Why We Can't Have Nice Things (in American Cities):

How Institutions Keep Voters from Holding Their Local Governments Accountable[1]

Most recent draft available here

Justin de Benedictis-Kessner[2]

May 27, 2025

[1]Tentative working title, open for feedback. Other options that have been suggested include: "The Fog of Accountability: ...", "Trust Without Performance: ...", "How Cities Fail: ...", "Navigating the Fog: ..."'

[2]Associate Professor, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Email: jdbk@hks.harvard.edu

Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

1

The Fog of Accountability in Cities

Mayor Jim Suttle was known as a guy who got the basics right. Elected to the City Council of Omaha, Nebraska, in 2005, and later to the office of Mayor, in 2009, Suttle was a known quantity within city government but relatively unknown outside of city hall. He'd been the director of Public Works for the city before his first campaign in 2005, and he'd spent a career as an engineer and in municipal public service before that in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Wichita, Kansas. By all appearances he was a dedicated public servant who launched a career in politics in order to give back to his community.

After taking office in 2009, Suttle inherited a local economy that was crashing – much like the economy in the rest of the country at the time. Local sales tax revenue had declined during his predecessor's time in office, to the point where Suttle was faced by an $11 million budgetary shortfall immediately after entering office.[1] He had to cut back on city services and increase taxes in order to fill this shortfall and balance the city's budget. Suttle made tough – and sometimes unpopular – cuts to spending but stood by his decisions. He was able to get the city's finances back on track with a balanced budget in 2010. By many accounts, he had saved the city from a fiscal cliff that might have led to economic devastation.

Yet only a couple years into his tenure as mayor, Suttle was faced with a recall effort from Omaha voters. In Suttle's view, this was a relitigation of his successful 2009 mayoral campaign. "They decided to add a fifth quarter to the football game I won fair and square," he was quoted as saying in the *Lincoln Journal Star*.[2] Suttle narrowly defeated this recall with 51% of the

[1] https://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/omaha-mayor-blames-politics-for-recall-effort/article_73073d14-b6fb-5cd9-a2e7-5760989cc428.html.

[2] https://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/

vote in 2011.

Then, in 2013, his re-election campaign came around. In the April primary he placed second behind Jean Stothert, an Omaha city councilor. Though Suttle claimed that his actions – and the city's improvement since he started as mayor – were "loud and clear," voters clearly weren't receiving this message.[3] Suttle was resoundingly defeated in his bid for a second term in office in the general election. Stothert beat him with 57% of the vote to his 42% that May.

This was despite the fact that the economy in Omaha was thriving in 2013 by the time of the election. Wages in the metropolitan area in the quarter before the election had increased by 4% since the previous year, even above state-wide wage growth in 2013. Suttle had returned the city's finances to where they had been before the nationwide financial crisis – including its AAA bond rating, its solid pension fund balances, and its general fund surplus. Crime was down in 2013. Just like Omaha's economic growth, the trends in Omaha's crime rates in 2013 were even better than crime decreases at the national or state level. Student test scores in the public schools had increased in the last few academic years. Yet Suttle – a mayor who had by most objective measures done plenty of things right – was thrown out of office by his city's voters.

Two years after Suttle's defeat and less than a thousand miles away in Memphis, Tennessee, Jim Strickland first ran for mayor in 2015. Four years after that, in October 2019, Strickland was re-elected easily with 62% of the vote. The incumbent mayor's catchphrase, "Memphis has momentum," was used by some to describe the mayor's re-election victory as well.

Memphis during Strickland's first term looked decidedly different than Omaha during Suttle's tenure, however. Wage growth in Memphis stagnated below national averages. In the year before Strickland's re-election, wages improved only 2.7% – relative to Tennessee's state-wide increase of over 4%. Large employers like Electrolux – the manufacturer of Frigidaire appliances – announced they were closing production and eliminating jobs in the city during Strickland's first term.[4] Critical businesses were shuttering their doors in Memphis' downtown: two Kroger grocery stores announced in early 2018 that they would close due to losses.[5] In response to these types of events, the mayor often stated his disappointment in the poor economic news.

Even more aggravating to Memphis residents than the sluggish economic environment in the years leading up to 2019 was probably the city's soaring

omaha-mayor-blames-politics-for-recall-effort/article_73073d14-b6fb-5cd9-a2e7-5760989cc428.html.

[3] https://www.kios.org/politics-elections/2013-04-03/omahas-mayoral-candidates-jim-suttle-and-jean-stothert

[4] https://wreg.com/news/electrolux-to-close-memphis-facility/

[5] https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/money/business/development/2018/01/05/horrible-just-horrible-kroger-shopper-says-plans-close-southgate-store/1007497001/

crime rate: in 2019 it had the second-highest per capita crime rate of large cities in the country, and the fourth-highest violent crime rate. Even though Mayor Strickland had increased the size of the police force in Memphis as well as raised police officers' pay, crime had increased in the city in his first four years in office relative to the years prior to his election. Journalists dubbed the year after Strickland's first election (2016) as a "murderous year" (Perrusquia 2017). In 2019, violent crime decreased slightly by 2.2% from 2018 – but in Tennessee as a whole, violent crime rates had steeply dropped by more than double that (4.6%).

At the end of Strickland's first term, Memphis lagged both Tennessee and the nation as a whole in economic performance and public safety. These two salient features of residents' lives were both showing no signs of improvement relative to the rest of the state and the country as a whole. Crime prevention and a healthy local economy are both some of the core responsibilities of city governments. Why, then, was Strickland so easily re-elected? Why did people vote the way they did in the Memphis mayoral election in 2019, and in Omaha's mayoral election in 2013?

The stories of Omaha and Memphis – and Suttle and Strickland – exemplify problems of accountability. Accountability in elections *should* mean that leaders who make decisions that improve residents' lives are rewarded at the ballot box. And it should mean that leaders who make decisions which lead to worse conditions for their constituents are penalized. In other words, voters punish and reward incumbent politicians for their performance in office. Yet stories abound of city leaders who revitalized their cities for their residents and, like Suttle, were thrown out of office by voters. And city leaders who failed to improve the lives of their residents have often been re-elected to office.

These stories stand in contrast to popular, legal, and scholarly conceptions of local governments as "closest to the people" – more so than the federal or state governments. When former mayor of New York City Michael Bloomberg was asked in a 2014 interview whether he thought mayors are more accountable than politicians at the national level, he replied simply, "Absolutely!"[6] He went on to explain the reason he believed that. "Because people can walk out the door and see what the mayors did or did not do. You can easily measure their effectiveness. Legislators, on the other hand, can simply say: 'Look, we are here to write legislation that will only have effects 10-15 years from now.' Mayors can't do that. They have to live up to their promises in as short a time frame as possible."

Bloomberg's comments are hard to deny: people experience the quality of public services provided by local government on a daily basis. The pavement of roads, the safety of neighborhoods, and the quality of public schools are

[6] https://m.theeuropeanmag.com/michael-bloomberg--2/8669-michael-bloomberg-on-cities-and-innovation.

all near-daily signals of the performance of local government. It is obviously true that such public services are commonly experienced by city residents. It would be difficult to ignore daily signals of public services failing at the local level. This fact lends credence to Bloomberg's conclusion that city leaders are held accountable for their actions.

Scholarly and legal interpretations of local governments also agree with Mayor Bloomberg's understanding. The outcomes of local public services are clear and tangible to voters (Kaufmann 2004). Local elections should, as a result, be an easy place for voters to reflect their retrospective experiences with public services in their vote choice (Oliver, Ha, and Callen 2012) – especially relative to federal or state elections. The courts' understanding of local governments clearly accords with this scholarly view of local democratic accountability. In the decision on *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*, 567 U.S. 519 (2012), the Supreme Court's plurality opinion states that vague federal legislation preserves room for policymaking by "governments more local and more accountable." The assumption, of course, is that voters can actually hold those governments accountable (for a review of the legal interpretations of accountability, see Stephanopoulos 2017).

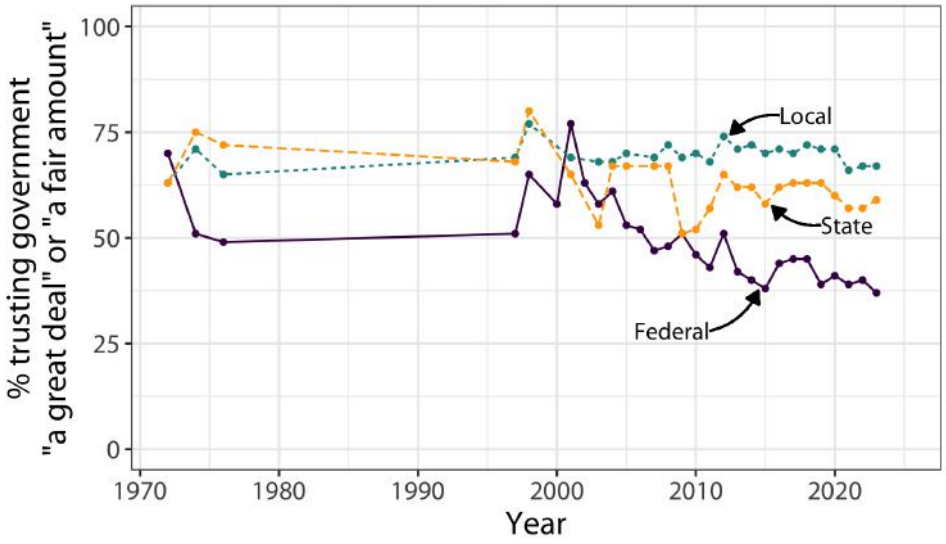
Some might interpret the empirical evidence to be in agreement with this view of local governments as closest to the people. The longest-running source of data on how residents of the United States feel about their governments comes from Gallup, which has been asking in polls for over 50 years several questions about exactly this. Gallup asks respondents to their surveys whether they trust various levels of government "to do what is right." They ask this about the federal government, about state governments, and about respondents' local governments. In Figure 1.1 below, I plot responses to these questions about different levels of government.

Since the 1970s, Americans have been reporting that they trust their local governments more than the federal government. And since the turn of the twenty-first century, they have trusted local governments more than their state governments as well. While trust in the federal government has declined in recent decades, trust in local government has remained strong. According to this evidence, the general consensus view of local governments as accountable and responsive by nature of being closer to the people might be correct.

This pattern – of high trust in local government, but low trust in the national government – stands out in global perspective. Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2023 presents a good comparison point that I display in Figure 1.2 alongside the Gallup data from the US. Each horizontal bar plots the difference in a country's residents' trust in their local government and their trust in their national government when asked in 2023 surveys.

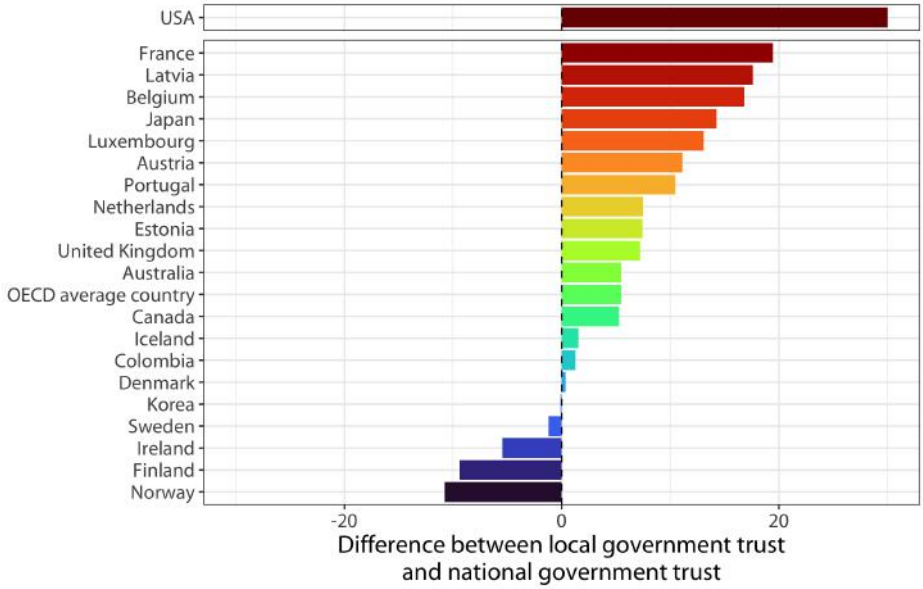
The United States – represented by the top bar – is a clear outlier.

Figure 1.1: Gallup polls on trust in government



Residents of the US trust their local governments a great deal more than their national governments, while residents of other countries have much smaller gaps between levels of trust in their local and national governments. In some countries, residents even trust their national governments *more* than their local governments.

Figure 1.2: OECD polls on trust in local vs. national government



Yet stories of mayors and city councilors who remain in office despite deteriorating cities – or the reverse phenomenon of competent service delivery managers who get thrown out of office – are both common. That rosy understanding of local governments also stands in contrast to the lived experiences of many people in U.S. cities. Residents of U.S. cities who travel outside the country are often struck by the simple phenomenon of well-functioning public services in global cities. The subway in Seoul, South Korea, or the smooth roads of Oslo, Norway, or the lack of garbage cluttering the streets of Singapore, or the widespread safety from crime in Ljubljana, Slovenia: all of these features of other cities appear aberrant to the average American abroad because of their contrast with their experiences at home. Why are American cities so far behind many of their peer global cities?

My argument in this book is that the *local politics* behind U.S. cities – the lackluster competition in local elections, the complex institutions that govern cities and local public services, and the cloudy information environment confronting voters in cities – are also part of the problem. Accountability for the quality of city residents' lives is a difficult task to accomplish via democratic elections in this setting.

If voters in city elections are not holding their elected leaders accountable for public services, on what basis are they voting? Are they making decisions based on name recognition, or convenient mental shortcuts like the race, gender, or political party of a candidate? Or do voters just make decisions based on their mood that morning as they go to their polling place? Are these decisions based on anything principled? If electoral accountability functions in cities, we would expect more than just voter sanctioning for extreme examples of malpractice by city leaders or major corruption scandals. Electoral accountability should also imply normal voting decisions that correspond with the performance of politicians in office. Are stories like those of Suttle and Strickland aberrant examples, or are they the norm? In other words, is accountability common in city governments? Do scholarly and legal views of local governments as more accountable to the people have any basis in reality?

The answer depends on when and where we look for answers to the question of whether there is electoral accountability in local politics. The imperfect mechanisms for political accountability at the local level that I describe in this book lead to functioning accountability for some issues in some places and for some types of leaders. But for other issues in other places and for other leaders, it does not. Institutions of local government combine with basic features of human psychology and behavior to create what I call a fog of accountability. Much of this fog was created by institutions designed *specifically* to insulate local government from the fickle whims of voters in the early twentieth century. These institutions were further adapted over to create fiscal efficiencies in the delivery of government services via specialization of responsibilities. In some ways, these institutional reforms

did their job, but did it too well. They made responsibilities for public services in cities complex and shielded from view.

This institutional complexity can lead to an overload of information with debatable relevance. As Herbert Simon put it, "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (Simon 1971, 40). As a result of this poverty of attention, voters struggle to hold city governments accountable. An information environment that makes accurate relevant information about government performance even more difficult for voters to learn exacerbates the institutional problems of local government. Public services in many cities – and the lives of their residents – suffer as a result.

My results stand in contrast to the bulk of evidence collected by others on electoral accountability at other levels of government. Most commonly, this research has shown that voters hold federal elected officials accountable for the economy, albeit with some biases (for a review, see Healy and Malhotra 2013). In the words of Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000), "citizen[s] vote for the government if the economy is doing all right; otherwise the vote is against." This finding – what some term "economic voting" – is perhaps one of the most well-studied phenomena in the field of political science. A Google Scholar search for the term "economic voting" returns over 16,000 results. The conclusions of this research have seeped into the media's and the public's understanding of politics in this country.

The implication of these studies is that, via democratic elections, politicians are held accountable. Electoral accountability, as described in this way, can both help citizens select competent leaders, and incentivize those leaders to perform well once in office (Fearon 1999; Ferejohn 1986). Yet the bulk of these studies rely on evidence from national or (sometimes) state elections to arrive at this sunny conclusion (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020*a*; Trounstine 2010). Accountability in local elections – cities, but also counties and other sub-state levels of government – is far less studied. This mirrors the fact that local governments and local elections have garnered far less popular attention as well.

Why are urban and local politics so ignored in popular and scholarly attention (e.g. Sapotichne, Jones, and Wolfe 2007)? In part, the local level of government escapes our attention by design. In the early twentieth century, cities were hotbeds of both political activity and corruption. The machine politics of cities in this era are infamous for the kickbacks received by city workers, and the cronyism that defined city service provision (Trounstine 2008). Cities more generally became nearly synonymous with the concept of political corruption in American politics, led by infamous examples such as New York's Tammany Hall and the "Chicago style" of politics (Peterson 1976; Schleicher 2010).

The machine politics of major cities worried Progressive-era reformers who believed that the services provided by local governments were much more efficiently delivered if they were divorced from politics. In these re-

formers' view, taking the politics *out* of local government would enable better public services. A wave of subsequent reforms changed the institutions in cities to insulate the business of running local government from voters. These reforms were successful in doing so – and political activity including voter participation in city elections is low nowadays. Most city elections are now held off-cycle (at a different time from national elections), lack partisan labels on the ballot, and in many instances lack a race for a top executive mayor but instead involve an elected city council with an appointed city manager (e.g. Anzia 2014; Bledsoe and Welch 1987; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Schleicher 2007; Trounstine 2010).

These historical and institutional distinctions lead to a local political environment that is different from national and even state politics (Trounstine and Hajnal 2024). It also demands a different version of a search for accountability. In national and state politics, strong partisan branding makes it both theoretically easy to say that accountability should function along partisan lines and empirically easy to study this phenomenon. For instance, in my own previous work with Chris Warshaw, we show that state and federal candidates are rewarded and punished for the performance of the local economy based on whether they share a partisan label with the President (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020*a*).

At the city level, however, it would be hard to argue that this is functioning accountability: why should a city mayor whose job has little to do with the President and who likely never interacts directly with the federal executive in the business of running their city be blamed or rewarded based on a shared partisan label with the President?[7] And empirically, it would be econometrically hard to even examine this question: because such a small percentage of city elections involve two-party competition in an officially partisan environment, it would lead to few observations of elections and little statistical power.[8] Accountability at the local level is therefore both more difficult to study and a higher bar for voters to clear.

For one, it is far more difficult for voters to find information about elected officials at the local level than the federal or even state level. Finding information about local candidates – rather than incumbents – is even more difficult. As a result, voters use national political information in their subnational political decisions. Hopkins (2018) documents this trend towards nationalized voting patterns, and shows that voters make decisions in state

[7]This logic also applies in other countries, where partisan discipline may be weaker among local government elected officials than at the national level and make individual or personal accountability a more relevant normative question than partisan accountability (Wilfahrt 2022).

[8]This is also why studies of the incumbency advantage in local politics often focus on the individual candidate incumbency advantage rather than the partisan advantage more often studied at the federal and state levels (de Benedictis-Kessner 2018*b*; Trounstine 2011; though see Warshaw 2019).

and Congressional elections that are more likely to reflect their opinions of national political parties than actual local candidates. Similarly, Steve Rogers shows that state legislative elections are influenced not by state legislators' votes or performance in office but by voters' opinions of the president and other national forces (Rogers 2016, 2017, 2023).[9] Even school board elections have become nationalized in recent years, attracting attention from national organizations and their donors (Reckhow et al. 2017).

These trends towards nationalization are one indicator of a challenging information environment for city voters. If it is difficult to find information about local candidates, their policy platforms, and the performance of local government, it becomes harder for voters to make reasoned decisions in elections. They may make these decisions with a more national frame of reference, as Hopkins and Rogers and others have argued in state and Congressional elections (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Hopkins 2018; Rogers 2023). But this may not always be a problem. National partisan brands might actually be a helpful heuristic cue to teach voters relevant information about candidates' association with incumbent leaders and with prospective policy platforms (e.g. Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015*a*, 2023; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Reece et al. 2024), given that electing state and local leaders of different parties can lead to meaningful distinctions in policy (Caughey, Warshaw, and Xu 2017; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016, 2020*b*; de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones, and Warshaw 2024; Grumbach 2022). Yet voters lack this partisan cue in the vast majority of city elections and must rely on other information (Elmendorf and Schleicher 2013; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). So while nationalization might be a problem for local democratic representation and accountability, it might actually be a helpful aid for voters. And as I will show in this book, nationalization is far from the only problem with the information environment – nor with the electoral environment – in local politics.

My argument throughout this book is that accountability in cities is difficult to accomplish. In large part, my argument relies on an understanding of the institutions that shape voters' choices in local elections. As Sniderman (2000) states it, "citizens do not operate as decision makers in isolation from political institutions" (Sniderman 2000, 68). If we want to know the effects of political institutions and their variation, then local politics is an excellent place to study it. There are over 50,000 subnational governments in the United States, and hundreds of thousands of elected and appointed officials serve in these governments and make influential decisions about the services they provide. Because of their number, there is naturally a great deal of variation in the way these local governments are set up. This variation pro-

[9]Though, see recent results from Kuriwaki (2023) that state and local races feature far more split-ticket voting than Congressional voting, indicating that these patterns are not universal among voters.

vides theoretical and empirical leverage to test the impact of institutions on voters, elections, and policy outcomes. Such examinations can in turn lead to a better understanding of both distinctive local government institutions *and* institutions that are relevant at other levels of government as well (e.g. Marschall, Shah, and Ruhil 2011; Post 2018; Thrower 2019; Trounstine 2010; Warshaw 2019).

My findings take both approaches to examining institutional variation. My evidence demonstrates problems with local institutions that result in poor accountability in cities, and also illuminates ways in which accountability can be limited in politics at other levels of government. The institutions present (or absent) in local elections limit competition in these elections, create confusing authority for local public services, and depress voters' levels of information about local politics and government performance. Functioning democratic accountability is less likely in these cases. As Key (1966) stated it, "the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available" (Key 1966, 7). The absence of these conditions – clear alternatives and high-quality information available – are what I show makes electoral accountability in cities unlikely.

First, because of the lack of partisan competition and the general low salience of local elections, there is only some degree of effective competition in elections. There is especially little competition for city offices when incumbents are running – indicating minimal threat to incumbents. When there is little choice in local elections, poor-quality incumbent leaders have little incentive to improve (Besley and Case 1995; Besley, Persson, and Sturm 2010; Ferejohn 1986). And voters have little ability to replace them with better alternatives.

Within this minimally competitive electoral environment, there are limited policy areas in cities for which voters can easily hold their leaders accountable for doing a good job. People often do not know who to blame for the public services that they do not like in their cities. And while all cities have some number of highly-involved and knowledgeable citizens who will know how to overcome these decision-making obstacles, these knowledgeable voters are always only a small number of the aggregate voting population.

This may make it possible to accomplish accountability in cities for highly visible and clearly "local" policy areas. Voters can easily reflect upon these issues and then connect those reflections to city leaders. But in many other policy areas, this does not happen. The institutional design of local governments creates complex responsibility for most public services. This is often done in the name of fiscal efficiency, but as I will show, it is at the expense of political confusion.

Two things can help the voting public solve this problem and accomplish accountability. When the information environment around local elections contains reliable signals of *who* is responsible and *what* performance

is, voters can learn the interstitial information that helps them link specific conditions in their city with elected leaders. And when responsibilities for public services are more clear for voters – by having unified jurisdictional boundaries for city elections and public services – voters have fewer barriers to connecting their experiences in local politics.

Together, these features of cities – which are by no means common in contemporary local politics – can enable effective electoral sanctioning. Without them, electoral accountability is unlikely. And the absence of such electoral accountability gives politicians no incentive to make better policy and consequently contributes to worse public services for city residents. The evidence of these problems with accountability helps us to understand the shortcomings of politics for achieving accountability in cities, but also the shortcomings of democratic accountability in a more general sense regardless of the setting.

In establishing this argument, I draw on both micro- and macro-level evidence to investigate the process of accountability in cities in the US. I use survey responses of people who live in cities, and experimental evidence to show how these people are affected by the provision of information. I use elections data and fine-grained data on individual public services and conditions in cities over time to show how these patterns occur at the aggregate level. I zoom into individual cities, at times, to harness advantages of certain data only available in one place. And I zoom out to examine accountability in thousands of cities at once to take advantage of data that spans a much wider temporal and geographic range. These different types of evidence, while each imperfect in certain ways on their own, together enable me to triangulate a consistent answer about accountability in local politics. They also teach us about politics in a multilevel federal system more broadly. My hope is that these findings focus on both the distinctiveness of local politics *and* its commonality with state and national politics, and the problems that exist in all these settings.

Accountability: the Basics

The basic process of accountability for performance is simple and familiar to most people. Indeed, most people with regular employment face a performance-based review somewhat periodically from their supervisors. At such a review for a salesperson, a boss might collect evidence on, say, her employee's sales over the past year. If a worker had surpassed his sales targets for that year, his boss might give him a bonus or promote him. And if he had underperformed those targets, the boss might withhold a bonus – or, in a more drastic scenario, she could fire the worker.

This scenario is relatively simple in an employment context, though these judgments on performance might already be subject to some subjectivity.

When adapting this framework to politics, however, a number of concerns arise. For one, nearly all outcomes of politics are the product of some degree of cooperation between leaders at multiple levels of government, making it hard to isolate which "employees" should be connected to which performance indicators. And there will always be some role for events outside the hands of politicians to determine outcomes: weather, global pandemics, and isolated occurrences like shark attacks.

When I write about accountability in this book, I am not writing about leaders being punished for shark attacks – or other events completely outside their control. I define accountability in this book – in a normative but also in a positive sense – as voters judging politicians on some aspect of performance that is at least somewhat under the control of those politicians. Within the federal structure of the United States, local governments are, of course, limited in their control of both policies and outcomes in their cities (e.g. Craw 2008; Gerber and Hopkins 2011; Peterson 1981, 1995; Rae 2003; Self 2003). Yet they still exercise substantial influence over a bevy of policy areas and subsequent outcomes by spending public money and making important policy decisions – in many areas, much more so than other levels of government. It is for the outcomes of these decisions – financial and otherwise – that I believe local governments *should* be held accountable. Throughout this book, I will use this as the benchmark by which I evaluate the presence of accountability: *are local government punished and rewarded for outcomes in the areas for which they bear at least partial responsibility*?

This definition of accountability is distinct from some other popular definitions of accountability in politics. For instance, recent debates on the empirical correspondence of irrelevant events – such as shark attacks or sports team wins – with election results primarily argue that these effects are evidence of voter irrationality (Achen and Bartels 2016; Busby, Druckman, and Fredendall 2017; Graham et al. 2023; Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010; Miller 2013, though see Busby and Druckman 2018; Fowler and Hall 2018; Fowler and Montagnes 2015, 2023). Yet as Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, and Friedenberg (2018) point out, "this interpretation is not warranted, or is at least premature" without evidence that these irrelevant events do not present any opportunity for voters to learn about leaders' competence in response to them.

My definition of accountability – and therefore the argument in this book – is linked directly to this assertion by Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, and Friedenberg (2018): I examine outcomes for which local governments play *some* role in determining the outcome, and so voters' judgments about performance should be at least partially linked to their local leaders. This role in determining outcomes can take multiple forms for the policy issues which I address in this book. Local governments might bear some responsibility via their spending, such as with road repair, education, and police protection, all of which make up substantial portions of city government spending

(Urban Institute 2024). Or they might bear responsibility via their relatively exclusive control over a policy area – such as zoning land use control. Zoning and land use policy decisions influence both housing and economic development, and so city government decisions matter a great deal in the policy areas affected by these. And even while cities might share their responsibilities with other political entities to differing degrees across these policy areas, the outcomes that I will examine in this book are all ones about which voters *should* learn something about their leaders' competency due to this partial responsibility.

My definition of accountability is also a more simple one than accountability for specific ideological policy *decisions*. To return to the sales analogy I made earlier, we might not just care about how an employee hits sales targets, but also the *way* in which they hit those targets. In politics, we often care about the way in which leaders pursue broad outcomes – in other words, what policies they choose to accomplish their goals.

Accountability for policy positions is a much harder hurdle for voters to clear than performance-based voting. As Lenz (2013) argues, voting based on performance is less cognitively demanding than voting based on specific policy positions. Policy accountability – as examined by Lenz and others (e.g. Rogers 2023) is unlikely given the tendency of voters to adopt the policy positions of leaders they already like or share a partisan bond with. This can give politicians "considerable freedom in the policies they enact without fear of electoral repercussions" (Lenz 2013, 3).

In contrast, the evaluations of performance-based accountability that I conduct in this book are a preliminary step at assessing accountability in local governments. Here, I seek to understand instead whether there are guardrails on politicians' actions in office due to anticipation of voter punishment or reward. In this minimal conception of accountability, voters might be able to incentivize good performance by politicians even without specific knowledge of their policy positions (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966).

What We Know About Local Accountability

This version of accountability based on performance echoes a large body of research in political science going back at least 50 years. For instance, Fiorina (1981) and others studying retrospective voting in presidential elections conclude that, while voters likely pay minimal attention to candidates' specific policy positions, they are competent enough to throw poorly performing incumbents out of office and reward ones that perform well. Other researchers have similarly shown that the performance of the economy influences presidential and Congressional elections (e.g. Erikson 1989; Key 1966; Kramer 1971; Markus 1988; Tufte 1978).

There is a subsequent – and rather cynical – literature that has identified

a number of problems in voters' ability to retrospectively vote. When voters reflect on past performance and judge incumbent leaders, they may be generally competent. But they also have a number of biases in their ability to do so (Healy and Malhotra 2013). Though by no means exhaustive, I highlight three such biases here.

For one, voters are myopic: they put more emphasis on recent performance than on an incumbent leader's performance over the course of their term (e.g. Healy and Lenz 2014; Healy and Malhotra 2009; Huber, Hill, and Lenz 2012). This empirical finding builds on a long line of research in psychology that shows how people have an availability heuristic by which they use the most cognitively available information when making judgments of the past (e.g. Tversky and Kahneman 1973). Second, voters may allow irrelevant events to influence their judgments of incumbents. These irrelevant events can range from sports team wins (e.g. Busby and Druckman 2018; Miller 2013) to shark attacks (e.g. Achen and Bartels 2016; Busby, Druckman, and Fredendall 2017; Graham et al. 2023; Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010). Voters may also blame incumbent leaders for outcomes for which those specific politicians are not actually responsible for (e.g. Sances 2021*b*) – and in some cases, for which voters are themselves responsible (Larsen 2021; Sances 2017).

These biases may all interact with a third – and overwhelming – bias that voters hold: a partisan bias. Partisanship, at least in American politics, hold primacy in the way that it can screen all information that members of the public consume and shape their subsequent perceptions (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002, cf. Peterson 2017). Partisanship can bias voters' perceptions of government performance and the degree to which voters judge specific local politicians for this performance – both in the US and elsewhere (e.g. Ang et al. 2022; Bartels 2002; Bisgaard 2015; Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Gerber and Huber 2010; Rudolph 2003*b*, 2006; Tilley and Hobolt 2011).

Some of these biases are likely to play no role in *local* political accountability, while some biases may be more likely to occur. First, the overwhelming partisan bias used by voters when making retrospective decisions is unlikely in the local context, where partisanship is less salient if present at all.

Voters' confusion of irrelevant from relevant information may, however, be much *more* likely to occur in the local government context due to the confusing setup of local government institutions and low levels of voter knowledge, as I will discuss in great detail throughout this book. And a recency bias could be either more or less likely to occur in voters' local political decisions: it might be more likely, due to the many signals of local government performance that confront voters in their every day lives; it might also be less likely due to the frequency of interactions that people have with their local government services, giving them many signals of performance. Exam-

ining the presence or absence of these biases in local politics is not the focus of this book. But I highlight them here to demonstrate that the presence of accountability is by no means a question with a firmly positive answer.

In many ways, the (at least partial) absence of a partisan bias in local politics makes it an "easy test" for accountability and potential ways to improve it. If electoral accountability exists anywhere, it should be apparent in settings that lack this large bias. Yet local politics also provides a setting to investigate the scope conditions that other examinations of accountability often ignore, but which are crucial for any assessment of accountability overall. Are politicians at the local level held accountable for the economy, or are predominant theories of accountability confined to federal or state elections, despite local politicians holding the vast majority of elected offices in the country? Do voters hold politicians accountable for areas of government performance – many of them important policy areas – beyond economic performance which are far less-studied by the disciplines of political science and economics? How do voters gain enough knowledge to judge government performance and then act accordingly in elections? And finally, what policy solutions might there be to remedy any faults in accountability that exist in an ideal setting for elections to operate as a tool to induce better governance? These are the questions that I take up in this book, which builds upon the work of many others that has addressed pieces of this story.

In answer to the first question, there is mixed evidence about accountability at the local level, even for something as simple as the economy. Though governors appear to be judged by voters for the performance of the economy (Lowry, Alt, and Ferree 1998; Peltzman 1987), this may be contingent on the economic geography and mix of industries present in a state (Ebeid and Rodden 2006). And when this argument is extended beyond governors, the story is even less clear. State legislators, for example, are only held accountable for the economy according to their partisan ties to the president (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020*a*; Rogers 2023).

The evidence on accountability for the economy below the state level is even more limited. Arnold and Carnes (2012) show that New York City mayors' approval ratings track objective measures of economic conditions. But they rely on aggregations of survey respondents' opinions about the mayor to make this argument, rather than actual voting choices. And, as they note, New York City may be an exceptional setting for accountability, with both strong competition between mayoral candidates and a local media environment that facilitates an informed citizenry.

Evidence from other studies on city elections is mixed, showing that economic accountability may depend on the presence of newspaper media coverage (Burke 2024; Hopkins and Pettingill 2018) – or, alternatively, that increased salience around issues like the economy will actually lead to *less* accountability (Kaufmann 2004). Holbrook and Weinschenk (2014) argue instead that the effect of the economy on voters' support for mayoral in-

cumbents depends on the campaign spending of their challengers. And the most comprehensive survey evidence on local electoral choice comes from Oliver and Ha (2007), who argue that voters' evaluations of the economy have little effect on their vote preferences. The conclusions from research on subnational accountability – and especially accountability in *cities* – are thus decidedly mixed.

Why is Accountability in Cities Difficult?

One reason that these conclusions may be so mixed at the local level is the variation among cities and among voters and among policy areas. Voters differ in their levels of knowledge about what government performance is, knowledge about which governments are responsible for different types of performance, and even about which local candidates in elections are incumbents who should be held accountable for current conditions. These incumbents dominate local elections not simply be being re-elected at high rates (which they are), but by being only minimally challenged in elections by viable competitors. Local governments exhibit a panoply of institutional design choices in the way that they elect leaders, the way that they make policy decisions, and the way that they provide services. The variation in these institutions, in turn, shapes the context in which voters make decisions.

On top of this, the information available to voters differs across cities. Some cities have a local press that is active and educates its consumers about local politics and current leaders ahead of local elections, while some cities have media that focus on more national politics than on local politics, and some cities lack media coverage entirely due to the decline of local news outlets (e.g. Martin and McCrain 2019; Peterson 2021*b*).

These features of urban politics – low knowledge, little competition, complex institutions, and information deficits – vary considerably across cities, across time, across policy areas, and across voters. And their presence (or absence) are key for explaining why electoral accountability for government performance is so difficult in cities.

Institutional Complexity

The first distinctive variable feature of local governments that I focus on is their *institutional complexity*. Institutional rules govern the way responsibility is distributed within and between local governments. In some cities, mayors are directly elected alongside a city council, while in others, mayors are merely figureheads and most executive decisions are made by a city manager appointed by the city council. In some cities, public services like schools are provided directly by the city government, while in other cities they are provided by an independent school district.

This variation is theoretically advantageous from an experimentation perspective, perhaps most famously articulated by Justice Louis Brandeis and his description of subnational governments as "laborator[ies]" for "novel social and economic experiments" (*New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 285 U.S. 262, 311, 1932). This viewpoint suggests that local governments might learn from the successes and mistakes of their peers and improve due to iterative changes. Local governments, both historically and today, provide impressive variation in the range of this institutional complexity.

Underlying this complexity is the argument that fiscal decentralization and specialization of responsibilities by hyper-local governments leads to both fiscal efficiency and competition. Specialization of governments – especially the proliferation of single-purpose governments ranging from school districts to mosquito abatement districts – can lead to efficient delivery of services. These so-called functional, overlapping, and competitive jurisdictions (FOCJ, Frey and Eichenberger 1996) can focus on delivering one service and therefore do so better than general-purpose governments that must spread themselves thinly across multiple service delivery functions (e.g. Frey 2001).

Under these theories, "market competition" between governments can allow subnational governments to experiment with the different bundles of service they provide to residents and consequent tax burdens they levy on them. Such competition could, theoretically, induce residents to vote with their feet by selecting a home under the authority of the local governments that provide the optimal bundle for their family (e.g. Tiebout 1956).

A large body of political economy research challenges this view of decentralization as fiscally efficient and better for citizens. The federated institutional design of subnational governments around the world have led to poor fiscal performance. This has been in large part because of the political pressure to expand services at the subnational level without credible borrowing constraints for subnational governments (e.g. Cameron 1978; Rodden 2002, 2006; Wibbels 2000). The United States's multi-level system with overlapping jurisdictions and both general-purpose and single-purpose governments can exacerbate this. Chris Berry and colleagues have shown that interest group pressure can lead to an overfishing of the common pool of taxation (Berry 2008, 2009).

Perhaps as a result of this institutional complexity, voters differ in who they think is responsible for local public services. The complex institutional environment around voters can make for an information overload: many signals of information that are all debatably relevant for making local political decisions. This information overload can disrupt the simple mental pathway between a government's performance and a voter's judgment of that government.

This also imposes a serious cost on a voter to become well-informed if they are to judge all those governments for their functions (Berry and Gersen

2009). The institutional context around voters can shape their perceptions of political responsibility for the economy and other indicators of government performance (Arceneaux 2005; Rudolph 2003*a*). These perceptions of responsibility can, in turn, shape voters' judgments of elected officials (Rudolph 2003*b*).

Yet only some voters know the *true* responsibilities of local government, and even among these knowledgeable voters this information – their perception of responsibility – is not always easily accessible when making electoral decisions. As a result, many voters are unable to connect their attitudes on government performance to their judgments of local elected officials (Arceneaux 2006).

Public policies more generally are often very hard for voters to connect to government and specific elected officials. Indeed, some policies have strong feedback effects – wherein citizens credit government for policy benefits and mobilize to support them (e.g. Campbell 2002, 2005; Clinton and Sances 2018; Rendleman and Yoder 2023). Yet other policies are subject to reduced or nonexistent feedback effects due to what Suzanne Mettler calls the "submerged state": many policies are delivered behind layers of bureaucracy or private actors in a way that obfuscates the role of government (e.g. Mettler 2011; Morgan and Campbell 2011). Much as policies insulated behind layers of confusing bureaucracy rarely get the credit they deserve from citizens, local governments that deliver services from behind layers of government can escape both credit and blame from voters. Voters may be completely unaware of how politicians' policymaking translates into the outcomes voters actually observe in some policy areas (Harding and Stasavage 2014). As Mani and Mukand (2007) show more formally, this complexity behind public services makes it "harder to isolate the role of the government's competence in determining their outcome" (Mani and Mukand 2007, 507). Institutional complexity thus can present a substantial barrier to accountability.

Information Deficits

The second feature of cities that I focus on is the varying *information deficits* in which voters find themselves about different policy issues, in different cities, over time, and across individuals.

Some policy issues are highly visible to voters in their everyday lives. As former Mayor Bloomberg and others have argued, people can easily observe whether their local politicians are effective on some policy issues by walking out their front door. Visible issues like road repair fall into this camp: residents of a city can walk outside and see the quality of roads, and they often travel around their city enough such that they can experience a broad swath of their city's road quality. We might therefore expect accountability to be easy on issues like roads that are visible in everyday life.

Yet this is far from true for most policy issues. For many issues, it

may be hard to directly observe performance in daily life. Most people do not experience crime, or unemployment, or school performance on a daily basis. They must instead learn about performance in these policy areas from intermediaries – whether friends and family, their neighbors, or the media.

In some cities, there is reliable information about government performance available to some voters. This might be due to the presence of a strong local media that provides information to the public (Auslen 2024; Hopkins and Pettingill 2018). In other cities the information to make informed decisions based on local government performance simply doesn't exist. Incumbent leaders seeking to stay in office may make conscious efforts to bias the information environment (Trounstine 2008). But these information deficits may also just be due to market forces in the media landscape. Local newspapers often have no incentive to cover local issues when national issues create more demand from voters (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2021; McCrain and Peterson 2024). This crowding-out of information about local government performance is only increasing as major conglomerates and investors consolidate the marketplace of media producers (Dunaway and Peterson 2023; Martin and McCrain 2019; Peterson 2021*b*). This consolidation can lead to some cities getting high-quality information about important local issues like crime, but other cities getting a cookie-cutter version of information about national conditions – or even something unconnected from objective policy issues (e.g. Mastrorocco and Ornaghi 2024).

The media may cover performance on some policy issues particularly well, while for some policy issues this may not be true – and potentially even subject to widespread misinformation. Research on the subject of economic performance, for instance, finds that in many situations, media coverage is not a simple unbiased reflection of objective conditions in the world. Media coverage of the economy in both local and national newspapers commonly reflects consumer sentiment – rather than influencing consumer sentiment with the content of its reports (Hopkins, Kim, and Kim 2017; Soroka, Stecula, and Wlezien 2015). And coverage of other issues such as crime can be subject to significant bias (Moreno-Medina 2021) or misinformation, which can be difficult to combat in a durable manner (Esberg and Mummolo 2018; Larsen and Olsen 2020).

This misinformation, combined with one-sided reporting that favors negative news (Harrington 1989; Soroka, Fournier, and Nir 2019), can influence citizens' fears of crime or other calamities in ways that do not reflect real-world conditions (Ash and Poyker 2024). Similar dynamics can play out on a range of political issues as distant as immigration (Djourelova 2023). On top of this, media other than the news may have strong influences on citizen's views of issues – such as crime drama shows and perceptions of crime, or "rags-to-riches" shows and economic inequality (Holbrook and Hill 2005; Kim 2023; Kim and Patterson Jr 2024). This is only exacerbated by the much higher likelihood that voters will choose to consume entertainment

media than news media in their daily lives (Guess 2021; Prior 2007; Wittenberg et al. 2023).

And many voters in all types of cities are simply not exposed to the kind of information that could allow them to develop knowledge about their city's performance. Thus it is hard, even in an environment with relatively high levels of information accessible to voters, for a large portion of the public to make informed electoral choices. This can lead politicians to make inefficient or even corrupt decisions that lead to disaster (e.g. Mullin and Hansen 2023). Information – and the lack of local political information – therefore provides another barrier to accountability in cities.

Different Problems for Different Issues

These two factors – institutional complexity and informational deficits – combine to make what I call a fog of accountability in cities. This fog can hinder accountability in many policy areas in which city residents naturally do not have much information about government performance. And it can hinder accountability in policy areas with complex responsibility sharing between different levels of government, or government and private actors.[10] Many policy areas in cities are doubly debilitated: they involve both a lack of information about government performance and complex institutional responsibilities. Local politics is therefore often clouded by the fog of accountability.

This fog of accountability bears some similarity to the infamous "fog of war" in which military decisions are made during armed conflict. During a life-or-death war, government officials' decision-making might be clouded by the lack of perfect information and a complex setting in which to make consequential decisions. The fog of accountability also resembles what political scientist Leah Stokes calls the "fog of enactment" surrounding technical energy policymaking in state governments (Stokes 2020). In her sharp explanation of how interest groups have historically thwarted effective sustainable energy policy, fossil fuel-aligned groups can take advantage of the technical complexity of energy grids and the low levels of information that state legislators have within the short period of bill enactment. During this foggy period, it is easy for these interest groups to push policy in a direction in line with their preferences.

A similar fog clouds voters' decision-making when they must make choices in local elections. Much as the fog of enactment afflicts technically complex issues like energy policy, the fog of accountability clouds decision-making in nearly all local policy issues due to the complex institutions surrounding them. And the fog of accountability in cities does not require quick timelines

[10]This complexity can stand in the way of reasoned judgments about government performance regardless of whether or not voters *know* about the public or private authority over public services, about which they often have little knowledge (Lerman 2019).

of enactment to produce problems for policymaking, but instead relies on the fact that – even unconstrained by time – most policy issues in cities are governed by an amalgam of both local government authority, the authority of other governments, and non-governmental actors.

Why does this happen in local governments, and how is this distinct from accountability at other levels of government? My theory – and the evidence that I present in this book – also bears a great deal of similarity to the literature on policy feedback to show when we might expect accountability for politicians. Studies on policy feedback have pointed to the need for policies to be both "visible and traceable" in order to deliver feedback effects (Arnold 1990; Hamel 2024). Similarly, government performance must be both visible and traceable to specific governments in order to allow for electoral accountability. In local government, these two criteria are rarely met. Instead, many areas of local government performance are invisible to voters without help, and this performance is hard to attribute to the responsible local officials.

There are, of course, some areas in which voters perceive accurate and regular signals of performance that are clearly linked to local government policymaking. For these issues, it may be easy for voters to reflect on those outcomes and vote for city leaders based on their performance in addressing these challenges. Yet for many issues, the complex layers of governments that are responsible for providing services complicate voters' decision-making, making traceability difficult if not impossible. And for many issues, voters need the media to explain how city policy tools are relevant for shaping outcomes, and for surfacing the performance of government in accomplishing their goals – making performance visible.

Many local policy issues, I would argue, tend to be invisible and untraceable: residents are short on information about them, and there are gradations of complex authority governing them.

Some issues, of course, might challenge this. For instance, relative to the other policy areas for which local governments tend to bear some responsibility, road repair is an area where people receive accurate and fairly regular information about conditions in their city on a daily basis. When we walk across the street, take a car or bicycle or bus to work, or buy groceries, we get there via roads. Roads are a policy area where voters have performance information more available to them than for many other policy areas. The visibility of city-level conditions on roads, I would argue, is not as clouded as for many other policy issues.

Roads also are relatively simple in their governance. In most cities, roads are governed by the decisions of city government. Despite this, the roads people drive on are also often governed or maintained by county governments, might be under the direct jurisdiction of the state rather than a city, and like many other local public services, are funded at least partially via intergovernmental transfers from state governments and the federal govern-

ment (e.g. Brooks and Phillips 2010).

If we would expect performance-based voting – electoral accountability, as I would define it – for any local government policy issue, it would be for roads. Crime, schools, homelessness, and the economy are all performance areas of cities that I will investigate in this book. All of these other policy issues have elements of institutional complexity and information deficits that I argue stand in the way of electoral accountability. School performance information, for instance, is often only something that parents of young children in public schools would know about – and it is often only released once per year, rather than on a daily basis. Moreover, the institutions governing schools are complex in many cities: schools are usually governed by school boards or committees, which are often elected separately from other city leaders, or controlled by a district that does not necessarily coincide with city boundaries. These other issues – less visible and more complex in their governance – are more likely to be shrouded by the fog of accountability.

This is not to say this fog of accountability is insurmountable. To enable accountability for a given policy issue shrouded in this fog, information about that performance area and its connection to local government can be made more clear to voters, or the institutional complexity can to be simplified – or both. Yet the opposite process can occur as well. For instance, strategic politicians might try to make information about performance only available when it is conveniently *positive* in its reflection on the incumbent government (de Benedictis-Kessner 2022). This can cloud the accuracy of the information available to voters. And even without formal institutional differences, there are other ways that policy areas can be made more complex for voters: strategic communication by politicians may involve pointing the finger at other actors within city hall, at other levels of government, or private actors to avoid responsibility – regardless of the true responsibility they may bear for government performance.

As I will show, there are a number of institutional and contextual features of cities that can alternately ease or hinder accountability. I examine an assortment of these institutional and contextual differences in the empirical chapters of this book. Among these are the simpler unified government responsibilities within the geographic boundaries of cities and media coverage of local politics. These features of cities can facilitate accountability by moving policy issues out of the fog of accountability. Conversely, the absence of these features can confuse voters or help depress the availability of accurate information – both of which can stymie accountability by moving a policy issue into the fog of accountability. The actions of politicians or others may help push policy issues in one direction or another, even if these more stable contextual features of a city position it well for accountability to function. In other words, regardless of the institutions and information context of local elections, they are always vulnerable to the strategic actions of people who wish to thwart electoral accountability.

The overall takeaway of this book is that in those cities where institutional complexity has been simplified or information already made more available, accountability appears to function. But this doesn't happen everywhere or all the time. Promoting accountability in the remainder of cities or for more difficult policy issues remains a challenge. The cities where elections do reward and punish incumbents for their performance in office provide a useful example of changes that can be made in those other places if we want to encourage accountability across all cities for public services.

Should Local Governments Be Held Accountable?

Of course, separate from the empirical questions that I address in this book is a normative question: *should* voters blame or credit local politicians for the quality of public services in cities? True responsibility for these services provided at the local level is often complicated. Control of the economy, for instance, is realistically the result of a number of government policies at the federal, state, and local level, as well as global trends. And these policies have only imperfect effects on economic conditions themselves. Similarly, fluctuations in other features of cities like crime are the subject of entire disciplines that assess their determinants. Criminology and related fields have decidedly shown evidence that crime is far from determined by criminal justice policy and policing but instead influenced substantially by, for instance, unemployment and other societal forces (e.g. Agan, Doleac, and Harvey 2021; Agnew 1992; Dynes and Holbein 2020).

Given this empirical fact that responsibility for many features of city life is not the direct and exclusive responsibility of local government, should citizens really punish local politicians when the economy worsens, or crime increases? Should they support local politicians when unemployment goes down in their city, or crime rates improve? My normative argument in this book is that – while true responsibilities are indeed complex – city governments nearly always do bear *some* responsibility for many features of their city.

For instance, while public transit in many cities relies on funding from state and federal governments, it is also well within the power of local governments to improve the speed and reliability of transit. Cities can use technology like transit signal priority (which gives buses priority at streetlights in the city), or reconfigure streets to allow exclusive access in some areas for public transit vehicles through the use of bus-only lanes or streets. Even in policy areas that we might think of as "more local" like street paving and repair, cities often contract out the actual asphalt work to private companies. Yet cities still control the allocation of repair across cities and the importance these repairs take in the overall distribution of funds by the city government. By pointing fingers exclusively at other actors who might bear

some or even the majority of responsibility over a public service, local governments are abdicating their partial responsibility for the quality of those services.

In this book, I address policy areas where local governments bear some responsibility for performance outcomes. They may spend a large amount of their funding on a given policy area – such as education, or on policing. Or they may simply have more logistical power over an outcome than any other level of government – such as for road repair. Or, their relatively exclusive legislative control – such as for issues like land use and zoning – may afford them some levers by which they should be able to drive outcomes. All the policy areas (and data) that I examine in this book are areas where local governments have at least some responsibility.

When local governments have even *some* responsibility in reality for the performance of a public service – even if not exclusive – I would assert that we should want citizens to update their views of their government when performance of that public service is better or worse. Without such updating – or herculean assumptions about politicians' second-order anticipation of citizen ignorance – politicians in government have fewer incentives to improve those public services. So if we believe in the value of high-quality public services in cities, we should want city residents to at least minimally respond to performance with their votes.

Overview of the Book

The book proceeds as follows. In this chapter, I have laid out my main theoretical argument. I draw on research from a number of other disciplines – psychology, decision theory, economics, and public administration – to advance a theory about how and why voters struggle to hold their local governments accountable. Voters in cities, I argue, are trapped in a fog of accountability. This fog is created in part by an institutional setup within a federal system that creates overlapping authority for nearly all the public services for which local governments are most responsible. This is exacerbated by a media environment that is not conducive to a broad set of voters focusing reliably on local political actors and their performance in office. As a result, voters have a scattershot understanding of local politics. Thus when it comes to making decisions in city elections, they are rarely equipped to do so. This only serves to further disadvantage the segments of the population in cities that have the least resources and time to commit to gathering information about their local politicians and holding them accountable.

Voter Knowledge Deficits Hinder Accountability

In Chapter 2 I show how this operates for individual voters. I delve into a series of post-election surveys from big cities that held elections in 2020,

2021, and 2022. Here, I show how people report mediocre evaluations of conditions and public services in their cities. Yet they also report relatively high levels of satisfaction with their local governments – both their mayors and their city councilors. And voters's evaluations of conditions in their city have little relation with their tendency to actually support incumbent politicians running for re-election. This is a puzzling conundrum: how do voters in cities both dislike the outcomes of many local government policies yet keep supporting their local incumbent leaders?

My argument in this chapter is that minimal voter knowledge about politics and government responsibilities limits electoral accountability. Using analyses of both high-knowledge vs. low-knowledge voters, I show that there is limited prospect for accountability for government performance among low-knowledge voters. These voters do not connect their feelings about critical features of their cities – the economy, schools, roads, and policing – with their vote choices in elections. Yet the limited number of higher-knowledge voters appear to do so.

Why might political knowledge be necessary for voters to connect evaluations of their cities with their votes? To answer this question, I use data from open-ended questions asking citizens to recall the services that their local government provides. For high-knowledge voters, these answers are sensible: they discuss services that local governments actually provide. But among low-knowledge voters, their answers to this questions demonstrate that they know very little about what local governments are actually responsible for relative to other levels of government. This provides one answer to the puzzle of why voters might like their city leaders but dislike the outcomes those politicians produce: they lack the interstitial information that would help them connect these outcomes with their local government. The evidence in this chapter presents a gloomy prognosis for accountability in cities: if a large portion of the population lacks the knowledge to connect local leaders with public services, there is little hope for electoral accountability.

Ineffective Competition in Local Elections

In Chapter 3, I examine how this plays out in the aggregate: not just for individual voters, but in the election results of thousands of cities. To do so, I use data on local elections from thousands of cities in the US over the last three decades. I highlight a number of descriptive features of local elections — and investigate one particularly necessary precursor to electoral accountability: competition in elections. Whether voters actually have any alternatives from which to choose in local elections is a necessary condition for electoral accountability to exist.

Using data from mid-size and large cities across the country, I show that there is limited electoral contestation, making the set of choices from which voters can select alternatives to their current leaders quite limited.

While most local elections are contested, the degree to which they are *effectively* contested is much lower: there are large margins of victory in mayoral and city council elections – especially when incumbents are running for re-election. This indicates that there is little truly effective competition in local elections.

One potential cause of this is that challenger candidates are often scared off by the presence of incumbent politicians running in city elections. To show the power of this scare-off effect – and that it is not simply a case of well-qualified and high-performing incumbents who are not challenged – I turn to a research design that allows me to compare those candidates who barely win an election (and therefore go on to become an incumbent) with those who barely lose (and therefore are not incumbents in the next election cycle, if they run). I show that when candidates barely lose an election, they are much less likely to run again in the future than candidates who just barely win and go on to become incumbents in the next election cycle. Though research on national elections has highlighted this as one component of the incumbency advantage, I argue that this scare-off component is an important feature of electoral politics in its own right. In local politics – where it is not guaranteed that there will be two-party competition in each election cycle – the scare-off of otherwise qualified candidates can greatly limit the potential for electoral accountability.

Together, these features of diminished competition in city elections result in high incumbent re-election rates. Just as the individual voter-level survey data showed, there is limited prospect for accountability if incumbents are not challenged effectively and qualified alternative candidates do not challenge them. Though these incumbency advantages do not necessarily indicate problems with accountability for incumbents' *performance* in office, they suggest an uphill battle for achieving accountability in local elections.

Visible Problems: Potholes and Homelessness

In the fourth chapter, I begin to examine accountability for local government's performance in the best case scenarios. When local governments make policy to address visible problems in their cities, do constituents reward them electorally? In this chapter, I start to use empirical data on conditions in cities for which voters might reasonably expect their city governments to have some responsibility, combined with data on elections.

I start with two tests of how voters react to highly salient conditions in cities: road pavement quality and homelessness. In both of these policy areas, voters get visible daily signals of local government performance by observing conditions in the world around them. And at least for roads, this policy area is easily connected with *local* governments. As a result, these issues might be somewhat of a "best-case" scenario for accountability. Folk theories of local government – including those of Bloomberg and other

current and local politicians – seem to suggest that salient issues like these affect elections in cities.

Using granular over-time data on the pavement conditions of each street segment in Oakland, CA, combined with precinct-level mayoral election returns, I show that in areas where the streets deteriorated, the incumbent mayor did worse. And in places where the streets improved, the mayor was rewarded by voters. In at least one city, people seem to vote based on the performance of the incumbent at repairing roads nearby. Next, I use data on reports of homeless encampments in Oakland. Just as with road pavement quality, this visible nearby problem influences voters in elections. Where there is more visible homelessness, people punished the incumbent mayor, and where there were decreases in homelessness, the mayor was rewarded.

I expand these analyses to other cities – both in the San Francisco Bay Area and across the country. In cities around the Bay Area, when road quality improves, incumbents are rewarded in their re-elections. Yet when I look at rates of homelessness in cities across the country, incumbent city leaders appear to face little punishment at the ballot box. This evidence on road quality suggests that for some highly-visible and highly-local aspects of government performance, voters can hold their local leaders accountable. But outside Oakland, homelessness – while visible – is not a feature of city government performance that voters appear to reflect on when making decisions about their local leaders.

Many features of cities are not as reliably visible to voters as roads or homelessness. Potholes are easy for voters to perceive and connect with their city government. Homelessness is similarly easy for voters to perceive in their daily life, but may – in some situations – be harder to connect with their city government. Local governments control land use and housing policy much more than any other level of government, but the policy tools that local governments use to address homelessness are often slow to yield results, while the direct and immediate policies to address homelessness are often implemented by nonprofit organizations and complex consortia of service providers established by federal law. The results from this chapter present a somewhat optimistic takeaway for accountability in cities for road quality, but demonstrate one of the first hurdles to accountability – complex institutions for service provision – as I show in the subsequent chapter.

Blurred Lines: Complex Institutions Complicate Accountability

I continue to examine performance-based voting in cities across the country in Chapter 5 by turning to two policy areas for which voters have a harder time learning about government performance and linking conditions in their cities to local politicians. I use data on both education performance and crime to show how an important local institutional design choice makes accountability difficult for voters: overlapping service jurisdictions. Models of

public choice and taxation argue that there are benefits (as well as potential drawbacks) to fiscal decentralization for fiscal bottom line of governments. Yet these fiscal policy examinations have largely left aside questions of political accountability in fragmented local government environments.

My findings in this chapter show that overlapping responsibilities of governments presents a confusing institutional framework within which voters struggle to make informed decisions. In cities where there is only one school district – a more simple institutional framework – voters hold city politicians accountable for education performance, but when multiple school districts overlap with city boundaries, politicians at the city levels are not rewarded or punished depending on the performance of schools. Similarly, I assess accountability for school board members, and show that there is functioning retrospective voting in school board elections. As with the city-level analyses, however, confusions around institutional boundaries can hinder accountability: in school districts that overlap with more than one city, the degree of accountability for school performance is dampened.

In parallel analyses, I show that this pattern of overlapping institutional responsibilities confusing voters' capacity for accountability extends to the policy area of crime as well. Many cities have somewhat unified control over law enforcement, with only one agency that operates within its boundaries. But in many other cities, there are a large number of agencies that operate by patrolling neighborhoods, conducting arrests, and ostensibly fighting crime. I show that having more law enforcement agencies operational in a city leads to confusion of responsibility for crime and subsequently less accountability for this critical feature of city life. In contrast, in places where there is only one major law enforcement agency, city leaders are held accountable for crime by voters. As with education, the confusion of jurisdictional boundaries frustrates accountability in cities.

Foggy Problems: How the Media Helps Voters Overcome Information Barriers and Connect Problems to Government

In Chapter 6 I examine the role of an informal institution – the news media – in facilitating accountability. As in Chapter 5, policy areas where outcomes are less visible to voters and where it is more difficult to associate performance with specific local governments, voters require help to hold those governments accountable. Both of these policy areas are ones in which voters need help to learn about government performance in their city as a whole, and need help connecting this performance with their city governments in particular. The key takeaway from this chapter is that the local media can facilitate accountability for city governments by providing this interstitial information.

To make this argument, I harness cross-city data on economic conditions – wage growth and employment – and crime – both highly salient violent

crime and crime overall – in combination with the local elections data used throughout the book. I assess the classic "economic voting" paradigm as applied to city government incumbents' electoral success. And using crime data in a similar framework, I examine whether increases and decreases in crime affect city elections. The pessimistic conclusion of these analyses is that for these less visible problems, there is nothing close to resounding accountability for city leaders.

However, for both mayors and city councils, more coverage of local politics in the news can help enable accountability for the economy and crime. I harness data on how the news media covers local government to show that the information environment surrounding local government can hinder or enable accountability. When local media coverage raise the salience of local politics, voters are galvanized into voting based on economic performance and crime. When the media focuses attention on local leaders who might actually play a role in boosting the local economy or reducing crime through their policy jurisdiction over both land use and policing, voters appear able to reflect on their accomplishments in this area. I corroborate this using data on both print news media coverage and television station ownership by the Sinclair Broadcast Group, a conglomerate that is notorious for reducing the quality and quantity of local politics coverage in television media. On the whole, this chapter shows that city politicians reap rewards from improving their local economy and crime, and suffer at the ballot box when they do not – but only when there is strong coverage of local government operations and officials.

Both of these policy areas are ones in which voters might reflect on their own personal experience most readily. However, each individual's personal experience might not necessarily reflect the overall picture of their city's current economic growth or crime rates. But when the local media covers these issues, voters can develop a more holistic city-level understanding of these important outcomes. And given the shared responsibility of different political leaders for both the economy and public safety, it might be easy for city leaders to blame other people for both of these outcomes. Yet when the local media includes regular coverage of local politics along with these important conditions, voters can connect the economy and crime to their city leaders when making decisions in elections.

Strategic Finger-Pointing

As the previous several chapters show, limited voter knowledge, paltry electoral competition, jurisdictional overlap, and a lack of strong media coverage all combine to equip voters with little ability to connect government performance to their choices about city leaders. In many complex policy areas there are hurdles to accountability that arise from the confusion of responsibilities around public services at the local level.

In Chapter 7, I show that this confusion that frustrates accountability is not static, but can be changed for individual voters. For better or for worse, it is possible for the media or other actors to provide the interstitial information that helps voters to connect government performance with specific local leaders. In the previous two chapters, I showed that in contexts with overlapping responsibilities for public service and without media coverage of local politics, voters struggle to hold their leaders accountable. In this chapter, I build on published work (de Benedictis-Kessner 2018*a*) and use data from an experiment on transit performance – a policy area where there is a large degree of overlapping responsibility. I show how providing information about local governments' responsibility for transit can facilitate accountability for city leaders for the delays that transit riders endure. When information is provided to voters, it helps them better align their real-world experiences with public services to their judgments of local government. Though much of the earlier evidence in this book provides a pessimistic conclusion about voters' capacity for accountability, the evidence from this real-world application of my theory suggests that information provision can, at least minimally, make up for these shortcomings.

Yet this sunny story is only half of the picture. In many places and for many public services, the barriers to accountability provided by institutional arrangements can be exacerbated by strategic actors. Politicians themselves can take advantage of the lack of clarity around public services and conditions in cities to escape accountability. To demonstrate the ease with which this can happen and the ramifications of such strategic behavior – even for such simple policy issues as road quality – I incorporate evidence from local politicians and bureaucrats. Government officials – in this case, senior government officials in one of my executive education classes – see the public as only minimally aware of their job responsibilities. I conduct an experiment on this group of government leaders to test how they believe unclear responsibilities might affect electoral outcomes. Even when it comes to providing basic public services like street pavement, they anticipate that local politicians can avoid significant electoral punishment when they make unpopular decisions if city government responsibilities are more complex. Politicians know that they can easily point fingers to other actors both within city hall and outside it to avoid being punished at the ballot box for their unpopular policy choices. In equilibrium, this can lead to worse policy outcomes for city residents.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I tie together the empirical evidence from the preceding chapters. I identify some prospects for policy reforms that address the institutional and behavioral foundations of the fog of accountability. Some reforms may be easy to accomplish in the short term. Political parties, advocacy groups, and other local organizations can help to make local elections more meaningfully competitive by training and encouraging qualified candidates to run and re-run for city offices. If advocates are able to

use informational tools to clarify policy responsibilities for voters in areas of shared policy responsibility, and the news media more accurately reflect objective performance of city leaders, the empirical results in earlier chapters suggest that accountability may have some hope for improvement. More powerful reforms such as institutional consolidation – or expansion – to the level at which services are provided to voters may prove to be a longer-term project, but these efforts may also improve accountability. While many scholars and pundits may assume that local governments are "closest to the people," my results indicate that democratic accountability in cities at the moment is far from healthy. If governance in cities – and the public services cities provide – are to improve, the institutions of local governments demand change.

Many pages of scholarly ink have been spilled over the problems with voter rationality and decision-making. Instead of taking that approach in this book, I take seriously Lenz's (2018) call to focus on our duty as scientists to benefit society. Given the presence of voter irrationality, what levers exist to make accountability function better? Luckily, there are tweaks to voters' knowledge, to institutions that provide public services, and to the information environment that can make accountability more likely. Throughout this book, I focus on several of these tweaks that – while not the only potential changes that might make accountability easier – are important and effective levers by which we can improve accountability. I show that when the media provides more information about local politics to voters, when institutions are simpler, and when individual voters are given the interstitial information that helps them attribute credit and blame to specific local government actors, electoral accountability is easier to accomplish. Of course, these tweaks can be accomplished in some policy areas, but for other policy areas it may not be easily accomplished (or even possible) to do so. The empirical chapters in this book further describe the ways these tweaks can be accomplished and facilitate accountability in cities, but also lay out the limits to electoral accountability.

