Chapter Three: Electing America's Election Officials

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Introduction

One of the unique aspects of democracy in the United States is the diffuse nature of our election administration. Rather than a central government office, elections are organized by local officials in thousands of jurisdictions across the country. Many of these officials are themselves directly elected by voters in contests they are charged with conducting, oftentimes with partisan affiliations on the ballot.

This chapter examines the practice of using elected officials to administer America's democratic contests. After exploring the historical roots of directly elected local election officials and recent trends in election administration, we turn our attention to examining what these officials do, where they are elected, how they are elected, and who gets elected. Our analysis leverages the most thorough survey to date of local election administration in the United States as well as the 2020 Democracy Fund/Reed College Survey of Local Election Officials. We focus on six dimensions of election administration: the degree of uniformity within states, the number and type of independent authorities responsible for administering elections, the geographic level of responsibility, the selection method, and the partisan nature of these offices. These dimensions are mapped between states, between jurisdictions, and over time, providing a complete picture of local election administration in the United States. We conclude by tackling the tricky question of whether election officials *should* be elected.

Electing the stewards of democracy traces its roots to the country's very founding. The practice has come under increasing scrutiny due to the changing demands of the office and an increasingly fraught political environment. These officials are tasked with completing a diverse array of complex tasks, including registering voters, selecting polling locations, recruiting poll workers, and counting and certifying election results.

Municipalities and counties act as laboratories of election administration, differing in terms of the number of local election authorities involved, whether they operate at the county or municipal level, whether they are constituted as boards or individuals, whether they are elected or appointed, and whether they are selected with partisan affiliation. Elected officials are more likely to serve sparsely populated, geographically large, and rural jurisdictions, and are also more likely to be older, non-Hispanic white, and Republican. However, elected and appointed officials hold similar preferences about election policies and administrative priorities.

Two-thirds of all jurisdictions elect their local election officials and half of all jurisdictions use an openly partisan selection process. This is the basis for concerns about partisanship in election administration (Ferrer et al. 2021; McBrayer et al. 2020; Porter and Rogowski 2018; Stuart

2004; White et al. 2015). Additionally, many jurisdictions have switched from elected to appointed officials and from partisan to nonpartisan administration over the past few decades. We believe these shifts to be positive and encourage other jurisdictions to reevaluate their methods for selecting the stewards of democracy.

At a moment when concerns about election integrity, politically motivated election administration, and election security have captivated the nation, this chapter offers a careful accounting of the current state of affairs and how it might change in the years to come.

Why are Election Officials Elected in the United States?

Decentralized election administration is very uncommon outside the United States. Nearly all other democracies have centralized election authorities, either in the form of appointed commissions, an appointed government official, or a government minister in charge of running elections (Massicotte et al. 2004). No other democracy entrusts elected, partisan local officials with the administration of their elections. How did the United States end up with such a unique system?

When English colonists first arrived in America, they imported familiar forms of government (Ewald 2009). Administrative positions such as clerks and recorders were established in municipalities across New England. Local self-governance arose in the form of town meetings and the election of citizens to local offices and boards. The first local government election in America took place in New York City in 1686 and included a city clerk (Byers 2008). This hyperlocal form of government spread from New England to the Midwest and South, leading many states to form important governance structures at the township and county levels.[1]

Initially, election administration formed only a small part of municipal and county officials' responsibilities. Elections took place infrequently and with little preparation; registration lists were not maintained and ballots only rarely used (Hale et al. 2015). Election administration became more complex and time consuming by the end of the 19th century with the adoption of voter registration and party primaries, the move to the Australian (secret) ballot, and the use of voting machines. It has grown even more so in recent decades, due to a combination of population growth, technological innovations, and frequent law changes (Minnite 2010). Although some centralization of duties has occurred at the state and federal levels—especially with the National Voter Registration Act in 1993 and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) in 2002—election administration duties have largely remained in the hands of local offices.

The political environment has grown more difficult as well. Voting rights have been contested throughout U.S. history, with periodic battles to expand the suffrage to racial minorities, women, and Native Americans (Keyssar 2009). Voting laws continue to be a highly partisan and

[1]https://www.michigan.gov/sos/elections/upcoming-election-information/voters/special-topics/michigans-elections-system-structure-overview

racialized affair (Bentele and O'Brien 2013). Increasing polarization (McCarty et al. 2016) has left Americans divided across pary and ideological lines. Meanwhile, an increasingly competitive electoral environment has raised the stakes of elections (Lee 2016). These trends have resulted in the politicization of election administration itself, with heated fights over election laws and partisan scrutiny over election officials (Hasen 2012). The 2000 election, decided on razor thin margins in Florida, catalyzed some of these changes. It led to the passage of HAVA, which created the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and set basic standards on how elections should be conducted across the country. President Trump's claims of a stolen election in 2020 spurred even more partisan acrimony and distrust of election officials. A 2020 Gallup poll found that 59% of Americans say they are not confident in the honesty of U.S. elections.

The new demands of the job coupled with a fraught political environment has led to increasing turnover rates of local election officials and recruitment issues.[2] Chapter 9 details how election officials now regularly face partisan acrimony, accusations of malfeasance, and even death threats.[3] As discussed in Chapter 4, COVID-19 has proven an additional burden for election officials that has led many to decide to retire. Such an environment might attract candidates with strong partisan inclinations who are willing to bear these costs due to their ideological extremism rather than those motivated by civic duty (Hall 2019). These trends raise pressing concerns about both the quality of local election officials and their ability to administer elections in a professional and unbiased manner. It also urges a reevaluation of direct election as a method for selecting local election officials.

What do election officials do?

Local election officials oversee registration and voting administration. Registration administration involves registering voters and maintaining a registration list. Voting administration involves creating ballots, hiring and training poll workers, selecting poll locations, processing candidate nominations, purchasing and maintaining voting equipment, overseeing the casting of ballots, processing absentee and provisional votes, and tabulating and certifying the election results (Ferrer et al. 2021; Hale et al. 2015; Kimball and Kropf 2006). Voting administration duties can also include enforcing campaign finance and electioneering laws, educating candidates about the election process, undertaking registration drives, handling voter inquiries, hiring staff, and creating department budgets. The exact responsibilities and amount of discretion local election officials have to carry out these responsibilities varies widely across jurisdictions (Ferrer et al. 2021).

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[2] https://www.themainemonitor.org/vacant-and-newly-filled-clerk-jobs-are-a-concern-ahead-of-maines-primary-elections/

[3] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/nov/01/us-election-workers-threats-violence; https://www.inquirer.com/politics/election/spl/pennsylvania-election-2020-officials-retiring-nightmare-20201221.html

Officials typically administer multiple elections each year. According to the 2020 Democracy Fund/Reed College Survey of Local Election Officials (2020 DF/RC Survey), nearly half of all election officials administered four or more elections in 2020. Each contest involves nearly a dozen deadlines for candidates and voters that administrators must track.[4]

Whereas states are tasked with setting policy and conducting elections in accordance with federal law, the primary responsibility for administering elections lies with local election officials. In most states, this authority rests with officials at the county or county-equivalent level,[5] and at the city, village, or township level in a handful of New England and Midwest states. Election officials operate in 7,793 independent jurisdictions throughout the county, including 2,921 counties and 4,872 municipalities. In many jurisdictions, duties are divided between multiple statutorily independent authorities. The size of election offices also varies widely. Half of all jurisdictions have no more than one full-time equivalent (FTE) election administrator (2020 DF/RC Survey). Jurisdictions have, on average, between two and five staff members, with just 2% comprising more than 20 FTE employees. The actual work of setting up polling locations, checking in voters, and tabulating votes is usually left to volunteers who serve as poll workers for a single day (Burden and Milyo 2015).

Where are election officials elected?

Building on the work of Kimball and Kropf (2006), Hale et al. (2015), Ferrer et al. (2021), and Ferrer (2022), we conduct the most thorough survey to date of local election administration in the United States. The following six dimensions of local election administration are explored:

- *Uniformity within State*: Does every jurisdiction in the state have the same form of election administration, or do some have different forms of administration?
- *Number of Election Authorities*: Is there a single local election authority in each jurisdiction, or are there multiple authorities?
- *Geographic Level of Responsibility*: Does administrative authority rest at the county level, at the municipality level, or is it shared between the two?
- *Authority Type:* Are elections administered by an individual or a board?
- *Selection Method*: Are elections officials appointed or elected?
- *Partisanship*: Are election officials directly elected with partisan affiliations or selected by officials with partisan affiliations?

[4] For an example, see Texas' 2022 election calendar: https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/voter/important-election-dates.shtml

[5] County-equivalents include the region level in Alaska, the parish level in Louisiana, and city-counties or independent cities in other states.

We examine differences between states, between jurisdictions, and over time, as well as demographic and geographic patterns in local election administration. Data sources and coding details are found in the Online Appendix.

Uniformity within State

Only a minority of states—21 plus DC—administer local elections uniformly across their local jurisdictions. Twenty-nine states have some degree of jurisdiction-level variation, which ranges from a single anomaly to widespread heterogeneity. For instance, every county in West Virginia has an elected partisan clerk who is in charge of election administration. The one exception is Ohio County, where instead the County Commission oversees elections and appoints an Elections Coordinator. Among Texas' 254 counties, 119 have an appointed elections administrator chosen by a county elections commission, 125 have a county clerk with chief election responsibilities, and 10 entrust election duties with the tax assessor. Adding an additional layer of complexity, the tax assessor handles registration duties in 116 counties and the county clerk handles these duties in 19 counties.

Deviations from a state's most common form of election administration are typically found in the most populous jurisdictions, usually in the form of an election board or an appointed position rather than an elected individual. This is the case in Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, Washington, and Wisconsin. Many states allow counties some discretion to determine their own rules for governance. These home-rule charter counties are a common source for variation in the selection methods of local officials, especially in California, Florida, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Widespread within-state variation may also be the result of the state devolving power to every county (Minnesota and Texas) or municipality (Connecticut, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, Vermont, Wisconsin) to choose its own form of election administration. States may also pass separate legislation for each jurisdiction-level change (Georgia and Massachusetts).

The degree of variation in local election administration makes broad characterizations across the U.S. difficult. However, it provides an opportunity for scholars to study whether certain forms of election administration—such as electing or appointing officials—produces better election outcomes.

