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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Party Strategies in Local Elections: Insights from Israel

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Abstract

In this study, we investigate national parties' strategic choices in Israeli local elections, utilizing a dataset of 3,737 electoral lists across 200 municipalities over three election cycles (2013–2024). Employing label coding and multilevel analysis, we reveal that municipality size, previous electoral success, mayoral candidacy, and ruling coalition membership significantly influenced parties' decisions to compete and their choice of label. Notably, almost 30% of party lists conceal their identity by opting for 'disguised' labels. We argue that Israel's extreme party decline in local politics, characterized by the dominance of independent lists, may foreshadow global trends as national parties withdraw from municipal contests. Our findings highlight the prevalence of disguised party lists, raising questions about voter information, as party labels serve as crucial informational shortcuts. This study contributes to the literature on party strategies and electoral dynamics in multilevel polities by emphasizing label analysis in local elections.

KEYWORDS

Independent list, Israel, Local elections, Party label, Party strategies

Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie untersucht die strategischen Entscheidungen nationaler Parteien bei israelischen Kommunalwahlen anhand von 3.737 Wahllisten in 200 Gemeinden über drei Wahlzyklen (2013–2024). Mittels Label-Codierung und Mehrebenenanalyse zeigen wir, dass Gemeindegröße, vorheriger Wahlerfolg, Bürgermeisterkandidatur und Mitgliedschaft in einer Regierungskoalition die Entscheidungen der Parteien zur Teilnahme und Labelwahl signifikant beeinflussen. Fast 30% der Parteilisten verbergen ihre Identität durch "getarnte" Labels. Wir

argumentieren, dass Israels extremer Parteienschwund in der Kommunalpolitik, gekennzeichnet durch die Dominanz unabhängiger Listen, globale Trends vorwegnehmen könnte. Unsere Ergebnisse unterstreichen die Prävalenz getarnter Parteilisten und werfen Fragen zur Wählerinformation auf, da Parteilabels als entscheidende Informationsträger dienen. Diese Studie trägt zur Literatur über Parteistrategien und Wahldynamiken in Mehrebenensystemen bei, indem sie die Bedeutung der Labelanalyse bei Kommunalwahlen hervorhebt.

Résumé

Cette étude examine les choix stratégiques des partis nationaux lors des élections locales israéliennes, utilisant 3 737 listes électorales dans 200 municipalités sur trois cycles électoraux (2013–2024). À travers la codification des étiquettes et l'analyse multiniveaux, nous démontrons que la taille de la municipalité, le succès électoral précédent, la candidature à la mairie et l'appartenance à la coalition au pouvoir influencent significativement les décisions des partis de participer et leur choix d'étiquette. Près de 30% des listes dissimulent leur identité par des étiquettes "déguisées". Nous soutenons que le déclin extrême des partis dans la politique locale israélienne, dominée par les listes indépendantes, pourrait préfigurer des tendances mondiales. Nos résultats soulignent la prévalence des listes déguisées, questionnant l'information des électeurs, les étiquettes servant de raccourcis informationnels cruciaux. Cette étude contribue à la littérature sur les stratégies des partis et les dynamiques électorales dans les systèmes multiniveaux.

Riassunto

Questo studio analizza le scelte strategiche dei partiti nazionali nelle elezioni locali israeliane, utilizzando 3'737 liste elettorali in 200 comuni su tre cicli elettorali (2013–2024). Attraverso il coding dei label e l'analisi multilivello, dimostriamo che le dimensioni del comune, il precedente successo elettorale, la candidatura a sindaco e l'appartenenza alla coalizione di governo influenzano significativamente le decisioni dei partiti di competere e la scelta del label. Quasi il 30% delle liste nasconde la propria identità con label "mascherati". Sosteniamo che l'estremo declino dei partiti nella politica locale israeliana, caratterizzato dal predominio delle liste indipendenti, possa preannunciare tendenze generali che vedono i partiti nazionali ritirarsi dalle elezioni locali. I risultati evidenziano la prevalenza di liste mascherate, sollevando interrogativi sull'informazione dell'elettorato, poiché i label di partito fungono da cruciali scorciatoie informative. Questo studio contribuisce alla letteratura sulle strategie dei partiti e sulle dinamiche elettorali nei sistemi multilivello, sottolineando l'importanza dell'analisi dei label nelle elezioni locali.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, several political parties in various democratic countries have encountered significant difficulties in maintaining their dominant positions. The emergence of personalized politics and dwindling loyalty among voters has weakened mainstream parties' popularity and electoral performance (Rahat & Kenig, 2018b). Consequently, these parties face a complex strategic dilemma in determining their campaign tactics and the arenas in which they should compete.

Local government politics is an arena in which parties' strategic choices have significantly reshaped the landscape. A growing global trend has seen national parties steadily withdrawing from municipal contests, ceding ground to independent local lists (ILLs) focused solely on jurisdictional needs and unrelated to any national party (Holtmann, 2008; Rahat & Kenig, 2018a; Reiser & Holtmann, 2008). While this pattern plays out across nations, Israel is an extreme outlier, with ILLs garnering an extraordinarily high vote share compared to European countries, as depicted in Figure 1.

Zooming in to Israel's municipal arenas, Figure 2 reveals the precipitous decline of national party lists over time, supplanted by the ascendancy of ILLs as the predominant electoral force
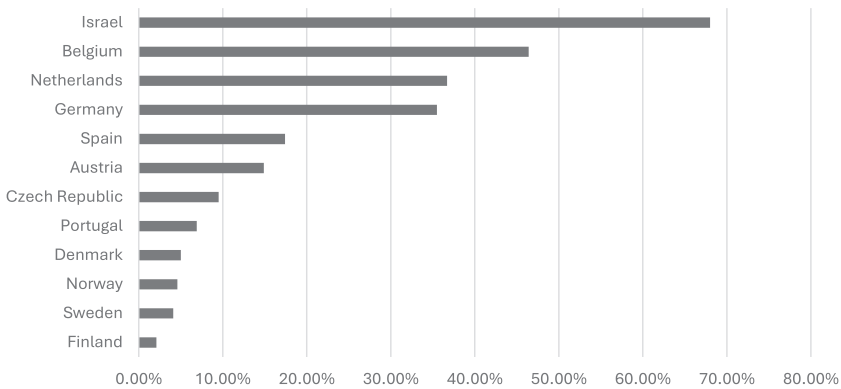

