

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

All politics are national: Partisan defection in national and subnational elections

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Abstract

Objective: While they were once viewed as largely local or candidate-centered contests, recent American elections have come to be dominated by national forces such as presidential politics and partisanship. Prior research on voter behavior in this new era of nationalized politics, however, has largely focused on more high-profile contests and has not examined voter decision making across multiple levels of government.

Methods: Our study uses cross-sectional (2006–2020) survey data from the Cooperative Election Study to explore the determinants of partisan loyalty and defection across both national and subnational American elections.

Results: We find consistent evidence that citizens increasingly rely upon national forces—specifically partisan-ideological sorting and presidential approval—to make decisions about candidates up and down the ballot. We also find mixed evidence that evaluations of the national economy inform defection behavior.

Conclusion: These findings indicate that the national political forces shape voter behavior in national and subnational contests in effectively identical ways. Thus, the evidence supports the notion that all (electoral) politics are now national.

The intrusions of national politics into elections at all levels of government is one of the defining characteristics of American electoral politics in the early 21st century. Whether it is driven by presidential politics (Jacobson 2015, 2019; Sievert and McKee 2019), partisan attitudes (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Davis and Mason 2016), or salient and divisive issues (Das et al. 2021; Hopkins 2018), down-ballot elections may not be insulated from national politics. Indeed, even nonpartisan local elections in cities of all sizes have begun to turn on presidential politics and issues like economic inequality, racial injustice, and abortion politics (Dotray 2020; Plott 2020). While the phrase “all politics is local” may no longer accurately describe American politics, we lack a comprehensive analysis of voter decision making in national and subnational elections in this new era of more nationalized politics. We address this gap by evaluating the follow question: to what extent do citizens use the same or different evaluative criteria in national and subnational elections?

The importance of national forces to vote choice and election outcomes is well documented in presidential (Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001; Smidt 2017), congressional (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Amlani and Algara 2021; Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2024; Jacobson 2015) and gubernatorial elec-

tions (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Carsey and Wright 1998; Hopkins 2018; Sievert and McKee 2019; Simon 1989), but scholars have given comparatively less attention to the role of national politics in lower level races. While a few recent studies explore nationalization in lower level races (Davis and Mason 2016; Melusky and Richman 2020; Zingher and Richman 2019; Reckhow et al. 2017; Rogers 2016; Weinschenk 2022; Weinschenk et al. 2020), most suffer from some combination of the following limitations: they focus on election outcomes rather than voter behavior or they do not directly compare voter behavior in both federal and state-level contests. The last omission is particularly notable given several decades of research that explores whether voters weigh an elected official's functional responsibilities—such as policy decisions and economic performance at their respective level of government—when making cross-level voting decision (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Arceneaux 2006; Carsey and Wright 1998; Simon 1989; Stein 1990).

Our study builds on and contributes to the scholarly literature on voting behavior in the 21st century in several ways. First, many studies focus on a single national force—presidential politics, the economy, or partisanship—in isolation. By including multiple national-level factors in a unified analysis, our study offers a more complete account of voter behavior. Second, we not only examine a broader array of offices and a longer time period, but our analysis conducts a direct comparison of the determinants of vote choice in national and subnational elections. In doing so, we build on and extend prior research that explores whether voters use the same decision calculus when evaluating candidates at different levels of government (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Arceneaux 2006; Carsey and Wright 1998; Simon 1989; Stein 1990).

To examine the impact of national factors on voter behavior, we use data from the Cooperative Election Studies (CES) to model vote choice across national and subnational elections in the United States. Our empirical analyses employ cross-sectional data collected from 2006 through 2020 to explore the determinants of partisan loyalty and defection in vote choice across both state and federal offices. We compare the effects of three different types of national forces—partisan-ideological sorting, presidential approval, and retrospective economic perceptions—on defection behavior in the context of national and subnational contests. We find that all three national forces systematically inform defection behavior in national and subnational elections. This suggests that citizens rely upon national forces to make decisions about candidates up and down the ballot. These findings have important implications for issues of electoral and political accountability. The nationalization of voting behavior across levels of government means that judgements about the performance of subpresidential elected officials have become less pivotal, which could allow these officials to (1) make choices that run counter to constituent preferences without fear of electoral retribution or (2) to view acting in ways that are consistent with their constituents' wishes as being electorally beneficial.

