

Mobilizing Interests: Group Participation and Competition in Direct Democracy Elections

David F. Damore · Stephen P. Nicholson

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2013

Abstract We examine group mobilization in direct democracy elections by assessing the conditions under which interests will actively support or oppose ballot measures. Motivating our analysis is that the decision to mobilize is driven by the costs and benefits of group participation, a calculus shaped by issue characteristics, state political institutions, and the electoral context. Using data from initiative and referendum measures appearing on statewide ballots from 2003 to 2008, we find that ballot measures involving social and tax issues are likely to produce competition among groups and increase the overall number of groups involved. In addition, we find that group competition and levels of mobilization increased in response to how difficult it would be for the legislature to undo the change brought about from passage of a ballot measure. Lastly, group competition and levels of mobilization increased for ballot measures appearing in nonpresidential election years and for ballot measures featuring a close election. Taken together, our results suggest that groups engage strategically in direct democracy elections to pursue a mix of policy and political goals.

Keywords Interest groups · Direct democracy · Ballot measures · Initiative · Mobilization · Social issues

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Las Vegas, NV, March 16–19, 2011.

D. F. Damore
Department of Political Science, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway,
Box 455029, Las Vegas, NV 89154, USA
e-mail: david.damore@unlv.edu

S. P. Nicholson (✉)
Department of Political Science, School of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts,
University of California, Merced, 5200 North Lake Road, Merced, CA 95343, USA
e-mail: snicholson@ucmerced.edu

Interest groups lie at the heart of pluralist accounts of American politics (Truman 1951). Essential to the proper working of pluralism is group activity and competition among interests. Whether groups mobilize, or fail to mobilize, has important implications for representation. If groups mobilize on both sides of an issue, competing interests may be meaningfully represented in the policy process. However, if groups fail to mobilize and compete, then the viability of the pluralist model may be questioned. Understanding when opposing interests will challenge groups seeking to alter the status quo then has both empirical and normative consequences for representative democracy.

In this paper we investigate these dynamics in the context of direct democracy elections. We do so because interest groups are central to direct democracy elections (Boehmke 2002; Bowler and Hanneman 2006; Gerber 1996). Not only do groups qualify measures for the ballot, but they also wage the campaigns for and against their passage (Garrett and Gerber 2001; Gerber 1996) and provide cues to voters (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Lupia 1994; Nicholson 2011). Analyzing groups in direct democracy elections also represents a highly visible, relatively straightforward means for observing group behavior in politics.

We advance research on group politics, direct democracy, and the intersection between the two by exploring why, and under what conditions, interests mobilize to contest a ballot measure. In particular, we seek to explain why some ballot measures mobilize no groups whereas others feature multiple groups on one or both sides. Motivating our argument is that the decision to mobilize is driven by an assessment of the costs and benefits of participation and that issue characteristics, state political institutions, and the electoral context vary these assessments.

In examining these processes, our research offers insight into the nature of policy competition in the American states. In particular, our analysis illuminates when we are likely to observe groups engaging in direct democracy elections, either as unitary actors or in coalitions, and whether this mobilization is competitive or one-sided. In so doing, our study provides insight into when and why groups mobilize and thus addresses normative concerns raised by pluralists regarding the ability of groups to promote meaningful representation.

Group Mobilization and Competition

Why do interests mobilize? The scholarly answer to this question largely involves individual motivation. In Olson's (1965) influential account, groups offering selective incentives or those interests able to coerce membership are more likely to mobilize whereas groups that can do neither will suffer from free riding and mobilize few, if any, of the individuals sharing the collective interest of the latent group. Further, Olson suggests that economic interests are better positioned to mobilize as a by-product of their nonpolitical activity. Subsequent scholarship has advanced, refined, and challenged Olson's framework (e.g., Moe 1980; Walker 1991; Salisbury 1969) but his legacy of examining group activity through a cost-benefit framework has persisted.

Nonetheless, the thrust of this research has been on the factors that cause individuals to involve themselves with organized interests. As a consequence, absent from many accounts of group mobilization are *group* variables (see Baumgartner and Leech 1998). An emphasis on groups, however, is central to pluralism, a theory of democracy holding that political power is exercised and dispersed among a variety of interests (e.g., Truman 1951; Dahl 1961). The early pluralists championed pluralism not only as a descriptive account of the American political system, but also as a normative standard for evaluating democratic legitimacy.

Truman (1951) offers the prevailing pluralist account of interest mobilization. Of particular relevance to our study is Truman's disturbance theory, his prediction that new groups emerge in response to disturbances to the status quo. Truman (1951) argued that groups mobilize in defense of their shared interest if threatened. Such disturbances are the catalyst for group competition. Evaluation of this theory has been limited, however. In comparing state interest group populations from 1997 to 1999, Lowery et al. (2005) found little evidence that health care interests responded to the mobilization of policy competitors. However, other scholars (e.g., Hansen 1985; Walker 1991) have shown that disturbances to the status quo can cause membership of established groups to increase.

In the direct democracy context much of the relevant literature has been concerned with explaining variation in interest group populations, as opposed to the behavior of individual groups (see Gerber 1996 for a notable exception). For example, Boehmke (2002) examines the effects of direct democracy on group mobilization but he, like Lowery et al. (2005), assesses variation in state interest group populations. Boehmke (2002) finds that initiative states have larger and more diverse interest group populations. Smith and Tolbert (2004) extend this research by assessing the effects of initiative *usage* and find that the size and diversity of interest group populations increases among states that more frequently use initiatives.

