Partisanship in Local Bureaucratic Appointments: Evidence from Election Administration*

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Abstract

Partisan officials make thousands of appointments for ostensibly nonpartisan bureaucratic positions each year. When the partisan balance of these principals flips, do they push out the existing bureaucrats and replace them with officials loyal to their partisan allegiances? In this paper, I examine partisanship in bureaucratic appointments through the widely discussed case of increasing turnover among local election officials. I combine original panel data of local election officials and partisan appointing authorities across 17 states, hundreds of jurisdictions, and 20 years. Employing a series of matching strategies, I find evidence that local election officials are much more likely to leave office upon a switch in the party control of their appointing authority. The effect appears for switches into both Democratic and Republican party control, though turnover appears especially elevated after a switch to Republican control. I fail to identify any effect of a switch in party control on election administration. My findings bring into question the extent to which ostensibly nonpartisan appointments to local offices are being influenced by party politics but also underscore the resilience of the U.S. election system.

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1 Introduction

One of the age-old questions of local politics is whether it replicates or is divorced from nationalized partisanship (Anzia 2021; Tiebout 1956). The traditional view of local officials is that they are nonpartisan bureaucrats operating in issue areas that do not cleanly map onto the national two-party system (Peterson 1981). Recent studies have shown evidence of increasing polarization in state and local politics, to the point where some argue that local politics now mostly replicates national partisan trends (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019; Hopkins 2018). Other studies have identified limits to such polarization, including among sheriffs Thompson (2020) and elected local election officials (Ferrer and Geyn 2024).

Appointments can help divorce government officials from national party politics. Officials selected by appointments instead of direct election are at least partially insulated from electoral pressures. Progressive Era reforms at the turn of the 20th century aimed to achieve this by handing the reins of hundreds of city governments to unelected bureaucrats via the council-manager model. While the impetus for some of these reforms were racist and nativist (Carreri, Payson, and Thompson 2023), insulating bureaucrats from partisan pressures may be desirable in some circumstances. Judges facing electoral pressure tend to render more punitive judgments than those who do not (Gordon and Huber 2007; Huber and Gordon 2004), elected municipal assessors in New York exacerbate inequality in property taxation (Sances 2016), elected city treasurers in California significantly increase borrowing costs relative to appointed treasurers (Whalley 2013), and appointed local election officials oversee elections with more participation and lower wait times than directly elected election officials (Ferrer 2025).

Insulation from partisan pressures might be particularly beneficial in the area of election administration. Nonpartisan election administration is desired by large majorities of the public across both parties (Stewart 2021). Election integrity is vital to a well-functioning democracy, and partisan interference or the appearance of partisan actors can significantly reduce voters' confidence in election results (Norris and Grömping 2019). Previous scholar-

ship has found that election officials who are directly elected administer elections similarly regardless of party affiliation (Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson 2024) and that election officials who are appointed by partisan actors do not appear to produce election results favoring their principals' party (Ferrer 2025). However, partisan appointers could still attempt to shape election outcomes via their appointing authority by replacing election administrators appointed by previous out-partisan principals. Hiring and firing decisions made with regard to partisan preference rather than ability could result in sub-optimal election administration. It could also contribute to increasing turnover rates in the profession, which have grown by nearly 50% over the past 25 years (Ferrer and Thompson 2025). Recent news reports suggest that at least some jurisdictions experienced turnover of election officials due to partisan appointers.[1] But how widespread are these incidents and are they negatively impacting election administration?

This paper studies partisanship in the actions of officials who appoint local election officials across the U.S. Where election officials' principals are themselves elected with party labels, do they use their authority to shape who the chief local election official is? Using original panel data on local election officials and their partisan appointers over two decades and across 842 jurisdictions spanning 17 states and a series of matching analyses, I find that appointed election officials are much more likely to depart their role in the midst of a change in party balance of their principals, particularly when that change is from Democratic to Republican control. However, these departures do not cause noticeable changes in election administration quality. This paper advances our understanding of the nationalization of partisan politics, skyrocketing turnover among election officials, and the resilience of the U.S. system of election administration.

[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/11/02/lynchburg-elections-registrar-lawsuit/

2 Partisanship in the Appointment of Public Officials

Political appointment of bureaucrats, which can be considered patronage in certain contexts, is as old as the system of democracy itself. Even if voters have a say in who represents them, it is infeasible for voters to directly elect all of the officials needed to carry out the necessary functions of government. Patronage politics is ubiquitous across the developing world (Grindle 2012). Comparative scholarship has disagreed about the effects of patronage. Some have found that patronage impedes development through the misallocation of public jobs and the depression of bureaucratic effort (Colonnelli, Prem, and Teso 2020; Geddes 1994; Xu 2018). On the other hand, patronage can improve accountability (Toral 2024). Studies have found patronage to be an effective tool for parties to derive electoral benefits, both in comparative (Calvo and Murillo 2004; Kitschelt 2007) and U.S. (Folke, Hirano, and Snyder Jr 2011) contexts.

Despite its ubiquity, laws and norms can be effective at insulating bureaucratic appointments from partisan political pressures. Bureaucratic independence can be viewed as a principal-agent problem, where the goals of principals can conflict with those of their appointed agents (Hassan, Larreguy, and Russell 2024). Additionally, the skill level of the position alters the degree to which patronage is possible. Low-skilled positions lend themselves more readily to effective patronage than high-skilled ones, where incompetence may be more detrimental to the bureaucracy and obvious to voters (Brierley 2021).

Principals could use their appointment authority to achieve partisan ends in two ways. First, they may seek partisan gain by choosing an agent that informally matches their declared party affiliation. In cases where the currently serving agent was appointed by previous principals of a different party affiliation, the principal could dismiss them or refuse to renew their appointment. Second, principals could influence the actions of their agent by issuing the threat of firing. This requires the willingness of the agent to alter their administrative decisions and the ability of the principal to effectively monitor the actions of their agent.

Principals may be constrained in pursuing partisan actions by laws, by other veto players, and by institutional norms. In the first case, statute can prohibit public officials with appointment authority from removing an agent from their position prior to the end of their term without cause. Even if the principal states ostensible cause, this allows the appointee to sue to retain their job. However, it is worth noting that such lawsuits rarely lead to a favorable outcome for the appointee. Second, multiple principals may be involved in the appointment decision. This creates the possibility for principals with strong partisan desires to be overruled, as a majority must agree on the appointment (Tsebelis 1999). Finally, even if principals have the formal authority and the institutional capacity to exert authority for partisan gain, they choose not to do so to maintain institutional norms of nonpartisanship. Norms are the weakest barrier to action, but politicians may adhere to them by selecting a consensus appointment or maintaining the previous party's appointment because by doing so, they reduce the likelihood that out-partisans will break the norm when they gain power.

3 Data and Methods

Rather than attempting to identify the motives behind the departures of individual election officials, my analysis begins with the premise that if appointers were pursuing partisan ends, they would be more likely to hire a new chief local election official when their party gains majority appointing authority than when there is not a change in the partisanship of the appointing authority. Because the previous election official was selected by out-partisans, the change in principal partisanship should increase the likelihood of turnover in the appointed election official if party politics is influencing the selection of local bureaucrats.

3.1 Data

I draw on two datasets: panel data on local election official turnover across all 50 states over 24 years and an original panel of appointing authorities across states with partisan election

official appointments. I use large-scale panel data on chief local election official turnover from Ferrer and Thompson (2025). This data captures the official who administered each even-year general election with primary responsibility for administering elections, especially overseeing voting on Election Day (Ferrer and Geyn 2024). In jurisdictions with boards, I identify the single official with the most responsibility in running elections. The majority of this data was collected from election results and official directories housed in state and local government websites. Some were acquired via public information requests, through third-party organizations, and from direct communication with jurisdictions. Turnover is calculated as a change in a jurisdiction's chief election officer since the November election held two (or, where noted, four) years prior.

Additionally, I identified all election jurisdictions administered at the county level that select their chief local election official through appointment by partisan officials. Appointed local election officials run elections for more than half of all voters in the U.S. and for 39% of all election jurisdictions (Ferrer and Geyn 2024). Of these, I identified and collected data on 831 jurisdictions where these appointed officials have been selected by principals who themselves run on party labels or are selected by officials who run on party labels at least once between 2004 and 2022. This represents roughly one in five counties. Of the 831 ever-treated jurisdictions, 679 had continuous partisan appointments between 2004 and 2022. I have complete panel data for 662, 97.5% of all jurisdictions that meet these criteria.[2]

The specifics of partisan local election official appointments vary widely, but can be split into two categories: those that are determined at the state and those determined at the county-level. First, some states empower state-level actors to determine the partisan control of county appointment bodies for their elections. The partisan affiliation of the Governor determines the majority party of local election boards in Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Virginia, which in turn select the chief local election official.

[2]Only jurisdictions that administer elections at the county level are included in these figures. In addition, at least some municipalities in Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin use partisan principals to appoint their chief local election officials. These states are not included in the analysis due to a lack of panel coverage of their appointment structures.

