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Political Influence in California

Matthew D. Atkinson
Long Beach City College

Darin DeWitt
California State University, Long Beach

Politics is about the struggle for influence. As Theodore White (1961, 136) put it: "To understand American politics is, simply, to know people, to know the relative weight of names—who are the heroes, who are the straw men, who controls, who does not." This study is about the relative weight of names and offices in California politics.

To explain political outcomes, political scientists require a model of the political process and estimates of the relative weight of names (Bueno de Mesquita 2009). While a rich literature intricately describes how the California political system works (e.g., Anagnoson et al. 2017, Cain and Noll 1995, Kousser 2005, Rarick 2013), scholars lack a unified measure of political influence. Our contribution is to fill this gap by offering an empirical measure of the clout wielded by a broad array of political actors in California. In doing so, we contribute to a long tradition among social scientists of studying clout within political systems (Bueno de Mesquita 2009, Mayhew 1986, Mills 1956, Schlesinger 1966, Stewart 2011).

In this manuscript, we begin by introducing a new dataset of office seeker rankings of their own endorsements. Then, using the Bradley-Terry model, we estimate how office seekers rate the relative desirability of endorsements from a range of officeholders (from city councilors to U.S. presidents), interest groups, and endorsing organizations. Finally, we discuss the substantive implications of clout for shaping political outcomes.

Data and Methods

To create our dataset of candidate endorsement rankings and measure clout, we rely on information collected by the nonpartisan League of Women Voters of California Education Fund between 1998 and 2014. This citizen education organization sends questionnaires to candidates for all elected offices in California, from school board member to U.S. senator. The questionnaire asks each candidate to list their top three "key endorsements." Responses are posted on a candidate webpage at http://www.smartvoter.org.[1]

[1] As of December 2014, Smartvoter.org hosted 29,367 candidate websites. In total, 68 percent of all candidates and 82 percent of general election winners list endorsements.

We use endorsement rankings from 19,945 office seeker campaigns to develop a continuous measure of endorsement power.[2] We assume that candidates deliberately choose to list their key endorsers based on desirability and that the ordering of endorsements implies a preference ordering. To illustrate, suppose a candidate is endorsed by the president, a U.S. senator, and a member of Congress (MC). In our actual data, a candidate with these endorsements will tend to list the president before the senator and the senator before the MC. Given our assumption that this ranking reveals a preference ordering, we would code this in our dataset as the senator being preferred to the MC and the president being preferred to the senator and the MC.

Since each candidate is endorsed by a limited subset of all potential endorsers, we do not observe comprehensive preference rankings. As a result, we need a method for inferring how candidates would rank the political desirability of all the different actors in the endorsement pool. The method we implement assumes that endorsements are fungible within political parties, which is consistent with the way the scholarly literature conceptualizes the value of endorsements (Dominguez 2011; Grossman and Helpman 1999; Kenny, McBurnett, and Bordua 2004; McDermott 2006). The fungibility assumption implies, for example, that every Democratic state assembly candidate would obtain a comparable electoral benefit from the current Democratic governor's endorsement. Therefore, we make the assumption that the underlying desirability of a particular endorsement has one value for all Democratic candidates and another value for all Republican candidates. In spite of idiosyncrasies among candidates for political office, this assumption is justifiable because potential endorsers have influence that is exogenous to the contests that they participate in as endorsers (Zaller 1984). Thus, the revealed preferences of co-partisans should directly reflect the endorser's general influence.

Given our stated assumptions, we can pool the revealed preferences of all candidates with the same party affiliation and estimate the desirability of all the different actors listed as endorsers. The data we have for producing these estimates is, in the language of the statistics literature, ordinal paired comparison data with an incomplete block design. This means we have many different observations where a pair of endorsers are ordinally ranked (ordinal paired comparison data) but not all endorsers are ranked relative to one another (incomplete block design). For example, we have paired comparisons involving the president and MCs, and we have paired comparisons of MCs and county sheriffs, but we do not have a paired comparison involving a president and a county sheriff. However, because of the interrelatedness of endorser desirability, it is possible to produce a general measure of desirability based on who each endorser has beaten and how those endorsers have fared against other endorsers and so on. In short, our summary measure of endorsement desirability estimates the probability that any given endorser beats any other endorser in a candidate's ranking.

