Geographic Proximity Versus Institutions

Evaluating Borders as Real Political Boundaries

Wendy K. Tam Cho
Erinn P. Nicley
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Scholars have recently begun to connect political phenomena with geographic proximity, noting that in addition to one's personal characteristics, individuals are strongly affected by their social context. We push this literature further by examining how institutions such as state borders mediate and condition the effects of geographic proximity. Our findings expand our understanding of geography by demonstrating that the geographic landscape has interesting facets beyond proximity and distance. Rather, geography is the product of political relationships that intersect in particular places.

Keywords: *spatial autocorrelation; spatial regression analysis; borders; voting; elections; U.S. states; geographic context*

Political scientists and political geographers have a robust history of examining the historical geography of U.S. elections. In the early 20th century, Frederick Jackson Turner (1914, 1932) pioneered cartographic analysis in a study of persistent geographic patterns of Democratic and Republican political support across multiple elections within select U.S. states. In doing so, Turner laid the foundation for subsequent research on the morphology of American sectionalism, geographic political cultures, and electoral geography (Archer & Taylor, 1981; Elazar, 1972; Gastil, 1975; Gimpel & Schuknecht, 2003; Ingalls & Brunn, 1979; Key, 1958; Shelley & Archer, 1984). The sectionalism literature, now dating back decades, presents an interesting geographic phenomenon whereby individuals who reside in different sections of the country behave distinctly from those in other sections but similarly to those within their section. These invisible but highly relevant sectional boundaries are erected, endure over time, and appear to have an important relationship with individual behavior. More recently,

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with the advancement of social-theoretic perspectives and the "spatial turn" since the mid-1980s, social science has emphasized greater awareness of place-based social context as integral to any understanding of political behavior (Agnew, 1988; Gimpel & Schuknecht, 2003; Huckfeldt, 1984; MacLeod, 1998; Massey, 1979, 1994; Pattie & Johnston, 2000). This literature stresses the role of localized social relations and geographic proximity in establishing political behavior in complex interaction with other scales. That is, people are social beings, influenced by those with whom they interact and who reside in geographically proximate locations (Baybeck, 2006; Cho, 2003; Darmofal, 2006).

Although the evidence that local context influences political behavior is readily evident, understanding the role of geography involves not only delving into its role as a localized scale of political behavior but also considering larger political scales and institutions that affect local(ized) political outcomes. Moreover, to broaden our understanding, we must also consider when and how geographic proximity *fails* to explain political behavior, despite clear social similarities among the voting population. The alternative may also be true: Social dissimilarity among neighbors may still produce homogeneous political behavior. These complex relationships between space and political behavior behoove greater study into when political behavior might *not* be spatially clustered despite close proximity and inspection of the circumstances under which institutions might eclipse the effects that geography might otherwise exhibit.

In this article, we explore these questions in an effort to better understand how geographic scales and institutions intersect with studies of political behavior. Specifically, we set out to examine the role of U.S. state borders as an element in the construction of political identities. Political geography and political science have scarcely studied the role of internal U.S. state borders, despite an abiding research interest both empirically (Gottmann, 1973; Grundy-Warr, 1990; Minghi, 1963; Turner, 1932) and theoretically (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999; Lugo, 2000; Murphy, 1990; Newman & Paasi, 1998; Paasi, 1991, 1999; Sack, 1983) in the significance of borders, borderlands, and the frontier. The institutional significance of borders is twofold. Borders are political–juridical structures that reproduce distinct sociospatial identities of insider and outsider and act as "containers" within which political, economic, and social action, behavior, and identity are structured (Newman & Paasi, 1998; Taylor, 1994). Simultaneously, borders are dynamic social institutions that create spaces, among peoples, of exclusion and inclusion, restriction and integration, isolation and community (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999; Berdahl, 1999; Paasi, 1999).

Although U.S. state borders have not been extensively studied, there is a significant literature on international borders from which we can draw our theoretical constructs. This literature highlights borders as sites of division but also of interaction (Thelen, 1999). Whether a border tends toward harboring division or nurturing interaction is partly a result of state action, often invoking and highlighting differences in the process of nation building. The case of East and West Germany has been instructional in this regard (Borneman, 1992; Glaeser, 2000). In other nation-states, the divide created by international borders has been strengthened and enforced by various citizenship and passport requirements (Löfgren, 1999). On the other hand, even in the midst of strong dividing borders, different dynamics may be induced by trade, commercial flows, and migration (Malkki, 1995). In a similar vein, others have linked identity formation processes to dynamics unique to borders (Bauböck, 1998; Ong, 1996; Rosaldo, 1989). Dynamics near the U.S.–Mexico border have been intriguing in the manner by which they have resulted in new and complex identities, blurring and integrating the characterizations of Mexicans, Latinos, and Americans. The interaction at this particular border has led to a distinctive and creolized identity spanning both Mexican and American cultures (Alvarez, 1995; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Kearney, 1995). Spotlighting these few examples highlights how borders are a unique and fascinating institution that have the ability to condition political behavior in complex, multifaceted directions.

