There's More than One Way to Party: Progressive Politics and Representation in Nonpartisan San Francisco*

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Abstract

Despite the significance of political parties for American politics, most governments in the United States are formally nonpartisan. Prominent theories suggest that this absence of parties will impede the development of stable legislative coalitions and hinder democratic accountability. In contrast to this perspective, I argue that when coalitions of policy demanders solve the information and coordination problems that arise without formal party institutions, nonpartisan politics will resemble two-party democracy. To explore this argument, I first examine politics in nonpartisan San Francisco, documenting the emergence and consolidation of distinct progressive and moderate legislative coalitions and the presence of a robust electoral connection between voters and their representatives. Second, using data from 120 additional municipal councils, I demonstrate that this behavior is not unique to San Francisco. Collectively, my findings suggest that organized interests can overcome the challenge of nonpartisan government, creating a political environment in the process that facilitates high-quality representation.

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1 Introduction

In 1942, E.E. Schattschneider famously argued that the "political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties." Over 75 years later, political parties remain a central and significant feature of American politics, yet democracy today is hardly unthinkable in their absence. Indeed, of the over 90,000 governments across the United States, approximately 75 percent are formally nonpartisan (Svara 2003).[1] Prominent theories of political parties suggest that this lack of an institutionalized party system will impede the development of stable legislative coalitions, resulting in disorganized and unpredictable patterns of elite behavior (Welch and Carlson 1973; Jenkins 1999; Wright and Schaffner 2002). This instability is important because it increases the barriers to democratic accountability and has the potential to diminish the quality of representation (Davidson and Fraga 1988; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Schaffner and Streb 2002; Wright 2008).

However, while institutionalized parties have long been thought to be vital to counteracting this process, whether they are the only mechanism to prevent legislative factionalism and facilitate responsible government is less clear. On the one hand, decades of scholarship has documented the central and seemingly unique role that parties play in organizing political conflict and managing the behavior of their members (APSA 1950; Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 2005). On the other hand, the vast majority of nonpartisan governments operate at the local level, and scholars of local politics have documented an array of groups and constituencies that have distinct policy preferences and a substantial incentive to organize within politics, just like political parties do (Adrian 1959; Molotch 1976; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1986; Hajnal and Trounstine 2014; Anzia 2015). Yet, empirical analyses of legislative behavior within nonpartisan governments have been limited almost entirely to three cases at the state and national levels, making it difficult to evaluate whether these incentives for long-term cooperation can ever translate into the type of organized elite behavior and

[1] Although political parties are sometimes still active in these places, they are far less common (Anzia and Meeks 2016) and are likely to lack the same influence as their counterparts in formally partisan systems.

responsive representation that scholars have found in formally partisan governments and, if so, how.[2]

In this paper, I reconsider the bounds of legislative behavior and representation within nonpartisan governments. In doing so, I argue that political parties—and the formal institutions that come with them—are simply one possible means to overcome the collective action problem. In turn, when coalitions of diverse interests find alternative methods to solve the information and coordination problems that arise without formal party institutions, elite behavior and representation will resemble the highly-organized, democratically-accountable politics that scholars have come to expect from competitive partisan systems.

To explore this argument I examine politics within the nonpartisan city of San Francisco, California.[3] With a long history of progressive activism in the city and both popular and media accounts of a significant and growing progressive/moderate divide (DeLeon 1992; Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015), San Francisco represents an ideal test case for identifying the bounds of nonpartisan legislative cooperation and representation. To conduct my analysis I pair qualitative evidence on the behavior of politicians, interest groups, and activists in the city with a unique collection of political records that spans nearly 50 years. These records include roll call votes from the San Francisco Board of Supervisors from 1970 to 2017, coverage of the Board of Supervisor's activities by the San Francisco Chronicle from 1985 to 2018, and measures designed to capture the relative progressivism of electoral districts in the city during specific time periods from 2000 to 2014 (DeLeon and Latterman 2004, 2006; Latterman 2011, 2015). In addition, to put my findings from San Francisco in context, I supplement these records with roll call votes for a set of 120 additional nonpartisan cities and counties between 2012 and 2017. This cross-sectional data is unprecedented in scope for a study of nonpartisan legislatures and provides a unique view of patterns of elite

[2]The three nonpartisan cases include the Nebraska unicameral state legislature, the Minnesota state legislature from 1913 to 1973, and the Confederate Congress. This exclusive state and national focus stems largely from the considerable challenges to gathering data on the local political process (Trounstine 2009)

[3]Technically, San Francisco is a a consolidated city-county, but for simplicity, I refer to it primarily as a city throughout this paper.

behavior across nonpartisan contexts.

Drawing on this data, I first show that legislative voting behavior in San Francisco is explained primarily by a single spatial dimension, meaning votes are highly predictable and voting coalitions are generally stable across issues. This evidence of low-dimensionality is present across a range of roll call scaling metrics and appears to be as strong as in the partisan chambers of Congress. Importantly, however, the factions that emerge on each side of this single dimension are different than those found in other American legislatures, aligning strongly with the progressive/moderate description that fills popular accounts of politics in the city. This divide dates back to at least the 1980s but has strengthened significantly over time, such that differences between progressives and moderates now explain nearly the full scope of issues facing the chamber. Notably, the increasing significance of this cleavage has occurred gradually over time, corresponding with both qualitative accounts of incremental progressive institutionalization and the growing visibility of the progressive brand in local news coverage. These patterns are important because they demonstrate the presence of precisely the type of institutional solutions to the collective action problem that scholars have argued facilitate organized behavior within partisan governments, suggesting that coalitions of policy demanders can develop and implement effective alternatives to formal party institutions.

Second, I show that the presence of these stable legislative coalitions is not without consequence. Specifically, between 2000 and 2017, when the city elected supervisors by district, I document a strong correlation between the relative progressivism of each district and the voting behavior of their supervisor. In other words, thanks to the unique brand that each coalition has forged, voters appear to be cognizant of the differences in candidate alignment and are, as a result, receiving precisely the type of representation that they are voting for. This alignment between districts and representatives demonstrates that the development and institutionalization of strong, differentiated political coalitions can yield seemingly high-quality democratic outcomes, regardless of whether those coalitions are formally identified

on the ballot.

Collectively, this evidence suggests that politics in San Francisco is entirely unlike the nonpartisan legislatures considered in previous analyses. This is important for understanding politics in San Francisco, of course, but it also raises the question: do other nonpartisan cities and counties resemble this seemingly unique context? In the final section, I compare the patterns of behavior observed in San Francisco to a larger set of local governments, showing that highly-organized, low-dimensional legislative behavior is not isolated to this single example. These cross-sectional findings are important because they suggest that a substantial number of local governments possess precisely the type of cohesive legislative coalitions that scholars have argued are a necessary condition for democratic accountability and responsible governance. With the increasing nationalization of local politics (Hopkins 2018), moreover, this behavior is only likely to become more common in the future, suggesting that San Francisco may very well be a precursor of the type of highly-organized, ideological nonpartisan local governance to come.

