

Elections and Representation in American Municipal Administration

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Abstract

Do selection methods for public officials impact how they represent their constituents? Municipal clerks in the New England states offer an ideal case to examine this question. As key government actors in full-service local governments with minimal overlapping jurisdictions, clerks in these states vary in how they are selected—either through election or appointment. Using an original online and mail survey of municipal clerks across five New England states, we find that elected clerks demonstrate a stronger orientation toward public service and are more responsive to constituent concerns. However, selection methods show little impact on substantive ideological, partisan, or policy representation. These findings highlight the relationship between the mode of selection and representation, offering a foundation for future research on other offices and dimensions of representation.

Keywords

local politics, municipal clerks, political representation

Local governments must balance two competing expectations. First, because they are at the lowest level of governance and are closest to the citizens they serve, they play a crucial representative function. Tocqueville regarded local government and participation as one of the main drivers of a young America's democratic spirit, noting that "Without the institutions of a township a nation can give itself a free government, but it does not have the spirit of freedom" (de Tocqueville, 2000, 58). Belief in the importance of local control over certain policy areas, the accessibility of local government for citizen input, and its centrality in representing citizen interests remain. These representational expectations, however, conflict with a second expectation of local government. Because many of the policy areas delegated to local government are not politicized like national- or state-level policymaking, many believe that local governments should emphasize competence and professionalism over politics. Commentators frequently argue, for example, that there is no partisan way to "fill a pothole" (de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2016, 722) or "pave a street... [or] lay a sewer" (Adrian, 1952, 766). Progressive-era institutions such as appointed municipal managers (e.g., Sahn, 2023) and non-partisan elections (e.g., Adrian, 1952, 1959) reflect this spirit. The public expects local policymakers to fulfill

both a political, representational role and a professional, administrative one.

Variation across local governments in the institutions used to select officials reflects these competing expectations. Elections are a natural way to select officials who are expected to represent and be accountable to the public they serve. Appointment, alternatively, may better select capable individuals while insulating them from political pressures. Perhaps because both methods offer significant strengths, there is substantial variation in the methods used to fill many local government offices. Such within-office variation in selection method is unusual in American politics, with most evidence on elections' consequences coming from variation in the *competitiveness*, rather than the *existence*, of elections. For example, studies of American legislative politics explore the

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consequences of the level of electoral threat to which legislators are subjected (e.g., [Burden, 2004](#); [Fouirmaies and Hall, 2022](#); [Jones, 2013](#); [Titiunik, 2016](#)). While these studies provide valuable evidence about elections' consequences, none can provide leverage on the most relevant counterfactual scenario: what if these elected officials were not elected at all? Local governments provide a unique opportunity to answer that question.

In this paper, we leverage the substantial variation in the selection methods of municipal clerks in five New England states to explore the consequences of elections. Whether clerks should be elected is a live political question being debated in New England and beyond.¹ Municipal clerks, therefore, provide a unique opportunity to understand how elections influence responsiveness to constituents. They also represent an essential office in local government. The clerk is crucial for a town to operate because they both do much of the work of municipal government and facilitate the ability of other officials and citizens to access its services ([Munro, 1934](#)). Their tasks include administering hundreds of laws, managing elections, issuing permits, conducting the town census, granting licenses, managing public records, and more. In a case that illustrates the importance of the office, the town of Passadumkeag, Maine, was effectively shut down when the town clerk resigned after she was denied vacation time.² Our study offers new evidence on this important local office.

To explore how selection methods shape the responsiveness of elected officials to their constituents, we conducted an original survey of municipal clerks in New England, which we fielded in the spring of 2023 both online and through the mail. We attempted to solicit responses from all town and city clerks in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. We focus on New England for several reasons: municipal government is both uniquely relevant and consistent across the region; counties play a limited role in local governance, resulting in fewer overlapping jurisdictions than in other states; and, most importantly, the region offers substantial within-state variation in clerk selection method.

We begin by presenting descriptive results comparing elected and appointed clerks. We show that elected clerks are generally less credentialed and work in lower-capacity offices but are generally more experienced and feel more self-directed than appointed clerks. We then explore our main hypothesis around clerk responsiveness. We do so in two ways. First, we use several questions that examine clerks' feelings of accountability to their constituents and other actors and their attitudes toward public service. We find that elected clerks report being more responsive to their constituents. We then examine whether the relationship between constituent political preferences and

clerks' political beliefs and attitudes differs between elected and appointed clerks. We find little evidence of this. Our results demonstrate key similarities and differences among clerks chosen with different selection methods.

Selection Method and Local Officials

Recent scholarship in political science finds that municipal government institutions shape local outcomes. For example, election timing affects incumbents' reelection prospects ([de Benedictis-Kessner, 2018](#)) and policy outcomes ([Anzia, 2011](#)). Other work finds that the level of party competition affects voting in municipal councils ([Bucchianeri, 2020](#)) and that different local government systems impact local taxing and spending ([Lineberry and Fowler, 1967](#)). Theoretically, this follows from research focused on institutions in other contexts: many municipal government institutions parallel state- or federal-level ones, so although their size and scope differ ([Oliver et al., 2012](#)), the incentive structures that municipal officials face might be similar. Evidence from other countries, such as Germany, supports this notion: scholars have found that elected officials can attract more state-level grant money ([Hessami, 2018](#)) and change the size of local government ([Garmann, 2015](#)) relative to their appointed counterparts.

However, institutions are not destiny. [Tausanovitch and Warshaw \(2014\)](#), for example, find no difference in responsiveness across partisan and non-partisan elections. In addition, while the adoption of council-manager systems is "arguably...the most important innovation in American local government over the last century" ([Carr, 2015, 673](#)), their impact on representation is less clear. [Carr \(2015, 685\)](#) specifically notes that "the quality of the evidence is uneven," reflecting limitations in both theorizing the relationship between municipal institutions and representation, as well as credible research design and management. Even compelling scholarship exploring these relationships outside the United States, such as that examining German local government ([Garmann, 2015](#); [Hessami, 2018](#)), may not be externally valid to their United States-based counterparts. Local institutions may still influence outcomes, but further research needs to be done to empirically demonstrate whether this is the case. Furthermore, we extend the framework of institutional consequences to offices other than municipal executives.

We focus on an important electoral institution: how local officials are chosen to serve. Municipal clerks are, depending on the charter or code of a given municipality, either elected directly or appointed by one or more town officials. We expect the choice of the selection method to have substantial consequences across several dimensions of clerk characteristics, attitudes, and behavior. Previous

work has explored, directly or indirectly, the effects of election versus appointment for several non-executive local offices and several possible outcomes. Appointed treasurers are associated with lower borrowing costs than elected (Whalley, 2013), appointed assessors are fairer than elected (Bowman and Mikesell, 1989; Sances, 2016, 2019), but school superintendent selection method has little effect on student performance (Hoover, 2008; Partridge and Sass, 2011). Existing studies explore, with contrasting findings, whether appointed clerks increase or decrease local turnout (Burden et al., 2013; Ferrer, 2025). With some exceptions (Burden et al., 2013; Ferrer et al., 2024; Ferrer N.D.), this previous scholarship focuses on performance- and competence-based outcomes; we focus instead on responsiveness to constituent preferences.

Our theoretical expectations build on prior scholarship on electoral accountability to establish a connection between the selection method and clerks' responsiveness to constituent preferences. Prior scholarship emphasizes that electoral threat induces public officials to exert effort (Alt et al., 2011; Fouirnaies and Hall, 2022) and heed constituent preferences, through either selection of politicians (Canes-Wrone and De Marchi, 2002; Hall, 2015) or politicians adapting their behavior (Gordon and Huber, 2007; Huber and Gordon, 2004). If a municipality appoints rather than elects its clerk, this may result in selecting a more qualified, less community-connected individual with access to more professional resources. Aside from selection issues, clerks may adapt their behavior to respond to the incentives presented by different selection methods. If clerks are elected, the public will have an opportunity to pass direct judgment on them, which elected clerks take seriously (Adona et al., 2019). If a clerk is appointed, their immediate accountability will be to a different public official. While this official may be accountable to voters, it is unlikely that the performance of the clerk will weigh heavily on the minds of voters. This lack of an electoral connection, in turn, may give voters less incentive to monitor clerks in the first place. Our theoretical expectations mirror the argument that while the broader electorate is less capable of selecting high-quality officials and monitoring their behavior than a more-informed appointer, elected officials will nevertheless be more responsive to voter preferences (Gailmard and Jenkins, 2009).

