A measure of nationalization: not all subpresidential elections are created equal

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Abstract

Scholars have documented the upward trend of nationalization within American politics, but frequently overlook the significance of local elections. I collect a dataset of presidential election returns at the municipal level and develop a novel, nonparametric measure of nationalization that incorporates a k-means clustering algorithm, which can be applied to most election data. After introducing a configuration of subpresidential elections that distinguishes between national, subnational, and local elections (mayoral and state legislative) with respect to nationalization, I show that nationalization trends at these levels differ. Congressional and gubernatorial elections have markedly nationalized over time, consistent with existing literature, but local elections have not followed the same rising trend and exhibit considerably lower degrees of nationalization. These findings suggest that conclusions made exclusively based on congressional and gubernatorial elections are not complete and perhaps national issues have not saturated and eclipsed local issues to the extent previously postulated.

Keywords: Nationalization, elections, local politics, machine learning, clustering.

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1 Introduction

We have witnessed, in the last few decades, a shift towards a consolidation of American political parties and a coalescing of political agendas. Trends of increasing nationalization in recent years have been documented, suggesting that national winds are permeating local environments that were once protected from such influences (Hopkins 2018; Stokes 1967; Sundquist 1973).

In the current literature, two main definitions of nationalization exist. The first is what Hopkins (2018) describes as a phenomenon whereby national politics permeate subnational politics to a degree where voters become much more engaged in national issues and less so in local issues; Americans have become "political monogamists". According to this view, nationalization is a top down homogenization of political issues across subnational units in different regions of the country, where the former informs and drives the latter. The second view defines nationalization as simply the congruence or convergence between electoral choice at the national level and subnational level (Sievert and McKee 2019; Amlani and Algara 2021), which some refer to as electoral nationalization. Hopkins' configuration is broader and centers around the dimension and scope of issues relevant to an electorate whereas the second definition focuses directly on the link between voting patterns. This second conceptualization in terms of electoral outcome teases out the competing forces between the national and local levels more rigorously through vote choice, and can be more directly measured. It is also much more easily adapted to different types of election data, even from other countries, requiring only electoral return data. It has also been demonstrated that nationalization in the beginning of the twentieth century was more intimately connected to electoral institutions and party actors (see Chhibber and Kollman 2004; Erikson 2016) whereas voter decisions and electoral outcomes are more responsible for the recent nationalization that we observe. Furthermore, it is difficult to differentiate between which issues are contributing more or less to nationalization, and how much weight to allocate to each issue

when measuring nationalization. While examining national and local party agendas can be informative about the top-down effect of nationalization, I focus on the second definition that assesses nationalization by quantifying the extent to which electoral outcomes align at the presidential and subpresidential levels.

With the second definition in mind, the objective is to determine whether there is a growing convergence of national and subnational electoral outcomes, where national parties and issues are determining voters' decisions at the local level, more so than local forces. Early work of how presidential evaluations affect downstream voting behavior (Carsey and Wright 1998; Simon 1989) did not frame these effects in the context of nationalization but these links have been more recently documented in relation to nationalization in studies such as Abramowitz and Webster (2016); Jacobson (2015); Sievert and McKee (2019). In general, there is little disagreement about the rise of electoral nationalization in American elections.

If these observations of rising nationalization are valid, it is concerning for several reasons. First, they run counter to the original vision of federalism held by the framers of the Constitution who emphasized the authority of local governments over local policies. When state activity becomes primarily focused on national concerns, this pulls state and local officials away from the local needs of their constituents and the preoccupation on national issues of voters often comes at the detriment to local issues that are more immediately relevant to their lives. Increased levels of nationalization can also lead to centralized, uniform party platforms and policy agendas across state and local governments, reducing variation and regional differences that previously existed.

But despite the overwhelming consensus on rising nationalization, it has mostly been studied at the federal or gubernatorial level (Amlani and Algara 2021; Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2020), using elections that are already considered national, or close to national, to measure nationalization. This ignores important sources of evidence from more local elections that could alter the current discourse on nationalization. Congressional elections have higher

turnout (Hajnal 2009), are often concurrent and heavily covered by national news media (Angelucci, Cage, and Sinkinson 2023+; Hayes and Lawless 2018). Logically, these election outcomes would align more closely with presidential election outcomes and statements about nationalization solely based on these national or federal elections are inadequate. I argue that local elections need to be added to the definition and analysis of nationalization in order to reach more accurate and comprehensive conclusions.

I propose a new definition of nationalization that quantifies the similarity between voting behavior in presidential elections and any other subpresidential election, including local elections. This definition relies on a simple k-means clustering algorithm that clusters units of analysis (congressional district, county, municipality, etc.) based on the margin of victory of a given party. In order to address the question of the extent to which nationalization has trickled down to state and local politics, I present a dataset that is comprised of three categories: presidential election returns, congressional and gubernatorial election returns, and mayoral election returns (and more limited state legislative election results). The biggest contribution of this dataset is presidential election results at the municipal level, as the large majority of states do not aggregate their results by municipality. I use an algorithm that matches each voting precinct, in every county in every state, to the closest municipality by longitude and latitude and ultimately aggregates the Democratic and Republican vote share by municipality. Although not the original vote share numbers, it provides the closest estimation that exists today of how a comprehensive set of municipalities voted in presidential elections.

Using this data and nationalization measure, I offer a precise and unified method of measuring nationalization that contributes to the existing literature in three major ways. First, although I find evidence that nationalization has indeed been on a steady increasing trajectory in the last few decades for House, Senate and gubernatorial elections, I also find that nationalization of local elections is much lower and has not seen a significant uptick

(the only exception being the subset of partisan mayoral elections). This disparity suggests that voters are not voting the same way in national and in local elections, where in the latter, national issues have not prevailed to the same degree. The inclusion of local election outcome casts doubt on the pervasiveness of nationalization beyond the most national elections, clarifying some of the debate about whether local elections are equally influenced by presidential elections as congressional or gubernatorial elections are. The second contribution is a classification of elections (according to election type and election unit) that differs slightly from the traditional American politics perspective in order to make a distinction between the varying degrees of nationalization across different elections. Finally, I propose a quantitative, data-driven approach with a k-means clustering algorithm that can be applied to other electoral returns data. Past studies have usually relied on linear models that make various assumptions on the data or required measuring variables such as partisanship that do not directly address nationalization. My measure of nationalization captures nationalization precisely based on vote share, makes little assumptions about the relationship between presidential and subpresidential electoral outcomes, and can be easily adapted to any election returns data.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I discuss the literature on nationalization and local politics. I also classify subpresidential elections according to election type and election unit within the scope of nationalization. I then outline the multi-pronged process of constructing the dataset. Next, I define my nationalization measure and then subsequently, the results for various subpresidential elections. Finally, I conclude and discuss the implications of the results.

2 Nationalization of U.S. Politics

As documented, the twentieth century saw peaks and troughs of nationalization in American electoral politics, with the current period situated at an all-time-high. The 1960s and 1970s experienced a peak in candidate-centered voting, and local elections were heavily focused on local issues and candidates (Bartels 2000; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). What many call the "decline of parties", or a "partisan dealignment", and a shift away from the Michigan model (a model that argues for the driving force of party identification behind voting Campbell et al. 1980), these two decades marked a period of lower levels of straight-ticket voting and party loyalty for both the Democratic and Republican party. Earlier works such as Kawato (1987) and William Claggett and Zingale (1984) that examine nationalization in terms of partisan support across various geographical subunits do not find clear evidence of growing nationalization at the time of writing.

However, the 1980s marked a turning point in the reconfiguration of American politics. For instance, there was a rise in national party strength as well as an increase in markers of partisanship such as negative partisanship and ideological polarization (Huckshorn et al. 1986; Ceaser and Saldin 2005; Abramowitz and Webster 2016).[1] Bartels (2000) offers evidence that party loyalty in presidential and U.S. House elections has been on the rise and Jacobson and Carson (2016) document the increasingly similar electoral outcomes of presidential and House and Senate races. Some have even posited that Reagan's presidency consolidated the Republican Party while the Democratic Party positioned itself as the cohesive, liberal alternative. Bartels (1998) suggests that the period immediately after Reagan's presidency marked a long-term nationalization of the American political landscape.

