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Local news, partisanship, and perceptions about election administration

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ABSTRACT

How does access to local news shape perceptions of election integrity? While existing research emphasizes the influence of partisanship and motivated reasoning, exposure to observable facts about election administration also affects these perceptions. Traditionally, local news was voters' main source for such information. However, local news has declined significantly – especially in reporting capacity – due to increased competition in the digital media landscape. As a result, the public has less access to objective information about how elections are run, potentially increasing reliance on partisan cues. In this paper, we use individual-level survey data, measures of local news availability, and county-level election results from the 2016 and 2020 cycles to examine whether and how access to local news moderates the effects of partisanship and the winner/loser gap on voter perceptions of election integrity.

1. Introduction

How does access to local news shape perceptions about election administration? A substantial body of research links partisanship and motivated reasoning to citizens' perceptions of election fairness and the prevalence of voter fraud (Atkeson and Saunders, 2007; Bowler and Donovan, 2016; Atkeson et al., 2022, 2023, 2025). This research also indicates that partisan polarization and animus increase the influence of partisan perceptual screens on how citizens judge the fairness and integrity of elections (Bowler and Donovan, 2024). Reliance on these perceptual screens is especially problematic after elections – particularly for those on the losing side – as it fosters mistrust, increases vulnerability to misinformation about electoral integrity, and discourages participation (Fitz and Saunders, 2024).

Until recently, objective differences in election administration across the United States significantly influenced citizen perceptions of election integrity. While party affiliation shaped views on fairness and accuracy, voters' experiences and local election quality also mattered. Voters in states with better administration were more likely to see elections as fair and accurate (Bowler and Donovan, 2016). However, recent research shows that stronger partisan identities now dominate citizen evaluations of elections, diminishing the impact of administrative quality. Partisan narratives increasingly overshadow the effects of election administration, leading to more polarized perceptions of election fraud (Bowler and Donovan, 2024). Although rising affective

polarization ostensibly drives this trend, we expect that recent and ongoing changes to local news ecosystems also play a significant role.

Because elections are administered locally, local news media were traditionally responsible for reporting on the conduct of elections.¹ However, the economic competition brought about by the arrival of the high choice digital media environment is severely diminishing local news, particularly in terms of reporting capacity (Peterson, 2021; Peterson and Dunaway, 2023). As a result, while partisanship increasingly shapes perceptions of election integrity, local news is losing its ability to provide objective on-the-ground reporting about election administration. The growing reliance on party cues may be driven, in part, by a lack of information. Without reliable local coverage, voters may be even more likely to let partisanship guide their views. It remains unclear whether and how changes in local news environments moderate the effects of partisanship and election administration quality on perceptions of election integrity.

Drawing on research in motivated reasoning (e.g., Druckman et al., 2013), election administration (e.g., Bowler and Donovan, 2016, 2024), and the impact of declining local news (e.g., Darr et al., 2018; Hayes and Lawless, 2021; Darr and Harman, 2024), we examine both individual and contextual factors shaping citizens' perceptions of election fairness and accuracy. Specifically, we analyze how partisanship, in-party winning and losing, and access to local news influence perceptions of election integrity.

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¹ Historically, local newspapers were the primary vehicle for reporting on everything political happening in subnational jurisdictions (Arnold, 2004).

Recent research in political communication shows that media system characteristics affect citizens' ability to hold politicians accountable (Dutra et al., 2023). This is especially true at the local level, where access to local news enhances political accountability from state and local officials (Arnold, 2004; Snyder and Strömberg, 2010; Campante and Do, 2014; Gao et al., 2020). In this paper, we examine whether strong local news environments also help citizens better evaluate the quality of election administration. While affective polarization and motivated reasoning shape individual perceptions of election outcomes, we argue that access to local news should moderate voters' ability to accurately assess election integrity.

We test these expectations using individual-level data from surveys, data on local news availability, and county-level election results for the 2016 and 2020 elections. Building on what existing work already tells us about the strong relationship between partisanship, electoral winner/loser status, and polarization in views about electoral integrity (Bowler and Donovan, 2016, 2024; Atkeson et al., 2022, 2023, 2025), we investigate the possibility of a moderating effect from access to local news. As expected, we find that an increasing margin of victory for the Republican party negatively affects Democrats' perceptions of election integrity, while it positively affects perceptions among Republicans. However, we also find that access to more information about the quality of election administration via local news moderates partisan reactions to in-party candidate wins and losses. Access to information on the local conduct of elections can reduce the tendency to respond to election outcomes based on wins and losses for the in-party. This effect is stronger among Democrats than among Republicans.

2. Election administration and voter perceptions

The contentious 2000 presidential election led to the Help America Vote Act (2002) and the creation of the Election Assistance Commission (2004).² Federally mandated data collection on election administration soon followed, prompting new research on election administration and voter perceptions in the United States.

Early research on election integrity focused on how variations in election administration and voting experiences affect voter confidence and perceptions of election integrity, given concerns that real or perceived problems could undermine participation and support for the electoral system (Atkeson and Saunders, 2007; Atkeson et al., 2015; Norris, 2017). This work showed that when, where, and how people vote matters (Stein and Vonnahme, 2012). Factors such as voting method (Alvarez et al., 2021) and the convenience or cost of voting (Gimpel and Schuknecht, 2003; Stein and Vonnahme, 2011) influence both participation and evaluations of election administration (Gronke, 2014; King, 2017). While recent analyses find polling place quality is generally high, significant variation remains due to differences in state and county implementation of election laws (Stein et al., 2019).

A majority of people cast their ballots at a polling place on Election Day or via in person early voting. In-person voters report various factors that shape their experiences, including polling place location. Urban polling places are often harder to reach, while rural locations are typically more accessible (Gimpel and Schuknecht, 2003). Convenience is important: In 2020, 2.5% of nonvoters cited transportation issues, and 3% cited inconvenient polling places, hours, or long lines as reasons for not voting. Innovations like voting centers, which allow voting at multiple locations, help reduce these barriers (Stein and Vonnahme, 2011). Still, about 8% of first-time voters report difficulty finding their polling place.

² The 2000 presidential election exposed problems in American election administration, many stemming from its decentralized structure and the wide discretion of local officials, resulting in significant variation in local election quality.

Election administration significantly impacts voter confidence and perceptions of election fairness (Gronke, 2014; Bowler et al., 2015; King, 2017; Alvarez et al., 2021). Public perceptions are crucial for democratic health, as low confidence can erode support for the system and foster anti-democratic behavior. While expert surveys indicate that election performance is generally good and officials are fair, there is a low correlation between expert assessments and citizen evaluations (Flavin and Shufeldt, 2019).

