



The Partisan Battle Over College Student Voting: An Analysis of Student Voting Behavior in Federal, State, and Local Elections

By: Phillip J. Ardoin, C. Scott Bell, Michael M. Ragozzino

Abstract

We aim to test the hypothesis that college students provide Democratic candidates with greater electoral support and whether this varies among federal, state, and local elections. We also test whether college students mobilized by presidential campaigns are more likely to abstain from voting for state and local elections. To examine these questions, we employed OLS and difference- of-means tests to analyze the distribution of votes cast in competitive elections for the November 2008 elections in 86 precincts located on 42 college campuses across five states as compared to the distribution of votes cast in noncollege precincts. College precincts were identified by representatives from each community's local Board of Elections. In line with conventional wisdom, the results of the analyses indicate Democratic candidates for federal offices do consistently receive greater electoral support from precincts located on college campuses as compared to noncollege precincts. However, the analyses of state and local elections highlight substantial variation in the level of support that Democratic candidates receive from precincts located on college campuses. Moreover, we found many college students in 2008 cast their ballots for Obama, but chose not to participate in lower-level elections. Republican fears regarding college students turning small towns on their heads via the ballot box are not supported by our analyses. On average, students vote more democratically than nonstudents but they are also more likely to simply choose not to vote for local candidates. By and large, they come to the polls to vote for national offices, not local ones.

The Partisan Battle Over College Student Voting: An Analysis of Student Voting Behavior in Federal, State, and Local Elections*

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Objective. We aim to test the hypothesis that college students provide Democratic candidates with greater electoral support and whether this varies among federal, state, and local elections. We also test whether college students mobilized by presidential campaigns are more likely to abstain from voting for state and local elections. *Methods.* To examine these questions, we employed OLS and difference-of-means tests to analyze the distribution of votes cast in competitive elections for the November 2008 elections in 86 precincts located on 42 college campuses across five states as compared to the distribution of votes cast in noncollege precincts. College precincts were identified by representatives from each community's local Board of Elections. *Results.* In line with conventional wisdom, the results of the analyses indicate Democratic candidates for federal offices do consistently receive greater electoral support from precincts located on college campuses as compared to noncollege precincts. However, the analyses of state and local elections highlight substantial variation in the level of support that Democratic candidates receive from precincts located on college campuses. Moreover, we found many college students in 2008 cast their ballots for Obama, but chose not to participate in lower-level elections. *Conclusion.* Republican fears regarding college students turning small towns on their heads via the ballot box are not supported by our analyses. On average, students vote more democratically than nonstudents but they are also more likely to simply choose not to vote for local candidates. By and large, they come to the polls to vote for national offices, not local ones.

Jenny Wahlen is a freshman at Western Carolina University (WCU) in Cullowhee, North Carolina. She is from Boston, Massachusetts. Should Jenny register and vote in Cullowhee or Boston? College students represent a key voting bloc throughout the country. Whether they register and vote in their local college town or their original home town has the potential to significantly influence not only election results but also the future political participation of student voters. In 308 political communities throughout the United States, enrolled college students represent more than 20 percent of the population; and in 42 of these communities, students represent more than 50 percent of the population.¹ For instance, in Cullowhee, North Carolina, more than 9,000 enrolled students of WCU potentially represent 95 percent of the city's voting population and therefore a key voting bloc in local elections. Considering the potential influence of the college student vote, particularly in local elections, Republican and Democratic party leaders are very interested in where Jenny Wahlen can register and vote.

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¹ Enrollment data from U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education System.

Political leaders' interests and concerns regarding where college students vote (in their local college communities or home communities) date back to at least 1872, but increased dramatically in 1971 with the passage of the 26th Amendment that lowered the voting age to 18 and granted the vast majority of college students the right to vote.² Those who support students voting in their local college communities worry about student disenfranchisement, proper due process, civic engagement, and student interests in the local community. On the other hand, opponents of students voting in their local college community voice concerns over large numbers of students voting in a bloc that might overpower the preferences of long-term residents who hold permanent interests in the community. As noted in the Missouri court case of *Goben v. Murrell* (1832): "It would certainly strike one as extraordinary to learn that it was in the power of those non-taxpaying sojourners to wrest the city or county government from the voice and hand of the permanent citizens."³ Opponents of students voting in their college communities also cite concerns over the potential of voter fraud with students voting in two places, the administrative inconveniences of keeping records up to date, and students' lack of interest in and understanding of the local community.

Citing many of these concerns, Republicans in the 2013 session of the North Carolina legislature sponsored the Equalize Voter Rights Bill (SB 667) that aimed to limit student voting in college towns by enacting a tax penalty for parents whose children register to vote at their college address. Specifically, the bill stated that "if a child registers to vote at an address other than that of a parent, that parent may not claim a personal exemption on account of such child." The bill also required voters to register their vehicles at the same address as their voter registration, which would also deter students from registering in their college communities since many college students maintain their parent's home address for their vehicle registration. Additionally, Republicans in the North Carolina legislature approved in 2013—and the Republican governor signed into law—new elections rules that require all voters to present photo identification cards and specifically do not recognize photo identification cards issued by universities as valid.

While the 34 Republican sponsors of the legislation claimed their chief intent was to combat voter fraud, Democratic opponents argued the legislation represented an obvious effort to limit the franchise of college students and other key Democratic voting blocs. Numerous student groups noted that the vast majority of students attend college outside of their "home" districts. Essentially, the law forces students to either leave school in the middle of the semester or go through the often confusing and cumbersome process of absentee balloting in order to vote. Many student advocacy groups believe students will opt for a third choice—not voting at all.

Currently, most research pertaining to college student voting focuses strictly on legal matters or presents findings based on conjecture and conventional wisdom rather than systematic analyses. With legislative leaders in at least 37 other states considering similar proposals, the time is ripe for political scientists to more closely examine the issue of college student voting.

This work aims to clarify the issue of college student voting as it continues to play itself out in the halls of state legislatures across the nation. Herein, we piece together the existing literature on college student voting from a variety of perspectives. We first present a brief

²In *Fry's Election Case* in 1872 a state court declared that "on no proper principle of true residence should the student vote today and fasten on the community officers whom the majority do not desire, then graduate tomorrow and be gone" (Eshleman, 1989:125).