FIGURE 1 Share of Vote for ILLs in Chosen European Countries.
Sources of votes for ILLs in different countries: Otjes (2018) for Belgium, Germany, Spain, Austria, Portugal, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden; Jüptner (2008) for the Czech Republic; Gradus et al. (2023) for the Netherlands; and author calculations for Israel.
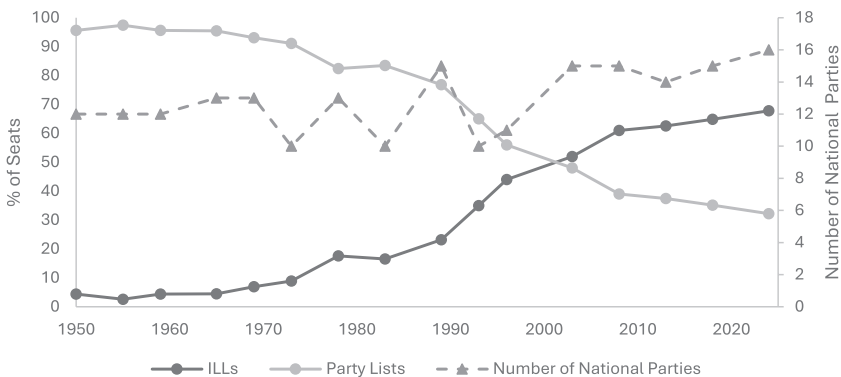

FIGURE 2 Party lists and ILLs in Israel's Local Government and Number of National Parties 1950–2024.
Source: Data for 1950–2003 (Brichta, 2005), 2008 (Finkelstein et al., 2024), 2013–2024 authors' data. The number of national parties in the parliament is the number of parties represented in the Knesset during the relevant local elections.

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(Brichta, 2005; Nachmias et al., 2016). The withdrawal of national parties from the local arena in Israel mirrors the broader global pattern but in an accelerated and extreme fashion (Rahat & Kenig, 2018a). This suggests that Israel may be a bellwether to where other nations are potentially headed.

However, making strategic decisions about local elections is not as simple as choosing to compete. National parties that participate in local elections face the additional decision of whether to openly identify with their party or adopt a neutral, non-partisan label. In this study, we examine the factors that influence this two-stage decision-making process. The first stage involves deciding whether to participate in the election. Parties must consider various factors before making this decision. The second stage involves choosing a label under which to compete if they decide to participate.

Scholarship on the first stage is vast and diverse. The seminal work by Dahl and Tufte (1973) established the theory behind the effect of municipality size on party decisions, supported by various studies throughout the years (Dodeigne et al., 2021; Hijino & Ishima, 2021; Kjær & Elklit, 2010; Maškarinec & Klimovský, 2016; Otjes, 2020; Vampa, 2016). The analysis of the 2006 national and 2008 local elections in Israel by Nachmias et al. (2016) revealed that local support patterns in previous national elections influence a party's decision to compete in local elections. Other scholars have provided further empirical evidence of the significant effect of different socioeconomic indicators of the municipality on party decisions. Among these is a municipality's socioeconomic rank (Dodeigne et al., 2020; Maškarinec & Klimovský, 2016; Vampa, 2016) and the periphery status (Nachmias et al., 2016).

While the first step has been extensively studied, the second step has received less attention, particularly the phenomenon of party lists being disguised as neutral labels. These party-affiliated lists compete using a label that does not reveal their national affiliation to the voter (Dodeigne et al., 2020; Vampa, 2016). Labels serve as information shortcuts for median voters, providing them with information about the electoral list or candidate and allowing them to compare different lists of candidates (Downs, 1957). When a candidate aligns herself with a national party, she signals her ideological and policy stance to potential voters (Cox, 1997; Snyder & Ting, 2002). In some countries, like Israel, a candidate is not required to disclose her party affiliation on her label. Whether a candidate or party makes the decision, using party cues on a list label is a matter of choice. This study aims to uncover some factors that influence these decisions.

Two questions lead our inquiry into the process of party election strategies in Israel's local government. First, what factors influence national parties' decisions to compete in local elections? Second, under what conditions do these parties opt to participate in their partisan identity rather than adopt a politically neutral label? To address these questions, we constructed a dataset of all elected lists in Israeli municipalities over three election cycles (2013, 2018, and 2024), covering all 3,737 lists in 200 municipalities. We start by manual label coding of all party-affiliated lists to uncover the lists "in disguise," followed by statistical analysis to test our hypothesis.

Our analysis reveals that municipality size and electoral success significantly influence party choice to compete. A mayoral candidacy and/or ties to the national ruling coalition influence the label choice. Notably, nearly 30 percent of party lists choose 'disguised' labels. This phenomenon of 'disguised' labels underscores the strategic adaptations national parties employ to navigate the evolving political landscape.

This study contributes to understanding national parties' strategic behavior in local elections by investigating the factors influencing their decisions to compete and their choice of labels. The analysis sheds light on the prevalence of disguised party lists, offering new insights into the strategic considerations of parties in multilevel polities. As party decline in local politics is a global trend, our findings highlight the importance of label analysis in local elections and invite further research into the complex dynamics of party strategies and electoral outcomes in local governments.

We continue our paper by introducing our theoretical framework for national parties in local elections and outlining our hypotheses. We then introduce the case study of Israeli local elections. Next, we present our data, methodology, and results of the analysis. Finally, we discuss the significance and potential impact of our study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A national party's decision to participate in a local election is a strategic calculus. The party makes a choice. This choice should ideally mean calculus decision-making, in which the party evaluates the chances of success, the amount of financial and organizational investment needed, the levels of existing electoral support, and the avenue in which they contest (Cox, 1997; Nachmias et al., 2016). Once this decision is made, the party must decide under what name the list will compete and campaign for in closed-list systems, such as Israel. In this study context, this is the party label (Dodeigne et al., 2020; Snyder & Ting, 2002). As in the first decision, this choice should ideally be a strategic one.

