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Compared to congressional elections, gubernatorial races are underrepresented in the campaign finance literature. At the same time, the great diversity of state campaign finance laws enables a comparative analysis of their impact in gubernatorial races. I use data from 1980 to 2000 to test hypotheses about challenger emergence, campaign finance laws, and candidate spending in gubernatorial party primaries. I find that incumbents with high job approval ratings and those in party endorsement states are more likely to be unopposed in the primary. In contested primaries, experienced challengers and those who accept public funding are better able to match levels of spending by incumbents. The findings shed light on the dynamics of challenger emergence and the potential for public funding programs to make elections more competitive.

The role of money in elections is one of the most hotly debated issues in American politics. Most of the attention to campaign finance reform focuses on federal races. Research on the role of spending in gubernatorial elections is less developed than the vast literature on congressional races (Epstein and Zemsky 1995; Erickson and Palfrey 1998, 2000; Gerber 1998; Green and Krasno 1988, 1990; Jacobson 1978, 1980, 1990; Squire 1991). Yet races for governor see more media coverage, higher candidate name recognition, and higher voter turnout than U.S. Senate races do (Boyd 1989; Squire and Fastnow 1994; Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin 1984). Recent studies reflect increasing interest in the role of money in gubernatorial elections (Gross and Goidel 2001; Partin 1999), but there is still the need and opportunity for systematic research on the financing of these races.[1]

[1] Due to the difficulty of gathering state data, research on the financing of gubernatorial campaigns is sparse (Malbin and Gais 1998). One scholar tracks spending in gubernatorial races and makes the data available to others (Beyle 1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1996). One study looks at the effects of spending on the vote for governor (Patterson 1982), but save for a recent study of election-cycle spending differences in gubernatorial and Senate races (Gross and Goidel 2001), the causes of spending are less well known.

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In contrast to federal laws, state campaign finance laws vary widely. This diversity creates fifty laboratories of reform where the effects of legislation can be measured. Because governors and U.S. Senators share high visibility, competitive races, and statewide electorates (Squire and Fastnow 1994), a study of gubernatorial races can clarify the potential impact of federal campaign finance proposals. Scholarly arguments over reform are framed in terms of fostering competition between incumbents and challengers for money and votes (Malbin and Gais 1998: 133-59). As such, primaries deserve specific scrutiny. Incumbents' fundraising advantage is greater in primaries than in general elections. Incumbents' war chests send early signals of strength or vulnerability to potential general election opponents (Epstein and Zemsky 1995). Finally, incumbents who deter primary competition are better positioned for success in the general election (Kenney and Rice 1984).

This study uses data from two decades of gubernatorial primaries to examine two issues. First, why are so many incumbent governors unopposed for the party nomination? Second, when incumbents are opposed, which challengers are more likely to be financially competitive? How do campaign finance laws help or hinder challengers in this regard? I propose and test two models representing the stages of challenger emergence in gubernatorial primaries. One seeks to explain which incumbents will be unopposed in the primary. I find that incumbent popularity and party endorsement rules are the best predictors of uncontested primaries. The other model highlights the determinants of challengers' share of primary spending. I find that experienced challengers and those who accept public funding have smaller spending deficits vis-a-vis incumbent governors.

Winnowing the Field: Uncontested Primaries

As elections in America have become increasingly candidate-centered, scholars have focused attention on the strategic behavior of candidates, especially challengers (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Jacobson 1989). Prospective challengers' estimations of their chances of winning help determine if and when quality challengers will emerge. Unpopular incumbents are seen as vulnerable to defeat and tend to attract strong challengers. Likewise, strong incumbents can deter some quality challengers from running (Goldenberg, Traugott, and Baumgartner 1986; Green and Krasno 1988). In some cases, prospective primary challengers are so intimidated by the strength of the incumbent and by internal party pressure that none of them dares to run. This "scare-off" effect is a major element of the incumbency advantage in congressional elections (Cox and Katz 1996; Squire 1989b, 1991).

