

# Candidate Choice without Party Labels: New Insights from U.S. Mayoral Elections 1945-2007 and Conjoint Survey Experiments

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## Abstract

In the absence of party labels, voters must use other information to infer candidates' ideology and competence. The institution of nonpartisan elections, therefore, may impact voter choice by increasing the weight that voters place on other dimensions of candidate quality. We hypothesize that in nonpartisan elections, voters will exhibit a stronger preference for more competent candidates, as measured by both their career and political experience. The existing evidence in favor of this hypothesis mainly comes from a handful of observational studies; to date, few if any experimental studies have rigorously evaluated this claim. We conducted conjoint survey experiments on both nationally representative and convenience samples. The results of these experiments indicate that when subjects cannot rely on party labels to infer ideological positions, they give greater weight to candidate competence. We find that this process unfolds differently for respondents of different partisan affiliations: Republicans give greater weight to job experience while Democrats give greater weight to political experience. We explore the generalizability of results obtained with online convenience samples by showing a strong correlation with results obtained on a nationally representative sample.

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*“But when we get right straight down to... all the various ramifications of the public service for our own individual lives, what difference does it make whether the men who do the work are Republicans or Democrats; whether they are high tariff or low tariff? We want the men who will do the work well and honestly.”*

— Major Henry T. Lee advocating the adoption of nonpartisan municipal elections to a meeting of Good Government organizations, Los Angeles, California, 1909

## 1 Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, Progressives advanced a set of reforms designed to erode the strength of parties and political machines in local politics (see e.g., Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Along with the institutions of city manager and at-large elections, nonpartisan electoral rules were a crucial component of the Progressives’ strategy. Reformers argued that the *raison d’être* of municipal government is the provision of essential services, which requires technical expertise rather than partisan fealty. Advocates of the reform movement espoused the benefits of business-like efficiency and a universalist approach to governance in contrast to the waste, corruption, and particularistic benefits associated with machine politics (Welch and Bledsoe, 1988; Bridges, 1997). The movement was largely successful: the vast majority of municipalities still feature reform institutions (Moulder, 2008).

Nonpartisan elections are among the most prevalent and durable of the Progressive-era municipal reforms. When ballots no longer indicate the political party of the candidates for office, the ability of machines to coerce voters (or reward them for loyalty) is reduced. A key question is, does this electoral institution lead to systematic changes in the sorts of candidates that run, gain support, and are eventually elected?

All else equal, nonpartisan elections should increase the quality of elected officials. A direct consequence of nonpartisan ballots is that voters are more uncertain about candidates’ ideological and policy positions. The theoretical mechanism is clear: partisan ballots provide voters a powerful, low-cost information shortcut (Popkin, 1991; Rahn, 1993). Knowing nothing more than party labels, voters can infer candidates’ ideology and issue positions with some degree of certainty. Second, many argue that in the absence of party labels, voters rely on alternative heuristics, such as race

or ethnicity (Pomper, 1966; Bullock, 1984; Bullock and Campbell, 1984; Squire and Smith, 1988) to infer candidates’ partisanship or ideology.

A second consequence of nonpartisan ballots is that voters may give greater weight to other characteristics beyond partisanship and ideology – in particular, indicators of competence or quality (Schaffner et al., 2001; Lim and Snyder, 2015). Perhaps the most salient signal of competence is a candidate’s political experience. Incumbents and prior office holders have electoral advantages in partisan legislative elections at both the national and state levels (Jacobson and Kernell, 1983; Jewell and Breaux, 1988; Jacobson, 1997; Lee, 2008). Several studies find that incumbency also benefits mayors (Ferreira and Gyourko, 2009, 2014) and city council members (Trounstein, 2011). In sum, a candidate’s prior political experience may serve as a relatively low-cost shortcut for competence.

The studies mentioned above all draw a theoretical distinction between partisan and nonpartisan elections and focus on how voters’ choices vary with these important contextual features. However, identifying the causal effect of nonpartisan ballots on vote choice is difficult for two main reasons. The first is common to studies in which the researcher does not manipulate the causal variable of interest directly. We cannot be sure whether the observed differences in election outcomes for partisan and nonpartisan elections are due to the causal effect of the electoral institution itself or some other feature of the electoral context. For example, it may be that localities that opted to institute nonpartisan elections place a higher value on leaders’ competence than those with partisan elections. If so, then the differences in outcomes would be due to the tastes and preferences of the local electorate, not the electoral rules. Statistical fixes for this problem such as multiple regression or matching only help if we are willing to assume that after conditioning on a set of observable characteristics of elections, the electoral institution is “as-if” randomly assigned. The plausibility of such an assumption varies from context to context.

The second challenge in analyzing the role of party labels arises from variation in the character of nominally nonpartisan contests. Nonpartisan rules do not necessarily ensure elections are nonpartisan in practice (Adrian, 1959). Candidates’ party affiliations may be widely known to voters or revealed during the campaign. Even in nominally nonpartisan elections, partisanship

remains a systematic predictor of voters’ preferences when information about candidates’ party or ideology is readily available (Squire and Smith, 1988; Schaffner et al., 2001). It is not clear how to measure and account for these complexities. For example, results suggesting that in nonpartisan elections, competent candidates are more likely to be elected might actually reflect the subtle dynamics of candidates’ decisions to compete in elections where candidates’ partisanship is not advertised but nevertheless common knowledge. In such a scenario, liberal candidates in conservative districts might be systematically less competent because the competent would-be liberal candidates, knowing they have a poor chance of victory, pursue careers outside of politics or run in other constituencies.

We take a two-pronged approach to addressing these issues. First, we will investigate the differences in electoral outcomes by election type (partisan and nonpartisan) at the mayoral level. Because some cities hold partisan elections while others use nonpartisan balloting, understanding how voters choose candidates with and without party labels is particularly relevant to mayoral politics. Elections held at higher levels of government within the US are typically partisan, but mayoral elections are the highest-profile elections that contain substantial variation on this key contextual variable. Using a novel dataset of mayoral candidate backgrounds we describe variation in candidate attributes in partisan and nonpartisan elections. Our analysis reveals that the vast majority of mayoral candidates have prior political experience, and candidates who have previously been mayor win considerably more often than inexperienced candidates.

Second, we investigate voters’ preferences with and without party cues using a pair of conjoint survey experiments, enabling us to estimate the causal effects of many candidate attributes in a multidimensional setting. We conducted our experiment on a convenience sample (using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk) and on a nationally representative sample (administered by YouGov).<sup>1</sup> Executing the same design on different platforms allows us to avoid over-extrapolating from a single experiment and to explore the external validity of convenience samples for survey experimental work (Mullinix et al., 2015; Coppock, 2016). Our work is closely related to that of Hainmueller et al. (2015a), who validate a conjoint experiment exploring Swiss attitudes toward immigration with a behavioral

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<sup>1</sup>YouGov uses sample matching techniques to construct a nationally representative sample from their panel of respondents. For more information about YouGov’s sampling procedures, see Vavreck and Rivers (2008).

benchmark.

