



## Campaign spending and the top-two primary: How challengers earn more votes per dollar in one-party contests

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### ABSTRACT

The top-two primary system changes the typical two-stage electoral process by creating scenarios in which two candidates from the same party may face each other in the general election. In two-party contests, voters receive information from candidate party labels and from campaign outreach, which is facilitated by campaign expenditures. Combined, this information helps voters make decisions on Election Day. In the absence of differentiating party labels in one-party contests, the information provided by candidate spending should matter more. Specifically, I argue that expenditures made by challengers facing same-party opponents should be more effective for increasing vote share than expenditures made by those facing opposite-party opponents. This study examines state legislative elections in California and Washington to investigate how the effectiveness of challenger campaign expenditures is conditioned by the presence of either a one-party or two-party contest. Results find that as challengers in one-party contests spend more, they are able to increase their vote share at more than double the pace per dollar spent when compared to challengers in two-party contests. Findings complement a broad literature investigating the role of electoral institutions in shaping voter and candidate behavior.

### 1. Introduction

Political scientists have long sought to understand the many ways in which money shapes electoral outcomes, with much of that attention directed towards better understanding the connection between campaign spending and vote share. Those who have investigated this question at the state legislative level, in particular, have long established that when challengers spend more, they typically will earn a greater percentage of the overall vote in both state legislative primaries (Breau and Gierzynski, 1991; Welch, 1976) and general election contests (Gierzynski and Breau, 1991). Others have found that these effects are mediated by several factors. For example, the presence of strong gubernatorial coattails may dampen the effects of spending in state legislative elections (Hogan, 2005), while the presence of stricter campaign finance regulations stimulate electoral competition by encouraging quality challenger emergence (Hamm and Hogan, 2008). In this paper, I use the context of the top-two primary to broaden our understanding of how the effectiveness of campaign spending is conditioned by electoral institutions.

States with traditional primaries typically have a process through which the slate of candidates is narrowed to one candidate from each party, if such candidates have filed to run. The top-two primary system

differs by placing all candidates for a given position into a single blanket primary. The two candidates with the most votes then proceed to a runoff general election, regardless of their respective party affiliations. This rule allows for contests in which two candidates of the same party may face each other in the general election. The top-two primary, implemented by Washington in 2008 and California in 2012,<sup>1</sup> provides a venue in which we can further develop our understanding of how electoral rules shape outcomes. Investigating the intended and unintended consequences also offers a practical importance as reformers in other states consider adopting the system.

State legislative elections are typically low-information contests that lack the media attention enjoyed by candidates at the top of the ticket (Kaplan et al., 2003). In the absence of information about candidates' positions, voters often rely on party labels as heuristics to guide preference-consistent choices (see Conover and Feldman, 1982; McDermott, 1997). When two candidates of the same party face each other in the general election, however, party labels no longer offer a meaningful signal to facilitate voting decisions. In this paper, I investigate whether the dual absence of media attention and differentiating party cues will raise the effectiveness of challenger campaign spending in state legislative elections. I expect that in one-party contests, challengers will receive a greater increase in vote share per dollar

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<sup>1</sup> Louisiana's system differs from those of California and Washington because if one candidate receives more than 50% of the total vote in the primary, that candidate is declared the winner and no runoff election is held.

spent when compared with those in two-party contests. This expectation is driven by the importance of campaign spending for establishing name recognition and conveying information to voters, which ultimately earns candidates more votes on Election Day. The present study will test these expectations by analyzing elections data from state legislative contests in California and Washington.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1. The top-two primary and electoral behavior

Recent diffusion of the top-two primary beyond Louisiana has inspired some scholarly attention towards investigating its effects. Many have sought to answer whether the top-two primary, as well as similar attempts to open up the primary process, fulfill reformers' goals of electing more moderate elected officials. Findings are mixed at best. One study finds that California's experiment with the open blanket primary in the late 1990s indeed produced more victories for moderates in legislative and congressional elections (Gerber, 2002). However, an experiment studying the top-two primary find that voters participating in same-party legislative contests do not have the information necessary to make policy-based distinctions between their choices, ultimately concluding that moderate candidates fare no better under the system (Ahler et al., 2016). Others find that no moderating effect is observed in the legislators elected under the top-two primary (Kousser et al., 2016) or in California's previous open blanket primary system in the late 1990s (McGhee et al., 2014).

Some have investigated how the top-two primary affects electoral competition and voting behavior more broadly. Many trends stand out in these early evaluations. First, analysis of California's legislative elections reveals that zero state legislative incumbents lost their re-election bids from 2002 to 2010, even following the 2000 redistricting (Olson and Ali, 2015). However, when the top-two primary was first used in 2012, state legislative incumbents in California saw a spike in the number of challenges within their own party, with the majority of these challengers emerging in traditionally safe districts (Masket, 2012). Ten legislative and congressional incumbents lost their seats in California that year, with six of them losing to same-party opponents. Nine out of the ten intraparty run-offs that year occurred in safe districts. Overall, California was rated as having the most competitive state legislative elections in the country in 2012 (Olson and Ali, 2015). It is worth noting that this rise in competition also follows a redistricting cycle and the introduction of a new bipartisan redistricting commission (Grainger, 2010). Thus, it is difficult to assess the degree to which increased competition can be attributed to either primary reform or redistricting.

