

Partisanship in Local Bureaucratic Appointments: Evidence from Election Administration*

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Abstract

Partisan officials make thousands of appointments for ostensibly nonpartisan bureaucratic positions each year. When the partisan balance of these principals flips, do they fire the existing bureaucrats and replace them with officials loyal to their partisan allegiances? In this paper, I examine partisan fires through the widely discussed case of increasing turnover among local election officials. Combining original panel data of local election officials and partisan appointing authorities with administrative data on elections, I find little evidence that election officials are fired for partisan reasons or that partisan principals reduce the quality of elections, bringing into question the extent to which increasing partisanship nationwide has percolated down to local politics.

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1 Introduction

One of the age-old questions of local politics is whether it replicates or is divorced from nationalized partisanship (Anzia 2021; Tiebout 1956). The traditional view of local officials is that they are nonpartisan bureaucrats operating in issue areas that do not cleanly map onto the national two-party system (Peterson 1981). Recent studies have shown evidence of increasing polarization in state and local politics, to the point where some argue that local politics is now mostly replicates national partisan trends (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019; Hopkins 2018). Other studies have identified limits to such polarization, including among sheriffs Thompson (2020) and elected local election officials (Ferrer and Geyn 2024).

One of the ways government officials might be divorced from national party politics is via appointments. Officials selected by appointments instead of direct election are at least partially insulated from electoral pressures. Progressive Era reforms at the turn of the 20th century aimed to achieve this by handing the reigns of hundreds of city governments to unelected bureaucrats via the council-manager model. While the impetus for some of these reforms were racist and nativist (Carreri, Payson, and Thompson 2023), insulating bureaucrats from partisan pressures may be desirable in some circumstances. Judges facing electoral pressure tend to render more punitive judgements than those who do not (Gordon and Huber 2007; Huber and Gordon 2004), elected municipal assessors in New York exacerbate inequality in property taxation (Sances 2016), elected city treasurers in California significantly increase borrowing costs relative to appointed treasurers (Whalley 2013), and appointed local election officials oversee elections with more participation and lower wait times than directly elected election officials (Ferrer 2024).

One area where insulation from partisan pressures might be particularly beneficial is in election administration. Nonpartisan election administration is desired by large majorities of the public across both parties (Stewart 2021). Election integrity is vital to a well-functioning democracy, and partisan interference or the appearance of partisan actors can significantly reduce voters' confidence in election results (Norris and Grömping 2019). Previous scholar-

ship has found that election officials who are directly elected administer elections similarly regardless of party affiliation (Ferrer, Geyn, and Thompson 2023) and that election officials who are appointed by partisan actors do not appear to produce election results favoring their principals' party (Ferrer 2024). However, partisan appointers could still attempt to shape election outcomes via their appointing authority by replacing election administrators appointed by previous out-partisan principals. Hiring and firing decisions made with regard to partisan preference rather than ability could result in suboptimal election administration. It could also contribute to increasing turnover rates in the profession (Ferrer, Thompson, and Orey 2024).

This paper studies partisanship in the actions of officials who appoint local election officials across the US. Where election officials' principals are themselves elected with party labels, do they use their authority to shape who the chief local election official is and does this result in negative downstream administrative outcomes? Using original panel data on local election officials and their partisan appointers over two decades and across 595 jurisdictions spanning 7 states, I find that a change in the partisan majority of election officials' appointing authority does not lead to an increase in turnover among administrators relative to when the principal partisanship stays the same. This holds across most states and years and a variety of specifications. I also find that a switch in partisanship of officials' appointing authority does not reduce the quality of election administration. Taken together with other recent studies, it appears that election administration remains resistant to increasing partisan pressures and that local politics remains at least partially insulated from hyperpartisanship in the national arena.

