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Justice System Journal

ISSN: 0098-261X (Print) 2327-7556 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ujsj20

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To cite this article: Amanda J. Heideman (2019): Is It All About the Money? How Campaigns Spur Participation in State Court Elections, Justice System Journal, DOI: 10.1080/0098261X.2019.1623138

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0098261X.2019.1623138

JUSTICE SYSTEM JOURNAL
https://doi.org/10.1080/0098261X.2019.1623138

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Is It All About the Money? How Campaigns Spur Participation in State Court Elections

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ABSTRACT

Competitive, vigorous campaigns have been shown to increase participation across a variety of elections, including those at the state and local level. Building on previous work that examines the impact of money in judicial elections, this study explores the impact of campaign effort on participation in state court elections. Using data from 260 state Supreme Court elections occurring from 1990 to 2004 across 18 states, I find that competitive campaigns—not just expensive ones—are important for encouraging participation in these contests. Additionally, the study uncovers differential effects of challenger and incumbent spending. Ultimately, the findings contribute to our understanding of campaign effects in judicial elections while also providing an additional test of the idea that campaigns matter, especially in low-information contests.

KEYWORDS

Judicial elections; state courts

Introduction

Ballot roll-off is an enduring reality in many low-information, low-visibility electoral contests, leading many scholars to ask why citizens who turn out to vote for more visible races choose not to participate in down-ballot contests (e.g., Baum 2003; Bonneau and Loepp 2014; Bullock and Dunn 1996; Hall and Bonneau 2008). After all, the cost of marking a ballot seems trivial when compared to the cost of turning out to vote in the first place. A significant portion of this research focuses on the correlates of participation in judicial elections, and provides a useful baseline for understanding which factors—especially institutional factors—are related to participation in these contests (Hall 2001, 2007). While a focus on institutional design makes sense given the diversity of institutional arrangements and debate surrounding judicial selection processes, the campaign context also warrants attention. With few exceptions, often absent from the literature is consideration of the role of campaigns and campaign effort in facilitating participation in judicial elections. Even as judicial elections evolve into increasingly expensive and competitive affairs, we still have an incomplete picture of how the campaign environment impacts the amount of roll-off in these contests.

To date, extant literature examining the impact of campaign activity in judicial elections has focused primarily on the impact of expensive races for judgeships, generally finding that more expensive races lead to decreased ballot roll-off. The underlying logic is relatively simple: The more money candidates spend, the more information they can provide to voters. The more information available to voters, the easier it is for them to participate. While the use of candidate spending data taps into the campaign context and information-generating properties of campaign spending, I contend that the use of total spending misses the mark when it comes to tapping into

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the competitiveness of the campaign environment. Considering the role of campaign effort on turnout in mayoral elections, Holbrook and Weinschenk (2014) argue that regardless of the overall level of spending during the election, contests in which both candidates spend the same amount of money are more competitive than contests in which one candidate vastly outspends the other. Further, the use of total spending assumes spending by all types of candidates exerts the same effect and does not capture any differential effects between challenger and incumbent spending.

Drawing on earlier work that examines the role of money in judicial elections, this study reconsiders the effects of competitive, expensive electoral campaigns on participation in judicial elections. I incorporate a new measure that better reflects aspects of competitiveness in the campaign environment and also allows for a more detailed look at the differential effects of spending by different types of candidates. Using data from 260 state supreme court elections occurring between 1990 and 2004 across 18 states, I find that increased competition results in significantly lower levels of ballot roll-off. The findings suggest that competitive campaigns—not just expensive ones—are important for encouraging participation in these contests. Further, spending on the part of challengers is more consequential than spending by incumbents when it comes to voter participation in these contests. The findings not only contribute to our understanding of campaign effects in judicial elections, but also provide an additional test of the idea that campaigns matter, especially in low-information contests.

Campaigns, Mobilization, and Participation

A great deal of research has argued that greater levels of campaign spending and, in some studies, close contests and competitiveness appear to influence an individual's likelihood of voting. A number of studies document a positive relationship between campaign spending and participation across a number of electoral contests, including presidential races (Holbrook and McClurg 2005) and congressional contests (Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko 1985; Cox and Munger 1989). Research has also found a positive correlation between total campaign expenditures or closeness of race and turnout in state and local elections (Austin et al. 1991; Bullock and Dunn 1996; Caldeira and Patterson 1982; Hajnal 2010; Hansen 1975; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014; Jacobson 1980; Patterson and Caldeira 1983; Verba and Nie 1972). The general conclusion of this work is relatively clear: a high-stimulus campaign environment increases participation.

One way in which campaigns influence participation is through direct mobilization activities such as voter identification efforts and "get-out-the-vote" activities. Gerber and Green (2000) show that many, but not all, forms of direct contact (e.g., personal canvassing vs. telephone contact) positively influence participation. Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995) and Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) show that individuals contacted by political elites are more likely to vote and participate in other forms of political activity than groups that are not exposed to mobilization efforts. Viewed as a whole, these findings support the notion that direct mobilization stimulates political involvement for an array of electoral activities.

In addition to directly influencing participation through direct mobilization efforts such as voter identification and get-out-the-vote activities, campaigns also have *indirect* effects on voter participation by reducing information costs. Campaigns are information-generating operations, and campaign spending is an effective way for candidates to publicize themselves and their views on relevant issues (Holbrook 2010). While campaign advertising may not sway voters to vote for or against a particular candidate or issue, campaign expenditures themselves may raise the general level of voter interest and awareness (Coleman and Manna 2000; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014; Jacobson 2004; Niven 2004). In turn, people may decide to go to the polls and cast a ballot. In other words, by making information less costly, campaigns can influence citizen participation. The same logic applies to ballot roll-off as well: by providing voters with information on which

they can make a decision, campaigns reduce the likelihood of abstaining from marking a ballot beyond top-of-the-ticket items.

