WILL SOUTH DAKOTA’S DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS LEAD TO CHANGES IN VOTING BEHAVIOR?
A COUNTY-LEVEL ANALYSIS, 1980-2008

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Public Policy

By
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Washington, DC
April 15, 2010
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ABSTRACT

The concept of generational cycles offers distinctive promise for understanding and thinking strategically about political attitudes and the relative strength and dominance of America’s political parties. As patterns of immigration, urban development, family structure, religion, and other demographic indicators change the landscape of postindustrial America, the merit of anticipating their impacts only increases. The presidential election of 2008 offered an early glimpse of how these transformations are shaping American politics in dynamic ways. Demographic groups like Millennials, nonwhites, college-educated professionals, and the religiously unaffiliated comprised an unprecedented share of the U.S. electorate, and current estimates project these subsets to continue to grow in proportion to other segments of voters. This study explores the utility of a cohort succession model for explaining differentials in voting patterns in South Dakota for each presidential election from 1980 through 2008, while accounting for changes in party registration, education, median age, family structure, race, and religious affiliation. Cohort succession is determined to be a statistically significant and meaningful factor in explaining changes in partisan voting. Shifts in social patterns involving marriage and children are also determined to be closely associated with voting behavior. By seeking to capture both structural and demographic transformations in American society over time and the unique contributions of cohorts as mechanisms of
social change, this study may serve as an exemplar for similar analyses in other states—particularly those in the agricultural Midwest. In addition, because the changing social patterns occurring in South Dakota may prove to be more gradual and subtle than in other states, this work may lend valuable insight into the political implications of demographic shifts nationwide. Indeed, the results of this study hold promise for a better understanding of voting behavior in past elections—and for predicting electoral outcomes in the future.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my sincerest gratitude to so many who helped me along the way in this arduous project. Most of all, I fear I would have been utterly lost were it not for my tireless thesis advisor, Dr. Donna R. Morrison. Her enthusiastic guidance and expertise proved invaluable in every stage of my study, and her dogged determination was vital in the homestretch! I want to profoundly thank Carrie Cushing at the South Dakota Department of Health Policy for supplying me with a wealth of vital statistics data. Likewise, I am indebted to Jacob Cummings of the Rural Life Census Data Center at South Dakota State University. His superlative knowledge of South Dakota demographic data was essential to my research. Thank you to Dr. Robert Burns of South Dakota State University, Dr. Elizabeth Smith of the University of South Dakota, and Steve Jarding. Your key insights into the demographics of South Dakota politics provided me with sound footing as I first set out on this undertaking. I owe a special thanks to Ruy Teixeira—one of the all-time experts in the field of election demographics—for some great words of advice and encouragement. Thank you also to Dr. Clyde Wilcox and Dr. Jonathan M. Ladd of Georgetown University, for taking the time to share your knowledge on public opinion with me. Finally, thank you to Tim Wojan of the Economic Research Service at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for helping me to better understand occupational coding in census data.
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INTRODUCTION

The concept of generational cycles offers distinctive promise for understanding and thinking strategically about political attitudes and the relative strength and dominance of America’s political parties. As patterns of immigration, urban development, family structure, religion, and other demographic indicators change the landscape of postindustrial America, the merit of anticipating their impacts only increases. The presidential election of 2008 offered an early glimpse of how these transformations are shaping American politics in dynamic ways. Demographic groups like Millennials, nonwhites, college-educated professionals, and the religiously unaffiliated comprised an unprecedented share of the U.S. electorate, and current estimates project these subsets to continue to grow in proportion to other segments of voters. And yet, surprisingly few political scientists and strategists appreciate the political reverberations of America’s changing demography.

Beyond the value of these insights for political strategists at the national level, there is much to be gained by identifying and explaining regional differences in voting behavior attributable to population dynamics. Immigration and migration of nonwhites, for instance, affect various locales in vastly different ways, and often lead to dramatic changes in the demographic makeup of an electorate. Some cities and states attract younger cohorts, while older generations are drawn to others. Certain cities and states in the Northeast or the Rust Belt have been more acutely affected by the decline of the American factory than have those in the Great Plains. At the same time, the technological revolution of agricultural methods and practices over the latter half of the
20th Century has produced a ripple effect through the populations of states in America’s heartland, further underscoring the need for a more focused approach.

In this sense, South Dakota may serve as an ideal case study of this sort of demographic and geographic evolution. Almost a polar opposite of a typical battleground state, South Dakota’s three electoral votes render its strategic value virtually negligible to presidential candidates of both major parties. Consequently, any generational or demographic effects I may observe in South Dakota are rather unlikely to be confounded with effects of campaign spending, involvement of outside interest groups, and polarizing issues specific to certain statewide campaigns. Furthermore, though the casual observer may consider the state to be an archetype of constancy, South Dakota has undergone a prolonged and steady condition of rural flight, as residents of farms and small towns have moved to larger towns and cities in search of economic opportunity. Census population estimates from 2000-2005 show Sioux Falls as the fastest-growing city in the Midwest, based on percent increase. South Dakota contains a significant and growing Native American population, and since 2000, has experienced some of the fastest Hispanic growth of any state in the nation. These kinds of demographic changes along with the replacement of older voters with younger ones may presage important long-term shifts in voting trends that may be generalized beyond the state’s boundaries.

