

The Increasing Nationalization of Local Elections: The Case of Prosecutors

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Abstract

To what extent are local races across the country being increasingly driven by politics at the national level? In this article, we examine the nationalization of elections for state executive branches' primary front line legal actors in the criminal courts—local prosecutors. We seek to better understand the factors influencing prosecutor election outcomes and why these types of elections have become more nationalized in recent years. More specifically, we aim to evaluate what effect this greater nationalization has had on the electoral fates of incumbent prosecutors seeking re-election. To date, there is a paucity of scholarship on prosecutor election outcomes within political science despite their importance historically and in light of recent events. This article seeks to fill an important gap in our understanding of what drives prosecutor elections in the United States. More broadly, we believe this research helps us better understand how even these local elections can be impacted by national events.

Keywords

prosecutors, elections, nationalization, state politics, president, law

During the past few decades, elections in the United States have become increasingly nationalized (Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2024; Hopkins 2018; Jacobson 2015). Whereas electoral politics throughout much of the twentieth century focused primarily on local factors, it is more common today to view events through the lens of national politics.¹ Gone are the days when factors such as candidate experience, incumbency, ties to local political elites and media, personal characteristics or popularity (branding) were largely influential in determining the outcome of individual elections. Now, alignment with the party's presidential candidates on specific national issues such as abortion rights, inflation, or affirmative action (among others) are driving the outcome of a growing number of subnational electoral races. This trend has been further magnified by the enormous sums of money flowing from outside a given region or state, especially when races are perceived as being electorally competitive (Baker 2022; Carson and Jacobson 2024).

This phenomena of increasing nationalization is not limited to federal elections, however. Indeed, this pattern of nationalization has begun affecting statewide and local races as well. One prominent example of this trend is with respect to races for the state executive branches' primary field level legal officers—local prosecutors around the

country. Prosecutors exercise extraordinary power within our criminal justice system and the United States is the only country in which these important officials are elected (Ellis 2012). With the greater saliency of issues such as sentencing, racial incarceration disparity, and violent crime (e.g., Heise 2015; Levine 2020; Shepherd 2002), increasing attention has been devoted to campaigns for local prosecutors since they play such a prominent and influential role in the criminal justice system. This is especially the case among the new group of what has been termed “progressive prosecutors” who seek to rely less on the traditional broad use of incarceration and more on alternative forms of accountability and prevention. Among the wealthiest donors supporting this progressive agenda during the past few years, billionaire philanthropist George Soros has been singled out as leading the

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charge to overhaul the criminal justice system to bring about what many perceive as long overdue change in an overly punitive system (Bland 2018).

Given the polarized nature of our political system, Soros' actions with respect to criminal justice reform have not gone unnoticed by conservatives and Republicans. During the invisible primary stage of the 2024 presidential campaign, both Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former President Donald Trump repeatedly mentioned Soros' progressive agenda in light of his support of Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, who has most notably prosecuted the former president for his alleged past violations of campaign and business reporting laws. Additionally, "DeSantis has reveled in vilifying left-leaning prosecutors as he inveighs against 'woke' politics. He has suspended two Florida prosecutors, contending they have broken the law by abusing their discretion" (White 2023, 1). These types of themes are certainly likely to continue among the various candidates in presidential and congressional elections whenever concerns about crime are raised.

In this paper, we examine the nationalization of prosecutor elections as reflected by many of these recent trends. More broadly, we seek to better understand the factors driving prosecutor election outcomes and why these types of elections have become more nationalized in recent years. In this study, we evaluate what effect this greater nationalization has had on the electoral fates of incumbent prosecutors seeking re-election. To date, there is a paucity of scholarship on prosecutor election outcomes within the field of political science. We believe this article fills an important gap in the literature and in our understanding of (1) what drives prosecutor elections in the United States; and (2) more broadly, how even these local elections can be directly impacted by national political events.

Nationalization in U.S. Politics

In context of elections, nationalization implies an amplified correspondence between national-level politics (e.g., presidential elections) and subnational elections. Hopkins (2018) illustrates that nationalization is a process in which top-down forces exert greater influence on the choices voters make at the polls and subsequent election outcomes as compared to candidate-specific characteristics or local forces. In other words, voters rely less on local factors such as candidate attributes (i.e., political background or elective office experience) when choosing who to support on election day, and more on factors such as which party currently resides in the White House. Consequently, factors like incumbency or candidates' individual ideology become subordinate to factors like an individual's partisanship or preferred choice for president

during periods of greater nationalization (Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2024; Hopkins 2018).

