

Fall 2001

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Jon Taylor
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, J. (2001). When a Tree Falls in Fayetteville Does it Make a Sound: The Impact of Issue Voting on Local Nonpartisan Elections. *Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/inquiry/vol2/iss1/10>

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WHEN A TREE FALLS IN FAYETTEVILLE DOES IT MAKE A SOUND: THE IMPACT OF ISSUE VOTING ON LOCAL NONPARTISAN ELECTIONS

by Jon Taylor
Department of Political Sciences
Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

Faculty Mentor: William Schreckhise
Department of Political Sciences

Abstract

This research provides an explanation of the impact that high-profile issues can have on local nonpartisan elections. The tree ordinance in Fayetteville sparked a controversy that ignited the community's interest in the race for Mayor. This controversy provides a unique opportunity to measure how issue voting effects elections that have limited information available. The research regarding behavior in local nonpartisan elections is incomplete, because of the challenges this subject provides for political scientist. It is difficult to gauge a voter's choice when the voter's process limited knowledge of the candidates and party affiliation is removed. Generally political scientist view issue voting as requiring a high level of voter sophistication, yet voting behavior at the local level is notable for its lack of sophistication. The purpose of my research is to show that when limited tangible information is available to voters they will base their votes on "easy-issues" such as the tree controversy. This research contributes to theories in the fields of voting behavior, voter sophistication, and issue voting.

Introduction

Issue voting is a topic of extensive research in political science. Some studies argue that issues have little or no impact on voters, citing instead the candidate or party identification. Others argue that the voter compares candidates and chooses the one who differs the least with their point of view. Even among scholars who acknowledge an impact of issues on voter behavior there is disagreement to what this impact implies about the voter's sophistication. The research has been unclear about the impact of issues on the electorate.

The Columbia University studies in the 1940's were some of the first to suggest that there is no relationship between issues and voter behavior. The researchers found that voters often decided which candidate they would vote for before campaigning began and before issues were discussed. This line of research

was supplemented by the authors of *The American Voter* (1956). They showed that on 16 different issues only 18 to 36 percent of the electorate showed sufficient knowledge of the issues. These studies suggest that voters base their decision on non-issue criteria, such as social group, party or candidate. (Niemi and Weisberg 1993)

The perception of issue voting began to change in 1957, when Anthony Downs created a voter behavior model that asserted a rational voter would calculate how much they differ with a candidate on the issues and then vote for the candidate that is closest to their own belief. This was followed by Key's *The Responsible Electorate*, which showed that when clear issue alternatives are present in an election issues could have an impact. Indeed in Nie, Verba, and Petrocik's (1976) *The Changing American Voter* they assert that the public had become more issue-oriented with the rise of the Civil Rights revolution and the Vietnam War. In summary, issues were important to a rational voter when there were clear alternatives available among salient issues.

Hard vs. Easy Issues and Voter Sophistication

After establishing a link between issues and voting, the controversy turned to the character of issue voting. "The common—indeed, universal—view has been that voting choices based on policy concerns are superior to decisions based on party loyalty or candidate image," observed Carmine and Stimson (1980, p. 78). Their complaint was that all issue voting was viewed as inherently good. In *The Two Faces of Issue Voting* they assert that there are two types of issues: hard issues and easy issues. Hard issues are the issues that are "the final result of a sophisticated decision calculus. (p.78)" Easy issues occur "when a particular issue becomes so ingrained over a long period that it structures voters' 'gut responses' to candidates and political parties." The explanation continues, "because gut responses require no conceptual sophistication they should be distributed reasonably evenly in the voting population." Carmine and Stimson continue by showing the difference comparing Desegregation (easy issue) and the Vietnam War (hard issue) and the impact

they had on the 1972 election. They find that people who's vote was determined by their view of desegregation showed no more sophistication than those who used party or candidate to decide, but that those who voted based on the war in Vietnam showed a higher level of sophistication. Carmine and Stimson assert that voters who vote on "easy issues" are not the traditional rational voters. Rather the traditional issue voter was the one who voted on "hard issues."

