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Place and participation in local elections

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ABSTRACT

How does place matter for participation in local politics and elections? To date, social scientists have largely ignored this question, in part because their focus has not been on local politics and elections. We think this is unfortunate given that 99% of all governments in the U.S. are local governments. Given stark differences in rates of turnout and office seeking across local and state/federal elections, we believe more attention to the way in which 'sense of place' affects residents' political behavior is warranted. In this study we look explicitly at how the geographic, functional, and socio-demographic features of cities shape turnout and contestation in local elections. Analyzing mayoral elections in two U.S. states, we find evidence not only that contextual factors are associated with both turnout and contestation, but *place* itself matters, independently of the features of its inhabitants, for the health of local democracy.

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The overwhelming majority of elections in the United States are for local office, however, local elections are understudied in the social sciences. Scholars who do work in this area have primarily investigated turnout in large U.S. cities, and have paid particular attention to the relationship between city size and civic engagement. Though we lack systematic evidence to draw definite conclusions, turnout in local elections is often considered to be abysmally low. That said, high turnout in local elections does not mean very much if voters have no decisions to make on election day. A recent report by the Center for Local Elections in American Politics found that 53 percent of mayoral elections held between 2000 and 2016 were uncontested (Marschall, Lappie, & Williams, 2017). Obviously, a healthy democracy needs voters *and* candidates, but at the local level both are sometimes in short supply. Why is this?

In this study, we build on the work of political scientists like Dahl (1967) and Oliver, Ha and Callen (2012), Oliver (2001) as well as the multi-disciplinary literature on sense of place to empirically assess not only whether the size and socio-demographic characteristics of cities shape participation in local elections, but also how and why "place" matters for local democracy. Our theoretical framework extends beyond electoral rules and context to consider how geographic, functional, and socio-demographic features of cities influence turnout and contestation in local elections.

Our empirical analysis is based on data from two states—Indiana and Kentucky. Though not representative of all U.S. states, these neighboring states share a number of commonalities in terms of the size and the demographic features of their municipalities and their local government arrangements more generally. Cities and towns in these two states are mostly small and medium-sized, as most municipalities in the U.S. are. At the same time, the two states differ on key institutional features such as election timing and partisan elections. Because we have complete data on mayoral elections for all cities across multiple election cycles in both states, we are able to tease out the extent to which institutional, demographic, and place-based factors matter for turnout and the likelihood of uncontested elections. Our empirical results indicate that *place* itself influences turnout and contestation, independently of the features of its inhabitants. One particularly interesting finding from this study, especially in light of the 2016 Presidential election, is the strong, positive relationship between rural municipalities and turnout in mayoral elections. The higher turnout in these localities and the fact that Trump won small towns and rural America easily, capturing 62% of vote (Morin, 2016), suggests that more attention to rural America, the distinctiveness of these places, and their role in American politics is warranted.

Local politics and place

Interest in American national elections are high. The media offers virtually round-the-clock coverage for nearly a year, partisan

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and ideological passions run high, and the candidates' campaigns are professional and well-organized. None of this is typically true of local elections.

For starters, while the issues at stake in local politics are important, and arguably have a greater effect on day-to-day life than the decisions made at the state or federal level, they tend to be issues of limited scope, without much ideological dimension (Oliver et al., 2012). Some would argue that it is only in very large cities that local politics begins to get interesting (Keheller and Lowery, 2009, 2004). In addition, unlike federal and most state politicians, who are careerists, in most American cities politics is said to be dominated by amateurs who run out of a sense of civic duty, or perhaps indignation over a specific local issue. Local elected officials are typically not considered to be progressively ambitious, and spend only a small fraction of their time on their mayoral duties (Oliver et al., 2012). This is partly due to the fact that many local offices receive little or no remuneration. Another factor relates to the limited functional responsibilities assigned to many local jurisdictions. Governments that provide fewer services tend to have relatively small budgets and more tranquil politics. Finally, a large share of local elections are non-partisan and/or are off-cycle—in odd years or times when there are no federal or state races on the ballot. For all of these reasons and more, interest in local politics tends to be lower than interest in national politics (Oliver, 2001).

It would of course be wrong to say that interest in local politics is low across all local elections and all local jurisdictions. In many places, local politics are lively, turnout is consistently high, and there is no shortage of local candidates. Among other factors, election timing (Anzia, 2012, 2013; Hajnal, Lewis, & Louch, 2002) and the concentration of groups typically considered as 'stakeholders' in local politics—homeowners (Fischel, 2009), higher income residents (Kelleher & Lowery, 2004)—are linked to higher political participation. In this study, we argue that features specific to place, which map to certain types of cities, also impinge upon citizens in ways that increase their awareness of place, thereby fostering greater participation in local politics. In these cities, residents have a better developed 'sense of place.'

The literature on 'sense of place' seeks to understand how place shapes a diverse array of social behaviors and outcomes (Harris, Werner, Brown, & Ingebritsen, 1995; Mesch & Manor, 1998; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). Although this broad and multi-disciplinary area of inquiry has led to a certain level of conceptual muddiness (Tester, Ruel, Anderson, Reitzes, & Oakley, 2011),[1] most scholars agree that sense of place is characterized by the meaning people give to certain spatial points or geographic locations (Altman & Low, 1992; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). And, while some people lack a sense of place altogether, others give meaning to many different places (Tester et al., 2011).

Sense of place is typically measured either with survey data that seek to directly gauge the degree to which individuals *feel* that they belong to, identify with, or are dependent on, various place scales—home, neighborhood, city, region, nation, etc. (Lewicka, 2011), or via Census or other aggregate-level data that tap residents' social networks, shared values, and sense of belonging. In this study we build and expand upon the latter. We conceptualize place as a locality that is given meaning by the human activities that take place within it, and focus not on the individual-level emotional and symbolic meaning people ascribe to place, but instead on the contextual, functional, and geo-spatial dimensions of place (Lin & Lockwood, 2014). As political sociologists have long argued, political behavior does not depend on individual-level characteristics alone, but instead, is shaped in important ways by the broader environment in which individuals are situated (Huckfeldt, 1986).

