The Constellation of American Voters
Partisan Sorting Near American Cities

Jordan Duffin Wong*

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Abstract

More than 130 million Americans live in *unincorporated areas*, or spaces outside the boundaries of cities, towns, and villages. Furthermore, unincorporated residents are more likely to be Republican. However, we have little understanding of why: what features of local government pull or push people to live in or out of cities? Analyzing the near-universe of registered Democrats and Republicans in the United States, I trace the most detailed picture to date of partisan sorting behavior in and out of incorporated places, finding that unincorporated Americans are 14 percent more Republican than their municipality-dwelling counterparts. This gap does not meaningfully disappear when accounting for geographic scope or plausible confounders. My findings have significant implications for local politics research because they reveal a new and important cleavage in political geography.

*Ph.D candidate, Department of Political Science, Washington University in St. Louis; Survey Research Affiliate, Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy. Seigle Hall 174, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, Missouri, United States of America. Contact at jordan.d.wong@wustl.edu.

Local politics are the foundational spaces of American Politics because they govern the spaces in which people live. Trounstine (2009, p.612) makes this case, noting "residents care deeply about the outcomes produced by local governments–from schools, to public safety, to land use decisions." Tocqueville addressed this idea in its most fundamental form, observing that local politics capture the space in which democracy occurs (Tocqueville, 2019). Over the last two decades, political scientists have made important strides in taking local politics as a serious domain of study.

A crucial constraint on studying local politics is demarcating in space where "local" ends. Although the situation of local politics within American Federalism is reasonably discussed (Conlan, 2017; Oliver, Ha, and Callen, 2012), research of local politics at large treats local governments as the boundary of demarcation. Their jurisdictions are exclusive; Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, are famously adjacent "twin cities," but their local governments necessarily end where the other begins. The study of local politics often adopts a comparative approach: what are the causes and consequences of local politics in one city or another? Many studies utilize local governments directly as the unit of analysis (Oliver, Ha, and Callen, 2012; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014), or indirectly as the setting of interest (J. R. Brown and Enos, 2021; De Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016; A. Jensen et al., 2021; Nilforoshan et al., 2023), to answer these questions.

However, a key limitation of this research is that it treats local governments as exhaustive, implicitly relying on assumptions that everyone lives under some form of local government. This is false. 130 million Americans, nearly 40 percent, live in an *unincorporated area*,[1] or a space outside the jurisdiction of any local government. Left unanswered are questions of whether findings in the scholarship of local politics generalize to these unincorporated residents. Why do people live in such a place? How do different con-

[1]These are formally defined as places outside of an incorporated municipal boundary, which in the United States include cities, towns, villages, and so on.

sequences of local politics attract people from or push people to unincorporated areas? What roles in local politics even exist for people who do not live under a local government?

In this paper, I show the extent to which residents of unincorporated America differ from their municipality-dwelling counterparts. Crucially, there is a distinct partisan divide: unincorporated Americans are 14 percent more Republican, a gap that does not meaningfully disappear after narrowing the geographic scope to places in proximity to local government boundaries, nor when accounting for plausible confounders.

This study makes three key contributions. First, I properly align theories of political geography with the limits of local government, which are related but distinct. Contemporary research in political geography emphasizes how "politically relevant identities or opinions about government are neither randomly nor evenly distributed across space" (Gimpel and Reeves, 2022), but the demarcations and decisions of local government can play a direct role in shaping that distribution. Boundaries represent sharp discontinuities for taxation, policy, and other features of local government, but the role of a proper counterfactual – no local government at all – merits serious consideration.[2] No free American citizen is legally required to live in a municipality. While not everyone directly chooses where to live based on this exact consideration, the factors they do consider manifest in geographic polarization.

Second, I comprehensively capture the empirical distribution of residential sorting into or out of local governments as a function of partisanship. Analyzing the near-universe of registered Democrats and Republicans, I build upon Van Rensselaer (n.d.)'s approach empirically demonstrating a sharp discontinuity of partisan affiliation inside and outside of American municipalities. This result is robust to a number of plausi-

[2]To date, only Van Rensselaer (n.d.) directly approaches such a counterfactual from either a theoretical or empirical perspective.

ble confounders, including individual-level demographic characteristics, municipal-level push or pull factors, and the very urbanity or rurality of the place in question.

Finally, I discuss the implications of this distribution for important features of local government, political participation, and American democracy. Regardless of the mechanism at play, researchers agree that where and among whom people decide to live has significant political consequences (Martin and Webster, 2020; Mummolo and Nall, 2017; Munis, 2022; Rodden, 2019). By definition, people who live outside a municipality have one less level of government in which to participate. Because the partisan distribution of these individuals is not random nor uniform, scholars and policymakers need to think carefully about the role of local government for people without such a government at all.

The Limits of Municipal Government

> *"Every political scientist lives in a city, a town, or at least a village."* – Paul Peterson, *City Limits* (1981, p.16)

The terms "city," "town," and "village" (among others) are inherently relational (Roberts, 1972; Tarrant, 1968). Colloquially, we think of cities as places with more people than towns, which have more people than villages, and so on. While these terms distinguish larger and smaller places in modern vernacular, their legal definitions are largely equivalent. Each term is a different toponym for a *municipal government*, "the entity that has been given general governing authority to provide a broad spectrum of public services, exercise general police powers, and raise revenue by imposing taxes within a defined area" (Stevenson, 2009, loc.336) in the United States today.

Municipalities, like other forms of government, are bound by geographic jurisdiction. A municipal government's powers and authority necessarily end with its borders; differing municipalities cannot overlap. As Evans (1953, p.35) puts it, "there cannot be two mu-

nicipalities possessed of the same or similar powers, privileges and jurisdiction covering the same territory at the same time." An important consequence of this is that residence is exclusive. Anyone who lives in a municipality garners all the direct costs and benefits associated with that residence, but not those of a neighboring municipality. Citizens only get to live, in terms of legal residence with voting privileges, in one municipality at a time.

As such, social scientists compare and contrast different features of municipal government in a number of ways. Broadly, variation in municipal characteristics can be described in terms of what Oliver, Ha, and Callen (2012) refer to as *size*, *scope*, and *bias*. In this framework, *size* refers to the population a municipality serves, with larger populations indicating larger sizes. *Scope* refers to the functions that a government must serve. Municipal governments, smaller in scope than state governments or the federal government, deal with more managerial tasks such as service and amenity provision and, as such, are "smaller" in scope. *Bias* refers to the (in)equality to which these things are distributed. Highly biased municipalities prioritize the distribution of resources to a privileged few, while less biased ones are more equitable.

