Ward Against Ward? District Elections and Particularism in U.S. City Councils

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Abstract

How does the adoption of district elections affect the legislative attentions of city councilmembers? Using original data and a regression discontinuity design, I find that councilmembers elected by district spend less time on particularistic issues compared to those elected at-large. This shift in attention is accompanied by changes in candidate entry dynamics, with fewer business leader and establishment candidates winning following the switch. Finally, I find the shift is operationalized by a decreased focus on administrative ordinances and an increased focus on more national topics. These findings challenge prevailing wisdom regarding how we think about particularism in the local context and how issue attention is affected by electing councilmembers by district or at-large. While traditionally the decision has been portrayed as a choice between a particularistic or citywide focus, here I find it is more accurately portrayed as a choice between a more political or administrative focus.

Keywords: regression discontinuity, local elections, electoral institutions, district elections, at-large elections, particularism

1. Introduction

George Plunkitt is one of the most well known New York politicians of the late 1800s and early 1900s, serving as a leader within the Tammany Hall political machine for over 20 years. In a series of speeches given at the county courthouse bootblack stand, Plunkitt laid out the inner workings of what is now referred to as machine politics. Discussing how a politician can keep hold of a district, Plunkitt stated "If there's a family in my district in want I know it before the charitable societies do, and me and my men are first on the ground. I have a special corps to look up such cases. The consequence is that the poor look up to George W. Plunkitt as a father, come to him in trouble—and don't forget him on election day" (Riordon 2020). Plunkitt plainly describes the direct service delivery practiced by machine politicians that served to keep them in office. While Plunkitt was describing common practices that have become associated with machine politics, providing services directly to constituents is a staple of legislative representation at every level of government today.

Despite the ubiquitousness of this form of representation, this ability to provide direct and personalized service to constituents was one of the main targets when progressive era politicians pushed for reformist institutions such as at-large elections and city managers. By breaking the connection between district resident and politician, these reformers hoped to break political machines. As one author in 1915 put it: "The spirit of sectionalism had dominated the political life of every city. Ward pitted against ward, alderman against alderman...The city manager plan proposes the commendable thing of abolishing wards" (Toulmin 1915). In lauding the work done following the reforms of the Dayton Ohio government, one reformer described the systematic focus on citywide needs, writing "The water plans which have been recently completed will cover sixteen years of construction; a sewer survey costing $30,000 is under way; a comprehensive study of public waste

disposal has been made" (Upson 1915). Rather than serving some constituents or communities while ignoring others, the rhetoric of reformers suggested that the purpose of government was instead to serve the broader city interest.

The belief that district-based city council elections encourage particularism and personal vote seeking has remained the status quo since the reformist era, leading many cities to adopt at-large elections during the early to mid 1900s. Despite the widespread acceptance of this belief among local government practitioners and researchers in the United States, there is strong evidence from comparative literature that the opposite may in fact be true. Much like Plunkitt, a recent Finnish MP spoke candidly about their incentives to cultivate a personal vote within their multi-member parliamentary district. This "MP admitted that he had 'carefully calculated' how many votes he needs to be elected, and when realizing that votes from his home town area were probably enough, he decided to focus in his constituency service on his home municipality...Other parts of the district, he continued, he did not need to bother with nor did he feel particularly welcome there" (Raunio and Ruotsalainen 2018). To distinguish themselves from copartisans within their multimember district and ensure reelection, elected officials from multimember districts face strong incentives to build a "home base" where they can cultivate a personal vote through personalized service delivery. While the terminology is different, at-large elections at the city level create some version of multi-member districts for city councils. Through this lens, the comparative literature would suggest that at-large elections, rather than district elections, should encourage more particularistic legislation.

While particularism exists everywhere, the question is how different institutions affect the incentives to pursue more or less of it. Here, I examine how one institutional structure (district versus at-large council elections) affects those incentives. In particular, I adjudicate between two theoretical expectations in regards to that institutional structure. Do at large elections discourage (as the literature on reform suggests) particularism or not (as the comparative literature suggests)?

Despite the presence of competing theories regarding district magnitude and its effect on the amount of particularistic legislation, little work in the US context has been done to explicitly examine the effects of district vs at-large elections on particularism. This lack of research is largely due to the difficulties of collecting data on the activities of city councilmembers and in comparing that activity across radically different electoral contexts. To measure the effect of these institutions on councilmember behavior, measures of councilmember activity are necessary. Information about this activity, stored on disparate file management systems and in tens of thousands of publicly available though practically inaccessible official records, has long been too difficult to collect.

In this article I adjudicate between these two expectations as well as offer a new explanation for how the use of at-large or district elections influences legislator activity at the municipal level. Specifically, I examine how this institutional choice affects the mixture of particularistic and general legislation pursued by city councilmembers. Throughout, I define particularistic legislation as legislation or council activity that contains benefits for a locally defined sub-constituency within the broader polity. Fundamentally, this measure is an attempt to capture the effort expended by councilmembers working for some city residents versus working for the city as a whole. This includes pork as well as policies and regulations specific to a community, person, or business[1]. To measure particularism, I look at the share of a council's legislative attention (in this case measured as the total number of agenda items) in an given week that could be defined as particularistic. To test the effect of district elections, I leverage the 2001 California Voting Rights Act, a state law making it easier for minority groups to force the adoption of district elections in municipal government. Focusing on 60 cities that switched to district elections as a result of this state law, I create an original dataset of legislative matters. To overcome the difficult data environment, I implement a method for

[1] While reform politicians and those analyzing their efforts often equate particularism with corruption, very little of particularism is corruption, and the reform movement's efforts explicitly went far beyond corruption to target particularism in general.

extracting specific information from official municipal records using AI advances in object detection and large language models. Using this method, I collect and analyze the agenda items brought to the floor by city councilmembers. Then, I use a regression discontinuity in time design to empirically test whether the new electoral rule influences which types of issues a city council chooses to focus on.

Looking at more than 270,000 agenda items stretching across two decades, I find switching to district elections has a significant effect on the legislative attention of councilmembers. As district councilmembers are elected to a city council and replace at-large councilmembers, that council spends a smaller proportion of its time on agenda items that are particularistic in scope.

Next, I examine what could cause the decrease in attention to particularistic legislation in district-based city councils. I find that this effect is at least partially driven by a change in the types of candidates most likely to run for and win office. Leveraging California's ballot designations, I find that following the switch to district elections, fewer business and establishment candidates win than in an at-large system. This indicates that the more localized nature of district elections may encourage a different type of candidate to run, potentially one more closely tied to the area of the city they represent. This different type of candidate, once in office, pursues a different governing strategy. I find that the shift away from particularistic concerns that occurs following the adoption of district elections is concurrent with a decrease in the use of ordinances, the official items that change municipal regulation or law. Instead, more attention is paid to items with a more national or ideological focus. These changes are indicative of a more politically active council replacing a more administrative one.

While it has historically been accepted that the adoption of district elections will lead to more particularism, I demonstrate that our understanding of how electoral institutions affect governing strategies is severely lacking. Additionally, I challenge the traditional conception of particularism within city government, suggesting that a more administrative and professionalized government will pursue more particularistic legislation compared to a more politicized one. With the adoption of district elections on the rise in response to appeals for more descriptive representation, it is critical to understand how this change in institutional structure affects the governance of our cities.

2. Particularism at Home and Abroad

While the comparative and urban politics literatures are rarely in conversation with each other, there is a surprising level of overlap when it comes to particularism. Though the language surrounding the term differs, the underlying principle is often formulated the same way. Carey and Shugart's seminal work on the topic frames particularism through the lens of the personal vote, and includes in particularism both pork barrel spending as well as legislation meant to benefit specific groups or regions (Carey and Shugart 1995). Similarly, early research assessing the impacts of reform governments tested hypotheses centered around reform governments being less focused on the interests of specific groups within the city and instead focused on the city as a whole (Cole 1971). In both, particularism describes how elected officials turn their attention to the needs of individuals or subconstituencies within their larger polity. Below, I walk through how both the urban politics literature and the comparative literature have assessed particularism, as well as how theories from each are at times in direct conflict.

