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Measuring Effects on Voter Turnout in State and Local Elections

Voting is a key attribute of democracy and, in order to promote and maintain democracy, it is imperative that people get out to vote and voice their opinions. However, even when a person has the ability to vote in an election, there are almost always a multitude of obstacles that work to deter them from actually voting. In the United States, the percentage of the population that goes out to vote in an election, also known as the “voter turnout” is not a fixed variable, particularly in elections that occur on the state and local level (Francia and Herrnson 84, Holbrook and Weinschenk 48). There are a variety of elements that influence turnout in state and local elections, these include the likes of institutional structures, electoral systems, voting reforms, campaign efforts, and legislature professionalization (Bowler 907, Francia and Herrnson 84, Hogan 854). The structure of an election and its institutions can have massive effects on turnout: restrictive voter registration laws can reduce turnout, while transitioning to a more progressive voting system (such as Cumulative Voting) can promote turnout and encourage people to get out and vote (Bowler 907). Moreover, certain political actions, such as increased campaign efforts and party get-out-the-vote (GOTV) actions, can work to inform the public and positively influence their turnout in elections (Francia and Herrnson 84). In addition, spending trends across the state and the institutional structure of a states legislature can actually work to influence the impact these factors have on turnout (Hogan 854).

Clearly, these factors all play a role in influencing voter turnout in state and local elections. However, it is not enough to simply recognize that they have an impact on turnout, it is vital to understand the extent to which these elements have an impact (both positive and negative) on voter turnout in state and local elections, as well as how their impacts oftentimes fit together within a common framework of elections and campaigning. This paper will ask the question of: to what extent do campaign efforts independently impact state and local voter turnout, and to what extent do they impact turnout when combined with other factors like GOTV efforts, electoral reform, trends in statewide spending, and legislature professionalization? To what extent do the structures of a state's elections institutions and its voting laws and systems impact turnout?

Literature Review

To conduct this study, I analyzed scholarly research and data on voter turnout in state and local elections in order to develop a firm scope on some of the following factors: party efforts, campaign intensity, electoral structure and voting systems, electoral reform, state trends in campaign spending, and legislature professionalization. Additionally, I examine how institutional state elections structures affect voter turnout by examining how different types of voting systems play a role in forming turnout. (Hogan 854). A multitude of studies have highlighted and scrutinized the importance of campaigning in affecting voter turnout; and campaigning does not only impact turnout independently, but also with Get-out-the vote (GOTV) efforts and electoral reform, as well as within the state structure of legislature professionalization and trends in statewide spending (Francia and Herrnson 84, Hogan 854).

Peter L. Francia and Paul S. Herrnson actually study this synergistic phenomena in *The Synergistic Effect of Campaign Effort and Election Reform on Voter Turnout in State Legislative*

Elections.,” where they measure the impact that GOTV, electoral reform, and increased campaign efforts have on voter turnout in state legislative elections (Francia and Herrnson 74). First off, research has found that an increase in campaign efforts (such as canvassing and spending) led to significant gains in turnout; similarly, GOTV efforts have been found to significantly stimulate voter turnout in state elections (Francia and Herrnson 74). Concurrently, they examine the negative effects that restrictive voter laws pose on turnout, and how contrastingly, positive electoral reforms like election day registration work to increase voter turnout (Francia and Herrnson 74-75). Using representative sample data of state districts across the nation, they found that GOTV efforts, electoral reform, and increased campaign efforts have a synergistic positive impact on voter turnout; concurrently, they found that turnout is highest in districts where candidates spend the most and both permissive voting and election day voting reforms are in place (Francia and Herrnson 75).

Scholarship has also examined how the impact that increased campaign spending on turnout can either be heightened or reduced within the framework of a state legislature’s professionalization and overall trends in campaign spending across the state (Hogan 854). Richard E. Hogan conducted a study in which he found that voter turnout is more responsive to high campaign spending when legislative professionalization is low, and the overall state spending trend is high (0.57 per voter) (Hogan 854). When legislature professionalism is high and spending is low, increases in campaign spending have virtually no impact on voter turnout, even in cases where candidates transition from spending little to investing heavily per person (Hogan 854). When the context of a state’s professionalization, statewide spending-campaign spending- turnout relationship is a “hybrid” of either high professionalization and low spending

or vice versa, heavy campaign spending seems to play a noticeable, yet muffled role in increasing state turnout (Hogan 854).

