ANATOMY OF A LANDSLIDE: WHY STATE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS ARE RARELY COMPETITIVE IN THE SOUTH

Abstract

*I examine South Carolina State House District 81 and 84 elections in 2018 as case studies of lack of competitiveness in state legislative elections. Using exit polls of both districts, I find that the districts were overwhelmingly Republican in composition. In the 81st this was due to racial gerrymandering placing black voters in a neighboring minority-majority district and in the 84th this was due to the greater racial polarization of voters. A State House district with the racial composition of the 84th and the voters of the 81st would be competitive. Partisanship matters because the vast majority of voters in the districts report the candidates’ partisanship as an important factor in their vote. This importance increases among voters with lower access to information. Finally, I find that Trump approval made a difference in vote but partisan polarization engendered by Trump led him not to be a serious factor in either race.*

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In 2018, despite a national wave election in favor of the Democratic Party, only four seats in South Carolina’s 124-member House of Representatives changed parties. Over the last several decades, political scientists have noted a major decline in the competitiveness of state legislative elections (Forgette, Garner and Winkle 2009; Weber, Tucker and Brace 1991), especially in the South (Forgette, Garner and Winkle 2012). The incumbency advantage, while declining among members of Congress remains high in state legislative elections and many seats are uncontested (Jewell and Breaux 1988), once again especially in the South (Squire 2000).

What explains the lack of competitiveness of state legislative elections, both in South Carolina and more broadly across the country? Compared to congressional, gubernatorial and presidential elections, elections for state legislature are less studied in the political science literature. Most analyses of voter behavior in state legislative elections use surveys such as the American National Election Studies or Cooperative Congressional Election Studies, which are focused on national context. Other studies utilize aggregate data vulnerable to the ecological fallacy. There is a paucity of individual-level data focusing on voter behavior in state legislative contests.

The present study examines the contests for South Carolina’s 81st House and 84th House Districts in 2018 as case studies of lack of state legislative race competitiveness. In the former race, despite an active campaign encompassing a vigorous get-out-the-vote initiative, Democratic challenger Elise Fox lost to Republican incumbent Bart Blackwell by almost thirty points. Republican incumbent Ronnie Young of the 84th District won still a greater margin over Democrat Jennifer Lariscey. In contrast to previous individual-level studies of state legislative races, I utilize an exit poll conducted of the districts with questions specifically focused on behavior and attitudes pertinent to state legislative races and designed to test conventional wisdom in political science regarding down-ballot contests.

Overall, my findings confirm previous work conducted on state legislative elections emphasizing the overriding importance of party identification in vote for down-ballot offices, as a heuristic employed by voters who are relatively uninformed about local politics. In both the 81st and 84th Districts, the vast majority of voters rated the party of the candidates as either *the most important* or *one important* factor in deciding their vote for state legislature. In addition, voters who did not consume local news were significantly more likely to rate partisanship as *the most important* factor compared to those who did. The difference was especially pronounced among strong partisans.

In addition, I find that evaluations of President Trump had an effect on vote for state legislature in the 81st and 84th Districts. Voters who disapprove of President Trump’s job performance were significantly more likely to vote for the Democrat compared to those who approve of Trump. Importantly, the effect of Trump approval operates separately from the effect of partisanship. However, in the 81st and 84th District, discontent with Trump did not significantly affect the reelection chances of the Republicans because support for Trump was strongly correlated with party identification and the majority of both districts supported Donald Trump.

I also examine the partisan and racial composition of vote support for the candidates. I find party identification to be racially polarized in both districts but that the polarization was significantly higher in the 84th District compared to the 81st District. A multivariate model of party identification indicates that the same factors that predicted party identification among white voters in one District did so in the next. However, the white electorate in the 84th District had demographic and attitudinal characteristics that made it more amenable to Republican identification: namely that fewer individuals had a college education, a much larger proportion were evangelical Christians and white voters in the 84th District expressed greater racial resentment than those in the 81st.

Essentially the electorates of each district advantaged their Republican candidate but in different ways: There were fewer white voters in the 84th District but they were more Republican. In the 81st District, voters were less racially polarized but the greater number of white voters made up for this.

Overall, the analysis confirms much of the conventional wisdom about state legislative elections. I partially support the hypothesis that the difficulty of Democrats to win office in the South is due to racial gerrymandering purging most districts of black voters to create minority-majority districts. However, in districts where a significant black minority exists such as the 84th, racial polarization of voting may also provide a challenge to Democrats. Neither gerrymandering nor polarization explains the whole story, but each does tell part of the tale.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

While elections, especially congressional and presidential elections, have been exhaustively studied in American political science, there is a relative dearth of information about how elections work for state legislative offices. This is in spite of the increasingly prominent role that state legislatures are coming to play in America’s policy debates (Grumbach 2018). Much of what literature does exist is a theoretical extension of the American voting behavior work in national elections. Research focused on state legislatures indicates that state legislative elections are routinely uncontested, rarely competitive and driven by forces largely outside the control of the candidates. In addition, like congressional elections, state legislative races have been subject to the “vanishing marginals” phenomenon in recent decades as the number of competitive races continues to decline and over half of seats are routinely uncontested in some states.

Like much elections research, assumptions about voters in state legislative races can be traced back to the Michigan school (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Downs 1957) which posited voters as generally poorly informed about candidates and issues but able to overcome these deficits through the use of heuristics. The most important such heuristic employed among voters is party identification. The use of candidate party as a guide to voting behavior is believed to be especially prevalent in “down-ballot” races for lower office, where voters may be especially unfamiliar with candidates and their issues positions. Evidence shows that in such races, party identification plays an important role in guiding the vote (Garlick 2015; Peterson 2017) and the use of partisan heuristics is inversely related to the information available on candidates (Peterson 2017). The increasing polarization and antagonism between the parties has also led to the effect of partisanship on down-ballot races increasing in recent years (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). Related research on coattails finds state legislative races to be strongly affected by presidential (Campbell 1986; Rogers 2016) and gubernatorial (Hogan 2005) performance.

