Introduction: The Increasingly United States

Signed into law in 2010, the sweeping health care reform known as Obamacare remained a major issue for candidates four years later. And not simply for candidates running for the U.S. House or Senate, where the legislation was drafted and where any changes would be considered. The health care law came up even in races as removed from national politics as a retention election for the Tennessee State Supreme Court. There, three incumbent justices found themselves targeted by TV advertisements denouncing them because “they advanced Obamacare in Tennessee.” The justices had not actually heard any cases related to the federal law. But they had appointed the state’s attorney general, and he later chose not to join an anti-Obamacare lawsuit, providing ammunition to their opponents (Fuller, 2014; Fox 17, 2014).

On their own, low-profile elections like a state supreme court retention election rarely attract much voter interest, so tying opponents to divisive national issue is a common campaign tactic. It is also one employed by both sides of contemporary U.S. politics. In a 2013 special election to Washington D.C.’s Council, one candidate found himself fending off attacks over his support of GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney (Craig, 2013). One of his opponents even bothered to post a negative website headlined with a simple message: “Patrick Mara is a Republican.” Mara responded by arguing that national allegiances were not relevant in a local race, and his campaign mailers urged voters to “vote your conscience, not your party.” Despite high-profile endorsements including The Washington Post’s and the Sierra Club’s,
he failed to win the at-large seat in an overwhelmingly Democratic city.

From the candidates’ vantagepoint, the rationale behind such attacks seems obvious. National politics is rife with people and issues that are evocative to voters. To say “Obamacare” or “Mitt Romney” is to cue a set of meaningful associations with the national parties, the social groups that support them, and the positions that they take. Contemporary state and local politics are presumed to be mostly devoid of such symbols, meaning that national politics can serve as a ready benchmark against which to understand otherwise unknown state and local candidates.

In other realms of American life, nationalization is so apparent as to be indisputable. Consider retail. The United States has over 35,000 cities and towns, and they vary tremendously in their size, geography, and demographics. Yet over the 20th century, their storefronts came to look increasingly similar, as large chains like Wal-Mart, Subway, and CVS replaced smaller, locally owned stores throughout the country (Rae, 2003). In earlier generations, many purchases required local expertise, since the stores and their products varied from place to place. In important respects, the nationalization of American political behavior parallels the nationalization of retail. Just as an Egg McMuffin is the same in every McDonald’s, America’s two major political parties are increasingly perceived to offer the same choices throughout the country.

It is not only candidates and campaign staffs who assume that today’s electorate is nationalized. The discipline of political science has tracked American citizens’ growing fixation with Washington, DC. In recent decades, scholarship on American political behavior has focused overwhelmingly on national politics, with much more limited research at the state and local level. After identifying articles on U.S. elections in five leading political science journals between 1980 and 2000, Berry and Howell (2007) report that fully 94% of those articles focus on elections for federal offices (845). To ignore state and local politics is a costly omission, as it means ignoring the politics that elect the vast majority of officials in the U.S. as well as
the policy areas where states and localities hold sway. States and localities spend 47 cents of every dollar of total government spending in the U.S. They also incarcerate 87% of all prisoners nationwide (Carson, 2015). But they are far from receiving corresponding levels of attention from political scientists.

Even those studies that do analyze states and localities frequently treat them as independent polities, more like ancient Athens than like Athens, Georgia. It is also a mistake to treat states and local politics as independent and autonomous when many of the same voters, candidates, parties, and interest groups are politically active across multiple levels simultaneously. Surely the fact that the state and local electorates are drawn from the same population as the national electorate is politically consequential, as is the fact that they are frequently choosing between the same two political parties at different levels of government. The goal of this book is to stop taking today’s highly nationalized political behavior as a fact to be assumed, and to make it a puzzle to be documented and then explained.

To understand today’s nationalization and its consequences, we need new evidence as well as new concepts, and this book aims to provide both. To that end, this book presents a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative evidence drawn from all fifty American states and the District of Columbia. It employs many surveys, some conducted decades ago for other purposes and some conducted in recent years exclusively for this book. It also considers varied election returns in gubernatorial and mayoral races, some dating back nearly a century. Along the way, this book discusses cases as varied as the political coverage in the Los Angeles Times during the Great Depression, the expansion of local television news in the 1960s, the shifting emphases in state party platforms, and support for nuclear power. That said, this book draws more heavily on state-level evidence than on local evidence, both because it is more readily available and because of localities’ subordinate legal status in American federalism. Still, as the example of D.C. Council candidate Patrick Mara makes clear, nationalization has implications at the local level, several of which are
detailed in the chapters that follow. Although the streams of evidence are many, the results are clear. Since the 1970s, the political information reaching American voters, America’s state parties, and its electorate have all nationalized.