In the quest to explain why national parties compete only in some municipalities and not in others, the size of the municipality is a dominant explanatory variable. Dahl and Tufte, in their seminal work of 1973, have laid down two central arguments that elucidate this phenomenon. First, they argue that larger municipalities, characterized by more significant socioeconomic heterogeneity, offer a broader electoral market, attracting diverse political parties (Dahl & Tufte, 1973, p. 101). Second, they contend that ideological conflicts gain prominence in these more extensive settings, prompting local branches of national parties to express their ideological positions more overtly. Conversely, smaller municipalities present a less ideologically fraught electoral arena, making them more amenable to the participation of local lists unaffiliated with national parties (Dahl & Tufte, 1973, p. 98). This is referred to as the size hypothesis. The larger the municipality, the greater its attractiveness to a national party and the higher the chance that a party will choose to compete in that municipality.

Recent empirical literature on the interplay between municipality size and party choice in local elections offers a more nuanced understanding of this relationship. Otjes (2018, 2020) posits that ILLs gain traction due to voters' dissatisfaction with national parties and their absence from local elections, particularly in smaller municipalities. When a party decides to be absent from a local arena, it might open the avenue to a new player. These new players are primarily ILLs. Dodeigne et al. (2021) further corroborate this notion, indicating a positive correlation between municipality size and nationalization (the level of the local political system resembles the national level) of local party systems in Belgium. They argue that larger municipalities mirror the national party system to a greater extent.

Similarly, Kjær and Elklit (2010) found that larger cities more closely resemble the national party landscape because of the greater complexity of social cleavages and associated interests that call for diverse political representation. On the other hand, smaller municipalities have been observed to feature a higher electoral share of independents, although this relationship is not necessarily linear (Gradus et al., 2023; Maškarinec & Klimovský, 2016). The smaller the municipality, the less it reflects the national party system.

While independent lists are not a novel political construct, their increasing prevalence and electoral success have been observed globally in recent decades (Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015). A book elucidating this phenomenon is Reiser and Holtmann's "Farewell to the Party Model" (2008). Studies in this volume provide further empirical evidence of the relationship between municipality size and party system. In Germany, small municipalities often feature independent local lists as the only electoral contenders, indicating that such lists are particularly salient in rural settings (Göhlert et al., 2008). Similarly, in the Czech Republic (Jüptner, 2008) and Croatia (Koprić, 2008), the likelihood of success of independent local lists decreases with

population size. Although these studies focused on ILLs, they supported the size hypothesis and led to the formulation of our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1.   Municipality Size and Party Choice.

Based on this theoretical foundation and vast empirical evidence, we hypothesize that *the larger a municipality's population, the more likely a national party will choose to compete in local elections.*

The size of the municipality or socioeconomic features are not the only predictors that empirical studies have uncovered. Nachmias, Rosenthal, and Zubida (2016) reviewed the 2008 local elections in Israel, providing insights into national parties' strategic considerations when competing in local elections. They argue that national parties will compete in local elections where their vote share in the national election is higher than their national average. The authors found that the decision is influenced by the party's valence (popularity and perceived competence), local support bases, and the locality's peripherality. Our analysis incorporates control variables that reflect this study's findings.

Once the decision to compete is made, we now turn to the question under what name this party should compete. The choice of a list label is far from a mere nuance. Downs (1957) provides us with theoretical grounds on which to understand the importance of labels. Drawing from economic theories, Downs suggests that gathering information before voting is irrational for median individual voters. Not because it is irrational to vote based on information but because the cost of gathering the information is higher than the benefit of voting "correctly." Because a single vote rarely changes election results, collecting information on candidates will be ineffective. "Insofar as voting is concerned, any attempt to acquire information beyond that furnished by the stream of "free" data is for them a sheer waste of resources" (Downs, 1957, p. 147), Downs concludes, setting our foundations for the importance of labels, which are part of the stream of free information.

As Cox (1997) identifies, party labels aid informed voters by decreasing their information costs. Essentially, these labels serve as an indication to voters, potentially revealing significant amounts of information in a single cue. When a candidate receives a party endorsement, it signals to voters that the candidate is both viable and aligned with the party's policy positions, thereby simplifying the decision-making process for those who rely on these labels as shortcuts. Cox posits that candidates often seek to affiliate with a political party to gain potential benefits, such as existing electoral support and credibility. However, this support can sometimes act as a double-edged sword, as maintaining the party's reputation and policy positions may harm the electoral prospects of local candidates (Nachmias et al., 2016; Snyder & Ting, 2002).

Recent empirical evidence has revealed that in some countries, party lists disguise the presence of party support from their list label. Dodeigne et al. (2020; 2021), in their analysis of Belgium's regional and local elections, acknowledge that many lists appearing as local or independent are well connected to national parties. They call them parties "in disguise." A similar trend was observed in Italy. A study by Vampa (2016) focusing on the Italian subnational level revealed "partisan lists in disguise," local lists that are well connected to the national party but keep their local characters. Vampa suggests that this strategic adaptation allows these lists to attract votes from electorates who are increasingly sceptical of traditional party politics while maintaining the influence of national parties at the local level.

The fact that parties hide their involvement complicates the measurement and interpretation of party system nationalization, the extent to which the local level resembles the national one, requiring intricate qualitative coding to accurately distinguish between genuinely local lists and national parties operating under neutral or local labels. This makes it challenging to accurately assess the level of national parties' involvement, thereby complicating

the straightforward interpretation of the role of municipality size. The empirical landscape calls for a more refined methodological approach that accounts for these disguises, which we present in this study. Therefore, our study design addresses label analysis with great attention to uncovering the actual status of local lists: party lists, party lists in disguise, or independent lists.

Hypotheses 2 and 3.   Party List Label Choice.

Establishing that parties choose different strategies regarding their label use poses our second question in this study: What influences a party's decision regarding its label use? Why will parties opt to show their identity in some cases while refining it in others? Approaching this question, we wish to include some country-specific evidence.

