

Local Roots in Local Politics*

Anna Weissman[†]

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Abstract

Local decision-making is enormously consequential. Yet who runs for and wins local office remains understudied. Given local officials' place-based responsibilities, I argue that local roots operate as a de facto requirement for candidacy. Using novel datasets of municipal campaign statements, linked voter file and candidate records, and original nationwide surveys of elected officials and constituents, I show that local roots overwhelmingly shape who runs for office, how candidates present themselves to voters, and who ultimately governs, with roots predicting candidacy and officeholding more strongly than race, gender, or age. But while voters of all backgrounds appear to prefer long-term residents in office, the descriptive overrepresentation of deeply rooted constituents may also translate into substantive underrepresentation for newcomers. I trace such consequences in the area of land use. These findings suggest that research on local politics should contend with the theoretical and substantive implications of this powerful bias towards longtime residents.

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[†]anna_weissman@berkeley.edu; Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for the Study of Democratic Politics, Princeton University

1 Introduction

Zohran Mamdani, the 2025 mayoral winner for the largest city in the United States, began his campaign bio with, “Born in Uganda and raised in New York City...” One hundred twenty miles north, in the small town of Olive, New York, a candidate for town board opened his bio with, “Jim and his wife Sharon have been residents of Olive for 40 years and raised their two daughters here.” Across the country in Seattle, Washington, mayoral incumbent and front-runner Bruce Harrell described himself as “a Seattle Public Schools and UW graduate, lifelong Seattle resident, and father...” In all corners of the United States, candidates for local office routinely emphasize their connections to their towns and cities. This makes intuitive sense. Local officials make decisions that primarily affect their immediate communities. They draw on detailed knowledge of local institutions and networks that outsiders typically lack. Yet despite how consistently candidates emphasize their connection to place, local roots remain largely unexamined in the study of local politics.

This absence in the literature is surprising. Questions of who runs for office and who governs have long been central to the study of local democratic representation (Dahl 1961). Existing research focuses on how characteristics like race, gender, partisanship, and incumbency status structure political power (Schaffner et al. 2001; Oliver and Ha 2007; Trounstine 2011; Crowder-Meyer et al. 2015; Kirkland 2022; Hajnal and Trounstine 2014; Sances 2018; Warshaw 2019; Conevska et al. 2024). These traits are critical to understanding democratic exclusion, but none of them directly capture what Oliver et al. (2012) identify as the core motivation for serving at the local level: a deep interest in and commitment to one’s community. Local roots, however, indicate a longstanding attachment to the town or city.

Scholars of state and national politics have found that voters prefer candidates rooted in their districts (e.g., Key 1949; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1983; Meredith 2013; Hunt and Rouse 2023). Recent studies use survey experiments to show a similar preference for rooted candidates in hypothetical local elections (Ornstein et al. 2024; Elder and Lueders 2024). While

these findings highlight the electoral appeal of rootedness, they do not focus on the broader role of place-based connection in who selects into serving their community.

The knowledge and social connections often linked to being rooted are bound up with governing place-specific change (Campbell et al. 2019; Hunt 2022). Unlike higher-level politicians, local officials are primarily responsible for enacting policies that directly reshape their communities. They set policy in core domains such as housing and infrastructure, areas that may structure national debates but are central components of local politics (Glaeser 2024).

If roots are a valuable quality for governing at the local level, they should also matter for who is seen as a plausible candidate for office in the first place. Access to democratic power is often driven by informal qualifications that influence who is viewed as eligible to govern. I argue that local roots function as one such qualification, consequential for who enters local office long before voters cast ballots. This theorized link between quality and rootedness raises several questions. Do candidates have strong roots? Are they more rooted than their constituents? What can this tell us about local power and representation? Despite enduring attention to who governs, these questions remain unanswered. In this paper, I address these questions using original data on municipal candidates, officeholders, and constituents.

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, using a novel dataset of city council candidate statements, I stress the importance of exploring rootedness by documenting a striking pattern: candidates almost universally emphasize their ties to the community, doing so far more frequently than they invoke characteristics such as gender, race, or partisanship, and in sharp contrast to state-level candidates. Second, I develop a theoretical argument to explain how local roots shape candidate emergence and access to local office. Third, drawing on administrative and survey data, I show that the people who run for office are overwhelmingly rooted in their communities. Rooted candidates are also more likely to win than less rooted opponents. As a result, those who serve are far more rooted than the populations they represent, and this gap exceeds those observed for race, gender, and age. I do not estimate the causal effect of roots on winning, but instead document inequality in who selects into

local candidacy. Finally, I provide suggestive evidence for the implications of this descriptive overrepresentation using surveys of both officials and constituents. Roots are widely viewed as favorable, but they are also perceived to signal distinct policy preferences between long-term residents and newcomers. The same quality that increases the legitimacy of local governments may also generate substantive underrepresentation for mobile constituents. Table 1 summarizes the core results and evidence that I present in this paper.

Table 1: Summary: Questions, Results, and Evidence

Question	Results	Inference	Evidence
Background: Why consider local roots?			
1. Are local roots salient in municipal elections?	Yes: Candidates emphasize community ties far more than other traits and more than candidates for state office do	Descriptive	Original dataset of 1,955 candidate statements
Who governs?			
2. Do local candidates have strong roots?	Yes: Most mayoral/council candidates have lived in their municipality for decades or a majority of adult life	Descriptive	CEDA-L2 matched data; 5,459 mayoral & council candidates
3. Do local officeholders have strong roots?	Yes: Sitting officials report long residency	Descriptive	Nationwide survey of 1,280 local officials
4. Are roots associated with winning elections?	Yes: In contested mayoral races, longer residency is associated with higher probability of victory	Associational	CEDA-L2 matched mayoral data (586 candidates)
Why does it matter that local officials are rooted?			
5. Are local officeholders more rooted than their constituents?	Yes: Candidates' residency greatly exceeds that of registered voters in the same municipalities	Descriptive & Associational	CEDA-L2; L2 for all CA voters
6. Does rootedness vary by municipality population size?	Yes for constituents; No for officials: Larger cities have more mobile residents; candidates remain rooted	Associational	CEDA-L2; Census; RUCA
7. Are rooted residents more overrepresented than men, white people, and older residents?	Yes: Long-term residents dominate the candidate pool relative to other groups	Associational	CEDA-L2; Census
Why does descriptive overrepresentation matter?			
8. How do officials and constituents view representatives' roots?	Positively: Officials and constituents like long-term residents in office and say roots signal local knowledge	Exploratory	Local official survey (N=1,280); public survey (N=991)
9. Are roots perceived to align with policy preferences?	Yes: Respondents associate rootedness with preferences, mainly on development issues	Exploratory	Local official and public surveys

Note: CEDA = California Election Data Archive. L2 = L2 voter file. RUCA = Rural-Urban Commuter Area scores. Both the official and public surveys are original data collection and were IRB-Approved.

Together, these results underscore a neglected aspect of political geography and power. As

partisan sorting has reshaped communities, research on local politics has increasingly focused on the partisanship and ideology of city leaders. But in both big cities and small towns, the people who govern are alike in that they are deeply tied to the places they serve. No matter their partisanship, ideology, race, or gender, municipal candidates and officials are more locally rooted than the constituents they represent. Even in areas undergoing population growth, local political power is systematically monopolized by long-term residents. Place-based connection matters for who runs, who wins, and ultimately, who governs.

2 Background: why consider local roots?

Municipal elections in the United States differ in many ways from state and national competitions. Most are formally nonpartisan and party labels rarely appear on ballots (Schaffner et al. 2001), interest-group activity is organized around local issues rather than national partisan coalitions (Anzia 2022), and candidates operate in low-information environments with limited media coverage (Hopkins and Pettingill 2018). When voters do receive information about candidates, it may come through brief campaign materials provided by either candidates themselves or the county or municipal government. Therefore, candidates' presentation of self provides important cues in these contexts. What candidates choose to highlight about themselves reveals what is treated as politically relevant in local elections.

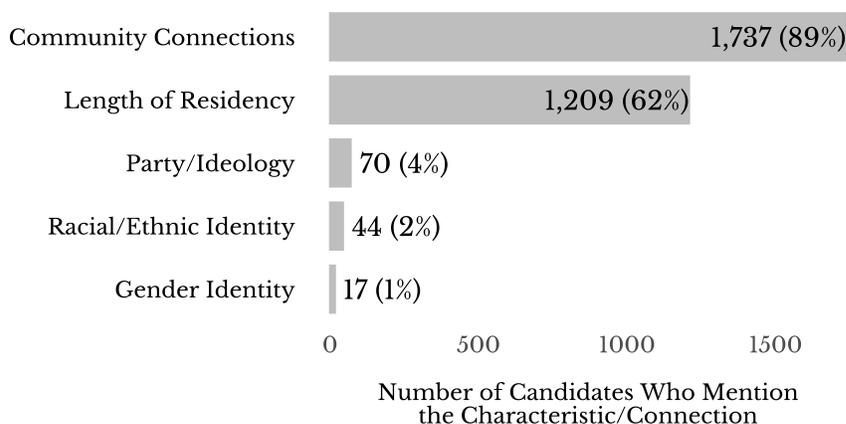
In this section, I document how candidates describe themselves in campaign materials to set up the theoretical argument that follows. I assembled a novel dataset of 1,955 official candidate statements from the 2022 and 2024 California municipal council general elections. These statements are printed in voter information booklets sent to all registered voters, making them a consistent and accessible way to observe how candidates present themselves.¹ With a team of research assistants, I collected statements for candidates listed in the California Election Data Archive (CEDA) using municipal websites or by directly

¹California is the only state with both a centralized candidate list and accessible voter guides. I replicate the analysis using nationwide municipal legislator bios from the KnowWho database, coded using a GPT-5 model trained on the human-coded California data (Appendix A). Results are consistent with Figure 1.

communicating with county clerks.²

Research assistants and I hand-coded each statement using a standardized codebook to identify two forms of rootedness. First, we coded whether a candidate mentioned their length of residency, such as specifying the number of years lived in the municipality, stating they grew up locally, or describing themselves as lifelong residents.³ Second, we coded whether they referenced other community connections, such as involvement in local organizations, raising children in local public schools, owning a local business, or holding a volunteer role in their municipality. If a candidate discussed experience in any of these capacities outside the municipality, that was not counted.⁴

Figure 1: Mentions of Rootedness and Other Characteristics



Note: This shows the share of California city council candidates who mention their length of residency, other community connections, or other characteristics in their official campaign statements, among those available for 2022 and 2024.

In Figure 1, among the candidates with accessible statements, almost two-thirds mentioned their length of residency and nearly 90% mentioned another community connection. These rates are consistent across 2022 and 2024. Only 6% of candidates mentioned neither form of roots. Candidates with a wide range of residency tenures reference their residency length, but the longer candidates have lived in their municipality, the more likely they are to

²See Appendix A for more details on data collection.

³When possible, we noted the year they moved to the municipality and whether they grew up there.

⁴Appendix A describes the manual coding and rates of missingness. There is a negative relationship between missingness and population size. Given the large share of smaller cities, there are still more small places than large ones in the sample. Missingness reflects access to candidate booklets, not candidate decisions to withhold information. My coding approach closely mirrors that of Hunt's (2022) for members of Congress.

highlight it.⁵ About one-third of those who mention length claim that they grew up locally.

In contrast, explicit references to traits that dominate the representation literature are rare. Fewer than 4% of candidates mentioned partisanship, a political party or ideology, or endorsements from partisan actors. Fewer than 3% of candidates mentioned their race, ethnicity, or gender (see Appendix B for details on coding). The number of explicit mentions is remarkable relative to the emphasis on local ties. Roots may aid in downplaying these other, potentially more divisive characteristics (see de Benedictis-Kessner 2021).

Municipal candidates consistently frame their qualifications through their relationship to the municipality,⁶ which stands in stark contrast to candidates for state office, who typically rely on professional backgrounds or political experience. To illustrate this, I collected 140 California State Assembly and Senate statements from 2022 and 2024. Mentions of residency length appear in only 24% of statements, and when candidates reference a local connection, most do so by discussing their political experience in the community (see Appendix D).

These data point to a unique and striking feature of local governance: place-based connection is treated as a central qualification by candidates themselves. Yet existing accounts of local politics offer little guidance for understanding whether and why rootedness occupies this role, whether it is associated with candidate selection, or what the implications are for governance. The following section advances a theory about local roots in local politics.

3 Theory

The prevalence of appeals to local roots in local politics is consistent with the demands placed on local officials to navigate highly place-specific institutions, histories, and political dynamics to a degree that higher-level officials do not. They oversee decisions that structure the physical and social features of their communities, such as zoning and land use, infrastructure, and the provision of basic services (Anzia 2021). Unlike at the state or national level,

⁵Length of residency is measured using date of registration from the L2 voter file. See Appendix L.

⁶It is difficult to have engagement without having spent time in the place, but living a long time somewhere without participating in the community may not signal the same level of quality as someone relatively new to the community and engaged. This should be considered in future work.

where officials born in their districts often channel their attachment into district casework (Kaslovsky 2022), local representatives are primarily responsible for community concerns. A Congressional candidate can relocate to a new district and still engage with similar policies and party cues as elsewhere. Local candidates, by contrast, face a distinct issue environment when crossing municipal boundaries. Relocating to a nearby city would require learning not only about new alliances and community networks, but also a new set of institutions, norms, and salient issues before becoming a credible candidate. Roots are tied to the place-specific political knowledge needed to serve in local government.

Geographic ties also indicate investment in the town or city. Specifically, time spent in a place or networks developed suggest a level of devotion to the place. As Oliver et al. (2012) show, the main reason people seek municipal office is commitment to one’s own community.⁷ Long-term ties reflect both familiarity with local conditions and a durable stake in those conditions. Roots bundle information about candidates’ knowledge of place and commitment to it.⁸

When governing is understood to require place-specific knowledge and investment, these traits come to define expectations for local officeholders. Therefore, I argue that local roots operate as an informal qualification for municipal office. At higher levels of government, quality is often tied to professional credentials or policy expertise (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). While these traits may matter in local contexts too (Kirkland 2022), in most municipalities, deep local ties should be an important and salient asset.

Rootedness should operate as an asset in primarily two ways. First, roots can matter for how constituents view officials. Length of residency and building social networks can convey commitment to the community and familiarity with place-specific issues (Shugart et al. 2005; Campbell et al. 2019; Hunt 2022). Alongside knowledge and devotion, existing literature provides several explanations for why roots are a positive signal to voters and why candidates

⁷Progressive ambition is rarely the driver – most local officials do not seek state or national office after serving in municipal government (Einstein et al. 2020).

⁸Importantly, rootedness captures place-based connection beyond homeownership (Figure G2).

may therefore both possess and highlight these connections (for a review, see Nyholt 2024). For example, roots can function as a descriptive characteristic: voters who are themselves long-term residents could feel represented by candidates who share that background (Pitkin 1967; Mansbridge 1999). Roots may also signal policy preferences. Place-based attachment has been linked to attitudes about land use, economic policy, and cultural preservation (e.g., Smutny and Takahashi 1999; Nelson 2001; Fischel 2002; Brown-Saracino 2004; Golding 2014; Trounstine 2020; Dublin-Boc 2023; Brouwer and Trounstine 2024). Given high rates of local participation among homeowners (Einstein et al. 2019; 2020), signaling preservationist preferences might be electorally advantageous.

Second, roots may operate as resources that make running for office more feasible. Long-term residency or meaningful community involvement can provide opportunities to build name recognition (Gimpel et al. 2008), learn about local issues, and develop the relationships that often prompt candidacy in the first place (Oliver et al. 2012). Without roots, candidates may face significant barriers to entry, regardless of other qualifications. Rootedness conditions not only electoral appeal, but access to candidacy itself. Inequality should emerge upstream, through ambition and recruitment, rather than through elections. Consequently, I predict that the pool of potential candidates for local office will disproportionately include residents with strong roots, which will have implications for who is elected.

