Introduction

Guilford County, NC held its first partisan election for school board in 2016. After a second cycle of partisan elections in 2018 a bipartisan group of state legislators filed bills to reverse course—making school board elections in Guilford County nonpartisan once again. While the Guilford case may be an outlier example of legislative whiplash, it is part of a larger trend of state legislatures specifying the time, place, and manner that local jurisdictions must conduct their elections[i]. The public-facing arguments for these changes often conflict with prior research that gives good cause for skepticism. There is evidence that support for particular election systems are partially based on perceived advantages. Abolishing the Electoral College had bipartisan support in the 1960's. After two elections where a Democratic candidate won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College (2000 and 2016) a sharp partisan divide emerged, with 81 percent of Democrats but just 19 percent of Republicans agreeing the national popular vote should determine the presidency (Skelley, 2019). At the local level, nonpartisan elections have been shown to benefit the Republican party (Lee, 1960; Hawley, 1973; Hershey, 2007, p. 36). More recently Schaffner, Streb, and Wright demonstrated that nonpartisan elections provide a more nuanced advantage, specifically for the minority party in a given locale, whether it is Democrats or Republicans (2007).

In recent years several state legislatures have considered bills mandating changes to how local elections are conducted. Many proposals include a requirement that local elections drop nonpartisan ballots and require candidates to run as partisans. At the same time, there is a countervailing effort by some state legislators to push back against those proposals and even expand the use of nonpartisan elections. Unsurprisingly, proponents

on each side of this issue, who I call "party defenders" and "nonpartisan reformers," cite normative arguments for their position and insist their constituents are on their side.

In this paper I aim to inform this debate in two ways. First, I provide context for the present tension between party defenders and nonpartisan reformers. I rely on existing literature on differences between partisan and nonpartisan elections and a review of proposed state legislation relevant to the ballot context of local elections. Second, I argue that missing from this debate is proper consideration of voters' actual preferences for selection methods to local office, and the possibility that voters differentiate *between* local offices. To provide insight on these questions I use new data from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) to reveal the public's attitudes as they relate to elections for various local offices.

I find that while nonpartisan elections are the modal preference for local offices, the proportion of voters favoring this model is conditional on office-type, party affiliation, and whether respondents live in counties with a majority of their co-partisans. Specifically, Democrats are more likely to prefer nonpartisan elections for local offices than Republicans, but this partisan gap only manifests in Republican-leaning counties. In addition, I provide evidence that the same conditions that affect preferences for local elections do not hold for elections to the U.S. House, suggesting that voters differentiate between federal and local offices when it comes to how they prefer to choose their representatives. Further, these results hold after testing for alternative explanations such as political interest and assessments of out-party extremity.

Nonpartisan Reformers and Party Defenders

The nonpartisan reformer theory is rooted in progressive-era municipal reforms when activists were concerned about the corrosive effects of party machines on city administration. Nonpartisan reformers maintain that local government is best served when political parties are absent from the process, and a necessary but perhaps not sufficient reform to achieve that goal is adoption of nonpartisan elections. In contrast, the party defender theory argues for the usefulness of political parties as institutions that enable citizens to organize around a collective set of values and policies.

The debate between nonpartisan reformers and party defenders is largely a product of competing values. In some cases these theories fundamentally disagree about potential causal relationships between the partisan ballot context and political or policy outcomes of interest. In many cases, however, the real conflict is rooted in differing priorities.

The theory behind removing partisanship from local elections and thus "allowing" qualified candidates with integrity to win nonpartisan elections correlated with a broader movement of civil service reform for merit appointment to government jobs that was already happening at the local and national level (Frederickson et al., 2004). Party machines were barriers to participation because they transmitted the influence of national and state politics onto local issues. Therefore, removing them from the electoral equation would enable citizens to make better decisions and in turn increase civic participation in local government (Keller, 2002; McGrath, 2011).

The days of party machines in major American cities are over (at least the ballot-stuffing Tammany Hall version), but the rationale for nonpartisan elections remains despite the demise of its catalyst. More than any other time since the dawn of the

progressive era, Americans are disinclined to identify with either of the two major parties (Pew Research Center, 2015). At the same time, the vast majority of Americans who do not affiliate with a party consistently vote for candidates of one party over another, lending credence to the party defender argument that labels provide useful information to voters (Pew Research Center, 2019). In addition, distaste for party affiliation is not limited to communities that themselves have a nonpartisan form of government (Cassel, 1987).

This presents two practical challenges for elections in general, and local elections in particular. First, unaffiliated voters are not able to participate in closed primary elections, effectively disenfranchising one-third of the electorate from weighing in on nominees for partisan-elected offices. This is especially problematic for local elections since one-party rule is more likely to play a role in election dynamics as the unit of government and size of the jurisdiction shrink, making it more likely that primary election winner will face no general election challenge. The second practical problem is that conducting partisan elections at the local level make it disproportionately difficult for unaffiliated candidates to get on the ballot. The same realities that make it difficult for unaffiliated voters to participate in partisan local elections also apply to potential candidates who are interested in running for local office. While many potential candidates could simply choose to register with one of the major parties, the Hatch Act might very well prohibit federal employees from running in a local partisan election even if they themselves run "No Party Affiliation" next to their name (Cohan, 2011; Allen, 2017).

Broadly speaking, party defenders reject the premise of many concerns articulated by nonpartisan reformers. Where reformers see partisan elections as adding party politics to apolitical administration of local governments, party defenders see governing bodies that make political decisions. Where reformers see party labels as providing a crutch to voters who might be uninformed about local candidates and issues, party defenders see valuable information for voters that are relevant to the office that candidates seek.

