

The Battle for Congress: Iraq, Scandal, and Campaign Finance in the 2006 Elections

Methodology

American campaigns are typically candidate centered.¹ Candidates hire strategists, raise funds, take polls, and generally conduct the campaign with relative freedom. This is true more for congressional races than it often is for presidential races.² However, it is increasingly difficult to ignore the role that noncandidate entities—interest groups, individuals, and political parties—play in congressional and presidential elections. They devote large amounts of money to the campaigns, often receive extensive media coverage, and in some cases assume responsibility for a significant portion of a campaign such as mobilizing voters.³

Studying campaigns and elections presents researchers with a wide variety of challenges. Campaigns are extraordinarily multidimensional events that consist of different actors, institutions, and dynamics. Researchers must choose between different methods when deciding how to examine the various processes at work within a campaign. Our research draws upon a number of different approaches, including case studies and surveys. Case studies of competitive congressional races are the core of this monograph. This appendix details the rationale behind the case study methodology as well as a description of case selection, elite interviewing, and our campaign communication database. Other aspects of the overall project are also briefly described, especially the national surveys conducted as part of the larger research program. The case studies enable us to examine the richness and diversity of campaign events. This project has studied enough cases, especially over several election cycles beginning with 1998, that we are also able to make useful comparisons across election cycles and generalizations that go beyond our set of cases to include the overall presidential and congressional campaign environment.

Students of elections have sought ways to study local differences and the ways in which those differences may influence the choices voters make. Context is the term often used to describe the conditions unique to a locale that may affect an individual's choice or reaction to an election. Context also has two important dimensions. First, context can differ over time. An election conducted in one cycle often has different properties from elections in another cycle. The 2006 cycle, as conveyed by the title, unfolded in the context of a controversial war being waged by the United States. Scandals and questions about Republican management also emerged. The features unique to a particular election will help researchers understand why a voter made the choice she did or felt the way she did. In any case, all voters in a specific election are subject to the unique circumstances, so the context has "global effects."⁴ Second, context can have "compositional effects." These effects derive from differences between different locales within the same election. The differences may be due to strength of party organization, socioeconomic composition, or some other independent variable normally associated with vote choice or attitudes. Whether testing for global or compositional effects, it is important that the study have enough cases in

¹ Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Rise of Candidate Centered Politics: Presidential Elections in the 1980s* (Harvard University Press, 1991).

² Paul Herrnson, *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2004). Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 6th ed. (New York, N.Y.: Pearson Longman, 2004).

³ See David B. Magleby and J. Quin Monson, eds., *The Last Hurrah? Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 2002 Congressional Elections* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004); David B. Magleby, ed. *The Other Campaign: Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 2000 Congressional Elections* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); David B. Magleby, ed. *Outside Money: Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 1998 Congressional Elections* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

⁴ For a discussion of these different sorts of contexts please see Michael Marsh "Electoral Context," in *The Future of Election Studies*, edited by Mark N. Franklin and Christopher Wlezien (Oxford: Pergamon, 2002).

each context to make comparisons across the contexts possible.⁵ With enough cases in each particular context, it is possible to assess the extent to which a particular variable unique to that context may affect attitudes toward the candidates, information about the elections, and ultimately voting choice.

For the most part, students of campaign effects seem to have placed more emphasis on global contextual effects, with an emphasis on survey research and a reliance on social-psychological factors. There are sound reasons for doing so, and we conduct surveys as a part of our overall research. However, in recent years students of elections have also started to look at the compositional effects with their focus on differences across jurisdictions. There are good reasons the two types of studies could be profitably merged. Foremost among those reasons is that the nature of the questions being asked about campaigns really demands some sort of innovative methods and data sets that more completely capture the complex character of context.

Overview of Methodology

It is in the spirit of trying to measure and include some of these “compositional effects” that the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy (CSED) at Brigham Young University organized and implemented a national study of the most competitive contests, where outside group spending was most probable, during the 2006 election cycle.⁶ The research design in 2006 is similar to previous work in 1998, 2000, 2002, and 2004. Using a case-study methodology, the research aims to document the largely undocumented aspects of candidate and noncandidate campaigns. Our methodology relies on academic field researchers. By the end of the 2006 cycle, this ongoing research sponsored by CSED will have monitored 115 contests with the help of 113 academics at seventy-one colleges and universities across the nation. These contests are summarized in table A-1. The participation of these academics has helped CSED obtain data on the involvement of outside groups in some of the nation’s most competitive electoral contests.

