First Wins: Explaining Initial Electoral Success in Local Races

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Abstract

For many years, there has been a consensus in the campaigns and elections literature that challengers who hold or have held elective office pose threats to incumbents. Candidates who have been electorally successful are crucial to the vitality of the democratic process. This paper asks the question, what explains first wins? Is a candidate's first win a function of a candidate's skill sets, including the organizational, management, and strategic choices made in mounting a successful election campaign? Or is a candidate's first win a function of an ability to make a valid probability estimate about the chances of winning? We suggest that there is a third possibility. We argue that first wins may be a function of candidate recruitment by local political elites. We focus on two groups of local elites: elected officials and party leaders. Based on a survey of local campaigns in six states conducted in the month leading up to the off-year elections of 2009, we focus on candidates that have never before won elective office. We find empirical support for the thesis that other elected officials "select" candidates to run who have a higher initial probability of success and who can mount better campaigns in terms of organization, management, and strategy. We do not find evidence that party officials "select" better candidates. In fact, we find evidence suggesting that candidates recruited by party officials do less well at the ballot box.

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1. Introduction

The vitality of democracies depends upon the willingness of citizens to volunteer to be candidates for elective office. In the United States, which contains almost 90 thousand governments of every size and description, the number of such candidates easily numbers in the hundreds of thousands running for office every two to four years. No doubt, many of these candidates see themselves as amateur politicians, serving in a given office for a limited number of years and harboring no thoughts of making politics a career. Others may be ambitious for high office and thus view running for a local office as an initial stepping stone in a political career.

For many years, there has been a consensus in the campaigns and elections literature that challengers who hold or have held elective office pose greater threats to incumbents (e.g., Jacobson and Kernell, 1981; Banks and Kiewiet 1989). The premise of this thesis is that these experienced candidates, through prior office holding, have acquired skills that contribute to electoral success, including such tasks as how to organize, manage, and run successful election campaigns. Recently, however, this consensus has been challenged by an alternative thesis, which holds that the success of experienced candidates is due not so much to prior office holding itself but rather to a differential ability of some potential candidates to make accurate probability calculations about the likelihood of winning a particular race (Lazarus, 2008). On this latter view, the electoral experience of some challengers is an effect, not a cause. The increased likelihood of subsequent electoral victory that these candidates enjoy, relative to candidates with no prior electoral experience, is a function of their ability to appraise the conditions under which they are more likely to win, an ability that was also largely responsible for their prior electoral victories.

This paper wades into this debate by examining the attributes of candidates at the point of their first successful try for elective office. Our central question is, "what explains first wins?" Is a candidate's first win a function of organizational, management, and strategic choices made in mounting a successful election campaign? If so, this suggests that the key attributes of experienced candidates when they run for subsequent offices is to be found in the bundle of skills developed in successfully running for office previously. Or, is a candidate's first win a function of entering a race when their appraisal of the chances of winning suggests a likely win? If so, then the advantages that experienced candidates bring to subsequent campaigns is their ability to run in races where there is a heightened likelihood of winning.

We suggest that there is a third possibility. We argue that both the skill set thesis and the probability estimation thesis are together a function of candidate recruitment by local political elites. We focus on two groups of local elites: other elected officials and party leaders. To test this possibility, we utilize a new survey of candidates running in races for local offices in six states. The survey, conducted during the four weeks prior to off year elections held in November of 2009, measured a variety of characteristics of campaigns, including questions about candidate recruitment. It also included a question in which candidates are asked to indicate their own

assessment, in percentage terms, of the likelihood that they would win the race. After the election, information on the actual vote percentage and electoral success or failure for each respondent was appended to the survey data, making possible an analysis of the factors contributing to first wins.

In the following section, we review the debate on the qualities of experienced candidates and offer our reformulation of this debate. In section three, we describe the survey that we have conducted and the specific portions of the survey data that are utilized in this paper. Section four contains the analysis of these data. Section five provides a discussion of what the analysis tells us about this debate and offers concluding thoughts about future research.

II. Whither the First Win

When candidates win the first time, by definition they have not held prior elective office. The literature on experienced candidates, sometimes described as quality challengers, has long held that these candidates pose special risks to incumbents (Hinckley, 1980; Jacobson and Kernell, 1981; Banks and Kiewiet 1989). Electoral margins, as well as the probability of success, for incumbents are suppressed when they face experienced challengers. The primary determinant of being an experienced challenger is previous or current elective office holding. Some scholars have argued that previous or current office holding is too simple as a definition of challenger quality. Canon (1990), for instance, shows that there are some occupations that give first time candidates special advantages, including careers as astronauts, athletics, and show business. Still, the main thesis remains. A prime determinant of electoral threats to an incumbent is a challenge from a candidate who previously held or currently holds elective office.