2 Partisanship in the Appointment of Public Officials

Principals could use their appointment authority to achieve partisan ends in two ways. First, they may seek partisan gain by choosing an agent that informally matches their declared

party affiliation. In cases where the currently serving agent was appointed by previous principals of a different party affiliation, the principal could fire them or refuse to renew their appointment. Second, principals could influence the actions of their agent by issuing the threat of firing. This requires the willingness of the agent to alter their administrative decisions and the ability of the principal to effectively monitor the actions of their agent.

Principals may be constrained in pursuing partisan actions by laws, by other veto players, and by institutional norms. In the first case, statute can prohibit public officials with appointment authority from removing an agent from their position prior to the end of their term without cause. Even if the principal states ostensible cause, this allows the appointee to sue to retain their job. Second, multiple principals may be involved in the appointment decision. This creates the possibility for principals with strong partisan desires to be overruled, as a majority must agree on the appointment (Tsebelis 1999). Finally, even if principals have the formal authority and the institutional capacity to exert authority for partisan gain, they choose not to do so to maintain institutional norms of nonpartisanship. Norms are the weakest barrier to action, but politicians may adhere to them by selecting a consensus appointment or maintaining the previous party's appointment because by doing so, they reduce the likelihood that out-partisans will break the norm when they gain power.

3 Data and Methods

Rather than attempting to identify whether certain hires or fires of local election officials are due to partisan motives, my analysis begins with the premise that if appointers were pursuing partisan ends, they would be more likely to hire a new chief local election official when their party gains majority appointing authority than when there is not a change in the partisanship of the appointing authority. Because the previous election official was selected by out-partisans, the change in principal partisanship should increase the likelihood of turnover in the appointed election official. If there were no difference in the turnover

of election officials between switches in principal party and maintenance in principal party, this would be evidence that principals are not systematically engaging in partisan-motivated hiring and firing of their agents.

3.1 Data

I draw on three datasets: an original panel of local election officials across all 50 states over 24 years, an original panel of appointing authorities across states with partisan election official appointments, and county-level turnout and election administration outcomes from David Leip’s Election Atlas and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission’s EAVS dataset.

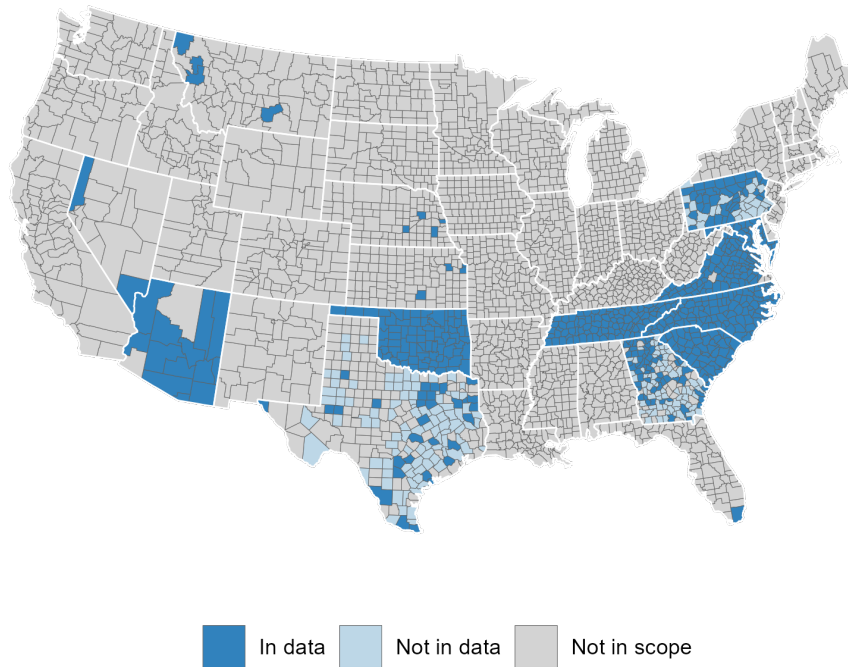
I collected a large-scale panel of chief local election officials across all 50 states from 2000 to 2022 (Ferrer, Thompson, and Orey 2024). This data captures the official who administered each even-year general election with primary responsibility for administering elections on Election Day (Ferrer and Geyn 2024). The majority of this data was collected from election results and official directories housed in state and local government websites either through election results for elected officials. Some was acquired via public information requests, through third-party organizations, and from direct communication with jurisdictions. Turnover is calculated as a change in a jurisdiction’s chief election officer since the November election held two (or where noted, four) years prior.

