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**To cite this article:** David Andersen (27 Sep 2023): Crowded Out: The Effects of Concurrent Elections on Political Engagement, Candidate Evaluation, and Campaign Learning in the United States, *Representation*, DOI: [10.1080/00344893.2023.2261450](https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2023.2261450)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2023.2261450>



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# Crowded Out: The Effects of Concurrent Elections on Political Engagement, Candidate Evaluation, and Campaign Learning in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

Holding multiple elections simultaneously, also known as concurrent elections, is well known to benefit electoral systems by increasing the rate of voter turnout. Essentially, the public becomes more willing to participate in voting because they can vote for more offices, and more prominent offices, at once and thus have a greater influence upon the functioning of government in a more efficient manner. However, very little is known about what happens with the electorate outside of the simple increase in voting. Just because citizens choose to vote, it does not mean that they actually pay attention to all the campaigns or feel that their participation is valuable. Using 20 years of American National Election Study survey data, and focusing primarily on the relatively low-salience House of Representatives, this paper examines the psychological effects of concurrent elections in the United States. It concludes that, while concurrent elections do boost turnout, lower-salience candidates receive less attention during concurrent elections, leading the public to rate them more negatively and know less about them. Higher-salience office candidates avoid these negative consequences. Thus there is a trade-off with concurrent elections – more people tend to vote when multiple offices are contested simultaneously but those voters also tend to focus on the higher offices and ignore the bottom of the ballot.

## KEYWORDS

Concurrent elections; voter turnout; candidate evaluation; election administration

Over the past 50 years scholars of elections have often measured the health of electoral democracies by focusing on a key metric – voter turnout. The general perception is that the higher the rate of participation in an election, the more democratically legitimate the result and the healthier the democracy (Lijphart, 1997; Dahl, 2000; Geys, 2006). This makes good sense, as elections that involve a greater proportion of the population (or electorate) likely produce governments that are more closely aligned with the desires and median preferences of those people. However, turnout alone is not the only important measure of an electoral systems success. Other factors, such as broad voter sentiment

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2023.2261450>.

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that the system is addressing the desires of the electorate and an attentive, informed, and engaged electorate are also important. If voters participate in elections but do not feel that they are well represented by the people they are choosing between or do not understand the choices they are making, that may also be a sign of an unhealthy democracy. Turning out to vote alone may not be indicative that voters are attending to, knowledgeable about, and content with the candidates they are choosing between. When assessing the health of a democratic system, all these factors must be considered.

In seeking to boost voter turnout, scholars have identified many structural factors that electoral systems can incorporate that will help to increase voter participation, often by reducing the costs of voting (Geys, 2006; Cancela & Geys, 2016; Downs, 1957). One such innovation is clustering multiple elections together at the same time – concurrent elections. By holding multiple elections simultaneously, the physical costs of voting (i.e. travelling to the polls, taking time off of work, etc.) are minimised across a number of electoral contests. By holding the costs and difficulty of voting to a minimum, voters are better able to participate in the election, granting greater legitimacy to all election winners. Much like other mechanisms of making voting easier – such as easier voter registration (Knack, 1995) or Election Day registration (Grumbach & Hill, 2021) – concurrent elections help citizens engage in more elections with less effort.

One prominent example of this is in the United States, where there is a well-recognised boost in voter turnout based on the federal election cycle. Turnout is notably higher during presidential election years than midterm years, typically by 10-5% of the voting-age population. There are clear shocks to voter participation rates based on the presence of the presidency on the ballot. This surge in turnout can affect outcomes as well, bringing marginal voters into the electorate during presidential years and removing them during midterms, changing the ideological composition of the electorate, and shifting the median voter (Campbell, 1986; Meredith, 2009; Fowler, 2015). The role of the presidential election in American concurrent elections is well understood, as are its impacts.

However, little research explores how concurrent elections affect how voters and non-voters feel about their participation in those elections (James and Garnett, forthcoming). When marginal voters choose to vote in presidential elections, do they then actively learn about all of the major offices on the ballot or just the presidency? As more offices appear on the ballot, are people able to pay attention to multiple campaigns waged simultaneously? Or do they only monitor the top offices, but still cast votes for the others? Does the effort in following multiple campaigns increase political knowledge or satisfaction with democracy and political candidates?

This paper uses American National Election Survey data to examine how concurrent elections in the United States influence how voters engage with an election, feel about the democratic process, and what they know about the various office candidates they face. It pursues three broad research questions:

1. How does the number of races on the ballot affect knowledge of and engagement with the election cycle, overall?
2. How does the number of races on the ballot affect satisfaction with the various office candidates in general?

3. How does the number of races on the ballot affect knowledge of the various levels of office candidates seeking election?

To pursue these questions, I rely upon American National Election Study data to examine how the number of concurrent elections influences how individual voters think, feel, and behave during an election. Some of the questions I rely on from the ANES are only available during a limited time period (1982–2000), so I restrict the analysis to the data from this time period. There is no reason to believe that this was a unique period in American electoral participation so these findings should generalise well across time and to other electoral systems.

I find that clustering elections together does not appear to increase overall engagement with the electoral environment outside of voting, and the public does not report being more interested in or knowledgeable about the political environment overall when elections are clustered together. Instead, it appears that the public gravitates their attention towards higher-salience offices while becoming less attentive to the lower-salience offices that ‘benefit’ from higher turnout. This in turn leads voters to decrease their evaluations of the lower-office candidates they evaluate and know less about them. So while concurrent elections attract more people out to vote, the public focuses their attention upon the higher-salience offices that bring them out to vote and become less knowledgeable about the lower-tier offices they vote on.