New England Municipalities and Their Clerks

Across the United States, thousands of county, city, and town clerks administer municipal government, implement and interpret local, state, and federal law, and act as the first point of contact for citizens and their government. The decisions of these officials can dramatically affect

citizens' lives. Munro (1934, 95), one of the first textbooks on municipal politics, described the office, noting that:

No other office in the municipal service has so many contacts. It serves the mayor, the city council, the city manager (when there is one), and all the administrative departments without exception. All of them call upon it, almost daily, for some service or information. Its work is not spectacular but it demands versatility, alertness, accuracy, and no end of patience. The public does not realize how many loose ends of city administration this office pulls together.

This century-old description holds true, and many municipal clerk websites quoted these very words today. The "loose ends" that clerks address include administering hundreds of laws, managing elections, issuing permits, conducting the town census, granting licenses, and managing public records. Thus, the role of the clerk is both administrative and representative.

Local government in New England is distinctive in its focus on the municipality, and not the county, as the most comprehensive unit of local government. Municipalities in the region are primarily classified as towns and overwhelmingly use the town meeting as their form of local government. This form of government takes a variety of shapes that range from the traditional whole-town political meeting to those more closely approximating the mayor-council or council-manager systems that predominate in other parts of the country.³ Other, primarily larger municipalities have the designation of city, which grants them additional home-rule powers. Because municipalities are the relevant unit of local government, services that might be provided in special districts in other states—such as education in school districts—are also primarily town-based in New England.

For our purposes, a valuable feature of local government in New England is that municipalities are a *comprehensive* and *exclusive* unit of local government. They are comprehensive because nearly every geographic area, and therefore nearly every person in the region, is under the jurisdiction of a municipal government. For example, there is no unincorporated land in Connecticut, Massachusetts, or Rhode Island (Betlock, 2014); there are "very few exceptions" to the general rule that "All lands in Vermont are located within municipalities";⁴ New Hampshire has twenty-five unincorporated places to join its thirteen cities and 221 towns.^{5,6} As a result, nearly the entire population of the five states we examine live in the municipalities that constitute our sampling frame.⁷

Municipal governments in New England are "exclusive" because of the near-absence of meaningful county-level government: "Unlike the rest of the nation, New

England states generally don't follow a county government system."⁸ Connecticut and Rhode Island have no county government,^{9,10} a number of Massachusetts county governments have been abolished,¹¹ and New Hampshire and Vermont have county governments, but they are relatively limited in their powers.¹² While in most other states, counties serve as the "comprehensive" unit of local government, ensuring that all residents lie in the service area of at least one local government, municipalities fill this role in New England, thus largely obviating county government.

These various features of New England local government—town-based governance, paucity of unincorporated areas, and absence of meaningful county government—make New England an ideal setting to conduct our survey and test our theoretical expectations. The importance of the municipality allows us to focus on that level of government, thus retaining a focus on an office with important roles—that many states would assign to the county level—but allowing us to have an increased sample size and variation in our key quantity of interest, clerk selection method. It also ensures that key variables of interest are available at the municipality level.

Moreover, the dearth of unincorporated areas and the absence of county government allow us to avoid complications that arise from overlapping and ambiguous jurisdictions. In other regions, counties and municipalities may provide the same services but for different areas, and special districts may be used to provide particular goods and services to areas that do not neatly fit to existing jurisdictional boundaries. These features of local government in other parts of the country may complicate citizen understanding of public service provision (Sances, 2017), shaping levels of observational data aggregation and affecting public servants' behavior (Berry, 2008). We avoid these potential complications by focusing on a region where one level of local government provides the same set of public services to all residents.

The town clerk has traditionally been an elected office. Massachusetts and Connecticut, for instance, have clerk elections as the "default" method of selection but allow individual towns the leeway to change the selection method at their discretion.¹³ Some towns, however, have sought to shift to an appointed clerk as the position has grown in responsibility and complexity.^{14,15} The result of gradual changes is a substantial blend throughout the region in the nature of clerk selection.¹⁶ While the choice of clerk selection method is non-random, there is considerable geographic and demographic diversity among communities using different methods, and we control for a variety of potential confounders in our analyses.

Original Survey of New England Municipal Clerks

We conducted an original survey of municipal clerks in five New England states to test our theory about the relationship between clerk selection methods and representation. Our survey, conducted via email and physical mail, yielded a relatively high response rate of twenty-eight percent, balanced across the clerk selection method.¹⁷

In our survey, we asked clerks about their attitudes toward public service, ideological and policy preferences, job performance and qualifications, and perceptions of their local government and community (Baldassare and Hoene, 2004; Barboza-Wilkes et al., 2023; Einstein et al., 2014; PRRI, 2021). These questions took a variety of forms. Most were structured as Likert scales, while others were multiple choice. We also collected demographic and background information on the clerks.¹⁸

We administered the survey both online and via postal mail. We began by creating a list of email addresses for municipal clerks. On April 4, 2023, the survey was emailed to these addresses through Qualtrics.¹⁹ A follow-up email was sent 1 week later, on April 11, 2023. We subsequently collected the mailing addresses of our list of clerks, and approximately 3 weeks later, we mailed a paper copy of the survey with a pre-paid response envelope to all clerks who had not yet responded online.

Our overall response rate was 28 percent. Our response rate was substantially higher for the paper surveys delivered via postal mail. The response rate to our online survey was 11 percent, with the remainder of our responses coming from mail surveys (which were sent only to those not responding to the online survey).²⁰ In the aggregate, we achieved similar and high response rates across appointed and elected clerks, with both groups exceeding 25 percent response rates. In Table A.1 in the Appendix, we summarize our recruitment and report response numbers and rates by survey delivery mode and clerk selection method.²¹ Our sample was also geographically diverse, with a significant number of respondents from all five states.²²

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the clerks in our sample. We compare the municipal characteristics of respondents and non-respondents in our sampling frame. Our sample is broadly representative: we find no significant differences for median age, population size, the share of town residents with a bachelor's degree, the share of town residents who are nonwhite, median household income, median home value, Biden two-party vote share in 2020, or the share of communities using a city manager. Collectively, Table 1 suggests that the municipalities in our sample are similar to those we could not reach. Our high response rate and our sample's geographic,

Table 1. Representativeness of Sample, ACS Variables

	Non-Respondents	Respondents	p-Value
Median age	46	46	.37
Population	13,333	12,814	.76
Percentage w/bachelors	30	31	.2
Percentage non-white	10	11	.22
Median household income	89,392	92,546	.15
Median home value	332,238	341,290	.46
Biden vote percentage	59	59	.41
Percentage with manager	10	8	.23

Note. Table presents means for respondent and non-respondent municipalities, and *p*-values for a difference-of-means test.

demographic, economic, and institutional representativeness provide confidence that our results generalize beyond our survey sample.

Descriptive Comparison of Elected and Appointed Clerks

We begin by exploring the descriptive characteristics of our sample. These comparisons provide a baseline for understanding who serves as a municipal clerk in New England, what resources they have at their disposal, and how they feel about their jobs. The analysis in this section is descriptive, and we focus on comparing elected and appointed clerks.²³ In short, we find that elected clerks are, on average, older, less educated, and work in offices with lower institutional capacity than appointed clerks. They are also longer-tenured and more independent and self-reliant in their work. These results also show how other systematic differences may accompany the selection method across the municipalities we study.

Clerk Personal Characteristics

We first consider clerks' personal and demographic characteristics. Figure 1 plots mean values for a variety of characteristics. In the top-left panel, we plot respondents' birth years. In general, elected clerks are older than appointed clerks and about twenty percentage points more likely to be 65 years of age or older. Elected clerks also have less formal education on average, being more likely to have high school as their highest level of educational attainment. In contrast, nearly twice as many appointed clerks as elected have post-graduate degrees. On gender and race, we find few differences between elected and appointed clerks but do note the homogeneity of our sample: unlike many other political offices (e.g., Thomsen and King, 2020), our sample of clerks is overwhelmingly comprised of women. Additionally, New England municipal clerks are disproportionately non-Hispanic whites.

