

Nationalization and Polarization of U.S. Politics

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Chair

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Abstract

State and local governments are responsible for much domestic policymaking in the U.S. federal system. Many journalists, politicians, and researchers argue that electoral politics in the U.S. has become increasingly nationalized and polarized at all levels. This trend is potentially harmful because, as Fiorello LaGuardia famously put it, “there is no Democratic or Republican way of cleaning the streets.” Nationalized and polarized politics can lead to poorer electoral selection and less electoral accountability; partisan fighting that reduces compromise and problem-solving by politicians; and governments that waste time on second-order issues instead of key problems. We analyze data from thousands of state and local elections, at the individual level (for 2020) and precinct level (from 2000 to 2004), to assess the degree to which these elections actually suffer from nationalization and partisanship. We find: (i) when party labels are on the ballot, voting is highly partisan even in state and local contests, consistent with polarization; (ii) when party labels are not on the ballot, voting is seldom partisan; (iii) there is some evidence of increased nationalization in non-partisan contests at the state level; but (iv) there does not seem to have been much change at the local level. Electorally at least, local politics is still rather local.