If roots serve as both a signal of quality and a resource, candidates with deeper ties should be at an advantage. State, national, and comparative scholars have found that candidates with stronger local ties consistently perform better in elections (e.g., Key 1949; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1983; Campbell and Cowley 2014; Johnston et al. 2016; Panagopoulos et al. 2017; Collignon and Sajuria 2018; Jacobs and Munis 2019; Hunt 2021; Hunt and Rouse 2023). Recent work also shows that residency tenure predicts candidate success in hypothetical local matchups (Ornstein et al. 2024; Elder and Lueders 2024). I expect that roots structure democratic selection before elections occur, but they should be associated with candidates' election outcomes when there is variation in rootedness.

3.1 Roots and representation

When deeply rooted residents both dominate the candidate pool and have an advantage in elections, governing bodies will overrepresent the most well-established residents, at least descriptively. This is more concerning in larger municipalities because smaller, less dense places tend to have stronger social ties and lower residential turnover than large cities (Oliver et al. 2012; Lappie and Marschall 2018; Marble and Lim 2023). In these latter settings, rooted officials could be more reflective of their electorates. But in larger, more mobile communities, the dominance of rooted candidates could lead to descriptive underrepresentation of a larger share of the constituency.

It is plausible that the descriptive overrepresentation of rooted residents has implications for substantive representation. If so, the gaps between officials and constituents would be of greater concern. Both American and comparative politics scholars have found that embedded leaders tend to be more responsive to embedded constituencies (Fenno 1977; Tsai 2007; Bhavnani and Lee 2018; Ban and Kaslovsky 2024; Crosson and Kaslovsky 2024; Smolders and Descamps 2024). Additionally, elites' perceptions of constituents' preferences may translate into the positions they take on important local issues. If strong-rooted constituents are among the most engaged residents (Einstein et al. 2020) and they are perceived as having distinct preferences from newcomers, this could influence how officials make decisions. When strong-rooted residents share the preferences of the broader electorate, this may be normatively desirable, but when preferences differ based on rootedness, the disproportionate power of rooted residents could result in substantive underrepresentation of those with weaker ties.

The descriptive overrepresentation of rooted residents, however, does not necessarily imply a shortcoming of local democracy. While descriptive overrepresentation can foster trust and enhance perceptions of legitimacy for rooted residents (Mansbridge 1999), the knowledge and competence attached to roots could lead to increased trust among newcomers as well, independent of their policy preferences. Regardless of their place-based connection, residents could still feel well-represented by rooted officials.

To the extent that rootedness is treated as a desirable qualification for local office, selection on this dimension can generate a democratic trade-off. Democracy depends on both effective governance and inclusive representation. The presence of strong-rooted officials should support the former, whereby these officials bring institutional knowledge and legitimacy. But if rootedness functions as an informal qualification for office, it narrows who is viable to serve, resulting in overrepresentation for the most established residents. When such dynamics result in substantive underrepresentation for more transient residents, a tension arises between the benefits of rooted officials and preferable policy outcomes for all. This pattern parallels the overrepresentation of lawyers in Congress, where informal credentials may facilitate effective governance but can also produce representational gaps when preferences diverge along occupational lines (Carnes 2012). Democratic inequality can arise even when elections are fair because socially accepted criteria matter for who is seen as eligible to run in the first place.

4 Who Governs?

In this section, I contribute to an ongoing conversation in political science about who governs. Specifically, I show that it is rooted people who govern. The candidate statements demonstrated that those who emerge for local office discuss local roots as a part of their qualifications, but they do not offer consistent or comparable measures of roots. Here, I turn to administrative and survey data to investigate candidates' and officials' rootedness.

4.1 Do local candidates and officeholders have strong roots?

Assessing the strength of roots is difficult, in part because data on municipal candidates remains limited. Scholars of state and national politics have greater access to indicators such as birthplace, length of residency, or local schooling, but no centralized database tracks such measures at the local level. Even complete lists of municipal candidates are unavailable in most states.⁹ In California, CEDA provides a candidate list with vote share and incumbency

⁹de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023) provide a large candidate database, but it excludes most small municipalities and does not include variables related to roots. This list can be used to scrape Wikipedia, but

status, but it must be supplemented with additional information.

To address these challenges, I draw on multiple data sources, generating several measures of rootedness. While no single measure fully captures rootedness as a concept, together they offer a way to better understand the relationship between local ties, candidate emergence, and who governs. Following de Kadt and Grzymala-Busse (2025), I treat careful description as essential for answering first-order questions in contexts where prior knowledge is limited.

4.1.1 Measure 1: voter registration as a proxy for residency tenure

For both practical and theoretical reasons, I operationalize rootedness as residency length. Practically, data on how long candidates and voters have lived in their municipalities are more widely available than data on birthplace, educational history, or social ties. Theoretically, long-term residents are more likely than newcomers to possess knowledge of the area and its residents, a sense of duty to the community, and established social networks.

Given the difficulty of collecting consistent information about local candidates through web searches, news articles, or direct outreach, I rely on a proxy for residency length: the length of time a candidate has been registered to vote in their municipality.¹⁰ This proxy likely understates true residency length. I cannot observe whether a candidate moved within the municipality and re-registered, left and later returned, lived in the municipality without registering to vote, or registered at age 18 after growing up there.¹¹

Using candidate data from CEDA and registration dates from the L2 voter file, I assess patterns in candidates' residency tenure. I matched mayoral and council candidates from the 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections to individual-level voter records using the `Fuzzylink` package in R (Ornstein 2025). The package implemented a probabilistic record linkage procedure based on candidate full name, with a required exact match on municipality. After matching,

pages typically exist only for winners or prominent candidates. In Appendix M, I present descriptives from a Wikipedia scrape, but I exclude this from the main text for reasons outlined in the Appendix.

¹⁰See Einstein et al. (2020) for evidence of others using the same proxy.

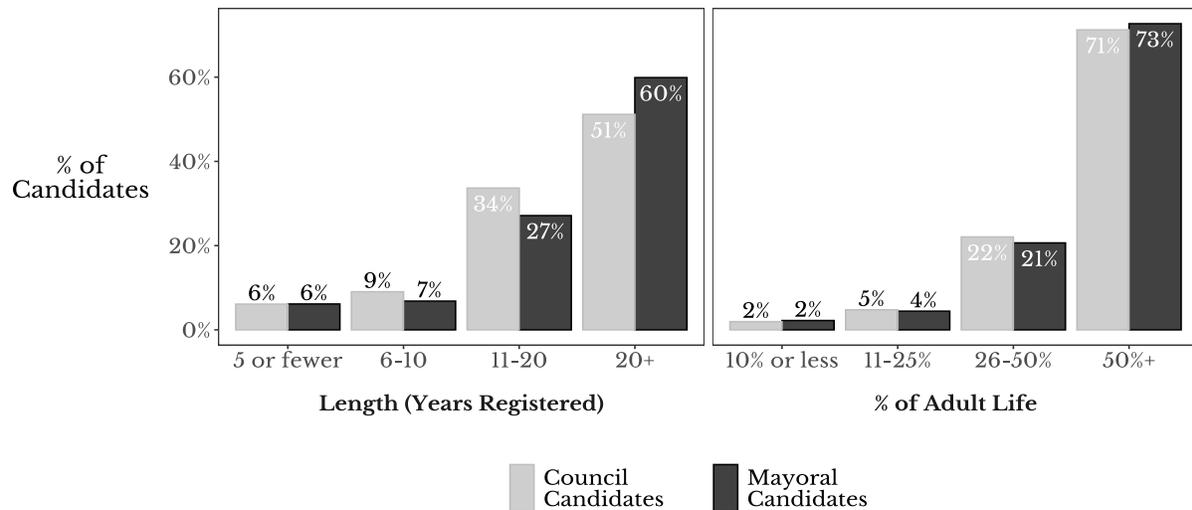
¹¹With survey data described in the next section, I find that among 52 CA officials for whom I have matched voter file data, 75% have reported residency length the same as their registration length or longer, consistent with delayed registration. Longer registration than reported tenure suggests administrative error or moving out of and back into the municipality without re-registering.

I dropped any rows that did not exactly match on last name. In cases where multiple potential matches had equal match probabilities, I used additional information, such as middle name or age, gathered through web searches, to select the most likely match (see Appendix E for details on missingness).

This process yielded a dataset of 4,873 matched council candidates and 586 mayoral candidates. The L2 voter file provides each candidate’s registration date at their current address and year of birth. I use this information to generate two measures. First, I calculate the length of residency by subtracting the year of registration from the year of the election.¹² Second, to account for age, I compute the percentage of adult life spent in a place as:

$$\frac{\text{Length of Residency}}{\text{Age During Election}-18} \times 100. \text{ }^{13,14}$$

Figure 2: Residency Tenure Among Candidates



Note: Length refers to the number of years since voter registration. In Appendix P, I present similar distributions when subset to only non-incumbents. 4,873 council candidates; 586 mayoral candidates.

Figure 2 presents the distribution of residency tenure among the matched candidates. The left panel categorizes candidates by the number of adult years spent in the municipality, while the right panel shows the percentage of their adult life spent there. Mean and median

¹²I use residency address. Fewer than 1% of matched candidates have mismatches between mailing and residency address cities. Candidates are not just claiming residency in the place where they are running.

¹³Around two-thirds of matched candidates were born in California, according to L2, but state of birth is distinct from growing up in the municipality.

¹⁴Years registered remains useful because a younger resident may have spent a greater share of their life in a place than an older one with the same residency length, but this does not entail a deeper connection.

residency tenure for council candidates is 21 years. They have lived an average of 64% of their adult lives in their municipalities. Their average age is 53 (median: 54). Given the average length of residence, the typical councilor appears to have moved to their municipality by their early 30s, if not earlier. Mayoral candidates show similar patterns: a mean residency length of 22 years (median: 23) and 63% of adult life spent in their municipalities (median: 62%), with an average age of 55 (median: 56).

Notably, 85% of council candidates and 87% of mayoral candidates have lived in their municipalities for more than 10 years, and over half of both groups have 20 or more years of residency. Almost three-quarters of candidates have resided in their municipalities for at least half of their adult lives. If, as Ornstein et al. (2024) propose in their hypothetical candidate profiles, 10 years is sufficient to establish roots, then the vast majority of individuals running for local office are strongly rooted in their communities. Even with a stricter threshold, such as 20 years, the majority of candidates would still meet the bar. This supports expectations laid out in the theory section: roots matter for candidate emergence.

4.1.2 Measure 2: reported tenure from survey responses

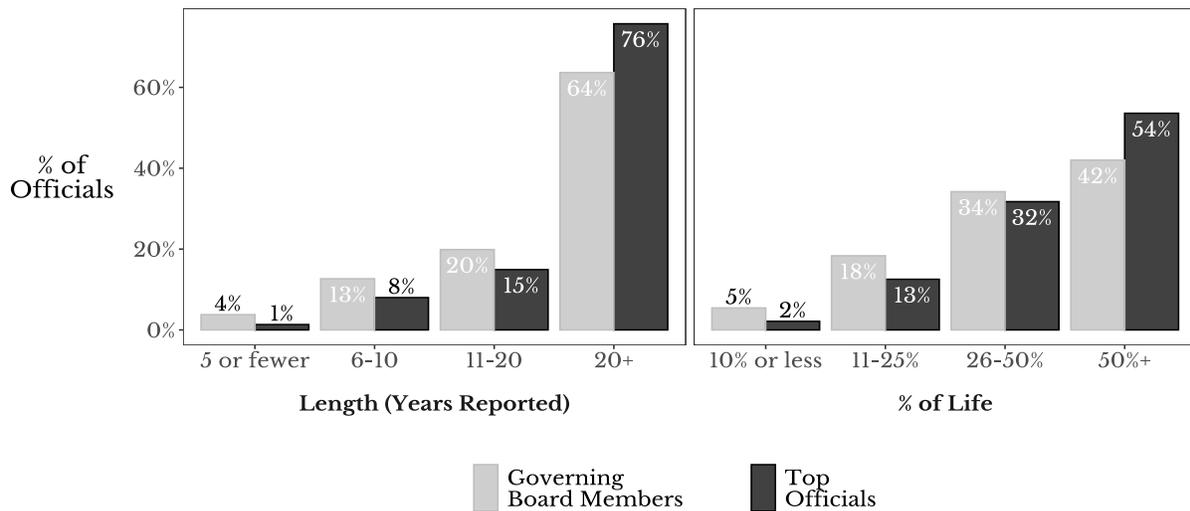
Registration records provide a useful proxy for residency length, but survey data can offer direct reports on the rootedness of those who hold office. Therefore, to complement the voter file data and better understand why candidates emphasize their roots, I conducted a survey in December 2023 with responses from 1,280 municipal elected officials nationwide. Respondents included elected officials in governing board roles (e.g., councilors, aldermen) and top positions (e.g., mayors, supervisors). The survey was administered via Qualtrics, with participants recruited through email invitations. Although those currently in office may differ in meaningful ways from candidates who were not elected, this approach yields the most direct measures of rootedness available.¹⁵

The survey included questions on demographics, place-based connection, preferences, and attitudes about local roots. The distribution of respondents across Census regions closely

¹⁵See Appendix F for information on response rates, sample composition, and survey procedures.

matches that of the full sample, and respondents are from all states except Hawaii and Nevada. The ratio of men to women is approximately 2:1. Nearly 90% of respondents identify as white. A majority (57.8%) are over the age of 60. National estimates for officials are unavailable, but the distribution of demographic groups closely mirrors data from Oliver et al. (2012). Political affiliation is fairly balanced: 42.81% identify as Democrats, 40.54% as Republicans, fewer than 10% as pure Independents, and under 7% with another party.

Figure 3: Residency Tenure Among Elected Officials



Note: Length refers to the number of years they report living in their municipality. Percent of life is calculated as years lived divided by their age, multiplied by 100. In Appendix P, I present similar distributions when subset to only first-term officials. 876 governing board members; 404 top officials.

Figure 3 displays variation in both reported length of residency and the percentage of life lived in the municipality, calculated as: $\frac{\text{Length of Residency}}{\text{Age}} \times 100$. Among all survey respondents, the mean length of residency is 31 years (median: 30), and the mean share of life lived in the municipality since turning 18 is 51% (median: 47.01%). The mean age of respondents is 61 (median: 63), several years older than the average among the California candidates.

Not every sitting official has deep roots, but the average municipal officeholder has spent a significant portion of their life in the place they represent. Many also grew up there, have a spouse who did, or have parents with local ties. About half of respondents were raised in the region in which they now live (see Appendix G). Lifelong residency is not a necessary qualification for running, but it is uncommon for officials to be short-term residents.

Table 2: Share of Races with Short-Term and Long-Term Candidates

Cut-off for long-term	Share of Races with mix
10 Years	21.2%
20 Years	42.4%
25% of Adult Life	13.9%
50% of Adult Life	31.8%

These patterns indicate that voters typically choose between deeply rooted competitors: roots influence elections via candidate supply. In Table 2, I demonstrate just how infrequently strongly rooted candidates run against weakly rooted ones. I report the share of mayoral races that include candidates on either side of several rootedness thresholds, using the matched candidate data. Ten years is a benchmark in prior research, but I also consider other thresholds: 20 years of residency, and 25% and 50% of a candidate’s adult life spent in the municipality. With all cutoffs, a minority of races feature a mix of long- and short-term candidates. This holds when I restrict this to only contested races. Races with candidates who have at least 20 years of residency are almost always composed of candidates with 10 or more years of residency. Inequality in access to local office is produced largely before elections occur, as informal qualifications matter for who enters the candidate pool and constrain the choices available to voters.