3.2 Where are election officials appointed by partisan principals?

Appointed local election officials run elections for more than half of all voters in the U.S. and for 39% of all election jurisdictions (Ferrer and Geyn 2024). As part of this project, I mapped out all jurisdictions that select their chief local election official via appointment by partisan officials.¹ Figure 1 shows which counties select their election official via partisan

¹Only jurisdictions that administer elections at the county level are included in these figures. In addition, at least some municipalities in Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin use partisan principals to appoint their chief local election officials. These states are not included in the analysis due to a lack of panel coverage of their appointment structures.

Figure 1: **Map of Included Jurisdictions in the United States.** This map displays which counties are in the data analysis (dark blue), which counties entrust the appointment of election officials via partisan officials but are not in the data (light blue), and which counties are not in the project’s scope (grey). Counties are out of scope either because their local election officials are not appointed by partisan actors or because primary election responsibilities are carried out by municipal actors.



appointment. In total, 792 counties across 11 states use partisan principals to select their chief local election official. This amounts to approximately 1 out of every 4 counties. The data on partisanship of appointing officials was obtained from a variety of sources, including election results, archived state and local government websites, newspaper articles, and direct communication with local officials.

The specifics of partisan local election official appointments vary widely, but can be split into two categories. First, some states empower state-level actors to determine the partisan control of county appointment bodies for their elections. The partisan affiliation of the Governor determines the majority party of local election boards in Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Virginia, which in turn select the chief local election official. The party-affiliated lieutenant governor in Alaska selects the State Director of Elections, who

in turn appoints Regional Election Supervisors. Appointments to Tennessee’s State Elections Commission are made by the Tennessee General Assembly—a combination of their upper and lower state legislative chambers. The State Elections Commission then makes appointments to the county election commissions, which finally appoint an administrator of elections in each county.

Alternatively, the partisanship of principals can be determined by county-level officials. County legislative bodies in Arizona, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia all hold appointing authority for chief local election officials that are appointed in these states. In Texas, elections administrators are appointed by the county election commission, which is uniformly composed of the direct elected county judge, clerk, and tax assessor, as well as the county chair of each major party.

Some states vary their appointment method by jurisdiction. In Nebraska, the Governor appoints county election commissioners in counties with over 100,000 residents, whereas the county legislative board makes these appointments for smaller jurisdictions that use an appointed election commissioner. Georgia empowers each county with a Board of Elections to choose its own appointing principals. There are dozens of variations in appointment procedure. The most common arrangement empowers the county legislative body to make all appointments, but it is also common to allow each major party to make an appointment.

3.3 Research Design

Panel data allows me to employ a difference-in-differences design, examining the effect of a change in the partisanship of the appointing official on turnover and election administration outcomes. I estimate the regression $Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta \text{Appoint_party_change}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$, where Y_{it} is whether there was turnover of the local election official in jurisdiction i at election year t (or some other administrative outcome), α_i and δ_t are jurisdiction and year fixed effects, respectively, and $\text{Appoint_party_change}_{it}$ is a dummy variable taking 1 when the appointing authority changes party and 0 when the appointing authority stays the same. β is the causal

