

Incumbency and Responsiveness in Local Elections

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Abstract:

It is well established that incumbents win reelection at high rates. But the source and effect of the advantage remains unsettled. Some scholars argue that incumbents' experience in office and their responsiveness to constituents generates electoral victories. As a result the advantage can be viewed a sign of successful representation. Alternatively, I argue that certain institutions can increase the probability of reelection and decrease responsiveness to the general electorate. Using data from more than 7,000 cities I provide evidence that low-information and low-participation environments increase the proportion of incumbents who run for reelection and the proportion who win. Then, I show that these same environments affect spending patterns in predictable ways. In low-information environments policy moves toward incumbent preferences and in low-turnout environments policy moves toward special interests.

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For a more than a quarter of a century, from the early 1950s through the late 1970's, the city government of San Jose, California was dominated by a reform organization that won reelection nearly without challenge. The powerful city manager, Anthony "Dutch" Hamann, presided over a vast bureaucracy which year after year rewarded a small coalition of residential developers and middle/upper-class, white homeowners with policies and benefits like subsidized development and neighborhood amenities. In contrast, working class and Latino neighborhoods suffered during this period – lacking things like adequate drainage, paved roads, and libraries. So how, in the face of such biased representation, did reformers continue to win elections?

One partial answer to this question is that San Jose's reformers benefited from a variety of institutional structures that limited the type of information residents received about city government and that curtailed voter participation. Reform supporters tended to be knowledgeable about city politics and active in municipal elections while the remainder of city residents participated fleetingly and only rarely engaged in local affairs; a stratification orchestrated by reformers themselves. For example, after determining that the news media was damaging reform efforts to pass a new municipal charter and secure election for their chosen representatives, two prominent members of the reform coalition purchased the city's newspapers and refused to print stories that threatened the dominance of their organization.

Reform officials also benefited from rules governing municipal elections like literacy requirements, and nonpartisan, non-concurrent elections. The type of constituents least inclined to support reform platforms in San Jose (and elsewhere) were labor organizations, the working class and poor, and people of color. Literacy requirements, nonpartisan and non-concurrent elections disproportionately demobilized these very constituents. By essentially writing their opposition out of the electorate reformers avoided potential challenges from these groups. So,

throughout their period of dominance, reform officials remained content to attend to the interests of a narrow group of active voters.

However, by the late 1970s reformers' cozy situation had come to an end. In 1977 they lost the loyalty of the city newspaper when the Florida-based corporate office hired a new publisher who required the reporting of diverse views. In 1970, the California Supreme Court deemed the literacy test unconstitutional, and in 1974, 1978, and 1980 neighborhood activists, labor organizations, and Mexican-American community groups successfully ushered in important election reforms. By 1981 San Jose's city council had completely transformed. The city's first non-appointed minorities were elected to the council and women won a majority of the seats. Not a single reform incumbent remained.

It is undoubtedly the case that a variety of factors generated both the establishment and collapse of San Jose's reform monopoly. But institutional context may have played an important role. The legitimacy of representative democracy rests on the notion that voters can and do hold their elected officials accountable for their actions in office. When an official acts in a manner that is consistent with the wishes of his constituents he ought to win reelection; when he does not he ought to be replaced. This means that when incumbents are reelected at high rates it should be because they have been attentive to residents' preferences. By the same reasoning incumbents who are unresponsive ought to lose or nearly lose their next election. But, as the brief history of San Jose indicates, not all elections work this way. In some cases incumbents win reelection because they benefit from systemic factors that increase their probability of winning. In these contexts some constituents may lack meaningful representation. As a result we can expect policy to look different when incumbents are protected by institutional structures.

In this paper I take advantage of the subordinate nature of city elections in a federal system to investigate the relationship between competitiveness, reelection, and responsiveness. This allows me to provide evidence of a causal effect of institutions on incumbency and policy. I use local level elections in the United States to show that institutions can increase the probability of reelection and decrease responsiveness to the general electorate. I begin by reviewing a small slice of the vast literature on incumbency. Then, I discuss institutions that might affect the probability of reelection, focusing on those which decrease information about elections and which decrease participation. Following this I show that these kinds of institutions increase the proportion of incumbents who run for reelection and the proportion who win. Then, I show that cities with low-information environments produce policy that is closer to elected officials' preferences and that low-turnout environments have spending patterns that benefit particular subgroups in the population who are less likely to be affected by high participation costs. I argue that these findings indicate that incumbents can benefit from institutional structures that enhance the probability of reelection regardless of their performance as representatives.

Background

We have a great deal of work investigating the electoral connection and propensity for retrospective voting at the federal level. Yet conclusions remain mixed; plagued by problems of endogeneity in the relationships and our measures. The competitiveness of any single election may be the cause or the consequence of responsiveness. Incumbents who are unresponsive to constituent preferences should face tough re-election campaigns as challengers seek to capitalize on their representation failures. Competitive elections should then encourage increased responsiveness in the next term (Mayhew 1974). By this reasoning, competitiveness will be

associated with responsiveness. Along these lines, theoretical work by Groseclose (2001) and Wittman (1983) predicts that very safe incumbents are the most likely to behave in ways that diverge from their constituents' median preference. Griffin (2006) provides evidence of this relationship in congressional elections; and Erikson and Wright (2000) find that incumbents facing tough elections vote more moderately than their colleagues. This means that the incumbents with the highest probability of reelection are the least likely to behave congruently with the residents they represent.

But an equally plausible scenario is that the incumbents who are most responsive are rewarded at election time; making responsiveness correlated with safety not marginality. Particularly if incumbents recognize their chances of winning prior to the actual election and change their behavior to ward-off future competition, safe incumbents should be the most faithful representatives. For instance, Gulati (2004) finds that Senators in safe seats are more responsive to the ideological center than Senators from competitive states. By this reasoning the high rates of reelection we see in Congress result from the benefits that office holders provide their constituents: governing experience, services, and policy decisions (Herrera and Yawn 1999, Cain, et al 1987, Fiorina 1989, Fenno 1978). This responsive behavior also prevents the emergence of quality challengers reinforcing the incumbency effect (Gordon et al 2007, Carson et al 2007, Cox and Katz 1996 and 2002, Stone et al 2004).

A third possibility is that electoral outcomes are at least partially unrelated to responsiveness. The safety of incumbents may be affected by factors that are exogenous to their performance as representatives. Partisan tides can sweep a highly responsive representative from office or allow a representative to keep his seat even when he has disregarded his constituents' preferences. Additionally, incumbents can benefit from systemic factors that favor current

office holders. Incumbents have access to various resources that increase their chances of reelection, which are unavailable to challengers, and which may not be related to the quality or performance of the incumbent. These include benefits like franking (Jacobson 1997, Cover and Brumberg 1982, Mayhew 1974), campaign resources (Abramowitz 1991, Abramowitz et al 2006), media coverage (Prior 2006), and control over districting (McDonald 2006, Monmonnier 2001, Tufte 1973). If these resources increase the propensity to win regardless of the performance of the office holder then elected officials may be able to retain their seats without being particularly attentive to constituents' preferences.

To analyze the strength of various factors that contribute to the Congressional incumbency advantage scholars have asked whether direct incumbent resources (such as franking, staff, or fundraising), ability to deter quality challengers, or experience of the incumbent have the most explanatory power (e.g. Levitt and Wolfram 2004, Lee 2001, McAdams and Johannes 1988). Evidence has been offered in support of all of these explanations; no single factor generates the incumbency advantage at the federal level.

