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Members in Two States

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Abstract

Studies suggest that between one-fourth and one-third of localities elect their leaders on partisan ballots. Does the presence of a party label on the ballot affect the level of partisanship in local office? I leverage the fact that within select states school boards vary as to whether their members are elected on partisan or nonpartisan ballots. Do the differences in policy preferences between Democrats and Republicans differ across these ballot contexts? Does a party cue treatment, where respondents are reminded of the general policy positions of both parties, differentially affect elected officials in different ballot contexts? Evidence from the survey reveals a group of "polarized nonpartisans" that tend to express more partisan views about public policy than their co-partisans elected in an explicitly partisan system. At the same time, providing party cues in policy debates disproportionately moves those elected on partisan ballots as opposed to nonpartisan ones. That partisan-elected officials are more influenced by party cues appears to validate the motivations of nonpartisan reformers, yet the "polarized nonpartisans" found in the control group should give those reformers pause and reveals the need for continued research into the behavioral consequences of nonpartisan ballots.

Keywords: Elections; Partisan; Nonpartisan; Local Government; Polarization; Survey Experiment

"There is no Republican way to collect garbage" – Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia

A hallmark of local governance in the U.S. has been the use of nonpartisan elections. County and municipal offices provide basic services to residents and are thus believed to function best when partisanship is not a consideration. Yet studies suggest that between one fourth and one third of localities elect their leaders on partisan ballots, where the candidate's party affiliation is listed next to their name (Northup 1987, Wood 2002, Oliver and Ha 2007, Meier and Rutherford 2014).[i] This would seem to violate the reformist idea expressed by LaGuardia that local government ought to be insulated from party politics. But is the presence of a party label on the ballot really consequential? It has been difficult to tell because offices with officially partisan elections often differ from *de jure* nonpartisan offices. In short, the type of ballot and type of office usually go together, making it difficult to know which is important. I attempt to resolve this methodological hurdle by examining elections for a ubiquitous local office—school board—where the office is held fixed but ballots vary in whether they are partisan or not.

To examine how ballot design affects the level of partisanship in office, I leverage the fact that within select states school boards vary as to whether their members are elected on partisan ballots, a condition I refer to as the "ballot context." This feature provides a unique opportunity to study differences between elected officials within the *same state* and serving in the *same type of office*. With this research design, I address two questions: Do the differences in policy preferences between Democrats and Republicans differ across ballot contexts? Does a party cue treatment, where respondents are reminded of the general policy positions of both parties, differentially affect elected officials in different ballot contexts? I first discuss existing scholarship on nonpartisan elections in the United States, revealing a need for research on the

behavior of partisan versus nonpartisan-elected officials and a research design that leverages within-state variation in ballot context. I next introduce an original survey of school board members in North Carolina and Georgia, two states where the ballot context varies. I next place the three public policies I ask board members to respond to—Common Core standards, school vouchers, and school prayer—in context with respect to their partisan dynamics in North Carolina and Georgia. This is followed by analysis and discussion of an experiment embedded within the survey designed to test whether or not 1) partisan gaps in policy preference differ across ballot contexts, and 2) party cues disproportionately affect members elected on partisan ballots compared to nonpartisan ones.

Evidence from the survey suggests that, among a control group, members chosen in nonpartisan elections tend to express *more* partisan views about public policy than their co-partisans elected in an explicitly partisan system. At the same time, providing party cues in policy debates disproportionately moves those elected on partisan ballots as opposed to non-partisan ones. That partisan-elected officials are more influenced by party cues appears to validate the motivations of nonpartisan reformers, yet the "polarized nonpartisans" found in the control group should give those reformers pause. While a rigorous examination of the causes of this result lie outside the scope of this study, I offer two theories to explain these divergent results: nonpartisan board members may exhibit polarized views due to "institutional cover", where the *de jure* nonpartisans feign independence. Separately, although not mutually exclusive, is the idea that nonpartisan board members disproportionately "signal" their preferences to demonstrate their partisan affinities when party labels are not available to do it for them. I make the case for continued research into the behavioral consequences of nonpartisan ballots to explore these mechanisms and other pressing questions.

Nonpartisan Elections in the United States

A key element of progressive reforms was a move towards nonpartisan local elections. The idea was noble: local government should be removed from the partisan fray and isolated from political machines, making it better able to operate efficiently and attract open-minded candidates who might shy away from parties (Howell 2005, Cassel 1987).

Charles Adrian (1952, 1959) offered the first critique, alleging that nonpartisan elections resulted in a greater incumbency advantage and the recruitment of fewer quality candidates. Adrian also formalized a typology of nonpartisan elections, recognizing both *de jure* partisan elections that are effectively nonpartisan in practice, and *de facto* partisan elections where parties continued to exercise significant influence in what were *de jure* nonpartisan contests. Recent studies of school boards, judicial elections, and even referenda support Adrian's concern that partisanship remains a significant factor throughout *de jure* nonpartisan elections (Meier and Rutherford 2016, Boudreau and Mackenzie 2013, Rock and Baum 2010).

While voting behavior and the electoral consequences of nonpartisan elections has been the subject of scrutiny, less examined has been any differences that might exist between officials elected on nonpartisan ballots compared to their otherwise similar counterparts elected on partisan ballots. This lack of scholarship is surprising, especially considering not only the variation that exists in how local governments operate, but also the extent to which state legislatures continue to debate these electoral reforms. Between 2012 and 2016 legislation to change the partisan nature of local school board elections was proposed in the Kansas, Tennessee, Indiana, Florida, and Pennsylvania legislatures.[ii]

Until recently, the studies of local elections often focused on a handful of large cities, complicating the generalizability of their findings (Oliver 2012, Marschall, Shah, and Ruhil 2011). Fortunately, efforts have been made to systematically gather data on local elections, enabling scholars to conduct analysis that speaks to a wide range of governing institutions (Marschall and Shah 2013, Marschall, Ruhil, and Shah 2010). Aggregate studies of school boards, suburban elections, and city councils are evidence of insights on political participation and representation that can be gained from leveraging electoral variation after the costs of gathering and analyzing data from the local level are overcome (Meier and Rutherford 2016, Oliver and Ha 2007, Cassel 1985).

Local elections are characterized in the literature as low-turnout affairs that are often off-cycle and nonpartisan (Hajnal and Lewis 2003, Wood 2002, Moe 2005, Anzia 2011). The prevalence of these shared characteristics has led to the tendency for the literature to treat all local elections as monolithic and has largely ignored the smaller (though recently growing) number of local elections that are *de jure* partisan, on-cycle, or both. To answer outstanding questions, a research design is needed that holds office constant but allows the partisan structure of the ballot to vary, and moves from the study of voters to the study of the politicians who actually hold local office.

