

**Campaigning in Lilliput: Money's Influence in  
Small and Mid-Sized City Elections**

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**Abstract**

Research on federal, state and big-city elections has concluded that campaign spending is a necessary but not sufficient condition for electoral success: even though the best financed candidates do not always win, aspirants for office need to raise and spend funds to mount competitive campaigns. But scholars have not explored whether this pattern holds in small to mid-sized cities. Money influences elections in all jurisdictions, but it is plausible that as cities get smaller campaign finance dynamics change. In this paper I explore whether campaign finance dynamics are different in small and mid-sized cities, using a dataset of 61 California cities. Despite reason to think that they will vary, I find that campaign finance patterns are similar across cities of various sizes. Few city council candidates are able to mount credible campaigns without money, even in small cities. Incumbents enjoy high re-election rates across all cities, and levels of competition may even decrease with constituency size.

**Introduction**

About one-third of Americans live in cities with populations between 25,000 and 500,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau 2015, 3), yet we know very little about politics in these cities. There is an increasing body of research on suburban politics (e.g. Gainsborough 2001, Oliver 2001, Oliver and Ha 2007), but not much on elections (save for Oliver 2012). Even though elections in small cities may be low-key with minimal stakes, collectively who gets elected has significant metropolitan-wide impact on policies such as growth, transportation, and housing. Further, studying elections in small jurisdictions can increase our understanding of electoral dynamics more generally by providing a diverse and varied context where key issues in the electoral politics literature can be explored.

This article focuses on one aspect of local elections: campaign finance patterns. Does the role and importance of money vary across different-sized cities? There is little discussion in the local campaign finance literature of how city size influences the role of money, focusing instead on the nature of fundraising coalitions (Adams 2007, Fleischmann and Stein 1998, Hogan and Simpson 2001, Krebs 2005a, Krebs 2005b, Krebs and Pelissero 2001), the timing of fundraising (Fuchs, Adler, and Mitchell 2000; Krebs and Holian 2005), the influence of money on electoral outcomes (Gierzynski, Kleppner, and Lewis 1998; Krebs 1998) and the effects of campaign finance reform (Kraus 2011). Most of the research to date has been on large cities and thus treats size as

a constant, but there is good reason to think that the number of voters in a jurisdiction influences electoral dynamics. Below I fill this gap by exploring how size might influence campaign finance dynamics, specifically how it affects the amount of money spent, the influence of campaign spending on electoral outcomes, levels of competitiveness, and incumbency advantage.

A central conclusion in the campaign finance literature is that money is a necessary but not sufficient condition for candidates to win elective office. Even though the best-financed candidates do not always win, raising a threshold sum of money is necessary to mount a competitive campaign; without money, candidates cannot win (Jacobson 1997). Evidence suggests that this pattern holds for congressional, state, and big-city elections, but it is unclear whether it is true in small and mid-sized cities. On the one hand it is plausible that money will be less important in smaller jurisdictions. As the number of voters decreases, candidates can avoid paid advertising and professional staff, instead directly contacting voters through canvassing and community events. This may result in elections where campaign finance plays a minimal role. On the other hand, given how little attention small-city elections receive, money could matter even more, as candidates will need to spend funds to communicate with voters who are not voluntarily following the election in the media. If this is the case, spending a threshold amount of funds would be necessary to mount a competitive campaign. I find that the “necessary but not sufficient” framework holds for cities of all sizes. Even in very small cities most competitive candidates spend funds; face-to-face canvassing may be possible in small constituencies but most candidates also spend money in their electoral bids. As with larger jurisdictions, the best financed candidates do not always win in small and mid-sized cities, and there does not appear to be much of an impact of constituency size on the influence of campaign spending on electoral outcomes.

City size could also influence competition and incumbency advantage. As city size decreases candidates need less money to run, potentially reducing the campaign finance barrier, encouraging more candidates to run, and thus increasing competition. On the other hand, lower stakes in small cities may lead to fewer candidates. The analysis below provides support for the latter argument, as smaller cities are generally less competitive than larger ones (although this pattern does not hold in cities with district elections). A reduced campaign finance barrier does not translate into more candidates or more competitive elections. As for incumbency, similar to state and national elections incumbents enjoy re-election rates of over 80 percent regardless of constituency size. That said, I find that incumbent fundraising advantage is slightly less in cities of under 50,000 registered voters, even though their re-election rates are similar to those in larger cities.

