

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

How Institutions Keep Voters
from Holding Their Local Governments
Accountable¹

Most recent draft available [here](#)

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¹Tentative working title up for feedback. Other options that have been suggested include: “The Fog of Accountability;” “How Cities Fail: ...”, “Navigating the Fog: ...”

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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

¹https://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 came in second place 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 national increases 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 crime rate: in 2019 it had the second-highest per capita crime rate of large

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-stother>

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/>

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. And both crime and the local economy are 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 all near-daily signals of the performance of local government. It is obviously

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

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). 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).

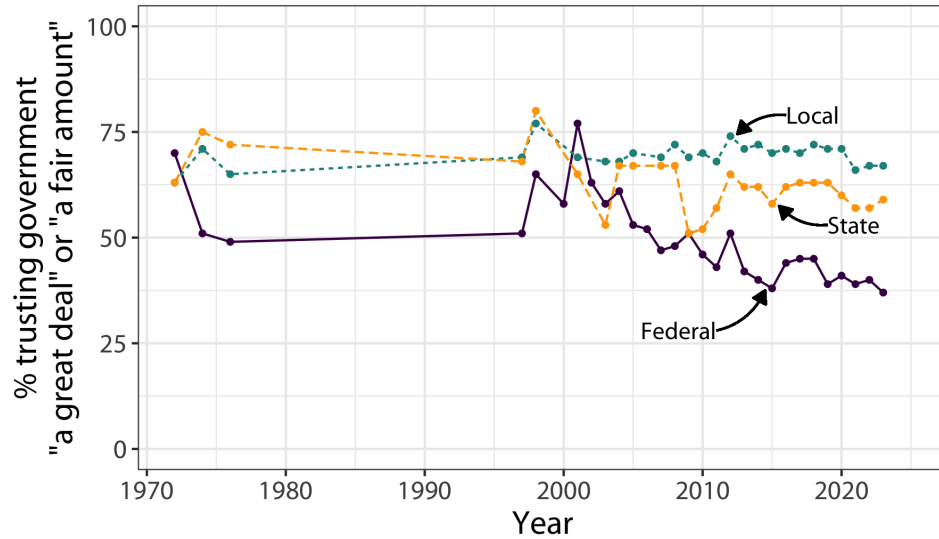
Some might interpret the empirical evidence to be in agreement with this view of local governments as closest to the people. The longest-running source of data on how residents of the United States feel about their governments comes from Gallup, which has been asking in polls for over 50 years several 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.

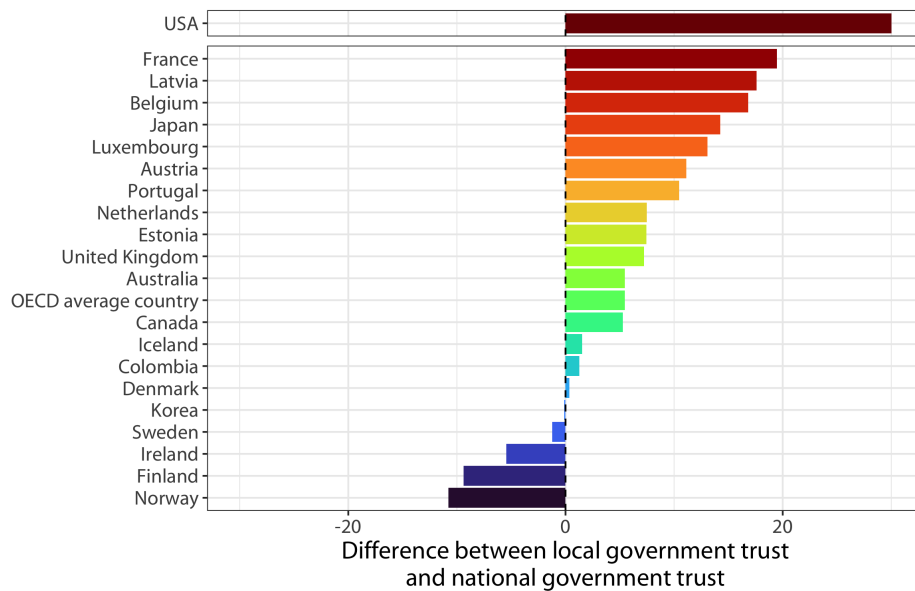
The United States – represented by the top bar – is a clear outlier. Residents of the US trust their local governments a great deal more than their national governments, while residents of other countries have much

Figure 1.1: Gallup polls on trust in government



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?

