Partisan Context and Political Behavior in U.S. Cities

Thomas M. Holbrook  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
(holbroot@uwm.edu)

Karen Kaufmann  
University of Maryland  
(kkaufma1@umd.edu)

While not quite commonplace in the political science literature, studies of the influence of context have played an important and perhaps underappreciated role in the study of U.S. elections (Marsh 2002). Of most interest to us are those studies that set out explicitly to examine how contextual variables influence attitudes and vote choice, either directly or indirectly (Books and Prysby 1999; Huckfeldt, Plutzer, and Sprague 1993; Mackuen and Brown 1987; Miller 1956; Prysby and Books 1987). The underlying assumption of these and other contextual studies is that the environment in which individuals live exerts an external influence on them, whether that environment is defined in social, demographic, institutional, or attitudinal terms, and that the source of this influence lies in the way context affects the information to which voters are exposed (see also, Prysby and Books 1987). In this paper we focus on an important institutional context that varies across local settings and that has real and demonstrable consequences on the types of information to which people are exposed: the use of partisan versus nonpartisan ballots in local elections. We are particularly interested in the extent to which ballot structure at the local level influences engagement and awareness of local political affairs. Using a unique data set of survey responses gathered during forty separate mayoral elections, we bring important individual-level data to bear on this question.

**Partisan and Nonpartisan Elections**

Progressive reform efforts in the early 20th century focused considerable attention on decoupling local political affairs from the influences of partisan politics. In addition to scheduling local elections in off cycles and supplanting mayor-council
systems with administrative systems, these reforms also including moving to a nonpartisan ballot that in most places substituted the party nomination with a system in which candidates competed without party labels on the ballot. The intention of these reforms was to wrest power from local political machines. And, indeed, one consequence of these reforms is that local party organizations are less involved in local elections in nonpartisan than partisan cities, and there is considerable evidence—mostly from aggregate-level studies—that party-line voting is in part supplanted by group, candidate, or issue-based voting in nonpartisan settings (Arrington 1978; Mueller 1970; Pomper 1966; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Taylor and Schreckhise 1966) However, in spite of evidence of decreased party voting in nonpartisan cities, some studies of specific locales suggest that removing the party label from the ballot does not always result in removing party from the campaign, as voters are still able to discern the party connections of the candidates demonstrate partisan voting patterns (Hagensick 1964; Salisbury and Black 1963).

Our analysis is informed by the aforementioned studies, but benefits particularly from those who have studied the effects of nonpartisan elections on voter engagement with and cognizance of local politics. The body of work on turnout is somewhat mixed, with some studies finding lower rates of turnout in nonpartisan than partisan cities (Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1983; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001), while others have found no significant relationship (Caren 2007; Wood 2002). The presumed route of influence is via the absence of party labels and a formal party nomination processes, creating elections
in nonpartisan cities that are likely to provide many fewer partisan cues (Rahn 1993a; Schaffner and Streb 2002; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001), thus making the act of voting cognitively more taxing. In addition, there are also likely to be fewer concerted get-out-the-vote GOTV efforts on the part of the local party organizations.

One closely related body of work has focused on the value of party as an information cue in the opinion formation process. A number of studies have utilized individual-level data to assess the extent to which partisan cues facilitate the ability to articulate a candidate choice in low-information elections (Mondak 1993; Schaffner and Streb 2002; Squire and Smith 1988) (Modak 1993; Schaffner and Streb 2002; Squire and Smith 1988). Schaffner and Streb (2002) compared the nonpartisan statewide office of Superintendent of Education with several partisan statewide offices in California and found respondent party identification affected both the ability of respondents to articulate a vote choice and also the direction of that choice in the partisan races but not in the nonpartisan races. Also important, Schaffner and Streb found that low-education voters had a more difficult time than high-education voters making a vote decision in the nonpartisan contest but that education level was unrelated to the ability to make a decision in partisan contests. We take this as evidence that decision-making is more taxing in nonpartisan than partisan settings.

Mondak (1993) and Squire and Smith (1988) also examined the importance of party cues, in nonpartisan elections only, but used survey items that varied the availability of party cues. Both studies analyzed the same survey data from a set of
nonpartisan judicial contests in California in 1982 and found that respondents had a higher probability of being able to state a preferred candidate when the survey vote choice questions included a partisan cue (identifying either Republican Governor Ronald Reagan, or Democratic Governor Jerry Brown as the person who appointed the judge). In addition, Mondak’s analysis found that the presence of partisan cues activated party identification as a determinant of the direction of the vote. Similar to Schaffner and Streb (2002), Mondak also found the partisan cue was particularly useful to those who were at an information disadvantage. What sets these studies (Mondak 1993; Schaffner and Streb 2002; Squire and Smith 1988) apart from others that have addressed the effect of nonpartisan races on political involvement is that they make use of individual-level data—data originally gathered for other purposes—and are able to address the effects on voters rather than electorates. We use the same strategy here, though we take advantage of a set of surveys constructed for the express purpose of analyzing how local political, social, and demographic environment affects political attitudes and behaviors in the local context.

