Nonpartisan Ballots and the Partisanship of Who Serves in Office

Abstract: Nonpartisan elections are often theorized to reduce the role of partisanship in local governance. This study examines whether US municipalities using nonpartisan or partisan election differ in the partisan composition of their elected officials. Unlike prior research, which has largely relied on survey experiments or focused on large cities where the differences are expected to be smallest, we analyze actual elected officials across cities of varying sizes using two novel datasets of municipal politics: the electoral institutions and demographics of 18,690 cities and towns and a list of 103,557 mayors and city councilors from these municipalities. We then match these officials to a nationwide campaign voter file, allowing us to estimate the partisanship of most of these policymakers and resulting in a dataset of 14,886 municipalities to analyze. In the data, nonpartisan election cities have more independents and – among the partisan officials – more officials from the minority party.

Partisan versus nonpartisan elections represent an institutional difference that may influence who runs for office and how people vote in elections, thereby changing the partisan composition of who serves in office. For example, in partisan elections, voters might use party labels as a shortcut for identifying candidates' preferences and priorities (e.g., Squire and Smith 1988; Schaffner, Streb and Wright 2001), especially on broad policies (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; de Benedictis-Kessner 2016; Warshaw 2019). In an experiment that varies the availability of party labels, Kirkland and Coppock (2018) find that when voters do not know the candidates' parties, they use other information such as the candidates' relative experience to choose how they vote. While this suggests that people might vote for candidates who are not from their party when participating in nonpartisan elections, the evidence on that point is mixed. Bonneau and Cann (2015) survey respondents about their vote in state judicial elections and find that even in nonpartisan elections, respondents vote for their copartisans at high rates. Oliver and Ha (2007) also find that suburban voters are more likely to vote for someone who shares their partisanship in nonpartisan elections; however, significantly, they also find that the predictive power of shared partisanship on vote choice is even larger in cities that use partisan elections.

We revisit the relationship between nonpartisan elections and partisan representation by comparing the partisan leanings of elected officials in nonpartisan election cities versus partisan election cities. Our study has at least two advantages over prior research. First, in actual nonpartisan elections, party organizations, media reports, elite endorsements, and/or the candidates themselves may provide voters with partisan cues, which can make nonpartisan elections effectively partisan affairs (Adrian 1959; Davidson and Fraga 1988; Squire and Smith 1988; Trounstine 2006). This type of dynamic is not easily replicated with a survey experiment. Second, our approach allows us to study the differences between nonpartisan and partisan

election cities of all sizes. Most previous observational studies are limited to larger cities. Welch and Bledsoe (1986), for example, limited their sample of local officials to those serving in cities with populations with 50,000 people or more. At the same time, Welch and Bledsoe find that the differences between partisan election cities and nonpartisan election cities only existed in the smaller cities in their sample, meaning that previous studies that focused on larger cities may be underestimating the differences between nonpartisan and partisan election cities.

Our work has its own limitations. Prominently we are only testing whether there are differences between nonpartisan election cities and partisan election cities. We are not testing why those differences emerge. Partisan elections influence who runs for office or how people vote in the election or both. It would be difficult for us to test these mechanisms because we are not using information about the campaigns or the election results. Instead, we are examining the culmination of that process by looking at the partisan leanings of those who serve in office.

We test whether the officials serving in nonpartisan election cities are different from those serving in partisan election cities in two ways. First, among the partisan officials serving in office, are there more officials from the party with weaker support among the public in cities that use nonpartisan elections? Second, among all officials serving, are there more officials who are classified as independents in cities using nonpartisan elections?

Major Data Collection to Identify Partisan Leanings and Election Type

In 2017, we collected a list of 244,122 municipal officials from 21,942 municipalities, which included 104,239 elected legislators (e.g., councilors) and 15,006 elected chief executives (e.g., mayors). For the median state, we have all the city councilors and mayors for 91% of municipalities in that state and at least the mayor from 98% of the municipalities. Most municipalities with missing data are small, with populations below 1,000, and are primarily what

the Census categorizes as "Minor Civil Divisions" from three states—Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. When we exclude these types of municipalities in our totals, we have officials from 92% of municipalities. Appendix A details how we identified municipalities and their officials. We used officials' data such as first and last names and location of the city where they serve to feed a probabilistic model of record linkage (Enamorado, Fifield and Imai 2018) to find matches within the L2 database of US registered voters (see Appendix B for more details). Our process linked 95 percent of the officials in our database to a record in the L2 database.

Table 1. The Quality of Matches Between the Survey and Matches from the Database

Sex	Exact Match	Birth Year	Exact Match
All Observations (N =737)	94%	All Observations (N =737)	76%
Low quality matches (N =199)	79%	*Low quality matches* (N =199)	38%
Medium quality matches (N=95)	99%	*Medium quality matches* (N =95)	81%
High quality matches (N =443)	100%	*High quality matches* (N =443)	91%

We assess the quality of the matches by comparing survey responses collected in 2017 that asked officials to identify their sex and birth year.[1] We compare their survey responses with the information found in the L2 database for each match. Table 1 looks at how often there was an exact match between the survey response and the database information when looking at different levels of quality of the matches. "Quality" captures closeness between an official and the match based on name similarity and geographical distance (in miles) using the geocoded location of both. The matching works well if the sample is limited to cases where the quality of the match is

[1] The survey was approved by the institutional review board at REDACTED University, IRB#: E17330. See Appendix C for more details on the survey and the sample.

medium or high. In our main analysis, we use the sample with only high quality matches.

