Strategic Partisans: Electoral Motivations and Partisanship in Local Government Communication

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Abstract

Politicians use their communication to present a strategic version of themselves to voters. One component of this is the ideological element of communication, which leaders can employ strategically when it is most electorally advantageous and depending on the qualities of their electorate. Using press releases from cities in the U.S., I show that these patterns of strategic communication extend to local politicians. While local politicians use communication that is distinguishable by their partisan identities, politicians engage in more or less partisan communication styles according to the electoral environment. Where politicians' partisanship is well-matched to the ideological leanings of their population, their communication is easily distinguished from that of the opposite party, but where they are misaligned with their constituents' ideology, they communicate in a way that is more similar to the opposite party. These findings provide evidence that the electoral connection influences politicians strategic communication in a way that threatens accountability.

Keywords: Local politics, urban politics, cities, partisanship, text analysis, classification

I appreciate feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript from Elisabeth Gerber, Vlad Kogan, Thad Kousser, Jessica Trounstine, and participants in the 2021 Local Political Economy Symposium at USC.

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Functioning democratic representation suggests that politicians present distinct policy positions that allow voters to make choices between potential policy options. In turn, accountability depends on the degree to which voters can hold politicians responsible for those policies once in office.¹ Both of these concepts hinge upon the availability of information provided to voters. Voters can then use such information to make informed choices at the ballot box.

Politicians themselves take an active role in providing this information to voters. A long line of research documents the ability of politicians to communicate strategically with their constituents (e.g. Fenno, 1978). Politicians have great incentive to do so if they believe that their communication may influence voters and help ensure their re-election (Mayhew, 1974). They may have even greater incentive to do so depending upon their electoral environment (Grimmer, 2013a). Democratic accountability relies on the ability of voters to select politicians through elections, but this process may be swayed by effective strategic communicators in certain circumstances.

Numerous researchers have studied the communication and representational styles of politicians at the national level (e.g. Grimmer, 2013b; Grimmer, Westwood, and Messing, 2014; Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling, 2015; Vavreck, 2009). Yet less attention has been paid to those politicians who serve in government at the state or local level. These local governments – cities, counties, and a host of special-purpose governments – constitute the majority of politicians, elections, and government spending in the United States. Yet we still know far less about the functioning of democratic representation and accountability in these settings, despite their importance (Trounstine, 2010). The variation of local governments in demographics, institutions, and electoral environments, however, provides an excellent opportunity to test theories of representation and accountability – phenomena central to political science (Warshaw, 2019).

¹Indeed, in 1950 the American Political Science Association bemoaned the blurred lines between the Republican and Democratic parties, arguing that the lack of intraparty cohesion in both policy positions and voting records in Congress could lead to failures of accountability due to unclear electoral choices (Committee on Political Parties, 1950).

In this paper, I use a large-scale dataset of political communication and elections in large cities in the United States to assess partisan representation in politicians' communication. Using supervised machine-learning algorithms, I show that local politicians – despite the purportedly nonpartisan nature of local politics – use communication that is distinguishable by their partisan identities. Integrating information about the places and times that these politicians serve, I show that the alignment of these politicians with their electorate – the match between their partisanship and the partisan leanings of their electorate – corresponds with the degree to which local politicians engage in more or less partisan communication styles. In places where politicians are well-matched to the partisan leanings of their population, their communication is easily distinguished from that of the opposite party. In contrast, in places where politicians are more marginal or misaligned with their constituents' partisan leanings, they communicate in a way that is more similar to the opposite party. These findings are not explained by the policy differences between aligned and misaligned politicians, suggesting that such communication patterns are strategic rather than simply moderate communication alongside more moderate policy.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I discuss previous research on representation and partisanship in local politics, and on the way that electoral motivations shape politicians' communication. Next, I introduce the local government press releases data and elections data that I use, along with my research design. I then discuss my findings and demonstrate how politicians strategically communicate in a more partisan way when they are ideologically aligned with their electorate than when they are marginal or misaligned. Finally, I briefly conclude and discuss the implications for future research on local politics, representation, and accountability.

Background

Democratic accountability relies at least partially on political elites who enact policies that are responsive to the views of their constituents. In turn, voters can punish or reward the outcomes of their leaders' policy choices. Partisanship can enable this by creating coherent brands that enable voters to easily make decisions between politicians of different parties.