Ballot Context and Behavior

Do officials elected under a partisan system differ in their policy views or behavior compared to holders of the same office elected by nonpartisan ballots? The most comprehensive data available to answer this question lie within research on judicial elections. Theory suggests that judges elected in nonpartisan elections should hand down decisions that closely mirror the

ideological leanings of their constituency due to the need for them to signal their preferences, given the absence of a party label to do it for them (Cranes-Wrone and Schotts 2007). In addition, voters are willing and able to apply partisan considerations to vote choices in judicial elections, even when party labels are absent from the ballot (Bonneau and Cann 2015). Cranes-Wrone and Clark (2009) found that state supreme court justices elected in nonpartisan systems were more likely to rule in line with their state's public preferences on abortion than state supreme court justices elected in partisan elections. Gordon and Huber (2007) took advantage of within-state ballot variation of district courts in Kansas and found that judges who run in competitive partisan elections sentence more harshly than judges who run in retention (thus nonpartisan and uncontested) elections. The decision to enter a judicial race may also be affected by ballot context, as nonpartisan judicial elections have been found to result in less electoral competition (Bonneau and Hall 2003, Hall and Bonneau 2006).

Apart from judicial elections, few studies have examined the differences between elected officials *within the same state* and for the same type of elected office who differ in the ballot context in which they compete. Perhaps the chief reason for this is that there are not many real-world cases where such variation exists. Most studies of nonpartisan elections utilize variation across states. Nebraska's nonpartisan unicameral legislature and its partisan but demographically similar neighbor, Kansas, make a common pair for study. Wright and Schaffner (2002) analyzed legislators in both chambers and found contradictory results. On the one hand, roll call voting showed "cohesive partisan cleavages form in the partisan Kansas Senate, while such partisan divisions are minor and inconsistent in the nonpartisan [Nebraska] setting" (p. 374). On the other hand, responses to candidate questionnaires showed that "in nonpartisan Nebraska, differences between Democrats and Republicans are similar to those in partisan Kansas…If anything,

Nebraska actually shows more partisan polarization" (p. 372). From this study it remains unclear whether reformers hopes about the benefits of a *de jure* nonpartisan setting actually translate to less partisan behavior in office. To inform the debate, I turn to an original survey of school board members from two states.

Partisan Variation in North Carolina and Georgia

I define a school board election to be partisan if candidates are listed on the ballot with their party affiliation and to be nonpartisan if no party label is listed. I refer to this distinction as the "ballot context" in which a school board member serves.

Because the presence of a party label is not randomly assigned, it is possible that differences between partisan and nonpartisan-elected board members may be endogenous, especially if counties whose officials were more polarized pushed successfully for the adoption of partisan elections. To assuage such concerns I offer three points. First, partisan and nonpartisan counties are similar across several relevant covariates, such as median household income, educational attainment, population size, and racial composition. Nonpartisan counties are slightly more conservative (as measured by Obama's 2012 vote share) and slightly more rural. I test for the effect of both of these variables more directly later in the paper.[iii] Second, all but two counties have maintained either their partisan or nonpartisan system since at least 1994. If endogeneity were a problem, the motivation behind a county's decision to adopt one system over the other would have to be related to the actual policy views of the candidates themselves. Third, it is unlikely that the "cause" of a county's adoption of a particular election format is correlated with any differences in policy views between board members 20 years (or more) later.

Georgia state law provides for a default status of partisan school board elections while allowing counties to move to nonpartisan systems through an act of the state legislature.[iv] In 2012, the Georgia legislature failed to pass a bill that would require the approximately 50 percent of local school boards who hold nonpartisan elections to join the other half that were already conducting partisan elections.[v] The Georgia School Boards Association's official position calls for the nonpartisan election of local school board members (2016).

North Carolina school board election law stem from a 1981 general statute that elections shall be nonpartisan, but many initial exceptions were made for specific counties to maintain their partisan system, and provisions were written to allow individual counties to move from one system to another through state legislation. 15 counties held partisan elections in 1981 and continued to do so after the statute's enactment.[vi] Of those, only one has switched to a nonpartisan system (Franklin County, in 1993). Two counties switched to partisan systems between the 1981 statute and the time of this study—Forsyth (2011) and Lee (2014). The North Carolina School Board Association does not take a position on partisan elections, only that the decision should be made at the local level (Boylan 2016).

In spring 2015, legislation to move all North Carolina counties to a partisan system failed to advance. Separate bills moving four North Carolina counties to a partisan system passed the legislature in May 2015 and became effective for the fall 2016 elections. Notable for this study, respondents completed the survey between March and April 2016. Any board members from the four counties affected by this change would have completed the survey prior to those changes going into effect. Importantly, the survey did not ask any questions related to partisan or nonpartisan elections.

2016 Survey of North Carolina and Georgia School Board Members

Based on data from a few large-scale, national surveys of school board members (Hess 2002, Meier and Rutherford 2014), North Carolina and Georgia are the states that best meet the criteria established for within-state comparisons, as they have the highest percentage of partisan elections among states that exhibit partisan variation (17% and 55% percent, respectively). Exploiting variation within states allows ruling out many alternative explanations. Analyzing two states, albeit both in the South, permits greater generalizability in the findings.

The website of every school district in both states was visited to identify all school board members. There was no district that did not have a web site and there was no district for which the names of school board members were not available. A total of 1,773 school board members were identified. Of these, 1,480 school board members had a publicly available email addresses and were sent pre-notification email messages alerting them to a forthcoming survey link. The remaining 293 school board members were mailed a pre-notification postcard. After accounting for bounced emails as well as respondents who opted-out of future contact, a total of 1,433 board members were emailed a link to the survey one week after the pre-notification.

Of these 1,433 board members, 20.4 percent completed the survey (N = 293).[vii] Of the 293 pre-notification postcards sent, 7 were returned as undeliverable and consequently 286 paper versions of the survey were mailed. Of these, 16.7 percent were returned (N = 48). When combined, 341 surveys were returned (19.8 percent). This response rate is comparable to a 2010 national survey of school board members (Hess and Meeks 2011, 23.6 percent) and surveys of other political elites, such as Butler and Powell's (2014) survey of state legislators (15 percent). Among respondents, 33 percent are elected by partisan ballot. This ratio closely mirrors the true

split in partisan ballot context, as 37 percent of the 288 school districts across North Carolina and Georgia are partisan. Characteristics of board members who did not complete the survey are unavailable; districts with at least one respondent are similar to the districts with no respondents across several demographic characteristics (race, education, income, and partisanship).[viii]

The Politics of Education Policy

The aim of this paper is to examine partisan policy gaps among elected officials relative to the ballot context they run in. School boards in North Carolina and Georgia provide a unique opportunity to do so, however it should be noted that position-taking on education policy has some unique features. While there has been increased partisan polarization across a range of issue areas in recent years, divergent views in education policy are not as stark. The parties have converged on several issues, such as accountability and charter schools (Wolbrecht and Hartney 2014). Testing the extent to which partisan position-taking occurs in this context may be complicated by evidence suggesting that education policy is less polarizing than other issue areas. This challenge presents an opportunity, as identifying partisan differences on certain education policies among school board members may prove a more conservative test of the effect of ballot context compared to a similar examination of other, more explicitly polarizing issues.