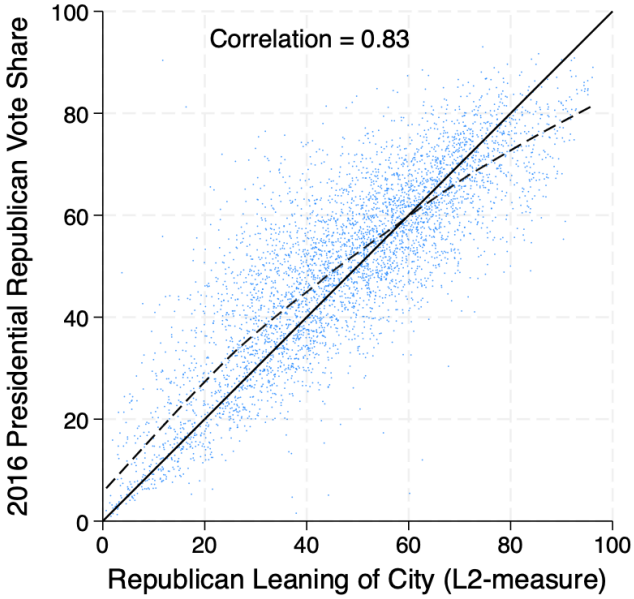
We aggregate L2's prediction of individuals' partisanship to measure the partisan leaning of the city's elected officials and the city's registered voters. L2 uses a proprietary model to classify individuals as Republican, Democratic or "Non-Partisan" (who we refer to as Independents). Because we do not know what goes into L2's model, we use the term partisan leaning to distinguish our aggregate measure from partisan identification and party registration. For officials, we create two measures. First, the percentage of Independents among all officials. Second, the percentage of Republicans among the partisan officials in that city (i.e., we only use Republicans and Democrats for the calculation). For each city, we create the Republican leaning of the city by calculating the percentage of Republicans among registered voters in that city (based on the longitude and latitude of their registration address) who are classified as either Democrats or Republican (n.b., we do not use Independents in the calculation).[2]

Figure 1 compares the Republican Leaning of the City measure we created from L2 (the x-axis) with the 2016 Republican presidential vote share (the y-axis) in 4,533 cities covered by Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013). The solid line is the 45-degree angle, and the dashed line is the loess regression fit between the two variables. The loess line indicates that the two measures are closely related, with a correlation of 0.83. There are three advantages to using our Republican Leaning measure as opposed to the presidential vote share. First, we have greater coverage; five times the sample size we would have with the presidential vote share, including thousands of small towns and villages across the US. Second, the dependent variable in our analysis is based on the same database. Thus, our two measures are on a similar same scale, which is helpful

[2] Appendix D discusses our use longitude and latitude to identify what city each person lives in.

because we are directly comparing the two measures. Finally, the L2 based measure is less susceptible to changes in voting based on who the candidates are in any particular election.

Figure 1. The Partisan Leaning of the City versus the Presidential Vote



Note: The solid line is a 45-degree line. The dashed line is the LOWESS line.

We also conducted extensive collection efforts to identify whether cities have nonpartisan or partisan ballots (N=26,907, 24% partisan), district or at-large elections (N=19,703, 69% all at-large), a particular form of government (N=20,944, 25% council-manager, 62% mayoral), or elections that line up with state and federal ones (N=24,541, 21% on-cycle). Details about that effort are available in Appendix E. Combined with basic demographic statistics, we produced a dataset of 14,886 municipalities with 61,467 mayors and city councilors with a high-quality match to the L2 voter file to study the partisan leaning of those who serve in local office at that single snapshot in time.[3]

The Majority Party is Less Represented in Nonpartisan Election Cities

[3] Table A4 in Appendix B provides a summary of these two datasets.

We use linear regression models to compare the partisan leanings of the officials in cities with nonpartisan elections compared to those with partisan elections, while controlling for the Republican leaning of the city. Election timing, the use of at-large elections, and the form of government are sources of potential omitted variable bias because the progressive movement often bundled the introduction of those reforms with the introduction of nonpartisan elections, and these reforms may also impact how well voters' and officials' partisan leanings align. To address that potential source of bias, we control for whether the election was held on-cycle with general elections for state and/or federal offices, an indicator for whether all the city officials are elected in at-large elections, and the form of government.[4] Finally, we include various demographic features of the city as reported in the US Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey, including the economic conditions (median income, percent home ownership, and percent unemployed), the total population, the median age of the residents, and the percent of the three largest racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. (white, Black, and Latino). The regression weights observations based on the natural log of the city's population (the results are substantively the same without weights).