Regardless of whether it is measured in terms of the partisan outcome of an election contest or the correlation between partisan vote shares across competitions, there is also ample evidence of nationalization in aggregate election outcomes across a variety of subnational contests (see, for example, Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Carson and Jacobson 2024; Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2020; Hopkins 2018; Jacobson 2015; Sievert and McKee 2019). The connection between national forces and election outcomes was likely first noticed in congressional elections. As the electoral advantages of incumbency declined in House and Senate elections during the past few decades, there has been a corresponding increase in the impact of the presidential contest on congressional elections (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Jacobson 2015; Sievert and McKee 2019). One consequence of this development is the near disappearance of legislators who serve in districts or states that were carried by the other party's presidential candidate (Carson and Jacobson 2024).

There is also growing evidence that presidential politics have begun to structure the outcome in many state-level races. Both Hopkins (2018) and Sievert and McKee (2019) find evidence of an increased correspondence between presidential and gubernatorial election outcomes, which supports earlier evidence of the connection between evaluations of the president and vote choice in gubernatorial contests (Carsey and Wright 1998; Simon 1989). Governors are not the only state-level election officials, however, whose electoral fortunes are now closely tied to presidential politics. Several studies have found a connection between presidential and state legislative elections (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Jacobson 2019; Melusky and Richmann 2020; Rogers 2016; Zingher and Richman 2019). In addition to state legislative elections, Weinschenk et al. (2020) find that voting for president even exerts an effect in state supreme court elections.

Carson, Sievert, and Williamson (2024) have shown that patterns of nationalization like those described above are not unique to modern politics but have analogs in earlier historical eras as well. One significant difference, however, is the root cause of this phenomenon. During the nineteenth century, increased nationalization was largely a function of the party ballot that was in use that required voters to support candidates of the same party. Indeed, voting for candidates of different parties was all but impossible prior to the adoption of the Australian or secret ballot during the late nineteenth century. As such, the electoral system in place during this era largely contributed to the nationalized political climate. Today, elections are likely to be nationalized not because of the current

electoral system as much as by the types of campaigns coordinated by the national parties and the increasing number of individuals who view politics as part of their individual identity (Klein 2020; Mason 2018).

We anticipate that this strong trend also may affect prosecutorial elections. As local prosecutors increasingly find their way into the national spotlight in high profile prosecutions (e.g., election fraud) and calls for criminal justice reform (and critiques of such reforms) make their way onto national media platforms, it is likely that prosecutor elections will gain salience and become intertwined with national concerns. An era of strong consensus about the enforcement priorities of state prosecutors—a vision shared by Republicans and Democrats—has given way to a time of broader choices for voters and more vigorous policy and ideological debates. Voters now face competing approaches to the prosecutor's job (Barr 2019; Ouziel 2020), and likely draw on their broader ideological loyalties to evaluate those choices, which are heavily influenced by the increased nationalization of politics.

In this study we examine the electoral fortunes of local prosecutors who are incumbents. We argue that national-level dynamics cast an influence on incumbents' electoral destinies. We also explore other important determinants of electoral outcomes for this important elected office. In the section that follows, we address the parameters and dynamics of prosecutor elections in the United States before turning to our empirical analyses.

Prosecutor Elections in U.S. Politics

While federal prosecutors are appointed, the United States stands alone as the only country in which local prosecutors are elected. It was not always this way. Prosecutors began as appointed government officials, but between 1832 and 1860 almost three-quarters of the states in the Union changed course and gave citizens the opportunity to elect their prosecutorial officials (Ellis 2012, 1530). Today, forty-five of fifty states employ prosecutorial elections at the local district level (with the districts sometimes consisting of a single county, at other times a small group of lower-population counties). By contrast, Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, and New Jersey use varying forms of appointment by statewide officials to choose the local prosecutor. For instance, in Alaska local prosecutors are chosen by the state's Attorney General.² In Rhode Island there is no selection process for local prosecutors—all cases are handled by the elected Attorney General. In Hawaii, Montana, and North Dakota the decision to elect or appoint is left to the counties, with the vast majority of counties in these states opting for elections (Hessick and Morse 2020, 1550-51). Of course the

choice of selection method reflects a balancing of interests often associated with state judicial elections—like judges, we generally prefer our prosecutors to be independent, but also accountable.

