National Conflicts in Local Contexts:
The Role of Candidates & Campaigns in Political Nationalization

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Abstract

This paper considers how candidates for state and local office respond to a nationalized electorate. Drawing upon a supply and demand framework, I consider how the nationalization of the American electorate extends national-level partisanship to subnational races. I then consider supply-side factors, arguing that state and local candidates are drawn by electoral and material incentives to strategically nationalize, in which they draw upon national debates, topics, and symbols. Using two data sets, I find that strategic nationalizing is widespread and most likely to occur in nationally competitive districts. Contrary to my expectations, I find that strategic nationalizing is least likely to occur in primary elections. I conclude with a discussion of future paths of research to discover long-term patterns in strategic nationalization to greater consider contextual factors incentivizing candidate strategic nationalization, including future use of time-series data.

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1   Introduction

In September 2020, then-President Donald Trump hosted the "White House Conference on American History" where he intended to "defend the legacy of America's founding, the virtue of America's heroes, and the nobility of the American character." Trump devoted a large part of the conference to denouncing critical race theory (CRT), a framework for discussing institutional racism taught primarily at law schools (Cineas 2020). Trump's attack on a relatively esoteric legal concept quickly became one of the main conflict points in school board races across the country, despite the little evidence that CRT is taught in K-12 public schools. In school board races in 2021 and 2022, Ballotpedia identified 573 school districts in 38 states where candidates took a position on critical race theory (Ballotpedia n.d.). American federalism creates a "dynamic struggle" between competing, and sometimes conflicting, spheres of jurisdiction. Imposing national-level frames onto subnational politics risks distorting the idiosyncratic issue agendas and constituents of institutions such as school boards, potentially detethering local politics from its local context.

This paper considers how politicians perceive and respond to nationalized political behavior from the electorate. After surveying the demand-side factors that drive trends in political nationalization in the electorate, I argue that material and electoral incentives offer supply-side factors for rational, ambitious, office-seeking politicians to "strategically nationalize" their campaigns, framing subnational races around national issues, politicians, and symbols. The extent of these incentives is moderated by district and race characteristics, further increasing or lessening the pull to strategically nationalize. Although this paper generally argues that politicians respond to the perceived demand of nationalized politics, the interplay between elite supply and voter demand is a two-way relationship where parties and strategic politicians reinforce national frames to the electorate.

American political science scholarship has focused overwhelmingly on federal elected officials at the expense of state and local politics. 94% of articles on U.S. elections in five leading political science journals between 1980 and 2000 focused on federal elections (Berry and Howell 2007). Inadequate attention to state and local politics ignores the reality of governance in America. Of the over five hundred thousand officials elected in the United States, solely 537 serve at the federal level (Hopkins 2018, 23). Only 12% of the 1.2 million Americans currently incarcerated are held at federal prisons (Carson 2021). The federal government provides hundreds of billions of dollars in grants to state and local governments to administer crucial services such as health care, education, and infrastructure (Office n.d.). So long as political science literature fails to pay proper attention to state and local politics, we will inevitably be left with an incomplete picture of American government.

Why should we care about the nationalization? When the electorate is nationalized and candidates campaign on national themes, evaluation of candidates across the federal ladder are based on one single set of criteria based on national-level debates, elites, and symbols. These politicians may see less reason to cater to their own constituents, as their electoral outcome becomes more a product of national partisanship over performance in office. Indeed, in this scenario, strategic politicians may prioritize the desires of campaign contributors, national party activists, and interest groups (Althaus 2003, Gilens 2001). While American federalism sought to create states as "laboratories of democracies," nationalized state politics risks promoting a "one-size-fits-all" solutions that result in deep policy polarization across states (Grumbach 2018). Nationalization may also contribute to furthering polarization and gridlock at the federal level. As regional party variation decreases among members of Congress, so does the ability to forge novel coalitions to pass legislation.

This paper proceeds as followed. First, I survey prior scholarship on the demand-side factors that promote nationalization among the American electorate. I then depart from existent literature by considering how strategic politicians respond to a nationalized electorate through supply-side factors. I argue that both electoral and material incentives - including voter heuristics, increased contributions, and strategic re-framing of races - prompt candidates to "strategically nationalize" or appeal to national frames in subnational races. These incentives are heavily moderated by district and race characteristics that either heighten or dampen candidates' choices to strategically nationalize. To test these claims, I draw upon two complementary data sources. First, I study campaign finance reports for state and local candidates in Virginia from 2012 through 2022. Second, I assess television advertisements from the Wesleyan Media Project to track mentions of federal politicians in gubernatorial races from 2010 through 2018. I find evidence that strategic nationalizing is dependent on district characteristics, with more nationally competitive districts seeing a higher degree of outside spending and mentions of federal officials in non-federal races. While these findings offer preliminary evidence of both the extent and contextual nature of strategic nationalizing, further research is required to consider whether this is a newfound phenomena using time-series data.

2   Literature and Theory

Drawing upon the framework used by comparative scholars to assess the rise of far-right parties in Europe (Golder 2016, March and Rommerskirchen 2015), I examine the demand-side and supply-side factors that promote the nationalization of subnational races. Demand-side explanations for nationalization argue that changes in Americans' identities and media con-

sumption create an electorate where voters use the same criteria to judge candidates across different levels of federalism and are more engaged and informed about national politics at the cost of local and state politics (Hopkins 2018). While existing literature shows that demand-side factors create an electorate apt to consider subnational politics through a national race, I extend our understanding by considering how strategic candidates respond to the perception of a nationalized electorate through their decision to strategically nationalize.

2.1   Demand-Side Explanations

In 1972, the correlation between voting for the House of Representatives and presidential vote was 0.51. By 2012, the correlation coefficient jumped to 0.92 (Jacobson 2015). Incumbency advantage for members of Congress, once a hallmark of American politics, has decreased to levels not seen since the 1950s (Jacobson 2015). Demand-side explanations seek to understand the factors driving voters to more uniformly cast ballots based on national party identification over disparate, region-specific voting blocs. Three main demand-side explanations are explained in this section: (i) partisan sorting and party polarization that leads to more transferable party labels; (ii) nationalization of Americans' partisan identities and identities more broadly; and (iii) a shifting media environment that prioritizes national politics at the expense of state and local issues.

