

Why do County Parties Have Platforms? Brand Differentiation in the States

Adam R. Brown

Department of Political Science

Brigham Young University

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Comments welcome: brown@byu.edu

<http://adambrown.info/>

Abstract

At the national level, written party platforms serve to define each party's distinct "brand" reputation. I seek to explain why some county Republican and Democratic party organizations draft their own platforms rather than rely on these national platforms. Although the major national parties draft platforms to differentiate themselves from one another, I find that local parties draft platforms to differentiate themselves from the national party organization whose name they share. As evidence, I find that local parties are more likely to draft a separate platform (or create a county party website) if the national party's presidential candidates perform poorly in local elections. I also find that resources play a role; local parties are more likely to draft a platform if they have greater membership resources to draw on in doing so.

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Every four years, the Republican and Democratic parties update their platforms at their national conventions. Because these two major parties dominate electoral competition in every part of the United States, these platforms serve as a written reminder of the fundamental disagreements that drive American political dialog at every level. These national platforms help create national “brand” reputations for both major parties, so that a voter who moves from Kentucky to Oregon can have some confidence that Democrats and Republicans represent roughly the same coalitions in her new state as in her old one.

Previous work, especially in the European literature, has sought to explain why parties write platforms. Implicit in this literature is the expectation that parties will write platforms only when they wish to specify clearly how they differ from other parties; by contrast, parties that want to downplay disagreements with their coalition members may choose not to write a platform at all. However, this literature has mostly sought to explain the purpose and nature of national party platforms. I seek to answer a slightly different question. I ask why a subnational affiliate of a national party (such as a state or county party organization) would write its own platform independent of—and perhaps conflicting with—the national party platform. Within the United States, 74% of state Republican parties and 65% of state Democratic parties have written or updated their own platform since 2009. Based on a sample described below, it appears that 2-4% of county parties have written or updated their own platform since 2000. I am especially interested in understanding the origins of these county-level platforms.

I propose two explanations for why some local parties adopt platforms while others seem content with the national platforms. The first explanation deals with incentives, the latter with resources. First, a local party organization has a greater incentive to draft a local platform if the national platform contains statements that are deeply unpopular locally. In this situation, a local

party may draft a platform that emphasizes the most appealing parts of the national platform while downplaying or even contradicting the least popular parts. Second, a local party is more likely to draft a platform as its membership resources grow; a larger membership base generally implies a deeper leadership pool from which to draft an active county chair and platform committee.

I find evidence for these arguments using data on county party platforms drawn from both major parties in the 48 contiguous states. My hypotheses help explain why some county parties have platforms while others do not. As an extension of my argument about party brand differentiation, I also find that my hypotheses explain why some county parties have websites while others do not.

Why National Parties Write Platforms

My goal is to explain the purpose of subnational party platforms—a topic largely ignored by existing research. To begin, however, I will consider what the literature has to say about national party platforms. In his seminal 1957 book, Downs suggests that political parties in a two-party system will tend to move toward the ideological position of the median voter. This is, according to Downs, an attempt to capture as many votes as possible and win elections. Because parties write platforms as a way of informing voters and capturing their votes (Pomper 1967), early work on party platforms looked for evidence of this Downsian convergence. Robertson (1976), for example, found evidence of ideological convergence in his study of British party manifestos.

In practice, however, the necessary conditions for the median voter theorem to operate rarely exist in the political world. In the American context, the two-step electoral system

consisting of both primary and general elections complicates application of the median voter theorem. And in the European context, multiparty competition violates the median voter theorem's assumption of two-party competition. Because of these complications, recent literature on party platforms has tended to speak less of convergence and more of differentiation.

In multiparty systems, for example, Katz and Mair (1995) modify Downsian logic to argue that parties have incentives to form an enduring centralized coalition. To remain in long-term power, these "cartel" coalitions downplay their disagreements and focus instead on areas of broad agreement. Parties within a stable cartel coalition often choose not to write separate manifestos, preferring instead to support the coalition's joint program. Separate manifestos, after all, would risk breaking up the coalition by emphasizing disagreements among member parties. Party platforms, then, become a tool of differentiation rather than convergence. Not all multiparty systems experience this sort of long-term cartel coalition, though. Italian parties, for example, tend to split into unstable left and right coalitions rather than merge into a stable central coalition (Conti 2008). Because Italian coalitions are more fluid, member parties typically write separate manifestos from their coalition partners so that they can maintain their various ideological reputations.

