Electoral Competition and the Voter

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Abstract:

This note examines how electoral competition, in the form of district-level campaign expenditures, affects voters' opinions about elections. We direct our attention at how voters perceive competition, and at how electoral competition affects how people perceive elections. Although people generally over estimate the competitiveness of US House races, we demonstrate that perceptions of competition are connected to actual levels of campaign activity. We also find that electoral competition may have contradictory democratic effects. District-level spending is associated with greater attention to news about the local campaign, but also with greater dissatisfaction with election choices.
Introduction

Studies examining electoral competition generally focus on how competition affects the behavior of representatives (e.g. Key, 1949; McDonald and Samples 2006), or how it affects voter turnout (e.g. Cox and Munger 1989; Blais 2000; Endersby el al 2002). A smaller body research examines the effects competitive elections might have on voter attitudes (Brunell 2008; Brunell and Buchler 2009). We are interested here in whether voters are aware of electoral competition, and whether campaign activity associated with competition affects voters' perceptions and attitudes about elections.

We demonstrate that congressional campaign activity corresponds with perceptions that the election in a person's district is close. We also find that when voters are exposed to greater campaign activity they appear more attentive to campaign news. However, competitive elections may not have uniformly positive democratic effects. Exposure to competition also corresponds with greater dissatisfaction with election choices.

How do voters perceive electoral competition?

Are voters' aware of how close elections might be, and does campaign activity affect other perceptions about elections? The strategic voting literature assumes that voters are not only aware of how close things are, but that these perceptions are accurate and acted upon (e.g. Downs 1957; but see Green and Shapiro 1994). A large body of work also documents that turnout in elections (Blais 2000) and instances of strategic voting (Cox 1997; Karp et al 2002) both correlate with how close an election is. Blais' (2000) extensive review of the voter turnout literature found that electoral competition is
associated with increased turnout (see also Franklin 2004), but this effect could be caused by the mobilization efforts of elites, rather than mass behavior being affected by actual awareness of how close an election is (Cox and Munger 1989).

There are reasons to expect that voters might not be particularly aware of district-level electoral competition, and reasons to expect that it may have limited effects on attitudes and behavior. Campaigns compete for attention in an environment where people generally pay little attention to politics (Converse 1962), and people have limited factual information about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997). Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974) provide a model of the decision to vote as a choice being made under uncertainty about how close an election might be. Voters must sort between information about the national contest and the reality of their local race when evaluating electoral competition in their own district. Perceptions of electoral competition may also be inaccurate, as people are biased toward over-estimating how close elections are (Uhlaner and Grofman 1986).

It is an open question, then, how voters are affected by electoral competition. We might expect they simply assume elections are competitive. Thus, regardless of campaign spending prior to the vote, perceptions of the closeness of a race could be independent of how much money is spent on the contest. Conversely, even if perceptions of closeness tend to be inaccurate, they may be responsive to variation in campaign activity.

District-level competition may not only affect how people view the closeness of an election, but it may also affect interest in the election and attitudes about the election. Studies have demonstrated that spending corresponds with greater exposure to campaign
ads (Kenny and McBurnett 1997), and campaign spending has been demonstrated to
decrease the likelihood that people would see something positive about incumbents
(Coleman and Manna 2000). Exposure to campaign ads has been found to make
citizens more interested in an election and more familiar with candidates (Freedman et
al 2004). Chong and Druckman (2007) also demonstrate that democratic competition
stimulates deliberation and generates greater attention to issues.

But do these patterns mean that campaign activity leads voters to feel more
positive about the election? Most campaign expenditures in US House races are
dedicated to advertising, and research demonstrates that most congressional candidates
running ads in 2006 (the election examined here) went negative (Druckman et
al 2009:14). Higher spending may increase the chances that voters are exposed to
information – positive and negative. Although some literature reviews (Lau et al 1999;
Coleman and Manna 2000) show that negative ads do not have pervasively detrimental
effects others show that negative campaigns may correspond with lower political
efficacy, less trust in government, a more negative public mood (Lau et al 2007),
demobilization, and increased cynicism (e.g. Ansolabehere et al 1994). Research also
demonstrates that people generally dislike politics and want to avoid it (Hibbing and
Theiss-Morse 2002). Active campaigns may thus have adverse effects on attitudes about
the election since they are a visible manifestation of the sort of politics that many people
distain.