Common Core

Some conservatives viewed the Common Core (CCSI) as an example of the federal government intruding on state and local control of education. While the federal government did not have a role in developing the standards, it did provide incentives for states to adopt them through the Obama administration's Race to the Top Program. As of 2015, five states had either

initiated a review process or backed out of implementation altogether. Teachers' unions have been hesitant about how the implementation of the standards may affect teacher evaluations (Henderson, Peterson, and West 2015).

In June 2013, the Georgia Republican party voted to oppose the CCSI because it "obliterates Georgia's constitutional autonomy" (Wilson 2013). In North Carolina, Governor Pat McCrory (R) ordered a select committee to initiate a yearlong review of the standards. The commission ultimately decided not to make any major revisions to the standards and Governor McCrory remained largely silent on the issue, deferring to the State Board of Education (Bonner 2015).

Whether or not school board members are supportive of Common Core is a relative unknown. The program represents a mandate that places additional burdens on school districts to ensure that they meet new requirements (Kober and Retner 2012, Sawchuk 2012). How board members view this policy most likely depends on the benefit they perceive the standards bring relative to the cost of implementation, an equation possibly affected by both the board member's political views in addition to their perceptions of the community to which they are accountable.

School Vouchers

North Carolina and Georgia each have a type of school voucher program, but local school board members have no direct control over anything related to their approval or implementation. If voucher programs are believed to divert public funds away from local public schools, then school board members of all partisan stripes may oppose their implementation. The North Carolina Democratic Party included a statement against vouchers in its 2012 platform. The 2012 GOP platform called for increased school choice, including voucher programs (Priebus and

McDonnell 2012). The National School Board Association is against school vouchers, and provides talking points against such programs on its website (2015).

School board members might face identifiable competing tensions with respect to school vouchers. On the one hand, support for voucher programs splits somewhat along partisan lines, an influence from which board members may not be immune. On the other hand, all board members might oppose voucher programs if they are perceived as a threat to local public education.

School Prayer

The 2012 General Social Survey found that 57 percent of Americans disapprove of a ban on school prayer (Lipka 2013). Disapproval is disproportionately higher in the South, where 73 percent of respondents disapprove of the ban. Opinion on school prayer also splits along partisan lines, with 80 percent of Republicans and only 45 percent of Democrats favoring daily prayer to be spoken in classrooms (Riffkin 2014). School boards are the governing body most likely to confront disputes over whether particular acts of prayer are permissible during school or at school functions, and often receive direct and cross-pressures from parents or organized interest groups to intervene one way or the other.

Establishing a Baseline of Partisan Differences

How does the design of the ballot affect the opinions of school board members on these important issues? If the partisan ballot context is not associated with the degree of partisanship displayed, then a Democrat (Republican) who runs on a partisan ballot should exhibit levels of support for a particular policy similar to a fellow Democrat (Republican) who runs on a nonpartisan ballot. In contrast, partisan elections might result in Democrats (Republicans)

exhibiting more polarized policy views than their co-partisans who run on nonpartisan ballots. If this is the case, it could be that partisan elections attract more partisan candidates to run for office in the first place. It could also be that candidates for school board *become* more partisan in their views as they run in a partisan primary, especially if the local party is involved. Although my analysis can not distinguish between a partisan ballot attracting different types of candidates and shaping the preferences of candidates who win office, either way the ballot is the "cause" of the difference as long as other differences between school districts are held constant. The within-state research design thus provides the first evidence about whether partisanship in policy opinions results from the presence of party labels on the ballot.

Partisan Differences in the Control Group

Even without providing explicit partisan cues in the survey, the messages from national party elites, state parties in government, and party platforms, in addition to results of public polling on these issues, lead to the expectation that Democrats and Republicans in the control group will express different levels of support for each policy. Specifically, I expect Democrats, compared to Republicans, will display greater support for Common Core, less support for school vouchers, and less support for school prayer. The expectation is that a partisan gap in policy support will exist among the control group from both partisan and nonpartisan ballots. If these differences do exist, are they equally pronounced in both contexts?

The literature on nonpartisan elections offers conflicting expectations about the extent to which Democrats and Republicans elected by nonpartisan ballot will express polarized views relative to their co-partisans who run in partisan systems. On the one hand, there is evidence of more polarized policy views between candidates for nonpartisan office compared to partisan

ones (Wright and Schaffner 2002). It has also been shown that nonpartisan-elected judges hand down rulings that closely mirror the views of their constituency when they have no party affiliation on the ballot to signal their preferences for them, and voters themselves are able to identify the partisan leanings of officially nonpartisan judicial candidates (Wright and Schaffner 2002, Cranes-Wrone and Schotts 2007, Bonneau and Cann 2015).

On the other hand are the concerns of reformists about partisan elections fostering environments in which politicians are more loyal to party than constituency. This prediction is supported by studies showing more partisan roll-call voting among partisan versus nonpartisan legislatures, in part because of nomination and funding networks within parties (Wright and Schaffner 2002). Like many politicians, partisan-elected school board members must go through a partisan primary and are likely to at least have a relationship with the local party apparatus. For these reasons, I hypothesize that, among the control group, the partisan gap in policy support will be greater among partisan-elected board members than those that run in nonpartisan elections.

Embedded within the survey is a three-question experimental design. Respondents were randomized into a treatment or control group, blocked by partisan ballot context. Blocking on partisan elections was implemented to ensure enough respondents from districts with partisan ballots, which are less common, were placed into the treatment group. The shares of partisan-elected respondents in the control and treatment groups were 32.0% and 33.5%, respectively.[ix]

I did not ask respondents about the type of election they run in. Data on which boards are elected by partisan ballots was gathered from local election results across all school boards in Georgia and North Carolina. Gathering these data outside of the survey accomplishes two goals. First, it avoids the potential for errors present in previous national surveys of school board

members who stated their school board elections were partisan when they were not (or vice versa). Second, asking respondents if they run in a partisan election may prompt them to answer certain questions differently than they otherwise would have. [x]

The control group was asked about their support for three separate general policies in a neutral manner. Comparing Democratic and Republican responses from the control group provides a baseline of partisan differences in policy views and allows for a test of whether such differences are more pronounced in partisan ballot contexts compared to nonpartisan ones.