At the same time, some research finds that spending does make a difference in both vote (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991) and turnout (Hogan 2013) in state legislative races with money benefitting challengers more than incumbents. However, in keeping with the down-ballot partisanship theory, the effect of money on election outcomes is often conditioned by the number of “up for grabs” voters in the electorate (Seabrook 2010); in districts where partisanship is more rigid, money matters little on the outcome.

Contrary to the idea of elections as mechanisms for holding officials accountable for their behavior in office, there is little evidence that the performance of state legislators in office makes any difference on their electoral fates (Tucker and Weber 1987) although some evidence does indicate ideologically extreme state legislators are more likely to be challenged and lose reelection (Birkhead 2015). Various other factors have been shown to affect state legislative elections such as gender (Hogan 2010), legislative professionalization (Berry et al. 2000) and incumbency (Garand 1991; Holbrook and Tidmarch 1991; Jewell and Breaux 1988) although among these factors, partisanship remains the most important (Hogan 2004).

Mirroring trends at the federal level, the percentage of marginal seats seems to be decreasing over time (Weber et al. 1991) which has been connected to the increasing prevalence of gerrymandering (Forgette et al. 2009). This lack of competitiveness is most prevalent in the South (Squire 2000) which in recent years is attributed to the Voting Rights Act leading to the creation of majority African-American Democratic districts and GOP leaning districts with few black voters (Forgette et al. 2012) as well as the increasing rigidity of partisanship as the South has completed its realignment (Myers 2018).

However the vast majority of the above literature has used either aggregate election return data vulnerable to the ecological fallacy (Robinson 1950) or election studies focused primarily on national politics and contests higher up the ballot. In addition, with some exceptions (Herrnson et al. 2007) we have little information about the campaign strategies that candidates pursue and how those strategies affect the behavior of voters. Thus much of the information we have about the behavior of candidates and voters we have come by indirectly. The present study seeks to remedy this by utilizing a state legislative-specific exit poll of South Carolina House races with questions geared to these contests.

METHODS

The present work is a quantitative case study of two fairly typical state legislative district elections in the South, South Carolina’s 81st House and 84th House Districts during the 2018 general election. The studies pairs an approximately 400-voter Election Day exit poll conducted of the 81st District with a 300-voter poll in the 84th District, both specifically utilizing questions about state legislative races.

The exit poll was conducted by the [Redacted] as part of a long-term biennial series of surveys of Aiken County that have been ongoing. The overall project utilized cluster sampling of sixteen precincts across Aiken County at twelve polling locations. In addition to the representative sample of Aiken County, extra precincts were sampled in both the 81st and 84th House District and questions were added specific to state legislative races in those districts. In the 81st district, eight of the district’s twenty-six precincts in five polling locations were sampled. In the 84th district, five of the district’s twenty-three precincts in four polling locations were sampled. The locations were chosen for demographic, partisan and geographic representativeness of the districts. Surveys were collected in two waves on Election Day, once during the morning and once during the afternoon. Systematic sampling was utilized with exit poll workers approaching voters leaving polling places. In the District 81 sample, there was a response rate of 75%. In the District 84 sample, there was a response rate of 73%. Once the data were compiled, rim weighting was used to weight the data by vote for State House and straight ticket voting. These weights were then used as the basis for entropy balancing (Hainmueller 2012) to construct weights based on the voter file which include the covariance structure for race, gender and year of birth.

Questions on the poll asked in both districts included basic demographic questions as well as standard partisan and ideological questions and finally questions specific to the State House race, including what factors played the largest role in the respondent’s vote, ideological rating of the candidates and questions about voters’ interaction with the campaigns.

ELECTION BACKGROUND

The South Carolina 81st House District is located entirely in central Aiken County. The district encompasses most of the City of Aiken. The 81st has a reputation as Republican—although exact numbers are difficult to come by because the district splits precincts, both Mitt Romney and Donald Trump received approximately 63% of the vote share of the district in its present configuration. While the Cook Political Report does not offer Partisan Voting Indices for state legislative districts, this gives the 81st District a R+16 lean. The 81st District has been held by Republicans since the 1990’s; in its present configuration no Democrat had run for the seat before 2018.

Demographically, in keeping with the observations of Forgette et al. (2012), the 81st District is significantly less diverse than Aiken County or the City of Aiken as a whole. While a significant African-American population resides in the City of Aiken, the majority of this population is encompassed by the neighboring 82nd House District, a majority African-American district. While 24% of Aiken County voters are African-American and 23% of voters in the City of Aiken are as well, only 13% of voters in the 81st District were black in 2018. The 81st District also contains a significant retirement population; over one-third of the voters in the 2018 election were 65 or older. The district contains the wealthiest and most educated portions of the county including a significant number of non-southern professionals who work at the local Savannah River Site government laboratory.

Going into the 2018 election, the district was represented by Bart Blackwell. Blackwell is a local business owner who was first elected in 2016 after winning a contentious Republican primary but facing no Democratic opposition in the general election. In 2018, Blackwell was challenged by Democrat Elise Fox. Fox is an engineer at the Savannah River Site government laboratory. She had not held elected office nor run for office before. Fox ran a fusion candidacy, running on both the Democratic and Working Families party labels.

The 84th House District is located in Aiken County’s “Valley” region—a corridor between the City of Aiken and Augusta. This area has a reputation for being the working-class core of the county. Until the mid-20th century, the Valley was the site of significant manufacturing that has evaporated in recent decades. Thus, the region has a reputation as economically depressed. Like the neighboring 81st, the region also is solidly Republican. Recent Republican presidential candidates have also received slightly more than 60% of the vote in the 84th, giving the district an approximately R+15 or R+16 lean. However, until recently, the Valley region was one of the last areas in the county with a majority white population where Democrats and candidates of color were still being elected down-ballot. The County Council district comprising the core of the 84th District was represented by a Democrat until her decision not to run for reelection in 2016. In addition, an officially nonpartisan candidate of color connected to the local Democratic establishment served on the School Board representing much of the Valley until 2019.

