The Challenge of Local Party Brand Differentiation

Abstract

In the USA, the two major parties put great effort into defining their national brands by publishing platforms, engaging social media, and so on. Given the immense regional differences in American politics and culture, however, these national brands are unsurprisingly more popular in some places than others. Local Republican and Democratic parties therefore have incentives to develop their own local brands, distinct from the national party's. The best known case of local brand differentiation occurred among southern Democrats in the late 20th century. As this research shows, however, local party brand differentiation efforts continue today, and under predictable circumstances: Local parties are more likely to pursue brand differentiation efforts the less popular they are locally, assuming they can muster the resources to do so. Unfortunately for local party leaders, though, the incentive to pursue a local brand differentiation strategy rises even as the ability to do so falls.

Highlights

- Like post-WWII Southern Democrats, local parties today wish to brand themselves.
- Local party branding efforts are most common where national candidates fare poorly.
- A very small membership base inhibits local party branding efforts.

The Republican and Democratic parties write platforms, maintain social media profiles, run advertisements, and take other actions to define their national "brands." However, political cleavages differ so much from place to place that local Republican and Democratic parties sometimes have incentives to differentiate themselves with their own local brands. In American politics, the most familiar example of local branding remains the decades-long differentiation between southern Democrats and national Democrats during the post-WWII southern realignment. Such local branding efforts have not ceased, however, even though they no longer capture as much attention from scholars and pundits. Even in our post-realignment era, 74% of state Republican parties and 65% of state Democratic parties have their own written platform, separate from the national platforms; a substantial minority of county-level parties do the same. Other local branding efforts, such as maintaining a local party website, are even more common. It is puzzling that so many state and county party organizations would pursue these costly efforts rather than free ride on the national party brand.

This article identifies two variables that help explain why some local party organizations pursue branding efforts independent of—and often conflicting with—the national party's. The first concerns incentives, while the second concerns resources. (To increase observations and variance, this article focuses on county-level parties.) First, county parties have a greater incentive to differentiate themselves when the national party is locally unpopular. Indeed, it appears that county-level brand building efforts are more about differentiating the local party from its national coalition than about differentiating it from its local opponent. Second, county parties are more likely to pursue local branding efforts as their membership resources grow; a larger membership base generally implies a deeper leadership pool from which to draft an active county chair and leadership team, allowing the county party to overcome the resource costs inherent in drafting a platform, maintaining an online presence, or otherwise pursuing a local branding strategy. Unfortunately for county party chairs, these two factors often work against each other. In areas where a local brand would most help local

Republicans (or Democrats) win office, local parties often lack the necessary resources. This, then, is the challenge of local party brand differentiation: Those who need differentiation the most find it hardest to obtain. These results highlight the need for renewed attention to local party brand differentiation in the post-realignment era.

Theory

Every four years, the Republican and Democratic parties update their national platforms. Because the two major parties dominate electoral competition in every part of the United States, their platforms serve as a written reminder of the fundamental disagreements that drive American political dialog. They also foster national brand reputations for both major parties—presumably so that a voter who moves from Kentucky to Massachusetts can have some confidence that Democrats and Republicans represent roughly the same coalitions in her new state as her old one. In practice, of course, Kentucky Republicans differ markedly from Massachusetts Republicans (Shor and McCarty 2011). The regional differences within each party go beyond simple movement along a left-right ideological continuum, though (Gelman et al. 2009). A lengthy literature has shown that American politics divide around entirely different cleavages from one state to the next, whether for reasons of political culture (Elazar 1966), issue salience (Brown 1995), racial-ethnic composition (Hero and Tolbert 1996), class composition (Hill and Leighley 1992), or ideology (Carsey and Harden 2010).

Despite these profound differences, electoral forces drive diverse voters into only two national parties. The first-past-the-post electoral rules prevalent in most of the country prevent local multiparty systems from emerging (Duverger 1954; Cox 1997). Of course, nothing about this phenomenon demands that the *same* two parties dominate in every state or even in every county (Cox 1999). Given the marked political differences between Utah and New York, between Alabama and Oregon, and even between coastal and inland California (Douzet, Kousser, and Miller 2008), we might marvel that

the same two parties compete throughout the United States. Yet two major forces—fiscal centralization (Chhibber and Kollman 1998) and the supreme importance of presidential elections (Hicken and Stoll 2011)—interact with the nation's first-past-the-post electoral rules to ensure that the two national parties will also be every county's two local parties (Cox 1999; Bowler et al. 2009).

