Candidates, Canvassing, and Campaign Finance in Local Elections: Unexpected Outcomes?

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Abstract

This paper is devoted to increasing the understanding in political science of local elections. While some minimal research has been done in this field, candidates and political scientists alike have long relied on a standing body of literature produced from congressional data to inform choices and predictions about elections. In the pursuit of a new and better understanding of local elections, a survey of Colorado county commission candidates in November 2008 was implemented. The survey was designed to elucidate data regarding door-to-door canvassing, campaign finance, choices candidates make in the pursuit of elected office, and control data, such as incumbency and population density. While it was hypothesized that money and canvassing have an inverse relationship in campaigns, this was found to be untrue. The amount of canvassing a candidate performed was related to money, but neither was affiliated with winning. What was found to be significant in predicting winning or losing in these races was incumbency, whether the candidate was of the plurality party in their county, and whether other elected officials recruited them to run for office. Finally, the paper offers hypotheses as to why these conclusions may not hold true in other election cycles and with different kinds of local candidates.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Topic Proposal

The topic of this senior honors thesis is the issue of local government politics, elections, and campaign finance. I implemented a survey to study whether conventional wisdom is true surrounding fiduciary contributions to campaigns, notably whether more money translates to a greater likelihood of winning an election. My initial hypothesis was that money can be useful to a candidate who is running for election in a small district, but if it is the case that money makes them become lazy so that they stop walking precincts and meeting their constituents, they will lose races at a higher rate than average.

1.2 Research Plan

In order to evaluate this hypothesis, I surveyed candidates for county commission races throughout the State of Colorado. Though not every county commission seat is up for election each election cycle, a majority of commission seats were open last year during the 2008 general elections. I developed a survey and sent it each of these candidates, which was very succinct and thus only took a small amount of time to complete.

The survey instrument was intended to provide me with a variety of data on the subject of county commission races and, by extension, local government races generally. Once that data was collected, I analyzed it using a variety of controls, the most important being the size of the district from which commission candidates are running. Also, by ascertaining which candidate won and lost each election, I used statistical analysis to examine what effect, if any, finances have on campaigns in these very localized races.

This survey was sent out during the week of October 6th, 2008, and the vast majority of candidates completed it before the election on November 4th. It was sent out to the address that they provided as a contact place to the office of the Secretary of State, as required of all candidates under Colorado law.

I believed these data and the conclusions that it elucidated are extremely important for understanding American politics at the local level, a field of study that has long been ignored. A longstanding myth is that the only important things in politics happen at the state or national level, and it simply is not the case. Further, I believed that much of the commonly accepted approaches to campaigns and elections could have been uprooted if my hypothesis had been proved out, specifically showing that “meeting and greeting” people within a candidate’s district, when possible, is more important than a media blitz through the use of large amounts of money.

Chapter 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Thesis Statement

Little research has previously been done in political science into the field of local candidates and elections. These races have largely been ignored in favor of focusing on congressional or presidential elections, or even state elections for the governorship or state legislative seats. For this reason, much of the conventional wisdom regarding elections and how candidates should run campaigns comes from the study of these relatively large races with huge constituencies. I believe that a variety of problems are presented with this top-down informational model, and ignore many of the fundamental differences that local elections have in comparison to congressional elections. Specifically, it has long been accepted as true by candidates and in political science literature that money is one of the primary factors in winning races; that is, whichever candidate raises the most money will win the race, on average. *Money translates into speech through advertising, among other things, and that advertising is the way in which candidates "get to know" their prospective constituents.*

2.2 Discussion of Investigation

In this study, I investigated whether this conventional wisdom regarding money translating into positive results for candidates holds true in local elections. While it was somewhat difficult to determine exactly how money plays into these races generally, variables were isolated to make unidimensional measures to help draw conclusions. Specifically, the question asked and answered was whether the amount of door-to-door canvassing in local elections determines outcomes in races in relation to campaign fundraising.

There have been a few studies published on the effects of door-to-door canvassing on elections, most of which were implemented in the past ten years. One of the first, published in 2003 by Melissa Michelson in *Political Behavior,* examined how canvassing affects voting trends in the Latino population in rural California. The study was done because, according to Michelson, "…Latino voter turnout is so low…less than a third of Latinos vote in Presidential elections, while less than one fourth participate in congressional elections" (Michelson, p. 247). This study is especially helpful, because Michelson studied a school board race, likely one of the smallest and most local of possible races. Michelson found that Latino Democrats were much more likely to vote when they had been contacted face-to-face by a campaign worker. In setting up her conclusions, Michelson cites a study conducted by Gerber and Green (2000) that explains the decline in voter turnout since 1960 as being due to the fact that face-to-face contact has been replaced by mass media advertising, direct mail, and phone calls. Thus, a move away from personal politics into impersonal politics suppresses voter turnout, and can obviously hurt candidates.

A study by David Niven published in 2004 seems to concur with the findings of Michelson, but on a broader scale. Niven studied the effects of face-to-face contact on mobilization in a local election in Florida, based on a random sample of voters. Niven found that, overall, personal contact increases voter turnout by about five points, a significant difference. However, when the data are broken down, Niven shows that, "The effect was greatest among those who vote intermittently but not consistently, who were up to 10 points more likely to vote after contact" (Niven, p. 881). The people on the margins of voting who are contacted in local elections are much more likely to vote, and that can turn the tide of an election.

Green, Gerber, and Nickerson, building on the 2000 article, published the results from an even more comprehensive experiment on the issue of voter turnout and canvassing in 2003. Their results were based upon aggregated data from six cities and found that voter canvassing has great potential for increasing voter turnout. Their conclusion states, "Each successful contact with a registered citizen raises that individual's probability of voting by approximately 7 percentage points, which is considerable given the fact that local elections often attract only 25 percent of the electorate" (Green, p. 1094). All of these findings show that personalized contact with people involved in campaigns can greatly increase voter turnout, which can clearly translate into results for candidates.