In notable contrast to the 81st District as well as the observations of Forgette et al. (2012) the 84th District has a fairly significant African-American population (approximately 26% of the electorate in 2018) which is greater than the proportion of the population that is black in the county. Also in contrast to the 81st District, the 84th is significantly younger, less educated and less wealthy.

The 84th District had a history of Republican representation for most of the past decades. Previous incumbent Republican Chris Corley had resigned in 2017 due to personal scandal. In response, Chair of the Aiken County Council and fixture in local Aiken politics Ronnie Young had run unopposed in the Republican primary (itself a surprising feat in the Republican-leaning district and a testament to Young’s stature and the formidability of his candidacy) and won a 2017 runoff against Democrat Jennifer Lariscey. Young was one of the best-known politicians in county politics and won initial election in a landslide. The 2018 election was a rematch between Young and Lariscey.

The races for State House 81 and 84 played out against a larger background of voter discontent with the presidency of Donald Trump and frustration with Republicans in Congress. It was widely expected that Republicans would suffer losses in the midterm and there was speculation that the US House of Representatives would shift control to the Democratic Party which ultimately did occur.

Overall, the 81st District election favored Blackwell’s reelection but there were some factors that pointed to the possibility of a Fox upset. The 81st District is configured, like many districts in the South, to be purged of African-American voters into a nearby majority black district and was significantly Republican leaning. This is in addition to its significantly older (and presumably Republican leaning) population. However, the district is much wealthier and more well-educated than most districts in the South and comprises a suburb of the Augusta area with many non-southern professionals working at a nearby government research facility. Given that there are documented trends of suburbs and educated white voters shifting in a Democratic direction, there was a hope among Democrats that an upset might be possible.

Blackwell was going into the election as an incumbent and evidence has indicated that even sophomore state legislators experience a vote surge (Holbrook and Tidmarch 1991). At the same time, indications that presidential performance plays an important role in vote for state legislative elections (e.g. Rogers 2016) and the well-documented discontent with Donald Trump’s presidency in the 2018 election led to hopes that national conditions could put wind at the back of the Democratic challenger.

In the 84th District, Young’s stature and previous 20-point win against Lariscey without incumbency advantage in the office combined with the 84th District’s Republican lean led many to regard the seat as safe for Young in 2018. Although the district had previously elected Democrats, given the movement of the white working class in recent years into the Republican camp, the 84th seemed to mirror many other areas of the country where election as a Democrat was a difficult prospect.

PARTISANSHIP AND RACE IN THE 81ST AND 84TH

One prominent theory regarding the lack of competitiveness in state legislative elections in the South concerns the Voting Rights Act. Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act mandates that no “standard, practice or procedure shall be imposed or applied by any State or political subdivision to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.” Part of the implementation of Section 2, codified in the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1968) is the creation of minority-majority districts (i.e. districts where a majority of the population is racial minorities) to prevent dilution of minority voters’ strength. Some research (Forgette et al. 2012) holds that this practice has led to a lack of competition in southern state legislative races because the creation of minority-majority districts partitions districts in the South into either Democratic-leaning districts where a majority of the population is African-Americans or Republican-leaning districts with very few voters of color.

The 81st the 84th District races provide an interesting test of this theory. African-Americans compose a portion of the 84th District representative of the greater county (i.e. they are not artificially purged via gerrymandering) while the 81st District loses most of the African-Americans in the City of Aiken to the neighboring 82nd District which is majority African-American. Interestingly, in spite of this, the Democratic candidate in the 81st District received a greater share of the vote than the Democrat in the 84th District.

An initial exploration of this question is found in Tables 1 and 2. I examine the degree to which partisanship and race are polarized in the 81st versus the 84th District. It is immediately obvious that the two districts differ in the composition of the Democrats and the corresponding racial and partisan polarization. While white voters make up 63% of Democrats in the 81st District, they only make up 27% of Democrats in the 84th District. Thus, while the 84th District contains many more African-Americans than the 81st District, it does not have more Democrats.

[Tables 1 and 2 About Here]

As mentioned, the districts differ in their characteristics in a number of ways that may explain why one district is more racially polarized than the other. The white voters in the 81st District are generally wealthier and better educated than those in the 84th District. In addition, many of the individuals in the 81st District are not native southerners and either retired to Aiken or work at the nearby government laboratory. Finally, the City of Aiken is far more racially segregated compared to the Valley region. The racial threat hypothesis (Giles and Hertz 1994) predicts that white voters in the South are more likely to identify as Republicans when African-Americans are more immediate and their perceived threat is high. Thus, it may be the paradoxical case that white voters in the more segregated 81st District suffer from a lower level of racial threat.

To evaluate these theories, I estimate multinomial logit models predicting party identification (leaners included with partisans) among white voters in the 81st and 84th Districts. In addition to basic demographics exemplifying the differences between the districts, I also include the length of time individuals have lived in Aiken County, as well as voter response to a question regarding reverse discrimination which is taken to be a proxy for racial resentment. The results of the model appear in Table 3. For clarity, I also include the first-difference changes in the probability of white voters in each district identifying as Democrats with a one-unit increase in each variable in Figure 1.

[Table 3 About Here]

[Figure 1 About Here]

Because the sample sizes of these districts are relatively small, the confidence intervals are large and it is thus difficult to declare clear contrasts between the two districts in the effects of the variables. Nonetheless, when we examine the estimated first difference effects along with the demographic and attitudinal composition of the white voters in each district, clear explanations emerge for the greater racial polarization observed in District 84. To improve ease of interpretation, the breakdown of the various variables examined for white voters in the two districts is included in Table 4.