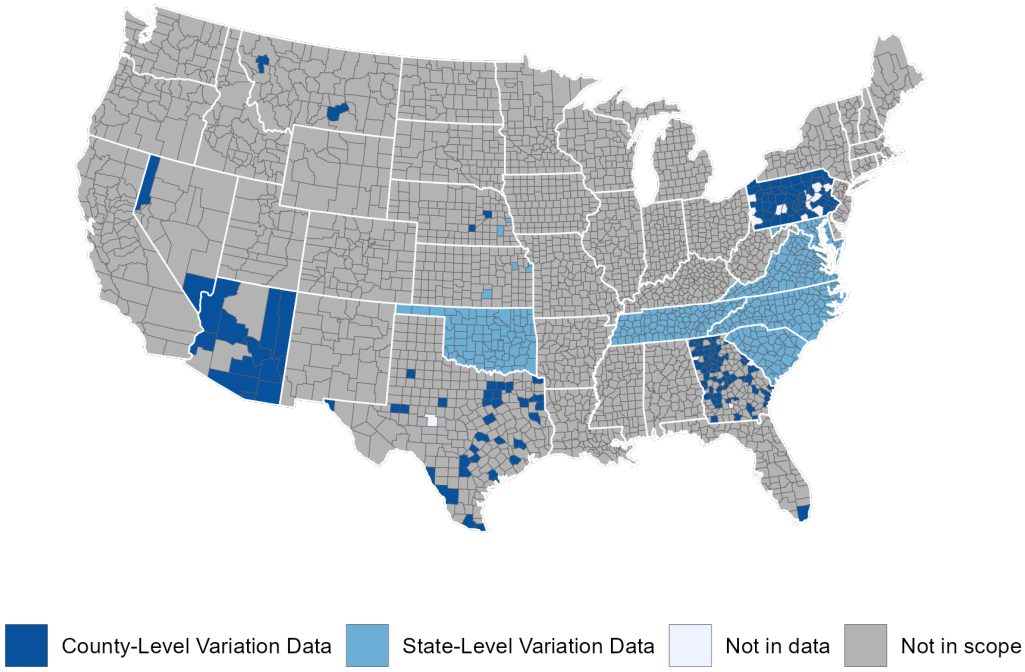
The party-affiliated lieutenant governor in Alaska selects the State Director of Elections, who in turn appoints Regional Election Supervisors. Appointments to Tennessee's State Elections Commission are made by the Tennessee General Assembly—a combination of their upper and lower state legislative chambers. The State Elections Commission then makes appointments to the county election commissions, which finally appoint an administrator of elections in each county.

Alternatively, the partisanship of principals can be determined by county-level officials. County legislative bodies in Arizona, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia all hold appointing authority for chief local election officials that are appointed in these states. In Texas, elections administrators are appointed by the county election commission, which is uniformly composed of the directly elected county judge, clerk, and tax assessor, as well as the county chair of each major party.

Some states vary their appointment method by jurisdiction. In Nebraska, the Governor appoints county election commissioners in counties with over 100,000 residents, whereas the county legislative board makes these appointments for smaller jurisdictions that use an appointed election commissioner. Georgia county appointing bodies can take dozens of different forms and counties frequently change the structure of these authorities. There are dozens of variations in appointment procedure. The most common arrangement empowers the county legislative body to make all appointments, but it is also common to allow each major party to make an appointment.

Table A.1 in the online appendix provides a summary of the appointing authorities for these officials. Figure 1 shows which counties selected their election official via partisan appointment between 2004 and 2022, as well as whether they vary at the county or state level. The data on partisanship of appointing officials was obtained from a variety of sources, including election results, archived state and local government websites, newspaper articles, and direct communication with local officials.

Figure 1: **Map of Included Jurisdictions in the United States**. This map displays which counties are in the data analysis and vary at the county-level (dark blue), which counties are in the analysis but vary at the state-level (light blue), which counties are eligible for analysis (partisan appointment of their chief local election official continuously between 2004 and 2022) but for which complete panel data is not available (white), and which counties are not in the project's scope (grey). Counties are out of scope either because their local election officials are not appointed by partisan principals or because primary election responsibilities are carried out by municipal actors. Alaska's election jurisdictions vary at the state-level, and Hawaii's are not in scope.



3.2 Research Design

I employ a series of difference-in-difference and matching designs to estimate the effect of a change in the partisanship of the appointing official on turnover and election administration outcomes. For difference-in-differences, I estimate the regression $Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta Appoint\_party\_change_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$, where Y_{it} is whether there was turnover of the local election official in jurisdiction i at election year t, α_i and δ_t are jurisdiction and year (or state-by-year) fixed effects, respectively, and $Appoint\_party\_change_{it}$ is a dummy variable taking 1 when the appointing authority changes party and 0 when the appointing authority stays the same. β is the causal effect of interest. This estimation strategy accounts for unit- and

common time-specific confounders. It produces causally valid inferences under the parallel trends assumption, which assumes that turnover rates in jurisdictions that undergo a switch in principal partisanship would have stayed on the same trend as turnover rates in jurisdictions that retain the same principal partisanship under the counterfactual where principal partisanship did not switch. Jurisdictions that only vary at the state level effectively drop out of the analysis when year-by-state fixed effects are employed.

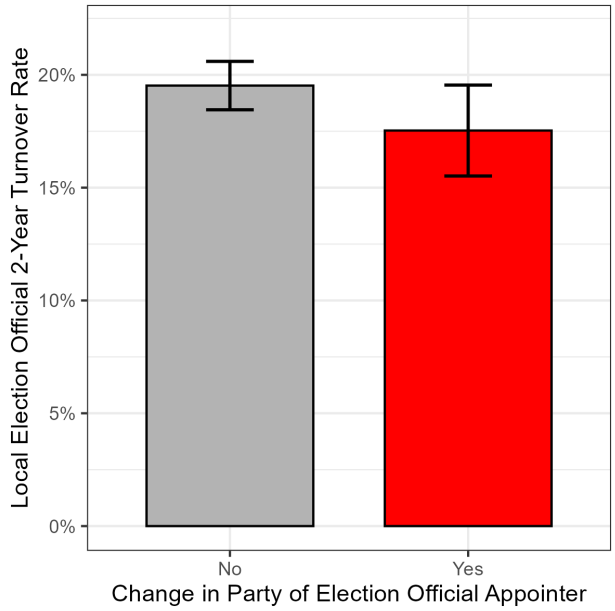
Unfortunately, it is easy to imagine scenarios under which the DID estimators will produce biased estimates. For instance, perhaps jurisdictions with particularly volatile appointment party memberships also have volatile election official turnover. Or, counties that are on a trajectory of partisan composition change also tend to have higher or lower election official turnover rates, for whatever reason. Under either case, changes in turnover rates observed in the wake of a switch in party control cannot be confidently attributed to the partisan principal shift itself. Furthermore, even if parallel trends hold, the staggered nature of the treatment means that any heterogeneity in the effect of treatment, either over time or across different jurisdictions, could bias the estimated treatment effect (Baker, Larcker, and Wang 2022; Borusyak, Jaravel, and Spiess 2021; Callaway and Sant'Anna 2021; de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille 2020).

In order to overcome these concerns, I conduct a series of matching analyses in the spirit of Imai, Kim, and Wang (2018). Given the binary nature of both treatment (appointment partisanship) and outcome (election official turnover), I construct ATT estimates that exact match on-pretreatment party control and election official turnover pattern for X years prior to each potential treatment year. For instance, for 2022 and X = 3, I compare the turnover rates of counties that switch principal party control in 2022 vs. those that did not, only using county pairs in each case that have the exact same party control and turnover patterns in 2016, 2018, and 2020. I also filter to the party switch direction to separately measure the effect of switching to Democratic control and to Republican control.

4 Descriptive Evidence of Partisanship in Election Official Appointments

I begin by showing the results of descriptive analysis of the data, before moving to two-way fixed effect and matching regressions in the following section. Figure 2 shows the percentage of local election officials who leave office over a two-year period split by whether there was a change in the majority party of the official's principal authority. On average, 17.5% of appointed local election officials leave office in a two-year period when the principal's party changes and 19.5% of appointed local election officials leave office in periods when the principal's party does not change. This is not a statistically significant difference, and it is in the opposite direction of what would be expected if principals were using their authority to push out out-party appointed agents after taking office.

Figure 2: **Average Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.



However, most of these averages are driven by a handful of shifts in party control at the state level. A different picture emerges in Figure 3, which separates these results according to whether there is variation in principal partisanship at the state or at the jurisdiction level.

Here, two different relationships are apparent. Turnover appears slightly lower after party switches in jurisdictions with state-level variation. However, turnover is significantly higher after such a switch in jurisdictions where variation is specific to the county. The two-year turnover rate is 30.2% in jurisdictions experiencing a switch in party control, compared with 21.7% in jurisdictions that maintain the same party composition.

Figure 3: **Average Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change and Variation Geography**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

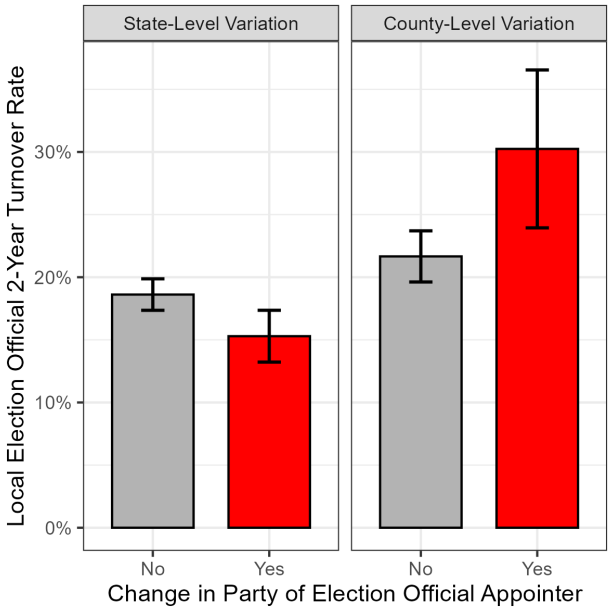


Figure 4 breaks down these average by state, subsetting to states with at least 10 counties of interest and with variation in party appointment over the period of analysis. This yields 5 states with state-level variation and 4 states with county-level variation. Among county-level variation states, turnover appears elevated in the wake of principal party shifts in two cases: Arizona and Georgia. The strongest evidence for a descriptive differential is in Georgia. When the party of an election official's appointing board switches, the turnover rate of election supervisors is 41%, compared with 22% when the party of the appointing board stays the same.

