Partisan Differences and Candidate Mobilization Efforts in Midterm House Elections

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Abstract

Recent work by Jackson (1993) has extended the literature on voter mobilization by noting that the effects of candidate mobilization efforts are contingent upon individual characteristics such as income and education. In the following analysis, we extend this work by examining whether the effects of candidate mobilization efforts are contingent upon more politically relevant variables such as partisanship. We find that: (1) independents are more susceptible to candidate mobilization efforts than are partisans; (2) independents are influenced by the mobilization efforts of the incumbent rather than the challenger; and (3) less educated independents are most susceptible to candidate mobilization efforts.

Introduction

Recent work by Jackson (1993) has extended the literature on voter mobilization by demonstrating that the effects of candidate mobilization efforts are contingent upon individual characteristics such as income and education. While past research has demonstrated the importance of mobilization efforts on behalf of political parties and candidates (see, e.g., Conway 1981; Copeland 1983; Calderia and Patterson 1982; Patterson and Calderia 1983; Calderia et al. 1985; Gilliam 1985; Tucker 1986; Cox and Munger 1989; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), little effort has been given to the conditional nature of these strategic efforts. In other words, Jackson's research begins to ask the question, if political parties and candidates attempt to mobilize and recruit citizens into the political arena, what mobilization efforts are most successful and among what groups of constituents? Specifically, Jackson (1993) finds that mobilization efforts have their greatest impact on highly educated, low income citizens. As Jackson (1993, 1095) observes, the "lesson for future scholarship is for students of political mobilization to consider the conditional nature of influences on electoral participation."

Despite these advances in our understanding of the conditional nature of campaign spending as a mobilization agent, one question that scholars have not yet answered is whether or not the effects of candidate mobilization efforts are contingent upon politically important variables such as partisanship. Particularly intriguing in this respect is the possibility that candidate mobilization efforts may have their greatest impact in mobilizing like-minded partisans and independents. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1992), for example, have noted that mobilization efforts are strategic, meaning that they are directed at contacting likely supporters (see also Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). In addition, according to the theory of surge and decline, during midterm elections, there is a significant drop in the number of what Campbell (1966) terms "peripheral" voters. These "peripheral" voters are only loosely connected to political parties and,

consequently, may be more susceptible to swings in short term electoral forces. While subsequent research has suggested that voters in midterm elections are demographically similar to voters in presidential elections (Wolfinger et al. 1981), it may very well be that in midterm elections "peripheral" voters are responding to short term - though district level - electoral forces (i.e., electoral competitiveness and candidate mobilization efforts).

In the analysis that follows, we explore whether these "peripheral" voters are more sensitive to variations in the campaign environment during midterm House elections. More specifically, we examine whether the effects of political mobilization are contingent upon individual level partisanship. We expect that independents will be most influenced by candidate mobilization efforts, but will be particularly susceptible to the mobilization efforts of the challenger. While it is well established in the literature that independents are less likely to vote than partisans (see, e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Conway 1981; Maisal 1993) the question of whether or not independents are more likely to be mobilized by a high stimulus congressional election has yet to be addressed.

The lack of attention to the moderating effects of campaign spending and partisanship is surprising given that in most congressional districts, mobilizing (or failing to mobilize) the independent electorate could mean the difference between victory and defeat (Goldenberg and Traugott 1984). While mobilization efforts are vital to the campaign races of incumbents, effective mobilization strategies may be even more crucial for challengers. As Goldenberg and Traugott (1984) have noted, challengers and their campaign managers often view turnout as critical to their electoral success. In addition, this view among campaign managers is not without empirical support. Consistently, previous research has demonstrated that higher turnout is associated with more competitive congressional elections (Caldeira et al. 1985; Gilliam 1985; Cox and Munger 1989; Copeland 1983). In addition, the campaign finance literature has found that challenger expenditures are more closely associated with electoral competition than incumbent expenditures (Jacobson 1978, 1980, 1990; Green and Krasno 1988; Goidel and Gross 1994). Accordingly, we expect that (1) challengers have a greater incentive to contact the independent electorate that may be more likely to respond positively to mobilization efforts; and (2) that higher challenger spending should be associated with greater electoral competitiveness. In addition we expect that this increased electoral competitiveness will stimulate interest in and attentiveness to the electoral campaign.