The prosecutor is among the most powerful actors in the American criminal justice system. This is the case for a number of reasons. For starters, in the United States the available tools of legal accountability to ensure that prosecutors act lawfully are weaker than in the systems of other countries. State criminal codes provide only modest limits on prosecutor choices. The statutes create broad latitude for prosecutors—covering a wide range of conduct while also giving prosecutors a deep set of choices on what provisions to apply to a given situation and what charges will be brought (Epps 2021; Wright and Miller 2010). Judges and other courtroom actors have no effective way to challenge the prosecutor's decision to decline charges entirely. As for the prosecutor's selection of one charge over another, judges and juries can only test the sufficiency of the evidence to prove the elements of that chosen charge at trial. Furthermore, most criminal cases in the country are disposed of not through trial, but through plea bargains, negotiated by the prosecutor—thus removing the question of whether the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt from the jury or judge (bench trial). While judges can reject negotiated plea bargains, they rarely do so (Hessick, Treul, and Love 2023, 43). Thus, any institutional check on prosecutors is essentially conducted via elections.

While prosecutorial elections share many commonalities with other subnational elections (legislators, judges, etc.), they do possess certain unique characteristics and dynamics. Traditionally, despite their powerful position in the criminal justice system, they are largely noncompetitive, low salience events—even more so than state judicial elections. This phenomenon is particularly pervasive in rural electoral districts—urban districts tend to be more competitive and have fewer uncontested races (Hessick and Morse 2020). Relative to other state official races, these contests tend to be low information affairs, offering voters few specifics about the incumbent's past performance. Challenger pools for prosecutorial office tend to be shallow, partly due to low pay for the position, compared to what candidates can demand elsewhere in the legal profession. Challengers also face the uncomfortable situation of running against their boss (if an assistant prosecutor) or against someone they will encounter across the bargaining table in future plea negotiations (i.e., a defense attorney) if they end up losing the race (Wright, Yates & Hessick 2021). For all of these reasons, the appearance of progressive challengers to incumbents has been somewhat surprising and has yielded a fair amount of media attention. As Wright, Yates & Hessick (2021) demonstrate, incumbent prosecutors in large metro

districts have faced increasing difficulty in recent years winning re-election.

Our study, the first of its kind in political science,³ examines the electoral fates of incumbent prosecutors in general elections in the 200 prosecutor districts that serve the largest populations in the United States, from 2012 to 2020. In the section that follows, we present our theoretical explanations to provide insight on the dynamics of incumbent electoral outcomes in these races. We also set forth the dependent variables we employ to evaluate incumbent fortunes in these 200 high population districts—which include forty states and cover over fifty percent of the U.S. population.⁴

Theory and Research Approach

We examine two important outcomes in general prosecutor elections—(1) whether an incumbent wins the election, and (2) whether an incumbent is opposed by a challenger. Incumbents in nearly all electoral contexts possess a well-known set of advantages in retaining their positions and, in the typical case, these advantages work to both suppress the likelihood of an electoral challenger and also make retention of office more likely should a challenger emerge (Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2020; Jacobson 2015). Hence, there is substantial overlap in our set of potential explanatory influences of these two phenomena. For both dependent variables we offer two basic groups of potential outcome drivers: (1) electoral district environmental factors and (2) incumbent/candidate considerations.

The electoral environment of an incumbent presents several potential factors affecting re-election prospects (Carson and Jacobson 2024). First, we consider the partisan dynamic of the setting. We are primarily interested in how national-level political dynamics (i.e., presidential elections) map onto incumbent prosecutors' fortunes. We propose that incumbents who are of the same political party as the presidential candidate who last won the district will fare better than those who are in the proverbial out-group (i.e., do not match on the presidential victor from the last presidential election). As such, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1. Incumbent prosecutors who are the same party as the district's last presidential victor are more likely to win re-election and less likely to be opposed by a challenger than incumbents of the other party.

