

Precinct Straddling of City Boundaries

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SUPPOSE a situation in which citizens of a particular city vote in county, state and national elections, but in which their combined vote for each candidate is not clearly separable from the votes of residents of adjacent areas outside of the city. It can be argued that the inability to identify the city vote would have undesirable implications for the visibility of the political preferences of the people of the city, for the reliability and indeed validity of the process of administering city elections and for the accessibility of the city to analysis of its political history.

The hypothetical situation described is in fact reality. In a large part of the west the city vote in non-city elections is considerably, and sometimes hopelessly, obscured by the county's practice of using election precincts which straddle city boundaries.

We discovered the straddling phenomenon in the process of studying voting returns in the 1970 general election in 11 western states—Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Because this practice seemed to have quite far-reaching implications, we explored its scope among the 140 incorporated cities of 10,000 population and over as of 1970 in those states. Data on the total number of precincts (or voting districts) and on the proportion of them which crossed city boundaries were obtained by correspondence with the appropriate county officer (in some cases city officers). The same kind of information was gathered also from 34 randomly selected cities in California. Further, the chief elections supervisor of each of the 50 states was queried as to whether state law allows precinct crossing of city boundaries.

In California, Montana, Nevada, Oregon and Washington there was no straddling in 1970 (except for a minuscule amount in some special circumstances in Oregon). California, Montana and Oregon have laws barring it.

In the other six states substantial numbers of cases occurred in 1970. Only one of them—Wyoming—has a statutory prohibition against the practice, but the law allows county commissioners to disregard the restriction in cases where they judge it to be impractical. Of 71 cities in the study in those six states, there were at least some precincts crossing city boundaries in 56 (78.9 percent). Of the 2,894 precincts in the 71 incorporated cities with at least 10,000 population in those six states in 1970, 478 (16.5 percent) crossed city boundaries. Table I shows the distribution across a range of the percentage of straddling precincts in the 56 cities.

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TABLE I
 PERCENTAGE OF STRADDLING PRECINCTS IN ALL CITIES (56)
 WHERE AT LEAST SOME COUNTY PRECINCTS CROSSED CITY BOUNDARIES IN 1970

Percentage of precincts	Less than 5%	5-10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	41-50%	51-60%	Over 60%
Number of Cities	0	8	11	9	9	5	4	10

In the cities where straddling occurred at all, it was in substantial amounts. It was less often present in the large cities than in the medium-sized and smaller cities, as Table II indicates. This is to be expected, since the larger the city the greater the probability that many precincts would not touch city boundaries. But other factors may also cause straddling. For example, larger cities may tend to be more self-conscious politically in non-city elections and thus more anxious to have the voting patterns of the city electorate distinguishable from others.

TABLE II
 VARIATIONS BY CITY SIZE AS TO PROPORTION OF PRECINCTS STRADDLING
 CITY BOUNDARIES

Population Range	Number of Cities	Total Precincts	Number of Straddled Precincts	Percentage of Straddled Precincts
10,000-49,999	55	1027	273	26.6%
50,000-99,999	10	491	85	17.3%
100,000 +	6	1376	120	8.7%

On the basis of our correspondence it appears that the practice of allowing precincts to cross city boundaries is directly or indirectly forbidden by state law in only 15 of the 42 states from which we obtained replies (Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, California, Montana, Oregon and Wyoming).

We looked for some obvious explanations of the boundary-straddling phenomenon. One hypothesis is that it tends to accompany rapid urban growth. The officials responsible for drawing precinct lines might find it difficult or at least bothersome to attempt to keep precincts adjusted, for example, to territorially ragged or uneven expansion of city boundaries, and to situations where population pockets emerge in county territory immediately adjacent to the city. As one state elections director said, "Cities may annex at any time while precinct lines are set every two years. . . . Precincts would have to be changed frequently to reflect annexation. It would also be extremely difficult to secure precincts of reasonably uniform size without an in-city out-of-city combination precinct or precincts in many counties. In addition, polling places for rural precincts are difficult to locate and quite frequently the only place to vote is in a town."

