Teams Without Uniforms: The Nonpartisan Ballot in State and Local Elections

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The use of a nonpartisan ballot was one of the many Progressive reforms introduced around the turn of the century that is still heavily used today. The intent of the change to a nonpartisan format was, and still is, to remove party cues from a voter's decision, thereby causing the voter to seek out other information about a candidate. This study seeks to examine the effects of nonpartisan elections on patterns of voter decisionmaking. We examine the structure of electoral choice in partisan and nonpartisan elections at the state and local levels using paired comparisons and interrupted time series. Using precinct and district level voting data, we compare mayoral races in the sister cities of Champaign and Urbana (IL) and state legislative elections in Nebraska and Kansas. In addition, we examine the city of Asheville (NC) during its change from partisan to nonpartisan elections in the early 1990s and state legislative elections in Minnesota during its change from nonpartisan to partisan contests in the early 1970s. The analysis of these cases helps us to understand the effects of removing party identification from the ballot. We find that nonpartisanship depresses turnout and that in nonpartisan contests voters rely less on party and more on incumbency in their voting decisions. The nonpartisan ballot "works," but how one evaluates the results depends on one's view of the electorate and the purpose of elections.

As of 1991, about three-quarters of all municipalities in the United States used nonpartisan elections to select their public officials (DeSantis and Renner 1991). Nonpartisan elections are also widely used in voting for judges and, in

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Nebraska, for the state legislature. Adrian (1959) noted that over half of the elections in this country are nonpartisan; yet party identification is often the central variable in many voting models. Citizens are voting in a large number of elections without the benefit of their major voting cue, but little research has been conducted regarding how voters choose between candidates when their party labels are removed from the ballot. It is our aim in this article to fill in some of the blanks about the impact of the nonpartisan ballot on information and elections. Specifically, we make three claims. First, voter turnout will be less in nonpartisan elections. Second, candidates' party affiliations will have less impact on the vote in nonpartisan elections. Finally, because party identification is not readily available to voters, the impact of incumbency on vote choice will become greater. Using data on elections at the local and state level, we test these hypotheses to examine the role of information in voting behavior.

The Progressives vs. the Political Scientists

We draw on two divergent theoretical traditions in developing hypotheses about the role of partisanship in state and local elections. We begin with a discussion of the Progressive Movement and the goals that they had in pushing the nonpartisan ballot, among other reforms. We find in their perspective a rather clear view of the electorate and the role of partisanship in influencing the character of voter decisionmaking. Then we fold into this more recent thinking about party identification from the voting behavior literature, particularly that influenced by the rational choice and cognitive psychological approaches. Together these views provide the set of hypotheses that guide our analysis.

The Progressives and Nonpartisanship

Progressives believed that the party machine system prominent around the beginning of the twentieth century limited direct government by the people (Duncan 1913; Hofstadter 1955; Gould 1986). The goal of the Progressives was to remove party politics from the local level, which would cripple the machines' powers and make municipal governments more responsive to citizens. Among the reforms that the Progressives promoted was the nonpartisan election. According to the Progressives, nonpartisan elections would eliminate national parties from the local scene and keep their divisive influences out of municipal decisionmaking.

Supporters of the nonpartisan movement conceived of democratic elections in different terms. Akin to the communitarians today, they strongly believed in a knowable, underlying public interest that men and women of good will could agree upon. According to the progressives, an active and properly motivated citizenry does not need party labels, which were seen as symbols of divisiveness and narrow self-interest. Rather, much of government was and should be

administrative in nature, and hence the role of the citizenry is to choose the best leaders and managers to make government run effectively.

The Progressives' normative view of the good citizen was that of the interested and involved individual, who with other well-meaning and public regarding citizens use the electoral process to select the most competent leaders who will then work for the common good. Partisanship and party labels have no positive function in this vision.

Partisanship and Political Science

Political scientists have frequently argued that political parties not only have a positive role but that they are essential for a strong democracy (Schattschneider 1942; The American Political Science Association 1950; Beck 1997; Aldrich 1995). In the liberal-pluralist vision of American politics that underlies most current empirical research, politics is more often viewed as being about "who gets what" than about discovering the common good. In this view, a measure of the strength of democracy is the character of the linkage between voters and rulers. In addition, we have come to realize that the normative view of a highly involved and informed electorate is unrealistic. Informed by rational actor theories of behavior, political science now generally accepts the view that many citizens are going to be poorly informed about, and only moderately interested in politics (Downs 1957). Nevertheless, more recent research has demonstrated that, in spite of these shortcomings at the individual level, we can and do achieve an electorate that is collectively rational and highly responsive to what government does (Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, forthcoming). This collective rationality is attained, in large part, by the use of information short cuts. Party labels, in this perspective, provide important cognitive information. They convey generally accurate policy information about candidates and their low cost and accessibility help voters to reach reasonable decisions (Aldrich 1995). It follows, then, that taking party labels away in nonpartisan elections and thereby raising the costs of information about candidates for voters, nonpartisan elections would make voting more difficult and thereby undermine the potential for popular control.

Parties also have an affective component. We know most voters have psychological attachments to parties. Empirically, from *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) on, scholars have repeatedly shown that party identification is a, or even the, central component of voter decision making. As an affective attachment, it motivates individuals to participate as a display of party support (Verba, Nie, and Kim, 1978). They identify the teams to root (and to vote) for in contests that otherwise—because of the costs of information—most voters would have a hard time getting excited about. Thus, party labels can provide an important mechanism to aid in voter decision-making and for mobilization of citizens into the political process.

The key question, then, is what citizens do when deprived of party labels in nonpartisan elections. One option, which apparently the Progressives were banking on, is that they will seek out other, more acceptable types of information on which to base their decision. Current theory, however, would note that taking away party labels does not provide any increase in the incentives to bear the cost of a new information search. Instead, we would expect citizens to simply rely on whatever other cues they have at hand—even though these may be less effective than party affiliation as an effective guide to voting.