The CSED research design is based on three assumptions. First, noncandidate campaign activity is most likely to occur in competitive races. In 2002 CSED studied seventeen noncompetitive races as a control group, in part, to test this assumption. We found overwhelming evidence that the vast majority of outside money is spent in competitive races.⁷ Second, because much of noncandidate campaign activity is not disclosed, it is best uncovered and understood by someone with knowledge of the local context. To understand the full impact and reach of noncandidate activity, academics knowledgeable about the competitive race are recruited to systematically monitor each campaign. The academics in each competitive race oversee the collection of campaign communications, including the extent of mail, telephone, email, and personal contact; they also collect as much information as possible on broadcast advertising. Each academic is also provided with broadcast advertising data from the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) for any of the top 100 media markets in the country that are in the district or state they are studying. The CMAG data allows us to compare what we learn from the ad-buy data from stations with data gathered by CMAG independently. The academics monitor voter mobilization efforts conducted by candidates, parties, and interest groups. Data on campaign communications in the contests are enhanced by a network of informants organized by the local academics. The informants agree to collect their political mail and keep a record of other campaign communications they view or receive.⁸

⁵ Ibid, p. 57.

⁶ The generous support of the Pew Charitable Trusts funded the 1998, 2000, 2002, and 2004 projects.

⁷ David B. Magleby and J. Quin Monson, eds., *The Last Hurrah?: Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 2002 Congressional Elections* (Washington, D.C.: Brooking Institution Press, 2004), pp. 8–10.

⁸ We gratefully acknowledge the participation in this data collection effort of local members of the League of Women Voters and Common Cause, Brigham Young University alumni, as well as many others recruited by the local academics.

The third assumption is that political professionals would be willing to be interviewed and discuss their decision making and funding allocation strategies. Elite interviewing helps “connect the dots” of our data collection efforts—both by validating what is discovered in the data collection efforts of the academics as well as by providing new information. With few exceptions interviews for the study are conducted on the record and with few exceptions the information from those interviews is fully attributed.⁹

As mentioned the CSED methodology relies on academic fieldwork and reconnaissance networks. The academics in each sample race observe the contest and retrieve data on noncandidate campaign communications with voters. They also monitor television and radio advertising buys, direct mail, and telephone contacts, print advertising, and Internet communications where possible. The academics supplement these efforts with the standard Federal Election Commission (FEC) data on the candidate campaigns, party, and PAC expenditures and in 2004 and 2006 with data from the Internal Revenue Service on 527 organizations. They also conduct post-election interviews with campaign managers, consultants, and political reporters involved with the interest groups or parties invested in these races. Using a set of case studies that employ multiple methods of data collection, the CSED methodology seeks to systematically investigate the causes and consequences of campaign spending “within its real-life context.”¹⁰ This provides the richest, most feasible, and most accurate method of understanding the phenomenon of campaign spending by noncandidate entities in congressional elections.¹¹

Case Selection

The sampling pool of competitive races CSED monitored in 2006 and other years was developed based on a combination of lists of competitive races published in early spring by the *Cook Political Report*, the *Rothenberg Political Report*, and *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*. This list was enhanced by interviews with current and former party and interest group professionals, reporters, and other political experts who helped identify contests in which outside money was most likely to be present.¹² In 2002 early in the election cycle the number of potentially competitive races was high enough that we quantified the input from the contacts and published sources by computing an additive score for each race during the final stages of case selection. Each score was comprised of a combination of the ratings in the published reports together with the likely competitive races named by the Republicans and key allied groups as well those named by the Democrats and key allied groups. Once scored, the list was sorted in rank order, and we used the ranking to aid our selection of competitive races. In 2006 there was broad consensus on the competitive congressional races early in the cycle. One contest that changed substantially was the Ohio Sixth Congressional District that became much less competitive after the primary while a proximate

⁹ Only five organizations refused our repeated requests for interviews. They include Americans for Job Security, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC), America Votes, Club for Growth, and the National Right to Life Committee.