Overall, we find that candidates’ political experience and occupation have a stronger influence on voters’ preferences than candidates’ demographic characteristics, especially in the absence of a party cue. Perhaps surprisingly, race, gender, and age did not appear to play a major role in survey respondents’ preferences over candidates. Indeed, our experimental results indicate that only candidate partisanship exerts a greater influence on vote choice than political experience.

This article will proceed as follows. First, we will lay out an explicit theory of how electoral institutions interact with information shortcuts to influence election outcomes. We will then present a descriptive analysis of mayoral candidates by context, documenting the observed variation in candidate attributes and electoral success in 1010 mayoral races held between 1945 and 2007. We then present two randomized survey experiments, conducted on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and YouGov. We conclude with a discussion of how the insights from the observational and experimental studies can be combined to provide a fuller description of the influence of this important electoral institution.

## 2 Voting and Information Shortcuts

Since the early voting studies of the Columbia and Michigan schools, political scientists have consistently documented uneven and generally low levels of political knowledge and interest among voters (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Although most voters tend to know very little about political candidates and their policy positions, information shortcuts or heuristics can guide political decision-making (e.g., Downs, 1957; Popkin, 1991). Indeed, some evidence suggests that heuristics can enable low-information voters to make nearly the same choices they would make if they were fully informed (Althaus, 2003; Lupia, 1994). Voters may rely on any number of shortcuts, including retrospective evaluations, endorsements, or candidates’ personal characteristics, but party identification tends to be the most potent heuristic (Rahn, 1993). Party identification is a “shortcut or default value, a substitute for more complete information about parties and candidates” (Popkin, 1991, p. 14). A party label generally provides a reliable proxy for candidates’ ideology and issue positions. For voters, party identification also

appears to be a stable and enduring attachment, akin to other social identities such as ethnicity, religion, or class (Campbell et al., 1960; Green et al., 2002).

Voters may evaluate candidates using a likability heuristic that relies on their affect toward politically salient groups (Brady and Sniderman, 1985). If voters use this information shortcut, their perceptions of candidates' ideological positions would reflect their own beliefs weighted by their feelings toward opposing groups. For example, Brady and Sniderman (1985) find that on average, conservative survey respondents dislike liberals more intensely than liberals dislike conservatives, and they argue conservative respondents consequently overestimate the ideological distance between the two groups. Another possibility is that voters rely on a representativeness or goodness-of-fit heuristic by making inferences about candidates based on how well they represent a given group or type (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974; Popkin, 1991). Carnes and Sadin (2015), for instance, argue that a representativeness heuristic leads subjects to mistakenly infer that candidates from working class families are more liberal on economic policy than candidates from affluent backgrounds.

Among studies of nonpartisan elections, a common finding is that voters rely on party cues when they can and look to other information shortcuts, such as race or incumbency, when necessary. Prior research suggests that characteristics such as race (Brady and Sniderman, 1985; McDermott, 1998), gender (e.g., Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; McDermott, 1998), and class (Sadin, 2014) also influence perceptions of candidates. Women and African-American candidates are seen as more liberal and more Democratic than white men (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; McDermott, 1998). Using occupation as a proxy for social class in a survey experiment, Sadin (2014) finds that respondents rate upper class candidates as more competent relative to either working class candidates or candidates whose social class is unknown.

### **3 Information Shortcuts in Nonpartisan Elections**

Our expectation is that in nonpartisan elections voters will rely less on the partisan information shortcut and more on other heuristics. The empirical record to date generally supports the expectation that partisanship and vote choice should be more strongly associated in partisan elections. For example, Pomper (1966) analyzes ward-level election results in Newark, New Jersey and finds vote

shares for candidates of the same party are highly correlated in partisan state legislative elections but not in nonpartisan municipal elections. In a recent study, Lim and Snyder (2015) find strong correlations (0.88 to 0.99) between the Democratic vote share for state judges and the Democratic “normal vote” in partisan elections. A different pattern emerges in nonpartisan elections, where judges’ vote shares are less strongly correlated with their co-partisans’. Schaffner et al. (2001) also find a systematic relationship between partisanship and Democratic vote share in partisan contests, but partisanship is not a statistically significant predictor of the vote in most of the nonpartisan elections they analyze.

Even when nonpartisan rules make candidates’ party affiliations difficult or costly to uncover, some evidence suggests that voters may try to infer party from other information. In a study of nonpartisan judicial retention elections in California, Squire and Smith (1988) leverage a pre-election survey that provided a random subset of respondents with the name of the governor who appointed each judge. Treatment group respondents were more likely to support retaining judges appointed by copartisan governors. Recent experimental evidence also indicates that voters may infer candidates’ party affiliations from issue positions. Bonneau and Cann (2015) provide descriptions of hypothetical candidates for state supreme court, with a random subset of subjects receiving party cues. Descriptions of the Republican candidate, for example, highlight support for the death penalty and a commitment to traditional family values while Democrats are described as advocates of same-sex marriage who believe the courts should take an active role in promoting equality. The experimental results show a strong link between partisanship and vote choice even in the absence of an explicit party cue.

The backdrop of low-information rationality leads us to an informal model of candidate choice. Imagine that voters care about two summary characteristics of candidates in particular, their ideological positions and their competence. *Ceteris paribus*, voters prefer candidates who are closer to them in ideological space. Again all else equal, voters prefer candidates who are more competent to those who are less competent. The difficulty for the voter is inferring candidate ideology and competence from the information gleaned over the course of a campaign. That is, voters do not know these candidate characteristics with certainty.

The degree of uncertainty about candidates' ideology and competence influences the relative weight that voters give to each dimension. The greater the uncertainty a voter faces about the ideological positions of candidates in the race, the greater the weight a voter will give to the competence dimension. The converse is true as well. The more uncertain a voter is about the relative competence of the candidates, the more weight will be given to ideology.

From this model we can derive a specific prediction about the causal effect that nonpartisan elections will exert on the dynamics of candidate choice. Relative to partisan elections, nonpartisan elections offer voters less information about candidate ideology. This is not to say that nonpartisan elections are devoid of ideological content, but because voters do not have access to the partisan shortcut, information about ideology is relatively more costly to acquire. We therefore predict that in nonpartisan elections, voters will be more likely to select the higher-competence candidate than in partisan elections. We note that while voters are predicted to select more competent candidates in nonpartisan elections, this may come at a utility loss. It may be that voters would happily forego a competent politician in favor of one who shares their views, but the nonpartisan rules make it more difficult to infer which politician is closer in ideological space.

