

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Objective conditions, political knowledge, and perceptions of electoral competition in U.S. mayoral elections

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Abstract

Objective: This article investigates the extent to which perceptions of the competitive context of mayoral elections reflect actual levels of competition and how that relationship is shaped by political expertise.

Methods: We use a unique survey data set of more than 6000 respondents interviewed in 40 separate mayoral elections.

Results: In broad strokes, people living in competitive cities are more likely than others to predict competitive outcomes. However, in keeping with the knowledge gap hypothesis, the relationship between objective levels of competition and perceived levels of competition is much stronger among those with relatively high levels of political knowledge than those with low levels of political knowledge.

Conclusions: The connection between actual and perceived conditions does not hold evenly for all segments of society—the information-rich respond to their political environment, while the information-poor are relatively unmoved by that environment. This pattern of asymmetric information acquisition is a familiar one in American politics and provides further evidence of an important source of political inequality.

Decades of research on political knowledge have provided fairly consistent findings about how much people know about politics, what types of people tend to know more than others, and how knowledge levels vary across domains and question-wording formats (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Eveland and Garrett 2014; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Luskin 1987; Luskin and Bullock 2011; Mondak 2001). One important related issue that has received more limited attention is documenting and explaining how well people use information from the political environment to make accurate judgments about future political outcomes. Most notably, some scholars have examined the connection between citizen predictions of election outcomes and the actual outcomes, finding that, in aggregate, survey respondents are pretty good predictors of U.S. election outcomes (Graefe 2014; Lewis-Beck and Skalaban 1989; Lewis-Beck and Tien 1999; Miller et al. 2012). Related individual-level work has found evidence that the same factors that influence levels of factual knowledge (education, sex, race, age) also affect the accuracy of citizen forecasts, though there is also strong evidence of

“wishful thinking,” whereby predictions are colored by preferred outcomes (Dolan and Holbrook 2001; Krizan, Miller, and Johar 2010; Uhlaner and Grofman 1986). In a significant departure from previous research, this article shifts the focus from national to local elections and from expected outcomes to expected levels of competition, examining the impact of the local political environment on expectations regarding the level of competition in local elections, with a focus on political expertise as a moderating influence.

Expectations and political competition

Typically, research on expectations in U.S. politics has focused on discrete outcomes of presidential elections—who will win and who will lose. One area that has received somewhat less attention is perceptions of the competitive environment in which the elections occur; in particular, perceptions of how competitive the survey respondents think election outcomes will be where they live. A few studies have examined this issue in congressional elections (Bowler and Donovan 2011; Huckfeldt et al. 2007; McDonald and Tolbert 2012), paying particular attention to the extent to which district-level factors (margin of victory, overall spending levels) influence individual-level perceptions of the level of competition in congressional districts. Huckfeldt et al. (2007) examined the 2002 congressional elections and found that the expected (perceived by respondents) closeness of the outcome was unrelated to the actual closeness of the outcome and that total spending was tangentially related to the probability that respondents expected a close outcome. Bowler and Donovan (2011) examined perceptions of competition in the 2006 congressional contests and found that total spending levels influenced the probability of expecting a close outcome, along with some bivariate evidence that closeness of the actual outcome influenced expectations of closeness. McDonald and Tolbert (2012) also examined the 2006 elections and found a modest connection between the closeness of actual outcomes and expectations of how close those outcomes would be. Other work has focused on predictions of both level of competition and party success in Canadian (Blais and Bodet 2006; Blais et al. 2008; Guinjoan et al. 2014; Temporão et al. 2019) and Western European elections (Meffert et al. 2011), generally finding that those predictions are informed by and reflect the electoral context. It is worth noting that perceptions of competition have important consequences for political behavior. McDonald and Tolbert (2012) found, for example, that “... *perceptions* of electoral competition are associated with political participation, while *actual levels* of competition in one’s House district are not” (p. 538, emphasis added).

Taken together, this body of research provides evidence from many different contexts that the electoral environment helps shape expectations about eventual outcomes. However, almost uniformly, these studies offer very few insights into the potential heterogeneity of reactions to the political environment. The limited exceptions to this are Blais and Bodet (2006), who find that politically aware respondents are more heavily influenced by the objective political environment, and Dolan and Holbrook (2001) and Meffert et al. (2011), who find that wishful thinking is moderated by level of political expertise. Additionally, despite exploring a variety of cross-country election contexts, extant research tends to focus on the relatively information-rich environment of national politics.