Underlying this type of accountability is the assumption that there are differences between politicians from different political parties. Decades of political science research has documented that parties structure elite behavior at the national and state level. Republican legislators in both Congress and state legislatures have more conservative policy preferences than Democratic legislators (Lee, Moretti, and Butler, 2004; Shor and McCarty, 2011). Polarization between legislators from different parties in Congress has expanded in recent years (e.g. Hetherington, 2001; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2016). Such evidence suggests that partisanship does provide some distinction such that voters may easily tell the difference between politicians from opposing parties.

Most of the evidence of these partisan patterns comes from research on politicians at either the federal or state level and has ignored local politicians. This may be due to the longstanding wisdom that local-level politics is devoid of the type of partisan conflict that dominates national policy-making. According to this line of thinking, local governments primarily deal with nonpartisan issues because there is "no Republican way to pave a street and no Democratic way to lay a sewer" (Adrian, 1952, 766). Taken to their logical extension, these arguments suggest that partisanship might not structure local government policy or the behavior of local politicians.

Instead, the divisions in both local elite-level and local voter-level preferences may correspond not with partisanship but with other characteristics such as homeownership (Hankinson, 2018; Einstein, Glick, and Palmer, 2019), race and class (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2014; Schaffner, Rhodes, and La Raja, 2020), seniority (Anzia, 2019) or membership in other groups (e.g. Anzia, 2011). The types of policies that local governments debate may therefore

not be the substantive areas where we expect partial to be most relevant (Anzia, 2020), and politicians may therefore form coalitions in government based on apartian dimensions of politics (Bucchianeri, 2020). The constraints on local governments may further limit the role that partial partial politics (Gerber and Hopkins, 2011).

A growing body of evidence, however, suggests that state and local politics are increasingly nationalized (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Hopkins, 2018).² Partisanship – a crucial component of national politics – may shape local politics just as it structures national politics. Indeed, recent research suggests that local politicians of different parties hold different views (Einstein and Glick, 2018; Lee, Landgrave, and Bansak, 2020). Local policy is also responsive to the partisanship and ideology of local residents (Einstein and Kogan, 2015; Palus, 2010; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014). Partisan elections may be a crucial mechanism by which local politics and policy are responsive (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016, 2020b). Even without partisan elections, ideological coalitions may form in city legislators' voting patterns (Burnett, 2019). This recent work suggests that partisanship is a powerful construct that shapes not just policy but the behavior of local politicians.

On the other other, we know less about the limits and conditions of partisanship's influence in local politics. The rich theories developed to explain partisanship, ideology, and polarization in national politics may help us to understand these limits on the influence of partisanship in local politics. In particular, I highlight one such condition here: the electoral environment in which politicians act — and their alignment with their constituents. This type of ideological or partisan mismatch may play a large role in the degree to which politicians' partisanship matters.

Research on national politicians' partisanship and ideology indicates that politicians are more likely to be extreme in places where the electorate is more extreme. In Congress, more extreme representatives serve in more extreme districts, while moderate representatives serve in moderate districts (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2009). Following this logic, the local

²Though see Das et al. (2019) for evidence that this may not extend to the topics that local politicians discuss on social media.

politicians who serve in more extreme localities may be more likely to have more extreme ideological leanings, while those who serve in moderate localities are more likely to moderate their views or their influences on policy (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014). This may either be caused by sincere ideological positions and effective electoral selection, or strategic politicians motivated by their desire for re-election who advocate for policy that represents their constituents' wishes (Mayhew, 1974). This line of reasoning implies that the influence of partisanship may be largest in more ideologically extreme locations.³ In contrast, in places with more moderate electorates, local politicians may have less incentive to move policy towards the ideological extremes. These politicians may have an incentive to instead advocate for moderate policy.

Of course, detecting the moderating role of such factors in the influence of partisanship is difficult when data on local-level policies are sparse. Other data, such as the communication output of local politicians, may be useful as both a temporally-dense and varied source of politicians' behavior. Research on national politicians suggests that they take advantage of their ability to communicate to develop a representational style that helps them cater to their electorate (Fenno, 1978; Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood, 2012). In particular, Grimmer (2013a) shows that politicians serving in moderate localities may choose to broadcast their non-policy efforts, such as pork-barrel appropriations, rather than focusing on partisan policy positions. The electoral alignment of politicians can structure their communication independently from their policy positions. This type of strategic communication has the potential to hinder accountability.

