Informing the Voter: Party Labels, Voter Participation, and Electoral Competition in Local Elections

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*Note to APW readers: This draft is part of my dissertation project focusing on partisan elections at the local level, using school boards as the entry-point. This excerpt combines portions of a couple of different chapters that examine the dynamics of partisan vs. nonpartisan ballots as it relates to voter participation, voter behavior, and electoral competition. For the purposes of APW, I limited some of the background/literature review in order to present results that will eventually appear in different sections of the dissertation. Some analysis is further along than others. For those interested, pages 2-5 provide a brief introduction to help situate the excerpt within the larger project.

Introduction

The September 10, 1911 issue of the *Reading Eagle* (PA) contained excerpts from an issue of the American School Board Journal assailing the Reading school board for moving from nonpartisan to partisan elections. The authors warned that if other districts followed suit, "the party machinery will control the School Boards… The personnel of the School Boards will be reduced in character and efficiency and the schools will become mere political playthings" ("Thinks Politicians Will Control Schools" 1911). The shift that the American School Board Journal condemned back in 1911 was antithetical to a nationwide trend of reforms that sought to remove partisan politics from local and city governments. Indeed, the use of nonpartisan elections has been a hallmark of local governance in the United States since the Progressive Era. County and municipal offices provide basic services to residents and thus believed to function best when partisanship is not a consideration. Yet studies indicate that as many as one-third of localities in the United States elect their leaders on partisan ballots. This would seem to violate the reformist idea that local government ought to be as insulated as possible from party politics. But what are the demonstrated causes and consequences of partisan local elections? Does the presence of a party label on the ballot really matter?

This research question is empirical and seemingly narrow, but the answers have implications for a wide range of academic disciplines and normative concerns. My dissertation addresses three broad research questions. First, what are the factors that motivate local governments to adopt one electoral system over another? Second, what are the consequences of partisan local electoral systems on voter participation, electoral competition, and representation? Third, to what extent does local government performance affect voter behavior, conditional on the type of electoral system the voters engage with? The answers to these questions will be of real value to scholars concerned with the realization of competent governance and representative democracy in local jurisdictions across the United States.

These questions have been neglected by researchers not because of their irrelevance—questions of how we elect our leaders are central to theories concerning representative democracy—but because it

has been difficult empirically to separate the type office being evaluated from the electoral system used to put those officials in power. Offices elected on a partisan basis (such as county commissioner) often differ from those elected on a nonpartisan basis (such as city council). In short, the type of ballot and type of office usually go together, making it difficult to discern which is pivotal. A second obstacle researchers face is the difficulty of developing theory as it relates to local governments when those governments are so varied in structure and purpose. This variation leads to a lack of systematically gathered data on local governments, making it difficult to test empirical claims. I resolve these methodological hurdles by examining what is perhaps the most ubiquitous type of governing body in the United States—school boards—and by learning from cases where the type of ballot used to elect school board members has varied. Specifically, I focus on four states where the type of office (school board) is held fixed but their electoral structure varies.

Nonpartisan Government – Past and Present

One result of early twentieth century progressive reforms was a move towards nonpartisan local elections. The idea of nonpartisan was noble—local government should be removed from the partisan fray, isolated from political machines, and thus better able to efficiently run an office as well as attract open-minded candidates who might shy from parties (Howell 2005). Since that time, nonpartisan ballots have been the modal form of elections for local governments, yet the extent to which nonpartisan systems are a positive is an unresolved question. Between 2010 and 2016 legislatures in at least seven different states have debated, and in some cases enacted, legislation that mandates their local governments move from nonpartisan to partisan elections, or vice-versa.

Theoretical Framework

This project is best described as being situated in an interdisciplinary home with room for those interested in election studies, theories of representative democracy, and historical analysis of American political development. While democratic theory, elections, and the relationship between partisanship and

voting behavior are widely studied topics in political science, research with local school boards as the governing body of interest has been scarcely conducted by political scientists. Local elections that are explicitly partisan (where candidates run under a party label) are equally understudied

Local media and state legislatures often debate whether or not local school boards should be selected through an explicitly partisan process, but these debates are usually anecdotal and the claims made have never been subject to rigorous examination by researchers. Should the partisan structure of school boards be thought of as an attribute relevant to representative democracy, whereby party label provides valuable information to voters? Conversely, should the debate about partisan ballots be based not on providing information to voters, but on the decisions for what the board itself is responsible? The old adage goes "There is no Democratic or Republican way to pave a road," but is there a Republican way to run a school system?

Data

I collect data on school board members, their elections, and legislative action and news archives related to their electoral structure, in four especially informative states: Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, and Connecticut. Florida voters passed a constitutional amendment that placed an exogenous mandate on all counties to elect their school boards on a nonpartisan basis beginning in 2000, allowing for over-time analysis while holding state factors constant. North Carolina and Georgia have the highest percentage of partisan school board elections among states that exhibit variation across counties in whether members are elected on a partisan or nonpartisan ballot. In Connecticut, candidates may or may not choose to run with a party label, and school board elections are only held in November of odd-years with other partisan municipal offices, eliminating any potential for state or national elections to disproportionately effect voter and candidate behavior across different towns.

This project is responsible for creating several original datasets that catalog: 1) the legislative history of partisan versus nonpartisan local school board elections, 2) the arguments espoused (past and

present) for partisan and nonpartisan elections, 3) the characteristics of elected school board members (including those that speak to descriptive and substantive representation of their constituents), and 4) comprehensive election results of all school boards within a state, across four states, and over several election cycles. These data will come from records of state and local legislative action, archived election returns, historical census data at the county level, newspaper archives, and the results of an original survey of current school board members.

Contribution

To my knowledge, this data collection effort will result in the first dataset that is comprised of school board election results with actual vote totals for every school district in a state, across multiple states and years. Tracing the legislative history of local elections in four states will, for the first time, document the motivations and rationales behind choosing one electoral system over another. There has been no study that seeks to address what effect the differences in partisan-ballot structure at the local level has on any number of electoral or representative outcomes, even though politicians, reformers, and activists believe that election rules affect how local governments operate.

The persistence of the debate regarding how local elections should be conducted will better informed by analysis that can speak to the effects of electoral structure on voter participation, school board member representation, and the relationship between partisan politics and electoral rules. The presence of party labels on the ballot for school board may well be a double edged-sword. The presence of party-label certainly provides more information to the voter, but to what end? Are partisan elections better for representative democracy? If so, does that gain come with costs? Are *de jure* nonpartisan elections *actually* nonpartisan or have political parties and candidates adapted to send partisan signals despite the absence of party label on the ballot? Investigating the effects of the electoral structure on local government is a necessary first step to informing these debates.

Voter Participation

　　　Ballot roll-off is an outcome commonly measured to assess rates of voter participation across unique contests that appear on the same ballot. Whereas voter turnout is either expressed as the percentage of the voting-age population (VAP) or the voting-eligible population (VEP) that casts a ballot in a given election, roll-off is traditionally calculated as the percentage of the electorate that cast a vote for the "top-of-the-ticket" race that did not cast a vote for the contest under examination. In more practical terms, the denominator is the total number of votes cast for the most salient contest, commonly the "the presidential, gubernatorial, or U.S. senatorial contest attracting the most voters in each election" (Dubois 1980, 66). An alternative denominator that can be used is the total number of ballots cast. Although highly correlated with the top-of-the-ticket vote total, this specification has its own benefits and drawbacks that I address later in the chapter.

