

**The Effects of Party Competition on Citizens' Political Engagement
in the American States***

Patrick Flavin[†]

Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97276
Waco, TX 76798
(254) 710-7418
Patrick_J_Flavin@baylor.edu

Gregory Shufeldt

Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Political Science
University of Notre Dame
217 O'Shaughnessy Hall
Notre Dame, IN 46556
(314) 517-2394
Gregory.D.Shufeldt.1@nd.edu

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* Authors' names listed alphabetically to reflect equal contributions to the research. Prepared for presentation at the 2014 State Politics and Policy Conference in Bloomington, IN.

[†] Corresponding author.

Abstract

Is political competition beneficial for democratic citizenship? We contend that the ideal venue for investigating the link between competition and citizen engagement is at the state level where the devolution revolution has focused increased attention on the policy decisions made by state governments and the degree of political competition varies (often dramatically) across both space and time. Using data on citizens' political attitudes and participation from the American National Election Studies and the Ranney measure of party competition for control of state government, we examine the effects of state party competition on citizen engagement from 1952 to 2008. Our analysis reveals that citizens report greater interest in politics and participate at higher rates when there is greater competition between the two parties in their state. These findings suggest that vigorous competition for control of state government has important implications for citizens' political engagement and, ultimately, the quality of democracy in the American states.

Keywords: U.S. state politics, party competition, citizen engagement, political participation

A large literature in democratic theory posits that vigorous competition between candidates/parties is essential for democracy to flourish because it engages citizen interest in politics, makes them more likely to participate in the process, and ultimately makes elected officials more accountable to their constituents (Schumpeter 1950; Dahl 1956, 1971; Key 1956). The belief that party competition produces important benefits for American democracy is also evident in popular accounts of contemporary politics. For example, *The New York Times* recently published a series of articles on “one party rule” that detailed the decline of competition between the two major parties for control of state governments across the nation (Confessore 2014; Davey 2014; Nagourney 2014; Park, Ashkenas, and Bostock 2014).¹ This unified partisan control of state government has led states to pursue markedly different policy trajectories for abortion regulations, Medicaid coverage, minimum wage, same-sex marriage, voter identification laws, and collective bargaining for public employees (Park, Ashkenas, and Bostock 2014).

In addition to the implications for policy outcomes, what effect (if any) might the lack of party competition have on the quality of democratic citizenship? We contend that the ideal venue for investigating the possible effects of party competition in the United States is at the state level where the devolution revolution has focused increased attention on the policy decisions made by state governments and the degree of political competition varies (often dramatically) across both space and time. Accordingly, in this paper we investigate the link between the intensity of state party competition and citizens’ political engagement. We begin by reviewing the existing literature that details the advantages (as well as the possible

¹ As of January 1, 2014, the legislature and governor’s mansion were controlled by a single party in thirty-six of the fifty states.

disadvantages) of party competition and discussing the logic underlying our expectation that increased party competition will lead to greater political engagement. Using data on citizens' political attitudes and participation from the American National Election Studies and the Ranney (1965, 1976) measure of party competition for control of state government, we then examine the effects of state party competition on citizen engagement from 1952 to 2008. To date, no study has investigated the link between party competition and citizen engagement at the state level across such a long time span and across multiple measures of political engagement. Our analysis confirms our theoretical expectations and reveals that citizens report greater interest in politics and participate in politics at higher rates when there is greater competition between the two parties in their state (and these results are robust to the inclusion of state and year fixed effects). These findings suggest that vigorous competition for control of state government can have an important effect on citizens' political engagement and, ultimately, the quality of democracy in the American states.

Political Competition and Democratic Citizenship

When political parties have to compete against one another for control of government and voters are provided the opportunity to choose among multiple candidates for office, elections serve as the primary linkage between citizens and their government. It is no surprise, then, that scholars of state politics dating back to V.O. Key (1949, 1956) are interested in measuring, evaluating, and explaining the degree of competition between the parties. For example, studies focused on the "quality" of democracy at the state level have long considered the level of competition between the two political parties as an important indicator (Ranney and Kendall

1956; Hill 1994; Shufeldt and Flavin 2012). More recently, two contrasting views have developed about the normative appeal and tangible benefits associated with political competition.

