Does Turnout Matter?
An Examination of a Non-Binding Referendum in Amarillo, Texas

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Abstract

This paper examines the 2015 vote on a non-binding referendum on a portion of the program of downtown redevelopment in Amarillo, Texas. Despite early polls indicating that the referendum would be easy defeated, Amarillo voters approved building a multi-purpose event center (MPEV) as part of a wave of downtown redevelopment. The analysis considers the reasons why the referendum was approved despite the vocal opposition to it. We find that voter turnout played a significant role in the referendum's approval. We also find that a professional campaign can win an election that seems lost at the beginning.

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On November 3, 2015, Amarillo voters supported a non-binding referendum to include a ballpark in the downtown multipurpose event venue (MPEV). The "Yes" side prevailed by a margin of 52 percent to 48 percent out of 22,000 votes cast. The election marked the end of a campaign that started in August when the City Council put the following question on the ballot, "Should the Multi-Purpose Event Venue to be constructed in downtown Amarillo include a Baseball Stadium at the approximate cost of $32 million?" (Welch & Stein, 2015). During the campaign, numerous local media outlets inquired about the role of voter turnout in the success or failure of the referendum. This paper examines the role of voter turnout in the referendum's success by examining the vote and several demographic and political variables at the voting precinct-level. The present research finds that precincts with a higher rate of turnout supported the referendum at higher levels. Several other variables are tested to produce a more complete explanation of why the referendum was successful.

Amarillo is the fourteenth most populous city in the state of Texas and the largest city in the Texas Panhandle (Texas State Library and Archives Commission, 2016). It also is the county seat of Potter County. Part of the city is located in Randall County as depicted in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

The population of Amarillo was 190,695 as recorded by the 2010 Census. Most of the population (105,486 residents) is located in Potter County. A smaller portion (85,209 people) is located in Randall County. According to the 2010 Census, 59.7 percent of the population was White, 6.3 percent Black or African American, 0.5 percent American Indian and Alaska Native, 3.1 percent Asian, 0.1 percent from some other race (non-Hispanic) and 1.5 percent of two or

more races (non-Hispanic). Over a quarter (28.8 percent) of Amarillo's population is of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin (may be of any race) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

The Contours of the Campaign

The official campaign started in August of 2015 when the City Council voted to place the question on the November 2015 ballot. The referendum shared spaced with state constitutional amendments. The actual debate over the role of a baseball stadium, and downtown redevelopment in general, can be traced back several years. In 2011, the Amarillo City Commission (now called the Amarillo City Council) created a partnership with Wallace Bajjali Development Partners, a Sugar Land-based firm that specialized in urban redevelopment (K. S. Welch, 2011). Wallace Bajjali recommended the construction of a multi-purpose event venue as a centerpiece of the new downtown.

In the spring of 2015, Amarillo voters elected three new members to the City Council. Mark Nair, Elisha Demerson, and Randy Burkett, supported the idea of having residents vote on whether to build the MPEV (Welch and Welch, 2015). By a 3-2 vote, the Council on August 11 decided to send a non-binding referendum to the voters. An amendment to move the MPEV vote to a May ballot failed, also by a 3-2 vote (Beilue, 2015a).

The campaign heated up quickly, using traditional campaign methods as well as finding spaces on social media networks. In September, Vote for Amarillo filed to be a "specific purpose" political action committee with the Texas Ethics Commission. An opposition group formed calling itself Amarillo Citizens for Tomorrow, although most of its activity was limited to Facebook (Beilue, 2015b). The campaign finance disclosure reports filed during the campaign showed that Vote for Amarillo raised $122,000, primarily in large contributions. Two other pro-

MPEV groups, Advance Amarillo and Amarillo Millennial Movement, reported raising about $600 and $6,992, respectively (K. Welch, 2015a). Much of the money raised by the pro-referendum groups provided funding for the work of Norfleet Strategies, an Austin political consulting firm.