Money, Campaigns, and Participation in Judicial Elections

It is well documented that campaign activities have a positive effect on participation among the electorate. The relationship is found across a number of different contexts, including elections for congressional office, governorships, and state legislatures (Cox and Munger 1989; Jackson 1997, 2002; Patterson and Caldeira 1983). Campaigns are perhaps even more effective in low-information contexts because coverage and information is generally scarce, and "simply seeing a candidate's name on a yard sign might be enough to encourage a person to vote" (Streb and Frederick 2011, 667). Studies of participation in local elections are one instance in which campaign spending has significant effects on turnout in low-information contexts (Holbrook 2010; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014).

Like local elections, judicial elections are also a useful context for identifying campaign effects because the preexisting level of information is likely quite low (Baum 2003). There are also unique concerns regarding the impact of expensive, competitive elections for judgeships that suggest there should be greater focus on the impact of campaigns in these contests.[1] In recent decades, judicial contests have begun to mirror other contests in terms of money spent and overall competitiveness (Hall and Bonneau 2008). In response, several scholars have begun to explore the impact of the changing nature of judicial elections. For example, in her analysis of various contextual determinants of ballot roll-off, Hall (2007) finds electoral competition is an important contextual element for enhancing voter activity. Using a historical measure of competitiveness based on previous election results, Hall (2007) finds that more historically competitive contexts tend to have lower levels of roll-off.

In addition to overall competitiveness, increased spending in state supreme court elections is also shown to have the effect of encouraging voter participation and reducing ballot roll-off (Hall and Bonneau 2008). While expensive campaigns in general appear to be informative and thus increase participation in judicial contests, television advertisements, more specifically, are a particularly useful campaign strategy. Judicial elections scholars find that television advertising is an effective strategy used by campaigns to reach a large number of potential voters (Hall 2014; Hall and Bonneau 2013; Iyengar 2002). Hall (2014) shows that attack advertisements in particular are important sources of voter information.

The efforts described above have worked to redirect attention to the effects of campaigns on voter participation and mobilization in judicial elections. However, extant studies often rely on somewhat coarse indicators of campaign effort and the campaign environment. For example, the use of historical measures of competition based on the average vote share of elected candidates tells us little about how the *current* campaign environment influences participation (e.g., Hall 2007). A more useful approach for exploring how campaigns influence participation is to use the total amount of spending in a race (e.g., Hall and Bonneau 2008). While this strategy certainly taps into the campaign context and the information-generating properties of campaign spending, the use of total spending misses the mark when it comes to tapping into the competitiveness of a race. Considering the role of campaign effort on turnout in mayoral elections, Holbrook and Weinschenk (2014) argue that regardless of the overall level of spending during the election, contests in which both candidates spend the same amount of money are more competitive than contests in which one candidate vastly outspends the other. The finding is relevant for understanding participation in judicial contests because competitive campaigns generate voter interest, increase

[1]Some scholars suggest money in judicial elections has a detrimental influence, citing concerns of bias among judges who have to raise money for elections (Geyh 2003).

the salience of elections, and provide information on which to vote—all of which reduce the cost of voting, making it more likely that they will cast a vote and less likely that they abstain (Basinger and Lavine 2005; Downs 1957; Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993; Johnson, Shaefer, and McKnight 1978; Kahn and Kenney 1997). As a result, the roll-off from higher participation in contests at the top of the ballot will be reduced.

In addition to the impact of competitive, not just expensive, campaigns, a second question left unaddressed by literature examining participation in judicial elections is whether different types of campaigns demonstrate differential influences on the participation of voters. The literature that examines the determinants of campaign spending in judicial elections generally finds that, much like elections to other offices, incumbents spend more than challengers, and quality challengers spend more than non-quality challengers (Bonneau 2005; Frederick and Streb 2011). However, little attention has been paid to the differential effects of spending by different types of candidates in these contests. Relying on measures of total spending in judicial contests assumes spending by all types of candidates has the same effect on participation. Research demonstrates, however, that challenger spending exerts a greater influence than spending by incumbents in House and Senate races (Jacobson 1978, 1980, 1989) as well as in local races (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). These differential effects are the result of an information asymmetry between the two candidates. Participation is more responsive to challenger spending because incumbents are better known, and additional spending is not likely to reduce information costs very much. Challenger spending, on the other hand, has a more dramatic effect because of a more severe informational disadvantage. It follows, then, that additional spending on the part of challengers will reduce ballot roll-off, while spending by incumbents will have no significant effect.

Data and Method

The data for this study cover all state supreme court elections in states with partisan and nonpartisan elections from 1990 to 2004.[2] In total, the sample includes 260 individual elections occurring in 18 states. The sample of cases is part of this study's strength as well as an important weakness that I directly acknowledge. It is particularly valuable because it contains a great deal of variation on important institutional, contextual, and campaign characteristics. A weakness, of course, is that it is limited to the 14-year period between 1990 and 2004, and any fundamental changes to judicial elections since then would render the findings time-bound. However, there is little evidence that any fundamental changes have occurred. In fact, recent work finds that many characteristics of judicial elections, including electoral competition, the costs of campaigns, and voter participation, have remained relatively stable into the current decade (Bonneau, Hall, and Streb 2011; Kritzer 2018).[3] Given the consistency of election characteristics over time, the data used in this study can be considered representative of the broader universe of state supreme court elections.

