

Buying the Grassroots: Voters and Money in Local Politics

Brian E. Adams

Professor of Political Science, San Diego State University

Visiting Scholar, Center for California Studies, Sacramento State University

badams@sdsu.edu



The benefits of smallness

- Greater capacity for retail politics, reducing influence of campaign spending
- Lower campaign finance barrier, allowing for more candidates to run competitive campaigns

Data overview

- Data acquired from the California Election Data Archive, Secretary of State's office, and individual cities
- 61 California cities
- City council and mayoral races
- Years: 2008-2015
- Approximately 400 races and 1,700 candidates

Research questions

- Is money necessary to run competitive campaigns in small cities?
- Does campaign spending matter less in small cities?
- Do elections become more or less competitive as city size decreases?
- How do voters make decisions in city elections?

Expenditures per registered voter

Major candidates in competitive elections

	Average expenditures per registered voter	% of candidates between 0 and \$2,000 expenditures	% of winners between 0 and \$2,000 expenditures*
<i>At-large elections</i>			
Less than 25,000 RV	\$.94	9.2	9.8
25,000 to 50,000 RV	\$.81	0.5	0.0
50,000 to 100,000 RV	\$.79	2.2	0.0
Over 100,000 RV	\$.74	3.3	0.0
<i>District elections</i>			
Less than 25,000 RV	\$2.79	3.7	4.9
25,000 to 50,000 RV	\$2.98	0.0	0.0
50,000 to 100,000 RV	\$2.73	0.0	0.0
Over 100,000 RV	\$3.53	1.6	0.0

Example: Novato, CA

- Population (2010): 51,904
- Registered voters: 29,765
- Average expenditures, competitive candidates: \$23,070
- Of the 16 competitive candidates, only three spent less than \$10,000 (none of whom were elected)
- There were four candidates who tried to run with \$2,000 or less, but none were competitive

Campaign spending and electoral outcomes

Competitive races only

	% of winning candidates who were outspent	# of winning candidates*
At-large elections		
Less than 25,000 RV	51.0	51
25,000 to 50,000 RV	37.4	107
50,000 to 100,000 RV	38.2	68
Over 100,000 RV	59.3	27
District elections		
Less than 25,000 RV	26.8	41
25,000 to 50,000 RV	36.2	69
50,000 to 100,000 RV	26.9	26
Over 100,000 RV	27.6	29

Findings on competition

- Incumbents had a 86% re-election rate
- Incumbents re-election rates and fundraising advantage consistent across differently-sized cities, although lower in at-large elections
- The likelihood of a race being competitive was not correlated with city size

Rules for ballot designations

- Up to three words (elected positions can be longer)
- Can list multiple occupations
- Must describe current “profession, occupation, or vocation”
- Cannot use superlatives (e.g. “world-renowned researcher”)
- Previous occupations not allowed unless retired
- Cannot list hobbies or generic status words such as “taxpayer”

Candidates by occupation

Occupation	Number of candidates	Percent*
Businessperson	475	25.6
Incumbents	355	19.1
Elected officials (not incumbents)	158	8.5
Educator	140	7.5
Attorney	131	7.1
None of the above	774	41.7

** Percentages do not add up to 100% because some candidates are categorized in more than one occupation.*

Success of non-incumbents by occupation

Occupation	Percent won	Percent advanced to runoff	Percent lost
Elected official (not incumbents)	39.2	10.8	50.0
Businessperson	22.7	3.7	73.6
Attorney	22.3	3.3	74.4
Educator	19.7	6.3	74.0
All other occupations	13.8	8.3	83.3

OLS regression predicting vote share

	All cities	Cities with less than 100,000 RV
Businessperson	1.77 (.814)*	.564 (1.004)
Attorney	2.05 (1.38)	1.46 (1.866)
Educator	.999 (1.34)	.538 (1.76)
Holds elective office	20.189 (.839)***	14.703 (1.007)***
# of candidates	-2.65 (.085)***	-3.09 (.128)***
Gender	-.020 (.062)	.041 (.068)
Adjusted R-squared	.510	.519

Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses

* p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Conclusions

- Small city elections aren't much different from their state and national counterparts
- There doesn't seem to be any democratic benefit to smallness
- Potential explanations
 - Lack of voter attention forces candidates to run media-focused campaigns
 - Campaign spending driven by the supply of funds