City size and other contextual features of place

Political science research, and the sense of place literature, have both given a great deal of attention to how the size, socio-demographic, and political makeup of local jurisdictions affect whether and how individuals participate in civil and political life. Scholars examining turnout in U.S. local elections have tended to focus on the effects of city size; for different reasons, so has the sense of place literature. However, with the exception of Downs' rational voter theory (1957), which posits a direct, negative relationship between city size and voter turnout, most studies investigating how place shapes participation and/or civic engagement incorporate other features of the local population into their causal explanations for how and why city size matters. For example, because small cities tend to be more homogeneous, they presumably foster stronger psychological attachments, loyalties, and shared values, which in turn foster electoral participation (Oliver, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972). In fact, residents of more homogenous communities do tend to have a stronger sense of place, though the effects of city size by itself are unclear (Lewicka, 2011). Residents of smaller cities tend to also have geographically proximate social networks, which not only disseminate local political information, but also create social pressure to participate (Grosser & Schram, 2006; Oliver, 2001). Since population size and density are positively related (Wirth, 1938), residents in smaller jurisdictions may also be less prone to both privacy-oriented behavior (Oliver, 2001; Simmel, 1903; Verba & Nie, 1972) and the by-stander effect—whereby the presence of so many possible actors discourages individuals from acting since everyone assumes someone else will do so (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002; Milgram, 1970).

On the other hand, since governments tend to provide fewer services in smaller cities, there is less at stake and thus potentially less incentive for voters to turnout in local elections (Dahl, 1967). There is also likely to be less candidate recruitment in smaller cities. This stems in part from the fact that local politics is less professional and local economies are less complex in smaller cities. In addition, compared to bigger cities, public officials in smaller cities tend to receive less compensation and be less professional, which may lead to less electoral competition, and ultimately reduced interest in local politics and elections (Kelleher & Lowery, 2009, 2004). Though the arguments on both sides are convincing, to date evidence remains scarce and relatively unimpressive. Most empirical studies have failed to find any significant relationship between city size and turnout (Kelleher & Lowery, 2004; Caren, 2007; Oliver, 2000, 1999; but see Hajnal et al, 2002).

Beyond city size, social scientists have identified other contextual factors that operate on residents' political attitudes and behavior. Naturally, one of the most important of these is economic status. Residents in low-income areas tend to vote less in national elections (Alex-Assensoh, 1997) then residents of more affluent areas. Cohen and Dawson (1993) find that residing in high poverty neighborhoods is negatively associated with talking to family or friends about politics, having indirect contact with public officials, attending meetings about community problems, and giving money to candidates, groups, or political parties. Conversely, a wealthy community is no panacea; Oliver (2001) finds that economic homogeneity has negative effects on political engagement and argues

[1] For example, scholars conceive of sense of place as both a multi- and uni-dimensional concept, as well as a set of correlated concepts (see Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Some refer to the over-arching concept as place attachment (see Manzo, 2003) and focus on the mostly positive affect associated it (though some scholars do note that attachments can also be negative; see Manzo, 2005, 2003). We utilize the term "sense of place" to describe the entire over-arching concept.

that this is because there is relatively less local political conflict in homogeneous cities.

When we speak of the contextual features of cities that promote sense of place, we are really speaking about the type of people who live there—homeowners, commuters, families with school-aged children, etc. Not coincidently, these are the sorts of groups that political science tends to consider stakeholders; those who are more likely to participate in local politics because they have a greater stake in the outcome (Fischel, 2009). While important, this still does treat place itself as a factor in defining or measuring sense of place. How does *place* itself matter for whether and how individuals participate in the political process?

Tuan (1975) argues that the more geographically and cognitively distinct a place is, the greater the likelihood that its residents will develop a strong sense of place (see also Lewicka, 2011). It is for this reason that cities, which tend to be significant entities with clearly defined boundaries, have typically been found to be more meaningful to their residents than neighborhoods (Hernandez, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, & Hess, 2007; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Lewicka, 2011; Tuan, 1975). However, how do we distinguish among cities? Do all cities engender the same sense of place among their residents? If not, what place-based features of cities matter and how do they shape levels of participation in local politics and elections?

Geographic and spatial features of place

Building on Tuan, we argue that the geographic location of a city and its spatial proximity to other cities help define whether it is salient and distinctive to residents. This in turn influences the extent to which a city is "bounded," which Verba and Nie (1972) define as relatively isolated places located some distance from large metropolitan areas that typically function as autonomous social, economic, and political units (see also Oliver, 2000). Verba and Nie (1972) found that residents of these bounded communities were more engaged in civic life than those who lived in places that were less bounded.

Based on the spatial and geographical location of U.S. cities, we define three basic city types. The first is central cities; the economic, social, and political centers of U.S. metropolitan areas. The second city type is suburbs, which are incorporated municipalities located within metropolitan areas. Suburbs are geographically proximate to central cities, and as such, are in the economic, social, and political orbit of central cities. The third and final city type, rural cities (often colloquially referred to as towns), are incorporated places that are not located in metropolitan areas, and thus are geographically, economically, and socially distant from both central cities and suburbs.

Rural cities are geographically distinct by virtue of their isolation. They tend not to directly border other cities, and there tends to be a clear distinction between the rural city and the less developed countryside. In many ways, rural cities embody Verba and Nie's (1972) bounded communities. Nodes of human activity tend to generate sense of place (Agnew, 1987), and in rural municipalities these are likely to take place within city limits. By virtue of their (relative) geographic isolation, residents in rural cities likely work, shop, organize their social lives, tend to government business, and perhaps attend religious services in their city of residence.