We propose that people experience electoral competition through campaign
activity, and that this activity is best measured by campaign spending. For example, a
low spending contest may be close but without active advertising campaigns, such a
race may have a limited effect on voter awareness and perceptions. People experience electoral competition directly in the form of radio and television ads, direct mailing, billboards, signs, phone calls and other campaign activity. Campaign spending serves as a measure of the level campaign activity in a specific geographic area, and it has been shown to be associated with candidate vote share (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Pattie et al 1995), changes in vote intentions in US House races (Jacobson 1990); variation in voter turnout in gubernatorial (Patterson and Caldiera 1983) and US House races (Gilliam 1985) and other elections (Matsusaka and Palda 1999). Active campaigns have thus been shown to affect voter behavior. Here we test how they affect perceptions of elections.

In short, competition in the form of campaign expenditures could affect whether voters think their House contest is close, and affect their interest in the race. We suggest that campaigns may focus greater critical attention on candidates and lead people to pay attention to the contest. If people generally dislike politics, visible political campaigns may sour their attitudes about the election. We test if greater exposure to political campaigns reduces satisfaction with elections.

**Modelling perceptions of competition and elections**

We test our argument by modelling responses to October 2006 Pew survey questions. This survey has an advantage over others because it included an item asking about perceptions of competition in a respondent's district. It also included an over-
sample of respondents in competitive US House districts\(^1\) and thus includes a rare, robust sample of respondents exposed to competitive House races. Weights are used in our analysis to account for this over-sample. Table 1 displays results from a question asking respondents whether they thought their US House race was competitive or not. This illustrates that although people clearly over estimated how close these races were there is a 12 percent increase in perceptions that contests are close when respondents from competitive districts are compared to those from non competitive districts.

We estimated a model that tests if a respondent perceived their local race to be close, and if this perception was roughly accurate. These perceptions are modelled as a function of district-level campaign spending, district-level measures of whether the race featured a Democratic or Republican incumbent (with open seats being the reference category),\(^2\) individual-level attitudes about the political process, the respondent’s partisanship, strength of partisanship, and standard demographic controls (age, 

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\(^1\) Details of question wording and sampling are in Appendix C. These districts were identified with information from Congressional Quarterly, the Cook Political Report, the Rothenberg Report, the New York Times, and Larry Sabato's Crystal Ball. Analysis presented in this paper is weighted to account for the oversample and to balance demographics. Michael McDonald of the Brookings Institution and John Samples of the Cato Institute provided consultation on the study design.

\(^2\) Alternate specifications of perceptions of closeness controlled for whether a seat was uncontested by one of the major parties, and if there were contested primaries. The coefficients for these controls were not significant.
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education, race, ethnicity, and gender). These results are reported in Appendix A. We also estimated similar models to test how district-level competition corresponds with whether people pay attention to news about the campaign and to test whether respondents were satisfied with the choices presented by the election (see Appendix B).

We expect that cynicism about politics will affect how people reason about elections in general. Each model includes a measure of generalized dislike for politics. Respondents were asked their views of the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as Congress, and allowed to rate these institutions on a 5 point scale from “very favorable” to “very unfavorable.” Our measure of political cynicism is a count of a respondent's total number of “very unfavorable” responses. People who are generally cynical about politics may also be skeptical about whether elections are close, and be less satisfied with the choices they have in elections. Partisans, particularly strong partisans, and people with more education, might be more attentive to campaigns. As such, these variables are included as controls to better isolate the potential effects of campaign activity.