The dependent variables are the level of support expressed for a particular policy, as measured on a 5-point scale, where 0 represents "strongly oppose" and 4 represents "strongly support." Respondents were asked to self-identify their party affiliation in a section after the policy questions.[xi]

[Figure 1]

Figure 1 shows the mean level of support in the control group for the implementation of Common Core standards, school voucher programs, and school prayer. Difference-in-means tests reveal significant differences between the parties for each policy, and in the expected direction. The mean level of support for Common Core among Democrats is 2.40 and 1.74 for Republicans (significant at $p < .01$, one-tailed). Allowing prayer in public schools garners the greatest amount of support of all three policies, and this is true regardless of party affiliation, but differences across party remain and are statistically significant ($p < .01$, one-tailed). The mean level of support for allowing prayer in public school among Democrats is 2.54 compared to 3.48 among Republicans. Support for school vouchers garners the lowest level of support of all three policies regardless of party affiliation. Differences across party remain, although they are less stark than

that for Common Core. The mean level of support for school vouchers among Democrats is 0.57 compared to .87 for Republicans ($p < .10$, one-tailed).

Polarized Nonpartisans

I next examine partisan differences in policy support *across* ballot contexts. If there is a condition under which Republicans and Democrats would exhibit no meaningful differences on these policies, it should be among the *control group* (who received no treatment reminding them of general party positions), who also run on *nonpartisan* ballots, and are therefore theoretically not influenced by party politics.

The results of the survey show that this is not the case. Figure 2 shows the gap in policy support between Democrats and Republicans in the control group from nonpartisan boards. Specifically, Democrats are more supportive of Common Core (+1.02), less supportive of school prayer (-1.03), and less supportive of school vouchers (-0.49) than Republicans, differences-in-means that are all statistically significant (one-tailed). Difference-in-means tests in the partisan context reveal no statistically significant differences between Democrats and Republicans. The partisan gap in policy support between self-identified Democratic and Republican school board members that appear in Figure 1 appear to be driven by those who were elected on nonpartisan ballots.

[Figure 2]

The Party Cue Experiment

The treatment group was asked about the same three policies as the control group, but was also presented with a statement informing them of the general policy position taken by both

parties. This treatment tests the theory that reminding board members the policy position of each major party will induce them to express views more aligned with their own party affiliation, increasing the polarization between Republicans and Democrats. The treatment and control prompts presented to respondents are shown in Table 1.

[Table 1]

Evidence that individuals can be affected by treatments of elite or group opinion has contributed to our understanding of how public opinion is formed. A well-developed literature speaks to the impact of party cues on public opinion, specifically that party cues act as an easy-to-use heuristic for respondents who otherwise lack interest or information (Popkin 1991, Rahn 1993, Zaller 1992, Boudreau and Mackenzie 2013). But do elected officials respond to party cues in the same way as regular citizens?

Experimental Hypotheses

I test whether being informed of the general position of *both* parties increases the partisan gap among school board members and additionally examine whether such a treatment differentially affects board members conditional on ballot context. It is possible that party politics plays no role in the opinions of elected school board members, regardless of ballot context. This *nonpartisan hypothesis* states that the treatment will *not* increase the partisan gap for a particular policy, and this null effect would be true across ballot contexts. In other words, Democrats and Republicans who are informed of *both* parties' general positions, prior to being asked their own opinion, will display levels of support indistinguishable from their co-partisans in the control group, and this result would be true among both partisan and nonpartisan-elected board members.

Conversely, partisan politics may influence the opinion formation (or opinion expression) of all school board members. This *partisan hypothesis* states that the treatment will polarize board members along party lines by increasing the partisan gap in policy support, regardless of ballot context. Democrats and Republicans who receive the treatment will express levels of support for a policy significantly different from their co-partisans in the control, and this would be true across ballot contexts. That is, a board member who runs for office with no party labels will be equally as influenced by a party cue as one running on a partisan ballot.

A third hypothesis is the *ballot context hypothesis.* This hypothesis states that the treatment effect is conditional on ballot context. The party cue treatment will polarize board members who run for office under a party label but no effect will be seen on their co-partisans who run in nonpartisan elections. Table 2 details the three hypotheses and the expected direction of each treatment effect by issue and party.

[Table 2]

Effects of Partisan Cue Treatment

I now turn to a more formal test of ballot design and partisan cues by estimating regression models of policy support as a function of party, the experimental treatment, and the interaction of the two. If the *ballot context* hypothesis is correct, then there ought to be a significant interaction such that the party cue treatment enhances polarization in attitudes among partisan-elected board members but not among those elected by nonpartisan ballots. This would seem to confirm the fears of reformers who believed partisan elections would lead to consideration of party over community, and imagined that officials elected in a nonpartisan fashion would be less susceptible to partisan ways of thinking about issues.

Table 3 reports ordered logistic regression estimates where the dependent variable is support for each of the three policies, as measured on a five-point scale where 0 = strongly oppose and 4 = strongly support. For all models, standard errors are clustered at the school-district level. Support for each policy is regressed on a dichotomous party identification variable (1 = Democrat and 0 = Republican) and an indicator for the party cue treatment.[xii] Districts with partisan boards were similar to districts with nonpartisan boards across a range of demographic variables with the exception of district partisanship and population density (see Figure A2 in online appendix). For this reason, I control for Obama's 2012 vote share and population density.[xiii]

If the treatment affects partisans in the expected direction, then Democrats who receive the treatment should exhibit higher levels of support for Common Core than Democrats in the control condition, whereas Republicans in the treatment condition should exhibit lower levels of support for Common Core than Republicans in the control condition. In order to parse these different dynamics, an interaction term is included (Democrat × Treatment).

Columns 1 and 2 display the results with respect to support for Common Core separately for nonpartisan and partisan-elected board members. Consistent with what was shown by difference-of-means test in the control group, the difference in support between Democrats and Republicans in nonpartisan elections is statistically significant ($p < .01$) while no difference exists for those from partisan elections. The coefficients for the treatment variable, which indicate the treatment effect for Republicans, are in the expected direction, but are not statistically significant. The coefficients on the interaction terms (1.181, $p < .05$ in nonpartisan, and 1.470, $p < .10$ in partisan) indicate that the treatment has a positive effect on Democratic support for Common Core. These results suggest that the party cue treatment affected Democrats

regardless of ballot context. As the two interaction terms are not statistically different from one another, Democratic school board members elected via partisan ballots respond to party cues with respect to support for Common Core just as readily as their co-partisans elected on an officially nonpartisan ballot.

The dependent variable is coded as *support* for a particular policy, regardless of party. As such, for school vouchers and school prayer, the expected direction of the coefficients for 'Democrat' flips from positive to negative. Conversely, the expected direction of the coefficient for 'Treatment', which represents the effect of the treatment for Republicans, flips from negative to positive. Columns 3 and 4 report results for the effect of the treatment on support for school vouchers. The party cue treatment has no effect on either Republicans or Democrats from nonpartisan ballots. Among those elected by partisan ballot, the treatment has a significant effect ($p < .10$) in the expected direction for both parties (+.765 Republicans, -1.567 for Democrats). The partisan gap among the control group from nonpartisan elections seen in difference-in-means dropped from statistical significance in the ordered logit model.