[Table 4 About Here]

The variables that exerted the strongest effect on white voters’ likelihood to identify as Democrats in both districts were college education, feelings of reverse racism (i.e. racial resentment), being an evangelical Christian and (in the case of District 81) being a woman. With this in mind, it is easy to see how District 84’s white voters came to be so much more polarized than District 81. On each of the four variables mentioned that exerted the strongest effect on whether a white voter identified as a Democrat or Republican, white voters in District 84 had aggregate demographic and attitudinal variables significantly more amenable to Republican identification. Significantly fewer white voters in the 84th District have a college education compared to the 81st. Also, over half of white voters in the 84th District identify as evangelical Christians compared to only one-third of white voters in the 81st District. Finally, white voters in the 84th District expressed greater racial resentment as measured by the reverse racism question compared to white voters in the 81st District. This tended to polarize the 84th District’s white vote. Overall, Fox received 10 points more of the white vote than Lariscey did.

Much has been made of Democratic success in the South in 2018 in suburban communities with large populations of wealthy, educated and relatively progressive white voters. For example, in neighboring Georgia, 14 Republican State House districts were flipped to Democratic in the 2018 elections, all in the Atlanta suburbs. While it would be a stretch to lump the South Carolina 81st House District into this growing trend in urban areas, the white voters in the district are significantly more educated, less religious and express less racial resentment than other districts in the county. Despite the district’s racial composition of over 85% white voters, Donald Trump has only a slight majority of approval. In contrast, in the neighboring 84th District with its much larger population of color, almost two-thirds of voters express approval for Donald Trump. Looking purely at numbers, we might partially lay the landslide victory of Bart Blackwell over Elise Fox in the 81st to the fact that fewer than 15% of the district’s voters are black in keeping with the Forgette et al. (2012) hypothesis.

However, the 84th District gives us reason to doubt the Forgette et al. (2012) hypothesis that minority-majority gerrymandering is completely to blame. Despite the large African-American population in the district the high level of racial polarization makes it all but impossible to flip to the Democratic side.

Interestingly, if either of the districts had had the racial composition of the 84th but the relative lack of racial polarization found in the 81st, it is likely that the race for State House there would have been competitive. Using the proportions of African-Americans and white voters found in the 84th but looking at the partisan vote breakdown for race for the 81st District puts the Democratic candidate at 45% of the vote and the Republican at 55%. To use a state example, in the 2012 presidential election, both Georgia and Alabama had approximately 27% of the electorate composed of African-Americans, similar to the 84th District. However, in that election Obama won approximately the same percentage of the white vote in Georgia that Elise Fox won in the 81st District and in Alabama Obama won approximately the same percentage of the white vote that Jennifer Lariscey won in the 84th District. Overall Obama won 38% of the vote in Alabama and 45% of the vote in Georgia.

PARTISANSHIP AS A HEURISTIC

Most extant theories of voter behavior in state legislative contests emphasize the role of party identification as a heuristic for poorly-informed voters in down-ballot election contests (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Garlick 2015; Peterson 2017). In particular, it is speculated that partisanship’s value to voters as a heuristic in guiding votes is inversely related to amount of information voters have regarding the candidates (Peterson 2017). We should therefore expect that the candidates’ party will play a more important role among voters who exist in a poorer information environment.

One difficulty with gauging the effect of political information on the effect of partisanship is that the two are correlated; studies going all the way back to the canonical documents of the Michigan school (Campbell et al. 1960) find that strong partisans tend to also be the most politically sophisticated and be among the largest consumers of political information. However, these individuals are also the least likely to defect in their vote, in large part because their partisanship leads them to process political information differently (Bartels 2002; Zaller 1992).

The exit polls conducted of District 81 and 84 asked a variety of questions, including the importance of various factors on vote for State House, one of which was the party of the candidates. In addition, the poll also asked voters about their media consumption habits. Based on the literature, we should expect that partisans who do not follow local news will be more reliant on partisanship in their decision of whom to vote for in the state legislative election. Table 5 confirms this, with 60% of those in District 81 who do not follow local news rating the party of the candidates as the single most important factor in deciding their State House vote compared to just 37% of those who follow local news. This difference is significant at *p* < 0.005 with a Cramer’s V of 0.235. The differences for District 84 are more modest but in the predicted direction, with a six-point gap between those who watch news or don’t rating partisanship as the most important factor in the expected direction. This difference is not statistically significant and has a Cramer’s V of just 0.088.

[Table 5 About Here]

Breaking down this relationship by strong partisans versus other partisans reveals that the effect of news on the importance of partisanship is conditioned on the strength of an individual’s party identification. While a majority of strong partisans in the 81st District who both watch local news and do not watch local news cite the party of the candidates as the most important factor in their vote, there is an over 30-point difference between consumers of local news and those who do not consume local news in District 81 (Table 6). 83% of strong partisans who do not watch local news cite partisanship as the most important factor affecting their state legislative vote compared to just 51% of strong partisans who watch local news. Among voters who are not strong partisans (e.g. weak partisans, leaners and pure independents), the effect of news consumption on the importance of partisanship is more modest (*p* > 0.05, Cramer’s V = 0.173) compared to strong partisans (*p* < 0.001, Cramer’s V = 0.347). Among these non-strong partisan voters, there is only a 13-point difference between local news consumers and non-local news consumers (Table 6).

[Table 6 About Here]

[Table 7 About Here]

District 84 (Table 7) once again shows fairly muted differences. This is possibly due to incumbent Ronnie Young’s well-known stature providing an incumbency advantage and forcing voters to rely less on the partisan heuristic. Voters in the 84th District attached a significantly greater importance to the personal characteristics of the candidates compared to the 81st District in deciding their vote.

