

1 Introduction

People in Cobb County don't object to upper-middle-class neighbors who keep their lawn cut and move to the area to avoid crime . . . What people worry about is the bus line gradually destroying one apartment complex after another, bringing people out for public housing who have no middle-class values and whose kids as they become teenagers often are centers of robbery and where the schools collapse because the parents who live in the apartment complexes don't care that the kids don't do well in school and the whole school collapses.

—U.S. Rep. *Newt Gingrich (R-Georgia)*, 1994, quoted in *Merle and Earl Black, The Rise of Southern Republicans*

To progressives, the best thing about railroads is that people riding them are not in automobiles, which are subversive of the deference on which progressivism depends. Automobiles go hither and yon, wherever and whenever the driver desires, without timetables. Automobiles encourage people to think they – unsupervised, untutored, and unscripted – are masters of their fates. The automobile encourages people in delusions of adequacy, which make them resistant to government by experts who know what choices people should make.

—George Will, “*High Speed to Insolvency: Why Liberals Love Trains,*” *Newsweek*, February 27, 2011

In recent decades, Democrats and Republicans have become increasingly geographically polarized along urban and suburban lines and increasingly polarized around the policies that define and create metropolitan America. The ideal community of an average conservative is located in a rural or suburban area, a safe distance from what he or she perceives as urban disorder. On the other hand, an average liberal is more likely to value racial and ethnic diversity, a walkable environment, and the density of urban life (Pew Research Center, 2014). Democrats have been increasingly more likely than Republicans to live in central cities (Rodden, 2014; Nall, 2015),

and Democrats and Republicans have adopted increasingly different positions on *spatial policy* issues such as transit and highways. The geographic bases of the two parties have changed accordingly.

Underlying this developing spatial and political order has been *physical infrastructure*: the roads, rail lines, and utility networks that connect people in cities and beyond and sustain life in cities and suburbs alike. Regardless of where they live, Americans are “on the grid,” relying on publicly subsidized highways, transit, or rail lines to get them from place to place. The development of this infrastructure has been crucial to economic opportunity, and it has also been vital to determining the residential choices of Democrats and Republicans, with significant implications for national, state, and local politics.

This book shows that the growth of suburban conservative neighborhoods, the geographic polarization of metropolitan areas, and the adverse consequences for urban Americans’ mobility cannot be understood only as a result of people “voting with their feet” (e.g., “white flight”). Nor is it merely the consequence of “the car,” which has had little power on its own to change residential choices. Intentionally or not, federal transportation policy has contributed to urban–suburban partisan polarization and urban–suburban inequality. By enabling Republicans’ (or groups likely to become Republicans’) flight to the suburbs, highways facilitated the geographic polarization of Democrats and Republicans in American metropolitan areas. This polarization has had substantial consequences for public policy attitudes and, specifically, in how transportation policy (whether pertaining to highways, mass transit, or trains) is implemented in American communities.

I center my narrative on partisan politics in order to focus on two outcomes. First, I am concerned with why the Republican Party became almost entirely a nonurban party whose voters are increasingly opposed to urban investment. Second, I am concerned with the extent to which the resulting polarized political geography has become increasingly central in the creation of policies that create and maintain metropolitan inequality and urban disinvestment. While public policy’s influence on urban and suburban development has been appeared in other (often classic) works (e.g., Jackson, 1985; Fogelson, 1993, 2001; Hayden, 2003), the consequences of these policies for the *political* development of suburbs often appear as an afterthought, or is taken as a given. Partisan geography has been treated as a mere

epiphenomenon of urban and suburban sprawl. But political interests in suburbia do not arise solely from the *pocketbook*, or material, interests of suburbanites. As I show, the idea of a reified “suburban interest” expressing itself in suburban bloc voting on specific policy issues has little support in survey and electoral data. When differences on transportation policy questions do emerge, they are often expressed through *partisan* disagreement. Nor can the policy attitudes of the suburbs be seen as a mere product of white flight and racial segregation. Rather, partisanship – and the geography of partisanship – are increasingly salient to the politics of mobility in metropolitan areas.