2

Voter Knowledge Deficits Hinder Accountability

In early November in 2013, a young man named Dominick was struggling to decide between some important choices in front of him. These choices weren't life-altering: they were choices between 25 different candidates running for the nine seats on the Cambridge, MA, city council. Dominick cared deeply about both transportation and housing policy and cared about how his city would fare over the next several years.[1] And he had a leg up on most potential voters in this election: as a student on his way to getting dual master's degrees in both transportation and urban planning, he was well-equipped with educational tools (and the time) to evaluate the candidates running in his city's election.

Dominick was confronted, however, by a rather byzantine way in which Cambridge voters cast their votes in city council races, however. Voters are required to rank candidates in order, and the votes are tallied using a single transferable vote system. That meant that Dominick had a challenge in order to make an informed choice in this election: he had to gather information on all 25 candidates in order to pick a top choice, a second choice, and so on.

As he worked his way through the list of candidates running for the city council, he was struck by a few facts. First, out of the nine seats on the council, seven of the current councilors were running to win their seats again. Relatedly, it was somewhat easy to find information on these incumbent councilors – for instance, each had a semi-informative website at the very least, though only some had informative policy platforms posted on these websites. Yet it was much more difficult to find information about the eighteen other candidates running for these nine seats. Dominick could form opinions of how the city was doing based on his own experience biking around

[1] Dominick still cares about these policy issues, to be clear (author correspondence, 2024).

his city and living in a shared apartment in a neighborhood in which rent was swiftly increasing. And he could use those opinions to judge the current office-holders running for re-election. But it was far more difficult to evaluate what their policy choices would be to confront the issues that he cared about. Even more difficult was finding information about which he could prospectively evaluate the challengers who had not held office beforehand.

By all counts, Dominick had the tools (graduate education in urban policy, the resources and time to spend on his couch research each candidate) to make good choices in his local election back in 2013. And we might therefore expect that he would be able to hold his incumbent local officials accountable for how his city was doing. Yet this was still a task that took several hours and kept him up late into the evening on a school night.

Dominick was – and is – by no means an average voter in local elections. He is educated on the policy issues that confront local governments, such as housing, transportation, crime, and economic development. And he has been motivated enough to vote in his local elections, even when they demand many hours of his time to do the research to inform himself about his choices. However, most voters in local elections are far less able to dedicate time and brain power to researching these choices – especially when they must choose between 25 options (e.g. Boudreau, Colner, and MacKenzie 2021). And most city residents do not even vote in their local elections, which have anemic levels of turnout in comparison to elections at other levels of government in the United States (e.g. Alford and Lee 1968; Caren 2007; Hajnal, Kogan, and Markarian 2022; Hajnal and Trounstine 2014; Marschall and Lappie 2018, 2024; Trounstine 2012; Wood 2002) – not to mention other countries. So while Dominick struggled to make informed choices that might hold his city government accountable, his process is by far a best-case scenario for a city voter. A pessimistic researcher might give up on the prospect of accountability in local politics existing at all given this type of choice environment.

In the previous chapter, I introduced my theory of accountability in local politics: namely, that it hinges on both the visibility of government performance and the degree to which that performance can be traced by voters to local government. The institutional environment and the informational environment in which voters must make electoral choices shape both of these factors.

Much of the chapters in this book will rely on macro-level evidence: voters aggregated into electorates. I will analyzed a plethora of election returns from thousands of cities across the country, along with an array of data documenting government performance in these cities. At the end of the day, however, the gaps in accountability that I describe all happen at the individual voter level. Aggregate elections data can only tell a part of the story of what hinders accountability in local politics. Individual-level evidence is needed to unpack the micro-foundations of these aggregate

phenomena.

More specifically, each person – like Dominick – makes their own vote choices in local elections through a process that varies across individuals as well as across cities and time. They might have their own experiences with the quality of public services in cities, or their own perceptions of conditions like crime or housing prices or road quality. Though the coming chapters will focus on variation in accountability across *cities*, in this chapter I dig into the variation in the functioning of democratic accountability across *people* within cities. How do voters like Dominick operate when making choices in between candidates for local office? And how might voters who have less information – perhaps, fewer than two graduate degrees from MIT – make these choices?

How might different individuals fare when holding their governments accountable?

Past research on accountability in local government has shown that misperceptions of objective conditions like the economy, crime, and school performance are commonplace but the more politically knowledgeable are better able to perceive objective real-world conditions (e.g. Holbrook and Weinschenk 2020*a*; Larsen and Olsen 2020). Not only do these knowledgeable voters pick up signals about government performance more easily, they also may be more likely to attribute credit and blame for that performance to appropriate political actors (Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Cutler 2008; Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003, 2008). These more knowledgeable voters – equipped with both accurate information about performance and information about government responsibilities – may be better able to then judge government for performance in these types of policy areas.

Indeed, when voters are highly knowledgeable, they often can connect the dots between public services, the responsible local governments, and their vote choices. For instance, Vin Arceneaux and Robert Stein show that Houston voters who were more politically knowledgeable were able to correctly attribute blame for poor responses to extreme weather events (Arceneaux and Stein 2006). And when it is easier for people to connect the dots between elected officials and their responsibilities (or information is provided to voters that helps them make these connections), they then judge various levels of government for those domains of policy (Arceneaux 2006; Malhotra and Kuo 2008).

Outside the United States, Larsen (2019*b*) shows that Danish voters are responsive to changes in municipal responsibilities for unemployment policy. When more responsibility is held by mayors, voters in mayoral elections in Denmark vote in line with economic conditions. As Larsen notes, however, Danish voters may not be a case generalizable to the United States: voters

in Denmark are highly knowledgeable, even in local elections, relative to those in the U.S. Similarly, Hobolt, Tilley, and Banducci (2013) find that in countries where responsibility is more centralized – and therefore who the incumbent leaders are is more clear – voters are better able to assign responsibility to the government and economic voting is more likely.

Research in American politics going back nearly a century documents the low levels of citizen knowledge about government responsibilities (e.g. Sances 2017) and politics more generally (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Voters can sometimes choose between alternatives with the use of heuristic cues (Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Lupia 1994*a*; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). This use of cues may be most helpful for people who lack pre-existing knowledge (Boudreau 2009), yet it may also depend on some level of existing knowledge about the source of these cues (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). How this individual-level variation in knowledge plays out across issues for voters in U.S. local elections remains very much up for debate.

In this chapter, I take up the question of whether voters have the capability to make performance-based decisions in local politics by zooming in to the individual level. I use micro-level evidence on the perceptions and attitudes of individuals rather than the macro-level evidence that I've used up until this point in the book. I harness data from surveys of 7,695 people in 67 different cities immediately after local elections in the 2020, 2021, and 2022 election cycles.

The argument that I will make using these survey data is twofold. First, most people's judgments about the performance of public services align with their overall opinions about the people currently serving in their local governments. Second, people have a great deal of trouble connecting those judgements about local government with their actual votes in local elections. It is only the most politically knowledgeable people who are able to actually connect their vote choices in local elections with their evaluations of public service performance. This is not surprising given the institutional environment and information environment around local elections that I've described can hinder accountability at the macro-level in the previous chapter. Yet it provides triangulating evidence for my overall argument in this book: that the deck is stacked against most voters when it comes to holding local government accountable via elections.

Data

In this chapter, I use survey data of people in US cities in the weeks after local elections were held in 2020, 2021, and 2022 from a collaborative project on city and county elections in the United States.[2] In each of the cities where

[2]These surveys were conducted as part of a broader project with Christopher Warshaw and John Sides that examines criminal justice, inequality, and voter behavior in local

we conducted surveys, we targeted a sample of 50-200 respondents using quotas to match the census demographics of the city's population in 2020 via the platform PureSpectrum.[3] The resulting samples are by no means probability-representative samples of each city's population. But they do match the general descriptive characteristics of each city's population on the characteristics that we used in our demographic quotas: race/ethnicity, gender, age, and education. Figure 2.1 shows the samples across all the cities where we collected data, broken into blocks by the time when we ran the surveys.

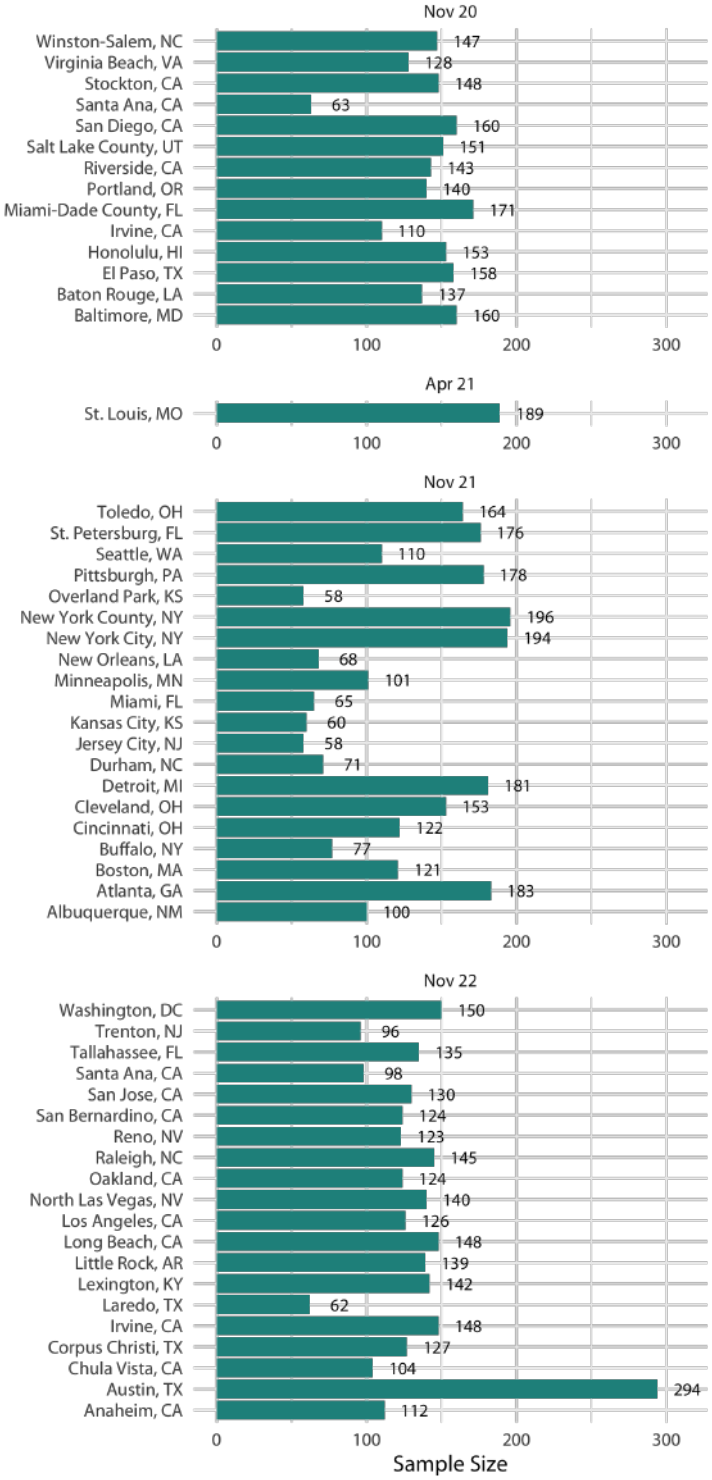
In the first wave of surveys following the November 2020 elections we collected responses in 11 cities. In 2021 we added one sample of a city with springtime elections (St. Louis, MO), following the November 2021 elections we added 19 more cities that held their elections in the fall, and in November 2022 we added another 21 cities with elections. In this chapter, I harness the data from these 67 total survey samples of 7,695 city residents following local elections. These arguments set up the empirical examinations of accountability that I conduct in the remainder of this book using aggregate evidence by first examining the potential for accountability at the micro-level of individual voters.[4]

elections (de Benedictis-Kessner, Warshaw, and Sides 2022).

[3]Like many other survey sample providers, PureSpectrum pulls potential respondents from an array of survey panel companies that primarily provide respondents for market research surveys. This allowed us to target a broad audience as well as conduct our sample data collection in even relatively small cities.

[4]Because the success of our efforts to collect samples of sufficient size varied across the survey waves, I will avoid making city-specific conclusions about vote choice or perceptions, but instead focus on the general patterns across cities.

Figure 2.1: Surveys of cities with mayoral elections



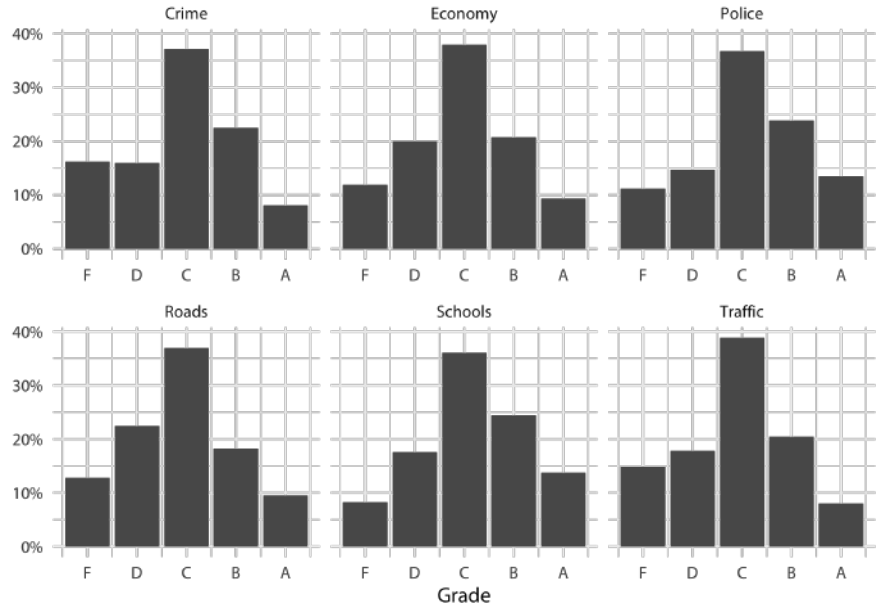
On these surveys, I asked several questions relevant to accountability. Of primary interest are a series of questions that I asked about how people evaluate public services in their city. I asked survey respondents to grade services across a range of policy areas in order to try and get a measure of how they felt about the actual performance of their local governments. In tandem with these questions about service performance, I also asked respondents to evaluate the local politicians currently serving in the office of mayor (in all survey years) and the city council (in 2022). Later in the survey, I also ask respondents to report their vote in the recent local election. On all of these questions about local incumbents and vote choice, I display the names of the actual incumbents and candidates in the recent election. I code their answers for whether or not they reported voting for the incumbent for mayor when there was a mayoral election. Finally, I also collect a number of demographic and political characteristics about respondents, including a standard battery of questions to measure their knowledge of national politics.

I first examine how these survey respondents evaluate their local public services. In Figure 2.2 plots the grades respondents gave to each of six services and conditions in their city that I asked them to evaluate. Respondents typically gave fairly mediocre grades to conditions in their city. The modal grade on all six items was a "C," and the average grade hovered just below and just above a "C" (around a score of 2 on a 0-4 GPA scale). Yet there was a substantial amount of variation in respondents' evaluations: in each of the six performance areas, some people clearly thought their city deserved a top mark of an "A," while in that same area others thought their city deserved a failing grade.

Of course, these grades for public services and conditions vary a great deal across cities as well as across policy areas. Figure 2.3 shows the average grade (along the 0-4.0 grade scale) for all six services and conditions that I displayed in Figure 2.2. In some cities, such as New Orleans, respondents were relatively much more pessimistic about the performance of their public services and conditions in their city. In other cities, such as Irvine, respondents reported relatively sunny views of their city's services.

I do not draw confident conclusions about the disaggregated city-level opinion on a given local public service or local conditions due to the fact that these are not representative samples, nor are they large enough (or repeated) samples to yield reliable estimates (Lax and Phillips 2009). Yet by aggregating across cities and averaging across the different domains of evaluations that my survey respondents make, I am more comfortable using these evaluations (and the variation in these evaluations) to make statements about accountability via city residents' perceptions of government performance.

Figure 2.2: Evaluations of local public services and conditions.



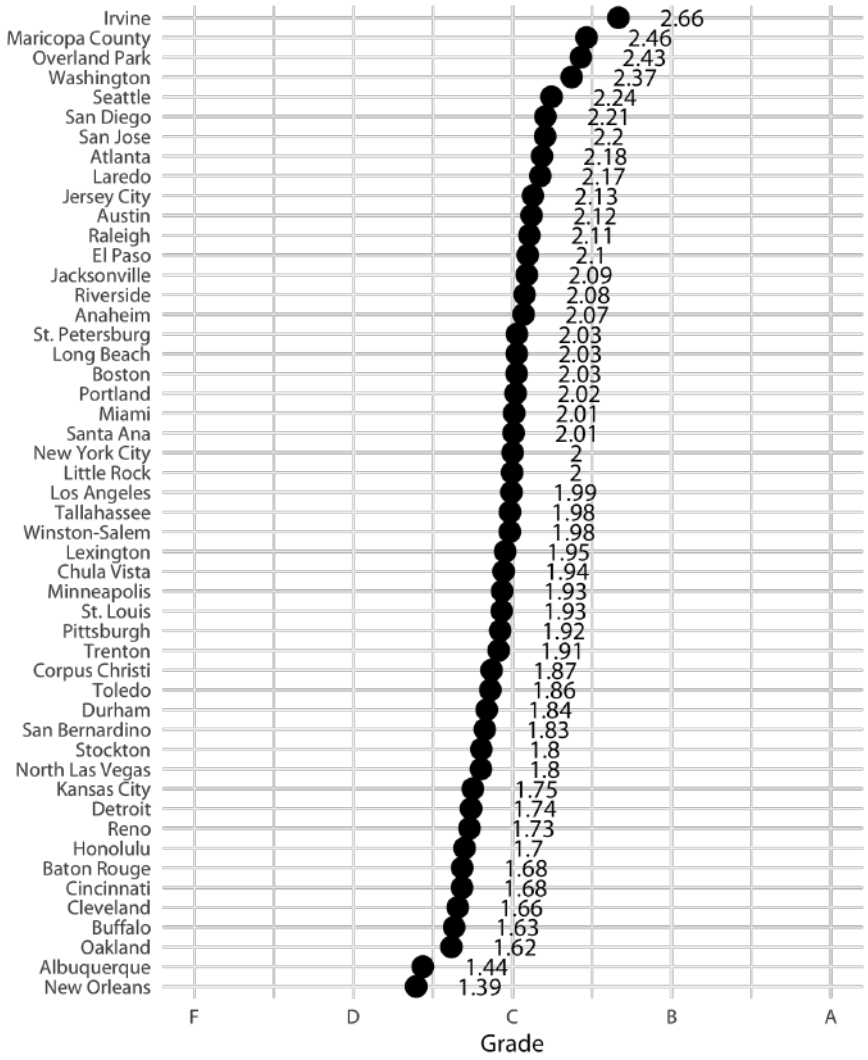
Performance Evaluations and Local Government Approval

The last several chapters have evaluated how local conditions – one way of measuring politicians' performance in office – affect incumbents' electoral fortunes in local elections. But how do performance evaluations correspond with their opinions of incumbents at the individual level? I investigate this next. In Figure 2.4 I plot the percent of respondents reporting that they approved (either strongly or not very strongly) of their incumbent mayor (in the left panel) and city councillors (in the right panel), according to the grade that they gave each of the six performance areas described above. Each line indicates one area of performance. If accountability functions at the local level – as imperfectly as the previous chapters have indicated it may – then we would expect to see strong positive correlations between survey respondents' grades for local services and conditions and their approval of local government officials.

Much as we'd hope if people are holding their local officials accountable for performance, there is a broad correspondence between evaluations of local public services and residents' approval of their incumbent mayors and city councillors. Service-provision appears to match – if not influence – residents' summary opinions of their local governments.

I am, of course, not the first person to examine this correlation between performance evaluations and government approval. A host of previous researchers have documented similar correlations between survey evaluations

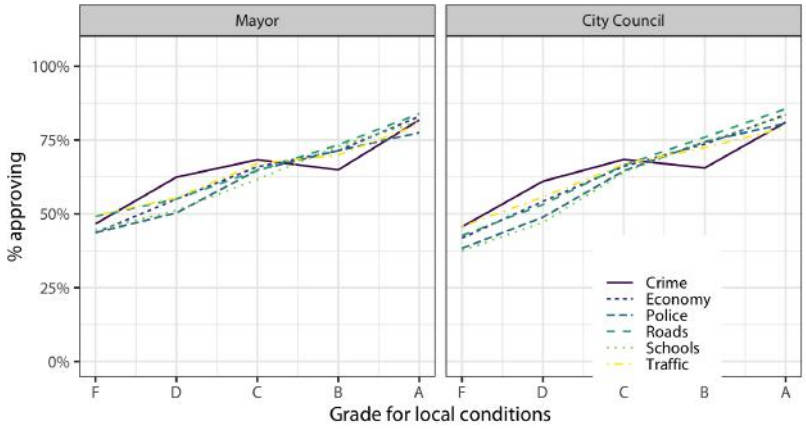
Figure 2.3: Evaluations of local public services and conditions by city.



of conditions like the economy and evaluations of federal (e.g. Tufte 1978), state (e.g. Brown 2010; Carsey and Wright 1998; Rogers 2023; Stein 1990*b*), and local government (e.g. Kaufmann 2004; Oliver and Ha 2007) officials. These results add to a chorus of other research that documents how evaluations of the economy (especially) appear to influence government approval. Yet these results also advance our previous knowledge of the extent of this pattern to a host of different public services and conditions other than the economy. The results I describe here also show that this pattern applies across a range of cities immediately after salient and competitive local elections.

These results about local government in particular also corroborate re-

Figure 2.4: Performance evaluations of local public services correspond with approval of local incumbents.



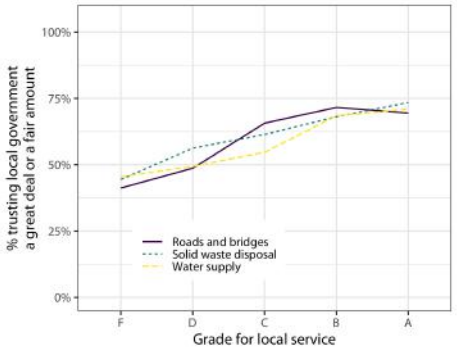
sults from a number of surveys dating from the 1990s till the present day. In addition to the original survey results reported here from post-election surveys in the past few years, I analyzed a number of other surveys which asked people in slightly different ways about both their satisfaction with local public services and their approval of their local governments. The same patterns I observe in post-election surveys in the last few years hold across a number of different surveys over the last three decades.

For instance, in the 1992 survey conducted by the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR), respondents from a national survey sample were asked about both the grade they would assign to three public services in their city and the degree to which they trusted their local government. I plot the correspondence between these service evaluations and this slightly different measure of government approval in the top left panel of Figure 2.5. Similarly, in the 2002 Community Indicators Surveys conducted by the Knight Foundation of people living in 27 different medium and large size cities, respondents were asked their evaluation of several public services and their summative evaluation of their local government, both along a scale from "poor" to "excellent." I show the correspondence between these ratings in the top right panel of Figure 2.5. In the middle left panel I plot a similar comparison from an online survey of a national sample of respondents that I conducted via SSI in 2014, and show the correspondence between respondents' satisfaction with various local public services and their satisfaction with their local governments. On the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2017) in 2016, survey respondents were asked to grade both their mayor and city council as well as various city services. I plot these relationships in the middle right and bottom left panels. Finally, in a 2021 mail-to-online survey of Boston residents, I found similar

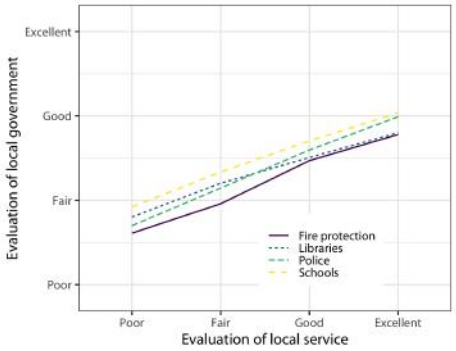
results when asking respondents about their satisfaction with public services and their approval of the current mayor, which I plot in the bottom right panel.

Across my multi-city post-election surveys conducted in 2020-2022 (Figure 2.4), and the four previous surveys asking similar questions (Figure 2.5), the data lead to the same conclusion: local residents evaluate a range of conditions and public services in their city in a way that corresponds to how they view their local governments. When they report being more satisfied with the provision of public services, they report that they are happier with their local elected officials. And when they are less satisfied with public service performance, they report being less satisfied with their local governments.

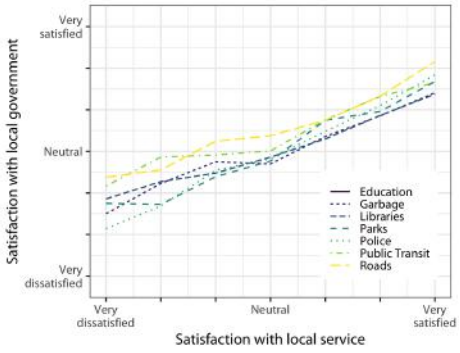
Figure 2.5: Across different survey samples, performance evaluations of local public services correspond with approval of local incumbents.



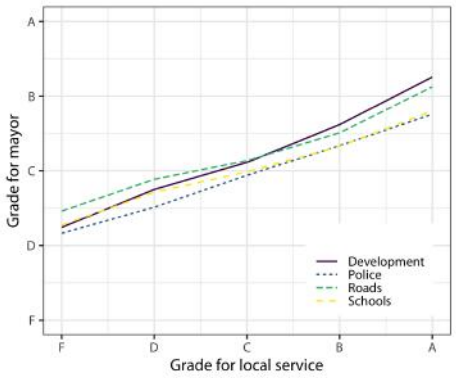
(a) ACIR (1992)



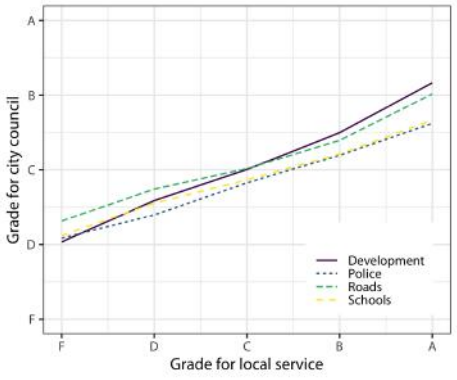
(b) Knight Foundation (2002)



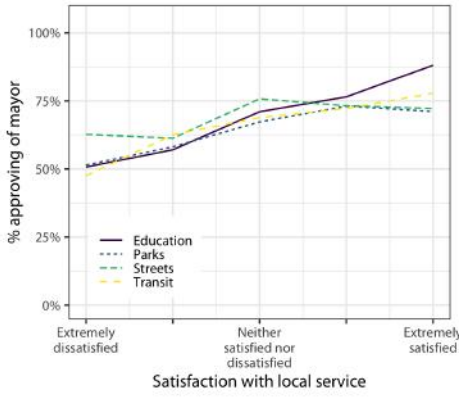
(c) SSI National Sample (2014)



(d) CCES, Mayor (2016)



(e) CCES, City Council (2016)



(f) Boston residents (2021)

Does Approval Translate Into Voting?

Survey questions asking people for their satisfaction with local government, trust in local government, or their approval of the mayor or city council

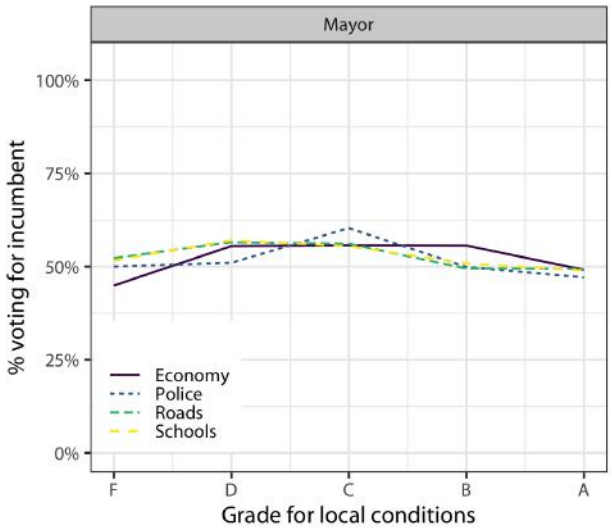
hint that there may be some degree of accountability for public services in cities. But the results up to this point do not point to true electoral punishment for local politicians who perform badly, or reward for local politicians who perform well. Indicating approval of local governments on a survey isn't the same as voting politicians out of office or re-electing others. And even more worrisome, survey responses are often correlated – that is, respondents will often report better evaluations of a number of unconnected services, policies, and people if they are asked on surveys in close proximity. The true attitudes that people have about these various concepts or actors may not be actually related – but the question-answering process itself can lead respondents to simply report answers in a highly correlated manner (e.g. Tourangeau et al. 1989; Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988; Zaller and Feldman 1992).

All of my post-election surveys included several questions about respondents' vote choices in the recent local elections. Specifically, I asked them who they had voted for in the mayoral election that was just held.[5] In all of these 67 cities, I displayed the actual names of all the candidates in the recently-held election for mayor. This question taps into the true mechanism behind electoral accountability – voting – rather than simply a survey response indicating approval levels. I report results from analyses of this question next.

In a similar fashion to the analyses of incumbent approval displayed earlier, Figure 2.6 shows respondents' evaluations of local public services and conditions along the horizontal axis, and the proportion of respondents who reported that they voted for the incumbent in the recent mayoral election along the vertical axis. In contrast to the results displayed in Figures 2.4 and 2.5, the results here indicate no correspondence between performance evaluations and respondents' propensity to vote for incumbent local politicians. Instead, respondents who rate their public services with a failing grade were about as likely to report voting to re-elect the incumbent mayor as those respondents rating their local conditions with a top "A" grade.

[5]This vote choice questions was amidst several questions asking about vote choice in the recent elections, which depending on the location and survey wave included races for sheriff, prosecutor, governor, senator, U.S. representative, and president alongside the question about mayoral vote choice.

Figure 2.6: Performance evaluations of local public services do not correspond with voting for local incumbents.



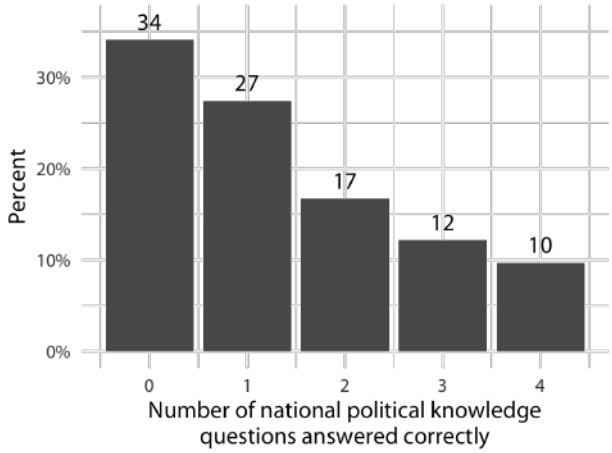
The Politically Knowledgeable Translate Service Performance into Voting

Of course, not all people voting in local elections are making the same decision calculus in their heads. Some people might better understand the institutional configuration around public services like schools – which as I will discuss more in Chapter 5, can be confusing for voters. For instance, the people who most often encounter school governance could be those whose children are in school (Boas, Hidalgo, and Toral 2021). People who have made a recent real estate transaction might be more in tune with the current performance of the economy more generally (Larsen et al. 2019). And some people might better be able to connect certain areas of performance with the elected officials who are truly responsible rather than others who are not in control of that area of policy – as I will discuss in Chapter **??**. Past assessments of voters' capacity for making informed decisions in politics suggest that information and knowledge can condition the degree to which their perceptions of government performance match objective indicators of this performance (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2020*a*,*b*).

To get at this question of *who*, if anyone, is able to hold local government accountable for performance, I next assess the patterns described in the previous section on incumbent vote choice and public services evaluations separately for individuals with high levels of political knowledge and individuals with low levels of political knowledge. I measure this knowledge using a standard battery of questions asking about political institutions, roles, and people currently serving in government. While this battery of po-

litical knowledge questions primarily asks about federal government officials, it is a helpful proxy for political knowledge more generally, which might encompass knowledge about local politics and institutions as well as federal and state.[6] Figure 2.7 shows the number of questions in this battery that respondents answered correctly across all waves of the survey. More than half of survey respondents across all survey samples answered 1 or fewer of these questions correctly.

Figure 2.7: Political knowledge among survey respondents.

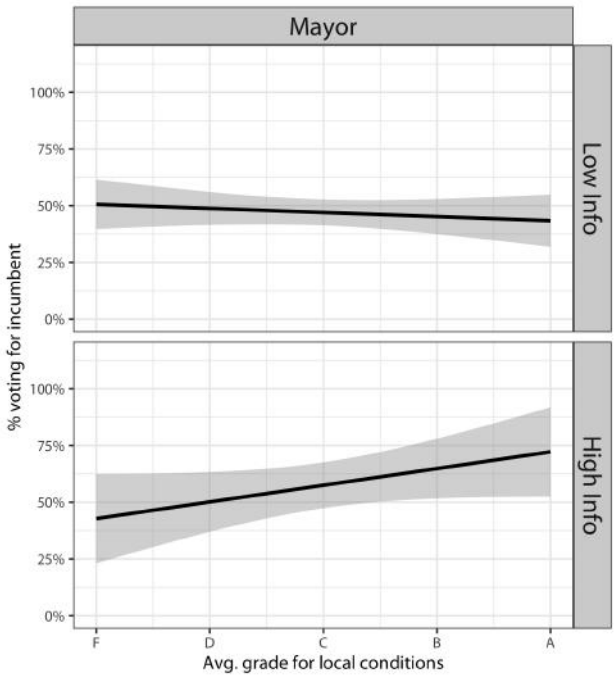


As a first cut at assessing whether political knowledge shapes the degree to which voters are able to connect their performance evaluations with their vote choices, I divide up respondents in my survey into those high in political knowledge (above the median in their city's sample) and those low in knowledge (below the median). I then look at how these people's judgments of public services and conditions correspond with their votes for mayoral incumbents. I plot the comparison between the average grade respondents gave to public services and conditions in their city with their propensity to vote for the incumbent mayor in Figure 2.8. The top panel shows this comparison for respondents low in political knowledge, while the bottom panel does so for those high in political knowledge. The line in each panel shows the least-squares fit of the data.

The difference between the two panels is fairly immediately apparent: for people low in political knowledge (in the top plot), there is no correspondence between evaluations of the public services and conditions in their city and their likelihood of voting for the incumbent. But among those people higher

[6]Local-specific political knowledge might be even more relevant, of course – but that's a more difficult construct to measure across different cities and states. As Bernhard and Freeder (2020*a*) discuss, a measure of local political knowledge could be flexibly used to assess heuristic use and other political behaviors in local elections.

Figure 2.8: People high in political knowledge translate performance evaluations into voting for local incumbents.

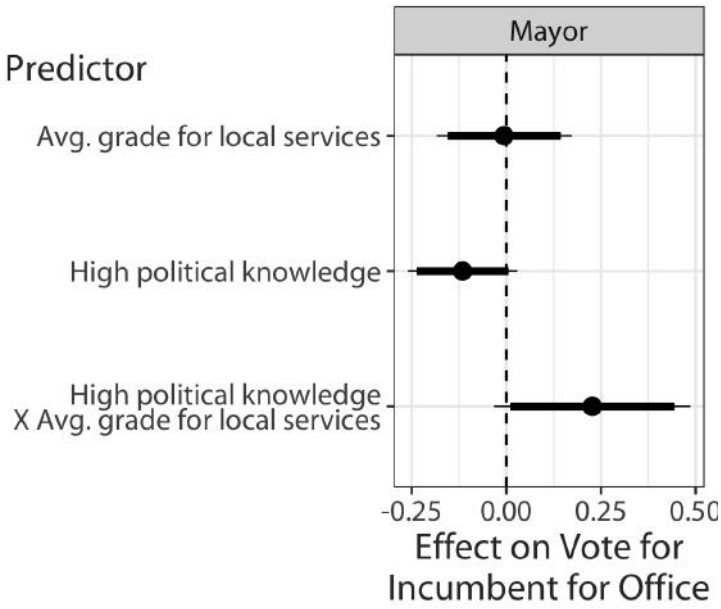


in political knowledge (in the bottom plot), there does appear to be a positive relationship. When high-knowledge voters evaluate conditions in their city more positively, they are more likely to vote for the incumbent mayoral candidate. This suggests that this electoral lever of performance-based accountability may be functioning – but only for high-knowledge voters.

To more rigorously assess the role that individual-level political knowledge plays in moderating local electoral accountability, I examine the relationship between these two variables in a regression format. I regress respondents' vote choices (for the incumbent, or for another candidate) on the average grade they gave to their local public services interacted with an indicator for whether they are high in political knowledge. Figure 2.9 shows the results of this analysis, with each predictor's point estimate and confidence intervals shown on a separate line.

While the average grade for local conditions has a null (and slightly negative) association with voting for the incumbent mayor (as shown by the top point estimate), the interaction between respondents' grades for local conditions and political knowledge is positive and statistically significant. In other words, for those people high in political knowledge there is much larger positive effect of evaluations of public services and local conditions on vote choice than for those people low in political knowledge. These results

Figure 2.9: Political knowledge helps voters connect performance evaluations of local public services with their vote choices. Points represent point estimates from an OLS model of voting for the incumbent mayor, with associated 90% (thick lines) and 95% (thin lines) confidence intervals.



corroborate the subset analyses displayed earlier in Figure 2.8.

Why are high-knowledge voters better at connecting public service performance to voting?

The previous sections have used survey data to unpack the evidence presented in earlier chapters demonstrating that voters sometimes do – and sometimes don't – appear to connect the performance of public services to their vote choices in local elections. Political knowledge appears to play an important role in voters's ability to use their performance evaluations in their choices between the incumbent candidate or a challenger in mayoral elections. But what is it about political knowledge that actually helps people connect their vote choices to their evaluations of public services?

In the final section of this chapter, I harness data from the 2014 national survey I described earlier. This survey, which polled a diverse national sample recruited through the firm SSI, did not contain a direct measure of vote choice in local elections, but it did contain a local government satisfaction question, which I used in combination with a battery of questions asking about respondents' satisfaction with specific public services in their city. The basic correlation between service performance perceptions and local

government satisfaction was presented earlier in panel (c) of Figure 2.5.

But for a random sample of the respondents in this survey, I did *not* ask them to evaluate specific public services provided by their local government. Instead, I asked them an open-ended question about the public services in their community. Specifically, I asked respondents "What services does the local government provide in the place where you live?" This question immediately preceded the question in which I asked respondents for their overall satisfaction with their local government.

In order to better understand why low-knowledge voters might be less able to connect the performance of public services with their choices in local elections, I next explore the responses to this open-ended question. I divide up respondents into those classified as higher in political knowledge and low in political knowledge, and conduct some very elementary text analysis of their responses about local public services. As a first cut at this, I plot the responses that people in this survey used to describe the public services provided by their local government in Figure 2.10. I plot the most common phrases used by low-knowledge respondents in the left panel, while I plot the common phrases used by high-knowledge voters in the right panel.

Figure 2.10: Most common phrases used to describe local public services by low- and high-knowledge respondents.

(a) Low-knowledge respondents (b) High-knowledge respondents

While these graphical presentations of the frequency with which respondents used certain phrases are helpful in getting a picture of what people think about when I asked them about local public services, I also examined these responses a little more rigorously. I break the text of each of the responses to this open-ended question into their component phrases and count the percentage of respondents in each category (low- and high-knowledge respondents) who used each phrase. I display the top 15 most-used phrases

Table 2.1: Most common phrases used by low-knowledge (left panel) and high-knowledge (right panel) respondents

	Phrase	% of Respondents
1	police	7
2	not sure	6
3	don't know	5
4	fire	5
5	education	4
6	nothing	3
7	food stamps	2
8	health care	2
9	parks	2
10	law enforcement	2
11	none	2
12	not much	2
13	water	2
14	welfare	2
15	ambulance	1

	Phrase	% of Respondents
1	police	37
2	fire	25
3	water	15
4	schools	11
5	education	11
6	sewer	8
7	roads	8
8	parks	6
9	trash collection	6
10	library	5
11	fire protection	4
12	utilities	4
13	building permits	3
14	road maintenance	3
15	social services	3

by low-knowledge respondents in the left panel of Table 2.1 and those most used by high-knowledge respondents in the right panel of Table 2.1.

Three primary conclusions arise from these basic analyses of respondents' open-ended reflections on local public services. First, those respondents low in political knowledge were much more likely than high-knowledge respondents to use phrases such as "don't know," "not sure," or "nothing" when describing their public services. Second, a much lower percentage of low-knowledge respondents correctly listed public services commonly provided by local governments, such as police, fire protection, and education, than high-knowledge respondents. The most common phrase mentioned by both high- and low-knowledge respondents was "police." Yet 37% of high-knowledge respondents listed this service in their answer, while only 7% of low-knowledge respondents listed police protection as a public service provided by their local government when asked. Finally, the prevalence of public services commonly provided by governments *other* than local governments is higher among low-knowledge respondents. For instance, some low-knowledge respondents listed "food stamps" (otherwise known as SNAP) and "welfare" as public services provided by local government – yet both of these programs are ordinarily provided by state governments using federal government funding.

These exploratory analyses, in combination with the evidence presented earlier in this chapter, point to several reasons *why* political knowledge may be so crucial for voters to hold their local governments accountable for public services. Those low in political knowledge may have no idea what public services are provided by their local government, and so their choices in local elections may seem – to them – unconnected from their satisfaction

about an assortment of public services. These low-knowledge voters may also have less strongly-held attitudes about these public services when they *are* forced to evaluate them by researchers. Even if they do have strong attitudes about these public services, they might be more likely to think of other governments when they are evaluating local public services – and in the reverse, they may be thinking about the performance of services that are *not* provided by local governments when they are asked to judge their local government or pick between candidates in a local election.

Conclusion

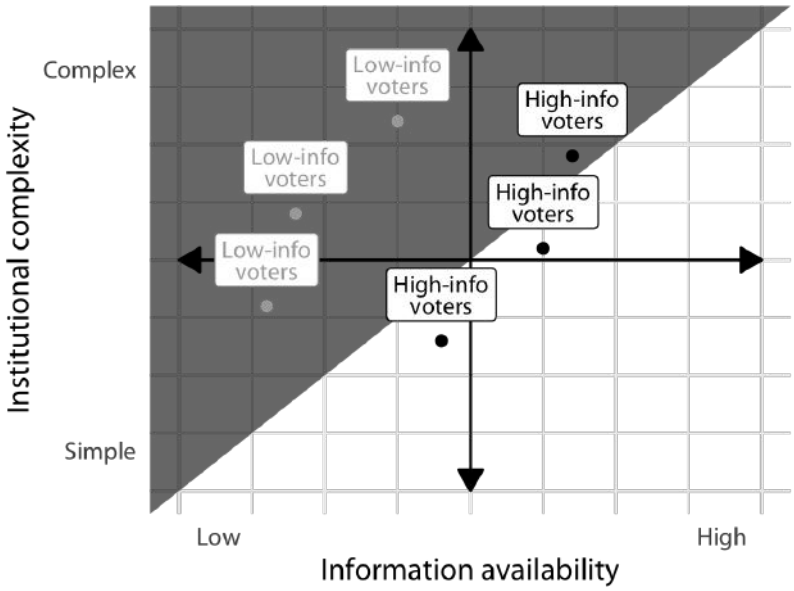
Voters like my friend Dominick, whose story I began this chapter with, might be able to appropriately figure out what the job of their city councilors and mayor are when it comes time for their city elections. Yet many others have little interest in the subject of local government or even politics more generally. They might – quite rationally – choose to spend their time relaxing, consuming entertainment, or just taking care of their other responsibilities in life. But as I have shown in this chapter, this type of person (unlike Dominick) is unlikely to have much information about their local government's performance. Nor are they likely to correctly connect the features of their life that are products of local government policy and appropriate signals of their local leaders' performance in office with those leaders when it comes time to vote.

This chapter assessed variation in the knowledge of voters in local elections. Individual differences in voter knowledge can translate into a better understanding of public service responsibilities and true government performance. In turn, these individual differences enable some people – like Dominick, perhaps – to hold government accountable for public services and prevent others – those with fewer resources, time, or education than Dominick – from doing so.

There will likely always be some voters who are able to accomplish the tough task of electoral accountability, and some who are less able to do so. In other words, some people are more susceptible to falling under the shroud of the fog of accountability, and some are less susceptible to its pall. In Figure 2.11, I show how the presence of both high-knowledge and low-knowledge voters can make accountability difficult – or even impossible – on some issues in city politics.

Put in somewhat pessimistic terms, the overall conclusion from much of this chapter is that electoral accountability is a tall task for voters in local elections. While many voters evaluate features of their cities as mediocre if not downright poor, few of them translate those judgments into votes against their incumbent local officials. When voters do not translate their performance judgments into vote choices, there is little prospect for accountability from elections.

Figure 2.11: The fog of accountability among low- and high-knowledge voters



Knowledge, I have shown in this chapter, gives voters power in the local context – power to translate their experiences with public services and conditions in their city into vote choices, and power to untangle the mess of complex local institutional responsibilities. The cycle of electoral accountability depends at least in part on this ability of voters to reward and punish politicians for the job they are doing.

I also offered some evidence for *why* knowledge enables some voters to hold local government accountable. It appears that at least one factor is voters' ability to connect responsibility for public services with their local government. When voters have more general knowledge about politics, they also are more likely to know what their local governments actually do – in other words, they are more aware that the crucial services with which they interact daily are provided by local governments.

This micro-level evidence sets up an empirical puzzle for the next few chapters that I will answer using more macro-level evidence. What happens when low-knowledge voters are confronted by the complex choice set of candidates in elections, and how do voters perform in the aggregate at holding their city governments accountable? Not only do individual differences across voters determine the likelihood of accountability, but the media environment, institutional designs, and the choices available to voters all combine to challenge voters in local elections. These types of contextual factors affect many voters at the same time and can dampen accountability

– and ultimately, lead to poor public service provision – for an entire city's population. The next few chapters will describe, as a result, problems that some would argue demand *systemic* solutions to overcome.

Yet as this chapter has shown, there is also variation *within* cities: among different types of voters, some are able to overcome the confusion of responsibility around public services, while others are not. This knowledge that allows some voters to attribute responsibility correctly (and the lack of this knowledge for other voters) is a key feature that results from the contextual and institutional features of local politics described in earlier chapters, but might be changed independently at the individual level as well.

How is this knowledge created, and can it be improved? In the next few chapters, I will focus on how government institutions – and other actors like the media – can help voters learn this important knowledge and better accomplish the task of electoral accountability. Strong competition in local elections, the presence of local media, and simple institutional designs may all be systemic solutions to faclitate accountability in local politics. However, this chapter has given a small preview of the way that micro-level variation between voters might also enable accountability. In Chapter 7 I will return to one solution for accountability that takes up this type of individual-level solution, using one important public service – public transit – about which responsibility for performance is quite reasonably very confusing for most city residents.

3

Ineffective Competition in Local Elections

Willie Brown, Jr., is a man known for many things. The first Black mayor of San Francisco, who was before that a 31-year member of the California State Assembly, was at the center of power in California Democratic politics for an entire generation. He is also known for his personal story: a fashionable man who often dressed in expensive suits[1], he was born of simple means in small-town Texas before he arrived in San Francisco. Over the years of successful re-election to the Assembly and as Speaker of the Assembly, he had amassed enough power that he nicknamed himself "the Ayatollah."[2],

Brown won election as mayor in 1995 with 55% of the vote, and rode into his inauguration party in January 1996 in a horse-drawn carriage.[3]

[1] https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-01-09-mn-22626-story.html

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/01/us/san-fransiscans-tire-of-the-life-of-the-party.html

[3] https://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/THE-MAYOR-S-LEGACY-WILLIE-BROWN-Da-Mayor-2832960.php

He faced sharp criticism during the next four years as mayor, including over his handling of the city's public transit system[4], homelessness, and his friendliness with real estate developers. By 1998, Brown was polling with support from only a third of San Francisco residents.[5] Yet in 1999, he won re-election for a second term with a commanding 60% of the vote. If he had not been term-limited out of office, he might have run again in 2003 and likely could have continued a career as mayor.

Why do incumbent mayors like Willie Brown get re-elected? Despite high-profile failures of public services, sometimes alongside low approval ratings from voters, incumbent city leaders are often voted back into office. The easy re-election of incumbent politicians suggests a lack of accountability for their actions or policy decisions. Are city politicians meaningfully challenged such that they are motivated to pursue the interests of their constituents while in power?

Willie Brown's story is instructive. In his 1999 re-election campaign, he faced two challengers as well as a last-minute write-in campaign from the president of the city council.[6] But he out-fundraised his nearest rival in the election by a factor of more than ten (Nieves 1999). Sitting President Bill Clinton recorded a campaign message on Brown's behalf, another signal of his dominant status. By all indicators the incumbent mayor ran in an election that was technically contested. But his victory was hardly a surprise.

The first two chapters of this book have introduced a theory that questions the health of American democracy in the local governments that are supposed to be "closest to the people." City governments with complex institutions create an informational obstacle for voters when they must make electoral choices. City elections are clouded by a fog of accountability for which voters require a great deal of help to overcome. In this foggy context, city residents struggle to base their votes on the performance of their governments.

In Chapter 2, I showed that at the individual level, many voters struggle to translate their disapproval of local government services – and their general views of their city – into votes. In elections across the country, voters often view their public services and the general conditions of their city as poor. Despite these negative views, they continue to vote for their incumbent leaders in local elections. Though often quoted for his argument that "voters are not fools," V.O. Key less famously added a major caveat to this argument: "the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it" (Key

[4]For more on this, see Chapter 7.

[5]https://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/01/us/san-fransiscans-tire-of-the-life-of-the-party.html

[6]In San Francisco the city council is called the Board of Supervisors due to a merged city-county government, but it functions in the same way as a traditional city council.

1966, 7). The presence and clarity of these alternatives were, in his view, crucial for democratic functioning.

In this chapter, I begin to examine accountability in cities in the aggregate by looking at the other side of the electoral calculus: the choices available to city voters and the outcomes of their local elections. In Schattschneider's (1960) words, "The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power" (Schattschneider 1960, 68). Examining the alternatives between which voters can choose in local elections is therefore an important precursor to investigating electoral accountability.

Using broad elections data from across the country over the last several decades, I show that – even if voters are knowledgeable about their governments, they face a significant barrier to electoral accountability that comes from the choices set before them. In most places, city elections can only be characterized as minimally competitive. Many incumbents face no challengers. In part this has to do with the scare-off of otherwise qualified candidates who might challenge these incumbents. Even when they do face challengers, they still usually win by wide margins of victory. This presents a depressing reality for city voters: they have little *opportunity* to meaningfully hold their incumbent leaders accountable. But it also demonstrates that even when voters do have alternative choices in front of them, they often choose to re-elect their current leaders.

Though this book will use many sources of data, the elections data that I introduce in this chapter is one of the chief sources of data for some of the chapters that follow. I will use these data to evaluate whether voters hold their local governments accountable through the ballot box. Why elections data? Though accountability (and barriers to accountability) could occur outside an electoral context, the *chief* way in which people can hold their elected leaders accountable in a democratic country like the United States is by voting in elections.[7] These elections serve as a method by which citizens can support the leaders who are already in office. They are also the principal way in which citizens can replace incompetent leaders with better ones. As a result, politicians in a (functioning) democratic system with regular elections can expect to have some consequences for poor performance. This can incentivize them to provide better public services and make choices in line with what voters want.

The functioning of these elections, however, is key. If we are to believe that electoral accountability (and anticipation of it) can actually produce better government, these elections must involve viable alternatives to in-

[7]Notably, non-electoral accountability is likely to produce large inequalities in who is able to demand better services or certain policy choices because it allows for biases in costly non-electoral participation to exacerbate existing resource differences (e.g. Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2019; Einstein, Glick, Godinez Puig, and Palmer 2023; Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2019; Sahn 2024*a*; Yoder 2020).

cumbent leaders and actual turnover of leaders.[8] In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this book, I directly examine the effect of performance in several policy arenas on election outcomes. However, in this chapter I begin by looking at the basics. How healthy are local elections? Do they provide meaningful opportunities for voters to replace poorly-performing politicians? These opportunities are a crucial precursor to effective accountability.

To answer these questions, it is important to lay out what local elections would look like if they were set up to facilitate accountability. A simple set of conditions should exist, I would argue, if elections can function as a tool to produce accountability.

1. Elections should be contested: they should have multiple candidates vying for the same seat. Without this, there is no ability for voters to choose a better candidate than the single one on the ballot, and the elections are somewhat meaningless. The number of candidates running for a seat, or just the presence of contestation at all, is a good indicator of this.

2. Elections should be competitive: they should feature multiple candidates, more than one of whom has a viable chance to win. When there are multiple viable candidates, they must campaign and seek to win voters over other candidate(s). Anticipating this is key for incentivizing incumbent leaders to make good policy. Margins of victory in elections are one way to measure this.

3. Elections should be fair: when good quality challengers run against incumbent politicians, they should have a shot at winning. This condition is is met if good quality candidates aren't deterred from running and incumbents aren't given an unfair advantage in elections. The incumbency advantage – and a possible precursor to it, the scare-off effect of qualified challengers – are two ways of measuring this.

To determine whether local elections meet these conditions, I harness a new dataset of local elections in medium and large US cities from the larger dataset I collected with several colleagues (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2023). Here, I focus on elections for the offices of mayor and city councilor – the primary focus of my arguments about city politics – to answer the questions raised above. I also incorporate data from school board elections in this database to make comparisons to city offices in Chapter 5. Together, these data represent the broadest (both geographically and temporally) source of

[8]Note that this contestation is only one dimension along which democracy must function in order to produce better outcomes in the framework of Dahl (1971). Dahl's framework argues that contestation must occur alongside inclusive participation. In this first chapter I focus on this first dimension of democratic health alone – and leave questions of the effects of participation to other chapters.

evidence about how local elections function. I dive into these elections data to assess several features of local elections and their basic "vital signs." The data will show that, while there are meaningful levels of contestation and competition in local elections, incumbents still manage to scare off qualified challengers and stay in office fairly regularly.

First, I show the relative rates of contestation (i.e. whether incumbents are challenged) in local elections and dimensions of competition (i.e. how often incumbents are re-elected, and how effective the competition is between the top candidates). High rates of contestation stand in contrast to high rates of re-election and large margins of victory in local elections. Does this mean that incumbent local politicians are just good at their job, and so their re-election actually demonstrates a functioning local democracy?

I next move to a causal framework using a regression discontinuity design to assess whether incumbency has a causal effect on entry into and success in future elections. This design allows me to focus on the trajectories of close losers and close winners of elections to isolate the impact of winning – and becoming an incumbent – from other quality-based differences between incumbents and challengers. In other words, are similarly qualified candidates who barely lose and barely win their first contest more likely to enter in and win future contests?

My results indicate the existence of a large incumbency advantage. Candidates who barely win their first race re-run in the next election – as an incumbent – at high rates. Meanwhile, candidates who barely lose their first election are far less likely to run in the next cycle. Incumbent leaders therefore benefit from otherwise-qualified candidates exiting from politics and often do not face a challenger – much less a viable one – in their next election. Incumbents thereby benefit not just from the policy-making power of their office, but the power to shape the choices in front of voters in subsequent elections – a classic example of what Bachrach and Baratz (1962) famously call the second face of power. This power is substantial. As Schattschneider (1960) puts it, "above everything, the people are powerless if the political enterprise is not competitive" (Schattschneider 1960, 137).

On top of this, incumbent leaders go on to win their future elections at higher rates than non-incumbents of similar quality. Together, these provide two pieces of evidence that bolster the individual-level findings from Chapter 2: there is little prospect for many voters to hold local leaders accountable for performance, nor do elections appear to provide meaningful competition and turnover when voters are aggregated into electorates. Incumbent city politicians are not necessarily better candidates, but do scare off similar-quality candidates. Moreover, they win their subsequent elections over similar-quality candidates in large part due to their incumbency.

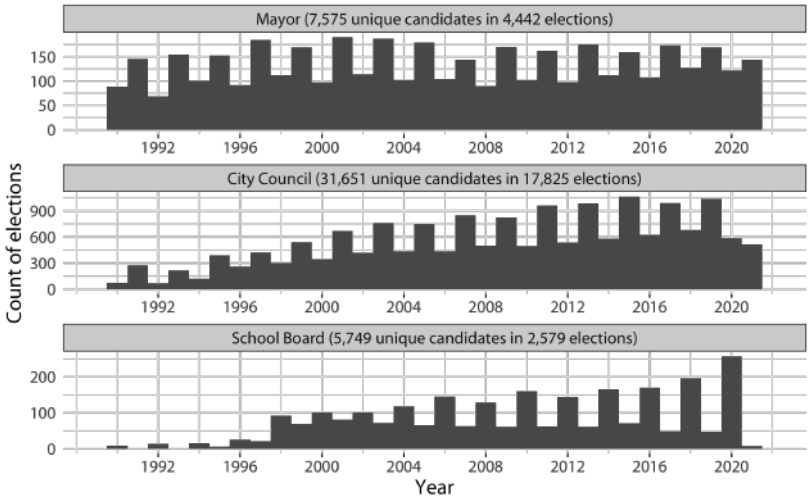
These findings provide another pessimistic conclusion for the hope of local accountability: while city elections are contested, incumbents benefit from a large scare-off effect. Incumbents are often re-elected and re-elected

with large margins of victory. With such minimally competitive local elections, a large barrier stands in the way of even the most informed local voters should they want to blame or credit their local politicians for their performance in office.

Data

To investigate these patterns in local elections, I use a new dataset of 57,204 local electoral contests in 2,632 cities and counties.[9] As my argument about local elections primarily focuses on city contests, I focus on the subset of these data that encompass races for the offices of mayor and city council – a total of 24,845 elections in 663 cities over 75,000 in population. I also include in my focus elections for school boards in 138 school districts. In Figure 3.1, I plot the temporal spread of these city elections, which date back to 1990 and – for mayoral and city council races – cover the majority of medium and large cities that held elections during these periods, especially in more recent years.

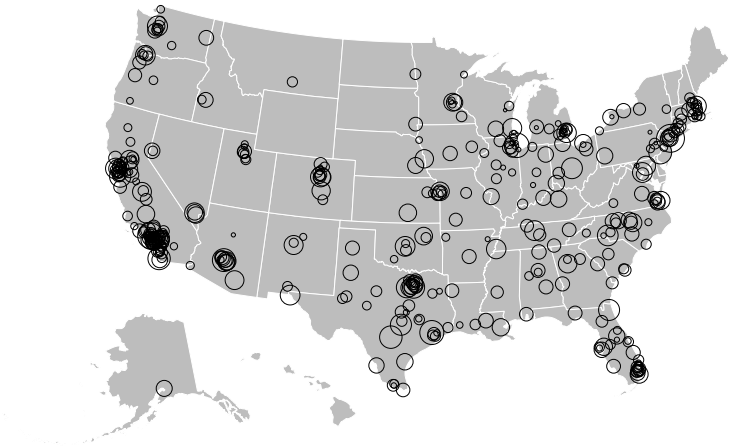
Figure 3.1: City and school elections data



[9]These data are the product of a multi-year collaborative effort and are publicly available in complete form online: https://osf.io/mv5e6/ (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2023). As described in this previous work, the elections data are compiled from a number of previously-published data collection efforts that have focused on mayoral elections (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016; Ferreira and Gyourko 2009; Gerber and Hopkins 2011), county legislative elections (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020*b*), sheriff elections (Thompson 2020; Zoorob 2022), prosecutor elections (Hessick and Morse 2019; Krumholz 2019), the MIT Election and Data Science's Lab's data on recent elections, and updated and corrected versions of the California statewide election database (CEDA 2020; de Benedictis-Kessner and Bernhard 2022), as well as web-scraped and hand-collected additional election returns.

The geographic spread of my data can also be captured by Figure 3.2, which maps each city where I have either mayoral or city council elections data. These data cover large and commonly-discussed cities, such as Los Angeles and Chicago, but also cover medium-sized cities not often mentioned in popular discussions of cities in the US. The cities of Pawtucket, RI, Rochester Hills, MN, and Alameda, CA, all feature in these data – and are examples of medium sized cities at the smaller end of the spectrum of cities in my data, with populations just over 75,000 in 2020.

Figure 3.2: Mayoral and city council elections data



As I make arguments throughout this book informed by these data, it will be tempting to think of salient examples of elections in the largest cities that might run counter the story I advance here. I will warn you in advance: those stories may be tempting as prominent exceptions that seem to question some of my arguments. But the purpose of the arguments I am making is not to advance a deterministic story of local elections, and not to advance a story about a select handful of large cities. Instead, my purpose is to advance a broad universal story of local elections by generalizing from the most extensive possible set of evidence on cities that I have available. The conclusions of this book will rest in part on the geographic and temporal breadth of the data I have covering these 663 cities – rather than the salient examples of elections in the largest few cities in the US.

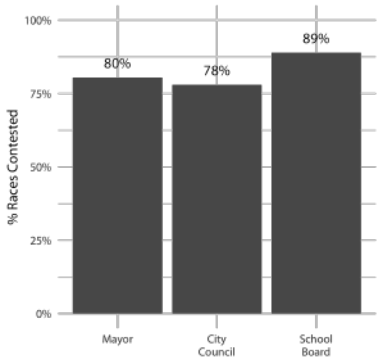
Contestation and Competition in Local Elections

I first examine several basic features of local electoral contests, with a specific focus on those for the offices of mayor, city council, and school districts. I begin by assessing the level of contestation in local elections across my data. This is a basic requirement of functioning electoral democracy: if

there are multiple candidates vying for the same seat in office, candidates have an incentive to distinguish themselves in campaigns so that voters can choose between them. And the candidates who win elections may be incentivized to perform well once in office because they can reasonably expect to be challenged in future elections.

Figure 3.3 plots the percentage of races for each of these three offices where the number of candidates running for office was at least one more than the number of seats up for election. In mayoral races, where there is one winner, I classify a race as contested when there are two or more candidates. In city council and school board elections that either have one winner or multiple winners (e.g. at-large races with multiple seats in the same contest) I classify a race as contested when there is at least one more candidate running than the number of seats up for election in that contest.

Figure 3.3: Local races are contested at relatively high levels



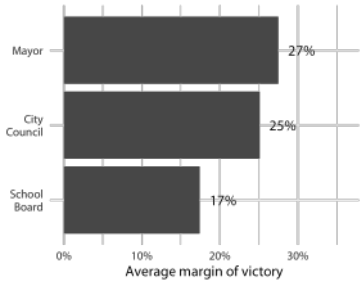
At first glance, it appears that there is a fair amount of competition in city elections. Large majorities of local races are contested. However, contestation alone does not necessarily signify *meaningful* competition. Some candidates who enter local elections, for instance, might be simply unqualified, or not taken seriously by voters, or simply not have enough funding to run a viable campaign. The levels of contested elections plotted in Figure 3.3 would not distinguish these kinds of races from races in which the election was more tightly contested.

To better evaluate levels of competition in these elections, I instead calculate the margin of victory in each contest by subtracting the voteshare of the first runner-up candidate from the voteshare of the winning candidate.[10] I plot the average margin of victory of all races for each office in my data in Figure 3.4. Mayoral and city council races typically feature winning margins over 25 percentage points – for instance, in which a winning mayoral

[10]In city council and school board elections that either have multiple winners I again alter this calculation slightly by subtracting the voteshare of the most-narrowly-lost candidate from the voteshare of the most-narrowly-won candidate.

candidate earns 60% of the vote, while the first runner-up candidate wins only 35% of the vote, and other candidate and write-in candidates earn a collective total of 5% of the vote. Clearly in this type of race, the fact that it is contested would not indicate *meaningful* competition, but a landslide election. The exception appears to be school board elections, where margins of victory are typically smaller – about 16 percentage points on average.

