

*Annual Review of Political Science*

# Local Elections and Representation in the United States

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Annu. Rev. Political Sci. 2019. 22:461–79

First published as a Review in Advance on  
February 6, 2019

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at  
[polisci.annualreviews.org](http://polisci.annualreviews.org)

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050317-071108>

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## Keywords

representation, elections, local politics, urban politics

## Abstract

In recent years, there has been a surge in the study of representation and elections in local politics. Scholars have made progress on many of the empirical barriers that stymied earlier researchers. As a result, the study of representation and elections in local politics has moved squarely into the center of American politics. The findings of recent research show that local politics in the modern, polarized era is much more similar to other areas of American politics than previously believed. Scholars have shown that partisanship and ideology play important roles in local politics. Due to the growing ideological divergence between Democrats and Republicans, Democratic elected officials increasingly take more liberal positions, and enact more liberal policies, than Republican ones. As a result, despite the multitude of constraints on local governments, local policies in the modern era tend to largely reflect the partisan and ideological composition of their electorates.

## INTRODUCTION

For decades, the study of local politics in the United States focused primarily on case studies of individual cities. The dearth of quantitative research on local politics was unfortunate given the key role that local governments play in this country. The United States has nearly 90,000 local governments, with hundreds of thousands of local elected officials. Indeed, the vast majority of elected officials serve at the local level. Moreover, local governments employ over ten million workers and collect nearly a quarter of the nation's total tax revenues (Trounstein 2009, 2010). There is also much more institutional variation at the local level than at the state or national levels, which gives scholars an opportunity to use local politics as a laboratory for the effects of institutions in American politics (Thrower 2018, Trounstein 2010).

Fortunately, in recent years there has been a surge in the study of representation and elections in local politics (Oliver et al. 2012, Trounstein 2009). Scholars have made important progress on many of the empirical barriers that stymied earlier researchers. They have conducted a myriad of surveys of voting behavior in local elections (e.g., Boudreau et al. 2015, Oliver & Ha 2007), developed new approaches to estimate public opinion at the local level (e.g., Tausanovitch & Warshaw 2014), and built vast databases of local election results (e.g., Ferreira & Gyourko 2009). These innovations have brought the study of local politics squarely into the mainstream of American politics, and have led to a number of important findings.

First, a large body of work has shown that voter turnout in local elections is abysmally low in large part because most local elections are not held concurrently with other state and federal elections (Anzia 2013, Hajnal 2009, Kogan et al. 2018). Moreover, there are substantial disparities in voter turnout across groups: Homeowners, the wealthy, and the elderly are most likely to participate in local elections (Kogan et al. 2018, Oliver & Ha 2007). As a result, local policies tend to be skewed toward the preferences of these privileged groups (Schaffner et al. 2016).

Second, similar to congressional and gubernatorial elections, electoral accountability at the local level is generally weak and contingent on various institutional moderators. This could be due to the sparse media coverage of local politics (Hopkins 2018, Peterson 2017). It could also be due to the large incumbency advantage in local politics, which mirrors the incumbency advantages in state and national politics. Finally, the important roles of race, ideology, and partisanship in elections may reduce the type of ticket splitting necessary for accountability.

Finally, recent work has overturned the longstanding consensus that local politics was essentially nonideological. For many years, scholars argued that there was little difference between the policies of Democratic and Republican elected officials at the local level because most local policy issues were technical rather than political. As Adrian (1952) put it, there is “no Republican way to pave a street and no Democratic way to lay a sewer” (p. 766). The nonideological consensus was bolstered by the numerous economic and institutional constraints on local governments, which scholars argued limited the ability of partisan or ideological factors to influence local policies (e.g., Bailey & Rom 2004, Ladd & Yinger 1989, Oliver et al. 2012, Peterson 1981, Rae 2003). It is now clear that partisanship and ideology have played important roles in local politics for at least the past few decades. Democratic (and Democratic-leaning) elected officials typically take much more liberal positions, and enact more liberal policies, than Republican ones. As a result, local policies in the modern era tend to largely reflect the partisan and ideological composition of their electorates (Tausanovitch & Warshaw 2014, Einstein & Kogan 2015).

This review begins by examining local elections. It discusses how low turnout and participation affect local politics. Then it examines how partisanship, ideology, and identity influence local elections, and discusses local electoral accountability. Next, it examines representation in local politics. Finally, it discusses pathways for future research.

## LOCAL ELECTIONS

### Turnout and Participation

One of the defining differences between national and local elections is the low turnout in local elections. A recent study estimates that less than 30% of voting-age adults and less than 40% of registered voters participate in mayoral and city council elections (Hajnal 2009). There are a variety of institutional explanations for this low turnout. Nonpartisan ballots, the degree of outsourcing of city services, and the number of appointed versus elected city officials are a few (Hajnal & Lewis 2003, Schaffner et al. 2001). Perhaps the most important explanation for the low turnout, however, is that many local elections are not held concurrently with high-profile federal elections. Instead, many occur during midterm elections, and a substantial number are held in November of odd years or even in April or May. Studies have shown that these off-cycle elections have substantially lower turnout than on-cycle elections (e.g., Anzia 2013, Hajnal 2009, Kogan et al. 2018).

The implications of the low turnout in local elections for election outcomes and representation continue to be hotly debated. There is some evidence that, relative to nonvoters, local voters are more likely to be affluent and are more likely to be homeowners than low-income renters (Oliver & Ha 2007). As a result, the electorates in local elections tend to underrepresent the poor and racial minorities (e.g., Hajnal 2009, Hajnal & Trounstein 2005). Other studies show that low-turnout elections empower interest groups and other high demanders, such as public employee unions (e.g., Anzia 2013, Berry & Gersen 2010). Although both perspectives have some support, there is an inherent conflict between them in terms of the policy outcomes they are likely to predict. The first perspective implies that conservative interests are more likely to win out in local elections and shrink the size of government, while the second perspective suggests that liberal employee unions are more likely to see their perspectives enacted into law, which would generally result in an increase in the size of government. Two analytical challenges have made it difficult to resolve this debate. First, the evidence often consists primarily of aggregate-level election outcomes. Thus, the composition of the electorate is generally assumed rather than directly tested. Second, many studies lack clear causal identification strategies. Thus, it is hard to know whether differences in outcomes are due to differential turnout across groups or, instead, to some other omitted variable.