## Literature Review

Democratic elections are complicated affairs, and it is well known that the design of an electoral system can have an enormous impact on who chooses to vote (Kelley et al., 1967; Kim et al., 1975; Rosenstone & Wolfinger, 1978; Lijphart, 1990) and thus who may win (Rusk, 1970; Patterson & Caldeira, 1985). Generally, a low turnout is seen as an indication of an unhealthy democracy that would be improved with a higher turnout representing the broader electorate (Lijphart, 1997). The overarching approach to designing elections to produce higher turnout relies upon the idea that people use a cost–benefit calculus when deciding whether to vote (Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). As elections are made easier for voters to participate in, people should become more likely to cast votes and become a part of the active electorate. Concurrent elections facilitate voting by clustering multiple elections onto a single ballot, allowing people to participate just once to elect multiple offices rather than have to pay attention to multiple different campaign seasons and turn out to vote for multiple elections.

There is a great deal of evidence that this does in fact work. Studies from around the world have demonstrated that clustering elections together does increase participation rates (Cancela & Geys, 2016). Importantly, the types of offices clustered onto the ballot tend to matter a great deal. The most salient offices, such as the presidency, always draw higher turnouts, so coupling low-salience elections to a ballot with a higher-salience office can boost legislative turnout (Cancela & Geys, 2016; De Benedictis-Kessner, 2018; Braccoa & Revelli, 2018). Those additions to the high-salience ballot do not lead to an overall increase in turnout for the already high-salience office however (Dettrey, 2009; Huang & Lin, 2012). Coupling multiple low-salience elections can also produce turnout increases (Garman, 2015; Leininger et al., 2018; Lysek &

Kouba, 2021), even if only limited. This can also be witnessed in reverse, as decoupling clustered elections in India produced lower turnout rates for lower offices contested independently (Nikolenyi, 2010). The ability of concurrent elections to increase turnout, particularly for lower-salience offices when coupled with higher-salience races, has been demonstrated globally, including individual studies in Czechia (Lysek & Kouba, 2021), Germany (Garmann, 2015; Leininger et al., 2018; Rudolph & Leininger, 2021), Italy (Bracco & Revelli, 2018; Cantoni et al., 2021), India (Nikolenyi, 2010), Indonesia (Yunanto et al., 2019; Sardini & Erowati, 2020), Latin America (Jones, 1993), Taiwan (Huang, 2010; Huang & Lin, 2012) and the United States (De Benedictis-Kessner, 2018; Collins et al., 2020).

Combined, these analyses point to a common theme in voter turnout – voters are attracted to some offices more than others and become more willing to turn out to vote for lower-salience offices when they are clustered together with other, preferably higher-salience, offices. Once present in the polling place these voters are then willing to vote for all of the offices they are asked to consider on the ballot. What is less understood currently is how clustering these elections together affects how voters learn about and feel about all of the offices they encounter at the ballot box. Does turning out to vote for a low-salience legislative race because there is a high-salience presidential race on the ballot lead voters to learn about those low-salience contests ahead of time? Or do they make snap decisions at the poll, with little information to guide them? If that is the case, do voters resent a system that asks them to vote on candidates they are unfamiliar with? Or do they appreciate the ability to influence multiple elections with a single trip to a polling place?

There is some evidence that concurrent elections can alter outcomes, particularly down-ballot in lower-salience elections through ‘coattail effects’. Presidential elections in the United States are well known to produce coattail effects in both the concurrent House and Senate elections (Ferejohn & Calvert, 1984; Campbell & Sumners, 1990), and gubernatorial elections produce similar effects on the state level (Hogan, 2005). De Benedictis-Kessner (2018), in examining mayoral incumbent re-election rates, finds that American mayors are more frequently re-elected when they run alongside other higher-office races. Presumably, when mayors top the ballot fewer voters turn out to vote but those who do so are more attentive (and critical) of the incumbent’s performance (De Benedictis-Kessner, 2018). Similarly, Bracco and Revelli (2018) find that in Italy, when higher-salient municipal elections are contested simultaneously with provincial elections, the vote choice for those municipal elections influences those for provincial incumbents. Even while these are separate contests dealing with separate issues, the higher-salience contest influences decisions in the lower-salience race. Rudolph and Leininger (2021) also find that in Germany, when local executive and legislative elections are clustered together, coattail effects are clearly evident, often creating greater partisan unity across areas of government. And in Indonesia, parties have attempted to win lower-office votes by focusing on higher-office campaigns and candidates, trusting in coattail effects to dominate (Ratnawati & Romansa, 2020). This reduces the cognitive load upon voters but also may result in a disconnect between what voters want and what the candidates they vote for in lower offices actually represent. Clearly, higher-salience contests influence how people vote for lower-office candidates.

This also can affect policy decisions, particularly in direct democratic elections. One way in which concurrent elections alter lower-office votes is by encouraging marginal voters who do not vote regularly to sweep to the polls when higher political offices are on the ballot (Fowler, 2015). Those voters may have different ideological leanings than more regular voters, changing the ideological composition of the electorate (Berry & Gerson, 2011; Hajnal et al., 2022). This alone can alter outcomes, particularly as it may strengthen the voice of interest groups or issue publics (Anzia, 2011; 2013). On the municipal levels of United States politics, there is a great deal of evidence that concurrent elections can affect local governance in this way, particularly affecting the passage of local bond and tax measures (Gong & Rogers, 2014; Kogan et al., 2018). Local officials, aware of these shifts in the median voter based on the composition of the ballot, may strategically time direct democratic elections to provide the highest likelihood of success by holding special elections that attract only the most committed regular voters (Meredith, 2009). In this way, local officials can choose the electorate they wish for direct democratic decisions and avoid a larger, more representative but less friendly electorate, during the normal general or primary election cycles.