As introduced in the previous section, the decline in party dominance in the local government in Israel has been well-documented (Brichta, 2005; Kenig & Rahat, 2023; Rahat & Kenig, 2018a). Over time, party lists have become less representative, and among those that compete, one-third choose to hide their involvement, acting in disguise, as we will introduce further. One possible explanation may be the uncommon characteristics of local coalitions in Israel. A recent study by Tuttnauer and Friedman (2020) suggests that in the local government in Israel, there are more incentives to formulate an oversized coalition, unlike the common minimum-winning coalitions at the national level. Through the analysis of 34 coalitions over two terms in the 17 largest municipalities, they reveal a unique dynamic that, at times, may encourage mayoral candidates to prefer cooperation with "as many lists as possible" (p. 370). Tuttnauer and Friedman describe how the local coalition presents unlikely ideological cooperation between political partners, which is unreasonable at the national level because of complex policy disagreements that do not exist locally. Drawing from the need to facilitate a broad coalition, we suggest that party lists with mayoral candidates may hide themselves from the party label, providing more cooperation space for their candidate.

A recent survey by the Israel Democracy Institute reinforced this explanation. In a representative sample of the Israeli adult population, when asked what effect an endorsement of one of the two large parties in a local candidate will have, 24.5–30 percent replied that it would lower the chances of them voting for this list. Only 13–16 percent responded that it would increase the chances of voting. 57–59.5 percent responded that it would have no effect (Finkelstein, 2024).

These observations lead to Hypothesis 2: *Having a mayoral candidate lowers the probability that a party will choose to compete using its full identity.*

The logic here is based on the notion that party lists choose the path they believe will benefit the most. An electoral list with a mayoral candidate wishes to maximize cooperation with other lists to support their candidate. Keeping the mayor list label neutral may enable the candidate to avoid obstacles such as the national party position. Therefore, we suggest that having a mayoral candidate may have such an effect.

The third hypothesis draws logic from the understanding that labels carry potential clues regarding a candidate's policy orientation and party affiliation. Choosing to withhold party information implies that the party or candidate might assume it will perform better with a neutral or local list name. Snyder and Ting (2002) suggested that voters and candidates can benefit from candidate affiliation with a party. Assuming that one might want to attract as many voters as possible, one will prefer to attach herself to a winning party representing the median voter as much as possible. In multiparty systems, coalitions composed of a few parties create a subset of the median voter preference. In this case, when a local candidate affiliates herself with the governing party, it might signal to the median voter that her beliefs sit within the national coalition beliefs. Recent empirical from Japan (Hijino & Ishima, 2021) suggests that local candidates affiliated with the governing party tend to emphasize the national party's performance when competing.

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From this point, we draw hypothesis 3: *The probability that a party will choose to compete using its full identity increases when it participates in the national governing coalition.*

It is worth mentioning that Tuttnauer and Friedman (2020) tested the hypothesis that local lists affiliated with national parties in the coalition are more likely to be in a local coalition and found no support for this hypothesis. However, as this study covers all municipalities rather than 17, there is room to test this hypothesis again in the context of party label choice.

The theoretical perspectives and empirical findings provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate dynamics of national party involvement in local elections. This framework guides our subsequent empirical analysis of the Israeli case. Our empirical analysis, enriched by comprehensive data, seeks to shed light on these strategic considerations and make valuable contributions to the scholarship on political decentralization and local governance.

Israel Local Elections

With its 200 municipalities, absence of a regional government, and diverse multiparty system, Israel presents a unique case study for exploring the intricate relationship between national parties and local government elections. This section briefly introduces our case study and its unique institutional features.

Each municipality elects a legislative council and mayor once every five years. The election process differs for each position. The legislative council is elected based on a closed proportional list system with a threshold of 1%, where each group of candidates is organized in an electoral list. Mayors are elected directly and personally, and if no candidate receives 40% of the votes, a run-off election occurs between the top two candidates. Once the election is completed, the mayor forms a coalition of elected council members (Finkelstein, 2020). Unlike the minimum-winning coalition that characterized the national government, coalitions in Israel's municipalities tend to be broad and inclusive, mainly because in Israel municipalities, the issues controlling the agenda are distinct from those at the national level, allowing more local-oriented coalition configurations, even when it is against the national party ideology preferences (Tuttnauer & Friedman, 2020).

The number of council members in each municipality, which ranges between five and thirty-one, is related only to the number of residents before the elections (Galnoor & Blander, 2013). Table 1 presents the relationship between the number of council members and residents based on the latest order signed by the Minister of Interior in 2023. In this study, we use the size of the council in a given city as a proxy indicator of municipality size.

There are multiple pathways to competition in local elections, as defined by the Local Authorities (Elections) Law of 1965. These pathways include submitting an electoral list on behalf of a national party with parliamentary representation, a voter-initiated list with at least 200 individuals or 2% of the electorate in a specific locality, and an incumbent council member submitting a list on her behalf. The last two are considered ILLs. As depicted in Figure 2, the share of local lists affiliated with national parties is progressively decreasing. Similarly, there are three ways to submit a mayoral candidacy: on behalf of a national party, 750 individuals or 3% of the total electorate, or an incumbent council member.

We argue that the institutional setting of local elections in Israel supports local lists filed by national parties. The Local Authorities (Election Financing) Law of 1993 shows nuanced differences in institutional disparities between local party lists and independent local lists, which can be categorized into financial and procedural dimensions. National parties have the advantage of receiving advance payments based on their electoral performance at the national

TABLE 1 Council size in Israel Municipalities.

Council Members	Number of Residents
5	1,000
7	1,001-3,000
9	3,001-10,000
11	10,001-15,000
13	15,001-25,000
15	25,001-50,000
17	50,001-75,000
19	75,001–100,000
21	100,001-125,000
23	125,001–150,000
25	150,001-200,000
27	200,001–250,000
29	250,001–300,000
31	300,001+

level, which can be used to support their local campaigns. On the other hand, independent lists must generate funds independently. In terms of procedures, local party lists enjoy benefits such as priority during registration and exemptions from certain bureaucratic requirements, including maintaining a separate bank account and filing individual post-election financial reports to the state comptroller.

This study examines what drives party choices in local elections, given national parties' advantages. This is especially pertinent in light of the decline of national parties in Israel's municipalities (Rahat & Kenig, 2018a). As shown in Figure 2, national parties' representation in local elections gradually decreases, with an all-time low in 2024. The rise of independent candidates is linked to the weakening of the country's leading political parties over the past few decades. This shift is part of a larger pattern of party decline, characterized by reduced voter loyalty, increased unpredictability, and party system fragmentation (Rahat & Kenig, 2018a).