³A Missouri court expressed a similar view in 1832: *Case Goben v. Murrell*, 190 S. W. 986 at 988 (MO 1916) quoted by Barron, Vance Jr. 1972. "The Equal Protection Clause and the Student's Right to Vote Where He Attends School." *North Carolina Law Review*, 50:489–525.

review of the legal history of the issue, beginning with the 1970 amendments to the Voting Rights Act and the 1972 ratification of the 26th Amendment that lowered the voting age to 18 and thus granted the vast majority of college students the right to vote. We then discuss the arguments both for and against students voting in their college towns, the calculus of student voting, and the theory that voting is a path-dependent, habit-forming process that directly impacts future levels of civic engagement. We conclude our review of the literature with a discussion of what political scientists know (and do not know) about the college electorate.

As sides in the debate seem to have been drawn along partisan lines, we explore two main objections to students voting in their college districts—that more students support Democrats than Republicans and that such large Democratic blocs disrupt the politics of small towns with large student populations. In short, are the voting patterns of college students significantly different than noncollege students? In order to address this question, we compare the election results of 86 precincts located on 42 college campuses to the results of noncollege precincts. We also compare the voter roll-off rate (from the presidential level to lower-level elections) in college precincts to the rate in noncollege precincts. Based on the results of these analyses, we are able to determine whether voting patterns in college precincts are significantly different than noncollege precincts and the extent to which this may impact elections.

A Confusing Patchwork of Laws

In 1970, growing public support for extending the franchise to younger Americans led the U.S. Congress to pass amendments to the Voting Rights Act laying the groundwork for future attempts to define college student residency. Among the many provisions, the 1970 amendments eliminated the durational residency requirement for presidential and vice presidential elections and established a 30-day residence requirement for all prospective voters (to allow state registrars time to process new voter registrations). However, the language of the amendments, which allowed states to restrict voting to “duly qualified residents” who were physically present and exhibited an “intention to remain,” led to a host of varied interpretations across the states.

In 1972, attempting to clarify potential registration restrictions in *Dunn v. Blumstein*, the Supreme Court struck down a Tennessee law that required one year of in-state residency and at least three years of in-county residency for prospective voters in state and local elections. In its decision, however, the Court decreed that states could restrict registration to “bona fide residents.” The new language did little to clear up the ambiguity, and 11 years later the Court revisited the matter. In *Martinez v. Bynum*, 1983, the Court declared that “bona fide residents” of a locality are defined as those who “have a bona fide intention of remaining there” but that this “does not imply an intention never to leave.” In their 2009 review of the Court’s handling of the matter published in the *Election Law Journal*, Niemi, Hanmer, and Jackson (2009) underscore the ambiguity that still characterizes the Court’s stance on the issue. Niemi, Hanmer, and Jackson (2009) further assert that this ambiguity has led to a frustrating lack of consensus across the states regarding the issue of college student voter registration.

As a result of the high court’s ambiguity on the issue of residence, a confusing patchwork of laws has developed across the United States. On this point, the existing literature typically divides states into two categories. In *Where Should Students Vote: The Courts, the States and Local Officials*, Eshleman (1989) classifies states as either “choice states,”

those with statutes that clearly allow students to register either at home or at school and have implemented administrative practices to protect that choice, or “restrictive states,” those with statutes that contain strict residency requirements and/or have implemented administrative practices that make it difficult for students to register to vote as residents of their college communities. In *Democracy and College Student Voting*, O’Loughlin and Unangst (2006) present the most recent nation-wide analysis of state practices in regard to student registration. As of the spring of 2006, only five states—Colorado, Iowa, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Wisconsin—specifically granted students the right to determine their own residency for the purpose of registering to vote. In addition, another 28 states do not specifically mention student choice in their statutes or have vague restrictions regarding student registration but employ administrative practices that allow students to choose their state of residence. The 11 remaining states have explicitly restrictive laws that are stringently administered.

Absentee Voting

Opponents of granting students the ability to vote in their college towns often point to absentee voting as a viable alternative. However, student advocates claim absentee voting is often unnecessarily complicated or confusing and consequently discourages many students from voting. In their 2004 report for the League of Conservation Voters Education Fund (*Not Home, Not Welcome: Barriers to Student Voters*), Kolasky and Wondolowski (2004) point out that seven states—Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Nevada, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia—require first-time voters to vote in person. Students who cannot return from college to their hometowns on the first Tuesday in November as well as those who are studying abroad are thus unable to vote. In addition to what student advocates believe is blatant disenfranchisement, the rules of absentee voting often vary wildly from state to state and many require an arduous effort on the part of any would-be voter. Students in Alabama and Louisiana, for instance, must request ballots between five and 40 days prior to the election and return them, signed by two witnesses or a notary, by the day before the election. Student advocates contend that requiring students to vote by absentee ballot clearly increases the costs of voting. As such, they argue that it is a poor alternative to allowing students to vote in their college towns.

The Calculus of Voting and Voting as Habit

Student groups and other opponents of laws restricting college student choice argue that erecting barriers to college student voting has a negative impact on American democracy. They point to both economic models and social psychology research to substantiate that claim. The economic argument stems from Anthony Downs’s (1957) treatise on voter behavior. Downs posits that an individual’s decision to vote depends primarily on the cost of voting, particularly the time it takes to do so. In other words, if the *perceived* benefits of voting outweigh the *perceived* costs, a potential voter will become an actual voter. Supporters of college student voting argue that, since the vast majority of college students experience their first election while at college, unclear rules about where and how to register can only increase the perceived cost of voting and therefore decrease the probability that students vote.

Erecting barriers to the college student vote may affect more than just an individual election. Political psychologists view voting as a series of related choices that an individual

makes throughout her lifetime. Once an individual goes through the process of voting for the first time, once she registers and waits in line and navigates the particulars of the voting booth, the costs of voting in subsequent elections—in her perception—dramatically decrease. Plutzer (2002) has labeled this phenomenon “voting inertia.”

The process begins as young citizens confront their very first election. Each has a latent probability of voting resulting from parental, demographic, and personal factors. Some will vote and become habitual voters, but most will not and are likely to remain nonvoters in subsequent elections. That is, most new citizens show evidence of inertia. (Plutzer, 2002:42).

In line with Plutzer (2002), Gerber, Green, and Shachar (2003) also suggest that voting is habit forming and that participation or abstention in one election significantly influences future behavior. Thus, when an individual decides to abstain from voting in her first election because she perceives the costs to be too high—say, she is given unclear instructions on how to register or faces challenges at the polls—the consequences may reach far beyond election night. Ultimately, student voting advocates argue that when we understand the initial vote choice as a cost-benefit analysis that leads to an enduring pattern of voting or abstaining for years (and elections) to come, the implications of restricting the college student vote become clear. Increasing the costs of voting for students, particularly raising the barriers to registration, may limit their participation in the electoral process for not just their first election, but for all those that follow.