Although we only examine high population electoral districts in this study, there is substantial variation in the relative size of these districts. More populous districts (above the median population examined) are likely to present a reduction in the traditional incumbent

advantages such as pervasive local reputational advantages and elite political ties.⁵ Further, more populous districts are more likely to attract challengers and, where a challenger is present, such challengers are more likely to be of high quality (i.e., they possess previous electoral experience). Finally, more populous districts simply have a larger supply of potential candidates as they typically have larger numbers of attorneys. From this, our second hypothesis follows:

H2. Incumbent prosecutors who run in more populous districts are more likely to lose re-election and more likely to face an electoral challenger than incumbents in less populous districts.

The specter of national political concerns and attachment to party political identity are ostensibly stronger in heavily partisan election environments. It stands to reason that incumbent prosecutors who run in nonpartisan electoral districts will be—in relative terms—insulated from national-level partisan dynamics. In the United States, five states (Arkansas, California, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Oregon) employ nonpartisan elections for prosecutors, where the candidates run without party labels on the ballot.⁶ Additionally, it is sometimes the case that incumbents face multiple challengers. While this situation may occur for a number of reasons, it often suggests that the incumbent is perceived as vulnerable. It also presents a potentially more volatile and complex set of voter dynamics that may undermine an incumbent's election chances.

Along similar lines, incumbents who face one or more primary challengers may have greater struggles in their re-election bids than those who do not face a challenger. Not only can primary challenges be a signal of pre-existing vulnerability, but such campaigns can also become divisive and expose weaknesses in an incumbent's performance that can carry on into the general election (see, for example, Fournais and Hall 2020; Gurian et al. 2016 on this phenomenon). This leads to our third, fourth, and fifth hypotheses, respectively:

H3. Incumbent prosecutors who run in nonpartisan districts are more likely to win and less likely to be opposed by a challenger than incumbents in partisan districts.

H4. Incumbent prosecutors who face multiple challengers are more likely to lose than incumbents who face a single challenger.

H5. Incumbent prosecutors who face a primary challenge are more likely to lose their general election and less likely to be unopposed than incumbents who face no primary challenge.

Finally, in assaying the impact of the electoral environment, we wish to consider an important factor that may influence the fates of incumbent prosecutors—crime rates. On this specific point, we do not have strong guidance in the small legal literature on prosecutor elections. [Hessick, Treul, and Love \(2023\)](#), for instance, find no relationship between increases in violent crime rates and contestation (incumbents challenged) of prosecutor elections after controlling for other relevant considerations. They noted that there could be a number of explanations for this lack of relationship—including potentially limited voter information on local crime rates. More broadly, the specter of voters making decisions on executive and enforcement officials by referencing crime rates has had somewhat mixed findings. For instance, [Cummins \(2009\)](#) found some support for the proposition that voters punish gubernatorial incumbents for state-level crime but found no relationship for national-level crime. At the local level, [Surette \(1985\)](#) found that incumbent sheriff candidates were punished for increases in certain crimes, whereas for murder rates they reacted favorably to incumbents, suggesting that citizens value continuity of leadership under certain conditions.

Given that most citizens get their news on crime via state or regional level media markets we have chosen to measure crime rates at the state level.⁷ Further, following the literature on the value of continuity in leadership in trying times, we posit that voters will stick with incumbents when crime is higher (see, for example, [Busch 1999](#); [Norpoth 2012](#)). Just as voters are unlikely to switch incumbent presidents during wartime or domestic crises, we believe that incumbent prosecutors will not be specifically targeted as crime rates increase. This is in part because of the role prosecutors play as enforcement actors who are charged with protecting the citizenry, rather than judicial actors who interpret law and facts and protect citizens' civil liberties. While citizens may punish judges for high crime rates (e.g., [Hall 2001](#))—fearing that the pendulum has swung too far toward protecting liberties—prosecutors are more often associated with advancing law and order. Our measurement strategy accordingly is based more on the perceived threat of crime than on blaming local agents—especially since voter knowledge of precise local crime rates is rather unlikely. Specifically, crime is measured as the number of violent crimes (murder, rape and sexual assault, robbery, and assault) per ten thousand population in the year previous to the election. This leads to our sixth hypothesis:

H6. Incumbent prosecutors who run in state environments that have higher violent crime rates are more likely to win and less likely to be opposed by a challenger than incumbents who run in states with lower rates.