These dynamics create strange bedfellows. Consider Utah's conservative Utah County and California's liberal Santa Cruz County. In 2008, John McCain won 78% of the presidential vote in Utah County, while Barack Obama won 78% of the vote in Santa Cruz County.[1] In 2010, Republicans won every statewide, Congressional, and legislative race in Utah County; Democrats won every race in Santa Cruz County. What makes these two counties interesting is not their lopsidedness, but rather that Santa Cruz County Republicans differ so dramatically from Utah County Republicans. In Santa Cruz County, 62% of Republicans have permissive views on abortion, 67% oppose same-sex marriage, and 48% report praying daily; in Utah County, these figures change to 17% (permit abortion), 94% (oppose same-sex marriage), and 88% (pray daily).[2] One marvels that Santa Cruz County Republicans and Utah County Republicans claim loyalty to the same party. As for Democrats, 95% in Santa Cruz County support action against climate change and 78% favor stricter gun laws; in Utah County, both figures drop to 56%. One marvels again.

In these two lopsided counties, the perpetual losers—Utah County Democrats and Santa Cruz County Republicans—have every reason to distance themselves from aspects of the national party brands that are least popular locally. The Santa Cruz County Republican Party's platform "supports the right of elected officials to protect air quality, water quality, coastlines, and parks" and "supports the right of private sector employees … to unionize and bargain collectively." The Utah County

[1] In the national sample discussed below, 9.6% of counties had a 2008 vote at least as lopsided as these two.
[2] Data drawn from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey. Santa Cruz County supplemented with respondents from adjacent (and politically similar) San Mateo County. Having permissive views on abortion or supporting action against climate change means choosing one of the two more liberal options out of four offered.

Democratic Party's platform stresses "the importance of religious faith" and opposes "elective abortion for personal or social convenience." Moreover, both county parties pursue active branding efforts online. For months, Utah County Democrats ran their "I'm your neighbor and a Utah County Democrat" campaign online. Those profiled on the party website would have their photograph and name displayed, followed by a few words about why they vote Democratic. For obvious strategic reasons, many of those profiled had held prominent positions within the Mormon church's local lay leadership. Meanwhile, the Santa Cruz County Republicans feature scenic photographs of wild California splashed across the top of their website—presumably for the same reason that their platform takes pro-environment stances—above a regularly-updated blog.

Though each national party seeks to brand itself in ways that will satisfy its most ardent supporters without alienating its more reluctant allies (Page 1978; Monroe 1983; Kollman, Miller, and Page 1992; Eyster and Kittsteiner 2007), national brands will inevitably fit some counties poorly. Local branding efforts worked well during the decades-long southern realignment: Democrats continued to govern the South long after Southern voters began voting for Republican presidents, because successful branding persuaded voters that Southern Democrats were different from other Democrats. Building a separate Southern Democratic brand was far more effective than forming a third party could have been.[3] Scholars and pundits alike talk less about local brand differentiation today than during the southern realignment, yet the presence of Santa Cruz County Republicans and Utah County Republicans in the same party suggests that local branding efforts continue successfully even today.

This discussion has two testable implications. First, the weaker a party's national brand within a particular county, the more we can expect that county party to desire its own local brand. Of course

[3] This remains as true today as during George Wallace's failed 1968 presidential bid. Nationally, the median vote share for minor party state legislative candidates between 1967 and 2003 was a paltry 2.2%. For independents, the median was better but still puny: 10.8%. Calculated using data from Carsey et al. (2008).

(and second), it takes resources for a local party to produce its own local platform, website, social media profiles, and other materials (Agasøster 2001). Again, the weaker a local party's vote share, the greater its desire to build a local brand, but the smaller a local party's donor and volunteer base, the lesser its ability to actually do so. The most obvious branding outcome to consider is the presence or absence of a county-level party platform. For reasons discussed below, I supplement this primary dependent variable with a secondary indicator of differentiation: Whether each county party maintains its own website.[4] These are obviously not the only branding efforts available to local parties, but they are reasonable indicators suggesting whether a local party is making at least a minimal branding effort. This exploratory article does not undertake the time-consuming task of coding the content of these party platforms and websites. It does, however, test this article's core logic by ensuring that the simple existence of party platforms and websites correlates with party popularity and resources as expected.

