



Party competition and citizens' political attitudes in the American states[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Democratic theorists argue that vigorous competition between candidates/parties is essential for democracy to flourish because it engages citizens' political interest and ultimately makes elected officials more accountable to their constituents. Using data on citizens' perceptions of government responsiveness to their political opinions from the American National Election Studies and the Ranney measure of party competition for control of state government, we examine the effects of competition on citizens' political attitudes from 1952 to 2008. Our analysis reveals that citizens feel government is more responsive to them when there is greater competition between the two parties for control of government in their state. However, this relationship is confined only to citizens who identify with the party that controls government in their state. We also find that the relationship between competition and efficacy is strongest among citizens with lower levels of education and income. These results suggest that vigorous competition for control of state government can have important implications for citizens' political attitudes.

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As the U.S. Congress continues to register record low levels of legislative productivity (Tauberer, 2014), citizens have grown increasingly frustrated with leaders in Washington. For example, a recent Gallup poll reports that Congress' job approval rating has reached record lows for two consecutive years and now hovers around 15% (Riffkin, 2014).¹ In contrast, at the state government level, an increase in the number of states under one-party control has led many to aggressively pursue different policy trajectories across a wide array of issues including abortion regulation, minimum wage, same-sex marriage, voter identification laws, collective bargaining for public employees, and Medicaid coverage (Park et al., 2014).

To the extent policy outcomes can benefit or harm political

winners or losers, one-party controlled states can have important consequences. For example, political losers may feel that access to essential health services for women or equal protection before the law for the LGBT population are under constant threat in Republican-dominated states. Similarly, political losers may feel that their religious liberty is under threat or that the rule of law is subject to every popular whim in Democratic-dominated states. After the November 2014 general elections, the legislature and governor's mansion are controlled by a single party in thirty of the fifty states. Reflecting the success the Republican Party has had recently at the state level, twenty-three of these thirty states are under Republican control while only seven states are under Democratic control.²

In addition to the clear implications for policy outcomes, what effect (if any) might a lack of competition between parties at the state level have on the vitality of democratic citizenship? Whereas previous studies have tended to focus almost exclusively on competition between candidates in individual elections, we instead focus on party competition for control of state government. Recent

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¹ More ideologically distant and internally homogeneous parties are two common explanations for the ongoing gridlock and lack of policy productivity (Binder, 1999; Jones, 2001; but see Mayhew, 1991).

² States under Republican control include AL, AZ, AR, FL, GA, ID, IN, KS, LA, MI, MS, NV, NC, ND, OH, OK, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, WI, and WY. States under Democratic control include CA, CT, DE, HI, OR, RI, and VT.

research suggests that rigorous party competition can promote more active citizens by encouraging higher levels of voter turnout and other forms of political participation (Flavin and Shufeldt, 2015). In this paper, we investigate the link between the intensity of party competition in a state and citizens' political attitudes. Specifically, we examine the link between party competition and citizens' perceptions about whether government is responsive to their political opinions (i.e. their level of political efficacy). We begin by reviewing the existing literature on political competition, explaining our rationale for focusing on party competition for control of state government (as opposed to competition between candidates in individual elections), and discussing the logic underlying our expectations that more intense competition between the two major parties will lead to higher levels of political efficacy. As discussed in detail below, we do so because intense competition between Democrats and Republicans for control of state government is more widely visible to citizens than either the competitiveness of the race for their own particular state legislator or the average level of competitiveness for legislative elections in their state.

Using data on citizens' political efficacy from the American National Election Studies and the Ranney (1965, 1976) measure of party competition for control of state government, we examine the relationship between state party competition and citizens' political efficacy from 1952 to 2008. Our statistical analysis reveals that citizens report feeling that government is more responsive to them when there is greater competition between the two parties for control of government in their state. Moreover, we find that the link between competition and efficacy is confined only to political winners – those who identify with the party that controls government in their state. By contrast, losers – those who self-identify as members of the party out of power – do not report an increase in efficacy when party competition is more intense. We also find that the relationship between competition and efficacy is strongest among citizens with lower levels of education and lower levels of income. Together, these results suggest that vigorous competition for control of state government can have important implications for citizens' political attitudes.