While there is extensive research on issue voting and the electorate, its focus remains predominately national. The impact of issues on local elections remains largely unexplored. The purpose of my research is to explore the possibility that issues can have an impact on local elections. The case I use is the 2000 election for the mayor of Fayetteville, Arkansas. This case provides a high profile issue in a local election, as well as the absence of partisan affiliations. The issue of the tree ordinance divided the community and caught the attention of the local media. Indeed the events that took place were very dramatic and unusual for this community.

The Tree Controversy

In 1992 Fred Hanna was elected the Mayor of Fayetteville in a close and controversial election. The day before the election an editorial article appeared in the primary local newspaper asking Hanna's leading challenger, Dan Coody, to come forward about the truth of his past. Using a former classmate of Coody, the article accused him of a shady past in Texas, where he dealt drugs and was convicted of a bank robbery. The accusations were false, but the damage was done as Coody lost by just 700 votes the next day. Later Coody won a libel lawsuit against the paper.

Over the next eight years Mayor Hanna governed the city through a time of rapid growth and development. In 1995 he adopted a city tree ordinance; hired a city tree and landscape administrator, and was awarded tree city USA status for the first time in Fayetteville's history. That same year he also oversaw a curbside recycling program that had a 70 percent participation rate in its first year. In 1997 the city was again awarded tree city USA status, as well as the EPA award for environmental excellence. The city again won the EPA award in 1998. Along with these environmental achievements Hanna also oversaw a drop in the crime rate and city taxes; as well as the addition of new schools, fire departments, and a public health and dental center for the poor. In 2000 he almost certainly anticipated he would run for reelection as a strong incumbent candidate.

The 1995 Tree Ordinance that Mayor Hanna had initiated called for the protection of old growth trees (trees larger than 24 inches in diameter) unless development would be otherwise impossible. It also called for a minimum of 15 percent of the canopy to be preserved during development. In an area known as Steele's crossing Argus properties had proposed a plan that

would destroy all but 10 percent of the old growth canopy of the property, putting in danger 51 rare old growth trees that were over a century old. The plan came before the city council on May 2, 1999. A large and vocal group of several hundred citizens were at the meeting, most to oppose the Argus development. The council put the issue to the vote, not allowing an open debate of the issue. The vote ending in a 4-4 tie with Mayor Hanna abstaining from the deciding vote which could have halted the Argus plan. The group became vocal, demanding to be given the right to speak about the issue. Mayor Hanna, along with the four councilmen who voted to allow development left the meeting, leaving behind the crowd and the four dissenting council members.

The reaction was immediate. The next morning at 6 A.M. Mary Lighthouse climbed "the old oak tree," chaining herself to a branch. Several lawsuits were brought against the city by citizens, a council member, the Sierra Club, and the League of Women Voters. The events were on local television and the front page of the local papers. Rallies were planned, organizations formed and citizens mobilized. The battle cry became "Remember in November." In early May the November election for mayor already had a defining issue, the trees in Steele's crossing.

The lawsuits were not received well by the courts. One lawsuit filed by the Sierra club citing a federal law that protected a rare bird that lived in the trees was thrown out. Another filed by the Women's League of Voters was accepted on the contingent that they put down 300,000 dollars to compensate Argus if the lawsuit were not won. The League could not raise the money. Still Mary Lighthouse sat chained in the trees. Mary Lighthouse was a 53-year-old grandmother who, according to herself, had never questioned the law. Soon after she climbed the tree the police set up a blockade, arresting anyone who tried to bring Mary food, medicine, or supplies. In all 30 people were arrested. A rainstorm moved through the area, and Mary stayed in the trees through two weeks of steady rain. Eventually she came down because of a court order brought by her ex-husband. They were in the process of finalizing a divorce, and she was to be held in contempt of court if she failed to appear. She came down from the tree in the middle of the night, three weeks after first climbing up. She appeared at the court proceeding and when the judge ask her where she had been at previous proceedings, she responded, "In my new home." When he ask for an address she responded, "Argus Properties." The next night she was arrested as she made a dash back to "the grandmother tree." As police overtook her a few yards from the tree she fell to the ground, passively resisting arrest. A few days later the trees were cut down.