[1] Although very tightly connected, there is a distinction to be made between nationalization and polarization, depending on the type of polarization. Nationalization is a kind of convergence whereas polarization is a divergence of political attitudes. There may be a causal relationship embedded in the context of democratic systems but this paper makes no attempt to measure polarization or to draw any conclusions between the two.

3 Subpresidential Election Classification

Most American Politics scholars would consider House and Senate seats to be national, gubernatorial and state legislature to be at the state level, and municipal to be at the local level. If congressional elections are strictly considered national elections, then they would also be used as a baseline, along with or in lieu of presidential elections, to measure nationalization of other American elections. Yet, what we see in the literature is an evaluation of nationalization based on the association between presidential and House or Senate elections. In other words, congressional election nationalization is often what is measured.

I put forth a different formulation of subpresidential elections by introducing two dimensions: election type (national or subnational) and election or electoral unit (state or below state). Election type separates between elections at the federal level and those below the federal level while election unit is the constituency an elected official represents, whether a congressional district or a municipality. As presented in Figure 1, the two dimensions separate Senate and House elections due to the difference in election unit. Both chambers do indeed legislate at the national level but they receive varying degrees of national importance and media attention depending on the seat and candidate. House members are relatively more involved in local policy concerns and less linked to national programs (save for some particular congressional districts) than Senators are (Jacobson 1989). Ultimately, there is more variation in the degree of intersection between national and local issues for House elections than for Senate elections. At the subnational level, I separate gubernatorial elections from municipal and state legislature elections, and define local elections as elections where both the election unit is below the state and the election is for a non-federal office (the shaded box in Figure 1). According to this definition, local elections such as municipal and state legislative elections are subnational elections that have election units smaller than the state. Even though state legislators are typically discussed along with governors in terms of national interest groups and party mobilization at the state and local level (Grumbach 2022;

Hertel-Fernandez 2019), under the context of nationalization, I contend that state legislative elections more resemble municipal elections than gubernatorial elections. Within the nationalization framework, a core disparity likely exists in the degree in which voters adopt a national lens when voting in various subpresidential elections that do not perfectly match the traditional configuration of American elections. Following this typology of subpresidential elections, I expect to see nationalization monotonically decrease from Senate, House, gubernatorial to local elections (municipal and state legislative).

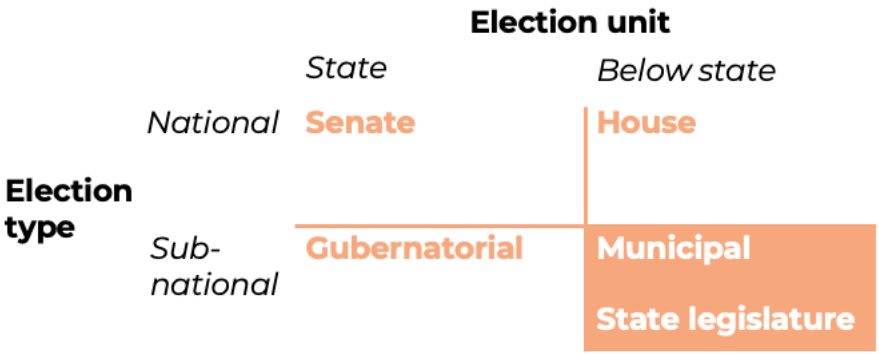


Figure 1: Subpresidential Election Classification according to election type and election unit.

4 Local Elections

Much of the current literature does not engage with elections at the very local level, specifically in terms of how nationalization is defined and measured. Conclusions about nationalization are frequently drawn exclusively from congressional or occasionally state-level races. Although the study of local government elections has seen a surge in the last decade, understanding of local elections is still somewhat limited and the methodologies used lag behind those used in general American Politics research. A behemoth that accounts for more than $2 trillion in spending in 2020[2], collects more revenue than the federal government in income taxes, and employs more than 13 million people (Oliver 2012; Trounstine 2010), local

[2]US Census Bureau's Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances

government offers a plethora of possibilities to further examine whether certain phenomena observed on the national level trickle down to local politics. There has been an increasing body of research in the last few years that puts state and local politics at the center of political activity and party mobilization due to various national trends like partisanship (Grumbach 2022; Hertel-Fernandez 2019). Yet despite its diversity and large sample size, research on local elections has heavily relied on either qualitative studies or exclusively on large urban cities. More importantly, little methodological advancements have been made on this front in order to better understand the relationship between local and national politics, which is partially due to the lack of readily available, centralized data. As Paul Peterson states in *City Limits*, "local politics is not like national politics" (Peterson 1981); local level theories and observations may not generalize to the national level and vice versa. But the two are nevertheless inextricably linked and deserve a nuanced, quantitative approach to explain their differences and similarities.

A divide between local politics research and the rest of mainstream American politics research still exists, especially due to the traditionally more qualitative nature of urban politics research (Anzia 2021). Scholars have found that local elections tend to have much lower turnout, less media coverage, and are often nonpartisan (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Hajnal 2009; Coppock and Kirkland 2018; Warshaw 2019). This is largely explained by the fact that many municipal elections do not take place concurrently with national elections and in general, off-cycle elections receive less voter interest and exhibit lower incumbency advantage (de Benedictis-Kessner 2017). Only recently have partisanship and ideology, previously exclusive to national and state politics, permeated local and urban politics research. There been an increasing amount of evidence that partisanship has seeped into local politics and that the partisan preference or ideology of voters is an important predictor of voting behavior (Hajnal and Trounstine 2014; Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015; Einstein and Glick 2018; Warshaw, de Benedictis-Kessner, and Velez 2022). As voters may be less

knowledgeable or invested in policy positions of state and local candidates, they may become more inclined to use party ID to pick between candidates. In fact, Rogers (2016) claims that state legislative elections specifically are heavily influenced by sentiments regarding the president and the national parties. These findings advocate for the position that polarization and national issues could be playing a role in local elections, where local residents are tapping into their party identities, preferences and loyalties when voting.

But a definitive measure of how much local elected officials tie their success and fate to those of federal officials is still somewhat nonexistent. With technological advancements and the changing media environment, voters have evolved in their adoption of heuristics and behaviors when voting in different elections. Instead of just addressing the question of whether this has taken place in local elections, I wish to also investigate the extent to which this is true relative to subnational elections. As in Hopkins (2018), "research that considers political nationalization in the United States is limited, with virtually no work on nationalization's impacts in state and local elections". One of the few studies that attempts to capture nationalization at the mayoral level is Das et al. (2022), who analyze tweets from mayors and find that the average American mayor is relatively unaffected by national rhetoric and mostly focuses on the needs of their local constituents. Rigorous evidence that demonstrates whether or not voters decide on local candidates based on their affiliation with national political parties is nevertheless sparse. The few that do touch on nationalization at the local level either focus only on a handful of large municipalities or do not directly engage with election results but rather use data such as Tweets or Facebook surveys (e.g. Moskowitz 2021).

In an effort to place local elections in the context of nationalization, I quantify the nationalization of local elections compared to other subpresidential elections - House, Senate, and gubernatorial - over the last few decades. In other words, I measure how similar the electoral outcomes of local and presidential elections are compared to those of congressional

or gubernatorial and presidential elections over time. In this paper, mayoral elections are taken as representative of local elections, but some results for state legislative elections are also reported.

