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THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF POPULATION CONSOLIDATION IN NEBRASKA

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ABSTRACT—In recent decades, the migration that has long been characteristic of life in the Great Plains has meant the steady relocation of population from rural to metropolitan counties. While much has been written about the social and economic consequences of this migration, far less is known of its political consequences. In Nebraska, the least-populated counties experience the most severe out-migration, and are the most reliably Republican. To discern a relationship between population migration and political outcomes, this study analyzes the six open-seat races for United States senator that have occurred in Nebraska since 1976. An econometric model that explains Democratic vote share at the county level demonstrates that larger growth in a county's population exerts a positive and significant influence on the proportion of the vote won by the Democratic candidate, when partisanship and other race-specific variables are controlled for. Consolidation of more of the state's population into fewer counties has increased the competitiveness of well-qualified Democratic candidates.

Key Words: Great Plains migration, Nebraska politics, population consolidation, Senate elections

INTRODUCTION

It only took four tries. From 1996—the first presidential election in which Nebraska law allowed the state to divide its Electoral College votes—through 2004, Nebraska voters awarded all five of their Electoral College votes to the Republican candidate for president. The 2008 presidential election represented the first time Nebraska split its Electoral College vote. Democrat Barack Obama won a majority of votes in the Second Congressional District, constituted largely by the city of Omaha and suburban Douglas and Sarpy Counties. Unique attributes of the Obama campaign may explain why the Democrat captured this electoral vote from his Republican opponent. Flush with cash and adept at grassroots and electronic organizing, Obama's campaign organization overtly targeted its efforts in Omaha, emphasizing voter registration and, especially, early voting (Bratton 2008). An alternative explanation holds that Obama's win in Nebraska's Second Congressional District may be attributed to recently increasing "geographic clustering" in American politics. In analyzing the geographic distribution of votes in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections,

Nicholas Seabrook finds a pronounced spatial component: "Republican Party support appears to be clustered in larger areas with more dispersed populations, while Democratic support is concentrated in smaller areas with higher population densities" (Seabrook 2009:4). We find the same phenomenon in Nebraska, on a smaller scale. Obama carried only four counties in the state, but they included the two most populated, Douglas (dominated by the city of Omaha) and Lancaster (dominated by the city of Lincoln).

Not to diminish the important influence of geographic clustering on election outcomes, but analysis of this sort fails to capture a dynamic element of population distribution. While support for Democratic candidates is concentrated in more densely populated areas, it is not known if, much less how, mobile populations contribute to this pattern. Nor is it understood what effect population migration exerts on other, nonpresidential political outcomes. This study explores the possibility of a causal relationship between population migration and political behavior by analyzing population change and electoral outcomes in Nebraska races for U.S. Senate over the past three decades. Like most other states in the Great Plains,

Nebraska has experienced a consolidation of more of its population into fewer of its counties. At the same time, the state has exhibited a willingness to elect Democratic candidates to statewide office while undergoing a gradual reduction in voter identification with the Democratic Party. Why Democrats continue to win statewide in Nebraska in the face of diminishing partisan loyalty is an important puzzle that is readily addressed by the candidate-centered character of congressional elections (Jacobson 1992). However, even standard explanations of Senate elections fail to account for the contributions of population dynamics to electoral results.

POPULATION CONSOLIDATION IN THE GREAT PLAINS

Migration and its effects have always been part of the culture of life in the Great Plains. E. Cotton Mather wrote in 1972 that “nomadism is a fundamental feature of the Great Plains culture” (Mather 1972:245), characteristic of every era of Plains history, from the nomadic Indian tribes, to white pioneers—those who passed through and those who settled—to the development of railroad and trucking industries, to summer tourists and local residents who think little of pulling a boat 300 miles round-trip for a weekend’s recreation on the water. If he were writing today, Mather might note the willingness of Nebraskans to drive those 300 miles to watch a football game in Lincoln or shop in Omaha or play the slots in Council Bluffs. In short, people in the Plains continue to be characterized as people on the move.

This willingness to move has resulted in a steady relocation of population from rural to metro counties in the Great Plains. Johnson and Rathge (2006) note that two-thirds of the counties in the Great Plains have lost population over the past half-century. And yet, the net population of the region had increased by 4.3 million, indicating a prolonged consolidation of residents from nonmetro to metropolitan counties. The rate of this consolidation varies according to the population of the county in question. Between 1950 and 1996, the populations of metro areas in the Great Plains grew by 152%, while the nonmetro population declined by 5%. But not all nonmetro counties shrank, nor did the declining counties decline in equal measure. Counties containing a city of at least 20,000 people grew by 39%. Counties containing a city whose population fell between 2,500 and 19,999 waxed and waned in population. While the smallest counties—those that do not have a city with at least 2,500 people—“showed the most dramatic decline,

losing more than a third of their population base between 1950 and 1996” (Rathge and Highman 1998:19). Most of the counties that lost population are rural or farm-dependent. Guttmann et al. (2005) report that between 1930 and 1990, population declined in 90% of the Great Plains counties with the most agricultural employment, while population increased in the counties with the least agricultural employment.