However, changes in the composition of the electorate may not be the only effect that concurrent elections have. In addition to influencing who chooses to cast a ballot, the offices on the ballot may also affect how the public approaches the information environment and the decision-making process involved with deciding how to vote (Wolak, 2009; Andersen, 2011; Seib, 2016). Voters (or potential voters) may alter their strategies for learning about candidates and considering their options as the number of decisions they face increase. There is evidence that voters alter their decision-making strategies as the number of candidates on the ballot increases (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006), and this is likely to also be the case as the number of vote decisions increase. This means that not only is the electorate changing based on who is motivated to vote but individuals within the population may change the manner in which they approach learning about and thinking about their ballot options as the number of offices on the ballot increases.

In the United States, the ideologies of winning US Senate candidates have been found to vary based upon the cycle when they are elected (Halberstam & Pablo Montagnes, 2015), becoming more ideologically polarised when the presidency is contested and more moderate when they top the ballot themselves. This could be targeted at an expanded electorate or could suggest that voters themselves may change what they are looking for in office candidates based on the overall electoral environment around them. There is also evidence that campaigns and parties recognise that voters are not seeking out information uniformly for all office candidates during concurrent elections. In the United Kingdom, the devolved government has led to the major political parties creating more diverse party manifestos on the national and sub-national levels, and campaigning differently based on the constituencies and responsibilities of each office (Clark, 2011; Clark & Bennie, 2016; Bennie & Clark, 2020). This results in voters having to learn a great deal more information overall, all compressed within a relatively short timeframe of an election season. Can voters meet these additional learning requirements? And if they are drawn out to vote by the top-of-the-ticket contest, do they still learn about those lower-salience candidates?

## Theory

In general, people pay limited attention to politics and the political world, as well as limited knowledge of the actions of the government (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). When elections are contested, people are willing to attend the campaigns but only within the limits of how important they view the contests to be (Andersen, 2011). Some offices – such as the national presidency – are clearly important and worth putting effort into, while others – such as a local mayor with limited discretionary power or a single legislator within a large legislature – are less likely to receive attention. These low-salience offices are perceived as unlikely to make a difference in a voter's life and thus are not worth spending effort and attention upon. Concurrent elections take advantage of the draw of high-salience offices and a couple of lower-salience elections alongside them, drawing more people to the ballot box.

Votes, however, can be cast with very little thought or planning. While people may be willing to pay attention to and expend cognitive effort on processing the attributes of higher-salience candidates, they are likely to be willing to cast top-of-the-head votes for lower-office candidates by relying even more heavily upon prominent cues like partisanship (Campbell et al., 1960) that can be inferred from the ballot itself. Once in the poll, there is no incentive to not vote for all of the elective offices, so voters likely cast less-informed votes farther down the ballot. These less-well informed votes likely do little to improve voters feelings towards the democratic process and the candidates they vote for and may lead them to decrease their satisfaction with the candidates and the system of government in general.

Simultaneously, as people encounter a political information environment with a greater number of offices being contested, the sheer number and intensity of campaigns may affect how they perceive and engage with politics. Voters gravitate their attention towards higher-level, more salient offices during campaigns and, not coincidentally, those more-prominent-office campaigns are often better funded and thus more capable of sending out campaign information to potential voters (Andersen, 2011). Voters both seek out more information about higher-salience offices and those offices are more able to send out information about themselves. Lower-salience offices, in such an environment, not only struggle for attention but also struggle to make what little information they are able to disseminate stand out amid an information environment with multiple competing office candidates (Jacobson, 1978). While voters may learn more overall in such an environment, they are likely to learn less about lower-salience offices in particular. Thus, concurrent elections may actually decrease what the public knows about lower-salience office candidates even while encouraging more people to cast votes for those contests.

Thus, I expect that any system of concurrent elections has a competing tension. The more offices, and the more prominent any individual office is, on the ballot, the greater the likelihood that people will turn out and vote for all the offices on the ballot. In the aggregate, turnout will be higher. Simultaneously, however, as the length of the ballot increases, people will become less knowledgeable and satisfied with the lower-tier candidates they evaluate. Because they know less about these candidates, they like them less. Limited by the time and effort they are willing to spend learning about the various office candidates, people prioritise the more important, higher-salience offices and

lend less effort to the lower-salience contests. They thus become less knowledgeable about the lower-salience office candidates, as their attention is drawn up to the more prominent contests.

Within the US system, where the federal elections cycle (midterm or presidential cycles with 1/3 of all US Senators elected each cycle) is run concurrently<sup>1</sup> with state-level gubernatorial, legislative, and direct democratic elections, based upon the theory of concurrent election proposed above I expect to see:

H1: Engagement with the election will increase as the number of major elections on the ballot increases

H2: Evaluations of presidential and Senate candidates will be unaffected by the presence of concurrent elections

H3: Evaluations of House candidates will decrease as the number of major elections on the ballot increases

H4: Recall of Senate candidates will be unaffected by the presence of concurrent elections

H5: Recall of House candidates will decrease as the number of major elections on the ballot, as voters turn their attention to higher office contests

## ***Data and Methods***

The base-level (lowest salience) office I examine here is the House of Representatives. The House is a clear choice for this analysis because it is contested across the country every two years in every state and also is asked about within major national-level surveys. It also benefits from being the lowest-level Federal office on the ballot, assuring that other offices that it is coupled with will be higher-salience. I also include in this analysis whether, in addition to the House, a presidential, US senatorial, gubernatorial race, or a major direct democratic election (either initiative or referenda) were contested simultaneously within a state. Thus, the number of concurrent elections within this analysis runs from a minimum of one, when only the House was contested, to a maximum of five, when within a state simultaneous elections for the House, state Governor, US Senate, President and at least one direct-democratic<sup>2</sup> election took place.

In order to study how concurrent elections affect how people think and feel about elections, I use individual-level survey data from the American National Election Study (ANES) Combined file, a collation of individual ANES surveys from presidential and midterm elections in the United States from 1948-2020.<sup>3</sup> I restrict the data to include 10 elections, ranging from 1982 through 2000, including five Presidential elections and five Midterm elections because this was the only timeframe when key questions were asked. This sample provides wide variance over time and among the number of races appearing on the ballot to respondents. I add to this data several key indicators of the intensity of the various campaigns being waged, allowing me to control for not just the presence of multiple campaigns but their intensity as well. Important to this analysis, this data is nationally representative within each year, so is not limited to just voters. The results thus speak to how the electorate as a whole, and not just those who are motivated to vote in a given year.