With the rise of targeted face-to-face contact among candidates in recent years based on data that show voter registration and voter activity by name and address, candidates can look for those people in their districts who are very likely to be induced to go to the polls based on personal contact. Through targeted walking, the increased turnout should, theoretically, translate directly into positive results for that candidate.

My study asked questions about how much canvassing candidates for local elections are doing, and whether and how they were targeting specific people or neighborhoods in their districts. An interesting question, which I address in a later chapter, is whether certain independent variables affect the amount of face time candidates give to their constituents, and what the effects on races are as a result of those variables. I was even able to push these findings further forward, showing that certain independent variables affect how much canvassing a candidate chooses to do, and the election results in the process.

2.3 Classes of Explanations

One possible explanation for candidates doing less canvassing, relative to other candidates, is a sense of arrogance or laziness, especially with regard to money. My main hypothesis for this study was that there is an inverse relationship between the amounts of money a candidate raises and the amount of canvassing they do. Because of the conventional wisdom arising from studies of congressional elections showing that money is what counts in elections, candidates at the local level can become complacent when they raise more funds than their opponents. Instead of walking door-to-door, these candidates may invest their money in advertising through direct mail, radio or TV, and campaign signs and literature. But we know from the literature that this type of advertising can suppress voter turnout in local elections, which can actually lead to a loss for the candidate who raises the most money but becomes complacent (Gerber and Green, 2000). Additionally, a further explanation from Jacobson helps to show that more money may not even necessarily mean huge differences for candidates: "Campaign spending is subject to diminishing returns; the more dollars spent the less gained by each additional dollar" (Jacobson, p. 44).

Another explanation for a small amount of canvassing could be a dearth of time, given that candidates for local races often have other jobs that take up much of their days. This is elucidated by data from candidates who raised little money, but still did a very small amount of canvassing. However, those candidates could simply be lazy, not wanting to put the work into running a successful campaign. Both of these scenarios had potential to skew the data and made it more difficult to prove my main hypothesis.

2.4 Important Caveats

One of the major differences I considered and controlled for in this survey was county size. Because races for county commission are divided by county and not by population, there are huge differences in the

amount of constituents to whom candidates are responsible. A county on the rural Western Slope of Colorado near Four Corners has far fewer people than Boulder County. This is in stark contrast with elections for the U.S. House of Representatives, where redistricting based on population produces largely similar districts across states.

That said, it would be difficult for most voters in congressional districts to expect to meet the candidates for Congress. The sizes of the districts simply are too large; candidates expect to meet people through advertising, the direct result of money. According to "The Politics of Congressional Elections," Gary Jacobson's seminal work on Congress, "First, congressional challengers rarely win if they do not spend a substantial amount of money, and the more they spend, the more likely they are to win" (Jacobson, p. 41). I hypothesized that the smaller the district, the more likely it is that voters are potentially able to meet the candidates for local office, and that this will be reflected in the data collected from the survey. Had I been correct, there should have been some kind of sliding scale present in the data, where the candidates in the smallest districts had the most face-to-face time per constituent, and the largest districts had the least. The biggest counties should have more closely resembled congressional districts, where more money is raised and less time is spent with or on constituents.

Another major issue I considered in this regard is incumbency advantage. According to Jacobson, there has been a sharp increase in incumbency advantage for congressional candidates since 1960 (Jacobson, p. 26). Incumbents generally have more resources and contacts than do challengers, which definitely puts them at an advantage. Another interesting connection was articulated by Gary Cox and Jonathan Katz (1996), who argued that incumbency discourages "quality challengers" and thus makes elections for incumbents much more easy than in open seats. Furthermore, "The connections for nonincumbents between spending and votes is therefore at least potentially reciprocal: money may help win votes, but the expectation that a candidate can win votes also brings in money" (Jacobson, p. 40). However, these data have been collected only for congressional candidates, not for local races. I thought it possible, initially, that incumbency has no advantage at the local level. Therefore, I aggregated my own data on incumbency and attempted to determine if there is actually an incumbency advantage in these races.

A final control I considered was that national politics and trends can affect politics down the ballot even at the local level, especially in the 2008 election. People were quite unhappy with their government—the incumbent president had an exceptionally low approval rating, and Congress' rating was even worse. Jacobson writes, "Some elections feature national political tides—driven by recessions, scandals, presidential politics, and the like—that strongly favor one party's candidates" (Jacobson, p. 41). On the other hand, there is evidence that people evaluate down ballot races in different ways, so how down-ballot voting affected results was elusive (Stein, 1990).

2.5 Research Hypotheses

The model suggesting that the more money is raised for congressional candidates relative to their challengers the better the results for the candidate hold true for congressional elections, where voters have no expectation of meeting the candidates for office. Convinced of this fact, they must glean knowledge about a candidate from the advertising that is done by that candidate, and make a choice between two people they will never meet. In local elections, however, I hypothesized that there is a different expectation. Voters are much more likely to vote for a candidate that they are able to meet in person than they are someone they have never met when *it is possible to meet the candidate*, as a function of district size and population density. In very small races, such as those for county commissioners, voters may well have an expectation of meeting their representatives. Given that fact, I

believed that if it is the case that money produces laziness or complacency on the part of candidates in counties or districts where voters expect to meet their representatives, it should be concluded the raising of more money has a negative effect on electoral chances for candidates. This is in stark contrast with existing data on Congressional elections, and could very well have changed the understanding of local government elections in the United States.