It has been extensively argued that greater levels of participation in the political process leads to more responsive elected executives and legislators (Lijphart, 1997; Lipset & Schneider, 1983), therefore it is wise to structure the electoral process to increase citizen participation as much as possible. Following Downs (1957), processes should be implemented to reduce the costs of voting. Examples include adoption of same day registration or vote-by-mail (Highton, 2004). It also includes consolidation of election timing by holding local elections at the same time as state and federal races—the very antithesis of one of the progressive era reforms.

Legislative Efforts

For the purposes of this study I focus on four local offices that vary across and within states with respect to their selection method. Two offices—sheriff and district attorney—are selected in partisan contests for most states. The vast majority of the third office—school boards—are elected by nonpartisan ballot. The fourth local office examined—local election officials—also varies in this regard, although the exact breakdown is not summarized here (see Table 1).

Table 1. Selection methods for select local offices in the 50 U.S. States

Office	Partisan	Nonpartisan	Appointed	Mixture	N/A
School Board	4	44	--	2	--
Sheriff	42	4	1	1	2
District Attorney	42	4	4	-	--

Local election officials are omitted from this summary table. Selection methods for this office vary considerably. One difficulty with summarizing that data is that the responsibility of administering local elections varies is not limited to a particular job title. For example, in very large jurisdictions there is a chief local election official appointed by an elected board. In some very small jurisdictions the local clerk or auditor may also be responsible for election administration (Kimball and Kropf 2006).

I focus my examination of recent legislature behavior on two specific electoral manipulations: timing and partisan ballot context. This paper focuses on the latter, but the former should rightly be thought of as a variable whose alteration can have similar effects as changing from partisan to nonpartisan ballots, especially in the context of local elections.

The National Council of State Legislatures maintains several databases to track state legislative activity. I searched two of these databases to identify cases of state legislation or ballot measures that either changed the timing of local elections or mandated a change in the partisan ballot context for elections to local office (switching either all localities in a state or specific locality from a nonpartisan system to a partisan system, or vice-versa).[ii] The first database is the 2001-2010 *Election Reform Database* and contains state legislation related to the administration of elections. The second database is the *2011-2018 Elections Legislation Database*. This contains state legislation related to the administration of elections introduced in 2011.[iii]

I searched legislation for all states and all topics within the elections legislation database that contained "nonpartisan" in the text of the legislation. Between 2001 and 2010, 114 pieces of legislation from all states related to elections returned with the keyword "nonpartisan". Of these, 15 were related to the timing or partisan nature of local elections and five specifically proposed changing the partisan ballot context. Florida twice attempted to require local supervisors of elections to be nonpartisan. Washington proposed making their county auditors nonpartisan. In two cases—Iowa and Virginia—the proposed changes did not affect school boards. Iowa provided for all townships to have nonpartisan elections, which school boards already did. In Virginia the legislation specifically exempted school districts from the local elections proposed to change to a partisan model. There were 10 unique pieces of legislation dealing with the timing of local elections. All 10 bills came from just three states—Georgia, New Jersey, and Wisconsin. Georgia and New Jersey went back and forth proposing bills that allowed or required nonpartisan local elections take place either at the same time as nonpartisan municipal elections, partisan primary elections for state and federal races, or November general elections.

The number of bills proposing to change the timing or partisan ballot context of local elections increased after 2010. The search for legislation between 2011 and 2019 resulted in 234 pieces of legislations from 34 different states. After accounting for bills unrelated to election timing, partisan ballot context, or local elections, 73 unique bills remained.[iv] Of these, 56 were proposed to alter the partisan ballot context of certain local elections while 17 bills proposed to change the timing of local elections. Some bills were targeted in their language to affect only particular local offices while others were broad in

their application (e.g. "all county-elected offices"). Table 2 summarizes this legislation

by reform type and the political party of the bill sponsor(s).

Two relevant findings emerge from the data displayed in Table 2. First, all 12

pieces of legislation that proposed switching some local elections *to* partisan ballots were

sponsored by Republican legislators. With the exception of Nevada, a Republican

majority between 2011 and 2019 effectively controlled each of these states' legislatures.

Second, while it would appear that both Democrat and Republican legislators are

proposing bills to make some local elections nonpartisan, half of the 14 Republican-

sponsored bills come from one legislator writing 7 different bills (one for each local

office). The larger takeaway then, is a pattern of Republican legislators backing partisan

local elections and Democratic legislators sponsoring bills to make local elections

nonpartisan.

Table 2. State Legislation: 2011-2019

Bill Type	Timing				Partisanship			
	Consolidate		Separate		→Partisan		→Nonpartisan	
Party of Sponsor(s)	D	R	D	R	D	R	D	R
Number of Bills	9	5	0	3	0	12	30	15
States[1]	NJ	AR		GA[4]		AZ	CT	GA[6]
	NY	ID[3]		NJ		NC	MS	FL
	VA	MS		WI[5]		UT	OK	IN
	IL[2]	WV				IN	SC	MI
	GA	MI				NV	TX	IA
						NE	FL	MS
							ME	CA
							NE	
							AZ	

[1] Numbers count House/Assembly and Senate Bills as separate proposals. Not included in this breakdown are two separate Iowa bills (S101, 2018 and H1190, 2016) where Independent legislators proposed switching all county offices from partisan to nonpartisan and making county auditors specifically nonpartisan, respectively.

[2] Specific provision to move all school board elections to November even-years. Then, in same bill, moves all school boards to November odd-years (consolidated with municipal) if that district serves less than 2,000,000 people (all except Chicago).

[3] Idaho Republicans proposed moving school board elections to November odd-numbered years to coincide with nonpartisan city elections. School boards had been in May. The stated purpose was to increase turnout. Democratic opposition cited clerk concerns about overlapping city and school district lines and preparing proper ballots for voters. Some Republican opposition from transportation committee chair who was concerned that school boards *leaving* May would leave only highway district elections taking place then, subjecting them to lower turnout.