Other political scientists have addressed the question of why cities fail to produce better outcomes for their residents from some other angles. For instance, in his book *Why Cities Lose*, Jonathan Rodden demonstrates the incredible disadvantage of urban voters relative to rural voters, which results from the spatial concentration of more liberal voters in single-member districts in cities (Rodden 2019). Thus the Democratic Party – but also city-dwellers more generally – suffer from somewhat intractable underrepresentation in state and federal governments.

Similarly, Dan Hopkins writes in *The Increasingly United States* about the nationalization of politics at the state and local level, and how this has led to both a lack of interest and a lack of political engagement in city politics (Hopkins 2018). This distraction of voters by national-level politics could understandably lead to fewer demands on local politicians to improve the quality of local public services.

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. 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 in some places and for some types of leaders. But 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. 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 leads to an overload of information with debatable relevance. As a result, 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 15,000 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 2020a; Trounstone 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 (Trounstone

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 reformers’ 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; Trounstein 2010).

These historical and institutional distinctions lead to a local political environment that is different from national and even state politics (Trounstein 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 2020a).

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, 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

⁷This 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).

⁸This 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 2018b; Trounstein 2011; though see Warshaw 2019).

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 sub-national political decisions. Hopkins (2018) documents this trend towards nationalized voting patterns, and shows that voters make decisions in state 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 more difficult to accomplish than at other levels of government. 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 op-

⁹Though, 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.

erate as decision makers in isolation from political institutions” (Sniderman 2000, 68). 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 lack of these conditions – clear alternatives and the high-quality information available to voters – are what I show is unlikely to result in electoral accountability in cities.

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, 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.

Examining 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. Many pages of scholarly ink have been spilled over the problems with voter rationality and decision-making. Instead, 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?

In many ways, the (at least partial) absence of a partisan bias in local politics makes it an excellent place to test for the presence of accountability and potential ways to improve it. If electoral accountability exists anywhere,

it should be apparent in a setting 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 2020a; 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 incumbents 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. 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 by 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.

Luckily, there are tweaks to voters' knowledge, to institutions that provide public services, and to the information environment that can make accountability more likely. In 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.

Institutional Complexity

The first distinctive variable feature of local governments that I focus on is their *institutional complexity*. Institutional rules govern the way respon-

sibility 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 sig-

nals 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 for some voters this information – and their perceptions of responsibility – are not 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 in different cities, over time, about different policy issues, and across individuals. 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 per-

formance 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).

Some policy issues are particularly well-covered in the media, while others are not – 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 (Djourelouva 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 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.

In local governments, I would argue, this phenomenon is broader: it does not afflict only technically complex policy issues, but nearly all local policy issues due to the complex institutions surrounding them. And the fog of accountability in cities does not require quick timelines 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 governments, and non-governmental factors.

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

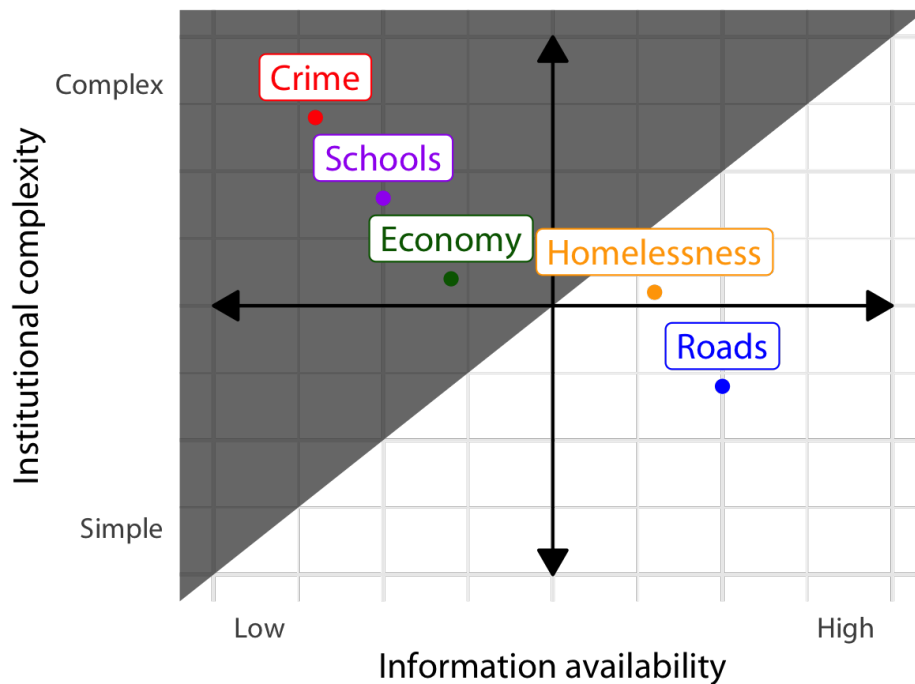
¹⁰This complexity can stand in the way of reasoned judgments about government performance regardless of whether or not voters *know* about the public or private authority over public services, about which they often have little knowledge (Lerman 2019).