The Partisan Basis of Republican Opposition

On October 15, 1971, in response to the adoption of the 26th Amendment, *Life* magazine ran an eight-page spread entitled “Young Voters Surge to Enroll in the System.” Citing high numbers of youth voter registration and the Democratic Party’s 5–2 advantage over Republicans among the new demographic, the article posited that a national political shake-up was in the air. “By November 1972,” the article claimed, “there will be 50 potential first-time voters for every vote that separated Nixon and Hubert Humphrey in 1968.” But Republican fears that the sea change in the electoral landscape would usher in an era of Democratic dominance proved vastly overblown. Richard Nixon went on to win the election by a 20-point landslide.

However, after the 2008 presidential election, analyses of exit polls by the Pew Research Center showed young voters (age 18–24) favored Barack Obama over John McCain by a 2–1 margin, and Republican fears resurfaced. Considering the potential electoral influence of the 21.6 million young college student voters in America and the more than 2.4 million students residing in battleground states, any policies related to how and where college students vote are likely to be heavily influenced by partisan politics. Indeed, recent battle lines in the fight over the issue have been drawn largely along partisan lines, with Republicans working to limit college student voting and Democrats working to increase it. According to analyses by Weiser and Norden (2012:19), voting laws and two executive actions aimed at significantly restricting the franchise of college students in 2012 were all sponsored by Republican legislators, approved by majority Republican legislatures, and signed into law by Republican governors.

The legislative fight regarding college student voting in New Hampshire perhaps best illustrates the issue. In March 2011, William O’Brien, the Republican state House speaker, called college students “foolish.” Because, in his words, students lack “life experience (and) just vote their feelings,” O’Brien was pushing for a new law that would prohibit students

from voting in their college towns unless their parents had already established permanent residency in those towns. He was also pushing to end same-day voter registration on the grounds that it “unleashes swarms of students on polling places, creating opportunities for fraud.” O’Brien left little doubt as to the fundamental motivation behind his opposition to student voting when he said, “voting as a liberal—that’s what kids do.”

Existing data on young voters, which largely define college students, support one of O’Brien’s claims. Data from numerous national surveys indicate that younger voters are significantly more liberal and Democratic than older voters. In 2008, 45 percent of voters aged 18 to 29 identified themselves as Democrats compared to only 26 percent who identified themselves as Republicans. Moreover, analyses of National Election Study (NES) and Current Population Survey (CPS) data of elections for the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate from 1992 to 2010 show that young voters (age 18–29) consistently tend to vote more for Democrats than Republicans. In six of the last 10 congressional elections, young voters chose Democrats over Republicans by margins exceeding 10 percentage points. The party gap has been even more pronounced over the last few congressional elections, with young voters choosing Democrats over Republicans by 20 percentage points in 2006, 37 percentage points in 2008, and 17 percentage points in 2010.

In *Is Voting for Young People?*, Wattenberg lays out a case for why young voters are more likely to identify with Democrats than Republicans. He argues that young voters are more likely than old voters to be on the job market or repaying student loan debt and less likely to own a small business or support pro-business agendas. “Additionally, young people have a notably different lifestyle on three key aspects of the New Right (Republican) agenda. They are (1) less inclined to be a born-again or evangelical Christian; (2) more likely to have a friend, colleague, or family member who is gay; and (3) less likely to have a gun or rifle at home.”⁴ However, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE, 2010) analysis of the 2010 National U.S. House Exit Polls indicates college students hold substantially different policy views than noncollege students. Specifically, they find college students were less supportive of expanding the new health-care bill and more likely to identify reducing the budget deficit as the highest priority for Congress. Finally, their analyses also indicate young voters with some college experience were slightly less likely to identify themselves as Democrats.

A (Potentially) Big Problem in Small Towns

While Speaker O’Brien minced few words, not every politician makes such direct, partisan claims against college student voting. Another oft-cited concern is that the college student voting bloc unfairly influences the politics of small towns with large student populations. At a public forum in January 2003, then New Hampshire House speaker, Republican Gene Chandler, declared:

It is simply not right to allow college students to have any say in our elections in New Hampshire. If they start voting in elections in a lot of these communities, they can have a big say in what’s happening. We need to control that.⁵

When the voting franchise was first extended to students in 1971, small-town officials across the United States echoed the sentiments of Speaker Chandler. In Madison, Wisconsin, State College, Pennsylvania, and a slew of other college towns, local residents

⁴Wattenberg (2012:131).

⁵Lane (2003)

petitioned their governments for stricter residency laws that would prevent students from “seizing control” of their local governments. For instance, in 2010 Scott Foster, a student at the College of William and Mary, was elected to the Williamsburg City Council thanks to a campus-wide effort. Foster benefited from a coordinated get-out-the-vote campaign by William and Mary students. Student organizations, including the Student Assembly, worked to encourage students to vote in the election through a series of registration efforts. On the day of the election, the Student Assembly provided free transportation for students between campus and the voting location and the president of the Student Assembly sent an e-mail to the college’s students, encouraging them to vote in the election.⁶

While the William and Mary election represents an extreme example of the potential electoral influence that students may hold if they are allowed to vote in their college towns, the issue of small towns is clearly the most complicating factor in the current debate. On one hand, as O’Laughlin and Unangst (2006) describe in *Democracy and Student Voting*, students pay rent and many forms of tax in their college towns; they patronize restaurants, gas stations, theatres, and local stores and provide a young, inexpensive, and energetic labor force. In addition, for at least nine months of every year, students are subject to the laws and regulations of their college towns. On the other hand, because most students do not own property or remain in their college towns after graduation, permanent residents may be justified in their concerns that the student vote may usher in bonds or property tax increases that affect them long after the students who voted for such policies have left town. Additionally, a large population of students—no matter the rate of individual turnover—could consistently lead to a local government that is ideologically divergent from the town’s permanent residents. Current New Hampshire state Representative Gregory Sorg, a proponent of stricter student voting measures, called upon these fears when he said that the votes of taxpayers in college towns are “diluted or entirely canceled by those of a huge, largely monolithic demographic group . . . composed of people with a dearth of experience and a plethora of the easy self-confidence that only ignorance and inexperience can produce.”