3. Partisanship, polarization, and the winner/loser gap

While polling place performance and voting convenience matter, recent decades have seen contentious elections, subsequent reforms, and global challenges in election administration unfold alongside a marked rise in affective partisan polarization.³ Fig. 1 shows the rise of affective polarization in recent years. Social identity theory helps explain this trend: As identities like religion, race, class, and geography become more closely aligned with partisan identity, partisanship evolves into a "mega-identity" that encapsulates the broader social attributes of a person (Mason, 2018, 23). This alignment brings social identities to the forefront, turning partisan competition into a zero-sum struggle between the two groups and intensifying animus between them.

Partisan affect and out-group hostility make it more difficult for partisans to accept electoral losses, because they are experienced as group losses (Mason, 2018; Janssen, 2023). This means that partisanship increasingly shapes how citizens evaluate elections. These trends reflect what is known as the "winner/loser effect", where those who voted for the winning candidate express a higher level of confidence that their vote and the votes of others were counted as intended relative to those who lost (Atkeson and Saunders, 2007; Atkeson et al., 2015; Gronke, 2014; Sances and Stewart, 2015; Sinclair et al., 2018; Persily and Stewart, 2021). Even the magnitude of the wins and losses (as indicated by vote margins) matters. Bigger wins/losses widen the perception gap between partisan winners and losers following elections (Abus, 2024).

As affective polarization increases, the gap in perceptions between winners and losers has a greater impact on how election administration is evaluated. The literature on election integrity supports this logic (Janssen, 2023). Earlier work found that as partisan polarization intensified, perceptions of electoral legitimacy became more strongly tied to partisan-motivated reasoning (Bowler and Donovan, 2016). More recent research shows that partisanship almost entirely overshadows the effects of voter experiences or information about election administration quality on citizens' evaluations (Bowler and Donovan, 2024).⁴

4. Election information and declining local news

As affective polarization rises, it poses a serious challenge to the American two-party system. Growing animosity toward the opposing party makes election losses increasingly difficult for partisans to accept. Perceptions of election fairness and integrity are now shaped more by whether one's party wins or loses than by objective facts about the election (Bowler and Donovan, 2024; Janssen, 2023).

Voter experiences and factual information about elections once played a significant role in shaping public perceptions, and they may

³ The sources of polarization are well-studied (Stoker and Jennings, 2008; Huddy et al., 2015; Smidt, 2017; Orr and Huber, 2020) and are beyond this study's scope.

⁴ Additional evidence demonstrates that voters' views on neutral election rules are heavily influenced by negative attitudes toward the opposing party, with support for reforms often hinging on perceived partisan advantage. This dynamic is reinforced by elite messaging and the framing of electoral reforms as benefiting one party over another, further deepening partisan divides in support for election law changes.

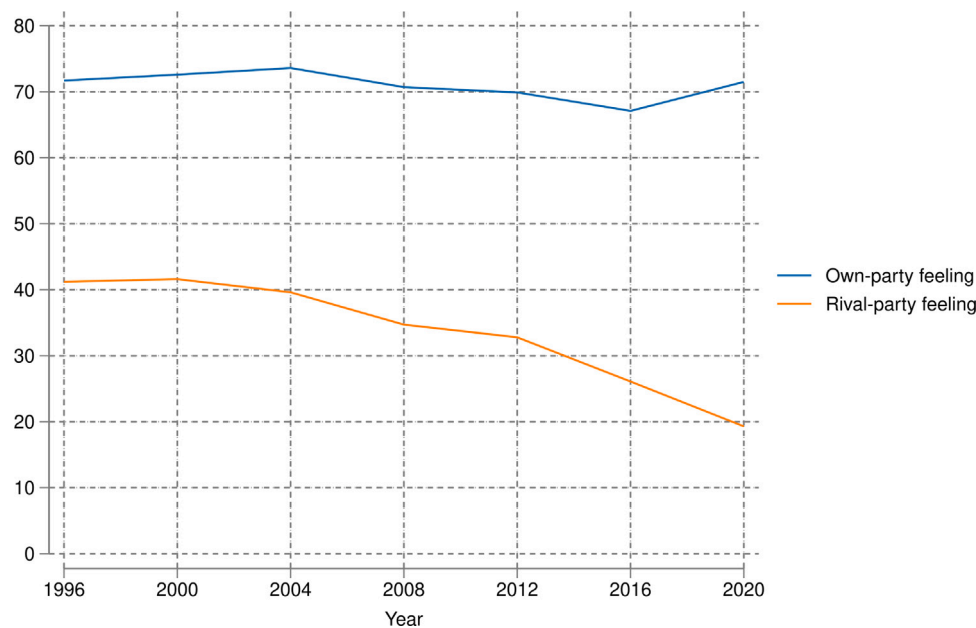


Fig. 1. Affective polarization in the US, 1996–2020.

Note: The figure shows the average of feeling thermometer question asked at ANES. In order to provide a baseline for comparison with the period of our study, the five previous presidential election periods are included in the graph.

Source: The ANES Guide of Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior (American National Election Studies, 2021).

still matter. Factual knowledge can help reduce attitude polarization (Stagnaro and Amsalem, 2025). However, public access to election information has changed dramatically in recent years due to steep declines in local news. Since news media are the primary source of election information and a key influence on trust in elections (Leeson, 2008; Birch, 2011; Schedler, 2013; Kerr and Lührmann, 2017; Coffé, 2017), this decline could also help explain the influence of partisanship. Local news, in particular, remains a trusted and valued source of political information, even as overall media trust has fallen (Shearer et al., 2024).

Citizens' perceptions of election integrity should be shaped by their direct experiences and the quality and quantity of information they receive about the electoral process (Kerr and Lührmann, 2017). When evaluating how elections are conducted at polling places, local media are especially important. Compared to national outlets, local news is more trusted and less polarizing (Padgett et al., 2019; Darr et al., 2021). Local media prioritize proximity and focus on truly local political events, making their election coverage more likely to highlight polling place operations, local GOTV activities, and races for local offices or representatives (Arnold, 2004; Trussler, 2021). They also provide extensive coverage of local campaign efforts, especially as Election Day approaches (Darr, 2018; Dunaway and Stein, 2013), and regularly report on the smoothness or irregularities at local polling places—coverage that national media typically cannot provide. In contrast, national news sources are often ideologically driven and make it easier for partisans to avoid exposure to a shared set of facts (Stroud, 2011). National outlets also lack the capacity to report on Election Day events across thousands of local jurisdictions (Arnold, 2004). As a result, the availability of reliable, on-the-ground information about election administration varies depending on access to local news coverage.

