Unequal Competence: Why Criminal Justice Reformers Are Disadvantaged in Local Elections

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February 27, 2025

Abstract

In elections for public safety officials, voters may select candidates based on technical competence as well as on policy positions. If competent candidates are more likely to hold conservative policy views, progressive candidates will be less likely to win. Using text analysis to classify 240 district attorney candidate positions in five states, I show competent candidates are more likely to hold tough-on-crime issue positions. In real elections in these states, competent candidates are more likely to win, while candidate positions are unrelated to election outcomes. In a conjoint experiment where I provide voters information on both competence and candidate positions, voters still often select incongruent but competent candidates. These results suggest the movement to elect "progressive prosecutors" will have limited success even if voters support criminal justice reform. More broadly, they point to limits to democratic responsiveness when elected officials are both politicians and bureaucrats.

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Given their apparently large influence over charging and sentencing, district attorneys have become a central target of activists seeking to reduce mass incarceration. To reduce the number of people in prison, so the argument goes, start by replacing the traditional "tough on crime" district attorney with one committed to progressive reform. The movement to elect "progressive prosecutors" has had some notable successes, with reformers elected in several big cities (Bazelon and Krinsky 2018), and overall district attorney elections have grown more competitive. In an analysis of the 200 largest districts, Wright, Yates, and Hessick (2021) find the share of incumbents facing no opposition drops from about 80% in 2012 to about 40% in 2020.

In this paper I argue that despite these successes, the movement to achieve criminal justice reform at the ballot box faces significant hurdles due to the district attorney's dual nature as both politician and bureaucrat. Because district attorneys are partly politicians, voters will choose candidates in part on the basis of policy positions. But because district attorneys are also partly bureaucrats, in charge of managing an office and prosecuting cases, voters will also choose candidates on the basis of technical competence. If competence and ideology were uncorrelated, voters' preference for competence would not disadvantage progressive candidates. But if competent candidates also tend to be more conservative, voters' preference for competence makes the election of progressives less likely.

To test this argument, I first investigate the relationship between experience and ideology among district attorney candidates. I construct a novel measure of district attorney candidate ideology, using text analysis to classify candidate positions from 240 candidate in five states. As a proxy for competence, I use whether the candidate previously worked as an assistant district attorney in the same office. I find that candidates with this experience are over half a standard deviation more conservative than candidates without this experience; the difference is also about roughly half the Democrat/Republican gap in ideology.

I next ask whether voters do, in fact, prefer experienced candidates. In real elections from the five states where I measure candidate ideology, experienced candidates are between twelve and nineteen points more likely to win; these differences are about a quarter to a third of the magnitude

of the incumbent/challenger difference in win probabilities. In contrast, candidate ideology is never predictive of incumbent success, either by itself or when interacted with local preferences. And in a conjoint experiment fielded on a diverse national sample, where I provide voters information on both competence and candidate positions, voters still often select incongruent but competent candidates.

While some legal scholars and journalists have pointed to a backlash against progressive prosecutors from voters and elites (Goldrosen 2021; Elinson and Gershman 2022; Pfaff 2023), my findings point to a more fundamental issue with the movement to elect reformers. Even if voters are pro-reform and elites don't stand in the way, progressive prosecutors will be less likely to win election in the first place. More broadly, my results suggest limits to responsiveness among the many elected but somewhat technocratic offices at the state and local level in the United States. While a large body of research documents greater responsiveness when such officials are elected rather than appointed (Besley and Coate 2003; Gordon and Huber 2007; Lim and Snyder 2021), the extent to which elections have these effects may depend on (1) the relationship between competence and ideology in the particular office, and (2) the strength of voters' preference for competence.

Why Competence and Ideology May Be Correlated

By *competence* I mean the technical skills required to execute the bureaucratic tasks of a position. In the case of the district attorney, these tasks include managing deputy district attorneys, understanding the law, and trying cases; additional skills that may help in the execution of these tasks include institutional knowledge, understanding of the local political environment, and relationships with other local public safety actors.

Given the skills required to do the job, the most competent candidate to replace the incumbent district attorney is likely someone who works in the office already: the assistant (or deputy) district attorney. As Balboni and Grometstein (2020) observe, the "typical path to the District Attorney's position" is "serving as an Assistant District Attorney for decades, then waiting until the Chief re-

tires or steps aside" (270). Consistent with this observation, Sances (2021) finds that three quarters of incumbent districts attorneys in California began as assistants in the local office.

If assistant district attorneys are more competent, why would they also be more conservative? One part of the answer is that for many years, the primary job of the district attorney was seen as convicting criminals and imposing harsh sentences. Dagan (2021) argues that in the 1950s, this perception of the district attorney's role as crimefighter was intentionally created by district attorneys themselves, when they organized to forge their own subnational bureaucratic autonomy. Partly through the formation of the National District Attorneys Association in 1950, prosecutors successfully promoted the idea that only they, as professional prosecutors, had the expertise needed to maintain public safety.

Thus, the "tough on crime" branding has long been fundamental to prosecutors' professional identity. Even if they wanted to embrace a more rehabilitative approach to criminal justice, incumbent prosecutors would risk sacrificing some of their autonomy in doing so. As for the assistant district attorneys, who are often next in line for the job, the idea of fighting crime may have been what attracted them to the profession in the first place. Even if they wanted to pursue reform, however, they risk alienating their boss, who could either fire them, or choose to endorse a more conservative assistant as a successor.[1]

While there is anecdotal evidence that many progressive reformers come from outside the district attorney's office, and served instead as public defenders or defense attorneys, there is currently no systematic evidence that assistant district attorneys are more conservative. However, some indirect evidence comes from Sances's (2021) study of prosecutors in California. Comparing incumbents' publicly stated positions on criminal justice ballot propositions to the views of their voters, Sances finds incumbents – who also typically have prosecutorial experience – almost always take the conservative position, regardless of constituency opinion. And in a study of another locally elected public safety official, Thompson (2020) finds both Democratic and Repub-

[1]Hessick and Morse (2020, 1583) point to anecdotal evidence of assistant district attorneys being fired for running against the incumbent. These authors also note (1569-1570) that incumbents often choose their own successors, resigning to run for hire office and suggesting a deputy to serve as interim district attorney.

lican sheriffs hold conservative immigration views. Given most incumbent sheriffs have prior law enforcement experience (Farris and Holman 2015), this could imply that experience and conservatism are correlated among sheriff candidates. However, neither of these studies examines the competence-ideology relationship among non-incumbent candidates.

Some insight into the prosecutor candidate pool comes from Bonica, Chilton, and Sen's (2016) study of the ideology of American lawyers. Using estimates of liberal-conservative ideology based on campaign contributions, they find lawyers working as public defenders are more liberal than lawyers working as prosecutors (including those working as unelected deputies); lawyers working as criminal defense attorneys have ideologies in between public defenders and prosecutors, but closer to public defenders. Consistent with Bonica et al.'s results, Miller and Curry (2023) find federal judges with prosecutorial experience are more likely to rule against motions to suppress evidence, while judges with public defender experience are more likely to rule in favor.

Voters' Preference for Competence

It has long been recognized that when two candidates compete on ideology, one candidate may be advantaged by a "valence" attribute such as charisma, name recognition, or competence (Stokes 1963; Groseclose 2001). I argue that technical competence is a valence characteristic that is particularly important to voters' when choosing district attorney candidates. If voters recognize that the prosecutor's job is partly bureaucratic, they may be willing to sacrifice ideological responsiveness for technical expertise. In this way, the prosecutor-voter relationship may resemble the federal politician-agency relationship, in which agencies secure bureaucratic autonomy – the ability to pursue their own goals independent of their principals – by developing a reputation for expertise (Carpenter 2001). Alternatively, voters might not learn about policy positions during district attorney campaigns. In a study of these campaigns between 1996 and 2006, Wright (2008) finds candidate qualifications and experience receive the most media coverage, while issues of crime control and fairness receive the least.

Scholars are only recently studying voter behavior in district attorney elections, but existing evidence suggests voters value both competence and issue positions. Concerning competence, Sances (2021) finds that out of 53 California races where the incumbent district attorney was not on the ballot, 81% saw the election of someone who previously worked in the local office. Concerning ideology, both Sung (2022) and Nelson and Samarth (2022) find that survey respondents are more likely to choose hypothetical candidates that promote more lenient policies.[2]

Importantly, for voters' preference for competence to constitute a hurdle for the election of criminal justice reformers, there must be a winning coalition for progressive reform in at least some jurisdictions. Put another way, if all voters were punitive, then the preference for competent candidates would pose no issues for accountability. I assume voters are not uniformly punitive. While I do not obtain representative measures of voters' issue positions, I believe my assumption is sound given the electoral success of progressives candidates in some areas, as well as other scholars' documentation of the public becoming sharply less punitive since the 1990s.[3]

Measuring Candidates' Criminal Justice Ideology

Testing my argument requires measures of the criminal justice ideology of district attorney candidates. To my knowledge, no existing measures exist. While Bonica, Chilton, and Sen (2016) place prosecutors and public defenders on an ideological scale, their measure only includes those who already work in these roles *and* have given to political campaigns; the measure also assumes a single-dimensional ideological space that applies to elections at all levels. Other scholars have developed binary codings of "progressive prosecutors." For instance, Agan, Doleac, and Harvey

[2]Note that the competence-ideology correlation is related to, but distinct from, the accountability issues raised by the incumbency advantage. Voters may in general prefer candidates with on-the-job experience, and incumbent officeholders in all settings may win simply due to their greater experience relative to challengers, even when those challengers are more ideologically congruent. However, unless experience and ideology are systematically related, the incumbency advantage on its own will not prevent the election of progressive candidates. Further, I argue district attorney candidates will see electoral benefits from experience even if they are not themselves incumbents.

