

Recent scholarship highlights the importance of the state in the facilitation of gentrification and the pricing-out of communities of color. While scholars have studied the impact of gentrification on myriad social outcomes, little attention has been paid to the role of law and policy in these processes (Thorpe 2021). This relative inattention has consequently left us with little insight into how processes of gentrification structure residents' relationship to the state. This project will explore that relationship by leveraging administrative voting records that allow me to follow individuals in Atlanta, Georgia, over a 10-year period. I will use these records to both explore migratory patterns in the face of gentrification, and engagement with local democracy as proxied by participation in mayoral elections.

Gentrification as a State Practice

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, decades of white flight and urban disinvestment reversed as Americans began moving back to some urban areas. Increased capital investments formed an important part of this back-to-the-city movement. As highly-educated and highly-compensated Americans sought to live in cities such as San Francisco and New York, communities that had been marginalized (both economically and physically) for a generation or more found themselves residing in areas with increasing potential value. As Samuel Stein argues in *Capital City* (2019), financial capitalists recognized the mismatch between the current and potential income being produced in urban neighborhoods. He explains: "Real estate speculators choose to invest in a particular location because they identify a gap between the rents that land currently offers and the potential future rents it might command if some action were taken" (Stein 2019, 49). Stein argues, however, that gentrification is at heart a political issue; it cannot transpire without the state clearing the way for investors to exploit that value gap. Smith (2002, 441, emphasis added) makes this point even more explicitly: "By the end of the twentieth century," he writes, "*gentrification fueled by a concerted and systematic partnership of public planning with public and private capital* had moved into the vacuum left by the end of liberal urban policy."

The state, then, is inherently involved in the gentrification of American cities. State (in)action led to under-investment in these neighborhoods in the 20th century, and state action is now paving the way for private interests to capitalize on that history. And yet, the existing work on gentrification has largely ignored how—or whether—residents hold the state accountable for their changed life circumstances. Scholars have instead focused on the non-state consequences of gentrification, asking questions primarily about whether gentrification leads to displacement (Hwang and Ding 2020), how it affects education (Keels, Burdick–Will, and Keene 2013), whether it increases employment (Meltzer and Ghorbani 2017), its effects on crime (Papachristos et al. 2011), and other matters. While these questions have clear merit, understanding whether residents turn to the ballot to contest gentrification is of key importance given the role of the state in its mechanics.

Political Threat

Throughout sociological and political science literature runs the notion of governmental or policy threat: namely, when individuals feel that they or a group to which they belong are being targeted by government policy, they can be mobilized (Tam Cho, Gimpel, and Wu 2006). Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013, 897) explain: "The more people feel that interests of the group and/or principles that the group values are threatened, the angrier they are and the more

they are prepared to take part in protest to protect their interests and principles and/or to express their anger.” Almeida (2018) characterizes these threats from the state as “rights eroding,” noting that threats to abortion and welfare programs often spur citizens to take action. Central to this mobilization is the understanding that group-level processes are at work: Piven and Cloward (1979) and Schlozman and Verba (1979), for instance, document how workers become politically engaged when they understand their unemployment as a widespread phenomenon that demands collective government response and not an individual failure.

Zepeda-Millán (2016) offers key insight into how even “unconventional” political actors can be mobilized to participate under certain circumstances. He uses the case of Latinos in Fort Myers, Florida, to demonstrate these processes. In 2006, Americans across the country took to the streets to protest *The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005* (H.R. 4437), widely considered to be discriminatory toward Latinos. The bill sought to change the penalty for being an undocumented immigrant from a misdemeanor to a felony, and to provide vast new resources for border enforcement. Zepeda-Millán (2016, 270) shows how neighborhood context and the cultivation of shared Latino identities led “unconventional political actors—from local soccer league players and nannies to farmworkers and ethnic entrepreneurs—to utilize pre-existing neighborhood assets for the purpose of immigrant mass mobilization.”

Betancur (2002) explores how these processes play out in the context of West Town (a collection of neighborhoods in Chicago) in the early 1990s and 2000. Betancur notes that, “Concerned about improving the tax base, city hall did all it could to promote gentrification.” Ultimately, “A crucial element at work in West Town was public-sector support for the processes and institutions that made use of public powers of social control to make life miserable for minority low-income residents” (806). Betancur argues that the state’s role in gentrification was contested politically through both institutional and non-institutional means. Gentrification was a major issue in alderman elections in 1999, following the splitting of the area into 4 wards in the aftermath of the 1989 census. But Betancur also shows how the political process took shape in non-institutional spaces as well: “Puerto Ricans made great advances in controlling local schools, getting local institutions (e.g., hospitals and churches) to pay attention to their needs and cultural and economic realities, promoting community identity and pride, and gaining respect from political forces” (802).