We also consider several individual attributes and characteristics of the incumbent candidates themselves. First and foremost among these would be one of the primary levers claimed by incumbent candidates—experience in the office. Incumbents with years in office can credibly claim that their experience promotes the efficient and effective stewardship of the office ([Carson and Jacobson 2024](#)). To be sure, such candidates will also have amassed a performance record in their current position—for better or worse. However, such incumbents also have campaign experience that typically exceeds that of their challengers. On balance, the more years in office an incumbent possesses, the more likely they are to keep the position—all else equal. This leads to our seventh hypothesis:

H7. Incumbents with more years in office (i.e., greater seniority) are more likely to win and less likely to be opposed by a challenger than incumbents with fewer years in office.

We also consider the relative impact of the incumbents' demographic identities on their electoral success (e.g., [George and Yoon 2017](#)). Specifically, we focus on gender. The literature regarding how matters such as candidate gender impact prosecutor elections is rather sparse (e.g., [Hessick and Morse 2020](#)), but suggests that women are generally underrepresented as prosecutors. While Wright, Yates, and Hessick found relative victory gains by historically marginalized groups among all prosecutor candidates while controlling for other relevant concerns, it does not appear that such advantages necessarily extended to female incumbents (2021, 148). Further informing our theoretical understanding is the literature on gender stereotypes (e.g., [Anzia and Bernhard 2022](#); [Bauer and Santia 2022](#)). Stereotypes regarding masculine and feminine traits held by voters tend to yield better outcomes for women candidates for offices such as city council or school board representative, while yielding worse outcomes for mayoral races ([Anzia and Bernhard 2022](#)). Prosecutorial offices have traditionally been headed by men and are apt to be associated with masculine traits. This leads to our final hypothesis:

H8. Female incumbents are less likely to win prosecutorial elections and more likely to be opposed by a challenger than male incumbents.

Estimation and Results

We test these hypotheses on a novel set of data based on prosecutorial elections held from 2012 to 2020 in the nation's 200 highest population districts. As noted above, we utilize two separate dependent variables; first, a simple

dichotomous variable for whether the incumbent prosecutor wins their election, and second, whether the incumbent prosecutor faced a challenger in the race. We estimate separate logit models⁸ to determine the relative influence of a variety of independent variables in each of the models. Results of these Models appear in Table 1. As logit coefficients are not easily interpreted directly, we provide a graphical depiction of average marginal effects of each variable on incumbent victory in Figure 1 and lack of general election opposition in Figure 2.⁹ As the marginal effect of a variable changes based on the value of that variable as well as all other variables in the model, the average marginal effect approach computes the marginal effect value based on each variable in the data set and then averages them to give a sense of the general effect of a variable in general circumstances. For continuous variables, this is the average of the marginal effect across all observations in the data set. For dichotomous variables, it is average effect of a discrete difference between the variable being at its reference category (0) to being 1.

Results of the model show strong support for H1, which speaks to the nationalization of prosecutorial elections. Specifically, when the prosecutorial candidate shares a party identification with the presidential candidate that won in their district, the probability of incumbent victory increases by nearly 0.2 on average (based on predictions across our observed data). Given the already high re-election rate of incumbents, this is a remarkably strong effect. Moreover, the probability of the incumbent going unopposed increases by nearly 0.25. While it is not impossible for an incumbent who does not share the party affiliation of the locally prevailing presidential candidate to win, it is meaningfully more difficult. This speaks to the influence of nationalized politics on elections to even hyper-local offices like that of prosecutors.

Our hypothesis regarding prosecutors serving larger population bases (H2) is also supported by the empirical results. Incumbents in districts with populations above the median in our sample have a probability of being unopposed that is about 0.25 lower than incumbents in districts below the median population. Additionally, the probability of incumbent victory decreases by about 0.1. The use of partisan vs. nonpartisan election format (H3) proves to be consequential as well. While we find that election format has no statistically significant influence in the probability of incumbents running unopposed, our results show that incumbents are more likely to win in nonpartisan elections than in partisan elections; the average magnitude of this effect across our data is 0.08.