In this study, we extend the analysis of perceptions of competition to local politics in the United States, a political arena that is vastly understudied and contextually very different from the electoral settings examined in previous research. Specifically, we examine the relationship between the competitive environment surrounding U.S. mayoral elections and perceptions of the expected closeness of those election outcomes, utilizing preelection surveys in dozens of cities. We view perceptions about political competition in the local context as a “tough test” for uncovering linkages between perceptions and objective conditions. While previous research has found that peoples’ perceptions about local crime, schools, and economic conditions are connected to objective indicators in those domains (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2020), it may be easier to learn about social and economic conditions than features of political campaigns due to the perennial importance of issues like public safety, school performance, and economic development to local communities and the nature of local media coverage on those topics. In short, we anticipate that people

would have to be at least somewhat attuned to local politics to have a realistic sense of the competitiveness of city elections.

Given this expectation, we explore the “knowledge gap” hypothesis by examining the extent to which preexisting inequalities in political expertise (political knowledge) condition the environment-perception connection. Generally, the “knowledge gap” hypothesis holds that information disparities are exacerbated when new information becomes available, as people with high levels of information are the most likely to expose themselves to and process the new information when it becomes available (Gaziano 1997, 2013; Holbrook 2002; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006; Kwak 1999; Moore 1987; Prior 2005; Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien 1970; Viswanath and Finnegan 1996). This hypothesis has important implications for the understanding of decision making and popular responses to political information, as it suggests that even well-intentioned efforts to make information available could increase the information divide among the public. In the context of perceptions of competition, the knowledge gap hypothesis suggests that respondents with higher levels of preexisting political expertise are the most likely to be exposed to and take advantage of cues in the political environment, enabling them to develop relatively accurate predictions of the level of competition on Election Day.

THE LOCAL ELECTORAL CONTEXT

Every year, all across the United States, millions of voters go to the polls to cast ballots that will determine who represents their interests in local government, both at the legislative (city council) and executive (mayoral) levels. These elections take place in both odd- and even-numbered years, sometimes coinciding with national elections, but more often not, and occur in highly varied institutional, demographic, and political contexts. As such, local elections would seem to provide an excellent research opportunity for students of electoral politics. Despite this, we know very little about the dynamics of local elections or about how similar or different the local electoral experience is relative to the national experience (Marshall 2010; Trounstein 2009).

The inattention to local elections is beginning to change, with a handful of studies extending beyond just single elections in single jurisdictions (Berry and Howell 2008; Caren 2007; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014a, 2014b; Hopkins and Pettingill 2018; Kaufmann 2004; Oliver and Ha 2007; Weinschenk and Holbrook 2014). Of particular relevance to this article are the aggregate studies of turnout (Caren 2007; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014a) and election outcomes (Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014b; Hopkins and Pettingill 2018; Weinschenk and Holbrook 2014) that have paid some attention to the causes and consequences of electoral competition.

In many ways, these studies have found that local elections have much in common with statewide and congressional elections, at least in terms of the competitive environment and the role competition plays in driving turnout. But the information environment in local elections is much different than that found in congressional, state-level, and presidential races; and we know very little about how individual voters perceive and react to virtually any aspect of mayoral elections, including the competitive environment. To date, our best guess would be based on Oliver and Ha’s (2007) individual-level study of suburban city council elections in 30 communities. Though not measuring competition directly, Oliver and Ha did find that interest in local political affairs was relatively high in those communities in which there was a coterminous mayoral election. Other than this single study, there are no other individual-level analyses of local elections that encompass more than just a couple of communities and certainly none that focus on the competitive environment.

To reiterate, there is some evidence that people are able to sense, at least in broad strokes, the level of competition in individual congressional contests (Bowler and Donovan 2011; Huckfeldt et al. 2007; McDonald and Tolbert 2012), as well as evidence that voter projections of party performance are responsive to the electoral context in other non-local settings (Blais and Bodet 2006; Blais et al. 2008; Guinjoan 2014; Lewis Beck and Skalaban 1989; Lewis Beck and Tien 1999; Meffert et al. 2011; Miller et al. 2012; Temporão et al. 2019), but there are no treatments of any of these issues in the context of U.S.

local elections or with an explicit framework for examining knowledge gaps in perceptions of levels of competition. The evidence presented below fills this gap, showing both that perceptions of competition in local elections are shaped by objective political conditions and that this relationship is particularly strong among high-information voters.

