

Does candidate information on the ballot increase voter satisfaction?

Evidence from a field experiment in Germany *

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Abstract: This study examines whether including different kinds of information about the candidates on the ballot affects the satisfaction of voters with elections in which most candidates are unknown. To this end, I use local elections in two German states in 2014 to conduct an experimental exit-poll survey of voters in which ballots with varying amounts of information about hypothetical candidates are randomly assigned to the respondents. The main results are: (1) More information on the ballot increases voter satisfaction. (2) The effect of an additional information cue is decreasing. (3) Information about the profession of candidates is particularly useful for voters. (4) Placing relevant information on the ballot may be helpful to increase voter turnout. (115 words)

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Extended abstract

In many occasions, individuals are supposed to select from a number of alternatives they do not know. In politics, this happens in particular in lower level elections. In most of these cases, the party affiliation of the candidates facilitates the task to a great extent. But what happens when party membership cannot guide the voter's choice, that is, when voters have to choose between candidates from the same party, as is the case in primary elections in the US and open-list elections (or "preferential voting") in other countries like Indonesia, Brazil, and Germany? As informing oneself about the aims and characteristics of all candidates is prohibitively costly (Downs, 1957), citizens often either abstain from voting completely under these circumstances or use any cue available on the ballot to obtain meaningful information about the candidates. This could be the names of the candidates, for instance, as they do not only reveal the gender of a candidate, but also transport certain hints about their ethnicity or regional background in many cases (Mueller, 1970; Byrne and Pueschel, 1974; McDermott, 1998; Fox and Oxley, 2003; Esteve-Volart and Bagues, 2009). A different selection method could be based on the order of the candidates on the ballot, which may convey information about the seniority of the candidates or their support from the party faithful in the case of open-list elections. Neither strategy is likely to satisfy the voter's desire to elect someone who is close to her political ideals.

A possible and more and more applied way out of this situation is to include certain information about the candidates on the ballot itself. Although not a perfect substitute for informing oneself properly about the candidates, these information cues may help voters making their choice in a more meaningful and satisfying way. If effective, this may lead to two important outcomes: First, higher satisfaction with the election process in general and the elected candidates in particular, which may translate into greater legitimacy of the elected representatives and higher acceptance of their political decisions. And second, potentially higher turnout at election days in the long-run, as citizens may feel that their votes are not wasted on candidates whose positions they do not know.

In this paper, I evaluate whether and how much different types of information about the candidates on the ballot affect the satisfaction of voters with the election system and the elected candidates. In particular, I examine the impact of three different information cues which are widely used in electoral campaigns: birth year, family status, and profession. Each of these may reveal important information to the voters and help them to make a meaningful choice.

In the literature, this issue has not been investigated so far as the content of real election ballots cannot be modified by the researcher and just asking voters of different countries or states with varying amounts of information cues on the ballot for their satisfaction may pick up underlying preferences instead of a causal effect. To avoid these issues, I therefore conducted a randomized experiment with real voters as part of a large exit-poll at the day of the European and local elections in two German states in 2014. To identify the causal effect of different information cues on the ballot on voter satisfaction, respondents were randomly assigned to different versions of a hypothetical election in which they were supposed to assign six votes over a list of 30 candidates. In each version, the ballot for this election varied in the amount of information about the candidates it contained, while holding the order of candidates constant. The different information treatments range from only

providing the candidate's name to additionally stating the profession, birth year, and family status. This setup enables me to exactly identify the impact of each information cue, as well as to disentangle it from any possible name or ballot order effects.

The results obtained provide evidence for a significant positive effect of stating more information on the ballot on the satisfaction of voters with the election system in general and the selected candidates in particular. Additionally, it can be shown that the marginal return to adding one more information cue is decreasing, meaning that the additional gain of one more information cue gets smaller the more are stated on the ballot already. Thus, the trade-off between the costs of processing information and making an informed choice seems to exist for information on the ballot as well. Furthermore, the results suggest that there is a difference in the quality of information provided by the different cues used. By far the most helpful seems to be the candidates' professions, as they not only reveal the candidates' educational attainment, but also hint at their personal views and daily life and challenges. And finally, I test whether different information cues affect the probability to participate in the hypothetical election as a proxy for their effect on real turnout. The outcome indicates that stating the age and family status of the candidates does not lead to any change in the willingness to participate, whereas knowing about the candidates' profession significantly increases "turnout". This effect is even stronger among those individuals in the sample who are most similar to nonvoters, i.e., those who are the least satisfied with the real election.