Still the issue lingered. Over 30 people were tried and sentenced for bringing Lighthouse food and medicine. Before Lighthouse's trial there was a rally on the Town Square. They had a piece of the "grandmother tree" labeling its rings by corresponding events such as Martin Luther King's assassination, World War I, and the turn of the last century. Julia "Butterfly" Hill, the famous treesitter who spent 18 months in a redwood in

California, gave a speech in front of more than 100 people on a Wednesday at around noon. At the rally were candidates for city council and Mayor, handing out bumper stickers and shaking hands. The election was four months away. The slogan "Remember in November" appeared on the bumper of vehicles, beside a picture of a fallen tree. These were the events that preceded the race for mayor of Fayetteville.

The Mayoral Election

There were six candidates for Mayor in the 2000 election. Mayor Hanna was the incumbent and he owned a local candle shop. Dan Coody was the leading challenger. He was a developer and had remained active in local politics since he lost the race in 1992. He had served as a councilman and been active in many committees in the community. The other contenders were Paula Marinoni, an activist for historical preservation in the community; and Cyrus Young, a sitting councilman who had lost his job with a developer for voting against the development of Steele's crossing in the May 2 vote. The other two candidates were Subroto Lahari, who was an art professor at the University of Arkansas and Mustin (first name only), who was a 19 years old and entered the race to "shake things up around here."

There were several Mayoral forums and debates hosted by the Chamber of Commerce, the League of Women Voters, the Green Party, and the Young Democrats at the University of Arkansas. The debates tended to be long because there were six candidates and the themes would be centered on environmental protection, economic development, water treatment, and the city infrastructure. During this time the other event that brought out the candidates was the cities Autumfest, a festival with rides, crafts, a parade, music and eclectic food. The four leading candidates had a booth at the festival, each offering stickers, pins, and flyers about them selves. Mayor Hanna handed out scented candled and sapling trees at his booth. The tree issue was obviously weighing on his mind. The Sierra club also had a booth at the festival where they officially endorsed Dan Coody for Mayor. Hanna still maintained a large base of support. He was supported by most of the local businesses as well as having the support of the largest local Baptist church of which he was an active member.

On Election Day Hanna publicly predicted he would win with 51 percent of the vote, and avoid a runoff. Coody also was hoping he could get the "50 percent plus just one vote," although he admitted it was unlikely. As the results came in it became obvious there would be a runoff. Coody won the first round with 8,595 votes, followed by Hanna with 7,677. The final percentage was 44% to 39%. The run-off was going to be on November 28. During the three weeks until the election Coody was attacked for being anti-business. The business community attempted to gather votes for Hanna, charging that Coody would ruin the local economy anti-business. Coody's strategy was to make sure that his supporters were aware of the run-off as well as to attempt to

attract the supporters of the other candidates. Both candidates increased spending on television advertisements, while the Coody campaign posted workers at polling stations with signs. On November 28 Coody defeated Mayor Hanna by a count of 7,194 to 4,855.

When the controversy started in May, it was impossible to tell how it would affect the outcome of the election in November. It was questionable if even a high profile issue such as the tree controversy could impact an election on a local level, and also if this issue could maintain momentum from May until November without the help of the national news media. This research is designed to measure the impact of the tree issue on the Fayetteville mayor's race.

Results

Exit surveys were given on Election Day to voters leaving the polling stations to evaluate the impact of the tree issue and the voter's level of sophistication (a complete survey form in the appendix). The author was able to survey 160 people in four different precincts. In the survey I asked for whom they voted, what issue most affected their vote, and specifically if the tree issue had an impact on their vote. I also asked about how often they used various sources for news. There was also a section that included questions to measure general political knowledge.