　　　Roll-off has been the outcome of interest in electoral administration research as a way to examine the effect of different ballot designs and voting machines on ballot completion (Nichols 1998; Darcy & Schneider 1989; Asher, Shussler, & Rosenfeld 1982). Ballot form can affect rates of voter participation, particularly whether or not straight ticket voting is an option (Boyd, Hamilton, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2005; Hamilton & Ladd, 1996; Nichols 1998). To test for differential rates of voter participation, Hamilton and Ladd controlled for SES variables related to age, race, income, urban population, district partisanship, incumbency , and the key independent variable – an indicator of straight ticket voting. They find the presence of straight-ticket voting is positive and significant for the down-ballot races but not the more salient contests. If higher rates of participation is seen as a normative good, then lowering transaction costs and maintaining straight ticket voting is a clear way to do that. Enabling a normatively

good outcome does not necessarily come without political cost. Hamilton and Ladd show, unsurprisingly, that the presence of straight-ticket voting benefits parties in counties where they are more dominant, but their analysis of 1992 elections and subsequent simulations yielded no evidence that election outcomes would be changed if all counties adopted one system or another.

Hall (2007) examined state supreme court elections in 38 states from 1980 to 2000. From the perspective of voter participation (roll-off), partisan, contested elections clearly generate the greatest rates of participation. Hall advocates for partisan elections in part because of increased participation, but also because partisanship is "an excellent predictor of supreme court justices' votes in the cases before their courts"(1157) – in other words, a relationship exists between the heuristic and the substantive outcomes of interest. I argue that this relationship may not exist with every elected office and is an important consideration in the debate about electoral processes, even if partisan races significantly increase participation. Hall also finds retention elections produce less roll-off than uncontested races (partisan or nonpartisan), but contested nonpartisan district elections are less participated in than statewide retention elections. Additional examination of lower courts, not to mention voter participation in other sub-state race is needed to produce a more complete picture of the dynamics of electoral competition and citizen participation.

It is important to identify the characteristics that make local elections different from state or national elections *as well as what makes local offices different from each other*. Specifically, Oliver (2012) identifies differences in size, scope, and bias as the traits most important for distinguishing local offices from one another.

The local elections most salient to voters are often for those offices that have the broadest scope—Mayor, City Council, or County Commission. Much of what we know about local elections come from studies of these broad-scope offices, including increased ballot-roll off as voters move down the ballot or encounter nonpartisan races (Nichols & Strizek 1995; Schaffner & Streb 2002; Squire & Smith 1988). It has also been shown that the presence of straight ticket voting and touch-screen ballots can moderate these effects (Bonneau & Loepp 2014; Kimball & Kropf 2008; Sinclair & Alvarez 2004). Judicial elections research points to the effects of election structure on pre-election candidate activity in terms of job performance (Gordon & Huber 2007), campaign spending (Bonneau & Hall 2009), and negative attack ads (Hall 2010).

There is reason to believe that the electoral and voter behavior that relate to broad-scope offices differ from elections for offices of a narrower scope, or what Berry and Howell (2007) refer to as "single-function elections." Examples of these offices include school board, sheriff, tax collectors, county clerk, district attorney, and water management boards. Relative to broad-scope offices such as mayor or council, little research has been conducted that investigates the election dynamics of domain-specific offices. When data challenges are overcome, these elections can provide important insight into local electoral politics. Unlike elections for mayor or city council, where the issues voters care about are difficult to identify and certainly vary from place to place, the electoral connection between domain-specific offices and the public services for which they are responsible provide researchers with "an obvious, though unexplored, opportunity to test claims about retrospective voting" (Berry & Howell 2007).

Above and beyond the differences between single-function elections and elections for broad-scope offices are differences that make school boards stand apart from their single-function peers. Schools are ubiquitous. Wherever voters reside, chances are they experience their

local schools in some manner or another. Some have school-aged children and some work for the school system itself. Other residents experience their local schools just by living near a school or driving by on their way to work and having to slow down in school zones. Almost all residents are affected by local property taxes that contribute to local school funding. Beyond voters' present relationship with local schools, all voters share the experience of having gone to school, giving them the ability (or at the very least a perceived ability) to form opinions about local schools and what is best for education in a way that is distinct from other local policy domains (Resnick & Bryant 2010; Chingos et. al. 2012). While many voters probably have an opinion about the safety of their neighborhood, most residents go about their day-to-day lives without any kind of interaction with local law enforcement. While almost all residents pay taxes, it is difficult to identify what factors voters would consider when evaluating the job performance of the incumbent tax collector. In short, school boards oversee a policy domain that voters are uniquely positioned to evaluate relative to other local offices.

The extent to which individuals are interested in participating in school board politics may be impacted by the size and demographics of the district they live in. Oliver (2000) uses survey data to show that residents of smaller communities are more likely to be engaged in community affairs and vote in local elections. At the same time, he also found that the more racially and economically homogenous a community was, the *less* engaged the residents were in local politics. Oliver attributed this to lower levels of conflict in more homogenous locations, which lead to less motivation to participate. This rationale makes sense for elections to broad-

scope offices but it could very well be the case that narrow-scope elections such as those for school board can cut through racial and economic homogeneity because of its singular focus.[1]

Conceivably, school performance is an issue that should cut across racial and economic lines, as better schools are not disproportionately in the interest of one racial group over another or one income group over another.[2] There is reason to believe that voters are relatively well-informed with respect to local educational issues, a characteristic that further distinguishes school board elections from other local offices. Due to reporting requirements in the No Child Left Behind Act, performance data on local schools and school districts are consistently and publicly disseminated. The cost of information for local public education is lower than other local policy domains, and there exists a direct connection to an electoral action that citizens can take. Additionally, citizen perceptions of public schools reflect the information about student achievement available to them, and while parents of school-aged children learn about school performance from a variety of sources, nonparent perceptions of schools are strongly impacted by the public dissemination of school grades (Chingos et al. 2012). Local school boards are not only distinguishable from other local offices due to their scope and bias, but data on their performance (to the extent one believes the board is responsible for district performance) are available to the public in a way that is not true for candidates for other types of locally elected offices.

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[1] Additionally, the survey instrument Oliver uses asks respondents only about voting in local elections in general and not about voting for specific offices. Depending on the timing of elections, scenarios can be imagined where respondents, if given the opportunity would answer differently if school board elections were asked about separately from council or mayoral elections.

[2] Of course, higher income residents in certain locations are more likely to send their children to private school, and thus be less concerned with public school performance. At the same time, home values are still correlated with school district performance.

School boards frequently find themselves included in studies of nonpartisan elections, but this is due to how often they are one of many examples of nonpartisan governing bodies (along with other nonpartisan municipal offices). Even when school board elections are the sole focus of research, nonpartisanship is a quality they all share rather than a characteristic that varies across cases.[3] As a result, we are forced to assume that what has been learned about nonpartisan elections also applies to school board elections in general. Therefore, theory suggests that nonpartisan school board elections will result in less participation and greater success for incumbents. While this may be true, school boards are distinct from other local political bodies in in their scope, their bias, and the public's perception of them—all factors that should impact voter participation and electoral competition.