**Connecting Parties to Political Behavior**

Beginning in 1960s, scholars of American elections came around to the idea that individuals developed a psychological identification with political parties, one that greatly simplified the vote decision and also provided a broader mechanism for voters to understand the political world (Campbell et al. 1960). Decades later, studies still confirm that political parties provide an important cue for simplifying the political world and shaping both the formation and direction of political
attitudes (Bartels 2002; Goren 2005; Goren, Federico, and Kittilson 2009; Rahn 1993b; Weinschenk 2010; Zaller 1991). However, the use of party cues does not rely just on the existence of party identification in the electorate but also on a party signal regarding the connections of political elites and political issues to the one of the political parties. Rahn's (1993) experimental work captures this point quite well, finding that the presence of party label had a profound impact on the type of information people used: when provided with party cues, subjects tended to disregard other sources of information (candidate messages); whereas in the absence of cues candidate messages became important pieces of information in decision making. Other experimental work supports the general conclusion that party labels are an important aid to decision-making, though these studies differ somewhat as to the impact of party cues on the importance of other types of information (Arceneaux 2008; Bullock 2011; Gerber, Huber, and Washington 2010; Nicholson 2011).

This body of work, along with the research on partisan and nonpartisan contests, provides strong evidence of party labels as an important heuristic device. The nature of heuristic devices is that the make information processing easier (Downs 1957; Lupia 1994; Popkin 1991). This doesn't mean that they always lead to “correct” decisions (though they should be in the ballpark), but they do make it easier for people to make a decision. We anticipate two important and related effects from ballot structure. First, as a result of the elevated presence of partisan cues, respondents in partisan cities should report higher level of engagement in local political affairs than respondents in nonpartisan cities. We expect this to occur
not just because the partisan environment facilitates cue taking, but also because local party organizations are more likely to be involved in partisan than nonpartisan contests. Both of these factors should reduce information costs and generate more interest, both of which make it more likely that respondent will engage local political affairs. Second, we also expect that the cue-rich environment associated with partisan elections should facilitate opinion holding, or what we refer to \textit{opinionation} in partisan cities relative to nonpartisan cities. Partisan cues are literally extra pieces of information that are likely to be more plentiful in partisan versus nonpartisan elections. Where there is more information, especially accessible information such as partisan cues, residents should be able to take advantage of that information for the purpose of attitude formation. This type of cue taking assumes an important role in prominent models of opinion formation (Zaller 1991; Zaller and Feldman 1992). We view opinionation as an important element of democratic politics, as holding an opinion is an important first step toward translating preferences into political action.

\textbf{The Data}

The primary data for this project come from the Urban Mayoral Election Study\textsuperscript{1} (UMES), a public opinion survey administered prior to 40 separate mayoral elections in 39 cities from 2007 to 2011.\textsuperscript{2} The overall sample size comprises 6365

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\textsuperscript{1} This study was supported with fund from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Research Growth Initiative (Study #101X074 ) and the National Science Foundation (Study #0921343).

\textsuperscript{2} The cases (Atlanta, GA, 2009; Baltimore, MD, 2007; Boise, ID, 2007; Boston, MA, 2009; Charlotte, NC, 2007 and 2009; Cincinnati, OH, 2007 and 2009; Cleveland, OH, 2009; Columbus, OH, 2007; Columbus, GA, 2010; Dallas, TX, 2011; Denver, CO, 2011; Detroit, MI, 2009; Durham, NC, 2007; Ft. Wayne IN, 2007; Fresno, CA, 2008; Garden Grove, CA, 2010; Greensboro, NC, 2007; Houston, TX, 2009; Indianapolis, IN, 2007; Jacksonville, FL, 2011; Laredo, TX, 2010; Mesa, AZ, 2008; Miami, FL, 2009; Philadelphia, PA, 2007;
respondents, with an average of 159 respondents from each city. The survey was administered via telephone interviews utilizing separate random-digit-dialing samples from each city and included approximately 90 questions.\textsuperscript{3} Though the survey items covered a broad range of issues, perceptions of candidates, engagement with local politics, and voting behavior constituted a major part of the study. In keeping with most estimates of local political arrangements, the partisan ballot is used in 30\% (twelve) of the contests covered by our surveys.\textsuperscript{4}

One of the advantages of our design, relative to those who have gone before us, is the ability to capture considerable variation in other aspects of the political, social, and demographic contexts in which urban mayoral elections take place. For instance, 22 of the races involve incumbent candidates, and 18 are open seat contests; 26 of the sitting incumbents are White, 10 are Black, and 4 are Latino; 16 of the contests involve Black and White candidates, one race had a White and Latino candidate, 16 had two white candidates, 4 had two Black candidates, and 3 had two Latino candidates; and there are 11 male-female races and 29 male-male races. There is also wide variation in the racial composition of the populations of these cities: the non-Hispanic White population proportion ranges from many cities less

\textsuperscript{3} The target population was the citizen voting-age population. Because there is a slight tendency to over-represent the non-Hispanic White population, post-stratification weights are used to bring the composition of the local samples into line with existing Census estimates of local racial composition, based on the adult citizen population.