We analyze Republican and Democratic cities separately because if the minority party does better in cities with nonpartisan elections, the coefficient on nonpartisan elections will be a different sign in the two regressions for the separate samples. To sort cities into these two samples, we put cities above 50 percent in terms of *Republican Leaning of the City* in the Republican city sample and those below 50 percent in the Democratic one. We use the 50

[4] Appendix E discusses how we gathered information on election timing and form of government.

percent threshold because we are interested in comparing outcomes relative to the partisan leaning of the majority of voters, which changes at the 50 percent mark.

Table 2. Nonpartisan Elections and the Partisan Leanings of Elected Officials

	DV = Percent Republicans Among Partisan Officials		DV = Percent Independent Among All Officials	
	Republican Cities	Democratic Cities	Republican Cities	Democratic Cities
Independent Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Nonpartisan elections	-5.5*	5.5*	9.1*	6.1*
	(0.7)	(0.9)	(0.5)	(0.6)
Includes Controls?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	9,016	5,949	9,129	6,059
R-squared	0.13	0.25	0.09	0.12

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * p<0.05. The full results are in Table A5 of the Appendix.

The dependent variable in Columns 1 and 2 of Table 2 is the percentage of Republicans among the partisan officials. In Republican cities (column 1), the coefficient on nonpartisan elections is negative and statistically significant, indicating that there are five percentage points fewer Republican officials in the Republican cities that use a nonpartisan ballot. And in Democratic cities, the coefficient on nonpartisan ballot is positive and statistically significant, indicating that there are five percentage points more Republican officials in the Democratic cities that use a nonpartisan ballot. In any given city, a five-percentage point difference will make little change in who serves, but in aggregate, it can make a big difference. If there are 10,000 partisan officials serving in rural Republican areas, a four-percentage point change in the partisan mix of who serves is equivalent to 500 fewer Republicans (and 500 more Democrats).

The dependent variable in Column 3 and 4 of Table 2 is that percentage of officials who are classified as Independents among all the elected officials in the city. Among Democratic cities, Independents represent six percentage points more of the elected officials in cities that use nonpartisan elections. In Republican cities that number is greater than nine percentage points. As

a robustness check to account for the possibility of partisan gerrymandering, we conducted an analysis only using cities where all the officials were elected in at-large elections (representing 69% of the sample) and found similar patterns (see Table A6 in the Appendix).

Because mayors also provide important representation to constituents, we also looked at how the results change if we limited the analysis to the partisanship of the elected chief executive (i.e., the mayor or equivalent). Three of the four probit regression models have statistically significant coefficients that point in the same direction as the main results (see Table A7 in the Appendix). The difference is that in Republican cities, the coefficient on nonpartisan elections is no longer significant in the regression model looking at whether the chief executive is a Republican. The correlation might be weaker for the position of mayor in Republican cities because elections for mayor receive more scrutiny. Future research might look at how candidates and voters behave in city elections that receive more scrutiny.

Discussion

For the year of data we analyze, we find that L2 classifies more of the officials who serve in cities that use nonpartisan elections (versus in cities that use partisan elections) as being Independents or from the party that is the numerical minority among the public. Unless the officials who are classified as Independents systematically belong to the majority party among the public, which seems unlikely to us, this means that the majority party among the public holds a smaller share of the elected positions in cities that use nonpartisan elections. The progressives that pushed for nonpartisan races in the early 1900s would probably be pleased with this pattern because it likely means voters are not voting purely based on party. Others might judge the value of this reform based on whether parties are represented in government in proportion to their prevalence among the public. We look directly at that possibility by estimating a regression

where the dependent variable is the congruence between the proportion of the mass public and of elected officials that is Republican. Those results (see Table A8 of the Appendix) indicate that among Republican cities, there are higher levels of congruence in cities using nonpartisan elections. Among Democratic cities, there is not a statistically significant difference between partisan election cities and nonpartisan ones. Still others argue that the winning party should have more seats than you would get under proportional representation (Stephanopoulos and McGhee 2015). By that standard, the nonpartisan elections might be worse than partisan elections. Our results alone cannot speak to whether nonpartisan elections are normatively good; however, our results strongly suggest that the type of election system used matters for levels of partisan representation.

The dataset we have compiled will allow researchers to further explore why and how this and other important electoral institutions interact with policy and representation in America. For example, Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2014) did not find differences in policy representation in terms of broad policy areas (like taxation rates and total expenditures) between cities with partisan and nonpartisan elections, at least among the 1,600 US cities with a population above 20,000. It would be interesting to see whether their null results extend into the smaller municipalities that we identified. Another avenue for future work with these data would be to analyze descriptive representation for women and whether it is diminished in cities with partisan elections, as they may lead to seemingly more divisive elections that may turn away potential female candidates (Schneider et al. 2016). This new dataset provides unique and expansive data for future scholarship on municipal politics and policy.

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