Campaign War Chests and Challenger Emergence in State Supreme Court Elections

Drew Seib

Murray State University

Introduction

Competitive elections are a cornerstone of democratic elections. Yet there is concern that incumbents may be able to deter challengers by using signals, such as the size of the incumbent’s war chests, thus reducing the competitiveness of elections. Scholars have started to examine what influences a challenger’s decision to enter an election. Most of the literature to date has focused on legislative elections (Box-Steffensmeier 1996 and Goodliffe 2002). This study will expand on previous studies accessing if campaign war chests deter the entrance of challengers, especially strong challengers, in state supreme court elections.

**Theory**

Incumbents would prefer to have no challenger, but if there is a challenger, they would prefer for it to be a weak challenger (Box-Steffensmeier 1996). One way incumbents can deter strong challengers is by accumulating a large campaign warchests (Box-Steffensmeier 1996; Goodliffe 2001). The large warchest plays two roles. First it shows that the incumbent has considerable support. Second, money is fungible and can easily be transferred into other campaign resources, such as staff and campaign commercials, both of which are essential to being able to compete competitively (Kahn and Kenny 1999). When a potential challenger sees the large warchest, they realize that it will take a lot of work to try to defeat the incumbent. Rather than challenge an incumbent with a large war chest, the incumbent strategically chooses to wait to run for office until either there is no incumbent or the tides turn and the incumbent has a smaller warchest.

When a strong challenger chooses not to run, it opens up the opportunity for a weak challenger to run (Hall and Boneau 2006). Weak challengers will run even when there is a large campaign war chest because they need political experience and they are doing a favor to their party by appearing on the ballot under the party label—a favor that may someday be repaid with campaign support.

Hypotheses

Hypotheses 1: As the size of an incumbent’s warchest increases, the probability that the incumbent faces a strong challenger decreases.

Hypothesis 2: When a strong challenger does not immerge, a weak challenger will immerge, regardless of the size of the warchest.

Data and Methods

I gathered data from 1900 to 2006 on state supreme court elections. The dependent variable is the presence of a challenger and data for this variable was gather from secretary of state websites. Due to the likelihood that a weak challenger emerges when strong challengers fail to emerge, a bivatiate probate model is used. A strong challenger is defined as having held a previous judgeship and weak is not having held a previous judgeship. Data on prior judgeships was obtained from court websites. The incumbent’s campaign warchest is the amount of money on hand at the beginning of the election cycle, which was obtained from secretary of state websites or other state agencies charged with archiving campaign finance reports. This variable is adjusted using the Consumer Price Index for 2006 dollars. Other important control variables are the length of the states’ supreme court term measured in years, salary of the position to the nearest thousand dollars, the percentage of the vote the incumbent received in the prior election, and whether the election is partisan or non- partisan.

Results

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Bivariate Probit Coefficients for Challenger Emergence | | |
|  | Strong Challenger | Weak Challenger |
| Constant | -0.949  (2.041) | 0.202  (1.867) |
|  |  |  |
| War Chest | -0.00002\*  (0.000006) | -0.000001  (0.000005) |
|  |  |  |
| Length of Term | -0.075  (0.208) | 0.157  (0.194) |
|  |  |  |
| Salary | 0.00001  (0.0000071) | -0.000005  (0.000007) |
|  |  |  |
| Partisan Election | 0.777\*  (.343) | -0.784\*  (0.326) |
|  |  |  |
| Prior Vote of Incumbent | -0.011  (0.007) | -0.007  (0.007) |
| Standard errors are in parentheses.  \* p<0.05 | | |

Conclusion

While the results above are consistent with Goodliffe’s (2001) conclusions regarding campaign war chests, the results above have the added artifact of occurring in both partisan and nonpartisan electoral systems. What is interesting here is state supreme court elections are low salience and low information elections. This means that people know less about the candidates that are running. With the absences of partisan cues on the ballot, nonpartisan elections provide an added challenge for voters. This may be what explains the emergence of weak challengers in nonpartisan elections. The low salience, low information aspect of the election gives weak challengers a better chance at winning.

References

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