In general, we expect that spatial border effects in the international state system are stronger than those in the U.S. state system because U.S. state borders, in contrast to international borders, are comparatively invisible and inconsequential barriers to political, economic, and social interaction. Nonetheless, one would expect the relevance of state borders to remain, if to a lesser degree. The historic propagation of a unified national territory, perpetuated by constitutionally guaranteed freedom of movement, commerce, and information among U.S. states, lends credence to the expectation of muted effects. At the same time, recent studies observe that U.S. state borders do have institutional effects, notably in the economic sphere, where manufacturing and retail location, taxation policy, interstate trade, and international trade are shaped in part by the presence of the border institution (Fox, 1986; Helliwell & Verdier, 2001; Hillberry & Hummels, 2003; Holmes, 1998; Mikesell, 1970; Nelson, 2002; Wolf, 2000). Less directly, recent political studies highlight the ways in which federal and state funds are redistributed differentially within a state for political effect, calling attention to the localized nature of politics "contained" within a state territory in ways that could disrupt the effects of geographic proximity in political behavior

(Alvarez & Savings, 1997; Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2006; Dahlberg & Johansson, 2002; Fleck, 1999; Fry & Winters, 1970).

The writings of V. O. Key (1949, 1956, 1958) are also pointedly relevant in the study of borders, and especially of the county unit, on political behavior. In Georgia, the Neill Primary Act of 1917 provided for the allocation of votes to counties based on population. Key discusses the critical importance of county-unit voting on campaign organization and management. Because counties were accorded influence based on their population size, campaigns sought to maximize their resources by allocating them most efficiently. This accentuated the rural–urban differences in Georgia and in so doing also strengthened the political identities adopted by various counties. Long before geographical information systems became popular, Key laid the foundation for spatial analyses with his county maps and insights into Northern and Southern sectionalism and the spatial autocorrelation of neighboring counties. More recently, others have treated populations near state borders as important entities for understanding policy diffusion (Berry & Baybeck, 2005).

Interstate borders simultaneously are institutional boundaries to and containers for political action. Accordingly, they should be afforded due attention in their potential role of shaping political behavior. As an initial examination of the topic, we pose a deceptively simple question: If people on either side of a state border are demographically similar, is it possible for a state border (as understood above as a social institution) to "create" distinctive political behavior on either side of the juridical line? This is an interesting puzzle with a nonobvious answer. We approach this question by discussing how various explanations of political behavior are interconnected. We then focus more closely on state borders as a social institution that is both a nexus and a barrier between individuals, giving us an interesting view of the simultaneous role of geography and sociodemographic variables in political identity formation. Our data analysis focuses concretely on political behavior along and across state borders during the national elections. Finally, we discuss how geographic context interacts with political institutions to create the complex mosaic of political identities revealed in our study.

Data and Analysis

To examine these questions, we compiled data that are plentiful in boundaries and socioeconomic attributes. Specifically, the data for our analysis are U.S. county-level data from the 48 contiguous states. This data set includes 3,109 counties. Our basic goal is to examine how political tendencies change across this electoral landscape. We obtain a sense of political tendencies with

a composite measure of several elections.[1] That is, we evaluate the political similarity of the counties with a measure of the normal vote (Converse, 1966; Stokes, 1962). In essence, the normal vote is the vote that we would expect to occur if everyone who identifies with a party favored their party's candidate and all independents split evenly. The normal vote allows us to remove short-term shocks in the vote and gives us a sense of the underlying partisan tendencies. Details about our specific measure of the normal vote can be found in Nardulli (2005). In general, our particular measure of the normal vote is based on a five-election moving average of the margin of victory in the presidential vote in the county. It includes the two elections preceding that election, the current election, and the succeeding two elections. We use the most recent normal vote measure available, the normal vote for 1996, which includes the vote in 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004. The normal vote serves as the key measure of partisan tendencies in our analysis.[2] Figure 1 shows the normal vote scores across the country using a Jenck's natural breaks categorization.

