

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT, MOBILIZATION, AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY

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Abstract Research has found that states using initiatives and referendums have higher turnout, particularly in midterm elections. Existing research has not examined *who* is mobilized to vote when issues appear on statewide ballots. Building on work by Campbell (1966. “Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change.” In *Elections and the Political Order*, eds. A. Campbell, P. E. Converse, W. E. Miller, and D. E. Stokes. New York: Wiley), we test whether ballot measures engage and mobilize people who do not fit the profile of regular voters. Using national opinion data from the 2004 and 2006 elections, we find that independents (relative to partisans) exhibited greater awareness of and interest in ballot measures in the midterm election. This pattern is not found in the presidential election, where peripheral voters are likely to be mobilized by the stimulus of the presidential race rather than by ballot measures. Absent salient ballot measures, some episodic independent voters may not be engaged by midterm elections. This suggests that some variation in midterm turnout maybe a function of peripheral voters becoming engaged by ballot measures.

Introduction

Research on participation in American elections has focused on individual-level factors such as levels of education, social status, race, exposure to

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partisan mobilization, and attitudinal and demographic traits (Campbell et al. 1960; Verba and Nie 1972; Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003). At the same time, scholars are aware of the effects that electoral institutions have on voter participation (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978; Powell 1986; Blais and Carty 1990; Bobo and Gilliam 1990). We merge these two research traditions by investigating which voters become engaged with politics as a result of the use of initiatives and referendums.

After a dramatic rise in the number of citizen initiatives appearing on American state ballots in the 1990s, scholars began to reassess how direct democracy affects turnout in elections. Comparison of turnout in states that used the process frequently to those that did not demonstrated that initiative use was associated with increased turnout, particularly in midterm elections (Smith 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith 2001; Lacey 2005). Larger turnout effects of direct democracy in midterms are presumably due to midterms providing fewer sources of political information, leaving ballot measures with less competition for attention than would be the case during a presidential race (Tolbert and Smith 2005). Still, scholars have yet to isolate *who* is mobilized to vote when issues appear on statewide ballots.

Aggregate data used in much of the existing research examining direct democracy and voter turnout did not allow for direct tests of hypotheses about *which* voters are mobilized when policy questions appear on statewide ballots. In this paper, we use individual-level survey data to investigate which voters may be engaged and mobilized by ballot measures.

Direct Democracy Campaigns and Political Engagement

Studies documenting attitudinal and behavioral effects of direct democracy on citizens are built on hypotheses derived from theories of participatory democracy (Pateman 1970; Barber 1984). These theorists contend that if democratic institutions offer people greater opportunities to participate in decisions, those institutions may have an “educative” effect on them (Smith and Tolbert 2004). By having more opportunities to act politically, citizens may learn to participate more and to come to believe that their participation has meaning. Although democratic theorists emphasized the educative potential of small-scale democratic arrangements, a number of studies show that mass-based direct democracy has indirect behavioral and attitudinal effects on citizens such as increasing political efficacy and engagement with politics and increasing the likelihood that citizens have information about politics (Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000; Bowler and Donovan 2002; Smith 2002; Benz and Stutzer 2004; Smith and Tolbert 2004; Lassen 2005).

One common assumption in this research is that the electoral context of a state may be changed by campaign activity associated with ballot measures

(Smith 2001; see also Holbrook and McClurg 2005 on the importance of campaigns). When issues such as tax limitations, term limits, affirmative action, gay marriage, abortion rights, immigration, the minimum wage, the environment—or many other subjects—are placed on a state ballot, the issue may receive more media attention than it would in states where the measure was not destined for a public vote. Nicholson (2005) demonstrated that voting on a ballot measure can prime voters to consider the ballot issue when assessing candidates. In 2004, campaigns associated with same-sex marriage measures placed on 13 state ballots might have increased the importance of gay marriage as a factor affecting presidential vote choice in those states (Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2008). In 2006, ballot measures were charged with affecting congressional elections by mobilizing voters who supported or opposed a minimum wage, stem cell research, and same-sex marriage.

