

When Local Elections Become the Talk of the Town

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1. Introduction

The study of local elections may be on the verge of a renaissance within political science (see Marschall, Shah, and Ruhil, 2011). This would be a positive development. Campaigns and elections at the local level have too often been viewed within the discipline as sleepy affairs, holding little interest to serious scholars. This is wrong at multiple levels. Empirically, it simply is not true that local elections fail to arouse passions of citizens. As Kaufmann (2004) has shown, shifting coalitions that bridge ethnic, racial, and partisan divides have long made elections in Los Angeles and New York as volatile as even the most complex gubernatorial campaigns. In the past month, citizens in Miami-Dade County voted to remove their mayor from office. A scan of local newspapers reveals no shortage of efforts by citizens to place measures on ballots to rein in city councils, recall mayors, and to elect new officials that will pursue different policy priorities than those of past officials.

There is another, more scholarly reason political scientists should focus on local elections. Local elections offer institutional variation that is generally lacking in elections for federal offices. Elective offices available locally are subject to rich combinations of institutional rules. Some are partisan; others are not. Getting on the ballot may involve a variety of mechanisms, including primaries (even for nonpartisan offices in some places), caucuses, fees, and petitions. Some offices are term limited; others are not. Limits can be short or long and can vary across offices within the same jurisdiction. Some allow all voters in the jurisdiction to cast ballots in a contest; others restrict balloting to voters residing within a subsection of the jurisdiction. In still other cases, all voters in the jurisdiction can cast ballots for an office, but candidates must live in a given subsection of the jurisdiction. For some offices, there may be multi-member at-large contests, while others may have individual at-large contests, and others may run in single member districts. Some jurisdictions use a combination of these electoral rules.

Adding to the institutional complexity is the variation in the types of offices for which candidates may run. Locally, there are offices for county executives, as well as multi-member county offices that may involve some combination of executive and legislative responsibilities, such as county commission seats, or may be more purely legislative, such as county council seats. Municipalities and town government subscribe allocate executive and legislative responsibilities in myriad ways. In most of the country, schools are governed by boards that are formally independent of overlying governments. Additionally there is an almost astonishing array of special districts that have elected representatives. Common types include fire districts, public utility boards, water, drainage, and sewer boards, development authorities, river, harbor, port and airport authorities, and more. We have even run across mosquito control authorities with hotly contested electoral campaigns. It seems that some local residents are adamantly opposed to spraying to eliminate mosquitoes; others are passionately in favor of it.

Let me offer another reason we should be focusing on local elections: the sheer enormity of the number of electoral contests that exist across the United States. As of the 2007 Census of Governments, there were a reported 89,527 governments in America, of which all but 51 were

local governments. Politically, campaigns to win the elective offices responsible for leading these governments are likely the most frequent gateway into politics for most politicians, as well as a common and accessible venue for political participation by citizens. There is huge variation in the demographic make-up and scale across these local jurisdictions. From tiny burghs to highly populated urban core cities, jurisdictions vary enormously in size. Likewise there is variation in the diversity of populations residing in jurisdictions – diversity in racial and ethnic composition and diversity of partisan affiliations and policy preferences. Contests to control these local governments thus offer an inviting window into politics in America.

In this paper, I tackle the question of when and why local campaigns shift from low key affairs that they are often assumed to be into closely fought contests. The argument I make is that the pace of local campaigns quickens and intensity increases when citizens begin to evidence discontents with the state of affairs in their local communities. Signs of campaigns becoming more fevered will be the entrance of multiple candidates and especially candidates that have prior experience in elective offices. The rationale for this argument is laid in section two of the paper. In section three, I describe a database that my students and I have been developing to permit the study of this question and other questions relating to campaigns and elections at the local level. In section four, I analyze these data and walk the reader through the key findings. In section five, I offer concluding thoughts about what this analysis may tell us about politics in local communities.

2. Research Question

This paper starts with a simple question: Why is it that local elections, though frequently languid, ritualistic affairs, sometimes erupt into the electoral equivalent of public brawls? In American politics, most of the research on conditions under which potential voters stay home and stay detached from electoral politics has focused on national elections. Questions of turnout in America have often revolved around issues such as why voter turnout is lower among some groups, especially minorities, than others (Piven and Cloward, 1988; Teixeira, 1992); why turnout in the US as a whole is typically lower than among other industrialized (and even many non-industrialized) countries (Lipjhart, 1997); and why turnout in America has fallen from its high fifty years ago to a nadir in the 1990s (Bafumi and Shapir, 2009). Much of this research has taken as its starting point the now-classic rational actor model of voting. The cost term, in particular, has been a topic of great interest in both the academic and legal communities. Understandably, there has been interest in how much voter turnout might be increased if barriers to voting were reduced. While some reforms have had modest effects on turnout, in the main, it would appear, few of the efforts at reducing costs of voting have netted much improvement in voter turnout (see, for example, Fitzgerald, 2005). A key line of argument, however, has been that long-term declines in the strength of parties have been centrally responsible for reductions in turnout (Miller and Shanks, 1996).