Conversely, suburbs usually lack clear boundaries (Verba & Nie, 1972). Because they are clustered around central cities within more densely populated metropolitan areas, unlike rural cities, they tend not to be bounded communities. The frontier of a suburban city is usually the frontier of *another* suburb, or perhaps the central city. This means that the cultural, social, economic, and political boundaries of suburbanites spread far beyond the official boundaries of their city of residence. While suburban residents may socialize within the confines of their local jurisdiction, they are equally (or more) likely to do so outside it.[2] The economic lives of suburbanites may be also more entangled with their metropolitan area than with the suburban municipality per se, and the politics of the local jurisdiction likely receive little media coverage since central city affairs dominate local news outlets. In sum, the lack of a clear demarcation between the suburban community, and other similar communities, makes it harder for suburban inhabitants to consider *their* city of residence as distinct, and thus meaningful.

Similar to suburban municipalities, central cities are likewise not geographically isolated. Instead, they are located near suburbs, giving residents the option of engaging in activities in lots of different places. While this may undermine city-based sense of place, as we posited it would for suburban residents, we believe the effect here is weaker. This is partly due to the fact that central city residents have less need to organize their activities and social interactions outside the city limits. After all, central cities are larger, more heterogeneous, and generally provide more numerous outlets for human activity (e.g., multiple shopping choices, places of worship, etc.) than the surrounding suburbs.[3] Since the costs (time, money) of organizing nodes of activity in satellite suburbs may not be trivial, central city residents have even less incentive to look elsewhere. We therefore expect central cities to fall in between rural cities and suburbs in terms of how their spatial and geographic features engender sense of place among residents. Relatedly, central cities, like larger cities, likely have more professional politics than their neighbors, which may mean there are more groups/individuals recruiting candidates to run for local office.

One classification that confers additional nodes of activity to a municipality, regardless of city type, is the county seat. With the exception of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and parts of Massachusetts and Virginia, every city in the United States is ensconced within the boundaries of a county (or counties), and each of these counties has a "capital"—the county seat. While being the county seat does not confer any additional powers on the municipal government, as the center of county government it is home to county administrative, judicial, law enforcement, and political offices and buildings, including the county court house and the county jail. In some states, community colleges are also located in the county seat. The presence of these government offices and activities means not only public-sector jobs, but also local establishments—from restaurants, to law offices, to janitorial services. Thus, independent of the three city types, municipalities designated as county seats will, *ceteris paribus*, engender a stronger sense of place among residents than municipalities that lack this status.

Functional features of place

The geographic and spatial features of U.S. cities are strongly related to their functional responsibilities. This provides a second means by which residents cognitively differentiate among city types and helps define how place is salient and meaningful to residents. As Burns (1994, p. 11) notes, living within one set of

[2] This should not be taken to mean that suburbanites lack strong social networks, social capital, or even sense of place. If they do have sense of place, however, it is likely to the metro area as a whole, not to the suburban city.

[3] While it is difficult to disentangle the effects of central cities from the effect of being a larger city, it should be noted that central cities do not necessarily have huge populations. New York, Houston, or Indianapolis are obvious examples of central cities, but smaller cities like New Haven, CT, population 130,000, and Kokomo, IN population 57,000 per the 2010-14 ACS (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), are also defined as central cities by the Census.

governmental units and boundaries opposed to another affects the ways residents can and do involve themselves in local politics. While functional features may be partially captured by city size, functional responsibilities of municipalities are also related to geographic and spatial features of U.S. cities. These functional features can make the city itself more (or less) important to the lives of their residents, or simply make the city more (or less) distinctive compared to its neighbors.

As municipalities, all three of our city types are classified as general-purpose governments. Broadly speaking, the authority of municipal governments is general and not limited to only one function. In practice central city municipal governments tend to provide more services than the other city types. This is partly a function of city size. However, as the economic centers of their metropolitan areas, the scope of a central city's municipal government tends to be larger, *ceteris paribus*, than similarly sized suburban or rural municipalities. With more service responsibilities come more municipal workers and also be more visibility. Residents see police patrol cars, fire trucks, parks department vehicles, and sanitation trucks with the city's name prominently displayed on them. This tells residents not only where they are, but what functions their city performs. We argue that the political and administrative functions performed within the municipality and the economic opportunities available there make a city more cognitively distinct to its residents, promoting sense of place.

Based on functional features alone, cognitive distinction is more difficult for those who live in suburbs and rural municipalities. This is due to the fact that in these places many services are provided not by municipal governments, but instead by special districts. Special districts are local governments that almost always provide a single service—from fire protection, to drainage and flood control, to parks and recreation.[4] Special districts lack the visibility of general purpose governments in part because they have geographic flexibility that other governments lack. Their boundaries typically overlap municipal boundaries making special districts amorphous, while at the same time obscuring the functional features of the municipal governments. It is often not clear who does what, and this likely contributes to a weaker sense of place.

Overall, the geographic, spatial and functional features of U.S. cities work together to make cities more (or less) salient and meaningful in the lives of their residents. Among the three city types, we expect suburbs to engender the lowest level of sense of place because they are not geographically or spatially distinct, lack many of the characteristics of bounded communities, and tend to have few functional responsibilities. Independent of city type, we also expect municipalities designated as county seats to engender a stronger sense of place among residents.

Different types of cities may promote different levels of sense of place, but how does sense of place relate to local political participation more generally? There are a variety of mechanisms by which sense of place may operate on turnout and candidacy in local elections. For example, dissatisfaction with service provision and municipal government performance is often an important factor that prompts residents to political action (Marschall, 2004; Oliver et al., 2012). Another is interest in a specific local issue, or local politics and affairs more generally (Karsada & Janowitz, 1974; Oliver, 2001). Both mechanisms are based on the assumption that residents have developed a sense of place. In other words, for residents to be interested in or dissatisfied with local government, they must have some basic awareness about the city government and the services it provides. Sense of place should therefore propel more people to vote in local elections and run for local office based on the recognition that the city *is* important to their lives, regardless of affect. Therefore, we hypothesize that both turnout and contestation in local elections will be higher in city types that engender a stronger sense of place among their residents. For the purposes of this study, this means rural and central cities (compared to suburbs) and cities designated as county seats (versus those without this designation).