2 Nonpartisan Elections and the Organization of Legislative Conflict

To understand how nonpartisan government influences legislative behavior and representation, it is necessary to start with the research on political parties. In broad terms, parties are simply coalitions of politicians and organized interests working together to win office and secure favorable policy (Aldrich 1995; Bawn et al. 2012; Downs 1957). Nothing about this definition requires formal party institutions to be embedded within government; however, in practice,these institutions have come to be viewed as a necessary condition for solidifying a party coalition. This view stems from the fact that—in order to accomplish their goals—parties must remain cohesive. Indeed, there is an ever-present collective action problem for parties, such that members will try deviate from the party line when it suits their individ-

ual interests, even though doing so weakens the party brand and makes it more difficult to pass majority-favored policy (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991). To solve this collective action problem, parties institutionalize themselves within the political system, developing formal tools and processes that allow them to reward good behavior and punish intraparty defection (Harmel and Hamm 1986; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005).

In practice, these efforts by parties to organize conflict have typically been successful, as evidenced by the highly-organized, low-dimensional patterns of behavior found across partisan legislatures in the United States (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Shor and McCarty 2011). In contrast, in nonpartisan governments, where many of the tools that parties use to solve the collective action problem are either formally prohibited or less prone to partisan manipulation, scholars have observed precisely the opposite: disorganized, chaotic, and factional patterns of legislative voting, with minimal evidence of long-term cooperation among legislators (Welch and Carlson 1973; Jenkins 1999; Wright and Schaffner 2002).

What explains the differences in behavior across partisan and nonpartisan governments? If party institutions are indeed central to solving the collective action problem, then their absence in nonpartisan governments is likely to blame. Notable among these omissions in nonpartisan contexts are party primaries and the use of party labels on the ballot, each of which solves a key problem for parties. Primaries, for example, provide a mechanism through which parties can weed out candidates that are poorly aligned with their platform and goals (Snyder and Ting 2002; Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2008). This screening process is valuable for parties in that it allows them to limit the heterogeneity of preferences in their member base and thereby decrease the odds of internal dissension down the line. Ballot labels, in contrast, differentiate the candidates and convey information to voters (Aldrich 1995; Schaffner and Streb 2002). As a result, when party labels are absent, voters rely more on incumbency and other heuristics—if they even vote at all (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Kirkland and Coppock 2017)—which makes it easier for legislators to defect from the party because their fates are ultimately less tied to its electoral brand.

Fundamentally, however, each of these institutional mechanisms is only a means to an end: primaries reduce the need to constrain out-of-step members after the election by decreasing the likelihood that they win office; ballot labels signal a candidate's beliefs and values, thereby aiding them in reelection and connecting them directly to the coalition brand. Yet, despite the absence of these institutional mechanisms in nonpartisan governments, policymaking requires a majority, and so the incentive for long-term cooperation within these chambers will certainly remain (Bawn 1999). In turn, if coalitions of diverse interests hope to be successful in fostering long-term cooperation, then they need to find new ways to overcome the specific information and selection problems that arise without primaries and ballot labels. When they do, cohesive, party-like legislative behavior is likely to follow.

Recent scholarship, which largely conceives of parties as coalitions of policy-demanding interest groups and activists suggests that the candidate selection problem is indeed solvable within nonpartisan contexts, particularly through the use of targeted campaign support (Bawn et al. 2012; Masket 2011; Hassell 2015). For example, Masket and Shor (2015) show that in recent terms of the nonpartisan Nebraska state legislature, state party organizations leveraged the adoption of term limits to develop funding networks that pushed politics to be more organized along party lines. Similarly, Masket (2016) finds that in the Minnesota state legislature, which was nonpartisan until the mid-1970s, there was a large degree of partisanship in roll-call voting on a set of key issues even before the state reinstituted partisan elections, suggesting that ideological caucuses in the legislature were able to fill the organizational void absent parties. These state-level studies align with recent evidence from the local level, which shows legislative organization and partisan behavior within local councils (Burnett 2017; Santucci 2018). Yet, despite this recent evidence of increasing partisan organization within nonpartisan governments, none of these studies finds the type of all-encompassing, one-dimensional legislative conflict that is typical of Congress, suggesting that these efforts may only partially solve the collective action problem.

Indeed, even if nonpartisan coalitions can organize in support of a favored candidate,

there remains an information problem: specifically, voters need to know which candidates are part of the coalition and what the coalition's values are so that candidates can leverage their affiliation with the group for electoral gain. This problem has the potential to influence long-term cooperation because if a coalitions's brand has little meaning to voters then legislators will still have an incentive to defect from the group when it suits their individual interests. Indeed, from the view of an office-seeking politician, there is no reason to sacrifice to protect something that has minimal electoral value. Importantly, however, there is evidence that interest groups can successfully solve this information problem and mobilize voters to achieve specific goals (Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Moe 2005; Anzia 2011). This process can be facilitated by a strong local media environment (Snyder and Stromberg 2010; Lyons, Jaeger, and Wolak 2013; Hopkins and Pettingill 2018) and a determined attempt by a party or coalition to establish a clear, meaningful brand. And in fact, local politics is rife with potential examples of groups that have tried to do this, whether explicitly as slates jointly pursuing elected office (Adrian 1959; Lee 1960; Davidson and Fraga 1988) or implicitly as 'regimes' seeking the capacity to govern (Stone 1989), yet we possess remarkably little evidence about whether these attempts to organize candidates and inform voters can facilitate the same type of long-term cooperation among elites within the legislature as we see from parties.

2.1 The Electoral Connection in Nonpartisan Governments

If coalitions of diverse interests can indeed solve the information and coordination problems described in the previous section, legislative behavior should become more organized and one-dimensional, in the same way that is typical of partisan governments. This organization is important because a substantial body of research suggests that it creates the opportunity for electoral accountability and, in the process, improves the quality of representation (Wright and Schaffner 2002; Simpson 2001; Key 1949). However, if coalitions are to effectively organize within nonpartisan governments, 'policy demanders' will play a key role,

which has the potential to subvert this process. As Bawn et al. (2012) explain: "parties dominated by interest groups and activists are less responsive to voter preferences, even to the point of taking advantage of lapses in voter attention to politics" (571). This perspective aligns with the evidence presented by Wright and Schaffner (2002), which suggests that nonpartisan politics severs the electoral connection between voters and their representatives.

Yet, recent work by Caughey (2018) on the one-party, functionally nonpartisan Solid South suggests that there may be reason for optimism. Specifically, Caughey (2018) shows that even though the South had neither party competition nor meaningful party labels on the ballot, voters were nonetheless able to both differentiate among the factions within the Democratic Party and use the party's primaries to effectively select among them. Part of the reason this was possible is that media coverage of primary campaigns focused heavily on candidates' issue positions, providing an opportunity for members of each faction to inform voters of their unique views and values.

The implications of these findings for representation within nonpartisan governments are twofold: first, representation and accountability are possible despite the lack of labels on the ballot as long as voters have sufficient information to distinguish among the candidates. Second, the media can play an important role in facilitating this process, providing clear information that voters would not be able to gather on their own. As a result, when attempting to solve the information problem, coalitions of policy demanders may inadvertently create a system that facilitates democratic accountability, thereby preventing politicians from drifting too far away from the preferences of their broader constituency.

