

US presidential elections can influence local prosecutor races

August 12 2024



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National politics don't stay in the federal arena. Instead, they are increasingly filtering down to local races—including the prosecutor's office.

Having the same political party alignment as a successful U.S. [presidential candidate](#) gives an incumbent [prosecutor](#) a significant edge in re-election, according to recent research by Binghamton University Political Science Professor Jeffrey L. Yates. Local prosecutors are important and powerful actors in the criminal justice system, he pointed out.

"They have a lot of discretion and impact, especially since the vast majority of dispositions in the [criminal justice system](#) are negotiated pleas rather than trial outcomes," Yates said.

Co-authored by Jamie L. Carson of the University of Georgia, Damon Cann of Utah State University and Ronald F. Wright of Wake Forest University, a [study](#) titled "The Increasing Nationalization of Local Elections: The Case of Prosecutors" recently appeared in *Political Research Quarterly*.

The researchers analyzed races from 2012 to 2020 in the nation's top 200 districts by population.

"I've always been interested in criminal justice policy and politics and noticed that there had been almost nothing written on prosecutor elections in political science. In fact, relatively little empirical work had been done on it in any field," Yates said.

That prompted a conversation with co-author Wright, who was the first to do empirical work on the topic. They began collecting data, which has led to a number of academic papers, Yates said.

The United States is the only country in the world in which local prosecutors are elected; 45 states elect their prosecutors, with Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey and Rhode Island as the exceptions. However, the researchers noted that this wasn't always the case; the post

was made by appointment until the mid-1800s.

"While people want prosecutors to have independence, they also want them to be accountable to the citizenry. The change in the [19th century](#) from appointed to elected prosecutors was part of a broader change in approaches to government in which people wanted more control over government, fewer patronage appointments and more responsive officials," Yates explained.

Through the decades, American politics has undergone a steady shift that has narrowed the division between national and local politics, he observed. Tip O'Neill, speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987, popularized the phrase "all politics is local," although the phrase itself is believed to date back much earlier.

"Local politicians can find themselves—and their campaigns—embroiled in national-level issues," Yates said.

More information: Jamie L. Carson et al, The Increasing Nationalization of Local Elections: The Case of Prosecutors, *Political Research Quarterly* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/10659129241256604](https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129241256604)

Provided by Binghamton University

Citation: US presidential elections can influence local prosecutor races (2024, August 12) retrieved 14 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-presidential-elections-local-prosecutor.html>

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