

Chapter Three: Electing America's Election Officials

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

Two-thirds of all jurisdictions elect their local election officials and half of all jurisdictions use an openly partisan selection process. This is the basis for concerns about partisanship in election administration (Ferrer et al. 2023; McBrayer et al. 2020; Porter and Rogowski 2018; Stuart

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

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

Why are Election Officials Elected in the United States?

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

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

Initially, election administration formed a small part of municipal and county officials' responsibilities. Elections took place infrequently and with little preparation, involving neither registration lists nor ballots. (Hale et al. 2015). Election administration became more complex and time consuming by the end of the 19th century with the adoption of voter registration and party primaries, the move to the Australian ballot, and the use of voting machines. It has become an even more demanding operation in recent decades, due to a combination of population growth, technological innovations, and frequent law changes (Minnite 2010). Although states and the federal government centralized some duties—especially with the National Voter Registration Act in 1993 and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) in 2002—election administration has largely remained the purview of local officials.

The political environment has grown more difficult as well. Voting rights have been contested throughout U.S. history, with periodic battles to expand the suffrage to racial minorities, women, and Native Americans (Keyssar 2009). Modern-day fights over voting laws are driven by

¹<https://www.michigan.gov/sos/elections/voting/voters/special-topics/michigans-elections-system-structure-overview>

partisan efforts to shape who shows up at the polls--and who doesn't (Bentele and O'Brien 2013). Polarization has divided Americans across party and ideological lines (McCarty et al. 2016). Meanwhile, an increasingly competitive electoral environment has raised the stakes of elections (Lee 2016). These trends have resulted in the politicization of election administration itself, with politicians pitching heated battles over election laws and partisans scrutinizing election officials' every action (Hasen 2012). The 2000 Presidential election, decided on razor thin margins in Florida, catalyzed some of these changes. It led to the passage of HAVA, which created the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and set basic standards for how elections should be conducted across the country. President Trump's claims of a stolen election in 2020 spurred even more partisan acrimony and distrust of election officials. A 2020 Gallup poll found that 59% of Americans are not confident in the honesty of U.S. elections.

Local election officials have had to bear the twin burdens of a more demanding job and a fraught political environment. Many have resigned or retired under these conditions, and new recruits are hard to find.² Chapter 9 details how election officials now regularly face partisan acrimony, accusations of malfeasance, and even death threats.³ COVID-19 has proven an additional burden for election officials that has led to many early retirements (discussed in Chapter 4). This difficult environment is conducive to attracting candidates with strong partisan inclinations who are willing to bear the costs of the office due to ideological extremism rather than civic duty (Hall 2019). These trends raise pressing concerns about both the quality of local election officials and their ability to administer elections in a professional and unbiased manner. We believe it demands a reevaluation of direct election as a method for selecting local election officials.

What do election officials do?

Local election officials oversee registration and voting administration. Registration administration involves registering voters and maintaining a registration list. Voting administration involves creating ballots, hiring and training poll workers, selecting poll locations, processing candidate nominations, purchasing and maintaining voting equipment, overseeing the casting of ballots, processing absentee and provisional votes, and tabulating and certifying the election results (Ferrer et al. 2023; Hale et al. 2015; Kimball and Kropf 2006). Voting administration duties can also include enforcing campaign finance and electioneering laws, educating candidates about the election process, undertaking registration drives, handling voter inquiries, hiring staff, and creating department budgets. The exact responsibilities and amount of discretion local election officials have to carry out these responsibilities varies widely across jurisdictions (Ferrer et al. 2021).

²

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

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/nov/01/us-election-workers-threats-violence;>
<https://www.inquirer.com/politics/election/spl/pennsylvania-election-2020-officials-retiring-nightmare-2020-1221.html>

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

Whereas states are tasked with setting policy and conducting elections in accordance with federal law, the primary responsibility for administering elections lies with local election officials. In most states, this authority rests with officials at the county or county-equivalent level,⁵ and at the city, village, or township level in a handful of New England and Midwest states. Election officials operate in 7,775 independent jurisdictions throughout the country, including 2,896 counties and 4,879 municipalities. In many jurisdictions, duties are divided between multiple independent authorities. The size of election offices also varies widely. Half of all jurisdictions have no more than one full-time equivalent (FTE) election administrator, whereas the average jurisdiction has between two and five staff members and 2% of jurisdictions employ more than 20 FTEs (2020 DF/RC Survey). The actual work of setting up polling locations, checking in voters, and tabulating votes is usually left to volunteers who serve as poll workers for a single day (Burden and Milyo 2015).

Where are election officials elected?

Building on the work of Kimball and Kropf (2006), Hale et al. (2015), Ferrer (2022), and Ferrer et al. (2023), we conduct the most thorough survey to date of local election administration in the United States. We explore six dimensions of local election administration:

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

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

⁵ County-equivalents include the parish level in Louisiana and city-counties or independent cities in other states. We also count Alaska's five election districts as county-equivalents, rather than its 30 boroughs and census areas.

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

Uniformity within State

A minority of states—21 plus the District of Columbia—administer local elections uniformly across their jurisdictions. Twenty-nine states have some degree of jurisdiction-level variation, which ranges from a single anomaly to widespread heterogeneity. For instance, every county in West Virginia has an elected partisan clerk who is in charge of election administration. The one exception is Ohio County, where instead the County Commission oversees elections and appoints an Elections Coordinator. On the other end of the spectrum is Texas, where 135 of its 254 counties have an appointed elections administrator chosen by a county elections commission, 110 have an elected county clerk with chief election responsibilities, and nine entrust the elected tax assessor with election duties. Adding an additional layer of complexity, tax assessors handle registration duties in 96 counties and county clerks undertake these responsibilities in 22 counties.

Deviations from a state's most common form of election administration are typically found in its most populous jurisdictions, and usually take the form of an election board or an appointed position rather than an elected individual. This is the case in Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, Washington, and Wisconsin. Many states allow counties some discretion in determining their own rules for governance. These home-rule charter counties are a common source for variation in the selection methods of local officials, especially in California, Florida, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Widespread within-state variation may also be the result of the state devolving power to counties (Minnesota, Montana, and Texas) or municipalities (Connecticut, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, Vermont, Wisconsin) to choose their own forms of election administration. States may also pass legislation for each jurisdiction-level change (Georgia, Massachusetts, and Minnesota (before 2019)).

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

Number of Election Authorities

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

92 local election authorities substantially involved in administering elections.⁶ These are listed in Table 3.1 and include both individuals and boards.

In 28 states, the typical form of administration is a single authority in charge of each jurisdiction. For example, every county in Idaho elects a partisan clerk as the sole official responsible for all voting and registration administration duties. Twenty-two states have two or more independent authorities. With six different entities involved, Alabama has the most divided local election administration of any state. The elected probate judge, circuit clerk, and sheriff each have independent responsibilities and form an election commission that selects poll workers. Meanwhile, state leadership appoints a county board of registrars and the county commission retains important election duties.

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

⁶ This figure is derived using the most common form of administration found in each state's jurisdictions. There are close to 150 unique election authorities when including jurisdictions that do not conform to the state's typical election administration format.