Continuing with the analysis of institutions, and how they affect voter turnout in state and local elections, Shaun Bowler addresses the extent to which the established voting system in an election impact turnout (Bowler 902). He conducts a study in which he measures the differences in voter turnout among state elections in which a plurality based voting system is used, and those where a Cumulative Voting (a semi-proportional voting system) is used, testing to see if a CV based system will provide for higher turnout (Bowler 903). Cumulative voting is a system in which multimember districts allocate seats at a lower proportion of votes than is usually needed, and has been adopted by roughly 80 jurisdictions at the time of the study (Bowler 903-904). Bowler measures turnout in districts that maintained a plurality system across election cycles as a control group, and then in districts that transition from a plurality to a CV system, finding that when jurisdictions transition from plurality voting in one election cycle to a CV system in the next, they see significant increases in turnout (Bowler 907).

When studying the effects of campaigning on turnout, it is vital to look at how campaign spending can independently impact voter turnout on both the state and local levels (Holbrook and Weinschenk 42, Tucker 67). On the local level, Thomas M. Holbrook and Aaron C Weinschenk conducted a study of 340 mayoral elections among over major American cities in the United States, where they discussed the low turnout among local elections and how factors, like campaign agendas, competitiveness, and campaign spending, affect local voter turnout (Holbrook and Weinschenk 42). They made sure to use intense scrutiny in their study, incorporating values like the year (presidential, midterm, off year), the structure of the mayorship, and median household income (Holbrook and Weinschenk 42). Along all levels, their

study has shown that increased campaign spending leads to a direct positive increase in turnout, and noted that when candidates in an election spent heavily on their campaigns, overall turnout was higher (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48). Research has also found that upward spikes in turnout are particularly notable in cases where candidates shift from spending very little to very high; thus when interest in an election is low, an increase in spending can work as a catalyst to revitalize voter turnout (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48).

Harvey Tucker goes deeper into the discussion on how campaign reform itself works to affect voter turnout in state elections in “*Contextual Models of Participation in U.S. State Legislative Elections*” (Tucker 67). Tucker derives his information from the writings of Caldeira and Patterson, who together formed the Caldeira- Patterson Model (Tucker 67). The Caldeira-Patterson model serves a contextual model of voter participation in state legislative elections that grounds itself in the reasoning that increased campaign efforts directly lead to increased voter turnout (Tucker 67). The model consists of five separate variables, which are Spending, Spending², Margins, Partisanship, and Competitiveness (Tucker 67). For his study, Tucker decides to test the Caldeira-Patterson Model in the context of Washington State Legislative Elections from the years of 1976-1982, and finds that the Caldeira-Patterson model was successful in elucidating the variations/changes in turnout in Washington State Elections of that period (Tucker 69,71).

Hypothesis

I hypothesize that I will find campaigning and increased campaign spending to have a positive effect on turnout in both state legislative elections and in local elections. I expect to find that campaigning will have different impacts within different frameworks, such as when coupled with GOTV efforts and electoral reform, or within the context of legislature professionalization and

state spending trends. Looking at institutional structure, I expect to find that transition to a Cumulative Voting (CV) system from a plurality based system will result in an upward increase in turnout.

Methods

For this study, I collected empirical data on the synergistic effects on turnout that increased campaigning, GOTV efforts, and electoral reform pose. I then illustrated this data into a table and conducted graphical analysis in order to measure the extent to which these three actions collectively contribute to impacting turnout. After this, I collected empirical data on the effects that campaign spending increases have on turnout in local elections and illustrated the data within a table, and conducted an extensive analysis of the implications of the results. I then conducted further empirical data analysis on the relationship between a state's campaign spending trends and legislature professionalization and the impact that campaign spending has on turnout in an election. Next, I illustrated the data into a table and conducted mathematical analysis in order to realize the impact that the two factors had on net increases in turnout that resulted from increased campaign spending. Moving towards institutional effects, I compiled empirical data on changes in turnout after a jurisdiction transitions to a cumulative voting system and analyzed the data in order to measure the impact that changes in an election's voting system can have on turnout in state elections.