Figure 3.4: Local races are characterized by large winning margins



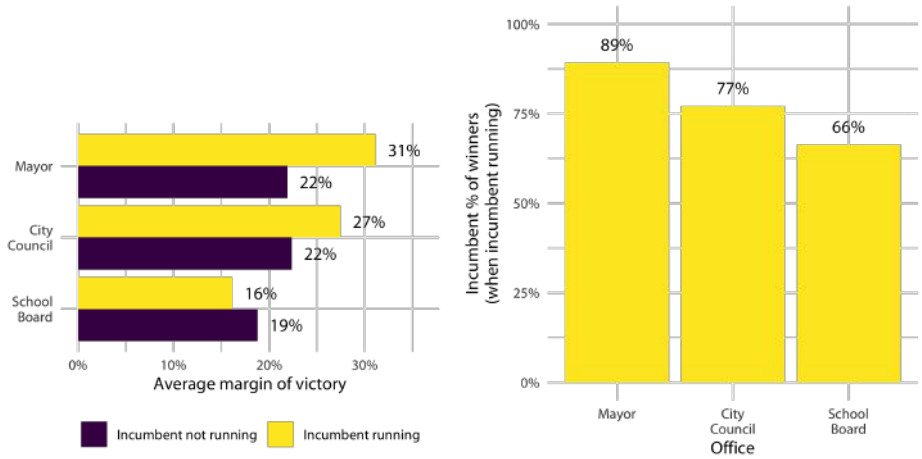
Why might margins of victory be so large despite the fact that these local races are often contested? One large piece of this is the fact that large numbers of local elections feature incumbents re-running for election. Local incumbents might scare away high-quality candidates (Eggers 2017; Hall and Snyder 2015) and be more likely to win their races for re-election than a challenger (e.g. de Benedictis-Kessner 2018*b*; Krebs 1998; Lucas 2021; Lucas, McGregor, and Tuxhorn 2022; Trounstine 2011). Some of the most comprehensive evidence on the supply of mayoral candidates and their electoral success documents that nearly 80% of winning mayoral candidates have previous political experience, and 40% of them were incumbents (Kirkland 2022, 2024).[11]

To begin exploring the possibility that incumbent candidates benefit from a dual advantage in local politics – that their presence both depresses challenger candidate entry and decreases challengers' prospects for success – I again calculate the average margins of victory in local races, but separately for contests that feature an incumbent running and for contests that do not have an incumbent running. The left side of Figure 3.5 plots this metric of competitiveness by office. The bars representing mayoral and city council elections in which an incumbent is running feature much larger margins of victory than those races in which no incumbent is running. School board elections, however, appear to be an exception to this: the margins of victory appear similar in open-seat races to those in which an incumbent is running.

The right side of Figure 3.5 further shows how little true competitiveness

[11] This matches some evidence from other countries: in Canada, Lucas (2015) and Lucas and Sayers (2018) document how both municipal council members and various special-purpose government officials tend to serve for periods of time long beyond one term.

Figure 3.5: Winning margins and incumbency win rates in open-seat and incumbent-running local elections



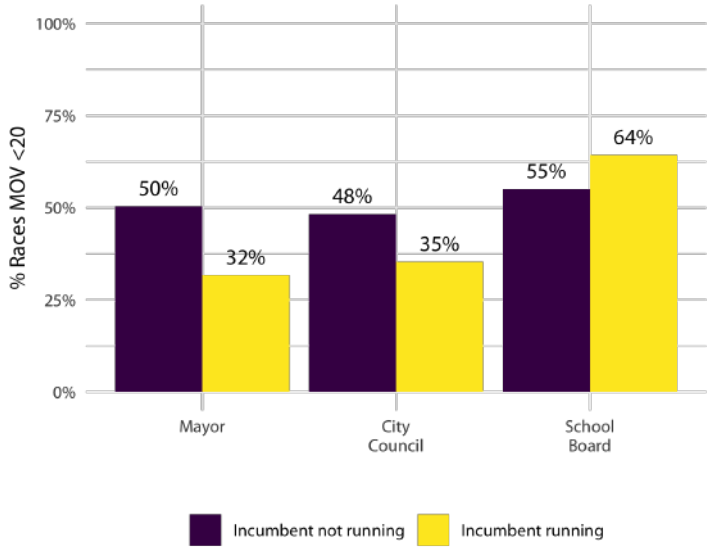
there is in local elections where an incumbent is running. The vertical bars plot the percent of winning candidates who are incumbents in races where an incumbent is running. In mayoral, city council, and school board elections, an overwhelming majority of the candidates who win are incumbents when they enter contests. Perhaps this is unsurprising, but when incumbents run they tend to win.

Another way of thinking about the competitiveness (or lack of competitiveness) is by calculating how many elections feature an even marginally close race. In Figure 3.6 I calculate the share of local elections that feature a margin of victory that is less than 20 percentage points. If elections are truly competitive, we would expect that many of them would have close margins. As the vertical bars show, only about half of mayoral and city council races without an incumbent running (open-seat contests) are "close" races using this metric. Races in which an incumbent is running, however, look even worse. Only about a third of mayoral and city council elections are close when an incumbent is running for re-election. Put another way, two-thirds of city elections in which incumbents run do not end up being even remotely close races.

As some of my earlier metrics of competitiveness showed, school board races appear to be a bit different. Over half of school board contests are competitive by this metric, and nearly two third are competitive even when an incumbent is running. School board races may actually be competitive in a large enough number of instances that accountability might occur – though I will leave that question for further examination later in this book.

More generally, these patterns suggest that elections in which incumbents are running have ineffective competition. Perhaps lower-quality candidates

Figure 3.6: Competitiveness of local elections that are open-seat and feature an incumbent running



decide to challenge incumbents in mayoral and city council elections than in open-seat races. Higher-quality candidates could be (quite reasonably) scared off by incumbents and choose to spend their time, money, and political effort elsewhere, or wait until an open-seat race (Cox and Katz 1996; Levitt and Wolfram 1997; cf. Hall and Snyder 2015). These patterns might reflect strategic candidate entry patterns that additionally depress the representation of women and racial minorities in local government (e.g. Bernhard and de Benedictis-Kessner 2021; Crowder-Meyer and Smith 2015; Farris and Holman 2024; Kanthak and Woon 2015; Lawless and Fox 2005, 2010; Shah 2014; Trounstine and Valdini 2008).

Yet these patterns also show the potential for an additional anti-competitive feature of elections that may be occurring on top of strategic candidate entry. Incumbents may be benefitting from advantages in elections – i.e. winning – over challengers due to a number of reasons, including their relative name recognition (e.g. Kam and Zechmeister 2013), resource advantages (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1984; Fiorina 1977 cf. Ansolabehere and Snyder Jr 2002), and experience in office. Disentangling whether incumbents benefit from being incumbents in subsequent elections or due to other factors is a more difficult task than simply comparing margins of victory or winning rates, which I take up in the next section.

The Incumbency Advantage in Local Elections

Up to this point in this chapter I have shown that while city elections are contested at high rates, they often feature large margins of victory – especially in races that feature an incumbent re-running. And when incumbents do run for re-election, they usually win. This suggests the possibility of large incumbency advantages in these elections, potentially due to scare-off of high-quality candidates.

Previous work has established the fact that incumbency win elections with greater regularity than challengers in national and state elections. Research from the last half-century has explored some of the determinants of this advantage as well as why it has varied over time (e.g. Ansolabehere and Snyder Jr 2002; Cox and Katz 1996; Gelman and King 1990; Lee 2008). While there is evidence that the incumbency advantage exists in local elections (e.g. de Benedictis-Kessner 2018*b*; Trounstine 2011; Zoorob 2022), little research has examined how it varies across different offices and over time, despite the fact that it could vary for any number of theoretical reasons. Comprehensive evidence gathered by Brian Adams suggests that incumbent local politicians fundraise more successfully than challengers by double or triple (Adams 2010, 2018). Examining the incumbency advantage is theoretically important due to the potential for it to inhibit accountability (Larsen 2019*a*),

To better investigate the possibility of an incumbency advantage and its ability to hinder accountability, I move to a framework that allows me to assess the *causal* effect of incumbency on the electoral entry and electoral success of candidates in subsequent races. Rather than just comparing, for instance, the voteshare of incumbent candidates and challengers, I use a regression discontinuity design (RDD) that focuses on candidates who just barely won a seat in an election and candidates who just barely lost a seat in an election. I look at the future success of these two types of candidates – measured using both their decision to enter an election in the next 4 years and their rate of winning those future elections.

Specifically, this RDD exploits the fact that the winners and losers in close elections are similar in many characteristics related to quality if they just barely win or just barely lose an election, but differ on the key characteristic of whether they go on to hold office. This design relies on an assumption that candidates are unable to sort on either side of the win/lose threshold – a tenable assumption given that candidates are fairly universally trying to win elections. With this assumption in hand, this design mimics the design of a randomized experiment, in which one candidate is assigned as the winner and one candidate assigned as the loser, and therefore allows me to see how this as-if-randomly-assigned office-holder does better in future elections.

I also make one further tweak to the way that the RDD is commonly

used in research on national and state elections. Most researchers who study these types of elections calculate a *partisan* incumbency advantage, which estimates the effect of a party holding office on that party's success in future elections. However, many city-level elections lack party labels on their ballots, and so the incumbency advantage calculated as the incumbent *party's* advantage would only describe a minority of local elections. Instead, I calculate an *individual*-level incumbency advantage, which represents the effect of an individual becoming an incumbent on their future electoral entry and success. This mirrors prior work on the incumbency advantage in US local elections (de Benedictis-Kessner 2018*b*; Trounstine 2011) as well as in other countries (Ariga 2015; De Magalhaes 2015; Hyytinen et al. 2015; Uppal 2009).

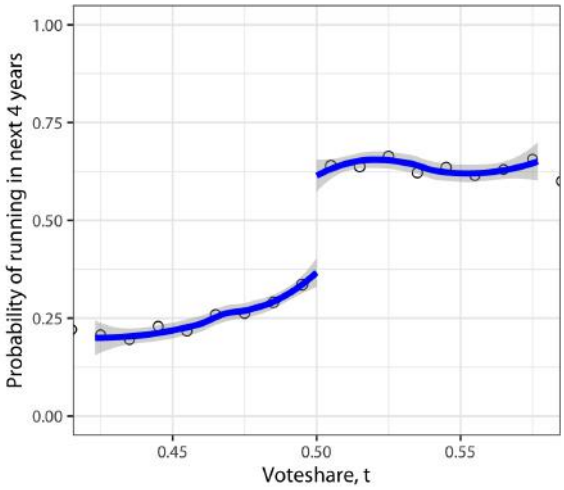
Mechanically, I use each individual candidate's current voteshare to predict their success in the next election. I calculate the effect of incumbency on the probability that a candidate will run in the next election as well as her probability of running in and winning that election. I follow the best practices for RDDs outlined in (Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2014*b*) and implemented in `R` using `rdrobust` (Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2014*a*) to choose the bandwidth around the threshold voteshare needed to win elections that minimizes mean squared error in estimation and adjust the confidence intervals for my estimates to account for any remaining bias.

Results

In Figure 3.7 below, I display one way of visualizing the results from this research design applied to the pooled data from all city-level and school board elections. The plot displays the voteshare of barely winning and barely losing candidates along the horizontal axis, with data represented by open circles aggregated into 1 percentage point bins. The vertical axis displays the probability of running again in the next four years for candidates within that binned voteshare. The trend lines represent weighted averages of the probability that candidates run again in the future using loess curves. The line on the left side represents the probability of running again in the future for those who lose their first election, while the line on the right side represents that same probability for those who win and go on to become incumbents. The clear "jump" between the two lines at the 50% voteshare threshold along the x-axis indicates the large positive effect of winning on the probability that candidates run again in the future.

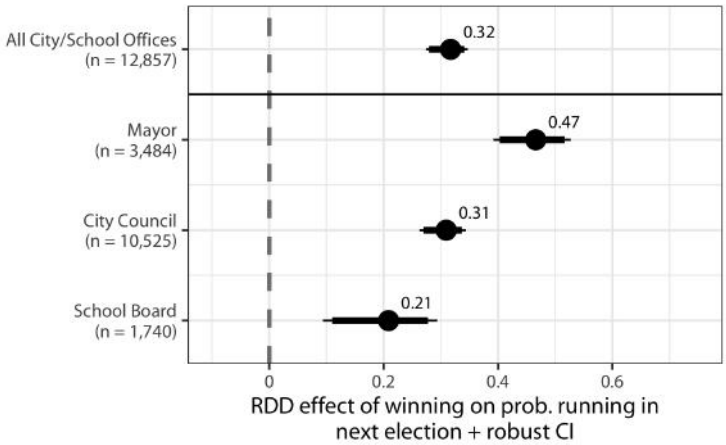
Figure 3.8 displays the results in a different visual format. Again, I analyze whether bare-winners and bare-losers in city elections run again in the future, but include different types of offices. In this plot, each point represents the effect of incumbency (relative to non-incumbency) for candidates on the probability that they re-run for that office in the next four years – the jump between the two lines in Figure 3.7. The lines on either side of the

Figure 3.7: Local incumbents run in the next election at far higher rates than bare-losers of elections



points represent the robust bias-corrected confidence intervals at the 90% (thick lines) and 95% (thin lines) levels. Each of these estimates can be interpreted as the causal effect of holding office (the incumbency advantage) on the outcome. The top points and lines in each panel show the estimated incumbency advantage across all city races and school districts, while the estimates presented below represent the incumbency advantage in mayoral, city council, and school board elections separately for each type of office.

Figure 3.8: Local incumbents have a large advantage in re-running in their next election (i.e. scare-off)



There appears to be a large scare-off effect of qualified candidates who

barely-lose elections not re-running in future elections at the same rate as candidates who barely win their elections. As Figure 3.8 shows, across the pooled dataset of city and school elections, incumbency increases the probability that candidates will re-run in the next election by 32 percentage points. In other words, incumbent candidates are much more likely to persist in running for office. Perhaps this is not a big surprise: politicians, like many of us, want to keep their jobs. Once they are in office they want to stay there. What is more surprising, however, is that there is such a large effect of incumbency *even* when I use a research design that subsets to a comparison of incumbents with losing candidates who are clearly qualified and nearly win their earlier election.

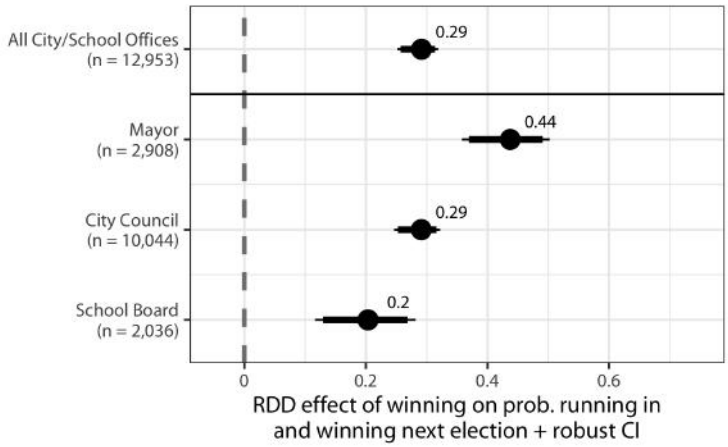
This tendency for incumbent candidates to re-run at much higher rates than near-winners extends across different types of local offices, though it varies in its magnitude. For mayoral candidates, this scare-off effect of losing candidates is a large 47 percentage points. City council candidates, on the other hand, exhibit a smaller scare-off effect of incumbency of only 31 percentage points. Incumbency has an even smaller effect on future electoral entry among school board candidates: only 21 percentage points.

Figure 3.9 shows similar analyses, but this time using as the outcome the probability that candidates re-run *and win* in the next four years. The effect of incumbency on the propensity to run in the next election cycle cascades into an effect on the probability that candidates will win their next election. Across elections for all city offices and school boards, incumbency increases the probability that candidates will re-run in and win the next election by 29 percentage points. This effect on future electoral success is 44 percentage points for mayoral candidates, while it is again substantially smaller for city council candidates: only 29 percentage points. For school board candidates, the effect of incumbency on the rate of running in and winning their next election is an even smaller 20 percentage points.

The patterns that emerge from these analyses of the incumbency advantage in local elections indicate two things. First, there is a substantial scare-off effect of high-quality candidates who nearly win elections but then drop out of politics. Second, incumbents are much more likely than these barely-losing candidates to go on and re-run in and win subsequent elections. The first of these findings suggests a significant structural power advantage from which incumbent politicians benefit. Though this second finding suggests an advantage to incumbents in their repeated elections, it is not evidence on its own that voters are mindlessly picking incumbent candidates in local elections. Yet it does point to the possibility that incumbent candidates are benefiting from a larger electoral advantage when compared to quite similar candidates.

The findings from this chapter to this point suggest that there may not be enough electoral competition for meaningful accountability to occur in local elections. Large margins of victory, low numbers of candidates running,

Figure 3.9: Local incumbents have a large advantage in running in and winning their next election



and the presence of large incumbency advantages in terms of both future electoral entry and electoral success, all point to low prospects for electoral accountability. At the same time, these local races – and especially those for mayor and city council – are contested at high rates. The patterns of incumbent success, then, might simply indicate voters rewarding competent politicians in office. Functioning democratic accountability – as I define it here – relies on the ability of citizens to reward and punish politicians in elections. But if incumbents are highly competent, it is difficult to distinguish effective accountability from dysfunctional democracy. Voters could be providing undue rewards to incumbents solely because of name-recognition or other benefits of holding office unrelated to their performance. Yet they could also be rewarding them for a job well done. So while the findings from this chapter indicate that accountability may be difficult in local elections, they do not on their own tell us about the presence (or lack) of effective sanctioning or reward in these elections.

Election Timing

If there is one institutional feature of local elections that stands out as most influential at shaping the landscape of the candidates on the ballot, the turnout of voters, and the outcomes of those elections, it may be their timing (Grimmer and Hersh 2023). While the majority of national news certainly focuses on the elections that happen in November for the office of the president (every four years) and other federal offices (every two years), the majority of elections in the United States happen at other times. And because of the lack of national or state (in most cases) rules about election timing across the country, cities (and other local governments) vary in the

timing of their elections. Municipal elections, especially, are far more likely to happen either in November of odd years or in the spring time. In this section, I examine whether this much-debated institutional feature of local elections can lead to more potential electoral accountability.

How did this varied landscape of election dates come about? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reform groups sought to insulate local elections from the partisanship of national politics and the machine capture of urban politics at the time (National Municipal League 1916; Trounstine 2008, 2010). These groups proposed a number of institutional reforms, such as making local ballots nonpartisan, eliminating mayoral executives and replacing them with appointed city managers, and moving the timing of elections so that they did not coincide with national contests. Many cities adopted these reforms – often as a result of organized interest groups which saw advantages to these changes (Anzia 2012*b*).[12]

While these institutional reforms may have affected a great number of facets of local politics, one of the largest debates around reform efforts such as off-cycle election timing has been its effects on representation and voter turnout. Off-cycle elections have undeniably lower voter turnout than on-cycle elections (Anzia 2014; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Hajnal, Kogan, and Markarian 2022; Marschall and Lappie 2018, 2024; Wood 2002). This lower voter turnout can lead to biases in policy representation because the people who show up to vote in off-cycle elections look different from those who show up in on-cycle elections, and have ideologically different views (Anzia 2011, 2012*a*; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2023; Dynes, Hartney, and Hayes 2021; Einstein, Palmer, Hamilton, and Singer 2023; Hajnal and Trounstine 2005; Hartney and Hayes 2021; Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz 2018; Schaffner, Rhodes, and La Raja 2020).

However, the implications of this electoral institution for *accountability* are unclear. On the one hand, it might facilitate accountability by involving a broader swath of the population in making choices over their elected leaders. The local election might receive more attention from voters as a result of being held at a time when more people are paying attention to politics. Politicians could anticipate needing to satisfy this broader set of attentive voters and therefore make better policy as a result. Some limited evidence suggests that this may happen (Payson 2017).

On the other hand, this broader set of voters in local elections could result in compositional effects that *decrease* the average information levels of the electorate. Off-cycle elections were intended to increase the influence of informed voters, and could lead to greater relative participation of knowledgeable and motivated voters (Anzia 2011; Berry and Gersen 2011; Oliver and Ha 2007; Oliver, Ha, and Callen 2012). Indeed, the goal of progressive

[12]See Grumbach, Mickey, and Ziblatt (2023) for evidence that the intention of these reforms may have been motivated by other racial political concerns as well.

era reformers was to have better public policy in cities by protecting what they saw as the technical work of running a city efficiently from the fickle wishes of a majority of voters. If their expressed intentions were correct, then we might expect reforms such as off-cycle elections to have actually improved accountability.

Incorporating more voters in on-cycle elections who are not as highly motivated by local policy concerns might mean that voters are making decisions based instead on vague background characteristics of candidates rather than policy positions or performance (Bernhard and Freeder 2020*b*), national political trends rather than local concerns (Hopkins 2018; Kuriwaki 2023) or on irrelevant recent events (Achen and Bartels 2016; Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010).[13] More knowledgeable voters who turn out in off-cycle contests might be better able to effectively hold local governments accountable than the less informed voters who turn out in on-cycle elections (de Benedictis-Kessner 2018*b*).[14] Accountability in on-cycle elections might therefore fare worse – despite the tradeoff of a more representative electorate.

Before examining the potential impact of this critical institutional design feature of local elections on accountability, I first assess the landscape of local election timing in the cities in my elections data. Figure 3.10 shows the timing of the most recent mayoral election in each of the cities in my elections data, with on-cycle (November in either presidential or midterm years) contests plotted with purple triangles and off-cycle (November of odd years or in the springtime) contests plotted with turquoise circles. As this map indicates, off-cycle contests dominate local elections across the country, though some coastal regions appear more likely to have on-cycle elections.

Of course, these patterns have fluctuated over time. In both mayoral and city council elections, the majority of elections have occurred off-cycle throughout the three decades which my data cover. Figure 3.11 shows the prevalence of both types of election timing in my data for mayoral elections (in the left panel) and city council elections (in the right panel). Though approximately three quarters of cities have held off-cycle elections for mayor and city council since the 1990s, this rate has trended slightly downward in recent years. In part, this is because many cities want to save time and money spent on election administration, though it has also been influenced by those who see normative benefits to increasing voter turnout (Jomsky, Mullins, and Pope 2015).

Much of the arguments around election timing have implicitly assumed that it will influence accountability in elections – in one direction or the other. But how does this central local institution influence elections and accountability in cities? I begin to explore this question by examining the

[13]Though see Fowler and Montagnes (2015).

[14]Though see Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2014) for theoretical evidence that when strategic politicians anticipate this voter irrationality, such irrationality may not necessarily lead to worse outcomes in equilibrium.

Figure 3.10: Mayoral election timing

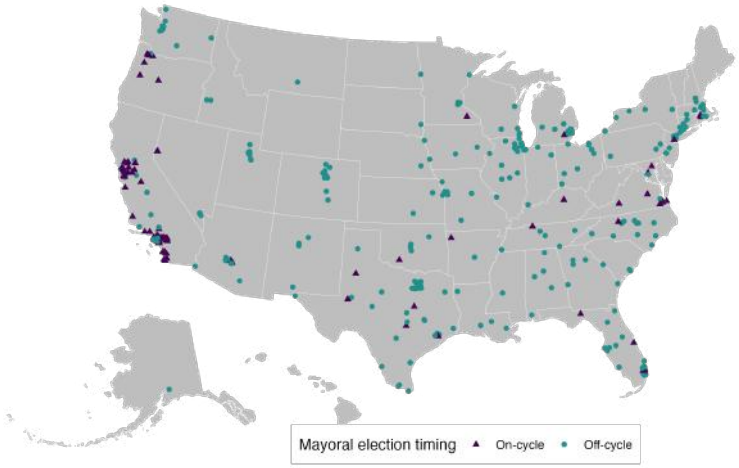
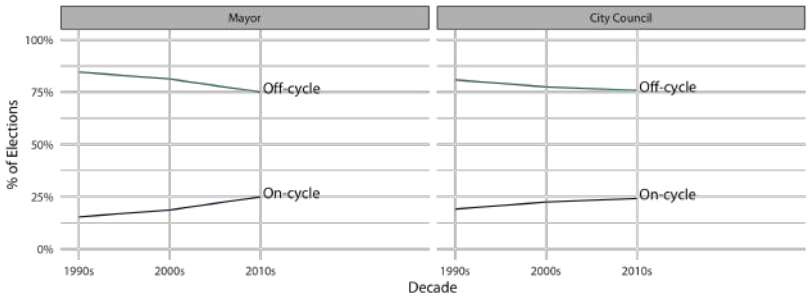


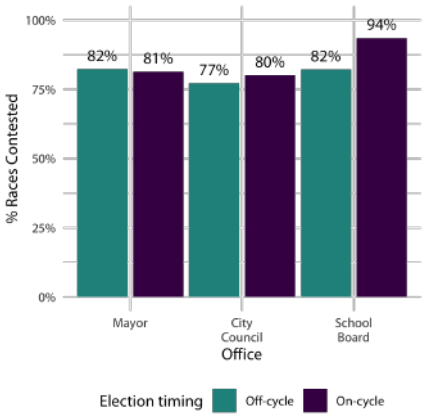
Figure 3.11: Off cycle elections are the most common, though on-cycle elections have become more common



rates of contestation and margins of victory of candidates in both on- and off-cycle local elections. Figure 3.12 show the percentage of elections that were contested under both electoral regimes. On-cycle elections are slightly more likely to be contested than elections held off-cycle. However, the differences in contestation rates are not substantial. Depending on the office, on-cycle elections are between three and eight percentage points more likely to be contested. Based on this metric alone, election timing does not appear to be standing in the way of competitive elections.

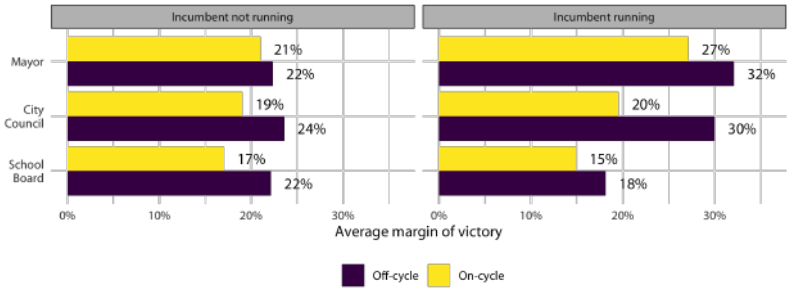
As I explored earlier, however, there are many indicators of local democracy's health. Next, I examine the winning margins of candidates in these races. In Figure 3.13 I plot the average margin of victory in elections for mayor, city council, and school board, but separate out these contests by the timing of the elections. Similar to the comparisons I showed earlier, I also separate these analyses between open-seat races (in the left panel)

Figure 3.12: Contestation is higher in on-cycle elections



and those that have an incumbent running in them (in the right panel). In open-seat elections, the timing of the elections corresponds with small differences in the winner's margin of victory. Open-seat city council and school board elections that are held off-cycle appear to have slightly higher margins of victory than on-cycle elections for these offices. Looking next at races where the incumbent is re-running, however, there are far larger differences in the margin of victory between on- and off-cycle elections. In these races, the timing of the election corresponds with a difference between two and ten percentage points. When an incumbent is running, on-cycle elections appear more competitive than off-cycle elections – especially in city council races.

Figure 3.13: On-cycle local races have smaller winning margins than off-cycle races across both contests with and without an incumbent running



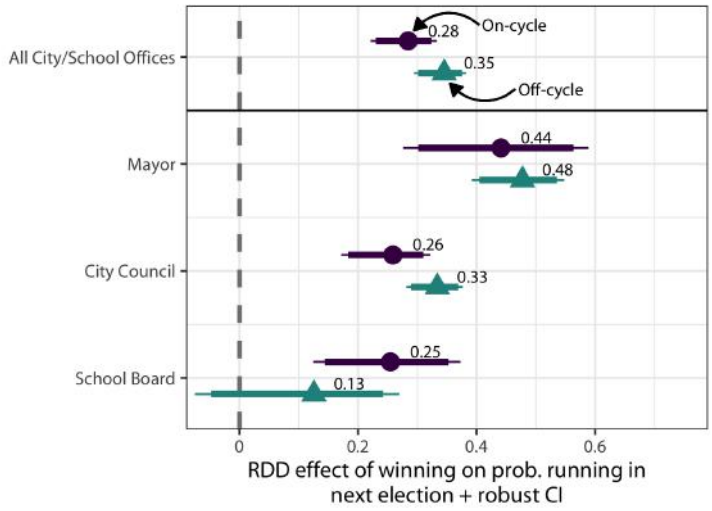
Of course, the contestation rate and winning margin are only two simple indicators of democratic health. But they both indicate that elections held off-cycle are less competitive than those held on-cycle. Off-cycle races with incumbents running are particularly less competitive.

To more deeply understand the effect that election timing has – especially

for those races with incumbents – I again calculate the regression discontinuity design-identified incumbency advantages. As with the previous use of this design, I first estimate the causal effect of incumbency on candidates' future electoral entry, and second estimate its effect on candidates' future success.

Figure 3.14 plots these first set of estimates. I display the effect of incumbency on the probability that candidates enter the next election cycle. This plot shows different patterns between different types of elections. In mayoral elections, timing appears to correspond with only small differences in the effect of incumbency on re-running in the future. In city council elections, on the other hand, the effect of incumbency on candidates' future entry is larger in off-cycle elections than in on-cycle elections. This difference is on the order of seven percentage points in the effect of incumbency on the probability of running in the next election.[15] In school board elections, however, the difference from election timing is reversed: in those races that are held *on-cycle*, incumbency has a *larger* "scare-off" effect on the rate of re-running in the next election (though the difference is not statistically significant). These are puzzling patterns: election timing – and specifically, holding elections off-cycle – appears to correspond with an indicator of *less* accountability for city council races, but the opposite for school board elections.

Figure 3.14: The incumbency advantage is larger for mayoral and school board candidates in on-cycle elections, but larger in off-cycle elections for city council candidates

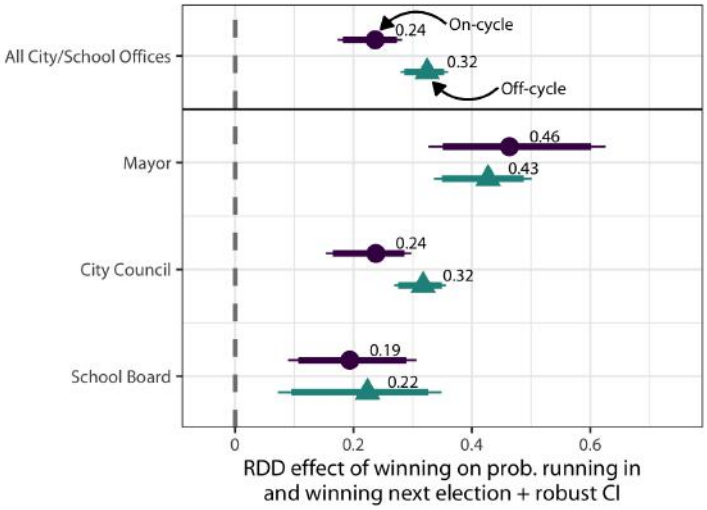


In Figure 3.15 I turn to the effect of incumbency on the probability

[15] A z-test of the difference in size between the coefficients indicates that this difference is marginally statistically significant as well $p = 0.1$.

candidates run in *and win* the next election. Here, mayoral incumbents appear to benefit from a significant advantage relative to similar challengers, but this advantage differs little by the timing of those elections. Again in city council elections, however, the difference in the advantage of incumbents between on- and off-cycle elections is substantial: an eight percentage point difference in the effect of incumbency on the probability of running in and winning the next election.[16] In school board elections, there appears to be no difference in the effect of incumbency on re-running and winning.

Figure 3.15: The incumbency advantage is larger for mayoral and school board candidates in on-cycle elections, but larger in off-cycle elections for city council candidates



However, as an attentive reader will potentially note, cities that have on-cycle elections and off-cycle elections can look quite different. The map earlier in Figure 3.10 shows that the most recent mayoral elections held on-cycle were scattered across the country with some geographic patterns, and especially a large cluster of these cities in the west. Meanwhile, off-cycle elections dominate the majority of cities across the midwest and much of the south. The differences in the incumbency advantage between on- and off-cycle elections could be due to other features of these cities, and not due to their election timing. Disentangling the true *causal* effect of election timing would require ruling out some of these other explanations for the differences.

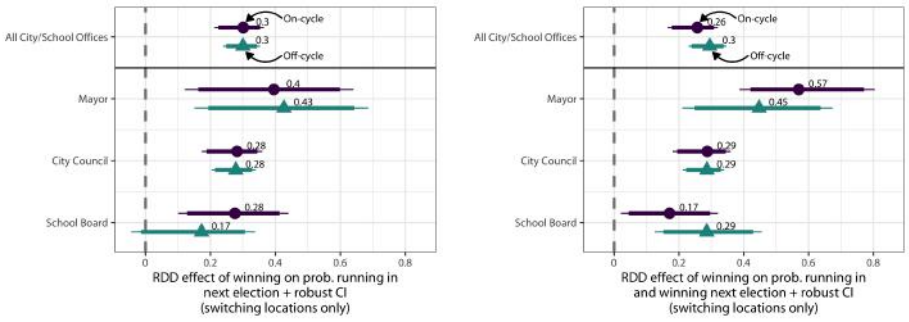
Though these observational data give me little ability to completely rule out alternative explanations for the differences in the size of the incumbency advantage other than these cities' election timing, I can take one step to

[16] A z-test of the difference in size between the coefficients indicates that this difference is statistically significant, $p = 0.02$.

make comparisons between more similar cities. I could control for a host of contextual and institutional features of the cities when calculating the incumbency advantage. But that would limit me to only ruling out those observable and measurable features of cities. Instead, I can zero in on the subset of cities that *switch* their election timing at some point in my dataset to attempt to rule out both observable and unobservable differences between cities that hold elections on-cycle and off-cycle. These cities – by virtue of holding elections at some point under both institutional contexts – are more comparable to one another than the full set of cities in my dataset.

I calculate the incumbency advantage in elections held in this narrow set of cities, and present the results in Figure 3.16. Among this subset of cities, the differences in the incumbency advantage in elections held on- and off-cycle shrinks in most cases and is statistically indistinguishable from zero in all.[17] This suggests that some of the differences observed earlier between the full set of on- and off-cycle elections may be due to other features of these cities than their election timing.

Figure 3.16: In cities that switch timing, the incumbency advantage differs by election timing by smaller amounts



These results, while potentially unsatisfying from the perspective of an accountability-minded prospective reformer of city government, highlight how difficult it is to find a panacea to improve accountability in local governments. It is tempting on representational grounds to think that elections held on-cycle can improve democracy – the people who show up to vote in these on-cycle contests look more like the population writ large (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2023). Indeed, this is a laudable goal on its own. Yet it does not appear to address problems of accountability. Incumbent politicians in cities are still re-elected at high rates under both

[17]The largest difference appears among mayoral elections: the advantage of being an incumbent creates a 57 percentage point increase in the probability of running in and winning the next election when elections are held on-cycle, while it results in a smaller 45 percentage point increase for off-cycle races. This difference, while not statistically significant ($p = 0.44$), suggests that on-cycle mayoral races may lead to less voter sanctioning of incumbent candidates (de Benedictis-Kessner 2018*b*).

types of electoral regimes.

Conclusion

Do local elections have any hope of producing accountability? In this chapter, I harnessed the largest available corpus of local government elections data in the US to begin addressing this question. How competitive are local elections, and how effective is that competition? How often are incumbent local politicians challenged in elections, and how do they fare when they are challenged?

The results presented in this chapter suggest that while local elections are contested at relatively high rates, they are not *effectively* competitive. Local elections – especially those in which incumbents re-run – are characterized by large winning margins. This suggests that while voters have options of leaders to choose from in elections, these choices are often not seriously viable. A large part of the reason for this lack of competitiveness is, as I show later in the chapter, the high degree to which local incumbents re-run in elections relative to similar-quality candidates who might otherwise challenge them. Perhaps because of this lack of effective competition, incumbents most often go on to win re-election when they re-run.

On the one hand, some might argue that high re-election rates of incumbents are just a symptom of incumbents' excellent performance in office. Yet my findings on the incumbency advantage in tandem with the earlier findings on the ineffective competition of local elections suggest that an important precursor to electoral accountability is missing. If there are not viable choices available to voters, it will be quite difficult for voters to effectively sanction or reward incumbent leaders who performance badly or well.

The results I have presented in this chapter are a first stab at assessing accountability in local elections. The findings provide a rather pessimistic conclusion, and some readers might wonder why I would even attempt to continue my assessment of accountability when elections provide such minimal alternatives to voters. Yet the subsequent chapters attempt to examine this question to determine whether, in spite of the minimal competition that local elections provide for incumbent leaders, voters are able to make use of the limited choices available to them.

Without data on their performance in office, strong conclusions about the health of local democratic accountability would not be warranted. The next several chapters build on this one by incorporating data on the actual performance of incumbents in office to go beyond the broad patterns of contestation and competition in elections. I demonstrate that performance-based accountability occurs in some policy areas but not in others where we might hope for normative reasons that it does. The institutional and behavioral reasons for these mixed results occupy the chapters to follow.

4

Visible Problems Drive Incumbent Fortunes

When Mayor William Bell of Birmingham, AL, was facing re-election in August 2013 alongside many of his city council colleagues, the city announced a major re-paving plan involving $9 million in city spending in the months leading up to the election. Critics of Mayor Bell grumbled about this, which they saw as a blatant attempt to influence the upcoming election.[1]

Despite these critiques, Mayor Bell and his administration repaved a number of well-traveled roads in Birmingham over the summer of 2013. Whether the timing of this plan was designed to boost his support at the ballot box or not, it clearly was interpreted by some as helping him cruise to a successful re-election with 74% of the vote that August. Mayor Bell is not alone among mayors and other local politicians in his attention to this basic city service. Nor is he alone in doing so ahead of an election. Potentially strategic intentions aside, many politicians clearly believe roads to be a marker of municipal performance for which voters will judge their leaders.

This is perhaps unsurprising: one of the first visible public services that a resident of a city confronts when they walk out their front door is the road outside their home. Whether walking to the bus stop to take a child to school, or heading to work in a car, or meeting a friend who lives in the neighborhood for a social event, people need roads to get there. City economies also depend on the smooth transportation of goods and services over those roads. In accordance with this, transportation spending is a substantial portion of cities' budgets: in 2021 on average municipalities in the US spent approximately 7.5% of their total direct expenditures on roads and highways, while townships spent an even larger share of their budgets

[1] See, e.g., https://www.al.com/jkennedy/2013/01/street_paving_to_start_soon_so.html.

(13%) on roads (Urban Institute 2024). Spending in this area falls behind only education and police spending in the typical city, and involves more money than most cities spend on numerous other city services.

Moreover, responsibility for local roads is often one of the public services that is most transparently under the primary control of local governments (e.g. Oliver, Ha, and Callen 2012). Public works departments in most cities manage the paving (and repaving) of the streets within their city boundaries.[2] Mayors and city councilors that make policy decisions in local governments manage these public works departments.

Municipal politicians and candidates for office also often discuss street and road repair in their press releases (de Benedictis-Kessner 2022) and as part of their campaign platforms. Incumbents often promise to repair roads, and challengers in elections often critique their current handling of roads. In other words, local politicians act like they will be punished if they do not keep up a good state of repair on their cities' roads.

Road repair is therefore an ideal place to start my examination of how public service performance influences voters in local elections. If accountability for this very basic and visible city service is occurring in cities, we would expect that when roads deteriorate in their quality – say, have more potholes – the incumbent local politicians are punished in elections. When road quality improves, on the other hand, we might expect that incumbents are subsequently rewarded.

More generally, issues that are highly visible and for which citizens have frequent signals of government performance are somewhat of a "best case" scenario for testing accountability. In her 2004 book on mayoral voting behavior, Kaufmann (2004) argues that these issues should matter in local voting decisions: "the kinds of issues that dominate local elections—are often more proximate and more discrete than are the larger symbolic issues of national elections" (Kaufmann 2004, 18). More generally in line with this claim, numerous public policy scholars have found that highly visible policies – and those which voters can more easily connect with government responsibility – are much more likely to yield responses (whether positive or negative) from those voters (e.g. Arnold 1990; Hamel 2024; Howard 1997; Mettler 2011; Morgan and Campbell 2011). This visibility may not be universal across individuals – and may vary by the race of the beneficiary of policy (Michener 2018, 2019) – but it will generate its biggest feedback effects when people notice that government is behind policy.

Roads, of course, are not the only policy area that is highly visible to city residents. People experience many other features of their city on a daily

[2]Of course, the primary responsibility that local governments have belies the more complicated truth that many arterial roads in cities are actually controlled by state governments because they are state highways, and the funding for much of the maintenance of these state roads is often provided by the federal government. This more complex responsibility is a topic that I return to in Chapter 7.

basis. One of the features of cities that famed urbanist Jane Jacobs valorized was the fact that cities feature many "eyes on the street" – so much so that public safety could be preserved through this audience (Jacobs 1961). Undeniably correct in this argument is that people observe much of the city in the course of their daily lives. Whether there are potholes in the road outside their house, whether the streetlight down the block isn't functioning, and whether there is a homeless encampment next to their subway station are all observations a city resident might make. Such observations can give them a picture of their city government's performance at handling these important issues. And they might reasonably make judgments of their incumbent city leaders based on these observations of performance.

In this chapter, I examine accountability for two such highly observable policy areas. I choose two issues which are both highly salient to residents of today's cities and easily traceable to city government: road repair and homelessness. The markers of government performance at addressing these problems are visible to city residents in their daily lives, without need for intermediaries to highlight this information for residents. And as I will elaborate on further in this chapter, both of these policy problems are solidly within the purview of local governments to address with local policy tools. These issues thus represent two *easy tests* of accountability in cities.

What should accountability look like for these visible policy issues in cities if it exists? Following the simple model of electoral accountability that I put forward in earlier chapters, I would argue accountability exists if:

1. Voters are more likely to vote for incumbent city leaders when road quality improves in their neighborhood or their city as a whole, and less likely to vote for those incumbents when road quality gets worse.

2. Voters reward incumbent city leaders for decreases in visible homelessness in their neighborhood or city, and punish city leaders when there are similar increases in visible homelessness.

Using both city-level and neighborhood-level data, I find evidence that incumbent city leaders are held at least partially accountable in elections for these visible issues. While these issues perhaps represent an easy case to test for the presence of accountability, these findings lend some optimism to the conclusions of the book: it may be possible at least for some policy issues to escape the fog of accountability in cities.

Do Visible Issues Matter?

Residents of cities may quite reasonably be affected by visible problems near where they live. When voters decide whether to reward or punish incumbents in local elections, we could expect that they are influenced by their perceptions of salient issues like road quality and homelessness. When

researchers at Boston University in their 2023 Menino Survey of Mayors surveyed mayors of cities in the U.S., 81% of these mayors reported believing that their constituents held them "a great deal" or "a lot" accountable for public disorder. And 73% reported thinking that their constituents held them "a great deal" or "a lot" accountable for addressing homelessness in their city (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2024). Political leaders clearly *expect* that voters will punish them for failures in these visible policy areas (Mani and Mukand 2007). Despite the importance of visible problems like roads and homelessness for city residents' daily lives and politicians' assumption that they matter in elections, there have been few previous direct examinations of this question.

Does electoral accountability for the policy issue of roads exist? There is at least some survey-based evidence from the U.S. that this can happen. For instance, Howell and Perry (2004) show that residents of several US cities have higher evaluations of their mayor when their evaluations of local transportation are higher. Similarly, Warshaw (2019) shows a correspondence between road quality ratings and mayoral approval among a national sample of CCES respondents. But in an earlier examination of this more general question, Kelly and Swindell (2002) found that many objective indicators of city policy *effort* in the domain of street and road maintenance have little correlation with residents' evaluations of their city overall or their judgments of the quality of road maintenance in their city.

In an alternative approach to this question, Burnett and Kogan (2017) use citizen service requests for road repair via San Diego's 311 non-emergency service request line as a proxy for road quality. They show that in areas of San Diego where there were more service requests, incumbent local politicians did worse in elections. Yet this proxy for road quality bundles together both its objective quality *and* the socio-political drivers of service requests (White and Trump 2018). This could confound the answer to the question of whether electoral accountability happens for roads with other factors that might influence *both* 311 reports and elections.

There have been more direct examinations of this question outside the U.S. For instance, Harding (2015) uses objective pavement quality ratings to assess the effect of road quality on the incumbent president's electoral performance in Ghana. He finds that, accounting for localized over-time fluctuations in elections, road quality drives voters' support for the incumbent. Yet others, such as de Kadt and Lieberman (2020) and Goyal (2024), have found a different picture of accountability outside the U.S. that suggests a more complicated model of electoral accountability for visible basic service provision. The sum of these limited assessments suggests that roads – one example of a highly visible policy area – may be an issue for which voters hold politicians accountable.

Though not as commonly thought of as a "basic" city service, housing – and its absence, as exemplified by homelessness – is also highly visible

in cities. As the housing affordability crisis has afflicted cities across the country (and around the world), it has come with the visible problem of homelessness in cities. Homelessness is, at its root, a problem caused by policy: shortages of housing on the private market exacerbated by restrictive zoning policy (Glaeser, Gyourko, and Saks 2005; Gyourko, Saiz, and Summers 2008; Gyourko and Krimmel 2021; Kok, Monkkonen, and Quigley 2014; Sahn 2024*b*), unavailability of publicly-provided housing, and economic inequality (Colburn and Aldern 2022). Despite the policy tools that local governments have available to them to address it (Einstein and Willison 2024; Willison 2021), homelessness has proved rather persistent in many cities (Willison et al. 2024).

Homelessness in San Francisco is among the highest in the nation (Rezal and Caughey 2022). By a recent count, there were over 4,000 unsheltered people experiencing homelessness in San Francisco – and nearly 8,000 total including both sheltered and unsheltered (City of San Francisco 2022). The city has become known as an example of both the housing affordability crisis and a center of visible homelessness. Homelessness has been a persistent problem for decades, both in San Francisco and in the greater Bay Area, including where I was born and raised in the East Bay (Fagan 2016). Large majorities of residents regularly cite homelessness as one of the top problems facing their city (Fagan 2022). People in the Bay Area would find it hard to avoid observing this visible policy failure in their daily lives.

Where I live in the South End in Boston, MA, neighbors have similarly noticed increased visible homelessness much as they have in San Francisco and other cities where this policy problem has increased in recent years. My neighbors reports of visible disorder have increased especially in the years since the opioid crisis has concentrated in my corner of the neighborhood in the last decade. This crisis has brought with it an increase in people seeking out medical care and social services. Increases in visible homelessness, drug use and discarded syringes, or human waste and garbage littering the streets can cause people to react with disgust and fear (Clifford and Piston 2017; Wilson 1975). My neighbors often talk about these markers of disorder – which can meaningfully decrease their quality of life – as if they are equivalent to crime. Yet crime in the South End has not been increasing in any meaningful way in the past several years. People have reacted strongly to the visible problem of homelessness despite its detachment from real danger.

People in my neighborhood and elsewhere might not know about objective trends in crime, but they do see the visible indicators of disorder. They appear to respond to these indicators politically. In a creative study, Brown and Zoorob (2022) studied exactly this phenomenon in my neighborhood in Boston. They found that in areas where there were increases in hyper-local perceptions of disorder (as measured by non-emergency 311 service requests), voters were more likely to participate in the subsequent local election. Brown and Zoorob (2022) found that while turnout increased as a

result of this visible problem, voters did not punish the mayoral incumbent in the next election because of his admirable performance handling the crisis of disorder. They argue that this good performance gave voters an opportunity to learn about his competence (Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, and Friedenberg 2018). Handling a concentrated crisis of drug use, homelessness, and associated visible problems led to electoral reward – what would appear to be an example of positive accountability.

Uniting most of these assessments of accountability for highly visible policy problems is the fact that researchers often must use proxies for true government performance or voters' judgments of incumbents in elections. It is quite difficult to gather objective data on issues like road quality along with some measure of residents' electoral judgments of their local government. Furthermore, when such data exists, it is often not available at a small enough level of aggregation or with enough temporal variation to use a research design that might allow for any leverage to assess *causal* effects.

I attempt to circumvent both of these concerns using multiple types of data on visible policy problems. I use geographically fine-grained road quality data and reports of homeless encampments from one US city – Oakland, CA – to examine the effects of these visible problems on voters' support for the incumbent mayor across neighborhoods of the city. I expand this examination to the city level and use road quality data from cities around the San Francisco Bay Area and homelessness data from cities across the country. These multiple sources of data allow me to assess electoral accountability for these two visible problems both *within* one city and *across* many cities. Together, this evidence paints an optimistic picture that at least some electoral accountability happens for visible policy problems.

Paving Streets in Oakland

Oakland lies directly east of San Francisco, and happens to be the city where I was born. It's also a city with a rich history of transportation and public services. The Oakland Port, thanks to its sheltered location on the east side of the San Francisco Bay, handles an immense amount of commercial shipping traffic – the fifth most container traffic among the country's ports. Its historical origins as a city date back to the 1850s, and it has been an important economic engine for the western US since its selection as the endpoint for the Transcontinental Railroad soon after its incorporation. Oakland is also the site of some of the first electric streetcars in the country: though Boston boasts the nation's first underground subway system, the surface rail in Oakland was an early pioneer in rail transit.[3] Transportation — by water, by rail, and by road — has been a crucial part

[3]The Alameda, Oakland, & Piedmont (AO&P) Railway began operations in 1892 (Evanosky 2022).

of the growth of Oakland in the nearly 200 years since its founding and its success as a city.

Like many cities, Oakland sometimes struggles to provide public services in the transportation arena. Its roads, in particular, are often rated some of the worst in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), a regional agency covering the nine counties and cities in the Bay Area, sends vehicles out on the region's roads to collect data on the pavement quality of each road using an automated system that assigns a pavement conditions index (PCI) score that ranges from 0 (unusable) to 100 (newly paved roads). A 2020 regional report from the MTC rated Oakland's roads in their second-worst category of "at-risk" with an average PCI score of 52 in comparison to a Bay Area-wide average of 67.[4]

Though it does not face some of the difficulties with winter weather that cities in colder climates must address — snow plowing, frost heaving, and the resulting repair needs — it is located on a geologic fault line, which can cause its own issues with frequent low-level and occasional large earthquakes. Much like many cities in the US, Oakland can sometimes struggle to fund the needed improvements for roads and other city services upon which many residents depend. Due in part to the poor quality of some of Oakland's roads and a perception among some Oakland residents that the city was not completing basic maintenance on its roads, a group of residents calling itself the "Pothole Vigilantes" arose in 2019 and began filling some of the city's potholes. Working at night, using their own asphalt and tools, and without official permission from the city, these residents took the poor quality of roads into their own hands. They raised money online to help support their efforts and spread the word of their filled potholes via social media posts like the one pictured in Figure 4.1. The Pothole Vigilantes attracted both national media attention and the praise of many fellow Oakland residents – and even inspired a song dedicated to their work by local musicians (as depicted on the right side of Figure 4.1).

While the work of the Pothole Vigilantes is certainly laudable as an example of civic volunteerism, a more cynical viewpoint might be that it represents a failure of urban government. The City of Oakland should have been maintaining its roads to a level at which the Pothole Vigilantes were not needed, and yet it did not repair potholes at the rate that satisfied residents. This type of failure might be one for which residents could rightfully punish their city's leaders in an election to hold them accountable for poor road service provision. Indeed, when Mayor Libby Schaaf of Oakland ran for re-election in 2018 — the year before the Pothole Vigilantes began their work — Oakland's roads were rated with an average PCI score of 54 by the MTC. In comparison, when Schaaf was first elected in 2014, the city's roads were

[4] https://mtc.ca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2021-11/PCI_table-2020_data%20%2800F%29.pdf

Figure 4.1: Pothole vigilantes

(a) Vigilantes on Instagram

(b) Vigilante-inspired music

rated an average of 59 by the MTC.[5] We might expect that voters would have punished Schaaf for not adequately repairing the city's roads during her first term in office.

This deterioration in road quality in Oakland was, of course, something that Mayor Schaaf was well aware of. Much like Mayor Bell in Birmingham, Mayor Schaaf took action to address this visible issue when her re-election campaign was under way. In mid-2018, Schaaf announced a new initiative with her Transportation director, Ryan Russo, to repave a number of streets in the city. Schaaf and Russo promised a "Summer of Paving" in 2018 that would involve more than four times as many road miles repaved as in previous years.[6] Schaaf promised that city workers would work longer hours and every day of the week to accomplish this drastic increase in road repair. She even drew special attention to how her administration would repave roads in certain areas that most needed such repair work.

Was this additional effort on road repair rewarded by Oakland's residents, or ignored? Did residents merely notice the (average) decline in quality of roads across the city as a whole over Schaaf's first term when it came time to vote in her run for office in 2018? In other words: did voters

[5] https://www.vitalsigns.mtc.ca.gov/street-pavement-condition

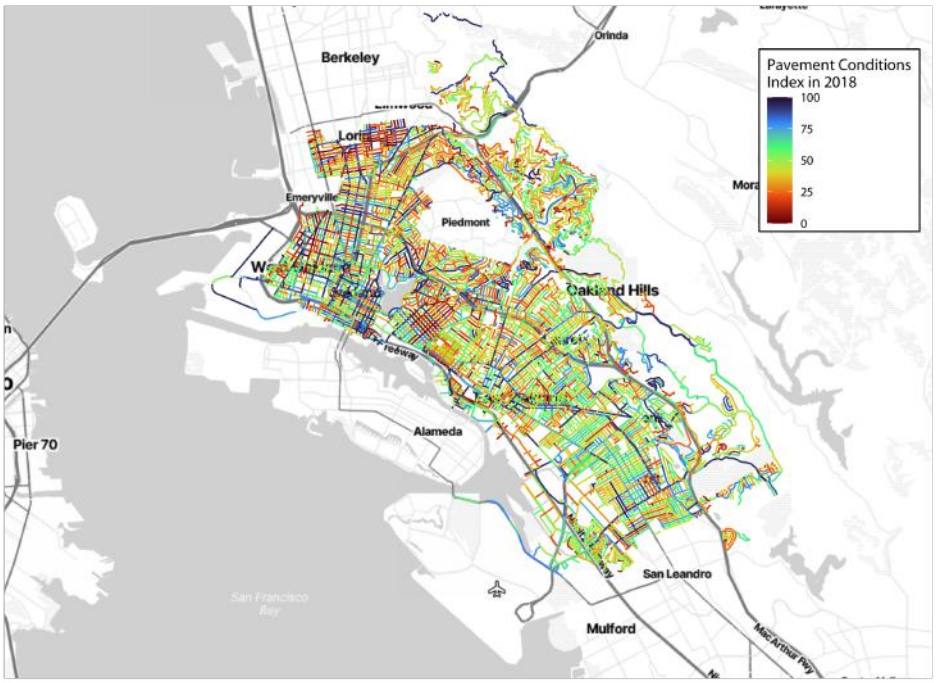
[6] For coverage of this initiative, see, e.g. https://www.ktvu.com/news/mayor-libby-schaaf-announces-plan-to-pave-oaklands-streets.

hold Schaaf accountable for the improved quality of roads in certain areas of Oakland? To examine these questions required both some measure of road quality over time (to measure the effects of road improvements or further deterioration) and some measure of residents' opinions of their incumbent mayor.

Pavement Quality Data

Thankfully, the City of Oakland has maintained data on its roads' quality over time that allow me to examine this exact possibility. Though the MTC publishes city- and county-level average PCI ratings each year, Oakland also tracks these ratings on a more granular level at the level of individual street segments. These street segments — usually about one city block in length – each have their own PCI rating from the automated rating system that is stored in software called "StreetSaver" that is maintained by the MTC. The level of detail that these individual PCI scores provide, as well as their geographic variation, is clear from the map in Figure 4.2, where I plot the PCI ratings of each street segment in Oakland in 2018.

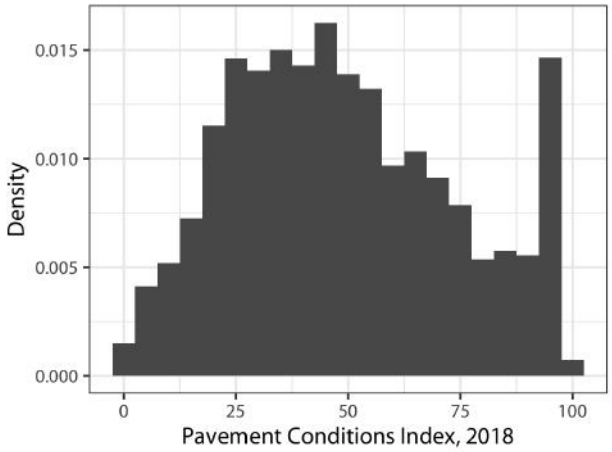
Figure 4.2: Pavement conditions in 2018



While some streets in Oakland received higher scores that were closer to 100 (plotted in dark blue), other streets received nearly failing scores of

0 (plotted in dark red). Figure 4.3 plots the distribution of scores for all segments in the city in 2018. As this histogram shows, many of the city's roads received scores below 50, i.e. in poor quality and in need of immediate repair. As the story of the Pothole Vigilantes suggests – and a good deal of engineering research that supports the use of these scores corroborates (Arellana et al. 2019; Shafizadeh and Mannering 2003) – these PCI ratings were reflected in many residents' perceptions. The roads in many parts of Oakland were so badly paved that residents spent their own time and money to repair them rather than wait for the city to do so.

Figure 4.3: Pavement conditions in 2018



However, many people might not have blamed the current political leadership of Oakland in 2018 for these poor conditions. After all, Libby Schaaf only came into office in 2014. The low PCI scores of many streets in Oakland likely reflected bad upkeep over a far greater time span than just her first four years in office. Deferred maintenance during previous city administrations likely led to worse deterioration in more recent years.

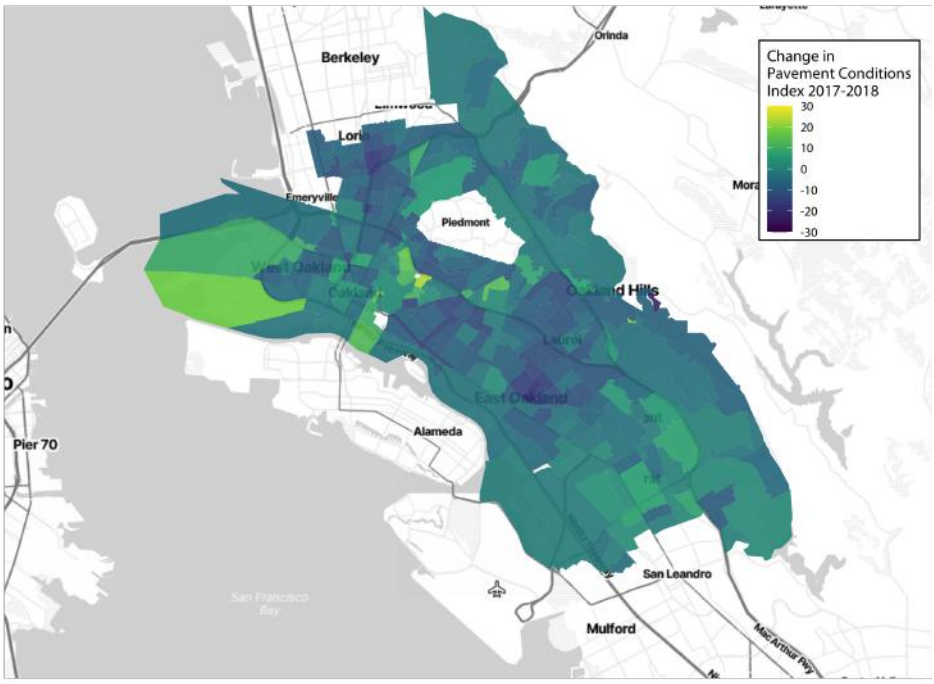
A more useful metric by which residents might blame Schaaf and her administration could be the recent *change* in pavement conditions in Oakland. Research on retrospective economic voting has focused predominantly on changes rather than levels of economic performance and shown that voters often reflect on these changes when judging political leaders (e.g. Achen and Bartels 2016; Healy and Lenz 2017).[7] Theoretically, this is likely to be true because people often care about relative performance rather than abstract levels by comparing their past state to their most recent status quo, perhaps because of biased media coverage (Soroka, Stecula, and Wlezien 2015), albeit with established psychological biases (e.g. Tversky and Kahneman 1973;

[7] Previous research on economic voting has not always justified the choice to focus on changes rather than levels very carefully (see, e.g., Healy and Malhotra 2013, 294).

Healy and Lenz 2014; Soroka 2006). Therefore rather than simply using the PCI scores of Oakland's streets in 2018 as my main measure of performance, I instead calculate changes in each street's PCI score over the last year (i.e. between 2017 and 2018).

In order to compare these road quality improvements (or deterioration) to residents' judgments of the city government, I use election data from Schaaf's 2018 mayoral reelection campaign. Of course, elections conducted under the secret ballot do not allow me to look at individual residents' judgments of Oakland' government. Instead, I collect data at the smallest geographic unit available in the 2018 election: electoral precincts. I aggregate the PCI data from individual road segments that I plotted in Figure 4.2 to the precinct level using GIS. I first overlapped all road segments with the boundaries of Oakland's 2018 election precincts, and then calculated a weighted average of all road segments within each precinct with weights according to the length of each street segment that was inside the precinct.[8] I plot the precinct-level average change in road quality between 2017 and 2018 in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4: Change in pavement conditions in 2017-2018

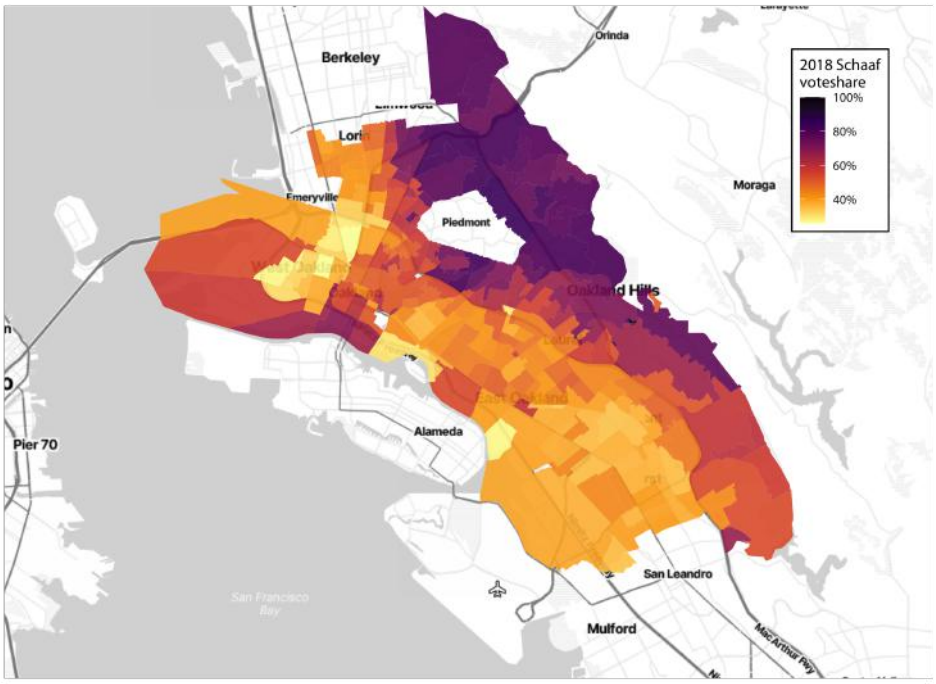


The main outcome measure that I use to assess accountability comes

[8]For roads that were partially inside more than one precinct, I use the length of the partial segments that lie inside each precinct in this weighting.

from Schaaf's 2018 election, which I also measure at the precinct level. I plot the results of the mayoral election in Figure 4.5. This map, and its relation to the map plotted in Figure 4.4, represent my primary way to assess accountability for road quality in Oakland. If Schaaf fared better in her reelection in areas where roads improved more than where roads deteriorated (or did not improve by as much), we might interpret that as some indicator of functioning accountability for this important public service.

Figure 4.5: 2018 mayoral election results



Results

Visual inspection of the preceding maps in Figures 4.4 and 4.5 gives us some preliminary idea of whether accountability for road quality is happening in Oakland. In some areas (such as the hills of Oakland, in the part of the city just north of Piedmont) road quality appears to have slightly improved or stayed the same between 2017 and 2018, and Schaaf fared quite well in the 2018 election. In contrast, in areas such as West Oakland and the Temescal area (just west of Piedmont), the roads had recently deteriorated in quality and Schaaf appears to have done worse in the 2018 election. This suggests that accountability may be functioning in this instance.

To more rigorously examine this question, I turn to a regression frame-

work to compare the change in road conditions with Schaaf's success in the election. Figure 4.6 shows a scatterplot of the precinct-level average change in pavement conditions along the horizontal axis and the precinct-level vote-share received by Schaaf in the 2018 mayoral election. Circles represent individual precincts, with their size scaled to the total number of votes in each precinct. The blue line plots a linear regression line, with regression weights according to precinct total votes. As Figure 4.6 shows, there is a slight positive relationship between the change in road conditions and the incumbent mayor's fortunes. In places where the pavement improved by more, Schaaf fared better in the 2018 election.

Figure 4.6: Precincts with improvement in pavement were more likely to vote for Schaaf.

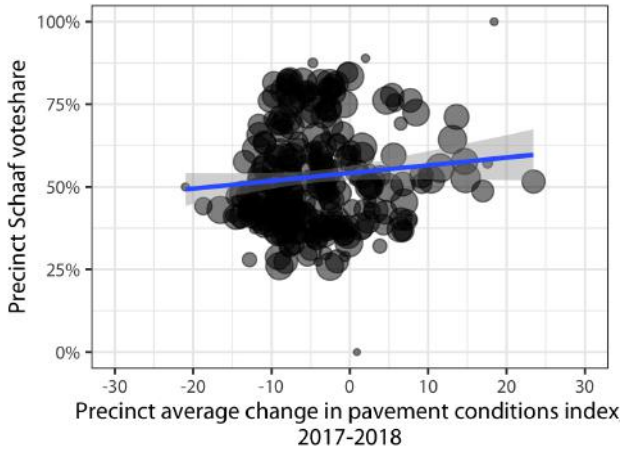


Table 4.1 gives more context for these effects by displaying results from a variety of specifications examining the effect of road conditions on the mayoral election. The first two columns show the results from regressions of the average 2018 PCI rating of each precinct (rather than the change between 2017 and 2018) on Schaaf's precinct-level voteshare. The second column uses weights according to the total number of votes in each precinct, while the first column does not. In both of these columns, it appears that there is little correspondence between the level of road quality in 2018 and Schaaf's voteshare in the 2018 election.

