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Author(s): Mark A. Smith

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The Contingent Effects of Ballot Initiatives and Candidate Races on Turnout

Mark A. Smith University of Washington

This study analyzes the potential of campaigns for ballot measures and elected offices to draw to the polls citizens who otherwise would not vote. The salience of initiatives and popular referenda in each U.S. state is measured for general elections from 1972 to 1996. Using a pooled time-series cross-sectional data set, a model of state-level turnout is estimated. Distinguishing between midterm and presidential years, the analysis tests for the effects of campaigns across those two kinds of contexts. Contrary to previous studies finding no effects at all for ballot initiatives, the results indicate that these measures—like gubernatorial and senatorial campaigns—provide a boost to turnout during midterm years but not presidential years. High-salience initiatives and popular referenda are estimated to increase turnout by about four points during midterm elections, as compared to effects for closely contested gubernatorial and senatorial campaigns of four points and three points, respectively.

The long-standing debate over the desirability of letting voters decide upon initiatives and popular referenda has intensified in recent years. Supporters claim that ballot measures strengthen democracy and create a more engaged citizenry, ultimately boosting election-day turnout (Schmidt 1989; Zimmerman 1986). A variety of activists, political consultants, journalists, and elected officials make similar assertions (Barabak 1998; National Journal's Congress Daily 1998). Yet it is likely that initiatives and referenda vary in their ability to increase voter participation. Some propositions are marked by extensive media coverage, vigorous campaigns, and high awareness among voters, while others rank low on each of these dimensions.

The rational choice approach to turnout provides a theoretical framework for expecting the former kinds of measures to exert a stronger effect on turnout than the latter ones. Riker and Ordeshook (1968), extending the work of Downs (1957), propose that an individual's decision to vote depends positively upon the benefits—the probability of affecting the outcome times the utility gained if the preferred candidate wins—and negatively upon the costs. As for the benefits, it is the most salient initiatives and referenda for which citizens will perceive the greatest differences from voting one way over the other. After all, when an individual knows and cares little about a ballot proposition, his or her perceived utility won't change much regardless of the outcome. Thus, the initiatives and referenda with the highest public salience should show the strongest relationship with turnout because of their impacts upon the benefits of voting.

Examining the cost side of the ledger also leads to the expectation that the most salient ballot measures produce the largest increase in turnout. The costs of voting, which include gathering information, fall as voters can acquire it without exerting much effort. Highly salient measures—those attracting voluminous media attention and lively campaigns—have lower costs than low-visibility measures for which citizens must seek out facts and arguments. By holding down the costs, the presence of salient

Mark A. Smith is Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Washington, Box 353530, Seattle, WA 98195 (masmith@u.washington.edu).

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propositions should increase the probability that an individual votes.

This line of reasoning about the benefits and costs of voting leads to *Hypothesis 1: Turnout bears a positive relationship with the salience of the initiatives and referenda on the ballot.*

We can further refine the expected relationship between ballot propositions and turnout by considering the electoral context, namely the candidate races decided at the same time. Boyd (1989), Patterson and Caldeira (1983), and Rosenstone and Hanson (1993) find evidence that different variables drive turnout in presidential elections as opposed to midterms. Jackson's (1997) data indicate that during presidential years other races have only minimal, if any, effects on turnout; during midterm years, however, high-profile gubernatorial and senatorial races noticeably increase rates of voting participation. As a general principle, adding contests to the ballot should increase the benefits of voting. From a rational choice perspective, though, when a presidential race already provides a large incentive to vote, diminishing returns likely mitigate the ability for other contests to further increase the benefits of voting. That is, the larger the benefits already gained from voting, the weaker the stimulus to turnout created by other contests simultaneously appearing on the ballot. This leads to *Hypothesis 2: the effects of ballot measures on turnout are lower during presidential elections than during midterm elections.*

Research Design and Measurement

The evidence compiled to date has strongly challenged the claim that ballot measures show any systematic relationship with turnout. Using a dummy variable to classify states, Everson (1981) found that those allowing initiatives did not obtain higher turnout. Gilliam's (1985) subsequent study, which reported that the presence of a tax or spending referendum had no effect on turnout, also used a dummy variable to capture the concept of interest. These studies, particularly Everson's, have often been cited as confirming a null relationship between initiatives and turnout. His findings, though, might have been affected by a statistical artifact, as a dummy variable indicating whether or not a state permits initiatives cannot capture their salience to voters both across states and also within states over time. Moreover, the existing research does not take into account the electoral context.