* * * * *

One way to stop taking the nationalization of contemporary politics for granted—and to recognize the importance of studying nationalization—is to think back to America’s earliest days as a nation. For the framers of the U.S. Constitution, citizens’ state-level loyalties were expected to be far stronger than those to the newborn nation (Levy, 2006, 2007). In Federalist 46, Madison gives voice to this belief, explaining “[m]any considerations... seem to place it beyond doubt that the first and most natural attachment of the people will be to the governments of their respective States” (Hamilton, Madison and Jay, 1788, pg. 294). Hamilton provides a similar view in Federalist 25, noting that “in any contest between the federal head and one of its members the people will be most apt to unite with their local government” (Hamilton, Madison and Jay, 1788, pg. 163-4). The states had key advantages over the federal government in winning citizens’ loyalties, as their purview included most of the issues that were familiar, local, and important to citizens’ daily lives (Levy, 2007). Citizens were also more likely to encounter state employees than employees of a distant federal government. In fact, so strong were state-level loyalties that Hendrickson (2003) explains the U.S. Constitution as a peace pact that averted conflict between separate countries.

At the time the U.S. Constitution was written, the assumption that citizens’ primary loyalties would lie with the more proximate state governments was uncontroversial. Although today’s America spans a far greater area than did the America of 1787, the distances covered by the original 13 states represented a more formidable barrier to imagining a singular, unified nation. In the late 18th century, the country’s primary transportation system was horse, oxen, and wagon, and a traveler could expect to go no more than 10 miles per day most of the year (Nettles, 1962, pg. 307). In
fact, transportation in the new nation was sufficiently poor that the Constitutional Convention was delayed for two weeks past its May 14th start to allow delegates time to brave mud-choked roads (Padula, 2002, pg. 44). Without broadcast media sources like radio or television, information traveled no faster than the horses and ships that carried it. What’s more, in 1790, just 5% of U.S. residents lived in urban areas. Living before the Erie Canal, before transcontinental railroads or interstate highways, the Framers held the reasonable expectation that political loyalties would wane over great distances.

The Framers’ assumptions about citizens’ state-level loyalties are not merely of historical interest. Americans today have inherited the political institutions they crafted, institutions whose operation hinges partly on whether those foundational assumptions hold true today. Consider one of the innovations of the U.S. Constitution, a federal system which divides sovereignty between the central and state governments (LaCroix, 2010). Stable federal systems are necessarily the product of a careful balancing act, in which neither the centrifugal forces of state-level disagreement nor the centralizing forces of pressing national problems dominate for long (Riker, 1964; Greve, 2012; Kollman, 2013). In one analysis of federalism, Levy (2007) considers the problem of protecting subnational authority from centralization, and ultimately concludes that federalism depends on strong emotional attachments between citizens and the subnational governments. In his words, the argument in the Federalist Papers “depends on the citizenry’s natural loyalty and attachment to their states as against the federal center. That is, a prediction about the affective relationship citizens will have to states is built into the account of what will make the constitutional structure work” (464). For the framers, citizens’ state-level loyalties were a critical counterweight to the centralizing tendencies inherent in a federal system. In fact, Pettys (2003) notes that the Framers wrote extensively about the competition between the federal government and the states for citizens’ affections, and dubs that competition “federalism’s forgotten marketplace.” Understanding
contemporary Americans’ engagement with state-level politics will thus help us understand whether that counterweight continues to work as the Framers envisioned (see also Young, 2015).

How Can Politics Be Nationalized When Communities Still Vary?

A quick glance at recent maps of election outcomes seems to argue decisively against nationalization, with states and towns differing dramatically in their support for the two major parties. Those differences appear to have hardened in recent years, as more and more states and localities grow reliably Republican or Democratic. In 2012, for instance, Barack Obama won 84% of the votes for President in New York’s Manhattan, while Mitt Romney won 80% of the vote in Midland County in western Texas. The very fact that calling Patrick Marra a Republican itself constituted an attack in Washington DC is evidence that political preferences vary greatly in different parts of the country.¹

It is not just partisan leanings that differ across American communities. Political mobilization and political behavior do, too. Since many political activities require face-to-face interactions, people who live in certain places are more likely to be asked to sign a petition, attend a campaign event, donate to a candidate, or vote than people living elsewhere (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Gainsborough, 2001; Oliver, 2001; Cho and Rudolph, 2008; Hopkins and Williamson, 2012; Sinclair, 2012).