I next turn to an examination of voter participation in partisan and nonpartisan school board elections in Florida using a newly created dataset of local elections from 1972 to 2014. This is followed by a section that compares voter participation across various local offices in North Carolina over three election cycles (2008-2012). Using the North Carolina data, I also test the extent to which district partisanship differentially effects democratic vote share across three different local offices. Lastly, I present data on electoral competition before and after a 1998 Florida amendment mandating all school boards move to nonpartisan elections.

Florida

Florida voters passed a constitutional amendment in 1998 that, among other provisions, mandated county school boards be elected by a nonpartisan ballot beginning in 2000. Prior to

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[3] Or, if the sample does include observations with partisan elections, this characteristic is not a focal point of the study and hence not factored in to any analysis.

passage, 8 counties already held nonpartisan elections while 59 counties elected board members on partisan ballots.

Data Collection

Florida's State Board of Elections does not maintain a centralized database of local election results, but each county website does (with variation in how far back their data are available). Availability of data varies widely from county to county. In some cases, the county maintains election data back to 1960 (Santa Rosa), and in other cases it only maintains the most recent election results. In all cases, contact information is provided to obtain election results that are not currently posted to the website. I contacted each of the 67 Florida counties' supervisor of elections office to ask for any county-level data available that was not already on the website. In total, I collected, cleaned, and organized election results for 1,782 unique general elections (county-year-seat) and 2,193 unique primary elections (county-year-seat/nomination).[4]

Florida School Board Elections, 1972-2014

	Contested	Uncontested	Total
Primary	1,488	705	2,193
General	656	1,126	1,782

Roll-off: General Elections

The complete dataset contains nonpartisan elections in Florida from 1972 to 2014, although not all counties are represented in each even-year. When pooled, the average roll-off

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[4] Note to APW readers: This number is still growing, as I am waiting for 5 counties to send hard copies of election data through the mail.

for all nonpartisan elections over that time period is 15.8% (sd 7.7, n=230). The average roll-off in partisan elections (by definition, only possible from 1972 to1998) is 8.8% (sd 9.6, n=316).

A topline comparison is not the most appropriate. I restrict the time series to cover contested general elections from 1984 to 2014. This results in 8 election cycles on either side of the 1998 constitutional amendment mandating all elections move to a nonpartisan ballot.

From 1984 to 1998, the average roll-off in partisan elections was 7.8% (sd 10.1, n=239). From 1984 to 1998, the average roll-off in nonpartisan elections was 19.4% (sd=8.6, n=36). From 2000 to 2014, when all elections were required to conduct nonpartisan elections, the average roll-off was 14.2% (sd 6.2, n=172).

I next subset the counties by whether or not they had a prior history of nonpartisan elections. The eight counties' average roll-off prior to 1998 was 19.4 % (sd=8.6, n=36). After passage of the 1998 amendment, which effectively altered 59 counties' election process, but not the 8 counties already holding nonpartisan contests, their average roll-off was 15.1% (sd=6.8, n=20). When only looking at the counties who were directly affected by the 1998 amendment, the average roll-off increased from an average of 7.7% (sd 10.1, n=237) to an average of 13.9% (sd 6.2, n=152).

Percent Ballot Roll-Off: General Elections

	1984-1998	**2000-2014**
Nonpartisan	19.4	14.2
Partisan	7.8	
Always Nonpartisan	19.4	15.1
Partisan -> Nonpartisan	7.7	13.9

There may be larger forces at work that effect roll-off over time. Year-specific effects may influence both overall turnout and the makeup of the electorate. In this case, all school board elections under consideration are held in November of even-years. I thus make an assumption, which may be idiosyncratically violated, that, contrary to springtime or off-year elections, turnout at the polls in November of even years is driven by salient top-of-ticket races such as President, Governor, Senator, or House, and not by a local school board race. One concern advocates of nonpartisan and springtime elections have is that by placing local races on the same ballot as these more salient and politically-contentious races would have the effect of "drowning out" local issues.

Roll-off : Primary Elections

Ballot roll-off in the period after all counties moved to a nonpartisan ballot is as straightforward a calculation as described for general elections. Primary elections prior to 2000, however, make for a more complicated roll-off calculation.

In Florida, primary voters cast their vote on one of three ballot-types: democrat, republican, or nonpartisan. Any offices where candidates do not run with party labels (such as judicial elections) appear on all three ballots so all voters have the ability to cast their vote. Any voter is not registered to vote with either the democratic or republican party are given a ballot that only contains nonpartisan offices. As a consequence, calculating ballot roll-off in a primary election requires additional thought, specifically as to the denominator used. I present two measures of ballot roll-off.

The first is a method commonplace in the ballot roll-off literature, where the number of votes cast for a school board seat is subtracted from the total number of votes received by the

"top of the ticket" race that garnered the most votes on that ballot, and then divided by that same top of ticket vote total. In general elections, all voters voted for the same school board race and had the opportunity to vote in the same top-of-ticket contest. In a primary election, this is not the case.

For example, in a nonpartisan primary election, a democratic voter might vote (or not) in the democratic gubernatorial primary and then vote (or not) in the nonpartisan school board election down-ballot. In that same county, a republican voter may have no gubernatorial primary contest to consider. In short, the republican voter's "top-of-ticket" race is different from the democratic voter's "top-of-ticket" race. This leaves two possibilities. Roll-off could be calculated using the "total ballots cast" as the denominator, since this represents the total number of voters who could have cast a ballot for the nonpartisan school board race. An alternative solution is to still identify a "top-of-ticket" contest, but one that equally applies to democratic and republican voters. In the case of Florida elections, this often takes the form of nonpartisan judicial races or ballot referenda.

A second calculation uses the total number of ballots cast as the denominator. Variation exists in how counties report their vote totals. The latter method will necessarily yield a greater roll-off because the denominator represents the greatest number of votes that could have been cast in any particular race whereas the former calculation uses a denominator that is the number of votes received in the most "popular" contest, which is almost never participated in by the whole number of voters that cast a ballot.

Florida School Boards: Number of Contested Primary Elections

	1972-1998	2000-2014
Partisan	94	--
Non-Partisan	648	746
Total	742	746

I present the results on primary election roll-off using both denominators. "Top-of-Ticket Roll-off" refers to the percentage of voters who cast a ballot for the most salient nonpartisan race but did not cast a vote for school board. This calculation is expected to yield a low amount of roll-off for two reasons. First, primary elections attract more committed voters and are more likely to complete a ballot than the electorate that turns out for general elections. Secondly, in some instances, the school board race *is* the nonpartisan contest that attracts the most voters. At the very least, because the contest against which the school board race is being measured is in itself not highly salient, it is expected that it too suffers from ballot fatigue.

The "Total Ballots Cast Roll-off" measure is the more conservative estimate, as it measure the percentage of total ballots cast that did not cast a vote for school board, regardless of what offices that ballot did contain a vote for. That primary elections dataset contains 742 contested primary election prior to 2000 and 746 contested primary elections from 2000 to 2014.