Like congressional incumbents, state governors have a strong track record of deterring primary opposition and walking through uncontested party nominations.[2]

From 1980 to 2000, approximately 46 percent of incumbent governors were unopposed in their party's primary, excluding nominees in Virginia and Utah who were selected by state party convention rather than by direct primary. Why do some incumbents escape even a token challenge while other incumbents face strong intraparty challenges? I focus on four factors that should influence the probability of an uncontested primary: the strength of the incumbent, the availability of public funding for candidates, party endorsement rules, and incumbent party dominance.

I measure incumbent strength in two ways. One measure captures the strength of the incumbent's last general election campaign. The larger an incumbent's margin of victory in the last general election, the more likely it is that he or she will be unopposed for the nomination (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Green and Krasno 1988). The governor's job approval rating is another source of incumbent strength. Popular incumbents can intimidate potential challengers and dissuade them from running (Epstein and Zemsky 1995). To measure the popularity of the incumbent, I average the governor's job approval ratings over the year prior to the primary election.[3] This is when most potential primary challengers make their entry decisions. Popular governors should be more likely to be unopposed than should unpopular governors (Adams and Squire 1997; Mondak 1995).

As of the 2000 races, eight states provided public funding to primary candidates. By matching small individual contributions, public funds minimize the influence of private interests. Public funds entice candidates to accept voluntary spending limits, given that the Supreme Court ruled mandatory limits unconstitutional in *Buckley* v. *Valeo* (1976). Because of incumbents' inherent fundraising advantages, public funding is of greater proportional benefit to challengers than to incumbents. It can help mitigate the "catch-22" that most prospective challengers face: contributors are more likely to give money to viable challengers, but challengers need to spend money and increase their statewide name recognition in order to become viable (Kazee 1994; 181). Incumbent governors in states with public funding should be less likely to be unopposed than governors in states without it.

Party endorsements are another plausible cause of uncontested primaries. Endorsements give state parties influence on the nominating process despite

[2] In this study, I define uncontested primaries as those where the incumbent is the only candidate running for the nomination. This definition of uncontested seats is common in the literature (Kenny and McBurnett 1994; Squire 1989b; Wrighton and Squire 1997).

[3] Job approval data are available online at *http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/jars.html*. To control for variance in state poll questions, the responses are collapsed into percent positive and negative categories. For example, "excellent" and "good" reflect approval, and "fair" and "poor" represent disapproval. For more information on this data set, see Beyle 2001.

direct primaries. The legal right of parties to endorse gubernatorial candidates is recognized in seven states.[4] These endorsements are made by convention months in advance of the primary. What does a nominee gain from an endorsement? A survey of convention delegates shows that they see legal endorsements as having three benefits: logistical support from state and local party organizations and activists, increased financial support, and a boost to candidate name recognition and momentum (Jewell and Morehouse 2001: 106-14). By unifying early support, endorsements protect incumbents from primary challenges. Recent trends in competition support this view. From 1980 to 2000, 79 percent of incumbents in legal endorsement states were unopposed, versus 39 percent of incumbents in states without legal endorsements.

Incumbent party dominance may also affect challengers' entry decisions. If challengers are strategic, they will be more likely to enter a primary against an incumbent when their party's probability of general election success is higher. To estimate prior party success, I use a measure of the "normal vote" that averages the vote share of the incumbent's party in the last three races for governor. If the incumbent's party has a string of victories in gubernatorial general elections, this should increase the incentive for a challenger to enter the primary field, regardless of the popularity of the incumbent (Jewell and Morehouse 2001: 120). Put simply, challengers are long-term strategists when it comes to their political careers. The better the chance of general election success, the more attractive a primary challenge will be.