Early in the campaign, information about the referendum reached Keats Norfleet in Austin. "Norfleet is a Republican political strategist with extensive consulting and campaign management experience at the federal, statewide, legislative and local levels" (About, n.d.). Norfleet also is an Amarillo native. As a student at the University of Texas, he started working with political campaigns. After college, he moved to helping with issue campaigns. In an interview Norfleet recollected, "when I heard about the non-binding referendum in my hometown, I reached out to the referendum supporters to see how I could help" (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016). He also recalled that he followed the unsuccessful vote on the Amarillo Recreation Center in 2013. After analyzing data from the 2013 vote, he wondered how to target voters for 2015 non-binding referendum (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016).

His first step was to develop a poll. This poll was fielded by Baslice & Associates, Inc., "a national research organization that has conducted projects across a broad range of issues and topics" ("Our Team," n.d.). The live operator poll queries regular voters in Amarillo municipal elections and voters who voted in primary elections, but did not regularly vote in municipal elections. The survey collected information from 400 respondents with a margin of error of 4.9 percent. About 40 percent of the respondents were from Potter County while 60 percent were Randall County residents (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016).

The survey began by plumbing opinions on the ballot questions that were "admittedly confusing." Norfleet reported, "Most voters knew what they were voting on, even if they found the question confusing." Respondents also were asked to identify themselves as baseball fans while also testing different messages about the referendum (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016).

The results of this initial poll painted a bleak portrait for referendum supporters. Only about 25 percent of the respondents supported the referendum while 61 percent reported being opposed to the referendum. The breakdown was similar across the two counties. Few of the respondents identified themselves as baseball fans (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016).

Finally, the survey asked about possible messages the campaign could use to advertise the referendum while determining possible messengers. The most popular message did not include a mention of a baseball stadium; rather, it discussed improving the city of Amarillo while not increasing taxes. The most popular messenger was identified as Dr. Paul Matney, the recently retired President of Amarillo College (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016). After considering possible messages and messengers, support for the referendum grew slightly to 36 percent of the respondents in favor with 56 percent reporting opposition.

In a strategy very appropriate to the present research, Norfleet reported that he conducted several data analyses on previous election outcomes. This goal of these analyses was to see if there were specific precincts to target with "get out the vote" efforts. Norfleet found that voters in Democratic primaries seemed "have a little more support" for the referendum. (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016).

Norfleet analyzed two previous elections. First, he examined the relationship between turnout and the vote in favor of the Amarillo Recreation Center (ARC) in 2013. The proposed $37.5 million ARC project was rejected by 54 percent of Amarillo voters who voted on a November 6, 2013, referendum (K.S. Welch, 2013). Norfleet found that precincts with higher turnout provided stronger support for the ARC referendum. He then compared the ARC vote to the May 2015 vote to reelect Amarillo Mayor Paul Harpole. Norfleet found that precincts voting for Harpole in 2015 also provided stronger support for the ARC in 2013 and these precincts exhibited higher turnout rates. These precincts became the targets for the pro-referendum campaign in the Fall of 2015. Most of the targets were in the central part of the city with very few targeted precincts in north Amarillo or in Randall County (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016). Pro-referendum groups spent many hours walking door to door in the targeted precincts (Garcia, 2015).

Groups opposed to the referendum also conducted an early poll and found that it was going to be defeated. They did not spend much money. While referendum supporters kept repeating the message that downtown redevelopment will benefit the whole community, groups opposing the referendum had to respond to distracting charges late in the campaign. Vote for Amarillo tried to place some pro-MPEV ads on outdoor billboards owned by Randy Burkett. The group was told that all boards were rented through the end of October. Burkett Outdoor Advertising ran ads urging voters to say no to the referendum. An Amarillo resident raised a conflict of interest complaint about the anti-ballpark advertising on Burkett's billboards (Graham, 2015). It is not clear if the billboard controversy played a significant role in the election.