These characteristics manifest in the things municipalities provide, which are more hands-on in scope. Parents regularly seek to live in places that allow their children to enroll in better schools (Brunner, 2013; Hoxby, 2000; Jud and Watts, 1981).[3] Citizens have minimum expectations of service provision for waste management (Banzhaf and Walsh, 2008; Graff Zivin and Neidell, 2013) and public safety (Tavares, Pires, and Teles, 2022). Municipalities also determine housing and zoning policies (Bayer and McMillan, 2005; Wyndham-Douds, 2023), which affect where residents can live, work, play, and build. However, because their tax bases are limited, municipal governments must opti-

[3]This is complicated by the development of private (i.e., non-state run) schools and state-level policies that provide parents with vouchers to cover the costs of enrollment.

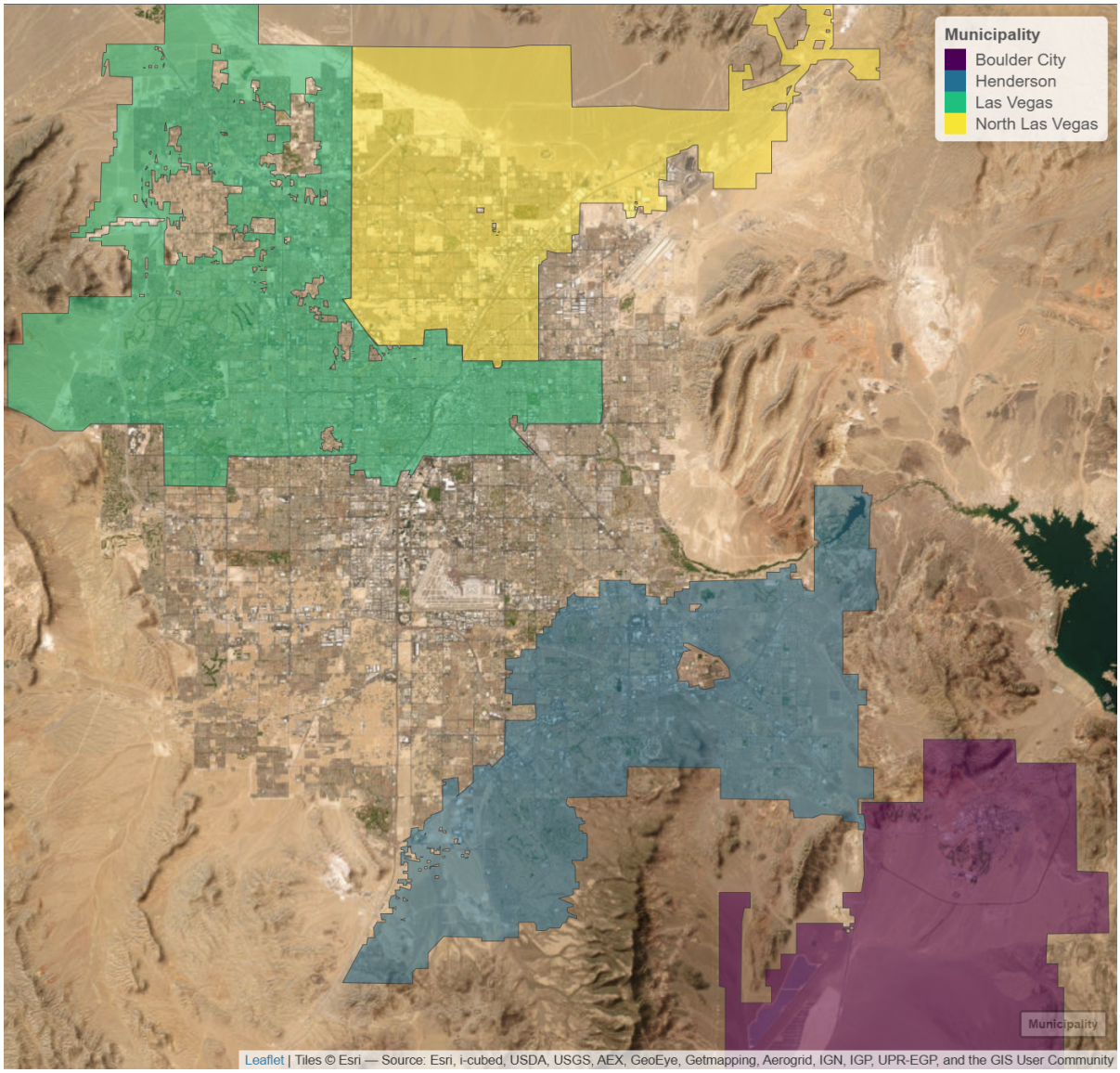
mize which services and amenities are provided and to whom.

Municipal provisions are not allocated in a vacuum; counties can also provide these services and amenities (Stevenson, 2009). The extent to which counties do so depends on how extensive municipalities are within a given county. Municipalities determine service provision by considering what their neighbors are doing – as well as whether they have neighbors at all. One way to frame this is by considering municipalities as existing along a rural-urban gradient. Rural municipalities, almost by definition, are more geographically isolated and – along with county governments – are responsible for making comprehensive decisions regarding healthcare (Arcury et al., 2005; Ricketts, 2000), education (Thier et al., 2021; Welsh, 2024), land use (D. G. Brown et al., 2005; K. S. Nelson and Nguyen, 2023), and more. Urban municipalities, on the other hand, can selectively choose which services to emphasize because, by virtue of proximity, their neighbors provide competing substitutes, and the county government may have less of a role.

Consider **Figure 1**: Las Vegas, Nevada, is part of a large agglomeration of municipalities in an urban and well-developed area. As a result, Las Vegas, and its neighboring municipalities have more leeway in selecting which services to provide at different tax rates. On the other hand, Thedford, Nebraska (**Figure 2**) is an isolated rural municipality with no neighbors. The Thedford municipal government, therefore, is responsible for providing all services that the broader county does not. These figures illustrate how the responsibilities of different municipal governments depend on how deeply integrated they are in large, often urban, municipal agglomerations.