Number of Contested Elections by Roll-off Measure, 1984-1998

	Top-of-Ticket	Total Ballots Cast
Partisan	498	175
Non-Partisan	59	53
Total	557	228

Number of Contested Elections by Roll-off Measure, 2000-2014

	Top-of-Ticket	Total Ballots Cast
Non-Partisan	315	452
Total	315	452

Roll-off (Top-Of-Ticket)

Nonpartisan elections in Florida (1972-2014) have an average roll-off of 0.24% (sd 16.6, n=374). Roll-off in partisan elections (1972 -1998) is 5.5% (sd 21.1, n=498). Again, as this comparison is not the most appropriate, I restrict the time series to 1984 to 2014. This gives 8 election cycles on either side of the 1998 cutoff. From 1984 to 1998, the average roll-off in partisan elections was 3.7% (sd 21.9, n=289) compared to 2.8% (sd=3.4, n=33) in nonpartisan elections. From 2000 to 2014, when all elections were required to conduct nonpartisan elections, the average roll-off was -0.3% (sd 17.9, n=315).

Similar to the analysis of general election roll-off, I subset the data by whether or not counties had a prior history of nonpartisan elections. These eight counties' average roll-off prior to 1998 was 2.8% (sd=3.4, n=33) and dropped to -1.6%(sd 5.8, n=42) after passage of the 1998 amendment, which effectively altered 59 counties' election process, but not the 8 counties already holding nonpartisan contests. When only looking at the counties who were affected by the 1998 amendment, the average roll-off decreased from an average of 3.7% (sd 22.3, n=278) to an average of 0.8% (sd 16.3, n=271)

Ballot Roll-off (Top-of-Ticket): Primary Elections

	1984-1998	**2000-2014**
Nonpartisan	2.8	-0.3
Partisan	3.7	
Always Nonpartisan	2.8	-1.6
Partisan -> Nonpartisan	3.7	0.8

Roll-off (Total Ballots Cast)

Using the more conservative estimate, nonpartisan elections in Florida (1972-2014) have an average roll-off of 9.9% (sd 6.5, n=503) while roll-off in partisan elections (1972 -1998) is 14.6% (sd 14.3, n=175).

A topline comparison is not the most appropriate. I restrict the time series to 1984 to 2014. This gives 8 election cycles on either side of the 1998 cutoff. From 1984 to 1998, the average roll-off in partisan elections was 12.4% (sd 11.8, n=141) compared to 15.5% (sd=6.1, n=39) in nonpartisan elections. From 2000 to 2014, when all elections were required to conduct nonpartisan elections, the average roll-off was 8.9%, sd 4.9, n=450).

I subset the 2000 to 2014 data by whether or not counties had a prior history of nonpartisan elections. These eight counties' average roll-off prior to 1998 was 15.5% (sd=6.1, n=39). After passage of the 1998 amendment, which effectively altered 59 counties' election process, but not the 8 counties already holding nonpartisan contests, their average roll-off fell to 9.1% (sd=4.0, n=77).

When only looking at the counties who were affected by the 1998 amendment, the average roll-off decreased from an average of 11.7%, (sd 11.4, n=136) to an average of 8.8% (sd 5.1, n=373).

Ballot Roll-off (Total Ballots Cast): Primary Elections

	1984-1998	2000-2014
Nonpartisan	15.5	8.9
Partisan	12.4	
Always Nonpartisan	15.5	9.1
Partisan -> Nonpartisan	11.7	8.8

Modelling Roll-off

Ballot roll-off is modeled as a function of the key independent variable—*partisan* ballot type—and several contextual variables known to affect ballot completion. *Margin* of victory is defined as the difference in vote share between the first and second place finisher in a given contest. This definition allows for a consistent measure of electoral competition across races that have different numbers of candidates. A narrowly won race may be indicative of a more salient contest compared to a race won in a landslide. Consequently, races with larger margins of victory are expected to attract fewer voters and produce larger ballot roll-off. For the Florida school board races contained in these data, 36% of primary elections and 45% of general elections were determined by 10 percentage points or less. I control for the effect of *incumbency* by including a dummy variable if the race contained a candidate that had previously held a seat

on that school board. Roll-off tends to be larger in jurisdictions with greater population. I include the *population* (log) of the county as an additional control.

Overall voter turnout and ballot roll-off are higher in Presidential election years than they are in midterms. I include a dummy variable for *Presidential* election years. This indicator is inherently more relevant for roll-off in general elections than primary elections. Presidential preference primaries are held early in the year while traditional primary elections, where school board races appear, are in in August or September. In Florida, however, Gubernatorial elections are held during midterm years, and primary elections for that office take place at the same time as school board races. As such, for years *Presidential* is coded as 0, *Governor* races are coded as 1.

Some counties may inherently attract more candidates than others, and this, in turn could produce heightened saliency and voter attention. To account for such factors I control for *the number of candidates* in a given race. Most counties in Florida elect their board members on a county-wide basis. That is, while the candidates may be required to live in a particular part of the county, all voters in the county cast ballots for every seat on the school board. Some counties, however, allow only residents of a particular district within a county to vote for their representative. Candidates who must campaign across the whole of the county likely need to expend greater resources as part of an effort to reach voters, and this could increase the saliency of the election, potentially reducing ballot roll-off. I include a dummy variable to indicate if a particular school board seat was a *county-wide* election or not.

Table 1 reports the results of estimating a model of ballot roll-off in Florida school board general elections from 1984 to 2014. Model 3 includes the full set of controls and shows partisan

elections reducing roll-off by 6.8% . As expected, roll-off increased with population. While

margin of victory, the presence of a presidential election, and whether or not the election was

county-wide all move in the expected direction, none achieved statistical significance.

[Table 1 Here]

Table 2 reports the results of estimating a model of ballot roll-off in primary elections,

using the "top-of-ticket" calculation. Recall that overall roll-off in primary elections using "top-

of-the-ticket" as the denominator was quite low. Model 1 indicates that partisan elections

increase roll-off by 4.8 percentage points. The positive effect of partisan elections on roll-off

(and thus a negative effect on ballot completion) maintains across all 3 models. The results from

Table 2 should be noted with caution. Finding that partisan elections lead to *more* roll-off than

nonpartisan races would be contrary to prior work on the effect of partisan elections on voter

participation. A more conservative estimate of ballot roll-off is possible by taking the percentage

of voters who cast a ballot, regardless of what races they voted for, that did not cast a vote for

school board.

[Table 2 Here]

Table 3 reports the results of estimating a model of ballot roll-off in primary elections

using "total ballots cast" as the dependent variable. Only in model 2, which controls for

contextual variables but not temporal effects, is the coefficient for partisan elections positive and

significant. Importantly, the other three models indicate that partisan elections do not have an

effect on ballot roll-off in primary elections.

[Table 3 Here]

Roll-off in North Carolina: A Comparison of Local Offices

An assumption is made that for the 2008, 2010, and 2012 November elections, voters are not driven to the polls for the purpose of participating in the down-ballot local elections, but are motivated by the Presidential (2008 and 2012) and Senate and House race (2010). Rather than drawing inferences on voter behavior in local elections that occur in the spring or odd-years, I leverage the assumption that voters arrive at the polls for reasons other than any particular local race. This brings me to my first research question: Does voter participation vary across local election office-type? Specifically, given the nature of school boards and their relationship to their constituency, do voters participate in school board elections at a higher rate than other local offices, as measured by ballot roll-off?

North Carolina provides a rare opportunity to compare voter behavior in partisan versus nonpartisan elections, for the same office (board of education). Most states mandate that local school boards be either nonpartisan or partisan, but North Carolina contains within-state variation. This brings me to my second research question: Is the partisan vote-share for the top-of-ticket race consistently predictive of partisan vote-share for down-ballot, partisan races?