At the local level scholars have shown that being an incumbent increases the probability of election in a number of different cities (Krebs 1998; Prewitt 1970; Lieske 1989). To explain why, scholars have shown that candidate success is linked to a number of factors on which incumbents have an advantage over challengers: campaign fundraising and spending (Fuchs et al 2000; Krebs 1998; Lieske 1989; Lewis et al 1995, Gierzynski et al 1998, Krebs 2001), name recognition (Lieske 1989), prior office holding (Krebs 1998; Merritt 1977), and endorsements from local media, political organizations, and parties (Krebs 1998; Stein and Fleischman 1987; Davidson and Fraga 1988). Lascher (2005) finds that California incumbents are more likely to win in large counties, a result he ascribes to low challenger visibility.

However, none of these results provide evidence that the local incumbency advantage is related to performance.¹ One recent paper investigates this connection explicitly. In an analysis of school board elections Berry and Howell (2007) find that incumbents benefit from inattentive publics. When student achievement was not the focus of media attention, incumbent decisions to run for reelection, challengers' decisions to contest elections, and incumbent vote shares were not affected by changes in test scores. These findings are consistent with my argument that incumbents sometimes win reelection regardless of their performance as representatives and that information levels can play an important role in this process.

Exogenous Influences on Incumbency

Political institutions which affect the amount of information constituents receive about campaigns and elections and those that affect the costs of voting may influence incumbents' chances of reelection. Environments in which citizens are more likely to learn about governmental performance and available alternatives, and in which they are more likely to cast ballots may shape challengers' and incumbents' opportunities as well as policy outcomes.

When constituents receive more information about candidates in an election they may be less likely to support incumbents. This could be true if, in the absence of policy information or other heuristics, voters use incumbency as a cue for quality. Oliver and Ha (2007) provide evidence in support of this possibility by showing that when "voters [are] less interested or informed about local elections...[they are] more likely to support incumbents, in the absence of any other information." Where exposure to the challengers' name and/or issue positions is low, voters may be more likely to select incumbents. In this view, low information environments offer incumbents a larger valence advantage. When more information is available, the valence

¹ Some research has, however, linked mayoral approval to performance (Stein et al 2005, Howell 2007)

advantage diminishes (e.g. Groseclose 2001). As a result high-information environments would be relatively worse for incumbents and low-information environments relatively better.

On the other hand, if high levels of information indicate a highly visible election; one in which high quality candidates are more likely to compete, they may produce higher quality incumbents. If this is the case we'd expect incumbency advantage and responsiveness to be positively correlated with levels of information (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2008, Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002). However, the evidence that I present below indicates that this account does not explain cross-sectional variation in incumbent reelection at the local level.

Variation in turnout may also affect incumbents' reelection chances. There are at least two reasons why this could be the case. First, the makeup of the electorate may differ significantly in high versus low turnout elections. Research shows that individuals are more likely to vote as they age, earn more money, and achieve more education (e.g. Leighley and Nagler 1992). Younger, poorer, and less educated individuals turn out less frequently. As turnout rates increase, lower probability voters may make up a larger proportion of the electorate. Indeed, Hajnal (2010) shows that compared to high turnout municipal elections, low turnout elections tend to produce electorates that are whiter, wealthier, older, and better educated.

Further, scholars have shown that low probability voters tend to have weaker attachments to candidates and parties (Burnham 1965) and Dunne et al (1995) show that as the costs of voting increase, those who stand to benefit the least from an election outcome drop out of the electorate more rapidly than those who stand to benefit the most. Their model assumes that the benefits of a particular election outcome are disproportionately distributed across the population such that the benefit function of the election outcome is convex (e.g. those who gain the most are a smaller proportion of the population than those who gain the least); while the costs of the

outcome are independently and more evenly distributed. Voters only vote when the benefits they receive (or the losses they incur) exceed the costs of voting. This implies that increasing the costs of voting will disproportionately affect net losers, shifting the median voter toward the net gainers. As voting becomes more onerous (and turnout declines), the benefiterers will make up a larger share of the electorate. Thus, if high probability voters are more likely to have stronger attachments to the current governing coalition or are more likely to benefit from and support the status quo, then higher turnout could negatively affect incumbent reelection. Gomez and Hansford (2010) provide evidence that this is the case in Congressional elections; higher turnout decreases vote shares for incumbent candidates and parties.

The second reason that incumbency advantage could be affected by turnout is related to, but different from the first. There may a limit to the number of constituents any elected official can reach and be responsive to, and these well-attended constituents could make up a larger share of the electorate when turnout is low. DeNardo (1980) has argued and Gomez and Hansford (2010) have demonstrated that as turnout increases, the electorate contains a higher proportion of unreliable and unpredictable voters. If these voters are less likely to have a connection to the incumbent then high turnout could negatively affect reelection.

Of course, the reverse is also possible. Low turnout elections could be populated by voters who have a greater stake in municipal policy outcomes – parents of school age children, home-owners, long-term residents – who might be more supportive of challengers if they are unhappy with the status quo. Thus, turnout could have a positive relationship with reelection, particularly if incumbents are unresponsive to these highly interested subgroups. While this is a plausible scenario, the data I present below suggests that incumbents and highly interested subgroups tend to benefit (not suffer) from low-turnout.

Finally, variations in turnout and information environments should be associated with identifiably different policy patterns. In low-information contexts the incumbent has the ability to use her valence advantage to imperfectly represent her constituents. Incumbents might use this freedom in any number of ways, but Groseclose (2001) predicts that when the valence advantage is sufficiently large incumbents will move toward their own ideal points, potentially producing a larger gap between the ideal point of the legislature and the median voter.

In low-turnout elections those who stand to benefit the most will comprise a larger share of the electorate as voting becomes more difficult (Dunne et al 1995). When the costs of voting are high, the median voter may have preferences that differ substantially from the median resident (Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003). Berry and Gersen (2009) provide evidence of this effect in school board policy - showing that in non-concurrent elections teachers unions win higher pay for teachers. We might expect that as voting becomes more onerous in municipal elections, policy will be more favorable for groups that have a consistent fiduciary interest in participating - municipal employees and homeowners. In the remainder of the paper I refer to high-information and high-turnout environments as contestable. A contestable environment is one in which the threat of facing a strong challenger keeps incumbents faithful to constituents regardless of the competitiveness of any particular election.² As a result, more contestable environments should be associated with a higher level of policy responsiveness.

It is important to note that cities can have many different combinations of institutions – some of which may produce low-turnout, others which might limit information, and still others that affect both processes. But, these are separable concepts (at least theoretically). An election in which turnout is high because of a close presidential election or an exciting initiative on the

² The term contestable was developed by Baumol, Panzar, and Willig (1982) to refer to economic markets in which the threat of competition is enough to constrain monopolistic behavior by firms. My use of the term is similar.

ballot could bring out many voters who haven't a clue about the platforms of city council candidates (high-turnout, low-information). Alternatively we might imagine a heated run-off election for city council in May when few people are paying attention to politics. Turnout is likely to be low but those who do come to the polls are likely to have a great deal of interest (and therefore knowledge) about local politics (low-turnout, high-information). In turn these institutional settings affect municipal policy in different ways. Table 1 summarizes my hypotheses regarding contestability and policy effects.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The following sections describe the types of institutions that may affect contestability in cities.