Findings

The findings of my research significantly support my hypothesis that increased campaign spending will lead to a positive effect on voter turnout in state and local elections, and that the impact that campaign spending has on turnout varies differently within the frameworks of electoral reform and state legislature professionalization. Figure 2.2. compiles data gathered from

The Synergistic Effects of Campaign Effort and Election Reform on Voter Turnout in State Legislative Elections, and illustrates the relationship between campaigning, GOTV efforts, and whether or not a state implemented electoral reform in influencing voter turnout in state legislative elections; the figure then displays a predicted turnout based off of the intensity of these efforts, and also calculates the net increase in predicted turnout that an election sees after adopting said voting reforms (Francia and Herrnson 84). It turns out that when GOTV and campaign efforts are low and voter reforms are not implemented, turnout is predicted at a mere 31%; however when Election Day registration reform is implemented, predicted turnout jumps 5 points to 36% (Francia and Herrnson 84). On the contrast, when no voter reform initiatives were implemented but campaigning and GOTV actions were high turnout is predicted at 37%; similarly to the former case, implentening Election Day Registration resulted in predicted turnout springing up 5 points to 42% (Francia and Herrnson 84). When the intensity of GOTV and campaign efforts were both described as “medium”, turnout sans reform was projected at 34%, and with reform that projection leaped by 4 points up to 38% (Francia and Herrnson 84). Clearly, the amount of effort that parties and campaign put into motivating the public to go out and vote and educating them on campaigns and candidates has a massive influence on overall turnout. Low efforts can see a rock bottom projection of 31%, while max efforts result in predicted turnout increasing by 11 points to 42% (Francia and Herrnson 84). The implementation of Election Day Registration reforms can further heighten the positive impact on turnout that the former two actions provide, but a lack thereof can easily stall any positive gains in turnout that were made (Francia and Herrnson 84).

Figure 1.1 Illustration of the Synergistic Relationship Between GOTV Efforts, Increased Campaign Spending, and Electoral Reform on Voter Turnout in State Elections

Intensity of Campaign Efforts	Intensity of Get-out-the-vote motions	Implementation of Election Day Registration Reform	Predicted Turnout	% Increase in Predicted Turnout After Adapting Electoral Reforms
High	Medium	Yes	41%	4%
High	Medium	No	37%	
Low	Low	Yes	36%	5%
Low	Low	No	31%	
Low	High	Yes	39%	5%
Low	High	No	34%	
High	High	Yes	42%	5%
High	High	No	37%	
Medium	Medium	Yes	38%	4%
Medium	Medium	No	34%	

Data used in this table was found from “The Synergistic Effect of Campaign Effort and Election Reform on Voter Turnout in State Legislative Elections” (Francia and Herrnson 84)

The effects of increased campaign are undoubtedly seen in local mayoral elections as well: Holbrook and Weinschenk find that institutional structures are not the only catalysts or deterrents of local turnout, but rather that these structural factors work jointly with the intensity of candidates’ campaigning activities to influence turnout in mayoral elections (Holbrook and Weinschenk 52). Focusing in on how increased campaign spending can impact turnout in local elections, Figure 2.1 illustrates data on how the amount of money that a campaign spends per citizen can work to increase overall turnout (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48). There is a clear

difference between turnout in mayoral elections, where candidates spend virtually nothing and where they spend hefty at \$40 per citizen, an 11% increase in predicted turnout from 18% to 29% (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48). Clearly, the increase from \$0 to \$10 is the most efficient spending increase, shifting the predicted turnout up a significant 8 points (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48). The impact that spending has on turnout definitely levels down the more that a candidate spends, but at \$20, and onward \$10, increases in campaign spending per citizen still resulted in a positive 1% increase in predicted turnout regardless (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48). These findings agree with Holbrook and Weinschenk earlier discussion that the highest upward spikes in turnout are seen in cases where candidates go from spending little to spending heavily; turnout in cases where \$0 was spent was a mere 19%, while a campaign spending \$40 per citizen saw leads to a predicted turnout of 29%, which is roughly a 61% increase in overall turnout (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48). Evidently, campaign spending has a monumental impact on voter turnout in local mayoral elections, but that effect is not completely linear-increases in turnout are muffled as a candidate spends more and more funds (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48).

