

The Cheap Seats: Party Development and Local Electoral Reform in Poland*

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September 17, 2015

Abstract

In this paper, I investigate the link between local electoral institutions and party building in new democracies. I argue that, as is the case with national electoral systems, local institutions can play an important role in party system institutionalization. Specifically, by shaping the incentives for local politicians to join national parties and for national parties to get involved in local politics, different local electoral institutions can inhibit or encourage national party penetration into local politics. I support this argument with an analysis of a unique electoral system discontinuity in Poland. My analysis, which applies a regression discontinuity design approach, shows that a change from plurality election rules to proportional representation had a significant effect on national party performance in local elections in Poland.

*I would like to thank Jan Box-Steffensmeier, Paul DeBell, Luke Keele, William Minozzi, Irfan Nooruddin, Frank Thames, and Peter Tunkis for their helpful comments and suggestions. This project was supported by the Ohio Supercomputer Center. An earlier version was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association (Chicago, 2012).

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1 Introduction

Stable political parties with robust linkages to society are widely seen to be a critical component of successful, long-lasting, and representative democratic governance (Huntington 1968; Kitschelt et al. 1999; Innes 2002; Mainwaring and Scully 1995). But building a successful political party in a modern democracy is difficult. In Western democracies, parties were able to co-opt long-standing social structures—the extensive linkages rooted in class and confessional memberships (Lipset and Rokkan 1967)—which helped defray the organizational costs associated with party building, and made the mass party a viable organizational model in many Western democracies (Katz and Mair 1995). This model was not, however, a viable option in post-communist democracies, where the requisite social structures were “largely undernourished and inchoate” due to decades of communist rule (Mair 1997, p. 177) and for which democratization was occurring in an overall environment of dealignment (Dalton and Weldon 2007). In the absence of a strong social foundation, party leaders in new democracies were forced to look to alternative strategies for building lasting party organizations.

Eschewing strategies requiring extensive party building efforts, post-communist party leaders have instead turned to alternative organizational models that leverage the mass media and charismatic party leaders in order to attract votes (Kopecký 1995). While not going so far as being completely cartelized (Innes 2002, p. 91), this strategy reflects the cartel-like reliance of parties on the state, which often finance party activities and grants airtime on media networks (Kopecký 2006, p. 256).¹ In a sense, the availability of the mass media provides parties the lowest marginal cost for each vote obtained. However, by many measures, the reliance on the mass media and top-down organizational structures has not produced the consistently stable and representative parties one may hope for in a healthy democracy. Instead, as is often remarked in the literature, party and party system consolidation in post-communist countries has been slow to materialize (Lewis 2000; Bielasiak 2002; Bakke and Sitter 2005; Epperly 2011).

This paper investigates the role of local electoral institutions in the process of party building. Recent research has demonstrated the importance of party organizations, including

¹Of the 10 post-communist Eastern European countries they survey, van Biezen and Kopecký (2007) find that in 8 parties get direct funding from the state.

local party branches, to party building in the young democracies of East Central Europe (Tavits 2012, 2011). While there is a long and influential literature discussing the importance of national electoral institutions on party system development (Duverger 1954; Cox 1997; Clark and Golder 2006), the importance of subnational electoral institutions in this process is unexplored.² The motivating hypothesis of this paper is that local electoral institutions can play an important role in national party development in new democracies. This is for two reasons: (1) Different local electoral institutions provide different incentives for local politicians to join national parties. (2) Local politicians joining national parties creates incentives for national parties to become involved in local politics.

I test the above hypotheses by leveraging an unique local electoral system discontinuity in Poland. Choice of local electoral institutions and overall national party system development are likely highly endogenously determined. As a consequence, the effects of local institutions on national party development is difficult to identify in stable electoral and party system contexts. A careful analysis of the discontinuity in local electoral institutions in Poland helps me avoid this endogeneity. In 1998, Poland's newly elected Solidarity coalition passed a broad package of local government reforms. These reforms changed how a certain class of municipalities elect their council members. For a subset of municipalities, council members would no longer be elected in single-member districts and would instead switch to an open-list proportional representation system. Taking advantage of this discontinuity, I use a regression discontinuity (RD) design approach to determine if the switch from SMD to PR had an effect on national party participation and performance in local elections as well as in national elections. I show that in those municipalities that experienced the change from SMD to PR, the performance of national parties improves significantly in both local and national elections. In other words, the nationalization of the party system was aided by the change in the electoral system. This highlights the importance of local politics in the overall party and party system development.

²Chhibber and Kollman (2004) provide an excellent study of the importance of subnational politics in the nationalization of party systems; however, their study focuses on the nature of issue salience—whether issues are national or subnational in scope—not on electoral institutions.

2 Local Politics and National Parties in Post-Communist Countries

Party development in post-communist Europe has been largely a top-down affair (Kopecký 1995, 2006). National elites have prioritized parliamentary politics, while simultaneously using broad, short-term strategies to capture as many votes as possible. This is in contrast to the development of party politics in Western Europe, where competition was focused on turning out the vote of particular groups or classes of voters.

There are several reasons why elites in post-communist Europe adopted this approach. First, unlike in Western Europe, the “flattened” social environment of post-communist society did not encourage the organization of party competition around a set of deep social cleavages. Consequently, there were few natural divisions that could be exploited by party leaders for the purpose of defining political competition and mobilizing voters (Mair 1997). Second, the communist era created a great distrust of parties and politics in general (Jowitt 1992, p. 215). Instead of representing the ideals of democratic political competition, because they were associated with the prior authoritarian regime, parties—and politics more generally—were viewed quite cynically. As O’Dwyer (2006, p. 123) puts it, “two defining features of postcommunist politics” are their “demobilized societies and delegitimized states.” One manifestation of this, was the “popular stereotype” that involvement with political parties was “a shameful activity to be frowned upon” (Szczurbiak 2001b, p. 166). Third, parties’ close ties to the state have meant that grassroots support was not needed in order to effectively compete in elections. State funding and state mandated access to the media provided the material resources party leaders needed to compete. In other words, in a very real sense, it was more cost effective, from party leaders’ perspective, to resist investing in party building efforts (Kopecký 1995).

While national parties have not spent a great deal of effort on party building, there are very real electoral and organization advantages to developing strong party organizations and this has not been lost on many politicians. Tavits, for instance, notes that party officials in Estonia have cited the importance of having active party membership as well as a network of visible party offices in developing ties to society (Tavits 2012, pp. 85–86). And the re-

generation of many ex-communist parties was in great measure facilitated by the legacy of communist-era party organizations (Grzymała-Busse 2002). However, while there are certainly exceptions, overall initial incentives favored top-down rather than bottom-up parties.

The argument being made in this paper is that local electoral institutions can play an important role in shaping the development of national parties and party systems. Two mechanisms—individual candidate decisions to enter politics and join national parties and party incentives to invest in local party operations—link local electoral institutions to the development of national parties. These are discussed in the following sections.

2.1 Local Elite Incentives

The first mechanism tying local electoral institutions to national party development is the way in which electoral institutions shape the incentives of local politicians to join national parties. It is a fundamental finding in the study of party politics that electoral institutions play a vital role in shaping the character of parties, party systems, and the broader democratic context. Electoral institutions have been found to affect everything from the number of parties (Duverger 1954; Clark and Golder 2006; Amorim Neto and Cox 1997), to turnout (Cox 1999; Blais 2006), to redistribution (Iversen and Soskice 2006).