4.2 Are roots associated with winning local elections?

Although only a small subset of races includes substantial variation in candidates’ rootedness, existing variation does allow for a test of whether strong roots are associated with winning. If so, this would suggest that candidates’ emphasis on local ties in campaign statements is most persuasive when those ties are especially strong. In this section, I demonstrate that in the contests where long-term residents face off against relative newcomers, the more established candidates are more likely to prevail. These associations demonstrate how electoral processes reinforce inequalities produced at the candidacy stage.

For mayoral candidates from the L2 match sample, I estimate the following equation:¹⁶

¹⁶I exclude council elections from this analysis given the number of unmatched candidates within elections.

$$\text{Win}_{ijt} = \alpha_{jt} + \beta_1 \log(\text{Residency Tenure}_i) + \boldsymbol{\omega} Z_i + \varepsilon_{ijt} \quad (1)$$

where i is an individual candidate, j indexes municipalities, and t is years. α_{jt} are municipality-year fixed effects, which ensure that candidates are only compared within a given election. This accounts for place-specific electoral dynamics and prevents comparisons across municipalities where only newcomers or only long-term residents are running. $\log(\text{Residency Tenure}_i)$ is the number of years a candidate has been registered in the municipality, logged to reduce skew.¹⁷ Z_i is vector of candidate-level covariates, including incumbency status (1 for incumbent, 0 otherwise), gender (1 for woman, 0 for man), age (standardized), and predicted White (using Bayesian Improved Surname Geocoding with `wru` in `R` to predict candidates' race), with corresponding coefficient vector $\boldsymbol{\omega}$. I present models with the incumbency control excluded as well because incumbency could be post-treatment, attenuating the observed effect of rootedness. All models cluster robust standard errors at the municipality level and exclude the 25 mayoral candidates in uncontested races.

This approach is inherently limited in its ability to estimate a causal effect of rootedness on winning.¹⁸ Even with included controls, unobserved confounders may exist. For instance, a candidate may share political or cultural values with longtime residents, which could both lead them to stay and make them more appealing to voters. Some studies of rootedness focus on birthplace to limit selection bias, but birthplace data are very difficult or impossible to obtain for many local candidates. Therefore, this model presents the association between rootedness and electoral success when there is variation in candidates' roots.

Table 3 presents the relationship between residency tenure and electoral success in mayoral races.¹⁹ In the first four models, the coefficient on residency length is positive and statistically

¹⁷All logarithmic transformations in the paper use the natural log.

¹⁸For further discussion on the limitations to causal inference, see Appendix J. If anything, the estimates should reflect attenuation bias. Newcomers who choose to run against rooted candidates likely bring compensating strengths. This comparison should be among strong-rooted candidates versus highly qualified newcomers on some other dimension, not the average newcomer.

¹⁹To assess potential multicollinearity among explanatory variables, I estimated variance inflation factors from models excluding fixed effects. All VIFs were below 2, suggesting multicollinearity is not a concern.

Table 3: Relationship Between Residency Tenure and Mayoral Election Victory

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
log(Years Lived)	0.124*** (0.042)	0.139** (0.057)	0.098** (0.044)	0.143*** (0.053)				
log(% Life Lived)					0.115** (0.057)	0.135** (0.061)	0.081 (0.050)	0.127** (0.062)
Woman		0.091 (0.070)	0.054 (0.057)	-0.004 (0.065)		0.098 (0.070)	0.058 (0.057)	0.002 (0.066)
Age (std.)		-0.015 (0.043)	-0.032 (0.032)	-0.047 (0.034)		0.054 (0.033)	0.016 (0.026)	0.028 (0.027)
$P(\text{White})$		-0.010 (0.103)	-0.013 (0.083)	-0.069 (0.087)		-0.010 (0.104)	-0.014 (0.084)	-0.067 (0.087)
Incumbent			0.598*** (0.066)				0.598*** (0.066)	
City-Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	558	556	556	426	558	556	556	426
Election-Year Groups	217	217	217	214	217	217	217	214
Only Non-Incumbents				✓				✓

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

Note: Controls include incumbency (0/1), age (standardized), gender (1=woman), and predicted probability of being white (0-1). Models 4 and 8 include only non-incumbent candidates. Robust standard errors clustered at the municipality level are in parentheses. Each observation is a candidate. Comparisons are made only within elections.

significant, even after subsetting to only non-incumbents.²⁰ For percent of adult life lived, the coefficient is statistically significant in all models, aside from the full specification with the incumbency control (Model 7).

Logging residency length means the estimate captures diminishing returns to tenure: the increase in predicted probability of winning is larger when moving from 10 to 20 years than from 20 to 40 years. In both cases, using the estimate from Model 4, doubling the number of years lived is associated with a 9.91 percentage point increase in the likelihood of winning ($\ln(2) \times .143$). These results are consistent with expectations, but they should be interpreted with caution. First, the observed relationship is an association, not to be interpreted as an effect. Second, rootedness matters for who becomes a candidate in the first place. That is, potential candidates with weaker local ties are filtered out before they reach the ballot.²¹

²⁰Oster (2019) sensitivity analysis indicates that under moderate assumptions ($R_{\max} \approx 0.03$, $\delta = 1$), the adjusted estimate remains positive. Only under much stronger assumptions does the estimate attenuate.

²¹Specifications regressing winning on relative tenure between the top two candidates yield similar directional estimates but are estimated with less precision given races with incomplete residency data.

The coefficients on incumbency are substantively and statistically significant in Models 3 and 7. This aligns with research finding an incumbency advantage in local elections (Schaffner et al. 2001; Trounstein 2011). Incumbency is related to rootedness and may be a post-treatment variable, limiting the interpretability of models that include it.

This analysis reveals that even when candidates' roots vary within an election, residency length remains a positive and statistically significant predictor of electoral success. Voters may respond to signals of embeddedness, but the results could also point to material advantages of long-term residence, such as social networks or access to resources.²² Regardless of the underlying mechanism, these electoral associations reinforce rather than generate inequality, given most sorting out of officeholding occurs before elections.

5 Why does it matter that local officials are rooted?

The representational significance of rootedness depends on whether leaders differ from their constituents and whether those differences matter for accountability or policy. If most residents are strongly rooted, support for embedded candidates could be driven by a preference for descriptive representation. But if constituents lack such ties, then positive evaluations of rooted candidates among these constituents would stem from something other than shared traits. Here, I show that rooted residents are descriptively overrepresented, suggesting that support for rooted candidates cannot be explained by trait congruence alone.

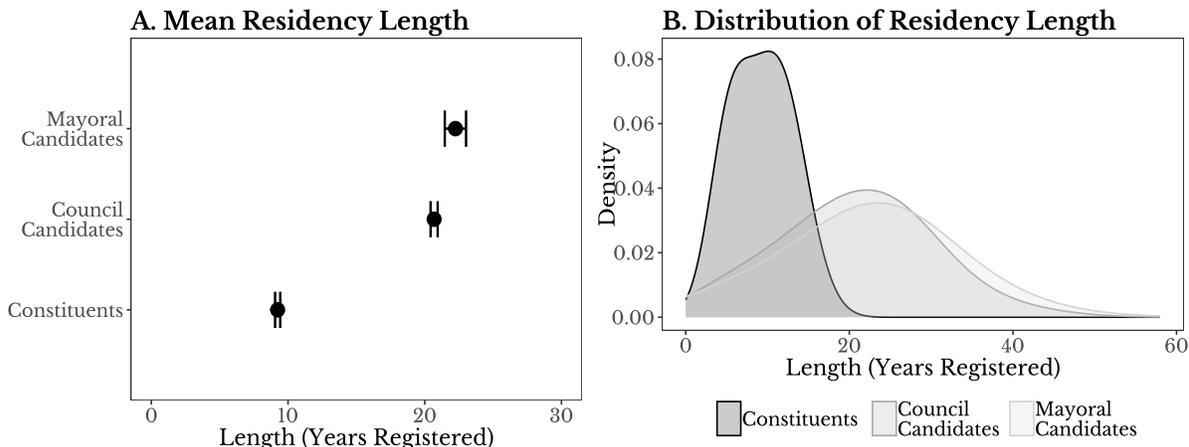
5.1 Are local officeholders more rooted than their constituents?

To measure registered voters' residency length in a comparable way to candidates', I calculate tenure for all constituents in California municipalities for which I also have candidate data (2018, 2020, and 2022). I use L2 registration date and birth date to calculate years lived and percent of adult life lived. The average residency length among constituents (mean of the averages across municipalities) is 9.2 years, and the average percent of adult life lived in the municipality is 23.8%. The average length does not exceed 20 years in any municipality. As

²²See Appendix M for details on how winning and losing candidates present themselves in statements.

average registration length increases within a municipality, municipal net population churn (using postal address changes) decreases, validating this measure.

Figure 4: Residency Length Averages and Distributions



Note: Panel A shows the mean residency length of constituents & candidates. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Panel B presents the distribution of residency length. For constituents, this is the distribution of average tenure for each municipality. Appendix K includes the constituent-level distribution.

In Figure 4, Panel A, I show that the average residency length of constituents does not mirror the tenure of the people serving them.²³ The distribution of length among candidates also differs substantially from the distribution among constituents (Figure 4, Panel B). I present the distribution of average constituent tenure at the municipality level, rather than the distribution of all individuals, to ensure that larger cities do not disproportionately drive the pattern. The distribution is also not driven by candidates' older average age than constituents: using percent of adult life lived, the same pattern emerges (see Appendix K).

To more formally estimate differences in residency tenure between candidates and constituents, I use the following equation:

$$\log(\text{Residency Tenure})_{ijt} = \alpha_{jt} + \beta_1 \text{Candidate}_{ijt} + \varepsilon_{ijt} \quad (2)$$

where specifications mimic Equation 1, but controls are excluded from the main model and the variables of interest differ. *Candidate* is a binary indicator for whether the individual ran for office (1) or not (0), and the outcome is years lived or percent of adult life lived

²³Following a similar matching procedure as for local candidates, I evaluate state-level candidates' average tenure in their districts. I allow for a match in any municipality that overlaps with the district, resulting in several false positives that I cleaned manually. See Appendix D.

(logged). β_1 represents the average difference in tenure between registered voters who ran for office and those who did not, within the same city and election year. The analyses include all registered voters from municipalities in which the sample of candidates are registered. In Appendix P, I present the same models with controls, as well as unlogged and rescaled versions of the dependent variable, which yield substantively similar estimates for β_1 .²⁴

Table 4 reveals that candidates for city council and mayor have substantially longer average residency tenure than their constituents. In all models, the coefficients are positive and statistically significant. Given the logged outcomes, I exponentiate the coefficients to show an interpretable difference between candidates and constituents. For instance, in Model 1, mayoral candidates have, on average, 3.73 times the residency length of non-candidates. The estimate is similar in magnitude for council candidates.

Table 4: Residency Tenure Regressed on Candidacy

	Log(Years Lived)		Log(% Life Lived)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Candidate	1.553**	1.397**	1.246**	1.219**
	(0.0325)	(0.0122)	(0.0276)	(0.0111)
% Difference	372.8%	304.4%	247.5%	237.9%
95% CI	[339.6, 410.4]	[286.9, 322.7]	[222.1, 275.8]	[221.1, 255.4]
N Candidates	586	4,873	586	4,873
Observations	39,097,818	39,097,818	39,097,818	39,097,818
City-Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Election	Mayoral	Council	Mayoral	Council

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

Note: This presents the relationship between residency tenure and whether an individual is a candidate in a given election year. Each observation is a registered voter in California. Candidate is an indicator for whether the voter is a candidate (mayoral or council). Models with controls are in Appendix P. Robust standard errors, clustered at the municipality level, are in parentheses. The % *Difference* row presents percent difference in residency tenure between candidates and non-candidates.

These patterns cannot be explained solely by the overrepresentation of older residents. The results hold when using percent of adult life lived (Models 3 and 4) and remain robust in models that control for age (see Appendix P). Moreover, when restricting constituents and officials to those over age 50 (older residents are more likely to be registered to vote), the gap

²⁴In Appendix P, I regress candidacy on residency tenure. This yields tiny estimates given a small share of residents ever run for office. Standard logistic regression does perform well.

between constituents' and candidates' tenure remains. Rooted constituents are descriptively overrepresented in the candidate pool.

5.1.1 Does rootedness vary by municipality population size?

Prior research suggests that as population size increases, residents' rootedness should decline (Marble and Lim 2023; Lewis 2011). However, almost all candidates have strong ties and not all municipalities in the sample are small towns, meaning candidates do not follow this expected pattern. Constituents have weak roots on average, but there is variation in the distribution of averages for each place. If constituents' rootedness changes with population size, the gap between constituents and candidates will vary by population as well, resulting in different rates of descriptive overrepresentation across municipalities.

In this section, I show that candidates with long local tenure are not limited to small-town America, but constituents' tenure declines with population size. I regress logged residency tenure on logged population with age and rurality controls (rescaled Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture). I control for rurality because many small places within urban commuting zones differ from isolated rural places (Nemerever and Rogers 2021). Because larger cities often have younger populations, failing to control for age could conflate differences in tenure with differences in age. I include only year fixed effects because I am interested in variation across municipalities.

Table 5 shows that as population increases, average constituent tenure decreases. Doubling population size is associated with a 2.68% decrease in average years lived in the municipality ($\ln(2) \times -.0387$). Constituents' average tenure is 9.2 years in cities with $\sim 10,000$ people. Therefore, in a city of 100,000 residents, the average tenure is predicted to be ~ 8.4 years. Overall tenure is low for constituents, but it is highest in the smallest places.

California is highly mobile, meaning this analysis provides a hard test. Mobility should weaken rootedness among all residents, and yet there are still substantial gaps between those in power and their constituents. For both mayoral and council candidates, population size is not significantly associated with residency tenure. Regardless of context, those who run for

Table 5: Relationship Between Population Size and Residency Tenure

	log(Years Lived)			log(% Life Lived)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
log(Population)	-0.0387** (0.0065)	0.0421 (0.0274)	-0.0015 (0.0093)	-0.0499** (0.0070)	0.0410 (0.0261)	0.0022 (0.0087)
Rurality (0-1)	-0.0565 (0.0372)	-0.1055 (0.1944)	-0.0887 (0.0619)	-0.0364 (0.0434)	-0.0385 (0.1887)	-0.0689 (0.0592)
Age (std.)	0.0457** (0.0124)	0.4260** (0.0278)	0.3521** (0.0089)	-0.1543** (0.0086)	-0.0604** (0.0214)	-0.1479** (0.0075)
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,338	586	4,873	1,338	586	4,873
	Constituents	Mayoral	Council	Constituents	Mayoral	Council

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

Note: This presents the relationship between population size and residency tenure. Tenure is measured at the individual level for mayoral and council candidates and at the municipality level for constituents. Columns 1 and 4 use municipality-level observations. The rurality indicator ranges from 0 (least rural) to 1 (most rural). Age is standardized. Robust standard errors, clustered at the municipality level, are in parentheses. Bucketed population averages are in Appendix K.

office tend to be deeply rooted. Therefore, strongly rooted individuals are overrepresented everywhere, but especially in larger cities. Even in less mobile, more rural states, residents' tenure is shorter than that of officials in California (see Appendix K). These findings demonstrate that strong local roots are a consistent characteristic among candidates, distinguishing those who run from the broader public.^{25,26}

5.2 Are rooted residents more overrepresented than men, white people, and older residents?

How does this compare to other characteristics that are more commonly considered in research on representation, such as race, gender, and age? Evaluating the role of local roots alongside more widely studied identities tests whether rootedness is, in addition to being conceptually distinct, empirically more powerful in explaining who selects into candidacy.