2.1.1   Party Polarization and Sorting

A strong body of evidence has documented the rise of "programmatic, cohesive, and ideologically distinct" Democratic and Republican Parties in the U.S. (Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006). Elite-level polarization has been found in the ideology of members of Congress (Poole and Rosenthal 2017, Fleisher and Bond 2004), party unity scores (Fleisher and Bond 2004), congressional committees (Aldrich and Rohde 2000), and presidential-congressional relationships (Binder 2003). A growing branch of literature has also found evidence of mass-level polarization. As previously noted, split ticket voting is increasingly rare even when incumbents are on the ballot (Hetherington 2001) and party identification is now the single most determinative vote choice factor (Bartels 2000). Party identifiers rate the opposing party more negatively (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012) and the number of partisans who report that they would be "upset" if their child married someone outside their political party has grown eightfold from 1960 to 2010 (Graham 2012).

Hand-in-hand with polarization, state parties now more uniformly mirror the national party. A crucial component of this story is the decline of the "Dixiecrat" South, whose state parties and representatives often acted in coalition with the Republican Party against

more liberal Democrats from outside the South (Mickey 2015). During the era of Southern Democratic dominance, state Democratic parties platforms differed vastly on a variety of areas, most notably on civil rights (Schickler 2016). As the Dixiecrats migrated to the GOP, regional intraparty differences declined (Mickey 2015). Since then, variation in state party platforms has decreased while the topics emphasized in state GOP and Democratic platforms have diverged dramatically (Hopkins, Schickler, and Azizi 1918).

2.1.2   National Political Identities

How does the polarization between parties and convergence of state and party platforms affect voter behavior? Party labels today offer very similar meanings across jurisdictions and different levels of federalism. While intraparty differences certainly still exist, they pale in comparison to those at the middle of the 20th Century. If the Democrat label is more assuredly transferable to presidential, House, gubernatorial, and state senate candidates, then Americans' partisan attachments can become more national, not regional, in scope.

Data from the American National Elections Survey (ANES) shows exactly this: since 1980, voters partisan identities have become less state specific (Hopkins 2018, 38). With a trend in identification with a national party brand, voters tend to weigh national party positions more heavily than the positions of individual candidates (Nyhan et al. 2012, Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012). The decrease in value placed in individual candidate positions versus those of the party at large may be one of the main factors driving the decline in the Congressional incumbency advantage since even "mavericks" cannot adequately distinguish themselves from the national party brand. Further, Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2015) find a "negligible" connection between incumbents' voting record and citizen support in a study of eleven hundred congressional elections and seventy-five thousand voters between 2006 and 2012 (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2015).

Beyond partisan affiliation, almost all Americans report their primary loyalty to the United States (Tarr 2013). One of the primary rationales for American federalism is thatit fosters multiple political attachments. In 1785, Thomas Jefferson repeatedly referred to Virginia as "his country" (Jefferson 1944). In the 200 years since his writing, the United States moved from a plural to singular noun and a singular national "American" identity has preempted any identity based on state or local affiliation. National personal and political affiliations allows for individuals to connect with politics and base their political evaluations on nationally based criteria. As national politics become a "contest of evocative symbols" of which state and local politics are both devoid and lowered in salience (Hopkins 2018), candidate evaluations are rooted in judgments detached from the confines of state and local politics.

2.1.3   National Media Environment and the Presidential Paradox

Parallel to the trends noted above, the national media landscape has undergone a period of rapid transformation. Local newspapers have experienced a dramatic drop in circulation, leading to decreased advertising revenue and ultimately resulting in a 57% reduction in newsroom employees compared to 2004 (*Newspapers fact sheet* 2022). Viewership for local television newscasts has similarly decreased 31% in the past decade (*Local TV News fact sheet* 2021). The generally cited reasons for the decline in local news have been the popularity of national cable news, mass entrance of digital news sites, and social media (Moskowitz 2021).

The media environment has therefore shifted from local to national in scope that increases the attention paid to national politics at the expense of state and local news. Large city newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* often overlook state politics, a trend that has also been found in an analysis of the 51 largest newspapers since 1980 (Hopkins 2018). The result is a public increasingly tuned into national news yet disconnected from state and local officials. Local television, however, has continued to cover state politics, and access to in-state television news has been found to substantially increase split-ticket voting in both gubernatorial and senate races (Moskowitz 2021). Decreased exposure to news on state and local politics decreases the amount of knowledge citizens hold on these spheres of government. With a decrease in political information, citizens are less able to form opinions on these governments and communicate their policy interests to officials (Krosnick and Milburn 1990, Carpini and Keeter 1996). A shifting media environment that places disproportionate attention on national politics helps to explain what Hopkins terms the "presidential paradox": even though voters acknowledge that state and local governments have more influence on their daily lives, they remain fixated on national politics (Hopkins 2018).

The three main demand-side factors influencing the nationalization of politics has commanded the bulk of the nascent research on nationalization. While these arguments persuasively tell a story in which an electorate increasingly understands daily politics through the lens of national polarized fights between the national political parties, they fail to fully capture key mechanistic questions including the *when* and *where* state and local politics nationalizes and *who* decides to active latent nationalization within the public and for what reason. To answer these questions, we must turn to supply-side explanations of nationalization.

2.2   Supply-Side Explanations

The existing demand-side explanations offer important evidence of nationalizing trends among the electorate but offer little guidance on how strategic elites respond and attempt

to co-opt a nationalized electorate. I argue that candidates operating in an uncertain political environment revert to nationalizing their campaign messages in an attempt to garner a higher degree of electoral support. I proceed using a rational choice framework, following the Downsian assumption of office-seeking parties and politicans (Downs 1957).[1]. Supply-side factors describe the incentives for candidates to strategically nationalize. Responding to demand-side factors, candidates have both resource and political incentives to strategically nationalize. These include: creating meaningful cues in low-information races; attempting to attract outside resources from national interest groups or political figures; and strategically reframing an election into a more favorable light. These "universal" candidate incentives are heavily moderated by district characteristics that I expect to increase strategic nationalization: (i) when they perceive their challenger to be out of step with the constituency's national political affiliation; (ii) in a nationally competitive constituency where appeals can be made to raise the symbolic stakes of a contest; and (iii) in a primary elections, especially where the national party has prominent divisions.