As dependent variables, I focus on four types of variables in the cumulative ANES file:

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|                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| • Engagement               | Interest in the election (vcf0310)<br>Campaign participation (vcf0723 – a count of political activities undertaken)<br>Political knowledge scale (percentage of political knowledge questions answered correctly)                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| • Evaluation of Candidates | Feeling thermometer for Presidential Democratic candidate (vcf0424)<br>Feeling thermometer for Presidential Republican candidate (vcf0426)<br>Feeling thermometer for Senate Democratic candidate (vcf9056)<br>Feeling thermometer for Senate Republican candidate (vcf9057)<br>Feeling thermometer rating of House Democratic candidate (vcf0906)<br>Feeling thermometer rating of House Republican candidate (vcf0907) |
| • Recall of Candidates     | Ability to correctly name and identify the political party of a single Senate candidate (vcf9067)<br>Ability to correctly name and identify the political party of a single House candidate (vcf1009)                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

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I employ various regression models (as appropriate to the specific dependent variable) using a vector of predictors and fixed effects for states and years. Fixed effects are important to include here because of the vast variation in political context present within each state and each year. Using fixed effects allows the regression models to account for correlation between the behaviours of respondents clustered within unique electoral environments (i.e. all respondents from Tennessee in 1984, or California in 1996, etc.) even without being able to explain what drives those correlations. Those respondents are reacting to similar situations that must be taken into account to avoid biased results.

To explain the role of concurrent elections, I employ two important controls. The key predictor I focus on in the analysis is the number of concurrent elections on the ballot, ranging from one to five. Based upon my theory, I expect that the coefficients for the concurrent election values will be both statistically significant and fit into a pattern, where for each additional election on the ballot that the magnitude of the coefficient should increase steadily. This accounts for the influence of the presence of an additional office on the ballot in shifting respondent behaviour. Additionally, within the ANES models, I account for campaign spending of the various offices on the ballot, to account for how active the campaigns were. Campaigns that are able to spend more heavily should be more noticeable and influential upon respondents, potentially distracting them away from paying attention to other, less visible, campaigns. A more detailed explanation of the various models employed and their specifications can be found in the Supplemental Appendix.

This analysis reports results for all survey respondents, which avoids the problems of accounting for differences in the composition of the electorate caused by concurrent elections bringing infrequent or marginal voters into the voting pool during high-turnout elections. The results for a voters-only sample are broadly similar and often stronger when examining the role of concurrent elections.

## Results

### *Political Engagement*

I first turn to how engaged<sup>4</sup> respondents are with an election, as measured by three questions in the ANES: political interest, political participation within campaign events, and the ability to answer a series of political knowledge questions. If people become more

**Table 1.** Regressions on ANES measures of overall engagement with an election cycle, 1982–2000

| Type of Model           | Interest in Election<br>Ordered Logit | Political Participation<br>Negative Binomial Regression | Political Knowledge<br>OLS Regression |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| N                       | 17,832                                | 16,693                                                  | 16,663                                |
| $p > \chi^2$            | 0.000                                 | 0.000                                                   | 0.000                                 |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.081                                 | 0.056                                                   | 0.300                                 |
|                         | Coef (S.E.)                           |                                                         |                                       |
| Female                  | −0.255*** (0.029)                     | −0.250*** (0.025)                                       | −0.136*** (0.005)                     |
| Black                   | 0.170*** (0.047)                      | −0.042 (0.043)                                          | −0.097*** (0.008)                     |
| Age                     | 0.019*** (0.001)                      | 0.003*** (0.001)                                        | 0.004*** (0.000)                      |
| Education               | 1.673*** (0.053)                      | 1.184*** (0.043)                                        | 0.459*** (0.009)                      |
| Strength of PID         | 1.281*** (0.053)                      | 0.914*** (0.041)                                        | 0.168*** (0.008)                      |
| Reside                  | −0.023*** (0.044)                     | 0.068 (0.040)                                           | −0.045*** (0.008)                     |
| House Spending          | −0.032 (0.020)                        | 0.000 (0.017)                                           | −0.002 (0.004)                        |
| Senate Spending         | 0.007 (0.005)                         | 0.006 (0.004)                                           | 0.000 (0.001)                         |
| Senate 2 Spending       | −0.007 (0.010)                        | 0.028*** (0.009)                                        | −0.000 (0.002)                        |
| Governor Spending       | 0.005 (0.005)                         | 0.009 (0.005)                                           | −0.002 (0.001)                        |
| President Spending      | 0.185 (0.196)                         | 0.602*** (0.167)                                        | −0.016 (0.036)                        |
| Concurrent              |                                       |                                                         |                                       |
| 2                       | 0.346* (0.141)                        | 0.252 (0.132)                                           | 0.004 (0.024)                         |
| 3                       | 0.247 (0.192)                         | 0.132 (0.174)                                           | 0.013 (0.034)                         |
| 4                       | 0.180 (0.244)                         | 0.005 (0.218)                                           | 0.009 (0.043)                         |
| 5                       | 0.183 (0.331)                         | −0.232 (0.295)                                          | 0.0612 (0.059)                        |
| Constant                | −4.493*** (0.691)                     | −1.448*** (0.352)                                       | 0.072 (0.071)                         |
| cut 1/ln alpha          | 0.979 (0.405)                         | −0.525 (0.052)                                          |                                       |
| cut 2/alpha             | 3.277 (0.406)                         | 0.591 (0.031)                                           |                                       |

likely to vote in an election, it is likely that they become more engaged overall, becoming more politically interested, more participatory in campaign events, and more knowledgeable about the broader political environment, such as which party holds a majority in Congress or is the more conservative party. These are self-report measures of how psychologically involved respondents were in an overall election cycle, outside of their decision of whether or not to vote.<sup>5</sup> Each of these variables differs in terms of their coding, requiring different forms of regression models, as listed in Table 1, below. Political interest is a 3-level variable in the ANES, requiring an ordinal regression, while Political participation is a count variable, requiring a negative binomial regression. Political knowledge is a percentage and can be analysed with an ordinary-least-squares regression. Again, all of these models use fixed effects for both states and years.