¹These obvious geographic differences in partisanship have helped foster an ongoing debate among academics about the extent to which Democrats and Republicans are becoming more geographically segregated from one another. In what Bill Bishop terms the “big sort,” he contends that Americans are increasingly finding themselves in communities that reflect their values and political preferences, reducing their contact with those likely to disagree (Bishop, 2009). The claim that spatial segregation is increasing is controversial, as is the claim that such spatial sorting has broader political impacts (Glaeser and Ward, 2005; Abrams and Fiorina, 2012; Tam Cho, Gimpel and Huì, 2013; Nall and Mummolo, 2013). But both sides of that debate readily acknowledge that communities across the U.S. differ dramatically in their political leanings—what is disputable are the causes of those geographic differences, not the fact of geographic differences.
INTRODUCTION: THE INCREASINGLY UNITED STATES

2012). Given limited resources, political organizers are likely to send canvassers to accessible neighborhoods with concentrations of supporters. Likewise, for efficiency’s sake, candidates and parties typically fundraise where like-minded donors are concentrated (Gimpel, Lee and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2008; Cho and Gimpel, 2010; Drutman, 2013). The fact that some communities are heavily Democratic or Republican also means that the types of political arguments that residents encounter—both from their neighbors and from local politicians—will vary considerably (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague, 2004). So we need to ask: are such pervasive geographic differences a straightforward refutation of the claim that contemporary U.S. politics is nationally oriented?

No, in a word, although such objections do illustrate the value of defining nationalization precisely. One feature of nationalized political behavior is that it is oriented toward the national level of government and its divisions, to the near-exclusion of the state or local levels. Still, how people engage in national politics is known to be related to various individual-level factors, from their social class (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006; Gelman et al., 2008) and racial and ethnic background (Dawson, 1994; Abrajano and Alvarez, 2010) to their religious backgrounds and engagement (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope, 2005; Glaeser and Ward, 2005), age cohort (Campbell et al., 1960; Miller and Shanks, 1996), and other characteristics. Such demographic factors are also the bases of political mobilization in many instances (Hersh, 2015). People with different characteristics tend to live in different places, so a nationally oriented politics is fully compatible with significant differences in partisanship or political behavior across space. Even in a nationalized political system, places can and do differ markedly. But those differences are primarily due to compositional differences in who lives where rather than the contextual effect of living in a specific place. When political attitudes and behavior are nationalized, similar people subject to similar information environments and mobilization efforts should respond in similar ways. The core issues that animate
politics will be similar, too.

To contend that American political behavior is nationalizing is not to argue for the death of distance or the irrelevance of geography. To the contrary, this book is motivated precisely by the fact that geography remains a powerful determinant of so many aspects of Americans’ social and economic lives. The quality of schools, the danger of crime, the availability of jobs, the presence of pollution—all of these concerns affect some neighborhoods, municipalities, and regions far more than others (e.g. Sampson, 2012; Chetty and Hendren, 2015; Chetty, Hendren and Katz, 2015). Americans living on one block can be served by dramatically different schools—or subject to dramatically different tax rates or crime threats—than their neighbors on adjoining blocks. So if today’s political behavior has nationalized, it is also likely to be divorced from many of the local issues that Americans confront in our daily lives. Political nationalization is important not because it heralds the end of geography, but because it complicates political representation on the many issues where geography continues to matter greatly.

Engines of Nationalization

What is behind today’s nationalization? Contemporary social science excels at examining the effects of a single, well-defined cause such as the introduction of television. But our tools for identifying the varied causes of a single effect (or trend) are more limited, however important that effect might be. That is especially true when our interest is historical and our capacity to conduct experiments or ask new survey questions is limited. Still, while this book cannot quantify the relative importance of all the would-be explanations precisely, it does devote sustained attention to the potential causes of contemporary nationalization. It identifies two separate pathways that promote different aspects of nationalization, each with a proximate factor as well as a more distant and speculative one. At the same time, it downplays other would-be causes, such as changes in residential mobility. Overall, residential mobility
has not been rising in recent decades, and so cannot explain today’s nationalization in any straightforward way.