This literature offers the simple premise that experienced challengers have honed skill sets that better enable a successful challenge to incumbents. Peverill Squire (1989) states the premise nicely: "more seasoned candidates, particularly those who have been successful in previous campaigns, have learned the electoral ropes. Such candidates benefit from some level of name recognition among some number of voters, have created campaign organizations, and have established the contacts necessary to raise money" (p. 533). In this paper, we refer to this as the skill set thesis. The idea is that through prior success in seeking elective office, these candidates have learned how to organize and manage campaigns, including fund raising and other key tasks associated with winning.

Experienced candidates tend to be strategic in their decisions as to when to seek higher office. National tides influence experienced candidates will mount campaigns against incumbents of one party or the other (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981). Experienced candidates are also more likely to run when the incumbent is retiring, has been involved in some sort of scandal, or was last reelected with by a small vote margin (Banks and Kiewiet, 1989; Gaddie and Bullock, 2000; Jacobson, 1989; Welch and Hibbing 1997). Conversely, experienced candidates strategically opt out of races against incumbents who have amassed substantial campaign war chests (Hersch and McDougall, 1994; Box-Steffensmeier, 1996; Goodliffe, 2001; Carson, 2005). Experienced candidates tend to be able to raise more campaign resources than their less experienced counterparts (Bond, Covington, and Fleisher, 1985; Ambramowitz, 1988; Krasno and Green, 1988; Squire, 1989; Jacobson, 2001). Interestingly, Gerber (1998), treating spending as an

endogenous rather than exogenous variable, finds that the marginal effects of spending are equal among incumbent and challengers.

In recent research, some scholars (Lazarus, 2005, 2008; Carson, 2005) have begun to reconsider the link between the strategic acumen of candidates and their prior electoral experience. Jeffrey Lazarus (2008) has developed most fully this alternative perspective, which we call the probability estimation thesis. On his view, experienced challengers are marked not primarily by their prior electoral success but by their ability to engage in rational calculations. Specifically, scholars that have focused on experienced challengers have been missing the key ingredient that permitted these candidates to have successfully acquired prior experience, which was their ability to assess electoral opportunities most likely to be propitious. By shifting his empirical analysis to encompass both primary elections and general elections, Lazarus provides compelling evidence that electoral experience itself is not the key determinant of eventual success in the general election. Instead he finds that amateur candidates (i.e., candidates that have never held elective office) who correctly assess that the time is right to mount a bid have essentially the same likelihood of winning as are their electorally experienced counterparts. One might ask if Lazarus's thesis may offer at least a partial solution to the puzzle identified by Canon in 1990, which is that approximately a quarter of the members of Congress regularly have been amateurs.

We suggest, however, a third possibility, one that may provide a link between the skill set thesis and the probability estimation thesis. On our view, what is lacking in both of these accounts is a compelling argument about how candidates prior to their first electoral success learn (a) how to mount a campaign or (b) how to engage in a valid probability estimate of victory should they decide to run for a given office. Who, if anyone, helps candidates learn how to do these things?

Attentive publics within congressional districts have long been thought to play a key role in monitoring the performance of incumbents and encouraging potential challengers to run against underperforming incumbents (Arnold, 1990; Bickers and Stein, 1996). Historically, one of the most important sources of candidate recruitment has been political parties (Moncreif, 1999). The specific mechanisms by which parties actually recruit candidates has been debated, as has the level of parties (local, state, or federal) that are most engaged in this activity (Herrnson, 1986; Sanbonmatsu, 2006). Kazee and Thornberry (1990), in their study of 36 congressional races, found that parties typically provide a place for activists to gain experience and overtime to emerge as candidates themselves; parties rarely overtly recruited candidates. Moncreif's (1999) review of the literature indicates that "self starters were more likely to emerge in both parties in marginal districts and within the majority party in safe districts" (p. 178). Others have found that parties aggressively recruit and train candidates (Lipset, 1983). Maestas, Maisel, and Stone (2005), for example, find that potential candidates are significantly more likely to be contacted by party officials if they conform to the party's expectations of the type of candidate who could win in a particular seat. Yet there is some evidence that party officials often are the recruiters of last resort for lost causes. Seligman, et al. (1974), found that parties were the most important recruiters of candidates for races where the party was a distinct minority and had few chances of winning.