In the remaining columns, I return to using the change in road conditions between 2017 and 2018, and look at the effect on Schaaf's voteshare in 2018 in the third and fourth columns (with and without weights). The fourth column replicates the weighted linear line shown in Figure 4.6, and shows that the observed positive relationship is also statistically distinguishable from zero. In the fifth and sixth columns of the table, I change to looking at an alternative outcome variable in an effort to rule out other precinct-

Table 4.1: Changes in pavement quality and Mayor Schaaf's re-election

	Schaaf voteshare				Change in Schaaf voteshare	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variables						
PCI rating	-0.0006	-0.0008				
	(0.0010)	(0.0009)				
Change in PCI rating			0.0029**	0.0023**	0.0027*	0.0017***
			(0.0013)	(0.0011)	(0.0014)	(0.0006)
Constant	0.5497***	0.5749***	0.5289***	0.5418***	0.2747***	0.2665***
	(0.0527)	(0.0467)	(0.0115)	(0.0112)	(0.0099)	(0.0051)
Fit statistics						
Weights?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	267	267	267	267	262	262
R^2	0.00205	0.00313	0.01606	0.01088	0.04035	0.02480
Adjusted R^2	-0.00172	-0.00063	0.01235	0.00715	0.03666	0.02105

Clustered (precinct) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

level variables that might confound this relationship, and assess the effect of changes in road conditions on the precinct-level *change* in Schaaf's voteshare between her first election in 2014 and the 2018 election. Again, there appears to be a statistically significant effect of road conditions on her electoral success. In places where road conditions improved more, Schaaf was more likely to improve her voteshare relative to 2014. This bolsters the causal interpretation of these effects: even accounting for Schaaf's initial support in 2014, places where road conditions improved more were more likely to electorally reward her in her reelection campaign.

Though these effects appear small in both their absolute size in Table 4.1 and the scale of Figure 4.6, it is important to remember that the road quality measure, PCI, is a scale that ranges from zero to 100. A more appropriate way to assess the size of these effects, rather than interpreting the effect of a 1-unit increase in PCI rating, is to look at the typical change in average PCI rating in precincts. The effects shown in the fourth column of Table 4.1 imply that moving from the median change in a precinct's average pavement quality (a decrease of 5 in PCI score) to the 90th percentile of the change in pavement (an increase of 5.5 in PCI score) corresponds with an increase in Schaaf's voteshare of approximately 2.4 percentage points. In other words, Schaaf appears to have been rewarded for repaving roads in the areas of Oakland where she did indeed improve the road quality.

Pavement Across the Bay Area

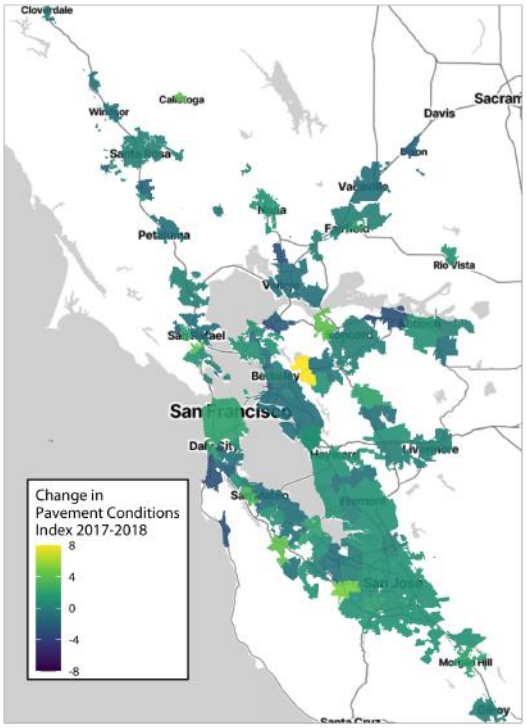
The results from precincts across Oakland suggest that voters in different neighborhoods responded to signals of government performance when making choices about their incumbent mayor in 2018. But how does this operate in different electoral contexts across cities and years?

Data

To examine this question, I broaden the scope of my analyses of road quality data to the city level across the entire Bay Area rather than the level of individual streets in Oakland. I use the city-level measures of pavement quality compiled by the MTC for the 110 cities around the Bay Area between 2003 and 2018. I then match these pavement quality data at the city-year level to elections data for mayors across these cities from the data that I introduced in Chapter 3. This leaves me with a dataset of matched pavement quality and election results in 70 of the Bay Area cities across 80 unique elections.

The average city-level change in pavement conditions between 2017 and 2018 is displayed in the map in Figure 4.7. In some cities, pavement deteriorated in that year, while in other cities it improved. In Orinda – a small city just northeast of Oakland – the streets improved by 8 points along the 100-point PCI scale between 2017 and 2018. Meanwhile, the roads in American Canyon – a small city just north of Vallejo and south of Napa – decreased in their PCI score by 3 points between 2017 and 2018.

Figure 4.7: Change in pavement conditions across the Bay Area in 2017-2018



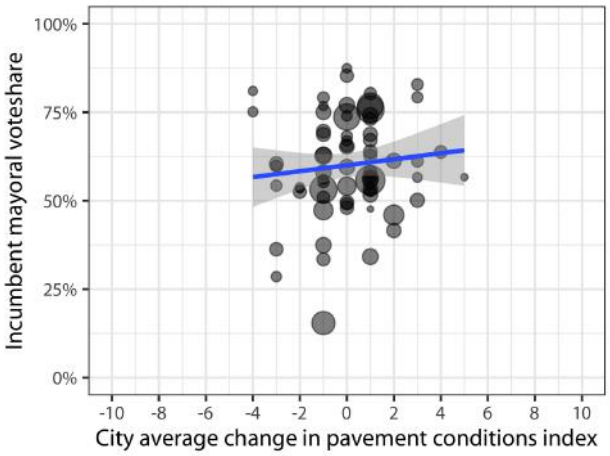
Mayor Schaaf of Oakland ran for re-election in 2018, but there are a

number of other cities that also held elections in that year – 14, in fact. To take advantage of these data across multiple cities in the same year, I use a research design that helps to eliminate some of the common variation in pavement quality in individual years across cities. Specifically, I regress incumbent mayors' voteshare on their city's average PCI rating in the year of the election alongside year-level fixed effects to eliminate some of these common shocks to pavement from, for instance, particularly bad weather in a single year.

Results

Figure 4.8 shows a scatterplot of the city-level average change in pavement conditions along the horizontal axis and the incumbent mayor's voteshare in city elections across the Bay Area. Circles represent city-year observations of individual elections, with their size scaled to the total number of votes in that election. The blue line plots a linear regression line, with regression weights according to total votes. The slight positive relationship between road quality and incumbent mayors' electoral success in Figure 4.8 suggests that there may be some degree of accountability for road quality happening across cities in the Bay Area.

Figure 4.8: Cities where pavement improved were more likely to vote for their incumbent mayors.



As with the previous analyses of precinct-level road quality changes and votes for Mayor Schaaf in Oakland, I more rigorously examine this using a regression framework. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 4.2 using a variety of model specifications. Though there is some variation across specifications in the statistical significance of the results, there is consistency in one thing: cities with higher-quality roads in the year of the election (columns 1-3) and greater improvements in the quality of roads

Table 4.2: Changes in pavement quality and incumbent mayors's success in the Bay Area

	Mayoral incumbent voteshare					
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variables						
City PCI rating	0.0039**	0.0043**	0.0052			
	(0.0017)	(0.0017)	(0.0051)			
Change in city PCI rating				0.0047	0.0095	0.0133*
				(0.0098)	(0.0092)	(0.0074)
Constant	0.3129**			0.5857***		
	(0.1166)			(0.0230)		
Fixed-effects						
Year		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
City			Yes			Yes
Fit statistics						
Observations	80	80	80	73	73	73
R^2	0.05740	0.31035	0.75968	0.00284	0.15827	0.75569
Within R^2		0.08202	0.02806		0.01235	0.04350

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

in the year before the election (columns 4-6) are more likely to vote for their incumbent mayors. In the most stringent of these specifications, which regresses mayoral incumbents' voteshares on the 1-year change in cities' PCI ratings while incorporating city and year fixed effects, it appears that a one-point increase in cities' PCI ratings results in a 1 percentage point increase in the incumbent mayor's voteshare.

To put these results in a real world context, it is helpful to use examples of typical decreases and improvements in road quality in cities across the Bay Area. These results imply that moving from the median change in a city's average pavement quality (a change of 0 in PCI score, such as for Alameda's streets in 2013-2014) to the 90th percentile of the change in a city's pavement (an increase of 2 in PCI score, such as for Richmond in 2009-2010) would lead to an increase in the mayor's voteshare of approximately 2.7 percentage points. These results from across the cities in the Bay Area indicate that accountability for this visible policy issue exists not just in Oakland, but across a number of cities.

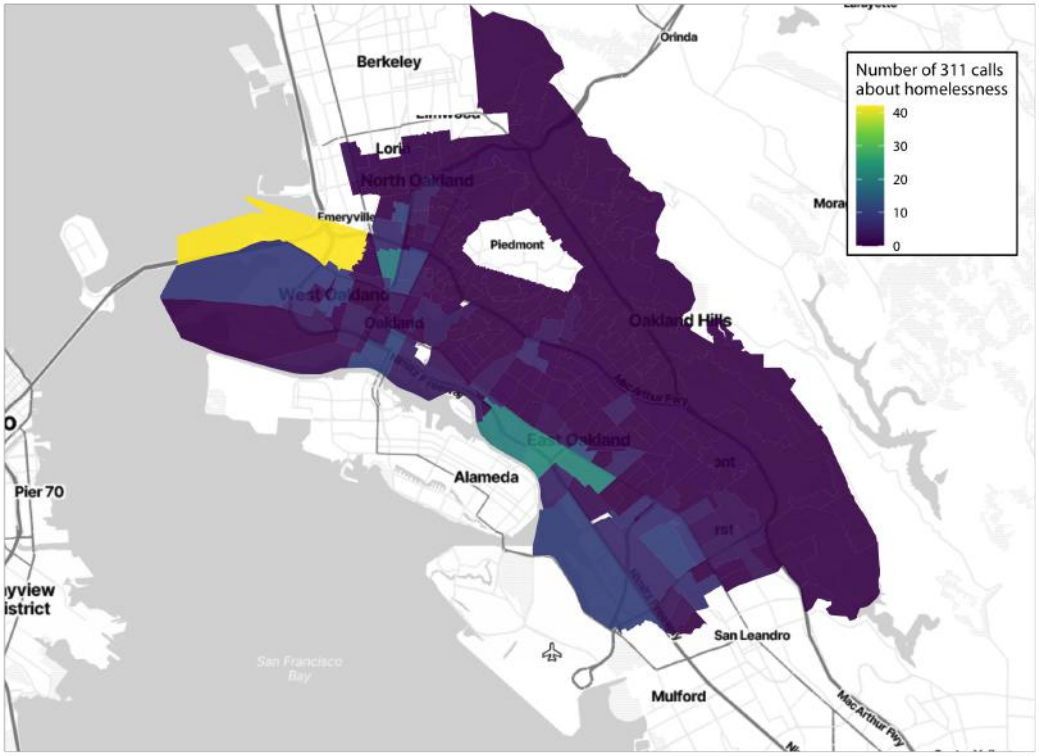
Homelessness as a Political Problem in Oakland and Across the Country

I next examine whether voters hold city leaders accountable for a second highly visible policy problem: homelessness. To do so, I use two types of data on visible homelessness.

First, I use data from within Oakland on reports of homeless encamp-

ments. These data come from the city's 311 non-emergency service request system. Like many cities, Oakland uses this 311 system – which comprises a phone hotline, a web interface, and a smartphone app – to collect citizens' requests for repairs, requests for information, and to prioritize problems in the city (Clark, Brudney, and Jang 2013; Clark et al. 2020; Hamel and Holliday 2023; Minkoff 2016). Of course, these data do not necessarily represent a true measure of the presence of homeless encampments in Oakland (Cook, Zuhlke, and Saywitz 2024; White and Trump 2018). Yet I follow Burnett and Kogan (2017) and use the rough density of these requests as a proxy for the presence of a visible policy problem that has reached the level of motivating citizens to report its existence in different areas of Oakland. The distribution of these calls across precincts in Oakland in 2018 is displayed in Figure 4.9.

Figure 4.9: Calls reporting homeless encampments across Oakland in 2018



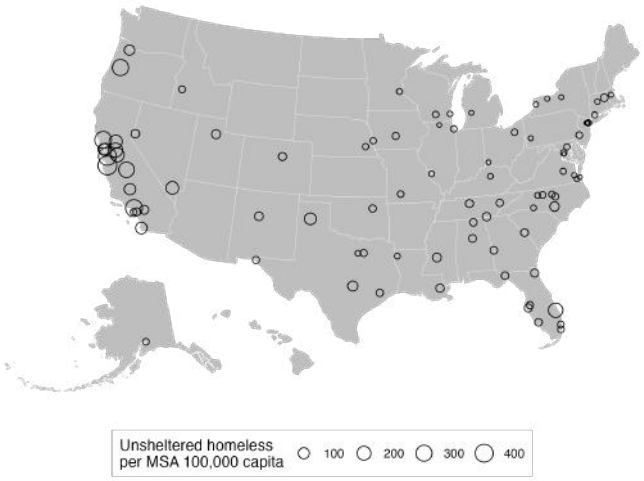
I connect these geography- and time-specific data on the visible presence of homelessness to the election returns from the 2018 mayoral election, much as I did earlier in this chapter with the road quality data at the street level. Together these merged data are a precinct-level measure of changes in homelessness and the electoral success of the incumbent mayor (Libby

Schaaf).

Second, I use data on a more objective metric of homelessness: actual counts of the number of unsheltered homeless people living on the streets. These data are collected at the level of a Continuum of Care (consortiums of service providers that help people experiencing homelessness) in each year. Each Continuum of Care conducts a federally-mandated "point-in-time" count of homeless people once per year and then reports these data to the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).[9]

A Continuum of Care can spread across city boundaries in many places to encompass an entire county (as in Los Angeles County), but it sometimes only covers a single city. I connect these cross-city homelessness data to the city level using crosswalk files constructed by Willison (2021). Following Willison (2021), I calculate per 100,000 capita rates of homelessness using Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) population counts from the 2017 ACS. Though these data are only available for a subset of years (2007–2021) and in a subsample of 109 cities in my elections data, they provide a preliminary look at whether this visible policy problem is affecting local voting. Specifically, I use the number of unsheltered homeless people in a given city in a given year as my measure of this visible policy problem. In Figure 4.10, I show the rates of unsheltered homeless populations in the cities in my data in the most recent year for which data were available.

Figure 4.10: Rates of unsheltered homelessness across cities in my elections data



I combine these data with my elections data that I described in Chap-

[9]Homeless individuals included in this count are defined as "an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence," which includes people living in public places, living in shelters, and residing in temporary shelter (HUD 2012).

ter 3. I calculate the city-level year-over-year change in the number of per 100,000 capita unsheltered homeless individuals, and regress the incumbent vote share in local elections across the country on this measure of the local government's performance at addressing this policy problem.

Results

I present the results of these analyses of accountability for homelessness for both the within-Oakland analyses and the cross-city analyses below. First, in Table 4.3 I present the results of precinct-level analyses of the effect of visible homelessness on Schaaf's re-election. As before in my analyses of road quality in Oakland, I present results from models both with (even-numbered columns) and without (odd-numbered columns) weights for the total number of votes in the precinct. And I assess both the impact of 311 reports in 2018 about homelessness (columns 1-2) and the change between 2017 and 2018 in the number of 311 calls about homeless encampments (columns 3-6) on either Schaaf's 2018 voteshare (columns 1-4) or the change in her voteshare between 2014 and 2018 (columns 5-6).

Table 4.3: Accountability for Homelessness Within Oakland

	Schaaf voteshare				Change in Schaaf voteshare	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variables						
311 calls about encampments	-0.0087***	-0.0084***				
	(0.0025)	(0.0026)				
Change in 311 calls about encampments			-0.0063***	-0.0057***	-0.00004	-0.0005
			(0.0020)	(0.0019)	(0.0017)	(0.0015)
Constant	0.5292***	0.5464***	0.5166***	0.5333***	0.2633***	0.2595***
	(0.0107)	(0.0110)	(0.0098)	(0.0103)	(0.0057)	(0.0047)
Fit statistics						
Weights?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	268	268	268	268	262	262
R^2	0.05118	0.06647	0.01478	0.01710	0.000002	0.00051
Adjusted R^2	0.04761	0.06296	0.01108	0.01340	-0.00384	-0.00333

Clustered (precinct) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

These results demonstrate a fairly consistent story. Both higher levels of homelessness and increases in visible homelessness in the year of the election were associated with lower precinct-level voteshare for Schaaf in 2018. For instance, one precinct in western Oakland experienced an increase from 15 reports in 2017 to 42 reports in 2018 about encampments – the largest increase within the city in that year. Following the results from column 4 of Table 4.3, this increase of 27 reports would be associated with a 15.3 percentage point lower voteshare for Schaaf in 2018. Within Oakland, there appears to have been accountability for increases in homelessness for Mayor Schaaf.

The results from across multiple cities are presented in Table 4.4. The table shows results from models assessing the effect of citywide changes in

homelessness on incumbent mayors (in columns 1-3) and the effects on incumbent city council candidates's voteshare (in columns 4-6). These results provide some suggestive evidence that visible homelessness may influence urban voters' decisions in local elections across cities in the U.S. Though none of the results are precisely estimated, they are consistently in the negative direction and equate to an approximately 2-percentage-point decrease in incumbent city leaders' voteshare following a one standard deviation increase in unsheltered homelessness. These estimates are all unsurprisingly imprecise given the lack of statistical power due to limited data on homelessness and the small number of observations that can be matched to elections data. Yet these analyses add some suggestive corroboration to the analyses within Oakland presented earlier.

Table 4.4: Accountability for Homelessness Across the Country

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:					
	Mayor			City council		
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variables						
Standardized change in unsheltered homeless per capita	-0.026*	-0.026	-0.002	0.006	0.008	0.0007
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.022)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.005)
Constant	0.644***			0.730***		
	(0.013)			(0.013)		
Fixed-effects						
Year		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
City			Yes			Yes
Fit statistics						
Observations	280	280	280	2,411	2,411	2,411
R^2	0.011	0.034	0.492	0.0008	0.011	0.255
Within R^2		0.012	0.0001		0.001	0.00001

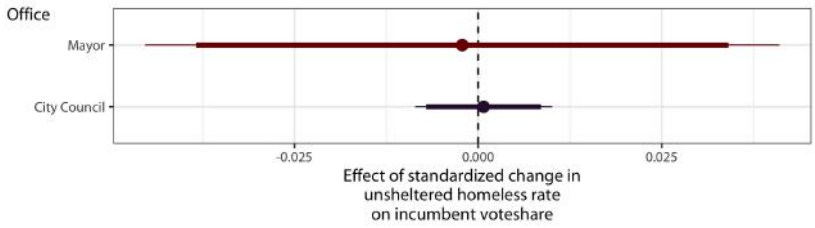
Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

I also display the results from columns 3 and 6 visually in Figure 4.11. The points and confidence intervals indicate the effects of homelessness on mayoral incumbents' voteshare (in the top half of the figure) and incumbent city council candidates' voteshare (in the bottom half of the figure). On average in cities across the country, when the number of people living unsheltered on the streets increases, mayors are punished at the ballot box. But when homelessness decreases, there may be rewards to incumbent mayors.

Conclusion

Basic city services are core to the jobs of urban governments. Paving streets, lighting those streets, and keeping the public safe on those streets are often considered the bread and butter of politicians who serve cities. When those city services deteriorate or fail, residents's lives suffer in both small and large ways. Elections – and the political process more generally – serve as a critical mechanism by which residents can get better services. But

Figure 4.11: The effect of changes in unsheltered homelessness on the incumbent voteshare in local elections.



this mechanism relies on the ability of voters to actually reflect the quality of public services in their votes. The evidence presented in this chapter shows that voters do reward city politicians for addressing visible policy problems like road repair. When the City of Oakland and other cities around the Bay Area repaired their streets' pavement, voters in places where the streets improved were more likely to vote for their incumbent mayors. Though the quality of pavement is obviously not the only factor in voters' decisions for city politicians, the fact that public services quality can affect residents' vote preferences even at the margins is heartening.

Yet responsibilities for public services are often complex. Mayors operate at the head of a large organization that is responsible for many other services. City councilors – often numerous and elected from distinct geographic districts – similarly have many responsibilities. And the people who actually pave streets are very distant from the elected leaders who (technically) direct them. This can lead to confusion among voters about the responsibilities of local political leaders, as I showed in Chapter 2. This confusion may limit their ability to hold their leaders accountable.

These results obviously lead to a cautiously optimistic conclusion about the health of democratic accountability in cities for highly-visible policy problems. While I have provided evidence in this chapter that voters held their mayor accountable for both road quality and homelessness, these two policy issues are easy tests for accountability given their easily-visible nature and the clear lines of responsibility between these problems and the local government. When there is less salient information about performance available to voters, and more complex responsibility for policy provision – a common feature of city services – voters may be confronted by a more confusing picture of who to hold accountable for the quality of those services.

These roadblocks contribute to the fog that I have argued confronts voters in most areas of city policy when they attempt to hold their elected leaders accountable. The remainder of this book broadens the focus of this chapter – on two highly visible policy problems – to cities across the country and a number of different policy areas. As the next several chapters will show, these other policy areas are more complex and lacking in visible

information about performance, creating a much cloudier decision-making environment. This fog obstructs accountability in cities in the U.S.

5

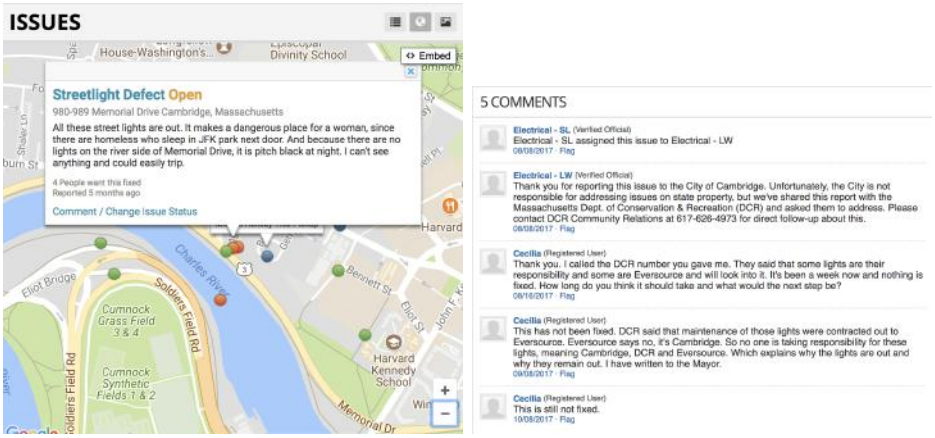
Blurred Lines: Complex Institutions Complicate Accountability

In the summer of 2017, a woman named Cecilia reported a broken streetlight along the pedestrian pathway that runs along the Charles River outside what is now my office at Harvard. She used a common digital tool that cities use for residents to request non-emergency city services from their governments called 311. Residents can usually request these 311 services by phone or online, as well as with smartphone apps that allow them to easily add a geolocation and take photos of the problem they are reporting. Across many cities, 311 request systems have been used to help cities reduce their need for proactive patrolling for problems like potholes, broken streetlights, and fallen trees. These 311 service request systems have been evaluated by a number of researchers in the last decade as they have spread in usage, and many have documented their somewhat mixed success in producing more responsive government service delivery (e.g. Christensen and Ejdemyr 2020; Clark, Brudney, and Jang 2013; Hamel and Holliday 2023; Minkoff 2016; White and Trump 2018).

Cecilia put her request for repair on this streetlight into the City of Cambridge's interface for their 311 system called SeeClickFix, a screenshot from which is shown in Figure 5.1. And then she waited, hoping that the city would fix this streetlight. However, shortly after Cecilia reported the broken streetlight, the City of Cambridge wrote back to her on the SeeClickFix platform to tell her that this broken streetlight wasn't actually under their jurisdiction, but under that of the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation, which owns the park in which this pathway runs – despite the fact that the city maintains the sidewalk and street immediately abutting the path. Cecilia wrote back that she tried calling this state agency, but they said that the electrical utility owns some of the streetlights. Later,

she wrote again after contacting the electrical utility, who had told her that actually the City of Cambridge was responsible for fixing the streetlight. More than two months later, the street light was still not fixed – and Cecilia was understandably not thrilled with the response from the city, as her last response shown in the right side of Figure 5.1 demonstrates.

Figure 5.1: Requesting city services can be difficult in areas of overlapping jurisdictional authorities.



The experience that Cecilia had – attempting to get a bare minimum of service provision from her city, but failing due to the complexities of shared responsibilities between a city, a state agency, and a private utility company – is obviously not a positive story of successful service provision. Yet Cecilia's experience also highlights how this might create problems for accountability: when responsibilities for public services are shared, or the division of responsibilities is unclear, it is difficult to get a straightforward response from government about who should fix the streetlight. Beyond this, it is even harder to know who to blame when the streetlight is still not fixed. Though Cecilia says she will write to the mayor, it's not even clear that this is the appropriate person for her to blame for the broken streetlight.

Cecilia's experience exemplifies many of the experiences that city residents have with their public services. Often it is unclear to whom they should be reporting problems with their public services. Similarly, it is frequently unclear who deserves the credit when public services are functioning well. Even when the quality of public services is incredibly salient and people are highly knowledgeable, complex institutional authority-sharing can prevent citizens from knowing who is actually responsible for a public service. In this scenario there is little prospect for performance-based accountability.

In this chapter, I directly investigate how the institutional complexity behind many public services – from streetlights, to roads, to crime prevention, to education – can stand in the way of effective local public services

and local governance. I assess the evidence for accountability in two policy arenas using a similar research design to the one that I used in Chapter 4. As in that chapter, I look at how changes in government performance influence incumbents' success in local elections.

While in Chapter 4 I focused on two highly visible policy areas – pavement quality and homelessness – in this chapter I examine two policy areas where institutions make accountability more complex. I focus on accountability for both school performance and crime. Both of these issues are governed by some combination of governments, with varying degrees of complexity of these institutional overlaps across cities. I assess the moderating role of jurisdictional overlap between school districts and more general-purpose city governments when I examine the effects of education performance. And I assess how the combination of multiple law enforcement authorities that address public safety in cities can similarly moderate the effects of crime.

As in the previous chapters, it is helpful to lay out what we might expect if accountability is functioning – and what it looks like if it is not. In this chapter, evidence of accountability would appear if voters are more likely to vote for incumbent city leaders when education performance or crime improve in their city, and less likely to vote for those incumbents when education performance or crime get worse.

If complex institutions moderate accountability, then we would expect that accountability, as operationalized above, would be more likely to occur in places with simpler institutions governing public services, and less likely to occur in places with more complex institutional arrangements. The analyses in this chapter will examine whether these expectations are born out by the data in cities across the U.S.

Why do local governments share responsibilities?

My results later in this chapter will investigate the effects of the institutional context of local governments and public services provided in cities. But a preliminary question deserves some attention first: *why* do American local governments exist the way that they do?

Cities in this country exist within a federal system of a federal government, state governments, and a landscape full of other local governments. These local governments include counties, cities, school districts, water districts, mosquito abatement districts, fire protection districts, and numerous other types of special-purpose governments. As Burns (1994) documents in her influential chronicle of the origins of the many single-purpose governments that exist today, special districts in particular have ballooned in their number since 1950. This has been paralleled by the growth of special-purpose governments around the world in countries ranging from Canada (Lucas 2016, 2017; Lyons and Spicer 2018) to Indonesia (Firman 2009) to

Ghana (Ayee 2013).

The creation of these special-purpose governments may have arisen as a way to circumvent the restrictions on local government authority from states or the federal government (Goodman and Leland 2019). Goodman (2019) helpfully lays out some structure for thinking about the way that American local governments are fragmented (or consolidated) across both geography and time. This fragmentation can be, in his description, both horizontal (e.g. multiple city governments each covering small areas and numbers of residents) and vertical (e.g. special districts overlapping within the same city that each provide one or more public services).

As Goodman (2019) describes it, the horizontal and vertical fragmentation of local governments across the country is a result of the historical movement driven in part by public choice theory. According to this theoretical perspective, more competition between local governments can improve efficiency of public service delivery by giving residents more choices over what bundle of public services they wish to receive (e.g. Ostrom 1972; Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961; Tiebout 1956). Special-purpose governments can also allow local governments to collaborate in order to provide public services in regional consortiums if needed. Such coordination can be more efficient via economies of scale; for instance, smaller townships might not have to each provide their own public transit services if a regional transit district is established (Stein 1990*a*).

In contrast, others have pointed out the inefficiencies inherent in the fragmentation of local governments. A great deal of political economy research has addressed the fiscal effects of both federalism and local government fragmentation. Under institutions with overlapping jurisdictions, government can over-tax its citizens and excessively spend money (Baqir 2002; Berry 2008, 2009; Keen and Kotsogiannis 2002).[1]

Others have added nuance to these binary perspectives. For instance, Hoyt (2001) argues that when intergovernmental transfers (grants) are possible between levels of government, the inefficiencies from subnational government taxation can be eliminated. Cutler, Elmendorf, and Zeckhauser (1993) suggest that there is an optimal mix of the cross-government collaboration (Hansen, Mullin, and Riggs 2020) that limits inefficiencies from vertical fragmentation. And Berry and Gersen (2009) address the mixed predictions of much of the previous research on government revenue, and find a U-shaped relationship between local government fragmentation and excess revenue. The under-specialization that comes from little local government fragmentation can lead to an overcollection of revenue by local governments, but excess fragmentation can, in turn, lead to excess revenue as well. And in his assessment of decentralization in federations around the world, Rodden

[1] Though, see Boyne (1992) for a contrasting perspective on fragmentation's effect on government spending.

(2006) shows how the reliance on both higher level governments for transfers and the ability to borrow heavily by subnational governments can lead to a overspending in local government.

Scholars at the intersection of both politics and public administration have broadened the focus on local government fragmentation beyond its effects on municipal finances. Recently, Christopher Goodman has revitalized the study of jurisdictional overlap between local governments and argued that this fragmentation can lead to certain amounts of overspending, but that this can be beneficial for urban growth Goodman (2018, 2021). Still others, such as Mullin (2009), point out that the specialization that arises from local government fragmentation can be beneficial for building expertise in the provision of public services like drinking water. This contrasts with settings where general-purpose governments provide these public services but often lack expertise about them. While specialization can allow for knowledge-building among the dedicated professionals in charge of providing public services, it also may shield their decision-making from public view (Berry and Gersen 2009; Mullin 2009, 2008). This shielded governance can lead to far-reaching disasters for urban residents' quality of life (Mullin 2020; Mullin and Hansen 2023).

The Flint, MI, water crisis of 2014 provides an instructive example of the complex effects of local government fragmentation on service provision. Among other disastrous choices made by state and city officials that led to the death and illness of numerous Flint residents (e.g. Hughes 2021) were some failures due to government fragmentation. Because of the *lack* of specialized governance over water in Flint, general-purpose city officials lacked specialized knowledge that could have been useful in avoiding choices that led to corrosion of lead pipes in the city. In parallel, the decision-making of the nascent special water district, the Karegnondi Water Authority, which made the financial decisions to fund a future pipeline for the region without recognizing the short-term costs of drawing water from the Flint River, were shielded from public view (Hammer 2019). This had disastrous consequences for the residents of Flint: both because of the lack of specialized knowledge in general-purpose government, and the effects of specialized government of the political process.

Despite the attention to the way that fragmented local governments can influence the efficiency of taxation and public service delivery, there has been far less attention to the way this fragmentation affects *politics* and accountability for the choices that surround local public service provision in the U.S. (Trounstine 2020). There are a few exceptions that deserve attention here. For instance, Hansen, Eskaf, and Mullin (2022) show that local government fragmentation in the area of drinking water provision can lead to failures of electoral accountability. And Arceneaux (2006) finds that only in situations of high salience will voters be able to connect issues of local government responsibility with their voting decisions due to the fragmented

institutional context in which they must act. And scholars of the politics of service delivery in cities outside the U.S. have developed a rich theoretic and empirical literature on how the credit-claiming incentives of local politicians can lead to under-provision of services due to complex institutional responsibilities (e.g. Post and Kuipers 2023). Yet very few studies have directly addressed the question of how the patchwork landscape of local governments that overlap in their responsibilities across the geography of the U.S. moderates voters' ability to hold local government accountable for performance (Trounstine 2020).

Education as a setting with unclear lines of responsibility

One local government service about which nearly every city resident with children knows is education. When voters are asked what services they believe local governments provide, education is nearly always close to the top of the list, as I show using my own survey data in Chapter 2. Even residents of cities who do not have children are likely to pay attention to school quality because of its impact on housing values (Figlio and Lucas 2004). And local politicians often report that they believe schools and education are one area where they are held accountable by voters (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2016).

One reason that education performance is so visible, of course, is that the federal government has, since 2003, mandated some publication of metrics of education performance at the district level due to *No Child Left Behind* (Holbein 2016). And even before the federal government legislated this performance information to be released by districts in standardized format determined by each state, many individual states had already been collecting (and releasing) school testing results in their own particular formats.

Perhaps because of these features of education and education policy, much of the research on local performance-based accountability in economics, political science, and related fields has focused on schools. Yet it has found only very conditional evidence of accountability for education performance in local politics. For instance, Berry and Howell (2007) assess whether or not school board members in South Carolina are punished and rewarded according to the quality of schools. They show that, under conditions in which the media focus on reporting school performance rather than more subjective information about the testing itself, school boards are held accountable. Similarly, Payson (2017) argues that the electoral context – and in particular, the timing of elections – determines whether school board members are held accountable for improvements in student testing performance.

In contrast, Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz (2016*a*) show that poor

school performance had little impact on incumbent school board members' electoral fortunes. However, Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz (2016*b*) show that local voters do appear to punish school districts by cutting their funding in tax referenda when education performance is worse – which can lead to the perverse outcome of even worse education performance after their funding decreases. Flavin and Hartney (2017) add more conditions to the evidence of retrospective voting for school performance findings, and argue that voters reward and punish school board members only for the performance of *white* students in their districts, but not that of black students.[2] Education performance is clearly noticed by voters *some* of the time. But it is less clear when that might translate into performance-based accountability.

Overlapping jurisdictions can confuse voters

There are many contextual factors – especially in the arena of education – that may influence the degree to which voters hold government accountable. Among the list identified in past research is the timing of elections, the tenor of media coverage of testing standards, and the racial breakdown of student performance. Yet there is one more that, as I explained at the beginning of this chapter, plays a crucial role in determining the degree of accountability for local government.

Like many services provided by local governments in the U.S., public schools are controlled by amalgam of different political entities. In some places cities operate and control schools, while in others they are provided by independent school districts. Even when cities operate schools, in the majority of those cities there is separate elected body that controls the schools – usually a school board or school committee – while other city services are controlled by a mayor or city council or both. Funding for schools comes from taxes paid to governments at the federal, state, and local level. But these funds are actually spent by local governments that control the schools. These funding and governance arrangements vary across the country. And in many places, special-purpose school districts do not perfectly coincide with other local governments, including cities.

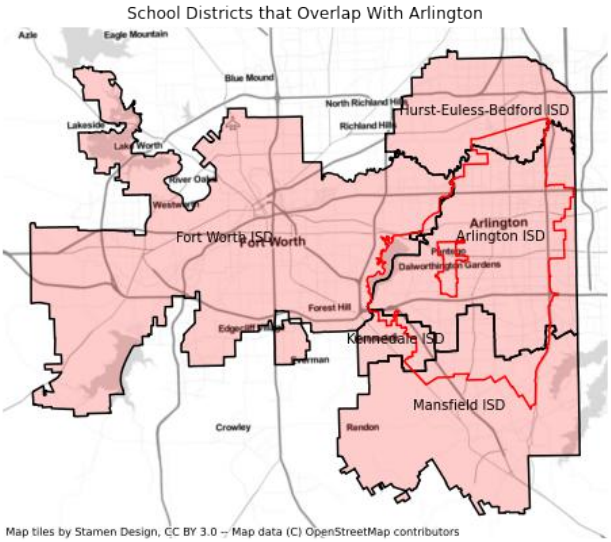
A rich literature in federalism and state politics has documented both the motivations for the creation of these special jurisdictions and their overlap with other governments (e.g. Burns 1994; Goodman 2019). The delegation of authority over education to school districts theoretically allowed these governments to develop specialized skills for running schools. Previous research

[2]Many of these conditional effects may be due to the substantial difference between the voting population and the student and parent populations of localities, especially under certain institutional regimes (Hajnal, Kogan, and Markarian 2022; Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz 2021, 2018).

has also documented the fiscal benefits of this jurisdictional specialization (e.g. Berry 2008; Goodman 2018, 2021).

In many cities there is only one school district, and the schools are all controlled either directly or indirectly by the city government. But in many other large cities, there are numerous school districts into which students fall. These multiple school districts, and the overlaps between jurisdictions which all elect different people to different political offices, may lead voters to be confused about who is responsible for a given public service. By way of example, in Figure 5.2 I plot the boundaries of the city of Arlington, TX (with a red outline) and the school districts that fall at least partially within Arlington (with black boundaries and red shading): the Arlington Independent School District (ISD), the Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISD, the Fort Worth ISD, the Kennedale ISD, and the Mansfield ISD. In total, residents of Arlington might send their children to schools in any one of these five school districts.

Figure 5.2: Overlapping jurisdictions in Arlington, TX.



This sets up a complex information environment for voters in Arlington. If these voters want to make decisions in local elections based on education performance, they might want to gather information about five different school districts, depending on which they care most about (perhaps because they have a student in that district). And, they must navigate a media environment that – no doubt – involves information about all five of these districts. The media in the Arlington area might also focus on education performance in districts in an even broader region encompassing the entire Fort Worth and Dallas metropolitan area. This could lead to two phenomena: an informational deficit, in which it is hard for voters to find the appropriate

information, and an information overload, in which voters are confronted with performance information about many irrelevant districts. This context is unlikely to lead to voters making well-informed decisions in local elections based on education performance.

This problem is not restricted to Arlington, TX, of course. And the problem is more extreme in some places. Take, for instance, Phoenix, AZ, which is broken into 30 different school districts.[3] Some of these school districts provide elementary education alone, some high school education alone, and some operate as unified school districts operating both elementary and high schools. One of the districts that covers part of the city, Scottsdale Unified School District, was rated as one of the best school districts in Arizona in recent years, and regularly boasts math and reading test score proficiency rates above 55%.[4] Tempe Union School District, on the other hand also covers a portion of the city of Phoenix. In 2019, Tempe's math and reading test score proficiency rates were just over a third of students. Voters in elections in the city of Phoenix thus have very different signals about school performance coming from the varied school districts in their city. These potentially conflicting signals might very easily confuse voters and hinder their ability to hold their government accountable for this public service.

Apart from a few studies in which researchers have surveyed voters about their functional knowledge of government responsibilities (e.g. Arceneaux 2006), there is little research documenting how these jurisdictional overlaps might affect the process of political accountability, however. An exception to this is Lay and Tyburski (2017), who show that in the few cities where the mayor has direct control of the school system, voters are more likely to hold mayors accountable for education performance. This research provides a clue as to how jurisdictional overlap may hinder accountability. Yet only in a handful of cities is the mayor directly in charge of education. In most places, there is far less clear political responsibility for schools with a separate elected school board that either coincides with the city's boundaries or does not. For voters to properly attribute responsibility for schools, they would have to both connect schools with either the city government or a separate school district, even even within a city government to either the mayor, city council, or school board.

Research Design and Data

I use a difference-in-differences framework to look at how changes in school performance and crime influence incumbent candidates' success. I use models with both jurisdiction-specific fixed effects (either city-level, for

[3] https://www.phoenix.gov/education/schools

[4] https://azreportcards.azed.gov/Districts/detail/4240

city elections, or school district-level, for school board elections) and state-by-year fixed effects. These models allow me to assess the effect of changes in performance relative to other jurisdictions in the state after netting out idiosyncratic jurisdiction-specific factors and year-specific factors.

To analyze the questions introduced in this chapter, I use the elections data that I have described in previous chapters assessing local elections across the country. To assess the success of incumbent candidates, I calculate the incumbent candidate's share of the total votes cast in that race – which for mayoral elections is simple, while for city council races involves taking the incumbent candidate's share of the total votes in their contest if there is only one seat up for election, and for multi-seat elections the total votes for all incumbent candidates divided by the total number of votes in that multi-seat race.

I combine these measures of incumbent success in elections with data on education performance that comes from the U.S. federal government's "Ed Data Express" tool available online.[5] The federal government publishes data on this platform related to performance in both math and reading/language arts at the school district level in each year from 2009 to 2019. To assess the effects of education performance overall, I average across the proficiency rates (i.e. the percentage of students who test above a state-defined level of "proficient") in each of these two subject areas. I then calculate the change in educational proficiency rates between the school year two prior to the election to the school year that ended most immediately before the election.[6] This change measure follows research on accountability which has also used changes rather than levels of economic performance on in analyses of economic voting (e.g., Bartels 2008; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020*a*; Healy and Lenz 2014, 2017). It is also appealing on theoretic grounds: voters care about *relative* performance rather than abstract levels of performance (Hart and Matthews 2022).

As these data on education performance are released at the school district level, I aggregate performance data to the city level for my city elections analyses. I use GIS tools developed by the Missouri Census Data Center (MCDC) that enable me to calculate the overlap between school districts and cities. I calculate the population-weighted overlap between city boundaries, on the one hand, and school district boundaries, on the other, using

[5] https://eddataexpress.ed.gov/

[6] Note that this is a departure from the previous chapters, which used changes in economic performance and crime between the year prior to the election and the election year. This is because education performance – in the form of school testing scores – is usually not released until a fair amount of time after the school year is complete. Voters would therefore not know any information about their school district's performance until (for elections held in the spring) after the election. I therefore calculate these changes using the performance data from the year that voters would reasonably have access to by the time the election occurs.

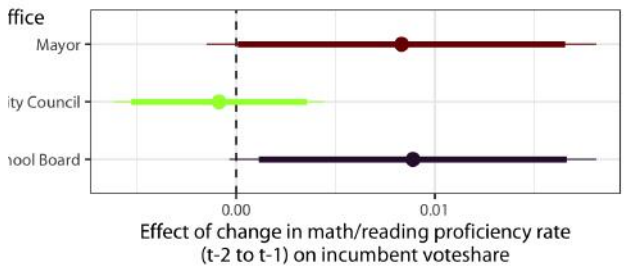
the MCDC's Geocorr application.[7] For each city I calculate the weighted average of proficiency rates from all districts that overlapped with the city to create the measure of education performance city-wide.

In order to assess the moderating role of the jurisdictional overlap between school districts and cities, I similarly use the MCDC's Geocorr application to calculate the number of school districts that overlap with each city's boundaries, and – in the reverse – the number of cities that overlap with each school district's boundaries. For the moderation analyses that I present later in this chapter, I simply split up by cities (and school districts) into ones that have more than one school district (city) that overlaps with their boundaries, or only one school district (city) that overlaps with their boundaries.

Results

The results of these analyses are shown in both Figure 5.3 and Table 5.1. They show that education performance has a substantial effect on school board incumbents' voteshares, but has noisy effects on mayoral and city council incumbents' voteshares. These effects for school board candidates are both statistically significant and substantively significant: a one percentage point increase in the proficiency rate translates into nearly a percentage point increase in the incumbent's vote share. A change from the 25th percentile of the within-district change in proficiency rate (a 0.5% decrease in proficiency) to the 75th percentile (a 2.5% increase in proficiency) would result in a 2.2 percentage point increase in incumbents' vote shares.[8]

Figure 5.3: Mayors, city councilors, and school board incumbents are held accountable for education performance to differing degrees.



[7] University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis, available online: http://mcdc.missouri.edu/applications/geocorr.html.

[8] This matches the approximate size of the effect that Berry and Howell (2007) identify in South Carolina school districts in 2000.

Table 5.1: Accountability for Education Performance

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for					
	Mayor		City Council		School Board	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variables						
Δ in math/reading proficiency rate (t-2 to t-1)	0.000	0.008*	0.000	-0.001	-0.003	0.009*
	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.005)
Fixed-effects						
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Year	Yes		Yes		Yes	
State-Year		Yes		Yes		Yes
District					Yes	Yes
Fit statistics						
Observations	809	809	3,788	3,788	519	519
R^2	0.710	0.798	0.416	0.467	0.442	0.536
Within R^2	0.000	0.010	0.000	0.000	0.010	0.012

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Institutional Complexity via Jurisdictional Overlap

I next divide up my analyses of the effect of educational performance on city-level incumbents' electoral fortunes by separately examining places where there is more jurisdictional overlap rather than less. I separately assess accountability in cities where there is one school district in the city and cities where there are multiple school districts within the same city. In the latter context, voters might naturally be more confused about both (a) what educational performance in the city actually *is* (i.e. multiple jurisdictions with potentially different levels of performance), and (b) whether cities are actually responsible for that performance (relative to other individual governments, like the independent school districts).

To assess the moderating role of these jurisdictional overlaps in voter's capacity to hold government accountable, in Figure 5.4 I show the effect of school district proficiency rates on local politicians' voteshares in cities where there is one district in the city (shown with triangles) and in cities where there are multiple school districts (filled circles). I also show the results of parallel analyses of the effect of proficiency rates on incumbent school board members' voteshares (at the bottom of Figure 5.4) in districts where there is one city in the district (shown with triangles) or multiple cities in the district (shown with filled circles). These analyses (also displayed in Table 5.2) show that the amount of jurisdictional overlap in local government matters for accountability.

In cities where there is only one school district, incumbent mayors are more likely to be rewarded and punished according to the educational performance of schools. But in cities where there are many school districts, city politicians' electoral fortunes do not correspond to educational performance. Similarly, in school districts where there is only one city, school board members are held accountable for educational performance, while in school districts that cover many cities, this appears to be less true.

Figure 5.4: Accountability for education performance, by jurisdictional overlap.

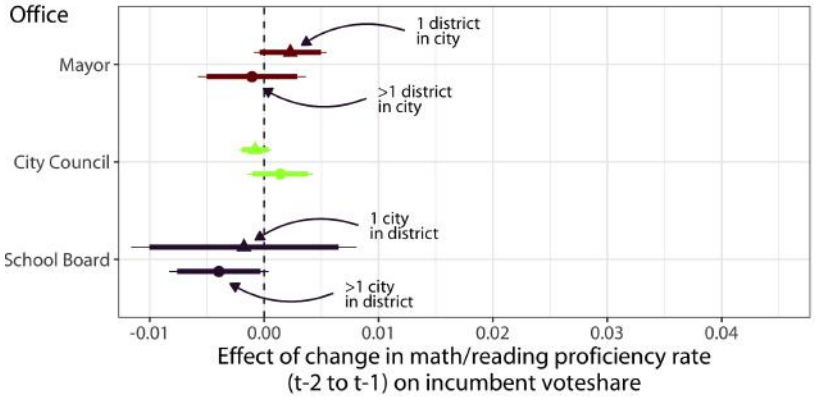


Table 5.2: Accountability for Education Performance, by Jurisdictional Overlap

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for					
	Mayor		City Council		School Board	
Jurisdictional Overlap	1 district	>1 district	1 district	>1 district	1 city	>1 city
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variables						
Change in math/reading proficiency rate (t-2 to t-1)	0.0023	-0.0011	-0.0008	0.0014	0.0220**	-0.0038*
	(0.0016)	(0.0024)	(0.0007)	(0.0015)	(0.0102)	(0.0021)
Fixed-effects						
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
District					Yes	Yes
Fit statistics						
Observations	525	284	2,630	1,158	65	454
R^2	0.68673	0.76783	0.41392	0.42451	0.48644	0.44512
Within R^2	0.00673	0.00155	0.00066	0.00239	0.08196	0.01644

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

This evidence indicates that jurisdictional overlap moderates accountability for single-purpose governments, like school districts, that have clear domain-level authority. Even though these school board members may be entirely responsible for the quality of schools in their district and city governments may have little independent authority over the provision of education, voters respond differently in school board elections depending on how cities overlap with their school district's boundaries.

This evidence also indicates that jurisdictional overlaps moderate accountability for *general-purpose* governments like cities. When there is only one school district – and therefore one authority in charge of education in a city – voters connect school performance with their support for incumbent mayoral candidates. Yet when there are multiple school districts in which city residents can send their children to schools, voters do not connect the performance of schools in those districts to their support for incumbent mayoral candidates in local elections.

Do these differences represent the effect of jurisdictional overlap, or just capture whether city government actually controls education? A few cities not only have a single school district within their boundaries, but also have reformed their governance of the district to allow for direct mayoral control of schools. This reform, which was instituted in several places in the 1980s-2000s, was designed to unify control over education policy across different areas – budgetary, infrastructural, and classroom teaching – under one elected office (Wong et al. 2007; Wong and Shen 2013; Wong 2011). Many have argued that not only does allowing mayors control over the schools improve student educational performance (Wong and Shen 2013), but it can also improve political accountability (Lay and Tyburski 2017; Wong 2011).

To disentangle the moderating role of jurisdictional overlap from the moderating role of direct mayoral control of schools, I would need to examine accountability in the cities and years in which mayors controlled schools, and those in which mayors did not. Using the coding from Wong and Shen (2013), I could analyze the subset of years in the 18 cities that had mayoral control at some point, 14 of which overlap with the time span of my elections data.[9] Unfortunately, because there are only a handful of elections with incumbents re-running for election in these cities in my data, the research design that I used for my other analyses are infeasible in this case. Further investigation of how mayoral and city council incumbents do in elections where mayors directly control the schools could further disentangle the moderation that I investigate here into its component determined by simplified formal authority and its component from district boundaries alone.

The results from this section provide evidence that when institutions make it easier to digest signals of schools' quality, elected officials are held accountable for educational results. In cities, mayoral incumbents appear to be rewarded and punished according to school performance when voters have an easier time connecting them with responsibility over schools. And school board incumbents are similarly held accountable, but only when the jurisdictional boundaries of districts do not overlap with multiple cities.

Crime and the Institutional Complexity of Multiple Service Providers

The results of this chapter to this point indicate that electoral accountability is more difficult for education when there are more jurisdictions pro-

[9]These cities are Jackson, Mississippi, Boston, MA (1992-), Chicago, IL (1995-), Baltimore, MD (1997-), Cleveland, OH (1998-), Philadelphia, PA (2001-), New York, NY (2002-2015), Providence, RI (pre-1990), Washington, D.C. (2007-2012), Oakland, CA (2000-2004), Indianapolis, IN (2001-), Yonkers, NY (pre-1990), New Haven, CT (pre-1990), Hartford, CT (2005-), Harrisburg, PA (2000-2010), Detroit, MI (1999-2004), Los Angeles, CA (2008-2013), and Trenton, NJ (pre-1990).

viding schooling within a city, and more cities overlapping with school districts. Yet education is not the only public service for which there are complex governing institutions. Indeed, there are many policy areas where this is shared authority with other levels of government, collaboration between adjoining local governments, or some amount of shared responsibility with the private sector.

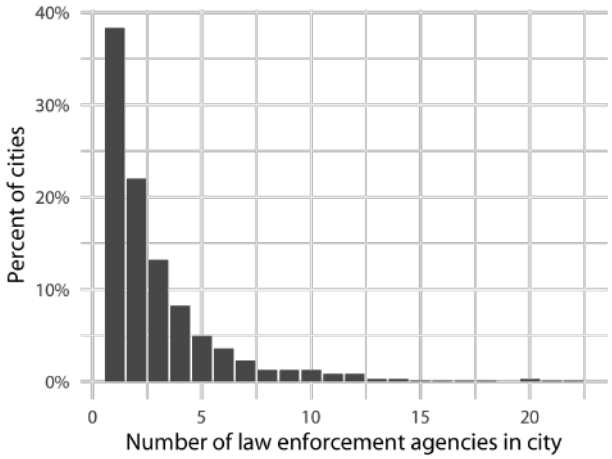
I next assess whether more complex shared authority in another policy area moderates electoral accountability. I address this in an important policy area of local government: public safety. Local governments are largely responsible for much of the financial burden of fighting crime via their spending on police. And this is a policy area that voters tend to think is well within the wheelhouse of city governments to address, as I discussed in Chapter 2.

Yet there are still complicated institutional arrangements governing criminal justice and public safety. City governments most often control their own police forces – the most visible way that government addresses crime. In many cities, however, the city's own police force operates in cooperation with other law enforcement agencies that make their own independent arrests and investigate crimes separately from the city's primary police force (Maguire and King 2004; Ostrom, Parks, and Whitaker 1978). And city police often fight crime alongside county sheriffs who control an often-overlapping jurisdiction (Farris and Holman 2024; Mavridis, Troumpounis, and Zanardi 2024; Thompson 2020). Separately elected (in most cases) district attorneys operate to actually prosecute people accused of committing crimes (Agan, Doleac, and Harvey 2023; Bellin 2019; Hessick and Morse 2019; Krumholz 2019; Sances 2021*a*). At least some of this shared governance was established via both formal and informal structures to facilitate collaboration and information-sharing in the name of counter-terrorism (Chenoweth and Clarke 2010), but with debatable effectiveness (Regan and Monahan 2014). This shared authority in the realm of criminal justice could understandably confuse even a highly knowledgeable city voter when attempting to hold their local government accountable for crime. Does having more complex service provision hinder voters from holding city leaders accountable for crime?

To demonstrate this complexity, Figure 5.5 shows the number of law enforcement agencies operating within cities in my elections data. Over 60% of the cities that held city council elections in 2020 had one law enforcement agency operating within the city. Anaheim – a city in the middle of Orange County, CA – is one example of this. The city's police force is the only operational agency within the city that makes arrests and reports crimes to the FBI every year. The police chief of Anaheim is appointed by the city council and city manager of Anaheim, and manages the force of over 400 officers.

In contrast, a number of cities have more than one law enforcement agency operating within their borders. For instance, Memphis, TN had 7 law enforcement agencies within the city that made arrests by the most re-

Figure 5.5: Law enforcement agencies in cities.



cent count in 2019. This included the police forces for several public and private universities, the Western Tennessee Violent Crime Task Force, and the city's own police department. Similarly, Houston, TX, had 14 agencies, and Jacksonville, FL had 7 agencies operational in 2020. These cities similarly had agencies as varied as the local university's police force, the county's highway patrol agency, the state's wildlife and conservation commission's police force, and the city aviation authority's police force. All of these agencies made arrests and arguably were working to address crime within their city's boundaries. This complex jurisdictional authority within the city might quite reasonably confuse voters as to which government is actually responsible for increases or decreases in crime.

To examine the role of crime in local elections, I follow previous research in criminology and public policy on crime by using data collected by the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program. This program mandates certain standards of data collection that local police departments are instructed to use and – in theory – report data yearly to the federal government.

I use a version of the UCR data that has been cleaned and compiled by and encompasses the total number of known crime offenses and crime clearances (the rate at which at least one arrest is made for each reported crime) reported by individual police agencies in each year (Kaplan 2021*a*). I aggregate these counts of crime and clearance rates from policing agencies to the city level in order to assess how city-level crime influences elections.

These data have a number of problems, however. As many criminologists, journalists, and others have noted, agencies are not required by any federal law to report data to the FBI. Many agencies report their data voluntarily, but often will be inconsistent in which data they report or in which

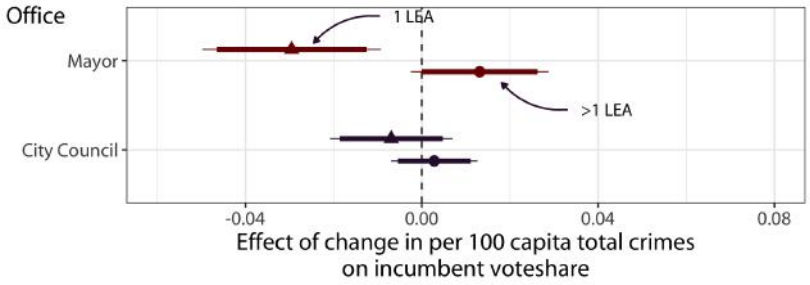
years they do so (Kaplan 2021*b*).[10] Despite these issues, the UCR data remain the most commonly-used measure of crime at the subnational level in the U.S. Using these data, I operationalize local crime conditions using the change in the number of total reported crimes per 100 capita in each city between year_{t-1} and year_t (the election year).[11]

I conduct parallel analyses to those that I conducted for education performance to examine the way that institutional complexity moderates accountability. I split my sample of cities with elections between those cities with multiple law enforcement agencies and those cities with only one primary law enforcement agency conducting arrests. i then analyze the effect of changes in crime on mayoral and city council incumbents' voteshare in their re-election campaigns.

Institutional Complexity Complicates Accountability for Crime

The results from these split-sample analyses are shown in Figure 5.6, and in tabular format in Table 5.3. For mayoral elections in cities with only one law enforcement agency, an increase in crime results in a penalty for incumbent mayors that is statistically significant. In contrast, there is no such penalty in cities with more than one law enforcement agency – and in fact, evidence that is more in line with a *positive* effect on mayoral voteshare.

Figure 5.6: Accountability for crime, by jurisdictional overlap.



While the results for city council incumbents are directionally in line with this story – a negative effect of crime increases on incumbent voteshare in places with one law enforcement agency and a positive effect in cities with more than one agency – neither estimate is statistically distinguishable from zero.

These results are limited to split-sample analyses and do not take advantage of changes in the number of law enforcement agencies within a given city

[10] Moreover, the degree to which policing agencies report may be a result of the administrative oversight of the state under which they operate (Cook and Fortunato 2023).

[11] Given problems identified with the UCR population estimates (Mello 2019), I calculate the per 100 capita crime rates using the intercensal population estimates of cities from the Census Bureau instead.

Table 5.3: Accountability for Crime, by Jurisdictional Overlap

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Number of LEAs	1 agency	>1 agency	1 agency	>1 agency
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in crimes per 100 capita	-0.029***	0.012	-0.007	0.004
	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.005)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	1,092	1,088	3,450	5,421
R^2	0.482	0.379	0.441	0.328
Within R^2	0.012	0.003	0.0003	0.0002

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

because there are so few that switch over time. But they remain supportive of the thrust of this chapter: there are significant downsides to having more service providing agencies that overlap with city boundaries for political accountability. Though I will examine the impact of crime on elections more fully in Chapter 6, these results provide some preview of the findings that I will discuss in that chapter.

Conclusion

As the story of Cecilia and the streetlight that began this chapter demonstrated, city residents confront a number of different actors whom they could blame for problems with their public services. Knowing who to complain to is a difficult task. People can have poor experiences with public services that are falling into disrepair, and not know who they should address with their complaints. On the other side, when public services are functioning well, residents similarly might not know who to credit for better performance. This leaves Cecilia and many others in a situation where they have little ability to demand better service provision from the appropriate authority, or use the levers of politics and elections to replace the politicians who do not perform well.

Stories like Cecilia's exemplify the difficulty that voters have in distinguishing between who is responsible for local public services even as simple as streetlights. This problem also confronts voters using services like education because of the morass of local governments that provide public services

in cities. In this context of institutional complexity, voters would be hard-pressed to figure out which information they should be using to judge government performance. Local newspapers and other media sources may try to provide information about government performance such as school district testing results to residents of cities. Yet even when the deficit of performance information is improved, institutional complexity can still stand in the way of accountability. Distinguishing between what performance information is relevant and what information is irrelevant becomes a hard task in the institutionally complex context. Rather than an information deficit, residents can face a problem of an information *overload*: too much irrelevant information (Simon 1971).

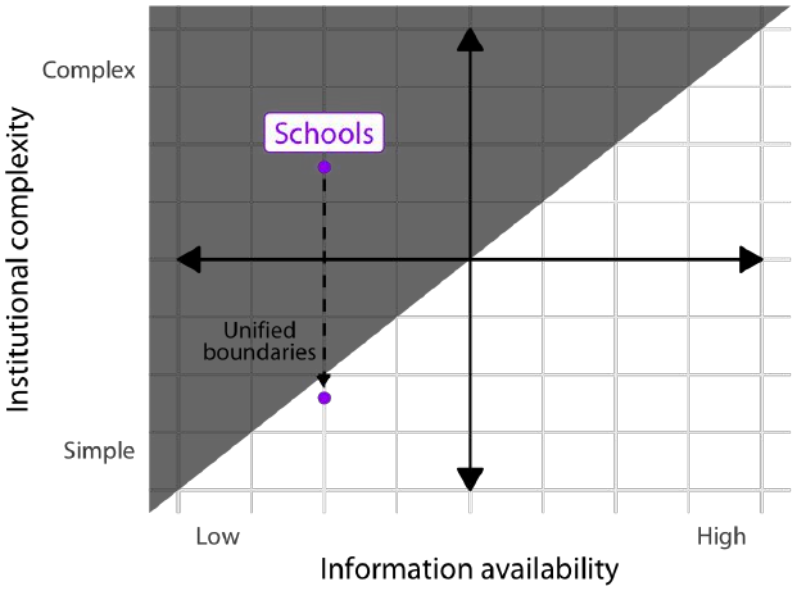
What is distinctive about this type of irrelevant information is that it appears so much like relevant information. It *is* in the realm of government performance, and not an event unconnected to political responsibilities – in contrast to much more truly irrelevant events such as sports team victories (Busby, Druckman, and Fredendall 2017; Miller 2013) or shark attacks (Achen and Bartels 2016; Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010). Yet the information presented in institutionally complex policy areas like education in cities can still detract from democratic accountability in a similar fashion.

The patterns of performance-based voting in elections for mayors and school boards in this chapter show that accountability can hinge, at least in part, on the jurisdictional complexity of local government. Overlaps between cities and school districts moderate voters' ability to hold government accountable for school performance. Similarly, shared governance over law enforcement can moderate voters' ability to hold government accountable for crime. This chapter's evidence highlights the institutional complexity dimension of the fog of accountability, as depicted in Figure 5.7 for education policy. When authority over schools is governed by boundaries that are coterminous with those of the city, voters are better able to hold government accountable for school performance. Yet when institutions are designed in a more complex manner, service provision can remain confusing for voters and shrouded in fog.

Though Cecilia's story was not an optimistic one for city services, the results presented in this chapter suggest there may be an institutional fix that could improve accountability. If street lights in Cambridge were provided by one authority, rather than several with overlapping jurisdictions, it might be easier for residents like Cecilia to hold their local governments accountable for these services. Government institutions moderate the process of accountability in local politics – and so they could also be leveraged to improve public services via a more accountable government. Key, of course, is the way that such potential institutions are designed.

The conclusions from this chapter and the previous one demonstrate how institutions shape the electoral behavior of voters. Complex institutions can hinder accountability for performance in important policy areas. Yet

Figure 5.7: The fog of accountability for education



this evidence leaves open questions about *how* voters might make sense of this cloudy institutional environment. Are there other institutions that can make voters' decision-making context less clouded? The next chapter takes up this question by investigating how the news media can help clear the fog of accountability in cities.

6

Foggy Problems: How the Media Helps Voters Overcome Information Barriers

In the spring of 2022, Chesa Boudin was in the middle of a tough campaign. Boudin had been elected in 2019 as district attorney in the famously liberal city of San Francisco, running openly on a progressive platform to reduce incarceration and a stubborn refusal to cooperate with federal immigration officials. His first two years in office were marked by – amidst a worldwide pandemic – reforms to the city's cash bail policies, more lenience for those found possessing drugs, and less aggressive sentencing policies in his office's prosecution of crime. Boudin exemplified a new wave of progressive prosecutors across the country. This group of progressive prosecutors pursuing decarceral prosecution policies included Larry Krasner in Philadelphia, Andrew Warren in Tampa, and Rachael Rollins in Boston.

Though some of these policies have been found to decrease recidivism and improve public safety (e.g. Agan, Doleac, and Harvey 2023), some prominent San Francisco politicians demanded Boudin's recall on the grounds that he was soft on crime. Supporters of his recall, including the billionaire William Oberndorf and Suzy Loftus, the candidate whom Boudin had beat in the 2019 election, launched a recall campaign gathering signatures. By spring 2022, Boudin's opponents had raised over $7 million in support of his recall. The news reported Boudin fighting against difficult odds, with two thirds of San Francisco voters supporting his recall in a February 2022 poll.[1]

Brooke Jenkins, a former prosecutor from Boudin's office and vocal supporter of the recall effort, was quoted in local news as saying "Boudin's

[1] https://www.kron4.com/news/bay-area/poll-most-sf-dems-favor-boudin-recall/.

unilateral decisions to hand down lenient sentences or not press charges, and to release violent criminals early is putting San Franciscan's at grave risk. Communities across our city feel unsafe" (Ferrannini 2022). She put it more bluntly in a tweet: "Crime rate is directly linked to his failed policies."[2] Her assumption, as well as those of others across the city and country, was that Boudin's office was to blame for crime in the city.