Data and methods

Data for this study include returns for mayoral elections held in Indiana (2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015) and Kentucky (2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014). Every city in both states have four year terms for Mayor. While we have data for 400 of Kentucky's 419 cities,[5] in Indiana we have data only for the 121 cities that have elected mayors (Indiana towns do not have elected mayors).[6] The source of the elections data is the Indiana Secretary of State's office (2016) and the Kentucky State Board of Elections (2016). Demographic data for this study come from the 2000 U.S. Census as well as the 2008-12 and 2009-13 five-year American Community Survey (ACS) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b, 2012, 2000). For intercensal/ACS years, we rely on interpolation. For 2011 onwards, we use the values reported in the 2009-13 ACS.[7]

Models and dependent variables

We measure political participation via two dependent variables: (1) turnout and (2) whether or not the mayoral contest was unopposed (1 = yes; 0 otherwise). Turnout is measured as the percentage of the voting age population (VAP) that cast a ballot strictly for the office of mayor. It is not a measure of overall turnout on election day. This distinction is important since the vast majority of mayoral elections in Kentucky are held concurrently with midterm or presidential elections. Since census/ACS data do not tabulate the number of non-citizen residents by age, we are unable to calculate Voting Eligible Population (VEP) at the municipal level. We do however include a control variable for the percentage of the population that is non-citizen.

Fig. 1 provides a descriptive look at our dependent variables over time and by state. In Indiana, turnout declined every election cycle from 2003 to 2015—from about 29% to about 22%. Simultaneously, the rate of unopposed elections increased, from 16% in 2003 to 35% in 2015. Excluding the outlier year of 2011, which has only six elections, turnout has remained fairly stable in Kentucky, with a slight uptick in 2012, almost certainly because these elections were held at the same time as the presidential election. On the other hand, the rate of unopposed elections is disturbingly high in Kentucky; about 57% in every year except 2011.

Place-based independent variables

Our place-based measures tap the geographic, spatial and functional features of a city. We operationalize sense of place as one

[4] There were more than 37,000 special districts in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a, 2013b).

[5] Elections in these cities are missing from the Kentucky Secretary of State's website. There are also 55 Kentucky cities who only appear in the Secretary of State's data in 2014, and 38 who only appear in 2010.

[6] Because Indiana's towns are also classified according to size (less than 2000 inhabitants), very small cities are underrepresented in the Indiana data. Note that all incorporated places in Kentucky are designated as cities, regardless of size.

[7] The 2010-14 ACS was not available at the time of data collection. The unemployment variable, which was collected later in the process, does use data from that ACS. Data from the Census and ACS was prepared by Social Explorer.

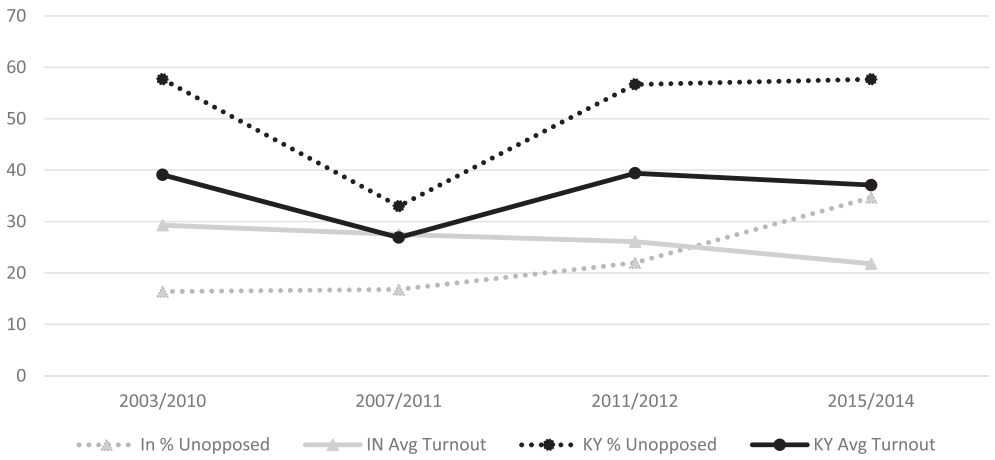

Fig. 1. Unopposed Elections and Average Turnout, by State and Year. *Note:* Years on the left side correspond to Indiana elections, while those on the right correspond to Kentucky elections.