One proximate cause emphasized here is the transformation of the U.S. media market. As Americans switch from reading print newspapers and watching local TV news to online news sources and cable television, they are moving away from news sources that provide significant information about state and local politics. Older media outlets tend to have audiences that are bounded geographically. Given the limits inherent in distributing a print newspaper, someone waking up in Oklahoma City in 1930 could not expect to read that day’s Los Angeles Times. Those geographic limitations provided economic incentives for some media outlets to foreground state and local politics. In recent decades, as audiences shift away from print newspapers and television news, they are also shifting away from the outlets most likely to provide extensive state and local coverage. These changes are especially likely to affect Americans’ knowledge about and engagement with state and local politics, which is one element of nationalization.

Yet today’s strongly national orientation among voters is not simply a product of our changing media markets. Canada and Britain have seen similar shifts in their media markets without a concurrent nationalization of their political behavior, as the September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and the continued success of the Parti Quebecois in Quebec vividly illustrate. In both places, there are powerful political movements seeking to break up the country. One critical difference between the U.S. and those countries relates to the structure of national and subnational identity.

In political science as well as psychology, a growing body of scholarship pays attention to the role of identities in shaping individuals’ interactions with their social worlds. People think about themselves as members of varying social groups, and those attachments prove critical in explaining how they handle new information (Zaller, 1992; Taber and Lodge, 2006), the attitudes they adopt, and the actions they
take. Two people might be categorized as identical based on demographic categories, for instance, and yet they may differ dramatically in what they understand those categories to mean for their lives (Theiss-Morse, 2009a; Wong, 2010; Schildkraut, 2011, 2014). National and ethnic identities are among the more enduring (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1992), even as their political import can shift quite suddenly. Yet while Americans’ regions, states, and communities of residence remain a component of their self-image, they are not a very strong source of identity, especially when compared with identities based on family roles, religion, or occupation. And more importantly, place-based identities are not very politicized in today’s United States.

The strength of contemporary American identity, especially as compared to state- or local-level attachments, anchors the first causal pathway outlined in this book. Absent strong or politically charged attachments to their states and localities, Americans are not chronically engaged by subnational politics. If information about state and local politics is readily available, they will pick it up (see also Prior, 2007). But in a transforming media market characterized by growing consumer choice, the structure of Americans’ identities means that they are unlikely to go out of their way to seek out information about state or local politics.

It is the second pathway, however, that proves to be the primary influence on vote choice. The increasing alignment of national- and state-level voting is to an important extent the product of a party and interest group constellation that is funded nationally (Garlick, 2015), and that increasingly offers voters similar choices in all parts of the country. Political scientists have long argued that party cues allow voters to connect their own policy preferences with the choices on the ballot in a straightforward way (Campbell et al., 1960; Fiorina, 1981; Popkin, 1994). Here, we add the important caveat that those party cues are national ones. Contemporary state parties do not vary markedly in the platforms they are offering voters, and even those differences that do exist do not appear to influence voters’ perceptions or their votes. Today, party labels convey very similar meanings in jurisdictions
across the country. In short, one proximate cause of nationalized vote choices is the increasingly similar choices the parties offer across the nation.

What, then, explains why parties nationalize? One answer comes from Chhibber and Kollman (2004), who emphasize the concentration of governmental authority. In places and at times where power is centralized at the national level, parties will focus on controlling the levels of national policymaking. It’s the same impulse that led Lyndon Johnson to tell a longtime friend he was making a mistake by leaving Washington, D.C. to run for Governor of Texas when “here’s where the power is” (Caro, 2012, pg. 93). But in more decentralized contexts, control over state or provincial governments is more valuable, and party systems are more likely to vary across the country. While the Democratic Party was shut out of the White House for most of the period between 1896 and 1932, it had noteworthy consolation prizes: one-party rule over most of the South (Mickey, 2015) and several large cities (Erie, 1988; Trounstine, 2008).

In analyzing the U.S., we do not find evidence of a straightforward link between governmental authority and the nationalization of political behavior. For instance, state and national vote choices became decoupled in the 1960s, at the very time that the flood of Great Society legislation was increasing the federal role in many policy areas traditionally handled by states and localities. Still, the evidence presented here is quite compatible with the claim of an indirect connection, as the concentration of authority is likely to have influenced voters over time by shaping the parties’ policy goals and platforms. This connection from state authority to party platforms and brands to vote choice constitutes the second pathway emphasized here.