Though previous research has identified such patterns in the communication of national politicians, we know less about the communication of subnational politics. Those studies that have examined the communication patterns of subnational governments have argued that

³Paradoxically, this may also lead to an unfortunate inability to detect partisanship's influence on policy in places where this influence is strongest because of the lack of counterfactual comparisons under de facto one-party rule. For instance, the focus of recent research on places with close elections due to their attractive econometric leverage for assessing causal effects may have had the consequence of narrowing researchers' data to places where partisanship is likely to have its smallest relative effects.

local politicians are adept at strategic communication. Local politicians take advantage of the bully pulpit to highlight their own positive performance (de Benedictis-Kessner, 2021).⁴ They also may strategically vary their communication to appeal to different constituencies that align with race (Howell and McLean, 2001; Perry, 2011). This work suggests that local politicians may be strategic in the partisan aspect of their communication much as they are strategic on other dimensions.

If a similar logic motivates local politicians, we might expect patterns of local political communication to correspond to the electoral environment in cities as well. This implies that politicians at the local level who serve in more aligned places — where the majority of the electorate matches their partisanship — are more likely to be partisan in their communication. Meanwhile, local politicians who are less aligned with their electorate may be less partisan in their communication.

Data and Research Design

In this section I describe the communications and elections data and the research design that I use to test these theoretical questions.

First, I use data on municipal press releases ranging from 1989 to 2017 in 50 of the largest cities in the United States, which I display in Figure 1.⁵ These press releases are gathered from the websites of each individual city, where they are generally posted in some sort of municipal press release archive.⁶ I use these press releases as a measure of the general style of communication released by the local government in each city under each mayoral administration. While in many cities, the press releases may not be written directly by the mayor or her staff, I interpret their content as a reflection of general priorities and an

⁴Separately, some research has suggested that local politicians may also highlight pressing policy issues, such as climate change and sustainability (Boussalis, Coan, and Holman, 2018), and frame issues differentially based on their personal style and gender (Holman, 2016).

⁵Many of these press releases are reprinted in local newspapers either partially or wholesale (Franklin, 2008, 1986; Turk and Franklin, 1987), especially in an age of declining local media resources (Martin and McCrain, 2019; Peterson, 2020; Rubado and Jennings, 2020).

⁶For more details on the data collection process of these press releases, see de Benedictis-Kessner (2021).

expressed agenda that filters down from the city's leaders regardless of specific authorship.⁷ Together, these data encompass 111,892 press releases, which I display within each city in Figure 2, with the date along the horizontal axis, the city along the vertical axis, and each individual press release plotted as a black point.⁸



Figure 1: Large cities in press releases dataset.

I combine these communications data with data on the leaders of these same cities. These elections data contain the names and partisan identities of the mayors in power at various times. These data primarily come from de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw (2016), though I have augmented them with more recent mayoral elections in targeted cities in my communications data for which they were missing. I plot the elections in Figure 2 as vertical

⁷This suggests that my measurement of communication style is a potentially noisy estimate of the politicians' own "true" communication style that they might engage in were they not communicating via the apparatus of the city press office. This potential for noise in measurement implies that the results presented here may be conservative estimates of how strategic politicians would be were their communication observed more directly.

⁸In Albuquerque and Omaha, dates were unavailable for all press releases, which unfortunately means that I cannot display them in this plot or use them in the main analyses of this paper.