A substantial literature has grown up addressing the causes and consequences of this population consolidation. Economic opportunity and quality-of-life considerations appear to drive most migration. Regarding economic opportunity, technological advances in agricultural production displaced farm families (Pursell 1981), especially young adults, causing them to move to cities where they found employment opportunity (Johnson and Rathge 2006). Irrigated agriculture and access to groundwater have also contributed to population consolidation in High Plains counties (White 1992). This out-migration from rural counties also harmed small businesses in those counties, contributing to a downward spiral of population loss (Johnson and Rathge 2006). Where populations grew, the proportion of college-educated residents in a county contributed to that in-migration (Guttmann et al. 2005), suggesting that economic opportunity accounts for both growth and decline.

Regarding quality-of-life considerations, environmental factors have contributed to population consolidation. From the 1950s through the 1980s, geographic features, especially high elevations and large bodies of water, attracted migrants who sought easy access to recreation (Guttmann et al. 2005). In the 1980s, net migration patterns in the Great Plains emphasized the growth of urban areas. By the 1990s, natural amenities and suburbanization (characterized by relocation to the fringes of cities) replaced urbanization as the leading attribute of net migration (Cromartie 1998).

Turning to the consequences of population consolidation in the Plains, we see a distortion in the age structure of the declining counties. Since most of those relocating for better employment opportunities tend to be in early- or mid-career stages of life, declining counties have become skewed toward an older population. Of the counties whose populations declined continuously from 1950 through 1996, almost half had a median age older than 35. In two-thirds of the continuous-growth counties, the median age was younger than 29 (Rathge and Highman 1998). The result is a higher concentration of elderly people in economically depressed counties (Rathge and Highman 1998), threatening the future ability of these

counties to attract new development or provide for ongoing needs like infrastructure, health care, education, or public safety.

The economic byproducts of a shrinking and aging rural population are numerous. Population loss in rural areas leads to labor shortages (Pursell 1981), a decline in consumer demand, which in turn causes declines in wholesale and retail trade (Adamchak et al. 1998). A shrinking and aging rural population also make it more difficult to attract new business development: "As working-age and work-ready people leave the area, many of the people left behind are too old, underskilled, or undereducated to find work elsewhere. Consequently, they comprise a workforce that is relatively unattractive to relocating business and relatively ill-equipped to start their own businesses" (Rowley 1998:4).

Consequence builds on consequence. As populations and local economies erode, so does the capacity to govern, causing "severe dislocations in local government, education, health care, and highway construction and maintenance" (Luebke 1984:36).

In addition to the material consequences of rural depopulation in the Great Plains, we have also seen a debate over what to do about it. Offers of free land to attract new "homesteaders" and tax incentives to attract industry seem most typical of proposed solutions (Shortridge 2004), but others have recommended efforts to make the best of things as they are. The Poppers' proposal to return vast stretches of Plains grasslands into a "buffalo commons" (Popper and Popper 1987) has drawn both applause and approbation in declining rural communities.

While the causes of population consolidation in the Plains are several, only some of the consequences are well known. Still underexplored are the relationships between migration and local political phenomena.

POLITICS AND PLACE

Social scientists have long understood the relationship between politics and place. Indeed, the expectation that people in different parts of the country would have different outlooks and interests is built into the design of federalism in the U.S. Constitution. James Madison, in *Federalist* No. 10, argued that this diversity of interests would serve the republic well over time by making it difficult for particular interests, or factions of interest, to dominate political decision making. Sectional differences overshadowed most other political issues in the 19th century. Well into the 20th century, Elazar (1972) argued that states and regions possess distinct political cultures. Political scientists Earl

and Merle Black (2007) delineate the regional patterns in presidential voting, with Republicans dominating the Electoral College in the South, Great Plains, and Interior West, and Democrats polling strongly on both coasts. The Midwest is the swing region, whose states determine the outcome of modern presidential elections.

Regional patterns in presidential voting notwithstanding, political variation exists within regions as well. Writing of urbanization in the Great Plains, Rugg and Rundquist (1981) address the common perception that the region is "the domain of the farmer, hunter, Republican and conservative. Yet, this perception is misleading. In reality, the farmer is in the minority, the Democratic Party is a significant factor in politics, and golfers probably outnumber hunters" (221). This portrayal hints at an urban-rural divide in the politics of the Plains. However, this urban-rural divide, if it exists, is not static. As the Plains undergo a transition in which rural places lose population at the expense of urban and suburban places, we should reasonably expect to find political results stemming from that migration.

