

Local political institutions and electoral context influence levels of campaign spending in mayoral elections

Campaign spending is a perennial concern in both national and local elections, especially since the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court ruling. Proponents argue that more spending increases interest in elections, while detractors claim that it creates biases in representation and public policy. Using an original dataset, [Aaron C. Weinschenk](#) examines campaign spending levels in mayoral elections, finding that the electoral context and local political institutions play the most important role in shaping levels of campaign spending across city elections. From these results, he identifies several ways to reduce campaign spending in mayoral elections, but notes that these changes may have unintended consequences. If levels of campaign spending decline due to institutional changes, cities elections, which often suffer from low voter turnout rates, might experience even lower levels of turnout.



Jesse Unruh, former Speaker of the California State Assembly, famously described money as the “mother’s milk of politics.” And while it has long been known that money matters in politics, the role of campaign spending is something that consistently garners attention and elicits debate. Within the context of national politics, there are frequently debates about the role of money in political campaigns. The same arguments that characterize debates over campaign spending on a national level extend to local politics as well, despite the fact that local campaign activities, and local politics more generally, are often overlooked. Those who think that money plays too large of a role in elections often make the argument that money buys influence and may therefore lead to biases in representation and public policy. People who support limiting the role of money in elections have also pointed out that the large sums of money often needed to conduct competitive campaigns make it exceedingly difficult for qualified candidates to run for elective office. Recently, such arguments have captured the attention of local policymakers across the United States. For instance, in a 2012 article in *The Seattle Times*, Seattle City Councilmember Mike O’Brien [argued](#) that “We can strengthen our local democratic institutions by reducing the role that money plays in local elections.”

Although many people have recognized the potential problems associated with campaign spending, a number of analysts have argued that the benefits associated with high levels of campaign spending actually exceed the drawbacks. Indeed, one of the most consistent findings from the literature on campaign effects is that as campaign spending increases, so too does [interest and participation](#) in elections. Given the positive effect of campaign spending on citizen engagement in politics, many have argued that high levels of campaign spending should be *encouraged* during elections. This idea has received some attention from local policymakers. Mayor Lee Leffingwell of Austin, Texas, for example, recently [pointed out](#) that candidates need to be able to raise and spend “enough money to effectively reach anyone outside the small group of people who regularly vote in city elections.”



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In light of the debate about campaign spending, it is crucial to understand the factors that foster or inhibit spending in local elections. Why do levels of campaign spending vary from city to city in mayoral elections? The question of what factors influence overall levels of campaign spending is particularly relevant to those who are interested in identifying policies or institutions that could be changed in order to reduce or increase levels of campaign spending in local elections. Local political institutions, though often quite stable over time, are humanly devised and can be altered to promote different outcomes.

In order to learn about why campaign spending levels vary across cities in the United States, Thomas Holbrook and I constructed an original dataset containing information on campaign spending levels in mayoral elections. In total, we gathered information on 341 U.S. mayoral elections occurring in 132 cities from 1996-2011. Our research focused on the impact of three sets of factors on total campaign spending in each of the 341 elections: political institutions, electoral context, and city characteristics.

Overall, we found evidence that local political institutions and measures of the electoral context played the most important role in shaping levels of campaign spending across city elections. In terms of institutional factors, our analysis indicated that those factors that could make some offices more attractive or “valuable” than others had higher levels of campaign spending. Specifically, cities in which the scope of municipal government is relatively great (measured as the number of city government employees per city resident), cities with a mayor-council form of government, and cities with longer mayoral terms tend to have higher levels of spending than other cities. The substantive effects of these variables are substantial and highlight the importance of city institutional arrangements to spending patterns. For instance, per capita spending in cities with a mayor-council form of government is approximately \$1.57 higher than in other cities (those with council-manager or commission form), and spending in cities with a four-year mayoral term is approximately \$2.61 higher than in cities with a two-year term. Interestingly, election type (partisan vs. nonpartisan) and election timing (on or off-cycle with a presidential or Congressional election) had no discernible influence on spending levels.

In addition to investigating the impact of city political institutions, we looked at the impact of electoral context on overall campaign spending. We focused on the experience of the candidate pool (measured as the number of candidates with previous elective experience), whether a city had a runoff election, and whether a city had an open-seat mayoral contest or one where the incumbent mayor was on the ballot. Consistent with our expectations, we found that elections featuring an experienced candidate pool, cities holding runoff mayoral elections, and cities with open-seat contests (no incumbent on the ballot) have higher levels of campaign spending. These measures are all indicators of electoral competitiveness, so the positive relationships make a great deal of sense. It is worth noting that these three variables remain important even after accounting for a more traditional measure of political competition—margin of victory between the top two candidates—which also exerts a strong impact on spending levels.

The influence of campaign spending in U.S. elections is a topic that has received (and continues to receive) a great deal of attention from the media, ordinary citizens, and policy makers. Much of the commentary (and debate) on campaign spending focuses on national and state level elections, with little attention devoted to campaign spending in local elections. Even at the local level, there are clearly different perspectives on how damaging or beneficial campaign spending is during elections. Indeed, a number of policy makers across the United States have voiced concerns about high levels of campaign spending in city council and mayoral contests. At the same time, some local officials have tried to develop ways of increasing local campaign spending, in part because higher levels of campaign spending stimulate citizen engagement in local electoral politics.

We found that a number of institutional and contextual variables that we considered had important effects on campaign spending. It is worth noting that a number of the factors that we considered are humanly devised institutions and could be changed to promote different patterns of campaign spending. For instance, longer mayoral terms tend to lead to higher levels of campaign spending and could be reduced in order to diminish local campaign spending. In addition, our analysis indicated that cities with a mayor-council form of government experience higher levels of mayoral campaign spending than their counterparts. Changing to another form of government is something that could be done to promote different spending patterns. Although there has been a great deal of concern about the negative impact of partisan elections, it is important to recall that our analysis indicated that partisan mayoral elections were no more expensive than nonpartisan elections. Moving from

partisan elections to nonpartisan elections for the purpose of reducing the role of money in politics, then, is unlikely to be effective.

Despite the above observations about changing policies or institutions to alter spending patterns, it is important to point out, especially to those who think that campaign spending has reached excessive levels in local elections, that changing local political institutions to foster lower levels of campaign spending might have unintended consequences. If levels of campaign spending decline due to institutional changes, cities might experience lower levels of voter turnout (since, as previously mentioned, campaign spending has an [important impact on local turnout](#)). Given how low local turnout is across the United States on average (voter turnout in our data set was 25.8 percent on average), this may not be a desirable outcome, especially since low turnout rates are associated with [biases in political representation](#) and [public policy](#). The potential ills of high campaign spending in local elections need to be balanced against gains that are realized by trying to reduce the role of campaign money in local electoral politics. There are clear trade-offs for policymakers to consider.

*This post is based on the article “[The Determinants of Campaign Spending in Mayoral Elections](#),” which is forthcoming in *State and Local Government Review*.*

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