Data

From 1923 to 1981, North Carolina school boards held partisan elections. A 1981 law made all school board elections nonpartisan, carving out exceptions for certain counties and allowing for counties to supersede the state-mandate for nonpartisanship. Of the seventeen counties that operated under partisan elections in 2014, fifteen of them had been doing so since

at least 1995.[5] Of the 100 counties in North Carolina, ninety-four hold school board elections in even-numbered years.

Election results for county-level offices are obtained from the North Carolina State Board of Elections. The NCSBE website houses election results for each county individually. Data was downloaded at the precinct-level within each of North Carolina's 100 counties and then merged by office-type. Election results were gathered for the 2008 and 2012 Presidential race and the 2010 North Carolina Senate race (together, these combine to form the "top-of-ticket" races). Election results for local races span 2008 to 2012 and include Board of Education, County Commission, Sheriff, Register of Deeds, Clerk of the Court, District Attorney, Soil and Water Supervisor, and District Judge. Table 4 provides a summary of the data, including the number of unique contests (uncontested races are not included) in the dataset.

[Table 4 Here]

Demographics

Demographic data is collected at the precinct-level from the voter files supplied for each election. These data include, for each precinct, group characteristics of the voters that cast a ballot in that precinct, such as race, sex, and age (percent over 65, e.g.).

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[5] Source: North Carolina Board of Education Election Law Report.
Forsyth County switched to partisan elections effective July, 2011. Lee County switched to partisan elections effective 2013. Franklin County held partisan elections from 1993 to 2005 and then switched to nonpartisan. Craven County had been conducting partisan elections before switching to nonpartisan in 1995. State legislation will make Guilford County partisan beginning in 2016 and there are currently three separate bills in the North Carolina House that would make an additional five counties partisan beginning in 2016.

Voter Participation

Because the local offices under consideration are elected on the same November ballot as statewide and federal offices, a simple measure of voter turnout is not appropriate. I consider *voter participation* in a contest to be the percentage of total votes cast for an office as compared to the total votes cast the top-of-ticket race. This is often referred to as a measure of ballot roll-off. I calculate roll-off as *1 – (local office total votes / top-of-ticket total votes).* I calculate this measure at the precinct-level. Ballot roll-off at the county level cannot be applied to those offices (county commission and board of education) where only certain precincts in a county vote for a particular contest (in a strict district-based system). As such, county-level roll-off for these races is better considered as "contest-level" roll-off. In a case where a school board or county commission race is open to all voters in a county to participate, then this "contest-level" roll-off is analogous to a county-level roll-off for traditional county races (sheriff, clerk, e.g.). School Board and County Commission races where only particular precincts participate are aggregated from the precinct-level and measured against the top-of-ticket total votes cast from those same precincts.

Partisan and Nonpartisan Elections in North Carolina

All county commissions in North Carolina are elected on partisan ballots. Between 12 and 17 counties in North Carolina elect their boards of education in a partisan manner (depending on the year). In 2014, 17 counties held partisan school board elections and this number increases to 22 in November of 2016. Changes in these electoral structures are largely the result of particular state legislators pushing for such changes for particular counties. Proponents of such a change argue that it will increase voter participation and provide more

information to the voters. Critics suggest that boards of education are best left outside the entanglements of partisan politics. The results presented below are a preliminary look at the differences that exist between partisan and nonpartisan school boards, in the context of other local elections.

Examining ballot roll-off has been used as a method to reveal the effects of ballot order, straight ticket voting, and electoral structure (retention or partisan/non-partisan judicial elections, e.g.). Largely absent from the outcomes under consideration is how voters may differentiate local races from one another. Several county-level offices appear in on-cycle, November ballots in the three election cycles presented here. Figure 1 shows the average roll-off for Register of Deeds, Sheriff, Clerk of the Court, District Attorney, and Board of Commissioners from 2008 to 2012. Each of these offices holds partisan elections. Straight ticket voting was available in each of these elections, advantaging these down-ballot partisan races with respect to voter participation.

[Figure 1 Here]

A visual inspection of the data reveals a few trends. First, there is little variation in voter participation for Sheriff, Register of Deeds, Clerk of the Court, and District Attorney, all of which hold partisan elections. Second, roll-off is reduced for all races in 2010 as compared to 2008 or 2012.While these differences are not statistically significant, the direction of movement is consistent with previous literature that ballot roll-off is lower in mid-term as opposed to presidential election years. Third, average roll-off for Board of Commissioners (11% pooled over the three elections) is greater than for the other local, partisan offices. At the same, the variation in voter participation is greater in board of commissioner races.

Figure 2 shows the same measure (ballot roll-off) for nonpartisan local races (district judge and soil and water supervisor) as well as both partisan and nonpartisan boards of education. Unsurprisingly, partisan boards of education have the lowest average roll-off, the mean and variation is comparable to county commission. The nonpartisan races do not have significantly different average levels of roll-off, although roll-off for soil and water supervisor is significantly higher in 2010.

[Figure 2 Here]

The presence and effect of straight ticket voting cannot be ignored. It can be assumed that amongst those voters casting a straight ticket vote are those who would have, in the absence of the straight ticket option, still have cast a vote for the down-ballot races. At the same time, it is likely there are individuals who, without the straight ticket option, would have rolled-off prior to getting all the way through the ballot. Of course, casting a straight ticket option is not completely constraining. Voters have the option to cast a straight ticket vote and then still work their way down the ballot, making alternate voting choices to match their preferences. One way to disentangle the relationship between straight ticket voting and participation in voting for local offices is to plot the roll-off of each of these offices against the percentage of straight ticket votes cast at the precinct-level. There are no clear expectations of what roll-off would look like in precincts with a low percentage of straight ticket voting compared to precincts with a high percentage of straight ticket voting. In precincts with lower rates of straight ticket voting (relative to other precincts), any significant differences in ballot roll-off between these local offices would suggest differential rates of voter participation attributable to that office. *Higher* levels of roll-off in precincts with a low percentage of straight ticket voting could be suggestive of an electorate that is both less partisan and also less participatory in local races. If, however,

roll-off for a particular office is *low* in precincts with low levels of straight-ticket voting, this would suggest an electorate that is particularly interested in participating in that election, especially given the higher voting cost associated with having to participate down-ballot without taking advantage of the straight-ticket option. Comparing the roll-off rates between each local office, particularly among precincts where a large percentage of voters did not cast a straight ticket vote, and thus have a higher cost associated with casting a vote down-ballot, can give some insight into the relative importance voters place on a particular office.

For Sheriff, District Attorney, Clerk of the Court, and Register of Deeds, there is no evidence of differential participation regardless of straight ticket vote share. Figure 3 displays the mean roll-off (and std. dev.) for local, nonpartisan races, for precincts at the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentile of straight ticket voting. For partisan school board races, there is no difference in roll-off regardless of the percentage of straight ticket vote share in a county. For nonpartisan school board races, the average roll-off for precincts in the bottom 25 percentile of straight ticket vote share is 10 percentage points lower than nonpartisan school boards in the 75th percentile of straight ticket vote share. Soil and water supervisor, also a nonpartisan office does not follow the same pattern as its nonpartisan school board counterpart.

