

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

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## Abstract

Political parties are often argued to be the central organizing force in American politics. Yet, most governments in the United States—nearly all at the local level—are formally nonpartisan. How is politics organized in these contexts? Is it always chaotic and factional, as existing evidence predicts, or can it ever resemble the type of highly-organized, electorally-accountable legislative environments that scholars typically associate with parties? In this paper, I document an empirical context—the city and county of San Francisco—where existing theory about nonpartisan government predicts poorly. Drawing on nearly 50 years of roll call votes, along with data on both newspaper coverage and the preferences of local voters, I show that legislative behavior in San Francisco is organized around two longstanding, party-like coalitions—one moderate, the other progressive—and that the electoral connection remains intact despite the lack of formal parties. Importantly, while this type of highly-structured, progressive-oriented political system is rare for nonpartisan governments, I show that it is unlikely to be unique, and that other nonpartisan municipalities across the country exhibit similar behavior. My findings highlight the value of extending studies of legislative institutions to the local level and provide strong evidence that representation is possible even in the absence of partisan elections.

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# 1 Introduction

In 1859, outside the city of San Francisco, California, state Supreme Court Justice David Terry killed Senator David Broderick in a duel. The two men, formerly friends, were both Democrats, but the factions within their party—organized around support and opposition to slavery—ultimately led to Broderick’s demise (Hittell 1878, 305–309). In San Francisco today, duels are hardly a common occurrence within local politics, yet contention among Democrats remains. Indeed, politics in the city today, as typically described by scholarly and media accounts, is a battle between two factions: one progressive, the other moderate (DeLeon 1992). Yet, despite the conventional wisdom that this cleavage underlies politics in San Francisco, elections in the city are formally nonpartisan and, by most theoretical accounts, this lack of institutionalized parties should inhibit the development of cohesive legislative coalitions and impede representation (Wright and Schaffner 2002; Jenkins 1999; Key 1949). In other words, though voters may have progressive inclinations, there is little reason to expect these preferences to support the type of ‘responsible’ coalitions that scholars tend to associate exclusively with parties (APSA 1950).

What happens to legislative behavior and representation when government is formally nonpartisan? Is it always chaotic and factional, as existing evidence predicts, or can it ever yield highly-organized coalitions and a robust electoral connection instead? Although previous research on nonpartisan legislatures has found little evidence of either of these features absent parties, there is reason to believe that these results are not universal. Indeed, the number of contexts where these questions have been considered is relatively slim, particularly compared to the significant number of nonpartisan governments—nearly 70,000 in total—across the country. Moreover, of these nonpartisan governments, the vast majority are 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. What remains unclear, however, is whether these incentives can ever translate into the type of organized political behavior that schol-

ars have typically only found in the presence of parties and, if so, what consequences this legislative organization might have for democratic accountability and representation.

To answer these questions and identify the bounds of what is possible within nonpartisan government, I focus my analysis on a nonpartisan context that is, by many accounts, most likely to exhibit party-like behavior: the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. With a long history of progressive activism in the city and both popular and academic narratives of a significant progressive/moderate cleavage, if San Francisco were to resemble the disorganized nonpartisan governments studied previously, it would cast significant doubt on the idea that legislative organization and representation can exist in a robust manner without parties.

To conduct my analysis and track coalitional stability and change in San Francisco over time, I collect roll call voting records from 1970 to 2017 and coverage of the Board of Supervisor’s activities by the San Francisco Chronicle from 1985 to 2017. I combine these records with measures designed to capture the relative progressivism of electoral districts in San Francisco 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 from a set of 106 nonpartisan cities and counties from 2012 to 2017, along with records of media coverage from 70 of the 115 largest cities starting as early as 1982.

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 and the state legislatures. 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 it has strengthened significantly over time, such that differences between progressives and

moderates now explain nearly the full scope of issues facing the chamber. Notably, though the progressive/moderate divide has grown significantly starker over the past 30 years, the longitudinal changes appear largely unrelated to the many institutional changes to election rules that the city has implemented over this time span. Rather, the increasing significance of this cleavage has occurred gradually, corresponding with both historical accounts of incremental progressive institutionalization and changes in patterns of media coverage.

Second, I show that the presence of these legislative coalitions is not without consequence. Specifically, between 2000 and 2016, when the city elected supervisors by district, I document an extremely high correlation between the relative progressivism of each district and the voting behavior of their supervisor. In other words, voters appear to be cognizant of the differences in candidate alignment and, perhaps as a result, receiving precisely the type of representation that they are voting for, with progressives representing progressive districts and moderates representing moderate districts. This alignment between districts and representatives shows that representation is indeed possible without formal parties and that the development and institutionalization of strong coalitions can yield seemingly high-quality democratic outcomes.

Taken together, the evidence shows 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 cities and counties resemble this seemingly unique context? In the final section, I compare the patterns observed in San Francisco to a larger set of local governments, showing that organized legislative behavior and progressive politics are not isolated to this single example. These findings contribute to our understanding of the local policymaking process and highlight that the bounds of nonpartisan government may not be as narrow as existing evidence predicts. Indeed, in many ways, San Francisco has been a leader in local policy for decades, and so if other cities are beginning to resemble it along these dimensions, then this study may very well be a precursor of the type of highly organized, ideological local government to come.

## 2 How Nonpartisan Elections Influence Legislative Behavior and Representation

Political parties are central to understanding legislative behavior and representation in the United States. Indeed, by developing and leveraging powers designed to protect their image and influence (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005), political parties push each facet of legislative conflict to fall predominantly along party lines, creating a system along the way that many scholars have argued supports democratic accountability and responsible government (APSA 1950). Accordingly, in the small set of nonpartisan legislative environments that scholars have studied, they have found that—absent party institutions—legislative behavior becomes disorganized. This disorganization, in turn, has been found to sever the electoral connection between voters and their representatives, diminish the quality of representation, and impede long-term planning and policymaking (Wright and Schaffner 2002; Jenkins 1999; Key 1949).

Yet, while common wisdom has come to view nonpartisan governments as inherently less organized than their partisan counterparts, there is little theoretical reason to believe that this will always be the case. Though the bar to creating and sustaining a legislative coalition may be higher in nonpartisan contexts, especially given the lack of certain election-oriented tools like party labels on the ballot (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001) and control over nominations (Cohen et al. 2008), groups of all kind should still have an incentive to organize within nonpartisan systems. Indeed, by either of the two dominant theories of party formation—parties as a means of solving social choice problems (Aldrich 1995) or parties as groups of policy demanders (Bawn et al. 2012)—there remains a significant political incentive for groups to develop coalitions, even if they cannot formally adopt a partisan election system. These benefits include both a higher likelihood of passing favorable policy when in power and a broader base of support to potentially draw upon come election time. Of course, existing theory is hardly ignorant of this point: Bawn (1999), for example, finds that a diverse range of ideologies can support long coalitions, independent of the institutional context and, in

certain cases, despite significant common interest. However, empirically, researchers have found little evidence of this type of behavior in practice.