2.2.1   Campaign Strategies in Response to a Nationally-Oriented Electorate

Office-seeking candidates attempt to make strategic decisions to maximize their electoral chances. In state and local elections, campaigns seek this aim in the context of low voter knowledge of the local candidates and specific policy priorities of a position. In the face of this uncertain, low information environment, strategic nationalizing offers electoral and material incentives that drive ambitious candidates to draw upon national frames. I consider three major incentives in turn: heuristics, outside resources, and strategic reframing.

Candidates aim to provide low cost cues, or heuristics, to voters as an information short-cut to lower the cost of determining one's preferred vote choice (Kahneman et al. 1982). In partisan elections, a candidate's attached party label is the "cheapest cue" and best predictor of vote choice (Downs 1957, Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). As party brands become reliably transferable across jurisdictions, party labels are even more of a powerful tool for down ballot candidates. We should expect that campaign strategies and rhetoric to shift to national themes in these races as an easy heuristic to drive support and, equally important, turnout. Candidates may drawn upon voter's passions for national politics with appeals to national policies, themes, symbols, and politicians.

Further complications may arise when party labels are removed from the ballot in non-partisan elections. Over three-quarters of municipal elections are nonpartisan, and over ninety percent of school boards are elected through nonpartisan voting (*Cities 101 - partisan*

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[1]This assumption is closely linked to the assumption of members of Congress as single minded seekers of re-election.Mayhew 2004

and non-partisan elections 2020). Nonpartisan elections have historically been seen as a form of "insulation" that localize a given race and promote divisions in local voting that do not mirror partisan divisions (Adrian 1952). When party labels are removed, voters must seek out nonpartisan cues to determine vote choice such as shared race with candidates (Kamin 1963, Pomper 1966, Lorinskas, Hawkins, and Edwards 1969, Arrington 1978). Past research has found mixed evidence on the role of issues and ideology in nonpartisan elections: While Salisbury and Black 1963, Taylor and Schreckhise 2003 found shared stances and ideology between voters and candidates affects vote choices, Adrian 1952 and Wilson and Banfield 1964 found the opposite.

Even so, are issues equally important or do some hold more importance in local races? Carmines and Stimson 1980 found that issues can have an impact on nonpartisan races when they are defined by "easy" issues that all voters understand. Easy issue voting occurs "when a particular issue becomes so ingrained over a long period that it structures voters' 'gut responses' to candidates" (Carmines and Stimson 1980, 78). Carmines and Stimson suggest that "easy issues" emerge over the long-term, creating broad salience and largely local in nature. However, political nationalization permits national issues, figures, and symbols to serve as their own "easy issue" that allow candidates to provide understandable forms of differentiation to the electorate. A candidate who states they "stand with Donald Trump," for instance, provides a low-cost and understandable signals to the electorate. Even in partisan elections, a state legislator may send a strong symbol by condemning a progressive national Democrat such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, regardless of the inherent differences in the policy spheres of state and federal legislators. We therefore see that strategic nationalizing is a useful strategy to provide meaningful partisan heuristics in both partisan and nonpartisan races.

Similar to their federal counterparts, strategic candidates at the subnational level may seek to cater to the priorities of these special interest groups both for their electoral motive and the influence they hold through donations (Grossman and Helpman 1996). The relative strength of special interest groups has bloomed over time. Since 2008, outside groups have spent more than $1 billion in political donations (*Outside spending* n.d.). While federal legislation such as the Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2002 limited the amount of contributions from political parties, the Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* and *SpeechNow.org v. Federal Elections Commission* struck down limits on political spending in the form of independent expenditures by non-party organizations such as corporations, non-profit groups, and interest groups. These decisions gave rise to the growth of Super PACs, which are formally nonconnected to candidates and operate solely through independent expenditures (and not direct contributions to candidates). Although

subject to contribution limits, PACs directly contribute to candidates as well.

The electoral power of outside actors extends beyond contributions and direct expenditures from special interest groups. Endorsements, especially from trusted organizations and officials, weaken the importance of other candidate characteristics such as ideology to voters (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2018). Endorsements also act as a form of communication between interest group leaders and activists within the group. The information networks of interest groups allow for their activists to strategically donate to candidates and overcome the collective action problem of small donors (Grumbach 2020). Appeals to interest groups and elites who are either national in scope or operate at the federal-level require strategic subnational politicians to craft appeals based on national-level divides to gain support from outside actors in the forms of resources such as endorsements and contributions.

Finally, with the decline of regional partisanship, these appeals to national politics become available in a broader swath of jurisdictions. As Schattschneider noted, "One way to restrict the scope of conflict is to localize it, while one way to expand it is to nationalize it" (Schattschneider 1960). When candidates engage in strategic nationalization, they localize national conflict for the purposes of electoral gain. As Schattschneider suggests, however, the decision to nationalize or not to nationalize is a strategic choice that during campaigns is generally made by candidates or elites. Strategic nationalizing changes the grounds of debate for a given race, potentially to a frame that would be more beneficial to a candidate.

There are many scenarios, which I describe in the following section on district characteristics, that may prompt candidates to reframe a race in an attempt to gain electoral support. Reframing changes the axes of debate away from local issues to ones that touch on established and generally durable partisan attachments. Incumbents may seek to draw upon these frames to deflect from their performance while in office while challengers may do the same to situate themselves as more in line with a jurisdiction's national political characteristics. These differing contextual reasons to reframe an election through strategic nationalizing are considered in greater depth in the following section.

I define the concept of local and state candidates drawing upon national politics for the purposes of electoral support as "strategic nationalizing." The perceived benefits of strategic nationalizing may be manifold: providing easy heuristics and increasing the perceived importance of otherwise low salience races; appeal to a broader donor base, especially among PACs and out of state contributors, by increasing the relevance of a given race to broader national politics; and similarly, framing a local race as an extension of national political debates. In line with these incentives, I define the following hypotheses:

H1. State and local level candidates will engage in strategic nationalizing by appealing to national issues, divides, politicians, and symbols.

