

The Impact of Gentrification on Voter Turnout*

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Objective. The goal of this article is to test between two competing theories (mobilization vs. destabilization) about the impact of gentrification on political participation. *Methods.* Using geographic information systems (GIS) software, Census data from 1990 and 2000, and a voter file for the City of Atlanta, we estimate a multilevel model of voter turnout. *Results.* Controlling for relevant individual and contextual factors, we find that gentrification decreases turnout among longstanding residents. *Conclusions.* Our findings provide support for the destabilization hypothesis and suggest that policymakers should develop strategies to soften the negative consequences of gentrification.

From the pages of scholarly journals to the streets of inner cities, gentrification generates considerable debate. Researchers have questioned the extent of gentrification (Henig, 1980), characterizing revitalized neighborhoods as “islands of renewal in seas of decay” (Berry, 1985), and chronicled the “resurgence of gentrification” in contemporary urban America (Wyly and Hammel, 1999). Scholars have debated the causes of gentrification, focusing on the consumer demand for in-town living (Ley, 1981) and the supply of uneven development in cities (London, Lee, and Lipton, 1986).

To some, gentrification epitomizes needed revitalization in the inner city, while to others gentrification represents destruction of longstanding communities. Critics of gentrification are particularly troubled by fears that existing residents on fixed incomes may be pushed out by higher housing costs, increased property taxes, and higher monthly rents. Gentrification can lead to racial tension if residents of one ethnic group displace longstanding residents of another group.

Although scholars have debated the magnitude, causes, and consequences of gentrification, there has been surprisingly little research on its political effects. In this article, we explore the impact of gentrification on voter turnout. We begin by discussing the importance context can play in an

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individual's decision whether to vote. Then, we consider gentrification as a contextual effect and generate theoretical expectations about the impact of gentrification on voter turnout.

Context and Voter Turnout

To participate or not to participate in a political activity like voting is an individual-level decision. Political scientists model this decision primarily as a cost-benefit analysis: a person will vote when the costs are outweighed by the benefits that accrue from the favored candidate winning discounted by the probability of having an impact on the outcome combined with the "satisfaction" of performing one's civic duty (Aldrich, 1993).

A second line of research shows that social context will also affect an individual's decision whether to vote. For example, a person with a relatively low level of education who interacts with highly educated neighbors is more likely to vote than if he or she had neighbors of the same education level (Verba and Nie, 1972). Studies have also demonstrated empirically that "people who talk together vote together" (Pattie and Johnston, 2000:41). This idea of context is particularly important for our study because we theorize that contextual effects related to gentrification will influence an individual's decision whether to vote.

To investigate these effects, we differentiate between longstanding residents and new residents, as well as between the effects of individual-level and contextual variables. At the individual level, we expect new residents would be less likely to vote because of fewer community connections and the burdens associated with adjusting to a new environment (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). We should note, however, that Laska and Spain (1979) found greater levels of political participation among New Orleans gentrifiers, which they attribute to these new residents' higher social status. In terms of contextual effects, we argue that new residents, who have fewer ties to the "old" neighborhood, should be less sensitive to gentrification.

We believe neighborhoods are the appropriate context to evaluate the impact of gentrification on voting decisions for three reasons. First, the dynamics of gentrification are most often discussed in the context of specific neighborhoods. Second, neighborhoods are important arenas for political participation: neighborhood organizations shape policies on a wide range of issues, including zoning, public safety, and education. Finally, neighborhoods provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction between citizens, helping to facilitate collaboration, overcome self-interest, and lead to policy outcomes based on the common good (Berry, Portney, and Thomson, 1993).

The contextual effects literature provides important clues about the dynamics of gentrifying neighborhoods. In the next section, we use this

literature and the research on gentrification to develop expectations about the impact of gentrification on voter turnout.

Gentrification as a Contextual Effect

A review of the literature leads to two conflicting predictions about the impact of gentrification on voter turnout. Some evidence suggests that gentrification may lead to increased turnout among longstanding residents. For example, Robinson (1995) documented increasing grassroots activism in response to gentrification pressures in San Francisco's Tenderloin. We also know that turnout is higher in more affluent areas and that "people who are surrounded by more participators (i.e., the educated and affluent) feel more social pressure and are given more opportunities to participate themselves" (Oliver, 1999:190). Taken together, these factors suggest a "mobilization hypothesis" indicating that gentrification will lead to greater voter turnout among longstanding neighborhood residents.