Institutional Determinants of Information

The lack of political information among potential voters is a well established feature of modern politics. But some institutions are likely to exacerbate this condition by decreasing the availability, accuracy, or comprehensiveness of information about elections and governmental performance.³ For instance, only four states, California, Maryland, Nevada, and New Jersey require sample ballots to be mailed to registered voters prior to municipal elections.⁴ When a voter receives a sample ballot she is assured of seeing challengers' names at least once prior to the election. If name recognition plays a role in local voting (and Oliver and Ha suggest that it does), then sample ballots may increase the probability of voting for challengers. Sample ballots may also aid voters in researching information about candidates' platforms and issue positions.

³ Of course many voters choose to remain uninformed about elections even when information is readily available. However, there is no reason to think that there should be a nonrandom distribution of uninformed voters that is correlated with institutions that I test in these analyses.

⁴ Maryland only requires Prince George's County to mail sample ballots. In Oregon local elections have been vote by mail since 1987. Because voters are mailed ballots to their homes they are essentially mailed a sample ballot prior to the election. In the statistical analyses Oregon is coded as requiring mailing of sample ballots.

Voter information should also be affected by the availability of election related news, yet most localities do not have their own news source. Of the cities in my data set only 23% have daily papers. Arnold (2004) argues that incumbents are likely to be electorally advantaged by the absence of news coverage because they maintain opportunities to enhance their name recognition and tout their achievements through newsletters, meetings, and advertisements. Particularly if challengers are disadvantaged relative to incumbents with regard to campaign resources, when no media outlet is available, challengers will tend to have a more difficult time disseminating information about their candidacy. Furthermore, Arnold finds that richer information environments increase challenger identification even among survey respondents who did not regularly read a newspaper. Thus, I expect that the presence of a local newspaper will increase the contestability of the electoral arena and decrease the incumbent advantage.⁵

A Smaller and More Manageable Electorate

It is well-established in the turnout literature that institutions which lower the costs of voting increase turnout (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978). Only nine states require registrars to mail voters the location of their polling place for local elections⁶ and in all but seven states

⁵ Other scholars argue that news coverage should be positively correlated with incumbency advantage. Incumbents are covered more frequently in the media (Arnold 2004), they are more likely to be endorsed by newspapers (Ansolabehere, Lessem, and Snyder 2006), and in areas with more television stations voters are more likely to support the incumbent (Prior 2006). On the other hand Niemi, Powell, and Bicknell (1986) find that challengers are disadvantaged when districts are not congruent with community boundaries (because they presumably receive less coverage) and Ansolabehere, Snowberg, and Snyder (2005) find no effect of congruency. Thus, the effect of news coverage for federal incumbents is unclear. I expect the effect for local officials to be different. The vast majority of municipalities have no media dedicated to coverage of their community. In these cities the hurdle of learning anything at all about challengers is so great that incumbents should have a strong advantage; this effect should be more powerful than the disadvantage challengers face from unequal coverage.

⁶ The states that require mailing of polling place locations are California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maryland, New Jersey, Nevada, and New York. Colorado and Maryland require mailings for some municipalities but not others. Oregon elections are all cast by mail and registered voters are mailed ballots to their home. Some or all municipalities in these states are coded as requiring mailings depending on state law.

voters must register at least 10 days before any election.⁷ This means that in most localities it is incumbent upon constituents to remember to register early enough and to figure out when and where to vote prior to the election. This could be a high hurdle for local races as only about 8% are held concurrently with state or federal elections. It comes as no surprise then to find that the median turnout in local elections is 27% of eligible voters, falling below 1% in some places.⁸ Scholars have found that institutions associated with lower turnout have differential effects on various subpopulations (Wolfinger et al 2005; Brians 1997). This means that varying turnout levels may be associated with differences in the composition of local electorates and support for the incumbent. I expect that institutions which increase turnout, like the mailing of polling locations, shorter registration deadlines, and concurrent elections to negatively affect reelection.

This framework leads to a number of related predictions which are tested in the remainder of the paper. Institutions that decrease contestability should positively affect the proportion of incumbents who run for reelection and the proportion who win. Secondly, more contestable environments should affect policy in predictable ways. Low-turnout elections should shift policy toward subgroups that are willing to bear the costs of voting and low-information elections should shift policy toward incumbents' ideal points.

Arizona requires mailings in federal and state elections but makes the mailing optional in local elections. Delaware, Alabama, Georgia, and Washington mail registration cards to voters that list their precinct number and in some cases their polling place however no notification of a coming election is mailed to voters in these states. These states are coded as not mailing polling place locations.

⁷ The seven states are Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Idaho, New Hampshire, and Wyoming enacted same day registration in the mid 1990s. The remaining states enacted their policy prior to the start of my data set. Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming require registration at least 30 days in advance for some years in the data set.

⁸ These figures are from the International City County Managers Association survey conducted in 1986. This is the most recent year that the ICMA asked localities about turnout. There is no other comprehensive source for turnout data in city elections. The figures represent data from 2,464 cities.

Decreasing Contestability of the Electoral Arena

As explained above we know from previous research that local legislators who win election to office are very likely to win reelection (e.g. Krebs 1998, Wolman et al 1990). The local incumbency effect is probably produced by a variety of factors. Serving in office may provide candidates with experience and expertise that is valued by voters. Particularly if incumbents are responsive to constituents' preferences, they ought to have little trouble keeping their jobs. Risk-averse challengers are likely to time their runs when incumbents are weak or retiring adding to the incumbency advantage. However, there may also be exogenous, systemic factors that affect voters' ability to evaluate candidates and their likelihood of turning out to vote regardless of incumbents' actions in office. If some institutional settings make it harder for voters to figure out what incumbents are doing and who the challengers is, or make it harder for them to get cast a vote or select a quality challenger, then we should see a measurable increase in incumbency advantage in these less contestable environments.

One problem with evaluating this prediction empirically is that it is difficult to measure incumbent success independently of contestability (or competitiveness) because the cause and effect are cyclical. In an attempt to minimize the endogeneity problems inherent in the relationships I take advantage of the subordinate status of cities with regard to state laws that are likely to affect information and turnout. City councilors are affected by these institutions but the state legislature, not city officials decide what the law will be. I supplement these state level analyses with local level factors that are also likely to affect information and turnout but which may suffer from problems of endogeneity.

The data that I use come primarily from the International City County Manager's Association (ICMA). The ICMA conducts periodic assessments of local governments by

mailing a survey to city clerks in all United States cities with more than 2,500 residents. They have a response rate of about 64%.⁹ Using surveys from 1986, 1992, 1996, and 2001, I created a dataset with 7,174 unique municipalities and a total of 18,416 observations. Each year contains approximately 4,500 observations and many cities are not represented in all years. The ICMA data include information on institutional features of city government. These data were merged with census data to control for city level demographics. Census data from 1990 were used for the 1986 observations and 2000 census data for the 2001 observations. Values were linearly interpolated for 1992 and 1996. Additional data were merged in from the 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2002 Census of Governments files regarding city expenditures. I coded the presence of a local daily newspaper from the 1986, 1992, 1997, and 2000 editions of the Editor and Publisher International Yearbook.