An important mechanism through which electoral systems affect party systems is by shaping the incentives for prospective politicians to participate in elections. Politicians will enter politics when they believe they have a decent probability of winning a seat, and this probability is a function of the vote share required to win. In the simplest case of single-member districts with first-past-the-post voting, the vote share required to win a seat is the highest (50% + 1 in the case of a 2 person race). In proportional representation systems, where multiple candidates are selected for each district, the share of the vote needed to win a seat will be lower. Comparing these two examples, a prospective candidate would clearly be more likely to enter the race in a PR system with a high district magnitude than in they would in a SMD system with plurality voting (Cox 1997).

Another key decision a candidate faces is whether to run as an independent, join an existing party, or to start one of her own. Of course, while running as an independent in a candidate-centered electoral system may be viable, this is not often possible in the electoral

systems that use party lists. In such circumstances, the candidate will have no choice but to choose between joining an existing party or starting her own. There are costs and benefits to both options. On the one hand, if the candidate joins an existing party, she will possibly benefit from financial support from the party and the party label will be a known entity to voters. On the other hand, joining a party means being forced to some degree to adopt that party's platform and to tow the party line on issues that may arise during the elections.³ By starting her own party, a candidate will have much more flexibility to run on a platform she sees as more compatible with the electorate and her own views. However, the costs of starting a party are high. Not only would the candidate need to pass any legal hurdles necessary to be recognized as a party, she would also face the substantial barrier of building familiarity with the electorate (Aldrich 1995).⁴

A candidate for local office faces these same incentives. As is the case for a prospective politician at the national level, a candidate for local office will base her decision to enter a race by weighing her prospects for winning against the costs of running. She will likewise face the decision of whether to join an existing party or to start her own. How will this affect national party development? Simply put, local elections that rely on party lists and multi-member districts are more likely than candidate-focused electoral institutions to (1) encourage prospective candidates to run for office and (2) to see these candidates join national parties.

The first hypothesis follows from the above argument that PR systems create more opportunities for prospective politicians, thus attracting a greater number of candidates.⁵ Furthermore, in new democracies, the effect of electoral systems on new candidate entry is particularly strong. Local offices in new democracies, such as those of post-communist Europe, are often captured by local elites (e.g., see O'Dwyer 2006, ch. 5). In such situations, there is little space for the entry of new politicians. Incumbent advantage keeps prospective

³This is even the case in East-Central Europe. As Szczerbiak (2001b, p. 57) notes that while the local party officials in Poland were given a great deal of autonomy "on purely local issues, . . . [m]ost party statutes contained clauses that empowered the central offices to intervene in the activities of any local branch when it felt that the party program or statute was being violated or when the party was suffering damage nationally."

⁴As Aldrich (1995) shows, there are also significant legislative incentives to join existing parties. Those are beyond the focus of this argument.

⁵This is known as the "strategic" or "psychological" effect of electoral institutions on politician and party participation (Clark and Golder 2006; Duverger 1954).

politicians out of local races, particularly when the electoral system is candidate-centered. PR in this case will provide greater space for new candidates to compete for office.

The second hypothesis—that multi-member districts will encourage local candidates to join national parties—follows from the simple requirement for candidates in PR systems to belong to a party. Every new candidate entry represents a potential recruit for national parties. If starting a party is costly, relative to joining an existing one, then national parties are a natural choice for new candidates. This is particularly the case when national parties are well developed, as they would provide the most benefit in terms of visibility, organization, and resources; however, the attractiveness of national parties to candidates for local office is also likely to be significant.

2.2 National Party Incentives

Once they have successfully attracted local politicians to their banner, national parties have an incentive to expend resources on local party development. This is the second mechanism linking local electoral institutions to national party development. The motivations for getting involved stems from parties' need to build and maintain their brand. Parties will not want to accept just any local candidates to run on their labels, and they will not want these candidates to run on policies that contradict the values and positions of the national party. Consequently, national parties will be motivated to exert control over candidates, either through their control local party lists, as in PR, or by restricting membership under SMD. This will require that parties develop the means of evaluating potential local candidates and drawing up, or at least approving, local lists.

While costly, there are significant spillover benefits to getting involved in local elections, which have the potential to strengthen national parties over the long term. First, as Geser notes, establishing a local presence allows parties to “maximize their chances of generating a large reservoir of experienced young adherents from which future candidates for higher roles or public positions can be recruited” (Geser 1999, p. 6). Second, investing in local organization and participating in local politics provides the opportunity for national parties to test new, alternative campaign strategies. In the case of electoral defeat at the national

level, local politics provides a venue for a party to regroup (Geser 1999, pp. 7–8).⁶ Recent empirical research supports this argument that local party organization matters to national party development (Tavits 2012). Finally, a local presence provides the means through which lines of communication from the local to the national level and back can be established. Issues at the local level can be monitored at the national level. Thus, this would make national politics more relevant to the electorate.

2.3 Observable Implications

In the previous sections, I have argued that different local electoral institutions should affect national party development in different ways. Specifically, PR at the local level will provide the incentives for prospective local politicians to join national parties. Faced with the need to integrate new members, parties will be forced to develop organizations to manage local lists. However, while costly to set up, these organizations will generate positive spillover effects for the party. They will (1) provide the means through which the party can attract and train new members; (2) provide a venue for new electoral and policy strategies to be developed; and (3) develop into conduits through which information can pass between the local to the national levels. In sum, relative to plurality electoral rules, proportional representation in local elections should benefit national parties and, thus, should contribute to the development of robust party systems.

There are two immediate observable implications associated with this argument. First, if PR creates greater incentives for local politicians to join national parties, overall national party performance in local elections should be better in PR electoral systems relative to their performance in plurality systems. This would be particularly the case if higher quality candidates—those more likely to win elections as independents in plurality elections—are induced to join national parties in PR systems. Second, if local politics matter at all to national party and party system development, we should observe some effect of the presence and performance of national parties at the local level on their performance at the national level. In other words, the increased exposure of national parties at the local level should translate into a greater familiarity on the part of voters and improved party organization at

⁶Also see (Tavits 2012, p. 86).

the local level, resulting in improved performance in national elections.

The following empirical investigation will focus on the first of these implications—that PR leads to improved performance of national parties in local elections—by taking advantage of a unique discontinuity in electoral laws in Poland.