The single post-mortem published in the Amarillo newspaper suggested that voter turnout played a significant role in the referendum's success. The reporter also pointed out some of the problems inherent in studying the importance of voter turnout in Amarillo. Welch (2015b, pp. A1, A8) reports, "Draw a line up Interstate 27 and look to the west to see which voters said Tuesday they favor making a $32 million ballpark part of an event venue downtown. Look to the east and at North Heights to see which voters tried but failed to turn down the measure." The reporter found that "turnout was sparse in many of the Potter County precincts that voted against the measure, ranging from the single digits to low double digits in most cases. Potter precincts that passed it had turnouts from 18 to 31 percent." "In Randall County, the precincts that turned it down had turnouts ranging from 14 to 25 percent. Precincts that passed the ballpark had turnouts of 25 to 34 percent." Welch (2015b, p. A8) provided some geographical references:

> Election documents show Randall county precincts west of Interstate 27 largely approved the stadium except in the Ridgecrest, Western Plateau and Western Air neighborhoods in south-central Amarillo.

> Precincts that passed the referendum in Potter County are south of Interstate 40 and west of Interstate 27, north of Interstate 40 west of from South Western Street, northwest of West Amarillo Boulevard and in an area bounded by South Georgia Street, Interstate 40, South Fillmore Street and Line Avenue.

The present research statistically analyzes the patterns of voter turnout to better understand the factors that led some precincts to approve the referendum.

Method

To better understand the voting patterns exhibited in the vote on the non-binding referendum, this paper uses a method employed by Morgan and Meier (1980) in their study of

voting on moral issues in Oklahoma. We adjust the method to use data collected from voting precincts in a city.

There is a growing body of research that looks at the influence of voter turnout on local issues of direct democracy, like the 2015 non-binding referendum in Amarillo. Much of this research has focused on local school bond elections. Gong and Rogers (2014) argue that the previous research is not convincing on the role of voter turnout on the success of school bond referendums. They state that "many sociodemographic factors and election parameters" influence both bond outcomes and voter turnout (Gong & Rogers, 2014, p. 248).

Turnout in local elections tends to be very low (Allen & Plank, 2005; Anzia, 2014; Berry & Gersen, 2010; Filer & Kenny, 1980; Hajnal & Lewis, 2003; Hajnal, Lewis, & Louch, 2002; Hess, 2002; Meredith, 2009; Pecquet, Coats, & Yen, 1996; Townley, Sweeney, & Schmieder, 1994; Trounstine, 2010; Wood, 2002). With low voter turnout in special elections, special interest groups are better positioned to mobilize their supporters and turn the election to their favor (Anzia, 2014). Interests that are able to strategically leverage campaign spending should be more likely to be successful. Because the literature is not clear, the present research tests the hypothesis that turnout did matter in the 2015 non-binding referendum in Amarillo.

Using data collected from a variety of sources, this paper assesses the hypothesis while testing for other potential explanations for the outcome of the referendum vote. Election return data and voter turnout data were provided by the Potter County Election Administrator and the Randall County Election Administrator. Amarillo straddles the Potter County/Randall County line and in the November 2015, Potter County administered the election for Amarillo in the northern part of the city while Randall County handled election duties in the south.

The Texas Redistricting website maintained by the Texas Legislative Council (http://www.tlc.state.tx.us/redist/data/data.html) is the source of some election return data as well as Spanish surname voter registration.

Measures

SUPPORT FOR THE NON-BINDING REFERENDUM

The dependent variable, support for the non-binding referendum, is measured by the percentage of voters in each of the 38 voting precincts in the city of Amarillo. This is a small dataset necessitating care in analyzing the data. The highest percentage of "Yes" votes was 73.03 percent in Potter Precinct 126, the area north of Tascosa High School bounded on the west by Western Street, on the east by Georgia Street, and the north roughly at Bushland Boulevard. The lowest support was 23.19 percent in Potter 426, a precinct in the northeastern part of the city centered on Mesa Verde School.

The non-binding referendum shared the ballot with seven Texas constitutional amendments, that all passed with ease.