In general, the individual-level predictors in each model make sense, with gender, race, age, education, and partisanship variables moving in expected directions. Men are more politically engaged than women (particularly during this time frame), older Americans are more engaged than young Americans, the higher educated are more engaged than the less educated, and stronger partisans are more engaged than weaker partisans. Surprisingly, the measures of campaign activity are generally not significant, indicating that the level of campaign spending from various campaigns has little effect on how people engage with an election cycle.

Against my expectations, however, there is also little evidence in the ANES that concurrent elections increase engagement with an election cycle. While the effects of concurrent elections are generally positive in direction, they are only significant for adding a second concurrent election alongside the House in terms of generating political interest. For political interest, adding additional concurrent elections alongside those first two offices returns non-significant results of decreasing magnitude. Similarly, the effects of concurrent elections on political participation are largest, but still not significant, at

the addition of a second contest and decrease thereafter. The political knowledge scale generally strengthens in magnitude with an increase in concurrent elections but never approaches statistical significance.

This is curious, as it is generally accepted that turnout increases when additional offices are added to the ballot but the other reported measures of electoral engagement reported here do not. Respondents do not report being more interested in the election, having participated in more political events, or knowing more about the general political landscape when more offices are contested. It seems as if people have a fairly standard level of engagement with an election that the level of campaign activity – in terms of both spending within individual races and the addition of other contests – has little effect upon. This seems unusual because voters clearly become more likely to go out and vote when additional contests are added to the ballot but they do not appear to be more interested or active in these elections overall. This is indicative of a stable level of effort put in by people responding to the electoral environment leading up to the actual activity of casting a vote. But in the presence of multiple elections, it would make sense to see greater activity, as people learned about all the offices being contested. This does not appear in the data, suggesting that as additional offices appear, additional effort is not put into evaluating those candidates.

### ***Evaluation of Candidates***

To examine the effects of concurrent elections on how candidates are evaluated, I turn to an analysis of feeling thermometers for candidates for various levels of office. The ANES has asked respondents for feeling thermometers for the presidential, Senate and House candidates from both parties consistently, making comparisons between how these evaluations are affected by concurrent elections possible. The theory I propose here suggests that the presence of additional contests will affect those evaluations for the lower-salience House candidates but not for the higher-salience presidential and senatorial candidates.

Table 2, below, displays the results of ordinary-least-squares regressions upon candidate feeling thermometer scores for the various offices. This again uses fixed-effects modelling for states and years.

The general pattern of results demonstrates that individual-level factors and campaign factors have similar results across evaluations of the various candidates. Women tend to rate candidates higher than men, African-Americans tend to rate Democrats at all levels higher than Republicans, and partisans tend to rate their in-party candidates higher.

Levels of campaign spending also tend to have weak, non-significant effects on thermometer ratings of all the candidates.

As expected, concurrent elections do matter. For presidential candidates from both parties, additional concurrent elections do lead to increasingly negative evaluations of candidates from both parties, but these results are not significant and thus indistinguishable from having no effect. Senate candidates also have generally not-significant results, although the GOP candidate does receive a significant negative value when there are four concurrent elections and a similar magnitude, but again not-significant result with five concurrent elections. The general pattern here suggests that there is not a consistent pattern of significant effects for these two sets of office candidates.