Crime, of course, was not something that everyone in San Francisco had experienced. But though people may not directly experience this problem themselves, they learn the extent of this problem in their city from other sources. In San Francisco, many of Boudin's detractors claimed that crime had increased. While there had been several high-profile homicides, as well as national reporting on disorder and homelessness on the streets of San Francisco, crime in San Francisco during Boudin's tenure had actually decreased. But because most people did not have a direct understanding of the extent of crime in their city, they must learn about it from others. And in this case, they heard that it was a big problem.

The recall effort against Boudin eventually succeeded: 55% of San Francisco voters supported his recall in the June 2022 election. Digging into the data yields some insight about voters' response to crime in San Francisco. Figure 6.1 shows the results of the recall vote (where a 'Yes' vote led to Boudin's recall) in a map of precinct-level voteshare. Support for Boudin's recall varied across the geography of the city.

In Figure 6.2 I compare the results of the recall election to the change in violent crime in the year before the vote. The positive slope of the line in this plot shows a mild positive correlation: in precincts where violent crime had increased more, voters were more likely to support recalling Boudin. Though these results are far from a causal explanation of the recall results, they do suggest that voters may have responded to the recent increases in violent crime by voting against Boudin – despite the overall low levels of crime and violent crime in comparison to past years.

Mayor London Breed was able to replace Boudin with her favored appointee – none other than Brooke Jenkins. The national news narrative focusing on the prosecutor's office's (supposed) responsibility for crime in San Francisco evaporated. Mayor Breed, whose position as mayor gave her authority to appoint the majority of the city's Police Commission and (along with that commission) appoint and fire the Chief of Police, escaped relatively unscathed.

Though the advocacy campaign against Boudin had initially called for the resignation of both Boudin and Breed, the eventual recall only offered the prosecutor's recall to voters on the ballot. Why was the district attorney effectively punished by voters, while the mayor was not? Much of the answer to this question comes down to voters learning *what* crime was and *who* was

[2] https://x.com/BrookeJenkinsSF/status/1485856396352520196?s=20

Figure 6.1: Precinct-level 'Yes' share of the vote in Boudin's recall election.

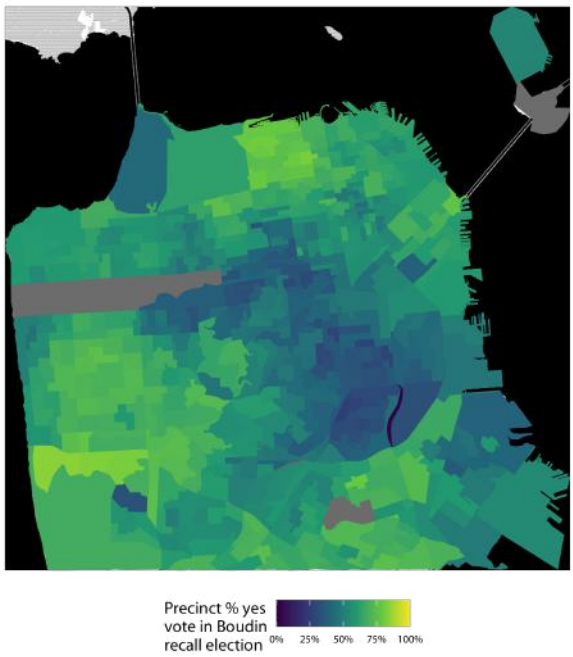
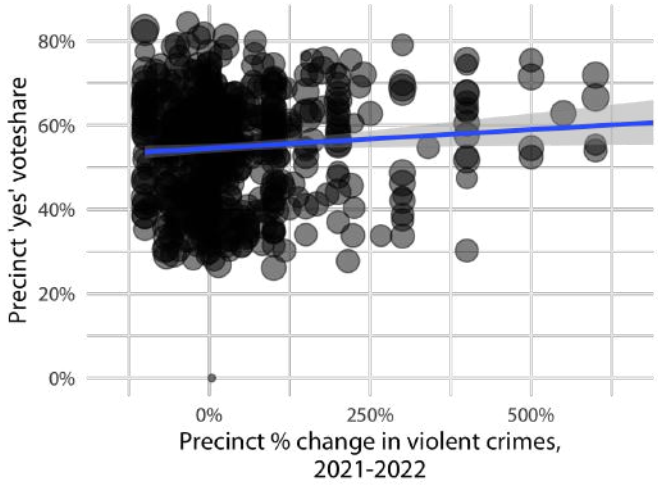


Figure 6.2: Violent crime and Boudin's recall results. Points indicate the percent change in the number of violent crimes and the 'Yes' share of the vote in Boudin's recall election at the precinct level, with the size of points scaled to the total number of votes in that precinct.



responsible from the media and the campaign to oust Boudin.

My argument in this chapter is that some problems in cities – like crime

– are not accurately perceived by voters more broadly, nor are they easily linked to city leaders. As the results in Chapter 4 showed, some policy problems in cities are easily apparent to voters, and *can* be linked to local politicians when it comes time to making electoral decisions. Yet the vast majority of problems in cities are much more difficult to accurately perceive on a citywide level. On top of this, most local policy issues are much more difficult to connect with city leaders due to complex shared jurisdictional authority, as Chapter 5 showed. Voters require help to connect an accurate picture of these less visible and less attributable problems to specific local politicians when they are voting.

In this chapter, I turn my focus to how voters respond to less visible problems in cities. I focus on two important policy problems for which city leaders are at least partially responsible: local economic conditions and crime. Both of these issues can affect individual voters a great deal. Whether a city resident has a job, and how much money they earn has an immediate impact on their lives. Yet the average person has to glean information from elsewhere if they want to know how their city is doing economically beyond their own pocketbook. Similarly, experiencing crime at an individual level can be an incredibly salient and terrible experience for the victim of a crime. Yet it is also rare, for most people, to be the victim of a crime. Learning about levels of crime in a city as a whole is hard to accurately do.

Nor is it often easy for voters to connect these issues to incumbent city leaders. Local governments have relatively exclusive control over land use policy in their cities, giving them a unique set of tools by which to attract employers to their cities and retain the businesses that exist. Cities use zoning policy, planning documents, and tax relief packages to influence the health of businesses. Urban politics as a research field has highlighted few patterns as reliably as the near-singular drive with which city politicians seek economic growth (e.g. Logan and Molotch 1987; Peterson 1981; Stone 1946; Swanstrom 1985). It would be natural for local governments to be held accountable for these policy decisions.

Similarly, cities spend large portions of their budgets on crime reduction and policing – over 13% on average (Urban Institute 2024). City leaders talk publicly about crime – and crime reduction – quite often (de Benedictis-Kessner 2022; Holman 2016; Marion and Oliver 2013). Though both the economy and crime are shaped by external factors as well – and by the actions of other levels of government – local governments deserve at least *some* of the blame and credit for these outcomes in their cities.

I examine whether city leaders are held electorally accountable for these less visible – but still important – policy issues of the economy and crime. When economic conditions and public safety improve or deteriorate, are city leaders rewarded or punished at the ballot box? Electoral accountability for these outcomes would be a good thing given their (at least partial) responsibility for these policy areas, as well as the vast literature in urban

politics showing that city governments make policy decisions on both these issues routinely. If electoral accountability exists for these less visible issues, it should involve voters rewarding city leaders when the economy improves or crime goes down, but punishing city leaders when the economy gets relatively worse or crime rates increase.

I find that, on the whole, there is little evidence that the economy or crime influence city politicians' electoral prospects. There appears to be minimal overall relationship between the health of the economy or crime rates and incumbent mayors and city councilors' success in elections. Despite the fact that city leaders dedicate a large portion of their public speaking, their campaign platforms, their budgets, and their policy decisions once in office to these issues, there appears to be little payoff to succeeding – and little penalty for these leaders when problems occur.

Yet institutions adjacent to the electoral environment matter for voters' decisionmaking. When I look at the institutional variation in media coverage of local politics, I find some instances in which these less visible issues do appear to influence local elections. In years and places where there is greater media coverage of local politics – the leaders of municipal government are mentioned in news coverage more often – both the local economy and crime are matched by electoral rewards and penalties for incumbent city leaders. But in places with less coverage of local politics, there is no detectable effect of shifts in the economy or crime on incumbents' electoral success.

The media can be an effective tool to help voters learn about problems in their city more accurately, and to learn who to blame for these problems. News coverage helps people broaden their knowledge of conditions beyond their own home. Using information from the media, people can learn about employment and wage growth or the safety of their city overall. News coverage of local leaders also helps voters connect who to blame with the actual economic conditions and crime in their cities. As the data in this chapter will show, city leaders are effectively blamed and credited for less visible and attributable problems like the economy and crime in elections when this aid is available to voters.

Together, these analyses indicate that the economy and crime are far from easy subjects of accountability in cities. People have little information about actual employment, wage growth, or crime rates available in their daily lives. As a result, these issues are primed for voters to misperceive true government performance when making electoral decisions. Both the economy and crime are policy issues lacking in accurate information – solidly inside the fog of accountability in most cities. And both issues are not so clearly associated with *city* government that voters can easily link these conditions to their local leaders. The media can play an important assistive role in accountability for both the economy and crime and help move these issues outside the foggy atmosphere in which they ordinarily reside.

"It's the Economy, Stupid"

The health of the economy has been seen as a critical part of politics at the national level for years among both political strategists and scholars. James Carville famously wrote the phrase "the economy, stupid!" on a sign in the campaign office of Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential election campaign. He meant this as a directive to staffers to talk about the poor economic conditions in 1992 to contrast their candidate with the incumbent, George H.W. Bush. His assumption was that by focusing on the economy, the Clinton campaign would convince voters to punish the incumbent president. Clinton, then, could win the 1992 election by focusing on economic performance.

In many ways, Carville was right. Clinton went on to win the 1992 presidential race. More generally, Carville was right that the economy is an excellent predictor of elections. An abundance of research in political science and economics has examined evidence of economic retrospective voting. This research has showed that the party of the incumbent president in presidential and Congressional elections is correlated with national economic conditions (e.g. Kramer 1971; Tufte 1978; Markus 1988; Erikson 1989). More recent evidence has also found that more localized measures of economic performance also seem to correspond with the incumbent party's fortunes in presidential elections (Hill, Herron, and Lewis 2010; Healy and Lenz 2017; Cottrell, Herron, and Westwood 2018) as well as other subnational elections (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020*a*; Ebeid and Rodden 2006; Wright 2012).

At the heart of Carville's statement, however, is not just that economic conditions help predict elections. He is implicitly advancing a theory of voters punishing and rewarding incumbent politicians for the economy as one proxy for the performance of those incumbents in office. This would suggest that the correspondence between economic conditions and electoral outcomes is a marker of performance-based voting. Elections are the main arena in which the public evaluates and acts on the performance of government, meaning that these types of judgments are crucial for functioning democratic accountability (Ashworth 2012; Healy and Malhotra 2013). Under this argument, retrospective voting incentivizes politicians to satisfy voters by growing the economy (Ferejohn 1986). It also allows voters to select more competent representatives (Fearon 1999). Thus, understanding whether voters judge politicians for economic performance is crucial for any assessment of representative democracy (e.g., Key 1966).

There is probably no feature of government performance that dominates news media conversations about elections more than the economy. Monthly and quarterly unemployment and wages growth reports are widely discussed in the national news. And local press cover economic news quite frequently as well (Atkeson and Krebs 2008). Voters might rationally learn about the

performance of government from these news reports. Political scientists and economists have called this a "sociotropic" understanding of economic conditions, in which voters pick up signals about the national economic environment and vote based on it (e.g. Fair 1978; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979). Work in this vein has shown that national economic conditions reliably predict election outcomes.

Of course, there are differences in economic performance in different areas. Certain areas may have thriving industries while others may be experiencing economic decline. Voters might care about more localized economic conditions when making judgements about the performance of government: their lived experience of their community and friends, rather than wonky reports from the federal government, may be what shape their understanding of how the government is handling economic growth (Bisgaard, Dinesen, and Sønderskov 2016). Cues that are closer to home, such as county- or state-level economic performance, might be more likely to shape their opinions of government.

At an even more micro-level, people's views of economic performance may be shaped by their own personal finances as well. Certain voters are more exposed to economic trends via job loss (or gain), and salary increases or decreases (O'Grady 2019). Some voters may even have their understanding of the economy shaped by recent experiences with the housing market (Hall, Yoder, and Karandikar 2021; Larsen et al. 2019). This type of argument underlies egotropic theories of retrospective voting (e.g. Fiorina 1978; Tufte 1978). Rather than relying on news about the economy to shape their perceptions, the public may simply internalize signals from their own life (Hopkins, Kim, and Kim 2017). Or, voters may reflect a mixture of these phenomena, and pick up some amount of information from national or state-level economic trends and some information from their own personal financial situation (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014; Bisbee and Zilinsky 2023).

But there has been only scattered research about whether voters hold politicians at the *city* level accountable for the economy. My recent work with Christopher Warshaw has found that local economic conditions affect the county-level success of the president's party in federal, state, and (somewhat) in county elections (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020*a*). This matches other previous work showing that the economy affects gubernatorial elections (e.g., Peltzman 1987; Ebeid and Rodden 2006; Wright 2012). It also corroborates the oft-forgotten work on economic voting in sub-state elections, which shows that unemployment can affect mayoral elections in combination with a host of other factors (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). In some of the strongest evidence of economic voting in city elections, Hopkins and Pettingill (2018) show that changes in local unemployment relative to national trends can influence voters' support for incumbent mayors.

Using data from survey self-evaluations of economic conditions and re-

ported votes, previous research has also presented a fairly strong set of evidence to support the existence of economic voting in mayoral elections (Howell and McLean 2001; Howell and Perry 2004; Kaufmann 2004), but not city council elections (Oliver and Ha 2007). Using a combination of both survey data and election outcome data, Arnold and Carnes (2012) found that changes in unemployment and inflation corresponded with electoral outcomes for New York City mayoral candidates.

Much of this research has pointed in the same direction – that economic voting may be happening, at least contingently, in city-level elections. Yet it has been limited by constraints of the data involved in most cases to assessing descriptive associations rather than supporting a causal argument about economic conditions influencing city-level vote outcomes. While city governments do a great deal to promote economic growth in their policymaking, the payoff to those politicians for that work remains somewhat unclear.

Does Crime Kill (at the Ballot Box)?

Much of local politics often revolves around public safety and crime. When big-city mayors were surveyed by researchers at Boston University's Initiative on Cities in 2017, many mayors reported that crime and policing are an area where they feel like they can have "a lot" of influence relative to the broader state and federal policy environment (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2018). Even greater numbers of these same mayors also reported that they believed constituents hold them accountable based on their performance in the arena of crime (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2024). In line with this, much of the communication that local politicians and city governments put out in press releases has to do with crime and public safety (de Benedictis-Kessner 2022).

This perception of influence often means that local candidates run on platforms related to crime and public safety. Mayoral candidates – and especially more conservative ones – commonly take a "tough on crime" approach. They promise that they will reduce local crimes rates, often via punitive policy (Beckett 1997; Simon 2007). At the same time, however, Democrats and more liberal candidates and the state and local levels have also campaigned on promises to reduce crime, and have then often implemented punitive policies once in office (Beckett and Francis 2020; Gunderson 2022; Murakawa 2014). If there is any policy area that has unified local politicians across partisan and ideological dimensions, it is their commitment to addressing crime in cities, often via increased spending on policing.

Of course, realistically, all elected officials only have narrow sets of tools to actually influence local crime rates. City governments have important constraints on their ability to unilaterally influence policy and the conditions in their local environment such as crime (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2024; Gerber and Hopkins 2011; Peterson 1981). While much attention has

been paid to police budgets via movements that seek to "defund the police" or decrease the size of police forces and the scope of their responsibilities, funding for police departments is only one of the more visible ways that local politicians might affect public safety. Crime is also a function of larger societal forces rather than specific policing policies (e.g. Agan, Doleac, and Harvey 2023; Dynes and Holbein 2020). This puts local politicians in a difficult bind: while they focus on crime and safety in their public communication, and believe they are judged for changes in crime and safety by voters, they may not actually have that much control over the broader societal phenomena that actually cause crime.

Despite this, previous research has found at least some evidence that crime affects voters' approval of local elected officials (e.g. Arnold and Carnes 2012; Go 2022). When crime increases, voters appear to approve of their mayors less. And when voters perceive crime to be higher, or evaluate the police less favorably, they are less likely to approve of their mayor (Howell and Perry 2004).Yet evidence of this mechanism translating into vote choices in actual elections is less clear. Hopkins and Pettingill (2018) show that there is little evidence of retrospective voting for crime in mayoral elections.

The Media's Facilitating Role

Much of the research on retrospective voting – and accountability more generally – has highlighted how the media can facilitate electoral accountability. The media can generally play a watchdog role in politics and induce politicians to make more constituent-serving decisions (e.g. Snyder and Strömberg 2010). Separately, the presence of a strong media can increase voters' political knowledge (e.g. Abramson and Montero 2023; Hayes and Lawless 2015; Peterson 2021*a*, cf. Cronin et al. 2023) and help them link information about performance and policy to their political decisions (Mutz 1994; Peterson and Jeong 2024). News media may operate through both of these mechanisms to inform citizens and signal to politicians that these voters are informed.

How the media actually help voters hold local government accountable for less visible problems like crime and the economy through this second mechanism, though? As I discussed in Chapter 1, information about city government performance is often not available – people do not know what *true* government performance is. Second, because of the complex institutions governing local service provision in many policy areas like the economy and crime, voters are unlikely to know *who* is responsible for these conditions in their cities. The media may help voters by both informing them about performance and by helping them connect that performance with their local government.

For both the economy and crime, most voters do not themselves experience fluctuations in the economy or in crime in a given year. Instead,

they must learn about these important conditions in their cities from other sources (Boydstun, Highton, and Linn 2018; Mastrorocco and Minale 2018; Soroka, Stecula, and Wlezien 2015). According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), an annual survey sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, less than 24 people in every 1,000 people in the nation were victims of a crime in the year 2022.[3] That means that people do not directly have a visible indicator of their city's crime rate from their own life available to them on a daily basis. Instead, they rely on third-party sources like the news media to tell them about crime in their area (e.g. Mastrorocco and Minale 2018). Crime and the economy may, in particular, represent an enormous fraction of local news coverage. By some estimates, up to a quarter of all local television news stories are about crime (Mastrorocco and Ornaghi 2024; Romer, Jamieson, and Aday 2006).

Similarly, few people actually experience drastic changes in the labor market themselves, though those might also influence their political beliefs and preferences (O'Grady 2019). Instead, most people learn about their city's or region's economic conditions from others around them, or from indirect interactions with aspects of the economy that are highly salient to them, such as buying or selling a home (Larsen et al. 2019). The news may also teach people about economic growth in their area through its reporting on broader economic trends, or through more specific narrative stories about businesses closing and opening. Berry and Howell (2007) argue that when the media focus on reporting policy performance, they can help voters make judgments of politicians based on more than their own isolated experiences. They apply this argument to school performance and the fates of school board members in elections, but their findings broadly illustrate the role of the media in providing information about local government performance. Similarly, Hopkins and Pettingill (2018) show that unemployment's effect on mayoral elections depends on the presence of local news media that reports on economic conditions.

In addition to the information that the media provides to voters about conditions in their cities – how the economy is doing, and whether crime is increasing or decreasing – it may also provide the interstitial information that helps *connect these conditions with city government.* I have argued in this chapter that both economic development and crime are central responsibilities of local governments and thus are something for which they *should* be held accountable. Yet this is likely not clear to many voters. The policy levers by which cities attract businesses and attempt to increase wages often operate behind the scenes. City governments might use complex tools like land use policy to rezone portions of the city or tax breaks for certain types of businesses to incentivize them to relocate to their city. And city leaders often address crime through a panoply of policy decisions – some of which

[3] https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/ncvsnibrscpc22.pdf

are quite visible, like police hiring and spending, but some of which are not. Coverage of these local policy decisions in both economic development and crime reduction, might highlight city leaders' (real) responsibility to improve the local economy and decrease crime. This coverage could therefore help voters connect performance with their local government incumbents.

In line with this, Burke (2024) uses an impressive compilation of data on both New York City and cities across the country, to demonstrate the key informational role of the media in voters' ability to judge city politicians for the economy. He shows that, first, the local news media covers the economy alongside local politicians a great deal: newspapers mentioned the economy in 20% of stories about the mayor in 40 cities in fall 2016. Second, he shows that this coverage of the two concurrently is crucial to enable voters to connect actual economic performance and their evaluations of their mayor. Using data from New York City across a number of years and from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study in 40 cities, he shows that when there is greater coverage of the economy and the mayor together, voters' approval of their mayors is more strongly related to the actual economic conditions in their city.

Evidence from research on the news media provides more evidence of the importance of these dual informational channels by which media coverage might facilitate accountability. In particular, the disappearance of news media outlets and deterioration in their local reporting have demonstrated how their absence can hinder accountability.

Broader trends in the news media industry mean that news outlets – especially those that cover local politics – are closing. As research by Erik Peterson has demonstrated, declining advertising revenues and subscriptions to newspapers have led the industry to drastically reduce resources devoted to reporting in local newsrooms (Peterson 2021*b*). This has led to gradual – but sometimes drastic – decreases in newspapers' focus on local politics in favor of information about national politics or broader national conditions (Hopkins 2018; Moskowitz 2021; Peterson 2021*b*).

This has also occurred alongside consolidation of news media under conglomerates that might care less about specific local concerns and more about reducing costs of running a newspaper – or their owners' own political goals. For instance, many struggling newspapers have remained in print in the last two decades after being acquired by private investment companies or their subsidiaries like GateHouse Media (e.g. Dunaway and Peterson 2023; Ewens, Gupta, and Howell 2023; Ewing 2024). Similarly, many broadcast news channels have been purchased by national media conglomerates like Sinclair. These acquisitions have led to decreases in coverage of local politics, with some replacement by coverage of national politics (e.g. Levendusky 2022; Martin and McCrain 2019). As Mastrorocco and Ornaghi (2024) show, this can lead to worse coverage of local crime in particular. When both print and television news media outlets disappear, get absorbed into national con-

glomerates, or are bought by investment firms, voters may be losing a crucial tool to enable accountability – and in particular, for less visible issues like the economy and crime.

These studies on the media's facilitative role in accountability, as well as the specific informational content of news media, set up a strong expectation that the media can help people reward and punish their local politicians for performance. I test this prediction directly in this chapter.

Why San Francisco Recalled Boudin But Kept London Breed

The example of San Francisco and Chesa Boudin is instructive in showing how the media can facilitate – or hinder – accountability for city leaders.

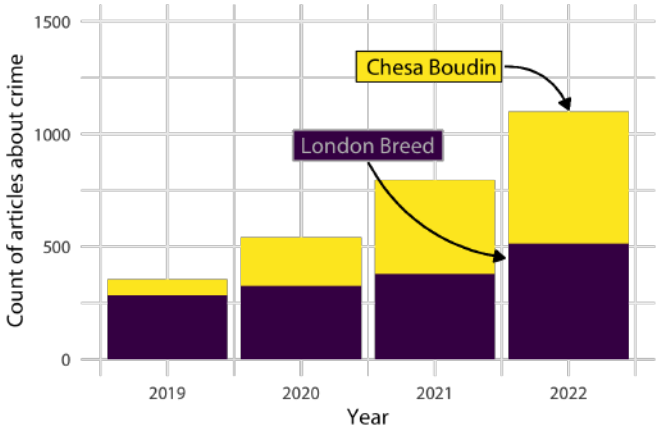
First, Boudin – rather than other political actors who play a role in public safety – was effectively blamed for crime. As city Supervisor Hillary Ronen was quoted as saying, "Chesa Boudin is the scapegoat in The City for anything that happens that isn't positive" (Duran 2022). The district attorney was placed squarely in the cross-hairs of the public narrative about crime by the national and local news, as well as by advocates in the recall effort. This was, at least in part, a problem created by Boudin's own success at branding himself as a prosecutorial candidate who would take on the city's crime with new progressive policies. As Boudin said himself, crime was "the focus of every single policy that we put into place" (Lowrey 2022).

His linkage with crime was also likely a result of the way people – including the mayor – painted him as the one responsible for crime, rather than other city leaders who were in more direct control of the police or equipped to address the systemic determinants of crime. When Mayor Breed was asked in early 2022 whether she had faith in Boudin's efforts to combat crime, she replied "I am not necessarily on the same page with a number of things that he's doing" and that "we need to start concentrating more on supporting the victims of this city than we are supporting in some cases, sadly, the criminals" (Shaban 2022). Her criticism of his policies put the blame for crime on him rather than her own administration. In tandem with more pointed criticism from others like Jenkins and those organizing the recall campaign, these remarks pointed the finger directly at Boudin for crime.

This finger-pointing towards Boudin played out most clearly in media coverage and likely shaped *who* voters connected with crime. The San Francisco Chronicle – the flagship local news publication for the city and the region – published over 2,500 articles about crime in 2022. A quick review of the articles in the *Chronicle* mentioning crime reveals some evidence that this coverage helped point the finger at Boudin. Of those articles about crime, over half in 2022 mentioned Boudin, while fewer mentioned Breed. This was a sharp increase relative to previous years in the tight connection between crime and Boudin in the *Chronicle*. Figure 6.3 shows this trend

in the data.[4] Though not proof of some causal relationship between media coverage and residents' connection between Boudin and crime rates in their voting patterns, these trends suggest a dominant narrative that Boudin was responsible for crime in the years leading up to his recall.

Figure 6.3: News coverage of crime in the *San Francisco Chronicle* by year that mentioned Mayor London Breed (in purple) or District Attorney Chesa Boudin (in yellow).



Second, as Boudin himself was quoted as saying in *The Atlantic* in May 2022, there was "a disconnect between what the data shows us and what people feel" about crime (Lowrey 2022). People simply felt that crime had increased, despite all evidence to the contrary. The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce released survey results showing that a large majority of San Franciscans believed crime was worsening (San Francisco Chamber of Commerce 2021). Local Bay Area news organizations reported similar poll results. City residents felt unsafe and ranked crime as a high priority among other policy issues (just below housing costs and homelessness) (CBS San Francisco 2022). This was despite the fact that violent crime in San Francisco in 2022 was at its lowest levels in decades (Grabar 2022).

Similarly, though crime – both violent and non-violent – has drastically decreased across cities in the last several decades, many Americans report year after year that they believe crime is getting worse. For instance, in a 2022 Gallup survey on the issue, 56% of respondents in a national poll reported believing that crime was worsening in their local area, despite record low levels of crime in 2022 (Brenan 2022).

These trends are not isolated to voters in the U.S., either: a recent innovative experiment in Denmark identified similar problems in misperceptions

[4]These data come from searches on the newspaper archiving site newslibrary.com for the words "crime" and [official's last name] in all article text, in the newspaper source "Chronicle, San Francisco" in each given year.

of crime and found these misperceptions hard to durably correct (Larsen and Olsen 2020). Nor are they isolated to crime: people's perceptions of economic conditions are also shaped by an amalgam of factors, among which objective conditions are only one (De Boef and Kellstedt 2004).

There are numerous reasons that people could perceive crime to be worsening in a departure from reality. For one, media outlets have a well-known negativity bias in their reporting on social conditions like crime (e.g. Lengauer, Esser, and Berganza 2012; Patterson 1994). Newspapers and television broadcasts often focus on increases in crime but do little to report on trends in the opposite direction. This type of press coverage of crime can stoke the flames of fear yet also lead to more engagement (Soroka, Fournier, and Nir 2019; Trussler and Soroka 2014). News outlets such as Fox News can, as a result, lead their consumers to believe that crime is a more important issue (Ash and Poyker 2024). Even if the media report on crime in a biased manner, citizens may interpret the facts and statistics involved in news articles differently from more salacious anecdotes or fictional programs that also often appear in the media (Esberg and Mummolo 2018; Holbrook and Hill 2005).

This story of Chesa Boudin's recall is not an isolated one. The way that crime and economic conditions influence local elections across the country is shaped by similar dynamics around the availability of information. Specifically, information provided in the media can tell voters *who* is responsible for the economy or crime, and *what* these conditions actually are. In many cities, voters believe the politicians responsible are not the ones leading the city government. And in many places, voters have inaccurate perceptions of either of these conditions in their city. This confusion about what performance is and who is responsible for addressing it are created by institutions like the media and the reality of shared responsibility for policy issues like public safety and economic growth across different political offices. This shared responsibility allows for substantial blame-shifting between politicians. Together, this means that voters are confronted by a foggy context in which to evaluate their leaders for crime.

Data and Research Design

My analyses in this chapter are built upon administrative data on local performance. In this case, I build upon the elections data described in Chapter 3 and combine it with fine-grained administrative data on the local economy and crime.

For my examinations of the influence of the economy on elections, I use a population-based dataset on economic growth. While much work in political science and economics has used measures of economic conditions such as those based on the Current Population Survey, those indicators are sample-based, making their measurement quite imprecise year-to-year. However, re-

cent research on economic conditions such as Healy and Lenz (2017), Sances (2017), and de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw (2020*a*) has used an alternative measure of local economic conditions that is not subject to this type of sampling error. Instead, I measure changes in the local economy using a dataset with annual measures of county-level economic conditions from 1969-2020 based on the population of business establishments in the United States: the Bureau of Economic Advisors' (BEA) Local Area Personal Income and Employment data. This dataset is largely based upon the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW), which is produced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics using administrative data on employers' unemployment insurance (UI) filings. It also incorporates a number of other administrative datasets from state and federal sources to encompass businesses that are not covered by UI.

Using these data, I operationalize local economic conditions using the change in wages per worker in each county between year_{t-1} and year_t in thousands of dollars. This measure accords with recent research on economic voting and accountability which has also used changes rather than levels of economic performance (e.g., Bartels 2008; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020*a*; Healy and Lenz 2014, 2017). It is also appealing on theoretic grounds: voters care about *relative* performance of the economy rather than abstract levels of the economy (Hart and Matthews 2022). Though the BEA releases these records of economic conditions at the county level, I disaggregate them to the city level using the Missouri Census Data Center's population-weighted geographic overlap files for 2010 census populations. This effectively creates measures of city-level employment and wages based on the average across all counties overlapping with each city weighted by the percentage of a city's population that lives in each county.

I similarly operationalize performance in the area of crime using measures of changes in overall and different types of crimes as in Chapter 5. These crime data are a cleaned and concatenated version of the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program (Kaplan 2021*a*). As in Chapter 5, I aggregate these data from policing agencies to the city level and calculate per 100 capita measures of both overall crime and two different types of crime – violent and property – between the year before the election and the election year.

I combine these data with the mayoral and city council elections data that I introduced in Chapter 3 and used in the subsequent chapters. I assess accountability by focusing on the 2,398 mayoral and 9,261 city council races where incumbent candidates were running, and look at all incumbent candidates' performance in these elections. As in previous chapters, I calculate the incumbent candidate's (or candidates') share of the total votes cast in that race, which I then match with the economic performance and crime data described above.

With these paired datasets of mayoral elections and city council elections

across the last three decades combined with performance data, I use several time-series cross-sectional models (Angrist and Pischke 2008) to estimate the causal effects of the economy and crime on incumbents' electoral fortunes in city elections. This research design involves using regressions with fixed effects at the city level and the year or state-year level in order to isolate the effect of performance rather than other trends within a city or in a given election cycle.[5] These fixed effects naturally absorb a great deal of the variation in both election results and performance, and the net causal effect of performance that I observe should be interpreted not as the *entire* effect of economic performance or crime on elections, but as the partial effect of these performance metrics after removing the state-year-specific and overall city-specific effects on elections.

In contrast to the majority of past studies on retrospective voting, for my main analyses I set aside looking at the incumbent president's party's fortunes in elections. Many of the city elections in my dataset are officially nonpartisan – over 80% in mayoral races and over 75% in city council races. Though many of the candidates running in these elections might be discernibly associated with a party by voters (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2023; Reece et al. 2024), focusing only on elections contested by both parties would limit the scope of my analysis.

Instead, given the evidence presented in Chapter 3 on the high rates at which incumbent candidates run for reelection in local races, I look at the incumbent *candidate's* electoral fortunes in city elections. This limits me to only using data from the races in which an incumbent candidate is running, but this is a tradeoff I am willing to make. This measurement strategy maps well onto the theory that I am trying to evaluate: whether or not the person or people in control of government are rewarded or punished for performance.[6]

Results

I first assess the overall relationship between performance in these two areas and local elections. Do voters across the country respond to increases (and decreases) in crime by punishing (or rewarding) their incumbent city

[5]The main assumption of this research design is that there are no time-varying confounders that might lead to any observed effects of the economy. I conduct a placebo check to bolster this assumption in Appendix B.

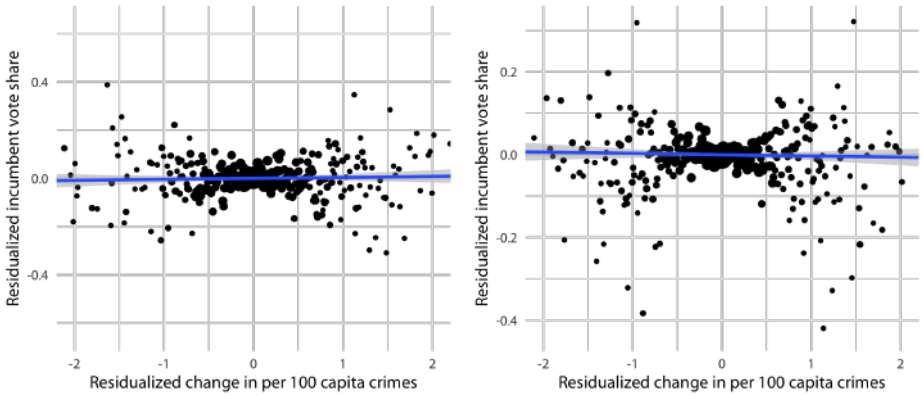
[6]While my main analyses focus on incumbent politicians' individual accountability for economic performance, readers attentive to the patterns of nationalization that are raised in other work such as Hopkins (2018), or the role of partisanship in local politics (e.g. de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016, 2020*b*; de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones, and Warshaw 2024) might naturally ask whether city-level incumbents are simply treated as partisans and held accountable via their partisan ties. It might be true that it is not incumbent local politicians who are rewarded and punished for performance, but the incumbent party holding an office. I assess this possibility in Appendix C.

leaders? Or, as the story of Chesa Boudin exemplified, do voters blame other politicians like local prosecutors? And when their city benefits from economic growth or suffers from stagnation, do voters reward or punish their city leaders for the economy?

Crime and No Punishment for City Leaders

Figure 6.4 shows the correspondence between the city-level change in crime and local incumbent candidates' electoral support in mayoral (left panel) and city council (right panel) elections. As in the previous chapter where I assessed voting based on economic conditions, I residualize both the crime and incumbent vote measures at the city- and state-year-levels to graphically approximate the effect of crime when fixed effects have been incorporated into my regression analyses, which follow these plots. The lines showing the linear relationship between crime and incumbent support in city elections are essentially flat in both plots. When crime increases, voters do not appear to punish incumbent mayors or city councilors. Nor do they reward them for decreases in crime.

Figure 6.4: The effect of changes in crime on the incumbent voteshare in local elections. Points indicate binned averages of the change in logged per 100 capita crimes and the average incumbent's voteshare, both residualized by city and state-year to match fixed effects models, with the size of each point scaled to the number of elections in that bin.

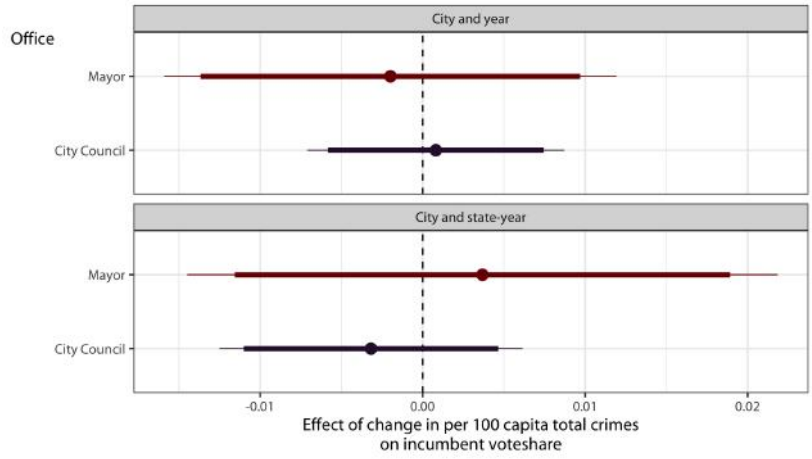


(a) Mayor (b) City council

I assess these trends more rigorously using panel regressions, the results from which I display in Figure 6.5. In models with either city- and year-level fixed effects (top panel), or city- and state-year fixed effects (bottom panel), I find no effect of the change in per 100 capita crimes on incumbent mayoral or city councilors' vote share in local elections. Table 6.1 displays these results in tabular format. The results are essentially null: there is no

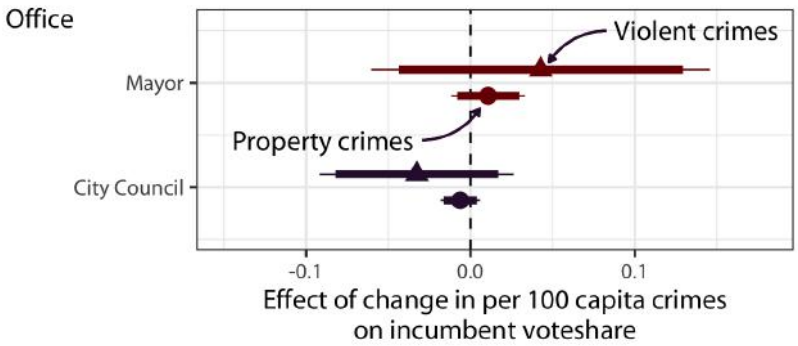
detectable impact of increases or decreases in crime on city leaders' electoral success.

Figure 6.5: The effect of changes in crime on the incumbent voteshare in local elections.



Nor do these null effects appear to be due to the fact that I am looking at overall levels of reported crime rather than more salient violent crime, which I showed played a role in Boudin's recall election. In Figure 6.6 I show the effects of violent crime (filled triangles) and property crime (filled circles) separately. The results from the models underlying the estimates in Figure 6.6 are also presented in Table 6.1. Neither violent crime or property crime appears to influence mayoral and city council elections. Nor – if we believe a story of accountability for crime – are the direction of these estimated effects even in the expected direction for mayoral incumbents.

Figure 6.6: The effect of changes in violent and property crime on the incumbent voteshare in local elections.



One additional feature of the politics of crime and policing in cities bears

Table 6.1: Accountability for Crime

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:											
	Mayor						City council					
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Variables												
Δ in crimes per 100 capita	-0.002	0.004					0.0008	-0.003				
	(0.007)	(0.009)					(0.004)	(0.005)				
Δ in violent crimes per 100 capita			0.018	0.043					-0.023	-0.033		
			(0.035)	(0.052)					(0.026)	(0.030)		
Δ in property crimes per 100 capita					-0.002	0.011					0.0005	-0.006
					(0.010)	(0.011)					(0.005)	(0.006)
Fixed-effects												
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
State-year		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes
Fit statistics												
Observations	2,180	2,180	2,180	2,180	2,180	2,180	8,871	8,871	8,871	8,871	8,871	8,871
R^2	0.394	0.610	0.394	0.611	0.394	0.611	0.380	0.444	0.380	0.444	0.380	0.444
Within R^2	6.75×10^{-5}	0.0002	0.0001	0.0008	3.11×10^{-5}	0.0009	6.78×10^{-6}	5.04×10^{-5}	0.0001	0.0001	1.53×10^{-6}	0.0001

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

some attention here as well. There is no doubt that the politics of crime and policing in the United States and elsewhere are racialized (e.g. Sances 2024). Interactions with the police can differ drastically by the race of the person interacting with the police (e.g. Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub 2018). As a result, constituents of different racial groups may evaluate criminal justice policies (Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014; Naftel 2023) and local politicians differently (Howell and Perry 2004). The race of local leaders can also result in substantively different policy outcomes (e.g. Kerr et al. 2013; Owens, Drake Rodriguez, and Brown 2021), especially in the area of crime and policing (Hopkins and McCabe 2012; cf. de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2024). Local leaders of different races may be evaluated based on different criteria (Howell and McLean 2001), and this may be particularly true in the area of crime. The analyses in this chapter suggest there is little overall accountability for crime. Yet these null effects may mask heterogeneity in voter's reward and punishment for changes in the crime rate that are dependent on the incumbent's race. I examine this possibility in Appendix E, but find little evidence that this is happening in the cities in my data. It appears that there is little accountability for crime for both white and non-white candidates in city elections.

The results up to this point present a confusing story if one believes national news narratives about crime. It is common for these media to state as a fact that people vote based on crime. For instance, a November 2022 headline in the *New York Times* read "Fear of Crime Looms Large for Voters, to Republicans' Advantage." [7] Yet the evidence in this chapter presents a resounding lack of evidence in favor of this narrative in cities. Are local elections simply different from popular narratives about elections more generally? Or does crime simply not determine people's votes in elections?[8]

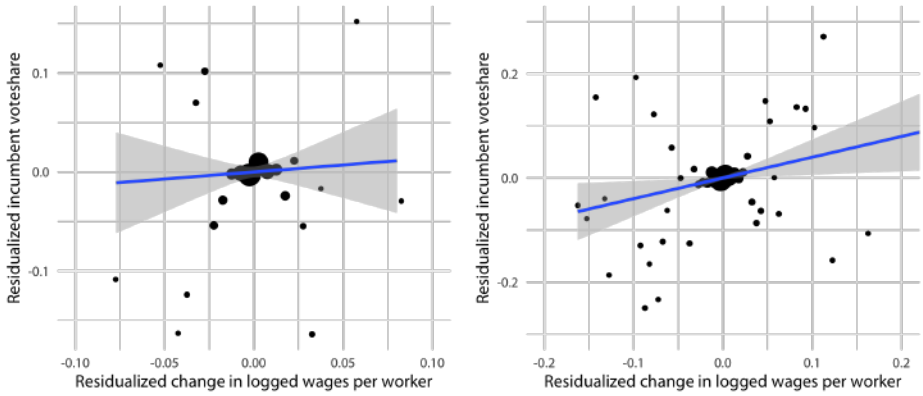
[7] https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/03/us/midterm-elections-republicans-crime.html.

[8] It also does not appear that police spending or staffing determine city incumbent

It's (Not) the Economy in City Politics

Using these research designs, I examine whether incumbent local politicians do better or worse according to the performance of the economy in their city. As a first graphical way of assessing this, Figure 6.7 shows measures of economic performance along the horizontal axes, and measures of incumbent electoral success along the vertical axes. The lefthand plot does this for mayoral candidates while the righthand plot shows this for city council candidates. Both the measure of economic performance and the measure of incumbent voteshare are residualized at the city- and state-year-levels, which means that I have de-meaned these measures by the average within each city and the average within each state in that specific year to graphically approximate the effect of the economy when fixed effects have been incorporated into my regression analyses.

Figure 6.7: The effect of changes in economic conditions on the incumbent voteshare in city elections. Points indicate binned averages of the change in logged wages per worker and the average incumbent's voteshare, both residualized by city and state-year to match fixed effects models, with the size of each point scaled to the number of elections in that bin.



(a) Mayor (b) City council

Both panels in Figure 6.7 show a slight positive relationship between economic performance and incumbents' electoral success, as indicated by the upward-sloping trend lines (in blue) in each panel. In other words, when wages are improving (relative to elsewhere in the country in that year), it

politicians' electoral success. Though a line of literature on political business cycles in both spending for and hiring of police (e.g. Guillamón, Bastida, and Benito 2013; Levitt 1997; McCrary 2002; Tepe and Vanhuysse 2013) has demonstrated that incumbent leaders may *expect* that they will reap electoral rewards from such behavior, those incumbents appear to be incorrect. I present analyses in Appendix F showing that increases in neither police expenditures nor police staffing benefit incumbents in mayoral or city council elections.

appears that incumbent candidates for mayor and city council do slightly better in elections.

These results, in regression form, are also presented in Table 6.2, and verify the graphical patterns observed in Figure 6.7. Though economic performance has a positive impact on the voteshare of incumbent mayoral and city council candidates, the estimates are noisy and not statistically significant. The first and third columns of Table 6.2 show these results using a specification with fixed effects at the city and year levels, while the second and fourth columns show these results using a more stringent specification with fixed effects at the city and state-year levels.

Table 6.2: Accountability for the Economy

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in logged wages per worker	0.320	0.095	0.242	0.395*
	(0.307)	(0.491)	(0.151)	(0.208)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes		Yes	
State-year		Yes		Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	2,213	2,213	8,527	8,527
R^2	0.395	0.608	0.381	0.445
Within R^2	0.0005	3.66×10^{-5}	0.0004	0.0006

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

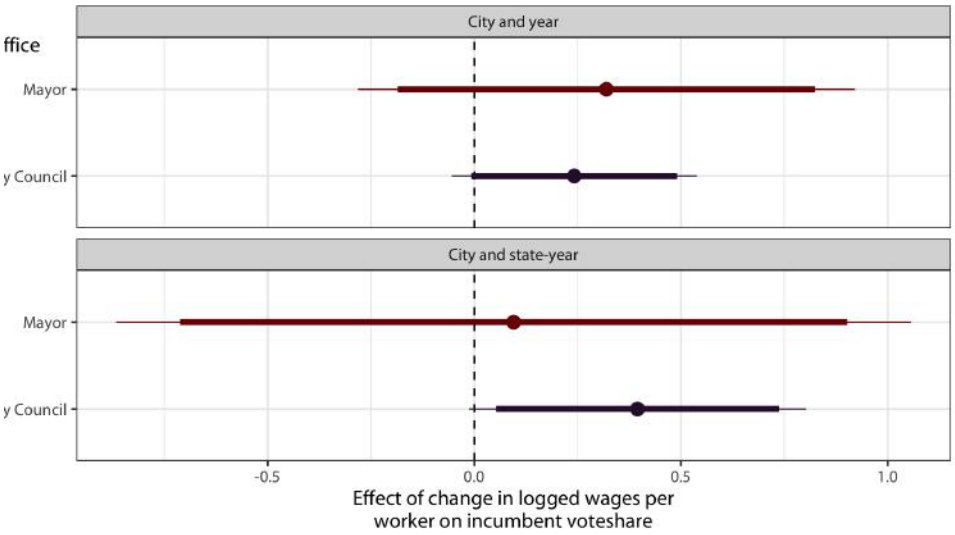
The effects identified in Table 6.2 suggest that increases in economic performance cause an increase in incumbent local candidates' success in elections. To put the size of these effects on mayoral elections in more meaningful terms, it is helpful to think about them in terms of typical changes in wages per worker. A standard deviation change in logged wages per worker is approximately $1,020. A typical increase in wages per worker of this size would translate into an increase in incumbent city council candidates' voteshare of approximately 0.8 percentage points when using the results from the more conservative specification with city- and state-year fixed effects.

Given that these models use city-level and state-year fixed effects, however, a more appropriate context for the typical change in economic performance is the *within-city* and *within-state-year* change in wages per worker (Mummolo and Peterson 2018). The change in wages per worker after residualizing by both city and state-year has a standard deviation of $13. These

models therefore imply that one standard deviation increase of this residualized measure of wage growth would lead to about a 0.1 percentage point increase in incumbent city council candidates' voteshares. It appears that economic performance – as measured by the average wage taken home by workers in the city – is used by voters when making the decision about supporting the incumbent in elections.

Figure 6.8 reproduces these results in a different visual format by plotting the coefficients from the models in the second and fourth columns of Table 6.2. The filled circles represent the estimated effect of a 1% increase in wages per worker on incumbent mayoral and city council candidates' voteshares. The horizontal lines around each circle represent the 90% (thick lines) and 95% (thin lines) confidence intervals for these point estimates. As the tabular results indicated, the effect of economic performance on incumbents' voteshare is positive, though the estimate is noisy for mayoral elections in particular, and especially using the more stringent models with state-year fixed effects.[9]

Figure 6.8: The effect of changes in logged wages per worker on the incumbent voteshare in city elections.



[9]Disentangling the two components from which I construct this main independent variable of wages per worker also shows that the main driver of these effects is the total amount paid to employees in the city, rather than employment, as I show in Appendix D.

How Media Coverage Facilitates Accountability for Crime and the Economy

Crime may play little role in local elections because it is so unclear for voters *who* is responsible for policy issues like public safety. As I discussed in the introduction of this chapter, prior to Chesa Boudin's recall election the coverage of Boudin in local media articles about crime increased, while coverage of Mayor London Breed stayed level. Do similar dynamics to Boudin's recall election play out for both crime and the economy when the media covers local politics more in cities across the country?

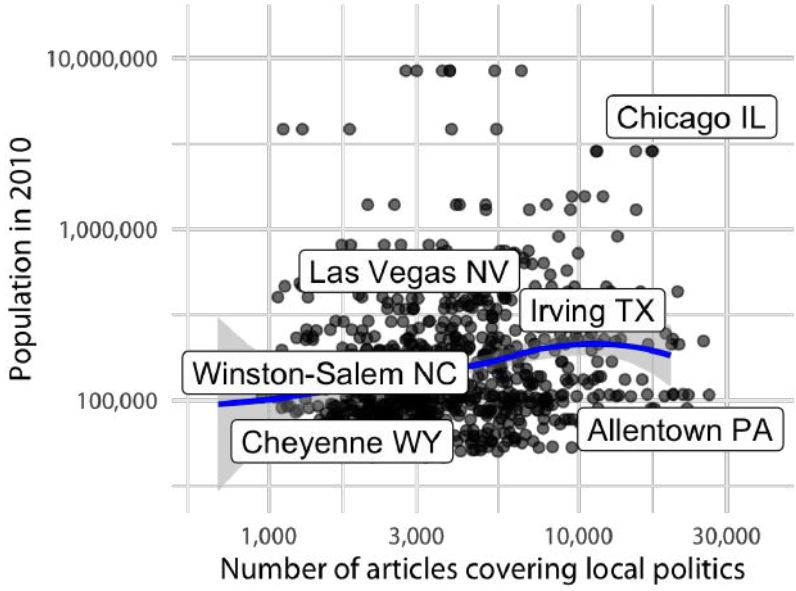
In this section, I dig into cross-city evidence on the information environment around local elections and show that it can moderate accountability for both the economy and crime – much as the media pointed the finger for crime squarely at Boudin and not the mayor. The story of Boudin's recall election demonstrated that political actors involved in crime prevention can often strategically shape perceptions around crime. As I document in other work, city politicians issue press releases about crime in a large departure from reality such that this information could easily bias constituents' perceptions of what crime levels are (de Benedictis-Kessner 2022). And, as the lawyer and civil rights activist Alec Karatsakanis has frequently publicly documented, police departments have an incentive to present information to the public via official press releases and quotes to local journalists about crime that depart from reality as well (Darrington 2023). This type of "copaganda," as Karatsakanis dubs it, serves to increase local residents' fears of crime and (at least in his view) their support for increased policing. These patterns may all play into not just *what* voters perceive performance to be, but also *who* they believe to be responsible.

Though measuring the exact tenor (and accuracy) of local government coverage in local media outlets would be a gargantuan task, to begin to examine this question I use data on local newspapers' coverage of local politics across the U.S. These data come from research by the political communication scholar Erik Peterson. In his research, he has used these data to show how the decline of local newspaper resources has led to less coverage of local government – but more relative coverage of national issues (Peterson 2021*b*). Using the newspaper database NewsBank, Peterson documents whether newspaper articles in a given year mention local political actors in their articles or not. From this database, he creates a measure of coverage of local politics.[10] I use this measurement as a proxy for how much information local voters might have available to them about their city governments – and in particular, the interstitial information that voters need to connect

[10]Specifically, he counts articles with any mention of the terms "Mayor" OR "City Manager" OR "Council" OR "Alderman" OR "Municipal" OR "County Government" OR "City Hall" OR "commissioner" OR "councilmember" OR "township" OR "ordinance" OR "school board" or "school district" and codes these as coverage of local politics.

performance about issues like the economy and crime to their city leaders.

Figure 6.9: Media coverage of local politics using data from Peterson (2021*b*).



In Figure 6.9 I display this measure of local political coverage across cities in my data. In some cities, like Chicago, IL, and Allentown, PA, there are strong local print news media that cover the local government quite frequently. In contrast, in other cities like Las Vegas, NV, and Winston-Salem, NC, the local government is rarely covered in the local newspapers.

How does this actually appear to consumers of these newspapers? Two headlines exemplify how the differential news media coverage of crime might help (or hinder) accountability. A recent headline from June 2024 in *The Morning Call*, the main newspaper in Allentown, PA, about a homicide read " Allentown man, 25, shot to death at city park; calls incident a 'terrible and preventable act of violence."'[11] This headline gives its readers a clear link between the homicide and the local mayor. A voter might reasonably assume that the mayor has policy tools that he could use to address crime – especially given that he is quoted as saying this crime was "preventable."

A recent headline about a similar crime in Las Vegas, NV, is quite different. "Las Vegas man shot, killed childhood friend, police say" read a recent line from the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.[12] Nowhere in the headline are city politicians mentioned – nor do they appear in the remainder of the news story. While a reader might learn about crime in their city from this

[11] https://www.mcall.com/2024/06/01/allentown-man-shot-to-death-in-city-park/.

[12] https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/homicides/las-vegas-man-shot-killed-by-childhood-friend-police-say-

article, they are unlikely to learn anything about local government's role in addressing crime.

I use these data on media coverage – from cities like Allentown and cities like Las Vegas – to assess whether there is more (or less) accountability for crime and the economy when the media covers local politicians more.

Figure 6.10 shows the effect of increases in crime at the local level on mayoral and city council elections, divided up by those places with more rather than less media coverage of local politics as measured by whether they were above (filled triangles) or below (filled circles) the median across the dataset of elections. As the plot shows, in cities when there was higher coverage of local politics, crime has a negative effect on mayoral and city council incumbents' electoral success. When local political actors are reliably covered in the media, voters appear to connect increases and decreases in crime rates with their vote choices in city elections.

Figure 6.10: The effect of changes in crime on the incumbent voteshare in local elections, by media coverage of local politics.

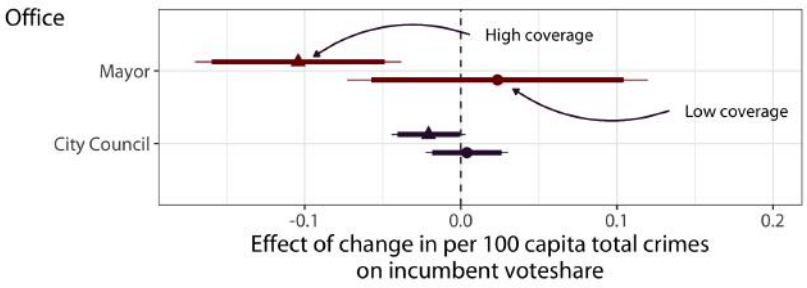


Table 6.3 shows these results in tabular form. The large size of the effects of crime here bears some attention. The change in crime per 100 capita (after residualizing by both city and state-year) has a standard deviation of 0.68 crimes per capita. The results in Table 6.3 therefore imply that – in places with high coverage of local politics – a one standard deviation increase of this residualized crime measure would lead to a decrease of 3.5 percentage points in incumbent mayoral candidates' voteshares and 2.2 percentage points in incumbent city council candidates' voteshares. In both mayoral and city council elections, it appears that when local media put attention on local political actors, voters are influenced by crime in their support for incumbent politicians.

Table 6.3: Accountability for Crime, by Media Coverage

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Local news coverage	High	Low	High	Low
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in per 100 capita crimes	-0.104***	0.024	-0.021*	0.004
	(0.034)	(0.049)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	128	141	897	831
R^2	0.851	0.713	0.396	0.489
Within R^2	0.135	0.008	0.002	9.49×10^{-5}

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

I similarly assess this role of the media in facilitating the effects of the economy on incumbents' electoral success. Using the same data from Peterson (2021*b*) on the coverage of local governments in local print news media, I examine whether there is more (or less) accountability for economic performance when the media covers local politicians more.

The results from these analyses are presented in Figure 6.11, which shows the effect of logged wages on incumbents' voteshares in cities with more coverage of local political actors (with filled triangles) and cities with less coverage (filled circles). Table 6.4 shows these same results in tabular form. Though the subset of elections for which I have media coverage data from Peterson (2021*b*) is far smaller than my overall dataset, there are suggestive results: it appears that for mayoral elections, more media coverage is associated with the presence of economic voting, while for city council elections, the opposite appears true.

Figure 6.11: How media coverage moderates the effect of the economy on incumbents' voteshare in city elections.

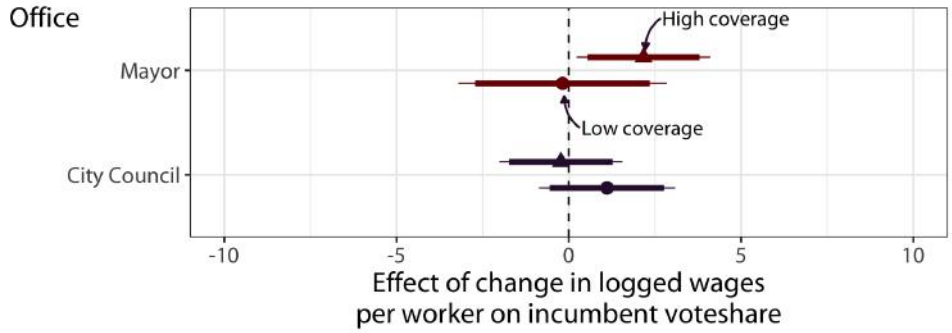


Table 6.4: Accountability for the Economy, by Media Coverage of Local Politics

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Local news coverage	High	Low	High	Low
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in logged wages per worker	2.17**	-0.184	-0.232	1.11
	(0.989)	(1.54)	(0.912)	(1.01)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	141	144	904	836
R^2	0.851	0.713	0.401	0.488
Within R^2	0.070	0.0002	7.22×10^{-5}	0.003

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Sinclair and the Consolidation of Broadcast News

One reason that local news coverage has decreased especially over the last decade is the acquisition and consolidation of news media under conglomerates or private investment companies (Dunaway and Peterson 2023; Ewens, Gupta, and Howell 2023; Ewing 2024). This has led to decreases in coverage of local politics with increased common coverage of national politics, sometimes with an ideological bent (e.g. Levendusky 2022; Martin and McCrain 2019). In particular, this has led to worse coverage of local crime (Mastrorocco and Ornaghi 2024). As the results in this chapter have shown already, more substantial local media coverage can enable accountability in policy areas like crime and the economy. Does decreased coverage of lo-

cal politics – and especially local crime – after local media are acquired by national conglomerates lead to less accountability?

My analyses in this chapter so far have been largely dependent on cross-city comparisons between places with and without strong media coverage of local politics. However, news media consolidation has changed the quality of local news coverage *within* cities in the last decade. This within-city variation in local media coverage enables me to test the causal impact of media coverage on electoral accountability while holding other city-specific features of the electoral environment constant.

To do so, I use data on the acquisition of broadcast news stations in the cities in my elections data by Sinclair Broadcasting Group. Sinclair is the largest conglomerate in broadcast television news, and has massively expanded its ownership of local stations in the last two decades. Sinclair and the four other largest media companies Gray, Nexstar, Tegna, and Tribune together owned over a third of all full-power local broadcast stations in the country by 2016 (Matsa 2017). This number was a massive expansion from just twelve years earlier in 2004, when these five companies together owned less than half as many broadcast stations.

Other researchers have meticulously collected data on Sinclair acquisitions in the last two decades, and so I use a merged dataset of city-level Sinclair station ownership by combining county-level data from 2008-2018 collected by Levendusky (2022), which I impute to the city level using the same procedure as for other county-level data described earlier, and city-level data from 2010-2017 collected by Mastrorocco and Ornaghi (2024). Figure 6.12 shows the number of cities in my elections data where a broadcast local television station is owned by Sinclair. Since 2008, the number of cities with Sinclair-owned stations has massively expanded.

I use these data in two ways to examine the moderating role of media coverage as proxied for by Sinclair ownership of broadcast stations. First, I conduct subset analyses as previously when I looked at how local media moderates the process of accountability for crime and the economy. These analyses are presented in Figure 6.13 for crime and Figure 6.14 for the economy.

These results indicate that, for crime and especial in mayoral elections, Sinclair ownership appears to blunt accountability – and perhaps even lead it to occur in the opposite direction from what we might expect. When a city has a Sinclair-owned broadcast television station, increases in crime have, if anything, a positive effect on incumbent mayors' and city councilors' voteshares. In contrast, increases in crime have a negative effect on mayoral incumbents' success in cities without Sinclair-owned stations. This negative effect – evidence consistent with electoral accountability for crime – is statistically significant for mayoral elections, but a null effect for city council elections.

Accountability for the economy appears to have less dependency on the

Figure 6.12: Sinclair Broadcasting expansion over time.

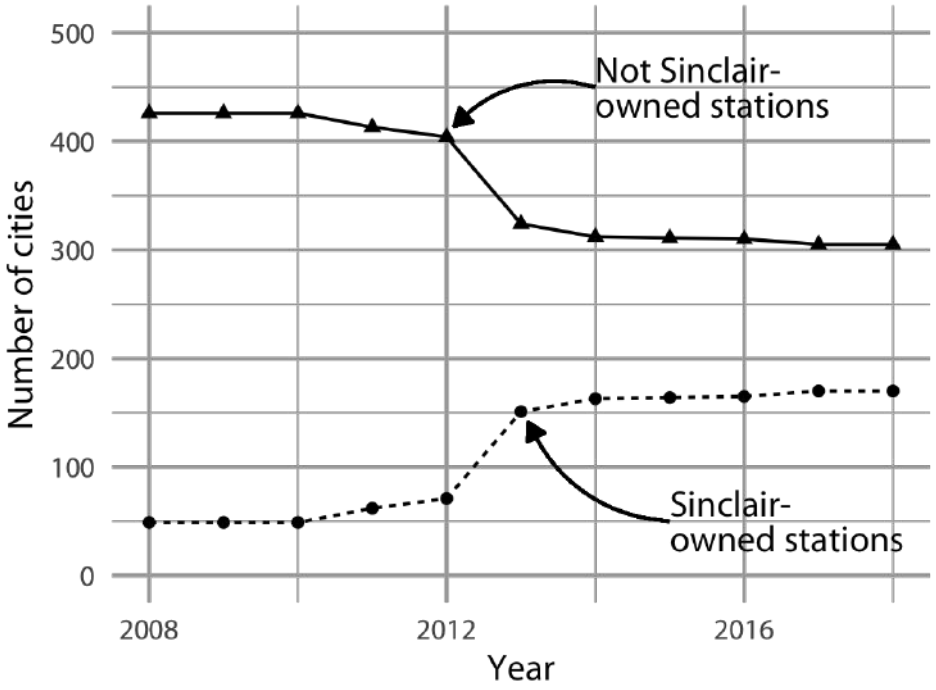
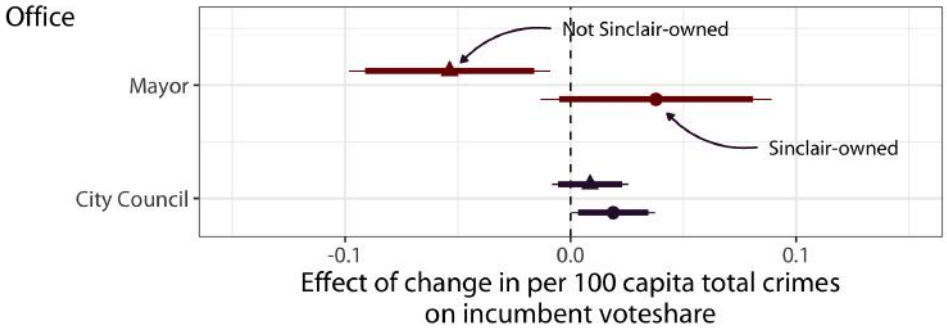


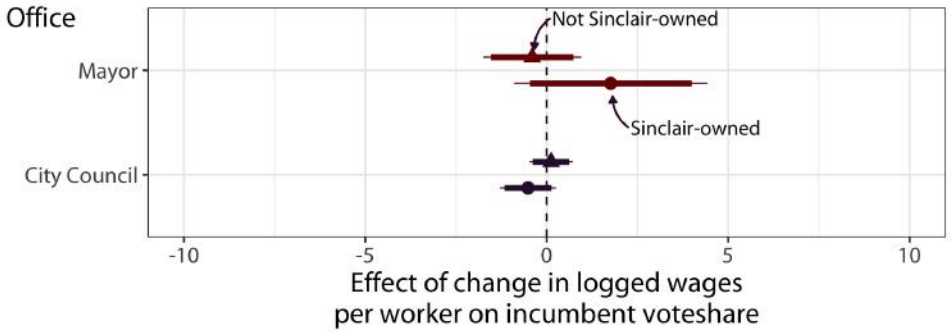
Figure 6.13: The effect of crime on incumbents' voteshare in city elections by Sinclair ownership.



quality of local media coverage (measured via Sinclair ownership) than accountability for crime. The results in Figure 6.14 show little moderation of accountability for economic conditions by whether or not Sinclair owned a broadcast station in the city.

To test the moderating role of Sinclair ownership more rigorously, I next conduct analyses that incorporate interactions between Sinclair ownership and my measures of local government performance. Table 6.6 shows these

Figure 6.14: The effect of the economy on incumbents' voteshare in city elections by Sinclair ownership.



analyses for crime, and Table **??** shows them for the economy. These tables include both the subset analyses shown visually above (in columns 1, 2, 4, and 5 of each table) and the interaction models (in columns 3 and 6). These results largely paint a picture corroborating my earlier analyses of the moderating role of media coverage, and show that Sinclair ownership blunts accountability (though the results vary in their statistical significance).