The Bradley-Terry model is the established method for analyzing ordinal paired comparison data with an incomplete block design (Agresti 2012, Bradley and Terry 1952). The Bradley-Terry model assumes that when two endorsers compete—that is, they are listed together in the same ranking—the log odds that endorser i is preferred to endorser j is $\log(\beta_i) - \log(\beta_j)$, with β_i and β_j being latent measures of endorser desirability. Endorser desirability can be estimated using logit analysis by putting the model in logit-linear form:

$$\text{logit}(\text{Prob}(\text{i is preferred to j})) = \log(\beta_i) - \log(\beta_j). \quad (1)$$

[2] Our analysis includes rankings for all repeat endorsers, specifically officeholders, interest group, and endorsing organizations whose endorsements have been ranked by three or more candidates from their party between 1998 and 2014. We set these criteria to ease computational demands and to limit the analysis to endorsers that help us distinguish between the desirability of other endorsers in our pool.

Most academic studies reporting Bradley-Terry analyses compute the desirability parameter using maximum likelihood methods (Agresti 2012). However, for three reasons, we use a hierarchical Bayesian approach. First, our data are naturally hierarchical because individuals are nested within institutional positions (e.g., assembly member, member of Congress, etc.); therefore, we need a model that allows us to account for natural hierarchies. Second, since our dataset has hundreds of endorsers, the data we have for estimating desirability is sparser than the data used in previous applications of the Bradley-Terry model (Agresti 2012; Carter and Spirling 2008; Stigler, Stigler, and Friedland 1995). Finally, prior scholarship reports expert judgments about the desirability of different officeholder endorsements, which we use to impose weakly informative Bayesian priors on our data (Cohen et al. 2008).[3] Using these priors helps address the problem of sparse data and produces results that optimally combine expert judgment and our new empirical data.

Our empirical estimates of political influence are computed using a Bayesian hierarchical model. Specifically, we use WinBUGS to fit the logit-linear form of the Bradley-Terry model (identified in Equation 1 above) to our endorsements data.[4] In fitting this model, we account for natural hierarchies in our dataset; specifically, individuals who share the same institutional position (e.g., state assembly members, lieutenant governors, city council members) are grouped together. Consequently, for each party, our model gives each type of political office a distribution (a mean and a standard deviation). The mean of this distribution is a measure of the average level of clout associated with a particular office. The standard deviation accounts for the fact that not all individuals holding the same office have the same level of clout and it empirically captures the variation in the value of an endorsement from different individuals who have held the same office (e.g., candidates judge Governor Jerry Brown's clout to be slightly more substantial than Governor Gray Davis's).[5] While this paper reports office-level distributions, our Replication Archive contains individual-level means and standard deviations for each elite endorser in our dataset (for example, the interested reader can compare estimates of Governor Brown's influence among Democratic office seekers against Governor Davis's).[6]

[3] The expert judgments of relative officeholder influence were collected and weighted by Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel and John Zaller. Lines 12 to 21 of the R scripts in our Replication Archive match these expert judgments to the offices in our dataset. The Replication Archive is available from the authors and is posted online at "http://www.cla.csulb.edu/departments/polisci/ faculty-staff/darin-dewitt/".

[4] For a discussion of the technical details about applying a Bayesian hierarchical model to political data, see Gelman and Hill (2006). We refer readers interested in the specifics of our application to the Replication Archive, where we provide further detail about our Bayesian hierarchical model.

[5] The large standard deviations associated with our office-level estimates, which we present in Tables 1 and 2 in the next section, reflect the diversity of influence wielded by different individuals who have held the office. Measuring the extent of heterogeneity or lack thereof is precisely what hierarchical models are designed to capture (Gelman and Hill 2006).