Ultimately, the logic of nonpartisan governance discussed in this section suggests that if diverse interests put in sustained effort to develop a coalition and inform voters of their distinct brand, then elite behavior and representation should look akin to what scholars have observed within partisan governments. In the rest of this paper, I test this proposition in one particular nonpartisan context: the city of San Francisco, California.

3 Background: Progressive Politics in San Francisco

With approximately 70,000 nonpartisan governments across the country, why study the government of San Francisco specifically? The primary reason to do so is that San Francisco represents a most-likely case for identifying highly-organized legislative behavior and a strong electoral connection in the absence of formal parties. Given that the literature is devoid of an example satisfying both these criteria, examining a most-likely case of this kind allows me to test the bounds of existing theory. Indeed, given the favorable conditions, if politics in San Francisco is relatively disorganized and the quality of representation is poor, then it would cast significant doubt on the prediction that coalitions of policy demanders can overcome the hurdles that come with nonpartisan government.

What makes San Francisco a high-quality test case for a study of legislative behavior and representation? There are two main factors. First, the Board of Supervisors, the government's primary legislative body, is situated within a city and county that both scholarly and media accounts have identified as having a unique ideological divide, with progressives on one side of the continuum and moderates on the other. What is especially notable about this ideological divide is that it exists within an area that is overwhelmingly Democratic, and yet it does not appear to simply be an extension of the liberal end of the liberal-conservative spectrum. As DeLeon (1992) explains, the progressive ideology in San Francisco is comprised of three different components: liberalism, environmentalism, and populism. Of course, given the connection to liberalism, when progressives and moderates disagree, it often aligns with national politics. Yet, this is not always the case. Consider, for example, the issue of land use and development. As former progressive Mayor Art Agnos explained, "The people of San Francisco vote for liberal politicians, but when it comes to protecting the beauty of their city, they are hard-line conservatives."[4] Indeed, for decades, San Francisco progressives have sought to limit the amount of growth in the city for precisely this reason, even as housing prices have skyrocketed. The underlying argument is functionally one of protecting existing

[4]As quoted in DeLeon (1992, 97).

residents and preserving the status quo. Yet, with both cost-of-living and local inequality rising, it is easy to imagine an alternative system in which progressives would be the ones to push for more housing development to lower rents and ease the burden on middle- and low-income residents. That this is not the case highlights the unique role of local issues in the formation of these coalitions.

Importantly, the interest groups connected to these coalitions were not necessarily natural allies; rather, over time and with significant effort, activists and entrenched interests solidified them into broad-based coalitions with unique agendas (DeLeon 1992). Indeed, whereas early work argued that progressivism was central to understanding patterns of protest and voting in elections, recent work has documented that the progressive-moderate divide actually maps onto elite preferences across a range of issues (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015). Of course, it is important to remember that—as Wright and Schaffner (2002) show in the context of Nebraska's nonpartisan legislature—ideologically coherent preferences at the elite level are not necessarily sufficient by themselves to create sustained legislative coalitions or facilitate representation. Elites may very well have an incentive to campaign as progressives or moderates but then ultimately behave as free-agents once on the Board of Supervisors, thus representing only a narrow subset of their constituency. Still, the expansion of progressive influence, the history of organizing by progressive groups within the city, and the fact that the moderate coalition grew out of the city's existing power base imply that each faction likely has sufficient organizational capacity to consolidate a legislative coalition, inform voters of their distinct views and values, and mobilize them in support of preferred candidates.

Second, San Francisco has long been a leader in local policy, tackling issues for many years that have typically been associated primarily with higher levels of government. For example, San Francisco has passed legislation related to immigration, gay marriage, and climate change, among others, during the period in study. This expansion in the scope of local policy in San Francisco is particularly notable given the broader shift towards more

partisan local government across the country in recent years (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Einstein and Kogan 2015; Einstein and Glick 2016; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016), along with both the increasingly nationalized context within which local governments are situated (Hopkins 2018) and the expansion of issues that are being tackled by cities and counties at large (Riverstone-Newell 2012). Thus, even if San Francisco is an isolated case of a highly organized, responsible nonpartisan government, the fact that other cities and counties are increasingly tackling similar issues suggests that the organization of politics there may be a good barometer for what to expect from broader trends in local government.

4 Data and Measurement

To evaluate the behavior of legislators in San Francisco and assess the quality of local representation, I first gather data on all recorded roll call votes from the Board of Supervisors from 1970 to 2017. This time period aligns roughly with the start of the progressive movement's rise and its shift in focus towards power in government after years of local activism by individual groups. The records from the first half of this period, 1970 to 1998, come from digitized versions of the chamber's journal of record. For the more recent years, 1999 onward, I gather the data directly from the city's online legislative management platform.[5]

I analyze these roll call votes in two ways: first, I use W-Nominate to scale the votes and generate ideal points in one-dimension for all legislators in each two-year term across the full range of the data (Poole and Rosenthal 1997).[6] I also extract measures of model fit to evaluate how well a one-dimensional spatial model explains patterns of voting behavior in each term. Second, I fit a dynamic, one-dimensional spatial model to the full set of legislative records using the method developed by Martin and Quinn (2002).[7] Unlike the term-specific

[5]These records can be accessed from at `https://sfbos.org/1999-1906` and `https://sfgov.legistar.com/`, respectively.

[6]In Appendix B, I show that the high level of model fit is not a function of the scaling method, with no difference in the results if I use Optimal Classification instead (Poole 2000).

[7]I use the implementation of the model in the R package MCMCpack. The estimation is conducted via a Markov Chain Monte Carlo sampler. I run the model for 100,000 iterations total, with the initial 50,000

measures, the dynamic model allows for comparisons of legislator ideal points over time and, in turn, makes it possible to evaluate how stable the cleavages in the chamber are from term to term.

In addition to roll call votes, I also gather data on every article in the San Francisco Chronicle that mentions the Board of Supervisors from 1985 to 2017, and I identify whether or not each article discusses board politics in terms of the progressive and moderate divide. To do so, I search the NewsLibrary database (`www.newslibrary.com`), using a data gathering method akin to Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010). Specifically, I first search for all Chronicle articles that contain the phrase 'Board of Supervisors.' Next, I conduct the same search, but I subset the data to include only articles that also use the term 'progressive.'[8] Thus, by cross-comparing the lists of articles, I am able to generate a longitudinal measure of the share of articles about the Board of Supervisors that use the term 'progressive' over time. Though simple, the logic of using patterns of media coverage to document the potential growth of the progressive coalition in this manner follows from recent work that has used similar methods to measure the relative power of political actors (Ban et al. 2018). Indeed, if the salience and power of the progressive coalition is growing over this time period, then we would expect the San Francisco Chronicle to reflect this increasing importance in its coverage of local politics.

Finally, I supplement my original data collections with measures of the relative progressivism of voters in each council district over five multi-year blocks beginning in 2000 (DeLeon and Latterman 2004, 2006; Latterman 2011, 2015). These 'Progressive Voter Indexes' were constructed by Richard DeLeon and David Latterman using factor analysis on a set of local ballot initiatives. The index covering 2000 to 2002, for example, uses 22 unique initiatives from five distinct elections, covering issues like public financing of elections, medical marijuana, and affordable housing bonds (DeLeon and Latterman 2004). After estimating a model for each period, the authors standardize and combine the first two factor loadings,

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as burn-in.