VOTERS IN NATIONALIZED ELECTIONS

Although nationalized elections can be defined and measured in different ways (Amlani and Algara 2021; Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2020, 2024; Hopkins 2018; Jacobson 2015), our focus is on how a nationalized electoral environment impacts vote choice across different offices. The nationalization of elections implies that “voters use the same criteria to choose candidates across the federal system” (Hopkins 2018, p. 3). An important consequence of a nationalized electoral environment is the diminished role for local context (Hopkins 2018), candidate-specific attributes (Carson and Sievert 2017; Jacobson 2015), and incumbency (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2020; Sievert and McKee 2019). Our theoretical expectations therefore build on and add to past work that explores voter decision making in elections across multiple levels of government (Arceneaux 2006; Atkeson and Partin 1995; Carsey and Wright 1998; Simon 1989) and work on partisan loyalty and split-ticket voting (Bartels 2000; Davis and Mason 2016; Jacobson 2015; Smidt 2017).¹

¹ Based on prior research, we might expect the hypothesized relationships discussed in this section to vary over time as elections become more nationalized. Due to the limited time frame in which we have data on vote choice across both federal and state offices, however, temporal dynamics are difficult

One of the primary factors explored in research on nationalization is the impact of presidential vote choice or presidential approval on subpresidential elections (Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2024; Hopkins 2018; Jacobson 2019; Rogers 2016; Sievert and McKee 2019; Sievert and Williamson 2022). Although several decades of evidence indicates that assessments of the president or presidential candidates can inform vote choice (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Carsey and Wright 1998; Simon 1989), these effects have increased over time (Jacobson 2019). Voters' attitudes toward the president are highly correlated with vote choice and election outcomes in both federal (Carson, Sievert, and Williamson 2024; Jacobson 2015) and statewide contests (Hopkins 2018; Sievert and McKee 2019). Candidates for down-ballot races, such as state legislature and judicial offices, also find that their electoral fortunes are tied to presidential politics (Burke 2021; Melusky and Richman 2020; Rogers 2016; Weinschenk et al. 2020; Zingher and Richman 2019). Prior studies have not, however, directly compared the influence of presidential politics on voter behavior in both national and subnational contests.

In addition to presidential politics, individual-level partisanship is central to a voter's calculus (Bartels 2000, 2002; Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004). Both partisan loyalty and straight-ticket voting have reached historic levels during the first several decades of the 21st century (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Jacobson 2015). Prior research offers two key explanations for increased rates of partisan loyalty. First, greater polarization in Congress and among political elites has produced a steady increase in the importance of mass partisanship for voting and political attitudes (Banda and Kirkland 2018; Banda and Cluverius 2018; Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002; Smidt 2017; Zingher and Flynn 2018). Second, partisan-ideological sorting, the consistency between partisan and ideological identification, has strengthened over time for many voters and appears to powerfully inform voting behavior (Davis 2018; Levendusky 2009; Mason 2015). Better sorted partisans—that is, those whose ideological preferences better fit their partisan identities—are more likely to support their party's nominee and are less likely to cast a split-ticket vote between presidential and congressional candidates (Levendusky 2009) or between state and federal contests (Davis and Mason 2015).

To date, most studies on the impact of partisanship on vote choice have examined presidential and congressional elections. At the state level, the impact of partisanship on voter behavior and evaluations is documented most clearly in gubernatorial elections (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Sievert and McKee 2019; Simon 1989). We know comparatively less though about how these factors—particularly the consistency between people's partisan and ideological identities—shape voting behavior in subnational elections (but see Rogers 2016). One of our study's primary contributions then is to offer a more systematic analysis of how partisan-ideological sorting influences voter behavior up and down the ballot and to directly compare its influence on behavior in federal and subnational contests.²

Last, economic considerations can play an important role in voter decision making at all levels of government (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Arceneaux 2006; Carsey and Wright 1998; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warsaw 2020). In the context of cross-level voting, scholars have debated whether the public considers the state and local economy or the national economy when casting a vote in subpresidential elections (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Carsey and Wright 1998; Stein 1990). There are reasons to expect, however, that voters in a nationalized electoral environment may not distinguish between the functional responsibilities of national and subnational elected officials. First, Arceneaux (2006) finds that while voters can make distinctions between the functional responsibilities of elected officials at different levels of government, the connection between these attributions and vote choice are limited. Second, the president's party is rewarded or punished based on the state of the economy (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warsaw 2020), which suggests that retrospective voting in response to local economic conditions can be viewed as “president-centric” at most levels of government.

to test. Indeed, the largest changes in split ticket voting or partisan defection in congressional elections occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, but were relatively stable during the period we examine (Jacobson 2015; Sievert and McKee 2019).