Kogan et al. (2018) at least partially address both of these limitations of the prior work on voter turnout and election timing. They examine more than 10,000 school-related tax and bond referenda considered by voters in California, Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin since 2000. Based on administrative data, they examine how the composition of the electorate and the outcomes of the referenda elections differ depending on when these referenda appear on the ballot. They find that election timing has important consequences for aggregate voter turnout, as well as for the composition of the electorate. Consistent with earlier work (Anzia 2013, Berry & Gersen 2010), they find that public school employees are more likely to participate in off-cycle elections. But the largest impact of election timing appears to be on the share of the electorate that consists of elderly people. This variation in the proportion of the electorate that is elderly has substantial effects on education ballot initiatives. However, other work finds that the share of voters that are elderly does not always matter. Anzia (2019) shows that the share of elderly does not affect the likelihood of senior-friendly transportation policies.

It is also important to understand inequities in other forms of local participation, beyond voting, and the implications of these inequities for representation. Regrettably, there have been few studies of participation in local politics. A large literature at the national level, however, has shown that the wealthy are more likely to participate in politics (e.g., Verba et al. 1995). In one of the few studies of participation in local politics, Einstein et al. (2019) examine participation in planning meetings in Massachusetts. They find that homeowners and older residents dominate

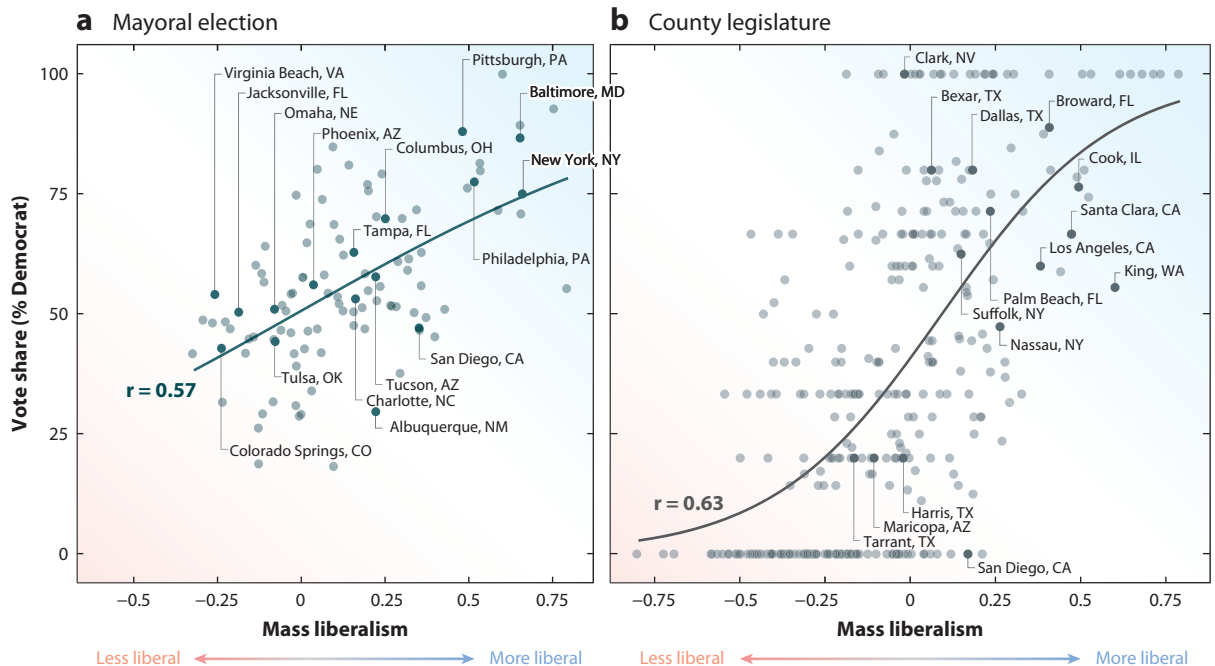
planning meetings, and these participants are likely to oppose new development. This matters because studies have shown that the views of activists tend to have an outsized influence on elected officials (e.g., Broockman & Skovron 2018). For instance, Einstein et al. (2017) find that mayors use neighborhood meetings to learn about public opinion. Moreover, Anzia (2019) finds that variation in the political cohesiveness and activism of senior citizens in local politics predicts variation in senior-friendly policies. Future work should expand the study of inequities in local participation, and their consequences for the policies that are passed by local governments.

### Partisanship, Ideology, and Identity in Local Elections

Scholars have long thought that partisanship played a minor role in local elections. Rather than partisanship, the local elections literature has predominantly focused on the role of racial cleavages and identity (Trounstone 2010). According to one influential book, “local elections are fairly sharply divided by race and ethnicity” and “there is a considerable gap between the vote of the white electorate on the one hand and the vote of the black, Latino, and Asian American electorate on the other” (Hajnal 2009, p. 42). One of the reasons for the general disregard of party as a force in local elections is that many local elections are technically nonpartisan. Another is that many municipal elections are dominated by Democrats and/or liberals, and thus the key elections are primaries. This led scholars to argue that voters in local elections base their decisions on an array of nonideological factors, such as incumbency (Schaffner et al. 2001) or race. Finally, scholars thought that the ideological cleavages at the local level did not map onto national cleavages in public opinion, and perhaps local electorates were less polarized than national ones. But there were few empirical studies of the role of partisanship and ideology in local elections. As one recent study put it, “prior conclusions about the lack of ideological voting in cities tend to be drawn either from theory alone, or from limited data” (Sances 2018, p. 738).