This research is largely exploratory. Limitations in the data prevent conclusive tests of hypotheses regarding the effects of size on campaign finance patterns: as with most campaign finance datasets it does not have all the information needed to isolate the effects of campaign spending on electoral dynamics and outcomes. Plus, variation in institutional variables adds additional challenges to modelling campaign finance effects. Because there has been so little research on small and mid-sized cities this paper’s goal is to develop a basic understanding of campaign finance patterns by offering preliminary assessments of the role of money in small and mid-sized cities. Despite the limitations, this dataset can provide insights into the effects of constituency size on campaign finance. With 61 cities and 1,400 candidates (almost 800 of which were major candidates in competitive races), there is a large enough  $n$  to establish patterns and illustrate how campaign patterns vary across different-sized cities.

## Data

This analysis uses data from city council races in 61 California cities (see the Appendix for a full list of cities). This was a convenience sample; cities were chosen based on the availability of campaign finance data.<sup>1</sup> Vote totals were obtained from the California Election Data Archive (CEDA), campaign finance data acquired from city clerk websites, and registration data from the California Secretary of State. Total expenditures for each candidate were calculated by adding direct candidate expenditures to independent expenditures spent on their behalf.<sup>2</sup> The time period for the study is 2008–2015, although some cities only have data for one or two elections. The threshold for itemizing expenditures in California is \$2,000 in total spending per election; candidates below that figure are listed as having zero expenditures.

Cities in California vary in how they organize their elections. Some cities use at-large, multi-member districts while others employ single-member districts with runoffs if no candidate receives over 50 percent of the vote in the primary.<sup>3</sup> A few also have hybrid at-large/district systems where each district is represented by a councilmember elected at-large. Most of the hypotheses examined below focus on the size of the constituency rather than city size; the number of voters that candidates need to contact is the most plausible factor that could lead to variation in electoral dynamics. However, as we will see below spending patterns are different in at-large versus district elections, and thus I examine them separately. I break down each into four categories according to the number of registered voters:<sup>4</sup> less than 25,000 RV, 25,000 to 50,000, 50,000 to 100,000, and over 100,000. Among cities with district elections, there was only one with districts between 50,000 and 100,000 RV (San Diego) and one with districts over 100,000 RV (Los Angeles). All of the other categories have at least four cities.

Most of the analyses below focus on competitive elections, defined as when the winner received less than 60 percent of the vote. Multimember elections were considered competitive if the winner with the lowest vote total outpolled the loser with the highest vote total by less than a 6:4 ratio, effectively measuring how close a losing candidate came to obtaining a seat. In competitive elections where there were more than two candidates, I only included “major candidates” in the analysis, defined as receiving 80 percent of an equal vote share. In a two-person race, an equal vote share is 50 percent, and 80 percent of that is 40 percent, the standard cutoff for a serious contender. In a three-person race, an equal vote share is 33 percent, with 80 percent being 26.4 percent. This eliminates “minor” candidates while taking into account that the number of candidates affects what constitutes a “good” showing at the polls (receiving 20 percent of the vote in an eight-person race is an impressive showing; 20 percent in a two-person race is not).

Limiting the pool of candidates to just major candidates in competitive races significantly reduces their numbers: there were a total of 1,456 candidates who ran in these cities but only 779

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<sup>1</sup> San Francisco has electronic campaign finance disclosure but was excluded from this analysis because it is a combined city/county government (the only one in California) that technically elects county supervisors and has fundamentally different powers than the other cities included in the study.

<sup>2</sup> Independent expenditures made in opposition to a candidate were not factored into the analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Primaries and runoffs are treated as separate elections in this analysis.

<sup>4</sup> For single-member districts I divided the number of registered voters by the number of districts for a rough approximation (exact registration data were not available).

meet the two criteria described above.<sup>5</sup> Such limitations, however, are necessary to accurately gauge campaign finance patterns, as spending in noncompetitive elections (or by minor candidates) is not reflective of the actual cost of running a campaign. For example, incumbents who face minimal opposition (or run unopposed) might not engage in serious campaigns, spending far less than what would be necessary if they had credible opponents. It is also necessary to exclude minor candidates, as they are often “vanity” candidates that have no intention or capacity to mount a competitive campaign. Further, the fact that some candidates run low-budget campaigns but do very poorly doesn’t tell us anything about campaign finance patterns; what we want to know is what it takes to run a competitive campaign. By limiting our analysis to just major candidates in competitive races we can better gauge the necessity of campaign spending and its influence on electoral outcomes. I will only include the entire pool of candidates and races in our discussion of competitiveness and incumbency advantage.