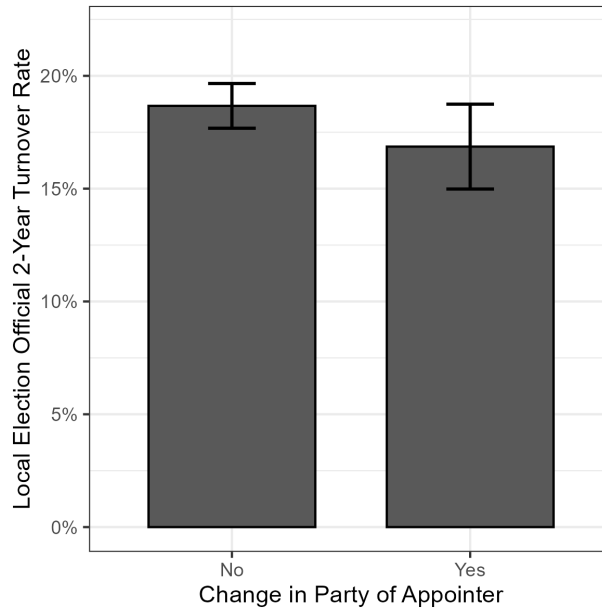
effect of interest. This estimation strategy accounts for unit- and common time-specific confounders. It produces causally valid inferences under the parallel trends assumption, which assumes that turnover rates in jurisdictions that undergo a switch in principal partisanship would have stayed on the same trend as turnover rates in jurisdictions that retain the same principal partisanship under the counterfactual where principal partisanship did not switch. I plan to conduct event study analysis in a future version of this paper to test the validity of this assumption.

4 Descriptive Evidence of No Systematic Partisanship

I begin by showing the results of descriptive analysis of the data, before moving to two-way fixed effect regressions in the following section. Figure 2 shows the percentage of local election officials who leave office over a two-year period split by whether there was a change in the majority party of the official's principal authority. On average, 16.9% of appointed local election officials leave office in a two-year period when the principal's party changes and 18.6% of appointed local election officials leave office in periods when the principal's party does not change. This is not a statistically significant difference, and it is in the opposite direction of what would be expected if principals were using their authority to push out out-party appointed agents after taking office.

Figure 3 breaks down this average by state. Across most states, there is no significant difference in turnover rate of election officials whether their principal's majority party switched or stayed the same in the two years prior. Turnover is much higher in Arizona when the majority party of the appointer changes, although the result could simply be due to chance. The strongest evidence for a differential is in Georgia. When the party of an election official's appointing board switches, the turnover rate of election supervisors is 41%, compared with 21% when the party of the appointing board stays the same.

Figure 2: **Average Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change.** Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.



Finally, Figure 4 examines descriptive turnover rate statistics between 2004 and 2022. While turnover in jurisdictions experiencing a switch in appointer party did rise significantly in 2018 and 2020, the result is powered by relatively few switches. In 2022, turnover was higher in counties that did not experience a switch in principal partisanship than those that did. Consistent with Ferrer, Thompson, and Orey (2024), overall turnover among appointed election officials has risen over the past two decades. However, this is not clearly driven by an increase in turnover among counties that switched partisan hands.

In sum, the descriptive data shows no clear evidence of systematic fires among local election officials when their principal authority changes between Democratic and Republican control.