In recent years, a growing battery of evidence has shown that ideology and partisanship matter in local elections. On the basis of voter surveys in 30 different suburban communities from five different states in 2004 and 2005, Oliver & Ha (2007) find that partisanship and issue positions play key roles in suburban elections. It is possible that partisanship matters in these communities because there are fewer racial cleavages than in urban areas. Other studies, however, find that partisanship matters even in urban elections with large numbers of nonwhite voters. In a novel study using a comprehensive data set of exit polls in mayoral elections, Hajnal & Trounstone (2014) find that partisanship and race are roughly equally important in mayoral races. Boudreau et al. (2015) examine an exit poll of the 2011 San Francisco mayoral election. They find a strong association between voters’ ideology and the ideology of the candidates they support. Sances (2018) examines mayoral elections in Tennessee and Illinois and finds that ideology is a powerful cross-sectional predictor of vote choice in several recent mayoral elections. In addition, he finds that learning about candidates’ positions causally impacts voters’ choices, with liberals who learn candidates’ positions becoming more likely to vote for the liberal candidate. One of the reasons that partisanship matters is that elected officials in nonpartisan local governments often clearly align with one of the two parties (Burnett 2017, Ferreira & Gyourko 2009). So, voters can use party as a heuristic even in ostensibly nonpartisan races. Moreover, several recent studies find that national and local cleavages in public opinion often map onto the same main dimension of left–right conflict in American politics (Cann 2018, Tausanovitch & Warshaw 2014).

One way to visualize the impact of ideology in local elections is via the strong association between mass ideology and whether Democratic or Republican candidates win local elections. **Figure 1** shows the association between the mass public’s ideological preferences (Tausanovitch & Warshaw 2013) and the partisan outcome of mayoral (de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw 2016)



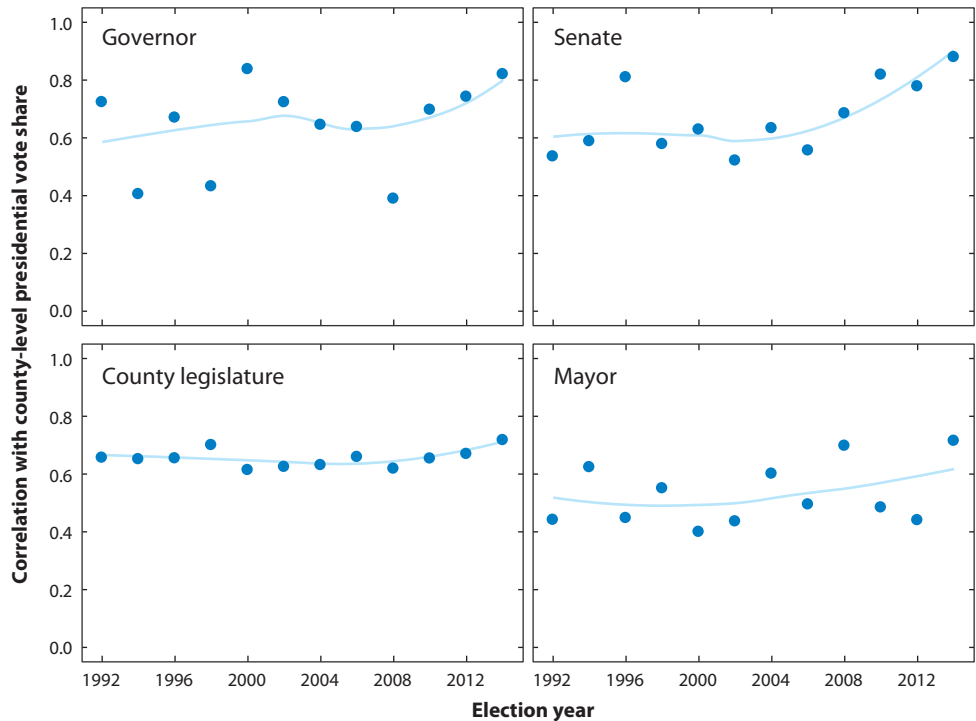
**Figure 1**

Association between mass ideology and the partisanship of mayoral (a) and county legislative (b) election outcomes. Cities with more than 300,000 people and counties with more than 1.25 million people are labeled. Adapted from (a) Tausanovitch & Warshaw (2013) and (b) de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw (2016, 2019).

and county legislative (de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw 2019) elections. In the most liberal cities, Democrats almost always win mayoral elections, and in the most conservative cities, Republicans almost always win. Likewise, Democrats dominate county legislatures in liberal counties, whereas Republicans dominate in conservative ones.

The importance of partisanship and ideology in local elections is probably related to the growing divergence between the ideological preferences of Democrats and Republicans, as well as the resulting nationalization of American politics (Hopkins 2018). **Figure 2** shows the correlation between county-level election returns in presidential elections and various state and local elections. A higher correlation between presidential elections and state and local elections indicates greater levels of nationalization. **Figure 2** indicates that state and local elections have been fairly nationalized since at least the early 1990s. However, the link between state and local and national elections is steadily increasing over time. The same places that elect Democrats at the national level tend to elect Democrats or Democratic-leaning nonpartisan candidates at the local level (but see Trounstein 2018 for evidence about factors that explain variation in partisan alignment). This is especially true in presidential election years and increasingly true in off-cycle years.

Future work on elections in local politics needs more survey-based evidence on how issues and partisanship affect voting behavior in different offices and institutional contexts. Although there is a growing body of work on the role of ideology and partisanship in mayoral elections, we know little about how ideology or partisanship affects elections for other local offices such as school boards, sheriffs, and special districts. There should also be more work on how the effect of ideology and partisanship has changed over time. In addition, future work needs to move beyond the narrow geographical reach of most existing studies. Of course, a national focus is likely to require



**Figure 2**

Association between county-level presidential voting and state and local elections. Greater associations between presidential and state and local elections indicate higher levels of nationalization.

much more survey evidence on local elections than currently exists. This could be accomplished if existing large-scale national surveys, such as the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, add questions about local politics. Alternatively, scholars of local politics could collaborate with one another to develop new large-scale surveys of public opinion and voting behavior in local elections. Finally, future work should examine the institutional factors that lead to ideological voting. For instance, how do nonpartisan elections influence the effect of partisanship and ideology on voting behavior?