Certainly, this account of the causes of contemporary nationalization is not exhaustive. For one thing, the pathways identified here are conceived of as two separate tracks, but it is possible they might intersect. As the media environment shifts, for example, so too does the capacity of the subnational parties to distinguish themselves. And while this book emphasizes how identities interact with the changing
media environment to shape political information, it is also possible that in the long run, the media environment shapes identities.\(^2\)

This book affords other plausible explanations less attention. The observation that the American economy has grown more nationally integrated over the same period gives reason to think that economic factors might play an important role as well. During its history as an agricultural and then industrial country, America’s economies were very distinctive regionally: cotton was the product of south and later the southwest, cars were made in the midwest, and potatoes came from Idaho and other northern and western states. But the service-oriented economy of recent decades has reduced regional economic distinctiveness (Kim, 1995). To be sure, over-time trends in economic homogenization do not match the trends in nationalization, as the latter are more variable. But these economic shifts remain a valuable backdrop that might help explain the nationalizing political parties. To claim that two factors—the media and the political parties—played critical, proximate roles in nationalizing our politics is not say that they were the only factors at work.

**Chapter Outline**

This book is divided into two sections. In the first, it seeks to define and describe trends in nationalization, while in the second it identifies two causal pathways that partly explain it.

**Trends in Nationalization**

This project is certainly not the first to take up questions of nationalization, so its Chapter 1 (“Meanings of Nationalization, Past and Present”) details what we already know about it before fixing the term’s meaning for the remainder of the book. Occasional studies have considered political nationalization within the U.S., but their focus has been principally on shifts in government, parties, or political institutions.

\(^2\)In fact, both Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1992) emphasize the role of print media in making national communities conceivable in the first place.
INTRODUCTION: THE INCREASINGLY UNITED STATES

(Lunch, 1987; Gimpel, 1996; Chhibber and Kollman, 2004; Paddock, 2005; Klinghardt, 2010)—and not voter behavior. That said, a separate body of scholarship have uncovered a variety of trends that are clues of nationalization in American voters' political behavior, from the declining incumbency advantage to the changing base of party activists. To date, though, we have not understood those observations within a single framework. We have seen them as isolated symptoms, not as evidence of a common diagnosis. After reviewing existing evidence on nationalization, we are then in a position to define the term. When applied to the study of political behavior, nationalization has two distinct elements. Political behavior is considered to be nationalized when it is motivated by the same conflicts at the national and sub-national levels and when it is engaged primarily with national affairs and symbols.

Chapter 2 (“The Nationalization of American Elections, 1928-2014”) presents empirical evidence on the first aspect of nationalization, the alignment of national and sub-national divisions. Specifically, it measures the level of nationalization in American voting behavior and partisanship over time, and it does so using a combination of county-level election returns and individual-level survey data. Writing in 1967, the political scientist Donald Stokes saw the nationalization of American voting behavior as a steady trend, one he linked to ongoing changes in communications technology. Yet the chapter’s varied analyses provide a more nuanced and up-to-date picture (see also Bartels, 1998; Brady, D’Onofrio and Fiorina, 2000). They focus chiefly on gubernatorial elections, as governors are at once sufficiently visible and influential that it is plausible their elections could generate distinctive geographic patterns of political support. The evidence shows that nationalization had been rising in the 1930s and 1940s, but it peaked and then declined in the 1960s and 1970s, precisely at the time Stokes was writing. Since around 1980, the nationalizing trend in gubernatorial elections has resumed and accelerated, a conclusion reinforced by analyses of individual-level survey data from exit polls and the American National Election Studies (ANES). In fact, by 2014, the relationship between presidential
and gubernatorial county-level voting was almost perfect, meaning that returns in
governors’ races could be predicted well without knowing any state-specific informa-
tion. As compared to the past, the present era is undeniably a nationalized one.
But the nationalization of political divisions is not a secular trend, increasing inex-
orably as revolutions in communication and transportation reduce the connection
between distance and information. Instead, it waxes and wanes in ways indicative of
a more complex causal story. These patterns are further reinforced through analyses
of partisan identification and presidential home-state advantages. In its conclusion,
this chapter also outlines why nationalized vote choices have tended to advantage
Republicans over Democrats.

In Chapter 3 (“Staying Home When It’s Close to Home”), we consider the sec-
ond element of nationalized political behavior, citizen engagement across the levels
of the federal system (see also Arceneaux, 2005, 2006). It also charts how that en-
gagement has varied over time. There are reasons to think—as the framers of the
Constitution did—that local and state governments would win the loyalties of the
citizens over the more remote federal government. Local politics frequently means
face-to-face politics, and it addresses tangible issues that are likely to have a direct
bearing on voters’ lives (Fischel, 2009; Oliver, Ha and Callen, 2012). But as this
chapter shows, Americans today are primarily engaged with national and above all
presidential politics. The evidence is extensive: contemporary Americans’ engage-
ment with federal politics is evident in their knowledge, descriptions of politicians,
web searches, campaign contributions, and choices about when to cast ballots.

