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Beyond Density & Diversity: Understanding the Socio-Cultural Geography of Contemporary Presidential Elections

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Beyond Density & Diversity: Understanding the Socio-Cultural Geography of Contemporary Presidential Elections

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2012 presidential election, a good deal of commentary held that President Obama's reelection resulted from the country's changing demography and his overwhelming support among nonwhite voters residing in the country's urban spaces. Less discussed was the fact that Republican Mitt Romney also carried many urbanized states with ethnically and racially diverse populations and that President Obama would not have been reelected without securing the Electoral Votes of a number of rural states with large white populations. In this paper, we argue that the combination of educated populations and a socio-cultural construct we call northernness allow us to differentiate which urban and diverse states and which white and rural states are Democratic and Republican voting in contemporary presidential elections.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2012 presidential election, a common refrain of pundits and analysts was that President Obama's victory over his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney, stemmed from Obama's overwhelming support among minority voters. Others emphasized geographic considerations by highlighting the president's substantial vote margins in the country's urban spaces.

To be sure, these two factors — density and diversity — were significant drivers of the Democratic vote and both variables loomed large in the swing states of Florida, Nevada, and Virginia. Yet, these two factors alone do not tell the story of President Obama's reelection. After all, President Obama lost, in some instances by substantial margins, a number of highly urbanized and highly diverse states. For instance, despite speculation that Arizona (93% of population in metro area; 42% of population nonwhite) might trend Democratic in 2012, Romney easily carried the state, as he did with Georgia (81% metro; 44% nonwhite) and majority-minority Texas (88% metro; 55% nonwhite). Further complicating the diversity and density narrative are Obama's victories in rural states with overwhelmingly white populations such as Iowa (57% metro; 11% nonwhite), Maine (58% metro; 6% nonwhite), and Vermont (34% metro; 6% nonwhite).

Thus, to more fully understand the political geography of contemporary presidential elections necessitates identifying variables that allow Republican and Democratic voting states that are urban and diverse and rural and white to be differentiated. We do so here by considering two state-level variables: the share of a state's residents who are college educated and a socio-cultural construct that we define as northernness. We begin by presenting our analysis of the relationship between President Obama's vote share and state density and diversity and then do the same for our measures of college educated and northernness. We also consider how the pendulum of American politics that swung in favor of the Republican Party, particularly in the South, is recalibrating in a manner that provides the Democrats with the advantage in the Electoral College.¹ Indeed, Democratic candidates have now won the popular vote in five or the last six presidential elections. The only time since 1988 that a Republican won the popular vote was in 2004 and then by a narrow margin and with a wartime incumbent seeking reelection. We conclude by using our framework to assess the contours of the 2016 presidential election.

Density and Diversity Revisited

Despite the Democratic Party's struggles at the time, in 2004 John Judis and Ruy Teixeira wrote *The Emerging Democratic Majority* in which they argued that changing demographics were reshaping the country's political geography in a manner that would help the Democrats compete in states where just a decade prior the party's presidential candidates rarely contested. In the intervening elections, Judis and Teixeira's work has offered an invaluable framework to explain state-level electoral outcomes with the basic

narrative being that Republicans win rural states with large white populations and the Democrats prevail in states that are urban and ethnically diverse. In states where neither block is dominant, suburban voters, whose marginal preferences tend to ebb and flow in response to macro-level conditions, hold the balance of power (Lang, Sanchez, and Berube 2008).

These partisan patterns, of course, are nothing new. In the post-Civil War era of party machines, outside of the South, the Democrats drew their support from the country's urban centers in the Northeast and the Midwest, while Republican strongholds were located outside the big cities and in the newer states of the Great Plains and the West. Since the Civil Rights Movement and the enforcement of federal protections allowing nonwhite citizens to fully participate in the electoral process, Democrats have enjoyed the bulk of these voters' support. In contrast, the GOP has increasingly become dependent upon white voters. In particular, the Republican Party's embracement of the Nixon-era "Southern strategy" and the subsequent aggressive mobilization of white Evangelical Christians beginning in the late 1970s accelerated the transformation of the former states of the Confederacy from Democratic to Republican control (Bullock and Rozell 2013). While this shift provided the GOP with the electoral support needed to sustain congressional majorities for the first time since the 1920s, the Republican Party's center of gravity is now well south of the Mason-Dixon Line.²

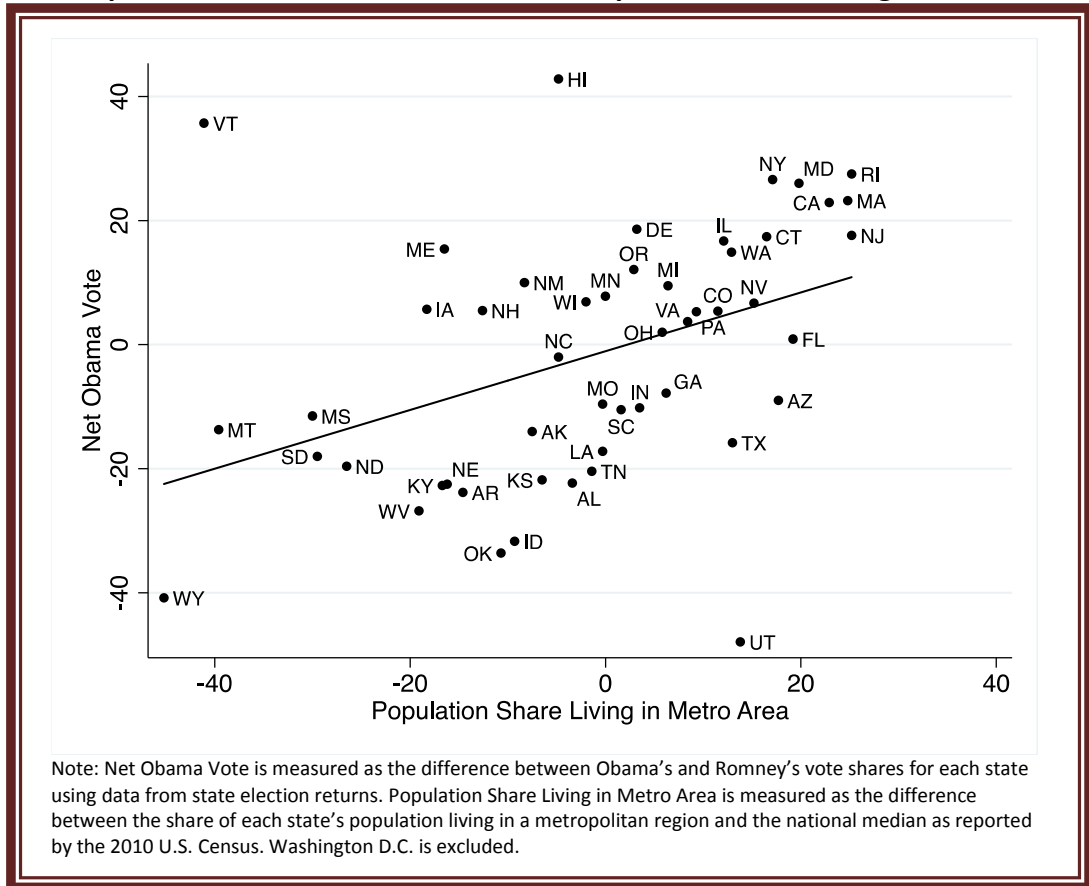
What has changed though, and what makes Judis and Teixeira's analysis so prescient, is the pace of demographic transformation and the geographic spaces in which these changes are occurring. To wit, in 1980, 80% of the country's population as defined by the U.S. Census as white; in 1990, 76%; in 2000, it was 69%, and in 2010 the white share of the population dropped to 63%. During this same time period, the share of the country's population living in metropolitan regions increased from 75% in 1980, to 78% in 1990, to 80% in 2000, and to 84% in 2010. More significantly, these shifts have not been limited to the traditional Democratic Electoral College giants in the Northeast, the Upper Midwest, or the West Coast. Rather, they have occurred in small-to-medium sized states (i.e., Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada in the Mountain West and North Carolina and Virginia in the Mid-Atlantic). The end result is that there are now more states with demographics that are strategically amenable to Democratic presidential candidates.

To be sure, states' levels of density and diversity co-vary (excluding Washington D.C. the correlation between a state's nonwhite population share and the percentage living in a metropolitan space is +.48). Yet, as the analysis presented in Figures 1 and 2 indicate, these variables are far from perfect predictors of voting in presidential elections. For both figures, the y-axis is President Obama's state level net vote share (Obama vote – Romney vote) gathered from election returns. The x-axis for Figure 1 is the difference between the share of each state's population residing in a metropolitan area and the national median as reported by the 2010 U.S. Census. For Figure 2, the x-axis is the difference between the share of each state's population that is classified as nonwhite

and the national median using data from 2010 U.S. Census. Data for Washington D.C. are omitted. The trend lines summarize the direction and strength of the relationships.