State	Local Election Official
Alaska	Regional Election Supervisor
Alabama	Probate Judge
	County Commission
	Board of Registrars
	Circuit Clerk
	Sheriff
	Election Commission/Appointing Board
Arkansas	Clerk
	Election Commission
	Quorum Court
Arizona	County Election Administrator
	County Recorder
	Board of Supervisors
California	Clerk
Colorado	Clerk and Recorder
Connecticut	Registrar of Voters
	Town Clerk
DC	Board of Elections
Delaware	Election Board/Department of Elections
Florida	Supervisor of Elections
	County Canvassing Board
Georgia	Board of Elections and Registration
Hawaii	Clerk
Iowa	Auditor
Idaho	Clerk
Illinois	Clerk
Indiana	Clerk
	County Election Board

Kansas	Clerk
Kentucky	Clerk
	County Board of Elections
	Sheriff
Louisiana	Clerk of Court
	Registrar of Voters
	Board of Election Supervisors
	Parish Council
Massachusetts	City/Town Clerk
	Board of Registrars
Maryland	Board of Elections
Maine	Municipal Clerk
Michigan	Township/City Clerk
	Township/City Election Commission
	County Clerk
	County Election Commission
	Board of County Canvassers
Minnesota	County Auditor
	City/Town Clerk
Missouri	Clerk
Mississippi	Circuit Clerk
	Election Commission
Montana	Clerk and Recorder
North Carolina	Board of Elections
North Dakota	Auditor
Nebraska	Clerk
New Hampshire	Moderator
	Town/City Clerk
	Supervisors of Checklist/Board of Registrars
	Board of Selectmen

New Jersey	Board of Elections
	Clerk
	Superintendent of Elections
New Mexico	Clerk
	Board of Registration
Nevada	Clerk
New York	Board of Elections
Ohio	Board of Elections
Oklahoma	Election Board
Oregon	Clerk
Pennsylvania	Election Director/Chief Registrar
	County Election Board
Rhode Island	Canvassing/Town Clerk
	Board of Canvassers
South Carolina	County Board of Voter Registration and Elections
South Dakota	Auditor/Finance Officer
Tennessee	Election Commission
Texas	Elections Administrator

	Election Commission
	Commissioners Court
Utah	Clerk
Virginia	General Registrar
	Electoral Board
Vermont	Town Clerk
	Board of Civil Authority
	County Clerk
	Town Moderator
Washington	Auditor
Wisconsin	Municipal Clerk
	County Clerk
West Virginia	Clerk
	Board of Ballot Commissioners
	County Commission
Wyoming	Clerk

Note: Bolded authorities indicate the chief/primary local election official responsible for administering elections in the state's modal jurisdiction. *Ex officio* positions such as Registrar of Voters in California and Superintendent of Elections in Georgia are not included in this list.

To make generalizations about local election administration across the U.S., we identify the primary authority responsible for administering elections in each state's modal jurisdiction (bolded authorities in Table 3.1). We exercise some judgment in making this determination, prioritizing voting administration over registration administration and Election Day duties over pre- and post-election tasks.⁷

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

Geographic Level of Responsibility

⁷ Prior literature (Bassi et al. 2009; Ferrer et al. 2023; Kimball and Kropf 2006) does not always agree on the primary election authority for each state.

In 42 states and in D.C., the primary local election authority operates at the county level.⁸ Elections in eight states in the Northeast and Midwest are instead administered by municipal election officials—typically, a city, village, town, or township. These states are Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin. In Michigan, Minnesota, Vermont, and Wisconsin, responsibilities are divided between municipal and county officials, although with the exception of Minnesota the municipality undertakes most administrative duties in these states.⁹

There are tradeoffs to delegating authority to municipalities rather than counties. Towns tend to be less populous than counties, with population counts often in the hundreds rather than the thousands. They are also more likely to use nonpartisan contests rather than partisan ones. Fewer people means fewer votes to oversee on Election Day, but it also usually means fewer resources to successfully administer elections (Kimball and Baybeck 2013). The benefits to accountability that come from highly localized and personal relationships likely compete with resource and know-how costs that are steepest in the smallest jurisdictions.

Authority Type

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

Boards aggregate the preferences of multiple people. Most operate through majoritarian rule, although in some jurisdictions—and for some decisions—unanimity is required. It is possible that boards informally operate according to bipartisan cooperation and deliberation, regardless of their formal composition. Boards can also act as little more than rubber stamps for the pivotal board member or chairman. In contrast, individuals are not directly constrained by other veto players, although other executive officers, the local legislative body, and state-level officials could influence election administration decisions.

A board could serve as a useful deliberative mechanism for election administration policies. Or, it could stymie much-needed reform. Similarly, an individual local election official could be a champion of change or could push partisan policies that result in suboptimal election outcomes. Future research should examine the tradeoffs between these two forms of local election administration.

⁸ This includes county-equivalents such as parishes (Louisiana) and independent cities, as well as Alaska's five election districts. In some of these states, municipal officials may run elections for municipal offices.

⁹ In five Illinois municipalities and one Missouri municipality, separate election entities are in charge of elections for residents within city boundaries. County officials in those areas run elections for residents within the county but outside those municipalities.

Selection Method

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

Thirty states select their primary local election official through election while the rest use appointments. The share of states using elections is roughly equivalent across county and municipal levels of administration. However, it is highly uneven when accounting for authority type. Of the 30 states with elected authorities, 27 elect individuals whereas three—Connecticut, Louisiana, and Mississippi—elect boards. Among the 20 states that appoint their officials, 11 use boards and 10 use individuals. Most elected authorities are individuals, whereas a majority of appointed authorities are boards.

Partisanship

When officials are elected, they can either run in partisan contests where their party affiliation is included on the ballot or they can run in nonpartisan races in which no party affiliation is listed. Appointed members can be selected by officials with partisan affiliation or by those who are nonpartisan. They can also be selected by boards of officials who are nonpartisan or that have a certain partisan balance, or by bipartisan boards with a mandated equal composition of Democrats and Republicans.¹⁰

In total, 35 states and D.C. entrust partisan local officials to be their primary election administrators, whereas only 10 use nonpartisan officials and five use bipartisan authorities. It is instructive to examine this breakdown by authority type and selection method, as a partisan elected official is quite different from an appointed board that is characterized as partisan. Among the 27 states that elect an individual official, 21 use a partisan administrator (78%) and six use a nonpartisan official (22%). Among the three states that elect a board, Louisiana and Mississippi use a partisan body and Connecticut uses a bipartisan body (i.e. one that mandates even party membership). Among the ten states that appoint an individual, six are partisan (60%) and four are nonpartisan (40%), and among the 11 states that appoint a board, seven are partisan (64%) and four are bipartisan (36%). In most places where individual election officials are elected, they run with partisan affiliation on the ballot. And in nearly half of states that elect or appoint boards to administer elections, they ensure even party membership in these bodies. Not a single state uses nonpartisan boards as their typical mode of local election administration.

¹⁰ Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Ohio all use boards with equal partisan balance. Kentucky and Michigan also use bipartisan boards but these are not their primary election authority.

Nonpartisan election administration is more common in states that delegate to municipal jurisdictions than those that delegate to county-level jurisdictions. Only two of the eight states with municipal-level election administration use partisan administrators (25%), compared with 34 of the 42 states with county-level jurisdiction (81%). This is consistent with the fact that Progressive Era reforms made many municipal elections nonpartisan (Cigler 1995; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Trounstein 2010), whereas counties have largely retained party labels on the ballot.

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

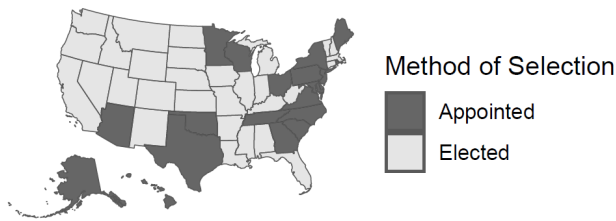
We argue it is incorrect to think of officials appointed by partisan actors as nonpartisan. Although the governor, county legislator, or municipal executive is not typically elected on an electoral reform platform, closely contested elections, the willingness of partisan officials to engage in rhetoric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

Geographic Distribution of Local Election Administration

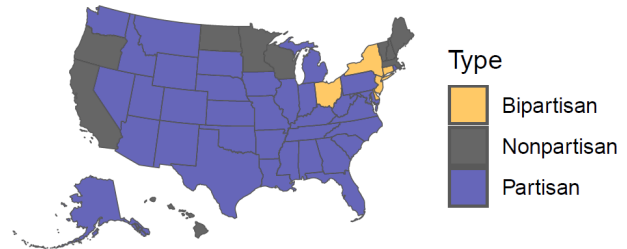
In this section, we illustrate the distribution of local election administration characteristics across the country. Figure 3.1 maps three key dimensions of administration: selection method, partisanship, and authority type. This figure reveals geographic patterns in how local election officials are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

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

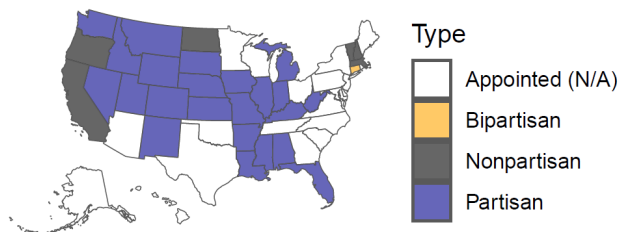
(i) Selection Method



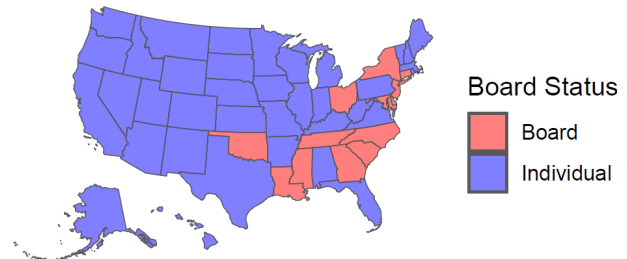
(ii) Partisanship



(iii) Partisanship (Elected Only)



(iv) Board vs. Individual



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

Panel (i) displays the typical selection method used to pick local election officials in each state. It reveals that appointment is most commonly used in the eastern half of the United States, especially the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic. In contrast, election officials are typically elected throughout the mountain West and Pacific states, and states in the Midwest and the South vary between elections and appointments.