Even without active campaigns, ballot measures may generate low-cost information. Conflict and controversy over attempts to qualify ballot measures (via legislative hearings or signature petition efforts) can attract media attention and reveal elite positions on issues. Many states also mail information to each registered voter about ballot issues and the task of voting on issues may compel some to seek additional information. In addition, ballot measure proponents and opponents often utilize campaign consultants, signature-gathering firms, and paid advertising (Bowler, Donovan, and Tolbert 1998). Some ballot propositions campaigns may even draw more media attention and spending than prominent candidate races (Matsusaka 2004). Further, some candidates, especially governors, have tied their campaigns to issues on the ballot (Tolbert and Hero 1996; Chavez 1998; Alvarez and Butterfield 2000; Nicholson 2003, 2005; Kousser and McCubbins 2005; Bowler, Segura, and Nicholson 2006). Given this issue campaign activity, ballot propositions may engage citizens in politics, increase political knowledge and interest, and mobilize participation in elections (Smith and Tolbert 2004; Lassen 2005). In sum, placing issues on ballots may alter the electoral context and act to stimulate interest and participation.

Little is known, however, about how potential effects on behavior produced by this stimulus may vary across individuals. In particular, who is likely to be mobilized to vote by the presence of initiatives and referendums? We offer a theoretical perspective on how the mobilizing potential of ballot measures may vary across individuals and election context. We suggest that direct democracy campaigns may give nonpartisans and independents more reason to be engaged with electoral politics in low-stimulus elections.

Peripheral Voter Mobilization Thesis

We expect that ballot measures may mobilize people who are not regular voters in midterm contests. Campaigns about policy issues may bring

attention to a midterm and increase interest in the election. Campbell (1966) presented a similar explanation of voter turnout based on a surge and decline theory which proposes that there is a relatively small group of core voters who tend to vote rather consistently across time. During higher stimuli elections, these core voters are joined by an additional set of peripheral voters who may vote fairly infrequently. This latter group becomes sufficiently motivated to go to the polls as a result of lower information costs associated with a high-stimulus presidential election. During higher stimuli, information-rich elections, peripheral voters receive more election news which lowers their cost of obtaining information. In addition, the excitement surrounding a high-profile election makes the outcomes seem more significant and increases the perceived benefit of participating. We suggest that the media campaigns associated with salient ballot issues may transform a low-information election into a relatively higher information election, engaging many peripheral voters.

Focusing on variation in turnout between midterm and presidential elections, Campbell (1966) found only marginal differences between core and peripheral voters based on demographic and socioeconomic variables such as race, education, and income (see also Converse and Niemi 1971; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass 1987). When comparing midterm to presidential elections, however, youth has been a consistent predictor of peripheral voters. Using the surge and decline model as an analogy, we might anticipate that when salient policy questions appear on state ballots the associated campaigns and media attention may stimulate interest and provide low-cost information sufficient to motivate peripheral voters to participate. This begs a question, however. Lacking panel data or survey data that included each respondent's voting history, who, beyond younger voters might we define *a priori* as more likely to be a peripheral voter?

Campbell's (1966) work, along with the partisan dealignment literature, suggests that voters who lack attachments to a political party vote less regularly. Over the last two decades, a larger block of peripheral voters might have emerged who lack an enduring attachment to either of the two major political parties (Wattenberg 1996; Patterson 2002). A decline in turnout from the 1960s through 2000 has been attributed to the failure of political parties to mobilize these citizens (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1998; Jackson, Brown, and Wright 1998; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003). These independent voters¹ are more likely to be mobilized episodically by "third" party and independent

1. By "independent" we mean the large proportion of people (about one-third of the electorate) who fail to identify with Democrats or Republicans when asked the initial NES party question. There is some controversy about the meaning of "independent," "independent leaner," and "pure independent" in American politics. Although "leaners" have been observed to behave as partisans when they voted in two-candidate presidential elections through the 1980s (see Keith et al. 1992), NES data from the 1990s and 2000s also show that the large category of independent "leaners" more closely resembles pure independents than partisans on several attitudinal and behavioral markers,

candidacies (Belanger 2004).² Although the information costs associated with voting are likely higher for episodic independent voters than for those with partisan attachments, studies suggest that the presence of easily available information shortcuts can provide minimally informed voters with the ability to make decisions on complex ballot measures (Lupia 1994; Gerber and Lupia 1995; Bowler and Donovan 1998; Karp 1998; Branton 2003; Nicholson 2003). Ballot measures, which have been found to stimulate expressed interest among “pure independents” (Magleby 1984, p. 125), may thus increase the motivation that peripheral voters—independents, the young, the less educated—have to participate in elections.