THE DATA

The primary data for this project are from the Urban Mayoral Election Study¹ (UMES), a public opinion survey administered prior to 40 separate mayoral elections in 39 cities from 2007 to 2011.² The overall sample size comprises 6365 respondents, with an average of 159 respondents from each city. The survey was administered via telephone interviews in the 3 weeks prior to the elections, utilizing separate random-digit-dialing samples from each city and included approximately 90 questions.³ Though the survey items covered a broad range of topics, perceptions of candidates, engagement with local politics, and voting behavior constituted a major part of the study.

ANALYSIS

The issues addressed in this analysis are (a) the extent to which individual-level perceptions of competition are related to an objective measure of actual competition and (b) the degree to which this connection is contingent upon an individual-level measure of preexisting political expertise. Our measure of competitiveness is based on the spending margin between the top two mayoral candidates.⁴ While many studies of competition have utilized the margin of victory (or some related measure) to measure competitiveness, the measure of the *spending competition* during the campaign used here has been used in studies of voter turnout (Clouse 2011; Heideman 2019; Holbrook and Weinschenk 2014a) and is a more direct measure of the level of competition voters are exposed to *during* the campaign.⁵ Note that the assumption is not that voters have any real sense of the level of spending parity during the campaign but that contests in which neither candidate has a distinct spending advantage are likely to be relatively closely and hotly contested. Because competitive elections typically generate more attention and media coverage than uncompetitive races, such elections tend to generate more information for potential voters (Evans 2014).

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² The cases (Atlanta, GA, 2009; Baltimore, MD, 2007; Boise, ID, 2007; Boston, MA, 2009; Charlotte, NC, 2007 and 2009; Cincinnati, OH, 2009; Cleveland, OH, 2009; Columbus, OH, 2007; Columbus, GA, 2010; Dallas, TX, 2011; Denver, CO, 2011; Detroit, MI, 2009; Durham, NC, 2007; Ft. Wayne IN, 2007; Fresno, CA, 2008; Garden Grove, CA, 2010; Greensboro, NC, 2007; Houston, TX, 2009; Indianapolis, IN, 2007; Jacksonville, FL, 2011; Laredo, TX, 2010; Mesa, AZ, 2008; Miami, FL, 2009; Philadelphia, PA, 2007; Pittsburgh, PA, 2007; Reno, NV, 2010; Riverside, CA, 2009; Sacramento, CA, 2008; Salt Lake City, UT, 2007; Santa Ana, CA, 2010; Seattle, WA, 2009; Shreveport, LA, 2010; Spokane, WA, 2007; St. Petersburg, FL, 2009; Tacoma, WA, 2009; Toledo OH, 2009; and Yonkers, NY, 2007) selected for this study drawn from among the 125 largest cities in the United States.

³ The target population was the citizen voting-age population. Because there is a slight tendency to over-represent the non-Hispanic white population, poststratification weights are used to bring the composition of the local samples into line with existing Census estimates of local racial composition, based on the adult citizen population. The response rates (AAPOR 4) for the survey range from 11.1 percent (Yonkers) to 27.1 percent (Laredo), with an average across all cities of 21.9 percent. The mean number of attempted calls was 3.81 (ranging from an average of 2.58 in Spokane to an average of 7.81 in Laredo).

⁴ To measure the spending margin, we take the highest spender's proportion of total spending minus the next highest spender's proportion of total spending. This measure is theoretically bounded by 0 and 1, with 0 as the most competitive outcome and 1 as the least competitive outcome.

⁵ One serious drawback to utilizing margin of victory as a contextual information influence is that it is based on events that do not occur until after the election is over, so it is difficult to argue that the margin of victory itself "causes" preelection expectations of levels of competition. Of course, this is also a problem for other studies that have used margin of victory to analyze the impact of the political environment on perceptions of competition and for studies that find connections between margin of victory and levels of turnout. No doubt, these studies are operating under the assumption that close outcomes reflect high levels of contestation during the campaign, which then influences participation or expectations regarding the outcome.