\textsuperscript{4} Cities in which partisan labels appeared on the ballot are: Baltimore, Charlotte (2007 and 2009), Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Shreveport, Toledo, and Yonkers.
than .15 to .89 (Spokane), and the non-Hispanic Black population ranges from less than .05 in several cities to .83 (Detroit). The survey sample was designed to capture this range of experience in urban political life specifically to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

We utilize several different items to gauge the extent to which residents in partisan cities are more attentive to local politics than residents of non-partisan cities are. These items fall into two separate but related categories: engagement and opinionation. By “engagement” we mean the extent to which voters are interested in, know about, and follow local politics. We use “opinionation” in the same way that Mondak (1993), Schaffner and Streb (2002), and Squire and Smith (1988) used it: a simple measure of the ability of respondents to articulate responses to questions about local candidates and local politics (see also, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Krosnick and Milburn 2012). In cases where the questions focus on perceptions of candidate characteristics, we combine responses to questions about both candidates.

We use three different items to measure level of local political engagement: a measure of self-reported familiarity with the mayoral candidates, a measure of how closely the respondent followed the mayoral campaign, and a measure of turnout intention. For the candidate familiarity questions, respondents were asked how much they knew about each candidate, ranging from “never heard of (candidate name)” to “a lot,” forming a five-point scale for each candidate. We use the sum of this candidate familiarity across both candidates as our measure of self-reported candidate information (range: 2-10). We also asked respondents how closely they
followed the mayoral campaign in their city. We coded this into a dichotomous variable, for which 1 represented responses of “somewhat” or “very closely” and 0 represents responses of “not very closely” and “not at all.” Finally, we use a simple dichotomous variable for turnout intention, coded 1 for those who said they definitely would or had already voted, and 0 for all others.\(^5\)

Our measures of opinionation come from several different survey items, most of which focused on the candidates and the election outcome. For each question, respondents were code 1 if they provided an opinion on the item, and 0 if they said, “don’t know” or “haven’t heard enough.” One important clarification needs to be made about the candidate-focused question. If respondents said they had never heard of the candidate when asked the general familiarity question described above, they were not asked any specific questions about the candidates. So the candidate-focused question are restricted to respondents who had already described themselves as having heard at least something about each of the candidates. This should provide a somewhat tougher test for the ballot structure hypothesis, especially since familiarity itself is hypothesized to be a function of the partisan ballot.

\(^5\) Our turnout measure, like most others, is affected by over-reporting, with 70% of respondents reporting an intention to vote. This is a difficult issue to deal with and may reflect some level of social desirability (Karp and Brockington 2005), as well as the fact that people who choose to participate in a survey are more likely to participate in other ways. These, of course, are problems face by all surveys of political participation. While we find this troubling at some level, we are really interested here in whether people are engaged enough in local politics to plan to, or express a desire to vote in the election. More to the point, the results of our analysis look very much like one would expect them look in a world of perfect measurement of turnout intention. We also take some solace in the fact that there is a tendency for aggregated self-reported turnout intention to correlate with actual turnout at the city level. For all forty elections, the correlation between the two is .29 and grows to .36 if the extreme over-report is Baltimore (2007) is excluded.
Of primary interest among the candidate questions is one that asks respondents whether they think each candidate is a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or something else. Given the relative absence of partisan cues in nonpartisan contests, respondents in partisan cities should have a much greater likelihood of answering this question. Note that we are not looking at whether respondents guessed correctly, just whether they had enough information to venture a guess at all. We also asked a similar question about perceptions of candidate political ideology and coded it in the same manner. Respondents were also asked if they had a favorable or unfavorable opinion about each candidate, or whether they hadn’t hear enough to have an opinion. Finally, we asked a series of questions about how well respondents thought each candidate would represent the interests of eight different groups in the city: Women, Latinos, African Americans, Whites, poor people, small businesses, real estate developers, and large businesses and corporations. Given the role that race, sex, and economic sector play in shaping party coalitions in the U.S., it should be relatively easier for respondents in partisan cities to connect candidates to these groups than it is in nonpartisan cities.

For all of these items, respondents who responded “don’t know” or “haven’t heard enough” were given a score of 0 while all others were given a score of 1, and the responses were summed across candidates. For instance, for the candidate party, ideology, and favorability variables, respondents who answered questions for both candidates received a score of 2, those who answered questions about one candidate received a score of 1, and those who could not respond for either
candidate were given a score of 0. For the candidate group representation questions (eight items for each candidate), respondent scores range from 0 (no valid responses) to 16 (responses given for every item for both candidates). To be sure, in most cases, respondents were able to answer all questions about both candidates, though there are significant differences across questions: 72% answered both ideology questions, 63% answered both party questions, 62% answered all the group representation questions for both candidates, and only 46% offered an opinion on both favorability questions.

We also use three questions about local politics that are not tied to specific aspects of the individual candidates: one is a question that asks respondent whom they think will win the election, another that asks them how close they think the election outcome will be, and we also use a mayoral approval question. Each of these questions is given a score of 0 for “don’t know” and a score of 1 for a valid response. Also, since these questions are not tied to information specific to either candidate, they were asked of all respondents, not just those who said they had heard of the candidates.