There are ongoing debates about whether Americans know enough to fulfill their
democratic responsibilities in national elections (Popkin, 1994; Delli Carpini and
Keeter, 1996). But however one assesses knowledge about national politics, knowl-
edge about state and local politics is markedly lower. Chapter 3 also brings to light
what we term the “presidential paradox.” At the same time that voters express their
disproportionate interest in the federal government, they acknowledge that mayors
INTRODUCTION: THE INCREASINGLY UNITED STATES

and governors can have more influence on their day-to-day lives. This effect is especially pronounced when asking about the president as a person, suggesting that the overwhelming media attention on the U.S. presidency might be one factor behind the disproportionate interest in national politics.

The conception of nationalization advanced in this book focuses partly on the alignment between national and subnational divisions in voting behavior. To conclude that today’s electorate is nationalized, we thus need to consider the dogs that didn’t bark—the variety of state and local issues that could have given rise to indigenous political conflict in a less nationalized system. Precisely because such issues are typically of interest in only some parts of the country, they are not frequently included in nationally representative surveys. Indeed, prior studies of the effects of local context have focused overwhelmingly on just a handful of factors, such as the ethnic and racial diversity of the community or the state of the local economy. Chapter 4 (“Local Contexts in a Nationalized Age”) takes up the task of studying a variety of political issues with disparate spatial impacts, issues that have the potential to give rise to distinctive, localized political divisions. The issues it considers vary markedly, from nuclear power and economic inequality to immigration, defense spending, and climate change. Yet the analyses uncover a fact common to many of them: on most issues, once we account for political partisanship, Americans’ political attitudes are not strongly correlated with attributes of their communities. Americans living near federal lands are no more opposed to the federal government than people living elsewhere, just as Americans who live on an ocean coast are only imperceptibly more concerned about climate change. In the contemporary U.S., once we know basic demographic facts about an individual, knowing her place of residence adds little to our understanding of a variety of political attitudes. The consistency of that pattern reflects the imprint of a nationalized political system, one in which citizens react not to local interests but to national symbols.

To be sure, there are some local conditions that show meaningful and consistent
associations with political attitudes, just as the extensive literature on contextual effects would lead us to expect. But ironically, the issues that do show disparate spatial patterns prove to be those salient in national politics, such as immigration, crime, or the economy. Far from being an alternative to national issues, local issues appear to become politically meaningful precisely when citizens can use national debates to understand and politicize them. All politics is decidedly not local.

**Explanations of Nationalization**

The book’s Chapter 5, entitled “Explaining Nationalization,” inaugurates its second section, a section that focuses on the potential causes of nationalization. This chapter briefly summarizes a range of potential explanations of nationalization, from economic transformations and geographic mobility to changes in U.S. media markets or its political parties. The Chapter then outlines the two causal pathways that are our focus here. The first emphasizes how shifting party platforms and brands lead to highly nationalized voting patterns, possibly as a long-term consequence of changes in state authority and parties’ shifting priorities. The second details how Americans’ identities and the changing media environment produce low knowledge of and engagement in state and local politics.

Accordingly, in Chapter 6 (“E Pluribus Duo”), we take up the political parties, the first proximate cause emphasized here. Are they heterogeneous national coalitions, with state parties enjoying considerable leeway to tune their platforms and strategies to the state context? Or are they unified and nationalized parties, in which the parties differ little from state to state? Both depictions are ideal types. But this Chapter uses various data sources to demonstrate that the state parties themselves, and especially as voters perceive them, have increasingly come to mirror their national counterparts. It reviews prior research on the state parties and provides straightforward spatial models of potential relationships between state parties and their national counterparts. The Chapter then reviews data from Shor and
McCarty (2011) illustrating the polarization of most state legislatures between 1996 and 2014. From there, it turns to automated analyses of state party platforms to extend our view back to the First World War. As the evidence makes clear, there has been a dramatic upswing in the polarization of state parties’ topics over time.

Chapter 6 then shifts from actual records of party positions to the question of how the voters perceive the parties. Voter perception and actual party positioning need not be the same. Analyzing a 2014 GfK survey conducted on a population-based sample, we see that the contemporary state parties are perceived with a bit less clarity than their national counterparts—but in almost identical terms. The Chapter demonstrates that very few voters have different partisan identifications at different levels of government, further undermining the capacity of state or local politics to sustain divisions that are not animated nationally. It also shows that even those differences in actual state party positioning which scholars do detect are not reflecting in gubernatorial voting: by 2006, there was essentially no advantage to gubernatorial candidates when their state party had taken more moderate positions in the outgoing legislative session.

