

Cities in American Federalism: Evidence on State Government Coercion from a Survey of Mayors

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September 15, 2016

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Abstract

Previous scholarship on American federalism has largely focused on the national government's increasingly coercive relationship with the states. This research fails to consider local government separately, and thus essentially excludes one third of the federalism triad. Using a new survey of mayors, this paper: (1) explores whether the city-state relationship manifests coercion analogous to that seen in the state-federal one; and (2) compares cities' assessments of state and federal governments. We find that mayors worry about financing from both levels of government, but that they are especially concerned with state regulations and preemption limiting their autonomy. We suggest that policy overlap between state and local government and a partisan mismatch between state and local officials help to explain mayors' frustration with their state governments.

Understanding how well different units of government cooperate and coordinate functions is critical to effectively implementing policy in the United States. At its most extreme, the inability of government at all levels to adequately respond to New Orleans' plight in the wake of Hurricane Katrina illustrates the potentially devastating consequences of the breakdown of federal, state, and local relations. In a day-to-day sense, relationships between different levels of government shape how programs and needs are funded, and how a large country balances potentially conflicting demands between local variation and broader consistency.

Given its centrality to American constitutionalism and public policy, many have sought to understand how federalism functions in practice. In particular, a vast literature focuses on the relationship between state and federal government. This work emphasizes the evolution of state-federal relations from cooperative to coercive (Elazar, 1962; Cho and Wright, 2001; Conlan, 2006; Kincaid, 1990, 2008, 2012). Much of this work highlights an increasingly frosty state-national relationship attributable to reductions in federal funding and increases in federal regulations including those tied to the remaining resources. While some scholars in this field briefly mention local government and/or imply that findings about state-federal relations may apply to local government, cities and their leaders remain largely absent from this literature.

What evidence we do have on local governments within a broader federal context comes largely from the urban politics literature. Much of this scholarship centers on the increasing fiscal abandonment of cities by the state and federal governments (Eisinger, 1998; Dreier, Mollenkopf and Swanstrom, 2004). While funding is obviously an important part of federal-state-local relations, this literature largely eschews the role of regulations from the state and/or federal level. Research on cities' ability to influence the state legislative process is similarly pessimistic (Weir, Wolman and Swanstrom, 2005; Gamm and Kousser, 2013, though see Burns et al. (2009)). None of this research, however, directly pertains to state regulations of inferior governments—a central component of studies of coercive federalism at the state-federal level.

This absence of scholarship on local governments and coercive federalism is problematic. With the federal government stymied by partisan polarization (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006; Abramowitz, 2010) and institutions that encourage gridlock, increasing policy demands fall to states and localities in areas such as infrastructure, redistribution, and environment. We know relatively little, however, about whether local governments feel that they are able to effectively tackle these initiatives or whether they feel hindered by restrictions and/or insufficient funding from higher levels of government.

Moreover, the failure to explore local governments in greater depth means we have little insight into whether *state* governments act coercively relative to the federal government. Indeed, what studies do center on localities tend not to assess their relationships with state and federal government comparatively. More colloquially, state and local governments are sometimes lumped together and distinguished from the federal government as the entities that are hindered by bureaucracy in Washington.

Using quantitative and qualitative evidence gathered directly from mayors, we empirically address these questions about cities in contemporary federalism. By speaking with local officials, we are able to directly observe whether mayors believe their relationships with their state and federal governments are cooperative or coercive. Moreover, by asking them to highlight which policies at the state and federal levels they find especially problematic, we can elucidate specific arenas in which those at the first layer of federalism are frustrated.

Our results suggest that mayors are especially unhappy with regulations from their state governments. Indeed, while they, at times, actually seek stronger regulations from the federal government, they worry more about state legislation impinging upon their autonomy. We identify two potential sources of states' particularly coercive relationships with local government: (1) policy overlap, and (2) partisan misalignment and conservative state governments.

1 Cooperative and Coercive Federalism

In his seminal work, Elazar (1962) notes that “virtually all the activities of government in the nineteenth-century United States were cooperative endeavors, shared in much the same manners as governmental programs are in the twentieth century” (pp. 1). Prior to the 1970s, warm state-federal relations were largely based on generous federal aid (Cho and Wright, 2001; Conlan, 2006). Elazar, however, saw the potential for a new, less warm era in American federal relations with government regulation—rather than (or attached to) federal aid—more likely to characterize American federalism.

Kincaid’s (1990, 2008) research confirms that this rise in federal regulation augured a shift in state-federal relations in the 1970s. Specifically, this work highlights movement away from the cooperative federalism that characterized earlier decades toward a more coercive relationship between the powerful federal government and the involuntarily compliant states. He provides a specific and useful definition of coercive federalism that we adopt when analyzing whether state-local relations can be similarly characterized as coercive.¹

Perhaps most saliently, coercive federalism includes a shift in federal aid distribution. Rather than focusing on places, federal support is increasingly centered on persons or groups (Kincaid, 2008). Moreover, funding increasingly features accompanying regulations that condition its use. Finally, congressional earmarking has become a mainstay of federal aid.

In addition to these changes in federal aid, Kincaid also observes a marked rise in the preemption of state powers. A disproportionate share of federal laws claiming functions that were previously left to the states have passed in recent years, leading to heightened federal regulation of the state (Zimmerman, 2005; Conlan, 2006). Kincaid also highlights mandates

¹While the theory of coercive federalism is highly influential, we note that there is some scholarly disagreement about whether the contemporary state of intergovernmental relations should be characterized as “coercive.” Conlan (2006) argues in favor of the term “opportunistic federalism,” which he defines as a system that encourages actors to pursue their own—rather than the collective’s—interests. The features of opportunistic federalism—including “federal mandates, policy preemptions, and highly prescriptive federal grant programs” (Conlan 2006, pp. 667)—are also important components of coercive federalism. We therefore use the term coercive federalism in this manuscript, while acknowledging that the motivations behind this change in intergovernmental relations may be better described as opportunistic.

as an important component of coercive federalism. A mandate is “a direct order from the federal government requiring state and local governments to execute a federal policy” (Kincaid 2008, pp. 15). If violated, the federal government can institute civil or criminal penalties on state and local officials. A fourth part of coercive federalism centers on taxation. Specifically, the federal government constrains the ability of states to tax and borrow, thereby limiting their capacity to raise own-source revenues. Fifth, coercive federalism features the federalization of criminal law. Historically, these statutes have been predominantly a state responsibility. Finally, Kincaid highlights the demise of intergovernmental institutions like the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations and more generally a decline in political cooperation. He suggests that federal-state cooperation has diminished across an array of major intergovernmental programs like Medicaid and surface transportation.

