

# Elections and Government Accountability: Evidence from the U.S. State Courts

Claire S. H. Limy and James M. Snyder, Jr.

## **Abstract**

We investigate the influence of electoral rules and voter information in elections on voting outcomes and accountability of incumbent public officials, using new data on election of state court judges in 39 states in the U.S. from 1990 to 2010. We find, first, that voting is very partisan in partisan judicial elections (i.e., there is a strong correlation between the Democratic “normal vote” and the Democratic vote share for judges) but not in non-partisan or retention elections. This partisan voting behavior cannot be attributed to clear differences between Democratic and Republican judges in their sentencing decisions, since such differences, if any, are small and not consistent. Second, we find that incumbent judges' quality has little effect on their vote share or probability of winning in partisan elections. By contrast, incumbent judges' quality has a substantial effect on their vote share and probability of winning in non-partisan elections. Incumbent judges' quality also has a noticeable effect on their vote share in retention elections, but the magnitude is rarely large enough to affect reelection. Evidence on turnout is consistent with a simple “voting cue” hypothesis. We find that about 83% of the voters who vote on the top office on the ballot also vote on judicial elections in partisan elections. In contrast, in non-partisan and retention elections, only 76% and 67% of those who vote on the top office also vote on judicial candidates, respectively. In addition, the amount of newspaper coverage affects voter turnout only in non-partisan elections.