The decline in parties has sometimes been treated as increasing the cost term in the rational actor model, on the grounds that one of the things parties do is to make information broadly available about issues and where candidates, at least those with a D or an R after their names, stand on those issues (Abramson and Aldrich, 1982). Declining parties has also been viewed as reducing the benefits term. On this argument, parties play a key role in sharpening the sense that voters

have of salient differences between candidates and the stakes of a given contest (Aldrich, 1993: 272). Parties, on this view, give voters cues as to which side in the contest shares their values and a sense of urgency that the outcome of the election may be decisive in upholding those values. Indeed, in the research on elections for federal offices, a primary function of campaigns has been argued to be to remind voters of their underlying partisan leanings and to bring them back home to that party's candidates (Holbrook, 2011). Gelman and King (1993) term this role of campaigns as helping voters make "enlightened decisions," in that campaigns help them vote in ways consistent with their priors.

Local elections, unlike federal and state-level elections, frequently are non-partisan. In the data reported below, this is the case for 61 percent of the local contests that we surveyed in five states during the general elections that culminated in November 2010. In a technical sense, a non-partisan election simply means that candidates have their names placed on the ballot through some sort of process that does not formally involve a party organization and that party labels are not included on the ballot. It does not, by any stretch, mean that underlying partisan cleavages may not be manifested in the set of candidates who seek to run or the issues that animate their campaigns (Adrian, 1959). Still, the removal of party organizations in determining nominees, dramatically reduces the likelihood that they will play the key roles that they are often thought to play in getting out the vote when elections are partisan.

The argument that campaigns provide a mechanism for helping voters make "enlightened decisions" does not focus exclusively on the role of parties in returning voters to their prior partisan leanings. Campaigns also help in this enlightening process, according to this line of reasoning, by shaping how potential voters engage in retrospective evaluations. While parties may be centrally involved in this aspect of campaigns, it is important to note that the framing of retrospective evaluations is a distinct enterprise from reminding voters why they should return home to their prior partisan leanings. Retrospective evaluations, particularly of economic conditions and national insecurities, have been shown to be powerful determinants of voting behavior, especially when presidents are on the ballot (see Campbell, 2008). In essence, campaigns that aggressively push potential voters to engage in retrospective evaluations are seeking to frame the recent past in either positive terms, if the campaign is on behalf of the incumbent candidate or party, or in negative terms, if the campaign is on behalf of the challenger or challenger's party. Many of the campaign advertisements that voters endure (or enjoy, depending on one's point of view) in the lead up to presidential, senate, gubernatorial, and even some House contests are designed to induce voters to think about recent policy performance in ways that advantage one candidate to the disadvantage of another. It is not uncommon for local elections, unlike those for federal and state-wide offices, to be uncontested. In our coding of election contests, we have found that about 30 percent of local offices have the same number of candidates as seats to be filled.¹ Where there is no opposition, there are no campaigns. Consequently, voters are not provided with information that campaigns provide about recent policy performance.

¹ This figure may understate the number of seats where there is no opposition, as some jurisdictions do not put on the ballot offices where there are the same number of candidates as seats to fill.

But perhaps this has cause and effect reversed. In the literature on so-called wave or national tide elections, there is an argument that one of the indicators that such an election is on the horizon is that incumbents begin to face increasingly large arrays of challengers, some of whom may have experience in elective office and thus may be quality challengers (Jacobson and Kernell, 1983; Jacobson, 2009: 168-174). On this view, conditions that are ripe for electoral turnover attract better candidates into contests against incumbents (Carson and Roberts, 2005). At the same time, these candidates are able to do what otherwise equivalent candidates running in an election cycle where conditions are not ripe for effectively challenging incumbents cannot do: they are able to attract substantial campaign funds from donors. The idea is that experienced candidates and potential donors are both acting strategically by interpreting external conditions as propitious for electoral change (Jacobson, 1989). The conditions that give rise to the entrance of more and better challengers, as well as to greater volumes of campaign funds, are precisely those that are identified in the literature on retrospective evaluations as advantaging challengers in races below the presidency: most particularly, the populace becoming restive over bad economic conditions.

This may offer a key clue for explaining the transformation of local contests from low octane events into public spectacles. When residents at the local level grow dissatisfied with policy performance locally, incumbents may find themselves facing more challengers and better challengers. Indeed, some incumbents, as is the case in House elections (Carson, 2005), may opt strategically to retire. Similarly, it may be that candidates, both those running in open seats and those challenging incumbents, will find it easier to raise money and attract volunteers for the myriad tasks of mounting campaigns. The policy performance for which citizens may assign functional accountability may vary across levels of government (Stein, 1990). Local politicians may be held responsible not for macro economic conditions but with such parochial policies as snow removal, traffic congestion, and performance of school children on standardized exams. Still, to the extent that discontents of local residents create perceptions among potential challengers that electoral turnover is possible, the preconditions for seriously contested campaigns exist.

Several hypotheses follow from this insight. Let me suggest four. One, we should expect that as perceptions of citizen dissatisfaction with the status quo deepens that more candidates will crowd into contests against incumbents and into open seat contests. To be sure, the extent of in-crowding is likely to be muted in races that are formally partisan. Below, we control for this possibility. Two, we should expect that as dissatisfactions mount, that candidates with prior or current experience in elective offices will mount campaigns. This is expected in both nonpartisan and partisan elections, as electorally experienced candidates seize on the discontents of local residents as an opportunity to win office. Third, dissatisfaction, in conjunction with the entry of more candidates and candidates with electoral experience into contests, is expected to lead to greater success in campaign fundraising and other signs of campaign activities. In addition to greater campaign resources, other indicators of heightened campaign activities may include more volunteers available to candidates to help with campaign tasks such as door-to-door canvassing of neighborhoods, as well as more invitations to participate in forums and debates. Fourth, the expectation is that dissatisfaction and the attendant entry of more candidates and experienced candidates into contests will lead to more closely fought campaigns. The hypothesis

is that this will lead to a perception that there was more campaign negativity than normal associated with such contests.