[4] Republicans, in 2012, passed a bill to move nonpartisan general elections from November to concur with the existing partisan primary date. *Partisan local general elections* would still take place in November, but *nonpartisan local generals would be at the same time as the partisan primary*.

[5] WI, in 2011 Republicans proposed to move clerks, sheriffs, and treasurers to spring odd-year elections rather than keep them at November even year.

[6] 7 Separate bills in GA for each local office – clerk, DA, Sheriff, Tax Collector, Coroner, County Commission, magistrate. The only one that passed was specifically for judge probate in Lanier county.

Legislation in context

Party labels are one heuristic that provide voters with valuable information about candidates (Conover & Feldman, 1989; Schaffner et al., 2001). Nonpartisan reformers would argue that there is a difference between whether a heuristic, or "information shortcut" is helpful to the point of being normatively problematic. While party labels on the ballot are known to provide voters with information about candidates that they find useful when casting a vote, this also causes uninformed voters to cast votes based purely on the label without knowing anything about the candidates themselves or the issues involved in a particular race. This belief has been used as an argument against party labels on the ballot. At the same time, voters get information about candidates from all sorts of sources – endorsements from political elites or newspapers and conversations with friends, family, and neighbors all help to influence voters' preferences for parties or candidates (Popkin, 1995). In addition, there is evidence that voters do not rely solely on the qualifications of candidates when making their voting decisions. When party labels are removed from the ballot, non-party cues play a larger role in nonpartisan elections, including occupation (McDermott, 2004), candidate ethnicity (Kamin, 1958; Lorinkas et al., 1969), ballot order (Bain & Hecock, 1957), and gender, race, and ethnicity (Arrington, 1978; Matson & Fine, 2006; Banducci et al., 2008). Is voting for a local alderman based on race, ethnicity, or because your neighbor told you they "are good" even though you know nothing else about them any different than voting for someone because "R" or "D" is next to their name?

Legislation proposed in state capitals and talking points disseminated through local media provide but one vantage point that election preferences may be understood.

While these elites offer arguments for their legislation rooted in citizen preferences it

would be naïve to assume they perceive no partisan benefit or that they accurately

represent constituent views. To date there has been relatively little empirical data that

reveals what the public thinks about these issues.

Public Views of Partisan Elections

Part of the 2018 pre-election CCES included a battery of items designed to

measure public attitudes about election administration. Included in this battery, for the

first time, was a question that asked respondents to give their opinion about the types of

elections they preferred for multiple local offices. Specifically, the question was

presented to respondent as follows:

Recently, there has been some discussion about how we choose representatives for various federal, state, and local offices.

In some places, these offices are chosen in partisan or in non-partisan elections.

In other places, they are appointed by other elected officials.

How do you think the following offices should be chosen?

     Local Election Officials
     Local School Board
     Sheriff
     District Attorney
     City or Town Council
     Members of the United States House of Representatives
     Members of the State Legislature

Options:
     They should be elected by the public, in a nonpartisan contest
     They should be elected by the public, in a partisan contest
     They should be appointed by an elected official or other governing body
     I don't think it matters
     I'm not sure

There is little research on public attitudes about preferences for how local officials should be chosen. One notable exception is Alvarez and Hall (2005) who show that a nonpartisan elected board is the most-preferred local election authority in a nationwide survey of citizens. As Table 2 demonstrated, there is extensive variation in the types of state legislation proposed regarding local election processes. These proposals range from broad, sweeping reforms such as North Carolina's 2015 HB 324, which attempted to make all county school boards in the state hold partisan elections, to uber-specific legislation such as a 2014 Georgia bill (H 800) that mandated one type of office (judge probate) in a single county (Lanier) be elected in partisan fashion.

The increased legislative activity indicates that, at the very least, legislators place some premium on altering local election structures. The specificity of many bills might also indicate that they differentiate not just between local and state offices, but also *between* local offices. Do the public hold strong preferences about the manner local officials are elected? That is, do their feelings about how to select local government officials systematically differ from how they feel about selecting representatives to state houses and Congress? Does the public differ in their selection preferences *between* local offices?

I focus initially on testing for differences in public preferences across office type via three hypotheses listed below.[v]

Nonpartisan reformers theory: A prior belief that progressive-era reforms responsible for nonpartisan elections at the local level are rooted in preference for nonpartisan and/or administrative local government.

- H$_{\text{REFORM}}$: For each local office more respondents will choose "elected in a non-partisan contest" as preferred selection method compared to "elected in a partisan contest."

Familiarity bias theory: Respondents who live in a state that uniformly uses one selection method will prefer will be more likely to choose that selection method.[vi]

- H$_{\text{GEO}}$: Differences between selection method preferences will vary conditional on the respondent's state of residence and the selection method therein.

Politically strategic theory: Differences between selection method preferences will vary conditional on the respondents' party affiliation and whether that party is the majority party in the local jurisdiction.

- H$_{\text{STRATEGIC\_MAJ}}$: For each local office voters who affiliate with the local majority party will be more likely to choose "partisan contest" than those who affiliate with the local minority party.

- H$_{\text{STRATEGIC\_MIN}}$: For each local office voters who affiliate with the local minority party will be more likely to choose "elected in a non-partisan contest" than those who affiliate with the local majority party.

Table 3 illustrates support for the H$_{\text{REFORM}}$ hypothesis. For each local office the share of respondents who prefer nonpartisan elections is significantly greater than the share that prefer partisan elections ($p < .01$). The greatest gap is for school board (+28) while the smallest advantage that nonpartisan elections have is for local election officials (+9). We asked respondents to answer the same question for two offices that are more

salient and are ubiquitously partisan—U.S. House and State Legislature. These were the

only two offices where *partisan* elections were the modal response.