A different pattern emerges when examining the partisanship of the selection process. Panel (ii) displays partisanship for all states and panel (iii) displays partisanship for those that elect their local election officials. Nonpartisan election administration is confined to a few states in New England, the upper Midwest, and the coastal West. Bipartisan arrangements are most commonly found in the Mid-Atlantic states. In the rest of the country, election officials are either directly elected with partisan affiliation or appointed by those with partisan affiliation.

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

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

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

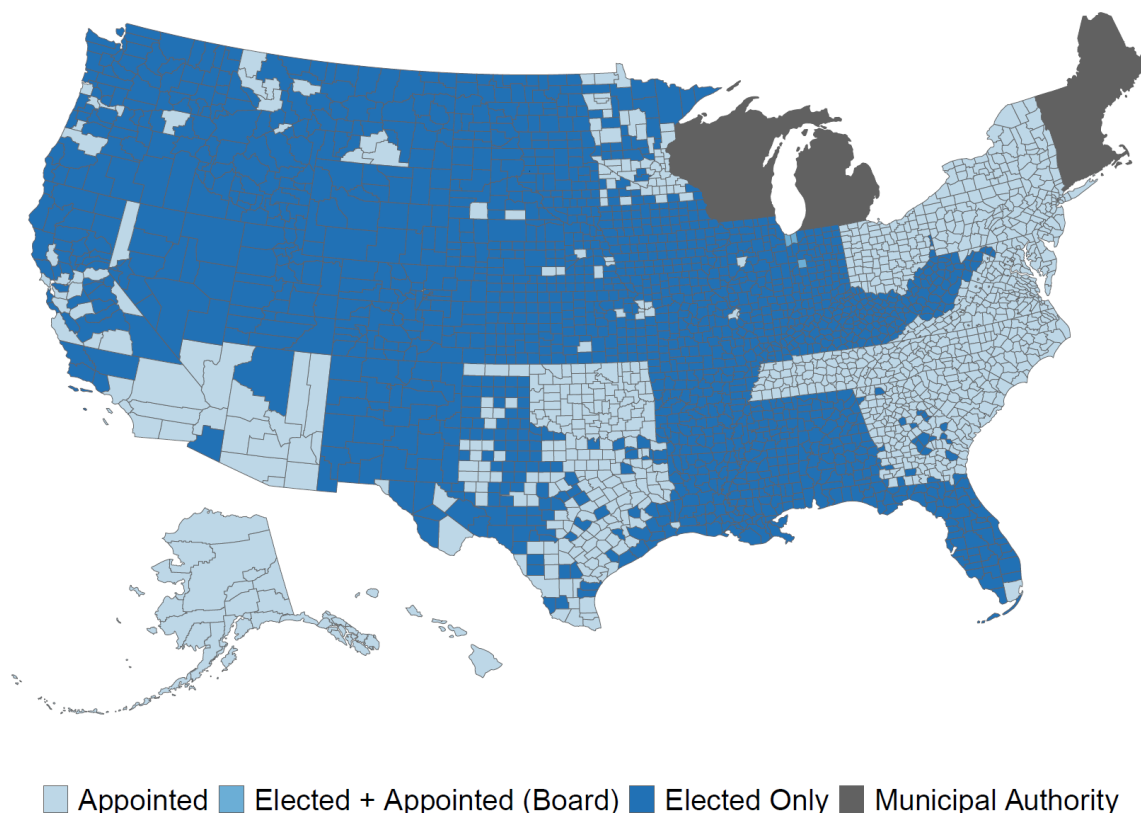
The previous sections examined the most common form of election administration in each state. We turn our attention now to county- and municipal-level variation in the selection method and partisanship of local election officials. In this section, we quantify the amount of sub-state variation that exists,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

County-level variation in characteristics of local election administration

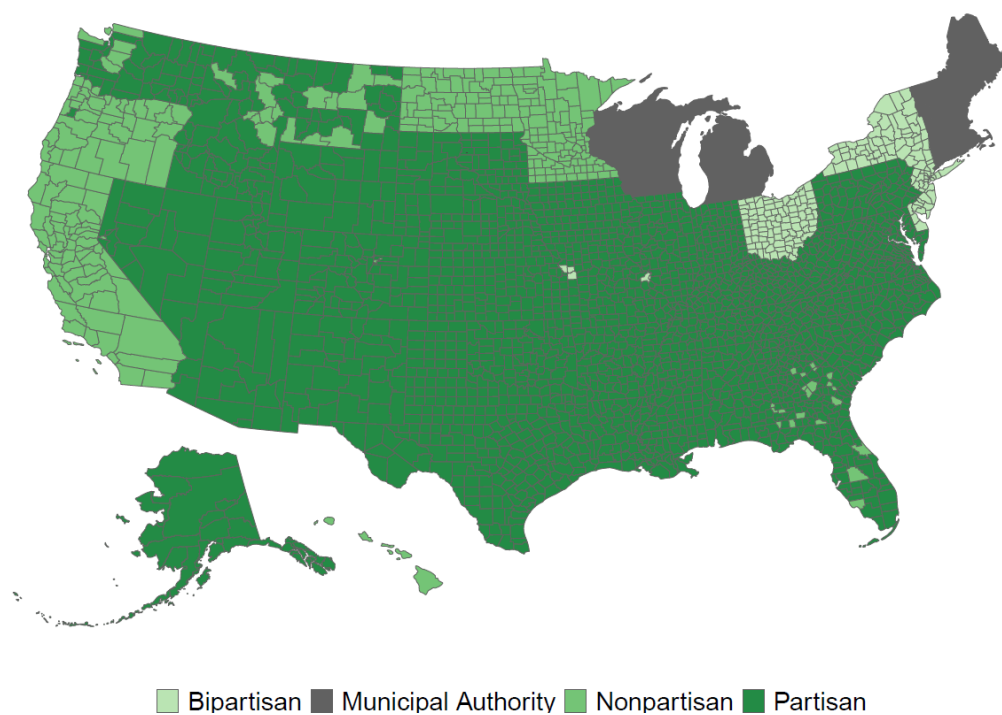
Of the 42 states with county-level election administration, 18 have variation in the selection method and partisanship of their primary local election authorities.¹¹ These differences are visualized in Figure 3.2. Some counties within these states elect their local election officials while others appoint; similarly, some use a partisan process whereas others use a nonpartisan one.

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

¹¹New Jersey is counted as uniform, although there is substantial county-level variation in the amount of responsibilities the primary election authority undertakes.



Partisanship



Note: In Illinois, the cities of Bloomington, Chicago, Danville, East St. Louis, Galesburg, and Rockford have independent appointed election boards. In Missouri, Kansas City has an independent appointed bipartisan election board. County officials run elections in the areas outside of these cities. These maps reflect the selection method and partisanship of the county official for those jurisdictions.

This level of analysis allows us to characterize the total number of jurisdictions and percentage of people covered by certain forms of local election administration. These are summarized in Table 3.2. Among the 2,896 counties in states with county-level administration—which make up more than 90% of the total country’s population—1,776 (61%) have elected officials whereas 1,120 (39%) have appointed officials.¹² Taking into account the fact that jurisdictions with appointed officials are typically more populous than those with elected officials flips these proportions. Approximately two-fifths (38.5%) of people are served by an elected local election official and 61.5% are served by an appointed official.