5. Theoretical expectations and hypotheses

The conduct of elections significantly influences voter confidence and perceptions (Gronke, 2014; King, 2017). Problems with election management, cost-cutting, and poorly implemented reforms can lower turnout (McNulty et al., 2009; Stein et al., 2019) and weaken overall support for the system. Consistent with previous research (Stein

and Vonnahme, 2014; Bowler et al., 2015; Menger and Stein, 2020; Cortina and Rottinghaus, 2023), we expect that evaluations of election administration will reflect individual characteristics and voting experiences.

Hypothesis 1. People living in jurisdictions with higher election administration quality should be more likely to perceive their polling place as well run.

Expert surveys show that election officials are generally fair and that widespread problems with vote tabulation are rare (Bowler et al., 2015). However, these expert assessments do not strongly correlate with public confidence (Flavin and Shufeldt, 2019), likely because voters have varying access to accurate information about election administration. As a result, public perceptions are shaped not just by facts, but also by a mix of knowledge, new information, personal experiences, emotions, and predispositions. Partisan-motivated reasoning influences both how people seek and interpret information (Festinger, 1950, 1957; Kunda, 1990). Partisans tend to seek out information that aligns with their beliefs and reinterpret information that does not (Druckman et al., 2013). When their party loses, supporters often attribute the loss to voter fraud, suppression, or poor election administration, rather than to the opposing candidate's strengths (Janssen, 2023). Therefore, even when negative experiences with local election administration are held constant, supporters of the losing party – especially after significant defeats – are more likely to blame poor administration for the outcome (Bowler et al., 2015). High levels of affective polarization can lead to attitudes and behaviors that diverge from what objective criteria would predict. Comparative research shows that polarization shapes partisan evaluations of election fairness and responses to the size of their party's win or loss—the win-loss gap (Janssen, 2023). Affective polarization is also strongly linked to democratic backsliding, reduced political accountability, and lower levels of freedom, rights, and deliberation (Orhan, 2022).

Hypothesis 2. When their out-party earns more votes, people should be less likely to perceive their polling place as well run.

Beyond experiences and predispositions, the way voters receive information about elections also matters. Some voters are exposed to extensive local news coverage of polling place activity, while others only know what happened at their own polling place, or may have no direct knowledge at all—especially absentee voters or non-voters. In areas with little or no local news, many voters rely solely on election returns and candidate statements. Since elections generally run smoothly in most places, we expect that voters with access to local news will have more positive evaluations of election administration. Access to factual, locally-based information should make it harder for partisan-motivated reasoning to distort perceptions of how elections are run.

Hypothesis 3. People living in jurisdictions with higher access to local news should be more likely to perceive their polling place as well run.

Where local news media are robust and widely consumed, citizens are more likely to encounter factual reporting about election administration—whether elections are running smoothly or facing issues like manipulation or fraud. In areas with strong local news coverage, voters have better access to information that can inform their perceptions, making them less likely to rely solely on partisan reactions to election outcomes.⁵ We therefore expect that access to local news moderates the influence of partisanship and the winner/loser effect on confidence in election administration.

We argue that this moderating effect is especially important for perceptions of electoral administration. While partisanship will always play some role in shaping individual perceptions, greater access to local news should lead to more accurate and less partisan evaluations of election integrity. Because election administration is fundamentally local, problems and successes are more likely to be reported where local news is available. In contrast, in areas lacking local news, perceptions are more likely to be shaped by elite rhetoric, national trends, and partisan identity rather than by local facts (Darr et al., 2018, 2021).

Notably, the decline of local newspapers is already linked to more polarized voting and increased affective polarization (Darr et al., 2018, 2021). This work suggests two possible mechanisms at play. First, limited local news means fewer objective facts about election administration are available to the public. Second, reduced exposure to local news is associated with higher levels of local polarization, increasing the likelihood that voters rely on partisan filters when evaluating election administration.

Without credible local reporting, partisanship continues to strongly influence how voters interpret election outcomes. When voters rely primarily on national news, partisan identity and elite rhetoric largely shape their perceptions about elections (Padgett et al., 2019; Arceneaux et al., 2025). Thus, partisanship should play a larger role as a perceptual filter in places with limited information about local election administration.

Hypothesis 4a. Perceptions about election integrity should be less influenced by partisanship among people living in jurisdictions with higher access to local news.

Finally, we expect access to local news to also shape how voting experiences influence voter evaluations. While personal experiences are important, voters who follow local news are aware that others may have different experiences at other polling locations. Local news coverage of election administration across the community can either reinforce or challenge voters' individual impressions.

Hypothesis 4b. Perceptions about election integrity should be more influenced by the quality of election administration among people living in jurisdictions with higher access to local news.

⁵ According to Pew Research (Shearer et al., 2024), local news is still trusted and valued, even as more Americans find their local news online and via social media.

6. Empirical analysis

6.1. Measurement and data

To test these hypotheses, we combined individual-level survey data from the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAEE) (Stewart, 2017, 2021) and the November Voting and Registration Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS) with contextual county-level data from the U.S. Census and public election results. To assess the local media environment for our third and fourth hypotheses, we used the *Editor & Publisher Newspaper Databooks* (2016, 2020) to code county-level newspaper locations and circulation across the contiguous U.S. The resulting pooled dataset provides a national sample of U.S. voters nested within their counties for the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.

Our dependent variable measures voter perceptions of polling place quality using a four-item scale. Because responses are heavily skewed toward the highest rating (“very well run”), we recoded the variable as binary: “very well run” is coded as 1, and all other responses as 0. Our findings are consistent when using the original four-category scale; these results are available in SI Appendix B.⁶

To test our hypotheses, we analyze four independent variables. First, we include an objective measure of county-level election administration quality using the County Election Administration (CEA) Index (Ritter and Tolbert, 2024), which adapts the state-level Elections Performance Index (EPI) to capture sub-state variation. While the EPI is widely used, it masks county-level differences; the CEA Index addresses this limitation by applying EPI components to county data for 2016 and 2020 (Ritter, 2024). This temporal constraint explains why we focus on these two election cycles despite broader SPAEE data availability since 2008.

Our second independent variable is the county-level Republican vote margin, calculated as the difference between Republican and Democratic vote shares in the two-party vote (MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2018). This creates a continuous measure where negative values indicate a Democratic advantage and positive values reflect a Republican advantage. The added benefit of this measure is that it also captures the magnitude of wins and losses.

Our third independent variable measures individual-level partisanship. To create this measure, we collapsed the standard 7-item partisanship scale into three categories: Democrats, (combining strong Democrat and not very strong Democrat), Republicans, (combining strong and not very strong Republicans), and Independents, (combining Democrat and Republican leaners and independents). Alternative codings, available in SI Appendix C, yield consistent results.

