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Mapping political geography

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In 1927, Carl Sauer claimed Political Geography was the “wayward child of the geographic family” whose relationship to geography was difficult to determine (Hartshorne, 1950, pp. 96–97). Though Hartshorne would argue in 1950 that Political Geography had made tremendous strides predicated on the wake of World War II and the rising power of the State encapsulated by the forthcoming “Cold War” and compulsions toward the study of regional geography.

Today, Flint and Taylor (2018) describe political geography as a small sub-discipline with big subject matter (1). Political geography has moved from distinctly regional approaches and a strict adherence to study the State, to a multifaceted sub-discipline with interests across numerous scales and topics. Due to this diversity, methodological approaches to the study of political geography have made defining the discipline even more difficult. Yet, one consistent thread in political geography remains, the map.

The simplest purpose of maps aided others in understanding where places were, but maps would be key in the development of the modern state. Demarcation of not only international boundaries were aided by cartography, so to would be maps that identified sub-national and local boundaries and would eventually be used in identifying property owned by individuals. Outside of borders, access to additional information allowed cartographers to map election results, identify administrative and political districts, and display change across numerous scales. As technology advanced, the use of computers and imagery only enhanced the importance of maps and their ties to understanding political geography.

The key inflexion point in cartography that has had the greatest influence upon politics is the change in technology. The Journal of Maps has published numerous maps focused on a variety of political topics over the years. Yet, mapping political geography has transcended well beyond traditional approaches and new work, like Kenneth Field’s Thematic Mapping (2022) is demonstrating how changes in methodology

and advancement in technology can aid in the advancement of political geography.

This special issue includes six papers, addressing issues in migration and borders, topics in electoral geography, redistricting, and the environment. The purpose of this issue is to provide examples of how maps continue to play a vital role in studying politics, as well as how new technologies and methodologies can also be used for studying political geography. These goals were accomplished using topics across the globe to address both traditional topics such as migration and electoral geography, but also demonstrating how new approaches and tools can enhance the study of similar topics.

Ichim and Mantuano (2024) provide a temporal and contextual analysis of elections in Italy to examine impacts of voter turnout tied to changes in electoral districts. This paper utilizes an extensive statistical analysis for voter turnout tied to Italian parliamentary elections. The quantitative analysis of temporal results is highlighted by the maps that demonstrate distinct regional variations in electoral participation in Italian parliamentary elections.

Artelaris et al. (2024) also examine electoral geography, but instead of studying direct voting results, the authors analyze citizens that did not turn out to vote, a study made possible by compulsory voting. This topic - called electoral abstention - has rarely been studied. The resulting maps combine mapping electoral abstentions with measures of spatial autocorrelation that identify distinct patterns of electoral abstention across the Grecian Parliamentary landscape.

In a unique study, Merino et al. (2024) combine remote sensing to analyze factors related to human development throughout federal districts in Brazil. Specifically, this study examines changes to land cover using Landsat imagery to assess changes to population, the Human Development Index (HDI), and unemployment rates. The resulting analyses identify clear spatial patterns related to development of specific federal districts.

The boundary between Portugal and Spain has seen little change since the Treaty of Alcañices in 1297. This unique boundary provides the backdrop for Cairo et al. (2024) to study several patterns between the two counties. This border, known as “La Raya”, is seemingly non-existent. Cairo et al. analysis provides a traditional approach to the study of political geography, specifically population and elections and identifies “La Raya” as an excellent example for other European countries with seemingly non-existent borders could adopt to address immigration.

Redistricting continues to be a contentious issue. In the United States all fifty states are responsible for establishing redistricting criteria. Subia (2024) provides a differing approach to understanding redistricting by examining qualitative responses. The resulting maps show how public input helped Colorado’s first independent and participatory redistricting process create the state’s 8th Congressional District.

The availability of geospatial data, via the Internet, has provided a multitude of options for research. Weichelt’s (2024) article provides several methods for scraping data from the Internet to provide support in the courtroom for Native American communities facing discriminatory voter disenfranchisement laws. This support was accompanied with a set of maps that identified locations of communities in relation to postal routes and the lack of direct access many Native American’s living on Reservations have using the post office for mailing voting ballots. This contestation of political space provided the backdrop of how maps can be helpful in courtrooms to address such political issues, such as voter disenfranchisement.

Overall, this set of articles provides examples of the development of unique methods used to examine political geography. This was especially true with Merino et al. using remote sensing, Weichelt’s approach to web scrapping to aid in mapping, and Subia’s use of interviews to explore redistricting. We hope these examples both encourage the use of similar techniques and inspire additional ways to use maps to study political geography.

We would like to thank the many reviewers of these articles. Their quick responses, and sometimes, additional reviews are greatly appreciated. We would

also like to thank the authors. Their unique perspectives and willingness to accept feedback made this special issue special. The hope is to encourage more political geographers to incorporate maps into their research. Additionally, a special thank you to Mike Smith for his support. This was a long process, and he was even willing to have meetings while on Holiday! Thank you, Mike, for all your help!

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