

The Effects of Gay Marriage Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout in the 2004 Election

By Jennifer Singleterry *

When the dust settled on the 2004 presidential election, pundits and political scientists of all stripes were left to debate how Bush had won re-election. In this incredibly close election, what tipped the scales in the incumbent's favor? Armed with exit poll data and the presence of new gay marriage bans in thirteen states, many commentators settled on one issue as the determinant of the election: gay marriage. But an important question was overlooked in the post-election punditry: what were the effects of the initiatives on American democracy in general? Whether or not these initiatives helped Bush win, the effects of them on voter turnout in general are important. Taking into account previous literature and methods concerning ballot initiatives and turnout, this study examines how the gay marriage ballot initiatives affected voter turnout levels in the 2004 election. Using a dummy variable to signify the presence of a gay marriage ballot initiative, the author measures the effects of the initiatives on the percentage change in voter turnout in the states from 2000 to 2004

When the dust settled on the 2004 presidential election, pundits and political scientists of all stripes were left to debate how President Bush had won re-election. In this incredibly close election, what tipped the scales in the incumbent's favor? Armed with exit poll data and the presence of new gay marriage bans in thirteen states, many commentators settled on one issue as the determinant of the election: gay marriage (see Cooperman and Edsall 2004, Dao 2004). Other members of the media disagreed (see Krauthammer 2004, Freedman 2004, and Sherrill 2004), and academics were equally as conflicted over the assertion. Some scholars found the issue to have no effect (see Smith 2005 for findings in Ohio) and that other issues like terrorism had much more significant effects (see Lewis 2005, and Hillygus and Shields 2005). Some called the gay marriage issue an "accomplice" to Bush's election at the very least (Campbell and Monson 2005).

Something very important has been lost in all of this commentary and scholarship – while focusing on how the issue affected Bush's election authors have overlooked the more general effects of the issue and the eleven ballot initiatives pertaining to it. What were the effects of the initiatives on American democracy in general? Whether or not these initiatives helped Bush win, the effects of them on voter turnout in general are important. Taking into account previous literature and methods concerning ballot initiatives and turnout, this study examines how the gay marriage ballot initiatives affected voter turnout levels in the 2004 election. Using a dummy variable to signify the presence of a gay marriage ballot initiative, this study measures the effects of the initiatives on the percentage change in voter turnout in the

states from 2000 to 2004, controlling for other variables.

FROM CONVENTIONAL WISDOM, TO THEORY, TO EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Since U.S. voter turnout levels began to stagnate and decline in the 1960's, scholars have put much time and effort into studying turnout and what encourages it. One theory, originally proposed by the progressives in the 1920's, is that the use of ballot initiatives and referenda in elections increases voter turnout (Everson 1981). Based on a "rational activist" conception of voters, turnout increases when initiatives are on the ballot because voters are issue-oriented. The presence of initiatives provides a connection between issues and candidates/policy outcomes, and therefore provides an incentive to vote (Everson 1981). With the increase in the use of ballot initiatives in the 1980's, scholars began to examine whether this theory was confirmed in empirical evidence (Tolbert, et al 2001).

The first results of these efforts were not promising to proponents of the turnout theory. Using a dummy variable to measure the effect of initiatives on state turnout, Everson (1981) concludes that allowing initiatives does not lead to higher turnout. These findings are confirmed in a similar study concerning tax or spending referenda (Gilliam 1985), and were left alone thereafter by scholars for the next fifteen years.

After the sharp increase in state initiative in the 1990's, scholars began to re-examine the relationship between initiatives and voter turnout (Tolbert, et al 2001). The original model provided by Everson does not account for the salience of the issues relevant to their specific ballot measures, nor does it account for the frequency with which certain states use the initiative

process. Two important works emerged in an attempt to account for these considerations in research designs. First, Smith (2001) develops a measure of salience based on the number of initiative-related news articles written on the day after an election. He concludes that highly salient initiatives do yield increases in turnout in midterm elections – the level of salience being proportional to the increase in turnout. He does not, however, find any statistically significant effects in presidential election years.