In terms of partisanship, 2,431 counties (84%) use partisan administration, 179 counties (6%) use bipartisan administration, and 286 counties (10%) use nonpartisan administration. 65% of people in jurisdictions with county-level responsibility for election administration have a partisan official whereas 20% reside in jurisdictions with a nonpartisan official and 15% have bipartisan officials.

Table 3.2: Select Characteristics of Counties by Selection Method Type

Type	Count	% of Total Pop.	Avg. County Pop. Size	Avg. White %
Elected	1,776	38.5	65,040	76.6
Appointed	1,145	61.5	161,442	68.1
Partisan	2,456	65.2	79,722	72.8
Bipartisan	179	14.9	249,512	79.4
Nonpartisan	286	19.9	209,452	73.7

Note: The counts are slightly inflated for Appointed and Partisan rows because these totals treat Alaska as having 30 counties rather than 5 jurisdictions.

Most deviations consist of a single case or only affect a handful of the state’s jurisdictions. For instance, Miami-Dade in Florida is the only county with an appointed Supervisor of Elections, whereas every other county has an elected official.¹³ Similarly, Denver County in Colorado elects a nonpartisan clerk and Broomfield County has an appointed clerk, whereas every other

¹² These figures include the District of Columbia. Three counties in Indiana use boards composed of both elected and appointed officials. These are counted as elected for simplicity.

¹³ This will change in 2024, when Miami-Dade will have an elected Supervisor of Elections.

county in the state elects a partisan clerk. Even where only a single county deviates, however, it could affect a sizable percentage of the state's population since it is typically the most populous jurisdiction. For instance, Colorado has 64 counties but 15% of the population is concentrated in Denver County. There is widespread heterogeneity in selection methods of local election officials in California, Georgia, Minnesota, and Texas, and in election official partisanship in Georgia and Montana.

What, aside from the size of a county's population, shapes its particular set of election administration characteristics? In line with the policy diffusion patterns observed at the state level, some evidence of clustering is evident at the county level. In Georgia, counties with elected officials tend to be found in the middle or eastern parts of the state. Most Texas counties with elected officials are found in west Texas and the panhandle, whereas most appointed election officials in Minnesota are in the southern and western parts of the state. Every Washington county with nonpartisan election administration is located along the Puget Sound, near Seattle and the state's most densely populated area. In South Dakota, both counties with appointed officials are located in the southwestern part of the state and lie within Native American reservations.¹⁴

Jurisdiction-level variation in local election official selection presents an important opportunity to study the impact of selection method and partisanship on the quality of election administration. States in America have often been called 'laboratories of democracy.' They experiment with new policies and forms of governance that, if successful, might be adopted nationwide (Conant 2006; but see Grumbach 2022). If states are the laboratories of democracy, counties can be considered the laboratories of election administration. Within-state variation in practices and changes in selection methods over time afford scholars the opportunity to investigate questions such as the causal effect of appointing rather than electing local election officials (Ferrer 2022). We encourage similar inquiries utilizing this heterogeneity.

Municipal-level variation in characteristics of local election administration

Six of the eight states whose primary local election authority lies at the municipal level experience jurisdiction-level variation in the selection method and partisanship of their election officials, which we map in Figure 3.3.¹⁵ The high degree of municipal-level variation is unsurprising considering that New England has always organized governance at hyperlocal levels. Municipalities in several New England states continue to hold town meetings in which the town's residents elect their representatives, collectively make policy and budget decisions, and decide their own form of self-governance.

As with counties, we characterize the number of municipalities covered by certain forms of local election administration. Among 4,872 municipalities in states with municipality-level

¹⁴ Oglala Lakota and Todd counties contract their local election administration to auditors elected in neighboring counties.

¹⁵ The other two states, Connecticut and New Hampshire, also experience heterogeneity in the selection of their municipal clerks, although this is not the primary election authority in either state.

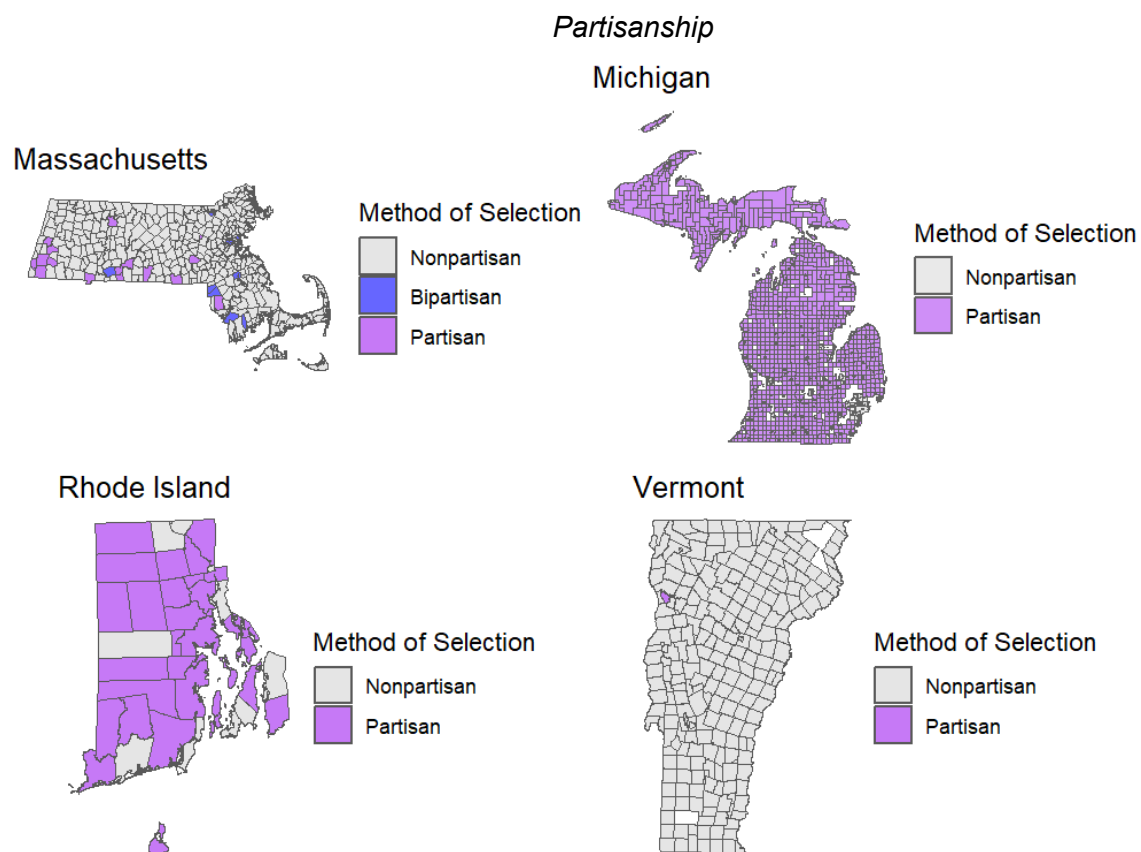
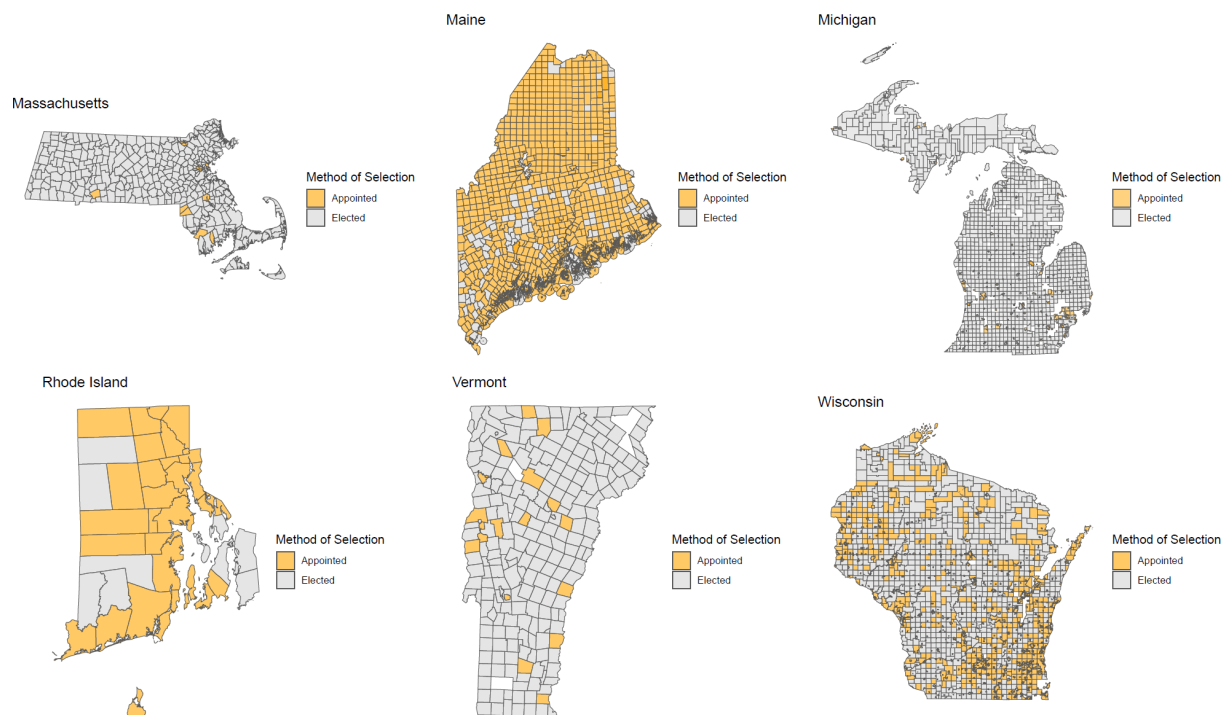
administration, 3,310 (68%) have elected officials and 1,562 (32%) have appointed officials.¹⁶ In terms of partisanship, 1,288 municipalities (26%) use partisan administration, 179 (4%) use bipartisan administration, and 3,405 (70%) use nonpartisan administration.

