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A New Look at the Republican Advantage in Nonpartisan Elections

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Conventional wisdom has long held that Republicans are advantaged when partisan labels are removed from the ballot. However, in this article, the authors argue that the advantage gained from nonpartisan elections favors the minority party because the low-cost partisan cue is hidden from voters who otherwise would be inclined to support majority party candidates. The authors test this hypothesis using aggregate-level data from state legislative races in nonpartisan Nebraska and partisan Kansas, mayoral races in nonpartisan Phoenix and partisan Tucson, and California statewide races including the nonpartisan contest for superintendent of public instruction. Findings indicate that nonpartisan elections have partisan consequences but that the effect is in favor of the minority party rather than the Republican Party.

Keywords: political parties; representation nonpartisan elections; Republican Party; Democratic Party; voting

In November 2003, voters in New York City went to the polls to decide whether the city should adopt nonpartisan elections, a format used by more than three-fourths of all cities in the United States, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, San Francisco, Dallas, and Seattle (DeSantis and Renner 1991). Michael Bloomberg, a Republican mayor in a city where Democrats have a five-to-one advantage, pushed for the vote on nonpartisan elections. Many argued that Bloomberg pursued this reform because nonpartisan elections tend to favor Republicans (Hammond 2003). This conventional wisdom reflects political science research that has long held that Republicans are favored when partisan labels are removed from the ballot (Lee 1960; Hawley 1973). Indeed, the leading undergraduate text on political parties educates students about the Republican advantage in nonpartisan elections (Hershey 2007, 36).

In this article, we argue that Bloomberg’s party would have benefited from the nonpartisan ballot, but not because nonpartisan elections inherently favor Republicans. Rather, we argue that the impact of the nonpartisan ballot favors the minority party by removing the low-cost partisan cue that would otherwise lead most voters to support majority-party candidates. We test this hypothesis using precinct-level data from state legislative races in nonpartisan Nebraska and partisan Kansas; mayoral races in nonpartisan Phoenix and partisan Tucson, Arizona; and census tract data for California statewide races including the nonpartisan contest for superintendent of public instruction. Our findings indicate that, compared to partisan contests, nonpartisan elections help the minority party rather than the Republican party. We begin by discussing the research establishing a Republican advantage and then continue by presenting the aggregate analyses we use to reach our conclusions.

The Republican Advantage in Nonpartisan Elections

For many years, scholars and practitioners have believed that nonpartisan elections favor Republican candidates (see, for example, Salisbury and Black 1963; Rogers and Arman 1971). Lee (1960) and Hawley (1973) provided the most systematic studies concluding that a Republican advantage does exist. In his book on nonpartisan elections in California, Lee found that “the persons holding important elective and appointive office in California’s cities and counties tend to be Republicans by a three-to-two margin, almost the
direct reverse of the distribution of the state’s registered voters” (p. 56). He also showed that Republicans are often elected in cities with Democratic majorities, but Democrats are less likely to be elected in communities with Republican majorities.

Hawley’s (1973) study builds on the work by Lee and remains the most comprehensive research on the subject to date. He argued that partisan politics are one way of narrowing the differences between the “haves” and the “have-nots” when it comes to income distribution. According to Hawley, nonpartisan elections only lead to more inequality between the poor (who tend to be Democrats) and the wealthy (who tend to be Republicans) because Republicans are more likely to have access to nonparty political resources. To test the Republican advantage hypothesis, Hawley studied nonpartisan council and mayoral elections in eighty-eight municipalities in the San Francisco Bay area from 1957 to 1966. He compared the nonpartisan electoral outcomes with those from ten federal and statewide elections by calculating the percentage of Democratic victories in the partisan races with the percentage of Democrats that won nonpartisan elections. His findings indicate that Democrats are at a disadvantage in the nonpartisan local races compared to the state and federal elections.

While these studies have indicated support for the Republican advantage hypothesis, other scholarship has found mixed support (Orleans 1968; Gilbert 1962; Hagensick 1964; Wildavsky 1964; Eualu, Zisk, and Prewitt 1967). Welch and Bledsoe (1986) used a nationwide sample of nearly one thousand city council members to reach the conclusion that the Republican advantage remains in certain instances, particularly in smaller rather than larger communities. However, they also found no Republican advantage in cities with lower median incomes.