To explore how political tendencies are related across this landscape, and particularly near state borders, we need to define a measure of neighboring counties—counties that we, a priori, expect to have some type of relationship with each other (e.g., exhibiting similar political tendencies) because of their close geographic proximity. We define a "neighbor" or a "neighboring county" in one of three ways. The first treats all adjacent counties sharing first-order contiguity as neighbors. The second definition defines an adjacent county as a neighbor only if it lies in a different state. The third defines an adjacent county as a neighbor only if that county is from the same state. These three definitions of neighbors allow us to tap into unique facets of adjacency that are created by geographic borders. If geographic borders were unimportant, then we would not expect the results to change between these different neighbor definitions. That is, it would not matter if the neighbors under consideration were on one side of a border or another. In this sense, many of the important considerations will come from comparisons of analyses with different neighbor definitions. Specifically, how do neighbors across state borders compare with neighbors within state borders?

We begin our analysis by computing weights matrices that correspond to the three neighbor definitions we have presented. Once weights matrices are created, we can compute Moran's I (Moran, 1948, 1950), a common statistic for assessing global spatial autocorrelation. Cliff and Ord (1972, 1973) formally presented Moran's I as

$$I = \frac{N}{S_0} \left(\frac{e'We}{e'e} \right),$$

Figure 1

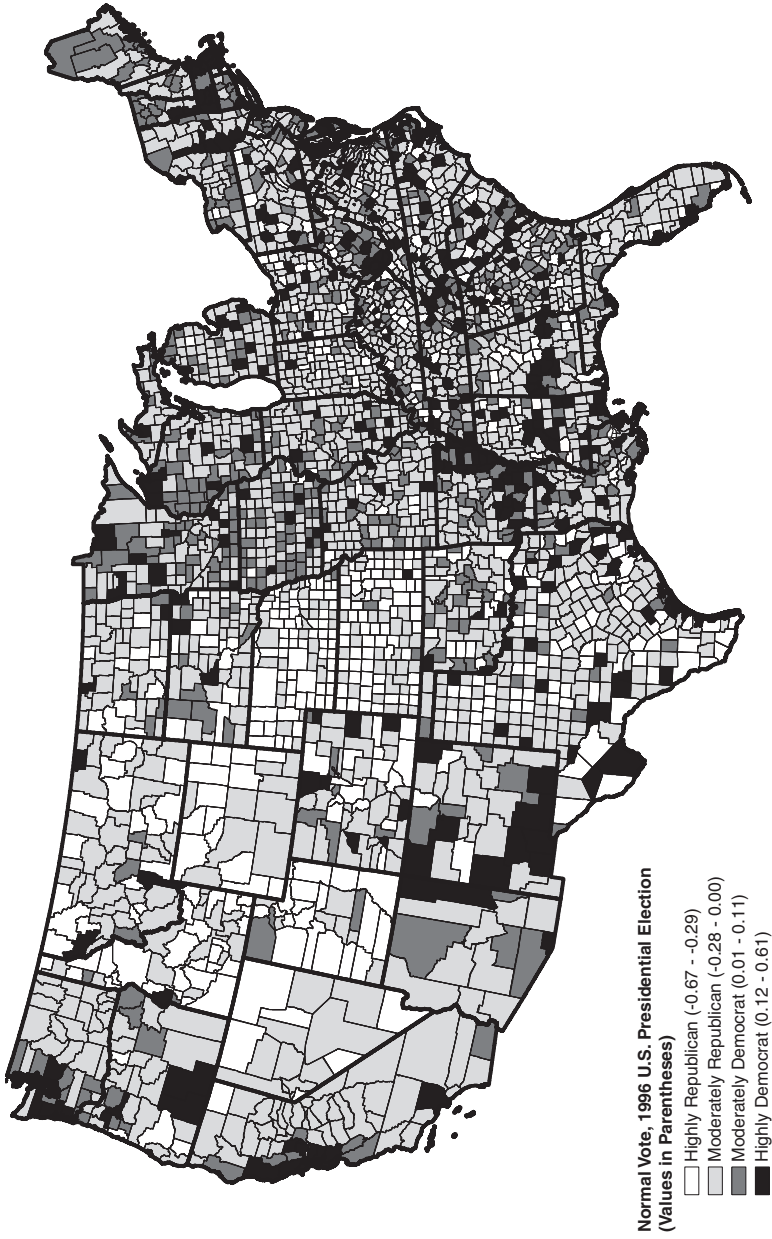**Nominal Vote, 1996 U.S. Presidential Election (Values in Parentheses)**

Normal Vote, 1996 U.S. Presidential Election (Values in Parentheses)

☐ Highly Republican (-0.67 - -0.29)
☐ Moderately Republican (-0.28 - 0.00)
☐ Moderately Democrat (0.01 - 0.11)
☐ Highly Democrat (0.12 - 0.61)