**Table 2.** OLS regression on ANES feeling thermometer for candidates running for office, 1982–2000

|                      | President         |                   | Senate            |                   | House             |                   |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                      | Dem               | GOP               | Dem               | GOP               | Dem               | GOP               |
| <i>N</i>             | 9810              | 9810              | 7299              | 7071              | 10554             | 9151              |
| <i>p</i> > chi2      | 0.000             | 0.000             | 0.000             | 0.000             | 0.000             | 0.000             |
| Adjusted R2          | 0.307             | 0.294             | 0.194             | 0.146             | 0.151             | 0.121             |
|                      | Coef. (S.E.)      |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Female               | 2.646*** (0.452)  | 0.771 (0.462)     | 1.932*** (0.524)  | 1.163* (0.516)    | 2.092*** (0.407)  | 1.065* (0.418)    |
| Black                | 8.141*** (0.746)  | −6.004*** (0.766) | 5.166*** (0.892)  | −0.520 (0.910)    | 2.272*** (0.674)  | −0.901 (0.835)    |
| Age                  | 0.096*** (0.014)  | 0.066*** (0.014)  | 0.089*** (0.016)  | 0.091*** (0.016)  | 0.134*** (0.012)  | 0.126*** (0.013)  |
| Education            | −4.511*** (0.795) | −4.550*** (0.815) | −1.004 (0.912)    | −1.851* (0.901)   | −1.065 (0.716)    | −0.423 (0.740)    |
| In-party partisan    | 26.952*** (0.483) | 27.545*** (0.496) | 15.525*** (0.560) | 13.802*** (0.554) | 12.230*** (0.439) | 12.110*** (0.443) |
| Strength of PID      | −8.594*** (0.483) | −7.237*** (0.714) | −1.917* (0.838)   | −1.594 (0.817)    | −0.632 (0.660)    | −1.250 (0.668)    |
| Reside               | 2.265*** (.0702)  | −0.236 (0.718)    | 1.746* (0.821)    | 0.831 (0.801)     | 2.791*** (0.613)  | 0.230 (0.662)     |
| House Spending       | −1.053** (0.334)  | 0.101 (0.342)     | 0.003 (0.364)     | 0.062 (0.359)     | −2.296*** (0.277) | −1.420*** (0.304) |
| Senate Spending      | 0.122 (0.091)     | 0.106 (0.093)     | −0.375 (0.206)    | −0.704*** (0.190) | 0.138 (0.072)     | 0.026 (0.074)     |
| Senate 2 Spending    | 0.104 (0.179)     | −0.031 (0.183)    | −0.030 (0.174)    | 0.078 (0.173)     | 0.145 (0.155)     | 0.045 (0.145)     |
| Governor Spending    | 0.208 (0.313)     | −0.209 (0.319)    | −0.173 (0.110)    | −0.144 (0.108)    | 0.108 (0.076)     | 0.127 (0.077)     |
| President Spending   | 2.058 (2.593)     | −1.569 (2.650)    | −4.124 (3.533)    | 3.737 (3.418)     | 0.591 (2.940)     | 4.350 (2.931)     |
| Concurrent elections | 2                 | -                 | -                 | -                 | −5.361** (2.003)  | −7.389*** (2.091) |
|                      | 3                 | −0.954 (1.481)    | −1.592 (1.513)    | 0.288 (2.330)     | 1.753 (2.261)     | −7.406** (2.738)  |
|                      | 4                 | −2.020 (2.641)    | −2.184 (2.699)    | 0.104 (2.989)     | 6.210* (3.012)    | −9.151** (3.473)  |
|                      | 5                 | −2.731 (4.486)    | −4.455 (4.585)    | 0.326 (4.924)     | 7.847 (4.787)     | −10.114* (4.648)  |
| Constant             | 67.358*** (8.426) | 52.348*** (8.607) | 51.408*** (6.640) | 45.552*** (6.502) | 94.071*** (5.671) | 70.574*** (5.974) |

For House candidates, however, there are consistently significant negative effects. Compared to when the House is the only office on the ballot, the addition of more elections produces significant negative effects on their feeling thermometer scores that grow larger as the number of elections increases. As campaign spending in these extra races is controlled for, this is not a result of the activity of those extra contests but simply their presence. This supports the theory that, while people are motivated to turn out to vote when higher-salience offices are added to the ballot, they also alter the manner in which they evaluate lower-salience office candidates. In this case, the evidence suggests that respondents became increasingly negative towards House candidates as additional offices appeared on the ballot.

There is no reason to believe that the candidates themselves change in based upon the number of elections on the ballot, but it is possible that these differences are related to the electoral environment they face. There is evidence that parties alter their manifestos in reaction to concurrent elections (Clark, 2011; Clark & Bennie, 2016; Bennie & Clark, 2020) and it is likely that candidates, particularly lower-office candidates, may alter how they campaign. As the number of campaigns increase and candidates struggle to gain attention amid the crowd, they may turn to more negative and polarising campaign styles (Lau et al., 2007; Lau et al., 1999). This could be an indication that respondents are accurately changing their evaluations of House candidates as those candidates are forced to alter their campaign strategies in response to a crowded election environment. Alternatively, it could also be a signal that respondents are less aware of those candidates, and

**Table 3.** Logistic regression on respondent ability to correctly identify a candidate, 1982–2000

|                      | Senate Recall     | House Recall      |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <i>N</i>             | 5,899             | 16,372            |
| <i>p</i> > chi2      | 0.000             | 0.000             |
| Pseudo R2            | 0.265             | 0.240             |
|                      | Coef. (S.E.)      |                   |
| Female               | −0.339*** (0.67)  | −0.210*** (0.042) |
| Black                | −0.386*** (0.109) | −0.611*** (0.078) |
| Age                  | 0.004* (0.002)    | 0.011*** (0.001)  |
| Education            | 1.116*** (0.121)  | 1.015*** (0.076)  |
| Strength of PID      | 0.306** (0.107)   | 0.159* (0.067)    |
| Reside               | 0.141 (0.100)     | 0.400*** (0.064)  |
| Pol Interest         | 0.634*** (0.104)  | 0.650*** (0.065)  |
| Pol Participation    | 0.735*** (0.187)  | 1.215*** (0.111)  |
| Pol Knowledge        | 1.787*** (0.103)  | 1.439*** (0.069)  |
| Voted                | 0.709*** (0.082)  | 1.091*** (0.058)  |
| Days Past Election   | −1.475*** (0.200) | −1.080*** (0.145) |
| Office Spending      | 6.165*** (1.805)  | 0.901*** (0.226)  |
| Office Diff          | 0.624** (0.206)   | 0.633*** (0.088)  |
| Office Incumbent     | −0.110 (0.150)    | 0.467*** (0.077)  |
| Senate Spending      | —                 | 0.120 (0.146)     |
| Senate 2 Spending    | 0.620 (0.629)     | 0.252 (0.266)     |
| Governor Spending    | −0.792* (0.348)   | −0.019 (0.148)    |
| President Spending   | −2.832*** (0.721) | −0.391 (0.286)    |
| House Spending       | −1.179*** (0.298) | —                 |
| Concurrent Elections |                   |                   |
| 2                    | —                 | −0.362 (0.192)    |
| 3                    | 0.381 (0.403)     | −0.601* (0.268)   |
| 4                    | 0.732 (0.470)     | −0.876* (0.346)   |
| 5                    | 0.475 (0.849)     | −1.257** (0.471)  |
| Constant             | −7.469*** (1.550) | −5.597*** (0.636) |

thus feel less warmly towards them and are making vague assumptions about who they are and what they represent.