A first glance at this prediction comes from the historical record of 1,010 US mayoral elections held between 1950 and 2007. Tables 1 and show the political and occupational experience of the winning candidate in each election, subset according to whether the election was nominally nonpartisan or partisan. Turning first to political experience, the statistically significant  $\chi^2$  statistic indicates that the political experience of winning candidates differs across partisan and nonpartisan elections. In partisan elections, 30% of winning candidates have no previous political experience whereas in nonpartisan elections, the share of inexperienced winning candidates drops by 9% points to 21%. That fewer inexperienced candidates win in nonpartisan elections fits with the predictions of our informal model of candidate choice.

The 9 percentage point difference might reflect the effect of nonpartisan ballots on who gets elected, but it could just as easily reflect other differences between cities that do and do not hold partisan elections. For example, larger cities are more likely to hold partisan contests, and in larger cities candidates, such as attorneys and business executives, with nonpolitical experience may be



more likely to run for election. Our own data bear this out. In partisan elections, 63% of candidates are attorneys or business executives while in nonpartisan elections the corresponding figure is 48%. Another potential confounder is that partisan organizations provide financial and institutional support, creating opportunities for politically inexperienced candidates. Observational analyses of the effects of election type are further complicated by elections that are nonpartisan in name only—that is, we cannot be sure which cities actually received the “treatment” of nonpartisan balloting.

Table 1: Political Experience of Winning Candidate in Partisan and Nonpartisan US Mayoral Elections.

|                                  | Nonpartisan |      | Partisan |      |
|----------------------------------|-------------|------|----------|------|
| No previous political experience | 163         | 21%  | 72       | 30%  |
| City legislator                  | 216         | 28%  | 39       | 16%  |
| County legislator                | 13          | 2%   | 3        | 1%   |
| State legislator                 | 37          | 5%   | 18       | 8%   |
| US legislator                    | 5           | 1%   | 4        | 2%   |
| Mayor                            | 338         | 44%  | 102      | 43%  |
|                                  | 772         | 100% | 238      | 100% |
| $\chi^2 = 21.2, p < 0.001$       |             |      |          |      |

## 4 Conjoint Candidate Choice Survey Experiments

In an effort to combat the challenges outlined above, we have adopted the conjoint survey design, ideal for studying multidimensional preferences (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Within political science, the conjoint design has been applied to the study of immigration preferences (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015; Hainmueller et al., 2015b), complex policy preferences (Bechtel et al., 2015), and (as in our case) candidate preference (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Franchino and Zucchini, 2015; Slough, 2015). The conjoint design will also allow us to evaluate the separate impacts of a large set of causal factors on subjects’ preferences over candidates.

In our studies, subjects judge five successive elections in which five (or six) attributes of two competing candidates are displayed: their race, gender, political experience, career experience, age, and in some cases, political party. The attributes of each candidate are fully randomized so that every possible candidate profile is equally likely. The possible levels of each attribute are displayed

in Table 2. Some levels were added to the Political Experience and Career Experience attributes in the YouGov version of the study.

Table 2: Attributes

| Race     | Political Experience       | Career Experience      | Gender  | Age | Party***     |
|----------|----------------------------|------------------------|---------|-----|--------------|
| White*   | None*                      | Educator*              | Female* | 35* | Independent* |
| Hispanic | School Board President**   | Stay-at-home Mom/Dad** | Male    | 45  | Democrat     |
| Black    | City Council Member        | Small Business Owner   |         | 55  | Republican   |
| Asian    | State Legislator           | Police Officer         |         | 65  |              |
|          | Representative in Congress | Electrician**          |         |     |              |
|          | Mayor                      | Business Executive     |         |     |              |
|          |                            | Attorney               |         |     |              |

\*: Reference category.

\*\* : Level only shown in YouGov experiment.

\*\*\*: Party only displayed in partisan elections.

A great deal of the methodological literature on conjoint analysis is concerned with the selection of attributes and levels. Attributes should be independent of one another and levels should describe a wide range of possibilities (Green and Srinivasan, 1978). A recurring question is how many attributes to include. The consensus seems to be that six or seven attributes is the limit. Above this limit, survey researchers caution that subjects may resort to cognitive shortcuts when evaluating profiles, causing two problems for inference. First, subjects may over-weight the first few attributes presented to them. Second, they may over-weight particularly salient attributes. We address the first problem by following the advice of Hainmueller et al. (2014, p. 7) to randomize the order of the attributes.

The second problem is, in our view, a feature, not a bug, of our design. Candidates' party is likely the most salient detail when subjects are choosing between profiles. By randomizing whether or not subjects are shown the party label, we can directly test whether the injection of partisanship into an election changes the impacts of the *other* attributes. Further, this design feature reflects the real-world variation in electoral institutions and is therefore our main experimental manipulation.

## Subjects

As noted above we conducted our experiment on a Mechanical Turk (MTurk) convenience sample and on a nationally representative sample constructed by YouGov. The demographic profile of the MTurk sample is quite different from that of the YouGov sample. On average, the MTurk sample is whiter, more male, more liberal, more Democratic, better educated, and younger.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these measured characteristics, the samples may differ on unobserved dimensions. Indeed, many social scientists are skeptical of MTurk samples because of these unmeasured dimensions (Goodman et al., 2013). Others (Berinsky et al., 2012; Mullinix et al., 2015; Coppock, 2016) are optimistic that experimental results on MTurk can generalize to other populations but stress the need for careful consideration of the individual-level moderators that might invalidate generalizing from one context to another. In our case, we believe that the most important moderator is respondents' partisanship. Fortunately, MTurk offers sufficient numbers of both Democrats and Republicans to obtain relatively precise estimates for each group.

We will limit our exploration of treatment effect heterogeneity to partisan differences only, for two reasons. First, because we randomized whether or not candidates' partisanship is displayed to subjects, it is appropriate to test whether the effects of candidates' partisanship are moderated by subjects' own party affiliation. Second, we are concerned about the multiple comparisons complications we would encounter with additional subgroup analyses.

### 4.1 Analysis

Our main dependent variable is candidate choice, which is asked "Which of these two candidates do you prefer?" A second dependent variable, candidate competence, is asked "On a scale from 0 to 100, how competent do you think these candidates would be as mayor?" We will use this dependent variable to explore a possible mechanism by which candidate attributes and electoral contexts affect vote choice.

We will analyze the effects of our experimental manipulations on these dependent variables using two models, shown in Equations 1 and 2. The coefficient vectors  $\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots$  and  $\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \dots$  are

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<sup>2</sup>See the online appendix for descriptive statistics by sample.

of length  $k - 1$ , where  $k$  refers to the total number of levels within an attribute. Individual-level idiosyncrasies in candidate preferences are captured by the error terms  $\epsilon$  and  $\eta$ . The required assumption that the errors are independent of each other and of candidate attributes is justified by the experimental design. We will estimate Equation 1 among the subset of elections that do not include party and Equation 2 among the elections that do include party.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Race + \beta_2 Age + \beta_3 Gender + \beta_4 Political\_Exp + \beta_5 Career\_Exp + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

$$Y = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Race + \alpha_2 Age + \alpha_3 Gender + \alpha_4 Political\_Exp + \alpha_5 Career\_Exp + \alpha_6 Party + \eta \quad (2)$$

Our experiment is motivated by the extent to which the party heuristic overwhelms the other factors contributing to candidate choice. Accordingly, we are especially interested in the differences between  $\beta_1, \beta_2, \dots$  and  $\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \dots$ . We will estimate Equations 1 and 2 by ordinary least squares (OLS) with standard errors clustered by respondent. Hainmueller et al. (2014, p. 15) show that this approach is asymptotically equivalent to their average marginal component effect (AMCE) estimator.<sup>3</sup> We will further condition the estimation on respondents' own party identification, focusing on effects among Democrats versus Republicans (including leaners).