Bill Bishop has recently argued that population dynamics shed light on our understanding of election results. In his book *The Big Sort*, Bishop (2009) contends that people with similar value orientations and related political outlooks have begun sorting themselves into like-minded communities. When people move, they often choose to live among people who share their political views, or to escape people who do not share those views, a phenomenon contributing to political polarization in the United States. For example, Bishop documents that 79% of the people who moved away from Republican counties between 1995 and 2000 settled in counties that voted Republican in 2004, and that most of them moved to counties in which George W. Bush won in a landslide in 2004 (Bishop 2009:44). Although migration patterns such as these do not necessarily reflect political choices, Bishop argues, they nevertheless have had political consequences.

These two phenomena—historical spatial patterns in voting and a more recent big sort—suggest a causal relationship between population shifts and political outcomes. Given that migration is part and parcel of the culture of the Great Plains, it is worth asking whether, and to what extent, population change has influenced political outcomes there.

MIGRATION AND POLITICS IN NEBRASKA

Nebraska has not been immune to the population dynamics that have characterized the Great Plains over the

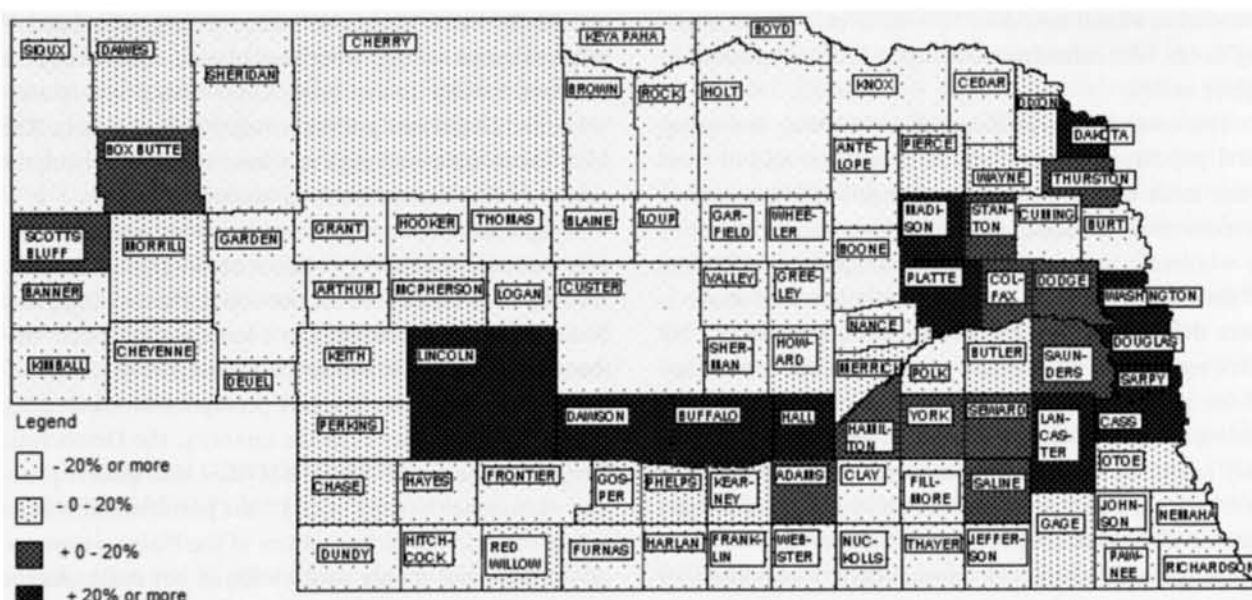


Figure 1. Population change in Nebraska counties, 1980–2008.

past 50 years. Its smallest counties have lost the greatest percentage of their populations. Figure 1 displays the pattern of population loss and gain in Nebraska's 93 counties between 1980 and 2008. The counties with the two darkest degrees of shading are those whose populations increased over those decades. Most of the counties that gained population form a pattern Nebraska officials call "the Fishhook" (Cantrell 2005). Fishhook counties lie primarily along the Interstate 80 corridor, from Lincoln County (North Platte) east to Lancaster County (Lincoln), then northeast as the interstate bends toward Omaha and its suburbs in Douglas and Sarpy Counties. From the Missouri River counties, the pattern hooks back west through Dodge, Colfax, Platte, Madison, and Stanton Counties. In 1980, these counties comprised 68% of the state's population. Combined, those same 20 counties made up 76.5% of the state's population in 2008. Figure 2 depicts the populations for all Nebraska counties, as of 2008. Although the fishhook pattern is not complete here, Figure 2 makes plain the overlap between population size and population growth in Nebraska.