These studies of national party manifestos in multiparty systems suggest something about why parties write platforms. When parties wish to downplay their differences with their coalition partners, they do not draft separate platforms; by contrast, when they wish to maintain a distinct ideological reputation, they do write separate platforms. It appears, then, that the presence of a platform reflects a desire for brand differentiation.

This claim travels well to the American context, where candidate-centered politics and primary elections force parties into an awkward balancing act where they must appeal to ideological extremists within their base without alienating more moderate voters. American parties do not converge toward the center (cf. Eyster and Kittsteiner 2007), for they would risk losing the support of interest groups and party activists (Page 1978; Kollman, Miller, and Page 1992). Instead, both major American parties tend to adopt some positions favored by moderate voters, but they also deviate from majority opinion as necessary to capture the views of important constituencies (Monroe 1983).

We see, then, that parties do not always converge to the center. When they do converge, as with stable cartel coalitions, party platforms become unnecessary and possibly harmful. But when they do not converge, as in Italy and the United States, written platforms are a tool that parties can use to build a distinctive brand name. The presence of a written platform, then, is a signal that parties are attempting to differentiate themselves.¹

Why Subnational Parties Write Platforms

Just as national parties have incentives to position themselves so as to maximize vote share—whether by converging or diverging—subnational American parties must also position themselves appropriately. To a large degree, state and county party organizations will inherit the ideological brand associated with their national party. Indeed, many subnational parties have brief mission statements (rather than platforms) explicitly stating that their goal is to promote the national party's platform within their jurisdictions. That being the case, we might wonder why

¹ Written platforms are not the only source of a party's brand reputation, of course. A large literature on party brands looks at Congressional voting (e.g. Woon and Pope 2008) and Congressional party leadership (e.g. Cox and McCubbins 2005) as other variables that influence a party's perceived ideological position.

local parties write platforms separate from their national party's. After all, the national platforms are already intended to provide adequate brand differentiation between the Republican and Democratic parties.

However, American counties and states differ ideologically from one another, sometimes dramatically. Some counties are far more liberal than is typical nationally; others are far more conservative. These differences can arise for a variety of reasons, such as variations in which issues are politically salient from place to place (Brown 1995) or differences in each region's general liberalism or conservatism (Carsey and Harden 2010). Because voters in one particular state or county may be very different from voters elsewhere, the one-size-fits-all approach of using the same national party platforms in every county may not be wise.

Consider two examples. In 2008, John McCain won 78% of the presidential vote in Utah's conservative Utah County, somewhat south of Salt Lake City. Meanwhile, Barack Obama won 78% of the vote in California's liberal Santa Cruz County, somewhat south of San Francisco. In 2010, Republicans won every statewide, Congressional, and legislative race in Utah County; meanwhile, Democrats won every statewide, Congressional, and legislative race in Santa Cruz County. These lopsided results were typical for these counties, and there are many counties nationwide as lopsided as these two.² As these election results show, a party platform that balances primary election and general election voters nationally may present a serious liability to a state or county party.

Would-be candidates in these lopsided counties who choose not to run under the dominant party's banner have three options. First, they can run independent of any party label.

² In the national sample of counties discussed below, 9.6% of counties had a 2008 presidential vote at least as lopsided as these two counties.

But without a party brand attached to the candidate's name, voters may find it hard to assess the candidate's ideology (Popkin 1995, 22)—especially in the information-poor context of a local election. Perhaps for this reason, the median vote share for independent state legislative candidates between 1967 and 2003 was only 10.8%.³ Clearly, an independent run will not be an attractive option to most candidates.