Ballot issues may also increase the perceived benefits of participating in politics for issue-oriented, independent voters who are not motivated by the political parties. If this is the case, issue-oriented independent voters—for example, those who care the most about immigration, taxation, or gay marriage—who are disillusioned with the partisan nature of candidate elections should be the most mobilized to participate by ballot measures. Recent research finds that disaffected citizens are more supportive of increased opportunities to participate in government and that the young are more supportive of using referendums to make government decisions (Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2007). This literature provides some evidence that disaffected citizens are more interested in issue-oriented processes for making public policy. In the face of unappealing candidate choices, such citizens may find ballot issues exerting a greater effect on their turnout decisions.

We expect the mobilization of peripheral voters by ballot measures to be most pronounced in midterm elections. In midterms, issue contests have little else to compete with as a mechanism to stimulate the attention and interest of peripheral voters. In presidential elections, the larger stimulus of the presidential contest may swamp the stimulating effects of ballot measures. Presidential contests may mobilize the attention of peripheral voters, leaving less room for any stimulating effect of ballot measures. Partisans, however, are more likely to be interested in high- and low-information elections and may be mobilized by congressional, gubernatorial, or other contests even in the absence of a presidential race or salient ballot measure.

Peripheral Voter Mobilization Hypothesis

We define peripheral voters as people most likely to have episodic participation in elections. Survey respondents who are politically independent, younger, and

including propensity to support third-party candidates and attitudes about the party system (Bowler et al., nd).

2. Examples of such effects include the appeal to younger and independent voters of Ross Perot and Jesse Ventura.

less educated are expected to be more likely to report being engaged by ballot measures in a midterm than in a presidential election.

National Opinion Data

We test the hypothesis two ways. First, we estimate multivariate models using data from two unique national opinion samples to predict who reported being aware of measures on their state's ballot in the 2004 and 2006 elections. We then estimate similar models to predict a respondent's self-reported interest in issues that appeared on their state's ballot. Awareness of and interest in ballot measures is used to measure engagement in politics and serve as proxies for mobilization. Interest and information about politics is a critical precursor to voting since studies have shown that knowledge about candidates increases the propensity to vote. Delli Carpini, and Keeter (1996) argue that political knowledge leads to increases in voter participation and Niemi and Junn (1988, p. 9) find that knowledge is a "prerequisite to successful political engagement." We estimate knowledge (awareness of) and interest in policy issues on the ballot.

It is important to note that although ballot initiatives are more common in the West, most Americans live in places where the initiative is used at the state or local level (Matusaka 2004) and voters in nearly every state have regular opportunities to approve constitutional amendments, bond referendums, or other policy measures referred to them by their state's legislature. In our study, "ballot measures" include constitutional and statutory initiatives as well as constitutional amendments and laws referred by state legislatures to the voters (referendums).

Our measures of awareness of and interest in ballot measures appeared on two pre-election national opinion surveys commissioned by the Pew Center for the People and the Press, each conducted two weeks prior to the election in mid-late October of 2004 and 2006.³ These data represent the first time Pew has included questions on initiatives and referendums in their annual election surveys. Because of similar timing of the surveys in the field, sample population (registered voters), identical question wording, and similar statistical controls, the two surveys create a natural experiment that allows us to compare outcomes in a low-information electoral context to those in a high-information context. Unfortunately, these unique questions were not asked on postelection surveys

3. The 2004 national random telephone survey for Pew was conducted by Princeton Research Associates from October 15 to 19 of 1,307 registered voters, 18 years and older, representing the continental United States (Report from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, October 20, 2004). In 2006, the national random telephone survey was conducted from October 17 to 22 of 2,006 registered voters, 18 years and older, representing the continental United States (Report from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, October 26, 2006). Both surveys are available (online) at <http://www.people-press.org>. Response rates for the Pew surveys are 37 percent for 2004 and 2006 (AAPOR Response Rate 3).

that included a sample of voters and nonvoters, so we cannot measure actual turnout. Instead, we measure political engagement.