[3]Jonson, Butler, and Cullen (2025, 14) report that in the General Social Survey, the share of Americans saying the courts were not harsh enough declined from 87% to 54% from 1994 to 2018, while the share saying the courts were "too harsh" increased from 3% to 18% over the same period. Jonson et al. also report that in the Gallup poll, the share of Americans saying the criminal justice system is "not tough enough" fell from 83% in 1992 to 41% in 2020.

(2021) code 35 prosecutors as progressive based on a list from a criminal justice reform nonprofit prosecutor, while Hogan (2022) uses self-identification as a progressive prosecutor and the acceptance of campaign contributions from "a George Soros PAC." A limitation of these measures is that they only capture incumbent prosecutors, while my interest is in the broader candidate pool.

As an alternative, I rely on candidates' public statements during campaigns. First, I rely on an existing cache of candidate statements collected by the California League of Women Voters, which has surveyed candidates for numerous state and local offices since the late 1990s. For each candidate in each race, the group asks the top three priorities the candidate would pursue if elected.[4] Second, I collect the text of 101 campaign web sites for candidates running in the four states holding a majority of their district attorney elections in 2023: Mississippi, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.[5] For each of my five states, Table 1 shows the total number of district attorney electoral districts, the number with competition during the sample period, the number of districts where I obtain the statements of at least one candidate, and the number of candidates.[6]

While my sample is not perfectly representative, it represents a marked improvement over existing measures, which either include only incumbents, or only candidates who already work as lawyers and give to political campaigns. That said, it is important to keep in mind how candidates enter my sample. In the California data, candidates would have had to respond to surveys by the League of Women Voters; in the other four states, candidates would have had to run in a contested election, and published a campaign web site that I was then able to find retrospectively. A major factor influencing both these selection processes is likely population, which past work shows is a predictor of competition in district attorney races (Hessick and Morse 2020). Competition, in turn, would likely spur candidates to respond to voter surveys and post campaign web sites. Indeed, Figure 1 shows sampled districts tend to be larger relative to the full sample of districts in these

[4]My approach follows Stemper (2022), who uses these profiles to classify school board candidates. See Section 1 of the Appendix for an example candidate profile.

[5]The time span of the California candidate profile data is 1998 to 2022, or 7 election cycles. For the web site states, I searched for candidates running in the most contested election as of 2023. Thus while most of my candidates ran in 2023 (n=69), some ran in 2020 (7), 2021 (24), or 2022 (1). See Section 2 of the Appendix for details on the collection of candidate web sites.

[6]The share with competition for California is based on 2018 data from the Politics and Prosecutors Project at the University of North Carolina; see https://ppp.unc.edu/state-names/california.

State	Districts	w/ Competition	Sampled Districts	Sampled Candidates
California	58	34	26	139
Mississippi	23	8	5	7
New York	62	22	17	39
Pennsylvania	67	19	17	29
Virginia	120	28	19	26
Total	330	111	84	240

Table 1: States, districts, and candidates included in the analysis of candidate positions.

states.

I use a two-stage strategy to classify candidate positions. In the first stage, I classify the California candidate statements as progressive (i.e., favoring a focus on rehabilitation and reform) or conservative (i.e., favoring a tough on crime approach) using human coders recruited via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk.[7] Each of roughly 100 coders saw 25 randomly selected issue priority statements that were stripped of any other information about the candidate. I assign each issue statement a score equal to the share of coders classifying it as conservative minus the share classifying it as progressive; I then assign each California candidate the average of the scores of their three issue statements.[8] In the top panel of Table 2, I show examples of statements receiving the most progressive and most conservative codings. Statements coded as progressive focus on homelessness, mental health, bail reform, alternatives to incarceration, and reducing recidivism; statements coded as conservative focus on public safety, aggressively investigating crimes, gangs, punishing offenders, and violent crime.

In the second stage, I use the automated Wordscores algorithm (Benoit, Laver, and Garry 2003; Lowe 2008; Di Tella et al. 2023) to code uni- and bi-grams from the text of candidate web sites in the other four states, using the coded statements in stage one as reference texts. I then predict

[7]For other applications of "crowd-sourced" text coding, see Benoit et al. 2016; Budak, Goel, and Rao 2016; Budak, Garrett, and Sude 2021; and Cirone and Hobbs 2023. I opted not to use automated text analysis given the relatively small number of CA candidate profiles in my data. As Grimmer and Stewart (2013) note, automated methods "never replace careful and close reading of texts" and are mainly useful when a careful reading is not feasible. Section 3 of the Appendix describes the crowd-coding task in detail.

[8]For the liberal/conservative codings, inter-rater reliability ranges from 0.32 to 0.49. These reliabilities are low compared to studies using undergraduate coders, but they are consistent with recently published studies using crowd-coding, which range from 0.14 to 0.55. See Section 4 of the Appendix.

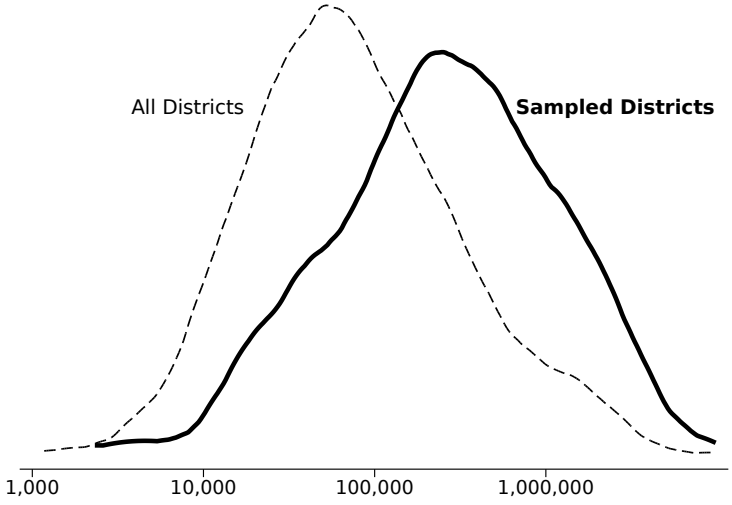

Figure 1: Sampled districts are larger on average. These plots show the frequency of log population for all districts in the five sample states (dashed line) and the sampled districts (solid line).

ideological scores for each candidate, transforming the scores back to the original scale (Martin and Vanberg 2008).[9] In the bottom panel of Table 2, I show examples of the most progressive and conservative terms in the web site data. The most progressive terms refer to alternatives, disparities, equity, justice, and race; the most conservative terms refer to accountability for crime, crimes, thieves, and victims.

[9]See Section 5 of the Appendix for more details on the Wordscores algorithm.

(a) Most progressive/conservative bullets from candidate profiles (CA)

Progressive	Conservative
addressing homelessness, mental health, and . . .	#1 priority is public safety, targeting dangero . . .
criminal justice reform, leading bail and sent . . .	aggressively prosecute human trafficking, fen . . .
ensure that incarceration is coupled with . . .	combating gang violence
expanding alternatives to incarceration, incre . . .	continue aggressive approach to the investiga . . .
implement smart on crime alternatives to jail . . .	continue to protect our communities by aggre . . .
implementing new strategies to address ment . . .	cut violent crime. will punish violent offende . . .
reduce recidivism: reduce the cycle of repeat . . .	ensure that serious, violent, and sexual crimes . . .
rehabilitation instead of incarceration	ensuring the public safety of the citizens of [c . . .
responding to realignment by creating innova . . .	expansion of teams targeting criminal street g . . .
root out the gross racial and economic dispari . . .	fight elder abuse, domestic violence and ident . . .

(b) Most progressive/conservative terms from candidate web sites (MS, NY, PA, VA)

Progressive		Conservative	
access_data	fight_safe	accountable_crimes	holding_habitual
adults_expanding	homelessness_court	analyze	office_hold
alternatives_juveniles	increasing_access	cell	people_fully
communities_continue	increasing_justice	commit	politics_office
continue_support	justice_alternatives	commit_protect	protect_rights
continuing_fight	racial_disparities	computers	renew
disparities_justice	reducing_racial	crimes_commit	renew_focus
enforcing_gun	safe_communities	crimes_holding	rights_accused
equitable	safety_laws	crimes_take	rights_victims
equitable_fair	system_continuing	families_well	starting_cyber
expanding_alternatives	system_fight	focus_prosecution	take_politics
fair_justice	system_investing	fully_accountable	thieves_accountable
fight_equitable	transparency_reducing	habitual_thieves	well_rights

Table 2: Examples of text coded as most progressive and most conservative.

