



Revitalizing Electoral Geography

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Chapter 2

On the Shores of the “Moribund Backwater”?: Trends in Electoral Geography Research Since 1990

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In the 1970s and 1980s, political geography emerged from its “moribund backwater” (quoted in Berry 1969). In the forefront of this resurgence was the subfield of electoral geography, as many of the leading political geographers of the time helped to advance the subdiscipline (e.g., Taylor and Johnston 1979). The rise of electoral geography culminated in a 1988 conference in Los Angeles and the subsequent 1990 publication of papers from that conference in the book, *Developments in Electoral Geography*, edited by three prominent political geographers: Ron Johnston, Fred M. Shelley and Peter Taylor. However, criticisms of major strains of work in electoral geography were also on the rise at the time, with such charges of “methodological obsession” (Agnew 1990, 15), “rampant empiricism” (Shelley, Johnston and Taylor 1990, 1), and a lack of concern for social theory leveled against much of the work in electoral geography (see also Agnew 1987, Reynolds 1990).

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze recent trends in electoral geography research since the publication of *Developments in Electoral Geography* in 1990. First, we examine whether electoral geography has declined as an important subfield of political geography. Second, we assess trends in the topics studied and theoretical approaches employed within electoral geography. We conclude by assessing to what extent electoral geographers have responded to the criticisms and critiques of the subdiscipline issued 20 years ago.

To address these issues, we have created a database of 224 electoral geography journal articles published between 1990 and 2007. Before we discuss our survey of the subdiscipline through these articles, we need to address how we decided what to include and what not to include within this database.

First, we chose to examine electoral geography articles published in major geography journals, given the ability of databases that allow us to perform a fairly comprehensive search of these journals. We have included in our survey human geography journals indexed in the ISI-Journal Citation Reports database, a standard source for assessing major journals in the field. To this group, we have added additional non-ISI journals that we know have published a variety of electoral geography articles (such as the *Southeastern Geographer*). However,

we recognize that it is nearly impossible to track down every non-ISI journal published that might contain electoral geography articles. As a result, we know we have missed some electoral geography articles published in non-ISI journals over the past 20 years (e.g., Ingalls and Strickland 1992). In addition, we have limited ourselves to English-language human geography journals. We recognize that, as a result, we have missed some electoral geography articles from journals published in other languages (e.g., Caviedes 1993). As well, our emphasis on journal articles means that we have not included books published in electoral geography, books that contain electoral geography analyses, chapters in edited volumes and essays in encyclopedias (for example, Agnew 2002b, Secor 2004, Leib and Webster 2009).

Has Electoral Geography Declined as an Important Subfield?

The first issue we address is whether electoral geography has declined as an important subfield within political geography. Our anecdotal observations gleaned from conferences and journals suggest that the field of electoral geography and the number of electoral geographers has been in decline over the past 20 years. As John Agnew (2003, 613) put it, by the late 1980s the focus on “studies of voting in electoral geography ... seemed passé to many geographers.” Writing in 2003, Agnew (2003, 613) suggested that while “much effort in political science and political sociology is still put into electoral studies ... with a few notable exceptions, leading political geographers have moved on to other, presumably greater, things.” It is telling that one of the leading current undergraduate political geography textbooks, Painter and Jeffrey’s 2009 *Political Geography*, directs readers to *Developments in Electoral Geography* (Johnston, Shelley and Taylor 1990) “for a broader survey of the field of electoral geography” (Painter and Jeffrey 2009, 102), thereby suggesting the paucity of work conducted in this area of study over the past two decades.

So how has electoral geography fared? By our count, between 1990 and 2007 some 224 journal articles were published on topics that we considered to be electoral geography, or an average of about 12 per year (Figure 2.1). In terms of the trends over time, we see a spike in the number of electoral geography articles from 1995 to 2002. Though speculative, we attribute this spike to several factors. First are factors in terms of the publishing of the journals themselves, including guest edited issues of journals on electoral geography topics, as well as plenary lectures and commentaries (such as John Agnew’s [1996] and Ron Johnston’s [2002] in *Political Geography*), which increase the number of electoral geography articles in these years (though an increase in such articles and guest-edited issues may also be reflective of an increased interest in electoral geography). Secondly, electoral geography analyses of important political events of the mid- to late-1990s and early 2000s also helped lead to this spike: such as post-Cold War elections in former communist states, the US Supreme Court rulings of the mid- to late-1990s on the use of race in redistricting, and the disputed 2000 US presidential election.