Still, the implication of this logic is that while politically beneficial coalitions may very well be easier to form and sustain when institutionalized within the election system as parties, parties are hardly a necessary condition for constructing long-term coalitions or facilitating responsible representation. Instead, the sources of these outcomes appear to be a function of both incentives—e.g., realistic competition and tangible differences in preferences across groups—and organizational capacity, particularly the ability to mobilize voters and support candidates come election time (Aldrich 1995; Wright and Schaffner 2002; Key 1949). Thus, coalitions of this kind need to work to develop precisely the type of institutional power that is often found within partisan governments. And indeed, recent evidence suggests that, in certain nonpartisan contexts, this has taken place to a degree. For example, Masket and Shor (2015) show that in recent terms in the Nebraska nonpartisan state legislature, state party organizations have leveraged the adoption of term limits to develop funding networks that have 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 reinstated partisan elections.

In both of the above examples, we see the nationalized party system being recreated within a subnational nonpartisan unit. Recent work by Caughey (2018) on the Solid South shows that this hierarchical party influence can indeed be a powerful force, facilitating an electoral connection in a functionally nonpartisan context by forcing representatives to operate within a structured partisan environment once in office. As local politics has become increasingly nationalized and partisan in recent years (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Einstein and Kogan 2015; Einstein and Glick 2016; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016), these forces may push local political actors to behave in a more ideological manner, consistent with this nationalized party system. Still, while this would suggest that local

politics should resemble national politics in many ways, the separation between levels of the federal system provides an opportunity for groups to forge coalitions that are adjacent to the national party system by incorporating or addressing the unique aspects of local policy.

In practice, the logic of nonpartisan governance documented in this section suggests that when diverse interests put in the sustained effort to develop a coalition and inform voters of their distinct policy preferences that nonpartisan government should look akin to partisan government, both in terms of legislative behavior and in patterns of representation. In the rest of this paper, I test this proposition in one particular nonpartisan context: San Francisco.

### **3 Background: Progressive Politics in San Francisco**

Given that there are approximately 70,000 nonpartisan governments across the country, why should we study the government of San Francisco specifically? The primary reason to do so is that San Francisco represents one of the most likely cases for identifying organized legislative behavior and a strong electoral connection in the absence of formal parties. Given that the literature is largely devoid of such an example, examining a most likely case of this kind allows me to test the bounds of existing theory. Indeed, given the favorable conditions, if the San Francisco Board of Supervisors is relatively disorganized and the quality of representation is poor, then it would suggest that our current understanding of nonpartisan governance is theoretically sound. If, however, voting within the chamber is highly predictable and legislators appear to represent their constituencies well, then it would show that nonpartisan government may be more dynamic than our existing evidence implies.

What makes San Francisco a high quality test case for a study of legislative behavior and representation? There are three 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 that is commonly found at the state and national levels. 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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 residents and preserving the status quo. Yet, with both cost-of-living and local inequality rising, you could also imagine that progressives would be the ones who would most push for more housing development to lower rents and ease the burden on middle- and low-income residents. That this isn’t 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 were able to solidify them into a broad-based progressive movement that appears to be increasingly important for local politics in San Francisco (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 representation. Elites

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<sup>1</sup>As quoted in DeLeon (1992, 97).



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, representing only a narrow subset of their constituency. Still, the expansion of progressive influence and the history of organizing by progressive groups within the city over time implies that the movement likely has sufficient organizational capacity to consolidate a legislative coalition, inform voters of their distinct views, and mobilize them within electoral contests.

Second, San Francisco has experimented with different institutional arrangements throughout the period of study, switching back and forth between district and at-large election systems twice, and switching to ranked choice (or instant runoff) voting in 2004. Given the recent evidence that changes in institutions or the presence of specific institutions might allow for party-like behavior in nonpartisan governments (Masket and Shor 2015), studying a context in which the electoral institutions change over time provides for some leverage to understand how influential the institutional context might be for legislative behavior and representation.

Finally, 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 ideological local government 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 becoming more like it, not less, suggests that the organization of politics there may be a good barometer for what is to come in other local governments moving forward.

## 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.<sup>2</sup> For the more recent years, 1999 onward, I gather the data directly from the city’s online legislative management platform, Legistar, which publicly hosts information about all of the bills that have been introduced in the chamber since the recording system went online.<sup>3</sup>

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).<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> Unlike the term-specific measures generated by using W-Nominate, 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

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<sup>2</sup>These records can be accessed from at: <https://sfbos.org/1999-1906>. The records are posted in a variety of formats, including a text file that has been created via Optical Character Recognition (OCR). I extract the votes from these text files by iteratively searching for keywords that indicate a roll call vote has occurred. I then hand-correct habitual OCR errors to minimize the number of missing votes. Some error, however, may still remain, but it is unlikely to be correlated with the quantities of interest in this paper.

<sup>3</sup>This platform can be found at: <https://sfgov.legistar.com/>

<sup>4</sup>In Appendix B, I show the the high level of model fit is not a function of the specific scaling method, and that there is essentially no difference in the results if I use Optimal Classification, a nonparametric scaling method, instead (Poole 2000).

<sup>5</sup>I conduct the scaling using the implementation of the Martin and Quinn (2002) model in the R package MCMCpack. The estimation is conducted via a Markov Chain Monte Carlo sampler. I run the model for 70,000 iterations total, with the initial 20,000 as burn-in, which typical MCMC diagnostics suggest is sufficient for convergence in this case.

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](http://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.’<sup>6</sup> 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 progressive cleavage is meaningful for politics during this time period, then we would expect the San Francisco Chronicle to reflect this importance in its coverage of local politics. While some of the mentions may, of course, be erroneous references to national politics or simply reflect the consideration of a particular progressive piece of legislation, a sustained shift in coverage over time is likely to represent a more systematic change in political dynamics.