Finally, I added data on state level institutions that govern local elections. I identified states that required sample ballot and polling place mailings by evaluating statutes for states that Wolfinger et al (2005) code as having sent mailings for the 2000 presidential election.¹⁰ The coding of these variables is constant for all years of the data. I gathered registration deadlines from Briens (1997) and the Federal Election Assistance Commission.¹¹ This variable changes over time for some states (but is constant across cities within states). The mean values of these variables by state are shown in Appendix Table A2.

⁹ The population of the localities that respond is fairly representative of the national urban population. (Aghion, Alesina, and Trebbi 2005). Also, by polling city clerks directly, the survey is able to provide relatively accurate measures of local structure and conditions (Hajnal et al 2002).

¹⁰ The coding notes these authors used were generously provided by Megan Mullin. See footnotes 4 and 6 for additional detail about the coding. It would clearly be preferable to have versions of these variables that change over time. While it is possible to locate current state constitutional language, codes, and statutes governing elections, it is extremely time consuming and in some cases impossible to determine dates of enactment and/or the language governing elections in prior years. Fortunately, Mullin collected these data during the time period my dataset covers, offering me the opportunity to test my hypotheses cross-sectionally.

¹¹ See footnote 7 for more detail about the coding of this variable.

The Incumbency Advantage in Low Information/Low Turnout Elections

To evaluate the factors that contribute to incumbent success I analyze the likelihood that city councilors will run for reelection and the joint probability that will run and win. I do not estimate the probability of winning conditional on running for two reasons - one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical reason is that given that the contestable institutions which I am interested in are typically in place before any candidate decides to enter the race, we should see most of their effect operate through selection. That is, knowing that elections will be harder to win and governing will be more difficult in high-information and high-turnout environments, weaker incumbents should be more likely to step down in these places leaving the pool of candidates who do enter the race to be very likely to win. There is evidence of this pattern in the raw data. On average about 70% of incumbents run for reelection and 86% of those running win. The second reason for not estimating the conditional effect is that my data are city level. The lack of individual councilor data limits my ability to estimate the effect of the institutions on winning while taking into account the candidate's decision to run. However, these data do allow me to estimate the joint probability of running and winning which I discuss below. The lack of individual level data also precludes me from accounting for candidate and race specific factors that may affect incumbents' decision to run and their probability of winning. This is a significant limitation of the data but impossible to remedy as candidate level data do not exist for large numbers of cities. The best I can do is to include proxies for such factors at the level of the city council. I discuss the specific variables that I use in more detail below.

I begin by analyzing the effect of low-information and low-turnout environments on incumbents' propensity to run for reelection. My dependent variable is the proportion of the

council *Running* for reelection reported by the ICMA¹² To measure the information environment I use state law regarding the mailing of *Sample Ballots* and the presence of a local daily *Newspaper*. To estimate the effect of turnout I use two state level institutions – the mailing of *Polling Place Locations* and *Registration* allowed within one month of the election; and one local level institution – *Concurrent elections* (elections held in November of even numbered years).¹³ When voters have more information about their choices for replacing elected officials and are more likely to participate we can expect the electoral arena to be more contestable and so should see fewer incumbents running and winning.

I include a number of control variables that might affect incumbents' decisions to run and their ability to get reelected and which may be correlated with the institutions affecting contestability. Oliver (2001) and Oliver and Ha (2007), find that constituents are more likely to be interested and knowledgeable about local politics in smaller communities where voters are more likely to know and support challengers to office. In small cities institutions of contestability may also be less important if candidates personally know many of their constituents. I include the natural log of city's total *Population* to account for this. I add a dummy variable designating whether a majority of the city council is elected by *District* or at-large. This accounts for the lower cost of campaigns and lower levels of competitiveness in

¹² Unfortunately the ICMA reports only the proportion of the whole council running for and winning reelection even in cities with staggered council terms or term limits where only a portion of the council seat are up for election in a given year. This means that for many of my cities I systematically underestimate the proportion of the council seeking and winning reelection. To deal with this problem I include dummy indicators for cities with term-limits and staggered councils in my models. In alternate analyses I estimate the effects of contestability only for cities with non-staggered elections and without term limits and the patterns are essentially the same as those presented. I also estimated the number of seats available in staggered elections by deflating the total number of council seats by 1/3rd or 1/2 and using this as the denominator for the proportion of councilors seeking and winning reelection. These results are also very similar to those presented. All alternate specifications are available from the author.

¹³ This variable was created from a 1986 ICMA question regarding the timing of the next municipal election and is constant for all years in the data set.

district elections as well as the ability for incumbents to provide targeted benefits in districted cities, creating a personal vote connection with their constituents. District councilors also typically represent smaller constituencies than at-large councilors and so may benefit from increased name recognition. I control for per capita *Council Size* to account for the possibility of increased competitiveness in smaller legislatures or decreased capacity to be responsive when an official represents larger numbers of constituents.

I include a dummy variable noting whether or not elections are *Partisan*. Although parties play a diminished role at the local level today, in some cases parties provide organizational and financial support to candidates as well as resources for mobilizing voters. So, partisan elections may have a positive effect on incumbent reelection rates. On the other hand, because voters tend to have less information about challengers in nonpartisan cities they may be more likely to rely on incumbency as a cue for experience. I include the percentage of city budget spent on *Central Staff* (which includes councilors' salaries) to capture the possibility that more professionalized legislatures are more attractive to office holders and so increase the probability of seeking reelection.

To capture the possibility that incumbents are more likely to run when they have more power I include a dummy variable noting whether the city has a *Council-manager* or mayor-council structure. Oliver and Ha (2007) argue that council-manager structures tend to create low information political arenas which might lead incumbents to fare better in these cities. However, councilors in these cities tend to have fewer opportunities to influence city policy because of the power of the city manager, and so may be less interested in running for reelection. I include two proxies for candidate quality - the proportion of the council that identifies as *Business Managers*

and *Professionals*.¹⁴ I expect both to be positive. As a proxy for councilors with low opportunity costs I include the proportion that is *Retired*. These councilors should be more likely than professionally employed members to seek reelection.

Research on the federal incumbency advantage has found that economic downturns can hurt incumbents (Brady, Buckley, and Rivers 1999). I control for this with using the proportion of people in the city who are *Unemployed*. Additionally, certain types of voters are more likely to have high levels of information about candidates, have a larger stake in local elections, and to turn out to vote, potentially putting more pressure on incumbents to be responsive. I use the proportion of housing units occupied by *Home-Owners* and the proportion of the population that is *College Graduates* to represent this population. I also control for *Median Household* income.

Given that an uncontested electoral arena on its own is insufficient to ensure reelection, for an incumbent to represent her constituents she must be able to build a cohesive coalition. This might be harder in more heterogeneous places. Additionally Oliver and Ha (2007) find that more diverse cities engender increased interest in local campaigns. I capture this with a measure of the racial *Diversity* of the population. This is a Herfindahl index (1-sum of the squared proportions) of the African American, Latino, Asian American, other non-white, and white populations in a city. I expect fewer incumbents to run and win in more diverse cities. Finally, I allow the intercept to vary in cities that have *Staggered Council Terms* and *Term limits* for city councilors. In such places some incumbents are legally prohibited from seeking reelection in any particular year. I expect both coefficients to be negative.