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

There is less geographic clustering at the municipal level than found at the state and county levels. Other features of towns and cities could be useful for explaining the origins of election administration practices. Municipalities with a history of politically fraught contests could attempt to insulate election administration from such negativity by using appointments. Conversely, a municipality concerned with corruption could see direct election as a way to improve the accountability of office. Considerations such as the degree to which appointments maximize experience and expertise (Ferrer 2022), a desire to minimize nefarious electioneering (Ferrer et al. 2023), and budgetary factors (Mohr et al. 2020) could play a role as well.

¹⁶ The 6 municipal-level election entities in Illinois and 1 municipal-level entity in Missouri are excluded from these counts.

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



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

Patterns in County Selection Method and Partisanship

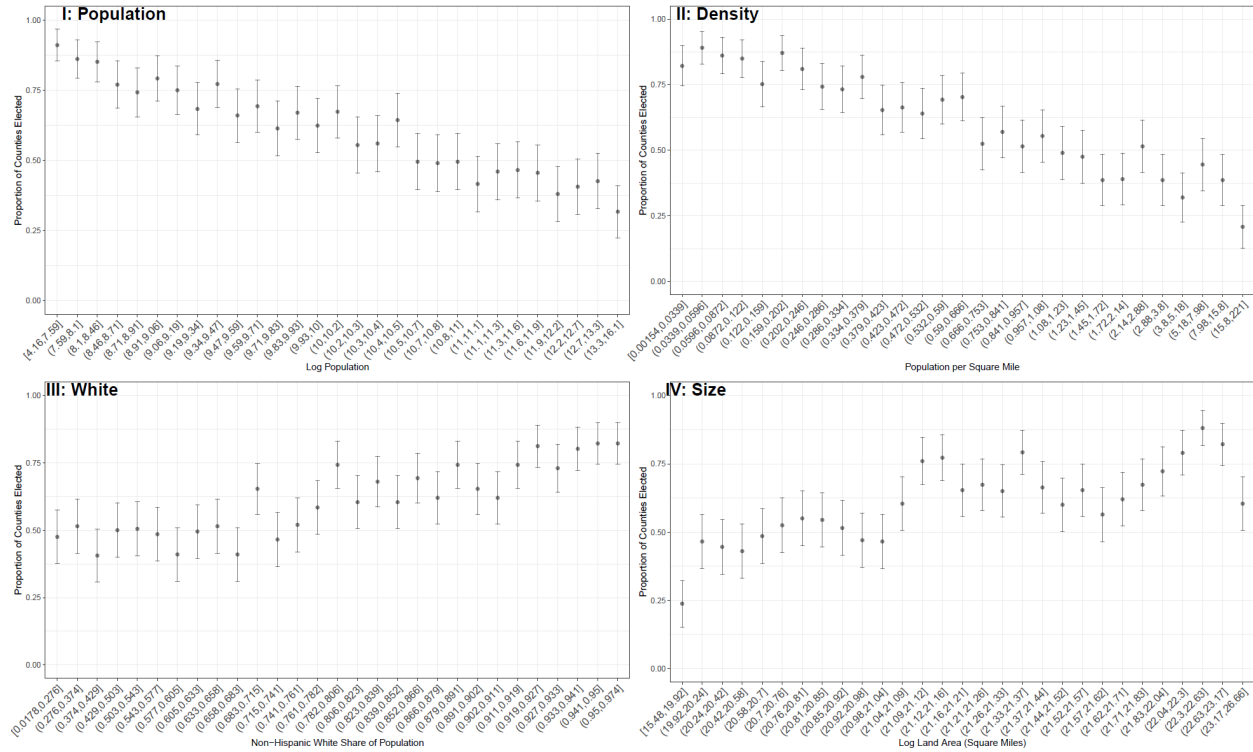
What explains the fact that some counties and municipalities appoint their local election officials while others use direct elections? In this section, we test whether demographic and geographic factors explain some of the variation in the selection method and partisanship of local election administration.

Figure 3.4 displays the output of nonparametric binned averages of a county's logged population, population density per square mile, non-Hispanic white share of the population, and land area (in log square miles) on whether it has an elected official (top panel) and whether it has a partisan official (bottom panel).¹⁷ This gives the proportion of counties having an elected local election official (top panel) and of having a partisan local election official (bottom panel) broken out for each individual binned group. In both panels, bins are arranged from lowest values on the left to highest values on the right. The nonparametric nature of this output means we make no prior assumptions about the relationship between selection method, partisanship, and the demographic and geographic factors examined.

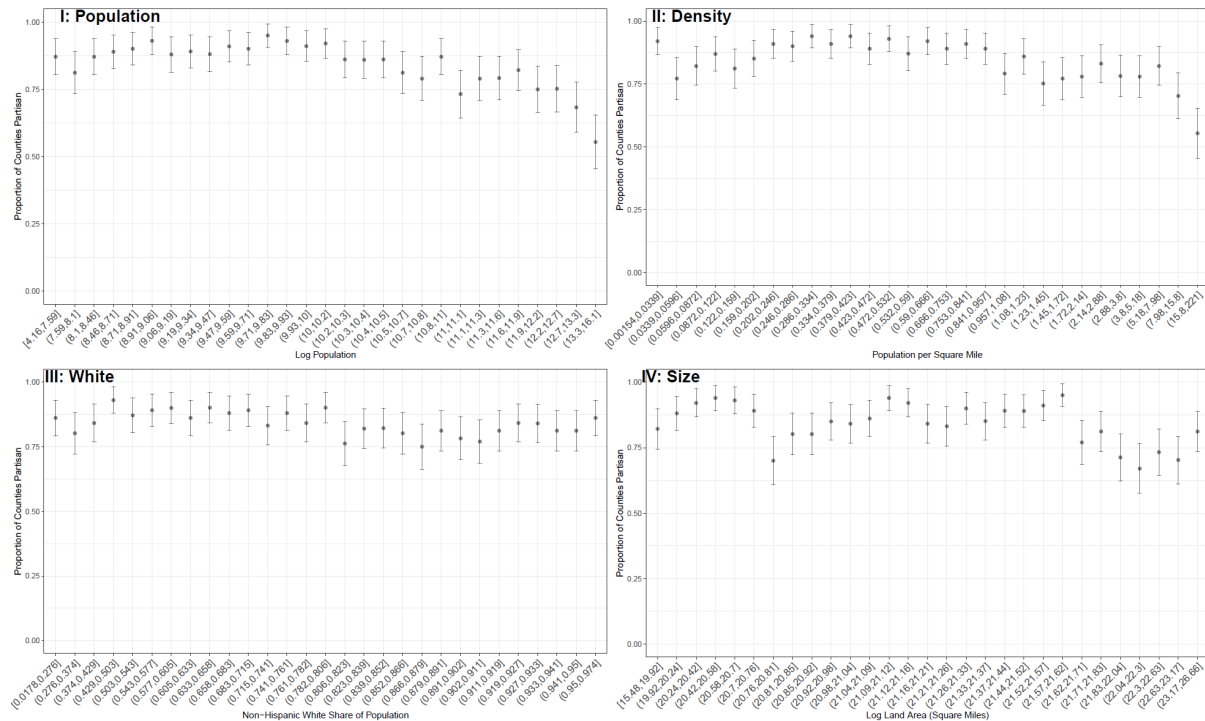
¹⁷ For each plot, we group the independent variable (horizontal axis) into bins containing roughly 100 jurisdictions each and present the mean of the dependent variable (vertical axis) for each binned group.