The present study explores the utility of a cohort succession model for explaining differentials in voting patterns in South Dakota for each presidential election from 1980 through 2008, while accounting for changes in party registration, education, median age, family structure, race, and religious affiliation. I use published data obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau and other government data sources, both state and federal, to build a
time-series panel data file comprised of county-level indicators for each of South Dakota’s 66 counties across eight presidential elections. Religious affiliation estimates were drawn from a database compiled by the Glenmary Research Center. I classify the electorate in each period according to five groups of birth cohorts: a combination of the two oldest cohorts, the GI Generation and the Silent Generation; Early Baby Boomers; Late Baby Boomers; Generation X; and the Millennial Generation. To account for unobserved heterogeneity across counties I estimate fixed effects models, using robust standard errors.

By seeking to capture both structural and demographic transformations in American society over time and the unique contributions of cohorts as mechanisms of social change, this study may serve as an exemplar for similar analyses in other states—particularly those in the agricultural Midwest. In addition, because the changing social patterns occurring in South Dakota may prove to be more gradual and subtle than in other states, this work could lend valuable insight into the political implications of demographic shifts nationwide. Indeed, the results of this study hold promise for a better understanding of voting behavior in past elections—and for predicting electoral outcomes in the future.

THE CYCLES OF AMERICAN POLITICS:
GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND REALIGNMENT THEORY

Schlesinger (1922) was among the first to recognize the apparent cyclical nature of the rise and fall of political parties in America. Schlesinger Jr. (1986) later described the recurrent nature of historical periods of “public energy” and “private interest.” Key (1955) established the foundation of realignment theory, based on cycles of long-term
political stability, separated by abrupt, decisive “critical elections” which signal a transition to a change in the political order. Since that time, others have analyzed the dynamic nature of major realignments, attempting to explain apparent substantial shifts in the partisan orientation of the American electorate (Key 1959; Schattschneider 1960; Burnham 1970; Kleppner 1979; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980; Sundquist 1983; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Rosenhof 2003).

Although many realignment theorists once believed that political realignments occur when a critical mass of voters converts from one party to another, consensus has since hardened around generational succession as the root cause of such major political turnarounds. William Strauss and Neil Howe (1991, 1997, and 2000) are at the forefront of applying generational theory to explain the cyclical nature of generational differences between cohorts as the cardinal genesis of American political realignment. Sociologist Karl Mannheim (1952) was the first to formulate a systematic view of ‘generations’ as a particular type of “identity location” and mechanisms of social change. For Mannheim, generations are groups of people born within roughly the same time period and significantly distinguished from their contemporaries by virtue of formative experiences they have shared under particular socio-cultural conditions. Marshall (1983) further specifies that to constitute a generation, “a birth cohort has to become aware of itself as different from other birth cohorts.” Demographers and economists add population and structural factors, such as cohort size, family and marriage arrangements, educational and employment opportunities, racial composition, and economic conditions to the distinguishing features of generational groups (Ryder 1965; Easterlin 1988).
Strauss and Howe explain how each generation eventually matures and exercises national leadership in its own way. By viewing American history through this prism, Strauss and Howe have noticed a recurring cycle of four distinct types of generations, or “peer personalities,” appearing in the same repeating sequence. They label these four generational categories Idealist, Reactive, Civic, and Adaptive. Though each generation type has its own attributes, the two “dynamic” or “dominant” strains in each generational constellation tend to be the righteous, value-driven Idealist and the constructive, problem-solving Civic generations. Since the average length of each generation is just over twenty-two years, the length of a total cycle stretches approximately eighty-eight to eighty-nine years. Broken down in this manner, America is currently in its fifth generational cycle. Strauss and Howe have designated the current era the “Millennial Cycle,” which began around 1967 and will last until around 2050. Because of the dominance of the Idealist and Civic generational types, political realignments in the United States have typically occurred in what Strauss and Howe refer to as the second and fourth “turnings” in generational cycles.

Winograd and Hais (2008) have built upon Strauss’s and Howe’s generational insights, and emphasize the importance of technological innovation coinciding with generational change to produce American political realignments. Periodic increases in birthrates over a sustained time eventually supply the electorate with a sizeable cohort possessing new attitudes and beliefs, open to new methods of technology through which to receive political communication. The advent of the telegraph and telephone in the 19th Century, for example, gave way to radio and television in the 20th Century, which eventually surrendered to the Internet in the current era.
Judis and Teixeira (2002) have explored the far-ranging political effects of America’s many changes over the course of the 20th Century. They recount America’s transition from an agrarian and industrial economy to the postindustrial economy of today, where the production of food and manufactured goods has in large part yielded to the production of ideas. Such transformation gradually effected changes in some American values, as the Protestant worldview centered on self-denial and sacrifice soon evolved into an American culture of consumerism, nudged along by the dawn of television and advertising. This new outlook on leisure and personal satisfaction eventually translated to shifts in societal values on sex, quality of life, concern for the environment, and a generally greater overall expectation for commercial and government services. Democrats’ identification with the counterculture of the 1960s allowed Republicans to win support from older generations of Americans by opposing these types of cultural change. Younger generations, however, tend not to identify with some of the values of their predecessors, and currently express more progressive views on these matters as they relate to politics. In short, the complex interrelatedness of the key economic, social, and cultural components of America’s 20th Century journey has produced the larger fabric that those in the Millennial Generation inherit today.
Increasingly, a select number of scholars are drawing on the power of demography to explain and predict American political behavior (Abramowitz 2003, Abramowitz and Teixeira 2008; Frey 2009; Frey and Teixeira 2008; Teixeira 2008, 2009; Winograd and Hais 2008). Generally, these analyses focus on those ways in which America’s demographics are changing most dramatically, and their predominant effects on voting behavior. These include shifts in such demographic characteristics as cohort composition, racial makeup, family structure, education and social class, religion, and geography.