In order to analyze the effects of the campaign environment on participation in judicial elections, I employ a two-stage model that first takes into account the conditions under which elections are contested, and then the correlates of participation in these contests. This strategy is appropriate because contested elections constitute a censored sample: Without a choice of candidates, people may not see the need to vote for that particular office. The modeling strategy is theoretically appropriate and consistent with other analyses of ballot roll-off (Hall and Bonneau 2008; Streb and Frederick 2011; Streb, Frederick, and LaFrance 2009).

[2]See tables 1A and 2A in the appendix for descriptive statistics and a list of institutional arrangements in each state.

[3]Bonneau, Hall, and Streb (2011) find no statistically significant changes in electoral competition, voter participation, and the costs of campaigns in elections occurring from 1996 through 2008, while Kritzer (2018) finds similar stability from 2010 through 2016.

Table 1. Variable descriptions stage one.

Variable	Variable description
Contested	Dependent variable. 1 if a challenger entered the supreme court race, 0 otherwise.
Competitive Seat	1 if the incumbent supreme court justice won previously by a margin less than 60%, 0 otherwise.
Elected Incumbent	1 if the election involves an incumbent who has previously won election, 0 otherwise.
Appointed Incumbent	1 if the election involves an incumbent who was initially appointed and has never won election, 0 otherwise.
Salary	Supreme court base salary at the time of election adjusted by state per capita disposable income, in dollars.
Term	Length of the term of office for state supreme court, in years.
Unified Government	1 if the legislative and executive branches of state government are controlled by the same political party, 0 otherwise.
Partisan	1 if the election is partisan, 0 otherwise.
District	1 if the election represents a district rather than a state, 0 otherwise.
Post-White	1 if the election occurred after the *White* decision in 2002. 0 otherwise.
Lawyers	Number of lawyers in each state at the time of each election.

Stage one of the model replicates work by Hall and Bonneau (2008). A list of the variables in the first stage of the model is contained in Table 1. The dependent variable in stage one of the two-stage model of ballot roll-off is whether there are at least two candidates running for the seat in the general election (*Contested*). In short, incumbent vulnerability (*Competitive Seat, Elected Incumbent, Appointed Incumbent)*, attractiveness of state supreme court seats (*Salary, Term*), the candidate pool (*Lawyers*), and political and institutional contexts are expected to promote competition (*Unified Government, Partisan, District*). Since my objective in this study is to examine the impact of campaign effort on ballot roll-off and not contestation in state supreme court elections, an extensive discussion of the variables and results of stage one is not included in the article. However, the results are consistent with previous work on the subject (e.g., Hall and Bonneau 2008).

In stage two, the dependent variable—ballot roll-off—is measured as the percentage of voters who did not vote in the state supreme court race despite having already voted for the highest office on the ballot. Across the 18 states and 260 elections in the data, ballot roll-off ranges from −3.5 percent to 39.9 percent across individual contests. The minimum amount, −3.5 percent, occurred in Mississippi in the 2002 race. The negative result indicates that in this contest, fewer votes were cast for candidates running for the Senate seat than those running for the Mississippi State Supreme Court seat. The highest level of roll-off that is found in the data occurred in the 2004 Texas race. Overall, the high levels of variation in proportions of ballot roll-off found in the data suggest there are a number of factors that contribute to voter participation.[4]

Table 2 contains a list of the variables in stage two of the model. Stage two of the model examines the correlates of participation in state supreme court elections and contains the main variables of interest: the campaign spending variables. To recap, previous research on the subject examines the role of total spending in judicial races and finds increased spending (and a corresponding increase in the amount of information provided to voters) decreases ballot roll-off (Hall and Bonneau 2008). In order to more appropriately assess the impact of competitive, vigorous campaigns, I include a new measure, *spending difference*, because contests in which both candidates spend the same amount of money are more competitive than contests in which one candidate vastly outspends the other (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). The spending difference is measured as the difference in the proportion of each candidate's spending. For instance, in Contest A, if Candidate A spends $80,000 and Candidate B spends $20,000, the value of the *spending difference* variable would be 0.60. In Contest B, if Candidate A spends $60,000 and Candidate B spends $40,000, the value of the *spending difference* variable would be 0.20. The smaller difference in Contest B (0.20) indicates a more competitive environment than Contest A (0.60). Larger values of the spending difference variable represent more lopsided contests, which should demonstrate a negative influence on the likelihood of voting (thus increasing ballot roll-off).

[4]Average roll-off in each election year according to election type can be found in Table 3a in the appendix.

Table 2. Variable descriptions stage two.

Variable	Variable description
Ballot Roll-off	Dependent variable. Percentage of ballot roll-off in the election.
Total Spending	Natural log of the total amount of campaign spending in the election by all candidates in 1990 dollars.
Spending Difference	Difference between each candidate's proportion of total spending.
New SC Candidate	1 if the election is for an open seat or an incumbent initially appointed and facing first election, 0 otherwise.
Presidential Election	1 if the election occurs in a presidential election year, 0 otherwise.
Education Level	Percentage of the state population 25 years of age or older with a high school diploma.
Partisan	1 if the election is partisan, 0 otherwise.
District	1 if the election represents a district rather than a state, 0 otherwise.
Period 2	1 if the election was held from 1994 to 1996.
Period 3	1 if the election was held from 1998 to 2000.
Period 4	1 if the election was held from 2002 to 2004.