2.1 District Magnitude: The Comparative Perspective

There is a strong vein of research on the impact of district magnitude on particularism in the comparative literature. This research, building on the work of Carey and Shugart, finds that in electoral systems that encourage personal vote-seeking, increased district magnitude leads to more particularism rather than less (Carey and Shugart 1995; Crisp et al 2004; Shugart et al 2005). Subsequent work has confirmed this hypothesis while adding additional details, including the

importance of electoral vulnerability and developed economies (André et al 2015; Muñoz-Portillo 2021).[2]

In this formulation, Multi-Member districts encourage more particularism due to the increased incentives for a legislator to distinguish themselves from their competitors. While in a Single-Member district competitors will mainly be of the opposite party, thus providing a clear and important distinguishing feature, in Multi-Member districts legislators must also distinguish themselves from copartisans. To do this, legislators focus on "home bases" that they can rely on to vote for them over both copartisans and outpartisans. Legislators build this support by bringing particularistic benefits to their base, with failure to build this support potentially exposing incumbents to challengers (Myerson 1993). The practice of building these sub-constituencies, often called bailiwicks, in Multi-Member District systems has been found in Japan (Hirano 2006) and Colombia (Crisp et al 2004).

The US literature has largely neglected district magnitude, in part because it has rarely varied at the national level. Though this research has largely focused on countries other than the United States, Bagashka and Clark apply this framework to US States (Bagashka and Clark 2016). Looking at 29 US States during the 2003-2004 legislative session, they find that Multi-Member District systems encourage legislators to pursue more particularistic legislation. Work focusing on legislator casework similarly found, contrary to their expectations, that legislators in Multi-Member districts spent more time on casework (Freeman and Richardson 1996).

An important aspect of this hypothesized effect of district magnitude on particularism is the role of intra-party competition. When campaigns involve significant intra-party competition, candidates cannot use policy differences to distinguish themselves from the other candidates. Instead, the role of the personal vote becomes more important, encouraging more particularism (Carey and Shugart 1995). Within the comparative literature on this topic, comparisons have often been made between open and closed list systems. This research, sometimes focusing on individual countries such as Brazil (Ames 1995) or Switzerland (Selb and Lutz 2015) and sometimes using cross-national comparisons (Shugart et al 2005), has largely confirmed this hypothesis.

Research on the role of intra-party competition in the United States has largely focused on places of one-party dominance. V.O. Key's classic argument that one-party dominance leads to factionalism and localism has been the defining feature of this literature. Work focusing on the effect of one-party dominance on particularistic legislation in state legislatures confirmed his hypothesis, finding that as one-party dominance grows, so does the proportion of particularistic legislation (Gamm and Kousser 2010).

Though never explicitly applied to the municipal level, this vein of comparative research has clear implications for the effect of at-large elections on particularism, making a strong case that district elections should lead to a decrease rather than an increase. At-large elections create a single, Multi-Member district. Given these elections are nearly all nonpartisan, candidates cannot rely on party labels to act as brands that signal ideological proximity at low cost (Snyder and Ting 2002). Instead, candidates must find other ways to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Indeed, creating a sub-constituency and maintaining their loyalty is likely much more difficult in an at-large system, forcing councilmembers to spend more time on particularistic legislation. In many cities, most if not all candidates running are Democrats, creating intra-party competition similar to that described by Shugart or Key. While policy differences are still possible, the lack of party labels to make those differences easily noticeable should encourage candidates to pursue more particularistic legislation.

2.2 At-Large and District Elections in the Local Context

Despite this strong theoretical and empirical basis, research on at-large and district elections in the local US context has typically assumed the exact opposite effect. This default belief that district

[2]See Lancaster 1986, Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2004, and Jewell 1982 for contradictory findings.

elections encourage rather than discourage particularism largely stems from the historical role district elections played in the success of political machines and the attempts of the Progressive Era to break political machines' power.

The Progressive Era of reform saw a wide variety of municipal reforms implemented across the United States, reshaping the relationship between citizens and their municipal governments. At the time, proponents claimed that electoral reforms were necessary to break the power of the machine politician, fight corruption, and implement good governance. While the reform movement's policy proposals were, and still are, often presented as targeting corruption or pork-barrel spending, they typically had much loftier aims. Instead, reformers wanted to restructure the fundamental relationship between constituents and their elected representatives. As historian Samuel Hays put it, "pre-reform officials spoke for their constituencies, inevitably their own wards which had elected them," and argued that reformers "objected to the structure of government which enabled local and particularistic interests to dominate," (Hays 1964). Rather than targeting corruption, reformers targeted a more general version of particularism. By centralizing the system of representation, reformers argued that government would pay less attention to particularistic matters and instead focus on the health of the city (Hofer et al nd). Reformers pushed a variety of new electoral institutions to reshape municipal government, perhaps the most important of which being at-large elections. Throughout the early to mid 1900s, at-large elections became the dominant mode of electing legislators to local governments.

Initial research on at-large elections and their effects on municipal policy focused on reformist institutions broadly, and frequently combined the use of at-large elections, city managers, and nonpartisan elections to discuss the effects of reform packages on the cities that implemented them. More specifically, overall spending or spending on specific categories was used to measure the effect of reformist institutions on city government. The use of at-large elections was thought to insulate elected officials from the masses and thus make the council less responsive to public opinion. In doing so, councilmembers would be able to focus on the health of the city.

This initial phase of research on at-large and district elections typically fell into two camps. The first examined spending policy in reform versus non-reform cities, with early work finding that reform cities taxed and spent less (Booms 1966; Lineberry and Fowler 1967). Other work argued that the differences in outcomes had other causes unrelated to political structure, or that reform and non-reform cities showed no differences in outcomes (Dye and Garcia 1978; Liebert 1974; Lyons 1977; Morgan and Pelissero 1980; Morgan and Watson 1995). Still others argued that reform and non-reform cities differ in how they allocated resources rather than in their overall level of expenditures, finding that the allocation of only certain types of divisible goods would be affected by district vs at-large councilmembers (Langbein et al 1996). Second, research examined the effect of reformist institutions on responses to economic distress, finding that non-reformist cities pursued more aggressive development policy (Bowman 1988; Sharp 1991). These lines of research, though certainly not uniform, largely connected less spending in reform cities with less particularism, stating that cities "think more of the community as a whole and less of factional interests in making their decisions" (Stone 1940).

This initial phase of urban politics literature on the topic often tested whether the claimed benefits of reform institutions materialized in reform cities. In doing so, it either tacitly accepted the theoretical framing from reform politicians or left it unexamined. Research from a more historical perspective has cast doubt on the reform movement's claimed goals, with many now agreeing that the reform movement represented more of a bid for power by upper class, business, and professional interests. Rather than attempting to professionalize city government and separate it from political considerations, the movement was instead focused on shifting political power into their own hands (Hays 1964). In many cases, this shift in political power was accomplished by disenfranchising working class and immigrant voters (Bridges 1997; Bridges and Kronick 1999). However, even if the motives behind the claims of reformist politicians are suspect, the theory that district elections

increase particularism is plausible, and needs to be examined empirically.

The debate described above largely defined the research around district vs at-large elections until the mid to late 1900s, when the Voting Rights Act and subsequent rulings on the discriminatory effects of at-large elections changed the focus within political science. These rulings precipitated a large-scale shift back to district elections beginning in the 1980s, and subsequent research examined whether district elections did in fact lead to better representation for minority voters. Though important in its own right, this work tells us little about particularism.

Recent research focusing on the effect of district elections that does look beyond descriptive representation is rare. Several studies investigating the effects of district elections on expenditures have found that, contrary to their expectations, district elections do not lead to increased expenditure levels (Baqir 2002; MacDonald 2008). Work that has identified increased spending in the wake of district election adoption focuses on non-infrastructure spending, and it is unclear whether this increased spending points to more particularism (Boylan 2019). Other work has focused on housing supply, finding that the supply has decreased following the adoption of district elections (Hankinson and Magazinnik 2023). While these studies are focused on, respectively, spending and housing supply, they have obvious implications for particularism. In both, the central hypothesis centers on a common-pool problem where district-based elected officials focus on the particularistic needs of the few in their district at the cost of the city.