Second, they can align with a minor party. The first-past-the-post voting rules used in most of the United States generally prevent more than two parties from vigorously contesting any particular election (Cox 1997). However, it is conceivable that those two parties could be different in different parts of the country (Cox 1999). Candidates wishing to challenge the dominant Republican Party in a place like Utah County could choose to align with the Constitution Party, Libertarian Party, or some other minor party rather than align with the tainted Democratic Party. It would not violate Duverger's law if the two dominant parties in Utah County were the Republican Party and the Constitution Party, or if the two dominant parties in Santa Cruz County were the Democratic Party and the Green Party. Indeed, this exact system arises in Canada and the United Kingdom, where two-party competition at the district level produces a three- or four-party system nationally. In the United States, however, a variety of forces combine to ensure a strong linkage between the national two-party system and local two-party systems (Bowler et al. 2009). In particular, fiscal centralization (Chhibber and Kollman 1998) and the supreme importance of presidential elections (Hicken and Stoll 2011) play important roles in ensuring that our two national parties will also be every region's two local parties. As a result, running with a minor party is often an every worse choice than running as an

³ Calculated using data from Carsey et al. (2008).

independent. The median vote share for minor party state legislative candidates between 1967 and 2003 was a paltry 2.2%.

Given the difficulty of running as an independent or with a minor party, candidates and activists hoping to challenge the dominant party must turn to the third option: Changing their party's *local* brand reputation. A struggling county Republican Party may choose to write a local Republican platform that breaks with the national platform in important ways. Unlike national parties, which draft platforms to differentiate themselves from competing parties, local parties draft platforms to differentiate themselves from counterparts within their party elsewhere in the country. After all, a county Republican Party does not need a platform to differentiate itself from the local Democratic Party; the national platforms already provide this cross-party differentiation. Rather, a local party needs a platform to differentiate itself from the national party that shares its name.

If this logic is correct, then a local party organization will have a greater incentive to draft a local platform if the national platform contains statements that are deeply unpopular locally. A few examples will serve to illustrate this point. In liberal Santa Cruz County, Republicans and Democrats alike tend to favor active government protection of the environment. To distinguish itself from the national party, the Santa Cruz County Republican Party's 2010 platform supports "the right of elected officials to protect air quality, water quality, coastlines, and parks." In conservative Utah County, by contrast, Republicans and Democrats alike tend to favor traditional family values. To distinguish itself from the national party, the Utah County Democratic Party's 2010 platform opposes "elective abortion for personal or social convenience." By differentiating themselves from the national parties in these ways, these county parties attempt to give their candidates a more competitive local platform than the national one can provide.

In a sense, then, we can think of state and county party organizations within the American system as members of a coalition led by their national party. Just as national parties in a multiparty system are less likely to write separate manifestos if they are happy with the coalition's program, subnational parties in the American system may be less likely to write separate platforms if they are happy with the national platform. By contrast, subnational parties in the American system may be more likely to write separate platforms if the national party's reputation hinders their electoral fortunes.

Of course, some local parties may not have enough resources to write and update a separate platform, no matter how badly they want one. Writing and distributing a local party platform involves not only monetary and logistical costs, but also the organizational costs of working parallel to the national party (Agasøster 2001). To successfully write and maintain their own platforms, subnational parties require more resources than they would otherwise need to simply support the national party. Thus, as much as a party's national reputation might hurt it locally, a local party is unlikely to draft a platform if it has too few resources to complete the task. One particularly crucial resource at the state and county level is active party membership. County platforms are typically written at the county party convention or by a committee of county party members. As the county party's membership base grows, it becomes increasingly likely to have enough people that it will have active leaders, a meaningful convention, and members willing to volunteer for the platform committee. Increased membership will also create a need for formal, written position statements rather than informal mutual understandings. For these reasons, I expect that a local party will be more likely to draft a separate platform as its membership base grows.

In addition to explaining why county parties might draft separate platforms, the foregoing logic can also explain any other local effort at brand differentiation. In particular, many county parties have created websites where they post news updates, commentary on local political disputes, and other relevant materials. The decision to create a county party website mirrors the decision to create a county party platform: The party leaders must decide that it is worth the time and expense to duplicate the brand-building efforts already being undertaken by the national party organization. Just as county parties draft local platforms to distance themselves from the national party's platform, we might expect that county parties will create websites to distance themselves from the national party's brand.

This discussion implies two specific hypotheses that I will test by looking at county party platforms in the United States:

- Hypothesis 1 (incentives): A local party is more likely to write a separate platform if the national party's brand is unpopular locally.
- Hypothesis 2 (resources): A local party is more likely to write a separate platform if it has a larger membership base to draw on.