There are also partisan dimensions to these municipal choices. Mayoral partisanship often drives municipal fiscal policy (De Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016; Einstein and Glick, 2018; Jimenez, Ke, and Hong, 2024) – but not always (Gerber and Hopkins, 2011). Many policy issues, including housing (De Benedictis-Kessner, Jones, and Warshaw, 2024; Ferreira and Gyourko, 2023; Freemark, 2024), schooling (Houston, 2024;

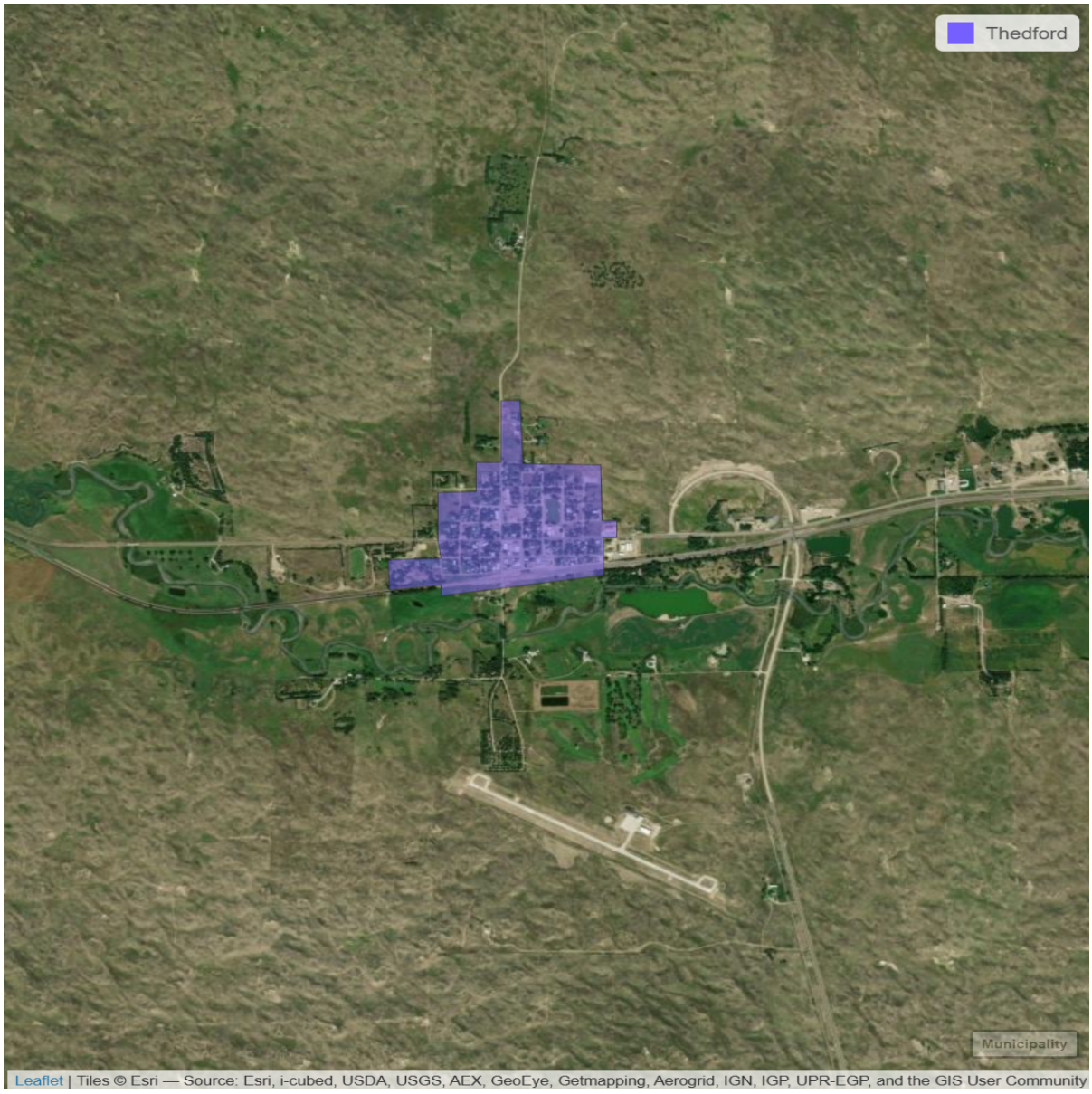
Figure 1: Integrated Municipal Governments



Note: This is a map of municipal boundaries in the Las Vegas metropolitan area. Residents have multiple municipal options, as well as a sizable amount of developed area in unincorporated parts of the region. Data come from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles.

Kitchens and Goldberg, 2024), and infrastructure (N. M. Jensen, Findley, and Nielson, 2020; Sances, 2021) can have either overtly partisan dimensions or reflect bundles of pref-

Figure 2: Isolated Municipal Governments



Note: This is a map of municipal boundaries in rural Thomas County, Nebraska. Residents of the county have one municipal option: live in the village of Thedford, where most of the county's built environment exists, or live in sparsely-populated farmland. Data come from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles.

erences that are highly correlated with partisanship. Like any democratic form of government, municipalities are limited by the preferences of their constituents and elected officials.

Sorting Across Municipalities

Any discussion of sorting across municipalities must begin with Tiebout (1956), which characterizes municipalities as firms competing for residents by diversifying the services they provide to citizens. In this framework, citizens select where to live by optimizing the set of all municipal policy options, settling into municipalities that provide their ideal bundle of goods, services, and amenities while minimizing their individual tax burden. A number of the Tiebout assumptions are empirically weak; in particular, his first and second, that citizens are fully mobile and have complete information (Tiebout, 1956, p.419), are likely to be only partially true. Others, such as the assumption that citizens have many competing options, seem robust. U.S. Census data indicate that there are nearly 20,000 municipalities today,[4] with considerable across-state variation. For instance, Illinois has more than 1,000 different municipalities, whereas Nevada has just 19.

The municipal sorting literature, based on the Tiebout model and its successors (Dowding and John, 2012; Hirschman, 1970), emphasizes that municipalities can both pull in residents with attractive options and push them out with unattractive ones. Kessler and Lülfesmann (2005) theorize that when individuals know their own incomes and amenity preferences (an extremely plausible assumption) and the set of choices is large, a wide variety of Tiebout-esque sorting equilibria exist. This does not result in everyone successfully sorting with perfect efficiency; rather, patterns of how individuals have sorted are indicative of the set of assumptions about what specifically those individuals want.

[4]See https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/regional-economist/2024/march/local-governments-us-number-type

Recently, political scientists have offered an additional explanation for residential sorting: partisan homogeneity, or the notion that partisans seek to live together. The existence-of-sorting evidence is quite robust: partisans have sorted into like-minded clusters and neighborhoods (J. R. Brown and Enos, 2021; Rodden, 2010; Rodden, 2019). However, evidence for the mechanism – partisan homophily as a first-order cause – is more mixed. Some scholars (Bishop and R. G. Cushing, 2009; Gimpel and Hui, 2015; Sussell, 2013) assert that the cause is indeed direct and partisans directly seek to live with other partisans. Others (Martin and Webster, 2020; Mummolo and Nall, 2017) are more restrained, acknowledging the empirical validity that partisan sorting has happened while stressing that partisan homophily is not the mechanism at play. In particular, Martin and Webster (2020, p.230) emphasize that "although partisans' tastes for politically salient attributes are correlated, they are not willing to act on those tastes if it means sacrificing proximity to jobs, school quality, housing affordability, or the myriad other idiosyncratic and non-partisan factors that influence voters' residential choices." More conservatively, while it is quite likely that some individuals have sorted primarily based on partisanship, it is unlikely to be the main decision-making factor for most.