For both figures, three points stand out. First and as anticipated, both trend lines are positive suggesting that the greater a state's density or diversity, the more electoral support Obama received. Excluding Washington D.C., the relationship is stronger for density, which correlates at $+0.41$ with the Obama vote, as compared to $+0.32$ for diversity. Hence, the trend line's slope in Figure 1 is slightly steeper than in Figure 2.

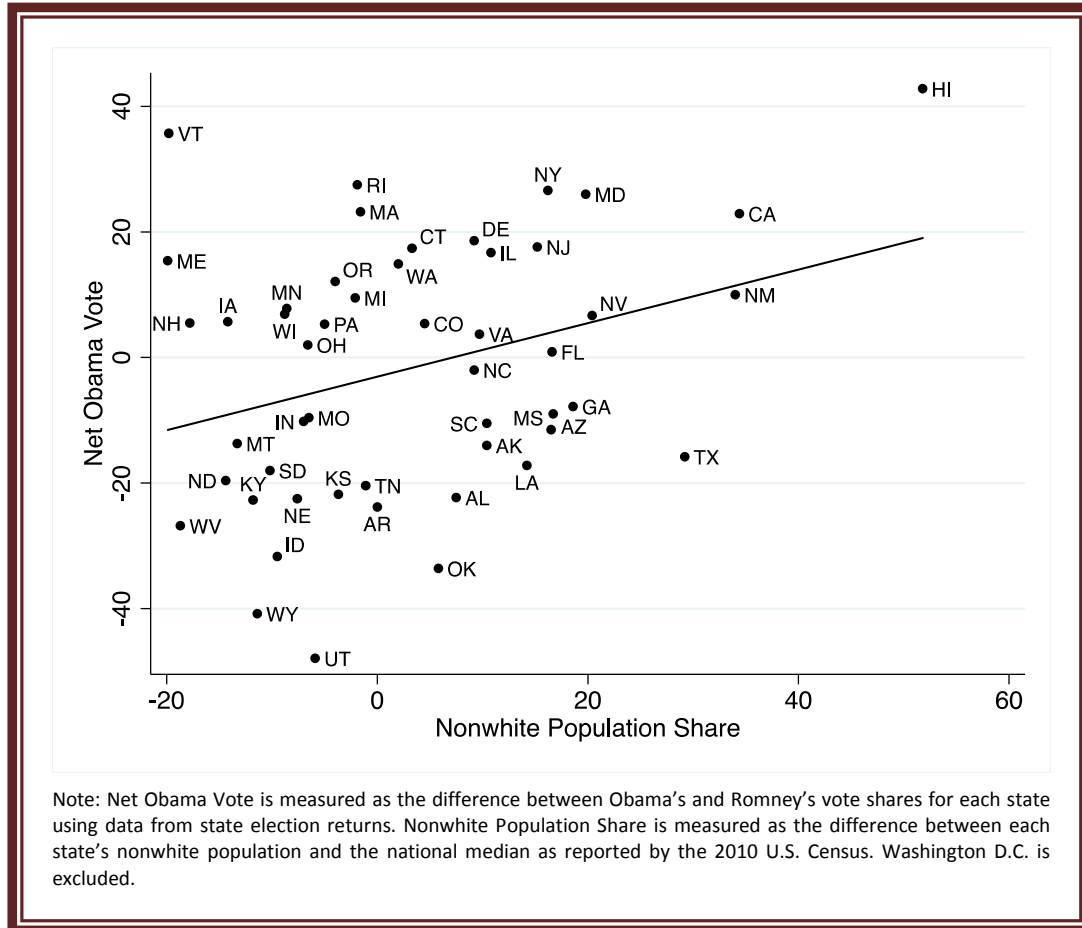
Figure 1
Scatterplot Between Net Obama Vote and Population Share Living in Metro Area



Second, for both relationships, many of the 2012 swing states — Colorado, Nevada, North Carolina, and Virginia — are either on or near the trend lines. This is consistent with Judis and Teixeira's analysis suggesting that changes to the country's political demography provide Democratic presidential candidates with more states in which to compete. Colorado and Virginia, in particular, exemplify these changes. Between 1964 and 2004, the Democrats carried Colorado twice; plurality wins by Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996. Prior to Obama, the last Democratic presidential candidates to win

consecutive elections in Virginia were Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman in 1944 and 1948.

Figure 2
Scatterplot Between Net Obama Vote and Nonwhite Population Share



Third and central to our purposes, for both figures, there are a large number of outlying states. Specifically, inspection of Figure 1 indicates that Obama won seven states (Hawaii, Iowa, Maine, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Vermont, and Wisconsin) with density levels below the national median and Romney carried eight states with levels of density above the national median (Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Missouri, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah). Similarly, the plot in Figure 2 reveals Obama victories in 14 states (Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin) with minority populations below the national median and Romney winning, often by large margins, ten states with minority populations exceeding the national median (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas).

At the same time and as can be gleaned from Table 1, these relationships are not unique to the 2012 presidential election. Using data from the 2010 U.S. Census, the table classifies states as either High (above the national median) or Low (below the national median) Diversity and as being Democratic, Republican, or Swing based upon the last four presidential elections (2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012). States that were carried by the Democratic (Republican) candidates in all four elections are coded as Democratic (Republican). States that split their support in at least one of these elections are coded as Swing.

Table 1
Population Diversity and Voting in Presidential Elections, 2000-2012

State Type	Loyalty	States (Electoral Votes)	Regional Patterns	Electoral Votes ^a	Share of Total	Share of 270
High Diversity	Democratic	CA (55), CT, (7), DE (3), D.C. (3), HI (4), IL (20), MD (10), NJ (14), NY (29), WA (12)	Northeast, Upper Midwest, and West Coast	157	29%	58%
High Diversity	Republican	AL (9), AK (3), AZ (11), GA (16), LA (8), MS (6), OK (7), SC (9), TX (38)	Confederate States of America, AL and AZ	107	20%	40%
Low Diversity	Democratic	IA (6), ME (4), MA (11), MI (16), MN (10), OR (7), PA (20), RI (4), VT (3), WI (10)	Northeast, Midwest, and Pacific	91	17%	34%
Low Diversity	Republican	AR (6), ID (4), KS (6), KY (8), MO (10), MT (3), ND (3), NE (5) ^b , SD (3), TN (11), UT (6), WV (5), WY (3)	Northern Mountain West, Plains, and South	73	14%	27%
High Diversity	Swing	CO (9), FL (29), NM (5), NV (6), NC (15), VA (13)	Southern Mountain West and South Atlantic (fast growing)	77	14%	29%
Low Diversity	Swing	NH (4), IN (11), OH (18)	Northeast and Midwest (slow growing)	33	6%	12%

Note: Based on 2000–2012 presidential elections. High (Low) Diversity states are above (below) the 2010 median nonwhite population share as reported by the U.S. Census. Democratic (Republican) states supported the Democratic (Republican) presidential candidate in the last four presidential elections. States that awarded their Electoral Votes to candidates of different parties in at least one of the last four presidential elections are classified as Swing.

^a Reflects current distribution of votes in the Electoral College. After the 2010 U.S. Census Arizona, Hawaii, Nevada, South Carolina, Utah and Washington gained one vote; Florida gained two votes; and Texas gained four votes. Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania lost one vote, while New York and Ohio lost two votes.

^b Maine and Nebraska award two Electoral Votes to the statewide popular vote winner and one vote to the popular vote winner in each congressional district. In 2008, Barack Obama won Nebraska's 2nd district (Omaha and its suburbs). All other states award their Electoral Votes to the statewide popular vote winner.

This longer time frame reveals that the Democratic presidential candidates have consistently won nine states and Washington D.C. that have minority populations above the national median and ten states with minority populations below the national median. Geographically, the solidly Democratic states are located in the Northeast, the Upper Midwest, and the West Coast. Given the current distribution of votes in the Electoral College, these states account for 248 Electoral Votes or 92% of the total needed to win the presidency.

The last four Republican presidential candidates have all won nine states with minority populations above the national median and 13 states with minority populations below the national median. In addition to the states within the former Confederate States of America, Alaska, and Arizona (part of which was a Confederate territory), GOP presidential candidates have drawn consistent support from the Great Plains, Border, and Northern Mountain West states.³ However, even with the Electoral College's small-state bias, these 22 states yield just 180 Electoral Votes or two-thirds of what is needed to gain the presidency.

Among the nine swing states, six have minority populations exceeding the national median, while three are below the national median. The swing states can be further differentiated by their growth patterns. The six High Diversity states located in the Southern Mountain West and along the South Atlantic grew much faster than the nation as a whole, while the three Low Diversity states grew at rates well below the national average.

In sum, while the country's changing demography, measured here in terms of density and diversity, have reshaped electoral competition, these variables explain only part of the political geography of contemporary presidential elections. Understanding why Democratic and Republican presidential candidates consistently win the states identified in Table 1 requires us to consider factors besides density and diversity.