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). Each of these ‘Progressive Voter Indexes’ were constructed by Richard DeLeon and David Latterman, in tandem and alone, 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, before providing evidence that the resulting measure

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<sup>6</sup>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’.

corresponds with progressive voting, as they conceive of it. 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 .8 (Latterman 2015). For all analyses, I aggregate these indexes to the district level using the mean across all precincts within that district.<sup>7</sup>

## 5 Legislative Behavior in San Francisco, 1970 to 2016

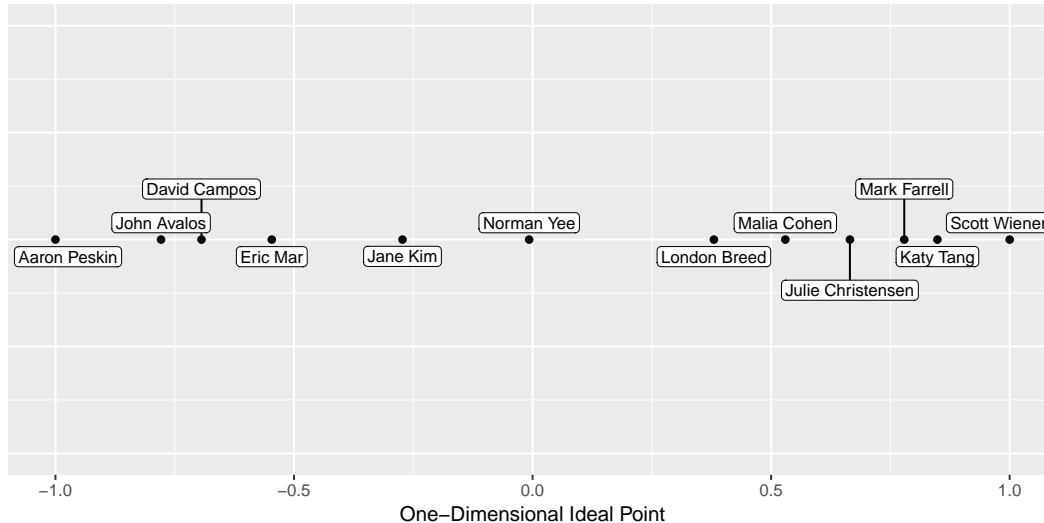
How organized are patterns of voting in the San Francisco Board of Supervisors? Existing evidence on nonpartisan government suggests that legislative behavior should be relatively disorganized despite the popular conception of politics as a battle between progressives and moderates. Empirically, this should result in a one-dimensional spatial model fitting the data poorly because coalitions should be relatively unstable across issues. That is, multiple dimensions should, in theory, be needed to fully explain politics within the legislature. 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 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

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<sup>7</sup>All results remain the same if I use the median instead

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



percent of votes correctly classified, and the percent of nay votes correctly classified. The 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 using the estimated model compared to a null model where all legislators are assumed to vote with the majority.<sup>8</sup> In addition, though not a common diagnostic, I include the percent of nay votes correctly classified to account for the fact that if many votes are lopsided, the model might predict votes at a high rate, on average, but predict the votes of those in the minority significantly worse.

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

<sup>8</sup>Thus, for all votes in a legislature, the APRE is calculated as:

$$\frac{\sum_{i=1}^q (\text{Minority Votes} - \text{Classification Errors})_i}{\sum_{i=1}^q \text{Minority Votes}_i}$$

where  $\text{Minority Votes}_i$  is the number of legislators voting in the minority for vote  $i$  and  $\text{Classification Errors}_i$  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

at 92 percent). Turning to the APRE, we see that the model reduces classification errors relative to a null model where all voters 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 (2015–2016).<sup>9</sup> Across all measures, the model fits equally well in San Francisco, if not better, than what we see in Congress. As Bucchianeri (2018b) explains, 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 certainly a more organized environment than existing theory would predict.

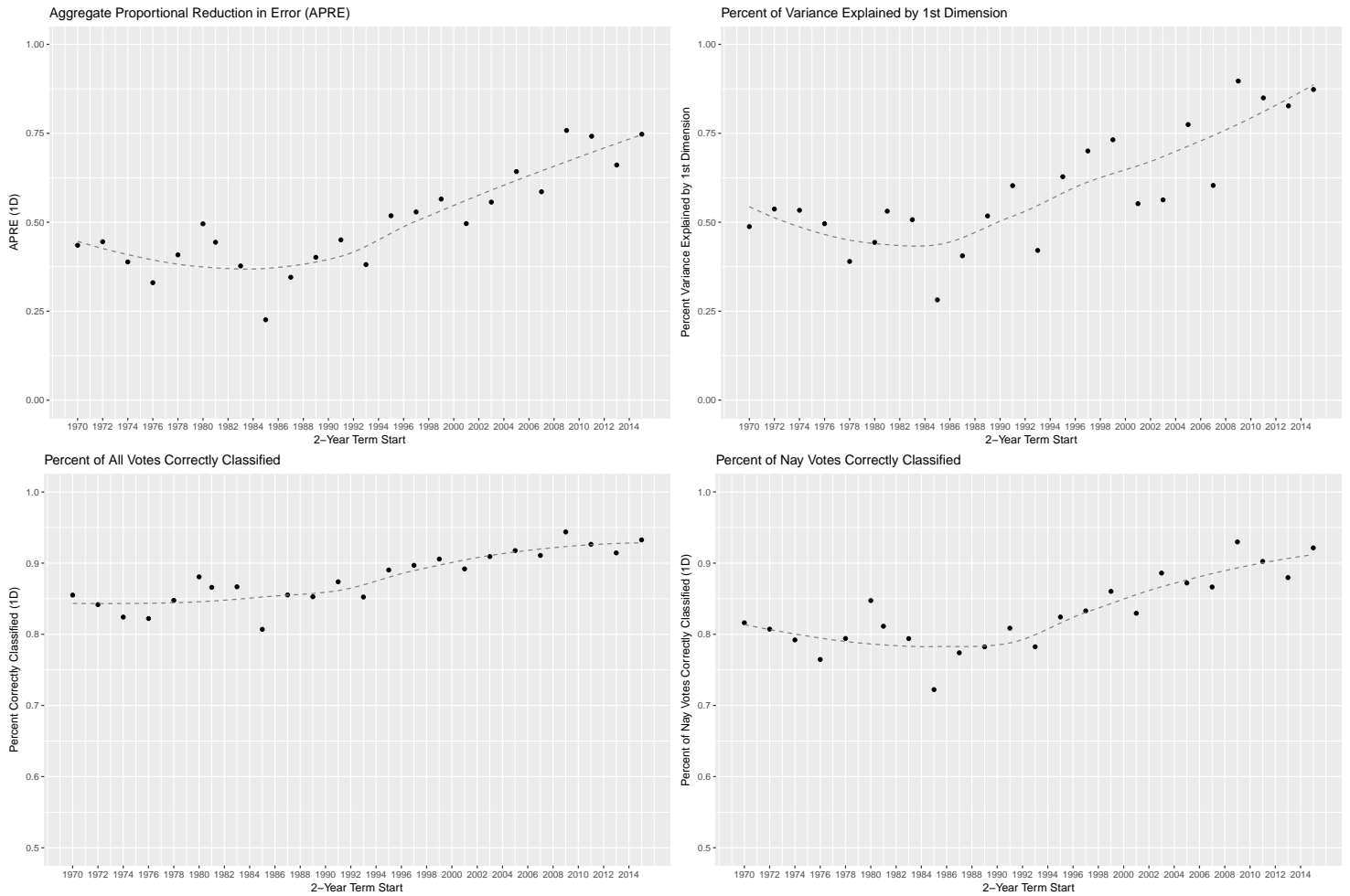
Is the most recent Board of Supervisors term an anomaly? Or has politics in San Francisco always been this organized? Figure 2 depicts the same four measures of fit as shown in Table 1 but for each term from 1970 onward. There are three important points about what is depicted in Figure 2. First, San 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.