Results

The dependent variable is the status of primaries where incumbents run for reelection (uncontested = 1, contested = 0). Given this dichotomous dependent variable, Table 1 presents coefficients from logistic regression (Menard 1995). Since these coefficients have no direct interpretation, I also estimate the impact of each variable on the probability that the incumbent will be unopposed.[5] The model performs reasonably well and predicts 68 percent of the cases correctly. While the incumbent's vote share in the last general election has no effect, public approval is a strong predictor of uncontested primaries. A state governor with a 70 percent job approval rating is more than twice as likely to be unopposed than

[4] This includes Connecticut and Utah, where candidates who win a super-majority of convention votes win the nomination outright and avoid a direct primary. (Jewell and Morehouse 2001: 107). In Virginia, party conventions have the sole right to select gubernatorial nominees. Because of a lack of comparability with direct primaries, nominations by party conventions are excluded from this study.

[5] The probability of an uncontested primary is calculated by multiplying selected values of a variable by its coefficient, holding other independent variables at their means. For more on logit coefficient interpretation, see Hosmer and Lemeshow 1989 and Menard 1995.

TABLE 1
PREDICTING UNCONTESTED GUBERNATORIAL PRIMARIES

Variable	Coefficient	Mean	± One Std. Dev.	Percent Probability
Incumbent's Previous General Election Vote Share (%)	−.003 (.038)			
Governor's Job Approval Rating in Prior Year (%)	.058** (.021)	57.41	45% 70%	18.41 49.03
Availability of Public Funding (Yes = 1)	.473 (.593)			
Legal Party Endorsement (Yes = 1)	1.826** (.667)	.18	No Yes	24.34 66.64
Normal Vote for Incumbent Party in General Elections (%)	−.065* (.036)	53.16	45% 60%	43.78 21.97
Constant	−.706 (2.384)			
Number of Cases	98			
Aldrich-Nelson R^2	.315[a]			
Correctly Predicted	68%			
Null Percent	54%			

[a]Aldrich and Nelson (1984); Hagle and Mitchell (1992)
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$ (one-tailed)

is a governor with 45 percent approval. When deciding to run, potential primary challengers care more about the incumbent's current popularity than about election results that are three years removed.

Contrary to expectations, the availability of public funding has no relation to whether incumbents are unopposed. The enticement of public campaign funding does not increase the probability that potential challengers will run for the party nomination. Meanwhile, state party endorsement rules have the largest substantive effect on the probability that an incumbent will be unopposed. Where formal party endorsement is recognized by state law, it is a strong deterrent to challengers who would enter a primary.[6] All else equal, governors in states with legal party

[6] Parties in some states lack legal endorsements but still endorse candidates according to party rules or tradition (Jewell and Morehouse 2001: 106-09). I included a dummy variable for informal endorsements in an early version of the model, but it was not significant.

endorsement of primary candidates are nearly three times as likely to be unopposed than are governors in states without formal party endorsement.

As for incumbent party strength, incumbents are less likely to avoid a primary challenge in states where their party's candidates have been highly successful in general elections. When the incumbent's party has averaged 45 percent of the vote in the last three general elections, the incumbent is twice as likely to be unopposed as an incumbent whose party averaged 60 percent of the vote. Overall, there is a large personal component to challengers' entry decisions that is not captured by the model. Factors like a candidate's personal ambition, family situation, and physical health are often hidden from the public eye (Kazee 1994).

Incumbents, Challengers, and Spending Competition

Many incumbents are successful in deterring challenger entry, but more than half will face primary opposition. Incumbents' advantages include name recognition, the perks of the office, and up-and-running fundraising machines. Challengers must spend large amounts of money on campaign advertising, travel, and staff to combat these advantages. One reality of most campaigns is incumbents' huge financial advantage over challengers (Green and Krasno 1988, 1990; Jacobson 1980, 1990; Krasno, Green, and Cowden 1994). On average, incumbent governors outspend their primary challengers five to one, as compared to a two-to-one spending advantage for sitting governors in general elections.

There are two sides to the financing of campaigns: fundraising and spending. A research bias in favor of election outcomes has emphasized the effects of campaign spending, rather than its underlying causes (Squire 1995). First and foremost, scholars have seen challenger spending as a means to "buy" votes, leading to a debate over its efficiency versus incumbent spending (Green and Krasno 1988; Jacobson 1990). Yet the challenger's ability to raise money to spend also reflects the strength of his or her candidacy. By highlighting the factors that help or hinder challenger spending, this study continues to fill a gap in the literature (Gross and Goidel 2001). Why are some challengers much more financially competitive than others are? I focus on four influences that drive spending by challengers: campaign finance laws, challenger quality, race closeness, and the incumbent's popularity.

