TVA Liberals

The Policy Feedbacks of the Tennessee Valley Authority

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Widely credited with transporting its coverage area "from the age of kerosene to the age of electricity," the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was ambitious experiment in regional development and a leading symbol of the New Deal. We examine the political feedbacks of the TVA, which was implemented just as White Southerners were beginning their ideological and partisan realignment to the right. Using Alabama Democrat John Sparkman, a self-described "TVA liberal," as an illustrative case, we argue that the TVA inhibited this realignment in its coverage area relative to comparable non-TVA areas of the South. Using trajectory balancing, we estimate that in the 1952–1964 elections, the TVA cost Republican presidential candidates between one and six percentage points. There is little evidence that the TVA mobilized new constituencies; if anything, it preempted Republican mobilization. The TVA also fostered the careers of liberal politicians such as Sparkman, reducing the conservatism of the area's representation in Congress. These liberalizing effects do not seem to have persisted past the enfranchisement of Black Southerners in the mid-1960s, by which time the TVA no longer received federal subsidies. We discuss implications for our understanding of politics in the "Long 1950s" and of policy feedback more generally.

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Pappa got a job with the TVA.

He bought a washing machine and then a Chevrolet.

Bob McDill, "Song of the South," as performed by *Alabama*

1. Introduction: John Sparkman and Alabama's 8th District

"EXTRA! NEW DAY DAWNS FOR DIXIE," blared north Alabama's *Florence Times*.[1] The occasion was the signing, by the recently inaugurated President Franklin D. Roosevelt, of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Act of 1933. The entity created by the Act exemplified the spirit of activism and experimentation that animated FDR's first hundred days in office. A government corporation, the TVA was charged with harnessing the resources of the Tennessee River—above all, its potential to generate hydroelectric power—to develop this desperately poor region of the South. Florence, home of Wilson Dam at the Tennessee's Muscle Shoals, was the epicenter of this economic, social, and ultimately political earthquake. It thus provides a particularly vivid illustration of the political feedbacks of the TVA.[2]

The TVA soon began supplying subsidized power to municipal and cooperative utilities around Florence, but its political ramifications took longer manifest. Florence's representative in the U.S. House, Edward Almon of Alabama's 8th District, died shortly after

[1] "Roosevelt Signature Put on Bill," *Florence (AL) Times*, May 18, 1933.

[2] This discussion of Alabama's 8th district is what Gerring terms a "pathway" case study, which "illustrates the contents of the theory and demonstrates its plausibility"; John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 105.

the TVA Act was signed. Like nearly all Southern representatives since the turn of the century, Almon had been a Democrat, as was Archibald H. Carmichael, the man who beat three other Democrats in the race to succeed Almon.[3] Prominent in state politics since the 1890s, the 69-year-old Carmichael had been endorsed by the *Montgomery Advertiser* of central Alabama's conservative "Black Belt."[4] Aware that this was a dubious honor in north Alabama, Carmichael took pains to assert that "he had no connections whatsoever with the power interests of Alabama"—that is, with the private utilities who were then fighting ferociously to block the implementation of the TVA.[5]

Despite this denial, Rep. Carmichael's coziness with private utilities quickly landed him in hot water. In July 1935, he voted against the "death sentence" provision of President Franklin Roosevelt's utility holding company bill, a litmus test of support for public power and for the New Deal generally. Carmichael's vote provoking an immediate backlash back home. As one political operative observed, nobody "but a fool would have expected…the Eighth Congressional District to do other than to stand by…the President."[6] A newspaper columnist joked:

[3]On the hegemony of the Democratic Party in the South in this period, see V. O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Knopf, 1949).

[4]"The Eighth District's Most Eminent Citizen," *Montgomery (AL) Advertiser*, 1933, 4. In intraparty contests, the *Advertiser* generally sided with conservative Democrats and later was an early champion of the Republican Party in Alabama; see Julia Marks Young, "A Republican Challenge to Democratic Progressivism in the Deep South: Alabama's 1962 United States Senatorial Contest" (Master's thesis, Auburn University, 1978), 125–26.

[5]"Black Belt Votes Do Not Count in Eighth District," *Decatur (AL) Daily*, August 11, 1933, 1

[6]Roy Nolen, "Confidential Memoranda for Senator Lister Hill" (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama, W.S. Hoole Library, Lister Hill Senatorial Collection, Box 367, Folder 1, January 15, 1938); the context

> I am sure the voters of the Muscle Shoals district are most grateful to their congressman, Archie Carmichael, for voting to scuttle the President's power program—after going all over the district in his campaign and solemnly swearing he would "uphold the New Deal"…. I am predicting that his constituents will show their appreciation of his services by inviting him to come back home to stay after next year.[7]

And indeed, Rep. Carmichael quickly drew multiple challengers for renomination in 1936. His opponents attacked him for siding with private utilities. "I believe the people of the district want a young man to aggressively fight for TVA," one of them explained. "The incumbent, A. H. Carmichael, when he voted against death warrant for unnecessary

for this remark was an analysis of the pattern of support for then-representative Hill, a strong FDR supporter who did vote for the death sentence, in his first Senate race. See also Rogers and coauthors' observation that "the most significant manifestation of how Alabamians of both races living in the valley felt about TVA was political: the congressional district became the most pro–national Democratic party in the state"; William Warren Rogers et al., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 486.

[7]B. U. L. Conner, "Dr. Conner: Doc Says Governor Wasn't Disappointed at Having Suggestions Ignored," *The Birmingham (AL) Post*, July 5, 1935, 4. Another editor joked: "When President Roosevelt insisted upon passage of the 'death sentence' clause of the utility holding company measure, perhaps he did not realize that the phrase might have something of a political significance for a couple of Alabama congressmen." See "Congressman," *Decatur (AL) Daily*, July 6, 1935, 4. The other House member referenced was Birmingham's Rep. George Huddleston, who did run for renomination but was defeated; Robert J. Norrell, "Labor at the Ballot Box: Alabama Politics from the New Deal to the Dixiecrat Movement," *Journal of Southern History* 57, no. 2 (1991): 214.

utility holding companies, did not vote the sentiment of the district."[8] Bowing to the inevitable, Carmichael decided to retire rather than run again.

Among the last candidates to enter the primary contest to succeed Rep. Carmichael was a 36-year-old Huntsville attorney, John Sparkman. Though hitherto a Carmichael supporter, Sparkman had been, a local newspaper assured its readers, "a strong and consistent ally of the TVA and of the New Deal from its beginning."[9] Sparkman was hardly unique in this respect. A decade later, he recalled that both he and his main rival in the primary were "strong for TVA," and each had tried to paint the other as the tool of private utilities (Sparkman even accused his opponent's brother of going to college on a power company scholarship).[10] But after Sparkman prevailed in a runoff and entered Congress, he proved to be just what he claimed.

Sparkman's victory launched him on a national political career spanning five decades. Even as his Southern colleagues drifted rightward, Rep. Sparkman quickly established himself a tenacious defender not only of the TVA but of New Deal–style programs generally.[11] The son of a tenant farmer, Sparkman strongly supported government aid

[8] "Sheffield Man Will Make Race: First Candidate Out for Congress in the Eighth," *Decatur (AL) Daily*, August 12, 1935.

[9] "Sparkman Puts Hat in Ring for Congress Post," *Decatur (AL) Daily*, February 28, 1936.

[10] Marguerite Johnston, "Alabama's Congr. John Sparkman Is One of Three Top Men in House," *Birmingham (AL) News Age-Herald*, March 10, 1946.

[11] Drew Pearson, "'Tuesday Night Club' Inspires House Democratic Cooperation," *Washington Post*, May 11, 1943; United Press, "Multi-Billion Job Measure Ready Today," *Washington Post*, January 10, 1949; more generally, see Leslie H. Southwick, "John Sparkman," in *Presidential Also Rans and Running Mates, 1788–1980* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1984), 582–89. On the emergence of a "conser-

to the economically disadvantaged, focusing on issues such as housing, full employment, and aid to education. In 1945, he capped his rapid ascent in the House by becoming Democratic whip. Shortly thereafter, Sparkman won a special election to the Senate, but his successor in the 8th district, Rep. Robert E. Jones, Jr., followed closely in his footsteps. Like his predecessor, Jones resisted the South's conservative turn, instead remaining instead a New Dealish Democrat into the early 1960s (see Figure 1).

vative coalition" between Southern Democrats and Republicans in the 1930s, see James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933–1939* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967).

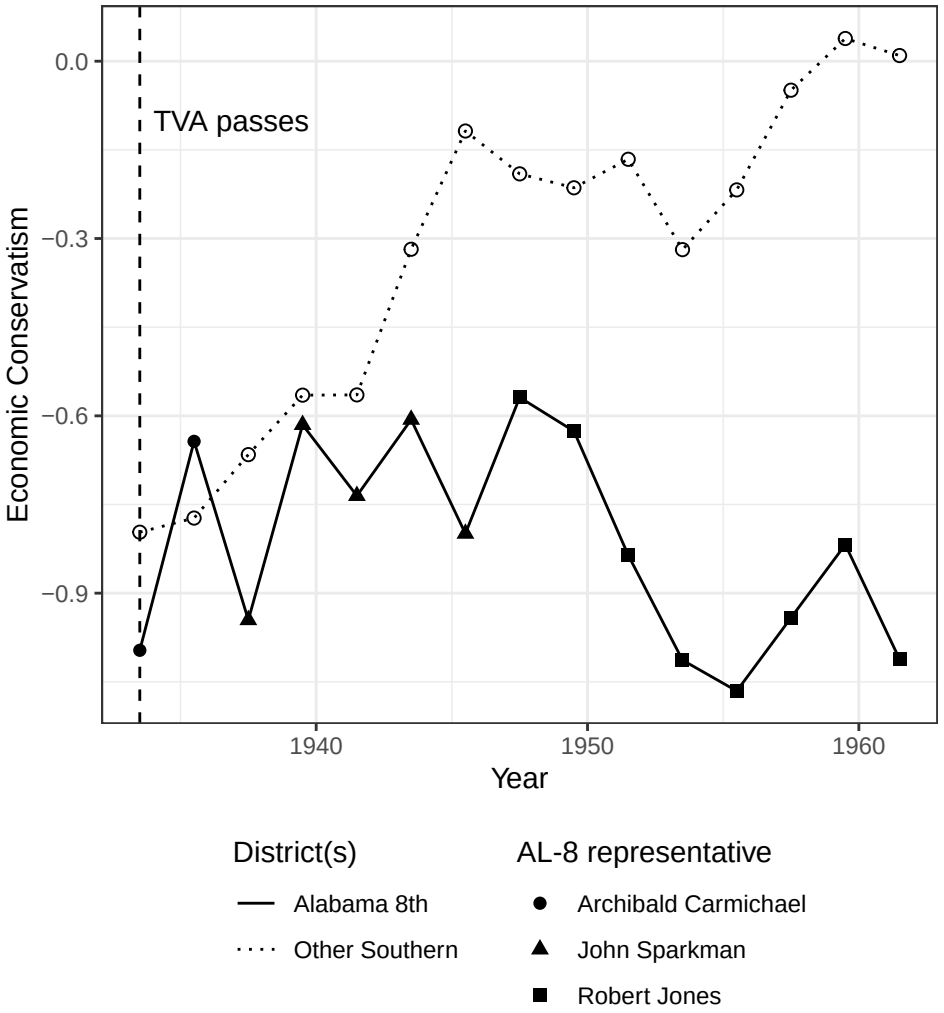


Figure 1: Representation of Alabama's 8th congressional district, 1933–62. The vertical axis represents the conservatism of U.S. House members' roll-call record on economic issues, scaled so that one unit equals approximately one standard deviation.[12] The solid line indicates the economic conservatism of the representative from Alabama's 8th district in each congressional session. Shapes on this line indicate the identity of the representative. The dotted line indicates the average conservatism of representatives from other Southern districts demographically similar to AL-8, as estimated by trajectory balancing (see Section 3.2).

[12]For a description of these estimates, see chapter 4 of Devin Caughey, *The Unsolid South: Mass Politics and National Representation in a One-Party Enclave* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Sparkman's move to the Senate did not alter his political stripes. Together with his senior colleague and close ally Lister Hill, Sparkman composed half of the most liberal senatorial delegation in the South. In 1946–47, for example, Sparkman was among the few Southerners to vote to sustain President Truman's vetoes of the anti-union Case and Taft–Hartley bills. Meanwhile, back in Alabama, he and Hill led the "loyalist" faction in their fight to regain control of the state party after the Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948.[13] In 1952, having earned a reputation as a rare Southerner who could bridge his party's sectional divide, Sparkman was first selected to help craft the Democratic national platform and then to serve as presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson's running mate that fall.[14]

Like nearly all elected Southern liberals in this period, Sparkman opposed federal legislation to protect civil rights.[15] Indeed, his main contribution to the 1952 platform was to weaken its civil rights section enough to avoid a repeat of the 1948 Southern

[13]Rogers et al., *Alabama*, 536–37; Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 200–201.

[14]John Sparkman, "The Reminiscences of John Sparkman" (Adlai E. Stevenson Project, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York, 1987), 3–5

[15]The only partial exception to Sparkman's opposition to civil rights was his support for the 1944 revision of the Soldier Voting Act, which the rest of the Southern caucus in the Senate opposed but declined to filibuster; Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2013), chap. 6; Keith M. Finley, "Southern Opposition to Civil Rights in the United States Senate: A Tactical and Ideological Analysis, 1938–1965" (PhD thesis, Louisiana State University, 2003), 82. For the few exceptions to Southern opposition to civil rights, see Timothy Werner, "Congressmen of the Silent South: The Persistence of Southern Racial Liberals, 1949–1964," *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 70–81.

bolt from the party.[16] Still, as a candidate for national office, Sparkman no choice but to campaign before non-Southern audiences, Black as well as White, for whom racial equality was now a core tenet of liberalism.[17]

To do so in a way that would not be politically fatal back home in Alabama, Sparkman leaned on the lessons of the TVA. While declaring himself "completely in accord" with Stevenson on civil rights, Sparkman nevertheless called for an "economic approach to progress in the South" that saw poverty as the root cause of racial division.[18] "I'm not saying we haven't discriminated against [Blacks] in the South," he admitted. "We have, in the scramble." But, he argued, "Most of our race problems arise from a competitive struggle between whites and Negroes to get enough."[19] The first step towards progress in civil rights, he told an audience of Black Democratic activists, should come in the

[16]Sparkman was given credit for two main changes: (1) moving an anti-filibuster plank from the the civil rights section to one labeled "Improving Congressional Procedure," and (2) the removal of the term "enforceable" from the platform's endorsement of legislation to guarantee equal opportunity in employment; Chalmer M. Roberts, "Strong Civil Rights Plank Ready," *Washington Post*, July 24, 1952, 9.

[17]On the redefinition of liberalism to incorporate civil rights, see Eric Schickler, *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[18]"A State Coercion Issue," *Greenville (SC) News*, September 2, 1952, 4; "The Winning Team: Stevenson – Sparkman" (pamphlet distributed by Democratic organization of Washington, DC, included in letter to Sparkman 8 Sep 1952, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama, W.S. Hoole Library, Sparkman Collection, Box 181, Folder "VP-1", 1952).

[19]Robert C. Albright, "Sen. Pepper Backs Truman Rights Plan," *Washington Post*, November 25, 1948.

economic realm. The South's problem is that "there are just not enough schools, not enough jobs for all the people."[20]

While far from a full-throated embrace of civil rights, Sparkman's economic approach to racial progress (not to mention his rare willingness to appeal directly to Black voters) distinguished him not only from overt racists in the South but also from stylistic moderates who preferred to avoid the issue entirely.[21] It was also enough to avoid alienating most non-Southern Black elites and voters, who remained largely loyal to the Democratic ticket in 1952.[22] More generally, it represented a brief moment of openness to racial moderation in the South—one that closed abruptly in the mid-1950s amid a furious White backlash to *Brown v. Board* and the rise of Black direct action.[23]

[20]"Sparkman Defends Civil Rights Position," *Washington Post*, October 5, 1952, M2.

[21]Emblematic of the latter two approaches were Sparkman's contemporaries, Senators Jim Eastland and John Stennis of Mississippi. Whereas Eastland was an overt race-baiter, his junior colleague Stennis stuck to constitutional generalities. See, e.g., "No Ranting, No Bands: A Quiet Campaigner Wins in Mississippi," *Associated Press*, November 5, 1947.

[22]"We know and do not fear John Sparkman," declared civil rights activist and former Roosevelt advisor Mary McLeod Bethune. "He has shown concern for and supported the economic advances of the poor people in the South and in the North as well—black and white alike"; Mary McCleod Bethune, "Mrs. Bethune Tells Why She's Behind Demo Ticket of Stevenson and Sparkman," *Chicago Defender*, October 25, 1952. See also Armistead Scott Pride, "The Negro Vote: Ike or Adlai," *The Nation*, August 16, 1952, 124–26; "GOP Cuts Democratic Lead to 6-1 in 5th Week of Defender Survey," *Chicago Defender*, September 6, 1952; "Democrats Sweep Philly," *Chicago Defender*, November 15, 1952; Henry Lee Moon, "The Negro Voter..." *The Nation*, September 17, 1960.

[23]Michael J. Klarman, "How *Brown* Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (1994): 81–118; Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); David Garrow, "'Happy'

After the Stevenson–Sparkman ticket's defeat in 1952, Sparkman returned to the Senate. In 1954, he faced a strong primary challenger who accused him of racial apostasy during his vice-presidential campaign, but thereafter faced little electoral opposition until his retirement in 1978.[24] Though he never voted for a civil rights bill, he remained a "New Dealer at heart," continuing to resist his fellow Southerners' turn to the right on economic issues by, for example, supporting the 1965 Medicare and Medicaid Act.[25]

Even as his political horizons broadened, however, Sparkman's political identity stayed rooted in the 8th district, which continued to be a stronghold of Alabama liberalism.[26] The TVA in particular, which he considered "[p]erhaps the greatest single project which has rebounded to the welfare of our region," remained central to Sparkman's self-presentation.[27] This is conveyed most clearly by what he called himself: a "TVA

Birthday, *Brown v. Board of Education*? *Brown*'s Fiftieth Anniversary and the New Critics of Supreme Court Muscularity," *Virginia Law Review* 90, no. 2 (2004): 693–729; Anthony J. Badger, "*Brown* and Backlash," in *Massive Resistance*, ed. Clive Webb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39–55; Kimberly Johnson, *Reforming Jim Crow: Southern Politics and State in the Age Before Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[24]Thomas Jasper Gilliam Sr., "The Second Folsom Administration: The Destruction of Alabama Liberalism, 1954–1958" (PhD thesis, Auburn University, 1975), 77.

[25]Gregory Michael Markley, "Senators Hill and Sparkman and Nine Alabama Congressmen Debate National Health Insurance, 1935–1965" (Master's thesis, Auburn University, Department of History, 2008), 134.

[26]Stewart E. McClure, "Stewart E. McClure: Chief Clerk, Senate Committee on Labor, Education, and Public Welfare (1949–1973)" (Oral History Interviews, Senate Historical Office, Washington, D.C., 1982-1983), 84; Gilliam, "The Second Folsom Administration," 80.

[27]John Sparkman, "Young Democrats, Greensboro, N.C. (Speech)" (Folder 32, Box 1319.0023. John J. Sparkman Papers, MSS-1319. The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, February 7,

liberal."[28]

As his use of this label indicates, for Sparkman the TVA was not just another pork-barrel project. Rather, it stood for something much larger—an entire ideological worldview in which federal aid would rescue the "colonial" South from economic subjugation to the North.[29] For Sparkman, this was the true meaning of "liberalism."[30] Useful for making himself palatable to Northern audiences, the TVA was even more resonant to his Southern constituents. A potent symbol of modernity, economic progress, and a beneficent federal government, the TVA was an invaluable rhetorical resource in Sparkman's rearguard battle against Southern Whites' growing conflation of activist government with civil rights. New Deal liberalism was increasingly a minority view in the Southern

1948); notably, these remarks were given to an audience of North Carolinians outside the TVA coverage area.

[28]John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times: Memoirs* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 290.

[29]On Southern liberals' view of the South as a "colonial economy," see Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 7 and *passim.* Along with Lister Hill and Lyndon Johnson, Sparkman was among the members of Congress who "hovered around" during the crafting of the 1938 *Report on the Economic Conditions of the South*, the definitive statement of this view of the federal government's role in transforming the South; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 65.

[30]In his post-retirement reminiscences, Sparkman maintained "that this term liberal and the term conservative are easily misused, and I've always said that Southern Senators and Representatives have been liberal. It just depends on by what standards you measure liberalism…. [N]ot a single New Deal measure of FDR would have been put through the Congress had it not been for the support of Southerners…. [O]n economic matters the South has always been liberal and most of the liberal economic programs have not only had Southern support but have had Southern sponsorship." Sparkman, "The Reminiscences of John Sparkman," 25–26.

electorate, even after the enfranchisement of Black Southerners in the mid-1960s, but among Sparkman's Alabama constituents it remained a viable position for the rest of his lengthy career.

John Sparkman's career was unusually long and successful, but he was far from the only TVA liberal. His view of the TVA as exemplifying the federal government's capacity to transform the South was shared by numerous other politicians, not to mention ordinary citizens, across the region. As will be discussed below, the totemic power of the TVA was fully understood by contemporary observers and has been well documented by historians. What is less clear, however, is whether the TVA actively fostered New Deal liberalism rather than merely symbolizing it. Did the TVA cause its beneficiaries to hold back from White Southerners' broader turn against the New Deal and the Democratic Party? Did this cause the TVA's congressional representatives to resist Southern Democrats' turn to the right? In short, was "TVA liberalism" a general phenomenon beyond Alabama's 8th District?

We argue that it was. As Section 3 of this paper shows, between the 1930s and 1960s, areas of the South otherwise similar to the TVA region experienced massive increases in vote share for Republican presidential candidates and in the economic conservatism of congressional representation. Inside the TVA coverage area, however, the growth in Republican vote share lagged 1–6 percentage points behind, while the average economic conservatism of TVA House members increased hardly at all. It thus appears that

inclusion in the TVA power area inhibited the partisan and ideological realignment of exhibited by White Southerners over this period.

Why did the TVA have these effects? Two additional sets of findings point to possible mechanisms. The first concerns timing. The TVA did not have any discernable impact on presidential partisanship or congressional representation until the 1940s, when most of its coverage area first started receiving TVA power. These effects peaked in the 1950s, roughly coinciding with the peak of federal transfers to the TVA as well as with sharp partisan conflict over its future. After its federal subsidies were largely cut off in the late 1950s, the TVA's effects on presidential partisanship began to dissipate. Partisan effects revived briefly in 1964 with the aggressively anti-TVA candidacy of Barry Goldwater, but by 1968 the TVA region converged politically with the rest of the South. In short, the TVA's effects on voting behavior roughly tracked the flow of government benefits to and political conflict over the Authority, and they did not persist beyond the transformation of Southern politics effected by the enfranchisement of Black Southerners in the mid-1960s.

The second finding is that while voter turnout elsewhere in the South approximately doubled between 1948 and 1968, turnout in the TVA region lagged 0 to 3 percentage points behind, depending on the election. This turnout difference peaked in the 1964 presidential election, the last before the widespread enfranchisement of Black Southerners, when the anti–civil rights Goldwater made unprecedented inroads in the Deep South. Thus, contrary to the prototypical account of policy feedback, the TVA does not seem to have mobilized new constituencies into politics. Rather, it seems to have exerted its

effects through a combination of persuading existing constituencies and *preempting* the mobilization of (Republican) opponents.

In sum, the political effects of the TVA were powerful but temporally as well as geographically limited. They did not appear until the flow of material benefits (as well as the realignment of the South) was well underway, and they did not persist long past the shutting off of government subsidies. Moreover, along with the cooptation of existing voters, an important mechanism for these effects seems to have been preempting the mobilization of White Republicans and conservatives that occurred more rapidly elsewhere in the South. Though rooted in material interests, this account accommodates an important role for symbolic politics as well. If not for the scale, salience, and sheer physical grandeur of the TVA, its beneficiaries would have had more difficulty tracing the benefits they received to the federal government, and strategic politician such as John Sparkman would not have found it so useful a political symbol.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. We first review the history of the TVA and the existing literature on its economic and political effects. This review suggests several hypotheses, which we investigate empirically in the following section. We compare TVA and non-TVA areas of the South between the 1930s and 1960s, tracking evolving differences in public opinion, voting behavior, and congressional representation. We conclude with a discussion of implications for American political development and the theory of policy feedback.

2. Background and qualitative evidence

2.1. Origins and expansion

Though ultimately a centerpiece of the New Deal, the TVA had its roots in a long-standing dispute over the government-owned Wilson Dam at Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Originally intended to supply electricity for munitions manufacturing during the First World War, the dam was not completed until half a decade after the war's end. Well before its completion, the dam became the focal point of a multisided conflict over whether it should remain under government control or instead be turned over to private interests. The leading advocate of government control—and of public power generally—was Senator George Norris, a Progressive Republican from Nebraska, who fought a long-running battle to use the dam's hydroelectric power for public purposes.[31]

When he assumed office in 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt seized upon and broadened Norris's proposal. Himself an ardent supporter of public power, FDR saw Muscle Shoals as an opportunity to showcase the value of regional planning more generally, "tying in industry and agriculture and forestry and flood prevention…into a unified whole over a distance of a thousand miles."[32] This vision was embodied in the TVA Act of 1933, which created a government corporation to oversee the construction of dams throughout the Tennessee River Valley for the purposes of navigation, flood control, and—most

[31]Casey P. Cater, *Regenerating Dixie: Electric Energy and the Modern South* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 95–97.

[32]George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913–1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 447

importantly—electricity generation. By providing low-cost power to municipal and cooperative utilities, the TVA would spur the electrification of the region while also serving as a "yardstick" by which to evaluate the prices charged by private power companies.[33]

The TVA's early history was filled with controversy. In addition to facing the bitter opposition of private utilities, its leaders disagreed with one another over the Authority's scope and priorities. This internal conflict was not resolved until the late 1930s, when, under the leadership of David Lilienthal, the TVA largely eschewed comprehensive regional planning in favor of a focus on agricultural extension work and especially power generation.[34] Seeking to develop the electricity market as rapidly as possible, Lilienthal aggressively encouraged municipal and rural cooperative utilities—which the TVA was statutorily obligated to prioritize—to apply for TVA power.[35] The pattern that eventually developed was for TVA to build or acquire generation and transmission facilities and for municipalities and cooperatives to do the same for distribution facilities, funded by bond issues and/or government loans.[36]

[33]Arthur E. Morgan, "The TVA Ideals and Program," *National Municipal Review* 23, no. 11 (1934): 577–78.

[34]Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 448–49; Norman Wengert, "TVA–Symbol and Reality," *Journal of Politics* 13, no. 3 (1951): 338.

[35]Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, [451].

[36]O. S. Wessel, "The Power Program," in *TVA: The First Twenty Years: A Staff Report*, ed. Roscoe C. Martin (Kingsport, TN: University of Alabama Press; University of Tennessee Press, 1956), 112. According to Kitchens, "Of the 40 rural electric cooperatives that signed wholesale contracts with the TVA, only four did not receive loans from the Rural Electrification Agency (REA) for the construction of rural distribution lines"; Carl Kitchens, "The Role of Publicly Provided Electricity in Economic Development: The Experience of the Tennessee Valley Authority, 1929–1955," *Journal of Economic*

In the short run, however, these plans "set TVA on a collision course with the utilities," whose primary representative was Commonwealth and Southern (C&S) executive—and future Republican presidential candidate—Wendell Willkie.[37] Beginning with Tupelo, Mississippi, a few municipal utilities did begin receiving TVA power in early 1934. Around the same time, C&S signed an agreement giving the TVA the option to buy transmission facilities in northeastern Mississippi, northern Alabama, and eastern Tennessee.[38] However, due to litigation and foot-dragging by C&S, it was several years before the Alabama and Tennessee properties changed hands and the TVA's legal and constitutional status was settled. As a consequence, despite strong demand from municipal and cooperative utilities, the TVA grew very little in its first few years.

By the late 1930s, the TVA was internally stable and legally secure enough to pressure private utilities to come to terms. "When TVA announced its intention of supplying a certain area and the major consumers declared their intention of accepting TVA power," writes Aaron Wildavsky, "there was little left for the private utilities to do but sell out."[39] Thirty-eight counties were added to the TVA power service area in 1936 and twenty-two in 1937–38. In 1939, a further 70 counties were added with the purchase of Tennessee Electric Power Company's properties in Tennessee, after which growth slowed to a trickle.[40]

History 74, no. 2 (2014): 392.

[37]Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 451–52.

[38]Thomas K. McGraw, *TVA and the Power Fight* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), 65.

[39]Aaron Wildavsky, *Dixon-Yates: A Study in Power Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 8.

[40]Aside from this purchase, the "TVA never significantly breached the borders" stipulated its 1934

By 1945, the expansion of the TVA service area had essentially ceased. This was due neither to statutory constraints nor lack of customer demand. The TVA Act authorized it to supply power not only the Tennessee River watershed itself, but also to "adjoining territory" and to customers "within transmission distance," which could be as far as 300 miles.[41] Moreover, municipal and cooperative utilities continued to request access to TVA power.[42] The wartime surge in electricity demand, however, exhausted the hydropower resources of the Tennessee River, and the TVA had to start building coal-power plants to keep up with demand.[43] Given the challenge of supplying its existing service area, the TVA could not handle further expansion. In 1959, private utility interests did finally win a statutory prohibition on TVA expansion, but by then expansion had not been a real possibility for more than a decade.[44]

agreement with C&S; Cater, *Regenerating Dixie*, 119.

[41]McGraw, *TVA and the Power Fight*, 53.

[42]Wessel, "The Power Program," 112.

[43]Wessel, 126.

[44]Marguerite Owen, *The Tennessee Valley Authority* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 118.

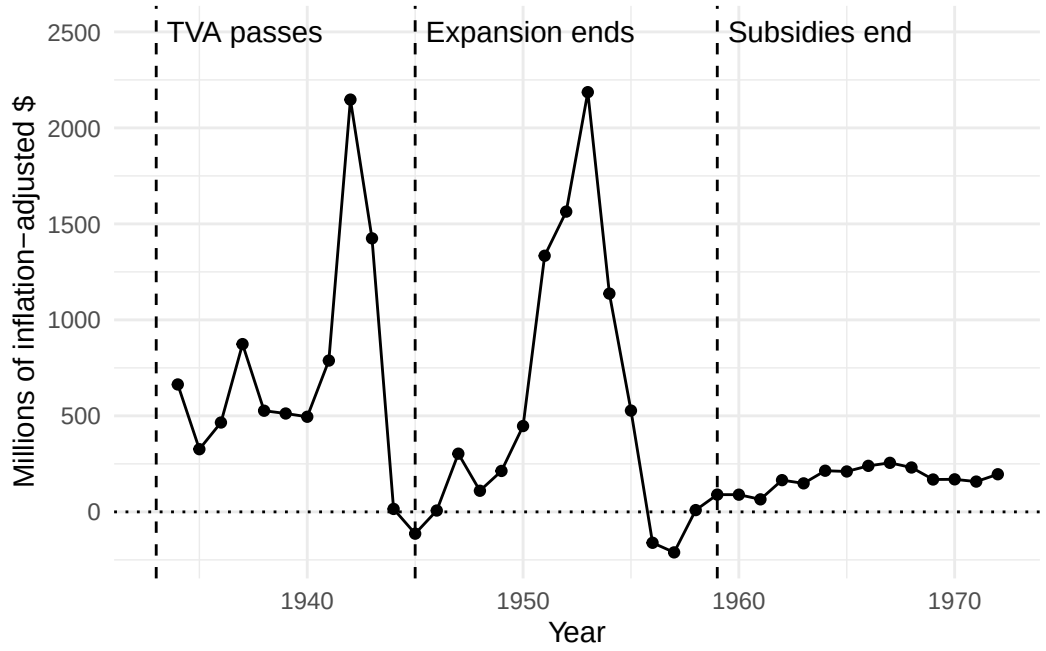


Figure 2: Net federal transfers to the TVA by year (in 2009 dollars). Source: Enrico Moretti, personal communication.