Of the voters surveyed, 60% indicated that the tree ordinance issue had an impact on their vote (Figure 1). Of those voters who felt the tree issue was important 75% voted for Dan Coody, while only 9.5% voted for Fred Hanna (Figure 2). Among voters who indicated that the tree issue did not impact their vote 46% voted for Mayor Hanna while 25.4% voted for Dan Coody (Figure 3). The voters were asked to choose which issue most affected their decision for mayor. The issues given were water treatment, economic development, environmental protection, city infrastructure, and other (left open-ended). The most given answer was environmental protection with 38%, followed by economic development with 24% and city infrastructure with 19% (Figure 4). Among the voters who were impacted by the tree issue and whom marked environmental protection as the issue that most affected their decision, 85% voted for Dan Coody, while only 15% voted for Fred Hanna (controlled for just Coody and Hanna). However among the voters who were impacted by the tree issue and who marked economic development 91% voted for Mayor Hanna, while only 9% voted for Dan Coody (controlled for Coody and Hanna).

Discussion

One of the main criticisms of issue voting studies is that there is no accurate way to delineate between party voting and issue voting. Critics claim that there is no accurate measure for the affect of partisan affiliation, since the two major political parties in the United States differ on most major issues. One of the

unique features of the Fayetteville election is that it is non-partisan. All six candidates were registered Democrats, and party was not listed on the ballot, so that the voter had no way of distinguishing party affiliation. This is just one of the factors that make the impact of the tree issue so clear. Sixty percent of voters surveyed indicated that the tree issue had an impact on their vote, with eventual winner Dan Coody garnering 75% of those votes. As with most issues, there were two sides. In this election I observed that voters perceived the tree issue as either favoring environmental protection or economic growth, with those emphasizing environmental protection favoring Coody (85%) and those emphasizing economic growth favoring Hanna (91%).

Further support of the impact of the tree issue is shown by the preferences and voting of those that did not indicate an impact. Among those voters, 43.1 % indicated that economic development had the most impact on their voting, followed by 25.9 % that indicated other, while environmental protection and city infrastructure had only 15.5 %. Fred Hanna won overwhelmingly with these voters, posting a 45% to 25% advantage over Dan Coody in the six-way race (Figure 5). These are the numbers more typical of an incumbent mayor. However, based on some of the comments received during the surveying it is possible that much of this group was impacted by the tree issue, but negatively so, and as a result marked "strongly disagree" or "disagree" on the question involving the tree issue. Many of those surveyed who disagreed that the tree issue had an impact on their vote made comments about the "crazy tree woman" referring to Mary Lighthead or referred to that "tree hugging group." In any case Mayor Hanna's strongest support was with those who indicated that they were most concerned with the economic development of the community. Dan Coody's supporters overwhelmingly indicated that they emphasized environmental protection and were mostly impacted by the tree controversy.

Conclusion

Literature concerning issue voting in local elections is rare. This study shows that issue voting can impact local non-partisan elections. In the case of the Fayetteville tree controversy the impact was deeply felt. The next step in this research is to explore the implications that issue voting has on voter sophistication. I also will analyze the voters surveyed to distinguish any correlation between voter sophistication and the tree issue. Also one hypothesis I will test is the possibility that a high profile issue can be used to replace party or ideological preferences in nonpartisan elections.

The contribution of this research is that it strengthens the case for the impact of issue voting. Some research indicates that issue voting occurs most frequently during periods of social turmoil when policy options are relatively distinct from each other, such as was the case in the U.S. during the turbulent 1960s

with civil rights and the Vietnam War (Nie 1976 p. 156-93). Although to a far lesser extent and much smaller in scale, Fayetteville experienced its own version of controversy and it had an impact in the Fayetteville mayoral election. The tree controversy covered the papers, headlined the news, invoked protest and rallies, and mobilized the citizenry. The unique aspects of this study are that it is done in a party vacuum, so that the impact can be shown independent of party bias; and that the study empirically shows an issue impacting a local election. The purpose of this research is to further study the impact of issues on non-partisan elections, as well as to broaden the field of local voting behavior.

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Author's Note

The information for the section about the tree controversy comes from local newspapers and television stations, courthouse documents, candidate and news web sites, personal interviews, as well as an active observation of many of the events. The community has been extremely cooperative in helping with the gathering of information for this project (which is greatly appreciated), this includes the candidates, Mrs. Lighthead, observers and participants, court house staff, and the 160 voters who took time to fill out the survey. It does not include the poll workers who ran me off of the polling sites. Also I want to thank the University of Arkansas Political Science Department for all of the support they have given me. I especially want to thank Dr. Shreckhise for his guidance, support, and advice.