Intuitively, campaign finance laws should have an effect on candidate spending, but there is conflicting evidence from state races (Gross and Goidel 2001; Hogan and Hamm 1998; Hogan 1999). And aside from anecdotal evidence, little is known about how these laws systematically advantage incumbents or challengers in gubernatorial elections (Malbin and Gais 1998: 135-37). I focus on individual contribution limits because individuals, as opposed to state parties and other groups, provide the lion's share of gubernatorial candidate funding.[7] Should contribution limits matter? In an era of permanent campaigns, incumbents' fundraising machines capitalize on networks of wealthy donors; most primary challengers lack this advantage. While one recent study found no effect for contribution limits on *levels* of spending (Gross and Goidel 2001), I expect higher limits on individual contributions to have a negative effect on challengers' share of incumbent spending.[8]

As for the impact of public funding on spending, there is a hitch: not all candidates with access to public funding accept it. Rates of participation are generally high but drop sharply in states where the spending limits are lower than average spending. Because public funding helps challengers who lack financial resources but are otherwise strong candidates, challengers who accept it should be more financially competitive than challengers who do not. Meanwhile, challengers facing incumbents who accept public funding should garner a greater share of spending than should challengers facing incumbents who refuse it. This is because publicly funded incumbents are more likely than challengers to bump up against spending limits.

Challenger quality should influence the competition for spending between incumbents and challengers. I use a modified version of Squire's (1992) candidate quality scale to measure challenger political experience on a 6-point scale from former governors (5) to novices (0). U.S. House members (4), state officeholders (4), state legislators (3), local officials (2), and other political positions (1) receive quality scores based on established political career ladders. Former officeholders are penalized one point to reflect a decline in statewide visibility. Candidates with celebrity status and statewide name recognition receive a score of four, the same as statewide officeholders. High-quality challengers should win a greater share of incumbent spending than low-quality challengers, reflecting their viability in the eyes of campaign contributors (Biersack, Herrnson, and Wilcox 1993; Squire 1989).

7 Most state parties provide little to no funding for primary candidates and prefer to be impartial and gather resources for the eventual nominee's general election run. Different state classification schemes complicate the analysis of funding sources. I gathered comparable data on funding sources for ten candidates in three states with unlimited party contributions in 1998. Individuals provided 85 percent of primary funding in these races. PACs and parties combined provide only 7 percent of funding. I included a control for party limits in an earlier version of the model, but it was not statistically significant.

8 Some states allow unlimited individual contributions; others have varying levels of limits. To measure the impact of levels of limits, not just their presence or absence, I assign unlimited contribution states the value of the highest state limit (in New York, $28,000 per candidate per election). This strategy preserves the most information and reflects the fact that total spending is similar in unlimited and high-limit states. To show this, I compared mean spending per voter in unlimited and high-limit states. To make the test more conservative, I classified New York *and* the states with limits of $5,000 or more as high-limit states. T-tests show that spending in unlimited states is not significantly higher than in high-limit states.

Race margin can also influence candidate spending in state races (Gross and Goidel 2001; Hogan and Hamm 1998). When incumbents run for reelection, most gubernatorial primaries are not competitive in the traditional sense (i.e., margin of victory of less than 10 percent). Incumbents have huge advantages in fundraising, while challengers struggle just to demonstrate minimal viability. When races tighten, however, contributors are more likely to believe that their donations to the challenger are potentially decisive. In these races, challenger spending should increase relative to spending by incumbents, whose fundraising coffers have less room to grow (Erickson and Palfrey 2000). So challengers in close races should garner a larger share of spending than challengers in blowouts.

