

Electoral Accountability and Bureaucratic Discretion

Evidence from County Coroners and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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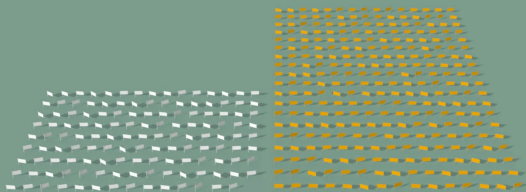
June 8, 2024

Washington University in St. Louis

Wavis Jordan, County Coroner for Cape Girardeau, MO



- Cape Girardeau County: Home of Rush Limbaugh; Trump with 72 percent (2016/2020).
- County Coroner of Cape Girardeau County, Missouri; Elected in 2020
- His office “doesn’t do COVID deaths.”



134

Official COVID-19 deaths
in 2020 in Lafayette Parish, La.

285

Excess deaths in 2020 in Lafayette
Parish not attributed to COVID-19

Uncounted: Inaccurate death certificates across the country hide the true toll of COVID-19

In some counties, half of the spike in deaths during the pandemic is attributed to COVID-19. Researchers say that points to a massive undercount.

The Documenting COVID-19 project and USA TODAY Network USA TODAY

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Research Questions

- Representation in local government? (Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016; Farris and Holman 2024; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2012)
- Elected versus appointed local bureaucrats? (Whalley, 2013; Sances, 2019; Bowman and Mikesell, 1989; Hoover, 2008; Partridge and Sass, 2011; Marsh, Olson, Reeves, and Wong 2024)
- Politics and public health? (Clinton et al. 2021; Lasen et al. 2023; Oberlander 2024)

Declaring Death: Characteristics of Declarer



Doctors



Medical Examiner



Coroner

Declaring Death: Preferences of Family



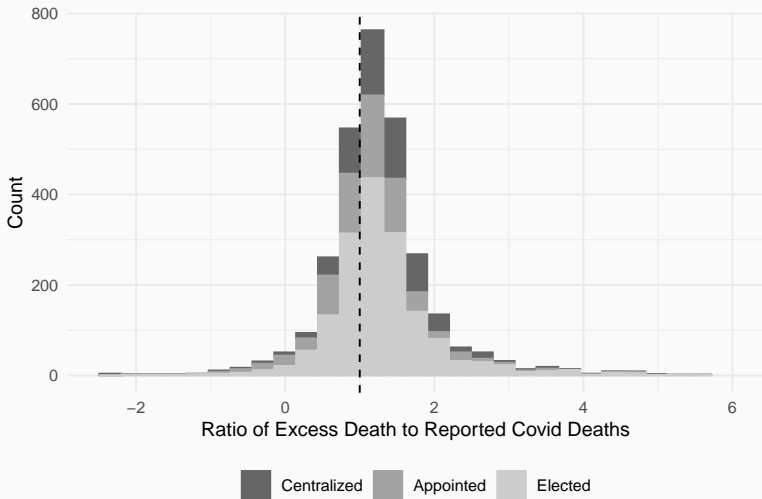
Declaring Death: Capacity



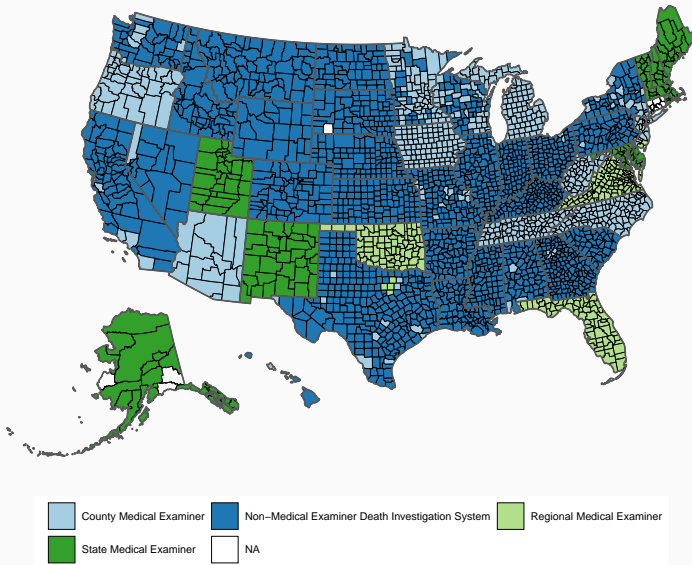
- Coroner Selection Method (Wash U Team)
- County Presidential Vote Share (MIT EDSL)
- County-level Characteristics (ACS/Census)
- COVID-19 Over/under-reportings (Paglino et al. 2024)