Columns 5 and 6 report results for the effect of the treatment on support for school prayer. The party cue treatment has no effect on Republicans in either ballot context or Democrats that run in nonpartisan elections. Among Democrats that run in partisan elections, the treatment has the expected negative effect but falls short of statistical significance.

Difference-in-means test revealed a significant partisan gap in policy support among board members from nonpartisan elections for all three policies in question (Figure 2). The ordered logit models show that nonpartisan board members in the control group remain significantly polarized on the issues of Common Core and school prayer while partisan-elected

board members continue to lack significantly polarized views on either Common Core or school vouchers. The coefficients for the party-cue treatment suggest an effect among nonpartisan board members only for the issue of Common Core. For partisan-elected board members, the treatment significantly affected Democratic support for Common Core and both Democratic and Republican support for school vouchers. While the treatment did not have an independently significant effect on either party for school prayer, it appeared to polarize these groups to a greater extent than their co-partisans from nonpartisan boards.

[Table 3]

To better understand the differing effects of ballot context on policy support, I estimate the marginal effect of shifting respondent party affiliation (from Republican to Democrat) on the predicted probability of both policy support and opposition, conditional on ballot context and treatment assignment, and holding district measures for partisanship and population density at their means.[xiv] The values displayed in Table 4 represent, in effect, the *partisan gap* in probability of policy support, defined as the predicted probability of Democratic support minus the predicted probability of Republican support. Thus, positive values indicate greater Democratic support and negative values indicate greater Republican support.[xv] Among the control group in the nonpartisan context, a significant partisan gap exists for probability of support and opposition to each policy, with one exception (*support* for school vouchers). For example, shifting from Republican to Democrat results in a .365 *increase* in probability of *support* for Common Core and a .323 *decrease* in probability of *opposition*. Similar, although less dramatic patterns appear for the school voucher and school prayer issues. In contrast, within the control group in the partisan ballot context, there is no significant partisan gap for support or opposition to any of the three policies. In short, without any treatment, school board members

elected on nonpartisan ballots consistently display more polarized policy attitudes than do their peers elected on partisan ballots.

[Table 4]

Potential Explanations

The oft-argued message of proponents of nonpartisan elections is that placing party labels on the ballot will unnecessarily entangle local government with partisan politics. This argument presumes that partisan elections yield elected officials who place the interests of party over that of local governance, while nonpartisan elections produce elected officials that meet the expectations of Progressive reformers (Williams and Adrian 1959, Rogers and Arman 1971, Cassel 1985, Berman 2015). Despite these claims, several scholars have argued that nonpartisan elections are not void of partisan considerations, either from the candidates or the voters themselves (Adrian 1952, 1959, Williams and Adrian 1959, Boudreau and Mackenzie 2013, Rock and Baum 2010, Meier and Rutherford 2016).

The data generated by my survey experiment cannot provide conclusive evidence as to *why* nonpartisan elected officials express these more polarized views, but it is possible to rule out several potential explanations.

Results displayed in Table 3 show that increased population density has a significant positive effect on support for Common Core and a significant negative effect on support for school prayer, while having no effect on support for vouchers. While Obama's 2012 county vote share had no effect on support for any policy, it is likely that population density picked up an underlying partisanship of each jurisdiction. Population density is correlated with district partisanship ($r = .272$, $p < .01$), with higher density areas voting more Democratic than more

rural areas. It is therefore unsurprising that board members, regardless of party, are more supportive of the Democratic position on Common Core in high-density areas and are more supportive of the Republican position on school prayer in low-density areas.

Kimball et. al. (2013) noted that partisan differences in policy views among local election officials increased with jurisdiction size. If polarized viewpoints are more likely to be seen in larger jurisdictions, then perhaps the disproportionately polarized views expressed by nonpartisan-elected board members is a function of partisan counties being slightly more rural.

To explore this possibility, I repeat the previous analysis separately for urban and rural communities. Table 5 shows the partisan gap in predicted probability of policy support, conditional on ballot context, estimated for low and high-population density areas (counties at the 25th and 75th percentile, respectively). Among the control group in the nonpartisan ballot context, a significant gap in probability of policy support and opposition exists across all three policies, regardless of population density (with the exception of *support* for school vouchers). The partisan gap is slightly greater in the higher population-density areas for Common Core and school prayer, a finding consistent with prior work on polarization and jurisdiction size (Kimball and Baybeck 2013, Kimball et al. 2013). Among control group respondents in the partisan ballot context, there is no significant gap between Republicans and Democrats for support or opposition to any of the three policies, regardless of population density. Considering that a partisan gap in policy support does not materialize even in highly populated, partisan-elected districts but is still witnessed in rural, nonpartisan-elected districts suggest that jurisdiction size does not explain the disproportionately polarized views expressed by nonpartisan-elected board members.

Table 3 revealed a significant treatment effect with respect to Common Core and school vouchers. Table 5 affirms these findings, showing the partisan gap in predicted probability of policy support for the treatment group. A significant partisan gap in policy support exists for Common Core in both the partisan and nonpartisan contexts, regardless of jurisdiction size. For school vouchers and school prayer, the evidence suggests that the treatment's effect on the partisan gap in policy support is mostly restricted to board members from larger jurisdictions.

In the control group, slightly greater polarization existed among nonpartisan-elected board members from large jurisdictions on the issues of Common Core and school prayer, yet that same polarization was absent among partisan-elected officials. In addition, the party-cue treatment was found to be more influential on board members from larger jurisdictions. Taken together, these results provide additional evidence that political polarization of elected officials is partially attributable to jurisdiction size.[xvi]

[Table 5]

Prior examination of covariate balance between partisan and nonpartisan counties showed that nonpartisan counties were slightly more conservative than partisan counties. At the same time, Democrats and Republicans are similarly represented on nonpartisan boards in counties where Obama received less than 50% of the vote (60 Democrats and 57 Republicans)[xvii]. After controlling for partisanship, the significant differences between Democrats and Republicans among nonpartisan elected board members remain significant. In addition, the insignificant differences between Democrats and Republicans in partisan-elected counties remain insignificant (Table 3). Obama's vote share does not have a main effect on support for any of the policies.[xviii] In short, these results indicate that the ballot design rather than constituent opinion is the culprit.

Partisan school boards in North Carolina and Georgia are not randomly assigned to counties, but demographic differences with nonpartisan counties were largely indistinguishable with the exception of district partisanship and population density. Both of these variables could have helped explain the polarized views of the nonpartisan board members, yet the data show that significant differences between Republicans and Democrats remain after controlling for these factors.