These national random sample telephone surveys asked respondents, "From what you have heard or read, will voters in your state this November be voting on any ballot initiatives, referendum, state constitutional amendments, or not?" Voters across the nation were attentive to ballot measures: 42 percent of respondents⁴ reported being aware of policy questions on their state's November 2004 ballot (163 measures appeared on the ballots of 34 states); 37 percent were aware of ballot measures in the 2006 midterm elections when over 200 measures appeared on the ballot in 37 states. Response categories to this awareness question included yes, no, and don't know. We combined "no" and "don't know" into a single category to create a dichotomous measure of awareness of ballot measures, with those aware of issues on their state's ballot coded 1. We assume awareness of ballot questions is a precondition for the issue to affect a voter's propensity to turn out.

As a follow-up, respondents who said they were aware of measures were also asked, "How interested are you in the ballot issues in your state this year? Very interested, fairly interested, not too interested, not at all interested?" We used this question to construct a variable representing those who were both aware of ballot measures and interested in them. The distribution of responses to the four-point "interested in ballot measures" question was such that we dichotomized the item, so that 0 = those unaware and uninterested, those aware and not at all interested, and those aware and not too interested. Respondents who reported being aware of ballot measures and being fairly interested or very interested were coded as 1.⁵

The 2004 survey found that 86 percent of respondents who were aware of ballot measures in their states were "very" or "fairly interested" in the policy questions on their state's ballot. Of those aware of the issues in 2006 survey, 81 percent were interested (39 percent were very interested and 42 percent fairly interested). Thus in both high- and low-information election contexts, roughly the same percentage of Americans were knowledgeable of and interested in policy questions on their ballot. Yet we know that the turnout effects from ballot propositions are significantly stronger in midterm elections than in presidential elections. What explains this pattern if on the face, awareness of and interest in the issues appear similar in both contexts?

4. Forty-two percent responded "yes, they were aware something was on their state's ballot"; 32 percent said "no"; and 27 percent said "don't know."

5. In the 2004 survey, the distribution for the awareness question was 43.3 percent ($n = 566$) for the respondents who replied yes, they were aware; 31.2 percent (408) no; and 25.5 percent (333) don't know/refused, recoded into 43.4 percent aware and 56.7 percent not aware. The distribution of the follow-up offered to those who said yes was 42.4 percent (240) very interested, 43.2 percent (245) fairly interested, 10.7 percent (61) not too interested, 2.1 percent (12) not at all interested and 1.4 percent (8) don't know. The resulting distribution for our variable reflecting awareness and interest is 37.1 percent (485) aware and (fairly or very interested) and 62.9 percent (822) unaware and/or uninterested. Similar distributions were found using the 2006 data.

We use these national opinion data to build on the work of Nicholson (2003) who examined awareness of ballot propositions in California between 1956 and 2000. Nicholson finds that media coverage, campaign spending, the number of days before an election, and issues that concern morality, civil liberties, and civil rights contributed to awareness of ballot propositions. Although Nicholson's research emphasizes the importance of the political environment in explaining awareness of ballot measures, we are interested in *who* is aware, interested, and motivated by ballot propositions. Our emphasis is on individual characteristics of voters while Nicholson's focus was the political environment.

Our primary independent variable measures whether an individual identifies with a political party. If our peripheral voter theory is correct, people who do not identify with a party should be most likely to report being aware of, interested in, and mobilized by ballot measures in midterm elections. We measure partisanship two different ways. First, we use a dichotomous variable representing independents based on responses to the standard party identification question: "Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Democrat, Republican, an independent, or what?" Independents and others are coded 1 and Democratic identifiers and Republican identifiers are coded 0. The Pew surveys included a follow-up to the three-point party identification question, asking if the respondent was a strong partisan. We also report models using measures of partisanship built from this follow-up question, with binary variables representing (respectively) strong Republicans, not strong Republicans, strong Democrats, and not strong Democrats. In these estimates, independents are the reference category.

We are also interested in the effects that additional factors may have on whether or not a person may be mobilized by ballot measures—particularly those features that might identify someone as a regular or peripheral voter. Our multivariate estimates thus account for a respondent's level of education,⁶ age (estimated as age in years plus a squared term for age to measure any nonlinear relationships), gender (with a binary variable coded 1 for males and 0 for females), race (with a binary variable coded 1 for whites), and income.⁷ A finding that the young and less educated were more likely to report being aware of and interested in ballot measures in the midterm would be consistent with our theory that ballot issues mobilize potential voters who might otherwise participate episodically. Education also serves as a control for people who may be more efficacious and participate fairly regularly.