Understanding Israel's local elections requires special attention to the differentiation between Jewish and Minority municipalities, which compose 60% and 40% of our dataset, respectively. Studies have provided empirical evidence of the substantial difference between voters' and parties' behavior in minority municipalities, given the political alienation of Arabs from national Israeli institutions (Halabi, 2014; Nachmias et al., 2012).

In his 2014 review, Halabi noted that local politics in Arab municipalities are likely to be dominated by clan-based politics, with limited involvement from Zionist national parties. Of the 16 national parties, five are non-Zionist. Most local lists in Arab municipalities are independent, not party lists. Our dataset shows differences between Jewish and Arab municipalities, as shown in Figure 3. However, Druze communities do not feel alienated from Zionist national parties and institutions, which may affect their local politics more than Muslim and Christian Arab communities (Halabi, 2014; Nachmias et al., 2012). This requires caution when analysing local election data in Israel. Our analysis will include a control variable for the ethnic groups of cities based on their official coding.

The Israeli context offers an exceptionally stimulating environment for this study. With 16 national parties represented in parliament and an electoral process ostensibly designed to favour them, the declining presence of party lists becomes an intriguing paradox.

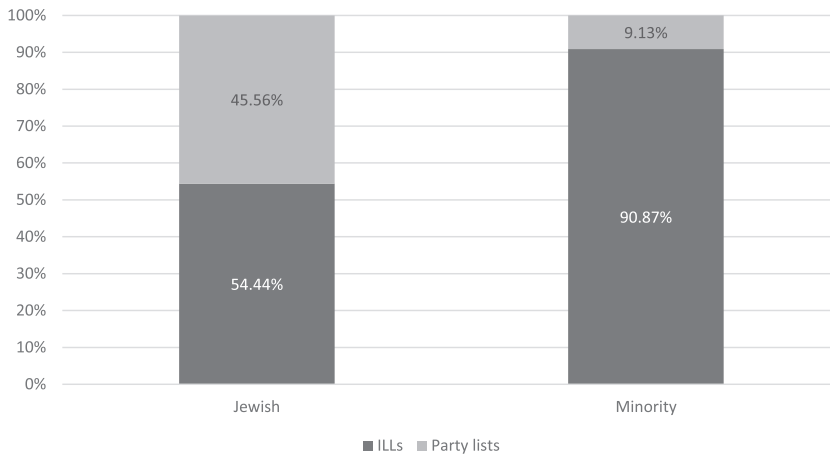The next section reviews our methodology, followed by our study findings.

FIGURE 3 Share of Party and Independent lists in Israel, 2013–2024, by Ethnicity.

DATA AND MODELS

This study adopts a multilevel analytical approach, reflecting the intricate nature of our research question. We constructed a dataset capturing the results and electoral list information from Israel's local elections in three election cycles: 2013, 2018, and 2024.

The choice of this timeframe was influenced by access to reliable data on party lists in the local government. We obtained data for the 2013 and 2018 elections through Freedom of Information requests, while data for the 2024 elections were gathered based on Ministry of Interior data made available to the public for the first time before election day.

Uncover Party Lists in Disguise

Following Dodeigne et al. (2020; 2021), we undertook a rigorous label coding process for all lists associated with at least one national party to understand the full scope of the parties' involvement. This process, employing a binary coding scheme to categorize them based on party identity or disguise, was conducted manually using a double-coding strategy for reliability. This approach enables us to discern genuine local lists from disguised national parties, thus ensuring the robustness of our analysis.

Label manual coding was conducted for all 1,124 lists submitted by at least one national party in our dataset to account for the type of party list. Before explaining the coding process, we shall define our categories. *Party identity* is when the label includes party cues by answering at least one of the following conditions: a) contains the party name or a recognizable portion, b) includes the official party letters. Otherwise, the list will be categorized as *a Party Disguise*.

For each list, we examined the official name, compared it with the party's official name or letters, and coded them accordingly. We employed a binary coding scheme to categorize the lists: lists were coded '1' for party identity and '2' for disguise. To ensure the reliability of our manual coding, we employed a double-coding strategy in which two independent coders analysed a subset of the lists. Table 2 provides examples of coding processes.

Our database, encompassing three election cycles across 200 municipalities, includes data on 3,737 lists and provides an unprecedented overview of Israel's local election landscape. Our manual coding of 1,124 party lists resulted in 795 coded as '1' and 329 as '2'.

For each local list, we collected data from the Israeli election board and the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), encompassing the official name, election results, the status of mayoral

TABLE 2 Label coding scheme.

List label	Party	Analysis	Code
Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (החזית הדמוקרטית לשלום ושוויון)	Hadash – Democratic Front for Peace and Equality	The label is identical to the party's full name	1
To give more (לתת יותר)	Likud	The label is unrelated to the party name	2
Mahal (מחל)	Likud	The label is identical to the party voting letters	1
Ophakim Our Home (אופקים ביתנו)	Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home)	The label is a local version of the party name	1
Tradition and action (מסורת ועשייה)	Shas, United Torah Judaism	A joint list of parties without any reference to any party	2
Meretz and Ha'avoda – Jerusalem Free (מרץ העבודה ירושלים החופשית)	Meretz, Ha'avoda	A joint list of parties. There is a reference to the party names	1

Table 2: Examples illustrating the label-coding process. 'List label' represents the list's name in local elections translated to English and the Hebrew original name in prentices. 'Party' specifies the corresponding national party. 'Analysis' elaborates on the coding rationale, and 'Code'indicates the assigned code.

candidacy, list vote share, and the national party vote share in the municipality, if applicable. Additionally, we compiled comprehensive data for each municipality, including the Socioeconomic Index, Geographic region, City subtype (ethnicity group), and Periphery index.

Each national party's ideological position was classified into the right, center, and left categories. The data regarding each party's ideological position are based on the recent Chapel Hill Expert Survey on Israel (Zur & Bakker, 2023), which provided a 1 to 10 scale. This scale was then transformed into a categorical variable in our dataset.

This dataset enables us to thoroughly study all the results of Israel's last three local elections. This helps us gain a comprehensive understanding of national parties' participation in local elections, extending the scope of our understanding and enabling further analysis of their competitive strategies.

Models

To test our study hypothesis, we fitted three different models, testing each hypothesis with a different dependent variable.

