The downballot roll-off effect in action

Overview

The November 2024 election ballot in Alameda County saw an unusual occurrence: overlapping recalls of the Alameda district attorney and the Oakland mayor. Media coverage of these recalls portrayed those separate county and city contest results as being very similar. But a more detailed look shows a noted discrepancy in the vote totals among the Oakland voters who could cast ballots for both officials. Price did significantly better in Oakland than Thao, mainly because a significant number of the pro-Price voters did not also cast a ballot in the mayoral recall. This is probably explained at least in part by the fact that the district attorney appeared higher on the ballot than the mayor. This would be a stark example of how the downballot roll-off effect can impact lower-level races.

Analysis

Ballot design is a long-running theme in American politics

How to structure ballots and elections has been a long-running debate in American history.[1] The original early-1900s Progressive movement promoted the short ballot, which was designed to remove some of the more obscure positions and transfer them from elected to appointed jobs.[2] The movement tied this simplification to both longer terms in office and (more in theory than in practice) a recall to give voters an out.[3] The arguments for a short ballot are bolstered by what has been called the downballot roll-off effect, which describes the steep falloff in votes for local positions listed below higher-profile contests, as voters only cast ballots for the top of the ticket and ignore the races below.[4]

Another argument has attacked off-year elections, which posits that because turnout is particularly low for non-presidential election year races the system would work more effectively if elections were consolidated. Nationwide in recent years there has

been a push against the spaced-out election day schedule, with some states prohibiting odd-year elections.[5] Other states have taken similar steps such as banning recalls on a special election day.[6] In a country where no one knows how many elected positions there are, figuring out the advantages and disadvantages of different dates and ballot lengths should at least be on the table.

The Price and Thao election results show the downballot roll-off effect

It takes a lot for a local race to become a national story during a presidential election year, as Alameda County did in November. It wasn't a regular election, but rather the two recall votes against District Attorney Pamela Price and Mayor Sheng Thao that grabbed the spotlight.[7] Alameda's votes were the first since at least 2011 to feature recalls in overlapping local jurisdictions (not including the two gubernatorial recalls in 2012 and 2021). Both Price and Thao were viewed as being on the same side in local politics, and both were blamed for the same activating issue — the perceptions of high crime and lax prosecuting and policing standards.

The two recalls were joined on the ballot, but examining the numbers reveals a marked difference in their vote counts that in large part are likely explained by the fact that the two candidates were placed pages apart on the ballot. This is a good example of the downballot roll-off effect and it also may point to which type of voter is least likely to roll off.

At first glance, the election results seem very similar, with Price losing with a 62.92% vote against in the county and Thao being ousted by 60.62% against in Oakland. But isolating only the overlapping voters in Oakland (by far the biggest city in the county) shows a different story. Price was on the ballot's third page, while Thao was on page eight — or ninth since one of the pages was blank. Price lost Oakland with 53% of the vote against her, 84,165–74,260. But Thao lost by a much larger margin, with 60% of the vote, 86,535–56,220.[8] There was a 15,000+ vote or 10% difference between the two races in Oakland, all on one side. Presuming that this is the same pool of voters, and assuming that anyone who supported one candidate supported the other, between 13,000–18,000 Price supporters dropped off and did not vote for Thao (2370 switched sides).[9] This shows that one side of the

contest, the Price–Thao supporters, did not vote downballot.

Other possibly influential factors

Of course there are some differences between these two recalls. Price's recall received much more attention, partly from the heightened attention caused by the backlash over the progressive prosecutor movement that led to San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin's recall in 2022. The Price recall was also an extended affair thanks to an unnecessary and unusual set of delays caused by the legislature, the county supervisors, and election officials — it took over 18 months to get the Price recall before the voters. Thao's recall was comparatively quick, with stories only starting to appear about 10 months before Election Day. The Price recall received more attention over a longer stretch of time, which partly explain the higher vote count in her contest.