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 other issues voters need the media to explain how city policy tools are relevant for shaping outcomes in the policy area at hand. For other issues, the complex layers of governments that are responsible for providing services may further complicate voters' decision-making.

Figure 1.3 shows a rough sketch of what this looks like for five policy areas: roads, homelessness, the economy, schools, and crime. Many local policy issues, I would argue, tend to be located in the top left half of this diagram: residents are short on information about them, and there are gradations of complex authority governing them. In this top-left section, the prospects for accountability are weakened by the fog of accountability.

Figure 1.3: The fog of accountability in four policy areas



I place only two of these four issues – roads and homelessness – outside the top-left quadrant. Roads, I would argue, are the simplest of these five issues in terms of institutional complexity. In most cities, roads are governed by the decisions of city government. Despite this, the roads people drive on are also often governed 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 government (e.g. Brooks and Phillips 2010). Similarly, homelessness is an issue which is largely related to housing and land use decisions (e.g. Colburn and Aldern 2022).

Relative to the other policy areas in this diagram, roads and homelessness are also areas where people receive more accurate and more regular information about conditions 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. Similarly, homelessness is a policy area about which people receive a great deal of information about conditions in their cities via their daily lives. Homelessness is often considered one part of the bundle of issues in the category of “visible disorder.” City residents are quick to notice such visible disorder. Roads and homelessness are policy areas where voters have performance information more available than for many other policy areas. This is not to say roads and homelessness are *always* outside the top-left area of the diagram and the fog of accountability. Indeed, as I discuss more in Chapter 4, there are places where political institutions governing roads are more complex in their structure, and times when political leaders and the media may prevent the availability of information. But the context around roads and homelessness, I would argue, is not as clouded as for other issues.

If we would expect performance-based voting – electoral accountability, as I would define it – for any of these five policy issues, it would be for roads and homelessness. Crime, schools, and the economy all 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.

In order to enable accountability for a given policy issue located in this top-left quadrant of this schematic, information about that performance area can be made more accessible to voters, or the institutional complexity can be simplified – or both. Moving a policy issue out from under the fog of accountability can be accomplished by either moving it rightwards (increasing the availability of information) or downwards (reducing the institutional complexity).

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 move the issue left in this schematic diagram.

And some cities have more complex institutions than others – moving some policy issues upwards in those cities. Even without 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 timing of elections, the presence of a media coverage of local politics, the use of citywide rather than geographic district-specific seats for elected officials *within* a city, and the overlap of geographic boundaries *between* cities and other local governments. All of these features of cities can either facilitate accountability by moving policy issues out of the fog of accountability in one direction (or both). Conversely, these features can confuse voters or help depress the availability of accurate information – both of which can stymie accountability by moving a policy issue up and to the left – 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 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 these 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 both of these policy areas are easily connected with *local* governments. As a result, these issues are, I argue, somewhat of a "best-case" scenario for accountability.

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. Next, I use data on reports of homeless encampments in Oakland. Just as with road pavement quality, this visible 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. Similarly, I show that when rates of homelessness increase in cities across the country, incumbent city leaders appear to be punished at the ballot box as well. This evidence from two highly-visible and highly-local policy areas offers two hopeful indicators that local leaders may be held accountable.

Yet many features of cities are not as easy for voters to connect to local government as road quality and homelessness, nor are many conditions in cities as reliably visible to voters. Potholes are easy for voters to perceive and connect with their city government. And because of its visibility and

local governments' control over land use and housing, homelessness is similarly easy for voters to perceive and connect with their city government. While the results from this chapter present a somewhat optimistic takeaway for accountability in cities, their conclusions are limited, as I show in the subsequent chapters.