Politically, observers characterize Nebraska as a "red state," owing primarily to its record of voting in presidential elections. From its first presidential election in 1868, Nebraska has distinguished itself as reliably Republican, choosing the Democratic candidate for president only five times out of 35. The most recent Democratic presidential candidate to win all of Nebraska's electoral votes was

Lyndon Johnson in 1964. Before that, it was Franklin Roosevelt in 1936.

The Republican Party's advantage among registered voters in Nebraska also gives the state much of its political coloration. The state began its system of permitting voters to register with one of the political parties (or not) in 1968, and since that time, registered Republicans have always outnumbered registered Democrats.

Figure 3 depicts the trends in voter registration from 1972 through 2008. Throughout this time, the proportion of registered voters identifying as Republican has remained fairly stable, ranging from a high of 51.18% in 1986, to a low of 48.12% in 1978. Proportions of voters identifying with the Democratic Party have fallen steadily, from a peak of 46.19% in 1976, to the low of 32.56% in 2006. The Democrats' losses have not spelled gains for the Republicans, though. As already indicated, Republican registration has changed very little. Seemingly few Democrats have switched to the Republican Party, but rather to some third party (in a few cases), or more commonly, to no party. Nebraska has witnessed a partisan dealignment, almost all of which has come at the expense of Democratic voter registration. The increase in independent registration covaries directly with the decrease in Democratic registration, with a statistical correlation (Pearson's r) between the two at $-.972$ ($p = .01$).

To begin drawing connections between population migration and political outcomes, note that the least-

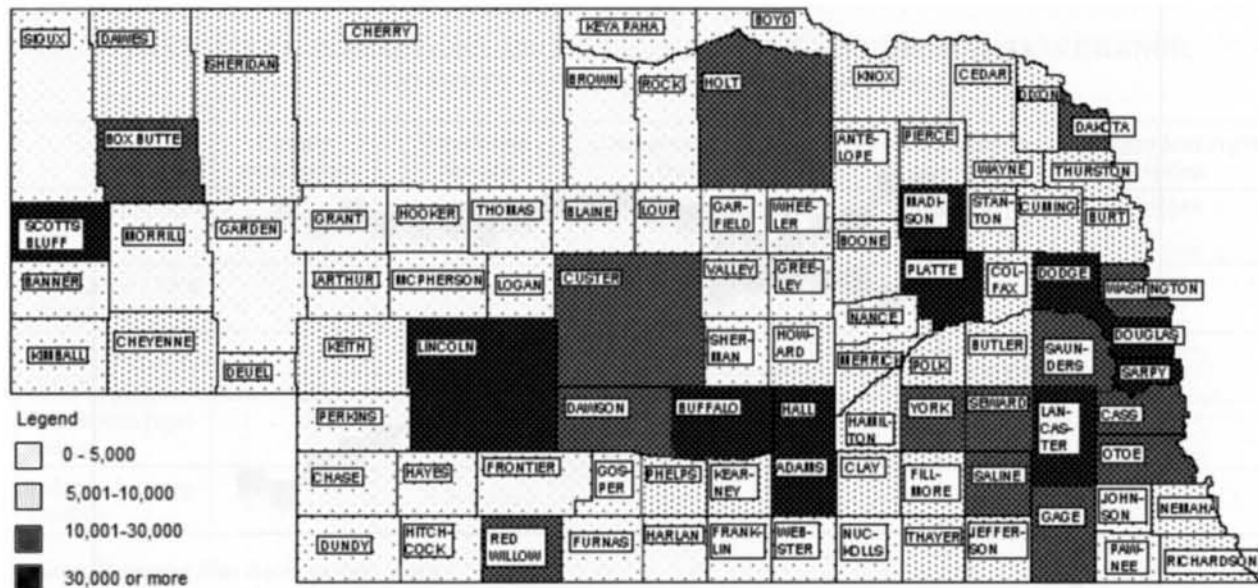


Figure 2. Nebraska population by county, 2008 estimate.

populated counties in Nebraska are also the most reliably Republican. Table 1 presents a correlation matrix showing the relationships among county population, population change, and voter registration. First, regarding county population, the matrix shows that the smaller a county's population, the stronger its affiliation with the GOP, while a larger population is more highly correlated with Independent, followed by Democratic, voter registration. Although these correlations are weak, their statistical significance nonetheless hints at a causal relationship, meriting further scrutiny.