We will test for the equality of the corresponding coefficients in Equations 1 and 2 by interacting the attributes with an indicator for election type in the full sample. We will test for the equality of coefficients between the Democrats and Republicans by interacting the treatment variables with an indicator for partisanship.

A short note on presentation: all together, these analyses will render a very large number of coefficient estimates. For this reason, we will present our results graphically using coefficient plots, in which attribute levels are placed on the vertical axis and point estimates with 95% confidence intervals are placed on the horizontal axis. We recognize that this presentation mode obscures some details while highlighting others – we have endeavored to maintain both clarity and transparency in our presentation choices.

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<sup>3</sup>Indeed, when we analyze our MTurk experiment using their estimator, both our point estimates and standard errors differ only in the third or fourth decimal place. The implementation of the AMCE estimator provided in the `cjoint` package for R (Strezhnev et al., 2015) cannot as of this writing accommodate survey weights.

## 5 Results

We will present four sets of results. First, we will examine the effects of candidate attributes, split by election type. Second, we will split our samples by respondent partisanship in order to examine the possibly heterogeneous effects of candidate attributes and election types. Third, we will examine a possible mechanism (perceptions of competence) by which election type affects the attributes that voters favor. Fourth, and finally, we will compare the results obtained from our two samples.

### 5.1 Effects of Partisan Elections on Candidate Choice

Figure 1 presents the results of the MTurk study. In the first column, the estimates of Equation 1 are shown. The strongest effects are observed for the political experience attribute. Relative to a candidate with no political experience, respondents prefer candidates who are City Council Members, State Legislators, Mayors, or Representatives in Congress by a margin of 25 to 30 percentage points. Candidates who previously held a mayoral office were rewarded most for their political experience. By contrast, we observe relatively muted effects for the job experience, race, age, and gender attributes, although our respondents do express a mild preference for candidates who are female and nonwhite. Our respondents' preferences for candidates varied non-monotonically with age: 45-year-olds are preferred to 35-year-olds *and* 55- and 65-year olds.

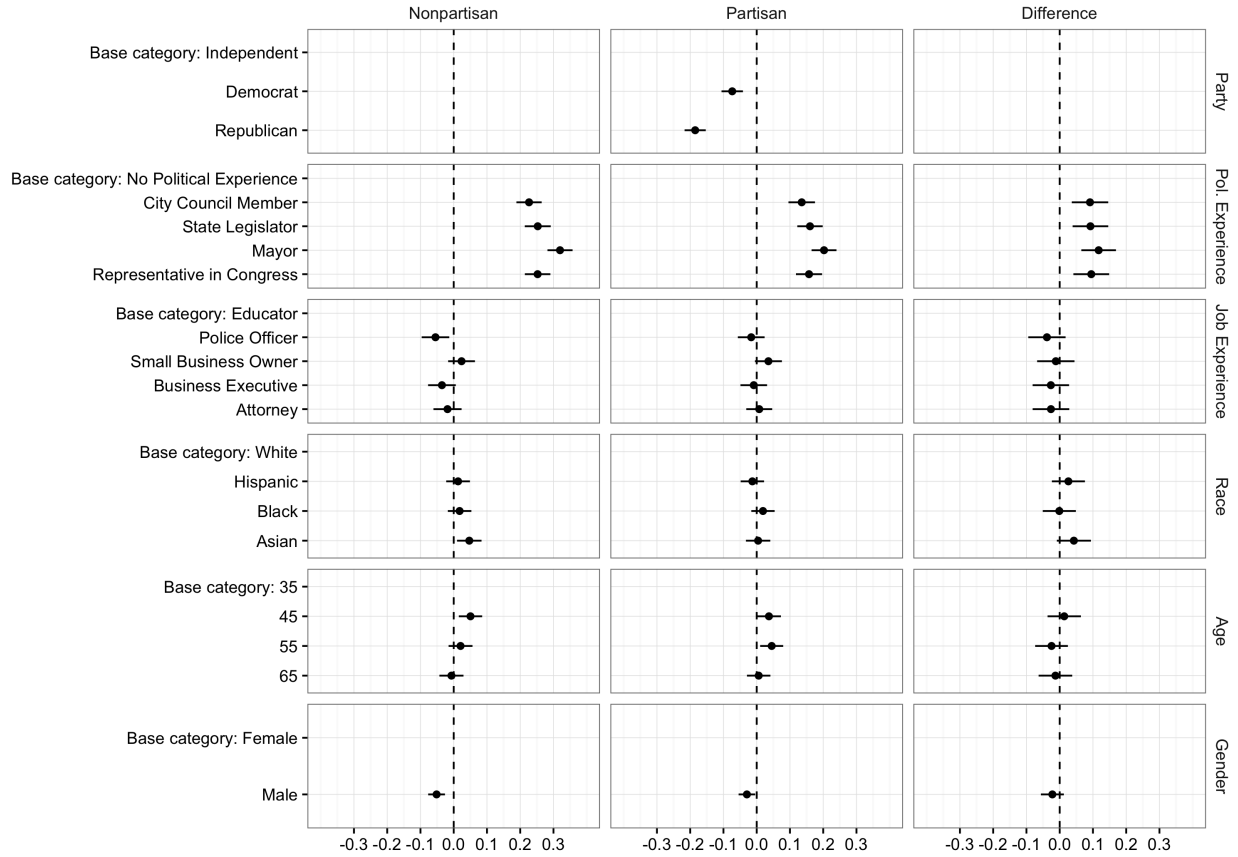
In partisan elections, we observe a similar pattern, though the effects for the political experience variables are more muted. On average, our sample prefers independents to partisan candidates of either stripe, though this average masks some heterogeneity by respondent party identification, as we will explore in the next section.

The final column of Figure 1 shows the difference between partisan and nonpartisan elections across the attributes they have in common. For job experience, race, age, and gender, the presence or absence of party labels makes no difference. However, we do observe statistically significantly different weight being given to the political experience variables, depending on election type. In nonpartisan elections, the effects of candidates' political experience are approximately 10 percentage points larger than in partisan elections.

Figure 2 presents the identical analyses using the YouGov data. Overall, we observe a very similar pattern of results. In nonpartisan elections, political experience is heavily rewarded. We added the “School Board President” level to test the alternative explanation that respondents prefer *any* experience to “No Political Experience.” Indeed, respondents do prefer school board presidents to political neophytes, but higher offices are nevertheless preferred to school board presidents as well. In the YouGov sample, we observe a similar interaction between election type and the effects of political experience. Political experience matters more in nonpartisan elections.