Table 1
Moran's *I*

	Moran's *I*	*p* Value
Contiguous neighbors	0.248	.00
Contiguous neighbors in same state	0.117	.00
Contiguous neighbors in different state	0.030	.14

where $e = y = X\beta$ is a vector of ordinary least squares residuals, $\beta = (X'X)^{-1}$ $X'y$, W is a matrix of spatial weights, N is the number of observations, and $S_0 = \sum_i \sum_j w_{ij}$ is a standardization factor equal to the sum of the spatial weights. If the weights are row standardized, Moran's *I* simplifies to

$$I = \frac{e'We}{e'e}.$$

A significant Moran's *I* statistic implies a departure from spatial randomness. In other words, rather than a spatially random pattern of political tendencies at the county level, either Republican counties are located in close proximity to other Republican counties and Democratic counties are found near other Democratic counties (positive and significant Moran's *I*) or Republican counties tend to be found near Democratic counties and vice versa (i.e., a checkerboard pattern resulting in a negative and significant Moran's *I*). If political phenomena are related to geography, then the manifestation of the phenomena should exhibit a nonrandom geographic pattern.

The Moran's *I* values for our data are shown in Table 1. The least surprising entry in this table is shown in the first row, which simply shows that the normal vote values of neighboring counties in the United States exhibit positive spatial autocorrelation. We would expect the Moran's *I* to be positive and significant if adjacent counties tend to be similar. The role of geography in political tendencies has been previously reported (Cho & Rudolph, 2008). What to expect is less obvious when we restrict the analysis to the counties in the United States that are on state borders. Are these border counties somehow unique from the set of counties as a whole? If we define a neighboring county as any adjacent county within the same state, the Moran's *I* value is 0.117. Again, this indicates the presence of positive spatial autocorrelation. So border counties, like adjacent counties in general, tend to be similar to adjacent counties within their own state. This effect is attenuated but still present, positive, and significant. It is interesting, however, that the spatial autocorrelation is no longer significant if we consider the relationship between border counties and their adjacent neighbors in a different state. The short

story is that counties in general tend to be like their neighbors. Border counties tend to be like their neighbors as well, but to a lesser extent and only if these neighbors are within their own state.

Moran's I is a global statistic and exploratory in nature. It gives no indication of whether and what type of autocorrelation any particular observation exhibits with its own specific neighbors. It merely gives the general tendency across all observations. Accordingly, although we can glean interesting and intriguing information from a global statistic such as Moran's I, a *local* spatial autocorrelation statistic might provide further insights into the puzzle before us. In this quest, we can compute a local Moran's I or LISA (local indicator of spatial autocorrelation) statistic for each of our observations, giving us an indication of how each of our counties is related to its specific neighbors. A local Moran's I gives, for each observation, an indication of the extent of significant spatial clustering of similar values around that observation. In addition, the sum of the local Moran value for all observations is proportional to Moran's I. See Anselin (1995) for further details on local indicators of spatial autocorrelation. Because spatial autocorrelation is not uniform across the United States, the local Moran's I provides a much richer picture and gives us an indication of what type of spatial autocorrelation exists and where. The local Moran's I statistic is given by

$$I_i = z_i \sum_j w_{ij} z_j,$$

where the observations z_i and z_j are deviated from their mean (i.e., $z_j = x_n - \bar{x}$) and the summation over j includes only neighboring values. Of the 1,158 border counties in the continental United States, there are 179 border counties that exhibit significant spatial autocorrelation with same-state neighbors and 94 border counties that exhibit significant spatial autocorrelation with different-state neighbors. The local Moran's I value allow us to decompose the global Moran's I value. An analysis of this decomposition indicated that none of our local Moran values appeared to be associated with large outliers for the global Moran's I value.

Significant spatial autocorrelation between neighboring border counties is evident in many locales across the United States. The exact patterning is not obvious, and one needs to delve further into the analysis to determine what factors lead to clustering of similar political tendencies around state borders. There are many reasons why political preferences in a county might be similar or dissimilar from those in a neighboring county in a different state. Here, we draw from the literature on international borders, specifically from their characterization of borders as sites of both division and interaction. Our

model is an attempt to delve into the empirics of this same theoretical space. Our first set of variables seeks to tap the "division" role that state borders may play. Although we expect U.S. states to be unlike international states in the level of distinction that they develop, our presumption is that states also develop distinct identities and that state borders are important entities defining the dividing line between these identities. In this sense, population size might be a relevant factor in determining how a state border manifests itself as an influence on political behavior and state identity. If a particular county is important to a state's identity and electoral base, there may be pressure on it to form a distinct identity peculiar to the state. On the other hand, a small county that is relatively unimportant in state politics would be able to behave distinctly or not with little effect on state politics as a whole. Another way to tap distinctiveness is to measure homogeneity. States that are politically homogeneous may have unique identities and may exert a different type of influence on border counties than states that are politically heterogeneous. These effects could be measured by computing the standard deviation of the normal vote in the state. States with a high standard deviation for the normal vote are composed of counties with a wide variety of preferences. One might venture to guess that if all counties within a state were relatively similar in preferences, this homogeneity might translate into a corralling effect for the border counties as well.