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 in combination with the local elections data used throughout the book. I use the classic “economic voting” paradigm to assess whether economic conditions affect local 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 no 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. 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 some conditions are met. 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.

Both of these policy areas are ones in which voters might reflect on their own personal experience most readily. 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 2018a) 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.

6

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

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

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

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 unilateral decisions to hand down lenient sentences or not press charges, and to release violent criminals early is putting San Francisco’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

²<https://x.com/BrookeJenkinsSF/status/1485856396352520196?s=20>

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

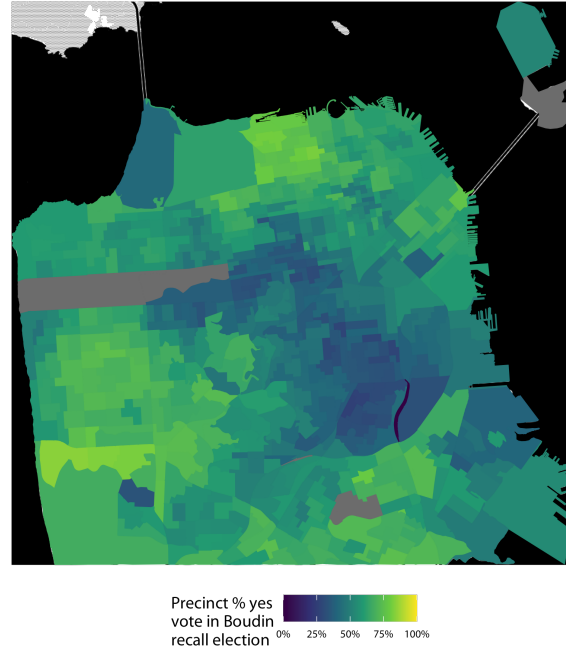
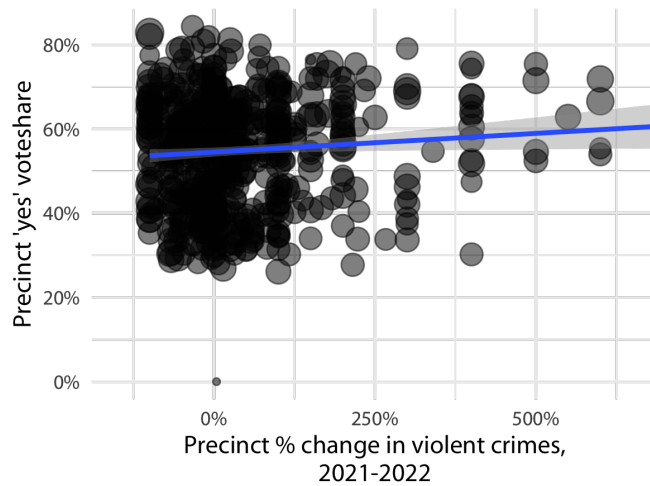


Figure 6.2: Violent crime and Boudin’s recall results. Points indicate the percent change in the number of violent crimes and the ‘Yes’ share of the vote in Boudin’s recall election at the precinct level, with the size of points scaled to the total number of votes in that precinct.



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

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 2020a). 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 reported 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 crime 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 condi-

tions 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 (Boydston, 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

³<https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/ncvsnibrscpc22.pdf>

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 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 Mastroiocco and Ornaghi (2024) show, this

can lead to worse coverage of local crime. When both print and television news media outlets disappear, get absorbed into national conglomerates, 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.

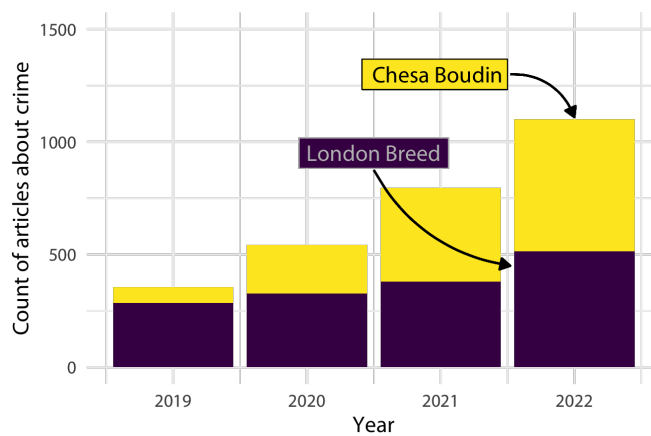
First, Boudin – rather than other political actors who play a role in public safety – was effectively blamed for crime. As city Supervisor Hillary Ronen was quoted as saying, “Chesa Boudin is the scapegoat in The City for anything that happens that isn’t positive” (Duran 2022). The district attorney 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).