Party officials are not the only agents capable of identifying potential candidates. Elected officials also may play this role. Sanbonmatsu's (2006) study focuses on the elected officials

who head the party caucuses in state legislative bodies. She finds that these legislative leaders are more active in candidate recruitment than are state and local party officials, a finding that held regardless of the level of professionalization of the legislature. Most studies do not separate out the recruitment done by party officials from that done by elected officials, grouping it all under party politics (Seligman 1961). For instance, Fox and Lawless (2010) study the gender gap in recruitment, finding that men are recruited more than women by what they call gatekeepers, which includes both party leaders and elected officials. Yet it may well be that elected officials, given their own electoral experience, are able to communicate to potential candidates the tasks required in running for office, as well as their sense of the strategic environment of a given race. Indeed, they may be better at this than party officials that do not hold elective offices. Party officials, especially at the local level, may have limited experience in organizing and running campaigns. Elected officials, by definition, have accomplished this at some point. Our hypothesis, then, is that candidates who are "selected" by local political elites, in particular other elected officials, are likely to be the types of candidates who are capable of making good choices about campaign strategy and organization, as well as to more correctly appraise their chances of victory. This hypothesis is in contrast to the skill set thesis and to the probability estimation thesis, both of which we see not as causing electoral victory but as effects of a selection process, which is predominately a function of the recruitment process by local political elites. Below, we subject these hypotheses to examination.

III. Research Design

Testing these hypotheses requires a database that is novel in several respects. First, we need to capture information about candidates for office at the point of their first win. Our goal is to observe candidates campaigning for their first elective office. Second, we need self-assessments of the probability that the campaign will result in a victory or a loss untainted by the reality that the campaign was or was not successful. Third, we need to have information about campaign organizations, resources, and strategies of winners, as well as losers, running in the same set of contests. And fourth, we need cases that are otherwise comparable where party officials and elected office holders might play a role in the recruitment of candidates. The database that we have compiled meets each of these requirements.

The data analyzed in this paper come from a survey of candidates for local offices that was conducted in the month leading up to the off-year general elections in November, 2009. Only candidates in races where at least one other candidate appeared on the ballot for the same office were surveyed. Candidates were asked to respond to items that described campaign resources, organization, and strategy. They also were asked to indicate, in percentage terms, their estimate, when they entered the race, of the likelihood that they would win. They were asked to indicate how influential each of several different types of people or organizations, including party officials, were in their decision to enter the race. Finally, they were asked to provide a variety of demographic information about themselves. Surveys were sent to candidates in six states: Florida, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington State, and the Atlanta metropolitan area within Georgia. Focusing on this set of offices allowed us to take advantage of the fact that many elections for local offices are sometimes non-partisan and sometimes partisan. Just under half of the candidates were running in races where the party of the candidates appeared on the ballot; the others were running in non-partisan races. States and (in some cases counties within states) were

selected so that the partisan/non-partisan dimension carried across the same types of offices. In other words, we surveyed mayoral races that were partisan, as well as non-partisan. Similarly, we surveyed candidates for city council seats, county offices, school district seats, and special districts, such as water and harbor authorities, obtaining a mix of partisan and nonpartisan races in each.

The survey took two forms. In cases where we were able to obtain email addresses of candidates, we used Survey Monkey, which is a web-based product. In other cases, we relied on home addresses and sent paper questionnaires by mail. The survey instruments were identical in every possible respect, except for the method of questionnaire delivery. Candidates that were sent the web-based version of the survey were sent email prompts approximately every ten days, if they had not already completed the survey, for a total of three opportunities to do the survey. Candidates who were sent the mail survey were sent a postcard reminder after ten days; a second questionnaire ten days after the first postcard reminder; and a second postcard reminder timed to arrive the day prior to the election itself. Each paper questionnaire was accompanied by a stamped return envelope, in addition to a cover letter explaining the purposes of the survey and their human subjects protections. Identical information also was provided in each of the email distributions. Not surprisingly, there were some email addresses that turned out not to be functional. We received Survey Monkey responses back from 314 candidates, which was a return rate of 27 percent of non-bounced and non-opt out email addresses. There were also a number of street addresses provided to us by county election clerks that were returned as undeliverable. We received mail questionnaires back from 187 candidates, which was a return rate of 44.5 percent of the deliverable mail packets. After the election, we coded vote returns for our respondents. In all, we obtained 499 analyzable cases containing information from the questionnaires that were matched to election returns (two questionnaires could not be matched to election returns).

For this paper, we have excluded observations from candidates that were incumbents (33% of the full set of respondents) or had previously held elective offices (an additional 19.6% of the respondents). This produced a data set with 262 observations for candidates that had, to that point in time, not experienced a first electoral win. Of these, 52% of our respondents faced incumbents who were seeking reelection, while 48 percent were running in open seats. City council candidates, the most numerous office seekers in the sample, comprise 59% of our observations; school board and special district candidates comprise 22% of the observations; mayoral candidates comprise 9% of the observations; and county office seekers comprise the remaining 10% of the observations. Overall, 28% of the candidates in the sample ran in races where party appeared on the ballot. Of the candidates where party appeared on the ballot, 40% were running as Democrats; 46% were running as Republican; and 13% as Independent or on a third party ticket. After Election Day on November 3, 2009, 45% of the candidates in our sample had won their contests; 56% lost.