Data and Analysis

The 3,142 counties in the 48 contiguous states aggregate to 6,284 county-level Republican and Democratic parties. I draw two samples from that population. First, I randomly selected 10% of these counties and collected data on both parties in each one, a sample of 628 county parties, reduced to 610 by missing data. Second, I selected five states varying in their population size and partisan leanings—California, Florida, Kentucky, Texas, and Utah—and compiled data on all 1,056 county-level parties within these states. Drawing two separate samples allows the strengths and weaknesses of each approach to balance out. The five-state sample contains sufficient intrastate variance to create confidence that the findings reported here reflect county-level (and not state-level) factors; the national sample includes sufficient diversity to create confidence that the findings apply nationwide. That is,

[4] Both variables recorded in early 2011. Quotes from party platforms reflect language as of that time. A handful of county parties have a private platform available only to party leaders; these were not counted. To correspond with the time period used for these variables, the presidential election data referenced below comes from 2008.

the five-state sample emphasizes internal validity, while the national random sample emphasizes external validity. As it happens, both samples produce similar results.

Only 2.3% of county parties in the national sample (3.8% in the five-state sample) have a platform. Their scarcity reflects the organizational costs of negotiating and updating such a document, as well as the shift from printed to online politicking (cf. Lassen and Brown 2011). Though platforms surely serve as the most direct evidence of local differentiation, modeling such rare binary outcomes creates statistical problems (King and Zeng 2001). As a more widely observed but secondary dependent variable, I also measure whether each county party has its own website, found in 33% of the national and 36% of the five-state sample. While websites are a less obvious indicator of local branding effort than platforms, we can draw useful inferences as long as their existence correlates with the county party's underlying desire to have a distinct voice. As it happens, there is a strong ($p<0.0001$) correlation between these two dependent variables. In both samples, over 90% of county parties with a platform also have a website, while over 66% of county parties lacking a platform also lack a website.[5] County parties having only one and not the other almost invariably have a website but not a platform, suggesting that websites serve as an entry-level branding effort. Clearly, the same motivations that produce county party platforms also produce county party websites.

The argument given above calls for two independent variables—one to measure the national party's county-level popularity, and another to measure the county party's resource base. For the first, I use the percentage of the vote (scaled between 0 and 100) going to the county party's presidential candidate. Measuring the second proves more complicated. Perhaps the most direct measure would be party registration numbers, with the number of registered partisans indicating the approximate size

[5] In both samples, fewer than 0.3% of county parties have a platform but not a website, while 31-32% of county parties have a website but not a platform. Overall, 2.1-3.5% have both, while 64-67% have neither.

of the county party's donor and volunteer base. Unfortunately, registration numbers are available for only 30% of parties in the national sample and 46% in the five-state sample. Fortunately, the raw count of presidential votes turns out to be a close proxy; where both are available, presidential vote counts correlate with party registration numbers at $r>0.9$ ($p<0.001$) in both samples. This near-perfect correlation suggests we can safely use each party's raw vote count as a proxy for the numeric size of its membership base. These two key variables—vote shares and vote counts—reflect both sides of the challenging situation described earlier: As a party's vote share decreases, it has greater incentive to differentiate itself from the national party, but as a party's membership base decreases, it has fewer resources to actually do so. Control variables include a Democratic (as opposed to Republican) indicator, as well as another dichotomous indicator recording the other major party's branding activity.[6] Summary statistics are available in a supplementary appendix, along with a map showing which counties were sampled.