H2. The effect of increased nationalization will be found across different levels of federalism, in both partisan and nonpartisan elections.

2.2.2   District Characteristics

The previous section considered candidate incentives to strategically nationalize. The extent of incentives for candidates to nationalize, however, is heavily moderated by the district and candidate characteristics that change the degree of incentives in a given race. I offer examples of three races where we may expect the highest degrees of strategic nationalizing: (i) where a candidate is deemed "out of step" with a district's national partisan characteristics; (ii) where a primary challenger seeks to outflank a candidate; and (iii) in a nationally competitive district where a candidate seeks to "raise the stakes" of a given subnational election.[2] These theoretical expectations are model in Figure 1, where the x-axis represents a district's national partisan/ideological composition while the y-axis represents an individual candidate's partisan/ideological profile. I turn to these three scenarios and their respective incentives to strategically nationalize in turn.

Figure 1: District and Candidate Characteristics Influencing Strategic Nationalizing

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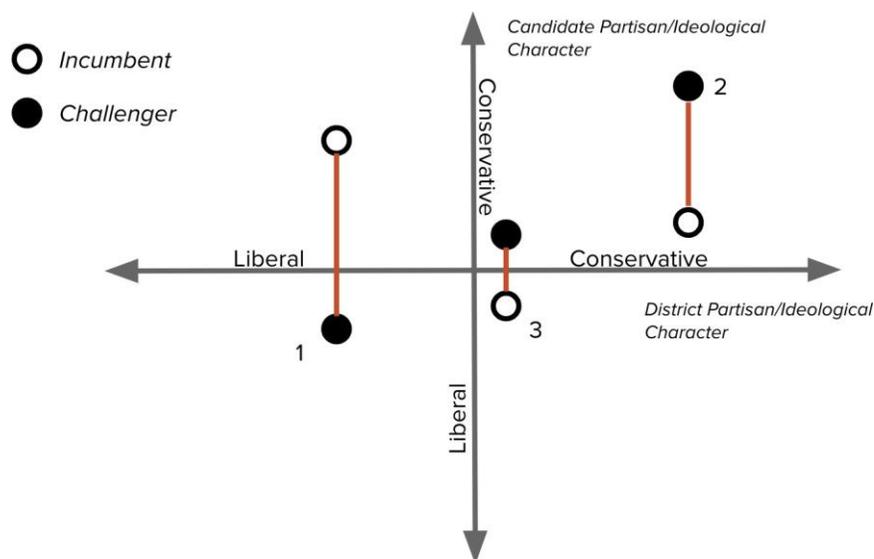
[2]This paper does not consider the types of races/districts where we could expect a lower degree of strategic nationalizing. Considering the characteristics of races where there are incentives to strategically *localize* is an important next step of this research.

Election 1 in Figure represents a district where there is a clear liberal majority in national elections. In the theoretical race, a conservative incumbent is challenged by a liberal. The liberal challenger in this scenario has an incentive to strategically nationalize in order to reframe the election away from discussions of a candidate's performance and instead to tap into national-level partisanship among those in the district. The challenger may say that the conservative incumbent is "out of step" with the district's political ideology. Beyond reframing, by strategically nationalizing, the liberal candidate draws upon cheap, understandable partisan heuristics. More broadly, I expect that in districts with a clear partisan majority, candidates in general elections will strategically nationalize in an attempt to tap into the existing partisan majority.

Election 2 represents a primary election in an extremely conservative district. Here the primary challenger, who is more conservative than the incumbent, would again have a rational interest in reverting to strategic nationalizing to outflank the incumbent from the right. The incentive to strategically nationalize in this scenario includes both to provide an understandable wedge heuristic between the more conservative challenger and the incumbent, and reframe the election to be a fight over the future direction of the party. In these types of races, strategic nationalizing also serves the purpose of attracting the resources of outside ideological interest groups and elites such as donations, endorsements, and general political consulting. By framing the primary as not a contest over the issues of the office up for election and instead as a fight over the direction of the party, strategic candidates raise the perceived stakes of a primary, potentially attract ideological interest groups and elites.

I expect the incidents of strategic nationalizing in primary contests to be most heightened in situations in which there are major national-level party divides that are, in turn, manifested in these primary elections. While the definition of party fracture for the purposes of considering nationalization is outside the scope of this paper, it is a crucial step to considering the role of nationalization in primary contests.

In Election 3, the district is politically competitive on the national level and both candidates are generally moderate. Here I expect that the incentive to strategically nationalize will come through all three major incentives. Candidates provide heuristics that provide understandable references.[3] Similarly, by reframing the election to be a contest over national-level politics and the direction of a given district, strategic nationalizing serves to raise the stakes

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[3]The central importance of understandable heuristics in low-salience races suggests that strategic nationalizing would provide even stronger incentives the lower a position is on the ladder of federalism. Put otherwise, the salience of a gubernatorial race is higher than that of a school board race. In the face of low-salience, heuristics can become even more crucial. While I expect that strategic nationalizing will be used by candidates across the different levels of subnational politics (see H2), future research is needed to test whether this is even more powerful in more local and low-salience races.

of an election to have ramifications that extend beyond a given race, assigning broader symbolic meaning to subnational races. Hand-in-hand with reframing and offering heuristics, strategic nationalizing also has the potential to attract support from outside groups, activists, and elites.

We therefore define the following hypotheses:

H3a. Strategic nationalizing will take place in more nationally competitive districts during general elections, to "raise the stakes" of a given race to those inside and out of a district.

H3b. Regardless of district competitiveness, strategic nationalizing will occur during primary elections.

I begin to test these three hypotheses about the supply-side factors influencing strategic nationalizing with two observational studies below. The first assesses campaign contributions in Virginia to understand differences in the composition of campaign contributions across jurisdictions while the second considers references to federal contributions in gubernatorial races from 2010 through 2018.