The automobile-dependent Atlanta metropolitan area – including Newt Gingrich’s Cobb County – is an archetype of the urban–suburban disagreements covered in this book. The central city of Atlanta is a diversifying and Democratic city; around it are fast-growing suburbs that have, until very recently, been tagged as “Newtland” (Balz and Brownstein, 1996). Along with the rest of the suburban South, Cobb County has generally been a bulwark for the Republican Party, which now dominates the region. Like many other then-rural counties around Southern postwar cities, Cobb County was virtually unpopulated in 1960, and like so many other rural counties in the Solid South, voter turnout was low. Kennedy won 61 percent of Cobb County’s 21,000 voters, and only 51 percent of Fulton County’s 109,000 voters. By 2012, Cobb County’s voting electorate had expanded fifteen times over, to 311,000 voters. While the county had diversified racially, it gave 55 percent of those votes to Republican Mitt Romney. By comparison, the more central and urbanized Fulton County, which has grown only by a factor of four over this period (still more than central cities in the Rust Belt), cast 64 percent of its 398,000 votes for Barack Obama. Over fifty-two years, the urban–suburban difference in the partisan vote share nearly doubled.

Many factors contributed to the development of Republican suburbs like Cobb County, and determining which of these factors is most important to partisan change is unlikely to yield any clear answer. But one feature is common to suburban areas like Cobb County: their growth and the political changes that came with that growth were a product of numerous federal investments and policies (Jackson, 1985). In this book, I examine what may be the most important of these policies: the federally financed network of highways that have made possible the development of automobile-dependent and conservative

suburbs. Atlanta is one of many metropolitan areas built around modern highways. Three major Interstate highways intersect in the central city. Such radial highways extending from cities have been the infrastructure around which suburbs – and much of the modern Republican Party – have grown. For example, in Cobb County, completion of Interstate 75 in 1964 facilitated a residential boom driven in part by white flight from Atlanta (Kruse, 2005), as well as in-migration of white professionals from other US regions (Jackson, 1985). Major companies, including Martin Marietta, located their plants and corporate office parks in the “edge cities” (Garreau, 1991) along these expressways. The same suburban voters protesting the “bus line” from Atlanta might very well have been able to reach their jobs throughout the rest of Cobb County and the greater Atlanta area with ease, thanks to roads generously subsidized by the federal government.

Highways have not just facilitated the rise of Republican suburbs; they have also played a role in metropolitan inequality. The poor in Atlanta, as in other sprawling automobile-dependent metropolitan areas, have been spatially disadvantaged, facing more difficult daily commutes because of highway-induced sprawl and underinvestment in transit.¹

Although the political (and specifically partisan) differences between cities and their peripheries have not been unique to the modern era (Glaeser and Ward, 2006), expansion of the federal-aid highway network has coincided with growing urban–suburban *partisan geographic polarization* in metropolitan areas, defined by a growing gap between the two-party vote in cities and their periphery.² By multiple measures, urban–suburban partisan polarization has become especially pronounced in the last fifty to sixty years, doubling since World War II and growing monotonically since 1970. Figure 1.1 presents one measure of such *geographic polarization*, the difference in the Democratic two-party vote between the central county (containing the central city) and other counties in the same Census 2000 metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) (Leip, 2012).³ These data, which are reported for the country as a whole and by region, show that the phenomenon of increased polarization, while most prominent in places like Atlanta, has not been limited to the South.⁴ Similar patterns are observed elsewhere in the Sun Belt and in some non-Southern cities. For example, urban–suburban polarization has grown significantly in the Milwaukee area since the 1950s, much of it occurring through growth along suburban Waukesha County’s I-94