This study advances our knowledge by measuring the salience of ballot measures and by distinguishing their effects on turnout between different electoral contexts. The analysis incorporates all statewide propositions during general elections from 1972 to 1996 that reached the ballot through citizen petitions, including both initiatives and popular referenda. I calculated the volume of coverage in the news media to determine the salience of each ballot proposition, thus following a frequently used approach to measuring issue salience (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Epstein and Segal 2000). The concept I seek to measure is the amount of awareness and concern people had about the propositions when they decided whether or not to vote. That awareness and concern arises in part through news coverage, of course, but it also results from informal discussions among citizens as well as from campaigns by the pro and con sides to reach voters through advertising and other means. Measuring the volume of coverage in newspapers taps the former channel directly and the latter ones indirectly, for the media can be expected to provide extra attention to a ballot proposition when citizens are interested in it and when supporters and opponents conduct intense campaigns. The profit motive should lead news organizations to extensively cover important and controversial initiatives while reporting less on those perceived by citizens to be of minor relevance to their lives.

For each state and election having initiatives or popular referenda on the ballot, I collected and coded—for the day following the general election—all paragraphs on the front page of the state's largest newspaper and all other newspapers with a circulation at least half that amount. Reflecting the size, diversity, and importance of California, within that state I included all newspapers with a circulation at least one-fifth the largest one. The measure of salience is calculated as the number of paragraphs discussing the results of initiatives and popular referenda divided by the total number of paragraphs on the front page, where each newspaper's contribution is weighted by its circulation. With a theoretical range from 0 to 1, the indicator taps the prominence of the propositions relative to all other election and nonelection news reported that day. States that do not allow initiatives or popular referenda automatically score 0 for each election.

In terms of average salience across the general elections from 1972 to 1996, Oregon easily ranks first, followed by Colorado and California. Among states that allow both initiatives and popular referenda, the bottom three states on the measure are Nevada, Oklahoma, and Illinois. The former three states are widely recognized by scholars and journalists to be national leaders in the initiative process, while the latter three are known to use initiatives infrequently and on less controversial issues. This correspondence between expectations and observed

values provides face validity for the indicator. In addition, most states show gains in salience over time. This is exactly what we would expect from knowing that during the period under study, initiatives have grown in sheer numbers as well as in prominence and importance (Tolbert, Lowestein, and Donovan 1998).

Still, despite the intuitive appeal of the measurement strategy and the face validity of the resulting indicator, journalistic norms could introduce nonrandom measurement error. One threat to measurement validity would occur if, on the day following the election, media outlets overlook the criterion of how much interest and attention an initiative created among the public—the concept this study seeks to measure—in favor of reporting on initiatives whose outcome couldn't be easily predicted in advance due to a narrow margin of victory. A second threat to the indicator's validity would occur if the volume of coverage reporters devote to initiatives on the day following elections decreases when attention must be given to the outcomes of presidential, gubernatorial, or senatorial contests. Both possibilities can be tested by estimating a model with the salience of initiatives and popular referenda as the dependent variable. A negative coefficient on the margin of victory, defined as the absolute value of the difference in vote percentage between the pro and con sides, would indicate that the volume of coverage rises with close contests and falls with landslides. Negative coefficients on dummies for presidential, gubernatorial, and senatorial races would indicate that their presence lessens the amount of coverage given to ballot measures.

Because the dependent variable clusters near the 0 end of the 0–1 range, an OLS regression yields biased coefficients and standard errors. Grouped logit, used when the dependent variable is bounded and can be treated as percentages, is the best model for this kind of data (Greene 2000, 834–837). The first column of Table 1 presents the MLEs of a grouped logit model of issue salience using all 648 initiatives and popular referenda decided during general elections from 1972 to 1996. We can see from Table 1 that the coefficient on vote margins is not statistically significant. Hence we cannot reject the null hypothesis that a ballot measure's volume of coverage is unrelated to the margin of victory. In addition, the results do not indicate that gubernatorial or senatorial races crowd out coverage of ballot measures.