Scholars have offered several reasons for why Republicans may hold an advantage in nonpartisan elections. Hawley (1973) posited a party resource explanation, arguing that without party labels, voters are forced to look for other low-cost cues. One of these cues is name recognition, which can be increased by candidates who are able to spend money on such things as billboards, brochures, and electronic media advertisements. Because campaign spending is the best way to increase name recognition, Republicans are at an advantage since they are more likely than Democratic candidates to have access to wealthy donors. Similarly, Lee (1960) argued that Republicans are at an advantage in nonpartisan elections because they have stronger party organizations and the party that does the best job of informing and mobilizing its members has an advantage in these elections.3

The most compelling reason to expect a Republican advantage in nonpartisan contests is that Republican voters may be more equipped to participate even without party labels as a guide. Nonpartisan elections do suppress turnout, even among voters who already went to the polls to vote in other contests (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). Those who are less likely to cast ballots in nonpartisan contests also tend to have less formal education than those who do vote (Schaffner and Streb 2002). Thus, because they tend to have higher levels of socioeconomic status (Verba and Nie 1972), Republican voters may be more likely to participate in elections even without party labels as a guide.

However, for Republicans to benefit from higher turnout in nonpartisan elections, Republican voters must vote for the Republican candidates in those contests. Yet voters in nonpartisan elections tend to vote less along party lines, relying instead on other cues such as incumbency, ethnicity, or even ballot position (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Squire and Smith 1988; Kamin 1958; Lorinkas, Hawkins, and Edwards 1969; Miller and Krosnick 1998). In other words, even if Republicans are more likely than Democrats to vote, that does not necessarily mean that they are more likely to vote for Republican candidates. If this is the case, a larger Republican turnout will not necessarily translate into an advantage for Republican candidates.

DeNardo (1980) provided an alternative explanation that helps to account for the apparent Republican advantage in nonpartisan contests. He noted that factors that cause defection from one’s party help the minority party. This is easily seen if we assume that each party’s defections are proportionately equal. Thus, a defection rate of 20 percent will yield more voters for the minority party than the majority party since 20 percent of the majority is clearly a larger quantity than 20 percent of the minority. Since Democrats were in the clear majority throughout most of the period since the New Deal, it is easy to conclude that Republicans gain from the higher rates of defection that follow from the nonpartisan ballot. Following this logic, however, there is nothing inherently Republican about the advantage in nonpartisan elections; rather, the effect is to help whichever party is the minority.4

Indeed, there is some support for this minority-party hypothesis. For example, while Williams and Adrian (1959) presented evidence that nonpartisan elections benefit Republicans by suppressing Democratic
turnout, their findings also indicate that the nonpartisan ballot allowed Democrats to perform better in some Republican-dominated cities. Similarly, Wildavsky (1964) demonstrated that the Republican city of Oberlin, Ohio’s, switch from partisan to nonpartisan elections actually benefited Democratic city council candidates.

Thus, we hypothesize that the advantage in nonpartisan elections does not favor Republicans but the minority party. In any given area, party labels are likely to benefit the majority party and be detrimental to the chances of the minority party. Consider a city council district where Democratic candidates tend to win 70 percent of the vote. In a partisan election, a Democratic candidate is likely to win based solely on the normal Democratic vote he or she can expect to receive by being a Democrat. Likewise, a Republican in such a district faces an uphill battle once voters learn of his or her party affiliation. However, if party labels are removed from consideration, voters will rely on other cues or even vote randomly. Relative to a partisan contest, this situation favors the Republican because it is more likely to put him or her on equal footing with the Democratic candidate.

Of course, this situation can work against Republicans just as easily. In Nebraska, nonpartisan elections for the state legislature have often helped Democrats perform well in those contests. In fact, despite a strong Republican presence in the state, Democrats held a majority of seats in the nonpartisan legislature during the early 1990s and were only a narrow minority through the end of that decade. To make matters worse for Republicans, the 1997 state legislature reelected a Democrat as its speaker by a vote of 38-10 despite the fact that the state Republican Chairman actively lobbied Republican members (who held a 26-22 advantage in the legislature) to vote for the Republican candidate (Hord 1997). Democrats in the legislature benefited from the lack of party labels in nonpartisan contests even when Republicans outside of the legislature attempted to insert partisanship into the process.