¹⁴ The ICMA lists the occupation of city councilors in nine categories: lawyers, professionals, business managers, business employees, farmers, homemakers, teachers, clergy, and retirees. At the city level there is no clear way to measure candidate quality. Lieske (1989) offers evidence that college degrees and occupational prestige are strongly associated with candidate success in Cincinnati and Bridges (1997) shows that successful coalitions in the Southwest were dominated by prominent members of the business community. I use the categories of business managers and professionals as possible indicators of these types of candidates.

Because the state level institutions are collinear with state fixed effects I use two different estimation strategies. For the local level factors I regress incumbent run and win rates on both factors of interest: a dummy variable noting whether or not the city has a local *Newspaper* and a dummy variable for *Concurrent* elections. I include state fixed effects in this equation and cluster the errors by city to account for the relationship in errors across time. For the state level factors I regress incumbent run and win proportions on each state level factor: a dummy variable noting whether or not the state requires the mailing of *Sample Ballots* and *Polling Locations*, and whether or not *Registration* is allowed within 30 days of the election.¹⁵ I handle the importance of state influence in two ways. First, I add a measure of each state's *Home Rule Score* collected and calculated by Jack Walker (available in his "Diffusion of Public Policy" dataset). This score measures each state's innovation with regard to granting municipal home rule. Higher scores indicate later adoption of home rule. I use this as a proxy for the permissiveness of state law with regard to municipal governance. Secondly, I cluster the errors by state-year. Fixed effects for survey years (1992, 1996, and 2001 with 1986 as the reference category) are included in all models.¹⁶ Summary statistics for all variables are shown in Appendix Table A1. Table 2 shows the results of these analyses for the proportion of incumbents running for reelection.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The results are clear: When institutions encourage voters to gain more information or turn out to vote fewer incumbents run for reelection. These differences are meaningful. Mailing voters sample ballots is associated with a nearly 5 percentage point decrease in the estimated

¹⁵ A high degree of collinearity between sample ballot and polling location mailing makes it inappropriate to combine these factors into a single model. Running models with one or the other of these variables and the registration variable produces similar results to those presented. Additionally, adding the state level variables to the local factors model without state fixed effects produces extremely similar results. The effect of the institutions presented in the tables below can roughly be considered additive.

¹⁶ Running the models on each survey year separately produces results similar to those presented.

proportion of the council running. The presence of a local newspaper is associated with a 1.5 point decrease. Laws that affect turnout have a similar impact. In cities where registrars are required to mail polling locations the proportion of incumbents running is about 3 percentage points lower; it is close to 2 points lower when voters can register within a month of election-day and when local elections are concurrent with national elections. As table 3 reveals estimating identical models where the dependent variable is the proportion of the council *Winning* reelection produces similar results.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Mailing sample ballots decreases incumbent win proportions by about 5 percentage points and local newspapers decrease proportions by about 1 percentage point. Mailing polling locations decreases the proportion winning by more than 3 percentage points, and allowing registration within a month of the election is associated with a nearly 2 point decline. Concurrent elections decrease the proportion winning by about 1 percentage point although the effect is less significant. Cumulatively these results offer strong support for my hypothesis that in cities where constituents have more information about elections and are encouraged to participate, incumbents are less insulated.¹⁷

Contestability and Municipal Policy

I have argued that institutions that reduce the contestability of elections allow incumbents to win reelection without being responsive to the general public. So, where politicians rely on a

¹⁷ A number of other interesting relationships emerge from these estimations. Many of the control variables work as expected. For instance, larger cities are likely to see more incumbents running for reelection and winning. Incumbents appear to benefit from mayor-council systems and district elections as well as more professionalized city councils. Retirees are more likely to run for reelection and businessmen and professionals are more likely to win.

lack of contestability to increase their probability of maintaining office, cities should have identifiably different expenditure patterns. As explained above, low-information elections may increase incumbents' valence advantage. As a result policy might move toward councilors' ideal points. Low-turnout elections should produce a different policy effect. As the costs of voting rise elections may produce a median voter whose preferences differ from the preferences of the median resident because these costs are likely to be borne unequally. At least two types of interests might be advantaged in low-turnout municipal environments: municipal employees and home-owners. Because of their fiduciary interest in election outcomes we should expect that these groups will be less likely to drop out of the electorate even when hurdles are high. Thus, we can expect that policy will be more likely to favor their interests when institutions generate lower turnout elections.

To test the first hypothesis – that low-information elections will allow incumbents to benefit from their valence advantage – I examine a policy area in which I expect incumbents' preferences to differ from the typical median voters' (allowing me to separate out their effects). I analyze city council salaries in low-information environments. I assume that voters prefer to spend as little as possible on councilors' salaries while council members prefer to have higher salaries (all else being equal). More specifically, I assume that politicians prefer to increase council salaries, but that fear of electoral reprisals limits them from doing this in high-information environments. This is essentially what I find using a simple model.

I use two different dependent variables. The first is a measure of each member's annual *Salary* and the second is the proportion of the city's general current expenditures spent on *Councilors' Salaries*.¹⁸ The main independent variables are dummy variables for high-

¹⁸ These data are from the ICMA survey in which clerks reported the total annual salary of council members. Data were largely missing from 1996 and I interpolated estimates using 1992 and 2001 reports.

information environments (*Sample Ballots* and the presence of a *Local Paper*). To account for different degrees of professionalization of city legislatures I include a dummy indicator noting whether the council is *Full* or part-time, the total number of *Council members*, and the log of total *Population*. To capture the level of need in the city (and demand for expenditures other than councilor salaries) I include the proportion of the population that lives in *Urban* areas, the proportion in *Poverty*, and racial and ethnic *Diversity*. To control for changing resources I include the level of *Home Ownership* and the proportion of total revenue coming from *Intergovernmental* sources. Finally, I add dummy indicators for local institutions (*Nonpartisan* elections, *District* elections, and *Council Manager* systems).

As above, I include fixed effects for survey year in both models and fixed effects for states in the Local Paper model. I include each state's *Home Rule Score* in the Sample Ballot model and cluster errors by state-year. Errors are clustered by city in the Local Paper model. Because of a significant number of cities that offer no pay to councilors I use tobit models censored at zero for these analyses. Table 4 shows the results of the estimations.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

As predicted low-information environments coincide with higher council salaries. Where sample ballots are mailed and where there is a local newspaper political elites appear to be more reluctant to increase their own pay. Holding all other variables at their mean values, in cities where sample ballots are mailed councilor pay declines from an estimated \$2,145 to \$1,004 per year.¹⁹ Daily newspapers reduce annual remuneration by about \$413, from \$2,037 to \$1,624. When voters have less information about the activities of government and available

For the latter of the two dependent variables I multiplied the annual salary by the total number of councilors and divided this number by current general expenditures. These variables are both coded zero if councilors receive no pay.

¹⁹ Estimations generated using Stata's "mfx" command, holding all other variables at their mean values.

options for replacement, incumbents appear to have more freedom to set municipal policy closer to their own ideal points.

To test the second hypothesis, that low-turnout elections will produce policy more beneficial for particular subgroups of the population that are likely to be less affected by the costs of voting I analyze the proportion of the general current expenditures spent on *Payroll and Retirement*, and the proportion of tax revenue coming from *Property Taxes*. As explained above I assume that municipal employees and homeowners are likely to make up a larger share of the electorate in low-turnout elections. As a result I expect that the proportion of the budget allocated to payroll will be lower and the proportion of tax revenues funded by property taxes to be higher in more contestable environments. My independent variables are dummy indicators of low-turnout environments (whether or not *Polling Locations* are mailed, *Registration* is allowed within 30 days of the election, and whether or not elections are *Concurrent*). I control for the same factors as in Table 4.²⁰ Table 5 presents these results.