However, it may be the case that gentrification decreases political participation levels among longstanding residents. Henig (1982) argues that in contrast to the large-scale urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s, gentrification poses greater difficulties for a united neighborhood response because it is less immediately noticeable and not as geographically specific. Gentrification may also weaken existing neighborhood institutions, such as politically active churches (Calhoun-Brown, 1996) and civic associations (Putnam, 2000), which normally foster political participation. In addition, gentrification may put economic pressure on longstanding residents and studies indicate that economic adversity can suppress political participation (Rosenstone, 1982). The literature also suggests that a lack of political efficacy can decrease electoral participation (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993) and gentrification may generate a level of frustration among longstanding residents that can decrease feelings of political efficacy. In total, these factors suggest a "destabilization hypothesis" where the process of gentrification decreases voter turnout among longstanding neighborhood residents.

Thus, the literature leads to two competing explanations of the impact of gentrification on voter turnout: the mobilization hypothesis and the destabilization hypothesis. We outline a strategy to test between these hypotheses in the section below.

Data and Methods

The Case of Atlanta

We focus on neighborhoods within the City of Atlanta, Georgia, for several reasons. First, Atlanta has identifiable neighborhoods that were

officially recognized as part of the city's charter in 1974. Second, there is considerable racial and economic variation across Atlanta, providing a mix of neighborhoods at various stages of development. Finally, Atlanta neighborhoods experienced enough change between 1990 and 2000 to precipitate creation of a Gentrification Task Force in 2000 by the Atlanta City Council.

We limit our study to Atlanta residential neighborhoods in the bottom 60 percent in terms of 1990 median household income. In keeping with other studies (see Wyly and Hammel, 1998), we exclude higher-income neighborhoods because wealthy neighborhoods cannot gentrify. This leaves 81 of Atlanta's 137 residential neighborhoods for examination in our study.

Measuring Gentrification

There are two major challenges to a quantitative study of neighborhood gentrification. The first stems from the fact that the U.S. Census Bureau does not compute neighborhood-level statistics; scholars typically analyze neighborhood change using tract-level data as a substitute (Ellen and Turner, 1997). However, Census tracts often diverge from traditional neighborhood boundaries; they can (and often do) cut across city limits. Moreover, citizens are much more likely to know what neighborhood they live in and its approximate borders than they are to know the same information about their Census tract. Significant divergences between tract and neighborhood boundaries can cast a shadow over the validity of studies that use tracts to stand in for neighborhoods to describe "context." Cohen and Dawson recognize this problem, conceding that Census tracts "are the best approximation available to us at this time" (1993:288).

We employ GIS tools to overcome this challenge. For example, we identified the neighborhood for our individual voters by geocoding their addresses (match rate = 98 percent) and tagging the individual voters to the appropriate neighborhood. Similarly, we use an overlay procedure to reestimate data from the U.S. Census of Population and Housing to the neighborhood level.

The second challenge is measuring gentrification itself, as there is no single accepted definition of this phenomenon. We therefore draw on several definitions to develop our gentrification measure. Kennedy and Leonard focus on population and household characteristics by defining gentrification as "the process by which higher income households displace lower income residents of a neighborhood, changing the essential character and flavor of that neighborhood" (2001:5). Smith and Williams emphasize housing characteristics, saying that gentrification "refers to the rehabilitation of working-class and derelict housing and the consequent transformation of an area into a middle-class neighborhood" (1986:1). Hamnett (1984) labels gentrification a physical, economic, social, and cultural phenomenon.

Based on the definitions of gentrification and studies verifying the validity of Census indicators (Hammel and Wyly, 1996; Wyly and Hammel, 1998), we select Census variables that capture each of these dimensions. To measure changing population and household characteristics, we include Census measures for percent of new households since 1995, change in percent college graduate (1990–2000), change in percent of persons in professional occupations (1990–2000), change in median household income (1989–1999), and change in percent of persons in poverty (1989–1999). In terms of housing characteristics, we include Census measures for change in median rent (1990–2000), change in housing value (1990–2000), and change in housing units (1990–2000). Finally, drawing on definitions emphasizing the social and cultural aspects of gentrification, we include Census measures of the percent of households with single-sex partners in 2000 and change in percent of persons ages 30–44 (1990–2000). As these factors are closely interrelated as concepts and highly correlated as variables, we utilize a principal-components model to extract a single measure of gentrification.