What explains these "polarized nonpartisans"? I propose two possible mechanisms. The first is one of "institutional cover." This idea posits that the absence of party labels facilitates more covert and perhaps more intense party views. This would happen in two ways. First, it may be that nonpartisan elections allow more extreme partisans to be elected. Candidates who run in nonpartisan elections are free to focus on issues salient to their local context without negotiating the perceptions that come with party labels. Extreme partisans could harbor strongly Democratic or Republican views on a range of issues that are never discussed in a local campaign. Second, it may be that partisan elections force candidates to moderate their positions in an effort to appeal to voters of the opposing party. If extreme partisans who were free to ignore polarizing issues in nonpartisan races were forced to run in partisan elections, they may be required to give opinions on politically divisive issues, thereby revealing their true partisan nature.

A second possible explanation is that candidates in nonpartisan elections may be more likely to signal their preferences because they lack a party label to do it for them. This explanation runs parallel to prior work finding that nonpartisan-elected judges are more likely to hand down decisions that mirror their constituencies' preferences, and that candidates for nonpartisan state legislature express more polarized views than similar candidates for partisan legislatures (Cranes-Wrone and Schotts 2007, Wright and Schaffner 2002). If board members

elected by nonpartisan ballot were to signal their partisanship, it is likely they would do so in counties where such information would be perceived as beneficial as opposed to politically risky.

I reran the models presented in Table 3 separately for "safe" and "competitive" counties, as defined by the difference in the two-party 2012 presidential vote share.[xix] In safe counties, the partisan gap in probability of policy support among the nonpartisan control group is significant for both common core ($p < .10$) and school prayer ($p < .01$). In competitive counties, no such gap exists. These results provide suggestive evidence for the signaling theory and demonstrate the need for further research into the underlying partisan behaviors of elected officials from both partisan and nonpartisan elections.

Conclusion

The *partisan* hypothesis stated that the party cue treatment would affect the level of policy support expressed by board members regardless of ballot context. Conversely, the *nonpartisan* hypothesis stated that the party cue treatment would have no effect on the level of policy support expressed by board members, regardless of ballot context. If either of these hypotheses were supported by the data it would be empirical evidence supporting the notion that the partisan ballot context of school board elections has no bearing on the policy views of elected officials.

The *ballot context* hypothesis stated that those elected on partisan ballots would respond to a party cue whereas those elected by nonpartisan ballots would not. Of the three, the *ballot context* hypothesis is most supported by the data. Of the six potential conditions where a treatment effect may be found (an effect on Democrats or Republicans for each of three policy issues), only one is significant under the nonpartisan ballot context—Democrats are positively

and significantly affected by the treatment for Common Core. Among those elected in the partisan context, a treatment effect is found in three of the six conditions; Democrats experience a treatment effect for both Common Core and school vouchers while Republicans are affected by the treatment for school vouchers only.

It should be noted that ceiling effects might also be at play. The average level of support for school prayer for Republicans is very high, and the null treatment effect may be a product of a ceiling effect that prevent them from moving any higher. Conversely, a floor effect might be expected for Democrats with respect to school vouchers, but that notion is not supported by the data, as the treatment effect for Democrats is negative and significant.

That a partisan gap in policy support exists among the control group for nonpartisan-elected officials while none is found for those elected by partisan ballot is deserving of further attention. I provide suggestive evidence of nonpartisans "signaling" their partisanship as a partial explanation for this puzzle. At the same time, demonstrating polarized views among nonpartisan-elected officials on these three policy issues provides only a narrow window into the partisan dynamics at play in local governance. Research exploring a wider range of policy questions is necessary to elucidate the extent to which "polarized nonpartisans" may be structurally pervasive or idiosyncratic to particular issues.

Variation in how local elections are conducted provides opportunities to test the effects of differing ballot contexts across a range of outcomes, including but not limited to voting behavior, campaign behavior, and policy views. I take advantage of a unique feature of local governance in North Carolina in Georgia—both states organize their school boards by county, yet some

officials run in nonpartisan elections and some in partisan ones. This type of within-state variation, let alone the same type of within-state variation occurring in neighboring states, is rare.

My results contribute to a growing debate about how best to structure local elections. This study indicates that the effects of ballot design are not as straightforward as either reformers or the defenders of parties have argued. Additional research into the differences between nonpartisan and partisan elections at the local level are clearly necessary, not just to examine rates of voter participation, but also differences in candidate behavior and policy outcomes.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Differences in Policy Support: Control Group[*]
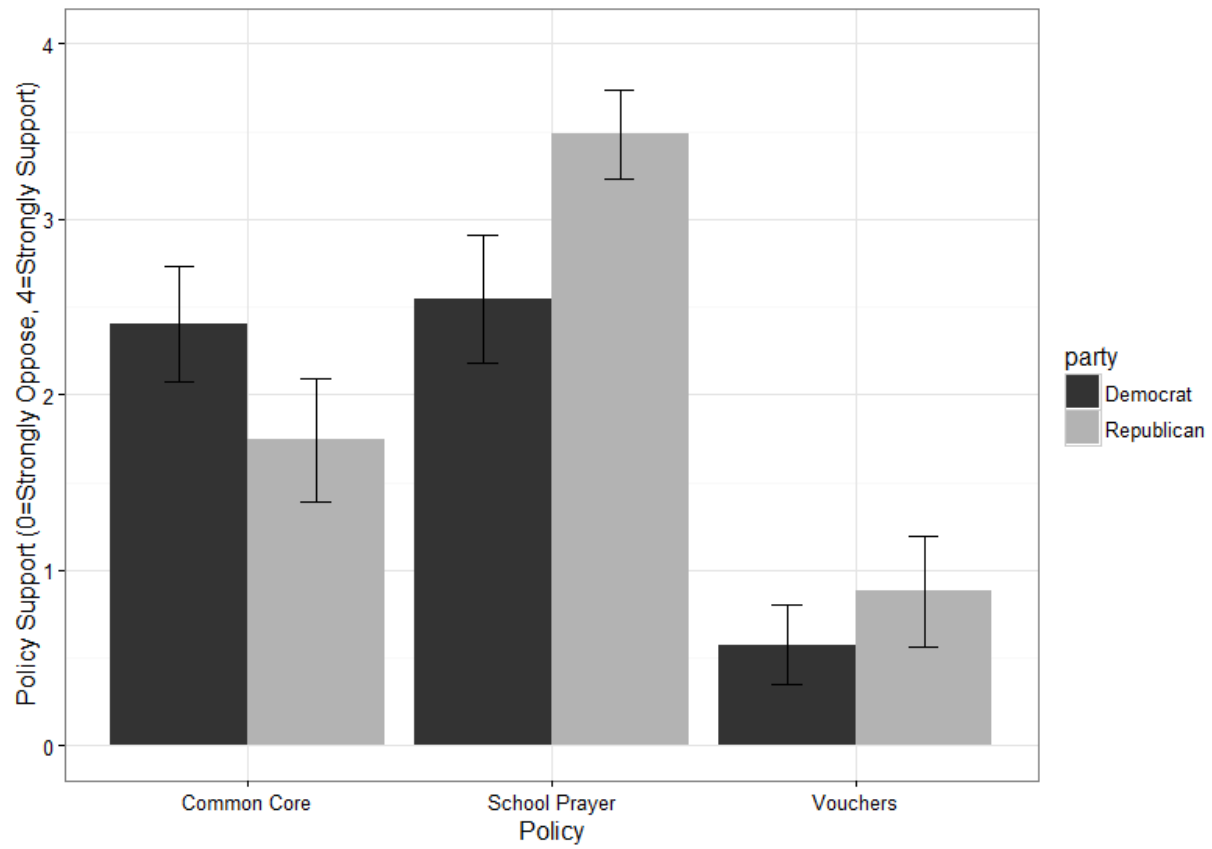
*Represents the pooled responses from partisan and nonpartisan-elected board members.
Error bars represent 95% confidence interval.