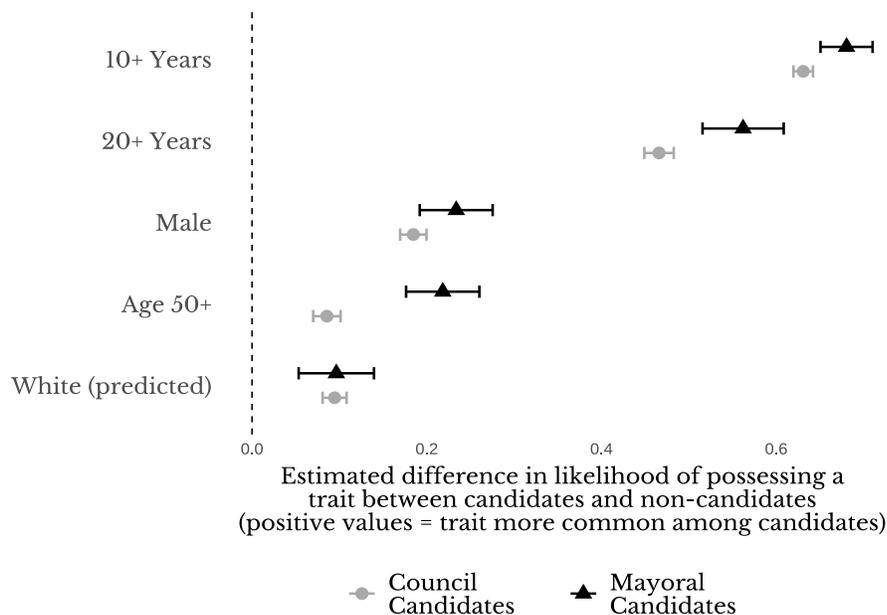
Using the same specifications as in Equation 2, I substitute the dependent variable with an indicator for the presence of other characteristics. Each outcome variable is binary: 10 or more years of residency, 20 or more years of residency, male (estimated by L2), age 50+ (using

²⁵See Appendix D for evidence of the same pattern among sitting officials from the survey.

²⁶Candidates in larger cities are marginally less likely to discuss their length of residency, but the difference is not substantively meaningful (see appendix K).

L2 date of birth), and predicted white (using the `predictrace` R package).²⁷ The coefficients represent the average percentage point difference in the outcome between candidates and non-candidates within a city and year. This can be interpreted as the selection margin, where candidacy is the revealed expression of political ambition among these groups.

Figure 5: Relationship Between Characteristics and Candidacy



Note: Coefficients indicate how candidates and non-candidates differ on the select characteristics. Models include municipality-level cluster-robust standard errors and election fixed effects. All coefficients are presented in Appendix P.

In Figure 5, the coefficients from all ten models are positive and statistically significant. Women, younger individuals, and people of color are underrepresented among candidates, consistent with existing literature. However, the coefficients on both binary measures of residency tenure are significantly larger than those from any other model, highlighting the extent to which long-term residents dominate the candidate pool relative to other groups.²⁸ Being a newcomer is not attached to a history of marginalization in the same way as race and gender. In fact, in contexts such as gentrification, newcomers have often wielded disproportionate power relative to longer-term residents. But the magnitude of this gap nonetheless raises

²⁷`predictrace` (Kaplan 2023) assigns each individual the most likely race associated with their surname, using Census names. This is applied uniformly to candidates and constituents.

²⁸Not all candidates were successfully matched to the voter file. If unmatched candidates are disproportionately short-term residents, estimates of candidates' rootedness are conservative.

questions about the symbolic and substantive implications of descriptive overrepresentation by tenure. I turn to these implications in the final section.

6 Why does descriptive overrepresentation matter?

Deeply rooted individuals disproportionately run for and hold local office, but what does this mean for representation? In this section, I present evidence to suggest that these representational gaps may produce normatively positive and negative implications for how constituents view their representatives. Specifically, I evaluate whether constituents and officials value local roots, why they do or do not, and what roots signal about policy.

6.1 How do officials and constituents view representatives' roots?

To assess whether local rootedness is perceived as a desirable qualification for office, I draw on original survey data measuring attitudes toward representatives' ties to their communities. In March 2025, I conducted a nationwide survey using CloudResearch.²⁹ The sample was stratified by municipality size to ensure inclusion of smaller municipalities. After excluding respondents who failed the attention check, the sample includes 991 participants.³⁰

In both my survey of officials and this public survey, I ask: “How important do you think it is for people serving in local government in your municipality to have lived in the municipality for a long time?” Responses range from “Not at all important” to “Very important” on a five-point scale.³¹

Figure 6 shows that most officials and constituents consider roots to be at least slightly important. About 58% of officials rated the importance of long-term residency as either “Very important” or “Slightly important,” closely aligning with the share of candidates who discuss their length of residency in their statements. Among constituents, about 85% say that officials' roots are important.

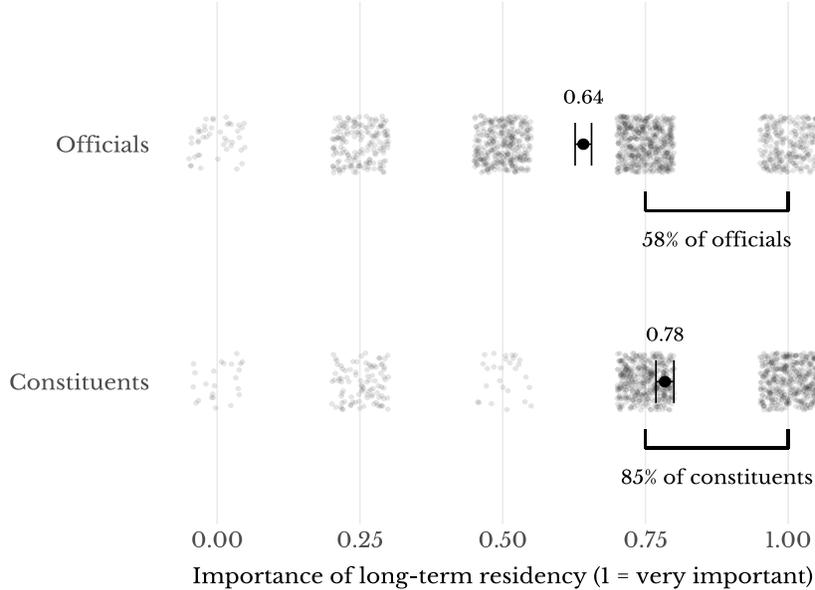
Among these respondents, those with weaker roots find residency tenure least important

²⁹See Litman et al. (2021) for details on the quality of CloudResearch data.

³⁰Weighted descriptives yield substantively similar results. More survey details are included in Appendix N.

³¹The middle value, “Neither important nor unimportant” is difficult to interpret, but the distribution is concentrated at the top of the scale. More focus should be on the extreme values of the scale.

Figure 6: Importance of Long Residency Tenure for Serving in Local Government



Note: Responses are rescaled 0 (Not at all important) - 1 (Very important). Brackets show the share of respondents who rate long-term residency as at least slightly important. Black points show means with 95% confidence intervals.

(see Appendix H). While these relationships are substantively small due to response clustering at the top of the scale, individuals who have spent a larger share of their lives in their municipalities tend to find long-term residency more important. However, positive views on officials’ rootedness extend beyond strong-rooted respondents. Most individuals with weaker roots perceive this quality as valuable, despite not possessing it.

Why do people value this quality? To answer this question, I ask participants in the public survey to explain why they find long-term residency to be important. In open-ended responses, 78.7% of respondents who rated long-term residency as at least slightly important explained their view in terms of understanding the municipality. For instance, one respondent wrote, “It takes time to fully understand all the needs of an area.” Responses were similar across small towns and large cities.³² In contrast, far fewer respondents emphasized connectedness, investment, or trust. Among respondents who did not find officials’ long-term residency to be important, some emphasized the value of new perspectives, while others

³²See Appendix O for items in the analysis and further details on the text-item search, structural topic model, and BERT-based classification model used to analyze the text.

argued that someone should be able to do their job independent of where they came from.

These findings suggest that the average constituent would prefer a long-term resident over a short-term resident in office, were they given such an option. Long-term residents are viewed as better equipped to make decisions. Rootedness is widely viewed as a sign of representatives' legitimacy, producing a selection process by which rooted residents are more likely to run and to win.

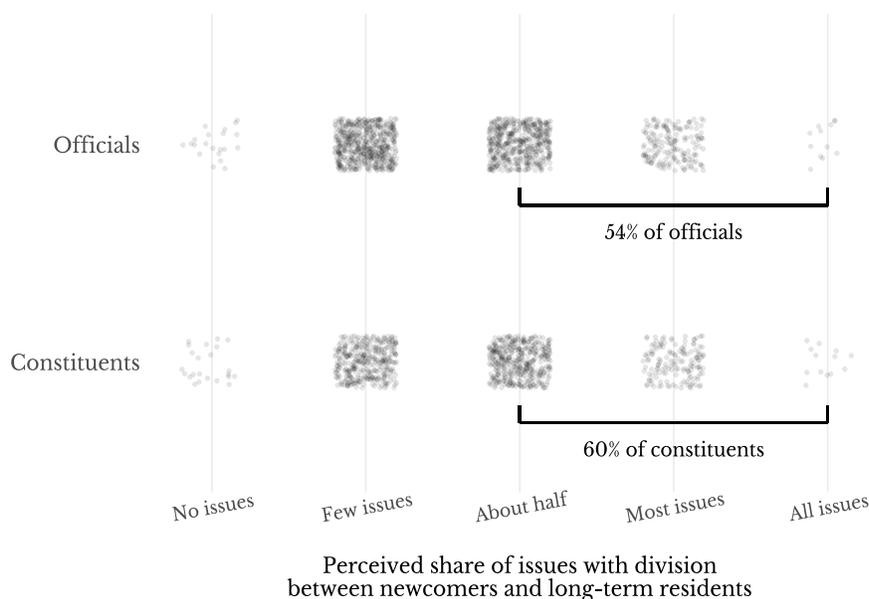
6.2 Are roots perceived to align with policy preferences?

Few participants explicitly discussed the relationship between roots and policy preferences in open-ended responses, but those who wrote about understanding community issues often indirectly referenced issue preferences. To evaluate whether officials and constituents see a relationship between rootedness and preferences, I ask in both surveys about perceived divides between long-term residents and newcomers: "In some cities and towns, people who have lived there a long time have different views on local issues than people who have moved there recently. In other places, there is no clear difference in preferences between those who have lived there a long time and those who haven't. On how many issues do you think there are differences in the views of newcomers and long-time residents in your municipality?"

In Figure 7, the majority of officials and constituents report that at least half the issues in the municipality are divided between newcomers and long-term residents. Most respondents perceive at least some division in local policy preferences between people with deep connections to their municipalities and newcomers. There is no clear relationship between perceiving these differences and respondents' own residency tenure (see Appendix H).

Respondents who perceived at least some division were then asked which issues they think divide newcomers and long-term residents. Nearly half of the officials who reported divisions referenced issues related to zoning, growth, development, land use, housing, building, and density. This pattern emerges consistently across multiple text-analytic approaches and is robust to alternative specifications (see Appendix O). Several responses emphasized resistance to change, with comments such as, "newcomers move here because they like the town,

Figure 7: Perceived Issue Division Between Newcomers and Long-Term Residents



Note: On how many issues do you think there are differences in the views of newcomers and long-time residents in your municipality? Brackets show the share of respondents who say that on at least half the issues in their municipality they perceive division between these groups.

then think they can change the way things are.” In contrast, relatively few officials mentioned taxes, schools, public safety, race, or immigration. Constituents perceive similar divisions: development-related issues were the most frequently cited source of conflict.

There is a statistically significant positive relationship between perceiving these divides and believing it is important that officials have long-term residency (see Appendix I). Either people prefer the issue positions of long-term residents, or there is something about these residents that overcomes an aversion to their preferences. Respondents may also not have defined preferences and therefore trust the preferences of those with deep roots.

These findings illustrate two important implications of the descriptive overrepresentation of rooted residents. First, the pool from which constituents can choose their representatives is composed of people who are perceived to hold positions on local issues that differ from those of many constituents. Second, while less-rooted constituents’ preferences may not align with strong-rooted candidates’ positions, they may nonetheless view these candidates as knowledgeable. This creates a tension between democratic legitimacy (having preferred

officials in office) and inclusion (having one’s preferences represented). These concerns are particularly salient when decision-making is influenced by officials’ perceptions of what residents want. If officials perceive preference divisions on land use and development, and the constituency they hear from most is rooted (Einstein et al. 2019), policy can systematically reflect the status quo preferences of long-term residents over the needs of newcomers or would-be residents. While beyond the scope of this paper, future research should examine how officials’ rootedness relates to policy outcomes directly.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

Local governments are responsible for policymaking in critical areas. To understand why certain decisions are made, we need to know about the people who have decision-making power. In this paper, I have shown that rootedness is a defining feature of municipal politics. The evidence here lays the groundwork for incorporating place-based connection into the study of local politics. More broadly, I demonstrate that exclusion need not stem from formal barriers or voter prejudice, contributing to a literature that looks beyond elections to the informal qualifications that structure candidate emergence.

Scholars of local politics have focused on many dimensions of electoral competition, but they have largely overlooked this informal yet powerful qualification for candidacy: local roots. This may be because such a quality seems obvious. Serving in municipal office requires familiarity with the place and its people. At the national level, scholars have considered connection to community a desirable quality, in part because rooted representatives may serve their districts better, but it is not a requirement for candidacy. In local politics, however, knowing and being a part of the municipality is integral to serving, potentially substituting for the political experience necessary at higher levels of government. This logic of informal qualifications should apply wherever governing requires place-specific knowledge, such as school boards, indigenous governments, or hyper-local bureaucracies.

Using data from a novel dataset of California candidate statements, administrative records, the L2 voter file, and an original survey of 1,280 local councilors and top offi-

cials throughout the United States, I show that rootedness is prevalent among candidates and sitting officials. Most candidates for city council and mayor in California have spent a significant share of their adult lives in the municipalities in which they ran. Nationwide, sitting officials have spent decades in their communities. Importantly, the role of roots in candidate emergence is consistent across different types of municipalities. The people serving in office are deeply rooted, not just because those with strong roots are more likely to win elections, but because those who run for office are embedded in their towns and cities.

The composition of the candidate pool is important for several reasons. First, it reveals who has access to candidacy. Short-term residents are underrepresented among both candidates and officeholders. Second, it highlights how rootedness is both a descriptive trait and a valence trait. Most constituents, regardless of their tenure, believe it is important to be locally rooted to serve in local office. Third, it raises a potential concern about the underrepresentation of newcomers' interests. My survey data reveals that representatives and members of the public perceive differences between long-term residents and newcomers, particularly on important issues such as land use and growth. If issue preferences differ between these groups, and the candidate pool is comprised of deeply rooted residents, constituents with similar community connection could be at a representational advantage.

These findings raise several questions about what the descriptive overrepresentation of rooted individuals means for decision-making and inequality in representation. For instance, when and how are newcomers incorporated into local political life? If rooted officials both hold power and oppose growth, how does new housing get built? Under what conditions do the resource advantages of newcomers allow them to gain influence in neighborhoods long governed by rooted racial minority groups? These examples foreground the difficulty of tracing the link from roots to preferences and ultimately to policy. Combined with limited data accessibility, these challenges make generalizable analyses difficult. However, understanding how roots translate into substantive representation remains a key area for future work.

Additionally, the research in this paper is not without its limitations. First, the candidate

statement data is exclusive to California, primarily due to a lack of available data in most other states. This stresses the need for scholars to collect more data. Second, I am not showing the effect of roots on candidate emergence. Instead, I demonstrate that most candidates possess this quality, suggesting it is either a desired quality, perceived as such by candidates, or helps a candidate to run. The survey data support this idea, but future research should aim to identify when investment in the community becomes candidate ambition. Third, I do not evaluate the interaction between roots and other candidate characteristics, such as race or gender, which could be tied to roots and affect local candidate emergence. Further scholarship should consider other factors alongside roots, as well as the ways in which various groups are tied to specific segments of the community.

