To Elect or Appoint? Evidence from Local Election Administration

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ABSTRACT

Do elected or appointed local officials produce better outcomes for their constituents? Elections should improve representation by providing a direct link to voters. However, some argue that citizens have too little information to select good leaders and hold them accountable, especially at the local level. In order to assess these conflicting claims, I examine the performance of local election officials, an office that has come under immense strain to deliver democratic elections and for which selection method is a live policy debate. Using an original collection of election administration structures in 1,116 counties across 13 states and 62 years, I leverage changes in selection method to credibly measure differences in election outcomes produced by elected and appointed local election officials. I find that appointed officials out-perform their elected counterparts, increasing voter turnout by 1 to 2

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Online Appendix available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1561/100.00023193_app Supplementary Material available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1561/100.00023193_supp MS received 21 December 2023; revised 28 February 2025; accepted 6 March 2025 ISSN 1554-0626; DOI 10.1561/100.00023193 © 2025 J. Ferrer percentage points and raising registration rates as well. Appointed officials appear to boost election administration resources, more actively communicate with voters, and reduce voter wait times. I present evidence that the quality of selection and sanctioning are higher for appointed officials, leading to better educated and more closely monitored agents. My findings speak to the challenges in designing local institutions that advance democratic ideals.

Keywords: Bureaucracy; democracy; elections; electoral institutions; political participation; local politics

One of the challenging aspects of designing democracies is deciding which public officials to directly elect and which to appoint. America's founders ratified a Constitution that relied almost exclusively on appointments. James Madison justified the indirect selection of the president via the Electoral College by reasoning that "A small number of persons, selected by their fellow-citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations" (Madison, 1788). In the nineteenth century, Jacksonian reformers expanded the practice of directly electing public officials to include senators, judges, state executives, and a multitude of county and municipal offices, whereas by the early twentieth century, Progressive reformers sought to return many of these positions to appointments.

Scholars disagree about whether elections or appointments produce better outcomes for constituents. Elections should improve representation by providing a direct link between voters and their agents (Besley, 2006; Ferraz and Finan, 2011). However, the mass public may not have sufficient information compared to political elites, leading to the selection of less qualified officials and weaker accountability once in office (Gailmard and Jenkins, 2009). Elections' agency problems are likely strongest in local politics, where expertise is hardest to find and the public is least aware of their agents' activities (Whalley, 2013).

In this paper, I assess conflicting claims over the selection method of local bureaucratic offices by studying the consequences of appointing vs. electing the people responsible for running elections. Unlike any other Western democracy, the US delegates election administration duties to over 8,000 local officials who handle the minutiae of elections: registering voters, hiring poll workers, locating polling places, mailing ballots, tallying votes, and certifying results (Hale *et al.*, 2015). These administrators have endured intense scrutiny in recent years, especially when President Trump alleged the 2020 presidential election was stolen. Some officials were pressured to refuse to certify the election results,¹ and many have received threats of violence over baseless accusations of malfeasance.² Some are elected and some are appointed (Kimball *et al.*, 2006) — a balance that is tipping more heavily toward appointments in recent decades while also becoming increasingly contested politically (Ferrer and Geyn, 2024). Harris County, the third most populous county in the country, was forced by the Texas state legislature to switch its chief election official from an appointed to an elected position in 2023.³ Georgia's state government considered taking over the administration of its most populous county after the legislature passed legislation in 2021 empowering it to do so.⁴ And Miami-Dade is being forced to return to an elected election supervisor after the approval of a voter referendum in 2018.⁵

Over 300 jurisdictions — nearly 1 out of 4 counties across 13 US states that comprise nearly 40% of the country's population — have switched from electing to appointing their chief local election official since 1960. I leverage an exhaustive original collection of clerk selection methods spanning 1,116 counties and 28 federal elections to provide the strongest evidence to date for whether elected or appointed local bureaucratic officials produce better outcomes for their constituents.⁶ Within-jurisdiction variation in selection method over time allows me to identify a precise effect on differences in election outcomes.

I use measures of voter participation such as turnout and registration rates as my primary outcome. Voter participation is one of the few reliable measures of election quality available over a large span of time. It is also an important one, frequently used in election quality indices such as the MIT Election Performance Index and the Varieties of Democracy Project. More than two-thirds of election officials consider increasing participation a central component of their job,⁷ as does their chief professional organization, the National Association of Election Officials.⁸ Finally, local election officials likely have the ability to influence participation rates given their far-ranging duties and discretion over administrative decisions (Burden *et al.*, 2013; Kimball and

 $^{3} https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/28/us/texas-voting-laws-harris-county.html$

 ${}^{\rm 4} \rm https://georgiarecorder.com/2021/08/18/panel-begins-review-of-fulton-elections-ahead-of-potential-state-takeover/$

 $^{5} https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/election/article215034905. html$

 $^{^{\}rm 1} \rm https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/us/politics/michigan-certify-election-results. html$

 $^{^{2} \}rm https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/06/us/politics/midterms-elections-threats-security. html$

 $^{^{6}\}mathrm{I}$ occasionally refer to local election officials as clerks in shorthand. While clerks are the most common county election officials, the position title varies widely across states and counties.

 $^{^{7}} https://evic.reed.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/leo2020_codebook.pdf$

 $^{^{8} \}rm https://www.electioncenter.org/about-us.php$

Kropf, 2006). Election administrator decisions over communication strategies (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea, 2023), election expenditures (Grose, 2022), and polling places (Yoder, 2018) have all been shown to affect participation, as well as their indirect ability to shape voter wait times (Pettigrew, 2017).

I find that when counties switch from electing to appointing their local election official, voter turnout in presidential elections increases by between 1 and 2 percentage points and registration rates seem to increase as well. These findings are robust to a variety of different estimators; hold across multiple states, offices, years, and reform mechanisms; and do not differ by jurisdiction partisanship or appear to come at the expense of increased partisan manipulation of elections. They are also substantively significant. A 2 percentage point boost to voter turnout in federal elections is equivalent to or larger than the effect of universal vote-by-mail (Thompson *et al.*, 2020), automatic voter registration (McGhee *et al.*, 2021), 10 additional days of early voting (Kaplan and Yuan, 2020), or a door-to-door canvassing campaign (Green *et al.*, 2013). I find suggestive evidence that part of the effect may be due to greater resource provision contributing to additional staff, more active communication with constituents, and shorter wait times at the polls.

Through a series of mechanism tests, I show that the quality of selection and sanctioning is higher for appointed clerks than elected clerks. Appointed officials are more likely to hold a college degree, elected administrators rarely face competition at the polls, and the performance gap is largest in jurisdictions where elections most limit the selection pool. I identify three factors likely contributing to better sanctioning of appointed administrators: voters know little about their local election official, the differences between elected and appointed clerks are largest in areas lacking a local newspaper, and appointed officials may have higher turnover rates.

My findings speak to the challenges in designing local institutions that advance and protect democratic ideals — especially for bureaucratic offices operating in low-information environments. In the midst of unprecedented threats to that democracy, declining trust in elections (Stewart, 2021), and partisan moves to shape election administration (Ferrer and Geyn, 2024), this paper also informs ongoing debates over who should run elections in the United States.

Selecting Public Officials

The United States is exceptional in the number of public officials we elect. By one count, approximately 520,000 elected officials serve in the country, with 96% of them holding office at the local level (Lawless, 2012). I consider why we might expect appointing local officials to be preferable to electing officials and the findings of prior scholarship on selection method.

Why Might Appointed Local Officials Produce Better Outcomes for Their Constituents?

According to political economy theories of governance, elections improve representation by allowing voters to select higher-quality politicians and ensuring their accountability to the electorate through the sanctioning mechanism of reelection (Besley, 2006; Besley and Case, 2003; Besley and Coate, 2003; Fearon, 1999). In some empirical contexts, it appears that elections do achieve these goals, producing officials who are more competent than the constituents they represent (Dal Bó *et al.*, 2017), who work harder when they have the incentive of being reelected (Alt *et al.*, 2011; Christensen and Ejdemyr, 2018; Ferraz and Finan, 2011; Fournaies and Hall, 2022), and who better represent voters (Besley and Coate, 2003). For technical jobs and low-salience offices, however, elections may have unintended consequences, lowering the quality of the pool of candidates, creating weak accountability mechanisms, and producing adverse incentives (Sances, 2016; Whalley, 2013).