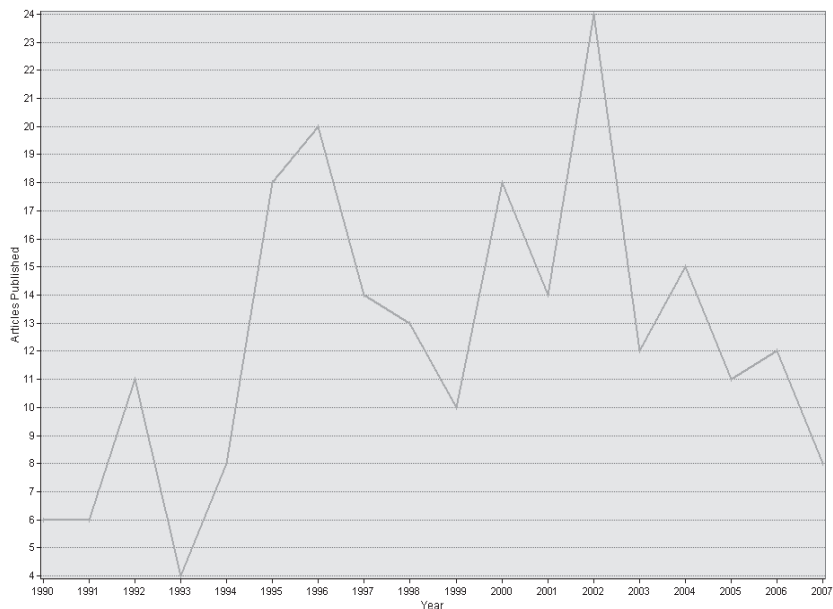


Figure 2.1 Number of Journal Articles on Electoral Geography Published, 1990–2007

In terms of journals, we found at least one electoral geography article in 28 different journals (Figure 2.2). Of these 28 journals, it is not surprising that about half of the 224 articles were published in one journal, *Political Geography*, the field's flagship journal. The only other two journals containing at least 5 percent of the electoral geography articles were *Post-Soviet/Eurasian Geography and Economics* (with 21 articles) and the *Southeastern Geographer* (with 13 articles). When we considered who was publishing electoral geography research, these 224 articles were published by 157 different authors (we assigned multiple authored articles to the lead author) from multiple disciplines. With that said, the disciplinary homes of these authors were overwhelmingly geography (59 percent) and political science (34 percent).

We should also note that the vast majority of geographers publishing articles in electoral geography during this time period were male. Only five female geographers published a single-authored/lead-authored article in the journals we surveyed from 1990 to 2007. Therefore, only 3.9 percent of all such electoral geography articles were single- or first-authored by a female geographer, a smaller percentage than that of female political geographers as a whole, and far below the 36.2 percent of all geographers who are women (as measured by 2009 membership figures from the Association of American Geographers) (AAG 2009).

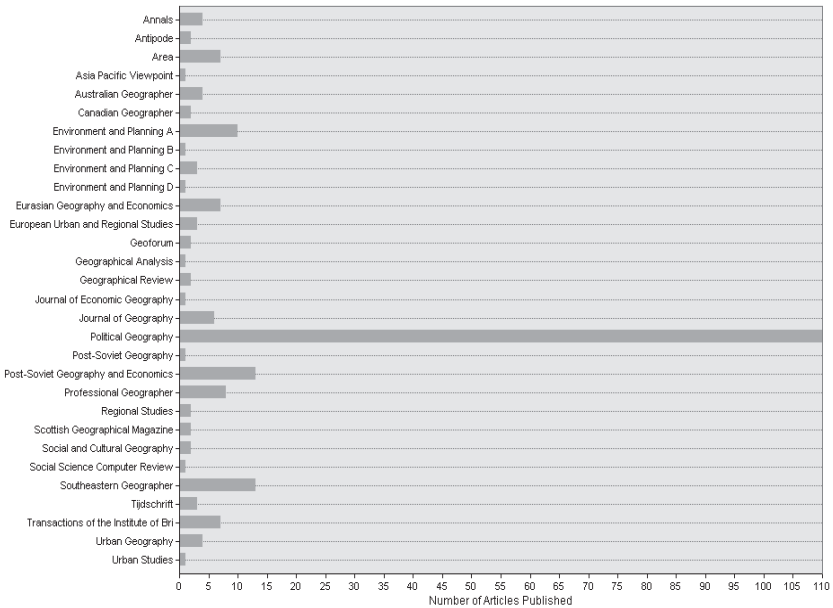


Figure 2.2 Number of Articles on Electoral Geography Published by Journal, 1990–2007