[8]Following Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010), I omit all articles that include the following terms in either the headline or author categories: 'editor', 'editorial', 'associated press', 'ap', 'opinion', 'op-ed', 'letter', or 'commentary'.

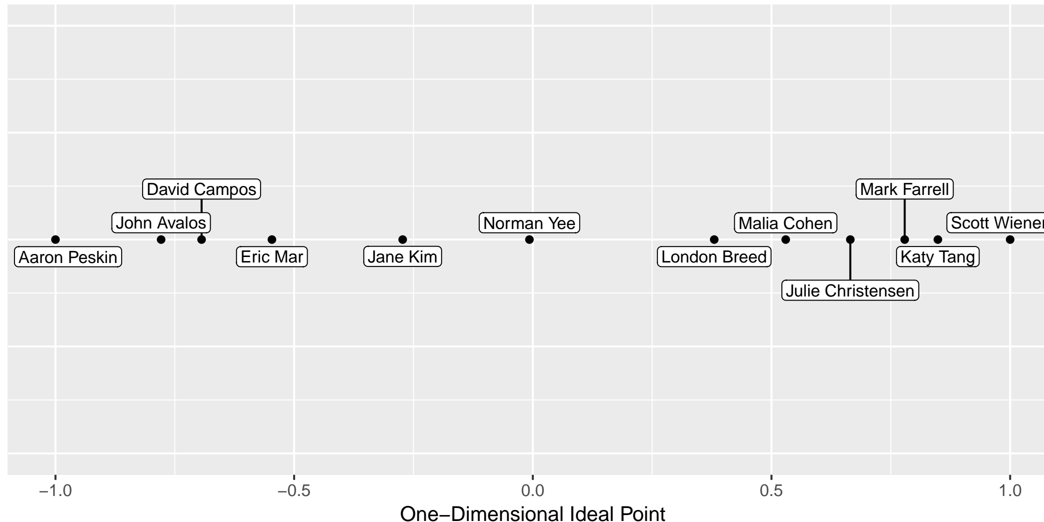
before providing evidence that the resulting measures correspond with progressive voting across the city. Interestingly, when comparing the indexes across the full time period, 2000 to 2014, patterns of progressive voting have remained relatively stable, with the cross-index correlations typically above .80 (Latterman 2015). For all analyses, I aggregate these indexes to the district level using the mean across all precincts within that district.

5 Legislative Behavior in San Francisco, 1970 to 2016

How organized are patterns of voting in the San Francisco Board of Supervisors? Existing evidence on nonpartisan government suggests that legislative behavior should be relatively disorganized despite the popular conception of politics as a battle between progressives and moderates. Empirically, this should result in a one-dimensional spatial model fitting the data poorly because coalitions should be relatively unstable across issues. Yet, as I have argued, there is good reason to believe that this might not be the case in San Francisco. In turn, I begin by first assessing the dimensionality of legislative voting in the most recent full term in my data, 2015 to 2016, before expanding the analysis to include all complete terms since 1970.

Figure 1 depicts ideal points from the 2015–2016 Board of Supervisors term. By itself, this figure tells us which members of the board tend to vote together, with those depicted closer in space having more similar voting records. However, analyzing these ideal points alone is insufficient to fully understand patterns of legislative organization. Indeed, though this dimension is estimated as being the most important for the board's politics, if it only explains a small share of the variance in votes, then there is little reason to believe that political coalitions in the city are especially stable. Instead, we need to consider the fit of the spatial model. To do so, I use four different fit statistics: the aggregate proportional reduction in error (APRE), the share of the variance explained by the first dimension, the percent of votes correctly classified, and the percent of nay votes correctly classified. The

Figure 1: One-Dimensional Ideal Points for 2015–2016 Board of Supervisors Term



higher each of these values is on a scale between 0 and 1, the better the spatial model explains patterns of voting. In particular, the first measure, the APRE, is designed to benchmark the model against a baseline level of explanatory power. Specifically, it compares the relative reduction in misclassified votes when using the estimated model compared to a null model where all legislators are assumed to vote with the majority.[9]

The first row of Table 1 shows each of these statistics for the 2015–2016 term. Across all four measures, we see that patterns of voting in the Board of Supervisors during this time period are highly predictable. Specifically, the model explains around 87 percent of the variance and classifies votes correctly at a rate of 93 percent (with nay vote classification at 92 percent). Looking at the APRE, we see that the model reduces classification errors relative to a null model where all legislators are assumed to vote with the majority by 75 percent. The second row of Table 1 shows similar metrics for the 114th United States Senate

[9]The APRE is calculated as:

$$\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{q}(\text{MinorityVotes} - \text{ClassificationErrors})_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{q}\text{MinorityVotes}_i}$$

where MinorityVotes_i is the number of legislators voting in the minority for vote i and $\text{ClassificationErrors}_i$ is the number of misclassified votes from the optimal classification model for vote i (Armstrong II et al. 2014).

Table 1: Fit Statistics from One-Dimensional Spatial Model for Two Chambers

Chamber	APRE	Percent of Votes Correctly Classified	Percent of Nay Votes Correctly Classified	Percent of Variance Explained
San Francisco Board of Supervisors 2015–2016	.75	.93	.92	.87
United States Senate 2015–2016	.76	.92	.91	.93