The Socio-Cultural Geography of Electoral Competition

The 16 states plus Washington D.C. with density and diversity levels above the national medians account for just over half of all Electoral Votes. In this group are the five most populous states, which have a combined 171 Electoral Votes (or nearly two-thirds of the votes needed to win the presidency). Yet, even though Obama won Washington D.C. and all but four of these 16 states, including four of the five most populated, he would not have been reelected without carrying states that are neither highly urbanized nor ethnically and racially diverse.

Thus, to understand which white and rural states are Democratic voting and which are Republican voting requires us to identify factors that explain why the outlying states in Figures 1 and 2 supported Romney and Obama. We do so by considering two additional state-level variables: the share of a state's population that is college educated and

northernness. We are not the first to note the link between states with large shares of college educated citizens voting Democratic. In the days after the 2012 election, numerous commentators made this point. However, as we demonstrate below, just as density and diversity tend to co-vary, so do educated populations and northernness.

The first of these variables, the share of a state's population over the age of 25 with a college degree, is as straightforward as the evidence is striking. In addition to Washington D.C., Obama won the 15 states with the largest percentage of college educated citizens. In contrast, Romney carried 12 of the 13 states with the lowest percentage of residents with four-year degrees. The only outlying state is Nevada, where just 22% of the over age 25 population holds a four year degree (the 2010 national median is 27.1%). However, Nevada has high values for the other three variables examined here.

Our second variable, northernness, is more qualitative and incorporates a number of geographically based socio-cultural indicators identified by scholars across a number of disciplines. Most notably, cultural geographers have long argued that those who originally settled a state and crafted its institutions have lasting influences even after they have being displaced by other groups. Known as the "the doctrine of first effective settlement," this scholarship asserts that initial migratory and settlement patterns have an enduring impact on states' socio-cultural development (Meinig 1986, 1992, 1994, 2004; Zelinsky 1973) and by extension, political behavior.

Consider the case of New York, which was originally founded as New Amsterdam in the 17th century by the Dutch. Even though New York City, for example, contains no structures from the colony established by the Dutch and the region has seen waves of immigrants, one durable Dutch characteristic remains: tolerance of diversity. The Dutch's founding of New York City during a period of commercial growth and cultural tolerance in the Netherlands drew to the region people of diverse backgrounds who to this day celebrate difference. While the original Dutch population, most of their descendants, and their material culture are all but effaced in New York, the Dutch's legacy is an enduring progressive attitude about racial, ethnic, religious, and lifestyle diversity. This view is reflected in New York's politics to this day.

The urban spaces of the northern United States, in general, much like New York, are the incubators of a commercially expansive and typically culturally permissive ethos that now articulates with the new politics of diversity. This view is certainly not universal and there are plenty of progressive areas in the South — such as the Central European settled Austin, Texas or the more recently Yankee-influenced research triangle area of North Carolina— but there is a greater pervasiveness of tolerance for diversity in the North.⁴

More generally, Zelinsky (1973, also see Fischer 1989) argues that the United States was settled out of several "cultural hearths." The Dutch, Scandinavian, and British political

dissenters founded New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. By contrast, the Briton "Calverts" and "Scots-Irish" settled much of the South from the coastal plains to the upland interior. In general, the parts of the United States that were dominated by migratory flows from the original Northern cultural hearths maintain white populations more inclined to vote along culturally progressive lines and to form political coalitions that include significant representation from minority communities. The opposite holds for the mostly Southern states, initially settled by Calvert and Scots-Irish hearths, that to this day tend to vote in blocks that mostly exclude minority representation.

The work of linguist William Labov (2010) extends this line of inquiry. Labov examines how patterns of "dialect geography" and migration flows (Fischer 1989) established the boundary between the North (New York and the cities of the Upper Midwest) and the Midlands (southern and western Pennsylvania across the middle sections of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) and how both of these dialect regions are distinct from the South.

He also links the geography of these dialects to research examining how east-west transportation routes and the diffusion of building methods (Kniffen and Glassie 1966) reinforced these regional differences. Western migration from the North often consisted of the movement of entire communities and the building of enclaves of temporary cabins that would give way to permanent towns and cities and the placement of houses along populated routes. In contrast, the migration through Pennsylvania into Appalachia and the Midland region and the movement of coastal Southerners into the Piedmont region was characterized by the movement of single families or small groups who built sturdier log cabins in isolated locations.

More specific to our purposes, Labov finds that the contours of the dialect regions are predictive of a number of political behaviors. For instance, the distribution of the three political cultures — moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic — identified by Elazar (1972) follows the boundaries of the dialect regions, as well as the subsequent western migration from these regions. As Labov notes, the geographic overlap between Elazar's work and that of the dialect regions is particularly notable given that Elazar's analysis was anchored in studies of political behavior as opposed to patterns of linguistic diffusion.

Labov's analysis of county-level voting patterns in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections in states straddling the North/Midland boundary (Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin) reveals stronger Democratic support in the North and Inland North dialect regions as compared to within the Midland region. These differences can be consequential in statewide elections given that the largest Combined Statistical Areas (CSA) in all of these states is within the North dialect region. Labov also finds that the North/Midland boundary tracks with states' decisions to re-impose the death penalty such that states that did not do so are clustered in the North and Inland North dialect regions.

In sum, a broad and diverse set of indicators (e.g., the diffusion of dialects, the pervasiveness of cornering techniques in log cabin construction, the manner in which towns and cities were established, and the saliency of specific social and cultural values) demonstrate how migration patterns and the "the doctrine of first effective settlement" provide geographic primacy to attitudes and beliefs with political resonance that remain well after the establishing groups have either been diluted or replaced by subsequent migrants.

An obvious limitation of much of this research is its emphasis on states located between the eastern seaboard and the Mississippi River. However, these same dynamics also matter in the later developing Western states. Most obviously, the migration of Mormon pioneers that led to the formation of the State of Deseret (now Utah in a smaller form) has had a lasting impact on the Mountain West, as did the founding of Portland, Oregon by migrants from New England. Thus, while it may be tempting to think of Western and Midwestern states as "blank slates" fulfilling uncharted destinies, this is not the case. Rather, some of what we observe today with respect to inter-state differences in public opinion, voting behavior, and other politically relevant attitudes and beliefs in the West and elsewhere are attributable to the degree to which "Yankee cultural imperialism" (Frazer 1993, Labov 2010) imbued these states at the time of their inception.

Consistent with this framing, our measure of Northernness seeks to differentiate states in terms of the degree to which Northern interests settled these physical spaces. Specifically, we operationalize Northernness as a five level ordinal measure such that the Deep South states are coded as -2, Southern Border States are coded as -1, Northern Border States are coded as +1, the Northeastern and most upper Midwestern states are coded as +2, and the remaining states are coded as 0. Coding for the Western states, many of which were granted statehood after the Civil War, was determined by migratory patterns and Civil War allegiances.

Figures 3 and 4 present the relationships between these variables and Obama's net vote share. The x-axis for Figure 3 is measured using data from the 2010 U.S. Census as the difference between a state's population share over age 25 with at least a bachelor's degree and the national median. For Figure 4, the x-axis is Northernness. Washington D.C. is excluded. The trend lines capture the strength and direction of these relationships.

As suggested by the trend line's slope in Figure 3, of the four variables considered here, the share of a state's population with a college degree is the strongest predictor of Obama's vote share. Interestingly, while the correlation between college educated and the Obama vote is quite strong (+.61), college educated is only moderately correlated with density (+.39) and it has no relationship with diversity (+.09).⁵

Further inspection of Figure 3 reveals a number of other important patterns. Most notably, many of the outlying states in Figures 1 and 2 are close to the trend line in Figure 3. This is most obvious for the Northeastern and New England states. Also, note that as compared to Figures 1 and 2, the performance of the swing states is less uniform. Nevada and Ohio are outliers, while Colorado and Virginia under perform and Florida over performs. North Carolina and New Hampshire are near their predicted vote shares. But perhaps what is most striking about Figure 3 is the clustering of the Romney states in the lower left quadrant. Among the states carried by Mitt Romney, only seven have over age 25 population shares with a college degree that are above the national median and none by more than three percentage points. In contrast, Obama won nine states with populations at or below the national median. Three of these, New Mexico, Nevada, and Florida, are highly urban and/or diverse and the other six are geographically northern: Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Figure 3
Scatterplot Between Net Obama Vote and Over Age 25 Population Share with College Degree