3. Research Design, Methods, and Data

Testing these hypotheses requires a database that contains information about local contests as well as information about campaign activities of individual candidates. While interest in building such databases seems to be growing (Marschall, Shah, and Ruhil, 2011), most scholars interested in examining local elections must build compile their own data sets that are tailored to their particular research interests. Beginning with a prototype survey in 2008, the database that my students and I have created, though far from perfect, offers a useful vehicle for exploring campaigns for local offices. For 2010, we used a web-based survey instrument hosted in Qualtrics to survey candidates running for local offices in five states: California, Colorado, Florida, Virginia, and Washington State. Three of these (Florida, Virginia, and Washington) are states where we also surveyed in 2009. The states were selected on the basis of three considerations: one, they present a variety of institutional rules (specifically, a mix of partisan/non-partisan local races, term limits, and single member versus at large elections); two, they represent a reasonable geographic range of states holding local elections in an even numbered year, subject to one caveat explained below; and three, the states or counties within the states make available email, as well as physical, addresses of candidates. We needed both email and physical addresses for the surveying protocol. The protocol was to send a letter to each potential respondent explaining the purposes of the study and providing the normal set of research with human subject protections. This letter was then followed with an email request to participate in the web-based survey. The need for email addresses prevented us from surveying in any of the large Midwestern states that had local contests on the ballot in November, 2010. We tried a variety of approaches to obtain email addresses for candidates, in particular, in Ohio and Indiana. Thus the survey lacks a Midwestern state for 2010 (in 2009, we utilized a mix of paper and web-based surveys, allowing us to include Iowa as a representative of a Midwestern state in that year).

Based on the average response rate of about 37 percent from the 2009 surveys and the desire to obtain at least 400 useable survey responses, we established a target of approximately 225 candidate names from each of the five states. Within each state, counties were ordered at random. Beginning with the first randomly selected county, all candidates for any non-judicial local office were added to the sample frame, so long as it was possible to obtain an email and physical address for the candidate, subject to the additional proviso that candidates running unopposed were skipped. Our plan was to survey only candidates who were in a situation where they might be running active campaigns. Local offices sampled included any county executives, county commission and/or county council seats; mayor and council seats for any municipalities, towns, and townships; school district seats; and special districts. Notice that in some cases, municipality, school district, and special districts might overlap a non-sampled county. In such cases, candidates for those offices were nonetheless included in the sample frame. When the count of 225 candidates was reached in a county, all local candidates were included in the sample frame so as to avoid including only a subset of the candidates from that county, even though this meant pushing the count over the preset limit of 225 candidates per state.

In all, 1287 candidates with useable mailing and email addresses were surveyed (i.e., neither the letter was undeliverable nor the email bounced). Our goal was to capture information during the course of campaigns. Consequently, respondents were sent links to the survey up to three times: four weeks before election; two weeks before election day; and, for candidates who requested to do the survey after the campaign, one day after election day. In the end, 469 candidates responded; 384 completed all questions on the survey, though in some cases some of the non-completers answered enough of the items for their survey data to be used. The response rates are thus 36.4% overall and 29.8% for completed surveys. As it turned out, seven candidates were actually running unopposed, typically because their opponent dropped out prior to the election.

This paper utilizes data only from the 2010 survey. This survey incorporated questions specifically added for the present paper. The survey and the larger study of which it is part have been designed to elicit information about (1) the institutional rules that pertain to each office for which candidates campaigned; (2) information about the candidates themselves, including their backgrounds as office holders, recruit patterns, and descriptive information; (3) information about campaign activities, including resources and allocation of time and resources by candidates and their supporters; (4) information about the context of the campaign, including the size of the potential electorate, the candidate estimates of citizen satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the status quo in the jurisdiction, and the negativity of the overall campaign for that particular office; and (5) the level of contestation for each office, including the number of candidates running and electoral outcomes, information collected not as part of the survey but from election officials after the fact.

After the election, results of the contests were recorded from websites maintained by secretaries of state and/or county election clerks. In a surprising number of instances, local race results were not posted to the web. In these cases, county election clerks were contacted, asking them to email or fax results. In cases where this measure failed to produce results, candidates themselves were contacted for this information. At the present, we are still lacking election results information for 42 respondents, though we are optimistic about obtaining information for many of these candidates over the next several weeks. The number of contests for which we have information, however, is substantial. We have useable information (though not always on every variable) in 303 contests, with responses from 415 candidates. These are clustered as follows: we have one respondent in 216 contests; two respondents in 71 contests; three respondents in 20 contests; four respondents in four contests; five respondents in one contest; and six respondents in one contest.

