

## **Too Far to the Bottom?**

### **Exploring the Phenomenon of Voter Roll-Off**

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## **Abstract**

Voter roll-off has been the subject of a variety of studies over the years. Researchers have found several possible explanations for why voters do not complete their ballot. We argue that one possible explanation is the level of electoral competition for the higher races on the ballot. Using precinct-level voting data, we find that when voter turnout increases for state-wide races, voter roll-off increases at the lower levels of the ballot. We also find that the presence of a significant third-party candidate increases roll-off, as does the relative margin of victory for candidates at several levels on the ballot. We posit that increasing roll-off as a result of increasing turnout is a result of less informed or less interested voters going to the polls to vote in the “big” races while leaving the lower-level races blank. We also believe the evidence shows that voters are less likely to finish a ballot if the outcome of the race is certain or near-certain.

## **Too Far to the Bottom? Exploring the Phenomenon of Voter Roll-Off**

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One of the less-explored areas in the field of voter behavior is the issue of voter roll-off, also known as voter fatigue. In simplistic terms, voter roll-off occurs when voters only fill out a portion of the ballot and leave other parts blank. Why does this phenomenon occur? Scholars in electoral studies have considered several possible explanations, none of which have proved entirely satisfactory. We propose that part of the explanation lies in the electoral outcomes of elections further up the ticket. We believe that electoral closeness, increased turnout, and the presence of third-party candidates can all influence the level of voter roll-off.

### **Literature Review**

Voter roll-off has been studied for decades in the United States. Scholars realized that voter roll-off can have a significant impact on the outcomes of elections. If the roll-off is at all uneven in terms of its partisan make-up, candidates that would win local races with full turnout may find themselves defeated as a result of roll-off. In addition, some states use overall state-wide turnout as the basis for passing referenda and/or constitutional amendments, but roll-off may prevent these from passing simply due to a lack of turnout.

Some of the studies of voter roll-off have focused on the physical aspects of the ballot. Walker (1966) examined ballot format, Miller & Krosnick (1998) examined candidate name

length, language, and other factors that mentally fatigue the voter to the point that they no longer feel the desire to continue (Dubois, 1979).

Another common thread in the roll-off literature is to see roll-off as a rational, informational choice by the voter (Wattenberg, McAllister, & Salvanto, 2000; Bowler, Donovan, & Happ, 1992; among others). These scholars argue that voters intentionally choose to participate in some races while ignoring others. Wattenberg, in particular, argues that voter roll-off is primarily caused by voters who do not feel they possess enough information to make an informed choice, and thus they opt not to vote rather than make the wrong choice.

While we agree that these factor certainly play a role in voter roll-off, we also believe that the level of electoral competition plays a part in determining roll-off levels. Structurally, voter roll-off is a result of voters choosing not to vote for the races listed lower on the ballot. We posit that part of the cause of this phenomenon is the competitiveness of the other races within the state. Previous research clearly shows a connection between the competitiveness of a race and voter turnout (Cox & Munger, 1989; Cox, 1988). We believe that when turnout increases because of a tight election, the “new” voters are generally less likely to be solid party members and are likely less informed about politics. If this assumption is true, these same voters should also be less likely to vote for elections lower on the ballot. In other words, they went to the polls because of one or two close elections, and have little interest in the outcomes for the other races. If this assumption is true, then we should expect to see increased roll-off at the state legislative level when other state races are competitive.

legislative races, county-level data are insufficient. Since most state legislative districts cross county lines, precinct-level data is the only source available that can encompass state legislative vote counts as well as those contests that are further up on the ballot.

While precinct-level vote counts include all of the information needed to examine the roll-off question, they are not the most easily accessible. For the purposes of this initial study, we limited our data collection to those states that had easily accessible precinct voting information in electronic form. The states included in this study are Kansas, Delaware, Maine, and Wyoming<sup>1</sup>. The datasets cover the years 1998 and 2000. This will allow us to examine both presidential and non-presidential elections. The data were gathered through personal contacts with officials at state elections offices as well as through information available on the state web pages.

We opted to use state legislative races as the “bottom” of the possible ballot simply for the reason that all states would have state races. While it is certainly true that roll-off would be even greater were we to study county sheriff’s races or school board elections, this data is not consistently available at a level that is useful. As a practical matter, the lowest-level races for which we can gather consistent electoral returns are those for the lower houses of state legislatures.

There are a myriad of possible variables that can be considered important for predicting voter roll-off. Our focus in this endeavor is on the impact of the other races within the state. Since roll-off is more likely to occur the further down the ballot a race is listed, contests for state legislature (in particular, the lower chamber of the legislature) should be the most likely to suffer

*Hypothesis I: Increased competitiveness for state-wide offices increases voter roll-off for state legislative races.*

Another electoral impact on voter roll-off is the relative competition of the state legislative seat itself. *In extremis*, if the race is uncontested, voters are less likely to vote because the outcome is a given. Even if the race is contested but one candidate clearly holds a significant advantage over the other, we expect roll-off to increase. Voters may still go to the polls to vote in state-wide elections, but they are likely to ignore races in which they do not expect to have an appreciable impact.