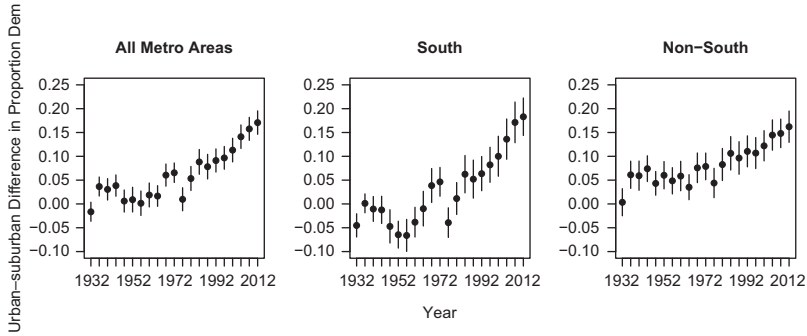


Figure 1.1. Mean metropolitan-level urban-suburban difference in the Democratic presidential vote, 1932–2012, for all metro areas (left), Southern metro areas (center), and non-Southern metro areas (right). Ninety-five percent confidence intervals for the unweighted means accompany each estimate.

Corridor. The national urban-suburban-rural political divide remains as salient as ever across the country. According to the Edison Research 2016 exit polls, rural voters supported Donald Trump by a 62–34 percent margin, while voters in cities of over fifty thousand supported Hillary Clinton by a 59–35 percent margin. Trump narrowly won the suburbs, 50 percent to 45 percent (Huang et al., 2016).

In this book, I show how infrastructure in the form of federally financed highways facilitated this geographic polarization, and what this polarization, in turn, means for the politics of mobility in metropolitan areas. I begin by explaining how transportation infrastructure has been a necessary condition of large-scale suburban growth and partisan change, facilitating migration into rural areas that were previously uninhabited and inaccessible to metropolitan commuters. I show that highways stimulated Republican growth in suburbs in many parts of the country, but especially in high-growth metropolitan areas. Metropolitan areas with more highways become more politically polarized. While infrastructure’s importance to suburban development, population growth, and white flight has been explored elsewhere, my aim here is to offer here the first detailed study of its importance to the development of partisan geography and how partisan geography, in turn, shapes the politics of transportation and mobility in metropolitan areas.

Since the urban-suburban partisan gap has been consequential to numerous aspects of American politics such as legislative redistricting, just showing that highways influence partisan geography could be a

sufficient scholarly discovery (see, e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2009; Rodden, 2010, 2014; Chen and Rodden, 2013). But legislative representation, while important, is only one indirect way that urban–suburban polarization translates into different policy outcomes. I show that urban–suburban partisan polarization interacts with state, local, and regional institutions to bring about more serious *spatial inequality* in American metropolitan areas. Partisan geography matters much more to equality than it might otherwise because of the extensive devolution of policy authority under American federalism. Federalism in transportation planning leaves substantial power in the hands of state and local governments and regional planning bodies – the very level at which geographic polarization is likely to be most visible and pertinent to decision-making.

By focusing on partisanship, I demonstrate why it should be more central to social science scholarship around the phenomenon of white flight and the “new suburban history.” Historical scholarship (Jackson, 1985, Ch. 15) has implied that federal policies have created issue publics rooted in suburban economic and policy interests, making the problem of “automobile dependency” an important consideration. As I show, the politics of transportation policy are not quite so tidily polarized or rooted in the naively constructed understanding self-interest of urban, suburban, and rural residents. Americans across the political spectrum have in fact become increasingly dependent on cars for their daily activities, with the number of vehicle registrations rising rapidly across the postwar era (Jones, 2008). Growing cohorts of automobilists might, as a result, be expected to demand additional roadbuilding. Similarly, among the mostly poor and elderly Americans without automobile access, one might expect to see much higher support for transit. Other scholarship on suburbia has suggested that “suburban” interests may reflect little more than white interest in protecting and maintaining neighborhoods (McGirr, 2001; Kruse, 2005; Hayward, 2013). Newt Gingrich’s opposition to the “bus line” running into the suburbs could reasonably be interpreted as a statement of just that sort of “defensive localism” by white suburbanites (Weir, 1996).