Of course, the level of political engagement and opinionation is likely to be a function of many other variables, some from the electoral context, and some measuring individual characteristics. In terms of the context of the election, in addition to ballot type we also control for three other variable: whether the contest involved an incumbent, competitiveness of candidates’ campaign spending, and
whether the election took place at the same time as the 2008 presidential election. Incumbency could cut both ways. It could signal a non-competitive environment in which the challenger is ill-equipped and not very well known; but at the same time, most incumbents should be relatively well known and respondents should be able to answer questions about them. In part, the spending closeness variable should help to measure the competitive environment of the contest. This variable measures the difference in the proportion of total spending by each of the candidates. Contests in which the spending playing field is relatively even should have more intense campaigns and generate much more interest in and information about the candidates.

Of course, it is important to control for a number of individual characteristics that are typically associated with high level of political involvement and opinionation: race, sex, education, age, and strength of partisanship (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Krosnick and Milburn 1990). In addition to these “usual suspects,” and to provide a basis for isolating the determinants of engagement and opinionation in local contexts, we also control for the level of knowledge respondents have about national politics. We construct a simple three-item scale that is the number of correct responses given to questions about which party

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6 This is likely to be particularly important for the turnout model. Only two cities in our sample (Sacramento and Fresno, California) held their mayoral election on the same day as the 2008 presidential election.
7 Technically, it is 1 - abs(.5 - (p_w)) where p_w is the proportion of total spending by the winning candidate. In contests in which both candidates spent roughly the same amount of money, this measure would stand at or near 1, and in cities where one candidate spent all of the money it would stand at .5.
8 We also tried using margin of victory as a measure of how competitive the environment was, and the results were very similar to those obtained using the spending variable. We opted to stick with the spending variable since spending is something that occurred during the campaign period.
controlled the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, and whether they knew what job or political office Nancy Pelosi (before the 2010 election) or John Boehner (after the 2010 election) held. We anticipate a strong positive relationship between this scale (0 to 3) and our measures of engagement and opinionation. The use of this knowledge variable should increase our confidence that we are capturing the effects of related but unspecified factors that might influence involvement or opinionation.

Because we are modeling individual-level outcomes as a function of city-level and individual-level variables, and because the errors associated with observations clustered within cities are not independent of each other, we use multi-level models that can accommodate this potential problem (Luke 2004; Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). Also our dependent variables differ in terms of scale, so we adapt our modeling to accommodate those differences. This means that some of the models are estimated with a hierarchical linear model (HLM), while others are estimated with a hierarchical generalized linear model (HGLM) with either a logit or poisson link function (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). 9

Findings

The findings are presented in tables 1 through 3. Turning first to table 1, which focuses on the measures of engagement, the dichotomous indicator for partisan elections is significant in all three models, indicating that levels of engagement are, on average, higher in partisan than nonpartisan cities. The impact of the partisan ballot is the most consistent of the four city-level contextual

9 All models are estimated with HLM 7.0.
variables, with the spending margin mattering to candidate familiarity and presidential election having a strong impact on turnout intention. Many of the individual-level variables also have a strong influence on engagement: age, strength of party affiliation, and knowledge of national politics are all consistently related to the dependent variables in the expected direction. Interestingly, the effects of race are mixed, and there are no significant sex-based differences. These findings may reflect Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1997) contention that women and African-Americans are more connected to local political affairs than to national politics.

Table 1. Ballot Structure and Political Engagement During Urban Mayoral Campaigns
(Unit-Specific Estimates with Robust Standard Errors)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Candidate Familiarity (2-10)$^a$</th>
<th>Follow Campaign (0-1)$^b$</th>
<th>Intend to Vote (0-1)$^b$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b t-score</td>
<td>b t-score</td>
<td>b t-score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>City-Level Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.441 1.887</td>
<td>-3.221 -4.978</td>
<td>-2.274 -4.281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Ballot</td>
<td>0.572 2.181</td>
<td>0.601 2.760</td>
<td>0.405 2.273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Closeness</td>
<td>1.508 1.726</td>
<td>0.649 0.893</td>
<td>-0.059 -0.096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Election</td>
<td>0.309 1.175</td>
<td>-0.086 -0.392</td>
<td>0.262 1.671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Election</td>
<td>0.890 1.601</td>
<td>0.611 1.321</td>
<td>0.942 7.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-Level Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.210 11.246</td>
<td>0.028 1.362</td>
<td>0.155 8.310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.023 13.816</td>
<td>0.025 13.177</td>
<td>0.027 11.725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>-0.039 -0.513</td>
<td>0.373 4.426</td>
<td>0.372 2.864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>-0.292 -2.643</td>
<td>-0.021 -0.172</td>
<td>-0.115 -0.859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.002 -0.037</td>
<td>-0.011 -0.180</td>
<td>-0.021 -0.293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Party ID</td>
<td>0.121 4.273</td>
<td>0.113 3.598</td>
<td>0.236 7.513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Political Knowledge</td>
<td>0.412 15.207</td>
<td>0.381 12.350</td>
<td>0.262 6.863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$df$ (level 2)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$df$ (level 1)</td>
<td>5441</td>
<td>5499</td>
<td>5492</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$Hierarchical linear model (HLM) $^b$Hierarchical generalized linear model (HGLM) with a logit link function
Table 2 presents the results of the candidate opinionation analysis. Once again, we see very consistent effects from the partisan ballot variable: with the single exception of candidate favorability, rates of opinionation about local mayoral candidates are higher for individuals living in partisan rather than nonpartisan cities. This effect is particularly impressive when considering that these questions were asked only of those respondents who self reported at least a minimal level of information about the candidates (“candidate familiarity” in table 1). Even among this group, the partisan cities are different from non-partisan cities in terms of opinionation on candidate related survey questions. Among the other city-level variables, elections that coincide with a presidential election have higher rates of opinionation on the group representation item, but this is the only case of a significant contextual effect other than those associated with ballot structure. The individual-level variables also show mixed results, though education, strength of party identification, and knowledge of national politics emerge as the strongest and most consistent influences on opinionation.