3   Study 1: Campaign Contributions

3.1   Data, Variables, and Specification

The first study considers how district characteristics affect the total amount and composition of campaign contributions to state and local candidates. Paralleling exponential increases in campaign contributions in federal races (*Statistical Summary of 24-Month Campaign Activity of the 2019-2020 Election Cycle* 2021), spending in state and local races has grown to unparalleled levels. In 2020, campaign donations to state-level candidates grew to $1.9 billion (*Most expensive ever: 2020 election cost* 14.4*billion* 2021).

This study tests Hypotheses 2 and 3a. If candidates strategically nationalize for the purposes of attracting support from outside donors and PACs, one of the signs of strategic nationalizing would be candidates having a higher percentage of contributions come from out-district and PAC donors. If H2 were correct, we would expect that an increase in outside contributions would happen in races across races at different levels. If H3a were correct, we would expect that more nationally competitive districts have a higher percentage of PAC and out-district donors.

I draw upon Virginia campaign finance reports from 2007 to 2022. These reports include all non-federal candidates who ran in Virginia. Virginia provides a useful case study for

three major reasons. First, while Virginia has been nationally competitive in recent years, there are a diverse variety of political and demographic contexts throughout the Common-wealth. Second, Virginia school districts overlap with county borders, which allows for easy modeling of a given school district's partisan competitiveness. Third, the Virginia campaign finance database includes all state and local candidates in one central database. I use Sched-ule A contributions specifically, which are direct contributions over $100 to candidates or candidate-associated committees.[4]

The dependent variables of interest are the total number of donations, percentage of con-tributions from PACs, and percentage of contributions from donors residing out of district. I run two models: the first considers all candidates in the time period, while the second considers solely school board candidates. Testing the differences between all candidates and school board candidates, who are elected in nonpartisan elections in one of the most local types of races, tests the claims of H2.

Measuring district characteristics, the main independent variables is the national com-petitiveness of a given district. I define competitiveness through the following equation

$$\left| .5 - \frac{DemocratVotes_i}{GOPVotes_i + DemocratVotes_i} \right| \tag{1}$$

Where *i* is the most recent presidential election in the county respective to a given state/local race.[5] The measure provides a statistic for the two-party competitiveness in high pro-file national-level elections. If H3a were correct, as *Competitiveness* decreases (meaning the district is more nationally competitive), we would see a higher percentage of PAC and out-district donors. I also include control variables for a district-specific factors including diversity (measured as the percent non-Hispanic white population from the 2019 Census American Communities Survey), population, and median household income. I also include race-specific controls, such as whether a candidate race unopposed, whether a given election was in November, and the number of candidates in a race.[6]

To correct for heteroskedasticity, I use a weighted least squares (WLS) model to measure the dependent variables of interest with two-way fixed effects for election year and an ordinal

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[4]Under Virginia law, candidates are not required to disclose contributions under $100.

[5]If a given state legislative district spans more than two counties, I use district characteristics based on the county in which the campaign is headquartered. Further developments of this research will assess cross-county districts with greater specificity.

[6]While future models could include "off-year" controls, given that Virginia holds statewide elections on odd years following presidential elections (such as 2017), it would be unclear what constitutes an "off year." Therefore this model uses year fixed effects. Another omitted variable future models should include is if a district is within the Washington, D.C. media market. For areas within the D.C. media market, we may worry that given the proximity to the seat of federal government, these individuals do not offer a representative sample.

categorical variable indicating the level of office for a given race.[7] The least squares model is defined below:

$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 * Competitiveness + \beta_2 * \%NHWhite + \beta_3 * MedianHouseholdIncome(log) + \beta_4 * CandUnopposed + \beta_5 * NumUniqueCandidates(log) + \beta_6 * DistrictPopulation(log) + \beta_7 * NonNovemberElection + \beta_8 * CandOfficeLevel + \beta_9 * ElectionYear$

3.2   Results and Discussion

As Figures 3-5 demonstrate, Virginia campaign donations indicate that a large degree of total, PAC, and out district contributions occur at every level of candidate office. As Virginia holds executive-level statewide elections on odd years following the presidential election (2013, 2017), we can clearly see spikes of spending during those years, separated by considerable and constant spending in state legislative and local races. It is important to note that one reason for the high degree of spending in local races is the considerable number of local offices on the ballot: the median levels of total contributions ($556,662), PAC contributions ($332,151), and out-district contributions ($334,454) for state legislative race far exceed the medians for local races ($37,905, $4,127, $21,057, respectively).

Figure 2: Total Contributions (Logged) by Election Year

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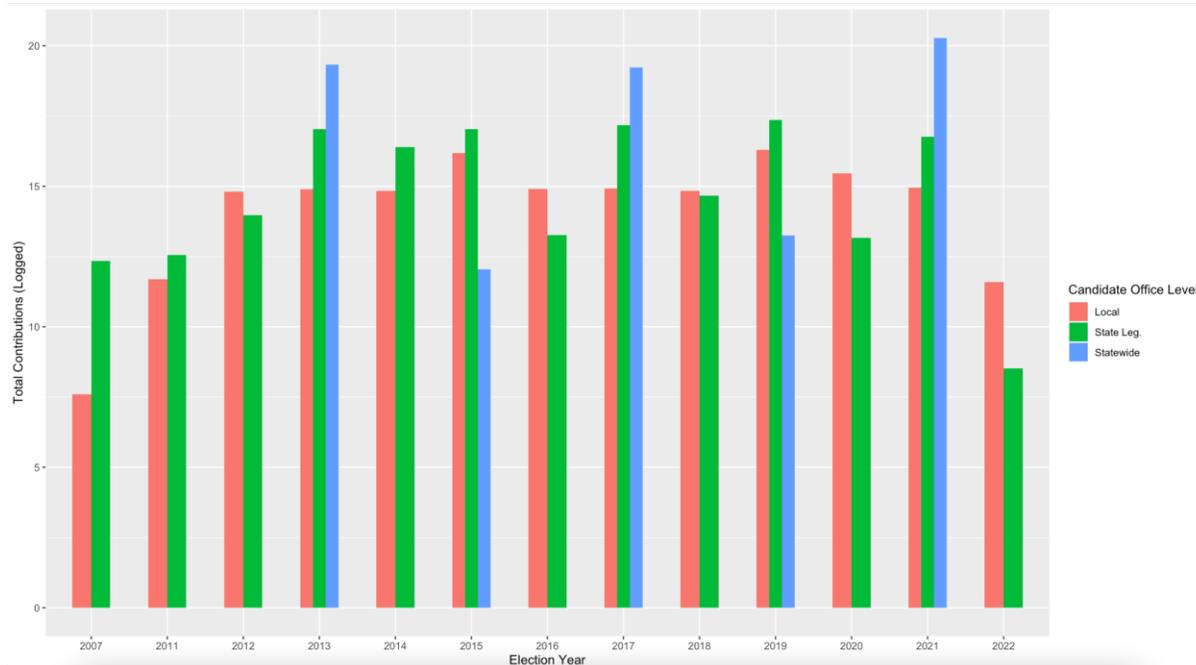
[7]Local races include school board, sheriff, county board of supervisors. The three statewide races in Virginia are governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general.