Let me turn now to specific measures used in this paper. With respect to hypothesis one, the level of contestation is measured in terms of the number of candidates seeking each office. The measure of the number of candidates in the race is *not* based on the number of responses we received for each contest. It is based on the number of candidates named on the election ballot in the contest. The expectation is that the number of contenders for an office will be greater as the level of satisfaction with the status quo in a jurisdiction decreases. Each respondent was asked to move a slider bar to a position ranging from 0 to 100 to indicate their response to this question: “In your opinion, how dissatisfied or satisfied are residents in your city with the way things are going in the [city, county, or district]?” Notice, that Qualtrics permitted the respondent to see the word “city,” “county,” or “district” based on their response to an earlier question asking what

office they were seeking. One might argue that the level of satisfaction should be measured from surveys of citizens. This is infeasible – to say the least. Moreover, such a survey might not, in the end, be appropriate for this research question. The key is whether potential candidates are rising to a sense of dissatisfaction by jumping into a race. That is, it is precisely the candidates' appraisals that are relevant. To be sure, some satisfaction or dissatisfaction might be the result of "bleed down" from state level contests. 2010 saw hotly contested senate and gubernatorial races in California, Colorado, and Florida. To control for the collateral influence of these races on the electoral politics within local jurisdictions, four dummy variables are included to control for state effects, with CO, FL, VA, and WA set, respectively, to 1 when candidates are running in jurisdictions within each of those states and to 0 otherwise. When all four variables take the value 0, the respondent is running for an office in California.

The number of candidates is also expected to be a function of at least three institutional rules, plus an institutional feature of offices that usually is not treated as a rule. The three rules included below are (1) whether the election is partisan in the sense that candidates are listed on the ballot as members of a party or instead is non-partisan and thus open to any qualified candidate; (2) whether the election is for a single member office or multi-member set of seats; and (3) whether the office is at large within the jurisdiction or for a particular district or portion of the jurisdiction. Prior work (Ehrenhalt, 1992) has found that greater generosity of compensation packages tends to elicit more candidates. Consequently, a measure of compensation was included as a control variable in this analysis. Each candidate was asked "In approximate terms, what is the annual salary, stipend, or other financial compensation for the position for which you are running?" Responses to this question were averaged across all of the respondents running for a given office.

The second hypothesis holds that experienced candidates make decisions to enter contests when dissatisfaction with the status quo is high. Here, the interest is in the calculations of particular candidates to strategically enter races. In the survey, candidates are asked if they currently hold or have held elective office. Hence the dependent variable is dichotomous, with the entry of candidates with electoral experience into a race coded 1 and 0 otherwise. In testing this hypothesis, the model is specified in both a parsimonious specification and a fuller specification. In the parsimonious specification, the key independent variable is the candidate's own appraisal (i.e., not an average across multiple candidates) of how satisfied citizens are with the status quo in the local jurisdiction. As before, this number ranges from 0 at the low end to 100 at the high end. This reduced model also includes the compensation variable, on the grounds that, as before, financial inducements may draw candidates into some contests. A third independent variable is the presence or absence of an incumbent in the contest. The expectation is that experienced candidates are less likely to enter a race, all things equal, when an incumbent is seeking reelection. In the fuller model, these three independent variables are supplemented with a bank of five dummy variables that capture the types of local offices available to candidates. The excluded category is special district seats. The included five dummy variables are municipal/town council seats, mayoral positions, county executive positions, county council or commissions, and school boards. The rationale for the inclusion of these office types is that experienced candidates may be more likely to strategically enter some types of offices, rather than others.

The third hypothesis is actually a family of hypotheses. These hold that in contests where the citizenry is viewed as especially dissatisfied those candidates will campaign more aggressively. Three dependent variables capture aspects of campaign effort. For each, the set of independent variables is identical, with one exception. The first dependent variable is campaign funds raised by the candidate. Candidates were asked in the survey how much money they had raised to date. They were also asked how much, in total, they anticipated raising through the campaign. In this analysis, the latter measure is used, since the date on which candidates responded to the survey varied by as much as four weeks. In a technical sense, of course, campaign funds are not an activity. The presumption is that the greater the funding available, the more active the campaign can be, in terms of ability to purchase all the various paraphernalia associated with campaigns. A second dependent variable is the amount of time the campaign devotes to door-to-door canvassing. Respondents were asked to indicate the number of hours in a typical week they, as the candidate, spend doing door-to-door canvassing. They were also asked how much time all campaign workers spend doing door-to-door canvassing. The measure used in this analysis is the total in a typical week of their own time canvassing and that of all of their campaign volunteers and workers. The third dependent variable is the number of debates in which the candidate has or anticipates participating.

In the analysis of these three dependent variables, the key independent variable is once again the dissatisfaction/satisfaction measure. Additionally, there is a dummy variable for whether the respondent is the incumbent, a dummy variable for whether the race includes an incumbent or is an open seat contest, whether the respondent is an experienced candidate (i.e, if other than the incumbent, holds or has held elective office), the five dummy variables identifying types of offices, and a variable estimating the number of people 18 years of age and older residing in the jurisdiction. This population estimate is the same measure that is discussed below as the denominator of the turnout measure, subject to one caveat. Because the populations of jurisdictions vary from quite small to hundreds of thousands of residents, the population estimate is logged. The model with campaign funds as the dependent variable includes one additional independent variable. It includes a dummy variable indicating whether the rules pertaining to campaigns for that office include campaign finance restrictions.