In seeking to understanding state identities, we also consider variables that tap systematic differences among counties. That is, whether border counties exhibit spatial autocorrelation or not is systematic and related to various sociodemographic variables such as percentage White, median income, median age, or ruralness. Rural counties or particularly wealthy counties may exhibit differences even apart from their distinction as a county that borders a different state. If so, we would want to ferret out these systematic differences. Last, other considerations may arise from the "interaction" that may occur near county borders. Here, it would be ideal to have measures of commercial linkages or economic activity. Our measures of interaction are admittedly lacking in this regard. Ideally, we would have a rich battery of measures of barriers to communication, including structural, geographical, or topological barriers, differences emerging from culture, and tariffs and quotas restricting free exchange among otherwise proximate neighbors. Many of these types of barriers have been shown to impede communication and interaction (Nijkamp, Rietveld, & Salomon, 1990; Rossera, 1990). We do, however, consider the role of some natural boundaries that would make cross-state interaction more difficult. In particular, we evaluate the role of major rivers that have the ability to moderate the interaction that might otherwise occur because of geographic proximity.

Table 2
Logistic Regression: Local Moran's *I* Statistics

	Same State	Different State
Intercept	−2.252	−3.653*
	(1.315)	(1.751)
Population	0.021	0.139*
	(0.047)	(0.045)
State's NV mean	−8.326*	−5.572*
	(0.819)	(1.011)
Deviation from state mean NV	2.836*	5.224*
	(0.809)	(0.967)
State's (NV) *SD*	−5.383	−9.478*
	(3.073)	(3.839)
Percentage White	−0.010	−0.004
	(0.010)	(0.009)
Median income	−0.130	−0.074
	(0.139)	(0.181)
Median age	0.038	0.048
	(0.025)	(0.033)
Rural	−0.167	0.213
	(0.366)	(0.525)
Three river	−0.071	−1.657*
	(0.217)	(0.451)
N	1,158	1,158
Log likelihood	−432.1	−281.6

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$.

We explore these relationships through a logistic regression analysis shown in Table 2. The dependent variable here is dichotomous, with a 1 indicating a significant local Moran's *I* statistic and 0 indicating that the observation does not exhibit significant spatial autocorrelation with its neighbors. The observations include all counties in the United States that lie on a state border. Table 2 has two columns. Both analyses are conducted on the same observations, but the definition of neighbors differs. The analysis in the first column defines neighboring counties as adjacent counties *within* the same state. The analysis in the second column defines neighboring counties as adjacent counties in a different state. Comparing the two sets of analyses helps us gain a sense of how geography is at play. Because the global Moran's *I* analysis indicated that neighbors in different states tend not to be spatially autocorrelated with a county's political tendencies, we are led to believe that these counties are not similar because the institution of the state border

has created a distinctive political identity and trajectory that trumps geographic proximity. However, although this may be the general tendency, it does not hold for all border counties. Our analysis here is more refined and helps us separate the significant local Moran's *I* counties from the insignificant ones, both within and between states.

The varied results shown in Table 2 imply that the factors that regulate spatial autocorrelation among neighbors differ depending on whether the neighbors under consideration are in the same state or in a different state. The intercept shows that same-state neighbors tend to be more similar than different-state neighbors, a finding that echoes the results from calculating the global Moran's *I* statistics. The only significant variables in the first-column analysis are ones related to the mean normal vote in the state. The negative coefficient on the mean normal vote for the state indicates that Republican counties are much more likely to cluster than are Democratic counties. As the normal vote in any particular county moves away from the state's central tendency, that is, the more "maverick" a county is within a state, the more that county resembles its surrounding areas. So there are pockets of counties that tend to deviate from the state's overall character. Other than these two characteristics, however, it appears that counties within the same state tend to exhibit similar political tendencies across a wide range of variables. The implication is that being in the same state is a key factor explaining a county's similarity with its same-state neighbors. Once that condition is met, other factors are less consequential.