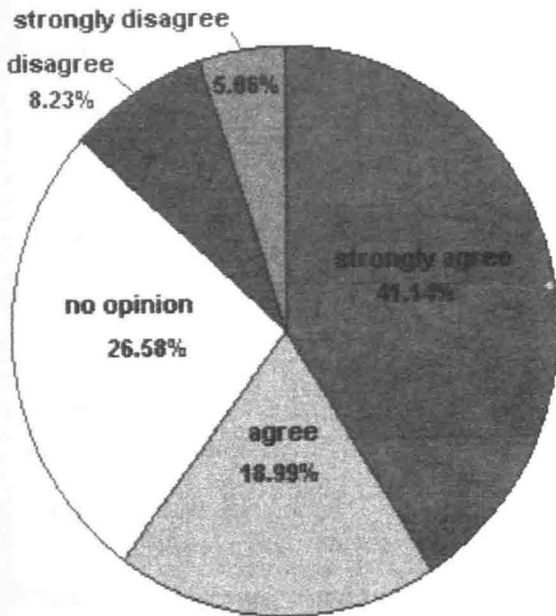


Figure 1: Responses to "The tree ordnace issue had an impact on my voting."

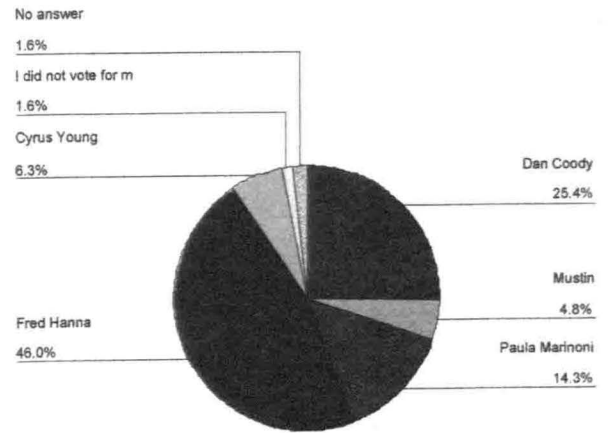


Figure 3: Choice for mayor among voters who indicated the tree issue had no affect on vote.

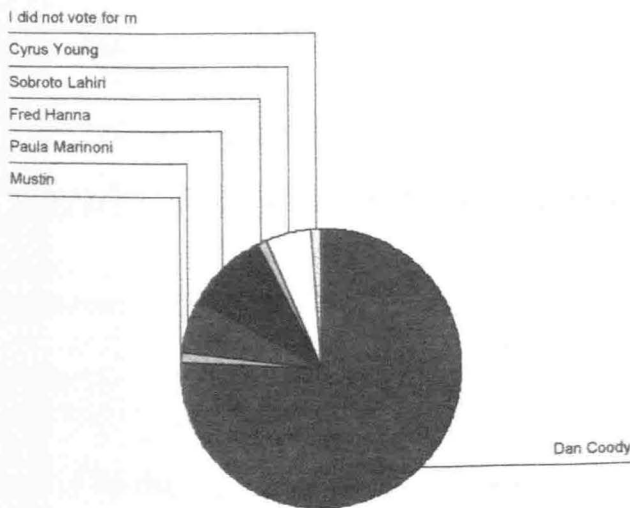


Figure 2: Choice for mayor among voters who were affected by the tree issue.