The correlations among party registration and county population changes reinforce this pattern and tie it more directly to population migration. As the population of a county has increased, the proportion of its citizens registering with the Republican Party has decreased. When dealing with simple correlations, the inverse is also true, so that as a county's population shrinks, the remaining population shows a higher concentration of registered Republicans. In practical terms, this finding suggests that as a county's population declines, it is the Republicans who appear more likely to remain behind, while the proportions of voters registered as Democrats and Independents increase as a county's population increases. This begs an interesting question: Why? Some of those who migrate from shrinking counties toward growing counties must necessarily be Democrats and Independents (which is not to suggest that they leave for political reasons—there is no evidence that they do, while the evidence that people

migrate for economic reasons is very compelling). It is also plausible that some among the migrants change their registration upon arriving in the new community. When paired with prior knowledge of the relationships among age, migration, and party identification, this party-switching explanation makes sense. It is well established in the literature on population migration that median age in declining counties is older than in counties with growing population (Rathge and Highman 1998). It is also well established in the literature on party identification that younger voters are more likely to identify as Independents (Jennings and Niemi 1981), and that party identification becomes more stable as people age and accumulate political experience (Franklin and Jackson 1983). Thus, if those who remain behind in declining counties are older, and are also more loyal to their political party, it stands to reason that party registration (in this case, Republican) should consolidate in the counties that lose population. Likewise, if younger people are more likely to relocate, and also are more likely to change their party affiliation, then it stands to reason that party switching could take place as they migrate from declining to growing counties.

At the level of analysis presented in this study, it is unknown how many of the increased Democratic and Independent registrants in the growing counties relocated from a declining county within Nebraska, or if they have relocated from another state. Sorting out the intra- and interstate migration patterns would yield some useful