Institutional Capacity

We next examine whether there are systematic differences in the institutional capacity of elected and appointed clerks (Figure 2). We explore this in a variety of ways. We find that appointed clerks are more likely to hold full-time positions, though most clerks in our sample are full-time employees. We also find that, on average, elected clerks manage smaller staffs compared to their appointed counterparts. On other dimensions, we find less substantial differences between elected and appointed clerks. Similar shares of the two selection methods have completed the New England Municipal Clerks Institute (NEMCI), a rigorous continuing education program. We find few significant differences in the college majors and previous employment of clerks, though these results do provide valuable details on the backgrounds of clerks, who often come from business and professional backgrounds. We do find that elected clerks may compensate for lower institutional capacity with greater personal capacity, as they are more likely to have held their position for an extended period.

Satisfaction, Efficacy, and Sources of Guidance

Finally, we explore differences in appointed and elected clerks' attitudes toward and efficacy in their work. We do so in two ways. First, in Figure 3, we plot the responses for a battery of questions examining job attitudes and personal efficacy. These questions build on studies in public administration exploring job satisfaction for local government bureaucrats (e.g., Petrovsky et al., 2023). Our results indicate that elected and appointed clerks feel similarly satisfied and efficacious in their roles. Both elected and appointed clerks agreed most with the idea that they were confident in their abilities. We find, most notably, that elected clerks report greater independence in their jobs.

As another approach to understanding how appointed and elected clerks differ in their approaches and attitudes

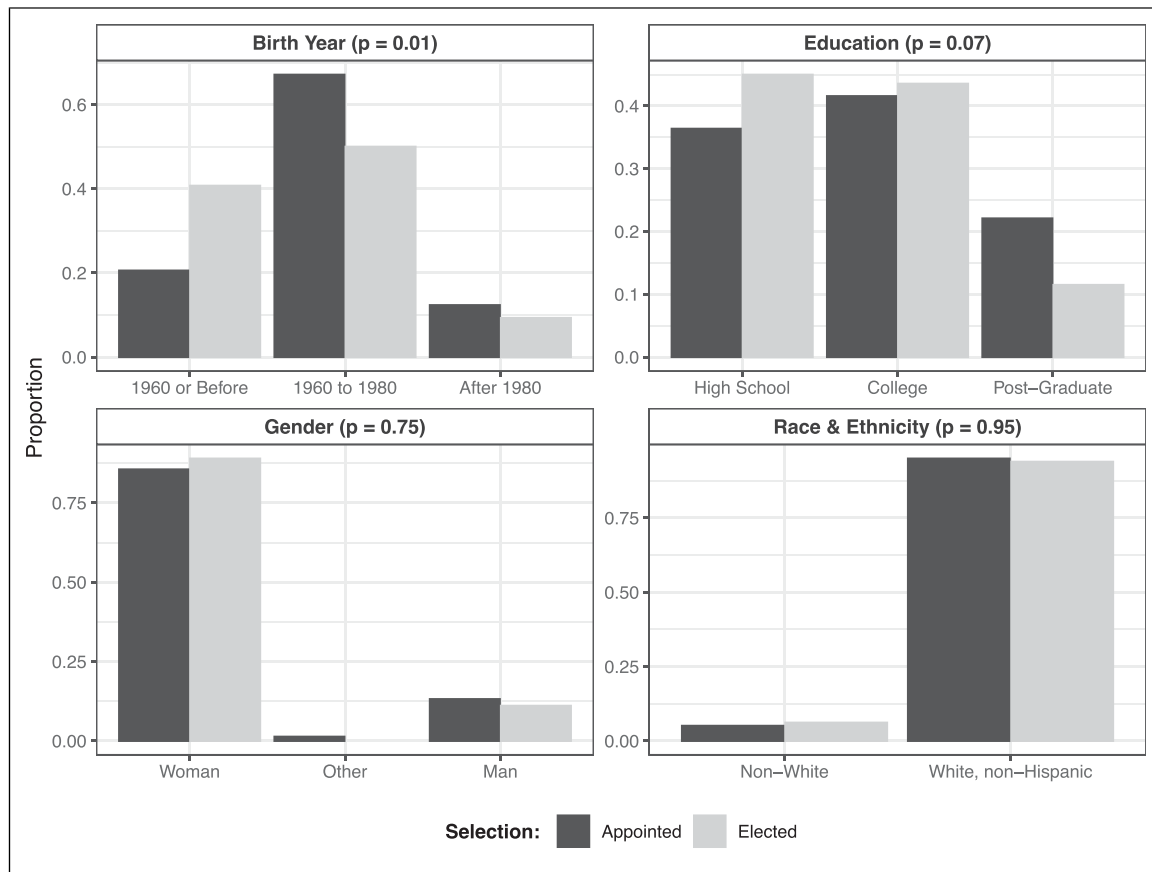


Figure 1. Clerk personal and demographic characteristics.

Note. Reported p -values are based on χ^2 tests; “other” gender category is omitted from that test because it has only one respondent.

toward their work, we asked them how often they turn to a variety of potential sources of guidance. The results are presented in Figure 4. We find many similarities across elected and appointed clerks, albeit with some notable differences. In particular, while neither elected nor appointed clerks are especially prone to turn to their personal political or religious beliefs, elected clerks are substantially more likely to do so; they are also more likely to rely on community members. The pattern in Figure 4 is consistent with elected clerks being more willing to turn to personal sources for guidance than appointed clerks.

Responsiveness and Selection Method

We now turn to formally testing our theoretical expectations.²⁴ To reiterate, we expect that elected clerks will be more responsive to their constituents’ preferences than appointed clerks. We conduct two sets of analyses. First, we asked clerks questions to measure their feelings of accountability and service toward their constituents. Our results show that elected clerks are more attentive to their constituents and feel a stronger call to public service than appointed clerks, who are more concerned with the

opinions of other local government officials. We then explore ideological and policy responsiveness by comparing local political preferences to clerks’ self-reported ideology, partisanship, and preferences on a specific policy question. Here, we find relatively few differences between elected and appointed clerks and even some evidence that elected clerks may, under some circumstances, be less responsive to voter preferences than appointed clerks.

Elected Clerks Have Constituents in Mind

We begin our exploration of our hypotheses by examining how their selection method affects clerks’ feelings of accountability toward the public they serve. To do so, we rely on a straightforward regression specification that allows us to control for a variety of potential confounders as we attempt to isolate the relationship between clerk selection method and responsiveness. Our base model is as follows:

$$Y_{ijs} = \beta \text{Elected}_j + \Psi \mathbf{X}_i + \Phi \mathbf{Z}_j + \alpha_s + \epsilon_{ijs} \quad (1)$$

where i indexes individual clerks, j indexes municipalities, and s indexes states.²⁵ This model contains both an indicator