To test our first hypothesis, we examine whether larger municipalities are more likely to be chosen by a national party for competition. We used a choice model and conducted conditional logit regression analysis using the 'clogit' command in Stata, with choices grouped by the election cycle. This method enabled us to incorporate alternative-specific variables that measure party characteristics and municipality-specific variables that may impact each party's decision to enter the competition differently (Alvarez & Nagler, 1998).

For each municipality and election cycle, each national party represented in the parliament at the time of local elections (ILLs were excluded) was listed. A choice variable indicates whether the party decided to compete, '1' being competed. The last election results before the relevant

municipal election (e) were recorded for the party (i) in the municipality (x). Our final dataset for the choice model, a statistical model used to predict the probability of a particular outcome, contains 5,457 rows, each representing a possible choice for a party in a city during an election cycle.

In our model, we used *choice* as the dependent variable. As an independent variable, we created a categorical variable, *size_cat*, based on the number of city council members as a proxy for the municipality's size. The four categories are small (up to 10,000 residents), medium (10,001 to 50,000 residents), large (50,001 to 150,000 residents), and very large (150,001 and above residents). We used the following variables to control our analysis: the vote share of the respective party in each city on a 0 to 1 scale. The right-to-left category, periphery index score, and city sub-type group are based on the ethnicity classification of the Israeli CBS.

Our second model tested our second and third hypotheses regarding label choice. We hypothesize that choosing to compete with the party identity will be higher when the affiliated party is in the national governing coalition (H3) and lower when having a candidate for the mayor (H2); we have used a similar conditional logit model with few changes. The dependent variable is now *identity*, where '1' is given when the party chooses to compete under its identity.

In this model, we have two independent variables. The first, *mayor_race*, is a dummy variable where '1' is if the list has also fielded a candidate for the mayor position. The second, *gov_coalition*, is another dummy variable where '1' is if the national party is part of the governing coalition. We used similar control variables, adding the size of the municipality, represented by *size_cat*. We omitted from the sample cases belonging to the Muslim-Christian subtype (four cases) due to low variation. Our final model contains 1,120 cases, given that we only include cases in which the party has already chosen to compete (*choice* = 1) and now chooses its label.

For each model, marginal effects were calculated at mean predictor values to better explore the model results.

RESULTS

Utilizing a robust dataset that spans three election cycles and covers 200 municipalities, we employ multilevel modelling techniques to test our hypotheses. The following analysis unfolds in a manner that allows each hypothesis to be individually tested while offering a comprehensive understanding of local electoral dynamics in Israel. We set the stage with key descriptive statistics, contextualizing our subsequent quantitative findings.

Descriptive Statistics

Our dataset includes 3,737 lists across 200 municipalities spanning three election cycles. Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for the key variables.

Of all lists in our dataset, ILLs comprise 69.9 percent, while party lists constitute 30.1 percent. Of all lists, 32.9 percent had a mayoral candidate. The average vote share for a local list is 13.9 percent, with a standard deviation of 10.75 percent, indicating a wide range of electoral support, from as low as 1.16 to as high as 97.24 percent.

Examining the subset of 1,124 party lists, we find that 70.7 percent compete under their full-party identity, while 29.3 percent do so in disguise. This distribution is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows the share of list types by election cycle. The figure reveals that most lists are independent local lists (ILLs), with the remaining lists divided into full-party identity and party-in-disguise lists. Of the 3,737 lists, 2,943 used neutral names (ILLs + in disguise), indicating a strong tendency towards non-partisan branding.

Our label coding process revealed that 70.7 percent of all party lists (*N* = 1,124) were full identity lists, and the remaining 29.3 percent were in disguise. Given the large share of ILLs

and the substantial share of party-in-disguise lists, the Israeli local arena is dominated by neutral list names that do not resonate with the national party identity.

These descriptive statistics provide an essential overview of our dataset, leading to the statistical analysis results.

Models Results

We begin by presenting the results of our two conditional logit models, which test our hypotheses regarding the factors that influence national parties' strategic decisions in Israeli local elections. Table 4 displays the coefficients and standard errors for each independent variable in the first model and Table 5 for the second model.

Model 1 examines the effect of municipality size on the probability of a national party choosing to compete in a given local election (Hypothesis 1). The results support our hypothesis, revealing that parties are significantly more likely to compete in larger municipalities than smaller ones. The coefficients for medium, large, and very large municipalities are all positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), with the magnitude of the effect increasing as the size of the municipality grows.

The adjusted predictions for the probability of party competition across different municipality sizes, presented in Figure 5, further underscore this trend. The probability of party competition in small municipalities is 25.16 percent, increasing to 41.78 in medium, 49.54 in large, and 70.55 in very large municipalities. These predictions highlight the substantial impact of municipality size on national party involvement, reinforcing our initial hypothesis. This finding aligns with the theoretical arguments put forth by Dahl and Tufte (1973) and empirical evidence from various countries (Dodeigne et al., 2021; Kjær & Elklit, 2010; Maškarinec & Klimovský, 2016; Otjes, 2018), suggesting that larger municipalities offer a more attractive electoral market for national parties.

In exploring the second and third hypotheses, which investigate the factors influencing a national party's decision to compete under its full identity versus a neutral label, the results

TABLE 3 Variables mean by city type.