⁴These data come from searches on the newspaper archiving site [newslibrary.com](https://www.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.

These trends are not isolated to voters in the U.S., either: a recent innovative experiment in Denmark identified similar problems in misperceptions 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 use data on both economic conditions and crime in cities.

My analysis in this chapter is built upon the elections data described in Chapter 3 combined with fine-grained administrative data on the local economy. 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, recent research on economic conditions such as Healy and Lenz (2017), Sances (2017), and de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw (2020a) 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 2020a; 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. 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 combine these data with the mayoral and city council elections data that I described in the previous chapter. 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. 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 match each of these voteshare measures with the economic performance data described above.

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 govern-

ment.

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 2021a). 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 2021b).⁵ 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).

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.⁶ 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, and 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 the previous chapter 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

⁵Moreover, 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).

⁶The 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.

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.⁷

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 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.

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.

⁷While 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.

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.

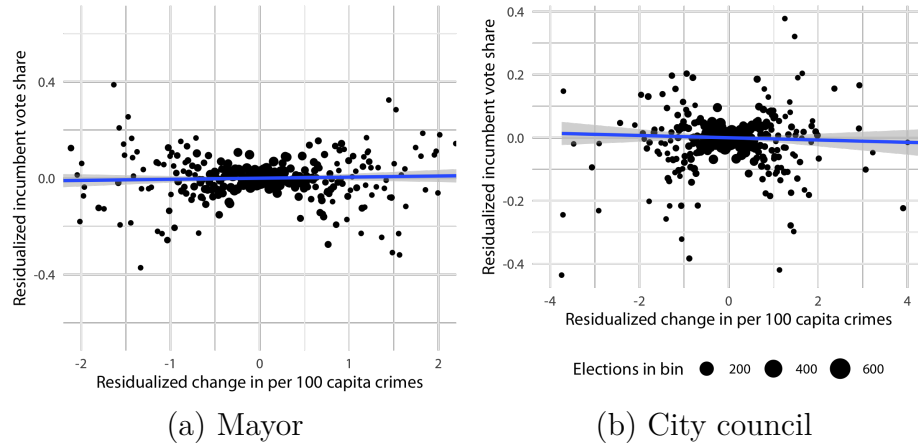
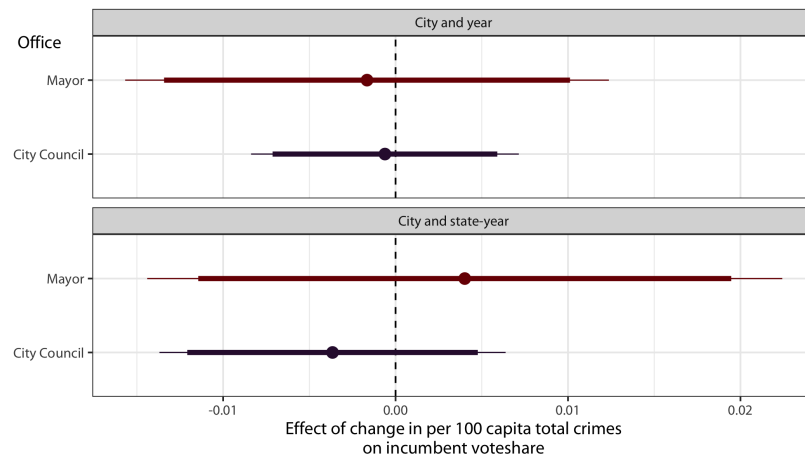


Figure 6.5: The effect of changes in crime on the incumbent voteshare in local elections.



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.