\[10 \text{ 64% of respondents reported having heard of both candidates, 24% heard of just one candidate, and 12% reported they had not heard of either candidate.}\]
Table 2. Ballot Structure and Opinionation on Candidate Perception and Evaluation Measures
(Unit-Specific Estimates with Robust Standard Errors)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Candidate Party (0-2)(^a)</th>
<th>Candidate Ideology (0-2)(^a)</th>
<th>Group Representation (0-16)(^a)</th>
<th>Candidate Favorability (0-2)(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b t-score</td>
<td>b t-score</td>
<td>b t-score</td>
<td>b t-score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City-Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.269 -1.305</td>
<td>0.217 1.943</td>
<td>2.422 24.521</td>
<td>-0.688 -3.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Ballot</td>
<td>0.294 5.460</td>
<td>0.083 2.789</td>
<td>0.077 2.959</td>
<td>0.104 1.541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Closeness</td>
<td>0.252 1.038</td>
<td>0.120 0.872</td>
<td>0.130 1.132</td>
<td>0.294 1.279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Election</td>
<td>0.047 0.813</td>
<td>0.034 0.990</td>
<td>0.020 0.736</td>
<td>0.078 1.155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Election</td>
<td>0.054 0.712</td>
<td>0.134 3.213</td>
<td>0.066 2.259</td>
<td>0.194 1.383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual-Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.017 3.300</td>
<td>0.010 2.252</td>
<td>0.000 -0.068</td>
<td>0.024 3.585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.001 -1.082</td>
<td>-0.001 -1.013</td>
<td>-0.001 -2.270</td>
<td>0.005 7.353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>0.076 3.900</td>
<td>0.019 1.099</td>
<td>0.061 4.002</td>
<td>-0.053 -1.864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.005 0.137</td>
<td>0.003 0.123</td>
<td>0.066 3.174</td>
<td>-0.010 -0.218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.061 -3.642</td>
<td>-0.065 -4.397</td>
<td>-0.046 -3.537</td>
<td>-0.027 -1.360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Party ID</td>
<td>0.048 5.150</td>
<td>0.019 2.376</td>
<td>0.022 3.589</td>
<td>0.035 3.427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Political Knowledge</td>
<td>0.096 8.966</td>
<td>0.046 5.987</td>
<td>0.028 3.521</td>
<td>0.094 8.972</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)HGLM with a log link function (Poisson) \(^b\)HGLM with a logit link function

The final set of opinionation variables—those that are not tied to specific candidates—are treated in Table 3. It is worth noting again that since these items are not tied to specific candidates, respondents were not filtered based on their level of candidate information. Once again, we see strong evidence of an important opinionation effect from the partisan ballot: across all three models, the slope for the partisan ballot variable is positive and statistically significant. As in the other analyses, it is also the most consistently important contextual variable: presidential elections increase opinionation on mayoral approval and perceptions of how close the outcome would be, and, not surprisingly, the presence of an incumbent increases...
the level of opinionation on which candidate would win the election. Among the individual-level variables, national political knowledge is most consistently important to opinionation, followed by strength of party affiliation, and then by sex. Interestingly, while sex of respondent had no effect on the measure of engagement (table 1), the results of the opinionation analysis (tables 2 & 3), on balance, point to female respondents being much less likely to offer opinions on questions about local politics.\footnote{This is in keeping with findings from Krosnick and Milburn’s (1990) study of opinionation. However, part of the effect could also reflect a tendency among male respondents to offer respond to questions even if they are not sure about the answer (Mondak and Anderson 2004).}

The findings from tables 1-3 are very clear with regard to the impact of partisan elections: in 9 out of the 10 models respondents in partisan cities are more likely than those in nonpartisan cities to show engagement with or offer opinions about local political affairs. Although there is a consistent pattern of significant effects from the partisan ballot, the impact varies somewhat across the ten dependent variables. However, it is somewhat difficult to assess when ballot type matters most because many of the dependent variables are measured on different scales; and even when they are measured on the same scale they have different variances.
In order to provide some sense of where the relative impact of the partisan ballot is stronger and weaker, the effects need to be adjusted to take into account the differences in how the dependent variables are measured. We adopt a two-step method to resolve this problem. First, we generate predicted outcomes (e.g., probabilities, counts, etc.) for residents in partisan versus non-partisan cities and take the difference in those predictions as our measure of the total effect of ballot structure. Generally, those dependent variables with wider ranges in values will

