How Partisan is Local Politics? A View from Public Meetings

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Local Politics in an Era of Partisan Polarization

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- **So, is the "politics" of local government today dominated by partisan conflicts at the national level?**

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- But, we know less about, in general, what both officials and participants deliberate on, how, and if it aligns with local constituency's partisan preferences (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014).

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  - Same local issues **framed** differently in Republican- and Democrat-voting places

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Incomplete picture of *inputs*:

- We know that in large municipalities, politicians' policies and preferences align with public preferences (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014)
- We think there's more attention to *Redistributive* issues in big liberal cities, and *Allocational* issues in small conservative towns (Peterson 1981)

Our Hypothesis About Local Policy-Making

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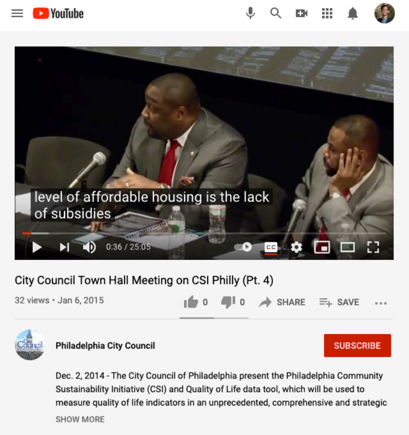
In local meetings, both the attention paid to local issues and how closely local political discussions adopt national partisan language should differ in predictable ways based on the partisan composition of municipality.

Data Collection from YouTube



URL

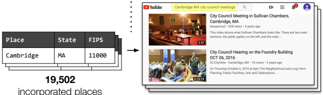
Data Collection from YouTube

Place	State	FIPS
Cambridge	MA	11000

19,502
incorporated places

Data Collection from YouTube

Step 1: Query for public meetings on YouTube API using census entries.



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*title or description text must contain `Place`, government body keyword (e.g. "`city council`"), meeting keyword (e.g. "`meeting`"), and `Date`

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Place	State	FIPS
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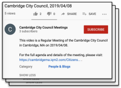
173,715 videos

```
[15:16]
and make Mass Ave a
safe transportation
option all the way
from Harvard ...
```

129,320 caption transcripts



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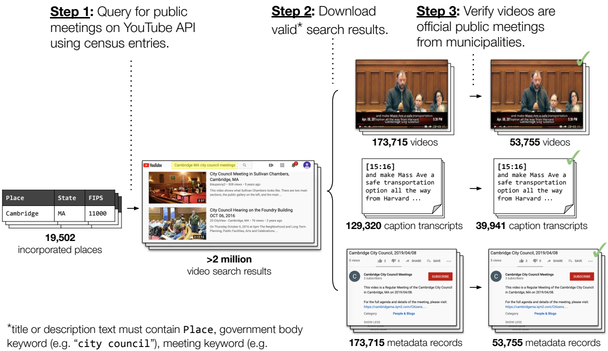

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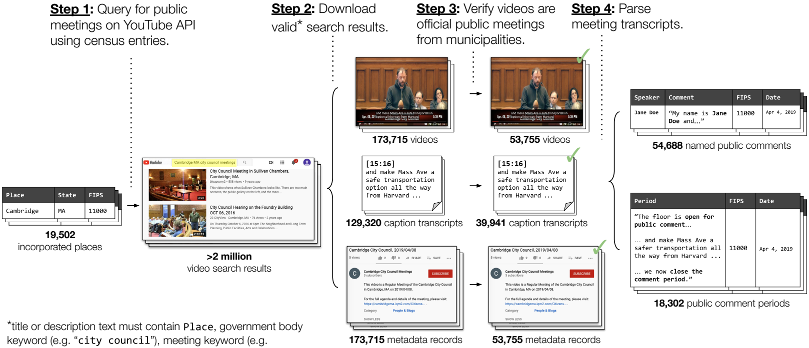

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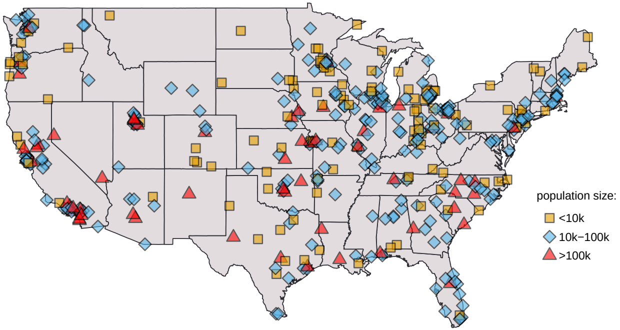
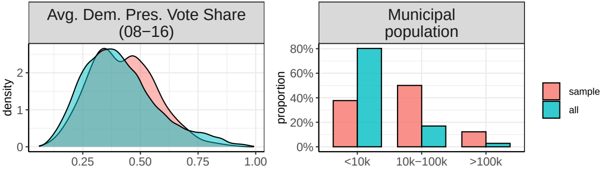
Sample Characteristics: Geographic Distribution