Table 6.5: Accountability for Crime, by Sinclair Ownership

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:					
	Mayor			City council		
Sinclair ownership	Yes	No		Yes	No	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variables						
Δ in per 100 capita crimes	0.038	-0.054**	-0.051**	0.019**	0.009	0.011
	(0.026)	(0.023)	(0.022)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Sinclair ownership			-0.037			0.008
			(0.030)			(0.016)
Δ in per 100 capita crimes × Sinclair ownership			0.057			0.007
			(0.041)			(0.013)
Fixed-effects						
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics						
Observations	179	725	904	1,089	3,577	4,666
R^2	0.735	0.643	0.615	0.418	0.450	0.431
Within R^2	0.034	0.015	0.015	0.003	0.0004	0.001

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 6.6: Accountability for the Economy, by Sinclair Ownership

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:					
	Mayor			City council		
Sinclair ownership	Yes	No		Yes	No	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variables						
Δ in logged wages per worker	1.76	-0.401	0.130	-0.517	0.121	0.247
	(1.36)	(0.692)	(0.676)	(0.393)	(0.307)	(0.288)
Sinclair ownership			-0.054*			0.016
			(0.031)			(0.017)
Δ in logged wages per worker × Sinclair ownership			0.958			-0.747**
			(1.28)			(0.379)
Fixed-effects						
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics						
Observations	186	755	941	1,101	3,589	4,690
R^2	0.736	0.622	0.600	0.411	0.451	0.430
Within R^2	0.018	0.0007	0.005	0.002	0.00005	0.0009

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Conclusion

When are city politicians held accountable for the economy and crime? This chapter presents evidence that there is very little universal accountability for either economic growth or changes in the crime rate in U.S. cities. In contrast to mainstream media narratives about both the economy and crime, it does not appear that local leaders – the politicians arguably most responsible for both local economic development and public safety at the local level – are rewarded and punished for fluctuations in these two conditions. These critical features of people's everyday life have little overall effect on incumbents' electoral fate in cities. While individuals interactions with the police and cities' policy *responses* to crime may affect both people's participation and their policy preferences (Ang and Tebes 2024; Ang et al. 2024; Naftel 2023; Sances 2023; cf. Cohen et al. 2019), crime itself appears to have no overall effect on support for incumbent city politicians. And wage growth and unemployment, while quite clearly important in people's lives, are not used by voters when they vote in city elections.

The further results that I showed in this chapter showed a more nuanced picture than a complete lack of city leader accountability, however. *Who* voters believe to be responsible is key for accountability in these policy areas. My results on local political coverage present a caveat for the story of accountability for both the economy and crime in local politics. When local politics is more often covered in the local media, people appear more likely to reflect changes in the economy and crime in their votes. Yet their votes show no relation with these conditions in places with less coverage of local politics. This points to the importance of the way that people get their information about performance and how it is connected to local leaders in the process of accountability.

These results adds a healthy dose of realism to claims in the national media and by politicians that either crime or the economy are of chief concern for voters in U.S. cities. City politicians reap little electoral rewards in many places from their efforts in these areas, despite spending enormous amounts of their budgets on public safety and economic growth – and sometimes to only minimal success at improving either (e.g. Jensen 2017). The exception to this lack of accountability appears to be in places with more local newspaper coverage of local political institutions and leaders. In those places, city leaders do benefit from reductions in crime and are punished for increases in crime. Similarly, I find tentative evidence of accountability for local economic conditions in places with more media coverage. The fog of accountability afflicts voters when it comes to crime and the economy, but strong media coverage of local politics can clear this fog.

The facilitative role of the news media in retrospective voting for these two policy areas fits solidly into my theory of accountability with which I began this book. City services experienced daily and somewhat broadly –

like both road conditions and the presence of unsheltered individuals living on the street – might be translated into vote choices in city elections, as I showed in Chapter 4.

But when it comes to *less visible* policy issues, like crime and the economy, people have less accurate information available to them both in order to make judgments about objective conditions in their city *and* to connect this performance to their city leaders. As a result, without accurate regular media reporting on local politics people are unable to hold their city governments accountable for these issues.

These results from cities across the country give broader context to the story of Chesa Boudin's downfall in San Francisco. Boudin was blamed for crime by voters, despite his limited role as a prosecutor. In contrast, Mayor London Breed, whose office has far more authority over the police force – a large city bureaucracy – by which the city government principally aims to reduce and prevent crime. The media coverage of crime in San Francisco had shifted to focus much more on Boudin in the years leading up to his recall election. This could reasonably have caused voters to focus less on city politicians like the mayor and more on him when deciding who they might blame for public safety.

As San Francisco journalist Gil Duran pointed out in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 2022, Boudin may have been a convenient scapegoat to allow many others to evade accountability. National and regional trends that people did not like were all blamed on the newly elected district attorney. President Barack Obama was blamed by detractors more than a decade earlier with the phrase "Thanks, Obama" for an assortment of societal ills over which he had little control. San Francisco's district attorney seems to have been blamed by voters for crime with "Thanks, Boudin" – despite others arguably bearing much greater responsibility (Duran 2022). Just as in many cities around the country, when local news media focus less on city elected officials like mayors and city councilors, other politicians may pay the price for crime – or, perhaps no one does.

These results further build a story of frustrated accountability in cities. The fog of accountability, as I have described it to this point, includes institutional barriers to effective accountability, such as complex jurisdictions with shared overlapping authority for important policy areas. Yet this chapter shows that it is not just the formal governmental institutions that matter, but also the information context in which voters make decisions. Voters have a foggy understanding of what crime rates and economic growth in their city actually are. And thanks to a news media that increasingly neglects coverage of local politics, voters develop little connection between these important conditions in their city and the local politicians who are largely responsible for them. This lack of information enables those politicians to evade accountability.

7

Strategic Finger-Pointing Can Hinder Accountability and Protect Incumbents

Muni: Hell on wheels

Commute a disaster — streetcar derails, 67 out of service

By Anastasia Hendrix
of the EXAMINER STAFF

Muni metro riders who thought the problems plaguing the system might improve by the end of the week got a shock Friday when the morning commute disintegrated into chaos and confusion.

A whopping 67 of The City's 78

Boeing streetcars were out of service for the morning commute, leaving only the fleet of 77 newer Breda cars to make almost all of the runs and causing delays two to three times longer than normal, Muni spokesman Alex Riegel said.

It was a variety of electrical and mechanical problems that debilitated the streetcars, not a single systemic breakdown, he said.

"People are seeing delays both in the time the trains take to come and then there are others that are passing them up because they are too full," he said. "I can't put an exact time to the delays, but it could easily be two to three times longer than what they've experienced already this week."

The orange, yellow and white trains have been a continual problem keep operationing, but the massive and unpredictable loss of so many in one morning left thousands of riders angrier than ever.

"This is the worst, and it's been pretty bad on a regular basis, so it's all relative," said Marie Rin, who works at UC-San Francisco and was waiting for an N-Judah line at Church and Duboce streets for more than 20 minutes.

"I don't know whether to eat my losses and take the 6-Parnassus now or wait," she asked. "Should I fish or cut bait?"

An in-bound N-Judah train then derailed at Hillway Avenue and Carl Street at 8:30 a.m., further botching the Muni metro's most heavily traveled line at the peak of the morning rush. Shuttle buses were sent in to try to keep

[See MUNI, A-20]

Two on-duty Muni workers arrested in prostitution sting [A-20]

[★★★★]
Friday evening
AUGUST 28, 1998
CLOSING STOCKS
Dow down 134.31
TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

Muni riders are packed like sardines into streetcars that may never even get them to their destinations, because of railway's many problems.

San Francisco Examiner

"We're all going to be held accountable, and rightfully so. The heat is on."

– Michael Yaki, San Francisco city/county supervisor[1]

In summer of 1998, the City of San Francisco's transit system, MUNI, experienced a major catastrophe with incredible delays. The San Francisco Examiner, a major local newspaper, called this crisis "hell on wheels" in a front-page headline. As a result of this meltdown, much of the downtown area businesses and workers that all relied on the transit system were thrown into chaos.

Local politicians – San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, and others – were fearful of retribution from voters for the city's failure to fix this catastrophe of public services. Michael Yaki, a San Francisco city supervisor, was quoted in the Los Angeles Times as saying "we're all going to be held accountable, and rightly so. The heat is on." Yaki's fear, as expressed in this quote, was that voters would punish local politicians who were responsible for public transit in San Francisco during the next election.

[1]Los Angeles Times, September 8, 1998

What actually happened in San Francisco? Contrary to what Yaki feared – that voters would punish politicians for terrible performance – in the November 1998 election, the five incumbent San Francisco supervisors running to retain their at-large seats topped the list of candidates and were re-elected.[2] In the 1999 mayoral election the following year, Mayor Willie Brown went on to get re-elected as well – with nearly a 15 percentage point lead over the closest runner-up, Supervisor Tom Ammiano, who was himself an incumbent city politician as well. These electoral outcomes suggest a story far from one of effective punishment for the politicians responsible for the MUNI crisis in 1998.

This story – a catastrophe of public services following by an absence of punishment by voters – casts doubt on the question of voters' ability to hold politicians accountable for performance. This is the question that motivated this book, and for which I have presented evidence in this book so far pointing to several institutional barriers that lead city voters to struggle with electoral accountability.

Decades of behavioral research on the limitations on citizen capacity has shown that people have trouble knowing and recalling basic political facts (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). As I showed in the previous chapter, this can include knowing who provides public services or which level of government provides them.

This lack of knowledge is a fault in the general process of attribution – or the process of connecting a certain actor with a given outcome. Political science research on both the US and elsewhere has shown that people are often confused about who is responsible for government services (e.g. Cutler 2008; Lyons and Lowery 1989; Sances 2017). Voters also struggle to figure out whether local public services are privately or publicly provided (Lerman 2019).

Misattribution of responsibility for public services to other levels of government or to non-governmental actors can lead to subsequent problems with accountability. Outside politics, a line of research in psychology shows the importance of attribution in judgement and decision-making more generally (e.g. Alicke 2000; Cacioppo, Petty, and Losch 1986; Gilbert and Malone 1995; Schlenker et al. 1994; Shaver 1985).

In line with this literature, political science research has shown that knowledgeable people who are able to successfully attribute responsibility for government functions are better able to make judgments of those in power (Arceneaux 2006; Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Gomez and Wilson 2008; Rudolph 2003*b*). My results from Chapter 2 corroborated this work in the setting of recent city elections. And in line with the results from Chapter 5, Lowery, Lyons, and DeHoog (1990) show that this variation in citizens' abil-

[2] https://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/Election-98-Coverage-S-F-Supervisors-2980526.php

ity to judge government on performance is a direct result of the fragmented institutional structure within which voters operate.[3]

How, then, can we expect local voters to make decisions at a level of politics defined by cooperative services arrangements between different local and regional governments (e.g. Gerber, Henry, and Lubell 2013) and between local governments and private contractors (Lerman 2019; Stein 1990*a*,*c*)? Disentangling this complex web of responsibilities is difficult for me, a person with a doctoral degree in political science. So it is quite understandable that it would also be difficult for a voter who cares little about local politics or politics at all.

As I showed in Chapter 6, effective local political media coverage may facilitate accountability in this confusing context. If voters can make use of nonpartisan voter guides to make choices between numerous candidates despite this low-information context (Boudreau, Colner, and MacKenzie 2021; Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2019), similar guidance from the media could help even low-information voters to hold their local governments accountable.

On the other hand, this confusing political context presents plenty of opportunity for other actors to further cloud voters' decisions and prevent accountability. Politicians acting within such collaborative arrangements have an incentive to point fingers and shift the blame for bad policy outcomes to other actors. This can be especially true if they know that they can take advantage of low voter knowledge to avoid electoral punishment. The misalignment of incentives between individual politicians who serve distinct constituencies and the broader interests of a community or region can lead to self-serving choices that do not serve the "greater good" when it comes to public service provision (Gerber and Gibson 2009). If political leaders want to, they can take such self-serving actions with little fear of electoral loss as a result of the confusing electoral environment.

In this chapter, I evaluate both of these possibilities. I show how the media can help point the finger at local governments for performance even within complex institutional environments that are confusing, and how politicians can strategically point fingers at others and take advantage of complex institutions to avoid accountability.

[3]Of course, these institutions are not the only features of elections that can hinder voters' judgments for performance. In a partisan electoral environment, for instance, these errors of attribution can often be influenced by voters' partisan attachments as well (Bisgaard 2015; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Marsh and Tilley 2010; Rudolph 2003*a*, 2006).

Reinforcing voters' knowledge about credit for public services helps them hold government accountable for performance

Is the political knowledge – specifically about who is responsible for public services – an innate feature of individual voters, or can it be influenced by external forces? And if people can be influenced, does this help them hold local government accountable for public services? Some research has experimentally manipulated the accessibility of information that attributes responsibility to specific government officials. When a policy issue is framed with a direct attribution of blame (or credit) to political officials, voters are more likely to judge them in accordance with recent performance in that issue area (Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Newman 2013). Yet much of this research has concentrated on the effects of attribution on voters' judgments of the federal government rather than local governments. The role of attribution may be even greater in the local context given lower levels of voter knowledge about local governments. And none of these studies has integrated real-world government performance data that varies across individuals, but has instead focused on disasters with universally poor government performance, or performance in the aggregate.

In this section, I present evidence from a partnership of mine with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA, or just "the T"), Boston's transit system, that endeavors to answer these questions. This direct partnership with the MBTA offers some unique advantages to examining how accountability for public services functions in cities. First, I can disaggregate people's experiences of public services performance to the *individual* level, rather than the types of aggregate city-level that I relied on in Chapters 5 and 6. Second, I am able to leverage real-world performance data – train delays in a large US city – rather than rely on self-reported data on public services performance, as I used in Chapter 2.

I use data from the performance of the MBTA – an important public service that people interact with daily – to test whether citizens are able to use salient cues from their everyday lives when forming opinions of government. I take advantage of objective individual-level transportation performance data to measure the effect of delays in public transportation on individual citizens. I construct these real-world performance data using travel records gleaned from individual riders' fare card transactions matched with performance information for each train. I then survey these riders to measure their opinions about elected officials and government. These individual-level and objective data — as opposed to aggregate performance data or self-report data alone — allow me to build on the analyses of the previous chapters to examine how (a lack of) attribution can interfere with the translation of actual performance into opinions and votes.

The findings of this chapter are twofold. First, I use data from people's recent experiences with the performance of the MBTA to show that, while people do perceive differences in the quality of the public service, they don't translate that into different opinions of their local governments. Despite a link – in funding, as well as (somewhat) in oversight – between city governments and the MBTA, riders of the T are unable to judge local government in accordance with its performance.

Part of the explanation for this lack of connection between public services and judgments of city politicians is the absence of interstitial knowledge that would help people connect their daily experiences with those political actors. As I have identified in the previous chapters, the institutional arrangement of local governments often does not assign clear responsibilities for important public services like economic growth, protection from crime, and education to the politicians in control of those services. Various features of the information environment make this even harder for voters to understand. And while the more knowledgeable voters among the population might be able to judge their local governments in accordance with performance, that is not true for a large segment of the population. These less-informed voters often have little understanding of what local governments do, and who is responsible for public services which they depend upon.

Voters might, however, be able to learn more about government responsibilities and as a result, better attribute their experiences to specific government actors. To test the power of attribution, I build upon the early results of this chapter and conduct an experiment embedded within the monthly surveys I conduct of MBTA riders. In this experiment, I vary the information that people receive about responsibility for the MBTA's service performance. These attributional cues are composed of actual rhetoric from politicians and media outlets about responsibility for the MBTA during the time period surrounding when I ran this experiment. The results of this experiment show that people who are provided with specific information tying local politicians to public services performance can reflect this performance in their judgments of local government. These findings contribute to the overall argument in this book about accountability and performance-based retrospective voting by showing that voters can overcome this important barrier to accountability.

Data

The data that I use in this chapter to assess these questions about the barrier that attribution presents for accountability come from several sources. I use performance data on public transportation that comes from real-time arrival data of heavy rail trains on the MBTA system to measure how long trains take to carry passengers from their origin station to their destination station. I connect these train departure and arrival times

to individuals' arrivals at MBTA stations using data on riders' fare card transactions, which tell me when riders arrive at their origin stations. Finally, I connect these trains and transaction data to individual-level survey responses.

Using these three sources of data from the MBTA required a multi-step matching procedure to connect individual respondents' surveys with their actual experiences of delay times. In order to give a better understanding of this process, it involved the following steps:[4]

- Match survey data on which respondents reported their farecard (called a CharlieCard) number to the MBTA's automated fare collection (AFC) database, which records transaction timestamps of when riders entered a station.

- Match CharlieCard transaction times with train arrival times at the entry station from the MBTA's web API. I then merged train arrival times and the preceding headway (amount of time between two train arrivals) to the survey response data and accompanying fare transaction data.[5]

- For this subset of people who match to both fare transaction data and train arrival data, I calculate wait time as the difference between transaction time when a passenger entered the fare gates at a station and the time when the next train came.[6] I operationalize wait time delay as the number of seconds that a passenger's wait time is greater than the expected benchmark (scheduled) wait time, based on headways (the benchmark amount of time between two trains). For passengers whose wait time was shorter than the benchmark, I set the value of their delay to 0.

- For this same subset of people who have matching transaction times and for whom I also have valid reports of the rail line they rode, the

[4]This process did mean that some survey respondents could not be matched to objective performance data, and inevitably could lead to some amount of measurement error in delays. I assessed this by comparing my metrics of delays with self-reported measures of how long riders reported waiting for the train or riding the train, however, and found that there was a strong correspondence between my objective measures and those subjective reports.

[5]While the MBTA records headways and arrival times for trains, they have not yet launched the ability to track these data on all lines of transit. So while transit riders in my panel could have ridden any of the modes or lines of service (e.g. subway, bus, commuter rail, ferry), I only have this form of objective arrival data for the customers who rode the Red, Blue, and Orange lines of subway service.

[6]Of course, people might opt to wait for the next train, or have trouble getting from the fare gates to the boarding platform in time to board the train, especially if the train arrival is immediate. This has the potential to introduce some amount of measurement error.

station at which they boarded, and station at which they exited, I calculate delays in their traveling time onboard the train. I operationalize a delay in travel time as the number of seconds in traveling time for a passenger greater than the benchmark (scheduled) travel time between the pair of stations. For passengers whose travel time was shorter than the benchmark, I set the value of their delay to 0.

- I then calculate the combined delay time for a passenger's most immediate trip as the sum of their wait time delay and their travel time delay.

For commuter rail riders, this process was slightly different, as payment for these customers occurs onboard and therefore wait times could not be calculated from objective fare transaction data. For commuter rail customers, I calculate their delay times using the following steps:

- I match survey data with self-reported date and time boarded, commuter rail line, station boarded, and station alighted to actual train departure and arrival times.

- I then calculate a person's total delay as the number of minutes that travel took that was greater than the scheduled travel time between their departure and arrival stations. This encompasses both extra waiting time at stations before actual train arrival and delays from slow travel.

Together, I use delay times from both these types of customers as my combined measure of delays for each individual's trip. These constitute my measure of performance for this important public service. There are, however, several assumptions about the nature of these performance data that I must make in order to use them to assess the causal impact of government services on people's political opinions.

Using these data means that I must assume that there is some amount of exogenous variation in the performance of transportation. More formally, service performance must be conditionally independent of potential opinions about politicians. I address this requirement with three strategies. First, I rely on the nature of the delay-generating process to assign delays as-if randomly across survey respondents.[7] This alone would be sufficient to satisfy the requirements for exogeneity, but I also bolster my identification assumption using two other strategies.

[7]This is also especially true because — as with most major metropolitan subway systems — the MBTA runs on a headway-based (set intervals between train arrivals) schedule, rather than a strict arrival-time schedule. This would make it relatively impossible for individuals to influence their own wait times for trains by targeting their arrival times, and even more impossible for them to anticipate delays in travel times, which are usually unknown even to MBTA operators and dispatchers ahead of time.

There is some possibility that people's pre-existing characteristics may determine both their opinions and the quality of performance that they receive. This does not seem to be a major concern, however: Table I.1 in the appendix to this chapter assesses the effectiveness of this identification strategy with a check on the balance on observed characteristics of respondents who experienced longer and shorter delays. Even so, to guard against this threat to my identification assumption, I include controls for respondents' observable characteristics in the analyses that follow. Finally, the assumption of exogeneity may be threatened by other, unobservable characteristics of respondents. When estimating causal quantities, I condition on transit mode as a proxy for other characteristics that may vary between users of different transit modes.

The outcome data that I use to assess people's judgments of government comes from the surveys that I link to this performance data. In partnership with the MBTA's Office of Performance Management and Innovation, I ran two original surveys of MBTA riders in 2015.[8] I plot the MBTA's rail and subway lines, along with the cities and towns in which respondents from this survey panel live (shaded), in Figure 7.1.

On these surveys, I asked questions about the respondents' perceptions of the trip, including wait time, travel time, and other features of the transportation experience. Specifically, I asked questions that gauged respondents' opinions about local public services and local government officials. To measure opinions on the subjective quality of the MBTA's services, I asked a simple question about respondents' satisfaction with the MBTA.[9] To measure local political approval – the main metric I use to assess accountability – I asked a basic question about respondents' approval of their local government.[10] This question provided my primary metric of each respondent's ability to judge government for the quality of public services. Thought it is admittedly not the same as a vote intention or reported vote question like those used in previous chapters, it is the closest I could get to the process of electoral accountability given that I was not running this survey during a local election period. I recode both of these outcome measures along a unit scale, with 0 representing the worst end of the spectrum ("extremely dissatisfied" or "strongly disapprove") and 1 representing the opposite end ("extremely satisfied" or "strongly approve").

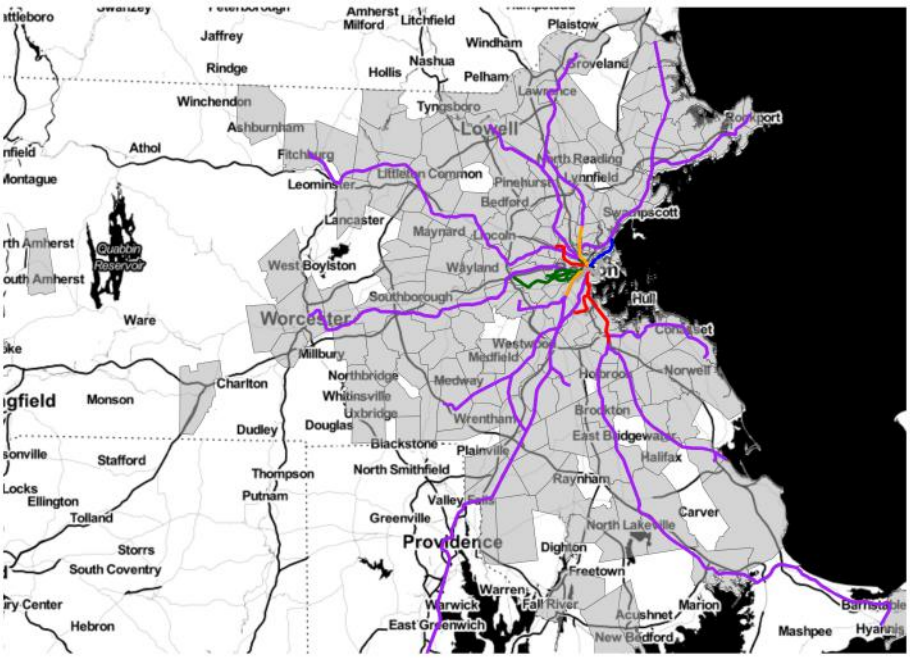
[8] I conducted the first survey of 934 riders in March 2015, and ran the experiment embedded within surveys with 1,082 respondents in July, August, and September.

[9] This question was: "How would you rate the MBTA overall?" and response options were extremely dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, somewhat satisfied, very satisfied, and extremely satisfied.

[10] This question was: "Do you approve or disapprove of the job that the mayor of [City] is doing?" and response options were strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, neither approve nor disapprove, somewhat approve, and strongly approve. I replaced [City] with the name of the city in which the respondent lived, which I gathered from an intake survey when respondents agreed to enroll in the survey panel.

Using these survey questions, I assess how performance relates to respondents' opinions to test for the presence of accountability for this important public service. I first examine whether respondents to my survey perceive differences in the quality of this important public service using the first outcome measure (satisfaction with the MBTA), and then assess political accountability. Accountability, as I define it in this context, would be the presence of a strong causal relationship between the measure of recent delays and their approval of their local governments.

Figure 7.1: MBTA Routes and Respondents' Localities



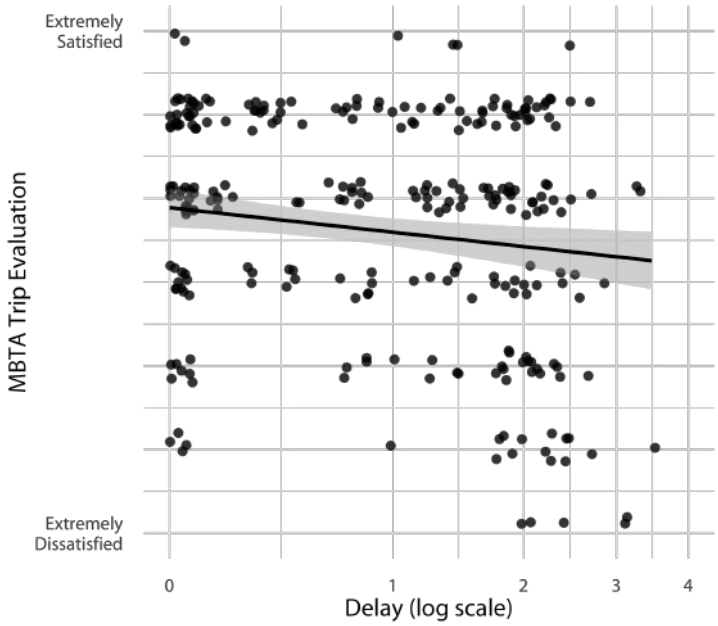
In addition to the basic survey design of my first survey wave, in the second survey I employed an embedded experiment to assess the role of attribution information in the link between performance and opinions of local government. In this survey, I used two experimental treatments to vary the cues about attribution of responsibility to test my hypothesis about the connection between performance and opinions. Both treatments presented respondents with several paragraphs of factual information that I compiled from press releases and news articles about the MBTA. The experimental treatments therefore approximated much of the rhetoric that voters might be exposed to in their daily lives surrounding public transportation. In the treatment group, I presented respondents with a stimulus that included information about the role that local governments play in funding and controlling the MBTA. In the control group, respondents read similar information, but instead of cues about the responsibility that local governments have over

the performance of the MBTA, it included information about how weather affects subway, train, and bus systems more generally. This treatment was designed to mimic the blame-shifting cues that could absolve local politicians from responsibility for negative performance. The full text of the two treatments is presented in the appendix to this chapter.

Results

I first examine the results from the initial survey wave, in March, in order to assess the impact of performance of this important public service on people's opinions. As a preliminary question, I wanted to know whether people actually perceived differences in the quality of this public service as measured by the delays they experienced on their most recent trip. To assess this, I compare respondents' satisfaction with their most recent trip on the MBTA, as reported on the survey, with the delays on their most recent trip. I plot respondents' delays on the horizontal axis of Figure 7.2, and their reported satisfaction on the vertical axis. As the trend line shows, when respondents experienced longer delays, their satisfaction with their most recent trip was lower – suggesting that they do, indeed, perceive differences in the quality of this public service and translate those perceptions into evaluative judgments of their trip.

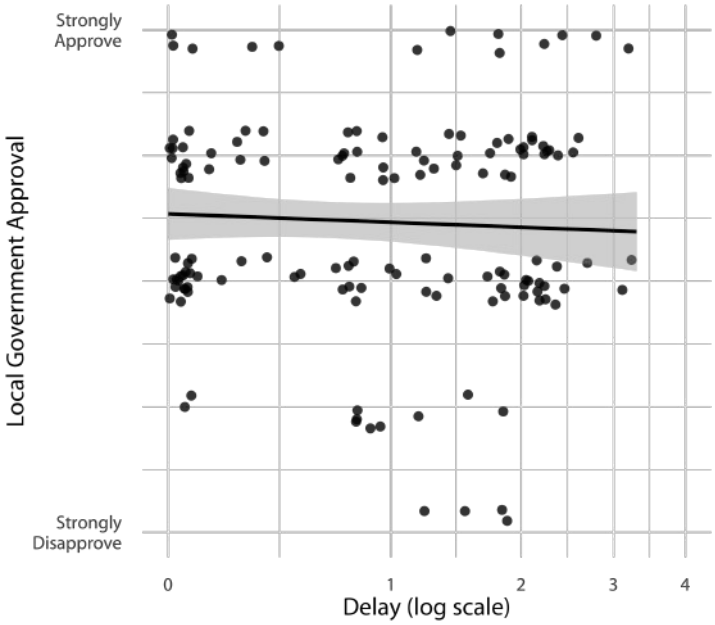
Figure 7.2: Respondents perceive differences in the service quality of transit.



However, the more pertinent question for my examination of political accountability is whether people are able to translate this service performance

into judgments about government actors. I examine this in Figure 7.3, which displays the delays from respondents' most recent transit trip along the horizontal axis and their approval of their local government along the vertical axis. The trend line displays the (lack of a) relationship between the two. When people experienced longer delays on the MBTA, they did not reflect this lower service performance in their opinions of their local governments.

Figure 7.3: No effect of transit performance on local government approval.



These results point to one of the critical problems in the process of accountability that I have discussed in the previous chapters. It is difficult for people experiencing the provision of public services to translate their experiences into judgments of (responsible) government officials. In part, this is quite natural: public services like those discussed in the previous chapters are often provided by an amalgam of different actors, including governments from the federal level to the hyper-local level as well as often private-sector contractors or non-profit agencies. Given that most people have fairly low levels of knowledge about the responsibilities of local government, it is perhaps not surprising that people have trouble reflecting the quality of public transit in their opinions of local government officials in the Boston area.

After all, the MBTA's governance involves local governments, but its top appointed official – the general manager – is appointed by the state's governor and their cabinet secretary in charge of transportation. A great deal of funding from the federal government provides operational and capital support to the MBTA. And its commuter rail services are operated by a private company – Keolis – that contracts with the MBTA. It is actually

Table 7.1: Transit performance influences satisfaction with the MBTA, but not local government approval

Dependent Variable:	Trip satisfaction		Local government approval	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
log(Delay time)	-0.046***	-0.063***	-0.005	0.004
	(0.014)	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.022)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	347	207	197	188
R^2	0.03037	0.19155	0.00038	0.07809
Adjusted R^2	0.02756	0.11883	-0.00474	-0.01410

IID standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

quite natural that people might be confused about who is responsible for the services they experience on a daily basis.

While this confusion may be logical, it makes the process of accountability more difficult. When people are confused about who is responsible for important public services, they will have trouble translating their experiences of government's performance into judgments of government. This hampers their ability to subsequently sanction poorly-performing politicians and reward better-performing ones, whether at the ballot box or elsewhere. Without such mechanisms for reward and punishment, politicians also have little incentive to perform well and provide better quality public services.

Experimental Results

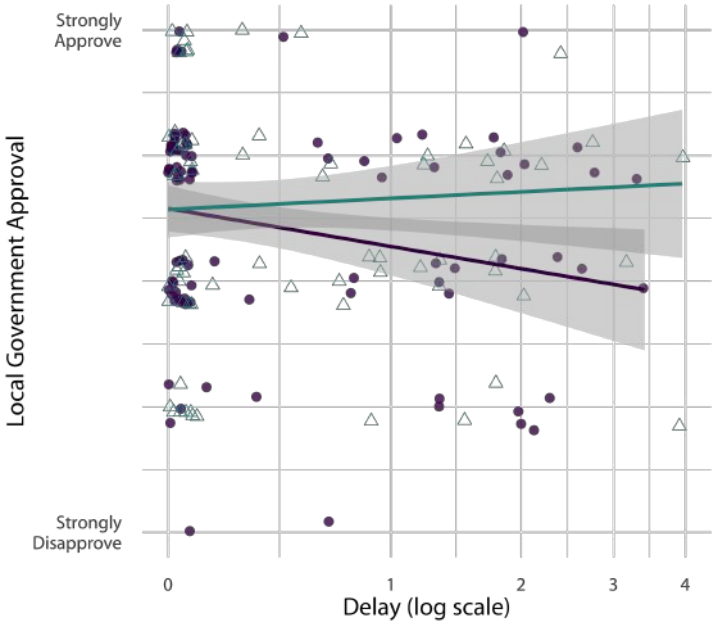
What hope, then, is there for accountability in local politics? The experiment that I implemented in the next few subsequent waves of my surveys of MBTA riders examined whether information about government responsibilities can facilitate accountability. My results provide some hope that accountability for the performance of public transit is possible.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the experimental treatments that I presented to respondents provided either information about local governments' (actual) responsibilities over the MBTA's governance and funding, or information about how weather affects public transit in general. The hope with this experiment was that, if provided with this information attributing

responsibility to local governments, people would be better able to connect their lived experiences using public transit with their judgments of local government.

In Figure 7.4 I display the results of my experiment in similar format to the results presented earlier. Along the horizontal axis I plot the delays people experienced in their most recent trip on the MBTA, and along the vertical axis their approval of their local government. The turquoise triangles and line represent those respondents in the control group, who received information about the weather, and the purple points and line represent respondents in the treatment group that received information attributing responsibility to local government.

Figure 7.4: Giving people information about local government responsibilities leads voters to connect performance with incumbent government approval.



In the control group, as in the initial survey wave's results that I discussed earlier, there was no relationship between the delays respondents experienced and their judgments of their local governments. Meanwhile, in the treatment group, those respondents who experienced longer delays – worse service performance – reported lower levels of approval of their local governments. In other words, when they were provided with information clarifying the role of local government in the provision of this public service, they were able to connect service performance with their opinions about government actors

Table 7.2 presents results from regressions of local government approval

Table 7.2: Transit performance and local government approval in experiment

Dependent Variable:	Local government approval	
Model:	(1)	(2)
Variables		
log(Delay time)	0.010	0.014
	(0.024)	(0.026)
Treatment	-0.002	0.026
	(0.035)	(0.036)
log(Delay time) × Treatment	-0.068*	-0.074**
	(0.035)	(0.038)
Controls	No	Yes
Fit statistics		
Observations	275	272
R^2	0.02302	0.12207
Adjusted R^2	0.01221	0.04832

IID standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

on survey respondents' recent delays interacted with an indicator for whether they were in the treatment group that received information attributing responsibility to local government, both without (column 1) and with (column 2) demographic controls included. The coefficient on the interaction between delays and treatment group represents the degree to which attribution information moderates the degree to which respondents held their local governments accountable for transit performance. These interaction coefficients are negative and statistically significant and corroborate the results presented visually in Figure 7.4. Respondents in the treatment group of the experiment connected their longer delays on the MBTA with worse opinions of their local government, while those respondents in the control group did not.

The substantive size of these effects bears some discussion. The average delay a respondent on my survey experienced was approximately 2.1 minutes, with a standard deviation of 6.3 minutes. The results presented in Figure 7.4 imply that a one standard deviation increase in a rider's recent delay from no delay to 6.3 minutes of delay would decrease their approval of their local government approximately 0.07 along the unit scale from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 1 (strongly approve) if they were given information helping them attribute responsibility to local government. While this is not

a sea change in support for respondents' local leaders, any marginal impact on their preferences could be important if they are otherwise undecided – or uncaring – voters.

Though the survey outcome I use here does not necessarily translate into vote choice, if I were to interpret the size of these effects into people's propensity to support an incumbent local politician in an election, it is likely that these effects could be substantial. The effect of train delays for respondents in the treatment group are large relative to the vote margins in city elections, as I discussed in Chapter 3. People living in Boston in the year prior to my data collection, of course, might remember that the performance of the T during that winter of 2015 was particularly terrible. Riders were confronted not just with delays due to infrastructure failures at multiple points during the winter, but also several system-wide shutdowns due to repeated storms with a total of more than 100 inches of snow within a five-week period.[11] These repeated delays and shutdowns could have had an accumulated effect on riders' opinions not just of the MBTA, but of their government officials as well. Such accumulated effects might lead to even more substantial electoral effects relative to typical winning margins of local elected officials. Yet without the information to connect these delays to public officials, voters would struggle to hold anyone accountable.

How Pointing Fingers in City Government Can Hinder Accountability

The correspondence between incumbent city leaders' electoral success and the improvements to visible problems that I showed in Chapter 4 suggest a picture of functioning accountability for at least some issues. Yet the story presented by the evidence in that chapter was an easy test for accountability: street paving is right outside every city voter's door, and so voters are constantly confronted by the performance of their city government in this arena. A similar story emerged with the issues of visible homelessness. This optimistic picture leaves some complications of urban governance and public services out of the story, however, as I have shown in the chapters that followed. And as the results of this chapter have demonstrated, when information received by voters points a finger at factors like the weather, it can help city leaders escape accountability. On the other hand, effective media coverage that details the roles of local government actors can help facilitate accountability.

How do city leaders respond within this environment? Elected politicians do not act alone in city government. Mayors of cities run large bureaucracies with a bevy of departments handling everything from public works, to

[11] See, e.g., https://www.wbur.org/news/2015/03/30/mbta-cold-weather-peer-review for coverage of the winter 2015 troubles at the MBTA.

economic growth, to police protection. The people within this bureaucracy who actually deliver public services – the literal street-level bureaucrats, in some cases – are not synonymous with the people whom voters elect to leadership positions. The separation between the actual delivery of services and the responsible politicians can lead to the well-studied phenomenon of principal-agent problems.

Less well-studied, however, is the impact of this bureaucratic distance on accountability. Voters might be unaware of the connection between someone like Mayor Libby Schaaf and the public works employees who actually repave their roads. As a result, voters would lack the kind of interstitial information that would help them attribute responsibility for public services like road repair to their mayor. They might believe politicians are not in control of policy outcomes like road quality but instead those outcomes are mainly in control of unelected and unknown bureaucrats. This bureaucratic distance could quite reasonably prevent them from holding their elected local government leaders accountable (Martin and Raffler 2021).

Even in the absence of voter knowledge about political control of public services, politicians' anticipation of voters' responses might lead to good public service provision (e.g. Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2014; Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, and Friedenberg 2018). This line of thinking requires, however, that politicians believe in a certain pattern of behavior from voters in the presence of unclear responsibility. Otherwise, these politicians may have little incentive to pursue good policy decisions. What degree of knowledge about political responsibility do government leaders think that voters possess?

Politicians may (or may not) realize that voters often lack the information to directly reflect on service quality when making judgments of local politicians. And these same politicians may also consciously or subconsciously realize that the status quo institutional and informational context in which they operate could protect them from some degree of accountability. This may help explain part of the persistence of confusing local government institutions across the country. It may also lead politicians to anticipate that they can get away with bad policy decisions due to unclear responsibilities.

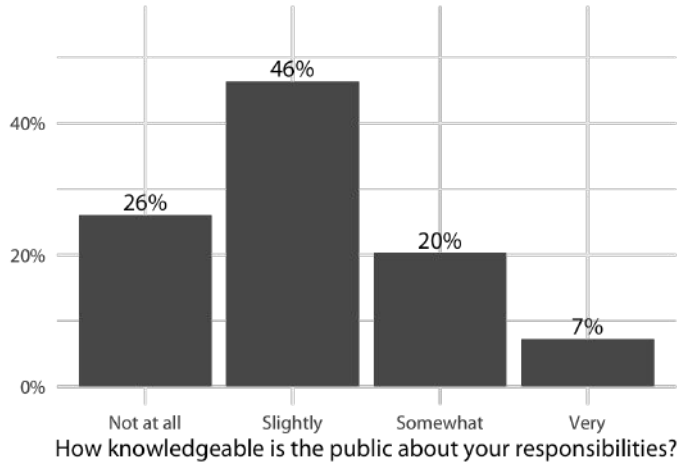
To assess these questions directly, I gathered some evidence by surveying students in an executive education class I teach at Harvard for senior executives in government.[12] On this survey, I asked respondents a number of questions about their perceptions of how members of their community viewed them and their jobs. I also asked them to evaluate the consequences of actions that a local politician similar to them might take. The responses

[12]I appreciate support on this from the incredible team in Executive Education at the Kennedy School of Government, including Taylor Woods-Gauthier, David King, Katie Blomquist, and Deb Iles.

of the 81 state and local government leaders who responded to my survey yield several conclusions relevant for the questions discussed in this book.

First, I assessed these respondents' answers when asked the question "How knowledgeable is the public about your responsibilities?" The answers to this question are shown in Figure 7.5. Though this is a basic question, it bears a great deal of relevance for the degree to which politicians expect that voters actually know how to judge their performance. A large majority of respondents reported that they think members of the public have only slight or no knowledge of their job responsibilities. Though these officials could be wrong (and the public might actually be more knowledgeable about their responsibilities), the fact that leaders in government do not *perceive* constituents to have this knowledge suggests that they might expect accountability for their actions to be limited.

Figure 7.5: State and local government leaders believe their constituents have very little knowledge about their roles.



Examining these leaders' perceptions of citizen knowledge, however, is not the same as looking at their perceptions of how accountability may operate based on their actions in office. To assess the prospect for accountability more directly, I could have just asked these government leaders whether or not they thought this lack of knowledge about job responsibilities hindered accountability. Yet this would be unlikely to yield honest answers. These leaders might have felt a sense of obligation to respond in a way that did not make them appear to be unaccountable to their constituents.

Instead, I embedded a small experiment in the survey that presented a small vignette, or story, about a mayor in city or town similar to the respondent's own community. In this experiment, I asked respondents to evaluate the electoral reward or penalty that they thought an incumbent mayor would face if they made a decision relating to street repaving after

facing pressure from constituents to repave roads in their city.[13] Crucially, I independently varied two features of this story. First, I varied the choice of the mayor to either repave the roads that residents were demanding be repaired, or not repave these roads. My government leaders might naturally expect that a mayor who made a popular decision (repaving the roads) would be rewarded, while a mayor who made an unpopular decision not to do so could be penalized in the next election.

Second, I varied the institutional context of the responsibility for road repaving. I either made it clear that the mayor was directly responsible for appointing the Public Works director and staff who made decisions about where to prioritize repairs and actually completed them, or made it less clear who was responsible for these appointments and repairs. This second condition – an unclear chain of responsibility for this important public service – mimics the confusion of responsibility around public transit, as discussed earlier in this chapter, as well as many other local public services.

Together, these manipulations amount to a 2 (repaving decision) x 2 (clarity of responsibility) factorial experimental design. The full text of the vignette shown to respondents in the clear responsibility and repaving condition was as follows:

> In a city similar to yours, citizens have organized a campaign to improve the quality of roads. The citizens accuse the city of neglecting the upkeep and repair of roads, especially in areas of the city that have more low-income residents and residents of color. These citizens demand that the city invest more money in repairing roads, especially in these neglected neighborhoods. City officials have received numerous emails and phone calls about the issue from upset constituents.
>
> The mayor, Jeffrey Forrester, believes that most voters in the city sympathize with the campaign to invest more money in road repair. However, Mayor Forrester believes that the city has more important priorities than investing a huge amount of money in road repair.
>
> In the most recent city council meeting discussing the next year's budget, a number of constituents showed up to speak in the public comment period about their experiences with the poor quality of roads in the city. In response, the councilor chairing the meeting explained to the audience several facts about roads repair in the city:
>
> - Roads in the city are repaved according to an optimized schedule driven by an engineering formula. This formula

[13] I modeled this experiment after the experimental design described in Dynes (2018). I deeply appreciate guidance from Adam Dynes in designing my similar experiment.

takes into account how busy each road is and how long ago it was last paved.

- Deciding which roads should be repaved or have improvements made to them is done by the **Transportation Planning Department** within the city, the director of which is appointed by Mayor Forrester.
- The **Public Works Department** is in charge of the budget category under which all road repair is funded, and their budget also contains many other infrastructural priorities. The Chief of Public Works is appointed by Mayor Forrester as well.
- Some roads in the city are controlled by the **State Department of Transportation**, which makes its own decisions about which major roads to repave and when they should be repaved, though it often will defer to the city on roads that are within its boundaries.

At this point in the city council meeting, a councilor made a motion to recommend that the Mayor increase the budget for the Public Works Department and Transportation Department in order to spend more money on road repair. The Mayor **followed the recommendation** and **increased funding in the budget towards road repair**, which the council then approved.

In contrast, the vignette shown to respondents in the unclear responsibility and no repaving condition was as follows:

In a city similar to yours, citizens have organized a campaign to improve the quality of roads. The citizens accuse the city of neglecting the upkeep and repair of roads, especially in areas of the city that have more low-income residents and residents of color. These citizens demand that the city invest more money in repairing roads, especially in these neglected neighborhoods. City officials have received numerous emails and phone calls about the issue from upset constituents.

The mayor, Jeffrey Forrester, believes that most voters in the city sympathize with the campaign to invest more money in road repair. However, Mayor Forrester believes that the city has more important priorities than investing a huge amount of money in road repair.

In the most recent city council meeting discussing the next year's budget, a number of constituents showed up to speak in the public comment period about their experiences with the poor

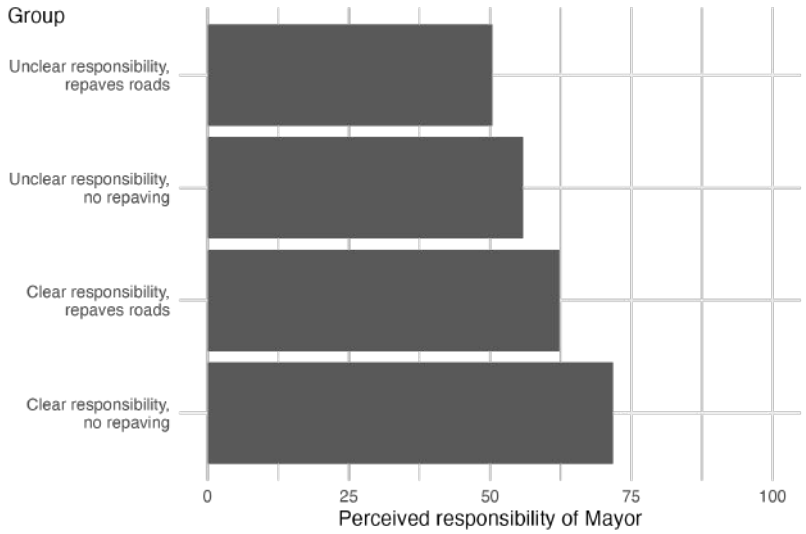
> quality of roads in the city. In response, the councilor chairing the meeting explained to the audience several facts about roads repair in the city:
>
> - Roads in the city are repaved according to an optimized schedule driven by an engineering formula. This formula takes into account how busy each road is and how long ago it was last paved.
> - Deciding which roads should be repaved or have improvements made to them is done by the **Transportation Planning Department** within the city.
> - The **Public Works Department** is in charge of the budget category under which all road repair is funded, and their budget also contains many other infrastructural priorities.
> - Some roads in the city are controlled by the **State Department of Transportation**, which makes its own decisions about which major roads to repave and when they should be repaved.
>
> At this point in the city council meeting, a councilor made a motion to recommend that the Mayor increase the budget for the Public Works Department and Transportation Department in order to spend more money on road repair. The Mayor **did not follow the recommendation** and **did not change the amount of funding in the budget for road repair**.

After respondents read this vignette, I asked them two questions. To measure the effect of the experimental manipulation on respondents' perceived responsibility of the mayor for road repair, I asked "From your perspective, how responsible is Mayor Forrester for the repair of roads in the city?" and recorded their responses along a scale from 0 (not at all responsible) to 100 (completely responsible).

In Figure 7.6 I plot respondents' answers to this question in each of the four treatment groups. In the two conditions designed to obscure mayoral responsibility for roads, respondents indeed were less likely to see the mayor as responsible for road repair. Respondents in both the unclear responsibility repaving condition (top bar in the figure) and unclear responsibility no repaving condition (second bar in the figure) perceived the mayor as less responsible than in the two conditions where I made responsibilities more clear.

To get at the crux of the question that I ask in this book about accountability, I asked another question to assess respondents' expectations about the downstream effects of these unclear responsibilities. I asked respondents what impact, if any, they thought this road repaving issue would have on

Figure 7.6: State and local government leaders expect constituents to attribute credit and blame to leaders less when the attribution of responsibilities is unclear.

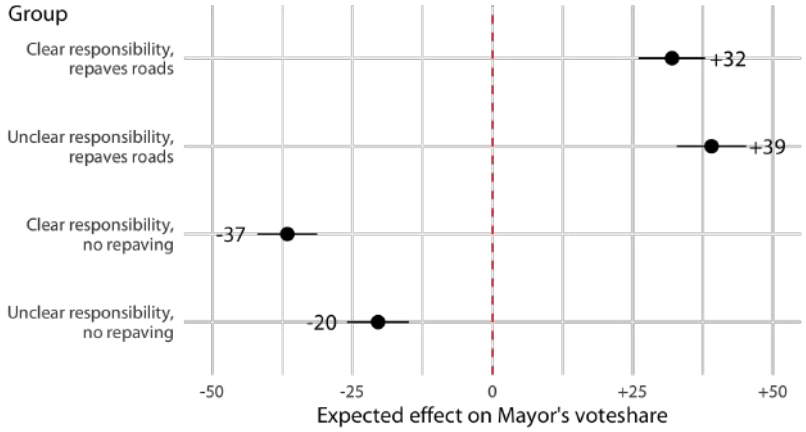


the mayor's re-election chances if he faced a challenger in the upcoming election. Respondents gave their answers along a scale from -100 (very negative impact) to +100 (very positive impact).

In Figure 7.7 I show the average responses to this question among respondents in each of the four treatment groups. As expected, respondents thought that the mayor would be electorally rewarded if he chose to increase funding for repaving the roads (the top two points in the figure). Respondents in both the clear responsibility (top point) and unclear responsibility (second point from the top) conditions expected the mayor's electoral reward would be similar: a gain of 32 in the clear responsibility condition and a gain of 39 in the unclear responsibility condition, both along the scale from -100 to 100. In contrast but also as expected, respondents thought that the mayor would be electorally penalized if he chose *not* to increase funding for repaving the roads (the bottom two points in the figure). Respondents in the clear responsibility (third point from the top) thought that he would be punished by 37, and those in the unclear responsibility condition (bottom point) thought he would be punished by 20 along the scale from -100 to 100.

Crucially, this electoral penalty differed across these two conditions even though the mayor made the same policy decision. If the mayor was described as operating in an institutional context that gave him clear responsibility over road repaving, respondents expected that the mayor would face a much steeper electoral penalty than when he was described as operating in a context with unclear responsibility over road repair. The difference of 16 in

Figure 7.7: State and local government leaders expect a harsher electoral penalty and a lower electoral reward when the attribution of responsibilities is clear.



these electoral penalties is statistically significant ($p = 0.04$).

Having responsibilities that are less clear was perceived as protecting the mayor from some of the electoral penalty he might otherwise have faced were his responsibilities clearer. Yet when the policy decision was the opposite choice – and the mayor chose to dedicate more funding to road repaving – his electoral reward was no different when his responsibilities were clear rather than unclear. In other words, respondents in my survey saw no downside to having unclear responsibilities when making popular decisions, as indicated by the lack of difference in the electoral reward for repaving. But they saw an enormous upside to having unclear responsibilities when making *unpopular* decisions, as indicated by the more lenient penalty for not repaving when responsibilities were unclear.

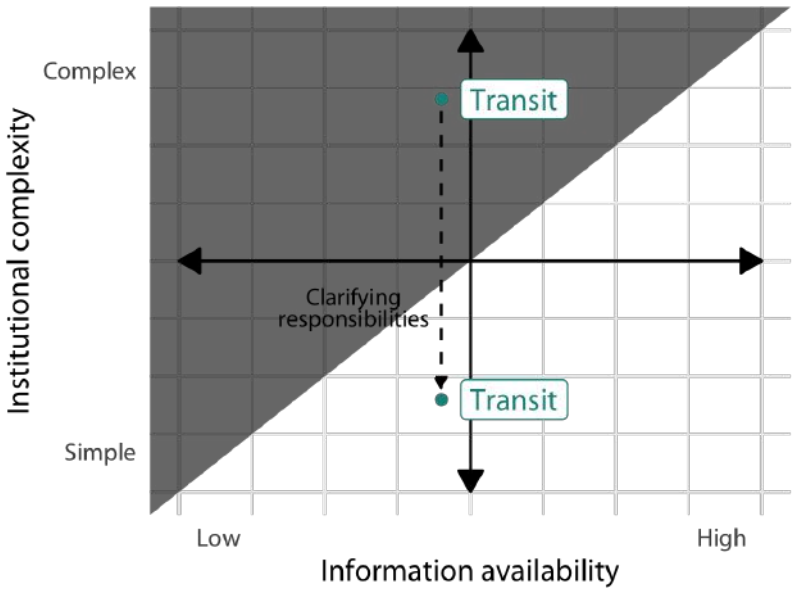
Conclusion

Though the San Francisco Supervisor Michael Yaki and Mayor Willie Brown feared after the summer of 1998 that they would lose their jobs representing the residents of their city due to MUNI's troubles, they did not. The success of these incumbents – and the many others discussed throughout this book – despite major failures to provide functioning public services do not paint city politicians as particularly accountable. As I discussed in Chapter 5, this is often because of the institutional context in which voters in cities find themselves. The overlapping authorities that provide services at the local level – city governments, school districts, regional transit authorities, water districts, and many others – create a context ripe for confusion.

The lack of clear responsibilities for public services at the local level and the ease with which the media and politicians themselves can point fingers at others – as described in this chapter – add to the more general fog in which voters find themselves when making decisions about the leaders of their cities. When people lack knowledge about who is responsible for public services, they are unable to connect experiences – despite their obvious salience in their daily lives – with specific politicians whom they might hold accountable at the ballot box. When they experience train delays, as described in this chapter, or their schools are not improving, as described in Chapter 5, or when local crime or the local economy is doing well, as described in Chapters 6, they may see these experiences as incredibly important (and troublesome). But without simplified institutions or the critical information attributing responsibility to specific political actors, voters can naturally struggle to hold their local governments accountable.

The evidence presented in this chapter affirms the evidence from previous chapters: confusion around the attribution of responsibility presents a clear barrier to accountability in local politics. When institutional authority for public services like transit is complex, as depicted in Figure 7.8, the fog of accountability can prevent voters from holding their local governments accountable for performance.

Figure 7.8: The fog of accountability for public transit



This chapter's results, however, also lead to one hopeful prospect for accountability. Politicians and others can present information to voters that help them overcome the obstacle of complex institutions. Without such

information, voters can struggle to connect performance with responsible government actors. When politicians expect that this unclear responsibility is likely to yield minimal electoral penalty, there is little reason to expect future improvements in local public services. Yet when information is provided to voters to help clarify responsibilities, as shown in Figure 7.8, it can facilitate accountability. While the actual complexity of the institutions has not changed, voters' *perceptions* of responsibility can be simplified.

The data used in this chapter from the MBTA point to a pessimistic conclusion for places like Boston. When the institutional configuration of a public service overlaps with city boundaries – much as the MBTA encompasses a region covering Boston and 175 other cities and towns, or as school districts across the country overlap with multiple cities as I showed in Chapter 5 – voters are unlikely to inherently know who to demand better public services from. As a result, performance of these public services can suffer.

The MBTA is an instructive example: year after year, the MBTA seems to experience enormous safety failures and poor performance. From trains catching on fire, to shutdowns of entire rapid subway lines for repair, to just generally unreliable service, the MBTA does not show much sign of improvement over the last few decades. This is despite a strong local media presence in the Boston area and a highly educated and informed public. The institutional governance structure for the MBTA – with significant state authority – quite reasonably confuses voters. And there is little hope for better service without a match between political officials whom voters can reward and punish for their policy choices.

When local politicians vie for increased local control over the MBTA – just as Mayor Michelle Wu of Boston recently called for increased local oversight of the MBTA via a seat on its board – they face an uphill battle to reform the governing structure. This is true even if they succeed at tweaks around the margin, like Boston's newly-gained seat on the MBTA Advisory Board.[14] But more generally, they are unlikely to succeed in the broader goal of making responsibilities clear for this public service. And that's only one issue amongst many potentially complex policy issues about which voters are reasonably confused. Politicians who benefit from the status quo confusion about responsibilities are unlikely to support reform that makes responsibilities for a difficult and expensive public service clear for voters. After all, if responsibilities were clear, voters might then hold politicians accountable for the poor performance of public services.

Of course, there are few local politicians who I would argue are purposefully trying to confuse voters. When it comes to the public services that local governments provide, there are rarely clear villains and heroes. Even when voters have information about how local governments are (or are not)

[14] https://www.wbur.org/news/2023/10/13/boston-mbta-board-mary-skelton-roberts-goals

responsible for public services, there is still some degree of ambiguity in who actually bears the responsibility for everything – from police protection to road repair. Rather than thinking of local politics as a clear flowchart where specific politicians provide services to constituents, I find that a more helpful analog to the decision context in which local voters find themselves is the board game "Clue" (and the subsequent film based on the game).

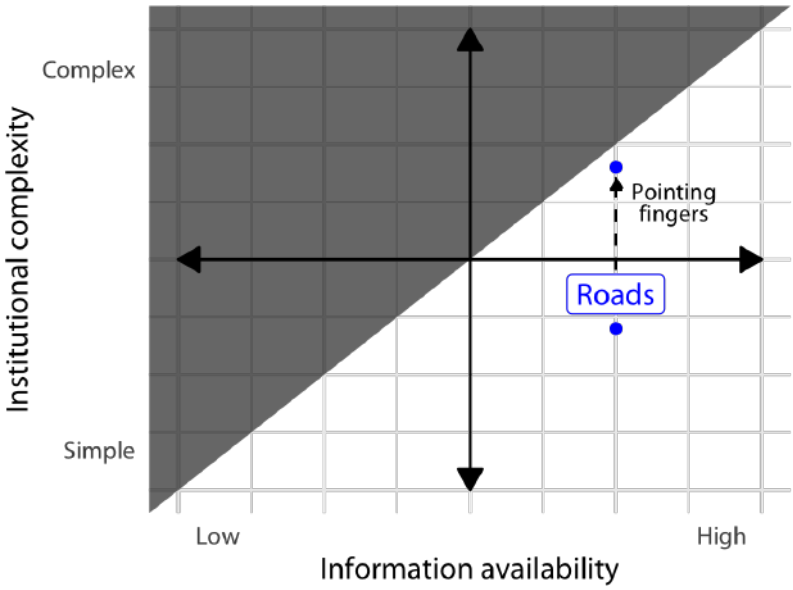
In the game "Clue," players are tasked with solving a murder mystery. There are a number of potential culprits, potential weapons, and potential locations for where this murder could have occurred. At any given time, voters may have some intuition or signal from their surroundings that leads them to conclude that they know who should be punished for poor performance. But this signal can easily be washed away by new events or new information. And the other participants in the game are unlikely to be willing to accept blame for a crime, regardless of whether they are in fact violent murderers. Similarly, no politician wants to accept punishment for something about which they believe themselves to be blameless. Pointing fingers at other actors both within and outside of government thus is a natural outcome. The collective impact of multiple actors engaging in this finger-pointing, however, is that voters are apt to be confused and easily swayed in their views about responsibility. This leaves them ultimately unable to hold government accountable.

The results from my experiment on government leaders complicate the evidence presented earlier in this chapter and show the ease with which finger-pointing can help politicians escape accountability. When responsibilities for public services like street repaving are unclear due to complex authority over them, local politicians can avoid – or at least *believe* that they will be able to avoid – accountability for the performance of these services. Yet when institutions make responsibilities clear, there is greater prospect for accountability. Figure 7.9 shows how this operates within my conceptual framework. Politicians can describe authority over roads in a less simple manner – and point fingers at other actors within or outside city hall. Whether institutional responsibilities are made more complex (in reality) or simply described in less clear terms through obfuscation, even a policy issue as simple as roads can be moved into the fog of accountability.

How can we reform such a system that easily allows such finger-pointing to be successful? The results from Chapter 5 indicate that reforming institutions to better match the scope of authority for public services with the city offices for which they vote can be one path to improvements in accountability. But changing institutions is difficult: it takes time and may face political opposition from incumbent politicians (e.g. Erie, Kirlin, and Rabinovitz 2016; Schleicher 2016).

The results from this chapter add one more potential improvement that can circumvent the costly process of changing institutions: information provision. Politicians may accomplish this through well-done communication.

Figure 7.9: The fog of accountability for roads



But they may not always have an incentive to do so, as the survey experiment I conducted on government leaders in my executive education course and presented in this chapter demonstrated. This means that an optimistic reformer would be naive to depend on politicians alone for this type of clarifying communication. A well-resourced local news media may not be a panacea for all problems of accountability in cities. But it can certainly provide the kind of information to voters that helps clarify responsibilities around public services. As I have shown in this chapter, this kind of information intervention can be a nimble reform: fast, cheap, and effective.

8

Closest to the People?

Why are public services in U.S. cities so often something for residents of those cities to complain about, rather than take pride in? The story that I shared in Chapter 4 of the Pothole Vigilantes in Oakland, CA, is one example of the extreme dissatisfaction that residents of many cities have for their public services. In that instance, residents were so angry with the quality of their roads that they took action into their own hands by filling potholes with asphalt patches in the dead of night. This kind of costly guerrilla action is uncommon. Much more common is that residents might simply bemoan their city's transit system online to their friends.[1] The political process might be one productive way that such dissatisfied residents could improve their cities' public services. Instead, so often the political process in U.S. cities fails to lead to better outcomes.

I began this book with the stories of two mayors – Jim Suttle of Omaha, NE and Jim Strickland of Memphis, TN – and their bids for re-election. Voters in these two major cities made choices that removed Suttle and kept Strickland in their respective offices in city hall. This was despite the fact that in the four years before their races Omaha had been thriving, and Memphis had lagged behind the rest of the state and country. The electoral process failed to reward and sanction politicians in both of these instances in accordance with major indicators of their performance in office. Why do these types of stories occur?

City and town governments occupy places of honor in the popular understanding of politics as the governments closest to the people in the U.S (Ogorzalek 2024). In line with this, former Seattle Mayor, Mike McGinn, was quoted in the *Seattle Met* in 2021 saying, "[being mayor is] an extremely hard job because no one is closer to the public, no elected official's closer to the public than a mayor in terms of expectations of doing things. Legis-

[1]For example, in Boston, MA, dissatisfied riders of the MBTA at one point registered a website with the title "How F*cked Is the T" and an eponymous URL (http://howfuckedisthet.com/).

lators can always point to the other party or somebody else who didn't do their job. And governors and presidents are far more distant. And when you look at what city government oversees, it's your garbage collection; it's your water. It's your parks and libraries. It's your potholes. It's police and fire, human services; these are all things that are really direct. So there's a level of accountability that mayors have that other elected officials don't have."[2] Clearly, even city leaders see themselves as more accountable to their residents than state or national politicians.

The evidence that I have presented in this book points to a very opposite empirical conclusion. Despite the proximity and importance of city public services and local government policy to the average person's daily life, voters in cities have little success in demanding better from their cities via the electoral process. My argument throughout the preceding chapters has been that two factors of urban politics deserve a great deal of our blame for this conclusion. The complex institutions that have created overlapping authority over public services often confuse voters with an overload of information that is both signal and noise when it comes time to judge city leaders. The lack of reliably available and accurate information about performance – and local governments' role in that performance – leave voters stranded without guidance in this context. Formal and informal institutions thus create a fog that clouds voters' ability to hold their leaders accountable.

This fog of accountability appears in many different policy areas that I have discussed throughout this book. Using new macro-level and micro-level sources of data on urban politics, I have highlighted how both institutional complexity and information deficits hinder accountability. My broad data on election returns for mayors, city councilors, and school board members over the last three decades together encompass information about over 40,000 unique candidates across medium and large cities in the U.S. Throughout the empirical chapters, I combined these elections data – both at the city level and at the sub-city level – with data on road repair, homelessness, economic performance, crime rates, and school performance to assess whether local politicians are held accountable for these important indicators of performance in cities.

To interrogate the micro-level foundations of these macro-level analyses, I harnessed data from post-election surveys conducted in more than fifty cities with competitive local elections in the last four years. These data allowed me to show *which* voters encounter difficulty in holding their leaders accountable. And using real-world individual-level data from residents' experiences riding public transportation in Boston, MA, combined with an experiment, I showed how one potential information intervention can ameliorate part of the fog of accountability. Yet information can also

[2] https://www.seattlemet.com/news-and-city-life/2021/02/is-seattle-mayor-a-bad-job.

hinder accountability when strategic politicians take advantage of complex institutions to point fingers elsewhere, as I showed in an experiment on government leaders. Together, this evidence paints a broad picture of how the fog of accountability clouds local politics in the U.S.

I began this book in Chapter 2, where I used micro-level data from my post-election surveys to explore individual voters' ability to hold local government accountable. These surveys demonstrated a strong correspondence between evaluations of performance in several areas – policing, education, roads, and the economy – and approval of incumbent officeholders. Previously ignored survey data stretching back to the 1980s that have asked about local government and public services corroborated this finding.