Together, these factors predict a pull- and push-effect of municipalities on individuals. The act of sorting consists of considering all possible municipalities and choosing the one that best matches individual preferences, which can be driven by any combination of taxation, service, amenity provision, or even partisanship. Municipalities, knowing this, dynamically alter the bundles extracted and provided. This will be attractive for some individuals, but it may be repellent for others. Consequently, unsatisfied individuals will exit – directly as Dowding and John (2012), Gehlbach (2006), and Hirschman (1970) posit – for some other municipality with better options. When municipal characteristics attract new residents or keep existing ones, it is because of pull factors at play; when they repel new or existing ones, it is because of these push factors.

Not all factors push and pull individuals equally. Multiple literatures indicate that individual characteristics, such as income (Gaigné et al., 2022; Hedman and Galster, 2013), property values (Grassmueck, 2011; Li, M. J. Cushing, and Anderson, 2018), race (Bayer and McMillan, 2005; A. A. Nelson, 2010), partisanship (Gimpel, Newton, and Reeves, n.d.), and their interactions change the sensitivity of individuals to where they live. Wealthy homeowners are more sensitive to property tax changes than poorer renters; white individuals often vacate when nonwhite individuals move in (Frey, 1979; Wilson, 2019). These factors are often directly political. Choices made by municipal governments regarding fiscal (De Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016; Jimenez, Ke, and Hong, 2024), housing (Ferreira and Gyourko, 2023; Freemark, 2024), infrastructure (N. M. Jensen, Findley, and Nielson, 2020; Sances, 2021), and zoning policies (Barseghyan and Coate, 2016; Lens, 2022; Wyndham-Douds, 2023) have consequences which attract some types of residents while pushing out others.

Unincorporated Residence: A Different Option

> *"Every political scientist lives in a city, a town, or at least a village."* – Paul Peterson, *City Limits* (1981, p.16), incorrectly.

A significant limitation of the residential sorting literature is that it treats the set of municipalities as exhaustive. This is not true: more than 130 million Americans do not live in an incorporated municipality at all (**Table 1**). Not only is "no municipality" an option for sorting, it is chosen by nearly forty percent of people in the United States.

In legal terms, unincorporated places are merely the complement of incorporated ones. Purifoy and Seamster (2021, p.1074) characterize this distinction geographically: "Municipalities are legally recognized by their respective states and establish separate municipal governments within their boundaries. Unincorporated communities are not."

Table 1: The U.S. (Un)Incorporated Population

Total Incorporated Population	198,722,523	60.25%
Total Unincorporated Population	131,102,427	39.75%
Total Population	329,824,950	

Note: Data come from the United States American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates for 2020. Results are author calculations. For more information, see https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs.

No provision of American law stipulates that individuals must reside within a municipality.[5] As a consequence, incorporated municipalities are not geographically comprehensive, and individual choice of residence is unbound by this distinction.

The micro-foundations of choosing to live in an incorporated or unincorporated place directly parallel the choice of choosing which municipality to live in. Individuals make the same decisions based on taxes, amenities, demographics, and so on, but the options expand beyond incorporated municipalities. Consequently, a possible outcome is choosing to live somewhere proximate to a municipality with desirable characteristics. Van Rensselaer (n.d.) directly surmises that sorting may be proximity-based because individuals may be motivated by the prospect of paying fewer taxes but remaining close to service and amenity provision. Furthermore, in many cases, moving just outside of a municipality often entails moving a much shorter distance than moving from one municipality to another. Fox, Herzog, and Schlottman (1989, p.532) note:[6]

[5]Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island informally require all residents to live in municipalities because there is no unincorporated territory in those states. See Lynn Betlock. "New England Towns, Counties, and States." *Vita Brevis*, March 31, 2014. Hawai'i, meanwhile, has no legal definition of incorporated municipalities whatsoever. See https://census.hawaii.gov/category/main/. Finally, people serving prison sentences actively "live" in municipalities that host those facilities, where applicable.

[6]This quotation is also directly used in Dowding, John, and Biggs (1994).

> "Fiscal factors are apparently more important factors in pushing people from an area (the decision to depart) than in pulling them toward one (the decision to enter) because information on fiscal structure is more readily available in an area where a person has been living for areas under consideration as migration destinations."

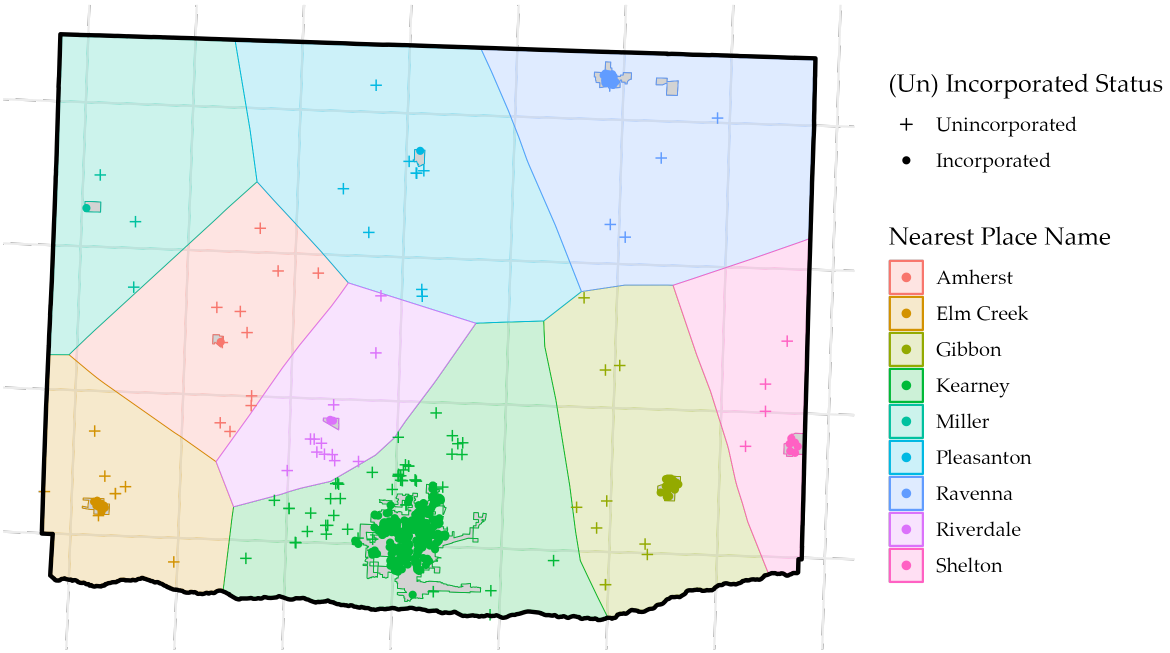
The mechanism specifies that individuals are more sensitive to taxes and extraction than what those taxes pay for. The ability to live near a municipality suggests a logic that minimizes the distance-facing costs of moving and the municipality-specific taxation while enjoying partial, proximity-based benefits subsidized by those who have chosen to live in said municipality.