In 1959, Congress also made the TVA power program self-sufficient. By that point, the TVA had received $15.7 billion (2009 dollars) in federal funds. These monies funded investments in roads, canals, and other infrastructure in addition to hydroelectric dams and networks. Annual appropriations peaked in the early war years, during a spate of defense-motived dam-building, and reached a more sustained plateau in the first half of the 1950s (Figure 2). During this latter period, federal transfers to the TVA amounted to about $750 per household in its service area, the equivalent of a remarkable 10% of average household income.[45]

[45]Patrick Kline and Enrico Moretti, "Local Economic Development, Agglomeration Economies, and the Big Push: 100 Years of Evidence from the Tennessee Valley Authority," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 1 (2014): 275–331.

2.2. Economic effects of the TVA

Before the TVA was created, the Tennessee Valley was one of the poorest areas of the United States, with a per-capita income less than half the national average.[46] Even relative to the rest of the South, the Valley was economically underdeveloped: manufacturing, urbanization, and literacy were all less prevalent than elsewhere in the region. One of the main reasons for this underdevelopment was lack of access to electricity, especially in rural areas.

The traditional view among historians is that the TVA utterly transformed the economy and daily life of the Tennessee Valley. The fraction of farms with electricity increased from less than 1% in 1929 (vs. 10% elsewhere in the South) to 90% in 1954.[47] "Cheap power transported farmers of the Valley from the age of kerosene to the age of electricity," powering "[r]efrigerators, freezers, electric sewing machines, chicken brooders, cream separators, feed grinders, and other labor-saving devices."[48] On this view, the TVA, like New Deal public works more generally, was an "extraordinarily successful method of state-sponsored economic development."[49]

While not disputing the region's economic transformation over this period, some economists have questioned how much of it can be attributed to the TVA specifically. Kitchens, for example, claims that the TVA actualy had little effect on electricity

[46]Eric Rauchway, *Why the New Deal Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 61.

[47]Kitchens, "The Role of Publicly Provided Electricity in Economic Development," 400.

[48]Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 454–55.

[49]Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933–1956* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19; see also Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt.*

prices and thus on economic growth, whereas Kline and Moretti argue that it had local benefits that were offset nationally.[50] The economic benefits of the TVA are thus less clear-cut than historians have traditionally claimed.

2.3. The politics of the TVA

The essential point for understanding the politics of TVA, however, is that its economic effects on its coverage area were *believed* to be extremely positive, especially among those it served. As FDR predicted when he proposed the TVA: "It's neither fish nor fowl, but whatever it is, it will taste awfully good to the people of the Tennessee Valley."[51] And indeed, despite the dislocations caused by the initial phases of dam construction, any early skepticism among Valley residents quickly faded. By 1940, local residents were overwhelmingly supportive, due not only to "the benefits bestowed by federal expenditures" but also to "a widespread and deeply rooted sense of participation in a significant program."[52]

This last quotation is indicative of the TVA's outsized place in national and even global ideological conflict. As "an enduring symbol of the New Deal," the TVA became an

[50] Kitchens, "The Role of Publicly Provided Electricity in Economic Development"; Kline and Moretti, "Local Economic Development". The estimation of the TVA's economic effects is complicated by the likelihood of spillovers, such as the rate decreases by private utilities in response to TVA rates posited by Wessel, "The Power Program", 119.

[51] David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945*, The Oxford History of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 148.

[52] Norman Wengert, "The Politics of Water Resource Development as Exemplified by TVA," in *The Economic Impact of TVA*, ed. John R. Moore (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967), 71.

article of faith for midcentury liberals.[53] To its supporters,the TVA exemplified "the ability of a democratic society to plan for the wiser use of its natural resources"—a pragmatic middle way between laissez-faire and totalitarianism.[54] It also occupied a central place in the policy program of the national Democratic Party, which not only sought to protect the TVA itself but also to replicate it in other undeveloped areas of the country.[55]

For conservatives, on the other hand, the TVA epitomized the dangers that "planning" posed to a free society. Southern opponents mixed in racist arguments as well,[56] but for the most part national critics stuck to libertarian critiques of the TVA as "socialistic"—a "bureaucratic menace" that constituted a form of "neo-feudalism."[57] These critiques were

[53]Aaron Wildavsky, "TVA and Power Politics," *American Political Science Review* 55, no. 3 (1961): 577.

[54]Wengert, "TVA–Symbol and Reality," 370; see also David Ekbladh, "'Mr. TVA': Grass-Roots Development, David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol for U.S. Overseas Development, 1933–1973," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 3 (2002): 335–74.

[55]Wesley C. Clark, "Proposed 'Valley Authority' Legislation," *American Political Science Review* 40, no. 1 (1946): 62–70. For example, the 1948 Democratic platform pledged "the continued full and unified regional development of the water, mineral, and other natural resources of the nation, recognizing that the progress already achieved under the initiative of the Democratic Party in the arid and semi-arid states of the West, as well as in the Tennessee Valley, is only an indication of still greater results which can be accomplished"; https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273225.

[56]For example, the president of the Georgia Power Company warned that "Negro meter-readers will visit the homes of farmers who have to leave their wives and children while they go to plow"; Cater, *Regenerating Dixie*, 117.

[57]"TVA 'SOCIALISM' HIT BY LIBERTY LEAGUE: 'Never Have Dreams of Bureaucrats Flowered so Perfectly,' Group Charges." *New York Times*, May 27, 1935, 9; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands:*

echoed by Republican politicians. Indeed, observes Wildavsky, "The very factors which originally secured such remarkable Democratic party solidarity for TVA—identification with the New Deal and the public power issue—led to similar Republican cohesion against it."[58]

Republican presidential candidates consistently expressed greater opposition to the TVA than their Democratic opponents, though with varying degrees of intensity. Least hostile were Thomas Dewey in 1944 and 1948 and Richard Nixon in 1960 and 1968, both of whom expressed support for the TVA, though not its replication in other regions.[59] In addition to 1940 nominee Willkie, a former utility executive whose political career was launched by his high-profile battles against the TVA, the Authority's strongest opponents were Dwight Eisenhower (who called it "creeping socialism") and Barry Goldwater (who urged its privatization).[60]

On top of his ideological critique of TVA, Eisenhower also lodged the more pragmatic objection that "we, all of us, provide…such cheap power for one region that…it can

The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal (New York: Norton, 2009), 66; cf. James C. Scott, "High Modernist Social Engineering: The Case of the Tennessee Valley Authority," in *Experiencing the State*, ed. Lloyd I. Rudolph and John Kurt Jacobsen (Oxford University Press, 2006), 3–52.

[58]Wildavsky, "TVA and Power Politics," 589.

[59]"Dewey Endorses TVA, Balks at Idea for All," *New York Times*, September 13, 1948, 7; Ray Hill, "Tennessee and the 1960 Presidential Election" (*The Knoxville Focus*, March 6, 2022), https://www.knoxfocus.com/archives/this-weeks-focus/tennessee-and-the-1960-presidential-election/.

[60]"Eisenhower Points to the T.V.A. As 'Creeping Socialism' Example," *New York Times*, June 18, 1953; Charles Mohr, "Goldwater Again Urges Privately Owned T.V.A." *New York Times*, September 16, 1964.

appeal and take away the industries from other sections of the country." This argument resonated with some Northern Democrats, including then-senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, as well as with increasing numbers of Southern Democrats from outside the TVA region.[61] In 1954, for example, Sen. John McClellan of Arkansas, asked, "Are we to continue to pour out millions and millions of dollars in this [TVA] area to build it up beyond its natural potentials while the rest of the country suffers and waits?"[62]

Finally, the TVA also faced criticism from the left. Most famously, in his 1949 *TVA and the Grassroots*, Philip Selznick argued that TVA's ideology of "grassroots democracy," which entailed collaboration with local public and private agencies, was merely cover for a deal allowing the agricultural establishment to "coopt" the TVA's agricultural programs.[63] In similar vein, civil rights organizations criticized the TVA for failing to live up to its avowed policy of non-discrimination.[64] These accommodations to Southern power structures, especially racial hierarchies, were typical of New Deal programs generally, and indeed were critical to the TVA's acceptability to White Southerners.[65]

[61]Owen, *The Tennessee Valley Authority*, 97–98.

[62]Wildavsky, "TVA and Power Politics," 584.

[63]Philip Selznick, *TVA and the Grass Roots: A Study in the Sociology of Formal Organization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949); cf. David E. Lilienthal, *TVA: Democracy on the March* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).

[64]Nancy L. Grant, *TVA and Black Americans: Planning for the Status Quo* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

[65]On the design of New Deal policies to suit Southern White sensibilities, see Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005). On the New Deal's general failure to challenge the basic social structure of the South, see Anthony J. Badger, "How Did the New Deal Change the South?" in *New*

2.4. Policy feedback

The TVA's accommodation to Southern politics, however, is only one side of the story. As the historian George Tindall notes, "the 'cooptation' worked both ways."[66] Just as the TVA was shaped by local mores and power structures, so too were the ideas and interests of local residents influenced by the TVA.

The literature on policy feedback suggests that this is an especially propitious setting for such feedbacks. Policy feedback is most likely when a policy is highly *visible*, when its benefits or costs are *large*, when participants are geographically *concentrated*, and when it is easily *traceable* to specific government actions and actors.[67] The TVA exhibited all these characeristics.

The TVA—with its monumental dams, ubiquitous power lines, and home-illuminating electricity—could hardly have been more visible. Accordingly, area residents were almost universally aware of its presence. In 1945 Gallup poll, for example, 83% of White respondents who lived in the core TVA states of Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Kentucky reported having "heard of" the TVA—a figure 30 percentage points higher than that for non-TVA White Southerners.[68] Support for the TVA among those familiar with

Deal/New South (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007), 31–44.

[66]Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 451; see also Wengert, "TVA–Symbol and Reality", 383

[67]Paul Pierson, "When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change," *World Politics* 45, no. 4 (1993): 595–628; Joe Soss and Sanford F. Schram, "A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 1 (2007): 111–27; Andrea Louise Campbell, "Policy Makes Mass Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 15, no. 1 (2012): 333–51.

[68]Though overall level of awareness varies depending on the year and question wording, other survey

it was also higher in TVA areas, by margins of 6–13 points depending on the survey.[69]

As noted above, the material benefits of the TVA were large, with the value of federal subsidies peaking at an astounding 10% of average household income in the region. The geographic definition of the TVA meant that its beneficiaries were naturally concentrated in its coverage area. As one of FDR's signature achievements, it was also highly traceable to the actions of the president and his Democratic allies in Congress. Finally, given the vociferous opposition of prominent Republicans and the extended and dramatic conflict between the TVA and private utilities, the public was continually reminded of who was for and against the TVA. For all these reasons, we should expect the policy feedbacks of the TVA to be unusually prominent.

But what kinds of feedbacks? Globally, there is evidence that voters often (but not always) reward incumbents for improvements in public services.[70] This in turn creates

items related to awareness of the TVA exhibit similar gaps between TVA and non-TVA White Southerners. The following polls include an TVA awareness item: Gallup Organization, "Gallup Poll 1938-0120: Horse Races-Business-Automobiles-Sports-TVA-Presidential Election, 1938 [Dataset]," 1938, Gallup Organization, "Gallup Poll 345, 1945 [Dataset]," 1945, and Gallup Organization, "Gallup Poll 1945-0353: Labor Party-Taxes-Geography-World War II, 1945 [Dataset]," 1945.

[69]The following polls include an TVA support item: Gallup Organization, "Gallup Poll 1937-0066 Automobiles-World War I-Trade, 1937 [Dataset]," 1937, Gallup Organization, "Gallup Poll 1938-0120: Horse Races-Business-Automobiles-Sports-TVA-Presidential Election, 1938 [Dataset]", Gallup Organization, "Gallup Poll 345, 1945 [Dataset]", and Gallup Organization, "Gallup Poll 1945-0353: Labor Party-Taxes-Geography-World War II, 1945 [Dataset]".

[70]E.g., Robin Harding, "Attribution and Accountability: Voting for Roads in Ghana," *World Politics* 67, no. 4 (2015): 656–89; but see Daniel de Kadt and Evan S. Lieberman, "Nuanced Accountability: Voter Responses to Service Delivery in Southern Africa," *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 1

incentives for incumbents to target these services at politically important constituencies.[71] In the case of the New Deal specifically, economic historians have long argued that federal spending on programs such as the Works Progress Administration was targeted at competitive states and that it yielded electoral rewards for the Democratic Party.[72] This general perspective suggests that with respect to both intent and effect, the provision of public services such as electricity can be viewed as geographically targetable form of vote-buying.

The TVA, however, does not really fit this template. Though highly political in purpose, many of its intended effects—to demonstrate the effectiveness of planning generally and public power in particular—were national in scope. In keeping with this national focus, both the TVA's legislative champions (Norris, FDR) and all its early leaders hailed from outside the region. Though the TVA's location in the South no doubt aided its legislative prospects, the states it covered were not politically competitive and would not be for two decades, so its short-term electoral rewards to the party were minimal.

(2020): 185–215.

[71] Sunila S. Kale, *Electrifying India: Regional Political Economies of Development* (Stanford University Press, 2014); Brian Min, *Power and the Vote: Elections and Electricity in the Developing World* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[72] Gavin Wright, "The Political Economy of New Deal Spending: An Econometric Analysis," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 56, no. 1 (1974): 30–38; Shawn Kantor, Price V. Fishback, and John Joseph Wallis, "Did the New Deal Solidify the 1932 Democratic Realignment?" *Explorations in Economic History* 50, no. 4 (2013): 620–33; but see Stephanie Ternullo and Simon Y. Shachter, "Old Patronage During the New Deal: Did Urban Machines Use Work Relief Programs to Benefit the National Democratic Party?" *Studies in American Political Development* 38, no. 1 (2024): 56–69.

Finally, by all accounts, one the TVA fended off early congressional attempts to use it as a source of patronage, it became an unusually insulated and technocratic organization, particularly with regard to its power program [Lilienthal in particular adopted a self-consciously apolitical stance as a means of insulating his organization from external influence; Erwin C. Hargrove[73], 58; see also Jeffrey C. Auerbach[74], 37 and the sources cited therein]. For these reasons, the TVA should not be considered mere distributive spending to which voters responded out of purely material motives. Rather, given its combination of ideological symbolism and technocratic administration, we should expect it to have had broader ideological as well as partisan effects.

Several other features of the context are worth emphasizing. The enactment and roll-out of the TVA occurred in the final heyday of the South's one-party system, a key prop in its system of racial domination over Black Southerners.[75] Apart from a few Republican pockets (some covered by the TVA), elections from president to dog-catcher were utterly dominated by the Democratic Party, and essentially all electoral competition took place in Democratic primaries.[76] This partisan stability, however, masked major ideological flux. Between the mid-1930s and mid-1940s, as New Deal liberalism came to be seen as a threat to Jim Crow, both the Southern White public and its Democratic representatives

[73] *Prisoners of Myth: The Leadership of the Tennessee Valley Authority, 1933–1990* (Princeton University Press, 1994).

[74] "Electrification, Health and Distributional Politics: The Case of the TVA" (Ph.D., University of Georgia, 2021).

[75] Robert W. Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[76] Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*.

in Congress moved sharply to the right on economic issues. Though they remained internally diverse, Southern Democrats came to occupy in a pivotal middle position between Northern Democrats and Republicans.[77]

The Democrats' stranglehold on presidential elections started to slip with the Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948, which was followed by more substantial Republican inroads in the 1950s and after. Republicans' increasing success was due largely to the national Democratic Party's convergence with Republicans on civil rights, which freed White voters to divide on the basis of other differences between the parties, such as their positions on the TVA. With Democrats continuing to dominate party identification in the region as well as the pool of viable candidates, Republican success at lower levels lagged well behind the presidential; through 1960, Democrats won all Senate races in the South and well over 90% of U.S. House races.[78] It is worth noting that the number of Black voters increased in this period, but because the number of White voters increased by approximately the same amount, the White proportion of the electorate remained above 89%.[79] It was not until after the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) that enough Black Southerners were enfranchised to fundamentally change the composition of the electorate and thus the

[77]Ira Katznelson, Kim Geiger, and Daniel Kryder, "Limiting Liberalism: The Southern Veto in Congress, 1933–1950," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 2 (1993): 283–306; Caughey, *The Unsolid South*.

[78]Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002).

[79]Harold W. Stanley, *Voter Mobilization and the Politics of Race: The South and Universal Suffrage, 1952–1984* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 154

character of electoral politics in the South.[80]

The implementation of the TVA thus occurred in the context of a White South that was in the midst of turning away from the New Deal and its traditional commitment to the Democratic Party. One possibility, then, is that the TVA's beneficiaries joined the South's general ideological and partisan shift to the right even as they remained devoted to this program specifically. The trajectory of Mississippi's 1st District, represented by the virulently racist (but strongly pro–public power) John Rankin, is suggestive of this possibility.[81] A number of historians and other observers, however, have argued that the TVA's effects were not narrowly confined but rather extended much more broadly.

First, by exemplifying the federal government capacity to aid the underdeveloped South, the TVA created hunger for other forms of assistance. "No government agency," asserts the historian Bruce Schulman, "so strongly inspired southern demand for federal economic intervention."[82] This can be viewed as an example of the "interpretive" effects discussed by Paul Pierson. In addition to serving as a cognitively accessible model for government action, the apparent success of the TVA also influenced the beliefs about

[80] On the interaction between Black mobilization and Republican growth, see M. V. Hood III, Quentin Kidd, and Irwin L. Morris, *The Rational Southerner: Black Mobilization, Republican Growth, and the Partisan Transformation of the American South* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

[81] McGraw calls Rankin the "TVA's best friend in Congress" after George Norris. Rankin's flamboyant racism was patterned after that of Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo, but Rankin was not as economically progressive as the "redneck liberal" Bilbo was, at least in the latter's earlier years. McGraw, *TVA and the Power Fight*, 58; Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 173.

[82] Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 35.

what government actions are possible or appropriate.[83] According to Anthony Badger, many Southerners "learned…that the federal government, through an agency like the TVA, could regenerate an entire region…. Federal government assistance was to be the answer to the region's problems of education, hospital construction, medical research, vaccination provision, electrification, and the provision of rural library services and telephones." [84]

Second, the TVA influenced the material and symbolic resources available to politicians and other political actors. Badger in particular has emphasized how New Deal infrastructure programs such as the TVA created opportunities for a "new generation" of younger, issue-oriented politicians inspired by FDR, especially after 1940. Established older politicians, such as Tennessee Senator Kenneth McKellar, supported the TVA but tended to see it primarily as a potential source of patronage.[85] In contrast, up-and-

[83]Pierson, "When Effect Becomes Cause", 611–24

[84]Anthony J. Badger, "Whatever Happened to Roosevelt's New Generation of Southerners?" in *New Deal/New South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007), 64. Rep. Frank E. Smith, who represented a TVA district in the Mississippi Delta and later became chairman of the TVA, put it even more bluntly: "My economic philosophy could be condensed to fairly simple terms—federal programs were necessary to get more money into the hands of the people. Few of my constituents would have expressed it like that, and neither did I, but both in practical terms and in speech-making generalities, it meant improving the standard of living by developing natural resources and enlarging economic opportunities for the South as a whole and the Delta in particular." Frank E. Smith, *Congressman from Mississippi* (New York: Pantheon, 1964), 90.

[85]Reformist Tennessee governor Gordon Browning claimed that McKellar wanted to "name everybody in that outfit." That the TVA, under Lilienthal's leadership, was able to prevent the powerful McKellar from capturing the TVA is a testament to the agency's insulation from local and congressional pressures;

comers such as Sen. McKellar's eventual successor Albert Gore, Sr. not only preferred a more apolitical administration—"The people who depend upon TVA for electricity don't want it operated by political hacks"—but also considered the TVA a model for a broader program of government-led economic and even political transformation.[86] While certainly interested in funneling federal spending to their districts, these Southern New Dealers were not mere pork-barrelers. Rather, they advocated policies with "a genuinely reformist, social welfare, redistributive element."[87]

As suggested by John Sparkman's self-given epithet "TVA liberal," these politicians found it useful to associate themselves with the TVA and deploy it as a rhetorical device. It was both a handy synecdoche for the New Deal as a whole and means of differentiating oneself from other, less favorable ideological labels, such as "socialist."[88]

Anthony J. Badger, *Albert Gore, Sr. A Political Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 45.

[86]Badger, 46; Lilienthal recalled that in 1940 or 1941 he took then-representative Gore to tour a TVA dam under construction, at which Gore remarked, "What we are seeing is not just a dam: it may be more important still; the end of a political regime." Badger, 44.

[87]Badger, "Whatever Happened to Roosevelt's New Generation of Southerners?", 62, 64–5. As a rule, this did not include openness to civil rights. These politicians did, however, draw support from the small but increasing number of Black voters in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as from organized constituencies fostered by the TVA, such as electrical cooperatives and labor unions.

[88]The term "TVA socialist" was used in this period, sometimes in a jocular or tongue-in-cheek manner. An example of the latter can be found in a mock-rustic pro-TVA letter to the editor of the *Auburn News* in a TVA area of Kentucky, which was signed "Cousin—jest a country boy TVA socialist-who-never-had-no-lites-in-the-barn-afore TVA—Charlie." "If They Don't Want It: Tell Stones We'll Annex Paradise," *Auburn (KY) News*, August 22, 1962, 2. I thank Bryan Jones for informing me of the use of this term.

In 1950, for example, Sparkman wrote a guest editorial in the *Montgomery Advertiser* rebutting the insinuation that he had changed his "conception of government" since his 1936 election to Congress. Citing the TVA among other policies, Sparkman argued that, on the contrary, he had consistently supported government programs that "enable us working together to do for ourselves things we need done but cannot do as individuals or separate states." These programs might fall "[u]nder a strict definition of 'socialism,' " but they had proven effective and popular. "[F]or most people," he concluded, "those particular measures which they like are good; those that they do not like are called 'socialistic.' "[89]

The positive symbolism of the TVA could also be wielded in electoral campaigns, as Sparkman (aided by the backlash against Eisenhower's attacks on the TVA) did in his tight 1954 Senate primary against a conservative Democrat.[90] With the rise of two-party competition, Republicans became targets as well. Sparkman's liberal colleague Lister Hill, facing an unexpectedly competitive general election in 1962, made the TVA a centerpiece of his campaign.[91] "The Republicans did not put TVA in Alabama," he

[89]John J. Sparkman, "Guest Editorial: History of a Philosophy," *Montgomery (AL) Advertiser*, July 6, 1950.

[90]Gilliam, "The Second Folsom Administration," 75–76; William G. Carleton, "Liberal Swing," *The Nation*, May 22, 1954.

[91]Walter Dean Burnham, "The Alabama Senatorial Election of 1962: Return of Inter-Party Competition," *Journal of Politics* 26, no. 4 (1964): 798–829, 811. Despite his roots in the central Alabama Black Belt, by this point Hill's core constituency lay in "the more liberal T.V.A.-conscious electorate of Northern Alabama"; Burnham, 812.

reminded his constituents.[92]

Once a critical mass of TVA liberals reached Congress, they began to be recognized as distinct from their fellow Southerners.[93] In the early 1960s, one Republican congressman reported:

> Most Southern members come from smaller communities and naturally line up with those opposed to public housing, for example, because they are persuaded to believe it is a form of socialism, and they have generally been strongly opposed to anything with socialistic tendencies. That group is dwindling though…. There are a group of Southerners I call TVA Southerners. Those in the TVA area don't vote with their Southern colleagues; they vote with the Northern Democrats. They are pretty liberal all the way.[94]

In this congressman's eyes, the TVA region received qualitatively different representation from the rest of the South. Crucially, the differences were not confined to the TVA specifically, or even to the general issue of public power, but rather entailed a fundamentally different ideological outlook. Instead of opposing "anything with socialistic tendencies," TVA Southerners were "liberal all the way."

[92]Young, "A Republican Challenge to Democratic Progressivism in the Deep South", 162

[93]David R. Mayhew, *Party Loyalty Among Congressmen: The Difference Between Democrats and Republicans, 1947–1962* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

[94]Charles L. Clapp, *The Congressman: His Work as He Sees It* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963), 363

2.5. Summary and hypotheses

Let us summarize the primarily qualitative and descriptive discussion so far.

Though slow to ramp up, the TVA had reached nearly its full coverage area by 1940. Federal spending on the TVA surged during WWII and again in the early 1950s before tapering off by 1960. By then, almost the whole region had been electrified, a profound transformation in the lives of ordinary people that was widely attributed to the TVA.

As a leading symbol of public power and of the New Deal generally, the TVA sparked controversy from the start. Championed by Democrats and criticized by Republicans, it was a persistent flashpoint of partisan and ideological conflict. In the Tennessee Valley itself, initial skepticism was quickly replaced by overwhelming enthusiasm, thanks in no small part to the TVA's accommodation to Southern racial mores.

But "cooptation" went both ways, for in addition to being shaped by Southern politics the TVA also shaped it. It stimulated White Southerners' demand for other forms of federal aid. Just as important, it fostered a new generation of Southern New Dealers whose political careers drew on the material and symbolic resources provided by the TVA. Importantly, these effects took place against the backdrop of White Southerners' general swing to the right and towards the Republican Party.

This analysis suggests several testable hypotheses:

1. If the TVA stimulated support for New Deal generally, residents of its coverage area should have expressed less support for economic conservatism than otherwise

similar areas of the South.

2. If Republican opposition to the TVA made them less appealing to TVA beneficiaries, Republican gains in presidential elections should be more muted in parts of the South covered by the TVA.[95]
3. If the TVA fostered the political careers of "TVA liberals," then U.S. representatives from its coverage area should have resisted the general rightward shift of Southern members of Congress.[96]

It also leaves open questions:

1. Were the TVA's inhibiting effect on Republican growth, if any, mediated by stimulating voter turnout (i.e, mobilizing supporters) or by depressing it (i.e., demobilizing potential opponents)?

[95]This hypothesis has been examined before, namely by Devin Caughey and Sara Chatfield, "Causal Inference and American Political Development: Contrasts and Complementarities," *Public Choice* 185 (2020): 370–73 and Auerbach, "Electrification, Health and Distributional Politics," 43–55. Both of these studies find support for the hypothesis. The first employs a district-level repeated cross-sectional design similar to that reported in Section C.3 of this paper's Supplementary Materials. The second uses a true (county-level) panel, but its two-way fixed effects regression omits state-year intercepts and thus entails cross-state comparisons likely to be dubious in presidential elections, where state-specific shocks are strong. Auerbach's analysis also exploits variation in the timing of the TVA's rollout across counties, which we do not so as to avoid the effects of localities' anticipation of later inclusion in TVA.

[96]This hypothesis too is briefly examined in Caughey and Chatfield, "Causal Inference and American Political Development," 370–73; see also Devin Caughey, Allan Dafoe, and Jason Seawright, "Nonparametric Combination (NPC): A Framework for Testing Elaborate Theories," *Journal of Politics* 79, no. 2 (2017): 697–98.

2. How long did these effects take to manifest, and how long did they persist? Did they emerge immediately upon enactment and slowly decay, or did they track the flow of federal subsidies to the region?

The following section investigates these questions with statistical analysis of quantitative data.

3. Quantitative analyses

In this section, we assess the effects of inclusion in the TVA on four outcomes: economic conservatism of the White public, Republican share and voter turnout in presidential elections, and economic conservatism of congressional representatives. Our basic approach is to compare geographic units covered by the TVA with otherwise similar units elsewhere in the South, tracking their differences over time. By showing that differences between these areas emerge only after the implementation of the TVA, we provide evidence that these differences are attributable to the causal effects of the TVA specifically.

3.1. Data

3.1.1. TVA coverage

Our causal variable of interest is inclusion in the TVA power area, which we measure at the level of the county. We operationalize this variable as whether any municipal or cooperative utility in the county had a power contract with the TVA as of July 1960,

after the TVA was statutorily prohibited from expanding.[97] Thus defined, the TVA covers all 95 counties in Tennessee, 35 counties in Mississippi, 25 in Kentucky, 16 in Alabama, 11 in Georgia, 4 in North Carolina, and 4 in Virginia (see map in Figure 3).[98] We define a congressional district as a TVA district if any (or alternatively all) of its component counties is a TVA county.[99]

[97] We derive this information from *Municipal and Cooperative Distributors of TVA Power: Annual Report* (Tennessee Valley Authority, 1960). We rely particularly the map included in Section A of this paper's Supplementary Materials. This definition differs only slightly from the county codings used by Kline and Moretti, "Local Economic Development". Note that this is a relatively expansive definition of the TVA service area in that it includes counties that are only partially covered by the TVA. It also includes Memphis's Shelby County, which decided to build its own generating plant in 1955 but continued to purchase TVA power on an interim basis through 1958; see *Municipal and Cooperative Distributors of TVA Power*, 17.

[98] One of the five TVA "counties" in Virginia is the city of Bristol, which is separate from surrounding Washington County.

[99] Until 1962, all Southern districts except two in Louisiana and (later) two in Texas were composed of whole counties.

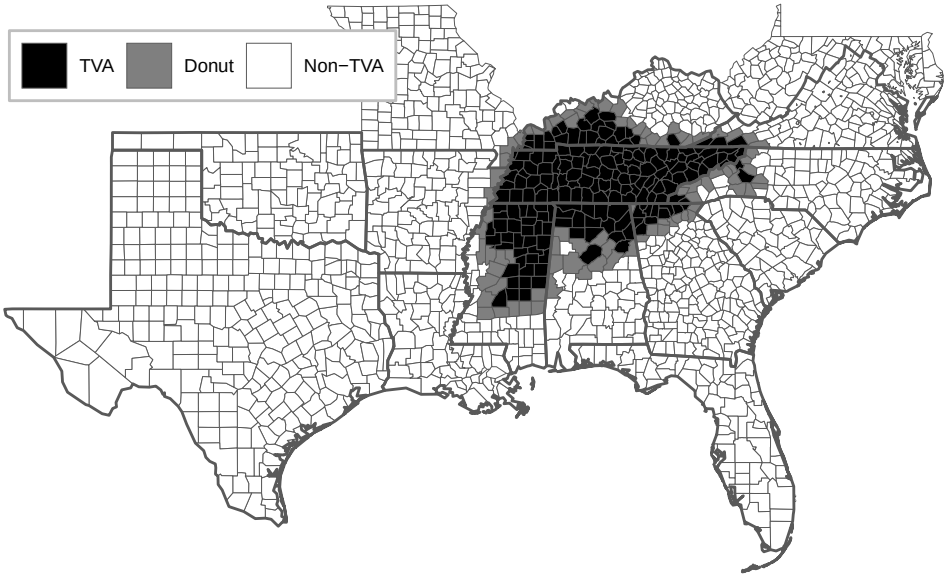


Figure 3: County-level map of the TVA power area. Black counties are those that contained a utility that received TVA power as of July 1960. The gray "donut" represents non-TVA counties that border the TVA. White counties are other counties in the 17-state South.