[6] As readers who scan these files will notice, our dataset does not include any cross-party officeholder endorsements: our list of repeat endorsers ranked by Democratic candidates does not include any Republican officeholders and, likewise, our list of repeat endorsers ranked by Republican candidates does not include any Democratic officeholders.

Results: An Empirical Measure of Elite Influence

The Bradley-Terry method produces a latent measure of endorser desirability, which we can use to calculate the probability that any given endorser is preferred to any other endorser. In presenting the results of our model, we use the state party as our baseline endorsement group and focus on the desirability of each office and group relative to the state party's endorsement. We label this measure of relative desirability as *Clout* and measure it based on the estimated probability that a particular endorsement is preferred to the state party endorsement.

Office Estimates

Tables 1 and 2 report the *Clout* scores associated with various offices (governor, mayor, etc.) for the Democrats and Republicans, respectively.[7] For instance, according to Table 1, there is an 85 percent probability that a Democratic candidate prefers an endorsement from a Democratic governor to the endorsement of the California Democratic Party.[8] Likewise, Table 2 presents results for the Republican Party: relative to a California Republican Party endorsement, a Republican candidate has an 84 percent probability of preferring a Republican governor's endorsement. The *Clout* scores are largely similar across parties with a few noticeable exceptions (e.g., sheriff carries more influence in the party that owns the crime issue).

In all, the estimates presented in Tables 1 and 2 provide, for each of California's major political parties, a comprehensive ranking of political influence among elected officeholders.[9]

[7] In Table 1, former president represents the clout associated with a single individual (former president Bill Clinton). Similarly, in Table 2, our estimate for governor also represents the clout associated with a single officeholder, Governor Schwarzenegger. As such, the standard deviations associated with these two lines of Tables 1 and 2 represent noise. By contrast, the *Clout* scores for all other offices listed in Tables 1 and 2 reflect, in addition to noise, the diversity of influence wielded by different individuals who have held the same office (as discussed in Footnote 5).

[8] The label statewide office includes: attorney general, secretary of state, insurance commissioner, controller, and superintendent of public instruction.

[9] Our time frame includes two election cycles under the top-two primary (2012 and 2014). We do not have enough data to evaluate whether endorsement rankings differ in the pre- and post-reform eras. There are reasons to expect that the rankings may be slightly different under the new primary system but there are also reasons to expect little change. On the one hand, since the top two primary encourages some candidates to appeal for moderate votes within their own party and across party lines, we might observe in future election cycles that interest groups with moderate and out-party appeal rise in the rankings. On the other hand, if the new primary system does significantly change the way the nomination game is played, it will take time for those changes to evolve. Most experts think the new primary system had little immediate effect on the way the nomination game was played; for example, in introducing a special issue of the *California Journal of Politics and Policy* on California's experiment with the top-two primary system in the 2012 and 2014, Sinclair (2015, 2) concludes that "campaigns, candidates, and voters have had little time to adjust to the reform" (see also McGhee and Shor 2017). In 10 years, one interesting way to evaluate whether the top-two primary has tangibly changed California politics will be to rerun our analysis to see if moderate groups and officeholders have more influence in the nomination game.

Table 1. Democratic Power Ratings by Office

Office	Clout Score	Standard Deviation
Former President	90.8	13.3
Governor	85.2	16.1
U.S. Senator	79.3	18.8
Lieutenant Governor	54.2	24.6
Former Lieutenant Governor	45.3	24.5
Member of Congress	42.5	14.1
Mayor	39.8	20.6
Former Member of Congress	39.6	24.9
Statewide Office	34.1	18.8
County Supervisor	24.4	16.4
Former Mayor	22.9	17.7
State Senator	22.6	10.4
Sheriff	20.6	17.6
Board of Equalization	20.1	18.5
City Council	15.7	12.0
Assemblymember	7.3	4.1