Moreover, political partisans with differing attitudes towards taxation and fiscal policy may have sorted in and out of municipalities for this reason. To date, only (Van Rensselaer, n.d.) has examined the possibility of an unincorporated-incorporated difference among American voters, finding that Democratic vote shares in 2016 and 2020 dropped considerably when moving from precincts just inside municipal borders to precincts just outside, in unincorporated territory. He cites (p.2) "survey evidence indicating that conservatives are more likely than their liberal counterparts to see local taxation as an undue burden (Reese and Zalewski, 2018; Holbrook and Heideman, 2022)." However, that paper abstains from asserting the causal validity of the sorting and relies on assumptions that precinct partisan vote share is a good proxy for individual partisan attitudes. Other studies (Eubank and Rodden, 2020; Martin and Webster, 2020; Rodden, 2010) do suggest that that assumption is reasonable, however.

Figure 3 illustrates an example of how proximity to different municipalities can be thought about geographically. Instead of choosing one of Buffalo County, Nebraska's nine municipalities to live in, residents can choose to live *proximate* to a municipality. For individuals with certain bundles of preferences – particularly tax aversion – living just

outside of a municipality may be the optimal choice because it reduces their individual tax burden while staying close to local amenities.

Figure 3: Proximity to Incorporated Municipalities



Note: This is a map of Buffalo County, Nebraska. Each shape filled in gray is in an incorporated municipality. Each point is a voter's residence in Nebraska in 2019 (sampled $N = 500$ for presentational clarity). Colored dots indicate that a voter lives in an incorporated municipality, while a crosshatch indicates they do not. Each color represents a unique municipality; voters living within a municipality are colored accordingly, while voters living outside are colored according to the nearest municipality. The colored areas represent the geographic coverage of which municipality is nearest. Data come from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles and the 2019 L2 voter file.

Data and Empirical Strategy

In this section, I offer evidence that partisans have sorted into and out of incorporated municipal borders. Using the near-universe of registered Democrats and Republicans, I

replicate Van Rensselaer's methodology of measuring the partisan discontinuity just on either side of incorporated municipal borders. However, whereas (Van Rensselaer, n.d.) utilized 2016 and 2020 presidential vote share at the precinct level, I utilize point-pattern geographic data to capture the most detailed picture possible.

My data come from the 2019 L2 voter file. Each observation is a registered voter and includes (in states that have it – refer to **Figure A-1**) that voter's partisan registration. Crucially, the data also include a latitude-longitude measure of each voter's home address, meaning that I precisely measure whether a voter lives inside or outside a municipal jurisdiction without interpolating based on aggregated geographic shapes, such as Census tracts or precincts. I measure that residence by overlaying the L2 voter data with geographic data from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles, which are the official geographic boundary files used by the United States government to document and classify different administrative units. One set of shapefiles, the place-level,[7] identifies precisely where incorporated municipal borders are drawn: areas enclosed with borders are incorporated territory, while areas outside of those borders are unincorporated territory. Using these data, I measure not only whether a voter lives in a municipality but also which one they live closest to, as well as what that distance is.

My dependent variable is a binary variable, Y_i, which indicates whether voter i lives in an incorporated municipality m. I formally estimate the extent of partisan using the following model:

$$Y_i \sim \beta \, \text{Republican}_i + \gamma \, \mathbf{X}_i + \varepsilon_m$$

My primary independent variable of interest is Republican_i, which indicates whether voter i is a registered Republican or not. Subsequently, the coefficient β is the parameter

[7]For more information, see https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/GARM/Ch9GARM.pdf.

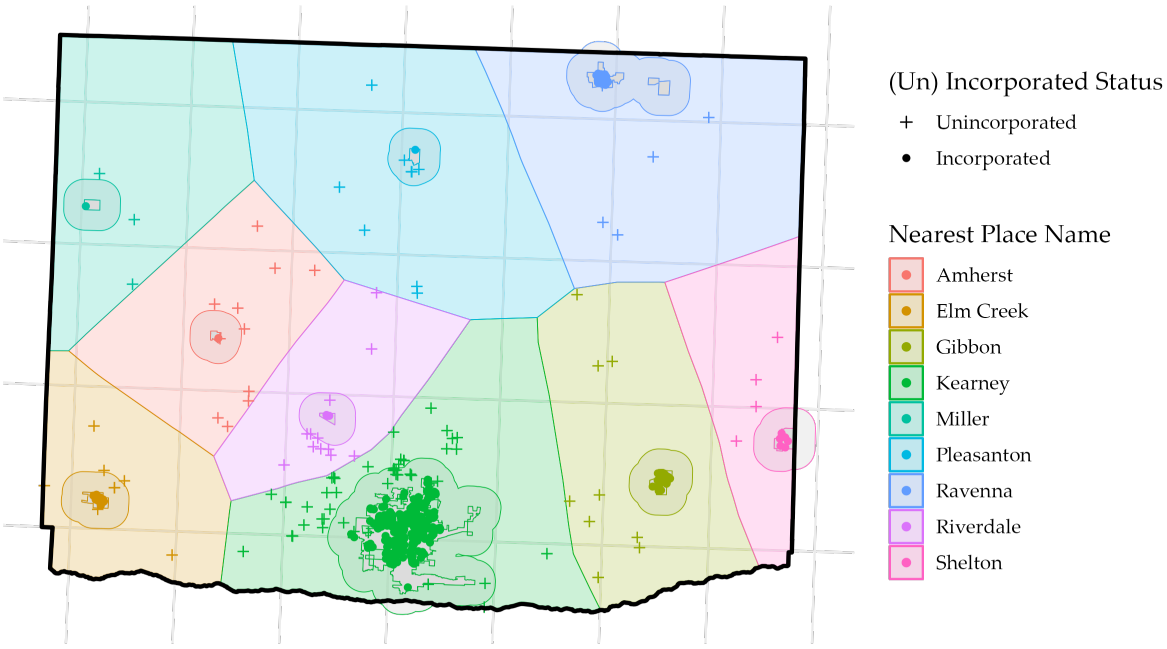
of interest, indicating the direction and magnitude of the relationship between partisan registration and municipal residence. $\mathbf{X}_i$ is a vector of demographic covariates associated with the choice to live inside or outside a municipality. These include whether that voter is retired (a binary variable), reflecting that individuals at different stages of life have sorted differently based on what cities (and proximity to them) offer in amenities or extract in taxes (Care et al., 2012; Estiri and Krause, 2018). Another is income, reflecting how the often-progressive (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014) income tax structures of municipalities might have pushed wealthier residents out (Gehlbach, 2006; Tiebout, 1956; Van Rensselaer, n.d.), as well as whether that person rents or owns their residence. Because of the empirical distribution of incomes, I take the natural logarithm for each observation and standardize it to be mean-zero.