We operationalize campaign strategy and management with three variables: the number of campaign workers, which includes volunteers, on an FTE basis; the total funds raised during the course of the campaign, and a dichotomous variable indicating whether door-to-door canvassing involved targeting particular households as a function of one or more decision rules, such as party affiliations, voter registration, or voting histories. We operationalized the probability

estimate variable with an item on the questionnaire that asked each respondent the following question: When you began campaigning for the race, what probability, in approximate terms, did you place on winning?

Operationalizing the recruitment variables was also relatively straightforward. The questionnaire listed eight types of people and asked each respondent to indicate how influential each was in recruiting them to run, with three available responses: not influential, somewhat influential, or very influential. The eight types of people included (a) officials or activists within a political party, (b) elected officials, (c) union leaders or members, (d) professional association officials or members, (e) leaders or members of a church or religious organization, (f) local civic organizations (Rotary, Elks, Kiwanis, etc.), (g) family members, and (h) coworkers. From these we constructed a dichotomous variable for party recruitment that was coded 1 if the candidate answered somewhat or very influential to the item on party officials or activists, and 0 if the candidate answered not influential. In the same way, we coded dichotomous variables for the influence of elected officials as recruiters. Additionally, we coded variables for family members as recruiters, and a catch all dichotomous variable that was coded 1 if any of the remaining categories were answered as somewhat or very influential. To preview, 35% of our respondents reported that party officials were somewhat or very influential in persuading them to run. The breakdown on this is interesting. Among candidates running for offices where party labels were listed on the ballot, 52% reported that party officials were somewhat or very influential in recruiting them to run. Nevertheless, even where party labels were not on the ballot (i.e., non-partisan offices), over a quarter of the candidates (28%) reported that party officials had been somewhat or very influential in their recruitment. Fifty-eight percent of the candidates reported elected officials as being somewhat or very influential in recruiting them. The most frequent reported source of recruitment was family: 61% reported family members as somewhat or very influential. The catchall category was reported by 56% of the candidates as somewhat or very influential in their recruitment.

In addition to the theoretically essential variables, we have also coded a number of variables to be used as control variables in analyzing the correlates of recruitment to run and first wins. Although not theoretically derived, we include a variable for Gender, measured as 0 for male candidates and 1 for female candidates. This is standard in the literature, a standard that we follow here. Likewise, we included a Race variable that is coded as 0 for whites and 1for minority candidates. We include variables for the number of years the candidate has lived in the jurisdiction in which he or she is running. We included a variable indicating whether the race is for an open seat or an incumbent is defending it. We coded a variable for races that are formally non-partisan or partisan. Finally, we have a dummy variable that measures the congruence between the candidate and the majority party in the county in which he or she lives, which is coded 1 if the candidate is of the majority party and 0 otherwise. Our measure of the majority party is imperfect. It is the two-party vote percentage within the county for the Democratic presidential candidates averaged across 2004 and 2008. This measure, albeit as good as we could obtain, unfortunately is measured at the county level, not at the level of the particular jurisdiction (e.g., a city council seat) in which our respondent candidates were running. Still it is an indication of whether the candidate shares the partisan affiliation of voters in the area.

IV. Analysis

Our analysis proceeds in two parts. In the first part, we pit the skill set thesis against the probability estimation thesis. We employ two dependent variables in this analysis: a dichotomous variable indicating whether the candidate won or lost the election and a variable measuring the percentage of the vote garnered by the candidate. Probit analysis is used with the dichotomous dependent variable; OLS is used with the continuous dependent variable.

In the second part of the analysis, we test the recruitment hypotheses. Testing these hypotheses is a bit more complex than the analysis where we pit skill sets against probability estimation. We look first at the types of agents who may play a role in recruitment. Then we shift to the ways in which two of the recruiters – party officials and elected office holders – affect the campaign tactics and probability estimates of candidates. In doing so, we continue to employ the two dependent variables discussed above, but we also incorporate a bank of interaction terms that permits us to estimate the effects of recruitment on skill sets and probability estimates.