At the same time, it is important to note that even for individuals who consume local news, partisanship still remains an important factor. In Tables 5, 6 and 7, the percentages that view partisanship of the candidates as either a minor factor or not a factor are essentially the same among those who consume local news and those who do not. The major difference between the two groups in all cases is that those who do not consume local news are more likely to view partisanship as the *most* important factor rather than *one* important factor.

THE PRESIDENT

Research on state legislative elections, following in the tradition of research on congressional elections, views voter evaluations of the president as an especially important factor in how individuals vote for state legislature (Campbell 1986; Rogers 2016). In presidential years, this can serve to create a coattail effect for a popular president but as in congressional midterms, state legislators of the president’s party may be in peril during off-year elections. The national unpopularity of Donald Trump’s presidency led to an expectation among popular political commentators that the 2018 election was going to be a wave election for the Democrats similar to 1994, 2010 and 2014 for Republicans and 2006 for Democrats.

Given that Blackwell and Young won their districts in landslides in spite of this, should we assume that evaluations of the president played no role in vote for state legislature? The exit poll asked voters to evaluate the performance of Donald Trump in office on a four-point scale ranging from Strongly Approve to Strongly Disapprove, which was recoded to -3, -1, 1, and 3 (with more positive numbers indicating stronger approval). In my analysis I was interested in evaluating not only the effect of approval of the president but also how the effect of this approval might be moderated by an individual’s partisanship. Given the overriding role that partisanship played in vote for state legislature, is it possible that the reason Trump’s unpopularity did not dent Blackwell’s support is because Republicans were inclined to ignore negative evaluations of Trump and Democrats were inclined to ignore any positive evaluations of the president. Thus, I interacted dummy variables for Democratic and Republican identification (or leaning) with the Trump approval variable. I also controlled for gender, race, age, education and ideology.

The results in Table 8 indicate that, in keeping with previous research, a voter’s approval of the incumbent president affects her vote for state legislature in ways consistent with punishing or rewarding the party of the president. The coefficient on the Trump approval variable in both districts is negative and given that the reference category is vote for the Republican this indicates that increasing support for Trump decreases the likelihood of voting for the Democrat and vice-versa. Also notable is that the interaction terms for Trump approval and identification as a Democrat or Republican are small and not statistically significant in both districts. This indicates that the effect of approval for the president operates separately from one’s party identification; the effect of presidential approval is not conditioned by party identification.

[Table 8 About Here]

To further clarify the effect of presidential approval on vote choice in the State House 81 and 84 races, Figures 2 and 3 plot the predicted probability of voting for the Democratic candidate among Democrats, Republicans and independents when one strongly approves and strongly disapproves of Trump. It is apparent among all groups that support for Trump plays an important role in an individual’s vote for state legislature. A Democrat who strongly approved of Donald Trump in District 81 was less likely to vote for the Democratic candidate than a Republican who strongly disapproved of Trump. As one might expect, the effect of Trump approval was particularly strong among independents. This is consistent with previous research finding that “up for grabs” voters are more persuadable by other factors than partisanship (Seabrook 2010).

[Figure 2 About Here]

[Figure 3 About Here]

However, an important factor to remember when examining these results is that the vast majority of Democrats in District 81 and 84 disapproved of Trump (93%) while the vast majority of Republicans approved of Trump (88%). Despite the unpopularity of Trump nationwide, in the 81st and 84th Districts, over half of voters expressed some support for Donald Trump. Thus, while approval of the president clearly played a role in how individuals voted, the lack of variation within partisan groups in support for Donald Trump and especially the robust support for the president among the Republican majority of the districts meant that Trump did not significantly endanger the reelection of Representatives Blackwell or Young.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The sound defeat of Elise Fox and Jennifer Cook Lariscey in the 81st and 84th districts, respectively in 2018, surprised many in Aiken County given the bids mounted by these candidates. It is an unfortunate fact that genuinely competitive state legislative elections are rare, especially in the South. The purpose of this paper has been to investigate why the competitive elections are rare and to employ a previously rarely seen source of individual-level exit poll data specifically geared towards state legislative races. In the process, I hoped to evaluate the theory that the racial gerrymandering of the Voting Rights Act and *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1968) has led to a lack of competition in southern states by creating districts purposely designed to achieve certain electoral outcomes. I also wished to evaluate the role of partisanship in down-ballot contests vis-à-vis information about politics among voters. Finally, I hoped to examine the effect of presidential popularity on votes for State House.

Immediately apparent was differing levels of racial polarization between the 81st and 84th District. As the white realignment of the South has reached its conclusion, finding differing levels of racial polarization in neighboring districts encouraged further study. Interestingly I found that the models used to predict party identification in both districts had relatively similar parameters, indicating that the differing demographic compositions of the two districts was the cause of the differing racial polarization. The 81st District bears a slight resemblance to areas of the South that political commentators have speculated may become Democratic areas of strength: wealthy, educated white areas located near cities that have large populations of non-southerners. The lack of competitiveness in this district was due to the extremely low diversity as many African-Americans were redistricted to the neighboring 82nd House District. On the other hand, the 84th District has a large African-American minority. However, nearly all white voters in the district are Republicans, once again leading to an uncompetitive election. I conclude that it is too simple to blame the lack of competitiveness in Republican-leaning districts solely on racial polarization or gerrymandering. Both play a role.

The focus on race and partisanship in state legislative races is necessary because much research indicates that these races are driven by partisanship as a heuristic to help poorly informed voters make decisions for offices in which they may be unfamiliar with the candidates. I test the idea that partisanship is a substitute for a lack of information by examining the importance voters place on it in making their choice for State House elections and how this importance changes with the level of information that voters presumably have access to. I find suggestive evidence that voters who do not consume local news were more reliant on partisanship to decide their vote for State House in District 81 and that this effect is increased among strong partisans. The lack of significant findings in District 84 may be in large part a result of the fact that the incumbent in that race had much higher visibility and so the incumbency advantage played a greater role in that race.