We advance research on interest groups and direct democracy by examining a different, but related type of mobilization: the participation of interests in direct democracy elections. A focus on the participation of interests seeking to either pass or defeat ballot measures allows us to examine the breadth and depth of interest representation, a crucial concern for evaluating pluralism since "organization is the mobilization of bias" (Schattschneider 1960, p. 69). A focus on whether and to what extent groups mobilize rather than the creation of new groups is also sensible given that most interests in direct democracy elections are well-established, repeat players (Bowler and Hanneman 2006). Thus, the mobilization of interests in direct democracy elections is largely about why interests expend resources to either support or defeat a specific measure, as opposed to explaining if these groups are newly engaged or veteran participants.

The Costs and Benefits of Group Mobilization

To explain group mobilization, we use a cost/benefit framework, an approach consistent with previous research on direct democracy and interest groups

(Boehmke 2005; Gerber 1996). In comparing interest groups to firms, for example, Gerber (1996, p. 7) offers how “Both...evaluate the expected costs and benefits of alternative courses of action and choose those that promise the greatest net benefit.” The decision to mobilize is not cost free as doing so obligates limited time and resources be devoted to fundraising, developing and implementing a campaign strategy, and persuading others of the merits of the group’s position. By choosing to contest a direct democracy election, groups also incur opportunity costs that inhibit their ability to partake in other activities such as working to elect or defeat candidates or lobbying elected officials.

At the same time, the policy benefits that a group may reap (e.g., being on the winning side, having preferred policy either preserved or implemented, and claiming credit for both) are outcome dependent. Thus, these benefits are best conceptualized as *potential*. Other benefits, however, may be achieved regardless of the outcome. For instance, mobilization may facilitate group maintenance (e.g., carving out a niche, advertising, recruitment, or developing relationships with like minded interests; see Gerber 1999). These contests also provide groups with opportunities to pursue a variety of political goals. Parties and their group allies may mobilize around “wedge” issues to set the electoral agenda and affect voting decisions for candidates running in both state and federal contests (e.g., Nicholson 2005). Mobilizing around ballot measures also may be designed to turn out voting blocks to affect the outcomes of races elsewhere on the ballot (Smith and Tolbert 2004, chap. 2). For well-heeled interests, mobilization may be motivated simply to force a response in order to empty the opposition’s coffers and decrease these interests’ abilities to compete in other contexts.

In seeking to fulfill this mix of goals, we expect groups to behave strategically, mobilizing only when the potential benefits outweigh the costs. In making these assessments, we propose that three types of factors will shape the cost/benefit calculus: issue characteristics, state political institutions, and the electoral context.

Issue Characteristics

Although the range of issues that ballot measures may tap is nearly unlimited, some issues are likely to generate more attention than others. To this end, the direct democracy literature has focused largely on two sets of contentious issues: social issues and taxes.

Ballot measures regulating access to abortion or banning same-sex marriage address divisive social issues that often invite controversy because they tap into deeply held beliefs that are central to the political identities of many citizens and groups. Prior research suggests that social issues increase the perceived benefits of citizen engagement (Nicholson 2003), produce higher voter turnout (Biggers 2011), decrease voter roll-off (Reilly 2010), and set the agenda in candidate elections (Bowler et al. 2006; Donovan et al. 2008; Ensley and Bucy 2010; Nicholson 2005).

Moreover, social issues such as those seeking to codify definitions of marriage, limit affirmative action, create official state languages, or limit access to public services for non-citizens, specifically seek to constrain the rights of others. From the perspective of disturbance theory, measures of this type convey an imminent threat

to targeted populations and may motivate interests to counter-mobilize in hopes of defeating the proposed change to the status quo. In this regard, the perceived benefits of participation may greatly outweigh the costs. Thus, all else equal, we expect greater mobilization for ballot measures addressing social issues.

If social issues are a source of a deep schism in American politics, taxes are certainly another. Tax restraint ballot measures, especially California's Proposition 13, were responsible for the surge of initiatives that began in the early 1980s by encouraging conservative interest groups to use the initiative process to further its goals, especially on tax issues (Smith 1998). Part of this encouragement, no doubt, stems from the public's hostility toward taxes (Sears and Citrin 1985), as well as broader disagreements about the role and scope of government. Thus, the potential benefits of participation by anti-tax groups might outweigh the costs since anti-tax crusades have strong ideological undertones that heighten expressive benefits and lower costs since the public is largely receptive to the goal of lower taxes. The opposite, however, is likely to hold for interests favoring higher taxes. Because of the antipathy towards taxes in contemporary American politics, mobilization of a broad coalition of interests may be required to make the case to the voting public for why an increase should be implemented.

Political Institutions

Beyond content, the institutions through which ballot measures emerge may also affect the cost and benefits of mobilization. The most fundamental institutional factor is whether a measure appears on the ballot as an initiative or a legislative referendum.¹ Of the two, the legislative referendum is by far the more common form of direct democracy as legislative referendums appear on state ballots twice as often as initiatives. In contrast to the initiative, a process dominated by interest groups, partisan legislative majorities are the drivers of legislative referendums (Damore et al. 2012). Because the role of groups may be limited in the qualification of legislative referendums, the mobilization of interests around these measures is likely to be in opposition, if at all. For the initiative, mobilization is nearly true by definition since groups qualify most of these measures (e.g., Gerber 1999; Banducci 1998; Boehmke 2005). Thus, groups must invest substantial resources to navigate the institutional hurdles needed to qualify a measure (Tolbert et al. 1998) before they even begin campaigning. The controversial nature of initiatives also invites counter-mobilization—competition—among interests compared to the far more consensual process that defines legislative referendums (Damore et al. 2012).

