Government Websites As Data:
Understanding how Mayoral Partisanship Shapes Municipal Website Content [*]

Markus Neumann[†]   Fridolin Linder[‡]   Bruce Desmarais[§]

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Abstract

A local government's website is an important source of information about policy priorities, procedures, and debates. Existing research on government websites has relied on manual methods of website content collection and processing, limiting the scale and scope of website content analysis. In this research note, we propose that the automated collection of website content from large samples of government websites can can compliment more targeted manual methods, and offer contributions through comparative analyses. We also provide software to ease the use of this data collection method. In our application, we collect a new and innovative dataset—the websites of over two hundred municipal governments in the United States—to study how website content is associated with mayoral partisanship. Using topic modeling methods, we find that cities with Democratic mayors provide more information on policy deliberation and crime control, whereas Republicans prioritize basic utilities and services such as water, electricity, and fire safety.

[†]Department of Political Science, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA. Email: mvn5218@psu.edu. Corresponding author.

[‡]Department of Political Science, Social Media and Political Participation Lab, New York University, New York, NY 10012, USA. Email: fridolin.linder@nyu.edu

[§]Department of Political Science, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA. Email: bdesmarais@psu.edu.