*Hypothesis II: If a state legislative race is uncontested, roll-off from the state-wide races will increase.*

*Hypothesis III: If a state legislative race is only marginally contested, roll-off will increase from state-wide races.*

Another factor that is likely to play into voter roll-off is the presence of significant third party candidates on the statewide ballot. Again, as with hypothesis I, we expect that such a circumstance will bring voters to the polls that would not normally participate. Under such circumstances, these voters would seem less likely to proceed to fill out the remainder of the ballot.

*Hypothesis IV: If a third-party candidate garners more than 5% of the vote in a state-wide election, it will increase roll-off in the state legislative races.*

The final factor we will consider in this analysis is the presence of presidential races.

the political process. As a result, we would expect that roll-off would increase in presidential election years.

*Hypothesis V: Voter roll-off will increase in presidential election years.*

### **Data Analysis.**

To test the preceding five hypotheses, we turn to the precinct-level data from the four states in question. As an initial examination of the data, it is important to look at the amount of roll-off at the various electoral levels. Table 1 shows the average amount of voter roll-off for the lower chambers of the state legislatures compared to the other offices on the ballot.

**Table 1. Roll-Off Compared To State House Turnout**

	N		Mean
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
President Roll-Off	4221	78.87	1.95
Governor Roll-Off	1063	64.55	3.29
Senator Roll-Off	1064	60.48	5.00
Representative Roll-Off	5265	43.33	1.56
State Senate Roll-Off	4795	26.52	1.79

The results clearly show two things: roll-off is occurring at all levels, and the level of roll-off increases as the election moves further up the ballot. Neither of these findings are surprising, but they do verify that our data fit the normal patterns found in other studies of this phenomenon.

**Table 2. Roll-Off Correlations**

		Presidential Roll-Off	Governor Roll-Off	Senate Roll-Off	Representati ve Roll-Off	State Senate Roll-Off
Presidential Roll-Off	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.993**	.983**	.981**	.854**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	4221	400	1064	4198	4008
Governor Roll-Off	Pearson Correlation	.993**	1.000	.998**	.974**	.714**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000	.000
	N	400	1063	400	1063	874
Senate Roll-Off	Pearson Correlation	.983**	.998**	1.000	.970**	.813**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.000	.000
	N	1064	400	1064	1064	873
Representative Roll-Off	Pearson Correlation	.981**	.974**	.970**	1.000	.856**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.	.000
	N	4198	1063	1064	5265	4778
State Senate Roll-Off	Pearson Correlation	.854**	.714**	.813**	.856**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.
	N	4008	874	873	4778	4795

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The extremely high correlation coefficients shown in Table 2 are both good and bad. The high levels do show that roll-off exhibits consistent patterns across the various races, but it also indicates a level of collinearity that may well present problems when developing a multivariate model.

Our next bivariate swing through the data is to compare the roll-off levels between the two elections. For the purposes of the following tests, it was important to account for the varying sizes of the precincts in question. Rather than looking at raw roll-off numbers, we considered roll-off at the state legislative level as a percentage of the total votes cast for the larger race in

show increased roll-off between the gubernatorial races and the state house races. Table 3 shows the results of this test.

**Table 3. T-Test for Gubernatorial-State Legislature Roll-Off by Year**

	Gubernatorial Roll-Off
	Equal variances not assumed
t	-6.201
df	780.625
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Mean Difference	-.0470
Std. Error Difference	.0076

The results clearly show that voter roll-off for the state-wide races does increase during the presidential election year. The strength of the relationship appears to leave little doubt as to the accuracy of our fifth hypothesis within these data. These results support the findings of previous research by showing that presidential races tend to bring voters to the polls that are less politically involved or less informed, thus reducing their likelihood of participating in lower-ballot races.

To test hypothesis IV, we generated a series of dummy variable for each of the election levels. These dummies were coded 1 if a third-party candidate received more than 5% of the vote in the election, 0 if they did not. The following tables show the impact of significant third-party candidates on the roll-off levels for governor, U.S. House, state senate, and state representative.

**Table 4a. Governor-State Legislative Roll-Off by Third Party**

<u>Gubernatorial Roll-Off</u>	
Equal variances not assumed	
t	6.152
df	783.812
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Mean Difference	.0469
Std. Error Difference	.0076

**Table 4b. US House-State House Roll-Off by Third Party**

<u>Representative Roll-Off</u>	
Equal variances not assumed	
t	-8.731
df	239.000
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Mean Difference	-.0262
Std. Error Difference	.0030

**Table 4c. State Senate-State Representative Roll-Off by Third Party**

<u>State Senate Roll-Off</u>	
Equal variances not assumed	
t	-3.899
df	307.951
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Mean Difference	-.0822
Std. Error Difference	.0211

argument that third-party candidates bring voters to the polls that are only interested in the upper-ballot races and have little or no interest in the races further down the ticket.