Because racial change sometimes accompanies gentrification and certainly increases its visibility, the two are often conflated in the popular press. Like Hammel and Wyly (1996), we do not use racial change as a component of our gentrification measures. From a theoretical standpoint, we consider gentrification to be primarily a matter of class and not racial change. To be sure, race and class are correlated in the United States, and both gentrification and decline are much more visible when the racial makeup of the neighborhood changes as well. But, as we discuss below, there are instances of “black on black” as well as “white on white” gentrification occurring in Atlanta. We believe that the difference between mere “revitalization” and “gentrification” is when property values and rents rise to the point that longstanding residents are pushed out of the neighborhood because they can no longer afford the rents or the property taxes. As a validity check, we examine the bivariate correlation between our gentrification measure and the change in percent black from 1990–2000. With a Pearson’s r of 0.150 ($p = 0.178$) we conclude that omitting this variable is appropriate.

A Multilevel Model

Since our test specifies individual-level characteristics, neighborhood characteristics, and, most importantly, a cross-level interaction between the two, a multilevel model is in order. Because the residents of the same neighborhood react to the same context, they cannot be treated as independent. Thus, using standard logistic regression would violate the assumption of uncorrelated errors, leading to biased hypothesis tests (Steenbergen and Jones, 2002). We therefore use the generalized linear latent and mixed model procedure (gllamm) (Rabe-Hesketh, Pickles, and Taylor, 2000) with the logit link. We report Huber/White/Sandwich robust standard errors to

account for the possibility of correlation and heteroskedasticity within clusters.

Level 1: Individuals. The dependent variable for our study is whether an individual voted in the 2001 mayoral election in the City of Atlanta. These data come from the city's voter file, which also contains information on race, gender, date of birth, and date of registration of each voter. Because older voters tend to vote at higher rates (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993), we included a variable for the *age* of each voter on Election Day. The 2001 Atlanta mayoral election had three black candidates, including a black female candidate, so we included dummy variables for *black* voters and *female* voters to capture the potential benefits to blacks and women of electing Atlanta's first African-American female. In keeping with our expectation that longstanding voters are more likely to vote regardless of the level of gentrification in the neighborhood, we include a dummy variable, *longstanding voters*, for residents registered to vote before 1995. Because we cannot differentiate between young residents who recently moved into a neighborhood and longstanding residents who simply achieved voting age while living in the neighborhood, we drop those under age 25 from the analysis (16,383 cases or 5.8 percent of our sample).

Level 2: Neighborhoods. In addition to the *gentrification* variable, three additional contextual factors deserve mention. Neighborhoods with greater levels of homeownership should have a greater sense of community investment; we measure *homeownership* as the percentage of owner-occupied housing units. In accordance with Verba and Nie's (1972) argument that interacting with educated people will increase a person's likelihood of voting, we expect individuals living in neighborhoods with higher education levels will be more likely to vote. We measure *college* as the percentage of residents of the neighborhood age 25 and over who are college graduates. Finally, we expect that neighborhoods with a strong organizational presence will better weather gentrification. We geocoded entities found in the city's official *Directory of Neighborhood Organizations* and assigned each to its respective neighborhood. To control for the size of the neighborhood, *organization* is measured as the number of neighborhood organizations per 1,000 population.

Cross-Level Interaction. In keeping with the logic discussed above, we expect that gentrification will influence voter turnout for longstanding residents of a neighborhood but not for new residents. We therefore include an interaction term between our dummy variable for longtime resident and our

gentrification measure (*longstanding voters* \times *gentrification*) for the neighborhood in which that person resides.

Results

Race, Class, and Gentrification in Atlanta

Before turning to our model of voter turnout, we discuss the spatial characteristics of our gentrification measure in relation to race and class in Atlanta. Despite Atlanta's growing reputation as a progressive city, racial segregation remains an important characteristic of its neighborhoods. In fact, Atlanta has been characterized as one of the most segregated cities in the United States (Massey and Denton, 1993).