Our fourth independent variable measures county-level access to local media, specifically local newspaper market penetration. This indicator reflects both the number of local newspapers and their readership within the community. We focus on newspapers because cuts to their reporting staff significantly reduce local coverage, and newspapers generally provide more substantive election reporting than local TV news (Hayes and Lawless, 2021; Peterson, 2021; Dunaway, 2008).⁷ To calculate newspaper penetration, we compiled county-level data on the number of newspapers and their circulation for each election year in our study. We then computed per capita newspaper circulation for both the total county population and the population aged 18 and older. The main analysis uses the adult population measure, but results are

⁶ This binary recoding is also used in recent robustness checks (e.g., Coll, 2022).

⁷ Even as more Americans report getting their local news online, it is important to note that our newspaper-based measure is still an indicator for an area's news reporting capacity. In places where there are newspapers, there are more news workers and more on the ground reporting in and about that place, which then often circulate into (or inform) stories appearing on sites like nextdoor, via news aggregators, and on social media.

consistent with the alternative. While this measure partially reflects local news interest, we also control for individual news interest in all models.

We control for various individual and county characteristics. At the individual level, we include education (measured on a 6-point scale, with higher values indicating more education), age (in years), and a binary variable for sex. The highest correlation among age, education, and media access is 0.07 (between age and education), indicating low multicollinearity. We also include race and ethnicity, originally measured on an 8-point scale, but recoded as a binary variable for non-white respondents (with white as the reference group) to account for potential differences in election administration for non-white communities (Ritter and Tolbert, 2024).

Existing research informs our selection of county-level control variables. Election administration quality varies by community prosperity and ethnic composition, with more urban and lower-income areas often facing greater challenges (Ritter and Tolbert, 2024, 270–271). We control for percent minority population and median household income at the county level. To account for community type, we use USDA rural–urban continuum codes, creating dummy variables to indicate whether a county is urban (used as the reference category).⁸ Additionally, lower precinct populations are linked to better polling place performance and evaluations (Stein and Vonnahme, 2014; Kimball and Baybeck, 2013), so we include this as a control, calculated using data from the Election Administration and Voter Surveys (EAVS) and the U.S. Census. SI Appendix I provides details on all variables, including summary statistics, coding, and sources.

We next provide spatial visualization of key variables and the dependent variables using bivariate maps (Naqvi, 2022) showing the co-occurrence of these variables.⁹ Figs. 2 and 3 show two maps each for 2016 and 2020.¹⁰ First, note the gray areas on the maps. These represent counties where the SPAE survey was not conducted and are therefore excluded from our analysis. For all other variables, such as newspaper circulation, we have complete county-level coverage.

The bins next to the maps show the percentage of observations in each category represented by the map colors. For example, in Fig. 2, moving diagonally from the lowest to highest values of polling place evaluation and newspaper circulation, the percentage of counties in these high-value categories increases (from 0.7% to 43.7% in 2016, and from 0.9% to 37.7% in 2020).

Looking at the highest category of polling place evaluation (3.8 to 4), most counties also have the highest newspaper circulation (11.5% to 43.7% in 2016; 10.6% to 37.7% in 2020). Similarly, in the highest category of newspaper circulation (0.06 to 1.5), most counties also report the highest polling place evaluations (3.7% to 43.7% in 2016; 3.3% to 37.7% in 2020).

An intuitive reading of the maps suggests several patterns: First, in both 2016 and 2020, counties with the highest newspaper circulation

⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/decoded/2019/11/22/evaluating-what-makes-a-us-community-urban-suburban-or-rural/>.

⁹ The bivariate maps cover 48 contiguous US states. The x-axis in the maps represents newspaper circulation per capita, ranging from 0 to 3.36, with a second quantile of 0.059, an average of 0.1449, and a third quantile of 0.1798. The variable is significantly right-skewed. So, we first exclude county-years with per capita circulation of 1.5 or higher, covering just 58 out of 41,774 observations in 2016, spanning six states: Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Oklahoma, and Virginia. Second, we set the x-axis cutoffs at 0, 0.02, 0.06, and 1.5. For the y-axis, which measures polling station evaluation, values range from 1 to 4, with a first quantile of 3.667, an average of 3.777, and a third quantile of 4. The data shows a significant left skew. We choose y-axis cutoffs as 0, 3.3, 3.8, and 4. Furthermore, we use the same cutoff points for the x-axis and y-axis across the maps.

¹⁰ Individual choropleth maps for the dependent variable, Republican Party vote margin, newspaper circulation, CEA index and EPI are provided in SI Appendix A.

also tend to have the highest polling place evaluations (Fig. 2). While this relationship is slightly weaker in 2020, it still indicates a possible positive link between local news access and perceptions of election administration. Second, the maps relating the CEA index and newspaper circulation (Fig. 3) reveal that counties with the highest CEA index scores are often those with the highest newspaper circulation. This trend is visible along the diagonal from the lower left to the upper right, though it is somewhat weaker in 2020 compared to 2016.

There are some limitations of the SPAE survey data. One limitation of this data is the current short temporal and limited spatial coverage. SPAE does not cover the whole country, but is administered in an increasing number of counties. The survey is not designed to capture county level effects, and the weights in the dataset are aimed at representing state voting age population. We proceed with the estimation and the results with these limitations in mind.

6.2. Estimation

Because individuals are nested in counties and one of the main independent variables is measured at the county level, at first sight, the correct estimation method is multilevel modeling. This framework allows for random intercept at the second level and provides better estimates when compared to methods that do not account for the hierarchical structure of the data. However, limitations in the SPAE data mean that non-hierarchical models with state fixed effects and clustering by county (Primo et al., 2007; Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2009, e.g.,) are the better choice for estimation. Specifically, the normal lower level (counties) have too few observations. The average respondent per county is 9.7. Although previous work has suggested that low number of first level observations is not detrimental (e.g., Bell et al., 2010), we also have to contend with a lack of representativeness at the county level. When the lack of representativeness is coupled with small sample size at the county, it can impact the reliability of estimates from a multilevel model. Based on these methodological concerns, we use non-hierarchical models for estimation. Nevertheless, we provide estimates from multi-level models in SI Appendix D; using multi-level models does not change our results.

Our analysis pools observations across two presidential election years, requiring adjustments for three key estimation issues. The first is the interdependence of observations. Voters and election dynamics in the same county across consecutive elections (time $t - 1$ to t) often share similarities. To account for this non-independence, we cluster standard errors at the county level, mitigating bias from correlated residuals within geographic units. The second estimation issue we must deal with is state-level heterogeneity. Including all states in a single regression risks bias from unobserved state-specific traits (e.g., cultural or institutional factors). To address this, we use state-fixed effects, isolating variables that differ between states but remain constant over time. Finally, we address temporal variations in the data. The pooled dataset spans election cycles, where systemic shifts between years (e.g., national economic trends) could confound results. Year-fixed effects are added to control for time-specific influences unrelated to the variables of interest. These adjustments enhance the robustness of our model, ensuring estimates reflect true causal relationships rather than spatial or temporal artifacts.