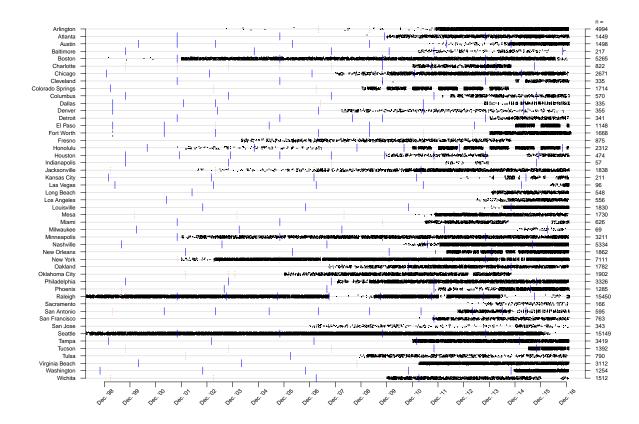


Figure 2: Press releases data and elections in large cities over time. Each press release is represented by a single black point, while elections are represented by vertical lines, the color of which corresponds to the partisan identity of the winner of the election (with Democrats represented by blue lines and Republicans by red lines).

lines, the color of which corresponds to the winner of that election in each city. I use these data to determine the partisan control of the mayoral office during each time period in the press releases data, and aggregate the text data within each mayoral term to measure that mayoral administration's communication style.

I also use a number of different measures of a city's electoral environment to encapsulate the marginality of a given mayoral administration. First, I follow others in the study of representation and use the share of the vote for the Democratic candidate (Barack Obama) in the 2008 presidential election (e.g. Einstein and Kogan, 2015; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014). Second, I use survey-based estimates of the ideology of a city's population from multilevel regression and post-stratification (Lax and Phillips, 2009; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2013) applied to national surveys conducted between 2000 and 2011 from Tausanovitch and

Warshaw (2014). Both of these measures capture the degree to which each mayoral administration is either aligned (representatives partisanship matching the partisanship or ideology of their constituents) or misaligned (leaders in cities with a larger share of the constituents who do not match their partisanship or ideological leanings).

Finally, I incorporate data on cities' fiscal policy in order to examine communication patterns alongside both electoral motivations and policy decisions made by city leaders. Specifically, I harness one common summary measure of local fiscal policy: total logged per capita expenditures (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016; Einstein and Kogan, 2015). These fiscal data come from the Historical Data Base of Individual Government Finances, which is based on the Census of Governments conducted every five years and the Annual Survey of Governments collected in every non-census year for larger cities. I use these data to compare how mayors from different parties but with similar policy outputs communicate.

In order to leverage these data to examine questions about partisanship and communication styles, I use a combination of empirical techniques. First, I use a number of preprocessing techniques to reduce the amount of noise in the text data. I remove common stopwords (such as articles, conjunctions, or prepositions) in the data, substitute the placeholder word "cityname" for the proper noun corresponding to each city's name (D'Orazio et al., 2014), and eliminate all non-alphanumeric characters. I also "stem" all words in the press releases, which combines different tenses or singular/plural forms of the same words into one word stem (Porter, 1980).⁹ I then combine the text of all press releases issued during each mayor's term into one meta-document for each mayoral administration. I then discard the press releases documents for any mayoral administration with fewer than 10 press releases during that mayoral term to reduce the impact of measurement error resulting from fewer words upon which to estimate mayoral communication patterns. This results in a condensed dataset of press releases from 141 mayoral administrations in 48 cities. I use

⁹While these pre-processing techniques are common in text analysis research, but introduce potential additional "researcher degrees of freedom" into my analyses, so I replicate the main analyses in the paper without stemming of words in the Online Appendix.

each of these mayoral administrations as the unit of observation for the analyses that follow.

Using these processed data, I harness several supervised machine learning algorithmic approaches for classification and repeated k-fold cross-validation. Though each method differs slightly in its specifics, the overall process for each of these methods is, first, to divide the set of all units (the words used in a mayoral administration's collection of press releases) into k folds, or groups, then train a classification model to predict the partisanship of the mayor on k-1 folds of the data, then test that method of classification on the held-out kth fold of the data, and repeat this process k times such that each fold of data is used once as a test set (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013; Hastie, Tibshirani, and Friedman, 2009). 10 I then repeat this process over n simulations, in which the units in each of the k folds are chosen at random each time. Through this series of repeated k-fold cross-validations, all of these classification methods produce an overall classification accuracy (i.e. across all units and all simulations, how often does the algorithm correctly predict the partisanship of mayors from their press releases) and an individual unit-level classification accuracy (i.e. throughout each of the n simulations, how often is that unit correctly predicted). I use the former (overall algorithm-level cross-validation accuracy) to evaluate and compare various methods of classification. I use the latter – that is, the ease with which each mayoral administration's press releases are classified as belonging to their party – as my primary dependent variable of interest.