Previous Literature on Nonpartisan Elections

Despite the fact that most of the elections in this country use a nonpartisan ballot, very little has been written concerning nonpartisan elections. Indeed, scholars who have researched this facet of American politics readily acknowledge this lack of information as a preface to their own studies—and we shall follow in their tradition (Adrian 1959; Lee 1960). Adrian laid out a framework for studying nonpartisan elections that is useful for thinking about the impact of the nonpartisan ballot. Adrian argued that there were four types of nonpartisan settings: (1) those where a candidate's party affiliation is easily identifiable; (2) those where political groups, including parties, slate the candidates they favor; (3) those where groups, excluding parties, slate candidates; and (4) those where neither political parties nor other slating groups exercise much influence. In effect, Adrian sought to order nonpartisan contests according to how accessible the key information shortcut of the candidates' party affiliations are in these contests. We will draw on Adrian's idea of informal or intermediate partisanship in our analysis below.

Especially relevant to our work here is Squire and Smith's (1988) quasi-experimental analysis of nonpartisan judicial elections. They found that when voters were supplied with partisan information, the number of respondents having no opinion about the candidates decreased substantially. This not only indicated that most voters were unaware of the candidate's party affiliation, but more importantly, that voters feel significantly less confident in their decisions without partisan cues in low information races like judicial contests. We expect that party labels perform a similarly central role in most state and local voting decisions—and that the reform of the nonpartisan ballot makes voter decision-making significantly more difficult.

The Effects of the Nonpartisan Ballot: Hypotheses and Research Design

The Progressives and the political scientists are at odds. The Progressives viewed parties as corrupt and thus they needed to be weakened. Political scientists, on the other hand, frequently argue that parties are important and that

relying on party cues is a sensible approach for voters. While they disagree about the appropriate role for parties, our reading of both the Progressives and the political science literature suggests they would not disagree on the three empirical hypotheses we examine in this paper.

Hypotheses.

By removing party identification from the ballot, less informed citizens lose their greatest information shortcut for making an educated vote. Without the listing of party identification on the ballot and the fact that other kinds of information (i.e., candidates' positions on issues) are not easily attainable in state and local elections, nonpartisan elections require citizens to exert more effort, sometimes quite a bit of effort, to determine the differences between the candidates. This increase in the cost of voting is expected to yield fewer voters. That is, unable to determine clearly and efficiently the differences between candidates, many voters are, we expect, more likely to skip the election altogether (Rusk 1970; Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Karnig and Walter 1977; Welch 1978). Thus our first hypothesis is that voter turnout will be lower in nonpartisan elections.

We also believe that partisan labels have a reduced impact on the decisions of those who do vote in nonpartisan elections. The most obvious hypothesis is that the candidates' party affiliations will have less influence on the vote in these contests. It is possible for a nonpartisan contest to provide partisan cues, and even for the parties to slate candidates actively (Adrian 1959). However, this would have to be blatant and pervasive enough to enable the party affiliation of the candidates to rival having labels on the ballot. Moreover, as we shall see in the nonpartisan races examined here, the level of partisan activity is somewhere between low and nonexistent. Thus our second hypothesis is that voters' party allegiances will have less of an impact in structuring vote choice in nonpartisan elections.

Voters who participate in nonpartisan elections will continue to search for low cost cues because they have little incentive to invest in time-consuming searches for pertinent information. Thus, we expect that they will pick up and use other clues about candidates. Squire and Smith (1988), for example, found that such voting decisions could be based on information such as ethnic identification and name recognition. Other experimental studies have found that voters do tend to react to ethnic names or ballot order when the party label is not readily accessible (Kamin 1958; Lorinkas, Hawkins, and Edwards 1969). A frequently available and important voting cue is incumbency and it has grown in importance in American legislative elections over the last 30 years (Jacobson 1997; Jewell and Breaux 1988). Indeed, incumbency is the obvious and, in many cases, the only low cost cue available to voters in nonpartisan elections. This yields our third hypothesis: we expect incumbency to have a significantly larger impact on voting decisions in nonpartisan than in partisan elections.

Research Design.

Our analysis of the impact of nonpartisan ballots uses precinct level data and compares relationships of precinct partisanship in contests with partisan and nonpartisan ballots. Rather than trying to sample all nonpartisan and partisan contests, we purposively sample pairs of jurisdictions in this analysis, picking those that are alike in most important respects, but which vary in the types of ballots used. In addition, we use two interrupted times series cases where governments have switched from using a partisan to a nonpartisan ballot (or vice versa) for the election of the same office. We test our set of hypotheses at both the local and the state level. For our paired comparisons, we will focus on the vote for nonpartisan offices during the period 1984-1990 in order to utilize the ROAD data set—an impressive collection of precinct level voting returns over that time period.[1] We use returns gathered from other sources at the precinct and state senate district level for our interrupted time series cases as well.[2] Precincts are made up of fairly homogenous groups of voters, frequently with distinctive and enduring partisan predispositions. Our strategy is to examine how these predispositions influence voting in similar jurisdictions, but which use different ballot forms.[3]

Before proceeding with the details of our research design, some comments are in order about our use of aggregate data in this study. The voting literature has long been concerned—too concerned in our opinion—about the dangers of the ecological fallacy. As a result there has been an unwritten rule that all aggregate level analyses (which includes most non-survey research) is suspect. This means that most elections go unstudied, which is entirely unnecessary. While for some questions the scholar does need individual level data, there are many interesting questions that can be addressed quite adequately with aggregate election data. In our case, the chief independent variable, ballot format, is contextual. Everyone within a precinct has the same value, whether they voted in a partisan or nonpartisan election. Hence, the ecological inference problem of differing coefficients between variables at the individual and aggregate level largely vanishes.[4]

[1] The ROAD data (Record of American Democracy) were compiled by Gary King and Brad Palmquist. A description of the project is available online at HTTP://data.fas.harvard.edu/ROAD/.