Similarly, Martin (2007) shows how communities in Atlanta, Georgia, resist political displacement in the face of gentrification. Worried about the rising numbers of newcomers to their neighborhoods, long-term residents created or invested in organizations to represent their interests. Martin describes how new and existing residents of the Bellevue neighborhood struggled for the upper political hand: “For seven years, long-time residents and new residents engaged each other in a series of bitter conflicts over political influence. Through separate organizations, they challenged each other about new neighborhood amenities such as a neighborhood library, a grocery store, and streetscaping in the neighborhood business district. They also sparred over valid means to control crime in the neighborhood, over appropriate neighborhood leadership, and even over the process of gentrification itself” (616). It is clear that, at least under certain circumstances, long-term residents in gentrifying neighborhoods are able to organize politically—in an electoral sense or otherwise—to contest the gentrification process.

Social Cohesion

While the policy threat literature indicates that gentrification might *increase* engagement with the state as a community feels itself threatened by the state and by real estate capital, other work indicates that gentrification could *erode* it by undermining social solidarity within a neighborhood. Social ties, which political scientists are central to political and electoral participation, are apparently weaker in gentrifying / gentrified neighborhoods. Gentrification can reduce the strength of local churches (Holmes 2020); the same is true of local businesses (Zukin et al. 2009). These are the sorts of places where social capital is built; it is perhaps unsurprising, then, Newman, Velez, and Pearson-Merkowitz (2016, 340) concludes that “gentrification ‘loosens’ the social fabric of black communities” and results in lower trust in neighbors and lower reported political engagement, although they recognize the need for “longitudinal and experimental research designs,” which their work lacks (341). Similarly, Betancur (2011) traces the dissolution of social network and local institutions in Latino communities in Chicago undergoing gentrification. Gentrification clearly poses a serious threat to the social capital long associated with higher civic participation and may thus lead to lower turnout.

The Case of Atlanta

In the fall of 2021, Atlantans elected Andre Dickens as their new mayor. While the mayoral race dealt with many issues, a central one was gentrification. Local papers such as *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Capelouto, DiRico, and Perry 2021) wrote articles in the months leading up the election examining how gentrification could shape the race, while scholars and journalists alike have noted how redevelopment plans and public infrastructure have contributed to gentrification in the city (e.g. Immergluck and Balan 2018; Ashly 2020).

Atlanta also uniquely lends itself to voter file analysis. As discussed in greater depth below, I rely in this study on voter file records to both identify where individuals move and to track their political participation. This necessarily means that I can only observe the behavior of individuals who are registered to vote, a condition that leaves me incapable of following noncitizens through time. Atlanta, however, has a relatively small noncitizen population: according to the Census Bureau, some 94% of the city’s population 18 years and older are citizens, contrasting with a median of 90% for the country’s 50 largest municipalities.

Data and Methods

This study primarily leverages administrative voter file records both to identify residents’ political engagement and to track their residential mobility over time. In all but one state in the nation, voters are required to register prior to casting a ballot. These records include information including the voter’s date of birth; their gender; their address; and, in eight states including Georgia, their self-identified race. Importantly, these files also include unique voter identification numbers that remain constant across time, even when voters move from one county to another. Using near-annual snapshots of these files between 2010 and 2020 (which I geocoded using the Texas A&M Geocoding Service) I follow residents of Atlanta across time and space.

It is worth noting that the use of the registered voter file marks an important step forward in rigor of our understanding of residential moves in the face of gentrification. In 2010, just shy of a half-million individuals were registered to vote in Atlanta. Such a large sample dwarfs other recent studies. Hwang and Ding (2020), for instance, uses the credit records of 50,000 residents of

Philadelphia. My sample is thus 10 times as large as theirs—despite the fact that Philadelphia is triple the size of Atlanta. By no means does this undercut the importance of the data used in Hwang and Ding (2020); their analysis of household debt and mortgages provides tremendous insight into the financial implications of gentrification. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the voter file data provide an unparalleled look at residential mobility patterns.

I will primarily use difference-in-differences models to test the causal effect of gentrification on participation in local politics. I will begin by identifying all individuals living in *potentially gentrifying* or *gentrifiable* neighborhoods in 2010. Voters will be considered “treated” if their neighborhood gentrifies over the 2010–2020 period; they will be “controls” otherwise. Various methods such as entropy balancing and genetic matching will be used to ensure that the treated and control voters mirror one another along key characteristics, including past turnout. These treated and control voters will allow me to measure whether voters who leave gentrified neighborhoods participate at different rates than those who leave neighborhoods that were similar in 2010 but did not gentrify; and whether remaining behind in a gentrified neighborhood shapes participation relative to voters who remained in neighborhoods that did not gentrify. Secondary analyses will also contribute to the gentrification and mobility literature by comparing the destination neighborhoods of individuals who left gentrified neighborhoods relative to those who left neighborhoods that did not gentrify.

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