Another way that political institutions may alter the incentives of group mobilization involves the depth of commitment behind a proposed ballot measure. Ballot measures may qualify as either a statute or a constitutional amendment. In opting to package a measure as an amendment, proponents are seeking to commit their states to a course of action that is more difficult to alter in the future. A deeper policy

¹ Additionally, 21 states allow for the popular referendum, a process whereby voters can invalidate existing state laws. While the popular referendum is seldom used, on occasion these elections can be quite contentious such as the Ohio's Issue 2 in 2011 where voters repealed legislation that limited collective bargaining for the state's public employees.

commitment, in turn, increases the potential benefits of participation. In a similar vein, the level of insulation that initiatives are afforded varies across states in terms of when and to what degree legislatures can ignore, change, or invalidate statutory initiatives (Bowler and Donovan 2004). All else equal, because passage may mean a more-or-less permanent change to state policy, the potential benefits of participation will be great for proponents and opponents alike. For this reason, we anticipate greater mobilization around ballot measures that are constitutional amendments or in states where legislatures are constrained in their ability to alter initiatives after passage.

State political institutions may also matter to the degree that they ease or hinder mobilization. In states with large interest group populations we might expect to observe greater mobilization in direct democracy elections. Simply considering the density of interest groups, however, may obscure differences within these populations. Where business interests dominate there may be *less* mobilization in direct democracy elections given that the participation of these interests is often in response to challenges to the status quo (Gerber 1999). Moreover, given that political mobilization among businesses is often a by-product of other activity (Olson 1965), when business groups participate they are likely to pool resources resulting in fewer distinct groups mobilizing. In contrast, for groups whose existence is political, coalitions may be the norm. For these groups, participation may further other goals (i.e., advertising, agenda setting, networking etc.) besides affecting the final outcome (see Gerber 1999, p. 82) and because these groups are political, they may be less willing to subordinate their identities to a coalition.

Electoral Context

The electoral context in which measures are contested is also likely to shape the incentives for group participation. Most obviously, the likelihood of a ballot measure passing should affect mobilization. If a measure is heading towards passage or defeat, then neither proponents nor opponents have incentive to mobilize. Conversely, if the outcome is uncertain both sides have more incentive to engage in hopes of influencing the outcome.

The decision to mobilize also may be affected by *when* a measure is placed before voters. While much of the direct democracy literature focuses on midterm and presidential elections, these are not the only instances when measures are on the ballot. Some states allow ballot measures to be qualified for primary elections, while other states hold special elections only featuring legislative referendums. The ability of groups to raise funds and mobilize supporters may be less successful in presidential elections given the large amount of oxygen that presidential contests consume. In presidential election years, for example, ballot measures are less well known (Nicholson 2003) and have weaker effects on turnout (Smith 2002) and setting the agenda in candidate races (Nicholson 2005, chapter 4). Diminished group activity directed toward state politics is also likely during presidential election years. Interests may prefer to mobilize in non-presidential elections for two additional reasons. First, because these elections tend to draw fewer voters to the polls, groups can more efficiently target their resources. Second, the composition of primary and off-year electorates may provide better opportunities for interests with an ideological focus.

Lastly, the competitiveness of a state's political environment may affect the incentives for group participation. As noted above, by mobilizing around ballot measures, groups may be able to shape the composition of the electorate in hopes of affecting the outcome of other races on the ballot. However, the efficacy of this strategy is dependent upon a competitive context. In states where one party is dominant, marginal shifts in turnout may have little effect. But in states where the parties are more evenly matched and races may be more competitive, small changes to the voting pool may yield significant benefits. As a result, we expect that the more a state's electorate favors one party, the less mobilization there will be in direct democracy elections.

Data and Methods

To investigate these hypotheses we use data collected for the 728 initiative and discretionary referendum measures appearing on statewide ballots between 2003 and 2008 as collected by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Ballot Measures Database.² For each ballot measure, we matched the number of committees that either campaigned for or against passage using data from the National Institute on Money in State Politics such that each identified committee was assumed to represent the mobilization of a distinct interest. There is significant variation in the number of committees associated with each measure (mean = 2.01; SD = 3.13; range 0–26). Of the 728 ballot measures, 333 (45.74 %) had no mobilization (314 of which were legislative referendums), 142 (19.51 %) had mobilization on one side, and 253 (34.75 %) had mobilization on both sides.

From these data, we constructed three dependent variables: (1) a trichotomous measure that equals zero if there was no mobilization, one if there was one-sided mobilization, and two if there was two-sided mobilization or competition; (2) a count of the number of total committees that mobilized around a specific measure; (3) separate counts of the number of committees that mobilized for and against passage. Since the functional forms of the dependent variables differ, we use a variety of estimation techniques. The first model examining the representation of interests, where the dependent variable is a three-category measure of mobilization, is estimated as a multinomial logit analysis. The second model is a count of the total number of groups that mobilized for or against a ballot measure and is estimated as a negative binomial regression. The final model, which simultaneously examines the number of committees that mobilized to support and oppose a ballot measure, is estimated as a seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) model. Robust standard errors clustered by state are used for all analyses except for the SUR model.³

² We exclude automatically referred referendums (many states require that voters be asked periodically if they would like to hold a constitutional convention) or referendums offered by actors besides state legislatures (e.g., the Arizona Commission on Salaries for Elective State Officers or the Florida Constitutional Revision Commission).