Figure 3: Average State Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

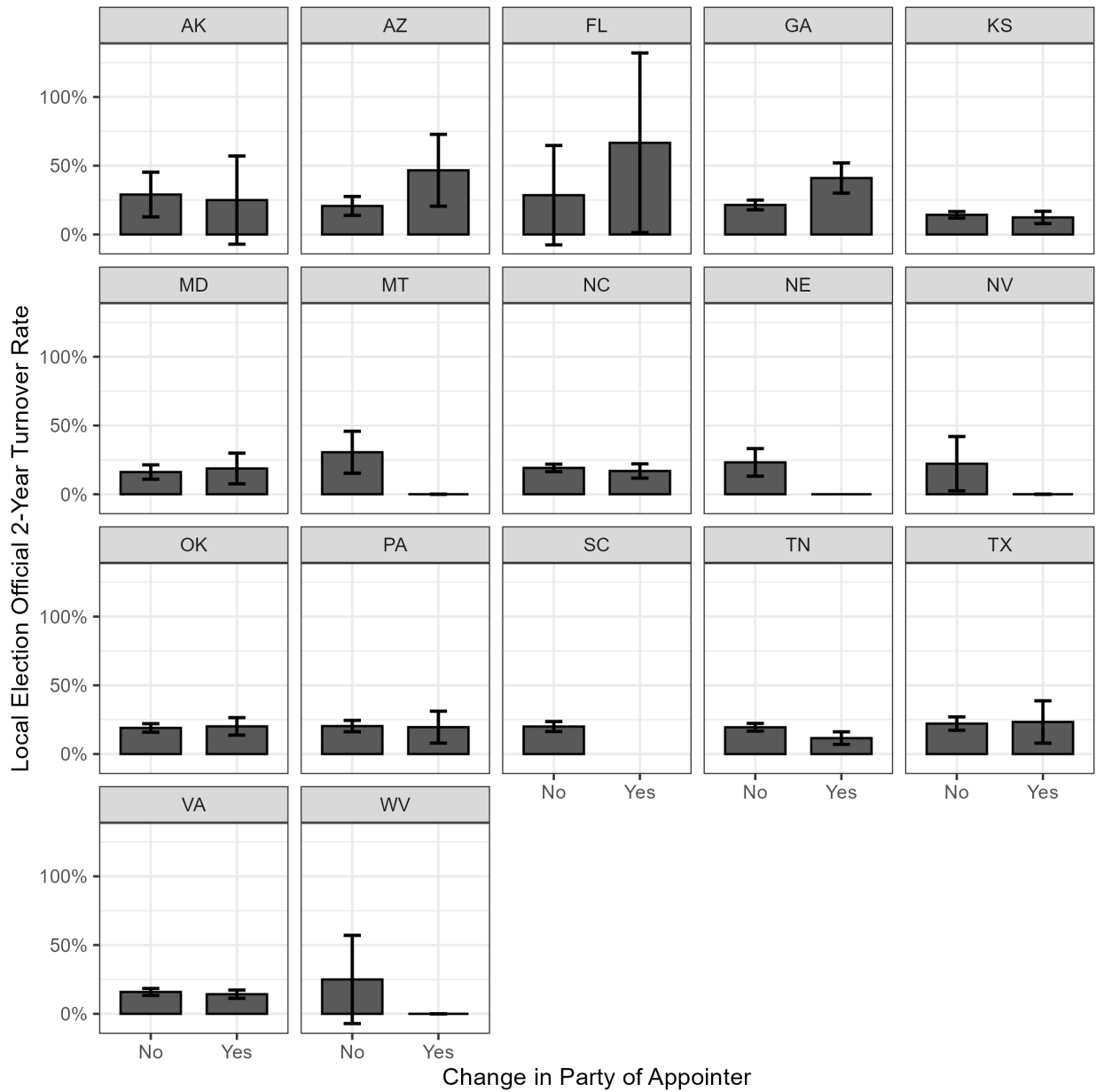
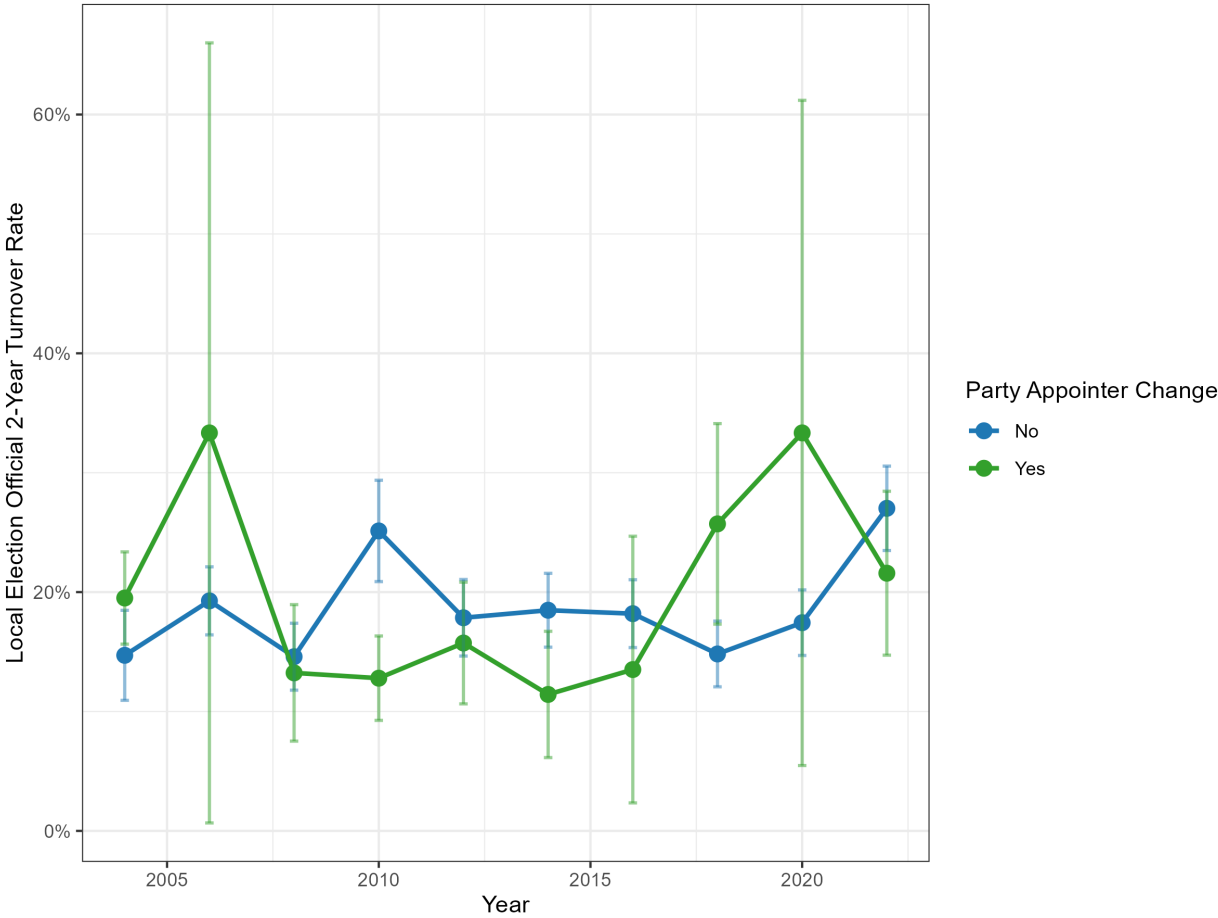