What We Know (and Do Not Know) About the College Student Electorate

Thus far, we have discussed how the Supreme Court’s ambiguity over the issue of where college students can and should vote has led to partisan battles in a number of states and reviewed the core arguments related to where students should vote. We now turn to what political scientists know about the college student electorate to determine the validity of the competing claims. We then identify the most pressing questions that scholars have yet to answer.

While standard national surveys, such as the NES and CPS, ask respondents to indicate the highest level of education completed, they do not specifically ask respondents if they are currently enrolled in college. Researchers, then, typically extrapolate information on the college student electorate from data on young voters and those who report having completed some college. Not only do these data sets include young voters who have dropped out or taken leaves of absence from college, but they also offer extremely limited sample sizes resistant to in-depth analysis.

In what is, to date, the most comprehensive study of the college student electorate, Niemi and Hanmer (2010) detail the problems presented by traditional data sets. They

⁶Erin Zagursky, “W&M Student Becomes First to Serve on City Council,” College of William and Mary, (<http://www.wm.edu/as/government/news/foster.php>).

point out that most studies include too few students, fail to ask about attitudes, and rarely differentiate between those living at home and those living on campus or those who attend two- or four-year institutions. The researchers also identify a host of obstacles to more direct approaches to studying the college student electorate, including students' transient living situations, erratic schedules, and inclination to rely solely on cell phones.

The few studies that have specifically targeted college students do not provide much support for advocates of students voting in their college towns. Niemi and Hanmer (2010) found increased barriers to registration and voting do not decrease college student turnout. Their survey revealed that less than 4 percent of respondents reported that they attempted to register but were unable to do so. They also found that 67 percent of students who registered to vote and attended college outside of their hometowns chose to register at home. Further complicating the student advocate argument, Castle, Levy, and Peshkin (2009) found, when encouraged by an absentee voter drive, that students at Northwestern University overwhelmingly chose to cast absentee ballots in their home states rather than in-person ballots in their college town. Both studies suggest that, when given the choice of where to vote, college students prefer to vote at home.

However, existing studies of the college student electorate also complicate the arguments of those supporting barriers to students voting in their college towns. When New Hampshire Speaker O'Brien directed his anger at "kids," he highlighted a glaring hole in the conventional wisdom underlying opposition to college student voting—namely, that college students are very different from other young voters. As noted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, in the 2008 presidential election, 75.3 percent of first-year college students and 81.4 percent of college seniors voted, compared to only 51 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29. Likewise, in their survey of 1,200 college students aged 18 to 24, Niemi and Hanmer (2010) found 77 percent of college students reported going to the polls in 2004, while the U.S. Census reports that only 46.7 percent of all 18- to 24-year-olds voted in that election.

Data and Analysis of College Student Voting

With such disparity between the turnout levels of college and noncollege youth, and with little reliable empirical data on the partisanship of the college student electorate, the belief that college students significantly improve the electoral fate of Democratic candidates and/or significantly influence the outcomes of local elections is based more on conjecture than fact. To better understand this important issue, the following section presents an analysis of the distribution of votes cast for competitive elections in the November 2008 elections in 86 precincts located on 42 college campuses across five states (a listing of included college and university precincts is available through the author's website) as compared to the distribution of votes cast in the 19,403 noncollege precincts located within these states and political districts.

The 42 colleges and universities are located within five states (Iowa, Louisiana, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island) and were primarily selected because of data availability. Specifically, the colleges are located in states for which the official precinct-level results for the national, state, and local November 2008 elections were publicly available and representatives for the local Board of Elections responded to requests to identify the specific precincts located on college campuses. Despite the use of a convenience sample, the data provide a representative sample of college campuses with a mixture of battle and nonbattleground states, restrictive and unrestrictive voting laws, and states from the southern,

midwestern, and eastern regions of the country. Moreover, the 42 colleges included in the analysis are quite diverse and representative of the distribution of colleges throughout the country with several flagship state universities, private and public colleges, historically black colleges, and small regional colleges (contact authors for listing and characteristics of colleges).

Although focusing on just one election year can pose problems for inference, the 2008 election serves as an excellent test for whether or not students on college campuses impact local elections. In 2004, 2006, and 2008, young voters made up a significant bloc of Democratic votes; and in 2008, 66 percent of people under the age of 30 voted for Obama—the largest boost in young voters since Nixon won reelection in 1972 (Keeter, Horowitz, and Tyson, 2008).⁷ Choosing an election in which historically high numbers of young voters are mobilized serves as a critical test for any potential electoral impact that college students may have on local politics. Because young voters, in general, were more mobilized in 2008 than in any prior election, their potential impact should be demonstrated in 2008. Luckily, the weaknesses of using a single election work to our advantage. Because our central aim is to uncover the effect that younger voters have on local elections, this selection bias (focusing solely on the 2008 election) actually improves our analysis and provides a stronger case for those advocates of student voting restriction. If we do find significant effects, those effects are, if anything, an overestimation of the true impact of college voters.

For the analyses, campus precincts are limited to those identified by local election officials as being located on college campuses and therefore include only students or individuals living in university housing.⁸ Precincts that surround college campuses likely have large student populations but are not coded as college precincts because they also include many permanent residents. Representatives of each local Board of Elections within the communities identified the college precincts. While we recognize restricting our definition of college precincts to those only located on college campuses provides a limited perspective of only residential college students, we argue that this provides us with a more direct measure of college student voting. Moreover, when state legislators, party leaders, and campaigns target college students with mobilization or demobilization efforts their focus is primarily on those students living on campus. In addition, concerns regarding students as “temporary” residents are most commonly referencing those students who live on campus.

Figures 1 and 2 show the percentage of the vote received by Democratic candidate Barack Obama in college and noncollege precincts in the presidential election of 2008. In line with conventional wisdom, Figure 1 indicates the majority of college precincts were significantly more supportive of President Obama than their surrounding noncollege precincts.⁹ However, the results reported in Figure 2 also indicate substantial variation in support for Obama across college precincts. For instance, only 14 percent of presidential votes were cast for Barack Obama in the precincts located on the campus of Nicholls State University while more than 98 percent of votes were cast for Barack Obama in the