Finally, Figure 5 examines descriptive turnover statistics between 2004 and 2022, split by level of variation. There appear to be no consistent trends over time, although turnover rates have generally risen in the sample over the past few years, consistent with Ferrer and Thompson (2025).

In sum, the descriptive data shows some suggestive evidence of heightened turnover among local election officials when their principal authority changes between Democratic and Republican control, especially in states with variation in principal partisanship at the county level. Appendix Section A.2 shows additional descriptive results across all states and when turnover is calculated over a four-year period rather than a two-year period.

Figure 4: **Average State Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change and Variation Geography**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

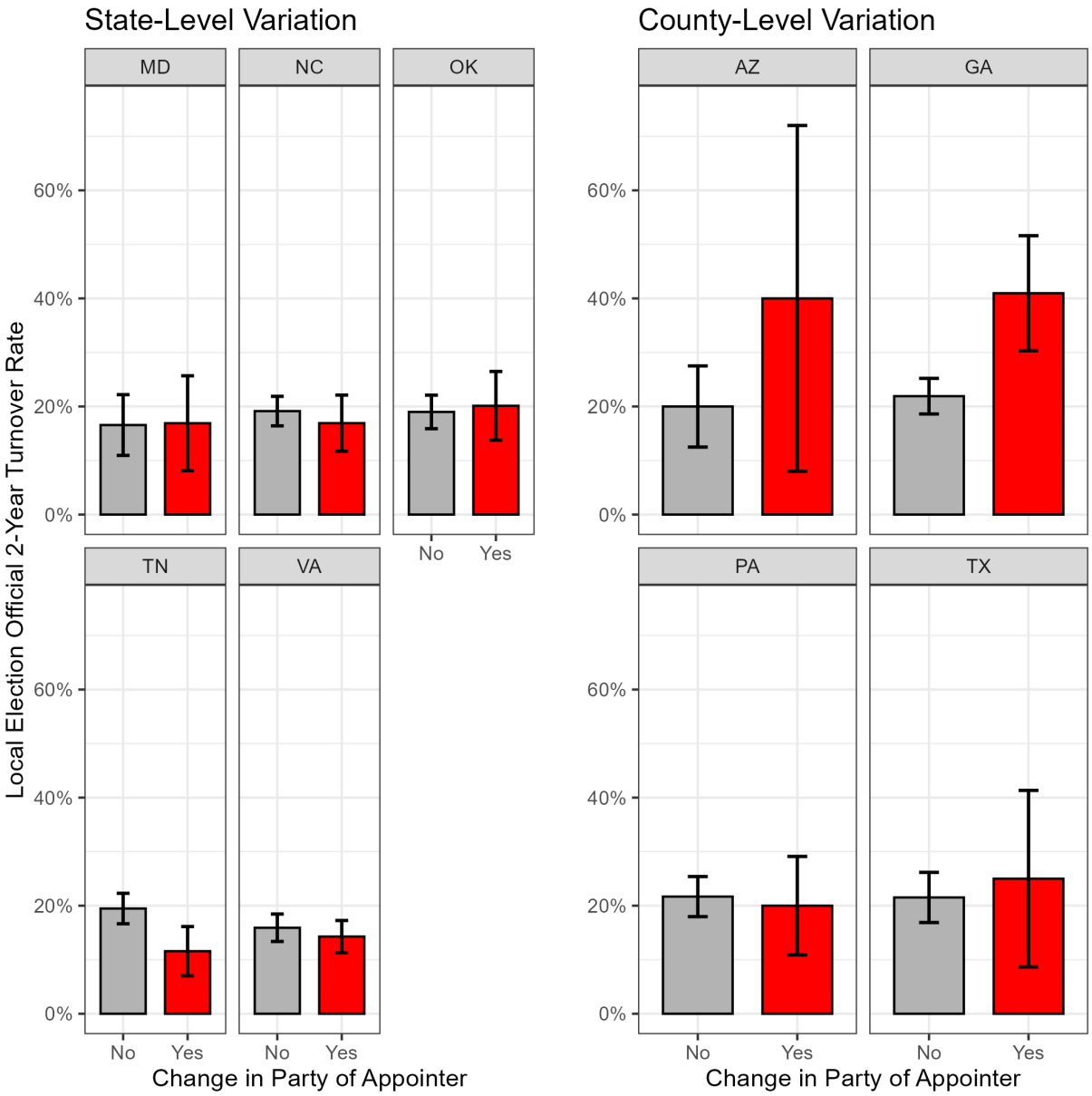


Figure 5: **Average Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials Over Time by Principal Partisanship Change and Variation Geography**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

5 Formal Evidence of Party Influence in Election Official Appointments

I first show the results of difference-in-difference regressions, and then results from matching analyses.

5.1 Difference-in-Difference Estimators of Effect of Principal Partisanship on Election Official Turnover

Table 1 shows the output of difference-in-difference linear probability regressions of the effect of a change in the party affiliation of an appointed official's principal partisanship on the likelihood that they leave their position. All specifications include county and state-by-year fixed effects, with results clustered at the jurisdiction level. State-by-year fixed effects effectively subsets the dataset to jurisdictions with county-level variation, as by definition there is no county-level variation at the state-year level in state-level variation jurisdictions. Column 1 uses the full dataset and a 2-year definition of local election official turnover. Column 2 uses a 4-year definition of turnover. Columns 3 and 4 subset the data to presidential and midterm elections, respectively. Columns 5 and 6 subset the data to cases where the new appointing party is Republican and Democratic, respectively. Positive values indicate that a change in principal partisanship increases the likelihood of turnover.

The results show no systematic evidence of an increase in turnover when principal party affiliation changes. Half of the point estimates are positive and half are negative, with none statistically distinguishable from a null effect. The results are also generally imprecisely estimated. Table A.2 in the online appendix shows the results are similarly inconclusive when relaxing the fixed effects to jurisdiction and year, which allows comparisons across different states. While relaxing this assumption increases the precision of the estimates, it also reduces the validity of the assumptions necessary for a causal interpretation.

Table 1: Does Switch in Partisanship of Appointing Authority Lead to Increased Election Official Turnover?

	Turnover					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Principal Party Change	0.037	−0.019	0.037	−0.042	0.056	−0.048
	(0.037)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.087)	(0.053)	(0.088)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year by State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Turnover yrs def	2	4	2	2	2	2
Elections	All	All	Pres	Midterm	All	All
Appointing party	All	All	All	All	Rep	Dem
Observations	1,770	1,770	885	885	1,033	532

5.2 Matching Estimators Show Change in Principal Partisanship Increases Election Official Turnover

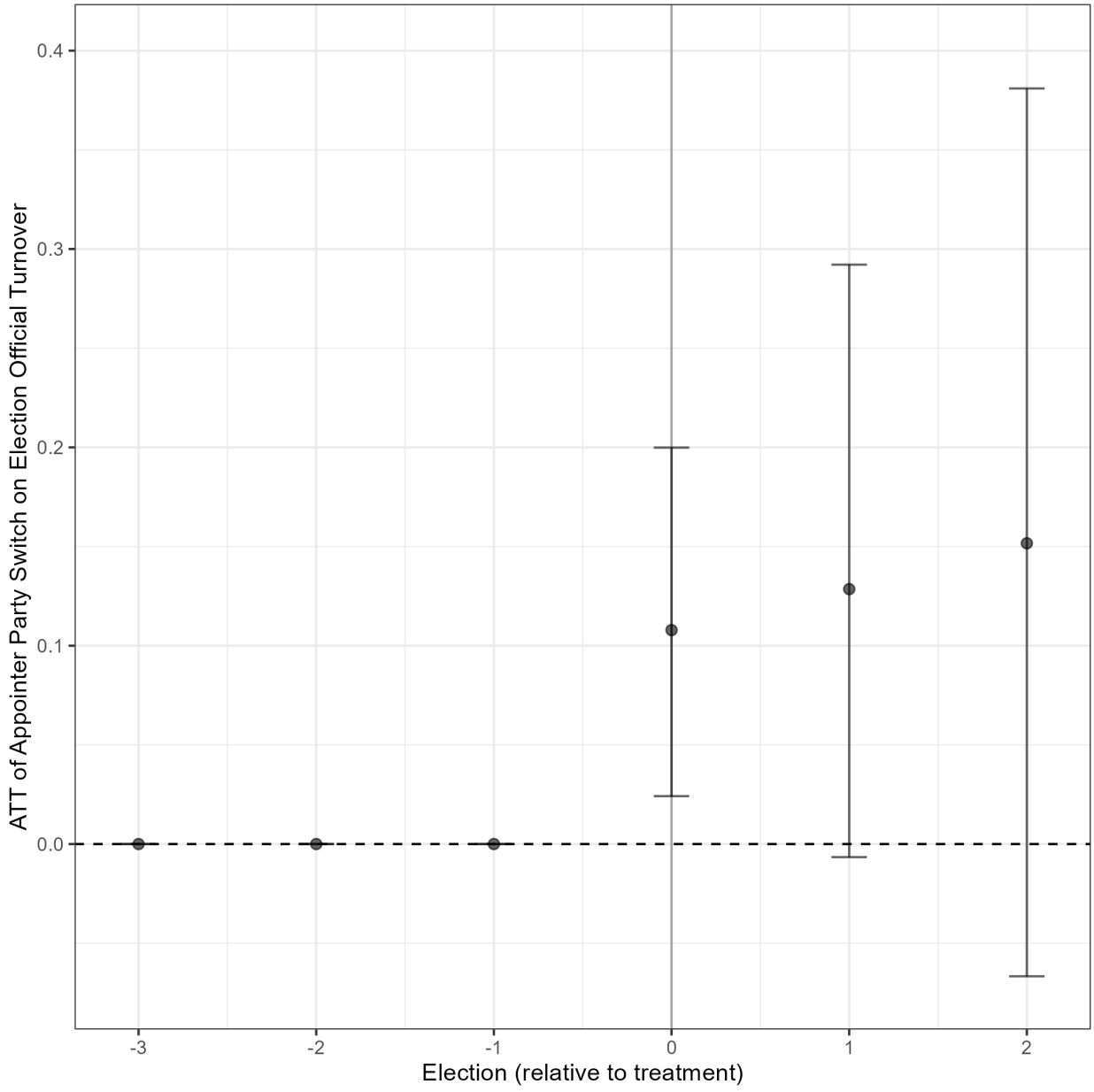
In order to overcome the problems with difference-in-differences designs, I proceed with a series of matching analyses that make turnover comparisons between jurisdictions that switch into treatment (change in principal partisanship) and stay in control (do not change principal partisanship) with the same X years of pretreatment principal partisanship and election official turnover history and within the same state. For matching analyses, only jurisdictions that have either Democratic or Republican majorities are included; those with only plurality partisan control are excluded. Figure 6 shows the results of this procedure when X = 3, with the ATT calculated as a weighted average across all eligible years. Since three lagged matching periods requires 6 years of pretreatment data, this procedure pools results from 2010 to 2022. For instance, the 2010 treatment year uses matching pretreatment data from 2004, 2006, and 2008. The 2022 treatment year uses pretreatment data from 2016, 2018, and 2020. For earlier pretreatment periods, post-treatment pooled ATTs are also calculated to create an event history, with the year of matching following treatment marked