Before examining whether the effects of political mobilization are contingent upon partisan identification, however, we begin by updating past research. Specifically, we test Jackson's (1993) logit model on the 1990 NES data.1 Doing so, demonstrates that Jackson's findings hold remarkably well across elections.2 We then present evidence showing that the effects of candidate mobilization efforts are contingent upon the respondent's partisan affiliation. As expected, we find that independents, rather than partisans, are much more likely to be drawn into a high stimulus election. Finally, we present models incorporating both the interactions used in past research and the interactions based on partisan similarity. In doing so, we demonstrate, first, that the interaction between expenditures and partisanship holds even when controlling for the interactions used in past research and, second, that candidate mobilization efforts have their most pronounced effect on less educated independents.

Replicating Jackson's Model

We begin by updating past research by using the 1990 NES study using the validated voter turnout measure. Doing so, serves two purposes. First, using a more recent electoral period demonstrates that past research findings are not confined to electoral dynamics unique to the elections of the 1980s. Second, it reemphasizes the point that mobilization plays an important role in individual level turnout decisions.3 In his 1993 article, Jackson specified and estimated the following model:

$$Pr(Y = 1) = \Phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6 + \beta_7 X_7 + \beta_8 X_8 + \beta_9 X_9$$
$$+ \beta_{10} X_{10} + \beta_{11} X_{11} + \beta_{12} X_{12} + \beta_{13} X_{13} + \beta_{14} X_{14} + \beta_{15} X_{15} + \beta_{16} X_{16} + \beta_{17} X_{17} + \epsilon)$$

where
$X1$ = incumbent expenditures
$X2$ = challenger expenditures
$X3$ = age
$X4$ = age squared
$X5$ = race
$X6$ = gender
$X7$ = income
$X8$ = education
$X9$ = senate race
$X10$ = governor's race
$X11$ = partisan strength
$X12$ = closing date
$X13$ = South
$X14$ = challenger expenditures X education
$X15$ = challenger expenditures X income
$X16$ = incumbent expenditures X education
$X17$ = incumbent expenditures X income

Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, logit is used to estimate the model.[4] The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Logistic Regression Replicating Jackson's Model on the 1990 House Elections

	M.L.E.	S.E.
Incumbent Expenditures	.15*	.07
Challenger Expenditures	-.23	.15
Age	.16*	.02
Age Squared	-.0012*	.0002
Race	.56*	.20
Gender	-.19	.15
Income	-.006	.02
Education	.57*	.13
Senate Race	.08	.15
Governor's Race	.20	.18
Partisan Strength	.41*	.07
Closing Date	-.018	.012
South	-.23	.20
Challenger Expenditures X Education	.19*	.06
Challenger Expenditures X Income	-.014	.009
Incumbent Expenditures X Education	-.06*	.03
Incumbent Expenditures X Income	.004	.005
Constant	-6.94*	.79
% Predicted Correctly	69.7%	
% Reduction of Error	9.6%	
N	1174	

* indicates significant at the .05 level (one-tailed test).

As can be seen in Table 1, past research findings hold up remarkably well in the 1990 NES Study. There are two notable exceptions. First, neither of the interactions for candidate expenditures and income were significant at the .05 level. Second, the interaction between incumbent expenditures and education was significant.5 Despite these differences, however, the findings presented in Table 1 reiterate the basic message of Jackson's research, mobilization matters - though its effects are contingent upon both the characteristic of the individual and on the source of the mobilization effort.

Differences Across Partisan Groupings

But to what extent are the effects of mobilization contingent upon more politically relevant attitudes such as partisanship? In Table 2, we present the results of Jackson's model according to the respondents' partisan similarity with the incumbent.6 For the moment, we have excluded Jackson's interaction terms so that we may focus solely on the interaction between mobilization efforts and individual partisanship. As mentioned previously, we expect that candidate mobilization efforts will have their greatest impact on independents.

Table 2: Logistic Regression of Voter Turnout in House Elections According to the Respondent's Partisanship

	Incumbent Partisans	Independent	Challenger Partisans
Incumbent Expenditures	-.01 (.04)	.12* (.05)	.08 (.07)
Challenger Expenditures	.14 (.09)	.05 (.09)	.04 (.11)
Age	.15* (.04)	.20* (.05)	.11* (.05)
Age Squared	-.0012* (.0003)	-.0016* (.0005)	-.0007 (.0005)
Race	.48* (.26)	.89* (.42)	.53 (.53)
Gender	-.38* (.21)	.09 (.28)	-.11 (.34)
Income	.02 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	-.004 (.03)
Education	.31* (.12)	.68* (.14)	.54* (.16)
Senate Race	.20 (.21)	.17 (.29)	-.36 (.33)
Governor's Race	.11 (.26)	.34 (.35)	.28 (.38)
Partisan Strength	.68* (.19)	.26 (.29)	.44 (.31)
Closing Date	-.014 (.016)	-.011 (.022)	-.029 (.028)
South	-.17 (.30)	-.21 (.37)	-.71 (.47)
Constant	-6.83* (1.16)	-8.94* (1.49)	-5.75* (1.72)
% Predicted Correctly	64.6%	75.6%	67.9%
% Reduction of Error	12.4%	5.6%	9.8%
N	531	397	246

* indicates significant at the .05 level (one-tailed). Standard Errors are in parentheses.