Figure 2: <u>Control Group</u>. Partisan differences in policy support are significant among nonpartisan-elected board members. There is no statistically significant partisan gap among partisan-elected board members for any of the three issues.
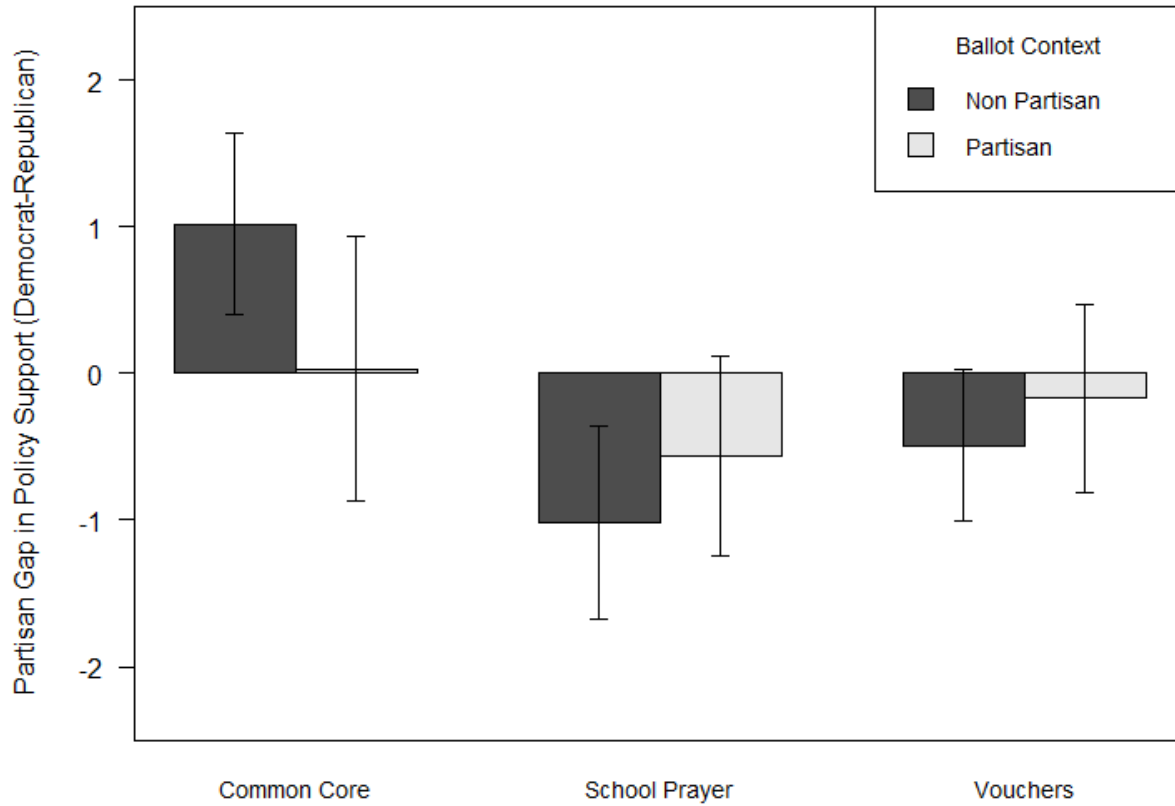
Error bars represent 95% confidence interval. Confidence intervals that cross 0 indicate no statistically significant difference in policy support between Democrats and Republicans.

Table 1: Survey Experiment Question Wording

Policy	Control	Treatment
Common Core	In recent years, the implementation of Common Core State Standards has been the subject of debate in state legislatures. All things considered, do you generally support or oppose the Common Core State Standards?	In recent years, the implementation of Common Core State Standards has been the subject of debate in state legislatures. *The Republican Party has generally opposed the Common Core State Standards and has taken steps to repeal or replace them. The Democratic Party has generally supported the Common Core State Standards and has sought to maintain them.* All things considered, do you generally support or oppose the Common Core State Standards?
School Vouchers	In recent years, several state legislatures have debated whether or not to implement school voucher programs. All things considered, do you generally support or oppose school voucher programs?	In recent years, several state legislatures have debated whether or not to implement school voucher programs. *The Republican Party has generally supported school voucher programs while the Democratic Party has generally opposed them.* All things considered, do you generally support or oppose school voucher programs?
School Prayer	In recent years many states and localities have confronted issues that center on prayer in public schools, and whether or not this should be permissible. All things considered, do you generally support or oppose allowing prayer in public schools?	In recent years many states and localities have confronted issues that center on prayer in public schools, and whether or not this should be permissible. *The Republican Party has generally supported allowing prayer in public schools while the Democratic Party has generally opposed this.* All things considered, do you generally support or oppose allowing prayer in public schools?

Italics in treatment prompts are my emphasis.

