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The Social Science Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/soscij



Does party support help candidates win?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 June 2014

Received in revised form 2 February 2015

Accepted 2 February 2015

Available online 10 March 2015

Keywords:

Political parties

Political campaigns

Congress

Campaign strategy

ABSTRACT

The parties' congressional campaign committees have made it their business to strategically provide contributions to candidate campaigns in order to help their candidates win. However, the effectiveness of these contributions in terms of increasing the competitiveness of party-sponsored candidates remains untested. Using contribution data from the U.S. Federal Election Commission in a series of mixed effects models as well as a matching analysis, the receipt of direct party contributions and coordinated support is shown to significantly improve the competitive position of challengers but not open seat candidates in races for the House. Further, independent expenditures by the parties do not significantly increase candidates' competitiveness. The implications of these results for future party strategies are explored.

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1. Introduction

Since their inception the Republican and Democratic parties' congressional campaign committees have remained committed to expanding the amounts of money and the kinds of support they are able to provide to the campaigns of their candidates. Party officials find loopholes within campaign finance laws enabling committees to distribute larger sums of money to candidates over time. For example, by 2012, party committees spent more than \$242 million on behalf of House candidates alone. Committee support does not stop there. Their monetary contributions are almost always accompanied by other forms of party assistance including in-kind contributions, subsidization of certain campaign costs, such as polling and voter lists, and services, such as strategic planning, image consultation, and fundraising advice (Bibby, 1998; Brox, 2013; Cantor & Herrnson, 1997; Herrnson, 1988; Leyden & Borrelli, 1990). Despite this impressive level of involvement and expense,

the effectiveness of party contributions in terms of increasing the competitiveness of candidates' campaigns remains untested.

This gap in the literature relates to the fact that most candidates receive a modest degree of direct financial support—often no more than several thousand dollars—from their parties relative to other campaign funding sources. Under campaign finance laws the parties' direct contributions and coordinated expenditures on behalf of candidates can only be spent in limited sums from funds raised from individuals and political action committees in legally proscribed amounts. The legal constraints are what qualify these forms of support as hard money. These are also the funds over which the campaign has some say in how they are allocated. While the parties found loopholes in the law that simultaneously enabled them to raise and spend soft money in unlimited amounts to support their candidates, these monies by definition could not be given directly to the campaigns. Most of these funds were spent on party-sponsored advertising or they were channeled through the state party organizations to support field operations until party soft money was banned in 2002 under the Bi-partisan Campaign Finance Reform Act

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(BCRA) (Brox, 2013). Parties continued to make direct contributions and coordinated expenditures under BCRA and increased their use of independent expenditures to conduct “shadow campaigns”—dubbed as such because the candidate’s principle campaign committee cannot legally be involved in the spending decisions and actions taken by the party to support the campaign (Herrnson, 2012). To date, no studies investigate whether the parties’ decision to continue to provide direct and coordinated forms of support to campaigns makes any difference in race outcomes and whether party funds spent collaboratively in partnership with the campaign are more effective than funds spent independently by the parties to support the candidate.

A set of House races between 1992 and 2012 is examined to determine whether the direct and coordinated hard dollar funds the congressional campaign committee can contribute or spend on behalf of campaigns make non-incumbent candidates’ bids for office more competitive. The timing of these contributions is considered to determine whether party contributions to the candidate prior to Labor Day, on the one hand, or funds received in the critical weeks leading up to Election Day, on the other, make any difference in the non-incumbent candidate’s vote margin and likelihood of winning. In keeping with expectations, the findings indicate direct and coordinated hard dollar party support at or above the average level of support the party committees can provide greatly increases the challenger’s predicted vote margin and slightly improves the likelihood of winning—in some cases transforming incumbent-challenger races into toss-ups—even as independent expenditures do not meaningfully alter the candidates’ odds of winning or vote margins. Hard dollar direct and coordinated contributions both early and later in the election cycle significantly factor into these gains—although contributions made in the weeks leading up to Election Day produce greater improvements in challengers’ competitiveness. In contrast, open-seat candidates’ competitiveness is not significantly impacted by party support at any point during the election cycle. The benefits uncovered for challengers are likely due to the contributions’ function as the party’s endorsement. Additionally, these contributions are accompanied by services provided to the campaign by the parties’ congressional campaign committees, which, according to party officials, includes mobilization of the party’s coalition on behalf of their candidates and guidance on ways to professionalize the campaign (Interviews with Party Officials May 16, 2010, January 14, 2010, October 17, 2011).¹ These results suggest the parties’ involvement in challengers’ campaigns not only raises the stakes of the election but also, in some instances, can alter the outcomes of elections. These results thus help to delineate the true value of direct and coordinated hard dollar party contributions in the eyes of challengers as well as other stakeholders in campaign politics and have

important implications for future research examining party resource allocation strategies and the benefits that might be connected to a candidate’s receipt of party support, such as media attention or increased fundraising momentum.

2. Party spending and candidate success

Two previous studies examine the effectiveness of party support with respect to increasing the candidate’s electoral competitiveness; each employs surveys of House candidates and campaign consultants respectively. Herrnson (1989) finds that candidates who receive party support believe many of the services provided by the committees “enhanced the quality and competitiveness of their campaigns” (p. 301). Similarly, in their survey of campaign consultants, Dulio and Thurber (2003) find that consultants valued party assistance with “campaign funds, opposition research, direct mail, GOTV efforts, coordinated ads, and management/strategic advice” (p. 220). As in Herrnson’s (1989) study, their analysis is strictly qualitative and focuses upon perceptions of the utility of party support, making it difficult to judge the magnitude of the effect of the services that were provided.

While these are the only two studies on the impact of party support on candidate competitiveness, when it comes to party spending on candidates, a number of studies investigate whether committee support in the electoral arena translates into loyalty in the legislative arena (Cantor & Herrnson, 1997; Damore & Hansford, 1999; Leyden & Borrelli, 1990; Nokken, 2003). With few exceptions, these studies conclude party support does not increase the loyalty of its recipients. Moreover, the results suggest parties distribute funds based upon the competitiveness of the candidate’s race (Damore & Hansford, 1999; Jacobson, 1985/1986; Nokken, 2003). If other concerns or goals enter the picture, they are secondary. These findings dovetail nicely with research on the distribution strategies of the parties’ congressional campaign committees in their efforts to maximize seats in Congress. They find that the parties generally do a good job targeting vulnerable candidates for support and subsequently distributing their funds efficiently according to the competitiveness of the race (Cantor & Herrnson, 1997; Damore & Hansford, 1999; Glasgow, 2002; Herrnson, 1989, 1990; Jacobson, 1985/1986; Kolodny & Dwyre, 1998; Nokken, 2003).

These studies raise the possibility that parties are only in the business of supporting competitive candidates and therefore it is the characteristics of the candidate rather than the party’s involvement in the race that makes the difference in vote margins. To a certain extent, this must be true. No amount of money or services can make up for the candidate’s personal shortcomings. However, wide variations in the experience, qualifications, fundraising abilities, and professionalism of challengers, open-seat contestants, and even incumbents suggest that parties must also make the best of the slate of candidates that emerges from the primary cycle. Moreover, such a viewpoint discounts the value of the contributions and services parties provide in order to professionalize the campaigns of their non-incumbent candidates and the value of the party’s endorsement.

¹ A personal interview was conducted on January 14, 2010 and two telephone interviews on May 16, 2010 and October 17, 2011 with three party officials, one Republican and two Democrats, all of whom have had experience working for the congressional campaign committees of the respective parties. In keeping with the consent agreement, their names will be kept confidential.

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