As can be seen in Table 2, our initial hypothesis was supported by the statistical analysis, though not quite in the manner we expected. As was expected, independents are the only group of voters that appear to be mobilized by the respective campaigns.[7] Surprisingly, however, it is incumbent rather than challenger expenditures that have the greatest impact on turnout among independents. While this finding may seem somewhat counterintuitive, we interpret the coefficient as indicating that, on average, in districts where incumbent expenditures were relatively high, turnout among independents was significantly greater than in districts where incumbent expenditures were relatively low. It should be noted that these are the same districts where one would expect that the incumbent is most vulnerable (Jacobson, 1978, 1980, 1985, 1990). Presumably, challengers that raise and spend relatively large sums of campaign financing also attempt to mobilize independent voters, but the reality is that most challengers fail to raise enough money to mobilize their own partisan adherents, let alone independents.

Table 3: Logistic Regression of Voter Turnout in House Elections Including Two-Way Interactions

	M.L.E.	S.E.
Incumbent Expenditures	.095	.07
Challenger Expenditures	-.13	.16
Age	.15*	.02
Age Squared	-.0012*	.0002
Race	.56*	.20
Gender	-.18	.15
Income	-.006	.02
Education	.57*	.13
Senate Race	.08	.15
Governor's Race	.21	.18
Closing Date	-.018	.012
South	-.31	.21
Independent	-.05	.36
Outparty	-.34	.31
Challenger Expenditures X Education	.19*	.06
Challenger Expenditures X Income	-.016*	.009
Incumbent Expenditures X Education	-.06*	.03
Incumbent Expenditures X Income	.004	.005
Challenger Expenditures X Independent	-.15	.13
Challenger Expenditures X Outparty	-.16	.14
Incumbent Expenditures X Independent	.12*	.06
Incumbent Expenditures X Outparty	.076	.078
Constant	-7.12*	.86
% Predicted Correctly	70.2%	
% Reduction of Error	10.1%	
N	1174	

* indicates significant at the .05 level (one-tailed test).

Interactive Models

While the evidence presented in the previous section of this analysis is sugges-
tive, a more convincing defense of our thesis requires that we demonstrate that the
interactions between candidate mobilization efforts and partisanship hold even when
controlling for interactions between candidate mobilization efforts and, respectively,
education and income. To consider this possibility, we reran the analysis including
two-way interactions between candidates' expenditures and education; candidate ex-
penditures and income; and candidate expenditures and partisanship. For the purposes
of this analysis, we removed the partisan strength variable and replaced it with two
separate dichotomous variables indicating whether the respondent was an independent
or a member of the challenger's political party. The results of this analysis are pre-
sented in Table 3.

As can be seen in Table 3, the interaction between incumbent expenditures
and independent status remains significant even when controlling for interactions be-
tween campaign spending and income or education. Therefore, we can reasonably
conclude that the interactive effect between incumbent expenditures and independent
status is not simply picking up the effects of education or income. It appears that inde-

Table 4: Logistic Regression of Voter Turnout in House Elections Including Three-Way Interactions

	M.L.E.	S.E.
Incumbent Expenditures	.12	.07
Challenger Expenditures	-.17	.15
Age	.15*	.02
Age Squared	-.0011*	.0002
Race	.47*	.20
Gender	-.15	.15
Income	-.005	.03
Education	.55*	.13
Senate Race	.07	.15
Governor's Race	.18	.18
Closing Date	-.018	.012
South	-.30	.20
Independent	-1.23*	.24
Outparty	-.41	.28
Challenger Expenditures X Education	.19*	.08
Challenger Expenditures X Income	-.012	.014
Incumbent Expenditures X Education	-.08*	.04
Incumbent Expenditures X Income	.006	.007
Challenger Expenditures X Education X Independent	-.011	.097
Challenger X Income X Independent	-.015	.021
Incumbent Expenditures X Education X Independent	.064*	.035
Incumbent Expenditures X Income X Independent	.0007	.007
Challenger Expenditures X Education X Outparty	-.04	.108
Challenger Expenditures X Income X Outparty	-.003	.022
Incumbent Expenditures X Education X Outparty	.049	.037
Incumbent Expenditures X Income X Outparty	-.005	.008
Constant	-5.56*	.77
% Predicted Correctly	70.4%	
% Reduction of Error	10.3%	
N	1174	

* indicates significant at the .05 level (one-tailed test).

pendents are more likely to be affected by candidate mobilization efforts than are partisans even in the face of some rather stringent controls.