Table 1 presents logit coefficients from four models, one for each combination of sample and dependent variable. In each, brand differentiation rises where vote shares are smaller, but also falls where the support base is smaller. The results reported here are robust to other reasonable specifications, including rare events logit, inclusion of state-level fixed effects, and clustering standard errors by county.[7] Logit coefficients lack intuitive meaning, so Figures 1 and 2 depict the results of Models 2a and 2b graphically. Each independent variable is plotted from its 10th to 90th percentile; controls are held at their mean or, for binary variables, at zero. In Figure 1, increasing the county party's vote share from the 25th to 75th percentile decreases the predicted probability by 0.13 (both samples); in Figure 2, increasing the membership base from the 25th to 75th percentile increases the

[6] We might expect county parties to be less likely to adopt a local platform if their state party has already done so, but including a dichotomous variable to this effect has no effect on the models. See the supplementary appendix for details.
[7] Clustering standard errors by county causes "share of vote" in Model 2b to lose its already marginal significance but does not affect other reported significance levels in Table 1. The supplemental appendix gives additional specifications.

predicted probability by 0.40 (national sample) or 0.64 (five-state sample). As for the controls, there are no consistent patterns across all four models, though there is suggestive evidence that county parties are more likely to produce a platform or website if their local opponent has already done so.

[Table 1, Figures 1 and 2]

Together, the two main variables go a long way toward predicting county-level brand differentiation efforts. For example, Model 2b correctly predicts 86% of cases. Because 64% of cases were in the modal category to begin with, Model 2b yields a proportional reduction in error (PRE) of 0.60, a measure analogous to the familiar R^2 statistic.[8] These PRE estimates are high in Models 2a and 2b, falling only slightly (to 0.32 and 0.55 respectively) when all other variables are omitted. Even without controls and state fixed effects, Model 2b correctly predicts 84% of cases. Models 1a and 1b have less predictive power, largely because the dependent variable in question is so rare to begin with. Nevertheless, the coefficients and standard errors are similar in these models as in Models 2a and 2b, suggesting that similar dynamics produce both types of brand differentiation efforts.

Discussion

American political culture varies widely from state to state, yet institutional pressures drive diverse factions into only two broad coalitions, the Republican and Democratic parties. As a result, the same two parties compete in every part of the country, despite varying local cleavages. In lopsided counties, the party that consistently loses has every incentive to differentiate its local brand from its national brand—at least, if it can muster the resources to do so. This article's empirical analysis

[8] These PRE estimates are calculated as ((1-A)-(1-B))/(1-B), where A is the proportion of observations correctly predicted by the model and B is the proportion of observations in the modal category.

demonstrates that county parties do indeed behave in this manner. Weak vote shares increase local branding efforts, while numerically small resource bases inhibit them.

This brief article has not attempted to explain everything about local party brand differentiation. It has, however, demonstrated that local party brand differentiation continues to merit attention. During the decades-long southern realignment, scholars and pundits recognized the importance of local party brand differentiation to the point that any study neglecting to include a South indicator was immediately suspect. Though the southern realignment has largely ended, local parties have not ceased their efforts at local differentiation. Obviously, brand differentiation can go well beyond publishing a platform or maintaining a website, but even these imperfect proxies produce clear relationships. Having shown that local parties pursue branding efforts under predictable circumstances, this article opens the door for future research investigating additional branding methods (such as paid advertising, social media, and so on), evaluating the actual content of these local partisan messages, as well as exploring whether local brand differentiation efforts succeed in changing voter perceptions of the local party.

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Table 1: Predicting Brand Differentiation Efforts

	Y = Has party platform		Y = Has party website	
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2a	Model 2b
Sample	National	Five state	National	Five state
Party share of vote	-0.055*	-0.005	-0.026*	-0.015†
	(0.028)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.009)
Party supporters (logged)	0.51*	0.61*	1.21*	1.42*
	(0.15)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)
Democratic party?	0.27	-0.10	-0.63*	-0.36
	(0.33)	(0.38)	(0.28)	(0.30)
Other party has same?	4.03*	0.40	0.35	0.66*
	(0.69)	(0.54)	(0.34)	(0.23)
Constant	-6.55*	-8.94*	-9.92*	-11.39*
	(1.07)	(1.41)	(1.14)	(1.09)
N	610	1,056	610	1,056
PRE	0.07	0.08	0.36	0.60

†p≤0.10, *p≤0.05 (two-tailed). Logit coefficients (with standard errors) shown. The national random sample cluster-corrects standard errors by state; the five-state sample includes state-level fixed effects. County Republican and Democratic parties are the unit of analysis.