5 Data and Dataset Construction

To accomplish the goal of rigorously quantifying nationalization of various levels of elections as described above, a set of electoral returns of presidential, House, Senate, gubernatorial, and local elections is needed. I use mayoral and state legislative elections to measure nationalization at the local level. For mayoral elections, I focus specifically on municipalities that operate under a mayor-council system where mayors are directly elected and are the chief executive of their respective local government. To consistently relate subpresidential elections to presidential elections, the same unit of comparison is used, i.e. county, congressional district, or municipality. Therefore, I collect data for House and presidential elections at the congressional district level; Senate and presidential elections at the county level; gubernatorial and presidential elections at the county level; gubernatorial and presidential elections at the congressional district level; and mayoral and presidential elections at the municipal level. Ideally, nationalization would be measured for a set of presidential and subpresidential elections based on the corresponding electoral unit, but for governors and senators, who are elected at the state level, having only fifty states would be too small of a sample size. I thus use election returns at the county level.

Putting all these parts together requires several different data sources. From CQ Press' Voting and Elections Collection, I collect presidential, gubernatorial, and Senate election results at the county level as well as House elections at the congressional district level. As for the presidential and gubernatorial electoral returns at the congressional district level, I use data compiled by myself and others.[3] These approximate returns are obtained by us-

[3], Christian Baehr, Dahyun Choi, and Rocío Titiunik, Department of Politics, Princeton University

ing county-level returns and allocating votes proportionally in each state according to the proportion of population of the county that belongs to each congressional district. Building upon Warshaw, de Benedictis-Kessner, and Velez (2022)'s local election dataset of U.S. mayoral elections of municipalities with a population of 50,000 or more residents, I fill in missing municipalities, party affiliations, and results from the most recent elections in 2022 where possible. For reasons I address in Section 7.2, I also record whether the mayoral election is a nonpartisan or partisan race (whether party affiliation appears on the ballot) and party affiliations of candidates who run in nominally nonpartisan races. This latter variable is relevant because despite a large quantity of local races being nominally nonpartisan, affiliations of candidates are often known to voters or made evident during the campaign. The party affiliations of mayoral candidates in nonpartisan races is found by combing through candidate websites, local news media, and other relevant platforms (Gerber and Hopkins 2011, do something similar). The final dataset contains 630 municipalities and 5084 races between 2000 to 2022. Table 1 displays the breakdown of municipalities included based on population and other variables. Due to restraints in data, the municipalities included in the dataset introduce a few biases but the dataset still offers a decent variety of small to large towns from all fifty states. Only a small minority of the 6% of the municipalities in the dataset have more than 500,000 inhabitants but obviously these cities constitute a large proportion of the total population. More pertinently, although nonpartisan elections represent 76% of the total races, elections where at least one known Democrat is running constitutes 67% of the municipalities included. Furthermore, 91% of elections in this sample are non-concurrent elections, another defining feature of many municipal elections.

The largest contribution of this data collection process is assembling presidential election results at the municipal level. While this data may be available for a few select states and the largest urban areas, it is largely missing from the universe of American election data. To put together this dataset, the first step of the process is collecting precinct-level

Table 1: **Dataset of U.S. municipalities, 2000-2022**

	Number	%	Avg Population	Total Population
All municipalities	630	100	185,061	116,588,526
>250,000	91	14	686,411	62,463,388
>500,000	37	6	1,200,726	44,426,866
<250,000	539	86	100,418	54,125,138
<100,000	334	53	70,998	23,713,202
All races	5,084	100		
Democrat runs	3,428	67		
Partisan	1,124	22		
Nonpartisan	3,878	76		
Concurrent	442	9		
Non-concurrent	4,642	91		

Democrat runs refers to elections where there is at least a Democrat or Republican running in the election, regardless of whether the race is non-partisan or partisan. Partisan are partisan races where candidates' party affiliations are written on the ballot and there are partisan primary elections. Concurrent elections are where the mayoral election is held at the same time as the presidential election.

presidential returns for all states from the MIT Election Data Science Lab for 2016 and 2020, Harvard Election Data Archive and Open Elections for 2004 to 2012, and the Federal Elections Project for 2000. I also use individual state and county websites to fill in any gaps when needed, which only leaves missing data for a handful of states in a few elections prior to 2012. To match each voting precinct to the city or town it belongs to, I use TIGER data from the United States Census Bureau that contains geographic entity codes for precincts in every state, collected every ten years. These TIGER files are processed using geographic information systems (GIS) software and require standardizing precinct names to optimize matching to the precinct names in the precinct-level presidential election results. Once each precinct is matched to a specific longitude and latitude, I write an algorithm, to apply to each state, that determines the closest geographical municipality for each precinct subject to a maximum distant constraint based on longitude and latitude coordinates [4]. If the

[4]There are two or three states like California that make available municipal-level presidential election results, which I use in lieu if that is the case.

precinct name contains the name of the city or town, then it gets automatically allocated to that city or town. Therefore, for all municipalities in the U.S. that have more than 50,000 residents and have directly elected mayors, I create a dataset that is an approximation of their presidential election returns for the elections from 2000 to 2020. This novel dataset is an addition to the growing body of local election data, allowing researchers to determine how voting behavior observed on the national level relates to that of the local level.

6 Methodology

One of this paper's main contribution is a data-driven, nonparametric, and easy-to-implement nationalization measure that can be applied to various types of election data. To this end, I cluster the Democratic (or Republican) margin of victory of all relevant units of study $i = 1, ..., N$ (county, congressional district, or municipality) using k-means clustering at both the subpresidential level and the presidential level. Using the k-means algorithm, I measure nationalization of an election by the proportion of election units where the subpresidential election and presidential units are clustered to the same vote cluster. Vote cluster, given a political party, is the cluster units are assigned to using $k - means$ based on margin of victory. As a concrete example, nationalization of congressional elections is the proportion of congressional districts that are clustered to the same vote cluster for subpresidential and presidential elections.

Algorithm 1 outlines the k-means algorithm in terms of margin of victory. A party's margin of victory is defined as the party of interest's vote share minus the vote share of its strongest opponent. I use margin of victory since it can be easily applied to other countries that do not have a clear two-party system and many local elections have third-party or independent candidates running. The central goal of k-means is to partition N observations into K clusters by minimizing within-cluster variances. As Algorithm 1 lays out, it first

initializes K centroids (or means of each cluster) randomly, then assigns each observation to the cluster with the nearest centroid, or the cluster with the least squared Euclidean distance, and then updates these centroids based on the observations that get assigned to each cluster. The resulting cluster assignments minimize the total cluster variance

$$C^* = \min_{C} \sum_{k=1}^{K} A_k \sum_{c_t^{(i)}=k} \|x_{i,t} - \mu_k\|^2, \tag{1}$$

where $A_k = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \mathbb{1}\{c_t^{(i)} = k\}$. C^* in Equation (1) is the solution that minimizes the within-cluster average dissimilarity of observations from the cluster's centroid. $c_t^{(i)}$, the resulting cluster assignment of unit i is equal to $L_{i,t}$ for the unit at the subpresidential level at election t and equal to $P_{i,t}$ for the unit at the presidential level at election t.

Each cluster is highly interpretable, as the centroids for each cluster is found only using the one-dimensional variable of margin of victory. For example, the cluster with the highest average margin of victory can be viewed as the most Democratic group based on votes. The only parameter to tune is K, the number of clusters. For example, if $K = 2$, then the two vote clusters would be lean Dem and lean Rep and if $K = 3$, the labels would be lean Dem, lean Rep, and swing/moderate, based on the average Democratic margin of victory. Any $K > 3$ would make less sense in this context.