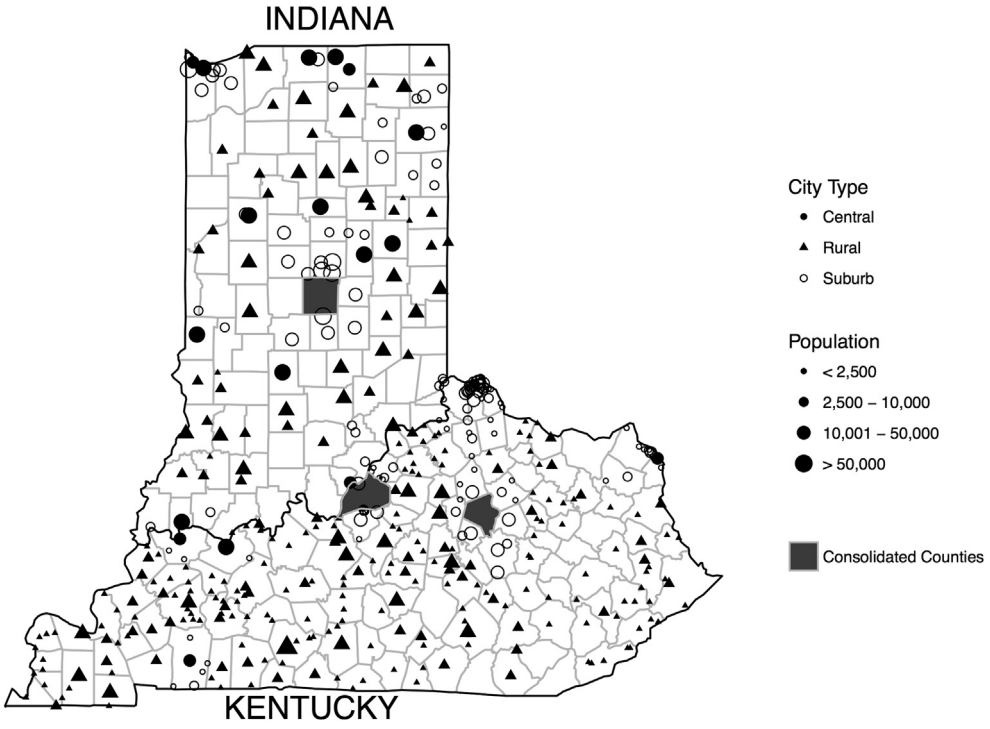

Fig. 2. Map of Indiana and Kentucky Cities, by Population and City Type. *Note:* Location of individual cities located within consolidated counties are not shown. These are: 82 cities in Jefferson County, KY; 4 in Marion County, IN; and 1 in Fayette County, KY.

of three city types (1 = yes; 0 otherwise), based on the Census definition of cities as either (1) the *Central city* of a metropolitan area, meaning that the city is the economic and social center of a dense region, (2) a *Suburban city*, which is located in a metropolitan area, but is *not* the central city, or (3) a *Rural city*, which is not located in a metropolitan area at all. We include a second place-based measure, *County seat*, that is conferred on some municipalities in the U.S. (1 = yes; 0 otherwise). We hypothesize that local elections in cities that engender a stronger sense of place (rural/central cities and county seats) among residents will have higher turnout and contestation.

We created a reference map to illustrate both the geographic location of the different city types in our two research sites and the relationship between city size and these city types in Indiana and Kentucky (Fig. 2). As the map reveals, central cities are both the largest shapes (and thus the largest in population) and surrounded by clusters of smaller, hollow dots (representing suburbs).[8] On the other hand, rural cities (triangles) tend to be scattered more evenly throughout both states, with relatively greater distances in between them and other types of cities. The map in Fig. 2 also makes clear the fact that suburban and rural municipalities look very similar when it comes to the size of their populations.

[8] Note that towns are excluded from the map of Indiana because they are not included in our analysis (since they do not have elected mayors). Note that cities within consolidated counties are not individually shown; we instead shade in the entire county. We used Tableau (https://www.tableau.com/) to create this map.

Context and sense of place

Beyond classifying cities by geographic location and functional responsibilities, our models also include city size and other contextual features of place that tap characteristics of the residents who live there. City size is measured by the total number of persons (in thousands) who live in the city. We also include a measure for the percentage of households with school-aged children. These residents are likely to have a greater stake in local politics than those without children, and are also likelier to develop a sense of place. Homeowners (measured as the percentage of owner occupied housing units) also have a greater stake in their city, in large part due to their economic interests and greater rootedness in the community compared to renters (Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2013). We also include a variable for the percentage of workers over age sixteen whose average daily commute is greater than thirty minutes. A high percentage of workers with a long commute increases may decrease sense of place due to the fact that voting age adults spend less time at home and in their communities and more time in their cars (Langdon, 1994). Finally, we include measures for unemployment (the percentage of the labor force that is unemployed) and population change (from 1990 to 2000 for 2003 elections in Indiana, and from 2000 to 2010 for all other elections)[9] and expect both to be negatively associated with political participation. Rapid population growth may undermine the connections between residents and their community (Oliver, 2001), whereas higher rates of unemployment correspond to both reduced resources for the voting-age population and a weaker sense of place compared to cities with more vibrant economies.

Attractiveness of office

The attractiveness of the mayoral office may also influence the probability that someone actually *seeks* that office. Most candidates for local office are civic minded amateurs who do not expect great material rewards or power, but this is not universally true (Oliver et al., 2012). It stands to reason that the more attractive the mayoral office is, the lower the probability of an unopposed election. That said, there is little reason to believe that the attractiveness of the office has an independent effect on turnout.

Our models of contestation include three variables that tap the attractiveness of the office. The first is whether the city uses the council-manager form of government (1 = yes; 0 otherwise).[10] The presence of a city manager reduces the power and prestige of the mayor's office and makes the office less attractive to potential candidates. We also include a variable for the presence of an incumbent on the ballot (1 = yes; 0 otherwise). While the office itself may remain attractive to potential candidates, incumbents make winning more difficult and thus running less attractive for potential candidates.[11] Civic-minded candidates typically don't want to be burdened with a contentious campaign (Oliver et al., 2012), while those who are progressively ambitious may strategically wait for an open seat. Our final measure of the attractiveness of the mayor's office is mayoral compensation. Using data from the Indiana Gateway for Government Units (2017) and the Kentucky League of Cities (2016), we created a dummy variable to measure whether compensation for the city's mayor is above the state average (1 = yes; 0 otherwise). In general, political offices with higher compensation are seen as more prestigious and thus more desirable to potential candidates.

Controls

A key control variable in our model is the state-level dummy variable (1 = Indiana, 0 = Kentucky). This controls for all state-level factors that may influence turnout and contestation in local elections. For instance, all Indiana mayoral elections are partisan, and nearly all Kentucky mayoral elections are non-partisan. Indiana local elections are also held in November of odd-numbered years, while in Kentucky nearly all are held in November of even-numbered years. The state-level dummy controls for all of these factors. Since variation in election timing and partisan elections is across states, we are unable to report the unique effect of these factors on turnout and unopposed mayoral elections. Because Indiana and Kentucky both have consolidated city-county governments (two in Kentucky, one in Indiana), we also include a control for this (1 = yes; 0 otherwise).[12] In two of these consolidations (Louisville-Jefferson County and Indianapolis-Marion County), other municipal governments in the county were left intact. Citizens of these suburban communities can vote (and run for) mayor of both their municipal government, *and* the consolidated government.