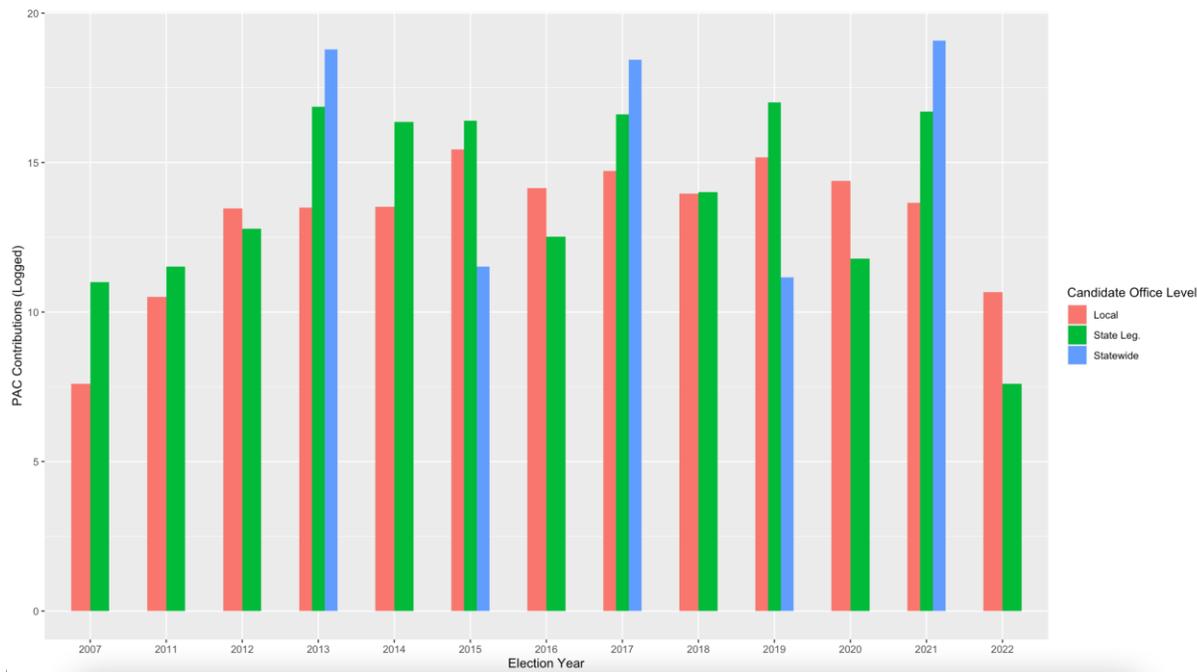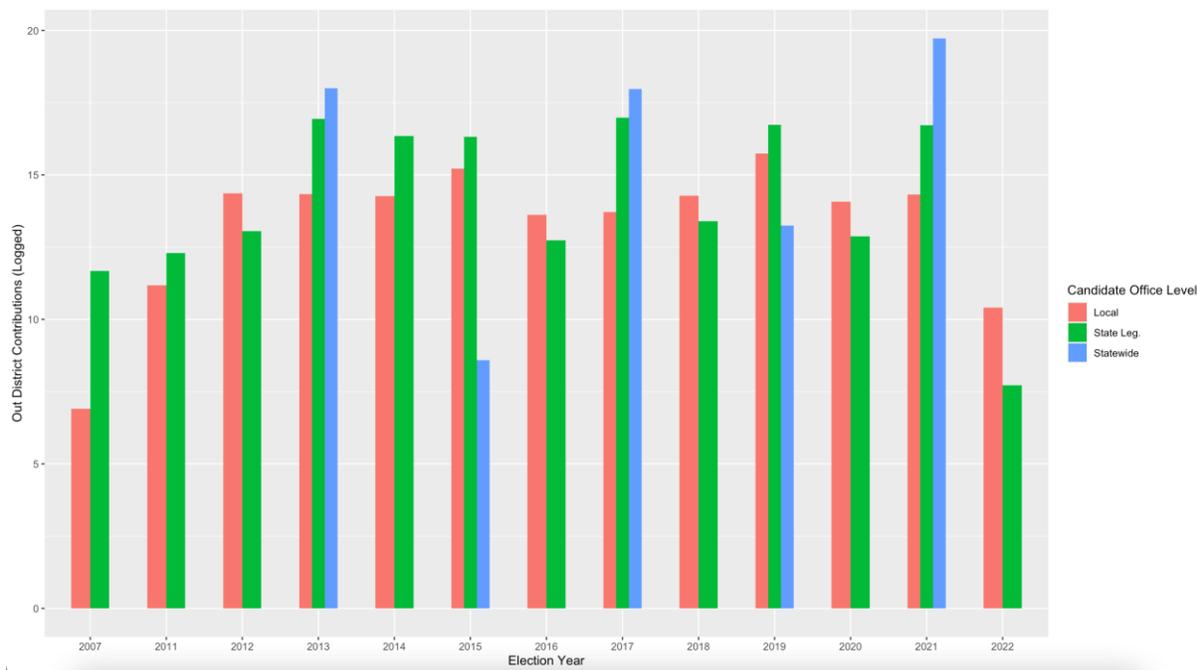Figure 3: PAC Contributions (Logged) by Election Year

Figure 4: Out-district Contributions (Logged) by Election Year

The results of the six weighted least squares regressions presented in **Table 1** offer general support for the theoretical expectations. As a district becomes less competitive between the two parties (an increase in the *Competitiveness* coefficient), the log of total campaign

contributions increases. At the same time, however, the *composition* of the total amount of donations change: as counties become more competitive, we find a higher percentage of out district and PAC candidates. This would suggest that outside actors are more apt to infuse money into races that are in nationally competitive districts. The results finding larger percentages of out-district and PAC actors in local races in competitive districts lends support for H3a.