While these same arguments might apply to state (as the superior) and local governments, their empirical focus—and that of federalism scholarship more generally—has thus far been on the federal government’s relationship with the states (Cho and Wright, 2001; Kincaid, 1990, 2008, 2012; Posner, 2007; Pickerill and Bowling, 2014). While certainly important, this focus may miss important intergovernmental dynamics occurring at the state and local level. Indeed, given the rising salience of state (Conlan, 2006; Shipan and Volden, 2006; Volden, 2006; Pickerill and Bowling, 2014) and local government (Shipan and Volden, 2006, 2008; Riverstone-Newell, 2012) policy innovation and responsibility, these dynamics are potentially critically important to policy and governance outcomes.

Based on prior scholarship, then, should we expect coercive dynamics to similarly manifest at the state and local level? The same partisan polarization that helps to explain changes in national-state relations (Conlan, 2006) is also a feature of state politics (Shor and McCarty, 2011; Pickerill and Bowling, 2014). Recent studies of local partisanship suggest it may also effect city policies (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014; Einstein and Kogan, 2016). Moreover, the success of conservatives in the states, which has been linked with declining federal-state relations, may also hamper state-local cooperation. While Democratic

presidential administrations have certainly helped to promulgate relatively uncooperative intergovernmental relationships, rising Republican power at both the state and federal level is associated with declines in cooperative federalism as Republicans have become increasingly inclined to trade deference to lower levels of government for the implementation their preferred social and economic vision via preemption and mandates (Conlan, 2006). Indeed, Cole, Stenberg and Weissert's (2001) surveys of scholars and practitioners find that the two most significant intergovernmental events since 1980 were Republicans' 1994 takeover of Congress and capture of 30 governorships. Given continued rising conservative power at the state level (Hertel-Fernandez and Skocpol, 2016; Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol and Lynch, Forthcoming), it seems reasonable to expect—at least in conservative states—uncooperative state-local federalism. The recent rise of preemption laws in conservative states designed to limit the ability of cities to pass left-leaning legislation (Dewan, 2015) provides preliminary empirical confirmation of this prediction.

Putting partisanship aside, the same incentives and capacity to exert influence over lower levels of government exist at the state level. Indeed, as creatures of the state, local governments' powers stem from their state governments (Frug, 1979). This relationship does not include the same vertical separation of powers protections that the Constitution affords the states to (at least somewhat) ensure their sovereignty from Washington. Perhaps even more so than the federal government, states have the ability to employ coercive policies if they are so inclined. That is, structurally we might expect to find *greater* coercion from states than we do from the federal government. In addition to possessing greater capacity to impinge upon the legal powers of cities, state government functions are more likely to overlap with cities' relative to the national government (Peterson, 1995). This overlap may make it less clear which entity should optimally perform a particular governing task and generate competition between the two levels of government over ownership of particular functions. Finally, in many instances, urban-rural divides may provide natural factions that pit state governments against the cities underneath them, and/or political homogeneity may make it

easier for a faction at the state level to set aside urban interests.

On the other hand, there are also reasons to expect state-local relationships to be friendlier than national-state ones. Most importantly, existing empirical evidence (Burns et al., 2009) indicates that cities are able to influence state legislatures' regulation of their affairs. In addition, while recent studies have highlighted partisan influences on local policies (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014; Einstein and Kogan, 2016), partisanship unsurprisingly does not appear to impact politics as deeply or as consistently at the local level. Given polarization's role in spurring national-state coercive federalism, this relative difference in partisan influence may render states less likely to employ coercive policies.

2 Survey of Mayors

To evaluate whether states regulate cities coercively, we use evidence from a new survey of mayors in which we included questions about other levels of government. The survey's target population was medium and large cities (100,000+ residents). In close collaboration with Boston University's Initiative on Cities and the US Conference of Mayors (USCM), we reached out to all 288 mayors of U.S. cities over 100,000 people. Before the 2015 summer USCM meetings, we contacted each attending mayor (by email with phone follow up). We invited each of these mayors to set up an in-person interview at the conference or to set up a phone call at a more convenient time. The USCM sent its own email about the survey to all members and made an announcement at the first day's lunch session. All conference interviews were conducted in person directly with the mayor. After the conference we contacted the rest of the target population mayors in similar ways leading to a number of phone interviews (and a few electronic completions) throughout the summer.

Overall, 89 mayors participated. Since most of our data were collected in person on the phone, we know it comes directly from mayors rather than from staff. 63 responses came from mayors in our target population (288 cities over 100,000) which translates to a 22%

response rate from large/medium size city mayors. The remaining responses come from mayors of smaller cities replying to USCM outreach. We opted to include these responses from the non-target population in our analyses for two reasons. First, recruiting elite samples is extremely challenging, making us reluctant to throw away data. Second, and more importantly, although these mayors lead somewhat smaller cities, their participation in a national conference that skews toward larger cities implies that they see self identify as leaders of policymaking cities rather than smaller towns, and are thus more likely to have thought about and/or been affected by their relationship with state and federal government.

Using a combination of demographic data from the U.S. Census' American Community Survey,² data on Democratic vote share (Einstein and Kogan, 2016), and information on state legal context (Hoene and Pagano, 2015), we show in Table 1 that participating cities look a lot like the wider universe of American cities. The third column summarizes the target population (all cities over 100,000). The other columns allow us to compare these traits to the total sample and the sample excluding the smaller city mayors. Racial and economic variables nearly perfectly match the national distribution. Geographic ones do as well. (The proportion in the Midwest, Northeast, South, and West are 18%, 12%, 35%, and 35% respectively vs. 17%, 9%, 35%, and 40% nationally.) The sample skews a little toward larger cities. This means that we still have good representation while, at the margins, we are capturing data from the types of places that the urban politics literature tends to focus on. Additional data on political (Einstein and Kogan, 2016) and state legal context (Hoene and Pagano, 2015) reveals that our cities are largely representative on those dimensions as well (a somewhat higher proportion of our cities are located in states with potentially binding property tax limits). Representativeness in terms of state legal context is especially important, since a number of our analyses center on mayors' attitudes concerning their autonomy from their state governments.