In addition to the competitiveness of the campaign environment, a number of additional contextual factors are also expected to influence ballot roll-off. The variable *New SC Candidate* distinguishes between elections that involve a sitting justice who has already organized a successful electoral campaign to the state supreme court and inexperienced candidates who are facing voters for the first time (either running in open seat contests or previously appointed). The latter type of contest is more expensive and competitive than contests in which an incumbent is seeking reelection, and thus should reduce ballot roll-off (Hall 2001; Hall and Bonneau 2006, 2008). In addition, state supreme court elections that occur during presidential campaigns are also expected to produce higher levels of ballot roll-off because large proportions of the electorate vote in highly visible presidential campaigns but have little information or interest in other races on the ballot (see discussion in Baum 2003). Finally, educational levels are also expected to influence ballot roll-off, as more educated people are expected to have greater capacity to receive and process information provided by candidates.

The formal means by which elections are organized, and the way in which choices are presented, affect citizens' propensity to vote (Brace and Hall 1995; Hall 2001, 2007). In short, there is a large body of literature that ties participation to institutional design. One important feature of various arrangements is the content of information available on the ballot, which can decrease the cost of voting. In contests that have limited visibility and salience, voters might enter the polls with a dearth of information, increasing the cost of casting a vote (Klein and Baum 2001). In the literature examining judicial elections, a general consensus exists that when comparing differences in voter participation (turnout and roll-off) in partisan and nonpartisan elections, participation in elections with partisan ballots is higher than in nonpartisan contexts (Adamany and Dubois 1976; Bonneau 2007; Bonneau and Cann 2011, 2015; Bonneau and Loepp 2014; Dubois 1979, 1984; Hall and Bonneau 2008). Party identification of candidates reduces the information cost of voting by providing a useful cue for voters. In nonpartisan elections, voters have little information and must rely on existing knowledge or other cues (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001).

In addition to the presence of party labels, the method of election—district or statewide—can also influence participation among the electorate. Elections taking place at the district level (as opposed to statewide) have been shown to decrease roll-off in judicial elections (Beechen 1974; Hall and Aspin 1987; Hall and Bonneau 2008). However, much like in stage one of the model, this relationship is expected to be conditional on the availability of party labels on the ballot. As Hall and Bonneau (2008) explain, without party labels in smaller constituencies, the minority party has a greater incentive to field candidates, and voters are more likely to be contacted by a campaign. Campaign contact and mobilization efforts increase the likelihood of participation (e.g., Gerber and Green 2000). In partisan districts, on the other hand, fewer challengers and less active campaigning should result in higher roll-off (Bonneau and Hall 2003; Hall and Bonneau 2008). In other words, institutional arrangements create incentives or disincentives to vote by reducing (or increasing) the cost of voting.

Table 3. Ballot roll-off in state supreme court elections, 1990–2004.

	Model 1 *b/SE*	Model 2 *b/SE*
Stage 1: Challengers in State Supreme Court Elections, 1990–2004 ***Dependent variable: Contested***		
Competitive Seat	0.543* (0.198)	0.587* (0.203)
Elected Incumbent	−0.901* (0.364)	−0.922* (0.372)
Appointed Incumbent	−0.348 (0.381)	−0.363 (0.387)
Salary	0.154 (0.227)	0.164 (0.237)
Term	0.001 (0.102)	0.026 (0.105)
Unified Government	−0.513 (0.298)	−0.506 (0.299)
Partisan	0.652 (0.412)	0.610 (0.427)
District	1.102* (0.513)	1.052* (0.521)
Partisan District	−2.717* (0.654)	−2.694* (0.661)
Post-*White*	0.106 (0.287)	0.105 (0.288)
Lawyers	0.000* (0.00)	0.000* (0.00)
Constant	−0.452 (1.227)	−0.643 (1.312)
Stage 2: Ballot Roll-off in State Supreme Court Elections, 1990–2004		
Total Spending	−1.762* (0.554)	−1.270* (0.522)
Spending Difference	–	5.900* (2.60)
New SC Candidate	−0.631 (1.056)	−0.518 (1.014)
Presidential Election	4.787* (0.767)	4.420* (0.820)
Education	−0.586 (0.30)	−0.651* (0.314)
Partisan	−15.077* (2.551)	−16.184* (2.667)
District	−13.038* (4.145)	−13.30* (4.391)
Partisan District	15.071* (3.702)	16.587* (4.277)
Period 2	2.402 (1.771)	2.394 (1.707)
Period 3	3.428 (2.126)	3.856* (1.921)
Period 4	0.735 (2.348)	1.511 (2.409)
Constant	90.376* (22.302)	86.602* (20.426)
Number Obs.	260	260
Censored	69	69
Uncensored	191	191
Log likelihood	−764.466	−759.009
Test of independent equations	21.81*	19.19*

Note: $^*p < 0.05$.

Finally, any temporal effects are controlled for using dummy variables that indicate when the election occurred.[5] Period 1 (omitted to avoid collinearity) covers elections that occur between 1990 and 1992. Period 2 covers 1994–1996, Period 3 is 1998–2000, and Period 4 is 2002–2004. Descriptive statistics for all variables used in this analysis are presented in the Appendix.