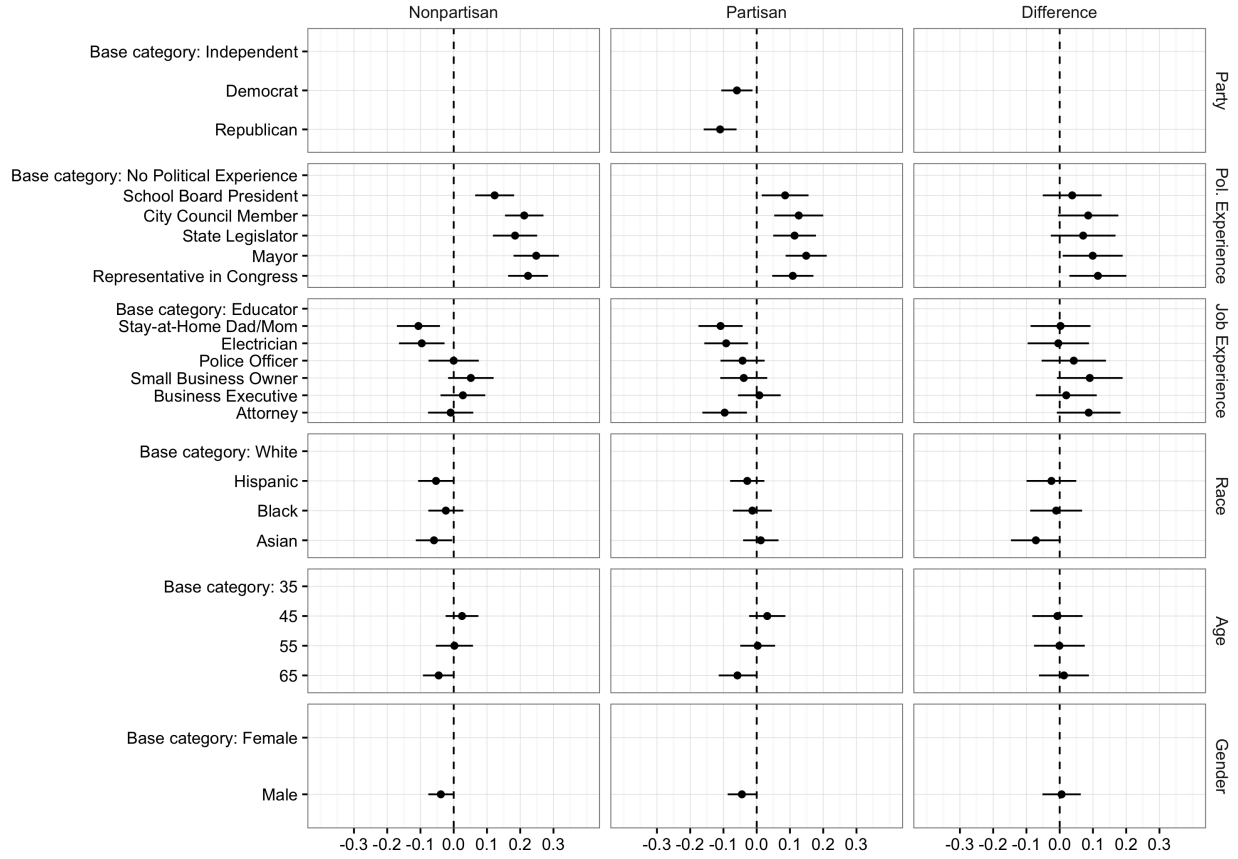
We added the “Stay-at-Home Dad/Mom” and “Electrician” levels to the job experience attribute.<sup>4</sup> Both of these careers were viewed negatively in both partisan and nonpartisan elections. We observe similarly small effects of gender and age in the YouGov sample as we did in the MTurk sample.

Figure 1: Mechanical Turk Main Analysis



<sup>4</sup>For female candidates, the level was “Stay-at-Home Mom” while it was “Stay-at-Home Dad” for male candidates.

Figure 2: YouGov Main Analysis



## 5.2 Heterogeneous Effects by Respondent Partisanship

In Figures 3 and 4, we reproduce the main analyses, splitting the samples based on respondents' own partisanship. As shown in the top center panel of each figure, Democrats dislike Republican candidates and Republicans dislike Democratic candidates. The differences in these preferences are large and statistically significant. Intriguingly, in both the MTurk and YouGov samples, partisans dislike the out-party (relative to an independent candidate) more than they like the in-party.

When we disaggregate by respondent partisan identification, we do see some small patterns with respect to candidate gender and race emerge. Republican respondents marginally prefer white candidates while Democrats marginally prefer nonwhite candidates. Republicans do not appear to have a gender preference, while Democrats are 10 percentage points more likely to choose a female

candidate than a male candidate. These race and gender patterns do not differ much by election type.

Turning next to political experience, Republicans and Democrats both reward more highly-experienced candidates in both partisan and nonpartisan elections. However, our main theoretical prediction – that political experience will matter more in nonpartisan elections than in partisan elections – is only borne out among Democratic respondents, not Republican respondents. This pattern is clearest in the MTurk sample, though it does obtain in the YouGov sample as well. It may be that, in the absence of party labels, Republicans and Democrats turn to *different* markers of competence. In the YouGov sample, Republican respondents give greater weight to occupational experience in nonpartisan elections, while Democratic respondents give greater weight to political experience. These findings resonate with those of Sadin (2014) who finds that candidates’ occupations influence perceptions of their ideology.

