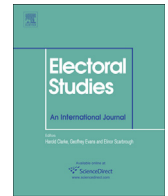




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Money, candidates, and mayoral elections

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we extend a well-trod line of research from congressional and state-level elections—the electoral impact of campaign expenditures and candidate characteristics—to a relatively understudied context, urban mayoral elections. Using a sample of large U.S. cities, we provide evidence that mayoral elections are very similar to elections at other levels of office: there is a tremendous incumbency advantage, one that is overcome only with great effort; campaign spending is closely tied to incumbent vote share but it is challenger rather than incumbent spending that seems to drive outcomes; and challengers are hopelessly outspent. In addition, we find that the effect of local economic conditions on incumbent success is mediated by challenger spending and that incumbent candidates fare better in racially diverse settings.

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1. Introduction

Much has been made of the idea that the fifty states serve as laboratories of democracy (Morehouse and Jewell, 2004). While scholars of state politics have (rightly) argued that the variation in political, institutional and demographic contexts across the fifty states provides an important opportunity for scholars to learn about politics more generally, it seems self-evident that the case is just as strong when considering the opportunities presented by the thousands of local units of government. Despite this, we know very little about how well theories and models of political outcomes explain local politics (Marschall, 2010; Trounstein, 2009; Marschall et al., 2011). Not only does this create gaps in our knowledge of local politics; it also means that broader theories and models largely are left untested in this fertile and diverse context. In this paper, we extend a well-trod line of research from congressional and state-level elections—the electoral impact of campaign

expenditures and candidate characteristics—to a relatively understudied context, urban mayoral elections.

One need look no farther than the impact of candidates and campaign expenditures on elections at virtually all levels of office for evidence of important campaign effects. With the exception of presidential elections, where the major-party candidates are fairly familiar to the electorate and, until recently, spend roughly equal amounts of money, differences in candidate experience and campaign expenditures have played a determinative role in shaping both election outcomes and voter turnout. Beginning with the early work of Jacobson (1980) on the role of money in elections, and continuing with Jacobson and Kernell's (1983) integration of the concepts of strategic candidates and the importance of candidate experience, we have learned a lot about the importance of money and candidates in sub-presidential elections.

The literature on congressional campaigns² points to a huge information advantage for most incumbents, one that

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² See Jacobson (2009) for an overview of research on congressional elections, and Currinder and Green (2010) for a concise review of the literature on campaign spending and election outcomes.

can only be partially offset by experienced, well-funded challengers. And in open-seat contests the political experience of the candidates and the amount of money they raise are driving forces in the election. Similar effects are found in state-legislative (Van Dunk, 1997; Abbe and Herrnson, 2003; Carey et al., 2000; Gierzynski and Breaux, 1996; Hogan, 2001, 2004), gubernatorial (King, 2001; Partin, 2002; Squire, 1992), city council (Gierzynski et al., 1998; Krebs, 1998; Leiske, 1989), and initiative (Bowler et al., 1992; Hadwiger, 1992) elections. Research at these different levels of office has also contributed to a better understanding of how campaigns act to mobilize and inform voters (Hogan, 1999; Jackson, 1997, 2002; Nicholson, 2003; Niven, 2001; Partin, 2001; Patterson and Caldeira, 1983).

In this paper, we turn our attention to the impact of candidates and expenditures in mayoral elections, focusing on incumbent elections occurring in a sample of relatively large U.S. cities. Hundreds of mayoral elections, including dozens of elections in large cities, occur every year. For instance, the U.S. Conference of Mayors lists 195 elections held in November alone in 2010 in cities with populations greater than 35,000, and 45 elections in cities with populations greater than 100,000. In 2009 the same source listed over 600 mayoral elections for the entire year, 90 of which took place in cities with populations greater than 100,000. Despite their pervasiveness, we know very little about the determinants of mayoral election outcomes, and almost nothing about the impact of campaign expenditures and candidate characteristics. This is unfortunate, for unlike federal and state-level elections, which all occur within fairly limited institutional and (to some extent) demographic contexts, mayoral elections take place across a wide variety of settings. Some elections are in even-numbered years, some in odd-numbered years; some occur in the fall, some in the spring, and even a few in the winter and summer months; some use a partisan ballot, some a non-partisan ballot, and some are surprisingly partisan despite the non-partisan ballot; some mayors have greater authority in a mayor-council system, and some operate in weaker council-manager systems; some elections take place in cities with very little racial diversity, and some take place in virtual melting pots. It is also the case that some mayoral elections attract high levels of voter turnout while others attract very few voters and that cities differ in their electoral regulations, including campaign spending regulations and rules. The point here is very simple: mayoral elections are all around us and provide a lot of really interesting variation in context, yet we know very little about them. Although these differences can certainly make it challenging to compare cities, by accounting for important institutional, demographic, and electoral factors across cities, it is possible to develop a general understanding of the dynamics of mayoral elections across the United States.

2. Research on local elections

The landscape of research on mayoral elections is relatively barren, save for a handful of studies. Notable among these is Kaufmann's (2004) study of mayoral elections in Los Angeles and New York City, which relied on publicly

available media surveys to test an innovative group-based theory of urban elections. Kaufmann's study represented a major advance in what we know about urban mayoral elections, but that understanding is limited due to the focus on just two cities, and it does not address the issue at hand here: candidates and campaign spending. To be sure, there have also been studies of turnout in mayoral elections (Caren, 2007), mayoral approval (Howell and McLean, 2001; Howell and Perry, 2004), campaign strategy in mayoral elections (Krebs and Holian, 2007), media coverage of mayoral campaigns (Atkeson and Krebs, 2008), and mayoral campaign fundraising dynamics (Adams, 2007; Krebs and Holian, 2005; Krebs and Pelissero, 2001); but no studies that focus explicitly on the influence of candidates and campaign spending on mayoral election outcomes across more than just a few cities.

Despite the relative dearth of research on mayoral elections, there have been a number of studies of other local elections—mostly city council races—and a few have focused on candidates and spending in those races. Oliver and Ha's (2007) survey-based analysis of city council elections in 30 suburban communities provides a unique opportunity to examine voter decision-making. While Oliver and Ha did not focus explicitly on candidate experience or spending, they did find that familiarity with candidates—something that typically coincides with candidate quality (Jacobson 2013)—influenced on how people voted. Other studies of council elections have focused more squarely on the role of candidates and expenditures. Earliest among these was Lieske's (1989) study of Cincinnati council elections, which was followed by Gierzynski et al.'s (1998) and Krebs' (1998) studies of Chicago Aldermanic races; and all three of these studies found that campaign spending had a profound impact of vote share, even after controlling for a multitude of other factors. Contrary to these studies, Fleischmann and Stein (1998) found no relationship between campaign spending and electoral success in their study of council elections in St. Louis and Atlanta. It should be noted, however, that Fleishman and Stein's model focused on the impact of spending on the probability of winning rather than on vote share.

Krebs' (1998) analysis of Chicago aldermanic races plumbs the sources of candidate success a bit more thoroughly than the other studies, and his findings are suggestive of what we expect to see in mayoral races: the success of aldermanic candidates is heavily dependent upon candidate characteristics and campaign spending; incumbents enjoy a distinct advantage over challengers, though this advantage is diminished somewhat if incumbents face experienced challengers; and in incumbent races, challenger spending has a stronger influence on vote share than incumbent spending does. For the most part, these findings mirror those found in studies of candidates and campaign spending at other levels of office (Currinder and Green, 2010).

3. Candidates and spending in mayoral elections

While the studies cited above are informative and provide more evidence to support what are becoming near

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