The Electoral Crisis of "West Coast Liberalism"

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis
May 2025

Abstract

West Coast cities are often associated with progressivism and support of the Democratic Party. However, local political shifts have emerged as ideological gaps on the issues have become increasingly visible over the last few years, specifically between “progressive” and “moderate” Democrats. This project focuses on crime and the unhoused as the two major issues driving these shifts. I argue that, one, urban West Coast electorates are targeting their backlash against progressives, but two, that is not necessarily a reflection of the local realities of crime and homelessness. First, I conduct a regional analysis of five traditionally liberal West Coast metropolitan areas (Los Angeles, Oakland, Portland, San Francisco, Seattle) with a difference-in-difference approach. Second, I conduct a local analysis of San Francisco at the census block group level with the same difference-in-difference approach. I augment my statistical analyses with descriptive analyses to contextualize these electoral shifts. My research contributes to the study of local government and is particularly timely given the ongoing nature of political change in West Coast cities.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Professor David Broockman for his role as my faculty advisor this year as I worked on this thesis project. His guidance and support has been invaluable throughout, from defining my topic to analyzing data and organizing my findings. He answered all questions, big and small, that contributed to putting together the best final version possible. I also express my gratitude to Professor Terri Bimes for her guidance as the instructor for POLSCI H190A and POLSCI H190B this academic year. Her comments and suggestions throughout the drafts of my work have been instrumental in refining my writing. She has also been generous with her time from office hours to refining my research presentation skills.

I thank Anna Weissman, who I was a research assistant for on her project examining partisanship in local politics. My project work and conversations with Anna spurred my interest in local politics which led me to the topic of this thesis. During my thesis process, Anna has been super helpful with feedback from my topic proposal to my conclusion. I also acknowledge Pia Deshpande, the statistics consultant for the honors program this year. Her assistance as I figured out my research design's intricacies was critical to ensuring my methodology was sound. There were also countless others at UC Berkeley and elsewhere who gave their time and knowledge into helping me lay the groundwork for various parts of my research and providing feedback.

I am grateful to have received the support of the Fiat Lux Fellowship, the Charles H. Percy Undergraduate Grant for Public Affairs Research, and the Student Opportunity Fund. The collective support has facilitated sharing my research on campus and off campus.

Lastly, I also express my appreciation to my friends and family for having heard me talk about this project all year and for their encouragement throughout the process. This has been the longest—and one of the most rewarding—pieces of academic work I have put together.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Politics always is part theater, but out West too often we settle for being performative rather than substantive."

— Nicolas Kristof (2024a)

I. Diagnosing the Problem

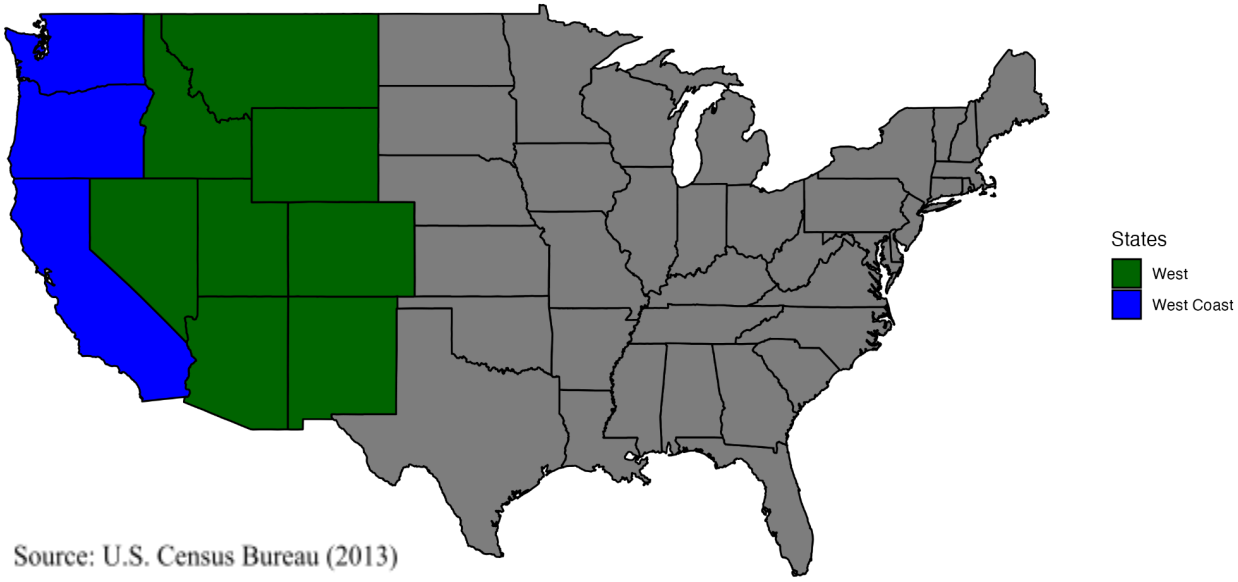
In several opinion pieces written by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, he questions the status quo of the Democratic Party on the West Coast. Why, Kristof (2024a) asks, are deep blue West Coast cities "plagued by homelessness, crime and dysfunction?" With the nation in the midst of the 2024 presidential election at the time—featuring national Democrats hoping to hold the White House—Kristof argues liberal governance in West Coast cities is a liability due to failures to address those aforementioned problems, rather than a pitch of successful governance that can be replicated nationally.

Is there a flair of liberalism unique to the West Coast? Kristof points to the unhoused crisis as one example. In 2024, California and Oregon led with the highest rates of unsheltered homelessness within their states nationwide and Washington came in seventh (de Sousa and Henry 2024). On the other hand, the liberal East Coast states of New York, Vermont, and Massachusetts had the lowest rates. Turning to crime, San Francisco and Seattle had car theft rates that were 4.5 and 5.8 times greater, respectively, than that of New York in 2024 (Lopez and Boxerman 2025). Kristof (2024a) attributes this disparity in outcomes to the flair of "West Coast liberalism," defined by an "ideological purity that is focused more on intentions than on oversight and outcomes."

The West Coast is a subset of the larger West region as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (see Figure 1.1). The label is most commonly attached to three states in the contiguous

United States that border the Pacific Ocean—California, Oregon, and Washington—and excludes Alaska and Hawaii which are separated from the United States (the former by Canada, the latter by the Pacific Ocean). All three West Coast states have backed Democratic presidential candidates since the critical election of 1992 (Leip 1992-2024; Tures 2022). Notably, Democrats held all congressional seats that bordered the Pacific Ocean in the 118th Congress, between 2023 and 2025 (Mishanec 2022). It is safe to say that the West Coast, as a region, has a distinctive liberal lean towards the Democratic Party.

Figure 1.1: Map of West Coast States



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2013)

The major cities of the West Coast, from Seattle to Los Angeles, are often associated with progressivism and support of the Democratic Party that even exceeds their statewide levels. The vast majority of their local elected officials are known to be Democrats. They have pursued innovative and progressive policies from Seattle's democracy vouchers (Young 2015), Portland's metropolitan governance structure (Abbott 2022), and San Francisco performing the first same-sex marriages nationwide (Marshall 2004). As a result, they are frequent subjects of conservative detraction nationally, including association with the pejorative term "coastal elite"

and “left coast.” However, in recent years, local political shifts have emerged through ideological differences on the issues of crime and homelessness which have become increasingly visible. Given their political homogeneity, they feature internal divides between local Democrats—sometimes framed with “moderate” and “progressive” terminology—rather than a partisan conflict with Republicans. With the salience of these issues, “West Coast” liberalism has been put to the test at the ballot box across the region. In this thesis, I examine these shifts.

II. An Electoral Crisis?

There have been a number of high profile elections that have fostered a sense of failure in “West Coast liberalism.” Three elections of note—all for prosecutorial offices—are Seattle’s 2021 election, San Francisco’s 2022 election, and Multnomah County’s 2024 election. They provide a useful starting point as demonstrations of the concept.

After the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020, demonstrations unfolded across the country demanding racial justice. In Seattle, protesters famously occupied a portion of the city’s Capitol Hill neighborhood—the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP)—and drove out city police who abandoned a precinct (Gupta 2020). While initially an activist symbol, it became a source of public frustration. 75% of Seattle voters supported the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 (Cascade Public Media 2020), but they elected Ann Davison, a Republican, as their city attorney in 2021. Davison ran on a law and order platform and defeated a progressive Democrat who had advocated for various reforms (Baker 2021).

San Francisco voters had expressed their concern over the state of criminal justice even before the 2020 protests. In 2019, they elected Chesa Boudin, a progressive candidate promising “radical change to how we envision justice” who made mass incarceration, police accountability, and racial disparities his campaign’s key themes (Cassidy et al. 2022; Sernoffsky 2019).

However, his term ended early with a rebuke from the same electorate through a successful recall election in 2022. Proponents of the recall "argued his progressive reforms were too lenient and made the city less safe" (Cassidy et al. 2022). His replacement was a moderate who was involved in the recall campaign (Rodriguez 2022).

Oregon voters passed a ballot measure in 2020 to decriminalize hard drugs that gained national attention, Measure 110 (Baker 2024). However, that experiment ended in 2024 when the state legislature passed legislation to bring back criminal penalties. When interviewed, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler said that the experiment failed in its implementation: "to decriminalize the use of drugs before you actually had the treatment services in place was obviously a huge mistake." As Baker also notes, Portland has undergone, in parallel to the decriminalization experiment, problems stemming from drug use, economic woes, public safety, social unrest, and unhoused numbers. Two years later, progressive Multnomah County District Attorney, whose jurisdiction includes Portland, Mike Schmidt lost renomination. His opponent "vowed to be tough on crime" and criticized Schmidt's "past support for Measure 110" among other issues (Rush 2024).

At first glance, these three examples—and others in Oakland/Alameda County and Los Angeles/Los Angeles County—form part of an apparent trend where progressive politicians, specifically prosecutors, are losing elections. Voter discontent seems to be coming from issues such as crime and drug use, the role of police, the unhoused and street conditions. This forms the basis for the two dimensions of West Coast urban politics that I examine in this thesis. First, are electorates voting against progressive politicians? Second, does voter discontent reflect the realities of crime and homelessness?

III. Research Significance

There has been significant finger pointing on this apparent crisis of "West Coast liberalism" from the media (such as Kristof), organized groups, politicians, and everyday citizens. In March 2024, the *San Francisco Chronicle* proclaimed that "San Francisco can no longer be called a progressive city" (Garofoli and Toledo 2024). Organized groups formed with memorable taglines such as GrowSF (n.d.) in San Francisco asserting that "our elected officials have failed us on the basics." Candidates running for office have criticized progressive criminal justice policies and embraced law and order platforms. Citizens have mobilized at election times to vote against candidates and policies that they may have even supported just a few years ago.

Within this local polarization, it is crucial to take a step back and look at what is happening with a systematic approach. Politics, at all levels of government, can become contentious and that may form the basis for narratives that perpetuate animosity. In this thesis, I take a systematic approach to better understand the trends of local politics on the West Coast that defines, measures, and evaluates the issues in a political science framework.

IV. Thesis Roadmap

In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I conduct a literature review to situate local politics within political science and adjacent fields. Specifically, I examine the topics of local political ideology, the different forces in local politics, retrospective voting, and the connection between politics and public safety. Understanding the current scholarship on these key topics paves the way for evaluating what is happening in West Coast local politics.

I lay out my research design in Chapter 3. I discuss the case selection process, my hypotheses, the variables I examine, and my data sources. I then outline my methodology and consider its limitations for the studies. This sets up my analysis in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

Chapter 4, my first study, is a regional analysis of West Coast elections across all case jurisdictions combining both a difference-in-difference approach and a descriptive trend analysis. Chapter 5, my second study, is a case study of San Francisco elections that applies the same difference-in-difference approach at the census block group level and descriptive analysis while additionally analyzing demographics and integrating interviews with local political figures to provide qualitative insights.

I synthesize my research in Chapter 6 by discussing my findings from my regional analysis in Chapter 4 and my local analysis in Chapter 5. Finally, I conclude my thesis in Chapter 6 by reflecting on my hypotheses, offering directions for future research, and sharing my final thoughts on the concept of "West Coast liberalism" itself and its implications.

Chapter 2: Situating Local Politics

Local politics has grown as a subfield within political science in the 21st century (Trounstine 2009). To be able to systematically study political change in West Coast cities, it is critical to understand where the literature stands on the issues that drive local politics more broadly construed. In situating local politics, I divide my literature review into several lines of scholarship that are relevant to my thesis. First, I consider the literature around political ideology to contextualize the labels "moderate" and "progressive" within local politics. Second, I examine the forces at play in local politics, focusing on electoral systems and jurisdiction powers. Third, I look at retrospective voting in local elections, particularly accountability, biases, and responsiveness. Lastly, I consider the politics of public safety and its connection to political ideology.

I. Local Political Ideology

Current scholarship into local politics has been centered around a debate of to what extent it is influenced by national politics. In the current polarized political environment, one might expect voters to conform to their party ideology at all levels of government, from presidential elections to city council elections. However, political scientists are divided on whether there is sufficient evidence for this, given that some issues are inherently federal (e.g. foreign policy, international trade) while some issues are conventionally local (e.g. street paving, zoning codes). Within this divide, there are two schools of thought: the traditional view and the new view.

The traditional view holds that local politics is unique and separate from national politics (Anzia 2021; Banfield and Wilson 1963; Ferreira and Gyourko 2009; Jensen et al. 2021; Kaufmann 2004a; Martin et al. 2024; Oliver et al. 2012; Peterson 1981; Schleicher 2007; Tang

2024; Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Banfield and Wilson (1963) posit that urban policy cleavages are different from those held by the national parties. Peterson (1981) argues that local issues have a "limited impact…on partisan relationships" (111). In a more recent work, Kaufmann (2004a) argues that "in many cases…party allegiances are distinctly unimportant to the choices that voters make in their local elections" (9). While the presence of party cleavages in local politics may vary with city size, only a minority of those cleavages are significant to local politics (Welch and Bledsoe 1988). Supporting this, several scholars have found that polarization is limited at the local level when compared to national issues (Ferreira and Gyourko 2009; Jensen et al. 2021). Tang (2024) finds that local elections have not nationalized alongside other elections, namely congressional and gubernatorial ones. A group of researchers also found, in a survey experiment, that a significant number of voters are willing to defect from their party in local elections under certain issue conditions (Martin et al. 2024). However, in many local elections, neither parties nor candidates present different platforms to voters (Schleicher 2007). Putting ideology aside, scholars have situated local elections in "managerial democracies" where ability to govern is valued over any particular party affiliation or ideology (Oliver et al. 2012). The traditional view argues that local elections are markedly different from national elections, but that is not to say that national issues are not relevant in cities, as I will discuss next.

The new view argues that local politics can be understood similarly to national politics in terms of partisanship and ideology (Choi et al. 2010; Einstein and Glick 2016; Gerber and Hopkins 2011; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Warshaw 2019). Some scholars have identified a link between partisanship and local fiscal policy, particularly that Democrats are more likely to pursue redistributive policies (Choi et al. 2010; Einstein and Glick 2018). In particular, Einstein and Glick (2016) find that this holds across different institutional and economic contexts which

they suggest is a result of national forces shaping local politics. Einstein and Kogan (2016) attribute increased overall spending to Democrats. Additionally, denser housing is built under Democratic mayors (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2024). Gerber (2013) links climate policy to mayoral partisanship. However, while Gerber and Hopkins (2018) connect public safety spending to Democratic mayors, they do not find any connection to tax or social policies, and argue that nationalization is only part of the local politics calculus. While there may be limited correlation at the top of a city's political operation, voters have more national ideological conformity based on a policy conservatism analysis that estimated ideal policy preferences (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014).

The boundaries between these two schools of thought are not clearly delineated. Some issues cut across ideological and partisan lines and others are more associated with one party than the other. With arguments and evidence in favor of both sides as the scholarly debate is still ongoing, Anzia (2021) and Tang (2024) both posit that it is premature to characterize local politics as having nationalized. But, as Anzia further points out, literature in the new strand of local politics has energized its study within political science.

I take the position that even when issues have somewhat nationalized, they remain distinctive in their local context. Crime and homelessness on the West Coast have nationalized to some degree, evidenced by coverage in the national media and detraction from politicians in the federal government. However, as I will demonstrate, they unfold differently in each metropolitan area with respect to both actual conditions and electoral settings.

II. Local Forces at Play

There are institutional and social forces that uniquely shape local governments. In American federalism, local governments are at the bottom of the hierarchy. As such, they face

challenges both vertically, from the federal and state governments, and horizontally, from other cities (Einstein and Kogan 2016; Gerber and Hopkins 2011; Peterson 1981; Sances 2019). This creates jurisdictional issues (e.g. responsibility for policing) and political co-dependence on surrounding municipalities (e.g. competition for investment).

The nature of local elections also shapes local politics. Local elections are often held outside of federal and state election cycles. Scholars have found that off cycle elections lead to better representation of organized interests rather than the everyday voter (Anzia 2014; Dynes et al. 2021). Many are conducted in a nonpartisan manner, lessening the influence of party organizations (Adrian 1959; Lee 1960; Trounstine 2010; Welch and Bledsoe 1986; Wood 2002). The West Coast reflects unique local electoral institutions with several cities having held off-cycle elections (though many have realigned election years recently) and all being nominally nonpartisan.

Demographic categories also affect the local political landscape. The local voter is different from the voter in a presidential or a midterm election. Research has identified homeowners, who typically vote in consideration of their property values, as the most active group in local elections (Fischel 2001; Oliver et al. 2012). Anzia (2019) also identified seniors while another scholar has characterized local voters as generally white, wealthy, and partisan (Schaffner et al. 2020). The imbalance of who votes has ramifications for the distribution of government services (Hajnal and Trounstine 2013). In this sense, local elections particularly fail to capture the actual dynamics of the electorate.

Race is the most frequently studied demographic, with several scholars agreeing that it has significant relevance (Kaufmann 2004b; Hajnal 2009; Trounstine 2018). However, there are also nuances to how much race really matters. In an analysis of New York City, Arnold and

Carnes (2012) find that race affects how citizens first viewed a mayor, but it does not affect performance evaluations. Hajnal and Trounstine (2013) argue that rather than different groups holding different attitudes, they just experience different local conditions. Demographic impact may be tied to other factors rather than as the defining characteristic of local politics.

III. Retrospective Voting

There is significant literature on retrospective voting—when voters evaluate past performance to inform their decision—from its ability to drive responsiveness and usage as an accountability mechanism to the biases that affect a voter's recollection of events. Although much of this research is at non-local levels of government, it is still valuable to understand the dynamics of how voters use the past to vote in the present. This holds relevance to how urban West Coast voters are evaluating the issues of crime and the unhoused in connection to progressive candidates, incumbents and non-incumbents alike.

Local governments are generally responsive to public preferences in many domains (Einstein and Kogan 2016; Palus 2010; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). However, local governments often face jurisdictional challenges, as discussed earlier. Local officials do not have influence over everything that voters think they do (Burnett and Kogan 2017). Even when they are able to, there is a calculus behind their decisions. Scholars have identified a link between election years and increased responsiveness (Dynes et al. 2021). Directly tied to my examination of public safety, Fulmer (2019) and Okafor (2021) both find that prosecutors charge more in election years.

Despite officials' efforts to be responsive, it is hard to inform voters of their actions so voters do not have reliable awareness (Bucchianeri 2020). Achen and Bartels (2004) find that voters are often unable to judge responsiveness although officials may pander to their

preferences, making myopia—how they felt recently—the only successful predictor of their vote. Scholars have looked into the role of the media to help inform voters. Berry and Howell (2007) link accountability to media attention though Hopkins and Pettingill (2018) view the media as helping to "facilitate" retrospective voting. McCrain and Peterson (2023) argue that local elections do not increase demand for the news, but Rubado and Jennings (2019) find that less local news staff depresses turnout in local elections. Weitzer and Tuch (2005) connect media coverage to public attitudes on police misconduct. Garz and Martin (2021) find that increased media coverage on economic conditions harms incumbent performance, with negative events having a greater impact than positive events. While there is agreement that media environments matter, voters are still unable to gauge with certainty their local politics which affects their ability to vote retrospectively.