Algorithm 1 K-means Clustering of Margin of Victory

initialize $\mu_1, ..., \mu_K \in \mathbb{R}$ randomly
Repeat until convergence
for `every` i **do**
  $c_t^{(i)} := \text{argmin}_k \|x_{i,t} - \mu_k\|^2$
  for `every` k **do**
    $\mu_k := \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N} \mathbb{1}\{c_t^{(i)}=k\} x_{i,t}}{\sum_{i=1}^{N} \mathbb{1}\{c_t^{(i)}=k\}}$
  end for
end for

Now I define the level of nationalization γ_t at election t as the share of units clustered to

the same vote cluster at the subpresidential level and the presidential level:

$$\gamma_t = \frac{|\{i = 1, ..., N | L_{i,t} = P_{i,t}\}|}{N}, \tag{2}$$

where $L_{i,t}$ is unit i's cluster at the subpresidential level and $P_{i,t}$ is unit i's cluster at the presidential level. $L_{i,t}$ and $P_{i,t}$ are obtained for each i using the k-means clustering algorithm. Given a set of a party's margin of victory for all units $i = 1, ..., N$ in an election t, $\{x_{1,t}, ..., x_{N,t}\}$, the algorithm is outlined in Algorithm 1. Essentially, Algorithm 1 is performed twice: once on the subpresidential elections and another at the presidential elections, using the same unit of analysis both times. It is important to note that the labels of the clusters for the subpresidential elections $L_{i,t}$ and those for the presidential elections $P_{i,t}$ for each election t correspond to the same cluster. In cases where they do not, I map the cluster with the lowest average margin of victory for the subpresidential elections to the cluster with the lowest average margin of victory for the presidential election, the cluster with the second lowest average margin of victory for the subpresidential elections to the cluster with the second lowest average margin of victory for the presidential election and so on.[5]

Since $x_{i,t}$ and $\mu_1, ..., \mu_K$ are one-dimensional, each cluster $C_t^k := \{i | c_t^{(i)} = k, i = 1, ..., N\}$ can be directly interpreted based on their average Democratic (or Republican) margin of victories $\mu_1, ..., \mu_K$. More explicitly, cluster $\text{argmax}_k \mu_k$ represents the cluster that contains the units that voted for the Democratic (or Republican) party by the highest margins while cluster $\text{argmin}_k \mu_k$ represents the cluster that contains the units that voted for the Republican (or Democratic) party by the highest margins. These clusters are the vote clusters referred to previously.

Once the clusters $C_t^k, k = 1, ..., K$ are found via Algorithm 1 for both the subpresidential and presidential voting returns for all units $i = 1, ..., N$, the nationalization measure γ_t for

[5]K-means clustering initiates the centroids randomly and the numeric label it assigns to each cluster varies each time so it is important to make sure the label of each cluster corresponds to the same label at the subpresidential versus presidential level.

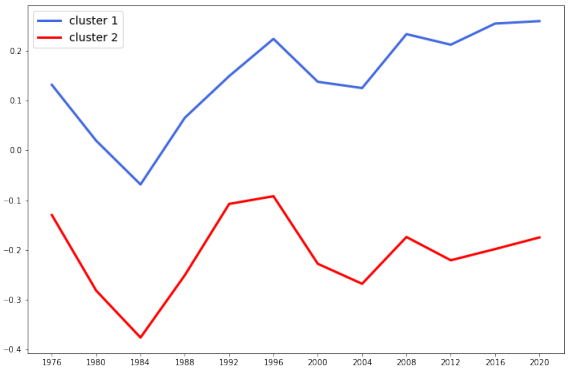
election t is calculated using Equation (2). For any $0 \leq \gamma_t \leq 1$, a $\gamma_t = 0$ represents zero nationalization with all counties belonging to different margin of victory clusters and $\gamma_t = 1$ represents complete nationalization with all counties belonging to the same margin of victory clusters for subpresidential elections compared to presidential elections.

7 Results

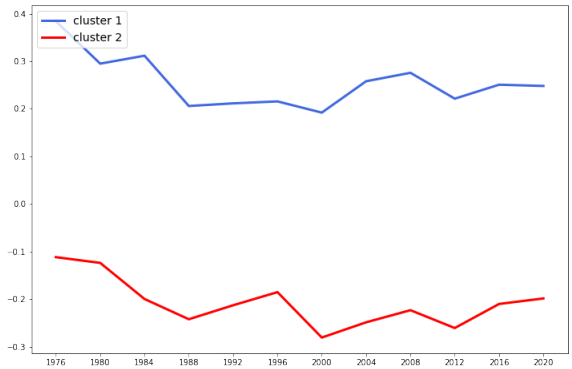
7.1 Congressional and Gubernatorial Election Nationalization Trends

The first part of the results is the nationalization of House, Senate and gubernatorial elections. Applying Algorithm 1 to the Democratic margin of victory, we obtain C^* of units that belong to each resulting cluster $k = 1, ..., K$. With a two-party system, anything with $K > 3$ would be hard to interpret and less appropriate in the given context so I conduct the analysis for $K = 2$ and $K = 3$. Figure 2 displays the average Democratic margin of victory at the county level (Figures 2a and 2b) and the congressional district level (Figures 2c and 2d) for two clusters. Each cluster is clearly separated from one another: cluster 1 is Democratic leaning and cluster 2 is Republican leaning. From 1976 until 2020, that gives us twelve measurements of these three offices in time. Table 2 reports the nationalization measure for $K = 2$ and $K = 3$ clusters. In both cases, γ_t clearly starts to increase from the late 1980s until 2020, as plotted in Figure 3a for $K = 2$. Across the board, the 2020 election resulted in the highest degree of nationalization over the four and a half decades. This is also consistent with what political scientists like Abramowitz and Webster (2016) and Jacobson (2015) have observed about nationalization by examining party loyalty, negative partisanship, and incumbency advantage.

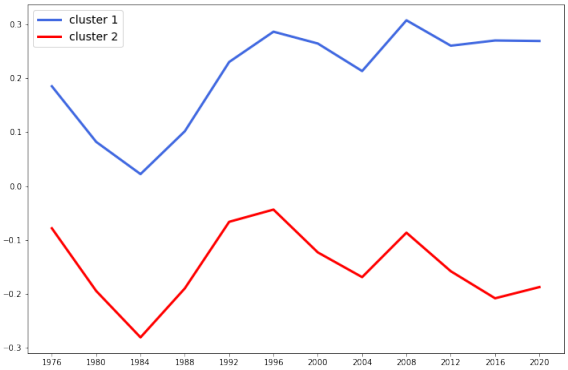
Nationalization appears to be the most pronounced in Senate elections with 89.68% in 2020 for $K = 3$ and 92.51% for $K = 2$. This directly translate to, in the case of two clusters, 92.51% of the counties being clustered to the same vote cluster. The process of nationaliza-



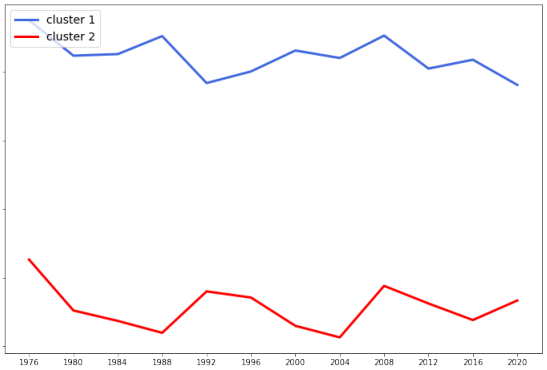
(a) Presidential election Democratic margin of victory on county level



(b) Senate election Democratic margin of victory on county level



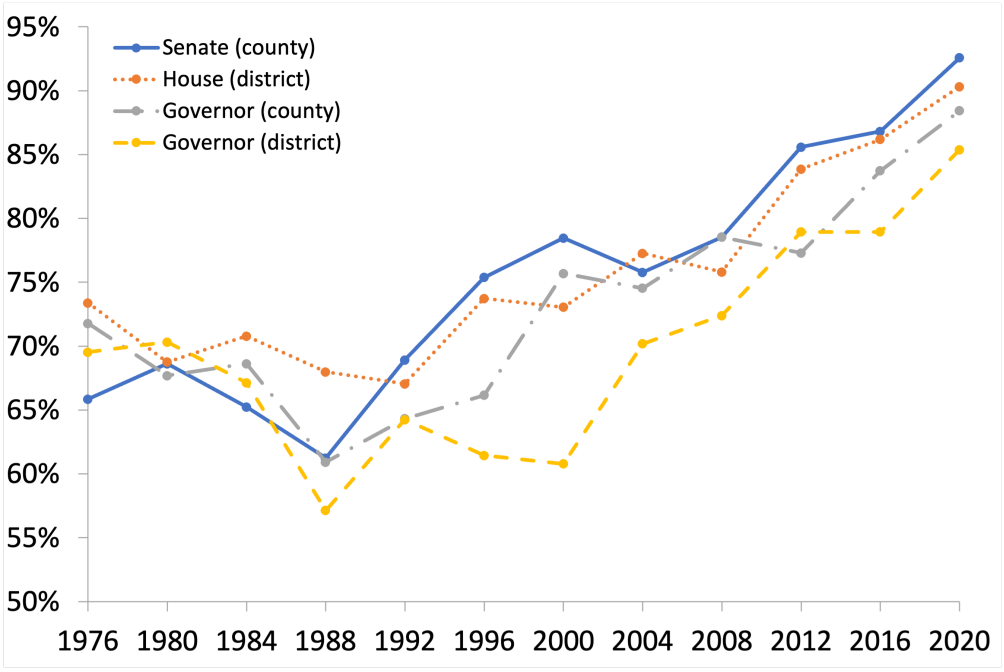
(c) Presidential election Democratic margin of victory on congressional district level