The analysis with different-state neighbors presents a somewhat richer story than the same-state neighbor analysis in that many of the variables in the analysis are significant and so help define when and how spatial autocorrelation is present across state borders. As we can see from the intercept term, contrary to counties within the same state that appear to be generally similar, different-state neighboring counties are not generally alike. One great divide occurs among border counties on riparian boundaries. Our three-river variable indicates counties that lie on one of the three principal river systems—the Mississippi, Columbia, and Colorado systems–which includes a total 23 rivers reaching into 34 of the 48 continental U.S. states and forming partial state borders among 26 states. As one might expect, if the county has a major river separating it from another state, the river appears to accentuate the proclivity to develop an identity unique from its neighbors in a different state on the other side of the river. The river appears to mute interaction across states. Higher population, on the other hand, tends to create an identity that spreads to neighbors even when those adjacent neighboring counties are in a different state. So centers of influence tend to emanate to

surrounding areas even when those areas cross state borders. In a perhaps similar dynamic, counties that are in politically heterogeneous states tend not to resemble their different-state neighbors. Instead, they tend to perpetuate this heterogeneity across the border.

Two dynamics mirror those of counties with their same-state neighbors. First, the farther a county is from its own state's mean normal vote, the more likely it is to resemble the disposition of its neighbors in another state. Second, akin to same-state neighbors, the negative coefficient on the state's mean normal vote indicates that Republican tendencies tend to spill across state borders more readily than Democratic tendencies, implying that Republican areas tend to congregate not only within a state but across state lines as well.

The same-state analysis bears some resemblance to the different state analysis in that Republicans cluster within and over state lines and maverick counties also cluster within and across state boundaries. However, there are more differences than similarities—echoing the results from the global Moran's I analysis that provided our first glimpse into how state borders interact with geographic proximity in the formation of political identities. The disparity provides strong evidence that state borders are powerful separators of differing political tendencies. Strikingly, borders are able to circumvent geographic factors that have been otherwise shown to be influential in other contexts. Border counties do exhibit similar political tendencies with their neighbors, but this tendency is significantly more prominent when those neighbors are not on the other side of the invisible state line.

Table 3 extends our analysis further by examining the factors that affect the magnitude of our local Moran's I statistics. The observations in this analysis include only those counties that have a significant local Moran's I statistic. Counties that have nonsignificant local Moran's I statistics are excluded from this analysis. The dependent variable in this analysis is simply the significant local Moran's I statistic. All of our significant local Moran's I statistics are positive—we have no significant negative spatial autocorrelation or checkerboard patterns in our data. In this analysis, the same-state and different-state analyses are quite similar. The important and main difference is that spatial autocorrelation with same-state neighbors is higher on average than it is with different-state neighbors. Besides this difference, however, the other effects are quite similar. Whether the neighbors are in the same state or not, we again observe a partisan difference in clustering. Although both Democrats and Republicans exhibit some clustering, Republican strongholds are more tenacious. This perhaps echoes the arguments that the Republican Party is more tight knit, whereas members of the Democratic Party span a wider range of individuals and beliefs. In addition, the more a county differs from

Table 3
Ordinary Least Squares: Significant Local Moran's *I* Statistics

	Same State	Different State
Intercept	2.980*	–0.636
	(1.211)	(1.134)
Population	0.089	0.028
	(0.052)	(0.031)
State's NV mean	–1.841*	–1.770*
	(0.539)	(0.541)
Deviation from state mean NV	3.466*	2.110*
	(0.785)	(0.559)
State's (NV) *SD*	–3.877	0.619
	(2.827)	(2.719)
Percentage White	0.007	–0.002
	(0.006)	(0.005)
Median income	–0.144	0.120
	(0.117)	(0.134)
Median age	–0.037	0.032
	(0.021)	(0.020)
Rural	–0.110	0.132
	(0.377)	(0.302)
Three river	0.002	–0.328
	(0.180)	(0.276)
N	179	94
R^2	0.14	0.28

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$.

the state's central tendency, the greater the spatial autocorrelation with the neighboring county's political inclinations. This again indicates the tendency for maverick clusters to form. The range of our statistically significant local Moran's *I* statistics is 0.7213 to 4.856, so the size of the coefficients indicates both statistical as well substantive significance.

Discussion

Political scientists have begun to explore how geographic elements interact with individualistic theories of political behavior, primarily by garnering increasing evidence that social context is an integral component of political behavior. This study of "context" has focused on geographic proximity and

shown that proximity to other like-minded individuals influences political behavior in a manner over and above one's personal inclinations. As this literature matures, it is important to step back to gain a fuller sense of the shape of geographic effects—not only to understand when and how context might influence political decisions but also to develop an understanding of when geographic proximity is inconsequential or trumped by other factors. The social institution of state borders is inherently interesting in this quest to untangle geographic effects because of their overlap. State borders have a specific geographic location and create physical though invisible separators between people who are otherwise geographically proximate. Because institutions have obvious influential tentacles and geographic proximity has also been shown to be a consequential factor in the formation of political identities, whether institutions or geography would win a head-to-head battle is nonobvious. Our analysis helps to sort out whether, when, and how social institutions matter.