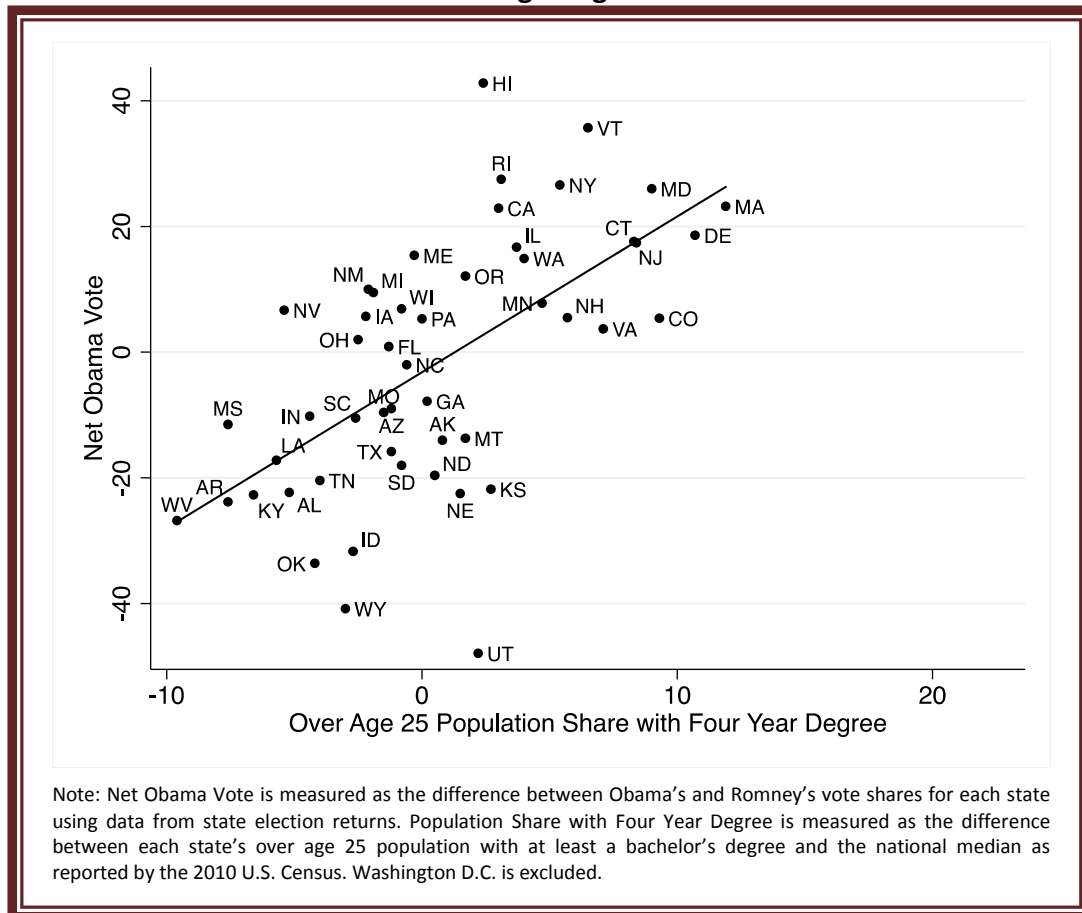
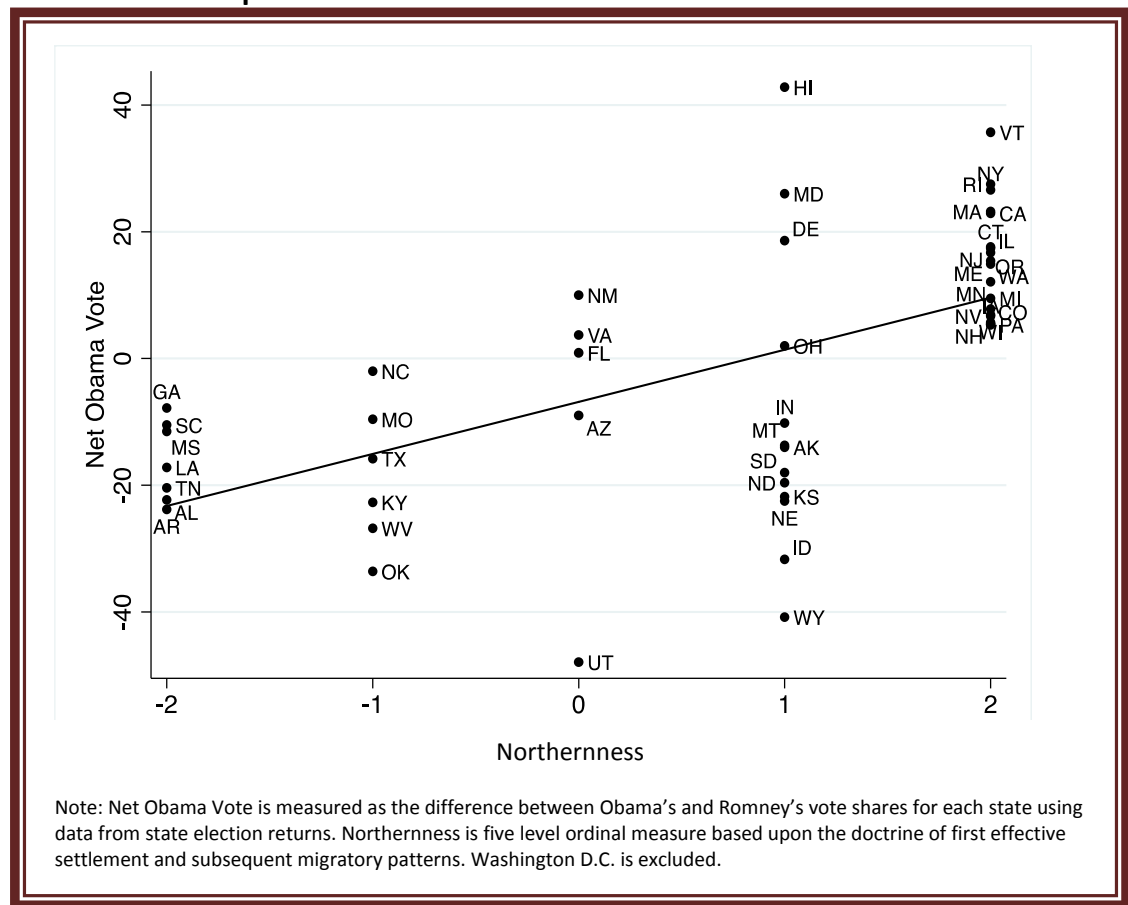


Figure 4 presents the scatterplot between Obama's net vote share and Northernness.

Upon first inspection, the slope of the trend line suggests a weaker relationship as compared to the scatterplots for density and diversity. This, however, is an artifact of the truncated scale used to measure Northernness. In fact, excluding Washington D.C., the correlation between a state's net vote for Obama and its Northernness value is $+0.58$; much stronger than either density or diversity. Northernness and college educated, not surprisingly, are highly correlated ($+0.60$). Indeed, one of the hallmarks of western migration from the North was a strong emphasis on literacy such that "schools and colleges were among the first institutions built" (Labov 2010, 213). However, Northernness is only weakly correlated with density ($+0.18$) and it is negatively correlated with diversity (-0.20); strong evidence that the contemporary Democratic coalition in presidential elections extends well beyond the country's urban melting pots

Figure 4
Scatterplot between Net Obama Vote Share and Northernness



Northernness performs quite well for the states located on the endpoints as the 2012 presidential vote essentially recreates the Civil War coalitions with partisanship reversed. The measure also does well predicting the vote for the states coded as -1 (the Southern Border States plus West Virginia). The outlying states have Northernness values of 0 and +1. Some of these differences stem from how and when these states

were established. Arizona and Florida exemplify these dynamics. Because Arizona and Florida have near identical levels of density, diversity, and college educated, they should both be swing states. However, while some Floridians did fight with the Confederacy and the state was a key supplier to the Confederate Army, parts of Arizona were a Confederate territory.⁶ Consistent with our thesis, Obama eked out a narrow win in Florida, while losing Arizona by over nine points.

With a few exceptions, the other outliers can be explained by the variables already presented. For instance, New Mexico's increased Democratic voting in presidential elections is a function of the state's increased urbanization and majority-minority population (Teixeira 2012). More interestingly, although Virginia fought with the Confederacy, today it is well above the national averages for density, diversity, and college educated.⁷ The same characteristics hold for the two Democratic outliers, Delaware and Maryland, with Northernness values of +1. In contrast, Republican voting Kansas, Montana, and Nebraska have below average levels of density and diversity and are just slightly above the national median for college educated. Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, states that Romney easily carried, are below the national median for all three variables, while Alaska is above the median only for diversity and Indiana is slightly more urban than the national median.