First, elections alter the pool of candidates by selecting for those willing to run for office (Anzia and Berry, 2011; Hall, 2019). The skills that make someone a good politician may not align closely with the factors that make someone a good public official. If this is the case, then the election process itself may select out higher-quality candidates, simply due to the barriers to entry. Elected candidates typically must live within the jurisdiction they are elected to, whereas appointed administrators can be chosen from a broader geographic pool. This can prove a significant restricting factor for less populous jurisdictions. Additionally, technological advancements and population growth have led many local public duties to require greater expertise, including election administration (Hale et al., 2015). Local elections are rarely contested (Burden and Snyder, 2021; Lappie and Marschall, 2018; Marschall and Lappie, 2018). In the 2020 general election, 78% of all county-level races went uncontested.⁹ and half of all elections for partian office went uncontested in 2022.¹⁰ Whereas long tenures and few challengers could be a sign of voter contentment with the officeholder, it could alternatively mean a breakdown of the accountability mechanism that is essential to ensuring good performance (Besley, 2006). If only one candidate is willing to run, this severely limits the ability of voters to select the highest quality candidate and punish them once in office.

Second, low-information and low-salience environments can prevent voters from using elections to effectively monitor officials and sanction them for poor performance (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2008; Berry and Howell, 2007; Besley, 2006; Lim and Snyder, 2010; Rogers, 2023). In theory, elections should

 $^{{}^{9}} https://organizations.ballotready.org/research/nothing-to-lose-uncontested-races-in-2020-and-their-implications$

 $^{^{10} \}rm https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/04/us/missouri-uncontested-races-elections.html ?smid=nytcore-android-share. See also https://www.civicpulse.org/post/how-many-local-elections-are-uncontested.$

provide voters with a more direct accountability mechanism than appointments (Burden et al., 2013). In the absence of sufficient information, however, voters may be unable to select good candidates in the first place, distinguish between highly and poorly performing officials, or select on quality rather than ideology or other characteristics (Franchino and Zucchini, 2015). Local media has been on the decline over the past few decades (Martin and McCrain, 2019) and has increasingly devoted less attention to local politics (Lockhart, 2021). This has led to less informed citizens and less competitive local races (Rubado and Jennings, 2020). The large number of elected positions may cause voter fatigue and high ballot roll-off, with not many voters making it all the way to the bottom of the ballot where local offices are typically found (Augenblick and Nicholson, 2015). Voters might be especially poor judges of performance in complex and technical policy areas (Whalley, 2013). The voter information gap for election officials is particularly acute because they have a portfolio of non-election responsibilities and unintuitive titles that dilute the ability of voters to effectively monitor and sanction their performance.¹¹ If public officials are acting rationally, we should expect them to shirk their duties in these circumstances because their principals (the voters) lack the information necessary to effectively monitor and sanction them. The information-poor environment voters face contrasts with the richer information environment that appointed officials' principals possess. Appointments for election administrators are typically made by boards of local elites and can include county officers, local party chairs, judges, and county supervisors.

Finally, elections can create adverse incentives for officeholders to make politically motivated decisions that are normatively undesirable (Canes-Wrone *et al.*, 2001). Electing rather than appointing assessors in New York exacerbates economic inequalities (Sances, 2016), electing rather than appointing city managers skews economic policies towards the wealthy (Lubell *et al.*, 2009), and electing rather than appointing municipal assessors in California leads to the adoption of more costly policies and higher borrowing costs (Whalley, 2013). If a majority of the voting electorate prefers political outcomes achieved by reducing participation, then elected officials could be incentivized to concentrate costs on certain voters or discourage voting across the board. Likewise, elected officials have won office with the present electorate, so they might be disinclined to pursue actions to expand the electorate. Appointments do not remove this possibility, but they may counterintuitively insulate officials from the pressures of responsiveness in ways that lead to socially desirable outcomes.

¹¹Examples include probate judge in Alabama and Georgia; auditor in Iowa, South Dakota and Washington; and tax assessor in Texas.

Prior Scholarship on Selection Method

A number of studies have examined the differences between elected and appointed public officials in federal, state, and local contexts. Elected officials tend to be more responsive to their constituents (Gailmard and Jenkins, 2009), but participation disparities could cause responsiveness to skew policy outcomes in ways that benefit the wealthy and whites (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2014; Lubell *et al.*, 2009; Sances, 2016) and lead to more punitive judicial outcomes (Gordon and Huber, 2007; Huber and Gordon, 2004). Additionally, appointing local bureaucrats has been found to improve policy outcomes in some cases. In a study of California treasurers, Whalley (2013) finds that municipalities that switched from elected to appointed treasurers enjoyed lower borrowing costs. He concludes that voters may be poorly equipped to judge performance, especially in complex policy areas.

A cross-sectional study of Wisconsin election officials finds that elected clerks produce higher turnout, although it relies on the assumption that elected and appointed clerks are assigned as-if randomly in the state (Burden *et al.*, 2013). The authors theorize that appointed officials are more insulated from public opinion than elected clerks, and thus pursue their own personal goals or the goals of the county officials who appoint them rather than the goals of the public. Because voters prefer that clerks make voting convenient whereas the appointing officials prefer minimizing costs, appointed clerks should in theory oversee elections with lower turnout.

Data and Methods

Measuring the Selection Method of Local Election Officials

I construct original panel data on the selection method of local election officials in 13 states from 1960 to 2022. In total, my dataset covers 62 years of election administration structures for 1,116 counties, encompassing over 30,000 county-federal election observations.

My sample consists of every state in the United States with at least one county-level change between appointing and electing clerks since 1960. These 13 states are a subset of the 42 states in the country where elections are primarily administered at the county level (Ferrer and Geyn, 2024) and combined cover nearly 40% of the nation's population. The states included are Arizona, California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, Oregon, Texas, and Washington.¹² Figure A.1 in the

 $^{^{12}}$ In states with multiple election authorities, I use the selection method for the authority with primary responsibility for administering elections on Election Day, as defined by Ferrer and Geyn (2024). I exclude five counties in Illinois and one in Missouri with nested municipal-level election administration.



Figure 1: Local election administration selection methods, 1960–2022. This graph displays over time change in the selection method of county election officials across all states with county-level administration where at least one change has occurred since 1960.

Online Appendix shows the selection method of election officials in all countyadministered jurisdictions across the United States. Table A.1 shows that counties in the dataset are similar to those that are excluded. Figure 1 shows which counties enter into the dataset (not in scope counties are in gray) as well as whether they are always appointed (white), always elected (light blue), switch from appointments to elections (medium-light blue), switch from elections to appointments (medium-dark blue), or have undergone multiple changes in selection method (dark blue). The vast majority of counties that have switched since 1960 have moved from electing to appointing their clerks. In fact, 99.1% of counties switching their selection method have adopted appointments, and 93% of all singular switches have been in the direction of appointments. Four states in particular stand out for the number of switches: California, Georgia, Minnesota, and Texas. Figure 2 shows when each switch in selection method occurred, with the earliest switches in orange and more recent ones in purple. Counties have changed their clerk selection method in a



Figure 2: Local election administration selection cohorts, 1960–2022. This graph displays the year county-level switches occurred between electing and appointing local election officials since 1960. In most cases, this switch is from electing to appointing the local election official. In counties where multiple switches occurred, the year of the first switch is reflected.

staggered fashion over many decades, with switches accelerating since 2000. Table A.1.3 in the Online Appendix details the specific election authority used for each state, as well as the number of counties falling into each clerk selection method category and the first and last year a change occurred.