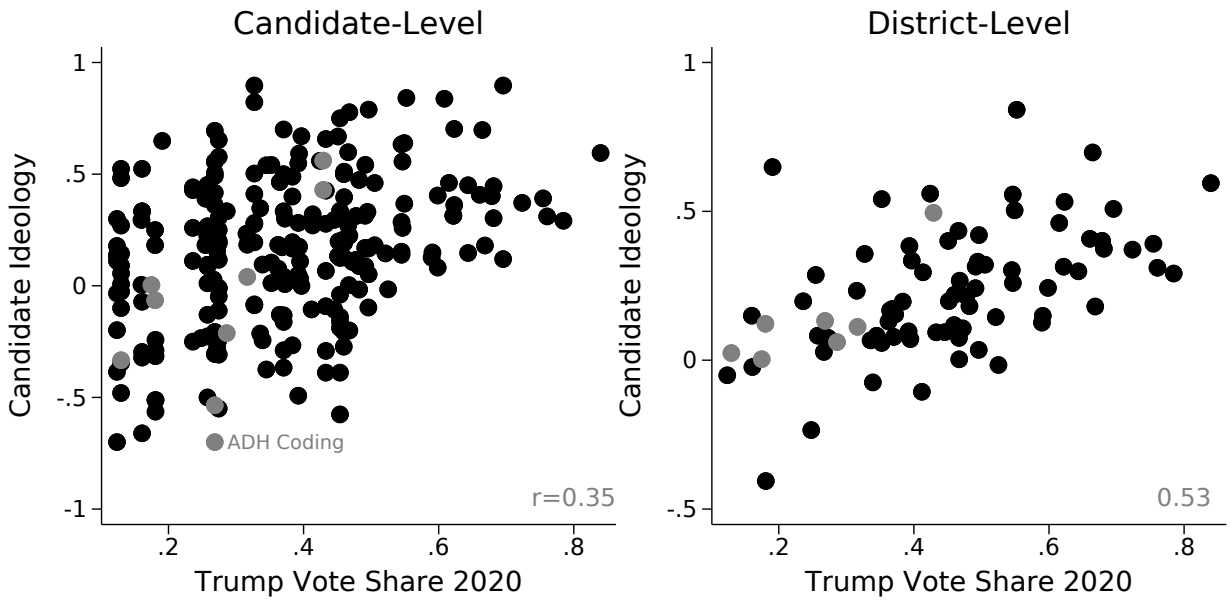

Figure 2: Validation of ideology estimates using presidential vote share and extant codings. *ADH* denotes coded as progressive by Agan, Doleac, and Harvey (2021).

In Figure 2, I validate my candidate ideology measure by plotting it against Republican Donald Trump's share of the 2020 presidential vote. If my measure captures candidates' criminal justice ideology, if presidential voting captures the criminal justice views of the local constituency, and if candidates are at least partly responsive to local views, then we would expect a relationship between these variables. In the left panel, I show this relationship at the level of individual candidates. There is a strong positive relationship, with more conservative candidates running in districts where Trump received more of the vote; the correlation is 0.35. In the right panel, I show the relationship at the level of districts, averaging the positions of all candidates within a district. The correlation with presidential vote share at this level is 0.53.

I also show candidates coded as progressive by Agan, Doleac, and Harvey as gray dots in the figure. This group includes Diana Becton in Contra Costa, George Gascon in Los Angeles, Larry Krasner in Philadephia, Mimi Rocah in Westchester, Parisa Dehghani-Tafti in Arlington, Steve Descano in Fairfax, and Tori Salazar in San Joaquin. With the exception of Salazar, for whom I measure ideology in 2014 and 2022, all of these candidates also lean left according to my

text-based measure.[10]

Candidate Experience and Candidate Ideology

As a proxy for competence, I use experience working as an assistant or deputy district attorney in the same jurisdiction where the candidate ran for office. To measure this experience, I use the candidate biographies that accompanied the issue position statements and web sites, as well as searches of newspaper archives and the public web. In my data, 154 of 240 of candidates, or 64%, are coded as experienced. The remaining candidates sometimes had other seemingly relevant experience: for instance, 23 worked as deputies in other counties in the state, 4 worked for the state attorney general, and 4 worked as a federal prosecutor based in the state. While these candidates certainly had relevant skills that they could point to, I favor my more restrictive coding given the local deputy is the most likely to possess the technical skills needed for the job.[11]

In Figure 3, I plot the density of ideology for candidates with and without experience. The density for experienced candidates is shifted markedly to the right compared to inexperienced candidates. In particular, the distribution for inexperienced candidates has a fatter left tail, indicating that the most progressive candidates are often those who lack experience as a deputy.

[10] In 2014, Salazar's issue priorities were the following:

- Will ensure violent criminals and repeat offenders are properly sentenced to the fullest extent of the law
- Will improve our quality of life by aggressively prosecuting property theft, graffiti and vandalism
- Will collaborate with community based organizations to protect victims of domestic violence, elder abuse and child endangerment

In 2022, her priorities were:

- Prioritize the most vulnerable in our society and give them the opportunity to seek justice from their perpetrators.
- Work with law enforcement, community partners and prioritize her office's resources to eliminate violence in our communities.
- Combat Human Trafficking until every predator is brought to justice

The disagreement between my coding and that of Agan et al. might be because their measure is based on policy decisions, while mine is based on campaign rhetoric. Again, I prefer my rhetoric-based measure because it allows me to measure positions for candidates that lost and so never had a chance to make policy decisions.

[11] Section 6 of the Appendix provides the tabulation of alternative prosecutor experience and tests robustness of my results to an alternative coding where I code those with any prosecutorial experience as "experienced."

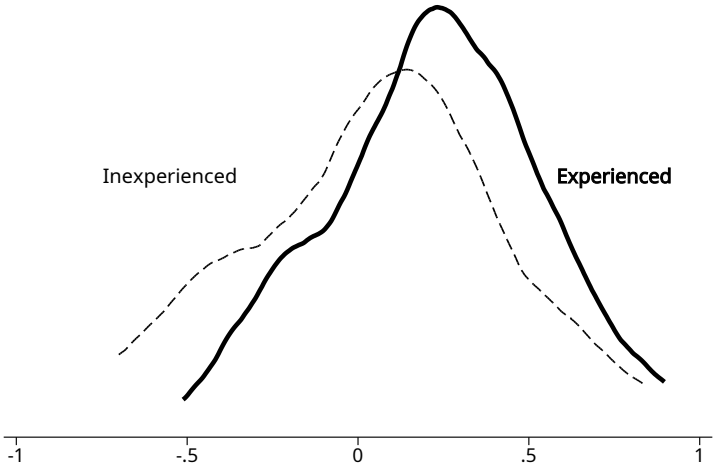

Figure 3: Experienced candidates are more conservative. This plot shows the frequency of ideology for candidates without experience (dashed line) and for candidates with experience (solid line).

In the top panel of Table 3, I show the results of regressions of candidate ideology on experience. In column (1), the constant term indicates that the average ideology among inexperienced candidates is 0.04, while it is about 0.18 more conservative among experienced candidates (the estimated standard error, clustered by district, is 0.04). Given the standard deviation of ideology is 0.33, this represents a difference of over half of a standard deviation. The relationship between experience and ideology holds when adjusting for presidential vote share (column 2), and for state and time fixed effects (columns 3 and 4).

To put these differences in perspective, and to further validate my measure of candidate ideology, I next regress ideology on candidate party. In the bottom panel of Table 3 I limit results to the sample states with partisan elections for district attorney (MS, NY, PA, and VA). In column (1), I show the simple difference in ideology by experience; in these states, it is 0.13, with a standard error of 0.05. In column (2), I include indicators for independent, other party, and Republican, with Democrat as the reference category. Compared to Democrats, independent and Republican candidates are between 23 and 25 points more conservative, respectively, with standard errors of 8 and 5 points. These estimates provide another validation of my ideology measure; they also suggest that the difference in ideology by experience represents about half of the difference by party.

(a) All districts

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Experienced	0.178***	0.183***	0.204***	0.188***
	(0.043)	(0.040)	(0.041)	(0.039)
Trump Vote Share		0.761***		0.748***
		(0.111)		(0.100)
Constant	0.044	-0.241***	0.295***	0.102
	(0.041)	(0.059)	(0.077)	(0.089)
Observations	240	240	240	240
Cycle fixed effects			X	X
State fixed effects			X	X

(b) Districts in states with partisan elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Experienced	0.130**		0.107*	0.128**		0.107*
	(0.048)		(0.042)	(0.045)		(0.042)
Independent		0.245**	0.138		0.269***	0.182*
		(0.076)	(0.070)		(0.073)	(0.076)
Other		0.096	-0.010		0.144	0.010
		(0.086)	(0.070)		(0.091)	(0.077)
Republican		0.225***	0.128*		0.211***	0.134*
		(0.053)	(0.053)		(0.050)	(0.051)
Trump Vote Share			0.541***			0.484***
			(0.105)			(0.098)
Constant	0.158***	0.115**	-0.125**	0.159***	0.116**	-0.108*
	(0.045)	(0.043)	(0.045)	(0.036)	(0.033)	(0.042)
Observations	101	101	101	101	101	101
Cycle fixed effects				X	X	X
State fixed effects				X	X	X

Table 3: Regression of candidate ideology on candidate experience. Cell entries are regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by district. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

As a further test of the relative predictive power of experience, in column (3) I also adjust for district presidential vote share, given candidates of different parties are more likely to run in districts with different electorates. In this regression, the estimate for experience is now 11 points, with a standard error of 4 points; while the estimates for independent and Republican are 14 and 13 points, with standard errors of 7 and 5 points. This provides further evidence that experience is a substantively important predictor of candidate ideology. In columns (4), (5), and (6), I repeat the prior three regressions but adjusting for state and time fixed effects; these adjustments make no substantive difference to the results.