## Analysis

### Is Campaign Spending Necessary in Small Cities?

Conventional wisdom in the campaign finance literature is that spending money is a necessary condition for mounting a competitive campaign. Candidates need money primarily to pay for advertising to convey their message to voters: since voters don’t pay much attention to elections, candidates need to run television, newspaper, and internet ads to communicate. Candidates will need less money as the number of voters decreases; communicating one’s message to 5,000 voters will be cheaper than doing so to 100,000 (Hogan and Hamm 1998). What is not clear is whether campaign spending will decrease proportionately to the number of voters, leading to dollars spent per voter to be roughly equal across jurisdictions, or whether it will increase or decrease exponentially. Each of these patterns suggests a different answer to whether spending money is necessary even in small jurisdictions.

It is plausible that as constituency size decreases, money spent will go down not just in absolute terms but also on a per-voter basis (in other words, campaign spending will decrease exponentially). In smaller jurisdictions candidates’ mode of communicating with voters may change. Rather than relying on paid advertising and media exposure, they could use face-to-face contact, community meetings, and door-to-door canvassing to convey their message (Oliver 2012). If this is the case, once jurisdictions become small enough for effective campaigning without paid advertising, dollars spent per voter will go down significantly and candidates will no longer need money to run a competitive campaign. Thus, given that paid advertising is the primary driver of campaign spending, we can hypothesize that as constituency size decreases there will be a threshold at which campaign spending per voter will decrease exponentially and money will no longer be a necessary condition for running a competitive campaign.

On the other hand, candidates in small constituencies may have just as great, if not greater, need for campaign funds given less media attention and voter interest. Even if candidates can convey messages without funds, the political discourse may still be dominated by paid communication from well-funded candidates, prompting candidates to supplement grassroots campaigning with direct mail and other forms of advertising (Strachan 2003). Further, candidates in small

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<sup>5</sup> Most cities had at least one competitive election; there were only four (Carlsbad, San Marino, San Mateo, and West Sacramento) that did not. Thus, for most of the analyses below there were 57 cities included (all 61 cities were included in the analysis of competitiveness and incumbency).

jurisdictions may suffer from diseconomies of scale, as expenses such as a campaign manager and a campaign office cost the same as if they were running in larger jurisdictions (Shaw 2004, 75). Also, certain means of communicating with voters may be more efficient in larger jurisdictions. For example, when candidates buy television advertising, they must purchase it for the entire metropolitan area, and a TV spot in a given metro area will cost the same regardless of whether their electoral district contains 300,000 or 500,000 voters. If candidates choose to use television, they can communicate with more voters for the same cost in larger electoral districts. Thus, it is possible that even though candidates need fewer campaign funds (in raw dollars) in smaller jurisdictions, they will spend just as much (if not more) per voter and that spending will be just as necessary to mount a credible campaign.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics relevant to these arguments. The first column provides average expenditures per registered voter, a figure that consistently decreases with size among at-large elections (although one-way ANOVA tests indicate that these differences are not statistically significant). Even though the raw dollar amounts are less in smaller cities, candidates spend just as much per voter. Similarly, in district elections there is no clear pattern of candidates spending less per voter in smaller districts. The most expensive elections are in the largest districts, in Los Angeles, but ANOVA tests again indicate that the difference is not statistically significant.

The second and third columns of Table 1 identify the percentage of candidates who were competitive and successful with less than \$2,000 in total expenditures (\$2,000 was used because it is the threshold under which candidates do not need to report itemized expenditures—it is not possible to choose a threshold lower than that). Not surprisingly, there are few competitive candidates who spent less than \$2,000 in cities over 25,000 registered voters. What is more surprising is how few competitive candidates ran minimally funded campaigns in cities of less than 25,000 RV. Such campaigns are possible: in at-large elections just under 10 percent of candidates spent less than \$2,000. But it is not typical: even in small cities most competitive candidates raise and spend funds. Given the number of small cities in the sample, it is hard to identify a specific threshold under which raising campaign funds is not necessary to be competitive. The two smallest cities in the sample are Cotati (just under 4,000 RV) and Corte Madero (just under 6,000 RV), and all six competitive candidates in these cities spent less than \$2,000. However, the other two cities with fewer than 10,000 RV (Marina and San Anselmo, both with approximately 8,000 RV) featured only one competitive candidate (out of 19 total) with less than \$2,000 in spending. The six cities with 10,000 to 20,000 RV (Belmont, Monterey, Burlingame, Atascadero, Seal Beach, and Benicia) only had two candidates below the \$2,000 threshold among them. These figures suggest that the threshold over which candidates need to raise campaign funds is low—perhaps only 5,000 to 8,000 registered voters. A larger dataset with more small cities is needed to explore the precise threshold, although it is clear from this data that even in small cities, most competitive candidates spend money.