This initial impression is reinforced when one considers the question of whether or not Jackson's interactions hold across partisans groupings. To answer this question, we ran an additional logit model, including the two-way interactions between expenditures and education; expenditures and income; and added three-way interactions between expenditures, education, and partisanship; and between expenditures, income, and partisanship. The two-way interactions included in the final model indicate the interactive effect of candidate expenditures and education (or income) for similar partisans. The three-way interactions then indicate whether this interactive effect is significantly different, first, for independents and, second, for challenger partisans.

As can be seen in Table 4, the results of this analysis are consistent with the results presented throughout this paper.8 Turnout decisions of independents are more sensitive to changes in the campaign environment than the turnout decisions of partisans. Interestingly, this appears to be particularly true for less educated independents. Since the model presented in this portion of the analysis is fairly complex a more detailed discussion of the findings is warranted.

The two-way interactions included in the analysis indicate the interactive effects of candidate expenditures and education; and candidate expenditures and income for incumbent partisans. As Table 4 indicates, the more the challenger spends and the more educated the incumbent partisan, the more likely it is that she or he will turnout to vote. Taken alone, this finding suggests that more educated, incumbent partisans are more sensitive to the nature of the challenge facing an incumbent representative. The more serious the challenge facing the incumbent, the more likely it is that incumbent partisans will turnout. Interestingly, this suggests that incumbent partisans "circle the wagons" in times of electoral peril.

Surprisingly, however, the results also indicate that the more the incumbent spends and the more educated the incumbent partisan, the less likely it is that she or he will turnout to vote. While this seems to undermine arguments that well educated, incumbent partisans are sensitive to the electoral challenge facing the incumbent, it may also suggest that incumbent spending, in absence of a serious challenge, actually depresses electoral turnout among more educated, like- minded partisans. This interpretation seems reasonable given that the interaction between challenger expenditures and education is considerably larger than the interaction between incumbent expenditures and education. Accordingly, candidate expenditures would depress turnout only when incumbent spending is considerably larger than challenger spending.

The three-way interactions included in the model indicate whether the two-way interactions are significantly different for independents and challenger partisans, respectively. Two points appear particularly noteworthy regarding the three-way interactions included in this model. First, none of the interactions including challenger partisans were significant. This indicates that the relationships between candidate expenditures and education are, statistically, no different for challenger partisans than for incumbent partisans. In this respect, well-educated, challenger partisans are no more likely to turnout given a well-funded campaign than well educated, incumbent partisans.

Table 5: Marginal Effect of Incumbent Expenditures on Incumbent Partisans and Independents Across Education Levels

	Incumbent Partisans	Independents
Less than High School	.03	.09
High School	-.05	.08
Some College	-.13	.06
College	-.21	.05

Note: cell entries are the marginal effect of incumbent expenditures on turnout across partisan groupings and level of education.

Second, only one of the three-way interactions including independents is statistically significant at the .05 level, the interaction between incumbent expenditures, education, and independent status. In general, this finding indicates that incumbent expenditures have a greater effect on turnout among well-educated independents than on turnout among educated incumbent partisans. To better illustrate the effect of incumbent expenditures on turnout decisions, we have computed the marginal impact of incumbent expenditures on turnout for incumbent partisans and for independents across education levels. These are displayed in Table 5.9

As can be seen in Table 5, the marginal effect of incumbent expenditures on turnout among independents is greater than the marginal effect of incumbent expenditures on turnout among partisans regardless of the education level considered. In addition, incumbent expenditures have their greatest effect, at least in terms of increasing turnout, on less educated respondents. Though this is true of all partisan classifications, the effect appears most pronounced on less educated independents. Because less educated respondents are less likely to be exposed to the campaign, only significant levels of candidate spending may entice them into entering the electoral process. In the average congressional election, only the incumbent is capable of spending enough to mobilize these potential voters. Challengers, on the other hand, are poorly situated in terms of their ability to mobilize this potential base of support. It seems reasonable to suggest, however, that because these respondents combine the traits of political independence with low education, they may, in some sense, be "ripe for the picking." In other words, they may provide a potential base of electoral support for any candidate who is able and willing to spend enough to mobilize them.