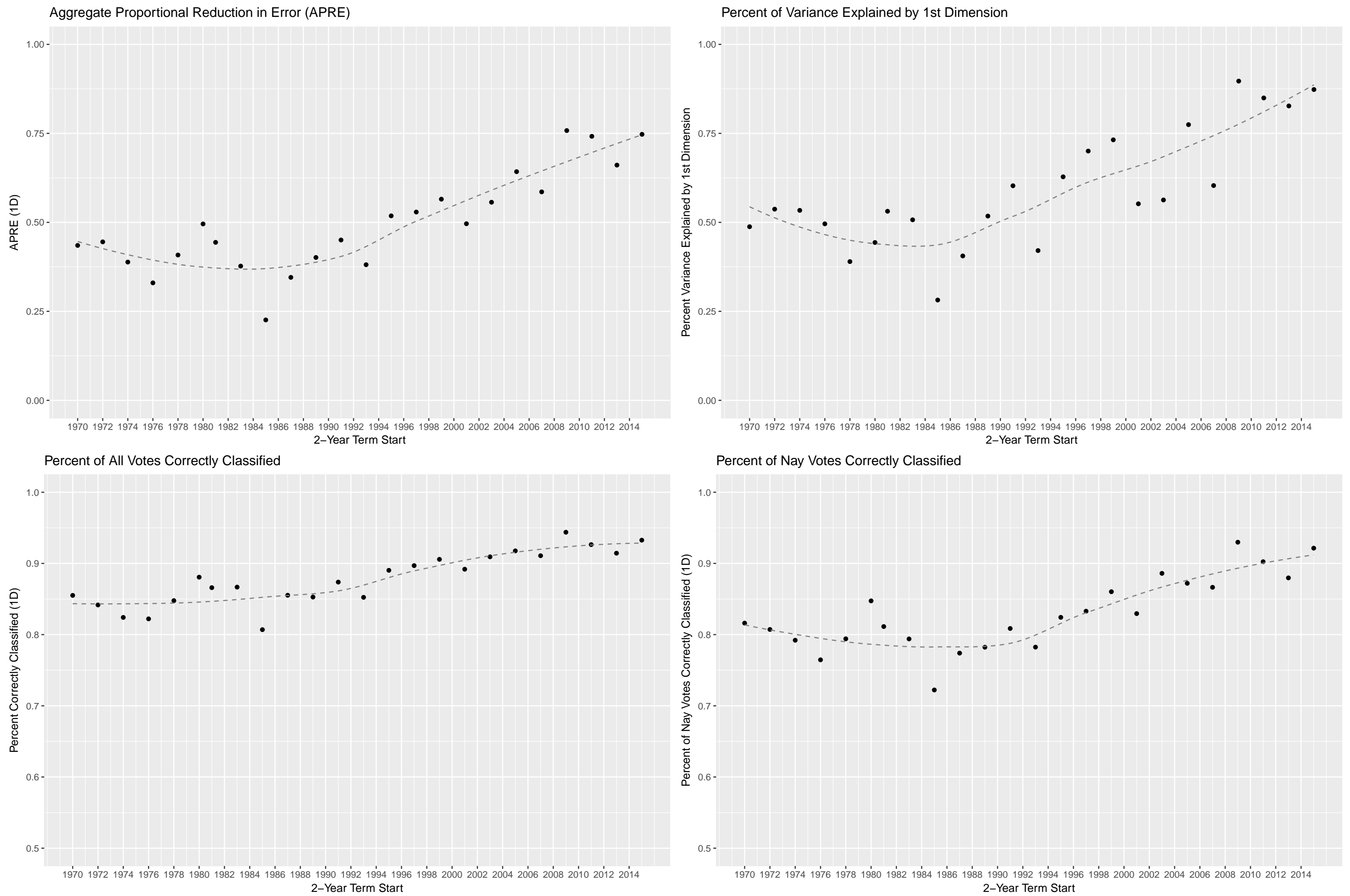
(2015–2016).[10] Across all measures, the model fits as well in San Francisco as it does in Congress. Part of the reason for the high level of fit in San Francisco may be the chamber size—with only eleven members, voting patterns are simply easier to explain in San Francisco than in Congress. Still, as I show in the final empirical section, this is not necessarily true of all small chambers, and San Francisco is a significantly more organized environment than existing theory would predict.

Is the most recent Board of Supervisors term an anomaly? Or has legislative politics in San Francisco always been this organized? Figure 2 depicts the same four measures of fit as shown in Table 1 but for each term from 1970 onward. There are three important points about the trends shown in Figure 2. First, San Francisco has been a relatively organized political environment throughout most of the time series. Indeed, even in the term with the poorest fit across all years, 1985–1986, the spatial model still classifies 80 percent of the votes correctly. it is worth noting, however, that the gain over a null model (the APRE) is relatively small early on compared to subsequent terms, with the model reducing classification errors by only 25 percentage points in the 1985–1986 term.

Second, although the trend is flat through the initial two decades, starting in the early 1990s, the fit of the spatial model begins to increase incrementally over time, resulting in an approximately 35 percentage point increase in both APRE and variance explained by 2016. This upward trend suggests that the relative organization and stability of legislative activity in the chamber is growing over time, which is precisely what we would expect if a

[10]The Senate votes come from the Voteview database (Lewis et al. 2018).

Figure 2: Fit Statistics from One-Dimensional Spatial Model for All Terms, 1970–2016



pair of coalitions were competing with one another and institutionalizing themselves within the political system during this period.

Third, there is no evidence that an institutional change in election rules facilitated the changes in legislative behavior that begin in the 1990s. San Francisco shifted back and forth between at-large and district elections during this time period, using district elections in the 1977 and 1979 elections, along with all elections from 2000 onward. The city also implemented instant runoff (or ranked choice) voting in 2004. Yet, the inflection in the trend occurs multiple terms before these rule changes in the early 2000s. Of course, a different institutional change may still underlie the differences in behavior from the mid-1990s onward, but it appears unlikely that either of these two major reforms were responsible.

5.1 The Increasing Organizational Capacity of the Progressive Coalition

The timing of the increase in the explanatory power of the spatial model documented in Figure 2 aligns strongly with scholarly accounts of San Francisco politics over this time period. As DeLeon (1992) explains, in 1987, in the wake of a series of battles over progressive initiatives that sought to slow the city's rate of development, San Francisco's ruling moderate regime began to crumble and progressive Art Agnos was able to win election as mayor with a progressive majority on the board in tow. While not the first progressive mayor, what is notable about the Agnos campaign is that it was, for the first time, able to unite groups affiliated with all facets of the progressive movement—liberalism, environmentalism, and populism. Moreover, once in office, Agnos made a concerted effort to fill many local citizen boards and commissions with individuals representing these interests, institutionalizing progressive power and influence for the future (DeLeon 1992). As a result, even when the progressives lost power in 1992, they were not obsolete, possessing a strong network of interest groups that were invested in their continuation, along with enduring bureaucratic influence within policymaking. Notably, it is also precisely during and immediately following

this time period when patterns of legislative behavior begin to become more coordinated.

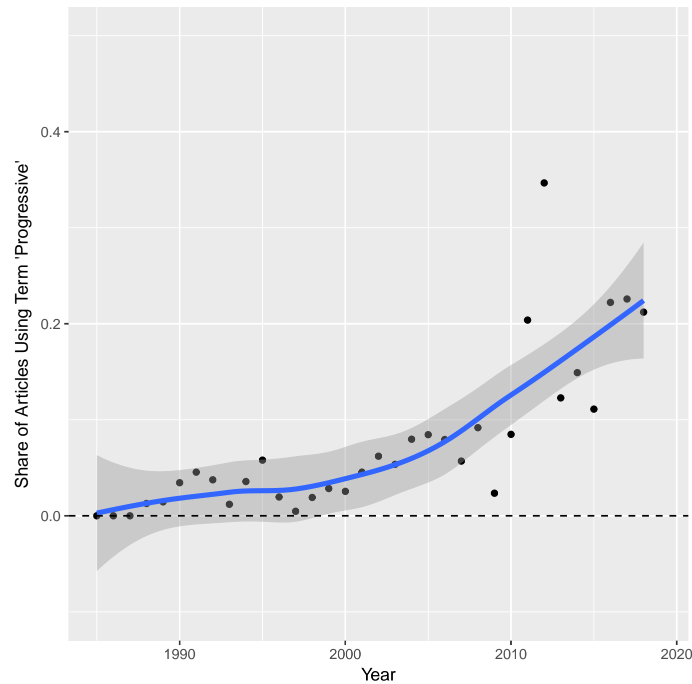
This shift in influence is reflected not only in historical accounts but also in changing patterns of media coverage, highlighting both the growth of the progressive brand and the increasing centrality of the coalition as a competitor to the moderate ruling regime. To illustrate this, Figure 3 shows the share of San Francisco Chronicle articles about the Board of Supervisors between 1985 and 2017 that mention the term 'progressive.' As the trend shows, while the Board of Supervisors was essentially never described in this manner in the late 1980s, local coverage begins to change—in a small way—in the early 1990s during Agnos's term. The trend then stays relatively stable throughout the 1990s, before increasingly rapidly from 2000 onward. This change in slope at the turn of the millennium aligns with progressive Tom Ammiano's impressive showing as a candidate for mayor in 1999, gaining 25 percent of the vote in a crowded first round before losing in the run-off. Moreover, in the aftermath of the election, the San Francisco Bay Guardian, the city's longtime progressive paper, reported a shift in progressive focus, with a newfound desire to attack the moderate coalition's power base: the Democratic County Central Committee (DCCC).[11] Although the city is formally nonpartisan, the DCCC is still permitted to endorse candidates, and moderates had used this to their advantage. However, following Ammiano's defeat, progressives used their growing organizational capacity to fight for control of this institutional arm, a battle that media reports suggest has only grown starker since that time.[12]