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mayoral Approval (0-1)b</th>
<th>Predict Outcome (0-1)b</th>
<th>Predict Closeness (0-1)b</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>t-score</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>City-Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.250</td>
<td>-0.330</td>
<td>0.705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Ballot</td>
<td>0.730</td>
<td>3.866</td>
<td>0.499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending Closeness</td>
<td>0.730</td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td>-0.250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Election</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>0.489</td>
<td>0.362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential Election</td>
<td>0.491</td>
<td>1.993</td>
<td>0.315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-Level</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>-0.111</td>
<td>0.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.008</td>
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<td>-0.004</td>
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<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>0.292</td>
<td>2.402</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.053</td>
<td>0.342</td>
<td>-0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.200</td>
<td>-2.320</td>
<td>-0.268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Party ID</td>
<td>0.104</td>
<td>2.736</td>
<td>0.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Political Knowledge</td>
<td>0.268</td>
<td>8.407</td>
<td>0.142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df (level 1)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df (level 2)</td>
<td>5490</td>
<td>5504</td>
<td>5524</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aHGLM with a log link function (Poisson) bHGLM with a logit link function
show larger total effect, due to their scale. In order to correct for the difference in scale, we then divide the total effect by the standard deviation of the dependent variable. The resulting standardized effect tells us how many standard deviations different the dependent variable is in partisan cities compared to nonpartisan cities, controlling for other influences. This language can be a bit confusing when trying to interpret the effects, but we think it provides us with a handy way of getting a general sense of the relative effect of the partisan ballot across multiple dependent variables.

The standardized effects of ballot type are presented in Figure 1. A couple of things stand out in this figure. First, while there are statistically significant differences between partisan and nonpartisan cities on 9 of the 10 dependent variables, the relative magnitude of those effects varies widely across the models. Second, not surprisingly, the strongest overall effect of the partisan ballot is on the ability to offer an opinion on the perceived party affiliation of mayoral candidates. This makes perfect sense to us since it is the party label that is removed in nonpartisan contests, and it would be surprising not to see a substantial effect. Among the other opinionation items, ballot structure also was relatively more important to making group connections to the candidates, providing responses to mayoral approval, and reporting a perception of the candidates’ political ideology. We find the relative importance of ballot structure to making group-based evaluations of candidates especially interesting, given the long-standing importance of group politics at the local level (Kaufmann 2004). It is also interesting that with the exception of candidate favorability, the opinionation items for which ballot
structure matters the least (though still making a significant difference) do not focus on perceptions of individual local political figures. In the end, these findings show that ballot structure is an important source of opinion development in local politics, especially when the object of the opinion is a local political figure, whose party affiliation is easier to discern in partisan than in nonpartisan cities.

**Figure 1. The Standardized Effect of Ballot Type on Measures of Local Political Engagement and Opinionation**

Turning to the measure of political engagement, ballot structure had the greatest impact on following the campaign, then self-reported familiarity with the candidates, followed by turnout intention. The impact on following the election is particularly impressive, second only to the effect on perceptions of candidate party affiliation. Using the unstandardized effect (not shown above), the probability of someone following the campaign somewhat or very closely is .16 greater in partisan
than in nonpartisan cities. Absent party labels, there is a greater tendency for local residents to disengage from local politics.

**Partisan Content and the Partisan Ballot**

As (Wright 2008) points out in his review of the literature on nonpartisan elections, not all nonpartisan cities are equally nonpartisan: the party organizations are more active than in others in some nonpartisan cities than others, in some cities one or more of the candidates have held partisan office at some point, making it easier to bump up against partisan cues, and in some cities campaigns or outside groups have an incentive to bring party back into the election. In other words, it is possible that the simple, legalistic distinction between partisan and nonpartisan ballots does not always fully capture how partisan the electoral context is in nonpartisan cities. This presents both a problem and an opportunity for our analysis. To the extent that the simple dichotomy does not correspond perfectly with the availability of partisan cues, then the estimates in Tables 1-3 may not tell the complete story. At the same time, to the extent that this is the case, we have an opportunity to examine the partisan environment of the forty cities in our study to see if an alternative measure of context can provide more information than the simple dichotomy between partisan and nonpartisan cities.