We also include a series of dummy variables to control for time. Since we have four election years for each state, we create a dummy variable for each election cycle. These four election cycles are: Time 1 (2003 IN, 2010 KY), Time 2 (2007 IN, 2011 KY), Time 3 (2011 IN, 2012 KY), and Time 4 (2015 IN, 2014 KY).[13] Finally, we include four other controls: educational attainment (measured as the percentage of the population over age twenty-five with a Bachelor's degree or higher), the median age of housing stock in that city, the percentage of the population that is non-citizen, and the percentage of the city population that is not non-Hispanic white (summary statistics for all variables is available in the Appendix).

Analysis and results

The data for our analysis involves a pooled cross-sectional time series. We specify random effects models and robust standard errors clustering on city.[14] Since cities repeat in our dataset, the observations are not independent of one another. Failure to control for this problem leads to inefficient standard errors. The random effects model essentially models the correlation between observations of the same unit in the error term. Another approach is to simply use robust standard errors (clustered on city) and estimate a standard logistic regression. We ran each of our models using this specification as well. These results, which were not substantively different from those of the random effects models, are available upon request.

We begin with our analysis of unopposed elections (Table 1).

[9] For the years between 2000 and 2010 we interpolate based on the city's population in the 2000 Census and the 2008-12 ACS.

[10] The data for Kentucky comes from the Kentucky League of Cities (2014). The data for Indiana comes from charters, city websites, and the Indiana Association of Cities and Towns (2012).

[11] Since we code incumbents based on the previous election results, we are unable to code incumbents for the first election in our dataset. Therefore, models are run with and without incumbency.

[12] Note that cities under consolidated city-county government are always coded as 0 for central city, suburban, or rural status.

[13] If we used yearly dummies instead, the baseline would be 2003, which contains only Indiana observations. It would then be difficult to say whether the 2014 dummy, which contains only Kentucky observations, is really capturing a *time* effect, or just capturing the difference between Kentucky and Indiana. We thank one of our reviewers for suggesting this alternative specification.

[14] We do not estimate fixed effects models since our time-series data has some time-invariant variables (such as our city types). The fixed effect would correlate perfectly with the time-invariant variables, causing the latter to drop out of the model.

Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, we use logistic regression. Model 1 includes the full sample of cities. From here we add compensation (Model 2) and incumbency (Model 3), which causes us to lose some observations since there are some cities where compensation data is unavailable, and since we cannot identify incumbents in the initial election of the time series.

Starting with the estimates for our sense of place measures, we find that county seats have a negative and statistically significant effect across all three models. In other words, county seat status is associated with a lower probability of an unopposed election. This finding confirms our expectation that political participation will be greater cities with a stronger sense of place. When it comes to the city type variables however, we find little evidence to support our hypothesis that the geographic features of place influence contestation. The coefficient on rural cities is consistently positive, indicating a greater probability of unopposed elections compared to suburban cities, but this effect is not statistically significant. To illustrate the substantive effects of the place-based variables, Fig. 3 reports predicted probability of an unopposed election holding all variables in Model 3, except for the place-based variables, at their means.

Table 1
Logistic regression output, unopposed models.

Y = Unopposed Election	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Rural (v Suburb)	0.375	0.436	0.502
	(0.244)	(0.287)	(0.374)
Central (v Suburb)	−0.065	0.0002	−0.524
	(0.607)	(0.610)	(0.765)
County Seat	−0.943**	−0.765**	−1.028**
	(0.230)	(0.260)	(0.350)
Percent change in population	0.009**	0.006	−0.003
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Percent with a long commute	0.011	0.008	0.009
	(0.009)	(0.013)	(0.017)
Percent homeowner	0.022**	0.027**	0.018
	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.014)
Percent households with children	−0.004	0.004	−0.025
	(0.014)	(0.019)	(0.027)
Percent unemployed	−0.056**	−0.031	−0.038
	(0.022)	(0.029)	(0.040)
Persons (in thousands)	−0.009**	−0.010*	−0.008
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Percent with a bachelors	0.011	0.024**	0.030**
	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.015)
Percent over age 65	0.036	0.046	0.003
	(0.023)	(0.030)	(0.042)
Percent who are nonwhite	−0.020	−0.026	−0.022
	(0.013)	(0.018)	(0.022)
Median year of house construction	0.0004	0.007	0.009
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.016)
Percent noncitizen	0.056*	0.044	0.021
	(0.034)	(0.038)	(0.051)
Indiana (vs Kentucky)	−1.032**	−0.865**	−1.001**
	(0.248)	(0.282)	(0.395)
City Manager	0.350	0.377	−0.105
	(0.454)	(0.523)	(0.802)
Consolidated (v suburb)	0.915**	0.492	−0.125
	(0.436)	(0.541)	(0.780)
Above average mayoral pay		−0.008	0.058
		(0.299)	(0.392)
Incumbent ran			1.090**
			(0.350)
Time 2	−0.334	−0.219	.
	(0.285)	(0.289)	.
Time 3	0.374	0.442	0.735*
	(0.272)	(0.296)	(0.379)
Time 4	0.494**	0.600**	1.057**
	(0.177)	(0.226)	(0.387)
Constant	−2.807	−17.204	−19.698
	(17.254)	(23.261)	(31.370)
N of observations	1174	837	512
N of cities	519	325	275
AIC	1304.25	924.834	572.492
BIC	1415.75	1033.62	669.973

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *p ≤ .10, **p ≤ .05 two-tailed test.