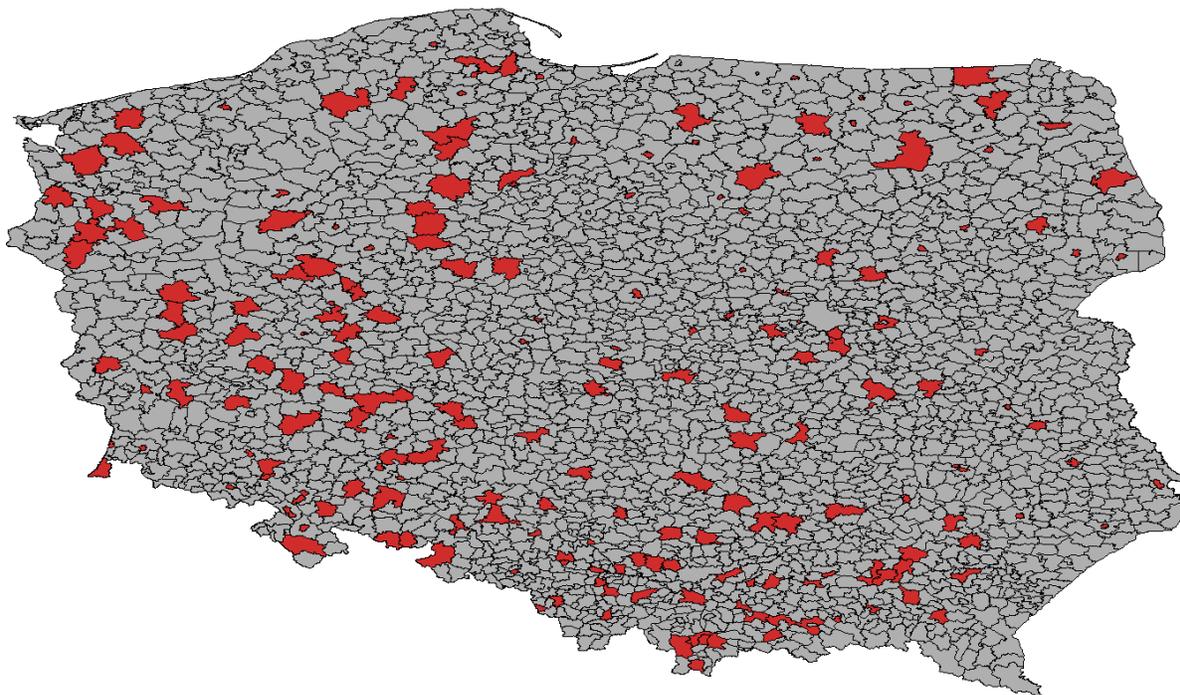
3 The Test Case: Local Electoral Reform in Poland

The relationship between local electoral institutions and party development is highly endogenous. This makes a clear test of the proposed hypotheses difficult. For instance, in established and stable political systems the stated hypothesis that some local electoral institutions facilitate national party development while others inhibit such development would be empirically indistinguishable from the inverse hypothesis that highly developed national parties in particular electoral contexts choose particular local electoral systems. In other words, does PR at the local level foster national party development or do highly developed national parties instead choose PR? While I have argued for the former, there are good reasons to believe the latter could also be at play. Simply put, strong parties may institute PR for local elections for reasons that have nothing to do with party development. As a consequence of this problem of endogeneity, only a research design that takes advantage of some source of randomization can help us parse out the effects of local electoral institutions on national party development. A change in local electoral institutions in Poland provides a great opportunity to do just that.

In June 1998, the Polish parliament enacted a wide-ranging local government reform program. Comprehensive local government reform had long been a goal of the political right, and had become an important component of Solidarity Electoral Action's (AWS) platform in the national parliamentary campaign of 1997. Once AWS had won the election and established a coalition government with Freedom Union (UW), passing local government reform became a key priority for the government. Balcerowicz, the architect of shock therapy and UW party leader, was particularly supportive of reforms, while many far-right members of the coalition were opposed (Szczerbiak 1999).⁷ The legislation that ultimately passed parlia-

⁷The nationalist and religious right was adamantly opposed to the reforms and, in protest to the legis-

Figure 1: Polish Municipalities Affected by the Change in Electoral System, 1998. The figure shows the geographic boundaries of all 2,478 Polish municipalities. The 194 municipalities between 20,000 and 40,000 residents affected by the change in electoral law are highlighted in red.



ment included significant changes at all levels of local government, including the reduction of the number of provinces (*województwa*) from 42 to 16 and the establishment of a new county (*powiat*) level of government, of which 308 were initially created (Regulski 1999).⁸

Most relevant to this study were the reforms made to the electoral rules governing local municipal council elections. Since the first post-communist local election were held in 1990, municipal councils had been elected using two different sets of electoral rules. In smaller municipalities with fewer than 40,000 residents, council members were elected in single member districts by a simple majority. In municipalities with 40,000 or more residents, council mem-

beration, 15 MPs defected from the coalition, 7 from the Confederation for an Independent Poland–Patriotic Camp (KPN-OP) and 8 from Polish Family Association (SRP) (Szczerbiak 1999, p. 86). While being the project of the Solidarity coalition, the opposition communist successor parties were closely involved in the negotiations that shaped the legislation. As O’Dwyer (2006, PAGE) points out, patronage was critical to gaining support.

⁸Of the 308 counties created, 65 were larger municipalities that were also granted county status.

bers had instead been elected through an open-list proportional representation system. The 1998 law changed this threshold, so that in the October 1998 and subsequent municipal elections all municipalities with more than 20,000 residents used the open-list PR system. This change in electoral system for municipalities between 20,000 and 40,000 residents provides the discontinuity that will be exploited in the empirical analysis below. Overall, 194 (8.3%) of some 2342 municipalities under 40,000 residents experienced the change to PR. The geographic distribution of the affected municipalities are shown in Figure 1 and Table 1 provides some basic demographic summaries for municipalities on each side of the discontinuity.⁹

Besides providing a convenient natural experiment, Poland also provides a difficult test of the theory. To begin with, starting a party in Poland is notoriously easy—requiring just 15 by citizens signatures (Cabada, Hlousek, and Jurek 2014, pp. 108–109). As a consequence, there has been a proliferation of parties at the local level. In 2002, which will be the focus of the analysis below, more than 25,000 parties participated in local council elections.¹⁰ Of course, the vast majority of these were “parties” consisted of a single person.¹¹ In the SMD districts, there were more than 24,500 unique parties active in the 2002 election. On average, nearly 14 parties competed for 15 council seats in each of these municipal elections. In municipalities between 20,000 and 40,000 residents (those that saw the change to PR), there were 822 unique parties active, with an average of almost 7 parties competing for 21 council seats.

⁹All elections data used in this analysis were scraped from the Polish National Electoral Commission’s (NEC) elections websites, <http://pkw.gov.pl>. Demographic and economic data come from the Polish Central Statistical Office, <http://stat.gov.pl>. All replication materials for this paper, including the code used to scrape the NEC’s election pages, will be available on the author’s website upon publication.

¹⁰While the first elections under the new electoral rules took place in October 1998, the complete results of these elections are not available from the NEC (nor, might I add, are the results for the 1994 local elections Szczerbiak 1999). Specifically, the results for municipalities under 20,000 residents—those using plurality elections—are not available from the NEC (O’Dwyer 2006, p. 129; I want to thank Peter Tunkis for verifying in person the unavailability of these results). For the purposes of this study, the lack of detailed results for 1998 is not seen be a significant obstacle. For one thing, many of the reforms to local governance were not implemented until after the election. Thus, local politicians and voters had not yet experienced the full implications of these reforms and, consequently, may not have been able to adjust their actions accordingly. Similarly, given that there was not a great deal of time between the passage of electoral reform in June and the first election in October, there was limited opportunity for political actors to adjust their election strategies. As such, it would not be surprising if the impact of the new laws on the 1998 election were quite muted.