Several observers have focused on generational change in the makeup of the electorate, and the resulting potential for a realignment of American politics. Like the GI Generation before them, Strauss and Howe classify Millennials as a Civic generation, per the generational sequence. Along with their sheer size, Millennials seem to possess the difference in “peer personality” required to affect such a change. Even larger than the Boomer generation (depending on which birth years are specified in defining the cohort), Millennials are unique from prior generations in their increased likelihood of having grown up in nontraditional households. They are more racially diverse, and represent the most technologically savvy generation of voters to date. Survey data in particular highlight the Millennial Generation’s unique identity when compared with older cohorts. Millennials, for instance, are more upbeat and optimistic today than Gen-Xers were at the same age approximately 20 years ago. They express greater support than their older counterparts for an active federal government in confronting a range of major economic, health, environmental, and terrorism-related challenges, and are less likely to view the
government as wasteful and inefficient. In foreign policy, Millennials tend to favor U.S. engagement with the rest of the world, albeit through a more multilateral and international approach than that practiced by George W. Bush. They express more liberal attitudes on issues relating to sex, gay marriage, interracial dating, and immigration. Also, the number of Millennials identifying as secular or religiously unaffiliated is nearly twice that of the nation as a whole, and about four times the number of the last remaining members of the GI and Silent Generations (Judis and Teixeira 2002; Winograd and Hais 2008; Keeter 2008).

For these and other reasons, Millennials have so far proven to be a generation decisively favoring Democrats. In the 2006 Congressional midterm election, voters in the 18-to-29 year old age group backed Democrats 60-38 percent. They supported Barack Obama in 2008 by an even more commanding 66-32 percent. It is estimated that approximately 48 million Millennials were citizen-eligible voters in 2008, putting their share of the national electorate at about 20 percent. By 2020, the first presidential election in which all Millennials will have reached voting-age, this generation will represent just fewer than 40 percent of all eligible voters in the United States. If Millennials’ ideological and voting orientations continue on their current course, we can expect progressives to gain an extra 2.5 percentage points over conservatives in 2012, and an additional 2.5 percentage points in 2016, simply as a result of cohort succession in the electorate (Judis and Teixeira 2007, Teixeira 2009). And, provided the ideological orientations of the two parties remain relatively fixed, this trend is likely to continue as Millennials progress through life’s various stages. Despite the widely held belief that people’s political thinking and behavior tend to change over the course of their lives,
survey research and decades of political science suggest otherwise (Berelson, Lazarfeld, and McPhee 1954; Pew Research Center 2007; Winograd and Hais 2008). Put another way, in the context of political ideology and voting behavior, cohort effects decisively trump those of age.

America’s rapidly changing racial composition—spurred largely by the recent steep increase in immigration—is another noteworthy demographic change occurring within the American electorate. Minorities constituted about a third of the U.S. population in 2008, and the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that America will be a majority-minority nation by 2050. In fact, the growth in America’s minority population accounted for more than 80 percent of the nation’s population growth in the first decade of the 21st Century. From 2000 to 2006, Hispanics and Asians grew by nearly a third, and blacks grew by 10 percent. Non-Hispanic whites, meanwhile, grew by a scant two percent over this same time period. Indeed, the steady swell in immigration from Latin America and Asia, higher fertility rates among most minority groups, and the relatively low fertility rates among America’s aging white population is quickly altering the demographic landscape of the U.S. electorate (Frey 2008, 2009). Historically, significant rises in immigration have preceded political realignments by two to three decades (Winograd and Hais 2008). As minority voters have long been a central component of the Democratic governing coalition, such a massive shift in the racial composition of the body politic is likely to favor Democrats in profound ways (Judis and Teixeira 2002, 2007).

Even changes in family structures occurring in American society are beginning to exhibit noticeable political consequences. Family demographers have documented
marked changes in marriage and family patterns across successive generations, including a declining share of married couple households with children and an increasing share of couples choosing to live together both before and as an alternative to marriage. Those Americans who do marry are waiting longer to do so and are having fewer children. Meanwhile, the percentage of employed women—especially mothers with very young children—has risen sharply in the last several decades (Smith 2008; Casper and Bianchi 2002; Goodwin, McGill and Chandra 2002; Seltzer et al. 2005; Bures 2009; Sayer, Cohen, and Casper 2004). Yet, there are echoes of the past in at least one respect. After declining for 30 years the divorce rate is at its lowest level since 1970. Not only are Baby Boomers less likely to divorce than their parents, but the rate of divorce is even lower among their children (Stevenson and Wolfers 2007).

These changes in family structure have helped bring about a revision of societal attitudes on sex, marriage, and gender roles in America today. These changing attitudes have important political ramifications. Married voters, for instance, are increasingly likely to support Republicans, while never-married voters align themselves increasingly with Democrats. Similarly, married voters with children are more likely to vote Republican than those married without children, while unmarried voters with children, such as single mothers and fathers, are increasingly more likely to vote Democratic than are those without children. On balance, as the share of nontraditional families continues to increase, Democrats stand to gain (Judis and Teixeira 2002, 2007; Smith 2008).