Thus, the Nebraska example provides anecdotal support for a minority-party advantage rather than Republican advantage in nonpartisan elections. Yet both of these hypotheses provide us with testable propositions. If the Republican advantage theory is correct, Democrats should perform worse in nonpartisan elections, regardless of whether they are the majority or minority party. On the other hand, if there is a minority-party advantage, relative to how they do in partisan contests, Democrats will perform worse in nonpartisan elections when they are the majority party in an area but better when they are in the minority.

Evaluating Partisan Advantage in Nonpartisan Elections

To examine partisan advantage in nonpartisan elections, we analyze vote patterns at the precinct and census-tract levels using three separate paired comparisons. First, we compare state legislative contests in nonpartisan Nebraska to those for the partisan Kansas senate from 1984 through 1990. Second, we compare the 1995 vote for mayor in nonpartisan Phoenix, Arizona, to the 1999 mayoral vote in partisan Tucson. Finally, we compare the 1998 statewide vote for California’s nonpartisan superintendent of public instruction to that for other statewide partisan offices during that same year (Schaffner and Streb 2002).

Our choice of paired comparisons provides us with a nice quasi-experimental design to test for partisan advantage in nonpartisan elections, but it is important to note that paired comparisons do not perfectly control for all alternative causes. Yet for this particular question, the paired comparison design allows us to control for as many alternative causes as possible in the most practical way. To overcome any weakness with the paired comparison design, we apply it to three different cases; if we find the same result for each of our tests, then we can be reasonably confident in our results. We can think of no spurious effect that would influence each of our analyses in the same manner.

Kansas and Nebraska are quite similar in their demographic balance (see Appendix A). They have nearly identical proportions of urban populations as well as very comparable educational levels and vary only slightly in their minority populations and median incomes (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). In addition to their demographic similarities, these states are also quite alike in the partisanship among their electorate. According to Elazar (1984), Nebraska and Kansas have comparable political cultures, each being described as individualistic-moralistic to varying degrees. Furthermore, Bibby et al. (1990) ranked both states as having similarly high levels of two party competition from 1981 through 1988, the period of time used in our study. Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) also noted the similarities between the two states regarding ideological and partisan predispositions.

Phoenix and Tucson also have comparable demographics. While Phoenix’s population is significantly
greater than Tucson’s, they have similar levels of racial diversity, education, and poverty (see Appendix B). They are Arizona’s two most populated cities, and both had significant population growth in the 1990s. According to recent registration rolls, Phoenix is slightly less Democratic than Tucson. Because Phoenix is more populous than Tucson, we might expect the party organizations in that city to be more active (Gibson, Frendreis, and Verts 1989). Yet the effect of size appears to be offset by Phoenix’s use of nonpartisan elections, which may suppress the strength of party organizations. During 1999, when both cities held municipal elections, the Maricopa (Phoenix) Republican and Democratic Party organizations spent a combined $64,888.74, while the party organizations in Pima County (Tucson) spent well over $200,000. Thus, party organizational strength appears consistent with the type of ballot each city uses to elect municipal officials.

Finally, the analysis of the statewide offices in California provides a more stringent design because we are comparing how the same jurisdictions voted for different types of elections being held on the same ballot. All of California’s statewide offices are partisan, with the exception of the superintendent of public instruction. Partisanship is often evident in campaigns for superintendent; both the Democratic and Republican parties in California slate candidates for the office and news coverage tends to include information about the candidates’ party affiliations. Yet pre-election surveys indicate that much of the electorate remains unaware of the candidates’ party affiliations (Schaffner and Streb 2002). Therefore, our comparison of the superintendent of public instruction to California’s other down-ballot statewide partisan offices provides us with a strong test of the Republican advantage/minority-party advantage hypotheses.

In our analysis, we examine the degree to which Democratic strength predicts the vote in an area. Our dependent variable is simply the vote for the Democratic candidate in the election of interest. As independent variables, we include the normal Democratic support in a precinct, a dummy variable for whether the race is nonpartisan, and an interaction term between those two measures. For the Phoenix-Tucson comparisons, we define the normal Democratic support in a precinct using the 2000 two-party vote for president. For the Nebraska-Kansas comparison and the California case, we define normal Democratic support using the percentage of those registering with one of the two major parties (see Appendix C). In each case, we rescale these variables so that a value of 0 indicates that the precinct had equal percentages of Democratic and Republican voters, while .5 represents a precinct that is completely Democratic and is all Republican. This rescaling is necessary for easy interpretation of the nonpartisan dummy variable.