¹¹In one municipality, Sędziszów, 49 “parties” participated in the 2002 local elections. Of these, nearly 30 were vanity parties with just one or two candidates.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Polish Municipalities

	< 20k	20–40k	> 40k	17500	22500
Population					
1996	7759.80	26615.23	126178.08	20737.63	21035.07
1997	7766.56	26681.98	125947.23	20786.47	21115.96
1998	7774.11	26733.46	125653.14	20822.93	21206.26
Population growth (%)					
1996	0.00	0.33	0.13	0.38	0.40
1997	-0.04	0.26	-0.16	0.31	0.39
1998	-0.00	0.22	-0.03	0.26	0.43
Area (km ²)					
1996	128.07	136.11	86.35	146.93	169.03
1997	127.89	136.11	86.40	146.11	169.03
1998	127.72	136.11	86.55	145.29	169.03
Population density (per km ²)					
1996	103.22	635.29	1611.04	446.47	372.18
1997	103.95	636.66	1606.73	454.02	373.29
1998	104.79	637.36	1604.28	460.46	374.89
Total employment					
1996	999.39	6823.69	43464.79	4606.04	4476.50
1997	1031.80	6877.47	43571.40	4683.60	4560.96
1998	1019.92	6850.04	43369.11	4640.44	4505.43
Employment growth (%)					
1996	1.32	1.29	0.89	1.72	1.98
1997	4.95	1.22	0.22	1.43	2.13
1998	-0.82	-0.30	-0.54	-0.21	-0.93
Working age population (%)					
1996	18.22	37.27	45.13	32.97	31.86
1997	18.69	37.19	44.89	33.18	32.08
1998	18.23	36.55	44.26	32.44	31.25
Number	2148	194	133	66	54

3.1 The 2002 Polish Local Elections

In terms of the theory being tested here, the ease at which parties could be established, as indicated by the proliferation of vanity parties, shows that there were few extra barriers to individual candidates raised by the change from SMD to PR elections. In other words, rather than joining existing national parties, it would have been relatively simple for prospective

Table 2: Distribution of Party Activity. The table shows the number of parties active in the number of municipalities. The most active parties were SLD (1855 municipalities), PSL (1374), Samoobrona (1245), and LPR (792).

Municipalities	Parties	Mean Pop.
Local		
1	25,222	14,979
Regional		
2 to 81	521	19,827
National		
LPR (792)	1	24,465
Samoobrona (1245)	1	20,808
PSL (1374)	1	12,982
SLD (1855)	1	17,735

candidates to either start their own party or to join with a small local group of candidates to start new parties. National parties were, in other words, not in a good position to attract local politicians to their banner. Thus, any increase in performance on the part of national parties would be strong evidence in favor of the theory.

A second characteristic of the Polish case that makes it a tough test of the theory is the high level of historic localism and the general distrust of the national parties that was felt at the local level. There was a desire to keep the national parties out of local politics (Szczerbiak 2001b), while it was also believed that locals would be better at governing and dealing with the issues unique to individual municipalities.¹²

4 PR and Local-Level National Party Performance

I have proposed a hypothesis linking local institutions and national party development. This hypothesis states that certain local electoral institutions, specifically PR, should lead, first, to better performance of national parties in local elections and, second, that better performance in local elections should result in better performance for national parties in national elections.

¹²Reflecting this view, Regulski, an architect of early attempts at local government reform, comments that a reform program to devolve social welfare programs to local officials “is based on the *obvious truth* that the local authorities know better how to effectively help their people than the central government does” (Regulski 1999, p. 44; emphasis added).

This section will test the first of these hypotheses. However, before discussing my analytic approach to testing this theory, I first want to define what I mean by a “national party” and their performance in local elections.

In an ideal world, all national parties active in the formulation of the law changing local electoral institutions would be active in local elections. But party politics in Poland are far from ideal. Instead, by the time of the 2002 local elections, AWS, the driving force behind the reforms, was defunct, having even failed to receive 5% of the vote and make it into parliament in the 2001 parliamentary election. Not surprisingly, AWS was a non-entity in the 2002 local elections; thus, testing whether the local electoral change had direct effects on its ability to build a local presence is not possible. It is possible, however, to test the effect on other national parties. Overall, just 4 parties—SLD, PSD, Samoobrona, and LPR—can reasonably be considered to be “national”, in the sense that they actively participated in a reasonable number of local municipal elections.¹³ As shown in Table 2, SLD and PSL, the communist successor parties, were active in the largest number of municipalities. Of the 2,478 local municipal council elections, SLD was represented in 1,855 (75%) local elections, while PSL was represented in 1,374 (55%). The representatives of the political right were somewhat less active, with Samoobrona participating in 1,245 (50%) of elections and LPR participating in 792 (32%). While no party was active in all municipalities, in very few (255 or 10%) was a national party presence completely absent. In more than 70% of municipalities, 2 or more of national parties were present.

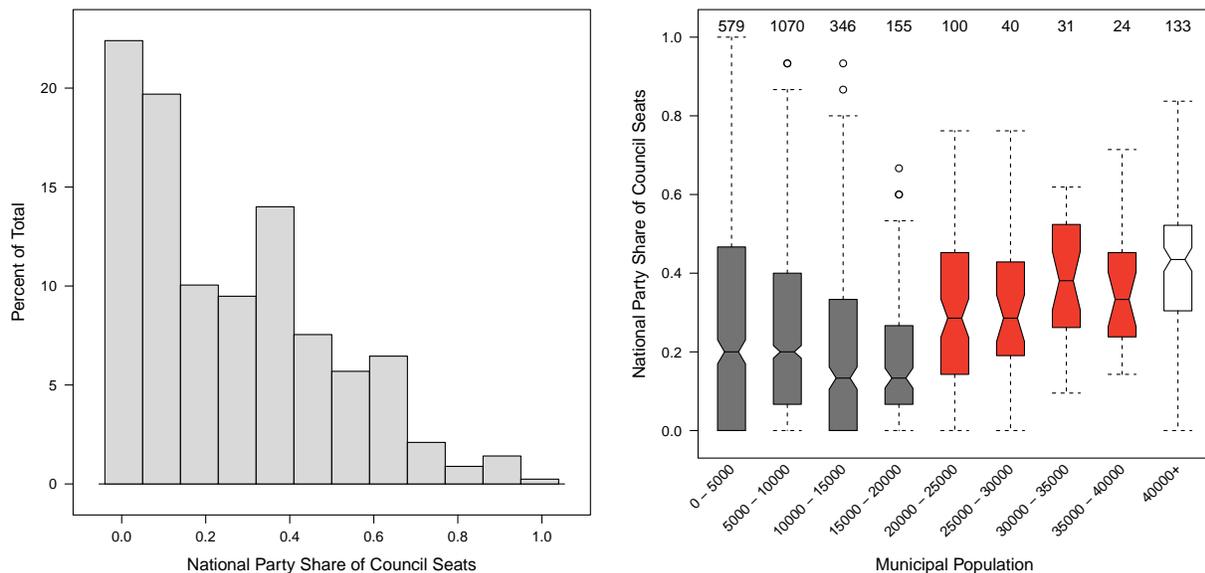
As my measure of national party performance—the outcome variable of interest—I use the share of local council seats won by national parties in the following analyses. Because the change in electoral laws also included an increase in the number of council seats for municipalities that changed to PR, it was not possible to use the raw number of seats as the response variable as they would not be directly comparable between these groups of municipalities. This, along with the nature of open-seat PR elections, also made the use of raw vote share problematic.¹⁴ Figure 2 presents the distribution of outcome variable. The

¹³National parties have been known to act behind the scenes to support candidates under different labels in local elections (Szczerbiak 2001a, p. 81).