Finally, I examine the theory of some researchers (e.g. Rogers 2016) that state legislative elections are in large part referenda on the president. I do find that voters’ approval of Donald Trump’s presidency in 2018 predicted their vote, with disapproving voters more likely to vote for Democratic candidates and approving voters supporting the Republican. In a multivariate logit model, the effect of Trump approval existed outside of an individual’s party identification and was not moderated by it. However, the robust support for Trump in both districts as well as the fact that very few Democrats approved of Trump and very few Republicans disapproved of him meant that approval did not appear to play a major role in either the 81st or 84th District election.

Overall, even though state legislatures continue to play an ever larger role in Americans’ lives and take a leadership role in making policy nationwide, most Americans know relatively little about their state legislator. Their vote is based on low levels of information and primarily driven by partisanship. For this reason, the partisan makeup of state legislative districts is important. When we find ourselves asking why state legislative elections are so rarely competitive, especially in the South, a useful first place to look is therefore the partisanship of the district. The Democratic challengers in both districts examined here lost their elections because the districts are overwhelmingly Republican. However, the districts are notably different—the 84th District had a significant African-American population but suffered from major racial polarization in terms of its party identification. On the contrary, the white voters of the 81st District were not nearly as polarized. However, the small proportion of African-Americans residing in the district led it to have a strong Republican lean.

What few places exist in the South where districts are competitive, we find white voters that are not racially polarized and districts with a strong racial minority. These factors combined can make districts competitive, often near major cities. The 81st District and 84th District both had one of these characteristics, but not both. Thus the races were not competitive.

State legislative elections do serve to lead to voters to reward or punish the party of the president but as feelings on the president become ever more polarized on partisan lines, everything once again comes down to the role party identification plays in our modern elections.

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Table 1: Race and Partisanship in the 81st House District

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Democratic | Independent | Republican | All |
| White | 63.4% | 91.9% | 96.7% | 87.2% |
| Black | 34.4% | 4.7% | 0.8% | 10.2% |
| Other | 2.2% | 3.4% | 2.5% | 2.6% |

Percentages represent the percent of each party identification group comprised by a particular race.

Table 2: Race and Partisanship in the 84th House District

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Democratic | Independent | Republican | All |
| White | 28.7% | 77.2% | 96.0% | 72.4% |
| Black | 71.3% | 16.4% | 2.2% | 25.8% |
| Other | 0.0% | 6.3% | 1.8% | 1.8% |

Percentages represent the percent of each party identification group comprised by a particular race.

Table 3: Logit Model Predicting Vote for State House 81

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | | | **State House 81** | | | | **State House 84** | | | |
|  |  | | | **Democrat** | | **Independent** | | **Democrat** | | **Independent** | |
|  |  | | | **Coeff.** |  | **Coeff.** |  | **Coeff.** |  | **Coeff.** |  |
| **Variable** |  | | | **(SE)** | ***p-*value** | **(SE)** | ***p-*value** | **(SE)** | ***p-*value** | **(SE)** | ***p-*value** |
| **Gender** | *Female* | | | 1.279 | 0.008 | -0.569 | 0.134 | -0.187 | 0.728 | -0.333 | 0.456 |
|  |  | | | (0.483) |  | (0.380) |  | (0.538) |  | (0.446) |  |
| **College** | *College Graduate (4 Year)* | | | 0.830 | 0.065 | -0.432 | 0.252 | 0.819 | 0.141 | 1.001 | 0.031 |
|  |  | | | (0.449) |  | (0.377) |  | (0.556) |  | (0.463) |  |
| **Age** | *Age in Years* | | | -0.211 | 0.049 | -0.179 | 0.057 | -0.404 | 0.004 | -0.041 | 0.766 |
|  |  | | | (0.107) |  | (0.094) |  | (0.142) |  | (0.139) |  |
| **Income** | *Income >$75,000* | | | -0.372 | 0.405 | -0.303 | 0.414 | -0.753 | 0.238 | -0.352 | 0.460 |
|  |  | | | (0.446) |  | (0.371) |  | (0.638) |  | (0.476) |  |
| **Time in Aiken** | *10+ Years* | | | 0.296 | 0.467 | -0.045 | 0.913 | -0.429 | 0.437 | 0.757 | 0.262 |
|  |  | | | (0.408) |  | (0.410) |  | (0.552) |  | (0.674) |  |
| **Reverse Racism** | *Reverse Racism Question* | | | -1.904 | 0.000 | -0.366 | 0.080 | -0.740 | 0.003 | -0.123 | 0.540 |
|  |  | | | (0.370) |  | (0.209) |  | (0.245) |  | (0.201) |  |
| **Religion** | *Evangelical Christian* | | | -1.450 | 0.013 | -1.699 | 0.000 | -2.679 | 0.001 | -1.271 | 0.005 |
|  |  | | | (0.584) |  | (0.462) |  | (0.791) |  | (0.457) |  |
| **Constant** | *Constant* | | | -2.700 | 0.001 | 0.723 | 0.311 | 1.060 | 0.288 | -1.585 | 0.119 |
|  |  | | | (0.796) |  | (0.713) |  | (0.998) |  | (1.016) |  |
| **Number of Observations** | | |  | 259 |  |  |  | 201 |  |  |  |
| **Log Pseudolikelihood** | |  | | -182.549 |  |  |  | -108.958 |  |  |  |

Reference Category is Republican

Table 4: Breakdown of Demographics, White Voters in Districts 81 and 84

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | District 81 | District 84 |
| % Female | 52.3% | 49.7% |
| % College Graduate | 53.1% | 31.1% |
| Average Age | 56.1 | 53.6 |
| % Income >$75k | 51.9% | 31.7% |
| % in Aiken Cty. 10+ Years | 72.8% | 76.1% |
| Average Reverse Racism | -0.388 | 0.014 |
| % Evangelical Christian | 33.5% | 51.5% |

Table 5: Effect of Local News Consumption on Importance of Partisanship in State Legislature Vote