Chapter 3
RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Testing Hypotheses

I tested my research hypotheses by aggregating the data from a mail survey of all candidates for county commission offices in Colorado in November 2008. I sent this survey to all candidates for which addresses could be obtained. Most addresses were taken from the Elections Division of the Colorado Secretary of State's website.[1] An additional thirty addresses were not found on that website, but I placed phone calls to the Clerk and Recorder's office of the respective counties where data were missing, and they were happy to provide contact information.

There were approximately 230 candidates for county commission races in Colorado in November 2008, and of those 230, the contact information for 208 was available. All 208 were contacted in the initial mailing of surveys, which took place on October 10th, 2008. Once two weeks had passed, I sent out another round of survey packets to the candidates I had yet to hear from. Since the second mailing, we have received surveys from both the first and second mailings in about equal proportions.

There were 195 surveys that were delivered of the 208 that I originally sent out (13 were undeliverable). Of those 195, 94 surveys were returned; 94/195 is a response rate of 48.2%. Adjusting for those data that I was actually able to match to candidates (3 surveys were returned with identifying information left blank), the total usable response rate was 91/195, or **46.6%.** Obtaining a return of about ½ of surveys in this mail format is considered an excellent result.

The survey instrument was sent to candidates in large 9"x12" manila envelopes. Inside each envelope was a cover letter addressed to the candidate from my honors thesis chair, Dr. Ken Bickers, a paper survey, and a self-stamped, self-addressed return envelope. The cover letter contained all appropriate information for the candidates, including the purpose of the survey, necessary disclosures, and procedures for contacting me. The Human Subjects Committee of the University of Colorado-Boulder approved both the cover letter and the survey before any candidate received them.

The survey was designed to gather identifying information from candidates so that I could organize them by party, county, and commission district. This served several purposes—candidates organized by party showed which party won and lost, and by county. Seeing which candidates won and lost by county allowed me to combine those data with information about population size and population density, an integral part of attempting to prove my hypothesis about canvassing as related to district size.

Using data gleaned from those sources as mentioned in the last paragraph, other parts of the survey were brought in to draw conclusions. The survey contained a section about monetary contributions they received and spent, as well as a question concerning what sources money came from. Additionally, candidates were asked to discuss how they spent their money—on hired staff, yard signs, radio/TV ads, buttons, etc. These questions illuminated for me how much money was raised and spent, and I correlated that to whether candidates won or lost.

Another section of the survey was concerning door-to-door canvassing. Candidates were asked how much canvassing they did during the month of September 2008, in terms of hours per day. They were

[1] http://www.sos.state.co.us/cpf/InquiryMainPage.do

asked how much of said canvassing was done by them, the candidate, and/or by paid or volunteer staff. Also, the candidates were questioned about strategy for walking their counties: did they target specific houses, or did they simply canvass all houses in a neighborhood? If they did target particular houses and skip others, were houses targeted based on voter registration, voting history, or another factor? From these data, we can correlate the amount and type of door-to-door canvassing with victory or loss in the election. Combining those data with the data on the use of money in the elections, I was able to show whether my hypothesis about a negative correlation between money and canvassing exists in these local races, and if canvassing and money also have an inverse relationship.

To add appropriate controls to these data, candidates were asked about incumbency. Were they the incumbent in this race? If so, how long had they held the office? Had they held any prior office that might add to their name recognition in the district? From this, I should be able to not only control for incumbency (based on the assumption that there is an incumbency advantage, as in U.S. congressional races) but also figure out if there actually *is* an incumbency advantage in local races. Further, there were many other questions throughout the survey designed to add controls: age, sex/gender, religion, children, marital status, campaign strategy, etc.

3.2 Methods for Hypothesis Testing

In order to test my hypothesis, I aggregated all of the data contained in the surveys. I used Microsoft Excel to create spreadsheets where all the data from the surveys was coded, using interval and ordinal data, where applicable. From there, I sorted the data and imported it into STATA, a statistics package that is widely used in political science. I used STATA to run simple and multiple regression analysis to analyze the data.

3.3 Strengths & Weaknesses; Threats to Validity

Mail survey data can present certain weaknesses that might not otherwise be evident in other methods of surveying. For one thing, candidates complete the survey by themselves, without clarification on questions; this resulted in vague or sometimes incorrect answers from candidates who did not completely understand a question. Another potential weakness is that candidates self-select into completing the survey or not, and candidates from specific geographic areas or with other predilections might complete the survey while others choose not to. What I did to address this when all surveys came in was to examine them and to see if I had a proper sample—did roughly proportional amounts of candidates from rural and urban and suburban districts respond? Did both Democrats and Republicans respond to the survey? What about incumbents and non-incumbents? The next chapter responds to these questions.

The strength of this method of data collection was that I quickly and easily obtained data from candidates in parts of Colorado that are far from Boulder, without having to call each one and spend an hour asking them questions and recording the data—provided that they theoretically would have even been willing to speak with a surveyor for that length of time around an election when their candidacy mandated spending any extra time fundraising and meeting with constituents.

Considering all of the pros and cons of mail surveys and other methods of data collection, it was decided that the mail survey was the best, most efficient route for gathering the information that I required for completing this thesis.

Chapter 4
THREATS TO VALIDITY EXAMINED

4.1 Survey Logistics

The survey as administered to candidates turned out quite well. In terms of representativeness, 41 respondents were Republican, 36 were Democrat, 10 were unaffiliated, and 4 were affiliated with minor parties.[2] This is very well representative of the Colorado electorate, where the plurality of voters is Republican, followed very closely by both Democrat and unaffiliated/independent voters.

Survey respondents came from 47 of Colorado's 65 counties. While some counties produced more respondents than others, the number of respondents was well distributed across counties. Candidates from rural, urban, and suburban districts responded to the survey; this allowed for differences in population and population density to be tabulated and reported in a significant manner.