Figure 3.4: Demographic and Geographic Patterns in County Selection Method and Partisanship of Local Election Officials

Selection Method



Partisanship



Note: Each panel reports the proportion of counties of a given demographic characteristic that use elections to select their election official (top panel) or have a partisan administrator (bottom panel). The subpanels represent the following four demographic variables: (I) log of total population, (II) population density, (III) white share of the total population, and (IV) log of total land area. Estimates of total population, population density, and white share of total population are from 2020 Decennial Census P.L. 94-171 Redistricting Data (U.S. Census Bureau).

There is a meaningful relationship between population size and selection method. Populous jurisdictions are much more likely to use appointed election officials compared to smaller jurisdictions. Geographically compact, densely populated, and racially diverse jurisdictions are also more likely to have appointed election officials than sprawling, rural, and mostly white areas.

There are weaker relationships between these demographic and geographic factors and the likelihood a jurisdiction will have nonpartisan administration. This is mostly due to the fact that so few jurisdictions actually use nonpartisan officials. The largest and most densely populated jurisdictions are more likely to have nonpartisan election administration, likely due to a desire for professionalization. Geographically large jurisdictions are slightly more likely to use nonpartisan officials--possibly an artifact of the fact that nonpartisan administration is more common west of the Mississippi.

This analysis uncovers correlations rather than causal relationships. However, it allows us to identify basic patterns in local election administration across America. The typical jurisdiction with an elected local election official is geographically large, sparsely populated, rural, and mostly non-Hispanic white. Appointed administrators, on the other hand, are more likely to oversee elections in compact, populous, urban, and racially diverse areas. Finally, the most populous jurisdictions also tend to employ nonpartisan officials to run their elections.

Changes in Local Election Administration Over Time

There has been a notable amount of institutional change in the selection method and partisanship of local election officials over the past few decades. Nineteen states have experienced at least some change in the selection method of their local election officials since 2000. These changes are somewhat rare among the 42 states with county-level election administration, with 13 of them experiencing shifts. In four, counties have been forced to change due to a state law or referendum. South Carolina overhauled their election administration in 2014, replacing a system that involved county election commissions, voter registration boards, and combined boards with combined boards of voter registration and elections across the state. A successful 2018 referendum in Florida required all counties to elect Supervisor of Elections in partisan contests, leading four to switch from nonpartisan elections. It will also force Miami-Dade County to switch from an appointive to elective position by 2024. Finally, a 2018 Utah law prohibited counties from holding nonpartisan races, leading Grand and Morgan counties to switch to partisan clerk contests. Texas recently enacted a state law requiring Harris County to switch from an appointed Elections Administrator to an elected official.

Four states have undergone widespread county-level changes over the past two decades (Ferrer 2022). In Georgia, most counties have switched from elected to appointed election administrators, and some have switched from nonpartisan to partisan elections. Similarly, in Texas, more than 100 counties have switched to appointed administrators, and some counties have also consolidated their elected officers from two authorities to one. Very few counties in either state have made switches in the opposite direction. Seven counties in California and dozens of counties in Minnesota have also switched to appointed election officials in recent decades. Arizona, Illinois, Indiana, Montana, Nebraska, and Washington have all had at least one county decide to switch from elected to appointed administrators since 2000, and in Montana a few counties have switched from partisan to nonpartisan elections.

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

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

How are election officials elected?

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

Competitiveness

Most local election officials are elected in uncontested races. Ferrer et al. (2023) collected data on nearly 5,900 partisan local election official contests in 21 states between 1998 and 2018. They find that only about one quarter of general election races feature a contest between two

candidates, and that fewer than one-in-eight result in a margin of victory less than 20 percentage points. While these findings are specific to partisan elected officials in county-level jurisdictions, they are in line with studies of other local offices (Thompson 2020, Yntiso 2021) and likely extend to the full population of elected election administrators.¹⁸

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

It is difficult to disentangle whether the lack of contested election official contests should be concerning for the health, fairness, and quality of locally administered elections in the U.S.. Theoretically, uncontested elections could either be the result of a satisfied electorate or the failure of the electorate to effectively monitor and sanction officeholders for their actions (Besley 2006). If the latter is the case, we would expect better outcomes following more competitive elections.

Timing

Elections usually take place in even years. Among partisan elected officials in county-level jurisdictions, a majority of contests take place on a midterm cycle (Ferrer et al. 2023). Approximately one-quarter of contests take place during presidential years; the rest do not follow a four-year cycle. Nonpartisan elections sometimes take place on separate dates from partisan contests or take place on the same day as the partisan primary. Partisan general election contests almost always occur in November.

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

Term Length

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

¹⁸ The rate is somewhat higher when taking into account contested primaries—although these contests do not involve the whole electorate. It is unlikely that nonpartisan contests have systematically higher rates. The rate of contested elections is likely even *lower* in municipal contests, where smaller population pools mean fewer candidates are available or willing to run.

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

Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest arises when local election officials participate in the contests that they administer. Local election officials could attempt to use their authority to sway results in order to secure reelection. Administrative decisions such as siting or removing polling places, accepting absentee and provisional ballots, determining early in-person voting times, selecting poll workers, and purging the voter roll may alter turnout and affect the composition of the electorate (Dyck and Seabrook 2009; Kimball et al. 2006; McBrayer et al. 2020; Merivaki and Smith 2016; Shepherd et al. 2021; Stuart 2004). In practice, Ferrer et al. (2023) find that the incumbent local election official party is no more likely to win a close race than to lose one.

At least a dozen states have statutes on the books limiting the involvement of elected office-holders in election administration when they are on the ballot.¹⁹ In Georgia, probate judges that participate in a contested election are temporarily relieved of their duties by a three-person Board of Elections, who administer the election in their stead. County clerks in Kentucky may, but are not required to, appoint a temporary replacement while they are candidates. In Florida, members of the county canvassing board are not allowed to be candidates.

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

Who gets elected?

According to a recent nationwide survey of local election officials, the typical official is white, female, between 50 and 64 years of age, and makes about \$50,000 annually (Adona et al. 2019; see also Chapter 2). They are also deeply committed to their task as the stewards of democracy, and to administering elections that are accessible, efficient, and secure. We have identified systematic differences in the places where local election officials are elected and

¹⁹ The authors are grateful to Phoebe Henninger for this data.

appointed. Elected officials are more likely to administer elections in jurisdictions that are rural, sparsely populated, mostly white, and located west of the Mississippi. Ferrer et al. (2023) show that counties that elect partisan officials as their primary election administrators are also significantly less populous and less racially diverse than counties that do not. Considering elected and appointed officials operate in different geographic contexts, are the officials themselves different?

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

Demographics

One important dimension of representation is election official demographics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Prior research suggests that descriptive representation of racial minorities can lead to better substantive representation and policy outcomes (Clark 2019; Tate 2003). Election officials who come from traditionally underrepresented groups may work harder to increase minority turnout and improve the voting experience for marginalized groups. For instance, King and Barnes (2018) find that descriptive representation among poll workers boosts African American and Hispanic voter confidence in election administration. It is also plausible that younger election officials might be especially mindful of increasing traditionally low levels of youth participation.