Secondly, Tolbert et al (2001) study a similar time-period using a different measure of initiative salience. These scholars take into account the frequency with which different states use the initiative process – some having several initiatives on their ballots every election, some rarely having any. Tolbert and her colleagues use the number of initiatives on a state's ballot as their measure of salience, and find that "ballot initiatives are systematically associated with higher turnout rates in both midterm and presidential elections." Tolbert and Smith (2005) confirm these findings and find them even more significant using voter eligible population data instead of voter age population data.

In addition to the use of aggregate data, Tolbert et al (2003) and Lacey (2005) study this topic using survey data. Tolbert et al use the salience measure from the 2001 Tolbert study. They conclude that initiatives are particularly good at stimulating turnout in low information elections (whether presidential or midterm). Lacey uses Smith's salience measure with NES data and confirms Smith's earlier findings that "ballot question salience stimulates voting during midterm elections but not during presidential elections."

Academic analyses of the 2004 election are just beginning to emerge. This

literature has mostly focused on voter *persuasion* as opposed to *turnout* (see Lewis 2005, Hillygus and Shields 2005, Smith 2005, and Campbell and Monson 2005). Some literature, however, has incorporated effects on turnout. Smith (2005) analyzes data from Ohio, one of the "battleground" states that had a gay marriage initiative on its ballot. Smith tests several hypotheses concerning the Republican Party's use of the initiative to give Bush the win, one of them being that the initiative would mobilize voters. Smith found no evidence that citizens living in counties that approved Issue 1 turned out in greater numbers than from 2000. Campbell and Monson (2005) study the effects of the eleven initiatives on religious voters. They find that "evangelicals and Catholics were more likely to turn out in states with gay marriage bans on the ballot."

While the two above studies have examined the effect of the gay marriage initiatives on certain, small segments of the population (Ohio voters and religious voters, respectively); this study attempts to examine these effects on the broader nationwide population. It is not limited to how the initiatives turned out Bush voters, because it is also likely that the initiative turned out liberal voters to vote against the initiatives. Based on Everson's (1981) articulation of the theory of rational, issue-based voting and turnout; given the highly salient nature of the gay marriage issue; and following the conventional wisdom of commentators after the 2004 election, this study proposes that the presence of a gay marriage initiative on a state's 2004 ballot will have a positive effect on percent-change in turnout from 2000 to 2004.

MODELING EFFECTS ON TURNOUT

There are two ways to analyze state turnout rates: the analyst can compare states

to themselves (seeing turnout over time), or the analyst can compare states to other states (seeing turnout across the country for the same election). Each method has merit, and the current model attempts to incorporate both into the research design to obtain the fullest depiction of turnout. The variables in this model utilize the concept of percent-change, which allows it to compare each state to itself. The inclusion of all states in the dataset, both states with the gay marriage initiative on the ballot and those without, allows the model to compare the states to each other.

The dependent variable in this study is the percent-change in voter turnout from 2000 to 2004 in a state. The 2000 election is the natural one to turn to for comparison, not only because of its proximity to 2004 chronologically, but also because of the absence of the super-salient gay marriage issue. While gay marriage might have been on voters' "radar screens" in 2000 (according to the Initiative and Referendum Institute, Nebraska and Nevada had gay marriage initiatives on their ballots in 2000), the issue did not rise to the heightened level of importance in national politics until the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the state's gay marriage ban violated the state constitution and the Mayor of San Francisco began issuing marriage licenses to gay couples in February of 2004 ("Focus on Marriage" 2004). This study uses turnout rates utilizing the number of voters eligible to vote in a state, as this data is widely recognized to be more accurate than voter-age turnout data (Tolbert, et al 2005; United States Elections Project; McDonald and Popkin 2001). Voter-eligible turnout rates for 2000 and 2004 are available through the United States Elections Project.

The primary independent variable in this study is the presence of a gay marriage initiative on a states' 2004 ballot. This variable is manipulated using a dummy

variable: presence of an initiative indicated by a '1,' absence of an initiative indicated by a '0.' All information about state initiatives is available from the Initiative & Referendum Institute website. The analysis, however, cannot stop here. Just like any other academic study of turnout, it must take into account several other independent variables in analysis.