Finally, Figure 3 graphs the extraordinary shift in selection method over time across these 13 states. The percentage of counties that appoint their election officials has grown from 2% in 1960 to 33% in 2022. The balance



Figure 3: Growth in appointed election officials across 13 states, 1960–2022. This graph displays over time change in the selection method of county election officials across the 13 states with county-level administration where at least one change has occurred since 1960. In total, these states have 1,123 counties.

continues to shift toward appointments, with the trend accelerating over the past two decades. Election official selection method is a live, ongoing, and at times contentious policy debate.

The mechanism and character of the changes vary widely across states. Most or all of the changes in California, Oregon, and Washington are due to the implementation of home rule charters that tended to make wholesale changes to local governance. Minnesota, Montana, and Texas devolve the power to switch selection methods to their counties, whereas California and Georgia typically require the passage of state legislation to enable a change. Some counties in California, Minnesota, Montana, and Washington hold binding referendums to initiate the reform, and several Midwestern states have population thresholds at which appointing their election official becomes possible or mandatory. In most cases, the switch in selection method is not accompanied by any other substantive change to election policy or resource provision. For instance, in Georgia a state legislator that represents the affected county introduces a law to the legislature transferring election administration authority from the elected probate judge to an appointed board of elections that then selects an elections director. In Texas, the county commissioners enact the transfer of authority from an elected clerk or tax assessor to an appointed elections

administrator. Minnesota presents a particularly minimal case of change, with county officials agreeing to a switch from election to appointment of the county auditor. In some cases, this does not even result in a change in leadership. I conduct a series of robustness tests isolating the effects of reform independent of other substantive policy changes.

Reasons counties state for making the switch include difficulty finding qualified candidates for office,¹³ a desire to professionalize the job,¹⁴ increasing efficiency and streamlining services,¹⁵ creating a dedicated position for election administration,¹⁶ or simply following in the footsteps of other counties in the state.¹⁷ Who receives appointing authority also varies, as well as whether they appoint an individual or a board (Ferrer and Geyn, 2024).

Local election officials are entrusted with broad statutory authority to conduct elections (Ferrer *et al.*, 2024). For instance, probate judges in Georgia determine precinct divisions, handle nomination petitions of candidates, publish notices and advertisements of elections, select and equip polling places, purchase and maintain election equipment, conduct early in-person voting, appoint and train poll officers, inspect the conduct of elections, receive and certify election results, prepare a budget estimate and appropriations request, conduct hearings to determine the eligibility of candidates, and administer photo ID provisions. Most clerks also handle registration administration and voter list maintenance duties, although these responsibilities are divided in Arizona, Georgia, and parts of Texas.

I use a combination of sources in order to identify the selection method of election officials across the dataset, including state legislative databases, home rule charters, newspaper archives, web scraped internet archives, Blue Book directories, public records requests, and correspondence with state and local election officials.

Data

I use presidential and midterm participation rates as my primary outcome measure. I focus on turnout and registration rates for four reasons: local election officials have the ability to influence participation levels, they view increasing participation as part of the job, voter participation is a key component of

 $^{^{13} \}rm https://www.fairmontsentinel.com/news/local-news/2023/07/19/faribault-county-looks-to-appoint-auditor-treasurer/$

 $^{^{14} \}rm https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/editorials/article/harris-county-elections-legislation-hudspeth-18552129.php$

 $^{^{15}} https://maplelakemessenger.com/2020/12/wright-county-considers-changing-auditor-treasurer-from-elected-to-appointed/$

 $^{^{16} \}rm https://www.timesrecordnews.com/story/news/local/2023/06/05/wichita-county-to-hire-election-administrator/70289429007/$

 $^{^{17}} https://www.union$ $recorder.com/news/commissioners-discuss-possibly-creating-a-board-of-elections/article_43508cfc-6718-11ee-a035-13c8d8908b19.html$

election quality metrics and the ultimate outcome of election quality, and I have access to high-quality data on participation rates. First, election officials typically have far-ranging duties and a significant degree of discretion in carrying out these duties (Kimball and Kropf, 2006). Some studies have found that clerks of different parties influence turnout rates (Bassi et al., 2009; Burden et al., 2013; but see Ferrer et al., 2024). Second, according to the 2020 EVIC Survey of Local Election Officials, over 67% of local election officials agree that encouraging voter turnout is part of their job, compared with fewer than 10%who disagree. This is reflected in the National Association of Election Officials, which lists increasing participation as one of the main considerations for election officials.¹⁸ Third, participation rates are widely viewed as a key measure of election quality. MIT's Election Performance Index uses both voter turnout and voter registration in comparing election administration performance across states,¹⁹ and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) uses electoral participation as one of its indicators of democratic health.²⁰ Voter turnout can be considered the ultimate effect of the quality of election administration. If voters have a poor voting experience or are not readily or proactively provisioned with the information necessary to vote, then they are less likely to participate. Finally, high-quality data for turnout exists at the county level and is available going back many decades. This is not true of any other indicator of election quality, including voter confidence, voter wait times, number of polling places, and constituent communication.

Data on county-level vote totals is from Congressional Quarterly and David Leip's U.S. Election Atlas and spans 1968 to 2022.²¹ I use data on registration totals from Leip's Election Atlas. This covers presidential elections from 1996 and gubernatorial elections from 2004. I measure voting age population using estimates from the National Cancer Institute's Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results Program.²² I measure registration rate by dividing total registrants by the voting age population.

I assemble a set of county-level indicators of election administration policy using the US Election Assistance Commission's Election Administration and Voting Surveys (EAVS) from 2004 to 2022, including the number of polling places per 1,000 people, provisional ballot rate, provisional ballot rejection rate,

¹⁸https://www.electioncenter.org/about-us.php

 $^{^{19}}$ https://elections.mit.edu/#/data/map

 $^{^{20} \}rm https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/img/refs/codebookv12.pdf$

 $^{^{21}{\}rm I}$ exclude Loving county, Texas from the analysis because its population is too small to reliably estimate participation rates.

²²This data includes some voting-age residents who may be ineligible to vote due to citizenship status or criminal record. While this may make some estimates noisier, it is unlikely to introduce bias because few people decide where to live based solely on the selection method of a county's local election official. The data I use is available at https://seer.cancer.gov/popdata/. It is available from 1970 to 2020. I extrapolate the estimates to 1968 and to 2022.

absentee ballot rejection rate, and the registration removal rate. Following Ferrer *et al.* (2024) and Pettigrew (2017), I use data from the Survey on the Performance of American Elections (SPAE) to measure the share of voters who had to wait at the polls for certain lengths of time.²³ This is available for general elections in 2008, 2012–2016, 2020, and 2022. I also use election official communication data provided by Thessalia Merivaki and Mara Suttmann-Lea.

I probe mechanisms using data on election administration expenditures from Mohr *et al.* (2018), data on the prior experience of local election officials from the 2020 EVIC Survey of Local Election Officials,²⁴ data on local newspapers from Gentzkow *et al.* (2014) and Sean Ewing, and data on voter knowledge of election officials from an original survey.

Design

It is difficult to estimate the effect of local election administrator selection because counties that appoint officials likely differ from those that elect officials for a host of reasons beyond the selection method of the election official and in ways that are likely to affect participation rates. Table A.3 in the Online Appendix shows some of the differences between counties that appoint their clerk vs. those that elect their clerk. For instance, populous, dense, and racially diverse counties are all more likely to appoint their election officials than sparsely populated, rural, and mostly white counties (Ferrer and Geyn, 2024). They also tend to have lower participation rates (Leighley and Nagler, 2017). Similarly, counties in Western states tend to elect their officials and also tend to have higher turnout rates than counties in other regions (Springer, 2014). Given these correlations, a simple cross-sectional analysis of counties would result in a relationship between appointed officials and lower turnout but this would not be evidence that appointing officials *causes* lower turnout. Even if all of these obvious differences are controlled for, unobservable factors likely exist that make counties different in ways that happen to correlate both with their participation rate and the selection method of their clerk.