Table 2: Experimental Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Ballot Context	Policy	Treatment Effect on Policy Support
Nonpartisan	Both Nonpartisan and Partisan	Common Core, School Vouchers, and, School Prayer	$T1_{DEM} \approx T0_{DEM}$ $T1_{REP} \approx T0_{REP}$
Partisan	Both Nonpartisan and Partisan	Common Core	$T1_{DEM} > T0_{DEM}$ $T1_{REP} < T0_{REP}$
		School Vouchers and School Prayer	$T1_{DEM} < T0_{DEM}$ $T1_{REP} > T0_{REP}$
Ballot Context	Nonpartisan	Common Core, School Vouchers, and, School Prayer	$T1_{DEM} \approx T0_{DEM}$ $T1_{REP} \approx T0_{REP}$
	Partisan	Common Core	$T1_{DEM} > T0_{DEM}$ $T1_{REP} < T0_{REP}$
		School Vouchers and School Prayer	$T1_{DEM} < T0_{DEM}$ $T1_{REP} > T0_{REP}$

$T1_{REP}$ = Republican in Treatment Group; $T0_{REP}$ = Republican in Control Group
$T1_{DEM}$ = Democrat in Treatment Group; $T0_{DEM}$ = Democrat in Control Group

Table 3: Party Cue Treatment Effect on Support for Common Core, School Vouchers, and School Prayer (Ordered Logit)

	Common Core		School Vouchers		School Prayer	
	Nonpartisan	Partisan	Nonpartisan	Partisan	Nonpartisan	Partisan
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Democrat	**1.527****	0.484	-0.723	-0.781	**-1.513****	**-2.109***
	(0.451)	(0.749)	(0.595)	(0.730)	(0.473)	(0.928)
Treatment	-0.561	-0.668	0.389	**0.765+**	-0.276	-0.481
	(0.446)	(0.562)	(0.581)	(0.416)	(0.521)	(0.515)
Democrat × Treatment	**1.181***	**1.470+**	-0.638	**-1.567+**	0.0244	-1.155
	(0.580)	**(0.842)**	(0.640)	**(0.860)**	(0.609)	(0.867)
Obama 2012 Vote Share	-0.005	-0.014	0.008	0.015	0.008	0.003
	(0.010)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.010)	(0.018)
Population Density (Log)	**0.460****	**0.354***	-0.0457	-0.0815	**-0.364***	**-0.786****
	(0.120)	(0.148)	(0.109)	(0.182)	(0.144)	(0.257)
Observations	172	97	174	97	174	97

Unstandardized ordered logistic regression coefficients are reported, with standard errors in parentheses.
Standard errors clustered at the district-level.
+ $p<0.10$, * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

Table 4: Partisan Gap in Predicted Probability of Policy Support (Control Group)

Predicted Probability of Democratic Support (Opposition) — Predicted Probability of Republican Support (Opposition)											
Common Core				School Vouchers				School Prayer			
Nonpartisan		Partisan		Nonpartisan		Partisan		Nonpartisan		Partisan	
Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose
.365**	**-.323****	.131	-.123	-.144	**.200**+	-.005	.020	**-.354****	**.271****	-.275	.080

Cell values represent change in predicted probability of policy support (opposition) conditional on a 1-unit change in the independent variable (in this case, moving from 'Republican' to 'Democrat'). Obama's 2012 vote share and population density are held at their means. Partisan gap in predicted probability is significant at + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 5: Partisan Gap in Predicted Probability of Policy Support

		Predicted Probability of Democratic Support (Opposition) — Predicted Probability of Republican Support (Opposition)											
		Common Core				School Vouchers				School Prayer			
		Nonpartisan		Partisan		Nonpartisan		Partisan		Nonpartisan		Partisan	
Experimental Condition	Population Density	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose
Control	25%	**.242***	**-.334***	.065	-.115	-.172	**.232+**	-.005	.019	**-.274***	**.187+**	-.194	.048
	75%	**.358****	**-.286***	.135	-.104	-.138	**.193+**	-.005	.020	**-.369****	**.291****	-.299	.092
Treatment	25%	**.634***	**-.756****	**.303***	**-.374***	-.096	**.183+**	-.243	.352	-.257	.129	-.000	.000
	75%	**.695****	**-.485****	**.346+**	**-.368+**	**-.100+**	**.189+**	**-.265***	**.376+**	**-.576****	**.392****	**-1.26****	.307

Cell values represent change in predicted probability of policy support conditional on a one-unit change in the independent variable (in this case, moving from 'Republican' to 'Democrat'). Obama's 2012 vote share held at mean. Partisan gap in predicted probability is significant at + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Endnotes

[i] This ratio is reflective of a broad range of local offices. Certain municipal offices, such as Mayor, may have a different share of partisan elections.

[ii] Tennessee HB 420/SB 748 (2013), Indiana S 289 (2014), Florida SJR 743 (2016), Kansas SB 171, and Pennsylvania SB 327 (2012) and SB 443 (2014).

[iii] See Figure A2 in online appendix for full depiction of covariate balance.

[iv] O.C.GA. 20-2-56.

[v] GA SB 184.

[vi] NC Gen. Stat. 115C-35(a).

[vii] Pre-notification emails were sent on March 7, 2016. The survey was closed on April 14, 2016.

[viii] School districts are represented by 34 city school systems and 254 county school systems for a total of 288 potential school districts across North Carolina and Georgia. See Figure A1 in online appendix for full comparison of demographic characteristics.

[ix] Random assignment ensures that any differences in board members response is due to the treatment rather than unobserved characteristics of the board members. Figure A3 (online appendix) presents the balance between treatment and control groups among relevant covariates.

[x] Replication data for this article is available with the manuscript on the PRQ website.

[xi] The question about party affiliation was worded so respondents could choose "Democrat," "Republican," "Independent," or "Other Party". These questions were placed at the end of the end of the survey and appeared several questions after the

experimental section. 9.2% of nonpartisan and 6.3% of partisan-elected officials refrained from identifying with a party.

[xii] I exclude self-identified Independents from the model. The substantive interest is whether or not partisans are affected by a cue that reminds them of the general policy position of the two major parties. Theoretically, Independents should not be affected by each party's general positions on the issues. Future research could examine whether or not a partisan cue has an effect on the level of support amongst those Independents.

[xiii] North Carolina had a straight-ticket option on the ballot until 2014 while Georgia abolished this option in 1994. Including state dummy variables does not change the results, nor is the dummy significant for any of the policies.

[xiv] For ease of interpretation I collapse the "strongly agree" and "agree" measures into a single category of policy support (the same is done for opposition). Respondents who stated they were "unsure" or "neutral" on a policy were left as such. For simplicity, Tables 4 and 5 present the partisan gap in predicted probability of only the collapsed measures of policy support and opposition.

[xv] Similarly, when policy opposition is modeled, positive values indicate greater Democratic opposition and negative values indicate greater Republic opposition.

[xvi] Figures depicting the relationship between party, ballot context, and experimental condition are available in the online appendix (Figures A4-A6).

[xvii] Table A1 in online appendix fully details this breakdown.

[xviii] I regressed policy support with an interaction term between Democrat and Obama vote share in case increased Obama vote share in a county had a differential effect on

Democrats and Republicans. The interaction term was not significant for either partisan or nonpartisan-elected board members for any of the three policies.

[xix] I define a "safe" county to be one where Obama's 2012 vote share was either below 40% or above 60%, and a "competitive" county to be one where Obama's vote share was between 40% and 60%. These results are available as Table A3 in the online appendix.