Number of Election Authorities

Election administration in the U.S. is decentralized beyond the fact that local officials are responsible for running elections. In many jurisdictions, multiple officials with separate authority administer elections. Across the 50 states and Washington D.C., we identify 92 different local

election authorities with substantive statutorily defined duties to run elections.[6] These are listed in Table 3.1, and include both individuals and boards.

In 25 states, the typical form of administration is a single authority in charge of each jurisdiction. For example, every county in Idaho elects a partisan clerk as the sole local election official responsible for all voting and registration administration duties. Conversely, half of all states have two or more independent authorities. With six distinct positions, Alabama has the most divided local election administration of any state. The elected probate judge, circuit clerk, and sheriff each have independent responsibilities and form an election commission that selects poll workers. Meanwhile, state leadership appoints a county board of registrars and the county commission retains important election duties.

Table 3.1: Local Election Authorities in Each State's Typical Jurisdiction

[6] This figure is derived by counting the form of administration found in each state's modal jurisdiction. There are close to 150 unique election authorities when including jurisdictions that do not conform to the state's typical election administration format.

State	Local Election Official
Alaska	**Regional Election Supervisor**
Alabama	**Probate Judge**
	County Commission
	Board of Registrars
	Circuit Clerk
	Sheriff
	Election Commission/Appointing Board
Arkansas	**Clerk**
	Election Commission
	Quorum Court
Arizona	**County Election Administrator**
	County Recorder
	Board of Supervisors
California	**Clerk**
Colorado	**Clerk and Recorder**
Connecticut	**Registrar of Voters**
	Town Clerk
DC	**Board of Elections**
Delaware	**Election Board/Department of Elections**
Florida	**Supervisor of Elections**
	County Canvassing Board
Georgia	**Board of Elections and Registration**
Hawaii	**Clerk**
Iowa	**Auditor**
Idaho	**Clerk**
Illinois	**Clerk**
Indiana	**Clerk**
	County Election Board
Kansas	**Clerk**
Kentucky	**Clerk**
	County Board of Elections
	Sheriff
Louisiana	**Clerk of Court**
	Registrar of Voters
	Board of Election Supervisors
	Parish Council
Massachusetts	**City/Town Clerk**
	Board of Registrars
Maryland	**Board of Elections**
Maine	**Municipal Clerk**
Michigan	**Township/City Clerk**
	Township/City Election Commission
	County Clerk
	County Election Commission
	Board of County Canvassers
Minnesota	**County Auditor/Treasurer**
	City/Town Clerk
Missouri	**Clerk**
MIssissippi	Circuit Clerk
	Election Commission
Montana	**Clerk and Recorder**
North Carolina	**Board of Elections**
North Dakota	**Auditor**
Nebraska	**Clerk**
New Hampshire	**Moderator**
	Town/City Clerk
	Supervisors of Checklist/Board of Registrars
	Board of Selectmen

New Jersey	**Board of Elections**
	Clerk
	Superintendent of Elections
New Mexico	**Clerk**
	Board of Registration
Nevada	**Clerk**
New York	**Board of Elections**
Ohio	**Board of Elections**
Oklahoma	**Election Board**
Oregon	**Clerk**
Pennsylvania	**Election Director/Chief Registrar**
	County Election Board
Rhode Island	**Canvassing/Town Clerk**
	Board of Canvassers
South Carolina	**County Board of Voter Registration and Elections**
South Dakota	**Auditor/Finance Officer**
Tennessee	**Election Commission**
Texas	**County Clerk/County and District Clerk**
	Tax Assessor-Collector
	Commissioners Court
Utah	**Clerk**
Virginia	**General Registrar**
	Electoral Board
Vermont	**Town Clerk**
	Board of Civil Authority
	County Clerk
	Town Moderator
Washington	**Auditor**
Wisconsin	**Municipal Clerk**
	County Clerk
West Virginia	**Clerk**
	Board of Ballot Commissioners
	County Commission
Wyoming	**Clerk**

Note: Bolded authorities identify the primary local election official responsible for administering elections in the state's modal jurisdiction.

To make it possible to generalize about local election administration across the U.S., for each state a single authority is identified who is the primary official responsible for administering elections in that state's modal jurisdiction (bolded authorities in Table 3.1). Some judgment is exercised in determining which authority undertakes the most important election administration duties.[7] In making this characterization, voting administration is prioritized over registration administration. In particular, we look to identify the authority who is the chief election official in charge on Election Day.

The following sections characterize states along key dimensions of local election administration using this definition of primary local election officials.

Geographic Level of Responsibility

[7] Prior literature—especially Bassi et al. (2009); Ferrer et al. (2021), and Kimball and Kropf (2006)— is not always in agreement for each state.

In 42 states and D.C., the primary local election authority operates at the county level.[8] Eight states in the Northeast and Midwest are instead administered by local election officials with responsibility at the municipal level—typically, a city, village, town, or township. These are Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin. In Michigan, Minnesota, Vermont, and Wisconsin, responsibilities are divided between municipal and county officials, although in Michigan, Vermont, and Wisconsin the municipality undertakes most administrative duties.

The implications for delegating authority to the municipal level instead of the county level are not immediately obvious. Towns tend to be less populous than counties with population counts often in the hundreds rather than thousands. They are also more likely than counties to use nonpartisan contests rather than partisan ones. While fewer people means fewer votes to oversee on Election Day, it also usually means fewer resources to successfully administer elections (Kimball and Baybeck 2013). In short, the benefits to accountability that come from highly localized and personal relationships likely compete with resource and know-how costs that are steepest in the smallest jurisdictions.

Authority Type

Election authorities can either be a single individual or a board composed of multiple individuals. Boards can undertake administrative responsibilities themselves, delegate those responsibilities to one or more other individuals, or share statutorily defined duties between themselves and other election authorities. The primary local election official is an individual in 37 states. In 13 states and D.C., a multi-member board wields chief election responsibilities at the local level.

Boards aggregate the preferences of multiple people. Most operate through majoritarian rule, although in some jurisdictions—and for some decisions—unanimity might be required. It is possible that boards informally operate according to bipartisan cooperation and deliberation, regardless of their formal composition. Boards can also act as little more than rubber stamps for the pivotal board member or chairman. In contrast, individuals are never directly constrained by other veto players, though other executive officers and the local legislative body could influence election administration decisions.

A board could serve as a useful deliberative mechanism for election administration policies. Or, it could stymie much-needed reform. Similarly, an individual local election official could be a champion of change, or could push policies towards undesirable election outcomes such as lower turnout in pursuit of self-interested ends. Future research should examine the tradeoffs between these two forms of local election administration.

Selection Method

[8] This includes county-equivalents such as parishes (Louisiana) and regions (Alaska), as well as states with independent cities that are county-equivalent

Local election officials can be directly elected by voters or appointed by other public officials. When appointment is used, the election office is removed from direct voter accountability and instead placed in the hands of the appointing individual or board. Appointing authorities are typically the jurisdiction's legislative body or local executive authority, but may involve state officials or judges. The chain of appointments can extend multiple times before an elected official is reached. Appointed authorities typically have titles such as Election Commissioner, Director, Manager, Supervisor, or Board of Elections.

Almost two-thirds of states select their primary local election official through election while the rest use appointments. This share is equivalent across county and municipal jurisdictions. However, it is highly uneven when accounting for authority type. Of the 33 states with elected authorities, 30 elect individuals whereas three--Connecticut, Louisiana, and Mississippi--elect boards. In contrast, among the 18 states that appoint their officials, 11 use boards and seven use individuals. Most elected authorities are individuals, whereas most appointed authorities are boards.

Partisanship

When officials are elected, they can either run in partisan contests where their party affiliation is included on the ballot or they can run in officially nonpartisan races in which no party affiliation is listed next to their name. Appointed members can be selected by officials with partisan affiliation or by those who are officially nonpartisan. They can also be selected by boards of officials who are officially nonpartisan or that have a certain partisan balance, or by bipartisan boards with a mandated equal composition of Democrats and Republicans.[9]

In total, 35 states and D.C. entrust partisan local officials to be their primary election administrators, whereas only 10 use nonpartisan officials and five use bipartisan authorities. It is instructive to examine this breakdown by authority type and selection method, as a partisan elected official is quite different from an appointed board that is characterized as partisan. Among the 30 states that elect an individual official, 22 use a partisan administrator and eight use a nonpartisan official. Among the three states that elect a board, Louisiana and Mississippi use a partisan body and Connecticut uses a bipartisan body with even party membership. Among the seven states that appoint an individual, five are partisan and two are nonpartisan. And among the 11 states that appoint a board, seven are partisan and four are bipartisan. In most places where individual election officials are elected, they run with partisan affiliations on the ballot. And in a majority of states that elect or appoint boards to administer elections, they ensure even party membership in these bodies.

[9] Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Ohio all use boards with equal partisan balance. Kentucky and Michigan also use bipartisan boards but these are not their primary election administration authority.

Nonpartisan election administration is more common in states that delegate to municipal jurisdictions than those that delegate to county-level jurisdictions. Only three of the eight states with municipal-level election administration use partisan administrators (38%), compared with 33 of the 42 states with county-level jurisdiction (79%). This is consistent with the fact that Progressive Era reforms made many municipal elections nonpartisan (Cigler 1995; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Trounstine 2010), whereas counties have largely retained party labels on the ballot.