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | District 81 | | District 84 | |
|  | Watch Local News | Do Not Watch Local News | Watch Local News | Do Not Watch Local News |
| Single Most Important Factor | 37.5% | 60.3% | 45.9% | 51.9% |
| One Important Factor | 39.4% | 15.2% | 31.1% | 20.9% |
| A Minor Factor | 15.3% | 15.8% | 17.6% | 21.6% |
| Not a Factor | 7.8% | 8.8% | 5.4% | 5.6% |

*p* < 0.005 *N.S.S.*

Table 6: Effect of Local News Consumption on Importance of Partisanship in State Legislature Vote Among Strong and Weak Partisans in District 81

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strong Partisans | | Weak Partisans and Leaners | |
|  | Watch Local News | Do Not Watch Local News | Watch Local News | Do Not Watch Local News |
| Single Most Important Factor | 51.0% | 83.5% | 22.3% | 35.5% |
| One Important Factor | 39.6% | 5.6% | 39.1% | 25.4% |
| A Minor Factor | 8.2% | 4.5% | 23.3% | 27.8% |
| Not a Factor | 1.2% | 6.5% | 15.3% | 11.3% |

*p* < 0.001 *N.S.S.*

Table 7: Effect of Local News Consumption on Importance of Partisanship in State Legislature Vote Among Strong and Weak Partisans in District 84

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strong Partisans | | Weak Partisans and Leaners | |
|  | Watch Local News | Do Not Watch Local News | Watch Local News | Do Not Watch Local News |
| Single Most Important Factor | 58.3% | 66.4% | 28.0% | 31.7% |
| One Important Factor | 29.9% | 23.8% | 32.8% | 17.0% |
| A Minor Factor | 9.4% | 4.2% | 29.5% | 45.6% |
| Not a Factor | 2.4% | 5.5% | 9.6% | 5.7% |

*N.S.S.*  *N.S.S.*

Table 8: Logit Model Predicting Vote for State House 81 and 84

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | | | **Vote for Fox (Democrat 81)** | | **Vote for Lariscey (Democrat 84)** | |
|  |  | | | **Coeff.** |  | **Coeff.** |  |
| **Variable** |  | | | **(Std. Error)** | ***p-*value** | **(Std. Error)** | ***p-*value** |
| **Trump** | *Approval for President Trump* | | | -0.642 | 0.001 | -0.556 | 0.012 |
|  |  | | | (0.202) |  | (0.221) |  |
| **Democrat** | *Democrat or Democratic Leaner* | | | 2.075 | 0.003 | 3.045 | 0.002 |
|  |  | | | (0.701) |  | (0.993) |  |
| **Republican** | *Republican or Republican Leaner* | | | -1.471 | 0.007 | -1.672 | 0.068 |
|  |  | | | (0.546) |  | (0.915) |  |
| **Trump\*Democrat** | *Interaction Term* | | | -0.078 | 0.760 | -0.051 | 0.905 |
|  |  | | | (0.256) |  | (0.430) |  |
| **Trump\*Republican** | *Interaction Term* | | | 0.005 | 0.984 | -0.129 | 0.743 |
|  |  | | | (0.243) |  | (0.394) |  |
| **Race** | *African-American* | | | 0.539 | 0.623 | 0.413 | 0.743 |
| **(Ref Cat:** *White***)** |  | | | (1.095) |  | (1.259) |  |
|  | *Other* | | | 1.288 | 0.047 | - | - |
|  |  | | | (0.648) |  | - |  |
| **Gender** | *Female* | | | 0.461 | 0.317 | 1.692 | 0.023 |
|  |  | | | (0.461) |  | (0.746) |  |
| **College** | *College Graduate (4 Year)* | | | 0.742 | 0.126 | 0.700 | 0.379 |
|  |  | | | (0.485) |  | (0.795) |  |
| **Ideology** | *Liberal* | | | -1.191 | 0.368 | 2.352 | 0.175 |
| **(Ref Cat:** *Very* |  | | | (1.322) |  | (1.733) |  |
| *Liberal***)** | *Moderate* | | | -2.096 | 0.003 | 0.661 | 0.723 |
|  |  | | | (0.715) |  | (1.865) |  |
|  | *Conservative* | | | -3.101 | 0.000 | 0.522 | 0.800 |
|  |  | | | (0.783) |  | (2.066) |  |
|  | *Very Conservative* | | | -3.425 | 0.001 | -0.059 | 0.977 |
|  |  | | | (1.040) |  | (2.075) |  |
|  | *Not Sure* | | | -5.048 | 0.000 | 2.766 | 0.182 |
|  |  | | | (0.879) |  | (2.071) |  |
| **Constant** | *Constant* | | | 1.088 | 0.192 | -2.445 | 0.148 |
|  |  | | | (0.834) |  | (1.688) |  |
| **Number of Observations** | | |  | 388 |  | 303 |  |
| **Log Pseudoikelihood** | |  | | -68.030 |  | -41.188 |  |

Reference Category is Vote for Blackwell (Republican)

Figure 1: Factors Affecting Probability of White Voters Identifying as Democrats by State House District

