

9/26/02

Thesis Proposal

**Title:**

The Importance of Money in Small Constituency Elections

**Abstract:**

The exorbitant levels of contributions and expenditures in recent campaigns have triggered a heated debate over the influence of money in American elections. This debate has led to extensive research at the national and state level about the significance of money in elections. However, very little research has been conducted on the role of money and elections in small constituencies. Understanding this relationship is important because, "one-fifth of all money spent in an election year is spent at the local level" (California Commission on Campaign Financing, 1989). To compensate for lack of research regarding small constituencies this thesis project will conduct a rigorous quantitative test and qualitative examination of the significance of money in these small grassroots campaigns.

**Statement of the Problem:**

The contemporary debate in political science surrounding the influence of money in elections has two distinct sides. One side sees money as the root of all evil. "Politics are corrupted and democracy is stolen from the people" (Gais, 1998 pg 1). The other side promotes the view that the ability to raise and spend money in elections is a fundamental liberty afforded by freedom of speech (Gais, 1998 pg 1). Money is necessary in all elections in order for the candidate to communicate their message to the voters. The importance of spending money to reach voters changes with district size, number of constituents, mass

media expenditures and so forth. As these factors increase, so does the amount of money needed to campaign. The question at hand is whether money plays a significant role in elections in small constituencies that do not face the expenses associated with increased district size.

This thesis project addresses the extent to which money influences small constituency elections. For the purposes of this paper, I define a small constituency conceptually to be one in which door-to-door voter contact and grassroots campaigning are both feasible and necessary components of a successful campaign. I am examining the electoral processes and financing of Vermont Legislative House races. These races exemplify the characteristics of elections in small constituencies. Vermont has some of the smallest electoral districts in the entire country. Campaigns in Vermont are run according to traditional grassroots campaign practices. Door-to-door campaigning is extremely important and necessary if a candidate has any hope of competing successfully in a Vermont election. Grassroots campaigning applies in other state legislative districts and small local city council races in the United States as well. Vermont's house constituency sizes are 4,059 for single-member districts and 8,120 for two-member districts.<sup>1</sup> However, I am hesitant to argue that these numbers define small constituencies because Vermont is an extreme case. That is why for the purposes of this study, the conceptual definition is best because it allows for flexibility in different contexts.

Vermont has a population of 608,827 (2000 Census) and is one of the smallest states in the Union. The combination of a small population and a large number of House seats results in some of the smallest districts in the country. Their size makes voter contact feasible on a door-to-door basis, thereby reducing the need for costly mass media, voter

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<sup>1</sup> To calculate these figures, the population of Vermont, which is 608,827 (2000 Census) is divided by the total number of House districts which 150. This yields the number 4,059 people per House district. For two-member districts, this number is multiplied by two, yielding 8,120.

contact and travel expenditures. However, if the door-to-door campaigns in a small constituency district, such as in Vermont House districts, demonstrate a distinct correlation between money and electoral success, then this finding would present evidence to the effect that there is something fundamental about the role of money in winning elections at any level. Thus, this thesis project will provide a rigorous test of the importance of money in all elections by testing for the impact of money on elections in which money is least likely to be important.

#### Previous Research:

This study will attempt to add to the amount of explanatory research on money's role in elections. On a broader level, much has been written on the subject of money in presidential and congressional elections. Spending patterns at the presidential and congressional levels have been widely researched, particularly in the past few years because the level of spending in them has skyrocketed since the 1996 Presidential campaigns. The 2000 elections marked the most expensive presidential and congressional elections to date.<sup>2</sup> Campaign finance reform has become a topic of much discussion and debate. The 1974 reforms passed by Congress have proved ineffective in controlling what they were intended to control, mainly special interest money and unmatchable levels of spending by candidates. This failure is due in part to the advent of soft money campaigning. Soft money is money not directly contributed or spent on a specific candidate. Rather, is it given to the party organization to run interest advocacy ads supporting the position of that party's candidate and get out the vote projects along with other voter contact and mobilization efforts.

Only recently has anyone delved into the study of financing elections at the state level. What state level research has been done has been conducted on a broad range of state

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<sup>2</sup> Nelson, Candice. In Financing the 2000 Election. Edited by David Magleby. Pg. 22

gubernatorial and legislative races. This research has uncovered commonalities between state and national level elections in areas of the importance of incumbency, spending levels and voter contact. However, this research is still mainly in states with large and moderate level districts and has neglected to focus primarily on small constituencies. A study of small constituency elections and the importance of money is necessary to add to our knowledge of the role of money in elections being that a number of state and local elections are in what are defined to be small constituencies. To date, the literature has not examined the role of money in small constituencies. This thesis project will contribute to the literature a rigorous test of the significance of money in small constituency elections using Vermont House legislative races as a case study.

At present, there is one state level campaign finance legal battle. This landmark decision is known as Landell v Sorrell in which a number of interests challenged Vermont's 1997 campaign finance law known as Act 64. Act 64 is unique because it focuses on limiting campaign expenditures. In this judicial challenge the federal district court upheld Vermont's campaign finance regulations on contribution levels. In his expert testimony, Anthony Gierzynski testified that from his research on Vermont elections, Act 64 did not impose any undue restrictions upon candidates that would limit their ability to campaign effectively. Many candidates did not raise or spend anywhere near the amount of money at which the law set the financial cap. For State House candidates, that cap for contributions is no more than \$200 from an individual or political party. The expenditure limits are \$2000 for challengers/open seat elections (\$3000 for two-member district) and 85% of that for incumbents (\$1800 for one-member districts, \$2,700 for two-member districts). However, the federal district court struck down as unconstitutional the provision of the bill that imposes

mandatory spending limits and the contribution limits on political parties and out of state contributors. A three-judge panel in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the district court's ruling on the spending limits and on the contribution limits for political parties. The decision of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Circuit Court has been further appealed.