To test the impact of the competitiveness of the state legislative races themselves on roll-off, we determined that the best baseline of comparison would be the roll-off from US House races. Of all of the electoral data available, the US House races are the only other races that occur every two years, allowing us to include as many of the state legislative races as possible. A t-test of the level of voter roll-off for uncontested seats (see Table 5) shows, not surprisingly, that uncontested state legislative seats show a significantly greater level of roll-off compared to contested seats.

**Table 5. US House-State Legislative Roll-Off, Uncontested vs. Contested State Legislative Seats**

	Representative Roll-Off
	Equal variances not assumed
t	15.878
df	4771.431
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Mean Difference	39.5865
Std. Error Difference	2.4932

To test the impact the marginally contested state legislative races, we examined the correlation between the margin of victory percentage for the state legislative races and the percentage of roll-off from the US house races.

**Table 6. Correlation of Margin of Victory and Roll-Off**

Again, the results show support for our hypothesis. As The margin of victory level increases in the state legislative race, the level of voter roll-off also increases. This would appear to confirm our argument that voters are less interested in lower-ballot races if they feel that the race is non-competitive.

Overall, the results of the analysis thus far have provided strong support for our hypotheses. We find voter-roll occurring at a variety of levels of the ballot, and we also find that increasing voter turnout tends to drive roll-off up. At this stage, it is important to consider a multivariate model of roll-off to try and gauge the relative importance of these forces on overall roll-off numbers.

Since we define roll-off as a percentage of the total votes cast, OLS regression can provide an effective and easily interpreted method for measuring the various forces at play in the process. For this model, we used the percentage of roll-off between the US House and the state house as our dependent variable. For our independent variables, we included a dummy variable for the presence of a significant third party candidate at any level on the ballot, the presence of a presidential election, and the margin of victory in the state legislative race.

**Table 7. OLS Regression Predicting US House-State Legislature Roll-Off <sup>a</sup>**

	Unstandardized		Standardize	t	Sig.
	Coefficients		d		
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	7.451	5.532		1.347	.178
Third Party	.015	.005	-.054	-3.009	.003
Year	.004	.003	-.022	-1.324	.186
State					

### Model Summary

Model	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.123	.113	.1313

The results of the OLS model are, at best, mediocre. While it is true that finding any significance within the data is worthy of mention, the “Law of Large Numbers” also applies. The overall predictive capacity of the model is clearly weak, although this is likely caused by high levels of collinearity as indicated in the correlation matrix in Table 2. What is worthy of note is that two of the three independent variables are significant and all of the variables are in the correct direction given the previous findings.

### Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

Overall, the results of our analysis are promising. We found that voter roll-off occurs at many levels in the ballot and the pattern is a monotonic one as one moves further down. We found that events that are likely to increase voter turnout, such as presidential races, hotly-contested races, and significant third-party candidates, appear to bring voters to the polls that are more likely to roll-off than more traditional party voters. While the results of our multivariate model were less than breath-taking, our overall results do give a good picture of the electoral factors that have an impact on roll-off.

That said, this project is clearly in the preliminary stages. While 5000+ precincts do offer us some information, the limited nature of the data at this point forces us to temper any of our

presidential and mid-term, we can get a much clearer picture of the events in question. Until we can complete further data collection, our conclusions are limited.

In addition, there are clearly other electoral factors that play into the mix. While margin of victory does act as a marginal proxy for overall campaign competitiveness, including variables on length of incumbency and campaign spending are vital to measuring the overall impact of electoral processes on voter roll-off. Other considerations may include the competitiveness of party primaries both within the state legislative races and at the state level.

Even when we take all of these factors into account, there are obviously many other elements that play into roll-off. Ballot structure, public opinion, and information levels all play a role in understanding roll-off. While we cannot hope to gather all of this information at the precinct level for this analysis, we must also recognize that our contribution only represents part of a much larger canvass.

While the causes of roll-off still remain unclear, the consequences are more obvious. Even a drop of a few percentage points can be the potential swing vote in close state races. In some states, such as Minnesota, the passage of constitutional amendments is tied to the turnout levels for the gubernatorial election. When roll-off is significant in these elections, the measures can be defeated even if a majority of the people who voted on the issue were in favor of its passage.

In many ways, this project has only begun to scratch the surface of voter roll-off. While there is little question that roll-off occurs, our level of understanding of the process is still

It is striking that voters would be least likely to vote for the offices that are most likely to make a difference to them. We know that roll-off occurs. The why of roll-off is an entirely different matter worthy of continued consideration by the academic community.

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