Table 3. Proportion of respondents who prefer nonpartisan or partisan elections across four local offices

School Board		Sheriff		District Attorney		Local Election Official	
Nonpartisan	Partisan	Nonpartisan	Partisan	Nonpartisan	Partisan	Nonpartisan	Partisan
.53	.25	.48	.27	.46	.26	.40	.31
(.49, .57)	(.22, .29)	(.44, .52)	(.23, .30)	(.42, .50)	(.22, .29)	(.36, .44)	(.27, .35)

Source: 2018 CCES (pre-election survey). Values do not sum to 100. Remainder is divided between 'appointed', 'unsure', and 'does not matter'. 95% confidence intervals generated with the WaldCC function in R, which calculates a Wald type interval with continuity corrections for multinomial proportions.

Respondents preferred partisan elections to nonpartisan elections for the U.S.

House (45-38) and State Legislatures (46-36). To rule out the possibility that respondents

giving uniform answers for each office are driving results, I calculated the proportion of

respondents who selected partisan elections for each office, nonpartisan elections for each

office, and nonpartisan elections for every *local* office. These results are presented in

Table 4. Approximately 29 percent of the entire sample chose either partisan or

nonpartisan elections as the preferred selection method for every office. This indicates a

majority of respondents made distinctions between office-types when considering the

selection preference. At the same time, it cannot be assumed that those respondents who

expressed a preference for the same type of selection method are not also expressing a

true preference.

Table 4. Patterns of response

	Total Respondents	Dem	Rep	Ind
Partisan for every office (*party defenders*)	.11 (N=108)	.28	.38	.22
Nonpartisan for every office (*nonpartisan reformers*)	.18 (N=179)	.36	.17	.42
Nonpartisan for every local office (*local reformers*)	.23 (N=237)	.40	.18	.37

How to read this table: 11% of all respondents selected 'partisan' for every office. Of that group, 28% are Democrats, 38% Republican, and 22% Independent.

To test for familiarity bias I grouped respondents by whether respondents live in states with the same selection method they chose as their preference. In Table 5 I display the proportion of respondents who express support for partisan or nonpartisan elections and find no significant differences between levels of support for selection method conditional on the selection method in their state of residence, thus the data fail to support H_{GEO}.

The politically strategic theory is informed by scholarship suggesting that political minorities benefit electorally from nonpartisan elections (Schaffner et al., 2007). Simply put, majority-party candidates benefit electorally from having their affiliation listed on the ballot, allowing for their co-partisan voters, who constitute an electoral majority, to identify them (particularly advantageous in low-salient elections). When those labels are removed, the majority-party candidate, who otherwise may be unknown, loses that advantage. This level of political strategy is more likely to be a calculus of legislators who craft bills designed to alter electoral structures—but it is unknown whether the

public thinks *this* strategically when asked their opinions about election preferences.

While we do not ask *why* voters express the preferences they do, testing for differences in

preferences after grouping respondents based on their partisan majority status represents

a rather conservative test of this theory.

Table 5. Difference in support for selection method is not conditional on actual method used by respondent's state of residence.

		Actual Selection Method in Respondent's State	
	Respondent Preference	Nonpartisan	Partisan
School Boards	Nonpartisan	.55	.50
	Partisan	.23	.26
	Difference (95% CI)	.32 (.27, .36)	.24 (.11, .37)
	N	832	98
Sheriff	Nonpartisan	.47	.49
	Partisan	.27	.24
	Difference (95% CI)	.20 (.08, .31)	.25 (.20, .30)
	N	137	755
District Attorney	Nonpartisan	.50	.47
	Partisan	.24	.25
	Difference (95% CI)	.26 (.13, .38)	.22 (.17, .26)
	N	110	831

Columns do not sum to 100. Remainder is divided between 'appointed', 'unsure', and 'does not matter'. How to read this table: Of the respondents living in states with nonpartisan school board elections, 55% prefer nonpartisan elections compared to 23% who prefer partisan elections. This difference (32%) is not significantly greater than the gap in preference for nonpartisan school board elections among respondents who actually live in states with *partisan* school board elections (24%).

To ensure that there were a sufficient number of respondents living in counties where they could be considered a political minority, I coded each county of residence among respondents as "Democratic", "Republican", or "Swing." Counties were coded based on the average two-party presidential vote share from the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections. A county that averaged 55 percent or greater for the Democratic (Republican) candidate was coded as a Democratic (Republican) county. Counties where the average two-party vote share fell between 45 and 55 percent were coded as "Swing."

Table 6 shows the number of respondents who fall into each category. For example, 156 respondents are Republicans who live in counties coded as "Republican," while 101 respondents are Republicans who live in counties coded as "Democratic."

Table 6. Number of respondents living in a county with a majority/minority of their co-partisans

Party ID	County Partisanship		
	Democratic-majority	Republican-majority	Swing
Democrat	222	131	99
Republican	101	156	58
Independent	158	138	74

County partisanship is determined by averaging the 2012 and 2016 two-party presidential vote share. Partisan-majority counties average > 55 percent of the vote. Swing counties indicate a two-party average between 45 and 55 percent.

Testing the Politically-Strategic Theory

In the analysis that follows I model the effect of party ID, county partisanship, and an interaction between the two, on the predicted probability that a respondent expresses a preference for a nonpartisan (Figure 1) or partisan (Figure 2) election for each local office. Recall that there was a total of five response options to the question, therefore, for each model the dependent variable = 1 if the respondent chose either "nonpartisan" (Figure 1) or "partisan" (Figure 2), and is coded as "0" if they chose any other response.