Table 2 further assesses the effects of constituency size on campaign spending with an OLS regression predicting expenditures per RV. Again focusing on serious candidates in competitive elections, the dependent variable is the log of expenditures per RV (to eliminate a right-hand tail in the distribution caused by a handful of big spending candidates). The variable of interest is the size of the electoral district, and also included are four control variables that are likely to have an influence on a candidate's expenditures: incumbency status, whether the candidate is running for

**Table 1. Expenditures per Registered Voter  
Major Candidates in Competitive Elections**

	Average expenditures per registered voter	% of candidates between 0 and \$2,000 expenditures	% of winners between 0 and \$2,000 expenditures*	# of candidates
<i>At-large elections</i>				
Fewer than 25,000 RV	\$.94	9.2	9.8	76
25,000 to 50,000 RV	\$.81	0.5	0.0	183
50,000 to 100,000 RV	\$.79	2.2	0.0	134
Over 100,000 RV	\$.74	3.3	0.0	61
<i>District elections</i>				
Fewer than 25,000 RV	\$2.79	3.7	4.9	82
25,000 to 50,000 RV	\$2.98	0.0	0.0	135
50,000 to 100,000 RV	\$2.73	0.0	0.0	44
Over 100,000 RV	\$3.53	1.6	0.0	64

\*Includes candidates who advanced to a runoff

**Table 2. The Effect of Electoral District Size on Expenditures Per Registered Voter**

Number of registered voters (1,000s)	-.001 (.001)
Incumbent	.309 (.130)*
Open seat candidate	.267 (.073)***
District election	1.301 (.130)***
Household Income (1,000s)	-.004 (.003)
Constant	-.638 (.287)*
Adjusted R-Squared	.153
N	779

Dependent variable is the log of expenditures per registered voter (major candidates in competitive races only). Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

an open seat,<sup>6</sup> the wealth of the city, and whether it was a district election. Electoral district size has no effect on candidate spending, which is driven largely by whether the candidate was running in a district or an open seat. These results provide further evidence that even though raw dollar amounts are less in small cities, candidates still spend comparable amounts to communicate their message per voter.

### **Does Campaign Spending Matter Less in Small Cities?**

The other half of the “necessary but not sufficient” formulation is that outspending one’s opponent does not guarantee victory; spending a threshold amount of funds is necessary but spending more than your opponent is not. We have reason to think, however, that in small jurisdictions spending more than one’s opponent will assure a victory. Small city elections are low-information and low-interest affairs. Because voters are not paying much attention, they may be more easily swayed by paid advertising and the name recognition that it garners. Name recognition is critically important in low-information campaigns (Lieske 1989), and thus the more money candidates have to increase their name recognition the more votes they will receive. Further, the lack of partisan cues in California local elections may leave voters more susceptible to advertising cues, allowing candidates to effectively “buy” votes. It may also be the case that voters will view campaign spending, particularly paid advertising, as a cue indicating viability and seriousness. As Hibbing and Theiss Morse (2002) demonstrate, voters fear being duped by politicians and thus they may be on the lookout for cues that a candidate is not serious or legitimate (see Lieske (1989) for more on the role of legitimacy in local elections). Voters may be hesitant to support candidates who lack campaign funds for fear that it signals an absence of supporters (and given the paucity of polling in local elections, they need to rely on such cues). For all of these reasons candidates may be able to ensure victory in small jurisdictions by outspending their opponents.

A competing hypothesis is that in smaller jurisdictions voters will be more likely to have personal connections with candidates or hear about them through word of mouth (Oliver and Ha 2007), undermining the importance of paid advertising. If candidates are canvassing door-to-door, appearing at community events, and otherwise directly contacting voters, paid advertising may be ineffective; voters will base their judgment on personal interaction (or the interaction of friends and neighbors) rather than glossy mailers or other advertising. Further, in low-turnout local elections the electorate will likely comprise more informed and engaged citizens who will have a greater chance of having information about the candidates. Supporting this line of thinking, Oliver and Ha (2007, 398) and Oliver (2000, 2012) found that voters in smaller suburbs are more likely to be politically interested than those in larger suburbs. If these patterns exist, “buying” votes through campaign spending may be exceedingly difficult and campaign spending will have minimal impact on electoral outcomes in small jurisdictions.