Importantly, while our survey includes a module on federalism that we use in this paper,

²All ACS data are 2012 5-year estimates.

Table 1: 2015 Survey of Mayors Sample

	Participated	All U.S. Cities Over 100,000	Participating Cities Over 100,000
Population			
Population	293,617	298,885	395,544
Population Density	4,152	4,224	4,338
Race			
% White	54.1%	48.7%	50.1%
% Black	15.7%	16.8%	15.6%
% Hispanic	20.2%	24.2%	23.3%
Socioeconomic			
Median Household Income	\$52,272	\$52,898	\$50,620
% Poverty	18.3%	17.8%	18.7%
% Unemployed	6.8%	6.8%	6.8%
Median House Price	\$251,548	\$232,755	\$231,178
Political			
% Dem	64.4%	62.2%	65.8%
State Legal Context			
% No TELs	6.7%	9.7	6.3%
% Less binding property tax limit	16.8%	19.3%	17.5%
% Potentially binding property tax limit	49.4%	35.9%	44.4%
% Binding property tax limit and general limit	27.0%	35.2%	31.2%
Number of Responses	89	288	63

Data are from 2012 American Community Survey, Einstein and Kogan (2016), and Hoene and Pagano (2015).

it also addresses a wide range of topics including infrastructure, policing, inequality, and public-private partnerships. Thus, there is no reason to expect our survey population to have opted in because of a particular interest in federalism. Mayors were simply invited to a survey about city policy and leadership, not a survey about their state governments or any specific topic that may have attracted those with abnormally strong views.

The survey included multiple closed- and open-ended questions designed to assess mayors' attitudes towards state and federal government funding and regulations. To learn about mayors' perceptions of financial support from higher levels of government, we asked: "Compared to an average city, how much financial support do you expect your city to receive from

other governments in the next year.” For both the state and federal government, they could then offer responses ranging from “much less than average (1)” to “well above average (5).” To assess mayors’ views on regulations of their cities, we asked: “Compared to an average city, how much do you expect laws and regulations (existing and new) from other governments to limit your city’s policy making autonomy and flexibility?” As with the previous question, for both the state and federal government, mayors could then provide responses ranging from “more restrictive than average (1)” to “less restrictive than average (5).”

Note that both of these questions ask mayors to rate their experiences with federalism “compared to an average city.” Without that phrasing, we feared—particularly on the question about finances—that we would be more likely to hear uniformly negative evaluations of federalism from mayors. By priming mayors to consider their cities’ positions relative their peers’, we hoped to elicit more nuanced assessments that reflect their actual experiences with their state and federal governments relative to the plausible baseline of an average city rather than an idealized notion of funding and autonomy levels. We also asked mayors who they partner with across a variety of policy areas. As we elaborate below, these data help us explore questions of policy overlap and coercive federalism.

In addition to these closed-ended questions, we also included open-ended questions that assess the state and federal policies that mayors find especially problematic. We asked: “In your role as mayor, what one state(federal) law would you most like to see repealed or changed?” Because the vast majority of our surveys were conducted in person or over the phone, we were able to elicit elaborations on both sets of questions that allow us to provide more qualitative evidence surrounding the cross-tabulations presented below.

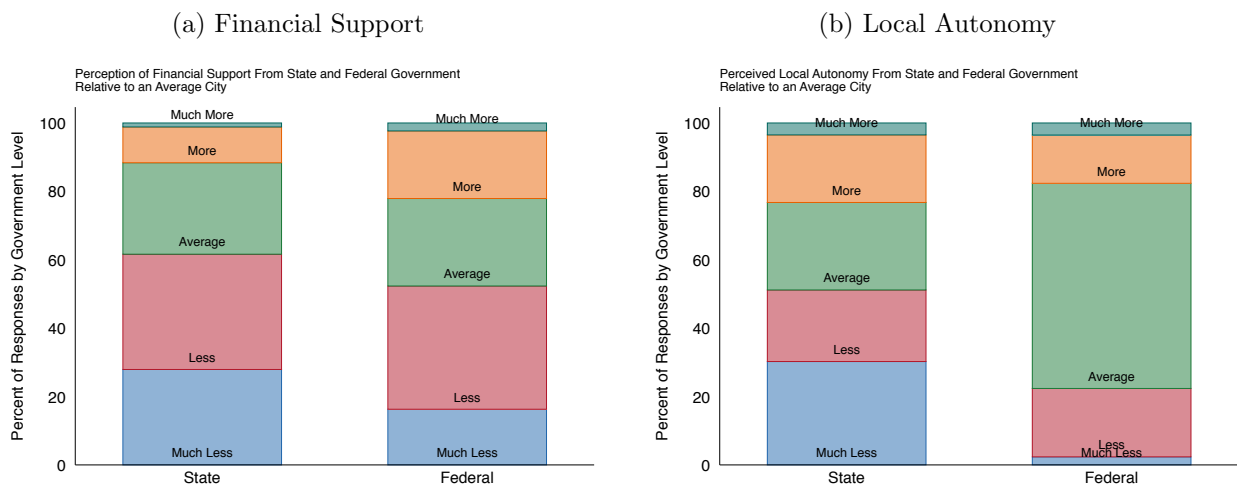
In using a survey to measure local assessments of the state and federal government, we provide one measure of intergovernmental relations. There are, of course, a number of other ways to measure these relationships; we seek here to provide one operationalization. Cho and Wright (2001) outline the value of conducting these kinds of surveys when describing their own analysis of state administrator attitudes in a similar context: “The extent of national

influence perceived by state administrators is one operational indicator of intergovernmental relationships. Whether their perceptions of intergovernmental relations correctly reflect reality is another question. What these agency heads see and how they act in response to their perceptions of the intergovernmental world is, in fact, one dimension of reality” (63). Our research follows a growing literature that surveys elites to uncover important information about relationships between political actors and local policymaking agendas (Cho and Wright, 2001; Gerber, Henry and Lubell, 2013; Gerber, 2013).

3 Coercive Federal and State Governments

We begin reporting results with descriptive summaries of mayors’ responses to the two closed-ended questions about state/federal support and restrictions. We display results for both of those questions (and for both the state and federal government) in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Assessments of state and federal government: financial support and limitations on local autonomy



Consistent with expectations from the literature on coercive federalism, Figure 1 reveals that over half of mayors believe that they are receiving less financial support than the average city from both the state and federal levels. A slightly higher share rate their financial support from their state government as “less” or “much less,” but the differences are not especially

large.