The fourth hypothesis holds that campaigns will be more intense in situations where more candidates have jumped into the contests, especially where one or more of those candidates are electorally experienced. This hypothesis is tested with the negativity of the campaign. The negativity of campaigns is inherently difficult to measure. Like the legendary Supreme Court test of what constitutes pornography, negativity, in the end, is in the eye of the beholder. Here, a measure taken from the public would clearly be optimal. No such measure is available. Instead, I rely on a question in the survey asked of each respondent about the overall tone of the campaign. The item states “Commentators from all political persuasions have described the tone of the current campaign cycle as unusually negative. On the scale below how would you characterize the overall tone of the race for the office that you are seeking?” and gives the respondent opportunity to move a slider bar to a position anywhere from 0=Not at all negative to 100=Extremely negative. The key independent variables in this models are the number of candidates that contested for a given office, a dummy variable indicating whether one or more of these candidates is electorally experienced, and the satisfaction variable. The expectation is that campaign intensity, measured as campaign negativity, will increase when the number of

candidates increases, when there are experienced candidates in the field, and when dissatisfaction is high. A control variable is included for whether there is an incumbent in the race, with the expectation that this will have a dampening affect on campaign intensity. Other control variables tap differences in the size of the jurisdiction, differences across types of offices and state-to-state differences, which may be affected by the tone of contests for statewide offices.

(Table 1 about here)

Table one contains descriptive data at the level of individual respondents for the variables discussed to this point. Visible in this table is that the average number of candidates per contest is almost 4, but with a range all the way to 21. The proportion of respondents who were incumbents was 28%. Non-incumbents with prior experience in elective office was 12% of the sample. The number of seats to fill in each contest ranged from 1 to 5, with 1.4 as the mean. Looked at another way, 12% of the contests were at large elections, with the balance as single member contests. Thirty-seven percent of the contests were expressly partisan on the ballot. The average annual compensation for the offices being sought was just over \$30 thousand, but this ranged from 0 in 84 of the contests to a high of \$250 thousand in one contest. Campaign funds raised and/or anticipated through the election cycle ranged from 0 to \$175 thousand, with an average of under \$15 thousand and a median of \$5445. The distributions by types of offices shows that the most common office sought by our respondents was an executive office at the county level, which included Sheriff to Coroner and everything in between (e.g., auditor, clerk, assessor, and prosecutor). The respondents were about equally found running for special district offices, school districts, city or town councils, and county council or commissions. The least common were respondents running for mayor. By state, our respondents were slightly more likely to be from California and less likely to be from Virginia. But in general, they were about equally drawn from each of the five states.

4. Findings

The first hypothesis holds that as satisfaction with the status quo in a jurisdiction falls, more candidates will jump into the fray to seek a given office. The technique utilized in testing this hypothesis and all of the hypotheses below is to cluster the data based on the contests that were surveyed. The survey based clustering methodology is designed to take advantage of the underlying process that was used to generate the data. It is a variant of multi-level modeling, by utilizing information about survey clusters in estimating parameters based on information from individual responses. In this instance, the survey clusters are contests. When conducting the survey, once we identified a contest to survey, all candidates (with emails) were sent surveys. In many cases, only one response was obtained. In these instances, that one response contributes all of the information about the contest, including the post-election information that we added for such things as the number of candidates, the share of the vote received, and winning or losing. In instances where multiple responses were received for a given contest, each of the respondents contributes information about that contest. This has two implications. One, multiple responses from a single contest over-weights that contest, relative to single responses for a contest. Two, the information for each respondent in multi-response contests is, at least in part, dependent on information potentially contained on the other responses from that contest. Utilizing the surveying structure in clustering the data adjusts standard errors based on the number of

responses per contest and calculates degrees of freedom for all parameter estimates to correct for the extent to which observations may not be independent of one another.

Table 2 displays the survey clustered OLS regression results of the model testing the entrance of multiple candidates into contests.² The results show that as the assessment of satisfaction declines, the number of candidates increases by a statistically significant amount. Substantively, with a coefficient of -0.015 the impact might not at first blush seem to be large. Notice, however, the mean for the satisfaction variable is 48.3, with a standard deviation of 27.8. This suggests that when the perceived level of satisfaction shifts from one standard deviation above the mean to one standard deviation below the mean, the number of candidates in a contest increases by almost one additional candidate. Put differently, it means that the chances are good that when dissatisfaction rises, there will be multiple contenders seeking a given office.

(Table 2 about here)

The control variables tell interesting stories of their own. The presence of an incumbent on the ballot decreases the number of other candidates by slightly more than one. Multi-member elections increase the number of candidates at a rate in excess of the number of seats to be filled. Specifically, 1.5 additional candidates enter the race for each additional seat that is available. The institutional rule of at-large versus district elections is not significant. Interestingly, at least when controlling for other factors, partisan ballots do not have a statistically significant impact in reducing access to the ballot. The expectation had been that district elections would increase the number of contenders, but this was not the case. Likewise compensation levels fall just below conventional levels of significance, indicating that more generous salaries and other benefits of office do not increase the number of candidates seeking an office. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there are substantial differences in the average numbers of candidates seeking different types of offices. In this model, the excluded categories of offices are city, town, county councils and commissions. Relative to the number of candidates seeking these offices, the numbers of candidates seeking special district offices, county executive positions, and school district seats are significantly reduced. Finally, there are substantial state to state differences in the number of candidates that, on average, run for office. Relative to California, which was the excluded category, the average local race in Colorado had 3 fewer candidates; Florida, 2.6 fewer candidates; Virginia, 3.4 fewer candidates; and Washington, 3.1 fewer candidates. Notice that this is true despite controls for variables that might account for why California has such a large number of candidates running for local offices. Summary statistics associated with this model indicate that these results are relatively robust. The R-square is 52.2%. The F-ratio is significant at every conventional alpha level.