Data

There are 3,142 counties in the 48 contiguous states. I randomly sampled 10% (314) of these counties to study. The map in Figure 1 shows that these counties come from across the contiguous United States; sampled counties are marked with dark highlighting. Because I am studying county Republican and Democratic parties, this technique produces a sample size of 628 county parties. The main disadvantage of using a national sample is that there will be an average of only 6.5 counties sampled from each state. This number is far too small to insert state

fixed effects dummies, which would help prevent state-level differences from influencing my results. To counter this problem, I also constructed a separate dataset in which I gathered data on *every* county in a sample of five diverse states: California, Florida, Kentucky, Texas, and Utah. Because these states have 528 total counties, this produces a sample size of 1,056 county Republican and Democratic parties. In the five-state analysis, I have plenty of variance within each state to justify including state-level fixed effects dummies.

[Figure 1 about here]

My first dependent variable is a dummy indicating whether a given county party has a published party platform. To code this, I checked state and county party websites for evidence of a county platform updated since 2000. For a platform to help with brand differentiation, it must be publicly accessible. In some unusual cases, I found that a county party would have a platform that was available only to party leaders; I ignored these private platforms in my coding.

It turns out that county party platforms are relatively rare, making them ripe for study. In my national sample, only 14 of 610 (2.3%) county parties have a platform; in my five-state sample, 40 of 1,056 (3.8%) county parties have one. This low variance on my dependent variable will reduce confidence in my statistical analysis. As a check on my findings, I also include a second dependent variable: A dummy indicating whether a given county party maintains its own website. As noted above, the decision to create a county website is subject to the same thought process as the decision to create a county platform. Both activities reflect an active effort at local brand differentiation. There is one key difference, however: It is far easier to create a website than a written platform. Creating a platform requires appointing a platform committee, bringing their suggestions to the county convention, debating the platform in convention, and holding

votes to adopt and amend the platform. By contrast, creating a website can be as easy as the county party chair choosing to start a free blog. Because websites are so much easier to create, they are far more common. In my national sample, 202 of 610 (33%) county parties have a website; in my five-state sample, 378 of 1,056 (36%) county parties have one. Because this second dependent variable has much higher variance than my first, I can have much more confidence in my efforts to model it statistically.

From Hypothesis 1, my first independent variable is the local reputation of the national party, which I estimate as the percentage of the vote won locally by the party's presidential candidate in 2008. Presidential nominees carry the unique burden of defining their national party's platform and vision during each presidential campaign year. Thus, presidential vote shares ought to reflect each party's local popularity within each county.

From Hypothesis 2, my second independent variable is the size of the local party's membership base. Unfortunately, I was able to collect party membership numbers in only a small minority of counties. In my national sample, I have party registration data for only 190 of 628 county parties; in my five-state sample, I have these data for only 490 of 1,056 county parties. However, it appears that raw presidential vote counts (not shares) are a close proxy. In the counties from my national sample where party registration statistics are available, there is a strong correlation ($r=0.98$, $p<0.0001$) between party registration statistics and the raw number of votes cast in that county for the party's presidential nominee. The correlation is just as strong in my five-state sample ($r=0.94$, $p<0.0001$). Because of these high correlations, I feel confident modeling each county party's membership base by using the raw number of presidential votes from 2008.

I also include a handful of other variables in my model. My unit of analysis is not counties, but county parties. As such, my first control is a dummy indicating whether the county party in question is a Democratic or Republican affiliate. Second, I include a dummy indicating whether the other major party in the county has a platform. Given the competitive pressures of two-party politics, a given county party may feel greater pressure to draft a local platform if its local competition has already done so.

When analyzing my national random sample, I also include a dummy indicating whether the county party's state-level affiliate has a platform. If the state Democratic Party has already made an effort to differentiate itself from the national Democratic Party, then a county Democratic Party may feel less need to do so. I omit this variable from my five-state analysis, since there are too few states in the model to justify this sort of variable. Instead, my five-state analysis includes a dummy for each state, with California the omitted category.