¹⁴The open-seat PR elections meant that votes for parties and votes for specific candidates was sometimes difficult to parse out in the Electoral Commission data.

left panel shows a histogram of national parties' council seat share across all municipalities. The panel on the right shows the distribution by population (1998) within nine bins, the first 8 bins of which are 5,000 residents in width, while the ninth bin on the far right contains the remaining 133 municipalities with more than 40,000 residents. The grey boxes on the left are those using SMD to elect their council members, while those in red are those that changed from SMD to PR.

Figure 2: Distribution of National Party Council Seat Share, 2002 Polish Local Elections. The left panel shows the distribution of the share of council seats won by the four national parties in the 2002 local elections. The right panel shows the distribution of the national party share by municipal population (1998) in bins of 5,000 residents. Boxes in grey indicate those municipalities with fewer than 20,000 residents; boxes in red are those with between 20,000 and 40,000 residents. Box sizes span the inter-quartile range for each bin, while the horizontal line is the median. The number of municipalities in each bin is shown at the top of the plot.



Overall, the national party share of council seats was an average of 32.5% in 194 municipalities with between 20,000 and 40,000 residents (those that switched to PR), while the national party share of seats was 24.2% in 2,149 municipalities with fewer than 20,000 residents (those using SMD).¹⁵ A difference in means test shows this difference in national

¹⁵Election results were unavailable for one municipality (Połczyn-Zdrój) below the cut-point.

party share to be statistically significant ($t = 5.91$), with a 95% confidence interval of [0.055, 0.110]. Because it applies the same weight those municipalities far from the cut-point as those close, thus not accounting for the heterogeneity across municipalities, a simple t -test does not provide a sufficient test for the theory; however, while problematic, this is at least positive evidence in support of the theory that PR promotes national party performance in local elections. In the next section, I use a regression discontinuity design to perform a more extensive, rigorous test of the theory.

4.1 Design

The regression discontinuity (RD) design approach was first applied by Thistlethwaite and Campbell (1960) to test the effects of receiving public acknowledgment of academic distinction on future performance. In recent years, the RD design has become popular in both political science and economics as a way of measuring causal effects in the absence of a manipulable treatment. The method has been broadly applied to a variety of questions, including the investigation of the importance of class size on academic performance in Israel (Angrist and Lavy 1999), the role of partisan alignment on fiscal transfers in Brazil (Brollo and Nannicini 2012), the effect PR on turnout in France (Eggers 2015), the effects of holding office on future earnings in Britain (Eggers and Hainmueller 2009), the impact of incumbency on PR vote share in Germany’s mixed-electoral system (Hainmueller and Kern 2008), and incumbency advantage in U.S. House elections (Lee 2008; Butler 2009).

The key idea behind RD designs is that the assignment of treatment status is determined by a discontinuous jump in a continuous forcing variable. The assumption is that at the point of the discontinuity—often the result of some change in public policy, such as the Polish case being investigated here—assignment of a unit’s treatment status is determined in an as-if random fashion. In other words, treatment status is wholly determined by the forcing variable and all other pretreatment characteristics that may condition the treatment effect are balanced at the discontinuity, or cut-point. Consequently, any change in the outcome variable can be plausibly attributed to the change in treatment status and not to other unobserved factors. In more concrete terms, in the Polish case being explored here, municipal population acts as the forcing variable and the cut-point of 20,000 residents

determines the treatment: whether the local electoral system was changed to PR or remained SMD.

The RD design is attractive because it allows a more credible case to be made about the effect of some treatment on the outcome of interest when direct manipulation of treatment status is not possible. However, the estimation of these effects is not trivial, and several important modeling choices have to be considered when estimating these effects.¹⁶ First, the RD design estimates the effect of the treatment on the outcome at the cut-point. However, in practical applications, including the Polish one, there is often a dearth of observations actually at the cut-point. Instead, global or local polynomial regression is used to estimate the difference in the outcome on each side of the cut-point. In this case, the inclusion of observations some distance—within some window or bandwidth—from the cut-point is necessary. The choice of this window can have a significant impact on effect estimates and the inferences made from them. For this reason, some principled method of selecting the window needs to be employed. For the primary results presented in the following sections, I use a method proposed by Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014) to select the optimal bandwidth and for calculating robust standard errors and confidence intervals. However, the robustness of the estimates will be checked against alternative methods popular in the literature.¹⁷

The second specification decision deals with the functional form of the estimator. While Lee (2008) uses a global parametric fourth-order polynomial model, Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012, p. 3) suggest that “local [non-parametric] methods build in robustness by ensuring that observations with values for the forcing variable far away from the threshold do not affect the point estimates.” For my analysis, I take this suggestion by estimating local linear regression (i.e., first-order), but following the suggestion of Eggers, Fowler, et al.

¹⁶At first glance, it may be tempting to use a method such as matching to estimate the differences in effects on each side of the cut-point. But in matching the assumption of covariate overlap is fundamentally violated in the presence of a discontinuity (Imbens and Lemieux 2008).

¹⁷Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014) argue that the optimal bandwidths recommended by other methods, such as the cross-validation procedure of Ludwig and Miller (2007) or that of Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012) are often “too large”. In other words, they include observations much further from the cut-point than does their method. In fact, in the Polish data, their method selects an optimal bandwidth approximately half the length of the cross-validation approach of Ludwig and Miller (2007) and a third of that of Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012).

(2015), I further test the robustness of this choice by providing estimates based on higher degree local polynomial models.

4.2 Results

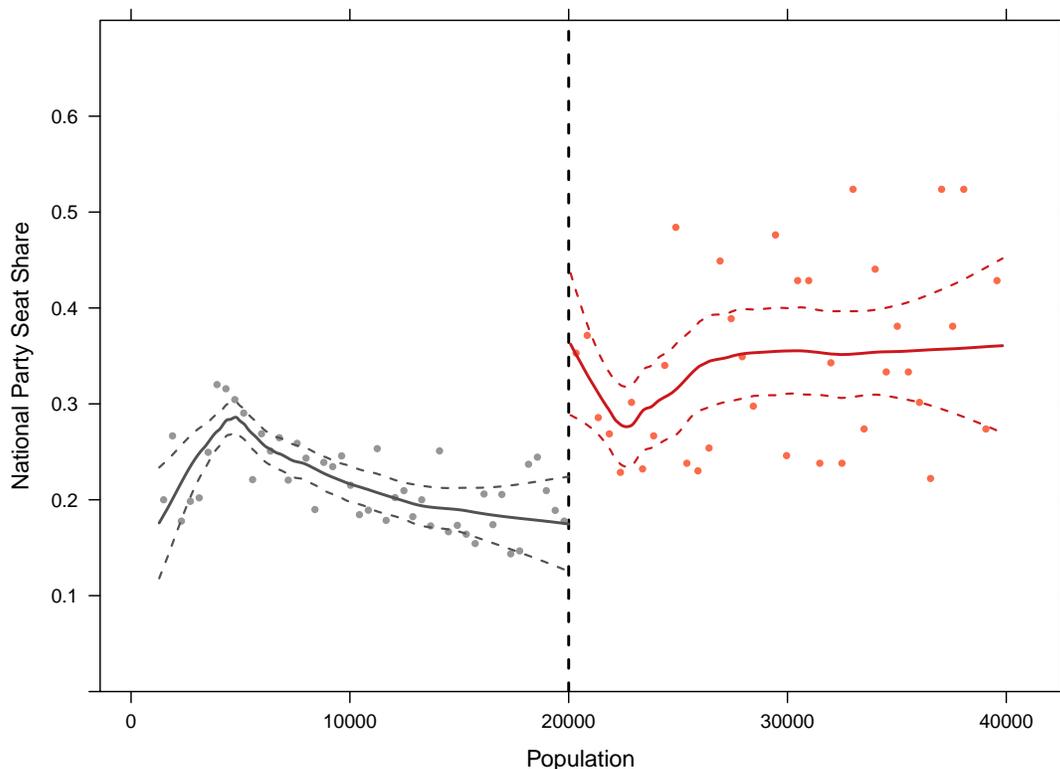
Figure 3 provides a graphical perspective on the impact of the change from SMD to PR on national party performance in local elections. It shows two local linear regression (loess) lines, along with their 95% confidence intervals—one set for those municipalities that retained SMD and one for those that adopted PR after the change to electoral law—regressing national party seat share (vertical axis) on population (horizontal axis). The dashed vertical line indicates the location of the 20,000 resident cut-point. The points represent mean outcome and population for municipalities binned according to population. There are 46 evenly-spaced bins on the left of the cut-point and 39 on the right.¹⁸ The conclusion to be drawn from this plot should be clear: the change from SMD to PR significantly increased the performance of national parties in local elections. This can be seen in the vertical distance between where the regression models meet the vertical cut-point. In this case, the distance represents an increase in national party seat share of approximately 15% (more than 3 seats on a 21 seat council), which is in line with the local non-parametric regression estimates presented below in Table 3.