² In the analysis that follows, we limit our focus to partisan-ideological sorting and do not directly consider the role of elite polarization. Prior to the CES, there was not a consistent survey instrument that asked about vote choice across the set of offices we examine. We are therefore limited to 14 years of data and there is far less variation in elite polarization during this period than the several decades examined in prior studies on the connection between elite polarization and individual-level behavior or attitudes (see Banda and Cluverius 2018; Hetherington 2001).

PARTISAN LOYALTY AND DEFECTION IN NATIONALIZED ELECTIONS

Based on prior research about the impact of nationalization on vote choice, we identify several theoretical expectations about the likelihood of partisan loyalty or defection in a nationalized electoral environment. First, the probability of a voter defecting to support a candidate from the other party should decrease as they become increasingly sorted along partisan and ideological lines. While prior research has uncovered evidence of a connection between split-ticket voting and sorting, our focus is on partisan loyalty and defection across a range of offices rather than consistency between two races. We expect that the likelihood of partisan defection in *any* electoral contest across *all levels* of government should decrease as a voter becomes more sorted.

H1 (partisan-ideological sorting): Increases in levels of partisan-ideological sorting will be associated with decreases in defection.

Second, a voter's assessment of the president should influence their likelihood of partisan defection. It is important to note though that these effects should be conditioned upon whether they share a partisan affiliation with the sitting president. For co-partisans, the probability of partisan defection should decrease as presidential approval increases. For out-partisans, an increase in presidential approval, while perhaps rare, should still increase the probability of partisan defection in subpresidential contests. While presidential approval has become increasingly polarized along partisan lines (Jacobson 2019), our expectation is that in a more nationalized and president-centric electoral environment, attitudes toward the president should still explain voter behavior across contests even after controlling for partisan sorting and identification.³

H2 (presidential approval): Higher levels of presidential approval will be associated with lower levels of defection among co-partisans and with higher levels of defection among out-partisans.

Last, evaluations of the economy can play a crucial role in which party individuals decide to support in subpresidential elections. While past scholarship has debated whether the public considers the state and local economy or the national economy when casting a vote (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Carsey and Wright 1998; Stein 1990), the president's party may be rewarded or punished based on the state of the economy (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020). There is also evidence that public opinion of the president and objective indicators of current economic conditions are only weakly related in today's more polarized political environment (Donovan et al. 2020). It is therefore plausible that economic evaluations add little explanatory power to vote choice once we account for partisan sorting and presidential approval. As with presidential approval, these effects should be conditional depending on whether the respondent's party controls the White House. For co-partisans, the probability of defection should decrease as economic evaluations improve, but for opposition partisans the likelihood of defection should increase as economic evaluations improve.

H3 (economic evaluations): More positive economic evaluations will be associated with lower levels of defection among co-partisans and with higher levels of defection among out-partisans.

While we expect that each of the factors outlined above will influence the probability of partisan defection, we anticipate that their impact may vary across election type. In general, we expect that national-level factors will have a stronger impact on voters in national rather than subnational contests since they come from national politics, which means it is easier for voters to make the requisite connection. For down-ballot contests, however, voters may perceive that neither the president nor the national economy is as relevant to

³ Our argument comports with de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw's (2020) findings regarding more president-centric retrospective voting, but we are interested in the behavior of individual voters rather than election outcomes.

their decision making. Our expectation, however, differs from past research cross-level voting and functional responsibility (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Stein 1990). In a nationalized electoral environment, we expect voters to use similar criteria to evaluate candidates at all levels of government, but anticipate that the magnitude of each factor should still vary across office type. For example, we would expect that presidential approval predicts vote choice in both national and subnational races, but that the substantive effect is larger in national contests than subnational races.