Although gender is primarily a control, women can be more likely to vote than men (Leighly and Nagler 1992). We also include a control variable

6. Education is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (less than eighth grade) to 7 (postgraduate) for both surveys.

7. In both surveys, annual family income is measured on a nine-point scale ranging from 1 (less than \$10,000 per year) to 9 (over \$150,000 per year).

representing Protestant religious preference, since gay marriage bans were on the ballot in multiple states in 2004 and 2006 and parental notification for abortion was on the ballot in Florida in 2004.⁸ Empirical studies have shown Protestants to be less supportive of measures extending gay rights (see Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2008). We measure Protestant religious affiliation, with Protestants coded 1, and followers of other religions and nonbelievers coded 0.⁹

Previous research has found that political contacting stimulates participation (Brady, Scholzman, and Verba 1999; Rosenstone and Hansen 2003). Since these effects may be important, we measure campaign contact with a question, "Recently, have you been contacted over the phone by any candidates, campaigns or other groups urging you to vote in a particular way?" with positive responses coded 1 and negative 0. We would expect citizens contacted by a political campaign (for a candidate or issue) to be more interested in and aware of questions on their statewide ballot. This is especially the case if there are active campaigns associated with the ballot measures. In the 2004 survey, we were also able to control for media consumption with three binary variables measuring whether the respondent relied primarily on television, newspaper, or online news to follow the election.¹⁰ Identical media use questions were not included in 2006. Instead, we include a question measuring consumption of campaign election news (coded 4 for following the news very closely, and 1 not at all closely),¹¹ and an index measuring the political knowledge of the respondent based on correctly answering two factual questions.¹² We expect regularly consuming news about the election and increased political sophistication to result in more awareness of and interest in the issues on the ballot (Nicholson 2003). Results of the statistical tests are unchanged when these media use variables are omitted.

Since our dependent variables are measuring awareness of and interest in a specific electoral phenomena, our estimates might be seen as biased unless we can demonstrate that the results are robust when we account for an individual's general interest in elections and when we account for variation in the key

8. When similar models were specified with a binary variable representing Catholics or born again Christians, the substantive results reported here were unchanged.

9. In both 2004 and 2006 surveys, respondents were asked: "What is your religious preference?", and they could identify themselves as Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, Orthodox, Islam, other, and none. Protestant respondents were coded as 1, others as 0.

10. The 2004 Pew survey asked: "How have you been getting most of your news about the presidential election. . .from television, newspaper or Internet?"

11. The 2006 Pew survey asked: "How closely have you followed news about candidates and election campaign?" Respondents were coded as 4 (very closely) and 1 (not at all closely).

12. Respondents were asked: (1) "Do you happen to know which political party has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives?" (2) "Do you happen to know the name of your current representative in Congress?" Those with the greatest political knowledge (both answers correct) were coded as 2, those with one correct as 1, and those unable to correctly answer either question as 0.

contextual factor we expect to be driving interest in and awareness of ballot measures. In addition to controlling for respondent's level of education, we account for the respondent's general interest in the 2004 presidential election with an ordinal four-point variable.¹³ We also control for the actual number of citizen initiatives appearing on a state's ballot in each election since we assume that initiatives are often more salient than laws referred by state legislatures (legislative referendums). By controlling for this contextual factor, we can better isolate whether peripheral or regular voters may be mobilized by ballot measures. Pew's sample design gives us the ability to merge state-level measures with individual data. Merging state-level variables with the American National Election Study (ANES) or General Social Survey (GSS) is less reliable than doing so with the Pew surveys given the nonrandom and small state samples of ANES and GSS.¹⁴

As a final robustness test, we restrict our analysis of awareness and interest to only respondents residing in one of the 34 (2004) or 37 states (2006) where an initiative or legislative referendum appeared on the ballot. All models are estimated by clustering respondents by state to adjust the standard errors for the multilevel data, as well as using robust (Huber–White) standard errors. Collinearity diagnostics indicate no problems with the set of predictor variables used here.¹⁵

Results—Pew Survey Data

As noted above, the dependent variables in our national-level estimates are dichotomous measures of awareness of ballot measures and of awareness plus interest in ballot measures. In tables 1 (2004 data) and 2 (2006 data), the first two columns present results of our estimates of awareness of state ballot measures, while the last two columns estimate who is aware of and interested in state ballot measures. Columns 1 and 3 model the effects of being an independent with partisan identifiers as the reference category while columns 2 and 4 model the effects of strength and direction of partisanship, with independents as the reference category. We begin by analyzing the 2004 survey data.