39,941 meetings across 1,222 municipalities in 47 states

Sample Characteristics: Representativeness



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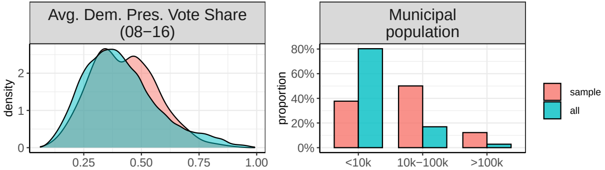

To account for skews, weight all places by inverse model-based sample propensity scores $\widehat{w}_i^{-1}$ for each municipality i:

$$w_i = \text{logit}^{-1}\left(\beta_1 s_{j[i]} + \beta_2 p_i + \beta_3 r_i + \beta_3 v_i\right)$$

where $s_{j[i]}$ is a state indicator, p_i is municipal population, r_i is average municipal revenue pierson2015government, v_i is average Pres. vote share (2008-2016), and w_i is an indicator for inclusion in our sample.

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   - Bound each comment by sequentially searching for plausible cut-offs:
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We split each meeting into public portion and officials portions $\rightsquigarrow$ exploring individual commenters in future work

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To avoid model dependence:

- Topic model with alternative K
- Topic model with alternative arena categorization
- Topics re-weighted at place-level by IPW weights
- Keyword-based topic model from Census of Gov'ts local issues

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"Some of the concern is in the 1800's we may not have known who was lynched for their land but in 2014 I know that the house down the street land belonged to Miss Mary [so] if we're going to be sustainable and [we] are in this initiative ... equality. We have to have families actually get dollars with our public money, we need to make sure the African American people are receiving those dollars which is not necessarily as fair and equitable right now."

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Elected official in Fairhope, AL:
"It is extremely naive for anyone to think that there would not be heavy abuse of the restrictions on purchase and consumption of alcohol contained in the draft ordinance turning the entire downtown area into an open bar; [it] would not seem to contribute to maintaining the character of our charming town ... beach communities work hard to attract swarms of drinkers, you know, adult and underage they don't care to promote economic growth in their towns ... Fairhope is not a beach community. Fairhope prides itself as being a family-friendly town. It's difficult for me to understand how allowing alcohol to be openly consumed on the city streets 24/7 would contribute to a family-friendly environment"

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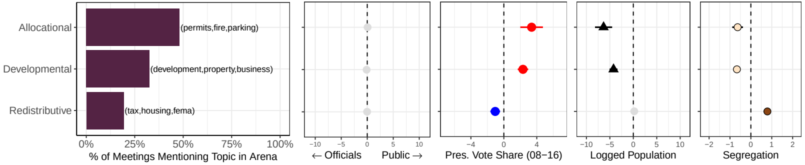
- Estimate using Expectation Maximization algorithm
- Fit again for public-only (β_i^{public}, ψ^{public}) and officials-only ($\beta_i^{\text{officials}}$, $\psi^{\text{officials}}$)