We also collected data on when the county joined the TVA, but there is not enough independent temporal variation to exploit in the analyses below. Instead, we define a county-year as "treated" if the year postdates the TVA's authorization in 1933 and the country ever received TVA power. This ensures that any covariate we condition on is entirely unaffected by treatment or even the anticipation thereof.

3.1.2. Mass conservatism

To measure public attitudes towards New Deal liberalism, we rely on Caughey and Warshaw's annual measures of mass economic conservatism.[100] These measures are

[100]Devin Caughey and Chrisopher Warshaw, *Dynamic Democracy: Public Opinion, Elections, and Policymaking in the American States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

estimated with an item-response model applied to data on survey responses to hundreds of economic issue questions going back to 1936. The estimates can be disaggregated into Black and non-Black segments of the public, and we focus on the latter, which in the mid-century South essentially means the White public. Due to limitations in the survey data, these measures of the economic conservatism of the White public are available only at level of the state, not the county.

3.1.3. Presidential Republicanism

To chart the partisan realignment of the TVA region in comparison to the rest of the South, we rely on the Republican share of votes cast in presidential elections between 1924 and 1972, measured at the county level.[101] We focus on presidential elections because lower-level offices remained overwhelmingly Democratic in this period and were frequently uncontested. We use Republican rather than Democratic share to avoid complications created by the Dixiecrats and other independent candidacies of erstwhile Democrats.[102]

[101] David Leip, "Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections" (http://www.uselectionatlas.org, 2013).

[102] In 1948, four state Democratic parties designated the Dixiecrat candidate Strom Thurmond as the official Democratic nominee. In Alabama, the national Democratic candidate, Harry Truman, did not even appear on the ballot; Michael Perman, *Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 271–72; G. Ward Hubbs, "Alabama Politics, 1819–1997," in *Alabama Political Almanac*, ed. James Glen Stovall, Partick R. Cotter, and Samuel H. Fisher III (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 52.

3.1.4. Congressional conservatism

Our main measure of congressional conservatism is derived from a dynamic IRT model estimated using U.S. House roll-call votes on issues related to social welfare and economic regulation.[103] This is available for each representative for each two-year congressional term between 1931 and 1962. We assign these values to congressional districts, averaging scores if a district changed representatives over the course of a session. As a robustness check, we construct analogous measures using Nokken and Poole's term-specific DW-NOMINATE scores.[104]

3.1.5. Covariates

Most of our analyses also make use of various covariates, primarily measured at the county level.[105] For years before 1963, these county attributes can be aggregated to House districts, which were generally composed of whole countries.[106] Table 1 reports covariate balance between TVA (treated) counties and non-TVA (control) counties elsewhere in the 13-state South.

[103]Caughey, *The Unsolid South*, chap. 4.

[104]Timothy P. Nokken and Keith T. Poole, "Congressional Party Defection in American History," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2004): 545–68, as updated in 2012.

[105]County-level data is from Michael R. Haines and ICPSR, "Historical, Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: The United States, 1790–2002 [Computer File]" (ICPSR02896-v3. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) [distributor], 2010-05-21. doi:10.3886/ICPSR02896.v3, 2010).

[106]Counties were matched to districts based on the descriptions in Kenneth C. Martis et al., *The Historical Atlas of United States Congressional Districts, 1789–1983* (New York: Free Press, 1982).

Table 1: Covariate balance between TVA (treated) counties and non-TVA (control) counties elsewhere in the 13-state South. Columns 2 and 3 show the mean and percent missing for TVA counties; columns 4 and 5 do the same for control counties. The rightmost column reports the standardized difference (mean difference divided by standard deviation of the treated).

Variable	TVA Mean	TVA % NA	Ctrl Mean	Ctrl % NA	Std Diff
Total population 1920	24,382.1	0.0	22,312.4	3.0	0.07
Total population 1930	27,307.4	0.0	25,029.1	0.7	0.05
Total area 1930 (sq. miles)	467.3	0.0	659.9	0.7	-1.12
Population density 1930	77.4	0.0	145.9	0.7	-0.21
White population 1930 (%)	83.1	0.0	71.4	0.7	0.63
Urban population 1930 (%)	12.2	0.0	16.7	0.7	-0.25
Share with radio 1930 (%)	1.7	0.0	2.4	0.7	-0.59
Factory workers / pop 1930 (%)	2.9	13.2	3.4	18.6	-0.11
Factory wages / pop 1930 ($)	22.6	13.2	26.4	18.6	-0.12
Factory output / pop 1930 ($)	119.6	13.2	156.7	18.6	-0.21
Crop value / pop 1930 ($)	101.5	0.5	110.2	1.0	-0.19
Farm land value / pop 1930 ($)	225.0	0.5	459.7	1.0	-2.51
Democratic share 1924 (%)	62.9	0.0	70.1	1.7	-0.31
Democratic share 1928 (%)	53.4	0.0	55.3	0.8	-0.08
Democratic share 1932 (%)	73.0	0.0	84.0	0.9	-0.51
Republican share 1924 (%)	34.6	0.0	24.4	1.7	0.44
Republican share 1928 (%)	46.5	0.0	44.4	0.8	0.08
Republican share 1932 (%)	26.3	0.0	15.4	0.9	0.51
Presidential turnout 1924 (%)	14.8	0.0	12.7	2.3	0.24
Presidential turnout 1928 (%)	16.6	1.6	15.3	1.0	0.14
Presidential turnout 1932 (%)	17.8	1.1	17.0	1.0	0.07

Many covariates are fairly well balanced (|Std Diff| < 0.25), but TVA counties do tend to have smaller areas, Whiter and more rural populations, less radio access, and in some presidential elections higher turnout and Republican share. They also have much lower farm land values per capita, though this is largely driven by a few outlier control counties with extremely small populations, mainly in Texas. We classify the variables *Total population 1930* through *Share with radio* as demographic covariates, *Factory workers / pop 1930* through *Farm land value / pop 1930* as economic covariates, and the remainder as political covariates. Note that missingness is most common among economic covariates, with the exception of per-capita crop value and land value.

3.2. Research design

Our basic approach is to track differences TVA areas with non-TVA areas over time. The causal inferences we can draw from this approach are most limited with respect to the conservatism of the White public. Not only do our estimates begin in 1936, after the TVA was created, but they are measured at a coarse level of aggregation (state). This is particularly unsatisfying given that all but one state where TVA has a substantial presence also include large non-TVA areas. Due these limitations, the differences we report between the four core TVA states (Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Kentucky) and other states in the 13-state South, which begin in 1936 and extending through 1972, should be regarded as only suggestively causal.

We can do better for other outcomes, especially those measured at the county level

(presidential Republicanism and turnout). For county-level variables, the fact that the TVA straddled state boundaries is an assert, for it allows us to compare counties within the same state and thus account for state-specific swings in presidential elections. The larger number of counties also makes it possible to adjust for the covariate imbalances reported in Table 1.

Our approach to covariate adjustment is to weight non-TVA counties so that the distribution of baseline covariates, including pretreatment outcomes, in the control group matches the treatment group. Specifically, we employ kernel balancing,[107] prioritizing mean balance while also seeking approximate balance on a kernel-based feature expansion of the covariate distributions (which helps account for nonlinearities and interactions among covariates). By including dummy variables for state, we can account for state-specific confounding, though at the cost of dropping all Tennessee counties from the analysis. We implement this approach using the R the "trajectory balancing" package **tjbal**,[108] which is well suited for panel causal inference with relatively few time units.

Finally, for the district-level outcome of congressional conservatism, we adopt two approaches. First, we apply trajectory balancing to the subset of Southern districts that have stable boundaries between 1933 and 1962. That is, we weight non-TVA districts match the covariate profiles of TVA districts and then track their outcome differences over time. We define as "treated" any district that contains any TVA counties. (Figure 1

[107] Chad Hazlett, "Kernel Balancing: A Flexible Non-Parametric Weighting Procedure for Estimating Causal Effects," *Statistica Sinica* 30 (2020): 1155–89.

[108] Chad Hazlett and Yiqing Xu, *tjbal: Trajectory Balancing*, 2024, https://github.com/xuyiqing/tjbal.

uses the same approach except that the control group is weighted to match the covariate values of Alabama's 8th District specifically.[109]) Unfortunately for our purposes, only four states—Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana—did not redistrict over this time period. This small sample limits our ability to adjust covariate imbalance and to calculate uncertainty estimates. We explore an alternative "pseudo-panel" approach in the Supplementary Materials (Section Section C.3).

3.3. Results

Having described our research designs, we now report and discuss the resulting estimates.

3.3.1. Mass conservatism

We begin with the economic conservatism of the White mass public. As noted above, we cannot geolocate respondents within state, so we simply compare the conservatism of White respondents in the four core TVA states against those elsewhere in the South, tracking the difference between the two areas over time. While not rigorously controlled, one advantage of this comparison is that both the treated and control sets span the most important geographic divide within the South: the Deep South versus the Peripheral South.[110]

[109] It is not feasible to find weights that exactly match AL-8's characteristics, but all covariate sets we have explored result in the same yawning gap between this district and other Southern districts.

[110] E.g., Black and Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans*.

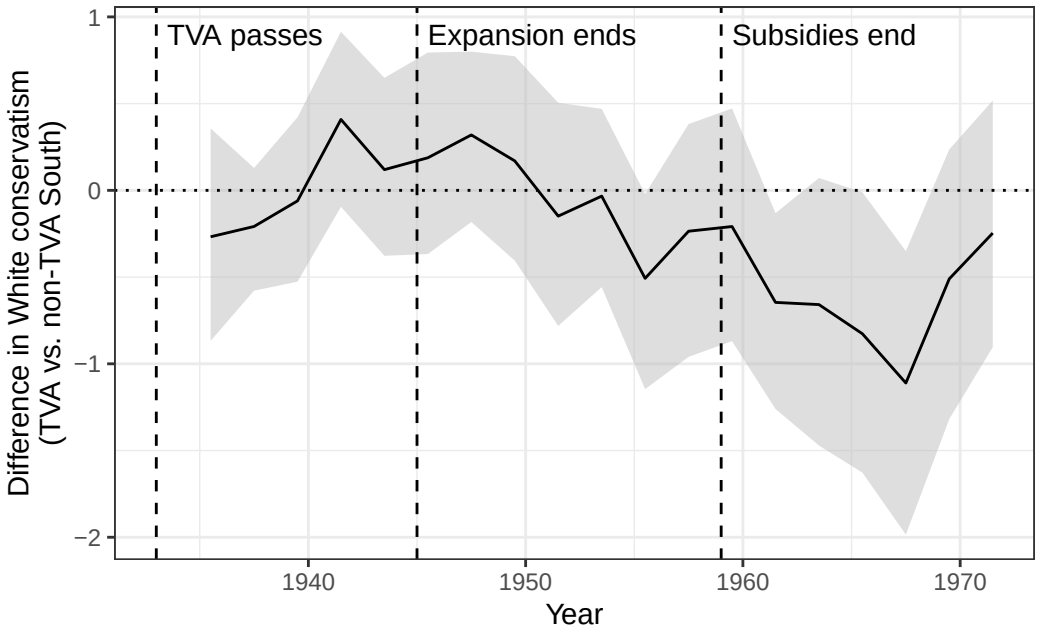


Figure 4: Difference in the economic conservatism of White residents of the core TVA states of Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Kentucky as compared to other states in the 13-state South. Estimates are reported for each biennium between 1936 and 1971–72 and are scaled so that the standard deviation across all U.S. states in the typical year is 1. The shaded region indicates 95% credible intervals.

Figure 4 reports the results of this comparison for each biennium (i.e., congressional term) between 1936 and 1971–72.[111] As this figure shows, White Southerners in TVA states were not ideologically distinctive before the mid-1950s, and certainly not systematically less conservative. The White publics of TVA states did start shifting leftwards relative to the region beginning in the late 1940s, shortly after the TVA stopped expanding. This trend continued through 1967–68, when TVA states were about one standard

[111]We aggregate by biennium to match the aggregation by congressional term in subsequent analyses of representatives' conservatism. Since the public opinion data begin in 1936, the 1935–36 biennium does not include data from 1935.

deviation more liberal than other states in the region.[112] It then reversed, with TVA states eventually converging with the rest of the South in the mid-1970s.

Given that these results lump all Alabamians, Mississippians, and Kentuckians in with the TVA, and that we do not explicitly control for differences between states, these results should be interpreted cautiously. They do, however, provide suggestive evidence that White Southerners in TVA states, despite lacking ideological distinctiveness before the mid-1950s, remained more supportive of New Deal liberalism than their counterparts elsewhere in the South.

3.3.2. Presidential elections

We now turn to an analysis of presidential elections. Our two outcomes, Republican share and turnout, have the virtue of being measured at the county level, which permits more precise inferences and more credible causal claims. As noted above, we employ kernel balancing to adjust for pre-treatment differences between TVA and non-TVA counties and compare their outcomes over time. We focus on a specification that includes all the demographic and political covariates listed in Table 1, plus two low-missingness economic covariates: the per-capita value of crops and land. To adjust for unobserved state-specific factors, which are strong forces in presidential elections, we also include dummy variables for state, which forces us to drop all Tennessee counties. Finally, to address potential spillovers to control counties, we drop the TVA "donut" from the

[112] The estimates are scaled so that the standard deviation across all U.S. states in the typical year is 1.

analysis. We highlight this specification because in our view it provides the best balance of covariate adjustment and sample size, but we also reference alternative specifications as appropriate.[113]

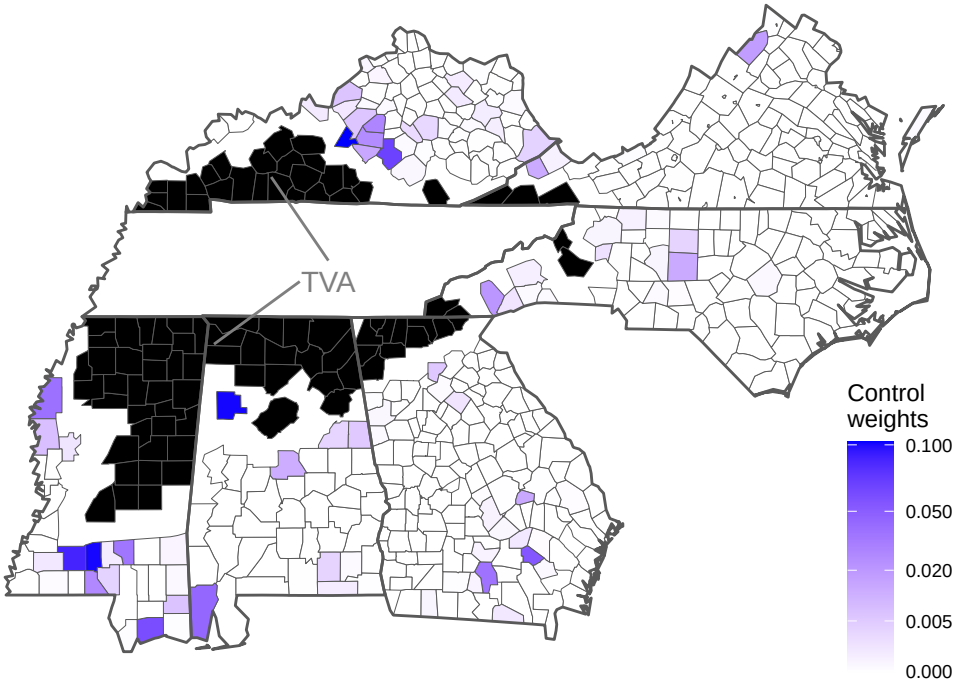


Figure 5: Map of counties used to estimate presidential outcomes. Black counties are part of the TVA. The weights of non-TVA counties, which sum to 1, are indicated with shades of blue.

Figure 5 maps the trimmed sample of counties, which covers the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, and Kentucky. The weights of control counties are indicated with blue shading. With a weight of about 10%, Larue County, Kentucky is the most heavily weighted control, followed by Fayette County, Alabama

[113] On the trade-off between covariate balance and sample size, see Gary King, Christopher Lucas, and Richard A. Nielsen, "The Balance-Sample Size Frontier in Matching Methods for Causal Inference," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2 (2017): 473–89.

and Lawrence County, Mississippi. The remaining weights are spread more evenly across counties. As Figure 6 shows, these weights achieve perfect mean balance on all low-missingness covariates.

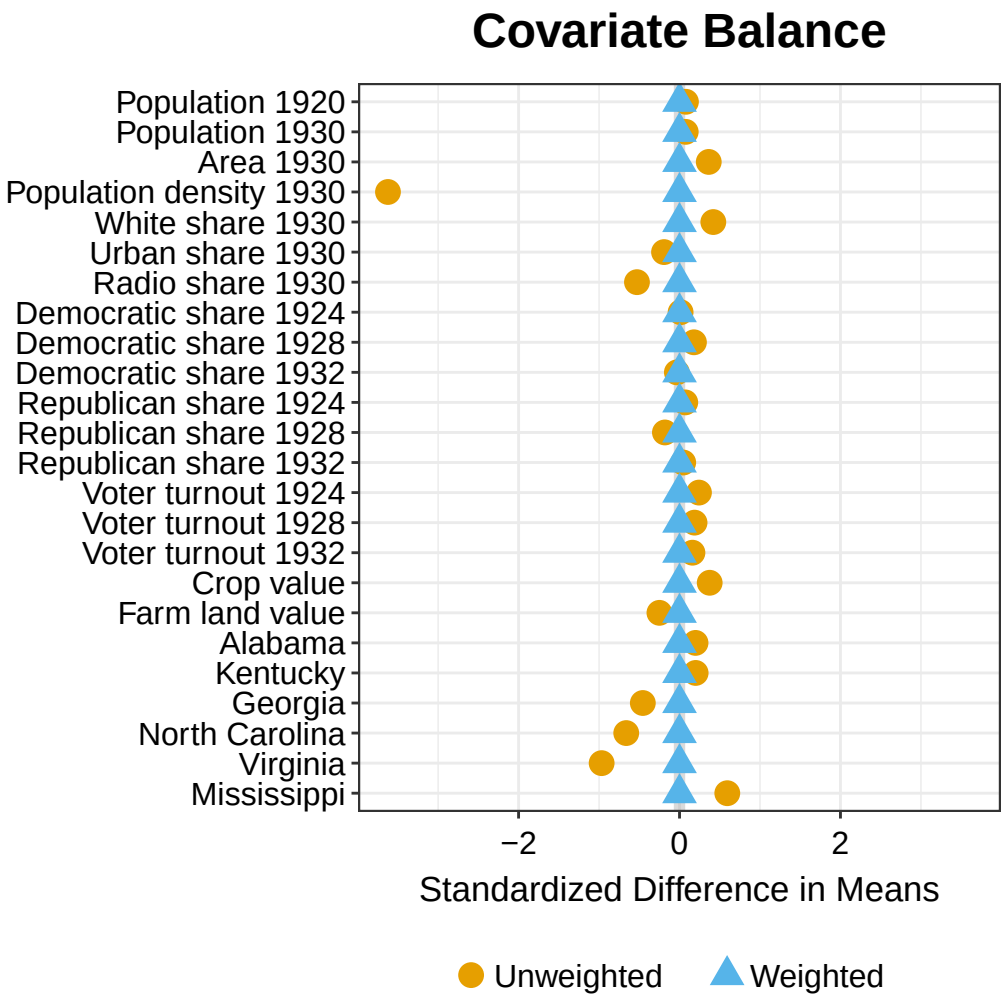


Figure 6: Covariate balance between TVA counties and non-TVA counties in the trimmed county sample used for within-state comparison. The extreme unweighted imbalance in population density is driven by independent cities in Virginia (nearly of which are outside the TVA), which appear in the data separately from the county that encloses them.

3.3.2.1. Republican share

The top panel of Figure 7 plots average Republican share in TVA and weighted non-TVA counties in presidential elections between 1924 and 1972. The non-TVA average represents our estimate of how the treated counties would have voted had they not been covered by the TVA.

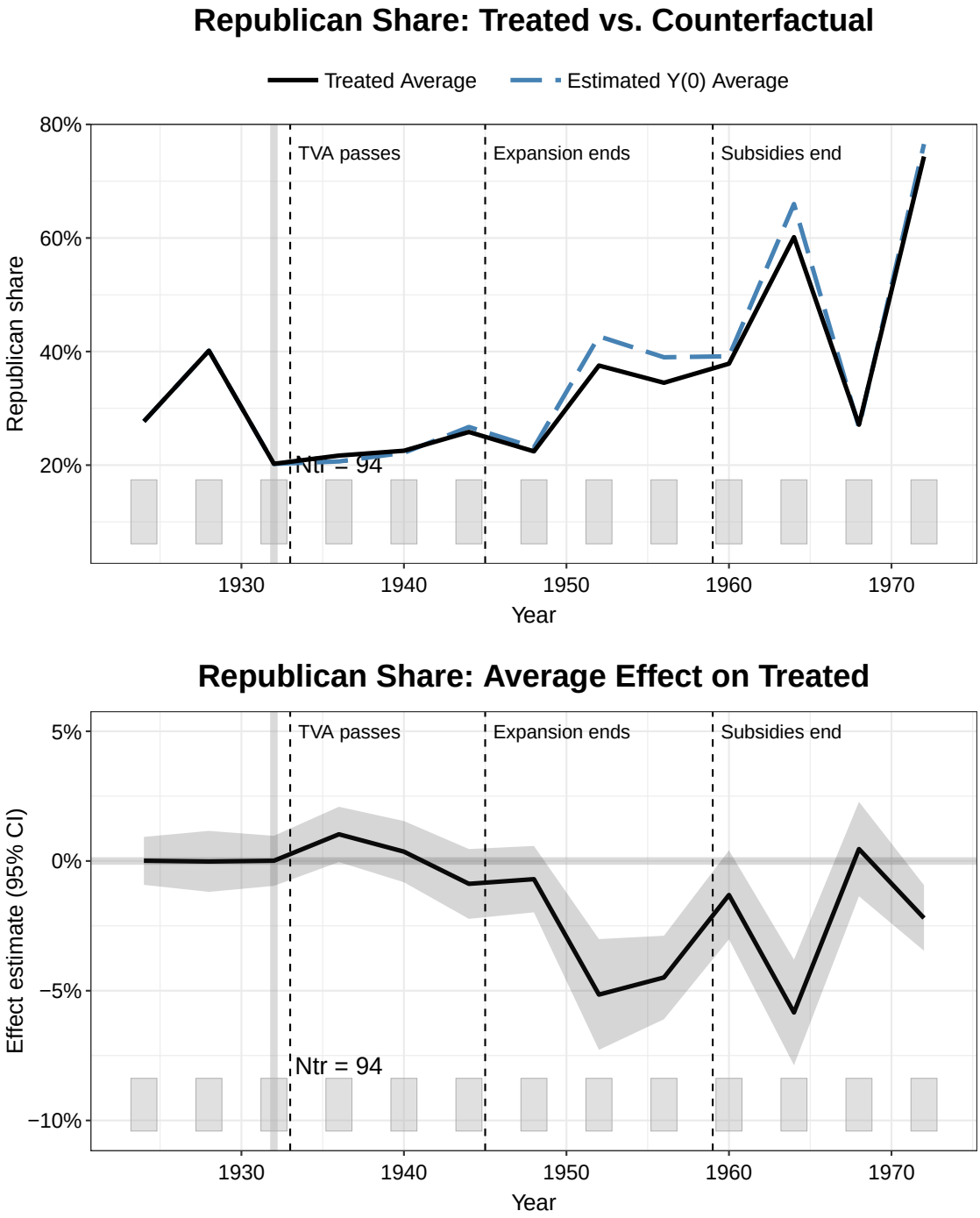


Figure 7: The TVA's effects on Republican presidential share, 1924–1972. Top: Treated and counterfactual trends in Republican share. Bottom: Estimated averaged effect on the treated, with jackknife 95% confidence interval. "Ntr" indicates the number of TVA counties.

By construction, the treated and weighted control groups have exactly equal Republican shares in the 1924, 1928, and 1932 elections. In the first two of these elections, with Coolidge and Hoover as its respective nominees, the GOP did quite well in the South, but its support collapsed in 1932 and did not really begin to recover until Eisenhower's election in 1952. Republican share spiked again in 1964 with Goldwater, the first Republican presidential nominee clearly to the right of his Democratic opponent on civil rights.[114] It collapsed again in 1968, which featured both widespread Black voting and the independent candidacy of Alabama Governor George Wallace, then shot up to even greater heights in Nixon's landslide reelection of 1972. Over the preceding quarter century, Republican support had increased by around 50 percentage points.

These general trends held in TVA and non-TVA areas alike. Nevertheless, it is evident from Figure 7 that the partisan realignment of TVA counties lagged behind the rest of the South. This is made even clearer in the bottom panel of this figure, which plots the TVA's estimated effect on Republican share across the same 1924–72 period. The effect first becomes substantial in the Eisenhower elections of 1952 and 1956, when it averaged −4.8 percentage points, and reached a peak of −5.8 points under Goldwater in 1964. Notably, both Eisenhower and Goldwater were highly critical of the TVA, and both faced Democratic tickets with at least one strongly pro-TVA Southerner.[115]

[114]Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[115]The Democratic vice-presidential nominees in 1952 and 1956, Alabama's John Sparkman and Tennessee's Estes Kefauver, were both closely tied to TVA. Lyndon Johnson, the 1964 presidential nominee, was also highly sympathetic to TVA and public power generally.

By contrast, the effect was more muted in the Nixon elections of 1960, 1968, and 1972. As noted above, Nixon expressed greater support for TVA than other national Republicans. Furthermore, his 1960 opponent, Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, was more skeptical of TVA and public power than most Democrats.[116] TVA areas' openness to Republican candidates seems to have tracked this within-party variation in candidate positions.

Still, the overall pattern transcends particular candidates: Between 1948 and 1964, as Republican support skyrocketed in the South, TVA areas lagged behind, but by the late 1960s these areas had largely caught up to the rest of the region. This basic pattern persists regardless of whether we include "donut" counties in the control set or if we also adjust for higher-missingness covariates (which forces us to drop several TVA counties). Based on state-specific analyses, the results appear to be driven primarily by the states of Alabama, Mississippi, and to some degree Georgia, but not, it seems, by Kentucky (see Supplementary Materials, Section B).

3.3.2.2. Voter turnout

[116] In 1954, for example, Sen. Kennedy voted against $12 million in transmission-line appropriations for the TVA and against allowing the Atomic Energy Commission to produce nuclear power; Wildavsky, "TVA and Power Politics," 585–86. Kennedy nevertheless put heavy stress on the TVA in his 1960 campaign in Tennessee, accusing Nixon of failing to support it. In his own visit to Tennessee, Nixon mentioned TVA less but did express support for its further development; Gavin Scott, "Many Sized up Kennedy, Nixon on Tennessee Visits: Both Received Warm Welcomes," *Knoxville (TN) News-Sentinel*, October 9, 1960, A–6.

What were the mechanisms for the TVA's inhibitive effects on Republican growth? One possibility is that the TVA persuaded the public of the virtues of remaining loyal to the Democratic Party without affecting the composition of the electorate. The relative leftward drift of the White publics of TVA states, reported in Figure 4, is consistent with this explanation. So is the observation by Tindall and others that the TVA "coopted" local elites, who presumably would have been politically active regardless, into supporting the program.[117]

Another possibility, familiar from the policy feedback literature,[118] is that the TVA had a mobilizing effect on its beneficiaries, inducing some who would otherwise not have participated in politics to do so. Political participation is robustly correlated with socioeconomic status,[119] so to the extent that the TVA did raise the income of area residents, it may have had the follow-on effect of increasing participation rates. This democratizing effect would also be consistent with the explicitly "democratic" ideology

[117]It is worth noting that persuasion effects of this sort would cut against any effects on income or economic development, which were correlated with Republicanism in this period, though this relationship was slower to emerge in the South; Byron E. Shafer and Richard Johnston, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism: Class, Race, and Partisan Change in the Postwar South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[118]See, e.g., Andrea Louise Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[119]Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

of the TVA.[120]

A final possibility is that, rather than mobilizing left-leaning supporters, the TVA instead demobilized conservatives and potential Republican voters. It could have done so through at least two mechanisms. First, it could have blunted the appeal of anti-TVA Republican candidates such as Eisenhower and Goldwater. Across the South generally, these candidacies were accompanied by a surge of Republican mobilization, top-down as well as bottom-up.[121] Dependence on the TVA may have depressed demand for such mobilization.

Second, the TVA may also have depressed the supply of mobilizing activities indirectly through its negative effects on electoral competitiveness, one of the most robust predictors of voter turnout.[122] The story of Republican growth in the South is just as much a story of increased competitiveness, and each fed on the other. Only once Republican support reached a certain threshold did it make sense for the party to invest in mobilizing supporters. In presidential elections, it was state-level competitiveness that mattered, but the same dynamics played out at the local level as well. Consider, for example, one Republican leader's explanation for the explosive growth in White voter registration in

[120] Lilienthal, *TVA*.

[121] Daniel J. Galvin, *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 63–67; Robin M. Morris, *Goldwater Girls to Reagan Women: Gender, Georgia, and the Growth of the New Right* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2022), chap. 1.

[122] João Cancela and Benny Geys, "Explaining Voter Turnout: A Meta-Analysis of National and Subnational Elections," *Electoral Studies* 42 (2016): 264–75.

his Alabama county:

> It was a result of the competition between the two parties in this county because we [Republicans] set out from 1962 on to register every Republican sympathizer in the county…. Because the party had been down so low—we had not elected a local Republican in thirty years—you had almost half the Republicans who were not even registered…. [How did we find Republican sympathizers] We knocked on doors. For a couple of years from 1962 to 1964, and in some parts until 1966 we had a couple of ladies we had hired all the time to knock on doors…. Sometimes they would do an entire beat and find the Republicans and independents. Then we would follow up on them.[123]

[123]Stanley, *Voter Mobilization and the Politics of Race*, 76. In personal communication, Stanley revealed the name of this county, which is located in the part of northern Alabama covered by the TVA. As the informant's reference to local Republican officials suggests, prior to 1933 this county had been among the more Republican in the state and had actually be carried by Hoover in 1928. Thus, even if Republican mobilization in this county was muted by the TVA, its higher starting point meant that it took less Republican growth to make the county competitive.