There are also mixed findings on accountability. In school board elections, scholars have found that voters hold officials accountable (Berry and Howell 2007; Payson 2017). However, Payson (2016) finds that this is limited to presidential election years while another study demonstrates to the contrary, that there is no evidence of accountability (Korgan et al. 2016). In other local elections, Arnold and Carnes (2012) find accountability on crime and the economy, Burnett and Kogan (2016) on road quality, and Hopkins and Pettingill (2017) on unemployment. Fulmer (2019) does not attribute tougher prosecutors with better electoral performance although they charge more in election years and neither does Siegel (2023) with crime at all. My research also yields mixed results on accountability in West Coast metropolitan areas, but supports research into information problems.

IV. Politics of Public Safety

Public safety is a highly salient issue as it affects an individual's daily experience from

whether they feel safe walking down the street to the value of their home. This saliency means changes in public safety can have significant political implications. While most policing falls to local governments, some public safety issues have gone national (e.g. “defund the police”). My research does not directly examine nationalized public safety concerns, they nonetheless impact local elections. For example, the national reform prosecutor movement is essentially a divide between “progressive” and more “moderate” criminal justice policies.

In the United States, public safety has historically been tied to race. This is a result of centuries of interactions between institutions like law enforcement and prisons with minority populations. This historical connection sets up one of two models for viewing public safety: the racial resentment model (Baranauskas 2022; Carroll and Jackson 1983; Carter and Corra 2016; Kent and Jacobs 2005; Silver and Pickett 2015) and the utilitarian model (Baranauskas 2022; Silver and Pickett 2015; Weitzer and Tuch 2005). The racial resentment model posits that group threat, from minority groups towards whites, leads to increased support for public safety measures such as increased police staffing. Amongst the scholars, Baranauskas (2022) hypothesized that, under the racial resentment model, there would be opposition to defunding the police. Carroll and Jackson (1983) found a correlation between a higher Black population and higher police spending. Carter and Corra (2016) as well as Silver and Pickett (2015) found that racial attitudes predicted support for police use of force. Kent and Jacobs (2005) find that the greater the threat, the more police staffing there was.

The racial resentment model is contrasted by the utilitarian model which is concerned with crime in general, without a focus on the racial factor. There is research into actual utilitarian concerns (i.e. actual crime) and perceived utilitarian concerns (i.e. perceived crime). Actual crime may lead to an interesting dilemma where actual crime does not necessarily translate to

support for police as Weitzer and Tuch (2005) associate how one views crime to their experiences, including negative interactions with law enforcement. On the other hand, Kleck and Jackson (2017) find a link between social views on crime and support for punitive criminal justice.

While the police maintain public safety on the streets, prosecutors enforce them in courts of law. Prosecutors, alongside sheriffs, have significant power over this process (Hoeffel and Singer 2015). Prosecutors in the United States are, a notable phenomenon in the global context, elected and face voter accountability (Wright 2014). As previously discussed, this has the effect of politicizing public safety, incentivizing prosecutors to have a "tough on crime" brand during election years (Fulmer 2019; Okafor 2021). This is consistent with public attitudes as Americans have increasingly favored punitive criminal justice measures that have led to the United States achieving the title of having the most citizens incarcerated, proportionally, in the world (Enns 2014). However, the alignment of prosecutors to voters is contested. Studying California prosecutors and their position alignment with voters on ballot propositions, Sances (2021) finds that they are more conservative than their electorates. Also previously discussed, Arnold and Carnes (2012) find a link between retrospective voting and crime. Yet other scholars do not make a connection (Fulmer 2019; Hopkins and Pettingill 2017; Siegel 2023).

I hypothesize that West Coast voters have exhibited backlash towards "progressive" officials as a result of public safety concerns. Given debate over local political ideology, studies involving "progressive" prosecutors have similarly been contested on their definition and have conflicting results on the effect they have on crime. Hogan (2022) finds that de-prosecution, "a policy not to prosecute certain criminal offenses, regardless of whether the crimes were committed," led to increased homicides in Philadelphia. On the other hand, a group of

researchers found no link between a progressive prosecutor to local crime (Agan et al. 2021). Another study found that progressive prosecutors led to an increase in property crimes but no effect on violent crimes (Petersen et al. 2024). In my research, I offer a new perspective into their electoral performance.

V. Research Directions

In this review of the literature, I established the debate over defining local politics. I bridge both the traditional and new view of local politics in that even issues with nationalized elements remain distinctive in local contexts. This is driven by how local governments function, with respect to institutional and social factors. West Coast cities are similar to local governments elsewhere in having had off-cycle and nonpartisan elections, but vary in what powers each position has and how elections for said positions occur.

Voters everywhere are affected by information problems, and this is especially true in how local politicians have sought to convey their messages and records on the West Coast. Given public safety's saliency in everyday life, it has significant implications in local politics on the West Coast as crime and the unhoused have become major issues across the region. At the same time, those issues do not manifest in the same way across the region. In the remainder of my thesis, I expand upon this body of knowledge with these regional developments.

Chapter 3: Research Design

As discussed in the previous chapter, current scholarship in local politics has focused on the debate of nationalization. My thesis focuses instead on instances of local elections, those in the major cities of the West Coast that share a brand of "West Coast liberalism." My research question, broadly speaking, asks how are voters driving local political shifts in traditionally liberal West Coast metropolitan areas over concerns of crime and the unhoused?

I employ a mixed-methods approach with quantitative difference-in-difference tests and qualitative trend analyses and interviews. I divide my research into two studies: a regional study of the West Coast and a local case study of San Francisco. In this chapter, I first introduce my hypotheses and variables. Then I define my research scope and case selection process. These two sections inform my methodology, which I outline for both studies. After, I detail my data sources which feed into the limitations of my research. I wrap up by discussing my approach to overcoming them.

I. Hypotheses

Spinning off my research question, I am specifically testing voter backlash against "progressive" politicians and its relationship to crime and homelessness variables. The first dimension is ideological, to examine "progressive" candidates' electoral performance.

H0. Voters are not specifically voting against "progressive" candidates
H1. Voters are specifically voting against "progressive" candidates

The second dimension is retrospective, to examine whether the electorate is responding to two variables—crime and the unhoused—at the ballot box based on their actual realities (i.e. crime statistics and homelessness statistics).

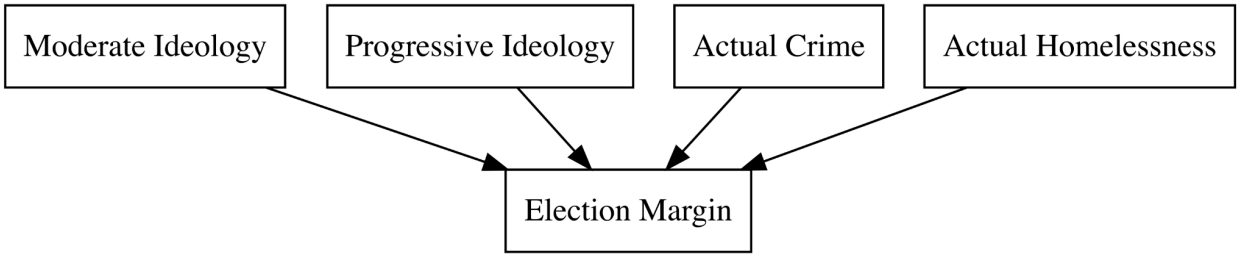
H0. Voters are voting retrospectively based on reality (i.e. actual crime and homelessness)
H1. Voters are voting retrospectively based on other factors

I argue that voters are directing their dissatisfaction towards "progressive" Democrats, ideologically, across the West Coast. However, I also argue that their ire is not necessarily a reflection of the realities of those two issues, but that they may be considering other factors when voting.

II. Variables

In testing my first hypothesis, my independent variables are "moderate" ideology and "progressive" ideology. To operationalize these variables, I qualitatively code each candidate in a given election as either "moderate" or "progressive" based on media reports (see Appendix A, Appendix B). While imperfect since these labels are contextual to both each jurisdiction and specific issues, it helps understand how those candidates are most popularly viewed.

Figure 3.1: Dependent/Independent Variables for Regional Analysis



In testing my second hypothesis, my independent variables are actual statistics of crime and homelessness. To operationalize the independent variables, I collect statistical data on crime and homelessness for all of my case jurisdictions. I further break down these variables into subcategories of crime and homelessness. For crime, the subcategories are violent crime and property crime. For homelessness, the subcategories are sheltered homelessness and unsheltered

homelessness. However, the homelessness variable is not broken down in the local analysis.

The dependent variable in both of my hypothesis tests is election margin, specifically the progressive candidate margin. To operationalize this variable, I collect election results data from county election authorities. Then, I clean election data to only feature results for the candidates I am studying and recalculate election margins based on candidate ideology as previously defined. The progressive margin is the vote share of the moderate candidate subtracted by the vote share of the progressive candidate.

$$\text{Progressive Margin} = \text{Progressive Votes \%} - \text{Moderate Votes \%}$$

III. Research Scope

In my research, I focus on two types of offices: mayors and prosecutors. Mayors are the top executive positions in most cities. They are figureheads for their cities and often play an instrumental role in defining city priorities, managing city offices, and shaping city policy. While their purview is not limited to only my variables of crime and homelessness, it is reasonable that voters can react to negative changes to those two issues during their term. Prosecutors, on the other hand, have a more narrow role with respect to crime and law enforcement. As existing research finds, their actions are responsive to electorate preferences on public safety.

The time period of my study is the past decade, 2014 to 2024. However, I selected elections only from the two most recent presidential election cycles (2016 to 2020 and 2020 to 2024). This allows for a relevant consideration of the "West Coast liberalism" crisis since it has unfolded more recently, rather than an issue that has persisted long-term. The study period is deliberately longer than the time period of considered elections. This is to provide context for how trends have unfolded immediately before, during, and immediately after elections.

IV. Case Selection

In selecting my case jurisdictions, I use four criteria: city location, city size, partisanship, and competitive elections. City location is confined to the three states of the West Coast—California, Oregon, and Washington—as previously defined (see Figure 1.1). City size is set at the threshold of 400,000 people and it must be the largest city in its county. This helps narrow the scope of this study to the principal city in a given county. Partisanship is defined as its county having consecutively voted for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate since the 1992 election and by a margin of at least 15% in each election. This further narrows the scope to traditionally liberal parts of the West Coast. Lastly, these cases must have had competitive elections (within a 10 point margin) that feature a "moderate" and "progressive" divide within the study period (2014 to 2024). This ensures that cases are valid.

Based on the most recent census in 2020, there were 11 cities on the West Coast that met the city size threshold (see Appendix C). From that shortlist, Long Beach, California was excluded since it is not the largest city in Los Angeles County. As of the 2024 presidential election, eight cities were located in counties that have voted Democratic at the presidential level since 1992 (see Appendix D). However, Sacramento, California was excluded as Sacramento County only met the 15 point margin threshold after the 2008 election. Finally, only five cities were selected based on the presence of competitive elections (see Appendix E). San Jose, California was excluded as it has not had a competitive prosecutorial election (Santa Clara County District Attorney) although it has had a competitive mayoral election. The selected cities, in alphabetical order, are Los Angeles (California), Oakland (California), Portland (Oregon), San Francisco (California), and Seattle (Washington).

V. Regional Analysis Methodology

I divide my regional analysis into two parts. First, I apply a difference-in-difference statistical approach. Second, I qualitatively assess each case jurisdiction and election. The difference-in-difference approach allows for a regional trend to be discerned in connection to my hypotheses. IThe descriptive analyses of the political landscape in each case jurisdiction, based upon media coverage, contextualizes the statistical tests.

Using the difference-in-difference design, I examine changes in progressive margins, as the dependent variable, to the interventions of crime and homelessness rates, as independent variables, over time. An initial election is used as a baseline (alongside the statistics for actual crime, actual homelessness during that year) while a subsequent election is used as a treatment (likewise with the same statistics during that year). I included two elections of each office type (mayor, prosecutor) from each jurisdiction. The difference-in-difference method yields an estimate at the regional level, based on data from all cases, of what a 1% change in one of the independent variables has on election margins.

While tying actual crime and actual homelessness rates to the year of the election offers a picture of the immediate conditions shaping that election, both variables can fluctuate over the term of an office. To capture those changes, I compute a weighted average for both crime and homelessness over a term of office. The election year is weighted at 50% while the intervening years during a term are collectively weighted at 50% (each year is weighted an equal share of that 50%).

VI. Local Analysis Methodology

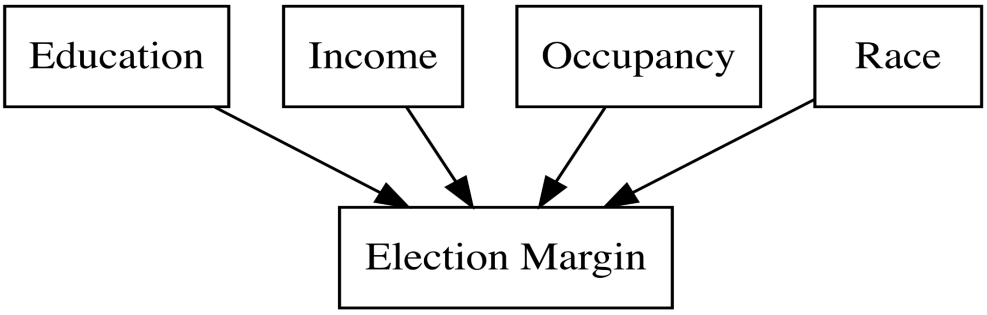
While comparatively studying case jurisdictions at the regional level establishes a trend in changing political behavior around “West Coast liberalism,” I augment that analysis with an

in-depth local case study of San Francisco. To do so, I collapse election results from the precinct level into the census block group level. Then, I map actual crime and actual homelessness statistics to census block groups. I apply the same difference-in-difference approach to analyze the relationship between crime, homelessness, and progressive margins within San Francisco block groups.

In my difference-in-difference tests, I examine the 2018 and 2024 mayoral elections as well as the 2019 and 2022 district attorney elections. I consider the two other elections during my study period—the 2019 mayoral election and the 2024 district attorney election—in my descriptive analysis.

The San Francisco case study allows for a more granular consideration of how voters are reacting to these issues and taking their concerns to the ballot box within a singular jurisdiction. The smaller unit of analysis allows for consideration of additional independent variables such as educational attainment, income, occupancy, and race/ethnicity.

Figure 3.2: Additional Dependent/Independent Variables



I also conduct interviews with three individuals connected to and with knowledge of San Francisco politics. On the "progressive" side, I interview former District Attorney Chesa Boudin. On the "moderate" side, I interview Todd David, the political director for Abundant San Francisco. Lastly, I interview Jason McDaniel, professor of political science at San Francisco

State University, who focuses on urban politics and elections. These interviews occurred in March 2025 and were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UC Berkeley.

VII. Data Sources

To measure candidate ideology, I rely on media reports (see Appendix A, Appendix B). For crime data, I rely on statistics reported by the California Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and local police departments (see Appendix F). For homelessness data, I use the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) aggregated point-in-time (PIT) counts and local point-in-time counts (see Appendix G). Election results are sourced from county election offices (see Appendix H) then re-calculated to determine the progressive margin. I use data from the final report issued after the certification of a particular election.

For my local analysis, I utilize slightly different data due to the need for granularity at the census block group level. Crime data is sourced from the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD)'s incident reports. Homelessness data is based on 311 cases that are classified under the categories of "encampment," "encampments," and "homeless concerns." Election precinct maps come from the San Francisco Department of Elections and census block group maps come from the U.S. Census Bureau. I use American Community Survey (ACS) data for census block group demographics, specifically the education, income, occupancy, and race/ethnicity variables.

VIII. Limitations

The major limitation in my research design is the availability and consistency of data sources. Data at the local level is notoriously difficult to find and standardize, especially across state lines. For my regional analysis, this affects actual crime and actual homelessness data.

While the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program publishes data reported by agencies broken down by violent and property crime types, there is a delay in when those figures become available and incomplete data reported by agencies. During the data collection process, 2023 was the most recent year in which data was published. Furthermore, some case jurisdictions had incomplete data in previous years. To overcome these issues and ensure each year had data values, I employed averaging and estimation techniques (see Appendix I).

Data on the unhoused is also nationally standardized to an extent by HUD which publishes sheltered and unsheltered PIT counts reported by continuums of care (CoC). Continuums of care "are local planning bodies responsible for coordinating the full range of homelessness services in a geographic area, which may cover a city, county, metropolitan area, or an entire state" (de Sousa and Henry 2024). Two issues arise with this data: unsheltered PIT counts are generally conducted every other year and CoCs do not perfectly conform to the boundaries of case jurisdictions. To overcome these issues, I employ aggregating, averaging, and estimating techniques (see Appendix J).

In a similar vein to crime and homelessness data, there is no consistent measure for local candidate ideology. My qualitative coding of each candidate's ideology is based on media content. This exercise is subjective though it does reflect popular perceptions of the candidates. But the binary of "moderate" and "progressive" as applied to my research design does gloss over some nuance. For example, two candidates can be considered progressive yet one would be coded as "progressive" while the other "moderate" based on relative ideology.

For my local analysis, PIT counts are not available at the census block group level as they are conducted across the jurisdiction of a CoC. In order to narrow data specific to the block group level, I use reports filed with San Francisco's 311 system. These reports include

geolocation data which allows me to map that to specific block groups. While that data depends on crowdsourcing, it reflects the intensity of public concern. A greater number of 311 reports filed in relation to homelessness can be a measure of how salient the issue is with residents of a specific area. In this sense, the data will still offer insights to be drawn although it is not necessarily an accurate indicator of homelessness itself.

Furthermore, election results are reported at the precinct level. However, San Francisco precincts do not align with census block groups, the lowest census unit in which sample data is available. To remap election results onto census block groups, I assigned census block groups to the precinct in which it had the most geographic overlap with. This is imperfect as some census block groups overlap with precinct lines in multiple locations, but it still roughly reflects the political leanings of voting residents in the specified area.

Overall, my strategies to address the limitations of local data attempt to preserve validity while also working around incomplete and missing points. Future research would benefit from later remediation of these limitations.

Chapter 4: Regional Analysis

I. Difference-in-Difference Analysis

To test my hypotheses, I first examine the regional trend on the West Coast between crime and homelessness (independent variables) and election margins of progressive candidates (dependent variable). To do so, I apply a difference-in-difference design. Using this method, I conduct two tests: a raw test and a weighted test. My first difference-in-difference test is between the raw values for each independent variable (i.e. the crime and homelessness rates) in the year of an election. The control is the initial election and the treatment is the subsequent election.

Table 4.1: Regional Difference-in-Difference Results (Raw)

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	*p*-value	Confidence
Total Crime	-2.13	68.15	0.978	Upper: 264.52 Lower: -268.79
- Violent	-10.1	90.08	0.92	Upper: 331.66 Lower: -351.86
- Property	-2.19	64.39	0.976	Upper: 264.52 Lower: 358.02
Total Homeless	-11.95	63.16	0.869	Upper: 290.24 Lower: -314.15
- Sheltered	-26.42	75.08	0.761	Upper: 329.96 Lower: -382.8
- Unsheltered	-11.19	40.64	0.811	Upper: 182.78 Lower: -205.17
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				
Statistical significance: * p<0.05 | ** p<0.01 | *** p<0.001				

My second difference-in-difference test is between the weighted values for each independent variable over the term of an office. The election year is weighted at 50% while the intervening years during a term are collectively weighted at 50% (each year is weighted an equal share of that 50%). The control and treatment elections remain the same.