Each of these three periods of research on district elections have left aspects of the relationship between particularism and district vs at-large elections unanswered. The first period, which broadly bundled reformist institutions together, focused on expenditure levels to measure particularism. However, expenditures as a dependent variable are not a direct measure of particularism. Perhaps more fundamentally, increased spending can indicate more or less particularism depending on how that money is being spent. Money spent repaving a specific road in a council district may be particularistic, but buying a new fleet of snow plows for the city may benefit the city overall. Both could be considered spending on improved transit infrastructure, yet have opposite implications for particularism. The research in this period also focused on the combined effects of reformist institutions. While at the time these institutions were inextricably linked, the recent implementation of district elections to increase descriptive representation means that district vs at-large elections should be analyzed as a distinct political institution.

The second period of research focuses on district elections' effect on descriptive representation. While important work, its focus on different questions means it offers little when it comes to questions of particularism. The third period of research, defined by more recent work on district elections but not centered on descriptive representation, offers the strongest evidence that district elections may lead to more particularism. Hankinson and Magazinnik's recent work convincingly shows that district elections lead to a decrease in the permitting of multifamily housing due to the increased power of local residents. Whether this serves as a concrete example of a wider trend towards more particularism or is an outlier (potentially caused by a type of deference similar to the blue slip policy in the Senate Judiciary Committee), is unclear.

This paper looks to address each of the concerns described above. First, it uses a novel method for measuring particularism that examines the content of the agenda items considered by city councils. In doing so, it avoids the issue of using expenditure levels, and provides a direct measure of the amount of particularistic policy items addressed by a city council. Second, this measure includes all policy areas, providing a single, city-wide measure of particularism. Finally, this paper uses a rigorous research design based on a policy intervention from another level of government to measure the causal effect of the switch to district elections. These results thus provide the first comprehensive investigation of the role adopting district elections has on the pursuit of particularistic policy items by city councilmembers.

3. The California Voting Rights Act of 2001

To examine the effect of district elections on particularism, I focus on cities affected by the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001. The CVRA, signed into law July 9, expands on the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. Specifically focusing on lawsuits alleging at-large elections disenfranchise minority voters, the CVRA lowered the burden of proof for plaintiffs, making it easier for them to win these lawsuits and force the adoption of district elections. Additionally, losing cities are required to pay the legal fees of plaintiffs, leading to potentially substantial financial risks. The law led to a wave of cities switching from at-large to district elections. While some governments switched following the loss of a lawsuit, others switched voluntarily or in response to the threat of a lawsuit. Often, cities were targeted for lawsuits by statewide or regional groups such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. These groups chose cities to target for litigation in ways that had very little to do with local decision-making or interest. Some of these cities were targeted after slow-moving demographic change eventually put them in the cross-hairs of these external groups. Even though cities were often switching a significant number of years after the law was passed, when any individual city was targeted was largely random.

Among the cities forced to switch to district elections following the CVRA, I specifically focus on those implementing district elections between 2016 and 2019. Focusing on later adopters offered several advantages. From a data collection standpoint, focusing on late adopters ensured that more cities had data on city council activity available before and after implementation. Similarly, dropping cities that adopted district elections after 2019 ensured that every city in the sample has fully implemented district elections and had it in place for a full election cycle. For each city in my study, implementation of district elections began in either November 2016 or November 2018. Additionally, every city used a staggered implementation, with about half of the councilmembers switching to district elections in the first cycle, while the remaining councilmembers continued to serve at-large for an additional two years. These seats were then converted to district-based seats once the at-large councilmembers' terms expired.

4. Agenda Item Collection

To analyze the allocation of city council attention to particularistic and general issues, I collected the records of each city council meeting held by the cities in my sample. The dates included ranged from at least one year prior to the election of the first district-based councilmember to at least one year after the last district-based councilmember was sworn in. Each city maintains its own set of records for meeting minutes and agendas, with the length of time records are maintained and the format of those records differing from city to city. Though 85 cities were identified as switching to district elections in 2016 and 2018, 18 did not maintain sufficiently old records to collect data covering the range of years surrounding implementation or had other issues with their formatting that precluded collection.[3] Finally, five cities that adopted district elections in 2020 were included in the data collection process but do not appear in the main analyses. These cities had their data collected for alternative purposes, and will be used for robustness checks that can be found across several appendices. For the 72 cities with available meeting records, I collected the PDFs of the agenda or meeting minutes [4], depending on availability. This resulted in a dataset of 24,395 meeting records, with each record representing a single, unique meeting by a city council.

The large number of meeting records precluded coding each agenda item by hand, while the use of regular expressions to identify agenda items would be similarly difficult. Converting PDFs to text

[3]For example, the organization of the meeting records was so poor that it was unclear what constituted a separate agenda item.

[4]Data extraction focused on the titles of items on the agenda, reducing concerns about comparability between agendas and minutes. Furthermore, the same type of record was collected within each city, meaning no city is a mix of agendas and minutes. The average number of words in an agenda item from meeting minutes versus from an agenda are 36 and 38, respectively.

files using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) is an imperfect process, making it impossible to identify consistent regular expressions indicating the beginning and end of an agenda item. Instead, I leverage a recent methodological innovation that uses object detection models to identify the visual formatting cues of agenda items on meeting records. Using a few hand-annotated documents as a training set, the fine-tuned object detection model finds agenda items on new pages of meeting records and extracts the text of those agenda items (Colner 2025)[5].

Because each object detection model was trained for each city separately, the accuracy of each model varied across cities. Some cities structure their meeting records such that agenda items are clearly formatted differently than other sections of the record, while for other cities the distinction is less clear. Cities with average precision scores below 60 were discarded to ensure that the agenda items included for each city were being accurately identified by the model, leaving 60 cities in the dataset.[6] After applying the trained models to the remaining meeting records, the result was a dataset of 271,368 agenda items across 60 cities and a 20 year span[7].

5. Measuring Particularism

Measuring particularism at the municipal level presents a challenge, and past research has either focused on aggregate measures of spending or on specific issue areas such as zoning. Beyond the methodological concerns discussed above, another key concern with these past studies is that they differ significantly from research on particularism at the state, national, and international level, where work focuses on bill sponsorship and issue attention, coding specific items as either particularistic or not. The focus on different outcomes has made comparisons between particularism at the local level and particularism at other levels difficult. Here I follow the work done at other levels of government and categorize agenda items as either particularistic or general (Bagashka and Clark 2016; Gamm and Kousser 2010). More specifically, I categorize agenda items that refer or apply only to specific subsets of the city as particularistic, while all other items are considered general. The subset in question can be an individual, a business, an address, a street, or a neighborhood. Items that combine both general and particularistic elements are coded as particularistic, since some part of the item is targeted. These items are rare, as agenda items are typically very short and narrow in their focus. This approach focuses on the content of the item itself rather than on the hypothetical effects. While it matches the standards used in projects on other levels of government, it does potentially miss implicitly targeted items. However, this is less of a concern at the municipal level, as cities do not face the same set of restrictions when it comes to prohibitions on special legislation (Gamm and Kousser 2010). Cities are free to, and often do, explicitly target specific people and places. Therefore, there is little reason to do it implicitly.

Consider an agenda item related to farmers' markets. The issue of farmers' markets could come before the council in several ways. A specific farmers' market could be up for discussion, potentially

[5]For five of the cities, an alternative data source (Legistar) allowed me to assess accuracy. Matched across individual meeting dates, the two methods on average had a correlation of 0.86, and in some cases reached 0.98. More details on the accuracy of the approach can be found in Colner, 2025, and a visual representation of the workflow can be found in Appendix O.

[6]Cities with scores below 60 were typically discarded because of idiosyncratic choices made by city clerks in regards to the formatting of their meeting records. While most use a format that emphasizes the different items being discussed, a few use a more fluid structure where the agenda items are not easily distinguished through visual formatting cues. This resulted in the model failing to accurately identify the agenda items on those documents. In Appendix H I show the balance between the cities collected and the cities dropped as well as the balance between the original dataset and the cities collected. I also show the balance between the cities collected and the other cities in California as well as a comparison between my sample cities and non California cities across the country. Finally, a table with each city included in the analysis and demographic information for each is included in the same appendix. Across all demographic characteristics, the difference between the original set of cities and the final set of cities is statistically insignificant. Substantively, the differences between the collected and dropped cities are minor.