On one hand, the traditional view speaks to the positive effects or virtues of competition, arguing that greater competition should lead to political behaviors consistent with responsible democratic citizenship. For example, increased competition raises the stakes of voting and other forms of participation for citizens as they are more likely to perceive that their actions can make a difference (Downs 1957). It is no surprise, then, that levels of voter turnout tend to be higher in jurisdictions with more competitive elections (e.g., Kim, Petrocik, and Enokson 1975; Patterson and Caldiera 1983; Cox and Munger 1989; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Campbell 2006; Pacheco 2008). In addition, citizens living in competitive areas are more likely to volunteer for political campaigns and get involved in their community more generally (Kenny 1992; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Putnam 2000; Campbell 2006; Lipsitz 2011).

The traditional view also posits that increased competition between candidates in elections leads to greater political interest and engagement. For example, increased competition has been linked to higher levels of political knowledge (Coleman and Manna 2000; Putnam 2007; Lipsitz 2011; Bowler and Donovan 2012; Lyons, Jaeger, and Wolak. 2012) and greater interest in following public affairs (Oliver 2001; Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht 2003; Chong and Druckman 2007; Oliver and Ha 2007; Jones 2013). Importantly, these positive effects of competition can have enduring effects long after elections are over (Evans, Ensley, and Carmines 2014). There is also evidence that greater competition can have positive effects on citizens' feelings of political efficacy and trust in government (Coleman and Manna 2000; Barreto and Streb 2007).

On the other hand, an emerging theoretical perspective contends that more competitive elections can actually have negative consequences for democratic citizenship by increasing the number of voters on the losing side in any given election and increasing citizens' feelings of political dissatisfaction and alienation (Brunell 2006, 2008; Brunell and Buchler 2009). For example, voters supporting the losing candidate have been shown to feel less efficacious, less trusting, and less unsatisfied with democracy in general (e.g. Clark and Acock 1989; Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Bowler and Donovan 2002, 2012; Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, and Listhaug 2005). Moreover, even those who generally extoll the virtues of political competition have found both positive and negative consequences. Competition may lead to more deliberation about political issues, but it can also depress participation rates (Mutz 2006). Moreover, competition leads to greater levels of awareness and mobilization, but also exacerbates partisan differences and lowers overall approval ratings of Members of Congress (Bowler and Donovan 2012). In another example, Barreto and Streb (2007) find a changing relationship between electoral competition and trust and efficacy when looking at trends over time. In the past, competitive congressional elections sparked higher levels of trust and efficacy. In today's political context, however, they find that competition diminishes political trust and efficacy.

As evidenced in the review of the literature above, to date the debate about the effects of competition has focused almost exclusively on electoral competition – how closely contested individual elections are between two or more candidates for elected office (but see Hanson 1980; Hill and Leighley 1993). In this paper, we shift the focus to the effects of competition between the two parties for control of state government, a related but empirically distinct concept (Shufeldt and Flavin 2012). We do so because we expect citizens to be more likely to pay

attention to state politics if the two parties routinely compete for control of state government. Given what we know about citizens' limited knowledge about state politics (Jennings and Zeigler 1970; Delli Carpini, Keeter, and Kenamer 1994), it is likely that citizens are more knowledgeable about the relative partisan balance of state government than about, for example, the average competitiveness of state legislative elections in their state. Indeed, there is little reason to expect that a competitive state legislative race on the other side of the state has any bearing on a person's political engagement. Instead, we believe what is more relevant is whether an individual resides in a state where control of government is closely contested between the two parties as compared to living in a state where one party dominates state government.²

Why do we expect that more intense party competition will lead to greater citizen engagement? In a state where control of state government oscillates between the two parties, citizens are more likely to believe that their participation in the political process "matters" in the

² As detailed in the next section, we conceptualize and measure competition in this paper as the degree of competition between the two parties for control of state government (Ranney 1965, 1976). An alternative conceptualization of competition is the Holbrook and Van Dunk (1993) measure of the average competitiveness of state legislative elections. However, we suspect that how competitive elections are "in general" in a respondent's state likely has little effect on engagement as compared to how competitive elections are in their own particular state house and senate district. Unfortunately, the American National Election Studies cumulative file we use to evaluate citizen engagement does not geo-code respondents at the state legislative district level, so we are unable to directly test this claim. When we substitute the Holbrook and Van Dunk (1993) measure of the average level of competition in state legislative elections for the Ranney party competition measure in the models we present below, we find (as expected) no statistical relationship between the general level of competitiveness of state legislative elections in a respondent's state and their level of political engagement.