Yet shifts within the parties are not as well matched to explaining the second face of nationalization, Americans’ declining engagement in state and local politics relative to national politics. For that, we turn to two factors operating in tandem: the structure of Americans’ loyalties and the changing ways in which they get political information. How federalism operates hinges on citizens’ relative connections to the different levels of government, and thus on their identities (Riker, 1964; Levy, 2006, 2007; Kollman, 2013; Young, 2015). Yet assessments of contemporary Americans’ geographic identities and their connections to the different levels of government have been few and far between (but see Wong, 2010; Young, 2015). In Chapter 7 (“Sweet Home America”), we consider the role of place-based identities in contemporary American politics. Even today, the chapter shows that many Americans feel attached to their places of residence. Yet they report far stronger connections to
their families and to America as a whole, making those identities more fertile ground for political mobilization. What’s more, among their various spatially defined communities, Americans’ strongest connections are to their neighborhoods, and not to more explicitly political units such as their towns, cities, or states. The content of these place-based identities is not usually political, a fact which further undermines state and local identities as a bedrock for durable political engagement.

Contemporary Americans’ identities are unlikely to motivate them to seek out information about state and local politics when that information isn’t readily available. That observation makes the structure of the information environment critical. Accordingly, we then turn to the changing media market in Chapter 8 (“The Declining Market for State and Local News”). Over the history of the American republic, the primary sources of political information have shifted repeatedly, as pamphlets, newspapers, and radio have been joined and in some instances replaced by broadcast television, cable television, and the Internet. Scholars and observers have devoted considerable attention to how such changes in the media market might influence the partisan and ideological slant of the news available to Americans (e.g. Prior, 2007; Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013; Levendusky, 2013b,a; Dilliplane, 2014; Hopkins and Ladd, 2014; Arceneaux et al., 2015; Lelkes, Sood and Iyengar, 2015; Mutz, 2015). But these changes are also likely to have profound influences on the available information about state and local government, as the shift in media technologies since 1900 has generally been away from media outlets with audiences that are bounded in space. Given limits in their distribution and dissemination, print newspapers have significant incentives to specialize in the news of a given, spatially defined community. Local television stations do as well, although the strength of the incentive depends on the fit between their broadcast area and local political jurisdictions. For internet and cable news outlets, that is far less true. Yet despite the likely impact of the shifting media environment on the balance of information about different levels of the federal system, the topic has received little scholarly attention.
Available technologies surely influence the information available to citizens, but the relationship between a medium of mass communication and its content is by no means deterministic. Media outlets’ relative attention to the different levels of government needs to be analyzed, not assumed. Accordingly, Chapter 8’s empirical analysis begins by using automated content analyses to identify the levels of attention to state and local politics since 1920. For two big-city newspaper outlets—The Chicago Tribune and The Los Angeles Times—it uses basic word frequencies to show that state politics has long been an overlooked topic, even in the more spatially oriented media environment of years past. For the period since the 1980s, digital archives provide access to far more media content, enabling the analysis of 51 of the largest American newspapers. Those analyses reinforce the core conclusion that state-level politics receives markedly less attention than local politics, which itself is neglected relative to national politics. There is some noteworthy spatial variation, with newspapers in state capitals providing more state-level coverage than their counterparts elsewhere. Somewhat surprisingly, analyses of select local television transcripts in the post-2006 period indicate that even in recent years, local television news has given significant attention to state politics and government.

Chapter 8 also considers the what these trends have meant for audiences. While there has not been a notable decline in the relative coverage of state and local politics within a given medium of communication, there have been critical shifts in the relative sizes of audiences across the different types of media since around 1990, with newspaper readership and local television viewership declining as the audiences for internet-based news and cable television have grown. Put differently, spatially bounded media sources are losing their audiences, and so citizens are likely to be losing their information about state and local politics. Given the differences in median audience ages across the various media types, this trend appears likely to continue.