The estimates in both the raw and weighted tests are reported in percentage terms, meaning that for a 1% increase to the rate of any of the independent variables, the progressive electoral margin (as the dependent variable) changes by the estimated percentage. While none of these results are statistically significant, that is to be expected. The nature of this study is small—there are only five case jurisdictions (though some are city/county pairs) with two case offices (mayoral elections, prosecutorial elections) in each jurisdiction—so its generalizability is limited. While it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions from these results, they offer a useful starting point to discuss the patterns in what is happening across the West Coast from a macro perspective.

Table 4.2: Regional Difference-in-Difference Results (Weighted)

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	*p*-value	Confidence
Total Crime	-21.45	61.35	0.761	Upper: 246.71 Lower: -289.6
- Violent	-40.45	40.4	0.498	Upper: 454.94 Lower: -535.83
- Property	-17.55	68.21	0.819	Upper: 255.33 Lower: -290.43
Total Homeless	-1.36	114.53	0.992	Upper: 677.43 Lower: -680.15
- Sheltered	-200.62	180.99	0.376	Upper: 525.72 Lower: -926.96
- Unsheltered	5.57	73.69	0.949	Upper: 457.45 Lower: -446.32
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				
Statistical significance: * p<0.05 | ** p<0.01 | *** p<0.001				

The raw test suggests a relationship between increases in all independent variables and a corresponding decrease in progressive margins. The greatest intensity are the three homelessness variables, particularly sheltered homelessness rate. In the crime category, violent crime rate has a greater impact than property crime rate. However, there are differences when compared to the

weighted test. The weighted estimate generally produces greater intensity in margin changes across variables. For example, a 1% violent crime rate increase leads to a 10.1% margin decrease in the raw test, but a 40.45% margin decrease in the weighted test. When measuring homelessness, a 1% increase in sheltered homelessness rate leads to a 200.62% decrease in margin. Additionally, the weighted test indicates a positive correlation between unsheltered homelessness and progressive margins. However, the weighted test may prove more unreliable with homelessness variables as the total homelessness variable has the highest *p*-value and the widest confidence interval.

The raw test results suggest an association between increased crime and homelessness with diminished margins for progressive candidates along the West Coast. It also supports the existing view of voters as myopic, that they vote retrospectively based on just current conditions. The weighted test results suggest that the backlash is limited to just crime variables given the unreliability of the homelessness variables. However, there are local nuances that skew these estimates. While some cities saw the progressive margin decrease as crime and homelessness increased, other jurisdictions experienced the reverse (see Appendix K, Appendix L). I will delve into these nuances through descriptive analysis of each case jurisdiction.

II. Descriptive Analysis: Los Angeles/Los Angeles County

Los Angeles is the most populous city in California and the second most populous nationwide (and Los Angeles County is the most populous county in the country). The city carries a glamorous reputation, as the epicenter of the entertainment industry, but is contrasted with a stark inequality between its most privileged and its least fortunate with inequality being "worse than the national average for income and wealth" (Ong et al. 2018). One area of Los Angeles, Skid Row, is notorious for being a microcosm of these twin problems. Skid Row and

the crisis at-large is shaped by Los Angeles' approach to the unhoused being one of "policing and incarceration" (Sheeley et al. 2021, 50). This punitive approach is one targeted by progressive reform, both towards criminal justice and unhoused issues. Given the city and county's sizes, policies to tackle crime and homelessness will affect a population base broader than other jurisdictions and thus demand greater attention to their mechanisms.

Table 4.3: Los Angeles County District Attorney Election Results

Office	Round	Year	"Progressive"	"Moderate"	Margin
District Attorney	Primary	2020	George Gascon	Jackie Lacey	-20.43%
District Attorney	Runoff	2020	George Gascon	Jackie Lacey	7.06%
District Attorney	Runoff	2024	George Gascon	Nathan Hochman	-19.78%

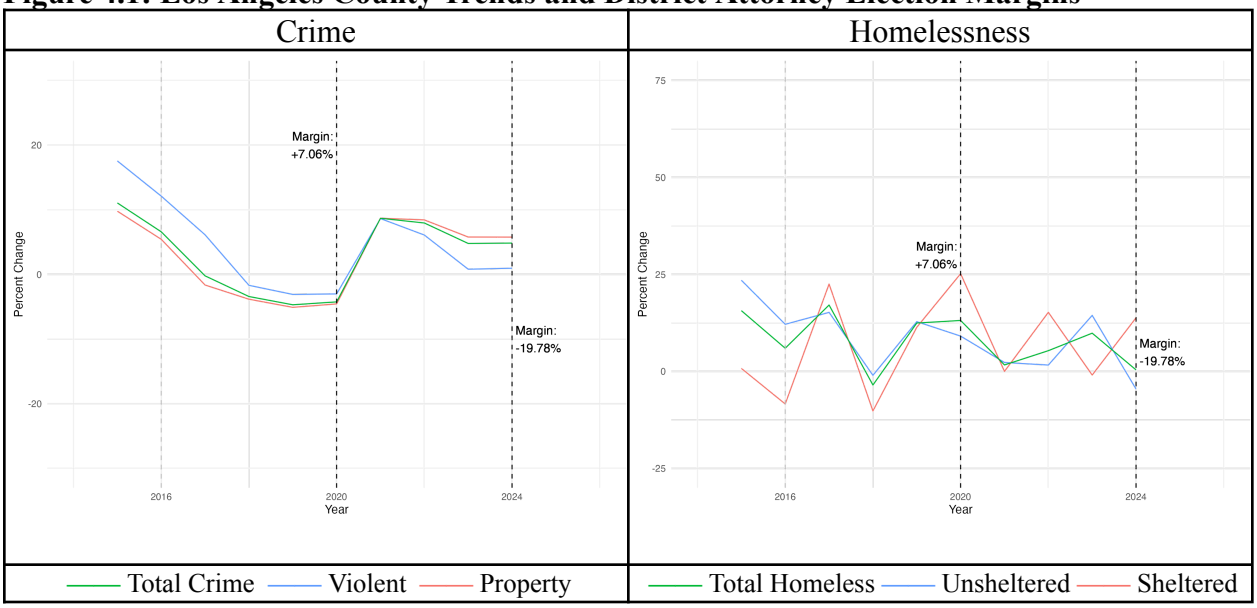
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.

Like the other case jurisdictions in this study, Los Angeles saw many protests in 2020 for police accountability in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder by police in Minneapolis. Jackie Lacey, the district attorney at the time, took a "tough line on crime" (Arango 2019). George Gascon, the former district attorney of San Francisco, was already running a progressive campaign against Lacey before Floyd's murder and the subsequent protests. Gascon's campaign emphasized his progressive track record in San Francisco, stating "from juveniles to the death penalty, from human trafficking and low-level offenders to the mentally ill, the way the criminal justice system operates must change" (Queally 2019). While Lacey had significant political support at the time of Gascon's initial announcement, she lost major endorsements with increasing calls for criminal justice reforms during the summer of 2020 (Arango 2019; Cota-Robles and Munoz 2020). This turning of political tides is evident in Gascon losing the March primary by over 20% then winning the November runoff by 7% (see Table 4.3).

While crime rates were mostly flat in the two years leading up to 2020, crime spiked during Gascon's tenure in 2021 before declining again (see Figure 4.1). However, Gascon lost

re-election in 2024 by nearly 20%. County voters elected Nathan Hochman, a former Republican and a former federal prosecutor, who ran on a platform "to reverse all of the DA [George Gascon]'s policies in favor of an approach he calls 'the hard middle'" (Stoltze 2024). Hochman portrayed Los Angeles in crisis, but as evident in the data, it did not necessarily "skyrocket" (Newton 2024). Although Gascon rode liberal discontent and interest in progressive reform to criminal justice into office, he lost the same enthusiasm in 2024. His loss is characteristic of a turn against progressives, but like progressives in other cities, may not just be a result of crime, but a struggle to define his record (Mason and Cadelago 2024).

Figure 4.1: Los Angeles County Trends and District Attorney Election Margins



While the district attorney has jurisdiction over all of Los Angeles County, the Mayor of Los Angeles has a comparatively narrower jurisdiction. Mayoral elections took place in 2017 and 2022, the former with then-incumbent Eric Garcceti running for re-election and the latter with Karen Bass, a congresswoman, running in an open race against Rick Caruso, a former police commissioner and billionaire developer (see Table 4.4). The Bass-Caruso race was shaped by the issue of crime and a staggering amount of money (Grimes 2022). Caruso argued that his

experience as police commissioner equipped him to lead the city in tackling it and spent $100 million to boost his campaign. There was consensus that a Bass loss in liberal Los Angeles—Caruso was a former Republican who registered as a Democrat before entering the mayoral race—would be an upset. However, Bass' victory just shy of 10 points and Caruso's competitiveness throughout the campaign illustrates Angelenos' frustrations with "housing affordability, homelessness and crime" (Medina and Cowan 2022). Both crime and homelessness had spiked during Garcetti's last term during the pandemic and only stabilized in 2022 (see Figure 4.2). Caruso holding Bass to under a 10% margin illustrated the changed electoral landscape in 2022 that featured voter backlash towards progressive policies. It should be noted that Garcetti did not face meaningful competition in the 2017 election.

Figure 4.2: Los Angeles Trends and Mayoral Election Margins

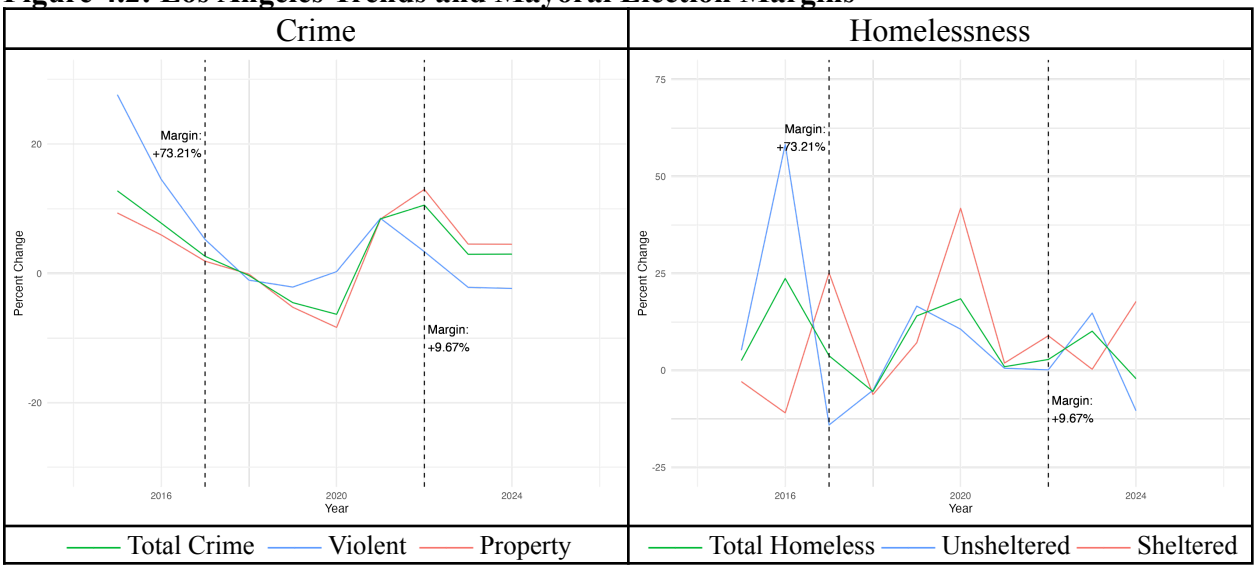


Table 4.4: Los Angeles Mayoral Election Results

Office	Round	Year	"Progressive"	"Moderate"	Margin
Mayor	Primary	2018		Eric Garcetti *	73.21%
Mayor	Runoff	2022	Karen Bass	Rick Caruso	9.67%
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.					
* Eric Garcetti did not face meaningful competition.					

III. Descriptive Analysis: Oakland/Alameda County

Sharing the same Bay Area credentials, Oakland has "long prided itself on being the scrappy answer to San Francisco" (Knight and Hubler 2023). But Oakland has a distinct identity, independent yet intertwined with its larger metropolitan area. Mitchell Schwarzer (2021) frames this in the title of his book *Hella Town*, words that are representative of an "Oakland that has struggled to measure up to its adjacent metropolitan center but, at the same time, an Oakland prideful in its upstart status" (5). Politically speaking, Oakland can be even more liberal than its neighbor across the bay. California's 12th congressional district, which includes the city of Oakland, is the second most Democratic district in the country when measured by the Cook Partisan Voting Index (Wasserman 2025).

A representation of the dichotomous proximity and divide is that as voters in neighboring San Francisco recalled their progressive district attorney in 2022, Oakland and Alameda County voters elected a progressive mayor and district attorney, respectively. Yet just two years later, they would fall to the same fate as San Francisco's Chesa Boudin through recalls.

Table 4.5: Oakland/Alameda County Election Results

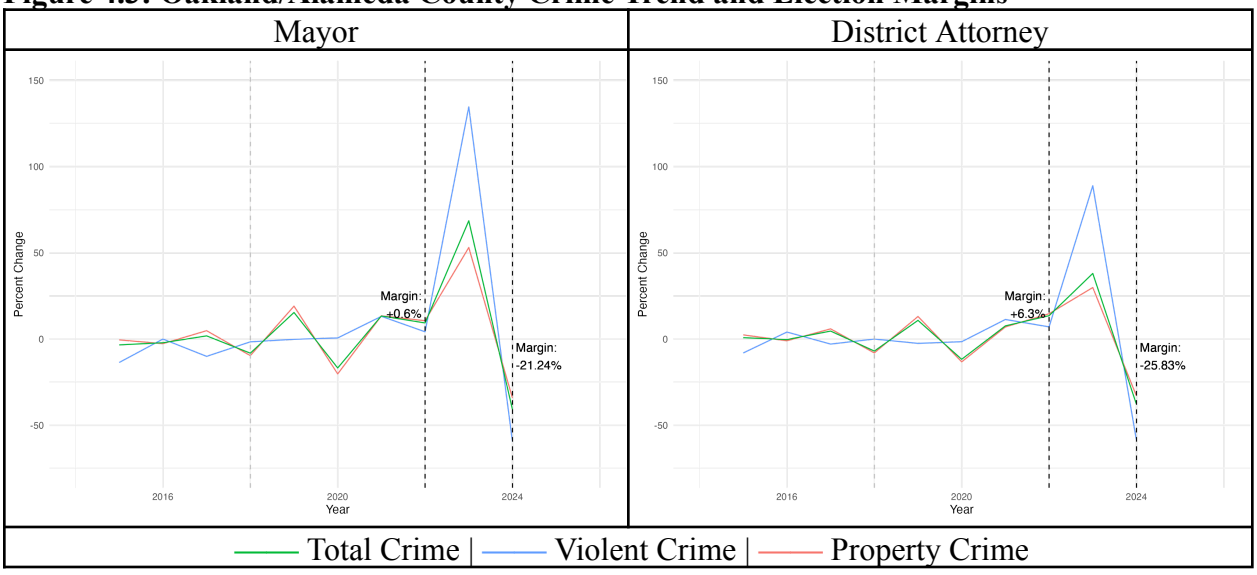
Office	Year	"Progressive"	"Moderate"	Margin
Mayor	2022	Sheng Thao	Loren Taylor	0.6%
Mayor	2024 *	No	Yes	-21.24%
District Attorney	2022	Pamela Price	Terry Wiley	6.3%
District Attorney	2024 *	No	Yes	-25.83%
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				
* Recall election (not regularly scheduled).				

Sheng Thao, a "self-described progressive," was narrowly elected as Mayor of Oakland in 2022 over a moderate candidate, Loren Taylor, after several rounds of ranked choice voting (Shultz 2022). Taylor was endorsed by outgoing Mayor Libby Schaaf. She made history as the

first Hmong American to serve as mayor of a major city and ushered in generational change as the youngest Mayor of Oakland in 75 years. While political responses to the public safety issues at the core of "West Coast liberalism" trended towards more authoritative responses, her campaign remained steadfast in a compassionate approach and "promised policies that will treat unhoused people with dignity and investment in public health and violence prevention programs" (Singh 2022). Her narrow victory was geographically segregated, with Thao winning the city's flatlands and Taylor winning the hills (BondGraham and Markovich 2022).

Pamela Price, a civil rights attorney, defeated Terry Wiley, then the chief assistant district attorney (Finney 2022). Price's platform included progressive policy points to address racial inequity in criminal justice and to provide alternatives to incarceration. Wiley's platform was more moderate and framed "things that Price spoke out against using" as "sometimes necessary to protect public safety" (Finney 2022). One Wiley supporter, an assistant district attorney, explicitly connected Price to San Franciscans recalling Chesa Boudin two years earlier: "the Chesa Boudin experiment was tried in San Francisco and it failed." While Alameda County and San Francisco shared similar crime and homelessness problems, Price won her election by 6%.

Figure 4.3: Oakland/Alameda County Crime Trend and Election Margins



Crime and homelessness were largely stable prior to both Thao and Price's victories, but crime saw a significant spike in 2023—the first year of their terms—with an over 125% increase in Oakland and an over 75% increase in Alameda County (see Figure 4.3). A differentiator of this increase from cities elsewhere is its timing: many cities saw a post-pandemic spike in 2021 but Oakland and Alameda County experienced their spikes in 2023. There were widespread calls for local leaders like Thao and Price to take action. Notably, the local NAACP chapter wrote:

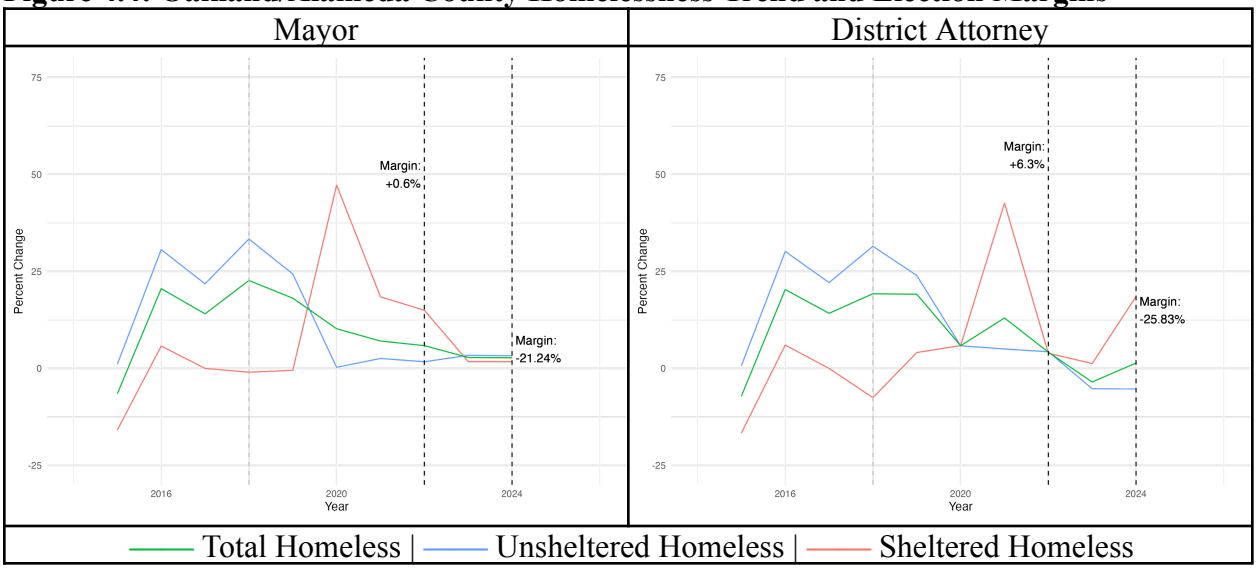
> "Failed leadership, including the movement to defund the police, our District Attorney's unwillingness to charge and prosecute people who murder and commit life threatening serious crimes, and the proliferation of anti-police rhetoric have created a heyday for Oakland criminals."
>
> — Adams and Jackson (2023)

Small business owners in Oakland protested "to demand public safety reforms" (La 2023). But the crime problems were compounded by other issues Oakland was experiencing. The city lost 15,000 residents between the pandemic and the end of 2023, its institutions were moving elsewhere, and it has largely been left out of Silicon Valley's innovation economy (Knight and Hubler 2023). These compounding issues cannot be solved in a single officeholder's term and had predated Thao and Price, but the crime spike in 2023 placed Oakland in what may be most emblematic of the crisis of "West Coast liberalism" regionally.