Our results on degree of challenge are mixed. In hypothesis 4, we posited that incumbent prosecutors with more than one general election challenger would be less likely to win, but the data show no statistically significant effect of multiple challengers on the likelihood of incumbent victory. In hypothesis 5, we posited that incumbents who were challenged in their primary election would also face a more difficult general election. Our results show that incumbents who had a primary challenger are indeed modestly more likely to face a general election challenge (a 0.05 increase on average across our data), but the presence of a primary challenge has no statistically significant effect on the likelihood of incumbent victory.¹⁰

As we noted above, crime is all but certainly the central issue relevant to election of a particular prosecutor. Consistent with our expectations, we find that higher crime rates are associated with a greater likelihood of the incumbent being unopposed as well as a greater likelihood of incumbent victory. As citizens wrestle with a desire to rein in high crime, they tend to be more likely to support

Table 1. Logit Models of Incumbent Victory and Incumbent Opposition.

	Incumbent Victory	Incumbent Unopposed
Match district presidential winner	2.47* (0.55)	1.32* (0.31)
Large population	-1.14* (0.52)	-1.39* (0.32)
Nonpartisan election	1.61* (0.64)	.64 (0.39)
Multiple challengers	-0.86 (0.93)	-
Primary challenge	-0.72 (0.67)	-1.09* (0.37)
Violent crime rate per ten thousand population	.054* (0.025)	.047* (0.015)
Years in office	.02 (0.03)	.03† (0.02)
Woman incumbent	-0.86† (0.49)	-0.87* (.29)
Constant	-0.32 (0.99)	-1.60* (0.64)
LR χ^2	38.93 ($p < .001$)	68.18 ($p < 0.001$)
Pseudo r^2	.21	.16
<i>n</i>	338	338

Note: Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. * denotes $p < .05$, two-tailed. † denotes $p < .1$, two-tailed.

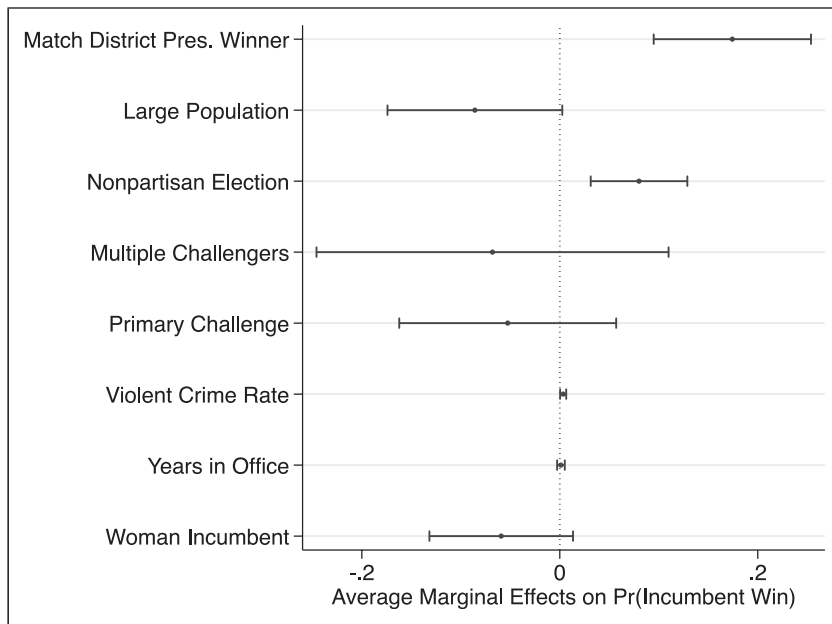


Figure 1. Average marginal effects on incumbent victory.