sense that it might make an eventual difference on which party controls government and, ultimately, the content of public policy. In contrast, in a state dominated by a single party citizens have less of an incentive to become and stay engaged because, in the end, their involvement will have little bearing on which party controls state government. Moreover, we expect that a state environment where control of government is up for grabs between the two parties will attract greater attention from interest groups and the media compared to a state where one party controls the agenda and outcomes are seemingly a foregone conclusion. Therefore, greater party competition is likely to increase the amount of information about state politics available to citizens which can, in turn, boost levels of political interest and engagement (Delli Carpini, Keeter, and Kenamer 1994; Eveland and Scheufele 2000; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006). Simply stated, we expect citizens to be more attentive to and more involved in politics when living in a context where the two parties are vigorously competing for control of state government.

Data and Empirical Strategy

We investigate the link between the level of party competition in a state and citizens' political engagement from 1952 to 2008. To measure the intensity of competition between the two parties for control of state government, we use a moving four year average of a state's Ranney Index.³ The multi-component index uses the proportion of seats controlled by Democrats in the lower and upper chambers of the state legislature, the vote share of the Democratic candidate in gubernatorial elections, and the percentage of the time the governorship

³ Data for the Ranney Index, created by Austin Ranney (1965, 1976), are from Carl Klarner and accessed online at <http://www.indstate.edu/polisci/klarnerpolitics.htm>.

and state legislature are both controlled by the Democratic Party. These components are then averaged over various time intervals (four years in our case) to yield a measure that ranges from zero (complete Republican control) to one (complete Democratic control). Exactly in between these two extremes (at 0.5) is perfect competition between the two parties, so we use the “folded” version of the Ranney Index that ranges from 0.5 (one party dominance) to 1 (perfect competition as a result of an equal balance between the two parties).⁴ In practical terms, this index measures the intensity of the competition between the two parties for control of the statehouse and a state’s policymaking agenda. One particularly useful aspect of this dataset is that levels of party competition vary widely both across and within states during the time period we examine.

To assess citizens’ political engagement, we use four separate survey items from the American National Election Studies cumulative file that have been asked in identical (or nearly identical) formats across time. First, we use a three response category item that asks respondents about their level of interest particularly in elections: “Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you, would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in the political campaigns this year?” Second, we use a four response category item that asks respondents about their level of interest in government and public affairs in general: “Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?” Both

⁴ The formula for the “folded” Ranney Index is: $1 - ABS(Ranney - 0.5)$.

items are coded such that greater interest is indicated by higher values and are intended to evaluate respondents' psychological engagement with politics.

We also evaluate respondents' levels of political participation. Our third measure of political engagement is whether a respondent reported voting in the most recent election, and our fourth measure is an additive index of five political participation items that ask whether a respondent engaged in the following activities during the election season:

- (1) trying to influence the vote of others by talking with them,
- (2) working for a political campaign,
- (3) displaying a button or sign in support of a particular candidate,
- (4) donating money to a candidate's political campaign, and
- (5) attending a meeting or rally in support of a particular candidate.

These items are summed for each respondent, producing a value from zero to five. It is important to note that none of our four measures of political engagement refer to a specific level of government or a specific elected office. For example, that section of the ANES survey that asks about political participation is simply prefaced with: "Now I'd like to find out about some of the things that people do to help a party or candidate win an election."

Our estimation strategy is to separately model each of the four measures of political engagement as a function of the moving four year average of the Ranney Index in the respondent's state the year of the survey and a series of individual level control variables to account for possible confounding factors. Specifically, we include covariates for the intensity of

a respondent's political partisanship,⁵ their level of education, income, gender, marital status,⁶ age,⁷ as well as dummy variables for whether a respondent is African American, Hispanic, or an "other" race⁸ (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). We also control for the closeness of the two party presidential vote in a respondent's state, which allows us to evaluate the independent effect of state party competition on citizen engagement above and beyond any effects that may arise due to close competition in the proportion of citizens who identify with each of the two major parties (Wolak 2006; Lipsitz 2009).⁹

⁵ Intensity of partisanship is constructed by folding the ANES 7-point partisanship scale with strong Democrats/Republicans coded as a 4, weak Democrats/Republicans coded as a 3, leaning Democrats/Republicans coded as a 2, and independent and/or apolitical respondents coded as a 1.