More broadly, we find that an increase in the total number of contributions is associated with more diverse, populated, and richer districts, along with contested races and races with a larger number of candidates. Among all candidates, richer districts are associated with a lower percentage of out of district and PAC donor. However, the association of population size and diversity with PAC and out state donations remain unclear, and coefficients between PAC and out district donations point in opposite directions, both with statistical significance. A potential reason for this is, as previously stated, the category of "out district donor" is calculated as donors from outside the county in which a committee is headquartered. This may interfere with the broader interpretation of these results and is an area of further model specification for the future.

A remarkable result of the six models presented is the degree to which trends in school board funding align with contribution patterns in races up and down the federalism ladder. Seven variables between the all candidates and school board candidates model share the same statistical significance and coefficient direction (positive v. negative). These results suggest that contributions to school board candidates are not immune to the broader political landscape and, as shown from the *Competitiveness* variable, are very much associated with broader political contexts. Given that school board elections in Virginia are non-partisan, this offers support for H2: non-partisan elections are not immune from broader political characteristics. In fact, non-partisan and partisan operate similarly, a departure from classic political science assumptions that non-partisan elections offer insulation from partisan fundraising patterns (Adrian 1952).

	(1) Total (log) All Candidates	(2) % PAC All Candidates	(3) % Out District All Candidates	(4) Total (log) School Board	(5) % PAC School Board	(6) % Out District School Board
Competitiveness	0.884*** (0.337)	—0.050 (0.052)	−0.142*** (0.038)	1.828*** (0.671)	−0.323** (2.65)	−0.200* (0.103)
% Non-Hispanic White	—0.677*** (0.186)	−0.08*** (0.028)	0.021 (0.02)	−1.574*** (0.411)	−0.121* (0.08)	—0.057 (0.062)
Unopposed (True)	—0.332*** (0.103)	−0.086*** (0.159)	0.006 (0.011)	−0.466** (0.203)	−0.09** (0.04)	0.007 (0.82)
# Candidates (log)	1.22*** (0.065)	—0.0026 (0.015)	−0.006 (0.024)	1.317*** (0.121)	0.003 (0.04)	−0.042** (0.019)
County Population (log)	0.123*** (0.03)	0.028*** (0.005)	—0.032*** (0.071)	0.106* (0.064)	0.025** (0.014)	−0.05*** (0.009)
Median Household Income (log)	0.427*** (0.10)	—0.037*** (0.015)	− 0.044*** (0.011)	0.059*** (0.205)	− 0.003 (0.04)	0.07*** (0.031)
Non-Nov. Election (True)	—0.307*** (0.107)	− 0.010 (0.015)	0.001 (0.011)	− 0.13 (0.19)	0.04 (0.041)	0.036 (0.029)
Observations	2, 896	2, 896	2, 896	424	424	424
R^2	0.559	0.38	0.112	0.662	0.13	0.188

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Note: Robust clustered standard errors in parentheses using two-way fixed effects for election year and candidate office level.

Table 1: Weighted Least Squares Results

4   Study 2: Political Advertising

4.1   Data, Variables, and Specification

The campaign finance data from Virginia offers strong evidence that national level national level contributions affect the fundraising composition of local and state candidates. We find that increased political competition is associated with higher levels of out of district and PAC funding in both partisan and non-partisan elections, offering general support for H2 and H3a. However, the model suffers from two weaknesses: first, it only considers within state differences and second, uses candidate contributions as a proxy for candidate behavior.

In light of these, I use a second observational model employing data from the Wesleyan Media Project (WMP) to track mentions of federal politicians in gubernatorial elections from 2010 through 2018. Starting in 2010, WMP tracks elected-related television advertising from candidates, parties, and outside interest groups (Fowler n.d.). WMP tracks advertising from presidential, congressional, gubernatorial, and down-ballot candidates. Unfortunately, WMP does not currently track mention of federal politicians in down ballot advertisements and thus I am limited to gubernatorial candidates for the purposes of this paper; tracking mentions of federal officials in down ballot elections is of great theoretical interest, however.

Mentions of federal politicians in gubernatorial advertisements represents a quintessential form of strategic nationalizing. While interactions between state-level executives and the federal government have increased in recent years, such as in the number of multistate lawsuits state attorneys generals have brought against the federal government (*Statistics and visualizations - Multistate Litigation vs. the Federal Government* 2021), rarely do the responsibilities of a governor involve their relationship with the leader of the Senate majority conference. Rather, framing gubernatorial elections as a referendum on national politics may be a potentially-winning electoral strategy and helps "increase the stakes" of a given election. This model seeks to test H1 (partially) by considering direct mentions of national officials in subnational races. If H1 were true, we would see gubernatorial candidates mentioning federal officials, both generally and with a partisan tone (pro/anti). The model also tests Hypotheses 3a & 3b. Under 3a, we would expect more nationally competitive states to see a higher number of federal officials mentioned. Under 3b, we would expect to see an increase in strategic nationalizing during primary elections.