To get at this issue we use a gauge of partisan information, based on partisan references in local media coverage of the campaigns prior to the election. We utilize online searches for articles appearing in local newspapers for this purpose. Specifically, we took the number of articles appearing in a three-week period prior to each election that mentioned both candidates and also included references to
either the Democratic or Republican parties as a proportion of the total number of articles that mentioned both candidates. We take this measure as an indicator of the availability of partisan cues during the campaign. The distribution of partisan cues in both partisan and non-partisan cities is presented in Figure 3. To be sure, cities that use partisan ballots, on average, hold elections in a much more partisan context than non-partisan cities (Mean=.29 vs. .83). This is clearly the case and helps explain the strong finding obtained using the simple dichotomy for ballot type in Tables 1-3. Simply put, partisan ballots produce different effects because of the difference in partisan cues. But it is also very clear that there is appreciable variation in partisan context within the two types of cities. While the variation is somewhat limited among partisan cities, there are some non-partisan cities that hold elections in very partisan environments. For instance, the “non-partisan” contests in 2007 in Columbus (OH) and Salt Lake City (UT), and in 2009 in Cincinnati (OH), were very partisan, and a number of other non-partisan cities had appreciable partisan content. It is interesting to note that even national partisan politics showed up in some of the contests we studied. This was particularly the case in 2007 in Durham, NC, and Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, PA. Perhaps the most blatant example of an attempt to nationalize a mayoral election was the flier distributed by the local Democratic Party in non-partisan Durham, NC, which asked voters, “Would you elect George W. Bush mayor of Durham?” (Dees 2007).

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12 It was the case of Columbus, Ohio, that first got us thinking about trying to capture the presence of partisan cues. While reviewing media stories about the mayoral elections for background information, we found so many media references to the mayor’s partisan affiliation that we had to double and triple-check sources to make sure it was really a “non-partisan” city. As it turned out, every story we found about the election included references to at least one of the political parties.
Certainly, the modal category for non-partisan cities is 0, indicating no partisan content, and the modal category of 1 for partisan cities indicates ubiquitous partisan content; but these data show the importance of recognizing that simple the “non-partisan” and “partisan” designation does not mean the same thing in all cities. We explore the potential benefit of moving beyond the simple dichotomy by substituting the continuous measure of partisan content for the dichotomous measure in the models tested in tables 1-3. Our expectation is that this measure of partisan context makes an important contribution. Because it is a more direct measure of the aspect of political context that is thought to make ballot structure relevant to vote choice—partisan cues—the continuous measure of party content
should be more strongly related to engagement and opinionation that the simple
dichotomous designation for ballot type. At the same time, it is possible that there
are many other ways in which the partisan and nonpartisan environments differ,
ways that are not capture by our measure of media coverage.

The models in tables 1-3 were all re-estimated using the continuous measure
in place of the dichotomous measure. The results (Appendix A) show that the
continuous measure was significantly related to the same 9 out of 10 dependent
variables that the dichotomous measure was related to. The difficulty with these
results is that it is somewhat difficult to get a sense of how much stronger or weaker
the effects of the continuous variable are, based on just a simple comparison of the
slopes. Instead, we can return to a consideration of standardized effects as we did in
figure 1. Using the same method used earlier, we calculated the standardized effects
of a based a change from 0 to 1 on the continuous measure. Since the ballot type
dummy variable and the continuous variable are both bounded by 0 and 1, we can
compare the standardized effects of both variables across the ten dependent
variables.

The results of this comparison (presented in Figure 3) are consistent across
all of the dependent variables. In every case, the standardized impact of the
continuous measure is greater than that of the dichotomous measure. Sometimes
the difference is small (predicting closeness, candidate familiarity, predicting
winner), sometimes it is larger (ideology, representation, follow the election), and
other times it is profound (mayoral approval, turnout intention); but in every case,
the continuous measure has a greater impact. One other important but easy-to-
overlook finding from this figure is that the order of relative impact of partisan context across the ten dependent variables is virtually the same for both measures. With the exception of mayoral approval and group representation, the picture that emerges, in terms of when partisan context matters most, is relatively unaffected by the choice partisan indicator.

**Figure 3. A Comparison of the Standardized Effect of Ballot Type and Partisan News Content on Measures of Local Political Engagement and Opinionation**

We want to be clear about what we take these findings to mean. We do not intend to suggest that the simple distinction between partisan and nonpartisan contests, based just on whether party labels appear on the ballot, is not a useful or important distinction. In fact, we think the evidence presented above enhances our understanding of why ballot type makes a difference: because the information environment in partisan systems is relatively dense with partisan cues, while the
environment in nonpartisan cities is relatively barren of partisan cues. It is precisely these differences in the information context that produce the effects we presented in Tables 1-3 and Figure 1. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that some cities have very partisan traditions, regardless of the legal designation as a nonpartisan city. When working with relatively small samples of cities such as ours, and when the type of specific partisan information we've presented here is directly relevant to the phenomenon being studied, we think it is worth the effort to try to gather as much of that data as possible.

**Conclusion**

The Progressive reform movement of the early 20th century transformed political life across the states, especially political life at the local level. Among those reform efforts, one that has attracted significant scholarly attention in the past forty years is the use of partisan versus nonpartisan elections. In this paper, we took up the question of how ballot type affects engagement with and opinionation about local politics. In doing so, we bring the first individual-level evidence collected across multiple jurisdictions (forty separate elections)—some partisan some nonpartisan—using multiple measures of engagement and opinionation. The findings could hardly be clearer: in nine out of ten cases, the models show significantly higher levels of engagement and opinionation among respondents in partisan than nonpartisan cities. We also provided confirmation of the likely causal mechanism between ballot type and engagement and opinionation: the political environments in cities using the partisan ballot contain many more partisan cues than the environments in nonpartisan cities. This isn't always the case, but on average he
two ballot types produce starkly different political environments. These differences in partisan contexts are strongly related to opinion-based outcomes at the local level.