We specify our models in the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Polling Place Evaluation}_{ij} = & \beta_1 \text{Partisanship} + \beta_2 \text{GOP vote margin} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{Newspaper circulation} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{CEA index} \\ & + \beta_5 \text{Partisanship} \times \text{GOP vote margin} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{Newspaper circ} \times \text{CEA index} \\ & + c'_j \theta + x'_i \beta + \alpha_s + \alpha_t + \epsilon_{ij}, \end{aligned}$$

where the outcome variable is a binary indicator of polling place evaluation for individual i at county j , $c'_j \theta$ is a vector of county level

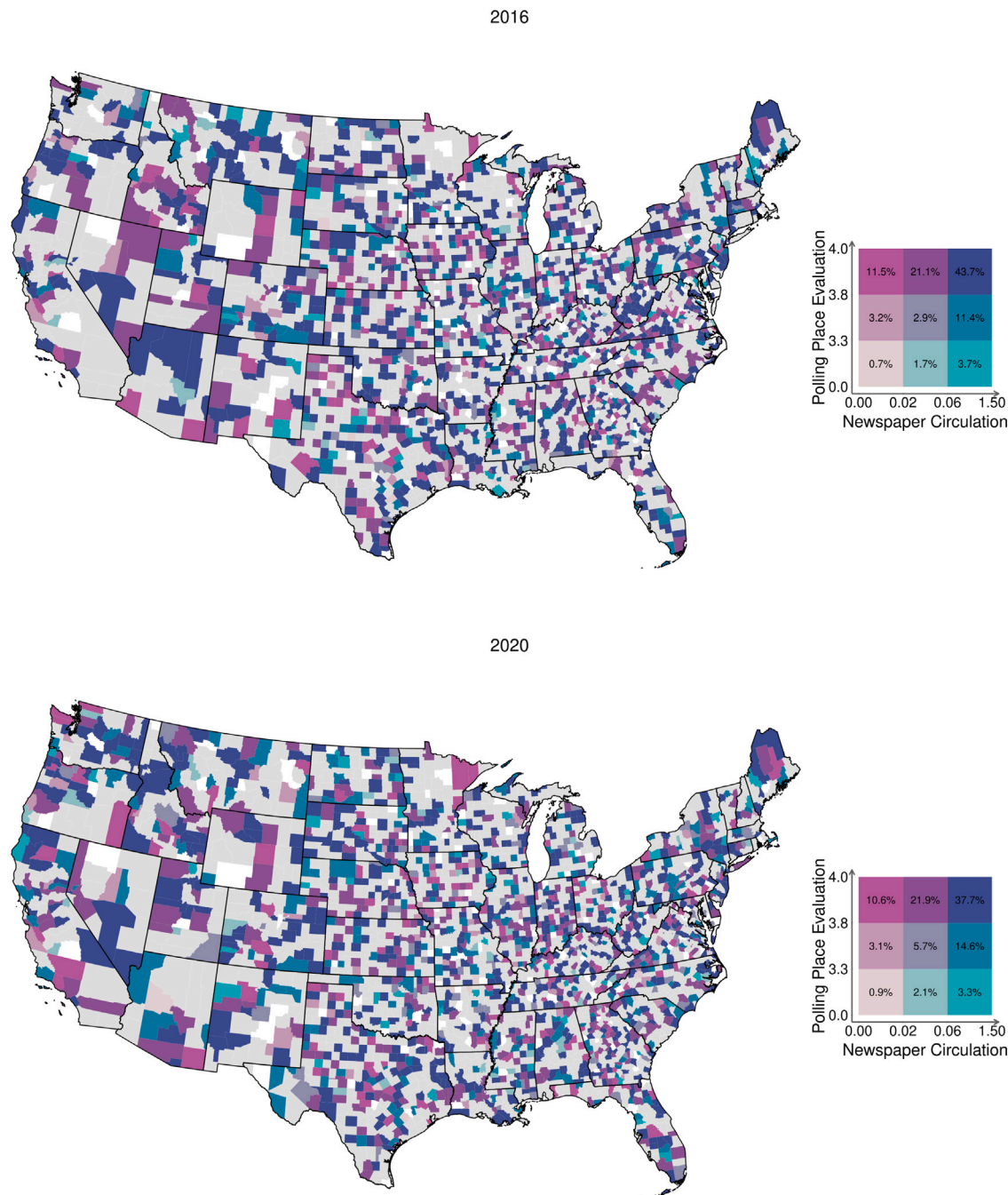


Fig. 2. Newspaper circulation and polling place evaluation, 2016–2020.
Note: The bivariate maps show the co-occurrence of newspaper circulation per capita and polling place evaluation at the county level for presidential elections of 2016 and 2020. The maps are drawn with Albers projection. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)
Source: Survey of the Performance of American Elections 2016–2020 for polling place evaluations, and Editor & Publisher for newspaper circulation.

controls with parameter estimate θ , $x'_i\beta$ is a vector of individual level controls with parameter estimate β , α_s is state fixed effects and α_t is year fixed effects. Since our dependent variable is binary, we use logistic regression for estimating our models. Next, we present the estimation results and marginal effects.

7. Results

The estimation results are shown in Table 1. We estimate four models. The first hypothesis is tested in the first two models through the inclusion of the county election administration index variable. The first two models test the second hypothesis through an interaction between

individual partisanship and Republican Party vote margin. The second model provides a test of the third hypothesis through the inclusion of an interaction term between newspaper circulation and the CEA index. To test the fourth hypothesis, we use the third and fourth models. The third model is run on a subsample with low newspaper circulation, and the fourth models is run on a subsample with high newspaper circulation. These models include the CEA index to test Hypothesis 4b, and they include interaction between individual partisanship and Republican party vote margin to test Hypothesis 4a.