When we map out the sites of electoral geography research, the United States and the United Kingdom dominate: 39 percent of all articles focus on the US, whether at the local, state, regional or national levels, while 20 percent focus on the UK (Figure 2.3). This is probably not surprising given that we are looking at English-language journals and that many of the authors publishing in these journals are either from the US or the UK. Third, behind the US and the UK, are studies of elections in Russia, reflecting an interest in the electoral process there since the breakup of the USSR. In addition, starting with Martis, Kovacs, Kovacs, and Peter's 1992 article on elections in Hungary, we have seen an additional eight articles on elections in other former Soviet states or their former Eastern European satellites.

However, the lack of coverage of elections in the rest of the world is a bit startling. We counted only eight articles since 1990 dealing with elections in Asia (three of these were about Israeli elections), and only four articles on Latin America (with three of these on Mexico). Over this time period, we can only find three articles about elections in Africa. Certainly there is much room for English-language electoral geography research on the non-North American and European world.

As discussed above, about half of all electoral geography articles appear in the journal, *Political Geography*. The percentage of geographers and political scientists publishing electoral geography articles in *Political Geography* is similar to the percentage of articles published in journals as a whole: 62 percent

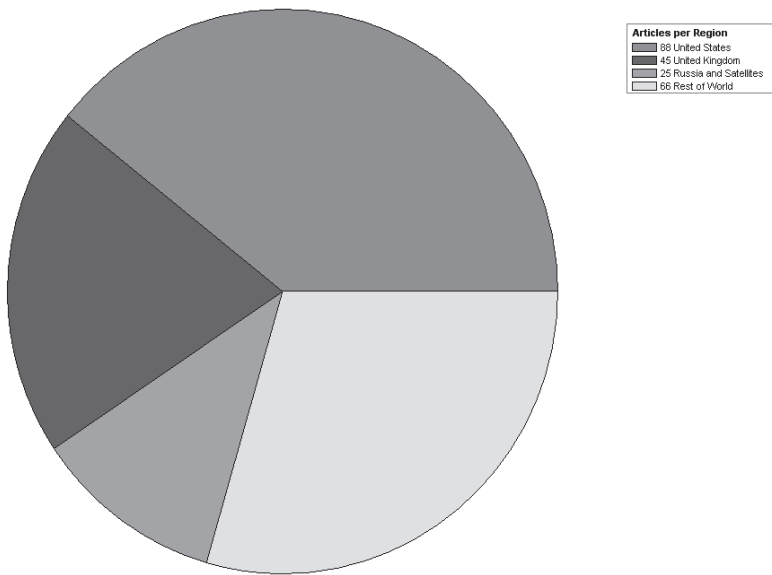


Figure 2.3 Country of Study in Journal Articles on Electoral Geography, 1990–2007

of articles in *Political Geography* are published by geographers, with 33 percent published by political scientists. We suggest there are two explanations for the relatively high percentage of political scientists publishing articles about elections in *Political Geography*: first, political scientists are still carrying out many studies of elections (and some are taking geographic perspectives more seriously [e.g., Gimpel, Karnes, McTague and Pearson-Merkowitz 2008]), and second, the journal *Political Geography* is highly ranked in the ISI Journal Citation Reports for political science. For 2009, the journal ranked sixth among 112 political science journals ranked by ISI. Hence for political scientists looking for a “top 10” publication, *Political Geography* is a good outlet.

Topics of Electoral Geography Research

What topics have been covered under the heading of electoral geography over the past 20 years? While the obvious answer is elections, the specific topics covered have been far ranging: from analyzing spatial dimensions of post-Soviet Russian election outcomes, to theoretical and empirical studies of redistricting and gerrymandering, to suggesting methods for teaching about the American Electoral College in middle- and high-school classrooms. Given this range, we have grouped

electoral geography studies into four broad categories which we discuss below in more detail: vote studies, comparisons amongst and critiques of electoral systems, discussions and examinations of the (re)districting process, and methods to bring electoral studies into the classroom.