Conclusions

In the preceding analysis, we have established that candidate mobilization efforts are contingent upon individual level partisanship. As was expected, independents are more susceptible to candidate mobilization efforts than are partisans. We do find, however, it is incumbent rather than challenger mobilization efforts that influence the turnout decisions of the independent electorate. We suspect that this relationship reflects two realities of American politics. First, the more the incumbent spends, the more competitive the election (Jacobson 1978, 1980, 1985, 1990; Green and Krasno 1988; Goidel and Gross 1994). Second, on average, challengers are unable to raise the money required to fully mobilize the independent electorate.

Like much of the research on congressional elections, the results of this analysis do not appear to bode well for congressional challengers. In this respect, challengers appear to be at a significant disadvantage in terms of their ability to mobilize the independent electorate. Since in many congressional districts the incumbent already has a significant advantage in terms of the partisan makeup of the district, mobilizing the independent electorate may be the key to the challenger's chances for electoral success. Yet, according to the results of this analysis, it is the incumbent rather than the challenger who is most capable of mobilizing the independent electorate.

Appendix A: Variable Description

Incumbent Expenditures	Incumbent expenditures measured in $100,000.
Challenger Expenditures	Challenger Expenditures measured in $100,000.
Age	Respondent age in years.
Race	Dichotomous variable, coded 1 for white, 0 otherwise.
Gender	Dichotomous variable, coded 1 if male, 0 otherwise.
Income	Respondent's family income.
Education	Respondent's Education.
Senate Race	Dichotomous variable, coded 1 if there was a Senate race in the state, 0 otherwise.
Governor's Race	Dichotomous variable, coded 1 if there was a Gubernatorial race in the state, 0 otherwise.
Closing Date	Number of days prior to the election that registration closed.
South	Dichotomous variable, coded 1 if the respondent lived in the South, 0 otherwise.
Partisan Strength	The respondent's partisan strength. In the equations for the separate partisan groups, partisan strength distinguishes between strong and weak partisans or straight independents and independent leaners.

Endnotes

1. One point of clarification may be in order. Jackson (1993) used the 1986 NES data for his analysis.

2. As with Jackson's analysis, the NES data were supplemented with expenditures data and information on state closing dates. The expenditures data were taken from The Almanac of American Politics.

The information on state closing dates was taken from The Book of States. All other data were taken from the 1990 NES Study made available through the ICPSR. The original collectors of the data bear no responsibility for the interpretation presented in this text.

3. See Jackson (1993) for a more complete description of his model.

See the appendix for a complete description of the variables included in the analysis.

4. While the substantive interpretations of this model do not change when attitu-

4. While the substantive interpretations of this model do not change when attitudinal measures such as political efficacy and interest in the campaign are included, we agree with Jackson (1993) that including these variables would require an extensive path analysis that is beyond the scope of this essay. We do not deny, however, that such relationships should be an important part of future research.

5. It is worth noting the interaction between challenger expenditures and income only narrowly missed being statistically significant at the .05 level. The t-ratio for the interaction was 1.55.

6. Running this analysis as a single equation with interactive terms for the expenditure variables and the respondent's partisan similarity with the incumbent indicates that only the interaction between independents and incumbent expenditures is significant at the .05 level.

7. We should note that this is true only when excluding the interactions between candidate expenditures and, respectively, education and income. As we will demonstrate later, partisans are influenced by candidate mobilization efforts, but in a more complex manner than is currently being modelled.

8. Using a Likelihood Ratio Test, we also tested to see if the partisan interactions significantly added to the overall fit and explanatory power of the model. While the interaction terms did increase the overall fit of the model, the improvement was under traditional levels of statistical significance (p<.05). Substantively, while we can conclude that there is a significant difference in the impact of candidate expenditures among partisans and independents, this differences does not (significantly) increase the explanatory power of the model. Nevertheless, despite the statistical insignificance of the Likelihood ratio test, the significant difference between the impact of candidate spending among independents and partisans is substantively important because it indicates that partisans and independents are influenced differently by the same campaign stimulus. Consequently, our understanding of the conditional nature of mobilization efforts is improved.

9. These are computed by taking the partial derivative of the equation used to estimate the model presented in Table 4 with respect to incumbent expenditures and then inserting the values of the independent dummy variable and the education variable respectively.

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