America’s class structure has also been substantially altered in the post-World War II era, producing yet another political effect. The share of the once-predominant white working-class in the U.S. electorate has shrunk considerably, as whites have not
only been supplanted by minority voters, but as they themselves have shifted from blue-collared jobs to entry-level white-collar or service industry occupations. Concurrently, fewer and fewer members of this demographic are high school dropouts, and the percentage with college degrees continues to climb. Although white working-class voters once constituted a key pillar of the Democrats’ New Deal coalition, they have now become reliably Republican voters—especially when voting for president—since the culture wars of the 1960s and the economic malaise of the 1970s (Teixeira and Rogers 2000; Judis and Teixeira 2002; Abramowitz and Teixeira 2008).

Experts have also analyzed demographic trends in other areas known to have strong associations with voting behavior, such as religion and geography. For instance, as regular church attendance has become a strong predictor in voting Republican in U.S. elections since the 1980s, Green and Dionne (2008) have explored the uptick in the number of evangelical Christians, along with the simultaneous spike in the share of secular or nonobservant Americans. However, the net effect of these competing dynamics is currently indeterminate. Lang, Sanchez, and Berube (2008) examine the trends in population density and voting in American cities, noting that Democrats’ electoral performance continues to improve in areas further outside traditional strongholds of the urban core. Battle lines are being drawn further out into high-density and emerging suburbs, in many cases allowing Democrats to bank votes at a greater rate than their partisan counterparts in the typically Republican-dominated but smaller exurbs, including even those that are growing at faster rates. In the meantime, Americans’ enhanced mobility has led to a sorting process in which they increasingly choose to live in areas surrounded by like-minded neighbors. The percentage of voters who live in
landslide counties—those in which one presidential candidate won by a margin of 20 points or more—has surged nationwide since 1976 (Bishop and Cushing 2008).

Teixeira (2009) has analyzed the major demographic trends that helped contribute to the Democrats’ decisive win in 2008—especially those shifts which occurred in rapidly changing areas that had previously been dominated by Republicans. Many of these areas are located in battleground states, causing them to receive a great deal of attention from candidates and the media. Teixeira describes an emerging American electorate brought about by a new demography, a new geography, and a new policy agenda. Results from the 2008 election reveal that in several key states, for instance, the share of white working-class voters declined by as much as a quarter, in some cases, while the percentage of white college graduates surged. Minorities, Millennials, and professionals—all very pro-Democratic voting groups—reached unprecedented levels as a portion of all voters. At the same time, fast-growing dynamic metropolitan areas herald the new geography, in which pro-progressive regions and cities are adding voters to battleground states in startling numbers. The new agenda refers to current leanings in the direction of progressive policy priorities, helped along by these growing progressive demographic groups and geographical areas. In short, the election of 2008 had the hallmark of a realigning, critical election (Judis 2008).

RURAL FLIGHT AND HEARTLAND LIFE IN POSTINDUSTRIAL AMERICA

America’s shift to a postindustrial economy has not only had important repercussions for industrial regions, but for agricultural ones as well. In pronouncing the death of the profitability of farming, Popper and Popper (1987) predicted the
abandonment of the American northern plains to their “pre-white condition,” of the 19th Century. While this forecast enraged many residents of those rural areas at the time, their hypothesis has largely borne out. Indeed, the abandonment of farming in America as a household livelihood strategy has been recognized as one of the most dramatic changes in the U.S. economy in the entire 20th Century (Labao and Meyer 2001). In the period from 1940 to 1980, technology and government intervention served to reduce America’s farm population tenfold, cutting the number of farms in half, while doubling the average acreage of farms. Perhaps ironically, farming in the heartland was industrialized, just as the rest of America’s economy was becoming postindustrial. In South Dakota, these monumental changes in agricultural practices sparked a rural flight that continues to this day; even as the state’s overall population increased slightly from 2000-2007, all but 10 of South Dakota’s 66 counties experienced negative net migration (Brooks, Vargas, and McCurry 2009).

Technology plays an important role in the ongoing metamorphosis of South Dakota life. Radio, television, and especially the Internet have made the isolation of those who remain on South Dakota’s farms and ranches much less of a factor than it once was. The 2000 Census reported that South Dakota ranked first in the nation in home-based businesses. Two-income families are on the rise, and more women than men are seeking off-farm work. Sioux Falls has the highest percentage of working mothers in the United States. Hoover and Miller (2005) describe South Dakota in the 21st Century as a state with increasing racial diversity, gradual urbanization, and a growing service economy, geared toward the production of ideas, in its larger cities and towns.
When evaluating demographic change over time in South Dakota, it is helpful to put these shifts in context with those of the United States as a whole. Here I present a time series of South Dakota’s overall statewide measures of cohort makeup, median age, racial composition, family structure, educational attainment, and rural population. These data are then compared with corresponding national statistics in each category.