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 30 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

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<sup>9</sup>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 Salience 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, the city’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 Agnos’s campaign is that, for the first time, he was 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 and enduring bureaucratic influence within policymaking. And, notably, it is precisely during and immediately following Agnos’s term where patterns of legislative behavior begin to become more coordinated.



This shift in influence permeates not just historical accounts but is also reflected in changing patterns of media coverage. 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 write-in candidate for mayor in 1999, gaining 25 percent of the vote in a crowded first round before losing in the run-off. Indeed, in the aftermath, 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).<sup>10</sup> 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 the evidence suggests has only grown starker since that time.<sup>11</sup>

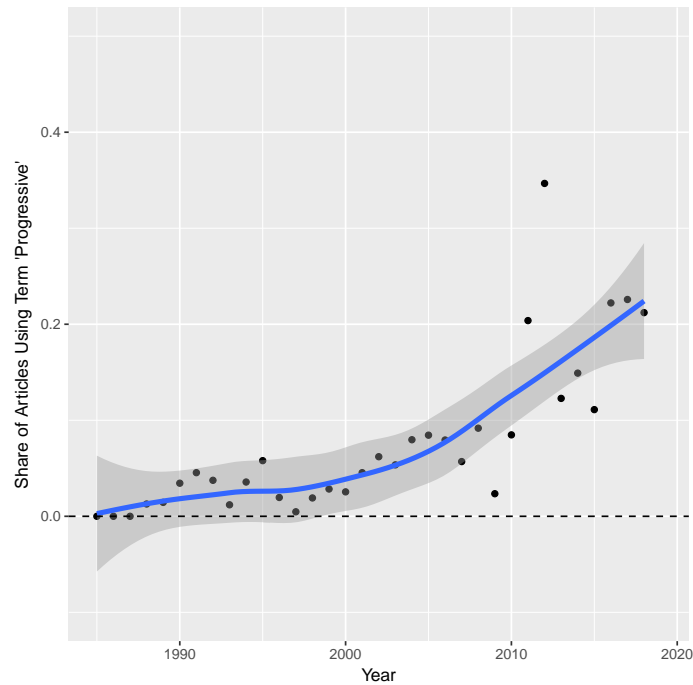
Thus, to the extent that news coverage can capture relative power or significance within politics, as some scholars have recently argued (Ban et al. 2018), then this steep rise in the number of articles characterizing the board’s politics in progressive terms supports the notion that this cleavage grew 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 that the progressive coalition did not just emerge with a coherent brand or agenda overnight. Rather, the evidence is consistent

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<sup>10</sup>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>

<sup>11</sup>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



with a coalition of diverse interests that had to develop the capacity to influence politics. And 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.

## 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 spatial model estimated on all of the roll call votes from the 2000 election onward.<sup>12</sup> Figure

<sup>12</sup>I use only a subset of the records as validating group membership becomes increasingly difficult the further back in time. Moreover, this period aligns with the board’s shift to district elections and, as such, the analysis of representation that follows.

4 depicts ideal points for all members of the board during this time period.<sup>13</sup> Each point represents the ideal point of a specific member during a particular term, with the points for each member connected over time.

If the progressive-moderate divide is at the center of conflict in the board of Supervisors, we should expect to see members from each group cluster together over time. And indeed, throughout the entire time period depicted, legislators who local reporters typically describe as progressive are on the lower half of the plot, while those considered moderates are on the top half.<sup>14</sup> In addition, 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 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> Most importantly, however, all of these progressive and moderate endorsements align with the cleavage 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

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

<sup>14</sup>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.

<sup>15</sup>San Francisco Bay Guardian. “Endorsements! The case for six progressive supes, Kim for state Senate...” <https://goo.gl/v5rKQN>

<sup>16</sup>San Francisco Moderates. “Endorsements.” 2014: <https://goo.gl/BLWGmJ>. 2016: <https://goo.gl/A5UKTo>



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 institutional capacity in direct competition with each other. Indeed, that the progressive coalition, which has been the newcomer trying to establish itself during this period, formed out of existing organized interests provided the framework necessary to mobilize voters and aid 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 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 create 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 similar to 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 nonpartisan governance. Indeed, existing evidence suggests that the link between voters and representatives can become severed in nonpartisan contexts (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Wright and Schaffner 2002; Simpson 2001). In practice, this could result in members responding more to narrow interests or wealthy residents instead of the average voter (Einstein, Palmer, and Glick 2018; Bucchianeri and Weitz 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 anal-

ysis, 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 somewhat. 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, but specific representation gaps may remain.