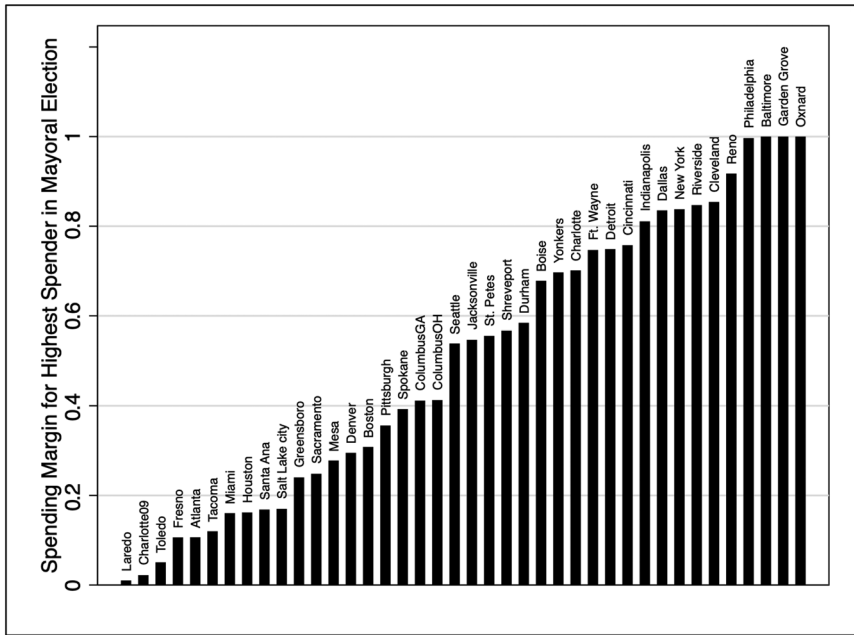


FIGURE 1 Competition in Urban Mayoral Election Study cities.

One of the necessary requirements for examining the impact of the competitive environment on perceptions of competition is that there is substantial variation in competition across cities. Figure 1 displays the range of competitive experiences across the 40 elections from the UMES data set. Overall, we see that in a few cities (Laredo, Charlotte, and Toledo), the top two candidates had nearly equal amounts of spending, while in a handful of other cities, the highest-spending candidate accounted for all the recorded spending,⁶ and the rest of the cities are fairly evenly spread between these two extremes. The typical outcome on this measure (0.51)⁷ points to a relatively uneven landscape in terms of campaign resources, though is important to note that there is quite a bit of variation in outcomes (standard deviation = 0.32).⁸

The individual-level measure of the perceived level of competition comes from a single survey question that asks, “Do you think the outcome of [City Name]’s upcoming mayoral election will be very close, somewhat close, or not at all close?” Among the 87 percent who provided valid responses, 29 percent said “very close,” 44 percent said “somewhat close,” and the remaining 27 percent said “not at all close.” If respondents are accurately perceiving the competitive context, then the probability of responding “very close” should be higher in competitive contexts (cities with close spending margins) than in non-competitive contexts. Again, in line with the anticipation of information-based knowledge gaps, the relationship between actual and perceived levels of competition should be strongest among respondents with high levels of political knowledge, who are more likely to be aware of and pay attention to the political environment (Gaziano 1997; Moore 1987; Prior 2005; Zaller 1991).

⁶ This does not mean there was no spending by the other candidate, just that they the amount they spent was less than the level set in state and local regulations that would have required them to file campaign expenditure reports.

⁷ So, for instance, this could be a race in which one candidate accounted for 75.5 percent of the total spending and the other candidate accounted for 24.5 percent of the spending.

⁸ We note that, as expected, there is some overlap between our measure of spending competition and the margin of victory in each race. The extent of statistical overlap ($r = 0.47$) is somewhat modest and suggests that they capture slightly different aspects of competition. Still, if we substitute margin of victory for the spending margin in our main analysis, the pattern of findings is very similar.