Candidate Experience and Voters' Choices

Candidates with experience may be more conservative, but does experience also bring benefits at the polls? As a first test of this question, I ask whether experienced candidates are more likely to win in actual elections.[12] In the top panel of Table 4, I show the results of a regression of winning on experience. On average, candidates without experience win 35% of the time, as indicated by the constant; candidates with experience are over 15 points more likely to win (standard error of 6 points). To benchmark this difference, and to show my results are not driven by incumbency,[13] in column (2) I adjust for incumbent status. Here we see that incumbents are 48 points more likely to win than non-incumbents; we also see that the estimate for experience is now 12 points, but still statistically significant at conventional levels. Adjusting for state and time fixed effects in columns (3) and (4) yields substantively similar results.

[12] I use a binary indicator of winning the general election. I do not use vote share given the different numbers of candidates per race.

[13] Incumbents are not automatically coded as experienced in my data. Instead, only incumbents who served as deputies *prior to becoming incumbents* are coded as experienced. That said, we might worry that the tendency of deputies to win leads to a correlation between experience and incumbency in my sample, in which case it would be important to adjust for incumbency.

(a) Experienced candidates win more often

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Experienced	0.151*	0.115*	0.189**	0.146**
	(0.059)	(0.048)	(0.065)	(0.055)
Incumbent		0.476***		0.468***
		(0.065)		(0.068)
Constant	0.349***	0.249***	0.300***	0.251***
	(0.044)	(0.041)	(0.073)	(0.065)
Observations	240	240	240	240
Cycle fixed effects			X	X
State fixed effects			X	X

(b) Candidate ideology does not predict winning

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Candidate Ideology	0.302	0.265		0.244	0.258	
	(0.166)	(0.255)		(0.201)	(0.291)	
Trump Vote Share		0.323	0.198		0.276	0.066
		(0.484)	(0.164)		(0.452)	(0.177)
Cand. Ideology X Trump Vote		-0.162			-0.220	
		(0.781)			(0.740)	
Experienced			0.084			0.106
			(0.091)			(0.105)
Experienced X Trump Vote			0.204			0.219
			(0.247)			(0.264)
Constant	0.284**	0.225	0.280***	0.257	0.224	0.311***
	(0.088)	(0.123)	(0.061)	(0.170)	(0.207)	(0.078)
Observations	240	240	240	240	240	240
Cycle fixed effects				X	X	X
State fixed effects				X	X	X

Table 4: Regression of winning office on candidate experience. Cell entries are regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by district. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Even if experienced candidates have an electoral advantage, perhaps inexperienced candidates can use their ideological match with voters to compensate and ultimately win. In the bottom panel of Table 4, I test whether candidate ideology by itself predicts electoral victory. In column (1), I show the bivariate relationship between ideology (rescaled to lie between 0 and 1) and victory. While the estimate is not statistically significant, it suggests more conservative candidates are actually more likely to win. In column (2), I interact candidate ideology with local presidential vote share (also rescaled to 0-1). Again, while the estimates are not significant, the signs speak against any relationship between ideological congruence and electoral outcomes. The coefficient of 0.265 on candidate ideology suggests that, in districts with the most liberal voters, the most conservative candidates are 27 points *more* likely to win. Likewise, the interaction term of -0.162 suggests more conservative candidates do relatively *worse* in districts with more conservative voters.

An additional possibility is that voters use candidate experience as a signal of ideology. If so, then experienced candidates should be less likely to win in districts with more liberal voters. In column (3), I include an interaction between experience and Trump vote share. The point estimates suggest that experienced candidates do 8 points better in the most liberal jurisdictions, and that this advantage grows another 20 points in the most conservative jurisdictions. However, I am unable to reject the null hypothesis that the experience advantage does not vary by local ideology.

The lack of any observable effect for candidate ideology could be interpreted in several ways. Voters might not learn about candidate positions during these campaigns; this would be consistent with Wright's (2008) analysis of candidate press coverage. Alternatively, voters might be aware of candidates' positions, but just ignore them, choosing to focus instead on experience. Note that regardless of which of these interpretations is correct, my argument about progressive candidates being electorally disadvantaged still holds. However, another possibility is that candidate entry and positions are both strategic choices, biasing my estimates of the effect of candidate characteristics in the observational data.

To adjudicate between these explanations, I fielded a candidate conjoint experiment (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014) to a sample of about 500 respondents recruited by Forthright,

an online survey panel company.[14] Each respondent saw five pairs of candidates; each candidate was randomly assigned one of the following experiences with equal probability: defense attorney, public defender, or assistant district attorney. To increase the strength of the treatment, candidates were also assigned a conviction rate variable. Candidates with a background of defense attorney or public defender were assigned a value of "(No prosecutorial experience)", while candidates with a background as an assistant district attorney were randomly assigned conviction rates of 70%, 75%, 80%, 85%, 90%, 95%, or 100% with equal probability.

Each candidate was also randomly assigned positions on three criminal justice issues: whether to end the death penalty; whether to end mandatory life sentences for "third strike" offenses; and whether to legalize recreational marijuana;.[15] For each issue, candidates were assigned the positions of oppose, neutral, or support with equal probability. Finally, candidates were assigned the following attributes: age (uniformly distributed from 35 to 75); sex (male or female with equal probability); race (white with probability 60%, Black with probability 15%, Hispanic with probability 15%, Asian with probability 10%); and education (state university, small college, or Ivy League university with equal probability).

Figure 4 shows results from a regression of vote choice (1 if a candidate is chosen and 0 otherwise).[16] The first three points show that voters do value experience when choosing district attorney candidates. Relative to candidates who served as assistant district attorneys, voters penalize

[14]See https://www.forthrightaccess.com/. Forthright is an online panel company that recruits members via Internet ads and address-based mail campaigns; it then samples from its panel based on demographic quotas to ensure a nationally diverse set of respondents. My subjects were recruited to match Census targets on age, gender, region, and race/ethnicity. Recent papers using Forthright samples include Druckman, Gubitz, Levendusky and Lloyd (2019) and Dias and Lelkes (2022). Section 7 of the Appendix provides more details on survey recruitment.

[15]I chose these issues because they have been topics of public debates around criminal justice, and because a past study shows prosecutors often do take positions on these issues (Sances 2021). I also chose these issues because they are areas where prosecutors exercise discretion. Although they do not set the law on marijuana, they can effectively legalize its use by deciding not to prosecute offenders (e.g., Mueller 2018). Likewise, while prosecutors do not write sentencing laws, they may recommend the death penalty or life in prison in particular cases or as a matter of general practice (e.g., Robles and Blinder 2017). Expressing candidates' positions as preferences for abstract policies, as opposed to commitments to not prosecute certain offenses or to never recommend certain sentences, makes it easier for respondents to judge which candidates best match their own views. This choice also eases the construction of the issue distance variable used below.

[16]The point estimates in this plot come from a regression that includes all attributes as predictors. Older, white, and male candidates were slightly less likely to be selected; conviction rates do not matter at all. Results for experience and issue distance are not sensitive to the inclusion of these covariates.

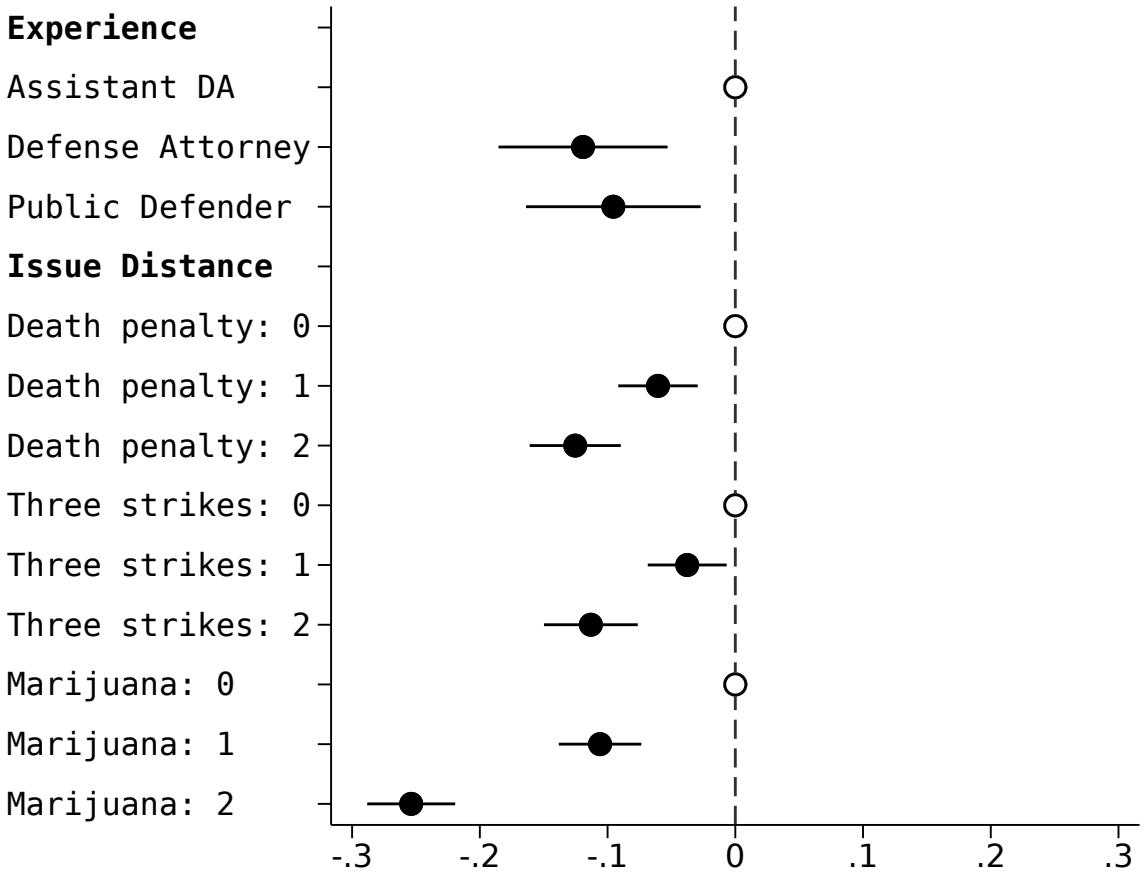

Figure 4: Candidate conjoint experiment results. Lines span 95% confidence intervals computed using standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