Table 1 displays the results of the head-to-head contest between the skill set thesis and the probability estimation thesis. Based on this analysis, it appears that Lazarus's (2008) hypothesis about probability estimation as the key to winning is correct. In the probit analysis, self assessments of the probability of winning are significantly related to winning. Likewise, these probability estimates are also related to the vote percentages received by candidates. Both models incorporate variables measuring campaign strategy and management, which are the strategic targeting of particular homes when engaged in door-to-door canvassing, the total size of the campaign organization, and the amount of money available to be spent on campaign activities. None of these variables are linked to either winning/losing or the vote percentage received. Two of the control variables tapping candidate demographics are important determinants of winning/losing and vote percentages. These are the race of the candidate. Minority candidates are less likely to win, all other things equal, and receive substantially lower vote percentages. In this analysis, the "cost" in votes of being a minority candidate is over 16 percentage points. Education benefits candidates. Those with a college degree or graduate education are more likely to win and, on average, receive 7 percentage points more votes compared to otherwise equivalent candidates who have attained less than a college degree. Interestingly, there is no significant difference between men and women in this analysis. Nor does the length of time lived within the jurisdiction seem to matter. These candidates, none of whom have previously won elective offices, do somewhat better in open seat contests, at least in terms of the vote percentage. Running for seats in partisan contests, however, is more difficult. Partisan contests appear to be more closely contested, all other things being equal.

(Table 1 about here)

In the next analysis, we replicate the above models but add the four dummy variables measuring the influence of elected officials, party leaders, family members, and others as agents in recruiting these candidates to run. Table 2 reports the results of this analysis. Several aspects of the results are interesting. One is that candidates reporting that recruitment by elected officials was influential in their decision to run are significantly more likely to win races than are other candidates and enjoy vote margins 8 points higher than the other candidates. A second is that

candidates recruited by party leaders do less well than do other candidates. The coefficient of recruitment by party leaders on winning is just shy of significance at conventional levels, but the coefficient for the impact of recruitment by party leaders on vote margins is significant and negative. This is consistent with the observation of Seligman, et al. (1974) from their study of Oregon elections almost four decades ago: party leaders appear to be selecting not strong candidates, but sacrificial candidates. The other two categories of possible candidate recruitment have no discernible impact on either winning or vote margins. The third aspect of the results that is interesting is how little the other variables in the model are affected by adding in these recruitment variables. The only variable from Table 1 that is changed in terms of significance is the impact of the candidate's probability estimation on winning. In the earlier analysis, it was positive and significant; here it is positive but with a z value that is below conventional levels of significance. This suggests that some of the impact of probability estimates on winning is now being picked up by the recruitment variables. Still, the probability estimation variable is positively and significantly related to vote margins. In all other respects, the variables that were significant in the prior analysis are significant here and signed in the same direction. Similarly, variables that were insignificant before continue to be insignificant here.

(Table 2 about here)

In the following two tables, we focus directly on the specific impact of party leaders and of elected officials as recruiters on the campaigns of our candidates. Table 3 focuses on recruitment by party leaders; table 4 on recruitment by elected officials. We continue to utilize the two dependent variables, one measuring wins/losses and the other measuring vote percentage. In both tables, we interact the recruitment variable with five campaign specific variables: the probability estimates made by the candidates at the outset of the campaign; the strategic targeting of specific homes when canvassing; the number of campaign staff; the funds raised by candidates; and running in open seats versus challenging a sitting incumbent. By including these interaction terms, we can examine the influence that each of these types of recruiters may have on the ability of candidates to make choices about campaigns that lead to greater or lesser success. In addition, we also include, though without interaction terms, the demographic variables for race, gender, and education and the party variables for whether the candidate of the same party as the majority in the county and whether the race is partisan or non-partisan.

(Table 3 about here)

The analysis of the impact of party leaders as recruiters of candidates is displayed in Table 3. These models indicate that differentiating the campaign specific variables by whether the candidate was recruited by party leaders adds little explanatory information to the analysis. The non-findings in this analysis are striking. Candidates recruited by parties are no better at making probability estimates. They do not use staff or funds in ways that lead to higher vote totals or enhance the probability of winning. They do not target households in ways that leads to greater electoral success. They do not do better in challenging incumbents or even in open seat contests. Other than the demographic variables for race and education, there are only two variables in the entire table that appear to be significant. One is the party recruitment variable in the analysis of vote percentages. We see, as above, that candidates who report that party leaders were somewhat or very influential in recruiting them to run receive substantially lower vote margins

than do other candidates. Candidates recruited by party leaders receive 18 percentage points less than their otherwise identical counterparts, though, interestingly, they are no more likely to lose. The only other coefficient that is even plausibly significant is for partisan races. As above, we see that candidates running in partisan races receive a lower vote percentage than those running in non-partisan races, presumably because they are more likely to face serious candidates when running for partisan offices. In sum, a candidate selected to run by party leaders cannot be said to be any better off, and may in fact be worse off, than candidates not selected by party leaders.