### **Candidate Knowledge**

A final attempt to assess how concurrent elections influence how citizens think and learn about campaigns and candidates examines respondents' ability to recall the name and party of a single candidate. Recalling this information is important because it is indicative of a respondent having some knowledge of the candidate outside of the poll. Based on the wide literature on cues and heuristics, if respondents know at least a candidate's name and party they should be able to activate cognitive shortcuts in decision-making and is an indication that they have paid some attention to and considered at least one candidate standing for an office (Wolak, 2009; Andersen, 2011).

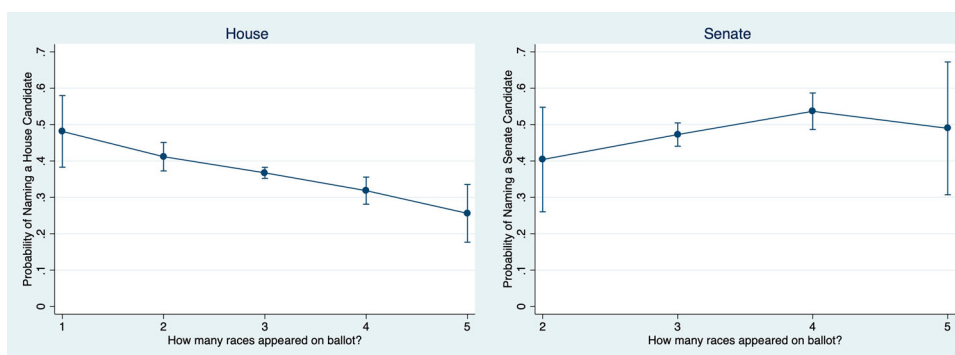
Table 3 presents the results of a logistic regression on a respondents' ability to correctly name and identify the party of a Senate candidate and a House candidate. The regression includes controls for individual factors that may influence the ability to recall a candidate (i.e. demographics, etc.), the campaign environment (i.e. spending levels of the various campaigns within the state/district), the number of major elections on the ballot, and fixed-effects for states and years.

The individual-level factors operate nearly identically for both the House and Senate recall models. Women and Black respondents tend to have worse recall for candidates, while older, better-educated, and stronger partisan respondents have better recall. The length that a person has resided within their current residence increased recall for the House member but not for the Senate member, which is likely a result of people being more likely to move across congressional districts but not state lines. The longer a person resides within the constituency the more likely they are to be familiar with candidates, particularly incumbents.

The engagement variables examined earlier are also significant predictors of being able to recall a candidate, as is having voted in the election. This makes logical sense, as the more active and involved a person is in an election, the more likely they are to learn.

candidate names and affiliations. The number of days past the election that the respondent answered the ANES survey is negatively associated with the recall, which is a standard finding of decay in memory over time.

The amount of money spent within the office contest influences both House and Senate recall, indicating that the intensity of a contest does matter to how familiar candidates are to the public. The difference in campaign spending between the two candidates in a contest matters to recall for both offices, and respondents were better able to recall candidates when there were large imbalances in spending. This is likely a result of one candidate spending large sums of money and flooding the information environment with their name and party affiliation. Incumbency was also influential in the recall of House candidates but not Senate candidates. This is again likely due to the nature of the office campaigns, where House candidates often rather relatively quiet campaigns without many television commercials, while Senate candidates typically have vaster resources available to campaign widely. Without the ability to spend on television ads, congressional candidates are more likely to rely upon incumbency to bolster their name recognition over time.



**Figure 1.** Likelihood of respondent recalling the name and party of a candidate

The most interesting findings appear at the bottom of the table and relate to the broader electoral environment. For the House recall model, none of the measures of campaign intensity was statistically significant. The intensity of other elections (President, Senate, Governor, direct democratic) had no influence on respondents' ability to recall a House candidate. The mere presence of those contests did, however, as evident in the significant results found for the Concurrent elections variables. Moving from the House being the sole electoral office on the ballot to the second produces a negative coefficient ( $-0.362$ ) that fails to reach standard levels of statistical significance at  $p > .059$ . However, each additional office added to the ballot significantly reduced respondents' ability to recall a House candidate.

The Senate recall model produced opposite results. Here the intensity of presidential, gubernatorial, and House races all significantly reduced respondents' ability to recall a Senate candidate.<sup>6</sup> The Concurrent variables, however, had no significant result and produced a positive coefficient. So the opposite results are found here. The presence of additional contests does not seem to impede or interfere with the knowledge of a Senate candidate but an intense additional contest might. The effects of the presence of concurrent elections on respondent recall is best visualised by examining predicted probabilities of correct recall, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that, as each additional office is added to the ballot, this has no effect on the ability to identify a Senate candidate. If anything, the recall of Senate candidate weakly (and not significantly) improves. However, under the same conditions, respondents become less able to correctly identify a House candidate. The rate of correctly identifying a candidate and their party falls from a maximum of .481 when the House is the sole office on the ballot to a minimum of .256 when it competes with four other contests. That is a decrease of nearly half its maximum, merely by adding additional races to the ballot. This finding suggests that voters treat these offices very differently.

For House recall, respondents are most likely to successfully identify a candidate when the House is the only office on the ballot. When a single additional office is added, recall declines slightly, but not significantly. When a third and fourth office are added, significant decreases appear. And, when a fifth office is contested, the likelihood of recall falls significantly again to a rate of half of that when the House appears alone on the ballot.

The House, being the lowest federal office on the ballot and relatively remote from affecting most people's daily lives, is the lowest priority for voters who must attend to multiple different political campaigns at once. Their attention gravitates towards the top-of-the-ticket contests, such as the presidency or Senate. These results also indicate that it is likely that voters gravitate towards higher offices, rather than becoming distracted by them. The lack of a significant effect for the campaign intensity variables indicates that the level of campaign activity by other offices is not what is decreasing knowledge of House candidates – it is their mere presence. Simply adding other, higher-salience more prominent offices, to the ballot decreases the level of attention that people are willing to give to House candidates, resulting in them recalling less about them.