Figure 1: Predicted Effect of Party Popularity on Branding Efforts

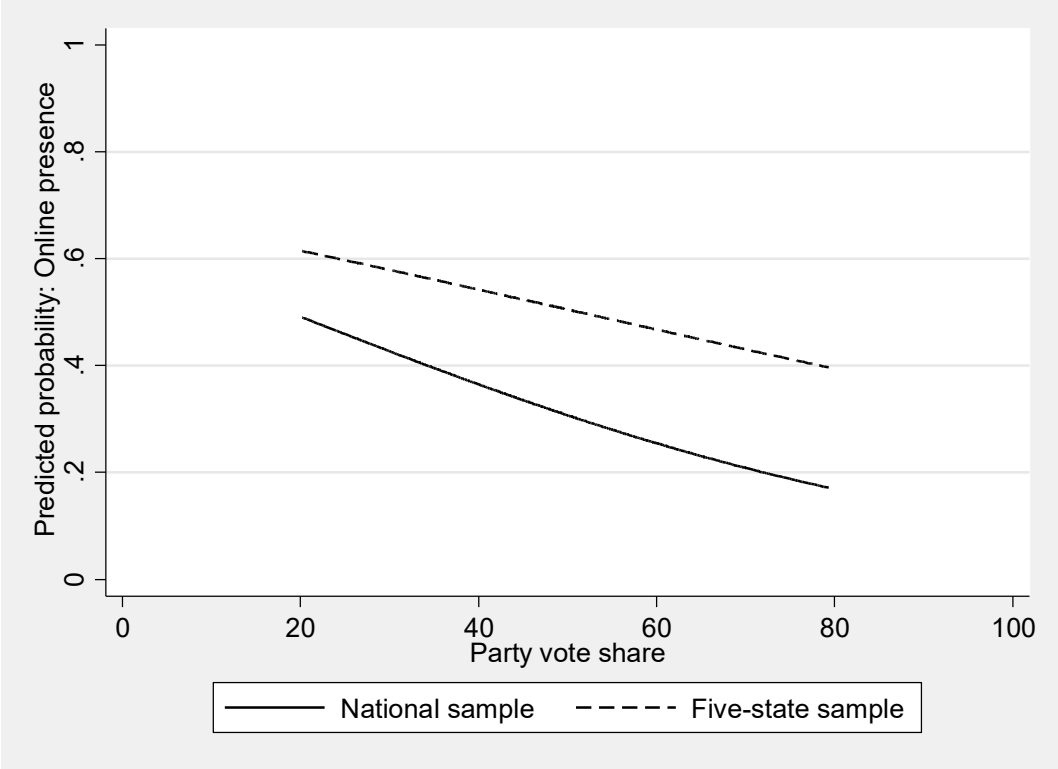
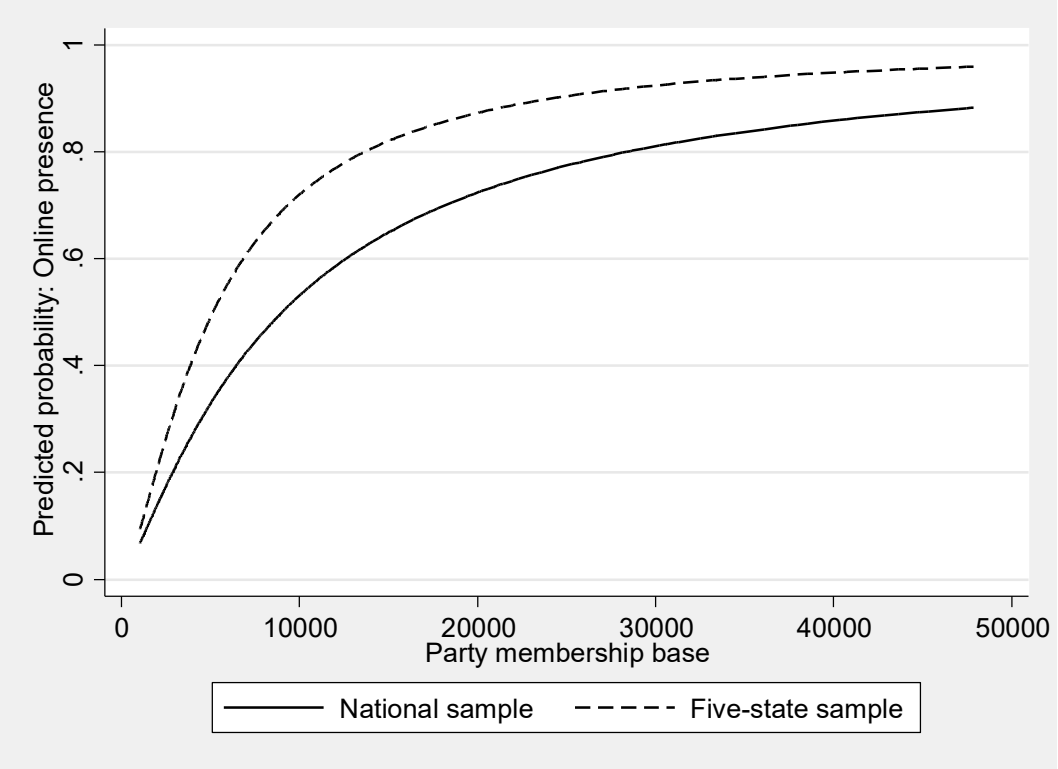