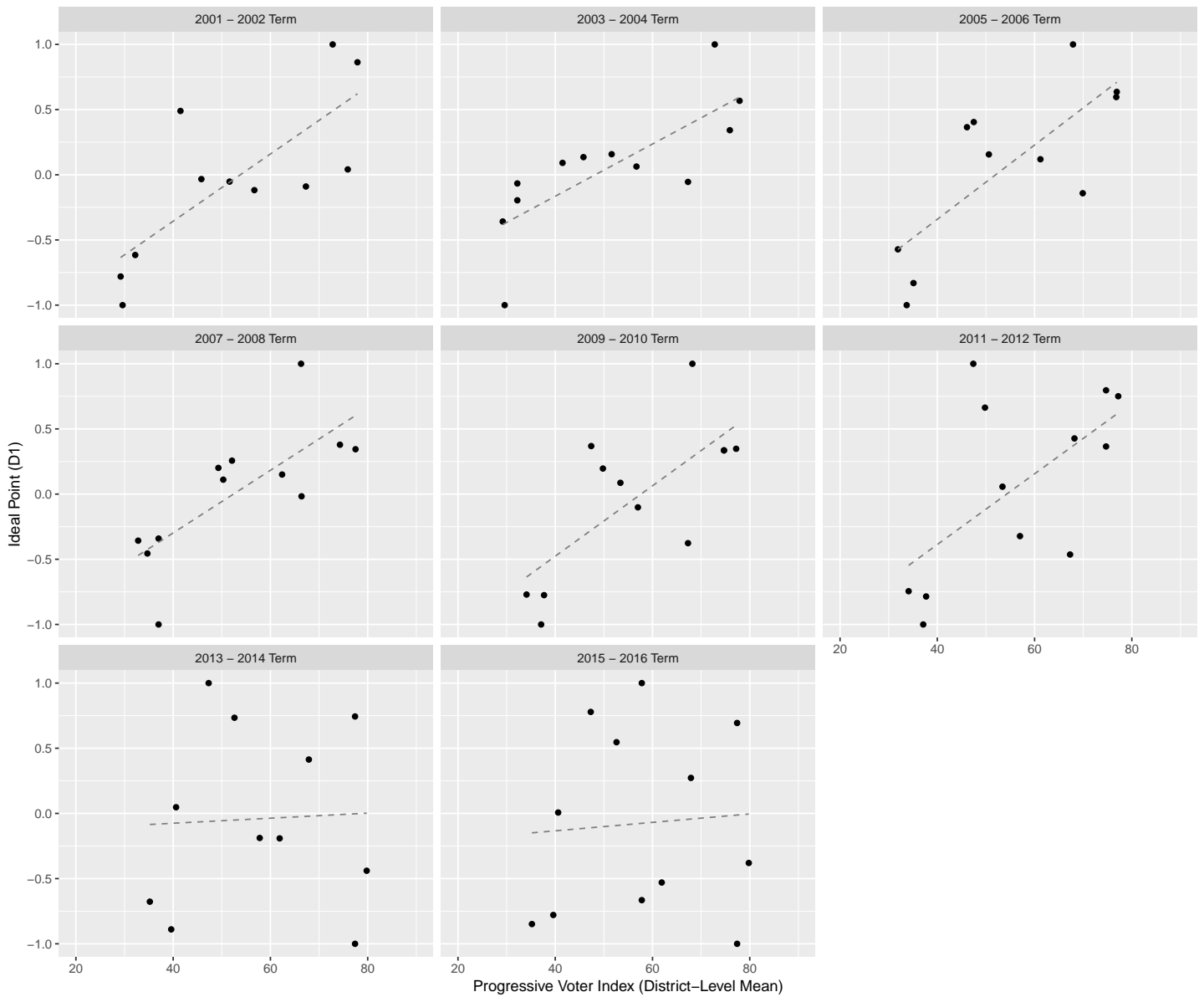
Figure 5 shows the simple bivariate relationship between the estimated ideal points for each term of the Board of Supervisors and the progressive voter index that most closely overlaps with that specific time period.<sup>18</sup> To simplify the interpretation, I invert the ideal points so that a higher value of both measures indicates a more progressive-leaning supervisor or district. 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 .6. 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 balanced between progressives and moderates. However, these errors are modest and the broader trend suggests that the electoral connection in San Francisco is relatively robust.

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<sup>17</sup>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; and second, the alignment between the earliest progressive voter index and each term would become increasingly distant, potentially introducing substantial error into the analysis.

<sup>18</sup>I use the ideal points estimated via W-Nominate for this analysis.

Figure 5: Relationship Between Electoral District and Supervisor Progressivism



Interestingly, the two most recent terms, 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 .2. Further time will tell whether this change is a systematic deviation in representation or a feature of measurement error.

## **7 Is San Francisco an Anomalous Case?**

The evidence in the previous sections suggests that—compared to the population of non-partisan legislatures that have been studied—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, particularly compared the huge number of local governments in the United States, there is good reason to doubt that what we have observed in San Francisco is an isolated example. In this section, I compare how the political context in San Francisco compares to other local governments across the country, both in terms of the city’s high level of legislative organization and the progressive cleavage that underlies its politics. Overall, the evidence suggests that although the political context in San Francisco is uncommon, it is hardly unique, with a number of other local governments



showing similarly high levels of legislative organization and a growing set of large cities seeing a progressive shift in their politics.

## 7.1 Do Other Governments Exhibit Similar Levels of Legislative Organization?

First, to put the dimensionality of legislative behavior in San Francisco in context, I begin by comparing 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 106 other nonpartisan cities and counties. The roll call data used for this analysis was gathered directly from each local government’s website by Bucchianeri (2018b) and spans from January 2012 to April 2017. In total, these records include 212,682 recorded roll call votes, with five percent of those votes being contested in each city, on average.<sup>19</sup> 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 more unequal than the population.<sup>20</sup> 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.

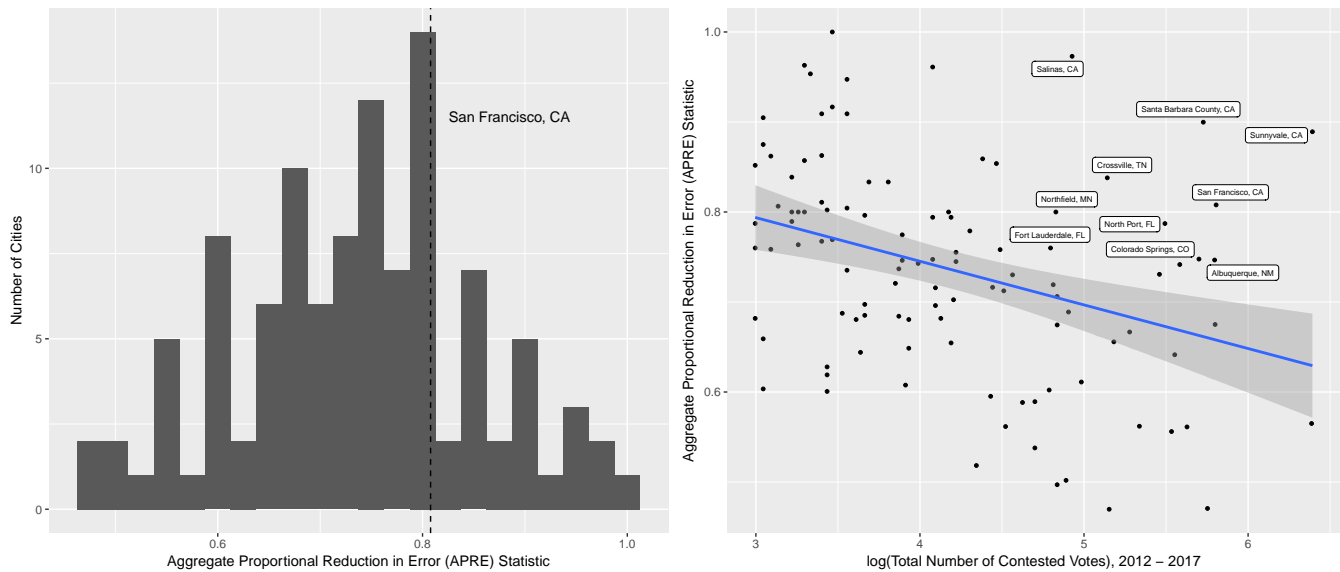
Figure 6 compares the Aggregate Proportional Reduction in Error (APRE) statistics for each of the 107 cities and counties, including San Francisco, in the sample. The APRE statistic, which is also shown in Figure 2, measures how effective the model is at explaining patterns of voting compared to a null model where all legislators are assumed to vote in the majority. A value of .81, for example, which is the value estimated for San Francisco by pooling the votes from 2012 to 2017, implies that using the results of the spatial model to

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<sup>19</sup>While this share of contested votes may seem low, the records for many cities include votes on every item before the council, include a significant amount of routine business such as individual zoning items and contract approvals.