Two other independent variables in the model incorporate both methods of measuring initiative salience previously discussed. Two distinct lines of methodology are emerging to measure initiative salience in this area of scholarship. These methods, however, are not mutually exclusive, because they do not actually measure the same thing. Smith's method measures the salience of the initiatives on the current ballot – in other words, it measures how important citizens think the current initiatives are. Tolbert's method measures the salience of ballot initiatives as a concept in a state – how regularly the state uses this method of democracy. The former measures the *issue* environment, while the latter measures the *institutional* environment. This study includes an independent variable for Smith salience and an independent variable for Tolbert salience. Tolbert salience is measured simply by counting the number of initiatives on each state's ballot in 2004 (available from the Initiative & Referendum Institute).

Smith's measure of salience requires a slight alteration from the original study. Smith (2001) and Lacey (2005) after him, counted the number of articles on a newspaper's front page the day after the election, then divided that number by the total number of articles on the paper's front page that day. Smith also limited his data collection to the newspapers in the state with the highest circulation. Such a labor intensive analysis is not worthwhile in the current study because of time and

technological restraints. Instead, this study uses the academic database Lexis Nexis and its search options to count how many articles contain the phrase "ballot initiative" in their text in each state for the day after the 2004 election. In this way, the essence of Smith's measure of salience is captured without engaging in such an onerous data collection process. The model uses this measure for all states, regardless of whether they had gay marriage bans on their ballots, or whether they use the initiative process at all.

It is also necessary to include in the model the standard control variables for studies of voter turnout. For this study, this data is converted into percent-change from 2000 to 2004, following the form of the dependent variable. The same independent control variables as Tolbert et al (2001) are included, which are based on previous turnout literature as well. The model includes a variable for education: the percent of a states' population that has at least a high school degree. Secondly, the model controls for income using the median income in each state. Lastly, it controls for racial diversity with a variable containing the percent of a states' population that is white.¹ The data for these three variables is available from the U.S. Census Bureau. See Figure 1 for a complete list of variables.

The model is as follows:

$$\text{(Turnout)} = a + b_1(\text{initiative}) + b_2(\text{Tolbert}) + b_3(\text{Smith}) + b_4(\text{education}) + b_5(\text{income}) + b_6(\text{white}) + u$$

¹ The use of white population seems counter-intuitive when trying to control for racial diversity. However, Census data does not include a "percent minority" figure; it only contains percentages for each race category ("white," "African-American," "Latino," etc.). Using the figures for "white" is the best way to get at the minority figure. It also allows all variables in my model to remain positive, as I would expect an increase in the white population of a state to be positively correlated with turnout.

Note that each independent variable is expected to positively affect the dependent variable.

STATA software is used to analyze the variables and their relation to each other. Because the dependent variable is an interval measure and the dependent variables are either interval or dichotomous, the primary means of analysis is multivariate linear regression. This test allows a measurement of the relative strength of each variable's regression coefficient, while also providing information on statistical significance (which is unnecessary because there is no sample in use, but it is still interesting to examine) and the predictive utility of the independent variables in the model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 reports basic descriptive statistics for all of the variables in the model. These variables have fairly normal distributions, evidenced by the closeness of their means and medians. And with the exception of the two salience measures, all of the variables have fairly little variation in their distributions (notice the small standard deviations). This small variation and range of these variables is admittedly a problem which could affect the usefulness of regression analysis. However, small ranges are to be expected due to the nature of the model – the primary independent variable is dichotomous, and most of the other variables are calculated as percent-changes. It is not realistic to expect large percent-changes in these variables when comparing years that are only four years apart.

The distribution of the data concerning the dependent variable is almost perfectly normal. Both the mean and median percent-change in turnout for the

states was 12%. The mean for the primary

independent variable, presence of initiative,

Figure 1: Variables and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Range
% Change in Turnout	12%	12%	0.05	3-26%
Presence of Gay Marriage Initiative	0.22	0	0.41	0-1
Tolbert Salience (Number of Initiatives on Ballot)	3.17	2	3.77	0-16
Smith Salience (Newspaper Articles)	1.06	0	3.40	0-22
% Change in Education	1%	2%	0.02	-0.05-0.06
% Change in Income	6%	7%	0.07	-0.14-0.18
% Change in White Population	-5%	-4%	0.05	-0.25-0.12

N=51

is expectedly low, as there were only eleven states that met this condition in 2004. The mean and median for Tolbert salience is also expectedly low, because not every state allows initiatives on the ballot (these states are registered as a 0 in the data, which brings down the mean and median). The statistics for Smith salience are somewhat surprising, simply because of the relative lack of news articles found on ballot initiatives the day after the election. The data for this variable ranges from 0 to 22 articles found, with the majority of the states having zero articles. This could have something to do with the method for collecting this data. As for the three control variables, the general trend is that the percent of citizens in a state with a high school education increased slightly from 2000 to 2004, and the median income for citizens increased at a slightly higher rate over this time period. The percent of a state's population that is white decreased slightly overall from 2000 to 2004.