Because my data are geographic, it is highly likely that Y_i, $\mathbf{X_i}$, and my errors are geographically correlated (Abadie et al., 2023; Barrios et al., 2012; Moody and Marvell, 2020). To account for these, I included fixed effects and clustered standard errors at the nearest-municipality level.[8] Furthermore, I directly adopt Van Rensselaer's approach of subsetting the data to residents who live within one mile of an incorporated municipal border[9] This reflects the reality that the features of built environments are gradients and – in many cases – the physical or demographic characteristics of a locality straddling either side of a municipal border are quite similar. **Figure 4** illustrates an example of how this is determined. While doing so necessarily attenuates coefficient estimates, it also provides a more meaningful counterfactual estimate of what it means to live "just" inside or outside a municipality.

[8]Formally, these are the *nearest* incorporated municipality to resident i calculated using Euclidean distance. For residents of incorporated municipalities, this is just their municipality of residence. For residents of unincorporated places, it is the incorporated municipality nearest to where they live. Refer to **Figure 3** for a visual example.

[9]Specifically, this is calculated by dissolving adjacent municipal borders into larger agglomerations and subsequently calculating the distance to the outermost boundary of the agglomeration.

Figure 4: Proximity to Incorporated Municipalities: Within One Mile



Note: This is a map of Buffalo County, Nebraska. Each shape filled in gray is in an incorporated municipality. Each point is a voter's residence in Nebraska in 2019 (sampled $N = 500$ for presentational clarity). Rounded shapes around municipalities represent distances within one mile of their border. Colored dots indicate that a voter lives in an incorporated municipality, while a crosshatch indicates they do not. Each color represents a unique municipality; voters living within a municipality are colored accordingly, while voters living outside are colored according to the nearest municipality. The colored areas represent the geographic coverage of which municipality is nearest. Data come from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles and the 2019 L2 voter file.

Table 2 provides clear evidence that partisans have sorted into and out of municipalities. Across the bandwidth of all geographic distances, the absolute rate of sorting (Column 1 of Panel A) indicates that Republicans live in municipalities at a rate 14 percent lower than Democrats, which attenuates to about four percent lower when accounting for individual- and place-level characteristics. However, even stratifying the data down to partisans who live within a mile of a municipal border, the separation is stark: Republicans are three-

to-four percent[10] less likely to live in a municipality even while living quite proximate to one.

Table 2: Partisan Sorting into (Un)Incorporated Places

Panel A	**Incorporated Residence (All Voters)**		
Republican	-0.14^{***}	-0.10^{***}	-0.04^{***}
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Retired		-0.02^{***}	-0.01^{***}
		(0.00)	(0.00)
Income		-0.01^{*}	-0.03^{***}
		(0.01)	(0.00)
Renter		0.19^{***}	0.06^{***}
		(0.03)	(0.00)
Nearest-m Fixed Effects			✓
N	68,750,004	58,189,057	58,189,057
Adj. R^2	0.02	0.05	0.49
Panel B	**Incorporated Residence (Within One Mile)**		
Republican	-0.04^{***}	-0.03^{***}	-0.03^{***}
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Retired		-0.01^{***}	-0.02^{***}
		(0.00)	(0.00)
Income		-0.01^{*}	-0.02^{***}
		(0.00)	(0.00)
Renter		0.08^{***}	0.05^{***}
		(0.01)	(0.00)
Nearest-m Fixed Effects			✓
N	33,802,432	28,495,216	28,495,216
Adj. R^2	0.00	0.01	0.33

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Note: All models use OLS. All observations are registered Republicans and Democrats (Independents and individuals registered with other parties are omitted). The coefficient on "Republican" should be interpreted with respect to Democrats. Voter registration and demographic data come from the 2019 L2 voter file. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. The measure of incorporated residence, as well as distance cutoffs, are calculated from come from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles.

It is also the case that only some individual-level characteristics are associated with choosing to live in or outside of a municipality. The coefficient estimates on retiree status, in-

[10]Incidentally, this is roughly the size of the discontinuity that Van Rensselaer (n.d.) finds.

come, and renter status are both statistically significant and of a large enough magnitude to be substantively meaningful: retirees across the board have sorted outside of municipalities at a one-to-to percent rate both across the board and in places proximate to a municipal border. Individuals who earn higher incomes also have sorted outside of municipalities at a one-to-three percent rate per log-unit increase in earnings. Renters are significantly more likely to live in municipalities, which is likely because rental-based housing units are constructed in municipalities much more frequently.

Partisan Differences in Individual Characteristics Next, I examine the extent to which the relationship itself between individual-level characteristics and incorporated residence is a function of partisanship. To do so, I interact Republican_i with other covariates in the model. **Table 3** shows how the effects of retiree status, income, and renter status on incorporated residence are affected by partisanship.

Table 3: Partisan Sorting into (Un)Incorporated Places: Interaction Effects

	Incorporated Residence (Within One Mile)			
Republican	-0.04^{***}	-0.04^{***}	-0.03^{***}	-0.03^{***}
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Retired	-0.02^{***}			-0.02^{***}
	(0.00)			(0.00)
Republican × Retired	0.01^{***}			0.01^{***}
	(0.00)			(0.00)
Income		-0.03^{***}		-0.03^{***}
		(0.00)		(0.00)
Republican × Income		0.02^{***}		0.01^{***}
		(0.00)		(0.00)
Renter			0.06^{***}	0.05^{***}
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Republican × Renter			-0.00	0.00
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Nearest-m Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	33,802,432	32,856,278	29,192,589	28,495,216
Adj. R^2	0.32	0.32	0.33	0.33

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Note: All models use OLS. All observations are registered Republicans and Democrats (Independents and individuals registered with other parties are omitted). The coefficient on "Republican" should be interpreted with respect to Democrats. Model intercepts are omitted because they represent the value for the omitted fixed-effect unit. Voter registration and demographic data come from the 2019 L2 voter file. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. The measure of incorporated residence, as well as distance cutoffs, are calculated from come from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles.