H4 (election type): National forces should have a stronger influence over voter behavior in national contests than in subnational contests.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We test our theory using data collected for use in the CES, which are a series of large-scale national surveys of American adults. These analyses use data drawn from surveys conducted in even numbered election years from 2006 through 2020. We use these data to evaluate the defection behavior of partisan validated voters ($n = 180, 185$). The CES data are useful for our purposes for two reasons. First, they were collected over a long enough period such that both Democrats and Republicans controlled the presidency, meaning that we can evaluate the defection behavior of both sets of partisans when their teams are both in and out of power. Second, they allow us to observe defection behavior across a wide range of federal and state offices. More specifically, we can observe reported voting behavior in presidential, gubernatorial, U.S. Senate, U.S. House, state attorney general, state secretary of state, state upper chamber, state lower chamber, state treasurer, and lieutenant governor contests.

Our analyses require a dependent variable that captures the vote choice of partisans. The CES surveys ask respondents to report who they voted for across the offices.⁴ We create a series of binary indicators of defection for each office, where defection is defined as voting for a candidate from the other party. In each case, we set the value to 1 if a partisan voted for a candidate belonging to the opposing party and 0 if they voted for their own parties' nominees. Unsurprisingly, partisans tend to support co-partisan candidates. Table 1 shows the raw summary statistics for these and all remaining variables in our analyses with one exception, which we will discuss later.

Next, we discuss our four key independent variables. To test H1, we need a measure of partisan-ideological sorting. We use indicators capturing respondents' partisan identities measured using the standard two-stage partisanship questions, which lead to a 7-point variable ranging from "strong Democrat" to "strong Republican." Ideology is measured using a 5-point scale ranging from "very liberal" to "very conservative." Because the two scales have different lengths, we collapse the classic 7-point partisanship measure down to a 5-point scale by combining weak and leaning partisans into single categories for each party. We calculate partisan-ideological sorting in the following way:

$$\left| (Ideology_i) - (Partisanship_i) \right|.$$

This leaves us with an indicator of sorting that that can take on any integer value from 0 to 4, where higher values mean that respondent i 's partisan and ideological identities are increasingly congruent with one another. In other words, a strong Republican (Democrat) who also identifies as very conservative (liberal) would have a score of 4, while a Republican (Democrat) who identifies as very liberal (conservative) would have a score of 0.

Respondents in both data sets were asked how much they approved of the way that the president was handling his job. We coded responses 1 for "strongly disapprove," 2 for "disapprove," 3 for "approve,"

⁴The precise number of offices varies by both the year of the survey and the state in which a respondent resides. Partisans who cast validated ballots reported between 1 and 9 votes and averaged about 5.5.

TABLE 1 Summary statistics.

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Defection				
President	0.049	0.216	0	1
Governor	0.069	0.254	0	1
U.S. Senate	0.063	0.243	0	1
U.S. House	0.069	0.253	0	1
Attorney general	0.05	0.217	0	1
Secretary of state	0.048	0.213	0	1
State Senate	0.044	0.205	0	1
State house	0.049	0.215	0	1
State treasurer	0.064	0.244	0	1
Lieutenant governor	0.064	0.245	0	1
Partisan-ideological sorting	2.662	0.974	0	4
Presidential approval	2.215	1.283	1	4
Retrospective economic evaluations	2.685	1.273	1	5
Respondent is an out-partisan	0.479	0.5	0	1
Strength of partisan identification	2.291	0.834	1	3
Respondent is a woman	0.522	0.5	0	1
Respondent is African American	0.093	0.29	0	1
Respondent is Hispanic	0.055	0.228	0	1
Respondent's race/ethnicity is "other"	0.051	0.221	0	1
Income	6.706	3.135	1	12
Level of education	3.796	1.461	1	6
Age in years	53.854	15.774	18	98
Year indicators				
2008	0.094	0.292	0	1
2010	0.143	0.35	0	1
2012	0.15	0.357	0	1
2014	0.104	0.305	0	1
2016	0.144	0.351	0	1
2018	0.14	0.347	0	1
2020	0.16	0.367	0	1

and 4 for “strongly approve.” Thus, higher values of this variable, which allows us to test H2, correspond with higher levels of presidential approval.

Testing H3 requires a variable that captures respondents’ evaluations of the state of the national economy. The CES provides us with this with a question that asks respondents, “would you say that over the past year, the nation’s economy has...” We code responses to this instrument 1 for “gotten much worse,” 2 for “gotten worse,” 3 for “stayed about the same,” 4 for “gotten better,” and 5 for “gotten much better.”