defense attorney candidates by about 12 points and public defender candidates by about 10 points; both estimates are significant at the 0.01 level. But the next set of points shows issue positions also matter, at least when voters are given these positions directly. For instance, relative to candidates who share voters' positions on the death penalty, a candidate who is one point away (e.g., the voter supports abolition but the candidate is neutral, or the voter is neutral and the candidate is opposed, etc.) is 6 points less likely to be chosen; a candidate who is two points away (e.g., the voter supports abolition and the candidate is opposed) is 13 points less likely to be chosen.

Across the three issues, candidate positions do matter, at least when voters are presented with them directly. For two of the three issues, however, even extreme issue distances do not cost candidates more support than does a lack of experience. Only in the case of the marijuana legalization

do issue positions play a greater role than experience; here the most extreme issue distance leads to a 25 point reduction in the probability of being chosen.

Table 5 shows the results of regressions of vote choice on experience, simplified as either a 1 for deputy district attorneys and 0 otherwise, and several measures of candidate positions. In the first column, I show that experienced candidates are 10 points (standard error of 3 points) more likely to be chosen in the survey data. In column (2), I include a 7-point measure of candidate ideology that combines the three issue positions.[17] Candidate ideology never predicts vote choice, except in the extreme case when the candidate takes the conservative position on all three issues. In column (3), I measure ideology using the combined issue distance between respondents and candidates.[18] These estimates show candidates are penalized the more they are out of step from voters' positions. However, candidates need to be at a distance of five or above – i.e., firmly on the "opposite side" of where voters are located – to lose more than they gain from experience.[19]

To test whether voters use experience as a signal of ideology in this context, column (4) interacts experience with the respondent ideology. Point estimates suggest experienced candidates are 4 points more likely to be chosen by the most liberal respondents, and that this effect is 7 points higher for the most conservative respondents. However, as in the observational data, these differences are not statistically significant, suggesting that experience helps candidates win votes from voters of all ideological positions.[20]

[17]The three issue positions take a value of either -1 for oppose, 0 for neutral, or +1 for support. The combined scale for a candidate is simply the sum of all positions, which ranges from 0 to 6. I then reverse the scale so higher values indicate more conservative positions, and so the minimum value is 1.

[18]Respondents' combined ideology is computed in the same manner as candidates'. The distance between the two is simply the difference, which ranges from 0 to 6; I rescale the variable so that 1 represents the minimum and 7 the maximum.

[19]The original scale of issue distance is zero to six, so the fifth point on the scale represents a distance of four points. Candidates can be four points away from the respondent's position if and only if they are on opposite sides of the scale midpoint.

[20]I fielded the same survey protocol on a sample of Mechanical Turk respondents prior to fielding the survey on the Forthright sample. Results are consistent with the Forthright results, and I present them in Section 8 of the Appendix.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Experienced	0.102**	0.105**	0.103**	0.039
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.042)
Ideology=2		0.080	0.002	-0.026
		(0.044)	(0.022)	(0.020)
Ideology=3		0.015	-0.073**	-0.019
		(0.041)	(0.023)	(0.015)
Ideology=4		0.002	-0.108***	-0.050*
		(0.041)	(0.023)	(0.020)
Ideology=5		-0.069	-0.210***	-0.024
		(0.042)	(0.026)	(0.016)
Ideology=6		-0.087	-0.295***	-0.023
		(0.047)	(0.036)	(0.028)
Ideology=7		-0.200***	-0.322***	-0.014
		(0.051)	(0.057)	(0.020)
Experienced X Ideology=2				0.079
				(0.059)
Experienced X Ideology=3				0.062
				(0.046)
Experienced X Ideology=4				0.167**
				(0.054)
Experienced X Ideology=5				0.085
				(0.047)
Experienced X Ideology=6				0.068
				(0.081)
Experienced X Ideology=7				0.065
				(0.063)
Ideology Measure	N/A	Candidate	Issue Distance	Respondent
Observations	5,076	5,076	5,076	5,076

Table 5: Regression of winning office on candidate experience and issue positions from the conjoint experiment. Cell entries are regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by respondent. All specifications adjust for candidate age, education, sex, race, and conviction rate. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Conclusion

Can criminal justice reform be achieved by electing progressive candidates at the local level? In this article, I have argued that the nature of the district attorney's job, which is both political and bureaucratic, disadvantages progressive candidates at the polls. I draw on theories of valence advantage and bureaucratic autonomy to argue that experienced candidates will be more ideologically conservative, on one hand, and that voters will prefer experienced candidates, on the other. I test my argument using candidate positions data from five states, finding candidates who worked previously as an assistant district attorney are substantially more conservative than those who did not. Further, these experienced candidates have an electoral advantage even when they are ideologically out of step with voters, a result that holds in both real and hypothetical elections.

Although I document a significant barrier to the election of progressive candidates, this does not mean such candidates can never win, as the victories of several well-known progressives already demonstrate. One possible path to the election of progressive candidates, given my results, is to find the relatively rare candidate who is both experienced *and* progressive. A second possibility is that, as more and more progressives take office, the share of progressive assistant district attorneys will increase, weakening the correlation between experience and ideology. A third possibility is that progressive candidates can win when criminal justice reform is especially salient; for instance, in my conjoint results, candidates who are far out of step on legalizing marijuana are penalized twice as much as experienced candidates are rewarded, which may reflect the fact that legalizing marijuana is more salient to voters than the death penalty or three strikes laws.

While I examine the case of district attorneys in this paper, the theory I have outlined is more general, with implications for numerous other political offices. Many of the thousands of other state and local elected officials are also partly bureaucrats and managers. My results suggest a potential barrier to democratic responsiveness in these state and local offices, but one that will depend both on the relationship between competence and candidate ideology and on the relationship between competence and vote choice. For instance, in school board elections, voters may prefer candidates with backgrounds in education (Atkeson and Hamel 2020), who may also favor policies that are

closer to the median teacher instead of the median voter. And in states that vote for election administrators, voters may prefer candidates with backgrounds in election administration, and such candidates may reject election denialism even in states where voters do not.

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Appendix

1 Data Collection: Candidate Web Sites (MS, NY, PA, VA) A2

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8 Robustness: Vote Choice Experiment MTurk Results A16

9 References A19

1 Data Collection: Candidate Web Sites (MS, NY, PA, VA)

Between summer and fall 2023, I sought to collect the web sites for all candidates running for district attorney in states holding the majority of their elections in 2023. I used the list of districts and state election calendars compiled by Hessick and Morse (2020), I determined that a majority of districts in Mississippi, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia would hold elections in 2023.

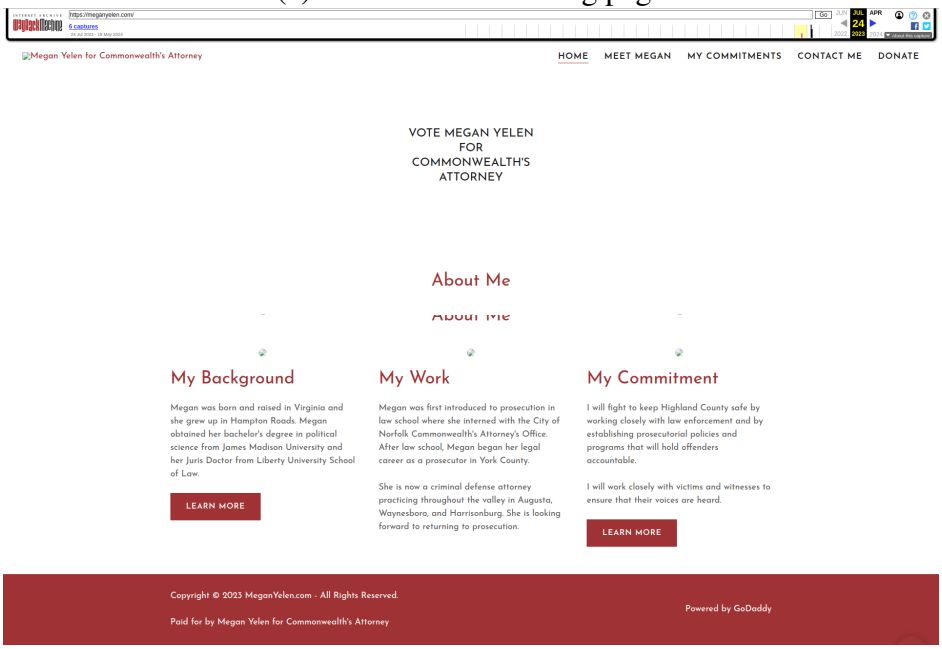
I distributed lists of these districts, along with their most recent election year as of 2023, among three undergraduate research assistants. I instructed these assistants to identify, based on online state or county election records, which districts saw competition in their most recent election. Then, for each district, the assistants compiled the names of all candidates running in primary and general elections. Last, the assistants entered each candidate's name into a search engine to identify the candidate's campaign web site address.