$$\frac{\textit{Estimated Excess Deaths}}{\textit{Reported COVID-19 Deaths}};$$

Ratio of Excess Deaths to Reported COVID-19 Deaths



Selection Method for Death Investigators



Local Political Preferences and Unreported COVID Deaths

| | | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| % Republican | 0.53** (0.13) | 0.65** (0.17) | 0.84** (0.18) | 0.68** (0.28) |
| Constant | 0.88** (0.09) | | 1.23 (0.96) | |
| Controls | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| State Fixed Effects | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Observations | 2,999 | 2,999 | 2,999 | 2,999 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.01 | 0.64 | 0.12 | 0.69 |

Note: Estimates are from OLS regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses. The unit of observation is the county.

* $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed test).

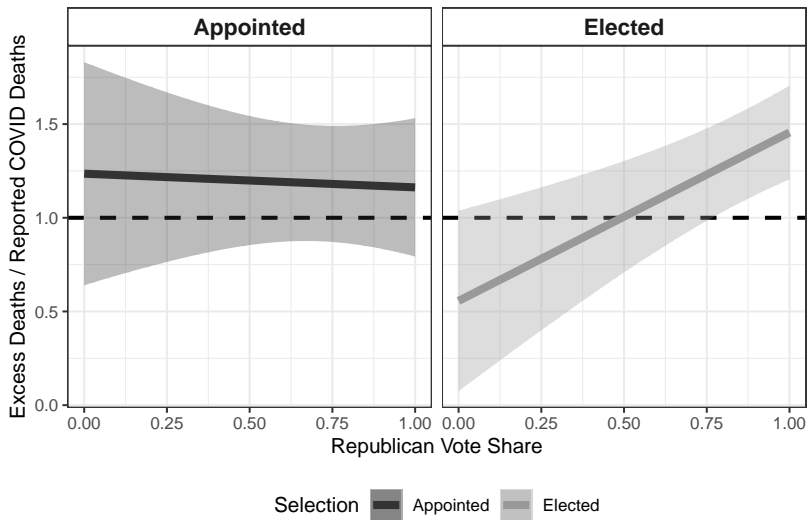
Local Political Preferences, Local Selection Methods, and Unreported COVID Deaths

| | | | | |
|-------------------------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| % Republican | 0.33* | 0.31 | 0.44 | −0.07 |
| | (0.20) | (0.21) | (0.27) | (0.35) |
| Elected Coroner | −0.05 | −0.34 | −0.36* | −0.68** |
| | (0.20) | (0.22) | (0.20) | (0.25) |
| Republican × Elected | 0.28 | 0.50 | 0.71** | 0.97** |
| | (0.30) | (0.34) | (0.29) | (0.37) |
| Constant | 0.89** | | 1.34 | |
| | (0.12) | | (1.09) | |
| Controls | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| State Fixed Effects | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Observations | 2,382 | 2,382 | 2,382 | 2,382 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.01 | 0.63 | 0.14 | 0.68 |

Note: Estimates are from OLS regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses. The unit of observation is the county.

* $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed test).

Partisanship and COVID-19 Underreporting



- Results are preliminary
- Representation in the context of local governments; importance of institutions
- Next Steps:
 - New Data: deaths by declarer
 - Ruling out alternative explanations
 - Other contexts: suicide? drug overdoses? AIDS?

Thanks!

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