There also were differences between the likely bases of support for the respective officials. As Mayor Thao received criticism on a wider range of local issues than Price did with her more focused one-issue job of prosecuting crime. And Thao endured negative publicity related to an FBI raid on her home that had no analogue in Price's recall. Far more money was spent on the Price campaign, although neither effort saw much in the way of spending after getting on the ballot.[10] In fact, there were numerous lawn signs printed that simply said "no on recalls" and did not even specify the targeted candidates. Contrast that with the county supervisor race, which represents only one-fifth of the county, and which generated a flood of expensive mailers and supervisor-related YouTube ads on both sides of the supervisor race. Mail and internet advertising on the district attorney recall was sparse at best.

The extra attention paid to the district attorney recall could have been offset by the fact that the mayor is a more high-profile and impactful position than a prosecutor, though that does not seem to be the case this year. In general, it seems odd that voters would focus on the district attorney rather than the mayor. As a point of comparison, in both candidates' hotly contested original victories in 2022, the variance in Oakland between the district attorney (133,636) and Oakland mayor (133,527) race was a mere 109 votes. Yet in the 2024 recall election the district

attorney got 15,000 more votes in the same district. The added attention appears to have helped increase votes in the 2024 race.

Roll-off happens even when the vote is for the same candidates right next to each other on the ballot. The race for California's U.S. Senate seat saw Adam Schiff and Steve Garvey running in both the general election for the full six-year term and in a special election to finish the last weeks of Dianne Feinstein's term.[11] The difference between the two races was less than 1% —but that does mean that over 300,000 voters statewide chose to vote in the regular race but ignore the special election race. Schiff did slightly worse in the special election than the general, but his total fell off by just 0.12%.

Finally, another factor besides the difference in place on the ballot may have influenced the discrepancy between Price and Thao: voter anger may create greater interest in ensuring that roll-offs are a lesser effect for pro-recall forces. For example, in November 2008 Michigan House Speaker Andy Dillon faced both a recall and a reelection run; the recall would only be for the remaining two months of the term. Dillon won his reelection race 27,864–14,311 and beat his recall (which was much further down the ballot) 23,987–14,257.[12] Once again, the drop-off is not evenly distributed. The kick-Dillon-out side lost 54 votes, less than one percentage point. The keep-Dillon side saw a 3,877 vote decline, or 14%. The roll-off was negligible for the pro-recall forces, but significant for the elected official.

This roll-off effect may explain another odd effect of recalls. Voters appear more likely to eject an official when the recall is paired with a general or primary election than as a standalone special election (67% versus 57%).[13] You'd expect those numbers to be reversed for several reasons: standalone special elections should more likely lead to an ouster because of a movers' advantage; the recall proponents just spent significant time running a signature gathering effort; it's the only political hot potato at the time; and a smaller and more motivated number of voters would be focused on the contest. Instead, that anger may lead to staying focused on completing the full ballot line.

Conclusion

The question of how long or short a ballot should be has been a source of debate since the original Progressive era in the early 1900s. Weighing those alternatives requires balancing the value of greater democracy in choosing candidates against the challenge of giving voters too many choices to make, leading to roll-off. This is a policy choice with competing imperatives, a balancing act with no right or wrong answer. The Alameda and Oakland recall results, with their marked relative drop-off in votes in comparable contests, are an example of the downballot roll-off's effect and a reminder to be mindful of the long ballot's disadvantages.

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5. Fischer, "New AZ law limits city elections even-numbered years, 2 days per year," East Valley Tribune (May 14, 2012). ↑
6. Michigan Bureau of Elections —Legislative Update(Jan. 23, 2013) at 6–7. "Special recall election dates for local officials are limited to regular May and November election dates."Before the new Michigan law the recalls were held on standalone special election dates. ↑
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8. Alameda County District Canvass (Certified Results) November 5, 2024 at 123 for Price, at 251–52 for Thao ↑

9. Ibid. ↑

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11. California Secretary of State, Statement of Vote November 5, 2024 at 6. ↑

12. Wayne County November 8, 2008 General Election Results. ↑

13. Spivak, What Recalls Tell Us About Regular Elections, Governing Magazine (Feb. 24, 2024) ↑