Findings

Small, But Robust Differences in Issue Attention



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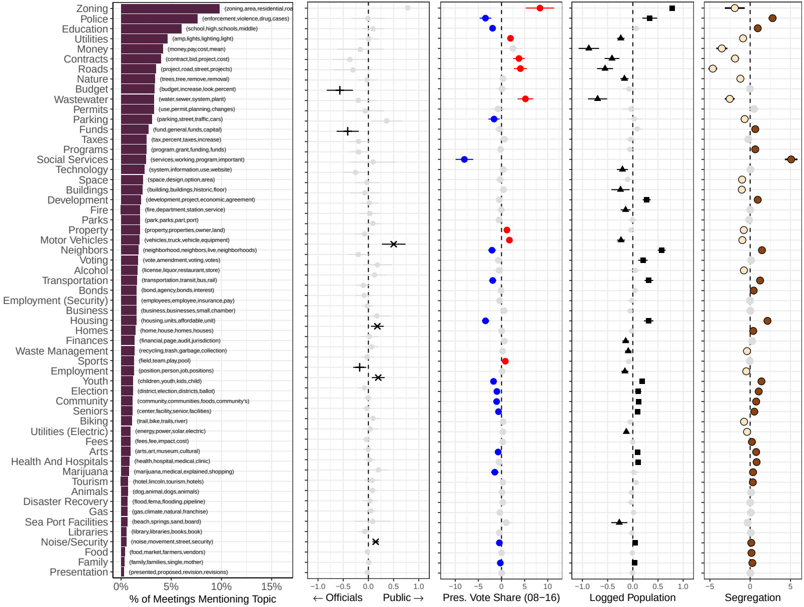
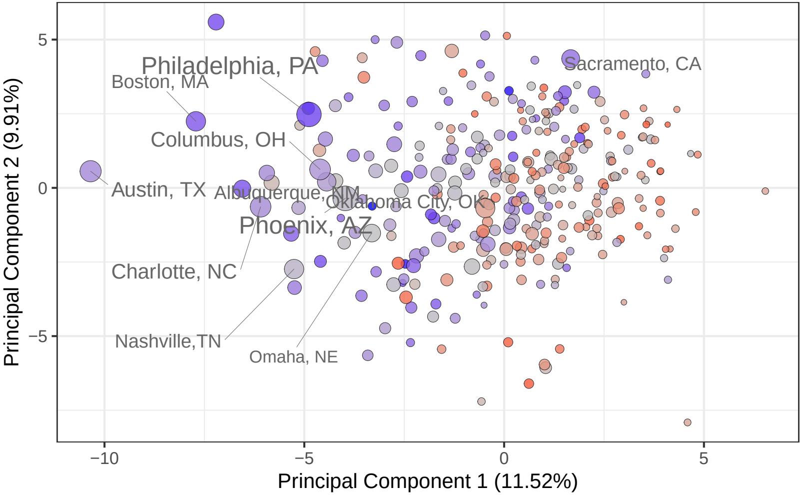


Small, But Robust Differences in Issue Attention

"Summaries" of issue attention correlates with partisan composition



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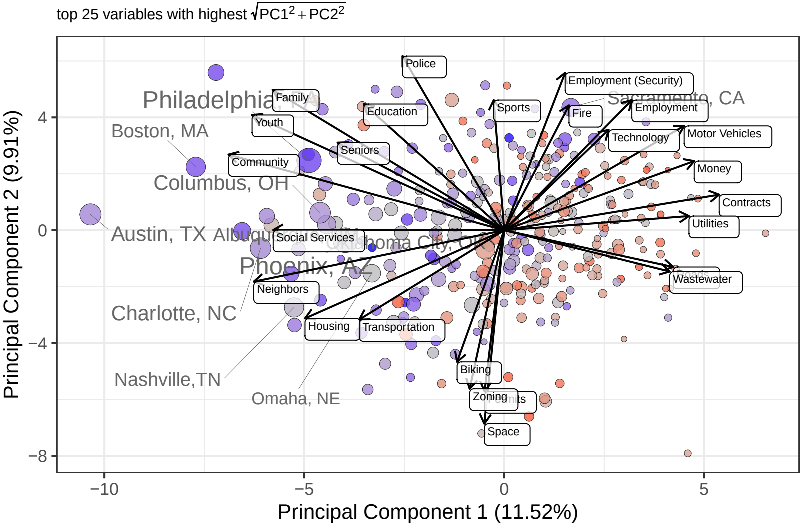