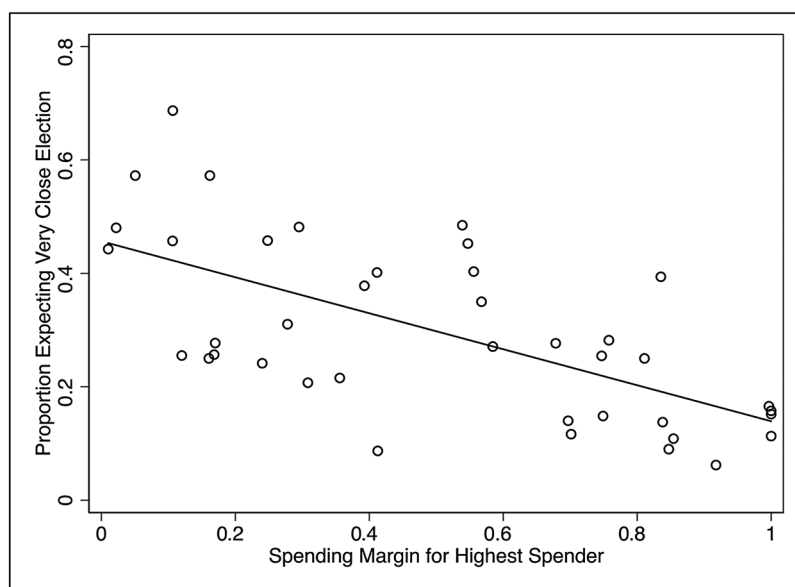


FIGURE 2 Relationship between objective measure of competition and expectations of “very close” outcome.

Findings

The first issue at hand is whether survey respondents in competitive (non-competitive) cities are more likely than others to expect competitive (non-competitive) outcomes in their mayoral elections. Figure 2 plots local expectations (aggregated by city) against the margin in campaign spending. While there is a bit of noise in the data (to be expected with relatively small local samples), the pattern shows that perceptions of competition among local electorates, in broad strokes, reflect the competitive nature of the local campaign context. The proportion of the electorate who expect the outcome to be very close declines as the measure of competition moves from highly competitive to not at all competitive.

In the remainder of this article, we test the extent to which this connection holds up in an individual-level model and also examine how the connection between perceptions of competition and the actual competitive outcome is conditioned by the level of political expertise. To get at this question, we use a measure of expertise that is theoretically distinct from the local context but is also a good indicator of the likelihood of being exposed to political information (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Zaller 1991). The measure of expertise used here is a scale that comprised the number of correct responses given to three questions about U.S. politics: Which party controlled the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, and whether they knew what job or political office Nancy Pelosi (interviewed before 2011) or John Boehner (interviewed in 2011) held. On this measure of expertise, 22 percent were unable to answer any questions correctly, 16 percent could answer one question correctly, 24 percent answered two questions correctly, and 38 percent could answer all three correctly. We view the national political content of this measure as a virtue for the purpose of studying knowledge gaps in the local context. Specifically, since our intent is to measure levels of *preexisting* political awareness, a knowledge variable based on national politics is less likely to reflect the content of the local campaigns. Local knowledge variables, on the other hand, may be shaped, in part, by information generated by the campaign. This is not to say that local and national political knowledge are unrelated,⁹ just that the national measure is less endogenous to the campaign.

⁹ For instance, the survey instrument included a question asking for self-reports of familiarity with the mayoral candidates. In incumbent contests, 40 percent of respondents with zero correct answers to the knowledge questions report never hearing of or only recognizing the name of the incumbent candidate, compared to only 12 percent of respondents who answered all three questions correctly; and 61 percent low-information voters reported

In keeping with the knowledge gap literature, we expect that the relationship between actual and perceived levels of competition will be strongest among those with high levels of expertise and weakest among those with low levels of expertise. Absent the interaction with objective measures of competition (as an additive term), respondents with high levels of expertise should be the most likely to perceive low levels of competition since the typical local experience is non-competitive. We also consider the influence of total per capita spending in the campaign (logged), based on previous research (Bowler and Donovan 2011; Huckfeldt et al. 2007) that found this to be related to perceptions of competition. While total spending is modestly related to actual levels of competition,¹⁰ it is not a measure of competition, per se. In fact, it is not uncommon at other levels of office for incumbents to raise large amounts of money in hopes of scaring off potential competition (Jacobson 2012). Instead, total spending can be viewed as a measure of the level of information likely to be generated by the campaigns. In this case, we expect campaigns with greater total spending to lead to higher levels of information, which should lead respondents to perceive lower levels of competition, again because the typical contest is non-competitive. Other election-specific control variables that might signal competition or otherwise shape how people view the local context include dummy variables for whether the election took place at the same time as a presidential contest (two cities) or midterm congressional contest (five cities), whether an incumbent was running (22 contests), and whether the city uses a partisan ballot (11 contests).