[7]While the collected data stretches back varying amounts by city, data stretching further than 5 years back from implementation is dropped for the below analyses

related to extending the number of days it is open a week or moving its location. Alternatively, a council could deal with farmers' markets as a type of industry. They might change regulations for food safety in farmers' markets or pass a resolution encouraging more neighborhoods to start farmers' markets. While all these items are related to farmers' markets, the first set of examples are focused on a particular farmers' market, while the latter set focus on farmers' markets generally. Real examples from the dataset are shown in table 1 below.

Table 1. Examples of particularistic and general agenda items related to farmers' markets

Category	Agenda item text
Particularistic	Approval for Community Civic Event – City of Porterville, Sierra View Medical Center and Visalia Farmers Market – Farmers Market – Tuesdays in the month of July and August beginning July 11, 2017. Re: Considering approval to hold a farmers market on Main Street between Thurman Avenue and Cleveland Avenue, and a request for the temporary street closure during the event …
Particularistic	Saturday Morning Certified Farmers' Market – Chairman of the Downtown Redlands Business Association's Merchant Advisory Board Al Hernandez made a brief presentation announcing the Saturday Morning Farmers' Market grand opening activities on Saturday, June 6, 2009, at 7:00 A.M.
General	Consideration of the initiation of a zoning code amendment to modify Ordinance No. 2016-11 (Farmer's Markets) by increasing the amount of non-agricultural products allowed for sale … By consensus, the City Council initiated a Zoning Code Amendment … amending the definition of "Farm Product" and allowing a broader range of non-agricultural products up to 40%.
General	Ordinance No. 2922 Sidewalk Vendors – … proposed Ordinance No. 2922, to establish regulations governing sidewalk vendors within City limits … Additional regulations are established to minimize the risk of hazardous traffic conditions such as required distances from crosswalks and intersections, as well as being 500 feet away from any school or certified farmer's market.

The main coding scheme used here focuses on categorizing items as either particularistic or general. However, within those two broad categories, there are several subcategories intended to capture the variation within each one. For particularistic items, possible subcategories include bid, building/business, neighborhood, individual, and negotiations. For general items possible subcategories include citywide and administrative (internal operations). These subcategories cover the majority of items that appear on city council agendas. Bids refer to private outsourcing or contracting bids, building/business items focus on a specific address or business called out by name, neighborhood items relate to subregions of the city, often distinguished by either a set of multiple addresses or a named area in the city, individual items will name a person, often to congratulate them for an achievement, and negotiation items typically refer to negotiations with labor unions or city departments. For general items, items that are administratively focused are separated from items that represent substantive policy and municipal code changes that affect the city as a whole. Returning to our farmers' market example, items related to a specific farmers' market would likely be categorized as neighborhood or building/business, depending on the content.

One potential critique is that city councils may have less control over what appears on their agenda. While there is some validity to this critique, and information on agenda control at the municipal level is severely lacking, we only need city councilmembers to be exercising some minimal degree of choice over how many items they tackle in a certain meeting and what those items are. Much like legislatures at the state and national level, city councils deal with a wide variety of issues as part of their daily agenda. Some of these issues are general in scope, such as deciding whether to allow recreational marijuana dispensaries to open in the town, while others are more focused, such as approving a project to repave a specific road. Though these more focused policies do not necessarily bring "pork" to a district, they do bring back comparable benefits. While the number of zoning requests may not be affected by a city council's choice to focus on particularistic benefits,

the speed at which they approve those requests, and therefore the number they can approve in a year, would be. Councilmembers make decisions about how to allocate their scarce time to a wide variety of issues and topics. Furthermore, given the frequent lack of staff resources and the potentially part-time nature of a city council position, the attention that can be paid to the effortful task of authoring legislation is scarce. Thus, any decision to devote attention to specific issues, whether particularistic or general, should be treated as an intentional choice. The proportion of particularistic items (measured as the number of particularistic items divided by the total number of items) addressed by a city council is thus a direct measure of how much time a city council has chosen to allocate to particularistic concerns.

Having created a dataset of 271,368 agenda items, the content of each agenda item needed to be coded as either general or particularistic in scope. Before categorizing each agenda item, I first randomly selected 1,000 items evenly distributed among the cities and qualitatively coded them by their scope. This qualitative exercise was used to generate a codebook that identified items as either general or particularistic. A more detailed description of the coding procedure used can be found in appendix G. As a basic rule of thumb, items that identified individuals, companies, streets, or districts by name were typically coded as particularistic. Items that directly related to government administration or failed to mention specific areas by name were largely treated as general.

Coding all 271,368 agenda items by hand would be prohibitively time consuming, and I instead leverage supervised machine learning techniques in the form of a fine-tuned large language model to identify the scope of each agenda item. Agenda items in my dataset are frequently short, and the most useful aspects of each item for determining if it is particularistic or general in scope are frequently heavily reliant on their context. For example, the use of an address in an agenda item is one of the most obvious indications that it is particularistic, however identifying multiple words and numbers together in a snippet of text as an address is a task only an LLM would be well-suited to.

To fine-tune an LLM for my specific text classification task, I first hand coded 5,250 agenda items, a random sample of 150 agenda items from 35 of the cities, as a training set. A third category, Other, was also included to identify those items that were miscategorized as agenda items, though these only made up about 2.3% of the training data. I then used Google's BERT model to classify the remaining items[8]. To fine-tune the BERT model, the 5,250 hand coded agenda items were used as a training set to modify the model to my specific task: identifying agenda items as either General or Particularistic. Of the 5,250 hand coded items, 75% were used to train the model and the remaining 25% used to test the model's performance[9]. Because of the unbalanced nature of the training set, I used oversampling to create balance between the three categories (General, Particularistic, and Other). Similarly, I train a separate BERT model to categorize agenda items by subtopic, following the same approach as for the main model.

After fine-tuning the BERT model, I tested the new model's performance on the 25% of the training data held out from the model training step. The model performed reasonably well, with an accuracy score of 0.93 and an F1 score of 0.91. Based on the success of the model with the withheld 25% of the training set, I applied the model to the full dataset of extracted agenda items. Applying the trained classification model to my dataset resulted in a classification of each of the 271,368 agenda items in my dataset as either particularistic, general, or other. The agenda items coded as other were dropped from the dataset, as they signify snippets of text that were misidentified as agenda items during the extraction process. While the main classification model demonstrated high levels of accuracy, the subcategory model displayed more errors. With an F1 score below 0.8, any results based on the subtopics should be taken with a grain of salt. Appendix Q investigates the subcategories in more detail.

[8] In Appendix P I look at alternative approaches to categorizing items and find that BERT offers the highest F1 scores for the lowest computational cost.

[9] In Appendix P I look at whether the model is equally accurate at classifying items before and after implementation. I find no significant difference overall or broken down by type.

6. Empirical Strategy

To measure the effect of district elections on the attention allocation of city councilmembers, I employ a regression discontinuity in time (RDiT) design (Hausman and Rapson 2018)[10] . Regression discontinuity designs have become increasingly popular within political science, largely as part of the literature on electoral outcomes and the incumbency advantage (Cuesta and Imai 2016; Lee 2008). RD designs take advantage of a particular threshold in a running variable (Cattaneo, Idrobo et al 2024; Cattaneo and Titiunik 2022). Observations below the threshold do not experience some sort of change, while those above the threshold do. While on average observations above the threshold may be substantively different from those below, an RD design focuses on those individuals who are right on either side of the threshold. In a regression discontinuity in time, the threshold is temporal (Auffhammer and Kellogg 2011; Davis 2008). Here, I compare city council meetings before and after the swearing in of councilmembers elected by district rather than at-large. Each city is compared to itself prior to the swearing in of these new members, then pooled across cities. The running variable in this case is time, specifically in weeks relative to each city's own swearing in date (which serves as the threshold). The core identifying assumption is that, in the absence of the treatment (in this case the swearing in of district rather than at-large councilmembers), the share of particularistic items would have evolved smoothly through the swearing-in date. The cutoff chosen comes from challenges to the use of at-large elections based on the California Voting Rights Act, paired with the fixed timing of the election calendar.