If voters are swayed by paid advertising or use campaign spending as a cue, we should see the best-funded candidates usually winning in small jurisdictions, and a trend where the smaller the jurisdiction the greater the influence of money on outcomes. If voters use other sources of information, as jurisdictions get smaller money should have less of an impact on electoral outcomes. Table 3 provides figures on the percentage of candidates who won their races despite be-

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<sup>6</sup> There are three types of candidates: incumbents, challengers, and open seat candidates. Thus, challengers are the excluded category in this regression.

**Table 3. Campaign Spending and Electoral Outcomes  
Competitive Races Only**

	% of winning candidates who were outspent	# of winning candidates*
<i>At-large elections</i>		
Less than 25,000 RV	51.0	51
25,000 to 50,000 RV	37.4	107
50,000 to 100,000 RV	38.2	68
Over 100,000 RV	59.3	27
<i>District elections</i>		
Less than 25,000 RV	26.8	41
25,000 to 50,000 RV	36.2	69
50,000 to 100,000 RV	26.9	26
Over 100,000 RV	27.6	29

\*Includes candidates advancing to a runoff (“outspent” being defined as being outspent by a candidate who did not advance).

ing outspent by at least one opponent. A candidate was considered to be outspent if at least one of the losing candidates spent more than 110 percent of their total expenditures. For purposes of this analysis, “winning” is defined as either winning the race or advancing to a runoff; in the latter case, a candidate was considered “outspent” if one of the candidates that did not advance spent more.

Regardless of city size, money was correlated with success: the majority of candidates who were outspent lost. However, there was a sizable minority of candidates who won despite being outspent. In at-large elections this ranged from 37 percent to 59 percent, and in district elections from 26 percent to 36 percent. These figures undermine the argument that money will be determinative in low-information local contests. Spending more than one’s opponents does not guarantee success, and candidates cannot always “buy” elections in small jurisdictions because they are low-interest affairs. Further, there does not appear to be a trend regarding constituency size. Among at-large elections, the smallest and largest cities had the greatest percentage of winning candidates who were outspent, which is not consistent with either of the arguments above. Figures for district elections were similar across different-sized cities except for those in the 25,000 to 50,000 RV range.

I explore these patterns further with a regression predicting candidate vote share. Establishing a causal relationship between electoral outcomes and campaign spending is problematic because, as many scholars have noted, fundraising is influenced by the likelihood of electoral success: candidates who are perceived as frontrunners will have an easier time raising funds (Fuchs, Adler, and Mitchell 2000; Gerber 1998; Green and Krasno 1988; Erikson and Palfrey 2000; Jacobson 1990). However, this may be less of a problem in low-information local races where donors are less sure of who is likely to win; absent the extensive polling done in state and national elections, “frontrunner” status may not be obvious. This is particularly likely in multimember council elections where everyone runs against everyone else. Table 4 presents regressions predicting candidate vote share, with the caveat that it is unclear to what extent the estimates are bi-

**Table 4. Predicting Candidate Vote Share**

	<b>&lt;25,000</b>	<b>25,000 to 50,000</b>	<b>50,000 to 100,000</b>	<b>Over 100,000</b>
Expenditures per RV	.012 (.004)**	.016 (.002)***	.011 (.003)**	.021 (.004)***
Incumbent	.063 (.014)***	.054 (.009)***	.051 (.012)***	.050 (.022)*
Open seat	.011 (.008)	.013 (.006)*	.010 (.008)	-.030 (.012)*
multimember election	-.086 (.015)***	-.060 (.011)***	-.138 (.015)***	-.036 (.020)
Number of candidates	-.040 (.003)***	-.033 (.002)***	-.020 (.002)***	-.019 (.002)***
Constant	.489 (.018)***	.443 (.011)***	.454 (.012)***	.387 (.028)***
Adjusted R-Squared	.718	.752	.827	.741
N	158	318	178	125

Dependent variable is percentage of the vote received (major candidates in competitive races only). Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

ased due to causation running both ways.<sup>7</sup> I ran four regressions, one for each category of electoral district size. In addition to spending per voter, I include five control variables: incumbency status, open seats, whether it was a multimember election, and the number of candidates (the more candidates running the lower one's likely vote share).

