

Initiative & Referendum Institute

# IRI REPORT

## ARE BALLOT PROPOSITIONS SPILLING OVER ONTO CANDIDATE ELECTIONS?

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### ARE BALLOT PROPOSITIONS SPILLING OVER ONTO CANDIDATE ELECTIONS?

Ballot propositions are increasingly viewed as a way to influence candidate elections. The best known example is Ohio in 2004, where many believe a constitutional amendment prohibiting gay marriage helped George W. Bush win the state, and thus the presidency. This year progressive groups qualified minimum wage measures in several states specifically to generate support for Democratic candidates. When ballot propositions influence candidate elections, we see what is called a **ballot proposition spillover**. This report reviews the existing scholarly research on ballot proposition spillovers, and highlights possible spillovers to watch for in close races in November 2006.

#### Background

In 2004, many believe Republicans benefited from spillover effects of ballot propositions in key races. Some link Bush's win in Ohio, a pivotal state to his victory, to the marriage initiative on the ballot. Immediately after the election, before scholars had sifted through the returns in detail, pundits credited the ballot measures as being important to Bush's victory. For example, James Dao of the *New York Times* said: "[P]olitical analysts credit the ballot measure with increasing turnout in Republican bastions . . . . The President's extra-strong showing in those areas . . . propell[ed] him to a 136,000-vote victory." Some also believe that a marriage amendment in Kentucky was critical in helping Republican Senator Jim Bunning retain his seat.

The 2004 election cycle is not the first time ballot propositions were credited with influencing the outcome of candidate elections. The year before the 1994 elections, California governor Pete Wilson (R) faced an uphill battle to reelection. His approval rating was abysmal and he trailed his likely opponent, Kathleen Brown (D), in the polls. Another California politician, Congressman Michael Huffington (R) also faced long odds in his bid to unseat U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D), who had won a special election two years earlier. According to the polls, Feinstein held a comfortable 27-point lead, and few believed she would have any trouble winning reelection. In the end, Wilson and Huffington both exceeded expectations. Wilson won in a landslide, and Huffington lost to Feinstein by only two points. Many credit the turnaround to the effects of Proposition 187, an initiative to deny illegal immigrants from receiving public benefits. Prop. 187 was a focal point during the candidate campaigns, with Republicans, including Wilson and Huffington, generally supporting the initiative, and Democrats opposing it. The proposition helped define the election and many believe increased support for the Republican candidates.

Another example is a nuclear waste initiative that went before Utah voters in 2002. Democratic strategists tried to use the initiative to mobilize Democratic-leaning voters who might not otherwise come to the polls. Democrat Jim Matheson managed to win reelection to the U.S. House in a competitive district in a decidedly red state.

#### Research on Spillovers

A large body of research generally agrees that ballot propositions increase political information and overall turnout. Increasing the amount of information available to the public

during an election may lead to increased political interest, engagement, and turnout. This is especially important during midterm elections, which are typically low information, low turnout elections compared to presidential elections. In *Educated by Initiative: The Effect of Direct Democracy on Citizens and Political Organizations in the American States* (University of Michigan Press, 2004), Professors Daniel Smith and Caroline Tolbert found that each additional initiative on the ballot during a midterm election increases turnout by an average of 1.2 percent. They also found that citizens are more knowledgeable, interested, and pay more attention to politics when there are propositions on the ballot.

Given that initiatives and referendums increase political information and turnout, there are two reasons why political strategists may use ballot propositions in an attempt to influence candidate elections: (1) to mobilize particular voters or (2) to influence voting decisions. Scholarly research on these two channels of initiative spillovers is still in its infancy, but existing evidence points to modest effects in most elections.

### *Mobilization*

Some believe that high profile, politically charged ballot propositions can be used to increase voter turnout among members of a particular political demographic. Campaign strategists seek to find issues suitable for an initiative that will motivate only one side – the side that will favor their candidate or political party. The measures opposing same-sex marriage may meet this condition, as might the minimum wage initiatives.