Despite these caveats, this study advances our understanding of elections and representation, while opening avenues for future work on the implications of these results. Roots operate as an informal qualification for local office. As a result, long-term residents are descriptively overrepresented among candidates, and in turn, elected officials. This does not inherently constitute an “overrepresentation” problem, as voters appear to genuinely value candidates with strong community ties, and the dominance of rooted officials may be perceived as a strength of local democracy. Yet, the widespread perception that preferences differ between long-term and short-term residents raises concerns that this imbalance could contribute to the substantive underrepresentation of more mobile populations. This tension between rootedness and mobility highlights broader questions of equity and inclusion in local politics. In places with more transient populations, where issues like land use and growth are salient, we should consider how power in the hands of long-term residents influences whose voices are amplified and whose voices are excluded altogether in local democracy.

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Appendix: Local Roots in Local Politics

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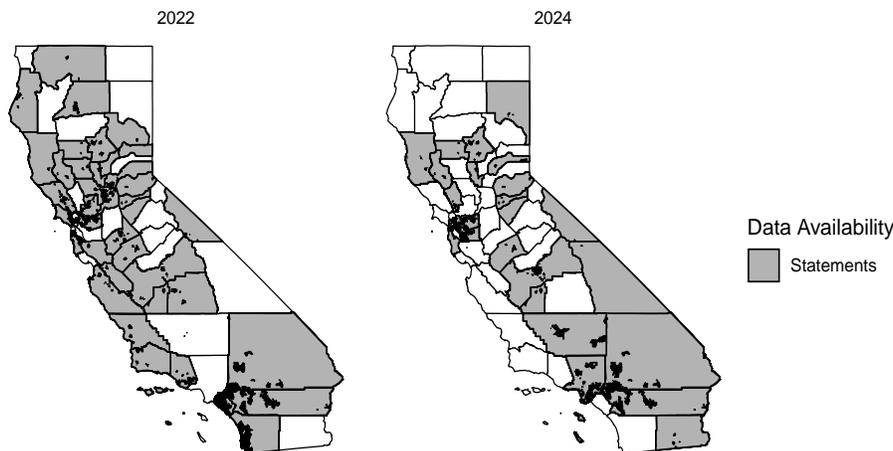
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A. Candidate Statement Data Collection

For 2022 statements, I began with a list of 2022 California municipal council candidates in the November election from the California Election Data Archive (CEDA). With help from a team of research assistants, I conducted web searches, explore municipal webpages, and reached out to counties in California. Counties are responsible for distributing voter guides to each municipality. These voter guides include official candidate statements for candidate who provide them. This is material that all constituents have an equal opportunity to read (registered voters receive them in the mail). For 2024 statements, I began by collecting 2024 candidate guides, given the CEDA 2024 dataset was not available at the time of data collection. After collecting statements with research assistants, I collected and cleaned data on candidates whose statements I had. Once 2024 CEDA data was available, I merged it onto the candidate statements data to calculate rates of missingness.

There are 58 counties and 482 municipalities in California. In 2022, 430 cities in 51 counties had council elections, and in 2024, 440 cities in 53 counties. In total, there were 2,134 council candidates in the 2022 general election, and 1,975 candidates in 2024. For 2022, we coded statements from 249 municipalities in 39 counties for a total of 1,151 candidates (over half of all total candidates). For 2024, we collected and coded 804 additional statements from 186 municipalities in 25 counties. Municipalities without statements do not meaningfully differ in their socioeconomic or demographic profiles from those included in the sample.

Figure A1: Counties and cities with candidate statements



Note: This shows counties that responded to requests, with cities for which I have statements in black.

Figure A1 shows the coverage of counties from which we were able to obtain statements for 2022 and 2024. Ideally, we would have statements from all candidates. Unfortunately, this was not possible because 1) not all candidates submit statements, 2) some counties would not provide statements, 3) some counties never responded to our requests.

Process: Research assistants conducted their coding for each statement using a survey I developed in Qualtrics to more easily keep track of coding. This survey included the research assistant's name, the name of the candidate, the municipality name, whether they mention

length (with a series of steps to determine this), whether they mention other connection to their current community (again, with specific instructions), the type of connection (if they mention it), the length of residency (if it is possible to obtain that from the information provided), and any additional notes. Below are the general guidelines for mentions of length and other connections.

Length of residency: this could look like the candidate providing a specific number of years they have lived there, stating that they grew up in a place, explaining that they have spent many years there, or some other variation of making a statement about their length of residency. These statements might look something like, 1) “As someone who grew up here, I have dedicated my life to Fresno and the Central Valley.” 2) “I was born, raised, and have lived in Hayward for over 20 years.” 3) “My wife and I raised our daughter here for 18 years.” This should not include how long they have worked in the municipality or participated in local organizations unless it is obvious that they are also indicating their length of residency.

Connection to community: this could look like kids in the local *public* school district, committees and commissions they sit on, volunteer and organizational work within the current town/city. If you select “yes” for connections, you will next be asked what these connections are. For example, if they list several committees on which they volunteered, you can write “committee volunteer”. If they were a sports coach for multiple local sports teams, you can write “local sports coach”. If you select “no” for connections, you will be taken to the end of the survey and will then move onto the next candidate.

If you selected “yes” for length of residency, you will be taken to a question asking how long they have lived in the municipality. If they provide a number of years, enter that. If they say something like they grew up in the place or went to high school there, enter “grew up.” If they do not provide anything specific, you should make a note of that.

As a reliability check, we selected 100 statements for double-coding. Inter-coder agreement was substantial (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.647, $p < 0.001$), and we resolved all discrepancies in person by consensus.

To illustrate the coding, I present an excerpt from a statement below, with text that informed our coding in bold. This was coded 1 for mention of length and 1 for mention of other connections. The candidate would be coded as having not grown up in their municipality.

*My family has called Eastvale home for the last **19 years**. I’ve been married for 29 years and we have two boys. I come from a family of three boys, all in law enforcement, and one sister. I hold a B.A. / M.A. degree along with a teaching, counseling, and school administration credential. I’ve been in education for 27 years, with the last 11 as a **school counselor at Ramirez Intermediate School**. As an active community member, I was involved in our **Citizen Advisory Board for JCSD for 5 years and a Kiwanis Board member**. Currently, I am a **Community Emergency Response Team member**...*

Why not a Large Language Model? I explored two automated approaches for this coding task: using ChatGPT-4 and training a supervised model on over 1,000 statements. Both methods performed poorly relative to human coders. ChatGPT frequently misinterpreted text and overlooked direct statements about living in a place. It also struggled with identifying community connection, frequently missing relevant content or misclassifying it. The trained model failed to achieve reliable accuracy. Given these limitations, I relied on research

assistants who could apply structured decision rules and interpret nuanced statements. See below for details on the use of GPT5 to code an extended sample of bios trained on these coded data.

Missingness

Table A1 shows how many statements were missing and collected by population size for the 2022 and 2024 data. Rates of missingness are greater in smaller municipalities. The largest municipalities also have high rates of missingness. With 2022 data, I regress missingness on logged population. The estimate is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.0365$, $p < 0.001$). The smallest population is 245 people and the largest is 3,849,297. A shift from the smallest to the largest municipality is associated with a 35.3 percentage point increase in the likelihood of collecting a statement. Given there are more small than large places, I still have a large sample of the small places.

Table A1: Missing candidate statements by population bucket

	0-10,000	10,001-25,000	25,001-75,000	75,001-150,000	150,001-300,000	300,000+
Collected 2022	170	200	380	281	89	31
Missing 2022	192	228	289	175	54	40
% Missing 2022	53.04	53.27	43.20	38.38	37.76	56.34
Collected 2024	72	163	49	256	71	193
Missing 2024	252	229	81	362	22	200
% Missing 2024	77.78	58.42	62.31	58.58	23.66	50.89

I also compare places with statement coverage to those without using 2023 ACS 5-year place estimates. Overall, there are no major differences. Cities with statements are marginally denser and have higher household incomes, home values, and rents than cities without statements. Coverage is slightly more common in more urban, higher-cost places, which are also the types of places with municipal websites and online access to voter guides.

Table A2: Balance Across Cities With and Without Statement Coverage

	No statements (N=91)		Statements (N=352)	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Population (1,000s)	84.7	414.6	63.7	103.0
Pop. density (per km ²)	1,313.2	786.6	1,667.9	1,270.9
Median HH income (\$)	98,897.7	57,299.5	105,740.9	43,745.9
Median age (years)	38.2	8.4	39.9	7.1
Median home value (\$)	731,074.8	586,163.4	795,001.5	469,968.7
Median rent (\$)	1,832.1	822.6	2,016.0	653.5
White (%)	50.9	21.0	50.6	20.5
Hispanic (%)	42.3	30.4	37.3	24.5

Example Statements

Example with only length of residency mention (candidate won):

*“I decided to get involved with Angels Camp City Council when a vacancy became available in December 2020. **As someone who was raised in Angels Camp** and knew how wonderful a community we are fortunate to live in, it was essential to be involved and be a voice for the constituents. **I attended Mark Twain Elementary and am an alumnus of Bret Harte High School.** Having lived in other parts of the state I can confidently say there is truly no other place like Angels Camp. I attended Saint Mary’s College of California in Moraga, graduating with a Communication BA and work as a Conference and Events Planner for NASPO. I have worked in both the private and public sectors, giving me a unique opportunity to understand our city’s inner workings better. I take the job of being on the City Council seriously, and although I am an individual, I feel that the most critical part of my role in being a City Council member is being a voice for the citizens. I humbly ask for your vote to continue representing you in the City of Angels Camp.”*

Example with only other community connection mention (candidate won):

*“I’m running for Chico City Council to improve Chico’s quality of civic life. Much progress has been made cleaning up our downtown and parks, and there is still much to do. As your councilmember, I will focus on these priorities. Public spaces are for the public. Living in tents in public areas cannot be allowed and has proven to be a disaster for the community as well as the homeless. Now that the pallet shelter is open, the homeless have a safe, clean place to go. Public safety must be enhanced. Chico has 40% fewer police officers than the average for California cities of our size. Chico needs more police officers so they can better patrol our city, including Bidwell Park and our downtown area. Housing should be more affordable and we need more of it. Planning and approval requirements must be simplified and streamlined to increase housing supply. **I’m a local business owner** and grew up on a small farm. My career experience includes the management of companies and solving problems, experience I will put to work to help make Chico a better place to live. I would be honored to have your vote.”*

Example with neither length nor other connection mention (candidate lost):

“I’m not a career politician. My day job is all about customer advocacy, and that translates directly to constituent advocacy. Every day, I talk with customers to understand their problems and concerns, and to learn what negative things my company has to change, and what good things need to stay the same. And every day, I push company leadership to prioritize and invest in making improvements that will benefit our customers the most. That’s what I’ll do for you: push other community leaders to do what benefits the people of Concord the most. The situation with the Naval Weapons Station is an ongoing disaster; our district and city are suffering from the complete lack of progress. And for years, residents have been asking city council for a humane and ethical solution to our homelessness crisis. But all we see is more sweeps. I’m listening to your agenda and am ready to fight for it. Concord won’t get better if we keep doing the same old things. The incumbent has been in office for 25 years, and it’s time for change. Elect me, Quinne Anderson, as your new Councilmember for District 1. Let’s break the cycle.”

Automated Coding of Nationwide Biographies (KnowWho): To extend this coding scheme beyond California, I applied the same decision rules to nationwide municipal legislator biographies from the KnowWho database using a GPT-5 model trained on the human-coded 2022 California data. Specifically, the model was prompted to reproduce the *Length.mention* and *Connection.mention* indicators based on the same definitions used for the California statements. The model records the exact sentence in each biography that triggered each code, allowing me to hand-validate a subset of coded statements to confirm that the indicators capture the intended information. This automated coding is used only to replicate the main analysis; the primary results rely on the human-coded California data.

Using bios from 27,582 unique legislators across 2,053 unique municipalities in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, I find that 79% of candidates mention community connections and 71% mention residency length. Biographies span 2008 to 2024. Bio availability is uneven

across municipalities, and missingness is higher in smaller and lower-capacity jurisdictions. Because many KnowWho biographies are substantially shorter and less standardized than California voter guides, the coding is conservative and likely understates mentions of community connection relative to the hand-coded California data.

B. Coding Mentions of Other Traits

Figure 1 in the paper presents the number and percent of all councilor candidate statements in my dataset that include an explicit mention of gender, race, party, or ideology. First, I conducted a keyword search across all statements using a dictionary of relevant terms associated with each trait. For each trait, I generated a binary variable coded 1 if the statement included a term from the corresponding category and 0 otherwise. The initial dictionary was developed with assistance from ChatGPT-4.

- Gender: gender, woman, women, female, male, man, men
- Race: black, african American, afro-American, Asian, asian American, chinese, filipino, indian, japanese, korean, pacific islander, native hawaiian, hispanic, latino, latina, latinx, mexican, mexican american, puerto rican, cuban, salvadoran, middle eastern, arab, armenian, iranian, persian, native american, american indian, indigenous, tribal member, chicano, chicana, biracial, multiracial, mixed race, person of color, people of color, poc
- Immigrant: immigrant, first-generation, first gen, second-generation, second gen, came to (the)(US, U.S., America, this country), born abroad, foreign-born, naturalized citizen, naturalized, moved (here, to the US) from, arrived in (the)(US, U.S., America), refugee, asylum-seeker
- Partisanship: partisan, party, nonpartisan, endorsed by .* party
- Party: democrat, republican, gop, independent, libertarian, socialist, green party, working families
- Ideology: liberal, conservative, progressive, leftist, maga, right-wing, Left-wing, centrist, moderate, far-(left|right)

Second, I downloaded the dataset containing the statements and the binary term indicators, and I hand-coded whether each term was used as an identity marker or merely as a descriptive quality, using the same criteria applied in my local roots coding. For example, the word “independent” appeared frequently, but it rarely indicated partisan identification as an Independent. Hand-coding allowed me to capture those rare identity references while disregarding irrelevant uses. Similarly, terms like man, woman, and gender often appeared in the context of serving specific groups, rather than expressing the candidate’s own identity. While the keyword list was non-exhaustive and some terms may have been initially missed, my review of nearly all statements during the hand-coding process allowed me to identify and include additional relevant cases. I completed the 2022 statements’ partisan and ideological coding with a team of research assistants to ensure replicability. For that coding, our Cohen’s Kappa was 0.836 ($p < 0.001$), indicating high inter-coder reliability.

C. Survey Data Population Models

Table C1: Relationship between residency tenure (Survey) & municipality population size

	Length (Years)	% Life	Length (Years)	% Life
log(Population)	-0.272 (0.390)	0.004 (0.006)	-0.035 (0.426)	0.008 (0.007)
Rurality			2.196 (1.941)	0.035 (0.030)
Constant	33.379*** (3.515)	0.456*** (0.056)	30.775*** (3.997)	0.415*** (0.065)
Observations	1,220	1,220	1,220	1,220
Adjusted R ²	-0.0005	-0.0005	0.0001	0.0001

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Note: These data are from the survey of local officials (governing board members and top officials combined). The population ranges from around 300 to just under one million. Like with candidates, there is no clear relationship between tenure and population size, given the concentration of long-term residents among officials.