TURNOUT

Voter turnout data were provided by the counties' election administrators. The highest voter turnout was 33.78 percent in Randall 222, a precinct bounded roughly by Coulter, Potter County, Palmer Drive, 34th Avenue, and 45th Avenue. The smallest turnout was 6.45 percent in Potter 421, a precinct that lies across Amarillo Boulevard and is centered on Palo Duro High School.

SPANISH SURNAMED VOTERS

The Texas Legislative Council provided data on the number of persons registered to vote who have Spanish surnames. This is an acceptable estimate of the number of Hispanic voter registration (Texas Legislative Council, 2012; Longoria, Wrinkle, and Polinard, 1990). Potter Precinct 223 has 65.10 percent Spanish surname voters. Randall Precinct 222 has 6.10 percent.

VOTE FOR HARPOLE IN MAY 2015

Keats Norfleet found a relationship between support for the ARC referendum in 2013, the vote for reelecting Mayor Paul Harpole in May 2015, and turnout in those elections (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016). Obtaining accurate vote totals and turnouts for the ARC referendum is challenging because the election administrator (in 2013, this was Randall County) combined some of the precincts. Norfleet estimated these data for 2013 and was able to find a strong relationship between the vote for the ARC referendum and the vote to reelect Mayor Harpole (K. Norfleet, personal communication, July 1, 2016). For ease of analysis, the present research will use the precinct-level vote for reelecting Mayor Harpole in May 2013.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION

The influence of the Tea Party in local Amarillo elections also was considered as a factor in the vote on the non-binding referendum. It is difficult to identify a reliable proxy for Tea Party vote. In addition, several observers of local politics argued that the Tea Party is not a factor in Amarillo politics. Most observers believe the vote on the non-binding referendum cut across party lines with many Republicans voting in favor while some local Democrats were vocal opponents of the city spending money on the downtown redevelopment project.

Findings

The initial, and most significant, finding is that support for the non-binding referendum is highly correlated with voter turnout. Figure 2 displays the correlation between turnout and vote support.

[Figure 2 about here]

Table 1 presents the correlations between the variables included in the analysis. We see that all of the variables are highly correlated with each other and with the dependent variable. Turnout and the percent of the voters supporting the referendum exhibits a strong, positive correlation. The percent of registered voters with Spanish surnames and vote presents a strong, negative correlation. The correlation between the vote to reelect Harpole and the non-binding referendum is a slightly weaker positive correlation.

[Table 1 about here]

An Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model was calculated and the results are summarized in Table 2. The variables included in the model are voter turnout, percentage of persons with Spanish surnames who are registered to vote, and vote for Mayor Harpole in 2015.

[Table 2 about here]

Regressing the precinct turnout on the precinct-level vote finds a beta of .716 (the same as the correlation coefficient) (p.>.001). The R^2 is .513, suggesting that about 51 percent of the variance in the vote solely is explained by voter turnout. Including the two additional variables in the model produces only a small increase in explanatory power as shown in Table 2.

The model likely is underspecified. Introducing additional variables in an analysis with 38 cases, even if the data measuring such variables could be identified, is an exercise fraught with uncertainty.

Conclusions and Discussion

The obvious conclusion is that turnout mattered in the success of the non-binding referendum on the Multi-Purpose Event Venue in Amarillo. There is a hint that ethnicity and ideology also played a role in the electoral outcome. It is interesting that had the opponents of the MPEV waited until an election with a larger voter turnout, they might have succeeded in ending the project. Several observers suggested to us that it would have been difficult for referendum supporters to maintain any momentum for an additional six months. Did the opponents of the Multi-purpose Event Venue on the Amarillo City Council err when they voted to place the referendum on the November 2015 ballot instead of waiting?