[Figure 3 Here]

Effect of Partisan Vote-Share

Democratic vote-share for each local office is measured at the precinct-level. The democratic vote share for board of education (partisan boards only), county commission, and sheriff were each modeled independently. The key variable of interest is the top-of-ticket democratic vote share, also measured at the precinct-level. Control variables vary by precinct

include percent black, percent female, and percent over 65, and are culled from voter files. The dearth of research on partisan loyalties as they relate to any of these three offices leads to the expectation that each of the control variables will have a similar effect across offices, and that the direction of the effect will mirror what would be expected for more salient offices. It is expected that percent black and percent female will have a positive effect on democratic vote share and that percent over 65 will have a negative effect on democratic vote share.

Table 5 depicts the OLS results of each of the three models. As expected, top-of-ticket democratic vote share is significantly and positively related to democratic vote share for each of the three local offices. A 5 percentage point increase in top-of-ticket democratic vote share is related to a 3.17 percent increase in democratic vote share for board of education and approximately a 4.18 percent increase for county commission and sheriff. The association between the control variables and democratic vote share generally behave as expected, though are not always significant. A notable exception to this is percent of voters over 65, which is negatively and significantly related to democratic vote share on board of education races, but positive and significant for both county commission and sheriff.

[Table 5 Here]

Electoral Competition

Are contested elections signs of a healthy democracy? Does lack of electoral competition, especially at the local level, indicate community apathy or satisfaction? What factors influence the level of competition? That is, under what conditions should uncontested elections be expected and viewed as a norm as opposed to some anomaly? Do some offices naturally attract more competition than others? Local political climate, compensation, and the possibility for

advance have all been offered as contributory factors . What about ballot design? In many cases it would be difficult to identify partisan versus nonpartisan ballot design as a factor affecting electoral competition since that almost always involved comparing two different types of office or two different states. Here, I am able to control for both office, geography, and time, albeit through a variety of methodological approaches.

Progressives in the early twentieth century believed nonpartisan elections would have multiple benefits. One outcome thought to be improved was electoral competition. By removing party labels from the ballot, it was thought that one-party rule that dominated many a city's politics would be broken (Schleicher, 2007; Judd and Swanstrom 1988). In some cases, nonpartisan elections have produced unintended consequences, such as lower turnout, safer incumbents, no policy competition, and even *less* contested races (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Hall 2001).

Fiorello LaGuardia famously said "there is no Republican or Democratic way to pick up the garbage", a notion based on the belief that local and city governments are mainly administrative. Paul Peterson (1981) argues that because everyone wants public goods, the only politics at play in local government is who gets how much. Local issues are inherently nonpartisan because they are either developmental in nature (and lack disagreement) or allocational (where disagreements are geographical or group-based rather than ideological or partisan). If this is true, then what explains local party competition where it does arise? In other words, if party competition were inevitable regardless of the level of government, than any lack of party competition need be explained. However, if that explanation takes the form of a rational model of administrative government that has no need for parties, than the presence of local party competition needs be explained.

I offer an alternative theory – political parties need not take sides on issues at the local level for political parties to be relevant on these issues at the local level. If voters attribute party-attitudes filtered down from the national level to local issues, then that has the force and effect of politicizing local issues. Disparate evidence, when synthesized, suggest that local politics may be isolated from national forces in the sense that local issues are not necessarily viewed in partisan terms (for whatever reason), at least if lack of partisan electoral competition can be viewed as a proxy for localized, nonpartisan issues. In other words, a strong case can be made that local partisan issues do not affect the way citizens perceive state or national partisan issues, or the way they think of national party brands. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the reverse is *not* true—that national partisan forces do not trickle down to and affect partisan perceptions at the local level. If polarization is growing at the national level, and parties are simultaneously sorting themselves into "neater policy boxes", local issues may not be immune.

Lack of competition and low turnout have consequences for public policy at the local level (Hajnal & Trounstine, 2005; Trounstine, 2006). A study of district court judges in Kansas found that those elected by partisan elections were more punitive in their sentencing compared to judges in noncompetitive retention elections, a finding attributed to "incentive effects of potential competition, rather than the selection of more punitive judges in partisan districts" (Gordon & Huber, 2007).

Importantly, I am able to look at both competition during primary and general elections. Inter-party competition and intra-party competition are distinct. In areas of political homogeneity, intra-party competition in local races may be just as combative as inter-party competition in more politically heterogeneous jurisdictions. There is some evidence that primaries are more competitive in places of de facto one-party rule as opposed to primaries in

places where more inter-party competition (in the general) exists (Jewell & Sigelman, 1986). Still, competitive partisan primaries are a weak substitute for inter-party competition in general elections. First, party primaries are still exclusive of citizens not registered with a party. This was a major rationale for the 1998 Florida amendment moving to nonpartisan school board elections – in counties with high-levels of political homogeneity, the majority party often ran unopposed in school board elections. This meant that only registered members of the dominant party ever had the chance to vote on who would eventually be on the school board, effectively reducing the degree to which that member could be said to have been evaluated by a representative segment of the population. Further, primary voters are hardly representative of even their own party, as they are often more ideological, further distancing the eventual representative from the median voter in their constituency.

I begin by charting the percentage of school board seats that are contested for both general and primary elections. Figures 4 and 5 depict the differences between counties that hold partisan and nonpartisan elections. From 1984 to 1998, 68.9% of 119 nonpartisan seats were contested in the general election. Over that same time period, 63.5% of the 812 partisan seats were contested in the general. After passage of the 1998 amendment, when all contests became nonpartisan, the percent of contested general elections dropped to an average of 47.8%.

[Figure 4 Here]

From 1984 to 1998, 88.6% of the 229 nonpartisan seats were contested in the primary election. Over that same time period, 72.9% of the 1,415 partisan seats were contested in the general. After passage of the 1998 amendment, when all contests became nonpartisan, the percent of contested general elections increased to an average of 93.7%.

[Figure 5 Here]

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Table 1: Florida School Board Ballot Roll-off, General Elections 1984-2014

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
partisan	-0.0678**	-0.0677**	-0.0683**
	(0.0143)	(0.0107)	(0.0145)
margin		0.0568	0.0473
		(0.0484)	(0.0390)
presidential		0.0127	0.0158+
		(0.0102)	(0.00877)
incumbent		-0.00533	-0.00760
		(0.00836)	(0.00959)
no. candidates		0.172	0.177
		(0.153)	(0.146)
countywide election		-0.100	-0.105
		(0.0645)	(0.0642)
population (log)		0.0316**	0.0325**
		(0.00684)	(0.00733)
1984-1990			0.0195
			(0.0139)
1992-1998			-0.0205
			(0.0147)
2000-2006			-0.0158*
			(0.00687)
2008-2014			0
			(.)
Constant	0.146**	-0.462	-0.469
	(0.00956)	(0.310)	(0.300)
Observations	448	444	444
R^2	0.138	0.385	0.415

Standard errors in parentheses
Standard errors clustered at the county level
+ $p<0.10$, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

Table 2: Florida School Board Ballot Roll-off (Top-of-Ticket), Primary Elections 1984-2014