Mayors differ to a greater extent in their ratings of regulations from their state and federal governments. Roughly half of mayors believe that they have “less” or “much less” autonomy from the state government relative to an average city. By comparison, only one quarter of mayors feel the same about the federal government. The differences become especially striking when we compare the proportion of mayors who believe they receive “much less” from their state and federal governments—the most extreme position they could adopt in response to this survey question. While almost one-third of mayors believe they are receiving “much less” autonomy from their state government, under 5 percent believed the same of their federal government.

Some of this may be a function of question wording since all cities are subject to the same federal limitations and thus respondents may gravitate towards the middle category (which may be the “correct” answer most of the time). On the other hand, at least some mayors did deviate from the middle based on the interactions between policy goals they hoped to accomplish and the federal laws that affected all cities. Moreover, the fact that all cities face the same federal regulations is a positive feature of the design that allows for a common baseline. The lower ratings for state government capture the mayors’ frustration (whether based in reality or mere perception) that they are more commonly blocked by the states than the federal government.

These differences in mayors’ evaluations of state and federal government financing, and, especially regulations, are statistically significant. Table 2 displays two models illustrating mayors’ consistently lower evaluations of their state governments. Model (1) predicts mayors’ perceptions of financial support from higher levels of government (state or federal), with higher values indicating greater satisfaction with financial support. Model (2) explores mayors’ views on restrictions from higher levels of government (state or federal), with higher values similarly indicating positive perceptions of restrictions (e.g., fewer restrictions and greater autonomy). All models are OLS models with standard errors clustered at the state

level, and results are robust to clustering standard errors at the FIPS level and to using an ordered probit specification.

Table 2: Assessments of state and federal financial support and limits on local autonomy

VARIABLES	(1) Support	(2) Restrictions
Federal	0.33** (0.15)	0.52*** (0.15)
Poverty Rate	2.53 (1.51)	-0.73 (1.03)
Population Logged	0.06 (0.09)	0.15* (0.08)
Democrat	0.06 (0.20)	0.56*** (0.17)
Republican State	-0.38** (0.18)	-0.52** (0.22)
Divided State	-0.14 (0.17)	0.16 (0.23)
Constant	1.27 (1.05)	0.60 (0.89)
Observations	170	169
R-squared	0.07	0.19

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Low scores indicate more negative (less money, more restriction) responses. State party indicators are relative to Democratic control.

The first variable—Federal—in both models illustrates that mayors are more likely, all else equal, to rate financial support and restrictions positively when considering their federal—rather than state—government. This main effect holds when it is the sole explanatory variable in our models and under the wide array of controls listed in Table 2, including poverty (which may be associated with funding needs), city size (which may be associated with the policy ambitions and/or political clout of a city), mayoral partisanship, state political control, and state political alignment.³ Mayors’ responses to the closed-ended questions thus confirm that mayors perceive elements of coercive federalism (insufficient financial aid and strong

³While we present somewhat more parsimonious models here, all results in this paper remain the same when we add state legal context (Hoene and Pagano, 2015) as a control.

regulation of local autonomy at both the federal and state levels). Moreover, the greater negativity about state government—particularly about the kinds of regulations central to theories of coercive federalism—suggest that the lack of comparisons between state and federal coercion is a notable gap in prior scholarship.

While we do not have longitudinal data to more rigorously assess this, qualitative statements from mayors suggest that this negativity towards states may be part of an adverse trend. One mayor of a medium-sized city described hostile city-state relations as “accelerating [in] the last five years.” Another mayor of a large city similarly cited a five-year timeline, though he suggested an even more rapid longitudinal trend: “I think that the legislature of [state redacted] would abolish cities if they could, and that’s....a 180-degree change from the policies of five years ago. This was probably one of the more progressive states in terms of support for local government authority.” A mayor of a small city did not cite a specific timeline for increasing state impingement on local autonomy, but agreed with his peers that such regulations did appear to be worsening: “The general assembly can set aside home rule. They increasingly do that. We’re descending slowly down a slope of average (referring to our scale) because the general assembly screws around with home rule more often than not.”

3.1 Federal and State Policies

Turning to the open-ended questions about the federal and state policies mayors would like to see changed reveals: (1) coercive policies on the part of both the federal and state governments, and (2) *greater* coercion on the part of the state government. Moreover, these data provide some evidence that overlap between state and local functions (Peterson, 1995) may be generating greater competition between the two units of government. While such competition would not explain *increasing* city negativity towards state governments, it would help us understand negative ratings of state government relative to the federal government.

Starting at the federal level, a significant portion of mayors were especially concerned about mandates—consistent with the literature on coercive federalism. 14 mayors specifically

cited U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rules as being “unfunded mandates” with a disproportionate impact on urban areas. Given that most mayors are Democrats, many of these complaints about the EPA come from those who are likely inclined to support its goals. Interestingly, however, many mayors also cited laws that they would like to become stronger and/or more standardized at the federal level. The next most frequently cited laws, in order, were gun laws (seven mentions), immigration laws (seven mentions), and marijuana legislation (six mentions). In all cases, mayors wanted more left-leaning and/or standardized policies at the federal level. To ameliorate the consequences of patchwork state-level policies and achieve more liberal policy goals, mayors were, in some cases, willing to endorse *stronger* and more coercive federal policy. While Kincaid (2008) found that state and local administrators often advocate for stronger standards in their policy fields, our research suggests that the same may be true for *elected* officials, and that support for stronger federal standards may stretch across multiple policies rather than single issues.

In contrast, the state regulations that mayors wanted repealed were almost uniformly coercive restrictions on local autonomy and/or capacity to generate revenue. Nineteen mayors wanted to repeal or change laws relating to local revenue options. Eight mayors hoped to change the distribution of revenues and another eight wanted to address limitations on local autonomy. Six mayors mentioned restrictions on pension programs as being problematic. The only frequently cited policy where mayors wanted to see *greater* state regulation was gun control, which received five mentions (though in some places even gun control may be an issue where states are blocking cities). This greater negativity towards state regulation manifests not only in the types of laws that were top mayoral considerations, but also in the ease with which mayors were able to provide a law to change when asked. Ten mayors were unable to proffer a single federal law that they wanted to see repealed or changed when asked. In contrast, only two mayors similarly struggled when asked about state regulations. Many implied they had a much longer list to provide than the survey asked for.