Among individual-level variables, we control for vote intention as a means of capturing the potential for something similar to wishful thinking (Dolan and Holbrook 2001; McDonald and Tolbert 2012; Uhlman and Grofman 1986). Typically, “wishful thinking” in electoral studies posits that individuals are prone to overestimate their preferred candidate’s chances of winning, in part to reduce emotional angst caused by cognitive dissonance. However, the dependent variable in our analysis is the expected level of competition, not who will win or lose the contest, so we consider whether respondents think their preferred candidate is going to win or lose, with the expectation that those who expect their candidate to lose are the most likely to predict a close outcome. Using the logic of wishful thinking, the idea is that the most comforting outcome for respondents who think their candidate is going to lose is that the race will be close rather than a blowout. In addition to this, there are several “usual suspect” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997) individual-level characteristics, including level of education, strength of partisanship (0 = pure independent, to 3 = strong partisan), and indicator variables for sex and race and ethnicity¹¹ that are often good predictors of political knowledge.

Table 1 provides the individual-level results, which are estimated using ordered logit models with standard errors clustered on the contest.¹² Although the primary interest is in the interaction effects, it is important to demonstrate the effect of the spending margin in an additive model to gain confidence that the relationship is not just a function of other contest-specific variables. In Model 1, we see that the spending margin is significantly related to expectations of competition in the contest. Overall, the results indicate that the probability of answering “very close” was 0.43 in the cities with the narrowest spending margin and 0.18 in the cities with the widest spending margin, for a net effect of 0.25. In addition, there is relatively modest support for the additive effect of the political knowledge ($p = 0.068$, two-tailed): Those with the highest level of information are somewhat more likely (0.28) to expect a wide margin than those with the lowest level of knowledge (0.24). Also, as anticipated by the wishful thinking hypothesis, the probability of expecting a close outcome was 0.37 for respondents who expected their candidate to lose, while the

never hearing of or only recognizing the name the challenger, compared to 37 percent of high-information voters. In addition, 56 percent of high-information voters report following the mayoral election somewhat or very closely, compared to just 27 percent of low-information voters.

¹⁰ The correlation between total spending per capita and spending margin is -0.39 .

¹¹ The excluded category is those respondents who answered something other than non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, or Hispanic descent.

¹² Our dependent variable is measured using three response categories (very close, somewhat close, or not at all close). However, we wanted to make sure that the results were similar if we combined the two highest response categories (somewhat and very close) since respondents may view those categories similarly. To do so, we replicated all of the models in Table 1 using logistic regression (where 0=those who answered “not at all close” and 1=those who answered either “somewhat” or “very close”). The results are shown in Table S2 in the Supporting Information (we also plot the interaction between knowledge and spending in Figure S2). Overall, our findings are very similar regardless of whether we use the three original response categories or collapse the two highest categories into one.

TABLE 1 Determinants of expectations of closeness of mayoral election outcomes (1 = not at all close, 2 = somewhat close, 3 = very close).

	Model 1	Model 2	Robustness checks	
			Model 3	Model 4
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
Political Knowledge	-0.086 0.050	0.185* 0.080	— —	— —
Spending Margin	-1.306*** 0.310	-0.433 0.290	-0.929*** 0.270	-0.288 0.400
Knowledge*Spending	— —	-0.535*** 0.130	— —	— —
Council Recall	— —	— —	0.549** 0.200	— —
Recall*Margin	— —	— —	-1.143** 0.330	— —
Candidate Familiarity	— —	— —	— —	0.426*** 0.120
Familiarity*Margin	— —	— —	— —	-0.549** 0.190
Log Spend Per Cap	0.019 0.090	0.019 0.090	0.017 0.090	0.023 0.090
Incumbent Election	-0.556** 0.200	-0.517* 0.200	-0.557** 0.200	-0.560** 0.200
Presidential Year	0.218 0.320	0.210 0.300	0.191 0.350	0.122 0.300
Congressional Year	0.331 0.390	0.344 0.390	0.305 0.380	0.330 0.370
Partisan City	-0.226 0.200	-0.249 0.200	-0.207 0.200	-0.196 0.200
Education Level	-0.066** 0.020	-0.069** 0.020	-0.087*** 0.020	-0.111*** 0.020
Partisan Strength	0.018 0.030	0.020 0.030	0.008 0.030	-0.011 0.030
Support Winner	0.151 0.080	0.157 0.090	0.155 0.080	0.030 0.080
Support Loser	0.515*** 0.100	0.508*** 0.100	0.491*** 0.100	0.382*** 0.100
Female	0.223*** 0.060	0.221*** 0.060	0.248*** 0.060	0.263*** 0.060
Non-Hispanic White	-0.068 0.170	-0.080 0.170	-0.052 0.160	-0.069 0.160
Non-Hispanic Black	0.070 0.170	0.032 0.170	0.127 0.160	0.141 0.150