At large, the partisan gap in (un)incorporated residence remains, but different factors push and pull Republicans and Democrats differently. Non-retired, home-owning Republicans with average income live outside municipalities at a three-to-four percent rate. However, Republican retirees and wealthier Republicans appear to have sorted back into municipal boundaries at a one-to-two percent rate, suggesting it is actually Democratic retirees and high-income earners who have sorted outside. While renters across both partisan affiliations live within municipal boundaries much more frequently, there does not appear to be a partisan difference between the two.

Municipal Push and Pull Factors While previous sections have utilized "nearest-m" fixed effects to account for municipal push- and pull factors at large, which factors specifically drive sorting? Now, I estimate models using the following specification:

$$Y_i \sim \beta \, \text{Republican}_i + \gamma \, \mathbf{X}_i + \nu \, \mathbf{M}_m + \varepsilon_m$$

where $\mathbf{M}_m$ is a vector of nearest-municipality variables, including percent Black, median household income,[11] and municipal property tax burden. Coefficients ν for these variables indicate how changes in the racial and economic makeup of a municipality pull individuals in or push them out.

The municipal property tax burden is measured using data from the Government Finance Database (Pierson, Hand, and Thompson, 2015), which compiles revenue and expenditure streams for different levels of American local government. Because differential property tax rates are commonly cited as a push- factor for municipal sorting (Li, M. J. Cushing, and Anderson, 2018), it may be the case that municipalities with higher property tax extraction (relative to the county level) push individuals outside. I measure this effect by subtracting the county-level per capita extraction from the nearest-municipality-level one. Units are in thousands of 2017 United States dollars per capita, so a one-thousand dollar increase in extraction per person is associated with a ν increase in the likelihood of incorporated residence.

Table 5 shows how different municipal characteristics attract or repel different partisans. All else equal, Republicans still have sorted outside municipal jurisdictions at a three-to-four percent rate. This pattern does not appear to be affected by the concentration of Black residents in a municipality or by the property tax burden. Although this does not directly affirm a null hypothesis that partisans sort based on these characteristics, the

[11] Percent Black and median household income data come from the American Community Survey and are standardized to be mean-zero.

Table 4: Partisan Sorting into (Un)Incorporated Places: Nearest-m Effects

	Incorporated Residence (Within One Mile)			
(Intercept)	0.66^{***}	0.66^{***}	0.65^{***}	0.65^{***}
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Republican	-0.04^{***}	-0.03^{***}	-0.03^{***}	-0.04^{***}
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)
% Black	-0.00^{*}			-0.00^{***}
	(0.00)			(0.00)
Republican × % Black	-0.00^{***}			-0.00
	(0.00)			(0.00)
Median Income		0.01		-0.01
		(0.02)		(0.02)
Republican × Median Income		0.08^{***}		0.09^{***}
		(0.01)		(0.02)
Property Tax Burden			-0.00^{***}	-0.00^{***}
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Republican × Property Tax Burden			0.00^{**}	0.00
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	28,491,983	28,455,385	22,978,370	22,950,963
Adj. R^2	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Note: All models use OLS. All observations are registered Republicans and Democrats (Independents and individuals registered with other parties are omitted). The coefficient on "Republican" should be interpreted with respect to Democrats. Voter registration and demographic data come from the 2019 L2 voter file. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. The measure of incorporated residence, as well as distance cutoffs, are calculated from come from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles.

evidence fails to demonstrate the alternative. However, it does appear that Republicans (but not Democrats) sort back into municipalities where residents are wealthier. They do so at a rate of about nine percent per log-unit of household income above average.

Urban and Rural Features Rural and urban places are fundamentally different. Consequently, deciding whether to live in a municipality or not may depend on the rurality of the space in question. To adjust for this, I measure the rurality of each voter using the K. S. Nelson and Nguyen (2023) Community Assets and Relative Rurality (CARR) index, which codes the rurality of U.S. census block groups continuously from zero to one, where zero indicates "most urban," and one indicates "most rural." This is an "objective"

measure of rurality, meaning it is geographically-based, instead of a "subjective" measure which reflects a battery of attitudes that individuals carry related to rural experiences (Jacobs and Munis, 2023; Lunz Trujillo, 2024; Nemerever and Rogers, 2021).

For voter i, the rurality measure R_g is the CARR score associated with their census block group g of residence. I calculated this by geolocating voters, who are points, into the corresponding block group where they reside. This approach implies that all voters living in census block group g have the same rurality score. Because my measurement strategy clusters standard errors at a level (usually) larger than census block groups, I account for spatial endogeneity within this measure, so regression estimates of the relationship between rurality and other variables are credible. Formally, I estimate:

$$Y_i \sim \beta \, \text{Republican}_i + \gamma \, \mathbf{X}_i + \eta \, R_g + \varepsilon_m$$

There are some necessary limitations to measurement in this approach. Rurality and incorporated municipalities are theoretically linked.[12] Within the L2 data, every voter with $R_g < 0.35$ lives in an incorporated jurisdiction, whereas every voter with $R_g > 0.793$ lives in an unincorporated jurisdiction. Consequently, I subset the data to voters with CARR scores between those two values and thus have common support across this measure.

[12]One could make the case that the very definition of "rural" is defined by proximity to municipalities (Nemerever and Rogers, 2021).

Table 5: Partisan Sorting into (Un)Incorporated Urban and Rural Places

	Incorporated Residence (Within One Mile)		
	All Places	**More-Urban Places**	**More-Rural Places**
Republican	-0.02^{***}	-0.03^{***}	-0.04^{***}
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Rurality	-8.47^{***}	-5.32^{***}	-15.22^{***}
	(1.16)	(1.15)	(0.68)
Republican × Rurality	-0.83^{***}	-1.26^{***}	0.24^{***}
	(0.18)	(0.36)	(0.06)
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓
Nearest-m Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
N	28,312,622	19,352,624	8,959,998
Adj. R^2	0.36	0.40	0.37

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Note: All models use OLS. All observations are registered Republicans and Democrats (Independents and individuals registered with other parties are omitted). The coefficient on "Republican" should be interpreted with respect to Democrats. "More-Urban" places have rurality scores less than 0.5; "More-Rural" places have rurality scores greater than 0.5. Intercepts are omitted because they represent the value for the omitted fixed-effect unit. Voter registration and demographic data come from the 2019 L2 voter file. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. The measure of incorporated residence, as well as distance cutoffs, are calculated from come from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles. The measure of rurality comes from K. S. Nelson and Nguyen (2023).