With a 46.6% response rate as mentioned previously, the results of this study (close to 50%) are significant and believable.

Finally, in terms of win/loss record among survey respondents, 48 respondents won their race while 43 did not. This gives a fair distribution of candidates to be studied, especially in light of the fact that 9 respondents were unopposed in their races and necessarily won.

4.2 Issues with Mail Survey Answers

As mentioned earlier, there are certain problems that present themselves in the administration of mail surveys. With no administrator present when the candidate takes the survey, they can misconstrue questions, or choose not to answer particular questions that would have been helpful. As for the latter issue, this is why 3 of the surveys that were returned were unusable; the data could not be matched to a candidate or county. Thus, the information was, unfortunately, discarded to preserve the accuracy of the data set.

The only other slightly pervasive issue in the survey was candidate's misunderstanding of how I wanted money to be reported. In the money section[3] I asked a question about how much money was raised for a candidate's campaign. I intended this question to elucidate how much money the candidates would spend over the campaign. Instead, a small minority of candidates interpreted this as money *raised* from sources that were not from their own personal finances. This question should be adjusted for future studies to read something along the lines of, "How much money do you intend to spend on this campaign, both from your own personal finances and donations from other individuals?"

However, neither of these issues affected the resulting data enough for it to be skewed beyond believability. I therefore accept the results of my survey as significant, and move onto data analysis.

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[2] The minor parties represented were the American Constitution Party, the Green Party, and the Libertarian Party.
[3] See Appendix, page 3 for questions about fiduciary matters.

Chapter 5
DATA ANALYSIS: REJECTED HYPOTHESES

After review of all of the data collected by this survey and after running regression analysis in STATA, it is clear that many of my original hypotheses regarding the supposed pay-off for candidates from walking their districts were incorrect. Running three simple regressions, and then adding in some more complex regressions with several controls, this was proved out conclusively. The following is a tabulation of important data about the most important variables to my analysis:

Table 5.1
Tabulation of Important Statistics

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Incumbent	91	.384	.051	0	1
Of the Plurality Party	91	.439	.052	0	1
Money	90	9361.26	1704.9	0	100000
Education	91	2.30	.102	1	5
Confidence	91	65.20	2.86	0	100
Lived in County	91	29.19	1.83	2	77
Won or Lost the Race	91	.5274	.052	0	1
Total Time Spent on Campaign	91	4.85	.422	0	20
Time Spent Walking Door-to-Door	90	5.34	.776	0	46

5.1 Number of Hours vs. Win/Loss Record

Running a simple regression where whether a candidate won or lost a race was set as the dependent variable and where the total number of hours walked per week by the candidate and their entire campaign staff was the independent variable, it is shown that there is a negative correlation between the amount of time spent walking the district and winning. The coefficient was -2.53, the t-statistic was -1.64, and the p-statistic was .104. This shows that the more time a candidate and their campaign staff walked in a district, the less likely they were to win; it can be hypothesized that the less likely a candidate feels they are to win, the more likely they are to walk their district in an attempt to meet people, introduce themselves, and sway their voting. These efforts were largely unsuccessful, according to these data. However, it should be noted that with a t-statistic of less than |2|, the probability of this being due to random chance is higher than it should be to prove something conclusively. The following is a table showing the complete results of this analysis:

Table 5.2
Regression Analysis of Amount of Canvassing (Independent Variable) Done by Campaign vs. Winning and Losing (Dependent Variable)

	Coefficient	T-Statistic	P>T
Won or Lost the Race	-2.53	-1.64	.104
Observed	90		
F Ratio	2.70		
Prob>F	.103		
R^2	.029		
Adjusted R^2	.018		
Constant	6.668		

5.2 Candidate Walking Hours vs. Win/Loss Record

Although the total walking hours of a candidate's campaign show a negative correlation to winning, I hypothesized it possible that voters meeting the *actual candidate* walking door-to-door, rather than his/her staff, would produce a greater payoff for the candidate. Running that simple regression, the results were actually worse for a campaign than the previous analysis in terms of whether a candidate won or lost. The more a candidate walked their district, the more likely they were to lose; the coefficient was -.023, with a highly significant t-statistic of -2.04, a p-statistic of .044, and an r-squared of .045. It appears that a candidate is much more likely to lose when they spend time walking their districts rather than focusing on other pursuits. It should be noted, though, that with such a low r-squared of only .045, a candidate's spending time walking their district did not *cause* them to lose a race; there were other, much more influential factors, which will be discussed in a later chapter.

5.3 Strategic Canvassing vs. Win/Loss Record

I further hypothesized in earlier chapters that perhaps walking itself was not what was important in this analysis—what was actually important was the *type* of walking a candidate's campaign engaged in. This was manifest in survey questions[4] about how a candidate or their staff selected specific homes to engage while walking. Survey questions asked whether they picked houses according to voter registration, voter history, or the party of registered voters in that house. According to much of the literature mentioned earlier, walking door-to-door should increase voter turnout significantly. By extrapolation, if that is true, then a candidate that targets specific homes where voters have the same party affiliation or political leanings should have a greater turnout for themselves, thus resulting in a win more often than they would have without walking.

Some candidates did engage in targeted walking, while others did not. This fact set up a perfect analysis to see if candidates that walked in a targeted fashion were more successful than those who did not. In that analysis it was clear yet again that those who engaged in targeted walking were still less likely to win than those who did not. However, the t-statistic of each of these, though negative, did not meet the threshold of |2| or greater to prove with actual statistical significance that targeted walking hurt a campaign or, at least, did not help it.