The methods for classification that I employ here are, necessarily, a subset of potential supervised learning techniques. Though many classification algorithms – including linear regression, for instance – perform well at prediction of binary labels such as partisanship, the high-dimensional nature of text analysis introduces several issues for traditional prediction. As such I use three algorithms that are particularly well-suited to the task of classification

¹⁰Note that there are large imbalances between the two classes in the press releases data – there are more Democratic mayoral administrations than Republican ones. Classification methods trained on imbalanced-class data are notoriously noisy in their predictive ability (He and Garcia, 2009), though undersampling majority class observations can improve classification accuracy (Chawla, Japkowicz, and Kotcz, 2004; Fithian and Hastie, 2014). I therefore downsample the majority class (Democratic mayoral administrations) when forming each training set and training the classification algorithms.

in a sparse high-dimensional space: support vector machines (SVM), ridge (L2-penalized) logistic regression, and lasso (L1-penalized) logistic regression. For all methods I use counts of words used in press releases, irrespective of their order within documents, as predictors of partisanship.

Results

As a first look at the partisan differences in communication patterns in local politics, I display the most common terms in the corpus of press releases under mayors of different parties in Figure 3. In the left panel, I display the count of the top ten most common words under Democratic mayors, and in the right panel I display the ten most common words in press releases under Republican mayors. Among mayors of both political parties, the most common word – by far – is the name of the city in which the press release is issued. In addition, many of these most frequent words are common under both Democratic and Republican mayors.

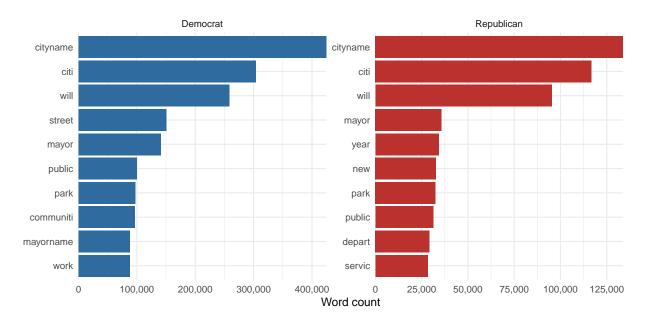


Figure 3: Most common words in press releases issued under Democratic mayors (left) and Republican mayors (right).

Of course, a basic comparison of the most frequent words does not encapsulate the complete picture of any potential differences between communication patterns under mayors of opposing parties. I next move to my primary empirical approach using several machine learning algorithmic approaches for classification. I first present the overall classification accuracy of different methods for predicting the political partisanship of all mayors in my dataset from the words contained in their press releases, and then present the most powerful predictors of partisanship in these classification models. Finally, I present results examining the classification accuracy of these methods for predicting the partisanship of individual mayors and the moderators of this individual-level accuracy.

In Tables 1, 2, and 3 I present the overall 5-fold cross-validation classification accuracy for each of the methods for classification that I employ in the form of a confusion matrix. For each method, the rows of the tables indicate the actual partisanship of mayoral administrations, while the columns indicate the predicted partisanship of the mayoral administrations based on the text of their press releases over the course of the 5-fold cross-validations. As these tables show, the overall classification accuracy of all methods are acceptable but far from perfect: on the whole, SVM was only able to correctly predict 74.6% of mayors' partisan labels. Ridge regression performed similarly, and was only able to correctly classify 71.5%. Lasso performed worse, with overall classification accuracy of 53.2%. The moderate performance of all classification methods suggests that there are not particularly consistent distinctions between language used in press releases from mayors of opposite parties. Of course, these moderate levels of accuracy could be due to other factors, such as press releases being a representation of politicians' communication patterns that reflects their strategic motivations. Such strategic communication could lead to poor predictive accuracy despite consistent underlying patterns.

¹¹Another metric of success in prediction tasks, the area under the receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve (or AUC), is 0.78 for SVM – indicating that the performance of SVM in this context is somewhere between perfect (at which point AUC=1) and random guessing (AUC=0.5).

¹²AUC for ridge regression was 0.74.

¹³AUC for lasso was 0.55.