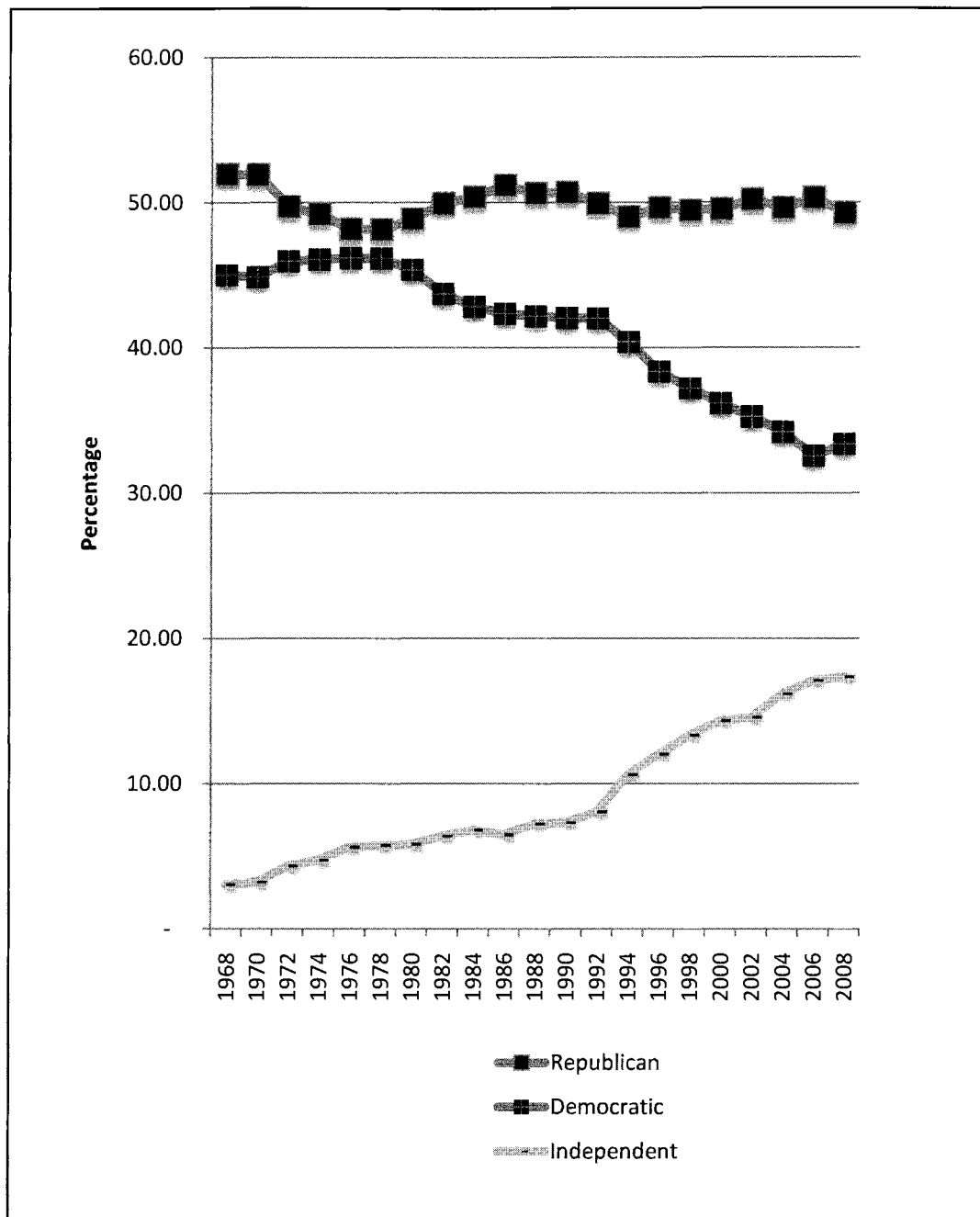


Figure 3. Trends in voter registration in Nebraska, 1968–2008.

insights on this question but would also extend this study beyond its immediate objectives. For the purpose at hand, it is enough to observe that counties losing population are more Republican, and counties gaining population are more Democratic or Independent. But are these patterns strong enough to influence election outcomes? In the next section we examine the influence of population gains and losses on U.S. Senate elections in Nebraska.

UNDERSTANDING SENATE ELECTIONS

Studies of Senate elections identify a set of factors that explain why a particular candidate has won. Candidate-specific factors, particularly the quality of his or her political experience, often prove relevant. Senate candidates who have held prior public offices, especially as governor or U.S. representative, are considered higher

TABLE 1
PEARSON'S R CORRELATIONS AMONG COUNTY POPULATION, POPULATION CHANGE,
AND PARTY VOTER REGISTRATION, 1976–2008

	County population	Population change	Democratic registration	Republican registration	Independent registration
County population	1	.303**	.182**	-.280**	.250**
Population change		1	.238**	-.315**	.200**
Democratic registration			1	-.919**	-.173**
Republican registration				1	-.315**
Independent registration					1

Source: *Nebraska Blue Book*, various years.
Notes: Entries are correlation coefficients. Population change calculated as percentage change between most recent census and election year. Voter registration calculated as percentage of voters registered Democrat, Republican, or other, aggregated at county level, for every election year between 1976 and 2008 inclusive. *N* for all entries = 558.
** *p* < .01.

quality candidates and win more frequently than political amateurs or candidates who have held lower-level state or local offices (Squire 1992). In a statistical analysis of 166 Senate races, Abramowitz and Segal (1992) find that having served as governor prior to running for the Senate increased a candidate's vote share by 5.8%.

Short-term forces are another form of influence on Senate elections that are unique to a particular race. A scandal involving one of the candidates may persuade voters to choose the other candidate, regardless of the other candidate's qualifications or political party. A particularly competitive primary race in one party may benefit the candidate of the opposing party, as disagreements or controversies from the primary continue to divide partisans in the general election (Abramowitz 1988).

Although bitter primaries are short-term forces, they are not the only factors in Senate elections that make political parties relevant. The partisan composition of the electorate matters, as citizens who think of themselves as Democrats tend to vote for Democrats, citizens who think of themselves as Republicans tend to vote Republican. In a state where one party can claim more adherents than the other, candidates from that party should be expected to win (Abramowitz and Segal 1992). National political tides also influence Senate election outcomes (Highton 2000). Whether they are caused by questions of war or peace, prosperity or deprivation, scandals, or failures of the government to govern well, some election years

strongly favor one party over the other. These trends often result from evaluations of the president and/or his party. In midterm election years, the party of the president usually loses seats in Congress, and Senate candidates can become victims of a larger national mood. During presidential election years, a Senate candidate's fate may in part be tied to the fortunes of the candidate heading his party's ticket. The evidence, however, suggests that presidential coattails are weak, where they exist at all (Campbell and Sumners 1990).

IMPACT OF POPULATION MIGRATION
ON NEBRASKA SENATE ELECTIONS

In this section, a model is developed and tested which examines the influence of population migration on Senate elections in Nebraska. Since 1976, Nebraska has held six Senate races (1976, 1978, 1988, 1996, 2000, and 2008) in which neither candidate was an incumbent. The selection of open-seat races eliminates the influence of incumbency on voter choice, which tends to overwhelm most other explanations for outcomes in congressional elections (Jacobson 1992). The matchups in the six races are detailed in Table 2.