If there is a Republican advantage in nonpartisan elections, the Democratic candidate would win less of the vote than expected regardless of whether Democrats are a majority or minority in a given precinct. Thus, in our regression models, the Republican advantage would be evident with a significant negative coefficient for the nonpartisan dummy variable (indicating a difference between intercepts in partisan and nonpartisan contests). If nonpartisan elections favor the minority party, we expect the Democratic candidate in a nonpartisan race to perform better than the normal Democratic vote in less Democratic areas but worse in more Democratic jurisdictions. This dynamic affects the slope of the coefficient for partisanship so the minority-party advantage would be detectable in our regression models by a significant negative coefficient on the interaction term.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the results from the comparison of vote patterns for the Nebraska unicameral with the Kansas state senate. First, the coefficient for the interaction term is negative and strongly significant. This demonstrates that candidates in nonpartisan Nebraska run ahead of those in partisan Kansas in precincts where they are the minority party and behind where they are the majority. Thus, the minority party tends to be more advantaged in the nonpartisan Nebraska elections than they are in partisan Kansas.

To demonstrate the magnitude of these effects, Figure 1 presents the predicted effects from our model. The x-axis in this figure represents the partisan registration in each precinct and the y-axis represents the vote for the Democratic candidate. In precincts where Democrats are the minority party, the Democratic candidates in nonpartisan Nebraska run ahead of those in partisan Kansas. For example, in Kansas precincts where only 30 percent of the population was registered as Democrats, Democratic legislative candidates received 42 percent of the vote. However, in similar precincts in nonpartisan Nebraska, Democratic legislative candidates received 45 percent of the vote. Thus, in precincts dominated by Republican voters, Democrats in the nonpartisan contests ran slightly ahead of those in the partisan races. The same pattern holds in Republican-dominated precincts. For instance, in precincts where Republicans make up

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[46x192]Democratic candidate in the election of interest.8 As

[46x205]Our dependent variable is simply the vote for the

[46x218]Democratic strength predicts the vote in an area.

[46x244]advantage/minority-party advantage hypotheses.

[46x257]offices provides us with a strong test of the Republican

[46x270]California’s other down-ballot statewide partisan

[46x283]of the superintendent of public instruction to

[46x296](Schaffner and Streb 2002). Therefore, our comparison

[46x309]remains unaware of the candidates’ party affiliations

[46x322]election surveys indicate that much of the electorate

[46x335]tion about the candidates’ party affiliations. Yet pre-

[46x348]the office and news coverage tends to include informa-

[46x361]Republican parties in California slate candidates for

[46x374]for superintendent; both the Democratic and

[46x387]instruction. Partisanship is often evident in campaigns

[46x400]with the exception of the superintendent of public

[46x413]lot. All of California’s statewide offices are partisan,

[46x426]different types of elections being held on the same bal-

[46x439]we are comparing how the same jurisdictions voted for

[46x452]California provides a more stringent design because

[46x465]Finally, the analysis of the statewide offices in

[46x468]California provides a more stringent design because

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[46x484]different types of elections being held on the same bal-

[46x491]lot. All of California’s statewide offices are partisan,

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[46x497]instruction. Partisanship is often evident in campaigns

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[46x506]the office and news coverage tends to include informa-

[46x510]tion about the candidates’ party affiliations. Yet pre-

[46x513]election surveys indicate that much of the electorate

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only 30 percent of party registrants, Republican candidates in nonpartisan Nebraska win 13 percent more of the vote than they do in Kansas. Thus, we find strong support for the minority-party advantage in nonpartisan legislative elections.

Interestingly, this analysis also provides some minimal support for the Republican advantage hypothesis. The negative and statistically significant coefficient for the nonpartisan dummy variable indicates that, on average, Democrats receive approximately 5 percent less of the vote in nonpartisan Nebraska than they do in partisan Kansas. This means, of course, that Republicans have a small advantage in Nebraska’s nonpartisan contests. While this advantage is not overwhelming, it is statistically significant and would likely tip the balance toward a Republican candidate in many legislative races. Therefore, in the Nebraska-Kansas comparison we find strong support for the minority-party advantage hypothesis as well as more modest support for the Republican advantage hypothesis.