Table 1: SVM Classification Accuracy.

| | Predicted Democrat | Predicted Republican |
|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Actual Democrat | 75 | 26 |
| Actual Republican | 7 | 33 |

Table 2: Ridge Regression Classification Accuracy.

| | Predicted Democrat | Predicted Republican |
|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Actual Democrat | 66 | 35 |
| Actual Republican | 7 | 33 |

Table 3: Lasso Regression Classification Accuracy.

| | Predicted Democrat | Predicted Republican |
|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Actual Democrat | 81 | 20 |
| Actual Republican | 28 | 12 |

To investigate these patterns further, I next focus on the best-performing of these classification methods, SVM. As suggested by the differing frequencies of common words between Republican and Democratic mayors, there are some words the use of which is more predictive of one or the other party. In Figure 4 I show the words that are most predictive of a Democratic administration (on the left) or a Republican administration (on the right) using my primary classification method. As suggested by the differences between the most-used terms under mayors of different parties, Democratic-led cities are more likely to use the word "streets," while Republican-led cities are more likely to use the word "center." Other words are also helpful in discriminating between cities led by the two parties, and I show the full list of the most predictive words for my models using SVM for each partisan label in Appendix A.

In order to examine whether the overall predictive accuracy of these models belies heterogeneity in the partisan behavior of mayors, I next move to examining the classification accuracy of each individual mayoral administration's press releases. Following approaches developed in comparative politics for legislatures with relatively low degrees of party discipline (Peterson and Spirling, 2018) as well as those used to assess over-time polarization in the US Congress (Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Taddy, 2019; Jensen et al., 2012), I use classifica-

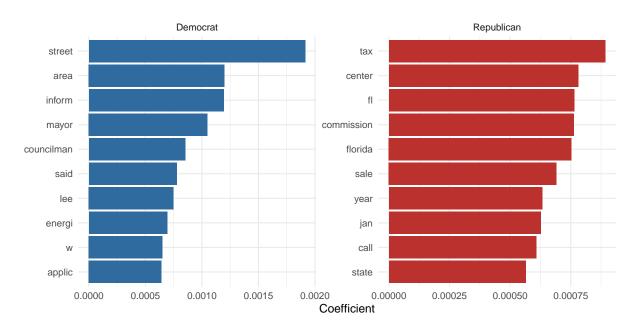


Figure 4: Most predictive words in press releases for Democratic mayors (left) and Republican mayors (right).

tion accuracy itself for specific units of observation as a quantity of interest in assessing the nature of partisanship. To do so, I calculate the classification accuracy of individual mayoral administrations' press releases across many repeated iterations of the 5-fold cross-validation approach using the overall most accurate classification model, SVM. Specifically, I repeat the following procedure 1000 times: I randomly sample k=5 folds of my data, train each classification model on k-1 folds of the data, and assess its accuracy on the kth fold of the data. In each iteration of this procedure, each unit is either classified correctly or incorrectly when in the kth fold test segment of the data. I calculate the unit-level classification accuracy as the average probability of correct classification for each mayoral administration across all 1000 iterations. In Figure 6 I show this unit-level classification accuracy, plotted along the horizontal axis, in order from the most easily classified mayoral administration, plotted at the top of the vertical axis, with the color of each mayoral administration's individual point corresponding to their partisanship.

As Figure 6 shows, the press releases under some mayoral administrations, such as those in Virginia Beach, VA, under Mayor Will Sessoms or San Francisco, CA, under Mayor Gavin

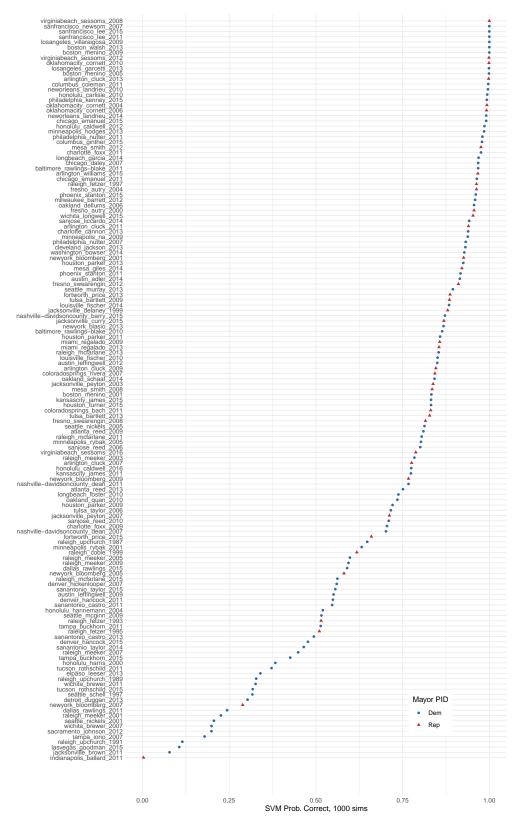


Figure 5: Unit-Level Classification Accuracy.