**Cohort Composition**

The generational cohorts included in this study consist of members of each living cohort currently of voting age. These cohorts begin with a combination of the oldest two generations still living, the GI Generation (those born between 1901 and 1924), and the Silent Generation (born 1925-1944). The Baby Boom Generation is split into two distinct groups, the Early Boomers (born 1946-1955), and the Late Boomers (born 1956-1964). Generation X, also referred to by Strauss and Howe as the “Thirteenth Generation,” consists of those Americans born between 1965 and 1976. Finally, although exact birth years for the Millennial Generation vary among demographers, I have defined the cohort as those born between 1977 and 2000. Below, Figure 1 presents each of these cohorts by age and calendar year, bounded by the oldest and youngest members of each generation.
Figures 2-6 compare each cohort as relative shares of the voting-age population in South Dakota and the United States for 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2008. In Figure 2, we see the steady decline of the oldest generations as a share of the voting-age population in South Dakota and the nation overall. This decline continues, albeit to a lesser degree, with both the Early and the Late Boomers, as shown in Figures 3 and 4. The oldest members of Gen X did not reach voting age until the 1984 presidential election, and by 2008, South Dakota’s share of voting-age Gen-Xers was substantially less (17.6%) than
the nation as a whole (23.6%), illustrated in Figure 5. Conversely, the oldest Millennials (Figure 6) first voted for president in 1996, and the 2008 comparison shows South Dakota with a larger share of voting-age Millennials (26.1%) than the United States collectively (24.0%). These portions will continue to swell over the next several election cycles, as Millennials replace older Americans in the voting-age population. Figure 7 illustrates all generational cohorts as relative shares of the voting-age population in South Dakota from 1980-2008, including the appearance of Gen-Xers in 1984, and that of Millennials three election cycles later, in 1996.

**FIGURE 2**

![GI & Silent Gen as a Share of Voting-Age Population: South Dakota vs. United States](image)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
FIGURE 3

Early Boomers as a Share of Voting-Age Population: South Dakota vs. United States

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

FIGURE 4

Late Boomers as a Share of Voting-Age Population: South Dakota vs. United States

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
FIGURE 5

Gen X as a Share of Voting-Age Population: South Dakota vs. United States

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

FIGURE 6

Millennials as a Share of Voting-Age Population: South Dakota vs. United States

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
Age

South Dakota and the United States have seen a fairly matched and gradual rise in median age since 1980 (see Figure 8). In 2008, South Dakota’s median age was just slightly higher (38.6 years) than that of the entire country (38.1 years).
**Racial Composition**

Figure 9 illustrates the considerable increase in the percentage of nonwhites in the U.S. population, especially since 2000. Although South Dakota has experienced a slight increase in its own share of nonwhites, neither the rate nor the proportion of such growth is comparable to the nation overall. By 2008, 34.4 percent of the United States population was classified as nonwhite, while that figure was a more modest 11.8 percent in South Dakota.
Family Structure

The decline in the percentage of married couples in America—especially married couples with children—has been well documented by demographers. Figure 10 depicts this drop in the percentage of married couple households with children under the age of 18. Additionally, we see that while South Dakota contained a noticeably larger share of married couples with children in 1980 and 1990, by 2008 it had achieved virtual parity with the nation as a whole. That year, just 21.8 percent of American households were married couples with children, compared to 21.6 percent in South Dakota.
Educational Attainment

The increased access to education in the United States has resulted in a steadily growing share of Americans graduating from high school and earning 4-year college degrees. Figure 11 illustrates the increase in the share of the population age 25 and over who have attained a college degree, and while South Dakota has enjoyed a similar rise, it continues to lag behind the nation. In 2008, 29 percent of American adults had earned a bachelor’s degree; 26 percent of South Dakotans were college-educated.
FIGURE 11

Percent with College Degree or Higher: South Dakota vs. United States, 1980-2008

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Rural Population

Finally, Figure 12 shows the glaring disparity between the comparative rural populations of South Dakota and the United States. We see the nationwide trend of a dwindling rural population that began in the early part of the 20th Century and continues today. Though South Dakota is gradually becoming less rural itself, this change is slower and less steady, and the state continues to stand in stark contrast to the rest of the United States in its substantially larger share of rural population.
DATA AND METHODS

Data Sources and Variables

To assess changes over time in South Dakota’s demographic composition and voting behavior, I have conducted a panel study using county-level data from each of the 66 counties for every presidential election year from 1980-2008.

Dependent Variable

My dependent variable is the percent of votes cast for the Democrat nominee in eight presentational elections. I obtained county election data consisting of voter registration and vote totals for president from the office of the South Dakota Secretary of State. Although presidential voting is limited in its explanatory power of political and
ideological thought over time, it is the best measure available to compare to county-level demographic data.

**Cohort Variables**

No consensus exists among scholars or pundits regarding where lines should be drawn to designate ‘generations’ according to birth cohorts. For this analysis, I classify the electorate in each period according to 5 groups of birth cohorts: a combination of the two oldest cohorts, the GI Generation (1901-1924) and the Silent Generation (1925-1945); Early Baby Boomers (1946-1955); Late Baby Boomers (1956-1964); Generation X (1965-1976); and Millennials (1977-2000).

**Demographic Variables**

I construct my demographic and economic variables using published data from several sources. I gathered county-level demographic data for South Dakota from the U.S. Census Bureau for the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Decennial Censuses, as well as estimates calculated in non-census years. These data include population totals, and county breakdowns by race, education, age, and household family structure. I obtained employment data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Finally, I utilized data from the Glenmary Research Center to create county-level estimates for religious affiliation.