(Table 4 about here)

We see a very different picture when we focus on the role of elected officials as recruiters of candidates. Table 4 reports these results. Candidates who report that elected officials were influential in recruiting them to run are significantly more likely to win their contests. The measures of statistical significance are below, though not by much, the levels required to conclude that they make better probability estimates about their likelihood of success or vote margins. Where the impact of recruitment by elected officials is particularly noteworthy, though in a somewhat heterodox manner, is in the various campaign strategy and management variables. Heretofore we have not seen these variables having much impact on electoral outcomes. The strategic targeting of homes variable indicates that candidates recruited by elected officials do less well when they target homes than do other candidates. The size of this difference is large. Strategic targeting by candidates not recruited by elected officials gives them a bump of 9 percentage points in the vote, whereas strategic targeting by candidates recruited by elected officials costs them over 20 points. This may be a function of the types of contests in which these different candidates are running. Our results suggest that candidates recruited by elected officials who forego targeting of specific homes and instead send volunteers to every home are rewarded with a bump of 20 points. Such a strategy, of course, requires a bigger campaign organization.

Here, too, we see the effect of recruitment by elected officials. Candidates not recruited by elected officials actually are harmed by approximately half a percentage point in the final vote for each additional person on their staff. Candidates recruited by elected officials experience a gain of nearly 8 tenths of a percentage point for each staff member. This is evidence that how one uses staff can make an important difference. The same is not true for campaign funding, at least when controlling for the other campaign specific variables. Having more (or less) funding neither adds to the vote total nor increases the chances of winning. We do see a difference, however, in terms of open seat versus incumbent-occupied seats. Candidates not recruited by elected officials do better in open seats than in incumbent-occupied seats. Candidates recruited by elected officials are able to do slightly better in races against incumbents than in open seats, though this difference is not quite significant at conventional levels. The rest of the analysis is similar to that in all of the prior analyses. Minority candidates, even when controlling for these other variables, continue to do less well than non-minority candidates. More highly educated candidates do better than less well educated candidates. Candidates running in partisan races have somewhat lower vote percentages, but are no less likely to win, than candidates running in non-partisan races. The take-away message, however, is that candidates recruited by elected officials run different kinds of campaigns with different, and usually better, results than do candidates not recruited by elected officials.

V. Conclusion

Our results indicate that the debate, as it has been waged to date, about what makes experienced candidates more potent challengers to incumbents may be misplaced. Our paper shifts the debate to the point prior to the first electoral success in order to determine what accounts for the ability to achieve the experience that makes candidates more formidable in contests against sitting incumbents. To be sure, as Lazarus (2008) predicts, we do find evidence that candidates who successfully win a first office are better at making probability estimates about the likelihood of victory and that this ability trumps the deployment of particular skill sets within the campaign. Yet this finding disappears when we incorporate information about who recruits those candidates to run. We find that the most important feature of successful first campaigns is to be recruited to run by other elected officials. Such candidates run campaigns that are distinctively different than self-recruited candidates and candidates recruited by other types of people. In particular, we find that candidates recruited by party officials do not run campaigns that are demonstrably different and fare worse than candidates not similarly recruited.

The literature on candidate recruitment has mostly failed to differentiate between party elites and elected office holders as agents of recruitment (an exception is Sanbonmatsu, 2003, 2006). The failure to differentiate the agents of recruitment, we find, masks something that is fundamentally important. As Seligman, et al. (1974) found, we also find that party officials recruit candidates for lost causes. Recruitment by elected officials, who know firsthand what it takes to win, produces candidates that can mobilize campaign resources to be victorious on Election Day. Our thesis is that other factors, including those in both the skill set thesis and the probability estimation thesis, stem from this initial recruitment calculation by elected officials.

The opportunities to expand upon this research are considerable. One logical next step is to examine the types of elected officials who are successfully recruiting local candidates for their first wins. Additionally, we need to know what this recruitment looks like. How do elected officials choose who they recruit? Another next step is to ask how durable or transferable the recruitment by elected officials is as candidates contemplate making a jump to higher and different offices. That is, are the capabilities that are "selected" by elected officials when recruiting candidates prior to their first wins of continuing utility in running for offices for which the now experienced candidate may later aspire?

Finally, there is an important normative implication of our findings. At the risk of extrapolating excessively, our results indicate that the division of labor between party elites and elected officials may need to be reconsidered. State and local elected officials, if they want to build up a stronger bench for their party, would be wise to begin recruiting candidates they believe can win elections. Individuals recruited by elected officials, it would appear, are more likely to be qualified to run for higher office in subsequent years, precisely because they will be the quality challengers having been successful in attaining electoral success previously. From the party standpoint, resources could be shifted from recruitment to other activities, such as voter education or get out the vote operations.