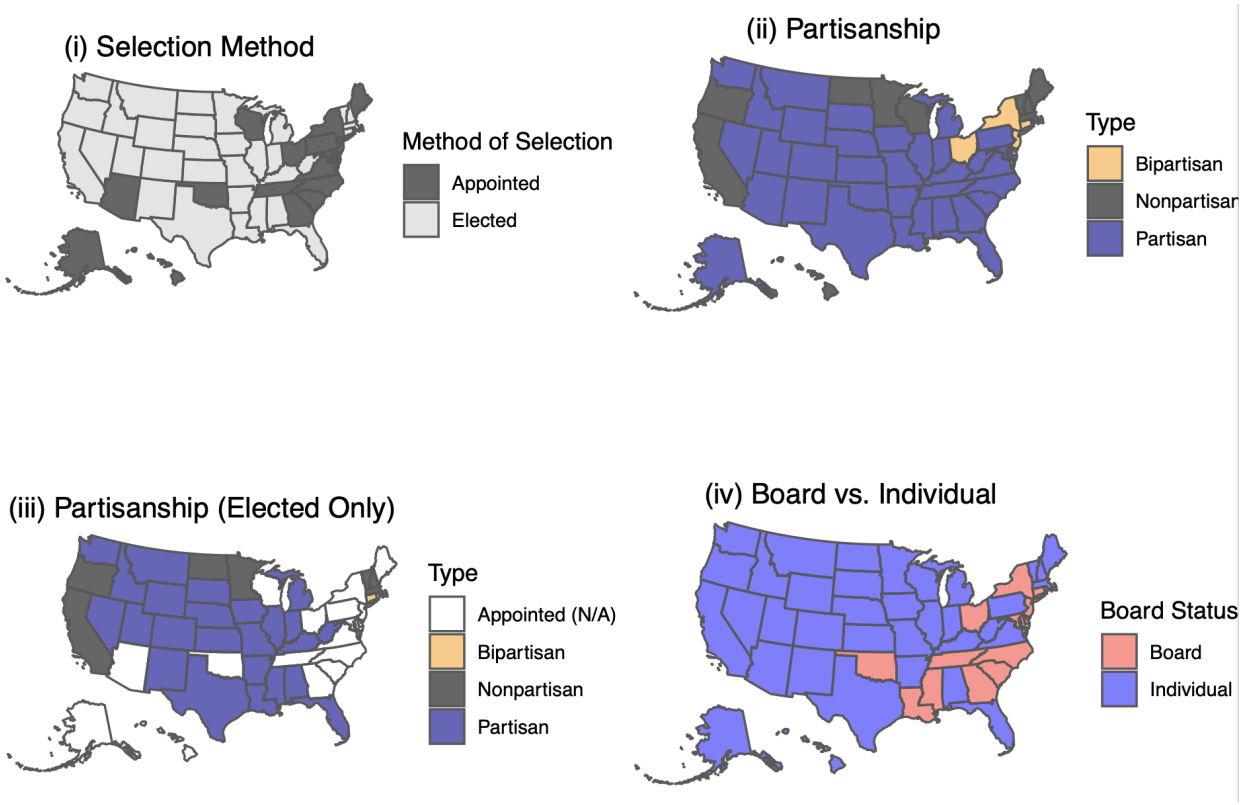
Election administration completely divorced from partisan politics is a rarity in the United States. The vast majority of elected officials who administer elections are selected through an openly partisan process. Even states that appoint and use boards typically involve partisan actors in the process, and rarely do they do so in ways that meaningfully ensure bipartisan cooperation. For instance, it is typical for a partisan county government to appoint individuals who are nominally nonpartisan but who have limited independent statutory authority. This is the case in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Virginia. Or there is a partisan authority with meaningful control over the nominally nonpartisan authority that directly appoints the local election official. In Alaska, regional election supervisors are appointed by the State Director of Elections, who is in turn appointed by the elected partisan Lieutenant Governor.

It is misguided to think of officials appointed by partisan actors as nonpartisan. Although the governor, county legislator, or municipal executive is not typically elected on an electoral reform platform, closely contested elections, the willingness of elites to engage in rhetoric attacking the integrity of elections, and their statutory authority to hire and fire appointed officials could lead local administrators to be subject to considerable partisan pressure. Whether these individuals are equipped to withstand such pressure is an open question.

Geographic Distribution of Local Election Administration

In this section, we illustrate the distribution of local election administration characteristics across the country. Figure 3.1 maps three key dimensions of administration: selection method, partisanship, and authority type. This figure reveals geographic patterns in how local election officials are selected and operate.

Figure 3.1: Map of U.S. States by Local Election Official Selection Method, Partisanship, and Authority Type



Note: The characteristics of the primary local election official is mapped for each state. This is the authority who handles the greatest share of election responsibilities in the state's modal jurisdiction. The titles are interpreted as follows: (i) the distribution of states with elected vs. appointed primary local election officials, (ii) the states in which these officials are selected via partisan, bipartisan, or nonpartisan processes, (iii) the breakdown in partisanship only among states that elect the primary local election official, and (iv) the breakdown in authority type between states with individual primary local election officials and those with boards.

Panel (i) displays the typical selection method used to pick local election officials in each state. It reveals that appointment is largely confined to the eastern half of the United States, especially the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic. In contrast, election officials are typically elected throughout the Midwest and Western states, as well as parts of the South.

A different pattern emerges when examining the partisanship of the selection process. Panel (ii) displays partisanship for all states and panel (iii) displays partisanship for those that directly elect their local election officials. Nonpartisan election administration is mostly used in a few Northern and Western states, especially those in New England, the upper Midwest, and the coastal West. Bipartisan arrangements are located in the mid-Atlantic states. In the rest of the county, the officials in charge of administering elections are typically either directly elected with partisan affiliation or appointed by those with partisan affiliation.

Panel (iv) illustrates that board-managed local election administration is widespread in only two regions: the Northeast and South. In all other regions, primary responsibilities lie with an individual.

All four graphs show signs of geographic clustering. States tend to use the same election administration practices as their neighbors. At the same time, these maps simplify a great deal of real-world complexity. No individual dimension of local election administration fully characterizes the states in terms of local election administration. Even the three dimensions considered here mask important differences such as the specific appointing authority, the composition of election boards, and term length, as well as within-state variation, the presence of other local election authorities, and the specific responsibilities of these officials.

Jurisdiction-level Variation in the Selection Method and Partisanship of Local Election Officials

The previous sections examined the modal form of election administration in each state. We turn our attention now to county- and municipal-level variation in the selection method and partisanship of local election officials. This section quantifies the amount of sub-state variation that exists, examines patterns, analyzes what factors make jurisdictions more likely to have particular forms of election administration, and explores jurisdiction-level changes in election administration over the past few decades. We characterize each jurisdiction according to its primary local election authority--the official or board who undertakes the most important election administration duties.

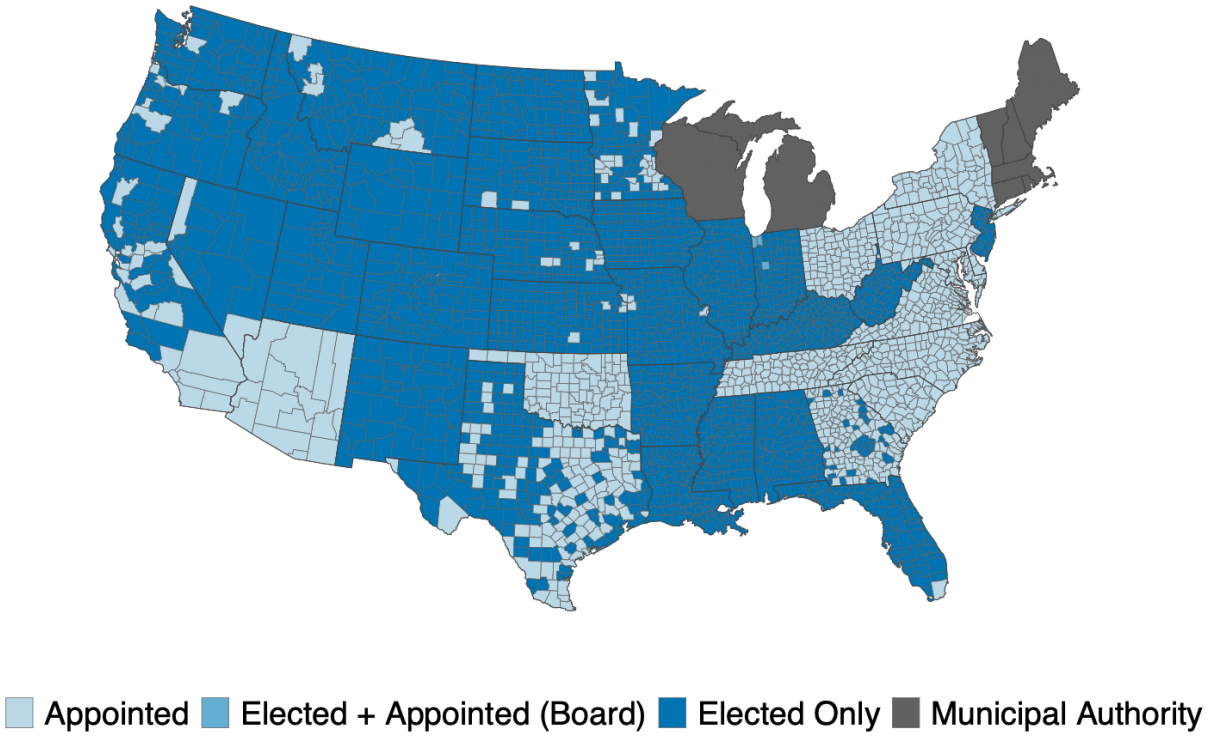
<u>County-level variation in characteristics of local election administration</u>

Of the 42 states with county-level election administration, 18 have variation in the selection method and partisanship of their primary local election authorities.[10] These differences are visualized in Figure 3.2. Some counties within these states elect their local election officials while others appoint; similarly, some use a partisan process whereas others use a nonpartisan one.