Public opinion data suggest that initiatives and referendums may have some effect on voter mobilization. In a recent study, Professors Todd Donovan, Caroline Tolbert, Daniel Smith, and Janine Parry surveyed citizens in Arkansas and Ohio, asking: “How much does your support or opposition to ballot measures in this election motivate you to vote?” Individuals who said they were more inclined to turnout because of a marriage amendment were 15 percent more likely to support Bush than individuals who said they were not motivated by a marriage amendment.

Of course, what people say in a survey and what they do in the voting booth are not necessarily the same. Research based on actual election returns rather than opinion surveys suggests that ballot propositions do not directly affect voter turnout. In a recent paper, Alan Abramowitz compared 2004 turnout in states with a marriage amendment to turnout in states without a marriage amendment. Turnout in the 11 states with a marriage amendment was, on average, 5.1 percent higher than in 2000. Turnout in the states without a marriage amendment was 4.4 percent higher than in 2000. Based on a regression analysis that controls for other determinants of turnout, Abramowitz concluded, “the presence of gay marriage referendums on the ballot had no impact on turnout.” Thus, while people say in surveys that the amendments motivated them to vote, Abramowitz’s research suggests that the amendments did not affect actual turnout.

### *Candidate Choice*

The other way spillovers may arise is if ballot propositions change individual voting choices. For example, placing a marriage amendment on the ballot may bring that issue to the forefront of the candidate campaigns – often referred to as “priming” the political agenda. The candidates will subsequently have to state their positions on the issue, and voters will evaluate the candidates based on those positions. Ballot propositions may also influence voting

decisions by increasing the visibility of particular issues.

In *Voting the Agenda: Candidates, Elections, and Ballot Propositions* (Princeton University Press, 2005), the only book-length treatment of spillovers to date, Professor Stephen Nicholson compared elections in states with particular ballot propositions, such as a nuclear freeze, to states without those propositions. Ballot propositions seemed to elevate the importance of certain issues, and voters tended to evaluate candidates based on those issues, according to surveys. The presence of ballot propositions in some states changed the declared probability of voting for a particular party by as much as 12 percent. In their survey-based study, Professors Donovan, Tolbert, Smith, and Parry asked: “In making your decision about who to vote for in the presidential election, how important will the issue of gay marriage be?” Voters living in states with a marriage amendment were more likely to say the issue was important to their voting decision, suggesting the measures had an effect on voter decisions.

However, research based on actual election returns, rather than opinion surveys, again casts doubt on the idea that marriage amendments influenced votes for candidates in 2004. Assessing Bush’s vote totals in 2000 and 2004, Abramowitz notes that Bush had consistent gains across almost all states, and in particular, gains were *not* larger in states with a marriage amendment. Bush gained an average of 2.5 percentage points in states with a marriage amendment and an average of 2.7 percentage points in states without a marriage amendment. A study by Professors Stephen Ansolabehere and Charles Stewart corroborates Abramowitz’s findings. Comparing Bush’s vote totals in 2004 and 2000, they found that Bush lost vote share in states with a marriage amendment (from 49.7 percent in 2000 to 49.6 percent in 2004). In contrast, Bush gained an average of one percentage point in battleground states without a marriage amendment. Thus, because Bush had consistent gains across almost all states, and because Bush lost vote share in states with a marriage amendment, the amendments do not appear to have been an important influence on voting decisions for president in 2004.

In sum, the evidence is mixed. The marriage amendments in 2004, in particular, were less important than commonly alleged. However, there is some evidence that ballot measures may play an important role during low information, midterm elections. And many political activists clearly believe that spillovers are important and are actively trying to exploit them where they can. The 2006 elections will provide a good test case to learn about the potential spillovers from ballot propositions.

### **Minimum Wage Initiatives in 2006**

In 2006, Democrats are trying to take advantage of perceived spillover effects in several states with minimum wage initiatives. Rick Klein of the *Boston Globe* wrote: “Democrats are preparing ballot initiatives in states across the country to boost turnout of Democratic-leaning voters in 2006.” Ten out of the 17 most competitive candidate races have minimum wage initiatives on the ballot.