The coefficients in the models show that our hypotheses are supported. First, we see that as illustrated in extant literature, election administration quality is an important determinant of voter evaluations

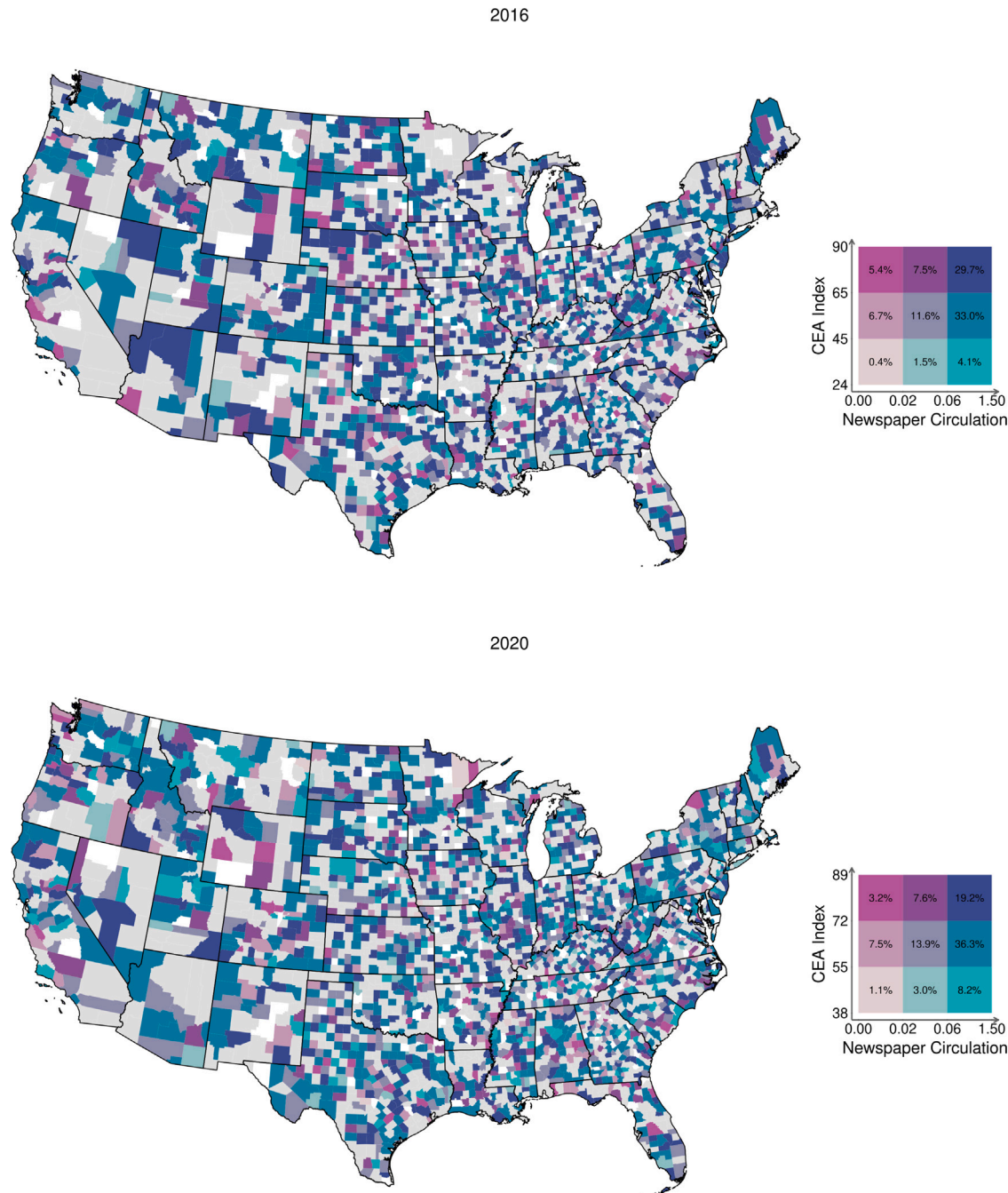


Fig. 3. County election administration index and newspaper circulation, 2016–2020.
Note: The bivariate maps show the co-occurrence of County Election Administration Index and newspaper circulation per capita at the county level for presidential elections of 2016 and 2020. The maps are drawn with Albers projection.
Source: [Ritter \(2024\)](#) and [Ritter and Tolbert \(2024\)](#) for CEA index, and Editor & Publisher for newspaper circulation.

([Hypothesis 1](#)). However, this effect is not static and is moderated by local news. When there is more access to local news, the effect of how elections are run on individual-level evaluations of elections is magnified ([Hypothesis 4b](#)). That is, as local news is likely to report on the same issues affecting election administration, individuals will be more firm in their evaluations. Also, as expected, evaluations are higher when there is more local media access, all else constant ([Hypothesis 3](#)).
The estimates also provide support for [Hypothesis 2](#). When Democratic candidates lose by large margins, Democratic voters are more likely to evaluate elections negatively. The same is true for Republican voters when Republican candidates lose. When their party's candidates

win by large margins, partisan voters are more likely to evaluate elections positively, regardless of the facts on the ground.
However, this partisan bias is not static and is moderated by local news. That is to say, when voters have access to local news, the effect of partisanship on evaluation of election administration - partisan bias - diminishes. This becomes apparent with a comparison of results from the third (low newspaper circulation) and fourth (high newspaper circulation) models. The presence of objective information about local elections increases citizens' ability to accurately evaluate election integrity ([Hypothesis 4a](#)). In further analysis, we see that the effect of local news in changing evaluations of election administration

Table 1
Logistic regression, Polling place evaluation, 2016–2020.

	I	II	III	IV
Newspaper circ	-.397** (.165)	-1.44*** (.362)		
CEA index	.0206*** (.005)	.018*** (.005)	.027*** (.007)	.016** (.008)
Newspaper circ × CEA index		.021*** (.007)		
Democrat	.309*** (.071)	.31*** (.070)	.524*** (.126)	.248** (.105)
Republican	.059 (.062)	.059 (.063)	.131 (.109)	-.036 (.089)
GOP vote margin	-.0008 (.002)	-.0006 (.002)	.0006 (.003)	.002 (.002)
Democrat × GOP vote margin	-.003* (.002)	-.003* (.002)	-.005* (.003)	-.004 (.003)
Republican × GOP vote margin	.005*** (.001)	.005*** (.001)	.005* (.003)	.004 (.002)
Age	.021*** (.001)	.021*** (.001)	.023*** (.002)	.022*** (.002)
Female	.036 (.055)	.035 (.055)	.011 (.096)	-.02 (.078)
Education	-.018 (.018)	-.018 (.018)	-.011 (.031)	.00005 (.025)
Non-white	-.069 (.068)	-.067 (.068)	-.273** (.128)	.023 (.084)
Interest in news	-.013 (.035)	-.013 (.035)	-.057 (.060)	.014 (.051)
Percent minority	-.334 (.338)	-.35 (.337)	-.252 (.553)	-.573 (.484)
ln (Median household income)	-.16 (.174)	-.133 (.175)	.179 (.287)	-.536* (.306)
Suburban	-.085 (.074)	-.094 (.074)	-.064 (.122)	-.192 (.122)
Rural	.136 (.108)	.135 (.107)	.221 (.163)	.026 (.187)
ln (Precinct population)	.076 (.065)	.069 (.064)	-.127 (.155)	.13 (.095)
State fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	15 042	15 042	5884	7083
AIC	13 213	13 209	4990	6417

Note: Dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator that polling place was “very well” run. County-clustered robust standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$.

