Strategic campaigning, closeness, and voter mobilization in U.S. Presidential elections

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ABSTRACT

The scholarly literature on voter mobilization is ambivalent regarding the effects of closeness on turnout. Economic analyses of turnout (i.e. the classic calculus of voting) contend that as elections become closer, voters perceive their participation as more valuable because there is a greater chance that they will cast the deciding vote. Other work argues that voters do not take closeness into account because the probability that their vote uniquely changes the outcome of an election is quite small even in close elections. Still, this second perspective maintains that closeness may increase turnout because elites distribute campaign resources to places where election results could be affected by mobilizing additional supporters. While the latter perspective is theoretically well-developed, empirical support for the notion that elite activity (rather than citizen perceptions) connects closeness and turnout is limited. Using improved measures of closeness and campaign activities, we test for citizen perception and elite mobilization effects on turnout in the context of U.S. Presidential elections. Results show that while closeness has no direct effect on turnout, elites indeed target campaign activities on close states and the asymmetric distribution of resources across states results in higher turnout in battleground states.

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1. Introduction

Without question, voting is one of the most important rights and responsibilities for citizens residing in democratic nations. Consequently, voter turnout has become one of the most explored topics in political science. The question is particularly important in the American context because voter turnout rates tend to be lower in the U.S. than in comparable democracies (Powell, 1986; Jackman, 1987).

Researchers have investigated a broad range of hypotheses in their attempts to uncover the determinants of voter turnout. Many characteristics of the voter (such as race, income, social connectedness and education) have been shown to affect participation (Caldeira and Patterson, 1982; Nagler, 1991; Copeland, 1983; Timpone, 1998; Patterson and Caldeira, 1983; Cox and Munger, 1989), as well as some features of electoral laws (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Timpone, 1998). However, characteristics of the candidates and the campaign have garnered a particularly large amount of attention. While the extent to which campaigns effectively change voters' minds remains contested (Campbell, 2000; Finkel, 1993; Holbrook, 1996; Lodge et al., 1995; Wlezien and Erikson, 2001), the turnout literature is relatively united in its claim that characteristics of the candidates and their campaigns have substantial influence on turnout. Two factors influencing turnout are particularly prominent in the economic and political science literatures: Campaign activity (often measured by campaign spending) and the closeness of the election.

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The hypothesized effects of both campaign activity and closeness are theoretically grounded in the classic calculus of voting (Downs, 1957), where the utility derived from voting is a function of the costs and benefits of voting (most of which are weighted by the probability that a voter casts the decisive ballot).[1] Campaign activity decreases the cost of voting, perhaps most significantly by reducing the time and effort a citizen must devote to gathering information about the candidates (Lipsitz, 2005; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). It has been argued that closeness could directly affect voter utilities by increasing the probability that a voter is pivotal (Downs, 1957; Campbell et al., 1960, 98–100; Milbrath, 1965, 102; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974; Silberman and Durden, 1975, 103–107). However, Cox and Munger (1989) and Aldrich (1993) contend that even in a close contest, the probability of the election being decided by a single vote is so small that any benefit of voting that is conditional upon being the decisive voter (e.g. policy benefits) could have only a negligible effect on voter utilities. As such, the effect of closeness will come not through voters' estimation of the probability of being decisive, but rather through elites sending campaign resources to contests where they may have the best chance of affecting an outcome. While these resources only bring small decreases in costs, Aldrich (1993) argues that the costs and benefits involved in the calculus of voting are already so small that elite allocation of resources could have substantial effects on voter turnout.

A handful of studies have empirically investigated the relative effects of closeness and spending, specifically in the context of U.S. House elections (Cox and Munger, 1989; Caldeira et al., 1985), U.S. Senate elections (Ragsdale and Rusk, 1995), and state legislative elections (Caldeira and Patterson, 1982). Yet, our understanding of the relative effects of closeness and campaign activities on turnout in presidential elections is more limited. This is unfortunate because the strategic campaign environment induced by the Electoral College system is known to affect candidates' campaign resource allocation (Bartels, 1985; Edwards, 2004; Shaw, 1999, 2006; but see Reeves et al., 2004 and Merolla et al., 2005), making presidential elections fertile ground for such an investigation. Indeed, it may be in presidential elections that elite activities can best be considered because a single national campaign directs the resource allocation for each major party candidate while in sub-national elections a diverse group of campaign contributors governs the distribution of campaign resources across the country.

2. Campaigns and turnout

A number of scholars have considered the effects of campaign activities on voter turnout. In the legislative realm, campaign spending has been shown to have tremendous effects on voter turnout (Cox and Munger,

1989; Caldeira et al., 1985; Ragsdale and Rusk, 1995; Caldeira and Patterson, 1982). Nevertheless, even some highly regarded studies of turnout in presidential elections do not consider the potential consequences of campaign activity (e.g. Timpone, 1998; Highton, 2000).

The importance of examining presidential elections becomes even more clear when one considers the effect of closeness. The seminal study on closeness and turnout, Cox and Munger (1989), offers two possible sources for the effect of closeness based on the classic calculus of voting (Downs, 1957). As the probability of casting the decisive vote (closeness of the election) increases, the utility of voting increases.[2] Cox and Munger term this a "Mass Electoral Response" to closeness. They, along with Aldrich (1993), cast doubt on this theoretical proposition, pointing out that the probability of being the decisive voter is very small even in a close election. Instead, they propose an "Elite Response" hypothesis for the effect of closeness. Because elites are strategic in allocating their resources, they allocate their resources to races where additional campaign efforts could actually change the outcome of a race. Along these lines, Lipsitz (2005) shows that campaign activities decrease information costs for voters, increasing their chances of turning out to vote.

Notwithstanding the richness of the theoretical insight that supports the elite response hypothesis, the vast majority of studies find a modest but statistically significant effect for closeness even when controlling for campaign activities (Berch, 1993; Cox and Munger, 1989; Ragsdale and Rusk, 1995; Patterson and Caldeira, 1983). As such, the literature has concluded that closeness has an effect at both the mass and elite levels. Nevertheless, there remains some question about this result. Cox and Munger (1989) particularly seem reluctant to concede that closeness has a direct effect on voter mobilization.

In the context of U.S. Presidential elections, we believe that the elite response hypothesis is correct, and that the theoretical expectations of Cox and Munger (1989) and Aldrich (1993) are correct regarding the mass electoral response to presidential campaign activities. There are two explanations for our expectations. First, these pioneering empirical studies use suboptimal operationalizations of both closeness and campaign activities. In most studies of closeness and turnout, closeness is measured using either the actual vote percentage of the winner or the margin between the vote percentage of the top two candidates (Berch, 1993; Cox and Munger, 1989; Ragsdale and Rusk, 1995; Patterson and Caldeira, 1983; Jackson, 1997). This is problematic because this information was not available to voters when they were making the turnout decision. Moreover, campaign spending is almost universally used as the sole measure of campaign activity. However, it is not the actual disbursement of funds from a bank account that motivates voters to turnout, but rather the purchase of advertising, funding of candidate appearances and other activities that leads to turnout. Indeed, a non-trivial

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[1] Because the realization of emotional or psychological benefits associated with doing one's civic duty is not conditional on the outcome of the race, these benefits are not weighted by the probability of being the decisive vote (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968).

[2] Note that the benefit of electing one party over the other can only be attributed to an individual's decision to vote if that individual casts the deciding vote.