5.4 Previous Regressions with Necessary Controls

While each of the above regressions were helpful in showing that walking the district in a variety of combinations was either statistically not significant in either winning or losing, or, more often, statistically significant in correlation with losing a race, those did not include any appropriate control groups. Taking each of those regressions again and adding in controls for incumbency, population density[5], whether the candidate was of the majority party in the district, whether the seat was open, how long a candidate had lived in the district, and if they had held prior office, there were no significant statistical changes from the simple regressions to report. In every case, walking of the candidate, walking of the candidate's staff, and walking in a targeted fashion were either associated with losing or were not statistically significant

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[4] See Appendix for complete survey as administered to candidates; see page 2 of the survey for questions concerning walking—time spent, which members of a campaign engaged in it, whether a campaign engaged in targeted walking, and what criteria, if any, were used in determining targets.

[5] This control was exceptionally important given my earlier hypotheses about population size and density affecting results. The analysis showed no significant differences between high and low populations, or high and low population densities.

enough to report whether they were correlated with winning or losing. This could be due to a variety of factors, which will be discussed in a later chapter.

5.5 Tradeoff Between Money and Canvassing

A final, and highly significant, rejected hypothesis is that there is a tradeoff between money and walking the district in county-commission-level races in Colorado. First, and quite interestingly, regression analysis shows no significant correlation between winning and raising significant amounts of money.[6] Next, regression analysis does show some positive correlation between amounts of money candidates raised and the amount of walking they did; however, the increase in the coefficient was remarkably small. And neither canvassing nor money was positively correlated with winning. I thus reject the extrapolation from Jacobson's congressional data that money is associated with winning at the countywide race level. Further, the non-finding that neither walking, nor money, nor the interaction between the two influence winning or losing in any way, whatsoever, at this level of elective office is highly significant.

[6] Coefficient: 4.68e-06; t-statistic: 1.43; p>t: .156

Chapter 6
DATA AND METHODS:
OBSERVED REASONS FOR WINNING & LOSING

Given that my earlier predictions about the relation of canvassing of a candidate's district to winning were incorrect, I sought to use the survey data for another purpose: to analyze what actually was correlated with winning or losing of candidates for county commission offices. This section will serve to explicate the findings of such analysis.

6.1 Incumbency & Party Identity

The most obvious and strong finding among these data are mirrored in the analysis of congressional-level data as discussed earlier—the correlation of incumbency to winning a race. Incumbency, run in a simple regression with no control variables, is related to winning a race with a coefficient of .62, t-statistic of 7.31, a probability of t at less than 0.000, and an r-squared of 0.36. This statistic could be especially high because 9 cases of the 91 survey respondents (nearly ten percent) were incumbents who were unopposed in their races. The fact that they were unopposed could be associated with two things: 1) incumbency is such a strong correlate with winning a race that people are much less likely to challenge an incumbent, and, 2) there could be a lack of quality challengers available to run for the seat at any given time.[7] Thus, this does not discount incumbency advantage, but rather strengthens it. Incumbents are so likely to win their races that quality challengers often do not even present themselves!

When incumbency is added to one other factor from the survey in this analysis, the picture of what causes the majority of winning and losing in this race is even more clear. That added control is whether the candidate was of the plurality party in their county.[8] When placed together, the coefficients of incumbency and candidate's party affiliation as compared to their county, respectively, were .482 and .478, and with exceptionally significant t-statistics.[9] The adjusted r-squared was .57 for this regression. The results of the analysis, and the analysis to be explained in the next paragraph, are contained in these tables:

[7] As articulated by Jacobson [2001].
[8] The data on whether a candidate is of the plurality party was extrapolated from voter registration data obtained from the Colorado Secretary of State, and then cross-referenced with the candidate's official party affiliation on the ballot.
[9] T-statistics, 6.48, 6.56. P>T, 0.000, 0.000. Constant, .132

Table 6.1				Table 6.2		
Associations With Candidates Winning or Losing a Race (Dependent Variable)						
	Coefficient	T-Statistic	P>T	Coefficient	T-Statistic	P>T
Incumbency	.482	6.48	0.000	.472	6.18	0.000
Of the Plurality Party	.478	6.56	0.000	.432	5.86	0.000
Lived in County				.001	.049	.628
Money				2.65e-06	1.16	.248
Total Time Spent				-.004	-.45	.650
Education				.050	1.28	.205
Recruited by Other Officials				.130	2.96	.004
Observed	91			90		
F Ratio	60.88			20.02		
Prob>F	0.000			0.000		
R^2	0.58			0.63		
Adjusted R^2	0.57			0.60		
Constant	.132			-.087		

This effectively shows that nearly every race studied in this survey was determined by incumbency and if the candidate was of the plurality party in their district (county). To better explain the coefficients in the above table, incumbents have an effective chance of winning their race of 61.4%,[10] candidates of the plurality party have 61% chance of winning, and incumbents of the plurality party have about as close to

[10] Coefficient of incumbency plus the constant of .132.

a 100% chance of winning as statistically possible in this model.[11] Finally, analyzing the coefficient of this model, *candidates that are not of the plurality party and are not the incumbent in their county have only a 13.2% chance of winning*. This is an exceptionally significant finding, and most definitely mirrors congressional-level data analysis previously mentioned.

To further analyze these findings, I added in control groups to the regression analysis to ensure that these findings were not being over-reported in the previous model. The results of that analysis are above, in table 3.2. When adding in controls for how long a candidate has resided in their county, how much money they raised, the total amount of time they spent on the campaign, their level of education, and by whom they were recruited to run for office, the coefficients and t-statistics for both incumbency and being of the plurality party were only diminished slightly, not in a significant manner.[12] Every control variable dropped off in this model to insignificance, except for whether a candidate was recruited by other officials.[13] The adjusted r-squared of this model is .60, and the coefficient is -.087.