In light of the earlier findings regarding uncontested primaries, I include a measure of the governor's popularity in the model. As the governor's job approval rating in the state increases, this should have a negative effect on the challenger's ability to raise money in quantities needed for a viable campaign. Finally, I include a counter that represents the year in which the primary election was held. This control will highlight long-term trends in the financial competitiveness of gubernatorial primary challengers from 1980 to 2000.

Results

Table 2 presents results from OLS regression for primary elections between incumbents and challengers.[9] The dependent variable is challenger spending as a percentage of incumbent spending. Given the time-series cross-sectional data, I present panel-corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995: 634). The model explains 77 percent of the variance in challengers' share of spending. Keep in mind that a challenger's uphill fight for financial support is exacerbated in primaries, when party insider activity and donors' perceptions of candidate viability work to the incumbent's advantage. The average primary challenger spends only 16 percent as much money as the incumbent. Although the substantive effect of some variables is large, even doubling or tripling mean challenger spending may not make the primary competitive.

The impact of public funding on challengers' share of spending is the most prominent finding in Table 2. Challengers who accept public funding receive a huge financial boost as compared to challengers who reject public funding or lack access to it.[10] Public money makes a run against the incumbent feasible for potentially strong challengers who lack the experience or organization to raise enough private money. On the other hand, public funding acceptance by

[9] Races with self-financed candidates are excluded. A detailed explanation of the primary spending data used in this analysis is located in the Appendix.

[10] A variable measuring levels of spending limits was included in an earlier version of the model, but it was not significant.

TABLE 2
EXPLAINING CHALLENGERS' SHARE (%) OF INCUMBENT SPENDING

Variable	
Governor's Job Approval Rating in Prior Year (%)	–.008 (.175)
Challenger Acceptance of Public Funding (Yes = 1)	62.434** (15.072)
Incumbent Acceptance of Public Funding (Yes = 1)	6.861 (6.578)
Individual Contribution Limit (thousands of $)	.182 (.176)
Challenger Quality	5.591** (1.886)
Race Margin (%)	–.504** (.102)
Election Year (1980 = 0)	.584 (.456)
Constant	29.761** (11.425)
Number of Cases	44
Adjusted R^2	.766

*p < .05, **p <. 01 (one-tailed)
Note: OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

incumbents has no effect on challengers' share of spending. Challengers might be expected to benefit from spending limits that cap incumbent expenditures. Why are primary spending limits ineffective? A plausible reason is that while spending is much lower in party primaries than in general elections, spending limits are typically the same for both. Most states set limits on primary spending that are much higher than average candidate spending.

Political experience also helps increase challengers' share of primary spending. Each one-point increase in challenger quality rating brings about a six-percent increase in their share of spending. For example, a primary challenger with state legislative experience garners a 17 percent greater share of spending than a challenger with no previous political experience. This finding parallels research on challenger quality and campaign spending in congressional races (Biersack, Herrnson, and Wilcox 1993; Krasno, Green, and Cowden 1994; Squire 1989a). And it suggests that the traits that define viable challengers are mutually reinforcing. A challenger with political experience is a better fundraiser, which fuels campaign spending and promotes the candidate's issue positions and statewide name recognition.

The closeness of the race also has a positive effect on challengers' share of incumbent spending.[11] For every 10 percent decline in the race margin (for example, from 25 percent to 15 percent), challengers' share of incumbent spending increases by 5 percent. For challengers, close races improve their fundraising prospects and their ability to match spending by financially advantaged incumbents. In light of how rare truly competitive incumbent-challenger primaries are, challengers in races that are perceived to be close automatically become more viable. The chance that donors' money could be decisive to the nomination outcome increases the utility of each dollar contributed to the challenger.

Other variables show no impact on challenger spending.[12] Incumbent popularity deters primary challengers, but it does not affect challengers' spending once they enter the race. This finding suggests that the "scare-off" effect has already weeded out the weakest challengers. Levels of individual contribution limits do not provide an advantage in campaign spending to incumbents or challengers. As with spending limits, the effect of contribution limits probably depends on the relationship of the limit to the average contribution. Even in states that have relatively low contribution limits ($1,000 for example), in practice the limit only constrains donors who are able and willing to contribute more than the law currently allows.