Figure 2.1 Impact of Increased Campaign Spending on Turnout in Local Mayoral

Elections

Campaign Spending Per Citizen	Predicted Turnout (approx.)	Net Increase in Turnout
\$0	18%	8%

\$10	26%	
\$20	27%	1%
\$30	28%	
\$40	29%	1%

Data compiled in this figure was compiled from *Campaigns, Mobilization, and Turnout in Local Elections* (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48).

After looking at the professionalization of a states legislature, and how that ties in with voter turnout in state elections, it was found that high professionalization in a state's legislature reduces the positive impact that increased campaign spending has on voter turnout in state elections (Hogan 854). This data supports my hypothesis that impacts of campaign spending on turnout will be altered within the framework of legislature professionalize and campaign spending trends across the state (Hogan 854). As illustrated in Figure 3.1 below, states where legislatures are highly professionalized see a mere 0% to 2% change in turnout as a result of high campaign spending (Hogan 854). Figure 3.1 also shows that states where overall statewide campaign spending is high tend to be more receptive to high individual campaign spending; states where legislative professionalization is low and spending is high see an average of a 4.5% net increase in voter turnout (Hogan 854). When overall campaign spending within the geopolitical context of a state's election is high, then increases in spending efforts by individual campaigns have a much stronger influence in getting people out to vote (Hogan 854). When legislature professionalization is low and spending trends are also low, turnout still increases by 2.5% (the second highest increase), which shows how the lack of a highly professionalized legislature allows for an environment in which increases in campaign spending can still have a sizeable impact on turnout in cases where there is a lack of a highly professionalized state

legislature (Hogan 854). However, the data shows that a more professionalized state legislature works to build a geopolitical environment that effectively blocks or dampens the impact that spending increased would have otherwise had on turnout (Hogan 854).

Figure 3.1 Relationships between State Legislative Professionalization, State Campaign Spending, and Campaign Spending in Influencing Voter Turnout

Legislature Professionalization	Campaign Spending Across the State	Turnout at low Campaign Spending of 0.15 per person (approx.)	Turnout at high campaign spending of 0.63 per person	Net % increase in turnout after campaign spending was increased
High	High	48.5%	51%	2%
Low	High	45.5%	50%	4.5%
High	Low	46.5%	46.5%	0%
Low	Low	43.5%	46%	2.5%

Data in this figure was compiled from research done in *Campaign Spending and Voter Participation in State Legislative Elections* by Robert E. Hogan (Hogan 854).

Moving on to institutional structure, Figures 4.1 and 4.2 illustrate data compiled on the increases in turnout seen across state legislative districts after transitioning from a plurality based voting system the semi-proportional Cumulative Voting (CV) system (Bowler 907). As seen in Figure 3.1, districts saw a 5% spike in overall turnout after progressing to a CV system (Bowler 907). While not as large as in increase as overall turnout, turnout among minority voters saw a 1% increase as a result of the change (Bowler 907). Figure 4.2 compares turnout among the control group (where a plurality based system was in continuous use) and the experimental group once they had transitioned to CV Voting (Bowler 907). The experimental group's overall turnout was a whopping six points higher than the control groups, which shows how CV clearly works to increase turnout (Bowler 907). Minority turnout saw no increase between the control and

experimental groups; however this could be due to a variety of outside factors (such as low campaign spending) within the individual districts (Bowler 907). Minority turnout saw no increase between the control and experimental groups; this could be do to a variety of outside factors (such as low campaign spending) within the individual districts (Bowler 907).

Regardless, more research on how a CV system affects turnout among minority voters should definitely be conducted (Bowler 907).

Figure 4.1 Net Increases in Turnout After Transitioning to a Cumulative Voting System

Voting System	Overall Turnout	Minority Turnout	Net Increase in Minority Turnout	Net Increase in Overall Turnout
Pre Transition Plurality	18%	37%	1%	5%
Post Transition CV	23%	38%		

Data in Figure 3.1 was compiled from data found in *Election Systems and Voter Turnout: Experiments in the United States* (Bowler 907).