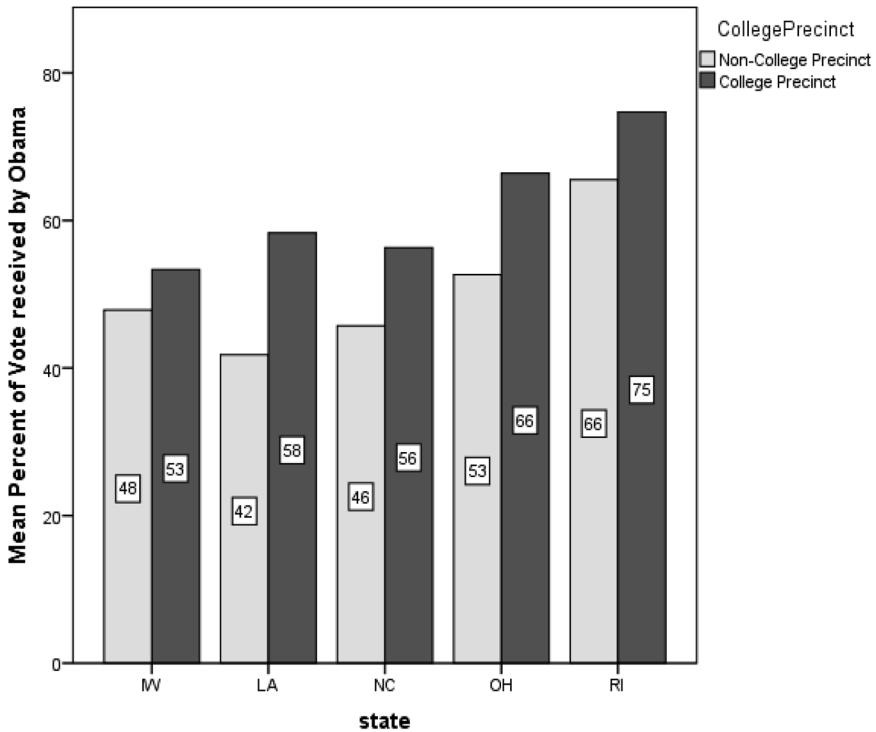
⁷For youth voting, 1972 was a landmark election. The 26th Amendment, which changed the voting age from 21 to 18, was signed into law in July 1971 by President Richard M. Nixon.

⁸While some individuals living in university housing may not be students and are still registered as voters in the precincts identified as “college precincts,” this number is very limited and unlikely to represent more than 1–3 percent of the registered voters in any college precinct. Considering our narrow definition of college precincts, nonstudents registered in these precincts would be limited to the residential housing staff or a small number of faculty and administrators provided housing on campus. For the vast majority of college campuses in the United States, this would include very few individuals.

⁹Difference of mean *T*-scores for college precincts versus noncollege precincts: all states ($t = 4.29$), Iowa ($t = 2.24$), Louisiana ($t = 2.44$), North Carolina ($t = 2.32$), Ohio ($t = 3.54$), and Rhode Island ($t = 1.39$).

FIGURE 1

Mean Percentage of Vote Received by Barack Obama in 2008 Presidential Election by State and College/Noncollege Precinct



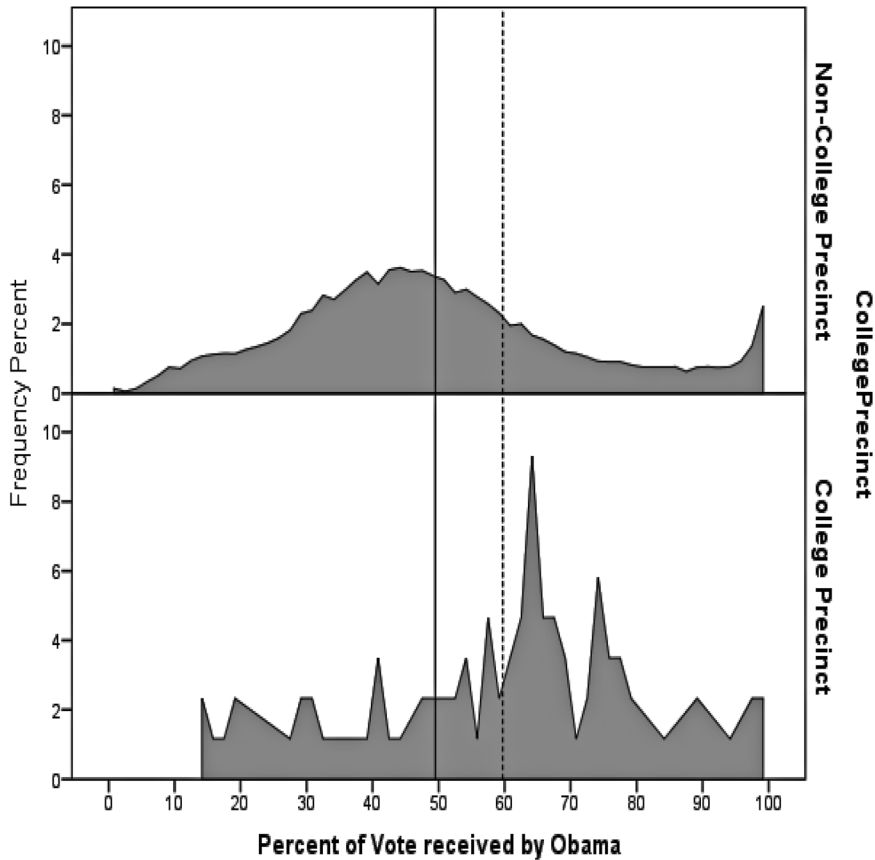
precincts located on the campus of Grambling State University. Moreover, these results do not differentiate whether college precincts are any different than the traditionally more liberal communities where colleges are often located. To better understand the unique patterns of voting in college precincts, an ordinary least squares (OLS) model of precinct voting for Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election is developed and tested.

The OLS model presented in Table 1 aims to examine the extent to which voting in college precincts favored Democratic candidate Barack Obama, controlling for several factors recognized as influencing the 2008 presidential election contest. Building on the work of Keeter, Horowitz, and Tyson (2008) and Wattenberg (2012), we hypothesize Barack Obama will receive significantly greater support in college precincts than noncollege precincts. The results of the OLS model support our hypotheses and indicate that Obama did receive a substantial and significantly greater percentage of the vote in precincts located on college campuses. Notably, holding other factors recognized as influencing the 2008 presidential election constant, Obama's percentage of the vote increased by more than 14 points in college precincts. Clearly, college precincts provided Democratic candidate Obama with substantial support and depending on the length of his coattails may have contributed significant support to Democratic candidates competing for lower-level offices.