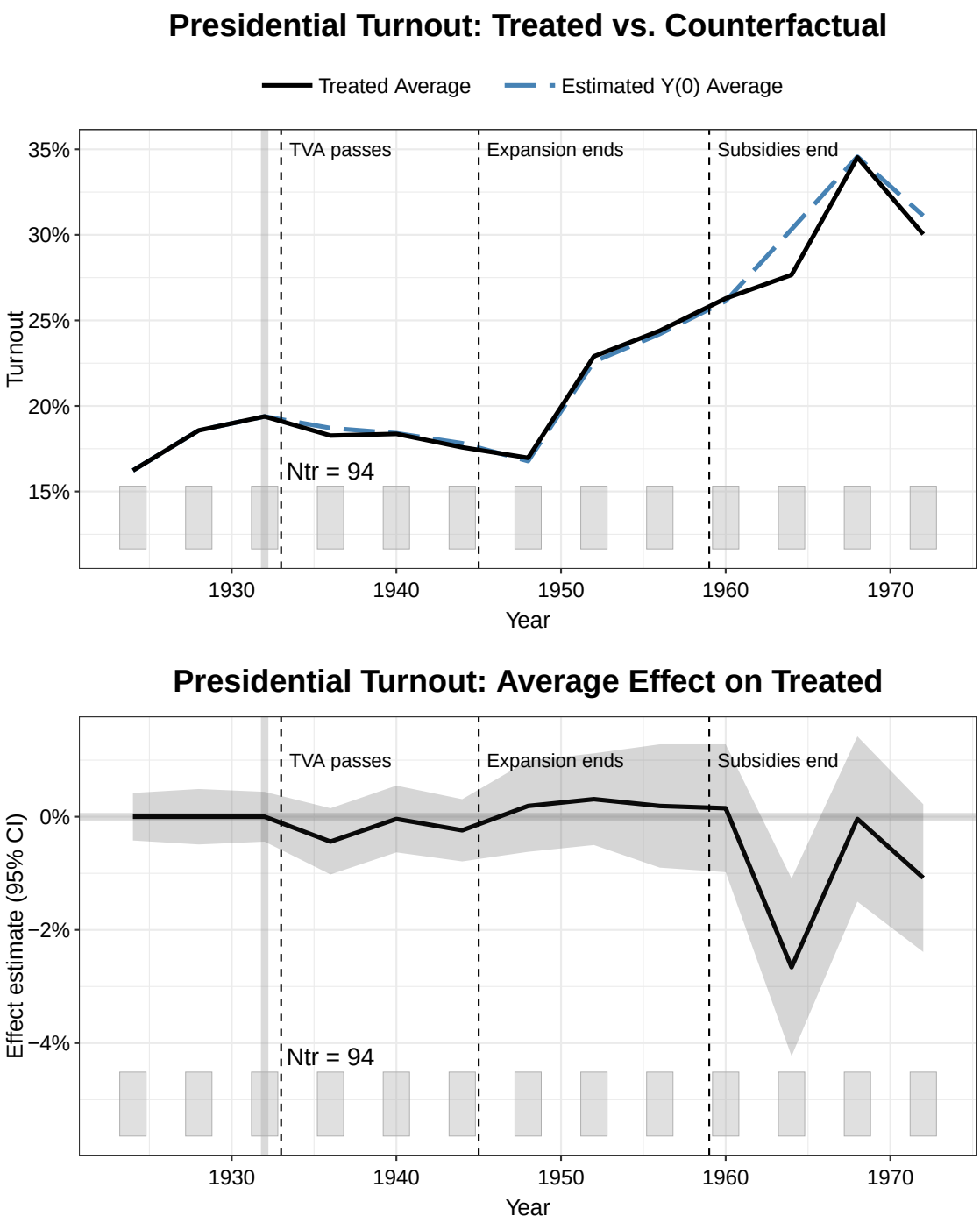


Figure 8: The TVA's effects on presidential turnout. Top: Treated and counterfactual trends in turnout. Bottom: Estimated average effect on the treated, with jackknife confidence interval.

Figure 8 helps adjudicate among these explanations. The top panel shows that, like Republican support, presidential turnout increased rapidly in the South between 1948 and 1968. As was the case with Republicanism, turnout growth generally lagged in TVA counties relative to control counties. The early dip in 1936, which could be due to the disruptions of the early TVA, is not evident in Republican share. But the peak effect of -2.7 points in 1964 does coincide with the largest difference in Republican share. Although the turnout estimates are not as stable across specifications as the effect on Republican share (see Supplementary Materials, Section B), the negative effect in 1964 is evident in nearly all of them, and under no specifications is there a positive effect on turnout.

In sum, between 1948 and 1964, the TVA decreased support for Republican presidential candidates relative to a sharply increasing trend. The primary mechanism for this effect does not appear to be the mobilization of new voters. Rather, by keeping elections less competitive and/or inhibiting the mobilization of conservatives that occurred elsewhere, the TVA actually seems to have suppressed voter turnout in at least some years.

3.3.3. Congressional representation

Having examined the TVA's effects on public opinion and presidential elections, we now turn to congressional representation. Did the TVA foster a "new generation" of Southern politicians who resisted the South's turn against the New Deal? We have already seen evidence that this was the case in the quintessential TVA district, Alabama's

8th (Figure 1; for a formal analysis using synthetic control, see Supplementary Materials, Section C.1.1). This section assesses the claim more generally, looking at a broader, though still limited, range of districts with stable boundaries.

There are seven TVA districts whose boundaries were stable between the 1932 and 1960 elections, all in Alabama or Georgia (Figure 9).[124] We compare the seven TVA districts to non-TVA districts in Alabama and Georgia as well as Louisiana and South Carolina, whose district lines were also stable over this period. All of these districts were represented by Democrats throughout this period. We focus on the results using demographic covariates alone, which maximizes the pool of control districts while also achieving balance on early-period outcomes, but other specifications yield very similar results.

[124]One district, Alabama's 7th, was represented by Rep. William Bankhead, who, while Speaker of the House 1936–40, did not cast enough roll-call votes to be scaled in those year. Bankhead was known as a strong supporter of the New Deal. His successor from 1941 to 1949, Carter Manasco, was much more moderate. In 1948 Manasco was defeated by another strong liberal, Carl Elliott, who served until 1963. To maximize our sample size, we impute the missing values for Bankhead and Manasco with their estimated ideal points in adjacent congresses.

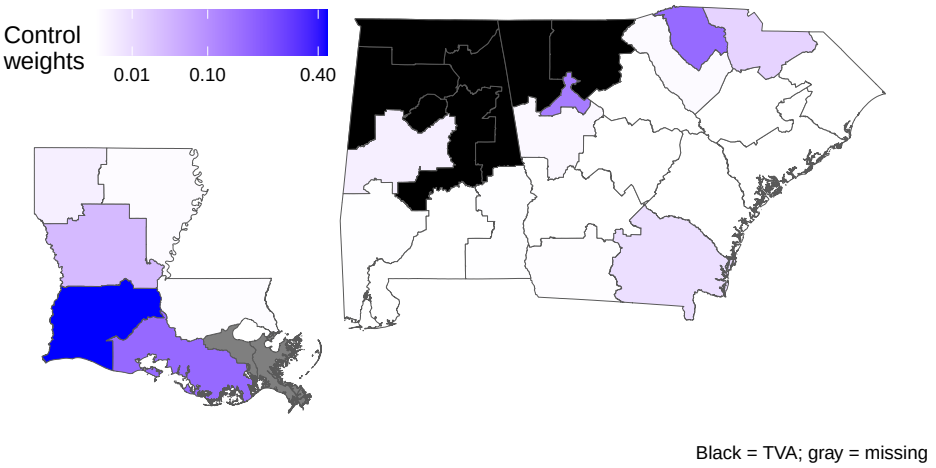


Figure 9: Congressional districts with stable boundaries, 1931–62

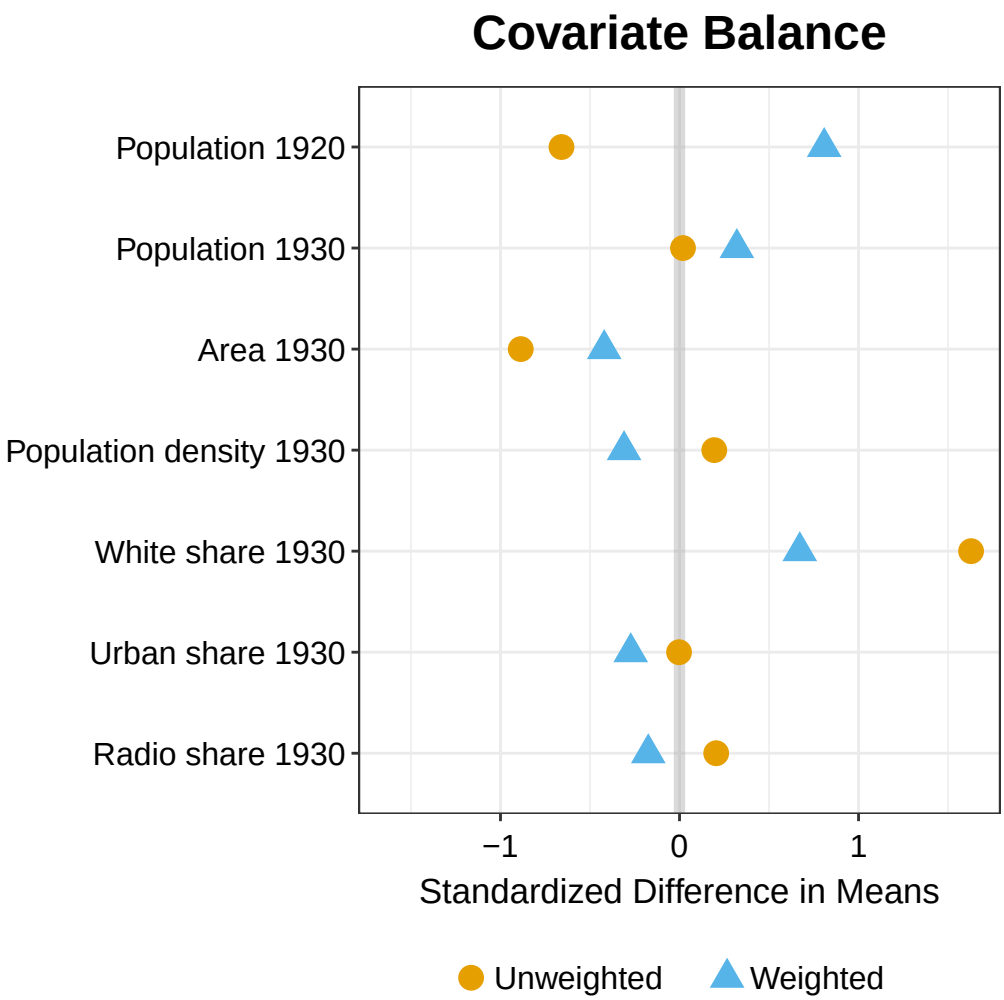


Figure 10: Covariate balance between TVA and non-TVA districts, before and after weighting.

Even with a reduced set of covariates, there is no set of weights that achieves perfect balance between TVA and non-TVA districts (Figure 10). The biggest barrier is racial composition: TVA districts have smaller White populations than any weighted combination of districts in these states. This is a serious concern; even before the widespread enfranchisement of Black Southerners, the most important cleavage in many Southern

states was between the plantation-heavy Black Belt and the Whiter upcountry.[125] This was less true at the congressional level, as evidenced by the fact that there is no difference in economic conservatism between TVA districts and demographically weighted controls before the 1945–46 session (Figure 11). It is also reassuring that if we restrict the sample to the two districts composed entirely of TVA counties—Alabama's 8th and 9th—we can obtain decent covariate balance and obtain basically the same effect estimates (Supplementary Materials, Section C.1.2). Nevertheless, district racial composition is a potential confounder to this analysis.

[125] Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*; H. C. Nixon, "Politics of the Hills," *Journal of Politics* 8, no. 2 (1946): 123–33.

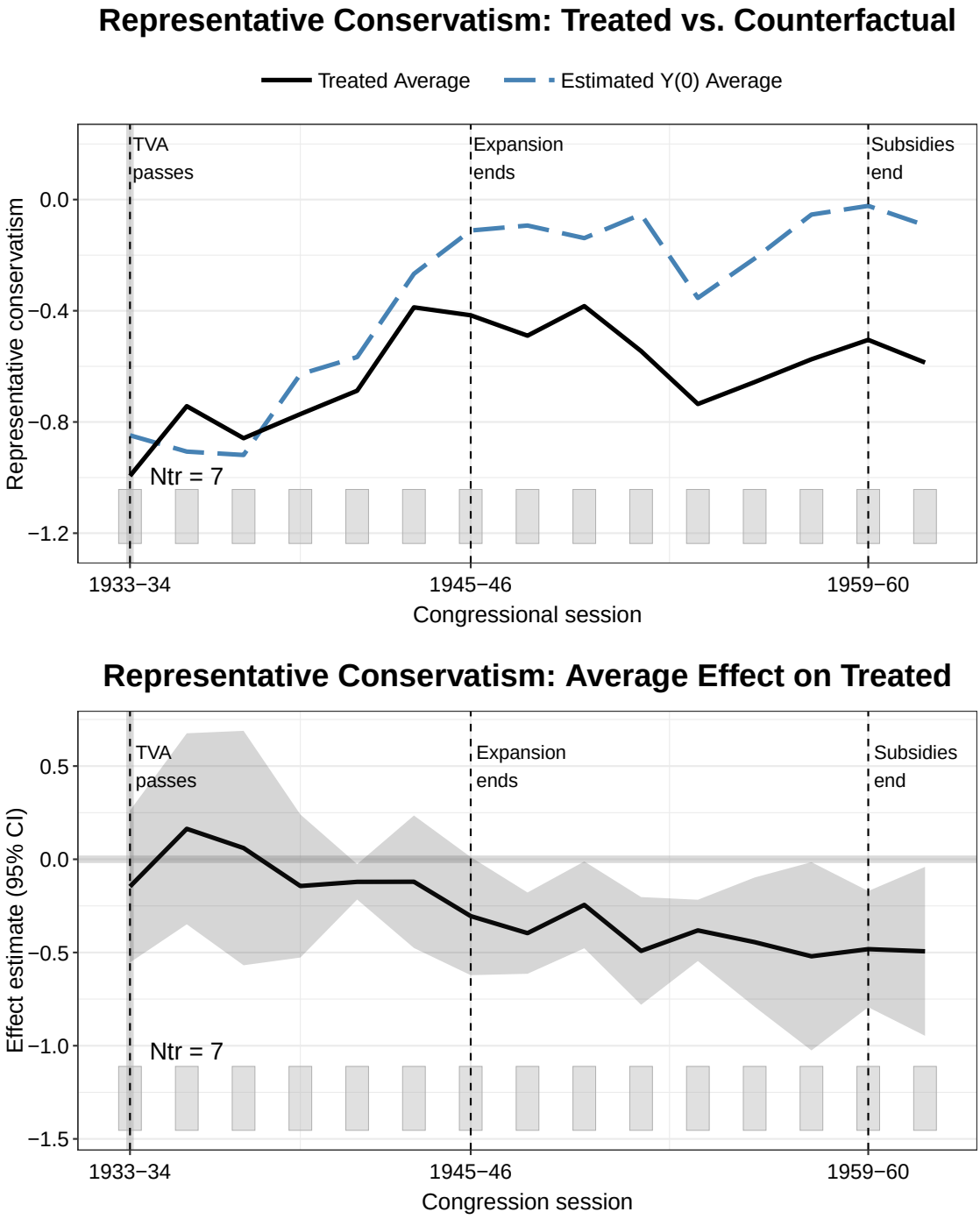


Figure 11: The TVA's effects on congressional conservatism 1933–62, as estimated by trajectory balancing on a panel of stable districts. Top: Treated and counterfactual trends in representative conservatism. Bottom: Estimated averaged effect on the treated, with 95% confidence interval.

This caveat notwithstanding, the estimated effects are clear and stable across specifications. For the first decade after the creation of the TVA, the economic conservatism of its representatives was almost indistinguishable from that of comparable non-TVA representatives. This remained true until after Southern Democrats in Congress turned rightward in the late 1930s, when a gap emerged. It gradually widened over the late 1940s and early 1950s and persisted through the end of this period. At its peak, the TVA representatives of northern Alabama and Georgia were about half a standard deviation more supportive of New Deal liberalism than other Deep South representatives.

As Supplementary Materials Section C.3 shows, we obtain broadly similar results if we expand the sample to include all TVA districts. Since at least some district lines change in every congressional term, this requires us to abandon panel analysis and instead employ a rolling cross-section design. The compensating advantage is a larger sample size, which enables us to obtain better covariate balance and to adjust for the residual imbalance that remains after weighting. This analysis too shows that representation of TVA and non-TVA districts was extremely similar before the TVA Act was passed, but TVA representatives were less conservative beginning in the late 1940s and continuing in most congresses through 1962.

The timing of the TVA's effect on congressional representation roughly mirrors its effects on Republican presidential share and, more roughly, on mass conservatism. That is, TVA areas did not really become distinctive until after World War II, when the TVA had stopped expanding and national conflict over its postwar status was heating up. This timing also matches Badger's claims about a new generation of politicians riding the

coattails of the New Deal. It is also worth noting that Alabama's 8th district, where the TVA was first implemented, was also the first to experience a political transformation. The representation of other TVA districts took longer to shift. It often did so by means of primary defeats of more conservative incumbents, as with the victories of liberal challengers Albert Rains of Alabama and and Earle Clements of Kentucky in 1944, Henderson Lanham of Georgia in 1946, and Carl Elliott of Alabama in 1948.[126]

3.4. Summary of findings

Let us summarize the quantitive results:

1. The White publics of core TVA states did become more liberal on economic issues relative to the rest of the South. They did so gradually beginning in the late 1940s, with the difference first becoming statistically detectable in the late 1950s and peaking at around -1.1 standard deviations ($\pm$ a standard error of 0.4) in 1967–68. This liberal trend rapidly reversed at the end of the 1960s.
2. At the county level, the TVA inhibited the growth of Republican support in presidential elections, relative to demographically and politically similar counties in the

[126]These liberals also benefited from the wartime organization of Southern labor unions which, it should be noted, was encouraged by the TVA. Badger, "Whatever Happened to Roosevelt's New Generation of Southerners?" 63; Thomas Hamilton Syvertsen, "Earle Chester Clements and the Democratic Party, 1920–1950" (PhD thesis, Department of History, University of Kentucky, 1982), 136–47; Michelle Brattain, "Making Friends and Enemies: Textile Workers and Political Action in Post-World War II Georgia," *Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 1 (1997): 91–138; F. Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 218.

same state. Detectable differences first emerged in 1948 and widened in the 1950s. The effect peaked in 1964 at around −5.8 (±1) percentage points and decayed rapidly thereafter.

3. The TVA also inhibited turnout growth, or at least did not spur it. The effect also peaked in 1964 at −2.7 (±0.8) percentage points and dissipated thereafter.
4. The TVA seems to have inhibited U.S. House members' turn to the right, at least in Alabama and Georgia. The effect on congressional conservatism first appeared in the mid-1940s and widened through the 1950s. It peaked in 1957–58 at −0.52 (±0.26) standard deviations and was still going strong when our data end in 1961–62.

Though they vary in robustness, all these estimates are consistent with the claim that the TVA exerted a broadly liberalizing, pro-Democratic effect on its service area. There is no evidence, however, that the TVA mobilized new voters. Rather, it seems to have preempted the mobilization of ideological and partisan opponents. Finally, it should be highlighted that the county-level results, as well as the district-level ones reported in the main text, are based on the subset of TVA states that contain non-TVA areas (i.e., not Tennessee). However, aside from the historically Republican areas of East Tennessee, which are anomalous within the South, we have no reason to believe that the TVA's effects do not generalize to Tennessee as well.

4. Conclusion

The TVA was just one agency that affected a relatively small portion of the United States. Moreover, though it still sometimes evokes political controversy,[127] the TVA's political salience today pales relative to its heyday in the 1930s–50s, or even relative to its later battles with environmentalists in the 1960s and after.[128] Like many observers before us, however, we believe that studying the TVA reveals much of broader significance. We focus on two sets of implications in particular: for our understanding of politics and policymaking in the "Long 1950s" and for the interpretation of policy feedbacks. We discuss each in turn.

4.1. Politics and Policymaking in the "Long 1950s"

From the perspective of the New Deal coalition, the period focused on this study—the late 1940s to the early 1960s—exhibited an ambiguous mix of crisis and stasis, frustration and consolidation. On one hand, the growing conflation of economic and racial liberalism, in the eyes of the latter's opponents as well as its supporters, drove a wedge between the Southern and non-Southern wings of the Democratic Party.[129] Among other

[127] Caroline Eggers, "Will TVA Be Privatized? Trump's Efforts to Control the Utility, Fire CEO Spark Speculation," *WKMS*, July 24, 2025, https://www.wkms.org/energy/2025-07-24/will-tva-be-privatized-trumps-efforts-to-control-the-utility-fire-ceo-spark-speculation.

[128] Bruce E. Stewart and Christopher J. Manganiello, "Watershed Democracy: Rural Environmentalism and the Battle Against the TVA in Western North Carolina, 1965–1972," *Environmental History* 23, no. 4 (2018): 748–73.

[129] Schickler, *Racial Realignment*.

things, this rift resulted in the formation of a contingent conservative coalition between Southern Democrats and Republicans in Congress as well as the collapse of the "solid South" in presidential elections.[130] The policy consequences included the defeat of liberal initiatives such as Truman's national healthcare plan, Taft–Hartley's retrenchment of the pro-union New Deal labor regime, and the passage of only the most toothless of civil rights legislation. On this view, this was a period of "deadlock" that was finally broken in the mid-1960 by the next moment of liberal ascendency.[131]

On the other hand, this period also saw the consolidation of a new mode of governance—the "New Deal order"—as well as a number of important policy innovations.[132] Despite severe internal strains, the Democratic Party—though a combination of compromise and decentralization—remained not only a functioning entity but also the usual majority party nationally. Wholesale retrenchment of the New Deal state, a genuine possibility after Republican captured Congress in 1946, was averted.[133] Policies such as Social Security's Old-Age Insurance, controversial when proposed, not only became almost

[130]David W. Brady and Charles S. Bullock III, "Is There a Conservative Coalition in the House?" *Journal of Politics* 42, no. 2 (1980): 549–59; Katznelson, Geiger, and Kryder, "Limiting Liberalism"; Black and Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans*.

[131]James MacGregor Burns, *The Deadlock of Democracy: Four-Party Politics in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963); James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1968).

[132]Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, "Regimes and Regime Building in American Government: A Review of Literature on the 1940s," *Political Science Quarterly* 113, no. 4 (1998): 689–702.

[133]David Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

consensually accepted but also underwent incremental but important expansions and reforms.[134] Indeed, as David Mayhew has argued, the "long 1950s" was a remarkably productive policy era, though one characterized less by doctrinaire liberalism than by pragmatic, cross-party policymaking focusing on "growth, development, efficiency, and productivity."[135]

TVA liberals played prominent roles in these developments. As we have seen with John Sparkman, TVA members of Congress were at the forefront of efforts to heal party rifts both inside their states (e.g., as "loyalist" opposition to states-rights factions) and at the national level (e.g., as crafters of platform and rules compromises).[136] It is no accident that the Democratic vice-presidential nominees in 1948, 1952, and 1956 were all from TVA states (Kentucky, Alabama, and Tennessee, respectively). These Southerners were almost uniquely able to articulate a development-oriented version of liberalism that was viable in both sections.

In Congress itself, TVA Southerners often played pivotal legislative and institutional roles. New initiatives in areas ranging from transportation to housing to hospitals to libraries to education—not to mention initiatives more closely related to the TVA's

[134]Alan Jacobs, "Policymaking as Political Constraint: Institutional Development in the U.S. Social Security Program," in *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, ed. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94–131.

[135]David R. Mayhew, "The Long 1950s as a Policy Era," in *The Politics of Major Policy Reform*, ed. Jeffery A. Jenkins and Sidney M. Milkis (Cambridge University Press, 2013) [28 and *passim*].

[136]See, e.g., Dennis J. Mitchell, *Mississippi Liberal: A Biography of Frank e. Smith* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 104–5.

focus on natural resources—bore the strong imprint of representatives from the TVA area.[137] Although these politicians were often much more sympathetic to organized labor and occasionally even to civil rights than other Southern Democrats, they tended overwhelmingly to focus on the kind of development-oriented, federally subsidized but locally implemented policies that typified this era.[138]

[137]Senator Albert Gore, Sr. of Tennessee was a leading force behind the Interstate Highway Act of 1957; North Alabama Representative Robert E. Jones assisted as well. North Alabama representative Albert Rains was the floor manager for the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964, the first mass transit bill. Complementing Sparkman's work in the Senate, Rains (known as "Mr. Housing") also "wrote practically all of the legislation on housing" passed between 1945 and 1965. Among many other initiatives, Senator Lister Hill of Alabama crafted the Hospital Survey and Construction Act of 1946, which provided federal subsidies for hospital construction. Hill also sponsored the Library Services Act of 1956, which provided similar federal funding for libraries. In addition, he and TVA representative Carl Elliott of Alabama spearheaded the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which pioneered federal aid to education. Badger, *Albert Gore, Sr.*, 104–8; "Robert Jones, 84, Ex-Alabama Congressman," *New York Times*, June 12, 1997; George M. Smerk, "The Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964: New Hope for American Cities," *Transportation Journal* 5, no. 2 (1965): 37; Erik Nicholas Haeuser, "A Tricky Chessboard: Albert Rains, New Deal Liberalism, and Southern Progressivism in Alabama" (PhD thesis, Auburn University, 2018), 69; Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton, *Lister Hill: Statesman from the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 179.

[138]Though he too got his start as a champion of the TVA, Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver expressed a different brand of Southern liberalism. In addition to focusing much more on raising his national political profile (as evidenced by his multiple presidential campaigns), Kefauver's domestic policy interests (aside from TVA) centered less on development-oriented spending and more on crime, anti-trust, consumer protection, and other regulatory issues; Charles L. Fontenay, *Estes Kefauver: A Biography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 8.

In the late 1930s to early 1950s, TVA Southerners served in several congressional leadership roles (Alben Barkley as Senate Leader; Hill, Sparkman, and Tennessee's Percy Priest as House Whip). This participation in formal leadership waned in the 1950s and 1960s, but TVA Southerners continued to exercise disproportionate influence through their pivotal position on key committees as well as their informal leadership. For instance, in addition to chairing the Labor and Public Welfare Committee after 1955, Lister Hill also presided over an bisectional "liberal caucus" in the Senate.[139] In the House, the example of Alabama's Carl Elliott is particularly instructive. Responding to liberal demands to break Chairman Howard Smith's conservative stranglehold over the critical Rules Committee, in 1961 Speaker Sam Rayburn selected Elliott as his vehicle for installing a bare pro-administration majority on the committee.[140] As the pivotal voter on the committee (who closely mirrored the House median), Elliott's support was critical to bring proposals such as Medicare to the floor.[141]

Though more legislatively productive than is often appreciated, TVA liberalism was mostly an ideological dead-end. Much like the national party system of the Long 1950s, it was predicated on the assumption that economic liberalism (in form of federal aid to underdeveloped areas) could be separated from racial liberalism (in the form of federal

[139]Hamilton, *Lister Hill*.

[140]Nelson W. Polsby, *How Congress Evolves: Social Bases of Institutional Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), [33–35]; Louis Silveri, "'Pushing the Fence Back Too Far': The Defeat of Congressman Carl Elliott in 1964," *The Alabama Review* 45, no. 1 (1992): [8].

[141]Carl Elliott Sr. and Michael D'Orso, *The Cost of Courage: The Journey of an American Congressman* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992); Sundquist, *Politics and Policy*, 476–77.

enforcement of civil rights). Though they often expressed concern for the welfare (and, more privately, for the civil and political rights) of their Black constituents, TVA liberals were convinced that "coerced" integration would destroy Southern liberalism while also meeting insurmountable opposition from White Southerners.[142] They instead expressed the vain hope that the problem of racial equality would be solved indirectly by economic development. In large part, this was due to a failure of imagination and empathy—an inability to really envision a world without Jim Crow.[143]

In the end, TVA liberalism was overwhelmed by other visions of Southern politics—first a ferocious conservative backlash sparked by *Brown* and Black mobilization, followed a decade later by an even more fundamental transformation imposed by the federal enforcement of civil and voting rights. Though the incumbency advantage helped some TVA liberals survive, others, such as Mississippi's Frank Smith and Alabama's Carl Elliott, did not.[144] Ultimately, just as the TVA eventually morphed into just another electrical utility, TVA liberals faded as a coherent force in congressional politics.

[142] For an example of TVA liberals' tortured justifications for their private support but public opposition to civil rights, see Smith, *Congressman from Mississippi*. On the pessimism of Southern liberals such as Supreme Court Justice (and former senator) Hugo Black of Alabama, see Badger, "*Brown* and Backlash".

[143] Johnson, *Reforming Jim Crow*.

[144] Both Smith and Elliott in 1962 and 1964 respectively as a result of unfavorable redistricting.

4.2. Policy feedback

In his landmark 1993 article, Paul Pierson called for increased attention to policy feedbacks on the mass public.[145] The decades since have seen a flowering of studies on this topic.[146] Increasingly, these have taken the form of well-identified causal studies that use random or haphazard variation in program eligibility or exposure to estimate policy feedbacks at the level of individual units (e.g., persons or geographic areas). The present study can be seen as basically following this approach.

It should be remembered, however, that casual estimates of this sort are predicated on the assumption that units not exposed the policy are plausible stand-ins for what exposed units would have been like had the policy never been implemented.[147] Only if this assumption holds can we plausibly claim that, for example, implementing the TVA made its coverage region less Republican than it would have been had the TVA never existed. The reason is that the assumption rules out spillovers or other ways in which the TVA might have affected areas it did *not* cover.[148]

In the case of the TVA, spillovers were in fact intended, as one of its purposes was to act

[145] Pierson, "When Effect Becomes Cause."

[146] For a review, see Campbell, "Policy Makes Mass Politics."

[147] This is one component of the Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA); see Henry E. Brady, "Causation and Explanation in Social Science," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, ed. Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady, and David Collier (Oxford University Press, 2009), 250.

[148] In economics, these often fall under the heading of "general equilibrium effects"; for a discussion in the context of TVA, see Kline and Moretti, "Local Economic Development."

a "yardstick" by which to evaluate and prod private utilities elsewhere in the country. More generally, the TVA served as a template for other development-oriented programs, such as the Rural Electrification Administration, that covered other areas in the South and across the nation. To the extent that such knock-on effects of the TVA enhanced the appeal of New Deal liberalism in areas in "control" areas, the estimates presented in this paper may understate the effects of the TVA.

On the other hand, there are equally good reasons to believe that the TVA may have *undermined* liberalism in non-TVA areas. As the TVA's idealistic, experimental image faded, it began to look to outside observers more and more like a mere pork-barrel program from which they did not benefit. This view had plausibility both because the TVA's costs were paid out of general revenues and because its economic benefits seemed to come at the expense of other regions. This charge resonated not only among Northerners (such as Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts) fearful of their factories being lured southward, but also among Southern Democrats resentful of the Tennessee Valley's special treatment.[149] To the extent that this resentment enhanced the appeal of anti-TVA Republicans in the non-TVA South, the estimates presented in this paper may be better interpreted as reflecting the effects of *missing out on* the TVA rather than of receiving its benefits.