While race and economic interest are deeply connected with partisanship, survey data show that partisan identity has become associated with support for policies designed to support urban mobility, even after accounting for respondents’ race, income, and place of residence. These policy attitudes do not fit the stereotypes of prohighway

suburbanites and antihighway urbanites, They do show that partisans disagree over whether to spend money on *alternatives* to highways. On surveys, both Republicans and Democrats have expressed strong support for building and funding highways, and this support does not appear to be driven only by naive economic self-interest (as captured by regular use of highways or vehicle mileage). Even urban voters have been generally supportive of highway spending, perhaps because they are, according to survey data reported in Chapter 4, *more* likely than rural voters to use an expressway, or because they do not see the harm of investing in widely used highways.⁵ When Republicans and Democrats do disagree over transportation, partisanship appears to be as strong an explanation as race, income, or density of place of residence.

While one must be careful not to read too much from regression analyses of survey questions asked about unfamiliar or low-salience policies (Converse, 1970; Bartels, 2003), one reason for growing partisan disagreement on transportation policy may be the transmission of important signals from party elites to both elected officials and the engaged partisan public. Among party activists (whose views are often injected into party platforms), the partisan fissure over transportation policy has been especially pronounced. For example, while the Democratic Party platform has featured a pro-urban and pro-density approach to transportation and urban planning, the 2012 and 2016 Republican platforms accused the Democrats of pro-urban “social engineering” (Republican Party, 2012, 2016). In short, what seem to be growing differences over transportation policy are manifesting in a more pronounced way among engaged partisans.

These growing partisan differences might be expected to influence the behavior of responsive partisan officials. Yet these partisan differences among voters and activists have been slow to translate into policy change, at least at the federal level: highway bills have maintained approximately the same distribution of funding for highways and highway alternatives (such as transit) for about forty years. And, importantly, almost all of this funding is distributed in the form of matching funds to state governments, where local biases determine project allocation.⁶ Even as the federal government has become more involved in transportation, decisions over the distribution of transportation funding are still largely made by state and local governments, as they have since the earliest days of the Republic (Weingast and Wallis, 2005). Formula-allocated

federal surface transportation funds are delivered to state and local governments. This is the very level at which the geographic distribution of partisans and their preferences is likely to matter most. The longstanding devolution of transportation programs to state and local institutions exposes policy to a host of local biases, including those arising from the urban–suburban partisan geographic divide.⁷

Why Examine Highways' Role in Geographic Polarization?

This book begins by demonstrating the federal highway program's role in the polarization of metropolitan areas, and the implications of this polarization for the subsequent development of American transportation policy. Since 1916, the federal government has delivered federal matching funds to states to build rural roads, major intercity routes, and the expressways of the Interstate Highway System. By influencing Americans' residential choices and changing the geographic distribution of increasingly ideological partisans, the federal highway program has created new, more polarized communities. As highways have made metropolitan areas more polarized, they have introduced conflict over an array of distributive and redistributive policies, with transportation policy being one of the most important. In the process, highways have also created political conditions that have worsened urban–suburban *spatial inequality*.⁸