Figure 3: Mechanical Turk Heterogeneous Effects Analysis

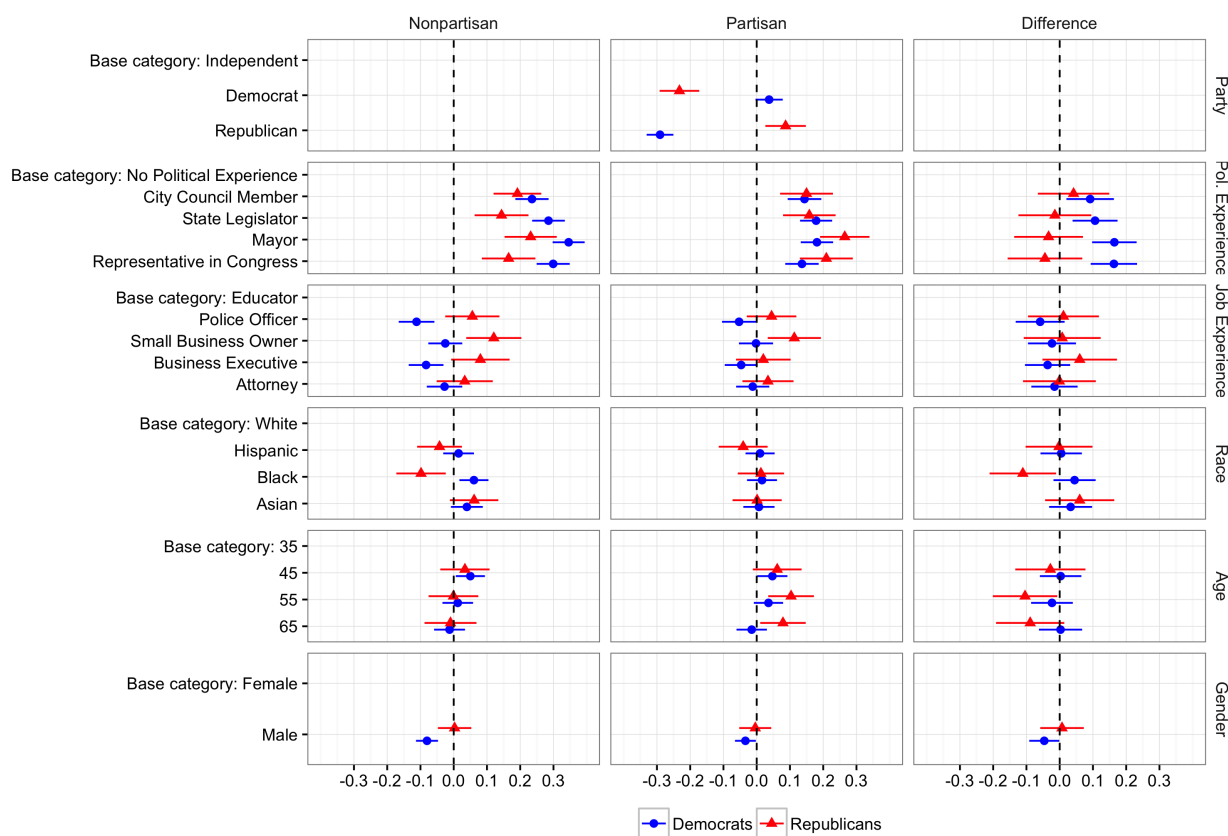
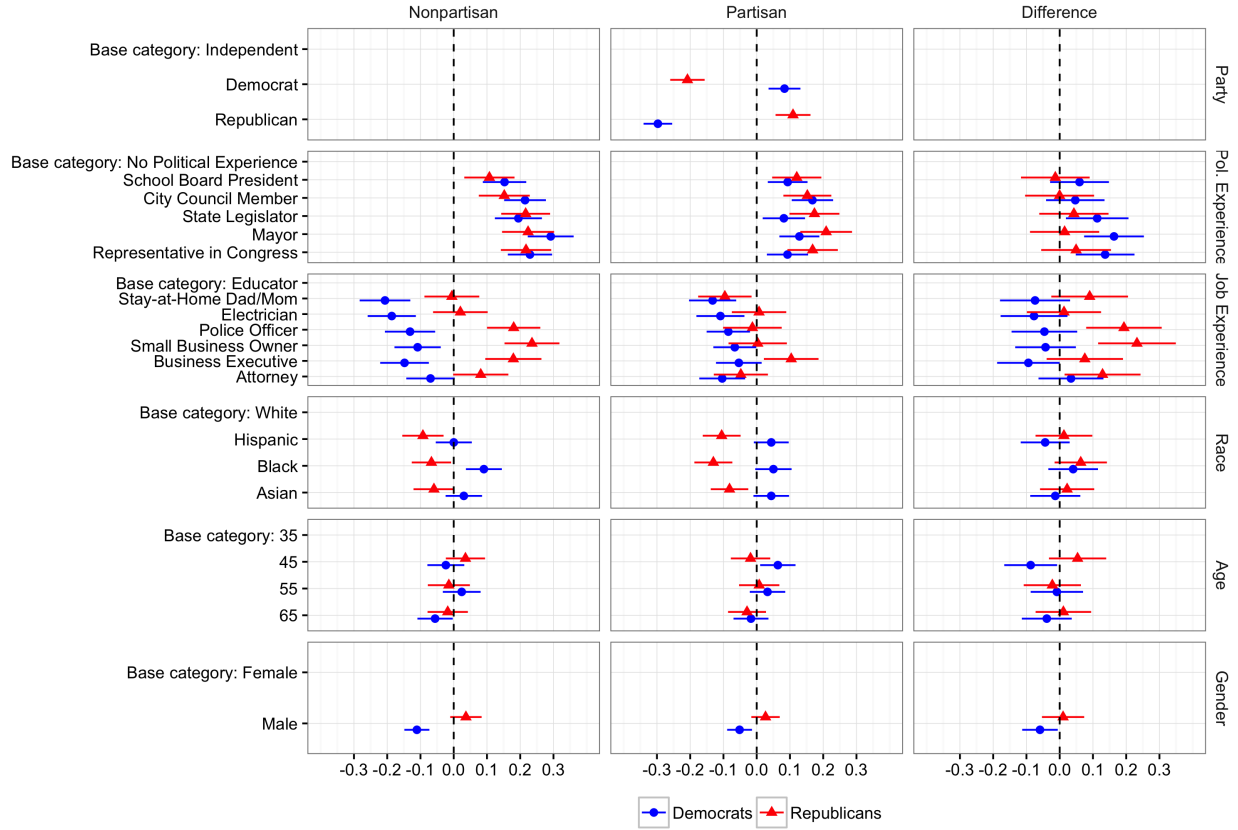




Figure 4: YouGov Heterogeneous Effects Analysis



### 5.3 Mechanism: Candidate Competence

In addition to asking respondents which candidate they would vote for, we also asked respondents to rate the competence of both candidates on a scale from 0 - 100. This measure will help us to substantiate a pillar of our main theoretical claim: in nonpartisan elections compared to partisan elections, voters will give relatively more weight to the competence dimension when evaluating candidates. While we cannot conduct a formal mediation analysis here because the required assumption of sequential ignorability (Imai et al., 2011) is difficult to justify in this context, this mechanism is rendered more plausible if we observe the same pattern of treatment effects on the competence dependent variable as we did for vote choice.

Figures 5 and 6 repeat the analyses presented in Figures 3 and 4 using the competence de-

pendent variable. Most importantly, both Republicans and Democrats rate candidates as more competent when they have more political experience. As shown in the difference column, Democratic respondents rate such candidates as even more competent in the absence of party labels. We observe small effects of race, gender, and age on competence ratings, although across both datasets, Republican respondents appear to rate white candidates as marginally more competent than non-white candidates, while the opposite pattern holds for Democratic respondents. We observe larger differences in competence ratings by occupation, with Republican respondents rating police officers, small business owners, and business executives more highly than educators, while Democrats hold the opposite views on such candidates. Neither party’s respondents rated stay-at-home parents as more competent than educators.