Before we go further, we should also mention that analysis in electoral geography is not only carried out on a number of topics, but also across a variety of political scales, including supranational (e.g., Laponce 2004), national (e.g., Shin 2001), and subnational (e.g., Chapman, Leib and Webster 2007). As well, electoral geography studies are carried out over a variety of electoral contexts. While most involve popular votes for candidates, parties, and issues, voting behavior within elected legislatures have also been analyzed through the study of legislative roll call voting (e.g., Webster 1992).

Vote Studies

Vote studies are likely the most recognizable form of electoral geography, and this is the category that includes the largest volume of work. Dissecting the intricacies of popular votes in a particular election or elections has been a common practice for electoral geographers since the 1950s and before.

These studies focused on the votes cast for a candidate, votes cast for a party, those on single-issue/referendum, or roll-call legislative votes. In general, vote studies examined either the spatial distribution of compositional factors (such as race or income) associated with electoral outcomes (Clem and Craumer 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 2000 for examples, or King 1996 for advocacy of this type of work), or place-based contextual factors (Agnew 1994, 1995, 1996; Rasmussen 2006; Shin 2001; Shin and Agnew 2002) and their relationship to voting behavior.

Further, vote studies, like electoral geography as a whole, have covered a variety of topics. For example, there have been studies that highlighted regional polarization within states or growing sentiments of nationalism and how that related to votes cast (Agnew 1995; Giordano 1999, 2001a, 2001b). Other studies have highlighted the difference between urban and rural voters (Clem and Craumer 1995b), or central city and suburban voters (Hodge and Staeheli 1992; Ley 1994). Still other geographers have studied turnout (Kohfeld and Sprague 2002; Lee and Brunn 1996; Pattie and Johnston 1998), tied economic factors to voting behavior (O'Loughlin, Shin, and Talbot 1996; Pattie, Dorling, and Johnston 1997; West 2005), and explored the effects of elections on migration (Lo and Teixeira 1998). This type of work has also included a series of studies that related debates over identity including race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation to electoral outcomes (Brown, Knopp, and Morrill 2005; Chapman, Leib, and Webster 2007; O'Reilly and Webster 1998; Webster 2000b). Thus, vote studies cover a number of disparate topics in different ways, but all of them offered analysis of a particular vote or series of votes.

Electoral Systems

Electoral systems, or perhaps more appropriately voting systems, are critical to election outcomes. Voting systems are the framework through which a person's vote is transferred to the candidate, party, or issue of their choice. Thus, understanding vote systems is important for electoral geography.

Electoral system research has approached the issue of voting systems from several directions. One group of articles assessed how effective a voting system is at translating votes into representation. So, for example, there have been studies comparing various systems in an effort to determine which provided the highest quality of representation, such as Arrington and Ingalls (1998), who offered an example of this approach with an analysis of six voting systems at use in the US based upon nine measures of feasibility, and Johnston (2007), who sought to outline Australian exceptionalism in terms of voting practices in a similar broad based study of voting systems. In a slightly different approach, some authors have assessed bias between the proportion of votes cast and the proportion of seats awarded. Johnston et al. (2002) explored this issue in Great Britain with attention to shifting bias from the Conservatives to the Labor party. Yet another related topic was offered by Johnston et al. (2006) in their attempt to replay the 2000 and 2004 US presidential elections under the Maine/Nebraska Electoral College system (in these two states, rather than electoral votes being awarded on a "winner-take-all" basis, their electoral votes are allocated based both on a "winner-take-all" basis and by congressional district). So, the effectiveness of representation has been one avenue of research about electoral systems.

Another avenue of research dealt with legitimacy. Vote systems must attain a level of legitimacy within an electorate in order to gain popular acceptance and be implemented (Arrington and Ingalls 1998). Included in our cross-section of vote systems are those studies that focused on implementation, including the study of public debates over changing the electoral systems in Israel (Waterman and Zefadia 1992). In a similar vein of research, Hazan (1999) followed the process of introducing primaries into the 14th Israeli Knesset (1996–1999), their ramifications and geographical significance. But some authors have gone beyond implementation to assess the legitimacy of the mechanics of the voting process itself. These authors have studied the means through which votes are initially cast and are then counted. Much of this work occurred in the aftermath of the disputed 2000 US presidential election, including such topics as residual votes in Florida (Warf 2006b), in terms of impact on the minority community (Warf 2006a), and in reference to vote tally irregularities associated with voting technology (Leib and Dittmer 2002).