The remaining variables in the model generally coincide with previous research and expectations. First, precincts in counties with college towns were significantly more supportive of Obama but the coefficient suggests the difference was not substantial. Second, the results

FIGURE 2

Vote Distribution for Barak Obama in 2008 Presidential Election by College and Noncollege Precincts



indicate Obama received significantly less support in southern precincts as compared to nonsouthern precincts. However, Obama’s support in precincts located in battleground states, where his campaign focused the majority of resources, is surprisingly not statistically different than precincts in nonbattleground states. Finally, college precincts located on the campuses of private colleges provided Obama with significantly less support. While this does not fit with conventional wisdom regarding college student voting, it is not necessarily surprising. First, due to their typically high costs, private schools are often populated by students from wealthier families who are less likely to identify with the Democratic Party. In addition to challenging conventional wisdom, this finding is notable to the extent that it highlights the diversity of college students and their political preferences.

While the analysis of precinct voting at the presidential level confirms that college precincts did provide significantly more electoral support for Obama, there is no guarantee that his electoral coattails carried over to Democratic candidates further down the ticket. Many opponents of college students voting in local elections do not oppose their voting participation but simply their undue influence on the local affairs of a community where they only temporarily reside. It is possible that college students,

TABLE 1

OLS Models of 2008: Percentage Precinct Voting for Democratic Candidates

	Precinct Percentage for Democratic President	Precinct Percentage for Democratic U.S. Senate
Constant (<i>SE</i>)	53.365** (0.479)	53.90** (0.327)
College precinct	14.838** (2.767)	6.290* (2.974)
College county	0.026 (0.471)	2.560** (0.559)
Private college precinct	-12.719* (5.172)	-11.613* (5.484)
Southern state	-9.672** (0.409)	-
Battleground state	-0.673 (0.458)	-
Iowa		5.730** (0.598)
North Carolina		-3.722** (0.490)
Rhode Island		21.069** (0.877)
<i>N</i>	19,360	8,724
College precincts <i>N</i>	86	63
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.042	0.079

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

voting in college precincts, cast their votes for their presidential candidate but refrain from casting a vote for candidates in congressional, state, and local elections—elections with which they are less familiar due to limited media attention and their lack of interest as new or temporary citizens of the community. Moreover, building on the work of Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina (1987) and more recently Serra and Pinney (2004) and Blais et al. (2003), we hypothesize candidate quality, constituent services, pork projects, and credit claiming may trump partisanship in congressional, state, and local elections.

In order to address this hypothesis, the OLS model for the presidential election was retested for U.S. Senate elections and difference-of-means tests were conducted (see Tables 1–3) for congressional, state, and local elections in college and noncollege precincts for competitive elections for which reliable data were available. The OLS results for the U.S. Senate model indicate that, like Obama, Democrats running for the U.S. Senate also held an electoral advantage in college precincts. However, their advantage was substantially smaller than that of Obama. Specifically, holding all other factors constant, Democratic candidates for the U.S. Senate received on average only 6 percent more support in college precincts than noncollege precincts as compared to Obama's 14 percent advantage in college precincts. Notably, as Obama, Democratic senate candidates also received substantially less support from college precincts located on the campuses of private colleges.

While the OLS results for both the U.S. Senate and president support conventional wisdom that Democrats have an advantage in college precincts, the results reported in Table 2 for 50 competitive U.S. House, state legislative, and local elections in 2008 show less

TABLE 2

Average Percentage of Votes for Democratic Candidate/Policy Preference by Precinct Type

Type of Election	College Precincts (N)		Noncollege Precincts (N)		Difference Between College and Noncollege Precincts (T-Score)	
	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	T-Score
Governor (North Carolina)	51.96%	(19)	49.95%	(496)	2.01%	(0.43)
Lt. governor (North Carolina)	55.54%	(19)	53.59%	(496)	1.95%	(0.46)
State attorney general (North Carolina)	64.68%	(19)	62.82%	(496)	1.86%	(0.49)
Secretary of state (North Carolina)	60.77%	(19)	59.04%	(496)	1.73%	(0.41)
Straight ticket (North Carolina)	60.75%	(19)	57.68%	(496)	3.07%	(0.60)
State attorney general (Ohio)	64.42%	(23)	50.41%	(913)	14.01%**	(5.05)
State Supreme Court seat 1 (Ohio)	41.65%	(23)	30.20%	(913)	11.45%**	(9.49)
State Supreme Court seat 2 (Ohio)	47.00%	(23)	33.50%	(913)	13.50%**	(9.81)
Yes: \$400-million-bond environmental initiatives (Ohio)	61.36%	(23)	62.52%	(913)	-1.16%	(0.47)
Yes: cap on rates payday lenders charge (Ohio)	55.16%	(23)	58.35%	(913)	-3.19%*	(1.59)
Yes to allowing casinos (Ohio)	38.82%	(23)	38.12%	(913)	0.71%	(0.38)
Yes to purchase open spaces & rec. areas (Rhode Island)	80.11%	(4)	78.32%	(111)	1.79%	(0.54)
Iowa state house district 3	10.79%	(1)	18.36%	(4)	-7.57%	(0.92)
Iowa state house district 4	12.57%	(1)	9.39%	(9)	3.18%	(1.43)
Iowa state senate district 8	52.09%	(1)	45.65%	(13)	6.44%	(1.46)
Iowa state senate district 10	49.59%	(1)	44.60%	(25)	4.99%	(0.73)
Iowa state senate district 12	64.43%	(2)	62.67%	(9)	1.76%	(0.36)
Iowa state house district 16	63.01%	(1)	55.31%	(8)	7.70%	(1.22)
Iowa state house district 19	58.98%	(1)	53.25%	(11)	5.73%	(1.18)
Iowa state house district 24	98.62%	(2)	98.68%	(4)	-0.06%	(0.10)
Iowa state house district 30	96.46%	(1)	97.37%	(9)	-0.91%	(0.39)
Iowa state house district 45	50.02%	(5)	53.27%	(8)	-3.25%	(0.36)
Iowa state senate district 48	64.32%	(1)	45.93%	(12)	18.39%	(1.59)
Iowa state house district 52	39.54%	(1)	29.83%	(12)	9.71%	(0.90)
Iowa state house district 77	72.82%	(3)	74.65%	(9)	-1.83%	(0.12)
Iowa state house district 78	96.46%	(1)	96.41%	(11)	0.05%	(0.20)
Iowa state house district 95	62.25%	(1)	50.28%	(12)	11.97%	(1.68)
Ohio state senate district 4	55.44%	(3)	40.01%	(295)	15.43%**	(2.06)
Ohio state senate district 20	48.06%	(8)	40.67%	(146)	7.39%**	(2.19)
Ohio state senate district 28	68.76%	(6)	63.17%	(125)	5.59%	(1.29)
Ohio state house district 53	50.61%	(3)	34.12%	(100)	16.49%**	(2.69)
Ohio state house district 68	69.33%	(6)	64.96%	(97)	4.37%	(0.97)
Ohio state house district 71	68.31%	(1)	37.82%	(93)	30.49%**	(3.47)
Ohio state house district 87	33.62%	(1)	28.17%	(34)	5.45%	(0.89)
Ohio state house district 90	87.42%	(1)	43.29%	(57)	44.13%**	(6.41)
Ohio state house district 92	62.87%	(1)	60.12%	(62)	2.75%	(0.62)
Rhode Island state senate district 11	56.85%	(1)	55.76%	(2)	1.09%	(0.19)
Rhode Island state house district 35	72.93%	(1)	56.94%	(4)	15.99%**	(5.82)