Recall of Senate candidates echoes this but from a different perspective. The Senate is a more elite institution than the House and its campaigns are typically more prominent. It is the intensity of other races that can significantly weaken the recall of Senate candidates. An active presidential, gubernatorial, or even congressional race might distract people away from paying attention to Senate candidates, but those campaigns must be active and vibrant. Other offices can be present, but not influence how voters attend to the Senate campaign because voters are attracted to this office. Only if those other campaigns are active and attractive can they distract voter attention away from learning about Senate candidates.

### ***Conclusions and Discussion***

Concurrent elections significantly alter both the information environment and the decision tasks that people face. As more offices are added to the ballot, more campaigns are also launched to enrich the information environment about the various candidates. Increased campaign activity and the presence of more, and more prominent offices, help to stoke the public's interest in voting in an election. Lower-salience offices, that people might not otherwise be interested in or bother to turn out to vote for, benefit from additional turnout when they are clustered onto a ballot with higher-salience offices. These are all positive outcomes for a democratic system, and this is what existing literature has largely focused on.

However, the decision to vote in an election cycle does not lead to equal attention across all offices. Lower-salience offices do not have the same attraction as more prominent offices and potential voters may not pay them much attention. The general electorate, and voters in particular, may not increase their knowledge of lower-office candidates, leading them to cast ill-informed votes. Simultaneously, voter satisfaction with those lower-office candidates also decreases. While participation may increase overall, satisfaction with the system suffers. There is trade-off involved with concurrent elections. Clustering elections together produces higher turnout overall but does not improve the quality of votes cast for lower-salience offices.

This leads to a mixed conclusion in regard to the benefits of concurrent elections. Clustering electoral contests together does bring some important benefits to democracies. It decreases the number of times that people are asked to vote and compresses the campaign season into a single period of time, freeing people from having to constantly attend to electoral politics. By clustering and reducing the costs of participation,

concurrent elections lead to higher turnout and a more engaged electorate. Administratively, it also reduces the costs of holding elections by running them more efficiently. Voters and governments alike benefit from being able to engage with more voting decisions simultaneously, rather than individually.

However, that engagement is not very deep. This analysis demonstrates that for offices that are seen as lower-salience, such as the House of Representatives, people quickly begin turning their attention away from those candidates and campaigns. Would-be voters are limited, both in the time and attention they are able to give to the political world and to the cognitive effort they are able to give to learning about, considering, and evaluating all of the issues, traits, and activities of all of the candidates that seek elected office. Given these limitations, voters prioritise and economise their decision tasks, choosing to focus on higher-level offices of greater prominence. These are the offices that they come out to vote for. While they are present in the poll, voters may also cast votes for lower-salience offices, whether or not they know much about them or rate them highly.

The system itself in America encourages this. Higher-office candidates typically benefit from vastly higher campaign finance totals and are able to spend more efficiently on things like television and radio to reach mass audiences. So the very offices that are more attractive to voters are the ones that are most likely to be able to reach out and connect with them. Concurrent elections may facilitate the ignorance of an electorate of lower-level offices and their candidates. Overall, this is a difficulty that democratic theory must grapple with. Is it normatively better to have a wide canvass of uninformed voters, or a low-turnout but better-informed electorate? Such a determination is beyond the scope of this analysis but is something that election administrators around the globe must confront. There is no reason to suspect that the findings presented here are unique to the United States.

For policy-makers, these are considerations that should be taken into account when considering whether to cluster elected offices together onto a single ballot. Doing so does make a system more efficient and more likely to have a high voter turnout. But in doing so it will also likely make the lower-salience office candidates less well-known and liked. This, in turn, may affect the functioning of those office holders once elected into office, as they struggle to gain attention and respect.

A crucial factor at play here is likely to be the salience of the particular offices involved. For some nations, the difference in salience between offices may not be so great. Clustering two types of legislative office with similar powers onto a ballot is unlikely to create an imbalance in attention, as long as they are similarly prominent offices in the public eye. In the US case, the relative perceived importance between the President, Governors, US Senators, and members of the House of Representatives is likely exaggerated in ways not seen elsewhere, at least not to this degree. Electing one member to a House of 435, where being in the minority confers the ability to truly wield influence, clearly diminishes the importance of House elections in comparison to executives and Senators. While this imbalance is not common globally, nations seeking to increase turnout by clustering elections should be wary of the potential effects upon lower-salience offices on the ballot.

## Notes

1. For a more complete discussion of the timing and composition of American elections, please see the Supplementary Appendix.
2. Direct democratic elections in the United States include both citizen-proposed initiatives and state-legislature proposed referenda. There is currently no systematic collection of funding data or categorization of the salience of these direct democratic elections, so I simply record whether one or more such elections appeared on the ballot. This data was
3. Replication data can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CSD83Q>
4. Another measure of engagement is, of course, voter turnout. In the Supplemental Appendix, I present an analysis of how concurrent elections influence voter turnout across the US on a state level during the matching time period as the ANES analysis covers. On an aggregate level, I show that additional offices on the ballot do increase turnout and that this is related to which offices appear on the ballot. Ideally, an identical analysis would be replicated in survey data, such as the ANES using self-reported turnout. I have also conducted such an analysis and included it in the Supplementary Appendix, but do not find matching results. Further discussion of why I suspect this is the case are in the Supplementary Appendix.
5. The ANES also includes a variable for the respondent's self-reported vote behavior in the election, but this is notoriously inflated through a social desirability bias. The question is asked in the post-election wave of the survey and typically reports turnout around 20% higher than is observed in the actual election with a surge among votes reported for the winning candidate. For these reasons, this analysis does not use the self-reported vote as a dependent variable but such an analysis is available in the Supplemental Appendix.
6. the Senate 2 intensity had a positive and non-significant result but in the ANES naming a candidate for either Senate contest was sufficient to be marked as a correct answer

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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