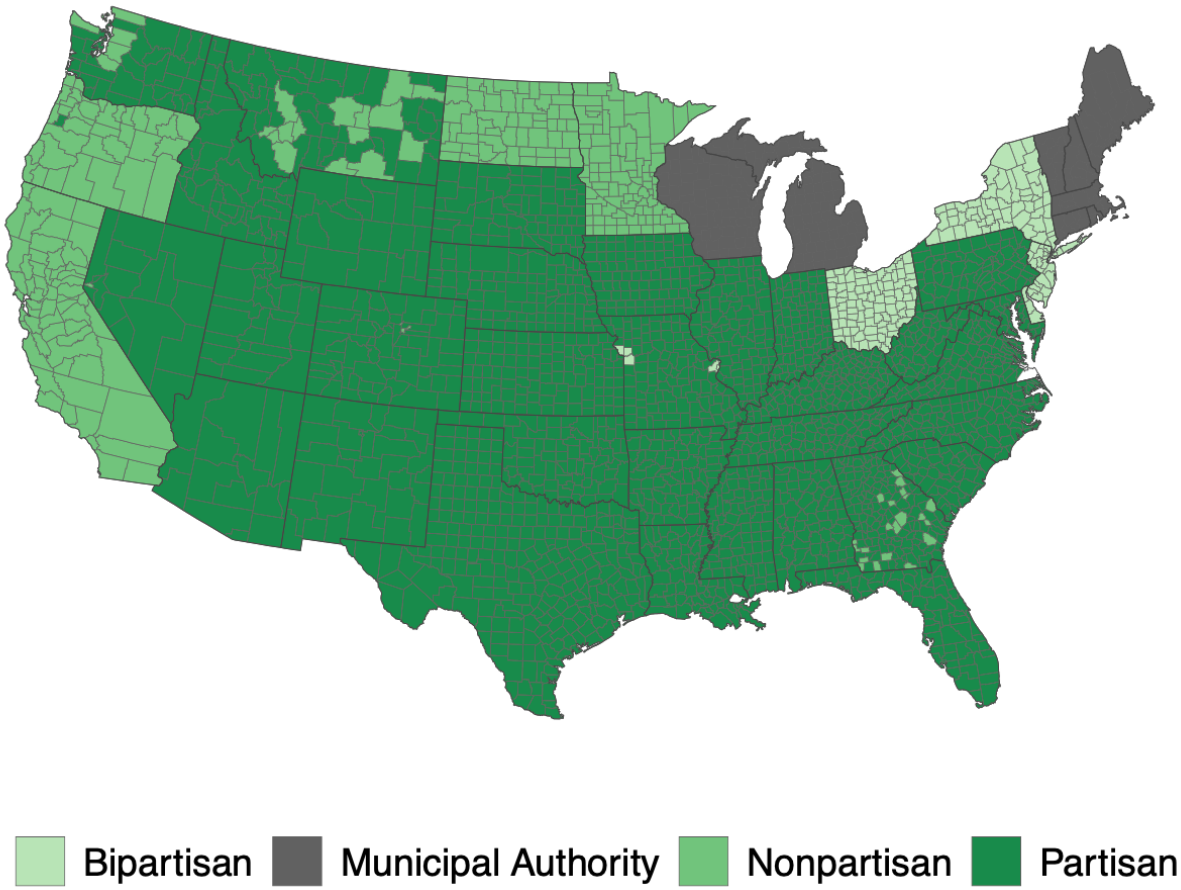
Figure 3.2: Local Election Official Selection Method and Partisanship by County

Selection Method

[10] Illinois is included in this count despite having county-level uniformity because some municipalities are in charge of administering elections within their borders rather than the county. New Jersey is excluded, although there is substantial county-level variation in the amount of responsibilities the primary election authority undertakes.



Partisanship



Note: In Illinois, the cities of Bloomington, Chicago, Danville, East St. Louis, Galesburg, and Rockford have independent appointed election boards. In Missouri, Kansas City has an independent appointed bipartisan election board. County officials run elections in the areas outside of these cities. All regions in Alaska use partisan appointed election administration, and all counties in Hawaii use nonpartisan appointed officials.

This level of analysis allows us to characterize the total number of jurisdictions and percentage of people covered by certain forms of local election administration. These are summarized in Table 3.2. Among the 2,921 counties in states with county-level administration—which make up more than 90% of the total country's population—1,825 (62%) have elected officials whereas 1,096 (38%) have appointed officials.[11] Taking into account the fact that jurisdictions with appointed officials are typically more populous than those with elected officials, we find that 38% of people are served by an elected local election official and 62% are served by an appointed official.

In terms of partisanship, 2,456 counties (84%) use partisan administration, 179 counties (6%) use bipartisan administration, and 286 counties (10%) use nonpartisan administration. 65% of people in jurisdictions with county-level responsibility for election administration have a partisan

[11] These figures include DC. Three counties in Indiana with boards composed of both elected and appointed officials are counted as elected for simplicity.

official whereas 20% reside in jurisdictions with a nonpartisan official and 15% have bipartisan officials.

Table 3.2: Select Characteristics of Counties by Selection Method Type

Type	Count	% of Total Pop.	Avg. County Pop. Size	Avg. White %
Elected	1,825	38.1	62,675	76.6
Appointed	1,096	61.9	169,690	67.8
Partisan	2,456	65.4	79,924	72.8
Nonpartisan	286	19.8	207,716	73.4

Most deviations consist of a single case or only affect a handful of the state's jurisdictions. For instance, Miami-Dade in Florida is the only county with an appointed Supervisor of Elections, whereas every other county has an elected official. Similarly, Denver County in Colorado elects a nonpartisan clerk and Broomfield County has an appointed clerk, whereas every other county in the state elects a partisan clerk. Even where only a single county deviates, however, it could affect a sizable percentage of the state's population since it is typically the most populous jurisdiction. For instance, Colorado has 64 counties but 15% of the population is concentrated in Denver County. There is more widespread heterogeneity in selection methods of local election officials in California, Georgia, Minnesota, and Texas, and in election official partisanship in Montana.

What besides a county's population size predicts its particular set of election administration characteristics? In line with the policy diffusion patterns observed at the state level, some evidence of clustering is evident at the county level. In Georgia, counties with elected officials tend to be found in the middle or eastern parts of the state. Most Texas counties with elected officials are found in west Texas and the panhandle, whereas most appointed election officials in Minnesota are in the southern part of the state. Every Washington county with nonpartisan election administration is found in the northwestern part of the state. In South Dakota, both counties with appointed officials are located in the southwestern part of the state and lie entirely within Native American reservations.[12]

Jurisdiction-level variation in local election official selection presents an important opportunity to study the impact of selection method and partisanship on the quality of election administration. States in America have often been called "laboratories of democracy". They experiment with new policies and forms of governance that, if successful, might be adopted nationwide (Conant 2006). If states are the laboratories of democracy, counties can be considered the laboratories of election administration. Within-state variation in practices and changes in selection methods

[12] Oglala Lakota and Todd counties contract their local election administration to auditors elected in neighboring counties.

over time afford scholars the opportunity to investigate questions such as the causal effect of appointing rather than electing local election officials (Ferrer 2022). We encourage similar inquiries utilizing this heterogeneity.

Municipal-level variation in characteristics of local election administration

Six of the eight states whose primary local election authority lies at the municipal level experience jurisdiction-level variation in the selection method and partisanship of their election officials.[13] These variations are mapped in Figure 3.3. This pattern of variation is unsurprising considering that New England has always organized governance at highly local levels. Municipalities in several New England states continue to hold town meetings in which the town's residents elect their representatives, collectively make policy and budget decisions, and decide their own form of self-governance.

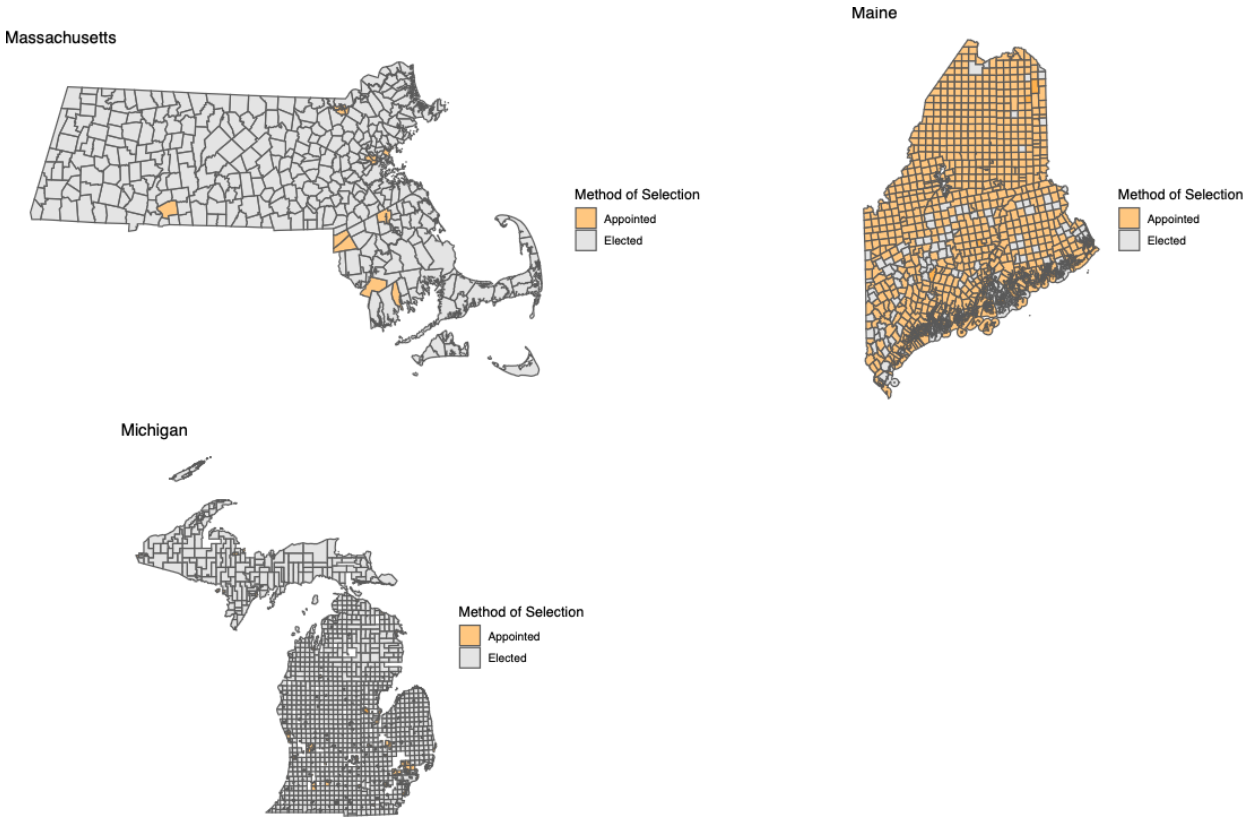
As with counties, we characterize the number of municipalities covered by certain forms of local election administration. Among 4,872 municipalities in states with municipality-level administration, 3,310 (68%) have elected officials whereas 1,562 (32%) have appointed officials. In terms of partisanship, 1,288 municipalities (26%) use partisan administration, 179 (4%) use bipartisan administration, and 3,405 (70%) use nonpartisan administration.