Results

Two versions of the two-stage model are presented in Table 3. For comparability, the results include a model using total spending absent any additional measure of competition (Model 1) as a replication of the model developed by Hall and Bonneau (2008). The first thing to note in the table is the result for the Wald test of independent equations. The test confirms that the error correlation (rho) is significant, meaning there are systematic differences between contested and uncontested elections. The result indicates that the two-stage procedure is appropriate.

Turning first to the results of stage one—challenger entry—the results mirror those of Hall and Bonneau (2006, 2008). Across all four models, incumbents who won their last election by narrow margins are more likely to face challengers than candidates seeking open seats. The tendency to draw challengers also differs between elected incumbents and appointed incumbents, with the former being less likely to face challengers. District-based elections are generally more

[5]I apply the same strategy as Hall and Bonneau (2008) and use periods instead of individual years because when estimated with single year variables, observations are dropped to avoid collinearity. However, the results are otherwise the same as those presented in Table 3 in the body of the paper. I include the results of an analysis using years instead of periods in the Appendix (Table 4A).

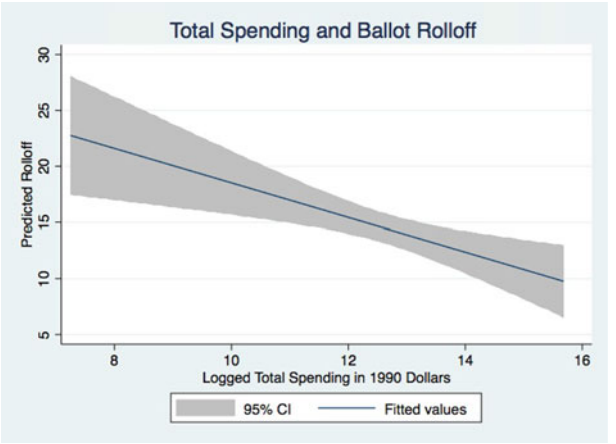

Figure 1. Total spending and ballot roll-off.

likely to host contested elections, but in partisan district-based contests, the opposite is true. Interestingly, partisan elections are no different than nonpartisan contests when it comes to producing contested elections. Finally, neither salary nor term length are correlated with an increased probability of facing a challenger.

Stage two of the analysis contains the results of primary interest to this project, and the results indicate that competition has a significant influence on ballot roll-off in state supreme court elections. As expected, ballot roll-off is generally lower in competitive environments than in noncompetitive environments. Turning first to the effects of campaign spending, the results are consistent with my expectations. In the column labeled "Model 1," which replicates work by Hall and Bonneau (2008), note the significant, negative effect of total spending on ballot roll-off. As the amount of total spending in a contest increases, so do the number of people who mark a ballot in these contests. While this measure surely reflects the amount of information available in the campaign environment, it does not capture the competitiveness of a race. After all, races in which candidates spend nearly the same amount of money are more competitive than those in which one candidate vastly outspends the other (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). To address this concern, I incorporate the difference between the candidates' proportion of total spending. When both total spending and spending difference are included in the model—as presented in the column labeled "Model 2"—each remains statistically significant in the expected direction.[6]

In order to illustrate the magnitude of these effects, it is useful to consider their substantive impact. Figure 1 presents the total spending slope from Model 2 with a range of total spending across contests. Overall, the difference in predicted roll-off between the lowest and highest spending contests is about 11 percentage points. Figure 2 presents the effect of the spending difference measure of competition. In less competitive contests in which only one candidate spends money, roll-off is approximately 7 percentage points higher than in more competitive contests in which both candidates spend about the same amount of money. Ultimately, the results of my analysis point to the importance of a competitive environment for stimulating participation and reducing roll-off in state supreme court elections. Competitive races, not just expensive ones, are important for participation in down-ballot races.

It should also be noted that the results in Table 3 indicate that in addition to a competitive campaign environment, other correlates of participation include election timing and institutional arrangements. According to expectations, ballot roll-off is higher in presidential election years. As

[6]I also test whether the presence of party labels significantly blunts the impact of spending, but find no significant interaction effects. The results of this additional analysis can be found in Table 5A of the appendix.

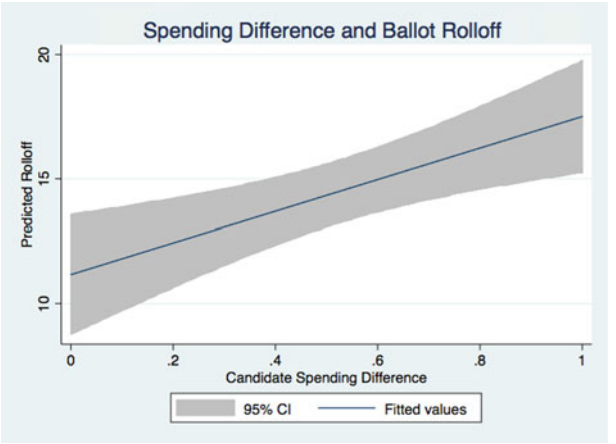

Figure 2. Spending difference and ballot roll-off.

Table 4. The differential effects of incumbent and challenger spending on ballot roll-off in state Supreme Court elections, 1990–2004.