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Robustness checks	
			Model 3	Model 4
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
Hispanic	0.019	0.019	0.064	0.081
	0.150	0.160	0.150	0.150
Cut point 1	-2.206***	-1.771***	-1.939***	-1.489***
	0.280	0.250	0.250	0.270
Cut point 2	-0.120	0.331	0.152	0.615*
	0.290	0.260	0.260	0.290
Pseudo R -sq	0.057	0.062	0.059	0.063
N of Obs.	5006	5006	5011	4958

Note: Ordered logit estimates with clustered standard errors.

* $p < 0.05$;

** $p < 0.01$;

*** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

probability for those who expected their candidate to win was 0.29.¹³ This fits with the idea that the most comforting response for respondents who believe that their preferred candidate will lose is that the race will be close as opposed to a landslide. Among the other independent variables, we find that incumbent races also led to increased expectations of non-competitive outcomes. While there are no apparent racial or ethnic differences to expectations, female respondents were more likely than males to expect competitive outcomes. This finding fits with previous research on sex and perceptions of political competition, which has found that women are much more likely than men to perceive the electoral environment as highly competitive, a pattern that is at least partially due to gender differences in political socialization (Fox and Lawless 2014; Lawless and Fox 2012).

Turning to the interaction between competition and political knowledge, there is strong evidence of expertise-related conditional effects, consistent with the expectations of the knowledge gap hypothesis. In Model 2, the interaction between levels of knowledge and the spending margin is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and indicates that the spending margin has a much smaller impact on the anticipated closeness of the outcome among respondents with low levels of political knowledge and grows more important as an influence as the level of knowledge increases.¹⁴ In Figure 3, we show the relationship between the spending gap and the probability of expecting a high level of competition (“very close”) at different levels of political knowledge. The slope for respondents with the highest level of knowledge (three knowledge questions correct) is much steeper than it is for those with the lowest level of knowledge (zero questions correct). For respondents with the highest knowledge level, the probability of answering “very close” is 0.49 when the spending gap takes on its minimum value (i.e., an extremely competitive campaign) and drops to 0.12 when the spending gap is at its maximum value (i.e., an extremely uncompetitive campaign), for a net difference of 0.37. In contrast, for respondents with the lowest knowledge level, the probability of answering “very close” is 0.36 when the spending gap measure is at its lowest level and drops to just 0.27 when the spending gap is at its maximum level, for a net difference of 0.09. These findings are perfectly consistent with the knowledge gap hypothesis: Information about the political environment informs perceptions of the

¹³ The probability for the excluded group, comprising respondents who did not express a vote choice or did choose a winner, is 0.26.

¹⁴ As a robustness check, we estimated the model using the margin of victory in place of the spending-based measure of competition. In the Supporting Information, we present the estimates (in Table S1) from this model. In addition, Figure S1 in the Supporting Information plots the predicted effect of the margin of victory on perceptions of competition. Overall, the results are very similar to what we report here.