The crime rate fell back to 2022 levels in 2024. Homelessness was relatively stable during their tenures (see Figure 4.4). But during the 2023 spike, critics of Price formed an organization to recall her from office, Save Alameda for Everyone (SAFE). In a statement, they took issue with Price's decisions to decline prosecution and reduce sentencing while "crime spirals out of control on Alameda County streets" (Swan 2023). Signatures to trigger a recall election were approved in April 2024 and, although organizers had hoped for a special election,

it was ultimately consolidated with the November 2024 elections (Asistio 2024; White 2024). Given that the November 2024 elections would have had higher turnout than a special election—there was a presidential election on the ballot in addition to congressional, state, and other local elections—it was assumed that it would benefit Price and this was the scenario that her supporters had hoped for. However, she lost decisively, by nearly 26%. While Price sought to defend her record and said some issues that Alameda County faced were "a long-standing problem that predates [her tenure]," she was also dragged down by accusations of anti-Asian racism, mishandling of records, restricting media coverage, and retaliation (Chronicle Editorial Board 2024a; Gecan 2024; White 2024).

Figure 4.4: Oakland/Alameda County Homelessness Trend and Election Margins



Price's recall was strongly influenced by the public safety environment in Oakland, the county seat and its most populous city. While SAFE was focused on the district attorney recall, another group of organizers in Oakland also successfully put a recall on the ballot in 2024, against Mayor Sheng Thao (Wolfe 2024). Much of the criticism levied against Price was also applied to Thao, who as the city's mayor, had more direct accountability to the city electorate.

Critics took issue with Thao's actions toward the Oakland Police Department (OPD) which amounted to "systematically dismantling" it. However, as *The Oaklandside* reports, OPD's budget was increased under Thao's tenure and more police academies were funded. Like Price, she countered her opposition by saying that "these issues didn't happen overnight, and they're not going to be solved overnight" (Karlamangla 2024). Further adding to her struggles, Thao's home was raided by the FBI just days after the recall election was scheduled (Qin and Rodriguez 2024). Thao lost the recall by over 21%, a similar margin to Price. She was later federally indicted for bribery offenses (U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of California 2025).

The recalls of both Price and Thao are more clear-cut examples of voter backlash against progressive politics, particularly in criminal justice matters. However, the two candidates were uniquely dragged down by missteps unrelated to their politics while in office. This is exemplified in the *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial board's (2022, 2024a, 2024b) endorsement stances on the recall of San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin in 2022 then the recalls of Price and Thao in 2024. They opposed the former, writing that recall elections should not be used for "buyer's remorse." Yet, they supported the latter, arguing that Price and Thao lacked competence and focused on the multiple ethical lapses during their tenures that damaged their credibility.

IV. Descriptive Analysis: Portland/Multnomah County

Framing Nicolas Kristof's criticism of "West Coast liberalism" is his connection to Portland, Oregon. The city has been a "model city" of sorts from livability to sustainability to urban development (Conaway 2010; Jarvie 2023). Yet, the city has seen that reputation transformed into one portraying urban crisis as it struggles with crime, drug use, and homelessness. For example, Multnomah County's unsheltered homelessness rate in 2024 was over 2.6 times higher than in 2014. While the city initially embraced progressive policies to

address these problems, voters have sent mixed messages about their policy preferences in recent elections. Portland may well be Kristof's personal case study for his concept of "West Coast liberalism."

> "The inability of progressives, particularly in the Portland metro area, to deal with the nitty-gritty of governing and to get something done is just staggering."
>
> — Congressman Earl Blumenauer (Kristof 2024a)

Portland and Multnomah County held elections for their mayor and district attorney in 2020 and 2024. Portland politics, like many in other places, were upended in 2020 during protests following George Floyd's murder that summer. That movement helped push progressive reforms and reformist candidates into office such as George Gascon in Los Angeles. Foreshadowing those political shifts, Multnomah County voters overwhelmingly elected progressive candidate Mike Schmidt as their district attorney in May 2020 by 53.5% (see Figure 4.5). In a press release following his win, Schmidt wrote "the message from Multnomah County voters was loud and clear: They are ready for major reform in our criminal justice system. Tonight, we celebrate a new era for our criminal justice system. But tomorrow, the real hard work of reform begins" (Camhi 2020).

Table 4.6: Portland/Multnomah County Election Results

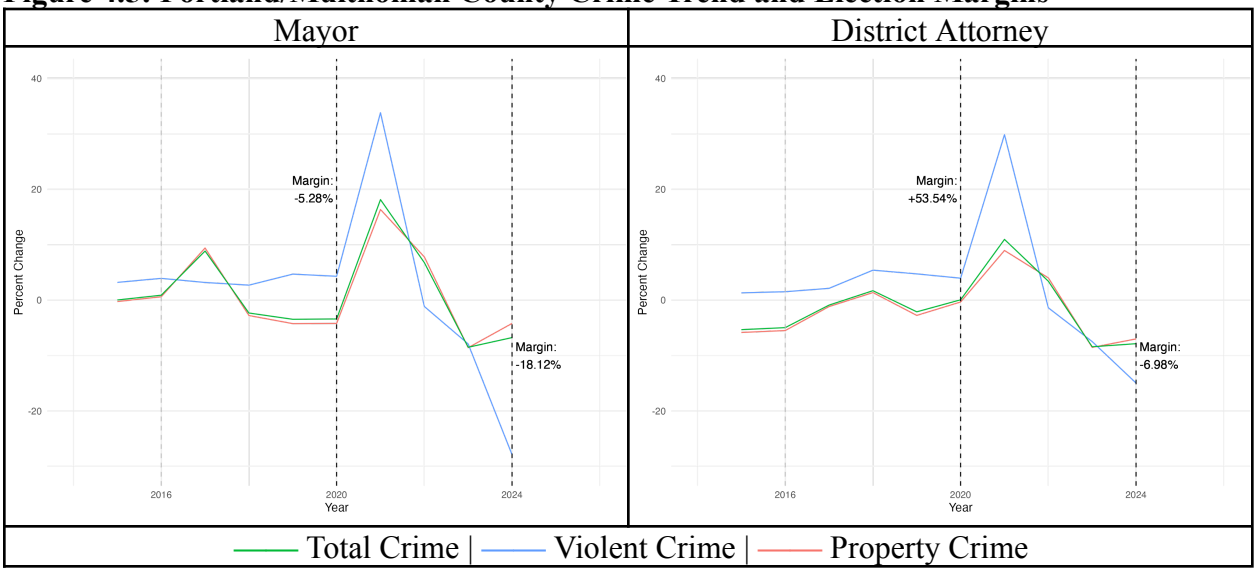
Office	Year	"Progressive"	"Moderate"	Margin
Mayor	2020	Sarah Iannarone	Ted Wheeler	-5.28%
Mayor	2024	Carmen Rubio	Keith Wilson	-18.12%
District Attorney	2020	Mike Schmidt	Ethan Knight	53.54%
District Attorney	2024	Mike Schmidt	Nathan Vasquez	-6.98%
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				

However, Schmidt would lose re-election in 2024 over "simmering local frustration with crime, homelessness and drug abuse" (Martin 2024). While crime rates have largely

decreased—aside from a spike in 2021 that was repeated in cities up and down the West Coast and across the country—during Schmidt's term, that did not reflect public sentiment (see Figure 4.5). Nathan Vasquez, the prosecutor that defeated Schmidt in 2024, told *Politico* that "what I hear when I'm knocking on doors, is 'Hey, I consider myself very liberal but this is out of step — we're not getting served well" (Martin 2024). In Schmidt's end-of-term report released by his office, it contained a note about this disconnect between actual crime and perception:

> "While both property and person crimes have generally decreased…Portlanders' negative perceptions of crime, particularly in the downtown area, have been slow to improve."
>
> — Multnomah County District Attorney's Office (2025, 8)

Figure 4.5: Portland/Multnomah County Crime Trend and Election Margins



Part of voter concerns around public safety has to do with Measure 110, a ballot measure to decriminalize hard drugs, discussed in Chapter 1 (Baker 2024). In a statement through his office, Schmidt had endorsed the premise of the law, saying "the passage of Ballot Measure 110 sends a clear message of strong public support that drug use should be treated as a public health matter rather than a criminal justice matter" (Weisberg 2020). He later retracted this support by

testifying in favor of recriminalization in 2024. Vasquez nonetheless criticized his past support for the policy (Manfield 2024; Rush 2024a). Measure 110 seems to be a symbol of progressive failure, with then-Congressman Earl Blumenauer—whose congressional district includes Portland—describing its implementation simply as "malpractice" (Martin 2024) and Mayor Ted Wheeler calling it a "huge mistake" (Baker 2024). The 2024 district attorney election can be viewed as a translation of Measure 110's symbolic failure into new political leadership by the Multnomah County electorate.

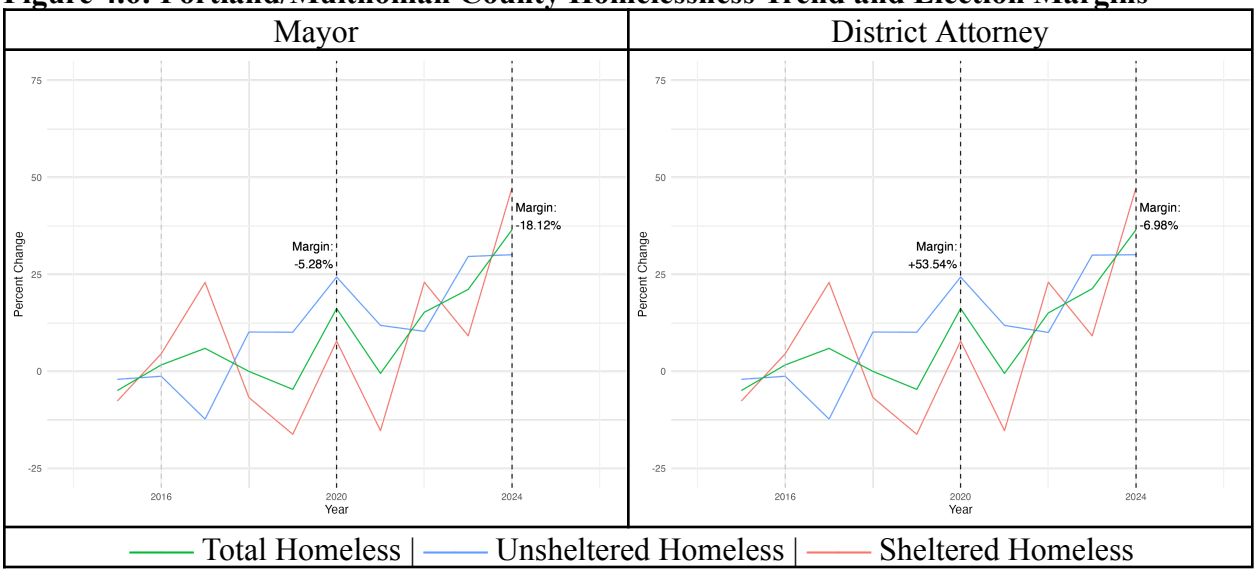
Turning to the 2020 mayoral election, incumbent Mayor Ted Wheeler ran for re-election. Wheeler was considered a "moderate" and the election held after that summer's protests gave it a comparatively different calculus than that of Mike Schmidt's election earlier that year. Despite early indications that he would be comfortably re-elected, his handling of the protests and lack of support from reformists mired his campaign (Speri 2020). For example, Wheeler "would not commit to defunding the police" which dismayed activists and even led to one punching him at a cafe (Jarvie 2023). He won with just a 5% margin over progressive candidate Sarah Iannarone who hammered in criticism of Wheeler on his approach to public safety reform. Wheeler's re-election was also buoyed by 47,000 write-in votes, amounting to around 13% of the total vote share.

In the 2024 mayoral election, Wheeler did not run for re-election. Although crime in the area has been on a downward trend, homelessness has steadily grown (see Figure 4.6) and Portland voters were most concerned about homelessness (Rush 2024b, Rush 2024c). Rene Gonzalez, a moderate, and Carmen Rubio, a progressive, were the frontrunners by fundraising numbers and both served on the City Council at the time. Gonzalez approaches the crisis from a law and order perspective and, during his tenure on the City Council, secured a pause in the

government giving tents and tarps to the unhoused (Rush 2024b). During his 2022 campaign for the City Council, he defeated a progressive incumbent, promising a "crackdown on homelessness and crime" (Ellis 2022). On the other hand, Rubio advocated for more social services to address homelessness (Rush 2024b). Despite both candidates holding the status as frontrunners, Portland instituted ranked choice voting ahead of the 2024 election. This aided the victory of Keith Wilson, a trucking company CEO and homeless services nonprofit founder, who pledged to "end unsheltered homelessness within a year of taking office" (Rush 2024c). While seemingly a repudiation of progressives as Rubio—a more ideologically defined progressive from her time on the City Council—lost, she was affected by scrutiny over her driving history (Kavanaugh 2024).

An article from *The Guardian* also proclaimed Portland city elections in 2024 as progressive victories (Anguiano 2024). Anguiano noted that Wilson emphasized "care and compassion" in his pledge to end unsheltered homelessness and interviewed Richard Clucas, a political science professor at Portland State University, who said that "[Portland voters] don't simply want a crackdown, arrests and other things; they want to find some way to compassionately address it."

Figure 4.6: Portland/Multnomah County Homelessness Trend and Election Margins



V. Descriptive Analysis: Seattle

Seattle is the most populous city in Washington state and the larger Pacific Northwest region. It is a major economic force, with its metropolitan area home to companies like Amazon, Boeing, Costco, Microsoft, and Starbucks. However, its economic acceleration has been fast with the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue metropolitan area's gross domestic product growing by around 147% between 2001 and 2023 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2024). The city's population and workforce have grown by 14% (Gregory 2015). Seattle politics may have welcomed more stakeholders, but continue to hold a progressive bent. For one, Seattle voters citywide elected Kshama Sawant, a member of Socialist Alternative, to the City Council in 2013 and she served until 2024. The coexistence of economic development and a progressive identity is what gives Seattle its "left coast formula" as James Gregory (2015) argues. He characterizes contemporary Seattle as "a progressive city, with loud echoes of a more radical past" (64). Some examples include democracy vouchers (Young 2015), enacting the highest minimum wage of any major city in the country (Hyde 2024), and voters recently approving a social housing initiative (Cohen 2025). However, Seattle progressivism is not a monolithic representation of the city as a whole. The city was historically affected by racial redlining and environmental injustice (Gomez 2017). More recently, the city was identified as having the most regressive tax system—"people with lower incomes pay higher tax rates than people with higher incomes"—of American major cities (Ryan 2018). Its technological boom has also fueled inequality. On the other hand, business leaders in the city have criticized city policies for being "too liberal" (Semuels 2019). These are the building blocks for how the crisis of "West Coast liberalism" plays out in the city.

Elections for both the mayor and city attorney offices occurred in 2017 and 2021 (see Table 4.6). The progressive candidate lost in both mayoral elections. The progressive candidate,

incumbent City Attorney Pete Holmes, won in the 2017 election. This election is interesting given that both candidates could claim a "progressive" platform. Holmes was challenged to his left by Scott Lindsay, the former public safety advisor to then-Mayor Ed Murray, who argued that the city needed "an activist city attorney that wants to and is focused on tackling our toughest challenges" and positioned himself as the right candidate for that (Green 2017). Holmes defended his record, saying "I've committed as I have been from day one to trying to address homelessness and address those who have not achieved success through traditional criminal-justice sanctions…treating people as human beings while making certain that public safety isn't compromised" (Beekman 2017). Holmes' reformist credentials were evident in his leadership around cannabis legalization, misdemeanor sentencing limits to protect immigrants, and Seattle Police Department reform under a federal consent decree. While Lindsay called for more aggressive, activist action on Seattle's homelessness crisis, he himself had a controversial role in the city's homeless encampment sweeps and criticized Holmes' declining misdemeanor prosecution rates (Beekman 2017). Lindsay was also viewed "as one of the more conservative members of the mayor's staff" (Barnett 2017). Holmes prevailed easily, with 49.6% margin.

Table 4.7: Seattle Election Results

Office	Year	"Progressive"	"Moderate"	Margin
Mayor	2017	Cary Moon	Jenny Durkan	-12.34%
Mayor	2021	Lorena Gonzalez	Bruce Harrell	-17.46%
City Attorney	2017	Pete Holmes	Scott Lindsay	49.61%
City Attorney	2021	Nicole Thomas-Kennedy	Ann Davison	-3.76%
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				

In a turn of events, Holmes did not advance from the nonpartisan primary in the 2021 election after being challenged from his left by Nicole Thomas-Kennedy. Thomas-Kennedy embraced an "abolitionist" platform targeting the criminal justice system and law enforcement

(Baker 2021). She questioned Holmes' apparent progressivism, telling *Real Change* that "I know he [Holmes] says he's a progressive prosecutor, but he's not" (Krieg 2021). She justified her abolitionist position by criticizing the existing system as fundamentally broken:

> "Ninety percent of the people who are prosecuted by the city attorney's office currently are poor enough to qualify for a public defender. It really is a court for poor people. That's what they do there. That's one of many reasons why I would like an abolitionist framework going forward in the city attorney's office. We're not going to fix this. The system doesn't need some incremental tweaks. That's what we've been doing for 100 years: trying to figure how to make the system less racist. But the foundations of this system are racist and classist. BIPOC, the poor and the disabled are who was locked up in the original prisons and it's who is locked up in prison now."
>
> — Nicole Thomas-Kennedy (Krieg 2021)

While Holmes dispatched Lindsay easily in 2017, the local turmoil alongside national demands for racial justice reform—such as the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP)—affected the 2021 dynamics (Gupta 2020). Thomas-Kennedy emerged with the most votes in the primary round, trailed by Democrat-turned-Republican, Ann Davison, who viewed the city as too lax in its prosecutions. Holmes came in third and did not advance to the general election.