13. The Pew survey asked respondents: "How much thought have you given to the coming [presidential/midterm] election?" . . . ranging from 4 (quite a lot) to 1 (only a little).

14. The ANES data are problematic for studying direct democracy effects because of the nature of using a Primary Sampling Unit (PSU) survey design. To accommodate face-to-face interviews, the ANES uses a multistage, stratified probability sample. While this method approximates a simple random sample of the entire population, it does not guarantee random samples within states and presents reliability issues in state- or congressional-level research designs which may be biased.

15. Collinearity diagnostics for the models reported in tables 1 and 2 are reported in online appendix A (please see the supplementary data online). Tolerance statistics (1/VIF) indicate no problems of multicollinearity in the statistical models.

Table 1. Political Engagement by Ballot Measures: Mid-October 2004 Presidential Election

| | Aware of measures on state ballot | | | | Interested in and aware of measures on ballot | | | | Interested and aware; 34 states | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|------------------------------------|-----------|
| | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE.) | $p > z $ |
| Independent | -.27 (.14) | .045 | | | -.28 (.13) | .031 | | | -.25 (.13) | .050 |
| Strong Republican | | | .33 (.18) | .060 | | | .46 (.22) | .035 | | |
| Not strong Republican | | | .17 (.19) | .375 | | | .02 (.21) | .924 | | |
| Strong democrat | | | .07 (.19) | .707 | | | .12 (.17) | .484 | | |
| Not strong democrat | | | .70 (.23) | .003 | | | .54 (.17) | .001 | | |
| Contacted by political campaign | .35 (.16) | .028 | .34 (.16) | .036 | .32 (.16) | .045 | .30 (.16) | .054 | .55 (.17) | .001 |
| Education | .08 (.05) | .128 | .08 (.05) | .115 | .06 (.06) | .256 | .07 (.06) | .222 | .16 (.06) | .013 |
| White | -.13 (.29) | .651 | -.12 (.31) | .709 | -.11 (.29) | .710 | -.11 (.31) | .713 | .23 (.27) | .401 |
| Protestant | .14 (.21) | .483 | .13 (.21) | .543 | .15 (.17) | .397 | .13 (.18) | .463 | .08 (.17) | .639 |
| Income | -.01 (.03) | .743 | -.02 (.03) | .586 | -.04 (.03) | .272 | -.05 (.04) | .202 | -.04 (.03) | .173 |
| Male | .21 (.13) | .122 | .20 (.14) | .147 | .14 (.14) | .341 | .13 (.15) | .372 | .24 (.15) | .113 |

Continued

Table 1. Continued

| | Aware of measures on state ballot | | | | Interested in and aware of measures on ballot | | | | Interested and aware; 34 states | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------|-----------|
| | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE.) | $p > z $ |
| Political interest | .12 (.11) | .265 | .13 (.11) | .231 | .06 (.11) | .572 | .06 (.11) | .605 | .14 (.10) | .137 |
| Age | .08 (.02) | .000 | .09 (.02) | .000 | .08 (.02) | .000 | .09 (.02) | .000 | .07 (.02) | .001 |
| Age squared | -.07 ⁻² (.02 ⁻³) | .000 | -.08 ⁻² (.01 ⁻²) | .000 | -.07 ⁻² (.02 ⁻²) | .000 | -.08 ⁻² (.02 ⁻²) | .000 | -.06 ⁻² (.02 ⁻²) | .004 |
| Television news consumption | .35 (.27) | .199 | .32 (.28) | .249 | .34 (.20) | .085 | .34 (.21) | .102 | .35 (.23) | .138 |
| Newspaper consumption | .46 (.28) | .100 | .44 (.29) | .125 | .41 (.26) | .114 | .41 (.27) | .126 | .27 (.32) | .405 |
| Online news consumption | .55 (.36) | .126 | .51 (.37) | .163 | .34 (.36) | .343 | .33 (.36) | .356 | .53 (.45) | .236 |
| Number initiatives on state ballot | .32 (.08) | .000 | .32 (.08) | .000 | .28 (.03) | .000 | .28 (.07) | .000 | .18 (.05) | .000 |
| Constant | -4.08 (.63) | .000 | -4.18 (.64) | .000 | -4.00 (.64) | .000 | -4.06 (.65) | .000 | -3.99 (.49) | .000 |
| Number | 1,070 | | 1,070 | | 1,070 | | 1,070 | | 679 | |
| Wald chi ² | 124.96 | .000 | 164.64 | .000 | 128.24 | .000 | 176.20 | .000 | 295.57 | .000 |
| Pseudo R ² | .13 | | .14 | | .11 | | .11 | | .08 | |