Given the fundamentally unobservable nature of the relevant counterfactuals, the relative importance of these dynamics is not easily gauged, but the available evidence suggests

[149]Most of the Democratic opposition to TVA appropriations came from Southern House members outside the TVA region; see Wildavsky, "TVA and Power Politics".

that both positive and negative spillovers were present to at least some degree. An awareness of this possibility should therefore temper the interpretation of the results of this study, as well as of any study that estimates policy feedbacks on individual units. It also suggests a general lesson about the limits of the policy feedback literature's recent emphasis on policy effects on the mass public. While certainly important, mass-level policy feedbacks have arguably received disproportionate attention due to their fit with the methodological individualism of modern methods of causal inference. Although estimates of individual-level policy feedbacks are relatively precise and credible, without further assumptions they do not generally answer questions about the global impact of policy—whether, for example, the TVA bolstered New Deal liberalism *on net* across the country.

Over-emphasis on mass-level feedback also draws attention away from other varieties of policy feedback whose effects are not solely or even primarily oriented towards the targets or beneficiaries of the policy. These effects include many of those highlighted in the works Pierson reviews: policy learning,[150] political alliances,[151] administrative

[150]Peter Hall, ed., *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism Across Countries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[151]Margaret Weir and Theda Skocpol, "State Structures and the Possibilities for 'Keynesian' Responses to the Great Depression in Sweden, Britain and the United States," in *Bringing the State Back in*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 107–63.

capacities,[152] and the negative reactions of non-beneficiaries.[153] That these effects are less easily isolated and quantified does not diminish their importance and should not lead to their neglect in favor of mass-level effects that appear to be more easily observed.

[152]G. John Ikenberry, *Reasons of State: Oil Politics and the Capacities of American Government* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

[153]Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Supplementary Materials

A. The TVA power system in 1960

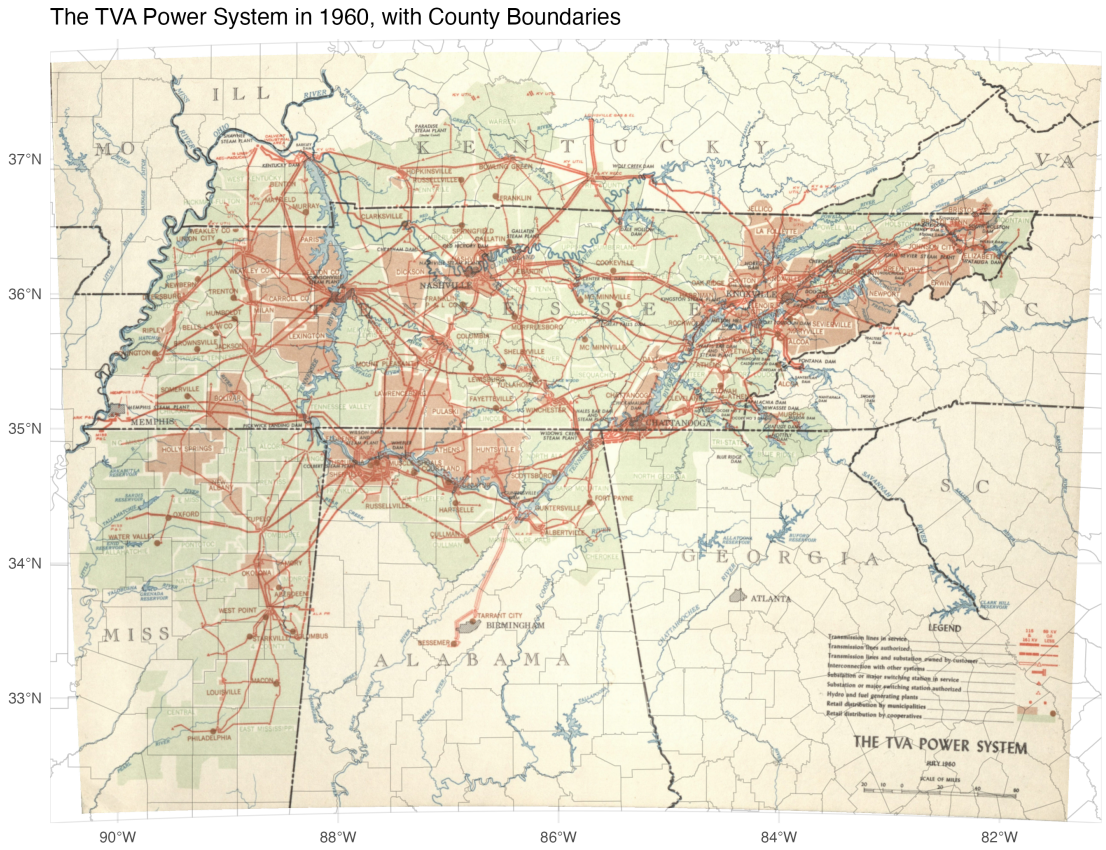
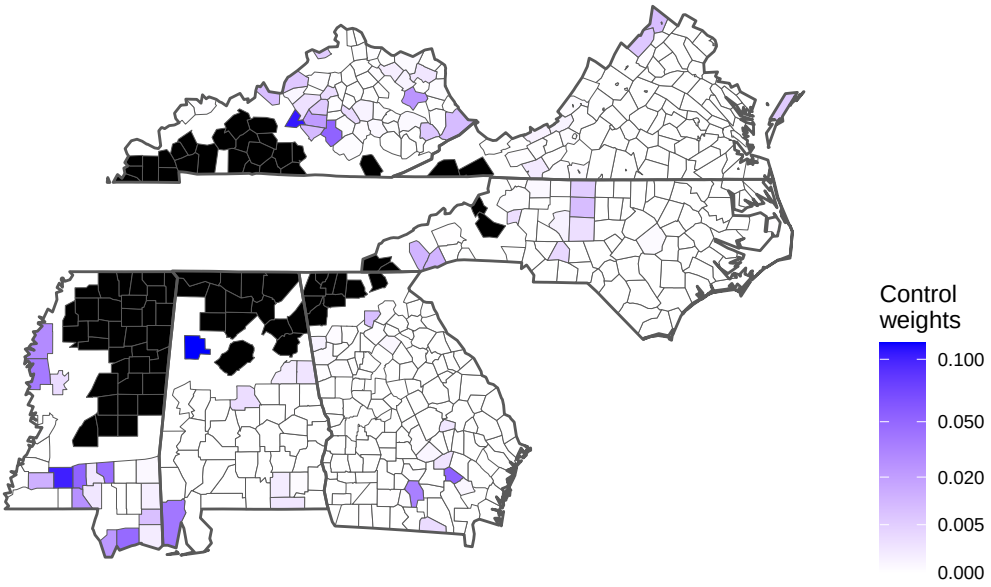


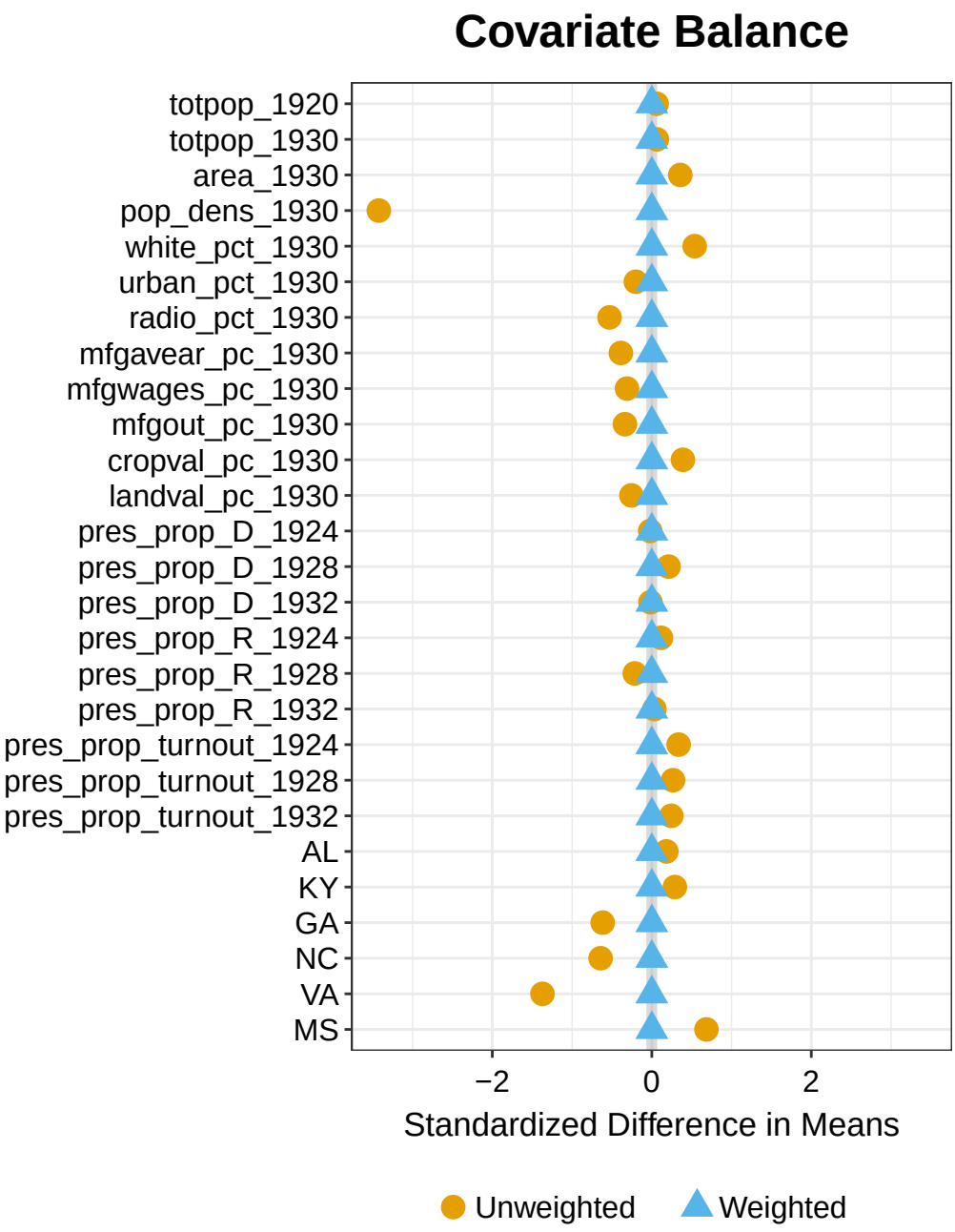
Figure 12: Territories of municipal and cooperative distributors of TVA power in 1960, overlaid with county boundaries.[154]

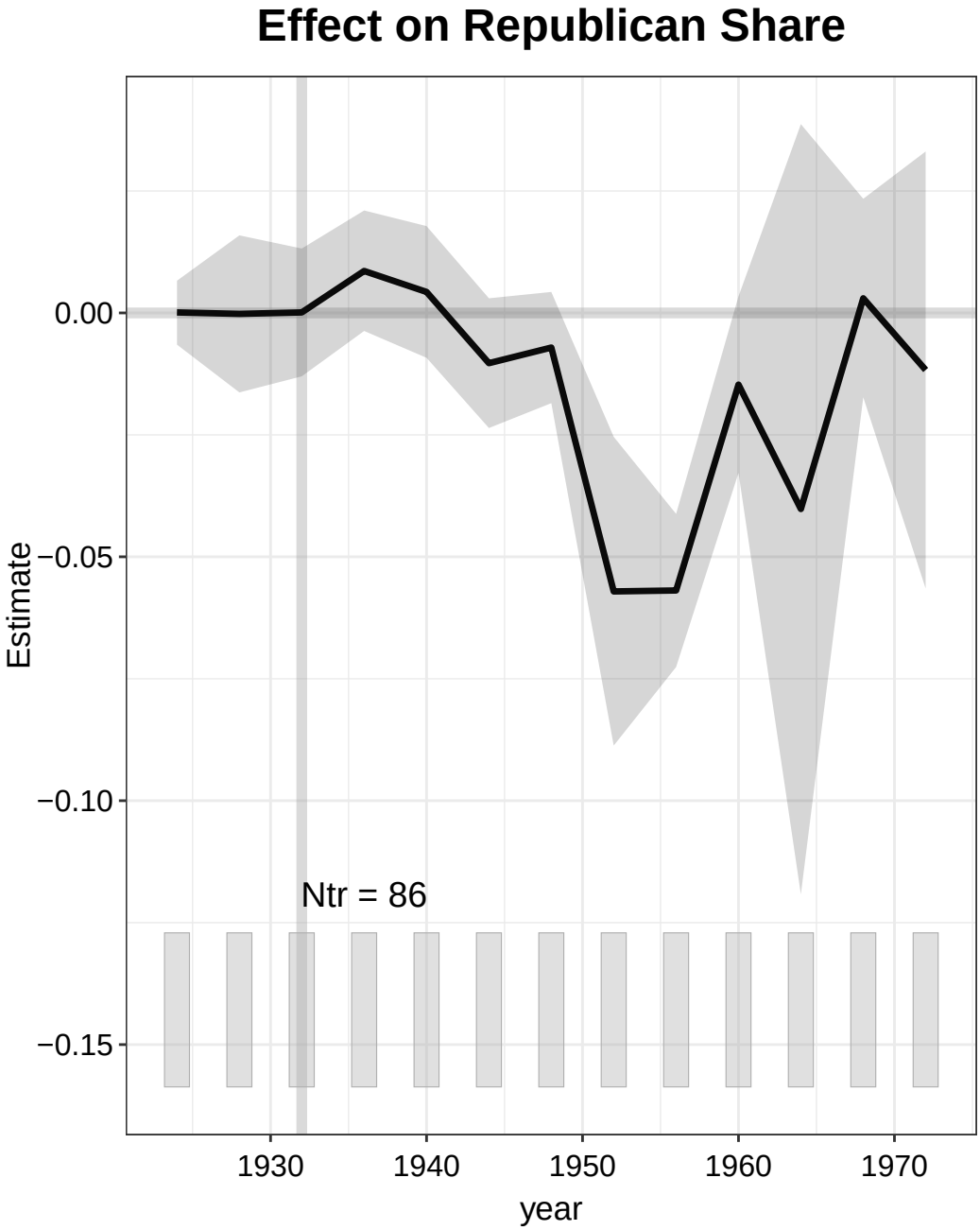
[154]The power system map is from *Municipal and Cooperative Distributors of TVA Power*, 64. The scanned map image was rectified using https://www.mapwarper.net/. County shape files are from Kyle Walker, *tigris: Load Census TIGER/Line Shapefiles*, 2025, https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=tigris.

B. County-level presidential analyses

B.1. All covariates, drop donut




Covariate Balance
totpop_1920
totpop_1930
area_1930
pop_dens_1930
white_pct_1930
urban_pct_1930
radio_pct_1930
mfgavear_pc_1930
mfgwages_pc_1930
mfgout_pc_1930
cropval_pc_1930
landval_pc_1930
pres_prop_D_1924
pres_prop_D_1928
pres_prop_D_1932
pres_prop_R_1924
pres_prop_R_1928
pres_prop_R_1932
pres_prop_turnout_1924
pres_prop_turnout_1928
pres_prop_turnout_1932
AL
KY
GA
NC
VA
MS
−2
0
2
Standardized Difference in Means
Unweighted
Weighted


Effect on Republican Share
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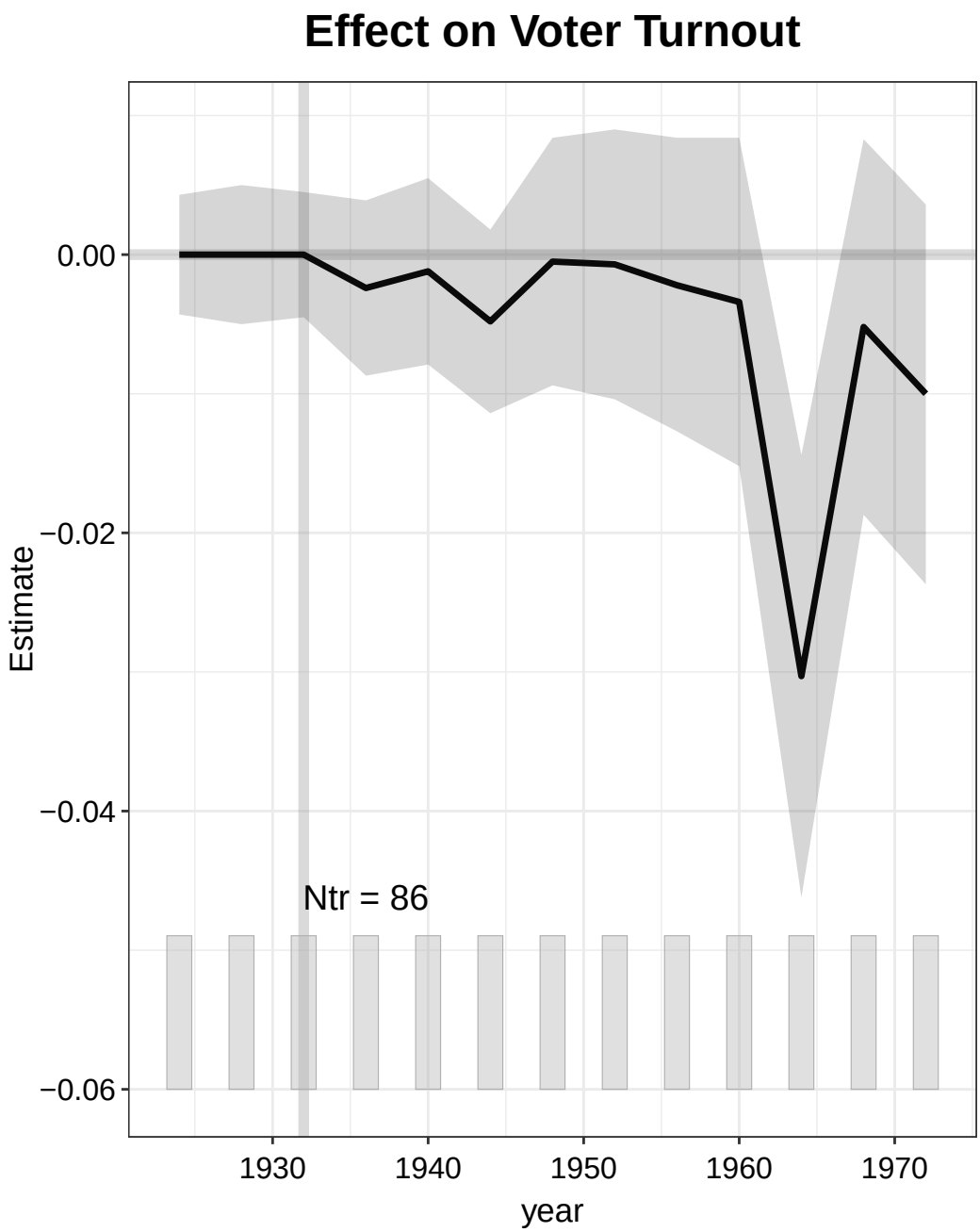
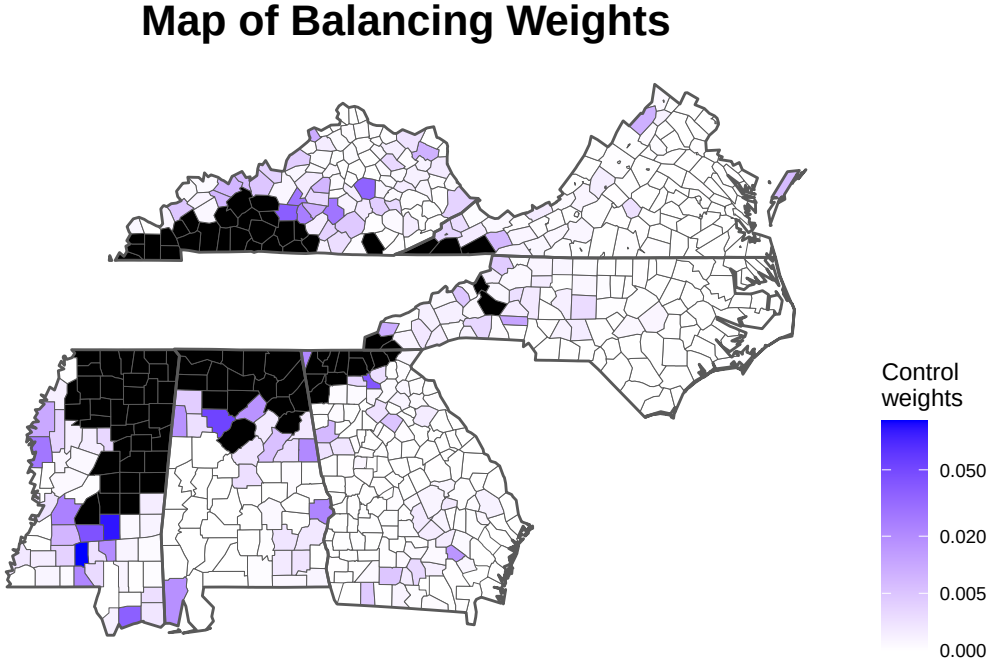
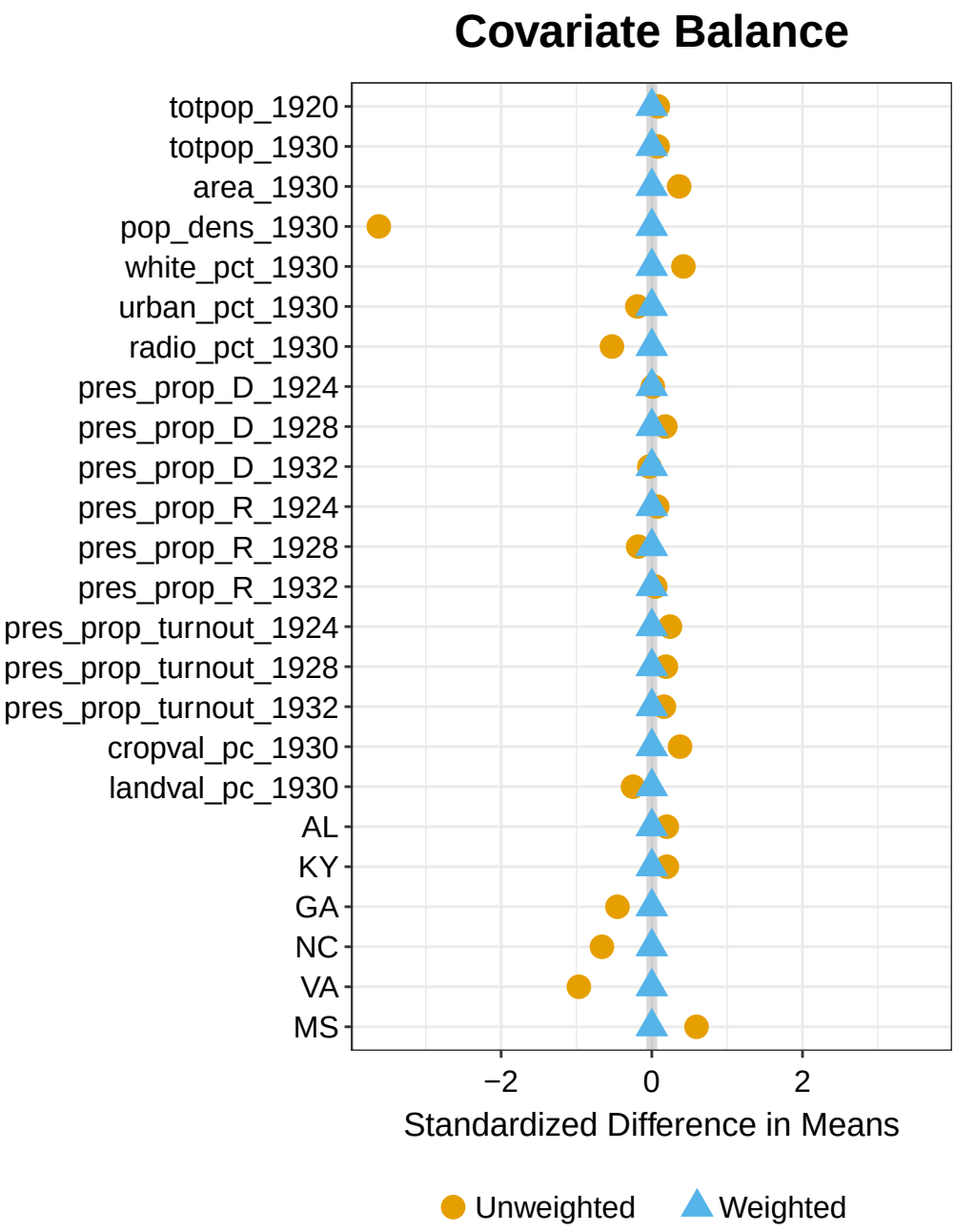
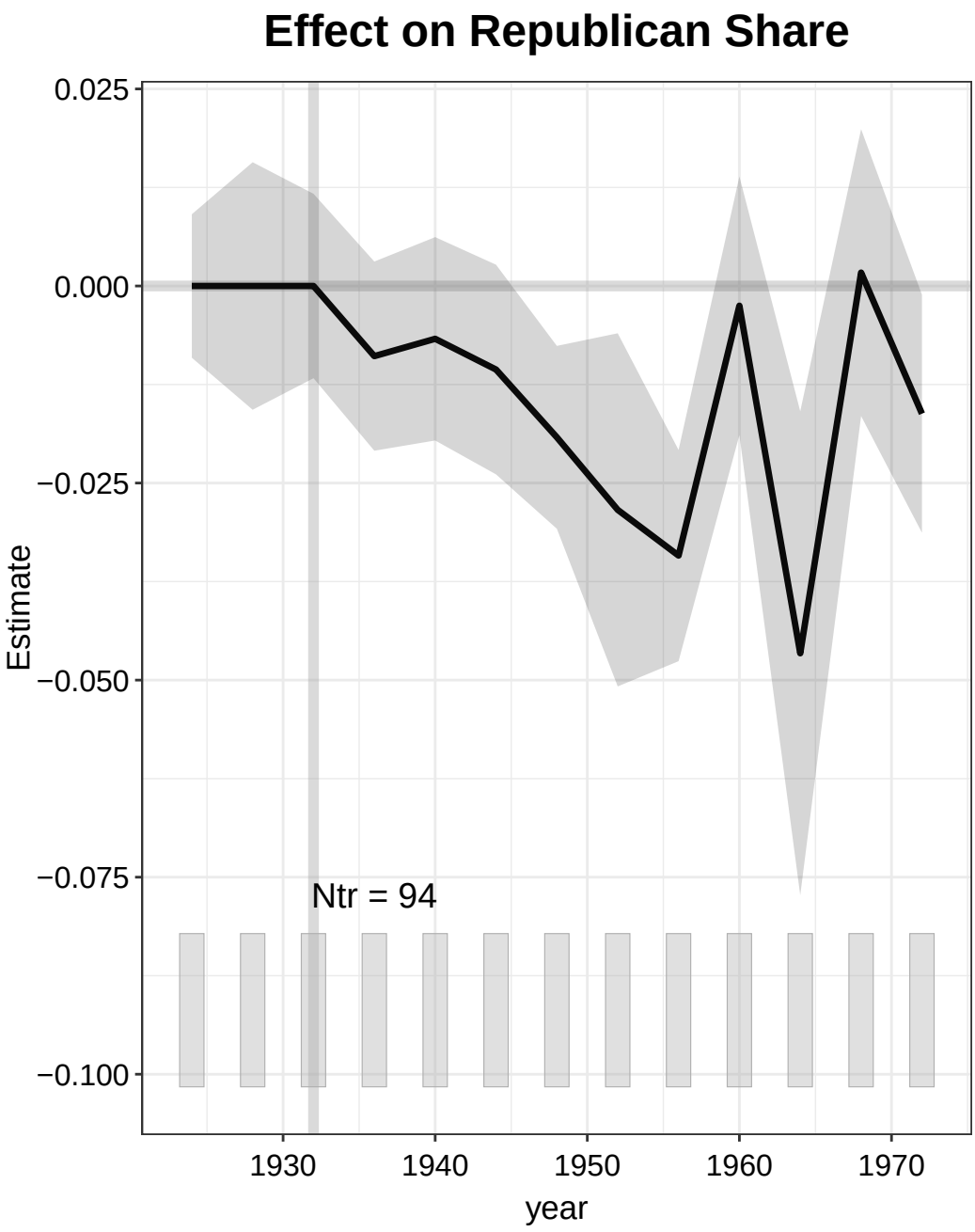
−0.05
−0.10
−0.15
Estimate
Ntr = 86
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

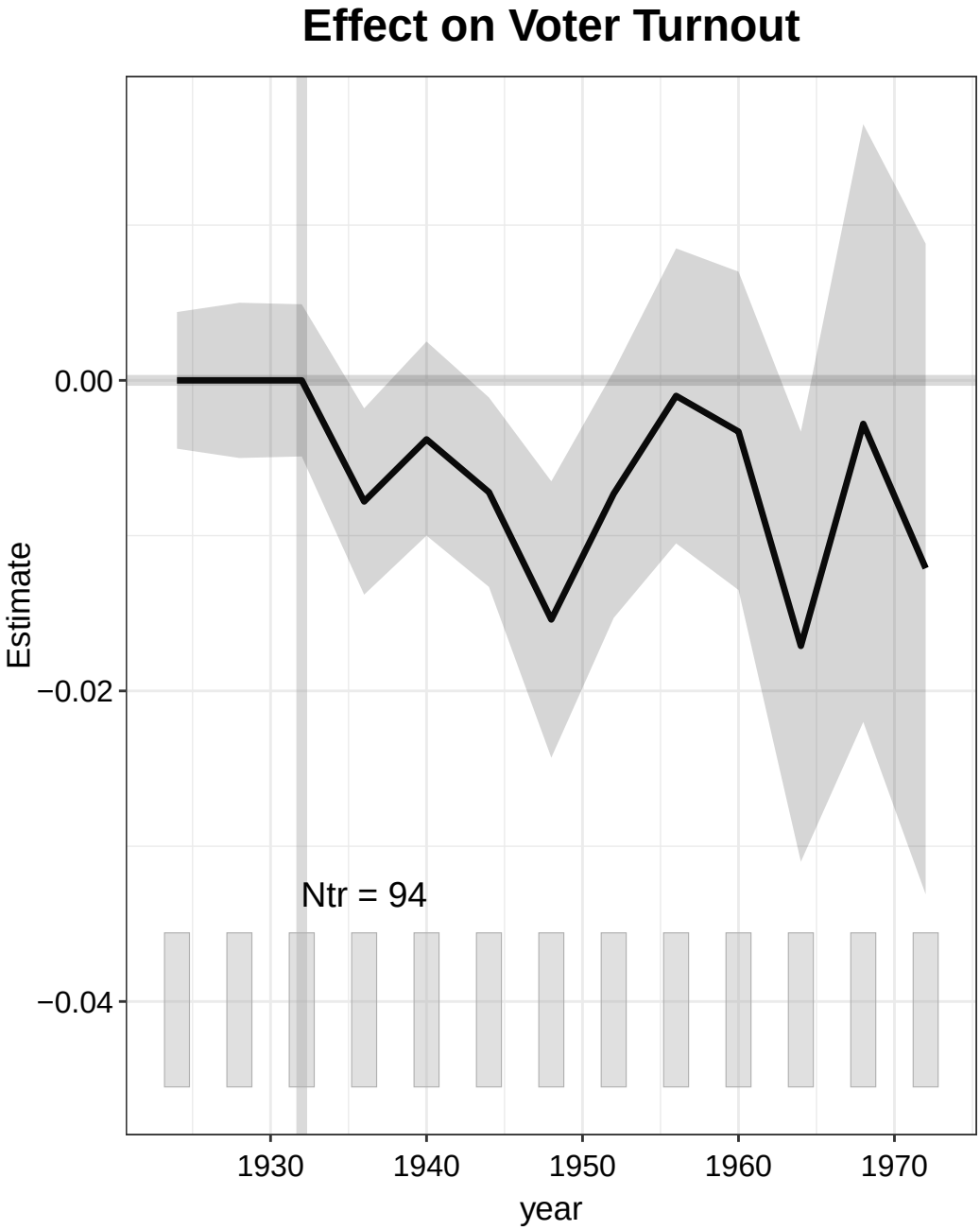

Effect on Voter Turnout
0.00
−0.02
−0.04
−0.06
Estimate
Ntr = 86
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