A clear result of our analysis is that the relationship between the border institution and geographic proximity effects is not reducible to a simple, unidirectional causal link. Instead, in our data set, we find many different relationships between geographic proximity and political tendencies. We highlight the variable relationship between geographic proximity and borders with three examples. In the West, border counties in Utah have a high incidence of spatial autocorrelation with their same-state neighbors but share no such relationship with neighboring counties in Arizona and highly limited relationships with counties in Nevada or Colorado. Conversely, cross-border political similarities do spill more readily into Wyoming and Idaho. Although the demographics of neighboring counties in Utah, Nevada, and Wyoming are nearly identical in poverty rates, population, racial composition, median household income, and population density, the Republican stronghold of Millard County (UT) remains politically similar to its same-state neighbors only. The demographically proximate, modestly Republican White Pine County (NV) is not significantly similar to any of its neighbors. The border appears as a powerful barrier, "containing" Utah politics. A short distance away, demographically similar counties at the conjunction of Lincoln County (WY), Caribou County (ID), and Bear Lake County (ID) share significant political tendencies with neighbors on both sides of the respective state borders. Here, the border seemingly does not divide the polity as it does in most of Utah.

Similar localized border effects exist in the South, most notably at the junction of the Arkansas–Tennessee–Mississippi border, where political life seems to take its cues from the Mississippi river frontier, an area that has

historically focused political and economic activity along both sides of the river. Shelby County (TN), home to Memphis, and neighboring Crittenden County (AK) share certain demographic traits yet vary widely on others. Despite demographic differences, the political tendencies in Shelby County are similar to those in Crittenden County, but not to those of its same-state neighbors in Tennessee. Crittenden County, in turn, is part of a "line" of politically similar counties along the western bank of the Mississippi river that is quite distinct from the political tendencies across the river. At a larger scale, Crittenden County is a microcosm of an extended partisan divide that separates Democratic Arkansas counties from Republican Mississippi counties along the length of their shared riparian border. Meanwhile, DeSoto County (MS), with its lower poverty, higher income, and largely White population, is not spatially autocorrelated to any of its poorer, minority-dominated Democratic neighbors. Here, there are three proximate counties and two distinct political outcomes. The relationship between the border and geographic proximity is complicated by the demographic patterns surrounding Memphis and its spillover into cross-border counties.

Finally, a cluster of Northeastern U.S. counties along the border of New York and Vermont show a third relationship, in which the demographically proximate counties centered on Rennselaer (NY) form a political "island." Washington and Rennselaer Counties (NY) and Bennington County (VT) each have political similarities with cross-border neighbors yet no ties to their same-state neighboring counties. This nucleus of Democratic counties is narrowly linked to a broader political clustering of both same-state and cross-border counties in western Massachusetts to the south. The New York–Vermont border appears to have minimal effect in dividing the polity here.

These examples demonstrate three distinct categories into which state border effects fall. First, borders frequently divide a place despite the shared social affinities that we expect to accompany geographic proximity (e.g., Utah). Second, the division of place by a border fails to materially alter the political similarity between cross-border neighbors (e.g., New York–Vermont). Finally, we can conceive of a situation in which borders (e.g., riparian borders) actually may concentrate political, economic, and cultural activity in ways that reinforce a unique "trans-border" political identity within a place. This phenomenon is frequently discussed in reference to the U.S.–Mexico border (Alvarez, 1995; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Kearney, 1995; Rosaldo, 1989), and we have no reason to believe it is not replicated in some domestic cross-border locations. Three examples and three distinct outcomes characterize a dizzying array of national and local patterns between borders, institutions, and the historic particularities of place. Faced with

such disparities, one might be tempted to lapse into either a paralyzing assertion of the "irreducible complexity" of political behavior or a dismissive reference to "contextual effects."

Although there are distinct and opposing examples of different behavioral patterns, our analysis shows that general patterns do emerge. Within a state, geographic proximity, even along the border, generally appears to play its expected role in encouraging the formation of like-minded clusters among geographically proximate locations. As we move across state borders the tide turns, and the prevalence of clustered political attitudes begins to dissipate. Our county-level examination of national voter behavior demonstrates that the state border creates a barrier to, or contains, political and economic institutions, policies, and possibly movement. At state borders, the importance of geographic proximity is generally secondary to institutional factors that condition political behavior. The impact of the border as an institutional divide, however, does vary among counties. Whether and the degree to which geographic proximity remains influential at state borders then becomes a factor of local conditions that may or may not create a climate conducive to sustaining clusters.