Figure 2 displays the results of a preliminary correlation analysis. Even from this preliminary test, all elements in the model do not turn out as expected. The original hypothesis expected each

independent variable to have a positive correlation with change in voter turnout. As Figure 2 shows, this is not the case. Smith salience (the number of newspaper articles containing "ballot initiative" in them published the day after the election) has a negative correlation with change in turnout. This salience measure is also negatively correlated with the presence of a gay marriage amendment on the ballot. This indicates a serious problem with this variable measure. Change in income is also negatively correlated with change in turnout, which contradicts previous literature on turnout and income levels (see Leighley and Nagler 1992, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, and Filer et al 1993).

Turning to the primary data analysis, Figure 3 displays the results of OLS regression on the variables in the model. To aid analysis, p-values have been included, even though the data is aggregate.

The first result that is conspicuously apparent is the negative sign on the coefficient for the primary independent variable, presence of a gay marriage initiative. According to this analysis, the presence of a gay marriage initiative on a state's ballot is associated with a *decrease* in

Figure 2: Results of Pearson's Correlation

	Turnout	Initiative	Tolbert Salience	Smith Salience	Education	Income	White Population
Turnout	1.0000						
Initiative	0.1443	1.0000					
Tolbert Salience	0.1348	0.0646	1.0000				
Smith Salience	-0.1068	-0.1365	0.5165	1.0000			
Education	0.0145	0.0591	-0.2101	-0.0856	1.0000		
Income	-0.4004	-0.2731	0.0374	0.1035	0.0169	1.0000	
White Population	0.0833	0.0414	-0.2373	-0.1136	0.0954	-0.0605	1.0000

Figure 3: Results of OLS Regression – Including Control Variables

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Presence of Gay Marriage Initiative	-.0021	.0186
Tolbert Salience (Number of Initiatives on Ballot)	.0042	.0024
Smith Salience (Newspaper Articles)	-.0033	.0023
% Change in Education	.1395	.3399
% Change in Income	-.3143**	.1119
% Change in White Population	.1201	.1631
Constant	.1334***	.0150

Adjusted $r^2 = 0.12$; $N=51$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

turnout – not an increase like was predicted. This association, however, is not a large one at all – a coefficient of .0021 is so small (disregarding the negative sign) that one would normally round it to zero. According to this analysis, the presence of a gay marriage initiative on a state's ballot is associated with a one-twentieth of a percent decrease in voter turnout. This relationship is so close to zero that it is not really worth discussing why the negative sign appeared on the coefficient. Not surprisingly, the result is not significant at a .05 p-value level.

In fact, the only variables that are significantly associated with percent-change

in turnout in this analysis are change in income (which once again is a negative relationship), and the constant. The coefficients for both the measures of salience are as incredibly small as that of the initiative variable. The negative sign appears once again on the Smith salience variable. Not surprisingly, the predictive usefulness of the independent variables in this model is also small: the adjusted r^2 score is just .12.

Figures 4 and 5 represent attempts to slightly amend the model. Because the variance in the three control variables (percent change in education levels, median

Figure 4: Results of OLS Regression – Excluding Control Variables

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Presence of Gay Marriage Initiative	.0131	.0189
Tolbert Salience (Number of Initiatives on Ballot)	.0035	.0024
Smith Salience (Newspaper Articles)	-.0035	.0027
Constant	.1098***	.0106

Adjusted $r^2 = .01$; N=51* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ **Figure 5: Results of Multivariate Regression – 2004 Data Only**

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error
Presence of Gay Marriage Initiative	.0002	.0161
Tolbert Salience	-.0014	.0020
Smith Salience	.0027	.0023
Education	.0067**	.0022
Income	0	0
White Population	.0021***	.0005
Constant	-.1868	.1548

Adjusted $r^2 = .51$; N=51* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

income, and white population) is so small, perhaps it is not necessary to control for these variables at all. Figure 4 displays the results of OLS regression leaving out the control variables. The relationship between presence of gay marriage initiative and change in turnout rises to 1.3%. Not much change at all is seen in the two variables measuring salience. Looking at the r^2 score, this model only predicts 1% of the values of the dependent variable. So dropping the control variables corresponded with an 11% drop in the predictive utility of the model.