as year 0. The averages are weighted by the number of matches included, so years with more matches are worth more in the overall ATT calculation. Bootstrapped confidence intervals are calculated for each event study year, as well as for a pooled ATT calculation. Figure 7 shows the election turnover means calculated by this same method, with the difference between treated and control means in each event-study year equivalent to that year's ATT.

Each x-axis tick in Figure 6 is a two-year period between biennial general federal elections. The y-axis is the average treatment effect switching principal party on election official turnover, with a .1 effect equaling a 10 percentage point increase in turnover. The three pretreatment periods have ATTs of 0. This shows the exact match on pretreatment turnover was successful: the comparisons starting with Election = 0 are only between jurisdictions with the exact same pretreatment turnover pattern. The point estimate at the first treatment period (0) is 10.8, meaning that on average, a switch in principal party control leads to a 10.8 percentage point increase in turnover over a two-year period. This result is statistically significant at the conventional 95% level. This means the result is unlikely to have arisen solely by chance. The two post-treatment periods have similar point estimates, meaning that turnover levels remain elevated in treated jurisdictions even four years after the initial switch in principal party control.

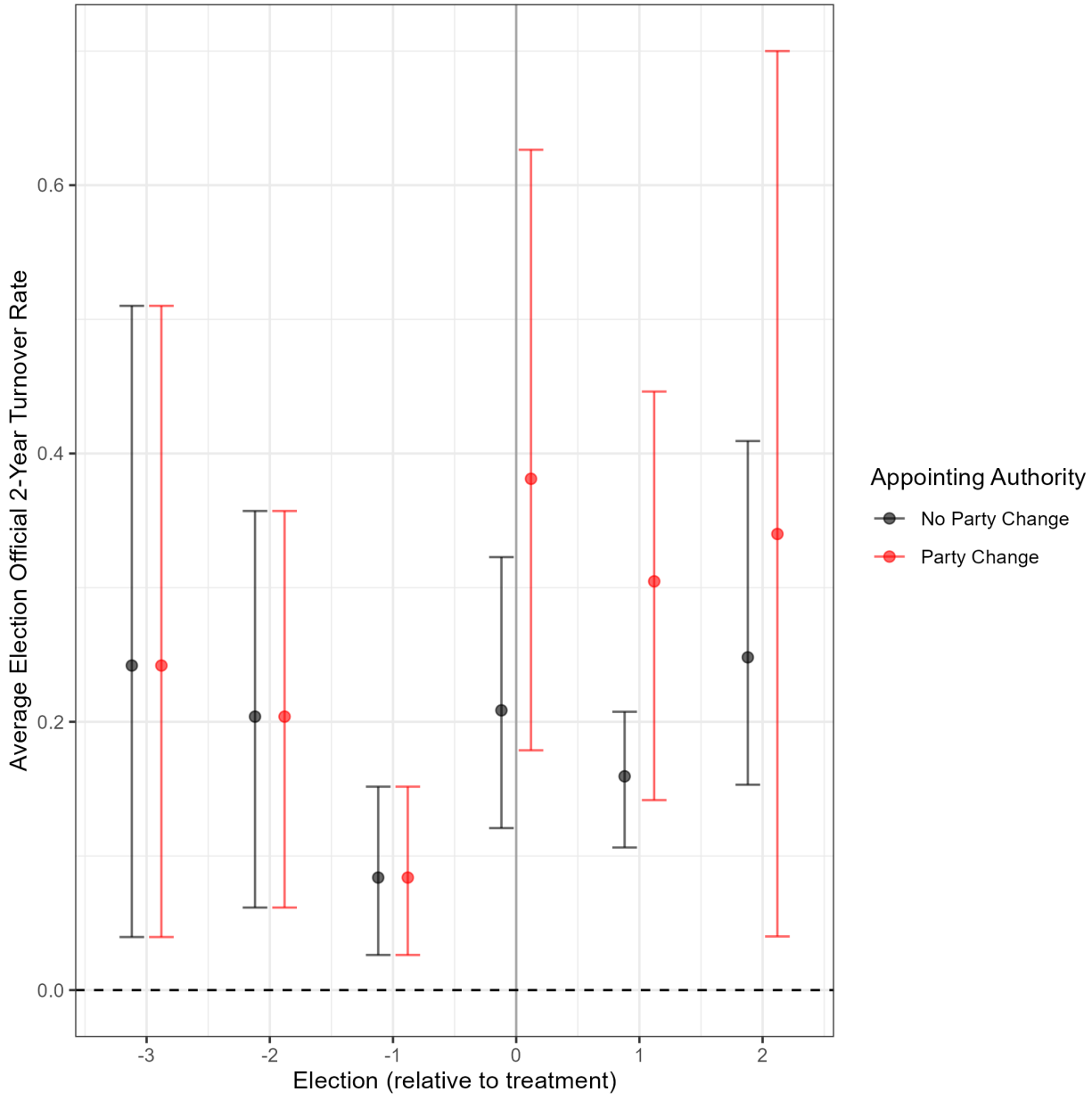
Figure 7 puts these treatment effects in context by showing the turnover rate means before and after treatment. Now, the y-axis shows the average turnover rate rather than the treatment effect. In the three pretreatment periods, we again see the success of the matching strategy, with average turnover in the treated and control jurisdictions identical. However, in the first treatment period (Election = 0), these averages sharply diverge. The average two-year turnover rate in treated jurisdictions in this sample approaches 40%, compared with only 20% in jurisdictions whose principal appointment authority partisanship remains unchanged. The treatment effect is roughly one-third of the average turnover rate—a substantively significant jump. As suggested by Figure 6, this difference-in-means persists in two additional post-treatment periods.

Figure 6: **Exact-Match Event Study ATT of Appointer Party Switch on Election Official Turnover**. This shows the ATT results of an exact matching procedure that matches the prior three biennial periods of principal partisanship and election official turnover pattern, making comparisons between matching same-state jurisdictions that switch principal partisanship in the following biennial period with those that do not. Error bars reflect 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals run with 1,000 simulations.



To ensure these results are not an artifact of the chosen lagged matching period, I run this same analysis with all possible matching lagged periods. Figure 8 visualizes the results and Table 2 shows the tabular results along with the total observations and years covered

Figure 7: **Exact-Match Event Study Election Official Turnover Means**. This shows the election turnover means of an exact matching procedure that matches the prior three biennial periods of principal partisanship and election official turnover pattern, making comparisons between matching same-state jurisdictions that switch principal partisanship in the following biennial period with those that do not. Error bars reflect 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals run with 1,000 simulations.



for each pretreatment matching length. The chosen lag is a balance between precision and causal validity. Shorter matching lag periods will allow for more matches, but post-treatment differences are less likely to be causally attributable to treatment. On the other hand, longer

Table 2: Pooled Exact-Match ATT Estimates of Effect of Switching Appointer Party on Election Official Turnover