This binary outcome is regressed on a dichotomous party identification variable (1 = Democrat and 0 = Republican). To account for respondent's local partisan environment, I use the average Democratic presidential vote share from the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections. While I collapsed this variable to classify respondents for descriptive purposes (Table 6), I treat this measure as a continuous predictor in the models that follow. To account for differential effects of county partisanship on Democrats and Republicans, I also include an interaction term between county partisanship and the dichotomous party identification variable.[vii]

Control variables

A benefit of the CCES is that in addition to the specific battery of questions we asked our 1,000-person module, they also answered a set of common content questions. Several of these items are helpful in ruling out alternative explanations for differential election preferences. It is possible that those who believe they are sufficiently informed

about politics and government do not see a benefit to making elections partisan. In other words, election-mode preference may have less to do with party id or partisan minority status and more to do with a true preference for nonpartisan elections, bolstered by an interest in politics and government. To account for this possibility, I include a measure of political interest and political activity.[viii]

A primary argument of party defenders is that partisan elections provide valuable information to voters—specifically the party label—that is particularly helpful in the often low-information context of local races. It may be that respondents who view candidates from the out-party as especially extreme would be more supportive of partisan elections so they may avoid the "mistake" of voting for a candidate from the opposite party. An ideal control for this alternative explanation would be a measure of affective polarization, or the extent to which respondents have negative views about the out-party. Unfortunately, this variable is not available in the 2018 CCES. As an alternative I constructed a dichotomous measure of "perceived extremity," where a Democratic (Republican) respondent is coded 1 if they perceive the Republican (Democrat) party as "extremely" conservative (liberal) on a 7-point scale of ideology, and 0 otherwise. While limited, this construction provides some purchase on the extent to which a self-identified partisan perceives the other party as being extreme, possibly increasing the cost associated with mistakenly voting for the "wrong" candidate in a nonpartisan setting.

Results

The partisan gap in selection preferences and the conditional effect of county partisanship are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. The inclusion of the interaction term demands a careful interpretation of the results. In Figure 1, the point estimate for

'Democrat' indicates that Democrat respondents are significantly more likely than

Republicans to prefer nonpartisan elections for school board and local election officials

when county Democratic vote share is 0 (a condition that is not satisfied in reality). The

estimate for 'Avg. Dem Vote Share' indicates that county partisanship does not affect the

probability that *Republicans* prefer nonpartisan elections. The interaction term indicates

that Democrats are *less likely* to prefer nonpartisan elections for school board, sheriff, and

district attorney elections as county Democratic vote share *increases*.[ix]

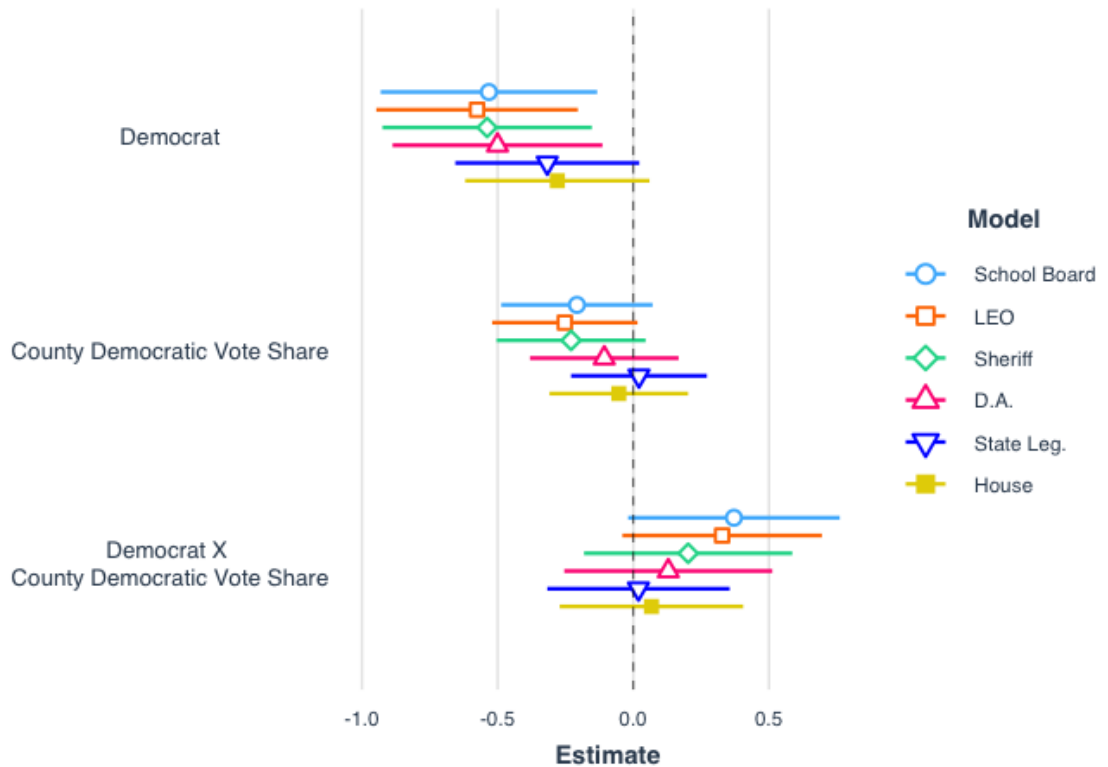Figure 1. Partisan gap in preference for *nonpartisan* elections
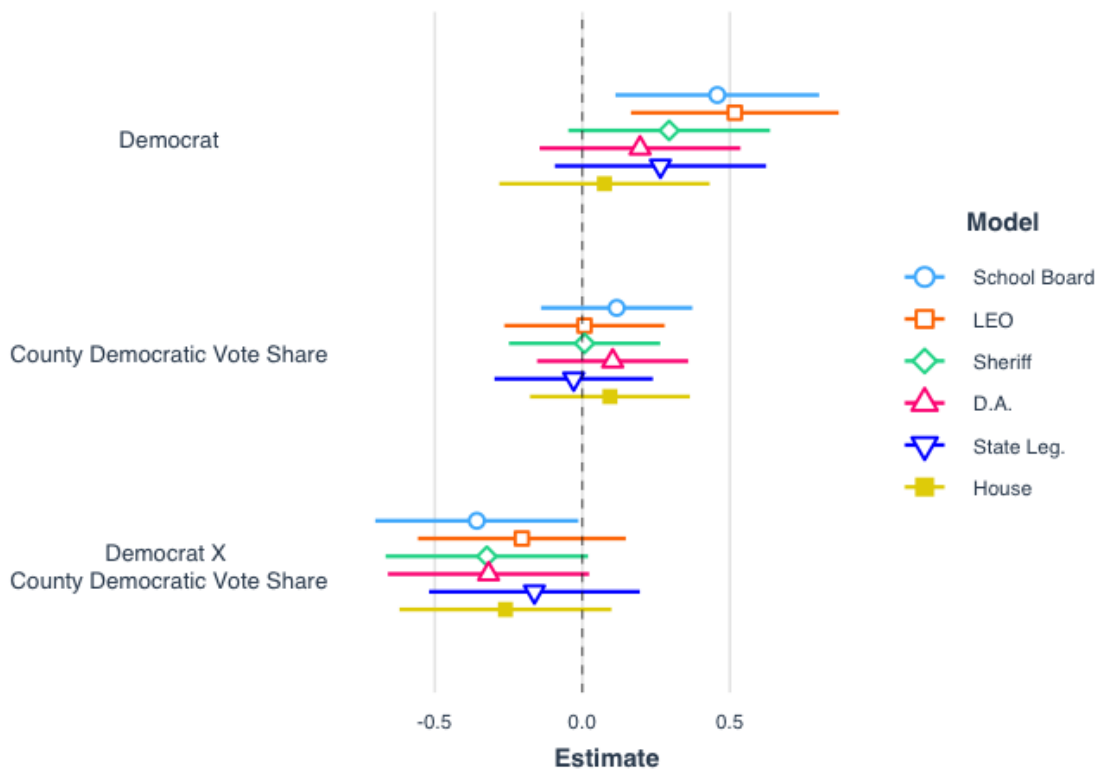
An important caveat in this research design is that respondents were not asked to