In early 2024, I accessed each web site using the Internet Archive's "Wayback Machine" tool for viewing historical web sites.[21] If a site was not available via the Wayback Machine, I used either a live version of the site or a cached page available via Google. Note that for some candidates, only the front page was available, while for others all pages were available. I manually saved each home page and all available pages hyperlinked from the home page. I excluded links to pages titled "Contact", "Volunteer", or "Donate," as well as any external links. I used the "html2text" Linux package to convert each HTML page to text, and I appended all resulting text files into one file per candidate. During this appending process, I used regular expressions to remove references to the Wayback Machine.

Figure 5 shows a screenshot of the landing page of a candidate web site in the 2023 Virginia election cycle.

[21] See https://archive.org/web/.

(a) Screenshot of landing page



(b) Landing page converted to raw text

```
    * Meet_Megan
    * My_Commitments
    * Why_I_am_Running
    * GOP_Endorsements
    * Contact_Me
    * Donate
****** VOTE MEGAN YELEN FOR COMMONWEALTH&#x27;S ATTORNEY ******
VOTE MEGAN YELEN FOR COMMONWEALTH&#x27;S ATTORNEY VOTE MEGAN YELEN FOR
COMMONWEALTH&#x27;S ATTORNEY VOTE MEGAN YELEN FOR COMMONWEALTH&#x27;S ATTORNEY
***** About Me *****
[]
*** My Background ***
*** My Background ***
*** My Background ***
Megan was born and raised in Virginia and she grew up in Hampton Roads. Megan
obtained her bachelor's degree in political science from James Madison
University and her Juris Doctor from Liberty University School of Law.
Learn_more
[]
*** My Work ***
*** My Background ***
*** My Background ***
Megan was first introduced to prosecution in law school where she interned with
the City of Norfolk Commonwealth's Attorney's Office. After law school, Megan
began her legal career as a prosecutor in York County.

She is now a criminal defense attorney practicing throughout the valley in
Augusta, Waynesboro, and Harrisonburg. She is looking forward to returning to
prosecution.
[]
*** My Commitment ***
*** My Background ***
*** My Commitment ***
I will fight to keep Highland County safe by working closely with law
enforcement and by establishing prosecutorial policies and programs that will
hold offenders accountable.

I will work closely with victims and witnesses to ensure that their voices are
heard.
Learn_more
Copyright Âo 2023 MeganYelen.com - All Rights Reserved.

Paid for by Megan Yelen for Commonwealth's Attorney
Powered by GoDaddy
*** This website uses cookies. ***
We use cookies to analyze website traffic and optimize your website experience.
By accepting our use of cookies, your data will be aggregated with all other
user data.
Accept
```

Figure A1: Example candidate web site.

2 Data Collection: CA Candidate Profiles

Figure A2 shows an example response to the League of Women Voters survey in California. The text under "Top Priorities if Elected" is what I extract and display to coders in the crowd-coding task.

Figure A2: Example district attorney candidate profile.

3 Data Collection: Crowd-Coded Positions for CA

Each of 139 California candidates has three issue priority bullets, for a total of 417 bullets. One bullet is repeated verbatim by two different candidates, so there are 416 unique bullets. I designed a Qualtrics survey that, for each participant, randomly selected 25 bullets from the set of 416. Participants who took the survey first saw a "warning" page that read:

> It is essential that you pay attention over the course of the survey. We will check each of your responses closely in order to make sure that you have read the instructions for the task and responded carefully. We will only accept your responses if you clearly demonstrate that you have read and understood the survey. Again, there will be questions that test whether you are reading the instructions.

Participants then saw instructions as shown below in Figure A3

The subsequent pages on the survey displayed bullets, with one bullet appearing per page. Figure A4 shows an example bullet. All respondents saw the same four five bullets first, followed by 25 randomly selected bullets.

Bullets one through four were "gold standard" items for which I was highly confident in the correct coding; I used these to determine whether participants understood the coding task and were expending the necessary effort. The fifth item was an attention check that instructed respondents to select all options. These first five bullets and correct responses are:

- "Incarceration of Violent Offenders". Correct coding: Traditionalist only.
- "Address racial and class inequities inherent in the criminal justice system. Increase diversity among staff in the District Attorney's Office." Correct codings: (Progressive only) OR (Progressive AND Other).
- "Reduce incarceration rates with a focus on rehabilitation". Correct coding: Progressive only.
- "Hard line prosecution of violent crime." Correct coding: Traditionalist only.

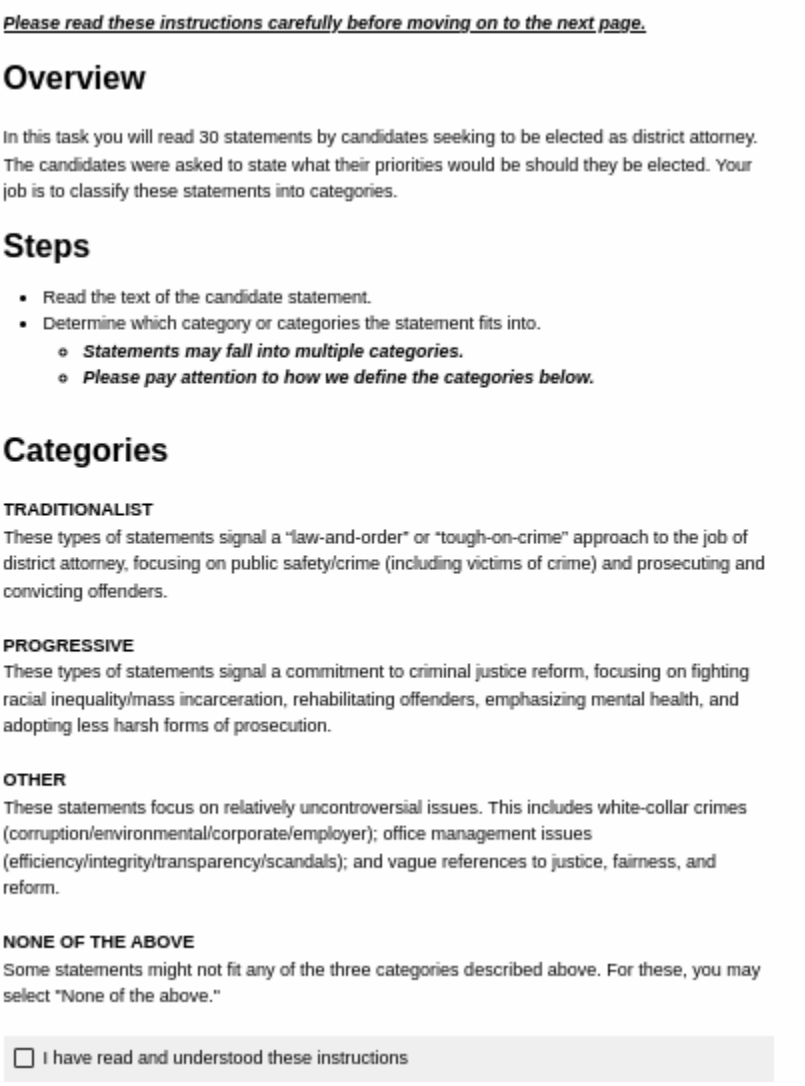


Figure A3: Rating task instructions.

- "This question is meant to verify that you are reading carefully. To demonstrate you are paying attention, please check all four options below." Correct coding: Traditionalist AND Progressive AND Other AND None of the above.

To recruit participants into the rating survey, I created and posted a HIT on Mechanical Turk in December 2022. The title of the HIT was "Classify 30 statements by political candidates", and the description was "Classify 30 statements by political candidates for academic research. Should take about 10 minutes.", keywords were "text, classification, reading, politics", the reward was $2.00 per completion, and the key text read:

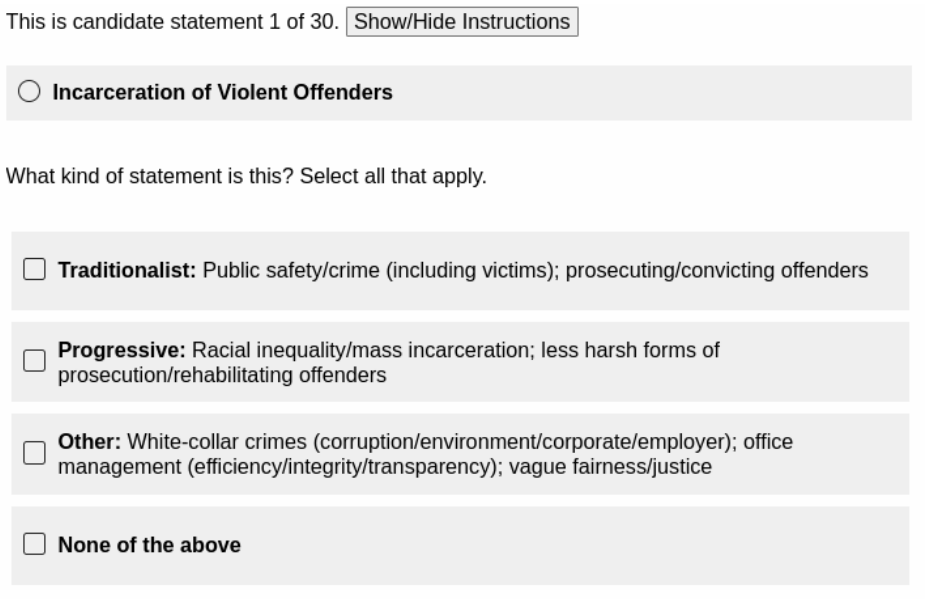


Figure A4: Example bullet as shown on rating task.