D. State-level candidate statements and residency tenure

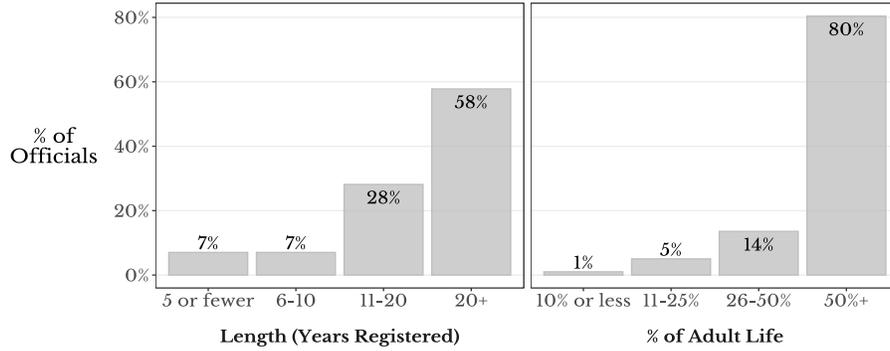
Table D1: Mentions of connection and length among a sample of state-level candidate statements (2022 & 2024)

Mention	Total	Pct.	type
No	107	76.43	Length
Yes	33	23.57	Length
No	31	22.14	Connection
Yes	109	77.86	Connection

Note: This includes 140 state candidates for which I was able to collect statements. Statements were coded following the same procedure as for city council statements. There is overlap in which state-level candidates mentioned length and mentioned connection, but the percentage who mention Length happens to nearly mirror the percentage that do not mention connection. These, however, are not the same group of candidates.

I also matched state-level legislative candidates (Assembly and Senate) from CA in 2018, 2020, and 2022 to the L2 voter file. I linked candidates by full name, exact matching on municipality for all municipalities that overlapped with the district in which the candidate was running. This resulted in several false positives for each candidate. I eliminated matches by hand using Wikipedia birthdate information and other online resources. In total, I have 199 matched state-level candidates.

Figure D1: Distribution of State Candidate Tenure in District



Note: This presents the distribution of the length of registration and percent of adult life registered in a municipality in the district for state-level candidates.

E. Missingness in the L2 Match

Table E1 reports the percent of matched candidates by population bucket, combining data from 2018, 2020, and 2022 for mayors and councilors. Match rates are generally higher for councilors, with approximately three-quarters matched across all population categories. For mayors, match rates increase with municipality size, reaching nearly 80% in the largest cities. The match rate for councilors is 76.5% and for mayors 66.4%, both relatively high.

Table E1: Percent of matched candidates by population bucket

Role	0-10,000	10,001-25,000	25,001-75,000	75,001-150,000	150,001-300,000	300,000+
Councilors	78.27	75.69	77.96	74.49	75.57	73.54
Mayors	59.79	62.61	64.23	64.86	75.63	79.71

F. Elite Survey Procedure, Response Rates, and Descriptives

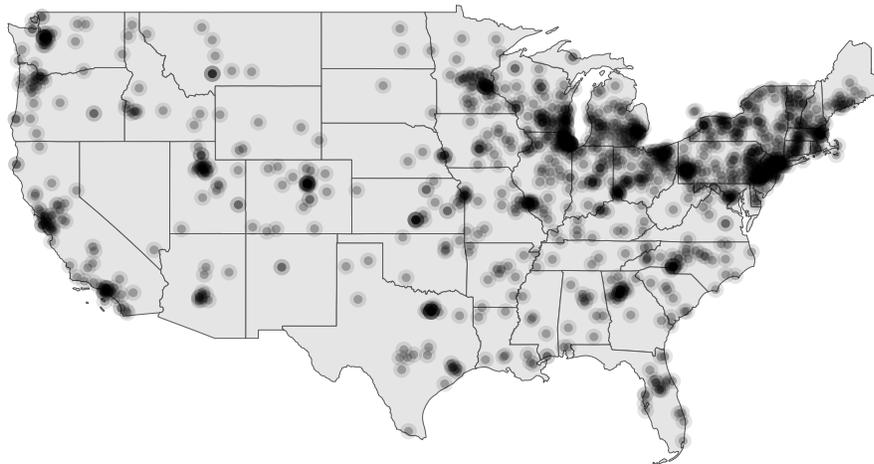
In December of 2023, I surveyed 1,280 top elected officials and governing board members from municipalities across the United States. These officials come from 1,183 unique places. In 83 places, two officials responded, six places three officials, and one place four officials. The sample was 50,000 local officials. I used data from PowerAlmanac from June 2023. Between June and December, several people left office, died, or changed their contact information. Thousands of emails bounced or were inactive addresses. Non-response could have been a result of non-contact or actual non-response. The distribution method closely follows the American Municipal Officials Survey – challenges associated with response rates are similar.

The survey was distributed by email through Qualtrics and recruited respondents through a link that would take them to the survey. The email also included a link to a website describing the survey with a university domain to increase the likelihood that respondents would not consider this spam and asked that only the official addressed in the email respond, not staffers or other officials. Respondents could complete the survey at their own pace. There was no option to go back once completing a question, but the link sent to their email would allow them to return if they closed out at any point. After three days, I sent a reminder

email. Four days later, I sent a final reminder. One month from the initial distribution, I downloaded responses for analysis. I responded to all emails with questions and questions in the open-response box at the end of the survey.

No compensation was provided for elected officials who participated in the survey. Respondents were informed in advance of the approximate time required to complete the survey. Because participants were public officials participating in their professional capacity, the absence of monetary compensation is consistent with common practice in elite surveys in political science. To provide some reciprocal value, participants were offered access to a summary of descriptive findings from the study upon completion, which some respondents indicated would be useful for. The survey protocol emphasized voluntary participation, informed consent, and the right to skip questions or withdraw at any time without penalty.

Figure F1: Municipality locations for elite survey respondents



Note: This shows elite survey respondents' locations. The map excludes two municipalities in Alaska to ensure those respondents remain anonymous.

Table F1: Overall Response Rate (completed surveys)

Type	Response Rate (%)	N
Governing Board Member	2.19	876
Top Elected Official	4.04	404
Total	2.56	1280

Note: This is based on the initial sample of 50,000 (40,000 governing board members and 10,000 top officials). Discussions with other scholars using the same data source and approach revealed that these response rates are what is expected of online surveys of local elites.

Table F2: All US Municipalities vs. Officials' Municipalities

	All		Officials'	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Population	10666	1207	17006	4844
Rurality (0-10, rural to urban)	3.87	2	3.27	2
Pct. White	75.5		82.77	
Pct. Black	13.6		6.43	
Pct. Asian	6.3		3.93	
Pct. Hispanic	19.1		8.57	
Pct. Voting Age Population	75.34		76.1	
Pct. Over Age 65	19.6		19.57	

Note: This shows means and medians for demographics of all US municipalities (from the Census) versus the demographics of municipalities represented by officials who responded to the survey.

Table F3: Gender Distribution

Gender	Count	Pct. of Total
Man	860	67.19
Woman	395	30.86
Other	10	0.78
NA	15	1.17

Table F4: Party Distribution

Party	Respondents	Pct.
Democrat	548	42.81
Republican	519	40.55
Independent	125	9.77
Other	88	6.88

Note: Democrat and Republican includes Independent leaners. Independent includes pure Independents who do not lean. Other includes any write-in that did not fit into one of these other three groups.

Table F5: Race/Ethnicity Distribution

Race	Count	Pct. of Total
Asian	9	0.70
Black	31	2.42
Hispanic	36	2.81
Middle Eastern	5	0.39
Native American	8	0.62
White	1145	89.45
Mixed	3	0.23
Other	6	0.47
NA	37	2.89

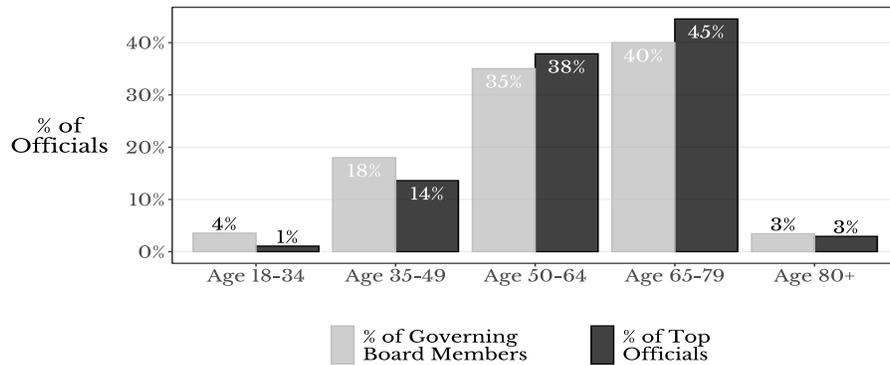
Note: Other includes all respondents who wrote in an additional category that did not fit within the other racial/ethnic groups. NA includes all respondents who provided no response to this question.

Table F6: Regional Distribution among Respondents

Region	Respondents	Pct. of Respondents	Sample N	Pct. of Sample
East North Central	355	27.73	13485	26.97
East South Central	42	3.28	2885	5.77
Middle Atlantic	271	21.17	10020	20.04
Mountain West	99	7.73	2300	4.60
New England	101	7.89	3315	6.63
Pacific West	121	9.45	2924	5.85
South Atlantic	104	8.12	5189	10.38
West North Central	125	9.77	5220	10.44
West South Central	62	4.84	4662	9.32

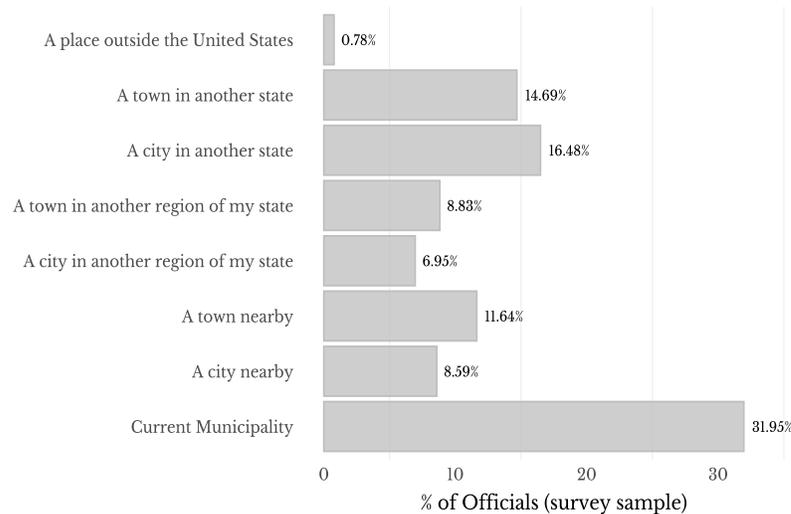
Note: There are Census regions. States within these groups are categorized by the US Census Bureau.

Figure F2: Age Distribution



G. Measures of roots from the survey

Figure G1: Where the official spent the majority of their adolescence



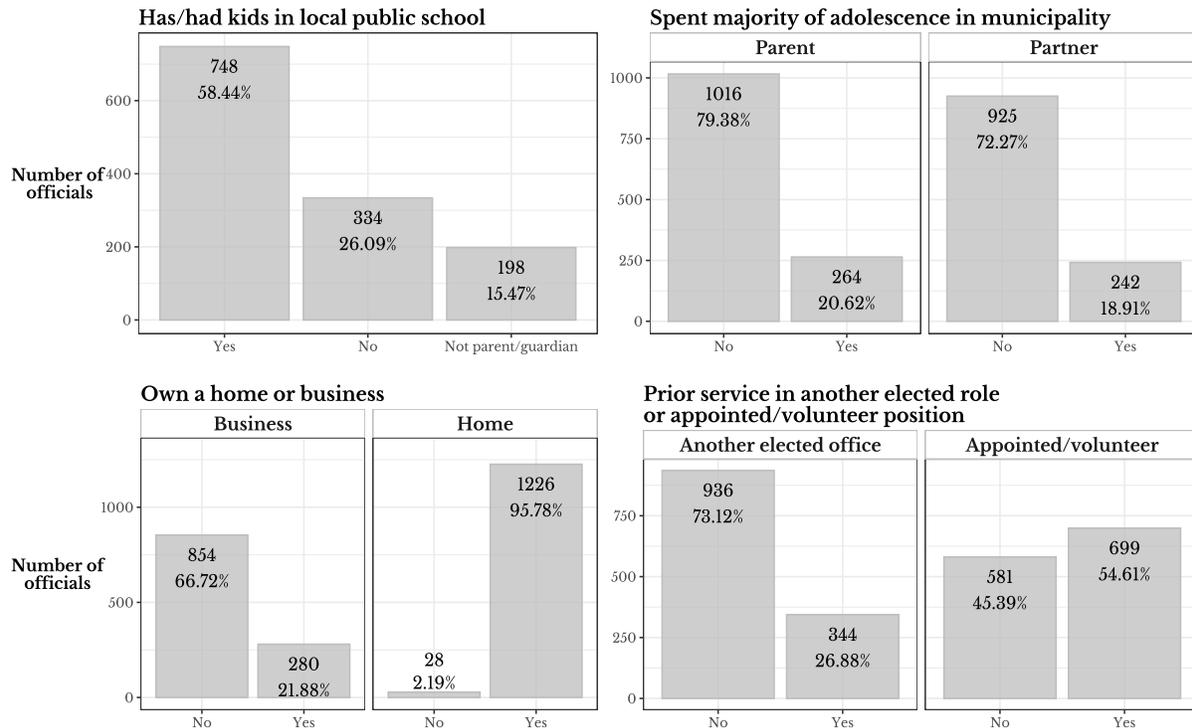
Note: Around one-third of respondents grew up in their municipality. Another 20% grew up in a municipality nearby. Only around 30% grew up in another state or outside the country.

Figure G2: Correlation Coefficients for Officials' Reported Characteristics

POC	-0.02	0.02	0.06*	-0.08*	-0.06*	0.04	0.03	1*
Woman	-0.15*	-0.13*	-0.08*	-0.08*	-0.05	-0.05	1*	0.03
Business Owner	0.1*	0.13*	0.12*	-0.05	0.08*	1*	-0.05	0.04
Homeowner	0.12*	0.04	-0.03	0.2*	1*	0.08*	-0.05	-0.06*
Age	0.37*	0.03	-0.12*	1*	0.2*	-0.05	-0.08*	-0.08*
Grew Up	0.58*	0.7*	1*	-0.12*	-0.03	0.12*	-0.08*	0.06*
Pct. Life Lived	0.92*	1*	0.7*	0.03	0.04	0.13*	-0.13*	0.02
Years Lived	1*	0.92*	0.58*	0.37*	0.12*	0.1*	-0.15*	-0.02

Note: This presents the Pearson's Correlation Coefficients for the correlations between reported characteristics held by officials. This shows few characteristics are strongly associated with rootedness.

Figure G3: Background of Officials



Note: The majority of respondents have children, and most of those with children had/have them attending local public schools. Most officials have neither at least one parent nor a spouse/partner who spent the majority of their adolescence in their municipality. Almost all respondents own a home. Only around one-fifth of officials in the survey own a business. Most officials were not in elected roles prior to their current position. The majority were involved in other community roles.

H. Relationship between Length of Residency & other Outcomes

Table H1: Relationship Between an Individual’s Residency Tenure and Perceived Importance of Officials’ Long-Term Residency

	DV: Importance of long residency tenure					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Prop. Life	0.253*** (0.025)	0.252*** (0.025)	0.247*** (0.028)			
Years Lived				0.004*** (0.0004)	0.004*** (0.0004)	0.004*** (0.0005)
Rurality		-0.009 (0.024)	-0.005 (0.024)		-0.009 (0.023)	-0.008 (0.024)
log(Population)		0.007 (0.006)	0.006 (0.006)		0.010 (0.006)	0.009 (0.006)
Seniority			-0.012 (0.071)			-0.095 (0.072)
Woman			-0.034* (0.016)			-0.033* (0.016)
Non-White			0.048 (0.031)			0.053 (0.029)
Constant	0.512*** (0.015)	0.457*** (0.057)	0.469*** (0.059)	0.513*** (0.014)	0.429*** (0.057)	0.447*** (0.057)
N	1,231	1,231	1,178	1,280	1,280	1,216
Adjusted R ²	0.071	0.071	0.075	0.080	0.082	0.088

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Note: Using an OLS model, I regress responses to the question about the importance of representatives living in a place a long time (scaled 0-1) on the proportion of an officials’ life that they have lived in their municipality (0-1) or the length in years. Coefficients remain statistically significant and in the positive direction for all models. Robust standard errors are clustered at the place level.