⁶ Marital status is dummy variable with respondents who are married coded as 1 and all other respondents coded as 0.

⁷ We include a term for age and age squared because of our expectation that the relationship between age and interest/participation is curvilinear (i.e. propensity to be interested/participate increases with age up to a point and then begins to decline).

⁸ For race/ethnicity, "white" serves as the reference category.

⁹ Specifically, we take the difference between the number of votes for the Democratic and Republican candidates and divide it by the total number of votes for the Democratic and Republican candidates. We then take that value and subtract it from 1 such that a higher value for the Presidential Competitiveness variable indicates greater competition in that state. For ANES respondents surveyed in a presidential election year, we use the two party presidential competitiveness measure from that election year. For ANES respondents surveyed in a midterm election year, we use the two party presidential competitiveness measure from the election two years prior. State vote data are from Dave Leip's "Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections" and accessed online at <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/>.

Importantly, we include state and year fixed effects in all estimations. The inclusion of state fixed effects allows us to account for all of the other ways in which states are different from one another that are constant over time (history, culture, etc.) and estimate the effect of party competition for control of government on political engagement within states. Including the year fixed effects allow us to account for events that might affect political engagement in all states uniformly in a given year. Both the state and year fixed effects are accomplished by including a dummy variable for every state and for every year in the sample (excluding one as a reference category). For all models, we report standard errors clustered by state to account for the fact that respondents nested within the same state are not statistically independent from one another (Primo, Jacobsmeier, and Milyo 2007; Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009).

Analysis

We model political engagement as a function of state party competition, the covariates discussed above, and state and year effects. Respondents' interest in elections (coded 1-3) and in public affairs in general (coded 1-4) are modeled using ordered probit, whether a respondent voted or not using probit, and the five point political participation additive index (because it is a count of the number of participatory acts a respondent engaged in and is over dispersed) using negative binomial regression. As discussed above, all four dependent variables are coded such that higher values indicate greater engagement. The coefficients for these four separate estimations are reported in Table 1. The top row of each column reports the coefficient for party competition in a respondent's state and reveals that the coefficient is positive and bounded above zero at conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < .05$) for all four measures of citizen political engagement. Simply put, more vigorous competition between political parties for

control of state government appears to boost political interest and participation among citizens living in that state. Interestingly, we find that the competitiveness of the presidential race in a respondent's state predicts higher levels of engagement for only one of the four measures (the political participation additive index). In addition, we find that (as previous studies lead us to expect) respondents with higher levels of education and income, more intense partisans, and respondents who are married report higher levels of political engagement.

[Table 1 about here]

Substantively, the magnitude of the effect of state party competition on citizens' political engagement is quite large. For example, Table 2 reports the substantive effect of state party competition on whether a respondent voted or not and compares it to other common individual-level predictors of political engagement (using the coefficient estimates from Column 3 of Table 1). As the Table indicates, varying state party competition from the 10th to the 90th percentile leads to a predicted increase in the likelihood of voting of 8.8 percentage points. By comparison, this effect is larger than the difference between married and unmarried respondents and roughly half the size of the effect of moving from a high school graduate to a college graduate in level of education and moving from the bottom quintile to the top quintile for income, two of the most powerful and commonly cited predictors of political engagement (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). In sum, when compared to traditional predictors of political engagement, the contextual effect of state party competition is substantively important.

[Table 2 about here]

Conclusion

As Robert Dahl (1971) famously argued, democracy requires the ability of citizens to transmit their opinions to government through political participation as well as real competition between candidates/parties for control of government offices. In this paper, we examine the linkage between these two axes of democracy by investigating if more intense party competition in the American states leads to greater political engagement among citizens. From a theoretical perspective, we expect that citizens will be more interested and engaged in politics when both political parties have a legitimate prospect of controlling state government and implementing their preferred policy agenda. Our empirical analysis provides broad support for this expectation – citizens are more interested in politics and participate at higher rates when party competition is more intense in their state. Competition is, simply put, beneficial for democratic citizenship.