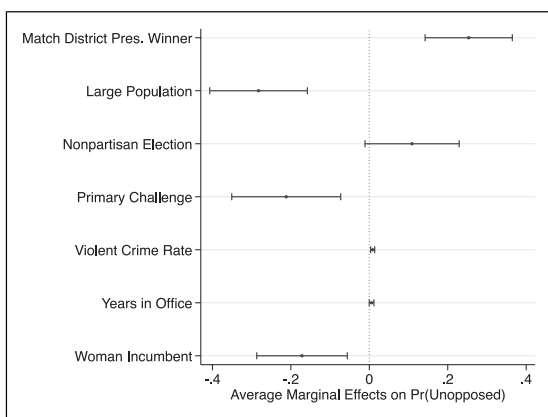


Figure 2. Average marginal effects on incumbent unopposed.

the incumbent prosecutor. But the average marginal effects of both phenomena are surprisingly small. Put in terms of changes in predicted probabilities, a shift from one half-standard deviation below the mean crime level to a half-standard deviation above (from about 34 violent crimes per 10,000 population to about 43 per 10,000) produces an increase of about 0.03 in the probability of incumbent victory, and an increase of about 0.08 in the likelihood of a being unopposed. Relative to the effect of partisan congruence with the locally popular presidential candidate, crime conditions appear to be far less consequential.

We find little effect of prosecutor seniority on individual election outcomes (H7), with no statistically significant effect of years in office on incumbent victory.

Seniority is only marginally significant on the likelihood of being unopposed and its effect is substantively trivial. Finally, we do find that incumbent candidate gender has a bearing on our dependent variables of interest. Consistent with the literature on gender and candidacy for other offices (Badas and Stauffer 2019; Stauffer and Fisk 2022), we find that incumbent women are more likely to face challengers than incumbent men (an average change in the predicted probability of 0.17 across our observations). Women incumbents are also less likely to win, though the coefficient is only marginally significant ($p = .08$), and the magnitude of the average effect is smaller (about 0.06 change in probability of victory).

Discussion

Elections in the United States have become increasingly nationalized during the past few decades, with congressional and state election outcomes influenced by the alignment of those candidates with national political figures, especially presidential candidates (Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2024; Hopkins 2018; Jacobson 2015). Our results reported in this paper illustrate that even very locally oriented elections that are focused largely on a specific issue (i.e., crime) have been affected by this nationalization. The effect of an incumbent prosecutor being aligned in partisanship with the locally popular presidential candidate has a stronger effect on the likelihood of incumbent victory (and the incumbent facing a challenger) than even substantial shifts in crime rates.

In short, some of the most important individuals in local justice systems are selected in no small part due to political alignment with actors who have little knowledge of or interest in those local justice systems. Polarization, which no doubt drives this dynamic, might sensibly inform voters' choice when the cues from national political figures have bearing on the issues those elected officials will decide on (e.g., members of Congress). However, one may worry that nationalization of prosecutorial elections can result in decision-making being based on the match of a prosecutor to a national candidate on issues like foreign policy, environmental, or economic policy, when such issues have no real connection to the day-to-day tasks addressed by local prosecutors. The examples of local prosecutors becoming intertwined with prominent national-level political issues posed at the beginning of our study are only recent instances of this phenomenon. Of course, local prosecutors have found themselves at the center of national political controversies throughout our nation's history—for example, the Tennessee Scopes Monkey Trial (teaching evolution in public schools) and Louisiana district attorney Jim Garrison's prosecution of Clay Shaw (conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy), among many others.

Further reinforcing the significance of increased nationalization in recent decades is the potential impact of nonpartisan prosecutorial elections. When partisanship is removed from the ballot (as a cue to the influence of national partisan trends) incumbents tend to largely benefit as incumbency becomes the most notable cue voters have when making voting decisions on this office. This provides yet more evidence that when partisanship is neutralized, nationalized politics have far less impact. In future research, we intend to investigate the possibility that state-level concerns, specifically gubernatorial election dynamics, may interact with national-level influences to further impact local prosecutor elections.

Beyond our main findings on nationalization of local prosecutorial elections, our study's results indicate that, all else equal, female incumbent candidates in prosecutorial elections face distinct challenges in retaining their positions. Given that prosecutors are influential actors—arguably the most influential actors—in the criminal justice system, these findings prompt concern for both proportional gender representation in our criminal justice system and for the viability of career pathways for women. In future research, we hope to investigate the dynamics surrounding the fortunes of female prosecutor candidates to better understand the drivers of these disparities.