If campaign spending matters less in small cities, it should have minimal explanatory power for vote share. Yet we see that even in the smallest jurisdictions expenditures per voter have a statistically significant impact on vote share; candidates with higher spending typically receive a greater share of the vote. That pattern is consistent across all size groups. Spending does have a bigger impact on vote share in electoral districts with over 100,000 registered voters but only marginally so. These results undermine both arguments made above. Campaign spending still influences electoral outcomes in small cities; on the other hand, it does not have a significantly greater impact on outcomes as electoral district size decreases. Fully assessing the merits of the arguments above would require additional data to control for other factors that could influence the role of money (such as media coverage), but this first effort suggests that the number of registered voters does not have a substantial impact on the importance of money for electoral success.

Tables 1 through 4 make a compelling case that campaign finance patterns in small and mid-sized cities mimic those in large cities, states, and the federal government: money is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. Even though there are plenty of reasons to think that small cities would be different—that candidates can win without money or that money will matter more—there is little evidence that they substantially depart from the norm.

<sup>7</sup> Ideally, we would want to sort through the causal relationship through a two-stage least squares regression that uses variables to predict fundraising capacity (such as past political experience) as well as control variables for other influences on electoral success (such as endorsements). Unfortunately, the current dataset lacks suitable predictor variables.

## Size, Competitiveness, and Incumbency

The literature on state and federal elections frequently identifies campaign finance demands as being a central barrier facing candidates who wish to run for office (Clawson, Neustadt, and Weller 1998); one common explanation for why many congressional and state legislative elections are not competitive is that the campaign finance hurdle prevents otherwise suitable candidates from mounting serious campaigns. If this barrier is lower in small jurisdictions (in terms of raw dollar amounts), then candidates will have an easier time raising sufficient funds from family, friends, or personal income rather than wealthy donors. Given a diminished campaign finance barrier, we should expect more individuals to run for office and a greater percentage of them to have the capacity to mount competitive campaigns as city size decreases.

A countervailing dynamic is that the value and prestige of holding local office diminishes as localities get smaller, leading to fewer individuals wanting to run as candidates. The campaign finance barrier becomes irrelevant if the office itself is not that desirable. However, there is good reason to think that there will always be individuals who want to hold elective office, even in very small jurisdictions. Holding a city council office, even if it grants little power, can act as a springboard to higher elective office or create intrinsic rewards such as prestige within the community. Just because an elective office is not terribly powerful does not mean that nobody will desire it. Another factor that may influence the size-competitiveness relationship is that as cities get smaller they are more likely to be politically homogenous and thus there will be fewer contested issues (Oliver 2012). Without hot-button local issues, potential candidates may lack the motivation to run. Thus, decreasing constituency size may increase the ability and willingness of candidates to run by reducing the campaign finance barrier but this effect could be weakened by less powerful offices and less contentious politics.

Table 5 explores competitiveness by presenting the percentage of contested races (defined as when there were more candidates than seats to be elected) and competitive races.<sup>8</sup> Almost all races were contested, although in districts with fewer than 25,000 RV more than one in five were not. In terms of competition, at-large elections were more competitive as cities increased in size, although the small *n* of races in cities over 100,000 RV qualifies this conclusion. District elections were most competitive in cities between 25,000 and 100,000 RV, but again the fact that the two largest categories are one city each qualifies this finding. It is noteworthy that cities with fewer than 25,000 RV were relatively less competitive for both at-large and district elections, suggesting that having a lower campaign finance barrier (in terms of raw dollar amounts) does not necessarily lead to more candidates or competition and supports the argument that the value of the office and the contentiousness of local politics drives competition more than accessibility. There is no evidence to support the contention that small constituencies will be more competitive because there is a diminished campaign finance barrier. Candidates may not need much money to run in small constituencies, but this does not translate into more competitive elections.

Incumbency advantage may be circumscribed in smaller jurisdictions. Research on local elections has found that, similar to higher tiers, incumbents have tremendous advantages leading to greater vote share (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014; Krebs 1998; Lieske 1989; Oliver 2012; Strachan 2003, 77–78; Trounstone 2010). Lascher (2005), however, argues that as constituency size decreases incumbents will have lower re-election rates because it will be easier for challengers

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<sup>8</sup> Three cities (San Marcos, San Rafael, and Torrance) cancelled one election during the time period of the study because there was the same number of candidates as seats. These were factored in as noncontested elections when calculating the figures on table 5.