I overcome this issue with a difference-in-differences research design. I leverage county-level changes in clerk method across 13 states to credibly measure the effects of a switch on participation. The design compares the change in turnout when a county switches from electing to appointing its election official to the change in turnout in other counties in the same state that continue electing clerks. So long as year-to-year differences in turnout are commonly experienced across a state and not indirectly related to switches in clerk selection method, I can be confident that an observed difference in turnout in the counties that switch to appointed clerks is due to the selection method itself.

 $[\]label{eq:asymptotic} \begin{array}{l} ^{23} \mbox{https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/survey-performance-american-elections} \\ ^{24} \mbox{https://evic.reed.edu/leo-survey-summary/} \end{array}$

I estimate the regression $Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta Appointed_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$, where Y_{it} is a measure of voter turnout or registration in county *i* at election year *t*, α_i and δ_t are county and year fixed effects, respectively, and $Appointed_{it}$ is a dummy variable taking 1 when counties appoint their local election official and 0 when counties elect their local election official. β is the causal effect of an appointed election official on voter turnout.

The causal interpretation of the difference-in-differences design rests on the parallel trends assumption. This means that counties that switch to appointed clerks are on similar turnout trajectories to those that do not switch, prior to the reform. It is possible to imagine that counties that switch to appointed officials are growing at a more rapid rate than those that stay with elected officials, and that turnout is trending down as a result. In this case, appointed officials might be viewed as a way to professionalize the county's election administration. Similarly, selection method might become a partisan issue. If more Democratic counties start to adopt appointed clerks, and Democrats reduce or increase their turnout relative to Republicans, then this would also result in the spurious appearance of a causal relationship between appointments and turnout. Table A.4 reveals differences in population, participation rates, and demographics between counties that switch to appointed officials and counties that stay with elected officials.

All regressions include at the minimum Year by State fixed effects. This ensures that comparisons are only made between counties in the same state, addressing the possibility that states may be on different turnout trajectories. I further address parallel trending concerns by incorporating two additional sets of interacted fixed effects: Year by State by Democratic vote share and Year by State by Population fixed effects. The former compares within-county over time change to other counties with similar partian makeup, whereas the latter compares within-county overtime change to other counties that switch their election administration may also happen to shift either population or partian trends in ways that are systematically related to turnout. Democratic vote share and population are divided into quartiles for each state, allowing the grouping cut points to vary by state, and measured pretreatment.²⁵

Even with these interacted fixed effects, it is still possible unobserved confounders exist. I conduct a generalized synthetic control balancing exercise to ensure that counties that switch are only compared to those that do not with similar pretreatment turnout trajectories and randomization inference to investigate the likelihood of getting the observed results given the structure of the data.

 $^{^{25}}$ I use the 1960 census for population and the 1968 presidential election for Democratic vote share. Democratic vote share is measured as votes for the top-ticket Democratic candidate divided by votes for the top-ticket Democratic and Republican candidates.

Results

In this section, I present evidence that appointing local election officials results in increased participation rates. I then validate this finding with a range of alternative estimators, conduct a placebo analysis using registration rates, distinguish between the effects of selection method and partisanship, and examine whether appointed officials benefit their principals' party or if the effect differs by jurisdiction partisanship.

Appointing Election Officials Increases Voter Participation

Table 1 displays the results of a two-way fixed effects regression estimating the effects of appointing a local election official on citizen participation. Columns 1 through 3 estimate the effects on votes per voting-age resident and columns 4 through 6 estimate the effects on registrants per voting-age resident. Both are measured as proportions out of 1. The coefficients are the average percentage point difference in turnout and registration rates when counties switch from elected to appointed clerks. All six regressions include, at minimum, county and year by state fixed effects.

Column 1 shows that counties switching from directly elected to appointed election officials see an average increase in voter turnout of 1.8 percentage points in even-year general elections, compared with counties that do not switch. The point estimate is precisely estimated, allowing us to confidently rule out effects smaller than 1.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence

	Voter turnout			Registration rate		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Appointed	0.018	0.016	0.014	0.009	0.009	0.008
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Counties	1,116	1,116	1,116	942	942	942
Elections	28	28	28	13	13	13
Observations	31,146	31,146	31,146	12,216	12,216	12,216
Outcome mean	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.84	0.84	0.84
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year \times State FEs	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Year \times State \times Dem vs FEs	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Year \times State \times Pop FEs	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

Table 1: Appointing local election officials increases citizen participation (even-year general elections, 1968–2022).

Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses. Voter turnout and registration rate are measured as proportions out of 1. The number of observations is smaller in columns 4–6 because Arizona and Georgia are excluded and because turnout data is available from 1968 but registration data is only available from 1996.

level. It is also substantively meaningful. The estimated effect on turnout in even-year general elections is on par or larger than those generated by the most significant modern policy interventions designed to boost voter participation. It is equivalent to implementing universal vote-by-mail (Thompson *et al.*, 2020) or adding 10 days of early voting (Kaplan and Yuan, 2020). It is also double the turnout boost caused by implementing automatic voter registration (McGhee *et al.*, 2021). This effect is also significant compared to get-out-the-vote interventions. It is twice the average turnout effect of door-to-door canvassing, three times that of a direct mailing, and five times that of a phone call campaign (Green *et al.*, 2013).

I introduce year by state by Democratic vote share fixed effects in column 2 to alleviate the concern that counties with similar partisan compositions were on the same participation trajectory prior to their shift in selection method. The result is similar under this estimation strategy. The inclusion of year by state by population fixed effects in column 3 makes comparisons between counties of comparable sizes within the same state and yields an estimated effect of 1.4 percentage points.

Appointed election administrators also appear to oversee elections with higher registration rates. Arizona and Georgia are excluded from these specifications because registration duties are always undertaken by appointed registration boards. The coefficients range from 0.8 to 0.9 percentage points in magnitude, and a null of no difference can be confidently ruled out in all three estimators. An event study plot of the effect of appointment on registration, shown in Section A.3.3, reveals some evidence of pre-trending, so this effect should be viewed with caution, though the point estimates are replicated in a matching analysis specification shown in A.20.

These estimates provide strong evidence that appointed clerks increase voter participation, relative to their directly elected counterparts. Regressions excluding midterm contests are found in Section A.2.1 and yield substantively similar findings. Table A.6 in the Online Appendix shows the results are also robust to the use of different criteria in constructing the panel data of election official selection methods, and Table A.7 shows the results are robust to the inclusion of county linear time trends, albeit attenuated.

The results hold in multiple states, across multiple offices, for multiple reform mechanisms, and over multiple years and date ranges. In Table A.13 in the Online Appendix, I show that switching to an appointed election administrator increases voter turnout in three of the four states with at least 10 counties experiencing switches (Georgia, Minnesota, and Texas), and is imprecisely estimated in the fourth case (California). Table A.14 in the Online Appendix shows that switching from elected probate judges, auditors, and clerks to appointments increases voter turnout. In Section A.2.5 in the Online Appendix, I show that both county- and state-initiated reform mechanisms lead to a boost in turnout and that the findings are robust to excluding the few cases where the change is packaged with unrelated reforms. This alleviates concerns that the boost to turnout is an artifact of the way the reform in selection method is initiated. I also run a series of Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) regressions in Section A.2.6 to estimate the dynamic effects of switching from an elected to an appointed election official. The positive effects of appointments on voter turnout appear over time and across multiple county cohorts and time periods.²⁶ Finally, it is possible that low rates of turnout among African-Americans in the South due to the lingering effects of repressive Jim Crow restrictions confound the results. I show in Table A.17 in the Online Appendix that the results hold using only more recent elections, with some attenuation in effect magnitude.

Validating the Effect of Appointing Election Officials on Voter Turnout

In this section, I validate my main finding that appointed local election officials produce higher voter turnout than directly elected officials. I utilize alternative difference-in-difference estimators and employ a generalized synthetic control balancing method which relaxes the assumptions needed for causal inference. These estimators show the results to be robust to a range of specifications.

Validating the Staggered Rollout Design

Recent scholarship has identified potential problems with the standard twoway fixed effects estimator when used in staggered adoption designs (Baker *et al.*, 2022; Borusyak and Jaravel, 2018; Callaway and Sant'Anna, 2021; Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille, 2020). These issues stem from heterogeneous treatment effects. If treatment effects vary across time or units, the estimate will be biased due to the assignment of negative weights to some comparison groups.