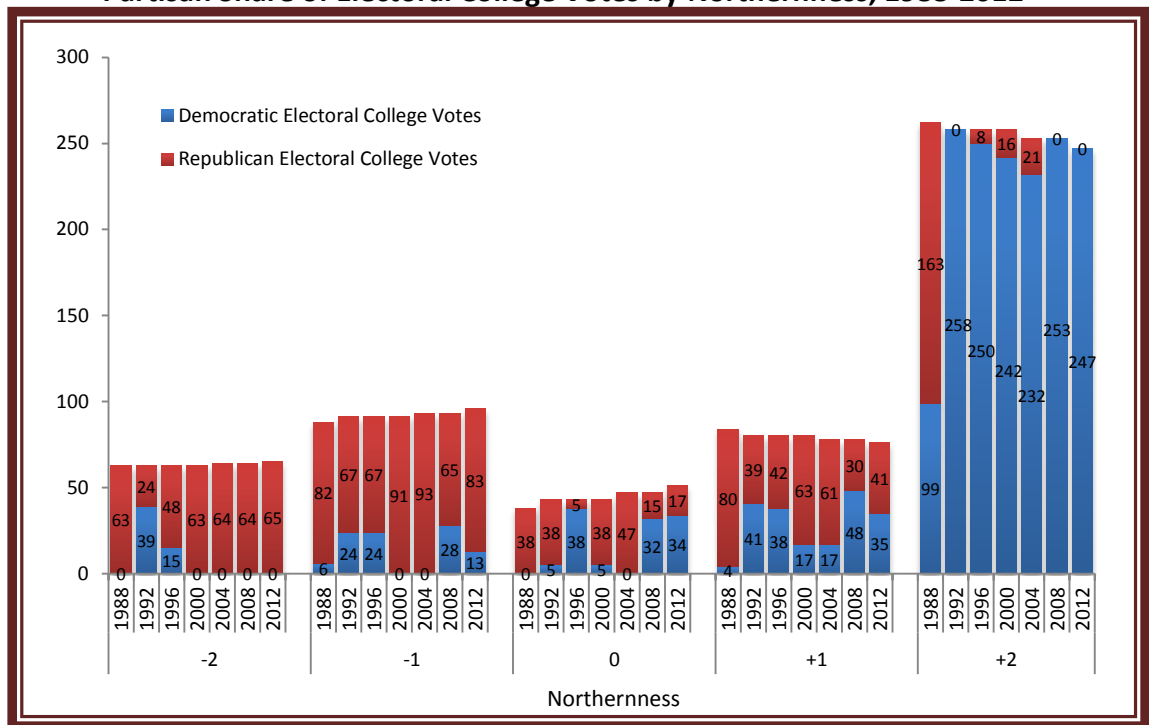
Thus, there are just three states – Hawaii, Ohio, and Utah – where our framework cannot easily explain Obama's vote share. Hawaii is just below the national median for density and has levels of diversity and college educated above the national median. Utah has high levels of density, but low levels of diversity and is just above the national median for college educated. Certainly, some of the deviations for Hawaii and Utah are a function of these states' close connections to Obama and Romney respectively. Outside of Washington D.C., Obama received his biggest vote share in Hawaii, while Romney's strongest showing was in Utah.

Ohio, of course, defies easy categorization. Ohio's major population centers — Cleveland in the north, Columbus in the middle, and Cincinnati in the south — are geographically balanced and the state shares borders with both Republican and Democratic voting states. Moreover, part of the boundary between the North and Midland dialect regions runs through Ohio, indicating migration patterns from the North and elsewhere. For our analysis, Ohio is on the trend lines for both the density and Northernness scatterplots (Figures 1 and 4), but it is an outlier for diversity and college educated. Thus, Ohio possesses a demographic and socio-cultural mix that makes it winnable for both Democrats and Republicans. No wonder every four years the state attracts some of the largest advertising buys and receives a constant stream of visits from candidates and surrogates of both parties. And of course, Ohio has voted for the presidential winner in every election since 1964 and no Republican candidate has ever been elected president without winning Ohio.

Discussion and Extensions

In 2016 it will be nearly 30 years since 1988, the last resounding Republican presidential election victory (a near 8% popular vote margin and 426 Electoral Votes). Comparing 1988 to 2012, 18 states flipped from one party to the other. The Democrats gained 17 of these including Electoral College behemoths (California, Florida, Illinois, and Pennsylvania), mid-sized states spread throughout the country (Colorado, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, and Virginia), and a handful of similarly scattered smaller states (Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Vermont). In contrast, only West Virginia moved from the Democratic to the Republican column.

Figure 5
Partisan Share of Electoral College Votes by Northernness, 1988-2012



The data in Figure 5, which aggregate votes in the Electoral College by Northernness for the 1988-2012 presidential elections, explain much of this shift. Excluding the Southern states carried by Clinton in the 1992 and 1996 election, the GOP has maintained a virtual lock on the Deep South and Southern Border States and has held their own in states with Northernness values of 0 and +1. However, the party has lost significant ground in the states with Northernness values of +2 that make up the largest share of Electoral Votes.

Democratic presidential candidates are not just benefiting from the country's changing demography, but also from a response brought about by the Southward pull of the Republican Party. To be sure, consolidating the South and the Southern Border states to reliably Republican by emphasizing a steady diet of socially conservative messaging and policies paid dividends for the GOP in many contexts (e.g., governorships and state houses that in 2011 facilitated a favorable redistricting of the House of Representatives). However, as these issues increasingly cut the other way, as demonstrated by the controversy over the displaying of the Confederate battle flag in public spaces and the diverging partisan and geographic responses to the Supreme Court's holding in *Obergefell v. Hodges* recognizing same-sex marriages, the Republican Party is demographically ill prepared to respond to the inevitable counter reaction that this agenda has sown elsewhere in the electorate.

Moreover, given that the last Democratic presidential candidate to seriously contest the South was Jimmy Carter in 1976, in terms of Electoral College politics, the Southern strategy has yielded the GOP very little new turf (Schaller 2008), while costing the party plenty in New England, along the eastern seaboard, and in the increasingly Electoral College-rich Mountain West (Teixeira 2012). Indeed, consider that had either John McCain in 2008 or Mitt Romney in 2012 won all of the states that each lost by less than five percent, neither man would have won the presidency.

Still, there are two potential limitations to our argument that may undercut its generalizability: our use of states, as opposed to individual voters, as the unit of analysis and its applicability to Congress.

While our emphasis on states is consistent with our broader argument and the manner in which Electoral Votes are allocated, election outcomes are, of course, the byproduct of the individual choices. Moreover, making inferences about the behavior of individuals based upon state level data leaves us vulnerable to the fallacy of ecological inference if our state level effects do not hold at the individual level. At the same time, because the presidency is not directly determined by the popular vote, and is instead decided by the allocation of Electoral Votes corresponding to the outcomes of 51 separate elections, the ecological fallacy does not notably undermine the macro-structural predictive model that we posit.

Table 2 presents the results of a logit analysis using data from the "American National Election Study 2012 Time Series Study" to model vote choice in the 2012 presidential election at the individual level. The dependent variable is coded as +1 for respondents' who voted for President Obama and 0 for those who voted for another candidate. Four independent variables (Nonwhite, Urban, College Educated, and Northernness) and controls for partisanship (Democrat and Republican) are included in the model.⁸

Table 2
Logit Analysis of Presidential Vote, 2012

	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Changes in Probabilities ^a
Urban	.357* (.221)	.09
Nonwhite	1.34* (.167)	.29
College Educated	.395* (.148)	.09
Northernness	.139* (.050)	.13
Democrat	2.41* (.174)	.52
Republican	-2.34* (.191)	-.53
Constant	-1.01* (.252)	
Number of observations	4,274	
F _(6, 4249)	141.30*	

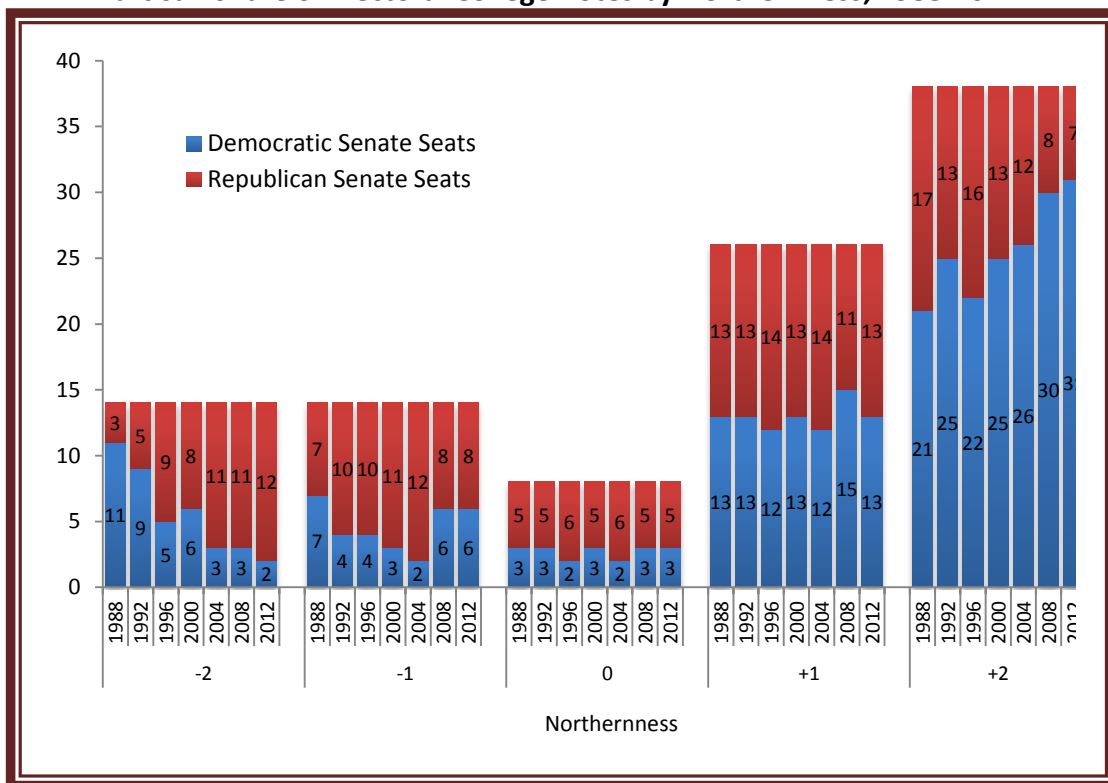
Note: * p < .05, one tailed test (model estimated using weights for full sample and Taylor series estimation). Coding of the dependent variable: +1 equals vote for President Obama and 0 equals a voter for another candidate.
^a Values reflect the changes in probabilities of voting for President Obama in the 2012 presidential election when each independent variable is increased from its minimum to maximum value and the other independent variables are held constant.