³ Robust standard errors are not an option for seemingly unrelated regression models in Stata. When the two models are run separately with robust standard errors the results are unaffected.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of a multinomial logit analysis looking at the participation of interests in direct democracy contests. The dependent variable is coded zero for ballot measures where there was no mobilization, one for measures where mobilization was one-sided, and two for measures where there was competition—mobilization for and against. The results presented in Table 1 are for one-sided and two-sided mobilization and the referent category is no mobilization meaning that the interpretation of coefficients is made relative to ballot measures where no interests mobilized. The appendix provides the coding for the independent variables.

The results in Table 1 suggest that a variety of factors affect group activity relative to no activity. To begin, we hypothesized that some policy issues are more likely than others to stimulate group participation. The positive and significant coefficients for *Social Issue* for one and two-sided competition indicates that ballot measures featuring social issues increase the mobilization of interests relative to no mobilization. The coefficient for *Tax Increase* is positive and significant only for two-sided mobilization suggesting that ballot measures featuring tax increases are likely to have groups on both sides.

There is also support for our hypotheses about the impact of political institutions on the participation of groups. As expected, the effect of *Referendum* is negative and significant for both one and two-sided mobilization compared to no mobilization, indicating that referendums are less likely than initiatives to feature group participation. The coefficients for *Legislative Insulation* are positive and significant

Table 1 Multinomial logit analysis of one and two-sided group mobilization in direct democracy elections, 2003–2008

	One-sided mobilization	Two-sided mobilization
Issue characteristics		
<i>Social Issue</i>	1.61* (.715)	3.55* (.652)
<i>Tax Increase</i>	-.621 (1.13)	2.27* (.861)
Political institutions		
<i>Referendum</i>	-1.16* (.368)	-3.05* (.423)
<i>Legislative Insulation</i>	.283* (.051)	.345* (.056)
<i>Constitutional Amendment</i>	-.854 (.349)	-.464 (.356)
<i>Group Density</i>	-.035 (.186)	-.448 (.245)
<i>Econ Dominance</i>	-5.48* (2.43)	-2.21 (2.86)
Electoral context		
<i>Competitive</i>	.472* (.255)	.463 (.340)
<i>Presidential Election</i>	-.263 (.248)	-.205 (.229)
<i>Party Difference</i>	.020 (.018)	.014 (.017)
<i>Constant</i>	3.74 (2.70)	-2.19 (3.08)
<i>n</i>	728	
Log Likelihood	-492.36	
Wald χ^2	362.02*	

* $p < .05$ (one tailed). Standard errors in parentheses. Referent category is no mobilization

for both one and two-sided mobilization indicating that, relative to no groups being mobilized, groups are more likely to be involved in direct democracy contests when legislatures are constrained in their ability to alter a measure after it has passed. Our indicators of the interest group populations suggest that the density of the group system does not affect competition, as the coefficient for *Group Density* is insignificant for both one and two-sided mobilization relative to no mobilization. However, the coefficient for *Economic Dominance*, the ratio of for profit to nonprofit interests in a state, indicates that relative to no group participation, if business interests dominate the group system it significantly decreases one-sided mobilization but has no effect on two-sided mobilization.

For the most part, the participation of interests in Table 1 appeared to be insensitive to the electoral context as only *Competitive* had a significant effect, increasing the probability of one-sided competition. Relative to no mobilization, neither *Presidential Election* nor *Party Difference* had a significant effect on one or two-sided mobilization suggesting that the presence of a presidential election or the competitiveness of party politics in a state have no effect on whether a ballot measure contest features a group on one or both sides of the contest.

As compared to the results in Table 1, Fig. 1 depicts the overall pattern of results. Figure 1 depicts the changes in predicted probabilities for the significant variables from Table 3, while the other variables are held constant at their means. The variable names in Fig. 1 are featured on the X axis whereas the Y axis depicts the predicted probabilities. The groupings of bars in Fig. 1 depict the effect of the independent variables moving from their minimum to maximum values for each category of the dependent variable. The bars on the left in Fig. 1 represent no mobilization, the middle bars one-sided mobilization, and the bars on the right represent two-sided mobilization or competition.

A notable pattern in Fig. 1 is that the factors that produce a positive change in the predicted probability of observing competition produce a negative change in the predicted probability for one-sided and no mobilization and vice versa. Specifically, an issue placed on the ballot as a referendum results in positive changes in the predicted probability of observing one-sided mobilization or no mobilization of .10 and .45 respectively, but results in a decrease of .55 in the predicted probability of observing competition. In contrast, as *Legislative Insulation* increases from its minimum to maximum value, the change in the probability of no mobilization decreases by .56, while the change in probability of one-sided mobilization and competition increase by .16 and .40, respectively.

Figure 1 also makes clear the effects that the content of ballot measures have on the representation of interests. For *Social Issue*, the change in the probability that such a measure will attract either no mobilization is $-.42$ or one-sided mobilization is $-.16$. In contrast, the probability that a measure addressing a social issue will result in competition, two-sided mobilization, produces a positive change in the predicted probability of .58. The effects for *Tax Increase* are similar. The change in the probability that a ballot measure seeking a tax increase will attract no mobilization or one sided mobilization are $-.28$ and $-.24$ respectively, whereas the probability that such a measure will result in groups mobilizing on both sides increases by .52.