Table 3 presents the estimated effects of a change from SMD to PR on the share of local council seats captured by national parties.¹⁹ These results use a local polynomial regression model, with bias corrected, robust standard errors and bandwidth calculated as in Calonico,

¹⁸Bins were defined following using the “evenly-spaced, mimicking variance” method of Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2015a). The local linear regression lines were fit with all of the data.

¹⁹ The results reported here exclude four municipalities, Dąbrowa Tarnowska, Boguchwała, Puck, Pyskowitz, and Pasłek. They were dropped because the number of the mandates recorded for these municipalities did not match the number they should have had given their populations recorded by the Central Statistical Office. For Pyskowitz, 15 mandates were reported, while it should have had 21 given its population greater than 20,000. The other three municipalities had reported populations below the cutpoint but 21 mandates were reported instead of 15, which would have been correct for their size. It is unclear why these municipalities had the incorrect number of mandates for their size, but it may be due to revisions in populations done by the Central Statistical Office in years following the change to electoral law. Because it was impossible to know why this apparent misclassification occurred, it was thought best to exclude these municipalities from the analysis. Finally, no election results were reported for Połczyn-Zdrój, thus it was also dropped from the analysis.

Figure 3: Regression Discontinuity Plot. The figure shows a local linear regression (loess) relating municipal population to national party seat share for each side of the discontinuity (vertical line). The points are the mean of binned observations (46 bins on the left, 39 on the right). Bin sizes were calculated using the ESMV method of Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2015a). The loess regression line was estimated with a span of 0.5 and degree 1 (linear) local polynomial. 95% confidence intervals are shown as dashed lines.



Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014).²⁰ The RD design estimates provide clear evidence in favor of the theory that local electoral institutions matter to the performance of national parties in those elections. As shown in Table 3, the change to PR increased the share of the seats won by national parties by an estimated average of 18% in those municipalities affected by the change in electoral law. Substantively, this is not an insignificant effect: for a 21 seat council, it represents an average increase of approximately 3.8 seats.²¹

²⁰The analysis was performed in R (3.2.0) using the `rdrobust` (0.80) package (Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2015b).

²¹These results are robust to changes in polynomial degree specification and bandwidth. In fact, for each of the alternative specifications using second-, third-, and fourth-degree local polynomial fits, the RD estimates were at least as substantively as strong as the local linear fit, while also maintaining statistical significance.

Table 3: Effects of a Change in Local Electoral Institutions on National Party Share of Local Council Seats. The table shows regression discontinuity estimates for the effect of a change from SMD to PR on national party share in local council seats.

Est.	Std. Err.	Conf. int.		Bandwidth	# obs.	
		lower	upper		left	right
0.180**	0.068	0.048	0.313	3972.3	111	85

First-degree local polynomial regression were estimated with robust standard errors, confidence intervals, and bandwidths calculated as in Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014). A triangular kernel was used and bias corrected robust standard errors were calculated with local polynomial regression of degree two used to calculate the effect estimates. ** $p < 0.01$

4.3 Robustness Checks

The evidence provided in the previous section suggest the change from SMD to PR had a significant effect on the performance of national parties in local elections in Poland. Furthermore, these results were strong and robust to different modeling assumptions. However, as with all modeling strategies and research designs, these inferences are based on strong assumptions about the data generating process. Possibly the most important assumption deals with possible sorting around the cut-point. Identification of effect estimates in an RD design are predicated on the random distribution of units around the cut-point. This identification assumption would be violated if units were able to manipulate their treatment status; i.e., if they were able to choose whether or not they received the treatment or not by manipulating their value on the forcing variable.

In the Polish case, sorting of municipalities around the 20,000 resident cut-point would occur if municipal governments (or other actors) were able to manipulate their population figures so that they could select into or out of the change to PR. In fact, there may have been some incentive for local elites to partake in this manipulation. First, if local leaders are already members of national parties, and if the theory is correct—national parties would do better under PR—then there would be an incentive for these leaders just below the threshold to increase their populations artificially in order to have their electoral system

Results available upon request.

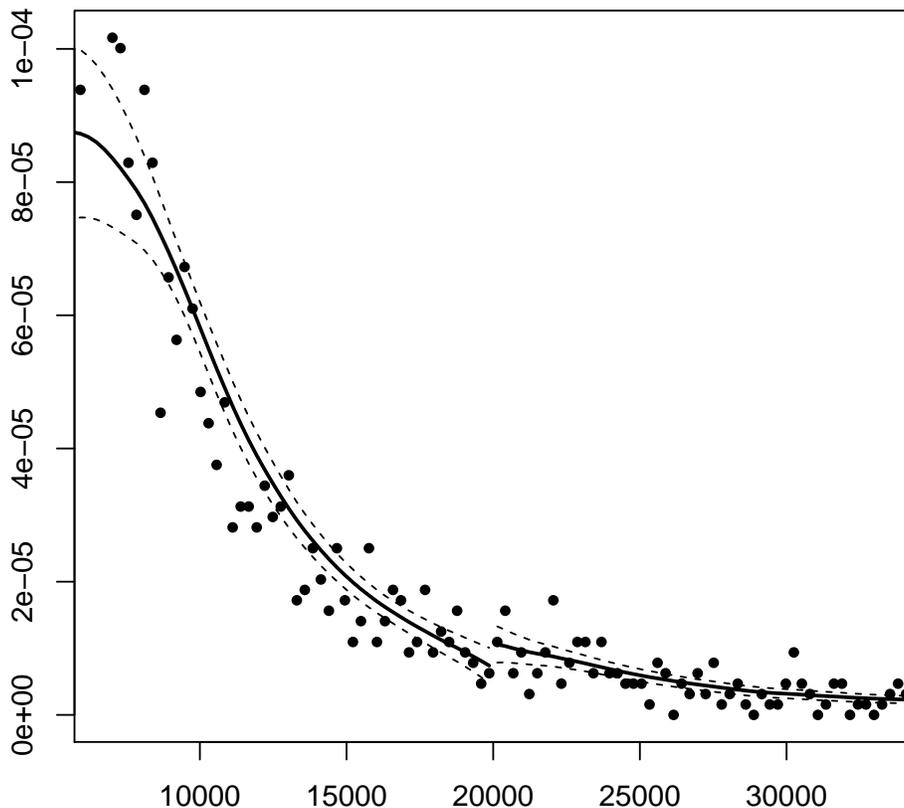
change to PR. Second, in municipalities without a large national party presence and with an entrenched local elite, there may be an incentive for leaders in municipalities just below the threshold to manipulate the population figures to avoid the change to PR. In each case, the significant effect estimates presented previously may be the result of PR being instituted in municipalities already inclined to vote for national parties or vice versa. If such sorting was occurring, it may manifest itself as a discontinuity at the cut-point in the forcing variable (municipal population) itself. To check for this, Figure 4 presents McCrary's (2008) test for sorting at the cut-point. The p -value for this test is 0.131, which suggests there is little evidence of sorting in municipal population at the 20,000 resident cut-point.