[2] We would like to thank the Buncombe County Board of Elections for supplying the voting data on Asheville and the Minnesota Board of Elections for providing the data for Minnesota.

[3] One problem with using precinct level data is that there is considerable variance across precincts in the numbers of registered voters and in levels of turnout among those registered. Treating each precinct equally runs the risk of biasing the results. A bias in our estimated coefficients would result if the behaviors of interest were systematically related to the size of the precincts or their turnout levels. to guard against this, we weight our regressions by the total vote for the office we are studying in each analysis. The weighted regression results did not differ markedly from those run with un-weighted values.

[4] Because the primary right hand side variable is a constant within precincts the individual and

Our analysis will focus on two different electoral levels with nonpartisan elections—municipal and state. First, to test the effect of the nonpartisan ballot at the city level, we will use a comparison of Champaign and Urbana (IL) and an interrupted time series of Asheville (NC). We compare two Urbana partisan mayoral elections (1985 and 1989) with the one Champaign nonpartisan contest (1987). In addition, we will examine the vote for mayor in Asheville's 1993 partisan contest to the vote for the same office using a nonpartisan ballot in 1995.

Champaign and Urbana are located side by side in the east central part of Illinois and share the same newspaper. The University of Illinois rests in both jurisdictions and many think of the cities as being one. In fact, there are often proposals to merge the cities. Although locals may see some differences between the two cities, they refer to the area as "Chambana" for short. Table 1 shows that demographically the cities are quite similar. Champaign is larger and has a slightly smaller minority population, but the cities are equivalent in their education and income statistics. The similar demographic characteristics of the cities as well as their geographical closeness and shared media market mean that Champaign-Urbana provide a good natural experiment by which to assess the effects of the nonpartisan ballot.[5]

The city of Asheville is the largest city in western North Carolina. Asheville previously held nonpartisan elections over 50 years ago, but had switched back to holding partisan elections, like the majority of North Carolina's other cities. However, in 1994, the city council voted to return to a nonpartisan ballot for its local elections. The Vice-Mayor, Chris Peterson, put forth the proposal because he believed the parties had too much control over financial contributions to candidates and in determining the outcome of the election (Clark 10/5/94: 1B). Although Peterson's Democratic party put up resistance to the change, the council unanimously voted to return to the previous nonpartisan format.

Our first hypothesis concerns voter participation. We expect that turnout in the nonpartisan contest will be lower than in the partisan contests because the cost of information processing is significantly higher in nonpartisan contests. To gauge this, we compare the percentage voting for mayor in the odd year local elections to a base of voter turnout out in a congressional midterm election (1986 for Champaign-Urbana, 1994 for Asheville).

Our second hypothesis concerns the impact of partisanship. This can be a bit of a challenge since the point of the nonpartisan ballot it to obscure the

aggregate level coefficients of, for example, regressing voter turnout on ballot format, should be identical. We do face an ecological inference situation when we look at the partisanship of precincts and voting in state and local elections by partisan and nonpartisan elections. We are quite happy here, however, to restrict any generalizations to the group level. The political implications of our analysis would remain unchanged.

[5] According to the Champaign city clerk's office, the city of Champaign changed to a nonpartisan ballot in 1917 when they implemented the city-manager form of government.

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS IN CHAMPAIGN AND URBANA (IL)

Characteristics	Champaign	Urbana
Total Population	63,502	36,344
White Population	81%	76%
Black Population	14%	11%
Other Minority Population	5%	13%
Population with High School Degree	44%	45%
Population with College Degree	23%	30%
Median Household Income	$22,967	$21,705

Source: 1990 U.S. Census.

candidates' party affiliations. By researching the Champaign and Asheville races, we were able to discover which candidate affiliated with each party and code their vote totals accordingly. Of course, the mayoral candidates in partisan Urbana are obvious. Our dependent variable in this analysis is the percentage of the precinct voting for the Democratic candidate for mayor. To measure the level of partisan voting in these local contests, we needed to create a variable that would capture the underlying partisanship within the precincts. Since there was no party registration figures available in Illinois or North Carolina, we created a party index measure using factor analysis of the Democratic vote for other partisan offices in order to gauge the partisanship in each precinct (see Appendix 1). Our third hypothesis concerns the impact of incumbency. This factor is a constant for all precincts within the Champaign-Urbana and Asheville cases, so we cannot test for the impact of incumbency in this part of our analysis.

Our second level of analysis focuses on the effects of nonpartisanship on voting for state legislative offices in our Nebraska-Kansas comparison and in an interrupted time series examination of Minnesota. While Kansas has a larger total population than Nebraska, the states are quite alike on a number of other measures (Table 2). They have nearly identical proportions of urban populations as well as very similar educational levels. Nebraska and Kansas also vary only slightly in their minority populations and median incomes. In addition to their demographic similarities, these states also share other traits important to the study of their partisanship. According to Elazar (1984), Nebraska and Kansas have very similar political cultures, each being described as individualistic-moralistic to varying degrees. Furthermore, Bibby et.al. (1990) rank both states as having similarly high levels of two-party competition during the 1981-1988 period. They occupy similar space in terms of ideological and partisan predispositions. Figure 1 highlights the two states on these dimensions using the Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) indicies. The graph shows, for all the states, the proportion of

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS IN NEBRASKA AND KANSAS

Characteristic	Nebraska	Kansas
Total Population	1,578,385	2,477,574
Urban Population	67%	69%
White Population	94%	90%
Black Population	4%	6%
Other Minority Population	2%	4%
Population with High School Degree	52%	51%
Population with College Degree	16%	17%
Median Household Income	$26,016	$27,291
Partisanship		
Democratic	31.9%	30.3%
Independent	26.8%	33.2%
Republican	41.3%	36.4%
	100.0%	100.0%
N of survey respondents	2,537	3,657

Sources: 1990 U.S. Census; CBS News/*New York Times* polls., 1976-1996.