### Electoral Accountability

Beyond the demographic and ideological predictors of voting behavior, a large literature has focused on accountability in local elections. This has revolved around three themes. First, are elected officials held accountable for high-profile societal outcomes, such as unemployment (Hopkins & Pettingill 2018), crime (Arnold & Carnes 2012), or test scores in schools (Berry & Howell 2007, Kogan et al. 2016, Payson 2017), which have indirect links with the actions of government (see also Holbein & Dynes 2018)? Second, are elected officials held accountable for the direct performance of government, such as the maintenance of roads (Burnett & Kogan 2017) and the on-time performance of mass transit systems? Finally, what are the barriers to accountability in local elections? For instance, what is the nature of the incumbency advantage at the substate level?

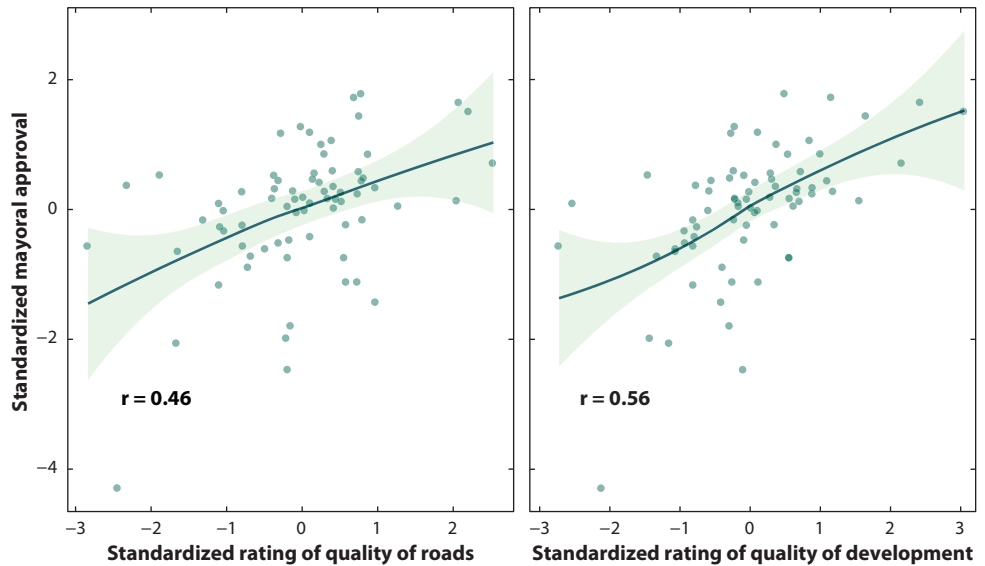
Some of the most studied questions in accountability are whether local elected officials are held accountable for crime, unemployment, and school performance. These outcomes are

interesting to study because they play central roles in people's lives and are some of the key focus areas of local elected officials. Moreover, accountability for these outcomes provides an incentive for elected officials to pass successful policies, so it seems reasonable that local officials should be held accountable for them. It is important to remember, however, that government policies have only weak or indirect effects on many of these outcomes (Burnett & Kogan 2017). For example, local governments probably have a very small causal effect on the local economy, which is dominated by national and statewide forces. The link between governmental policies and other outcomes, such as crime and school performance, is also hotly debated by economists and sociologists. At most, government policies probably affect a small portion of the within-unit variation in these outcomes.

Regardless of the theoretical merits of accountability for societal outcomes, the empirical findings have been mixed. Arnold & Carnes (2012) find that changes in crime and the economy are associated with modest changes in mayoral popularity in New York City. Looking at a broader set of cities, Hopkins & Pettingill (2018) find that mayors are not held accountable for changes in crime, but there is a strong association between the local economy and incumbents' vote share. However, they find that accountability is contingent on the presence of a strong local media. In some ways, the mixed and contingent findings in the local politics literature about economic accountability are unsurprising. At a theoretical level, local politicians have few levers to influence the economy. Moreover, the evidence for economic accountability in local elections mirrors findings at other levels of government, where there is also only weak, contingent evidence that governors and members of Congress are held accountable for the local economy. In American politics, only presidents are clearly held accountable for the economy (e.g., Erikson 1989, Healy & Lenz 2017). Future work should look at economic accountability in a larger set of elections than just mayoral elections (e.g., county commission or city council elections). It also needs to utilize stronger identification strategies that account for potential confounders.

Turning to accountability for the performance of schools, the findings are also mixed. Berry & Howell (2007) look at school board elections in North Carolina in 2000, 2002, and 2004. They find that "the 2000 elections reveal considerable evidence that voters evaluate school board members on the basis of student learning trends. During the 2002 and 2004 school board elections, however, when media (and by extension public) attention to testing and accountability systems drifted, measures of achievement did not influence incumbents' electoral fortunes" (Berry & Howell 2007, p. 844). Kogan et al. (2016, p. 639) look at recent elections in Ohio and find "little evidence that poor performance on widely disseminated state and federal indicators has an impact on school board turnover, the vote share of sitting school board members, or superintendent tenure, suggesting that the dissemination of district performance information puts little (if any) electoral pressure on elected officials to improve student achievement." Holbein (2016) finds that weak performance in North Carolina schools leads to increases in turnout in school board elections. Finally, Payson (2017, p. 421) examines recent elections in California and finds that "incumbents are more likely to win re-election when test scores improve in their districts—but only in presidential election years. This effect disappears in midterm and off-years, indicating that election timing might facilitate local government accountability." Thus, overall, the literature seems to find that school performance can affect school board elections in some states, some years, and some election contexts. The most persuasive finding is that election timing matters for accountability (Payson 2017). More work is needed to adjudicate these findings. In particular, it would be useful to examine elections in more states and in a wider variation of election contexts.