There are many other ways in which the use of partisan or nonpartisan ballots might affect political life in the cities (Wright 2008). For instance, it is generally suggested that removing party labels leads to increased reliance on other voting cues, such as race, incumbency, and local issues (Arrington 1978; Mueller 1970; Pomper 1966; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Taylor and Schreckhise 1966). Most of the research along these lines has relied on aggregate voting patterns, or from one or a few jurisdictions. Another avenue of research, thus far relatively unexplored, is the impact of ballot type on the level of political trust and efficacy in the local setting. Simply put, we know very little these and many other questions, especially at the individual level. We do not address these questions in the analysis presented here; however, using the survey data we have assembled, and taking advantage of variation in ballot type and partisan context across the forty settings in our study, we are well positioned to answer these and many other questions related to the use of partisan versus nonpartisan ballots.
Appendix A: The Impact of the Continuous Measure of Partisan Cues on Each of the Dependent Variables Used in Tables 1-3 (slope/t-score)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>$b_{\text{Party Cues}}$</th>
<th>t-score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Familiarity</td>
<td>0.659</td>
<td>2.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow Campaign</td>
<td>0.798</td>
<td>3.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intend to Vote</td>
<td>0.667</td>
<td>3.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Party</td>
<td>0.341</td>
<td>4.526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Ideology</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>2.825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Representation</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>2.741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Favorability</td>
<td>0.116</td>
<td>1.505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayoral Approval</td>
<td>0.153</td>
<td>4.325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predict Outcome</td>
<td>0.610</td>
<td>2.835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predict Closeness</td>
<td>0.689</td>
<td>2.568</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Question Wording for Items used to Create Dependent Variables

Turnout Intention
In talking to people about elections, we often find that some people who would like to vote are not able to because they’re not registered, they’re going to be out of town, or they just don’t have time. We also find that a number of people aren’t satisfied with the choice of candidates or haven’t heard enough about them to vote. Which of the following statements best describes how likely it is that you will vote in the upcoming mayoral election in [CITY]? [Rotate order for responses 1-4 or 4-1]

1. I will definitely vote
2. I haven’t decided if I will vote
3. I usually vote but I do not plan to vote in this election.
4. I will definitely not vote.
6. (vol.) I have already voted
8. DON’T KNOW
9. REFUSED

Follow Election
How closely have you been following the mayoral campaign in your city—Very closely, somewhat closely, not very closely, or not at all?

1. Very closely
2. Somewhat closely
3. Not very closely
4. Not at all
8. Don’t Know
9. Refused

Candidate Familiarity
I’d like to get your impressions of the candidates for mayor in your city, based on what you’ve seen or heard about them.

First is [Candidate Name1]. How much would you say you know about [him/her]? Would you say you know a lot, a fair amount, only a little, only know the name, or have never heard of [Candidate1]?

1. A lot
2. A fair amount
3. Only a little
4. Only the name
5. Never heard of (SKIP to CI7 or K1 depending on randomization order)
8. DK
9. RF
Candidate Party Affiliation
Would you say that [CN1] is a [ROTATE: Democrat, a Republican,] an independent, or what?

1. Democrat
2. Republican
3. Independent
4. Something else (vol.)
8. DON’T KNOW
9. REFUSED

Candidate Political Ideology
We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives, would you say that [Candidate Name] is generally [ROTATE: liberal, conservative], or moderate?

1. Liberal
2. Moderate
3. Conservative
8. DON’T KNOW
9. REFUSED

Group Representation
How much attention do you think [Candidate Name1] would pay to the interests of each of the following groups if [she/he] wins the election? [RANDOMIZE ORDER]

How about...[Group name]? How much attention would [Candidate Name1] pay to the interests of [Group Name]—a lot, some, very little, or none at all?

Candidate Favorability
Is your opinion of [Candidate Name1] favorable, not favorable, or haven’t you heard enough to have an opinion?

1. Favorable
2. Not favorable
3. Haven’t heard enough
8. DON’T KNOW
9. REFUSED
Mayoral Approval
Do you approve or disapprove of the way [Mayor’s Name] is handling [his/her] job as acting mayor?

1. Approve
2. Disapprove
8. Don’t Know
9. Refused

Predict Winner
Who do you think will win the upcoming mayoral election in [City Name], [Candidate 1] or [Candidate 2]? (ROTATE CANDIDATE ORDER)

1. Candidate 1
2. Candidate 2
3. Someone else (vol)
8. Don’t Know
9. Refused

Closeness of Outcome
Do you think the outcome of [City Name]’s upcoming mayoral election will be very close, somewhat close, or not at all close?

1. Very close
2. Somewhat close
3. Not at all close
8. Don’t know
9. Refused
References