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

As expected in low-turnout environments the proportion of the budget spent on payroll is higher and the proportion of taxes coming from property taxes is lower. In cities where polling locations are mailed the proportion of the budget spent on payroll and retirement is about 5 percentage points lower and the proportion of tax revenues funded by property taxes is about 8 points higher. Similarly in jurisdictions where registration is allowed closer to the election and in those where elections are held concurrently with other levels of government there is evidence

²⁰ Adding a control for the total number of public employees or number of employees per capita to the payroll analysis does not change results.

that payroll spending is lower and property taxes are higher.²¹ In sum, these results indicate that when elections are less contestable certain subpopulations appear to win more from government.

Conclusion

Gaining deeper knowledge of the presence and sources of the incumbency advantage contributes to our understanding of representative democracy. If incumbents win reelection because they are responsive their constituents then the high rates of incumbent reelection can only be considered a good thing. This paper has provided evidence that this may not be the right conclusion to draw about local elections. I have shown that exogenous institutions can increase the probability of seeking and winning reelection. Additionally, I have shown that these same institutions are associated with policy outcomes that are more likely to favor the preferences of elected officials and highly interested subgroups. There is a tremendous amount of evidence that incumbents gain experience over time, that they work hard to learn what their constituents want and to take actions in office that faithfully represent their voters. However, some political environments undoubtedly encourage these behaviors more than others. I have suggested that we can measure the contestability of any electoral arena. By determining the degree to which constituents are able to learn about the activities of their government and about available alternatives, and the degree to which voting is made less costly we can determine how likely officials are to use responsiveness as a strategy for reelection.

The mailing of sample ballots and the presence of a local newspaper have the potential to increase constituent information while the mailing of polling place locations, holding concurrent elections, and establishing registration deadlines closer to election-day increase the probability of

²¹ Replacing the registration variable with a measure designating states that allow registration within 10 days of elections produces larger, more robust results.

voting. In the presence of institutions that increase information and turnout fewer incumbents run for reelection and fewer win. I have argued that this is because these institutions increase contestability of the political arena; they create more knowledgeable and less predictable electorates. In such environments incumbents should only be able to win reelection by faithfully representing a broad base of constituents. Running should be less attractive and winning harder in these cases. Given the institutional context that they face, we can expect politicians to behave strategically when choosing to run for office and deciding what strategies to adopt to ensure reelection – they will be as responsive as they need to be. When incumbents win reelection in uncontested environments they have less incentive to be responsive to the broader public at least at the local level.

Until we dissect the many elements that contribute to the incumbency advantage at all levels of government we will never be able to fully evaluate the success of our system. This paper has made three contributions toward this goal. First, I have shown that institutions affect the degree to which incumbents can be expected to win reelection and I have identified a set of institutions that affect incumbency in municipal elections. Second, I have offered a clear test of the casual effect of these institutions by taking advantage of the subordinate position of cities in the federal system. Finally, I have shown that levels of turnout and information have significant policy ramifications. Low-information allows incumbents to move policy toward their own preferences and low-turnout makes local government more responsive to organized, vocal interests. If we want to increase the responsiveness of local democracy, the policy prescriptions are now clear.

Table 1: Expected relationships between contestability, elections, and policy

	Incumbency Effect	Election Effect	Policy Outcome
Low-Turnout	Increased advantage	Shift median voter	Spending favors interested groups
Low-Information	Increased advantage	Incumbents' valence advantage dominates	Spending favors incumbents' preferences

Table 2: Effect of Contestability on Proportion of Incumbents Running for Reelection

	Sample Ballots			Polling Locations			Registration			Local Factors		
	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t
Sample Ballots Mailed	-0.046	0.010	0.000									
Polling Locations Mailed				-0.030	0.010	0.005						
Registration within 1 Month							-0.016	0.006	0.007			
November Concurrent Elections										-0.021	0.008	0.006
Local Paper										-0.015	0.005	0.003
Population (log)	0.010	0.002	0.000	0.009	0.002	0.000	0.010	0.002	0.000	0.009	0.003	0.003
District Council	0.009	0.005	0.054	0.010	0.005	0.036	0.013	0.005	0.007	0.021	0.004	0.000
Partisan Elections	-0.007	0.006	0.230	-0.003	0.006	0.579	-0.010	0.007	0.126	-0.004	0.007	0.540
% Budget Spent on Central Staff	0.090	0.036	0.012	0.084	0.036	0.021	0.098	0.037	0.008	0.087	0.034	0.010
Council Manager System	-0.013	0.004	0.003	-0.014	0.004	0.002	-0.014	0.005	0.002	-0.017	0.004	0.000
% Council Retired	0.039	0.010	0.000	0.039	0.010	0.000	0.039	0.011	0.000	0.030	0.010	0.004
% Council Professionals	-0.006	0.012	0.629	-0.006	0.012	0.615	-0.007	0.012	0.574	-0.004	0.014	0.763
% Council Business Managers	0.010	0.008	0.178	0.010	0.008	0.179	0.010	0.008	0.198	0.012	0.008	0.149
Term Limits	-0.051	0.007	0.000	-0.051	0.007	0.000	-0.052	0.007	0.000	-0.047	0.008	0.000
Staggered Council Elections	-0.331	0.010	0.000	-0.332	0.010	0.000	-0.333	0.010	0.000	-0.319	0.009	0.000
% Unemployed	-0.171	0.110	0.122	-0.201	0.109	0.066	-0.263	0.109	0.016	-0.085	0.131	0.516
% Homeowners	-0.047	0.019	0.015	-0.046	0.019	0.017	-0.027	0.020	0.184	-0.026	0.023	0.260
Diversity	0.026	0.012	0.035	0.021	0.013	0.099	0.011	0.013	0.400	0.023	0.015	0.129
% College Graduates	-0.079	0.023	0.001	-0.069	0.024	0.004	-0.061	0.024	0.013	-0.065	0.023	0.004
Median HH Income (10 thsds)	0.000	0.000	0.025	0.000	0.000	0.140	0.000	0.000	0.788	0.000	0.000	0.518
Council Size Per Thsd Persons	0.003	0.001	0.000	0.003	0.001	0.000	0.003	0.001	0.000	-0.003	0.002	0.161
State Home Rule Score	-0.028	0.009	0.002	-0.025	0.009	0.008	-0.012	0.009	0.174			
1992	0.098	0.008	0.000	0.099	0.008	0.000	0.099	0.009	0.000	0.097	0.005	0.000
1996	0.097	0.008	0.000	0.098	0.008	0.000	0.100	0.008	0.000	0.095	0.005	0.000
2001	0.083	0.009	0.000	0.085	0.009	0.000	0.089	0.009	0.000	0.081	0.006	0.000
Constant	0.591	0.029	0.000	0.598	0.028	0.000	0.591	0.029	0.000	0.503	0.042	0.000
R^2	0.360			0.358			0.357			0.374		
N	12,508			12,508			12,508			11,072		

Note: OLS regression; State fixed effects included but not presented in local factors model. Robust errors clustered by city in local factors model and by state-year in state factors models.