Several conditions mediate when the effects of geographic proximity extend over borders. One factor is a large population center. These populous regions, large cities, and particularly those located on major rivers are able to overcome the separation effects of borders by creating distinct political cultures regardless of state lines. This conjecture is supported by recent economic research on cross-border commercial linkages in urban border regions, as noted above. Conversely, the political influence of counties with smaller towns and greater rural population declines more rapidly with distance and does not overcome the institutional barriers that a state border may present. In addition, the "maverick" factor (how distinctly a county votes compared to the state average) highlights both the centralizing tendencies in state politics and the geographic patterning of distinctive political attitudes into isolated "islands" that exceed the effects of state borders to marshal political behavior. To wit, our study strongly suggests that "voters of a feather flock together" regardless of institutional boundaries and state lines when their interests are further from the norm in their own state. Finally, the partisan differences in the significance of the border as a barrier to political cohesion highlight the institutional power of political parties in constructing distinct political behavior. Republicans have long been recognized as the more cohesive party, spanning a narrower range of opinions (Polsby, 1983). This cohesiveness appears to translate to the geographic realm as well. Both Republican and Democratic Parties tend to cluster and weave webs of influence, but the strength of their

weave is not the same. The greater likelihood of Republican counties to be clustered on both sides of the border and the greater strength of Republican clusters over their Democratic counterparts suggest that the Grand Old Party has superior organizational capacity to mobilize and influence its core constituency. Alternatively, Republican support may occur in more politically homogeneous regions of the country (e.g., the Great Plains states) so that border effects are minimized by a widespread conservative political culture.[3]

Clearly, state borders do act as institutional barriers that channel political behavior and divide geographically proximate voters into distinct camps. Yet at a broader level, this study points toward a far more complex relationship between geography and institutions. Geographic location plays a vital role in the everyday formation of beliefs and identities—people are partly products of their spatial context. Political scientists are increasingly recognizing that individuals are influenced not only by their own sociodemographic characteristics but also by the sociospatial setting in which they are located. This view of "context" has focused on geographic location and asserts that geographic proximity conditions individual political behavior along certain, at times place-specific, trajectories, but although such effects appear to be strong and pervasive across a wide variety of political phenomena, their forms vary from place to place. Our study, by incorporating the geographic concept of place into an institutional analysis of state borders, explores the particular settings within which social institutions, borders, and local political relations join together to create distinct patterns of political behavior. The long-standing focus in political geography on place context, scale, institutions, structures, and individual voting behavior likewise benefits from the wholesale examination of the border as a social institution with material effects.

By focusing future research on these distinct outcomes, we may avoid the pitfalls inherent in any attempt to only examine national-scale sociodemographic patterns among institutions, geographic proximity, and voter behavior. National trends do matter. However, we must be mindful that national trends are conglomerations of a multitude of smaller-scale configurations in the relationship among institutions, geography, and political behavior. Geography, then, is more than a comparison of proximity and distance. Rather, geography is the product of political relationships that come together in particular places and through which national trends emerge. Institutions, such as borders, are a part of that geographic context. By focusing on a typology of political outcomes that feed into national trends, our research contributes to a progressive growth in the political science literature while still permitting the contextual understanding that will clarify whether,

when, and how social institutions matter and within which geographic contexts. Both facets are important to gaining a robust understanding of the role of political institutions in shaping political behavior at multiple scales.

Notes

1. Because only 28 states (as of 2007) register people by party, partisan registration figures are not a viable measure.

2. We chose the 1996 normal vote because these were the most recent data available. Note that although some might consider this window of time to be unique with both Clinton elections as well as the close election between Gore and Bush, the normal vote should not be "unrepresentative" in any era because short-term shocks such as unique single elections are not part of how the normal vote is defined. A state's normal vote in a particular election, by definition, should be the margin of victory in the election if habitual voting patterns determined the vote. In this sense, the normal vote measures the relative size of the major parties' electoral base in a state, not the effect of a Clinton personality or well-run campaign.

3. This latter influence is the basis for regional sectionalism arguments, though our study found no significant sectional differences in relation to only border counties using the three-way sectional model suggested by Archer and Taylor (1981).

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Wendy K. Tam Cho is associate professor in the Departments of Political Science and Statistics and senior research scientist at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Erinn P. Nicley is a PhD student in the Department of Geography at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.