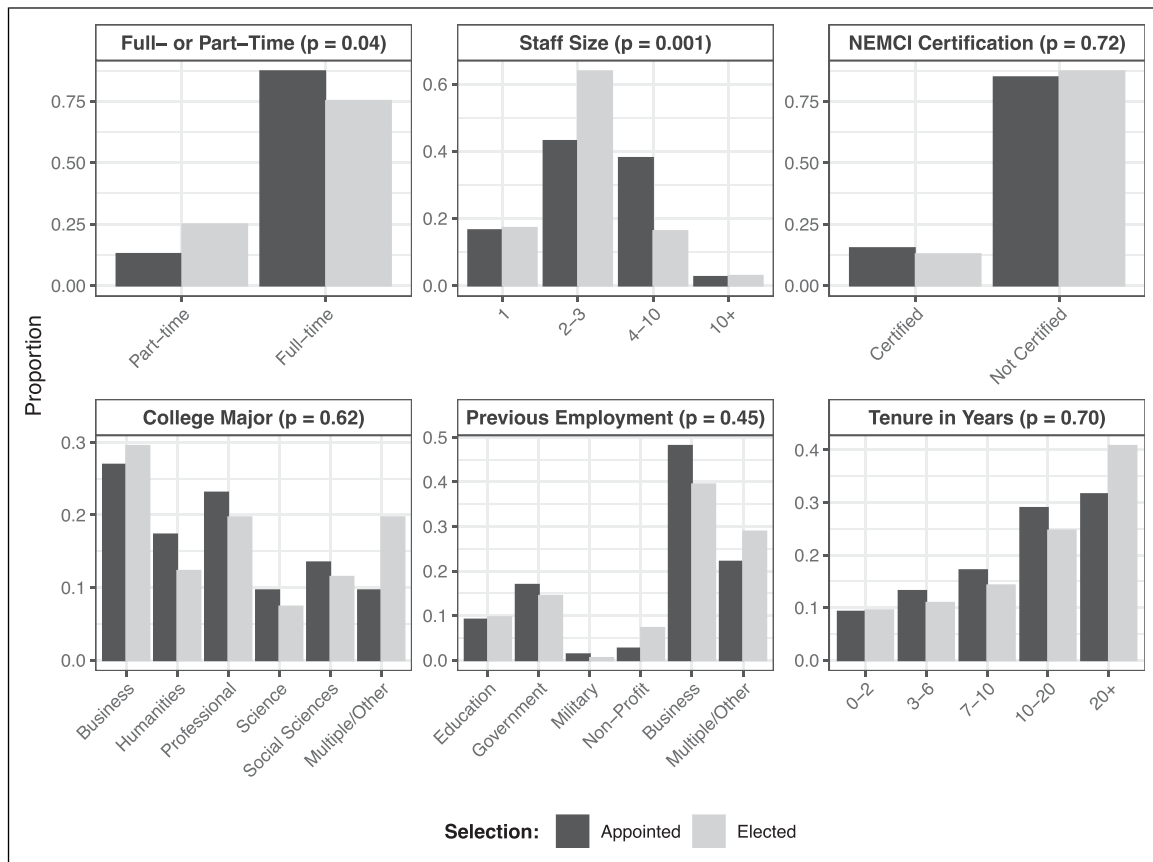


Figure 2. Clerk office institutional capacity. *Note.* Reported p -values are based on χ^2 tests.

for whether a community selects clerks through elections, a vector of clerk-level control variables $\mathbf{X}$,²⁶ a vector of municipality-level variables $\mathbf{Z}$,²⁷ and state indicators α . Of particular theoretical importance among the control variables is an indicator variable reflecting whether the municipal government uses an appointed manager to run the day-to-day operations of local government. Because this reflects a propensity for appointing local officials and is somewhat associated with appointing a clerk,²⁸ it is important to rule this out as a confounder.²⁹ We estimate heterogeneity robust standard errors for all models.

We apply this specification to two sets of survey questions that focus specifically on clerks' attentiveness to the community they serve and different members of it. First, we asked clerks about their level of agreement with six statements about their community and obligations to the public. Their responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale. In the top panel of Figure 5, we plot our regression results for these outcomes. The figure plots the coefficient on *Elected* for each of three specifications: one with only state fixed effects, one with state fixed effects and respondent-level covariates, and one with state fixed effects, respondent-level covariates, and municipality-level covariates. All outcomes are re-scaled to fall between 0 and 1; higher estimates indicate that elected

clerks gave higher responses than appointed, on average. While results are mixed, on balance the evidence points toward elected clerks feeling a greater obligation to and interest in their community. The results indicate that elected clerks agreed more that "An official's obligation to the public should always come before loyalty to superiors," that they consider public service their civic duty, and that they find it less difficult to be interested in their community (note the negative phrasing of that statement); note, however, that not all of these are significant at the $p < .05$ level. For the remaining three questions, we find no meaningful difference between elected and appointed clerks, though we note that these questions also had high overall levels of agreement.

Second, we asked respondents about their concern over a variety of actors' perceptions of their job performance, recorded using a four-level Likert scale, again re-scaled to between 0 and 1. Our model specifications are the same as those above. The means among appointed clerks indicated in the figure suggest substantial variation across the different actors. Moreover, there is a significant difference between elected and appointed clerks' levels of concern for different audiences. Elected clerks are more concerned about local business and religious leaders, and especially residents, than appointed clerks are. Conversely,

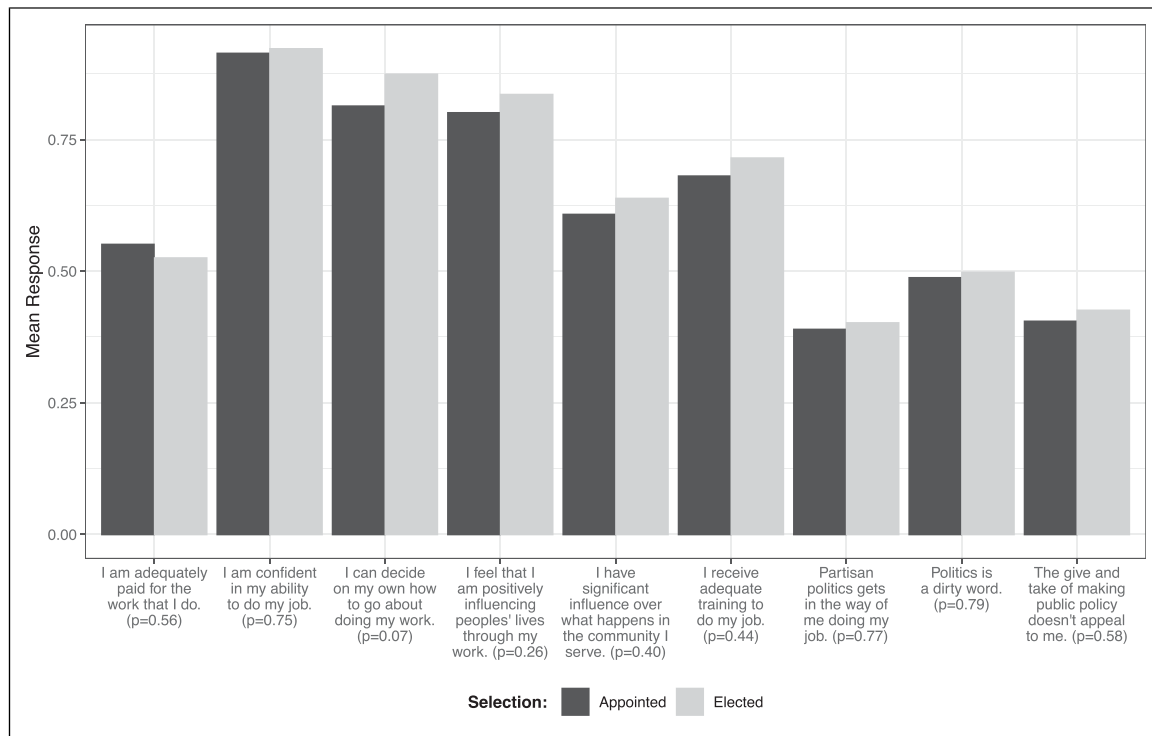


Figure 3. Clerk job attitudes.

Note. Clerks were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the given statement. Outcome options were a five-level Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” and have been re-scaled between 0 and 1. Reported p-values are based on t tests.

appointed clerks are more concerned, and elected clerks less so, about the opinions of municipal executive and legislative officials. In Figure B.1 in the Appendix, we extend this analysis to consider whether the nature of appointed clerks’ appointers—whether these individuals are themselves elected or appointed—affects appointed clerks’ responsiveness.³⁰ We find that clerks who are appointed by appointed officials appear to be somewhat more attuned to the concerns of municipal executives than clerks appointed by elected officials, while the reverse is true with respect to municipal legislatures. Importantly, the overall pattern of our results in Figure 5 is replicated for both groups of appointed clerks relative to elected. Together, the two panels of Figure 5 paint a clear picture: elected officials are more likely to view themselves as the agent of residents, while appointed officials are more likely to view municipal officials as their principals.

Elected and Appointed Clerks Are Similarly Responsive to Constituents

In the previous section, we establish that elected clerks are more attentive to constituent preferences and feel a greater call to public service than appointed clerks, who are more concerned about the views of their bosses, other members of local

government. We now explore whether the selection method conditions clerks’ responsiveness to constituent preferences regarding substantive representation. In other words, we now ask whether the different sense of accountability that elected and appointed clerks feel to the people they serve manifests in their political views and attitudes.