Table 3.3 displays demographic differences between elected and appointed election officials using data from the 2020 DF/RC Survey. The second and third columns show the mean for appointed and elected local election officials, respectively. The fourth column displays the difference between these values, the fifth column displays the standard error, and the sixth column displays whether this difference between appointed and elected officials is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Appointed officials are significantly younger, on average, than elected officials. While gender and racial/ethnic demographic differences fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance, the results suggest that elected officials are more likely to be white and less likely to be Black, Latino, or Asian than appointed election officials. This could be due to demographic differences in the underlying electorates or a range of other factors, but it is possible that the selection method itself contributes to a lack of diversity among these officials. To the extent that minorities face a penalty when it comes to fundraising (Grumbach and Sahn 2020), candidate recruitment (but see White et al. 2022), and perceptions of qualification and viability (Sigelman et al. 1995), appointments may provide an avenue to a more racially and ethnically diverse pool of officials.

Table 3.3: Demographics of Elected and Appointed Local Election Officials

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

Source: 2020 DF/RC Survey

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

This is especially important considering the low levels of racial and ethnic diversity among election officials examined in Chapters 2 and 4 of this book. Over 90% of local election officials are white, compared with 76% of Americans (Adona et al. 2019; Ferrer 2023). Given the continued barriers to the franchise and discrimination at the ballot box faced by racial and ethnic minorities (Atkeson et al. 2010; Baringer et al. 2020; Barreto et al. 2009; Chen et al. 2020; Cobb et al. 2012; Shino et al. 2021), future research should probe why this disparity exists and what can be done to alleviate it.

Partisanship

One key concern about the partisan selection of local election officials is that it introduces the potential for biased election administration. This section examines differences in partisan affiliation between elected and appointed officials. More than half (56%) of elected administrators—including 89% of elected county-level administrators—run with partisan labels on the ballot. There are legitimate concerns that these officials may carry out their duties in ways that favor their party.

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

Table 3.4 displays these three measures of partisan affiliation, comparing appointed and elected officials. When asked to declare partisan affiliation, approximately three-fourths of both appointed and elected officials identify with a party. Appointed officials are noticeably more Democratic than their elected counterparts. The average appointed official is somewhere

between “lean Democrat” and independent, whereas the average elected official is somewhere between independent and “lean Republican”. These differences are large enough to be unlikely to have arisen by chance, and are likely driven by the fact that appointed officials happen to serve in districts that are more Democratic than the districts that elected officials serve in. Elected officials are also much more likely than appointed officials to strongly identify with a party. It is plausible that this difference is driven by something inherent in the selection method itself rather than where those selection methods happen to be employed.

Table 3.4: Partisan Affiliation of Appointed and Elected Local Officials

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

Source: 2020 DF/RC survey.

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

Table 3.5 displays the differences in party affiliation between local election officials that are elected in partisan contests and those elected in nonpartisan elections. Those elected with partisan affiliation on the ballot more readily state their party affiliation. Almost all (87%) officials elected in partisan elections expressed a party preference in the survey, whereas two-thirds (66%) of those elected in nonpartisan contests expressed a party preference. Partisan officials are also much more likely to be Republican. The average official elected in a partisan contest leans Republican, whereas the average official elected in a nonpartisan contest is an independent. Finally, election officials selected through partisan contests tend to more strongly identify with a party than those selected through nonpartisan means, though this difference does not attain conventional levels of significance.

It is difficult to discern whether these observed differences between officials elected through partisan and nonpartisan contests is an artifact of where nonpartisan elections happen to take place or a cause of the institution itself. The large difference in partisan slant is likely due to the fact that partisan contests happen to take place in more conservative jurisdictions. However, the increased likelihood that officials state a party identification and the higher incidence of strongly identifying with a party among officials elected in partisan contests suggests that *how* election officials are selected shapes their degree of partisan polarization.

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

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

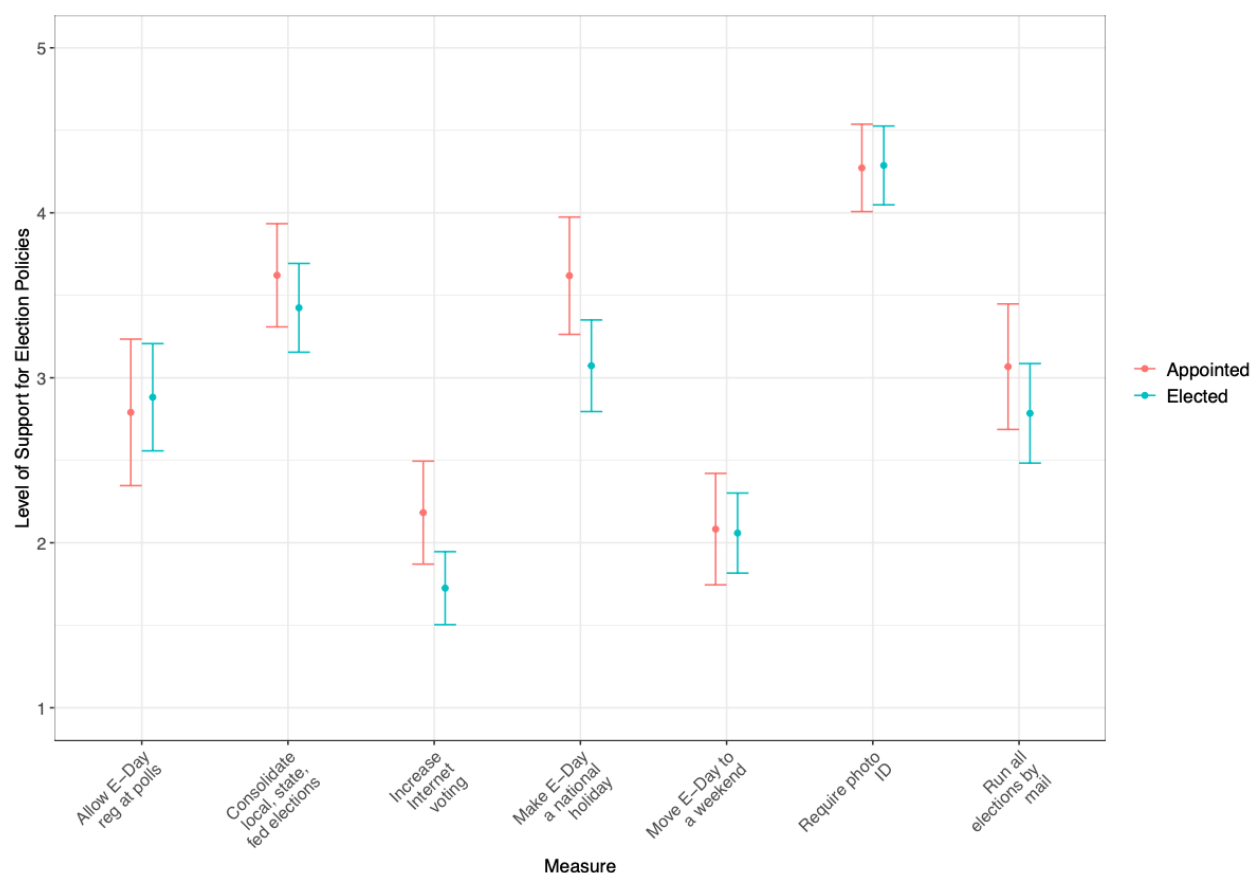
Source: 2020 DF/RC survey.

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

Policies and Priorities

Do elected and appointed local election officials have similar views on election policies and administrative priorities? Figure 3.5 displays the views of elected and appointed officials on a number of key election policies using data from the 2020 DF/RC Survey. Overall, the picture is one of similarity. Elected officials are somewhat less likely to support convenience measures such as all-mail elections and making Election Day a national holiday. This is consistent with the fact that elected officials lean to the right of appointed officials. However, the observed differences are relatively modest, and on most policy issues elected and appointed officials have similar preferences. On average, they both oppose moving Election Day to the weekend, somewhat oppose Election Day registration, support consolidating elections, and strongly support requiring voter identification at the polls.