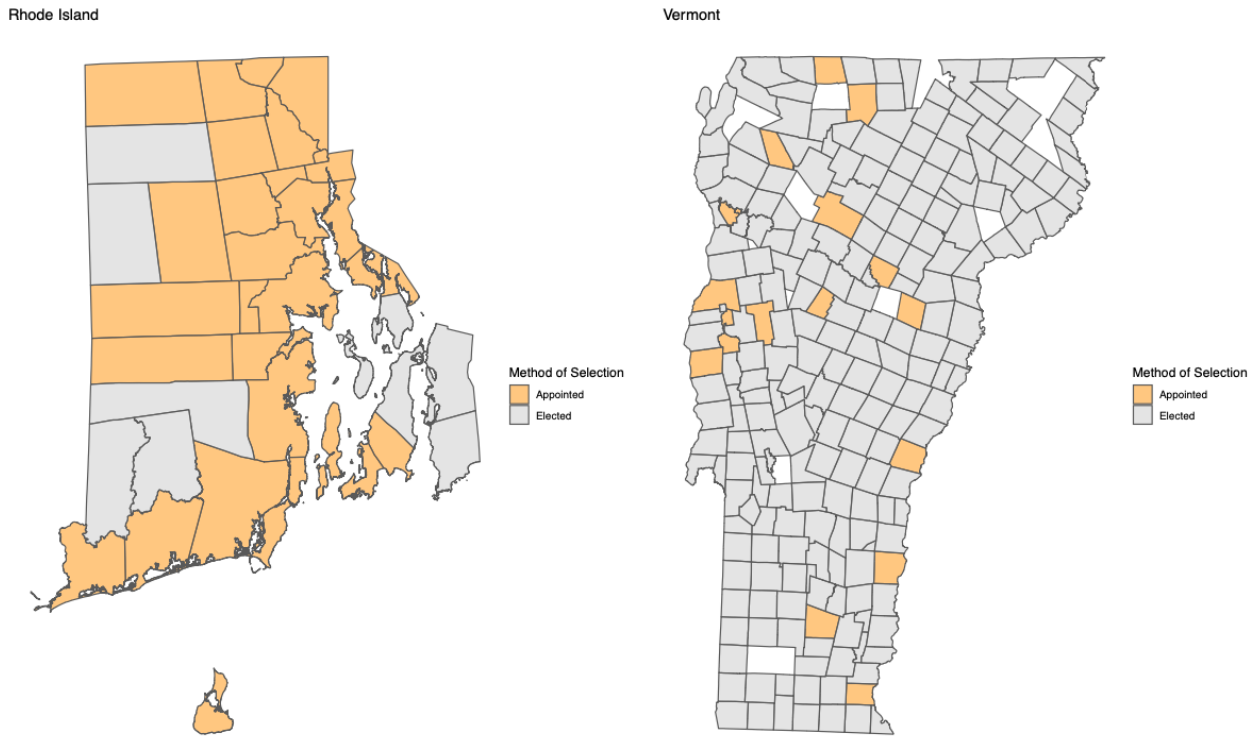
In most cases, only a handful of municipalities deviate from the selection method and partisanship used throughout the rest of each state. Notable exceptions include elected vs. appointed splits in Maine and Rhode Island and partisan vs. nonpartisan splits in Rhode Island. As with county-level variation, deviations are most likely to come from populous jurisdictions, but are far from exclusive to these places.

There is less geographic clustering at the municipal level than found at the state and county levels. Other features of towns and cities could be useful for explaining the origins of election administration practices. Municipalities with a history of politically fraught contests could attempt to insulate election administration from such negativity by using appointments. Conversely, a municipality concerned with corruption could see direct election as a way to improve the accountability of office. Considerations such as the degree to which appointments maximize experience and expertise (Ferrer 2022), a desire to minimize nefarious electioneering (Ferrer et al. 2021), and budgetary factors (Mohr et al. 2020) all likely play a role as well.

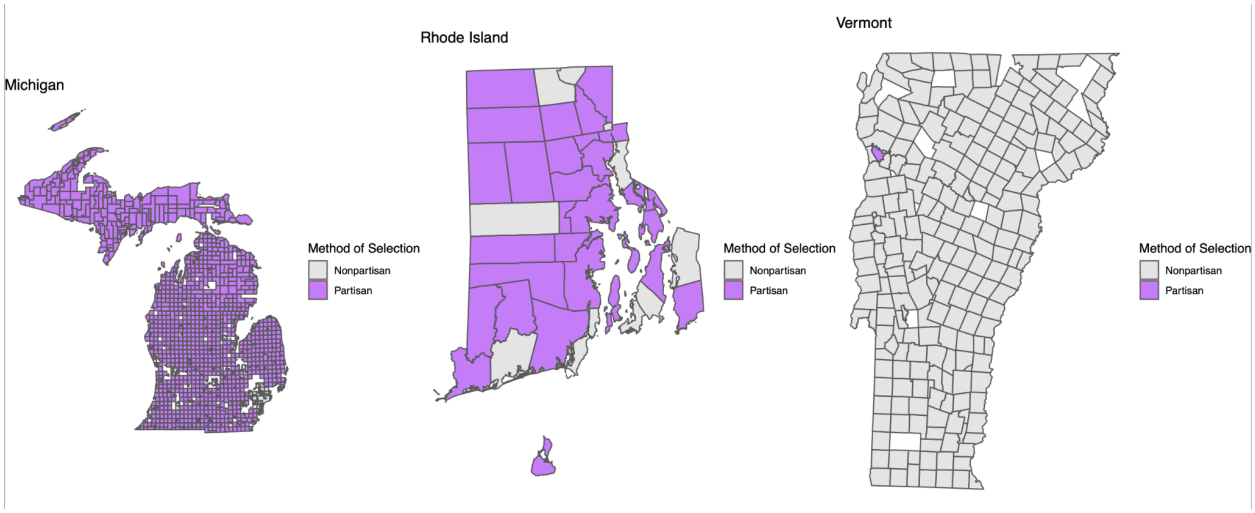
[13] The other two states, Connecticut and New Hampshire, also experience heterogeneity in the selection of their municipal clerks, although this is not the primary election authority in either state.

Figure 3.3: Local Election Official Selection Method and Partisanship by Municipality
Selection Method





Partisanship



Note: States without municipal variation in selection method or partisanship are not pictured. In Maine, unincorporated townships are coded as appointed.

Predicting County Selection Method and Partisanship

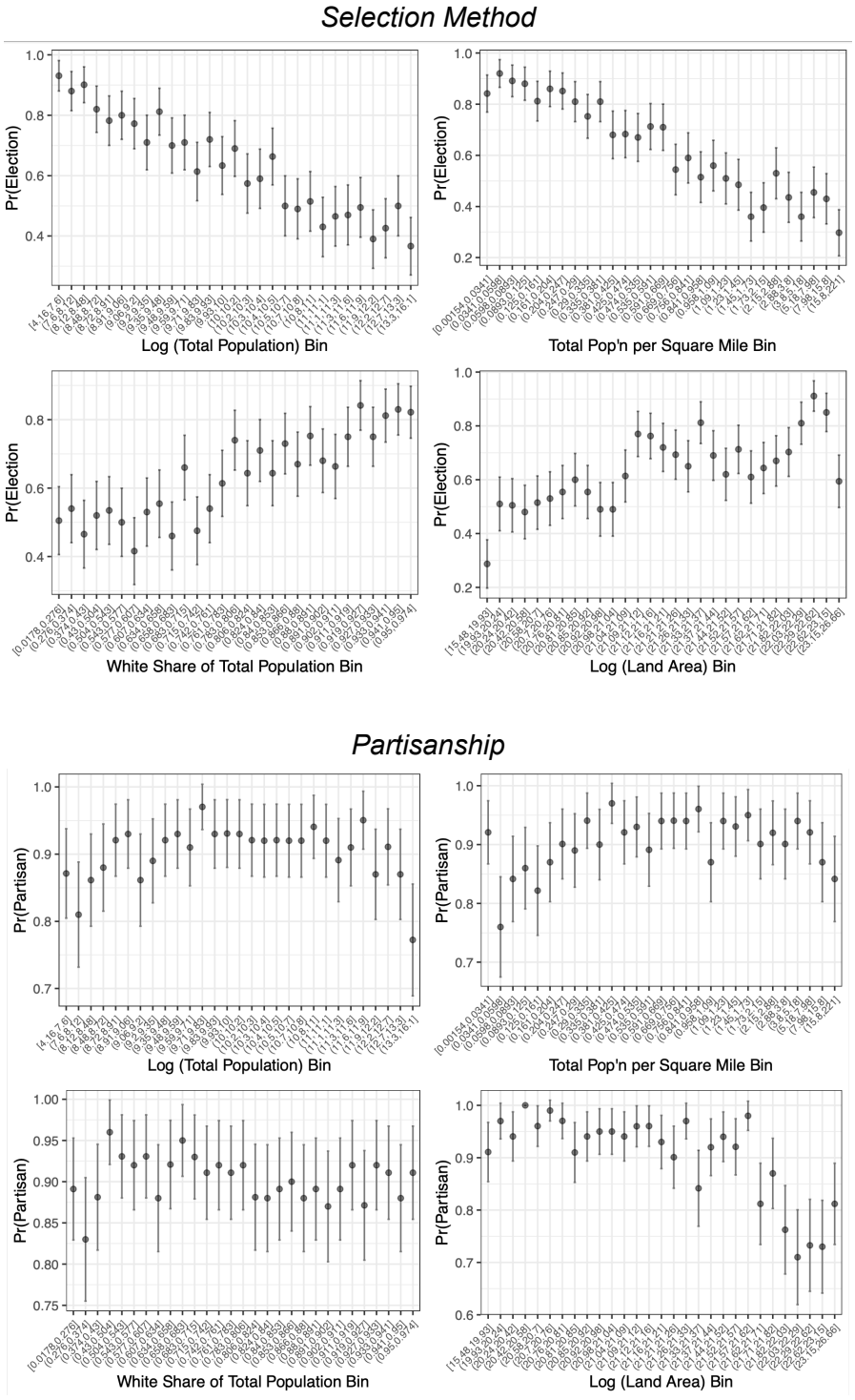
What explains the fact that some counties and municipalities appoint their local election officials while others use direct elections? In this section, we test whether demographic and geographic

factors explain some of the variation in the selection method and partisanship of local election administration.