While different years may generate unique challenges that affect the ratio of particularistic to general issues councilmembers must focus on, those long term temporal changes are unlikely to have an effect in the narrow time-band surrounding the swearing in of new councilmembers. Instead, any significant changes in the allocation of attention by city councilmembers within this narrow time frame is most likely caused by the new type of councilmember holding office. Because the running variable in a regression discontinuity in time study is time, there is no possibility of sorting on one side of the threshold or the other. However, there are still concerns over anticipatory effects. Councilmembers in the cities switching to district elections had ample warning before the switch, and for any incumbent councilmember running for a district-based seat, there could be an incentive to begin acting as a representative of that district prior to the election. If this was the case, then any effect found in this study could be considered a lower bound of the actual impact district elections have on particularism. I address concerns over anticipation with donut specifications in Appendix B, while concerns over time-of-year and new-member confounders are addressed with placebo cutoffs and an incumbent turnover difference-in-differences.

The outcome variable of interest is the proportion of particularistic agenda items that are addressed by the city council. In the following analysis, I look at both the first implementation of district elections (where half of the seats are switched to district elections) and the second implementation (where the remaining seats are switched). Because the data collected does not include information about which councilmember introduced each agenda item, the city council as a whole is treated as a monolith. This means the unit of analysis is the city-week. The estimate of a regression discontinuity in time design is, much like in a standard RDD design, a local average treatment effect. However, in this case, local is referring to local in temporal space rather than in some other dimension. Therefore, the estimated effect is the change in the particularistic share of agenda items during the period of

[10] A RD design was chosen over a difference-in-differences design because of the lack of any natural periods to use for pre and post treatment, requiring an arbitrary decision regarding at what level to aggregate. While the RD design estimates a sharp jump around the continuity, a difference-in-differences design aggregates all meetings into a rough yearly measure, possibly hiding local effects at the discontinuity. However, a monthly measure may be too narrow to identify an effect due to the inconsistent meeting frequencies across cities. Instead, the quasi-continuous nature of the data is best modeled using an RD design. In Appendix N I show the results of a difference-in-differences approach and find negative effect sizes, though they are near zero and too small to reach standard levels of statistical significance. A more detailed discussion of the decision to use a RD design can also be found in appendix N.

time immediately following the swearing in of district-based city councilmembers.

The nature of the adoption of district elections in these cities makes it ideal for a regression discontinuity in time design. The California cities that switched to district elections following the passage of the CVRA switched due to state law. The lowered standard for minority vote dilution also led to a wide range of cities switching from at-large to district elections, with about a quarter of all California cities considered to be well-suited for CVRA litigation (Hankinson and Magazinnik 2023). The expansive nature of the CVRA reduces concerns over the external validity of a study focusing on the cities forced to adopt district elections. Rather than representing a small cross-section of cities in California, these cities look like many other cities across the state and across the country. California cities adopting district elections are also an ideal sample because the motivation for city-level adoption is unrelated to constituent demand for either particularistic or citywide legislation. Instead, most cities adopting district elections following the passage of this state law are either choosing to do so to fend of a lawsuit or forced to do so following a lawsuit. The unique implementation of the CVRA has allowed several studies to carry out similar analyses on the effects of switching from at-large to district elections (Abott and Magazinnik 2020; Hankinson and Magazinnik 2023).

While traditional RD designs frequently used the entirety of the dataset on each side of the cut-point and higher order polynomials in estimating the function on each side, I use a local linear estimator. Local linear estimators have been found to perform well near the threshold (Snyder, Folke et al 2015). Recent work has found that estimates from global higher-order polynomials are highly sensitive to the polynomial used and thus can produce spurious results (Cattaneo, Idrobo et al 2024; Gelman and G Imbens 2019). The local linear estimator used in this study is based on the optimal bandwidth calculated using a triangular kernel.[11] This method weights observations closer to the cutpoint higher and reaches a point where observations far enough away from the cut-point receive a weight of 0. I also cluster standard errors at the city level. The results reported below use the bias-corrected estimate with robust standard errors, which helps account for the bias introduced by large bandwidths (Calonico et al 2014). Finally, the running variable used in the results below is a weekly value.

7. Results

The results of the estimation procedure discussed above provide strong evidence of a discontinuity in the proportion of particularistic agenda items following the swearing in of district-based councilmembers. First, I show RD plots to visualize the discontinuity for both the first and second implementation. In figure 1, we see that there is a visible discontinuity in the proportion of particularistic agenda items following the swearing in of district-based councilmembers.

[11] I use the rdrobust package to calculate optimal bandwidth and generate bias-corrected robust estimates. These bias corrected and robust estimates use a method that involves subtracting an estimate of the model fit's bias based on a local quadratic equation.

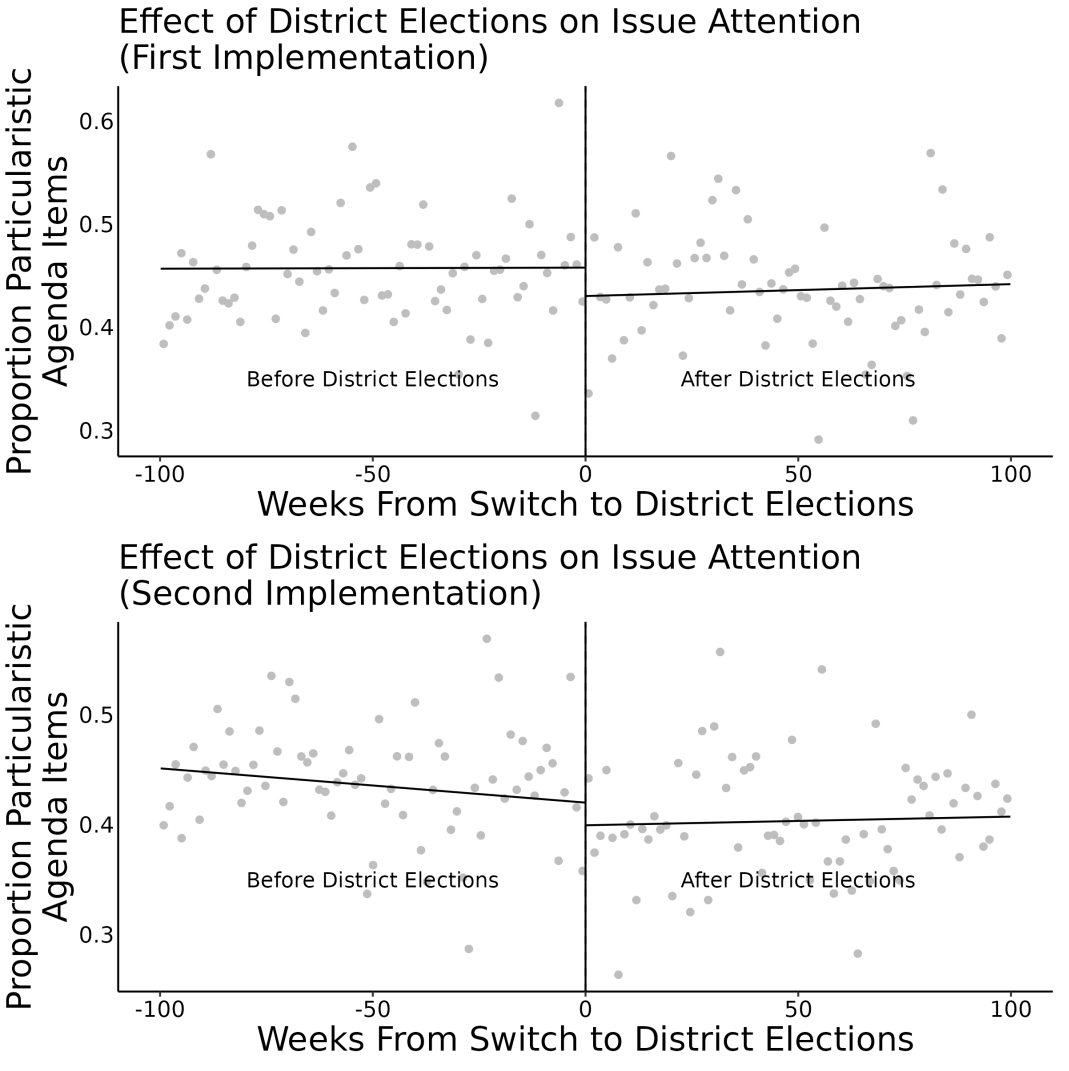


Figure 1. Shows the RD plot for the proportion of particularistic items surrounding the swearing in of district-based city councilmembers replacing at-large-based city councilmembers. A triangular kernel is used and a global linear estimator fitted. Points are a binned mean across city-weeks.