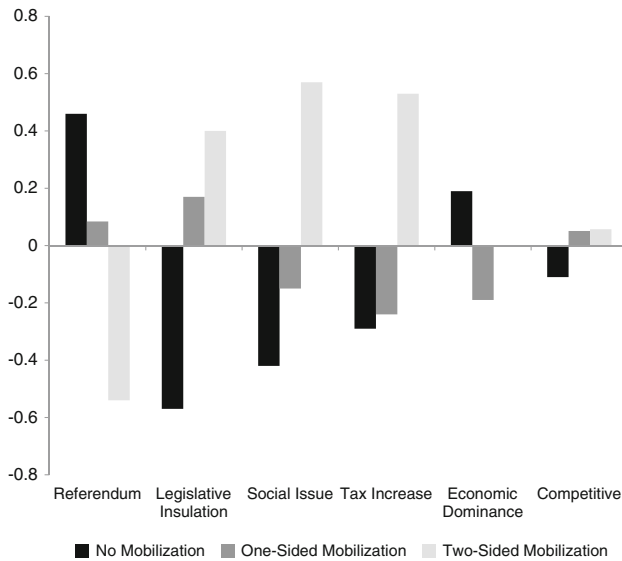


Fig. 1 Changes in the probability of group mobilization in direct democracy elections, 2003–2008. *Note* Quantities represent changes in predicted probabilities calculated by looking at a minimum to maximum change in an independent variable holding all other variables at their mean values from the analysis presented in Table 1

Levels of Mobilization

Table 2 presents the results for our models assessing the level of mobilization in direct democracy elections. The first column of Table 2 presents the results of a negative binomial regression model in which the dependent variable is the number of total groups mobilized. This model allows us to examine the level of mobilization in broad strokes. However, some of the discussion above, such as the portion gleaned from pluralist arguments about mobilization and group competition, suggests differences in the mobilization calculus between proponents and opponents. Assessments of the costs and benefits of mobilization may differ for opponents as compared to supporters since the former will be responding to threats to the status quo whereas the latter is proposing alterations to the status quo. To examine this aspect of mobilization, columns two and three in Table 2 present the results of our seemingly unrelated regression analysis examining the number of groups mobilized to either support or defeat a measure.⁴

Consistent with the analysis presented in Table 1, the results from Table 2 suggest that issue characteristics play a significant role affecting the number of

⁴ The specification of the SUR model may raise concerns about simultaneity, as groups may mobilize not just in response to the factors we identify, but also to the presence of opposing groups. When the analysis presented in columns two and three of Table 2 is estimated controlling for the number of opposing groups, the coefficients are positive and significant (.62 for number of con groups and .78 for the number of con groups) and the effects for *Social Issue*, *Legislative Insulation*, and *Tax Increase* (pro group model) are dampened, while *Economic Dominance* and *Competitive* (pro group model) falls out of significance.

groups mobilized. For each model, *Social Issue* is positive and statistically significant in explaining the total number of groups participating and the number of groups on either side, pro or con. Specifically, using the estimates from the negative binomial regression analysis presented in column one of Table 2 to generate predicted probabilities indicates that a ballot measure addressing a social issue results in 3.5 more mobilized groups as compared to a non-social issue measure, holding the other variables constant. Moreover, given the similarly sized coefficients from columns two and three, it appears that mobilization is more-or-less evenly split among pro and con interests.

Ballot measures proposing tax increases also have more participation. In the first column of results, the coefficient for *Tax Increase* is positive and significant indicating that ballot measures featuring tax hikes increase the overall number of groups participating (change in predicted probability, holding all other variables constant, is 1.56 groups). However, inspection of the models for the number of groups on the pro or con side of a ballot measure show that *Tax Increase* is only significant for groups supporting a tax increase; a result indicative of the uphill battle waged by proponents of tax increases.

The results from Table 2 also indicate that state political institutions affect the number of groups mobilizing. As found in Table 1, the coefficient for *Referendum* is

Table 2 Analysis of group mobilization in direct democracy elections, 2003–2008

Dependent variable	Number of groups (negative binomial)	Number of pro groups (seemingly unrelated regression) [†]	Number of con groups (seemingly unrelated regression) [†]
Issue characteristics			
<i>Social Issue</i>	1.37* (.324)	1.52* (.193)	1.64* (.216)
<i>Tax Increase</i>	.789* (.322)	1.19* (.293)	.462 (.328)
Political institutions			
<i>Referendum</i>	-.909* (.144)	-.418* (.138)	-1.35* (.154)
<i>Legislative Insulation</i>	.112* (.040)	.098* (.022)	.047* (.025)
<i>Constitutional Amend</i>	-.096 (.189)	-.191 (.121)	.352* (.135)
<i>Group Density</i>	-.117 (.131)	-.249 (.095)	-.184 (.104)
<i>Econ Dominance</i>	-2.81 (2.10)	-2.35* (1.09)	-3.61* (1.23)
Electoral context			
<i>Competitive</i>	.175 (.153)	.242* (.126)	.203 (.142)
<i>Presidential Election</i>	-.279* (.124)	-.208* (.114)	-.427* (.128)
<i>Party Difference</i>	.007 (.009)	.003 (.006)	.004 (.004)
<i>Constant</i>	1.36 (2.02)	.417 (1.12)	2.29* (1.25)
<i>N</i>	728	728	728
<i>R</i> ²	–	.24	.28
Log Likelihood	-1,202.98	–	–
Wald χ^2	86.19*	–	–