Figure 3.4 displays the output of nonparametric binned averages of a county's logged population, population density, non-Hispanic white share of the population, and logged land area on whether it has an elected official (top panel) and whether it has a partisan official (bottom panel).[14] This gives the probability of having an elected local election official (top panel) and of having a partisan local election official (bottom panel) broken out for each individual binned group. In both panels, bins are arranged from lowest values on the left to highest values on the right.

[14] For each plot, we group the independent (horizontal axis) variable into bins containing roughly 100 observations each and present the mean of the dependent (vertical) variable for each binned group.

Figure 3.4: Predicting Selection Method and Partisanship Using County-Level Demographic Characteristics



Note: Estimates of total population, population density, and white share of total population are from 2020 Decennial Census P.L. 94-171 Redistricting Data (U.S. Census Bureau).

There is a meaningful relationship between population size and selection method. Populous jurisdictions are much more likely to use appointed election officials than smaller jurisdictions. Urban, densely populated, and racially diverse jurisdictions are more likely to have appointed election officials than rural ones. Finally, geographically large jurisdictions are more likely to use elections and nonpartisan contests than geographically small ones.

These analyses suggest correlations rather than causal relationships. However, they allow us to identify basic patterns in local election administration across America. The typical jurisdiction with an elected local election official is geographically large, sparsely populated, rural, and mostly non-Hispanic white. Appointed administrators, on the other hand, are more likely to oversee elections in compact, populous, urban, and racially diverse areas.

Changes in Local Election Administration Over Time

There has been a notable amount of institutional change in the selection method and partisanship of local election officials over the past few decades. Sixteen states have experienced at least some change in the selection method of their local election officials since 2000. These changes are relatively rare among the 41 states with county-level election administration. Only 10 have experienced changes. In three, counties have been forced to change due to a state law or referendum. South Carolina overhauled their election administration in 2014, replacing a system that involved county election commissions, voter registration boards, and combined boards with combined boards of voter registration and elections across the state. A successful 2018 Florida referendum required all counties to elect Supervisor of Elections in partisan contests, leading four to switch from nonpartisan elections. It will also force Miami-Dade County to switch from an appointive to elective position by 2024. Finally, a 2018 Utah law prohibited counties from holding nonpartisan races, leading Grand and Morgan counties to switch to partisan clerk contests.

Two states have undergone more widespread county-level changes over the past two decades (Ferrer 2022). In Georgia, most counties have switched from elected to appointed election administrators, and some have switched from nonpartisan to partisan elections. Similarly, in Texas over 100 counties have switched to appointed administrators, and some counties have also consolidated their elected officers from two authorities to one. Very few counties in either state have made switches in the opposite direction. California, Illinois, Minnesota, and Washington all have counties that have voluntarily switched from elected to appointed officials, and in Montana a few counties have switched from partisan to nonpartisan elections.

Municipality-level switches are much more common. Of the eight states with municipality-level election administration, six have experienced at least some changes. These are most widespread in Connecticut and Wisconsin, where dozens of municipalities have moved from elected to appointed positions since 2000. Maine, Michigan, and Vermont have witnessed switches of the same type on a smaller scale, and a few towns in Massachusetts have replaced partisan contests with nonpartisan ones.

In almost all cases, changes in local election administration have moved from partisan to nonpartisan elections and from elected to appointed positions. Both are due to the increasing demands of the position, the need for professionalization, and concerns over partisan polarization. The administrative mishaps with the 2000 presidential election were a particularly strong impetus for jurisdictions to switch their form of administration. Still, most states and counties have not altered their election administration structures over the past few decades and are unlikely to do so in the near future.

How are election officials elected?

This section explores basic descriptive facts about the electoral contests local election officials participate in, including their general level of competitiveness, timing, term length, and conflicts of interest that arise when the officials overseeing an election are also on the ballot. Races for local election officials are similar to other contests for local offices in that they are rarely competitive, usually take place in even years in November, and most commonly have four-year term lengths. They differ from other offices in that a conflict of interest arises when the election official administers the election they themselves participate in.

Competitiveness

Most local election officials are elected in uncontested races. Ferrer et al. (2021) collected data on over 5,800 partisan local election official contests in 21 states between 1998 and 2020. They find that only about one quarter of general election races feature a contest between two candidates, and in fewer than one-in-eight is the margin of victory less than 20 percentage points. While these findings are specific to partisan elected officials in county-level jurisdictions, they are in line with studies of other local offices (Thompson 2020, Yntiso 2021) and likely extend to the full population of elected election administrators.[15]

There is also some variation in ballot practices. In some states and jurisdictions, uncontested races are left off the ballot altogether or listed as declared elected at the end of the ballot. Florida, for example, does not hold primary or general contests when a single individual runs in a contest. In other cases, voters always have an opportunity to register an affirmative vote in the general election and may also be able to vote for a write-in candidate.

It is difficult to disentangle whether the lack of contested election official contests should be concerning for those worried about the health, fairness, and quality of locally administered elections in the U.S.. Theoretically, uncontested elections could either be the result of a satisfied

[15] The rate is somewhat higher when taking into account contested primaries—although these contests do not involve the whole electorate. It is unlikely that nonpartisan contests have systematically higher rates. The rate of contestation is likely even *lower* in municipal-level contests, where smaller population pools likely mean fewer candidates are available or willing to run.

electorate or the failure of the electorate to effectively monitor and sanction officeholders for their actions (Besley 2006). If the latter is the case, we would expect better outcomes following more competitive elections.

Timing

Elections usually take place in even years. Among partisan elected officials in county-level jurisdictions, a majority of contests take place on a midterm cycle (Ferrer et al. 2021). Approximately one-quarter take place during presidential years; the rest do not follow a four-year cycle. Nonpartisan elections sometimes take place on separate dates from partisan contests or take place on the same day as the primary. Partisan general election contests almost always occur in November.

There is more variation in municipal-level elected officials, with local election dates less likely to be consolidated with state and federal elections. Many municipal elections take place off-cycle from presidential or midterm elections, which greatly diminishes participation (Anzia 2012).

Term Length

Elected local election officials usually serve a four-year term, though this varies anywhere from one to six years. In the sample of states that elect partisan officials at the county level, all but Alabama and West Virginia use four-year terms, with those two states electing officials for six years. A longer term comes with the increased risk that an official will not serve the entirety of their term, leading to widespread temporary appointments.

There is also some variation in term lengths within states, especially those with election authority at the municipal level. For instance, 48 towns in Connecticut elect their clerk to a two-year term, 72 elect to four-year term, and one town elects their clerk for a six-year term. Appointment lengths also range widely and are frequently indefinite in length.

Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest arises when local election officials participate in the very contests that they themselves administer. Local election officials could attempt to use their authority to sway results in order to secure reelection. Administrative decisions such as siting or removing polling locations, accepting absentee and provisional ballots, determining early in-person voting times, selecting poll workers, and purging the voter roll may alter turnout and affect the composition of the electorate (Dyck and Seabrook 2009; Kimball et al. 2006; McBrayer et al. 2020; Merivaki and Smith 2016; Shepherd et al. 2021; Stuart 2004). In practice, Ferrer et al. (2021) find that the incumbent local election official party is no more likely to win a close race than to lose one.

Several states have introduced specific provisions to avoid the potential for this conflict of interest to arise. In Georgia, probate judges that participate in a contested election are

temporarily relieved of their duties by a three-person Board of Elections, who administer the election in their stead. County clerks in Kentucky may appoint a temporary replacement while they are candidates, but are not required to. And in Florida, members of the county canvassing board are not allowed to be candidates. In total, at least a dozen states have statutes on the books limiting the involvement of elected office-holders in election administration.[16]

These types of provisions rarely come into effect since few local elections are contested in the first place. Nonetheless, they should be more widespread to remove the potential for a conflict of interest. While it appears that election officials do not typically influence election outcomes in their favor when they are on the ballot, the incentive to do so remains. Even the appearance of election manipulation can have a negative impact on political participation (Bowler et al. 2015). Given low turnout in local U.S. elections and prevailing negative sentiment around election administration, it would be wise for states to consider stronger conflict of interest laws to create checks on election officials overseeing contests in which they themselves are candidates.

Who gets elected?

According to a recent nationwide survey of local election officials, the typical official is white, female, between 50 and 64 years of age, and makes about $50,000 annually (Adona et al. 2019; see also Chapter 2). They are also deeply committed to their task as the stewards of democracy, and to administering elections that are accessible, efficient, and secure. We have identified systematic differences in the places where local election officials are elected and appointed. Elected officials are more likely to administer elections in jurisdictions that are rural, sparsely populated, mostly white, and located in the Midwest, South, and Mountain West. Ferrer et al. (2021) show that counties that elect partisan officials as their primary election administrators are also significantly less populous and less racially diverse. Considering elected and appointed officials operate in different geographic contexts, are the officials themselves different?

This section examines the demographics, ideology, and relevant policy preferences of elected and appointed officials using the 2020 Democracy Fund/Reed College Survey of Local Election Officials (DF/RC Survey 2020).

Demographics

One important dimension is election official demographics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Prior research suggests that descriptive representation of racial minorities can lead to better representation and policy outcomes (Clark 2019; Tate 2003). Election officials who come from traditionally underrepresented groups may work harder to increase minority turnout. For instance, King and Barnes (2018) find that descriptive representation among poll workers

[16] The authors are grateful to Phoebe Henninger for this data.

boosts African American and Hispanic voter confidence in election administration. It is also plausible that younger election officials might be especially mindful of increasing traditionally low levels of youth participation.

Table 3.3 displays demographic differences between elected and appointed election officials using data from the 2020 DF/RC Survey. The second and third columns show the mean for appointed and elected local election officials, respectively. Appointed officials tend to be younger, on average, than elected officials. While gender and racial/ethnic demographic differences fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance, the results are suggestive that electing officials yields officials that are more likely to be white and less likely to be Black, Latino, or Asian. While this could be due to demographic differences in the underlying electorates or a range of other factors, it is possible that the selection method itself may contribute to a lack of diversity among election officials. To the extent that minorities face a penalty when it comes to fundraising (Grumbach and Sahn 2020), candidate recruitment (but see White et al. 2022), and perceptions of qualification and viability (Sigelman et al. 1995), appointments may provide an avenue to a more racially and ethnically diverse pool of officials.