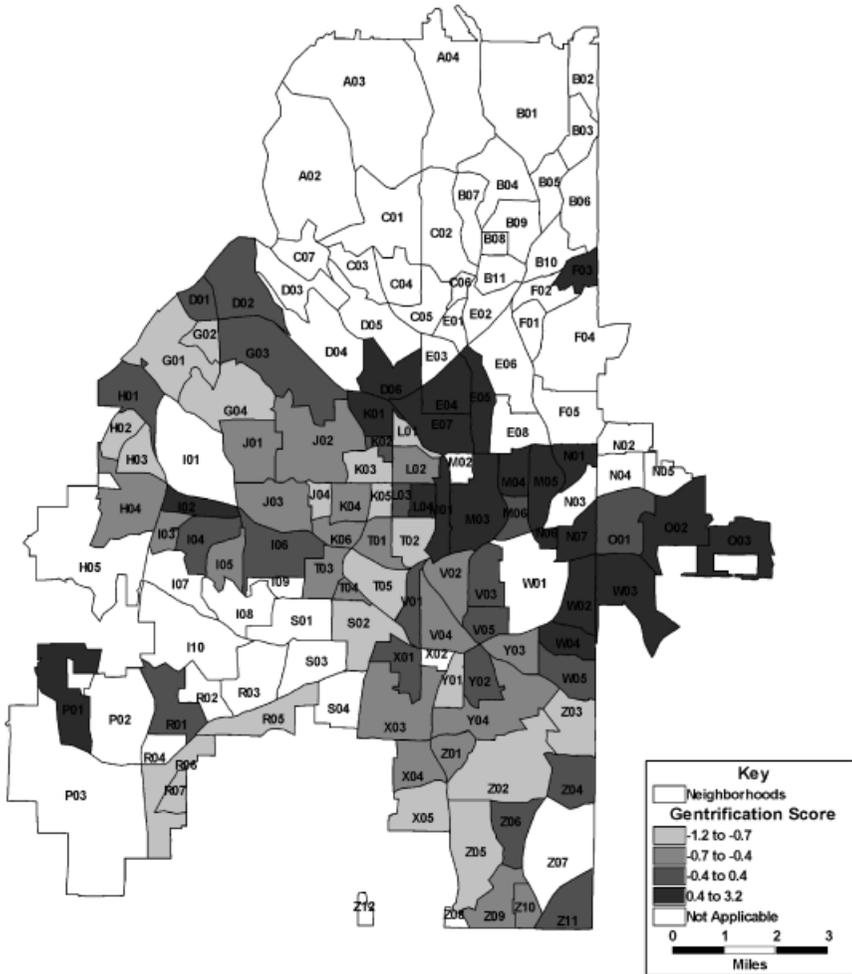
In general, white residents live in northern Atlanta and black residents live in southern and western Atlanta and over 90 percent of residents are of the same race in 73 of the 137 residential neighborhoods. In addition to racial segregation, there is also considerable economic segregation in Atlanta. For example, 78 of 137 neighborhoods have more than 20 percent of residents living in poverty, and 25 of 137 Atlanta neighborhoods have greater than 40 percent of residents living in poverty. Geographically, north and some southwestern Atlanta neighborhoods have low levels of poverty, while central and southeastern Atlanta neighborhoods have high levels of poverty.

Despite this racial and economic segregation, it is important to note that race and poverty do not necessarily go hand-in-hand in Atlanta. The city's large number of middle- and upper-income African-American neighborhoods is unique. In fact, southwest Atlanta has some of the wealthiest black neighborhoods in the United States (Gentry, 2002). Overall, the spatial distributions and patterns of race and income suggest three Atlantas—one is white and affluent (largely neighborhoods in the northern section of the city), one is poor and black (largely neighborhoods adjacent or near the central business district on the east, south, west, and northwest), and one is black and affluent (west and southwest).

Like those in many cities, Atlanta neighborhoods underwent substantial economic change between 1990 and 2000. Revitalization of low-income neighborhoods was facilitated by several factors, including strong economic conditions, increased traffic congestion and a desire for in-town living, the emergence of neighborhood-based community development organizations, and construction associated with the Centennial Olympic Games in 1996.

Figure 1 illustrates the level of gentrification across Atlanta neighborhoods using our gentrification scale. The map demonstrates that neighborhoods with the highest levels of gentrification were located in central and eastern Atlanta. Neighborhoods in southern and western Atlanta experienced less gentrification.

FIGURE 1
Gentrification by Neighborhood, 1990–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau (1990, 2000).

Gentrification brought controversy to some Atlanta neighborhoods during the 1990s. For example, in Kirkwood neighborhood (O2), with a gentrification score of 0.607, a white gay couple won a 1997 lawsuit against black neighbors for allegedly running a crack house. In April 1998, the couple received a death threat that was attached to a rock thrown through their car window, and the next month, Reverend Amos Moore distributed a flier to black Kirkwood residents urging them to attend a meeting about gentrification. In part the flyer read: “Save our neighborhood. If you are concerned about the ‘white takeover’ of Kirkwood, come meet . . . to discuss

how we can put an end to the homosexual takeover of our community. Kirkwood concerned black neighbors” (Schrade, 1998). City officials brought the sides together to mediate the dispute, and tensions were eventually resolved.

However, racial tensions were not evident in every case of gentrification in Atlanta. The Old Fourth Ward neighborhood (M5) had a high gentrification score of 0.799, and although whites moved to the Old Fourth Ward between 1990 and 2000, longtime residents have been active participants in the Historic District Development Corporation, a neighborhood CDC.