¹⁰ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2003). Using multiple methods of data collection helps to enhance the validity of our conclusions. See Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Our methodology is similar to that followed by other research in congressional elections that uses case studies. See James A. Thurber, “Case Study Framework and Methodology,” in *The Battle for Congress: Consultants, Candidates, and Voters*, edited by James A. Thurber (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), pp. 239-246. For another recent example of case-study based research, see L. Sandy Maisel and Darrell M. West, *Running on Empty: Political Discourse in Congressional Elections* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

¹² Among others, we acknowledge the assistance in this effort of David Boundy, Bernadette Budde, Martin Burns, Guy Cecil, Charlie Cook, Chuck Cunningham, Jennifer Duffy, Mike DuHaime, Cathy Duvall, Greg Giroux, Chris Hull, Harold Ickes, Karen Johanson, Jim Jordan, Linda Lipson, Mike Lux, Tony Massaro, Tom McMahon, Bill Miller, J.B. Poersch, Matt Rhoades, Steve Rosenthal, Stuart Rothenberg, Mark Steitz, Andy Stern, Mark Stephens, Amy Walter, Karen White, and Pam Womack.

district, the Ohio Fifteenth District became much more competitive. In this rare instance we switched these two districts and this volume has a case study on the Ohio Fifteenth District.

While largely based on the potential for a competitive race, the case selections take other considerations into account as well in order to assure a broad range in the number and type of noncandidate groups observed. We make an effort to stratify the sample in terms of incumbent and open-seat races and for contests which would permit us to capture a wide variety of interest group and party communications and strategies. We also select cases so that we have variation in geographic location, level of minority population, and the number and type of interest groups likely to become involved. The last step of the case selection involves finding academics willing to participate in the project. The academics recruited to monitor the contests are selected based on their scholarly reputations and knowledge of state electoral politics.

In 2002 we added seventeen noncompetitive control races to test some of the assumptions about where noncandidate money is spent, thus establishing a baseline against which to compare the competitive races.¹³ Many of the control races were selected because they were adjacent to the competitive races already sampled, as it would be difficult to convince academics to study a race where we expect little if any serious campaign activity. The most cost effective way to add some control races was to ask the academics studying our competitive races to identify an adjacent district to cover in addition to the competitive race. These control races were in the same media markets as the competitive races and thus did not require additional trips to television and radio stations to obtain ad buy data. They also involve elite interviews with many of the same people at the state level. We also selected some control races in states that had competitive races in the 2000 election in order to contrast the role of outside money in the same state or district over time.¹⁴

In sum the procedures followed to select the cases for this study achieve an appropriate balance between maximizing the observable variance and minimizing bias while at the same time keeping the research costs at an acceptable level. In addition non-random case selection in a small-n study helps to ensure that one does not exclude an important case.¹⁵

Voter Reaction to the Campaigns

The project also sought to connect the activities of the candidate and noncandidate groups to the voters targeted by those activities. In both the 2002 and 2004 election cycles, CSED, in cooperation with Washington State University and the University of Wisconsin, developed and executed surveys that seek to measure the reaction of voters to federal campaigns.

¹³ On this point we are especially indebted to Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Richard Fenno, and other panel participants who provided feedback on our methodology as part of a panel titled, "Getting Inside the Outside Campaign: Using Collaborative Fieldwork to Study Soft Money and Issue Advocacy" at the 2002 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

¹⁴ Because the differences between competitive and control races were so clear in 2002 and because of budget constraints, we did not select control cases in our 2004 study.

¹⁵ See Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton University Press, 1994), especially chapter 4, for a comprehensive discussion of the issues involved in qualitative case selection. They provide an especially good discussion of why a random sample is not always an acceptable method of case selection in small n case study research. Our non-random case selection method uses a key explanatory variable (competitiveness) to drive our case selection of our focus and control races while also using other available prior information to increase the range of values across our dependent variable (noncandidate campaign activity).

The public opinion research in 2004 consisted of a three-wave national panel survey that sought to measure the impact of the immense ground and air-war activities. The survey results in 2004, as in 2002, showed that voters felt overwhelmed by the deluge of information received from candidate and noncandidate groups in an attempt to persuade them to vote a particular way.¹⁶ Furthermore, the 2004 survey placed an emphasis on media markets that will be linked to ad-buy information such as the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) data coded by Professor Ken Goldstein and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin. The ad-buy data and the ground war data can then be linked with the individual level data to assess the different effects of the campaigns on the choices and attitudes of voters.

In 2002, 2004, and 2006, the project also asked a sample of voters in different states to fill out a log survey documenting the various forms of contact that they received from the candidate and noncandidate campaigns in the three weeks leading up to Election Day. The project then surveyed these voters to register their opinions on the nature of the campaign and the information they were able to glean from the different activities that they observed.