Our second test compares mayoral elections in Phoenix and Tucson. While Phoenix holds nonpartisan elections for its city officials, Tucson elects its mayor and council members on a partisan ballot. Table 2 presents the regression results from this comparison. For these elections, party registration statistics were not available, so we used the 2000 presidential vote as a substitute. Similar to our first comparison, the coefficient for the interaction term in this model is strongly negative and statistically significant, indicating support for the minority-party advantage hypothesis. On the other hand, while the coefficient for the nonpartisan dummy variable is statistically significant, it is in the opposite direction than expected. Thus, the Republican Party was actually at a slight disadvantage in the nonpartisan Phoenix election.

Figure 2 presents the predicted effects from the model in Table 2. The first important pattern from this figure is that in evenly divided precincts (those with a 0 for partisanship), Democratic mayoral candidates in both parties ran behind the vote for Gore. Thus, Republican candidates performed better than might be expected in both of these mayoral contests. However, the Democratic candidate in nonpartisan Phoenix received approximately 4 percent more of the vote than the Democrat running in Tucson. While no Republican advantage was evident in this comparison, Figure 2 does demonstrate that there was a significant minority-party advantage in the nonpartisan mayoral contest. Specifically, in precincts where Democrats were a minority, the Democratic candidate in the nonpartisan contest received a larger share of the vote than the Democrat running in partisan Tucson. For example, in precincts that were only 30 percent Democratic, the candidate in the partisan mayoral race captured only 15 percent of the vote while the candidate in the partisan contest won 34 percent. However, in precincts where Republicans were the minority party, the Republican candidate for the nonpartisan office ran ahead of the Republican running in Tucson. The model predicts that in a precinct that was 30 percent Republican, the Republican candidate in the partisan race won 51 percent of the vote, but the Republican in the nonpartisan contest received 62 percent of the vote.

The final analysis of vote returns, and our strongest test, focuses on the 1998 statewide contests in California. Among the statewide offices is a nonpartisan post for
the superintendent of public instruction. The contest in 1998 featured the incumbent superintendent Delaine Eastin (D) defending her seat against challenger Gloria Matta Tuchman (R). As a comparative baseline, we also analyzed vote patterns for other down-ballot partisan contests, such as the races for attorney general, insurance commissioner, and treasurer. For this model, our unit of analysis is each of California’s 7,005 census tracts. Since we are using the same precincts for each office, we did not include them in the same model with an interaction variable because the observations would not be independent.

Therefore, in table 3, confirmation of the minority-party advantage hypothesis would be evident from a coefficient in the nonpartisan superintendent model that is significantly smaller than those in the models for the partisan offices. The Republican Party advantage hypothesis would be confirmed if the intercept for the superintendent model is significantly smaller than those in the other models.

The results in Table 3 provide evidence supporting the minority-party advantage but not the Republican advantage. The coefficient for the party registration variable is less than half the size in the model for the nonpartisan race (.34) than in the partisan models and the difference is statistically significant ($p < .001$). On the other hand, the intercept for the nonpartisan race is significantly larger than one partisan contest (insurance commissioner), slightly smaller than another (treasurer), and statistically indistinguishable from the third (attorney general). Overall, there is no evidence that the Republican candidate fared better in the nonpartisan superintendent race.

Figure 3 presents the predicted estimates from the regression models in Table 3. The pattern in this figure follows the findings of the previous analyses. In census tracts where the Democrats were a minority, they performed better in the nonpartisan contest than in the partisan races. For example, in a census tract that was only 30 percent Democratic, the models estimate that Democratic candidates for partisan offices captured between 20 and 33 percent of the vote, while the Democratic candidate for superintendent won a predicted 44 percent of the vote. Likewise, in a precinct that was only 30 percent Republican, the Republican candidate won between 28 and 37 percent of the vote in the partisan races but 43 percent of the vote in the nonpartisan race.

In sum, the findings from this section provide consistent support for the minority-party advantage hypothesis rather than the Republican advantage hypothesis. Democratic performance in nonpartisan elections was not always worse than expected. In fact, the Democratic vote in nonpartisan races exceeded expectations in areas of Democratic weakness but failed to meet expectations in areas of Democratic strength. Thus, Democratic and Republican performance in nonpartisan contests is directly affected by each party’s status as the majority or minority party in an area.