4 Sources of Negative Evaluations of State Governments

By comparing mayors' attitudes toward state and national government, we are able to provide new insight into cities' position in America's federal structure. While they are facing some coercion from the federal government, their relationship with their state governments appear even more negative in many ways. Here, we highlight two possible explanations: (1) policy overlap between state and local governments; and (2) partisan divides and ideological policymaking at the state level.

4.1 Policy Overlap

Peterson (1995) contends that federalism is most effective if different levels of government specialize in implementing different functions and tackling different problems. Moreover, he argues that different levels of government are better suited to particular tasks, with the national government more effective at redistribution, and state and local governments better at developmental policy. One logical extension of Peterson's theory of functional federalism is that levels that are closer to one another—like state and local—are more likely to overlap in policy function, and potentially compete over ownership in these areas. Such an overlap might help to explain mayors' greater frustration with their state governments.

Some evidence from our survey confirms that there is indeed an overlap in function between state and local government. In addition to the federalism questions described above, we asked mayors “which of the following entities are you likely to partner with in each of the following areas?” For a series of policy areas—education, roads, public transit, water, environment, affordable housing, economic development, and public safety—mayors could provide one or more (as applicable) of the following as partners (without distinguishing between voluntary partnerships and those driven by institutional features): your state's government, the federal government, the local business community, nonprofits/philanthropic

organizations, and/or surrounding governments. Despite their negative views towards their state governments, mayors listed state governments most frequently as partners; state government received 363 total mentions, compared with 305 for the federal government. Figure 2 displays these results.

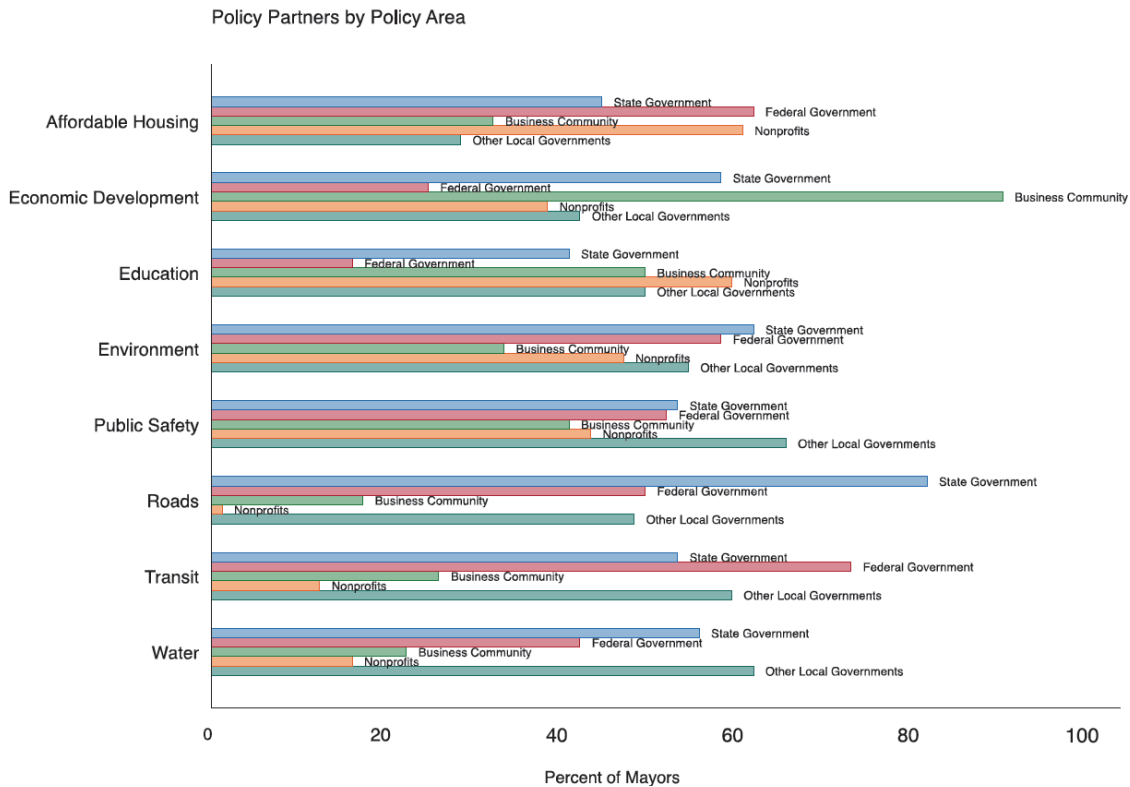


Figure 2: Government and Private-Sector Partners by Policy Area

The state government was not the most frequently cited policy partner across all policy arenas. It was, however, consistently among the top three. States were the most frequent partner for water, environment, and roads, second most frequent partner for public safety, and third most frequent for transit and affordable housing. In six of the eight policy arenas, more than half of mayors selected it as a policy partner. Thus, there does appear to be significant overlap between state and local government function, at least partially explaining

the particularly negative mayoral evaluations of state government.

4.2 Partisanship

A second potential explanation stems from rising partisanship and/or polarization. Conlan (2006) argues that partisan polarization has been an important driver of changes in federalism because political moderates—especially Republicans—have historically been the greatest supporters of “traditional intergovernmental management concerns” (671). Liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans, in contrast, are both more supportive of federal government activism. If political moderates are similarly declining in number at the state level—and current empirical evidence suggests that this is the case (Shor and McCarty, 2011)—then we might anticipate greater state policy activism by more politically extreme governors and state legislators leading to disapproval at the local level.

While this would explain equivalent frustration towards state and federal government regulation, it would not explain the *greater* hostility towards the state that we observe. If mayors and the federal government tend to be aligned in terms of partisanship while many states and mayors are not, it would help us understand why mayors rate states more negatively. Given cities’—especially large cities’—disproportionately Democratic and liberal tilt (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014; Einstein and Kogan, 2016), and the fact that many of their interactions with the federal government are with the executive branch, mayors might feel more positively toward the Obama administration than towards a Republican governor and/or state legislature. Moreover, some empirical evidence on the implementation of federal government policies such as the Affordable Care Act indicates that a partisan mismatch between the state and federal level may generate state hostility to federal policy priorities and programs (Kincaid, 2012; Pickerill and Bowling, 2014).