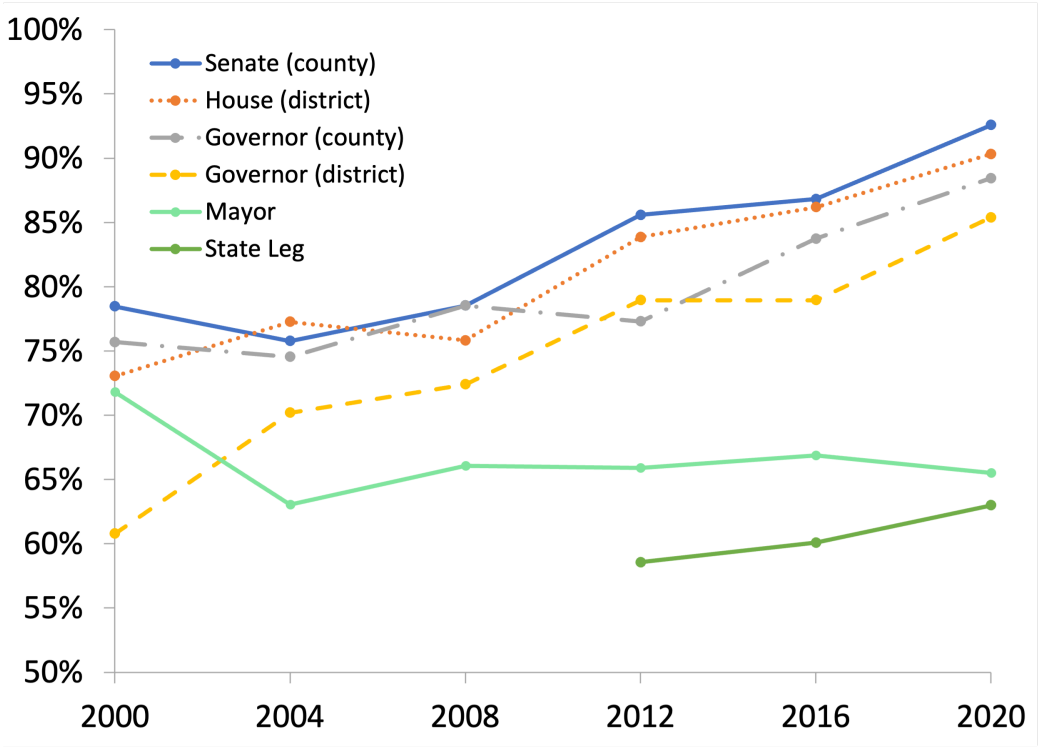
(d) House election Democratic margin of victory on congressional district level

Figure 2: Average Democratic margin of victory for each cluster, $K = 2$, for each presidential election in the period 1976-2020.

tion of Senate elections also witnessed the steepest and most striking increase starting from the 1988 election, as seen in Figure 3a. We also see a slightly smaller magnitude of nationalization, although still substantive in itself, for governor races in 2020, as well as in the few elections before that. In 2020, compared to the 92.51% for Senate races, the nationalization measure for House races is 90.32%, 88.44% for gubernatorial races at the county level, and 85.38% for gubernatorial races at the congressional district level. This has important



(a) Congressional and Gubernatorial Elections, for each presidential election in the period 1976-2020.



(b) Subnational and Local Elections, for each presidential election in the period 2000-2020.

Figure 3: Nationalization of Subpresidential Elections, $K = 2$.

implications in the varying degrees to which voter choice in congressional and gubernatorial results converge to voter choice in national elections. An obvious explanation is that Senate elections tend to receive more national media coverage, with Senators having longer tenures and higher recognition among the general public who are not their constituents, compared to House elections. House races can vary heavily in the amount of national attention they receive and some candidates are much more "national" than "local". Many congressional election campaigns center their platform and messaging on more nationally-oriented issues compared to gubernatorial campaigns, which can partially elucidate the generally lower level of nationalization in recent elections. Nevertheless, nationalization measured for these three elections is not too distinct.

It is worth emphasizing that the interpretation of two versus three clusters is significant: two clusters may reflect the discrepancy in Democratic margin of victory more accurately on a more national level as third party candidates rarely receive a significant portion of the vote and the average Democratic margin of victory of the three clusters for $K = 3$ is not as distinct as those of the two clusters for $K = 2$. However, this changes for the local election analysis, where having $K = 3$ still results in distinct clusters (see Figure 4). Refer to Appendix A for plots of nationalization for congressional and gubernatorial races for $K = 3$.

7.2 Local Election Nationalization Trends

7.2.1 Mayoral Elections

Turning to local elections, Table 3 reports the results for mayoral elections from 2000 to 2020. As mentioned, mayoral elections are taken as representative of local elections but the following section presents results for state legislative elections. As shown in Figure 3b, nationalization of mayoral elections remains distinctly lower than that of the elections discussed in Section 7.1 over the last two decades, save for 2000 where House races were less nationalized. For example, in 2020, mayoral election nationalization is measured to be at

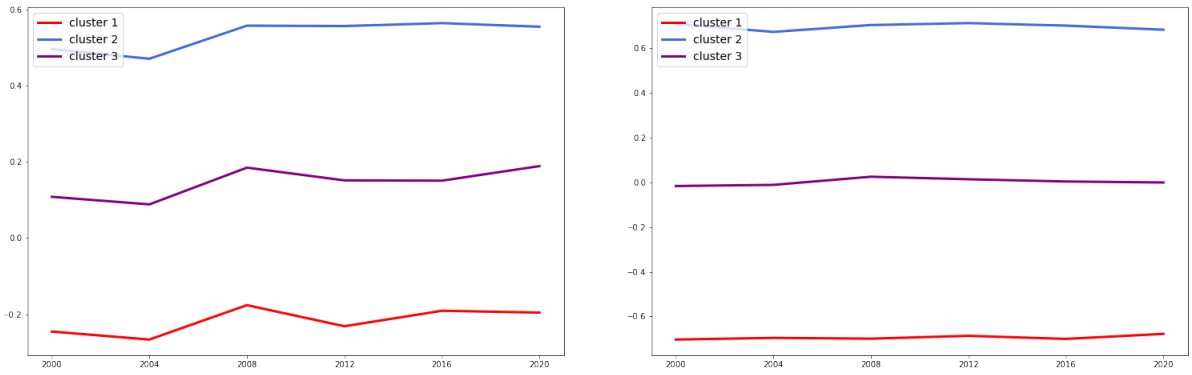
Table 2: **Nationalization of Congressional and Gubernatorial Elections, 1976-2020.**

Unit	Election Year	Clusters	Senate *County*	House *CD*	Governor *County*	Governor *CD*
	1976	3	51.69	53.70	49.54	49.22
	1980	3	50.15	55.09	45.23	50.00
	1984	3	54.77	53.49	51.07	39.29
	1988	3	45.85	54.29	40.62	39.29
	1992	3	56.62	51.97	49.23	45.70
	1996	3	60.62	61.06	48.92	40.52
	2000	3	70.77	58.29	59.38	56.21
	2004	3	62.88	50.58	68.28	67.70
	2008	3	66.56	57.83	67.48	58.90
	2012	3	81.90	52.30	69.02	69.59
	2016	3	76.99	43.09	72.09	68.42
	2020	3	89.68	81.34	81.29	75.44
	1976	2	65.85	73.88	71.77	69.53
	1980	2	68.62	68.75	67.69	70.13
	1984	2	65.23	70.79	68.62	67.14
	1988	2	61.23	67.98	60.92	57.14
	1992	2	69.92	67.05	64.31	64.24
	1996	2	75.38	73.73	66.15	61.44
	2000	2	78.46	73.04	75.69	60.78
	2004	2	75.77	77.26	74.54	70.19
	2008	2	78.53	75.81	78.53	72.39
	2012	2	83.58	83.87	77.30	78.95
	2016	2	86.81	86.18	83.74	78.95
	2020	2	92.51	90.32	88.44	85.38

Measure of nationalization in Senate, House, and Gubernatorial elections (in percentages), defined as in (2), where Clusters is the number of clusters K used in Algorithm 1. CD refers to congressional district.