* $p < .05$ (one tailed). Standard errors in parentheses

[†] Breusch–Pagan test of independence: $\chi^2_{(1)} = 119.46^*$; correlation of residuals = $-.41$

negative and statistically significant for the total number of groups (column one) and the number of pro and con groups (columns two and three) indicating that interests are less likely to mobilize around measures placed on the ballot by state legislatures. Consistent with the results from Table 1, the coefficients for *Legislative Insulation* in Table 2 are positive and statistically significant for the overall number of groups mobilized and the number of pro and con groups mobilized suggesting greater interest group mobilization for ballot measures in states where the legislature is constrained from altering the measure after passage. Using results from column one of Table 2 to generate predicted probabilities indicates that compared to states with the least amount of legislative insulation, the number of groups engaged in a direct democracy increases by 1.54 in states with the highest levels of legislative insulation, holding the other variables constant. Also note that while the coefficient for *Legislative Insulation* is positive and significant in Table 2 for both pro and con groups, the magnitude of the coefficient is half as large for interests opposing a measure compared to interests in favor of passage.

Except for opposition groups, the results for *Constitutional Amendment* in Table 2 are similar to Table 1. The coefficient for this variable is not significantly different from zero when looking at overall group mobilization or mobilization for pro groups. However, the coefficient is statistically significant in the analysis of con groups (column two, Table 2) suggesting that interests that would be adversely affected by a ballot measure are more likely to mobilize.

Among our institutional variables measuring a state's interest group population, the coefficient for *Group Density* in Table 2 is statistically insignificant for the models looking at overall mobilization and the number of groups mobilized, pro or con. Although *Economic Dominance*, the ratio of for profit to nonprofit interests in a state, does not have a statistically significant effect on the total number of groups mobilized, it has a negative and significant effect on the number of pro and con groups mobilized (although see note four).

As for the variables capturing the effect that the electoral context exerts on group mobilization, the results are mixed. The coefficient for *Competitive* is positive and significant only for the number of pro groups. On the other hand, the negative and significant coefficient for *Presidential Election* in all the analyses indicate that groups, both pro and con, are more active in off year elections. We had anticipated such an effect given that fewer resources are available during presidential election years as compared to midterm and off year elections. Thus, while presidential elections do not dampen the representation of interests (the focus of Table 1), they decrease, albeit slightly, the breadth of the coalitions emerging in these contests. Lastly, contrary to our expectations but consistent with the results from Table 1, *Party Difference* is not statistically significant in either of the analyses.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on pluralist arguments about group competition and mobilization, our analysis of interest mobilization in direct legislation contests helps explain when and why interests are likely to contest these elections and if they do, whether

mobilization is competitive or one-sided. Underlying our work is the point that interests engage in direct democracy elections when the policy and political benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. Consistent with this framework, our results suggest that a measure's content, state political institutions, and the electoral context affect variation in mobilization. To aid the discussion, Table 3 provides a summary of results.

In terms of the policy goals that interests pursue through direct democracy elections, our results make clear the importance of issue content as a mobilizing force. In particular, social issues had a positive effect on mobilization regardless of how we measured mobilization or competition suggesting that the qualification of such measures increases the probability that a group, oftentimes multiple groups, will engage on both sides of the issue. The implications of this finding are twofold. First, our results offer an interesting compliment to work demonstrating that ballot measures addressing social issues increase voter awareness (Nicholson 2003) and turnout (Biggers 2011). Aside from media attention, there is little understanding of what causes these effects. Our analysis suggests one potential driver—the activity of groups. Obviously, this claim is speculative, but it does suggest an avenue for future research.

Second, the activity around social issues is consistent with pluralist expectations of mobilization and counter-mobilization. Because the policies imbued in these measures are often value laden and seek to limit the rights of societal groups, the nature of these proposals is consistent with the types of threats that Truman (1951) argued would mobilize interests on both sides. Accordingly, the mean number of mobilized interests for a measure addressing a social issue is over five (5.39), while the average mobilization for all other measures is less than two (1.68). Moreover, of the 64 social issue measures in our dataset, 52 (81 %) had group competition whereas only seven (13 %) had no mobilization.

The mobilization for ballot measures seeking tax increases suggests a different calculus. While measures seeking tax increases significantly increase the number of groups participating and the likelihood of observing competition, much of this activity is among supporting interests. From the pluralist perspective, the onus appears to be on supporting interests, often working in coalitions, to make the argument about why the status quo should be altered. And while opposing interests may see these proposals as threats to their economic well-being, mobilization in opposition tends to be narrower. This may be the case because business interests, the likely opponents of tax increases, are typically involved in politics as a by-product (Olson 1965) and thus may prefer to pool efforts. This point is consistent with our result suggesting that the more a state's interest group population tilts towards business interests, the less mobilization.

Our results also offer support for the role of state political institutions in shaping mobilization and competition. If an issue appeared on the ballot as a referendum as opposed to an initiative, then it was less likely to mobilize groups. We also expected that ballot measures packaged as constitutional amendments would result in greater group activity and competition. We only found evidence supportive of this relationship for the model assessing the number of groups mobilizing against the passage of a ballot measure. Although we are unsure why constitutional