Minimum wage initiatives may mobilize partisan voters without attracting strong opposition. It is possible that the minimum wage issue is extremely important to Democratic voters who tend to support minimum wage workers. At the same time, these initiatives may avoid strong opposition because they are so popular.

Furthermore, because minimum wage initiatives are so popular, voters might evaluate candidates based on the issue. Candidates may be unable to avoid taking a position on the issue because it is so popular – voters may want to know where a candidate stands on the issue – and

candidates who oppose the minimum wage may lose votes. Republicans generally oppose increasing minimum wage while Democrats favor it. If a Republican candidate openly opposes a minimum wage initiatives while his or her Democratic openly supports it, the Democrat may benefit.

It is also possible that the initiatives may fail to mobilize partisan voters more than other voters because support for the minimum wage is so widespread, even among many Republican voters. In 2004, there were minimum wage initiatives on the ballot in several states, and there is little evidence that those initiatives affected the candidate elections.

### **Competitive Races in 2006 with Possible Spillovers**

There are currently several ballot propositions that may influence competitive elections across the country. They can be divided into two groups: (1) voter mobilizing – propositions that get voters to polls who would otherwise abstain; (2) candidate defining – propositions that force candidates to take stances on issues they would otherwise not address.

#### *Voter Mobilizing*

Examples of voter mobilizing issues may include gay marriage, minimum wage, and environmental initiatives. As discussed above, some argue that the marriage amendments in 2004 mobilized partisan voters. Possibly, the minimum wage initiatives currently on state ballots may mobilize Democrats.

#### *Candidate Defining*

Gay marriage, stem cell research, abortion, minimum wage, immigration, and affirmative action may be candidate-defining issues. Candidates may prefer not to address a particular issue during the campaign, but a high-profile initiative may force them to take a position. For example, candidates in states with a minimum wage initiative may prefer to avoid the issue, but find themselves forced to take a position, in some cases even having to oppose the popular initiative to maintain consistency with past votes. Missouri's stem cell initiative is another possible example – the U.S. Senate candidates have taken opposite positions on it, creating a clear distinction between them.

With these ideas in mind, the following tables list key races for Governor, U.S. House, and U.S. Senate in which ballot propositions may spill over.

#### *Notes.*

1. James Dao, "Same-Sex Marriage Issue Key to Some G.O.P. Races," *New York Times*, November 4, 2004, P4.
2. Todd Donovan, Daniel Smith, Caroline Tolbert, and Janine Parry, "Did Gay Marriage Elect George W. Bush?," unpublished paper prepared for presentation at the 2005 State Politics Conference held in East Lansing, MI, May 2005, [http://polisci.msu.edu/sppc2005/papers/frpm/dtsp\\_sppc05.pdf](http://polisci.msu.edu/sppc2005/papers/frpm/dtsp_sppc05.pdf).
3. Alan Abramowitz, "Terrorism, Gay Marriage, and Incumbency: Explaining the Republican Victory in the 2004 Presidential Election," *FORUM*, December 2004, <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol2/iss4/art3/>.
4. Stephen Ansolabehere and Charles Stewart III, "Truth in Numbers," *Boston Review*, February/March 2005, <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR30.1/ansolastewart.html>.
5. Rick Klein, "Democrats to Woo Voters on Wage Issue; Frozen Minimum Pay Seen as Spur," *Boston Globe*, December 25, 2005, A1.