Table 2. Republican Power Ratings by Office

Office	Clout Score	Standard Deviation
Governor	83.5	8.8
Member of Congress	67.1	15.2
Lieutenant Governor	58.1	9.0
Former Member of Congress	49.5	24.5
Former Governor	46.4	25.6
Former Statewide Office	44.0	25.9
Sheriff	32.2	20.7
County Supervisor	31.5	16.9
State Senator	26.3	12.6
Mayor	23.0	18.9
Former Mayor	10.1	12.1
Assemblymember	8.6	5.1
City Council	5.4	5.0

Group Estimates

Political influence is not limited to officeholders. Consequently, in Tables 3 and 4, we present *Clout* scores associated with interest groups and endorsing organizations for Democrats and

Table 3. Democratic Power Ratings by Group

Office	Clout Score	Standard Deviation
County Firefighters' Association	28.9	12.1
County Democratic Party	28.0	2.9
California Democratic Council	27.7	6.9
Americans for Democratic Action	26.8	11.6
California State Firefighters' Association	25.6	14.4
California Teachers Association	25.5	2.7
California Small Business Association	25.2	11.2
California Labor Federation	25.0	3.0
Planned Parenthood Advocacy Project	24.3	13.3
California Association of Highway Patrolmen	23.5	5.8
County Farm Bureau	21.8	10.9
California Faculty Association	21.6	4.9
CDF Firefighters	21.0	6.6
National Education Association	20.1	9.3
American Federation of Teachers	20.1	4.4
United Farmers Workers	19.8	6.9
California Federation of Teachers	19.6	3.0
County Federation of Labor	19.2	2.9
California School Employees Association	19.2	3.5
Progressive Democrats of America	18.9	5.9
Chamber of Commerce	18.3	3.0
United Auto Workers	17.5	6.9
SEIU Local	17.4	5.4
California Nurses Association	17.4	2.5
National Organization for Women	17.1	5.9
County Professional Firefighters' Association	16.0	8.1
Crime Victims United	15.0	4.7
California Teamsters Public Affairs Council	14.9	6.0
California Police Chiefs Association (State/County)	14.8	7.0
California League of Conservation Voters	14.7	2.3
Labor Council (County/Regional)	14.5	2.9
Peace Officers Research Association of California	14.2	5.0
County Deputy Sheriffs' Association	13.4	3.2
California Professional Firefighters	12.5	2.3
Police Protective League (Local)	11.4	3.3
Planned Parenthood Action Fund	11.4	5.7
Stonewall Democratic Club	9.1	3.0
County Green Party	8.5	3.6
Democracy for America	8.2	4.5
National Women's Political Caucus	7.8	3.8
Mexican American Political Association	7.4	8.5
California Organization of Police and Sheriffs	7.0	3.8
Equality California	6.9	5.1
SEIU California	6.6	7.5
County Democratic Club	5.6	1.8
California Labor Council	4.3	7.7
American Nurses Association	2.7	6.0
Latino Legislative Caucus	2.5	5.6
County Young Democrats	2.3	1.6
California National Organization for Women	2.2	2.3
California State Sheriffs' Association	2.1	4.3

Table 4. Republican Power Ratings by Group

Office	Clout Score	Standard Deviation
California Peace Officers' Association	50.1	12.1
California Teachers Association	47.0	9.8
Log Cabin Republicans (County/Local)	46.0	12.1
County Republican Party	44.4	5.3
Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association	42.3	6.0
California State Firefighters' Association	42.2	19.0
Crime Victims United	42.2	10.7
County Farm Bureau	41.4	14.1
California Republican Assembly	40.6	6.1
California Small Business Association	36.7	9.0
County Deputy Sheriffs' Association	34.0	8.0
Wish List	33.3	19.0
California Association of Highway Patrolmen	32.9	12.2
Republican National Hispanic Assembly	30.7	15.0
California Police Chiefs Association (State/County)	30.6	12.9
California League of Conservation Voters	29.7	9.2
Chamber of Commerce	29.7	6.3
California Professional Firefighters	28.0	8.7
California School Employees Association	27.7	7.7
Peace Officers Research Association of California	26.9	9.2
California Congress of Republicans	26.4	7.8
Family Action PAC	24.6	9.9
California Republican League	22.4	10.6
California ProLife Council	20.1	10.6
Log Cabin Republicans of California	17.3	10.6
California Young Republicans	17.1	6.9
Lincoln Club (Local)	15.0	3.5
National Tax Limitation Committee	13.6	5.9
California Organization of Police and Sheriffs	12.0	5.6
Liberty Caucus	11.8	8.1
County Republican Central Committee	11.1	8.4
Farm Bureau Federation	8.4	6.8
National Federation of Independent Businesses	8.2	6.3
National Women's Political Caucus	2.6	3.3
National Rifle Association	1.5	3.3
California College Republicans	0.7	1.9