² The observant reader will notice that the dependent variable is a count measure. Thus a functional form such as a negative binomial might be viewed as more appropriate than the normal distribution that lies at the heart of linear models. A negative binomial regression reveals identical results in terms of the significance and direction of individual variables. Very few variables significant in the survey clustered linear regression are insignificant in the negative binomial regression or vice versa. Linear regression results have the advantage of being more interpretable and thus are reported here.

The second hypothesis holds that experienced candidates will be better attuned than the average candidate to dissatisfaction in a local jurisdiction and will thus seek out races where conditions appear to be favorable for their candidacies. Table three reports a survey clustered probit model where the dependent variable is the entrance of an electorally experienced candidate into a contest. Because this variable is dichotomous, probit is the method of analysis. The model contains all the same independent variables as in the prior table. The results are striking. There is a significant increase in the likelihood that declining satisfaction will lead to experienced candidates entering a race. Probit coefficients are difficult to interpret directly. With the other variables in the models set to their modal categories (or mean, in the case of the compensation variable), we find that a downward shift of 10 points in a candidate's estimation of citizen satisfaction increases the likelihood that an experienced candidate will jump into the race by about 10 percent. Put differently, when the estimate of satisfaction falls from 100 points to 0, there is near certainty that one or more experienced candidates will enter the fray. Were this an analysis of amateur candidates, this might simply be a product of endogeneity. That is, candidates might be reporting that citizens are dissatisfied as a rationalization for their entrance into the campaign. With experienced candidates, which is what this model measures, there is reason to think they are likely to be more experienced, not just electorally, but in their ability to assess true levels of discontents. Perhaps the most interesting finding in this entire model is the raft of non-findings. The only variable that is significantly related to the entrance of electorally experienced candidates into contests is satisfaction. These candidates are not deterred by incumbents that may be in a contest, by the electoral rules in place, the types of offices, or the states in which the contests are on the ballot. The only variable, at least in this model, that explains their entrance into a contest is their assessment that citizens in the jurisdiction are dissatisfied with the status quo.

(Table 3 about here)

How much difference does the entrance of additional candidates and experienced candidates make in the pace of contests? Table 4 reports the results of the three models analyzing components of campaign activities. The first dependent variable analyzed is campaign funding. From the survey, it is obvious that the amounts of funding that candidates raise varies tremendously. Ten percent of the respondents reported raising no funds whatsoever. The average amount raised and anticipated was just under \$14 thousand. The maximum was \$175 thousand. This pattern of dispersion posed problems for the analysis. Often when there is a distribution clustered toward the low end with a few outliers at the high end, the solution is to take the natural log of the values. This has a nice interpretation, as it permits one to describe the impacts of independent variables on dependent variables in percentage terms. Here, however, this seemed unwise. With so many zero values, logging would either produce lots of missing data or require the addition of an arbitrary constant that has been shown to create biases in estimates of unpredictable magnitude (King, 19xx). Consequently, I have opted to use the square root of the campaign funds as the dependent variable. This avoids the zero substitution problem and still allows for relatively straightforward interpretation of coefficients, as squaring them produces an estimates the impact on the dependent variable of one unit changes in the independent variables.

(Table 4 about here)

Campaign funds show no sign of being effected by candidate assessments of the level of satisfaction in the local jurisdiction. This is inconsistent with the hypothesized relationship. Translating dissatisfaction, at least as it appears to candidates, into cold hard cash from potential donors seems not to be occurring. But the number of candidates in a contest does have an impact on campaign funds that are raised. Experienced candidates do not report raising significantly more campaign funds than non-experienced candidates. This is contrary to the finding in the congressional elections literature (e.g., Jacobson, 2009). Being the incumbent, however, is significantly associated with having more funding. Among non-incumbents, the presence of an incumbent in the race negatively impacts the ability to raise funds. Or put in the opposite light, candidates running where no incumbent is on the ballot are generally raising significantly more campaign funds. Not surprisingly, there is an effect of population size on the ability to raise funds. Each percent increase in population is associated with an increase of approximately \$141 in campaign funds (i.e., 11.9 squared). Somewhat surprising is the lack of a relationship at a statistically significant level between campaign finance restrictions and the amount of money that candidates raise. The sign on this relationship is in fact in the opposite direction, which might suggest – were the results significant – that candidates actually raise more money in jurisdictions where campaign finance restrictions have been imposed. Among the most notable results in the analysis of this dependent variable is the wide variation in the amounts of money, controlling for the other factors, across types of offices. Mayoral candidates raise substantially more than candidates running for city council and county council and commission races – on average about \$1800 more. Candidates for various executive positions within county governments raise about \$550 less than candidates for the contests that comprise the excluded category. School board candidates raise amounts that are comparable to candidates running for the contests that are in the excluded category. Candidates for special districts raise the least, on average about \$3000 less than candidates running for city council and county council and commission races.

The commitment of campaigns to do door-to-door canvassing is the second measure of campaign activities hypothesized to be related to the level of dissatisfaction or satisfaction in a jurisdiction. As with the fund raising variable, there is no statistically significant relationship observed in this analysis between the level of satisfaction and the total number of hours per week in which candidates and their supporters are engaged. As in the analysis of funds raised, we see that the entrance of more candidates has an impact on the contest. As the number of candidates in a contest increases, all of the candidates take to the sidewalks more. Substantively, the increase is relatively modest, representing about a half hour per week more for each additional candidate in the contest. Experienced and non-experienced candidates do not differ in the extent to which they canvass door-to-door. There is a large and significant difference, however, between non-incumbents and incumbents. Non-incumbents spend about 5 more hours per week knocking on doors compared to incumbents. Perhaps this is due to the other advantages that incumbents have or perhaps it is more a reflection of non-incumbents hitting the pavement to introduce themselves to potential supporters. The amount of canvassing appears not to differ between open-seat and incumbent-challenger contests. There are some differences in the amount of canvassing across types of offices sought. Most notably, candidates running in special district elections report less canvassing than do candidates for other offices.