**Conclusion**

The empirical evidence in this article does not provide consistent support for a Republican advantage in
nonpartisan elections, but it does provide strong support for the existence of an advantage for the party that is in the minority. The nonpartisan ballot appears to favor the minority party whether Democratic or Republican, a finding that contradicts conventional wisdom about a Republican advantage in nonpartisan elections. Democrats perform worse than expected in heavily Democratic areas but better than expected in heavily Republican ones. An identical pattern holds for the Republican Party. This evidence clearly indicates that the minority party has the most to gain from the absence of party labels on ballots. To return to the New York City case, Bloomberg and his party would have benefited had the proposal for nonpartisan elections passed. But they would have benefited because of their status as the minority party in New York City, not because they are Republicans.

These findings call into question the effect that the minority-party advantage has on representation. In many cases, this advantage may not affect who wins or loses an election; it may just mean that the losing candidate wins more of the vote than he or she would have otherwise. Indeed, that seemed to be the case in the California superintendent race. The Republican candidate (minority party) performed better than expected in heavily Democratic areas but still lost the race. It is also likely that the minority-party advantage does sometimes help a candidate from the minority party win an election that he or she would have otherwise lost. Indeed, in Nebraska during the early 1990s, the Democratic Party was a clear minority in the state but held the majority of the seats in the legislature. In other words, Democrats won several seats in Republican areas, and this may have been at least partly due to the minority-party advantage inherent in nonpartisan elections.

Whether one believes that a minority-party advantage is a problematic feature of nonpartisan elections depends on one’s perspective towards the usefulness of party labels. On one hand, Progressives instituted nonpartisan elections because they believed that party politics constrained the ability of citizens to choose candidates and that removing the party label would lead citizens to seek

### Table 3
Explaining the Democratic Vote for Statewide Constitutional Offices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attorney general model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic share of registration</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared = .93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance commissioner model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic share of registration</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared = .93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treasurer model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic share of registration</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared = .94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent of public instruction model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic share of registration</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared = .44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 7,005 census tracts for all models.

### Figure 3
Predicted Democratic Vote Based on Precinct Partisanship in California

Note: Based on estimates generated by the model in Table 3.
out new sources of information. In this context, the altered voting patterns in nonpartisan contests may reveal decisions that citizens have come to based on alternative considerations. According to this perspective, the fact that the minority party performs better in nonpartisan election may simply reflect the fact that citizens were constrained by party labels in partisan contests. Once freed from party ties, citizens may be more likely to find reasons to support the other party.

On the other hand, party labels can be invaluable sources of information for citizens, allowing them to make sense of the political world (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993). Party provides a useful heuristic that allows citizens to more easily connect their own policy preferences into votes for candidates who have similar preferences. In many low-information elections, this is simply accomplished by voting for the candidate affiliating with the same party. However, if partisan information is not available and citizens have little other information to rely on, then they may be less likely to vote for candidates from another party simply by mistake. In this case, the minority-party advantage is generated not by informed choices made free of the party label but rather by uninformed mistakes made by voters who would otherwise rely on the party heuristic to guide their vote. If this second possibility is driving the minority-party advantage, then these mistakes mean that the electorate may receive less equitable representation in government, with minority parties becoming more likely to win a majority of elected offices.

**Appendix A**

**Comparison of Demographic Characteristics in Nebraska and Kansas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Nebraska</th>
<th>Kansas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>1,578,385</td>
<td>2,477,574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban population</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White population</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black population</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other minority population</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population with high school degree</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population with college degree</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$26,016</td>
<td>$27,291</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Partisanship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Nebraska</th>
<th>Kansas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N of survey respondents: 2,537


**Appendix B**

**Comparison of Demographic Characteristics in Phoenix and Tucson (Arizona)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Phoenix</th>
<th>Tucson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>1,321,045</td>
<td>486,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White population</td>
<td>70.2%</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black population</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other minority population</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population with high school degree</td>
<td>80.4%</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population with college degree</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals below poverty level</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Appendix C**

**Measuring Partisanship**

There are two potential concerns with using party registration as a measure of partisanship in a precinct or census tract. The first concern is that party registration might lag behind actual partisan changes occurring in the electorate. In other words, the measure may not be as responsive to actual changes in partisanship as an alternative measure such as presidential vote (which we use in the Phoenix-Tucson comparison). However, this is less likely to be a problem in a closed primary state where voters must be registered with a party to vote in that party’s primary. If a state holds a closed primary, there is an incentive for voters to bring their party registration in line with their party affiliation. Prior to 1998, California held closed primary elections and Kansas and Nebraska also hold closed primary elections. Thus, we do not expect party registration to be unresponsive to partisan change in the electorate.