B.2. Low-missingness covariates, include donut

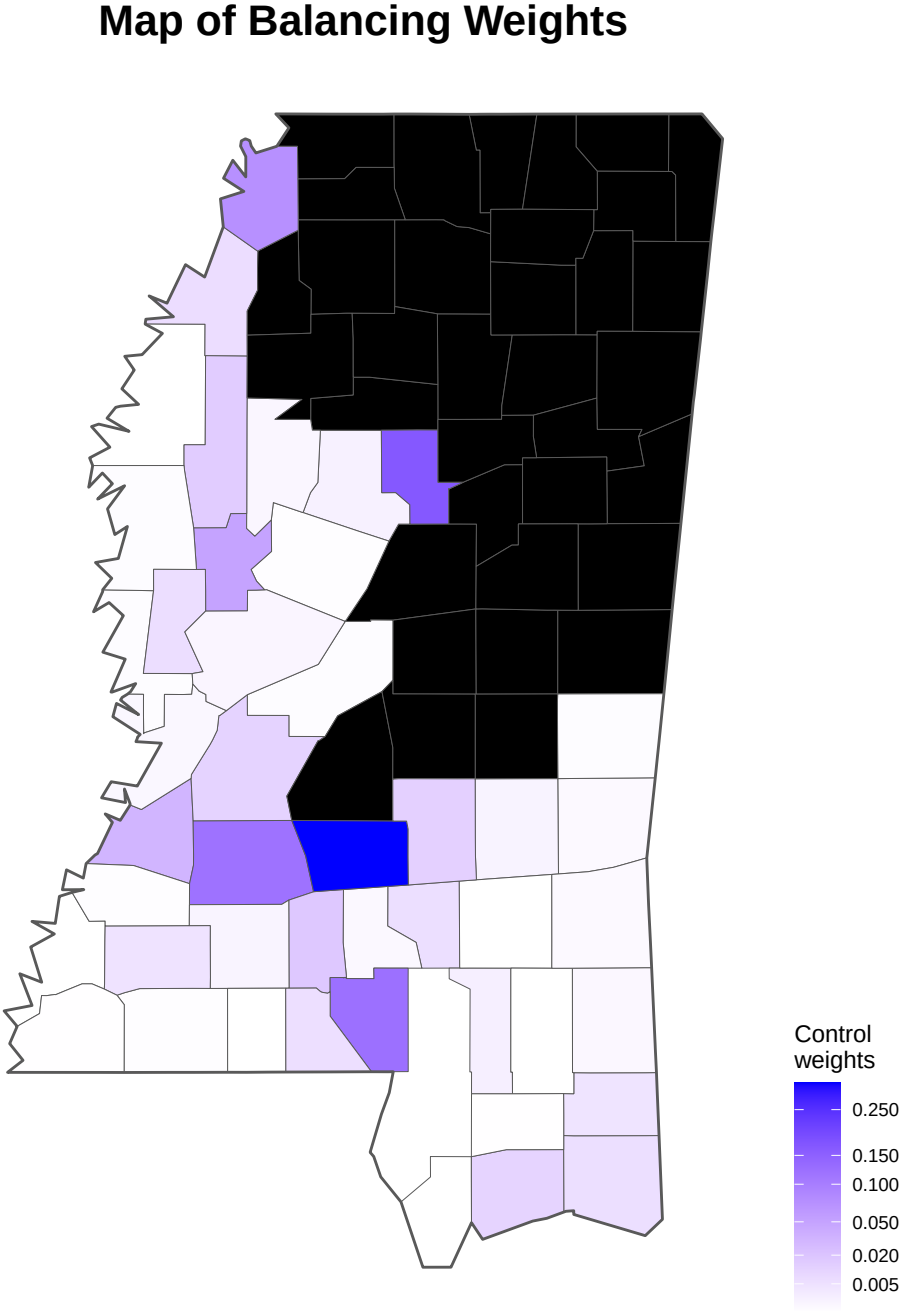


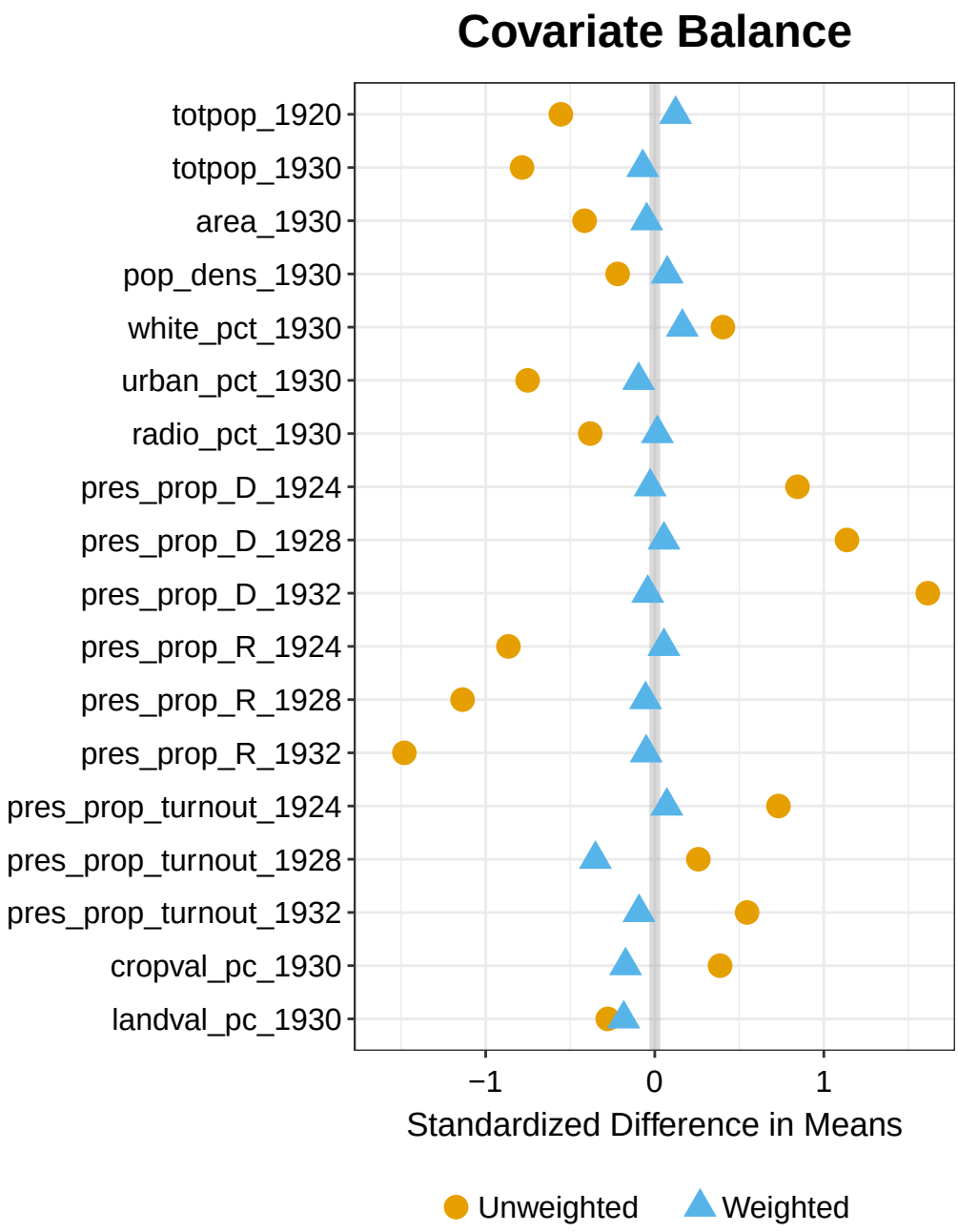

Covariate Balance
totpop_1920
totpop_1930
area_1930
pop_dens_1930
white_pct_1930
urban_pct_1930
radio_pct_1930
pres_prop_D_1924
pres_prop_D_1928
pres_prop_D_1932
pres_prop_R_1924
pres_prop_R_1928
pres_prop_R_1932
pres_prop_turnout_1924
pres_prop_turnout_1928
pres_prop_turnout_1932
cropval_pc_1930
landval_pc_1930
AL
KY
GA
NC
VA
MS
−2
0
2
Standardized Difference in Means
Unweighted
Weighted


Effect on Republican Share
0.025
0.000
−0.025
−0.050
−0.075
−0.100
Estimate
Ntr = 94
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year


Effect on Voter Turnout
0.00
−0.02
−0.04
Estimate
Ntr = 94
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

B.3. Low-missingness covariates, include donut, Mississippi only




Covariate Balance
totpop_1920
totpop_1930
area_1930
pop_dens_1930
white_pct_1930
urban_pct_1930
radio_pct_1930
pres_prop_D_1924
pres_prop_D_1928
pres_prop_D_1932
pres_prop_R_1924
pres_prop_R_1928
pres_prop_R_1932
pres_prop_turnout_1924
pres_prop_turnout_1928
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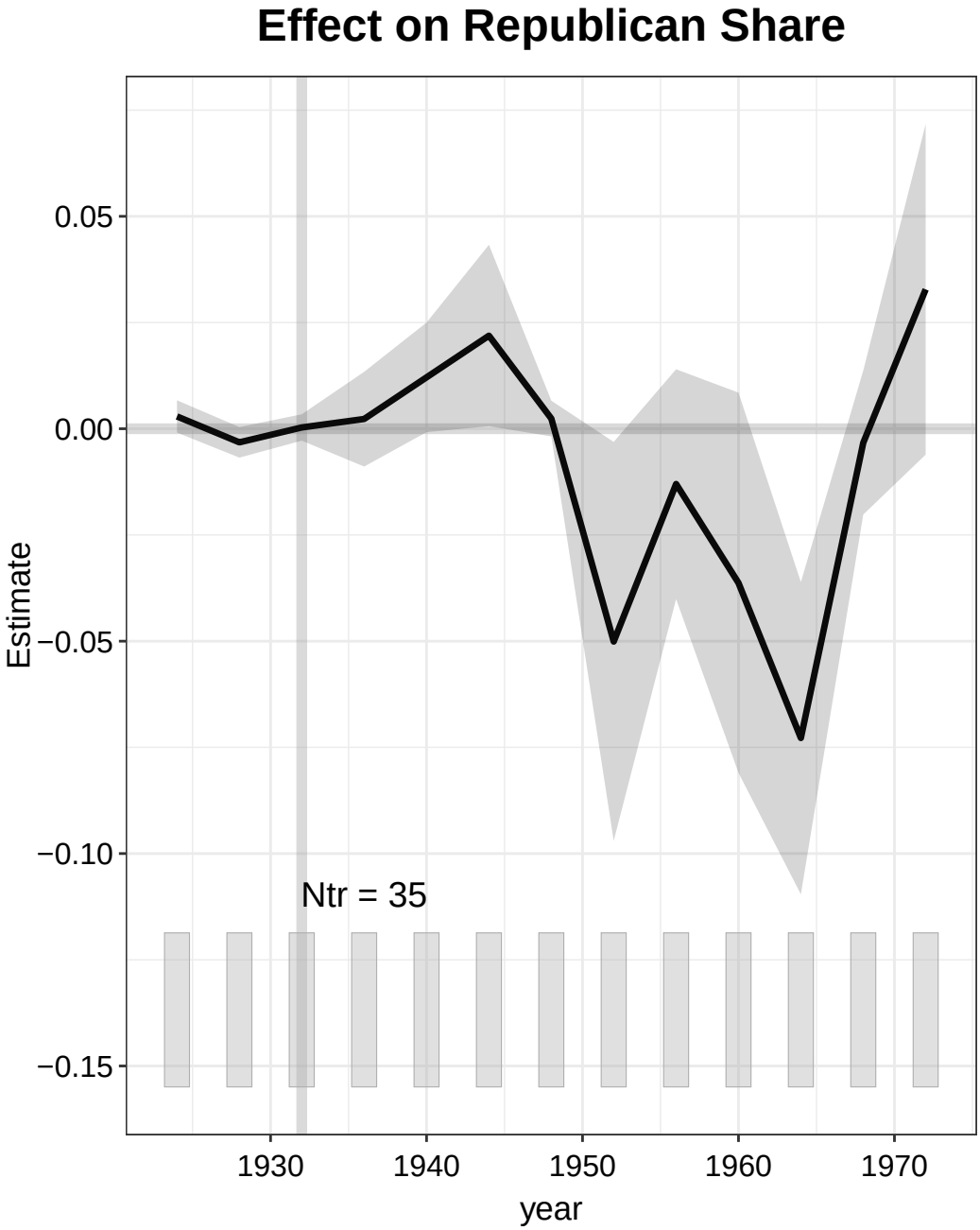
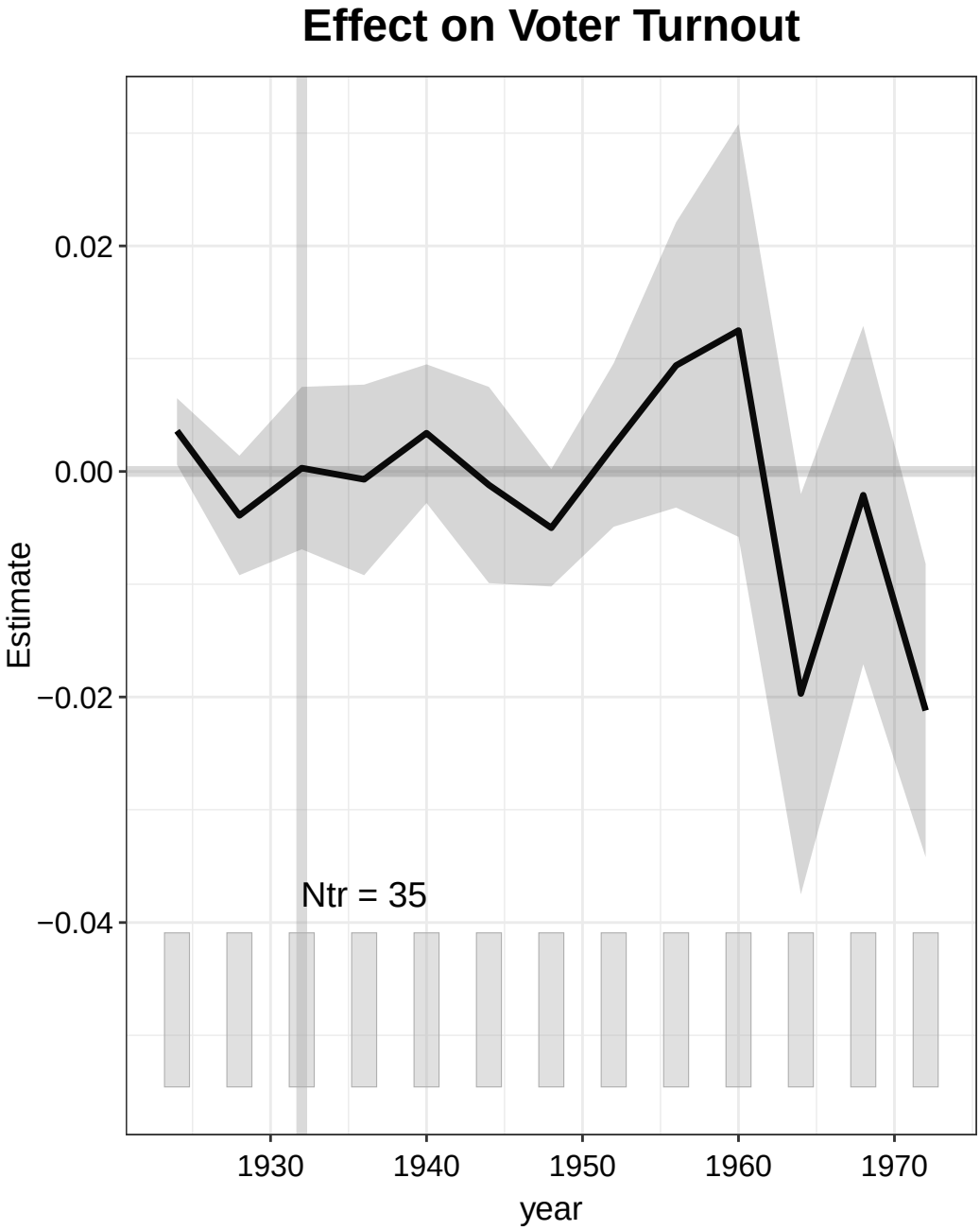
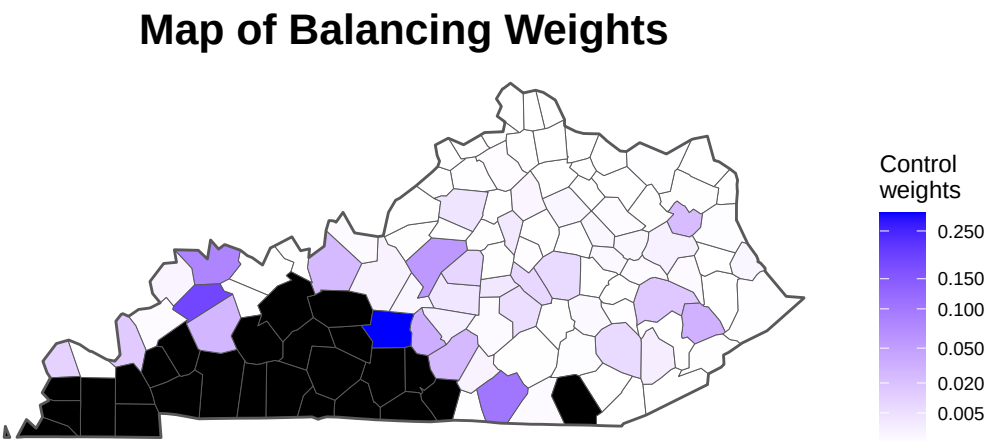
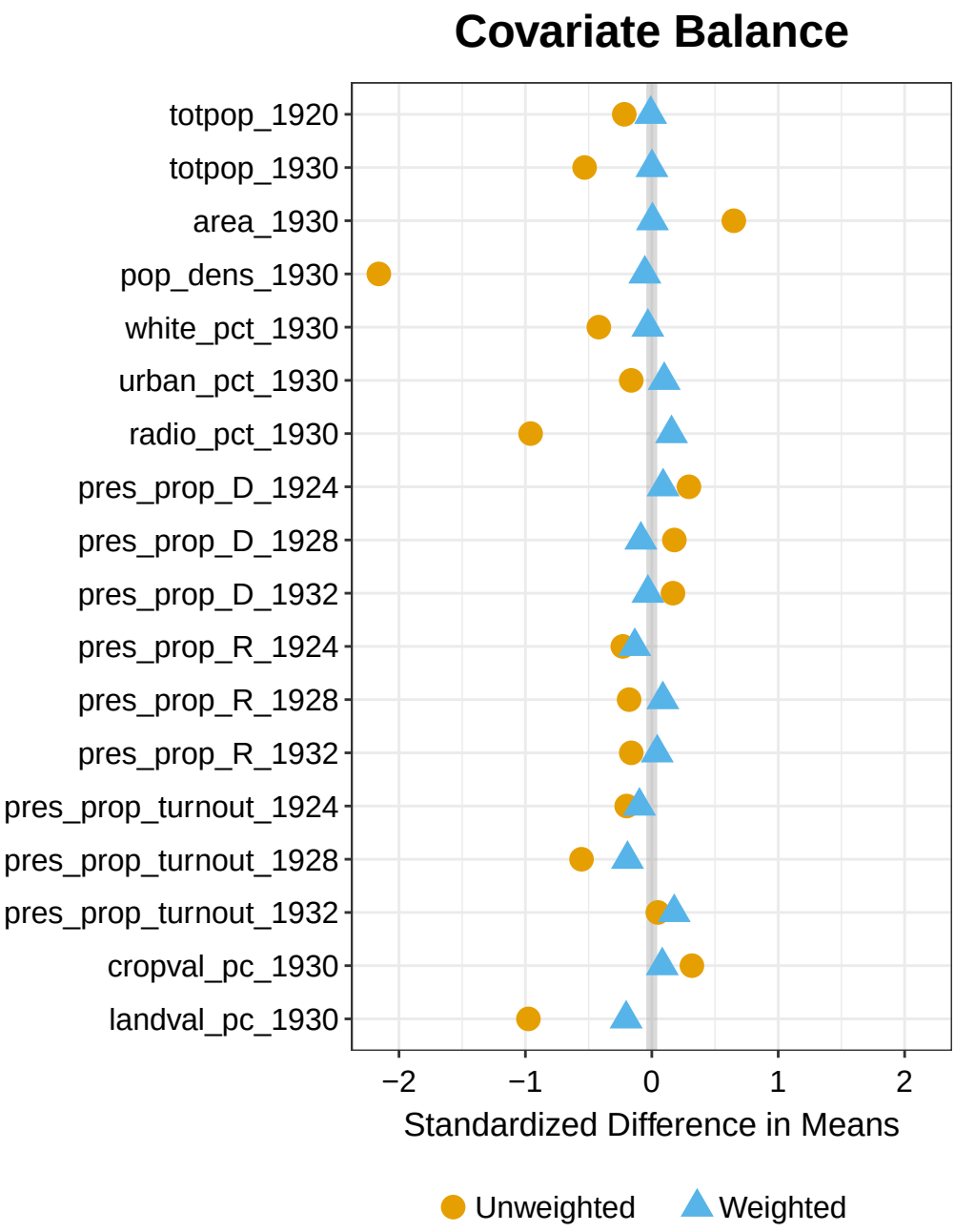
cropval_pc_1930
landval_pc_1930
−1
0
1
Standardized Difference in Means
Unweighted
Weighted

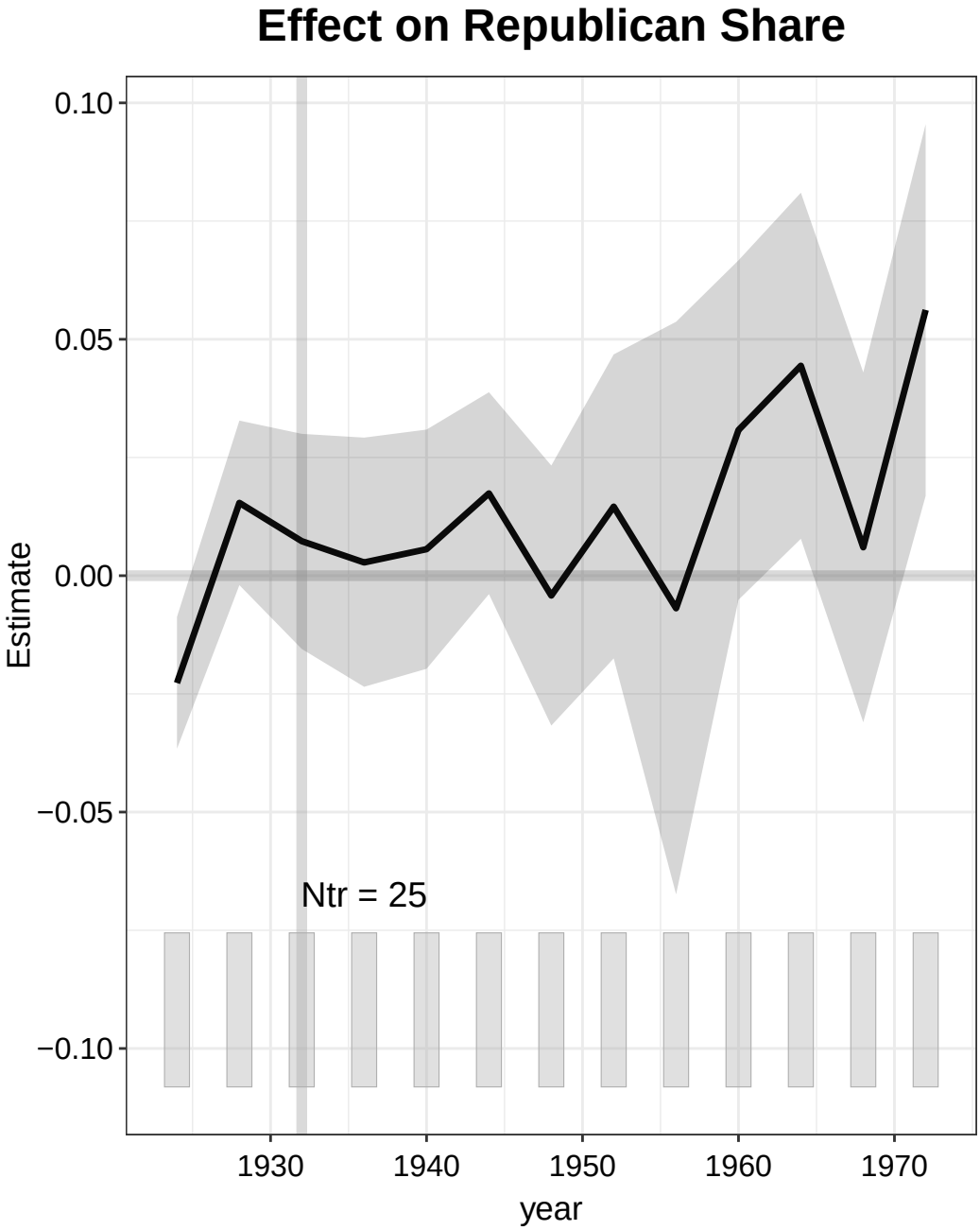

Effect on Republican Share
0.05
0.00
−0.05
−0.10
−0.15
Estimate
Ntr = 35
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

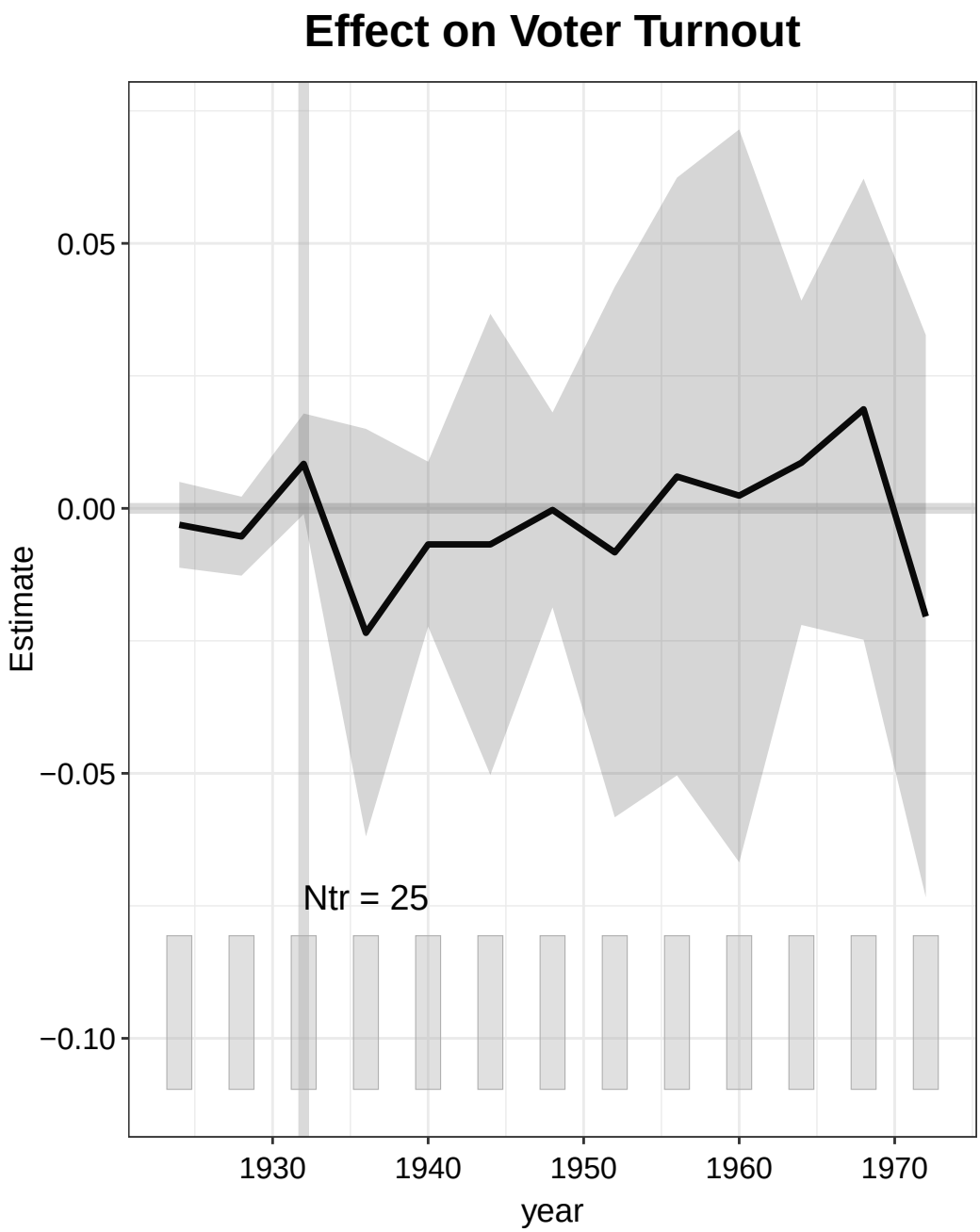

Effect on Voter Turnout
0.02
0.00
−0.02
−0.04
Estimate
Ntr = 35
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