Thus, to the extent that news coverage can capture relative power or significance within politics, then this steep rise in the number of articles characterizing the board's politics in progressive terms supports the notion that this cleavage grew increasingly central for San Francisco politics over this time period. That this shift occurred gradually over time and after significant organizational development within the progressive movement highlights

[11]Blackwell, Savannah. "The Party's Over - Activists who tried to get Tom Ammiano elected mayor have set their sights on taking S.F.'s Democratic Party back from the machine." February 2, 2000. *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. https://goo.gl/UtrhS3

[12]Knight, Heather. "Dems line up for chance to win seat on panel." March 8, 2008. *SFGATE*. https://goo.gl/MJG35u

Figure 3: Use of the Term 'Progressive' in San Francisco Chronicle Articles about the Board of Supervisors, 1985 – 2018



that the progressive coalition did not just emerge with a coherent brand or agenda overnight. Rather, the evidence is consistent with a coalition of diverse interests that had to develop the capacity to overcome the barriers to collective action. The result of these efforts is that their presence is now embedded into one of the primary mediums through which citizens can learn about important local policy issues, which only serves to reinforce and sustain their significance within politics by differentiating them from the longstanding moderate coalition.

5.2 Into the Divide: Progressive and Moderate Voting Behavior

If the trends in model fit align with historical and media accounts of local politics in San Francisco, does the behavior of legislators also map onto the progressive and moderate divide that these accounts describe? That is, are legislators who are considered moderates actually voting with moderates and are those considered progressives actually voting with progressives? To answer this question, I examine ideal point estimates from a dynamic spa-

tial model estimated on all of the roll call votes from the 2000 election onward. I begin my analysis in 2000 because this period aligns with the board's shift to district elections and, as such, the analysis of representation in the following section. Figure 4 depicts ideal points for all members of the board during this time period.[13] Each point represents the ideal point of a specific member during a particular term, with the points for each member connected over time.

Consistent with scholarly and media accounts of a significant progressive/moderate divide, legislators who local reporters typically describe as progressive are depicted on the lower half of the plot, while those considered moderates are on the top half.[14] Furthermore, the orderings within each wing largely align with those thought to be more or less extreme on this dimension. For example, in their 2016 endorsement of Sandra Fewer for District 1, the progressive-leaning San Francisco Bay Guardian noted that the district was previously represented by Jake McGoldrick, who "was mostly with the progressives... [and] then Eric Mar, who has been a progressive stalwart and leader." The paper also notes that Fewer has "amazingly widespread support, from state Sen. Mark Leno and Assemblymember Phil Ting to Sups. Jane Kim, Aaron Peskin, Norman Yee, David Campos and John Avalos," and that her opponent is "the candidate of the mayor's allies–London Breed, Scott Wiener, Mark Farrell."[15] Notably, this view of San Francisco politics is not constrained to the progressive side alone. Indeed, the endorsements by the San Francisco Moderates from 2014 and 2016—which include Mark Farrell, Katy Tang, Scott Wiener, Malia Cohen, and London Breed—correspond strongly with what the Bay Guardian describes.[16] Most importantly, however, all of these progressive and moderate endorsements align with the cleavage

[13] In addition, in Appendix A, I present term-specific ideal point plots from the W-Nominate models that correspond with Figure 2.

[14] To code members into each group, I examined media coverage of the Board of Supervisors going back in time. Specific articles corresponding to each coding decision are included in the replication data for this paper.

[15] San Francisco Bay Guardian. "Endorsements! The case for six progressive supes, Kim for state Senate..." `https://goo.gl/v5rKQN`

[16] San Francisco Moderates. "Endorsements." 2014: `https://goo.gl/BLWGmJ`. 2016: `https://goo.gl/A5UKTo`

Figure 4: Dynamic Ideal Points in One-Dimension for San Francisco Board of Supervisors, 2000 – 2016

described in past work and the ideological placements in Figure 4.

Thus, political conflict in San Francisco appears to be highly structured, akin to what we might expect from a partisan system with relatively balanced competition on each side. By all accounts, this structure appears to be the result of two coalitions with significant organizational capacity in direct competition with each other. Indeed, that the progressive coalition, which was the newcomer trying to establish itself during this period, formed out of existing organized interests provided the framework necessary to mobilize and inform voters while aiding ideologically-aligned candidates in their quest for office. The moderates, in contrast, had the existing institutional regime supporting the mayor at their disposal, along with an increasingly salient incentive to respond to the progressive electoral threat. This has led to the development of clear, meaningful brands that have been embedded into local news coverage. Together, these features of local political conflict in San Francisco have allowed each coalition to overcome the impediments to collective action despite the lack of formal party institutions. Moreover, they also have created conditions seemingly favorable for democratic accountability and a strong electoral connection. In the next section, I evaluate the extent to which this potential is realized.

6 Representation in the Absence of Political Parties

If San Francisco has a relatively organized political system, with coalitions that are as organized as parties, do those coalitions also act like parties when it comes to representation? This is an important question, both directly for understanding representation in San Francisco and broadly for understanding the limits of democratic accountability in nonpartisan governments. Indeed, existing evidence suggests that the link between voters and representatives can become severed in nonpartisan contexts (Wright and Schaffner 2002). In practice, this could result in members responding more to narrow interests or wealthy residents instead of the average voter (Bawn et al. 2012; Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2018).

To evaluate the electoral connection in San Francisco, I draw on set of district level progressive voter indexes (DeLeon and Latterman 2004, 2006; Latterman 2011, 2015). Together, these measures cover the periods between 2000 and 2014. To incorporate them into the analysis, I match each of the two-year terms following the city's switch to district elections in 2000 to the most temporally overlapping iteration of the index.[17] It is important to note that while the progressive voter indexes and the roll call records measure the same propensity for progressivism in theory, they are not on a common scale and so the substantive meaning of each individual measure may differ. Moreover, aggregate measures of progressivism of this kind, like ideal points broadly, cannot guarantee that representation is occurring on a policy to policy basis (Ahler and Broockman 2018). Still, if the most progressive districts are electing the most progressive representatives, it certainly suggests better representational alignment than we might expect otherwise; however, specific representation gaps may remain.