Others have observed a rise in information-seeking among voters participating in state legislative elections in California. When two legislative candidates of the same party faced each other in the general election, leaving voters without a meaningful party cue to distinguish their options, Google searches about those candidates increased by 15% when compared to candidates in two-party contests. No such increase in information-seeking was observed during the first stage of the election (Sinclair and Wray, 2015).

The present study seeks to complement and expand upon these findings to further investigate how the top-two primary shapes electoral competitiveness and voter behavior. If challengers are indeed able to earn more votes per dollar spent, such results would reveal one way in which the top-two primary fulfills reformers' hopes of increased electoral competitiveness.

<sup>2</sup> Some works in the campaign spending literature point out the possibility of reverse-causality, whereby popularity, viability, or strong poll performances encourage stronger fundraising, which in turn feeds back into increasing viability or popularity (see Adkins and Dowdle, 2008). The cross-sectional nature of the present data complicate the untangling of this possibility. However, the principal theoretical argument remains that gaining information from some other source is more critical in the absence of differentiating party labels, and that each dollar spent towards the provision of information becomes more valuable in such scenarios.

### 1.2. Voter knowledge in state legislative elections

State legislative elections have long been recognized as low-information contests in which voters possess little or no information with which to make an informed decision on Election Day (Gierzynski and Breaux, 1991; Jewell and Olson, 1988). Surveys frequently corroborate this claim by revealing a lack of knowledge about state legislators and legislative elections among the majority of voters: a 2006 survey of Utah voters revealed that only 34% could name at least one of their legislators, a 2014 survey of Tennessee voters found that just 44% knew which party controlled their state legislature, and in 2007, only 25% of New Jersey voters were aware that their state legislative elections would be held just two weeks following the date of the survey (Squire and Moncrief, 2015).

Despite the lack of voter knowledge regarding state legislators and legislative elections, most voters are quite adept at using party cues to make meaningful inferences about candidate policy preferences. This facilitates voters' ability to make preference-consistent vote choices (see Conover and Feldman, 1982; McDermott, 1997; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). Further, while the specific cause is subject to debate, there is broader consensus that the accuracy and ease with which voters are able to use party cues has improved in recent decades. Whether caused by party sorting (Levendusky, 2009; Nivola and Brady, 2006), ideological polarization (Abramowitz, 2010; Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009), or conflict extension (Layman and Carsey, 2002), the contemporary party system now presents voters with clearly distinct images of the two major parties. It has thus become easier for inattentive voters to make reasonably accurate approximations of the candidates' policy preferences based on party labels alone.

Voter reliance on party labels to drive vote choice is most prominent in down-ballot contests, such as state legislative elections (Schaffner and Streb, 2002). This behavior is illustrated by studies of primary elections, where voters must use some means beyond party identity to evaluate candidates. Voters are reasonably able to make policy-based distinctions between candidates of the same party in statewide primaries such as gubernatorial and U.S. Senate contests, however, most lack the information needed to do so in down-ballot primaries (Hirano et al., 2015). Further, voters claim that they indeed want to cast preference-consistent votes in down-ballot primaries (Hirano et al., 2015) non-partisan contests (Lovrich and Sheldon, 1983), and one-party contests (Ahler et al., 2016), but that the information necessary to do so was less readily available. When such information is provided through candidates' campaign expenditures, voters should be more likely to use that information when they cannot rely on party labels alone. The top-two primary provides a context in which to test this expectation.

### 1.3. Campaign spending as a conduit for voter knowledge

One factor contributing to the disparity in voter knowledge in up-ballot versus down-ballot elections is that candidates at the bottom of the ticket receive far less (if any) free media coverage. Analysis of the 2002 midterm election reveals that only three percent of campaign stories on local news broadcasts mentioned state legislative contests (Kaplan et al., 2003). Therefore, the burden of educating voters about state legislative contests is left to the candidates themselves, and candidate-funded communications are often the primary method through which voters learn about their campaigns (Gierzynski and Breaux, 1991). The present research examines how the role of campaign spending as a means for candidates to make themselves known to voters, and therefore increase vote share, is conditioned by the presence of a one-party or two-party contest.

While it is common to hear political observers lament the role of money in politics and the state of the uninformed electorate, higher levels of campaign spending produce normatively desirable outcomes in low-information contests ranging from judicial elections to U.S. House contests. It is well-established that increased spending in campaigns for

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