Conceptually, our focus here is on the responsiveness of clerk attitudes to constituent preferences (Matsusaka, 2015), which we measure by examining the slope of their relationship. To explore this, we use a slightly different regression specification than in our previous analysis:

$$Y_{ijs} = \beta \text{Elected}_j \times \text{Preferences}_j + \eta \text{Elected}_j + \gamma \text{Preferences}_j + \epsilon_{ijs}$$

This model specification adds a measure of local preferences and interacts this measure with the indicator for whether a clerk was *Elected* or not. The coefficient estimate $\hat{\gamma}$ from this model captures how responsive to constituent preferences appointed clerks are, while the coefficient estimate on the interaction, $\hat{\beta}$, captures how much more or less responsive elected clerks are than appointed clerks. We omit control variables from Model 2 because our primary theoretical interest is the unconditional relationship between constituent and elite preferences. While we expect that municipality-level

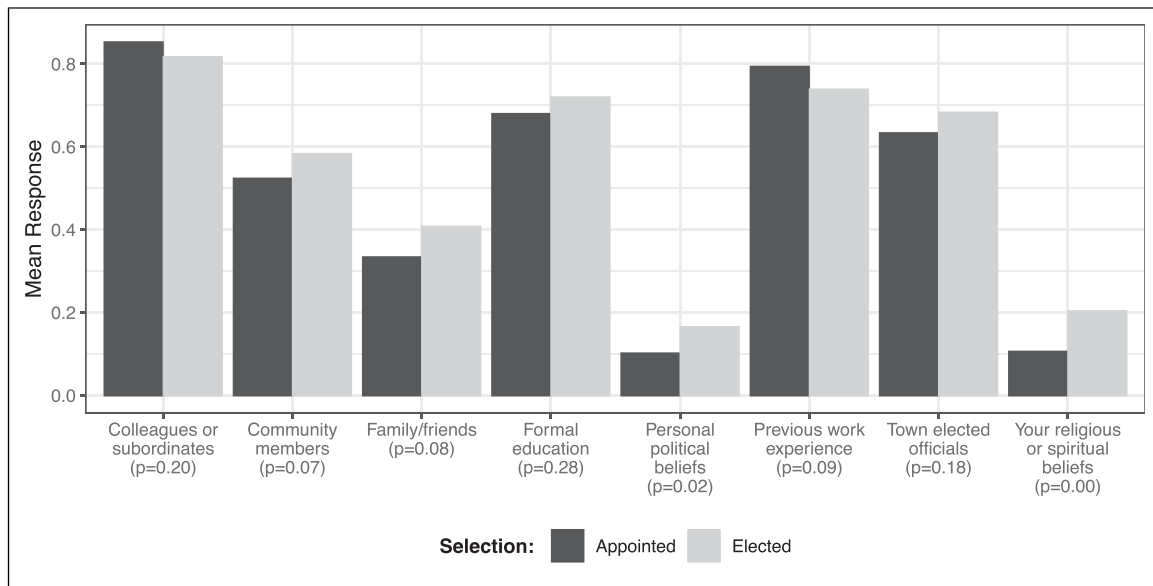


Figure 4. Clerk sources of advice.

Note. Responses to the prompt, “Thinking about your responsibilities as a clerk, how often do you rely on the following for guidance?” Outcome options were a four-level Likert responses ranging from “never” to “often,” and have been re-scaled between 0 and 1. Reported *p*-values are based on *t* tests.

characteristics such as income, race, and others help shape municipality-level preferences, we do not necessarily want to “control away” these differences. We present results in the [Appendix](#) that do account for both municipality and clerk-level factors, as we describe below.

We use two measures to capture municipality-level constituent preferences. Our preferred measure of local preferences is municipality-level two-party vote share for President Biden in the 2020 Presidential Election. This measure—also used in the above models as a control variable—is created from state-specific data sources that report vote totals at the municipality level. While election data does not perfectly capture local ideological preferences, [Warshaw and Rodden \(2012, 212\)](#) report that “presidential vote shares generally have a correlation with public opinion between 0.6 and 0.7. This is a rather impressive correlation, and it should be somewhat heartening for researchers who wish to continue using presidential vote shares as catchall proxies for district-level ideology.” Because we study a small geographic unit for which MRP-based estimates are likely to leave substantial missingness, we are comfortable turning to presidential vote share as our primary measure. To explore the robustness of our results and use a measure that more explicitly taps into constituent *ideological* preferences, we also use clerks’ perceptions of local ideological preferences, solicited in our survey on a seven-point Likert scale that we have re-scaled between 0 and 1. This measure correlates highly with Biden vote share ($\rho = 0.66$), but it may better reflect clerks’ subjective understanding of local

preferences to which they are responsive while making policy decisions. [Figure 6](#) presents the joint and marginal distributions of these two measures of constituent preferences. As this demonstrates, there is a strong positive relationship between the two measures, but also considerable variation in local partisanship with a given category of clerk response; for example, clerks described communities ranging from 35% to more than 80% in Biden vote share as “middle of the road.” Also of importance is that, as a function of our New England sample, most communities are solidly Democratic, with about a quarter of municipalities in our sample voting for Donald Trump in the two-party vote.

To measure clerks’ attitudes, we turn to three survey questions. First, we examine clerks’ self-reported ideology and partisanship, both solicited through five-level Likert scales in our survey and re-scaled between 0 and 1 (higher is more liberal/Democratic). While these are relatively non-specific in terms of specific policy focus, they do capture broad value systems and sets of beliefs (e.g., [Jewitt and Goren, 2016](#)) that clerks might hold, and are relatively directly associated with our measures of constituent preferences. We next examine clerks’ responses to a specific policy prompt related to voting rights in the United States, which both (1) is related to a policy area in which clerks are actively involved and (2) should be associated with underlying ideological or partisan values. Specifically, we asked whether “The U.S. Congress should...” either “Pass legislation protecting the right to vote for all American citizens” or “Leave voting

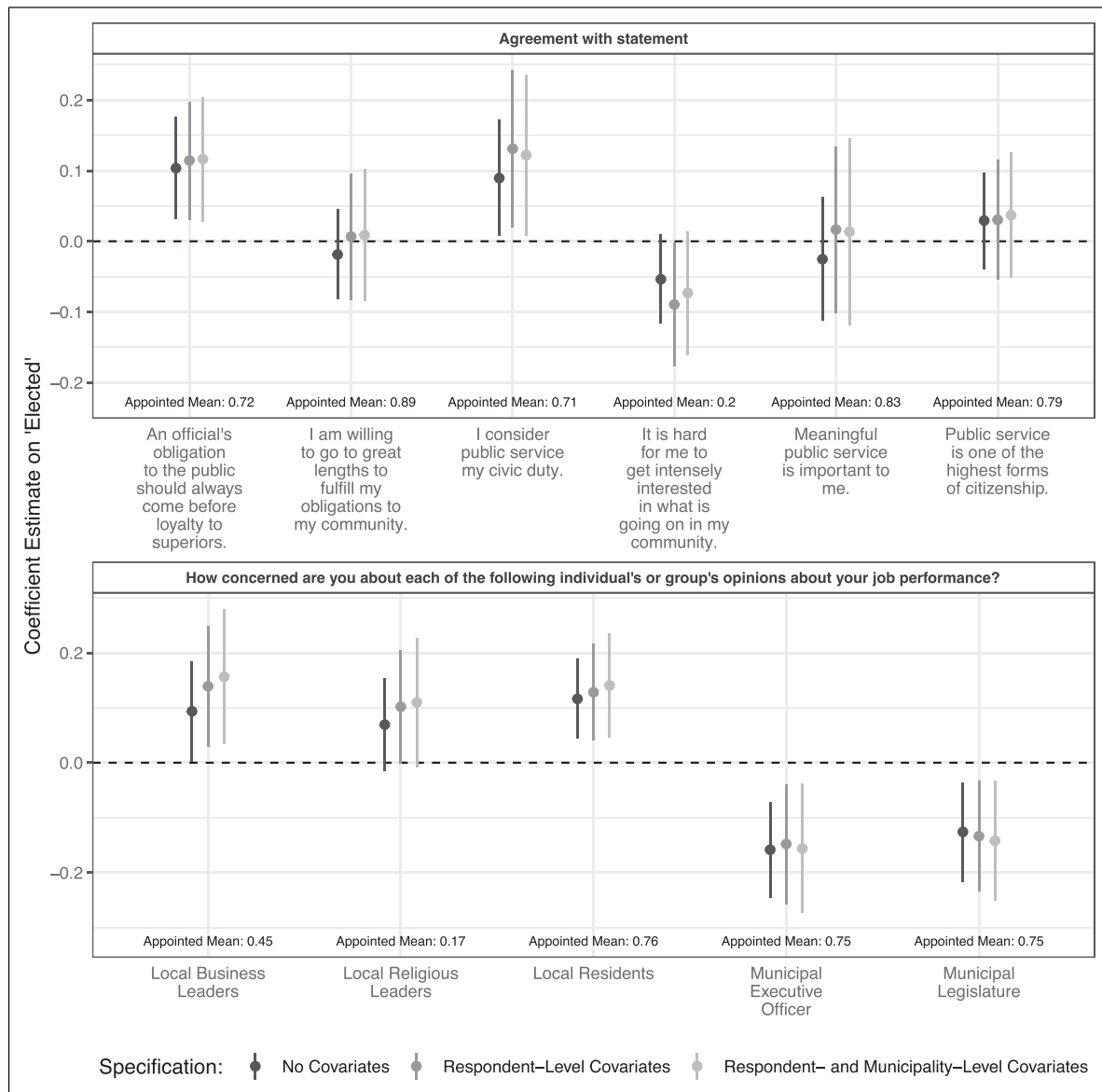


Figure 5. Effect of electing clerks on perceptions of constituency and community.