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
partisan	0.0481**	0.0546**	0.0508**
	(0.0140)	(0.0161)	(0.0178)
margin		0.0503	0.0390
		(0.0338)	(0.0335)
gubernatorial		-0.0250+	-0.0254+
		(0.0147)	(0.0145)
incumbent		-0.00969	-0.0187
		(0.0176)	(0.0201)
no. candidates		0.00684	0.00620
		(0.00590)	(0.00568)
countywide election		-0.0688*	-0.100**
		(0.0255)	(0.0262)
population (log)		0.0143+	0.0133
		(0.00825)	(0.00988)
1984-1990			0
			(.)
1992-1998			-0.00563
			(0.00817)
2000-2006			0.0223
			(0.0176)
2008-2014			-0.0349
			(0.0210)
Constant	-0.00166	-0.0812	-0.0226
	(0.0110)	(0.0819)	(0.113)
Observations	636	387	387
R^2	0.023	0.057	0.088

Standard errors in parentheses

Standard errors clustered at the county level

+ $p<0.10$, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

Table 3: Florida School Board Ballot Roll-off (Total Ballots Cast), Primary Elections 1984-2014

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
partisan	0.0305	0.0444*	0.0199
	(0.0201)	(0.0197)	(0.0291)
margin		-0.00672	-0.0110
		(0.0215)	(0.0192)
gubernatorial		0.0126+	0.0108*
		(0.00633)	(0.00521)
incumbent		0.00696	0.00628
		(0.00521)	(0.00504)
no. candidates		-0.000640	-0.00251
		(0.00351)	(0.00206)
countywide election		-0.0384	-0.0407+
		(0.0237)	(0.0241)
population (log)		0.0329**	0.0330**
		(0.00297)	(0.00323)
1984-1990			0.0501
			(0.0411)
1992-1998			0
			(.)
2000-2006			-0.0148
			(0.0232)
2008-2014			-0.0119
			(0.0229)
Constant	0.0939**	-0.210**	-0.190**
	(0.00778)	(0.0352)	(0.0385)
Observations	631	631	631
R^2	0.029	0.266	0.306

Standard errors in parentheses
Standard errors clustered at the county level
+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

Table 4: North Carolina Contested Elections, 2008-2012

| Office	Contests	County-Years	Precinct-Years	Partisan
County Commission	360	234	6653	yes
Board of Education	336	175	6317	mixed
Sheriff	71	71	1991	yes
Register of Deeds	35	35	1435	yes
Clerk of the Court	30	30	827	yes
Soil and Water Supervisor	153	153	5041	no
Attorney	113	113	3164	yes
District Judge	298	163	2833	no

Figure 1: NC Ballot Roll-off, Partisan Elections
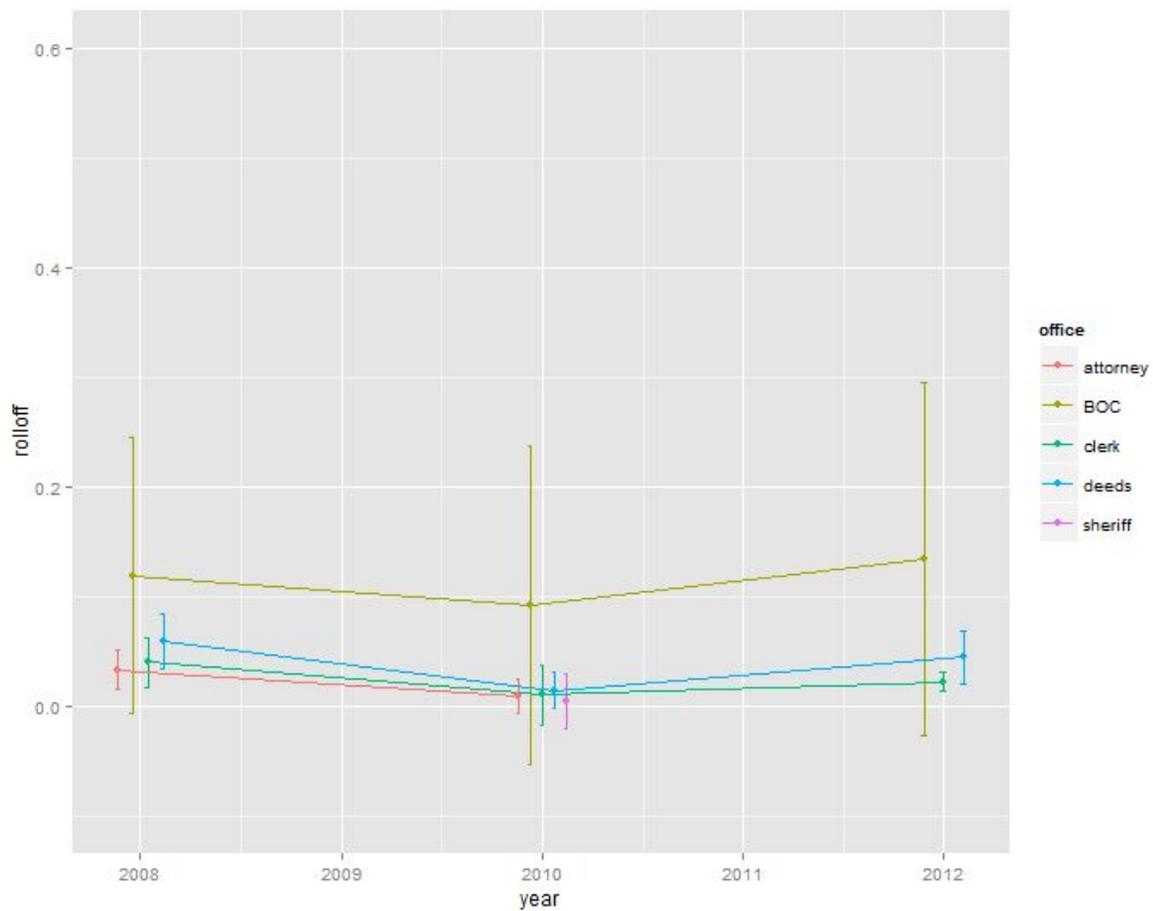
Error bars represent 2 standard deviations