> In this task you will read 30 statements by candidates seeking to be elected as district attorney. The candidates were asked to state what their priorities would be should they be elected. Your job is to classify these statements into categories. We estimate the task should take about 10 minutes to complete.

Only workers with the following qualifications were allowed to complete the HIT: approval rate greater than or equal to 98%, located in the United States, and number of HITs approved greater than 1000.

I initially sought to recruit 100 coders, but there were 288 total submissions to the HIT, as I rejected many invalid responses. Passage rates on the gold standard questions ranged from 57% to 87% based on the item, and I use only responses from the 37% of the sample that passed all five checks.

Ultimately, a total of 104 unique raters successfully completed the classification task. While each rater was meant to avoid seeing the same bullet twice, due to a coding error, some raters gave the same bullet more than one rating. I treat cases where the same rater classified the same bullet multiple times as multiple raters; this coding results in 116 raters. Putting aside the four "gold standard" bullets which all raters coded, the number of ratings per bullet ranges from 1 to 12 with

an average of 6 and a standard deviation of 2. The vast majority of bullets (99%) received more than 3 ratings.

Before fielding the coding survey and HIT, I reached out to my institution's Institutional Review Board to inquire whether the project required IRB approval. The IRB deemed my proposed coding task was not research, and so the rating survey was not reviewed by the IRB.

4 Measurement: Inter-Rater Reliability for CA Candidates

Table A1 displays Krippendorff's alpha, a measure of inter-rater reliability in content analysis (Krippendorff 2004). With gold items included, the alphas for the traditional and progressive categories are 0.49 and 0.44, respectively; they are 0.41 and 0.32 when excluding the gold items. Reliability is lower for the other and none categories. My values are considerably lower than those typically found when using a small number of undergraduate assistants (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2015 report 0.88; Budak, Garrett, and Sude 2021 report 0.77). However, they are in line with reliabilities found in recent papers utilizing crowd-sourced coding (e.g., Cirone and Hobbs 2023 report values between 0.14 and 0.55; Budak, Garrett, and Sude 2021 report values ranging from 0.21 to 0.38). I also assigned bullets my own codings prior to fielding the crowd-coding task. Table A2 cross-tabulates average rater codings against my own codings for each bullet. Overall, the two sets of ratings correlate at 0.68.

Category	Gold Items Included	Alpha
Traditionalist	Yes	0.49
Traditionalist	No	0.41
Progressive	Yes	0.44
Progressive	No	0.32
Other	Yes	0.29
Other	No	0.25
None	Yes	0.08
None	No	0.07

Table A1: Inter-rater reliability.

	Author=-1	Author=0	Author=1
Raters <= -0.33	51	27	15
	(76)	(21)	(7)
-0.33 < Raters < 0.33	15	85	72
	(22)	(67)	(32)
Raters >= 0.33	1	14	136
	(1)	(11)	(61)

Table A2: Cross-tabulation of average rater codings and authors' codings. Cell entries are frequencies with column percentages in parentheses.

5 Measurement: Wordscores Algorithm (MS, NY, PA, VA)

I construct the corpus as follows. First, for each of the California candidates I combine their three bullets into one document. Second, I append the California candidates' documents and ideological scores to the uncoded vector of candidate web site texts. I then convert the matrix to a corpus using the "corpus" function in the "quanteda" library in R. Third, I tokenize the corpus using the "tokens" function from the same library, removing punctuation, numbers, symbols, and URL's. Fourth, I remove common English stop words. Fifth, I convert the tokens to unigrams and bigrams using the "tokens_ngrams" function.

I construct the document-feature matrix as follows. First, I use the "dfm" function from "quanteda" to convert the tokens object to a document-feature matrix. Second, I remove numbers, navigation-related terms ("home", "donate", and "volunteer"), words less than four characters, and URL's.

After constructing the document-feature matrix, I implement the Wordscores model using the "textmodel_wordscores" function from "quanteda". In brief, this model assumes each word w in the document-feature matrix has an ideological value s. Each document d in the matrix then has a document-level ideology S defined as the sum of the ideologies of each word s, weighted by the probability that word occurs in document d:

$$S_d = \sum_{i=1}^{N} s_i * P(w_i|d)$$

The estimated score for each word, s, is then the sum of of the document-level ideologies, weighted by the probability we are reading that document given it contains word w:

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{s_w} &= \sum_{j=1}^{J} S_j * P(d_j|w) \\ &= \sum_{j=1}^{J} S_j * \left(\frac{P(w|d_j)P(d_j)}{P(w)} \right) \end{aligned}$$

where we re-write $P(d_j|w)$ this way due to Bayes' rule. Then $P(w)$ can be expressed in terms of

$P(w|d)$ due to the Law of Total Probability:

$$= \sum_{j=1}^{J} S_j * \left(\frac{P(w|d_j)P(d_j)}{\sum_{i=1}^{N} P(w|d_i)P(d_i)} \right)$$

The prior probabilities of each document are assumed equal, and so this simplifies further:

$$= \sum_{j=1}^{J} S_j * \left(\frac{P(w|d_j)}{\sum_{i=1}^{N} P(w|d_i)} \right)$$

With word-level scores in hand, it is then straightforward to predict document-level scores for the uncoded web site texts:

$$\hat{S}_d = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \hat{s}_i * P(w_i|d)$$

I generate a term-level data set that includes each term in the document-feature matrix, its raw wordscore, and the proportion of documents including it. I also generate a candidate-level data set that includes each candidate's predicted ideology score.

In most cases, I identified whether the candidate served as a deputy DA using the information on the candidate web sites. In some cases, I supplemented with biographical information available elsewhere on the web.

6 Robustness: Experience Measure in Observational Data

In the main text, I code the 154 former deputies listed in the first row of this table as "experienced", and I code all 86 other candidates as "inexperienced." The top panel of Table A3 shows that of the 86 candidates I code as inexperienced, 51 had no prior prosecutorial experience, but the other 35 had some prosecutorial experience, either in another county in the state (23), another county out of the state (2), in the state attorney general's office (4), or as a federal prosecutor (5). One candidate in Virginia who ran in the 2023 cycle had actually previously been the incumbent prosecutor in their district; because this candidate had no experience prior to becoming the incumbent, however, I code them as inexperienced in the main text.

The remaining columns in the top panel of this table give some insight into the consequences of my coding decisions. Of the 35 candidates with some non-local prosecutor experience, 23 served as deputies in another county in the state, and the average ideology of this group if 0.15. As the average ideology for deputies in my main coding is 0.22, this suggests coding these other candidates as "experienced" would not change my results for ideology that much. Some other types of experience, such as serving as a local deputy out of state or serving as a federal prosecutor, are associated with more liberal ideologies, but the sample sizes are much smaller for these subgroups. In terms of winning, most of these other candidate experiences are associated with lower win rates relative to both deputies and those with no experience at any level. Interestingly, deputies serving in another county in the state only win 22% of the time. This could reflect voters recognizing the value of local relationships and institutional knowledge; alternatively, it could reflect a "friends and neighbor" effect.

In the middle panel of Table A3 I show regressions of ideology on experience, now coding rows 3 through 7 in the top panel as "experienced." Results are slightly attenuated in magnitude relative to those shown in the main text, but experienced candidates continue to be more conservative. In the bottom panel, I show regressions of winning on experience using this alternative coding. While the point estimates are similar to those in the main text, they are no longer statistically significant at conventional levels.

(a) Frequency and averages for experience categories

Experience	N	Mean Ideology	Pr(Winner)
1 NA (was a deputy DA)	154	0.22	0.50
2 no prosecutor experience	51	0.03	0.37
3 deputy in another county in state	23	0.15	0.22
4 deputy in another county out of state	2	-0.27	0.00
5 prosecutor in state attorney general's office	4	0.06	0.50
6 federal prosecutor in state	5	-0.25	0.60
7 was chief prosecutor in this county	1	0.30	1.00

(b) Regression of ideology on experience using alternative coding

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Experienced	0.164**	0.163**	0.178**	0.159**
	(0.057)	(0.053)	(0.053)	(0.050)
Trump Vote Share		0.748***		0.761***
		(0.108)		(0.103)
Constant	0.029	-0.247***	0.288**	0.095
	(0.055)	(0.069)	(0.093)	(0.092)
Observations	240	240	240	240
Cycle fixed effects			X	X
State fixed effects			X	X

(c) Regression of winner on experience using alternative coding

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Experienced	0.093	0.091	0.105	0.103
	(0.076)	(0.063)	(0.082)	(0.069)
Incumbent		0.486***		0.482***
		(0.065)		(0.068)
Constant	0.373***	0.249***	0.342***	0.263**
	(0.066)	(0.059)	(0.085)	(0.087)
Observations	240	240	240	240
Cycle fixed effects			X	X
State fixed effects			X	X

Table A3: Frequency of experience and robustness to alternative codings.