Indeed, some of our qualitative evidence suggests that a partisan mismatch between mayors and state leadership (and a partisan match between mayors and the federal executive branch) matters. Comments about the federal government frequently distinguished between

the left-leaning president and the conservative Congress. One medium-sized city mayor noted: “When you say federal government, you know there are two branches there that each play a role. I think it needs to be really distinguished between Congress and at least this administration. This administration is the best friend that cities have ever had. They continue to act within their authority in a way that is cooperative, supportive, and helpful.” A big city mayor was similarly critical of Congress, and specifically attributed his critique to partisan differences: “Congress is primarily red and large cities are primarily blue. We recognize that advocates for large metro areas are not currently a [priority] for Congress.”

Unsurprisingly, Democratic mayors were similarly critical of conservative state governments. One big city Democrat in a conservative state argued, “They’ve declared war on local governments in [state redacted], the state legislature has.” Another medium-sized city mayor in a conservative state observed that her state was very ideological: “There’s a political rhetoric at the expense of reasonable and rational policymaking.” A different medium-sized city mayor in a conservative state expressed dismay at the seeming ideological inconsistencies of the Tea Party movement and its perceived attacks on local government: “We’re experiencing the....same kind of Tea Party response, which is just totally counterintuitive in my mind. A party that supposedly is opposed to big government....”

Interestingly, one Republican mayor was also highly critical of his right-leaning state legislature and governor: “Our state is nuts....I’d say they’re all on the same board as me, but they’re nuts.” This evidence at least suggests a particular frustration with conservative states that may be less about a partisan *mismatch*, and more about partisanship generally. Indeed, the proliferation of preemption laws highlighted in media accounts (Dewan, 2015) appears to be confined to right-leaning states. Moreover, research from Hertel-Fernandez and Skocpol (2016) suggests that organized conservative interests may be pushing harsher regulation of local governments in conservative states.⁴ As one medium-sized city mayor in

⁴While conservative organizations like ALEC have combatted more liberal organizations like PLAN for influence of state-level legislation (Kincaid, 2008), recent evidence contends that conservatives have been far more successful at promulgating state-level legislation (Hertel-Fernandez and Skocpol, 2016).

a conservative state put it: “We’ve learned that regulation of shopping carts [is] a matter of statewide concern.”

Using our two closed-ended questions about state and federal government financial support and regulation, we can further evaluate what role (if any) partisanship and partisan matching play. We begin by exploring the relationship between state party control and assessments of state financial support and autonomy restrictions in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Assessments of state financial support and autonomy restrictions by state party control

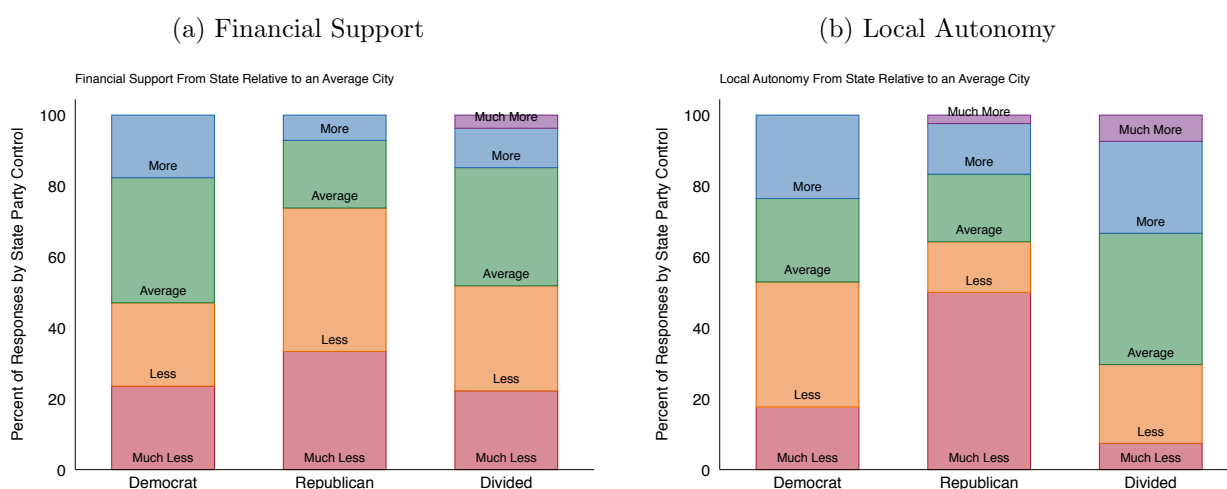


Figure 3 illustrates that mayors in Republican states are more likely to rate their financial support as “less” or “much less” than an average city compared to their peers in Democratic states or states with divided governments. The results surrounding local autonomy are even more stark. Mayors in Republican states were twice as likely to rate themselves as having “much less” autonomy than an average city compared with their counterparts in Democratic or divided states. Most strikingly, mayors in Republican states were 30 percentage points more likely to select the extreme “much less” category when asked to rate their autonomy.

We do not know, however, whether these results are a consequence of a partisan mismatch—with Democratic mayors particularly unhappy with Republican states—or whether Republican states are generally infringing upon the autonomy of local governments, regardless of the

partisan and ideological leanings of area cities. To answer that question, we turn to Figure 4, which illustrates answers for three categories of mayor: (1) mayors whose partisanship is not aligned with their states’; (2) mayors whose partisanship is aligned with their states’, and; (3) mayors whose states have divided government (in any way).

Figure 4: Assessments of state financial support and autonomy restrictions by alignment of mayor’s party and state party control.