We conclude that campaigns matter. Campaign consultant Keats Norfleet argues that the "reason the referendum as approved was that the referendum supporters had data, money, and followed a good targeting plan. They also had a lot of help with door-to-door contact in the targeted precincts" (K. Norfleet, personal communications, July 1, 2016). The referendum supporters worked hard to turn public opinion around from the negativity measured in the initial campaign survey.
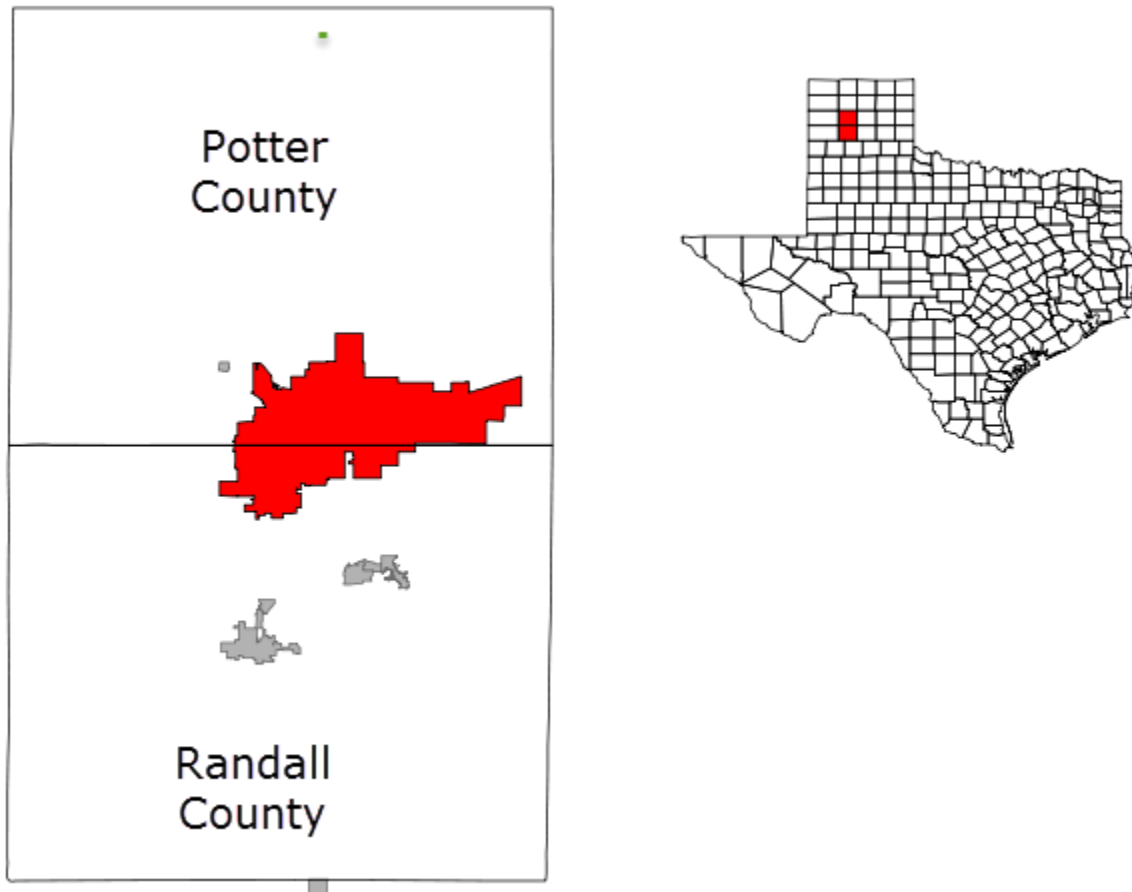
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Figure 1. City of Amarillo and Location Within the State of Texas.