Figure 2: Predicted Effect of Party Membership on Branding Efforts



Supplemental appendix

Table A1 provides summary statistics for all variables.

Table A2 employs rare events logit in all four models. The dependent variable is not particularly rare in Models 2a and 2b, but it is sufficiently rare in Models 1a and 1b to consider this specification. The results do not differ materially from those in the main manuscript.

In the main manuscript, state-level fixed effects are included only in Models 1b and 2b—that is, models based on the five-state sample. It is not possible to include state fixed effects in Model 1a; because the dependent variable (party platforms) is rare, and because there are only a handful of observations in each state, inserting fixed effects renders the model overdetermined in the vast majority of cases. It is, however, possible to insert state fixed effects into Model 2a. The results are shown in Table A3. (Models 1b and 2b from the main manuscript are also reprinted in Table A3 for reference.) Inserting these state fixed effects does not meaningfully change the coefficients of interest.

Figure A1 depicts the counties included in the national random sample.

Table A1: Descriptive Statistics

	National random sample	Five-state sample
N (county parties)	610	1,056
Democratic parties	50%	50%
County parties with websites	202 (33.1%)	378 (35.8%)
County parties with platforms	14 (2.3%)	40 (3.8%)
Party share of vote		
10th percentile	28%	23%
25th percentile	38%	31%
Median	49%	49%
75th percentile	61%	67%
90th percentile	70%	76%
Party size		
10th percentile	1,119	671
25th percentile	2,262	1,697
Median	4,863	4,388
75th percentile	11,855	14,041
90th percentile	33,376	66,040

Table A2: Rare events logit

	Y = Has party platform		Y = Has party website	
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2a	Model 2b
Sampling frame	National	Five state	National	Five state
Party share of vote	-0.052*	-0.005	-0.026*	-0.014†
	(0.023)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Party supporters (logged)	0.49*	0.59*	1.19*	1.40*
	(0.15)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.11)
Democratic party?	0.20	-0.09	-0.62*	-0.35
	(0.64)	(0.38)	(0.25)	(0.32)
Other party has same?	3.83*	0.43	0.35	0.66*
	(0.72)	(0.37)	(0.24)	(0.22)
Constant	-6.24*	-8.64*	-9.77*	-11.19*
	(1.22)	(1.36)	(1.00)	(1.12)
N	610	1,056	610	1,056

†$p \leq 0.10$, *$p \leq 0.05$ (two-tailed). Rare events logit coefficients shown (standard errors in parentheses). The five-state sample includes state-level fixed effects.

Table A3: State fixed effects

	Y = Has party platform		Y = Has party website	
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2a	Model 2b
Sampling frame	National	Five state	National	Five state
Party share of vote	NA	-0.005	-0.034*	-0.015†
		(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.009)
Party supporters (logged)	NA	0.61*	1.59*	1.42*
		(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.12)
Democratic party?	NA	-0.10	-0.61*	-0.36
		(0.38)	(0.27)	(0.30)
Other party has same?	NA	0.40	-0.59*	0.66*
		(0.54)	(0.29)	(0.23)
Constant	NA	-8.94*	-12.47*	-11.39*
		(1.41)	(1.66)	(1.09)
N	NA	1,056	566	1,056

†p≤0.10, *p≤0.05 (two-tailed). Logit coefficients shown (standard errors in parentheses). All models include state-level fixed effects.

Figure A1: National Random Sample of Counties