In addition, an invasion of whites did not accompany gentrification in every Atlanta neighborhood. For example, the Florida Heights neighborhood (I6) had a high gentrification score of 0.340, but the percent black decreased modestly from 99 percent in 1990 to 94 percent in 2000. Racial change in the Cabbagetown neighborhood (N6) was even more unique. Originally settled by mill workers from Appalachia, Cabbagetown underwent considerable changes as developers converted its abandoned Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill to loft apartments (Eckstein, 2000). The influx of new residents resulted in a high gentrification score of 2.38, and the black population increased from 13 percent in 1990 to 32 percent in 2000.

The Impact of Gentrification on Voter Turnout

We now turn to the results of our multilevel model to evaluate the impact of gentrification on voter turnout in Atlanta. The first column in Table 1 reports the coefficients for our individual-, neighborhood-, and cross-level interaction variables. The final column in Table 1 displays the change in predicted probability for moving from the lowest to the highest value of the respective independent variable, holding each other variable at its mean or mode.

Examining the estimates for our individual-level variables, our findings indicate that women were significantly more likely to vote than men, older residents voted at significantly higher levels than younger residents, and race did not have a significant influence on turnout. Of particular interest to our study, we discover that controlling for gender, age, and race, longstanding voters are more much more likely to vote irrespective of gentrification.

In terms of our neighborhood-level variables, we find that high levels of homeownership are conducive to increased turnout. Although in the expected direction, the impact of college is not statistically significant. Organizations in a neighborhood also have a positive impact on individuals' turnout decisions, showing nearly an 11 percentage point differential between the strongest neighborhood and a neighborhood with no organizations. We also find that gentrification at the neighborhood level does not seem to have any impact on turnout, at least not for new residents.

For our variable of theoretical interest, the cross-level interaction between gentrification and longstanding voters, we see that the effects of gentrification

TABLE 1
The Impact of Gentrification on Voter Turnout

	Coefficient	Standard Error	Z	ρ Value	Δ Probability*
College	0.006	0.005	1.11	0.267	
Homeownership	0.008	0.002	4.46	0.000	0.187
Organization	0.084	0.038	2.22	0.026	0.108
Gentrification	-0.003	0.063	-0.05	0.961	
Black	-0.078	0.126	-0.62	0.533	
Female	0.148	0.025	5.97	0.000	0.037
Age	0.020	0.001	19.22	0.000	0.366
Longstanding voters	1.063	0.032	33.75	0.000	0.246
Longstanding voters × Gentrification	-0.160	0.028	-5.65	0.000	-0.177
Constant	-2.535	0.175	-14.47	0.000	
Number of Level 1 units = 78,991					
Number of Level 2 units = 81					
Percent reduction in error = 18.5					

*Change in probability moving from the minimum to maximum values of the independent variable, holding all other variables at their respective means or modes.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau (1990, 2000); City of Atlanta voter file.

are quite large. Our findings indicate that gentrification has a negative and significant impact on voter turnout for longstanding residents in the City of Atlanta. Indeed, the probability of a longstanding resident voting, holding all other variables at their means or modes, drops from 0.559 in the least gentrified neighborhood to 0.383 in the most gentrified neighborhood. At the same time, the probability of voting among new residents remains flat.

Conclusion

Previous research has not adequately evaluated the political effects of gentrification. Our results indicate that gentrification decreases voter turnout among longstanding residents in the City of Atlanta, providing support for the destabilization hypothesis. Despite Laska and Spain's (1979) argument, we found no evidence that new residents in gentrifying neighborhoods had higher levels of voter turnout. Instead, our results are consistent with the expectations of Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) that participation will lag among new residents lacking community connections.

Our findings also highlight the importance of context for political participation. The decision to participate in politics is not made in a vacuum

and scholars must continue to evaluate the impact of context on the vote calculus. In addition to context, we believe that *contextual change* is another important factor that should be considered. In urban America, changes associated with gentrification can shape the political environment.

These results have important policy implications as well. We suggest that advocates of urban revitalization consider the political consequences of gentrification as well as the economic benefits. Although newly constructed and revitalized houses have aesthetic appeal and generate additional tax revenues for city coffers, the revitalization process does have social and political consequences as well. Our research also shows that the negative effects of gentrification can be ameliorated by neighborhood-level organizations that help preserve the sense of community in a neighborhood and integrate new residents into that community. We suggest that political leaders consider advocating policies that help build and maintain such institutions in gentrifying neighborhoods.

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