How Municipalities Deliberate Aligns with How They Vote

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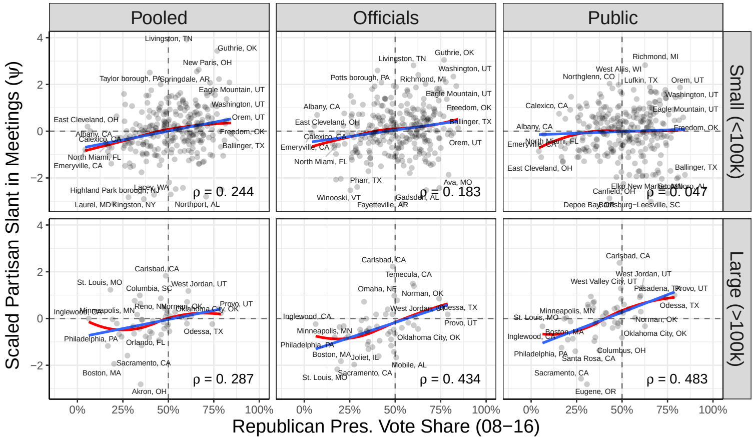
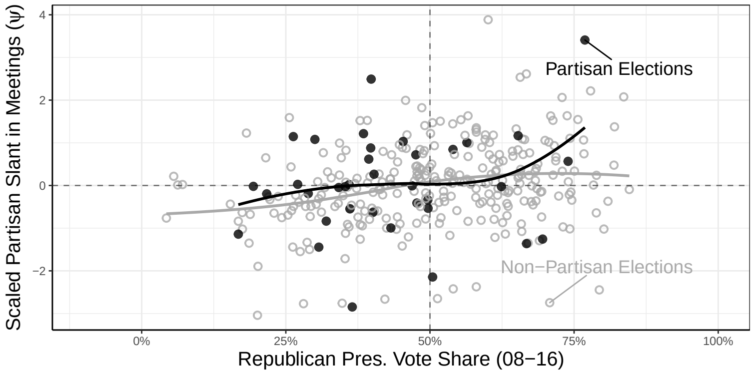
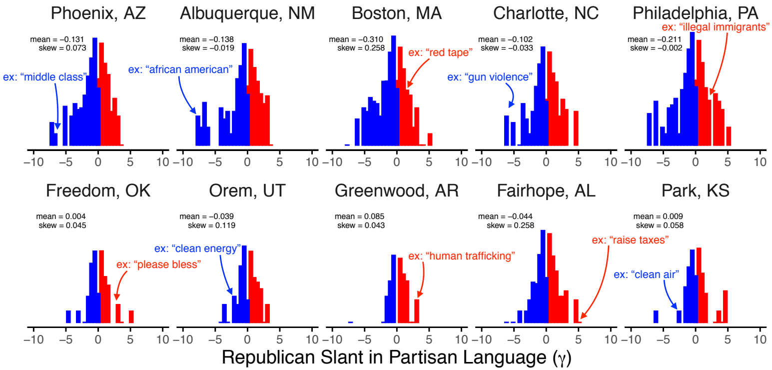


...And No Difference Between "Formally" Partisan and Non-Partisan Municipalities



Distribution of Partisan Expression *Within* Municipalities is Asymmetric, But Not Polarized



Partisan Language is Heard in Liberal Places, Omitted in Conservative Places

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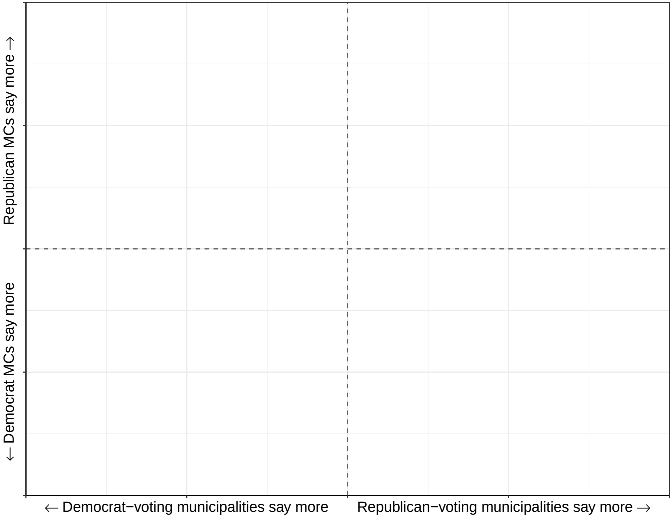

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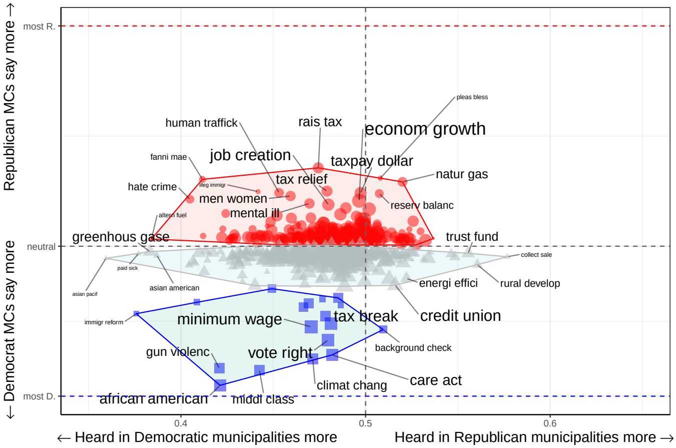