The most notable feature of Fig. 3 is that regardless of city type, the predicted probability of an unopposed election drops drastically as one moves from non-county seat status to county seat status. In each type of city, the predicted probability of an unopposed election is cut roughly in half in county seats versus non-county seats.

In terms of the socio-demographic variables, we find mixed support for our expectations. On the one hand, the coefficient for city size is negative and statistically significant in Models 1 and 2, indicating that unopposed elections are less likely in larger cities. However, the substantive effect is unimpressive; the probability of an unopposed election is only about 4 percentage points lower in a city of 20,000 residents versus a city of 1,000 residents, and the effect becomes non-significant when incumbency is introduced to the model (Model 3). The effects of homeownership and educational attainment are contrary to expectation: in cities with larger shares of college educated residents or homeowners, unopposed elections are, *ceteris paribus*, more likely. While the effect of homeowner disappears when incumbency is added to the model, the effect of education remains statistically significant.

The effects of the attractiveness of the mayor's office on contestation are also mixed. While mayoral compensation does not have a statistically significant effect on the probability of an unopposed election,[15] the presence of an incumbent is strongly and positively associated with an unopposed election. Unopposed election are about 19 percentage points more likely when an incumbent is seeking re-election, as opposed to an open seat race. This is not particularly surprising since incumbents have built-in name recognition that makes them difficult to beat. Consequently, strategic, risk-averse challengers may prefer to wait for an open seat contest.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the coefficient for the Indiana dummy variable is negative and highly statistically significant, indicating that unopposed elections are significantly less likely in Indiana cities. This is most likely due to the partisan feature of Indiana mayoral elections. We would expect that local political parties would feel bound to recruit candidates to run for mayor. After all, parties that do not nominate candidates fail at their most basic function, and lose any possibility for attaining political power.

We shift now to Table 2 and the results from the turnout models. Similar to the models of contestation, we estimate random effects models with robust standard errors (clustering on city). In this case, since the dependent variable is continuous, we employ generalized least squares (GLS) regression rather than a logistic regression. This means that the coefficients in Table 2 can be straightforwardly interpreted as the marginal effect of a one-unit change in the independent variable on turnout. As we did in Table 2, we again report separate results for models run with and without the incumbency variable. Though we do not expect incumbency to have an independent effect on turnout, we nevertheless include it as a control.

In contrast to contestation, there is strong evidence supporting our hypothesis that rural cities will have higher turnout. Compared

[15] We ran three other versions of Model 3, using different specifications of the compensation variable. In no case was this variable significant. These auxiliary regressions are available on request.

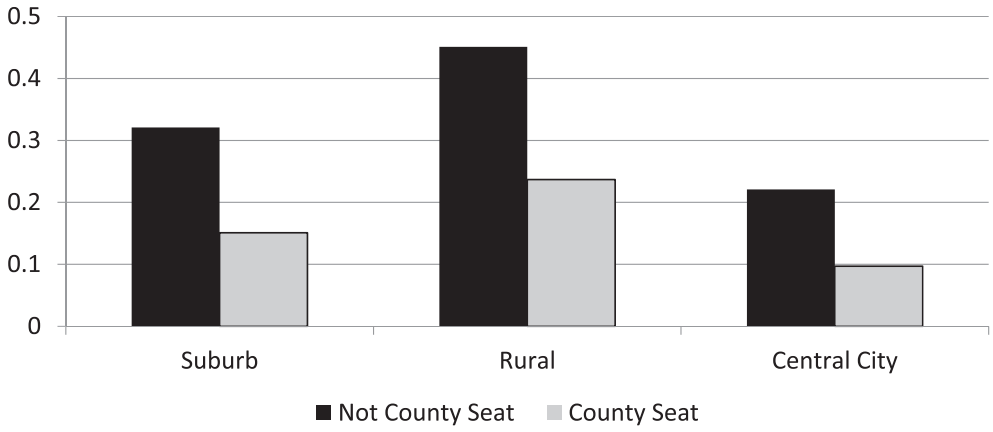

Fig. 3. Predicted probability of an unopposed election, by city type and county seat status.

Table 2
GLS output, turnout models.

Y = Turnout	*Baseline Model*	*Model w/Incumbency*
Rural (v suburb)	3.301**	2.950**
	(0.997)	(1.106)
Central (v suburb)	2.276	0.344
	(1.509)	(1.606)
County Seat	0.865	0.566
	(0.843)	(1.046)
Percent change in population	−0.107**	−0.102**
	(0.021)	(0.025)
Percent with a long commute	0.001	0.011
	(0.040)	(0.047)
Percent homeowner	0.157**	0.166**
	(0.038)	(0.045)
Percent households with children	0.180**	0.182**
	(0.052)	(0.064)
Percent unemployed	−0.170**	−0.134
	(0.081)	(0.094)
Population (in thousands)	−0.008**	−0.003
	(0.004)	(0.003)
Percent with a bachelors	0.175**	0.225**
	(0.037)	(0.045)
Percent over age 65	0.423**	0.387**
	(0.095)	(0.102)
Percent who are nonwhite	−0.157**	−0.116**
	(0.043)	(0.039)
Median year of house construction	−0.002	−0.016
	(0.033)	(0.037)
Percent noncitizen	−0.110	−0.109
	(0.115)	(0.116)
Consolidated (v suburb)	9.607**	4.955**
	(1.580)	(1.816)
Indiana (vs Kentucky)	−12.803**	−14.905**
	(0.938)	(1.021)
Unopposed election	−12.238**	−12.023**
	(0.563)	(0.765)
Incumbent Ran	.	−0.868*
	.	(0.466)
Time 2	−0.114	.
	(0.636)	.
Time 3	−0.450	−1.401**
	(0.633)	(0.583)
Time 4	−2.349**	−3.890**
	(0.399)	(0.725)
Constant	22.784	51.852
	(63.890)	(73.730)
N of observations	1125	614
N of cities	517	409
Overall r-squared	0.597	0.631

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *p ≤ .10, **p ≤ .05 two-tailed test.

to suburban municipalities, rural cities are significantly and consistently associated with higher turnout in mayoral elections (by roughly 3 percentage points). On the other hand, we find no significant effects for central cities or county seats in the turnout models.