Table 3.3: Demographics of Elected and Appointed Local Election Officials

Demographic	Appointed	Elected	Difference	SE	Sig. 95%
Age	50.8	62.9	12.1	1.414	Yes
Woman %	78.8	81.8	3.0	3.794	No
White %	90.2	92.2	2.0	2.683	No
Black %	2.7	1.7	-1.0	1.359	No
Latino %	5.1	4.7	-0.4	2.077	No
Asian %	0.6	0.1	-0.5	0.501	No

Source: 2020 DF/RC Survey
Note: Age is estimated from an ordinal question as follows: the midpoint is taken for four age ranges between 18 and 65, and a gamma distribution is used for those who report being 65 years of age or older.

This is especially important considering the low levels of racial and ethnic diversity among election officials examined in Chapters 2 and 4 of this book. Over 90% of local election officials are white, compared with 76% of the general public (Adona et al. 2019). Given the continued barriers to the franchise and discrimination at the ballot box faced by racial and ethnic minorities (Atkeson et al. 2010; Baringer et al. 2020; Barreto et al. 2009; Chen et al. 2020; Cobb et al. 2012; Shino et al. 2021), future research should probe why this disparity exists and what can be done to alleviate it.

Partisanship

One key concern about the partisan election of local election officials is that it introduces the potential for biased election administration. This section examines differences in partisan affiliation between elected and appointed officials. 56% of elected administrators--including 88% of elected county-level administrators-- have partisan affiliations on the ballot. As such, there are legitimate concerns that these officials may carry out their duties in ways that advantage their party.

The 2020 DF/RD survey asks election officials their partisan affiliation on a 7-point scale, ranging from strong affiliation with the Democratic Party (-3) to strong affiliation with the Republican Party (+3). We use this question to create three measures of difference between appointed and elected officials: overall partisan slant, the likelihood of identifying with a party, and the likelihood of strongly identifying with a party.

Table 3.4 displays these three measures of partisan affiliation, comparing appointed and elected officials. When asked to declare partisan affiliation, approximately three-fourths of both appointed and elected officials identify with a party label. On average, appointed local election officials are noticeably more Democratic than their elected counterparts. The average appointed official is somewhere between “lean Democrat” and independent, whereas the average elected official is somewhere between “lean Republican” and independent. These differences are large enough to be unlikely to have arisen by chance, and are likely driven by the fact that appointed officials happen to serve in districts that are more Democratic than the districts that elected officials serve in. Elected officials are also much more likely than appointed officials to strongly identify with a party. It is plausible that this difference is driven by something inherent in the selection method itself rather than where those selection methods happen to be employed.

Table 3.4: Partisan Affiliation of Appointed and Elected Local Officials

Measure	Appointed	Elected	Difference	SE	Sig. 95%
Partisan Scale	-0.40	0.56	0.96	0.24	Yes
Strong Partisan %	26.07	43.24	17.17	5.71	Yes
Partisan %	73.54	78.46	4.92	4.97	No

Source: 2020 DF/RC survey.
Note: Partisan Scale ranges from -3 (Strong Democrat) to +3 (Strong Republican). Strong partisans are those who identify as either a “strong Democrat” or a “strong Republican”. Partisans are those who identify with a party. Those who respond “I prefer not to answer” are excluded from the analysis.

Table 3.5 displays the differences in party affiliation between local election officials that are elected in partisan contests and those elected in nonpartisan elections. As expected, those elected with partisan affiliation on the ballot are more likely to be partisan. A large majority (87%) of those elected in partisan elections expressed a party preference in the survey, whereas 66% of those elected in officially nonpartisan elections expressed a party preference. Partisan officials are also much more likely to be Republican. The average official elected in a partisan contest leans Republican, whereas the average official elected in a nonpartisan contest is an independent. This is likely due to the fact that partisan contests happen to take place in more conservative jurisdictions rather than something inherent in the election process itself. Finally, partisan contests may produce officials who are more likely to strongly identify with a party.

The differences between partisan elected local election officials and nonpartisan elected local election officials are even larger than the differences between appointed and elected officials. While elected officials on average are about 0.5 scale points more conservative than their appointed counterparts on a seven-point scale, partisan elected officials are nearly a full point more conservative compared to those selected through nonpartisan elections. These findings suggest that how election officials are selected may shape their party affiliation and political polarization.

Table 3.5: Partisan Affiliation of Partisan and Nonpartisan Elected Local Election Officials

Measure	Nonpartisan	Partisan	Difference	SE	Sig. 95%
Partisan Scale	0.01	0.95	0.94	0.27	Yes
Strong Partisan %	39.54	45.84	6.30	6.51	No
Partisan %	65.89	87.28	21.39	5.23	Yes

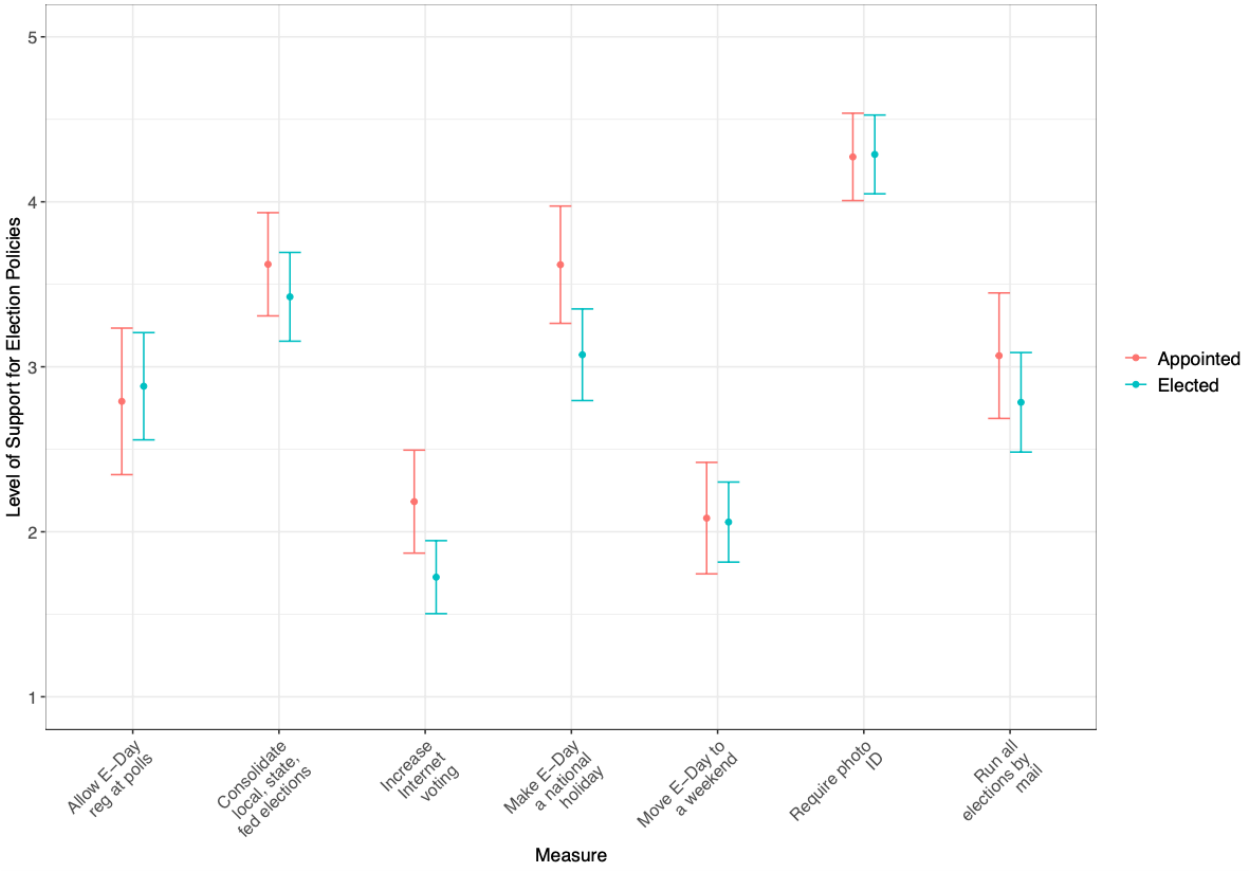
Source: 2020 DF/RC survey.
Note: Strong partisans are those who identify as either a “strong Democrat” or a “strong Republican”. Partisans are those who identify with a party. Those who respond “I prefer not to answer” and appointed officials are excluded from the analysis.

Policies and Priorities

Do elected and appointed local election officials have similar views on election policies and administrative priorities? Figure 3.5 displays the views of elected and appointed officials on a number of key election policies using data from the 2020 DF/RC Survey. Overall, the picture is one of similarity. Elected officials are somewhat less likely to support convenience measures such as all-mail elections and making Election Day a national holiday. This is consistent with the

fact that elected officials lean to the right of appointed officials. However, the observed differences are relatively modest, and on most policy issues elected and appointed officials have similar preferences. On average, they both oppose moving Election Day to the weekend, somewhat oppose Election Day registration, support consolidating elections, and strongly support requiring voter ID.