The coefficient for presidential elections, however, is negative and statistically significant. Initiatives and popular referenda decided at the same time as a presidential race receive slightly less coverage on the day following the election. Now that this source of nonrandom measurement error has been identified, though, it can be alleviated by transforming (increasing) each observation during presidential years by the expected loss of coverage attributable to a presidential race. The revised scores are given by

$$y_i + \left[\frac{\exp(-3.03)}{1+\exp(-3.03)}\right] - \left[\frac{\exp(-3.03-0.22)}{1+\exp(-3.03-0.22)}\right]$$

where y_i are the original scores, –3.03 is the constant, and –0.22 is the coefficient on the presidential race. These transformed values will be used in the analysis to follow.[1]

Table 1 Probing the Validity of the Measure of Ballot Propositions' Salience

Variable	MLE[a]
Constant	–3.035***
	(0.089)
Margin of Victory	0.001
	(0.002)
Presidential Election	–0.222***
	(0.070)
Gubernatorial Election	–0.060
	(0.070)
Senatorial Election	–0.083
	(0.062)
N	648
Pseudo R^2	0.001
Log likelihood	–4976.4

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ (one tailed)

[a]Table entries are grouped logit coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

A Model of State Turnout

Turnout is calculated in the usual manner as the number of ballots cast for the office attracting the most votes divided by voting age population.[2] The unit of analysis is the state-year, leading to a total of 650 observations (50 states × 13 years). The salience of initiatives and popular

[1] Not surprisingly given the large negative constant, the substantive effect of the presidential race is trivial. Hence as a practical matter it makes little difference whether the original or the corrected values are used in the subsequent analysis. When using the corrected values instead of the original ones, the coefficient on the salience of initiatives changes by only about 1 percent (going from 12.52 to 12.39) while its standard error changes by even less (going from 3.18 to 3.19).

[2] Turnout has a mean of 48.20 and a standard deviation of 10.73.

referenda must follow the same unit of analysis; therefore each observation's value is calculated by summing the salience of the measures on the ballot for that state and year. Determining whether the relationships change across presidential and midterm elections can be easily conducted by including the interaction between the salience of ballot measures and the presence of a presidential race. The coefficient for the salience of ballot measures, the central variable under study here, provides an estimate of the effect during midterm years, the base category. Under Hypothesis 2, the interaction term should show a negative coefficient, indicating that the relationship declines in presidential years as compared to midterm years.

To interpret the results, I will compare the effects attributable to initiatives to those stemming from candidate races. It would be useful to know, for example, whether the increases in turnout sparked by ballot measures are larger than, smaller than, or equal to those created by gubernatorial and senatorial elections. As is true for initiatives, though, one should recognize that not all candidate elections are equivalent; some of these contests undoubtedly create a greater increase in turnout than do others. In particular, scholars have often argued that close races not only attract the most intense efforts by candidates and political organizations to mobilize voters but also provide the greatest likelihood that one vote could affect the outcome (Cox and Munger 1989; Patterson and Caldeira 1983). Accordingly, the analysis incorporates not only whether other contests appear on the ballot but also their closeness, defined—following Cox and Munger (1989)—as the number of votes separating the top two candidates. If the coefficients are negative on interactions between closeness and dummy variables for each kind of race, that would indicate that the effects decline as the vote differences increase.

Turnout is a well-studied topic in political science, and so in specifying the model I build upon previous research such as Cox and Munger (1989), Jackson (1997), Patterson and Caldeira (1983), Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), and Teixeira (1992). A full list of the variables included and their coding procedures is provided in the Appendix.

The Relationship between Ballot Measures and Turnout

To account for differences between states not captured by the independent variables, I include separate intercepts for each state through the least squares with dummy variables (LSDV) specification. A pooled LM test revealed substantial heteroskedasticity, which has been addressed by calculating panel corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995). The lagged dependent variable from four years earlier is included on the right-hand side to account for the dynamics. Including the lagged dependent variable eliminates the threat of autocorrelated residuals, as indicated by a pooled LM test for autocorrelation.[3]

The results of the estimations are shown in Table 2. Looking first at the bottom of the table, the variables for demographics and registration laws yield mixed results. The coefficients for race, income, and the closing date of registration are not statistically significant.[4] At the same time, the coefficients on education, age, unemployment, and purging of registration rolls reach statistical significance at the .10 level or better. Turning next to the variables for electoral context in the top part of the table, almost all of the relevant coefficients reach statistical significance at the .001 level, including those for the salience of initiatives, the presence of presidential, gubernatorial, and senatorial races, and most of the interactions. The contests being decided, the closeness of them, and whether it is a presidential or midterm year each make a large difference in determining how many people participate.