Figure 4.2 Differences in Overall Turnout Between the Control and Experimental Groups

Voting System	Control or Experimental	Minority Turnout	Overall Turnout	Difference in Minority Turnout	Difference in Overall Turnout
Plurality	Control	38%	17%	0%	6%

Cumulative Voting	Experimental	38%	23%		
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Data in Figure 3.1 was compiled from data found in *Election Systems and Voter Turnout: Experiments in the United States* (Bowler 907).

Discussion

It is clear that the intensity and extent to which parties and campaigns work to put effort and funds into campaigning and motivating the public to get out and vote significantly influences rates of turnout in state elections (Francia and Herrnson 84). When parties and campaigns put in intense efforts, more people come out to vote, thus raising turnout; and when they do not, less people do, thus leading to a lower turnout (Francia and Herrnson 84). A similar trend is found in local elections: turnout is highest among mayoral elections where candidates both spent heavily on their campaigns, with particular upward spikes being recorded in cases where prior spending trends were low (Holbrook and Weinschenk 48). When voters know little about a candidate, they are less likely to put in the effort to go out and vote; thus it is vital that if a candidate and party wants to drive interest and turnout in an election, they put in their best efforts during campaign season (Francia and Herrnson 48). Nevertheless, campaign spending does not pose an absolute linear effect on turnout. Research has shown that a lack of electoral reform in a jurisdiction can stall the positive impacts on turnout that increased spending and GOTV efforts might have had (Francia and Herrnson 48). Similarly, scholarship has found that a highly professionalized legislature can work to establish a geopolitical environment that muffles the impact of increased spending on heightening turnout in state elections (Hogan 854).

Not to say that contextual factors do not positively impact spendings influence though; when electoral reform and high campaign spending already exist within a states geopolitical context, voter turnout is much more receptive to increases in campaign spending (Francia and

Herrnson 48, Hogan 854). Speaking further on context, this study has worked to elucidate the massive impact that the structure of an election's actual voting system can have on turnout (Bowler 907). After switching from a plurality based system to a CV system, districts saw massive hikes in their voter turnout (Bowler 907). Once voters were provided with a system that allocated seats more proportionally, they were more motivated to actually get out and vote (Bowler 903-904,907). Essentially, the system itself that voters are presented with works to impact to the extent to which they seek to participate in it (Bowler 907). However, the study did find that switching to a CV system impacted turnout among minority voters to a much lesser extent, and further research definitely needs to be conducted on why this is the case (Bowler 907).

The findings of this study provide both candidates and parties alike with major implications that they can utilize to examine, critique, and improve their campaigning methods. Politicians can hopefully draw conclusions from this data that they can then use to plan the intensity of their campaign spending and efforts in such a fashion that they will be able to maximize both the impact and the efficiency of increasing their campaign spending on state voter turnout. Candidates for local office (such as mayor) can also utilize this data in order to properly plan their own campaign spending. Members of a state legislature can also work to use the data to their favor, as the level to which they professionalize their legislature can work to either heighten or dampen the impact that increased spending by a politicians campaign will have on turnout in their state (Hogan 854). However, one area in which more research definitely needs to be conducted is on the specific factors that impact minority turnout in state and local elections and to what extent their impact is. While I was able to find scholarship on the effects that various actions and structures had on minority turnout in federal (mostly presidential) elections, I

struggled to find data that focused particularly on minority turnout in state and local elections. If scholars and politicians want to develop a further understanding of turnout in state and local elections, and how it can be impacted by different elements, it is imperative that we look at how turnout among different people of different identities can be affected, and not just at turnout among the population as a whole. It would also be productive to conduct further research on the effects that transitioning to a semi proportional or proportional voting system have on turnout. In addition, it is definitely important to branch out and study voter turnout within other voting systems besides CV and plurality based as well in order to develop a more substantial understanding of institutional structure influences on state and local turnout rates. Altogether, I find that my study contributes significantly to scholarship on voter turnout within state and local elections, providing an extensive analysis on structural, institutional, and campaign based factors that impact it, and to what extent they do so. Hopefully, politicians, party leaders, and members of state legislatures alike can use this data to work towards facilitating high rates of turnout in their state and local election, to ensure that the people have a say in who they elect to office.

Works Cited

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