Figure 4.7: Seattle Crime Trend and Election Margins

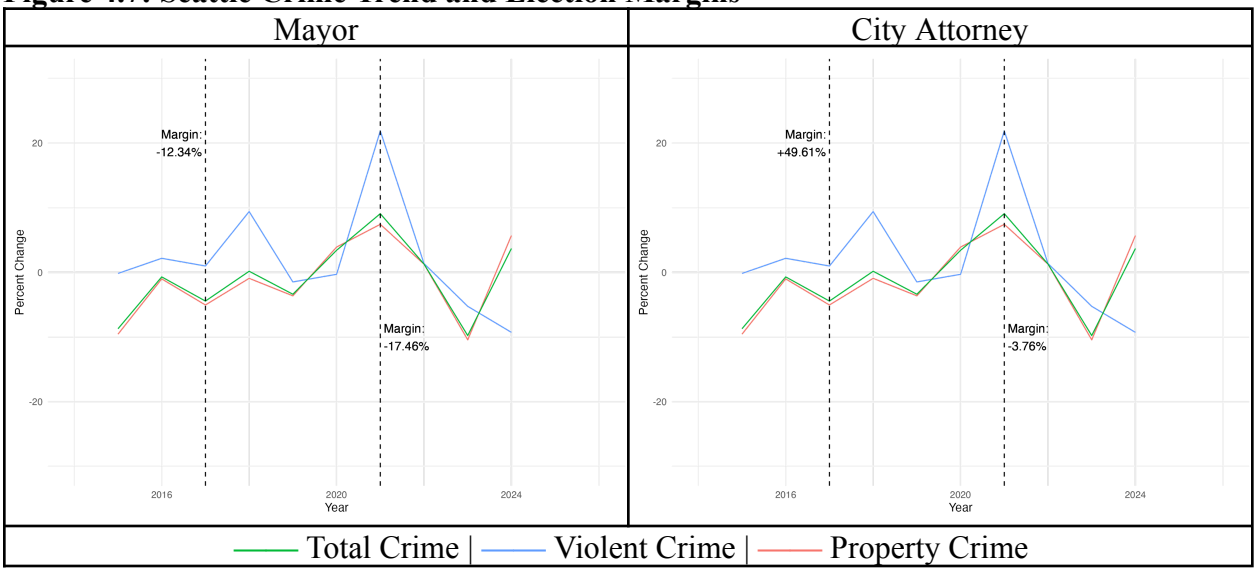
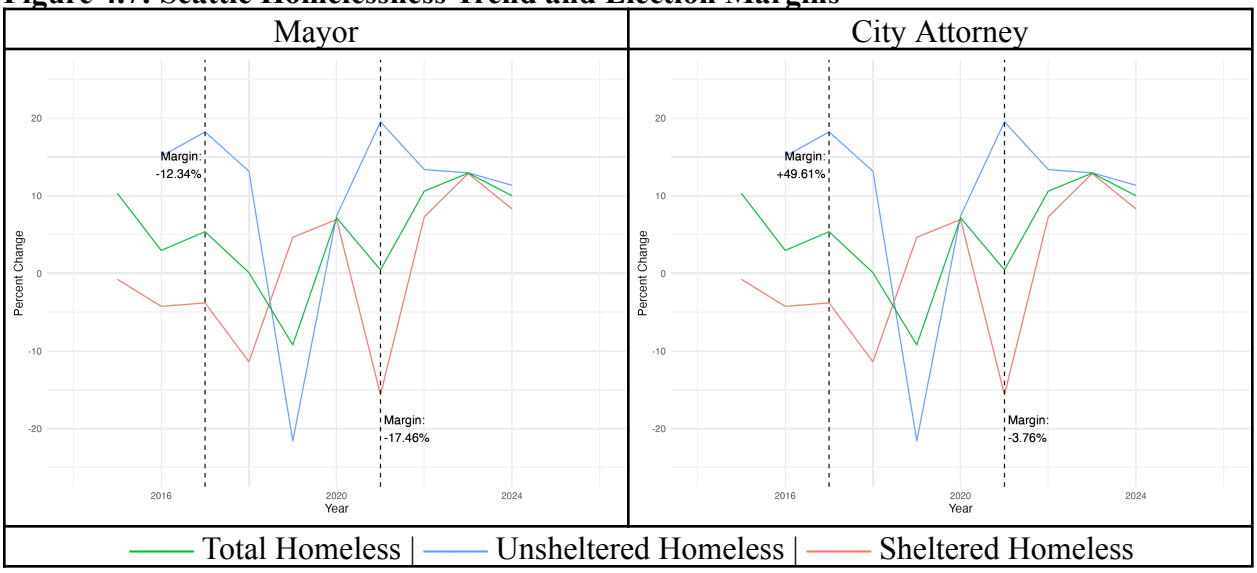


Figure 4.7: Seattle Homelessness Trend and Election Margins



As discussed in Chapter 1, a registered Republican winning a citywide race was a notable shock to Seattle politics. However, it is a reflection of public concerns over crime (see Figure 4.7) and homelessness (see Figure 4.8). In 2021, both violent and property crimes saw an increase (with violent crime spiking) as did unsheltered homeless (though sheltered and total homeless declined). Unsheltered homelessness is more visible than sheltered homelessness and its increase likely affected perceptions of the issue much more than a decline in homelessness overall. While violent crimes are not the purview of the city attorney—who only handles "the prosecution of misdemeanor and gross misdemeanor offenses"—property crime increased as well (Seattle City Attorney n.d.). However, the city attorney's office is also inherently part of addressing Seattle's unhoused crisis. Lindsay called for a more "activist" city attorney in his 2017 campaign and both Holmes and Thomas-Kennedy acknowledged the interplay between crime and homelessness. Thomas-Kennedy's primary win but general election loss was significant in marking the city's shift to a more conservative approach to public safety. While her platform appealed to enough progressive voters in Seattle to secure a top two win in the primary

over incumbent Pete Holmes, she failed to diversify that appeal to the wider Seattle electorate in the general election.

While progressives have won the city attorney's office, they have not been able to win either the 2017 or 2021 mayoral elections. The 2017 election became an open race when Mayor Ed Murray resigned following multiple accusations of sexual abuse (Johnson 2017). There was a wide primary field, in which former U.S. Attorney Jenny Durkan and urban planning activist Carry Moon advanced to the general election (Kroman 2017). The primary environment featured targeted opposition where "it looked like everyone was running against Jenny Durkan" and a political consultant wrote "FIVE credible candidates ran to the left of her [Durkan] and took 60 percent of the vote" (Shapiro and Beekman 2017). Despite the strong progressive showing in the primary, Moon's flaws were more pronounced in a head-to-head matchup against Durkan. She stumbled with convincing voters she was ready to take on the mayoralty, securing grassroots donors, and differentiating her progressive bona fides from Durkan's. Moon lost by 12%.

In 2021, with Durkan choosing not to run for re-election, Seattle's mayoralty was another open race. Councilmember Lorena Gonzalez added to the progressive deficit, coming in at 5.12% worse than Moon's 2017 performance. Bruce Harrell, a former City Council member and past mayoral candidate, won the election by over 17%. Writing for *Cascade PBS*, David Kroman (2021) suggests that Seattle voters agreed with Harrell's approach to "improve policing by spending more, not less" and in removing encampments. As a councilmember, Gonzalez backed cuts to police funding in favor of community investment (Craighead 2023). Gonzalez also faced backlash for a campaign advertisement that misrepresented Harrell's record and was labeled racist (Daniels 2021). Both Gonzalez and Thomas-Kennedy, as reported by *AP News* (2021), "stumbled in the election after endorsing leftist prescriptions for addressing homelessness,

policing and public safety." The Seattle electorate may have not had the appetite for the reformist platform that the progressive pair were pushing for, given that crime and homelessness were significantly increasing at the same time.

Chapter 5: Local Analysis
(San Francisco Case Study)

Chapter 4 examined the crisis of "West Coast liberalism" at the regional level, across all case jurisdictions. In this chapter, I conduct a local analysis through the case study of San Francisco. San Francisco stands out amongst the other case jurisdictions for its unique embodiment of "West Coast liberalism." While the West Coast as a whole has been associated with various pejorative labels, San Francisco has been attached to its own: "San Francisco values" (Garofoli 2006). Out of all case jurisdictions, it has the highest margin of support for Democratic presidential candidates nationally (see Appendix D). It is also the launchpad for many liberal politicians who have ascended to notable positions at the federal and state levels: Governor Gavin Newsom got his political start on the Board of Supervisors and later as mayor, former Vice President Kamala Harris previously served as the city's district attorney, and former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi represents most of the city in Congress (Simon 2024). And as brought up in Chapter 1, the city's progressivism is the specific target of Michael Shellenberger's 2021 book entitled *San Fransicko: Why Progressives Ruin Cities*.

San Francisco is one of the three cities—together with Oakland and San Jose—anchoring the Bay Area region of California. It has long had a progressive image, from a hotbed of LGBTQ+ activism to the policies pursued by successive mayors and members of the Board of Supervisors (Fuller 2018). Owing to its proximity to Silicon Valley further south, San Francisco is also a hub for innovation. That innovation has influenced the politics of the city as, much like Seattle politics explored in Chapter 4, technology companies seek to expand their influence to enact policies favorable to them (McNeill 2016). However, as McNiell also notes, the growth of the tech industry has led to "increasing socio-spatial inequality within the region" (499). Another

article investigating inequality and displacement notes San Francisco is an extreme example (Chapple 2016). For example, the San Francisco housing market is ranked as the fourth least affordable in the country—eighth least affordable globally—in 2024 (Cox 2024). Inequality drives the issues forming the core of "West Coast liberalism" as those who can no longer afford homes become homeless and feed into the culture of criminalization against those on the streets (Dholakia 2023).

In recent years, the city has been pushed to the forefront as a symbol of West Coast cities in crisis. A variety of institutions—academic and media, national and local—have published critiques amplifying the city's struggle to recover in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic as it deals with parallel crises of crime and homelessness or declaring San Francisco as "failed" (Bowles 2022; Carbonaro 2023; Dubner 2025; Heller 2023; Ohanian 2023; Shellenberger 2021; Smith 2024). Even before the pandemic, the city struggled with both issues and especially in housing the unhoused: a United Nations report even criticized homelessness in the Bay Area as "cruel and inhuman treatment and is a violation of multiple human rights" (Graff 2018). The city's issues have manifested itself through a contentious period of elections, during the timeframe in which I am studying here, as representative of "West Coast liberalism."

In investigating San Francisco as a case study, I take a similar approach to the regional analysis in Chapter 4. First, I conduct two difference-in-difference analysis tests. Second, I move into descriptive analysis. Third, I consider San Francisco's demographics. Fourth, I weave in qualitative insights from interviews with three individuals connected to San Francisco local politics: Chesa Boudin, Todd David, and Jason McDaniel. Put together, this local analysis offers a comparatively more in-depth consideration of how the crisis of "West Coast liberalism" is unfolding within a single jurisdiction.

I. Difference-in-Difference Analysis

The first test is between the raw values for each independent variable in the year of an election and the second test is between the weighted values of each independent variable over the term of an office. These tests replicate the approach of tests I conducted at the regional level.

Table 5.1: San Francisco Difference-in-Difference Results (Raw)

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	*p*-value	Confidence
Total Crime	0.12	0.6	0.84	Upper: 1.29 Lower: -1.05
- Violent	0.12	0.18	0.5	Upper: 0.47 Lower: -0.23
- Property	0.06	0.56	0.914	Upper: 1.15 Lower: -1.03
Homeless	-0.41	0.23	0.075	Upper: 0.04 Lower: -0.85
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				
Statistical significance: * p<0.05 | ** p<0.01 | *** p<0.001				

Table 5.2: San Francisco Difference-in-Difference Results (Weighted)

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	*p*-value	Confidence
Total Crime	-0.66	1.16	0.571	Upper: 1.62 Lower: -2.94
- Violent	-0.33	0.23	0.149	Upper: 0.12 Lower: -0.78
- Property	-0.67	1.15	0.559	Upper: 1.58 Lower: -2.93
Homeless	-0.13	0.57	0.822	Upper: 0.98 Lower: -1.24
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				
Statistical significance: * p<0.05 | ** p<0.01 | *** p<0.001				

There are two key differences between the local analysis and the regional analysis. First, instead of using case jurisdictions as the level of analysis, the local analysis uses census block groups. Second, while the crime variable is broken down into subcategories like in the regional

analysis, the homelessness variable is not. As discussed in Chapter 3, this is due to a lack of homelessness data at the census block group level. Despite that, 311 reports offer alternative data that is still a useful indicator of public perceptions of the issue.

Like in the regional analysis, the estimates in both the raw and weighted tests are reported in percentage terms, meaning that for a 1% increase to the rate of any of the independent variables, the progressive electoral margin (as the dependent variable) changes by the estimated percentage. All of these results are not statistically significant, but it still offers information to understand how the San Francisco electorate is responding to crime, homelessness, and progressive politics. However, in the raw test, the homeless variable approaches statistical significance at the $p<0.1$ level. And despite the estimates being insignificant, the confidence intervals offer a range for which these estimates can be interpreted. For the impact of a 1% increase in homelessness in an election year (raw test), it will lead to, at most, a 0.04% increase (upper bound) or a 0.85% decrease (lower bound) in the progressive margin.

Both tests correlate increased homelessness to decreased progressive margins across block groups. The homelessness estimate approached statistical significance, suggesting that election year rates may have a greater impact than the over term rates. These results suggest that San Francisco voters are myopic, consistent with the literature.

However, there is an interesting paradox with crime rates. The raw test predicts increasing progressive margins with increasing crime rates while the weighted test does the opposite. Conventional wisdom means it is unlikely that increasing crime means increasing support for progressives, but there is the potential that voters in higher crime block groups agree with progressives on more reform-minded policies to address the problem. Through visualization of block groups by crime rates and block groups by progressive margin, it appears that block

groups more centrally located in San Francisco—in neighborhoods like Hayes Valley, the Mission, South of Market (SoMa), and the Tenderloin—tend to have higher crime rates yet also back progressive candidates in both the mayoral and prosecutorial races (see Figure 5.1, Figure 5.2). However, progressive strength is not limited to these areas as they also win block groups elsewhere in the city such as Bernal Heights, the Inner Sunset, and Noe Valley.

Figure 5.1: San Francisco Block Groups by Crime and Mayoral Election Margins

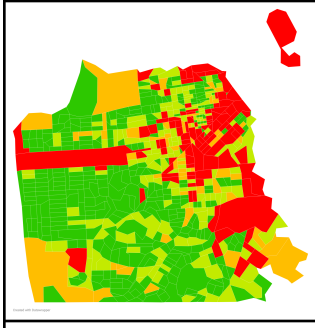
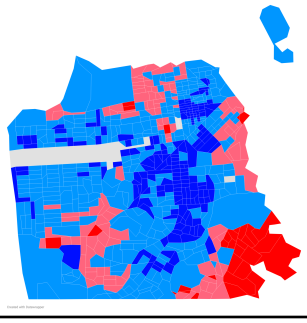
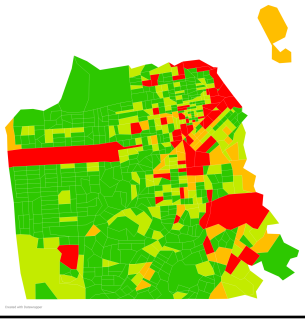
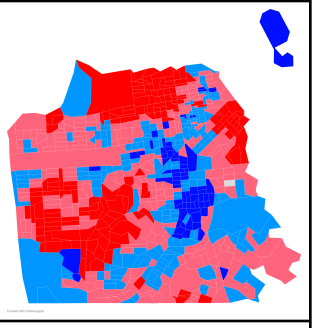
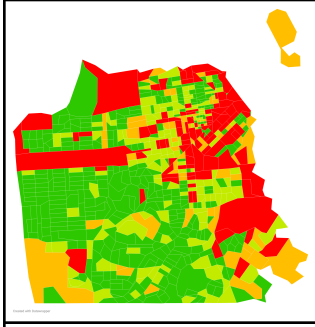
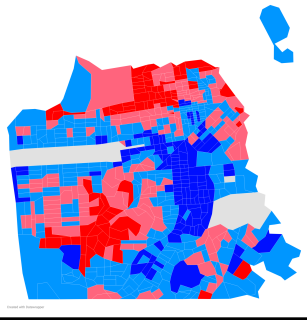
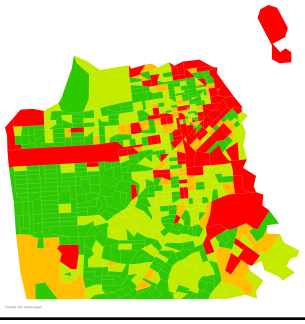
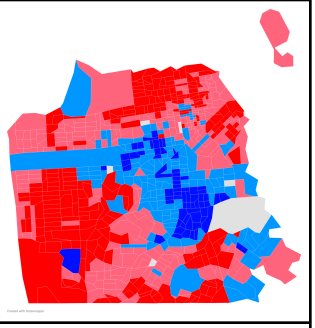
2018 Crime	2018 Election	2024 Crime	2024 Election
			
Crime Legend: ■ <50 ■ 50 to 100 ■ 100 to 150 ■ >150			
Election Legend: ■ <-25 ■ -25 to 0 ■ 0 to 25 ■ >25			

Figure 5.2: San Francisco Block Groups by Crime and District Attorney Election Margins

2019 Crime	2019 Election	2022 Crime	2022 Election
			
Crime Legend: ■ <50 ■ 50 to 100 ■ 100 to 150 ■ >150			
Election Legend: ■ <-25 ■ -25 to 0 ■ 0 to 25 ■ >25			

II. Descriptive Analysis: Mayoral Elections

Following the death of Mayor Edwin Lee in 2017, Supervisor London Breed assumed the mayorship by virtue of her position as president of the Board of Supervisors. However, other

supervisors sought to deny Breed an incumbency advantage going into 2018 special election (Swan 2017). In that election, Breed prevailed over former State Senator Mark Leno and fellow Supervisor Jane Kim, both progressives, despite Leno and Kim forming an alliance and asking their supporters to put the other as their second choice under San Francisco's ranked choice voting process (Melendez 2018). Crime and homelessness were key issues during this campaign, with Breed and former Supervisor Angela Alioto, another moderate candidate, embracing "forceful" positions such as adding more police officers and increasing conservatorships (Fuller 2018). In 2018, San Francisco had a total crime rate and unsheltered homeless rate of 6,413 incidents and 540 individuals per 100,000 residents, respectively (see Figure 5.3). The crime rate had declined compared to 2017 though the homeless rate had increased.

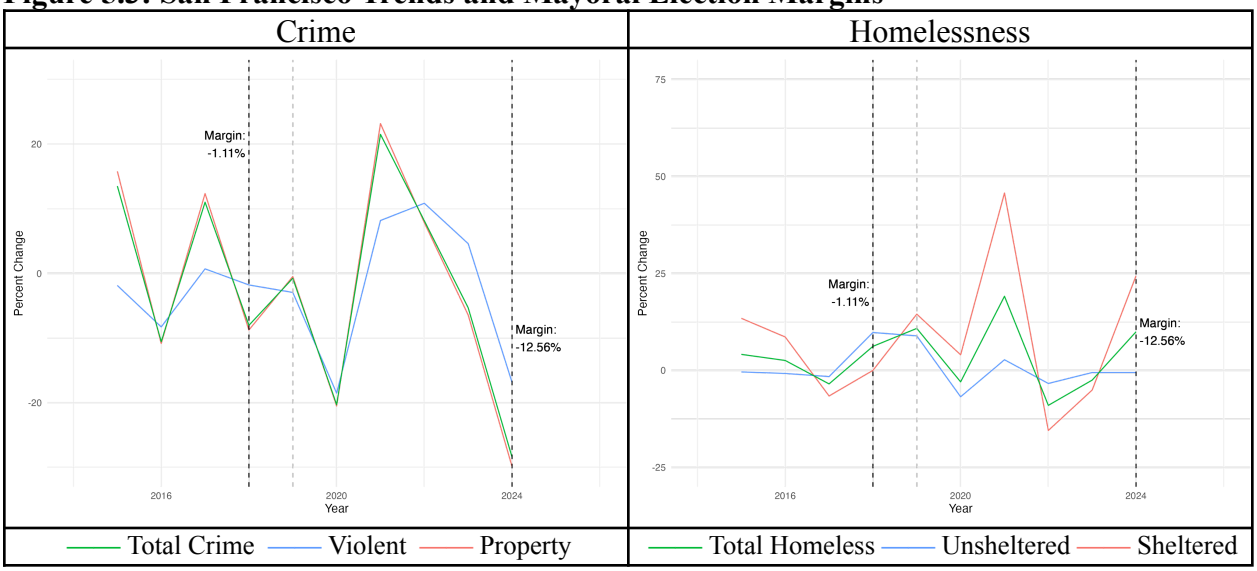
Table 5.3: San Francisco Mayoral Election Results

Office	Round	Year	"Progressive"	"Moderate"	Margin
Mayor	Initial	2018	Mark Leno	London Breed	-12.23%
Mayor	Final	2018	Mark Leno	London Breed	-1.11%
Mayor	Final	2019		London Breed *	56.74%
Mayor	Final **	2024	Aaron Peskin	Daniel Lurie	-12.56%
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.					
* London Breed did not face meaningful competition.					
** Final round before Aaron Peskin was eliminated, not final round overall.					