We suggest that campaign spending is the most direct measure of how voters experience the effects of electoral competition, as spending reflects the intensity of campaign advertising, voter contacting, and voter mobilization efforts.\(^3\) We use total spending in a district as a measure of electoral competition since the majority of campaign spending goes to advertising that many voters are likely to be exposed to. We assume that total expenditures is the most direct representation of how (or if)

\(^3\) The mean level of district spending was $2,899,000 (sd = 2,435,150 with a range from $181,051 to $11,092,914).
respondents are exposed to electoral competition. We are interested in here in the effects of the total volume of campaign activity on perceptions, rather than distinguishing between the effects of challenger versus incumbent spending. Spending was heavily one-sided in small set of districts, however these tended to be lower spending contests. Voters in these districts thus received relatively limited exposure to campaigns. Not surprisingly, districts with the most total spending tended to be closer contests. District vote margin in the 2006 House race is well correlated with spending (r = .62).\(^4\) However, unless voters are particularly attentive to district-level pre-election opinion polls or to previous results, it is not clear how they can be directly affected by vote margin in the immediate election since votes have not yet been counted.

We use probit and ordered probit with standard errors clustered by congressional district to estimate our models. Perceptions of the existence of a competitive election are coded dichotomously, with those who responded that their election "would be a close contest" coded as 1, and other respondents coded as 0. Accurate perception are coded as 1 if a respondent said the contest would be close, and the actual margin was less than 10%, and 1 if the respondent said it would not be close and the margin was greater than

\(^4\) When vote margin and spending are included in the models at the same time, the coefficients for spending remain significant and in the same directions in each estimation, and none of the coefficients for vote margin are significantly different than zero.
10%.\(^5\) This measure is coded 0 otherwise. Attention to the local campaign is coded 1 if the respondent reported following "news about candidates and election campaigns in your state and district" very closely, and 0 if otherwise. Satisfaction with choices in the campaign is coded 1 if a respondent said she was satisfied with choices in the election, and 0 if otherwise. Question wording and sampling details are reported in Appendix C. Additional estimates using a sample limited to respondents in competitive districts and using alternate coding of dependent variables produced results similar to what we report below. These estimates are included in the on-line appendix for this paper.

**Results**

How then, do voters perceive electoral competition? As noted, many voters over-estimated how close elections actually were. With key attitudes and demographics accounted for, we find that electoral competition as represented by campaign spending had a strong association with perceptions of elections. Figure 1 displays the probability (simulated from estimates reported in Appendix A) that a respondent reported thinking her district had a close contest (the lighter bar), and the probability that this perception was roughly accurate (the darker bar). People in districts with very high spending ($10,000,000 total) are predicted to have had a .28 greater probability of saying their election was close\(^6\) when compared to people in districts with

\(^5\) The 10% standard was used to define competitive ("marginal") districts by Mayhew (1974).

\(^6\) All predicted probabilities reported are for an independent, moderate, non-Hispanic white woman of median age and education.
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some of the lowest spending ($200,000). The probability that someone in the highest spending districts had an accurate perception of a race being close was .27 greater than someone in a district with low spending. Results in Appendix A also demonstrate that higher education was associated with being less likely to say elections were close and with accurate perceptions of closeness. Somewhat surprisingly, African Americans were more likely than whites to think their contest was close in 2006. As expected, people who were cynical about politics were significantly more likely to think their election would not be close, as were people in districts with no incumbent.

Figure 1 about here

Models in Appendix B estimating attention to the campaign and whether a respondent was satisfied with choices in the election are similar to those used in Appendix A. Additional variables are included in the estimate of satisfaction to control for attention to campaign news and for the party of the incumbent.