<sup>20</sup>For more details on the characteristics of the sample, see Bucchianeri (2018b)

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



predicts votes in the city results in an 81 percent reduction in incorrect predictions compared to simply assuming unanimity. 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 C, I show comparisons for the other three statistics shown in Figure 2; the results yield similar 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 22 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. Indeed, Bucchianeri (2018b) shows that there is a modest, negative relationship between the number of contested votes and the fit of a spatial model, and San Francisco has 332 contested votes during this time period. 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 that are on par with San Francisco. For example, Crossville, TN; Sunnyvale, CA; Albuquerque, NM; and a number of other local governments exhibit behavior that is as organized as San Francisco and with a similar number of contested votes. Taken together, 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 share of local governments for which legislative behavior is akin to what we observe within partisan governments.

## **7.2 Have Other Cities Seen an Increase in Local Progressivism?**

How unique is the progressive cleavage that underlies San Francisco politics? On the one hand, recent scholarship has found that local politics is increasingly nationalized, with a growing role for partisan ideology (Hopkins 2018; Einstein and Glick 2016; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014) and, in certain cases, local progressivism (Clavel 2010; Bucchianeri 2018a). On the other hand, there are a large number of groups and cleavages that scholars of local politics have identified as significant for local voting and policy development, most notably race (Kaufmann 2004; Marschall and Ruhil 2007; Hajnal and Trounstine 2014; Trounstine 2016), and these other divides may be more common in the population of cities at-large.

To evaluate how widespread the progressive shift observed in San Francisco might be, I return to patterns in media coverage. Unfortunately, the universe of newspapers is not accessible in the database of newspapers that I use, so for this analysis I focus on a set of 70 of the 115 most populous cities in the country. To generate this sample, I match each city to the daily newspaper with the largest circulation in its metropolitan area. When one or more cities share a region, I select the paper among those with the highest circulation that best targets each specific city, cross-checking the frequency of local coverage in each newspaper where necessary. I omit all cities for which no newspaper meeting these criteria can be found.

For each of these cities, I construct yearly estimates of the share of articles about the local council that use the term ‘progressive,’ using the same method as described previously for the San Francisco Chronicle. I plot smoothed versions of these trends in Figure 7.<sup>21</sup> The solid black line depicts the mean level of progressive news coverage across all cities over time, while the dashed black lines show the 10th and 90th percentiles. In addition, on the right side of the plot, I label all cities with progressive news coverage rates above 7.5 percentage points in 2018. I also highlight the trend line for San Francisco in red.

Looking at the trends over time, there is little evidence that council politics was frequently described in progressive terms before 2000. While there are occasional single-year spikes in specific cities, there is no systematic increase for any city during this time period. Starting in the mid-2000s, however, we see a slow increase in the rate of progressive coverage in a small set of cities. While the mean rate increases only marginally over this time period—up to about 3 percent in 2018—the city at the 90th percentile during this time period increases much more rapidly, from around 3 percent in 2008 to nearly 10 percent in 2018.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, there are a number of cities besides San Francisco that exceed this threshold, including Baltimore, New York City, and Washington, D.C. While it is difficult to interpret precisely what a specific rate of progressive coverage means, what is key here is that these cities are all trending upwards over time. This suggests that for many cities, perhaps spurred on by the recession in the mid-2000s, politics has become relatively more centered around progressive issues and conflicts. Notably, this pattern aligns with accounts of a progressive shift in local policy during this time period (Riverstone-Newell 2012), with a number of local governments either considering or implementing policies like the fifteen dollar minimum wage, paid sick leave, universal pre-kindergarten, and sanctuary city policies, among others.

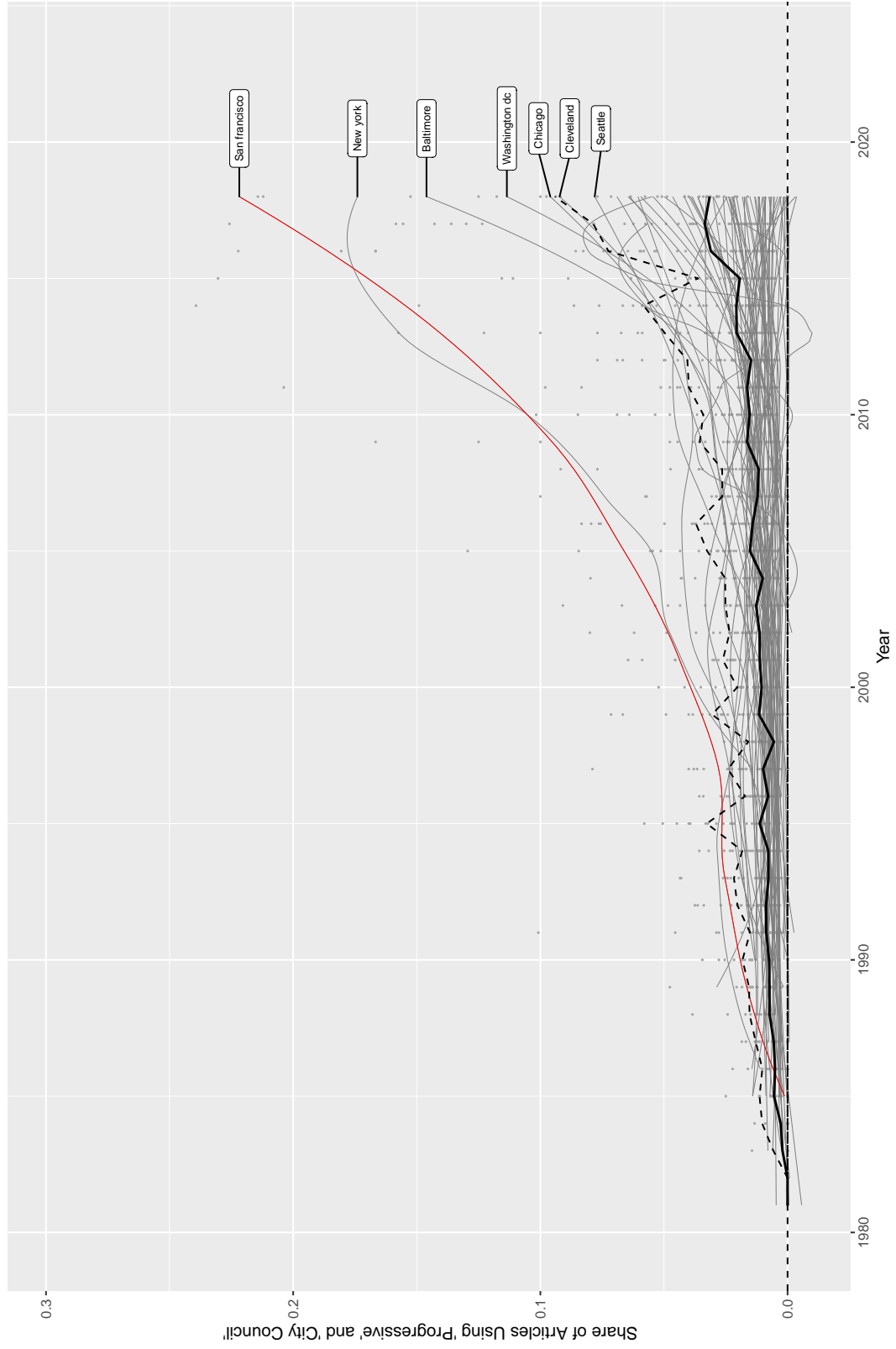
Of course, the increase in progressive coverage documented in these cities over this time