Therefore, a candidate that is the incumbent, is of the plurality party in the county, and is recruited by other officials has virtually a 100% of winning their race. A candidate who is of the plurality party and was recruited by other officials but is not the incumbent has approximately a 56.2% of winning. And an individual not from the plurality party, and not the incumbent, but who was recruited by other officials has about 13% chance of winning. A candidate with none of the above three qualifications effectively has a 0% chance of winning their race.[14] It is plausible to believe that the constant of 13.2% in the regression model of only incumbency and party affiliation against winning or losing is explained completely by candidate recruitment patterns.

In addition, it is of exceptional importance that the other control groups in Table 3.2 dropped out as explanatory factors for winning. In direct contrast with congressional-level data, how much money a candidate raises in these races has no effect on their chances of winning or losing, whether they raised no money (as many candidates did), or $100,000. In seeming contradiction with common sense, how much time a candidate spent on their campaign was of no importance, whether they put in no time or 40+ hours every week. The candidate's level of education had no effect on the outcome of their race.[15] And finally, how long a candidate lived in their county meant nothing in this model, whether they had resided there 2 years or 77. Adding in any other controls from this survey to the model produces no change in the results, including population density, population size, race, age, religion, etc.

6.2 What Causes Candidates to Canvass

In further analysis of previous discussion of candidates' canvassing patterns and relations to winning or losing, I examined what things are correlated with a candidate's decision to canvass their district more or less. The results of that regression are presented in this table:

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[11] There is overlap in the data between incumbency and being of the plurality party, so these data are skewed slightly, though not significantly.

[12] Coefficients, .472, .432. T-statistics, 6.18, 5.86. P>T 0.000, 0.000.

[13] Coefficient, .120. T-statistic, 2.96. P>T .004.

[14] Any discussion of the "chances of winning" is relative to the model used to show results; it is also subject to the constraints of statistics when regression models are used. Any group of variables should never be construed as "certainty" of winning in future races—there are always individual factors in play that could alter a dramatically alter race, such as a sex scandal or a death.

[15] The median education level was some college, no degree conferred.

Table 6.3
Regression Analysis: What Causes A Candidate to Canvass (Dependent Variable)

	Coefficient	T-Statistic	P>T
Confidence	-.013	-.43	.665
Incumbent	-3.39	-2.12	.037
Of the Plurality Party	-.216	-.14	.886
Money	.000	5.70	0.000
How Long Candidate Lived in County	-.009	-.22	.83
Education	.176	.23	.82
If Candidate Held Office Prior	.091	.06	.95
Other Officials Recruited Candidate	.882	1.04	.303
Observed	89		
F Ratio	5.76		
Prob>F	0.000		
R^2	.365		
Adjusted R^2	.301		
Constant	4.376		

The only significant findings from this are that incumbents canvass far less than do challengers, and that money is correlated with the amount of canvassing that a candidate engages in. These data make good sense in light of previous discussions. Incumbents canvass less, knowing that they do not need to engage much in canvassing since their incumbency is, in and of itself, a significant advantage. And that money is correlated with canvassing is an interesting finding. It could well be that the more a candidate canvasses, the more likely people are to donate who speak with that candidate. It could be that those who raise significant amounts of money and canvass large amounts are the candidates who know they are likely to lose; they attempt to close the gap through canvassing and campaign spending. And the data do show that neither money nor canvassing is correlated with winning, and thus seem to lend credibility to this hypothesis. It is, however, impossible to test these hypotheses in the context of this survey. It could be interesting for a future study to add questions that would help further illuminate this issue.

Chapter 7
CONCLUSIONS: SIGNIFICANCE OF OBSERVED DATA & IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

7.1 Party Identification

It was previously believed, falsely, that party identification in races at the county level would be insignificant. I believed that with enough canvassing by a campaign, counties were small enough—especially ones with high population density—that a candidate could overcome their party affiliation by the sheer power of name recognition. Clearly this was not the case. With 43% of a candidate's chances of winning being explained by party identification, party identification makes a significant difference in who gets elected. I suspect this variable becomes even more significant in races for open seats where there is no incumbent; however, this survey did not return enough data on open seats[16] for any analysis to rise to the level of significance.

7.2 Incumbency Advantage & Incumbent Recognition

Additionally, it is clear that incumbency plays a major role in deciding the outcome of races. Yet, analysis of the data shows that incumbents are often unopposed, and that, when they are opposed, they put in significantly less work on their campaign than do others. Therefore, another analysis is prudent, but an analysis that is beyond the scope of this study. In Colorado, the incumbent in any race is *not* identified on the ballot. Therefore, voters do not necessarily have an incumbent bias that is based entirely on having been told at the last minute that a candidate is also the incumbent. *They must bring with them to the polls a working knowledge (name recognition) of who the incumbent is*. The methods voters use for identifying the incumbent (often absent much campaign effort on the part of the incumbent) is a major question that deserves study. Is it from their previous work in the last term, community forums, door-to-door canvassing (independent of reelection campaigns), or some other measure? A survey of incumbent county commissioners could be implemented asking questions about voter contact to attain name recognition throughout their term and then analyzed according to their reelection success to determine the answer to this question. Perhaps the data will show a method that non-incumbents could utilize to better attain name recognition.

7.3 Reanalyzing the Literature on Canvassing in Light of Survey Data

The literature on the subject of campaigning and canvassing in a candidate's district as tied to voter turnout is very sparse, and the subject of how canvassing relates to winning is non-existent in political science literature. Thus, in setting up the background for this thesis I was forced to make connections out of the existing literature that were not necessarily supported explicitly. The most important of these drawn connections was that 1) if it is the case that canvassing increases voter turnout, and 2) candidates engage in targeted canvassing based on party affiliation, voter registration, and voting history of a home, then 3) canvassing can result in greater turnout for likely supporters of a candidate, therefore making him/her more likely to win a race than if they had not canvassed.