B.4. Low-missingness covariates, include donut, Kentucky only

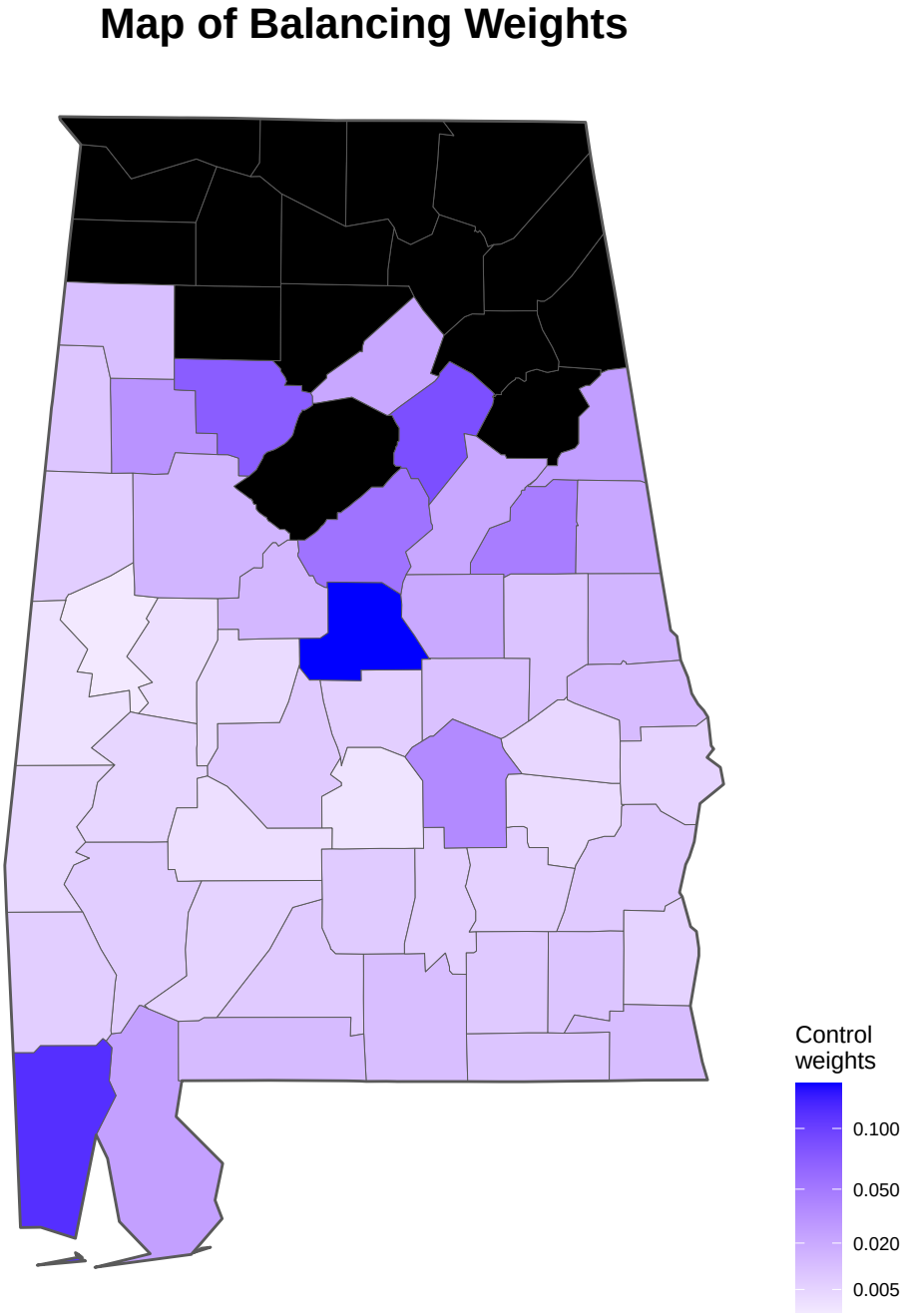


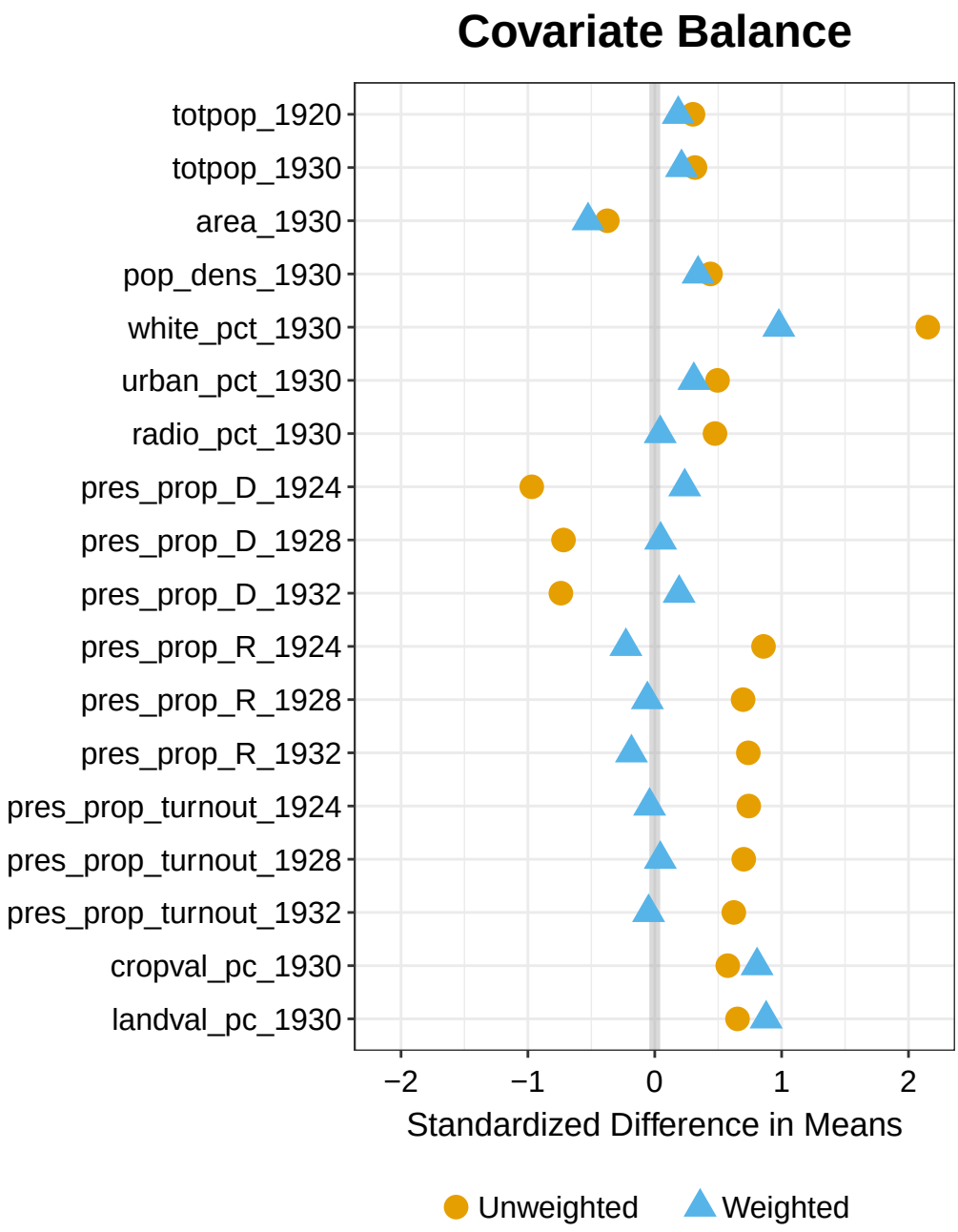

Covariate Balance
totpop_1920
totpop_1930
area_1930
pop_dens_1930
white_pct_1930
urban_pct_1930
radio_pct_1930
pres_prop_D_1924
pres_prop_D_1928
pres_prop_D_1932
pres_prop_R_1924
pres_prop_R_1928
pres_prop_R_1932
pres_prop_turnout_1924
pres_prop_turnout_1928
pres_prop_turnout_1932
cropval_pc_1930
landval_pc_1930
−2
−1
0
1
2
Standardized Difference in Means
Unweighted
Weighted

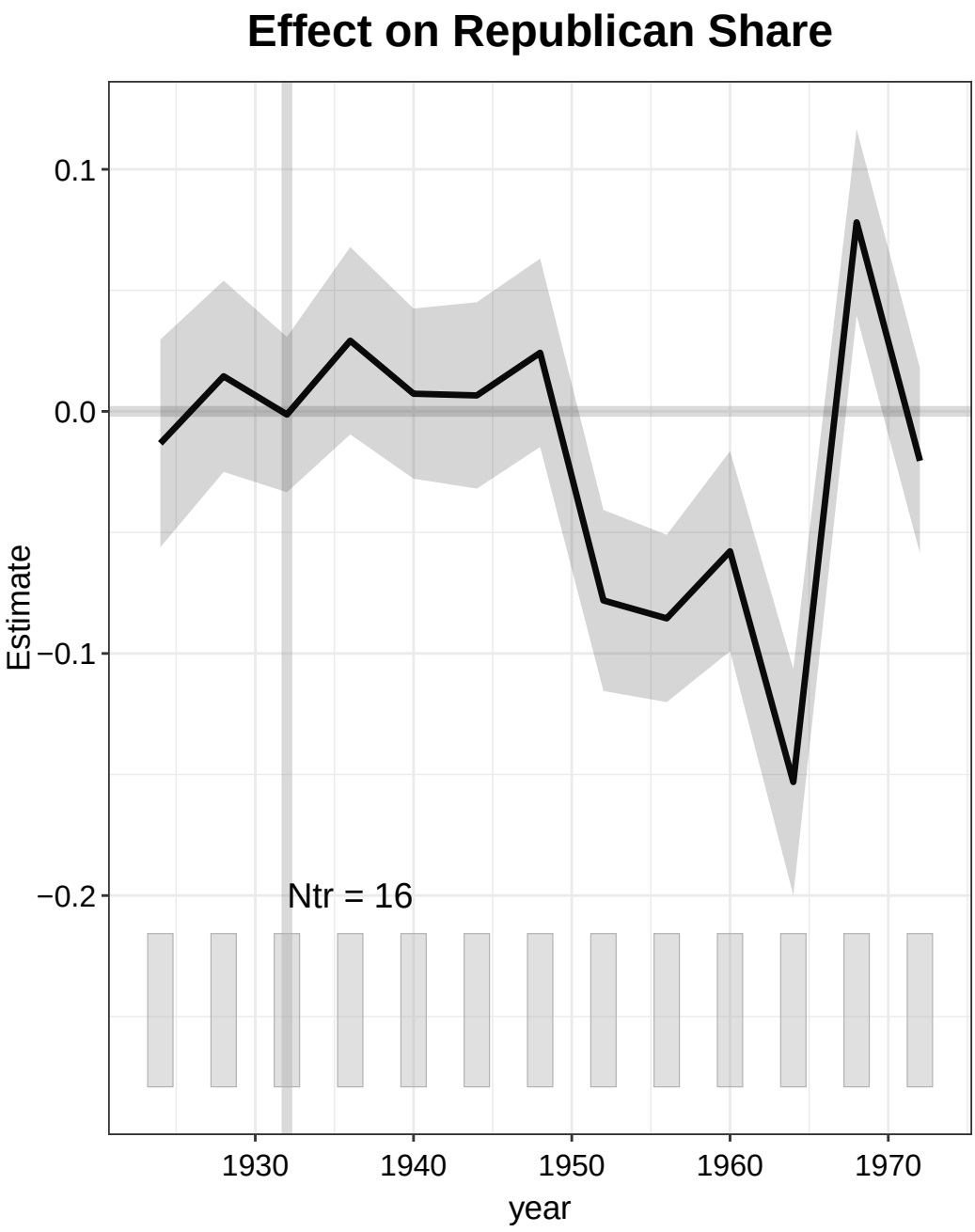

Effect on Republican Share
0.10
0.05
0.00
−0.05
−0.10
Estimate
Ntr = 25
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

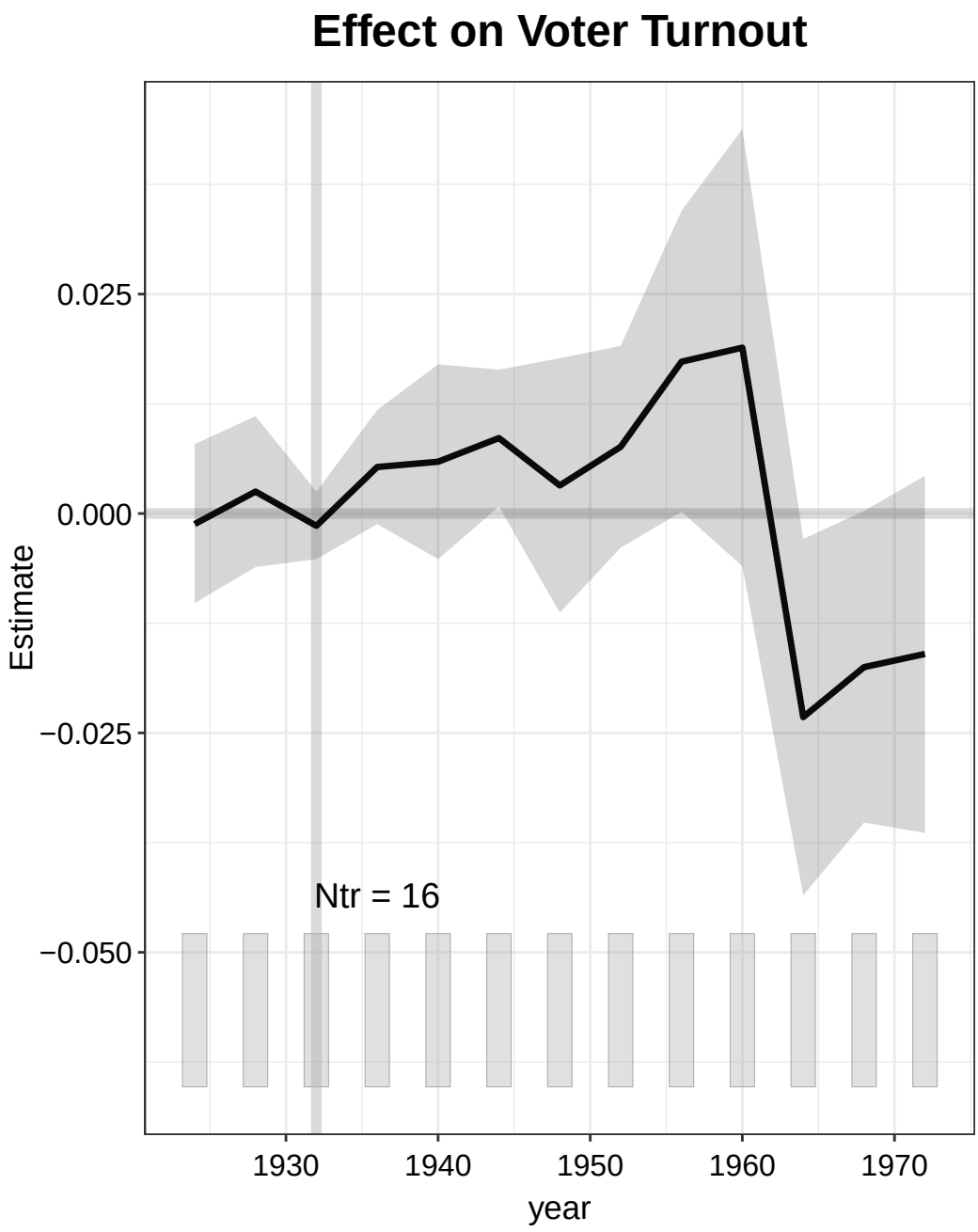

Effect on Voter Turnout
0.05
0.00
−0.05
−0.10
Estimate
Ntr = 25
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

B.5. Low-missingness covariates, include donut, Alabama only

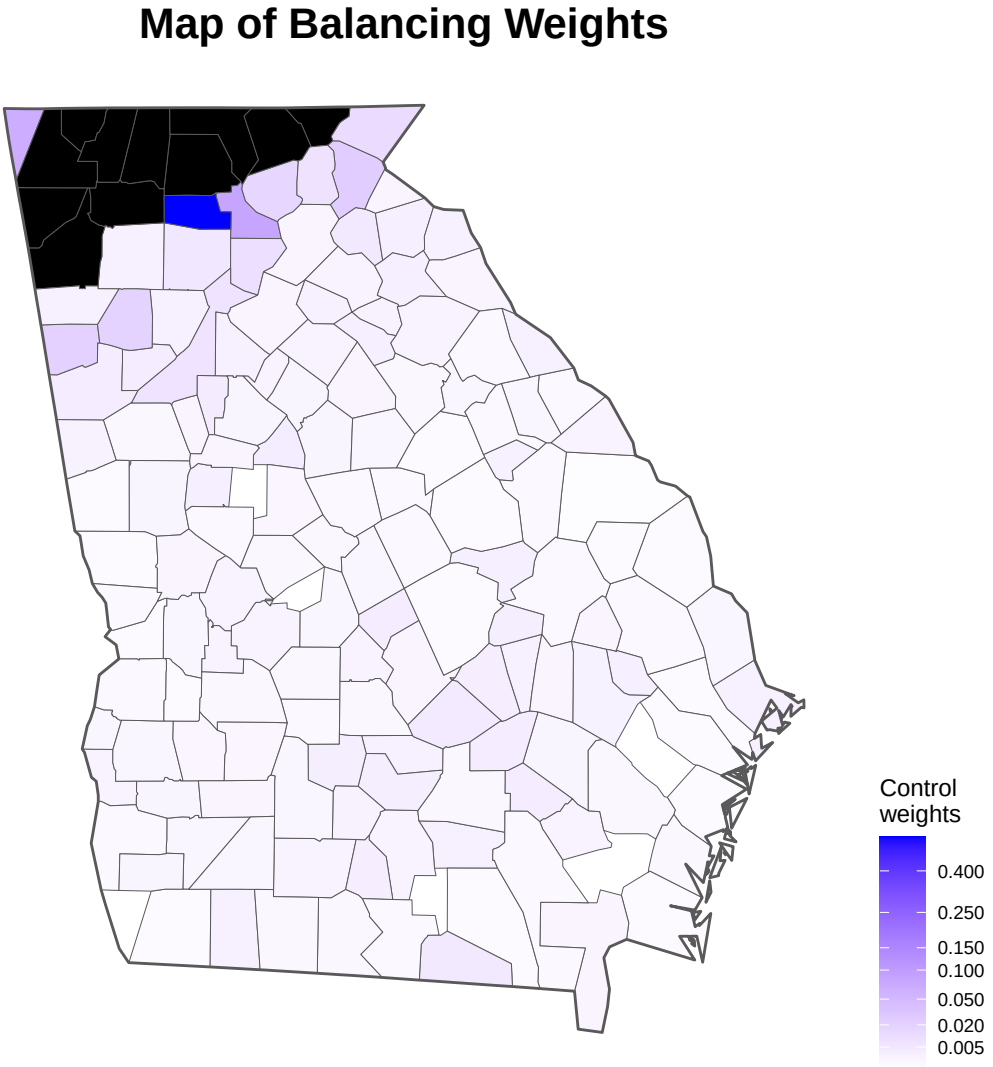


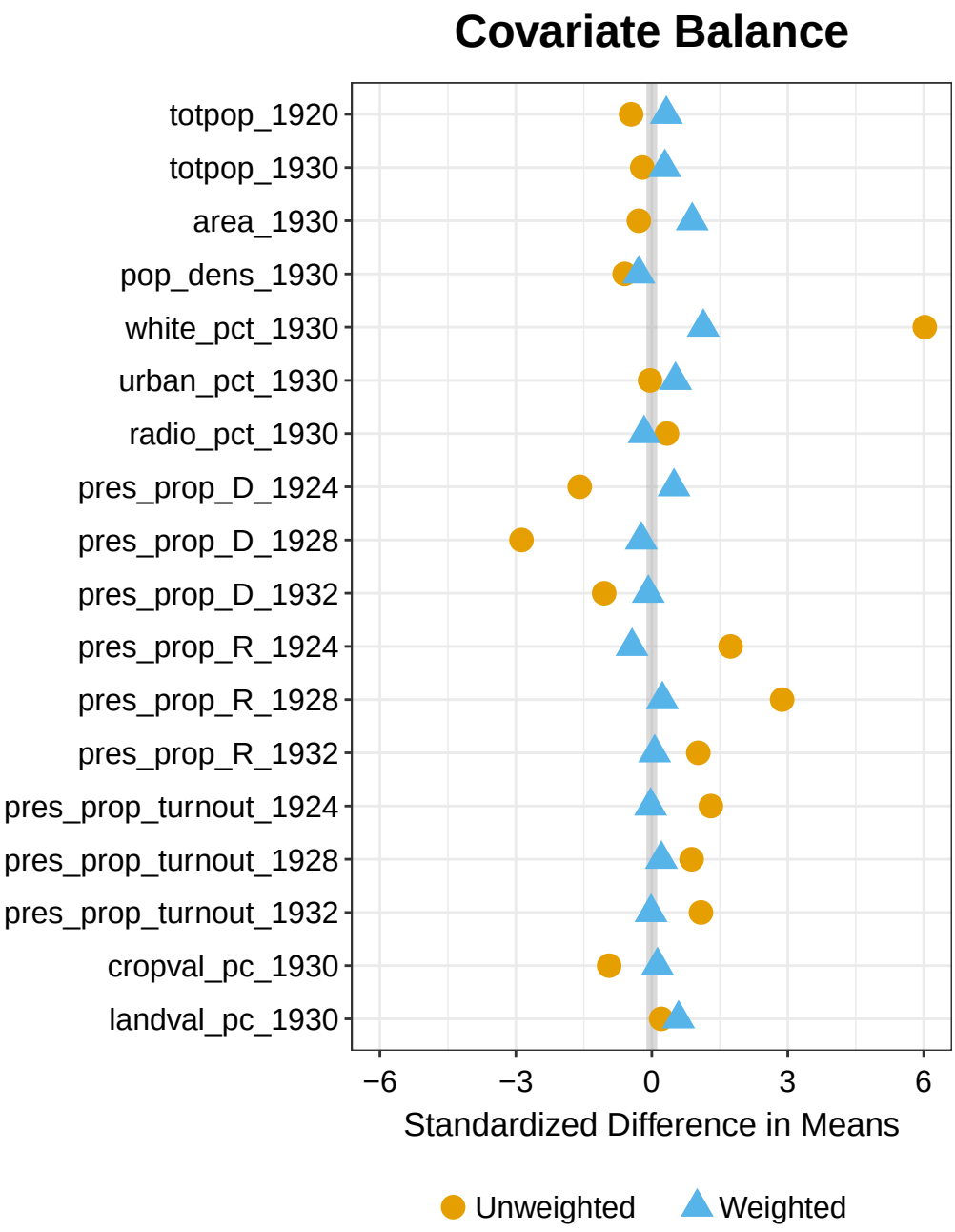

Covariate Balance
totpop_1920
totpop_1930
area_1930
pop_dens_1930
white_pct_1930
urban_pct_1930
radio_pct_1930
pres_prop_D_1924
pres_prop_D_1928
pres_prop_D_1932
pres_prop_R_1924
pres_prop_R_1928
pres_prop_R_1932
pres_prop_turnout_1924
pres_prop_turnout_1928
pres_prop_turnout_1932
cropval_pc_1930
landval_pc_1930
−2
−1
0
1
2
Standardized Difference in Means
Unweighted
Weighted

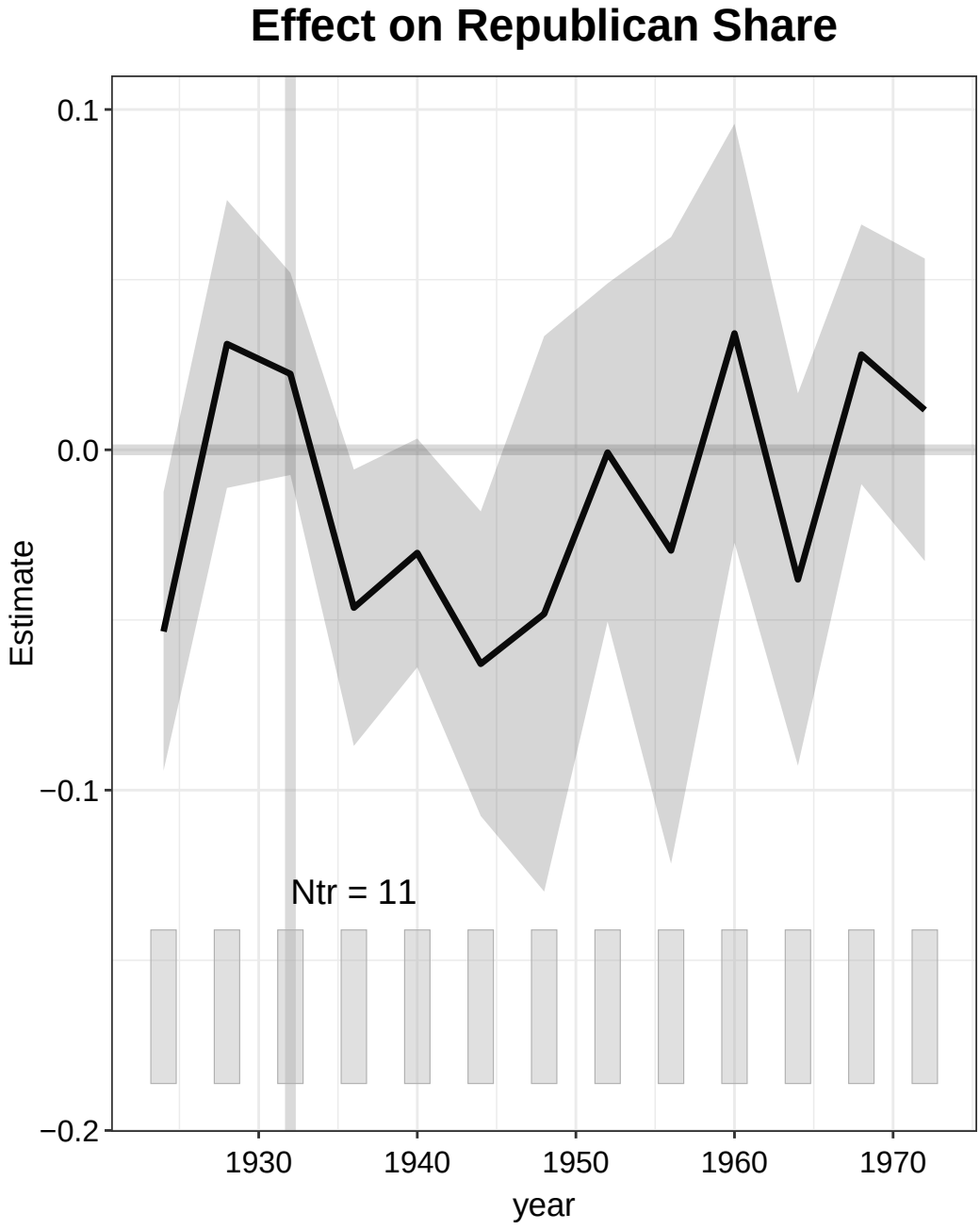

Effect on Republican Share
0.1
0.0
−0.1
−0.2
Estimate
Ntr = 16
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

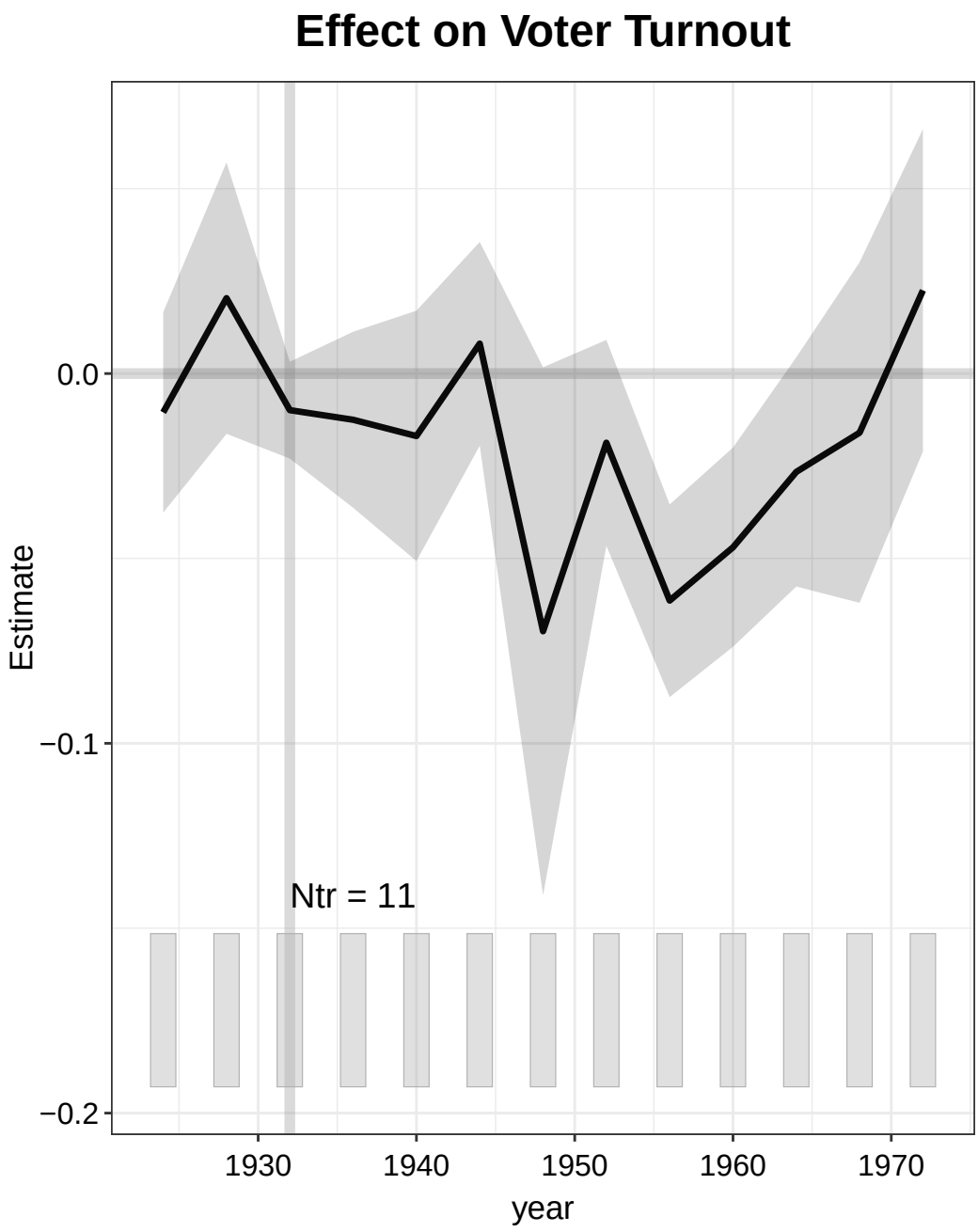

Effect on Voter Turnout
0.025
0.000
−0.025
−0.050
Estimate
Ntr = 16
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

B.6. Low-missingness covariates, include donut, Georgia only




Covariate Balance
totpop_1920
totpop_1930
area_1930
pop_dens_1930
white_pct_1930
urban_pct_1930
radio_pct_1930
pres_prop_D_1924
pres_prop_D_1928
pres_prop_D_1932
pres_prop_R_1924
pres_prop_R_1928
pres_prop_R_1932
pres_prop_turnout_1924
pres_prop_turnout_1928
pres_prop_turnout_1932
cropval_pc_1930
landval_pc_1930
−6
−3
0
3
6
Standardized Difference in Means
Unweighted
Weighted


Effect on Republican Share
0.1
0.0
−0.1
−0.2
Estimate
Ntr = 11
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year


Effect on Voter Turnout
0.0
−0.1
−0.2
Estimate
Ntr = 11
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
year

C. Districts

C.1. Synthetic control

C.1.1. Alabama 8th

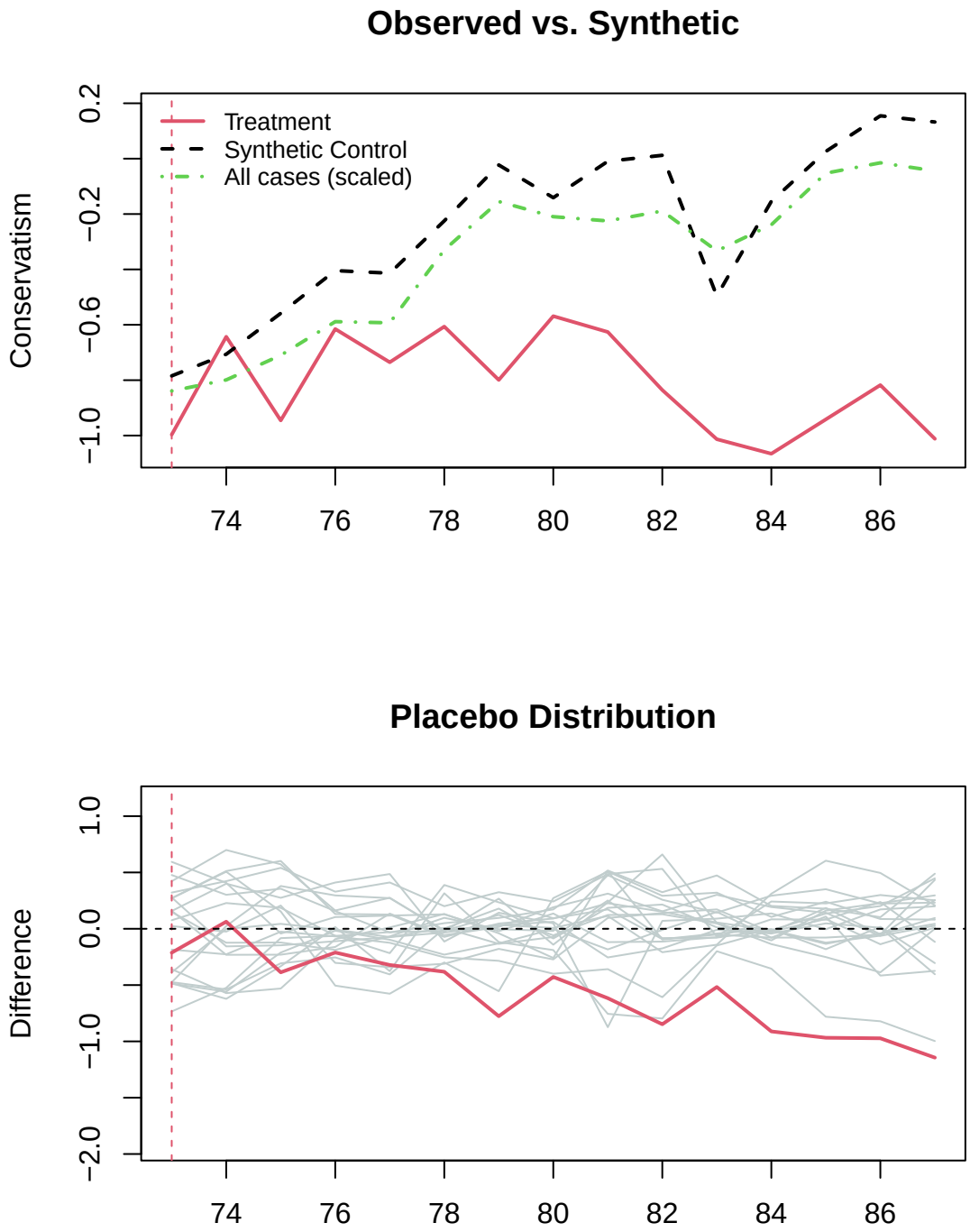


Figure 13: Synthetic control analysis of Alabama's 8th congressional district. Top: The (average) economic conservatism of AL-8's representative (solid red line), of the representatives of all stable districts (dot-dashed green line), and of the representatives of districts weighted to resemble AL-8 on low-missingness covariates. Bottom: The placebo distribution of effect estimates, obtained by conducting the same analysis for each district in the control set. In every congress after the 77th (1941–42), the observed estimate is consistently extreme relative to the placebo distribution, indicating a low permutation p-value.