Below, Table 1 provides descriptive statistics on each of these measures.
### TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Democratic Presidential Vote</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>38.28%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>88.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Registered Democrat</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>41.81%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>79.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Millennials</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>7.50%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Gen X</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Late Boomer</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>18.22%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Minority</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>13.19%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Married Couples with Children</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>27.76%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with Bachelor's Degree or Higher</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>15.30%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Religiously Affiliated</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>71.33%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Unemployed</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>3.94%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>52.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Density</td>
<td>528</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>221.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Limitations**

South Dakota’s many counties and the long time span of this analysis provided a large sample size by which to evaluate the state. However, since much of the data at the county level was available only for Decennial Census years, interpolation—and in some cases, extrapolation—was required to produce data for intermediate years. Thus, estimates for cohort composition, racial makeup, educational attainment, median age, family structure, and religious affiliation were interpolated in non-census election years were interpolated using census data, as well as the available recent data for 2008. While the use of such techniques made highly inaccurate estimates an unlikely result, doing so
may have assumed less variation over time among variables than was truly the case. Also, estimates of religious affiliation by county may be less closely tied to voting behavior than are measures of a more concrete indicator, such as church attendance. This data, however, were not available at the county level for South Dakota. Additionally, since this analysis was conducted on the aggregate level, only broad assumptions about counties’ demographic compositions and their correlation to voting behavior could be made. This differentiates a study such as mine from exit polls or other survey data, which evaluate voting behavior on an individual basis, and can draw more direct conclusions.

Finally, as the main thrust of this study focuses on cohort succession, the phenomenon is limited to the extent that as of the 2008 presidential election, only about half of Millennials were of voting age. Even at such a reduced capacity, however, the presence of this cohort was clearly felt in the electorate, as Millennials turned out in high numbers (relative to young voters in previous generations), and voted so strongly in favor of Barack Obama. Still, we will be able to make more definitive conclusions after future election years; by 2020, when all Millennials will have reached voting age, they will make up nearly 40 percent of the voting-age population in America. As the number of Millennials in South Dakota is currently higher than the national average, they may be an even more consequential force in South Dakota in future elections.

**Analytic Strategy**

Despite the heuristic appeal of the theory of generation or cohort succession, it is challenging to investigate quantitatively. First, it is impossible to operationalize
empirically the qualitative notion of “conscious identification with age peers on the basis of significant shared experiences.” Yet, the only means of differentiating these social conceptions is by using groupings of birth cohorts. As my delineations of cohorts generally correspond to public perceptions of distinct generations—one of Mannheim’s prerequisites (1959)—my classification scheme has face validity.

A second challenge in quantifying cohort effects is that it is computationally difficult to isolate the unique contributions of a generation’s three constitutive parts. This is because each of the three—generational subculture, chronological age, and historical period are temporally defined as well as conceptually interrelated. Consider two counties with different percentages of registered voters in a given election year. To assign the observed difference to its proper source requires differentiating the effects of each generation’s defining ‘persona’ from, for example, prevailing social conditions that may have inspired one group more than the other to be civically engaged. The final complexity for most studies of cohort succession relates to limits in the periods of observation. The full life cycle of a cohort is rarely observed and it is generally impossible to see every cohort of interest as it reaches particular life stages, such as when it is first eligible to vote, during early family-building, and in retirement. In the present analysis, the youngest cohorts (whether in full or in part) were not eligible to vote in every one of the presidential elections under study. This truncation problem is particularly notable for the Millennials; in 2008 only about half of the cohort members were of voting age.

Despite these difficulties, this analysis enjoys several strengths. I combine data records for 66 individual counties for eight presidential election cycles into a pooled
panel data set that consists of 528 observations, or “county-election years” (Sixty-six counties * eight years). By having more than one observation per county, I am able to control for differences in the general nature of the counties that I would not ordinarily be able to measure. For example, some counties may consist of more cohesive neighborhoods while others may have residents who are more transient. Without a way to capture these differences, they could confound the effects of other key variables, including cohort composition. To remedy this problem I use fixed effects regression analysis.

Fixed effects offers additional benefits in this context. It allows me to use a differencing approach to identify the effects of cohort succession. From one election cycle to the next, the mix of cohorts comprising each county’s eligible voter pool will change, but non-uniformly. Some counties may attract a greater share of young singles, for example while the generational mix may shift in others via the out migration by new retirees. I can then leverage these differences in generational composition that will exist both within and between counties to explain differences in voting behavior. To examine the relative importance of the previously mentioned demographic indicators in explaining voting behavior I estimate a series of fixed effects models in which I incrementally introduce explanatory variables.
RESULTS

Descriptive Results:
An Overview of the Presidential Vote In South Dakota

South Dakota is, by many standards, a solidly Republican and conservative state. Despite a strong populist and progressive heritage, South Dakotans have not voted for a Democratic presidential nominee since 1964, nor have they elected a Democratic governor since 1978 (Hoover and Miller 2005). Since that time, Republicans have enjoyed a sizeable—if not insurmountable—lead in party registration over the Democrats (see Figure 13). Figure 14 illustrates the breakdown of the presidential vote in South Dakota in each contest from 1980 to 2008.

FIGURE 13

Source: South Dakota Secretary of State
Using the demographic indicators detailed in Table 1, I have divided South Dakota’s counties into five separate categories in each of the eight presidential elections under study. These categories are based on county-wide election totals, and consist of the following: landslide Republican or Democratic counties, which voted for either the Republican or Democratic nominee by 20 percentage points or more; strong-to-lean Republican or Democratic counties, which voted for a candidate by more than 5 but less than 20 percentage points; and a group of tossup counties, which went for either the Republican or the Democratic candidate by less than 5 points. Naturally, since South Dakota is a solidly Republican state, a much greater number of counties fell into the Landslide Republican and/or Strong-to-Lean Republican categories. Nevertheless, I have identified some of the key demographic trends of these groups of counties, based on their
vote for president in each contest. Such trends help form the basis for my research hypothesis in investigating changes in these trends over time, and their relationship to the presidential vote in South Dakota counties.