Yet this rosy picture of performance-based public opinion does not translate into vote choices in city elections. Voters tend to vote for their local incumbents with no regard to their ratings of performance in these same domains – despite variable approval. However, when I look at higher-knowledge survey respondents (those who know more about who does what in politics more broadly), it appears these voters *do* translate their performance evaluations into their vote choices. These higher-knowledge voters may be able to overcome the barriers to accountability posed by both complex institutions and informational deficits. I showed one reason that this may be true: when asked, high-knowledge respondents are much more likely to know the (true) responsibilities of their local governments rather than misattribute non-local public services to their local government, or report that they don't know what their local government does. Knowledge – and specifically, knowledge connecting local government to its true responsibilities – appears crucial for translating perceptions of public services in people's lives into vote choices.

In Chapter 3, I broadened my examination of accountability to voters in the aggregate and evaluated the setting in which they make these voting choices. Looking at elections for city and school board races across the country, I showed that large numbers of local elections are, even when contested, often won by incumbents. This chapter's evidence highlighted a clear advantage to incumbents across different local offices that is substantial in size and has persisted in its strength over the last few decades. Not only do incumbents scare off qualified challengers, they do better in their subsequent races relative to other qualified candidates. These patterns suggest a barrier to accountability from a lack of viable alternatives in local elections. This limits the prospects for effective electoral sanctioning of poorly-performing politicians.

In the three chapters that followed, I continued with my investigation of accountability to see whether voters – even with this lack of individual-level knowledge and the barriers presented by a lack of electoral alternatives – are able to hold local government accountable for performance. These chapters present a picture of accountability that varies across policy areas and across cities, and depends on both the complexity of institutions and the avail-

ability of information about performance and government responsibilities to voters.

Chapter 4 begins with the best-case scenario in which we might expect performance accountability. I investigated how two highly visible and locally-controlled issues – road pavement quality and homelessness – affected voters' choices in Oakland, CA and across a number of cities. I showed that voters punished Oakland's mayor in places where roads deteriorated, and rewarded the mayor in places where the roads improved. Similarly, voters rewarded and punished the mayor for decreases and increases in visible homelessness. This suggests that accountability may be possible in these "easy cases" for voters, when information signals about performance are salient and easily available to voters in their daily lives, and where responsibility for the public service is relatively simple.

In Chapter 5, I showed that the complex institutional arrangements governing local public services can confuse voters and hinder accountability. Using education performance data, I showed that jurisdictional overlap between cities and school districts leads to variation in accountability for school performance. When public education is provided by a more complex combination of cities and school districts, voters are understandably confused about which officials to hold accountable – and do not reward any of their leaders for improvements in test scores or punish them for worsening scores. The institutional designs that led to specialization of services under single-sector governments like school districts have made responsibility for schools – and other public services – quite complex. These design choices have therefore contributed to the fog of accountability in cities. Similar results from the provision of public safety services via law enforcement agencies corroborate this story. When there are more agencies addressing crime in a city, voters are less capable of determining their city leaders' responsibility and therefore holding those leaders accountable for crime.

In Chapter 6, I turned to the role of the media in facilitating accountability for issues shrouded in the fog of accountability, where institutions are complex and there is a deficit of accurate information available to voters. Using both crime and economic conditions, I showed that media coverage of local politics can be crucial to equip voters with the information crucial for holding their city leaders accountable. Voters' support of incumbent mayors and city councilors appears not to hinge on rising or falling local crime rates overall. But the media's focus on specific actors like mayors and city councilors can lead to accountability for some politicians. Across the country, in cities where the local media cover city-level politicians more, voters punish and reward urban leaders for crime rates. But in places where local media do not cover those actors, there is little accountability for crime. Despite longstanding theories of retrospective voting for the economy, or "economic voting," which argue that this is a simple metric of performance by which voters can evaluate their leaders, I similarly showed that economic conditions

influence incumbent city leaders' electoral fortunes only when newspapers cover actors within city hall more. Thus the fog of accountability can hinder accountability due to information deficits. The media can help simplify complex policy areas like crime and the economy for voters by covering local politics more frequently, thus reducing the fog of accountability.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I used experimental data from one important service, public transportation, to investigate whether voters' knowledge can be improved to facilitate accountability. Helping voters by giving them information attributing responsibility to local politicians enabled them to connect their real-world experiences on their daily commutes to their judgments of their local government. While institutional responsibilities may be hard to simplify via broad changes to jurisdictions like those I examined in Chapter 5, this chapter showed that information provision to voters can be one simple shorter-term solution. Yet I also show the reverse of this using an experiment on government leaders. When there are complex institutions that govern even simple policy areas like roads, strategic politicians can easily take advantage of this to avoid accountability.

The bevy of data throughout the book paints a picture contrary to many of the popular conceptions of local governments as those "closest to the people." Anecdotal stories of accountability in local politics aside, there is little evidence that voters more broadly punish city politicians for performance in many of the complex areas where they make policy and provide public services. Institutional complexity and information deficits contribute to a fog of accountability in urban politics. Public services – and the voters that use them in American cities – suffer as a result.

As with many academic books, I've pointed out a number of problems for democracy and the functioning of elections in this book. But just as many other scholars before me have done, I've saved some of my optimism for this final chapter. I now turn to the potential prospects for improvement to accountability in cities.

Prospects for Improvement

In his Presidential address to the American Political Science Association in 1967, Robert Dahl referred to our cities as "one of the most obvious incapacities of Americans," yet their improvement "a task worthy of our best efforts because of its urgency, its importance, its challenge, the extent of our failure up to now, and its promise for the good life lived jointly with fellow citizens" (Dahl 1967, 964). I agree with Dahl's call to action: cities in the U.S. – and the public services most vital to Americans' lives – deserve improvement.

Improvement demands a great deal of work, however. The institutions of local government have made for elections that are far from ideal mecha-

nisms for accountability in cities. Many of these institutions were designed to protect local government from what reformers at the turn of the twentieth century saw as widespread corruption and the politicization of a level of government that should be primarily managerial in nature. While these reforms may have at least partially rid US cities of political machines that were instruments of corruption, they also served to create a fog of accountability around city government. Local elections are characterized by little true competition against incumbents, lack information environments that could enable voters to make decisions based on government performance, and have confusing jurisdictional overlaps that exacerbate the issue. Because of this fog, voters are prevented in many contexts from holding their city governments accountable. The public services that these governments provide are far worse due to this.

Former Seattle Mayor McGinn's statement that I discussed earlier in this chapter – as well as the words of many others mayors and politicians at other levels of government that I have presented throughout this book – argued for one view of accountability in cities: local politicians are "closest to the people" relative to other levels of government and the services that they oversee are more directly relevant for city residents' daily lives, which keeps local government accountable to the people. Yet the evidence I have presented in this book has shown that, despite the fact that local governments may be physically closest to the people, this physical proximity doesn't necessarily lead to effective accountability.

The public services that local governments oversee *are* crucial for people's daily lives, and the failures of these public services are disastrous. Institutional barriers to accountability at the city level hinder voters from accurately and effectively judging local politicians for performance. These institutions and the behavioral dynamics that they engender present a roadblock for electoral accountability in cities. But there are many hopeful avenues by which we might change the fogginess of the local electoral environment to improve accountability. This requires changes to the politics of local elections via both changes to the institutions that provide local public services and to the way that information is provided to voters.

Institutional reforms

The first subset of these potential reforms involves changing the institutions that play a role in both elections and service delivery in cities. Though these reforms may seem enormous in their scale – and potentially infeasible as a result – they still deserve at least some mention because of their potential for long-lasting effects. After all, the barriers to effective accountability that I discuss in this book have been primarily framed as problems. But a reframing of this perspective could present the *absence* of these barriers as a significant opportunity for structural reforms with enduring positive

consequences.

Making local elections more competitive

Legal scholar David Schleicher argues that "the best way to fight the problem of urban political corruption is with more rather than less politics" (Schleicher 2010, 293). To reduce the problems of cities being governed by corrupt officials, he argues, we should insert more competition, which can lead to more effective challenges to ineffective incumbent leaders. He poses the specific reform of more partisan involvement in local politics to accomplish this.

Schleicher's assertion is that more competition would reduce corruption, but I think this argument also applies to less extreme versions of a deficit of accountability, such as those that I have described in this book. By making local elections partisan, voters might be more easily able to distinguish between candidates (Elmendorf and Schleicher 2013). But even without the voter information cues of partisanship, partisan elections could, by construction, involve party organizations in candidate recruitment, which they frequently already do (Broockman et al. 2021; Seligman 1961). This may be especially true for women candidates (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Crowder-Meyer 2013). Party organizations might provide challenges to long-term incumbent mayors or city councilors as a result of more partisan involvement in local elections (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001, though see Sparks 2020). This would ameliorate one large problem of local accountability: the lack of truly effective competition.

A minor alternation to this potential reform could involve not political parties but instead other organizations that encourage political competition. The rise of groups like Emerge America, Ignite National, Run For Something, EMILY's List, and other candidate recruitment, training, and fundraising organizations has been especially helpful in encouraging women and racial minority candidates to run for office (Bernhard, Shames, and Teele 2021; Fox and Lawless 2010; Kreitzer and Osborn 2019; Lee 2024). Some of these organizations already focus explicitly on running candidates for subnational offices. This kind of work encouraging candidate entry into elections – *especially* against incumbents – can help break down the barrier to electoral accountability posed by a lack of alternatives.

Institutional consolidation to the city level

A simple fix to the institutional complexity dimension of the fog of accountability involves simplifying institutions. As I and others have pointed out, the abundance of local governments – and the many choices that voters must make for local government offices as a result – present voters with a never-ending number of electoral choices on seemingly random days through-

out the year. These many oddly-timed elections depress political participation and may hinder representation and accountability as a result (e.g. Anzia 2014; Berry and Gersen 2010, 2011; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2023; Dynes, Hartney, and Hayes 2021; Hajnal and Lewis 2003; Hartney and Hayes 2021; Marschall and Lappie 2018, 2024; Payson 2017).

Simplifying these institutions could just involve consolidating these governments into fewer overlapping governments. This could mean making public services like schools directly controlled by mayors or their appointees, as some cities already do (Lay and Tyburski 2017). My results from Chapter 5 indicate that this will lead to mayoral accountability for education. We could imagine more authority under the control of city governments for other public services currently provided by other forms of special districts, or by collaborations between multiple levels of government. This could lead to more clear lines of accountability for these public services to city government.

One instructive example for such consolidation working well comes from a city outside the US: London's public transportation system. After decades of outsourcing public transit service provision by the United Kingdom government to private contractors, in 2000 the national government restructured the London-area system, previously called London Transport. In tandem with the establishment of a new directly-elected mayoral position in Greater London, the public system became Transport for London, or TfL. The new TfL was governed by the mayor and their appointees (for a review, see Lotshaw et al. 2017). This devolved authority – from a national parliament to a local elected authority whose jurisdiction and constituents coincide with the service area of TfL – allows voters to make judgments of a local politician who actually bears responsibility for the quality of service on TfL. In contract to the previous system, in which voters would have to trace a complex line of responsibility from private contractors delivering service all the way up to their representatives in a national government that spans the whole country, this institutional devolution to the local city level is much simpler. Institutional reform – moving service authority to the city level – thus holds some promise as a mechanism to improve accountability.

But my results from that chapter also point to a slightly simpler solution that can preserve the more general-purpose authority of mayors and city councilors along with the single-purpose authority of school board members. My results showed that just establishing boundaries that are coterminous between school districts and cities can lead to better accountability for school board members, too.

As suggested by the results of Chapter 5, reform need not necessarily be drastic electoral consolidation (fewer specialized elected officials), but just a simplification of the electoral environment for voters. By making one jurisdiction for which voters already make some electoral choices – their city government – the same jurisdiction for which they make other choices

– for officials overseeing schools, but also potentially for those overseeing water treatment, or fire protection – the institutional complexity of local government can be made simpler for voters. My results suggest that this may facilitate accountability.

Institutional expansion to regions

In the opposite direction, it may also be helpful to unify governments to the regional or metropolitan level. By no means do I intend this as a glib academic attempt to satisfy advocates on both sides of debates over municipal consolidation. Improvements to accountability could, I believe, be accomplished by changing the scale at which public services are provided and voters make decisions in either direction. Moving the authority for some public services to the city level might be attractive to some reformers. But it might also be impossible for some responsibilities which involve larger physical infrastructure systems that already span beyond the geography of a city. In those cases, it may be helpful to expand the scale of elected government bodies to match the scope of public services. This can make electoral choices for the voters who use those public services less complex: the scale of services matches the scale at which they are voting.

An example of such institutional scale mismatch that will be especially familiar to readers of Chapter 7 is the public transit systems in many US cities. In Boston, the MBTA spans 175 cities and towns in a service area across eastern Massachusetts and into part of Rhode Island. And while its governance structure involves people appointed by both the elected leaders of the local governments in its service area and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' governor, there is no elected body whose jurisdiction matches the scale of the public transit services provided by the agency.

In Boston and elsewhere, the institutional complexity caused by the mismatch between jurisdictions for which voters make choices and the jurisdiction of public services can frustrate accountability. Fixing this could involve systemic reforms with gradations of magnitude. To continue with Boston's public transit problems as an example, one very drastic reform could involve the dissolution of the small local governments within the MBTA's service area into one regional metropolitan government.

There are already agencies in major metropolitan regions designed to plan for the transportation needs of regions (see, e.g. Gerber and Gibson 2009; Gerber, Henry, and Lubell 2013). For instance, in the Boston region we have a Metropolitan Area Planning Council, which conducts research to inform policy on transportation and housing needs for the area, among other things. Yet the planning capacity of this agency is not matched with any policy-making power to actually make these plans happen. Nor do the region's residents have any ability to influence the agency via formal mechanisms of representation.

Consolidating local governments into these types of planning agencies and giving them the authority over the public services for which they actually plan would involve a herculean consolidation of responsibilities. But allowing for the leaders of the metropolitan government that this consolidation produces to be elected by regional interests could serve the population of the area more holistically than the local appointees to these planning bodies currently do, as Gerber and Gibson (2009) show. This would be another way to reduce the institutional complexity of local government and give voters a better chance at accountability.

Behavioral reforms

The potential reforms discussed up to this point involve institutionally-focused changes. But another option to improve accountability in local politics could involve more of a focus on *voters*. Specifically, reforms could address the informational deficits confronting city voters.

Expansion of local political media coverage

The first of these reforms comes directly from the findings in Chapter 6: expanding news media coverage of local politics. If news coverage of local government performance, local politicians, and the role of local governments in addressing problems in cities like crime, education, and the economy were to increase, the findings of this book indicate that accountability might improve.

Of course, a problem with relying on the news media to aid accountability is that the industry is currently moving in the opposite direction. Many print and broadcast news outlets are losing revenue and decreasing rather than increasing their coverage of local politics (e.g. Peterson 2021*b*). Consolidation of news outlets under national conglomerates like Sinclair has led to increasing revenue but less local coverage (e.g. Dunaway and Peterson 2023; Dyer, Lang, and Oh 2024; Levendusky 2022; Martin and McCrain 2019; Mastrorocco and Ornaghi 2024). Some bright spots have emerged for the coverage of local politics, however. Martin et al. (2024) show that these trends may not be universal across news conglomerates: in fact, as one corporation (Nexstar Media Group) has taken over broadcast television stations, they have *increased* local coverage while also increasing news ratings and revenue. This demonstrates some promise even in an era of market trends that are forcing news outlets to examine their choices of what to cover.

Unfortunately, the expansion of local news coverage of local politics is unlikely to reach some of the most crucial audiences if it is to improve accountability. Many of the voters whose opinions are most likely to be persuaded by the news media do not opt into consuming such media (e.g.

de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018; Stroud 2011; Wittenberg et al. 2023). Some of the least educated and least informed members of the public are less trusting of the news media (e.g. Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020; Toff, Palmer, and Nielsen 2023). And demand for high-quality news media, especially about local politics and information relevant to local elections, is likely quite limited (Hopkins and Gorton 2024; McCrain and Peterson 2024; Trexler 2024).

How then might increased media coverage of local politics improve local accountability? As the results of my experiment on state and local government officials in Chapter 7 showed, one barrier to accountability in local politics may be the lower anticipation of electoral punishment for poor decisions by politicians themselves. Similarly, Mullin and Hansen (2023) show that informing politicians that local news will cover infrastructure failures can lead politicians to make better infrastructure investment decisions. So news media may have an effect on accountability even if there is low uptake of that media by voters but merely increased awareness of the presence of coverage by those in power.

Nonpartisan voter guides can help make decisions easier

A promising option in this area comes from the use of non-partisan voter guides. In cities and states across the country, civic organizations and local partisan groups often collect and share information with voters to help them make choices in elections. Much of this information is focused on the distinctions between candidates on policy positions and those candidates' background characteristics. As Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie (2015*b*) show, these types of guides can help voters choose candidates whose policy positions are closer to their own policy preferences. Even when the voting context of local elections is more complex than an ordinary two-candidate comparison, such guides can be helpful for policy representation beyond the effects of party-based cues (Boudreau, Colner, and MacKenzie 2021; Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2019).

A potential variation on these voter guides is directly relevant to the informational deficits in local elections that I have identified in the preceding chapters. If the information provided in these guides contained information on government performance – for instance, unemployment or school test scores – or information that reduced the complexity of institutional responsibilities for that performance, these guides might also improve accountability. And given that voters – even uninformed ones – are likely to choose to consume such information guides (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2023), their power could be substantial.

However, providing information on government performance alone may not be enough – especially for unsophisticated voters. Alt, Lassen, and Marshall (2016) show that providing information on unemployment to Dan-

ish voters improved accountability for the performance of the economy. Yet they find that less informed members of the public do not vote based on this information about economic performance – despite learning about true rates of unemployment and changing their projections of what unemployment is likely to be in the future.

The results from Chapter 2 suggest a reason why this may be true, and one way to improve the effects of such information for accountability. Specifically, the results in that chapter indicated that a crucial feature of those people who lack political knowledge is that they are less likely to know what types of services and policies local governments are responsible for. Rectifying this information deficit – along with an information deficit about government performance. The information on performance – much like that provided in the experimental manipulation done by Alt, Lassen, and Marshall (2016) – may need to be paired with information that connects that performance with specific government officials. With this type of *connective* information, unsophisticated voters may be more likely to vote based on performance.

Local governments can inform their citizens

Of course, the entity most equipped to provide this information to help unsophisticated voters could be local governments themselves. One easy way to do so would be to provide voter guides much like some states and localities do for their ballot initiatives. Such guides, much like endorsements from interest groups, can help voters make more competent decisions in line with their policy preferences (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015*a*; Lupia 1994*b*). And this is especially true when these cues come from credible sources (Lupia 1992). Local governments could themselves provide this information to harness their own credibility to help inform voters. Given the powerful role that politicians play in shaping voters' opinions (Lenz 2013), leaders might also be able to effectively communicate this information to voters.

One more complex way that local governments might inform their citizens is via the regular processes by which they conduct the business of government: public hearings. Public hearings may be conducted for a variety of reasons (Fung 2006*b*), yet the challenge of getting meaningful participation and engagement can leave many governments viewed as less legitimate even if they use such participatory practices (Fung 2015). Many governments already seek to collect public input *from citizens* to guide policy in public meetings, but could instead harness these existing meeting processes to communicate *to citizens* the actions and policy decisions of government. This might serve to help illuminate the role of specific government actors – both within and outside city hall – in providing or improving public services. Such information could help attendees better understand the roles

and authority of local government actors. In turn, this might enable them to make better decisions in elections.

When elections fail to produce accountability, inequality can only deepen

The question I examined in this book – whether voters can hold their local governments accountable – is of course a broader one than the empirics that I have used in this book. I have focused in particular on *electoral* accountability. But this leaves out an entire realm of political action other than voting by which citizens might demand more from their government. Citizens might use public meetings with government officials to hold those elected leaders accountable. The promise of such meetings is that they provide regular opportunity to hold government officials accountable in between less frequent elections (e.g. Adams 2004; Roberts 2002). These more deliberative processes may also be better for representative democracy when people do not have well-informed preferences, or when elected representatives do not know what their constituents want (Fung 2006*a*).

Such public participatory processes in local government stand in stark contrast to the history of urban renewal. Mid-1950s policies in American cities involved the destruction of neighborhoods – especially lower income and working class communities of color – in the service of constructing highways, new housing developments, and business centers, all under the assumption that the areas in which such infrastructure was built were blighted. And most of this was done with little public participation in decision-making (Dunning 2022). Robust public participatory processes, especially in local government, have emerged as a result of this history (see, e.g. Rae 2003). The top-down elite-driven model of decision-making in the urban renewal period in American history did not provide much opportunity for representation of people's policy views nor opportunity to hold government accountable for its decisions.

One might reasonably conclude from the findings of this book that there are too many barriers to electoral accountability to expect it to function in city governments effectively without broad reforms. Instead, a critical reader might argue, we should simply look to the existing extra-electoral processes of citizen voice that allow city residents to demand accountability from their city governments.

While these venues do provide opportunity for citizen voice, the existing inequalities in who participates in local participatory processes – for instance, meetings that disproportionately empower homeowners, as well as the wealthier, older, and whiter residents of cities (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2019; Einstein, Glick, Godinez Puig, and Palmer 2023; Sahn 2024*a*; Yoder 2020) – make them far from a panacea to accomplish broad-based

accountability.

In fact, if city governments lean heavily on such participatory processes to ensure accountability to their citizens, they are likely to achieve a version of accountability that is simply *selective* accountability. Democracy in American cities – and the public services those cities provide to their residents – may subsequently become more unequal. Instead, leaning into the representative electoral process – and reforming those processes via institutional and behavioral interventions that I have outlined throughout this book and especially in this chapter – can better achieve *broad* accountability for city residents. It is towards this goal of broad accountability that politicians, policy reformers, and scholars alike should look if we want to truly improve cities.

Appendix A

Analyses of Candidate Exit

A natural question raised by the analyses of Chapter 3 combined with the findings of Chapters 5 and 6 is: do incumbents strategically exit from office when their cities are not doing well? Much as Steve Rogers shows that state legislators strategically retire when they might anticipate voters punishing them at the ballot box (Rogers 2023), in this section I investigate whether incumbents in city government who wish to evade accountability decide not to run in the next election.

To examine this question roughly, I regress an indicator for whether or not the incumbent is re-running in mayoral and city council elections on the performance indicators that I used in Chapters 5 and 6: wage growth, changes in crime rates, and changes in test score proficiency rates. I also conduct regressions looking at the combined effect of all these factors on the choice of incumbents to re-run. The results of these analyses are shown in Table A.1 (for mayors) and Table A.2 (for city councilors). These results indicate little impact of city-wide conditions on the choice to re-run in subsequent elections.

Table A.1: City Conditions and Mayoral Incumbent Exit

	Mayoral			
Dependent Variable:	Incumbent running			
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in wages per worker (t-1 to 1)	0.007			-0.022
	(0.013)			(0.038)
Δ in crimes per 100 capita (t-1 to 1)		0.011		-0.002
		(0.016)		(0.042)
Δ in math/reading proficiency rate (t-2 to t-1)			0.0002	0.003
			(0.009)	(0.010)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State-year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	4,145	3,298	1,145	998
R^2	0.451	0.390	0.544	0.558
Within R^2	0.0002	0.0003	5.54×10^{-7}	0.001

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table A.2: City Conditions and City Councilor Incumbent Exit

	City council			
Dependent Variable:	Incumbent running			
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in wages per worker (t-1 to 1)	0.001			-8.38×10^{-5}
	(0.005)			(0.007)
Δ in crimes per 100 capita (t-1 to 1)		-0.006		0.021
		(0.008)		(0.018)
Δ in math/reading proficiency rate (t-2 to t-1)			0.004	0.002
			(0.005)	(0.004)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State-year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	16,374	16,489	6,537	5,854
R^2	0.312	0.308	0.267	0.271
Within R^2	1.22×10^{-5}	4.78×10^{-5}	0.0002	0.0004

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Appendix B

Placebo Check Analyses for Voting Based on the Economy

The main assumption underlying the panel difference-in-differences design that I use to assess the effects of the economy on incumbents' electoral success is that there are no time-varying confounders. In other words, there might be other differences between cities with improving and deteriorating economic conditions that covary with wage growth (and decline) and are *actually* leading to the observed differences in election results.

Though this assumption is fundamentally untestable, a common way to assess this assumption is to see if there are "effects" on pre-treatment outcomes in the main dependent variables. In my case, this would involve testing whether changes in economic conditions affect previous incumbent election results. To examine this possibility, I replicate my main empirical specification looking at the effect of logged wages per worker on election results, but using wage growth from the year following the election rather than the year prior to the election. These results are shown in Table B.1, and indicate little potential for violation of this assumption.

Table B.1: Placebo Checks for Economic Conditions and Accountability

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in logged wages per worker, t to $t+1$	-0.114	0.488	0.214	0.247
	(0.311)	(0.449)	(0.185)	(0.245)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes		Yes	
State-year		Yes		Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	2,097	2,097	7,897	7,897
R^2	0.414	0.628	0.391	0.452
Within R^2	7.03×10^{-5}	0.001	0.0003	0.0003

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Appendix C

Partisan Electoral Accountability for the Economy

Though the main analyses in Chapter 6 focus on incumbents' fortunes in city elections, a large body of research in political science highlights the role of partisanship across levels of government in determining accountability (e.g. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Rogers 2023).

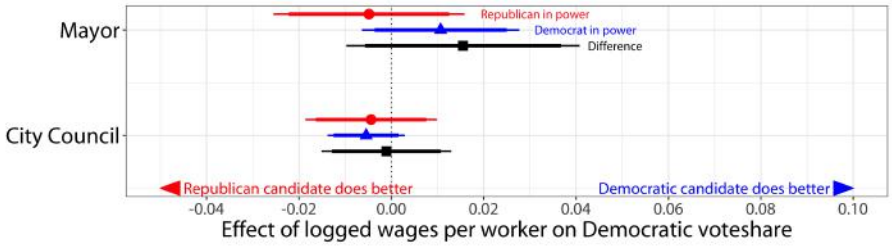
In this section, I implement similar analyses to those looking at the effect of the economy and crime on incumbent politicians' electoral success. Instead of using the incumbent politician's voteshare in the election, however, I follow previous work on economic voting in national and state politics and investigate the effect of the economy on the Democratic party's candidates in the election differentially based on whether the seat is held by a Democrat. More specifically, I interact my measure of performance (wage growth, or the change in the crime rate) with an indicator for whether Democrats control a local office.[1] The crucial indicator of accountability is whether or not there is a positive interaction between partisan control and my measure of performance. This interaction term taps into whether or not Democratic candidates in local elections are punished differently based on whether or not they hold the office at the time of the election.

[1]For mayoral elections, this indicator is a simple binary measure of partisan control of the executive office. For single-member city council seats, I similarly construct a binary measure of Democratic control. But for multi-member council seats, I construct a continuous measure based on the number of Democrats holding the multi-member seats up for election – e.g. if two of four seats are held by Democrats, this variable would take the value of 0.5.

Partisan Accountability for the Economy

The results of these analyses for economic performance are shown in Figure C.1 and Table C.1. These results are in line with partisan accountability for mayors but not city councilors. The red points and lines in Figure C.1 indicate the effect of wage growth on Democratic candidates' electoral fortunes when Republicans are in power, while the blue points and lines indicate the effect on Democratic candidates's success when Democrats hold an office. The black points and lines represent the interaction coefficient from Table C.1, and is the key indicator of partisan accountability. These results (while not statistically significant), suggest that mayoral candidates are punished (and rewarded) for economic performance based on whether or not their party holds the office of mayor. However, city council candidates are not differentially held accountable for the economy based on whether or not their party holds the office.

Figure C.1: The effect of changes in wage growth on Democratic candidates' voteshare in local elections, by partisan control of office.



To better disentangle the facilitative role of partisanship in electoral accountability, I divide these analyses by whether or not the ballot on which voters make their choices in elections list the official partisanship of the candidates or not. If accountability along partisan lines exists, we would expect that it is most apparent in elections with partisan ballot designations. And if accountability for individual incumbents exists, we might expect that it is more pronounced in nonpartisan races.

I present results from analyses of incumbent accountability in Figure C.2 and analyses of partisan accountability in Figure C.3, displaying results for the subset of my elections data in cities with officially partisan ballots (right panels) and nonpartisan ballots (left panels). In line with theoretical explanations, individual accountability for both mayoral and city council incumbents appears to exist in nonpartisan races, as shown by the positive effects in the left panel of Figure C.2. Yet partisan accountability for the economy also appears to exist in mayoral races with partisan ballots, as shown by the suggestive effects in the right panel of Figure C.3.

Table C.1: Economic Conditions and Party Accountability

Dependent Variable:	Democratic Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in wages per worker	0.005	-0.005	-0.004	-0.004
	(0.007)	(0.011)	(0.006)	(0.007)
Democratic control	0.079***	0.088***	0.183***	0.196***
	(0.013)	(0.021)	(0.018)	(0.020)
Δ in wages per worker × Democratic control	0.010	0.015	-0.0008	-0.001
	(0.008)	(0.013)	(0.006)	(0.007)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes		Yes	
State-year		Yes		Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	1,447	1,447	3,579	3,579
R^2	0.658	0.829	0.591	0.667
Within R^2	0.051	0.063	0.216	0.244

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Figure C.2: The effect of changes in wage growth on incumbent candidates' voteshare in local elections, by ballot design.

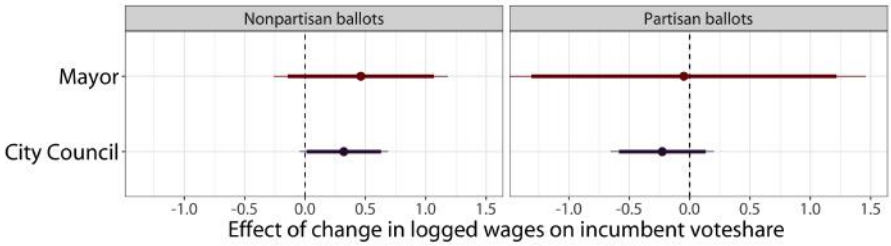
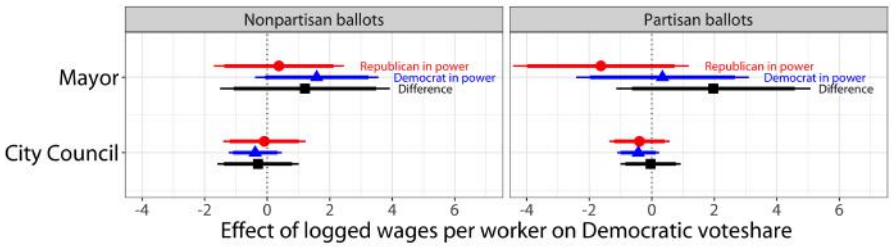


Figure C.3: The effect of changes in wage growth on Democratic candidates' voteshare in local elections, by partisan control and by ballot design.



Partisan Accountability for Crime

I also conduct analyses of partisan accountability for crime. Are local candidates held accountable for crime according to whether or not they share

partisanship with the incumbents holding office?

I first look at the effects of overall crime on Democratic candidates' voteshare under either Democratic control or Republican control, and the difference between the effects of crime by partisan control (i.e. the interaction between the change in the crime rate and an indicator for Democratic control of the office). These results are shown in Figure C.4 and columns 1, 2, 5, and 6 of Table C.2, and indicate little partisan accountability for overall crimes.

Figure C.4: The effect of changes in crime rates on Democratic candidates' voteshare in local elections, by partisan control of office.

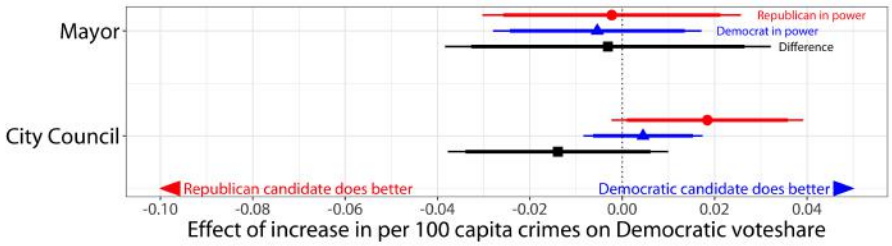


Table C.2: Crime and Party Accountability

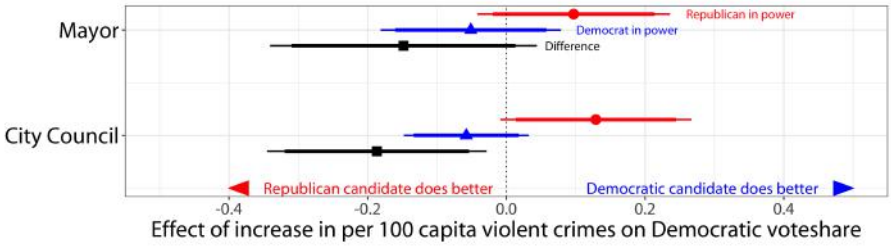
Dependent Variable:	Democratic Vote Share for:							
	Mayor				City council			
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Variables								
Δ in crimes per 100 capita	-0.002	-0.002			0.003	0.018*		
	(0.012)	(0.014)			(0.009)	(0.011)		
Democratic control	0.086***	0.089***	0.086***	0.088***	0.184***	0.194***	0.182***	0.194***
	(0.012)	(0.022)	(0.012)	(0.022)	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.015)	(0.018)
Δ in crimes per 100 capita × Democratic control	0.00002	-0.003			-0.003	-0.014		
	(0.013)	(0.018)			(0.010)	(0.012)		
Δ in violent crimes per 100 capita			0.031	0.097			0.088	0.129*
			(0.048)	(0.071)			(0.055)	(0.070)
Δ in violent crimes per 100 capita × Democratic control			-0.052	-0.148			-0.146**	-0.187**
			(0.056)	(0.098)			(0.062)	(0.081)
Fixed-effects								
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
State-year		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes
Fit statistics								
Observations	1,132	1,132	1,132	1,132	3,760	3,760	3,760	3,760
R^2	0.699	0.880	0.700	0.881	0.588	0.665	0.589	0.666
Within R^2	0.059	0.073	0.060	0.080	0.220	0.250	0.222	0.252

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

However, when isolating one of the main components of overall crimes, violent crimes, a different story begins to appear. As Figure C.5 shows, when Republicans are in power (as shown by the red points and lines) and violent crime goes up, voters punish Republican candidates (and Democratic candidates do better). In contrast, when Democrats are in power, voters punish Democrats (and reward Republicans) when violent crime rates increase. Columns 3, 4, 7, and 8 in Table C.2 display these results as well.

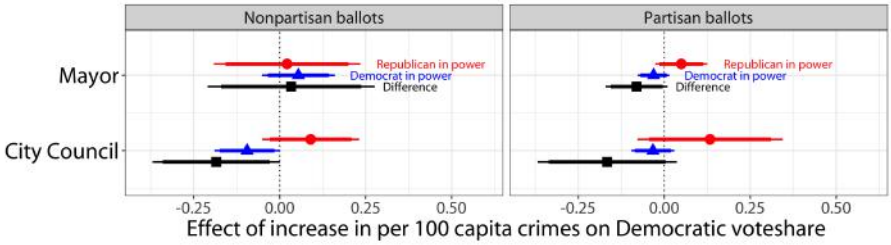
Though the interaction term between partisan control and crime is only statistically significant in one model, the general pattern is consistent with accountability for violent crime along partisan lines.

Figure C.5: The effect of changes in violent crime rates on Democratic candidates' voteshare in local elections, by partisan control of office.



Furthermore, when disaggregating my elections data into those cities with partisan and nonpartisan elections – which my results earlier on economic perforamnce suggest may help facilitate partisan accountability in local elections – the results are even more suggestive of partisan accountability for violent crimes. Figure C.6 shows these results, with results from cities with nonpartisan ballots in the left panel and partisan ballots in the right panel. For city councilors, voters appear to hold candidates from the incumbent party accountable in both contexts. For mayoral candidates, partisan ballots appear to enable partisan accountability just as they did with economic performance.

Figure C.6: The effect of changes in violent crime rates on Democratic candidates' voteshare in local elections, by partisan control and by ballot design.



Appendix D

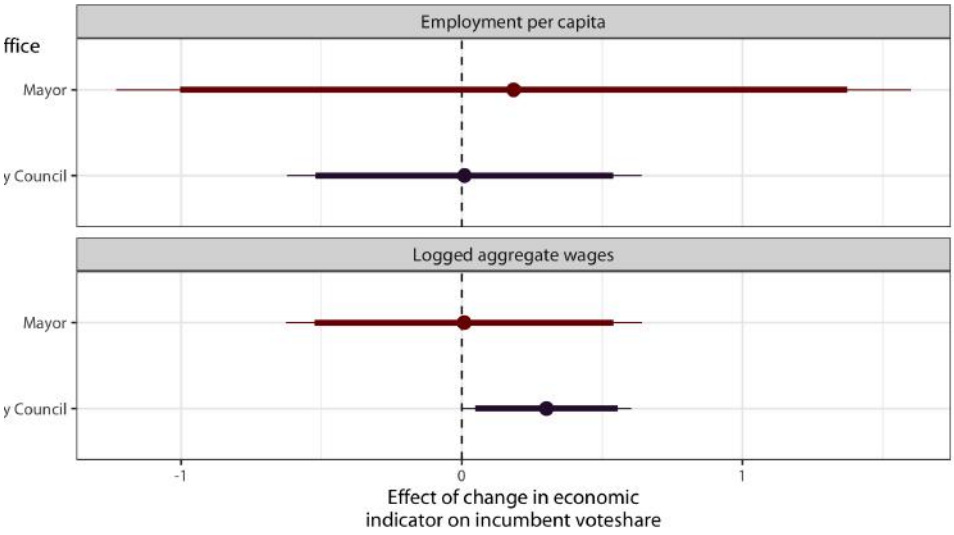
Electoral Accountability for Component Parts of the Economy

Up until this point, I have examined the effect of economic performance using my preferred measure of the change in the average wages per worker. This measure is made from two separate aspect of the economy, however: both wages paid to workers, and the number of people who are employed.

I can also disentangle these two components of this measure of economic conditions. Voters could be responding to the increased income in their area, or they could be responding to lower levels of unemployment. I next assess the effects of wages and employment separately in Figure D.1. The top panel plots the effects of per capita employment growth on incumbents' voteshare, while the bottom panel plots the effects of logged aggregate wage growth in a city on incumbents' voteshare. Again, the filled circles represent the point estimates of each economic performance measure's effect from models using city and state-year fixed effects, while the horizontal lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

As Figure D.1 shows, only wage growth – rather than employment – appears to influence voters's support for local incumbents, and only for city council candidates. The effects of logged total wages are positive and (for city council candidates) statistically significant. When the total amount of wages paid to workers in a city increases, incumbent councilors do better in their elections.

Figure D.1: The effect of changes in logged aggregate wages and employment per capita on the incumbent voteshare in city elections.



Appendix E

Electoral Accountability for Crime, by Candidate Race

The analyses in Chapter **??** show overall null effects of crime on incumbents' electoral success, yet these results may hide racial heterogeneity in these effects. To examine the possibility of differential racial accountability for crime, I analyze the effect of crime rates on incumbent electoral success in local elections separately by the race of the incumbent politician. The results of these analyses are presented in Figure E.1, Figure E.2, and Table **??**. Despite the racialized nature of American criminal justice politics and policing, there appears to be little difference in electoral accountability for crime and crime clearance between white and non-white politicians across the elections in my data.

Figure E.1: The effect of changes in crime on the incumbent voteshare in local elections, by incumbent politician's race.

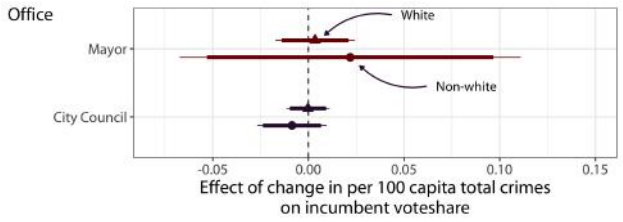
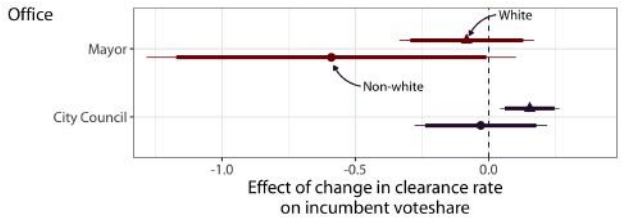


Table E.1: Accountability for Crime, by Incumbent Race

Figure E.2: The effect of changes in clearance rates on the incumbent vote-share in local elections, by incumbent politician's race.



Appendix F

Electoral Accountability for Police Spending and Staffing

The analyses in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 show overall null effects of crime on incumbents' electoral success. Yet a great deal of literature in economics and political science suggests that city spending on police and increases in police staffing can lead to lower levels of crime (e.g. Chalfin et al. 2022; Levitt 1997; Lin 2009; Mello 2019). These decreases in crime might, at least in the view of incumbent politicians, lead to electoral rewards. These rewards may be their (implicit) justificaiton for increasing police spending and staffing in the year before an election (e.g. Guillamón, Bastida, and Benito 2013; Levitt 1997; McCrary 2002).

To examine whether such folk wisdom – that increases in police spending or staffing actually bolster incumbents' electoral fortunes – I analyze the effect of per capita police spending and staffing on incumbent electoral success in local elections in this section. The results of these analyses are presented in Figure F.1 and Figure F.2, as well as in Tables F.1 and F.2. There appears to be little evidence in my data that increases in police staffing or spending, whether holding levels of crime constant or not, yield any electoral reward for city politicians.

Figure F.1: The effect of changes in police spending on the incumbent vote-share in local elections.

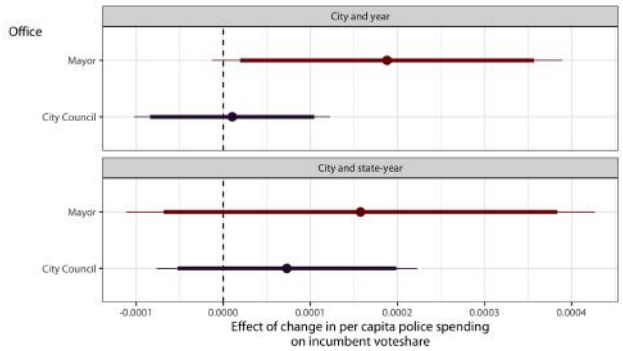


Figure F.2: The effect of changes in police staffing on the incumbent vote-share in local elections.

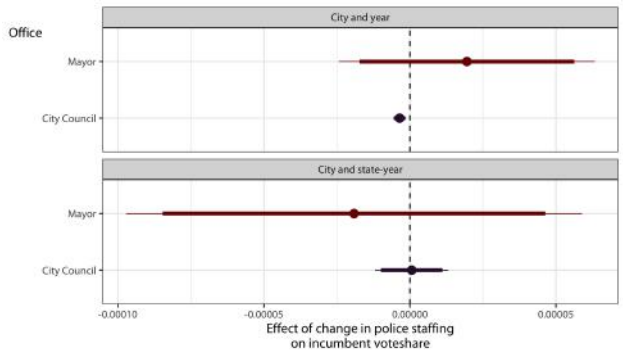


Table F.1: Accountability for Police Spending

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in per capita police expenditures	0.0002	0.0002	0.00007	0.0001
	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.00008)	(0.00007)
Δ in crimes per 100 capita		0.011		-0.0006
		(0.010)		(0.005)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State-year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	1,840	1,763	7,301	7,241
R^2	0.662	0.673	0.424	0.426
Within R^2	0.002	0.004	0.0001	0.0003

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table F.2: Accountability for Police Staffing

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in per 100 capita police FTEs	-0.00002	-0.00002	0.0000006	-0.000001
	(0.00004)	(0.00004)	(0.000006)	(0.000006)
Δ in crimes per 100 capita		0.0006		-0.005
		(0.012)		(0.007)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State-year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	1,827	1,682	7,551	7,188
R^2	0.654	0.680	0.416	0.419
Within R^2	0.0002	0.0002	0.000003	0.0001

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Appendix G

Electoral Accountability by City Size and Scope

The well-developed theories of Oliver, Ha, and Callen (2012) about the effects of size and scope of local government on local elections point to a clear conclusion that incumbency and performance-based accountability should be more evident in cities that are *small in size* and *limited in scope*, while in larger cities and ones with broader scope for local government's responsibilities, national partisan trends and other valence issues may dominate this type of performance accountability. Here, I assess this hypothesis using the research designs and data from Chapters 3, 5, and 6.

To do so, I conduct subset analyses of the incumbency advantage, as well as the effects of the economy and crime on local incumbents' electoral success, both for cities that are smaller (below 100,000 in population) and those that are larger (100,000 residents or more). These analyses directly answer the question of whether *size* seems to matter for electoral accountability.

The results of these analyses are shown in Figure G.1 (for the incumbency advantage), Figure G.2 for the effects of the economy on incumbents' electoral success, and Figure G.3 for the effects of crime on individual incumbent candidates' success.

Figure G.1: Local incumbency advantage in re-running in and winning the next election, by city size.

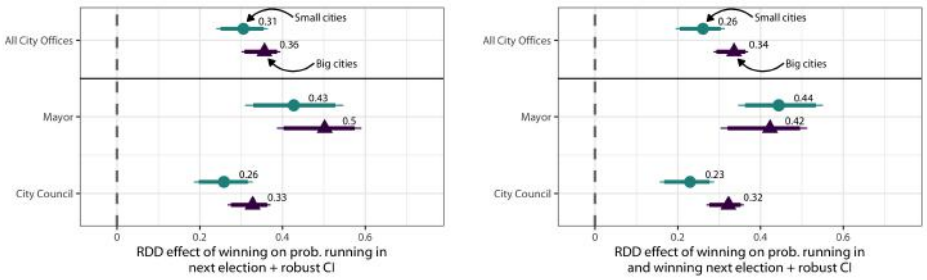


Figure G.2: The effect of changes in wage growth on incumbent candidates' voteshare in local elections, by city size.

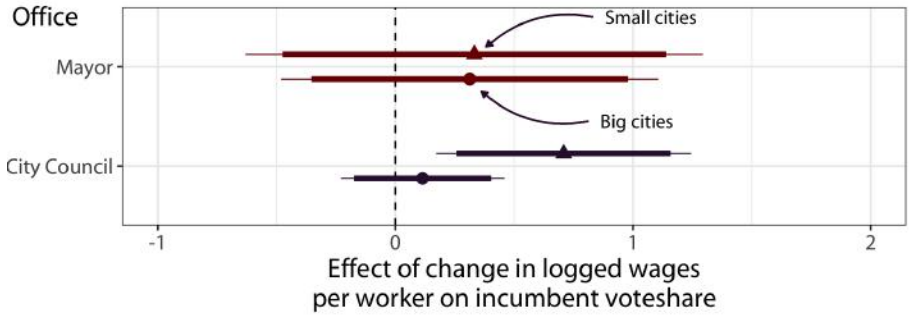
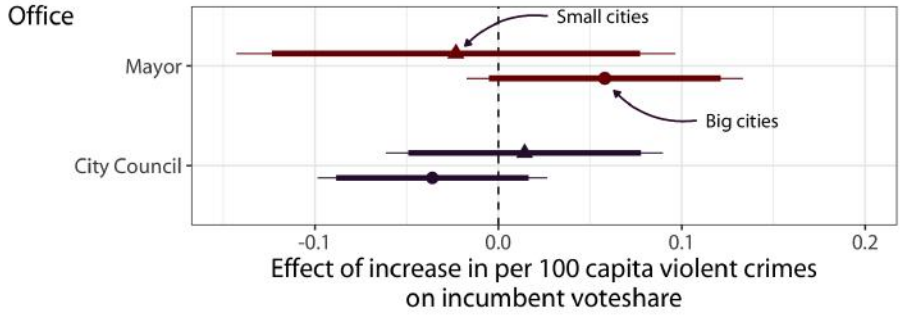


Figure G.3: The effect of changes in violent crime on incumbent candidates' voteshare in local elections, by city size.



I also conduct analyses to assess the moderating effects of *scope* on accountability. To do so, I use one proxy for the scope of government responsibilities: the municipal form of government. As Oliver, Ha, and Callen (2012) explain, cities with "strong mayor" governments have decidedly more scope of policy power for elected officials than cities with "weak mayor" (often called the "council-manager") governments. In Oliver, Ha, and Callen's (2012) theory, voters in cities with more scope should make retrospective evaluations based on ideological or partisan divisions, while voters in low-scope cities should make retrospective evaluations based more on the managerial performance of government.

Figure G.4: Local incumbency advantage in re-running in and winning the next election, by municipal form of government.

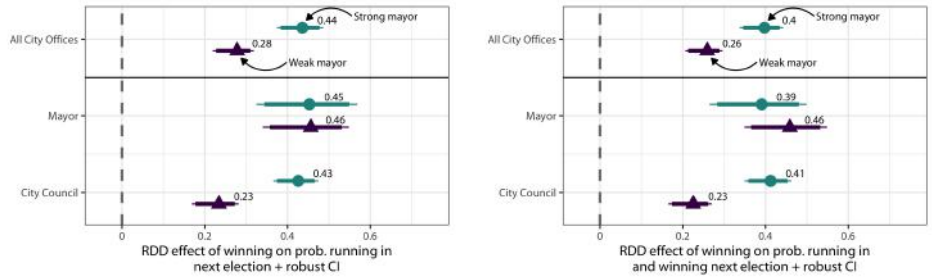


Figure G.5: The effect of changes in wage growth on incumbent candidates' voteshare in local elections, by municipal form of government.

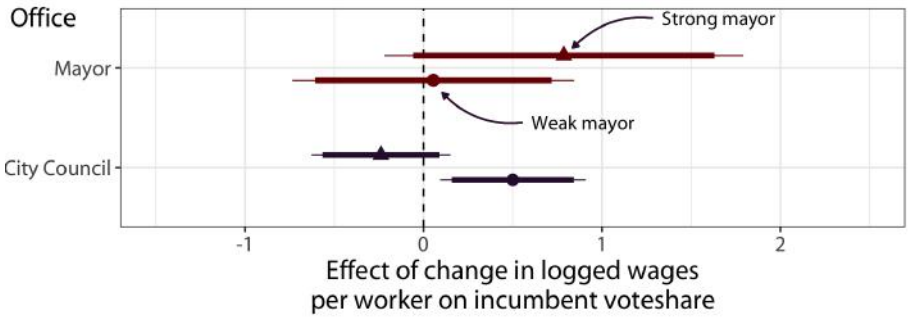
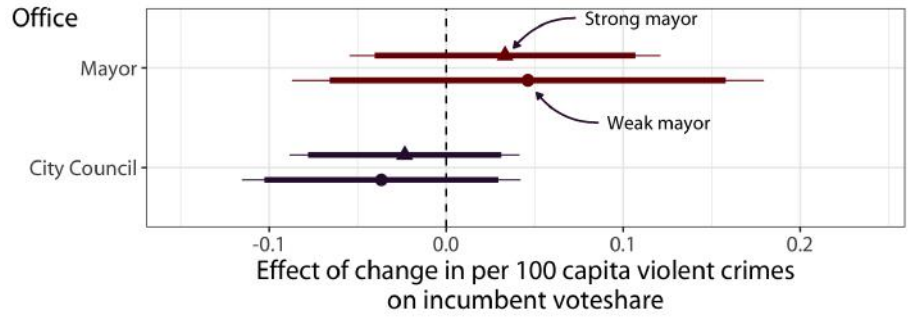


Figure G.6: The effect of changes in violent crime on incumbent candidates' voteshare in local elections, by municipal form of government.



Appendix H

Electoral Accountability in Combination

The findings of Chapters 5 and 6 raise questions about not just how city government performance affects leaders' electoral success in each policy domain, but also how each measure of performance influences voters relative to other aspect of performance. For instance, how does crime influence elections when it is not accompanied by changes in the economy? What is the marginal impact of improvements in the education system without concomitant improvements in crime rates?

To examine this question for the subset of elections for which I have data on economic performance, crime rates, and school test scores, I regress the incumbent voteshare in mayoral and city council elections on all the change in all three city-level conditions. The results of these analyses are presented in Table H.1. In models with city and state-year fixed effects (columns 1 and 3) or city and year fixed effects (columns 2 and 4), none of the three measures of performance appears to influence city politicians' electoral success.

Table H.1: Electoral Accountability for Multiple City Conditions

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Δ in wages per worker (t-1 to 1)	-0.022	0.003	0.007	0.002
	(0.020)	(0.017)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Δ in crimes per 100 capita (t-1 to 1)	-0.002	0.003	0.009	0.007
	(0.030)	(0.017)	(0.009)	(0.006)
Δ in math/reading proficiency rate (t-2 to t-1)	0.010*	0.0003	-0.002	0.0004
	(0.005)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.0007)
Fixed-effects				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State-year	Yes		Yes	
Year		Yes		Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	709	709	3,470	3,470
R^2	0.819	0.724	0.469	0.421
Within R^2	0.019	0.0003	0.0010	0.0005

Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Appendix I

Demographic Balance of Train Delays

In the main text of Chapter 7 I use the delays that people experienced on the MBTA to assess the effect of government performance on people's opinions about local government. These analyses make a principal assumption: that delays are plausibly exogenous, at least conditional on some set of observable characteristics of my survey respondents. In this appendix, I assess this assumption by checking for the balance of the length of delays people experienced on observable characteristics of survey respondents. Table I.1 shows the results from regressions assessing the impact of respondents' demographic characteristics on delay time (both raw, in the first column, and logged, in the second). Given that some of these characteristics do predict the length of delays that people experienced, I incorporate demographic controls in the main analyses of the impact of delay time on opinions about government.

Table I.1: Covariate Balance on Delays

Dependent Variables:	Delay time	Log delay time
Model:	(1)	(2)
Variables		
Democrat	0.667	0.092
	(0.777)	(0.114)
Republican	1.94**	0.197
	(0.939)	(0.138)
Political knowledge	-1.91	-0.230
	(1.20)	(0.176)
Education	0.362	0.153
	(1.26)	(0.185)
Income	1.17	0.148
	(1.06)	(0.156)
Age	0.270*	0.063***
	(0.154)	(0.023)
Race = black	1.44	0.291
	(1.43)	(0.211)
Man	-0.286	-0.034
	(0.529)	(0.078)
Commuter (> 4 times/week)	-0.802	0.046
	(0.790)	(0.116)
Voted in 2014	0.457	0.008
	(0.690)	(0.102)
CR vs. Subway	-0.125	0.520***
	(0.572)	(0.084)
Constant	1.75	0.099
	(1.63)	(0.240)
Fit statistics		
Observations	531	531
R^2	0.029	0.105
Adjusted R^2	0.008	0.086

IID standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

References

Bibliography

Abramowitz, Alan I, and Steven Webster. 2016. "The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of US Elections in the 21st Century." *Electoral Studies* 41: 12–22.

Abramson, Scott, and Sergio Montero. 2023. "The Effect of Local News on Political Knowledge." *Available at SSRN 4380889* .

Achen, Christopher H, and Larry M Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Adams, Brian. 2004. "Public Meetings and the Democratic Process." *Public Administration Review* 64(1): 43–54.

Adams, Brian E. 2010. *Campaign Finance in Local Elections: Buying the Grassroots*. Boulder, CO: First Forum Press.

Adams, Brian E. 2018. "Campaigning in Lilliput: Money's Influence in Small and Mid-Sized City Elections." *California Journal of Politics & Policy* 10(2).

Agan, Amanda, Jennifer L Doleac, and Anna Harvey. 2021. "Prosecutorial Reform and Local Crime Rates." *George Mason Law & Economics Research Paper Series No. 22-011* .

Agan, Amanda, Jennifer L Doleac, and Anna Harvey. 2023. "Misdemeanor Prosecution." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 138(3): 1453–1505.

Agnew, Robert. 1992. "Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency." *Criminology* 30(1): 47–88.

Alford, Robert R., and Eugene C. Lee. 1968. "Voting Turnout in American Cities." *American Political Science Review* 62(03): 796–813.

Alicke, Mark D. 2000. "Culpable Control and the Psychology of Blame." *Psychological Bulletin* 126(4): 556–574.

Alt, James E, David D Lassen, and John Marshall. 2016. "Credible Sources and Sophisticated Voters: When Does New Information Induce Economic Voting?" *Journal of Politics* 78(2): 327–342.

Ang, Desmond, and Jonathan Tebes. 2024. "Civic Responses to Police Violence." *American Political Science Review* 118(2): 972–987.

Ang, Desmond, Panka Bencsik, Jesse Bruhn, and Ellora Derenoncourt. 2024. "Community Engagement with Law Enforcement after High-Profile Acts of Police Violence." *American Economic Review: Insights* (forthcoming).

Ang, Zoe, Andrew Reeves, Jon C Rogowski, and Arjun Vishwanath. 2022. "Partisanship, Economic Assessments, and Presidential Accountability." *American Journal of Political Science* 66(2): 468–484.

Angrist, Joshua D, and Jörn-Steffen Pischke. 2008. *Mostly Harmless Econometrics: An Empiricist's Companion.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ansolabehere, Stephen, and Brian F. Schaffner. 2017. "CCES Common Content, 2016.".

Ansolabehere, Stephen, and James M. Snyder Jr. 2002. "The Incumbency Advantage in US Elections: An Analysis of State and Federal Offices, 1942-2000." *Election Law Journal* 1(3): 315–338.

Ansolabehere, Stephen, Marc Meredith, and Erik Snowberg. 2014. "Mecro-Economic Voting: Local Information and Micro-Perceptions of the Macro-Economy." *Economics & Politics* 26(3): 380–410.

Anzia, Sarah F. 2011. "Election Timing and the Electoral Influence of Interest Groups." *Journal of Politics* 73(2): 412–427.

Anzia, Sarah F. 2012*a*. "The Election Timing Effect: Evidence from a Policy Intervention in Texas." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 7(3): 209–248.

Anzia, Sarah F. 2012*b*. "Partisan Power Play: The Origins of Local Election Timing as an American Political Institution." *Studies in American Political Development* 26(01): 24–49.

Anzia, Sarah F. 2014. *Timing and Turnout: How Off-Cycle Elections Favor Organized Groups.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arceneaux, Kevin. 2005. "Does Federalism Weaken Democratic Representation in the United States?" *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 35(2): 297–311.

Arceneaux, Kevin. 2006. "The Federal Face of Voting: Are Elected Officials Held Accountable for the Functions Relevant to Their Office?" *Political Psychology* 27(5): 731–754.

Arceneaux, Kevin, and Robert M Stein. 2006. "Who Is Held Responsible When Disaster Strikes? The Attribution of Responsibility for a Natural Disaster in an Urban Election." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 28(1): 43–53.

Arellana, Julián, Luis Fuentes, Joyce Cantillo, and Vilma Alvarez. 2019. "Multivariate Analysis of User Perceptions About the Serviceability of Urban Roads: Case of Barranquilla." *International Journal of Pavement Engineering* pp. 1–10.

Ariga, Kenichi. 2015. "Incumbency Disadvantage under Electoral Rules with Intraparty Competition: Evidence from Japan." *Journal of Politics* 77(3): 874–887.

Arnold, R. Douglas. 1990. *The Logic of Congressional Action*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Arnold, R. Douglas, and Nicholas Carnes. 2012. "Holding Mayors Accountable: New York's Executives from Koch to Bloomberg." *American Journal of Political Science* 56(4): 949–963.

Ash, Elliott, and Michael Poyker. 2024. "Conservative News Media and Criminal Justice: Evidence from Exposure to the Fox News Channel." *The Economic Journal* 134(660): 1331–1355.

Ashworth, Scott. 2012. "Electoral Accountability: Recent Theoretical and Empirical Work." *Annual Review of Political Science* 15: 183–201.

Ashworth, Scott, and Ethan Bueno de Mesquita. 2014. "Is Voter Competence Good for Voters? Information, Rationality, and Democratic Performance." *American Political Science Review* 108(3): 565–587.

Ashworth, Scott, Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, and Amanda Friedenberg. 2018. "Learning about Voter Rationality." *American Journal of Political Science* 62(1): 37–54.

Atkeson, Lonna Rae, and Timothy B. Krebs. 2008. "Press Coverage of Mayoral Candidates The Role of Gender in News Reporting and Campaign Issue Speech." *Political Research Quarterly* 61(2): 239–252.

Auslen, Michael. 2024. "Public Goods and the Press: Policy Implications of Disparities in Local Political News." Working paper. Online: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/wbg9016farvx6zmycrsca/pgp_auslen.pdf?dl=0.

Ayee, Joseph RA. 2013. "The Political Economy of the Creation of Districts in Ghana." *Journal of Asian and African studies* 48(5): 623–645.

Bachrach, Peter, and Morton S Baratz. 1962. "Two Faces of Power." *American Political Science Review* 56(4): 947–952.

Baqir, Reza. 2002. "Districting and Government Overspending." *Journal of Political Economy* 110(6): 1318–1354.

Bartels, Larry M. 2002. "Beyond the Running Tally: Partisan Bias in Political Perceptions." *Political Behavior* 24: 117–150.

Bartels, Larry M. 2008. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Princeton University Press.

Baumgartner, Frank R, Derek A Epp, and Kelsey Shoub. 2018. *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us About Policing and Race*. Cambridge University Press.

Beckett, Katherine. 1997. *Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Beckett, Katherine, and Megan Ming Francis. 2020. "The origins of mass incarceration: The racial politics of crime and punishment in the Post–Civil Rights Era." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 16: 433–452.

Bellin, Jeffrey. 2019. "The Power of Prosecutors." *NYU Law Review* 94: 171.

Bernhard, Rachel, and Justin de Benedictis-Kessner. 2021. "Men and Women Candidates Are Similarly Persistent After Losing Elections." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118(26).

Bernhard, Rachel, and Sean Freeder. 2020*a*. "The More You Know: Voter Heuristics and the Information Search." *Political Behavior* 42(2): 603–623.

Bernhard, Rachel, and Sean Freeder. 2020*b*. "The More You Know: Voter Heuristics and the Information Search." *Political Behavior* 42(2): 603–623.

Bernhard, Rachel, Shauna Shames, and Dawn Langan Teele. 2021. "To Emerge? Breadwinning, Motherhood, and Women's Decisions to Run for Office." *American Political Science Review* 115(2): 379–394.

Berry, Christopher. 2008. "Piling On: Multilevel Government and the Fiscal Common-Pool." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(4): 802–820.

Berry, Christopher R. 2009. *Imperfect Union: Representation and Taxation in Multilevel Governments*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Berry, Christopher R., and Jacob E Gersen. 2009. "Fiscal Consequences of Electoral Institutions." *Journal of Law & Economics* 52: 469–495.

Berry, Christopher R, and Jacob E Gersen. 2010. "The Timing of Elections." *The University of Chicago Law Review* 77(1): 37–64.

Berry, Christopher R., and Jacob E. Gersen. 2011. "Election Timing and Public Policy." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 6: 103–135.

Berry, Christopher R., and William G. Howell. 2007. "Accountability and Local Elections: Rethinking Retrospective Voting." *Journal of Politics* 69(3): 844–858.

Besley, Timothy, and Anne Case. 1995. "Incumbent Behavior: Vote-Seeking, Tax-Setting, and Yardstick Competition." *American Economic Review* 85(1): 25–45.

Besley, Timothy, Torsten Persson, and Daniel M Sturm. 2010. "Political Competition, Policy and Growth: Theory and Evidence from the US." *The Review of Economic Studies* 77(4): 1329–1352.

Bisbee, James, and Jan Zilinsky. 2023. "Geographic Boundaries and Local Economic Conditions Matter for Views of the Economy." *Political Analysis* 31(2): 288–294.

Bisgaard, Martin. 2015. "Bias Will Find a Way: Economic Perceptions, Attributions of Blame, and Partisan-Motivated Reasoning during Crisis." *Journal of Politics* 77(3): 849–860.

Bisgaard, Martin, and Rune Slothuus. 2018. "Partisan Elites as Culprits? How Party Cues Shape Partisan Perceptual Gaps." *American Journal of Political Science* 62(2): 456–469.

Bisgaard, Martin, Peter Thisted Dinesen, and Kim Mannemar Sønderskov. 2016. "Reconsidering the Neighborhood Effect: Does Exposure to Residential Unemployment Influence Voters' Perceptions of the National Economy?" *Journal of Politics* 78(3): 719–732.

Bledsoe, Timothy, and Susan Welch. 1987. "Patterns of Political Party Activity Among US Cities." *Urban Affairs Review* 23(2): 249–269.

Boas, Taylor C, F Daniel Hidalgo, and Guillermo Toral. 2021. "Competence Versus Priorities: Negative Electoral Responses to Education Quality in Brazil." *Journal of Politics* 83(4): 1417–1431.

Boudreau, Cheryl. 2009. "Closing the Gap: When Do Cues Eliminate Differences Between Sophisticated and Unsophisticated Citizens?" *The Journal of Politics* 71(3): 964–976.

Boudreau, Cheryl, Christopher S Elmendorf, and Scott A MacKenzie. 2015*a*. "Informing Electorates via Election Law: An Experimental Study of Partisan Endorsements and Nonpartisan Voter Guides in Local Elections." *Election Law Journal* 14(1): 2–23.

Boudreau, Cheryl, Christopher S Elmendorf, and Scott A MacKenzie. 2015*b*. "Lost in Space? Information Shortcuts, Spatial Voting, and Local Government Representation." *Political Research Quarterly* 68(4): 843–855.