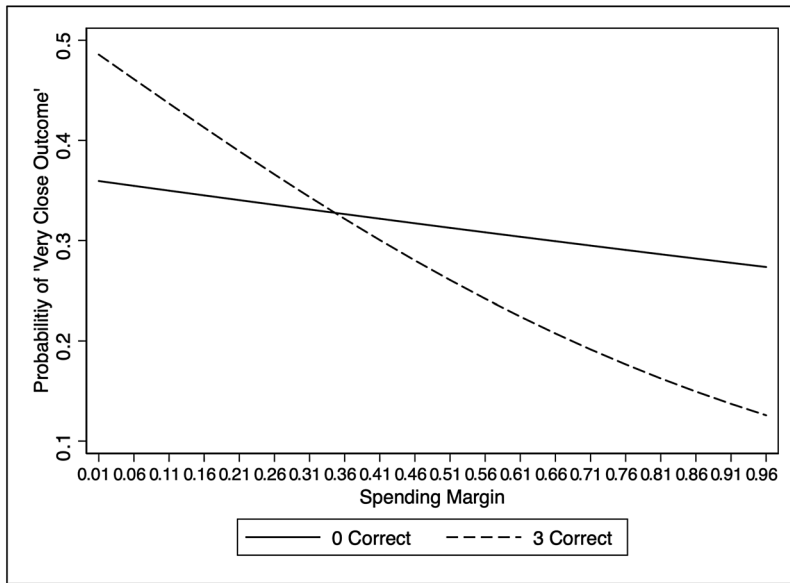


FIGURE 3 Relationship between spending margin and expected level of competition, conditioned by political knowledge.

environment among the information-rich respondents but has a much more limited impact on perceptions among the information-poor.

As discussed earlier, we see a national-politics knowledge scale as most appropriate for the task at hand. Still, to examine the robustness of the knowledge gap pattern found using the national politics knowledge battery, we re-estimated Model 2 using two measures that provide some sense of what respondents know about local politics. The survey included two questions asking respondents to assess their level of familiarity with the mayoral candidates in their city.¹⁵ Our expectation is that people who report being more familiar with the mayoral candidates are likely more attuned to local politics than their counterparts. The survey also included a question asking respondents “Do you happen to know the name of at least one member of your local city council? (If Yes: What is that person’s last name?).” We coded the names that were provided based on who was serving on the city council at the time of the survey (1 = respondent correctly provided the name of a council member, 0 = provided an incorrect name or were not able to name a council). When we used each of these measures in place of the knowledge measure with national political content (see Models 3 and 4 in Table 1), the interaction effects were very similar to those reported in Model 2. The relationship between competition and the perception that the election will be very close was stronger for those who were able to correctly name a city council member, compared to those who were not. Similarly, the relationship between competition and expected levels of competition was much stronger for those with the maximum scores on candidate familiarity (know a lot about both candidates) than those with the lowest scores (never heard of either mayoral candidate).

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented here provides a sort of mixed verdict on the accuracy of political perceptions in U.S. local elections. In general, people who live in cities with competitive mayoral elections—measured

¹⁵ The wordings are as follows: “First is [Candidate 1 name]. How much would you say you know about [him/her]? Would you say you know a lot, a fair amount, only a little, only know the name, or have never heard of [Candidate 1]?” and “What about [Candidate 2 name]? How much would you say you know about [him/her]? “Would you say you know a lot, a fair amount, only a little, only know the name, or have never heard of [Candidate 2]?” We created an overall measure of familiarity using these questions (coded 0–4 where 4 is more familiarity).

with campaign spending margin—tend to expect close outcomes; while those who live in less competitive contexts tend to expect fairly wide margins of victory on election day. Indeed, at the aggregate level, the correlation between perceptions of electoral competition and an objective measure of competition was -0.65 ($p < 0.001$). While scholars like Achen and Bartels (2016) have noted that people are unlikely to form accurate assessments about political conditions (e.g., due to inattentiveness to politics and the impact of identities like partisanship when forming perceptions and opinions), it appears that at least on the somewhat narrow aspect of the political environment examined here, the local electorate can make sense out of what is going on.

However, the connection between actual and perceived conditions does not hold evenly for all segments of society. Instead, in what is a classic pattern from the knowledge gap literature, the perceptions held by people with relatively high levels of preexisting political expertise track very closely with objective indicators of the actual level of competition, while the perceptions held by people with the lowest levels of expertise appear to vary independently of the objective indicators. Put differently, the information-rich respond to their political environment, while the information-poor are relatively unmoved by that environment. This pattern of asymmetric information acquisition is a familiar pattern in American politics and provides further evidence of an important source of political inequality. Further, it provides partial support for Achen and Bartels' (2016) concern that the "folk theory" of democracy is flawed due to its assumption that voters can form accurate perceptions of the political and economic context surrounding elections. This assumption holds for the information-rich but is on much shakier ground among voters who generally are less politically aware. It is important to note that one important implication of this pattern is that efforts to improve the accuracy of perceptions about politics or provide voters with more information about politics may actually amplify preexisting inequalities—those who already have high levels of political expertise may benefit much more from such efforts than those who lack political expertise (i.e., the rich get richer).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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