The second concern, which contrasts with the first, is that party registration may be too responsive to short-term changes to provide a useful measure of underlying partisanship. Because we are using registration figures in closed primary states, our party registration measures may be more erratic if voters change parties to cast ballots in different parties’ primaries. However, given the costs involved with changing one’s party registration, we believe that this concern is likely unwarranted. Indeed, time series evidence appears to underscore the stability of our party registration measures. From 1990 through 2004, the percentage of California citizens registering with one of the two major parties who registered as Democrats ranged from a low of 55.5 percent in 2004 to a high of 56.9 percent in 1994. In Nebraska, the percentage of two party registrants who were registered as Democrats ranged from 45.9 to 46.4 percent over the period of 1984 to 1990. In Kansas, the percentage of those registering as Democrats declined slightly from 43.0 percent in 1984 to 40.9 percent in 1988, but this change appears to be capturing a secular decline in Democratic Party registration that continued in that state during the following decades (39.4 percent...
Democratic in 1996; 37.9 percent in 2000). Thus, party registration appears to be quite stable over the time.

As an additional validity check on our measures of partisanship, we compared the results of the Kansas-Nebraska analysis to those we would have attained by using presidential vote instead of party registration (we did not have access to presidential vote for California). Our findings for the presidential vote analysis provide even stronger support for the minority-party advantage and no support at all for the Republican advantage. Overall, our substantive conclusions would not have changed depending on the measure of partisanship utilized. (The results from this alternative analysis are available from the authors upon request.)

Notes

1. This point was raised by Douglas Muzzio of Baruch College in his testimony to the Charter Revision Committee (May 22, 2003), and it was subsequently addressed (and dismissed) by the Charter Revision Committee’s report on the proposal.

2. We do not offer tests of these explanations for the Republican advantage hypothesis but rather a direct test of the hypothesis itself. Since we find no support for a Republican advantage in nonpartisan elections, explaining such an advantage becomes unnecessary.

3. While it has long been the conventional wisdom that Republicans have stronger party organizations than Democrats, more recent scholarship has debunked that wisdom (Gibson et al. 1985; Cotter et al. 1984), and some suggest that Democratic local party organizations are actually stronger than those of Republicans (Beck et al. 1997; Hogan 2004).

4. The minority-party advantage hypothesis assumes that Democrats and Republicans will be equally likely to drop out of the electorate (or equally unable to identify and vote for their party’s candidate) in nonpartisan elections. One potential criticism of this assumption is that Republicans tend to be of higher socioeconomic status than Democrats and should find it easier to participate in nonpartisan elections. However, in recent decades, the socioeconomic gap between the parties has become less pronounced. In addition, Schaffner and Streb (2002) found that while more educated voters are more likely to vote in nonpartisan elections, they are not significantly more likely to vote for their party’s candidate than those with less education. Thus, these findings suggest that higher-socioeconomic-status voters are not better able to identify their party’s candidates in nonpartisan elections, which supports our assumption that defections should occur equally from both parties.

5. We use the 1984 to 1990 state legislative elections to take advantage of Gary King, Bradley Palmquist, et al.’s (1997) Record of American Democracy (ROAD) data, which cover this time period.

6. We were unable to obtain earlier results from Tucson.

7. This information comes from reports filed with the Arizona Secretary of State and available online at (http://www.azsos.gov/scripts/cfs_committee.dll).

8. In California and Phoenix, the Democratic candidates were clearly identifiable from news accounts of the campaigns. In Nebraska, we were able to determine the Democratic candidate in each race by using party registration information to determine which party candidates were registered with.

9. This data was acquired from the Statewide Database archive maintained by the University of California, Berkeley (http://swdb.berkeley.edu/index.html).

References


Schaffner et al. / A New Look at the Republican Advantage in Nonpartisan Elections

1984-1990. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA [producer]. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor].