Newsom, are easily classified by their partianship. Other sets of press releases are less easily classified, such as those in Jacksonville, FL, under Mayor Alvin Brown, or Indianapolis, IN, under Mayor Greg Ballard.

How Electoral Alignment Moderates Partisan Communication

I next examine the moderating role of the electoral environment in which local politicians operate on their classification accuracy – that is, under what electoral circumstances local political communication is more easily classified as the party of the actual mayor at the time. I use my two measures of the electorate's preferences, the Democratic presidential voteshare in 2008 and the conservatism of a city's residents (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014), to assess the electoral environment's moderating role in local political communication.

In Figure 6, I plot the probability of correctly classifying each mayoral administration's press releases, along the vertical axis, with points colored according to the mayor's partisanship. In the left panel, I compare this classification accuracy to the 2008 Democratic presidential voteshare along the horizontal axis, with more Democratic cities towards the right and more Republican cities towards the left, and in the right panel, compared to the ideology of the city's population, with more conservative cities to the right and more liberal cities to the left. In both panels, I plot trend lines for mayors of each party.

Similar patterns in the classification accuracy of mayoral administrations by the mayor's electoral alignment are evident in both panels. In the left panel, cities with a more Democratic-leaning electorate with a Democratic mayor (plotted with the blue points and line) are more easily classified by their party. Those with a Republican mayor, however, are less easily classified where the city is more Democratic. In the right panel, cities with a more conservative population and a Democratic mayor are less easily classified by their party, as shown with the blue line. In cities with a Republican mayor and a more conservative population, on the other hand, the press releases are more easily classified.

Together, these plots show that where mayors are more aligned with the partisanship and

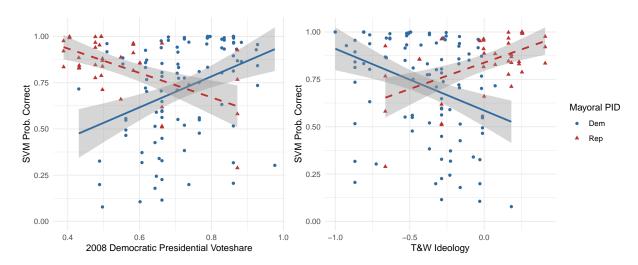


Figure 6: Unit-Level Classification Accuracy by 2008 Presidential Vote and by Tausanovitch & Warshaw Ideology Score.

ideology of their city's populations, their press releases are more partisan in their character. Where mayors are not aligned with their city, on the other hand, their press releases are less easily classified. This suggests that local politicians' communication is more ideologically moderate when their population is more moderate, but more partisan when their city is more ideologically extreme.¹⁴

Of course, this examination may conflate strategic behavior with authentic moderation in political leaders' speech. Politicians who are less aligned with their city's population may be elected because they are indeed more moderate leaders. The analyses presented above could be evidence of strategic behavior motivated by electoral concerns, or they could be evidence of one additional way that partisan politicians can authentically by moderate.

In the first two columns of Table 4 I show regression results for both the comparisons described earlier. As shown in Figure 6, for both local partisanship and local ideology, the communications of cities whose mayors are more aligned with their local constituencies are statistically significantly more accurately classified than the communications of cities whose mayors are less aligned. In the third and fourth columns of Table 4, however, I also control for the average of the logged per capita total expenditures across the four years of the mayoral

¹⁴In Appendix B and Appendix C I show similar patterns for individual-level accuracy using both ridge regression and lasso.