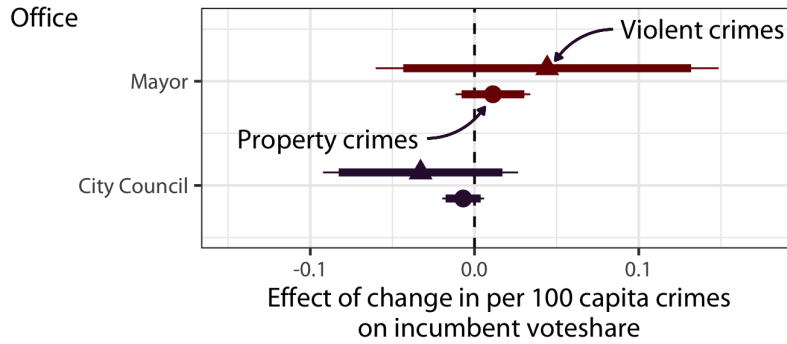


Table 6.1: Accountability for Crime

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:						City council					
	Mayor								City council			
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
<i>Variables</i>												
Δ in crimes per 100 capita	-0.002 (0.007)	0.004 (0.009)					-0.0006 (0.004)	-0.004 (0.005)				
Δ in violent crimes per 100 capita			0.021 (0.035)	0.044 (0.053)					-0.028 (0.026)	-0.033 (0.030)		
Δ in property crimes per 100 capita					-0.001 (0.010)	0.011 (0.012)					-0.001 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.006)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>												
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
<i>Fit statistics</i>												
Observations	2,150	2,150	2,150	2,150	2,150	2,150	8,713	8,713	8,713	8,713	8,713	8,713
R ²	0.396	0.611	0.396	0.611	0.396	0.611	0.384	0.447	0.384	0.447	0.384	0.447
Within R ²	4.7×10^{-5}	0.0002	0.0002	0.0008	1.56×10^{-5}	0.0009	3.82×10^{-6}	6.27×10^{-5}	0.0002	0.0001	5.22×10^{-6}	0.0001

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

One additional feature of the politics of crime and policing in cities bears 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.”⁸ 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?⁹

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-measured 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.

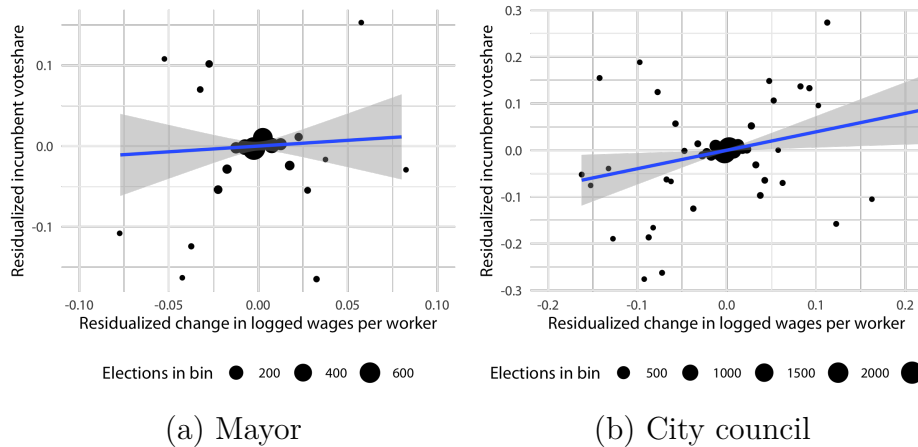
Both panels in Figure 6.7 show a slight positive relationship between economic performance and incumbents’ electoral success, as indicated by the upward-sloping trend lines (in blue) in each panel. In other words, when wages are improving (relative to elsewhere in the country in that year), it appears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

⁸<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/03/us/midterm-elections-republicans-crime.html>.

⁹It also does not appear that police spending or staffing determine city incumbent 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 Vanhuyse 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.

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.



formance 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.

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

Table 6.2: Accountability for the Economy

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Variables</i>				
Δ in logged wages per worker	0.320 (0.307)	0.095 (0.491)	0.242 (0.151)	0.395* (0.208)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes		Yes	
State-year		Yes		Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>				
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