Table 3: Effect of Contestability on Proportion of Incumbents Winning Reelection

	Sample Ballots			Polling Locations			Registration			Local Factors		
	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t
Sample Ballots Mailed	-0.049	0.008	0.000									
Polling Locations Mailed				-0.032	0.010	0.001						
Registration within 1 Month							-0.019	0.006	0.002			
November Concurrent Elections										-0.011	0.007	0.151
Local Paper										-0.010	0.005	0.062
Population (log)	0.005	0.003	0.04	0.004	0.003	0.079	0.005	0.003	0.061	0.005	0.003	0.062
District Council	0.010	0.005	0.057	0.010	0.005	0.04	0.014	0.005	0.009	0.017	0.005	0.000
Partisan Elections	-0.003	0.006	0.665	0.001	0.007	0.852	-0.006	0.007	0.36	0.004	0.007	0.619
% Budget Spent on Central Staff	0.055	0.039	0.16	0.049	0.040	0.221	0.065	0.039	0.102	0.073	0.036	0.041
Council Manager System	-0.009	0.004	0.05	-0.010	0.005	0.03	-0.010	0.005	0.034	-0.012	0.005	0.012
% Council Retired	0.048	0.011	0.000	0.049	0.011	0.000	0.049	0.011	0.000	0.043	0.011	0.000
% Council Professionals	0.020	0.012	0.096	0.020	0.012	0.102	0.019	0.012	0.125	0.022	0.014	0.114
% Council Business Managers	0.029	0.008	0.001	0.028	0.008	0.001	0.028	0.008	0.001	0.031	0.009	0.000
Term Limits	-0.043	0.007	0.000	-0.043	0.007	0.000	-0.043	0.007	0.000	-0.040	0.008	0.000
Staggered Council Elections	-0.276	0.010	0.000	-0.276	0.010	0.000	-0.278	0.010	0.000	-0.270	0.009	0.000
% Unemployed	-0.170	0.106	0.109	-0.200	0.106	0.061	-0.267	0.108	0.014	-0.100	0.132	0.451
% Homeowners	-0.065	0.023	0.005	-0.064	0.023	0.005	-0.043	0.023	0.068	-0.023	0.024	0.331
Diversity	0.023	0.013	0.085	0.017	0.013	0.196	0.007	0.014	0.629	0.041	0.016	0.010
% College Graduates	-0.047	0.025	0.054	-0.037	0.025	0.143	-0.028	0.025	0.262	-0.016	0.023	0.495
Median HH Income (10 thsds)	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.005	0.000	0.000	0.13	0.000	0.000	0.175
Council Size Per Thsd Persons	0.002	0.001	0.014	0.002	0.001	0.024	0.002	0.001	0.036	0.000	0.002	0.973
State Home Rule Score	-0.023	0.009	0.01	-0.021	0.010	0.032	-0.006	0.009	0.488			
1992	0.085	0.008	0.000	0.085	0.009	0.000	0.086	0.009	0.000	0.082	0.005	0.000
1996	0.092	0.008	0.000	0.093	0.008	0.000	0.095	0.008	0.000	0.091	0.005	0.000
2001	0.068	0.008	0.000	0.070	0.009	0.000	0.074	0.009	0.000	0.068	0.006	0.000
Constant	0.520	0.029	0.000	0.527	0.029	0.000	0.519	0.031	0.000	0.400	0.043	0.000
R^2	0.286			0.284			0.283			0.307		
N	11,925			11,925			11,925			10,594		

Note: OLS regressions; State fixed effects included but not presented in local factors model. Robust errors clustered by city in local factors model and by state-year in state factors models

Table 4: Effect of Low-Information Environments on Municipal Policy

Annual Council Salaries						
	Sample Ballots			Local Paper		
	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t
Contestable environment	-1140.3	437.1	0.009	-413.3	146.7	0.005
Full Time City Council	865.3	280.0	0.002	781.2	215.2	0.000
Total # Councilors	-296.2	60.1	0.000	-110.8	69.9	0.113
Log Population	2447.2	135.1	0.000	2390.0	156.8	0.000
% Urban	-2307.0	351.6	0.000	-2127.1	336.0	0.000
% in Poverty	-2620.9	924.8	0.005	804.0	1073.1	0.454
Diversity	1185.4	611.8	0.053	1407.8	427.4	0.001
% Homeowners	-4730.3	716.7	0.000	-3474.2	561.2	0.000
% IG Revenue	2875.5	792.6	0.000	419.2	450.4	0.352
Partisan	254.6	176.5	0.149	-287.2	169.5	0.090
District Council	66.3	145.9	0.65	142.5	134.7	0.290
Council Manager	-2130.0	198.2	0.000	-1567.8	203.4	0.000
State Home Rule Score	-376.5	357.5	0.292			
Constant	-13753.4	303.9	0.000	-16309.0	1777.4	0.000
<i>Pseudo</i> R ²	0.024			0.032		
<i>N</i>	11107			11107		

Council Salaries % of Expenditures						
	Sample Ballots			Local Paper		
	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t
Contestable environment	-0.005	0.002	0.007	-0.001	0.001	0.105
Full Time City Council	0.001	0.001	0.139	0.001	0.000	0.030
Total # Councilors	-0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.053
Population (log)	0.000	0.000	0.403	0.000	0.001	0.824
% Urban	0.004	0.001	0.008	0.004	0.001	0.017
% in Poverty	-0.011	0.005	0.013	-0.007	0.004	0.129
Diversity	0.001	0.002	0.567	0.002	0.001	0.108
% Homeowners	-0.007	0.002	0.001	-0.007	0.003	0.038
% IG Revenue	0.014	0.006	0.016	0.013	0.010	0.163
Partisan	0.001	0.000	0.215	-0.002	0.001	0.112
District Council	0.000	0.000	0.954	0.000	0.000	0.693
Council Manager	-0.004	0.001	0.000	-0.002	0.001	0.003
State Home Rule Score	-0.003	0.001	0.036			
Constant	0.004	0.001	0.017	-0.008	0.009	0.399
<i>R</i> ²	-0.008			-0.018		
<i>N</i>	11105			11105		

Note: Tobit regressions; State fixed effects included but not presented in local paper models. Robust errors clustered by city in local paper models and by state-year in sample ballot models.

Table 5: Effect of Low-Turnout Environments on Municipal Policy

Payroll Expenditures									
	Polling Locations			Registration			Concurrent Elections		
	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t
Contestable institution	-0.052	0.017	0.002	-0.018	0.014	0.186	-0.017	0.008	0.022
Full Time City Council	0.007	0.004	0.078	0.010	0.004	0.027	0.004	0.005	0.393
Total # Councilors	0.002	0.002	0.232	0.004	0.002	0.044	0.002	0.001	0.099
Population (log)	0.012	0.003	0.000	0.011	0.003	0.001	0.017	0.002	0.000
% Urban	0.011	0.018	0.549	0.008	0.018	0.645	0.005	0.015	0.761
% in Poverty	0.233	0.037	0.000	0.273	0.037	0.000	0.290	0.031	0.000
Diversity	0.055	0.026	0.032	0.031	0.027	0.242	0.000	0.015	0.982
% Homeowners	-0.027	0.028	0.34	-0.002	0.027	0.941	0.002	0.020	0.91
% IG Revenue	-0.178	0.022	0.000	-0.185	0.021	0.000	-0.213	0.018	0.000
Nonpartisan	-0.001	0.009	0.914	-0.013	0.008	0.116	-0.007	0.006	0.261
District Council	0.011	0.006	0.064	0.016	0.006	0.013	0.003	0.004	0.565
Council Manager	0.004	0.006	0.535	0.005	0.006	0.454	-0.004	0.005	0.401
State Home Rule Score	0.056	0.019	0.003	0.078	0.021	0.000			
Constant	0.370	0.020	0.046	0.343	0.021	0.056	0.451	0.037	0.000
R^2	0.093			0.087			0.200		
N	13138			13138			11813		