7 Data Collection: Vote Choice Experiment

I recruited the Forthright sample between February 21st and March 2nd, 2023. I sought to recruit 500 workers, though ultimately I collected 509 valid, completed responses.

As a pilot study, I also recruited a Mechanical Turk sample on October 13th, 2020. The title of the HIT was "Answer a 10 minute survey for a university-sponsored study", the description was "Answer a fun short survey for a university-sponsored study. Should take 7 to 10 minutes.", the keywords were "survey, news, opinion, exciting, interesting", and payment was $1. Workers must have met the following qualifications: past HIT approval greater than or equal to 95%, and located in the United States. I sought to recruit 500 workers; ultimately I collected 502 valid, completed responses.

Subjects recruited via both samples consented to the survey after reading the following statement:[22]

> We are looking for participants interested in completing a survey about current social and political issues. This research study is conducted by [redacted], a researcher in the Department of [redacted] at [redacted]. The study is titled "Vote Choice in Simulated Prosecutor Elections" (protocol number [redacted]).
>
> Purpose: The purpose of the study is to understand people's attitudes about public affairs. You do not need to have any prior information to participate in the study. We are simply interested in your opinions.
>
> Eligibility: By participating in this study, you affirm that you are a United States resident and at least 18 years of age.
>
> Costs and Compensation: There is no cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the survey.
>
> Time: It will take around 10 minutes to complete the study.
>
> Confidentiality: No information is collected that could identify you from your responses. This survey is being hosted by Qualtrics and involves a secure connection. Terms of Service, addressing confidentiality, may be viewed at http://qualtrics.com/security-statement/. The answers you provide to this study are completely confidential. The results of your responses will be stored on a computer, but will not contain any information that will allow for the identification of a participant. Persons other than the investigators might view your study records, but your answers are completely anonymous. We have ensured that your IP address will not be recorded in the survey data.

[22] Forthright subjects read the statement below. Mechanical Turk subjects read a statement that also mentioned compensation but was otherwise identical to the Forthright statement.

	Mturk Sample	Forthright Sample
White	0.71	0.50
Female	0.36	0.50
Age	37.09	45.48
BA or above	0.75	0.33
Support legal marijuana	0.54	0.48
Oppose death penalty	0.30	0.06
Oppose three strikes	0.36	0.12

Table A4: Sample characteristics for conjoint studies.

> Participation: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty. An alternative to participating in the study is to choose not to participate. You may discontinue the study at any time.
>
> If you have questions or comments regarding this survey you can contact [redacted] at [redacted]. For additional information about your rights as a research participant in this study, please feel free to contact the [redacted] Institutional Review Board Office at [redacted], referencing the study "Vote Choice in Simulated Prosecutor Elections" (protocol number [redacted]).
>
> We greatly appreciate your cooperation in helping us to collect quality data for academic research!

Table A4 shows sample means for several respondent-level variables. Consistent with past research, the Mechanical Turk sample is skewed toward white, male, young, educated, and liberal respondents. The Forthright sample is closer to national averages gender, age, and race;[23] the Forthright sample is also more moderate on criminal justice issues compared to the Turk sample.

The protocol fielded on both samples was reviewed and approved by my institution's IRB.

[23]Here "white" means white and non-Hispanic. In the Mechanical Turk survey, race and ethnicity was recorded in a single variable with separate choices for "White" and "Hispanic". In the Forthright study, race and ethnicity were supplied by the survey company in a supplementary data file, and come from separate questions. Here I code Forthright respondents as "white" if they answer white only on the race question, *and* answer "no" when asked if they are Hispanic.

8 Robustness: Vote Choice Experiment MTurk Results

Figure A5 replicates the conjoint results shown in Figure 4 in the main text, now using the MTurk sample. As in the Forthright sample, defense attorney and public defender candidates are less likely to be chosen relative to assistant district attorneys, though this difference is not significant in the case of defense attorneys. Also similar to the Forthright sample, candidates who are more out of step are less likely to be chosen; these effects are similarly sized to the effect of experience.

Table A5 replicate the regression results shown in Table 5 in the main text, now using the MTurk sample. Experienced candidates are about seven points more likely to win, whether or not we adjust for candidate ideology or issue distance. Perhaps because of the relatively more liberal sample, we also see in column (2) that very conservative candidates are less likely to win. We also see in column (4) that, among the most liberal MTurk respondents (those at a 1 on the 7-point scale), experience as a deputy brings no electoral benefit. At the same time, for the next-most liberal (those at a 2), deputies are about 13 points more likely to be chosen.

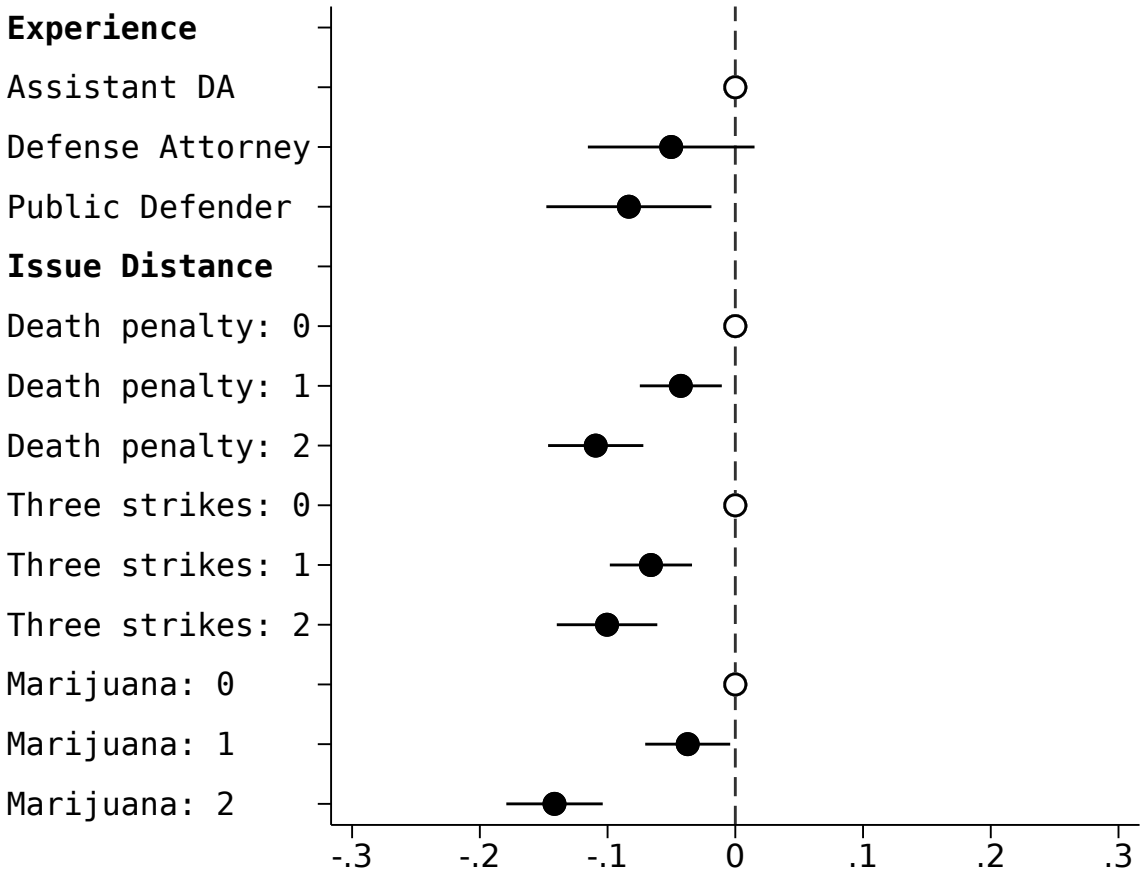


Figure A5: Candidate conjoint experiment results in the MTurk sample. Lines span 95% confidence intervals computed using standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Experienced	0.073*	0.073*	0.072*	0.002
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.038)
Ideology=2		-0.011	-0.003	-0.036*
		(0.040)	(0.025)	(0.017)
Ideology=3		-0.069	-0.051*	-0.023
		(0.038)	(0.025)	(0.015)
Ideology=4		-0.057	-0.070**	-0.055**
		(0.037)	(0.024)	(0.017)
Ideology=5		-0.129***	-0.142***	-0.032
		(0.038)	(0.027)	(0.016)
Ideology=6		-0.164***	-0.221***	-0.004
		(0.041)	(0.034)	(0.027)
Ideology=7		-0.194***	-0.200**	-0.063**
		(0.053)	(0.070)	(0.020)
Experienced X Ideology=2				0.127*
				(0.053)
Experienced X Ideology=3				0.064
				(0.043)
Experienced X Ideology=4				0.166**
				(0.051)
Experienced X Ideology=5				0.104*
				(0.051)
Experienced X Ideology=6				0.011
				(0.083)
Experienced X Ideology=7				0.175**
				(0.055)
Ideology Measure	N/A	Candidate	Issue Distance	Respondent
Observations	5,018	5,018	4,998	4,998

Table A5: Regression of winning office on candidate experience and issue positions from the conjoint experiment in the MTurk sample. Cell entries are regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by respondent. All specifications adjust for candidate age, education, sex, race, and conviction rate. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

9 References

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