Each of these demographic breakdowns are depicted graphically in Figures 15-20. Figure 15 demonstrates the close relationship between median age and voting behavior. Specifically, the median age of those select counties voting Democratic by landslide margins was substantially lower than that of tossup or Republican counties.

**FIGURE 15**

*Average Median Age of South Dakota Counties by Presidential Vote: 1980-2008*

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; South Dakota Secretary of State
Figure 16 illustrates the rise of the Millennial Generation as a share of the voting-age population in South Dakota counties, and the strong association with counties’ propensity to vote heavily Democratic for president.

**FIGURE 16**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; South Dakota Secretary of State
In Figure 17 we see the high concentration of nonwhites (primarily Native Americans) in Landslide Democratic counties, and conversely, the exceedingly low percentage of racial minorities in Landslide GOP counties.

**FIGURE 17**

![Average Share of Nonwhites in South Dakota Counties by Presidential Vote: 1980-2008](image)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; South Dakota Secretary of State

Figure 18 depicts the steady decades-long decline of counties’ shares of married couples with children. Although the decline is apparent for each category of county voting, a clear gap emerges between Landslide Democratic and Landslide Republican counties, beginning in 1984. Consistent with existing theory, marriage and the presence of children appear to be reliably correlated with voting Republican.
Figure 18 presents the share of counties attaining bachelor’s degrees by their presidential vote. In this case, the Strong-to-Lean Democratic counties exceed Republican-voting and tossup counties, which is consistent with nationwide trends in the recent past. However, Landslide Democratic counties lag far behind all other categories in educational attainment. This is almost certainly due to the high concentration of nonwhite residents in these highly-Democratic counties.
Finally, Figure 20 displays some evidence of the often-noted “God gap,” showing a lower average share of religiously affiliated residents in Democratic-voting counties. Interestingly, however, in 2008 the average percentage of religiously affiliated persons in Strong-to-Lean Democratic counties far surpassed that even of Landslide GOP counties, 85 to 73 percent.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; South Dakota Secretary of State
Multivariate Regression Results

The next step is to investigate the extent to which the relationships observed in my descriptive analyses hold up when other factors are controlled in a multivariate model. I use fixed effects regression to estimate the models, employing robust standard errors to correct for unobserved heterogeneity.

Model 1 examines the effect of Democratic voter registration on the percentage of the Democratic vote for president. As we would expect, we see a statistically significant relationship between the two. In this barest of models, every 10-percentage point increase in a county’s share of registered Democrats is associated with a 2.4 percentage point increase in the Democratic vote for president. In Model 2, I add a number of additional factors including the racial composition, education level, median age, and
religious affiliation of South Dakota counties and see an increase in the statistical
significance of the effect of Democratic voter registration. While also controlling for
population density and the unemployment rate of counties, this model suggests that every
10-percentage point increase in the share of registered Democrats is associated with a 7.3
percentage point increase in the Democratic presidential vote. Moreover, the share of
nonwhites in a county has a statistically significant effect above and beyond that of
Democratic voter registration alone, with every 10-percentage point increase in the share
of nonwhites in a county associated with a 3.5 percentage point increase in the
Democratic vote. The median age of counties has a highly statistically significant, but
substantively negligible effect on voting behavior.

Model 3 builds on the two previous models by including a measure of family
structure, the percentage of married couple households with children under age 18 in each
county. The results reveal an inverse and statistically significant relationship between the
prevalence of “traditional family” households and the Democratic vote; a 10-percentage
point increase in the share of households comprised of married couples with children is
associated with a 4.6 percentage point decrease in the vote for the Democratic
presidential candidate. The addition of this measure to Model 2 increases the overall
explanatory power of the model, yielding an $R^2$ of .67. The coefficient on Democratic
registration is .65 and remains statistically significant. However, the percent minority
variable loses statistical significance when the family structure indicator is added to the
model, due to the strong correlation between minorities and Democratic voter registration.
Likewise, the remaining explanatory variables in the model are not statistically
significant.
My fourth and final model seeks to address the question of whether, independent of age and period effects, the generational composition of South Dakota counties has affected voting behavior over eight presidential election cycles. In this model, we observe a statistically significant and consequential effect by the arrival in the electorate of the two youngest cohorts, Gen X and the Millennials. Late Boomers, the next-oldest generation, are included in the model as well, but do not achieve statistical significance. As with previous models, these cohort effects are associated with variation in the Democratic vote above and beyond other statistically significant predictors, namely Democratic registration and the share of married couples with children. Thus, a 10-percentage point increase in a county’s share of Gen X residents of voting age corresponds to a 2.4 percentage point increase in the Democratic presidential vote. Similarly, a 10-percentage point increase in the share of Millennials in South Dakota counties is associated with a 1.8 percentage point increase in the Democratic vote.