A second hypothesis is that the larger the average precinct population in a given city, the greater the likelihood that precincts in the city will cross its

boundaries. As a practical matter, precincts need to be large enough so that costs of staffing and supervising them are not excessive, and so that adequately trained personnel can be provided. But precincts should not be so large that their administrators become unable to cope with a high turnout in a particular election. Thus, large precincts may be more likely to extend beyond city boundaries, because of an unwillingness of officials to act frequently to create the small precincts requisite for sorting out city residents from non-residents in various difficult boundary circumstances.

Our initial investigation did turn up a moderate relationship between increased urban population growth and increased size of urban precincts. But when we compared urban growth directly with cities ranked according to proportion of precincts straddling boundaries we found almost no relationship at all. Nor did much of a relationship emerge when we compared cities rank-ordered according to precinct size with proportion of precincts straddling boundaries. The data did indicate a slightly stronger relationship for precinct size and precincts straddling boundaries.

We believe that the explanation for the problem rests not with urban population increases nor with the size of the precinct but rather with the electoral administrative practices followed by local government. States as obviously diverse as California and Montana prohibit the practice of boundary straddling. Arizona and Idaho both allow it and it exists in nearly every city in the study within those two states. State laws and traditions vary regarding the creation and definition of precincts. Boundary straddling is a product of a tradition of election management that may have serious consequences not only for the student of urban politics but also for the voter and for the candidate seeking to identify his or her actual constituency.

Presumably any municipality wishes to confine to its own residents the privilege of voting for its officials. Administrators of election precincts crossing over a city's boundaries must, therefore, employ some means to exclude people who live outside of the city. Such people may attempt to vote because they are confused about the jurisdictions in which they live, or about the nature of the election. The possibility of confusion may be reinforced by the multi-tiered and geographically overlapping structures of city, county, special district, state and federal governments; by the fact that many people do not read newspapers or pay much attention to details of election notices; and by the low rate of consumption of political or governmental information in general among large segments of the population. And, of course, there is always the danger of fraud.

Cities may use for city elections a set of precincts different from those for elections administered by the county. But this entails the drawbacks of duplication of machinery and added complexities to be faced by the voters. In the absence of such a dual system, administrators of straddling precincts have a dual checking task in city elections: they must verify that the voter resides within the precinct and that the address in turn lies within the city portion of the precinct. It seems reasonable to suppose that the rate of errors in election administration may be associated in part with the quantity of

separate verifications needed to avoid error, and that precinct crossing of city boundaries may contribute significantly to a higher number of mistakes in the conduct of municipal balloting. If that is true, then the greater the proportion of straddling precincts in a given city, and the larger the number of non-residents within such precincts, the greater is the possibility of error.

The same added complexity may also contribute to confusion in some voters' minds over which elections they are eligible to take part in. This can lead to a reduction in voter turnout.

The straddling problem has no effect on opportunities for the analysis of election returns by county. But it has adverse consequences for the study of turnout and preferences of city populations in elections for county, state and national officials. Identification on a city basis is gravely reduced or altogether prevented, depending on the number of precincts, because it would be extraordinarily costly to distinguish the participating city residents from non-residents, and it would be impossible, except by very costly survey research and then only for a very recent election, to separate out the voting preferences of the participating non-residents. Therefore the accessibility of the city for the study of an important part of its political history is severely limited whenever it has precincts astride its boundaries.

Why is the city worth analyzing as to its people's responses in non-city elections? (1) The city is a significant political unit in the sense of having its own governmental system and, to a substantial extent, its own laws. (2) Each city has its own distinctive, individualized political, social and economic history, its own pattern of evolutionary development. (3) Cities in the aggregate provide some alternative civic life styles for meeting human needs, so that in a sense many people with the requisite means "vote for" a city by moving to it or by deliberately residing in it when they could go elsewhere. (4) The city must be understood in the context of competing and sometimes overriding jurisdictions. Consequently, cities are affected considerably by the outcomes of county, special district, state and national elections. Aware of their interests in the behavior of these larger jurisdictions, cities actively seek appropriate attention to their needs by the governments involved. Thus the city electorate participating in non-city elections can appropriately endeavor to view the election contests at least partly in the light of evaluations of the problems, needs and goals of the city.