Of course, a potential explanation for the weak and contingent findings on accountability for the economy, school performance, and crime is that these outcomes have only small and indirect links to government policy. We might expect there to be stronger accountability for areas under



**Figure 3**

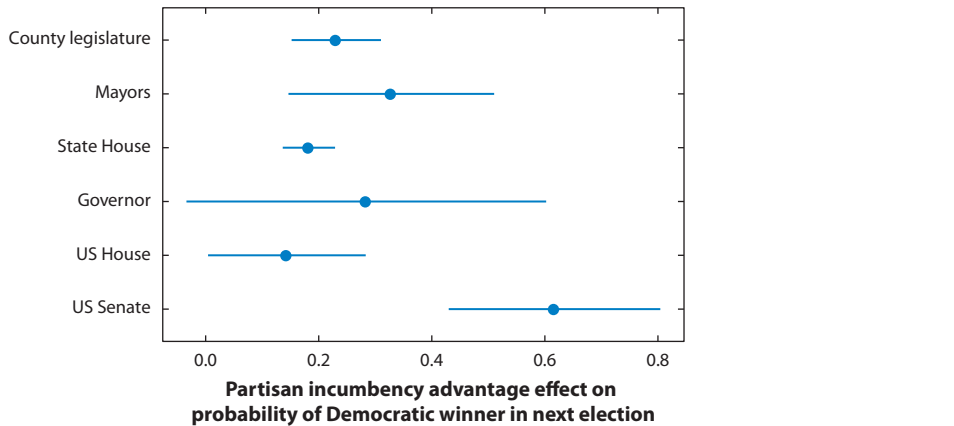
Association between assessment of government performance and mayoral approval ratings in the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere & Schaffner 2017).

direct governmental control. For instance, local governments generally have primary responsibility for road maintenance and could presumably reduce road issues (potholes, congestion, etc.) through larger allocations of funds or other policy changes. They also directly control planning decisions about whether to allow more development. It seems reasonable for citizens to hold elected officials accountable for outcomes in these areas. **Figure 3** examines the association between the views of survey respondents about these policy areas and their evaluations of their mayors in the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere & Schaffner 2017). Although this analysis should not be interpreted in a causal fashion, it clearly shows a strong relationship between citizens' evaluations of roads and development decisions and their local mayors.

These findings are generally consistent with the findings of a small literature that has examined electoral accountability for government performance on roads and transit. Arceneaux (2005) finds that survey respondents connect their evaluation of mayors' performance on traffic congestion and other salient issues to their vote choice. Similarly, Howell & Perry (2004) show that respondents' evaluations of city services in four large cities (Charlotte, Chicago, Detroit, and New Orleans) were significantly related to mayoral approval ratings. Burnett & Kogan (2017) examine whether mayoral and city council candidates in San Diego are held accountable for the quality of local roads. They show that over-time variation in pothole complaints helps explain neighborhood-level differences in support for incumbents in two political offices—mayor and city council—across several electoral cycles. On a slightly less optimistic note, de Benedictis-Kessner (2018b) finds that Boston transit riders are generally unable to link their perceptions about transit performance to their evaluations of local elected officials.

An important focus of the literature on elections has been the barriers to accountability in local politics. Perhaps the most important barrier is the low level of knowledge that most voters have about local politics. Indeed, it is hard for voters to hold candidates accountable if they do not know candidates' issue positions (Sances 2018) or what policies they have responsibility over (de Benedictis-Kessner 2018b). One of the reasons that most people know little about local





**Figure 4**

Partisan incumbency advantage for county legislature, mayor, state House, governor, US House, and US Senate (1988–2016).

politics is that many local governments receive little media coverage (Hopkins & Pettingill 2018, Peterson 2017).

Another important barrier to accountability is the incumbency advantage. Several recent studies have examined the incumbency advantage in local politics using regression discontinuity designs (RDD) that compare how future election results differ between candidates that narrowly win or lose elections. Trounstein (2011) examines the personal incumbency advantage in elections between 1915 and 1985 in Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, and San Jose. She finds that incumbents have a 22% vote share advantage, and they are 32% more likely to run and win than nonincumbents. Looking at 9,131 mayoral elections in over 1,000 cities between 1950 and 2012, de Benedictis-Kessner (2018a) finds that incumbents are 37% more likely to run and win than nonincumbents. Finally, Ferreira & Gyourko (2009) find that the partisan incumbency advantage in about 2,000 mayoral elections between 1950 and 2005 is about 32%.<sup>1</sup>

A limitation in the literature on the incumbency advantage is that few studies have compared the incumbency advantage across levels of office. An important exception is by Ansolabehere & Snyder (2002) who find that the incumbency advantage is similar across different congressional and statewide offices. **Figure 4** extends this work and the studies above by using an RDD to compare the incumbency advantage between 1988 and 2016 across elections for county legislature, mayor, state House, governor, US House, and US Senate. It shows the effect of incumbency on the probability that the incumbent's party will win the next election. Similar to the studies discussed above, I find an incumbency advantage in mayoral elections of around 33%. I also find that the incumbency advantage is very similar in all three types of “top of the ticket” elections: mayor, governor, and senator. The incumbency advantage for county legislative elections is somewhat smaller at 23%. Interestingly, however, this quantity too is similar to other district-based legislative elections in state Houses and the US House, both of which are approximately 15–20%. Overall, the incumbency advantage in local elections appears to be like the incumbency advantage in state and federal elections.

<sup>1</sup>Although the personal and partisan incumbency advantages are technically different quantities, Fowler & Hall (2014) show that nearly all of the partisan incumbency advantage stems from a personal incumbency advantage. Thus, the two quantities are very similar in practice.

## REPRESENTATION

In recent years, a growing focus of the literature on local politics has been the link between elections and political outcomes, such as the policies a government produces. This literature has focused on three general questions. First, does the race or gender of elected officials reflect the general population, and does the demographic composition of local government affect political outcomes? Second, how does the partisanship of local officials affect policy? Finally, are local governments responsive to the ideological views of the mass public?