**Table 5. Competition Levels**

	<b>Total races</b>	<b>% of contested elections</b>	<b>% of races competitive</b>
<i>At-large elections</i>			
Less than 25,000 RV	31	96.8	71.0
25,000 to 50,000 RV	59	91.8	78.7
50,000 to 100,000 RV	42	93.0	76.7
Over 100,000 RV	12	100	91.7
<i>District elections</i>			
Less than 25,000 RV	64	78.1	57.8
25,000 to 50,000 RV	78	88.5	69.2
50,000 to 100,000 RV	26	92.3	73.1
Over 100,000 RV	41	92.7	53.7

to become viable candidates. Further, some of the advantages that incumbents enjoy, such as franking privileges and the ability of their staffs to do constituency work, may be reduced as jurisdictions get smaller. It may also be the case that incumbents with small constituencies have a diminished capacity to amass a large war chest to scare off potential challengers, a common practice in congressional and state elections. Oliver and Ha (2007) found that voters are more likely to vote against incumbents in smaller suburbs because they are more likely to know candidates personally and are more engaged, adding to incumbents' problems. These arguments suggest that incumbency advantage decreases with constituency size. On the other hand, increased importance of name recognition in small jurisdictions, if true, may give an advantage to incumbents (especially in nonpartisan races where voters do not have a partisan cue to utilize). But an advantage in name recognition is likely to be overshadowed by the other factors described above.

Table 6 provides incumbent winning percentage and fundraising differences between incumbents and challengers (open seat candidates are excluded from this analysis).<sup>9</sup> Incumbent re-election rates are consistently high across all sized-constituencies; like their state and federal counterparts, over 80 percent of local officials in the study were re-elected (and over 90 percent in district elections). Only in at-large elections in cities over 100,000 RV did the re-election rate dip below 80 percent, although there were only 18 incumbents in this category and thus one or two races can sway the results. The high re-election rate contradicts Oliver and Ha's (2007) survey findings that voters are more likely to vote against incumbents in smaller cities. Turning to campaign finance, incumbents typically outspend their challengers by a 2:1 or 3:1 ratio. Only in at-large elections in cities with fewer than 50,000 RV did incumbent fundraising advantage fall below a 2:1 ratio. The data indicates that incumbent fundraising advantage increases along with city size, suggesting that fundraising advantages may be less in small cities. This however, does not appear to influence incumbents' chances of re-election.

<sup>9</sup> A multimember election was considered open only if no incumbents ran.

**Table 6. Incumbency Advantage**

	Incumbent winning %*	Avg. exp. per reg voter, incumbents**	Avg. exp. per reg. voter, challengers**
<i>At-large elections</i>			
Fewer than 25,000 RV	81.9	.78	.90
25,000 to 50,000 RV	81.0	.87	.51
50,000 to 100,000 RV	87.2	.84	.42
Over 100,000 RV	72.2	.98	.28
<i>District elections</i>			
Fewer than 25,000 RV	95.2	3.36	1.26
25,000 to 50,000 RV	97.7	3.00	1.21
50,000 to 100,000 RV	88.9	2.71	.88
Over 100,000 RV	95.0	3.92	.82

\*Includes all races. Candidates who advanced to a runoff are coded as winning.

\*\*Contested elections only.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored how constituency size affects campaign finance dynamics, expanding our understanding of money in local elections and providing a foundation for future research. A comprehensive dataset with a greater number of cities and control variables would allow for more rigorous tests of the hypotheses regarding how constituency size influences campaign finance dynamics. In particular, the data presented in this paper are consistent with the idea that campaign spending is driven by factors other than the number of voters that candidates need to communicate with; adding such variables (such as the prestige of the office and candidate background characteristics) will assist in determining the factors that drive campaign spending and its influence on outcomes. A larger dataset could also shed light on why at-large elections are more expensive and less competitive as city size decreases. Extending this research to local partisan elections could also bear fruit, as there is reason to believe that electoral dynamics will be substantively different when candidates run under a party banner. More generally, extending this research to different regions of the country can highlight how these institutions influence the role that money plays in local elections.

Another fruitful avenue for researchers is to examine differences between at-large and district elections. The analysis presented in this paper suggests that district elections are more expensive, less competitive, and safer for incumbents. One explanation is that campaign spending is driven by the prestige of the office rather than the number of voters: a small district in a large city is more desirable than an at-large council seat in a small city, leading to greater spending per voter in the former. It may also be the case that electoral dynamics are influenced more by the size of the city than constituency size. Alternatively, the correlation between electoral structures and spending, competition, and incumbency advantage may be spurious, with district election acting as a proxy for other variables (such as diversity or population density). Regardless of the reasons, further research exploring these differences is critical given the recent move towards district

elections prompted by the California Voting Rights Act. District elections may increase diversity on city councils, but there may be some other effects that are less desirable.