Republicans, respectively.[10] As before, *Clout* is the probability that a candidate lists an endorsement from a particular group before they list their state party as an endorser.

When groups endorse a candidate, the *Clout* scores presented in Tables 3 and 4 will help political observers make sense of the potential impact. To illustrate, in Table 4, the California Republican Party continues to be our Republican baseline with a *Clout* score of 50. For Republicans, the California Peace Officers' Association has a *Clout* score of 50. This means that it will be preferred to the state party about half the time. By contrast, the California ProLife Council's *Clout* score is 20, which means that 20 percent of time the California ProLife Council's endorsement will be preferred to the California Republican Party. At the very bottom of the Republican rankings, the California College Republicans have the least clout: a Republican candidate has less than a one percent probability of preferring an endorsement from the California College Republicans to the California Republican Party.

In summary, the group *Clout* scores presented in Tables 3 and 4 rank the influence associated with groups that use to endorsements to shape the political process in California.

Implications

Clout matters because it is a measure of an actor's ability to influence political outcomes. And in a democratic political system, elections are the most important political events. In this section, we use our *Clout* scores to, first, identify who has the capacity to influence election outcomes and, second, explore the electoral calculus of ambitious politicians.

Electoral Influence

The endorsement of a political actor with a *Clout* score of 50 is worth eight percentage points in a primary election. This election effect is established by Kousser et al. (2015) who find that the marginal effect of a state party endorsement—a political actor with a *Clout* score of 50—is worth eight points in primary vote share for California congressional and state legislative races.[11] Kousser et al. (2015) argue that the state party is a "kingmaker" because eight points is enough to swing a competitive primary election. By combining our *Clout* scores with the Kousser et al. benchmark, we can identify the set of political elites who matter most in electoral politics.

Political actors with *Clout* scores that match or exceed the state party "kingmaker" have the clout to significantly shape election outcomes. First, our data shows that candidates regularly prefer several political actors to the state party. These include offices with *Clout* scores above 50 —former president, governor, U.S. senator, and lieutenant governor. Among Republicans, candidates also regularly prefer MCs to their state party, perhaps reflecting meager Republican representation in California's premier offices. Second, we observe that many former, high-profile

[10] We present *Clout* scores for groups where we have a reasonably precise estimate of influence. For groups, the standard deviations listed in Tables 3 and 4 simply measure noise—they are not hyperparameters that measure both diversity and noise as is the case with offices in Tables 1 and 2. Thus, in cases where a group's standard deviation is greater than 15, the estimate is too imprecise to be useful. For the interested reader, the Replication Archive provides a comprehensive set of estimates.

[11] In their regression discontinuity analysis of congressional and state legislative primaries, Kousser et al. (2015) find that the state party exercises "free will" when choosing which candidate to support. Further, the eight-point boost in primary vote share associated with a state party endorsement represents the total advantage secured from informational cues and subsequent campaign dynamics.

officeholders match the desirability of the state party—that is, they have *Clout* scores of approximately 50. Among Republicans, this includes former MC, former governor, and former statewide officeholder, and, among Democrats, former lieutenant governor. In addition, among Republicans, one group—the California Peace Officers' Association—matches the desirability of the state party. In summary, when the set of political actors listed in this paragraph gets involved in the electoral arena, they have the currency to guide campaign dynamics and election outcomes.