### Group Representation

In general, research finds that local governments do not reflect the demographic composition of their citizens.<sup>2</sup> Blacks constitute the largest voting bloc in many of the nation's largest cities, but although many of these cities have elected black mayors at some point over the past 50 years, less than 20% of southern cities and 10% of nonsouthern medium and large cities currently have black mayors (Vogl 2014). In addition, Hajnal & Trounstein (2005) show that racial minorities are underrepresented on city councils, and they are particularly underrepresented in low-turnout elections. Studies have shown that women are also underrepresented in local governments. Only about 15% of winning mayoral candidates in a large sample of cities in 2005 were female (Ferreira & Gyourko 2014). Other studies have found that women hold an average of only 25% of city council seats and 19% of mayoral seats in cities with 30,000 or more residents (Cent. Am. Women Politics 2016, National League of Cities 2016). Kellogg et al. (2017) examine a sample of 394 county governments and find that half of the counties did not have any women serving on their governing boards. Moreover, the representation of women in local government appears to have plateaued. Several studies have found that the percentage of female local elected officials has been essentially flat over the past two decades (Cent. Am. Women Politics 2016, Ferreira & Gyourko 2014, Holman 2017).

What are the policy consequences of the underrepresentation of women and minorities in local government? The underrepresentation of these groups could affect policy through two pathways. First, these groups could be proxies for partisanship and ideology. For example, African-Americans are generally more liberal than whites. As a result, African-American elected officials are more likely to enact liberal policies than white ones. Second, women and minorities could have unique preferences even beyond their ideology and partisanship. For instance, female elected officials could seek to hire more women municipal employees (Holman 2017).

Looking first at the policy effects of the racial composition of local governments, early studies generally found significant impacts of elected officials' race on local policy, but the findings varied across policy areas (e.g., Karnig & Welch 1980). These studies had relatively weak research designs, though. More recent studies with stronger research designs have obtained mixed results. In a cross-sectional study of 9,000 cities in 2012, Sances & You (2017) examine US city governments' use of fines and court fees for local revenue, a policy that disproportionately affects black voters. They find that greater black representation on city councils reduces the use of fines. But in an RDD study of 149 municipal elections between 1989 and 2006, Hopkins & McCabe (2012) find that electing a black mayor has only minimal effects on municipal spending.

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<sup>2</sup>It is important to note, however, that there are severe data limitations on our knowledge regarding the demographic composition of local officials. For example, Holman (2017, p. 286) discusses how "limited access to reliable information on women's representation...[in] local offices limits the conclusions that we can draw about the barriers facing women in seeking political parity."

Turning to the effect of elected officials' gender on policy outcomes, Holman (2014a,b) finds substantially larger spending on social welfare programs in cities with female mayors and city councilors in a cross-sectional analysis of about 200 cities in 2007. In a larger RDD study of 5,500 elections over the past 50 years, however, Ferreira & Gyourko (2014) find no difference between the actions of male and female mayors.

One explanation for the mixed findings in these studies is that race and gender are primarily proxies for partisanship. Thus, we should expect to see the policy effects of the demographic composition of local government growing over time due to the greater ideological divergence between Democrats and Republicans in recent years (Caughey et al. 2017). Moreover, we should expect larger effects of gender due to the greater alignment between gender and partisanship (Gillion et al. 2018). This suggests that studies focusing on the past decade or two (e.g., Holman 2014a,b) are likely to detect larger policy effects of elected officials' race and gender than studies focusing on earlier decades (e.g., Ferreira & Gyourko 2014). Moreover, it is not surprising that studies focusing on policy areas where underrepresented groups are likely to have particularly strong preferences, such as the usage of fines, find larger policy effects of electing these groups into office (e.g., Sances & You 2017).

Looking beyond race and gender, another important question is whether the career background of elected officials affects local policies. Kirkland (2018) shows that business executive mayors shape municipal fiscal policy by shifting the allocation of expenditures across policy areas, investing in infrastructure while curtailing redistributive spending. Moreover, she shows that being a business executive is not simply a proxy for partisanship.

## **Ideological Representation**

A large literature demonstrates that elected officials at the national (Stimson et al. 1995) and state (Caughey & Warshaw 2018, Erikson et al. 1993, Lax & Phillips 2012) levels are responsive to the policy preferences of their constituents. In contrast, until recently "very little work at the local level analyze[d] responsiveness from an ideological standpoint" (Trounstein 2010, p. 416). At a theoretical level, the primary reason was that scholars generally focused on the myriad of constraints on local governments (e.g., Bailey & Rom 2004, Ladd & Yinger 1989, Peterson 1981, Rae 2003). Moreover, scholars viewed local policy issues as technical rather than ideological. At an empirical level, this gap in the literature was largely due to the fact that scholars lacked a measure of the policy preferences of local mass publics (Trounstein 2010). As a result, most studies used proxies for public opinion, such as demographic groups, rather than a direct measure of the policy conservatism of citizens in each city and town (e.g., Craw 2010, Hajnal & Trounstein 2010).

In recent years, however, scholars have developed new approaches to study the association of the ideological views of the mass public with local policy outputs. These studies have found that local governments are responsive to the ideological views of the mass public. Palus (2010) compares survey-based measures of mass ideology with policy outputs in 26 large cities and finds that the ideological preferences of citizens are reflected in the spending decisions of governments. Tausanovitch & Warshaw (2014) use a multilevel regression and poststratification model to estimate the mass public's ideological views in over 1,600 cities using data from national surveys. They find a strong association between the mass public's policy preferences and municipal policies. Einstein & Kogan (2015) examine a large set of cities and find a strong association between presidential voting patterns and municipal policies. They also show that municipal spending changes in response to changes in presidential voting patterns. At the county level, Choi et al. (2010) find that Democratic votes for president are associated with greater expenditure levels and a larger share spent on redistribution. Moreover, Sances (2017) shows that county spending responds to changes

in presidential voting patterns, particularly in areas that are less constrained by state laws. In addition, he finds that responsiveness has increased in recent decades. Although these studies provide persuasive evidence that the mass public influences local policies, Hajnal & Trounstein (2010) show that economic and institutional factors continue to constrain local policies in important ways.