With a short lapse between the 2018 special election and the 2019 election and the lack of meaningful competition, I did not include that election in the difference-in-difference analysis. There was no doubt Breed, the only major candidate in the race, would win re-election (Fracassa 2019). Prior to her re-election, Breed had touted a 34% reduction in tents in November 2018 and asserted that "large tent encampments...they are all gone" in July 2019, her first anniversary as mayor (Breed 2018; Matier 2019). However, both crime and homelessness had ticked up that year. Ellen Lee Zhou, the runner up, criticized Democratic governance of the city and response to

homelessness. But her support for the Trump administration and a campaign billboard condemned as "racist, misogynistic and sexist" was a non-starter in San Francisco (*CBS News* 2019; Trefny 2019). Evidenced by Breed's nearly 57% margin of victory, she had united San Francisco's liberal ideological spectrum.

Figure 5.3: San Francisco Trends and Mayoral Election Margins



In 2024, Breed was challenged from her left and her right, with Supervisor Aaron Peskin viewed widely as the "progressive" choice and a field of other "moderate" candidates from former Supervisor Mark Farrell—who had served as acting mayor back in 2018 when Breed was removed from that position—to then-Supervisor Asha Safai and first-time candidate, nonprofit leader Daniel Lurie (Dickey 2024). The election was pushed to 2024 rather than in 2023—voters approved Measure H in 2022 which realigned mayoral elections to be held in presidential election years—which gave Breed an extra year in office (SF Department of Elections 2022). Ultimately, she did not even garner the most votes amongst the three leading moderates, coming in second to Lurie both amongst moderates and overall. Breed's opponents hammered various parts of her record from affordability and homelessness to public safety. But both crime and

homelessness declined significantly in 2024 compared to 2023 (see Figure 5.3). Compared to 2018, the crime rate also went down from 6,413 incidents per 100,000 residents in 2018 to 4,516 incidents in 2024. The unsheltered homelessness rate did not budge and the sheltered homelessness rate increased. While crime came down and homelessness was stable in 2024, there were spikes during Breed's term. This included the 2021 spike which, as previously discussed, was similar to the post-pandemic increase that many major cities across the country experienced. There was media coverage on this positive development, but not enough to save Breed's campaign (DeBenedetti 2024; Har 2024).

Breed's loss seems like a case of voters turning against an incumbent rather than progressives. However, Peskin, the progressive in the election, did not advance to the final round and ran 12.56% behind Lurie in the last round before he was eliminated. That is similar to Mark Leno's first round performance back in 2018, but a significant underperformance when taking into account the fact that Peskin consolidated progressive support while Mark Leno and Jane Kim both vied for the progressive vote. Peskin challenged Breed on the state of the city and believed homelessness to be the city's biggest issue, offering an alternative progressive approach to tackle homelessness and public safety (Dickey 2024; Morris 2024). Breed staked her position in favor of a "forceful" approach in 2018 and pursued such policies while in office. This included declaring in July 2024 that "we are going to be very aggressive and assertive in moving encampments" following the Supreme Court decision in *City of Grants Pass* v. *Johnson* (2024), a decision that found laws against public camping are constitutional (Johnson 2024). Her moderate challengers in 2024 advocated for similar policies. With Peskin's platform unique in this election in contrast to the incumbent, his loss is emblematic of how voters have become dissatisfied with compassionate approaches to tackle crime and homelessness. As Jason McDaniel, professor of

political science at San Francisco State University, told *Reuters*: "what voters care about right now are not currently the kind of issues that progressives tend to do well on" (Langowski 2025).

III. Descriptive Analysis: District Attorney Elections

Chesa Boudin, a public defender, was elected as District Attorney in 2019 as part of a "national movement to elect reform-minded prosecutors" (Sernoffsky 2019). He promised to tackle mass incarceration, police accountability, and racial disparities. Boudin had a powerful personal story of his own connection to the criminal justice system: his parents were members of Weather Underground—a "radical and violent" leftist organization—and incarcerated for their roles in a robbery and murder (Smith 2019). He was raised by two other members of the Weather Underground organization and spent his childhood visiting his parents in prison. That, he argued, made him uniquely aware of the criminal justice system and positioned him to pursue reform.

> "I want to restore a sense of compassion. That's just a true, motivating fact that we do have compassion for victims, compassion for the community…compassion for the family members of people who are accused of committing crimes and compassion for the people who, themselves, have caused harm. We need to hold them accountable in a way that is serious. Because I think that, often, the criminal justice system is dehumanizing to all that it touches from all sides. And people are dealing with real trauma in the case of violent crime and experiences that leave people in fear and make it more likely the people will themselves commit crimes."
>
> — Chesa Boudin (Smith 2019)

Boudin succeeded Suzy Loftus in office, who while also a candidate in the election, had been appointed by Mayor London Breed to the position right before voting started (Eskenazi 2019). Criticism was levied at this appointment as it would give Loftus the advantage of being an incumbent, albeit just for a few weeks. The vacancy arose when then-District Attorney George Gascon resigned the position to prepare a campaign for the same position in Los Angeles

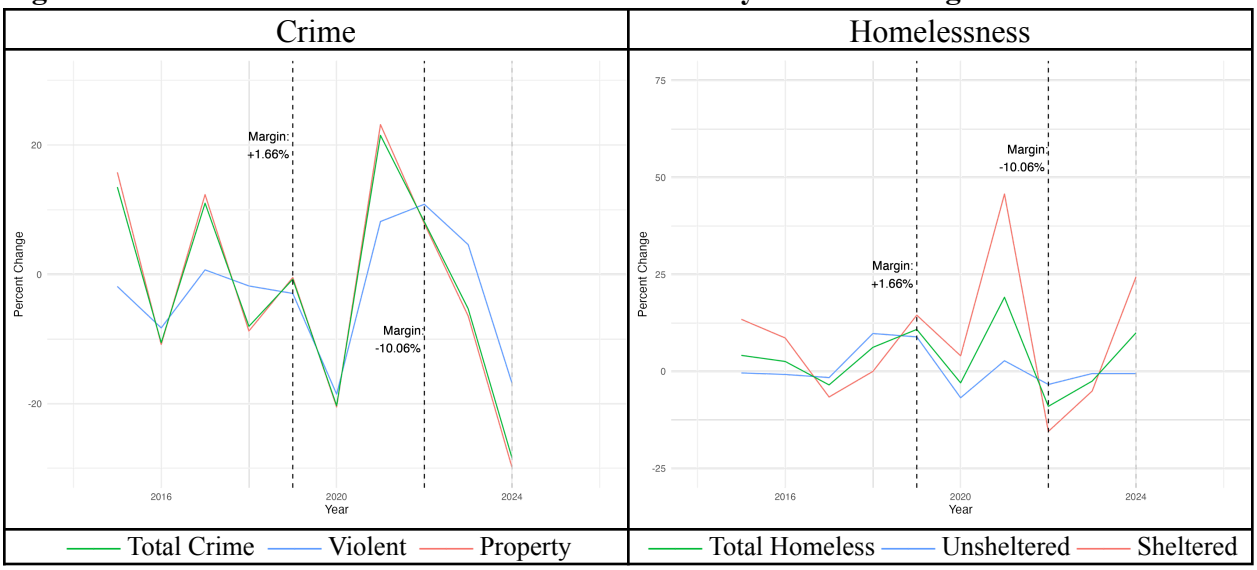
County, an election he later won, as discussed in Chapter 4. Gascon, also considered a progressive reform prosecutor, had endorsed Proposition 47 to reduce many charges from felonies to misdemeanors and proactively expunged old marijuana convictions (Lagos 2018). Perhaps foreshadowing the recall campaign against Boudin, Gascon left office with a "complex legacy:" he struggled to define himself, missed the mark on police accountability, mishandled major cases, and was wrapped in political conflicts (Eskenazi 2018; Eskenazi 2019).

Table 5.4: San Francisco District Attorney Elections Election Results

Office	Round	Year	"Progressive"	"Moderate"	Margin
District Attorney	Initial	2019	Chesa Boudin	Suzy Loftus	4.5%
District Attorney	Final	2019	Chesa Boudin	Suzy Loftus	1.66%
District Attorney	Recall *	2022	No	Yes	-10.06%
District Attorney	Final	2022	John Hamasaki	Brooke Jenkins	-7.35%
District Attorney	Final	2024	Ryan Khojasteh	Brooke Jenkins	-31.85%
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.					
* Recall election (not regularly scheduled).					

During Gascon's tenure, crime had fluctuated with a peak in 2017. Crime had gone down in 2018 and 2019, prior to Boudin's election. Homelessness overall increased prior to Boudin's election though unsheltered homelessness declined slightly between 2018 and 2019 (see Figure 5.4). During the 2019 campaign and throughout his tenure, his opponents said his policies would "create a perception of permissiveness that emboldens criminals" (Marchese 2022). In Boudin's first year, crime declined around 20 percent. It spiked in 2021 before dipping in 2022, the year that he was recalled from office. While there were increases, the number of incidents never exceeded 2019 levels during his term, something Boudin emphasized with respect to property crime: "if you look at the data, overall thefts last year went up a bit but were still well below their 2019 levels" (Marchese 2022). However, the crime rate was higher in 2022 than in 2019.

Figure 5.4: San Francisco Trends and District Attorney Election Margins



Like with crime, San Francisco saw a major post-pandemic spike in homelessness. While his critics tied Boudin to the larger crisis of the unhoused, he pushed back on the notion that it was being extenuated by his policies or that his office was responsible. When asked about something that his office does not have control over, but what he would like to see change, he pointed to homelessness: "homelessness, open air drug use and mental illness — which we all see in this city — are things we've been relying on the DA's office and the jails to deal with" (Martichoux 2020). Prosecutors are often tied more to crime, rather than the issues connected to homelessness like housing affordability. In the midst of the recall campaign, Boudin asserted that his connection to the crisis was a political attack: "it's not wrong or unfair for people to feel that way, but the connection with me is an explicitly political one driven by the recall" (Marchese 2022). However, homelessness and crime may be inherently intertwined which contributes to what led to Boudin's recall. Amy Donley, a sociologist, told Annie Lowrey (2022) of *The Atlantic* that "the perception is that homelessness and crime are almost synonymous."

The recall campaign against Boudin was first launched by Richie Greenberg, a former Republican. Although his attempt to gather signatures failed, a second recall campaign successfully triggered the election, held in June 2022. On many occasions, Boudin has characterized the recall election as an elite ploy: "We're not dealing with a grass-roots movement. We're dealing with a small number of wealthy individuals, many of whom are national Republican major donors" (Marchese 2022). While many proponents of the recall were Democrats (Ferrannini 2022), Boudin may have been hampered by the money problem as proponents significantly outspent Boudin and opponents of the recall (Thadani and Sumida 2021). However, ultimately, Boudin's loss in the recall may be a case of his struggle to defend his record. The statistics show drops in both crime and homelessness in 2022 and, as previously quoted, Boudin touted that crime throughout his tenure was less than before he took office. But, politics is not necessary about the facts but how that is defined in the course of a campaign: "Boudin has responded in part by refusing to respond, declining to crack down or even to seem like he is. Whatever evidentiary backing that refusal might have, it has left many members of the relevant jury, the city's voters, unconvinced" (Lowrey 2022).

While Boudin's recall may be a symptom of electoral backlash against progressives on the West Coast, recalls are fundamentally different from other elections as they were in Oakland and Alameda County. It is a different playing ground that arguably disadvantages Boudin as the focus was entirely on his record and time in office. After Boudin's recall, Mayor Breed appointed Brooke Jenkins, a former prosecutor in the office and involved in his ouster (Rodriguez 2022). Jenkins won the November 2022 election over another progressive, John Hamasaki, who had emphasized his independence: "I need to be very clear that I am not Chesa Boudin" (Cassidy 2022). However, Jenkins won by just 7.3%, a decline from the 10% margin that "yes" on the

recall won by. Crime rates declined between 2022 and 2024—the balance of Boudin's term that Jenkins was elected to complete—but homelessness increased. While Boudin was tied to both crime and homelessness, it appears that Jenkins avoided the same conflation. She won re-election in 2024 by a nearly 32% margin over Ryan Khostajeh, a progressive who, similar to Hamasaki, sought to distance himself from Boudin: "I have not sought the endorsement of Chesa Boudin, although I did work with him" (Zhou 2024).

IV. Descriptive Analysis: Demographics

Progressive support itself varies amongst San Francisco's diverse demographic groups. Its diversity makes the city a valuable case study for examining the connection between different demographics and progressive electoral performance.

Table 5.5: San Francisco Progressive Margins by Race/Ethnicity

Variable	2018 Mayor	2024 Mayor	2019 D.A.	2022 D.A.
Asian	-0.012 *** (0.034, p = 6.15e-04)	-0.011 (0.044, p = 0.797)	0.04 (0.042, p = 0.352)	-0.474 *** (0.041, p = < 2e-16)
Black	-0.802 *** (0.079, p = < 2e-16)	0.315 ** (0.104, p = 0.003)	0.266 ** (0.1, p = 0.008)	0.214 * (0.097, p = 0.029)
Hispanic/Latino	0.184 *** (0.053, p = 5.88e-04)	0.775 *** (0.07, p = < 2e-16)	0.672 *** (0.067, p = < 2e-16)	0.419 *** (0.065, p = 2.88e-10)
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				
Statistical significance: * p<0.05 | ** p<0.01 | *** p<0.001				

In particular, San Francisco's Asian-American population has seen a political mobilization in the last few years paralleling the time period of "West Coast liberalism" in crisis. Relative to block groups with a higher percentage of white voters, block groups with more Asian voters were negatively correlated with support for Chesa Boudin in the 2022 recall election, a moderately strong relationship (see Table 5.5). Not only were they correlated with support for Boudin's recall, they were key drivers, "frustrated by Boudin's handling of crime, anti-Asian

hate, and other public safety concerns" (Raman 2022). While the city saw a crime and homelessness spike in 2021, anti-Asian hate crimes spiked 567% (Chan and Martin 2022). They directed their grievances at Boudin's office, with one victim saying they felt "cast aside, ignored, and re-victimized by the institutions that were supposed to protect him." Asian voters were more likely to back Breed in the 2018 mayoral election. The correlations between heavier Asian block groups with progressive support in the 2019 district attorney election and the 2024 mayoral election were statistically insignificant. A potential explanation for the Asian vote in 2024 is that the correlation is computed between Lurie as the "moderate" and Peskin—who represented Chinatown while on the Board of Supervisors—as the "progressive." The incumbent, Breed, had an 80% disapproval rate with the bloc in a February 2025 poll (Cheang and Morris 2025).

Block groups with more Black and Hispanic voters, generally speaking, were correlated with increased support for progressive candidates. Hispanic voters had the most intense support, with those block groups having the highest estimates in all mayoral and district attorney elections considered in this study. Perhaps contributing to Peskin's 2024 performance with Hispanics was labor organizer Dolores Huerta's endorsement (Smith 2024). Block groups with a higher Black population, however, had a strong negative correlation with progressive support in the 2018 election, but that can be explained by the presence of Breed—who took office as San Francisco's first female Black mayor—on the ballot as a "moderate" candidate compared to Leno and Kim.

Table 5.6: San Francisco Progressive Margins by Education

Variable	2018 Mayor	2024 Mayor	2019 D.A.	2022 D.A.
College degree	0.293 *** (0.06, p = 1.12e-06)	-0.226 ** (0.08, p = 0.0048)	0.259 *** (0.076, p = 6.79e-04)	0.155 * (0.08, p = 0.05)
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				
Statistical significance: * p<0.05 | ** p<0.01 | *** p<0.001				

Areas with a higher percentage of college-educated voters were correlated with higher progressive support in the 2018 mayoral election and both district attorney elections (see Table 5.6). However, this flipped in the 2024 mayoral election in which they backed the more moderate Lurie.

Table 5.7: San Francisco Progressive Margins by Occupancy

Variable	2018 Mayor	2024 Mayor	2019 D.A.	2022 D.A.
Owner	-0.221 *** (0.03, p = 2.01e-13)	-0.305 *** (0.039, p = 2.39e-14)	-0.284 *** (0.037, p = 6.68e-14)	-0.226 *** (0.039, p = 1.32e-08)
Renter	-0.233 *** (0.029, p = 5.33e-15)	0.306 *** (0.039, p = 1.31e-14)	0.283 *** (0.037, p = 5.76e-14)	0.227 *** (0.039, p = 1.02e-08)
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				
Statistical significance: * p<0.05 | ** p<0.01 | *** p<0.001				

Progressives did not perform well in block groups with more owner-occupied units (see Table 5.7). This supports existing thinking on homeowners being most attentive to their property values, and public safety being an issue that progressives have struggled to define themselves. Interestingly, block groups with more renters effectively mirrored the voting preferences of homeowners across all four elections. In a city that struggles with housing affordability, occupancy seems to be the most predictive of ideological lines in local politics.

Relative to the middle income block groups—where median household income was between $125,000 and $175,000—progressives saw their worst margins in block groups with above a $175,000 median income, particularly in the 2019 district attorney election and the 2024 mayoral election (see Table 5.8). While there was a negative correlation in the 2022 recall election, the estimate was not statistically significant. In block groups with under a $125,000 median income, progressive margins were more mixed. While they were associated with support for the 2022 recall election, they also supported Peskin in the 2024 mayoral election. The 2018 mayoral election and 2019 district attorney election had statistically insignificant results.

Table 5.8: San Francisco Progressive Margins by Income

Variable	2018 Mayor	2024 Mayor	2019 D.A.	2022 D.A.
Over $175k	-4.846 * (2.16, p = 0.025)	-13.568 *** (2.751, p = 1.02e-06)	-13.938 *** (2.619, p = 1.4e-07)	-4.349 (2.816, p = 0.123)
Under $125k	-0.972 (1.721, p = 0.572)	6.740 ** (2.193, p = 0.002)	2.641 (2.091, p = 0.207)	-6.566 ** (2.252, p = 0.004)
All values are rounded according to standard conventions.				
Statistical significance: * p<0.05 | ** p<0.01 | *** p<0.001				

V. Qualitative Insights

To better evaluate the results of both the statistical and descriptive analyses, I conducted three interviews in March 2025 with figures connected to San Francisco local politics. Former District Attorney Chesa Boudin, now director of the Criminal Law & Justice Center within the UC Berkeley Law School, provided insight from a "progressive" standpoint. Todd David, the political director for Abundant San Francisco, added a "moderate" perspective. Finally, Jason McDaniel, a professor of political science at San Francisco State University, grounded the city's politics with an academic viewpoint.

As discussed in Chapter 2, local political ideology is contested. I started by asking all three interviewees about ideology in San Francisco's politics specifically, with focus on understanding the meaning of "moderate" and "progressive" labels. All three agreed that the labels are not accurate descriptors, but have been co-opted as a shorthand to describe issue positions that are cross-cutting on the political spectrum. Boudin stated that "I think it's [ideological labels] pretty inaccurate." He acknowledges that "yes, you do have a lot of people who identify as so-called progressives," but cautions that "what that means varies dramatically over time, it's not a fixed feature of politics any more than things at the national level are fixed." McDaniel sees more willingness from those on the "progressive" side to "embrace the label" and "only relatively recently did more 'moderate' liberal politicians somewhat embrace that label."

This, he says, is contextualized by the origin of "moderate" as "pejorative from [the] 'progressive' side." David calls the ideological terminology "super reductive…but kind of like political junk food in San Francisco." He also emphasizes the inconsistency that Boudin brought up, saying "these 'moderate' and 'progressive' definitions really don't apply consistently anymore." Part of this, he attributes to generational differences: "I actually think that the big differentiator now is age. If you are younger, you are more likely to be pro-housing, pro-transit, whether you consider yourself a young progressive or young moderate."

Moving to specific political issues, I asked each what they perceived to be San Francisco's most pressing issues. Boudin listed crime, the unhoused, the city's fiscal crisis, and downtown recovery. McDaniel identified the pandemic, public education, and disorder. David said affordability, downtown recovery, and street disorder. While they used umbrella terms, there are similarities in their responses. All three noted the problems of crime and the unhoused—Boudin specifically while McDaniel and David grouped them under disorder—and Boudin and David identified downtown recovery.