All political actors listed in our tables have an electoral impact proportional to their *Clout* score. But by the Kousser et al. (2015) standard, those with *Clout* scores less than 50 do not qualify as "kingmakers." Nonetheless, officeholders with a *Clout* score of less than 50 are active participants in electoral politics—they account for 87 percent of ranked officeholder endorsements in our dataset—and our estimates help illuminate variation in influence among these lower-profile actors. For instance, the typical county supervisor wields a lot more clout than the typical city councilmember. Among Republicans, Table 2 shows that there is a 32 percent probability that a Republican candidate prefers an endorsement from a county supervisor to the endorsement of the California Republican Party, but will prefer a city councilor's endorsement more than the California Republican Party's with only a five percent probability. In summary, our *Clout* scores illustrate that some political actors who do not meet the "kingmaker" threshold can still be consequential under the right circumstances.

Electoral Ambition

Our *Clout* scores provide insight into the career ladder for ambitious office seekers in California. Officeholders typically have progressive ambition and seek to move up the office hierarchy to elected positions with greater levels of clout (Black 1972, Rohde 1979). As Prewitt and Nowlin (1969, 309) put it: "in the American political arena there is a continuous upward flow of talent and power." Yet the empirical outline of this hierarchy is impressionistic with, for example, city council near the bottom, governor and United States senator near the top, and United States representative in between (Prewitt and Nowlin 1969, Rohde 1979, Schlesinger 1966). These impressionistic notions match the rankings provided by our office-level *Clout* scores, presented in Tables 1 and 2, but our measure fills in a greater diversity of offices and helps quantify the relative jump in influence between various offices.

By leveraging our office-level *Clout* scores, political observers can better understand the strategic decisions of ambitious office seekers as they navigate the office hierarchy. For instance, the *Los Angeles Times*—the most widely circulated newspaper in the state—frequently attempts to assess career paths for rising politicians—asking, for example, whether a state senator or a mayor can move directly to the governor's mansion (Finnegan and Smith 2017, Meyerson 2017). Among Democrats, the *Clout* scores in Table 1 suggest that advancement toward governor, an office with a *Clout* score of 85, is a more feasible task for a mayor, with a *Clout* score of 40, than it is for a state senator, with a *Clout* score of 23.

Discussion

The *Clout* scores we report are useful for three reasons.

First, they help us account for who has influence over political outcomes in California. *Clout* scores tell us whose name matters and whose does not. In American politics, clout is heavily concentrated (Achen and Bartels 2016, Bawn et al. 2012, Gilens and Page 2014, Hill and Tausa-

novitch 2015). Likewise, in California politics, the distribution of *Clout* scores indicates that political influence is also concentrated in a handful of offices. The individuals who occupy these offices hold out-sized influence over political outcomes; and therefore, understanding their preferences and strategies is key to understanding California politics.

Second, the *Clout* scores help us make sense of the career paths of politicians aspiring to out-sized influence over California politics. In his seminal research on political ambition, Schlesinger (1966) focuses on identifying the steppingstone that immediately precedes the most powerful offices (specifically, governor or United States senator). Schlesinger urges political scientists to understand the paths to power in American state and national politics. In recent years, scholars who have seized Schlesinger's mantle focus on rankings to understand career paths. For example, Stewart (2011) uses committee preference data to rate the relative desirability of congressional committees and intuit committee system career paths. Similarly, our endorsement preference data allows us to rate the relative desirability of political offices and intuit career paths for ambitious politicians. By situating all levels of office within California's political landscape, our *Clout* scores help observers understand political ambition in California. The *Clout* pecking order we report is the sequence of offices which aspiring politicians progress through on their way toward building out-sized influence.

Finally, our *Clout* scores address the strategic concerns of political practitioners. For coalition builders, the *Clout* scores indicate who you need on your side—who leads and who follows in the coalition formation process. For political analysts trying to make sense of coalition building in California, the *Clout* scores help explain political outcomes and resolve the question of "who gets what, when, how" (Lasswell 1936).

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