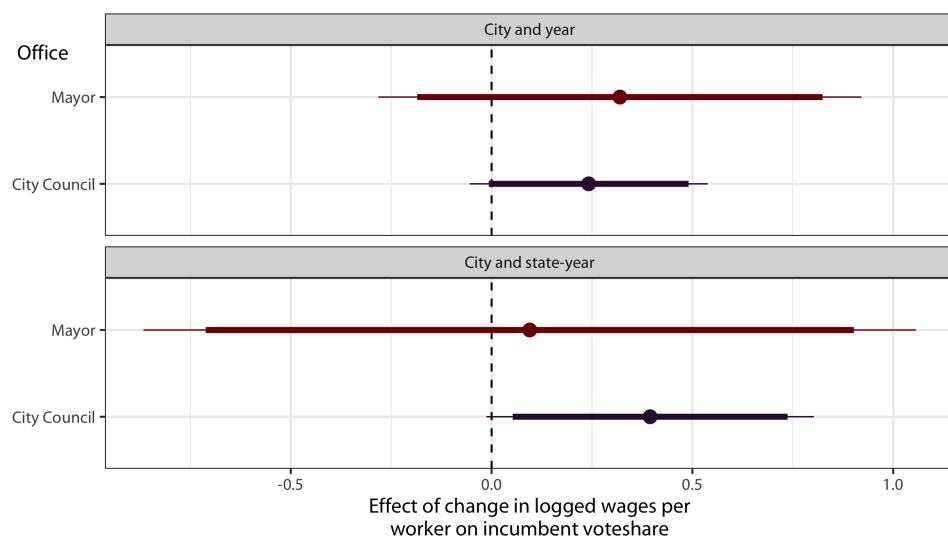
Clustered (City) standard-errors in parentheses
*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

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' vote-shares. 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.¹⁰

¹⁰Disentangling 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.

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



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?

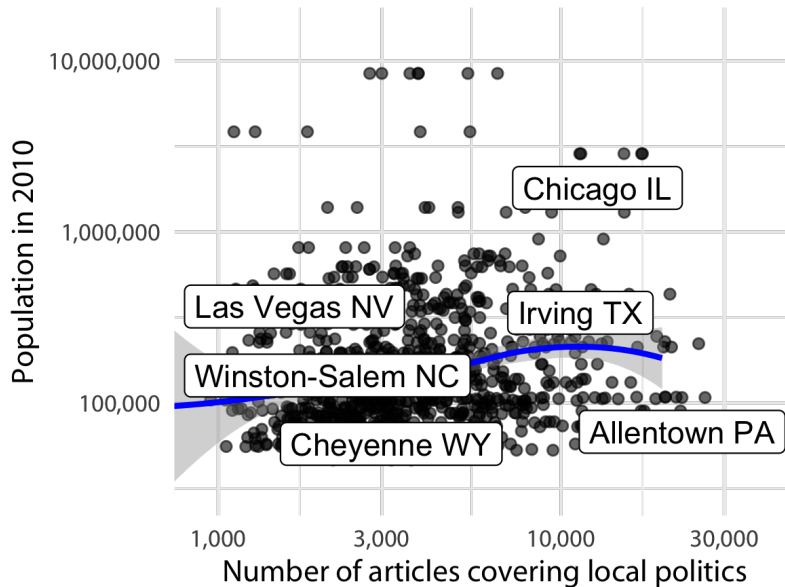
In this section, I dig into cross-city evidence on the information environment around local elections and show that it can moderate accountability for both the economy and crime – much as the media pointed the finger for crime squarely at Boudin and not the mayor. The story of Boudin’s recall election 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 “co-paganda,” 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.¹¹ 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

¹¹Specifically, 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 (2021b).



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.’”¹² 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*.¹³ 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

¹²<https://www.mcall.com/2024/06/01/allentown-man-shot-to-death-in-city-park/>.

¹³<https://www.reviewjournal.com/crime/homicides/las-vegas-man-shot-killed-by-childhood-friend-police-say-3068596/>.

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.