Table H2: Relationship between perceived issue division and residency tenure

	DV: Perceived Division on Issues Between Newcomers and Long-term Residents					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Prop. Life	-0.023 (0.020)	-0.023 (0.020)	-0.009 (0.022)			
Years Lived				-0.001* (0.0003)	-0.001* (0.0003)	-0.0005 (0.0003)
Rurality		-0.006 (0.018)	-0.005 (0.018)		-0.006 (0.017)	-0.006 (0.018)
log(Population)		-0.003 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.005)		-0.004 (0.004)	-0.005 (0.005)
Seniority			-0.053 (0.045)			-0.040 (0.046)
Woman			0.039** (0.012)			0.037** (0.012)
Non-White			-0.0004 (0.022)			0.005 (0.022)
Constant	0.433*** (0.012)	0.462*** (0.042)	0.461*** (0.044)	0.442*** (0.011)	0.477*** (0.042)	0.473*** (0.045)
N	1,231	1,231	1,178	1,279	1,279	1,215
Adjusted R ²	0.0003	-0.001	0.007	0.004	0.003	0.009

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Note: Using an OLS model, I regress responses to the question about whether officials perceived issue preference differences between newcomers and long-term residents on residency tenure for survey respondents. Models 2 and 5 include place-level controls, and models 3 and 6 include respondent-level controls as well. Robust standard errors are clustered at the place level.

I. Importance of residency tenure and division on local issues

Table I1: Relationship between perceived importance of officials’ rootedness and perceived division between long-term residents and newcomers

	DV: Importance of long residency tenure			
	Constituents		Officials	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Issue Division	0.108*	0.109**	-0.071	-0.016
	(0.043)	(0.042)	(0.043)	(0.041)
Years Lived		0.002***		0.324***
		(0.001)		(0.037)
Logged Pop.		0.011**		0.011
		(0.004)		(0.006)
Age		0.0004		0.001*
		(0.001)		(0.001)
Woman		0.015		-0.026
		(0.016)		(0.016)
Party (D=1)		-0.048**		-0.084***
		(0.018)		(0.016)
Constant	0.737***	0.551***	0.671***	0.377***
	(0.021)	(0.060)	(0.019)	(0.064)
N	991	981	1,279	1,216
Adjusted R ²	0.006	0.030	0.002	0.087

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Note: I regress responses to the question about whether officials find it important for representatives to have lived in a place a long time (scaled 0-1) on perceived division between newcomers and long-term residents (scaled 0-1, with 1 being all issues). Coefficients for constituents are positive and statistically significant. A shift from perceiving no issue division to seeing division on all issues is associated with a 10 percentage point increase in perceived importance of officials’ rootedness. Robust standard errors are clustered at the place level.

J. The challenge of causal identification

Even with the limited variation in candidate roots, ideally, I would be able to estimate the causal effect of strong roots on winning local elections. That would demonstrate whether candidates who are deeply tied to their communities have an advantage in local elections over those with relatively less weak ties, the same way in which scholars have found that candidates for state and national government fare better when they were born in their municipalities. There are several data challenges to this. First, I am unable to access large-scale data on candidates’ place of birth, where they attended high school, how long they have lived in their municipalities (beyond the L2 data). Second, many local candidates have lived in their municipalities for enough years to establish connections to the community, making it difficult to identify meaning in the difference between birth place and growing up in a place.

Beyond data constraints, however, there are methodological challenges to estimating an effect of roots on electoral outcomes. The main problem with a basic OLS model, preventing us from interpreting these estimates as causal, is the issue of selection. Both roots and electoral outcomes are influenced by unobserved candidate characteristics. Adding candidate-level controls to the models will not entirely overcome this bias. There is also self-selection into the candidate pool. As described in the paper, candidates with stronger roots are likely more willing to run because they expect it will help them to win, or they have additional resources and connections from their rootedness. Finally, incumbents with strong roots might strategically deter challengers. Controlling for incumbency does not account for this.

Instrumental variables could be one approach. However, potential instruments like job relocation likely violate the exclusion restriction. Relocation might affect winning through

paths other than length of residency. Second, most plausible instruments, like economic shocks affecting mobility, are at the municipality level, not candidate level. Even if I had a valid instrument, it would only identify effects for a specific complier population, candidates whose roots were affected by the instrument, which may not be relevant given the prevalence of strong roots among candidates.

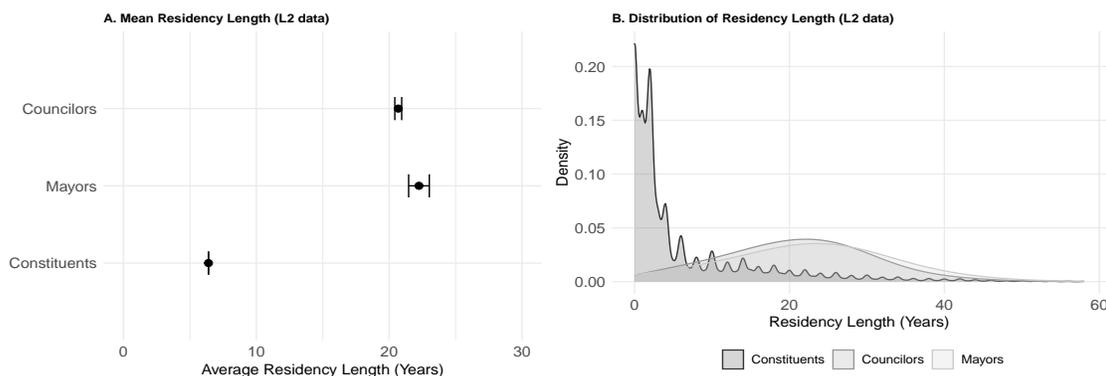
I could try a close-election regression-discontinuity design. However, even if I dichotomized treatment (some cut-off for strong-rooted), there are not enough close elections between long-term and short-term residents. The places with close elections between these types of candidates are not representative. The LATE would not provide much information and I would be underpowered.

I could try generalized propensity scores, which are often used to estimate the effects of a continuous variable, like residency length. However, candidates clustering at high residency lengths is again a problem. Even if there were more variation, this does not allow us to balance on unobserved confounders, and it assumes no unmeasured confounding between residency length and electoral outcomes.

The challenges of causal inference are vast. However, the descriptive trends uncovered in the paper are important independent of causally identifying an effect of rootedness on winning or running. My argument about the importance of roots in local politics does not suffer from this limitation.

K. Municipality-level residency tenure and population size

Figure K1: Distribution of Residency Tenure Using Individual-level Constituent Data



Note: This presents the distribution of years registered in the municipality. Here, I use all constituents, not the average across municipalities, meaning this distribution is driven by larger cities.

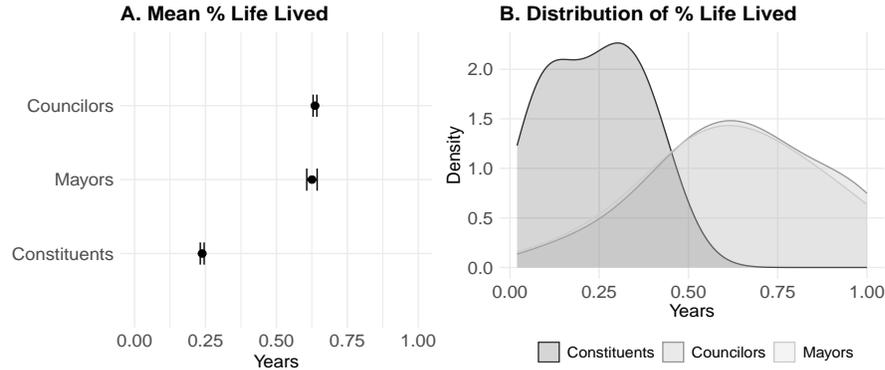
Table K1: Relationship Between Population and Mentions of Embeddedness

	Mention Length		Mention Connections	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
log(Population)	-0.0130 (0.0086)	-0.0203* (0.0100)	-0.0010 (0.0072)	-0.0057 (0.0079)
Rurality (0-1)		-0.1140+ (0.0678)		-0.0727 (0.0521)
Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,955	1,955	1,955	1,955

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

Note: This presents the relationship between municipality population size and mentions of embeddedness in councilors' candidate statements. Robust standard errors are clustered at the municipality level.

Figure K2: Distribution of Residency Tenure Using Percent of Life lived



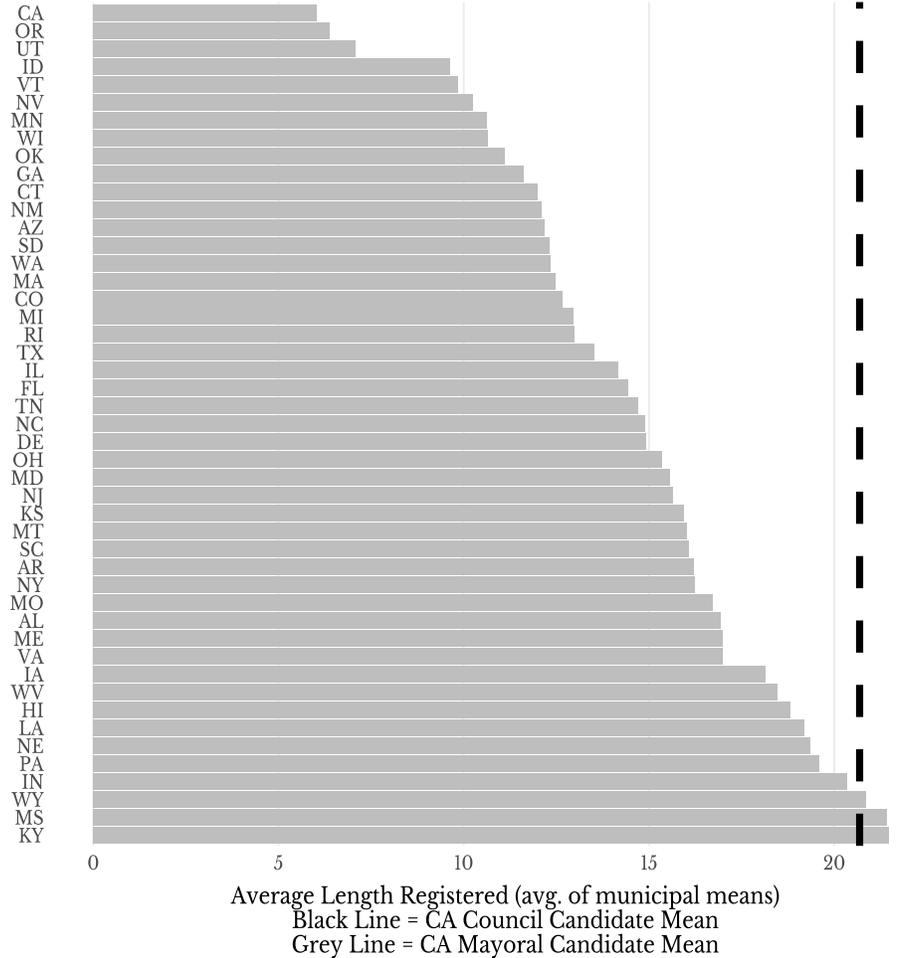
Note: This presents the distribution of residency tenure, but rather than using years registered, I use the percent of adult life registered.

Table K2: Average Residency Tenure by Population Bucket

pop.bucket	Average Tenure (Years)	Average Tenure (% Life)
Up to 10,000	10.15	24.05
10,000-19,999	9.39	23.67
20,000-49,999	9.20	24.60
50,000-99,999	8.91	23.61
100,000-199,999	8.63	23.08
200,000+	7.89	22.68

Note: This presents the average tenure of municipalities within each population bucket to more clearly see variation by population size. I take the average tenure within each municipality and average across those averages.

Figure K3: Constituents' Average Years Registered by State



Note: This presents constituents' average residency tenure by state. I take the mean of registration length in each municipality, and then I average across all municipalities within a state. Alaska is excluded because its voter file contains municipalities with implausible zero or near-zero registration tenure due to administrative re-registration practices.

L. Relationship between mentions and L2 residency tenure

Table L1: Mentions of Length/Connection and Residency Tenure

	Length	Connection	Length	Connection
Prop. Life	0.225** (0.083)	0.137* (0.063)		
Length			0.392** (0.123)	0.453*** (0.088)
Constant	0.440*** (0.058)	0.792*** (0.045)	0.446*** (0.049)	0.719*** (0.039)
N	655	655	655	655
Adjusted R ²	0.010	0.008	0.014	0.047

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Note: I regress mentions of length or other connections from candidate statements on length of residency (rescaled 0-1) or proportion of life lived in a place. This includes the 655 candidates for whom I both have statements and an L2 match. Greater residency tenure is associated with a higher likelihood of mentioning length of residency. Despite limited variation in connection, there is a positive association. I use robust standard errors clustered at the municipality level.

M. Mentioning Roots and Winning

Candidate statements: For constituents to base their electoral decisions on candidates’ roots, they need to be aware of candidates’ residency tenure. Official candidate statements provide accessible information on candidates. In smaller communities, voters may already know the person running for office, but in mid-to-large-sized cities, the candidate statement could be the only information available before voting.

Table M1: Mentions of residency tenure & winning

	Total		Percent	
	Mentions	No Mentions	Mentions	No Mentions
Winning Candidates				
Length	325	235	58.04	41.96
Other Connection	531	29	94.82	5.18
Either Length or Other Connection	544	16	97.14	2.86
Non-Winning Candidates				
Length	366	225	61.93	38.07
Other Connection	492	99	83.25	16.75
Either Length or Other Connection	533	58	90.19	9.81

Note: This table presents mentions of residency tenure and community connections among the 560 winning candidates and 591 losing candidates in 2022. “Either Length or Connection” counts candidates who mention length, connection, or both.

Table M1 shows the data on electoral outcomes and mentions of length or other connection for 2022 statements (where I had greater access to data than for 2024). Among the 560 winning candidates with statements, only 16 mention neither their length of residency nor other connections to their community. Among losing candidates, only 58 out of 591 make no mention of these ties. The majority of candidates provide information to voters about who they are in relation to their communities. While there is still a high rate among losers, there is some evidence of an expected difference here: winners talk about their connection more on average. Though, even non-viable losing candidates (those who lost by margins of greater than 5-10 percentage points) are more likely to mention their connections and length of residency than to not do so.

Among the 16 winning candidates who did not mention either, they are in an uncontested race, are running against another person who does not mention community ties, put a heavy emphasis on preserving the community for locals, or have a list of endorsements that highlight their connections without explicitly stating those connections. For example, one of these candidates asserted, “We need a city that puts locals first, before the casinos, before the developers, and before the resorts. Locals are being priced out...” The candidates who do not mention length do emphasize other connections, seemingly either making up for the fact that they have weak roots or assuming their other connections signal roots.

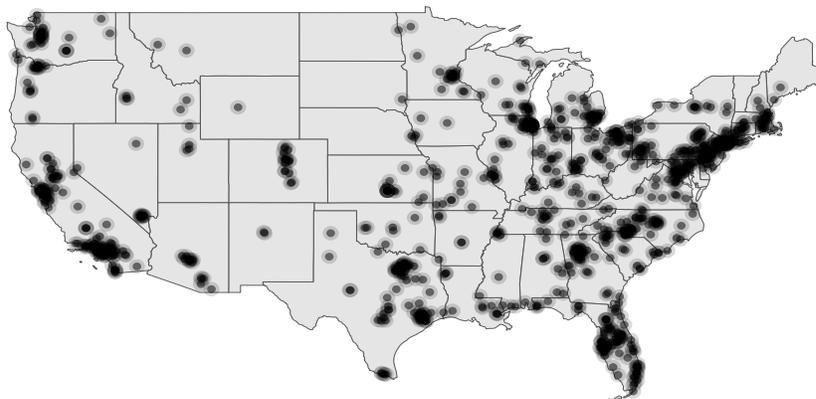
Only half of all races for which I have candidate statements in 2022 include a mix of candidates who mention and do not mention length of residency, and less than a quarter include a mix of candidates who do or do not mention other connection. To compare win rates for candidates who mention roots and those who do not would require observing this relationship within an electoral race, but most races do not include this mix. These patterns support the argument that roots shape local electoral competition through candidate entry and campaign messaging, even if their direct effect on winning is difficult to isolate.