To validate my main findings, I test a range of alternative specifications in Table A.18 in the Online Appendix, including removing counties that switch from appointments to elections, removing counties that use appointments throughout the dataset, and using stacked difference-in-difference estimators. All specifications result in precisely estimated effects on turnout between 2.1 and 3.5 percentage points. In Section A.3.2, I employ the Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille (2020) estimator and the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021)

 $^{^{26}}$ This provides evidence that the positive effects of appointments are not simply due to a novelty or Hawthorne-style effect in the immediate aftermath of a change. I am not able to reliably estimate the effects of switching from appointed to elected clerks due to the small number of counties that have switched in this direction.

dynamic effects estimator for states with at least 10 treated counties. The results are consistent with those shown in Section A.2.4.

Generalized Synthetic Control

An underlying concern of the difference-in-difference estimation strategy is that treated and control units do not look like one another. If the places that switch from electing to appointing election officials are fundamentally different from those that remain elected on some unobserved characteristics, then this undermines the causal validity of the regression specification. Figure A.5 in the Online Appendix investigates the validity of the parallel trends assumption using the Dube *et al.* (2022) local projections event studies estimator. It shows evidence that places that adopt appointments may be on different trajectories prior to reform.

I overcome this concern through the generalized synthetic control method. This estimation strategy rebalances the data sample by comparing treated and untreated units with similar pre-treatment voter turnout history. Figure 4



Figure 4: Estimated ATT of generalized synthetic control. This graph displays a generalized synthetic control method of the two-way fixed effects regression estimating the effect of appointing local election officials on even-year general election voter turnout. The specification includes two-way additive county and year fixed effects, automated cross-validation to identify the optimal number of factors, and a parametric bootstrap with 1,000 samples. The black line is a dynamic estimated ATT effect of appointing an election official on turnout and the band is a 95% confidence interval.

displays output from a Xu (2017) generalized synthetic control estimation. The line in the left-hand side of the figure is close to 0, showing that the strategy successfully compares treated and control counties with similar pre-treatment turnout trajectories. It becomes positive in the right-hand side of the figure and is statistically distinguishable from 0. This provides additional evidence that appointed election officials administer elections with higher turnout than their elected counterparts. As shown in Table A.26 in the Online Appendix, it produces a precisely estimated effect of 0.8% on voter turnout, lower than the estimates shown in Table 1 but still substantial for participation in federal general elections. In Section A.2.6 in the Online Appendix, I explore two possibilities for an increasing effect magnitude over time: delayed effects due to selection method reform triggering turnover, and a secular trend of declining availability in local news.

Randomization Inference

Randomization inference can be used to derive an alternative estimate of the likelihood of finding an effect as large or larger than the one observed by chance. I employ two different randomization permutations: in Figure A.9 in the Online Appendix, I randomly permute both which counties are treated and when they are treated, and in Figure 5, I randomly permute when treated counties receive treatment. Counties that switch from appointed to elected clerks and counties that switch selection method multiple times are excluded. 1,000 permutations are computed for each exercise. The three regressions shown in Table 1, columns 1–3 are replicated with the permuted data and the coefficient stored for each permutation. Finally, the actual coefficient derived is compared with the distribution of permuted coefficients. The *p*-value is the number of randomized coefficients that are greater than or equal to the actual estimated effect divided by the total number of iterations.

Figure A.9 shows that the likelihood of observing the actual result or a more extreme effect is close to 0, given randomized treatment and treatment timing and assuming the true effect is null. The more demanding inferential test is when the counties that switch to appointments are preserved, but when they switch is scrambled. Figure 5 shows that random treatment timing of the treated units typically results in a positive relationship between appointments and voter turnout. This aligns with the evidence of pre-trending shown in Figure 4. However, it is still extremely unlikely to get an observed effect as large as that actually observed — only in about 1 out of 200 simulations does the effect reach 1.8%. This provides additional validation that appointing election officials increases voter turnout.



Figure 5: Randomization inference for Table 1, Columns 1-3 — Timing of treated counties. This graph displays the output of randomization inference for the main effects of appointed local election officials on voter turnout. Which counties receive treatment is preserved, but when they first switch to appointments is randomly permuted. The black distribution shows the resulting coefficients of 1,000 iterations. The red solid vertical line is the actual coefficient observed, and the *p*-value is the share of coefficients that are equal to or larger than the one estimated in the respective specification in Table 1.

Appointing Election Officials Boosts Registration Rates More when Their Duties Specifically Include Registration

I run a placebo test examining whether switching to appointed officials increases registration rates more in states where their duties specifically include registration. The results, found in Online Appendix A.3.6, show suggestive

evidence that counties experience a larger boost in registration rates when the official directly in charge of registration duties switches from an elected to an appointed position.

Selection Method, Not Partisanship, Explains the Results

Are the observed effects the result of a switch from elected to appointed clerks, or are they due to the switch from an openly partisan office to an ostensibly nonpartisan position? The results in Table 1 present a bundled treatment of both selection method and partisanship. The partisan nature of elected office could lead clerks to act in ways that differ from their nonpartisan appointed counterparts — for instance, by attempting to alter turnout to advantage co-partisans. Georgia, Montana, and Washington's history of county-level changes between elected partisan, elected nonpartisan, and appointed election officials provides an opportunity to disentangle the effects of selection method and partisanship. Table A.28 provides strong evidence that selection method, and not the partisan nature of the office, drive the main results on voter turnout.

Appointed Local Election Officials Do Not Appear to Benefit Their Principals' Party

I test whether appointed officials benefit the party of their supporters by compiling original data on counties in two states where partian county commissioners appoint the local election official: Arizona and Pennsylvania. I use a difference-in-differences specification, testing what happens when the majority party of the election official's appointing body changes. The results, shown in Table A.29, tell two different stories depending on specification. In regressions without unit-specific linear effects, it does appear that election officials appointed by a newly Democratic body shift presidential/gubernatorial vote shares and registrants in a Democratic direction. However, it is likely that counties that switch to having Democratic majority councils are also trending Democratic in their federal and state voting behaviors (Hopkins, 2018). These effects disappear with the inclusion of county linear time trends, which tests whether switching to a Democratic appointing body creates an out-of-trend increase in Democratic vote shares or registrants. I discuss known issues with the latter specification in Section A.2.3 of the Online Appendix. In short, it is not clear that appointed local election officials benefit their principals' party.

I also test whether the effect of appointments on participation is shared equally across jurisdictions, regardless of partian lean, or concentrates in jurisdictions of a certain partian balance. I show in Table A.30 that the benefits of switching to appointed election officials are similar across Democratic- and Republican-leaning jurisdictions.

Why Does Appointing Election Officials Increase Voter Participation?

What do appointed local election officials do differently from elected officials that increases voter participation for their constituents? I show that appointed officials obtain additional election administration resources. Beyond this, I cannot definitively tell how appointed officials increase participation. However, I provide suggestive evidence that appointing election officials leads to higher election official salaries, a larger workforce, more robust communication with voters, and may lower wait times, all consistent with activities that could increase participation. However, some findings are inconsistent with expectations. I fail to find any differences between appointed and elected officials in number of polling places per 1,000 residents, share of provisional ballots cast, share of provisional or absentee ballots rejected, and share of registrants removed from the list.