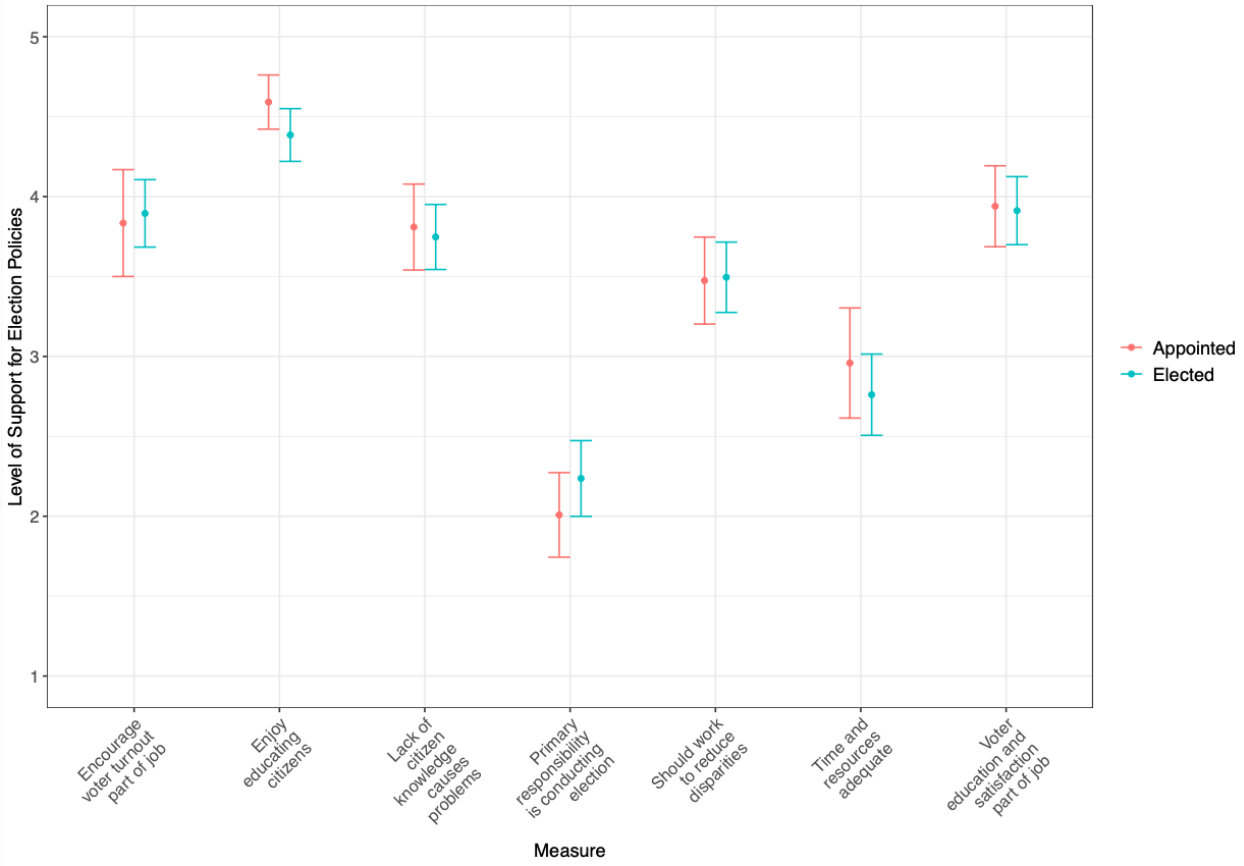
Figure 3.5: Preferences about Election Policies by Selection Method



Source: 2020 DF/RC survey.
Note: Responses range on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support).

Figure 3.6 displays the views of elected and appointed officials on several election administration priorities. Some modest differences are apparent. Appointed officials are slightly more likely to agree that voter education and satisfaction is a part of their duties, to report enjoying educating citizens about elections, and to consider voter education and voter satisfaction as primary responsibilities alongside conducting elections. However, the overall picture is one of similarity. Both appointed and elected officials generally agree that voter education and satisfaction are important, enjoy undertaking these responsibilities, and consider encouraging voter turnout as part of the job. Regardless of selection method, these officials believe that lack of citizen knowledge about voting rules and procedures causes problems, that they are given insufficient time and resources to educate voters, and that they should work to reduce demographic disparities in voter turnout. How local election officials engage and educate voters is explored in Chapter 7 of this book.

Figure 3.6: Preferences about Election Administration Priorities by Selection Method



Source: 2020 DF/RC survey.
Note: Responses range on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support). "Time and resources adequate" asks whether the election official has enough time to educate voters in addition to running elections. "Primary responsibility is conducting election" asks whether the election official agrees that they should not worry about voter education or voter satisfaction.

In summary, the specific selection method used appears to make relatively little difference in the preferences and priorities of local election officials. This is in line with the fact that election officials tend to be less politically polarized than the general public in their views on election administration (Manion et al. 2021).[17] Elite and mass public opinion on election administration is discussed further in Chapter 6. Chapter 10 explores views of local election administrators when jurisdiction population is accounted for.

Should election officials be elected?

Theoretically, elected officials should be more accountable to voters than appointed ones (Besley 2006; Przeworski et al. 1999). This is because voters have the opportunity to select the

[17] The results of a similar series of tests comparing partisan and nonpartisan election officials are available in the Online Appendix. They also show strong evidence of preference convergence.

best candidate in competitive elections, and they also have the opportunity to sanction a current officeholder they find deficient by voting them out of office. Fear of losing an election should motivate officeholders to perform well and be responsive to their constituents (Burden et al. 2013). Additionally, the highly local nature of election official jurisdictions may forge productive ties between officeholders and constituents (Kimball and Baybeck 2013). Many jurisdictions are small enough that all voters can realistically know the election official. This local connection might improve the ability of the official to communicate important facts about the election to their constituents and increase voter participation.

Unfortunately, the selection and sanctioning mechanisms may break down at the local level, especially for local election officials (Ferrer 2022). Elections are only effective at creating accountability when voters have access to high-quality information about the candidates and the quality of their work (Berry and Howell 2007; Lim and Snyder 2010; Snyder and Stromberg 2010). Elected election officials such as clerks and auditors are near the bottom of the ballot and receive minimal news coverage. These positions are also rarely contested. The technical nature of the work may make it difficult for voters to select good candidates in the first place and punish those who perform poorly in office. Additionally, local election officials frequently have titles that do not clearly indicate their election responsibilities and usually handle multiple responsibilities. This dilutes the ability of voters to effectively monitor and sanction their performance.

Given the increasingly technical nature of the job and fraught nature of electoral politics, elections might also negatively alter the pool of candidates by selecting for those willing to run for office rather than those best qualified to administer elections.[18] Additionally, elections limit the geographic pool of potential officials to those living within the jurisdiction. Moving to an appointed position can expand this pool, especially in rural and less populated areas.[19]

There is also a concern that elected local election officials could discriminate along partisan or racial and ethnic lines when administering elections in order to benefit those of the same political affiliation. America's decentralized election system has historically enabled the disenfranchisement of Blacks and other minorities (Keele, Cubbison, and White 2021; Keyssar 2000; Piven et al. 2009). There are continuing concerns that local officials make racially discriminatory decisions (Herron and Smith 2015; Hughes et al. 2020; Merivaki and Smith 2020; Pettigrew 2017; Stuart 2004; White et al. 2015) or provide a benefit for their co-partisans, especially when they openly run with a partisan affiliation (McBrayer et al. 2020; Porter and Rogowski 2018; but see Ferrer et al. 2021).

Resource provision is also an important issue. Existing literature provides conflicting predictions over whether appointing or electing local election officials leads to greater election administration resources. On the one hand, it is possible that elected officials are better advocates for increasing resources, whereas appointed officials are more beholden to the

[18]https://www.petoskeynews.com/story/news/local/charlevoix/2014/08/07/city-voters-choose-an-appointed-clerk/45970739/

[19]https://www.samessenger.com/news/community/st-albans-city-looking-to-give-appointment-powers-to-city-council-to-fill-to-be/article_77ce1142-5dc0-11ec-8869-6b0f8ac134f4.html

cost-cutting efficiency concerns of their principals (Burden et al. 2013). On the other hand, it seems that in particular institutional contexts, the provision of a dedicated appointed official increases the amount of resources flowing into election administration (Ferrer 2022). This is especially the case in smaller jurisdictions, many of which have less than one full-time equivalent (FTE) staff member and where an appointed office can guarantee one FTE worker. According to the 2020 DF/RC Survey, 80% of jurisdictions with less than one FTE are elected, compared with only 44% of jurisdictions with exactly one FTE. This is strong descriptive evidence that selection through appointment increases resource provision. It is imperative that elections are adequately funded, no matter the specific selection method of local election officials (Mohr et al. 2018, 2020). Chapter 8 discusses election funding, with a focus on the role that philanthropy played in ensuring the success of the 2020 elections.

Few studies have directly examined the effects of electing versus appointing local election officials. An audit study of constituent communication found no difference in communication rates between elected and appointed officials (White et al. 2015). A cross-sectional analysis of Wisconsin election officials found evidence that elected and appointed municipal clerks hold different policy preferences and that elected clerks oversee elections with higher participation than appointed clerks (Burden et al. 2013). The most causally credible study utilizes over time changes in the selection method of local election officials in Georgia, Oregon, and Texas (Ferrer 2022). Employing a difference-in-difference strategy with county and time fixed effects, the study finds that switching from elected to appointed clerks boosts voter turnout by at least 1.5 percentage points on average, and registration rates by about 1 percentage point. These benefits are concentrated in smaller counties.

More scholarship has studied the question of whether directly elected Democratic and Republican election officials administer elections differently (see Ferrer et al. 2021). Studies have found differences in the way that Democratic and Republican elected officials facilitate voter turnout (Burden et al. 2013), handle voter purges from the registration list (Stuart 2004), administer provisional ballots (Kimball et al. 2006), site polling places (McBrayer et al. 2020), and communicate with voters (Porter and Rogowski 2018). However, several studies have found null effects on important dimensions (Burden et al. 2013; McBrayer et al. 2020; Shepherd et al. 2021; White et al. 2015). The most causally credible study to date, employing a regression discontinuity design using close contests between narrowly elected Democratic and Republican election officials, finds little evidence that they administer elections in systematically different ways (Ferrer et al. 2021).

In short, it appears that partisan local election officials have not typically benefited their own party. Whether this will hold given the increasingly fraught environment surrounding election administration remains to be seen. Additionally, the latest scholarship suggests there are some advantages to selecting local election officials via appointment rather than election.

Conclusion

Election administration in the U.S. is notable in terms of its diversity. Rather than a uniform top-down system, the exact form of local election administration varies across nearly eight thousand local jurisdictions. Key aspects such as the number of officials involved, their duties, and the selection process used differ across states, counties, and even municipalities. Local jurisdictions act as laboratories of election administration, experimenting with a multitude of different forms in the hopes of discovering what works best.

Local election officials are most typically selected directly by voters in a partisan election. This method is more likely to be used in the Midwest, mountain West, and South, and in rural, mostly white, and sparsely populated jurisdictions. While legitimate concerns have been raised about the unique nature of partisan elected officials, the scholarship so far has provided reassurances that it does not lead to biased election outcomes.

Even so, the demands on our stewards of democracy are only likely to increase further in the decades to come. It is imperative that they are up to the task to succeed. We recommend jurisdictions consider the benefits and costs of their current selection methods, and believe the general shift to nonpartisan elections and appointed positions to be a positive one. It is also imperative that, regardless of their selection method, local election officials remain impartial and fair administrators of the voting process. America’s democracy has come under unprecedented attack in recent years. The stewards of democracy play a key role in ensuring that it survives in the decades and centuries to come.

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