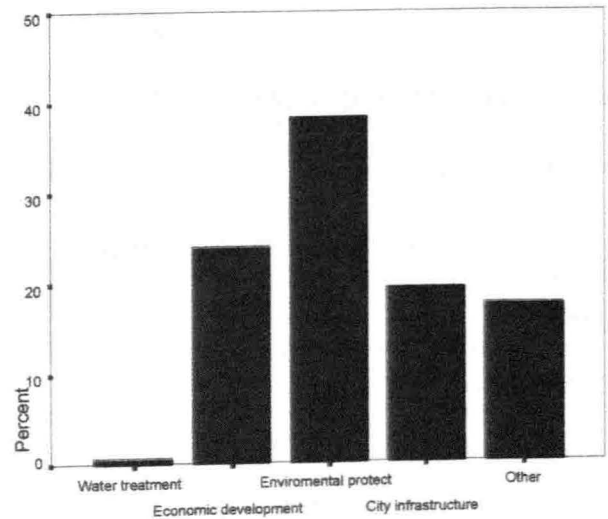


Figure 4: Impact of issue upon voting choice.

Appendix::

Please follow the directions for each question. Your answers will be kept confidential and please feel free to skip any question you do not wish to answer.

1. *Who did you vote for mayor of Fayetteville? (Circle one)*

- a. Dan Coody b. Mustin c. Paula Marinoni d. Fred Hanna e. Sobroto Lahiri
- f. Cyrus Young g. I did not vote for mayor

2. *Which of these issues most affected your decision? (Circle one)*

- a. Water Treatment b. Economic development c. Environmental protection
- d. City Infrastructure e. Other please specify: _____

3. *In the following questions please circle the response that best represents how you feel about the following statements.*

	Strongly <u>Agree</u>	Agree	<u>Neutral or No Opinion</u>			Disagree
	Strongly <u>Disagree</u>					
The tree ordinance issue had an impact on my voting	1	2	3	4	5	5
I pay close attention to national news	1	2	3	4	5	5
I pay close attention to local news	1	2	3	4	5	5

4. *How many times a week do you use the following for news? (circle one for each type of media)*

	Rarely	1-2 times per week		3-4 times per week		5-6 times per week	7 or more
times per week							
Internet	1	2	3	4	5		
Newspaper	1	2	3	4	5		
Magazines	1	2	3	4	5		
Local TV	1	2	3	4	5		
National TV	1	2	3	4	5		
Other Sources	1	2	3	4	5		

5. *How many times a week do you read the following papers?*

	Rarely	1-2 times per week		3-4 times per week		5-6 times per week	7
or more times per week							
Northwest Arkansas Times	1	2	3	4	5		
The Arkansas Democrat Gazette	1	2	3	4	5		
The Morning News	1	2	3	4	5	5	
USA Today	1	2	3	4	5		
The New York Times	1	2	3	4	5		
Other	1	2	3	4	5		

There is a lot of talk these days about what the aims of this country should be for the next ten years. I have here a list of aims that some people feel the country should have for the next ten years. Would you please say which of these you, yourself, would consider the most important long term goals? (Circle one)

1. Maintaining order in the nation
2. Giving the people more say in important government decisions
3. Fighting rising prices
4. Protecting freedom of speech

Which of these would you rank second?:

1. Maintaining order in the nation
2. Giving the people more say in important government decisions
3. Fighting rising prices
4. Protecting freedom of speech

Last, one measure of the success of the news media is how good a job they are doing of informing the public of the government in Washington. The following questions are to determine the quality of the media.

1. Do you happen to know what political position is held by William Rehnquist?
2. Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not: the President, the Congress or the Supreme Court?
3. How much of a majority is needed to override a presidential veto in the House of Representatives and the Senate?
4. Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the House of Representatives?
5. Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? If so which is more conservative?

Please indicate your political preferences:

Strong Republican ____ Republican ____ Independent ____ Strong Democrat ____ Democrat ____

Strong Conservative ____ Conservative ____ Middle of the Road ____ Strong Liberal ____ Liberal ____

Year of Birth: _____ Gender: MALE _____ FEMALE: _____

Using the categories listed below, please indicate your ethnic background.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| _____ 1. NATIVE AMERICAN | _____ 4. HISPANIC ORIGIN |
| _____ 2. ASIATIC ORIGIN | _____ 5. AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK |
| _____ 3. CAUCASIAN/WHITE | _____ 6. OTHER (Please Specify): _____ |

Please circle your level of education:

- | | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| a. Some High School | b. High School Graduate | c. Some College or Trade School |
| d. College Graduate | e. Graduate Degree | |