Figure 2: NC Ballot Roll-off, Nonpartisan Elections
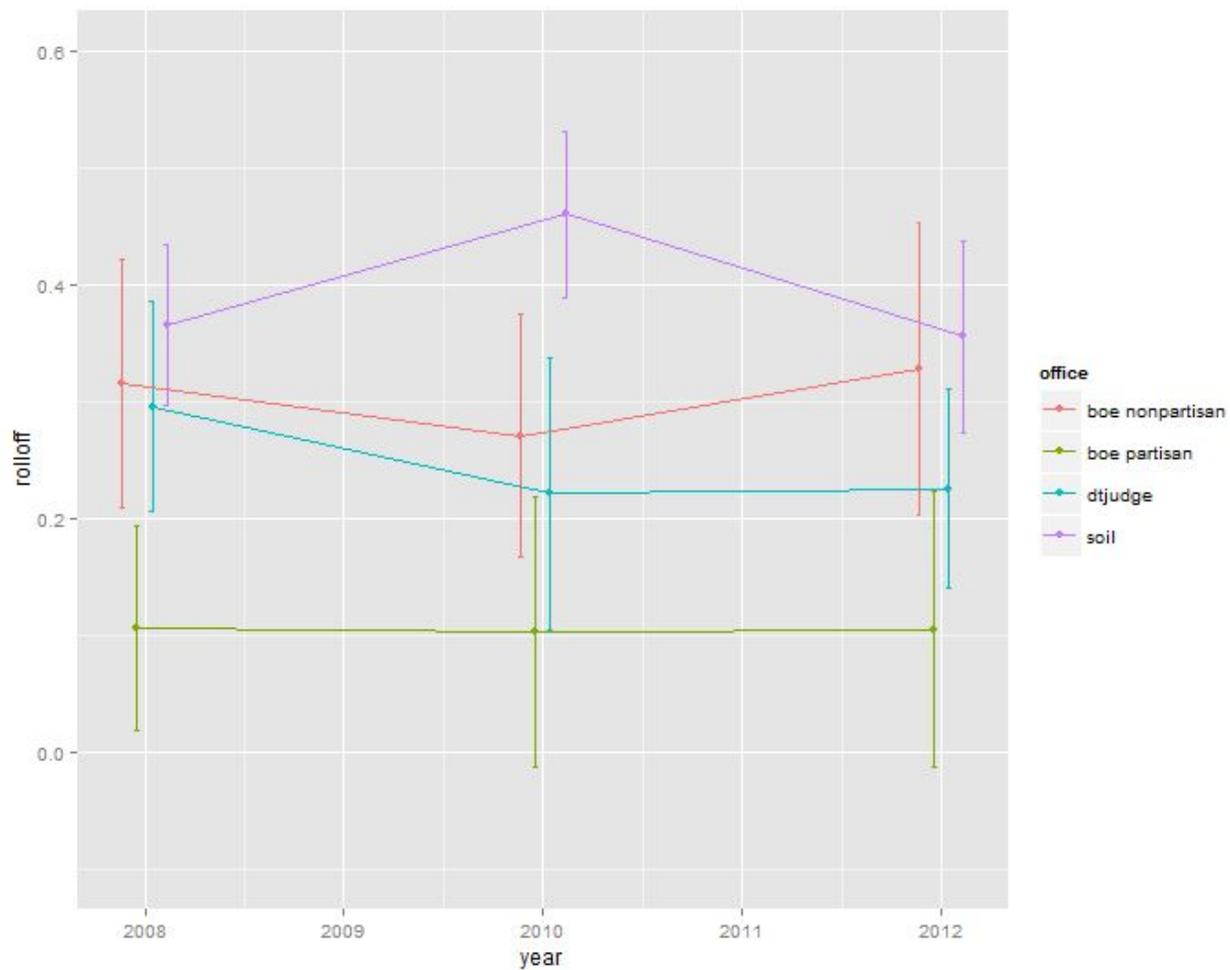
Error bars represent 2 standard deviations

Figure 3: NC Ballot Roll-off by Straight-Ticket Voting
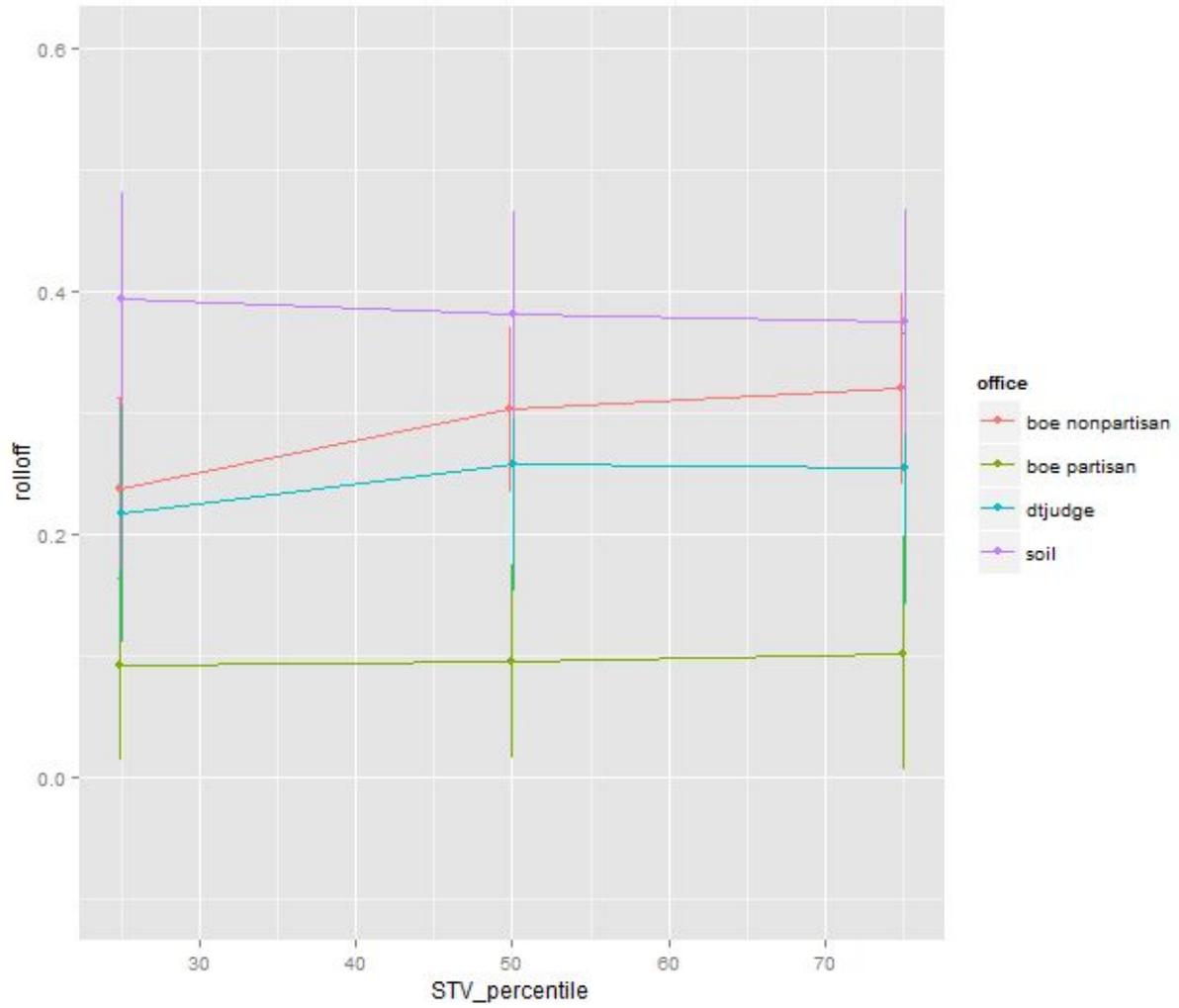
Error bars represent 2 standard deviations

Table 5: *Effects on Democratic Vote Share*

	(1) Board of Ed b/se	(2) Cy. Comm. b/se	(3) Sheriff b/se
Dem vote, top ticket	0.638***	0.834***	0.842***
	(0.07)	(0.02)	(0.03)
Percent black	0.224***	0.086***	0.023
	(0.05)	(0.02)	(0.03)
Percent over 65	-0.190**	0.115***	0.214***
	(0.07)	(0.03)	(0.05)
Percent female	-0.482	0.113	-0.324*
	(0.29)	(0.09)	(0.16)
R-sqr	0.576	0.750	0.558
N	473	2698	1974

Figure 4

General Elections - Florida School Boards

Figure 5