We also need two additional indicators, one telling us when respondents’ partisan identities match the party of the president and another indicating whether a given contest is national or subnational. Turning to the former first, we code a shared partisanship indicator 1 if a respondent’s party identification is the

same as the president's affiliation at the time of the survey and 0 if it is not. For the latter, we create a binary indicator coded 1 (national) if a given vote choice was for the presidency, a U.S. House seat, or a U.S. Senate seat and 0 for any of the subnational offices. We return to the national indicator momentarily.

We also control for several alternative possibilities in our analysis. Our model includes controls for respondents' strength of partisan identity (1 for leaners, 2 for not very strong partisans, and 3 for strong partisans), whether respondents identify as women, respondents' racial identities, respondents' level of income (from "less than \$10,000" to "\$500,000 or more"), respondents' level of educational attainment (ranging from 1 for those lacking a high school diploma to 6 for those with a postgraduate degree), and respondents' age in years. We further control for the year in which the survey was conducted.

To test our hypotheses, we need to compare the marginal effects of our national force indicators—partisan-ideological sorting, presidential approval, and economic perceptions—in national contexts to those in subnational contexts. This cannot be done without transforming the data. In its raw form, the CES data contain one observation for each respondent. For our purposes, this means that there is one row of information about a respondent and within each row, we have defection indicators across an array of offices. We transform the data such that there are as many observations for each respondent as that respondent has vote choices. For example, if a survey respondent reported having voted in five contests, then that respondent appears in the transformed data set five times rather than one time. By transforming our data from wide to long format, we also treat the defection indicators as a single dependent variable which is coded 1 if the respondent voted for the opposing party's candidate *in that contest* and 0 if they voted for their own party's nominee. Once the data are transformed, just over 5.5 percent of partisans reported having defected across all offices combined and about 38.7 percent of the vote choices we have data for were for national offices.

Our hypotheses require that we compare the marginal effects of national forces on defection behavior in both national and subnational contexts. We do so by interacting the variable indicating whether the reported vote choice was for a national or subnational office with the three national forces covariates. Because we suspect that in- and out-partisans' behavior may differ in response to their approval of the president or their economic perceptions, we also interact those variables with the indicator for whether a respondent shares their partisanship with the president. We have no such expectations for the effects of partisan-ideological sorting. We include all constituent terms in our model (see Brambor et al. 2006).

RESULTS

We test our hypotheses by using logistic regression to predict defection behavior using the above variables—including interaction terms. Because survey respondents can appear in the data more than once, we cluster the standard errors on respondents. The results of the model are shown in Table 2. Note that while there are 889,961 observations used in the model, only 163,715 unique respondents are analyzed.

For the most part, the raw coefficients do not allow us to evaluate our hypotheses with one exception: we can see the results of the joint tests of H1 and H4 by observing the coefficients estimated for the partisan-ideological sorting measure and that generated for the interaction between it and the national contest variable. The partisan-ideological sorting coefficient is negative as expected. This indicates that as partisans become better sorted, they become less likely to vote for the opposing party's nominee. The coefficient also achieves a traditional ($p \leq 0.05$) level of statistical significance. The coefficient for the interaction term between sorting and whether the contest is national, on the other hand, is quite small in magnitude (-0.006) and cannot be distinguished from a null effect. Thus, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that partisan-ideological sorting's effects on defection behavior differs between national and subnational contexts.

We examine these results more closely by plotting the predicted probability of defecting in national and subnational contests in Figure 1. The lines represent the predicted probabilities while the shaded regions capture the 95 percent confidence intervals around those probabilities. These quantities show that, as expected given the previous results, there is little substantive difference in the proclivity of partisans to

TABLE 2 Nationalization and defection behavior, 2006–2020.