Findings

Table 1 uses logit analysis to predict whether each county party will have a local party platform. My two main variables of interest appear in the first two rows of the table. I ran the model separately with each of my two data sets, but the results are similar in both cases—especially for my two variables of interest. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, I find that a county party is somewhat more likely to have a local platform if the party's national presidential candidates perform poorly. However, the effect is small and of borderline statistical significance ($p=0.073$) in the national random sample, and it is far from statistically significant in the five-state sample. The low variance in the dependent variable casts further doubt on this estimate.

[Table 1 about here]

The estimated effect of the party's membership size is much larger, though still modest. In both models, this estimate has clear statistical significance. Using the estimate from the five-state sample, I find that a movement from one-half standard deviation below the mean to one-half standard deviation above it would increase the predicted probability of having a platform by 0.021. Larger movements would, of course, yield larger effects.

I calculated each model's proportional reduction in error (PRE), a measure analogous to R^2 in ordinary least squares regression, and found that neither model explained much of the variance in the dependent variable.⁴ As noted earlier, the dependent variable in these models has low variance. The poor overall fit of these models likely reflects that low variance. As another test of my general argument about brand differentiation, I also estimated a second dependent variable, one with much higher variance: The presence or absence of a county party website. As shown in Table 2, these models produce similar results as those in Table 1, but with much more precision.

[Table 2 about here]

Both models in Table 2 provide evidence in favor of Hypothesis 1: County parties are more likely to have a website if they are electorally weak. In the national random sample, a movement from one-half standard deviation below the mean in vote shares to one-half standard deviation above it decreases the predicted probability of having a county party website by 0.090—a small but meaningful effect. Despite the smaller coefficient and borderline significance ($p=0.086$) in the five-state sample, the estimated marginal effect is similar; the same movement in the independent variable decreases the predicted probability of having a county party website

⁴ I calculated these PRE estimates as $((1-A)-(1-B))/(1-B)$, where A is the percent of observations corrected predicted by the model and B is the percent of observations in the modal category (i.e. no platform).

by 0.073. Using the coefficients from the national random sample, Figure 2 shows how movement in a county party's presidential vote share affects its predicted probability of having a website. In this figure, dummies are held at zero and logged party size is held at its mean. These findings suggest that the similar finding in Table 1 was genuine, even if the low variance in Table 1's dependent variable made the estimates imprecise. There is indeed a moderately strong relationship between a party's electoral weakness and its efforts at brand differentiation.

[Figure 2 about here]

Both models in Table 2 also provide evidence in favor of Hypothesis 2: County parties are more likely to have a website if they have a larger membership base. A movement from one-half standard deviation below the mean in logged party size to one-half standard deviation above it increases the probability of having a county party website by 0.35 in the national sample and 0.56 in the five-state sample. These are unquestionably large effects. Using the coefficients from the national sample, Figure 3 plots the relationship between (unlogged) party size and the predicted probability of having a website; dummies are held at zero and vote shares are held at their mean. To keep the figure readable, county parties with a membership base of over 80,000 voters—less than 5% of the sample—are omitted. As this figure shows, the effect is strikingly strong.

[Figure 3 about here]

Whether I use the national random sample or the five-state sample, the estimates in Tables 1 and 2 are similar to one another—especially on the two variables of theoretical interest. Given the higher variance in my second dependent variable, it is not surprising that the overall fit (as measured by my PRE calculations) is so much better in Table 2 than in Table 1. Still, the

similarity of Tables 1 and 2 suggests that a local party's efforts at brand differentiation really do reflect its electoral weakness and its membership base.

Conclusion

Although we might expect the political diversity of America's states and counties to produce a national multiparty system, centralizing tendencies produce a highly nationalized two-party system. As a result, the same two parties compete in every part of the country—from extremely conservative Utah County to extremely liberal Santa Cruz County. Independent and minor party candidacies rarely succeed, forcing would-be candidates who wish to run against their region's dominant party to work through their local minority party—even if that party's national platform makes the minority party extremely unpopular locally.

I have found evidence that county parties try to differentiate themselves from their corresponding national party when the national party has a poor reputation locally. If a national party is electorally weak in a particular county, then the county party is more likely to draft a separate platform to differentiate itself from the national party. The effect is not powerful, but it seems genuine. I infer that it is genuine by finding a similar effect when I predict which county parties will maintain a website—a far simpler task than drafting a platform, which is far more common and therefore far easier to model econometrically.