1. State party competition and citizens' perceptions of government responsiveness

The idea that candidates and parties compete for control of government is a cornerstone of democracy theory (Key, 1949, 1956; Schumpeter, 1950; Dahl, 1956, 1971), and competition is theorized to contribute to a host of characteristics long associated with the ideal democratic citizen. For example, competitive elections are consistently linked to higher levels of political knowledge (Coleman and Manna, 2000; Putnam, 2007; Lipsitz, 2011; Bowler and Donovan, 2012; Lyons et al., 2012) and voters living in more competitive jurisdictions also seem to show more interest in following public affairs (Oliver, 2001; Gimpel et al., 2003; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Oliver and Ha, 2007; Jones, 2013). Of particular note, these positive effects of political competition often have enduring effects that extend long after elections are over (Evans et al., 2014).

Citizens living in a place with more competition also are more likely to believe that their participation in the political process “matters” (Downs, 1957). As a consequence, citizens are more likely to turn out to vote if they live in a jurisdiction with more competitive elections (Kim et al., 1975; Patterson and Caldiera, 1983; Cox and Munger, 1989; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Campbell, 2006; Pacheco, 2008). Not only are citizens more likely to vote, but citizens living in competitive areas are more likely to volunteer for political campaigns and get involved in their community more

generally (Kenny, 1992; Kahn and Kenney, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Campbell, 2006; Lipsitz, 2011).

Recent studies also suggest that more competitive elections may boost feelings of political efficacy and trust in government (Coleman and Manna, 2000; Barreto and Streb, 2007). To date, however, most of the empirical studies on the impact of competition on democratic citizenship have focused on competition at the national level. Moreover, most studies have focused almost exclusively on electoral competition – how closely contested individual elections are between two or more candidates for elected office. In contrast, in this paper we focus on the degree of competition between the two parties for control of state government, a related but empirically distinct concept (Shufeldt and Flavin, 2012).

We focus on party competition and not electoral competition because it is likely that the average citizen is more aware of the general partisan balance of state government offices than about the competitiveness of the election for their own particular state legislator or the average competitiveness of elections statewide. Most citizens possess low levels of knowledge about state politics (Jennings and Zeigler, 1970; Delli Carpini et al., 1994; Farnsworth, 1999; Hogan, 2008). For example, one public opinion survey found that just one out of four registered voters was able to name their state representative (Songer, 1984). More recent research echoes these findings that most citizens know little about their state legislature and that individual races receive little media coverage to ensure electoral accountability (Rogers, 2016a; 2016b).

Intense competition between the parties for control of government is more likely to generate media coverage than individual state legislative races or how competitive state legislative races are on average. When Democrats and Republicans compete for control of government, they provide an *opportunity* for citizens to gain greater knowledge about state government (Delli Carpini et al., 1994; Barabas et al., 2014). It is no surprise, then, that previous research has found that political knowledge about state government in general is higher when ideologically divided parties compete for control (Lyons et al., 2012). In light of these facts, we are interested if perceptions of government responsiveness vary systematically based on whether an individual resides in a state where control of government is routinely contested between the two parties as compared to living in a state where one party dominates state government for extended periods of time.³

To date, a handful of studies have examined the relationship between party competition and political efficacy (Kagay, 1972; Hanson, 1980; Iyengar, 1980), but none in the last thirty-five years. For example, Kagay (1972) found that members of both parties experience higher levels of efficacy when residing in competitive states, but that only partisans of the majority party felt efficacious in non-competitive states. However, Iyengar (1980) found that political winners living in one-party dominated states are no more likely to report feeling efficacious than political losers. To complicate matters further, Hanson (1980) identified a convoluted and possibly endogenous relationship between political culture, interparty competition, political efficacy, and voter turnout.

³ As detailed in the next section, we conceptualize and measure political competition in this paper as the degree of competition between the two parties for control of state government (Ranney, 1965, 1976). An alternative conceptualization of competition is Holbrook and Van Dunk's (1993) measure of the average competitiveness of individual state legislative elections that accounts for the average margin of victory along with the presence of uncontested and “safe” seats. When we use a moving four year average of the Holbrook and Van Dunk electoral competition measure instead of the Ranney party competition measure in the model specification presented below, we find no statistical relationship between the average level of competitiveness of legislative elections in a respondent's state and levels of political efficacy (the full results of this analysis are reported in Table A-1 of the Appendix).

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