In table 2 I show the results of the RD estimation. The bandwidth of the model (which is the MSE optimal bandwidth calculated using a triangular kernel) is slightly over 50 weeks for both the first and second period of implementation. While the bandwidths are wide, the triangular kernel gives distant weeks little weight. Given how infrequent and variable city council meetings are, the need for a wider bandwidth is unsurprising. I find a strong effect of the temporal cutoff on the proportion of particularistic issues addressed by the city council. For the first half of the staggered implementation and across all three estimation strategies, the estimated effect is both negative and significant. The effect is also substantively significant. Focusing on the robust estimates, the introduction of district-based city councilmembers appears to decrease the percent of agenda items that are particularistic in nature by around 9%. The effect in the second half of staggered implementation is substantively

smaller, yet still significant at the 0.05 level[12].

Following the suggestions of Hausman and Rapson, I conduct several robustness checks to guard against potential pitfalls common to regression discontinuity in time designs (Hausman and Rapson 2018). In the appendix, models varying local polynomial orders, bandwidths, and aggregation levels are assessed. Further tests using a lagged dependent variable (the proportion of particularistic agenda items in the prior city-week) and a multiple cutoff RD design can be found in the appendix as well. Across each of these robustness checks, the results and implications of the model generally hold true.

Table 2. Shows the estimated effect of switching to district elections on the proportion of particularistic agenda items pursued by a city council. The first half and the second half of the staggered implementation are modeled separately.

RD Estimates (Weekly Proportion Particularistic)

Estimated with rdrobust

Method	Coefficient	SE	P Value	Bandwidth	Effective Sample Size
Initial Adoption					
Conventional	−0.076	0.030	0.012	50.634	2,591
Bias-Corrected	−0.093	0.030	0.002	50.634	2,591
Robust	−0.093	0.033	0.004	50.634	2,591
Second Adoption					
Conventional	−0.047	0.028	0.097	52.792	2,814
Bias-Corrected	−0.062	0.028	0.028	52.792	2,814
Robust	−0.062	0.032	0.050	52.792	2,814

There are two confounding factors that could artificially inflate these results, giving the appearance of an effect where there is none. First, both adoption periods (i.e. the swearing in of new councilmembers), occur in mid-to-late December. The sudden decrease in the number of particularistic agenda items could be caused by the time of year the switch occurred, rather than the new electoral rule. If this is true, then the discontinuity should appear at the same time every year, regardless of whether new councilmembers were sworn in or not. A second confounding factor could be that new councilmembers always start new tenures by focusing on less particularistic issues. This could be caused by new councilmembers following through on promises made on the campaign trail or by citizens who don't feel comfortable going to a new councilmember with particularistic concerns. If this were the case, then there should be a decrease in the proportion of particularistic issues following the swearing in of new councilmembers every election cycle, not just those that include the first district-based councilmembers.

Both of these potential confounders can be tested using placebo treatments. For the years surrounding the implementation of district elections, there should be no discontinuity in the proportion of particularistic agenda items addressed by the council. Placebos in the off-cycle years will test whether there is a temporal discontinuity caused by the time of year, while placebos in on-cycle years will test whether new councilmembers always initially spend less time on particularistic issues. Using the data collected, there are four years prior to the start of the first implementation that can be used as placebo tests. Starting six months before the true implementation, a placebo intervention for every week stretching back four years was set and a discontinuity estimated at that implementation.

[12]The results for the second half of implementation are more sensitive to alternative specifications, reducing confidence in a significant effect occurring in the second half of implementation. This suggests that a sizable portion of the change in behavior is caused by the disruption of the council during the first change.

In figure 2, I show the estimated coefficient with confidence intervals for each placebo (in gray) as well as the initial true intervention (in black). To avoid contamination from the actual treatment effect, only data from before the real cutoff was used (Cattaneo, Idrobo et al 2023; GW Imbens and Lemieux 2008). As we can see in the figure, while there is some fluctuation in the estimated placebo effect, not one of the nearly 200 placebo estimates are as extreme as the real discontinuity[13]. This demonstrates that the true estimated effect is not simply part of a longer term cyclical trend caused by either the time of year or the election cycle. In the appendix, I also demonstrate that the effect is not due to turnover (Appendix L).

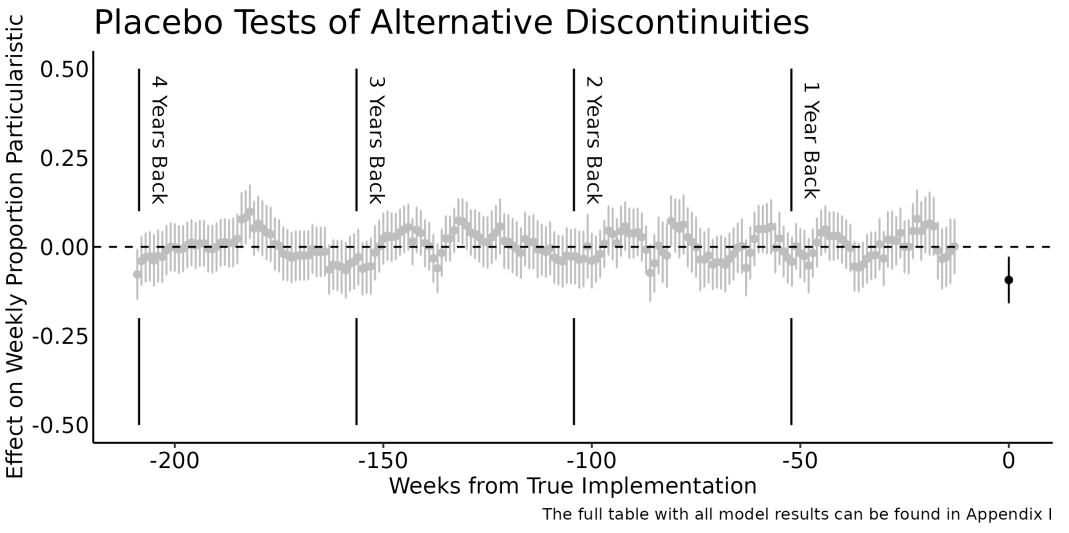


Figure 2. Shows the RD estimates for placebo cut points set every week starting 6 months before true implementation in grey and the true estimated effect in black. All models examine the effect of the cut point on the proportion of particularistic agenda items.

While a regression discontinuity design is not optimized for a test of long term effects, I can run a test that provides suggestive evidence of a stable, long term effect. To do so, I iteratively remove one, two, three, four, and five years worth of data immediately following the initial adoption of district elections and rerun the RDD estimates. In doing so, I compare city council activity immediately prior to the swearing in of district councilmembers to activity k years afterwards. These estimates capture the effect of district elections at horizon k (plus any temporal drift over those k years) compared to the period immediately prior to implementation. If the initial effects were temporary, we would expect these estimates to shrink to zero or to fluctuate more randomly due to temporal effects. Instead, we see stable estimates over time. While not causally identified, null effects in these RDD estimates would suggest that the immediate effects seen in the real RDD are temporary. Instead, as we see in Figure 3, the estimate of the discontinuity remains constant across the years. This provides additional evidence that the main effect is due to a fundamental shift in how city councils elected by district act compared to those elected at-large.