Table 4: SVM Accuracy by Mayoral Party and Electorate Characteristics

| | | Dependent | t variable: | |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| | SVM Prob. Correct | | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| 2008 Democratic Presidential voteshare | 0.836*** (0.318) | | 0.674^* (0.347) | |
| T&W Ideology | | -0.326^{**} (0.130) | | -0.264^* (0.142) |
| Republican Mayor | 1.084*** (0.249) | 0.253*** (0.063) | 1.093*** (0.238) | 0.246*** (0.063) |
| Avg. Logged Expenditures PC | | | 0.074 (0.047) | 0.064 (0.048) |
| 2008 Democratic Presidential voteshare × Rep. Mayor | -1.497^{***} (0.349) | | -1.525^{***} (0.331) | |
| T&W Ideology \times Rep. Mayor | | 0.605*** (0.144) | | 0.599*** (0.145) |
| Constant | 0.115 (0.236) | 0.586*** (0.065) | -0.377 (0.368) | 0.084 (0.385) |
| Observations R ² | 140 | 140 | 139 | 139 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.200 0.182 | 0.189 0.171 | 0.231 0.208 | 0.212 0.189 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 Standard errors clustered by city.

administration to examine the effect of mayoral partisanship apart from their actual policy outputs. Similar interactive relationships between the party of the mayor and both local partisanship and ideology appear, even holding constant fiscal policy.¹⁵ Politicians' alignment with their city's mass public corresponds with the degree to which their partisanship is easily distinguishable in their communication in a way that is not explained by their true policy differences alone. This suggests strategic electorally-motivated communication rather than simply moderate communication in tandem with moderate policy. While these results use only one measure of fiscal policy and are largely descriptive rather than causal analyses, they still show substantial differences in elite behavior that add nuance to our understanding of partisan representation at the local level.

 $[\]overline{}^{15}$ I show similar results using classification accuracy from ridge regression and lasso in Tables A2 and A3 in the Appendix.

Conclusion

Partisan accountability rely on the distinction between political parties. Political communication is one way that politicians present themselves to voters to establish this distinction. Politicians may make use of this form of self-presentation to strategically emphasize (or ignore) certain aspects of their platforms. In this paper, I show that cities' official press releases are distinguishable by the parties of their mayors. I also show that where the partisan leanings of a city's population are better aligned with the partisanship of their mayors, city leaders are more partisan in their communication. However, where mayors are less aligned with their constituents, local communication is less easily distinguished from communication of the opposite party. Though these results do not necessarily demonstrate causal effects, they do show broad descriptive patterns. The understanding of the patterns shown here could be further augmented through the fruitful use of rigorous causal inference techniques to better assess the role of partisanship in local politicians' behavior. These results help develop theories of political communication originally built using data at the national level by applying them to the local electoral environment.

In addition, the research presented here helps to resolve some theories of the distinctiveness of local politics. Some have argued that local politics and policy have little opportunity
for partisan influence. Yet recent evidence suggests that partisanship can shape fiscal policy
at the local level even in close electoral environments (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw,
2016, 2020b). At the same time, rates of re-election for local politicians are quite high across
large- and medium-sized cities (de Benedictis-Kessner, 2018; Trounstine, 2011, 2012) and partisan accountability in local elections is limited (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2020a),
perhaps because citizens often have trouble gathering information about the policy positions
and performance of their local leaders (Bernhard and Freeder, 2020; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine, 2020; Holman and Lay, 2020). The patterns of communication and their
correspondence to the local political environments that I identify here may help to reconcile
these facts. While partisanship plays a role in policymaking, politicians can strategically

communicate in ways that disguise this when they are misaligned with the electorate, thus bolstering their chances at re-election despite their marginality. This may parallel the ability of local politicians to strategically communicate in a way that emphasizes better performance and downplays worse performance (de Benedictis-Kessner, 2021). Together, these types of strategic communication can help to better explain both the local information environment and electoral patterns in cities.

Such strategic behavior – clear partisan communication in electorally safe environments but less obvious partisanship in competitive places – may not only bolster incumbents' reelection chances. It may also obfuscate the real policy differences between politicians from opposing parties to voters. These differences are key for voters to make informed choices in elections. Though voters can gather information on candidates from many other sources, press releases are one form of communication that has the potential to reach voters either directly or indirectly. When this strategic communication is used by local politicians in the ways identified in this paper, it may threaten partisan accountability.

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