Table 3 Summary of results

	One-sided mobilization	Two-sided mobilization	# groups	# pro groups	# con groups	Interpretation
Issue characteristics						
<i>Social Issue (+)</i>	+	+	+	+	+	Social issues increase all forms of mobilization
<i>Tax Increase (+)</i>	ns	+	+	+	ns	Tax increase ballot measures increase group competition, the number of overall groups and the number of pro groups
Political institutions						
<i>Referendum (-)</i>	-	-	-	-	-	Mobilization decreases for measures placed on the ballot by state legislatures
<i>Legislative Insulation (+)</i>	+	+	+	+	+	All forms of mobilization increase in states where legislatures are constrained in their ability to alter a measure after passage
<i>Constitutional Amendment (+)</i>	ns	ns	ns	ns	+	Mobilization increases for groups in opposition if a measure seeks to amend a state's constitution
<i>Group Density (+)</i>	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	The density of a state's interest group population has no effect on mobilization
<i>Econ Dominance (-)</i>	-	ns	ns	-	-	Business dominance of state interest group populations decreases one-sided mobilization and opponent mobilization
Electoral context						
<i>Competitive (+)</i>	+	ns	ns	+	ns	Competition increases mobilization, particularly among supporting interests
<i>Presidential Election (-)</i>	ns	ns	-	-	-	Mobilization for and against a measure decreases during presidential elections
<i>Party Difference (-)</i>	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	The partisan composition of a state's electorate has no effect on mobilization

+ or - in bracket represents hypothesized effect
 ns not statistically significant

amendments did not have significant effects on the other dependent variables, it is consistent with our expectations that these ballot measures would increase the number of groups in opposition given the higher stakes associated with amending a constitution.

One of our most consistent results is the effect of legislative insulation. As expected, we found greater group mobilization and competition in states where it is difficult to undo an initiative through legislative action. Taken together with our results indicating that competitive elections were likely to increase group mobilization and the number of groups promoting a measure, it appears that both the permanency of a proposed policy change and its likelihood of passage are key factors in the mobilization calculus. The results also speak to pluralist concerns as they suggest that the immediacy and potential immutability of a threat stimulate group activity in direct democracy elections.

We also hypothesized that there would be greater group activity and competition in states with larger interest group populations. However, across all models, the density of a state's interest group population did not have a significant effect. This suggests, rather curiously, that a higher density of groups does not result in more groups involved in ballot measure campaigns. Yet, it is important to remember that the Gray and Lowery (1996) measure of interest group populations is based on the number of interest groups registered to lobby a state legislature. At the same time and as discussed above, we do find that the more biased a state's interest group population was toward business interests the fewer the number of interested engaged.

Lastly, our results offer support for the contention that groups use direct democracy elections to advance political goals such as shaping the composition of the broader electorate or setting the agenda in candidate races (see Nicholson 2005). However, this activity is more salient in off year elections as we find fewer groups engaged during presidential elections when turnout is higher and voters may be less interested in state issues. As a consequence, groups may see less benefit in allocating resources to ballot measure campaigns.

In sum, a common criticism of direct democracy is the outsized influence that organized interests play in these elections. To be sure, groups are at the heart of these contests. However, as our results make clear, there is significant variation in how interests engage in the process. In some instances, such as when measures are placed on the ballot by state legislatures, interests are unlikely to mobilize. In other cases, we observe significant activity and competition that is consistent with pluralist expectations of mobilization and counter-mobilization. Most notably, ballot measures that tap into deep divisions in contemporary American politics, such as social issues and tax increases, and those that seek to make more lasting changes to state policy are likely to mobilize multiple interests on both sides.

Acknowledgments We are thankful to Matt Barreto and Baodong Liu for helpful comments. We are indebted to Denise Roth Barber of the National Institute on Money in State Politics for providing us with her institute's data on ballot measures. All interpretations of the data, of course, are our own. For RWJ—friend and mentor.

Appendix. Measurement and data sources for independent variables

Variable name	Measurement and data sources
Issue characteristics	
<i>Social Issue</i> ^a	Dummy variable that is coded one if a measure addresses a social issue, zero otherwise. Data from Biggers (2011)
<i>Tax Increase</i>	Dummy variable that is coded one if a measure proposed to increase taxes, zero otherwise. Data from the National Conference of State Legislatures Ballot Measure Database
Political institutions	
<i>Referendum</i>	Dummy variable that is coded one if a measure was a legislatively proposed referendum, zero otherwise. Data from the National Conference of State Legislatures Ballot Measure Database
<i>Legislative Insulation</i>	A nine level measure where higher values indicate greater insulation from legislative interference after passage of an initiative. Data from Bowler and Donovan (2004)
<i>Constitutional Amendment</i>	Dummy variable that is coded one if the measure seeks to amend a state's constitution, zero otherwise. Data from the National Conference of State Legislatures Ballot Measure Database
<i>Group Density</i>	Interval level measure coded as the log of the number of interest groups per capita. Data from Gray and Lowery (1996)
<i>Economic Dominance</i>	Interval level measure that is coded as the ratio of for profit to nonprofit interest groups in a state. Data from Gray and Lowery (1996)
Electoral context	
<i>Competitive</i> ^b	Dummy variable that is coded one if the final vote difference was equal to or less than five percent, zero otherwise. Data from state election returns
<i>Presidential Election</i>	Dummy variable that is coded one if the measure was on the ballot during a presidential election, zero otherwise
<i>Party Difference</i>	Interval level variable coded as the absolute value of the difference in Ceaser and Saldin's (2005) major party index for the Republican and Democratic parties. Data from http://scholar.harvard.edu/saldin/data

^a Specifically, a measure was considered a social issue if its content focused on any of the following: same sex marriage, domestic partnerships or homosexual rights, creation of an official state language, access to governmental services for non-legal residents, immigration, affirmative action, abortion rights, legalization of marijuana or medical marijuana, stem cell research, the death penalty, or euthanasia

^b Although the *ex post* nature of this variable is a limitation, previous research on the closeness of elections has made ample use of this type of indicator (e.g., Cox and Munger 1989). Furthermore, as a practical matter it is the best indicator available to us since very few ballot measures are the subject of media polling. To assess if the measurement of *Competitive* affects the performances of the other independent variables included in the analyses presented below, the models were estimated with and without *Competitive*. These diagnostics indicate no substantive differences suggesting that the inclusion of *Competitive* is not biasing our estimates

References

- Banducci, S. A. (1998). Direct legislation: When is it used and when does it pass? In S. Bowler, T. Donovan, & C. Tolbert (Eds.), *Citizens as legislators: Direct democracy in the United States*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University.