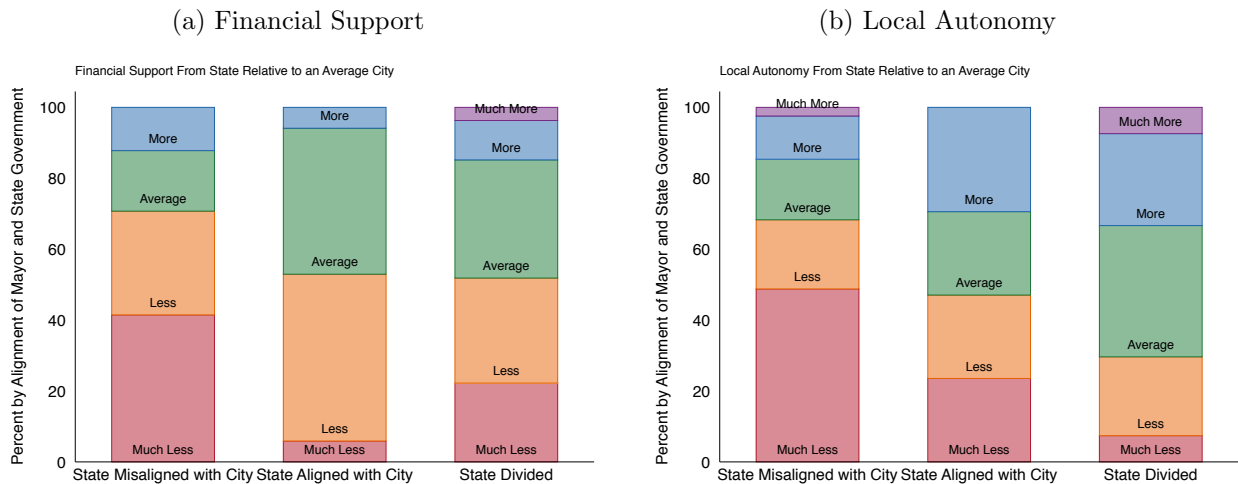


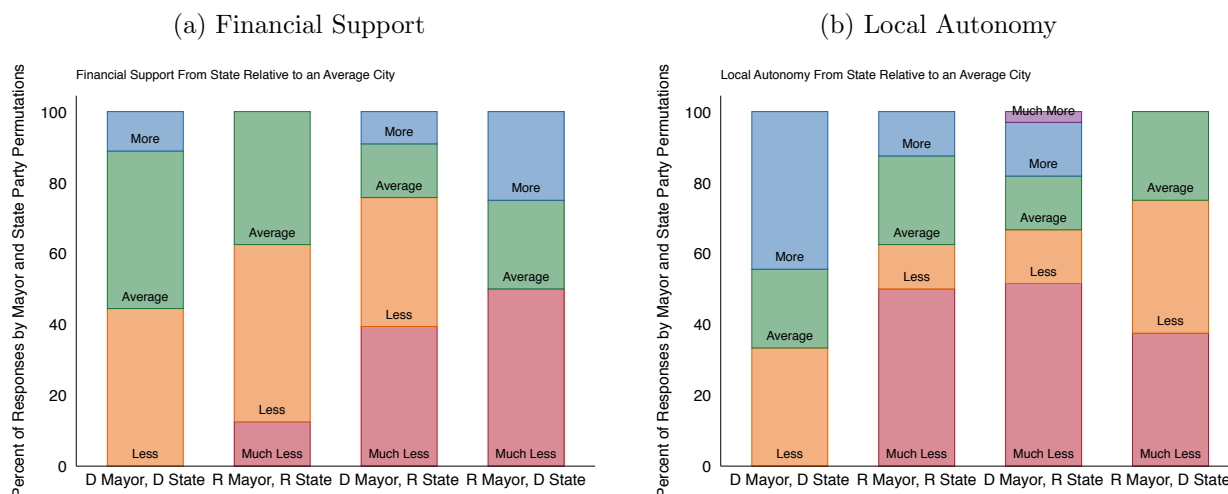
Figure 4 suggests that alignment seems to be important. Mayors whose partisanship does not align with their states’ were over 30 percentage points more likely to rate financial support from their state as “much less” relative to an average city than their counterparts whose partisanship aligns with their states’. Mayors whose states have divided governments fall somewhere in the middle. The story is similar with regard to state regulations. Mayors whose partisanship does not align with their states’ were twenty percentage points more likely to say that they had “much less” autonomy compared to their peers with matched partisanship or divided state governments.⁵

To further hone in on the extent to which partisan mismatch versus partisan control of state government helps to understand mayoral frustration with state government, we turn to

⁵While our experience suggests that the responses to these questions were thoughtful and that the direct interpretation of the findings is the correct one, we do note that cannot refute the possibility that in some cases broader negative feelings about rivals in state government drive negative responses to these specific queries.

Figure 5, which removes mayors under divided state government from our analysis. Figure 5 plots four different categories of mayors for each of our closed-ended questions: Democratic mayors in Democratic states; Republican mayors in Republican states; Democratic mayors in Republican states, and Republican mayors in Democratic states.

Figure 5: Assessments of state financial support and autonomy restrictions by party of mayor and state party control.



Responses to the fiscal question suggest that partisan alignment at a minimum predicts extreme dissatisfaction with financial support. Over one-third of Democratic mayors in Republican states, and nearly one half of Republican mayors in Democratic states believed that they received “much less” than the average city in state financial support. In contrast, *no* Democratic mayors in Democratic states rated their state financial support negatively, and only 15 percent of Republican mayors in Republican states described their financial support as “much less” than the average city. When we incorporate those mayors who responded “less,” partisan alignment is not quite as predictive: in fact, among Republican mayors, a higher proportion of those in *Republican* states rated their financial support as “less” or “much less” than their counterparts in Democrat-controlled states. In other words, while partisan alignment predicts extreme dissatisfaction with financial support, it does not appear especially predictive of overall negative ratings of financial support from higher levels

of government.

Conversely, responses to the question on state regulations suggest that a combination of conservative state leanings and partisan mismatch are predictive of dissatisfaction with regulations from state governments. While *no* Democrats in Democratic states responded that they have “much less” local autonomy, 50 percent of mayors in Republican states—regardless of political party—select this category, indicating a particular mayoral unhappiness with conservative state governments. One-third of Republican mayors in Democratic states selected the “much less” category, too, revealing that partisan mismatch may also help explain extreme unhappiness with state regulations. When we take into account the proportion of mayors who believed that they had “less” autonomy than average, the story is fairly similar. Once again, Democratic mayors in Democratic states appeared to be happiest with their state governments, with only one-third selecting the “less category.” Over 60 percent of Republican and Democratic mayors in Republican states opted for one of the two negative response options as did 75 percent of Republican mayors in Democratic states.

We juxtapose the effects of conservative state leanings and state-mayor partisan mismatch in regression models displayed in Tables 3 and 4. Each table illustrates the main effects of mayoral partisanship, state leanings, and the interaction between the two. Both tables display models for mayoral perceptions of state and federal financial support and restrictions. We should, based on our theoretical predictions only observe effects of state partisanship at the state level, with federal-level dependent variables providing a helpful check.

The results provide limited evidence of a state partisan effect. While the main effect of Republican state government—which in these models represents the effect of Republican states on Republican mayors—is negative for both the state financial support and state restrictions dependent variables, the coefficient estimates fall well short of statistical significance. Confidence bands are wide because of the relatively low number of Republican mayors in our sample (reflecting the comparatively low number of Republican mayors nationwide); we thus take these results to be tentative at best.