While the McCrary test did not uncover any obvious discontinuity in the municipal population at the cut-point, the test is not particularly suited for a situation where some municipalities may select themselves into the treatment (PR), while others simultaneously select themselves out (remain SMD); in other words, the scenario I outlined above where some elites may artificially increase their reported populations because they prefer PR, whereas others decrease their populations to retain SMD. When the sorting is similar on either both side of the cut-point, there may not be much of discontinuity in population to detect. One way of testing whether or not some municipalities near the cut-point may have selected into or out of the treatment is to look at the recorded population growth rates. If population growth between 1997 and 1998 is higher for those municipalities on the right side of the cut-point, this could be evidence for selection. Table 4 presents the results for this analysis.

The results shown in Table 4 suggest that just such a sorting may have occurred: municipalities above the cut-point saw higher levels of growth than those below it. Specifically, the local linear regression result (first line) shows an estimate of approximately 0.5% higher population growth on the right side of the cut-point than on the left. At this level of growth, a municipality with around 19,900 residents would be able to meet the cut-point and, thus, be assigned to the group of municipalities switching to PR.

On the face of it, these results are quite problematic for the theory that national parties perform better in local election under PR than they do under an SMD electoral system. If local or other elites were able to select into or out of PR, the previous analysis showing a large effect associated with switching to PR may hardly be surprising: where elites thought

Figure 4: McCrary (2008) Test for Population Sorting at the Cut-Point. The p -value for the test is 0.131, indicating that there is little evidence of such sorting.



PR would benefit them, they would attempt to select themselves into PR, but when they believe PR is against their interests, they would attempt to select out of the change to PR. However, the question remains: If this selection process did take place, how successful was it?

We can get some idea of how much sorting was taking place by looking closely at the municipalities around the cut-point. Table 5 shows all of the municipalities within 300 residents of the cut-point in 1997 and includes their populations as reported by the Polish Central Statistical Office in 1997 and 1998 as well as the growth rate between those two

Table 4: Effects of a Change in Local Electoral Institutions on National Party Share of Local Council Seats. The table shows regression discontinuity estimates for the effect of a change from SMD to PR on population growth.

Poly. degree	Est.	Std. Err.	Conf. int.		Bandwidth	# obs.	
			lower	upper		left	right
1	0.005**	0.002	0.001	0.008	4761.2	140	97
2	0.005*	0.002	0.000	0.010	6359.8	213	110
3	0.006*	0.003	0.001	0.012	9775.4	465	136
4	0.006*	0.003	0.000	0.012	12614.9	917	159

Degree 1–4 local polynomial regression were estimated with robust standard errors, confidence intervals, and bandwidths calculated as in Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014). A triangular kernel was used and bias corrected robust standard errors were calculated with local polynomial regression of degree one greater than that used to calculate the effect estimates. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

years.²² As the table shows, in just three municipalities was population growth between 1997 and 1998 high enough to push the municipality past the 20,000 resident cut-point. In no case did population decrease enough in a municipality for it to drop below the cut-point. What this suggests is that if political actors sought to sort themselves into their preferred electoral system, they were not particularly adept at doing so. In other words, while the results of Table 4 suggested it was possible that there was some sorting around the population cut-point, looking closely at the actual growth of municipalities around the cut-point indicates that any manipulation of population growth that may have occurred was not significant enough to change the results of the previous analysis.²³

4.4 Regional Party Participation in Local Elections

The analysis in Section 4.2 shows a strong relationship between the local electoral system and the performance of national parties in local elections in Poland. In municipalities that were forced to adopt PR, national parties were able to capture a greater proportion (approximately

²²This table excludes those municipalities discussed in footnote 19.

²³To verify that there was not any intentional sorting in the three municipalities indicated in Table 5, I excluded them from the sample and estimated the RD model again. The estimated effect of moving from SMD to PR was 0.174 with a 95% confidence interval of [0.034, 0.315]. This is in-line with the results reported in Table 3 and Figure 3.

Table 5: Population and Population Growth of Municipalities Close to the Cut-Point, 1997–1998.

Municipality	Population		Growth 1997–98	Passed cut-point
	1997	1998		
Warka	19727	19742	0.001	
Słubice	19754	19924	0.009	
Sierpc	19841	19857	0.001	
Żukowo	19869	20285	0.021	✓
Łańcut	19891	20087	0.010	✓
Hrubieszów	19962	20157	0.010	✓
Olesno	19972	19995	0.001	
Tarnów	20045	20298	0.013	
Czerwonak	20123	20478	0.018	
Czarny Dunajec	20153	20305	0.008	
Pyrzyce	20182	20270	0.004	
Czersk	20212	20199	−0.001	
Biskupiec	20220	20320	0.005	
Grodków	20221	20206	−0.001	
Tuchola	20234	20328	0.005	
Gołdap	20300	20390	0.004	

18% greater) of local council seats than they did in those that retained plurality voting. Overall, this is strong support for the theory that local electoral systems matter to the ability for national parties to penetrate local elections. However, these results also raise further questions about the mechanisms linking the electoral system to national party performance. Specifically, the left panel of Figure 3 reveals an interesting relationship between municipal population size and the performance of national parties in local council elections. As shown, population size is *negatively* related to national party performance for those municipalities below the 20,000 resident cut-point (i.e., the slope of the line is negative), while for those above the cut-point the relationship is *positive*.

What could account for this change in relationship between population and national party seat share above and below the 20,000 resident threshold? The data point to an explanation for this in the emergence of regional parties in larger municipalities below the cut-point, which

appear to compete against national parties for local politicians and overall vote share.²⁴ Some evidence for this was shown previously in Table 2. As reported, 521 different parties were active in between 2 and 81 municipalities, which also had an average municipal population somewhat larger than in those municipalities where local parties (those only active in a single municipality) competed. On average, regional parties competed in municipalities with approximately 19,000 residents, while local parties were active in municipalities with an average of around 15,000 residents.