After documenting these facts, Chapter 8 considers their political implications.
Using survey data, it shows that people’s knowledge about state politics is strongly associated with their sources of news. People whose primary news sources have significant state and local content are more likely to know their governor or to name in-state Representatives and U.S. Senators than other citizens. The chapter then substantiates the claim that these changes in the media environment are a cause of declining state and local political engagement. It does so by using the leverage afforded by the varied relationships between state capitals and TV’s Designated Market Areas (DMAs). In the 1960s and 1970s, living in a state capital DMA increased gubernatorial turnout, while living in a DMA dominated by another state had the opposite effect. Such patterns are expected: local television news became a major source of political information in the 1960s (Prior, 2006, 2007). Yet these effects are much more muted after around 1990, as local TV news lost viewers to cable news and then the Internet. Where people live—and the amount of information local television provides about state politics as a result—is no longer as influential on their participation in gubernatorial elections as it was 30 years ago. These case studies make the underlying causal claim credible: as news audiences move to cable television and the Internet, the effects of their access to television coverage of their statehouse have declined. In theory, the internet has the potential to vastly increase the local news available to Americans—local news from any part of the country is but a few computer keystrokes away. In actuality, that potential goes largely unused, as new media outlets serve to concentrate attention on a small number of national news sources (Hindman, 2008).

The Consequences of Nationalization

The nationalization of American retail is inscribed on our landscape, visible to any passerby. The nationalization of our politics is at once less visible to the casual observer and yet potentially more consequential. In fact, the breadth of nationalization’s impacts is part of what makes the topic so important, as it touches on many
of the core questions of contemporary political science. If voters’ political information and behaviors are primarily oriented toward national politics, and if political agendas are set nationally, those facts have implications for elections and accountability in state and local politics. Similarly, enquiring about citizens’ relationship to particular subnational spaces and polities clearly speaks to questions about representation and the role of spatially defined legislative districts. Studying the changing role of space in American political behavior might also illuminate aspects of voter decision-making, party strategy, party organization, and intra-party bargaining. To the extent that real-world social networks are spatially bounded, studying space has the potential to provide insights into the role of interpersonal encounters in political attitudes, too. These research questions are related to still more general questions posed by social theorists, such as the impact of the size of the political community (e.g. Dahl and Tufte, 1973), communications technology, economic transformation, or geographic mobility on political behaviors and identities. Insights about nationalization can reshape our answers to a wide variety of questions.

In the Conclusion, we explore two consequences of nationalization of particular interest—those related to political accountability and to the design of our political institutions. States and localities make critical decisions across a broad array of policy areas, from what is taught in their schools and how land can be developed to who can marry and what constitutes a crime within their boundaries. Yet in a nationalized polity, many votes cast for governors, state legislators, and even sometimes mayors are cast with an eye toward the candidates’ alignment in national politics (see also Rogers, 2013a). Such voting patterns have the potential to dampen the electoral connection between voters and officials, as state and local officials may come to believe they are insulated from the threat of losing at the ballot box. Nationalization might explain why in 2014, during a period of relatively even and fiercely contested partisan competition nationally, 36 of the 50 states have unified party control of their statehouses, a fraction higher than it has been in six decades (Nagourney, 2014).
Certainly, nationalization is a critical part of the explanation for contemporary Republican dominance in many statehouses and in the U.S. House of Representatives: even among parties with equal levels of overall strength, it advantages parties with majority support in many jurisdictions over those whose support is more spatially concentrated (Chen and Rodden, 2013; Abramowitz and Webster, 2015; Jacobson, 2015). In nationalized eras, it is also plausible that the political agenda will be set nationally, and will be outside the control of state or local actors. The risk, then, is of a mismatch between the political system’s relentless focus on national issues and the important decisions made at the state and local levels. It was that mismatch that Republican Patrick Mara pointed to when arguing for his election to the D.C. Council.

Contemporary nationalization is also important because American political institutions were designed in—and perhaps intended for—a less nationalized era. The U.S. Constitution and many state constitutions were written long before television, the Internet, or even the railroad. They place a significant emphasis on representing space: each of the 50 states has authority that is geographically bounded, and legislators at all levels of government are typically elected from spatially defined districts. Where Americans live determines the laws to which they are subject, the taxes that they pay, and the services and protections they can claim. It also shapes who represents them and how they are represented at all levels of government. But in the centuries following the American Founding, advances in communication and transportation have transformed the role of space in Americans’ day-to-day lives. Information that might have taken days to reach a citizen now arrives in fractions of a second, while an interstate trip that might have taken many weeks now takes hours. Contemporary Americans also commonly move across political boundaries. While our founders expected political loyalties to fray with distance, it appears today that the opposite relationship is closer to the truth. These shifts raise questions about how well 18th century political institutions map onto 21st century lives, and about
whether contemporary America takes full advantage of its federalist institutions. We turn to those questions in the book’s conclusion.