The analysis displayed in Figure 5, eliminates one of the essential elements of the model: the election comparison element. Instead of comparing states to both each other and themselves, as the original model does, this model just compares states to each

other. It uses data from the 2004 election only, and does not include percent-changes. Looking at the results, the good news is that the predictive use of the model has increased drastically – the r^2 score of this analysis is .51. The independent variables in this model predict 51% of the turnout in 2004. However, the coefficients in this analysis are still nowhere near large, and only education and white population survive the .05 p-value significance standard. In this model, Tolbert salience (total number of initiatives on a state's ballot) is negatively associated with turnout.

Conclusions

One can draw two possible conclusions from this data analysis, each of which will be discussed in turn: either there is something fundamentally wrong with this model, or the gay marriage ballot initiatives had no effect on turnout in the 2004 election.

Conclusion One: Problems with the model

There are several possible problems with the model proposed in this study, and therefore many avenues to improve upon this analysis. The forms the variables took could have been a problem that tainted the results. One of the strengths of this model is its ability to compare states to each other and to themselves. However, perhaps expressing the data in this way caused the OLS regression to not work properly. There was not nearly as much variation or range in the variables as there would have been if the model had used just 2004 data. However, as discussed above, taking away the 2000 data did not yield much better results. Another problem in this vein could have been with the primary and secondary independent variables. While the dependent and control variables were expressed in percent-changes, presence of initiative, Tolbert salience, and Smith salience were expressed using only 2004 data. This is logical because it is the effects on the 2004 election that the model is concerned with. But perhaps if these variables were also expressed in percent-changes from 2000, the model would work differently.

The most likely problem with the model is the problem that all researchers face: unknown error. Because of the relatively small N in this dataset, the model was limited in the number of independent variables it could include. But perhaps it failed to include an important control

variable in the model – average age or mobility of the state population, the strength of political mobilization in the state, or the number of interest groups are all possibilities and merit further investigation.

Additionally, while the three control variables followed from previous literature, this study did not necessarily measure the variables exactly how the previous literature did. Perhaps the important measure for education, for example, is the percent of the population that has a bachelor's degree, not a high school diploma. There also could have been a problem with how the study measured the variable for Smith salience. The methods section explains how this measurement was changed because of time and technological restraints. This might have resulted in a drastic undercounting of news articles – perhaps the research design did not use the right search term, or perhaps Lexis Nexis does not search enough papers. The results also might have been different if it had not limited the count to the day after the election – although this is something that was in the original Smith measure as well. As for the Tolbert and initiative variables, there is really no other way to measure them, so the problem cannot lie there. Obviously, however, there are several possible problems to choose from in this model, and many opportunities for criticism and re-testing.

Conclusion Two: the gay marriage initiatives had no effect on turnout in 2004.

It is also possible that, despite any problems this model has, the conclusions of the regression analysis are accurate, and there is no significant relationship between the gay marriage initiatives and turnout. This conclusion confirms previous scholars and commentators who concluded that the initiatives did not win the election for President Bush (see Krauthammer 2004,

Freedman 2004, Sherrill 2004, Smith 2005, Lewis 2005, and Hillygus and Shields 2005). It also confirms the previous literature that does not find that the initiative process affects turnout in presidential, or "high information" elections (Everson 1981, Gilliam 1985, Smith 2001, Lacey 2005). Lest the Smith camp rejoice at the repudiation of Tolbert's conclusions, the outlook is just as dismal for Smith's measure of salience in this model. Smith salience is frequently associated with a negative effect on turnout.

The conclusions of this data analysis are bad news for promoters of the concept of direct democracy as a means to increase voter participation. They are also bad news for the political pundits who were quick to blame or thank the gay marriage initiatives for Bush's win in 2004. The conclusions here are important to both the academic community and the "real" political world. However, the topic merits further study before firmly settling on these conclusions.

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