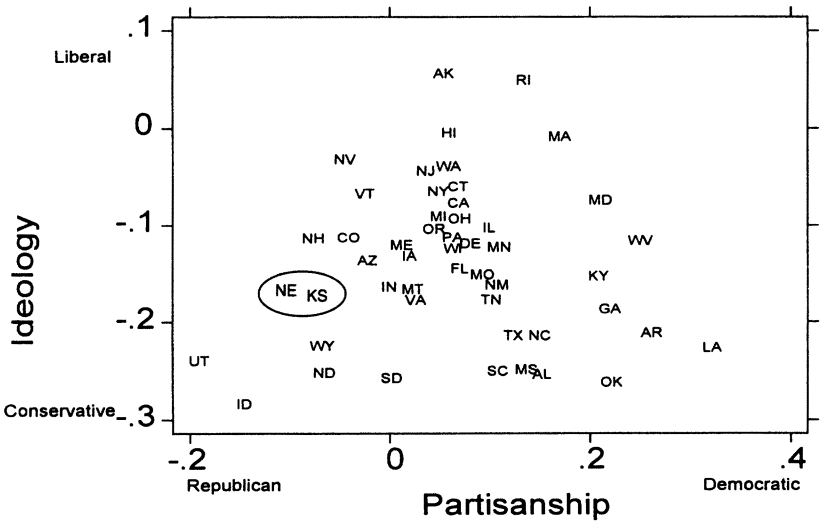
Democratic-Republican identifiers (Partisanship) and the proportion of Liberal-Conservative (Ideology). Compared to the variation across the states, Nebraska and Kansas are rather similar in the political orientations of their electorates.

Nebraska has a unicameral legislature with 49 members, half of whom are elected every two years to serve four-year terms (1984, 1986, 1988, and 1990 in our data set). For our comparisons, we use the Kansas Senate, which has 40 members who are all elected in the same year to serve four-year terms (1984 and 1988 in our data set).

In Minnesota, we use the same 67 state Senate seats that were contested using a nonpartisan ballot in 1972 and a partisan ballot in 1976. We use roll-off (the change in voting for the U.S. House and for the state Senate) to measure the impact of the partisan ballot on citizen participation. Our measure of partisanship for the Nebraska-Kansas comparison is the percentage of voters registered with the Democratic party. Since Nebraska and Kansas both require that citizens be registered with a party to vote in that party's primary, most voters are registered as a Democrat or a Republican, thus making this a simple and effective measure of partisanship.[6] For the Minnesota case, these figures were unavailable

6 This registration practice also came in handy by allowing us to determine the party of most candidates in Nebraska by simply researching which party they registered with. This practice allowed

FIGURE 1.
COMPARABILITY OF NEBRASKA AND KANSAS ON PARTISANSHIP AND IDEOLOGY



so we used a party index similar to those created for the municipal cases (see Appendix 1).

The history of Minnesota legislative elections under nonpartisanship was significantly different from Nebraska's. Adrian warned that some nominally nonpartisan contests have partisan motivations and actors even though party labels do not appear on the ballot. Before changing to the partisan ballot, Minnesota's candidates were widely recognized as belonging to either the liberal or conservative factions within the legislature—factions which formally organized as parties subsequently. We expect then, that at least a portion of the electorate would key on the affiliations and make the link to their own partisan preferences. Hence, partisanship in Minnesota should be larger than we find in Nebraska, but still smaller than we would find after partisan elections are instituted.

ANALYSIS 1: MUNICIPAL LEVEL

Our first analysis focuses on the nonpartisan ballot at the municipal level. However, interpreting the results requires some attention to the character of

us more easily to code our dependent variable—Democratic vote for state legislator in the districts and precincts. In addition, we coded the incumbency status of each race (1 if Democratic icumbent, –1 if Republican incumbent, and 0 if no incumbent) in order to test hypothesis 3 concerning the effects of other heuristics on voters' decisions.

Champaign and Asheville's nonpartisan elections. The potential problem is that in some locales, even though the ballots are nonpartisan, in practice the parties are active; they slate candidates and the underlying cleavages are partisan (Adrian 1959).

Partisan Information in the Champaign and Asheville Campaigns

We sought to determine the availability of partisan cues, and their relevance for the city elections in Champaign and Urbana as well as in Asheville. We interviewed local politicians and did a content analysis of the local newspaper's coverage of the mayoral and city council elections in both Champaign and Urbana. Members of the Champaign city council believe that there is little if any party in local elections for mayor and city council.[7]

The principle media coverage is in the *Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette*. By coding all articles relating to the local campaigns for the two months before each mayoral election, we are able to compare the types of information that are available to the voters when they are making their decisions. Table 3 lists the number of articles, the number of times each candidate's name was mentioned, and the number of times their partisan affiliation was mentioned in each city for each year. Of the 16 articles dealing with Urbana elections, 15 made at least one reference to each candidate's party. Five of the articles mention the party of at least one of the candidates more than once.