| Variable	Observation	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Vote share	3,737	.1390359	.1075131	.0115969	.9724
Mayor race	3,737	.3294086	.4700614	0	1
Periphery	3,737	5.83363	2.189973	1	10
Independent Lists	3,737	.6994916	.4585405	0	1
Party List	3,737	.3005084	.4585405	0	1
Identity	1,124	.7079252	.4549191	0	1
In Disguise	1,124	.2920748	.4549191	0	1
Gov coalition	1,124	.5966162	.4907951	0	1
City Subtype					
Bedouin	3,737	.0254215	.1574225	0	1
Druze	3,737	.0342521	.1819003	0	1
Jewish	3,737	.5394702	.4985064	0	1
Jewish & Muslim	3,737	.0353225	.1846182	0	1
Muslim	3,737	.3569708	.4791702	0	1
Muslim & Christian	3,737	.008563	.0921519	0	1
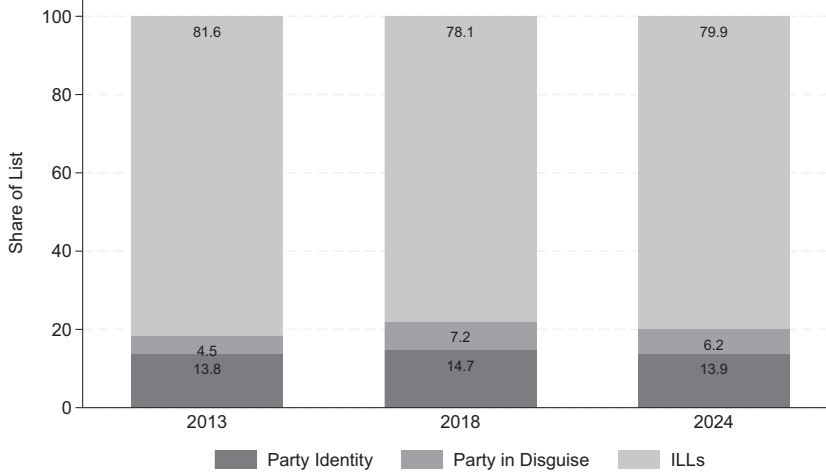
FIGURE 4   ILLs and party lists share by list type and election cycle.

TABLE 4   Conditional Logit Choice Model.

Variables	Model 1 Choice
Size Category (Reference: Small)	
Medium (10,001 to 50,000 residents)	0.758***
	(0.121)
Large (50,001 to 150,000 residents)	1.072***
	(0.140)
Very Large (150,001 and above residents)	1.964***
	(0.166)
City Party Support	1.835***
	(0.222)
Right Left (Reference: Right)	
Centre	−1.136***
	(0.116)
Left	−1.491***
	(0.0863)
City Subtype (Reference: Jewish)	
Bedouin	−1.745***
	(0.606)
Druze	−0.833**
	(0.361)
Jewish & Muslim	0.377**
	(0.181)
Muslim	−0.848***
	(0.114)
Muslim & Christian	−1.221
	(0.749)
Periphery	−0.0440**
	(0.0211)
Observations	5,457

Standard errors in parentheses.

***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$,

TABLE 5 Second Model Conditional Logit.

Variables	Model 2
	Identity
Mayor Race	−0.996***
	(0.154)
Gov Coalition	0.833***
	(0.217)
Size Category (Reference: Small)	
Medium (10,001 to 50,000 residents)	0.0903
	(0.242)
Large (50,001 to 150,000 residents)	0.366
	(0.290)
Very Large (150,001 and above residents)	0.726**
	(0.335)
City Party Support	0.325
	(0.463)
Right Left (Reference: Right)	
Centre	0.746***
	(0.284)
Left	−0.783***
	(0.277)
City Subtype (Reference: Jewish)	
Bedouin	−13.34
	(497.9)
Druze	1.140
	(0.841)
Jewish & Muslim	0.920**
	(0.412)
Muslim	1.025***
	(0.297)
Periphery	−0.0275
	(0.0417)
Observations	1,120

Note: Standard errors in parentheses;
***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05,

of Model 2 provide significant insights. The presence of a mayoral candidate significantly decreased the likelihood of using party identity, with a coefficient of −0.996 ($p < 0.01$). This supports Hypothesis 2, which states that parties prefer a neutral label to maximize coalition potential and avoid alienating voters who support other lists. The conditional marginal effects analysis revealed that having a mayoral candidate reduces the probability of using a party identity by 20.6 percent. This finding aligns with Tuttnauer and Friedman's (2020) observation that local coalitions in Israel are often oversized and inclusive, a dynamic that encourages mayoral candidates to prefer neutral labels to facilitate broader cooperation with various lists.

Conversely, national parties that are part of the national governing coalition are more likely to use their full identity, as evidenced by the coefficient of 0.833 (p < 0.01), which supports Hypothesis 3. The marginal effects analysis shows that being part of the national
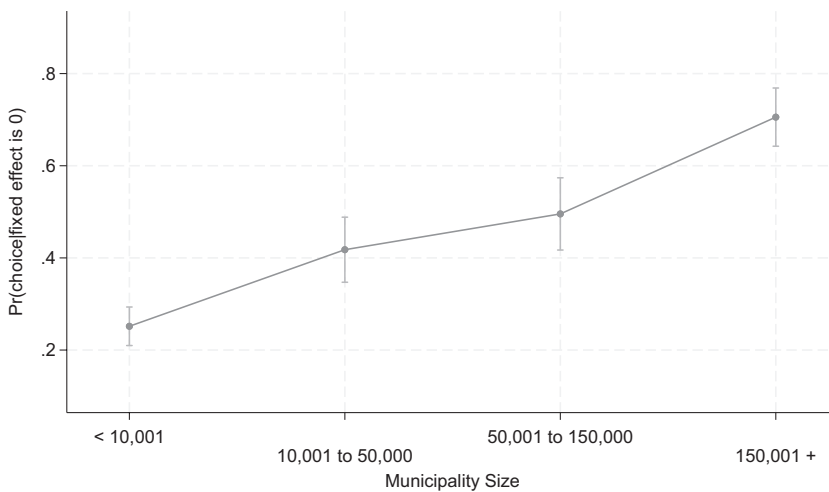
FIGURE 5 Marginal Analysis post first model.

coalition increases the probability of using the party's full identity by 17.3 percent. This result suggests that being part of the governing coalition at the national level signals credibility and alignment with broader voter preferences, making it advantageous for parties to retain their full identities.

Among the control variables, we find that parties are more likely to compete in municipalities with more substantial electoral support in national elections, as indicated by the positive and significant coefficient for city-party support in Model 1. This finding is consistent with Nachmias, Rosenthal, and Zubida's (2016) study, which argues that national parties consider their local support bases when deciding whether to compete in local elections.

Additionally, central and left-wing parties are less likely to compete overall (Model 1), while left parties are more likely to compete in disguise, and central are more likely to compete using their affiliation (Model 2) than right-wing parties. While not directly addressed in the theoretical background, this finding may be related to the general decline in popularity and electoral success of mainstream parties, particularly center and left-wing parties, as mentioned by Rahat and Kenig (2018a).