51.72% for $K = 3$ and 65.52% for $K = 2$, which are both significantly lower than the 2020 values for Senate, House, and gubernatorial races. There is also no upward trajectory over this period. These results together suggest that mayoral elections have not nationalized to the degree as House, Senate and gubernatorial races and have maintained a lower, relatively more stable course.

In Table 3, as well as Table 2, there is a discrepancy in magnitude of γ between the



(a) Presidential election Democratic margin of victory on municipal-level

(b) Mayoral election Democratic margin of victory on municipal-level

Figure 4: Average Democratic margin of victory for each cluster, $K = 3$, for each presidential election in the period 2000-2020.

Table 3: **Nationalization of Mayoral Elections, 2000-2020.**

Unit	Election Year	Clusters	Mayor *Municipality*
	2000	3	48.72
	2004	3	51.52
	2008	3	46.30
	2012	3	46.59
	2016	3	46.01
	2020	3	51.72
	2000	2	71.79
	2004	2	63.03
	2008	2	66.05
	2012	2	65.91
	2016	2	66.87
	2020	2	65.52

Measure of nationalization in mayoral elections (in percentages), as defined in (2), where Clusters is the number of clusters K used in Algorithm 1.

two choices of K. This can be explained by the underlying mechanism of Algorithm 1, or k-means clustering in general. With $K = 3$, the distance between the centroids, or average

Democratic margin of victory in this case, is smaller so it would require less of a change in vote share between elections for a unit to get assigned to a different voting cluster. But with $K = 2$, the distance is a lot larger (we can interpret the two clusters as Democrat and Republican, instead of Democrat, Republican, and independent/swing) and thus, it would take a much larger change in vote share to get assigned to a different vote cluster. The $K = 2$ nationalization values are higher due to this fact since more electoral units will belong to the same cluster on the local and national level, where a swing to a different cluster would take a much larger change in voting outcome. Due to the nature of local elections that have independent, third-party, or nonpartisan candidates capturing a significant percentage of the vote, and often times winning, the $K = 3$ value is arguably a better evaluation of nationalization for mayoral elections.

7.2.2 State Legislative Elections

Aside from mayoral politics, another integral component of local politics according to the definition in this paper is state legislative elections. Much like municipal elections, state legislative elections elect candidates neither for federal office nor at the statewide level. State legislators have important policy-making responsibilities but Americans are generally relatively much less informed about state politics. It has been shown repeatedly that approximately fewer than 20 percent of Americans can name their state legislators and half do not know whether their state has a one or two-house legislature (Johns Hopkins University, 2018). State legislative elections and their candidates also receive much less attention from local news media, as these outlets have also allocated a much greater portion of their reporting to national and mayoral elections. Due to a confluence of factors, some of which mentioned here, there has been some indication that voters use their assessment of the president as a heuristic to inform their decision-making in state legislative elections (Rogers 2016). Zingher and Richman (2019) also find that in environments of high national polarization,

voters' evaluations of national parties play a larger role in state legislative election results than the actual policy positions of state legislative parties.

Differences between municipal and other subpresidential elections could slightly detract from the direct comparison of the nationalization measure of municipal and subnational elections. To sidestep this challenge, state legislative elections are used as an additional check on the quantification of nationalization at the local level as they are concurrent with national elections and share the same party labels, unlike mayoral elections that are often nonpartisan and non-concurrent.

Following the same basic process as mayoral elections, I collect state legislative election results from Klarner Politics from 2012 to 2022 as well as presidential election results at the state legislative district level from Daily Kos from 2012 to 2020. Due to limited data of presidential election results by state legislative district, this analysis is thus restricted to the period 2012 - 2020. I replicate the analysis with γ_t as defined in Equation (2) and the results are presented in Table 4, split by all state legislative elections, State Senate, and State House. During the examined period, nationalization of state legislative elections is very similar to that of mayoral elections: distinctly lower than that of House, Senate and gubernatorial elections. $K = 2$ results for all state legislative elections is also plotted in Figure 3b. The decision to classify these elections as local elections instead of state elections with gubernatorial elections becomes apparent here, with state legislative elections resembling mayoral elections more in terms of their nationalization trajectory in recent years. Despite state legislative elections and gubernatorial elections being considered state elections, the degree to which presidential voting behavior determines subpresidential voting behavior is found to be much weaker in the former.

State Senate nationalization increased by approximately 8-9% from 2012 to 2020 for $K = 2$ and $K = 3$, a much larger increase than State House. This higher value for State Senate elections observed in 2020 aligns with some of the results for other subpresidential

elections that also culminate in a peak in nationalization in 2020. The next step is to construct or gather presidential election returns at the state legislative district level prior to 2012 in order to get a better sense of the development of nationalization starting from the 1970s for a more in-depth comparison.

Table 4: **Nationalization of State Legislative Elections, 2012-2020.**

Election Year	Clusters	All	Senate	House
Unit		*State Legislative District*	*Senate District*	*House District*
2012	3	43.00	44.78	41.99
2016	3	38.99	38.47	39.27
2020	3	45.14	53.13	42.03
2012	2	58.56	62.57	56.64
2016	2	60.08	58.54	59.91
2020	2	62.98	70.52	59.65

Measure of nationalization in state legislative elections (in percentages), defined as in (2), where Clusters is the number of clusters K used in Algorithm 1.

7.2.3 Robustness of Local Election Results

To disentangle the effects of the differences between local and more national subpresidential elections, Table 5 presents results for different types of mayoral races. The Partisan and Nonpartisan columns separate the municipal elections nationalization analysis into partisan and nonpartisan races, respectively. Evidently, partisan and nonpartisan races do not display a large difference in effects, except in 2020, where partisan mayoral races exhibit a 54.74% nationalization compared to the 47.14% for nonpartisan races (for 3 clusters). There is a 12% increase in nationalization for partisan races from 2000 to 2020 whereas nonpartisan races remain quite stable in the same twenty year period. The heterogeneity here points to how partisan mayoral elections are more similar to say congressional elections in the use of party IDs (Democrat or Republican) and units with larger population.[6] People who live in

[6]In the U.S., cities with partisan mayoral election tend to have larger populations such as New York City and Philadelphia.

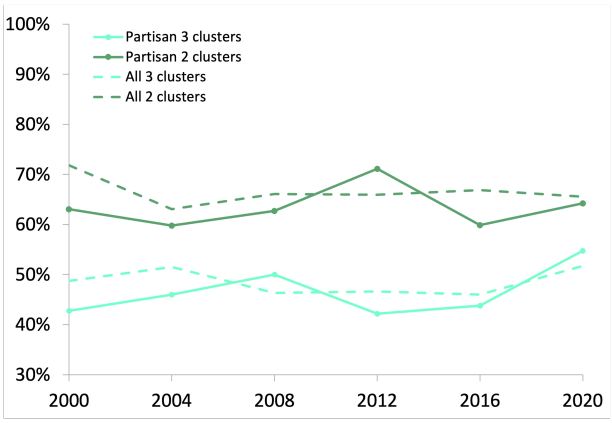
more metropolitan areas are generally more tuned into national politics and these mayoral races can even garner national attention. For partisan races, with both partisan primaries and general elections, voters tap more into their partisan loyalties and affinities, or at least can directly use party ID as a heuristic in voting. But as a whole, nationalization is still clearly lower than that of congressional and gubernatorial elections. There may still remain a certain degree of independence in how voters make decisions at the local ballot box that involves a mechanism that draws less from their voting decisions in presidential elections.