Continued

TABLE 2—continued

Type of Election	College Precincts (N)		Noncollege Precincts (N)		Difference Between College and Noncollege Precincts (T-Score)	
Black Hawk County sheriff (Iowa)	55.31%	(1)	55.91%	(62)	-0.60%	(0.05)
Decatur County sheriff (Iowa)	36.23%	(1)	39.88%	(12)	-3.65%	(0.53)
Buena Vista County Board of Supervisors (Iowa)	47.63%	(1)	57.37%	(12)	-9.74%	(0.99)
Fayette County Board of Supervisors (Iowa)	43.89%	(2)	53.55%	(23)	-9.66%	(1.47)
Story County Board of Supervisors (Iowa)	56.41%	(5)	47.48%	(38)	8.93%**	(2.29)
Johnson County Board of Supervisors (Iowa)	36.03%	(5)	34.91%	(52)	1.12%*	(1.83)
Johnson County auditor (Iowa)	65.75%	(5)	56%	(52)	9.95%**	(2.17)
Decatur County auditor (Iowa)	25.00%	(1)	22.62%	(12)	2.38%	(0.31)
Fayette County auditor (Iowa)	67.57%	(2)	69.67%	(23)	-2.10%	(0.20)
Approve E. Baton Rouge Parish tax increase (Louisiana)	61.30%	(5)	52.25%	(309)	9.06%	(1.43)
Hammond City Referendum (Louisiana)	51.93%	(3)	40.76%	(16)	11.18%	(1.57)
South Kingstown School Board (Rhode Island)	66.74%	(1)	59.04%	(11)	7.70%**	(3.45)

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

consistent support for Democratic candidates further down the ticket.¹⁰ Although precincts on college campuses provided down-ticket Democratic candidates with an average of 5.6 percent more electoral support, the Democratic electoral advantage in college precincts was statistically significant in only 14 of the 50 elections. Moreover, in 12 of the reported elections, the Democratic candidate actually received a smaller percentage of the vote in the college precincts than in the surrounding noncollege precincts. Notably, as seen in Table 2, the Democratic advantage in college precincts is the smallest for county and local elections, with an average difference of only 2.04 percent between college and noncollege precincts. This falls in line with our hypothesis that suggests as voters move down the ballot to county and local elections partisanship plays a less significant role. Rather than partisanship, such factors as candidate quality, credit claiming, and constituent services are more likely to influence voters in down-ticket elections. Considering these findings, the fear that transient student populations unduly provide a liberal influence on the policies of local permanent communities seem largely unfounded.

While the above analyses confirm Barack Obama and fellow Democrats running for the U.S. Senate received significantly greater support in college precincts, their electoral advantage did not extend to Democrats further down the ticket. Considering the substantial variation in support for Democratic candidates at the state and local levels across college precincts, the question that remains is whether college students who voted for Obama in

¹⁰The 50 elections included in this analysis represent all of the competitive elections that occurred in the college towns coded for the 2008 elections with data available at the precinct level.

TABLE 3

Drop Off in Voting Participation from Presidential Election by Precinct Type

Type of Election	College Precincts (N)		Noncollege Precincts (N)		Difference Between College and Noncollege Precincts (T-Score)	
Governor (North Carolina)	2.09%	(19)	1.03%	(496)	1.06%**	(3.95)
Lt. governor (North Carolina)	5.58%	(19)	3.48%	(496)	2.10%**	(5.89)
State attorney general (North Carolina)	5.90%	(19)	4.32%	(496)	1.58%**	(4.11)
Secretary of state (North Carolina)	7.87%	(19)	5.97%	(496)	1.91%**	(4.01)
Straight ticket (North Carolina)	7.54%	(19)	0.33%	(496)	7.21%**	(3.71)
State attorney general (Ohio)	19.15%	(23)	10.71%	(913)	8.44%**	(10.39)
State Supreme Court seat 1 (Ohio)	39.46%	(23)	22.26%	(913)	17.20%**	(16.09)
State Supreme Court seat 2 (Ohio)	42.94%	(23)	26.38%	(913)	16.56%**	(14.94)
Yes: \$400-million-bond environmental initiatives (Ohio)	24.02%	(23)	10.29%	(913)	13.73%**	(14.01)
Yes: cap on rates payday lenders charge (Ohio)	21.89%	(23)	5.85%	(913)	16.04%**	(14.48)
Yes to allowing casinos (Ohio)			Multicandidate election			
Yes to purchase open spaces and rec. areas (Rhode Island)	11.87%	(4)	21.63%	(111)	-9.76%**	-(4.15)
Iowa state house district 3	4.59%	(1)	6.21%	(4)	-1.62%	(0.54)
Iowa state house district 4	2.20%	(1)	2.21%	(9)	-0.01%	(0.01)
Iowa state senate district 8	15.13%	(1)	3.10%	(13)	12.03%**	(5.51)
Iowa state senate district 10	13.89%	(1)	2.95%	(25)	10.94%**	(7.62)
Iowa state senate district 12	3.28%	(2)	5.08%	(9)	-1.80%	(0.77)
Iowa state house district 16	13.71%	(1)	2.71%	(8)	11.00%**	(4.82)
Iowa state house district 19	20.07%	(1)	4.42%	(11)	15.65%**	(6.84)
Iowa state house district 24	20.48%	(2)	25.89%	(4)	-5.41%	(1.11)
Iowa state house district 30	25.90%	(1)	29.99%	(9)	-4.09%	(0.68)
Iowa state house district 45	13.84%	(5)	8.57%	(8)	5.27%**	(4.30)
Iowa state senate district 48	4.91%	(1)	2.00%	(12)	2.91%**	(2.76)
Iowa state house district 52	8.61%	(1)	7.61%	(12)	1.00%	(0.47)
Iowa state house district 77	23.27%	(3)	24.86%	(9)	-1.59%	(0.39)
Iowa state house district 78	29.20%	(1)	25.08%	(11)	4.12%	(1.48)
Iowa state house district 95	8.93%	(1)	5.16%	(12)	3.77%	(1.83)
Ohio state senate district 4	22.27%	(3)	10.43%	(295)	11.84%**	(7.40)
Ohio state senate district 20	16.82%	(8)	4.95%	(146)	11.87%**	-(9.02)
Ohio state senate district 28	16.13%	(6)	9.14%	(125)	6.99%**	(7.02)
Ohio state house district 53	23.51%	(3)	10.72%	(100)	12.79%**	-(5.62)
Ohio state house district #68	30.67%	(6)	35.04%	(97)	-4.37%**	(6.03)
Ohio state house district 71	20.96%	(1)	5.23%	(93)	15.73%**	(5.57)
Ohio state house district 87	0.87%	(1)	2.48%	(34)	-1.61%	(0.83)
Ohio state house district 90	14.62%	(1)	4.02%	(57)	10.60%**	(6.11)
Ohio state house district 92	18.82%	(1)	4.23%	(62)	14.59%**	(7.19)
Rhode Island state senate district 11	6.90%	(1)	6.85%	(2)	0.05%	(0.06)
Rhode Island state house district 35	10.55%	(1)	5.41%	(4)	5.14%**	(6.72)