The results also reveal significant differences across city subtypes, with parties being less likely to compete in Bedouin, Druze, and Muslim municipalities compared to Jewish ones (Model 1), but more likely to compete under their own identity in Muslim and mixed Jewish-Muslim municipalities (Model 2). This finding partially aligns with the observations made by Halabi (2014), Nachmias et al. (2012), and Rosenthal et al. (2018), who suggest that the political dynamics in minority municipalities may differ from those in Jewish municipalities due to political alienation and clan-based politics.

Finally, parties are less likely to compete in municipalities with higher periphery index scores (Model 1), consistent with Nachmias, Rosenthal, and Zubida's (2016) findings. They argue that a locality's peripherality is one of the factors that influences national parties' decisions to compete in local elections. However, the periphery index score did not significantly affect the decision to compete in disguise (Model 2).

The multilevel models provide empirical evidence confirming the hypothesized relationships between municipality characteristics, list labels, and the characteristics of national parties. The findings offer valuable insights into the strategic calculus that shapes national parties' involvement and competitiveness in Israeli local elections. With these established results, the discussion now explores their broader implications and situates them within the extant academic literature on municipal elections.

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SPSR
Swiss Political Science Review
Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft
Revue Suisse de Science Politique
Rivista Svizzera di Scienza Politica

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DISCUSSION

This study investigated the strategic choices made by national parties when deciding whether to compete in local elections and how to present themselves to the public if they choose to do so. We examined the factors influencing a party's decision to compete and the choice between using the party's full identity or disguised label.

Our findings reveal that the decision of parties to compete is influenced by the size of the municipality, a result that supports the "size hypothesis" (Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Dodeigne et al., 2021; Hijino & Ishima, 2021; Kjær & Elklit, 2010; Maškarinec & Klimovský, 2016; Otjes, 2018, 2020; Vampa, 2016). Larger municipalities attract more parties to compete, likely due to the greater electoral market and prominence of ideological conflicts in these settings (Dahl & Tufte, 1973). Additionally, we find that a party's previous success in national elections within a given city increases its likelihood of competing there, confirming the findings of Nachmias, Rosenthal, and Zubida (2016).

When addressing how a party should compete, we discovered that the presence of a mayoral candidate decreases the likelihood of competing under the party label, which is likely to appeal to a broader audience and facilitate the formation of large coalitions (Tuttnauer & Friedman, 2020). Conversely, being part of the ruling coalition increases the likelihood of using the party's full identity, aligning with the findings of Hijino and Ishima (2021) and the theoretical arguments of Snyder and Ting (2002).

The examination of party names and the identification of hidden party connections are significant contributions of this study. By analyzing list labels, we produced a reliable picture of the extent to which party lists in Israel conceal their identity. This phenomenon, also observed in other countries (Dodeigne et al., 2020, 2021; Vampa, 2016), raises important questions regarding transparency and voter information. Downs (1957) and Cox (1997) argued that a party's name is crucial information for voters, as it serves as an informational shortcut. The concealment of party affiliations may hinder voters' ability to make informed decisions.

We believe that providing this information as part of the "free data stream," using Downs's definitions, is vital from the voters' perspective. Instead of hiding party connections in complex Excel spreadsheets on the Elections Supervisory Committee website, a more proactive approach should ensure voters can easily access and comprehend their voting lists' institutional and ideological connections.

The strategic decision to conceal party identity potentially allows these lists to benefit from the best of both worlds. On the one hand, they can access the resources and support the national party organization provides. On the other hand, they can present themselves to voters as a local, independent entity, free from the baggage and potential negative associations of the national party brand. This adaptability may appeal to voters who are increasingly doubtful of traditional party politics and are looking for candidates more in tune with local concerns.

At this point, we wish to address Israel as an extreme case. Israel represents an extreme case of limited party involvement in local governments, with independent lists dominating when parties are absent. However, the trend of rising independence and declining party presence is evident worldwide (Åberg & Ahlberger, 2015; Göhlert et al., 2008; Jüptner, 2008; Koprić, 2008; Rahat & Kenig, 2018a; Reiser & Holtmann, 2008). Israel's experience may foreshadow the future trajectory of parties in other countries.

As parties continue to play a role in our lives, understanding their motivations for participating in local elections remains relevant and intriguing, especially when most players choose not to compete. This study contributes to the literature on party strategies and electoral dynamics in multilevel political systems by offering an in-depth analysis of national party involvement in Israeli local elections.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the strategic considerations that guide national parties' decisions in Israeli local elections. By examining a rich dataset spanning three election cycles and 200 municipalities, we identified key factors influencing party competition, label choice, and electoral performance.

Our findings highlight the importance of municipality size, previous electoral success, mayoral candidates' presence, and being part of a national coalition in shaping parties' competing decisions and how they present themselves to voters. The widespread use of party lists in disguise raises critical questions regarding transparency and voter information in local elections.

We suggest further investigation into whether local lists should be legally obligated to disclose their affiliations clearly and accessibly, ensuring that voters can make fully informed decisions. The task of examining party names is an important research task, but it requires a significant investment of time. If we agree that a party's name is essential for the voter, as suggested by Downs (1957) and Cox (1997), concealing this information is interesting. The fact that this phenomenon exists not only in Israel but also in other countries, as demonstrated by Dodeigne et al. (2020, 2021) and Vampa (2016), raises an important issue for local government scholars, who are required to pay attention to the labels of lists in local governments and try to identify hidden party connections. This part may be the most significant contribution of this research, as by analyzing list labels, we could produce a reliable picture of the state of party lists in Israel that hide their identity. This analysis allowed us to examine the components in the formation of this decision.

The Israeli case, while extreme, serves as a potential harbinger of future trends in other countries experiencing declining party presence and rising independence in local governments (Rahat & Kenig, 2018a). Understanding party strategies and motivations in this context is crucial for promoting informed voter choices.

By conducting this research, we contribute to the growing literature on party strategies and electoral dynamics in multilevel political systems, underscoring the importance of considering strategic calculations, institutional incentives, and unique social and political contexts when examining local electoral outcomes.

Future research could build upon these findings by conducting qualitative interviews with local candidates and party leaders, exploring the long-term dynamics of party strategies, and investigating the implications of concealed party identities for voter information and accountability. As parties evolve and adapt to changing political landscapes, understanding their strategic choices in local elections remains a vital area of inquiry.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZUWOUI.

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