select between only "partisan" and "nonpartisan" elections—they were also given the

options of "appointed", "I'm not sure", and "I don't think it matters." Therefore, the

probability of respondents choosing "partisan" is not necessarily the inverse of the probability of choosing "nonpartisan." In other words, just because Democrats are more likely than Republicans to choose "nonpartisan" when living in Republican-majority counties does not mean that Republicans are more likely to choose "partisan" as their method of choice in those same counties—they could just as easily have preferred "appointed" systems or stated that they were unsure or did not think it matters.

Figure 2 displays evidence that in Republican-majority counties, Democrats are *less likely* than Republicans to prefer a partisan election for school board, local election official, sheriff, and district attorney[x]. Similar to the pattern displayed in Figure 1, increased Democratic county vote share significantly affects preferences among Democrats—increasing the probability that Democrats prefer partisan elections for school board and local election officials. Also consistent with the results from Figure 1 is the non-effect of Democratic vote share on Republican preferences for most offices.

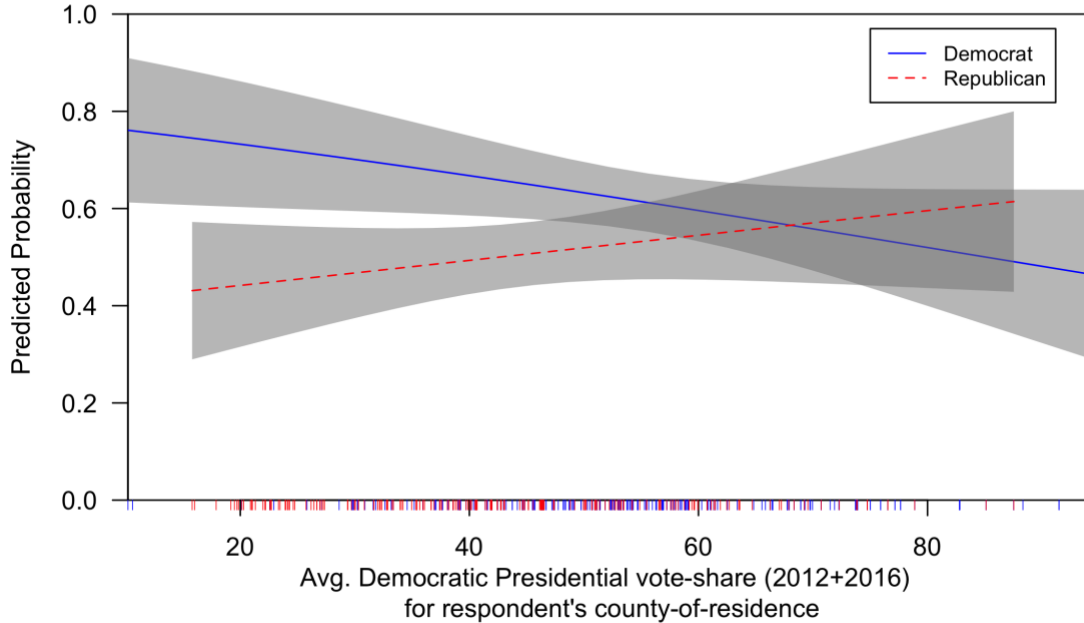Figure 2. Partisan gap in preference for *partisan* elections

To better illustrate the conditional effect of county partisanship I plot the

predicted probability of Democrats and Republicans expressing preference for

nonpartisan school board elections against county partisanship in Figure 3. Party ID

explains a significant difference in preference for nonpartisan school board elections in

majority-Republican counties but ceases to be predictive when the county becomes

majority-Democrat. While this effect does not reach statistical significance for each local

office examined, the pattern remains consistent—In Democrat-majority counties,

Democrat and Republican respondents do not significantly differ in the probability that

they choose 'nonpartisan elections' as their preferred selection method for any office, and

the same is true when the outcome variable is choosing 'partisan elections' as the preferred method.