	Model 1 *b*/SE	Model 2 *b*/SE
Total Spending	−1.690* (0.527)	–
Incumbent Spending	–	−0.006 (0.472)
Challenger Spending	–	−0.948* (0.380)
New SC Candidate	0.478 (1.109)	0.735 (1.357)
Presidential Election Year	4.366* (1.233)	3.587* (1.289)
Partisan	−11.295* (2.939)	−12.168* (3.565)
District	−11.329* (3.402)	−11.587* (4.342)
Education	−0.299 (0.343)	−0.391 (0.420)
Period 2	1.201 (2.113)	1.375 (1.891)
Period 3	2.872 (3.022)	2.142 (2.731)
Period 4	−0.957 (2.459)	1.238 (2.933)
Constant	63.598* (25.536)	59.836 (29.107)
Number of Obs.	127	127
R^2	0.363	0.430

Hall and Bonneau (2008) explain, "[p]residential elections encourage 'casual' voters to participate, and these people are not likely to vote for 'insignificant' races, such as state supreme court" (466). Consistent with expectations, elections using partisan ballots have significantly lower levels of ballot roll-off than elections using ballots without a party cue. District elections also have an effect on decreasing ballot roll-off when compared to statewide races. However, this relationship is conditional on the availability of party labels. Consistent with the expectation that fewer challengers and less active campaigning will lead to lower participation, district elections using partisan ballots appear to increase ballot-roll off. Finally, contrary to expectations, races in which candidates lack election experience—running for an open seat or initially appointed—are not an important factor motivating citizen participation in state supreme court races.[7]

[7]It is frequently observed that incumbency increases participation because it provides a useful cue for voters. From this perspective, it would seem that open seat contests are different from those involving any type of incumbent (elected or appointed) because open seat contests are more informationally expensive for voters. In order to clarify incumbency effects, I also test whether open-seat contests produce higher levels of roll-off than contests involving any type of incumbent, elected or appointed. While the sign on the coefficient is positive (the expected direction), the results indicate there is no statistically significant difference between open seat contests and contests with either type of incumbent. This may suggest that the effect of incumbency, whether elected or appointed, is in the ability to attract (or ward off) challengers in the first place. These additional analyses are not included in this article but are available upon request.

The second hypothesis presented in this article concerns the differential effects of candidate spending on ballot roll off in state supreme court elections. Turning to a subset of contests, those involving an incumbent candidate, I focus on the relative impact of incumbent versus challenger spending. To recap, hypothesis 2 was grounded in the idea of information asymmetry and predicts spending matters in incumbent contests, but challenger spending matters *more than incumbent spending*. The results presented in Table 4 confirm this intuition.[8] First, Model 1 tests the effect of overall spending on ballot roll-off in incumbent contests. The results indicate that spending also has a significant, negative effect on roll-off in this smaller subset of contests with an incumbent on the ballot. However, the use of total spending assumes both challenger and incumbent spending has the same effect on participation, when significant evidence exists and suggests otherwise (see Jacobson 1978, 1980, 1989). To address this issue, Model 2 tests for differential effects of incumbent and challenger spending.

The results of Model 2 indicate that challenger spending is what drives participation in state supreme court elections: As challenger spending increases, ballot roll-off decreases. While the coefficient for incumbent spending is negative in the expected direction, it does not exert a statistically significant effect on ballot roll-off. In order to demonstrate the significance of the results of Model 2, it is once again useful to consider the substantive impact of each type of spending. When comparing the overall difference between roll-off in contests where incumbents spend the most and the least amount of money, the result is quite small: less than 0.1 percentage points. In contrast, challenger spending has a much greater effect. In contests where challengers spend nothing, predicted roll-off is 24.4 percent. In cases where challenger spending is the greatest, roll-off drops approximately 14 percentage points (to 10.7 percent), despite the fact that incumbent spending is about twice that of challenger spending. Ultimately, campaign efforts on the part of challengers appear to be more consequential for ballot roll-off than efforts on the part of incumbents.

Summary of Findings

To reiterate, the primary interest of this analysis is in how the campaign environment influences levels of ballot roll-off in state supreme court elections. Specifically, how vigorous, competitive campaigns influence participation in down-ballot state supreme court races. Building on previous research that examines the role of campaign spending in judicial elections, the findings presented in this article provide some new insights into the role of campaign effort in these contexts. First, the results of my analysis show that beyond total spending levels, a competitive campaign environment matters to participation in down-ballot state supreme court races. The effect of the candidate spending gap is notable, even when included in the model alongside total spending. Ultimately, the results of my analysis point to the importance of a competitive campaign environment for stimulating participation and reducing roll-off in state supreme court elections. Competitive campaigns, not just expensive ones, are important for participation in down-ballot races.

Second, the results of my analysis of the role of campaign spending in incumbent contests suggest that researchers should take into account the differential effects of campaign spending in judicial elections. While the differential effects of incumbent and challenger spending are well documented in other contexts, the distinction between challenger and incumbent efforts and their effects on participation in judicial elections is something previously overlooked by the literature

[8]Initially, I applied the Heckman procedure to this part of the analysis as well. However, the results of the Heckman model indicate that the rho is no longer significant, which indicates that the two-stage procedure is unnecessary. Instead, I use OLS with robust standard errors clustered by state. The results of the Heckman model analysis are nearly identical and are available upon request.

examining ballot roll-off in judicial elections. This study takes into account the possibility that challenger and incumbent campaigns may demonstrate differential influences on ballot roll-off in state court elections. The findings indicate that spending on the part of challengers is more important than spending on behalf of incumbents when it comes to decreasing ballot roll-off in state supreme court elections.