## BALLOT PROPOSITION SPILLOVERS

Governors				
Rank	State	Candidates (* = incumbent)	Propositions on ballot	Notes
2	OH	Ken Blackwell (R) vs. Ted Strickland (D)	<u>Issue 2.</u> Minimum wage increase.	- Blackwell opposes Issue 2. - Strickland supports Issue 2.
3	CO	Bob Beauprez (R) vs. Bill Ritter (D)	<u>Amendment 42.</u> Minimum wage increase. <u>Amendment 43.</u> Bans gay marriage. <u>Referendum I.</u> Establishes “domestic partnerships” that give same-sex couples legal rights of marriage.	- Ritter supports increasing the minimum wage. - Beauprez supports marriage amendment.
8	MI	Jennifer Granholm (D)* vs. Dick DeVos (R)	<u>Proposal 2.</u> Prohibits state universities from discriminating on basis of race.	- Both candidates oppose Proposal 2.
11	WI	James Doyle (D)* vs. Mark Green (R)	Amendment that bans same-sex marriage.	- Green supports marriage amendment. - In 2003, Doyle vetoed bill to ban gay marriage.
15	NV	Jim Gibbons (R) vs. Dina Titus (D)	<u>Question 6.</u> Minimum wage increase.	- Gibbons opposes Q 6. - Titus supports Q 6.
20	SC	Mark Sanford (R)* vs. Tommy Moore (D)	<u>Amendment 1.</u> Bans gay marriage.	- Both candidates support marriage amendment.

All rankings are from the *National Journal's* race rankings available at <http://nationaljournal.com/racerankings> (last visited Oct. 12, 2006). A state-by-state listing of propositions on the November 2006 ballot can be found in IRI's "Election Preview 2006" at [www.iandrinstitute.org](http://www.iandrinstitute.org).

U. S. House of Representatives				
Rank	State	Candidates (* = incumbent)	Propositions on ballot	Notes
1	AZ-08	Randy Graf (R) vs. Gabrielle Giffords (D)	<u>Prop. 103.</u> Makes English official language of state. <u>Prop. 107.</u> Bans gay marriage. <u>Prop. 202.</u> Minimum wage increase.	- Graf supports 107. - Giffords supports 202.
4	CO-07	Rick O'Donnell (R) vs. Ed Perlmutter (D)	<u>Amendment 42.</u> Minimum wage increase. <u>Amendment 43.</u> Bans gay marriage. <u>Referendum I.</u> Establishes "domestic partnerships" that give same-sex couples legal rights of marriage.	- Perlmutter endorses Referendum I.
10	OH-15	Deborah Pryce (R)* vs. Mary Jo Kilroy (D)	<u>Issue 2.</u> Minimum wage increase.	- Kilroy supports I 2.
11	OH-18	Joy Padgett (R) vs. Zack Space (D)	<u>Issue 2.</u> Minimum wage increase.	
23	VA-02	Thelma Drake(R)* vs. Phil Kellman (D)	<u>Question 1.</u> Bans gay marriage.	- Drake supports Q 1.
24	WI-08	John Gard (R) vs. Steve Kagen (D)	Amendment banning gay marriage.	

## BALLOT PROPOSITION SPILLOVERS

U. S. Senate				
Rank	State	Candidates (* = incumbent)	Propositions on ballot	Notes
2	MT	Conrad Burns (R)* vs. Jon Tester (D)	<u>I-151</u> . Minimum wage increase.	- Burns has voted against increasing minimum wage. - Tester has voted for increasing minimum wage.
3	OH	Mike DeWine (R)* vs. Sherrod Brown (D)	<u>Issue 2</u> . Minimum wage increase.	- DeWine supports Issue 2. - Brown supports Issue 2.
5	MO	Jim Talent (R)* vs. Claire McCaskill (D)	<u>Amendment 2</u> . Allows stem cell research. <u>Prop. B</u> . Minimum wage increase.	- Talent opposes A 2, no position on Prop. B. - McCaskill supports A 2 and Prop. B.
7	TN	Bob Corker (R) vs. Harold Ford, Jr. (D)	<u>Amendment 1</u> . Bans gay marriage.	- Both candidates support ban on gay marriage.
8	VA	George Allen (R)* vs. James Webb (D)	<u>Question 1</u> . Bans gay marriage.	- Allen supports Q 1. - Webb opposes Q 1.

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