C.1.2. Alabama 8th and 9th

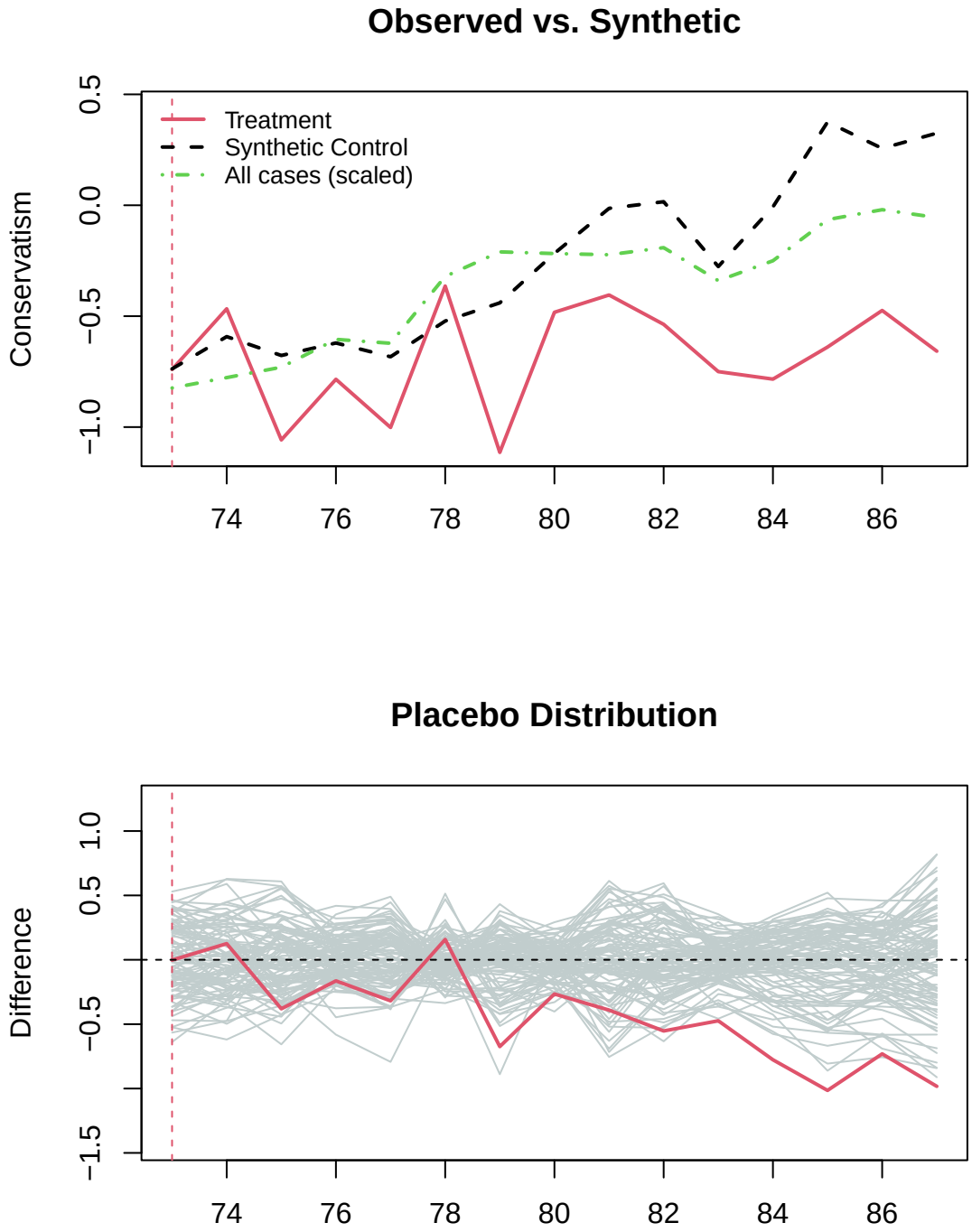
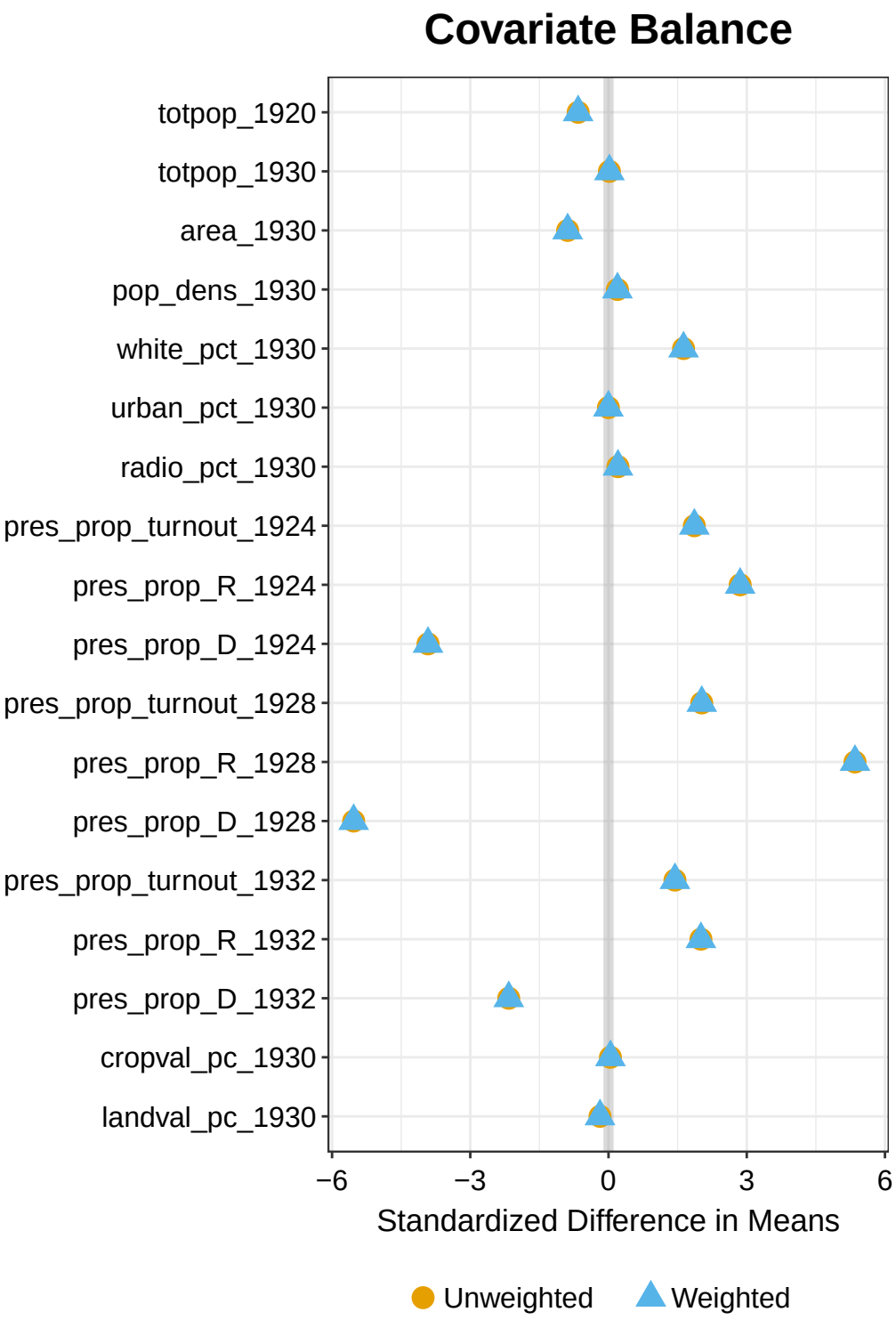
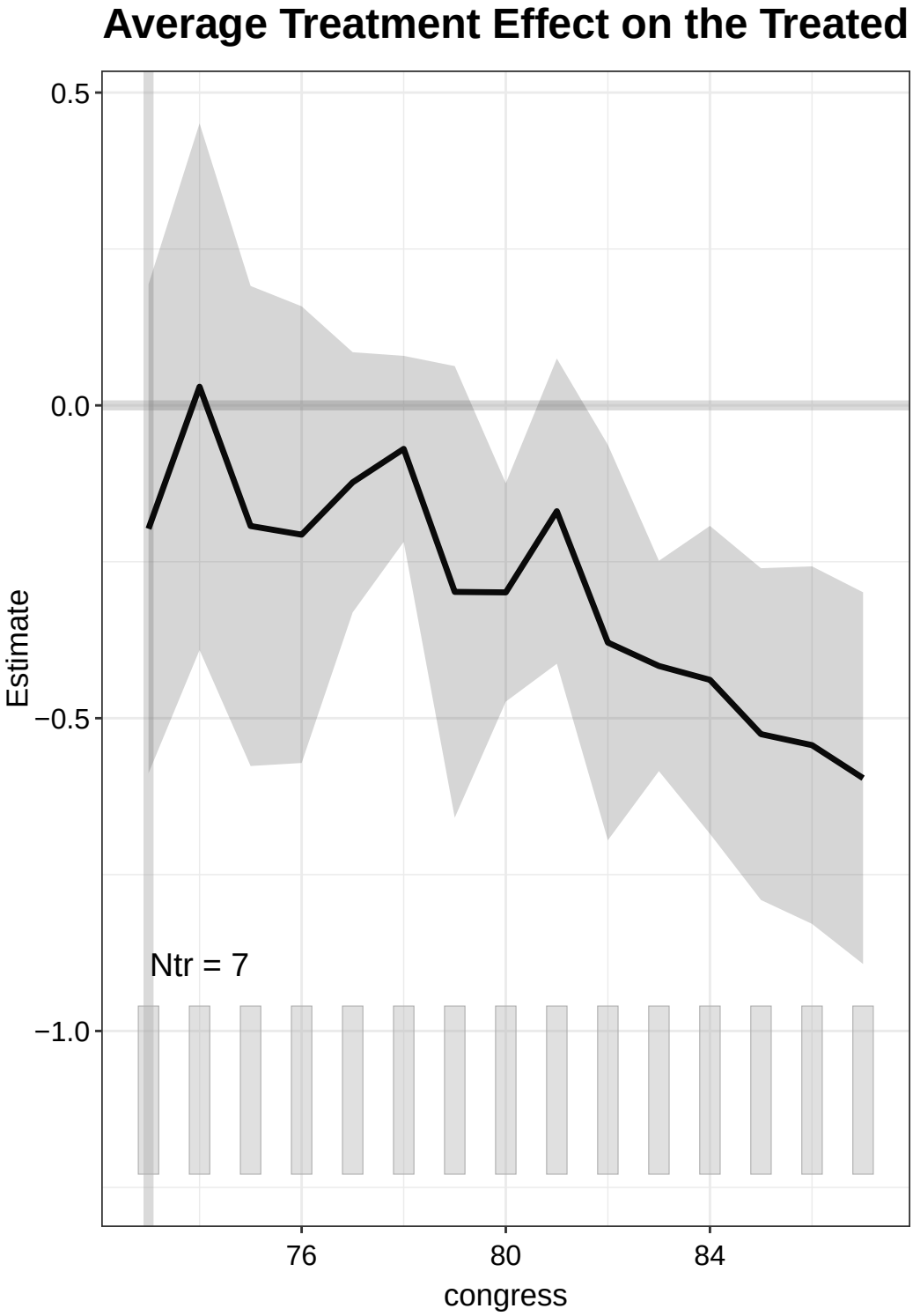


Figure 14: Synthetic control analysis of Alabama's 8th and 9th congressional districts

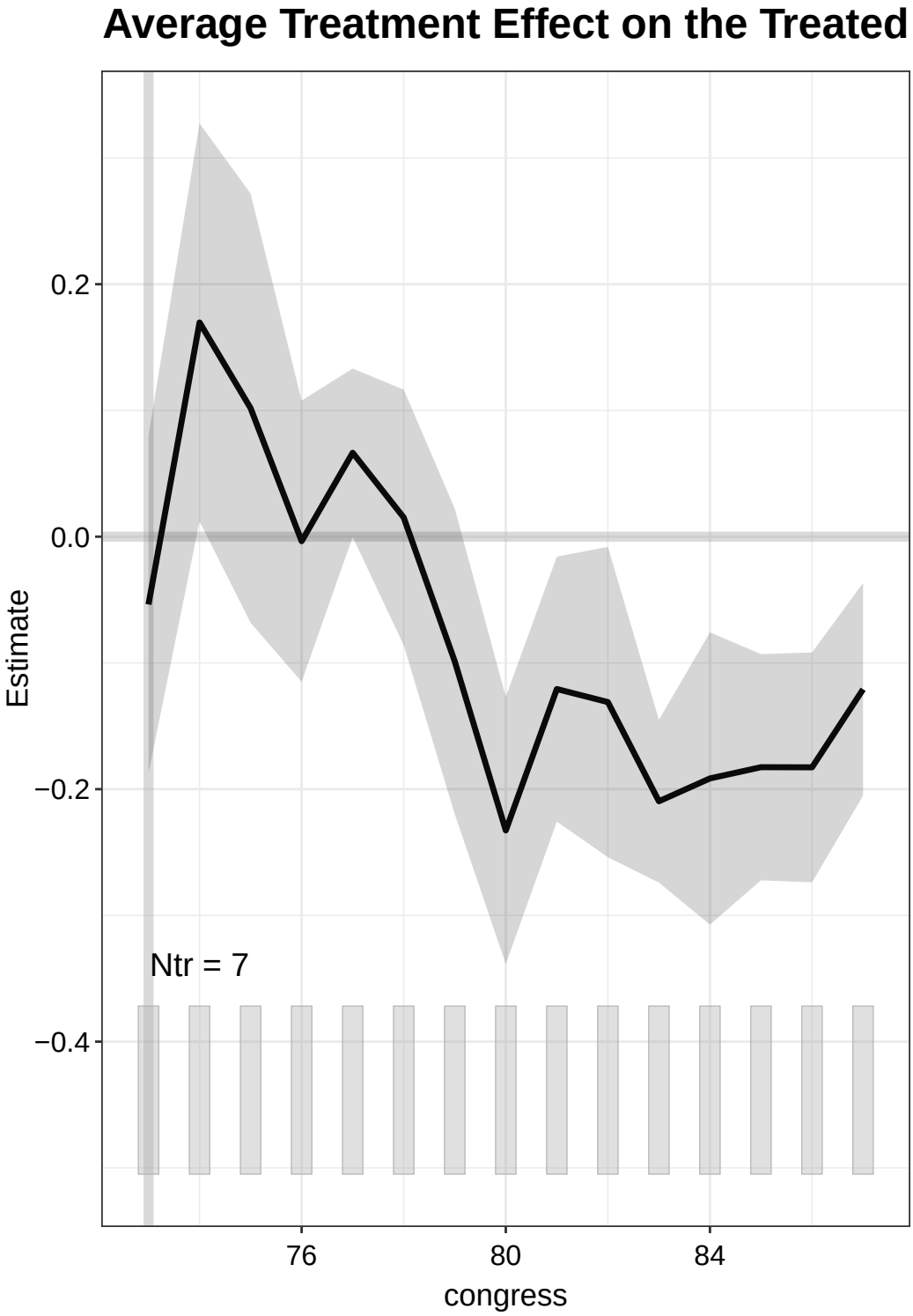
C.2. Trajectory balancing

C.2.1. Low-missingness covariates




Average Treatment Effect on the Treated
0.5
0.0
−0.5
−1.0
Estimate
Ntr = 7
76
80
84
congress

C.2.2. Demographic covariates, Nokken–Poole


Average Treatment Effect on the Treated
0.2
0.0
−0.2
−0.4
Estimate
Ntr = 7
76
80
84
congress

C.3. Repeated cross-sectional analysis

Here we explore an alternative, "pseudo-panel" approach that enables us to use all Southern states including, for the first time, Tennessee itself. The procedure is as follows:

1. In each congressional term, assign counties to districts.
2. Aggregate pre-treatment county attributes (including treatment) to the districts as they existed in that term.
3. Weight non-TVA districts to match the distribution of pre-treatment covariates in TVA districts.

That is, we use the same underlying county data to repeatedly construct new weights and calculate new effect estimates for every congressional term. Because at least some district lines change in almost every term, we cannot adjust directly for pre-treatment outcomes as we do with the county panel. We can, however, make use of the pre-treatment outcomes in another way, as placebo tests. That is, they provide an indirect test of the assumption that the *potential* outcomes—the outcomes that would have obtained had a TVA district not been included in the TVA—are balanced between treatment groups.

We expand the pool of control districts to include not only the 13-state South (the former Confederacy plus Kentucky and Oklahoma) but also the Border South states of Missouri, West Virginia, and Maryland, each of which contained pockets politically similar to the South. For covariate adjustment, we use the low-missingness variables used in the presidential analysis. To illustrate how the paired sets of treated and control

districts change with redistricting, Figure 15 displays the TVA districts and weighted controls for two illustrative congresses: the 72nd (1931–32) and 87th (1961–62).

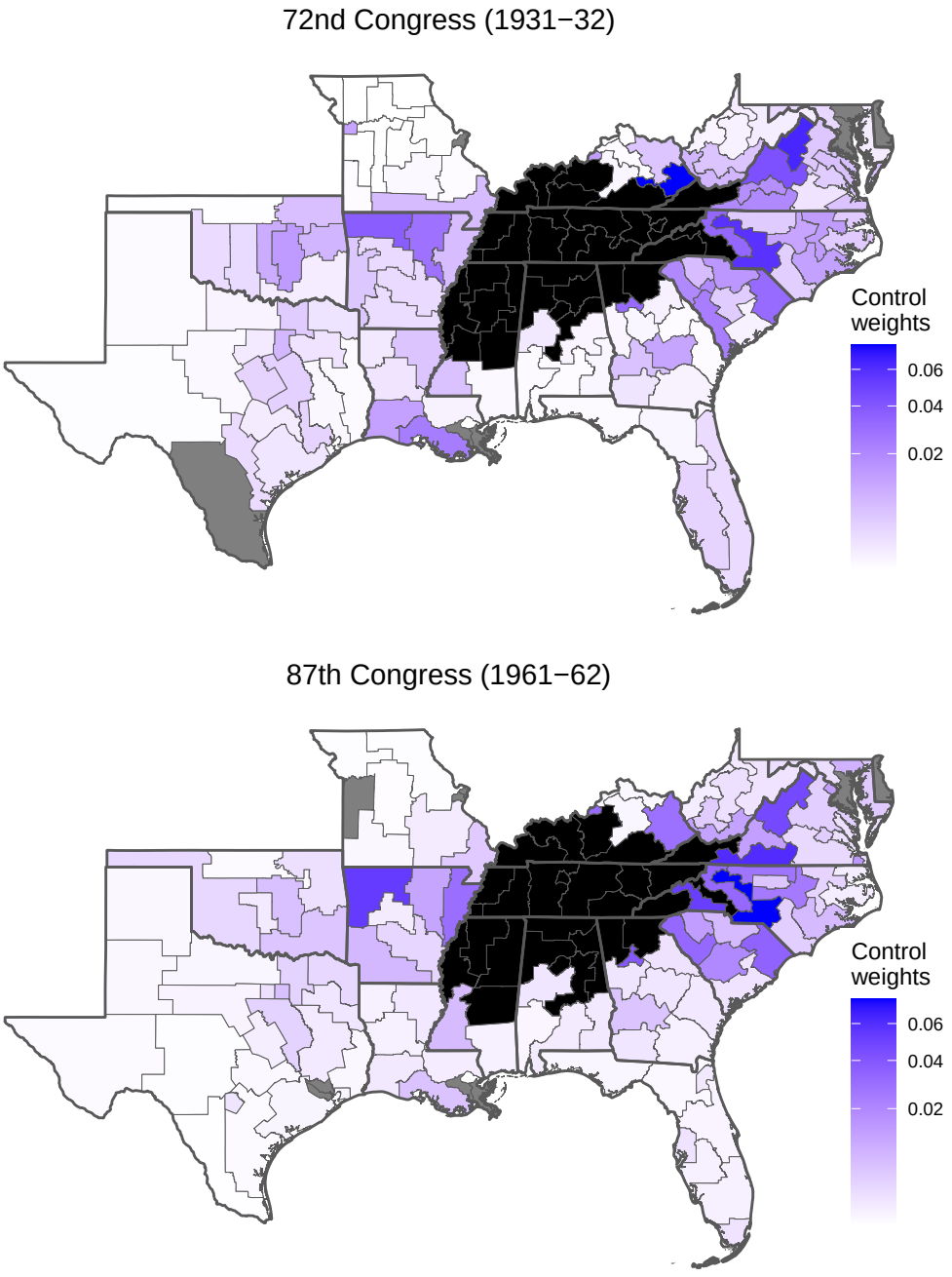


Figure 15: TVA districts and weighted controls in the 72nd (1931–32) and 83rd (1953–54) congresses. Gray districts are excluded from the analysis due either to missingness or to the definition of the sample.

As these maps illustrate, changes in district lines (as well as in missingness) cause concomitant changes in the treated districts and the weights assigned to controls. Nevertheless, the areas of the non-TVA South that are highly weighted—the cities of Louisville and Atlanta, the Ozarks in Arkansas, Appalachia in Kentucky and southern West Virginia, the Piedmont regions of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina—are fairly consistent across time.

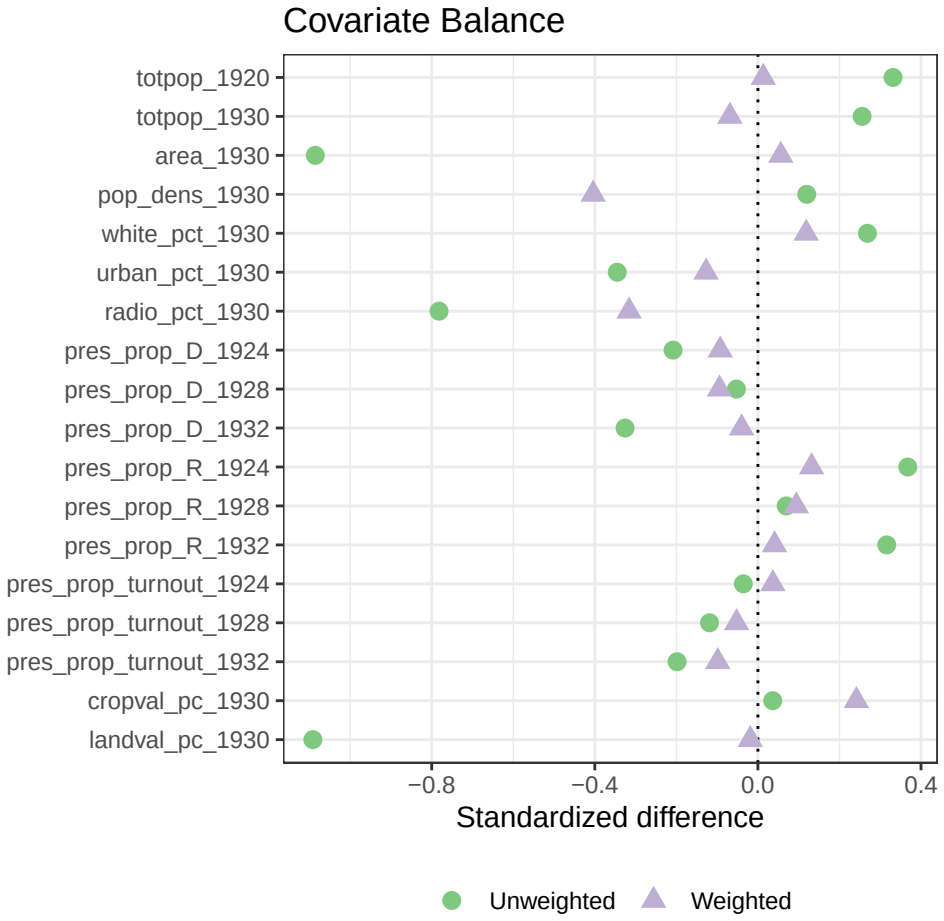


Figure 16

As Figure 16 illustrates with respect to the 87th congress, weighting reduces but does not eliminate covariate imbalance. We therefore report two treatment-effect estimates:

the weighted treated–control difference and the covariate-adjusted weighted difference, as estimated by linear regression.[155] Both sets of estimates are plotted in Figure 17. Note that in several congresses there are not enough TVA districts to calculate standard errors for the adjusted estimate. Nevertheless, the overall pattern is consistent between the two estimators and also, broadly speaking, with the trajectory balancing estimates reported in Figure 11. There is no sign that TVA districts were less conservative before the passage of the TVA act, and the differences remained minor through the TVA's roll-out period. Significant differences first arise after WWII and appear again in the mid-1950s through the early 1960s.

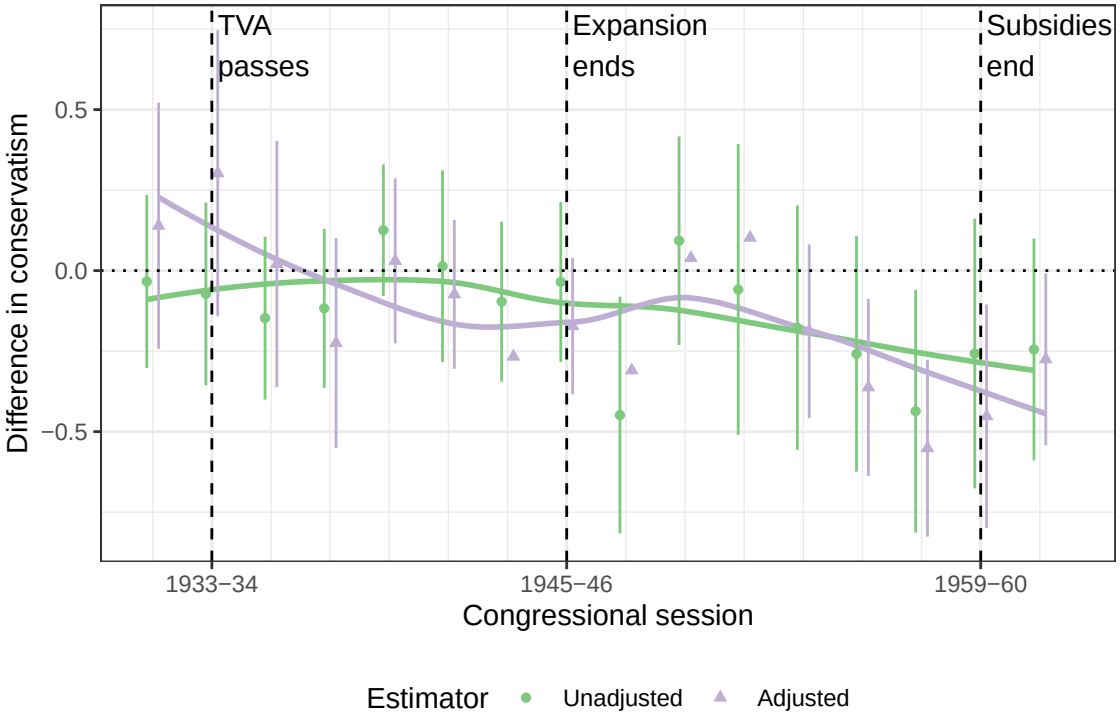


Figure 17

[155]Winston Lin, "Agnostic Notes on Regression Adjustments to Experimental Data: Reexamining Freedman's Critique," *Annals of Applied Statistics* 7, no. 1 (2013): 1–39.