Like in previous models, the measure of Democratic registration remains highly statistically significant in Model 4, and continues to be determinative, with a regression coefficient of .68, which again demonstrates the close association with Democratic voting we would expect. The family variable also continues to register significance, but its effect is diminished slightly from Model 3, with a regression coefficient of -.29, again suggesting the inverse relationship between married couples with children and Democratic voting. All other measures and controls in Model 4 are not statistically significant. With the inclusion of cohort measures, this model is the strongest yet, with an overall $R^2$ of .69 (see Table 2).
**TABLE 2**: Fixed effects (within) Regression Coefficients for Demographic Characteristics Explaining Presidential Voting in South Dakota Counties, 1980-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primitive</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
<td>Full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Registered Democrat</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.68**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Minority</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent with Bachelor’s Degree or Higher</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Religiously Affiliated</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Unemployed</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Density</td>
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<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.01**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Married with Children</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.46**</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Millennial</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Gen X</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Late-Boomer</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=528  Mean Democratic Vote=.38  s.d.=.12  
Notes:  * = p<.05;  ** = p<.01

**DISCUSSION**

In the full model above, we see the way in which a county’s cohort composition exhibits a statistically significant and meaningful effect on its voting behavior for president. Such an effect does not, however, imply that age in and of itself is a reliable predictor of the presidential vote. In the fixed effects model over a period of nearly 30 years, the median age of each county is not statistically significant. In other words, my model uncovers a cohort effect, but not an age effect. Thus, we can predict that as Millennials come to be an increasingly larger share of the electorate as more of them reach voting age, and as they turn out to vote in larger numbers as they reach middle age,
their presence in the electorate will continue to increase Democratic support. This estimation is made all the more significant when considering that only about half of Millennials were of voting age in the 2008 election. As older voters are replaced with younger ones, the share of Millennials in the South Dakota electorate will continue to increase until 2020, when all Millennials will have reached voting age (see Figure 21).

**FIGURE 21**

![South Dakota Generations](image)

My analysis also highlights the statistical significance of the presence of ethnic minorities in South Dakota counties, and the correlation with Democratic voting. While the share of nonwhites in South Dakota remains well below that of the nation overall, the presence of minorities in the state has grown steadily over time, from 7.4 percent in 1980 to 11.8 percent in 2008. Native Americans comprise almost three-quarters of the
nonwhite population in South Dakota, but the Hispanic and Asian populations are considerable as well. Although voter registration and turnout tends to be lower among these groups compared to whites, their impact in the electorate is likely to remain consequential.

Similarly, my statistically significant findings of the declining share of married couples with children and the inferred voting behavior is consistent with a long-established national trend. Such a movement has both political and policy implications. First, the erosion of the “typical” American family might signal a diminishment of the resonance of issues pertaining to “traditional family values.” In addition, children who grow up in nontraditional households are more likely to harbor substantially different political and social views than those of previous generations raised in traditional family households. From a policy perspective, the decline of marriage and traditional families has implications for the way in which government programs and services are expected to cater to the needs of such families.

CONCLUSIONS

Some experts have anticipated the political ramifications of the dramatic demographic, economic, and geographic transformation currently underway in the United States. Moreover, these forecasts appear to have been validated in the 2008 election. South Dakota is one state that represents, in some respects, the way in which many of these changes go beyond the conventional “Red State-Blue State” paradigm. In other ways, South Dakota is not changing as much or at the same rate as other, more dynamic areas of the country. Modern political realignment theory is based on the periodic emergence into the electorate of new generations of voters, with unique viewpoints and
values, which tend to support a certain political party and its candidates. On this principal score, South Dakota mirrors the nation as a whole, since cohort succession in the electorate transcends regional or state boundaries. The rise of the progressive Millennial generation as the dominant cohort in the American electorate portends a relatively stable period of Democratic dominance for approximately 32-40 years. My analysis confirms that shifts in the generational composition of the voting age population in South Dakota counties have shaped aggregate trends in past voting behavior. As the voting power of Millennials in South Dakota grows, the state should become more progressive on balance as well.

There is little doubt that regional and state-specific political differences will persist, even as Democrats ascend as the dominant political party nationally. Regardless of whether the cascading effects of America’s next partisan realignment are realized as concretely in South Dakota as in the nation overall, the overarching policy implications are similar. As one of Strauss and Howe’s Civic generations, Millennials are much more interested in practical problem-solving than in the divisive, moralistic fights that characterized the Idealist Boomer Generation. Hence, the desire for a more activist but effective government will likely take root. Rural flight from South Dakota’s smallest communities that began decades ago will persist—and may even accelerate—as residents of farms and small towns move to larger towns and cities in search of greater economic opportunities. These citizens will increasingly operate in a more diversified, global economy. As Millennials step to the forefront of leadership in South Dakota civic life, they will be eager to invest in the future of the state—their children, their schools, and the needed infrastructure to build strong communities and families. Rallying cries from
political opponents decrying the tyranny of “big government” are unlikely to resonate with Millennials the way they may have with previous generations, even in a state with a long heritage of western ruggedness and libertarianism like South Dakota. Future political debates in South Dakota can be expected to center less around the size of government, and focus more on how civic leaders can effectively address the needs of South Dakotans, partnering with business to foster economic opportunity, educate South Dakota’s children, provide quality health care, and curb pollution. By and large, Millennials do not quibble with the notion that an able government can and should play an active roll in each of these policy areas.

This analysis may serve as a future prototype for similar studies of other states. Despite the many limitations, analyses of aggregate demographic and voting data at the county level allow scholars to study the changing effects in a state over long periods of time. Doing so will allow social scientists to more definitively understand cohort effects, and the cyclical nature of generations and their impact on the American political system. Furthermore, the availability of demographic data in future years will provide only the latest installment in the ongoing American story of demographic transformation and political change.
Bibliography


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