[13]Due to differences between cities, the number of years worth of data differs city by city. This means that the sample size decreases as we estimate placebos further in the past. While this would be a potential concern if the analysis was solely focused on the significance of the placebo estimates, our finding focuses on the lack of similarly large effects. Indeed, the shrinking sample size should be more likely to lead to equally extreme coefficients, making the test more conservative. The size of the decrease can be found in full estimation results in appendix I.

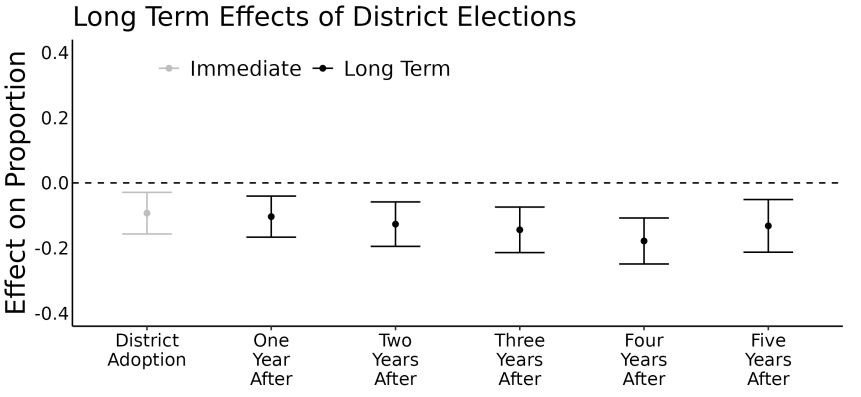


Figure 3. Shows the RD estimates for the main implementation effect as well as the long term effects. Long term effects are measured by removing years immediately following implementation and rerunning the model. Full model results can be found in Appendix J.

Though the results above indicate that councilmembers pay less attention to particularistic issues when they are elected by district rather than at-large, it may be that this decrease is not due to increased attention to general issues. Instead, district-based councilmembers may be less productive than their at-large counterparts. In appendix M, I use the same RDD estimation strategy to demonstrate that the overall number of agenda items addressed by city councils is not affected by the swearing in of district based councilmembers. This demonstrates that district-based councilmembers are not simply less productive, but are instead turning their attention away from particularistic concerns.

7.1 Candidate Entry and a National Focus

To better understand why district-based councilmembers are turning their attention away from particularistic agenda items, and what they are instead focusing on, I first examine one of the potential causal mechanisms through which this effect could be occurring. If the behavior of city councilmembers is changing, as the results shown above indicate, one cause of this change could be a shift in the composition of the candidates winning election. District elections may make a city council seat less desirable, change which candidates voters find most appealing, or attract a different type of candidate.

To test whether the candidate pool and winning candidate profiles are affected by the adoption of district elections, I utilize California's system of ballot designations to categorize the types of candidates running in each electoral cycle. In California elections, candidates are allowed to put three words on the ballot that describe their experience or occupation for the voters. Following Anzia and Bernhard, I use their keyword dictionaries to put candidates into any of six different categories: Activist, Business, Education, Government, Lawyer, and Other (Anzia and Bernhard 2022). The full list of keywords searched can be found in Anzia and Bernhard's appendix but, taking activist as an example, keywords included activist, non-profit, community, volunteer, advocate, and organizer.

As a simple test, I examine the average number of each type of candidate winning office pre and post the electoral rule change across all the cities in my sample. As can be seen in figure 4, there are some important differences pre and post implementation. Generally speaking, we see a decrease in lawyer and business candidates and an increase in activist and other candidates. Given the small number of seats up for office each year, the effects are not all significant at traditional levels, but there is suggestive evidence that more establishment candidates such as lawyers, business people, and government candidates are winning less frequently than before, while non-traditional candidates such as activists, education, and other candidates are winning more often.

While the effects are small, they may undersell the effect the electoral rule change has on campaigns. More non-establishment councilmembers can shift the topics being discussed in local campaigns, leading to a more political environment even among candidates who would consider themselves establishment candidates. Additionally, the types of business and lawyer candidates interested in the position may differ in a way not picked up by ballot designations. These findings indicate that the adoption of district elections may affect the candidate pool. While the adoption of district elections could also affect the behavior of the same set of candidates who held office before the switch, these results suggest that at least some of the effect can be explained by a change in the type of candidate who wins office in district elections. In appendix R I investigate whether the places with decreases in establishment candidates drive the effects in the main model, and find that the coefficients are directionally consistent, if not statistically significant.

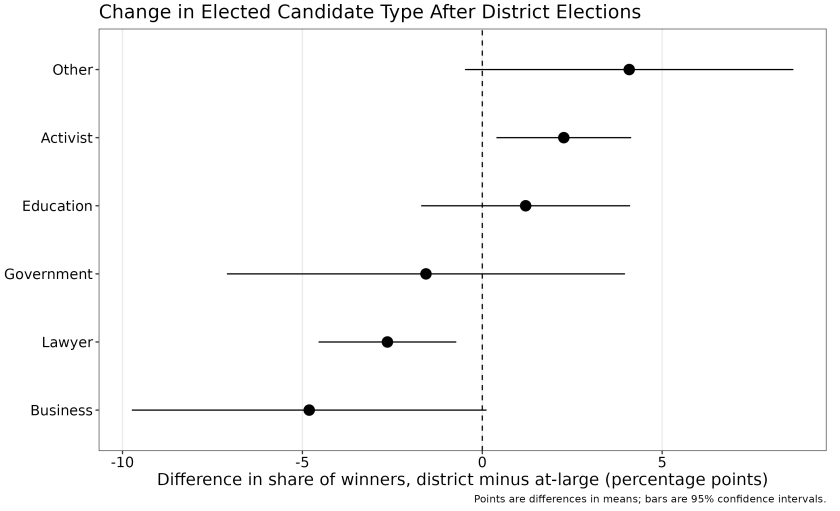


Figure 4. Shows the change in proportion of each type of winning candidate in elections before versus after the adoption of district elections.

Why does the election of fewer establishment candidates lead to fewer particularistic agenda items? Rather than non-establishment candidates focusing more intently on the city or on their own district, I argue that these candidates instead turn their attention outwards, to more political and ideological topics. I conduct two tests to assess this hypothesis. First, I examine whether there is a discontinuity in the number of ordinances on the city council agenda. City ordinances are among the most administrative issues dealt with by city councils on a daily basis, serving as the official vehicle for changing municipal regulation or law. While items such as resolutions or motions can be related to either administrative or political issues, ordinances by design serve an administrative purpose. To measure the number of ordinances a city council addresses, I search for the word in the agenda items extracted using the structured text extraction method discussed above. Finally, I use the same RDD design as above but examine the number of ordinances as the outcome variable rather than proportion of particularistic items. In table 3, I show the RDD estimates, and find a statistically significant decrease in the number of ordinances tackled by city councils following the swearing in of district based councilmembers.

As a second test, I look for evidence that the councils with district based councilmembers spend more time on more political topics. I do a keyword search for words most likely to be political in their focus, including: racism, climate, senate, assembly[14], LGBT, condemn, Israel, Ukraine, and Congress.

[14]The lower house of California's State Legislature is known as the assembly

While these words are not necessarily only found in agenda items focused on non-local issues, they are much more likely to be found in agenda items looking beyond the confines of the city. Again, the same RDD design as above is used but with a count of the number of politically focused agenda items as the outcome of interest. In table 3, I show the results of the model, and find a statistically significant increase in the number of politically focused items following the swearing in of district based councilmembers[15]. In appendix R I again test whether the increases in politically focused words is concentrated in cities with a decrease in establishment winners, and find a significant effect in those cities compared to an insignificant effect in the cities that saw an increase in establishment winners.

Table 3. Shows the effects of the implementation of district elections on the number of ordinances (as a measure of administrative focus) and on the number of politically focused agenda items (as a measure of ideological or political focus) in the first implementation period. RD estimates include standard, robust, and bias adjusted methods.