The Champaign articles tell a completely different story. Of the 24 articles and 294 mentions of candidate names, only three times is there any mention of party. Only 2 of the articles make a reference to party affiliation and none of the articles

[7] Mayor and former council member Dannel McCollum claims that, while parties do get somewhat involved in the local races, it is within "manageable proportions." McCollum asserts that no public slating of candidates occurs, but that party members talk privately with one another. There seemed to be a general agreement among current city council members with the mayor's assessment. In interviews with three council members, none said that partisan activity is obvious. According to Council member Tom Bruno, partisan cues are only available to insiders who attend party events; "there are no cues readily apparent to the public." Bruno also claims that parties provide no money or other resources for candidates. Others argue that partisan activity is quite abundant even though the elections are nonpartisan. "In Champaign, we piously state that we conduct a nonpartisan election," writes *Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette* columnist John Hirschfield. "But beneath the trappings the most vigorous partisan activities take place, even to the point where one party has publicized openly its successes as 'party victories'" (1985, p. A-4). Current Urbana Mayor Tod Satterthwaite believes that the local parties in Champaign are quite active as well. "If you know where to look for [partisan information], you can get it," he explained. According to Satterthwaite, many of the Champaign council members either were, or currently are, their parties' precinct leaders. However, he maintains that just reading the newspaper was unlikely to provide such partisan cues. Members of the elite disagree a bit. Our impression is that there is only minimal party involvement. Some party activists do get involved, but this is not as an organized party activity. Based on the elite informants, we believe that if Champaign voters are to get partisan cues, it probably will have to come via the media.

TABLE 3
NEWSPAPER CODING FOR MAYORAL ELECTIONS

	Urbana (1985 and 1989)	Champaign (1987)	Asheville (1995)
Number of Articles	16	24	51
Number of Name Mentions	316	294	327
Number of Party Mentions	39	3	1
Number of Articles that Mention Party	15	2	1
Number of Articles that Mention Party more than Once	5	0	0

Source: Compiled by the authors from the February through April issues of the 1985, 1987, and 1989 *Champaign Urbana News-Gazette* as well as the September 15th through Election Day issues of the *Asheville Citizen-Times*.

had more than one mention. None of the 35 paid newspaper advertisements show any indication of party as well. The partisan cues that did exist are easy to miss, especially if one does not read the paper carefully or everyday. In the midst of a competitive mayoral race in 1987, the chairperson of the Champaign County Republican party stated that Republicans tended to support one candidate and Democrats usually sided with the other. A later article mentioned that one of the candidates had previously campaigned for Senator Paul Simon and state legislator Helen Satterthwaite (both are Democrats). Thus, a total of only three partisan cues were transmitted in the newspaper throughout the entire campaign.

We analyzed the *Asheville Citizen-Times* from September 15, 1995, until Election Day to determine the extent of partisan cues available through the newspapers. Since Asheville had only changed to a nonpartisan format less than a year earlier, voters had more partisan information available to them than they did in Champaign. However, if one relied solely on the newspaper for partisan information, it would be difficult to decipher either candidate's partisanship. Of the 51 articles about the race and 327 candidate mentions, only *once* was there an indirect reference to partisanship. The paper said that one of the candidates stated that a previous Republican mayor was the best mayor the city ever had. The article claimed this was strange since their political views were so different.

It appears to be difficult to acquire either partisan or issue information about the mayoral candidates through the local media. We were only able to determine definitively the partisanship of the two mayoral candidates in Champaign after closely reading the local papers for two months prior to each election. A citizen paying less attention to the media would probably have missed the two partisan mentions altogether. While we are not able to gauge whether door-to-door or other types of campaigning might have taken on a more partisan or issue-based character, our interviews suggest that is unlikely. The contest in Champaign is

posed quite differently to voters than the elections in Urbana. It is devoid of partisan cues, and with little issue information it looks like a Progressive's model of a contest of leadership or management abilities. Even though a Democrat was running against a Republican, the context of the campaign and the design of the ballot give the race the appearance of a genuinely nonpartisan contest. While it may be easier for the voter to determine partisanship in Asheville than in Champaign, since they recently changed ballot formats, our analysis of newspaper coverage indicates that partisanship is still difficult to determine if one relies on the local newspaper for election information.

Analysis

The first hypothesis is that turnout should be lower in nonpartisan contests. We assess this by comparing the turnout in the 1987 Champaign mayoral and the 1985 Urbana contests with the turnout in each city in the 1986 contest for the House of Representatives. Since the House district encompasses both cities, this makes a solid common base against which to assess turnout in the mayoral contests. Table 4 shows the drop-off between the higher turnout congressional contest in the adjacent year and the mayoral contest. The evidence is about as clear as it can be for a sample of two: turnout dropped fully 10 percent more in Champaign than in Urbana. Of course, the small N here means that we cannot control for competitiveness, campaign intensity or any of the plethora of variables that are associated with turnout differences. Nevertheless, for the case of Champaign and Urbana, the evidence is consistent with our expectations.

While the statistics on turnout conform to our hypothesis in the Champaign-Urbana comparison, the Asheville case is less supportive. Table 4 presents the turnout for Asheville's mayoral elections in 1993 and 1995 (before and after the change to a nonpartisan format) compared to the turnout for the U.S. House election in 1994. In Asheville's last partisan contest, 12,571 voters turned out to vote for mayor—35 percent fewer people than voted for the House in 1994. In 1995, 12,217 voters turned out to vote for mayor, a drop of 37 percent from the 1994 House mark. Thus, the differences in turnout drop off before and after Asheville changed to a nonpartisan election is negligible. One explanation for these unchanging turnout figures may be that the candidates running for mayor in 1995 were familiar faces to Asheville voters. Indeed, one candidate was the incumbent mayor while the other was the sitting vice-mayor. Thus, voters may have readily recognized these candidates and avoided the information costs of voting that might otherwise depress turnout in a nonpartisan contest. Nevertheless, our evidence concerning turnout is only partially supported at the municipal level.