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<sup>21</sup>I opt to smooth the trends for this visualization to account for deviations in the number of articles for certain cities over time.

<sup>22</sup>In many ways, that this increase is not present in all of the cities in question is an important validation of the measure. Indeed, one concern might be that the method is picking up noise from national level politics that finds its way into local newspaper coverage. That the increase is isolated to a small set of cities suggests this is not the case.

Figure 7: Progressive Council News Coverage Across 70 of the 115 Largest U.S. Cities



period does not necessarily mean that politics in each of these cities is ideologically identical. Indeed, the progressive coalition in San Francisco is centered around a distinct set of interest groups and so progressivism there may not align perfectly with progressive politics in, for example, Baltimore. Still, that this type of ideology appears to be becoming more relevant for local politics across the country is notable, and it suggests, at the very least, that ideological coalitions of the kind observed in San Francisco are possible—or even already present—elsewhere.

## 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 parties succeed are too narrow, at present. Indeed, in examining politics within the nonpartisan San Francisco Board of Supervisors, I show that stable, long-term coalitions and high-quality, substantive representation are not unique to partisan governments. Rather, when diverse interests join together and develop the institutional capacity to inform and mobilize voters, 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 legislative context 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.

Yet, at the same time, the ‘party system’ that exists in San Francisco diverges from this policy demander story in two ways: first, though these coalitions can and have supported in-group members for office, they have significantly less ability to screen candidates who may defect from their agenda. Indeed, the progressive press in San Francisco has long lamented this fact, calling out supervisors like Jake McGoldrick, who was elected under the progressive banner but ultimately drifted toward the center. The ability to control nominations is central to the policy-demander theory of parties, and so this seeming inability or weak control in San Francisco raises questions about how necessary this power is and whether other institutional powers might overcome its absence. Second, and perhaps more importantly, if parties are dominated 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 this theory currently presumes.

Beyond their importance for theories of parties, my findings also have implications for students of local politics and policy. Indeed, a burgeoning literature in recent years has documented the increasingly nationalized, partisan orientation of local politics (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Einstein and Glick 2016; Hopkins 2018), suggesting that—on further examination of local councils—we may often find nonpartisan coalitions that mirror the lines found within the national party system. Yet, despite operating within this polarized world, the dynamic coalitions that we observe in San Francisco are centered around salient local groups and policy issues in a unique partisan-adjacent way (Hankinson 2018). 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, this raises the question of what 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. For instance, given the significance of race for local politics, along with the relatively mixed evidence about whether descriptive representation yields substantive gains at the local level, it suggests that how racial minorities are incorporated into—or excluded from—these coalitions is of significant importance and may ultimately impact policy outcomes. Thus, the dynamics of these coalitions have potentially important consequences for our understanding of the local political process and what emerges from it, and so future work should leverage newly available sources of local legislative data to delve into these contexts and identify the contours of these legislative divides.



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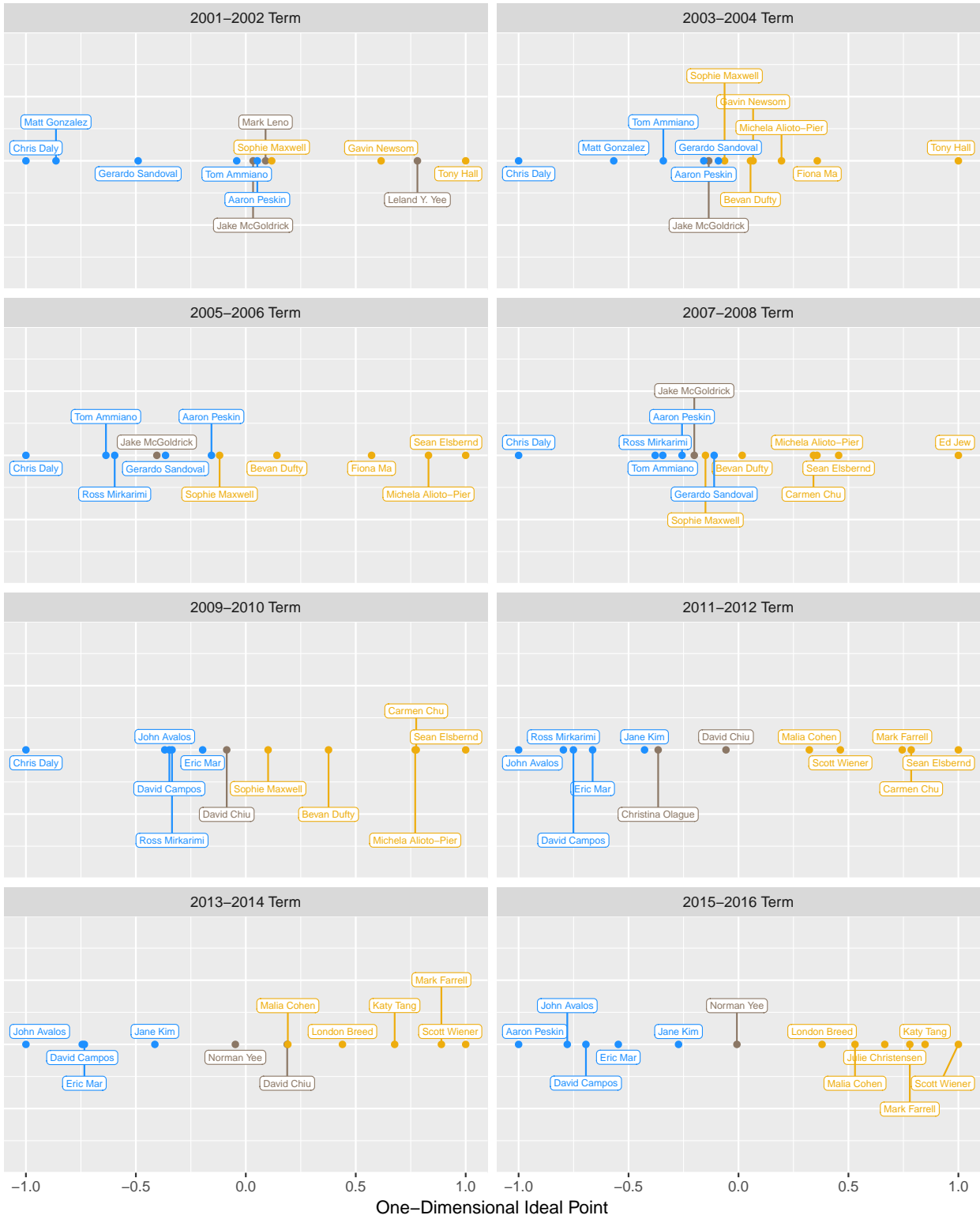
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## A Term-Specific Scaling Results