A third contribution made by my analysis concerns the impact of institutional arrangements in facilitating participation in low-information contests. Even after taking into account the amount of spending and competition in campaigns for state supreme court seats, I find that ballot roll-off is approximately 13 points lower in partisan elections than in nonpartisan elections. This effect is substantial, and even larger than the effect of campaign effort and competition. The findings confirm the significance of the partisan cue as a readily accessible, low-cost source of information that encourages voters to continue to fill out the ballot beyond top-of-the-ticket races. Additionally, the finding that roll-off is lower in district elections also comports with some findings in previous studies of ballot roll-off and institutional design that suggest that because district-based elections have smaller constituencies, it is easier to contact voters, which increases the likelihood of voting (Hall and Bonneau 2008). However, this relationship appears to be conditional on the availability of party labels on the ballot: I find partisan district races have higher amounts of roll-off, which is likely due to fewer challengers and less active campaigning in these contests. Whatever the nature of these relationships might be, the results point to the power of institutions in encouraging or discouraging participation in state supreme court elections.

Conclusion

Ballot roll-off, like voter turnout, varies across elections and is the product of electoral contexts and institutional arrangements (Hall 2007; Hall and Bonneau 2008). Elements of institutional design and the nature of the political contest provide useful information to voters and decrease the cost of voting. Particularly important are the effects of expensive, competitive campaigns in facilitating citizen participation (Hall and Bonneau 2008; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014). Until now, though, research examining money in judicial elections has generally limited its focus to the effects of total campaign expenditures. In this article, I build on previous findings and more carefully examine the effects of campaign effort on participation in judicial elections.

The findings comport with much of the literature on state court races and races occurring in low-information contexts (e.g., mayoral elections), and they indicate that electoral campaigns play an important role in enhancing voter participation. In addition to the informational effects of candidate spending, the competitiveness of a race—measured as closeness of spending—is also an important feature that facilitates voter participation in state supreme court elections. The results point to the importance of campaign effort when it comes to encouraging voter participation. Of course, whether one wishes to increase campaign spending and competition given the nature of the office is controversial, but it seems clear that competitive, vigorous campaign environments can boost participation in less visible contests.

What my results do not do is remove the burden of low participation from institutional design. Instead, the findings confirm the power of institutional arrangements when it comes to encouraging or discouraging participation in judicial elections. Partisan elections significantly reduce ballot roll-off, confirming the significance of the partisan cue as a readily accessible, low-cost source of information that encourages voters to continue to fill out the ballot beyond top-of-the-ticket races. District-based (vs. statewide) elections also generate lower levels of roll-off, irrespective of campaign factors such as total spending or competitiveness.

This study has made strides in determining what factors contribute to greater participation in low-information judicial elections. However, more questions remain to be answered. For instance, future research should take into account the role of straight ticket voting, which is something not

addressed in this analysis. In order to understand roll-off in state supreme court elections, it is important to take into account whether voters have an easy way to vote a straight party ticket. It may very well be that the observed decrease in roll-off found in partisan elections actually reflects something other than the role of information, and instead reflects the use of straight-ticket voting option (STVO), "which allows voters to cast ballots for offices they never took even a moment to think about" (Kritzer 2016, 410). In addition, STVO might *increase* roll-off in nonpartisan judicial elections, which would lead to biased conclusions about the comparative advantage of partisan ballots (Kritzer 2016).

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Appendix: Additional tables

Table 1A. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Ballot Roll-off	206	14.166	8.993	−3.4	39.9
Spending Difference	206	0.514	0.326	0	0.999
Total Spending	210	12.567	1.326	7.254	15.672
New SC Candidate	275	0.531	.50	0	1
Presidential	275	0.596	0.491	0	1
Partisan	275	0.458	0.499	0	1
District	275	0.153	0.360	0	1
District Partisan	275	0.062	0.241	0	1
Education	275	80.366	6.314	64.6	92.3
Period 2	275	0.225	0.419	0	1
Period 3	275	0.273	0.446	0	1
Period 4	275	0.214	0.411	0	1
Competitive Election	275	0.233	0.423	0	1
Elected Incumbent	275	0.473	0.50	0	1
Appointed Incumbent	275	0.236	0.426	0	1
Salary	275	5.119	0.714	3.413	7.069
Term	275	6.953	1.370	6	12
Unified Government	275	0.422	0.495	0	1
Lawyers	275	22553.04	20204.63	1244	68321
Post-White	275	0.214	0.411	0	1

Table 2A. Institutional arrangements by state.

State	election type	District/Statewide
Alabama	Partisan	Statewide
Arkansas[1]	Partisan to Nonpartisan	Statewide
Georgia	Nonpartisan	Statewide
Illinois	Partisan	District
Kentucky	Nonpartisan	District
Louisiana	Partisan	District
Michigan	Nonpartisan	Statewide
Minnesota	Nonpartisan	Statewide
Mississippi[2]	Partisan to Nonpartisan	District
Montana	Nonpartisan	Statewide
Nevada	Nonpartisan	Statewide
New Mexico	Partisan	Statewide
North Carolina[3]	Partisan to Nonpartisan	Statewide
North Dakota	Nonpartisan	Statewide
Ohio	Nonpartisan	Statewide
Oregon	Nonpartisan	Statewide
Texas	Partisan	Statewide
Washington	Nonpartisan	Statewide
West Virginia	Partisan	Statewide

[1]Arkansas changed to nonpartisan elections in 2000.
[2]Mississippi changed to nonpartisan elections in 1994.
[3]North Carolina changed to nonpartisan elections in 2002.