Next we examine the impact of partisanship in shaping voting decisions. Table 5 presents the bivariate regression using the party index as a predictor of the vote for the Democratic mayoral candidate. First, the coefficients for Urbana's elections in 1985 and 1989 are highly significant ($p < .001$) and conform exactly

TABLE 4
TURNOUT DIFFERENCES IN PARTISAN AND NONPARTISAN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

Elections	Total Citizens Voting
Analysis 1:	
Urbana (Partisan):	
U.S. House (1986)	7,945
Mayor (1985)	5,347
Dropoff:	2,598 (33%)
Champaign (Nonpartisan):	
U.S. House (1986)	13,033
Mayor (1987)	7,395
Dropoff:	5,638 (43%)
Analysis 2:	
Asheville 1993 (Partisan):	
U.S. House (1994)	19,265
Mayor (1993)	12,571
Dropoff:	6,694 (35%)
Asheville 1995 (Nonpartisan):	
U.S. House (1994)	19,265
Mayor (1995)	12,217
Dropoff:	7,048 (37%)

as they should. A standard deviation difference in precinct partisanship resulted in a 13 to 14 percent change in the predicted for vote the Democratic candidate for mayor. Precinct partisanship does a good job of predicting vote for mayor in Urbana (adjusted R-squares of .59 and .73 respectively). On the other hand, the estimate for Champaign's election in 1987 shows no significant relationship for the precinct partisanship, the coefficient is far smaller than it is in Urbana—a reduction of over 80 percent of its impact in Urbana—and the adjusted R-squared for that equation (.02) shows that the partisanship in Champaign precincts explains virtually none of the subsequent vote for mayor. These results are exactly what we would expect from hypothesis 2—party is not structuring the vote in Champaign, but it is in Urbana.[8]

[8] Another way of examining these is to pool the precincts and treat nonpartisanship as an independent variable:

$$V = a + b1*ptydindex + b2*ballot + b3*(ptyindex*ballot)$$

where V is the percent voting for the Democratic mayoral candidate in Champaign and Urbana elections, ptyindex is our party index measure, and ballot is a dummy variable coded 1 for elections using a nonpartisan ballot and 0 for a partisan ballot. The coefficient that we are focusing

TABLE 5
PARTISANSHIP IN MAYORAL RACES

Race	Constant	Party Index	Adj. R-Squared
Analysis 1:			
Urbana (Partisan):			
1985	.448***	.132***	.590
(N = 28)	(.020)	(.021)	
1989	.374***	.144***	.733
(N = 28)	(.014)	(.016)	
Champaign (Nonpartisan):			
1987	.530***	.026	.023
(N = 44)	(.017)	(.018)	
Analysis 2:			
Asheville (Partisan):			
1993	.445***	.068***	.479
(N = 23)	(.013)	(.015)	
Asheville (Nonpartisan):			
1995	.323***	.035	.056
(N = 23)	(.020)	(.023)	

*p < .05
**p < .01
***p < .001
Standard errors in parentheses.

An examination of Asheville's elections yields similar results to those outlined above. In Asheville's last partisan election, the coefficient for the partisanship (.068) is highly significant ($p < .001$) and predicts a large amount of the vote for mayor (adjusted R-squared = .479). When Asheville began using a nonpartisan ballot for mayor, the coefficient for party (.035) decreased by almost half and became insignificant while the adjusted R-squared for that equation was only .056. Again, this analysis is supportive of hypothesis 2 indicating that the nonpartisan ballot does remove a great deal of partisan structure to the vote in municipal elections.

on here is b3, which corresponds to the interactive variable. If the coefficient is negative and significant, then the effect of the party index in predicting vote is greater in partisan elections as we would expect. The combined effect of party is significant in Urbana (b1 = .137, p = .014) while the interaction is strongly negataive (b3 = –.111, p = .024). This yields virtually the same slope for Champaign we achieved in Table 5 (b1 + b3) = .137 + (–.111) = .026.

Analysis 2: State Level

We examine the impact of Nebraska's nonpartisan ballot on roll-off (non-completion of the ballot by voters), as well as the relative importance of district partisanship and candidate incumbency on electoral outcomes. As explained above, voting in Kansas Senate elections is our basis of comparison. We will also repeat this analysis for Minnesota Senate elections before and after the state switched from the nonpartisan to the partisan ballot for those contests.

We start our Nebraska-Kansas analysis looking at the effects of the nonpartisan ballot on roll-off. Table 6 reports the average number of votes cast in each district for a partisan office (U.S. House was used since it is contested in each of our years) and for the state legislative office. Kansas experiences only modest roll-off as voters move from voting for the House of Representative to the state senate contests (6 percent), but over one-third (39 percent) of the House of Representatives' voters failed to cast ballots for the Nebraska Senate. This indicates that a tremendous number of Nebraska citizens, who have already made the effort to turn out to vote, do not have enough information to make a decision without the aid of a party label. In contrast, in the neighboring state of Kansas, party labels seem sufficient to keep all but a handful of voters active in the state legislative contests. Our first hypothesis receives strong support in this comparison.

Turning to an examination of turnout in Minnesota's State Senate elections offers different results from those presented above. In Minnesota's 1976 partisan contest, roll-off from voting for the U.S. House was a low 3 percent. However, this figure is only slightly better than the 7 percent roll-off figure that Minnesota had under the nonpartisan ballot four years earlier. Thus, the effects of the nonpartisan ballot on turnout are far less clear with this case. While there was a small increase in turnout when Minnesota turned to partisan elections, the difference was not nearly as dramatic as the contrast between Nebraska and Kansas. This small level of roll-off in the 1972 election may be due to the climate in which the campaigns took place. As mentioned earlier, Minnesota elections under the nonpartisan ballots were often partisan affairs where most candidates typically ran openly as liberals and conservatives. Because this was the case, it may have been far easier for Minnesota voters to receive partisan information about their state legislative candidates than it is for Nebraska voters to do the same.

We examine the impact of partisanship and incumbency in Table 7.[9] Here we work with the precinct voting data aggregated to the legislative district level.[10]

[9] Note that a few races were dropped from our analysis of Nebraska since we were unable to determine the partisanship of the candidates after extensive research. A few races were dropped from the Minnesota analysis when candidates were running unopposed.