Appointed Election Officials Obtain More Resources

Sufficiently funding elections is essential to ensuring high quality administration (Kropf et al., 2020; McGowan et al., 2021; Mohr et al., 2019, 2020). Previous scholarship has shown that increasing election administration resources can boost voter turnout (Grose, 2022; but see Lal and Thompson, 2024). Burden et al. (2013) argue that appointed officials are less able to advocate for more resources than their elected counterparts and therefore administer elections with fewer resources. However, Taylor et al. (2024) find that appointed boards of election in Georgia spend 45% more on election administration than elected probate judges. Appointed officials might have better relationships with their principals and thus more sway over election funding. If the quality of selection is higher for appointed officials, they might be more proactive in securing additional resources. Alternatively, they might be more responsive to the interests of cost-conscious voters because elected judges are more attentive voter's desires to be efficient (Choi *et al.*, 2010). It is also possible that in smaller jurisdictions, switching to a dedicated appointed local election official increases the amount of full-time equivalent (FTE) employees who work in election administration.²⁷

²⁷Appointed officials' sole job is to effectively administer elections. In comparison, most directly elected local election officials in the US undertake additional responsibilities beyond election administration. County clerks have a variety of non-election duties such as maintaining legislative/judicial records and recording vital documents. Other offices, such as tax assessors (used in South Dakota and some Texas counties) and probate judges (used in Alabama and Georgia) have more substantial non-election duties. This resource difference should only exist in the least populous counties, where sometimes only a single official administer elections. According to the 2020 EVIC Survey of Local Election Officials, 34% of jurisdictions have no full-time election administrators and 17% have exactly one FTE (https://evic.reed.edu/leo-survey-summary/). In all other jurisdictions, switching to an appointed official should not directly increase the amount of FTEs.

I use jurisdiction election administration expenditure data from Mohr et al. (2018). This dataset includes estimated yearly expenditures for each county in Arizona, California, Georgia, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and Nevada starting from as early as 2002. This enables the use of a difference-in-differences regression design to test the effect of switching to appointed election officials on election expenditures. Following Taylor *et al.* (2024), I use the natural log of total election expenditures per registered voter as my dependent variable. Table 2 displays the results (an event study plot, found in Section A.3.3, shows no evidence of pre-trending, and the inclusion of county time trends in Section A.2.3 shows similar results). The first three specifications test the overall effect of appointments on election expenditures and the latter three test whether less populous counties enjoy a larger boost in resources than more populous counties, defined as counties below each state's median county population. All point estimates are large and statistically distinguishable from zero. The coefficient in column 1 means that when counties switch to an appointed election official, their election expenditures per registered voter increases by 28 percentage points on average. We can confidently rule out effects of less than 7.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The average county

	Ln(Total election expenditures per registered voter)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Appointed	0.280	0.270	0.310	0.323	0.367	0.357
	(0.100)	(0.091)	(0.098)	(0.110)	(0.110)	(0.109)
Appointed \times Small County				-0.100	-0.204	-0.122
				(0.224)	(0.209)	(0.215)
Counties	434	434	434	432	432	432
Elections	6	6	6	6	6	6
Observations	1,929	1,929	1,929	1,920	1,920	1,920
Outcome mean	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year \times State FEs	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Year \times State \times Dem vs FEs	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Year \times State \times Pop FEs	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Year \times State \times Small FEs	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Year \times State \times Dem vs	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
\times Small FEs						

Table 2: Appointing local election officials increases election expenditures (even-year general elections, 2004–2016).

Small counties rank in the bottom half in population compared to other counties within the same state. Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses. Data is from Mohr *et al.* (2018) and is available for Arizona, California, Georgia, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and Nevada. Elections refers to the average number of elections included for each state, rounded down to the nearest integer. Expenditure data is normalized to 2020 dollars.

spends \$9.50 per registered voter on administering elections in even years, and appointed officials secure an additional \$3.06 per registrant.

The effects are, if anything, smaller in less populous jurisdictions. This means they are likely driven by the actions of the local election official rather than a result of creating an additional FTE election administration position. An alternative explanation is that counties that become more concerned about the quality of election administration both switch selection methods and increase election expenditures at the same time. I further investigate the reason for this effect by examining whether appointed officials were more likely to apply for the Center for Tech and Civic Life's 2020 COVID grants to election administrators, a decision made directly by the election official rather than county supervisors. Using data on grant applications from Lal and Thompson (2024) and nationwide cross-sectional selection method data from Ferrer and Geyn (2024), I find in Table A.31 that appointed officials were 7 percentage points more likely to apply for the grants compared to elected officials in counties within the same state, even after controlling for a range of factors including population, partisanship, median income, urbanicity, non-Hispanic white share, and COVID severity. This provides suggestive evidence that the effect is due to a quality difference between elected and appointed officials rather than elected officials simply being more attentive to the desire of voters to minimize costs or because a switch to appointments happens at the same time counties pour more funds into election administration. Finally, I show in Table A.32 that increased election expenditures may lead to additional voter turnout, especially in smaller jurisdictions. A doubling of expenditures per registrant increases voter turnout by 0.27 percentage points on average, and by 0.39 percentage points in smaller counties. This is in line with previous findings linking election expenditures with higher turnout (Kropf and Pope, 2020).

What Administrative Policies Do Appointed Election Officials Pursue Differently?

Given that appointed election officials obtain more resources, what might they do with these resources that could lead to higher participation? Using data from the 2020 EVIC Survey of Local Election Officials, I find suggestive evidence in Section A.5.1 that appointed officials serving in similarly populous jurisdictions within the same state make \$5,000 more than elected officials and hire an additional 0.6 FTEs on average, although both results are imprecise.

Election officials could use additional funding to improve voter outreach. Clerks have significant discretion in their communication with voters. They can pursue a proactive strategy of providing additional information to the public and accurately responding to constituent questions. Or, they can provide the legally required minimum amount of information. More active election official communication strategies has been shown to increase the share of registered voters (Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea, 2023), improve voter confidence (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki, 2023), and reduce the number of mail ballots that are rejected (Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki, 2022). In an audit study of election officials, White *et al.* (2015) found that elected officials were 16% less responsive and 12% less accurate in their responses than appointed officials. Figure A.34 in the Online Appendix uses data from Merivaki and Suttmann-Lea to test whether appointed officials are more likely to maintain official social media accounts than elected officials serving in similar jurisdictions. I find that appointed officials are twice as likely to have a Twitter account as elected officials, although I do not find differences in the usage of other platforms.

I use EAVS data to explore the possibility that more voter outreach reduces the usage of provisional ballots and the rejection of provisional and absentee ballots or additional resources leads appointed officials to open more polling places. The results, found in Section A.4.3, do not allow me to rule out that appointed and elected administrators run elections with similar provisional ballot usage, provisional rejection rates, and absentee ballot rejection rates, as well as numbers of polling places per 1,000 residents and registration removal rates.

Additional resources could be employed to improve the Election Day experience for voters in a number of additional ways, including hiring more poll workers, providing them with better pay and more rigorous training, and better provisioning polling places with poll booths and voting machines. While I cannot directly test these mechanisms, I use data from the 2008, 2012. 2014, 2016, 2020, and 2022 Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAE) to examine whether voter wait times decrease when counties switch to appointed administration. I employ difference-in-difference regressions with county and state-by-year fixed effects and individual controls for gender, race, age, education, and party identification. The results are shown in Figure 3. While the regressions are relatively imprecise, the coefficients are all negative and the effect sizes are substantively meaningful. Switching to appointed election officials reduces the average voter's self-reported wait time by roughly half a minute on average. It reduces the percentage of voters that wait at least 10 minutes in line by 3 percentage points and reduces the percentage of voters waiting in line for 30 minutes or more by 1 percentage point. Longer wait times have been found to depress future voter turnout (Pettigrew, 2021), making this one plausible factor explaining why appointed officials boost participation.²⁸

 $^{^{28}}$ Table A.9 in the Online Appendix shows these results are somewhat robust to the inclusion of county time trends.

	Min waited	>10 min	>30 min	>1 h
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Appointed	-0.387	-0.031	-0.012	-0.006
	(0.774)	(0.031)	(0.021)	(0.010)
Counties	798	798	798	798
Respondents	9,169	9,169	9,169	9,169
Elections	6	6	6	6
Observations	9,169	9,169	9,169	9,169
Outcome mean	8.43	0.29	0.11	0.04
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year \times state FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 3: Appointed local election officials may decrease voter wait times (even-year general elections, 2008–2022).

Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses. Individual controls are gender, race, age, education, and party identification.

Why Do Appointed Election Officials Outperform Elected Officials?