Boudin noted that "crime is at or near record lows…if you look at the data, crime is at, in almost every category, or near record lows." On the unhoused, he makes a similar observation, saying "we're pretty consistent with historic levels, not higher or rising." As district attorney, he had centered data in his approach to tackling those problems which was a flaw that voters may not have resonated with. David said as much, characterizing Boudin's approach as "people were saying things like 'I don't feel safe,' and Chesa responded with data, as opposed to acknowledging people's feelings…he did not meet voters where they were." McDaniel agreed, noting that "he would talk about that…and I was always talking to people and the old saying goes 'in politics, if you're explaining or losing,' right?" However, in our interview, Boudin

acknowledged that both issues "continue to be a really important topic for voters and for City Hall." And regardless of his political style, crime and homelessness were down in 2022, the year he was recalled. Even aside from a data-based message that did not resonate, Boudin's office was not necessarily responsible for the crime and homelessness problems in San Francisco at the time. He noted the commonality that progressive prosecutors campaign on "issues related—and I did this—to addressing root causes of crime." However, a drawback is their conflation with those issues once in office: "it's really easy for other people who aren't doing their job or who can't for whatever reason politically solve these difficult problems to kind of blame you…even though really there's not hardly anything D.A.s can do about those problems on their own."

Boudin's recall was also complicated by other factors beyond public safety concerns. He won the 2019 election narrowly and with the help of ranked choice voting. His vulnerability stemmed from how, with ranked choice voting, a candidate does not necessarily need majority support in votes. Speaking more broadly about progressives, McDaniel said "progressives didn't feel like they had to necessarily craft a majority kind of campaign to win in a runoff." David connected it to Boudin's case: "He was a little bit of a victim of ranked choice voting being like, well, you know, he didn't really never really had a mandate to begin with." Emphasizing that "I actually got more votes against the recall than I did to get elected," Boudin explained:

> "The fundamental reason why I lost is because when I ran in the recall, I had to get 50% plus one vote to survive. And to get elected, I only had 35% of the population put me as their first choice. So if I was going to survive the recall, I would have had to have increased my base of support by 15% during the COVID pandemic."

He also added that "in a scenario where voters weren't being asked to think about who should replace me, they were just being asked 'should he keep going,' voters love to vote out the

incumbent." Touching on the demographics of the city electorate, Boudin also pushed back against the idea that Asian-American voters were particularly mobilized against him:

> "But the fact that if you look at who endorsed me in 2019 and who opposed my recall in 2022, we had the who's who of the Asian American community. And we had *Sing Tao*, we had all of the Asian American members of the Board of Supervisors, we had retired elected officials who were Asian American, Chinese American. We had the, you know, most of the local Democratic clubs that are predominantly Asian American. We had the Chinese Tenants Association, you know, we had the Chinese Progressive Association Action Committee, we had SF Rising Action, we had, so you know, the leadership of the Chinese community that I've been working with that had seen the efforts we'd made in office to address concerns that were particular to the Asian American community were all with us."

However, McDaniel sees a larger impact from the Asian-American bloc, especially in the 2024 mayoral election with London Breed on the ballot. He says:

> "I do think Chinese American, Asian American voters seem to be ideologically on average, more conservative, more moderate than most of the other groups of voters in San Francisco in terms of racial ethnic groupings…and so I think that's a big part of the story."

The dynamics of the 2024 mayoral election were very different from the 2022 recall election that ousted Boudin. McDaniel believed that "it was less about ideology and more about anti-incumbency" and David opined "I think that the primary thing was the public disorder, that there was a sense whether fair or not that her administration did not do enough to deal with the public disorder." David also noted that Breed had a "70 percent disapproval rating," which as discussed in demographics, was 80 percent with Asian-American voters (Cheang and Morris 2024). While McDaniel speculated on the impact of another candidate, such as David Chiu, in capturing the crucial Asian-American vote, David expanded to another demographic aspect. Although speculation, he questioned whether "[Breed] might have been held to a different standard than a white man [such as Daniel Lurie or Mark Farrell] would have been held to."

Returning to the Asian-American electorate, their political mobilization may have been as much to do with public education as it was with Boudin's recall. For context, San Francisco voters ousted three "progressive" members of the Board of Education that oversaw the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) in February 2022—just four months before Boudin's recall in June 2022—that had "galvanized" Asian-American voters (Fuller 2022). McDaniel argued that schools were the "nexus" of the recent political shifts, with issues such as "the renaming of schools, more equity policies on getting rid of algebra in the eighth grade, [changing] Lowell [admissions]." David agreed, characterizing the San Francisco's Board of Education as engaging in "performative politics" and that "at the end of the day, they [voters] want elected people to do their jobs…with the Board of Education recall specifically, San Francisco was the last major city to return their children to school."

While all three interviewees have their expertise in San Francisco politics, I asked them for their takes on the broader issue of "West Coast liberalism" or how these issues play out on a larger geographic scale. Boudin differentiated the West Coast's approach to homelessness as having a unique dynamic compared to elsewhere, particularly the East Coast:

> "There's a fundamental difference in the way that homelessness manifests in the West and East, which is that in the East, people [who are] homeless in the winter they die. But as a general rule, coastal West Coast, people can live year around outdoors. And what that's meant historically is that in places like New York and Boston, they build enough shelter capacity to house the entire unhoused population so that in the winter people aren't freezing to death on the streets. And it's meant that on the West Coast, that hasn't occurred. You just haven't seen the number of shelter beds get created that are needed to house the unhoused population."

Specific to San Francisco, he also noted how development of previously underutilized areas (e.g. Mission Bay) has pushed the unhoused population into more visible areas. The capacity differential and development trends have created a unique West Coast flair to these problems. On

progressivism, Boudin emphasized the inherent nature of politics in which "the pendulum swings…it's pretty normal that people change their minds, voters change their minds, different things are in fashion and out of fashion." With respect to the future, he said "voters are clear that they support reform…like most policy areas, there's going to be a pendulum swing and we just have to hope it doesn't overcorrect and go too far."

David took a more broader view, that what San Francisco and the West Coast is experiencing is not geographically constrained. He said "I think you would probably see, in coastal cities that are basically run by Democrats, that you are seeing similar types of homeless, the high cost of housing…if you really melt them down to their core, it is the lack of housing supply." He also added that every region faces its share of challenges, "when we talk about the drug crisis that we see on the streets, rural America also [has] statistically speaking." But the differentiating factor is that "housing…is a ton less expensive [so] the crisis is indoors, not outdoors." McDaniel rounds out these thoughts, returning to the pandemic as a potential explanation for the West Coast political shifts, beyond just public safety: "I think that the confounding factor on this is the sort of pandemic sense that everybody's just pissed off at stuff." Acknowledging political homogeneity but a sense of exhaustion from lack of results, McDaniel said "they're still liberals, they're willing to pay a lot of money and taxes to tackle problems from a liberal point of view…but it's [variety of issues from crime to housing] not working and it's visibly not working."

Building on this thought, I will bring together insights from Boudin, David, and McDaniel in Chapter 6 by linking my regional study and local study together to synthesize the concept of "West Coast liberalism" and its applicability to describe current conditions in the region's urban centers.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In Chapter 4, I conducted a regional analysis with difference-in-difference tests for all five case jurisdictions and descriptive analyses for four case jurisdictions that are emblematic of the "West Coast liberalism" electoral crisis. I expanded upon this regional study with a case study of San Francisco in Chapter 5. In this chapter, I synthesize my earlier analyses and discuss my key findings. I focus my discussion around a "backlash" towards progressives, the role of information and retrospective voting, and local differences.

I. Backlash Towards Progressives?

The popular understanding of the "West Coast liberalism" trend has been that progressives have been losing elections en masse. This is supported by high profile examples brought up in Chapter 1 and others that I brought up later in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. However, there is evidence that this backlash is more focused. While every progressive incumbent running for re-election came up short (see Table 6.1), many progressive candidates won elections for the first time even as others were losing their re-elections (see Table 6.2). There is also the case of a non-progressive, London Breed in San Francisco, losing her 2024 re-election bid. Other non-progressives chose not to run for re-election, such as Jenny Durkan in Seattle's 2021 mayoral election and Ted Wheeler in Portland's 2024 mayoral election.

Table 6.1: Incumbent Progressives and Electoral Performance

Year	Office	Jurisdiction	Candidate	Result
2021	City Attorney	Seattle	Holmes	Lost
2022	District Attorney	San Francisco	Boudin	Lost
2024	District Attorney	Los Angeles County	Gascon	Lost
2024	Mayor	Oakland	Thao	Lost
2024	District Attorney	Alameda County	Price	Lost
2024	District Attorney	Multnomah County	Schmidt	Lost

Table 6.2: Non-Incumbent Progressives and Electoral Performance (2021* to 2024)

Year	Office	Jurisdiction	Candidate	Result
2021	Mayor	Seattle	Gonzalez	Lost
2021	City Attorney	Seattle	Thomas-Kennedy	Lost
2022	Mayor	Los Angeles	Bass	Won
2022	Mayor	Oakland	Thao	Won
2022	District Attorney	Alameda County	Price	Won
2024	Mayor	Portland	Rubio	Lost

* 2021 marks the first progressive incumbent losing their re-election bid (see Table 6.1).

The ability of non-incumbent progressives to still win elections for the first time, combined with the election loss of a non-progressives like Breed, point to a potential anti-incumbency trend. However, Breed's re-election loss is just a singular case and the vast majority of re-election losses are with progressive incumbents on the ballot. The descriptive analyses and interview insights point to more targeted electoral dissatisfaction with progressives. As Chesa Boudin pointed out, progressive prosecutors especially are vulnerable to conflation with problems that their offices cannot independently solve.

As I briefly touched upon in Chapter 3 when discussing my research's limitations and in Chapter 5 through interviews, the binary view of candidates as either "progressive" or "moderate" versus a view of ideology as a spectrum loses nuance. Elections may feature multiple progressive candidates yet, save for formal electoral alliances like that of Mark Leno and Jane Kim in San Francisco's 2018 mayoral election, that is not reflected in my analysis. For example, although Carmen Rubio—coded as the progressive candidate—lost the 2024 Portland mayoral election, Keith Wilson—coded as the moderate candidate—Wilson was also considered progressive.

But aside from solutions to larger public safety problems or defining ideology, progressive candidates are not uniform. In each election, the candidates had their own strengths

and weaknesses. In Oakland/Alameda County, Sheng Thao and Pamela Price were both affected by scandals and Thao was later indicted on federal charges. In Portland, Carmen Rubio was dragged down by parking tickets. In Seattle, Nicole Thomas-Kennedy's "abolitionist" platform may have veered too far left for a citywide electorate. In San Francisco, Chesa Boudin struggled to communicate his record to voters in a meaningful way. These examples demonstrate that a candidate's persona and image matter as much as their policy positions.

II. Retrospective Voting

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is a gap in voters' information knowledge and the ability of politicians to communicate their records to voters. That is particularly relevant to recent elections on the West Coast as, for the most part, progressive incumbents have lost their elections despite statistical decreases to crime and homelessness (see Table 6.3).

Table 6.3: Incumbent Progressives and Crime Dips

Year	Jurisdiction	Candidate	Result	Crime	Unhoused
2021	Seattle	Holmes	Lost	Up	Down
2022	San Francisco	Boudin	Lost	Down	Down
2024	Los Angeles County	Gascon	Lost	Stable	Down
2024	Oakland	Thao	Lost	Down	Down
2024	Alameda County	Price	Lost	Down	Down
2024	Multnomah County	Schmidt	Lost	Stable	Up

Metrics are based on total crime and total homelessness.

Only in two races—crime in the 2021 Seattle city attorney election and homelessness in the 2024 Multnomah County district attorney election—did any metric trend upwards. While it is reasonable to assume that voters can notice these decreases through their everyday activities (e.g. less visible homelessness), the onus is also on the candidates themselves to communicate that information in a way that resonates with voters. As discussed in Chapter 5, San Francisco

District Attorney Chesa Boudin relied on data rather than validation of public sentiment. Multnomah County District Attorney Mike Schmidt hinted at a communication disconnect in his end-of-term report since although crime has gone down, “Portlanders' negative perceptions of crime, particularly in the downtown area, have been slow to improve” (Multnomah County District Attorney's Office 2025, 8). Communication ability is tied to a candidate's persona and image, with progressives already starting off at a disadvantage due to conflation with problems beyond the scopes of their positions.

Although these statistics were mostly trending downwards in the years that progressive incumbents were up for re-election, voter memory can also be tricky. Political scientists have reached consensus that voters are myopic in that they just consider recent conditions. But West Coast urban centers have faced the problems of crime and the unhoused stretching back years, if not over a decade. Perceptions of the issue may be hard to shake which cloud voters’ understanding of current conditions. This is likely extenuated by the post-pandemic spike of crime and the unhoused in 2021 that occurred in urban areas across the country, not just the West Coast (Rosenfeld and Lopez 2022). As a result, the wave of progressives elected right around increasing national interest in reform policies may have just been unlucky as the pandemic and the post-pandemic spikes unfolded on their watch and added to existing problems.

III. Local Differences

There is evidence for a trend of “West Coast liberalism” in electoral crisis, but I caution against a regional generalization. While California, Oregon, and Washington and their urban centers form the distinct West Coast region that is nationally associated with liberalism, each has a unique set of local dynamics that affect each election. The key factors in these differences are temporal, demographic, geographic, and external.

As discussed in the last section, the temporal effects around public interest in progressive reform and the pandemic reinforce the importance of election timing. While my study, as detailed in Chapter 3, looks for elections in the two most recent presidential election cycles (2016 to 2020 and 2020 to 2024), elections fell on various years within those ranges. The ranges are helpful in constraining the study to a more or less specific period of when I conceptualize "West Coast liberalism" has occurred, the differential years likely affected progressive electoral performance. For example, without the summer 2020 protests for criminal justice reform, progressive candidate George Gascon might have had a harder time defeating, or may not have defeated, incumbent District Attorney Jackie Lacey in Los Angeles County. Lacey had established a strong slate of endorsements until public sentiment worked against her law and order platform and towards Gascon's reformist credentials. Additionally, if Oakland and Alameda County experienced their post-pandemic crime spikes in 2021 rather than in 2023, Sheng Thao and Pamela Price may not have had recall elections triggered against them. The local temporal context is crucial to understanding the outcomes of each election.

Each electorate has different demographics that changes the political calculus not just for progressives, but all candidates. The California case jurisdictions are much more diverse than that of the two Pacific Northwest jurisdictions (see Appendix M). The central cities of Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco have white populations under 41% while Portland and Seattle have white populations of 62% and 70%, respectively (though Los Angeles County is similar, at nearly 70% white). In San Francisco, for example, Asian-American voters were key in successfully recalling District Attorney Chesa Boudin. The city has a 35% Asian population, matched only by Alameda County. Additionally, the distribution of other demographic categories such as education, income, and occupancy is different in each electorate.

Geographically, crime and the unhoused are concentrated in the central cities of each West Coast urban center. The downtown areas of Los Angeles, Oakland, Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle have become microcosms for the problems associated with "West Coast liberalism." However, the offices that I consider—mayors and prosecutors—have differing geographic scopes. In all cities, the mayors are elected from within city limits. But prosecutorial jurisdictions vary. In San Francisco, the district attorney is also elected from within city limits as San Francisco is both a city and a county. Contrasting San Francisco is Los Angeles where the district attorney is elected countywide, drastically expanding the electorate and changing its demographics. With a population just shy of 10 million people, Los Angeles County has over double the population of Los Angeles city proper. As a result, the Los Angeles County district attorney is responsible to a wider swath of voters who potentially understand crime and the unhoused in different ways than just the voters in Los Angeles proper. Furthermore, with evidence from San Francisco, voters in areas with higher levels of crime and the unhoused may be more inclined to see progressive reform as an alternative to traditional approaches to addressing those problems.

Finally, there may be additional, external factors that contribute to the idea of "West Coast liberalism" beyond crime and the unhoused. In San Francisco, there was political mobilization, over education, even before District Attorney Chesa Boudin was recalled. Driven by accusations of injecting performative politics into public education, voters recalled three members of the city's Board of Education. When putting forth "West Coast liberalism" as a term, Kristof (2024a) notes performatism as a symptom of the problem. The San Francisco case clearly meets that criteria, but education is something very different than the public safety umbrella that crime and homelessness fall into. Other cities did not experience a similar upheaval around the

education issue, but may have their own factors other than public safety.

The temporal, demographic, geographic, external factors that differ between these urban West Coast electorates underscores the importance of considering each jurisdiction and each election in its local context. Returning to my point in Chapter 2, even issues with nationalized elements remain distinctive in local contexts and that has been demonstrated through my studies of crime and the unhoused as conceptual components of "West Coast liberalism."

Chapter 7: Conclusion

I. Reflection on Hypotheses

My first hypothesis focused on ideology. The null hypothesis is that voters are voting against candidates of varying ideologies while the alternative hypothesis is that voters are specifically voting against "progressive" candidates. While there is a level of voter dissatisfaction with progressives, that has mostly been directed towards incumbents. Non-incumbent progressives have still won elections and a non-progressive incumbent lost an election. There is evidence in support of this hypothesis, specifically backlash towards progressive incumbents.

But is the backlash towards progressives justified? The null hypothesis is that voters are retrospectively voting based on the actual realities of crime and the unhoused in their jurisdictions. The alternative hypothesis is that voters are considering factors other than those actual realities when making their ballot choices. My statistical and descriptive analyses have yielded mixed results to this regard. As demonstrated in the statistical tests from the regional analysis in Chapter 4, progressive candidate margins generally decreased with an increase in crime and the unhoused. In the statistical tests from the local analysis in Chapter 5, this is more nuanced with a puzzling positive impact of increasing crime on progressive margins. Overall, retrospective voting may be more contingent on local contextual factors brought up in Chapter 6: temporal, demographic, geographic, and external.

II. Future Research

Explanations for the trends of "West Coast liberalism" may also lie elsewhere beyond my study's scope, largely of electoral margins and statistics of crime and the unhoused. Perceptions

of crime and homelessness potentially have a bigger impact on voters' minds than the numeric fluctuation of annual statistics. My study was unable to measure that given the lack of consistent local public opinion data for each West Coast urban center. Media effects through level of coverage and framing of stories can affect those perceptions. "West Coast liberalism" itself is a media topic, given its origin in the *New York Times*. As explored in Chapter 2, the media plays a crucial role in disseminating information to voters. Content analysis of that media coverage could provide critical insight into how media outlets are translating these issues for the public.

My study is also limited in the selection of case jurisdictions. Some cities, such as San Jose, had competitive mayoral elections, but not competitive prosecutorial elections (or vice versa) so they were excluded. Other cities, such as Sacramento, were excluded for other reasons, but had relevant competitive elections. "West Coast liberalism" may also concern issues in other local elections from those for city councils to boards of education. Consideration of those cases could add further context to understanding how the conceptual trend unfolds in either cities that have not been traditionally liberal or where only some political positions have been the target of voter discontent.

III. Final Thoughts

The recent performance of progressives in the traditionally liberal West Coast cities considered in my thesis have become somewhat of a parlor topic. It has been framed by many as evidence that these cities are shifting to the right and that progressive policies, while idealistic, do not work in practice. The premise of Nicholas Kristof's criticism of "West Coast liberalism" encapsulates that sentiment, that the West Coast has prioritized political theater over outcomes. However, as I have demonstrated in my regional and local analyses and emphasized in my discussion, these trends do not characterize a zero sum equation of "progressives lose, moderates

win." Instead, local contexts matter.

"Moderate" and "progressive" are loose ideological labels that are shorthand for popular discourse at best and obscure true local electoral dynamics at worst. But their loose definitions mean that they are firmly on a spectrum, with these labels representing different issue positions in different jurisdictions. In a region where affordability has driven many out of their homes and exacerbated the unhoused crisis, is political support for housing construction just a "progressive" policy? And is there a fine line between criminal justice and police powers that differentiate "moderate" and "progressive" positions? Many issues are cut across ideology and perhaps even more so at the local level.