Figure 2 about here

Figure 2 reports the relationships between competition (district spending), attention to the campaign, and satisfaction with the election. The figure compares the simulated probabilities of responses expected from people residing in districts with low spending ($200,000) to those residing in districts with high spending ($10,000,000). Respondents exposed to greater campaign spending were more likely to say they were dissatisfied with choices presented in the election. Compared to people in low spending districts, those in districts with the most spending had a .12 lower probability of saying they were satisfied with choices in the election. There are also significant differences in attention to the campaign associated with campaigns. People from higher spending
districts were more likely to say they were following news about the candidates and campaigns. In lower spending districts a respondent is estimated to have a .21 probability of saying she followed news about the campaign. A similar respondent in a high spending district is estimated to have a .30 probability of saying this. The control variables indicate that political cynics were more likely to report following local campaign news, and that strong partisans (rather than partisans per se), men, and older respondents were more attentive. As expected, respondents with more years of formal education were more attentive to campaign news. Political cynics, African Americans, women, and people with less education were less satisfied with choices offered by elections. Partisans,\(^7\) and those who followed campaign news, were more satisfied.

It is important to note that when we estimate perceptions using vote margin to measure competition, results (not shown here) are a bit different. Margin is associated with accurate perceptions of how close a race is, and with following campaign news. It is not associated with the general impulse to view any election as close, nor with lower satisfaction with elections - yet spending is. We expect this may reflect that spending captures exposure to campaign activity that the vote margin measure does not fully capture.

\(^7\) We also specified the models with a term to account for Democrats residing in districts with Democratic incumbents, and a term for Republicans in districts with Republican incumbents. The coefficients for these were not significant and did not alter the results reported here.
**Discussion**

This research has some mixed news for those who study the role that electoral competition plays -- or should play -- in congressional elections. Despite a beneficial effect that competitive districts may have on voters (more accurate perceptions about whether a race is close, and increased attention to campaign news), voters appear less satisfied with elections where campaigns are most active. This finding is consistent with literature showing that people dislike being exposed to politics. Our results may be then seen by some as a glass half full, and by others as a glass half empty. We assume that if efforts to increase the number of competitive districts are successful (e.g. by changing districting practices, adopting term limits, etc), that this might increase the proportion of the electorate exposed to high-spending campaigns. This could increases in voter attention to campaign news. When this is considered, greater electoral competition appears as a normative gain. But intensive campaign spending might also stimulate dissatisfaction with the candidates voters must select from.

The results of this study have implications for how we view the relationship between campaigns and voters. We find that variation in electoral competition in the form of spending affects voters' perceptions that a race is close, as well as other attitudes and behavior. Although the Pew data are not suited for testing how campaign activity might affect voter turnout or strategic voting, results reported here are consistent with the idea that voters are aware of competitive campaigns and that they respond to them. District-level campaign activity, as measured by campaign spending, appears to have a substantial effect on whether people think the contest in their district will be close. Commonly reported links between close elections, voter turnout, and strategic voting
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might then reflect direct voter awareness of, and responsiveness to, the intensity of campaign activity and the fact that the contest is actually close.
### Appendix A: Probit estimates of perceptions of electoral competition (standard errors in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Respondent thinks election is close</th>
<th>Thinks close, and margin lt 10%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campaign expenditure in R's district</td>
<td>5.0e-8* (2.2e-08)</td>
<td>8.0e-08** (2.4e-08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican incumbent</td>
<td>-.29* (.13)</td>
<td>.09 (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic incumbent</td>
<td>-.36* (.14)</td>
<td>.15 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent cynical about politics</td>
<td>-.10 (.06)</td>
<td>.08 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic party ID</td>
<td>.07 (.12)</td>
<td>-.03 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican party ID</td>
<td>.06 (.12)</td>
<td>.02 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong partisan</td>
<td>-.14 (.11)</td>
<td>.09 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.08** (.03)</td>
<td>.10** (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.002 (.002)</td>
<td>.001 (.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-.05 (.09)</td>
<td>.10 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>.19 (.17)</td>
<td>-.16 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>.41* (.17)</td>
<td>-.29 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.73* (.29)</td>
<td>-.99** (.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>1496</td>
<td>1496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald Chi2 Model</td>
<td>38.0**</td>
<td>32.6**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Probit estimates with sample weights. Robust standard errors clustered by congressional district in parentheses. ** p < .01; * p < .05 (two-tail).*
Appendix B: Probit estimates of attention to campaign news and perceptions of choices (standard errors in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District-level expenditure</td>
<td>4.2e-08**</td>
<td>(1.5e-08)</td>
<td>-3.2e-08*</td>
<td>(1.6e-08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican incumbent</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic incumbent</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent cynical about politics</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>(.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent follows campaign news</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic party ID</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican party ID</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong party ID</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>(.09)</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>(.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.10**</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.02**</td>
<td>(.002)</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>(.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>(.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>(.18)</td>
<td>-.39*</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant 1</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>(.23)</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>(.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant 2</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant 3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>(.24)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>1485</td>
<td></td>
<td>1485</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald Chi2 Model</td>
<td>128.3**</td>
<td></td>
<td>67.4**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Probit and ordered probit estimates with sample weights. Robust standard errors clustered by congressional district in parentheses. \( ** = p < .01; * = p < .05 \) (two-tail).
Appendix C. Data collection.