The middle column of Table 2 presents the logit coefficients and the right-hand column presents the change in predicted probabilities of voting for President Obama in 2012 when the independent variables are changed from their minimum to their maximum values and the other variables are held constant. Overall, the model performs quite well and is consistent with the aggregate analysis presented above. All of the coefficients are in the predicted direction and all are statistically significant. More importantly, even controlling for partisan identification, the four coefficients of interest, Urban, Nonwhite, College Educated, and Northernness, have strong substantive effects on the probability of voting for Obama. Specifically, the probability that a voter who resides in an urban area voted for President Obama increases by .09 as compared to a rural voter. The effect for Nonwhite is three times greater. As compared to a similarly situated white voter, the probability that a nonwhite voter supported President Obama increased by .29. The probability of voting for Obama for a voter with at least a four-year degree increased by .09 as compared to a non-college educated voter, while the probability of a

voter living in a state with a Northernness value of +2 voting for Obama increased by .13 as compared to a voter living in a state with a Northernness value of -2, holding all else constant.

A second potential limitation is that our argument may apply only to contemporary presidential elections. Certainly, presidential elections are atypical of most elections in terms of their competitiveness, the level of media and voter attention they command, and the relatively equal access that opposing candidates have to campaign resources. Presidential candidates also are the only names appearing on every ballot in every state. Moreover, the research on congressional elections (i.e., Jacobson 2013) suggests that House and Senate races are shaped, in part, by a number of factors that are either less salient (i.e., incumbency) or not applicable (i.e., redistricting of House districts) to presidential elections and half of all House and Senate elections take place in midterms when the composition of the electorate is smaller, older, and much less diverse as compared to in years when the presidency is contested.

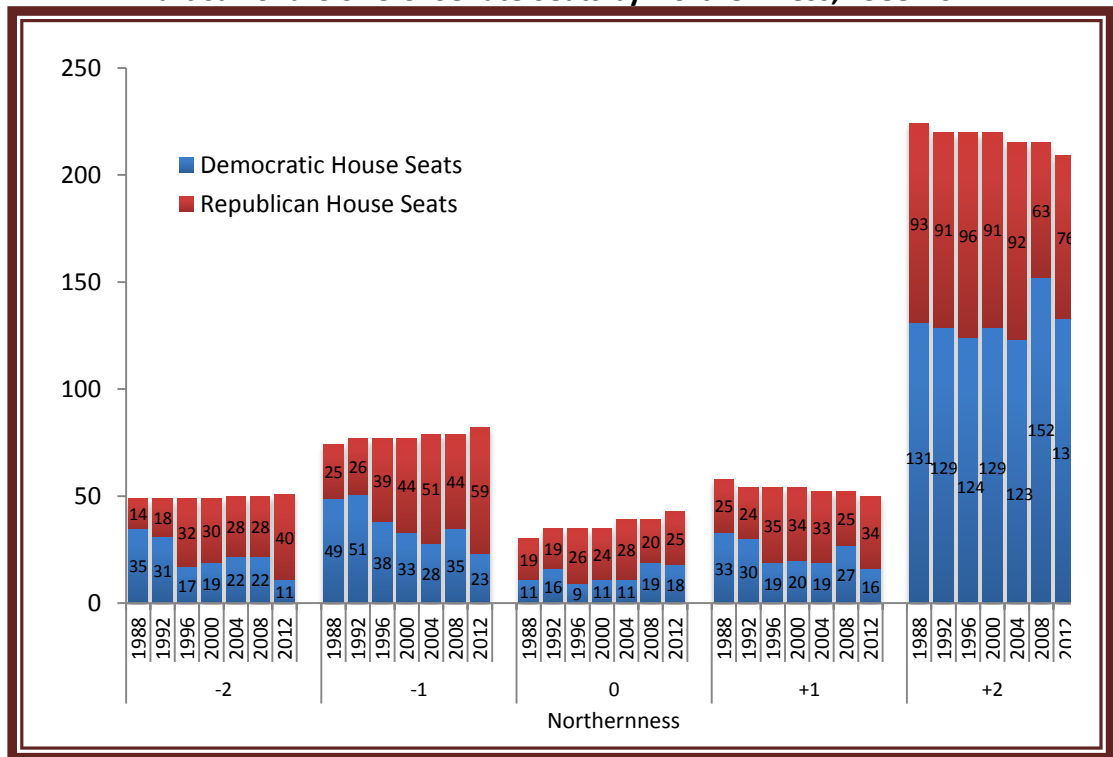
Figure 6
Partisan Share of Electoral College Votes by Northernness, 1988-2012



Nonetheless, the data in Figures 6 and 7 are suggestive of partisan changes similar to those documented in Figure 5. Specifically, these data capture the Democratic and Republican held seats in the Senate (Figure 6) and House of Representatives (Figure 7) between 1988 and 2012 aggregated by Northernness. The pattern is clearer in the

Senate where Democratic losses in the Deep South have been offset by gains in the states with Northernness values of +2. The parties essentially have held their own among the other groups of states. The relationship is somewhat muted for the House due in part to the gerrymandering of districts, but follows the general patterns for presidential and Senate elections. Thus, while our primary goal is to explain state-level outcomes in contemporary presidential elections, our argument is supported at the individual level and it explains, in part, shifts in the geographic composition of the Democratic and Republican Senate and House caucuses during the last 30 years.

Figure 7
Partisan Share of U.S. Senate Seats by Northernness, 1988-2012



Conclusion

After the 2012 presidential election the conventional wisdom was that the country's changing demography and increased urbanization reshaped the geography of political competition in presidential elections. As a consequence, Democratic presidential candidates now have significantly more paths to accrue the 270 Electoral Votes needed for the presidency as compared to just a generation ago. As we argue here, these variables — density and diversity — only tell part of the story. Just as important are socio-cultural factors, operationalized here in terms of college educated populations and northernness, that allow us to differentiate which urbanized and diverse states and

which white and rural states vote Republican and Democratic in contemporary presidential elections.

Underlying our argument is the assumption that accelerating diversity and generational replacement among eligible voters in key swing states combined with the patterns of the white vote identified above could solidify the Democrats' structural advantage in the Electoral College. However, politics are never static and in addition to Republicans improving their standing with minority voters, the composition and character of the white vote could shift. For instance, a new identity politics could emerge among white voters who may view their imminent status as the nation's largest minority voting bloc as a basis for a new solidarity on race. Such identity politics have been exhibited in the former states of the Confederacy for decades. But were white-identity politics to gain traction in states with growing minority electorates, the balance of Democratic leaning swing states could shift to the Republicans.

Voting patterns in recent presidential elections in Missouri are suggestive of such a shift. Once a swing state, Missouri has been in the GOP column in the last four presidential elections. In 2004 George Bush won Missouri by nearly eight points, while John McCain narrowly carried the state in 2008. Exit polls indicate that in both elections 57% of white voters supported the Republican candidate and McCain's weaker showing relative to Bush stemmed in part from a decrease in the white share of the vote from 89% in 2004 to 82% in 2008. In 2012, however, Romney won 65% of the white vote to secure a ten-point victory even though whites constituted 78% of the state's electorate. Further consolidation of white votes into the GOP even as the white share of the electorate continues to contract is likely to keep states like Missouri in the Republican column in future presidential elections. Certainly, support for Democrats among college educated whites may counter-act this shift in other contexts, but such a response to increased minority support for Democratic presidential candidates is certainly plausible.

