**Polarization Research Lab Proposal**

**Investigating the Potential of Non-Partisan Elections to Lower Affective Polarization and Distrust in Electoral Integrity**

Affective polarization and distrust in electoral institutions are on the rise in America, and scholars have proposed a number of personal, social, and institutional remedies (Phillips 2022; Sances and Stewart 2015; Hartman et al. 2022). We propose that a type of election already existing in the U.S. has been overlooked by scholars in favor of more drastic institutional reform such as multiparty systems. Our project investigates whether non-partisan state and local elections could mitigate partisan animosity and improve trust in elections. We seek to answer the question of whether voters are less polarized and have greater trust in electoral institutions when political parties have effectively been removed from the electoral system. We hypothesize that citizens in communities where the local electoral process does not explicitly occur through the prism of partisanship will exhibit lower affective polarization, particularly toward members of their own community.

Non-partisan elections were originally implemented in hopes of quashing the power of party machines in cities across the United States. Existing work has painted non-partisan elections negatively, finding they depress turnout – particularly among low information and low education voters – and increase dependence on incumbency cues thereby favoring incumbents and undermining popular control of government (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Wright and Schaffner 2002).  Further, parties have been found to overcome non-partisan institutions and remain a force in these elections (Masket and Shor 2014). Although non-partisan elections appear to have fallen short of progressive reformers’ hopes, no work yet analyzes whether non-partisan elections reduce partisan animosity or increase confidence in electoral outcomes by potentially mitigating the well-documented “winner’s effect” (Karp, Mai, and Norris 2018; Sinclair, Smith, and Tucker 2018; Levy 2021).

By removing explicit partisan primes from the ballot, voters may be less likely to ascribe partisan tampering to electoral outcomes they dislike, a source of animosity toward the other side and distrust in electoral institutions, which deepens America’s ideological divide. Additionally, without clear partisan cues, voters may view elections through a less partisan lens and thus may exhibit less negativity toward out-party members during the election time period. Because clear partisan cues remain in national elections, we expect that the effect of local non-partisan elections will be most evident when measuring animosity toward out-party members within an individual’s community, as opposed to the out-party more broadly.

If our hypotheses are correct, further research should be undertaken to see how few partisan cues are needed for voters to perceive their election as non-partisan and for the benefits of non-partisan elections to be incurred. Depending on the findings of this survey, we plan to run a conjoint survey experiment to test the mechanisms at play. Non-partisan elections are an existing institution that may have significant effects on affective polarization and distrust in electoral integrity, which we believe deserve additional study.

**References**

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