Source:
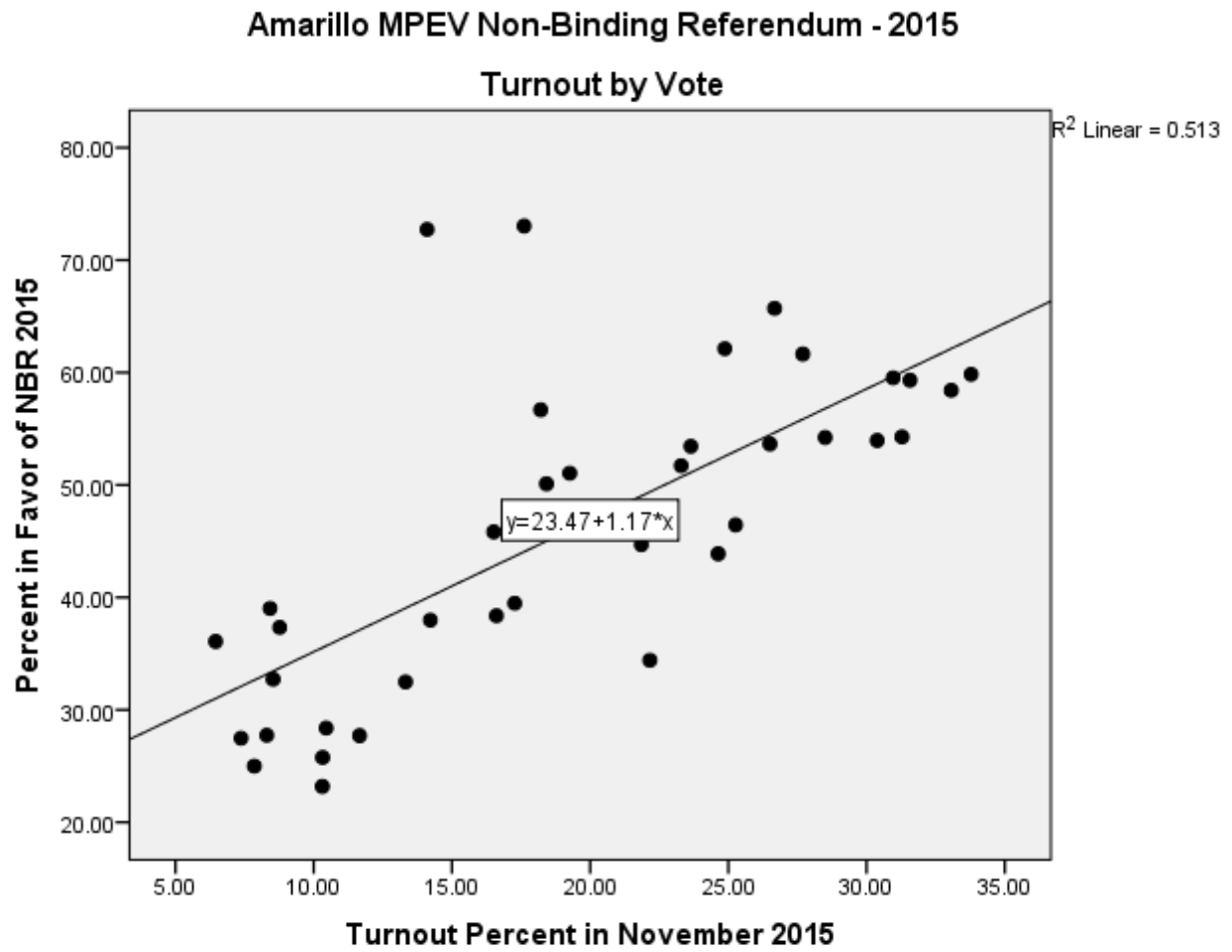By 25or6to4 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4574031

Figure 2.

Amarillo MPEV Non-Binding Referendum - 2015
Turnout by Vote

R^2 Linear = 0.513

y=23.47+1.17*x

Percent in Favor of NBR 2015

Turnout Percent in November 2015

Table 1. Correlations (N=38).

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
(a) % Yes on Referendum	1.00			
(b) % Turnout	.716**	1.00		
(c) % Spanish Surname Voter Registration	-.649**	-.737**	1.00	
(d) % Voting for Harpole in May 2015	.549**	.653**	-.522**	1.00

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

Calculations by authors.

Table 1. OLS Regression of Precinct Vote on the Non-Binding Referendum (N=38).

	Beta	P
% Turnout	.447	.026
% Spanish surname voter registration	-.254	.144
% Voting for Mayor Harpole in May 2015	.125	.417
	R^2 = .554	
	Adj. R^2 = .514	
	p = .0001	

Calculations by authors.