I have also found evidence that county parties are more likely engage in these brand differentiation efforts if they have more resources to draw on. No matter how badly a county party might want to differentiate itself for strategic reasons, it will be unable to do so if it is hamstrung by a tiny resource base. County parties are more likely to publish a platform or maintain a website if they have a larger membership base.

It may seem strange to some that the same two parties would dominate political competition at every level in American politics. Given the diversity of America's various regions, this two-party dominance might even strike some as unhealthy. However, my results suggest that America's two-party system is able to adapt, if imperfectly, to this regional diversity. Although each major party works hard to cultivate a favorable national brand reputation, county party organizations are allowed the option of drafting their own local platform, running their own local website, and taking other initiatives to differentiate themselves from their national party affiliates. Whether these efforts at local brand differentiation are actually successful is a question for future research.

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Table 1: Predicting Existing of Published County Party Platforms

	National random sample	Five state sample
Party share of vote	-0.057 [†] (0.03)	-0.0045 (0.011)
Party size (logged)	0.54** (0.17)	0.61** (0.12)
Democratic party	0.36 (0.32)	-0.10 (0.38)
Other party has platform	3.7** (0.72)	0.40 (0.54)
State party has platform	1.6 (0.98)	--
State dummies?	No	Yes
N	610	1056
Pseudo R ²	0.31	0.22
PRE	0.071	0.075

[†]p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01. All statistics rounded to two significant digits. In the national random sample, standard errors are cluster-corrected by state.

Table 2: Predicting Existing of County Party Websites

	National random sample	Five state sample
Party share of vote	-0.026* (0.011)	-0.015 [†] (0.0085)
Party size (logged)	1.2** (0.12)	1.4** (0.12)
Democratic party	-0.65* (0.29)	-0.36 (0.30)
Other party has website	0.35 (0.34)	0.66* (0.23)
State party has platform	-0.065 (0.27)	--
State dummies?	No	Yes
N	610	1056
Pseudo R ²	0.30	0.50
PRE	0.35	0.60

[†]p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01. All statistics rounded to two significant digits. In the national random sample, standard errors are cluster-corrected by state.