Of those six races, four were won by the Democratic candidate and two were won by the Republican, providing a fair amount of variance in the partisan result. Two of the races were very close, decided by a spread of five or fewer

TABLE 2
CANDIDATE MATCHUPS IN OPEN-SEAT SENATE RACES, NEBRASKA, 1976–2008

Year	Democratic nominee	Political experience	Two-way vote share	Republican nominee	Political experience	Two-way vote share
1976	Ed Zorinsky	Omaha mayor	52.91%	John J. McCollister	Second District, U.S. House of Representatives	47.09%
1978	J. James Exon	Governor	68.27%	Donald Shasteen	Staff of retiring Senator Carl Curtis	31.62%
1988	Bob Kerrey	Governor	57.65%	David Karnes	Senator	42.35%
1996	Ben Nelson	Governor	42.59%	Chuck Hagel	Deputy administrator, U.S. Veterans Administration	57.41%
2000	Ben Nelson	Governor	51.10%	Don Stenberg	Nebraska attorney general	48.90%
2008	Scott Kleeb	Political amateur	41.05%	Mike Johanns	Governor	58.95%

Notes: Karnes is listed as incumbent senator, but he was appointed to the seat by Governor Kay Orr after the death of Ed Zorinsky in 1987. Prior to the appointment, Karnes was a businessman who had served as the Second District chairman for Orr's gubernatorial race in 1986. Whether 1988 should qualify as an open-seat race is open to interpretation. It is included in this study because

points. One was a complete blowout, in which the winner accumulated 68% of the two-way vote. The remaining races were decisive, but not on an epic scale.

It is noteworthy that two-thirds of these races were won by the Democratic candidate, given Nebraska's reputation as a "red state." Partisanship matters, but these cases demonstrate that other electoral assets can outweigh partisan affiliation. Ed Zorinsky was a popular mayor of the most heavily populated part of the state, and even his opponent, Second District Congressman John McCollister, argued that Zorinsky ran a better campaign (Frisbie 1978). J.J. Exon, Bob Kerrey, and Ben Nelson all served as governor prior to running for the Senate, where all three developed reputations for conservative fiscal management. In Kerrey's case, this may have reflected the state's economy in the mid-1980s more than his own preferences. Nevertheless, at the midpoint of his term, in 1985, Kerrey enjoyed an approval rating among Nebraskans of 70%. At the time he left the governor's office, Exon's approval rating in the state was 89%. Ben Nelson's approval rating at the end of his term as governor was 80%. The storied nonpartisan strain in Nebraska's political culture may also contribute to these Democratic victories (Walton 2000). Whatever the reason for the individuals' victories, all of these cases make plain that the partisan composition of the electorate can be matched or exceeded by individual candidates' qualities in open-seat races.

Candidate qualities notwithstanding, the central question of this study concerns whether population gains and losses matter in explaining candidate vote share. Previously reported correlations between population change and party registration, and the correlations between the size of a county's population and its partisan voter base, suggest the possibility that both matter. That is, the size of a county's population is a good predictor of its vote, as is the rate and direction of its population change.

A measurement of population change, along with the previously described variables believed to influence voter choice in Senate elections, can be expressed in the following equation:

$$\text{Democratic vote share} = \text{Constant} + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_{6-10} X_{6-10},$$

where Democratic vote share = percentage of vote the Democratic candidate won in a given county; X_1 = percentage change in the county's population since the previous census; X_2 = population of the county; X_3 = percentage of voters in the county registered Democratic; X_4 = candidate's political experience; X_5 = margin of victory in Republican primary; and X_{6-10} = other, unmeasured effects of each election year.

The data are arranged in a pooled time series. In practical terms, this method combines six separate cross-

TABLE 3
ORDINARY LEAST SQUARES ESTIMATES: INFLUENCE OF POPULATION CHANGE ON DEMOCRATIC
VOTE SHARE IN OPEN-SEAT SENATE RACES, NEBRASKA, 1976–2008

Dependent Variable: Democratic Share of Two-Way Vote, by County

Explanatory variables	Coefficient (standard error)	t score
Change in county population since most recent census	.134 (.031)	4.278***
County population	1.02E-7 (.000)	1.804*
Percent of county voters registered Democratic	.693 (.028)	25.086***
Margin of victory for Republican primary winner in county	-.102 (.017)	-6.179***
Election effects, 1978	.203 (.009)	23.436***
Election effects, 1988	.06 (.01)	5.828***
Election effects, 1996	-.05 (.01)	-4.781***
Election effects, 2000	.047 (.009)	5.086***
Election effects, 2008	.025 (.01)	2.585**
Constant	.212 (.016)	13.495***