**Significance:**

Why do we care about what happens in a small constituency campaign? First and foremost is the question of the importance of money. If in these small districts, places in which money would be least expected to have a significant impact, it in fact does, that would present evidence that money is fundamental in elections at all levels. The findings of this project will further enhance our understanding of not just elections in small constituencies but in all elections meaning that politicians, activists and citizens alike all have a great deal at stake in what happens in small constituency campaigns.

Additionally, the states are important in and of themselves. As of late, the national government has demonstrated a trend towards the devolution of power. Devolution means giving more power and leverage to the states, getting away from centralized federal power. This is significant because the states are being afforded much more power and have the potential to significantly influence national politics. States also currently have some abilities to influence who controls Congress and the way in which national level politics operate. They achieve this influence through their redistricting abilities. Redistricting is required of state houses once every ten years. It consists of redrawing the electoral districts in the state to adjust for population shifts in order to maintain the constitutional requirement of one person equals one vote. The combination of devolution increasing state power and their

current redistricting abilities signify an increasing amount of state level influence and power throughout American politics.

Using Vermont as a case study from which to examine the importance of money in small constituencies will also be valuable. Vermont elections will be studied in-depth from within the framework of Vermont politics and campaign practices. Since Vermont House districts are smaller than many city council districts around the country, Vermont House races present good cases of small constituency campaigns. This thesis will provide a clear and coherent examination of Vermont elections, in the context of Vermont law and characteristics.

However, if this study does not find a major significance of money in small constituency elections, the findings will still have important implications. There is the conception among some people that small elections are more democratic and clean. Finding that money is not important could reinforce this image by implying that elections are not bought on the smaller level and perhaps larger elections should more closely align themselves with the principles of small constituency elections.

All of this will have implications for campaign finance reform. Up until this point reform has been woefully ineffective due, in part, to loopholes in the laws and the use of soft money. Could the focus of campaign finance legislation reform be incorrectly oriented? Is there justification for campaign finance reform laws, such as that in Vermont? If we can fully understand the role and importance of money in the smallest and most basic elections, this understanding can lead to more realistic and effective reforms, either on a state-by-state basis or on the broader national level.

**Proposed Methodology:**

Through the combination of literature review, independent data gathering, hands on research and field experience, I will develop a comprehensive understanding of what it takes to get elected in Vermont. My advisor is Professor Anthony Gierzynski, a nationally recognized expert on state legislative elections, as well as campaign finance. I have assisted Professor Gierzynski over the past three years in previous research projects involving finances at the state level in the Vermont campaign finance case, Landell v Sorrell and a similar case in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Professor Gierzynski has fully committed himself to aiding me in my research through both availability and guidance. He is willing to meet anytime to work on my thesis. Already, we have been meeting to discuss my questions and progress on a weekly basis

To research the influence of money in small constituencies, both quantitative and qualitative research methods will be used. I have been reading what has been written to date regarding both congressional and state elections. Through numerous books and articles from political publications, I have come to have a comprehensive understanding of the status of the research and of the broad policies and themes that are accepted by the political community in regards to the study of elections. To date, I have read and reviewed three books, the findings of Landell v Sorrell and two articles. I have two more books to review and at least four more articles. In order to get an inside view of the workings of Vermont House elections, I am currently engaged in participant observation by serving as campaign manager for Professor Gierzynski's Vermont House candidacy. Thus far, I have assisted him in organizational projects, literature development and door-to-door campaigning. I have

acquired several knowledgeable contacts at the Vermont Democratic Headquarters on Bank Street who can assist me in understanding how these campaigns progress.

Since this is a study of Vermont elections, I am focusing primarily on information pertaining to elections here at home. This is where the quantitative component of my research is important. I am compiling expenditure and contribution data for all Vermont House candidates from the 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2002 elections. The expenditure data is being entered into five large databases which were created using Microsoft Access. This data will provide me with information on who and what candidates spend money, as well as how much. From this data, I will abstract statistical models that will isolate the significance of money, while controlling for other factors, such as partisanship, district size and so forth. To date, I have my databases complete for the 1994, 1996 and 1998 elections and I have begun entering data for the 2002 elections. I plan to complete the 2000 expenditure data on November 30<sup>th</sup>.

*Timeline:*

*Research-* This portion cannot be fully completed until all of the 2002 expenditure data has been entered, which will be by January 15<sup>th</sup>. The Vermont elections are on November 5<sup>th</sup>, thereby completing my hands-on experience of campaigning. All research (with the exception noted above) will be completed by November 30<sup>th</sup>.

*Writing-* My thesis will have seven, potentially eight chapters. The chapter pertaining to previous literature and its evaluation as well as the Methods section of this thesis will be completed by January 1<sup>st</sup>. Based on my projected workload next semester, I feel that writing the bulk of the paper from January to mid-March will be achievable and in my best interests.

Review/Revisions- As drafts are completed, Professor Gierzynski will review and comment on them. I plan to defend my thesis in mid-April therefore, all revisions will be completed by late March.

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