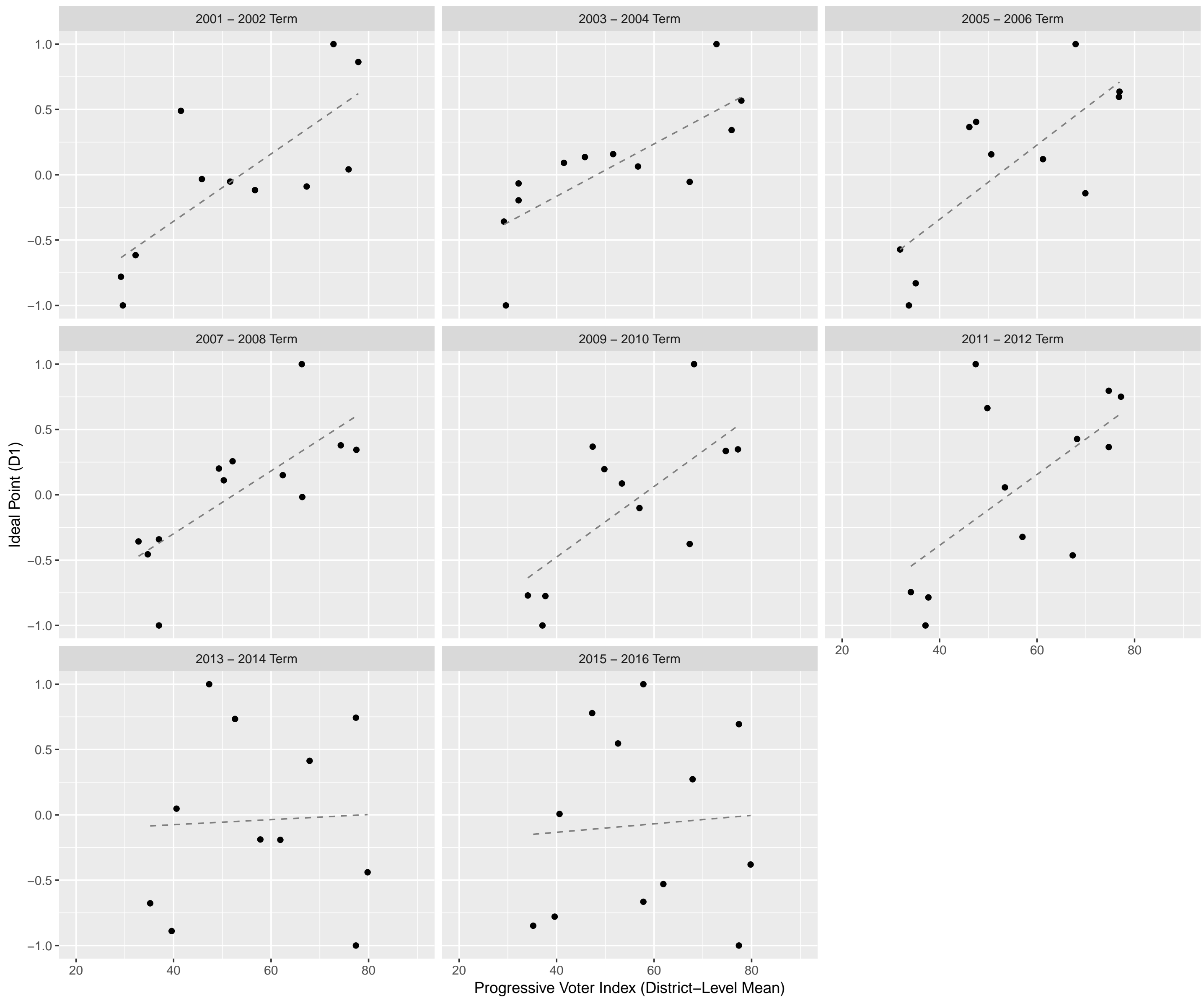
Figure 5 shows the simple bivariate relationship between the estimated ideal points for each term and the progressive voter index that most closely overlaps with that time period. To simplify the interpretation, I invert the ideal points so that higher values of both measures correspond with higher levels of progressivism. Thus, a positive correlation would be evidence of alignment between districts and their representatives. Looking at the panels for each term from 2000 to 2012, this is precisely what we see: a strong, positive correlation between patterns of local voting and supervisor progressivism, with no term having a correlation below .60. In practice, this means that the most moderate districts tend to elect the most moderate supervisors, while the most progressive districts tend to elect the most progressive supervisors. Of course, this correlation is not perfect, and there are noticeable errors across years, particularly for the districts that are most evenly balanced. However, these errors are modest and the broader trend suggests that the electoral connection in San Francisco is

[17] I do not analyze the relationships prior to 2000 for two reasons: first, the use of at-large elections presents challenges for matching districts to specific supervisors; second, the alignment between the earliest index—2000—and each term beforehand would become increasingly distant, potentially introducing substantial error into the analysis.

relatively robust.

Interestingly, the two most recent terms in the data, 2013–2014 and 2015–2016, exhibit a significantly lower correlation than the six preceding terms. Why this is the case is not immediately clear. On the one hand, this change could be indicative of a significant decline in representation, with districts electing legislators who do not appear to represent their interests well. On the other hand, it may also be a function of the most recent progressive voter index. As Latterman (2015) explains in his introduction to the index that spans 2012 to 2014, there were fewer distinctly progressive and moderate issues proposed as ballot initiatives during this time period, and so this may affect the measure's comparability to past years. Moreover, San Francisco updated district boundaries in 2012, and so it is possible that this process induced misalignment between voters and their supervisors. Swapping in the 2007–2010 index instead, the correlation between the district and supervisor measures of progressivism does increase, but it remains significantly below the other terms at around .20. Further time will tell whether this change is a systematic deviation in representation or a feature of measurement error.

Figure 5: Relationship Between Electoral District and Supervisor Progressivism



7 Is San Francisco an Anomalous Case?

The evidence in the previous sections suggests that San Francisco is a relatively unique political environment. Yet, given that scholars have only examined legislative behavior and representation in a small number of nonpartisan governments, there is good reason to doubt that what we have observed in San Francisco is an isolated example. In this section, I explore whether other nonpartisan cities and counties have local councils that are as organized as what I have documented in San Francisco.