Property Taxes									
	Polling Locations			Registration			Concurrent Elections		
	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t	Coeff.	St Err	P> t
Contestable institution	0.084	0.051	0.105	0.042	0.048	0.378	0.019	0.008	0.014
Full Time City Council	-0.006	0.009	0.540	-0.009	0.010	0.342	-0.007	0.005	0.113
Total # Councilors	0.003	0.005	0.544	0.001	0.005	0.857	0.001	0.001	0.666
Population (log)	-0.012	0.007	0.075	-0.012	0.007	0.103	-0.005	0.002	0.036
% Urban	-0.053	0.031	0.092	-0.049	0.031	0.115	-0.010	0.012	0.416
% in Poverty	-0.608	0.111	0.000	-0.663	0.126	0.000	-0.092	0.035	0.01
Diversity	-0.301	0.076	0.000	-0.262	0.080	0.001	-0.015	0.017	0.38
% Homeowners	-0.190	0.071	0.008	-0.229	0.079	0.004	0.119	0.023	0.000
% IG Revenue	0.471	0.083	0.000	0.475	0.083	0.000	0.051	0.023	0.029
Nonpartisan	0.022	0.025	0.377	0.043	0.026	0.101	-0.008	0.006	0.202
District Council	-0.005	0.018	0.783	-0.014	0.018	0.464	-0.012	0.005	0.015
Council Manager	0.020	0.021	0.342	0.020	0.022	0.367	-0.003	0.005	0.569
State Home Rule Score	0.140	0.068	0.042	0.102	0.062	0.103			
Constant	0.022	0.061	0.715	0.022	0.060	0.714	0.494	0.055	0.000
R^2	0.202			0.157			0.515		
N	13140			13140			11815		

Note: OLS regressions; State fixed effects included but not presented in local factors model. Robust errors clustered by city in local factors model and by state-year in state factors models.

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Appendix

Table A1: Summary Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
% Incumbent Running	12508	0.430372	0.230504	0	1
% Incumbent Reelected	11925	0.370798	0.221173	0	1
% Council Salaries	10302	0.00326	0.018006	0	1
Annual Council Salaries	10302	2691.278	4219.119	0	109,933
% Payroll Expenditures	13138	0.491757	0.180029	0	1
% Property Taxes	13140	0.194104	0.14822	0	0.944314
Sample Ballots Mailed	13140	0.144673	0.351784	0	1
Polling Locations Mailed	13140	0.181887	0.385766	0	1
Registration within 1 Month	13140	0.645129	0.478492	0	1
November Concurrent Elections	11072	0.106485	0.308471	0	1
Local Paper	13140	0.271842	0.444926	0	1
District Council	13140	0.331659	0.470827	0	1
Partisan Elections	13140	0.211872	0.408650	0	1
% Budget Spent on Central Staff	13138	0.050549	0.058935	0	0.888158
Council Manager System	13140	0.569635	0.495146	0	1
% Council Retired	12508	0.192591	0.190569	0	1
% Council Professionals	12508	0.081921	0.142884	0	1
% Council Business Managers	12508	0.262252	0.23630	0	1
Term Limits	12508	0.066757	0.249611	0	1
Staggered Council Elections	12508	0.823633	0.381147	0	1
% Unemployed	13140	0.03718	0.018046	0	0.279518
% Homeowners	13140	0.651524	0.125045	0.074164	1
Diversity	13140	0.251473	0.189015	0	0.993423
% College Graduates	13140	0.211603	0.137473	0.004389	0.884035
Median HH Income (10 thsds)	13140	35522.49	18112.64	9544	200001
Population (log)	13140	9.227964	1.180221	3.218876	15.12245
Council Size Per Thsd Persons	13140	1.071943	2.53623	0.00406	200
% Urban	13140	0.965975	0.160609	0	1
% in Poverty	13140	0.130467	0.084755	0	0.64483
% IG Revenue	13140	0.186749	0.138234	0	1
State Home Rule Score	13140	0.56448	0.330928	0	1

Table A2: Independent Variables Mean Values by State

	Sample Ballots	Polling Locations	Registration 1 month	Concurrent Elections	Daily Paper
Alabama	0	0	1	0.012048	0.227106
Alaska	0	0	0	0.025317	0.264368
Arizona	0	0	1	0	0.234375
Arkansas	0	0	0.547619	0.82243	0.428571
California	1	1	1	0.328052	0.239028
Colorado	0	0.027875	0.529617	0.012346	0.303136
Connecticut	0	0	1	0.024316	0.115385
Delaware	0	0	1	0	0.166667
Florida	0	0	0.487106	0.061514	0.164756
Georgia	0	0	0	0.061093	0.204482
Hawaii	0	1	0	0	1
Idaho	0	0	1	0	0.366337
Illinois	0	0	1	0.002195	0.189484
Indiana	0	0	1	0.021661	0.485714
Iowa	0	0	1	0.002571	0.296471
Kansas	0	0	1	0	0.41954
Kentucky	0	0	1	0.00813	0.237226
Louisiana	0	0	0.611111	0.108333	0.339506
Maine	0	0	1	0.009592	0.065817
Maryland	0.330986	0.330986	1	0	0.21831
Massachusetts	0	0	1	0	0.109705
Michigan	0	0	0	0.074124	0.205097
Minnesota	0	0	1	0.45738	0.143581
Mississippi	0	0	0	0.023256	0.355263
Missouri	0	0	1	0.010163	0.247191
Montana	0	0	0	0.069444	0.448718
Nebraska	0	0	1	0.815385	0.303867
Nevada	1	1	0	0	0.522727
New Hampshire	0	0	1	0.012658	0.138298
New Jersey	1	1	1	0.147321	0.092961
New Mexico	0	0	1	0	0.453608
New York	0	1	1	0.011494	0.276042
North Carolina	0	0	1	0	0.281768
North Dakota	0	0	1	0.115385	0.694444
Ohio	0	0	0	0.038945	0.246377
Oklahoma	0	0	1	0	0.378378
Oregon	1	1	1	0.835821	0.17737
Pennsylvania	0	0	0	0.053248	0.199438
Rhode Island	0	0	0	0.730769	0.184466
South Carolina	0	0	0	0.066298	0.180995

Table A2: Independent Variables Mean Values by State

	Sample Ballots	Polling Locations	Registration 1 month	Concurrent Elections	Daily Paper
South Dakota	0	0	1	0	0.558824
Tennessee	0	0	0.538462	0.086777	0.180602
Texas	0	0	0	0.004682	0.243478
Utah	0	0	1	0	0.068421
Vermont	0	0	1	0	0.165468
Virginia	0	0	0.518797	0.079602	0.319549
Washington	0	0	0	0.023256	0.260726
West Virginia	0	0	0.455285	0.036036	0.365854
Wisconsin	0	0	1	0.008547	0.193117
Wyoming	0	0	0.458333	0.614035	0.347222