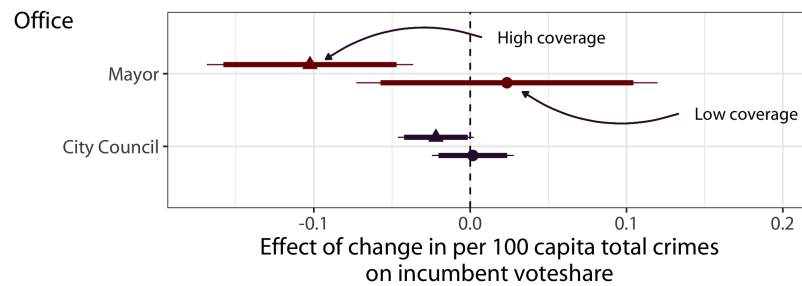


Table 6.3 shows these results in tabular form. The large size of the effects of crime here bears some attention. The change in crime per 100 capita (after residualizing by both city and state-year) has a standard deviation of 0.67 crimes per capita. The results in Table 6.3 therefore imply that – in places with high coverage of local politics – a one standard deviation increase of this residualized crime measure would lead to a decrease of 2.7 percentage points in incumbent mayoral candidates' voteshares and 2.3 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 Model:	High (1)	Low (2)	High (3)	Low (4)
<i>Variables</i>				
Δ in per 100 capita crimes	-0.102*** (0.034)	0.024 (0.049)	-0.022* (0.012)	0.002 (0.013)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>				
Observations	125	140	870	818
R ²	0.856	0.712	0.408	0.479
Within R ²	0.133	0.008	0.003	1.72×10^{-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 (2021b) 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 (2021b) 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: The effect of changes in economic conditions on the incumbent voteshare in city elections.

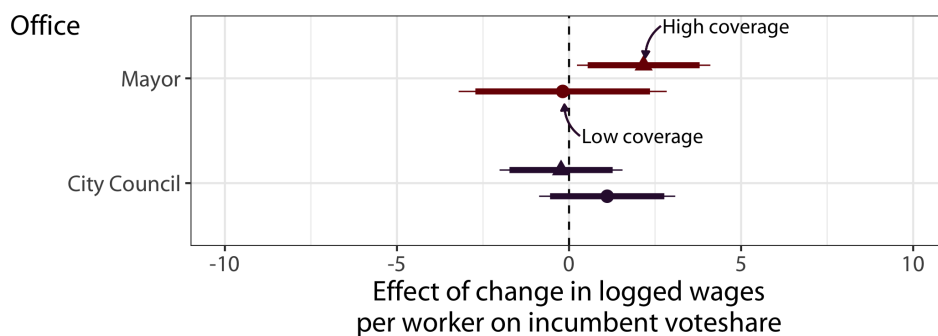


Table 6.4: Accountability for the Economy, by Media Coverage of Local Politics

Dependent Variable:	Incumbent Vote Share for:			
	Mayor		City council	
Local news coverage Model:	High (1)	Low (2)	High (3)	Low (4)
<i>Variables</i>				
Δ in logged wages per worker	2.17** (0.989)	-0.184 (1.54)	-0.232 (0.912)	1.11 (1.01)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>				
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>				
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*

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.

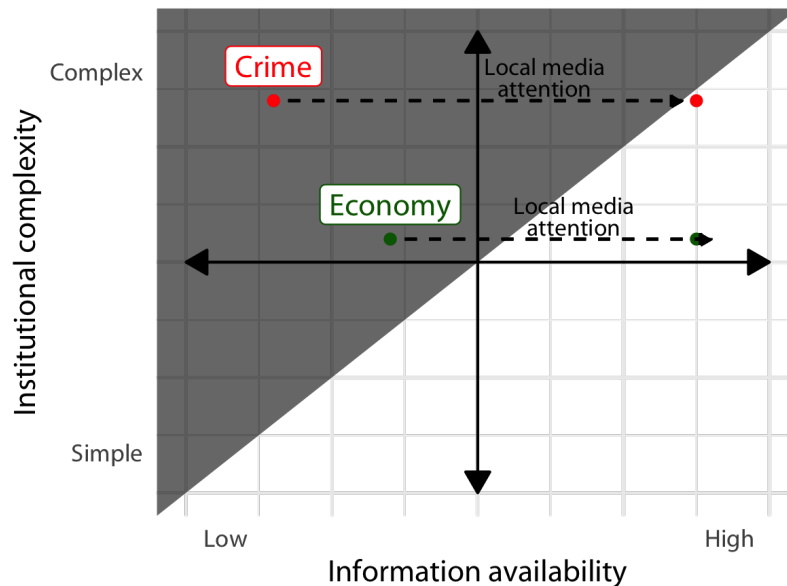
The further results that I showed in this chapter showed a more nuanced picture than a complete lack of city leader accountability, however. *Who* voters believe to be responsible is key for accountability in these policy areas. My results on local political coverage present a caveat for the story of 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 – can 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 in order to make judgments about their city leaders' performance in office. Without accurate media reporting on local politics, people are unable to hold their city governments accountable for these issues. Figure 6.12 shows conceptually how local media coverage can lift issues like crime and the economy out from the fog of accountability for city voters.

Figure 6.12: Media coverage and the fog of accountability



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.

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