**Figure 5** helps contextualize the level of responsiveness in local politics by comparing cross-sectional policy responsiveness across levels of government and policy domain. The top set of panels shows the association between measures of mass preferences and per capita spending in state, county, and municipal governments (all the measures of mass preferences are standardized to have a standard deviation of 1).<sup>3</sup> The middle panels show the association between mass preferences and broader measures of economic policy.<sup>4</sup> The bottom panels show the association between mass preferences and social policies.<sup>5</sup> Across all the plots, there is a strong association between mass liberalism and government policy. However, there is always more responsiveness in state governments than at lower levels of government, perhaps due to the greater constraints on local governments. In addition, the plots show that there is generally more responsiveness on broader policy measures that capture more than spending. Finally, social policies appear to be most responsive to mass opinion (consistent with the state-level findings of Caughey & Warshaw 2018).

Future work is likely to focus on inequities in policy representation in local government. Differential responsiveness is the subject of an extensive literature at the national level (e.g., Gilens 2012), but it has received little attention at the local level. Studying differential responsiveness is likely to require scholars to develop innovative ways to measure public opinion across demographic groups. For instance, Schaffner et al. (2016) use data from a commercial voter file with information on over 200 million Americans to measure public opinion among different groups at the local level. They find evidence that local policies tend to be slanted toward the views of whites and the wealthy. Similarly, Kogan et al. (2018) find that local outcomes tend to be slanted toward the views of the elderly.

### Partisan Effects on Policy

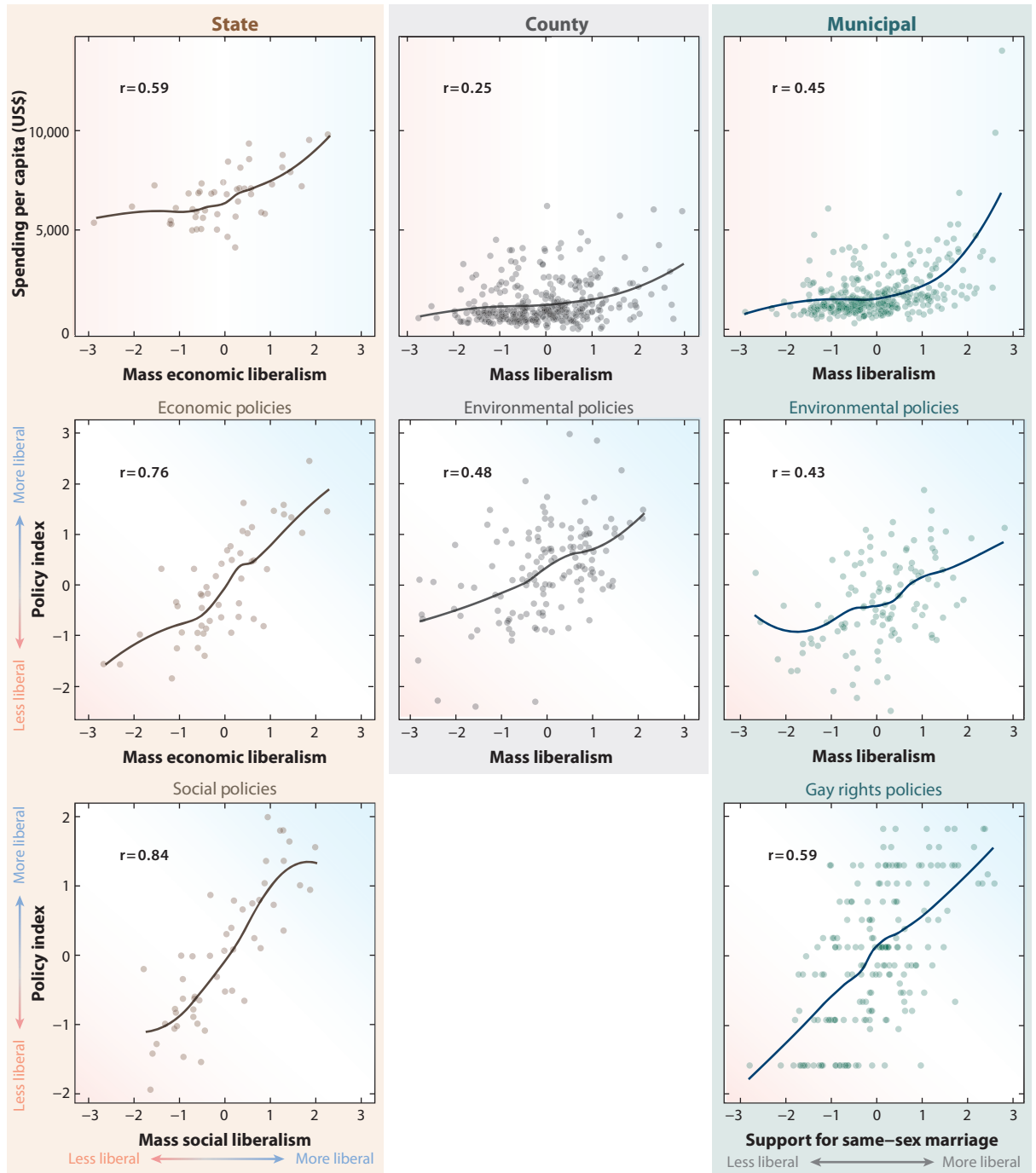
What is the mechanism for the link between mass preferences and local policies? One possibility is that liberal publics tend to elect Democratic officials, who then enact liberal policies. There is a large literature at the state and federal levels showing that there are substantial differences between Democratic and Republican elected officials. Democrats in both Congress and state legislatures have much more liberal roll call voting records than Republicans (Lee et al. 2004, Shor & McCarty

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<sup>3</sup>These plots use per capita spending data that the Urban Institute compiled from the 2012 Census of Governments data (Urban Institute, State and Local Finance Data Query System). The graph of responsiveness for states uses estimates of mass economic preferences from Caughey & Warshaw (2018). Also, I drop three states from the analysis of responsiveness on spending that receive outsized revenues from natural resources (US Energy Information Administration, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=22612>). The graphs of responsiveness for counties and cities use estimates of mass preferences compiled by Tausanovitch & Warshaw (2013).