NOTE.—Unstandardized logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses to correct for heteroskedasticity. Probabilities based on two-tailed tests. Standard errors adjusted by clustering cases by state.

Table 2. Political Engagement by Ballot Measures: Mid-October 2006 Midterm Election

| | Aware of measures on state ballot | | | | Interested in and aware of measures on ballot | | | | Interested and aware; 37 states | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|------------------------------------|-----------|
| | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ |
| Independent | .30 (.13) | .020 | | | .33 (.11) | .004 | | | .44 (.14) | .002 |
| Strong Republican | | | -.50 (.19) | .008 | | | -.44 (.21) | .034 | | |
| Not strong Republican | | | -.21 (.20) | .303 | | | -.15 (.19) | .449 | | |
| Strong Democrat | | | -.21 (.18) | .261 | | | -.28 (.16) | .081 | | |
| Not strong Democrat | | | -.27 (.19) | .168 | | | -.40 (.23) | .085 | | |
| Contacted by political campaign | .29 (.14) | .042 | .27 (.14) | .053 | .11 (.14) | .446 | .11 (.14) | .424 | .22 (.18) | .253 |
| Election news consumption | .41 (.09) | .000 | .42 (.10) | .000 | .57 (.10) | .000 | .58 (.11) | .000 | .65 (.11) | .000 |
| Political knowledge | .11 (.10) | .273 | .12 (.10) | .227 | .17 (.12) | .159 | .17 (.12) | .149 | .37 (.14) | .009 |
| Political interest | .23 (.09) | .010 | .23 (.09) | .011 | .31 (.08) | .000 | .31 (.08) | .000 | .37 (.08) | .000 |
| Education | -.05 (.05) | .377 | -.05 (.05) | .350 | -.09 (.06) | .121 | -.09 (.06) | .127 | -.14 (.07) | .057 |
| Male | .02 (.13) | .901 | .05 (.14) | .730 | .06 (.17) | .743 | .07 (.17) | .683 | .21 (.22) | .340 |

Continued

Table 2. Continued

| | Aware of measures on state ballot | | | | Interested in and aware of measures on ballot | | | | Interested and aware; 37 states | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------|-----------|
| | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ | Coef. (SE) | $p > z $ |
| White | .04 (.18) | .819 | .07 (.18) | .683 | -.06 (.20) | .746 | -.06 (.21) | .767 | .09 (.27) | .730 |
| Age | .03 (.02) | .231 | .03 (.02) | .245 | .02 (.03) | .309 | .02 (.02) | .322 | .03 (.03) | .258 |
| Age squared | -.02 ⁻² (.02 ⁻²) | .165 | -.02 ⁻² (.02 ⁻²) | .167 | -.02 ⁻² (.02 ⁻²) | .261 | -.02 ⁻² (.02 ⁻²) | .272 | -.03 ⁻² (.02 ⁻²) | .195 |
| Income | .02 (.03) | .527 | .02 (.03) | .555 | .02 (.03) | .634 | .01 (.03) | .681 | .04 (.04) | .401 |
| Protestant | -.01 (.15) | .967 | .03 (.15) | .861 | .03 (.13) | .801 | .04 (.13) | .752 | .18 (.15) | .224 |
| Number initiatives on state ballot | .34 (.05) | .000 | .34 (.05) | .000 | .31 (.04) | .000 | .31 (.04) | .000 | .25 (.04) | .000 |
| Constant | -3.68 (.70) | .000 | -3.73 (.73) | .000 | -4.36 (.89) | .000 | -4.39 (.93) | .000 | -5.29 (1.04) | .000 |
| Number | 1,238 | | 1,231 | | 1,230 | | 1,223 | | 809 | |
| Wald chi ² | 196.8 | .000 | 218.93 | .000 | 164.95 | | 161.98 | .000 | 229.97 | .000 |
| Pseudo R ² | .17 | | .17 | | .18 | | .18 | | .20 | |

NOTE.—Unstandardized logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses to correct for heteroskedasticity. Probabilities based on two-tailed tests. Standard errors adjusted by clustering cases by state.