Table 6 shows that Republicans and Democrats have differentially sorted into (or out of) municipal jurisdictions based on how rural that location is. In the most urban places, Republicans have sorted outside of municipal borders at a two-to-three percent rate. However, a striking pattern emerges in more rural places: Democrats overwhelmingly opt out of municipal jurisdictions as rurality increases, whereas Republicans (relatively) seem to opt *back in* to those jurisdictions. The empirical pattern flips: in the most rural parts of the United States, "city-dwellers" are more Republican, while Democrats live on the periphery.

Discussion

Republicans and Democrats have sorted in and out of American municipalities, a pattern that is robust to a number of plausible confounders, including demographic characteristics and features of municipalities themselves. Although partisanship itself is unlikely to be a first-order cause – recall Martin and Webster (2020)'s observation that partisans will not sacrifice job- and amenities-based opportunities – these persistent partisan patterns have implications for the way citizens interact with local government because they define the scope of who gets to participate in local politics. Anzia (2021) calls for researchers to "think about and evaluate the power of different constituencies" (p.146) in local politics research; one such dimension that studying unincorporated Americans can shed light on is defining who gets to be a constituent and who does not.

The *de jure* limits of local government end with their boundaries. Consequently, citizens who live outside, no matter how close, are constrained in how they may participate in local government. In some sense, this is a good thing; people who live outside of municipalities probably should not be voting for mayor of somewhere else, for instance. But citizens living on the periphery of local government are nonetheless affected by spillover consequences of decisions made on the inside (Anselin, Varga, and Acs, 2000; Singh and Marx, 2013). If citizens' preferences just outside of municipalities matched those of citizens just inside, this might be less of a problem as citizens inside can advocate directly for the same desired outcomes. However, the fact that a partisan discontinuity exists, as well as evidence that partisanship is a reliable indicator of different preferences (De Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016; Houston, 2024; Reese and Zalewski, 2018), means that citizens just outside cannot directly express preferences for policies or elected officials. While this is a necessary political consequence of choosing to live outside of local government (regardless of motive), they are nonetheless affected downstream by

the decisions of those who remain, and both researchers and policymakers should act accordingly. A key question for future researchers should consider is whether the very act of living in a municipality itself constitutes a form of political participation. Other directions involve investigating the political consequences of this discontinuity directly, for specific forms of political participation, such as voting, or more nebulous forms, such as trust in government.

Furthermore, researchers of local government must think carefully about how local governments affect (and are affected by) their surrounding built environments. Despite being legally similar entities, a local government integrated into a complex metropolitan area is substantively different from one that is rural and isolated. I show that the partisan composition of these places is different. That distinction engenders a different set of duties for local governments, which either must be more exhaustive in their service provision or rely strongly on county and state governments to compensate. That rural Americans are more Republican is well-established (Cramer, 2016; Gimpel, Lovin, et al., 2020; Slack and L. Jensen, 2020); that rural Republicans have sorted into rural municipalities while rural Democrats have sorted out hints at fundamental differences in what activities rural local governments undertake, as well as their consequences. Because the sorting pattern flips from urban to rural settings, researchers ought to think carefully about who exactly local governments represent and where.

Finally, the partisan discontinuity helps us think about broader issues in political division and discourse. One common refrain in American politics is that cities, controlled by Democrats, are disasters of governance.[13] A cause or consequence (or both) may be that American cities have fundamentally different constituencies (Cramer, 2016; Gimpel, Lovin, et al., 2020; Rodden, 2019). Politically motivated narratives cast cities and

[13]See, for instance, George Chidi. "City of Villians: Republicans Stoke Fears of Democratic-Run Cities." *The Guardian*, October 6, 2024.

non-cities as dichotomous; Americans are city-dwellers or country folks. My results demonstrate that this political divide is not merely a large-scale phenomenon spanning metropolitan hearts and and flyover country; the divide exists at the very line where municipalities end and unincorporated America begins.

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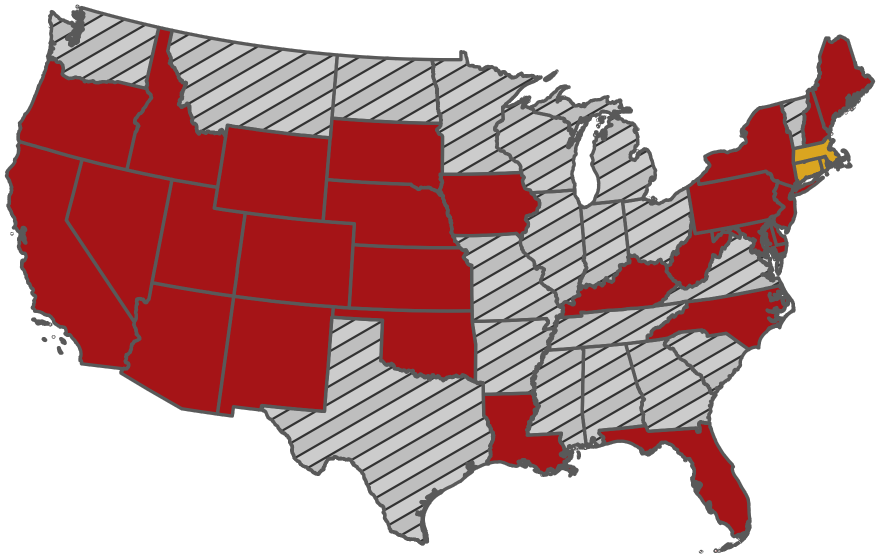
Contents

A Geographic Coverage

Figure A-1: Geographic Coverage of L2 Data



Note: This map represents the states used in the paper. States in red are included; states in yellow are not because there is no unincorporated territory there, as municipal government is largely exhaustive of those state's geographies. States with a crosshatch pattern do not have party registration and will not be used. Neither Alaska nor Hawai'i are used. Data come from the 2020 U.S. TIGER/Line Shapefiles and the 2019 L2 voter file.

B Alternate Model Specifications

here are alternate model specifications (pending)

B.1 Individual Characteristics

B.2 Race

B.3 Movers

B.4 Nearest-*m* Characteristics

C State-by-State Considerations