Conclusions

This study provides insight into the effects of incumbent strength, party endorsement rules, and campaign finance laws on challenger emergence. Can the level of competition in gubernatorial primaries be increased? One solution is to reduce the rate of uncontested races by enabling potentially strong challengers to

[11] The interaction of spending and race margin is likely bi-directional. Spending buys name recognition and closes the gap on the incumbent, which attracts contributions and funds more spending. If state tracking polls were available, they would allow a dynamic analysis of the ebb and flow of spending and race closeness (Jacobson 1990: 342). But state poll coverage is sparse, especially during primaries. Removing race margin from the model does not change the sign or significance of the other variables, and the model fit remains strong (adjusted R^2 = .624). While not central to this analysis, prior studies show that donors give strategic contributions to candidates in close races (Hogan and Hamm 1998; Kahn and Kenney 1999).

[12] I included a control for challenger party affiliation in an earlier version of the model, but it was not significant. Evidently both parties' donors are equally stingy when it comes to funding primary challengers.

run. I find that incumbent popularity is a deterrent to many primary challengers. Yet placing a handicap on incumbents may not be desirable, given that public job approval is a reflection of the incumbents' competence (Mondak 1995). I find that legal party endorsements help protect many incumbent governors from primary challenges. Reforms that reduce internal party barriers to challengers will help increase primary competition. This requires changing party rules, a task that is complicated by the enduring strength of many state party organizations (Jewell and Morehouse 2001: 92-98).

Given the effectiveness of challenger spending (Green and Krasno 1988; Jacobson 1990), reforms that level the financial playing field will increase competition. I find that experienced challengers are better fundraisers than amateurs are. Yet the ability to attract quality challengers depends on incumbent popularity. Many challengers wait for vulnerable incumbents or an open seat (Squire 1989a). I find that public funding programs favor challengers and can help equalize financial competition, but contribution limits have no effect (Gross and Goidel 2001). Levels of public funding and spending limits need to be high enough to entice participation in the system. These findings suggest that reforms addressing the "catch-22" of challengers' low visibility and insufficient funding have the potential to make primary races more competitive.

APPENDIX

Historically, data-gathering problems have hindered research on campaign finance in gubernatorial races (Squire 1992). Some states publish summaries of spending for primary and general election periods, but because state reporting dates do not perfectly coincide with these periods, many states are unable to provide this clean breakdown. Yet it is important to separate primary and general election spending because these races have different opponents, strategies, constituencies, and levels of competition (Epstein and Zemsky 1995). The primary election data in this analysis come directly from state campaign finance agencies.

For about one quarter of the cases, mostly in earlier races, I use primary spending data gathered from state agencies by Beyle and Jensen (2001). To obtain the remainder of the data, I requested copies of candidate reports for each reporting period in the primary and then compiled the spending totals to most accurately reflect the full primary period. This means that some cases reflect a slightly earlier or later finish to the primary, based on which spending report was closer to the primary date. In these cases, the average difference between the actual and imposed end of the primary period is 12.7 days. While not perfect, these data are the best available on gubernatorial primary spending and cover 82 percent of all primaries from 1980 to 2000.

The data are listed in Table 1A. Missing cases occur for various reasons, many of them familiar to state politics scholars. Data for some early races are

TABLE 1A
PRIMARY ELECTION SPENDING DATA, 1980-2000

Years	States
1997-2000	All
1993-1996	All but NV
1989-1992	All but MS
1985-1988	All but MN, NV, ND, NY, RI
1981-1984	All but AR, IL, IN, KS, MD, MT, NV, OK
1980	All

unavailable because a few states temporarily archive files but then destroy them as space constraints dictate. A few states archive spending reports for only a sample of all primary candidates. Due to budget and staff shortages in a few states, academics have to visit archives in person to fill research requests. Gathering data on spending in these cases was cost prohibitive. As more states mandate the electronic disclosure of spending, these problems will be alleviated.

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