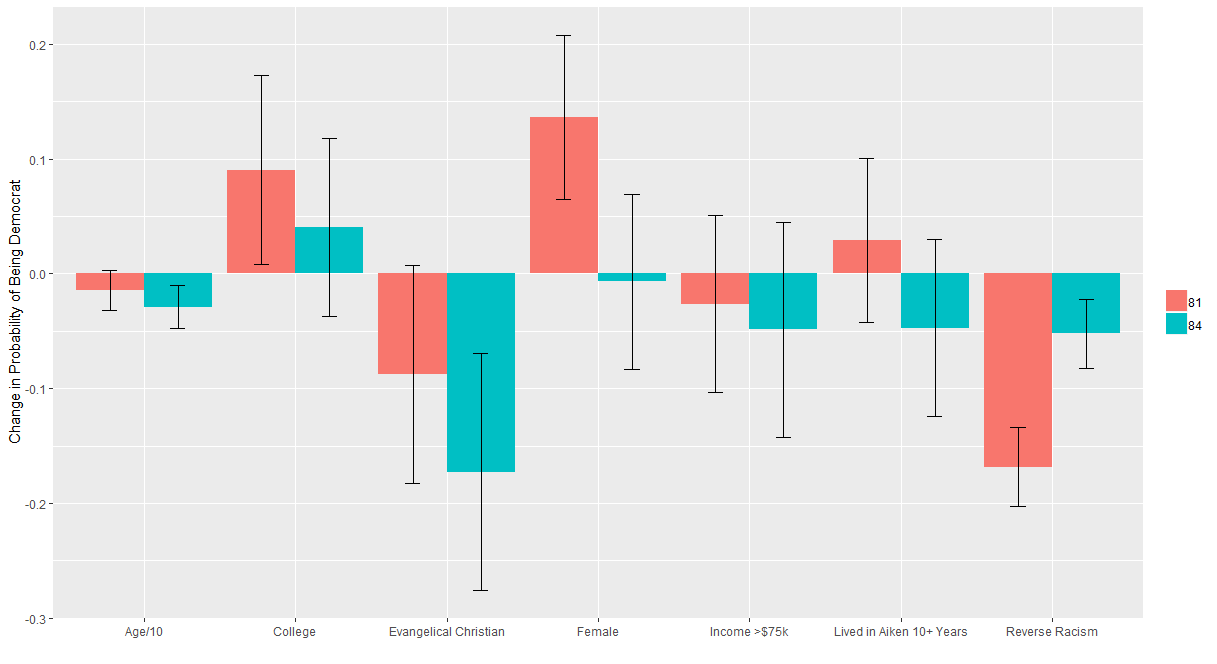


Figure 2: Probability of Voting for Fox (Democrat)

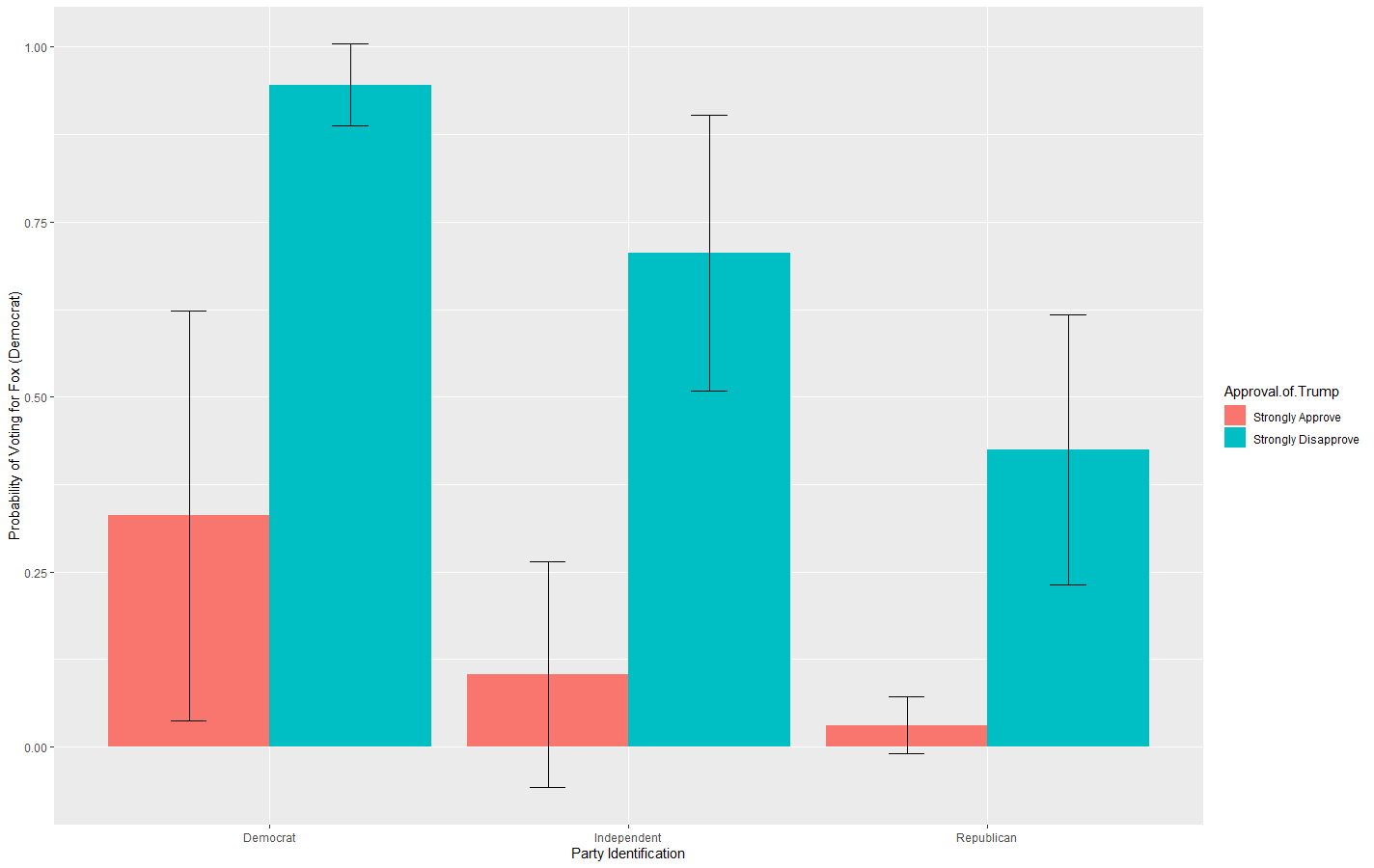


Figure 3: Probability of Voting for Lariscey (Democrat)