The analysis of participation in debates hints at other interesting features of local contests. Satisfaction levels have a significant impact on the number of debates in which candidates participate. Thirty percent of candidates report participating in no debates. These candidates are running disproportionately in jurisdictions where citizen satisfaction was assessed as high. A drop from the maximum level of satisfaction to the minimum level is associated with participation in 2.6 additional debates, all other things equal. Interestingly, the number of debates is not a function of the number of candidates that jumped into the race. Nor is it a function of having experienced candidates in the race. Incumbents report participating in significantly more debates than do non-incumbents – on average, slightly more than two additional debates. Likewise, we see no statistically meaningful difference between challengers running in incumbent-challenger contests and candidates running in open seat contests. We do see more debates in jurisdictions as the size of the eligible voter population increases. There are also differences in the numbers of debates across types of offices. Candidates running for the excluded category of city council and county council and commission races participate in the most debates. Mayoral candidates participate in somewhat fewer debates, though not at statistically significant reduced level. School board candidates report fewer still, followed by candidates for executive offices at the county level. Bringing up the bottom are candidates for special district offices, where participation in debates appears to be quite rare.

With Table 5, attention focuses on a key dimension of campaign intensity, the negativity of campaigns. The negativity measure, recall, is based on the appraisals of candidates. This is less than optimal. It would be better to have assessments of residents within each jurisdiction. The lack of optimality may be reflected in the generally weak findings. We do not see dissatisfaction leading to more negativity. Nor does negativity increase with the number of candidates or as result of experienced candidates in a contest. The presence of an incumbent in a race is associated with an increase of almost 7 points on the 100 point negativity scale, based on a test of significance at the 0.1 level. We see that contests for school boards and special district contests are less negative than contests for the excluded categories of contests, which are those for city council and county councils and commissions. We also see some state to state differences. The state-to-state dummy variables may be meaningful in picking up the spillover effects of statewide contests. Virginia was the only state in the sample with no highly charged state-wide races. In Colorado, there was a highly charged Senate race, but the gubernatorial race devolved into a strange three way contest in which two candidates were each trying to make the case that they should be viewed as the real GOP nominee. Still the lack of robustness with this dependent variable stands out more than any particular results. The r-square of 11.3% would seem to corroborate the need for caution in relying heavily on this dependent variable and its analysis.

(Table 5 about here)

5. Conclusion

Local elections shift into higher gear as perceptions deepen about the extent of discontents among local residents with the status quo in a jurisdiction. The effect of dissatisfaction on the number of candidates and experienced candidates entering contests is persistent and strong.

More candidates pile into campaigns where dissatisfaction is thought to be high. Contests held where these conditions exist also draw experienced candidates. We also see other effects. We see that more candidates crowd into races where multiple seats are to be filled simultaneously, rather than in single-seat offices. What we do not see is dissatisfaction leading to more campaign enthusiasm among potential supporters in the form of greater campaign funds or time spent doing door-to-door canvassing. Instead, we see that the affect of dissatisfaction on these dimensions of campaign activities is indirect. The entrance of additional candidates into contests, which is related to dissatisfaction, increases both funds raised and door-to-door canvassing. The direct impact of dissatisfaction with the status quo is on the number of debates. Where conditions are viewed as dissatisfying, candidates on average participate in significantly more debates. The impetus for these debates cannot be determined from this study. It would be interesting to know if the candidates who are identifying low levels of citizen satisfaction are calling for the debates or whether local media outlets and civic organizations, in sensing percolating discontents in the jurisdiction, organize debates to which the candidates are invited. Finally, with respect to campaign intensity, there are differences in the negativity of campaigns across types of offices, with school board and special district contests typically less negative than contests for municipal and county bodies. What was not found, however, was an impact of the number of candidates or the entrance of experienced candidates or even of dissatisfaction itself producing a discernible impact on the extent to which campaigns go negative.

These findings suggest interesting additional research questions to pursue. Is the pattern of candidate recruitment different when there is dissatisfaction with the status quo locally than when residents are generally satisfied? Who runs, by gender, ethnicity, educational and professional background? Even in the non-partisan contests, do the races end up being between candidates who affiliate with opposite major parties? And in the end, are incumbents more likely to be unseated when the status quo is viewed as unsatisfactory? If so, who wins and under what sorts of institutional conditions? These are questions for additional papers.