RD Estimates (Agenda Item Types)

Estimated with rdrobust

Method	Coefficient	SE	P-Value	Bandwidth	Effective Sample Size
Number of Ordinances					
Conventional	−0.332	0.160	0.039	39.048	1,856
Bias-Corrected	−0.401	0.160	0.012	39.048	1,856
Robust	−0.401	0.176	0.023	39.048	1,856
Number of Nationally Focused Items					
Conventional	0.104	0.029	0.000	83.552	4,036
Bias-Corrected	0.106	0.029	0.000	83.552	4,036
Robust	0.106	0.034	0.002	83.552	4,036

Looking at both the number of ordinances over time as a measure for administrative focus and the number of agenda items with more political keywords over time as a measure for political focus, there is evidence that district elections lead to a less administrative and more political focus. The above analysis is consistent with a change in who gets elected post implementation of district elections, but more rigorous tests would be required to confirm it. An alternative mechanism could be that candidates strategically change their ballot designations to appear more politically oriented. This would lead to a change in ballot designations, but would mean that the candidates winning office are not different post implementation. While a potentially valid alternative, both mechanisms point to a change in the types of candidates voters are interested in, and a change to how the winning candidates act in office. Identifying to what extent candidate selection versus candidate adaptation is driving the change is beyond the data collected here.

An alternative explanation to the candidate replacement/adaption mechanism discussed above is that district elections lead to an increase in the number of veto points across the city. If councilmembers protect their own districts from unwanted particularistic items like multifamily housing, there could be a chilling effect on the number of requests made by external actors. The decrease in ordinances found above, and the decrease in the bids subcategory shown in appendix Q, both would support this alternative mechanism. However, it is less consistent with both the increase in politically oriented agenda items and the immediate nature of the change. Though the mechanisms I explore above may not explain all the change in particularistic issue attention, they likely do play a key role.

[15] In appendix S I test whether any one keyword is driving the result, and find that results stay positive and significant when any one keyword is dropped.

8. Discussion

The findings above related to the causal mechanisms behind the shift in particularistic focus raise questions surrounding the justification of the semi-experimental design. Specifically, if new individuals coming into office are at least partially responsible for the shift in attention, and the switch to district elections is implemented to encourage different elected officials, then how do we rule out the possibility that the places that switched did so because these types of people wanted to run for office? There are several reasons why this possibility isn't concerning. First, the long term effects discussed above should assuage some of these fears. If the long term analysis indicated this effect was short-lived, we might worry that certain individuals caused this shift to district elections, immediately won office, and changed the focus of the council. The long term effect of this shift however indicates that this change is more fundamentally linked to how individuals are elected to office rather than the individuals who first pushed for the change. While the long term effects do not stretch beyond the term limits, the high rates of turnover in many of these cities imply that if the change was caused by specific individuals, we would see at least some tapering off in the effects over time.

Second, the process through which many of these cities were forced to switch indicate that the individuals and organizations pushing these changes are not the same people running for and winning office in the cities that switch. A large number of the cities that switched to district elections did so due to the intervention of national or regional activist networks. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP) both pursued strategies of choosing cities to target for litigation that had little to do with activists within those cities (Hankinson and Magazinnik 2023). The cities that switched due to targeting from these organizations are thus highly unlikely to have a group of individuals within that city who encouraged the switch due to a desire to win office. If individuals who wanted to win office to pursue more political agendas are the ones causing the switch to district elections, then the cities where these external organizations were the major impetus for the change should see no change in the focus on particularistic agenda items. In Appendix K, I describe how I identify cities that switched due to these two organizations' actions and use this subset of data to rerun the main analysis of the paper. I find that these cities continue to show a decrease in particularistic agenda focus[16], demonstrating that this effect is likely not caused by city-level actors who cause the switch to district elections to win office and implement their own agenda.

One potential critique of the findings discussed above is that the evidence only points to changes in the city council agenda, not city council activity. However, it is unlikely there is significant activity that never appears on the city council agenda. The extremely specific items that show up on meeting records indicate that most of the activities of the city council are conducted through the meeting process. Items as specific as approving checks for disbursement through the treasurer's office, notices of completion and amendment for various grants, and discussions of how councilmembers should represent the city at various functions all regularly show up on the agenda. Given that a city with a significant agenda such as Chicago must still individually approve each and every handicapped parking permit is additional evidence that items are not being rolled into single agenda items or carried out away from the public eye. Furthermore, California has strong open government laws, and requires both that all meetings be publicly available and on the record unless confidential and that any form of discussion of official business by city councilmembers that at some point reaches more than half of the councilmembers be considered a meeting. Given the minutia of activities that need council approval and the strong behavioral norms of government transparency in California, It is unlikely that the findings from above simply demonstrate a shift from conducting certain business in city council meetings to conducting that business away from the public eye.

However, even though this hypothetical is unlikely, it would still be a relevant and significant

[16]The decrease identified it not statistically significant at traditional levels. This is likely caused by the sample size decreasing by more than half.

finding. If city councils shift items that were previously public knowledge off of the public docket and to city administrators, it indicates that the performance and activities of city government are becoming less transparent. A more shadowy local administration would likely make it harder for political outsiders or disenfranchised citizens to access the particularized benefits provided to those with insider knowledge.

Given that the findings above likely point to a real change in the activities of city councilmembers, it's important to emphasize how important of a finding that is. Councilmembers spending significantly less time on the mundane administrative issues of governance and more time on political and national issues could have grave consequences for local government. Councilmembers spending less time on particularistic issues such as approving business licenses or specific zoning changes can lead to economic stagnation and increased frustration with local government performance. Increased attention to more political issues can similarly lead to reduced government legitimacy and increased gridlock as more and more of governance is politicized.

While the cities studied are limited to California, there is little reason to believe these findings wouldn't be replicated in most cities. The causal mechanism discussed above, that a more politically oriented class of candidates win elections and focus more on political topics, has little to do with any particular dynamic unique to California. The cities included in this study are not the hyper politicized large cities that people often think about in California such as San Francisco and Oakland. Instead, these are smaller and more conservative cities that look more like the majority of the cities across the country.

9. Conclusion

Using a new method for collecting and categorizing agenda items from city council meeting records and a regression discontinuity design, I examine the effect of switching from at-large to district elections on the legislative attentions of city councilmembers. I find that councilmembers elected in district elections pay less attention to particularistic issues than those elected at-large. Furthermore, this effect is sizable, with close to a 9% shift in attention immediately following district councilmembers taking office. This effect coincides with a shift in the type of candidate running and winning office, with establishment candidates like lawyers and business people proving less successful. Non-establishment candidates appear to pursue a more political agenda at the expense of more administrative issues, leading to less attention paid to more particularistic issues and more attention paid to more general, non-local issues.

While these results in many ways match the findings related to particularism at the national level found in comparative literature, they deeply contrast with long-standing beliefs among urban scholars. These urban scholars, largely based on historical understandings of particularism and machine-style politics, argued that district elections lead to more focus on particularistic concerns. Instead, I find that councilmembers elected by district are more politically focused, and refocus their attention outside the city rather than within their district. This change in focus is accompanied by fewer administrative agenda items and more national or political agenda items. These findings in some ways match the finding by Hankinson and Magazinnik that there is a decreased housing supply following the adoption of district elections, but point towards a different cause. Rather than increased particularism causing this decrease in housing permits, my findings raise the possibility that it is a decreased focus on administrative items altogether.

There are several limitations to this study that future work should look to address. Perhaps most fundamental is the inability to look at individual-level behavior even though the theory relies on individual-level bill sponsorship. The data collected does not offer an insight into which councilmembers propose or push for certain items to be on the agenda, making it difficult to more directly measure the change in behavior being posited. Additionally, future work might explore variations in this effect. How variations in city demographics and electoral institutions affect the

impact of district elections on particularism are important to understand, and future work should look to leverage datasets covering more cities to try and tease apart these differences.

Though district elections are an effective way to improve descriptive representation at the local level, other effects of switching away from at-large elections are often left unconsidered. While it has been traditionally accepted that adopting district elections will lead to more particularism, I find that is not the case. Instead, cities adopting district elections spend more time on general issues, not less. This finding indicates that our understanding of these electoral institutions is still lacking. When new electoral innovations are considered at the local level, government administrators should consider the full range of potential effects to ensure that local government is designed to best serve its citizens.

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