Figure 3.5: Preferences about Election Policies by Selection Method

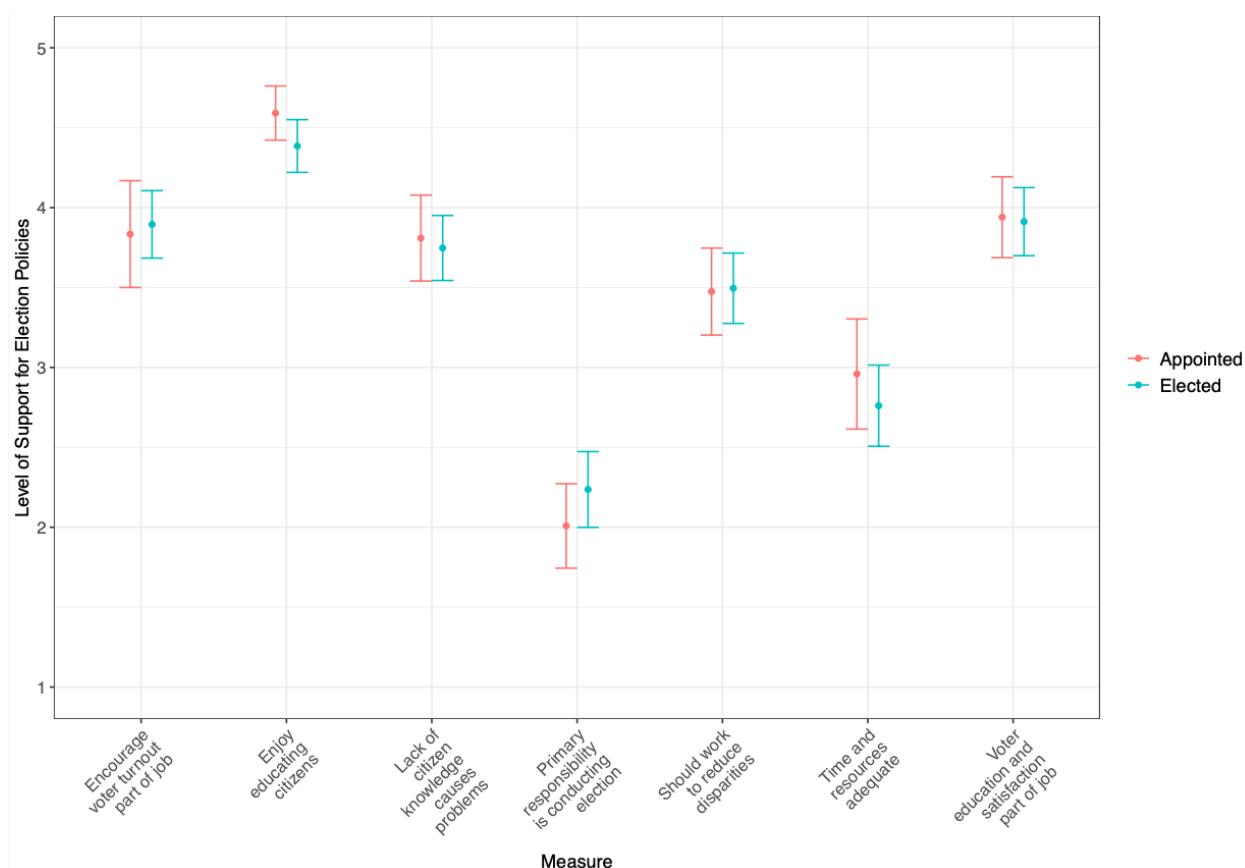


Source: 2020 DF/RC survey.

Note: Responses range on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support).

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

Figure 3.6: Preferences about Election Administration Priorities by Selection Method



Source: 2020 DF/RC survey.

Note: Responses range on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support).

“Time and resources adequate” asks whether the election official has enough time to educate voters in addition to running elections. “Primary responsibility is conducting election” asks whether the election official agrees that they should not worry about voter education or voter satisfaction.

In summary, the specific selection method used appears to make relatively little difference in the preferences and priorities of local election officials. This is in line with the fact that election officials tend to be less politically polarized than the general public in their views on election administration (Manion et al. 2021).²⁰ Elite and mass public opinion on election administration is discussed further in Chapter 6. Chapter 10 explores views of local election administrators when jurisdiction population is accounted for.

Should election officials be elected?

²⁰ The results of a similar series of tests comparing partisan and nonpartisan election officials are available in the Online Appendix. They also show strong evidence of preference congruence across selection methods.

Theoretically, elected officials should be more accountable to voters than appointed officials (Besley 2006; Przeworski et al. 1999). This is because voters have the opportunity to select the best candidate in competitive elections, and they also have the opportunity to sanction a current officeholder they find deficient by voting them out of office. Fear of losing an election should motivate officeholders to perform well and be responsive to their constituents (Burden et al. 2013). Additionally, the highly local nature of election jurisdictions may forge productive ties between officeholders and constituents (Kimball and Baybeck 2013). Many jurisdictions are small enough that all voters can personally know the election official. This local connection might improve the ability of the official to communicate important facts about the election to their constituents and increase voter participation.

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

Given the increasingly technical nature of election administration and fraught state of electoral politics, elections might also negatively alter the pool of candidates by selecting for those willing to run for office rather than for those best qualified to administer elections (Hall 2019).²¹ Additionally, elections limit the geographic pool of potential officials to those living within the jurisdiction. Moving to an appointed position can expand this pool, especially in less populated jurisdictions.²²

There is also the concern that elected officials could discriminate along partisan or racial/ethnic lines in order to benefit those of the same political affiliation. America's decentralized election system has historically enabled the disenfranchisement of Blacks and other minorities (Keele, Cubbison, and White 2021; Keyssar 2000; Piven et al. 2009). There are continuing concerns that local officials make racially discriminatory decisions (Herron and Smith 2015; Hughes et al. 2020; Merivaki and Smith 2020; Pettigrew 2017; Stuart 2004; White et al. 2015) and provide a benefit to their co-partisans, especially when they openly run in a partisan contest (McBrayer et al. 2020; Porter and Rogowski 2018; but see Ferrer et al. 2023).

²¹<https://www.petoskeynews.com/story/news/local/charlevoix/2014/08/07/city-voters-choose-an-appointed-clerk/45970739/>

²²https://www.samesessenger.com/news/community/st-albans-city-looking-to-give-appointment-powers-to-city-council-to-fill-to-be/article_77ce1142-5dc0-11ec-8869-6b0f8ac134f4.html

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

Few studies have directly examined the effects of electing versus appointing local election officials. An audit study of constituent communication found no difference in communication rates between elected and appointed officials (White et al. 2015). A cross-sectional analysis of Wisconsin election officials found evidence that elected and appointed municipal clerks hold different policy preferences and that elected clerks oversee elections with higher participation than appointed clerks (Burden et al. 2013). The most causally credible study utilizes over time changes in the selection method of local election officials across 13 states (Ferrer 2022). Employing a difference-in-difference strategy with county and time fixed effects, the study finds that switching from elected to appointed clerks boosts voter turnout by 2 percentage points and boosts registration rates by 1 percentage point. These benefits are concentrated in smaller counties, and may be driven by improved accountability.

More scholarship has studied the question of whether directly elected Democratic and Republican election officials administer elections differently (see Ferrer et al. 2023). Studies have found differences in the way that Democratic and Republican officials facilitate voter turnout (Burden et al. 2013), handle voter purges from the registration list (Stuart 2004), administer provisional ballots (Kimball et al. 2006), site polling places (McBrayer et al. 2020), and communicate with voters (Porter and Rogowski 2018). However, several studies have found null effects on important dimensions (Burden et al. 2013; McBrayer et al. 2020; Shepherd et al. 2021; White et al. 2015). The most causally credible study to date, employing a regression discontinuity design using close contests between narrowly elected Democratic and Republican election officials, finds little evidence that they administer elections in systematically different ways (Ferrer et al. 2023).

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

Conclusion

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

Local election officials are most typically selected directly by voters in a partisan election. This method is more likely to be used in the western part of the country, and in rural, mostly white, and sparsely populated jurisdictions. While legitimate concerns have been raised about the nature of partisan elected officials, the latest scholarship alleviates fears that the practice inherently leads to biased election outcomes.

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

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