Note. Figure presents OLS regression estimates. All models include state fixed effects. 95% confidence intervals are based on robust standard errors. Outcomes in the top panel are five-level Likert scale responses, re-scaled from 0 to 1; outcomes in the lower panel are four-level Likert scale responses, re-scaled between 0 and 1. Models include between 218 and 291 observations.

rights issues to the states.” The question was forced choice between those two options, and respondents were instructed to “indicate which option comes closest to your view.” We coded responses indicating that Congress should pass legislation to protect voting rights as “1,” and responses indicating a preference for Congress to leave the issue to states as a “0.” In light of the controversy around the 2020 election (Eggers et al., 2021), Republican-led states’ efforts to restrict access to the ballot box (Grumbach, 2022, 2023), and President Biden’s public advocacy for legislation such as the John

Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act,³¹ we interpret the former response to be more liberal/Democratic and the latter to be more conservative/Republican. Nevertheless, clerks’ familiarity with election administration and procedures and their own (possible) status as elected officials may give them unique insight into the question.

Our results are presented in Table 2. The top panel presents results using Biden vote share as our measure of local constituent preferences; the bottom panel presents results using clerks’ perceptions of constituent ideology.

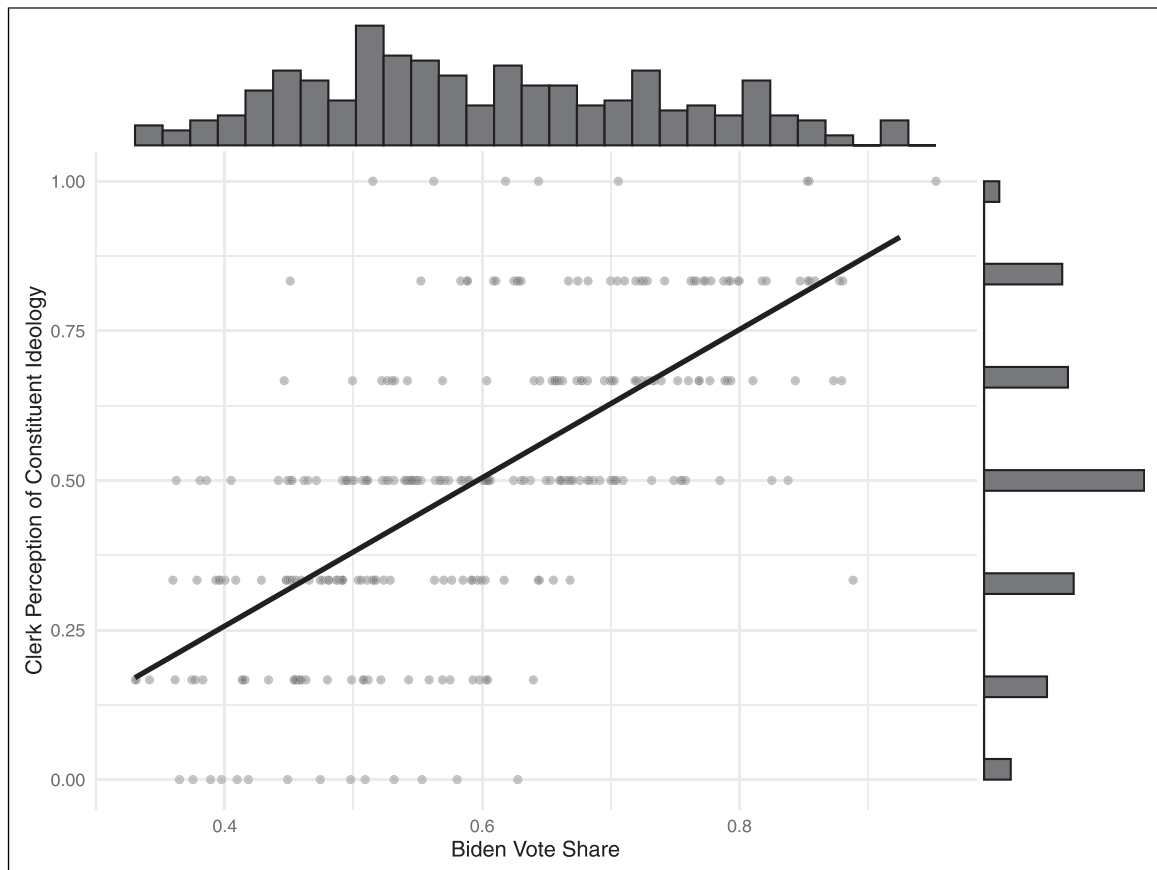


Figure 6. Biden vote share and clerk perceptions of constituent ideology.

Note. Black line presents linear relationship between Biden vote share and clerks' perceptions of their constituents' ideologies. Marginal histograms present the distribution of the two measures; x-axis is jittered.

For each of our three outcomes, we present two models: one using Model 2 above and one that omits the clerk selection method and the interaction therewith; we include the latter to establish a baseline for responsiveness when aggregating all clerks together. In Table 2, the two leftmost models have clerk ideology as the outcome, the two middle models have clerk partisanship, and the two rightmost models use our binary voting rights outcome measure, with a "1" indicating a preference for greater federal involvement in protecting voting rights (i.e., the more liberal/Democratic position).

Our results are consistent with clerks being responsive to their constituents' preferences, but provide little indication that elected clerks are more so than appointed clerks. Focusing first on Panel A, the three models without interactions indicate positive responsiveness to constituent partisan preferences. Places that gave Biden a greater share of the vote had more liberal and more Democratic clerks, on average, and those clerks were more supportive of federal involvement in protecting voting rights. We find no evidence, however, that responsiveness was greater among elected clerks. The interactions between *Biden* and

Elected do not approach conventional thresholds for statistical significance and are inconsistently signed, suggesting that more Democratic areas receive more liberal and more Democratic clerking regardless of whether those clerks are appointed or elected. While elected clerks express more concern about residents' opinions, their responses to these questions do not reflect greater actual responsiveness to them.

To more clearly visualize the patterns at play here, in Figure 7, we plot the predicted probability of supporting Congressional action on voting rights across the support of Biden vote share in our data, separately by elected and appointed clerks. As this figure shows, there is exceedingly little difference between the fits for the two selection methods; the figure provides virtually no indication of a substantive difference in representation between the two groups, although we emphasize that we may be underpowered to detect differences.