Taken together, these figures do lend support to the theory that in nonpartisan elections, voters give greater weight to the competence dimension. The same candidate types that respondents view as more competent are the ones that they tend to elect at higher rates in nonpartisan elections. We do, however, interpret these results with caution as there may be other (unmeasured) pathways beyond competence by which voters prefer some types more in nonpartisan elections. For example, it is plausible that party labels remind subjects of rancorous party politics, which in turn makes them marginally more likely to select outsider candidates. While we do not think this explanation is particularly likely, we cannot rule it (or other similar explanations) out as a possible mechanism by which nonpartisan elections affect candidate choice.

## 5.4 Generalizability

In this section, we explore the extent to which the experimental results obtained on MTurk generalize to the U.S. adult population. Whether or not a causal effect estimate from one study generalizes to another (real or hypothetical) study depends on the similarities in the subjects, treatments, contexts, and outcome measures of each study (Cronbach et al., 1982; Coppock and Green, 2015). In our case, the treatments (candidate attributes), contexts (online survey), and outcome measures (candidate preference) were held constant by design. The experimental feature that might undermine our ability to generalize from the MTurk study to other populations is the plain fact that the

Figure 5: Mechanical Turk Competence Analysis

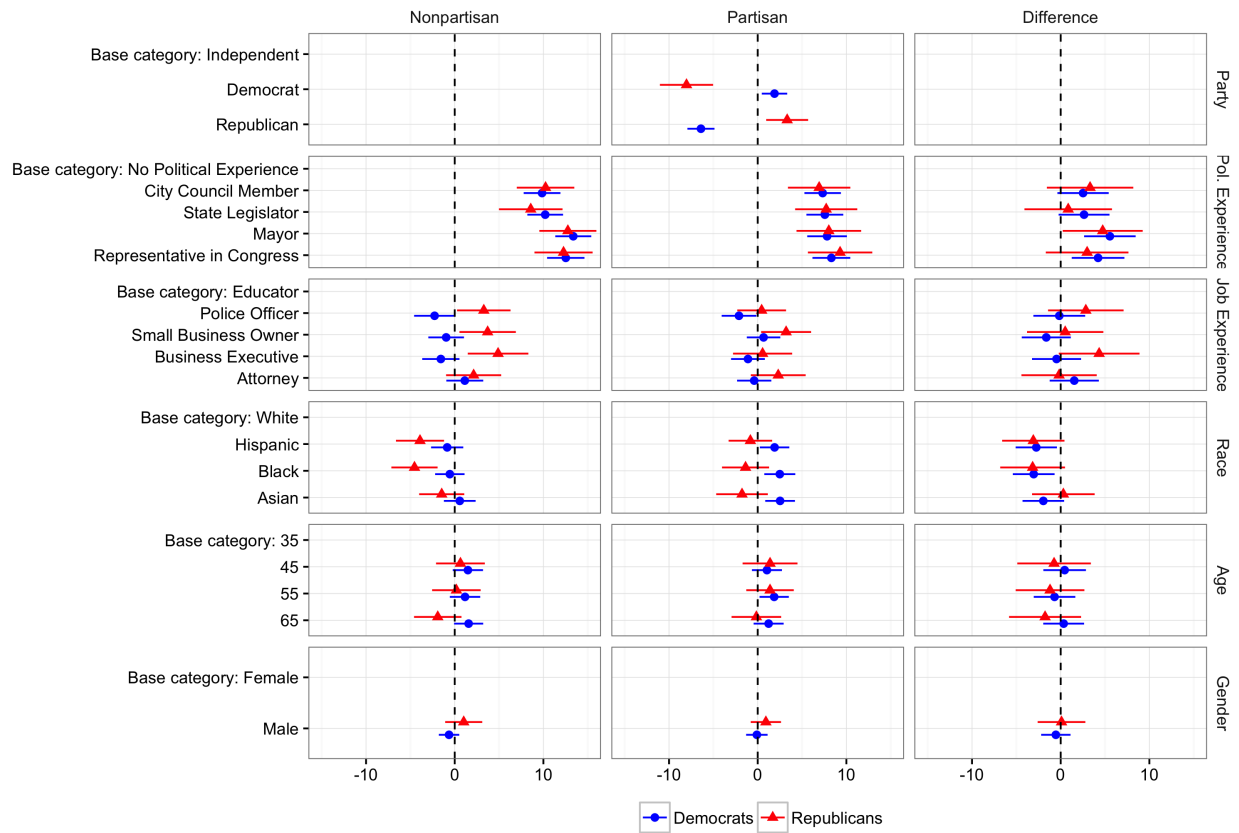
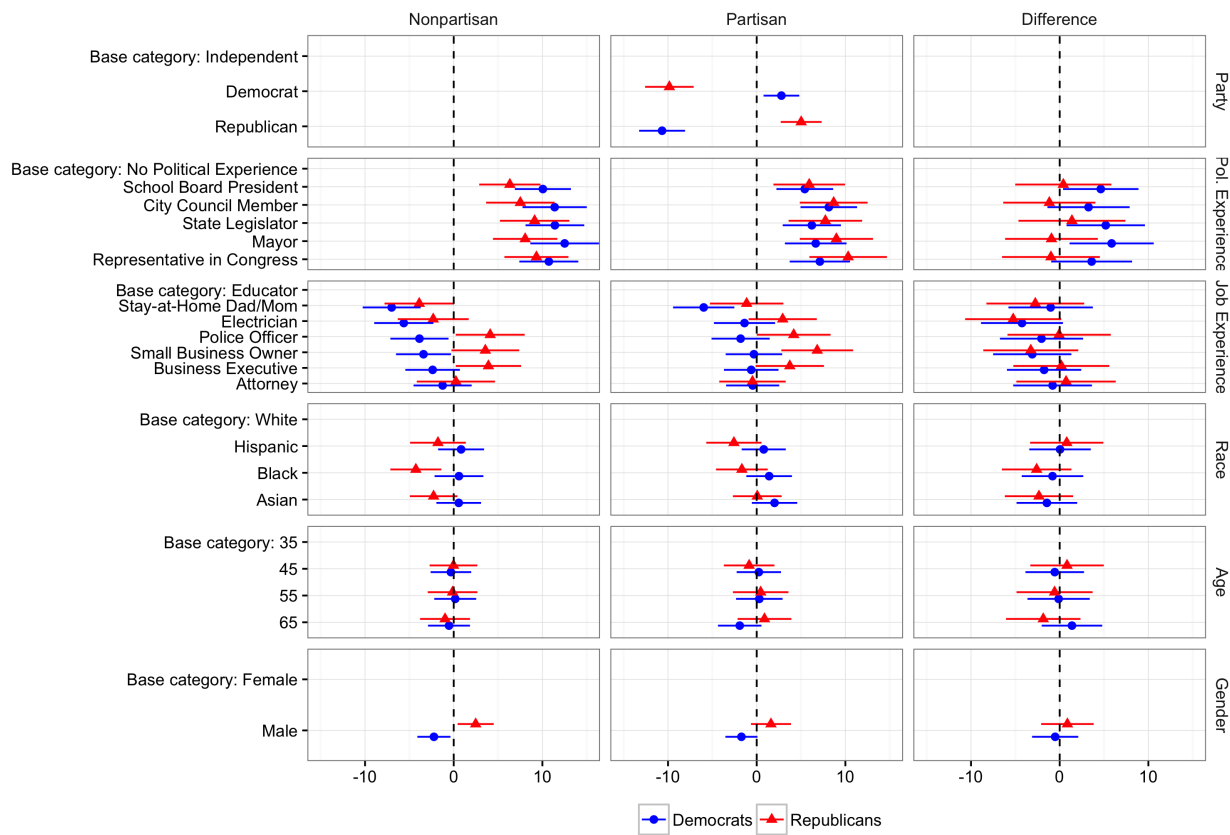


Figure 6: YouGov Competence Analysis



MTurk sample differs in many ways from the national population.