In order to see the patterns of conflict within San Francisco more clearly, Figure 10 depicts ideal points estimated separately using W-Nominate for each term of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors since 2000. One reason to do this is because we might be concerned that the dynamic, one-dimensional model shown in the main text, by virtue of modeling the member changes over time, may be overstating the degree of continuity in the political system. In turn, examining the patterns of conflict individually by term ensures that the stable coalitions in we see in the dynamic plot do not shift at different points over this time period and in a way that the dynamic model is unable to capture. Looking across all of the terms depicted in Figure 10 we see strong evidence that the progressive-moderate divide has been a significant feature of San Francisco politics over the past eight terms. Specifically, in each term, we see that progressives tend to clump together on the left, moderates on the right, and those members that media reports depicted as being in-between or provided no clear information about faction affiliation as being relatively central. Notably, we see some evidence of polarization increasing over this time period, with progressives and moderates being further apart and less likely to overlap during the most recent three terms. This pattern should not be too surprising given the modest increase in the term-specific fit statistics (shown in Figure 2) over this time period.

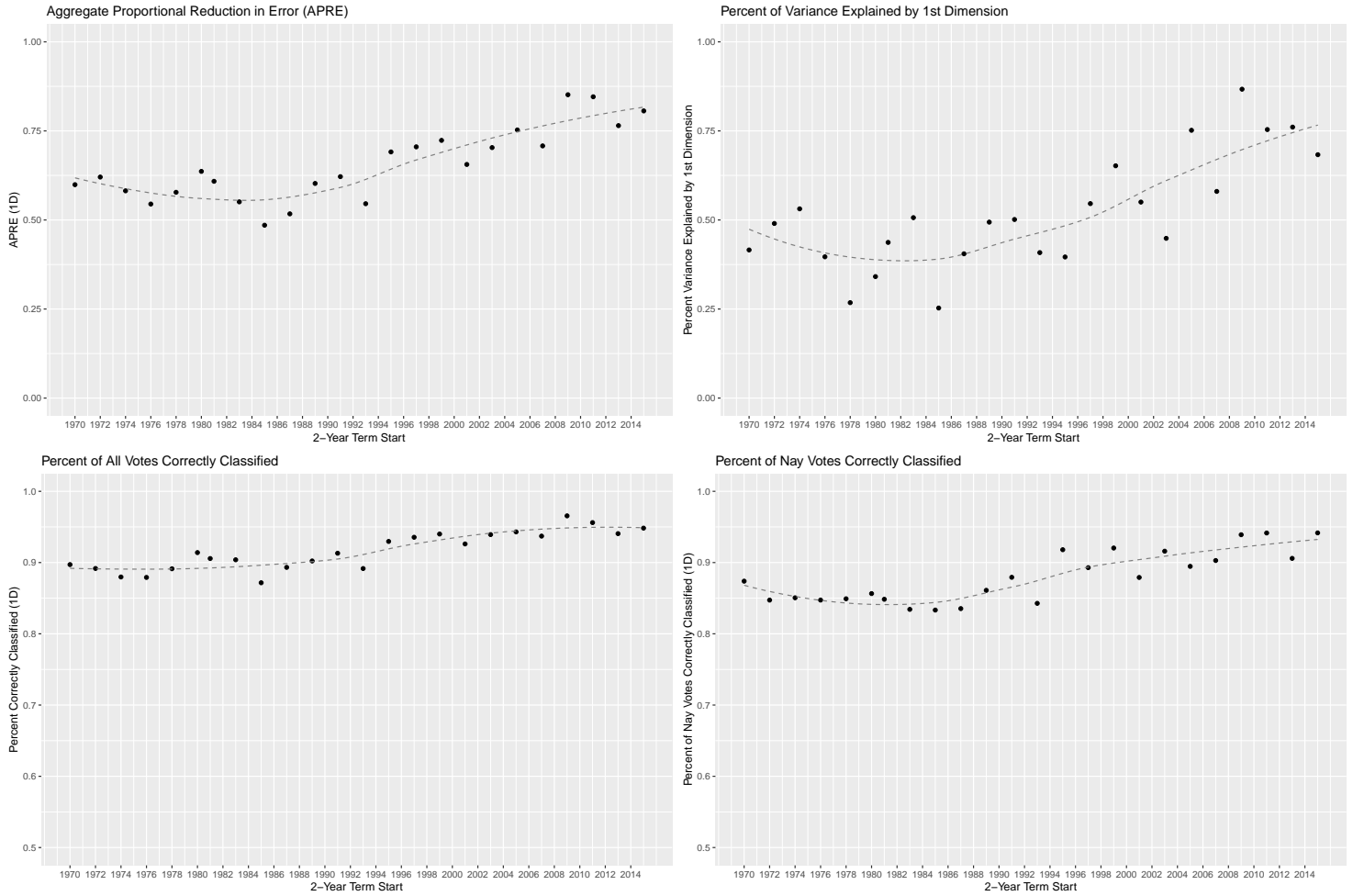
Figure 8: Ideal Points Estimated Separately for Each Term of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, 2000–2016



Faction Affiliation (Coded from News Reports) ● Mixed Evidence ● Moderate ● Progressive

## B Result Using Optimal Classification

Figure 9: Fit of a One-Dimensional Optimal Classification Model, 1970 – 2016



## C SF in Context: Alternate Measures of Fit

Figure 10: Comparing the Unidimensionality of Legislative Behavior in San Francisco to 106 Nonpartisan Cities and Counties Using Three Measures of Fit