The most important results for assessing the hypotheses motivating the article involve the coefficients for the salience of ballot measures as well as the comparisons with candidate races. The coefficient of 12.39 for the salience of initiatives and popular referenda gives the effect during midterm elections, and it is statistically significant at the .001 level. This is an important finding, for it contradicts previous research that failed to uncover any relationship between initiatives and turnout.[5]

[3] The LM test statistic for heteroskedasticity, distributed as $\chi^2(50)$ under the null hypothesis of homoskedasticity, is 308.5. The LM test statistic for first- or second-order autocorrelation, distributed as $\chi^2(2)$ under the null hypothesis of no autocorrelation, is .34.

[4] One should not read too much into the findings for the closing date of registration. Because this variable has almost no within-state variation, it shows high multicollinearity with the state intercepts—the multiple R between them is .96—that inflates its standard error. A pooled time-series cross-sectional model is not the most fruitful way to analyze a variable that is nearly constant over time within each unit; if the questions being asked centered upon such a variable, a purely cross-sectional analysis like that of Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) would be the best way to proceed (Smith 1995).

[5] This result does not hinge upon the outlier states. If the three states with the highest average salience are excluded from the model, the relevant coefficient actually increases slightly. Running the analysis across three slices of the thirteen elections (using 1/3, 1/2, and 2/3 as the cutting points) did not find statistically significant differences in the coefficient across the periods.

TABLE 2 The Determinants of State Turnout, 1972–1996

Variables	LSDV estimates
Lagged Turnout	0.35***
	(0.08)
Electoral Variables	
Salience of Ballot Measures	12.39***
	(3.19)
Salience of Ballot Measures x Presidential Race	–13.94***
	(3.42)
Presidential Race	13.75***
	(1.71)
Presidential Race x Presidential Closeness	–0.62
	(1.06)
Gubernatorial Race	3.72***
	(0.77)
Gubernatorial Race x Presidential Race	–3.69**
	(1.33)
Gubernatorial Race x Gubernatorial Closeness	–3.65***
	(0.82)
Gubernatorial Race x Gubernatorial Closeness x Presidential Race	2.27
	(1.82)
Senate Race	2.80***
	(0.58)
Senate Race x Presidential Race	–3.01 ***
	(0.75)
Senate Race x Senate Closeness	–2.37**
	(0.94)
Senate Race x Senate Closeness x Presidential Race	2.68**
	(1.17)
Demographics, Socioeconomic Variables, and Registration Laws	
Income	–0.28
	(0.37)
Education	0.13*
	(0.08)
Age	0.73*
	(0.41)
Race	0.42
	(0.26)
Unemployment	0.71 ***
	(0.19)
Closing Date	–0.01
	(0.06)
Purging Years	–0.64***
	(0.13)
N x T	650
Adjusted R^2	0.88

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ (one-tailed)

Note: Intercepts for each state are estimated but are not listed here. Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients.

Panel corrected standard errors are in parentheses.

During midterm elections, the relationship emerges quite clearly—demonstrating the value of estimating a well-specified model that does not assume that all propositions count equally. In fact, if the same specification developed here is estimated using a dummy variable for the presence of an initiative or popular referendum in place of the variable for their salience, no statistically significant relationship can be detected.

As Hypothesis 2 predicts, however, the estimated effect decreases during presidential years, as shown by the coefficient of –13.94 on the interaction between the salience of ballot measures and the presidential dummy. Critical differences thus separate midterm and presidential years: the positive effect of ballot measures revealed in the former context shrinks to a level statistically indistinguishable from zero in the latter context.[6] Similar findings apply to gubernatorial and senatorial elections. In each case, a positive effect that is statistically significant during midterm years falls to a level not statistically different from zero during presidential years.[7]

Table 3 provides a summary of the results that illuminates the substantive magnitude of the coefficients. The first column gives the turnout increase associated with each kind of contest during presidential years. Presidential races themselves and the campaigns that accompany them, the estimates suggest, increase turnout by 13.75 points independently of other variables. When a presidential race is on the ballot, however, the other contests have no demonstrable relationship with turnout. The second column of Table 3 reveals the forces at work during midterm elections. Here these other contests show a clear relationship with voter participation. The consequences of ballot measures, as Hypothesis 1 predicts, depend upon their salience. Consider first measures of high salience, defined as those attracting a .30 or greater proportion of the front-page paragraphs. Salience of this strength, reached a total of thirty times in thirteen different states, leads all else being equal to a turnout rise of 3.72 points. At the average salience of .12 for the states and years having initiatives or popular referenda on the ballot,[8] the increase in turnout is more modest at 1.49 points.