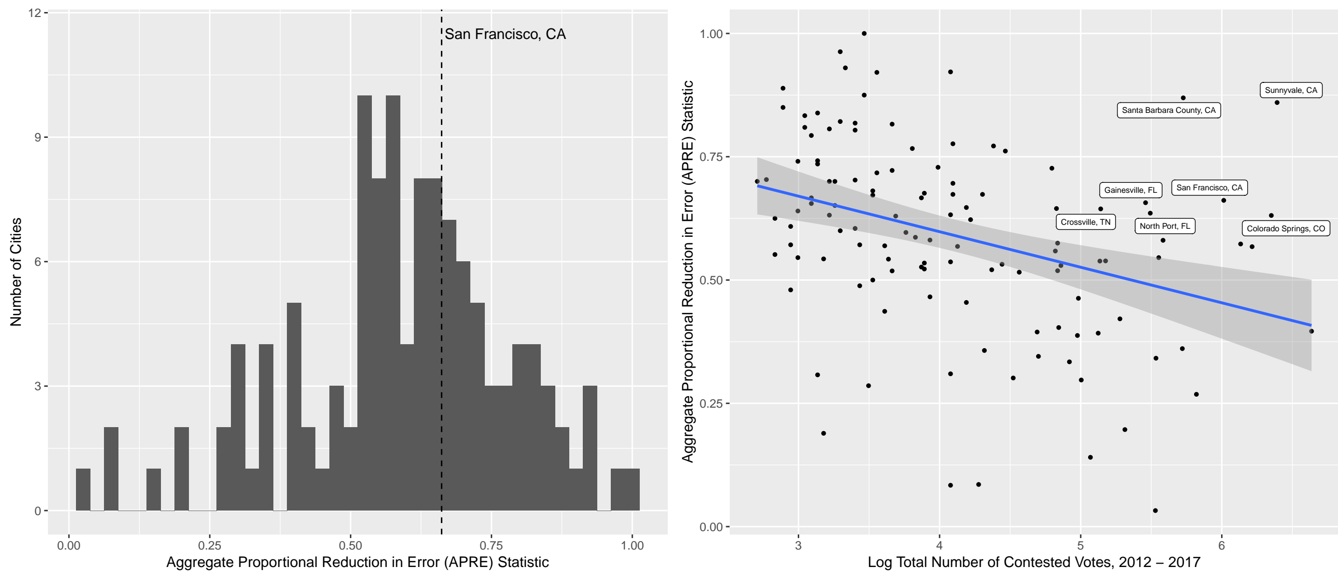
Specifically, to put the dimensionality of legislative behavior in San Francisco in context, I compare the fit of a simple, one-dimensional spatial model estimated on roll call votes from San Francisco to the fit of similar models estimated using data from a set of 120 other nonpartisan cities and counties. The roll call data used for this analysis was gathered directly from each local government's website and spans from January 2012 to April 2017.[18] In total, these records include 195,233 recorded roll call votes, with seven percent of those votes being contested, on average.[19] The common factor across all of these cities, besides being nonpartisan, is that they use the same online platform, Legistar, to manage their legislative records. As a result, the data is not representative of cities at-large, with those in the sample being larger, more diverse, more highly educated, and having more functional responsibilities than the full population. Yet, for this particular analysis, a perfectly representative sample is not necessarily the most important feature as the costs to gathering such a sample would likely require a tradeoff in terms of sample size, and the focus in this analysis is on gauging the uniqueness of San Francisco politics, not its absolute generalizability.

Figure 6 compares the Aggregate Proportional Reduction in Error (APRE) statistics for each of the 121 cities and counties, including San Francisco, in the sample. The APRE statistic, which is also shown in Figure 2, measures how effective the model is at explaining

[18]The time span for each individual city or country varies depending on when each government adopted their online platform.

[19]While this percentage may seem low, the records for many cities include votes on every item before the council, including a significant amount of routine business (e.g., individual zoning items contract approvals).

Figure 6: Comparing Legislative Behavior in San Francisco to 106 Nonpartisan Cities and Counties



patterns of voting compared to a null model where all legislators are assumed to vote in the majority. A value of .66, for example, which is the value estimated for San Francisco by pooling the votes from 2012 to 2017, means that using the results of the model to predict roll call votes results in a 66 percent reduction in the number of incorrect predictions compared to simply assuming all members vote with the majority. Thus, high values imply that the spatial model fits better, that votes are more predictable, and that the legislature is relatively more one-dimensional. In Appendix D, I show comparisons for the other three statistics shown in Figure 2, the results of which yield identical conclusions.

Looking first at the left panel of Figure 6, we see that the value of the fit statistic for San Francisco—represented by the dashed vertical line—is relatively large in comparison to the average local government. However, this estimate is by no means an outlier, with approximately 35 percent of the sample reporting an APRE equal to or greater than what we observe in San Francisco. One concern with this comparison might be that some of the local governments included in the analysis only have a small number of contested votes

compared to a relatively large 409 contested votes for San Francisco. The right panel, which plots the APRE for each city and county against the total number of contested votes, shows that this feature is not artificially inflating the estimates for all of the cities and counties with fit statistics greater than or equal to San Francisco. For example, Gainesville, Florida; Sunnyvale, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; and a handful of other local governments are as organized as San Francisco, with a similar number of contested votes. This evidence suggests that highly organized, low-dimensional legislative behavior among nonpartisan governments is not unique to San Francisco; rather, there appears to be a modest number of local governments for which legislative behavior is akin to what we observe within partisan governments.

8 Discussion

A substantial literature in political science credits parties with creating order within the political system and, in the process, facilitating democratic accountability. This paper does not challenge this important role that parties hold. It does, however, argue that our understanding of what makes a party and the conditions under which strong, cohesive coalitions succeed are too narrow. Indeed, in examining politics within the nonpartisan San Francisco Board of Supervisors, I show that stable coalitions and high-quality representation are not unique to partisan governments. Rather, when diverse interests join together and develop the institutional capacity to solve key collective action problems, nonpartisan governments can come to resemble precisely the type of system that we typically only associate with parties.

This finding has implications for ongoing debates about parties as institutions. Recent work, for example, has conceptualized parties as coalitions of policy demanders who leverage control over the nomination process to achieve their policy goals (Bawn et al. 2012; Cohen et al. 2008). On one dimension, the political system in San Francisco provides strong support

for this theory: a diverse set of local progressive activists and interest groups joined together in the pursuit of office to achieve favorable policy. The existing moderate regime, which was already centered around traditional economic and business interests, solidified in response, with each coalition using their institutional position to support like-minded candidates and inform voters of their distinguishing issue positions.

Yet, at the same time, the 'party system' that exists in San Francisco diverges from this policy demander story in an important way: the representational consequences. Indeed, if parties are dominated purely by policy demanders, it implies that policy will diverge from the interests of voters. Yet, in this case, we see evidence of seemingly high-quality representation. This suggests that the interests of the coalitions in San Francisco are either perfectly aligned with those of everyday voters or, as McCarty and Schickler (2018) argue, that voters play a more substantial role in bounding legislative coalitions than what a theory based purely on policy demanders implies.

My findings also have implications for students of local politics and policy. For example, despite the increasingly partisan nature of local politics (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Einstein and Glick 2016), the dynamic coalitions that we observe in San Francisco are centered around salient local groups and policy issues in a unique partisan-adjacent way. Given the large number of nonpartisan governments at this level, along with the sizable number of groups and interests that have an incentive to influence local policy, it raises the question of whether other types of substantive coalitions of this kind are present within local politics and whether certain groups and interests are represented more or less within these governing coalitions than others. The answers to these questions have potentially important consequences for our understanding of the local political process and the policies that emerge from it, and so future work should continue to leverage newly available sources of local legislative data to delve into these contexts and identify the contours of their legislative divides.

Finally, this paper highlights the increasing significance of progressive issues and pro-

gressive politics for the local political environment. While not all local governments have coalitions centered around this particular ideological divide, a substantial number of municipalities have begun to shift their attention towards progressive causes in recent years, even though many of the policies designed to address them push the bounds of what has traditionally been considered germane for local policy. With increasing alignment between local and national politics (Hopkins 2018), the incentive for pursuing legislation of this kind is only likely to grow moving forward, suggesting that the political environment that I document in San Francisco may very well be a precursor for the type of highly-organized, ideological municipal government to come to these contexts moving forward.

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