(Re)Districting

Topics of vote studies and electoral systems are closely related to that of (re) districting. Redistricting, the "process of drawing electoral district boundaries for

the purpose of electing members to a legislative body” (Leib 2006, 404), has been a staple of electoral geography research going back as far as the early work of Carl Sauer (1918). Though most associated with US redistricting, overviews of the redistricting process have not been limited to studies in the US. Broad overviews have been published on the districting process in the UK (see Johnston 1992), India (see Singh 2000), and Canada (see Belanger 2003).

In the US, such studies have been important in terms of examining the partisan impact of redistricting, the impact of redistricting for effective representation of racial and ethnic minority groups, and ways of creating and measuring fair and effective redistricting plans. Given the role of the courts in the redistricting process over the past 20 years, a number of these studies have examined the impact of court decisions and case law on the political-geographic division of space. Of these, a series of articles have provided broad overviews of the precedents established in case law and how recent court rulings have impacted existing ways of regulating, implementing and evaluating the redistricting process (e.g., Forest 1995; Forest 1996; Forest 2004b; Leib 1998; Webster 1997, 2000a, 2002). Other US-based studies have examined specific dimensions of the redistricting process, such as gerrymandering (e.g., Ingalls and Moore 1995; Lennertz 2000) and malapportionment (Rallings, Johnston, and Thrasher 2004).

More than in other areas of electoral geography research, redistricting studies have been produced by a wide array of authors, as authors from across the discipline of geography, outside of geography, and outside of academe have contributed. Along with political geographers and political scientists, redistricting issues attract GIS experts, statisticians, Department of Justice professionals, and social theorists alike (though, of course, there is the potential for overlap among these categories). Such studies have included the use of quantitative applications to meet legal standards for (re)districting (Cirincione, Darling, and O’Rourke 2000; Eagles, Katz, and Mark 1999; Thill 1998), such as an evaluation of compactness (Belanger and Eagles 2001; Flaherty and Crumplin 1992; Horn, Hampton, and Vandenberg 1993), and the use of Bayesian statistics to detect electoral manipulation (Altman 2002). In addition, there are (re)districting studies that offered a critical perspective, such as affirmative (re)districting (Webster 1993) in establishing/maintaining voting rights (Webster 1995, 2007). And, in a similar vein, post-structuralist ideas of hybridity and multiplicity have emerged in research discussing communities of interest (e.g., Forest 2004a; Leib 1998). Thus, the body of work on (re)districting is produced by a unique web of authors within and outside of electoral geography.

Education/Classroom Methods

Finally, a small, but critical, component of electoral geography relates to praxis in education. We have several articles that have been published in geography journals that provide approaches to relate issues of elections and representation to students in a classroom setting. Depoali (1993) offered various strategies to

aide in teaching middle- and high-school students about the American Electoral College. Jones (1997) highlighted geographical perspectives on a range of issues that include delineating electoral districts in an effort to help inform public policy debate amongst students. Finally, Webster (2004) provided examples of the (re) districting process to help incorporate social justice issues into the classroom.

Theoretical Perspectives within Electoral Geography Research

Topics studied within electoral geography over the past 20 years have been disparate to say the least, ranging from poll taxes in Scotland (McCormick 1996) to grassroots movements in India (Currie 1998). Each study, however, fits within at least one of the three major theoretical approaches, as outlined by John Agnew (2002a), which have dominated political geography in its post-1970 renaissance. These theoretical frameworks are the spatial-analytic tradition, political economy, and post-structural approaches. We outline these below.

Spatial Analysis

The first and largest set of electoral geography studies are those that are firmly situated within the spatial-analytic tradition. Spatial analysis is typically conceptualized as the application of statistical methodologies to quantifiable data, though this is not necessarily always the case (Agnew 2002a). However, the dominant manifestation from this theoretical outlook in electoral geography has undoubtedly been quantitative in nature. The spatial analysis tradition dominated electoral geography in the 1970s. This is not surprising, in that the rise of electoral geography in that decade, leading the way in the resurgence of political geography, coincided with the high point of spatial analytic methodologies within human geography. Elections provided a “natural” area of study for geographers within this tradition, as elections provide vast amounts of quantitative data (i.e., votes) that can be mapped, manipulated and analyzed through sophisticated statistical techniques.