The results in Panel B of Table 2 are less suggestive of clerk responsiveness. While the unmoderated models suggest responsiveness, the relationships are substantively small and fail to achieve statistical significance for

Table 2. Constituent Preferences, Selection Methods, and Clerk Attitudes

	Dependent Variable					
	Ideology		Party		Voting Rights	
Panel A: Biden vote share						
Biden vote share	0.607** (0.113)	0.347 (0.237)	0.509** (0.131)	0.526* (0.285)	0.500** (0.210)	0.499 (0.397)
Elected clerk		-0.222 (0.171)		0.015 (0.208)		-0.017 (0.317)
Biden × elected		0.341 (0.269)		-0.018 (0.322)		-0.084 (0.477)
Constant	0.130* (0.069)	0.304** (0.153)	0.206** (0.082)	0.192 (0.187)	0.387** (0.132)	0.434 (0.275)
Observations	257	257	255	255	273	273
Panel B: Clerk estimate of constituent ideology						
Constituent ideology	0.193** (0.072)	0.096 (0.128)	0.111 (0.080)	0.197 (0.163)	0.126 (0.117)	0.212 (0.214)
Elected clerk		-0.096 (0.095)		0.055 (0.120)		0.014 (0.166)
Ideology × elected		0.118 (0.160)		-0.138 (0.192)		-0.183 (0.262)
Constant	0.392** (0.038)	0.471** (0.083)	0.453** (0.044)	0.415** (0.108)	0.628** (0.066)	0.636** (0.147)
Observations	251	251	250	250	262	262

Note. Entries are linear regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$ (two-tailed test).

the Party and Voting Rights models. As with the Biden vote share, we find no significant interaction for ideology, party, or voting rights. While clerks' perceptions of their constituents' ideology may be subjective or variable, these findings nonetheless suggest similar levels of responsiveness regardless of the selection method.

Additional Results and Robustness Checks

As we note above, we also estimated the models reported in Table 2 while including respondent- and municipality-level covariates. These results are presented in Tables B.5 through B.8 in the Appendix. The conclusions drawn from the models using Biden vote share are generally similar to those presented in Panel A of Table 2, albeit with some loss of precision; the models using perceived constituency opinion differ somewhat more from those reported in the text, although they remain broadly null. We caution against over-interpreting these models as the inclusion of covariates may absorb important factors shaping the partisan preferences of a municipality.

In keeping with our pre-analysis plan, we also replicated our results from Figure 5 and Table 2 using a matched sample of data (Ho et al., 2007; Hansen and Olsen Klopfer, 2006). While doing so limits our sample size, this procedure guards against different distributions of covariates among the appointed and elected municipalities in our sample, and our results continue to be

patterned similarly to those reported in the text. We describe our procedure and report these results in Section B.4 in the Appendix.

We also acknowledge that variation in election cycles may affect elected clerks' behavior (Hessami, 2018); while our survey was not conducted at a time of year that might be typically associated with "election time"—the spring of an odd-numbered year—there is substantial variation in the timing of local elections in New England. As a conservative approach to exploring the effect of electoral pressures on our estimates, we collected the election year for as many clerks in our sample as possible;³² we then re-estimate our main results from Figure 5 and Table 2 while retaining only elected clerks that we are confident were not elected in 2023. Our results, presented in Section B.5 in the Appendix, are broadly consistent with the results in the text.

Finally, to further interrogate the relationship between clerks' selection method and their policy attitudes, we also asked several questions about additional policy areas in clerks' jurisdiction. Because these policy areas are less obviously associated with overall political attitudes, they are less directly connected to our theoretical expectations, but they nevertheless offer insight into the differences between elected and appointed clerks. In Figure B.6 in the Appendix, we present estimates of the relationship between the selection method and two sets of questions. Because our interest with these questions is not in responsiveness to constituent ideology but rather in whether

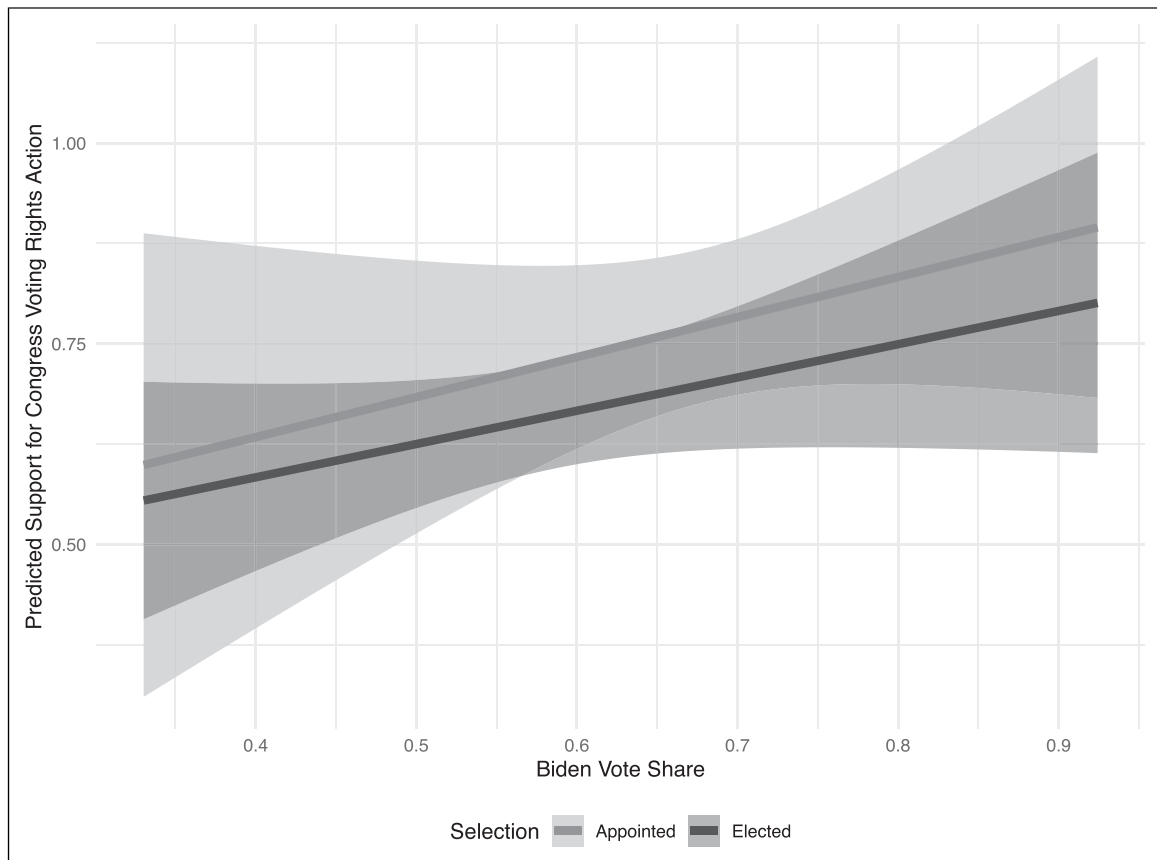


Figure 7. Predicted relationship between voting rights attitudes and Biden vote share.

Note. Figure plots predicted values based on rightmost column in Table 2. Support of Biden vote share is drawn from sample.

there are aggregate differences in policy professionalism by selection method, we return to our uninteracted specification (Model 1). Across a variety of additional questions about election administration, licensing and registrations, permits, public records requests, and record-keeping, we find no meaningful differences between elected and appointed clerks.

Discussion and Conclusion

New England's municipal clerks play a critical role in sustaining democracy in at least two ways. Within their communities, they fulfill essential administrative duties, overseeing the proper execution of local government functions, including the issuance of licenses and permits, the maintenance of vital records, and the administration of elections. Clerks also stand at the conceptual forefront of democracy. Their unique combination of political and administrative responsibilities places them in a role that defies clear classification. Unlike legislators, whose positions are *clearly* suited for election, or public health officials, who are *clearly* suited for appointment, clerks occupy a space at the intersection of the political and

administrative, the democratic and bureaucratic. The varied methods used to select clerks underscore their dual identity as they navigate and bridge these distinct realms.

We theorized that elections influence both the selection of municipal clerks and their behavior in office. While we anticipated that elected clerks would demonstrate greater responsiveness to their constituents than appointed clerks, our findings provide mixed evidence for this expectation. To test these ideas, we designed a survey of New England municipal clerks—a population that exhibits substantial variation in selection methods while holding other key factors relatively constant.

Our findings highlight both similarities and differences between elected and appointed clerks. First, we show that the selection method alters who clerks perceive as their principal to whom they are most responsive. Elected clerks are more concerned with the opinions of residents and other community members, while appointed clerks are more attentive to their bosses and other municipal officials. In this sense, elections shape clerks' perceptions of accountability by clarifying to whom they feel most responsible. Our subsequent findings, however, cast doubt on how much these different orientations matter. We find

little evidence that election relative to appointment facilitates responsiveness to constituent partisan or ideological preferences and on a hot-button, clerk-specific policy area. These findings on partisan, ideological, and policy responsiveness serve as a complement to existing work focused on performance or competence-based outcomes by offering a more well-rounded picture of the ways that election and appointment privilege particular dimensions of public service (e.g., Ferrer, 2025).