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Notes

1. Former Speaker of the House, Thomas Tip O'Neal was often credited as noting that "all politics is local" during the twentieth century. Today, it would be much more accurate to update that statement by reflecting that "all politics is national."
2. The other non-election states employ the following methods: Connecticut (appointed by state commission); Delaware (appointed by state's Attorney General); New Jersey (appointed by the Governor with the advice and consent of the state Senate) (see [Hessick 2020](#) for more details).
3. Scholars have produced a small but insightful line of scholarship on prosecutor election outcomes in law journals (e.g., [Hessick and Morse 2020](#); [Hessick, Treul, and Love 2023](#); [Wright 2009](#); [Wright 2014](#)). However, studies analyzing actual prosecutor election outcomes have not yet graced the pages of political science journals as far as we can find. Certainly social scientists have considered the influence of prosecutor elections on prosecutor performance in office (e.g., [Bandyopadhyay and McCannon 2014](#); [Gordon and Huber 2002](#)). Additionally, social scientists have also explored prosecutor election dynamics without electoral outcome data through the use of formal theory and experimental approaches (e.g., [DeAngelo and McCannon 2019](#); [McCannon and Pruitt 2018](#); [Sung 2023](#)).
4. Five states (Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming) do not have a city large enough to be included in our analysis. As noted previously, five states (Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, and Alaska) do not use local prosecutor elections.
5. Prior research suggests that incumbents can cultivate a stronger personal relationship in more rural areas since they maintain closer connections with constituents in those areas (see, for example, [Fenno 1978](#); [Grimmer 2013](#)). In more

populous areas, the nature of representation is more indirect (i.e., their interactions derive from appearances on television, print media, or perhaps social media in the modern era rather than interpersonal connections with voters). For a related discussion of representation in the context of Senate elections, see Hibbing and Brandes (1983) as well as work by Lee and Oppenheimer (1999).

6. Two states (Hawaii and Montana) allow counties to decide if prosecutor elections are partisan or nonpartisan (Hessick, Treul, and Love 2023, 68). In our data set, the counties included from Hawaii and Montana employ nonpartisan elections.
7. Iyengar (1991) suggests that media framing may have implications for how the public perceives social and political issues. Briefly, episodic framing (i.e., specific, narrowly focused narratives of individual events) may lead to citizens holding government actors less accountable for public problems (e.g., crime). In contrast, when thematic framing (which emphasizes broader, over time analyses and the societal conditions that yield problems) is employed by media, the public is more apt to hold government actors accountable. We anticipate that in most state or regional media markets a mix of the two frames is used with the balance tending toward episodic framing as it is likely to attract more consumer interest. However, it is likely the case that citizens are also influenced by the events they experience and hear about from more informal sources. Hence, crime rates essentially reflect a metric of citizens' experiences and personal interactions and communications—which, in turn, may influence their political views.
8. As a robustness check, we re-ran the models reported in Table 1 but with standard errors clustered by state. The results change very little from those reported here. The crime rate becomes narrowly non-significant at the $p < 0.05$ level in the incumbent win model, with all other variables remaining the same in terms of statistical significance. In the unopposed model, significance indicators remain the same as in Table 1 with the exception of seniority, which leaves the realm of marginally significant and becomes outright significant.
9. In contexts where a prosecutor runs in a nonpartisan election, they are coded as not matching the party of the president. Such an approach is necessary because voters do not receive party cues for these races on the ballot and receive substantially reduced levels of these types of cues in the course of nonpartisan elections generally, and partisanship has been demonstrated to have substantially diminished influence on vote choice in nonpartisan elections. Specifically, Schaffner, Streb, and Wright (2001) show that news coverage that reveals partisan cues is very uncommon in nonpartisan elections. Moreover, Schaffner, Streb, and Wright (2001) also find that partisanship has little effect on votes in lower-information local government races (such as mayor or state senate), a finding consistent with that of

Bonneau and Cann (2015) in the context of judicial elections.

10. In most jurisdictions, a nonpartisan primary election is held to narrow the number of candidates to two. Although it is possible to observe a primary challenge to an incumbent in a nonpartisan state, it is quite rare and something we do not observe in the temporal and spatial parameters of our data.

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