The relationship between constituency size and campaign expenditures has implications for both campaign finance reform and the regionalism debate. As for the former, campaign finance reform regimes such as those in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle may vary in their effectiveness across different-sized constituencies. For example, the lack of competition in small cities despite a minimal campaign finance hurdle suggests that reforms designed to lower that hurdle may not yield the desired competitive benefits. Developing a greater understanding of how campaign finance varies across different-sized jurisdictions has implications for how we assess the merits of various reform proposals.

Exploring the effects of constituency size can also contribute to the literature on regionalism, which needs to confront the issue of size and democratic capacity (Swanstrom 2006, 253–55). The argument that fragmentation promotes democratic control of local government rests on assumptions about the nature of small-city politics, for example that elective office is accessible to nonelites and that money cannot “buy” electoral outcomes. Research into small and mid-sized city elections can illustrate whether these assumptions are warranted. The evidence presented here suggests that the democratic benefits of small-city elections are exaggerated. Unless one supports a radical fragmentation of metro areas into hundreds of tiny cities, from a campaign finance perspective there are few benefits to fragmentation, and thus consolidating mid-sized cities into larger ones (or with counties) will have few downsides regarding the financing of elections. Additional research could provide further evidence to help us predict the effects of regionalist policies on the democratic character of local elections.

## Appendix: List of Cities in Study

City	Population (2010)	Electoral system
Alameda	78,630	At-large, multimember
Anaheim	350,742	At-large, multimember
Atascadero	29,819	At-large, multimember
Bakersfield	373,640	Single-member districts
Baldwin Park	77,071	At-large, multimember
Belmont	27,218	At-large, multimember
Benicia	28,167	At-large, multimember
Berkeley	120,972	Single-member districts
Brea	41,944	At-large, multimember
Burlingame	30,459	At-large, multimember
Carlsbad	113,453	At-large, multimember
Corte Madera	9,901	At-large, multimember
Costa Mesa	113,204	At-large, multimember
Cotati	7,445	At-large, multimember
Cupertino	60,572	At-large, multimember
Dana Point	34,181	At-large, multimember
Escondido	151,451	At-large, multimember (2008–2012); Single-member districts (2014)
Fresno	520,052	Single-member districts
Fullerton	140,847	At-large, multimember
Glendale	201,020	At-large, multimember
Huntington Beach	201,899	At-large, multimember
Irvine	256,927	At-large, multimember
Los Angeles	3,971,883	Single-member districts
Marina	21,229	At-large, multimember
Mission Viejo	97,156	At-large, multimember
Monterey	28,338	At-large, multimember
Moreno Valley	204,198	Single-member districts
Newport Beach	87,127	At-large, elected from districts
Novato	55,530	At-large, multimember
Oakland	419,267	Mixed single-member districts/at-large
Oceanside	175,691	At-large, multimember
Palo Alto	66,853	At-large, multimember
Pasadena	142,250	Single-member districts
Petaluma	60,438	At-large, multimember
Pleasanton	79,510	At-large, multimember
Rancho Palos Verdes	42,732	At-large, multimember
Redlands	71,035	At-large, multimember

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Redwood City	85,288	At-large, multimember
Sacramento	490,712	Single-member districts
San Anselmo	12,653	At-large, multimember
San Bernardino	216,108	Single-member districts
San Diego	1,394,928	Single-member districts
San Jose	1,026,908	Single-member districts
San Leandro	90,712	Single-member districts
San Luis Obispo	47,339	At-large, multimember
San Marcos	92,931	At-large, multimember
San Marino	13,464	At-large, multimember
San Mateo	103,536	At-large, multimember
San Rafael	59,162	At-large, multimember
Santa Ana	335,400	At-large, elected from districts
Santa Barbara	91,842	At-large, multimember (2009–2011); Single-member districts (2015)
Santa Clara	126,215	At-large, elected from districts
Santa Cruz	64,220	At-large, multimember
Santa Monica	93,220	At-large, multimember
Santa Rosa	174,972	At-large, multimember
Seal Beach	24,619	Single-member districts
Sunnyvale	151,754	At-large, elected from districts
Torrance	148,475	At-large, multimember
Tracy	87,075	At-large, multimember
Turlock	72,292	At-large, multimember
West Sacramento	52,721	At-large, multimember

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