Table 3: Assessments of state and federal financial support by party of mayor and state party control.

VARIABLES	(1) State Financial Support	(2) Federal Financial Support
Poverty Rate	0.51 (1.84)	4.51*** (1.50)
Population (Logged)	-0.03 (0.12)	0.16 (0.10)
Democrat Mayor	0.26 (0.24)	-0.01 (0.31)
Republican State	-0.01 (0.33)	-0.27 (0.43)
Democrat Mayor * Republican State	-0.60 (0.46)	0.17 (0.53)
Constant	2.60* (1.37)	-0.10 (1.20)
Observations	85	85
R-squared	0.07	0.15

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Low scores indicate more negative (less money, more restriction) responses. State party indicators are relative to Democratic control. OLS coefficients with standard errors clustered at the state level.

In contrast, we find fairly strong evidence in support of a partisan mismatch story. Democratic mayors in Republican states are somewhat more likely to rate their state financial support poorly and significantly more likely to provide negative ratings of their autonomy from state government. We hone in on this partisan mismatch effect further in Figure 6, which illustrates the effects of different mayoral and state partisan combination on mayoral ratings of state autonomy (all effects are relative to a baseline of Republican mayors in Democratic states and are derived from models that control for city poverty rate and population). All else equal, Democratic mayors rate their restrictions from their state government almost a full point lower (on a five point scale). Conversely, Democrats in states with unified Democratic control rate their state government restrictions over a full point higher, all else equal. As expected, state-level partisan leanings do not shape mayoral attitudes towards federal financial support and restrictions.

Table 4: Assessments of state and federal autonomy restrictions by party of mayor and state party control

VARIABLES	(1) State Restrictions	(2) Federal Restrictions
Poverty Rate	-1.20 (1.71)	-0.08 (0.93)
Population (Logged)	0.12 (0.12)	0.16** (0.06)
Democrat Mayor	1.04*** (0.37)	0.43* (0.22)
Republican State	-0.24 (0.48)	-0.38 (0.35)
Democrat Mayor * Republican State	-0.92* (0.55)	0.10 (0.37)
Constant	0.95 (1.38)	0.89 (0.72)
Observations	85	84
R-squared	0.20	0.13

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

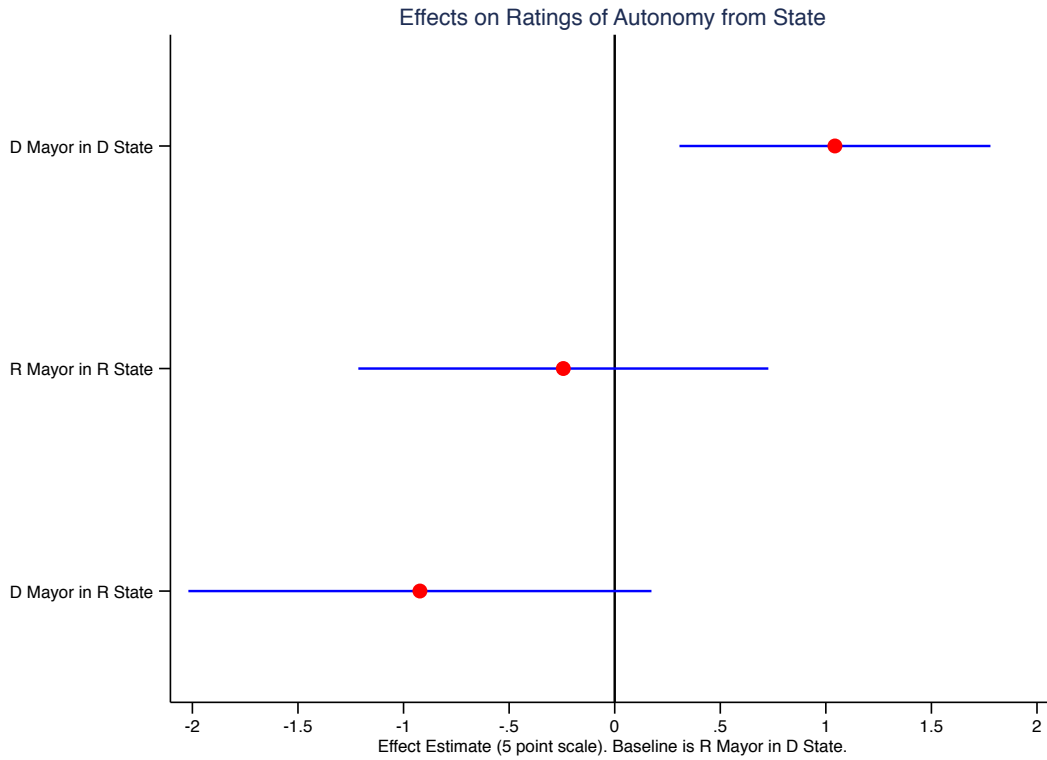
Low scores indicate more negative (less money, more restriction) responses. State party indicators are relative to Democratic control. OLS coefficients with standard errors clustered at the state level.

5 Conclusion

By comparing cities' relationships with two different levels of government—state and federal—this paper, theoretically and methodologically, pushes researchers to consider state and local government separately. Rather than simply getting lumped together relative to the federal government, state and local governments should be viewed as separate entities with differing—and, at times, competing—interests whose relationships are driven in part by overlapping policy functions and partisan polarization.

Many scholars who lament the health of America's federalism point to policy innovation at the state and local level as bright spots (Conlan, 2006; Shipan and Volden, 2008; Pickerill and Bowling, 2014). Much of this activism takes place at the city level. This paper suggests important obstacles to cities' ability to accomplish these policy goals from a somewhat

Figure 6: Assessments of state autonomy restrictions by party of mayor and state party control



Low scores indicate more negative (more restriction) responses. OLS coefficients with standard errors clustered at the state level. Baseline is Republican mayor in Democratic state.

surprising entity: state government.

Moreover, our results reveal that partisan polarization is contributing to this state obfuscation. In keeping with widespread media reports of state preemption laws targeting left-leaning cities, Democratic mayors in Republican states were much more unhappy with restrictions from their state government. These findings suggest that rising Republican dominance in state-level elections may foment increasingly antagonistic (and coercive) relationships between state and city governments.

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