Our evidence suggests that replacing elected clerks with appointed ones may reduce the extent to which public preferences are directly considered. However, when examining actual policy preferences, we find no significant difference in how constituents' views are reflected. Appointed clerks may still account for constituency preferences, either directly or indirectly, through the influence of the elected officials they serve. Future research could explore representational differences in situations where clerks must navigate more contentious, divisive issues within their communities. Finally, it is important to emphasize that policy responsiveness does not necessarily equate to policy soundness.

We acknowledge several limitations in our study. First, our measure of policy responsiveness is constrained by our reliance on survey instruments. Specifically, our measures capture clerks' self-reported perceptions of their responsiveness and their positions on voting rights. However, responding clerks may feel compelled to provide socially desirable answers, and other biases inherent in survey methodologies could obscure actual behaviors. Furthermore, perceptions of responsiveness may not directly translate into actual responsiveness. This distinction is highlighted by our findings: while we observe some differences in clerks' perceptions of responsiveness, we find little evidence that the characteristics of constituents significantly influence clerks' views on voting rights, regardless of whether they are elected or appointed. To this end, researchers should continue to explore responsiveness by examining outcomes beyond survey measures.

Our results suggest several directions for future research. First, future analyses should look beyond New England and consider how selection methods affect descriptive representation. While we had pre-registered analyses to examine this, the racial and ethnic homogeneity of our sample precludes an extensive formal analysis (but see Table B.1 in the Appendix). Our results for substantive representation, particularly our analysis of voting rights attitudes, suggest that further analysis on other policy areas—both politicized and non-politicized, and in and out of clerks' jurisdiction—would provide valuable clarity on how and when clerks represent the ideological and partisan interests of their constituents.

From a public administration perspective, further research is needed to explore how clerks perceive their

role within municipal government. Do they see themselves as just one of many employees accountable to municipal officials, or do they view themselves as more independent and directly responsible to their constituents? Beyond examining clerks' own perceptions, investigating additional office characteristics—such as personnel policies, salary, and benefits relative to other staff—could provide valuable insights into this question. Relatedly, additional research should explore the career paths and trajectories of these clerks.

Finally, while clerks provide a valuable lens for studying the effects of elections, they are just one of many local offices with varying selection methods. Future research should broaden its focus to include other state and local offices. By examining different dimensions of representation across these offices, we can gain a deeper understanding of how and why elections shape governance.

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Data Availability Statement

A pre-analysis plan for this survey was created using AsPredicted (#127549) and is available at https://aspredicted.org/NFR_1XZ. Data and code cannot be shared to protect respondent privacy.

IRB Approval

This study was reviewed by the Washington University Institutional Review Board (ID# 202303085).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See, for example, Klein, Riley. “Issue of Electing vs. Appointing Town Staff in North Canaan goes to November Ballot.” *The Lakeville Journal* (Lakeville, CT). July 16, 2025.
2. Bartov, Shira Li. “Town Forced to Shut Down After Sole Clerk Resigns Over Vacation Denial.” *Newsweek*. May 18, 2022.
3. “Cities 101—Forms of Local Government.” National League of Cities. Accessed August 2023.
4. “Land Use in Vermont.” Two Rivers - Ottauquechee Regional Commission. Accessed August 2025.
5. “NH Cities and Towns.” NH.gov. Accessed August 2023.
6. These unincorporated places are disproportionately small in population. See Howe (2024).
7. In the final New England state, Maine, on the other hand, “somewhat more than half of the total land area of the state is designated ‘unorganized territory’” (Howe 2024). While these areas are sparsely populated, they consist of more than four hundred unincorporated townships, making Maine distinct from the states we include.
8. “County Government.” Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Citizen Information Service. Accessed August 2023.
9. “Quick Facts: Connecticut Municipal Governments.” CT State Library LibGuides. Accessed August 2023.
10. Kohli, Nish. “Mystified by How Local Government Works in RI? Here’s How the Pieces Fit Together.” *The Providence Journal* (Providence, RI). March 27, 2025.
11. “County Government.” Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Citizen Information Service. Accessed August 2023.
12. “State Profiles.” National Association of Counties. Accessed August 2023. <https://www.naco.org/program/county-governance-project#state>
13. See MA Gen L ch 41 § 1 and § 1b (2022), CT Gen Stat § 9-189 (2022), and CT Gen Stat § 7-16a (2022).
14. Dunn, Tim. “Dartmouth Looks to Appointed Town Clerk as Job Becomes More Complex.” *The Standard Times* (New Bedford, MA). November 9, 2020.
15. In New Hampshire, the ability to appoint a clerk is specifically tied to having a “city” form of government.
16. We collected data on the selection method in a variety of ways: first, we created a list of municipal governments in these states, then we searched across directories of municipal clerks, municipal government websites, local election results, and finally direct phone calls. We then verified our coding of selection method for the sample of municipalities that responded to our survey.
17. We pre-registered that we would analyze separately both our full set of respondents and the subset who indicated that they were themselves the clerk; however, due to the relatively small number of non-clerk (or unidentified) respondents (nineteen out of more than 300), we chose to focus only on self-identified clerks. All values reported in the text are for clerks only. We also declined to analyze open-ended responses as we had pre-registered, largely due to our limited sample size.
18. See Appendix Section C, for the full text of the survey.
19. Several email addresses bounced back our recruitment email; we attempted to contact these via email a second time.
20. Some clerks emailed us to question the legitimacy of our online survey or to express that they were not allowed to click on emailed links.
21. Response rates for this type of survey may be biased, since responsiveness itself is a potential quantity of interest. Following the guidance laid out by Butler and Crabtree (2021), we carefully fielded the survey in such a way that encouraged response while minimizing respondent risk. We also examine the differences in characteristics between survey respondents and non-respondents and find them to be very similar.
22. We received fifty-six responses from Connecticut, 106 from Massachusetts, fifty-seven from New Hampshire, nine from Rhode Island, and sixty-three from Vermont.
23. While we prefer these simple descriptive comparisons for these measures, we also present multivariate regression results in Appendix Section B.1.
24. We pre-registered our hypotheses and analyses at AsPredicted (#127549). It is available at https://aspredicted.org/NFR_1XZ.
25. In our sample there is one clerk per municipality, so i and j are used only to distinguish covariates and do not indicate a nested relationship.
26. Our clerk-level control variables are *Party ID* (three levels), *Ideology* (three levels), *Woman* (0–1), *Nonwhite* (0–1), *Age* (cont.), *Bachelor's Degree* (0–1), and *Ten Years of Service* (0–1). All are measured from our survey.
27. Our municipality-level control variables are *Full-time position* (0–1), *More than three employees* (0–1), *Median Age* (cont.), $\ln(\text{Population})$ (cont.), % *Bachelor's* (cont.), % *Nonwhite* (cont.), *Median Household Income* (cont.), *Median Home Value* (cont.), % *Biden* (cont.), and *Manager* (0–1). The full-time and office size variables are drawn from responses to our survey. Municipality-level Biden two-party vote share is collected from state-specific sources. The use of an appointed manager in municipal government was collected from various state and local government sources. The remainder are from the 2020 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.
28. About twenty percent of municipalities in our sampling frame that appoint their clerk use an appointed manager, while only six percent of those that elect their clerk do so. Our “manager” measure is generally limited to municipalities using a council-manager form of government; it

does not typically include town meeting governments that employ an appointed town administrator.

29. We used the 2018 Municipal Forms of Government Survey (2018 Municipal Form of Government Survey: Summary of Survey Results 2019) to assess the relationship between clerk selection method and partisan elections. Limiting to the five states we consider, we find that 65 percent of all municipalities reported using non-partisan elections for the city council. Moreover, this usage was balanced across clerk selection methods: 62 percent of municipalities that appointed their clerks used non-partisan elections, while 67 percent of those that elected their clerks did so.
30. For more details on the data and implementation, see discussion in Section B.3 in the Appendix.
31. Corasaniti, Nick and Reid J. Epstein. "A Voting Rights Push, as States Make Voting Harder." *The New York Times* (New York, NY). January 11, 2022.
32. We were unable to identify election years for thirty elected clerks in our sample; they are omitted, along with 2023-elected clerks, from these analyses.

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