Conversely, in Republican-majority counties, Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans to choose nonpartisan elections as their preferred selection method for *each* local office. In addition, they are less likely than Republicans to choose partisan elections for both school board and local election officials. These differences retain their substantive and statistical significance after controlling for political interest, political activity, and perceived out-party extremity.[xi]

Figure 3. Effect of county partisanship on preference for nonpartisan school board elections

The results displayed in Figures 1, 2, and 3 suggest some support for $H_{STRATEGIC\_MAJ}$ and $H_{STRATEGIC\_MIN}$, although these affects are not symmetrical. The partisan gap in

preference for *local* offices is clearly present in Republican-majority counties, but that same preference gap does not manifest in Democrat-majority counties.

Discussion

Table 3 displayed evidence that voters differentiate between local offices with respect to preferences for partisan or nonpartisan elections. While nonpartisan elections garnered a plurality of the responses for each local office, voters were not uniform in their preference. School board was the only office for which a majority (53 percent) expressed a preference for nonpartisan election while only 40 percent said the same about their local election official.

Evidence that voters think about local elections differently from state or federal races can be seen by comparing their support for nonpartisan local election to those for the U.S. House of Representatives – a partisan contest no matter what state or county a respondent lives. As a reminder, a plurality of respondents preferred partisan elections for U.S. House (45 percent), while only 38 percent supported nonpartisan elections. That the public express differential support for election-type conditional on whether they are asked about local or federal elections may not be surprising, but this is the first nationally-representative sample to provide such a finding.[xii]

A supplementary piece of evidence that suggests voters have different election preferences at the local level would be the extent to which the partisan dynamic exhibited in the politically-strategic hypothesis holds at the federal level. Democrat and Republican respondents living in Republican-majority counties significantly differed in their support for partisan and nonpartisan *local* elections—a difference that the data from Democrat-

majority and swing counties fail to show. I next test whether that pattern holds when the outcome of interest shifts to elections for the U.S. House of Representatives.

I examined respondent answers to the question about the U.S. House in two ways. First, I replicated the analysis from the local election models (Table 7, models 1 and 2). The benefit to this method is that all respondents are matched to a county. The cost is that congressional districts and counties do not neatly overlap. For example, a respondent might live in a very Democratic congressional district that is subset of a very Republican county, making it difficult to draw inferences. To account for this, I performed a second analysis (Table 7, models 3 and 4) where I match respondents' congressional district of residence in the 115th Congress to the political party-affiliation of their member of Congress. In a sense, the party ID of the respondent's representative is a proxy for the county-majority designations created for the county-level analysis.

Table 7 displays the results of the U.S. House analysis. I find no partisan difference in support for electoral systems, regardless of whether respondents live a county or congressional district with a majority of their co-partisans. In other words, while respondents in Republican-majority counties appear to have partisan-driven preferences for *local* election type, there is no support for the same conclusion regarding U.S. House races given the data presented here.

Table 7. Logit regression model: Effects on probability of expressing preference for U.S. House elections (log-odds)

	Nonpartisan Model 1	Partisan Model 2	Nonpartisan Model 3	Partisan Model 4
Democrat	0.70	-0.25	0.11	0.08
	(0.63)	(0.62)	(0.36)	(0.35)
Avg. Dem Vote Share	0.03	0.02		
	(0.14)	(0.14)		
Democrat X Avg. Dem Vote Share	-0.19	-0.07		
	(0.36)	(0.35)		
Democrat Rep			-0.20	-0.07
			(0.40)	(0.38)
Democrat X Democrat Rep.			0.62	-0.46
			(0.53)	(0.52)
Political Interest	0.14	0.27**	0.16	0.40*
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.15)	(0.16)
Political Activity	-0.11	0.18	-0.11	0.15
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.15)	(0.14)
Out-party extremity	0.28	0.43*	0.31	0.35
	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.30)	(0.29)
N	538	538	265	265
AIC	707.11	725.81	355.11	358.25
BIC	737.12	755.82	380.17	383.31
Pseudo R2	0.02	0.08	0.03	0.11

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Conclusion

Local elections are being increasingly nationalized, with respect to both issue-orientation and fundraising (Warshaw, 2019; Reckhow et al., 2017). At the same time the

vast majority of local officials are elected *unlike* those who run for state and federal office. Some state legislatures are actively pursuing proposals to change that, citing the public's desire to know the party affiliation of candidates for their local offices. Opponents largely cling to the progressive-era reformers' argument that local government is inherently nonpartisan and should remain so. It has been relatively costless for both sides to claim the public's support as, until now, there has been little to no systematically-gathered evidence that reveal public attitudes about selection processes for local government. Using new data from the 2018 CCES I show that the public generally prefer nonpartisan elections for local office, but this preference is by no means overwhelming. Of the four local offices queried, nonpartisan elections earned majority support for only school boards. Further, I show that in Republican-majority counties there is significant difference between Democrats and Republicans in their preference for partisan and nonpartisan local elections. The same cannot be said for Democratic-majority or swing counties. This relationship makes sense given prior work demonstrating that nonpartisan elections benefit minority-party candidates. Whether voters in these Republican-majority counties are consciously aware of the strategic nature of their choices goes beyond the data gathered for this paper but is deserving of further study.