The main dependent variables of the second study is total mention of federal politicians, mentions of national Republican, and mentions of national Democrats. I also assess positive mentions of national Democrats plus negative combined mentions of national Republicans along with positive mentions of national Republicans and negative mentions of national

Democrats.[8]

My main independent variable of interest is a metric of competitiveness created as the absolute value of a state's Cook Partisan Voting Index as calculated from the immediately preceding presidential election. A larger value would mean more one-party dominance in a given state. To test H3b, I include a variable as to whether an election was a primary or general. Along with year fixed effects, I employ a host of control variables including a state's population, whether an incumbent was on the ballot, median household income, and the percentage of the population that is non-Hispanic white. The model is defined:

$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 * PV ICompetitiveness + \beta_2 * StatePopulation(log) + \beta_2 * Incumbent + \beta_3 * \%NHWhite + \beta_4 * Income(log) + \beta_5 * PrimaryElection + \beta_9 * ElectionYear$

4.2   Results and Discussion

The results of three ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions are reported below in Table 2. The results offer support for Hypotheses 1 and 3a. More competitive states have a higher level of total mentions of federal candidates, including more positive messages about GOP and negative about Democratic leaders (no statistically significant was found as to pro-Democrat/anti-GOP messages). These types of adds seem to be particularly likely in open-seat gubernatorial contests. This would seem to suggest that in races where no candidate has the added legitimacy and name recognition that comes with incumbency, candidates are more likely to strategically nationalize the race. With more uncertainty in a race without an established candidate through incumbency, strategic nationalizing offers a ready-made campaign strategy to attract an established base of supporters.

Contrary to the expectation of H3b, a primary election was associated in a substantial decrease (-1.907) in ads mentioning a federal candidate. An alternative explanation for this result may be that strategic nationalizing is fiercest in interparty and not intraparty settings. Candidates may be best suited by tapping into a simply partisan identity over a more nuanced sub-party identity (e.g. Progressive Democrats or Trump Republican). These may be less effective and clear frames. The null results for the primary dummy variable in the second and third models measuring the tone of appeals to national candidates may be the result of an omitted variable in the current model: elections are solely coded as primary versus general. Further model refinement is required to subcategorize elections as Republican or Democrat would permit better clarification.

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[8]Advertisements for 2016 gubernatorial elections unfortunately do not include an analysis of the tone of the variables, and therefore the year is removed from the last two models. WMP tracks mentions of the following national politicians: Donald Trump, Barack Obama, George Bush, Ronald Reagan, Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, John Boehner/Paul Ryan, Mitch McConnell, and Harry Reid/Chuck Schumer.

Table 2: OLS Analysis: District & Political Characteristics on Advertising Content

	(1) Total Mentions (log)	(2) Pro-Dem/ Anti-GOP (log)	(3) Pro-GOP/ Anti-Dem (log)
PVI Competitiveness	−0.116**	−0.088**	0.072
	(0.061)	(0.043)	(0.05)
Population (log)	0.810**	0.552**	0.680***
	(0.061)	(0.253)	(0.292)
Incumbent (True)	−2.666***	−1.257***	0.921**
	(0.664)	(0.475)	(0.548)
% Non-Hispanic White	4.402	− 2.118	3.178
	(2.503)	(1.744)	(2.009)
Median Household Income (log)	—0.758	4.400***	− 3.131**
	(1.948)	(1.486)	(1.712)
Primary Election (True)	−1.907***	−0.219	−0.074
	(0.604)	(0.448)	(0.516)
Observations	122	192	192
R^2	0.251	0.275	0.211

*p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, *p*< 0.01

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses with election year fixed effects.

Finally, when a normal Cook PVI is substituted for the standardize PVI-Competitiveness score for the main independent variable (the latter being the absolute value of the former), partisan effects on the tone of ads emerge. States with a higher R+ PVI have a higher incidence of television advertisements that support GOP leaders and oppose Democratic leaders (coefficient: 0.104 [0.032], $p < 0.01$) while states with a higher D+ PVI (more negative on -50 to 50 scale) see an increase in the number of ads support national Democrats and criticizing Republicans (coefficient: -0.10069 [0.0283], $p < 0.001$). This result is largely obvious but offers useful confirmation that the model captures state partisan political characteristics in the tone of ads. More models would be helpful to look at partisan dynamics of the presence of national competitiveness.

5   Conclusion

In Federalist 46, James Madison opined that under the new constitution, "many considerations ... seem to place it beyond doubt that the first and most natural attachment of the people will be to the governments of their respective States." Writing in Federalist 25, Alexander Hamilton similarly believed that "in any contest between the federal head and one of its members the people will be most apt to unite with their local government" (Hamilton,Madison, and Jay 2009).

Contemporary demand- and supply-side reasons challenge the localized understanding of political identity the founders presumed. As polarized parties become nationally unified and the most popular forms of media provides extensive coverage of federal politics at the expense of local issues, the American electorate is apt to consider their political identities and candidate evaluations in national terms.

This paper considers how strategic subnational politicians respond to the demands of a nationalized electorate. I argue that both electoral and material incentives provide supply-side factors that prompt candidates for state and local office to strategically nationalize. Drawing upon two different data sources, I find that strategic nationalizing is widespread among different levels of subnational government, including nonpartisan offices, and most likely to occur where two-party competition at the national level is fiercest. Contrary to my expectations, I find that strategic nationalizing is less likely to occur in primary contests as compared to general elections. These theoretical and empirical results help us better understand federalism, party polarization, candidate behavior, political communications, and changes to the American constitutional order more broadly.

While this paper offers a first step in understanding candidate responses to nationalization, further research is necessary to fully understand under what district/state circum-

stances candidates are most apt to use national-based appeals. Social media offers a promising potential: looking at state and local politicians interact with their federal counterparts, both during the campaign trail and while in office, could provide valuable further information as could expanding the data from the Wesleyan Media Project to include the degree to which down ballot candidates invoke federal politicians. For those candidates who engage in the most strategic nationalizing, the outcomes as to whether they won election and/or sought higher office would provide greater detail for both demand- and supply-side considerations of nationalization.

To properly contextualize the results showing that strategic nationalizing is widespread, we must consider how newfound a phenomena this represents. Drawing upon a data set that spans many decades would provide valuable lessons on how strategic nationalizing developed as a campaigning tool, and would provide for a better understanding of the degree to which candidates respond to nationalized political behavior or drive that behavior themselves. As suggested in the results of Study 2, further research is needed to understand the differences in strategic nationalizing incentives for Democrats and Republicans. Is one party more likely to strategically nationalize over another? Do we see the out-party of the presidency more likely to strategically nationalize versus the party that holds the White House? The interplay between parties, institutional control, and strategic nationalizing begins to be developed in this paper but is ripe for future study.

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