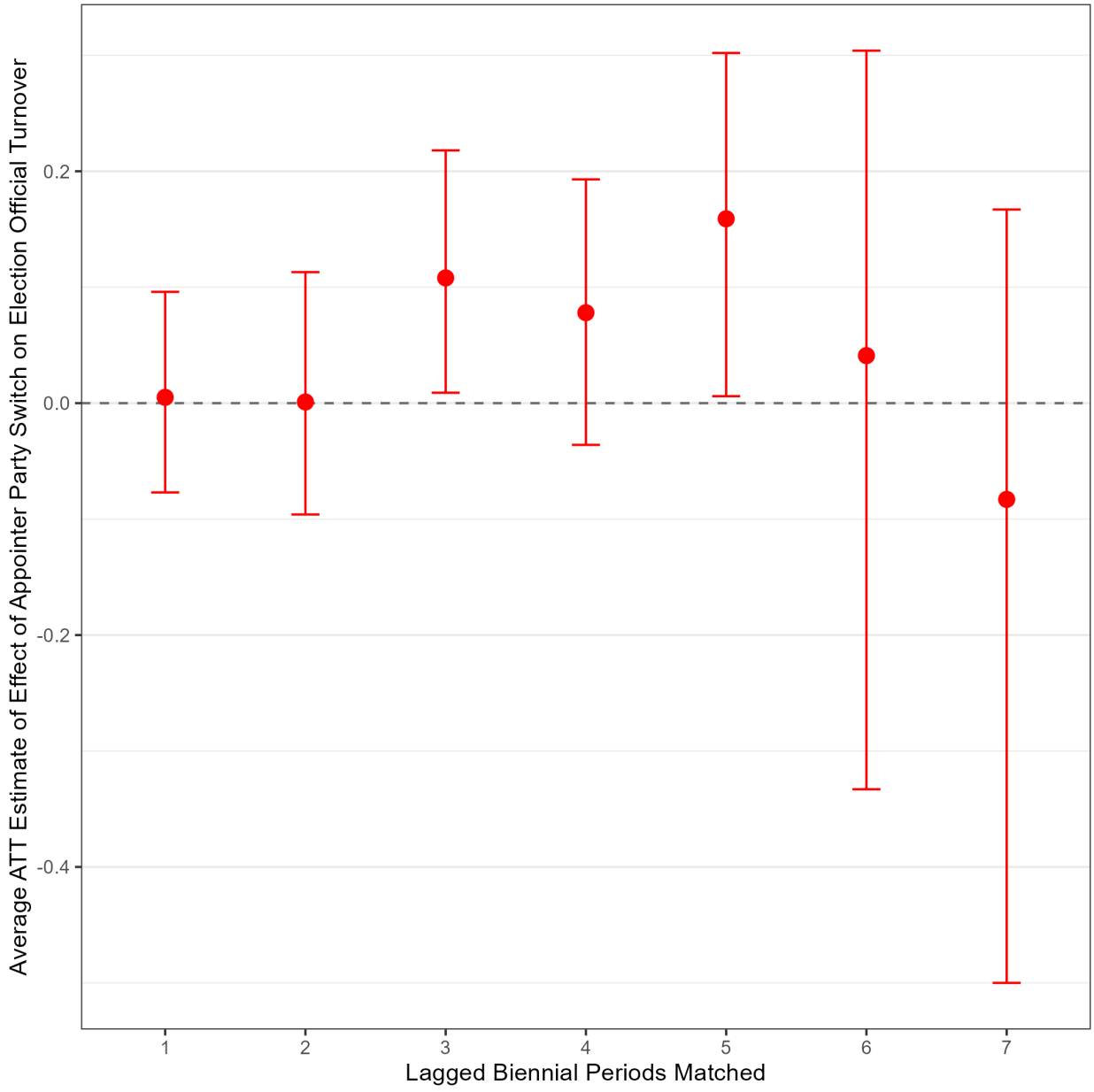
Lags_matched	ATT_avg	CI_low	CI_high	Total_obs	Years_covered
1	0.005	-0.077	0.096	644	2006–2022
2	0.001	-0.096	0.113	421	2008–2022
3	0.108	0.009	0.218	244	2010–2022
4	0.078	-0.036	0.193	172	2012–2022
5	0.159	0.006	0.302	88	2014–2022
6	0.041	-0.333	0.304	49	2016–2022
7	-0.083	-0.500	0.167	17	2018–2022

matching pretreatment lag periods will increase the causal validity but may lead to very few eligible counties in the match. I find fairly consistent results across the middle-period lags (X = 3, 4, or 5). In all, the point estimate is roughly 10 percentage points, and the finding is statistically significant in two and approaches significant in the third case. Lags 6 and 7 produce noisy nulls, whereas the shortest lag periods lack causal validity. This analysis provides some reassurance that the identified effect is real. I also test a cleaner version of this analysis, removing all cases where jurisdictions switch party control more than once. The results, found in Appendix A.4, align with those shown here.

5.3 Treatment Effect Differences by Party Taking Control

So far, I have shown evidence that local election officials are significantly more likely to depart in the wake of a shift in the majority party of their appointment. Does this hold equally for shifts to both parties, or is the effect larger for one of the major parties? In order to test this, I create two datasets, one consisting of jurisdictions that either never switch party control or switch from Republican to Democratic control, and the other consisting jurisdictions that either never switch party control or switch from Democratic to Republican control. I then run the same procedure described in the preceding section. The results are visualized in Figure 9 and tabular results are shown in Table 3.

Figure 8: **Exact-Match Event Study ATT of Appointer Party Switch on Election Official Turnover by Years Matched**. This shows the ATT results of an exact matching procedure that matches the prior X biennial periods of principal partisanship and election official turnover pattern, making comparisons between matching same-state jurisdictions that switch principal partisanship in the following biennial period with those that do not. Error bars reflect 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals run with 1,000 simulations.



The results show evidence of heightened local election official turnover in the wake of switches to both Democratic and Republican party control. However, the results are slightly larger and notably more consistent for switches to Republican control. In other words, it

Figure 9: **Exact-Match Event Study ATT of Appointer Party Switch on Election Official Turnover by Years Matched and by Party Switched To**. This shows the ATT results of an exact matching procedure that matches the prior X biennial periods of principal partisanship and election official turnover pattern, making comparisons between matching same-state jurisdictions that switch principal partisanship in the following biennial period with those that do not. Error bars reflect 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals run with 1,000 simulations. Jurisdictions are filtered to those only switching to Republican principal control or never switching in red point estimate analyses, or to those only switching to Democratic principal control or never switching in blue point estimate analyses.

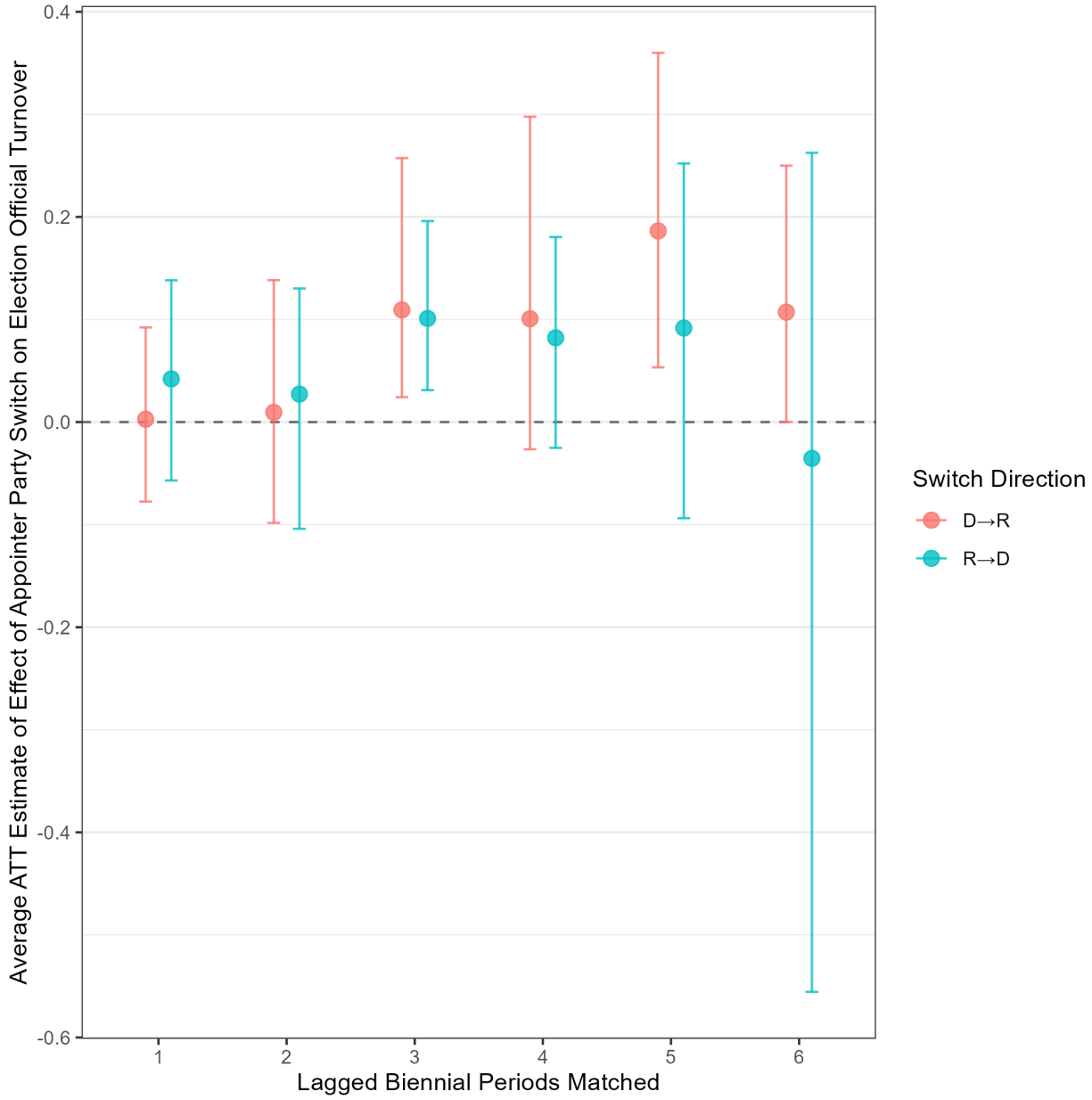


Table 3: Pooled Exact-Match ATT Estimates of Effect of Switching Appointer Party on Election Official Turnover by Party Switch

Direction	Lags_matched	ATT_avg	CI_low	CI_high	Total_obs	Years_covered
D→R	1	0.003	-0.078	0.092	534	2006–2022
D→R	2	0.010	-0.098	0.138	329	2008–2022
D→R	3	0.109	0.024	0.257	160	2010–2022
D→R	4	0.101	-0.027	0.298	107	2012–2022
D→R	5	0.186	0.053	0.360	35	2014–2022
D→R	6	0.107	0.000	0.250	19	2016–2022
R→D	1	0.042	-0.057	0.138	414	2006–2022
R→D	2	0.027	-0.104	0.130	244	2008–2022
R→D	3	0.101	0.031	0.196	133	2010–2022
R→D	4	0.082	-0.025	0.180	100	2012–2022
R→D	5	0.092	-0.094	0.252	50	2014–2022
R→D	6	-0.035	-0.556	0.262	32	2016–2022

is much less likely that the finding of heightened turnover arose due to chance alone for switches to Republican control and possible that the magnitude of the effect is larger. The evidence is consistent with switches in local appointment authority to Republicans resulting in a ten percentage point jump in local election official turnover than switches in the reverse direction. However, it appears both parties influence the appointment of these bureaucratic officials for partisan reasons.