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[16] The number of open seats in the data collected was only 15 of 91, and as such is not significant enough to report.

While the data extracted from the survey in this study has conclusively disproved this argument, there are other mitigating factors to consider, which led me to believe that this race was not representative of a true "low-information" election, and thus my hypothesis could be true in another context. For example, in the earlier literature review I cited a study by Gerber and Green (2000), which posited that a move from personal politics of canvassing to impersonal politics of direct mail and mass media advertising drove down voter turnout. However, given that my study was conducted in 2008 and not the period 1960-2000 as Gerber and Green noted, I believe that there may have been mitigating factors that skewed results.

The following is a graph of Colorado voter turnout in the most recent national elections (congressional and presidential), 1980-2008.

Table 7.1
Voter Turnout in Colorado: 1980-2008 National Elections

Year	Voter Turnout
1980	57.2%**
1982	43.5%
1984	57.1%**
1986	45.9%
1988	59.0%**
1990	43.2%
1992	62.9%**
1994	42.1%
1996	54.5%**
1998	46.1%
2000	57.5%**
2002	46.3%
2004	66.7%**
2006	40.2%
2008	69.8%**

As obtained from George Mason University at:
http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm

** Presidential elections

As this table obviates, voter turnout in the 2008 presidential election in Colorado was nearly 70%. This is a considerable difference from only two years prior, 2006, when only congressional offices were at stake. 2008 had increased voter turnout even over the hotly contested 2004 presidential election, and significantly greater turnout than the 2000 election. In fact, 2008 represented the highest turnout in any election in Colorado since prior to 1980, even though the population of voting age has increased throughout that period.

Yet, the studies I cited earlier about how canvassing increases voter turnout significantly did have some caveats of their own. One in particular is in the study by Niven (2004), which states that the effect of canvassing was a 10 point increase in likelihood of voting among those voters contacted by the candidate who were intermittent but not consistent voters. The issue of conducting this survey in 2008 is that with the highest voter turnout in recent Colorado history, it is possible, and highly likely, that *all the intermittent but inconsistent voters were going to turn out to vote in the presidential race anyway, regardless of being contacted by any local candidate*. This is likely due to the fact that the previous president, George W. Bush, as well as the Democratic Congress, had exceptionally low voter approval ratings in the period leading up to the election. Additionally, presidential candidate Barack Obama paid special attention to exciting voters who generally had been unlikely to vote, such as young people and students. I believe that this increased voter turnout made canvassing in the concurrent local elections completely worthless. And this conclusion is supported by the aforementioned data in the earlier chapter about rejecting hypotheses.

An additional explanatory factor for the lack of any effect on a candidate's chances of winning or losing by canvassing their district is found in the study by Michelson (2003). In this study of Latino voters in California, Michelson found a significant increase in voting among contacted individuals in a local school board election. However, this school board race was non-partisan, and thus the data from my survey showing that being of the plurality party in a county plays a major role in deciding a candidate's fate (as candidate's are identified by party on the ballot), Michelson's survey is not as relevant. Without party identification cues, it is much more difficult to equate the results from her survey with the results from my own. When party identification is destroyed as a voting cue, I hypothesize that voters must look elsewhere to make their choice of whom to vote for.

Finally, the Green, Gerber, and Nickerson (2003) study is also not as germane to my results as I had originally hoped. In their aggregated study of more than six cities, canvassing in local elections produced an increased voter turnout of 7%. However, they go on to state that voter turnout in these elections is only about 25%. Given that the voter turnout in Colorado was 45% greater in November 2008 than in this study, it is exceptionally difficult to compare these two results and conclusively reject any hypotheses. The fact is, in my estimation, if people were not going to turn out to vote either for or against Barack Obama in an exceptionally exciting and high-information presidential election, a county commission candidate could not *possibly* have hoped to get them to vote based on his/her contact through canvassing. Because of this fact, the effect of canvassing was negligible in local elections in 2008. Rather, voters relied on party identification and incumbency cues, not on who contacted them for a local race. They were far too busy with the high-information presidential and (to a lesser extent) congressional elections, to be bothered to turnout specifically to support a local county-level candidate.

7.4 Implications of Findings & Discussion of Future Courses of Study

Given that the conditions under which I conducted my survey were constrained by the 2008 presidential election, which elevated turnout to levels not seen in any recent memory, and given that these conditions

do not match up with the circumstances under which the current understanding of the subject of canvassing was created*, I do not fully reject my original hypotheses*. I believe that since voter turnout was so elevated in this election, canvassing could not possibly have increased voter turnout. I do however reject the hypothesis that money is either a causational or correlational factor in winning, as in congressional races. This is a highly significant finding, and one of the first showing a definite difference between the races for office at the congressional and local levels.

Future studies should continue to work from the hypothesis that canvassing increases voter turnout, and thus strategic canvassing produces results for canvassing candidates at the polls. What I believe this study shows, though, is that this is only the case in low-turnout, low-information elections that are not influenced by national tides. A good example of this would be Denver county commission races, where races are set in spring and summer months completely separate from November elections. Future studies added to this body of information could provide a guide as to what times and years are best for challengers to enter races, should this hypothesis prove correct.

An additional consideration in designing future studies is the effect of party identification in my survey, as expressed through a candidate being of the plurality party in a county. Many races throughout the United States are free of party identification cues (as alluded to in the discussion of Michelson's 2003 work). In these very low-information elections, candidates run on their name and reputation and candidacy alone, and are not subject to party identification cues. Thus, I hypothesize that in these races, canvassing would carry a great deal of weight in driving voter turnout and in driving a candidate to victory.