We can better interpret the magnitude of these effects by comparing them with those generated by guber-

[6]The estimated effect during midterm years is given by the quantity 12.39 – 13.94. A test statistic for the hypothesis that the true quantity equals 0 can be calculated using the estimated coefficients and the variance-covariance matrix (Greene 2000, 272–274). The resulting test statistic, distributed as $t_{(580)}$ under the null hypothesis, is –.30.

[7]The test statistics during, calculated as described above, are .06 and –.92 for gubernatorial and senatorial elections, respectively.

[8]Among those states and years, the minimum value is 0, the maximum is .67, the average is .12, and the standard deviation is .11.

TABLE 3 The Effects on Turnout of Ballot Measures and Presidential, Gubernatorial, and Senatorial Races

Kind of Campaign	Turnout Increase, Presidential Years	Turnout Increase, Midterm Years
Presidential	13.75	
Ballot Initiatives (high salience)	NS	3.72
Ballot Initiatives (average salience)	NS	1.49
Gubernatorial (high closeness)	NS	3.70
Gubernatorial (average closeness)	NS	2.99
Senatorial (high closeness)	NS	2.79
Senatorial (average closeness)	NS	2.16

Note: Cell entries are the increase in turnout attributable to each kind of campaign. NS indicates that the estimated effect cannot be statistically distinguished from 0.

natorial and senatorial elections. One basis of comparison is highly close races, defined here as those for which the top two candidates' vote totals were separated by 6000 votes or fewer. For that level of closeness, achieved fifteen times for gubernatorial elections and seventeen times for senatorial elections, the boost to turnout—all else being equal—is 3.70 and 2.79 points, respectively. The former effect is about the same size as the one attributable to high-salience initiatives while the latter effect is somewhat smaller. For races of average closeness, the effects during midterm elections are 2.99 and 2.16 points, which are larger than those seen for ballot propositions of average salience.

Hence the effects of a high-salience ballot measure are larger than those of a close Senate race and roughly equal to those of a close gubernatorial race. Yet the decrease in effect sizes for ballot measures, when moving from high-salience to average-salience ones, is greater than the decrease for candidate races that move from high closeness to average closeness. Highly salient initiatives and popular referenda lead to large increases in turnout during midterm elections, but those of average salience create much smaller increases. In order for a ballot measure to make a substantial impact on turnout, then, it needs to be prominent and widely discussed.

This evidence should bring onto a stronger empirical footing one aspect of the debate over the consequences of allowing initiatives and popular referenda onto the ballot. Previous research has found them to be unrelated to turnout, but with improvements in research design the findings herein lead to different conclusions. Careful consideration of both the salience to voters and the electoral context reveals the conditions under which initiatives and popular referenda do and do not stimulate additional voter participation.

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Appendix

The right-hand side variables included in the model are constructed as follows:

Salience of ballot initiatives: the proportion of paragraphs devoted to initiatives and popular referenda on the front page of leading newspapers on the day following the general election.

Presidential race: dummy variable coded 1 if there was a presidential race on the ballot and 0 otherwise.

Presidential closeness: the number of votes (in 100,000s) separating the top two candidates in each state.

Gubernatorial race: dummy variable coded 1 if the state had a gubernatorial race on the ballot and 0 otherwise.

Gubernatorial closeness: the number of votes (in 100,000s) separating the top two candidates.

Senate race: dummy variable coded 1 if the state had a Senate race on the ballot and 0 otherwise.

Senate closeness: the number of votes (in 100,000s) separating the top two candidates.

Education: the proportion of a state's residents aged 25 and over who have graduated from high school. Before 1989 the Census Bureau did not collect yearly state-level data, so those observations must be interpolated using figures from the census each decade.

Income: real state income per capita, calculated using the regional consumer price index.

Race: the proportion of the state's population that is black. Observations between 1970 and 1980 are interpolated.

Age: the proportion of the state's voting age population falling within the age groups having the highest voting rates, namely ages 45–64.

Unemployment: the statewide unemployment rate, averaged across each election year.

Purging years: the number of years between systematic purges of the registration rolls. States without purging, and all states after the National Voter Registration Act overrode state laws on this matter, are coded as having the highest number of years—ten—in the sample.

Closing date: the number of days before the general election that registration closes. States without registration are coded as 0.

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