6 Does Partisan Influence in the Appointment of Local Election Officials Impact Election Administration?

Previous studies have shown that Democratic and Republican election officials oversee election administration in remarkably similar ways (Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson 2024) and that changes in the partisan composition of election boards does not affect partisan electoral outcomes, at least in Arizona and Pennsylvania (Ferrer 2025). Yet heightened turnover in the wake of a shift in principal partisanship suggests that these officials are using their authority to replace the old election official with someone more to their liking. Given these prior

findings, there are two possible explanations for these actions: first, their new party-aligned election official might make different administrative decisions that, while failing to influence overall electoral outcomes, might change election administration in ways favorable to that party. Alternatively, party officials could replace the old election official simply due to the perception that their chosen official will make different decisions, even if the data does not support such a conclusion.

In order to distinguish between these explanations, I collect county-level turnout and election administration outcomes from David Leip's Election Atlas and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's EAVS dataset. Denominators for voting-age population come from Census estimates.[3] I compute residual vote as the number of ballots cast in a jurisdiction minus the number of votes cast in the race at the top of the ticket, either the presidential or gubernatorial election (Kropf et al. 2020; Stewart et al. 2020).

Table 4 shows the results of difference-in-difference regressions with jurisdiction and state-by-year fixed effects on the effect of a change in principal party control on voter turnout (column 1), residual vote (column 2), the provisional vote rate (column 3), the absentee ballot rejection rate (column 4), and the likelihood of a jurisdiction's reporting error for the residual vote rate (column 5). There is little evidence that a switch in the partisanship of the appointing principal leads to different election administration decisions or a change in the quality of election administration. This is consistent with the findings of previous literature.

An additional concern could be that the simple switch in election officials itself leads to decreased quality of election administration. However, recent findings allay those concerns. Turnover of local election officials was found to make little difference in the quality of election administration, with the possible exception of a small increase in voter wait times (Ferrer and Thompson 2025).

Due to a lack of evidence for the first mechanism, it appears the second mechanism is at play. Party-minded local officials, recently empowered to make their own appointment

[3]I use estimates from the National Cancer Institute's Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results Program available at `https://seer.cancer.gov/popdata/singleages.html`

Table 4: Switch in Partisanship of Appointing Authority Does Not Affect Quality of Election Administration (County-Variation Only)

	Voter turnout	Residual vote	Provisional rate	Absentee reject rate	Reporting error residual vote
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Principal Party Change	−0.002	−0.001	0.00004	−0.001	0.004
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.0004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year by state FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,755	1,205	1,341	1,651	1,205

decisions, believe it will benefit the party to have their selections work for them, even if that is not the case. The greatest effects of this reality then may lay in the personal cost to the public servants who are pushed out with little cause and to the detriment of the public's confidence in election officials to act in a nonpartisan manner (Norris and Grömping 2019; Stewart 2021).

7 Conclusion

If local politics were indeed distinct from national party politics, we would expect to see little relationship between the partisanship of public officials and the departure and hiring of local election bureaucrats. But that is exactly what is evidenced in this paper. Thousands of politicians with partisan affiliations are empowered throughout the country to select the bureaucrats tasked with administering democratic elections. In many cases, it appears their decisions are influenced by the party that appointed the currently serving bureaucrats. There may not be a Democratic or Republican way to pave a road—but there certainly is a Democratic and Republican way of selecting the bureaucrat who paves that road.

The evidence presented in this paper may be construed as worrisome considering recent strains to the country's election system. However, beyond the direct human cost of those involved, it coincides with a string of findings that underline the resilience of that system even under stress to deliver free and fair elections. Directly elected election officials act similarly regardless of their party affiliation (Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson 2024), Democratic and Republican election officials tend to have less polarized election policy beliefs than their general public counterparts (Manion et al. 2021), partisan appointers fail to gain an advantage for their party when they are in charge of appointments (Ferrer 2025), and turnover does not noticeably diminish the quality of election administration (Ferrer and Thompson 2025). Add to these findings that switches in party control of election official appointments seem to have little impact on the quality of election administration, and it suggests that America's election infrastructure is resilient in the face of attempts at partisan interference. The degree of that resilience is certainly being put to the test, however. It is worth emphasizing partisan interference has real human and institutional costs even if elections remain soundly administered.

The broader implications of this project are that even the most technical and bureaucratic functions of local government—running an election—are being influenced by national party politics. If reformers hoped that appointments were the key to insulating certain positions from party politics, these findings bring into question the ability of the selection method to achieve those goals. It brings into question whether partisan principals anywhere can credibly commit to bureaucratic neutrality.

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Online Appendix

Intended for online publication only.

Contents

A.1 Principal Appointing Bodies of Included Local Election Officials

Table A.1 displays data on the local election officials included, as well as the structure of their appointing authorities. 'County-level variation' indicates whether the partisanship of the appointing authority is determined at the county level rather than the state level. 'Uniform' indicates whether the appointing structures are the same across included jurisdictions.

Table A.1: **Local Election Officials Included**

State	Election Official	Geography	Jurisdictions	County-level variation	Uniform	1st degree offices	1st degree size	1st degree partisan	2nd degree office	2nd degree size	2nd degree partisan
AK	Regional Election Supervisor	Region	5	0	1	State Director of Elections	1	No	Lt. Governor	1	Yes
AZ	County Election Administrator	County	13	1	1	Board of Supervisors	3 or 5	Yes			
DC	Executive Director	County	1	0	1	Board of Elections	3	Yes	Mayor	1	Yes
FL	Supervisor of Elections	County	1	1	1	County Mayor	1	Yes			
GA	Elections Director	County	115	1	0	Board of Elections					
KS	Election Commission	County	4	0	1	Secretary of State	1	Yes			
MD	County elections administrator	County	24	0	1	County Board of Elections	5	Yes	Governor	1	Yes
MT	Election Administrator	County	4	1	1	Board of County Commissioners	3	Yes			
NC	County Elections Director	County	100	0	1	County Board of Elections	5	Yes	Governor	1	Yes
NE	Election Commissioner	County	4	1	1	County Board	3, 5, or 7	Yes			
NE	Election Commissioner	County	3	0	1	Governor	1	Yes			
NV	Registrar of Voters	County	2	1	1	County Commission	5	Yes			
OK	Election Board Secretary	County	77	0	1	State Board of Elections	3	Yes	Governor	1	Yes
OR	Elections Manager / Director	County	1	1	1	Board of County Commissioners	3	Yes			
PA	Election Director / Chief Registrar	County	67	1	0	County Election Board	3	Yes	Board of County Commissioners	3	Yes
SC	County Director of Voter Registration and Elections	County	46	0	1	County Board of Elections	5	Yes	Governor	1	Yes
TN	Administrator of Elections	County	95	0	1	County Election Commission	5	Yes	State Elections Commission	7	Yes
TX	Elections Administrator	County	135	1	1	County Election Commission	5	Yes			
VA	General Registrar	County	133	0	1	Local Electoral Board	3	Yes	Governor		
WV	Elections Coordinator	County	1	1	1	County Commission	3	Yes			

This table lists information about the jurisdictions from states included in the data. Number of jurisdictions are total number of jurisdictions in that state that appoint election officials with partisan principals at least some point between 2004 and 2022. In states where multiple officials are coded, a '/' separates each distinct official and they are listed in order by frequency. County-level variation indicates whether jurisdiction's principal appointing authority varies at the county level rather than the state level. Nebraska is listed twice because some counties vary at the county level and some vary at the state level. Uniform indicates whether included jurisdictions within the state vary in terms of their appointment structures. Where there is variation, the most common appointment structure is provided. '1st degree' is the direct appointing authority of the local election official. '2nd degree' is the appointing authority of the 1st degree authority, where the direct appointing authority is not directly elected.

A.2 Additional Descriptive Evidence of Relationship Between Principal Partisanship and Election Official Turnover

Figure A.1 shows descriptive turnover rate averages by change in principal party balance across all states, not just those with at least 10 jurisdictions of interest and with at least one party switch.

Figure A.2 examines descriptive turnover statistics between 2004 and 2022, this time pooled across level of variation. There again appears to be no consistent relationship between party appointment shifts and election official turnover.

Figures A.3, A.4, A.5, and A.6 show overall, by-variation-level, by-state, and over-time descriptive plots similar to those shown, with turnover calculated over a four-year period rather than a two-year period. The results are largely unchanged from those in the main analysis.