More formally, Table 6 presents four regression models relating regional party participation and performance to municipal population above and below the 20,000 resident population threshold. Models (1) and (2) are logistic regression models that regress an indicator of regional party participation on the 1998 municipal population. For model (1), the regression coefficient is positive and statistically significant, indicating that in municipalities below the cut-point, regional parties are more likely to be active in local elections as municipal population increases. In terms of predicted probabilities, an increase in municipal population from 10,000 residents to the 20,000 is associated with an increase in the predicted probability of participation from approximately 0.54 to 0.68. On the other hand, for municipalities above the cut-point, model (2) indicates that there is little evidence for a relationship between population and the probability that a regional party participated in a local election.

To determine whether regional parties are able to compete successfully against national parties in these elections, models (3) and (4) in Table 6 regress the difference between national and regional party performance (measured as the share of council seats won) on municipal population.²⁵ For those municipalities below the 20,000 resident cut-point, the coefficient on population is negative and significant, indicating that a 1,000 resident increase in municipal population is associated with an increase in relative performance of the regional parties of approximately 0.9%. Once again, for the model explaining relative electoral performance in municipalities above the cut-point, the coefficient for population is not significantly significant.

Figure 5 provides another perspective on the performance of local, regional, and national

²⁴I want to thank William Minozzi for making this suggestion.

²⁵The dependent variable is measured as National Share - Regional Share; thus, a negative value indicates a higher share went to regional parties.

Table 6: Activity of Regional Parties and Performance Relative to National Parties by Municipal Population, 2002 Polish Local Elections. The first two logistic regression models estimate the probability of a regional party being active in local elections given the municipal population size for those below (1) and above (2) the 20,000 cut-point. Models (3) and (4) are OLS regressions of the difference in national and regional seat shares won on municipal population.

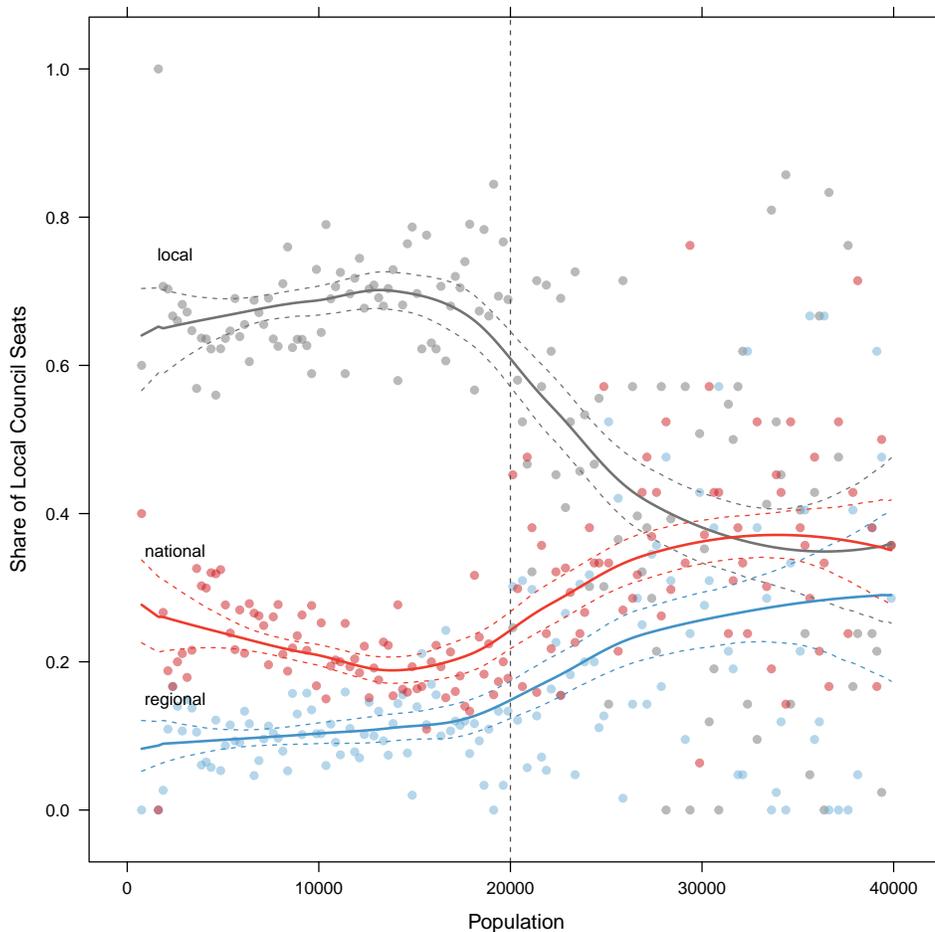
	Logit		OLS	
	Below (1)	Above (2)	Below (3)	Above (4)
(Intercept)	-0.493*** (0.098)	0.459 (0.912)	21.191*** (1.492)	20.887* (10.165)
Population (1998; 000's)	0.063*** (0.011)	0.035 (0.034)	-0.882*** (0.171)	-0.411 (0.373)
<i>p</i>	0.000	0.295	0.000	0.272
N	2150	195	2149	195

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

parties relative to the municipal population. The points in the figure show mean council seat shares for these three party categories binned according to population. The solid lines are bootstrapped local regression fits, with the dashed lines indicating 95% confidence intervals.²⁶ Three observations can be made from this figure. First, it is clear that performance of local parties drops considerably at the cut-point. For example, at 10,000 residents in SMD elections, local parties capture around 70% of all council seats, while in municipalities of 30,000 residents and PR, local parties capture approximately 40% of seats, on average. Second, as the regression models also show, regional party performance increases relative to national party performance up to the 20,000 resident threshold, at which point the performance of regional and national parties both increase in step, taking share from local parties. Third, regional parties interestingly never out-perform national parties. What this suggests is that

²⁶The width of each bin was 250 residents. 2,500 bootstrap samples were used to calculate the predicted loess means (solid lines) and confidence intervals (dashed lines). For the loess estimates, a span of 0.75 and tricubic weights were used.

Figure 5: Local Council Seat Share Plots for Local, Regional, and National Parties. Points are mean seat shares binned by population (width=250). Local parties are in grey, regional parties in blue, and national parties in red. Lines are bootstrapped loess curves (2,500 samples; span=0.75; tricubic weights), where the solid lines are the mean loess predictions and dashed lines represent 95% confidence bands. Vertical dashed line represents the 20,000 resident cut-point.



5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that local electoral institutions matter to national party development. I have argued that by shaping the incentives for local politicians to attach themselves to national parties and, in turn, by altering the incentives for national parties to get involved in local elections, local electoral institutions can play an important—and largely unrecognized—role in the process of party system institutionalization. I have provided em-

empirical support for this argument by taking advantage of a unique electoral discontinuity in Poland to show that a change from SMD to PR has a significant effect on the penetration of national parties into local politics. Specifically, using a regression discontinuity design, I have shown that a change from SMD to PR has the effect of increasing national parties' share of local council seats by an estimated 18%. This strong result is robust to changes in model specification and to potential sorting at the population discontinuity.

The results presented here are closely related to recent research by Tavits (2012, 2011). However, while she focuses on the importance of party organization (including at the local level) and MP independence, which is conditioned by the strength of local party organizations, my argument points to the ways in which parties may become organized in the first place. As has been argued elsewhere (Kopecký 1995), party development in East-Central Europe has been largely neglected by national politicians, who are more likely to use the relatively cheap (in effort as well as money) mass media to win elections than they are to spend the resources necessary to build long-term grassroots party organizations. By shaping the incentives for local politicians to seek out a national party label, local electoral rules may play an important role in shaping the context through which national parties become engaged in local politics.

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