Boudreau, Cheryl, Christopher S Elmendorf, and Scott A MacKenzie. 2019. "Roadmaps to Representation: An Experimental Study of How Voter Education Tools Affect Citizen Decision Making." *Political Behavior* 41(4): 1001–1024.

Boudreau, Cheryl, Christopher S Elmendorf, and Scott A MacKenzie. 2023. "The Civic Option? Using Experiments to Estimate the Effects of Consuming Information in Local Elections." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 10(3): 391–402.

Boudreau, Cheryl, Jonathan Colner, and Scott A MacKenzie. 2021. "Ranked-Choice Voting and Political Expression: How Voting Aids Narrow the Gap between Informed and Uninformed Citizens." Working paper. Online: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3786972.

Boydstun, Amber E, Benjamin Highton, and Suzanna Linn. 2018. "Assessing the Relationship between Economic News Coverage and Mass Economic Attitudes." *Political Research Quarterly* 71(4): 989–1000.

Boyne, George A. 1992. "Local Government Structure and Performance: Lessons from America?" *Public Administration* 70(3): 333–357.

Brenan, Megan. 2022. "Record-High 56Gallup report, online: https://news.gallup.com/poll/404048/record-high-perceive-local-crime-increased.aspx.

Broockman, David E, Nicholas Carnes, Melody Crowder-Meyer, and Christopher Skovron. 2021. "Why Local Party Leaders Don't Support Nominating Centrists." *British Journal of Political Science* 51(2): 724–749.

Brooks, Leah, and Justin H Phillips. 2010. "An Institutional Explanation for the Stickiness of Federal Grants." *The Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization* 26(2): 243–264.

Brown, Adam. 2010. "Are Governors Responsible for the State Economy? Partisanship, Blame, and Divided Federalism." *Journal of Politics* 72(3): 605–615.

Brown, Jacob R, and Michael Zoorob. 2022. "Resisting Broken Windows: The Effect of Neighborhood Disorder on Political Behavior." *Political Behavior* 44(2): 679–703.

Burke, Richard. 2024. "Spotlighting the Economy: Media Coverage and Mayoral Evaluations." *Urban Affairs Review* (forthcoming).

Burnett, Craig M, and Vladimir Kogan. 2017. "The Politics of Potholes: Service Quality and Retrospective Voting in Local Elections." *Journal of Politics* 79(1): 302–314.

Burns, Nancy. 1994. *The Formation of American Local Governments: Private Values in Public Institutions*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Busby, Ethan C, and James N Druckman. 2018. "Football and Public Opinion: A Partial Replication and Extension." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 5(1): 4–10.

Busby, Ethan C, James N Druckman, and Alexandria Fredendall. 2017. "The Political Relevance of Irrelevant Events." *The Journal of Politics* 79(1): 346–350.

Cacioppo, John T, Richard E Petty, and Mary E Losch. 1986. "Attributions of Responsibility for Helping and Doing Harm: Evidence for Confusion of Responsibility." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50(1): 100–105.

Cain, Bruce E., John A. Ferejohn, and Morris P. Fiorina. 1984. "The Constituency Service Basis of the Personal Vote for US Representatives and British Members of Parliament." *American Political Science Review* 78(1): 110–125.

Calonico, Sebastian, Matias D. Cattaneo, and Rocío Titiunik. 2014*a*. *rdrobust: Robust Data-Driven Statistical Inference in Regression-Discontinuity Designs*.

Calonico, Sebastian, Matias D. Cattaneo, and Rocío Titiunik. 2014*b*. "Robust Nonparametric Confidence Intervals for Regression-Discontinuity Designs." *Econometrica* 82(6): 2295–2326.

Cameron, David R. 1978. "The Expansion of the Public Economy: A Comparative Analysis." *American Political Science Review* 72(4): 1243–1261.

Campbell, Andrea Louise. 2002. "Self-Interest, Social Security and the Distinctive Participation Patterns of Senior Citizens." *American Political Science Review* 95(3): 565–574.

Campbell, Andrea Louise. 2005. *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Caren, Neal. 2007. "Big City, Big Turnout? Electoral Participation in American Cities." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 29(1): 31–46.

Carroll, Susan J, and Kira Sanbonmatsu. 2013. *More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislatures.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Carsey, Thomas M, and Gerald C Wright. 1998. "State and National Factors in Gubernatorial and Senatorial Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* pp. 994–1002.

Caughey, Devin, Christopher Warshaw, and Yiqing Xu. 2017. "Incremental Democracy: The Policy Effects of Partisan Control of State Government." *Journal of Politics* 79(4): 1342–1358.

CBS San Francisco. 2022. "Poll: Fear Of Crime Preventing Bay Area Residents Return To Big City Downtowns.".

CEDA. 2020. "California Elections Data Archive (CEDA)." https://csu-csus.esploro.exlibrisgroup.com/esploro/outputs/99257830890201671.

Chalfin, Aaron, Benjamin Hansen, Emily K Weisburst, and Morgan C Williams Jr. 2022. "Police Force Size and Civilian Race." *American Economic Review: Insights* 4(2): 139–158.

Chenoweth, Erica, and Susan E Clarke. 2010. "All Terrorism is Local: Resources, Nested Institutions, and Governance for Urban Homeland Security in the American Federal System." *Political Research Quarterly* 63(3): 495–507.

Christensen, Darin, and Simon Ejdemyr. 2020. "Do Elections Improve Constituency Responsiveness? Evidence from US Cities." *Political Science Research and Methods* 8(3): 459–476.

City of San Francisco. 2022. "Homeless Population." City report, online: https://sfgov.org/scorecards/safety-net/homeless-population.

Clark, Benjamin Y, Jeffrey L Brudney, and Sung-Gheel Jang. 2013. "Coproduction of Government Services and the New Information Technology: Investigating the Distributional Biases." *Public Administration Review* 73(5): 687–701.

Clark, Benjamin Y, Jeffrey L Brudney, Sung-Gheel Jang, and Bradford Davy. 2020. "Do Advanced Information Technologies Produce Equitable Government Responses in Coproduction: An Examination of 311 Systems in 15 US Cities." *American Review of Public Administration* 50(3): 315–327.

Clifford, Scott, and Spencer Piston. 2017. "Explaining Public Support for Counterproductive Homelessness Policy: The Role of Disgust." *Political Behavior* 39: 503–525.

Clinton, Joshua D, and Michael W. Sances. 2018. "The Politics of Policy: The Initial Mass Political Effects of Medicaid Expansion in the States." *American Political Science Review* 112(1): 167–185.

Cohen, Elisha, Anna Gunderson, Kaylyn Jackson, Paul McLachlan, Tom S Clark, Adam N Glynn, and Michael Leo Owens. 2019. "Do Officer-Involved Shootings Reduce Citizen Contact with Government?" *The Journal of Politics* 81(3): 1111–1123.

Colburn, Gregg, and Clayton Page Aldern. 2022. *Homelessness is a Housing Problem: How Structural Factors Explain US Patterns*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Cook, Scott J, and David Fortunato. 2023. "The Politics of Police Data: State Legislative Capacity and the Transparency of State and Substate Agencies." *American Political Science Review* 117(1): 280–295.

Cook, Scott J, Samantha Zuhlke, and Robin Saywitz. 2024. "Potholes, 311 Reports, and a Theory of Heterogeneous Resident Demand for City Services." *Policy Studies Journal* (forthcoming).

Cottrell, David, Michael C Herron, and Sean J Westwood. 2018. "An Exploration of Donald Trump's Allegations of Massive Voter Fraud in the 2016 General Election." *Electoral Studies* 51(1): 123–142.

Cox, Gary W, and Jonathan N Katz. 1996. "Why Did the Incumbency Advantage in US House Elections Grow?" *American Journal of Political Science* 40(2): 478–497.

Craw, Michael. 2008. "Taming the Local Leviathan: Institutional and Economic Constraints on Municipal Budgets." *Urban Affairs Review* 43(5): 663–690.

Cronin, Jane, Bernhard Clemm von Hohenberg, João Fernando Ferreira Gonçalves, Ericka Menchen-Trevino, and Magdalena Wojcieszak. 2023. "The (Null) Over-Time Effects of Exposure to Local News Websites: Evidence from Trace Data." *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 20(4): 407–421.

Crowder-Meyer, Melody. 2013. "Gendered Recruitment Without Trying: How Local Party Recruiters Affect Women's Representation." *Politics & Gender* 9(4): 390–413.

Crowder-Meyer, Melody, and Adrienne R Smith. 2015. "How the Strategic Context Affects Women's Emergence and Success in local Legislative Elections." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 3(2): 295–317.

Cutler, David M., Douglas W. Elmendorf, and Richard J. Zeckhauser. 1993. "Demographic Characteristics and the Public Bundle." National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 4283. Online: https://www.nber.org/papers/w4283.

Cutler, Fred. 2008. "Whodunnit? Voters and Responsibility in Canadian Federalism." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 41(03): 627–654.

Dahl, Robert A. 1967. "The City in the Future of Democracy." *The American Political Science Review* 61(4): 953–970.

Dahl, Robert A. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Darr, Joshua P, Matthew P Hitt, and Johanna L Dunaway. 2021. *Home Style Opinion: How Local Newspapers Can Slow Polarization.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Darrington, Patrick. 2023. "Alec Karakatsanis on Copaganda, Punishment, and Policing in the United States." *Teen Vogue* (May 9).

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin. 2018*a*. "How Attribution Inhibits Accountability: Evidence from Train Delays." *Journal of Politics* 80(4): 1417–1422.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin. 2018*b*. "Off-Cycle and Out of Office: Election Timing and the Incumbency Advantage." *Journal of Politics* 80(1): 119–132.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin. 2022. "Strategic Government Communication About Performance." *Political Science Research and Methods* 10(3): 601–616.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, and Christopher Warshaw. 2016. "Mayoral Partisanship and Municipal Fiscal Policy." *Journal of Politics* 78(4): 1124–1138.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, and Christopher Warshaw. 2020*a*. "Accountability for the Local Economy at All Levels of Government in United States Elections." *American Political Science Review* 114(3): 660–676.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, and Christopher Warshaw. 2020*b*. "Politics in Forgotten Governments: The Partisan Composition of County Legislatures and County Fiscal Policies." *Journal of Politics* 82(2): 460–475.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, and Christopher Warshaw. 2023. "The Electoral and Policy Effects of Election Timing in City and County Governments." Working paper.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, and Rachel Bernhard. 2022. "Concatenated Files Fixing Errors in the California Elections Data Archive (CEDA)." GitHub repository, online: https://github.com/justindbk/ceda/.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, Christopher Warshaw, and John Sides. 2022. "Criminal Justice and Voter Behavior in Local Elections." Working paper, Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, Daniel Jones, and Christopher Warshaw. 2024. "How Partisanship in Cities Influences Housing Policy." *American Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, Diana Da In Lee, Yamil R Velez, and Christopher Warshaw. 2023. "American Local Government Elections Database." *Scientific Data* 10(1): 912.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, Matthew A. Baum, Adam J. Berinsky, and Teppei Yamamoto. 2019. "Persuading the Enemy: Estimating the Persuasive Effects of Partisan Media with the Preference-Incorporating Choice and Assignment Design." *American Political Science Review* 113(4): 902–916.

de Benedictis-Kessner, Justin, Matthew Harvey, Daniel Jones, and Christopher Warshaw. 2024. "The partisanship of mayors has no detectable effect on police spending, police employment, crime, or arrests." Working paper.

De Boef, Suzanna, and Paul M Kellstedt. 2004. "The Political (and Economic) Origins of Consumer Confidence." *American Journal of Political Science* 48(4): 633–649.

de Kadt, Daniel, and Evan S Lieberman. 2020. "Nuanced Accountability: Voter Responses to Service Delivery in Southern Africa." *British Journal of Political Science* 50(1): 185–215.

De Magalhaes, Leandro. 2015. "Incumbency Effects in a Comparative Perspective: Evidence from Brazilian Mayoral Elections." *Political Analysis* 23(1): 113–126.

Delli Carpini, Michael X, and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters*. Yale University Press.

Djourelova, Milena. 2023. "Persuasion through Slanted Language: Evidence from the Media Coverage of Immigration." *American Economic Review* 113(3): 800–835.

Dunaway, Johanna, and Erik Peterson. 2023. "The New News Barons: Investment Ownership Reduces Newspaper Reporting Capacity." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 707(2): 367–386.

Dunning, Claire. 2022. "Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State." In *Nonprofit Neighborhoods*. University of Chicago Press.

Duran, Gil. 2022. "'Chesa Boudin Derangement Syndrome' grips S.F. politics.".

Dyer, Travis, Mark H Lang, and Jun Oh. 2024. "Media Conglomeration, Local News, and Capital Market Consequences." *Management Science* (forthcoming).

Dynes, Adam M. 2018. "Procedural Obfuscation and Electoral Accountability in Local Politics." Working Paper. Online: https://adamdynes.com/documents/WP_2018_dynes_procedural-obfuscation.pdf.

Dynes, Adam M, and John B Holbein. 2020. "Noisy Retrospection: The Effect of Party Control on Policy Outcomes." *American Political Science Review* 114(1): 237–257.

Dynes, Adam M, Michael T Hartney, and Sam D Hayes. 2021. "Off-Cycle and Off Center: Election Timing and Representation in Municipal Government." *American Political Science Review* 115(3): 1097–1103.

Ebeid, Michael, and Jonathan Rodden. 2006. "Economic Geography and Economic Voting: Evidence from the US States." *British Journal of Political Science* 36(03): 527–547.

Eggers, Andrew C. 2017. "Quality-Based Explanations of Incumbency Effects." *Journal of Politics* 79(4): 1315–1328.

Einstein, Katherine Levine, and Charley E Willison. 2024. "Planning for Homelessness: Land Use Policy, Housing Markets, and Cities' Homelessness Responses." *Urban Affairs Review* (forthcoming).

Einstein, Katherine Levine, David Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2016. "2015 Menino Survey of Mayors.".

Einstein, Katherine Levine, David Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2018. "2017 Menino Survey of Mayors.".

Einstein, Katherine Levine, David Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2024. "2023 Menino Survey of Mayors: Mayoral Accountability and Control.".

Einstein, Katherine Levine, David Glick, Luisa Godinez Puig, and Maxwell Palmer. 2023. "Still Muted: the Limited Participatory Democracy of Zoom Public Meetings." *Urban Affairs Review* 59(4): 1279–1291.

Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2019. *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America's Housing Crisis*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Einstein, Katherine Levine, Maxwell Palmer, and David M Glick. 2019. "Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes." *Perspectives on Politics* 17(1): 28–46.

Einstein, Katherine Levine, Maxwell Palmer, Ellis Hamilton, and Ethan Singer. 2023. "The Gray Vote: How Older Home-Owning Voters Dominate Local Elections." Working paper. Online: https://sites.bu.edu/kleinstein/files/2024/03/Gray_Vote.pdf.

Elmendorf, Christopher S, and David Schleicher. 2013. "Informing Consent: Voter Ignorance, Political Parties, and Election Law." *University of Illinois Law Review* (2): 363–431.

Epp, Charles R, Steven Maynard-Moody, and Donald Haider-Markel. 2014. *Pulled Over: How Police Stops Define Race and Citizenship*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Erie, Steven P, John J Kirlin, and Francine F Rabinovitz. 2016. "Can Something Be Done? Propositions on the Performance of Metropolitan Institutions." In *Reform of Metropolitan Governments*, ed. Steven P. Erie, John J. Kirlin, Francine E. Rabinovitz, Lance Liebman, and Charles M. Haar. Routledge pp. 7–41.

Erikson, Robert S. 1989. "Economic Conditions and the Presidential Vote." *The American Political Science Review* 83(2): 567–573.

Esberg, Jane, and Jonathan Mummolo. 2018. "Explaining Misperceptions of Crime." *Available at SSRN. Online: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3208303* .

Evanosky, Dennis. 2022. "Electric Streetcars Once Served Alameda.".

Ewens, Michael, Arpit Gupta, and Sabrina Howell. 2023. "Local Journalism under Private Equity Ownership." NBER Working Paper 29743, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA.

Ewing, Sean. 2024. "Profit over Public Good: The Impact of Investment Firm Ownership on Local News and Political Behavior." Working paper. Online: https://preprints.apsanet.org/engage/apsa/article-details/66d6776fcec5d6c142f4e767.

Fagan, Kevin. 2016. "S.F. Homeless Problem Looks the Same as It Did 20 Years Ago.".

Fagan, Kevin. 2022. "Homelessness is S.F.'s top challenge — that's obvious. But S.F. Chronicle poll reveals unexpected views.".

Fair, Ray C. 1978. "The Effect of Economic Events on Votes for President." *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 60(2): 159–173.

Farris, Emily M, and Mirya R Holman. 2024. *The Power of the Badge: Sheriffs and Inequality in the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Fearon, James D. 1999. "Electoral Accountability and the Control of Politicians: Selecting Good Types Versus Sanctioning Poor Performance." In *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, ed. Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp. 55–97.

Ferejohn, John. 1986. "Incumbent Performance and Electoral Control." *Public Choice* 50(1): 5–25.

Ferrannini, John. 2022. "Poll: most SF Dems favor Boudin recall.".

Ferreira, Fernando, and Joseph Gyourko. 2009. "Do Political Parties Matter? Evidence from US Cities." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124(1): 399–422.

Figlio, David N., and Maurice E Lucas. 2004. "What's in a Grade? School Report Cards and the Housing Market." *American Economic Review* 94(3): 591–604.

Fiorina, Morris P. 1977. "The Case of the Vanishing Marginals: The Bureaucracy Did It." *American Political Science Review* 71(1): 177–181.

Fiorina, Morris P. 1978. "Economic Retrospective Voting in American National Elections: A Micro-Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 22(2): 426–443.

Fiorina, Morris P. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. Yale University Press.

Firman, Tommy. 2009. "Decentralization Reform and Local-Government Proliferation in Indonesia: Towards a Fragmentation of Regional Development." *Review of Urban & Regional Development Studies: Journal of the Applied Regional Science Conference* 21(2-3): 143–157.

Flavin, Patrick, and Michael T Hartney. 2017. "Racial Inequality in Democratic Accountability: Evidence from Retrospective Voting in Local Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 61(3): 684–697.

Fletcher, Richard, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2018. "Are People Incidentally Exposed to News on Social Media? A Comparative Analysis." *New Media & Society* 20(7): 2450–2468.

Fowler, Anthony, and Andrew B Hall. 2018. "Do Shark Attacks Influence Presidential Elections? Reassessing a Prominent Finding on Voter Competence." *Journal of Politics* 80(4): 1423–1437.

Fowler, Anthony, and B Pablo Montagnes. 2015. "College Football, Elections, and False-Positive Results in Observational Research." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112(45): 13800–13804.

Fowler, Anthony, and B Pablo Montagnes. 2023. "Distinguishing Between False Positives and Genuine Results: The Case of Irrelevant Events and Elections." *The Journal of Politics* 85(1): 304–309.

Fox, Richard L, and Jennifer L Lawless. 2010. "If Only They'd Ask: Gender, Recruitment, and Political Ambition." *The Journal of Politics* 72(2): 310–326.

Frey, Bruno S. 2001. "A Utopia? Government without Territorial Monopoly." *The Independent Review* 6(1): 99–112.

Frey, Bruno S, and Reiner Eichenberger. 1996. "FOCJ: Competitive Governments for Europe." *International Review of Law and Economics* 16(3): 315–327.

Fung, Archon. 2006*a*. "Democratizing the Policy Process." In *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, ed. Robert Goodin, Michael Moran, and Martin Rein. New York: Oxford University Press chapter 33, pp. 667–683.

Fung, Archon. 2006*b*. "Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance." *Public Administration Review* 66: 66–75.

Fung, Archon. 2015. "Putting the Public Back into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future." *Public Administration Review* 75(4): 513–522.

Gelman, Andrew, and Gary King. 1990. "Estimating Incumbency Advantage Without Bias." *American Journal of Political Science* 34(4): 1142–1164.

Gerber, Alan S, and Gregory A Huber. 2010. "Partisanship, Political Control, and Economic Assessments." *American Journal of Political Science* 54(1): 153–173.

Gerber, Elisabeth R, Adam Douglas Henry, and Mark Lubell. 2013. "Political Homophily and Collaboration in Regional Planning Networks." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(3): 598–610.

Gerber, Elisabeth R, and Clark C Gibson. 2009. "Balancing Regionalism and Localism: How Institutions and Incentives Shape American Transportation Policy." *American Journal of Political Science* 53(3): 633–648.

Gerber, Elisabeth R, and Daniel J Hopkins. 2011. "When Mayors Matter: Estimating the Impact of Mayoral Partisanship on City Policy." *American Journal of Political Science* 55(2): 326–339.

Gilbert, Daniel T, and Patrick S Malone. 1995. "The Correspondence Bias." *Psychological Bulletin* 117(1): 21–38.

Glaeser, Edward L, Joseph Gyourko, and Raven E Saks. 2005. "Why Have Housing Prices Gone Up?" *American Economic Review* 95(2): 329–333.

Go, Min Hee. 2022. "Holding Mayors Accountable? Policing and Mayoral Approval in American Aities." *The Social Science Journal* .

Gomez, Brad T, and J Matthew Wilson. 2001. "Political Sophistication and Economic Voting in the American Electorate: A Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution." *American Journal of Political Science* 45(4): 899–914.

Gomez, Brad T, and J Matthew Wilson. 2003. "Causal Attribution and Economic Voting in American Congressional Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 56(3): 271–282.

Gomez, Brad T, and J Matthew Wilson. 2008. "Political Sophistication and Attributions of Blame in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 38(4): 633–650.

Goodman, Christopher B. 2018. "Jurisdictional Overlap and the Size of the Local Public Workforce." *State and Local Government Review* 50(1): 15–23.

Goodman, Christopher B. 2019. "Local Government Fragmentation: What Do We Know?" *State and Local Government Review* 51(2): 134–144.

Goodman, Christopher B. 2021. "Political Fragmentation and Economic Growth in US Metropolitan Areas." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 43(9): 1355–1376.

Goodman, Christopher B., and Suzanne M. Leland. 2019. "Do Cities and Counties Attempt to Circumvent Changes in Their Autonomy by Creating Special Districts?" *The American Review of Public Administration* 49(2): 203–217.

Goyal, Tanushree. 2024. "Do Citizens Enforce Accountability for Public Goods Provision? Evidence from India's Rural Roads Program." *The Journal of Politics* 86(1): 97–112.

Grabar, Henry. 2022. "What the Great Pushback Against Urban Progressives Is Really About.".

Graham, Matthew H, Gregory A Huber, Neil Malhotra, and Cecilia Hyunjung Mo. 2023. "Irrelevant Events and Voting Behavior: Replications Using Principles from Open Science." *The Journal of Politics* 85(1): 296–303.

Green, Donald, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler. 2002. *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Grimmer, Justin, and Eitan Hersh. 2023. "How Election Rules Affect Who Wins." Working paper. Online: https://www.eitanhersh.com/uploads/7/9/7/5/7975685/effectslaws_080123.pdf.

Grumbach, Jacob. 2022. *Laboratories Against Democracy: How National Parties Transformed State Politics.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Grumbach, Jacob M., Robert Mickey, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2023. "The Insulation of Local Governance from Black Electoral Power: Northern Cities and the Great Migration." Working paper. Online: https://uc7918308b79ff339df25b8c3a2c.dl.dropboxusercontent.com/cd/0/inline2/CFDr5ayWU3uIVFgDUYew3KYLbHijYySffJFKuGyeQsv_bQK4LK1Nh-cLXdbgvOGflMHJkuwJ0nj0Ng4XbyvISfG5c3IR9GFYI5CI2eaySsb7seLpxZCTSzKEdNiGOEHnWebfNOVMMIaiDMbnrR_DfBJcHvFRMVMWEZa1NW9ss5ft6L-RFrAqq-rHPvpoeEHT5pmZUS-HF493n3Z1odS5KnAgek76wycWTWWO9xyVi4zFOeX3qTWvKcPUcDJNdTc0I0QQzlX7cKmg49s_bVfDU2PYEppCYaCrfOTQ_bmdiW9SOxB2Jy4lIq9yc6kKxZwTJcDfsygBVZ32hwN_HE2kZX1r8zr4dtphY8sKSbma3drUB9O4/file.

Guess, Andrew M. 2021. "(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans' Online Media Diets." *American Journal of Political Science* 65(4): 1007–1022.

Guillamón, Ma Dolores, Francisco Bastida, and Bernardino Benito. 2013. "The Electoral Budget Cycle on Municipal Police Expenditure." *European Journal of Law and Economics* 36: 447–469.

Gunderson, Anna. 2022. "Who Punishes More? Partisanship, Punitive Policies, and the Puzzle of Democratic Governors." *Political Research Quarterly* 75(1): 3–19.

Gyourko, Joe, and Jacob Krimmel. 2021. "The Impact of Local Residential Land Use Restrictions on Land Values Across and Within Single Family Housing Markets." *Journal of Urban Economics* 126: 103374.

Gyourko, Joseph, Albert Saiz, and Anita Summers. 2008. "A New Measure of the Local Regulatory Environment for Housing Markets: The Wharton Residential Land Use Regulatory Index." *Urban Studies* 45(3): 693–729.

Hajnal, Zoltan, and Jessica Trounstine. 2014. "What Underlies Urban Politics? Race, Class, Ideology, Partisanship, and the Urban Vote." *Urban Affairs Review* 50(1): 63–99.

Hajnal, Zoltan L, and Jessica Trounstine. 2005. "Where Turnout Matters: The Consequences of Uneven Turnout in City Politics." *Journal of Politics* 67(2): 515–535.

Hajnal, Zoltan L, and Paul G. Lewis. 2003. "Municipal Institutions and Voter Turnout in Local Elections." *Urban Affairs Review* 38(5): 645–668.

Hajnal, Zoltan L, Vladimir Kogan, and G Agustin Markarian. 2022. "Who Votes: City Election Timing and Voter Composition." *American Political Science Review* 116(1): 374–383.

Hall, Andrew B., and James M. Snyder, Jr. 2015. "How Much of the Incumbency Advantage is Due to Scare-Off?" *Political Science Research and Methods* 3(3): 493–514.

Hall, Andrew B, Jesse Yoder, and Nishant Karandikar. 2021. "Economic Distress and Voting: Evidence from the Subprime Mortgage Crisis." *Political Science Research and Methods* 9(2): 327–344.

Hamel, Brian T. 2024. "Traceability and Mass Policy Feedback Effects." *American Political Science Review* (forthcoming).

Hamel, Brian T, and Derek E Holliday. 2023. "Unequal Responsiveness in City Service Delivery: Evidence from 42 Million 311 Calls." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

Hammer, Peter J. 2019. "The Flint Water Crisis, the Karegnondi Water Authority and Strategic–Structural Racism." *Critical Sociology* 45(1): 103–119.

Hansen, Katy, Megan Mullin, and Erin K Riggs. 2020. "Collaboration Risk and the Choice to Consolidate Local Government Services." *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* 3(3): 223–238.

Hansen, Katy, Shadi Eskaf, and Megan Mullin. 2022. "Avoiding Punishment? Electoral Accountability for Local Fee Increases." *Urban Affairs Review* 58(3): 888–906.

Harding, Robin. 2015. "Attribution and Accountability: Voting for Roads in Ghana." *World Politics* 67(4): 656–689.

Harding, Robin, and David Stasavage. 2014. "What Democracy Does (and Doesn't Do) for Basic Services: School Fees, School Inputs, and African Elections." *The Journal of Politics* 76(1): 229–245.

Harrington, David E. 1989. "Economic News on Television: The Determinants of Coverage." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 53(1): 17–40.

Hart, Austin, and J Scott Matthews. 2022. "Unmasking Accountability: Judging Performance in an Interdependent World." *The Journal of Politics* 84(3): 1607–1622.

Hartney, Michael T, and Sam D Hayes. 2021. "Off-Cycle and Out of Sync: How Election Timing Influences Political Representation." *State Politics & Politics Quarterly* 21(4): 335–354.

Hayes, Danny, and Jennifer L Lawless. 2015. "As Local News Goes, So Goes Citizen Engagement: Media, Knowledge, and Participation in US House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 77(2): 447–462.

Healy, Andrew, and Gabriel S. Lenz. 2014. "Substituting the End for the Whole: Why Voters Respond Primarily to the Election-Year Economy." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(1): 31–47.

Healy, Andrew, and Gabriel S Lenz. 2017. "Presidential Voting and the Local Economy: Evidence from Two Population-Based Data Sets." *Journal of Politics* 79(4): 1419–1432.

Healy, Andrew, and Neil Malhotra. 2013. "Retrospective Voting Reconsidered." *Annual Review of Political Science* 16: 285–306.

Healy, Andrew J, and Neil Malhotra. 2009. "Myopic Voters and Natural Disaster Policy." *American Political Science Review* 103(3): 387–406.

Healy, Andrew J, Neil Malhotra, and Cecilia H Mo. 2010. "Irrelevant Events Affect Voters' Evaluations of Government Performance." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107(29): 12804–12809.

Hessick, Carissa Byrne, and Michael Morse. 2019. "Picking Prosecutors." *Iowa L. Rev.* 105: 1537.

Hill, Seth J, Michael C Herron, and Jeffrey B Lewis. 2010. "Economic Crisis, Iraq, and Race: A Study of the 2008 Presidential Election." *Election Law Journal* 9(1): 41–62.

Hobolt, Sara B, James Tilley, and S Banducci. 2013. "Clarity of Responsibility: How Government Cohesion Conditions Performance Voting." *European Journal of Political Research* 52(2): 164–187.

Holbein, John. 2016. "Left Behind? Citizen Responsiveness to Government Performance Information." *American Political Science Review* 110(2): 353–368.

Holbrook, R Andrew, and Timothy G Hill. 2005. "Agenda-Setting and Priming in Prime Time Television: Crime Dramas as Political Cues." *Political Communication* 22(3): 277–295.

Holbrook, Thomas M, and Aaron C Weinschenk. 2014. "Money, Candidates, and Mayoral Elections." *Electoral Studies* 35: 292–302.

Holbrook, Thomas M, and Aaron C Weinschenk. 2020*a*. "Are Perceptions of Local Conditions Rooted in Reality? Evidence From Two Large-Scale Local Surveys." *American Politics Research* 48(4): 467–474.

Holbrook, Thomas M, and Aaron C Weinschenk. 2020*b*. "Information, Political Bias, and Public Perceptions of Local Conditions in US Cities." *Political Research Quarterly* 73(1): 221–236.

Holman, Mirya R. 2016. "Gender, Political Rhetoric, and Moral Metaphors in State of the City Addresses." *Urban Affairs Review* 52(4): 501–530.

Hopkins, Daniel J. 2018. *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hopkins, Daniel J., and Katherine T. McCabe. 2012. "After It's Too Late: Estimating the Policy Impacts of Black Mayoralties in US Cities." *American Politics Research* 40(4): 665–700.

Hopkins, Daniel J, and Lindsay M Pettingill. 2018. "Retrospective Voting in Big-City U.S. Mayoral Elections." *Political Science Research and Methods* 6(4): 697–714.

Hopkins, Daniel J, and Tori Gorton. 2024. "Unsubscribed and Undemanding: Partisanship and the Minimal Effects of a Field Experiment Encouraging Local News Consumption." *American Journal of Political Science* 68(4): 1217–1233.

Hopkins, Daniel J, Eunji Kim, and Soojong Kim. 2017. "Does Newspaper Coverage Influence or Reflect Public Perceptions of the Economy?" *Research & Politics* 4(4): 2053168017737900.

Howard, Christopher. 1997. *The Hidden Welfare State: Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Howell, Susan E, and Huey L Perry. 2004. "Black Mayors/White Mayors: Explaining Their Approval." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 68(1): 32–56.

Howell, Susan E, and William P McLean. 2001. "Performance and Race in Evaluating Minority Mayors." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65(3): 321–343.

Hoyt, William H. 2001. "Tax Policy Coordination, Vertical Externalities, and Optimal Taxation in a System of Hierarchical Governments." *Journal of Urban Economics* 50(3): 491–516.

Huber, Gregory A., Seth J. Hill, and Gabriel S. Lenz. 2012. "Sources of Bias in Retrospective Decision Making: Experimental Evidence on Voters' Limitations in Controlling Incumbents." *American Political Science Review* 106(4): 720–741.

HUD. 2012. *Criteria and Recordkeeping Requirements for Definition of Homelessness*. HUD.

Hughes, Sara. 2021. "Flint, Michigan, and the Politics of Safe Drinking Water in the United States." *Perspectives on Politics* 19(4): 1219–1232.

Hyytinen, Ari, Jaakko Meriläinen, Tuukka Saarimaa, Otto Toivanen, and Janne Tukiainen. 2015. "Does Regression Discontinuity Design Work? Evidence from Random Election Outcomes." *Government Institute for Economic Research Finland (VATT) Working Papers* (59).

Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York, NY: Random House.

Jensen, Nathan M. 2017. "Job Creation and Firm-Specific Location Incentives." *Journal of Public Policy* 37(1): 85–112.

Jomsky, Mark, Zizette Mullins, and Lisa Pope. 2015. *Elections – There's More Than One Way*. City Clerks New Law and Elections Seminar League of California Cities.

Kam, Cindy D., and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. 2013. "Name Recognition and Candidate Support." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(4): 971–986.

Kanthak, Kristin, and Jonathan Woon. 2015. "Women Don't Run? Election Aversion and Candidate Entry." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 595–612.

Kaplan, Jacob. 2021*a*. "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting Program Data: Offenses Known and Clearances by Arrest (Return A), 1960-2020." ICPSR. Available online: https://doi.org/10.3886/E100707V17.

Kaplan, Jacob. 2021*b*. *Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: A Practitioner's Guide.* Online: https://ucrbook.com/.

Kaufmann, Karen M. 2004. *The Urban Voter: Group Conflict and Mayoral Voting Behavior in American Cities.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Keen, Michael J, and Christos Kotsogiannis. 2002. "Does Federalism Lead to Excessively High Taxes?" *American Economic Review* 92(1): 363–370.

Kelly, Janet M, and David Swindell. 2002. "A Multiple–Indicator Approach to Municipal Service Evaluation: Correlating Performance Measurement and Citizen Satisfaction Across Jurisdictions." *Public Administration Review* 62(5): 610–621.

Kerr, Brinck, Will Miller, William D Schreckhise, and Margaret Reid. 2013. "When Does Politics Matter? A Reexamination of the Determinants of African-American and Latino Municipal Employment Patterns." *Urban Affairs Review* 49(6): 888–912.

Key, V.O. 1966. *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting 1936–1960.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kim, Eunji. 2023. "Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility." *American Journal of Political Science* 67(1): 39–54.

Kim, Eunji, and Shawn Patterson Jr. 2024. "The American Viewer: Political Consequences of Entertainment Media." *American Political Science Review* (forthcoming).

Kinder, Donald R, and D Roderick Kiewiet. 1979. "Economic Discontent and Political Behavior: The Role of Personal Grievances and Collective Economic Judgments in Congressional Voting." *American Journal of Political Science* 23(3): 495–527.

Kirkland, Patricia A. 2022. "Representation in American Cities: Who Runs for Mayor and Who Wins?" *Urban Affairs Review* 58(3): 635–670.

Kirkland, Patricia A. 2024. *Electing CEOs: Business Owners and Executives as Politicians.* Book manuscript.

Kogan, Vladimir, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz. 2016*a*. "Do School Report Cards Produce Accountability Through the Ballot Box?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 35(3): 639–661.

Kogan, Vladimir, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz. 2016*b*. "Performance Federalism and Local Democracy: Theory and Evidence from School Tax Referenda." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(2): 418–435.

Kogan, Vladimir, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz. 2018. "Election Timing, Electorate Composition, and Policy Outcomes: Evidence from School Districts." *American Journal of Political Science* 62(3): 637–651.

Kogan, Vladimir, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz. 2021. "The Democratic Deficit in US Education Governance." *American Political Science Review* 115(3): 1082–1089.

Kok, Nils, Paavo Monkkonen, and John M Quigley. 2014. "Land Use Regulations and the Value of Land and Housing: An Intra-Metropolitan Analysis." *Journal of Urban Economics* 81: 136–148.

Kramer, Gerald H. 1971. "Short-Term Fluctuations in US Voting Behavior, 1896-1964." *American Political Science Review* 65(1): 131–143.

Krebs, Timothy B. 1998. "The Determinants of Candidates' Vote Share and the Advantages of Incumbency in City Council Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 42(3): 921–935.

Kreitzer, Rebecca J, and Tracy L Osborn. 2019. "The Emergence and Activities of Women's Recruiting Groups in the US." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7(4): 842–852.

Krumholz, Sam. 2019. "The Effect of District Attorneys on Local Criminal Justice Outcomes." Working paper. Online: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3243162.

Kuriwaki, Shiro. 2023. "Ticket Splitting in a Nationalized Era." Working paper, online: https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/bvgz3/.

Larsen, Martin Vinæs. 2019*a*. "Incumbent Tenure Crowds Out Economic Voting." *British Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

Larsen, Martin Vinæs. 2019*b*. "Is the Relationship Between Political Responsibility and Electoral Accountability Causal, Adaptive and Policy-Specific?" *Political Behavior* 41(4): 1071–1098.

Larsen, Martin Vinæs. 2021. "How Do Voters Hold Politicians Accountable for Personal Welfare? Evidence of a Self-Serving Bias." *Journal of Politics* 83(2): 740–752.

Larsen, Martin Vinæs, and Asmus Leth Olsen. 2020. "Reducing Bias in Citizens' Perception of Crime Rates: Evidence from a Field Experiment on Burglary Prevalence." *Journal of Politics* 82(2): 747–752.

Larsen, Martin Vinæs, Frederik Hjorth, Peter Thisted Dinesen, and Kim Mannemar Sønderskov. 2019. "When Do Citizens Respond Politically to the Local Economy? Evidence from Registry Data on Local Housing Markets." *American Political Science Review* 113(2): 499–516.

Lau, Richard R, and David P Redlawsk. 1997. "Voting Correctly." *American Political Science Review* 91(3): 585–598.

Lau, Richard R, and David P Redlawsk. 2001. "Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making." *American Journal of Political Science* 45(4): 951–971.

Lawless, Jennifer L, and Richard L Fox. 2005. *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lawless, Jennifer L, and Richard L Fox. 2010. *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lax, Jeffrey R., and Justin H. Phillips. 2009. "How Should We Estimate Public Opinion in The States?" *American Journal of Political Science* 53(1): 107–121.

Lay, J Celeste, and Michael D Tyburski. 2017. "The Buck Stops with the Education Mayor: Mayoral Control and Local Test Scores in US Urban Mayoral Elections." *Politics & Policy* 45(6): 964–1002.

Lee, David S. 2008. "Randomized Experiments from Non-Random Selection in US House Elections." *Journal of Econometrics* 142(2): 675–697.

Lee, Diana Da In. 2024. Minority Political Ambition and Candidate Supply in the United States PhD thesis Columbia University.

Lengauer, Günther, Frank Esser, and Rosa Berganza. 2012. "Negativity in Political News: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings." *Journalism* 13(2): 179–202.

Lenz, Gabriel. 2018. "Time for a Change." *Critical Review* 30(1-2): 87–106.

Lenz, Gabriel S. 2013. *Follow the Leader? How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lerman, Amy E. 2019. *Good Enough for Government Work: The Public Reputation Crisis in America (and What We Can Do to Fix It)*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Levendusky, Matthew S. 2022. "How Does Local TV News Change Viewers' Attitudes? The Case of Sinclair Broadcasting." *Political Communication* 39(1): 23–38.

Levitt, Steven D. 1997. "Using Electoral Cycles in Police Hiring to Estimate the Effect of Police on Crime." *American Economic Review* 87(3): 270–290.

Levitt, Steven D., and Catherine D. Wolfram. 1997. "Decomposing the Sources of Incumbency Advantage in the US House." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 22(1): 45–60.

Lewis-Beck, Michael S, and Mary Stegmaier. 2000. "Economic Determinants of Electoral Outcomes." *Annual Review of Political Science* 3(1): 183–219.

Lin, Ming-Jen. 2009. "More Police, Less Crime: Evidence from US State Data." *International Review of Law and Economics* 29(2): 73–80.

Logan, John R, and Harvey Molotch. 1987. *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Lotshaw, Stephanie, Paul Lewis, David Bragdon, and Zak Accuardi. 2017. A Bid for Better Transit: Improving Service with Contracted Operations. Technical report TransitCenter and Eno Center for Transportation.

Lowery, David, William E Lyons, and Ruth Hoogland DeHoog. 1990. "Institutionally-Induced Attribution Errors Their Composition and Impact on Citizen Satisfaction with Local Government Services." *American Politics Research* 18(2): 169–196.

Lowrey, Annie. 2022. "The People vs. Chesa Boudin.".

Lowry, Robert C, James E Alt, and Karen E Ferree. 1998. "Fiscal Policy Outcomes and Electoral Accountability in American States." *American Political Science Review* 92(4): 759–774.

Lucas, Jack. 2015. "Local Governance and the Local Political Career in Canada: A Sample Dataset." *Canadian Public Administration* 58(4): 605–617.

Lucas, Jack. 2016. *Fields of Authority: Special Purpose Governance in Ontario, 1815-2015*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Lucas, Jack. 2017. "Patterns of Urban Governance: A Sequence Analysis of Long-Term Institutional Change in Six Canadian Cities." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 39(1): 68–90.

Lucas, Jack. 2021. "The Size and Sources of Municipal Incumbency Advantage in Canada." *Urban Affairs Review* 57(2): 373–401.

Lucas, Jack, and Anthony Sayers. 2018. "Responsiveness, Accountability, and the Long-Term Development of Local Political Careers in Calgary and Edmonton." In *Accountability and Responsiveness at the Municipal Level: Views from Canada*, ed. Sandra Breux, and Jérôme Couture. McGill-Queen's University Press pp. 107–131.

Lucas, Jack, R Michael McGregor, and Kim-Lee Tuxhorn. 2022. "Closest to the People? Incumbency Advantage and the Personal Vote in Non-Partisan Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 75(1): 188–202.

Lupia, Arthur. 1992. "Busy Voters, Agenda Control, and the Power of Information." *American Political Science Review* 86(2): 390–403.

Lupia, Arthur. 1994*a*. "The Effect of Information on Voting Behavior and Electoral Outcomes: An Experimental Study of Direct Legislation." *Public Choice* 78(1): 65–86.

Lupia, Arthur. 1994*b*. "Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections." *American Political Science Review* 88(1): 63–76.

Lupia, Arthur, and Mathew D McCubbins. 1998. *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lyons, Joseph, and Zachary Spicer. 2018. "Accountability and Local Collaborative Governance." In *Accountability and Responsiveness at the Municipal Level: Views from Canada*, ed. Sandra Breux, and Jérôme Couture. McGill-Queen's University Press pp. 177–199.

Lyons, William E, and David Lowery. 1989. "Governmental Fragmentation Versus Consolidation: Five Public-Choice Myths about How to Create Informed, Involved, and Happy Citizens." *Public Administration Review* 49(6): 533–543.

Maguire, Edward R, and William R King. 2004. "Trends in the Policing Industry." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 593(1): 15–41.

Malhotra, Neil, and Alexander G Kuo. 2008. "Attributing Blame: The Public's Response to Hurricane Katrina." *Journal of Politics* 70(1): 120–135.

Mani, Anandi, and Sharun Mukand. 2007. "Democracy, Visibility and Public Good Provision." *Journal of Development Economics* 83(2): 506–529.

Marion, Nancy E, and Willard M Oliver. 2013. "When the Mayor Speaks... Mayoral Crime Control Rhetoric in the Top US Cities: Symbolic or Tangible?" *Criminal Justice Policy Review* 24(4): 473–491.

Markus, Gregory B. 1988. "The Impact of Personal and National Economic Conditions on the Presidential Vote: A Pooled Cross-Sectional Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 32(1): 137–154.

Marschall, Melissa, and John Lappie. 2018. "Turnout in Local Elections: Is Timing Really Everything?" *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 17(3): 221–233.

Marschall, Melissa, and John Lappie. 2024. "Local Democracy in America: How Access, Competition, and Place Shape Turnout in Mayoral Races." *Urban Affairs Review* (forthcoming).

Marschall, Melissa, Paru Shah, and Anirudh Ruhil. 2011. "The Study of Local Elections: Editors' Introduction: A Looking Glass into the Future." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44(1): 97–100.

Marsh, Michael, and James Tilley. 2010. "The Attribution of Credit and Blame to Governments and Its Impact on Vote Choice." *British Journal of Political Science* 40(1): 115–134.

Martin, Gregory J, and Joshua McCrain. 2019. "Local News and National Politics." *American Political Science Review* 113(2): 372–384.

Martin, Gregory, Nicola Mastrorocco, Joshua McCrain, and Arianna Ornaghi. 2024. "Media Consolidation." Working paper. Online: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4991904.

Martin, Lucy, and Pia J Raffler. 2021. "Fault Lines: The Effects of Bureaucratic Power on Electoral Accountability." *American Journal of Political Science* 65(1): 210–224.

Mastrorocco, Nicola, and Arianna Ornaghi. 2024. "Who Watches the Watchmen? Local News and Police Behavior in the United States." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* (forthcoming).

Mastrorocco, Nicola, and Luigi Minale. 2018. "News Media and Crime Perceptions: Evidence from a Natural Experiment." *Journal of Public Economics* 165: 230–255.

Matsa, Katerina Eva. 2017. "Buying spree brings more local TV stations to fewer big companies." Pew Research Center report, online: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/05/11/buying-spree-brings-more-local-tv-stations-to-fewer-big-companies/.

Mavridis, Christos, Orestis Troumpounis, and Maurizio Zanardi. 2024. "Police Militarization and Local Sheriff Elections." *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* (forthcoming).

McCrain, Joshua, and Erik Peterson. 2024. "Local Elections Do Not Increase Local News Demand." *Political Science Research & Methods* (forthcoming).

McCrary, Justin. 2002. "Using Electoral Cycles in Police Hiring to Estimate the Effect of Police on Crime: Comment." *American Economic Review* 92(4): 1236–1243.

Mello, Steven. 2019. "More COPS, Less Crime." *Journal of Public Economics* 172: 174–200.

Mettler, Suzanne. 2011. *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Michener, Jamila. 2018. *Fragmented Democracy: Medicaid, Federalism, and Unequal Politics.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Michener, Jamila. 2019. "Policy Feedback in a Racialized Polity." *Policy Studies Journal* 47(2): 423–450.

Miller, Michael K. 2013. "For the Win! The Effect of Professional Sports Records on Mayoral Elections." *Social Science Quarterly* 94(1): 59–78.

Minkoff, Scott L. 2016. "NYC 311: A Tract-Level Analysis of Citizen–Government Contacting in New York City." *Urban Affairs Review* 52(2): 211–246.

Moreno-Medina, Jonathan. 2021. "Local Crime News Bias: Extent, Causes and Consequences." Working paper. Online: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ec5aa4736bba52179f2ff85/t/60fff6312b91eb1daf977e98/1627387447004/moreno_crime_news.pdf.

Morgan, Kimberly J., and Andrea Louise Campbell. 2011. *The Delegated Welfare State: Medicare, Markets, and the Governance of Social Policy.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Moskowitz, Daniel. 2021. "Local News, Information, and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections." *American Political Science Review* 115(1): 114–129.

Mullin, Megan. 2008. "The Conditional Effect of Specialized Governance on Public Policy." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(1): 125–141.

Mullin, Megan. 2009. *Governing the Tap: Special District Governance and the New Local Politics of Water.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mullin, Megan. 2020. "The Effects of Drinking Water Service Fragmentation on Drought-Related Water Security." *Science* 368(6488): 274–277.

Mullin, Megan, and Katy Hansen. 2023. "Local News and the Electoral Incentive to Invest in Infrastructure." *American Political Science Review* 117(3): 1145–1150.

Mummolo, Jonathan, and Erik Peterson. 2018. "Improving the Interpretation of Fixed Effects Regression Results." *Political Science Research and Methods* 6(4): 829–835.

Murakawa, Naomi. 2014. *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Mutz, Diana C. 1994. "Contextualizing Personal Experience: The Role of Mass Media." *Journal of Politics* 56(3): 689–714.

Naftel, Daniel. 2023. "When Policing Mobilizes: Political Action in the Wake of Anti-Gang Crackdowns." Working paper.

National Municipal League, Committee on Revision of the Model City Charter. 1916. A Model City Charter and Municipal Home Rule. National Municipal League.

Newman, Brian. 2013. "Polls and Elections: Decreasing the Economy's Impact on Evaluations of the President: An Experiment on Attribution Framing." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43(4): 866–882.

Nieves, Evelyn. 1999. "San Francisco Mayor Easily Wins Another Term.".

Ogorzalek, Thomas. 2024. "Who Governs Now?" *Political Science Quarterly* 140(1): 133–146.

O'Grady, Tom. 2019. "How Do Economic Circumstances Determine Preferences? Evidence from Long-Run Panel Data." *British Journal of Political Science* 49(4): 1381–1406.

Oliver, J. Eric, and Shang E. Ha. 2007. "Vote Choice in Suburban Elections." *American Political Science Review* 101(3): 393–408.

Oliver, J. Eric, Shang E. Ha, and Zachary Callen. 2012. *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ostrom, Elinor. 1972. "Metropolitan Reform: Propositions Derived from Two Traditions." *Social Science Quarterly* 53(3): 474–493.

Ostrom, Elinor, Roger B Parks, and Gordon P Whitaker. 1978. "Police Agency Size: Some Evidence on its Effects." *Policy Studies* 1(March): 34–46.

Ostrom, Vincent, Charles M Tiebout, and Robert Warren. 1961. "The Organization of Government in Metropolitan Areas: A Theoretical Inquiry." *American Political Science Review* 55(4): 831–842.

Owens, Michael Leo, Akira Drake Rodriguez, and Robert A Brown. 2021. ""Let's Get Ready to Crumble": Black Municipal Leadership and Public Housing Transformation in the United States." *Urban Affairs Review* 57(2): 342–372.

Patterson, Thomas E. 1994. *Out of Order: An Incisive and Boldly Original Critique of the News Media's Domination of America's Political Process.* New York: Vintage Books.

Payson, Julia A. 2017. "When are Local Incumbents Held Accountable for Government Performance? Evidence from US School Districts." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 42(3): 421–448.

Peltzman, Sam. 1987. "Economic Conditions and Gubernatorial Elections." *American Economic Review* 77(2): 293–297.

Perrusquia, Marc. 2017. "Memphis murder rate mirrors '90s cocaine epidemic level.".

Peterson, Erik. 2017. "The Role of the Information Environment in Partisan Voting." *The Journal of Politics* 79(4): 1191–1204.

Peterson, Erik. 2021*a*. "Not Dead Yet: Political Learning from Newspapers in a Changing Media Landscape." *Political Behavior* 43(1): 339–361.

Peterson, Erik. 2021*b*. "Paper Cuts: How Reporting Resources Affect Political News Coverage." *American Journal of Political Science* 65(2): 443–459.

Peterson, Erik, and Jongwoo Jeong. 2024. "Making Issues Matter: Local Media and Policy-Based Evaluations of Politicians." *Political Behavior* (forthcoming).

Peterson, Paul E. 1976. *School Politics, Chicago Style.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Peterson, Paul E. 1981. *City Limits.* University of Chicago Press.

Peterson, Paul E. 1995. *The Price of Federalism.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Post, Alison E. 2018. "Cities and Politics in the Developing World." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21: 115–133.

Post, Alison E., and Nicholas Kuipers. 2023. "City Size and Public Service Access: Evidence from Brazil and Indonesia." *Perspectives on Politics* 21(3): 811–830.

Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rae, Douglas W. 2003. *City: Urbanism and Its End.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Reckhow, Sarah, Jeffrey R Henig, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Jamie Alter Litt. 2017. ""Outsiders with deep pockets": The nationalization of local school board elections." *Urban Affairs Review* 53(5): 783–811.

Reece, Mason, Gabrielle Péloquin-Skulski, Kate Murray, Joseph Loffredo, Kevin E Acevedo Jetter, Fernanda Gonzalez, Zachary Djanogly Garai, Alejandro Flores, Luka Bulic Braculj, Samuel Baltz et al. 2024. "Hidden Partisanship in American Elections." *MIT Political Science Department Research Paper. Online: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4721012* .

Regan, Priscilla M, and Torin Monahan. 2014. "Fusion Center Accountability and Intergovernmental Information Sharing." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 44(3): 475–498.

Rendleman, Hunter E., and Jesse Yoder. 2023. "Do Government Benefits Affect Officeholders? Electoral Fortunes? Evidence from State Earned Income Tax Credits." *American Political Science Review* (forthcoming).

Rezal, Adriana, and Erin Caughey. 2022. "Key facts about homelessness in San Francisco.".

Roberts, Nancy C. 2002. "Keeping Public Officials Accountable through Dialogue: Resolving the Accountability Paradox." *Public Administration Review* 62(6): 658–669.

Rodden, Jonathan. 2002. "The Dilemma of Fiscal Federalism: Grants and Fiscal Performance around the World." *American Journal of Political Science* 46(3): 670–687.

Rodden, Jonathan. 2006. *Hamilton's Paradox: The Promise and Peril of Fiscal Federalism.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rogers, Steven. 2016. "National Forces in State Legislative Elections." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667(1): 207–225.

Rogers, Steven. 2017. "Electoral Accountability for State Legislative Roll Calls and Ideological Representation." *American Political Science Review* 111(3): 555–571.

Rogers, Steven. 2023. *Accountability in State Legislatures.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Romer, D., K. H. Jamieson, and S Aday. 2006. "Television News and the Cultivation of the Fear of Crime." *Journal of Communication* 53(1): 88–104.

Rudolph, Thomas J. 2003*a*. "Institutional Context and the Assignment of Political Responsibility." *Journal of Politics* 65(1): 190–215.

Rudolph, Thomas J. 2003*b*. "Who's Responsible for the Economy? The Formation and Consequences of Responsibility Attributions." *American Journal of Political Science* 47(4): 698–713.

Rudolph, Thomas J. 2006. "Triangulating Political Responsibility: The Motivated Formation of Responsibility Judgments." *Political Psychology* 27(1): 99–122.

Sahn, Alexander. 2024*a*. "Public Comment and Public Policy." *American Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).

Sahn, Alexander. 2024*b*. "Racial Diversity and Exclusionary Zoning: Evidence from the Great Migration." *Journal of Politics* (forthcoming).

San Francisco Chamber of Commerce. 2021. "New Polling Shows That 8 Out of 10 Residents Believe Crime Has Gotten Worse in San Francisco; Vast Majority Support Increasing Police Officers and Expanding Police Work.".

Sances, Michael W. 2017. "Attribution Errors in Federalist Systems: When Voters Punish the President for Local Tax Increases." *Journal of Politics* 79(4): 1286–1301.

Sances, Michael W. 2021*a*. "Do District Attorneys Represent Their Voters? Evidence from California's Era of Criminal Justice Reform." *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy* 2(2): 169–197.

Sances, Michael W. 2021*b*. "Presidential Approval and the Inherited Economy." *American Journal of Political Science* 65(4): 938–953.

Sances, Michael W. 2023. "Defund My Police? The Effect of George Floyd's Murder on Support for Local Police Budgets." *The Journal of Politics* 85(3): 1156–1160.

Sances, Michael W. 2024. "Attitudes toward Police and Police Spending." *Public Opinion Quarterly* (forthcoming).

Sapotichne, Joshua, Bryan D Jones, and Michelle Wolfe. 2007. "Is Urban Politics a Black Hole? Analyzing the Boundary Between Political Science and Urban Politics." *Urban Affairs Review* 43(1): 76–106.

Schaffner, Brian F, Jesse H Rhodes, and Raymond J La Raja. 2020. *Hometown Inequality: Race, Class, and Representation in American Local Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schaffner, Brian, Matthew Streb, and Gerald C. Wright, Jr. 2001. "Teams Without Uniforms: The Nonpartisan Ballot in State and Local Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 54(1): 7–30.

Schattschneider, E.E. 1960. *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Schleicher, David. 2007. "Why Is There No Partisan Competition in City Council Elections: The Role of Election Law." *Journal of Law & Politics* 23(4): 419–474.

Schleicher, David. 2010. "I Would, but I Need the Eggs: Why Neither Exit Nor Voice Substantially Limits Big City Corruption." *Loy. U. Chi. LJ* 42: 277–293.

Schleicher, David. 2016. "The Boundary Problem and the Changing Case Against Deference in Election Law Cases: Lessons from Local Government Law." *Election Law Journal* 15(3): 247–262.

Schlenker, Barry R, Thomas W Britt, John Pennington, Rodolfo Murphy, and Kevin Doherty. 1994. "The Triangle Model of Responsibility." *Psychological Review* 101(4): 632–652.

Self, Robert O. 2003. *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Seligman, Lester G. 1961. "Political Recruitment and Party Structure: A Case Study." *American Political Science Review* 55(1): 77–86.

Shaban, Bigad. 2022. "San Francisco Mayor Breed Explains Why You Haven't Seen Her With DA Boudin.".

Shafizadeh, Kevan, and Fred Mannering. 2003. "Acceptability of Pavement Roughness on Urban Highways by Driving Public." *Transportation Research Record* 1860(1): 187–193.

Shah, Paru. 2014. "It Takes a Black Candidate: A Supply-Side Theory of Minority Representation." *Political Research Quarterly* 67(2): 266–279.

Shaver, Kelly G. 1985. *The Attribution of Blame: Causality, Responsibility, and Blameworthiness*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Simon, Herbert A. 1971. "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World." In *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, ed. M Greenberger. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press pp. 37–72.

Simon, Jonathan. 2007. *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sniderman, Paul M. 2000. "Taking Sides: A Fixed Choice Theory of Political Reasoning." In *Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice, and the Bounds of Rationality*, ed. Arthur Lupia, Mathew D. McCubbins, and Samuel L. Popkin. Cambridge University Press pp. 67–84.

Snyder, Jr., James M., and David Strömberg. 2010. "Press Coverage and Political Accountability." *Journal of Political Economy* 118(2): 355–408.

Soroka, Stuart N. 2006. "Good News and Bad News: Asymmetric Responses to Economic Information." *Journal of Politics* 68(2): 372–385.

Soroka, Stuart N, Dominik A Stecula, and Christopher Wlezien. 2015. "It's (Change in) the (Future) Economy, Stupid: Economic Indicators, the Media, and Public Opinion." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(2): 457–474.

Soroka, Stuart, Patrick Fournier, and Lilach Nir. 2019. "Cross-National Evidence of a Negativity Bias in Psychophysiological Reactions to News." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116(38): 18888–18892.

Sparks, Steven. 2020. "Quality Challenger Emergence Under the Top-Two Primary: Comparing One-Party and Two-Party General Election Contests." *Electoral Studies* 65: 102136.

Stein, Robert M. 1990*a*. "The Budgetary Effects of Municipal Service Contracting: A Principal-Agent Explanation." *American Journal of Political Science* 34(2): 471–502.

Stein, Robert M. 1990*b*. "Economic Voting for Governor and US Senator: The Electoral Consequences of Federalism." *Journal of Politics* 52(1): 29–53.

Stein, Robert M. 1990*c*. *Urban Alternatives: Public and Private Markets in the Provision of Local Services*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Stephanopoulos, Nicholas O. 2017. "Accountability Claims in Constitutional Law." *Northwestern University Law Review* 112(5): 989–1068.

Stokes, Leah Cardamore. 2020. *Short Circuiting Policy: Interest Groups and the Battle Over Clean Energy and Climate Policy in the American States*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Stone, Clarence N. 1946. *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.

Stroud, Natalie J. 2011. *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Swanstrom, Todd. 1985. *The Crisis of Growth Politics: Cleveland, Kucinich, and the Challenge of Urban Populism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Tepe, Markus, and Pieter Vanhuysse. 2013. "Cops for Hire? The Political Economy of Police Employment in the German Etates." *Journal of Public Policy* 33(2): 165–199.

Thompson, Daniel M. 2020. "How Partisan is Local Law Enforcement? Evidence from Sheriff Cooperation with Immigration Authorities." *American Political Science Review* 114(1): 222–236.

Thrower, Sharece. 2019. "The Study of Executive Policy Making in the US States." *The Journal of Politics* 81(1): 364–370.

Tiebout, Charles M. 1956. "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures." *The Journal of Political Economy* 64(5): 416–424.

Tilley, James, and Sara B Hobolt. 2011. "Is the Government to Blame? An Experimental Test of How Partisanship Shapes Perceptions of Performance and Responsibility." *The Journal of Politics* 73(2): 1–15.

Toff, Benjamin, and Antonis Kalogeropoulos. 2020. "All the News That's Fit to Ignore: How the Information Environment Does and Does Not Shape News Avoidance." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 84(S1): 366–390.

Toff, Benjamin, Ruth Palmer, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. 2023. *Avoiding the News: Reluctant Audiences for Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tourangeau, Roger, and Kenneth A Rasinski. 1988. "Cognitive Processes Underlying Context Effects in Attitude Measurement." *Psychological Bulletin* 103(3): 299.

Tourangeau, Roger, Kenneth A Rasinski, Norman Bradburn, and Roy D'Andrade. 1989. "Carryover Effects in Attitude Surveys." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 53(4): 495–524.

Trexler, Andrew. 2024. "The Minimal Effects of Making Local News Free: Evidence from a Field Experiment." Working Paper. Online: https://osf.io/8x46u/.

Trounstine, Jessica. 2008. *Political Monopolies in American Cities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Trounstine, Jessica. 2010. "Representation and Accountability in Cities." *Annual Review of Political Science* 13: 407–423.

Trounstine, Jessica. 2011. "Evidence of a Local Incumbency Advantage." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36(2): 255–280.

Trounstine, Jessica. 2012. "Turnout and Incumbency in Local Elections." *Urban Affairs Review* 49(2): 167–189.

Trounstine, Jessica. 2020. "Local Political Economy: The State of the Field: Past, Present, and Future." *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy* 1(3): 319–340.

Trounstine, Jessica, and Melody E Valdini. 2008. "The Context Matters: The Effects of Single-Member versus At-Large Districts on City Council Diversity." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(3): 554–569.

Trounstine, Jessica, and Zoltan Hajnal. 2024. "Urban Affairs Review: A Retrospective on the 2010s." *Urban Affairs Review* 60(6): 1622–1627.

Trussler, Marc, and Stuart Soroka. 2014. "Consumer Demand for Cynical and Negative News Frames." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 19(3): 360–379.

Tufte, Edward R. 1978. *Political Control of the Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tversky, Amos, and Daniel Kahneman. 1973. "Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability." *Cognitive Psychology* 5(2): 207–232.

Uppal, Yogesh. 2009. "The Disadvantaged Incumbents: Estimating Incumbency Effects in Indian State Legislatures." *Public Choice* 138(1): 9–27.

Urban Institute. 2024. *State and Local Finance Data: Exploring the Census of Governments*. Urban Institute.

Warshaw, Christopher. 2019. "Local Elections and Representation in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 461–479.

White, Ariel, and Kris-Stella Trump. 2018. "The Promises and Pitfalls of 311 Data." *Urban Affairs Review* 54(4): 794–823.

Wibbels, Erik. 2000. "Federalism and the Politics of Macroeconomic Policy and Performance." *American Journal of Political Science* 44(4): 687–702.

Wilfahrt, Martha. 2022. "Citizen Response to Local Service Provision: Emerging Democratic Accountability in Decentralized West Africa?" *Electoral Studies* 79: 102498.

Willison, Charley E. 2021. *Ungoverned and Out of Sight: Public Health and the Political Crisis of Homelessness in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Willison, Charley, Naquia Unwala, Phillip M Singer, Timothy B Creedon, Brian Mullin, and Benjamin Lê Cook. 2024. "Persistent Disparities: Trends in Rates of Sheltered Homelessness Across Demographic Subgroups in the USA." *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 11(1): 326–338.

Wilson, James. 1975. *Thinking About Crime*. New York: Basic Books.

Wittenberg, Chloe, Matthew A Baum, Adam J Berinsky, Justin de Benedictis-Kessner, and Teppei Yamamoto. 2023. "Media Measurement Matters: Estimating the Persuasive Effects of Partisan Media with Survey and Behavioral Data." *Journal of Politics* 85(4): 1275–1290.

Wong, Kenneth K. 2011. "Redesigning Urban Districts in the USA: Mayoral Accountability and the Diverse Provider Model." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 39(4): 486–500.

Wong, Kenneth K, and Francis X Shen. 2013. "Mayoral Governance and Student Achievement: How Mayor-Led Districts Are Improving School and Student Performance." Center for American Progress.

Wong, Kenneth K, Francis X Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, and Stacey Rutledge. 2007. *The Education Mayor: Improving America's Schools*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Wood, Curtis. 2002. "Voter Turnout in City Elections." *Urban Affairs Review* 38(2): 209–231.

Wright, John R. 2012. "Unemployment and the Democratic Electoral Advantage." *American Political Science Review* 106(4): 685–702.

Yoder, Jesse. 2020. "Does Property Ownership Lead to Participation in Local Politics? Evidence from Property Records and Meeting Minutes." *American Political Science Review* 114(4): 1213–1229.

Zaller, John, and Stanley Feldman. 1992. "A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions Versus Revealing Preferences." *American Journal of Political Science* 36(3): 579–616.

Zoorob, Michael. 2022. "There's (Rarely) a New Sheriff in Town: The Incumbency Advantage for Local Law Enforcement." *Electoral Studies* 80: 102550.