Figure A.1: **Average State Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

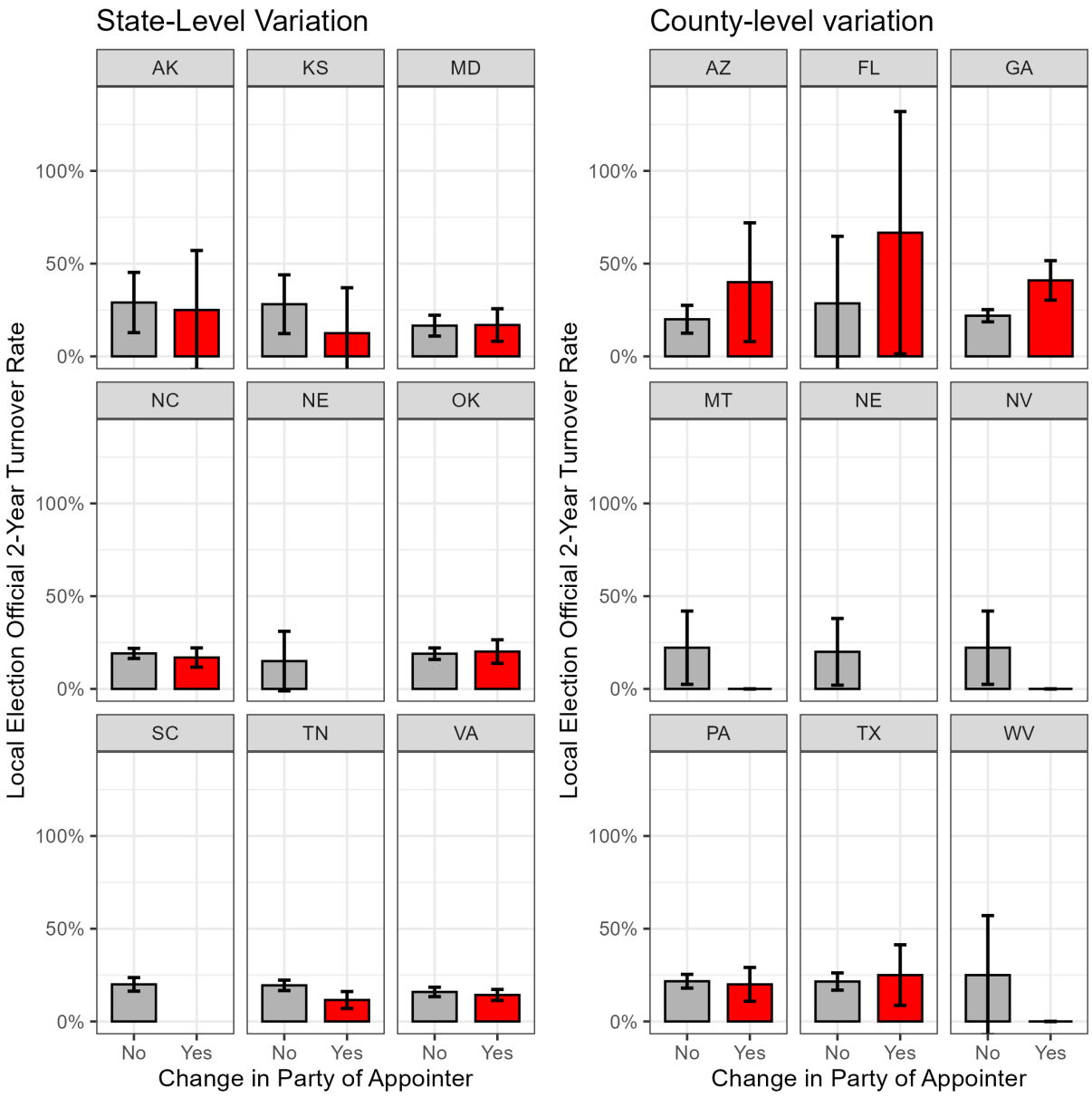


Figure A.2: **Average Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials Over Time by Principal Partisanship Change**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

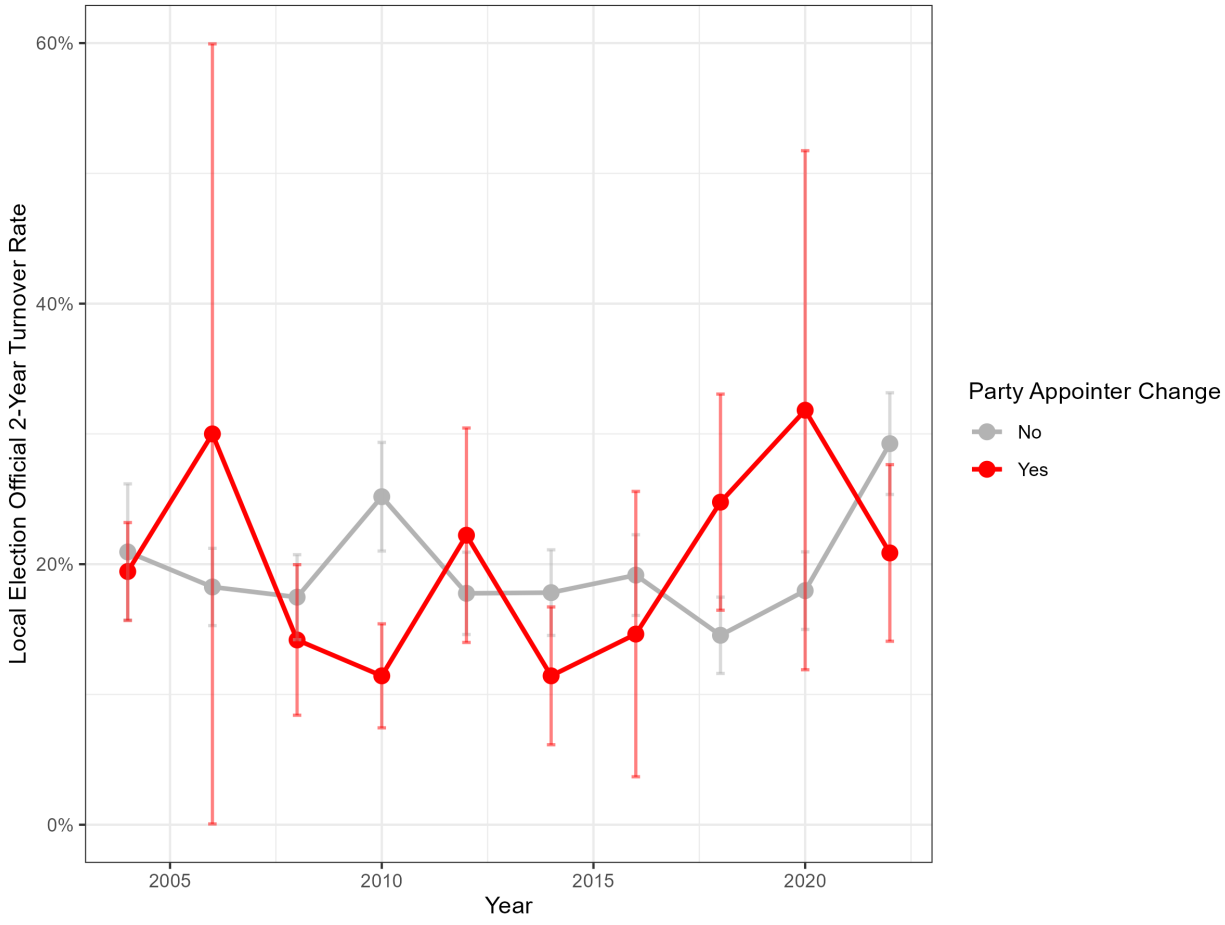


Figure A.3: **Average Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Turnover is calculated over a four-year period rather than a two-year period.

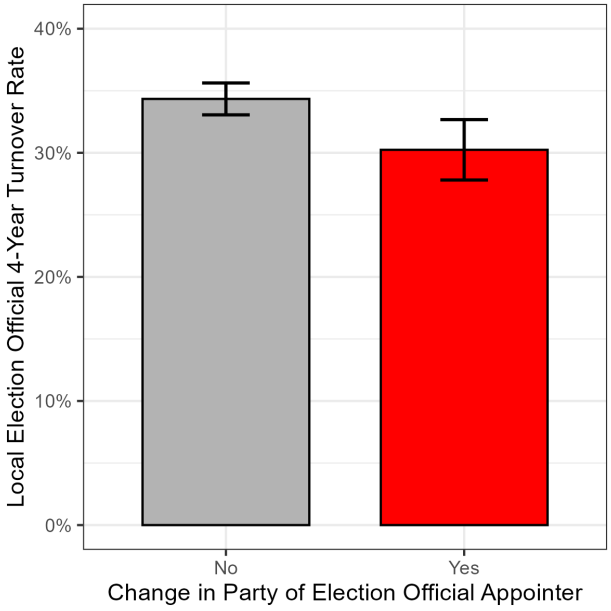


Figure A.4: **Average Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change and Variation Geography**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Turnover is calculated over a four-year period rather than a two-year period.

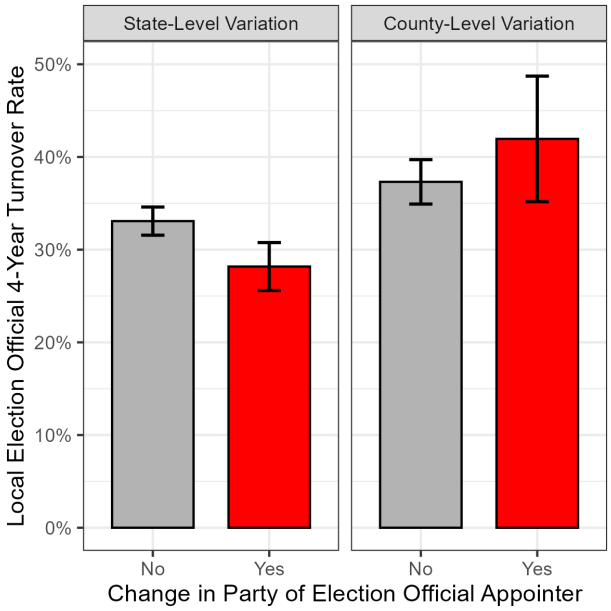


Figure A.5: **Average State Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change and Variation Geography**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Turnover is calculated over a four-year period rather than a two-year period.