The data were collected via telephone interviews by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Center for the People and the Press between October 17 and October 22, 2006. The sample was drawn using list assisted random digit dialing, and included an over-sample from 40 competitive congressional districts. Using AAPOR standards the contact rate was 77 percent, the cooperation 37 percent, and the completion rate was 91 percent. The resulting response rate was 26%. A total of 732 interviews were from competitive districts, and 1274 were from other districts. Questions we examine were asked of registered voters.

Question wording and coding.

Election close?: What's your impression -- in the race for the U.S. House in your district, is one candidate heavily favored to win or do you think this will be a close contest? Response categories included: One candidate heavily favored (n=329), will be a close contest (n=933), don't know/refused (volunteered, n=290). This is coded 1 if the respondent reported one candidate was heavily favored, 0 if the race will be close or don't know.

Follow local campaign news: How closely have you followed news about candidates and election campaigns in your state and district? Have you followed it very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely? Response categories included: Very closely fairly closely (n=468), fairly closely (n=708) not too closely (n=240), not at all
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closely (125), don't know/refused (volunteered, n=11). This is coded so not at all = 0, not too closely = 1, fairly closely = 2, and very closely = 3. 'Don't know' is omitted.

*Satisfied with election choices?:* Generally, are you satisfied with the choices you have in the elections this year in your state, or do you wish there were other choices?

Response categories included: Satisfied (799), wish other choices (666), depends on race (Volunteered, n=12), and don't know/refused (volunteered, n=75). This is coded so satisfied = 1 and other responses = 0.
Bibliography


Chicago, IL.


Source: Pew survey 2006. Estimated with probit model reported in Appendix A, where 1 = think election close, 0 = other. Predicted probabilities produced with Clarify. Estimated with sample weights and robust standard errors clustered by congressional district.

Note: Standard errors of the estimated probability are represented by error bars. Predicted probabilities represent a non-Latina, white, female, independent respondent of median age and median education; with mean or median responses on attitudinal questions. Standard errors shown as bars. Mean district spending is $2.9 million.
Source: Pew survey 2006. Estimated with ordered probit and probit models reported in Appendix B. Estimated with sample weights and robust standard errors clustered by congressional district. Probabilities generated by Clarify.

Note: Standard errors of the estimated probability are represented by error bars. Predicted probabilities represent a non-Latina, white, female, independent respondent of mean age, mean education, mean attention to the campaign and mean level of cynicism about politics. Low spending is a district with $200,000 in expenditures. High spending is $10,000,000.
Table 1: Perceptions of electoral competition in US House race.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>R lives in non competitive district</th>
<th>R lives in a competitive district</th>
<th>All respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One candidate is favored</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will be a close contest</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/refused</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1017</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>1552</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: October 2006 Pew Survey.

Note: Respondents were asked, What's your impression -- in the race in the race for the U.S. House in your district, is one candidate heavily favored to win or do you think this will be a close contest.

Seats are classified as competitive if the margin was greater than 10%.

Chi-square = 24.1 (p < .000).
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