To explain exactly why metropolitan areas have become polarized, one would need to consider many separate and sometimes mutually dependent causes. Instead of attempting to identify the “causes of effects,” offering a survey of all the contributing factors to suburbanization and urban-suburban polarization, here I aim to focus on the “effects of causes” (Holland, 1988). While urban–suburban polarization has had many causes, ample reason exists to estimate highways' effect on American metropolitan areas' political geography. To identify highways' effects, I examine the Interstate Highway System, which dwarfed previous federal investments in highways. Since passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, the federal highway program has been a massive spatial intervention that remade American metropolitan areas. However, until now, social scientists especially have treated it mostly as historical background to the major demographic and political changes in metropolitan areas across the postwar period. Despite

their enormous scale – the federal government has spent in excess of \$1 trillion in present-day dollars on highway grants to state governments since 1957 – highways and other transportation infrastructure usually receive only passing mention in political science research on residential segregation and urban–suburban inequality.⁹ One reason for the neglect is that infrastructure's influence over suburban development is seen as common sense. Indeed, some effects of highways, such as their direct effects on mobility and their less direct effects on suburban development, may seem “ex post obvious.” But the specific mechanisms by which highways have influenced the political development of American metropolitan areas have rarely been developed in political science research, at least beyond this basic intuition.¹⁰

Unlike impacts of other policies that have reshaped the suburbs, highways' effects can be plausibly inferred from both historical and contemporary data. Among the most important reasons for studying the federal highway program is that it has been a massive policy that lends itself to causal analysis. A federal formula-based matching program has subsidized road building on designated federal-aid highways since 1916, beginning with the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916. Over most of this period, across most types of highway mileage, the federal government reimbursed state highway departments building roads by reimbursing half (or more) of construction costs. The program's annual outlays increased greatly under the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which launched the Interstate Highway System as we know it today, created a Highway Trust Fund supported by gas taxes, and covered 90 percent of the cost of Interstate routes (in addition to funding other federal-aid roads). Before passage of the 1956 act, the federal government provided total federal-aid highway funding of only \$6.2 billion per year (in 2016 dollars). This amount leapt to \$20–25 billion by the early 1960s as states quickly built Interstate projects to claim their share of federal funding (United States. Department of Transportation. Federal Highway Administration. Office of Highway Information Management, 1996, HF-210). In brief, the reasons for studying the federal highway program as a central cause of suburbanization and polarization of metropolitan areas are threefold: it has been a large-magnitude intervention, it is a clear case of devolved federal policy interacting with political geography within states, and, finally, the highway program lends itself to careful causal analysis in ways that other federal policies do not.

The Federal Highway Program Is a Massive Spatial Intervention

A key reason to be concerned with the federal highway program's political effects is the program's sheer magnitude. Especially after passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, generous aid drawn from the Highway Trust Fund helped to create what was to be, at the time, the largest public works project in history.¹¹ Between 1957 and 2010, the Highway Trust Fund disbursed over \$1.4 trillion (in 2010 dollars) to state highway and transportation departments (Williamson, 2012, 12).¹² Federal highway dollars go to different classes of highways in the federal-aid system, but the Interstate program alone had a huge impact on American geography and American life. Interstates required excavation of 42 billion tons of dirt, the equivalent of 116 Panama Canal projects (McNichol, 2006, 126). Making room for Interstates also required clearing urban neighborhoods, such that the localized damage wrought by the project was immense. In the process of creating the highway right-of-way urban communities, Interstates displaced a roughly estimated one million persons, often in poor and ethnically and racially diverse neighborhoods (Mikulski, 1970; Mohl, 1993; Mohl, 2002, 2). Since Interstate highways have become a commonplace feature of daily life, their behavioral effects have been as extensive: Americans today drive more than 750 billion vehicle-miles per year on Interstate highways, and through 2014 had cumulatively driven 32 trillion vehicle miles (Cox and Love, 1996, 5; United States. Department of Transportation. Research and Innovative Technologies Administration's Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2017). The federal-aid highway program has not just been a major construction program, but a major presence in Americans' daily life.

The Federal Highway Program Reveals the Challenges of Policy Federalism

The magnitude of the highway program is reason enough to study its wide-ranging effects, but the program's institutional design has also been important to the creation of both metropolitan geography and the geographically contingent political institutions that are sensitive to polarized political geography. The federal-aid highway program put implementation of federal transportation policy goals in the hands