Although the results presented in this paper suggest that competition is a net positive, we are also cognizant that competition could have unintended negative consequences (Brunell 2006). For example, in competitive states the proportion of citizens who are political “losers” (in the sense that they identify with the political party that does not control government) is higher than in uncompetitive states where large majorities of both citizens and legislators identify with the one dominant party. Therefore, future studies should investigate if citizens living in more competitive states (even though they have higher levels of political engagement) tend to have lower levels of political efficacy and trust in government. In other words, further research is necessary to examine if there is a “dark side” to increased party competition.

In addition, this study focuses on the degree of party competition for state government whereby every citizen living in a particular state in a given year experiences the same level of inter-party competition. Future investigations should examine if the competitiveness of the race

for one's own particular state house member and/or state senator has the same positive effect on citizen engagement. Moreover, future investigations should attempt to adjudicate for which level of government party competition has the strongest effect. For example, does living in a city with intense competition between parties for control of city government offices have the same effect as living in a state with high levels of party competition? Because of the nested political jurisdictions that most Americans find themselves living in, there is ample opportunity for further investigation of the potential implications that vigorous party competition can have for democratic citizenship.

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Table 1: State Party Competition and Citizen Political Engagement

	(1) Interest in Elections (1-3)	(2) Interest in Public Affairs (1-4)	(3) Did Respondent Vote? (0-1)	(4) Participation Count (0-5)
<i>Estimator:</i>	<i>Ordered probit</i>	<i>Ordered probit</i>	<i>Probit</i>	<i>Negative binomial regression</i>
State Party Competition	0.323* [0.105]	0.377* [0.100]	0.776* [0.207]	0.533* [0.147]
Presidential Competitiveness	-0.029 [0.076]	0.056 [0.092]	0.063 [0.119]	0.313* [0.119]
Strength of Partisanship	0.237* [0.009]	0.167* [0.007]	0.273* [0.012]	0.298* [0.012]
Education	0.171* [0.005]	0.205* [0.005]	0.215* [0.008]	0.183* [0.007]
Income	0.066* [0.007]	0.057* [0.010]	0.143* [0.010]	0.134* [0.009]
Female	-0.155* [0.015]	-0.347* [0.014]	-0.051* [0.021]	-0.197* [0.023]
Married	0.061* [0.014]	0.037* [0.015]	0.156* [0.023]	-0.032 [0.018]
Age	0.020* [0.002]	0.028* [0.003]	0.055* [0.003]	0.018* [0.004]
Age ²	-0.000* [0.000]	-0.000* [0.000]	-0.000* [0.000]	-0.000* [0.000]
African American	0.121* [0.025]	0.031 [0.031]	-0.011 [0.052]	0.046 [0.035]
Hispanic	-0.050 [0.029]	-0.058 [0.043]	-0.068* [0.034]	-0.095* [0.038]
Other Race	-0.058 [0.032]	-0.086* [0.040]	-0.304* [0.048]	-0.072 [0.076]

Constant	--	--	-3.490* [0.232]	-2.786* [0.150]
Cut Point #1	1.366* [0.133]	1.518* [0.151]	--	--
Cut Point #2	2.637* [0.135]	2.272* [0.150]	--	--
Cut Point #3	--	3.354* [0.149]	--	--
State Effects?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Effects?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pseudo R ²	.08	.08	.20	.06
N	39,085	31,974	39,102	33,367

Dependent variable listed above each column. All standard errors (reported beneath the coefficient in brackets) are adjusted for clustering by state. * denotes $p < .05$ using a two-tailed test.

Table 2: Comparing Substantive Effects on the Likelihood of Voting

Explanatory variable	Percentage point increase in probability of voting
<i>State Party Competition</i> 10 th percentile → 90 th percentile	8.8 [3.4, 5.6]
<i>Education</i> High school diploma → Bachelor's degree	19.3 [18.6, 20.1]
<i>Income</i> Bottom quintile → Top quintile	19.2 [17.3, 21.2]
<i>Marital Status</i> Not married → Married	5.4 [4.2, 6.5]

Cell entries are the predicted percentage point increase in the probability of voting when varying the independent variable as specified and holding all other variables at their mean values (generated using CLARIFY from the model specification in Table 1, Column 3). The 95% confidence interval for the predicted change is reported in brackets beneath the estimate.