In 2004, in addition to the panel survey, the research team used Knowledge Networks to examine voter reactions to the new disclaimer provisions of BCRA. The “Stand by Your Ad” provisions require candidates, parties, and interest groups to include both an oral and written disclaimer statement with radio and television ads, thereby taking responsibility for the content of the ad.¹⁷ By requiring the candidates, parties, and interest groups to place “Stand by Your Ad” disclaimers in political advertising, legislators hoped to reduce negativity in political campaigns and increase voters’ confidence in the political system. CSED conducted an experiment by which a sample of over 800 voters was shown ads with and without the disclaimers. We will then test reactions to the ads on dimensions of negativity and confidence.

CSED also conducted a disclosure audit of TV and radio broadcast stations located in competitive races across the country in 2004. Under BCRA broadcast stations are required to maintain public political files that document all BCRA-defined electioneering communications purchased and aired by candidates, groups, and individuals. CSED researchers evaluated to what extent these groups chose to run electioneering issue ads before the time periods covered by BCRA in addition to the quality of disclosure of purchased political advertising. Furthermore, researchers assessed how accessible this information is to citizens and what, if any, difficulties prevent full disclosure of information required by law.

Together, the public opinion, log, and “Stand by Your Ad” surveys make it possible to connect what the academics learn in the field with what the voters experience in the campaigns. In this manner, researchers can more fully grapple with the different global and compositional variables that may produce changes in the dependent variables selected for examination.

Challenges

This research design tries to address several of the obstacles currently encountered by students of political campaigns and these obstacles’ effects. It cannot overcome all of these obstacles—no research project reasonably can. However, it is helpful to elaborate on these obstacles in order to develop strategies to overcome them.

The first obstacle is the increasing difficulty of gathering some of the more important contextual data. For example, it is getting increasingly difficult to survey those individuals who can describe, compare, and

¹⁶ David B. Magleby and J. Quin Monson, “Campaign 2002: ‘The Perfect Storm’” (Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy, Brigham Young University, November 13, 2003).

¹⁷ Federal Election Commission, *Federal Register*, Vol. 67, No. 205. (October 23, 2002), pp. 65190-65212.

contrast specific campaigns. Some congressional candidates, mostly members of Congress, now routinely refuse to answer any surveys. Academics situated in those particular races, however, can provide much of the data that surveys used to provide.

Second, there is an increasingly high financial cost of gathering enough information on important institutional variables from the different actors in the various campaigns. Researchers from different projects should explore ways to pool resources to create large, rich data sets. These data sets could include variables from the campaigns, such as the tone, strategies, and electoral procedures in the various races. It is often too difficult or too costly for one research project to perform all of these data gathering tasks, but collaborating scholars can create very useful data by monitoring particular races, interviewing elites, and sharing their results.

Finally, it will also be difficult to assemble these large data sets over time. The grants that have funded many of the studies prominent in the field today are unique in because they have often been funded over multiple cycles. However, if we theorize that time is an important dynamic and that many of the factors may shift over time, researchers will need to come to terms with the question of what is an acceptable time horizon. Collaboration across institutions could clearly help alleviate some of the burdens discussed above. But what types of institutions, research and otherwise, would the field need to create in order to facilitate collaboration and the construction of the larger, more useful data sets? We firmly believe that this can be an important innovation in the field and that ways should be constructed to facilitate more cross-institutional collaboration, particularly between the excellent research centers at different universities and colleges. The eventual placement of these research efforts in data archives such as ICPSR should always be a goal.

Conclusion

We hope that this research encourages innovations in gathering data about the factors that affect the dynamics and outcomes of congressional and presidential elections and in constructing data sets sufficient for the types of questions the discipline needs to examine. The research design discussed above has specific weaknesses but also holds out the hope of gathering data that can help scholars more fully understand campaigns and their effects. It can also help answer the more popular questions such as why a particular candidate may have won.¹⁸ With further data gathering and more collaboration, efforts like those outlined above should result in more complete data sets and more refined knowledge about the dynamics of campaign effects.

¹⁸ See for example Adam Nagourney, "So What Happened in That Election, Anyhow?" *New York Times*, January 2, 2004, sec. 4, p. 3. The article examines some of the different explanations for the outcome in 2004 and discusses some of the confusion surrounding the conventional explanations.