Figure 4: Average Turnover Rate of Appointed Election Officials by Principal Partisanship Change Over Time. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.



5 Formal Evidence of No Systematic Partisanship

1 shows the output of difference-in-difference linear probability regressions of the effect of a change in the party affiliation of a appointed official’s partisanship on the likelihood that they leave their position. All specifications include county and year fixed effects. Column 1 uses the full dataset and a 2-year definition of local election official turnover. Column 2 uses a 4-year definition of turnover. Columns 3 and 4 subset the data to presidential and midterm elections, respectively. Columns 5 and 6 subset the data to cases where the new appointing party in Republican and Democratic, respectively. Positive values indicate that a change in principal partisanship increases the likelihood of turnover.

Table 1: Switch in Partisanship of Appointing Authority Does Not Lead to Increased Election Official Turnover

	Turnover					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Principal Party Change	-0.010 (0.012)	-0.040*** (0.015)	0.011 (0.017)	-0.029 (0.020)	-0.052*** (0.018)	0.023 (0.025)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Turnover yrs def	2	4	2	2	2	2
Elections	All	All	Pres	Midterm	All	All
Appointing party	All	All	All	All	Rep	Dem
Observations	7,459	7,459	3,729	3,730	4,564	2,685

The results show no systematic evidence of an increase in turnover when principal party affiliation changes. The point estimates in columns 3 and 6 are positive and suggest a 1 and 2 percentage point increase in turnover after a switch in principal party partisanship, respectively, but the estimates are not statistically significant. Indeed, only columns 2 and 5 attain conventional levels of significance, and both suggest that there is less turnover when the principal party of an election official changes than when it stays the same. The results

are robust to using 2- and 4-year definitions of turnover, employing logit rather than linear probability models, and subsetting to only presidential or midterm elections. They are also robust to subsetting by party, with no strong evidence that switching to a Democratic or a Republican principal specifically increases a local election official’s probability of leaving.