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Estimate heterogeneities in mentions of four national partisan frames (economic growth, tax relief, racial minorities, climate change) in context of local topics:

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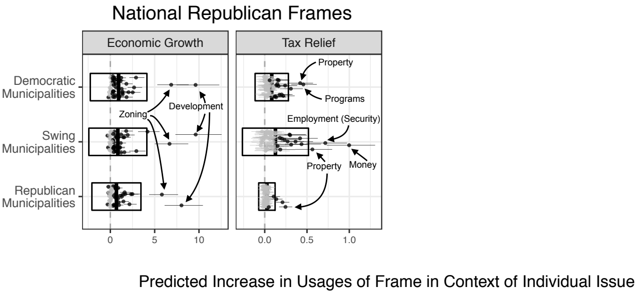

(Reference topic is Alcohol)

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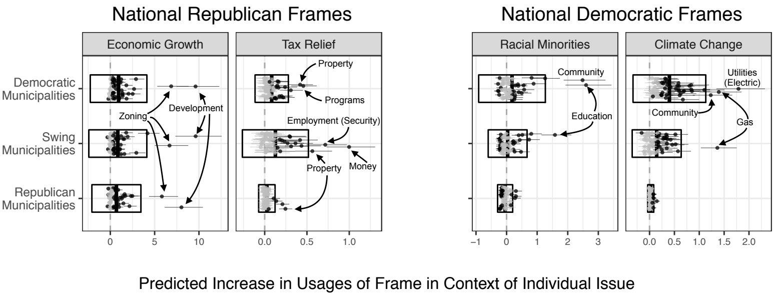

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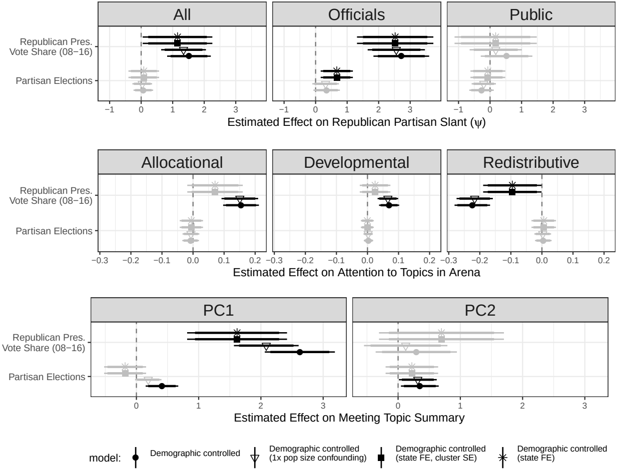
Summary of Model-Adjusted Effects

All effects persist after adjusting for population size, diversity, segregation, and state:



Sensitivity Analyses: Slant Alignment Result

How much omitted variable bias (relative to the the effect of log population size) would be needed to destroy or reverse alignment result?

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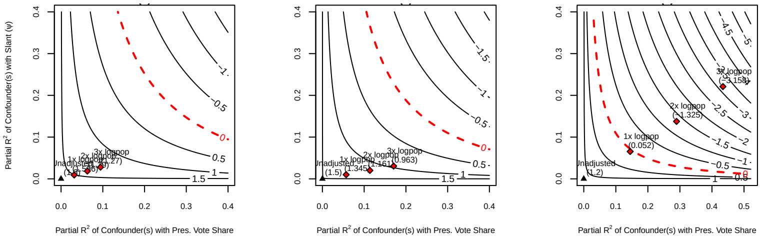

A More Nuanced View about Partisan Polarization

How strongly a town voted for Trump tells you about its' local politics.

A More Nuanced View about Partisan Polarization

How strongly a town voted for Trump tells you about its' local politics.

- But, differences in overall issue attention across place are pretty small
- Distribution of partisan slant is nearly identical across places
- Tail of liberal language in liberal cities drives differences in *average* slant
- Asymmetric *omission* of partisan language and frames (e.g., climate change, racial minorities) from conservative places

Concluding Thoughts

No Democratic or Republican way to pick up garbage

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No Democratic or Republican way to pick up garbage $\rightsquigarrow$ but, in local politics, how often it's discussed (relative to other issues) and whether climate change and racial equity considerations are made <u>is</u> influenced by partisanship.

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