Notes: Table entries are regression coefficients, calculated using ordinary least squares. Parenthetic phrases in each cell indicate the standard error of the coefficient. All percentages entered in decimal form (i.e., 10% =.10). County population changed measured as difference between most recent census and population estimate for election year by U.S. Bureau of the Census. Margin of victory for Republican primary winner measured as loser’s share of two-way vote subtracted from winner’s share of two-way vote. Election effects coded as dummy variables, with 1 entered for each respective election year, 0 for other years. Measure of candidate quality excluded from the estimate, as it covaries precisely with election effects variables. $R^2 = .799$; $F = 241.906^{***}$; Pooled Durbin-Watson $d = 1.86$; $N = 558$.
* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

sections (one for each of the elections studied) into one data set for the purpose of estimation. Estimating pooled time series with ordinary least squares (OLS) can violate the OLS assumption of homoskedasticity, however, given the unlikely situation that the error terms for each cross-section are consistent with one another (Sayrs 1989). Pooled time series is also subject to estimation error with OLS because it estimates a single constant, when it is more plausible that each cross-section has its own constant (Hanushek and Jackson 1977). Introducing dummy variables into the equation (X_{6-10} , in the present case) to capture the unique effects of each cross-section (election cycle) helps remedy both of these concerns. In theoretic terms, the variables for election-year effects capture na-

tional forces, such as presidential coattails, and race-specific considerations that are not otherwise controlled for in the model. The equation is estimated using ordinary least squares, and its results are presented in Table 3.
Population change matters in Senate elections. Over these six Senate races, growth in a county’s population exerts a positive and statistically significant influence on the Democratic candidate’s share of the vote. Where the population of the county has grown in recent years, the Democratic candidate wins a larger proportion of the vote. Apart from Democratic registration, to be discussed momentarily, growth in a county’s population exerts the largest influence on Democratic vote share. This result provides clear evidence that larger growth

in a county's population exerts an independent effect on election results, in a way that has favored Democratic candidates in these races. Although population growth matters in explaining these election outcomes at the county level, the size of a county's actual population exerts no meaningful influence on Democratic vote share in these races. While it is true that larger counties have higher proportions of registered Democrats and Independents, county population in and of itself does not produce much in the way of Democratic vote share, when controlling for Democratic registration. The parameter estimate is so small as to be expressed by the estimation software in scientific notation, and the standard error, although rounded to zero, is large enough to fall barely within an acceptable confidence interval. Taken together, these results suggest a negligible influence of county population on Democratic vote share. The larger counties in Nebraska may be more Democratic and Independent than the smaller counties, but factors other than county population explain more variance in the election results.

Specifically, the other two variables hypothesized to influence Democratic vote share in these races—Democratic voter registration and the competitiveness of the Republican primary—produce expected results. According to the parameter estimates reported in Table 3, the percentage of voters in a county registered as Democrats exerts more influence on Democratic vote share than any other variable included in the model. This fits the results reported in national studies of Senate elections (Abramowitz and Segal 1992) and indicates that, although registered Democrats are a shrinking share of the state's voters, they remain consistently loyal to Democratic candidates.

Regarding the influence of the Republican primary on Democratic vote share, the negative sign on the coefficient lies in the expected direction. The variable is measured as the winner's margin of victory over his nearest competitor in each county, based on the two-way vote total. A larger margin of victory means a more unified Republican primary electorate. A more unified Republican primary creates less reason for Republicans to be disgruntled with their party's nominee and thus defect to the Democratic candidate in the general election. That is what happened in these races. A unified Republican Party, based on an absence of closely contested primaries, stayed unified in the general election. The absence of closely contested Republican primaries drove down Democratic vote share at the county level, reflecting a general tendency in Senate elections (Abramowitz 1988).

CONCLUSIONS

The analyses presented in this article demonstrate a relationship between population dynamics and political dynamics in Nebraska in the past three decades. Counties with more rapid rates of growth exhibit more support for Democratic candidates. Shrinking counties exhibit more support for Republican Senate candidates.

Two implications of these phenomena suggest themselves. First, the growing counties in Nebraska are attracting voters with weaker ties to the Republican Party. Although the GOP holds a sizable advantage in voter registration across the state, that advantage does not guarantee electoral wins in Senate elections (nor apparently, in gubernatorial elections, since the office regularly changes party hands between Democrats and Republicans), and the expectation of GOP wins is the weakest in the faster-growing parts of the state. If the Republicans' most loyal supporters dominate the parts of the state that are small and shrinking, and if population migration trends toward increases in the more populated counties continues, the two parties should remain competitive in statewide elections.

Second, these findings provide partial support for Bishop's argument that migrating populations alter the political landscape. As county population increases, so do the proportions of voters registered as Democrats and Independents, as does support for Democratic candidates. As counties lose population, their share of Republican identifiers and voters increases. The literature on population migration in the Plains argues that people leave small communities for economic reasons or to be closer to amenities. It is no doubt true that population shifts in Nebraska have been driven by economic necessity, and perhaps by the amenities and quality of life offered in larger communities. But it is also true that, among other consequences, these changes are contributing to a changing political environment in the state.

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