Yes, there is an electoral crisis that has grappled local progressive politics on the West Coast, but that is neither inherent nor permanent. As former District Attorney Chesa Boudin stated in our interview, "the pendulum swings…it's pretty normal that people change their minds, voters change their minds, different things are in fashion and out of fashion." And it may already be swinging back. Former Congresswoman Barbara Lee won the Oakland mayoralty just last month in a special election as the progressive in the race (Karlamangla 2025). Seattle voters will vote later this year in mayoral and city attorney elections. And in 2026, Angelenos will head to the polls for a mayoral election.

The public safety problems that have been amplified on the West Coast are not ideological problems. Crime is not a "progressive" issue the same way that homelessness is not a "moderate" issue. In order to meaningfully address the region's challenges, there must be collective solutions. Politics underlies all of this with the decisions of officeholders at all levels of government playing a pivotal role in policy formulation and implementation, then communication to their constituents, the voters. The particular period my research focuses on

featured voter discontent with how progressives may have approached this responsibility, but it is not symbolic of progressivism in decline. After all, progress itself is something that is always in demand and the West Coast has always set a standard, emblematic in the region's shared values, to aspire for better.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Partisanship of Mayoral Candidates

Year	Jurisdiction	Candidate	Ideology
2017	Los Angeles	Garcetti	Progressive
2017	Los Angeles	Schwartz	Moderate
2017	Seattle	Durkan	Moderate
2017	Seattle	Moon	Progressive
2018	San Francisco	Breed	Moderate
2018	San Francisco	Kim/Leno *	Progressive
2020	Portland	Iannarone	Progressive
2020	Portland	Wheeler	Moderate
2021	Seattle	Gonzalez	Progressive
2021	Seattle	Harrell	Moderate
2022	Los Angeles	Bass	Progressive
2022	Los Angeles	Caruso	Moderate
2022	Oakland	Taylor	Moderate
2022	Oakland	Thao	Progressive
2022 **	Oakland	“No” vote	Progressive
2022 **	Oakland	“Yes” vote	Moderate
2024	Portland	Rubio	Progressive
2024	Portland	Wilson	Moderate
2024	San Francisco	Lurie	Moderate
2024	San Francisco	Peskin	Progressive

* Jane Kim and Mark Leno formed an electoral alliance.

** Recall election (not regularly scheduled).

Appendix B: Partisanship of Prosecutorial Candidates

Year	Jurisdiction	Candidate	Ideology
2017	Seattle	Holmes	Progressive
2017	Seattle	Lindsay	Moderate
2019	San Francisco	Boudin	Progressive
2019	San Francisco	Loftus	Moderate
2020	Los Angeles County	Gascon	Progressive
2020	Los Angeles County	Lacey	Moderate
2020	Multnomah County	Knight	Moderate
2020	Multnomah County	Schmidt	Progressive
2021	Seattle	Davison	Moderate
2021	Seattle	Thomas-Kennedy	Progressive
2022	Alameda County	Price	Progressive
2022	Alameda County	Wiley	Moderate
2022 *	San Francisco	“No” vote	Progressive
2022 *	San Francisco	“Yes” vote	Moderate
2024	Los Angeles County	Gascon	Progressive
2024	Los Angeles County	Hochman	Moderate
2024 *	Alameda County	“No” vote	Progressive
2024 *	Alameda County	“Yes” vote	Moderate
2024	Multnomah County	Schmidt	Progressive
2024	Multnomah County	Vasquez	Moderate

* Recall election (not regularly scheduled).

Appendix C: West Coast City Populations

City	County	State	Population (2020)
Los Angeles	Los Angeles	California	3,898,747
San Diego	San Diego	California	1,386,932
San Jose	Santa Clara	California	1,013,240
San Francisco *	San Francisco *	California	873,965
Seattle	King	Washington	737,015
Portland	Multnomah	Oregon	652,503
Fresno	Fresno	California	542,107
Sacramento	Sacramento	California	524,943
Long Beach	Los Angeles	California	466,742
Oakland	Alameda	California	440,646
Bakersfield	Kern	California	403,455

* San Francisco is a city and a county.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2023)

Appendix D: West Coast County Partisanship

County	1992	1996	2000	2004
Los Angeles	D+23.5	D+28.38	D+31.12	D+27.5
San Diego	D+1.55	R+1.46	R+3.97	R+6.12
Santa Clara	D+20.83	D+24.72	D+26.22	D+29.31
San Francisco	D+54.6	D+56.58	D+59.44	D+67.81
King County	D+22.87	D+24.97	D+25.62	D+31.22
Multnomah	D+31.09	D+32.89	D+35.32	D+44.43
Fresno	D+1.5	D+-2.1	R+10.09	R+15.7
Sacramento	D+8.2	D+8.97	D+3.98	D+0.23
Alameda	D+42.42	D+42.7	D+45.23	D+51.89
Kern	R+11.3	R+17.12	R+24.5	R+34
County	**2008**	**2012**	**2016**	**2020**
Los Angeles	D+40.37	D+41.86	D+49.35	D+43.96
San Diego	D+10.16	D+7.56	D+19.64	D+22.75
Santa Clara	D+40.9	D+42.83	D+52.13	D+47.41
San Francisco	D+70.34	D+70.39	D+75.24	D+72.54
King County	D+41.94	D+40.36	D+48.81	D+52.71
Multnomah	D+56.08	D+54.72	D+56.27	D+61.31
Fresno	D+2.08	D+1.78	D+6.03	D+7.83
Sacramento	D+18.96	D+18.93	D+24.23	D+25.25
Alameda	D+59.33	D+60.57	D+63.52	D+62.21
Kern	R+17.68	R+16.71	R+12.65	R+10.2
County	**2024**			
Los Angeles	D+32.91			
San Diego	D+16.79			
Santa Clara	D+39.94			
San Francisco	D+64.8			
King County	D+51.34			
Multnomah	D+61.6			
Fresno	R+4.39			
Sacramento	D+19.71			
Alameda	D+53.55			
Kern	R+21.05			
Source: Leip (1992-2024)				

Appendix E: Competitive Elections

City	County	State	Mayor	Prosecutor
Los Angeles	Los Angeles	California	2022	2020, 2024
San Jose	Santa Clara	California	2022	None
San Francisco *		California	2018, 2024	2019, 2022
Seattle	King	Washington	2017, 2021	2021
Portland	Multnomah	Oregon	2020, 2024	2020, 2024
Oakland	Alameda	California	2022, 2024	2022, 2024

* San Francisco is a city and a county.

Appendix F: Crime Data Sources

Jurisdiction	Source	Years
Los Angeles	CA Department of Justice	2014 to 2023
Los Angeles County	CA Department of Justice	2014 to 2023
Oakland	CA Department of Justice	2014 to 2023
Oakland	Oakland Police Department	2024
Alameda County	CA Department of Justice	2014 to 2023
Portland	FBI	2014, 2016 to 2023
Portland	Portland Police Bureau	2024
Multnomah County	FBI	2014, 2016 to 2023
Multnomah County	Gresham Police Department, Portland Police Bureau, Multnomah County Sheriff	2024
San Francisco	CA Department of Justice **	2014 to 2023
San Francisco	SF Police Department *	2018 to 2024
San Francisco	SF Police Department **	2024
Seattle	FBI	2014 to 2023
Seattle	Seattle Police Department	2024
San Francisco: * For local analysis | ** For regional analysis		

Appendix G: Homelessness Data Sources

Jurisdiction	Source	Years
Los Angeles	LA Homeless Services Authority	2015 to 2024
Los Angeles County	HUD	2014 to 2024
Oakland	EveryOneHome	2017, 2019, 2022, 2024
Alameda County	HUD	2014 to 2024
Multnomah County	HUD	2014 to 2024
San Francisco	311 *	2018 to 2024
San Francisco	HUD **	2014 to 2024
Seattle	King County Regional Homelessness Authority	2017 to 2020
King County	HUD	2014 to 2024
San Francisco: * For local analysis | ** For regional analysis		

Appendix H: Election Data Sources

Jurisdiction	Source	Elections
Los Angeles, Los Angeles County	LA Registrar-Recorder/ County Clerk	2017 Mayor 2020 District Attorney 2022 Mayor 2024 District Attorney
Oakland, Alameda County	Alameda County Registrar of Voters	2022 Mayor 2022 District Attorney 2024 Mayor * 2024 District Attorney *
Portland, Multnomah County	Multnomah County Elections Division	2020 Mayor 2020 District Attorney 2024 Mayor 2024 District Attorney
San Francisco	San Francisco Department of Elections	2018 Mayor 2019 District Attorney 2022 District Attorney * 2024 Mayor
Seattle	King County Elections	2017 Mayor 2017 City Attorney 2021 Mayor 2021 City Attorney

* Recall election (not regularly scheduled).

Appendix I: Crime Data Issues and Solutions

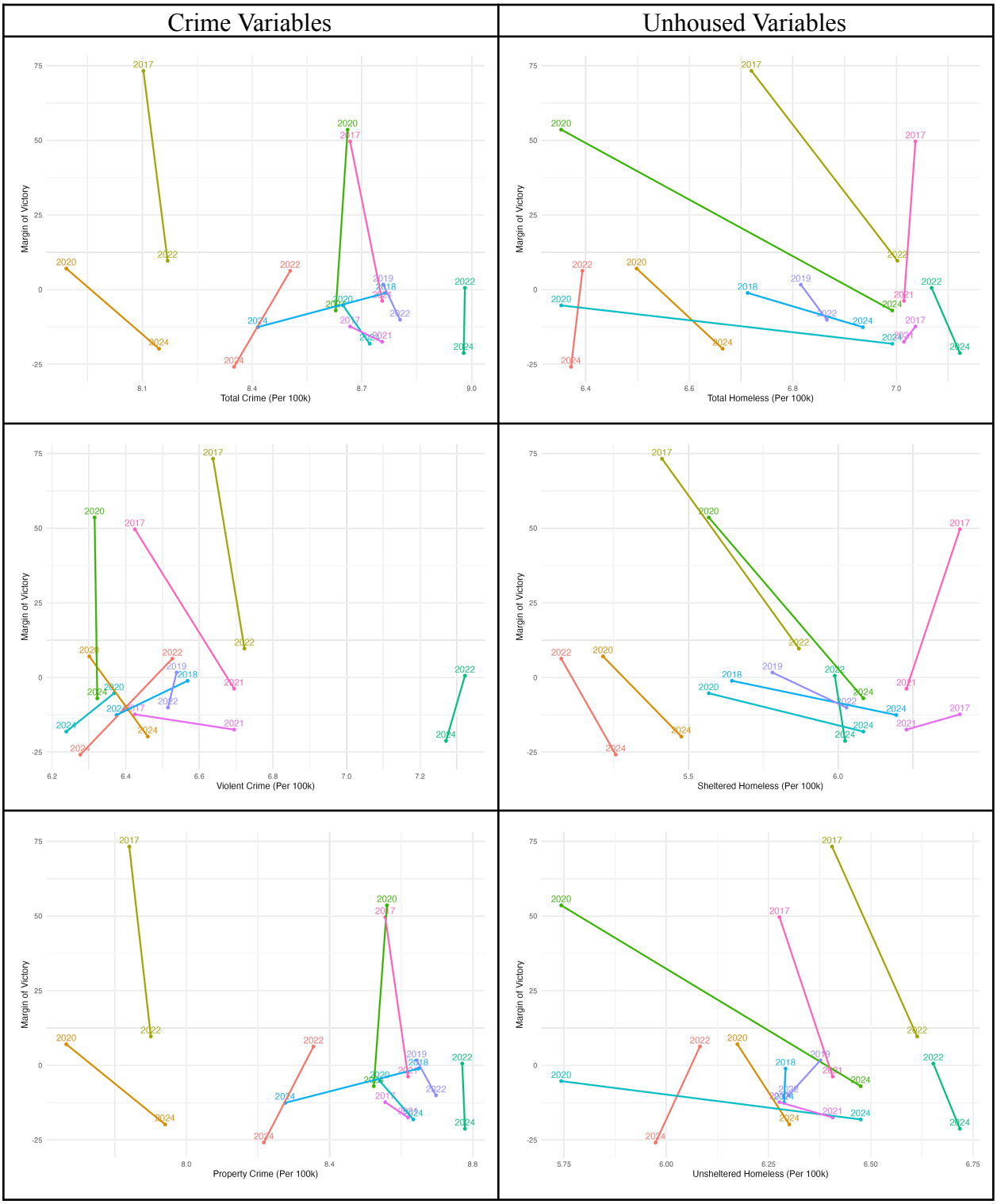
Jurisdiction	Affected Year(s)	Issue	Solution
Los Angeles	2024	No data	Percent change between 2022 and 2023
Los Angeles County	2024	No data	Percent change between 2022 and 2023
Alameda County	2024	No data	Percent change between 2023 and 2024; computed based on Oakland crime data in 2024
Portland	2015	Incomplete data (April to December)	Average of 2014 and 2016
Multnomah County	2015	Incomplete data (April to December)	Average of 2014 and 2016
Multnomah County	2024	Faulty data (Gresham Police Department reported all assault offenses together)	

Appendix J: Homelessness Data Issues and Solutions

Jurisdiction	Affected Year(s)	Issue	Solution
Los Angeles	2014	No data	Average of 2013 and 2015
Los Angeles	2021	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2020 and 2022 (unsheltered)
Los Angeles County	2021	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2020 and 2022 (unsheltered)
Oakland	2014 to 2016	No data	Alameda County data proportional to city population (based on 2017)
Oakland	2018	No data	Average of 2017 and 2019
Oakland	2020	No data	Average of 2019 and 2022
Oakland	2021	No data	Average of 2020 and 2022
Oakland	2023	No data	Average of 2022 and 2024
Alameda County	2016	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2015 and 2017 (unsheltered)
Alameda County	2018	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2017 and 2019 (unsheltered)
Alameda County	2020	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2019 and 2022 (unsheltered)
Alameda County	2021	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2020 and 2022 (unsheltered)
Alameda County	2023	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2022 and 2024 (unsheltered)
Portland	2014 to 2024	No data	Multnomah County data proportional to city population
Multnomah County	2018	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2017 and 2019 (unsheltered)
Multnomah County	2020	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2019 and 2022 (unsheltered)
Multnomah County	2021	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2020 and 2022 (unsheltered)

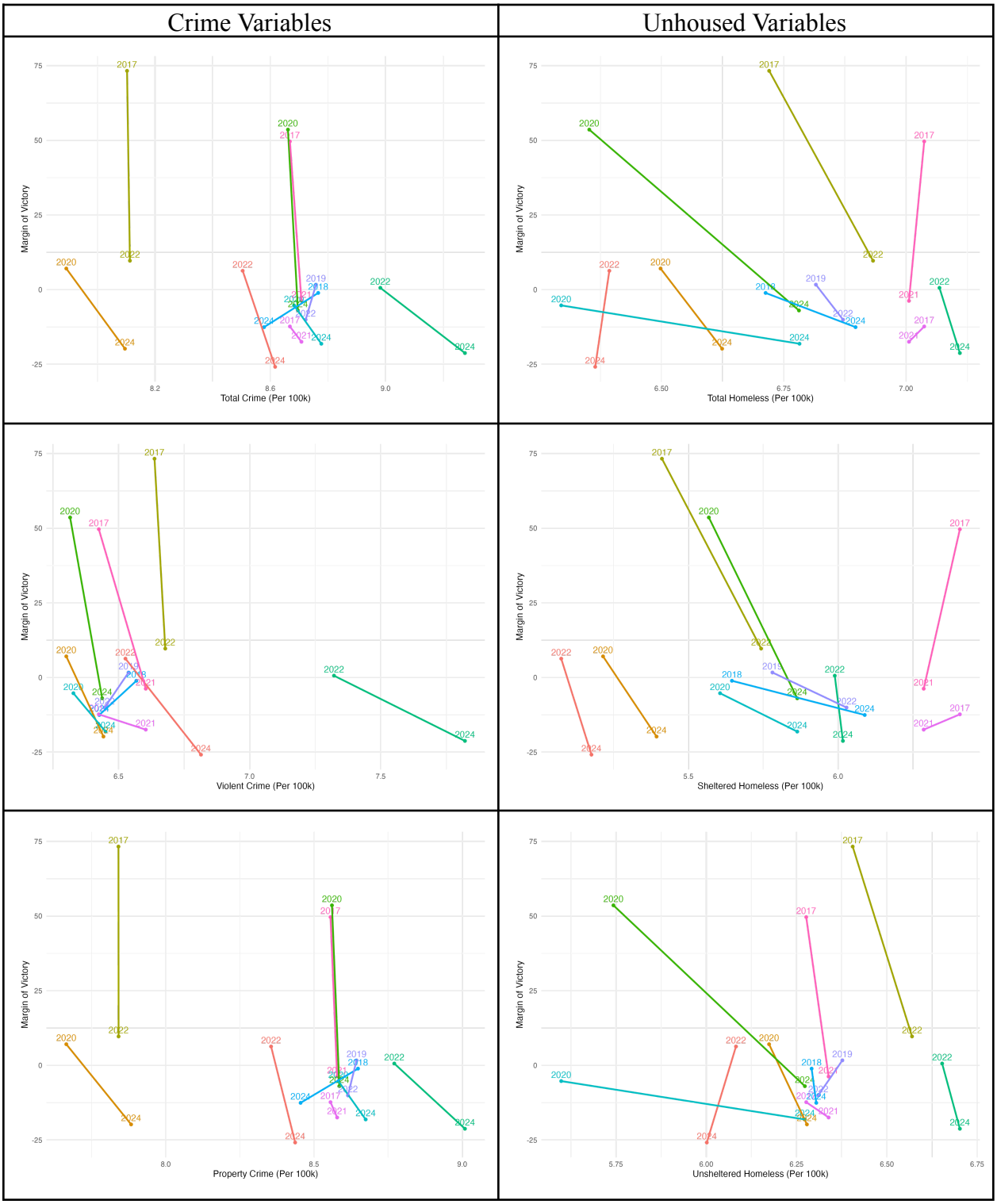
Jurisdiction	Affected Year(s)	Issue	Solution
Multnomah County	2024	No data	Percent change between 2022 and 2023
San Francisco	2016	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2015 and 2017
San Francisco	2017	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2017 and 2019
San Francisco	2020	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2019 and 2022 (unsheltered)
San Francisco	2021	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2020 and 2022 (unsheltered)
San Francisco	2023	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2022 and 2024 (unsheltered)
Seattle	2014 to 2016	No data	King County data proportional to city population (based on 2017)
Seattle	2021 to 2024	No data	King County data proportional to city population (based on 2020)
King County	2021	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2020 and 2022 (unsheltered)
King County	2023	No data (unsheltered)	Average of 2022 and 2024 (unsheltered)

Appendix K: Difference-in-Difference Visualizations (Raw Test)



Each line represents a pair of mayoral or prosecutorial elections in a unique jurisdiction.

Appendix L: Difference-in-Difference Visualizations (Weighted Test)



Each line represents a pair of mayoral or prosecutorial elections in a unique jurisdiction.

Appendix M: Race/Ethnicity Statistics of Case Jurisdictions

Race/Ethnicity	**Los Angeles**	**Los Angeles County**
Asian	12%	16%
Black	8.5%	9%
Hispanic/Latino	47.2%	48.6%
White	37.3%	69.6%
Race/Ethnicity	**Oakland**	**Alameda County**
Asian	15.5%	34.5%
Black	21.1%	10.5%
Hispanic/Latino	28.9%	23.3%
White	30.5%	47.1%
Race/Ethnicity	**Portland**	**Multnomah County**
Asian	8.1%	8.3%
Black	5.8%	6.3%
Hispanic/Latino	11.3%	13.7%
White	70.1%	77.8%
Race/Ethnicity	**San Francisco**	**Seattle**
Asian	35%	17.2%
Black	5.1%	6.6%
Hispanic/Latino	15.9%	8.2%
White	40.5%	61.8%
Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2023)		