[10] For the Nebraska and Kansas cases, we used precinct level data that we then aggregated up to the legislative district level. Note that running the analyses for these states at both the precinct and district levels yielded similar results indicating that there is no aggregation bias present. Also note

TABLE 6
ROLL-OFF IN PARTISAN VERSUS NONPARTISAN ELECTIONS
(CONTESTED ELECTIONS ONLY)

Elections	Mean Citizens Voting (by District)
Analysis 1:	
Kansas (Partisan): (N = 64)	
U.S. House (1984 and 1988)	23,373.72
State Senate (1984 and 1988)	21,943.83
Mean Roll-off:	1429.89 (6%)
Nebraska (Nonpartisan): (N = 63)	
U.S. House (1984-1990)	16,962.27
State Senate (1984-1990)	10,370.68
Mean Roll-off:	6,591.59 (39%)
Analysis 2:	
Minnesota 1976 (Partisan): (N = 67)	
U.S. House (1976)	26,781
State Senate (1976)	26,117
Mean Roll-off:	664 (3%)
Minnesota 1972 (Nonpartisan): (N = 67)	
U.S. House (1972)	25,221
State Senate (1972)	23,434
Mean Roll-off:	1787 (7%)

Note: None of these states had a straight ticket option on their ballots during these periods.

A number of interesting patterns emerge in this table, all of which support our hypotheses. First, the coefficient for Democratic registration in Kansas (.54) has the expected effect on the vote for Democratic legislative candidates and is highly significant ($p < .001$). The coefficient is fairly large and indicates that for each additional 10 percent of Democratic registrants in a district, the Democratic candidate can expect an increase in his vote total of over 5 percent. Comparing this with the same coefficient for Nebraska shows the huge difference between the two ballot types. For the nonpartisan Nebraska elections, the coefficient is far smaller (.211) and insignificant. The nonpartisan ballot results in a greatly decreased role for party in the voters' decisionmaking.

Turning our attention to the coefficients for incumbency gives us some insight into how voters might use other heuristics differently depending on the type of ballot. While incumbency does exert a positive and significant impact on

that we were unable to run a similar check on the Minnesota data since precinct level returns were not available for that time period.

TABLE 7
EFFECTS OF PARTISANSHIP AND INCUMBENCY ON VOTE IN PARTISAN AND NONPARTISAN STATE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS (DISTRICT LEVEL)

Race	Constant	Party	Incumbency	Adj. R-Squared
Analysis 1:				
Kansas (Partisan): (1984 and 1988, N = 60)	.327*** (.043)	.541*** (.132)	.067*** (.014)	.559
Nebraska (Nonpartisan): (1984-1990, N = 60)	.427*** (.084)	.211 (.190)	.113*** (.019)	.406
Analysis 2:				
Minnesota (Partisan): (1976, N = 62)	.582*** (.011)	.080*** (.014)	.048** (.015)	.593
Minnesota (Nonpartisan): (1972, N = 64)	.485*** (.011)	.048*** (.013)	.100*** (.016)	.591

*p < .05
**p < .01
***p < .001
Standard errors in parentheses.

the vote totals for Democratic legislators in Kansas, the impact is far greater in Nebraska. Indeed, incumbency appears to exert almost twice the effect in the nonpartisan Nebraska elections than it does in partisan Kansas (.113 versus .067). In Nebraska, incumbency status is worth an increase in over 11 percent of the vote, whereas it is less than 7 percent in Kansas. This supports our third hypothesis that voters in nonpartisan formats would have to depend on other voting cues more than they do in partisan elections. These findings about the relative effects of district partisanship and incumbency are quite robust. A pooled analysis reveals that the differences are clearly significant, and replicating the analysis using precincts, rather than legislative districts, as the units of analysis reveal the same patterns reported here in all respects.[11]

The analysis of Minnesota's state Senate elections before and after their switch from nonpartisan to partisan ballots reinforces the findings from above. First, when Minnesota returned to a partisan contest, the coefficient for the district partisanship increase about 40 percent in its value from .048 to .080. The coefficients are both significant at $p < .001$. This indicates the increased role of partisanship on the vote when party labels are listed on the ballot. The temporal difference in Minnesota is less than the cross-sectional Kansas-Nebraska comparison and this would be consistent with the differences in the informal

[11] These analyses are available from the authors upon request.

partisanship noted earlier: Nebraska does run what appear to be nonpartisan elections whereas in Minnesota candidates running were generally clearly aligned with groups that were party affiliated. That seems to have been enough to provide a partisan cue to many voters, but actually having party labels on the ballot resulted in a significantly greater alignment of vote and district partisanship.

Second, during this change from nonpartisan to partisan ballots, the effect of incumbency on the vote was more than halved from .100 ($p < .001$) to .048 ($p < .01$). In other words, while incumbency was worth an additional 10 percent of the vote in the nonpartisan era of Minnesota's state senate elections, it was worth less than 5 percent when party labels were added to the ballot. Thus, the case of Minnesota also supports hypotheses 2 and 3—the effect of party is reduced in nonpartisan elections while the incumbency effect increases when no party labels are present.

The findings from our Nebraska-Kansas and Minnesota cases compliment those from our municipal level analyses. In both cases, the findings concerning the effects of the nonpartisan ballot on participation were mixed. On the other hand, all four cases were clear in demonstrating that the vote for nonpartisan offices was much less partisan-driven than in the comparable partisan elections. Furthermore, the examination of state senate elections demonstrated that when party was removed from the ballot, voters relied much more heavily on incumbency.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of mayoral and state Senate elections has produced strong confirmation for two hypotheses (and weaker support for a third) about nonpartisan elections: in some cases participation is pushed down and in all cases voting is affected less by partisanship and more by incumbency. Removing party from the ballot takes away or weakens partisan considerations from voters' decisions, both in situations where campaign activists do not reinsert partisanship and in those where the partisanship of the candidate is more obvious (such as in Minnesota). In addition, we find, consistent with the views of voters as cognitive misers, that without partisan cues voters rely on the next most obvious low cost voting cue—incumbency—which represents some combination of candidate name familiarity, less uncertainty about the candidate, and satisfactions with performance in office.