	Estimated coefficient	Standard error
Partisan-ideological sorting	-0.593*	(0.016)
Presidential approval	-0.989*	(0.024)
Retrospective economic evaluations	-0.066*	(0.022)
National contest	0.040	(0.055)
Respondent is an out-partisan	-4.801*	(0.089)
Sorting × National contest	-0.006	(0.013)
Out-partisan × National contest	0.619*	(0.066)
Approval × Out-partisan	1.933*	(0.037)
Approval × National contest	0.098*	(0.023)
Approval × Out-partisan × National contest	-0.121*	(0.030)
Economic evaluations × Out-partisan	0.158*	(0.028)
Economic evaluations × National contest	-0.022	(0.019)
Economic evaluations × Out-partisan × National contest	-0.108*	(0.028)
Strength of partisan identification	-0.078*	(0.015)
Respondent is a woman	-0.026	(0.022)
Respondent is African American	-0.459*	(0.053)
Respondent is Hispanic American	0.085	(0.051)
Respondent's race is "other"	-0.043	(0.052)
Income	-0.003	(0.004)
Level of education	-0.006	(0.008)
Age in years	-0.002*	(0.001)
Year indicators	-0.436*	(0.046)
2008	-0.401*	(0.044)
2010	-0.451*	(0.043)
2012	-0.357*	(0.046)
2014	-0.219*	(0.040)
2016	-0.337*	(0.040)
2018	-2.714*	(0.068)
2020	2.426*	(0.092)
Intercept		
Pseudo- R^2	0.160	
N	889,961	

Note: Estimates are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on respondent identifiers shown in parentheses. There are 163,715 unique respondents used in this model.

* $p \leq 0.05$ (two-tailed).

defect in national versus subnational elections. In national elections, the predicted probability of defection is about 0.2 among the least sorted partisans, which declines to 0.03 for the most sorted partisans. In subnational contests, the predicted probability of defecting decreases from approximately 0.17–0.02 moving from the least to the best sorted partisans. Partisans typically do not defect, so these shifts in behavior are meaningful, but the differences in behavior in national and subnational contests are not.

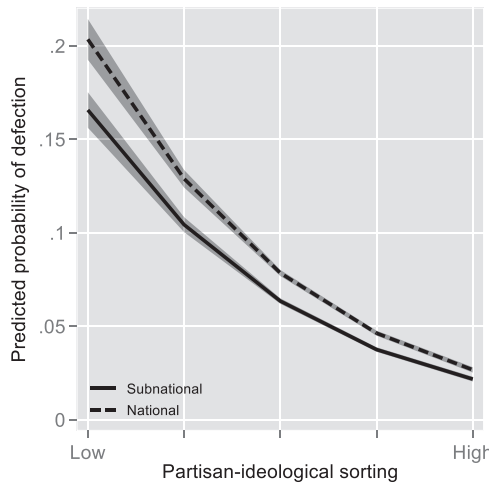


FIGURE 1 The predicted probability of defection across the range of partisan-ideological sorting. Shaded areas represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

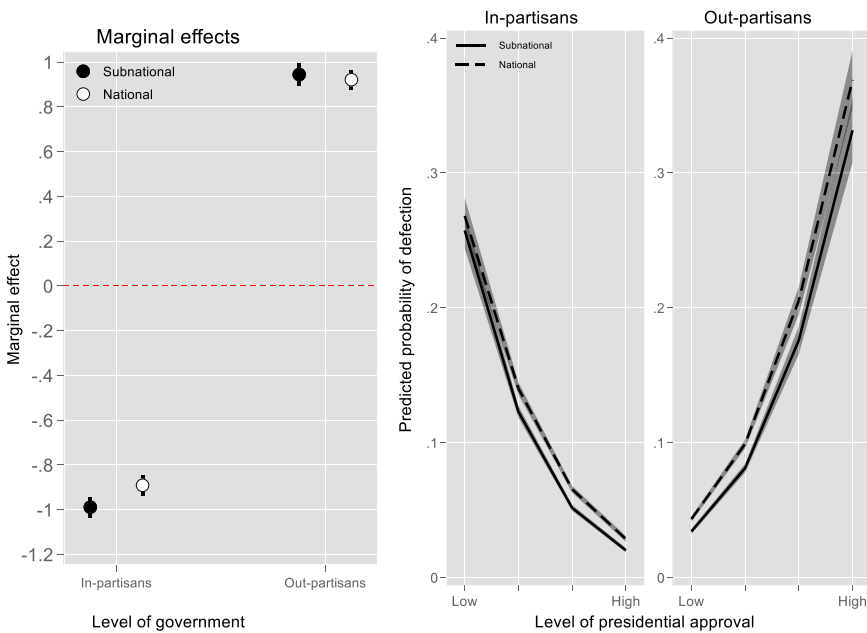


FIGURE 2 The marginal effects of presidential approval (left) and predicted probability of defection (right) in national and subnational contests among in- and out-partisans. Vertical lines (left) and shaded areas (right) represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Next, we consider our tests of H2 jointly with H4 by turning to the marginal effects of presidential approval on defection behavior in national and subnational contests among both in- and out-partisans. The three-way interaction required for this test makes it difficult to evaluate the hypothesis test using the raw coefficients, so we generate each key marginal effect and plot it in the left panel of Figure 2. Points are marginal effects and vertical lines capture 95 percent confidence intervals. The remaining panels show the predicted probabilities of defecting for each partisan group in national and subnational contexts.