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Table 1: Skill Set versus Probability Estimation Hypotheses

	DV: Candidate Won=1, Lost=0 (probit)			DV: Candidate Vote Percent (OLS)		
	Coef.	z	P>|z|	Coef.	t	P>|t|
Probability Estimate of Winning	0.007	1.78	0.074	0.128	2.38	0.018
Strategic Targeting of Homes for Canvassing	0.175	0.83	0.404	-0.684	-0.25	0.802
Total FTE Number of Staff, Paid & Unpaid	-0.001	-0.07	0.943	-0.089	-0.61	0.544
Log of Total Funds Raised	-0.027	-0.73	0.464	0.539	1.06	0.292
Race (White=0; Minority/Other=1)	-0.866	-2.39	0.017	-16.321	-3.73	0.000
Gender (Male=0; Female=1)	0.139	0.67	0.504	0.873	0.31	0.754
Education (Less than College Degree=0; Coll. Degree or more=1)	0.530	2.46	0.014	7.245	2.65	0.009
Years residing in jurisdiction	0.004	0.7	0.482	0.062	0.78	0.434
Open seat (No=0; Yes=1)	0.218	1.13	0.259	4.939	1.92	0.056
Candidate of Same Party as Majority Party in County (No=0; Yes=1)	0.202	1.02	0.307	2.387	0.91	0.366
Partisan Office (No=0; Yes=1)	0.249	1.07	0.285	-6.676	-2.14	0.034
Intercept	-1.148	-2.69	0.007	24.505	4.25	0.000
	Observations		198	Observations		190
	Log likelihood		-126.15	F(11, 178)		3.93
	LR chi2(11)		19.26	Prob>F		0.000
	Prob > chi2		0.057	R-squared		0.195
	Pseudo R2		0.071	Adj R-squared		0.146

Table 2: Recruitment versus Skill Set versus Probability Estimation Hypotheses

	DV: Candidate Win=1, Lost=0 (probit)			DV: Candidate Vote Percent (OLS)		
	Coef.	z	P>|z|	Coef.	t	P>|t|
Recruited by Elected Officials	0.811	3.78	0.000	8.183	3.08	0.002
Recruited by Party Leaders	-0.310	-1.44	0.150	-5.845	-2.20	0.029
Recruited by Family Members	-0.182	-0.85	0.395	-2.870	-1.09	0.279
Recruited by Other Types of Actors	0.149	0.69	0.493	2.920	1.09	0.277
Probability Estimate of Winning	0.005	1.22	0.221	0.101	1.93	0.055
Strategic Targeting of Homes for Canvassing	0.080	0.36	0.722	-1.294	-0.48	0.634
Total FTE Number of Staff, Paid & Unpaid	-0.002	-0.13	0.900	-0.089	-0.62	0.534
Log of Total Funds Raised	-0.030	-0.77	0.439	0.608	1.23	0.219
Race (White=0; Minority/Other=1)	-0.839	-2.18	0.029	-15.180	-3.55	0.000
Gender (Male=0; Female=1)	0.159	0.73	0.463	1.432	0.53	0.599
Education (Less than College Degree=0; Coll. Degree or more=1)	0.567	2.53	0.012	7.323	2.76	0.006
Years residing in jurisdiction	0.005	0.78	0.434	0.056	0.72	0.472
Open seat (No=0; Yes=1)	0.297	1.47	0.142	5.737	2.29	0.023
Candidate of Same Party as Majority Party in County (No=0; Yes=1)	0.170	0.81	0.419	2.221	0.85	0.398
Partisan Office (No=0; Yes=1)	0.332	1.34	0.179	-5.144	-1.66	0.098
Intercept	-1.374	-2.86	0.004	22.632	3.84	0.000
	Observations		198	Observations		190
	Log likelihood		-117.28	F(15, 174)		4.14
	LR chi2(15)		37.02	Prob>F		0.000
	Prob > chi2		0.001	R-squared		0.263
	Pseudo R2		0.136	Adj R-squared		0.199