Looking forward, our analysis suggests three overlapping, but distinct constituencies that should provide the Democratic Party's nominees with an Electoral College advantage in coming presidential elections. The first of these is consistent with the density and diversity hypothesis. Democrats can lay claim to many states where younger, minority voters primarily residing in these states' urban regions are rapidly replacing the aging white electorate. While these dynamics are most obvious in states such as Florida, Nevada, and New Mexico, these same trends are occurring elsewhere, including Michigan and Ohio where the African American share of the electorate has increased in the past three presidential elections, while the share of white voters has decreased. Given these trends, Arizona and perhaps Texas may be added to this group in coming presidential elections, although probably not at least until the next decade (see Latino Decisions 2014a and 2014b).

A second group of states are those with less diversity and density, but with high Northernness values and populations that are better educated. This group includes

states not just in New England and the Northeast, but also Oregon in the Pacific Northwest and Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin in the Midwest. As suggested above, while these states are demographically favorable to the Republicans, geographically and culturally they are not and as a consequence, without a major retooling of the Republican agenda, it is unlikely that these states will be consistently in the Republican column any time soon.

The last of these constituencies is perhaps the most intriguing: states that are diverse and urban and where white, highly educated voters are increasingly voting Democratic. Colorado, North Carolina, and Virginia best capture this set of states. As compared to 2004, the number of white voters decreased in all three of these states. However, exit polls indicate that Obama's support among white voters in these states increased by 2%, 4%, and 5% respectively between 2008 and 2012. Moreover, it is this set of states, as well as perhaps Georgia, that is most troubling for the GOP's long-term prospects. Not only do these states have significant numbers of Electoral Votes, but the Republicans have historically exerted little effort to win these states. This is no longer the case as the GOP must now dedicate increasing levels of energy and resources just to stay competitive.

Consistent with the Romney campaign's attempts to put upper Midwestern states into play in 2012, our framework too suggests that the best opportunities for the Republicans to play offense will continue to be Ohio, as well as Michigan and perhaps, Pennsylvania — states that not coincidentally straddle the boundary between the Northern and Midland dialects (Labov 2010). Presuming that the Republicans suffer no additional losses, winning these three states along with the 24 states that Romney carried in 2012 would yield 260 Electoral Votes; still short of the 270 needed to gain the presidency. Thus, even with these pick-ups the GOP would still need to win Florida, Wisconsin, or Virginia or some combination of smaller states such as Iowa and Nevada. This is not the easiest of path to the White House, but the one that the Republican Party now faces as.

The Southern strategy devised by Richard Nixon in 1968 yielded multiple Electoral College victories for the GOP for the better part of four decades. But this strategy now runs counter to the new American demographics that capture diversity within the emerging electorate (Bowler and Segura 2011) and it fosters a dialectical response from the parts of the United States shaped by northern culture that are now exacting their political response in subtle but profound ways.

Endnotes

¹ All states allocate their Electoral Votes to the statewide popular vote winner except for Maine and Nebraska, which allocate two Electoral Votes to the winner of the statewide popular vote and the remaining votes to the candidate receiving the most votes in each congressional district.

² The Mason-Dixon line forms part of the borders of Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and what is now West Virginia and has long symbolized the boundary between the North and the South with respect to the legality of slavery.

³ The Confederate States of America was comprised of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

⁴ See the appendix for an analysis and discussion of the validity of Northernness as an indicator of diversity acceptance.

⁵ Washington D.C. is excluded from these correlations.

⁶ Also, note that southern Florida, in particular, the Miami metro area, contains a majority of white residents who were born in northern states. As a consequence, one can travel so far south in Florida to actively leave the American South as a cultural zone. Zelinsky (1973) even notes this pattern writing over 40 years ago.

⁷ Northern Virginia above the Rappahannock River is essentially a socio-cultural and economic extension of the Northeastern United States. There is very little Southern accent detectable in the Virginia counties that form the D.C. metro space.

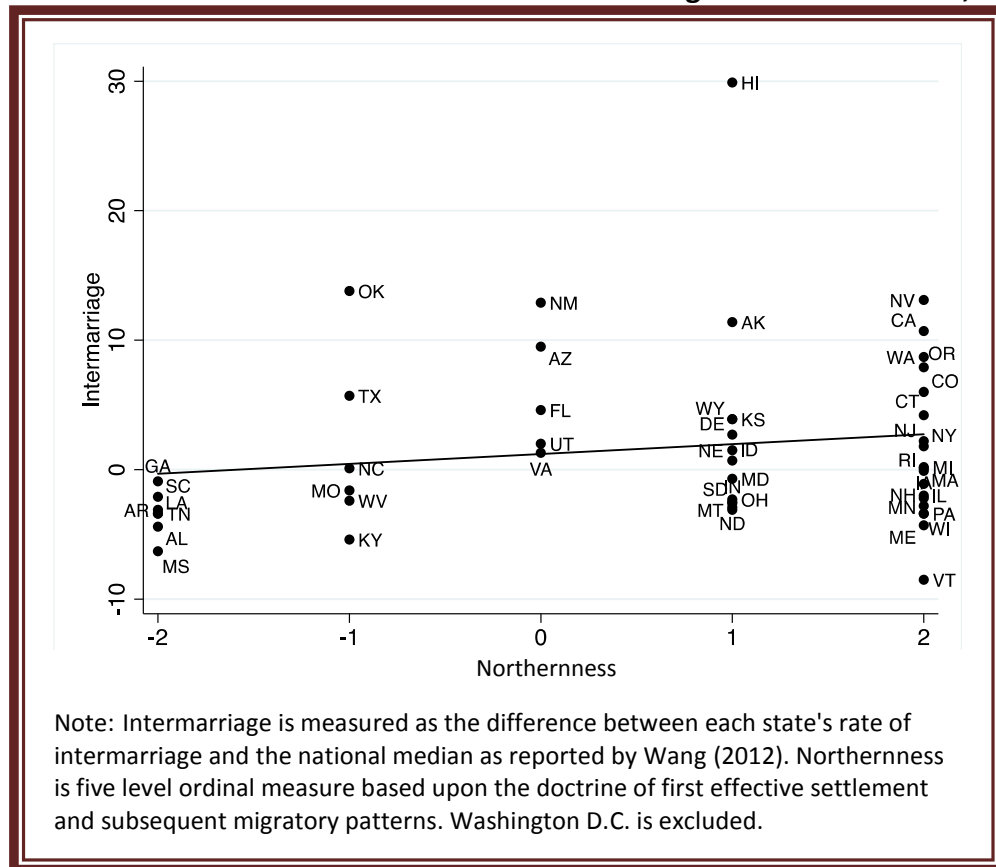
⁸ Urban is a dichotomous measure that is coded +1 if a respondent lives in a county that is not designated as part of a Metropolitan Area by the Office of Management and Budget based upon the 2010 U.S. Census as reported by the Office of Rural Health Policy, 0 otherwise. Nonwhite and College Educated are dichotomous measures where respondents who are nonwhite or who earned at least a four-year degree are coded as +1 and all others are coded as 0. Northernness is a state level measure ranging from -2 to +2 (see Figure 4). Democrat (Republican) is a dichotomous measure that is coded as +1 for respondents who reported being strong, not very strong, or independent Democrats (Republicans). Nonpartisans or minor party registrants are the referent category.

Appendix: Validity Analysis of Northernness

The qualitative nature of Northernness may raise concerns about its validity. To address this, we use one of its key attributes — acceptance of diversity — to assess the degree to which Northernness is predictive of behaviors and attitudes indicative of diversity acceptance. Specifically, we examine the relationships between Northernness and rates of intermarriage and between Northernness and support for same-sex marriage.

Intermarriage can be conceptualized in terms of social distance scales (Bogardus 1926) measuring how accepting individuals are of members of other groups under various contexts ranging from the least close (excluding members of another group from entering one's country) to the most close (having a close relative by marriage). The closer one's acceptance of a member of another group, the greater the sympathy one has towards the group.

