

Researcher explores why voters ignore local politics

March 18 2016, by Jill Disanto

Daniel Hopkins, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, says that, while today's voters are more engaged in federal elections, they've pretty much abandoned state and local politics.

In a book that he's developing, *The Increasingly United States*, Hopkins, whose research as an associate professor focuses on American elections and public opinion, says American federalism was based on the idea that [voters'](#) primary political loyalties would be with the states. But that idea has become outdated.

"With today's highly nationalized [political behavior](#), Americans are no longer taking full advantage of federalism. Contemporary Americans are markedly more engaged with national politics than with the state or local politics," Hopkins says. "We now know more about national politics, vote more often in national elections and let our national loyalties dictate our down-ballot choices."

The book presents evidence about Americans' voting and political engagement and offers two reasons to explain why today's voters are paying more attention to federal elections.

The first, Hopkins says, is a landscape in which the political parties offer similar choices at the national level.

"Just as an Egg McMuffin is the same in any McDonald's, America's two major political parties are increasingly perceived to offer the same

choices throughout the country," Hopkins says.

The second reason is the changes in the media and how Americans get their news, an environment that allows people to follow their interests in national-level politics, making local and state-level politics easy to ignore, he says.

"As Americans transition from print newspapers and local television news to the Internet and cable television, they are also leaving behind the media sources most likely to provide state and local information," Hopkins says. "The result is a growing mismatch between the varied challenges facing states and voters' near-exclusive focus on national politics."

For *The Increasingly United States*, Hopkins examined historical and recent surveys from the 50 states, along with election results from gubernatorial and mayoral races dating back nearly a century. He also traced the evolution of political media coverage from *The Los Angeles Times*' coverage during the Great Depression through the expansion of local television news during the 1960s and the role of social media today.

"Voters' attention, engagement and campaign contributions are targeted more toward national politics," Hopkins says. "This 'nationalization' is likely to have profound consequences for state and local politics and policymaking. Accordingly, this book seeks to document and explain the nationalization of contemporary Americans' political behavior."

With a secondary appointment in Penn's Annenberg School for Communication, Hopkins studies questions related to racial politics, ethnicity, immigration and urban [politics](#).

Hopkins hopes *The Increasingly United States* will be published in 2017.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

Citation: Researcher explores why voters ignore local politics (2016, March 18) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-03-explores-voters-local-politics.html>

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