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Table 1: Descriptive Data

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Obs
Number of candidates in contest	3.88	3.69	1	21	414
Respondents who were incumbents	0.28	0.45	0	1	413
Non-incumbents with prior elected experience	0.12	0.32	0	1	413
Candidate's assessment of citizen satisfaction	48.29	27.82	0	100	340
Number of seats to be filled in contest	1.41	0.82	1	5	415
At Large versus single-member election	0.12	0.33	0	1	317
Partisan versus non-partisan contest	0.37	0.48	0	1	415
Total compensation of office	30,650	39,615	0	250,000	349
Campaign funds raised and anticipated for contest	14,637	25,206	0	175,000	356
Special district	0.18	0.38	0	1	415
County executive office	0.29	0.45	0	1	415
School District	0.15	0.36	0	1	415
City or Town Council	0.19	0.39	0	1	415
County Council or Commission	0.18	0.38	0	1	415
Mayor	0.01	0.11	0	1	415
California	0.27	0.45	0	1	415
Colorado	0.19	0.39	0	1	415
Florida	0.20	0.40	0	1	415
Virginia	0.13	0.34	0	1	415
Washington	0.20	0.40	0	1	415

Table 2: The Number of Candidates Running for Local Offices

Survey Clustered Linear Regression Results	Coef.	t-ratio	P> t
Intercept	7.041	4.59	0.000
Satisfaction	-0.015	-2.29	0.023
Incumbent in race	-1.258	-2.10	0.037
Number of seats to fill	1.464	1.81	0.072
At-large v district election	1.160	1.14	0.255
Partisan ballot	-0.050	-0.11	0.910
Compensation (\$s)	0.000	1.41	0.161
Special District	-2.481	-2.66	0.008
County Executives	-2.028	-2.26	0.025
School Districts	-2.191	-2.06	0.041
CO	-3.064	-3.43	0.001
FL	-2.636	-2.81	0.005
VA	-3.372	-3.82	0.000
WA	-3.137	-3.69	0.000
Number of strata	1		
Number of PSUs	204		
Population size	273		
Design df	203		
F(13, 191)	8.200		
Prob > F	0.000		
R-squared	0.522		

Table 3: Entry of experienced candidates into contests

Survey Clustered Probit Results	Coef.	t-ratio	P> t
Intercept	-0.209	-0.46	0.646
Satisfaction	-0.007	-2.01	0.045
Incumbent in race	-0.233	-0.94	0.348
Number of seats to fill	-0.023	-0.13	0.896
At-large v district election	-0.456	-1.17	0.243
Partisan ballot	0.150	0.37	0.714
Compensation (\$s)	0.000	-0.47	0.641
Special District	-0.307	-0.83	0.405
County Executives	-0.472	-1.16	0.246
School Districts	-0.636	-1.67	0.097
CO	-0.086	-0.14	0.886
FL	0.386	1.05	0.295
VA	-0.713	-1.83	0.068
WA	-0.253	-0.67	0.507
Number of strata	1		
Number of PSUs	204		
Population size	274		
Design df	203		
F(13, 191)	1.3		
Prob > F	0.2164		

Table 4: Campaign Activities

Survey clustered linear regression	<u>Campaign Funds</u> (square root)			<u>Canvassing door-to-door</u> (hrs/wk)			<u>Debates (# during campaign)</u>		
	Coef.	t	P> t	Coef.	t	P> t	Coef.	t	P> t
Intercept	-27.230	-0.93	0.352	2.766	0.60	0.546	0.009	0.00	0.996
Satisfaction	-0.029	-0.20	0.844	0.037	1.41	0.160	-0.026	-2.62	0.009
Number of candidates	4.038	2.95	0.003	0.519	2.13	0.034	-0.020	-0.21	0.836
Experienced candidate	6.514	0.55	0.585	-0.476	-0.23	0.822	-1.036	-1.53	0.126
Resp is incumbent	24.322	2.54	0.012	-4.777	-2.82	0.005	2.012	2.62	0.009
Incumbent in race	-19.911	-2.16	0.032	1.496	0.91	0.364	-0.438	-0.67	0.502
Experienced candidate	6.514	0.55	0.585	-0.476	-0.23	0.822	-1.036	-1.53	0.126
Campaign finance rest.	9.358	1.20	0.230						
Eligible pop (logged)	11.889	4.61	0.000	0.513	1.25	0.213	0.625	3.80	0.000
Mayor	42.520	0.82	0.413	6.954	0.93	0.351	-1.521	-1.15	0.251
County Executive Office	-23.533	-2.07	0.040	-1.531	-0.87	0.383	-2.397	-2.66	0.008
School Board	-13.893	-1.15	0.252	-1.115	-0.58	0.561	-2.085	-2.56	0.011
Special District	-55.178	-4.50	0.000	-4.480	-2.45	0.015	-3.651	-3.97	0.000
Number of strata	1			1			1		
Number of PSUs	250			251			251		
Population size	321			325			323		
Design df	249			250			250		
F – ratio	4.750			3.390			4.510		
Prob > F	0.000			0.000			0.000		
R-squared	0.204			0.092			0.123		

Table 5: Campaign Intensity

Survey clustered linear regression	Negativity (0 to 100)		
	Coef.	t	P> t
Intercept	31.045	2.53	0.012
Satisfaction	-0.072	-1.12	0.264
Number of candidates	-0.594	-1.41	0.159
Resp is incumbent	4.591	0.98	0.327
Incumbent in race	6.586	1.70	0.091
Experienced candidate	0.345	0.08	0.940
Eligible pop (logged)	1.245	1.36	0.174
Mayor	5.959	0.47	0.640
County Executive Office	1.777	0.40	0.692
School Board	-13.160	-2.56	0.011
Special District	-12.356	-2.25	0.025
CO	-16.699	-2.64	0.009
FL	-5.758	-0.95	0.342
VA	-20.294	-3.58	0.000
WA	-4.558	-0.71	0.479
Number of strata	1		
Number of PSUs	241		
Population size	311		
Design df	240		
F – ratio	2.810		
Prob > F	0.001		
R-squared	0.113		