Since 1990, electoral geography work from a spatial-analytic perspective has included analyses of the channels of information that political discussion travels, including friends and neighbors effects (Johnston, Jones, Sarker, Burgess, and Bolster 2004; Kramer 1990; Rallings, Johnston, and Thrasher 2004; Sui and Hugill 2002). There have also been explorations of a variety of political cleavages that divide selected electorates under the spatial-analytic umbrella (Hodge and Staeheli 1992; Perepechko, Kolossov, and ZumBrunnen 2007). One study has been published expounding on the cube rule in search of fractality (Maloney, Pearson, and Pickering 2003). Further, there are studies that have sought to deepen the level of quantitative sophistication in terms of eigenfunction analysis (Thill 1998), combating the ecological fallacy (Johnston and Pattie 2003; Owen and Grofman

1997), using Bayesian statistics to detect electoral manipulation (Altman 2002), evaluating the significance of temporal and spatial data (Fernandez-Duran, Poire, and Rojas-Nandayapa 2004), and forwarding the use of local area statistics (LISA) in electoral analysis (Darmofal 2006).

Finally, there are a series of studies that employ statistical methodologies to describe electoral outcomes. Some catalog demographic trends as they vary through space over particular elections or groups of elections (Archer 2002; Clem and Craumer 1995a; Clem and Craumer 1995b). Others include discussions of normal and deviating elections as parts of broader electoral trends (Forrest, Johnston, and Pattie 1999). These studies have also been extended into discussions of the mechanics of large scale electoral changes, including flow-of-vote as opposed to the uniform swing hypothesis (see Pattie and Johnston 1993).

Political Economy

Over the past 20 years, political economy approaches have been less popular within electoral geography than studies those from a spatial analytic perspective. There are at least three notable studies that incorporated political economy perspectives during this time period (though having said this, there were electoral geography studies from a political economy approach in the 1980s, when political economy perspectives were more in favor within political geography (Oseikwame and Taylor 1984). First, Duncan (1991) explored the geography of support and power in Fijian elections. Next, Flint (2001) employed a world systems approach to explain the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. Finally, Varsanyi (2005) delves into the intersection between labor unions, undocumented immigrants, and political control. Despite these studies, it is apparent that this perspective has received less attention within electoral geography than it has within political geography in general over the past two decades.

Post-Structuralism

Lastly, there are studies from post-structuralist viewpoints. These have grown in popularity in recent years and now include studies utilizing feminist perspectives and those explicitly dealing with the politics of identity. Pieces of note include Webster and Leib's (2001) study of the display and meaning of the Confederate flag in South Carolina with consideration to the contestation of identity and "place." Forest's (2004b) study of racial identity in *Shaw v. Reno* and *Easley v. Cromartie* is another example. The formation of regional political identities in Mexico from a feminist perspective also illustrates the point (Nelson 2006). Finally, Rasmussen (2006) offers a critique of the 2000 Nebraska anti-gay marriage referenda in terms of creating a decidedly non-gay "place" known as Nebraska.

Answering the Call?: Electoral Geography Research since 1990

To what extent, then, have electoral geographers answered the call for change made in *Developments in Electoral Geography*? We cannot provide an answer without contextualizing the initial call. Accompanying the growing critiques of electoral geography in *Developments* and those criticisms from other sources within the late 1980s and early 1990s was the growing engagement with post-structural perspectives across geography. Though the critiques levied against electoral geography were not necessarily made from explicitly post-structural perspectives, the critiques themselves can not be separated from the social milieu of academic geography at that juncture in time and space. Discipline-wide criticisms included feminist and post-colonial interjections into the meta-narratives produced by both positivist approaches and critical strands of geography. These post-structural critiques were followed by others concerned with identity, including queer theory, and post-structuralisms detailing heterogeneous associations, such as actor-network theory. At present the uses of post-structuralist ideas have become a significant trajectory of geographic inquiry in their own right, and are no longer simply challenging positivist epistemologies at each turn.