Figure 1: National Random Sample of Counties

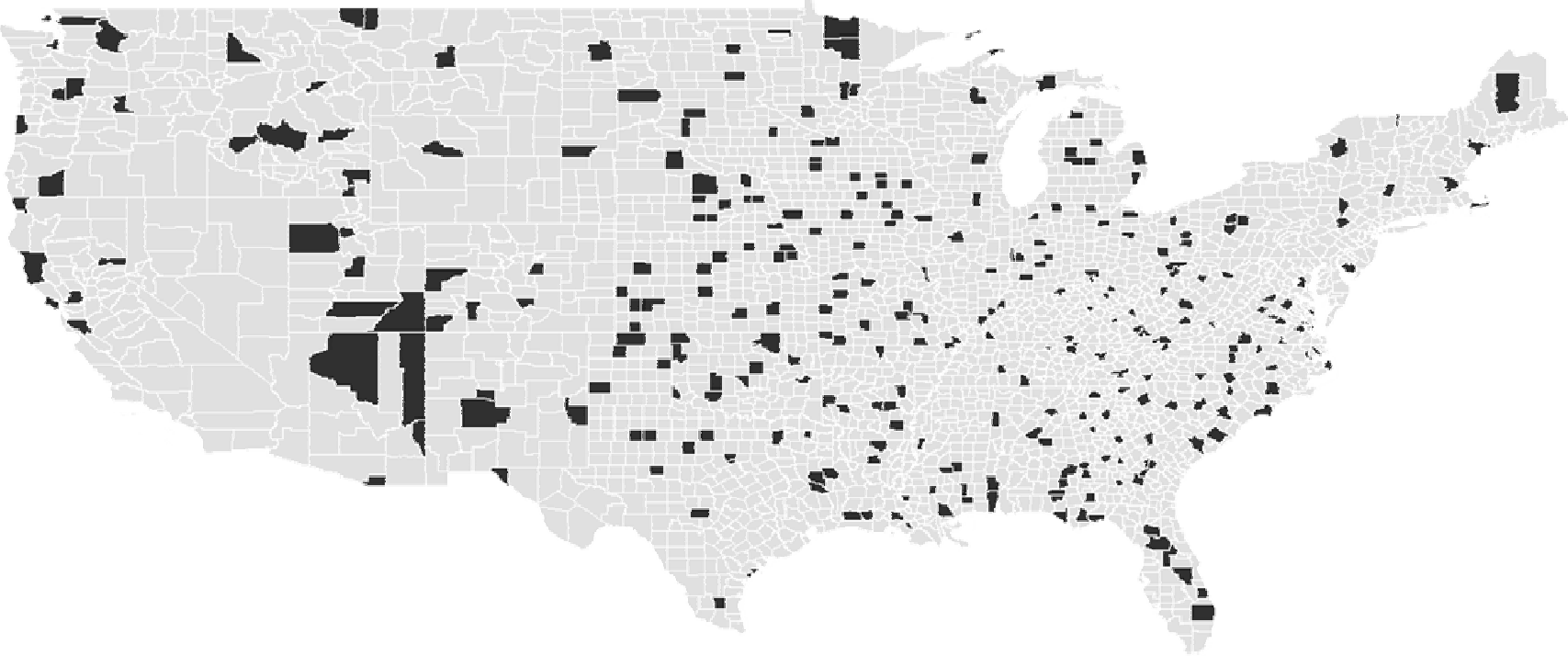


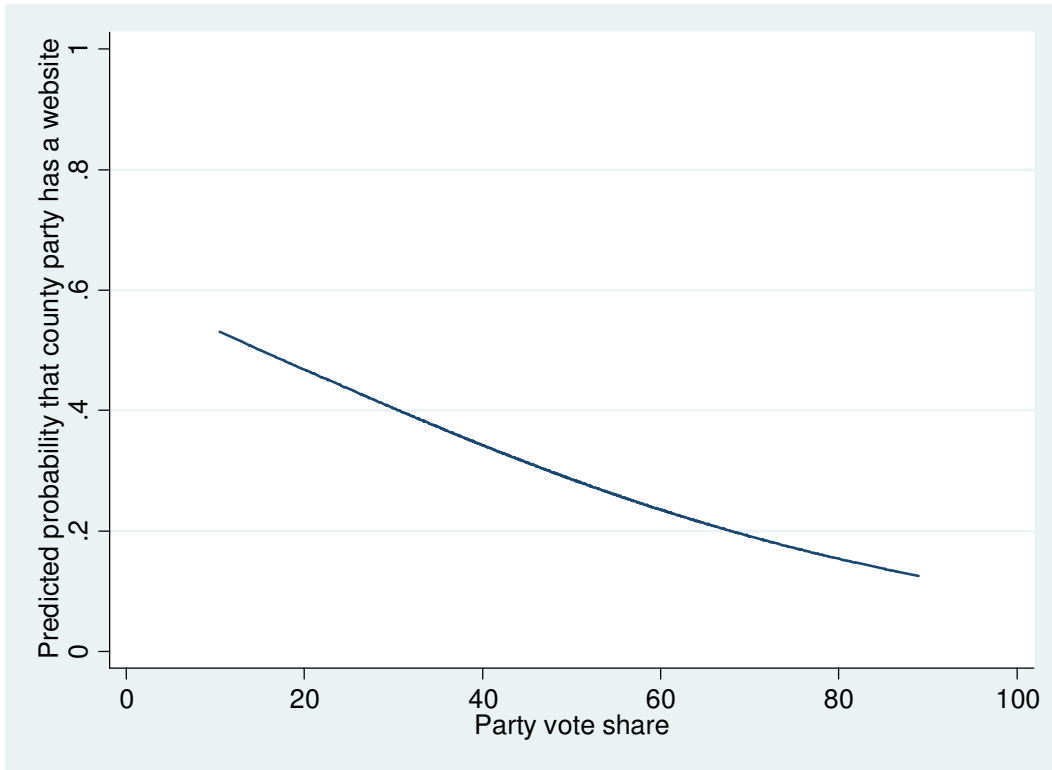
Figure 2: Predicted Effect of Party Popularity on Branding Efforts

Figure 3: Predicted Effect of Party Membership on Branding Efforts