Our analysis raises an intriguing question about the nonpartisan reform. When voters are unable to draw on party cues to make their decisions in nonpartisan elections, then what does structure these choices? We have suggested and tested one possible answer to this question—incumbency—and found some support for its use. Indeed, it seems that pure name recognition may drive voters' choices when they are left without a partisan cue on the ballot. However, much of the variance in voting in these elections remained unexplained and one can imagine any number of other factors that might influence a decision that is not bound by partisanship. While one can hope with the Progressives that such

decisions are informed by knowledge about the policy positions, experience and competence of the candidates, previous research suggests that it is more likely that voters just rely on other low cost cues such as an ethnic or gender-specific name (Squire and Smith 1988).

There is also plenty of room here for campaigns to have an impact. In such low information environments, even a modestly effective campaign might have substantial effects where voters have few readily available pointers on who they should support.

Earlier, we mentioned that the nonpartisan ballot was intended to remove the corrupting influence of parties and force voters to seek other sources of information which would, in turn, lead to a more informed vote choice. Indeed, our analysis shows that the nonpartisan ballot succeeds in greatly reducing the influence of partisanship on citizens' vote choices. Therefore, as far as party being removed from the electoral process, the nonpartisan ballot has been quite effective in the sample of races we have examined. How one judges the effects we have uncovered depends on one's view of the electorate. More recent works in political science give voters some leeway for lower levels of information, arguing that, given information costs, voting on the basis of cues like partisanship is quite reasonable (Fiorina 1981; Popkin 1994). One implication of this perspective is that since nonpartisan ballots raise the information costs to citizens, the nonpartisan ballot would result in less informed voting decisions and thereby would undermine democratic accountability and representation.

The Progressives might, however, be quite pleased with our findings. If one views elections in communitarian terms—where elections serve to select wise and able leaders who pursue the common good—then divisive cues to group self-interests are inappropriate. That partisanship has only a small role would be applauded. Further, the Progressives were quite willing to make distinctions about the quality of voters. Those who took the trouble to become informed were better for democracy than those easily mobilized by the parties for narrow self-interest. Thus, our finding that in some cases the nonpartisan ballot results in substantial numbers not participating would be seen as a blessing, not a shortcoming of the reform. It was the Progressives, after all, who brought us voter registration which is widely regarded as an important brake on turnout in American elections (Powell 1986; Lijphart 1997).

Finally, the underlying tone of much political science research on incumbency is that the advantage incumbents have is a cause for worry. From this perspective, the tendency of incumbents to do even better in nonpartisan elections is not at all desirable. Without a means of connecting voter policy preferences to their ballots, the representation connection is severed. Incumbents win regardless of what they stand for or what voters want. For the Progressives, however, governing is less about resolving conflicting interests than in choosing leaders whom will work in the public interest. Taking self-interested promoting cues like

partisanship out so that leaders are evaluated more consistently on whether they are doing a good job is, for them, a move in the right direction. In summary, we find substantial evidence that the nonpartisan ballot "works." Parties do become "teams without uniforms" and citizens do not know who is on what team. However, given what we have found and what is know about how citizens gather and process information, there is little reason to believe that nonpartisanship promotes an effective policy linkage between citizens and their elected leaders.

Appendix 1: Creation of Party Index

To analyze properly the vote for the Champaign-Urbana, Asheville, and Minnesota analyses, it was necessary to create a variable representing the underlying partisanship in the precincts and senate districts. Using the vote for partisan state and national offices, a party index was created for each analysis. Using factor analysis, all offices that loaded on the first factor in each case were scored to create the index (in no cases did any offices load on any factor other than the first). This factor score then became the variable for underlying partisanship. More information on how each specific index was created is presented below.

Champaign-Urbana

The ROAD data was used to create the party index for this analysis. A different party index was created for each election cycle and the prior year's partisan contests were used for its creation. In other words, elections from November of 1984 determined the index that we used for our analysis of the elections held in April of 1985. This time span represents a matter of a few months and should not be problematic considering the stability of voting patterns at the precinct level. Below is a list of offices that loaded on our factor in each year of our analysis.

1984: President, Senate, House, State Senate, State House, and another state office variable.
1986: Senate, House, Attorney General, Treasurer, Comptroller, and another state office variable.
1988: President, House, and another state office variable.

Asheville

Voting data provided by the Buncombe County Board of Elections was used to create the party index for this analysis. One party index was created for the analysis of both the 1993 and 1995 mayoral elections. These elections include the 1994 and 1996 House elections, the 1996 presidential election, and the 1996 gubernatorial elections.

Minnesota

Voting data provided by the Minnesota Board of Elections was used to create the party index used for this analysis. One party index was created for the analysis of both 1972 and 1976 state Senate elections. These elections are the 1974 contests for governor, secretary of state, treasurer, auditor, and attorney general.

Appendix 2: Interview Data

To get a better picture of local government in Champaign and Urbana, we interviewed by telephone or over e-mail several members of the two cities' city councils as well as both cities' mayors. The interviews took place on April 13, April 14, and April 21, 1998. Interviewed by phone were Champaign mayor Dannel McCollum (April 13, 1998), Urbana mayor Tod Satterthwaite (April 21, 1998) and Champaign council members Michael LaDue (April 13, 1998) and Maggie Mattingly (April 14, 1998). Champaign council member Tom Bruno responded to a letter by e-mail (April 21, 1998).

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