** $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.01$.

is stronger among Democrats than it is among Republicans, a finding in line with research showing partisan differences in media trust (Ladd and Podkul, 2018).

7.1. Magnitude of effects

While logistic regression coefficients (including interaction terms) reveal the direction and statistical significance of relationships, they do not directly quantify practical effect sizes. To address this, we calculate predicted probabilities to assess the magnitude of key variables’ impacts. The first analysis predicts the likelihood of respondents giving election integrity the highest rating based on newspaper circulation and the CEA index. Second analysis predicts the same outcome but incorporates the Republican vote margin, newspaper circulation, and respondent partisanship. For the second analysis, the results are presented by partisanship to isolate the effects for each group. We focus on a range of (–50 to +50) for vote margin and (0–1) for newspaper circulation, as these intervals cover most of the observations in our data.

First, we examine how newspaper circulation influences the relationship between election administration quality and the predicted probability of respondents’ positive evaluations of election integrity. High election administration quality is generally linked to a high

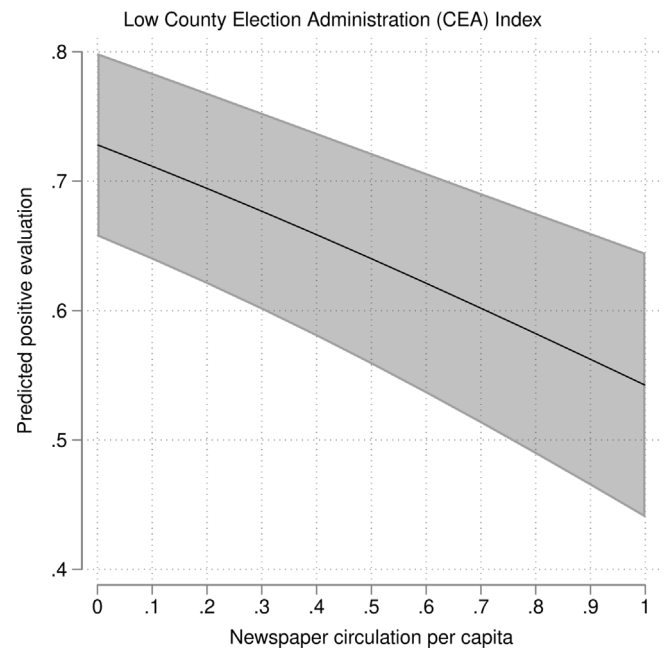


Fig. 4. Local media access and polling place evaluation, 2016–2020.

Note: The plot shows the marginal effect of newspaper circulation on the probability of giving a “very well run” evaluation to polling place under low election administration quality at the county level tracked by the CEA index.

likelihood of positive evaluations. While newspaper circulation has a statistically significant effect in these cases, its impact is not substantial, so we do not present visual results for scenarios with high CEA index values. Instead, we focus on situations with low election administration quality, as shown in Fig. 4. Here, the effect of poor administration is amplified by greater media access: as newspaper circulation per capita increases from 0.1 to 0.5, the probability of a positive evaluation drops by 7 percentage points—from 71% to 64%. This represents a meaningful change. The maximum theoretical effect is a 17 percentage point decrease in positive evaluations when moving from no newspaper circulation to the highest observed level.

In Fig. 5, we present the predicted positive evaluation of election administration as Republican Party vote margin, newspaper circulation, and partisanship change. All panels in the figure have Republican Party vote margin on the x-axis. We break down the analysis by partisanship. The top row displays the analyses for Democrats, and the second row displays the results for Republicans. All panels have predicted positive evaluation on the y-axis. The figure has common y-axis to improve visual comparison across partisanship. The panels on the left depict the marginal effect of GOP vote margin on predicted positive evaluation and hence provide the baseline partisan bias. The center panels show calculations under conditions of low newspaper circulation, and the panel on the right shows the effect of GOP vote share under high newspaper circulation.

We first look at the case of Democrats. We are interested in the comparison of the plots with low and high newspaper circulation. The slope of the line decreases, providing a visual representation of the insignificant coefficient we found in model 4. Under low local media access, Democrats are expected to give a positive evaluation with 89% probability when the GOP vote margin is at –50, all else constant. Under same conditions, when GOP vote margin increases to 50, the probability of positive evaluation drops to 84%. Under high local media access, the corresponding probabilities become 86% and 84%. The change in the probability (and the reduction in partisan bias) is important. High local media access reduces the impact of partisanship—a factor unrelated to the quality of election administration itself—on evaluations of election administration.