I explore two sets of mechanisms that could lead appointed local election officials to produce better outcomes for constituents than elected officials: that the quality of selection is higher for appointed officials, and that the quality of sanctioning is higher for appointed officials. For the former, I examine differences in education between elected and appointed clerks, the low contestation rates of clerk elections, and differential effect of appointments in small and large jurisdictions. For the latter, I investigate the information voters know about their election official, differences in turnover rates, and triple difference-in-difference estimates comparing the effect of selection method based on the presence of a local newspaper.

The Quality of Selection Is Higher For Appointed Election Officials

Are appointed local election officials more equipped for their job than elected administrators? This could be due to some failure in elections that prevent voters from selecting the most qualified individuals — because of a limited pool of viable candidates, lack of contested elections, aversion of experienced or welleducated administrators to elections, or the absence of high-quality information. It could also be due to geographic restrictions imposed by elections. In order for voters to choose quality candidates, they need to run in the first place. But voters rarely have a choice in election administrator at the ballot box. Ferrer *et al.* (2024) find that only 23% of general election races for local election official feature a contest between a Democrat and a Republican, and only 12% of all contests result in a race with a margin of victory of less than 20 percentage points. Previous research shows that low contestation rates is a problem across local offices (Burden and Snyder, 2021; Lappie and Marschall, 2018; Marschall and Lappie, 2018; Thompson, 2020; Yntiso, 2022).

I use the 2020 EVIC Survey of Local Election Officials to examine whether elected and appointed officials possess different levels of education, a common indicator of the quality of public officials (Dal Bó *et al.*, 2017). Table 4 tests differences in education between elected and appointed officials. All specifications include state fixed effects and both log population and log population squared controls to ensure that comparisons are only made between appointed and elected officials who oversee elections in similarly sized jurisdictions within the same state. Any differences that arise are likely due to the selection method itself rather than inherent differences in the places that elect and appoint clerks.

Appointed officials appear to possess more formal education than elected officials. Appointed officials are 16 percentage points more likely to hold a college degree than elected officials (column 2) and are 11 percentage points more likely to receive any college education (column 3), an effect statistically distinguishable from 0. Columns 4–6 test whether the difference in education between elected and appointed officials is larger in less populous jurisdictions.

	Any					Any	
	Edu	Degree	college	Edu	Degree	college	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
Appointed	0.336	0.160	0.113	0.578	0.148	0.116	
	(0.209)	(0.115)	(0.044)	(0.232)	(0.089)	(0.056)	
Appointed \times Small County				-0.385	0.087	0.009	
				(0.316)	(0.168)	(0.100)	
States	44	44	44	38	38	38	
Observations	581	581	581	581	581	581	
Outcome mean	2.86	0.58	0.88	2.86	0.58	0.88	
State FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Log Pop	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Log Pop squared	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	

Table 4: Appointed local election officials possess more education than elected officials.

Robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. Data is from the 2020 EVIC Survey of Local Election Officials and is filtered to only include chief local election officials. County is imputed from zip code to calculate population controls. Observations are weighted to be representative of the population of local election officials. Columns 1 and 4 measure educational attainment on a 5-point scale: high school, some college, college, some graduate school, and graduate school. Columns 2 and 5 measure whether the official possesses a college degree, and columns 3 and 6 measure any college education.

This should be the case if the quality difference is due to a limited pool of candidates or geographic restrictions, rather than the absence of adequate voter information or inherent aspects of elections that turn away more educated professionals. Little evidence suggests that the effect varies across less and more populous jurisdictions.

Table A.35 in the Online Appendix tests a number of additional indicators of quality between elected and appointed officials using the 2020 EVIC survey. I find that appointed officials tend to possess less previous experience in election administration, may hold more professional memberships, are likelier to have served elsewhere and in a greater number of previous jurisdictions, are less likely to be over the age of 65 years, make approximately 10% more in salary than elected officials, and recruit an additional 0.5 FTE. These findings are in line with a recent survey of municipal clerks in New England which found that elected clerks are older, less educated, longer-tenured, and have less institutional capacity than appointed clerks (Marsh *et al.*, 2024). I take this as evidence that appointed officials possess less election administration experience but are more professionalized than their elected counterparts.

Selection Method Effects Are Largest in Small Jurisdictions

Previous research suggests that the population of a jurisdiction is a defining feature in how its elections are run (Burden et al., 2012; Kimball and Baybeck, 2013). The vast majority of election jurisdictions serve a small number of people, with 94% of jurisdictions serving less than one-third of the population and the median jurisdiction serving only 2,000 individuals (Kimball and Baybeck, 2013). In counties where local election officials have fewer deputies, the actions of the chief official could have a greater impact on participation rates. The gap in selection quality between elected and appointed officials is likely to be greatest in less populous jurisdictions. This is because elected officials typically must live in the jurisdiction, whereas appointed officials can be hired from elsewhere. Table 5 displays the results of difference-in-difference regressions testing the magnitude of the difference in effect between less and more populous counties. A "small county" is defined as ranking in the bottom half in population compared to other counties within the same state. The top row is the effect of switching to appointed election officials for populous counties, and the bottom row is the additional effect of switching to appointments for relatively less populous counties. It is apparent that the effects are largest in small counties. Appointed election officials in less populous jurisdictions produce turnout rates that are between 2.0 and 2.2 percentage points higher than their elected counterparts, compared with 0.7 to 0.9 percentage points higher in more populous jurisdictions. A similar pattern is found with registration rates, with point estimates in smaller counties double those found in large counties.

	Voter turnout			Registration rate		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Appointed	0.009	0.007	0.009	0.005	0.005	0.006
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Appointed \times Small county	0.013	0.013	0.013	0.006	0.005	0.003
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Counties	1,114	1,114	1,114	941	941	941
Elections	28	28	28	13	13	13
Observations	31,104	31,104	31,104	12,203	12,203	12,203
Outcome mean	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.84	0.84	0.84
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year \times State \times Small FEs	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
$\begin{array}{l} {\rm Year} \times {\rm State} \times {\rm Dem} \ {\rm vs} \\ \times {\rm Small} \ {\rm FEs} \end{array}$	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Year \times State \times Pop FEs	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

Table 5: Appointing local election officials increases citizen participation especially in small counties (even-year general elections, 1968–2022).

Small counties rank in the bottom half in population compared to other counties within the same state. Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses. The number of observations is smaller in columns 3 and 4 because Arizona and Georgia are excluded and because turnout data is available from 1968 but registration data is only available from 1996.

This evidence is consistent with selection mechanisms explaining the difference in performance between elected and appointed officials.²⁹

The Quality of Sanctioning is Higher for Appointed Election Officials

In this section, I present evidence that voters do not know much about their local election official, that the effects of switching to appointments on voter turnout are largest in jurisdictions without the continuous presence of a local newspaper, and that appointed officials may have higher turnover rates.

Voters Know Little About Their Local Election Official

I fielded a survey of 3,200 US adults to test respondent knowledge of their local election official. The survey hypotheses and analysis are preregistered on OSF,³⁰ and technical details are provided in Section A.5.2 in the Online Appendix. I compiled a complete list of currently serving chief local election officials from government websites and linked respondents to their current election official using zip code. Correcting for guessing, only 17.2% of respondents

 $^{^{29}\}mathrm{Table}$ A.10 in the Online Appendix shows that the voter turnout results are robust to the inclusion of county time trends but the registration results are not.

³⁰osf.io/k7hq2

were able to correctly identify the title of their chief election official. Only 5.2% of respondents knew whether their election official is elected or appointed. And fewer than 8% of respondents correctly identified their election official out of a list of five names.

If the vast majority of voters do not know the position responsible for administering their elections, whether it appears on their ballot, or the person in charge of running elections in their community, it is unlikely that voters are able to adequately monitor the performance of this official and sanction them for mediocre performance. This is in contrast to the local elites in charge of appointing election officials. By their very nature, all principals know who the election official is and are likely to have a better idea of the quality of their work.