The crucial question, then, concerns treatment effect heterogeneity. Do subjects on MTurk weigh the experimentally-manipulated candidate attributes differently from others? Conducting the same study on each platform allows us to answer this question directly. We will compare the coefficients in Equations 1 and 2 across samples. Effectively, the data for this comparison are the coefficients presented in the first two columns of Figures 1 and 2. A first cut at assessing generalizability is the Pearson correlation between the coefficients estimated from each sample, which is estimated to be 0.95. This correlation is extraordinarily high, despite being attenuated by measurement error. The Spearman (rank-order) correlation is also quite high, at 0.80.

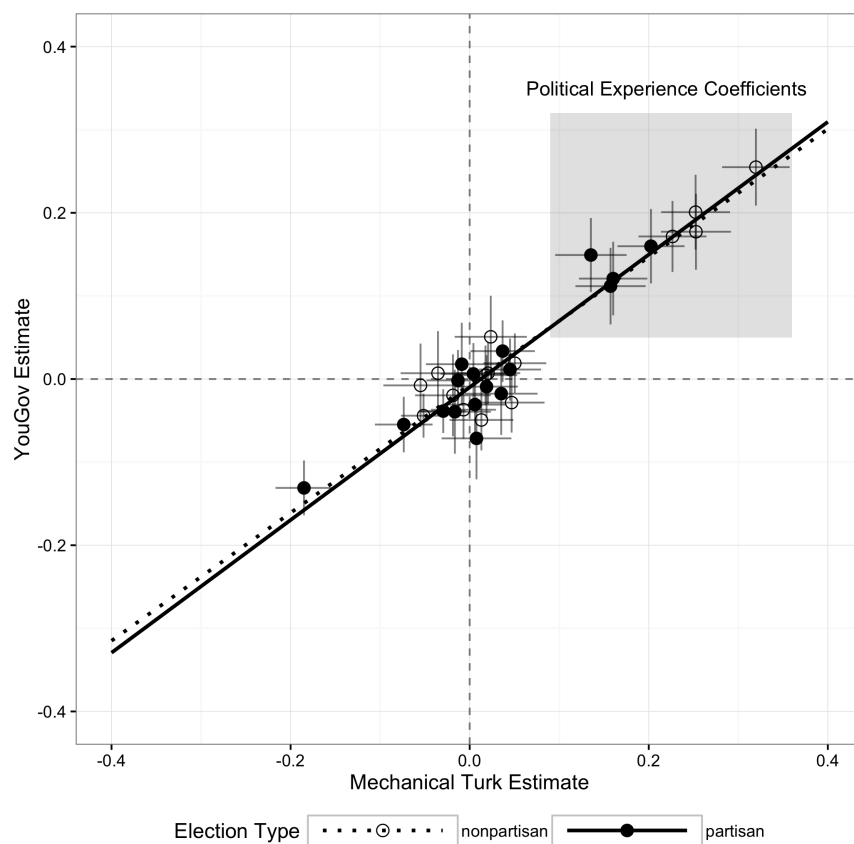
The coefficient estimates themselves are plotted in Figure 7, with the MTurk estimates on the horizontal axis and the YouGov estimates on the vertical axis. Coefficients from the nonpartisan elections are plotted with open points, while the partisan coefficients are filled. The plot shows two bivariate regression lines, one for the partisan elections and a second for the nonpartisan elections. The slopes for partisan and nonpartisan elections barely differ, indicating that both sets of results appear to generalize. Finally, the figure emphasizes our main finding. The effects of political experience (shown in the shaded gray box) are stronger in nonpartisan elections than in partisan elections. This finding obtains in both samples.

## 6 Discussion

Drawing on both observational and experimental data, we have shown how a specific electoral institution – nonpartisan balloting – can influence candidate selection. We relied on a theory of candidate choice that posits that voters trade off between two candidate dimensions: ideology and competence. Voters prefer candidates who are ideologically similar to them but who are also competent. In the absence of the party label shortcut, voters have more difficulty inferring the ideology of candidates and as a result rely more heavily on other characteristics. As their uncertainty over candidate ideology grows, so does the impact of candidate competence on vote choice.

The implications of this theory of candidate choice were borne out in two survey experiments

Figure 7: Comparison of MTurk and YouGov Estimates



conducted on both convenience and nationally representative samples. The institutional context *matters* for the evaluation of candidates based on their attributes. The effect of previous political experience – a key indicator of competence – was shown to be statistically significantly larger in nonpartisan elections. This finding directly supports the major theoretical prediction of our model.

The conjoint experimental design allows us to avoid many of the challenges inherent in studying nonpartisan elections, in particular the problem that cities with partisan and nonpartisan elections may differ in systematic ways. The survey experimental design ensures the clear delineation of partisan and nonpartisan contests. However, these studies were not without limitations. First, we are unable to account for local political contexts. Factors such as retrospective evaluations (Oliver et al., 2012) or inter-group conflict (Kaufmann, 2004) might alter the salience and effects of certain cues; we did not control in any way the other features of the electoral context that our subjects may have been imagining. Second, hypothetical candidate choice is related to, but distinct from, actual vote choice. However, it is unclear which way the “biases” from this difference would cut. Considering the thin information environment, one might make the claim that the effect of the electoral institution on the weight given to competence is understated in these experiments.

These results have important implications for the institutional features of elections beyond local contests. Some hold the normative position that members of the judiciary should be selected for their competence not their ideology. Our results suggest that nonpartisan elections may be a powerful institutional tool for achieving this goal. Voters in primary elections seek to know the ideological positions of candidates but cannot rely on a party cue. In this constrained information environment, voters may give special consideration to candidates’ backgrounds and resumes.

In particular, we manipulated the presence of one shortcut and measured its effects on *other* shortcuts. Voters seek to make the best decisions possible, given available knowledge and a constrained budget for acquiring new information. When one cue – for example party labels – is no longer available, voters turn to other sources of information to learn about both candidate ideology and competence.

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