- Baumgartner, F. R., & Leech, B. L. (1998). *Basic interests: The importance of groups in politics and in political science*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Biggers, D. R. (2011). When ballot issues matter: Social issue ballot measures and their impact on turnout. *Political Behavior*, 33(1), 3–25.
- Boehmke, F. J. (2002). The effect of direct democracy on the size and diversity of state interest group populations. *The Journal of Politics*, 64(3), 827–844.
- Boehmke, F. J. (2005). Sources of variation in the frequency of statewide initiatives: The role of interest group populations. *Political Research Quarterly*, 58(4), 565–575.
- Bowler, S., & Donovan, T. (1998). *Demanding choices: Opinion and voting in direct democracy*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
- Bowler, S., & Donovan, T. (2004). Measuring the effect of direct democracy on state policy: Not all initiatives are created equal. *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, 4(3), 345–363.
- Bowler, S., & Hanneman, R. (2006). Just how pluralist is direct democracy? The structure of interest group participation in ballot proposition elections. *Political Research Quarterly*, 59(4), 557–568.
- Bowler, S., Nicholson, S. P., & Segura, G. M. (2006). Earthquakes and aftershocks: Race, direct democracy, and partisan change. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(1), 146–159.
- Ceaser, J. W., & Saldin, R. P. (2005). A new measure of party strength. *Political Research Quarterly*, 58(2), 245–256.
- Cox, G. W., & Munger, M. C. (1989). Closeness, expenditures, and turnout in the 1982 U.S. House Elections. *American Political Science Review*, 83(1), 217–231.
- Dahl, R. A. (1961). *Who governs?*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Damore, D. F., Bowler, S., & Nicholson, S. P. (2012). Agenda setting by direct democracy: Comparing the initiative and the referendum. *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*, 12(4), 367–393.
- Donovan, T., Tolbert, C., & Smith, D. (2008). Priming presidential votes with direct democracy. *Journal of Politics*, 70(4), 1217–1231.
- Ensley, M. J., & Bucy, E. P. (2010). Do candidate positions matter? The effect of the gay marriage question on gubernatorial elections. *American Politics Research*, 38(1), 142–164.
- Garrett, E., & Gerber, E. R. (2001). Money in the initiative and referendum process: Evidence of its effects and prospects for reform. In M. Dane Waters (Ed.), *The battle over citizen lawmaking*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Gerber, E. R. (1996). Legislatures, initiatives, and representation: The effects of state legislative institutions on policy. *Political Research Quarterly*, 49(2), 263–286.
- Gerber, E. R. (1999). *The populist paradox: Interest group influence and the promise of direct legislation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gray, V., & Lowery, D. (1996). *The population ecology of interest representation*. Ann Arbor, MI: Lobbying Communities in the American States.
- Hansen, J. M. (1985). The political economy of group membership. *American Political Science Review*, 79(1), 79–96.
- Lowery, D., Gray, V., Wolak, J., Godwin, E., & Kilburn, W. (2005). Reconsidering the counter-mobilization hypothesis: Health policy lobbying in the American States. *Political Behavior*, 27(2), 99–132.
- Lupia, A. (1994). Shortcuts versus encyclopedias: Information and voting behavior in California insurance reform elections. *American Political Science Review*, 88(1), 63–76.
- Moe, T. M. (1980). *The organization of interests: Incentives and the internal dynamics of political interest groups*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nicholson, S. P. (2003). The political environment and ballot proposition awareness. *American Journal of Political Science*, 47(3), 403–410.
- Nicholson, S. P. (2005). *Voting the agenda: Candidates, elections, and ballot propositions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nicholson, S. P. (2011). Dominating cues and the limits of elite influence. *Journal of Politics*, 73(4), 1165–1177.
- Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Reilly, S. (2010). *Design, meaning, and choice in direct democracy: The influences of petitioners and voters*. New York: Ashgate Publishing.
- Salisbury, R. H. (1969). An exchange theory of interest groups. *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 13(1), 1–32.
- Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semi-sovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

-
- Sears, D. O., & Citrin, J. (1985). *Tax revolt: Something for nothing in California*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, D. A. (1998). *Tax crusaders and the politics of direct democracy*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, M. A. (2002). The contingent effect of ballot initiatives and candidate races on turnout. *American Journal of Political Science*, 45(3):700–706.
- Smith, D. A., & Tolbert, C. J. (2004). *Educated by initiative: The effects of direct democracy on citizens and political organizations in the American States*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Tolbert, C. J., Lowenstein, D. H., & Donovan, T. (1998). Election law and rules for using initiatives. In S. Bowler, T. Donovan, & C. J. Tolbert (Eds.), *Citizens as legislators: Direct democracy in the United States*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Truman, D. B. (1951). *The governmental process*. New York: Knopf.
- Walker, J. L. (1991). *Mobilizing interest groups in America*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.