The Performance Gap Between Elected and Appointed Officials is Largest in Jurisdictions that Lack a Local Newspaper

If appointed local election officials perform better than elected officials because they are better monitored, then the difference in performance should be smaller in jurisdictions where voters have greater access to information about local politics. Previous scholarship has established a causal effect between the presence of a local newspaper and increased turnout in federal elections (Gentzkow *et al.*, 2014), increased electoral competition in local races (Rubado and Jennings, 2020), and a stronger incumbency advantage (Lockhart, 2021). Is the performance gap between appointed and elected clerks larger when the county lacks a local newspaper, thus depriving voters of the information necessary to hold the public official accountable?

I test the effects of the presence or lack of a local daily newspaper on the relationship between selection method and voter turnout using a triple difference-in-differences design and a combination of two datasets: Gentzkow et al. (2014), which contains newspaper data from 1960 to 2004, and data from Sean Ewing that updates this data through 2020. I sort counties into two categories: those that have continuously had at least one newspaper headquartered in its boundaries within the study period, and those that have not. Table 6 displays the results of this analysis. The first row shows the effect of counties switching from elected to appointed election officials when they lack the continuous presence of at least one local newspaper. Column 2 is the additive effect on switching for counties that have a local newspaper presence. Nearly the entirety of the positive benefits to appointing election officials lie in counties that lack local news coverage. An alternative specification, introducing over-time variability in the presence of a local daily newspaper, shows results consistent with Table 6 and is found in Section A.5.3. The inclusion of county time trends, found in Section A.2.3, shows the same general finding for voter turnout but not for registration rates.

	Voter turnout			Registration rate		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Appointed	0.025	0.024	0.021	0.011	0.011	0.007
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Appointed \times Newspaper	-0.021	-0.020	-0.013	0.001	0.002	0.007
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Counties	979	979	979	824	824	824
Elections	14	14	14	6	6	6
Observations	13,661	$13,\!661$	$13,\!661$	5,751	5,751	5,751
Outcome mean	0.58	0.58	0.58	0.85	0.85	0.85
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year \times State \times	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Newspaper FEs						
Year \times State \times Dem vs	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Year \times State \times Pop \times Newspaper FEs	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

Table 6: Consistent presence of a daily local newspaper attenuates the effect of appointing local election officials on citizen participation (even-year general elections, 1968–2022).

Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses. All counties that switch between having and not having a daily newspaper over the period of analysis are dropped. The number of observations is smaller in columns 4–6 because Arizona and Georgia are excluded and because turnout data is available from 1968 but registration data is only available from 1996.

Appointed Election Officials May Have Higher Turnover Rates than Elected Officials

If appointed local election officials are monitored and sanctioned more than elected officials, then they should have shorter tenures in general. I test this using an original panel of the names and service tenures of chief local election officials across jurisdictions spanning 2000 to 2022, collected mainly from state and local administrative archives (Ferrer and Thompson, 2024). Table 7 shows the results and Table A.7 in the Online Appendix tests for pre-trending.

Column 1 shows the effect of a switch in a county from elections to appointments on turnover of the election official. Because this switch causes turnover in most cases, I impute missing dependent variable values for the year each jurisdiction moves into treatment. It appears that appointed officials leave the position at higher rates than elected officials. Switching to an appointed official increases the probability of turnover over a 2-year period by 4.9 percentage points. Considering the average 2-year turnover rate of election officials in the dataset is 18%, this is a fairly substantial effect.³¹

 $^{^{31}}$ Table A.12 in the Online Appendix shows that the inclusion of county time trends returns a noisy null effect of appointments on turnover.

	Election official turnover
	(1)
Appointed	0.049
	(0.025)
Counties	1,113
Elections	3
Observations	10,881
Outcome mean	0.18
County FEs	Yes
Year \times State FEs	Yes

Table 7: Appointed local elections officials turnover at higher rates than elected officials (2004–2022).

Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses.

Conclusion

Across America's history, democracy-minded reformers have tinkered with the selection method of government offices in an attempt to improve the accountability and performance of its public servants. In recent years, this practice has spread to local election officials, who are facing intense scrutiny from political elites and immense pressure to deliver free and fair elections. States are increasingly shaping the administrative structures of local jurisdictions for seemingly partisan ends, affecting who controls elections for millions of Americans. These decisions could have significant consequences for the quality of elections and the timely and accurate certification of election results — something that came close to not happening in the 2020 presidential election.³² Yet we have lacked the ability to effectively adjudicate between selection methods.

Using original data from 13 states, spanning 1,116 counties across 62 years, I show that when counties switch from electing to appointing their clerks voter participation rates increase substantially. The boost to voter turnout is on par with the most effective convenience reforms designed to raise participation such as implementing universal vote-by-mail (Thompson *et al.*, 2020) and automatic voter registration (McGhee *et al.*, 2021). It is several times the effect of get-out-the-vote interventions such as door-to-door knocking, mailings, and phone calls (Green *et al.*, 2013). The findings are robust to alternate specifications including general synthetic control and randomization inference; hold across multiple time periods, states, offices, and reform mechanisms; and do not appear to come at the expense of increased partisan manipulation of

 $^{^{32}} https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/17/wayne-county-michigan-election-certification-437181$

election results. Appointed officials appear to boost local expenditures on election administration, hire additional staff, increase communication with voters, and may reduce voter wait times. I show evidence for stronger selection and sanctioning mechanisms to explain these effects. Appointed officials are more educated and more professionalized than elected officials, and outperform their elected counterparts most in the jurisdictions where elections most limit the selection pool. The vast majority of voters cannot identify their local election official from a list of names, appointed officials outperform elected officials most in jurisdictions with the least availability of local news, and appointed clerks may have higher turnover rates.

These findings add to a growing literature on the limits of elections in ensuring accountable officeholders (Ashworth, 2012; Rogers, 2023). Elections are designed to achieve accountability between officeholders and the public. When voters have access to high-quality information, can make a choice between multiple candidates, and are able to effectively sanction an officeholder who shirks their duty, agents are incentivized to perform their best in order to win another term in office. However, if voters do not have access to adequate information or a sufficient choice on election day, they have little ability to demand accountability from elected officials. The findings are in line with studies that have found that appointing other local offices, such as municipal assessors, treasurers, and managers, leads to preferable policy outcomes (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2014; Sances, 2016; Whalley, 2013). Elections for local bureaucratic offices can counter-intuitively fail to ensure accountability or create adverse accountability effects that have undesirable policy consequences. This is especially true considering information environments in local politics continue to deteriorate (Lockhart, 2021; Martin and McCrain, 2019), the tasks demanded of local officials grow more complex (Hale et al., 2015), and contestation rates remain low. In short, knowledge, information, and expertise matter — and sometimes democracy works best when it does not let voters make all the decisions.

It is worth noting that appointing local public offices does not guarantee desirable outcomes and that elections play an important role in the democratic process. In the 1960s, counties in the South eliminated elected offices in the wake of the Voting Rights Act for the express purpose of maintaining white power (Komisarchik, 2018). The politicization of appointing authorities is emerging as a concern once again. For instance, several recently enacted bills in Georgia have created partisan election boards, including some filled with election deniers.³³ However, my results suggest that over a long period of time and across several states, appointed election officials have produced better outcomes for their constituents than elected officials.

 $^{^{33} \}rm https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/03/14/georgia-elections-fraud-purge/$

Future work should consider other instances where elections fail to achieve their intended effects, with the goal of uncovering under what conditions appointed public officials produce better outcomes for their constituents. This analysis suggests that the information environment, competition, and technical requirements of the office shape the selection method trade-off. We also need better measures of objective accountability outcomes for public officials (Carreri and Payson, 2021). Finally, scholars should work to distinguish between public responsiveness and conflicts in principals' goals. Appointments are likely only to be beneficial when the desires of the general public and political elites align. Measuring which issues and to what degree elites and voters have differing preferences could go a long way to clarifying the contexts where appointments are preferable to elections.

These findings also inform an ongoing public debate over the best form of election administration in the United States. Jurisdictions across the country continue to actively consider changes to how they select their local election officials. At a time when America's democracy has come under immense strain, it is more important than ever that the stewards of the democratic process are up to the task of administering our elections.

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