Faculty comments:

William Schreckhise, Mr. Taylor's faculty mentor had the following comments about His research:

Jon is an exceptional student who is working hard on a unique and important piece of research. I could not have come up with a better topic to study than Jon - the impact of Fayetteville's "Tree Ordinance Controversy" on the November elections. Political scientists largely have ignored local elections as possible areas of study. The field's negligence is simply a product of the unfortunate fact that the bulk of the scholarly attention to the voting behavior of Americans has simply been directed at the national-level with a smidgen of state legislative and gubernatorial races studied here and there. Hence, Jon's thesis will help us to better understand the dynamics of the far more numerous local elections.

Perhaps even more important is the contribution Jon will make to the theory behind elections, in general. In national elections, political scientists have found that a person's political party identification (and NOT their ideological proximity to candidates on issues) is the primary driving force behind how they vote. The importance of the party identification "cue" on a ballot is such that even those who refuse to admit allegiance to one of the parties will, in fact, vote consistently for one party over the other over time. Since an individual's party identification is so important, the vast majority of voters ignore the issues in campaigns even though conventional wisdom might dictate otherwise.

Jon's thesis allows us to explore the possibility that issues may actually affect a local, non-partisan election. Because Fayetteville's mayoral candidates' stances on the *Tree Ordinance Controversy* reveal a clear ideological division, voters could use their positions on local issues as effective replacement cues when deciding for whom to vote. In short, Jon's thesis demonstrates that in this instance that proved to be the case.

I have been impressed by his diligence Jon has shown in the various stages of writing his honor's thesis, regularly coming to my office to seek advice, "touch base," or go over things he has already done. He has given every indication to me that he is very dedicated to sticking to our pre-planned timeline and producing a product on-time and of considerable quality. This is in spite of the fact that the means he is employing to complete the product are quite impressive; he has been utilizing literature that political science students normally do not read until graduate school. Additionally, he has conducted in-depth interviews with local community leaders, and conducted his own exit polling in the November election.

I think Jon's project is both topical, of considerable theoretical import, and is of extraordinary quality.

Janine Parry, one of Mr. Taylor's faculty advisors said of Mr. Taylor's work:

I am familiar with Mr. Taylor's intelligence and work ethic, as well as his knowledge of and interest in politics and political science, because he performed exceptionally in my Introduction to Political Science course two years ago. Since that time, it has been my pleasure to know him as a welcome and regular visitor to my office for advising, graduate school advice, literary exchange, and more!

Mr. Taylor has earned my respect in many ways. Specifically, in the fall semester of 1998 he was one of the first students to really grab notice in my introductory course in political science. From the start, he set "front and center making insightful comments which demonstrated he was keeping abreast of the readings (which were not insubstantial), as well as current news. He also performed extremely well on the three written examinations. In addition, Mr. Taylor produced two research papers on local political events, which were of top-notch quality. Each was a thoroughly-researched and well-organized research effort in which the author displayed analytical ability beyond his years. He performed at this level, incidentally, in spite of the fact that he was simultaneously running competitively for the University of Arkansas's men's cross country team; you would never have known from his impeccable class attendance and regular participation that he was meeting such demands.

Another member of the Political Sciences faculty, Todd Shields, also praised Mr. Taylor's research work:

I am writing to you on behalf of Mr. Jonathan Taylor who is one of our best undergraduate students in the department of political science. Mr. Taylor's undergraduate research is simply outstanding. In fact, Mr. Taylor's paper won the best research paper by an undergraduate student at a recent political science conference, held at Rice University. The conference included students from across the country and the award is quite prestigious. Mr. Taylor's research examines the importance of local political issues on residents' votes for mayor. His evidence indicates that a significant reason for Fred Hannah's recent failed attempt at another term was his stance and decisions regarding the tree ordinances and the development of the Kohl's outlet store on the north side of town. Mr. Taylor's research is important as it indicates that in some instances voters, notorious for not understanding or possessing even the most basic levels of political knowledge, can become quite sophisticated concerning environmental issues at the local level.