We first consider how presidential approval informs defection behavior among in-partisans. The marginal effects of approval on defection are about -0.99 and -0.89 , respectively, subnational and national contests. Both effects are significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) different from zero, which indicates that as in-partisans' evaluations of the president become more positive, they also become less likely to defect from their parties' nominees in both national and subnational contexts. These marginal effects also differ significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) from each other, but there are two things to note about this finding. First, the effect of presidential approval on defection behavior is statistically larger in *subnational*, not national, contests, which is the opposite of the expectation generated by H4. Second, whereas the comparison between the two marginal effects leads us to be quite certain that they differ from one another, from a substantive perspective, this difference is so small that it may be meaningless. We can see this in the predicted probabilities presented in the middle panel of Figure 2. In national contests, the predicted probability of defection decreases from 0.27 to 0.02 from the least to the most approving in-partisans. In subnational contests, these values range from 0.26 to 0.02. This is not a meaningful difference, so despite the result of the statistical test, we interpret this result as evidence against H4. We suspect that the result of the statistical test is driven by the large number of observations included in the model rather than any "true" substantive differences.

Turning next to the behavior of out-partisans, we see that the marginal effect of presidential approval on defection is about 0.94 in subnational elections and 0.92 in national elections. These positive values, both of which differ from zero at traditional levels of statistical significance ($p \leq 0.05$), indicate that as out-partisans approve of the president more, they become more likely to defect, that is, more likely to vote for members of the president's rather than their own party. These quantities are also not different than one another ($p = 0.24$), which is an additional piece of evidence against H4. The predicted probabilities generated by these marginal effects across the range of presidential approval are mostly like one another and are shown in the right-most panel of Figure 2. The predicted probability of defection for out-partisans in subnational contexts ranges from about 0.04 to 0.32 from the least to the most approving of the president. In national contexts, these quantities range from 0.10 to 0.28.

The last set of results allow us to jointly test H3 and H4. To what extent do partisans' perceptions of the state of the national economy inform their defection behavior? We plot the key marginal effects and predicted probabilities in Figure 3. We once again consider the behavior of those who share their partisanship with the president first. In subnational contexts, the marginal effect is equal to -0.07 . In national contexts, it is -0.09 . These negative marginal effects suggest that in-partisans become less likely to defect from their parties' nominees as their perceptions of the state of the national economy improve. Both marginal effects differ significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) from zero, but they do not differ from each other ($p = 0.25$). Once again, the evidence fails to offer support for H4. The predicted probabilities, plotted in the middle panel of Figure 3, are also quite similar between national and subnational contexts. The predicted probability of in-partisans defecting ranges from 0.16 to 0.13 from the worst to the best economic perceptions in subnational contexts. In national contexts, the predicted probability ranges from about 0.18 to 0.14.

The marginal effects of retrospective economic perceptions look a little different for out-partisans. The marginal effect is 0.09 in subnational contexts and -0.04 in national contexts. Thus, the probability of defection increases among out-partisans who are voting in subnational contests as their view of the national economy becomes more positive, but the probability decreases for those out-partisans who are involved in national contests. This second finding is at odds with our expectations. Both marginal effects differ significantly from zero ($p \leq 0.05$), but readers should note that the p -value for the marginal effect in national contexts is only 0.035, which is perhaps not particularly impressive given the number of observations used by the model.⁵ These two marginal effects also differ significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) from one another, but these results still do not offer support for H4. If H4 is correct, we would have observed two positive marginal effects, and the marginal effect for national contests should have been larger than that produced for subnational contests. That is not at all what we observe here.

We last turn to the predicted probability of defecting for out-partisans across the range of retrospective economic perceptions. In subnational contexts, they range from 0.12 to 0.16 from the worst to the best

⁵ The other key p -values that we interpret in this research are small enough, which round to 0.