<sup>4</sup>The graph of responsiveness for states uses estimates of economic policy conservatism from Caughey & Warshaw (2018). The other plots use scaled measures of environmental policy conservatism based on the 2010 ICMA sustainability survey (<https://icma.org/documents/icma-survey-research-2010-sustainability-survey-results>).

<sup>5</sup>The graph of responsiveness for states uses estimates of social policy conservatism from Caughey & Warshaw (2018). The graph of responsiveness in city governments on gay rights uses data from Warshaw (2016). The estimates of the conservatism of city gay rights policies are based on data from the Municipal Equality Index developed by the Human Rights Campaign (<https://www.hrc.org/mei>).



(Caption appears on following page)

**Figure 5** (*Figure appears on preceding page*)

Association between mass preferences and policy outputs across levels of government and policy domains (based on data and results in Caughey & Warshaw 2018; Tausanovitch & Warshaw 2013, 2014; Urban Institute State and Local Finance Data Query System; Warshaw 2016). *Top*: The association between measures of mass preferences and per capita spending in state, county, and municipal governments. *Center*: The association between mass preferences and broader measures of economic policy. *Bottom*: The association between mass preferences and social policies.

2011). At the local level, Einstein & Glick (2018) show that there are large policy differences in the views of Democratic and Republican mayors. Connolly & Mason (2016) find that Democratic and Republican elected officials in California have distinct ideological positions. Burnett (2017) shows that the roll call voting behaviors of Democratic and Republican city councilors in San Diego are different from one another. Finally, de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw (2019) show that Democratic county legislators have much more liberal campaign-finance scores than Republicans.

This partisan polarization in position taking implies there should be policy effects from electing a Democratic rather than Republican candidate. Surprisingly, however, until recently the consensus in the local politics literature was that the partisanship of candidates had little effect on policy. Ferreira & Gyourko (2009) find no effect of partisanship on municipal fiscal policies in an RDD study of 413 cities with more than 25,000 people. In a smaller-scale study that focused on larger cities, Gerber & Hopkins (2011) also find minimal policy effects of mayoral partisanship. However, several recent studies have found party effects on policy, at least in medium and large cities and counties. De Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw (2016) find significant effects of mayoral partisanship in an RDD study of 204 cities with more than 75,000 people. Similarly, de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw (2019) find a substantial effect of the partisanship of county legislators on fiscal policies in medium and large counties. Gerber (2013) finds that the partisanship of local elected officials affects local climate policies. Although there have been fewer studies on school boards, Macartney & Singleton (2018) show that the election of Democratic school board members in North Carolina reduces school segregation. In contrast, Thompson (2018) finds no significant partisan differences in the immigration policies implemented by sheriffs.

An important question is what explains the different findings across studies. First, partisan effects on policy appear to be larger in local governments with greater policy flexibility (e.g., big-city mayors) than in offices that are highly constrained. Second, partisan effects are larger in the modern polarized era due to the greater ideological divergence between Democrats and Republicans (Caughey et al. 2017). Third, partisan effects are larger in policy areas where there is more polarization, such as redistribution and race policies.

## **Institutions and Representation**

A long-term focus of the literature on local politics has been to examine whether institutions mediate the link between the mass public and local policy outputs. Many municipal institutions were designed with representation and accountability in mind. Progressive reformers around 1900 sought to improve government by decreasing the power of party machines and increasing professionalization. Tausanovitch & Warshaw (2014) examine a number of these reform institutions, including term limits, direct democracy, at-large city council elections, and nonpartisan elections. However, they find that no individual institution affects the cross-sectional association between mass preferences and policy. Hopkins & Pettingill (2018) find that voters are more likely to hold incumbents accountable for economic performance when there is a local newspaper, but they find no impact on accountability from other local institutions. Trounstein & Valdini (2008) find that district city councils (as opposed to those with at-large elections) increase diversity when

underrepresented groups are highly concentrated and compose a substantial portion of the population. Many other studies have examined a multitude of other institutions such as the form of local government (i.e., presence of an elected executive versus an appointed manager) (Sharp 1997, Lubell et al. 2009).

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The study of local politics has advanced rapidly in recent years and moved into the mainstream of American politics research. But there remain abundant opportunities to advance the study of elections and representation at the local level. First, it is important to examine a wider variety of local offices. The bulk of existing work has focused on mayoral elections and other aspects of municipal politics, but most Americans do not live in large cities, and municipal governments constitute a small fraction of the local governments in the United States. Future work should examine school boards (e.g., Berry & Howell 2007, Kogan et al. 2016, Payson 2017), county governments (e.g., de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw 2019), sheriffs (e.g., Farris & Holman 2017, Thompson 2018), judges, and other offices.

One of the reasons that past work focused mostly on big cities is that there were no comprehensive national data sets on local politics across a range of local offices. Scholars could address this gap by collaborating to develop large-scale databases of public opinion and voting behavior, exit polls (e.g., Hajnal & Trounstein 2014), historical election results across many local offices (e.g., Marschall & Shah 2018, MIT Election Data and Sci. Lab 2018), and governmental outcomes (e.g., roll call votes, social policies). With this information in hand, scholars could tackle an array of important questions in local politics. What percentages of local offices are held by Democrats versus Republicans? Does the demographic and partisan composition of elected officials vary across different types of offices (e.g., school boards versus mayors)? How does the demographic and partisan composition of local government change when electoral tides sweep federal elections? How do the policy effects of partisan control of local government vary across offices? Do the effects of race, partisanship, and ideology in local elections differ from their effects in national elections?

Second, it is important to understand the role of institutions in local politics. How do institutions affect local elections? Which institutions strengthen or distort representation? How do legislative rules (e.g., agenda control and veto powers) vary across city governments and county commissions, and what are the effects of these rules? The study of local institutions can also provide insights into the roles of institutions at the state and national levels where there is less institutional variation (Thrower 2018). But it is important to leverage strong research designs to advance our knowledge of local institutions. For instance, scholars could examine how changes in institutions lead to changes in voting behavior, roll call votes, or policy.

## **DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am grateful for feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript from Nolan McCarty, Julia Payson, Justin de Benedictis-Kessner, and Chris Tausanovitch.



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