Therefore it is my recommendation that future studies of this type be conducted in a wide range of areas and in races that include party cues and races that do not. Then, the aggregated data and requisite statistical analysis can ascertain the differences, if any, that exist across these categories, and provide conclusions as to whether and when canvassing is truly an important factor in deciding which candidates win and which candidates lose.

Appendix
SURVEY INSTRUMENT AS IMPLEMENTED

Local Government Election Project:
Colorado County Commission Races

A. Candidacy Information

1. Are you the incumbent? (Circle One)
   - • No
   - • Yes
   - ⇒ If yes, how long have you held this office? ____ years
   - ⇒ If no, is there an incumbent in the race? (Circle One) • No • Yes

2. For the seat for which you are running, are all voters in the county eligible to vote or only voters in your district? (Circle One)
   - • All voters in county
   - • Only voters in district

3. How influential were each of the following in recruiting you to run for this office?

	Not Influential	Somewhat Influential	Very Influential
a. Other elected officials	0	1	2
b. Officials or activists within a political party	0	1	2
c. Union members or leaders	0	1	2
d. Professional association members or officials	0	1	2
e. Members or leaders of a church or religious organization	0	1	2
f. Local civic organizations (Rotary, Elks, Kiwanis, etc.)	0	1	2
g. Family members	0	1	2
h. Coworkers	0	1	2
g. Other: _____	0	1	2

4. How much time during the last month have you spent on each of these activities?

   a. Debates _____ hours per day
   b. Public Speaking _____ hours per day
   c. Managing Campaign _____ hours per day
   d. Fund Raising _____ hours per day
   e. Other (please specify) _____ _____ hours per day

5. What are the major issues on which you are campaigning?
   a. _____
   b. _____
   c. _____

6. What issues is (are) your opponent(s) emphasizing?
   a. _____
   b. _____
   c. _____

7. How important are each of the following in providing volunteer help or other kinds of help during this campaign?

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
a. Other elected officials	0	1	2
b. Officials or activists within a political party	0	1	2
c. Union members or officials	0	1	2
d. Members of a church or religious organization	0	1	2
e. Professional association members or officials	0	1	2
f. Local civic organizations	0	1	2
g. Environmental groups	0	1	2
h. College/high school students	0	1	2
i. Family members	0	1	2
j. Neighbors	0	1	2
k. Coworkers	0	1	2
l. Other: _____	0	1	2

B. Time and Energy

1. During the week leading up to Election Day, how large do you expect your campaign staff will be? _____
   ⇒ Number of paid personnel: _____
   ⇒ Number of volunteers: _____

2. During the month of September, how much time, on average, did each of the following spend walking door-to-door?

	Weekdays	**Weekends**
a. You, the candidate	_____ hours per day	_____ hours per day
b. Paid staff	_____ hours per day	_____ hours per day
c. Volunteer staff	_____ hours per day	_____ hours per day

3. When walking door-to-door in a neighborhood, did you: (Circle One)

   a. Knock on every door • No • Yes
   b. Target specific homes • No • Yes

   ⇒ If you targeted specific homes, how important were each of the following in determining which homes to target?

	Not Influential	Somewhat Influential	Very Influential
a. Party affiliation	0	1	2
b. Voter registration	0	1	2
c. Voting history	0	1	2
d. Other:_____	0	1	2

C. Finances

1. Approximately how much money, to date, have you raised to run for this office? _____

2. In approximate percentage terms, how much funding came from each of the following sources?

   a. Self-financing: (Including contributions from immediate family) _____%
   b. Contributions from non-immediate family members: _____%
   c. Contributions from non-family members: _____%

3. In approximate percentage terms, how much of your pool of financial resources have you allocated to each of the following?

	(Circle the closest percentage)										
Paid media (e.g., newspaper ads, tv/radio):	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100%
Yard signs:	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100%
Get-out-the vote efforts:	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100%
Consulting services:	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100%
Overhead expenditures:	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100%
Other (please specify): _____	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100%

4. If you were to speculate, how much would you estimate your main opponent(s) has raised to date? _____

D. Biographical and geographical information

1. County in which you are running: _____

2. Commission seat for which you are running: _____

3. How long have you lived in this county? _____

4. How long have you lived in the state of Colorado? _____

5. Your party? (Circle One)
   - Democratic
   - Republican
   - Other: _____

6. What is your primary occupation? _____

7. Your age? _____

8. Your Gender: (Circle One)
   - Male
   - Female

9. Your race/ethnicity: (Circle One)
   - White (not Hispanic)
   - Black/African American
   - Hispanic/Latino
   - Asian
   - Native American
   - Other: _____

10. Your highest level of educational attainment: (Circle One)
- Graduate Degree
- College Graduate
- Some College
- High School Graduate
- Less than a High School Degree
- Other: _____

11. Your current marital status: (Circle One)
- Single (never married)
- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Other: _____

12. How many children, if any, do you have? _____

13. What, if any, is your religious affiliation? (Circle One)
- Christian – Protestant
- Christian – Catholic
- Jewish
- Other: _____

14. Have you held public office before?
- No
- Yes

⇒If yes, what was your most recent position? _____
⇒Over what period did you hold it? _____
⇒Was it elected or appointed? (Circle One) • Elected •Appointed

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E. Concluding Thoughts

1. When you began campaigning for this race, what probability, in approximate terms, did you place on winning? _____%

2. What would you say are the key factors contributing to your success or lack of success thus far in this race?
_____
_____
_____

Thank you for participating. Please return the completed survey in the enclosed envelope to:

By Mail:
Prof. Kenneth Bickers
Local Government Election Project
University of Colorado-Boulder
Ketchum 106
Boulder, Colorado 80309-0333

Or fax the survey to:
Professor Kenneth Bickers
Fax: (303) 492-0978

For comments or questions about the survey, please call Professor Bickers at 303-492-7871

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