Continued

TABLE 3—continued

Type of Election	College Precincts (N)		Noncollege Precincts (N)		Difference Between College and Noncollege Precincts (T-Score)	
Black Hawk County sheriff (Iowa)	25.32%	(1)	4.86%	(62)	20.46%**	(8.30)
Decatur County sheriff (Iowa)	7.59%	(1)	2.60%	(12)	4.99%**	(2.49)
Buena Vista County Board of Supervisors (Iowa)	6.93%	(1)	7.33%	(12)	-0.40%	(0.14)
Fayette County Board of Supervisors (Iowa)	2.70%	(2)	3.00%	(23)	-0.30%	(0.23)
Story County Board of Supervisors (Iowa)	15.89%	(5)	6.68%	(38)	9.21%**	(7.50)
Johnson County Board of Supervisors (Iowa)	Multicandidate election					
Johnson County auditor (Iowa)	24.51%	(5)	19.15%	(52)	5.36%*	(1.88)
Decatur County auditor (Iowa)	28.57%	(1)	30.03%	(12)	-1.46%	(0.28)
Fayette County auditor (Iowa)	39.01%	(2)	36.03%	(23)	2.98%	(0.30)
Approve E. Baton Rouge Parish tax increase (Louisiana)	13.65%	(5)	10.62%	(309)	3.04%	(1.52)
Hammond City Referendum (Louisiana)	22.46%	(3)	47.70%	(16)	-25.24%	(1.14)
South Kingstown School Board (Rhode Island)	Multicandidate election					

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

these precincts crossed party lines and split their tickets in state and local elections or did they simply choose to abstain from voting in down-ticket races? The results presented in Table 2 suggest the latter. Many students mobilized by the Obama campaign marched to their college precincts and cast their ballots for Obama, but chose not to participate in lower-level elections.

To measure whether the roll-off rate differed significantly between college precincts and noncollege precincts, we conducted difference-of-means tests on voter turnout data for college and noncollege precincts for several federal, state, and local elections (see Table 3). Overall, the findings indicate the decline in participation from the presidential election to lower-level elections was substantially larger in college precincts (14.6 percent decline) as compared to noncollege (10.7 percent decline). Specifically, the difference-of-means tests indicate the decline in turnout for college precincts was significantly greater than for noncollege precincts in 27 of the 48 elections examined. These results clearly indicate voters in college precincts are substantially less likely to cast their votes for down-ticket races.

Conclusion

The results of this research show college precincts did provide Democratic candidate Barack Obama with significantly more support than noncollege precincts. Moreover,

Obama's coattails benefited Democratic candidates running for the U.S. Congress and to a substantially less extent lower-level elected offices. Notably, analyses of the partisan differential between college and noncollege precincts for the 50 local elections included in the study suggest no Democratic candidate won his or her race due to an electoral advantage in college precincts.

Ultimately, these analyses highlight the tremendous amount of variation in voting behavior across college campuses. As noted by previous scholars, candidate quality, constituent services, pork projects, and credit claiming provide opportunities for candidates, particularly in lower-level offices, to insulate themselves from potential partisan disadvantages and/or unfavorable presidential coattails.

Although Democratic candidates do generally receive greater electoral support in college precincts, this support cannot be taken for granted. The bivariate analysis of state and local elections highlights several cases that Republican candidates received greater support in college precincts than in noncollege precincts. In line with these findings, the College Republican National Committee in July 2014 committed more than 2 million dollars in field programs specifically targeting college students for the 2014 midterm elections. Moreover, while the differences were not large, the analyses of the roll off in voting from the presidential election to lower-level elections clearly suggest voters in college precincts are more likely than noncollege precincts to abstain from voting in lower-level races.

While partisans on both sides of the aisle put forth reasons in support or opposition to college students voting, their ultimate goal is winning elections. Conventional wisdom suggests college students are significantly more likely to vote for Democratic candidates and barriers to college student voting will benefit Republicans at the polls. While our results provide support for conventional wisdom at the federal election level, the results do not provide much support for this view with regard to state, county, and local elections. Our analysis of local elections in 2008, a banner year for Democrats, indicates Republican candidates can and often do achieve greater electoral success in college precincts than noncollege precincts. Moreover, the findings of the OLS models highlight the idea that college voters should not be considered a monolithic group. College precincts located on the campuses of private colleges were actually more likely to support Republican candidates. In summary, Republican Party leaders' fears regarding college students turning small towns on their heads via the ballot box are not founded in fact. Yes, on average, university students vote more democratically than nonstudents. They also, on average, are more likely to simply choose not to vote for local candidates. By and large, they come to the polls to vote for national offices, not local ones.

While this research begins to answer some of the fundamental questions related to college student voting, the results also bring to light additional questions. For instance, to what extent is variation in college precincts the product of difference in the characteristics of campuses or rather differences in campaigns and candidates? Likewise, to what extent is the substantial level of college student roll off observed in our analyses explained by campaign and candidate activities?

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