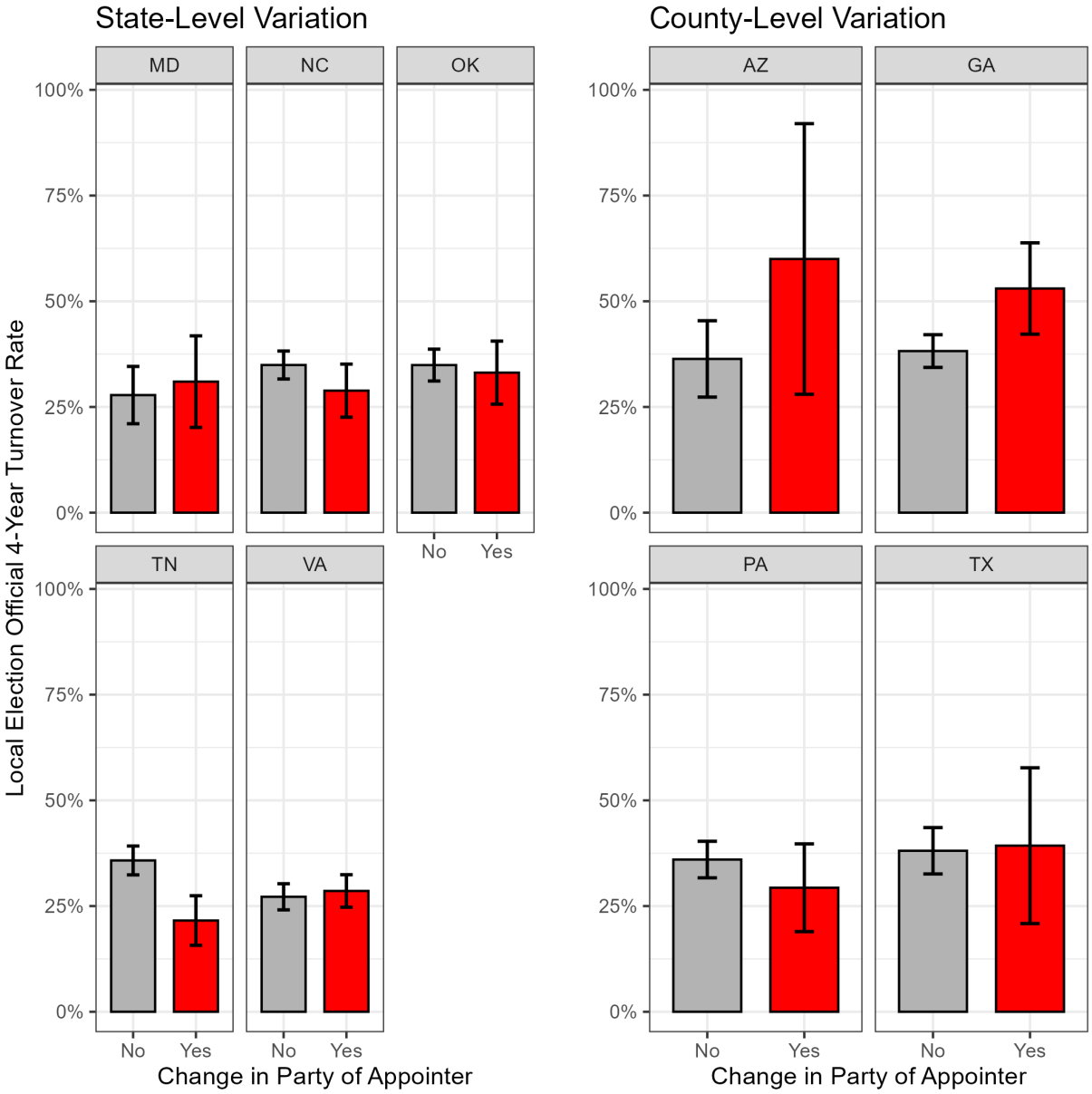
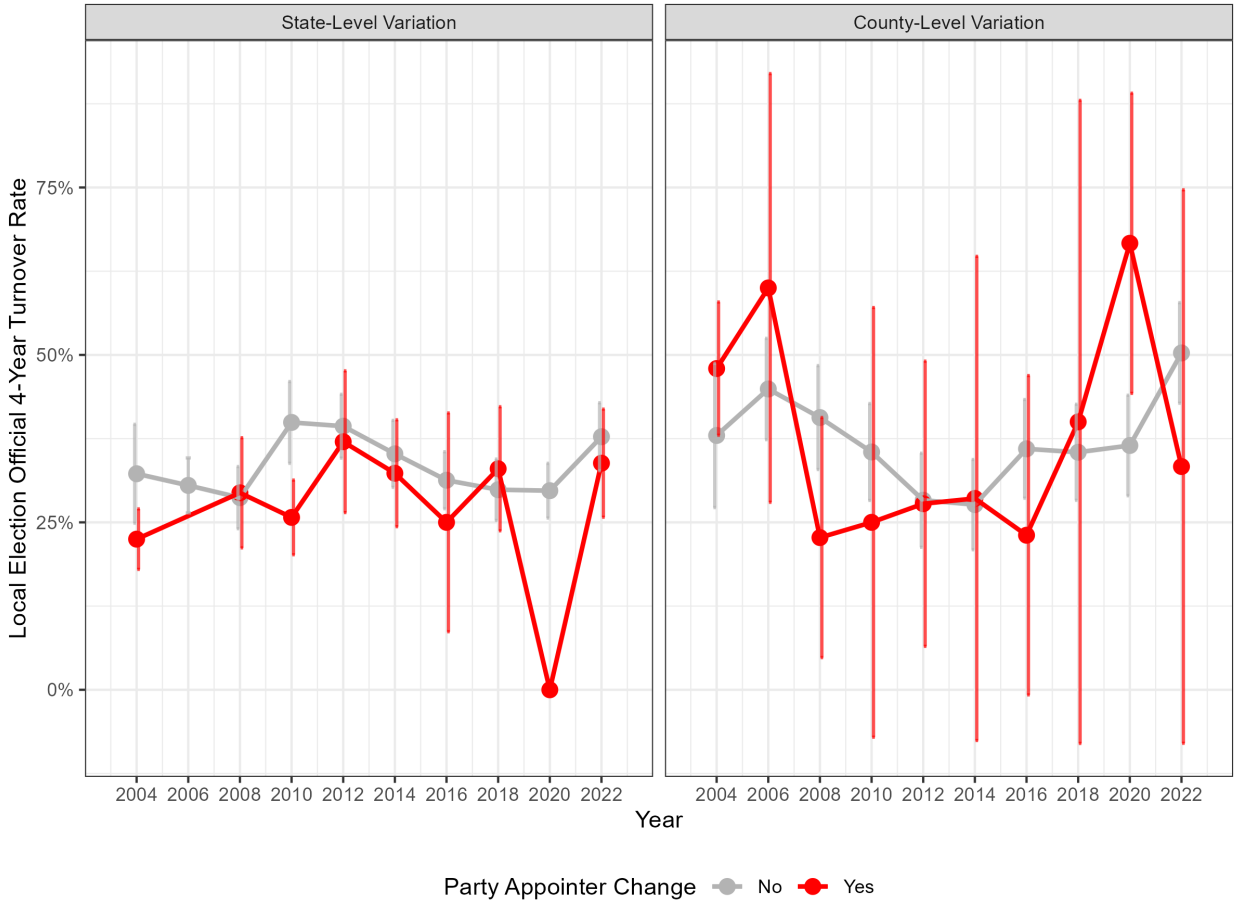


Figure A.6: **Average Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials Over Time by Principal Partisanship Change and Variation Geography**. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Turnover is calculated over a four-year period rather than a two-year period.



A.3 Formal Results of Difference-in-Difference Analysis With the Inclusion of State Rather than State-by-year Fixed Effects

In the main analysis, I used DID estimators with jurisdiction and year-by-state fixed effects. This greatly restricted the sample size in order to produce more causally credible point estimates. In Table A.2, I show the results of DIDs with less exacting comparison criteria, with otherwise identical specifications to those used in Table 1.

Table A.2: Does Switch in Partisanship of Appointing Authority Lead to Increased Election Official Turnover?

	Turnover					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Principal Party Change	−0.017	−0.022	−0.006	−0.032	−0.074***	0.014
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.022)	(0.026)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Turnover yrs def	2	4	2	2	2	2
Elections	All	All	Pres	Midterm	All	All
Appointing party	All	All	All	All	Rep	Dem
Observations	6,619	6,619	3,309	3,310	3,745	2,661

The results are more uniformly negative, with the point estimate in column 5 attaining statistical significance. This suggests that a change in principal party reduces the likelihood of election official turnover by 7 percentage points. However, the point estimates are again relatively unstable. In short, this fails to provide clear evidence of a link between principal partisanship and heightened bureaucratic turnover.

A.4 Additional Matching Analysis

The main analysis included jurisdictions that switch appointment principal party multiple times. A potentially cleaner—but weaker-powered—analysis is to remove such jurisdictions. Therefore, comparisons are only made between true controls (never switch principal party control) and clean treatment jurisdictions (only switch principal party control once). The results of this analysis are visualized in Figure A.7 and tabular output is shown in Table A.3. The results are noisier, but largely mirror those shown in the main analysis. X = 7 is excluded due to insufficient number of observations matching the criteria for inclusion.

Table A.3: Pooled Exact-Match ATT Estimates of Effect of Switching Appointer Party on Election Official Turnover, Excluding Multi-Switchers

Lags_matched	ATT_avg	CI_low	CI_high	Total_obs	Years_covered
1	-0.025	-0.176	0.173	374	2006–2022
2	0.005	-0.158	0.213	269	2008–2022
3	0.096	-0.128	0.310	172	2010–2022
4	0.070	-0.123	0.265	125	2012–2022
5	0.185	-0.071	0.309	71	2014–2022
6	-0.002	-0.500	0.330	36	2016–2022

Figure A.7: **Exact-Match Event Study ATT of Appointer Party Switch on Election Official Turnover by Years Matched, Excluding Jurisdictions with Multiple Party Switches**. This shows the ATT results of an exact matching procedure that matches the prior X biennial periods of principal partisanship and election official turnover pattern, making comparisons between matching same-state jurisdictions that switch principal partisanship in the following biennial period with those that do not. Error bars reflect 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals run with 1,000 simulations. The estimation only includes comparisons between jurisdictions that switch principal partisanship once and those that never switch principal partisanship.