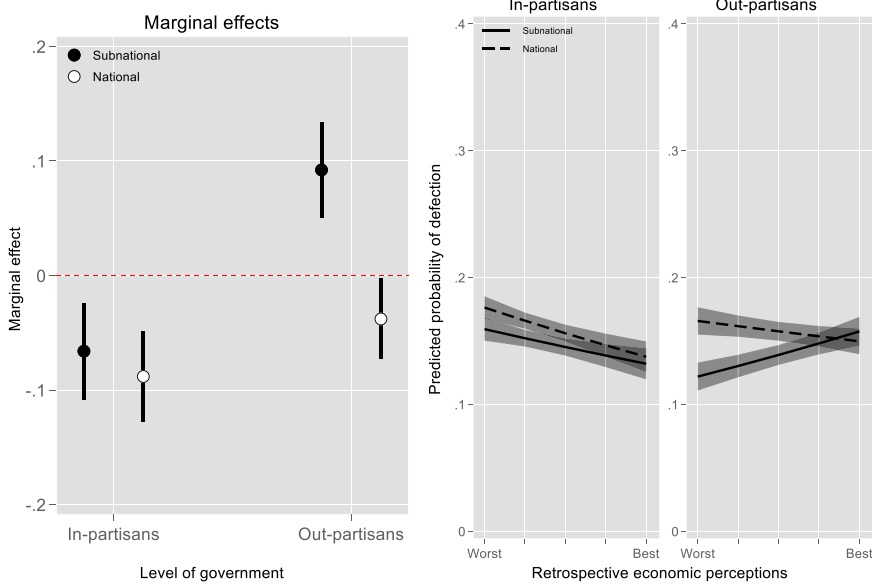


FIGURE 3 The marginal effects of retrospective economic perceptions (left) and predicted probability of defection (right) in national and subnational contests among in- and out-partisans. Vertical lines (left) and shaded areas (right) represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

economic perceptions. The pattern is reversed in national contexts, where the predicted probability of defection ranges from 0.17 to 0.15 as out-partisans move from the least to the most positive in their views about the economy.

CONCLUSION

In this research, we explored how national political forces—partisan-ideological, presidential approval, and economic evaluations—informed defection behavior among partisan voters in both national and subnational contests. On the whole, the evidence presented here offers support for the notion that partisans who are better sorted into their party are less likely to defect (H1), that those who share their partisanship with the president are less likely to defect when they approve of the president at higher levels, and that those who identify with the party opposed to the president are more likely to defect when deciding who to vote for as their approval of the president increases (H2). The evidence that economic perceptions shape defection behavior is weaker in terms of substantive magnitude, but it is still largely consistent with the expectations of H3. We fail to observe evidence that favors H4. In other words, it appears as if national political forces inform voting behavior in national and subnational contests in identical ways. Thus, the evidence supports the notion that all (electoral) politics are national.

Overall, these results make several contributions to our understanding of the nationalization of American politics. First, the evidence presented in this research suggests that national forces—specifically the sorting of citizens' partisan and ideological identities, their approval of the president's performance, and sometimes their evaluations of the state of the national economy—can play a powerful role in voting behavior, even in less explicitly nationalized contexts like contests for state treasurer. Thus, the kinds of electoral dynamics that have been documented in recent congressional and gubernatorial elections appear to have spread to down-ballot races. Second, we add to the literature by showing evidence that these national forces influence vote choice over a longer period and across many more high- and low-level offices than has previous research. While prior studies have noted that nationalization can be conditional

upon the information environment, our results suggest that national forces limit partisan defection in races of varying levels of salience.

The increasingly nationalized behavior across both national and subnational levels of government documented in this research has important implications for American politics. First, as government officials' electoral constituencies become increasingly defined along partisan lines, they will likely face fewer incentives to compromise or work with their colleagues from the other party. These developments could result in the type of political gridlock and partisan antipathy that has come to dominate the modern Congress becoming more common in both state and local governments. Second, nationalized elections have the potential to undermine political accountability. When vote choice is driven by top-down forces instead of evaluations of individual candidates or elected officials, it means that candidate-specific factors and office-based judgements of political performance take a back seat. Similarly, when elected officials have little reason to expect to be punished on Election Day, it frees them to make choices that run counter to constituent preferences. Both dynamics can undermine the role of elections as mechanisms for accountability.

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