5.1 Do Changes in Principal Partisanship Affect Election Administration?

Even if principals do not appear to fire election officials for partisan reasons, it is still possible they pressure their agents to take actions beneficial to their party. Previous research, using data on appointments in Arizona and Pennsylvania, has shown that partisan appointers do not receive an obvious electoral benefit to their party, on average (Ferrer 2024). However, it is still possible that principals attempt to alter administrator’s decisions in way that affects the quality of election administration.

In order to test this possibility, I use data on total ballots cast from David Leip’s Atlas of U.S. Elections and data on election administration outcomes from EAC’s EAVS survey. Denominators for voting-age population come from Census estimates.² I compute residual vote as the number of ballots cast in a jurisdiction minus the number of votes cast in the race at the top of the ticket, either the presidential or gubernatorial election (Kropf et al. 2020; Stewart et al. 2020).

Table 2 shows the results of difference-in-difference regressions on the effect of a change in principal party control on voter turnout (column 1), residual vote (column 2), the provisional vote rate (column 3), the absentee ballot rejection rate (column 4), and the likelihood of a jurisdiction’s reporting error for the residual vote rate (column 5).

There is little evidence that a switch in the partisanship of the appointing principal affects the quality of election administration. A change in principal party control leads to

²I use estimates from the National Cancer Institute’s Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results Program available at <https://seer.cancer.gov/popdata/singleages.html>

Table 2: Switch in Partisanship of Appointing Authority Does Reduce Quality of Election Administration

	Voter Turnout (1)	Residual Vote (2)	Provisional Rate (3)	Absentee Reject Rate (4)	Residual Vote Error (5)
Principal Party Change	-0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001*** (0.0004)	-0.0003 (0.002)	-0.030*** (0.007)
County FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	6,025	5,016	5,415	6,304	5,016

an statistically and substantively insignificant decrease in voter turnout (0.2%). There is also no clear effect on the residual vote or absentee rejection rate. A change in principal partisanship is associated with a slight increase in the provisional ballot rate, but a decrease in the likelihood that a jurisdiction records an error in its turnout data.

6 Conclusion

If local politics were a replica of the nation’s increasing polarized party camps, we would expect to see public officials use every lever at their disposal to benefit their co-partisans. Thousands of politicians with partisan affiliations are empowered throughout the country to select the bureaucrats tasked with administering democratic elections. However, this paper has uncovered little evidence that politicians use this power aggressively. Rather, it appears that election officials are no more likely to leave their jobs when their principals switch party hands than when they stay the same.

The evidence presented in this paper is reassuring for the resiliency of a democracy that has come under unprecedented strain in recent years. It aligns with recent findings that directly elected election officials act similarly regardless of their party affiliation (Ferrer,

Geyn, and Thompson 2023) and that partisan appointers fail to gain an advantage for their party when they are in charge of appointments (Ferrer 2024). It also provides additional evidence that local politics remains distinct from the national arena: just because politicians have the ability to hire and fire local bureaucrats does not mean they necessarily exercise these powers in an unconstrained fashion.

These findings should not be construed as suggesting that partisan fires of appointed election bureaucrats never happens. Recent news reports suggest that at least some jurisdictions have experienced turnover in their election officials specifically due to partisan appointers.³ However, the evidence does mean that such actions are the exception rather than the norm.

³<https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/11/02/lynchburg-elections-registrar-lawsuit/>

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