If partisan labels are viewed as important and valuable cues to make the "correct" voting decision, then there is little reason to expect that value to change based on what office is being elected. At the same time, the analysis in this paper provides evidence that voters differentiate their election-method preferences both between federal and local offices, and within local offices as well. Asking respondents whether they think elections should be nonpartisan may prime a different framework altogether separate from voter

information. These data do not allow for an inference as to why voters prefer partisan or nonpartisan elections, nor can it be assumed what comes to their mind when asked about nonpartisan elections. For example, perhaps when voters are asked whether elections for school board should be partisan or nonpartisan, their focus shifts to the *job* of being a school board member, and a belief that the job *should be* nonpartisan inherently means that the selection methods should also be that way. In other words, there remains an unanswered question deserving of further inquiry – to what extent do voters view the functions and duties of different local offices as inherently partisan? When voters express a preference for nonpartisan local elections, are they actually expressing a preference for nonpartisan elections or for a nonpartisan approach to local governance?

These open questions should be investigated with caution. The asymmetric nature of the results presented in this paper—that a significant difference in election-type preferences between Democrats and Republicans exist in Republican-majority counties only—lead to additional questions about the extent to which the public believes the job of specific local offices, are inherently partisan, and whether those beliefs are similarly polarized.

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Notes

[i] NC Session Law 2013-361, HB 182 (2019), and SB 132 (2019) were acts of the state legislature specific to Guilford County only.

[ii] I refer to these places as "localities". In some cases the legislation specifically applies to county governments, but legislation also could apply to townships, villages, or other "municipalities" broadly construed.

[iii] The data described in this paper represents a search of records between January 1, 2011 and March 15, 2019.

[iv] Examples of bills that resulted from the search but were unrelated are bills related to establishing top-two primaries for statewide offices and rules concerning filing deadlines.

[v] Hypotheses were pre-registered with Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) on March 5, 2019. It has since merged with Open Science Framework and is listed as "Public Perceptions of Local Partisan Elections."

[vi] Regardless of whether respondents could correctly identify the selection method of each of these offices, the expectation is that preferences are a product of the selection method respondents are familiar with. Four states and parts of two others use partisan elections for local school board. The remaining 44 use non-partisan elections (Crawford 2018). Four states use nonpartisan elections for sheriff, one state uses both nonpartisan and partisan, one state uses gubernatorial appointment, and two states have no sheriff. The 42 remaining states use partisan elections (National Sheriff's Association). Four states use nonpartisan elections for district attorney/chief prosecutor, four states use appointment by a statewide official. The 42 remaining states use partisan elections (Hessick 2020).

[vii] Each model was estimated using logistic regression with the glm function in R. OLS estimates produce similar results.

[viii] Political interest is measured on a 4-point scale. Respondents were asked how often they "follow what's going on in government and public affairs (1=hardly at all, 4=most of the time). I created a 7-point index of political activity that counts the number of activities a respondent stated they did in the past year (attending a local political meeting, put up a political sign, worked for a candidate, attended a protest/march/demonstration, contacted a public official, donated money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization).

[ix] The full table of the results of these logistic regression models are available in the appendix (Tables A1 and A2).

[x] An equally valid way to read this result is that Republicans living in majority-Republican counties are *more* likely to prefer partisan elections than Democrats living in those same counties.

[xi] Full results available in the online appendix (Tables A1 and A2).

[xii] To the authors' knowledge.

Appendix

Table A1. Logit regression models: Effects on probability of expressing preference for partisan elections

	School Board	L.E.O.	Sheriff	D.A.
Democrat	-1.80 *	-1.57 *	-1.12	-0.91
	(0.71)	(0.65)	(0.67)	(0.68)
Avg. Dem Vote Share	-0.24	-0.22	-0.33 *	-0.14
	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Democrat X Avg. Dem Vote Share	0.69	0.50	0.37	0.21
	(0.40)	(0.37)	(0.39)	(0.39)
Political Interest	0.04	-0.17	0.04	0.02
	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Political Activity	0.03	0.24 *	-0.01	0.04
	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Out-party extremity	-0.03	-0.11	-0.10	0.07
	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.23)
N	535	541	539	542
AIC	600.02	666.19	623.20	622.41
BIC	630.00	696.24	653.23	652.47
Pseudo R2	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.03

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05. Table reports coefficients expressed as log-odds. How to read this table: All else equal, a Democrat is significantly less likely to prefer partisan elections for school board and local elections officials compared to a Republican. A one standard deviation increase in the average county Democratic vote share has no significant effect on the likelihood a Democrat or Republican prefers partisan elections (exception: increased Democratic vote share decreases the likelihood Republicans prefer partisan Sheriff elections).

Table A2. Logit regression model: Effects on probability of expressing preference for nonpartisan elections (log-odds)

	School Board	L.E.O.	Sheriff	D.A.
Democrat	1.91**	1.37*	1.62**	1.56*
	(0.63)	(0.62)	(0.62)	(0.62)
Avg. Dem Vote Share	0.19	0.03	0.11	0.20
	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.14)
Democrat X Avg. Dem Vote Share	-0.84*	-0.41	-0.73*	-0.72*
	(0.36)	(0.35)	(0.35)	(0.35)
Political Interest	0.34**	0.28**	0.37***	0.33**
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Political Activity	0.21	-0.08	-0.01	-0.04
	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Out-party extremity	0.32	0.19	0.43*	0.59**
	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.20)
N	535	541	539	542
AIC	701.95	725.21	725.25	729.66
BIC	731.93	755.26	755.28	759.73
Pseudo R2	0.11	0.06	0.09	0.08

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Table reports coefficients expressed as log-odds. How to read this table: All else equal, a Democrat is significantly more likely than a Republican to prefer nonpartisan elections for all elections except for U.S. House. A one standard deviation increase in the average county Democratic vote share has a statistically-significant negative effect on the likelihood a Democrat prefers nonpartisan elections for school board, sheriff's, and district attorneys. At the same time, average Democratic vote share has no significant effect on the likelihood Republicans prefer nonpartisan elections for any office.