Table 3A. Average roll-off by year and election type (partisan or nonpartisan).

Year	Type	Min.	Mean	Max.	*SD*	*N*
1990	Partisan	3.9	10.84	24.4	4.61	16
1990	Nonpartisan	5	20.62	31.7	9.85	6
1992	Partisan	6.8	12.71	33.7	6.45	16
1992	Nonpartisan	3.8	18.27	33.7	8.96	16
1994	Partisan	6.4	10.74	28	6.62	9
1994	Nonpartisan	2.7	18.88	35	10.31	6
1996	Partisan	4.2	9.54	28.6	6.33	13
1996	Nonpartisan	3.4	19.46	35.6	11.28	16
1998	Partisan	4.5	7.63	28.2	5.96	14
1998	Nonpartisan	12.4	19.28	25.4	4.34	9
2000	Partisan	3.7	14.77	33	11.25	16
2000	Nonpartisan	3.6	17.86	30.4	8.22	20
2002	Partisan	1.6	5.41	7.7	1.53	13
2002	Nonpartisan	−3.4	11.2	27.3	9.97	6
2004	Partisan	3.9	13.1	39.9	12.82	11
2004	Nonpartisan	6.8	17.07	25.2	6.17	19

Table 4A. Ballot roll-off in state Supreme Court elections.

	Model 1 *b/SE*	Model 2 *b/SE*
Stage 1: Challengers in State Supreme Court Elections, 1990–2004		
Dependent variable: Contested		
Competitive Seat	0.551* (0.197)	0.591* (0.203)
Elected Incumbent	−0.895* (0.367)	−0.913* (0.372)
Appointed Incumbent	−0.328 (0.385)	−0.343 (0.388)
Salary	0.148 (0.233)	0.156 (0.242)
Term	−0.004 (0.105)	−0.026 (0.108)
Unified Government	−0.518 (0.311)	−0.514 (0.310)
Partisan	0.648 (0.422)	0.612 (0.435)
District	1.077* (0.514)	1.038 (0.524)
Partisan District	−2.678* (0.665)	−2.665* (0.669)
Post-*White*	0.092 (0.294)	0.095 (0.295)
Lawyers	0.000* (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
Constant	−0.435 (1.261)	−0.603 (1.333)
Stage 2: Ballot Roll-off in State Supreme Court Elections, 1990–2004		
Total Spending	−1.815* (0.509)	−1.349* (0.469)
Spending Difference	–	5.586* (2.438)
New SC Candidate	−0.713 (1.098)	−0.601 (1.066)
Presidential Election	9.052* (2.577)	7.880* (2.075)
Education	−0.541 (0.331)	−0.611 (0.312)
Partisan	−14.448* (2.895)	−15.606* (2.965)
District	−12.579* (4.086)	−12.913* (4.441)
Partisan District	14.437* (4.087)	15.935* (4.539)
1990	3.126 (3.361)	1.654 (3.264)
1992	−2.725 (3.061)	−3.088 (3.009)
1994	6.237* (2.474)	4.964* (2.377)
1996	−0.907 (4.029)	−1.371 (4.062)
1998	5.339* (1.137)	4.230* (1.230)
2000	1.158 (2.102)	1.279 (1.919)
2002	omitted	omitted
2004	omitted	omitted
Constant	84.952* (27.652)	83.432* (25.803)
Number Obs. Censored Uncensored	260 69 191	260 69 191
Log likelihood	−761.772	−756.848
Test of independent equations	17.88*	15.49*

Note:
*$p < 0.05$.

Table 5A. Ballot roll-off in state Supreme Court elections.

	Model 1 *b/SE*	Model 2 *b/SE*
Stage 1: Challengers in State Supreme Court Elections, 1990–2004		
Dependent variable: Contested		
Competitive Seat	0.538* 0.197	0.594* 0.219
Elected Incumbent	−0.901* 0.364	−0.908* 0.373
Appointed Incumbent	−0.348 0.382	−0.344 0.388
Salary	0.160 0.229	0.124 0.232
Term	0.005 0.101	0.022 0.101
Unified Government	−0.508 0.300	−0.525 0.299
Partisan	0.641 0.417	0.644 0.432
District	1.092* 0.515	1.066* 0.526
Partisan District	−2.724* 0.646	−2.665* 0.659
Post-*White*	0.105 0.285	0.069 0.292
Lawyers	0.00* 0.00	0.00* 0.00
Constant	−0.518 1.226	−0.394 1.262
Stage 2: Ballot Roll-off in State Supreme Court Elections, 1990–2004		
Total Spending	−2.256 1.295	–
Spending Difference	–	5.461* 2.819
Total Spending*Partisan	0.702 1.469	–
Spending Difference*Partisan	–	4.683 3.632
New SC Candidate	−0.676 1.065	−0.457 1.124
Presidential Election	4.880* 0.735	3.968* 0.909
Education	−0.635* 0.279	−0.551 0.294
Partisan	−24.400 19.217	−17.856* 3.850
District	−13.519* 3.942	−12.356* 4.798
Partisan District	15.703* 3.423	15.257* 4.917
Period 2	2.517 1.843	1.385 1.839
Period 3	3.775 2.047	2.376 2.057
Period 4	1.244 2.462	0.389 2.735
Constant	100.615* 26.593	63.240* 23.898
Number Obs. Censored Uncensored	260 69 191	260 69 191
Log likelihood	−764.180	−762.426
Test of independent equations	19.29*	18.48*

Note:
*$p < 0.05$.