Table 5: **Nationalization of Local Elections, by type of race, 2000-2020**

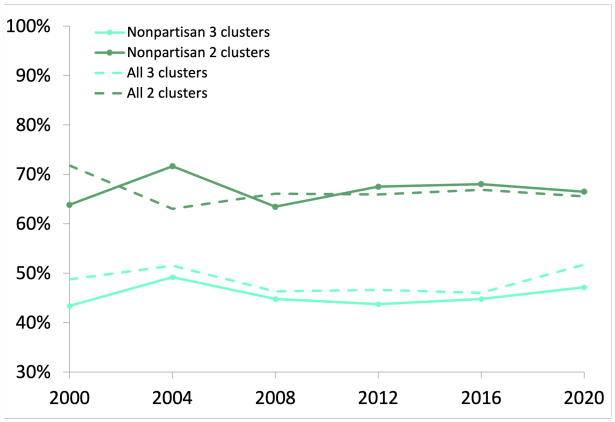
Type	Election Year	Clusters	Mayor *Partisan*	Mayor *Nonpartisan*	Mayor *Dem Runs*	Mayor *Non-Concurrent*	Mayor *Concurrent*
	2000	3	42.75	43.41	34.76	42.66	50.00
	2004	3	45.98	49.16	40.80	44.39	61.26
	2008	3	50.00	44.79	40.94	49.03	44.64
	2012	3	42.19	43.71	40.31	45.14	47.11
	2016	3	43.80	44.78	39.39	46.18	47.32
	2020	3	54.74	47.14	43.89	47.58	56.25
	2000	2	63.04	63.84	59.59	68.30	70.00
	2004	2	59.77	71.63	60.80	70.41	67.57
	2008	2	62.69	63.44	60.18	69.50	69.64
	2012	2	71.09	67.51	57.30	79.10	61.16
	2016	2	59.85	68.02	55.36	67.85	66.07
	2020	2	64.21	66.49	60.50	68.19	64.58

Measure of nationalization in mayoral elections (in percentages), as defined in (2), where Clusters is the number of clusters K used in Algorithm 1. Partisan elections are mayoral elections that are partisan; Nonpartisan elections are mayoral elections that are nonpartisan; and Dem Runs are mayoral elections where there is at least one Democrat candidate running. Concurrent (non-concurrent) are elections where the mayoral election was (not) concurrent with a presidential election.

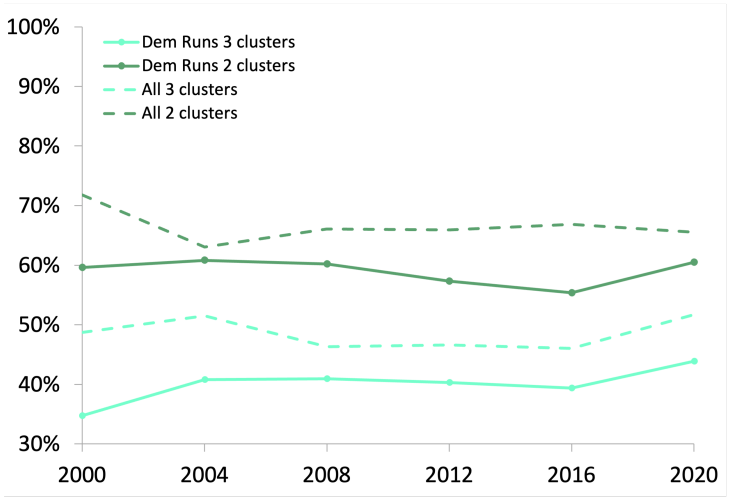
These results also indicate that the notable lower levels of nationalization observed in mayoral elections are not misleading due to their largely nonpartisan nature as even partisan election nationalization is mostly lower than or on par with those of House, Senate or gubernatorial elections. As Figures 5a and 5b establishes, nationalization of partisan mayoral elections is not much higher than nationalization of the entire sample of mayoral



(a) Partisan elections



(b) Nonpartisan elections



(c) Mayoral elections where there is at least a known Democrat candidate

Figure 5: Nationalization of Mayoral Elections for $K = 2$ and $K = 3$, by type of race, for each presidential election in the period 2000-2020.

elections, suggesting that the lower mayoral nationalization measured is likely not due to mayoral elections being predominantly nonpartisan. Note that for the nonpartisan elections, I only use elections where there is at least one Democrat or Republican candidate, party information I obtain by scouring local news outlets and various other websites, to calculate the Democratic (or Republican) margin of victory. The Democratic margin of victory used is therefore based on party affiliation that I find for candidates.

We see from the "Dem Runs" column in Table 5 and Figure 5c the results for races where there is at least a known Democrat candidate running, which accounts for 67% of the total number of races. The difference between these results and the results in Table 3 is that instead of computing zero for races in which no Democrat runs, they are removed entirely from the analysis. Removing these observations slightly reduces the overall level of nationalization, confirming that the lower local election results is not propelled by elections where no Democrat is running.

Another distinguishing factor between congressional or gubernatorial and local elections is that most local elections are non-concurrent, meaning that they take place on a different day as presidential elections. One would expect to see more nationalization for concurrent elections as voters are more directly and immediately influenced by their presidential vote choice as opposed to non-concurrent elections. Looking at Table 5, from the non-concurrent and concurrent columns, the concurrent elections tend to display higher nationalization, especially in 2020 and 2004. But nevertheless, even the concurrent mayoral elections do not exhibit significantly greater degrees of nationalization than the overall sample, also peaking in magnitude in 2020.

7.3 Nationalization and Incumbency Advantage

There have been some studies that document the recent decline of incumbency advantage in U.S. elections over the last few elections. According to Jacobson (2015), incumbency

advantage is inextricably related to "diminishing levels of partisanship and party loyalty...and a decoupling of congressional from presidential elections", resulting in elections more centered on candidates and incumbents with the upper hand (Ferejohn 1977; Kritzer and Eubank 1979). The recent patterns of decreasing incumbency advantage paint a picture of party divisions and fewer voters who are inclined to defect from their own party loyalties. Jacobson (2015) and others have even made the direct connection between growing nationalization of congressional elections and diminishing incumbency advantage.

Table 6: **Nationalization and Incumbency Advantage, 1976-2020.**

Office	Unit	Clusters	Coef	P-value
House	District	2	-1.074	0.091
Senate	County	2	-1.010	0.164
Governor	County	2	-0.214	0.586

Regression of measure of nationalization in mayoral elections (in percentages), defined as in Equation (2), on incumbency advantage as in Gelman and King (1990).

To provide additional evidence on the relationship between nationalization and incumbency advantage, I calculate the correlation between γ_t and incumbency advantage using Gelman and King (1990)'s incumbency advantage model. The results are reported in Table 6, where the coefficient between the two variables is negative for all three elections. The lowest and most significant negative correlation is found in the House and these results are overall consistent with works such as Jacobson (2015); Carson, Sievert, and Williamson (2020) who find that incumbency advantage is higher in times of low nationalization and vice versa. Indeed, this validation strengthens the observations made by some scholars and demonstrates the potential of γ_t for other applications.

8 Discussion and Conclusion

Elections in the U.S. have long been dictated by a duopoly of two national political parties that have become increasingly centralized, homogeneous and powerful. A political condition that we now find ourselves in, nationalization, along with polarization and partisanship, can reshape American politics in ways that could depress diversity and individualism. However, to gain a better and deeper understanding of this phenomenon, a rigorous measurement must be developed and applied to not only congressional but also state and local offices. With this quantifiable standard, we can take a pulse on how nationalization has changed over the years and manifested under different political settings.