Table 3: Impact of Recruitment by Party Leaders

	DV: Candidate Win=1, Lost=0 (probit)			DV: Candidate Vote Percent (OLS)		
	Coef.	z	P>|z|	Coef.	t	P>|t|
Recruited by party leaders	-0.485	-0.64	0.523	-17.748	-1.73	0.086
Probability estimate by candidates **not** recruited by party leaders	0.004	0.72	0.471	0.085	1.27	0.207
Probability estimate by candidates recruited by party leaders	0.011	1.29	0.195	0.106	0.92	0.357
Strategic targeting of homes by candidates **not** recruited by party leaders	0.182	0.69	0.492	0.832	0.24	0.808
Strategic targeting of homes by candidates recruited by party leaders	0.023	0.05	0.960	-1.032	-0.18	0.861
Total FTE Number of Staff, Paid & Unpaid, for candidates **not** recruited by party leaders	-0.004	-0.16	0.876	-0.060	-0.17	0.862
Total FTE Number of Staff, Paid & Unpaid, for candidates recruited by party leaders	0.009	0.32	0.748	0.017	0.05	0.963
Log of total funds raised by candidates **not** recruited by party leaders	-0.008	-0.17	0.866	0.267	0.40	0.689
Log of total funds raised by candidates recruited by party leaders	-0.038	-0.52	0.602	0.691	0.70	0.486
Open seat (No=0; Yes=1) contested by candidate **not** recruited by party leaders	0.360	1.48	0.138	3.248	1.01	0.313
Open seat (No=0; Yes=1) contested by candidate recruited by party leaders	-0.385	-0.96	0.337	4.693	0.90	0.371
Race (White=0; Minority/Other=1)	-0.960	-2.59	0.009	-17.479	-3.92	0.000
Gender (Male=0; Female=1)	0.121	0.57	0.568	0.846	0.30	0.764
Education (Less than College Degree=0; Coll. Degree or more=1)	0.525	2.36	0.018	6.228	2.21	0.029
Years residing in jurisdiction	0.004	0.58	0.563	0.064	0.80	0.427
Candidate of Same Party as Majority Party in County (No=0; Yes=1)	0.226	1.12	0.263	2.675	1.00	0.321
Partisan Office (No=0; Yes=1)	0.271	1.13	0.259	-5.415	-1.69	0.093
Intercept	-1.034	-1.92	0.054	30.859	4.40	0.000
	Observations		198	Observations		190
	Log likelihood		-124.33	F(17, 172)		2.84
	LR chi2(17)		22.9	Prob > F		0.000
	Prob > chi2		0.152	R-squared		0.219
	Pseudo R2		0.084	Adj R-squared		0.142

Table 4: Impact of Recruitment by Elected Officials

	DV: Candidate Win=1, Lost=0 (probit)			DV: Candidate Vote Percent (OLS)		
	Coef.	z	P>|z|	Coef.	t	P>|t|
Recruited by elected officials	1.488	1.94	0.052	-3.013	-0.34	0.738
Probability estimate by candidates **not** recruited by elected officials	0.001	0.13	0.894	0.028	0.38	0.704
Probability estimate by candidates recruited by elected officials	0.009	1.04	0.297	0.134	1.32	0.187
Strategic targeting of homes by candidates **not** recruited by elected officials	0.507	1.44	0.149	9.009	2.36	0.02
Strategic targeting of homes by candidates recruited by elected officials	-0.773	-1.68	0.093	-20.336	-3.94	0.000
Total FTE Number of Staff, Paid & Unpaid, for candidates **not** recruited by elected officials	-0.059	-1.05	0.293	-0.508	-2.76	0.006
Total FTE Number of Staff, Paid & Unpaid, for candidates recruited by elected officials	0.068	1.18	0.238	0.780	2.88	0.005
Log of total funds raised by candidates **not** recruited by elected officials	0.043	0.73	0.463	-0.117	-0.17	0.861
Log of total funds raised by candidates recruited by elected officials	-0.119	-1.53	0.125	1.231	1.39	0.165
Openseat contested by candidate **not** recruited by elected officials	0.699	2.13	0.033	4.463	1.23	0.220
Openseat contested by candidate recruited by elected officials	-0.554	-1.32	0.188	2.139	0.45	0.657
Race (White=0; Minority/Other=1)	-0.905	-2.27	0.023	-16.704	-4.04	0.000
Gender (Male=0; Female=1)	0.174	0.79	0.429	1.204	0.46	0.645
Education (Less than College Degree=0; Coll. Degree or more=1)	0.631	2.73	0.006	6.525	2.53	0.012
Years residing in jurisdiction	0.006	0.99	0.324	0.031	0.41	0.683
Candidate of Same Party as Majority Party in County (No=0; Yes=1)	0.129	0.61	0.539	2.630	1.05	0.295
Partisan Office (No=0; Yes=1)	0.258	1.04	0.298	-7.295	-2.5	0.013
Intercept	-1.980	-3.06	0.002	29.548	4.02	0.000
	Observations		198	Observations		190
	Log likelihood		-112.35	F(17, 172)		4.93
	LR chi2(17)		46.88	Prob > F		0.000
	Prob > chi2		0.000	R-squared		0.328
	Pseudo R2		0.173	Adj R-squared		0.261