. Elazar (1972), for example, identifies unique state cultures in the United States that have persisted for generations. Tracing neighborhoods in Chicago for decades, Sampson (2012) concludes that enduring neighborhood disparities still organize and mediate much of residents' social life. Although one-party domination by Democrats is now history, many contentious aspects of Southern politics documented half a century ago, including acrimonious racial tension and deep-rooted social conservatism, remain into the present (Key, 1949; Bullock and Rozell, 2010).

In this realm, we can enlist some aid from less utilized statistical techniques. While most statistical analyses are conducted at a "global" level, there are a number of techniques that are aimed at taking local effects into account, thus allowing us to gain some traction on a more expansive interpretation of the role of geography. In particular, geographically weighted regressions provide not just one global estimate but many local estimates. Cho and Gimpel (2010) examine spatial patterns of political participation with a geographically weighted regression. They find yet additional evidence for the global patterns in participation that have been noted by others, but also find interesting patterns in the local regression parameters that capture significant heterogeneity of the contextual process. Indeed, theoretically, spatial nonstationarity would appear to be the rule rather than the exception. Accordingly, being sensitive to local effects is an important component of untangling the role of geography in political phenomena.

## Conclusion

In recent decades, political scientists have begun to explore the role of geography in shaping attitudes and behaviors. The spatial dimensions of American politics are varied and rich, as we have seen through the growing and important literature that highlights the role of geography in American politics. This literature is an important complement to the rational actor literature where individuals are largely seen as atomistic actors, making choices based on one's own interests and utility functions. This rational actor or individual perspective need not be viewed as antithetical to an analysis that is more mindful of context and geography. As decisions, choices, and actions are not taken entirely alone, other considerations from social pressure to peer influence also enter into our calculations. The behavior and choices of others provide contextual information that affect decision making. We might like to think that we are stubbornly self-reliant individuals but social psychology tells us otherwise. Indeed, there is nothing inherently problematic about combining rational choice with context dependence. To the contrary, they are nicely complementary.

Recent growth in geographical analysis in social science has been closely related to advances in GIS and spatial econometrics. We are still amidst expansive growth in both of these areas. Importantly, we wish to emphasize the critical role of careful spatial thinking with statistical modeling. Methodological considerations never sit apart from research design. The former is only as good as the latter. As we have shown, there has been, and is, tremendous interest in the role of geography in political processes on the part of political science, albeit sometimes in inchoate and implicit ways. A more explicit engagement will yield new and exciting insights into the phrase "geography matters." Both learning how to quantify geographic effects and the substantive knowledge of the phenomena we are studying will have positive effects, alone, and one on the other.

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