I put forth an adaptable nationalization measure using a k-means clustering algorithm and conceptually distinguish between various subpresidential elections within a nationalization framework. The results using this measure on congressional and gubernatorial races are congruent with a lot of extant literature that tracks the increase in nationalization starting from the late 1980s. In the 2020 general election, there was a notable surge in nationalization to an all-time-high, with Senate elections exhibiting the highest degree of nationalization. With the fewest number of elected officials out of the ones studied here, the Senate is often regarded as the most nationalized as its candidates - a national election at the state level - are considerably more concerned with national issues and more closely associated with the national party than governors or even their counterparts are in the House. I also find that House elections, although less nationalized than Senate elections, are more nationalized than gubernatorial elections in 2020, where the latter are subnational elections and thus relatively more detached from national currents.

However, I do not observe the same upward dynamic in local elections, namely mayoral and state legislative elections, where nationalization has increased much less in the last two decades and remains at a significantly lower level than that of other subpresidential elections. This may run counter to existing beliefs that assume national issues and political

organizations have even come to dominate local politics. These findings suggest that voting at the local level is still less impacted by national voting behavior. Nevertheless, a common thread that runs through congressional, gubernatorial, and some subsamples of local elections is the surge in nationalization in 2020, a result that could be attributed to the heightened partisanship and polarization that prevailed in the Trump-Biden election.

A main weakness of existing conclusions regarding a distinct rise in nationalization is that they do not quantitatively take into account local politics, whose elections are often not concurrent with presidential elections and are nominally nonpartisan. Without the inclusion of local elections, conclusions about the effect and magnitude of nationalization cannot be completely credible. I provide a comprehensive look at nationalization at the national and local level via a methodology that is data-driven and easy to implement. A shortcoming of to note is that the local election results in this paper is limited as the mayoral election returns only span the last twenty years and the results for state legislative elections are also limited to the last ten years or so. To add to these results, I will explore the possibility of incorporating older election returns and other types of local elections to bolster these results. But the dataset constructed in this study already offers a fertile resource for more quantitative work to be done in local politics research.

In the future, this measure of nationalization can be applied to political systems in other countries that do not consist of a strict two-party system. It can even be used to shed light on the often convoluted relationship between nationalization and polarization, as well as other related concepts such as partisanship. Although there has already been headway made in this area of research, there still remains many answered questions about the causes and mechanisms of nationalization.

A Nationalization with $K = 3$

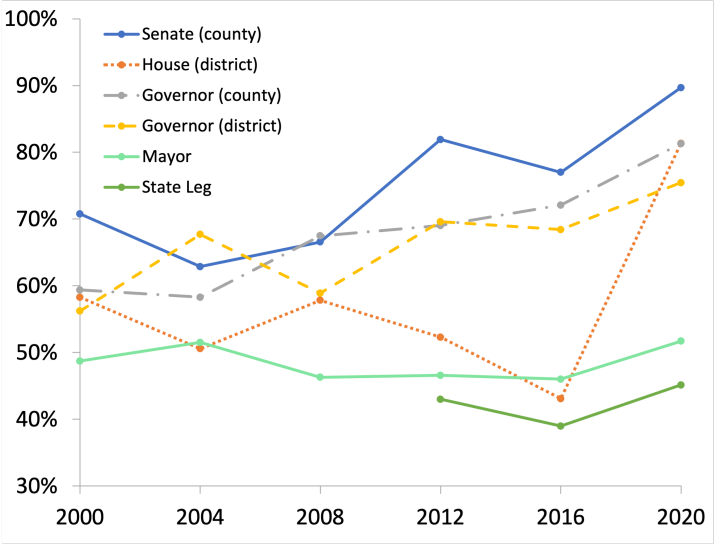


Figure 6: Nationalization of Subpresidential Elections, $K = 3$.

B Comparing Nationalization Measures

Replicating an existing nationalization measure on House, Senate and gubernatorial elections, I implement a simple regression model to determine how much presidential vote share correlates with subpresidential vote share. Following Sievert and McKee (2019), the dependent variable is the Democratic margin of victory and the independent variables are the Democratic presidential margin of victory, incumbency status (1 for Democratic incumbent, -1 for Republican incumbent, and 0 for open seat or otherwise), and incumbent's party (1 if Democrats won the previous election, -1 if Republicans won the previous election).

Table 7 reports results for House, Senate and gubernatorial elections but also for mayoral and state legislative elections using the dataset collected in this paper. It is clear from Figure 7 that the trends for subnational elections are quite similar to those presented in this paper (see Figure 3b), with a peak in nationalization in 2020, albeit with much more fluctuation. Local elections also present a much lower level of nationalization, consistent with my findings.

This is additional evidence to support that the distinction I make between subnational and local elections is important as nationalization manifests differently in these two categories of elections: we do not observe the same degree of nationalization across all subpresidential elections but a unilateral increase on the side of national and gubernatorial elections.

The results in Table 7 also underscore the contribution of my data-driven clustering methodology. Although we see increasing trends and a separation between subnational and local elections in terms of nationalization, the significance of these regression coefficients and confidence intervals vary greatly, namely for mayoral and state legislative elections. Additionally, confidence intervals often overlap, making it difficult to ascertain the precise change in nationalization from election to election, whereas this problem does not apply to the methodology outlined in this paper. Furthermore, these methodologies cannot be applied to political systems with more than two major parties.

Table 7: **Nationalization using regression coefficients**

Year	House	Senate	Gubernatorial	Mayoral	State Legislative
1976	0.729*	0.504*			
1980	0.524*	0.354*	0.255*		
1984	0.341*	0.456*	0.213*		
1988	0.485*	0.760*	0.237*		
1992	0.498*	0.660*	0.561*		
1996	0.559*	0.769*	0.786*		
2000	0.553*	0.796*	0.457*	0.318	
2004	0.545*	0.851*	0.361*	0.211	
2008	0.494*	0.849*	0.432*	0.227	
2012	0.571*	0.809*	0.581*	0.137	0.083*
2016	0.538*	0.769*	0.580*	-0.182	0.009
2020	0.812*	0.918*	0.777*	0.093	0.133*

Measure of nationalization of subpresidential elections using regression coefficient. The dependent variable is the subpresidential election Democratic margin of victory. The main independent variable is the presidential election Democratic margin of victory. The other two predictors are the incumbency status and incumbent's party status. * denotes statistical significance at the 1% level.

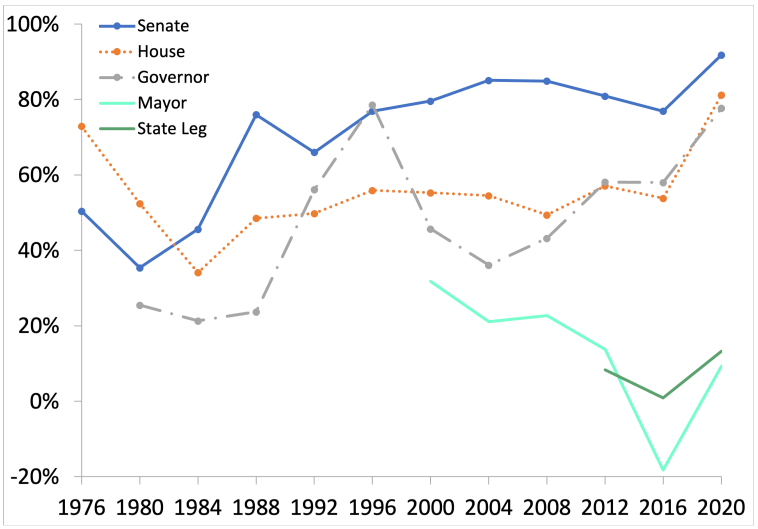


Figure 7: Regression Coefficients for Subpresidential Elections.

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