Despite criticism, electoral geographers did participate in these broader changes within academic geography. A critical component of geographic post-structuralisms is that space and place is produced and power relations are central to its production. In the sense that power is critical to spatial relations, each of the political economy studies embodies an answer to the call for change in electoral geographies. Spaces of capital accumulation are at the forefront of the political debates included in these studies and each involved the exercise of power throughout. Another body of work focused on power relations and space and place involved in redistricting(s) in the United States. These studies focused on redistricting designed to provide fair and effective representation for African-American citizens. Thus, issues of political representation based upon racial and ethnic identity were drawn to the forefront of these debates concerning issues of delineating spaces of representation.

Another component of post-structural geographies is the multiplicity of channels through which power travels. Thus, some of the most recognizable examples of changing epistemologies manifested themselves in the studies of identity and electoral politics listed above. Race, gender, and sexuality were all brought into focus as contestations of spatialized identities as played out within electoral processes. The diversity in these cleavages of power and their usage to produce spaces and places leaves little doubt that post-structuralisms have influenced the current shape of electoral geography.

Electoral geography studies that dealt with political economy, redistricting, and identity politics each engaged another axis by which post-structural geographies can be differentiated; contextualized and contingent power relations. The most sustained engagement with this particular idea has been found in the work of John Agnew (e.g., 1987, 1996, 2002b). Through the context of peoples' lives these

works on place and its political implications have highlighted the contingent results of electoral processes. In the same sense that the outcomes of political debates over identity are not preordained in electoral processes, the outcomes of place-based political debates are contingent on the application of power in varied and unpredictable ways.

Surprisingly (or possibly not surprising), however, the most numerous engagements with post-structural ideas by electoral geographers has been in conjunction with the spatial analytic tradition. While post-structuralist studies throughout the broader discipline have by and large jettisoned quantitative methods, electoral geographers' engagements with post-structural ideas have embraced quantitative methods. Recent works have taken the relationship between the post-structural ideas of power, difference, and contingency and coupled them with quantitative methodologies. In particular recent work by John Agnew and Michael Shin (Shin and Agnew 2002; Shin and Agnew 2008), Richard Morrill, Larry Knopp, and Michael Brown (Brown, Knopp, and Morrill 2005; Morrill, Knopp, and Brown 2007), as well as Gerald R. Webster, Jonathan Leib, Thomas Chapman and Nicholas Quinton (Chapman, Leib, and Webster 2007; Webster, Chapman, and Leib 2010; Webster and Leib 2001; Webster and Leib 2002; Webster and Quinton 2010), have made inroads in coupling post-structural and quantitative geographies. All have deployed contexts and the capillaries that power traveled through within these places alongside quantitative measures. Thus, in these ways, attempts have been made to fuse post-structural ideas with the dominant positivist forms of geographic inquiry in electoral geography, quantitative methodologies.

Thus, has the call for change in electoral geography issued in 1990, that the field address its rampant empiricism, methodological obsession, and lack of concern for social theory, been answered? The answer appears to be that it has, at least to a limited extent. Though any claims to significant change must be tempered with the broader findings of this chapter. In actuality, the number of articles employing post-structural viewpoints has been small compared to the total number of articles we count as electoral geography. The paucity of engagement with post-structural approaches should not be surprising given the penchant for empiricism and quantitative methods shown by electoral geographers. Indeed, the overwhelming number of articles we identified that fit into the spatial analytic tradition shows that electoral geographers have by and large not answered the call for change, post-structural or otherwise. Still, approaches have changed and post-structural ideas have been employed in some accounts of electoral geographies, even though they have occasionally come in unlikely shapes.

To what extent, then, has electoral geography declined as an important subfield of political geography? The uses of post-structural ideas have undoubtedly been a part of the changes in the broader practice of political geography over the 20-year time period since the 1990 publication of *Developments in Electoral Geography*. At the same time, the maintenance of the quantitative tradition in electoral geography has distanced it from recent trends in political geography

more generally. The answer then is mixed. As Murdoch (2006, 2) notes, “post-structuralism’s endless variety means it becomes hard to draw any clear line or boundary around post-structuralist theory or its influence.” In this sense we can say clearly that while on the one hand electoral geography has contributed to the discussion of post-structuralism more generally (though in its own way) and thus remains a relevant subfield of political geography, on the other hand further engagement with emerging trends within the discipline are necessary for it to regain its former prominent place within political geography.

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