Overall, we find relatively strong support for the socio-demographic features of place. Cities with larger shares of homeowners and households with school-aged children have higher turnout rates, *ceteris paribus.* Since local governments deal primarily with land use policy (Oliver, 2001), and households with school-aged children tend to care about the quality of local school, both homeowners and parents are natural stakeholders in local government. Other socio-demographic features of place are also important. Unsurprisingly, cities with larger shares of college educated and senior citizen populations have significantly higher turnout rates than those with smaller shares of each of these demographics. On the other hand, cities with more substantial population increases and those with larger shares of non-white residents have lower turnout rates for their mayoral elections.

We also find that unopposed elections are significantly and negatively associated with turnout. Across both models, unopposed elections have a turnout rate about 12 percentage points lower than contested elections, *ceteris paribus.* In addition, cities operating under consolidated government have significantly higher turnout compared to cities that are not under consolidation. Since most of the consolidated governments in our sample are under *partial* consolidation, which means that only the central city's government was abolished and merged with the county (not those of the suburban cities in that county), residents of these cities are likely voting for the high profile mayoral races in the consolidated government at the same time as the low-profile mayoral election in their own city of residence. The presence of an incumbent on the ballot has a statistically significant, but substantively unimpressive, effect on turnout; a decline of about 0.9%. Finally, results in Table 2 indicate that Indiana cities have a turnout rate about 13–15 percentage points lower than Kentucky cities. We believe this effect is captures off-cycle elections (characteristic of all Indiana cities), which is perhaps the most significant predictor of low turnout in local elections (Anzia, 2012, 2013; Hajnal et al., 2002).

Conclusions and implications

Building on the work of political scientists and the multi-disciplinary literature on sense of place, this study sought to

more systematically measure and test the effects of "place" on participation in local government. In particular, our theoretical framework developed an explanation for how the geographic, spatial and functional features of cities influence not only turnout in local elections, but also contestation. While findings from this study provide further support for the socio-demographic features of place, our empirical results indicate that *place* itself influences turnout and contestation, independently of the features of its inhabitants. In particular, we find that rural cities have significantly higher turnout rates than suburban cities, and that cities designated as county seats are significantly less likely to have uncontested mayoral elections, *ceteris paribus.*

First, we argue that rural cities, by virtue of their relative isolation (Verba & Nie, 1972), engender a stronger sense of place than suburban cities, which are often lost in the greater metropolitan sprawl. While most local politics scholars continue to focus on major U.S. cities (but see Oliver et al., 2012; Oliver, 2001), rural cities are the most common city type, not just in Indiana and Kentucky, but also in the U.S. more generally. Given the nature of electoral geography and the possibility that the higher levels of turnout we uncovered in our rural municipalities might be generalizable at the state and federal level, more attention to electoral processes and outcomes in rural areas is warranted. To be sure, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 has prompted more interest in both the urban-rural divide in American politics and the meaning and implications of rural political consciousness.

Second, we believe that while voting certainly matters, so too does the presence of candidates. Residents' willingness to actually run for and hold local office is a critical, yet largely overlooked indicator of local democracy. We find that in county seats, mayoral elections are more likely to be contested, meaning that more candidates are seeking the mayor's office in these places. As the 'capital' of the county, these cities are the center of county government and all of the associated activities, establishments, and jobs that come with this status. We argue that the greater concentration of political and economic activity in county seats not only contributes to a stronger sense of place, but also makes the office of mayor more attractive, and thus more desirable to potential candidates.

Since our study is based on elections in only two states, additional empirical work is necessary to confirm whether these findings can be generalized beyond Indiana and Kentucky. Expanding the scope of this research would also give researchers better insights about how institutional arrangements (such as election timing and partisan elections) shape local participation, whether political rules and institutions matter in different ways depending on location, and whether 'place' might mediate these effects across space and time. In addition, since the present study relied on aggregate-level data it was unable to investigate how more affective conceptions of place (such as attachment, values or norms) might also shape participation in local political elections. We believe these are all fruitful lines of future inquiry. Indeed, given that local governments represent 99% of all governments in the U.S., more systematic studies of local elections, whether based on aggregate- or individual-level data, are certainly warranted. Such studies could shed invaluable empirical light on some of the most pressing questions about the health of democracy in the United States.

Declaration of interest

None.

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Appendix Table 1. Summary statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Unopposed	1181	.434	.495	0	1
Turnout	1132	33.6	13.5	2.3	97
Rural City	1181	.517	.499	0	1
Suburban City	1181	.285	.451	0	1
Central City	1181	.052	.222	0	1
County Seat	1181	.390	.488	0	1
Change in Population	1181	6.4	23.7	−85.5	231.3
Commute	1181	27.3	11.5	3.1	85.2
Homeownership	1181	67.0	14.7	14.6	100
Households with children	1181	32.4	7.6	4.1	62.3
Unemployment	1181	9.5	4.7	0	28.2
Population (1000s)	1181	15.4	64.6	.037	912.2
Educational Attainment	1181	20.3	17.7	0	90.2
Percent over age 65	1181	16.0	5.3	.525	44.2
Nonwhite Population	1181	11.4	12.2	0	90.8
Median Year of House Construction	1174	1965.8	12.5	1939	2002
Percent Non-Citizen	1181	1.9	3.1	0	28.7
Indiana	1181	.401	.490	0	1
Consolidated City	1181	.144	.352	0	1
City Manager	1181	.045	.208	0	1
Incumbency	660	.695	.460	0	1
Mayoral Compensation (Raw)	837	38370.1	33834.9	0	142095.7

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