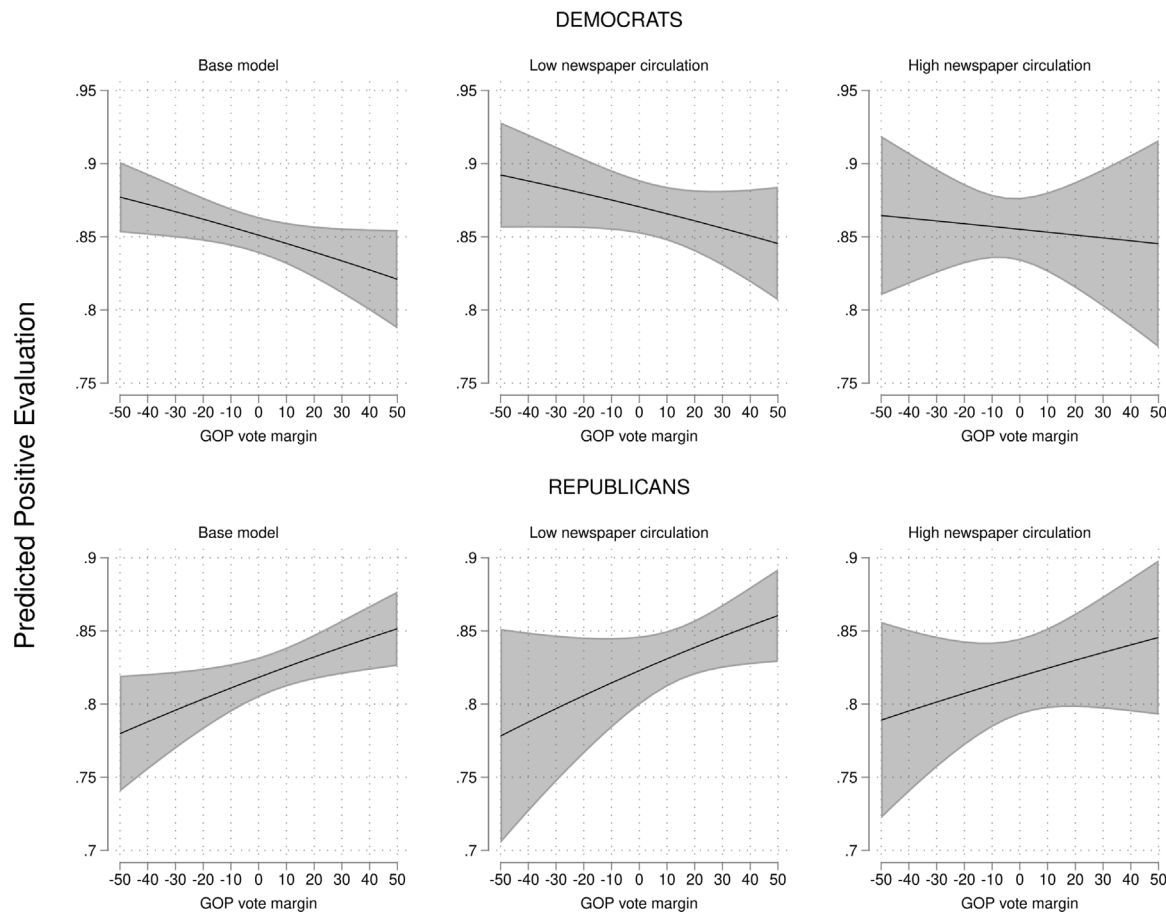


Fig. 5. Partisanship, news media and polling place evaluation, 2016–2020.

Note: The plots show the marginal effect of GOP vote margin and newspaper circulation on the probability of giving a “very well run” evaluation to polling place.

Next we look at the case of Republicans. When we compare the slope of the lines under low and high local media access, we notice a similar trend as with the Democrats, however this analysis suggests that the effect of news media among Democrats is stronger compared to Republicans. All else constant, Republicans are expected to give a positive evaluation with 86% probability when GOP vote margin is at 50. Under the same conditions, when GOP vote margins drops to −50, the probability of a positive evaluation drops to 78%. Under high local media access, the corresponding probabilities become 84% and 79%. Like with the Democrats, high local media access reduces partisan bias.

To sum up, the actual quality of election administration and partisanship are still important determinants of citizens’ perceptions about how the elections were run. We interact partisanship with GOP vote margin and show that the magnitude of loss or win at the local level helps predict the likelihood a citizen will evaluate the election administration positively. We also introduce local media access to this important line of inquiry, and find support for our theoretical expectations. First, high levels of local media can magnify the effect of actual election administration quality on voters’ evaluations of election administration. Further, when voters have more access to local news, they are more likely to evaluate election administration more accurately, with less influence from partisanship.

7.2. Robustness

We conducted several robustness checks to ensure our results are not driven by specific estimation methods or model specifications. First, we re-estimated the models using the original four-category coding of the dependent variable with an ordered logit approach. Second, we

tested alternative model specifications by using different measures of party identification and substituting ideology variables for partisanship. Finally, we applied multi-level estimation techniques. The results of these robustness checks are presented in S.I. Appendices B, C, and D. Across all these tests, our findings remain robust.

8. Conclusion

We undertook this study to better understand what shapes public perceptions of election administration—a crucial issue, as trust in elections underpins government legitimacy in representative democracies. Recent false claims of widespread voter fraud in the U.S. underscore the need to examine the institutional factors that influence electoral trust. While existing research has established links between partisanship, motivated reasoning, and views of election integrity, less is known about how local news may moderate these effects. Our goal is to bridge this gap by investigating whether access to local news influences perceptions of election administration integrity, thereby contributing to the conversation in this field.

Using data on polling places and surveys of individual perceptions of election administration, Abus (2024) hypothesized that under high polarization, partisans would base their polling place evaluations on reactions to the opposing party, even when objective information was available. He found that the out-party vote margin influenced polling place evaluations regardless of being on the winning or losing side. Building on this work, we offer a more nuanced analysis of the role partisanship plays by interacting self-reported partisanship with the GOP vote margin in each county. This approach demonstrates that the effect of partisanship is not constant and changes with the magnitude of win or loss for the party.

While election administration quality is an important factor in shaping perceptions of electoral integrity, it does not always predict confidence in elections. Characteristics of the information environment and partisan attitudes also influence how citizens evaluate government performance, including election administration. To better assess the impact of local news, we include a detailed county-level measure of election administration quality (the CEA index), allowing us to more accurately assess the influence of access to local news and partisanship while accounting for the actual quality of election administration. Although partisanship continues to shape individual perceptions-especially where newspaper access is low-we find that access to local news moderates these evaluations, reducing the dominance of partisan effects.

Election administration is handled locally, and local news outlets are best positioned to report on related problems or successes. Where local news is lacking, perceptions are more likely to be shaped by elite rhetoric, national trends, and individual partisanship rather than by local realities. Previous research shows that local newspaper closures and increased exposure to national news fuel affective polarization (Darr et al., 2018, 2021). In our analysis, we find that a higher Republican vote margin leads to more negative evaluations of election integrity among Democrats and more positive evaluations among Republicans. We also test whether access to local news moderates this partisan “winner/loser effect” and find that it does, albeit modestly: greater access to local news reduces partisan bias in evaluations of election integrity. Although the actual quality of election administration matters, we also find that access to local news moderates its effect, appearing to primarily enhance perceptions based on quality. When election administration quality is low in the context of high access to local news, the probability of expressing confidence in local elections declines.

These results support our theoretical expectations and offer a new perspective on perceptions of election integrity, moving beyond the traditional winner/loser framework. Our analysis shows that the negative impact of low election administration quality is much stronger than the positive impact of high quality. More broadly, our findings suggest that in today’s polarized climate, partisan loyalties heavily influence how people evaluate polling place practices-and potentially, election outcomes themselves.

We contribute to the discussion on election integrity by demonstrating that partisanship, election results, and administration quality alone do not fully determine public trust in elections; the information environment also plays a crucial role. This underscores the risks posed by the decline of local news and the rise of partisan media choices. It also highlights that while improving election administration is vital, it is not sufficient on its own to restore trust in this essential democratic institution.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Murat Abus: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kexin Bai:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Visualization, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Johanna Dunaway:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Resources, Validation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.102970>.

Data availability

The code and data required for the reproduction of analyses are deposited at Harvard Dataverse.

[Replication Data for: Local News, Partisanship, and Perceptions about Election Administration \(Reference data\) \(Dataverse\)](#)

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