Wikipedia Scrape

Ideally, I would identify additional indicators of candidate rootedness to both evaluate entry into candidacy and compare across winners and losers in local elections. Birthplace, for example, is commonly used in studies of roots in state and national politics, but this information is not available in the L2 voter file. I use de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023) data on mayors to scrape Wikipedia for candidate names and obtain birth place. I generated a dataset of 747 unique mayoral candidates from 1989-2021. Among those for which I could find a Wikipedia page, 25.17% of candidates were born in the city in which they ran for mayor. However, most local candidates, especially those who lost and those from smaller municipalities, do not have Wikipedia pages. As a result, the data are very incomplete. This limitation highlights the need for improved strategies to systematically collect local candidate information in future research.

N. Public survey descriptives

Below I present descriptive information about the public survey respondents. Survey respondents were compensated at a rate of \$12 per hour and were informed in advance of the approximate time required to complete the survey (15-20 minutes). The survey protocol emphasized voluntary participation, informed consent, and the right to skip questions or withdraw at any time without penalty. Potential risks included minor time costs and the possibility of discomfort when responding to questions about local politics.



Note: This presents public survey respondents' locations. The map excludes Hawaii and Alaska.

Table N1: Respondents by Population

pop.bucket	Total	Percent
Up to 10,000	189	19.07
10,000-19,000	133	13.42
20,000-49,000	187	18.87
50,000-99,000	161	16.25
100,000-199,000	118	11.91
200,000+	203	20.48

Table N2: All US Municipalities vs. Public Survey Sample

	All		Survey Sample		
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Pct. Of Sample
Population	10706	1206	399577	46202	
Rurality (0-10, rural to urban)	3.87	2	1.66	1	
Pct. White	75.53		64.84		76.39
Pct. Black	7.72		16.14		11.3
Pct. Asian	1.59		7.57		9.69
Pct. Hispanic	9.68		17.18		8.38
Pct. Voting Age Population	75.34		72.76		100
Pct. Over Age 65	19.93		16.27		7.87

Table N3: Gender Distribution

Gender	Count	Pct. of Total
Man	493	49.75
Woman	488	49.24
Other	10	1.01

Table N4: Regional Distribution among Respondents

Region	Respondents	Pct. of Respondents
East North Central	149	15.04
East South Central	52	5.25
Middle Atlantic	144	14.53
Mountain West	62	6.26
New England	36	3.63
Pacific West	164	16.55
South Atlantic	234	23.61
West North Central	53	5.35
West South Central	97	9.79

Table N5: Party Distribution

Party	Respondents	Pct.
Democrat	455	45.91
Republican	238	24.02
Pure Independent	115	11.60
Independent Lean Democrat	99	9.99
Independent Lean Republican	60	6.05
Pure Other	10	1.01
Other Lean Democrat	13	1.31
Other Lean Republican	1	0.10

O. Open-ended Text Analysis

Importance of Long-Term Residents in Office

For these open-ended responses, I first used a structural topic model (STM) to extract latent topics from the open-ended responses (Roberts et al. 2014). However, no matter the number of topics, there was redundancy across topics. I then applied a BERT-based sentence embedding model, which turns full sentences into numeric vectors that capture their semantic meaning. Similar responses are placed close together in a high-dimensional vector space, and I used KMeans clustering to group these into topic clusters. However, for a range of cluster solutions, the resulting topics centered on respondents’ knowledge and understanding of their

municipalities, producing conceptually redundant clusters with limited interpretive value. I used these results to guide the text-item search.

For the text-item search, I generated binary variables for each term of interest, indicating whether a response included the term or not. I then hand-checked that each was capturing an actual instance related to that term.

Terms: understand, idea, trust, know, grasp, familiar, care/caring, position, invest, motivated, connect

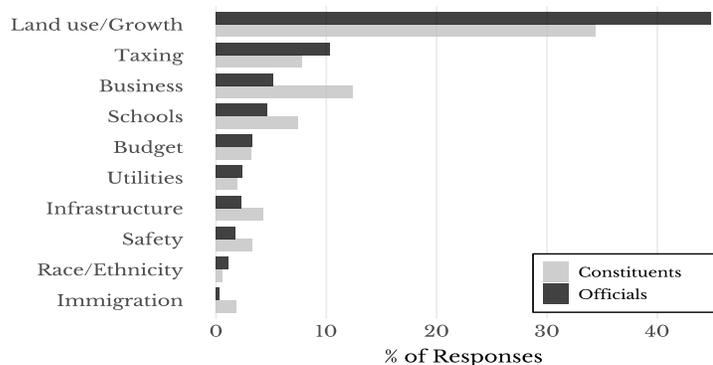
Perceived Issue Division

I first used an STM to extract latent topics from the open-ended responses. However, most words in most topics were related to development, growth, and housing. This pattern persisted even when varying the number of topics. I also applied a BERT-based sentence embedding model. For a range of cluster solutions, the topics consistently centered on housing, development, and growth, producing redundant clusters. Other large language model approaches may have been appropriate, but I follow Soria (2025), who recommends such approaches be used as, “supplements to, rather than replacements for, human judgment.”

Therefore, I shifted my approach to a more transparent text-item search. I built a corpus of words under topic umbrellas, using the most common words from the topic modeling. I then searched for these words in the text of each response, generating binary indicators for when a specific topic was addressed. These binary indicators were then aggregated.

- Housing: development, develop, growth, grow, zoning, zone, land use, housing, houses, space, preserv, density, dense, home size, lot size, expansion, permit, use of land
- Safety: police, policing, public safety
- Taxing: tax, taxing, taxes
- Budget: budget, budgeting, spending, revenue, spend
- Race: race, racism, ethnicity, racial
- Immigration: immigrant, immigration, migrant
- Business: business, businesses, company
- Schools: school, schools, education, schooling
- Infrastructure: infrastructure, roads, bridges
- Utilities: water, gas, utilities, electric

Figure O1: Open-ended Responses on Division between Newcomers and Long-time Residents



Note: This presents the percent of responses on each topic among respondents who indicated there was at least some division between newcomers and long-time residents.

P. Residency Tenure and Candidacy

Table P1: Residency Length (scaled) regressed on candidacy

	Years Lived (Scaled 0-1)	
	(1)	(2)
Candidate	0.2072** (0.0058)	0.1769** (0.0021)
N Candidates	586	4,873
Observations	39,097,818	39,097,818
City \times Year FEs	✓	✓
Election	Mayoral	Council

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

Note: This replicates the results in Table 4, but here the outcome variable is rescaled from years to 0-1.

Table P2: Residency Tenure (logged) on candidacy (controls)

	log(Years Lived)		% of Life Lived	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Candidate	1.435*** (0.0280)	1.355*** (0.0113)	0.4159*** (0.0115)	0.4042*** (0.0047)
Age (std.)	0.4429*** (0.0042)	0.4429*** (0.0042)	-0.0323*** (0.0014)	-0.0323*** (0.0014)
Woman	0.0037 (0.0025)	0.0038 (0.0024)	-0.0020** (0.0010)	-0.0019** (0.0010)
Democrat	-0.1091*** (0.0047)	-0.1090*** (0.0047)	-0.0230*** (0.0014)	-0.0230*** (0.0014)
Observations	27,295,330	27,295,330	34,275,392	34,275,392
City \times Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Election	Mayoral	Council	Mayoral	Council

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

Note: This replicates Table 4, but includes controls for age, gender, and party (L2 registration).

Table P3: Candidacy on Residency Tenure (logged)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
log(Years Lived)	1.98×10^{-5} ** (1.75×10^{-6})	0.0001 ** (9.07×10^{-6})		
log(% of Life Lived)			1.56×10^{-5} ** (1.37×10^{-6})	0.0001 ** (7.53×10^{-6})
Observations	39,097,818	39,097,818	39,097,818	39,097,818
City \times Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Election	Mayoral	Council	Mayoral	Council

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

Note: This presents the relationship between candidacy and residency tenure. Here, candidacy is the outcome.

Table P3 tests how predictive tenure is of candidacy. The small coefficients reflect the rarity of the outcome. Very few individuals run for local office, meaning even potentially strong predictors like residency tenure will appear to have minimal marginal effects in absolute terms. These estimates speak more to the direction and consistency of the relationship than to substantive magnitude.

Table P4: Logit of Candidacy on Residency Tenure (logged)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
log(Years Lived)	1.506** (0.0511)	1.306** (0.0191)		
log(% of Life Lived)			1.554** (0.0661)	1.587** (0.0270)
Observations	9,459,054	30,215,105	9,459,054	30,215,105
City × Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Election	Mayoral	Council	Mayoral	Council

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

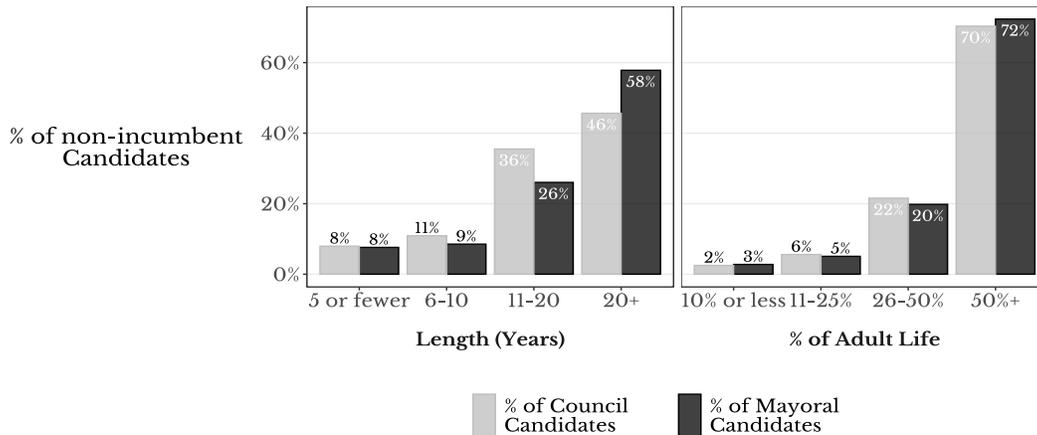
Note: I test whether tenure predicts candidacy using logistic regression, with robust standard errors clustered at the municipality level. Models 1 and 3 present log odds for mayoral candidacy; Models 2 and 4 for council candidacy. Coefficients represent changes in the log odds of running for office associated with a one-unit increase in the logged measure of tenure. Substantively, a shift from 5 to 15 years of residency – a one-unit increase in $\log(\text{Years Lived})$ – is associated with a 4.5-fold increase in the odds of running for mayor ($\exp(1.5) \approx 4.5$). Because candidacy is a rare event, the absolute increase in predicted probability is small but meaningful: in the mayoral model, the probability of candidacy increases from approximately 0.0001 to 0.00045.

Table P5: Comparison of Standard and Rare-Events Corrected Logit Models

Model	Intercept	Intercept _{SE}	Slope	Slope _{SE}	Pseudo _R ²	N	Correction
Mayor (Corrected)	-14.8280	0.1666	1.5651	0.0535	NA	49381351	Yes
Mayor (Standard)	-14.9282	0.1666	1.5651	0.0535	0.0916	49381351	No
Council (Corrected)	-12.3999	0.0541	1.4614	0.0177	NA	49381351	Yes
Council (Standard)	-12.5002	0.0541	1.4614	0.0177	0.1011	49381351	No

Note: This table compares estimates from standard logistic regression and rare-events corrected models using King and Zeng’s (2001) prior correction method. Given candidacy is extremely rare, the intercept in standard models could be biased downward. The corrected models apply a constant offset to adjust the baseline rate of candidacy. As expected, the intercepts shift slightly, but the slope estimates remain virtually identical, indicating that the observed relationship between residency tenure and candidacy is not driven by rare-events bias.

Figure P1: Distribution of Residency Tenure for Non-Incumbent Mayoral and Council Candidates



Note: The black bars display data on mayoral candidates, and the grey bars present data on council candidates. Length refers to the number of years since voter registration. Percent of adult life is calculated as years since registration divided by the number of years since the candidate turned 18, multiplied by 100. These data only include non-incumbent (did not serve in the prior term) candidates.

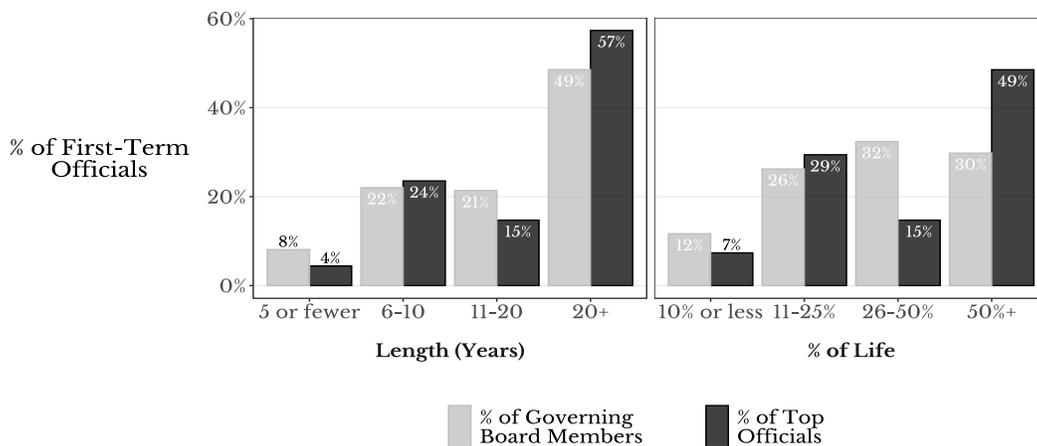
Table P6: Relationship Between Characteristics and Candidacy (Figure 5)

Panel A: Mayoral Candidates					
	20+ Years	10+ Years	Male	Age: 50+	White (predicted)
Candidate	0.5621** (0.0237)	0.6805** (0.0152)	0.2337** (0.0213)	0.2183** (0.0214)	0.0965** (0.0220)
City × Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	49,381,351	49,381,351	48,672,166	49,381,351	49,381,351

Panel B: Council Candidates					
	20+ Years	10+ Years	Male	Age: 50+	White (predicted)
Candidate	0.4659** (0.0086)	0.6309** (0.0057)	0.1846** (0.0077)	0.0857** (0.0080)	0.0945** (0.0070)
City × Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	49,381,351	49,381,351	48,672,166	49,381,351	49,381,351

Note: Each observation is a registered voter. Panel A shows mayoral candidacy; Panel B shows council candidacy. Coefficients indicate how candidates and non-candidates differ on the characteristics in each column: (1) 20+ years of residency, (2) 10+ years of residency, (3) male (L2 estimate), (4) age 50 or older, and (5) predicted white (1 = white, 0 otherwise). Robust standard errors, clustered at the municipality level, are in parentheses.

Figure P2: Distribution of Residency Tenure for First-Term Officials



Note: The black bars display data on top officials who responded to the survey and the grey bars are for governing board members. Length refers to the number of years they indicate living in their municipality. Percent of life is calculated as years lived divided by their age, multiplied by 100. These data only include first-term incumbents, which limits the sample to only 389 respondents.

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