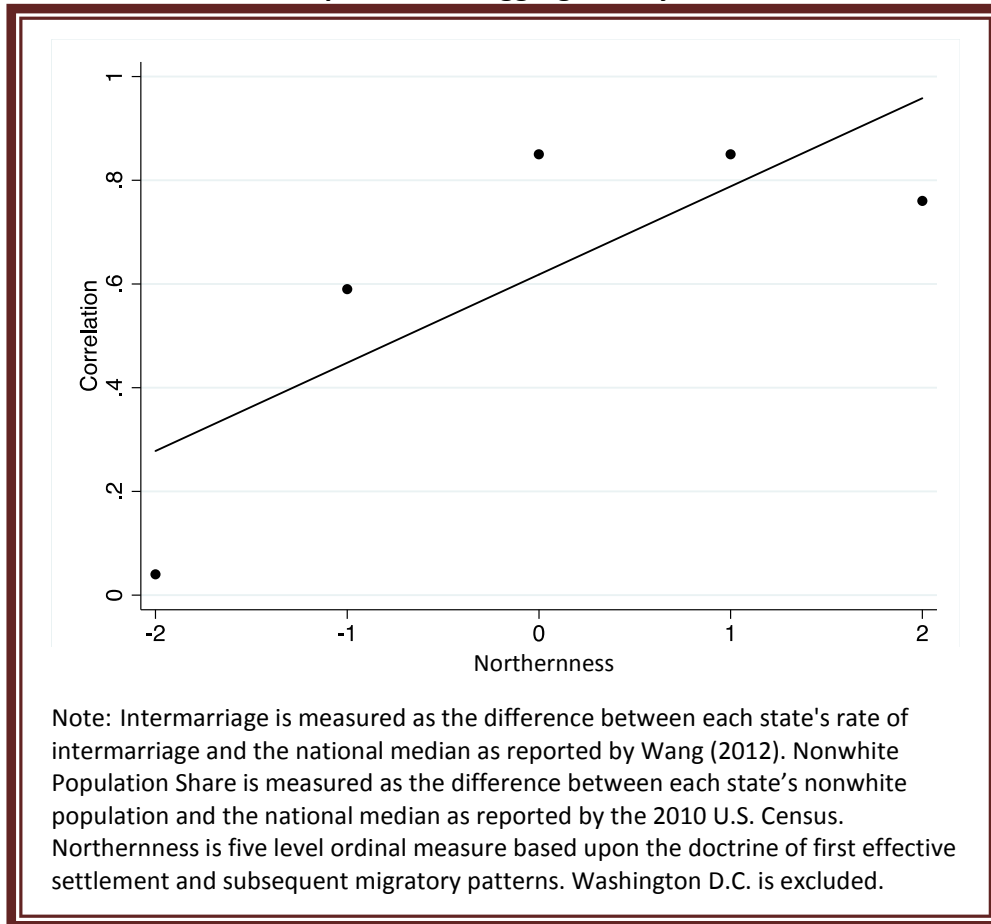
Figure A.1
Cross-Tabulation Between Views on Same-Sex Marriage and Northernness, 2012



The data presented in Figure A.1 provide some support for the expectation of higher rates of intermarriage in states settled by northern interests. Specifically, the figure plots

Northernness on the x-axis and the difference between the national median and the rate of intermarriage in each state on the y-axis. The intermarriage data are from Wang (2012) and are derived from the 2008–2010 American Community Survey Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample assessing the share of inter and intra-group marriage occurring in each state during the prior 12 months.

Figure A.2
Scatterplot of Correlations Between Intermarriage and
Nonwhite Population Disaggregated by Northernness



While the trend line suggests higher rates of intermarriage as Northernness increases, the slope is not particularly steep and there is a clear clustering of states below the median at both ends the distribution. Some of the clustering, as well as the outliers, is an artifact of the fact that these data do not take into account the potential for intermarriage. That is, a state like Hawaii has high rates of intermarriage because of the diversity of its population, whereas in a state like Vermont the low rate of intermarriage is caused, in part, by limited interactions with members of other groups; a characteristic accentuated by the state's small and rural population.

A straightforward way to control for incidence potential is to consider the correlations between states' rates of intermarriage and their share of residents who are nonwhite. All else equal, we expect a positive correlation between the two variables such that in states with more (less) diverse populations, there should be higher (lower) rates of intermarriage. The correlation for all states (excluding Washington D.C.) is .67 ($p < .001$) and is consistent with this expectation nationally. Figure A.2 presents the correlations disaggregated by Northernness. Because of the small sample sizes, only the values when Northernness equals 0 ($r = .85$), +1 ($r = .59$), and, +2 ($r = .75$) are statistically significant ($p < .05$). Still, the correlations for the states with Northernness values of -1 ($r = .59$) and especially, -2 ($r = .04$) are consistent with contexts inhabited by large minority populations, but with low rates of intermarriage.

Table A.1
Cross-Tabulation Between Views on Same-Sex Marriage and Northernness, 2012

Views on Same-sex Marriage	Northernness					Total
	-2	-1	0	1	2	
Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry.	198 30.6%	360 35.0%	288 37.8%	246 40.7%	1,265 45.2%	2,357 40.4%
Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to form civil unions but not legally marry.	204 31.6%	333 32.5%	287 37.7%	192 40.7%	947 33.9%	1,963 33.6%
There should be no legal recognition of a gay or lesbian couple's relationship.	244 37.8%	333 32.5%	186 24.5%	167 27.6%	586 20.9%	1,516 26.0%
Total	646 100%	1,026 100.0%	761 100.0%	605 100.0%	2,798 100.0%	5,836 100.0%
Pearson $\chi^2_{(8)} = 125.10^*$ Gamma = -.17* Kendall's tau-b = -.12*						
Note: * $p < .01$; cell entries are number of observations and column percentages.						

At the same time, because the data used in Figures A.1 and A.2 are aggregated at the state level, these analyses may be vulnerable to an ecological fallacy. To assess diversity acceptance at the individual level, we draw on data measuring support or opposition to same-sex marriage from the "American National Election Study 2012 Time Series Study." Included in the survey is a question asking respondents which of three positions comes closest to their views: "Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry;" "Gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to form civil unions, but not legally marry;" and "There should be no legal recognition of a gay or lesbian couple's relationship."

Table A.1 summarizes the cross tabulation between respondents' views on gay marriage and Northernness. Each cell contains the raw number of observations and the column percentages. The significance of the χ^2 value means the null hypothesis can be rejected (e.g., no differences in views towards same-sex marriage depending upon if a state was settled by northern interests), while the gamma and Kendall's tau-b statistics suggest a moderate to weak substantive effect. Inspection of the cells indicates that support and opposition to same-sex marriage varies across all five values of Northernness.

Table A.2
Ordered Logit Analysis of Views on Same Sex Marriage, 2012

	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Changes in Probabilities ^a		
		Oppose Same-Sex Marriage	Support Civil Unions	Support Same-Sex Marriage
Urban	.395* (.105)	-.07	-.02	.09
Nonwhite	-.653* (.086)	.12	.04	-.15
College Educated	.535* (.067)	-.09	-.04	.13
Northernness	.137* (.024)	-.10	-.03	.13
Democrat	.673* (.112)	-.12	-.05	.16
Republican	-.956* (.112)	.17	.04	-.22
Cut 1	-.760* (.136)			
Cut 2	-.890* (.136)			
Number of observations	5,786			
F _(6, 5771)	86.28*			
Note: * p < .001, one tailed test (model estimated using weights for full sample and Taylor series estimation). Coding of the dependent variable: +1 equals opposition to any legal recognition of same-sex couples' relationships, +2 equals support for civil unions, and +3 equals support for same-sex marriage.				
^a Values reflect changes in probabilities for the different values of the dependent variable when each independent variable is increased from its minimum to maximum value and the other independent variables are held constant.				

However, the least amount of support for same-sex marriage is found in states with Northernness values of -2 and -1, while the most support for same-sex marriage exists in the states with Northernness values of +1 and +2. Indeed, as compared to a state with a Northernness value of -2, support for same-sex marriage is nearly 50% greater in

states with Northernness values of +2. The opposite holds for opposition to same-sex marriage: the highest levels of opposition occurs in states with Northernness values of -1 and -2 and the least amount of opposition is found in states with Northernness values of +1 and +2.

To further assess these effects, as well as control for other factors that may also explain these views, Table A.2 presents the results of an ordered logit analysis using the ANES same-sex marriage item as the dependent variable.

We include the independent and control variables from the analysis presented in Table 2 and code the dependent variable so that +1 equals opposition to any legal recognition of same-sex couples' relationships; +2 equals support for civil unions; and +3 equals support for same-sex marriage. The coefficients and standard errors are presented in the second column and the third, fourth, and fifth columns present the changes in probabilities when each of the independent variables is increased from its minimum to maximum values and the other variables are held constant.

All of the variables are statistically significant and inspection of the changes in probabilities indicates strong substantive effects for the independent variables. Of particular note is the effect of Northernness. When the value of the variable is increased from -2 to +2, the probability of opposing same-sex marriage decreases by .10 and the probability of supporting same-sex marriage increases by .13; effects akin to those for College Educated and slightly larger than those for Urban. The negative sign for Nonwhite suggests that, all else equal, minorities, particularly African Americans who regularly attend religious services, are less supportive of same-sex marriage as compared to whites. The changes in the probabilities suggest effects on the magnitude of those for the two coefficients for partisan identification (Democrat and Republican).

In sum, the key social exchange dynamic that has consistently unified the northern, progressive tradition in the United States is a tolerance of difference and the promotion of a diverse social sphere. As we have argued here, these attitudes persist today in localities that were initially settled by northern interests. The saliency of these attitudes in contemporary presidential elections is undoubtedly a consequence of the southern shift of the Republican Party that occurred just as the country's diversifying population began to manifest itself in the American electorate. As we have demonstrated here, Northernness, as an empirical variable, provides a succinct and valid measure of the socio-cultural geography of contemporary American politics that is predictive of a number of outcomes, behaviors, and attitudes at the aggregate and individual levels.

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