2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

In the high-stimulus 2004 presidential election (table 1), the most noteworthy finding across all estimates is the effect of partisanship. Independents were consistently less likely to report being aware of issues on their statewide ballot and were less interested in ballot measures than partisans. Models 2 and 4 reveal that in the 2004 election, strong Republicans were particularly aware of and interested in the measures appearing on their statewide ballots relative to independents (the reference category). This may be related to the fact that same-sex marriage measures appeared on 13 statewide ballots in 2004 and that partisan Republicans found that particular issue to be more interesting than other respondents. Replications of these models (not reported here) indicate that controlling for residence in a state with a gay marriage ban on the ballot does not alter this. Similarly, weak Democrats were more aware of and interested in measures on statewide ballots than independents.

Many of the other coefficients from our national presidential election sample (table 1) are consistent with the idea that ballot measures engage people who resemble regular rather than peripheral voters. For example, we see that the unique effects of being a partisan identifier and an older voter both significantly increase the likelihood that a respondent reported being aware of measures on his or her state's ballot and being aware of and interested in those ballot measures. The substantive magnitude of these effects is not changed after we control for a respondent's interest in the election or media consumption. As expected, citizens residing in states with more initiatives on the ballot in 2004 reported an increased awareness of and interest in ballot issues. Even the most restrictive test, where the sample is limited to only those respondents from the 34 states where an initiative or referendum appeared on the ballot, reveals that independents were less aware of and less interested in ballot measures than partisans (see column 5, table 1) in 2004. The results are unchanged with the restricted sample, except that the effect of education on interest in ballot measures is stronger.

Control variables reported in table 1 are in the expected direction. Those contacted by the political campaigns of "candidates, issues or other groups" reported being considerably more likely to be aware of and interested in ballot propositions. Those who consumed more television news were marginally more likely to be interested in initiatives and referendums on their state ballots. When this control variable and the newspaper readership variable are dropped from the model, the primary substantive findings remain unchanged. Notable is that general political interest is not a predictor of knowledge about or interest in ballot measures. The presidential contest may engage those with and without general political interest but general interest does not differentiate between those interested in and aware of state ballot measures in 2004.

Thus, in a sample drawn from a presidential election year, awareness of and interest in ballot measures tends to be differentiated by partisanship, and age.

Independents, the young, and (in the restricted sample) the less educated appear less interested in ballot measures than regular voters.

2006 MIDTERM ELECTION

Table 2 reports similar models based on the 2006 midterm election survey. In these tests, the coefficient for independents is now statistically significant and positive. Independents were more likely to report being aware of and interested in ballot measures in the midterm than partisans. Rigorous cross-tabulation of the 2006 survey instrument was conducted to ensure there were no coding errors by Pew or the authors on the partisanship measures (analysis available from the authors). It is important to note that the model fit improves substantially when using the 2006 survey.¹⁶ Furthermore, whether partisanship is modeled using a binary variable for partisans or the measures of strength and direction of partisanship, the strong and consistent effect of independents being more engaged by ballot propositions in the midterm remains. Adding and dropping control variables also does not modify this finding that these peripheral voters show more interest in ballot propositions (relative to partisans) in the midterm election.

There are other differences between 2004 and 2006 in the voters who were engaged by ballot measures that are consistent with the peripheral voter thesis. In 2004, interest in and awareness of ballot measures increased with age (up to a high age point, as by the effect of age plus age squared). In the midterm election, however, younger voters were no less (nor more) interested in or aware of ballot measures than older voters. Estimates limited to subsamples of respondents living where measures were on state ballots also show that increasing levels of education corresponded with increased engagement in 2004. In the 2006 midterm, this was reversed. Residing in a state with more initiatives on the ballot was associated with more awareness of and interest in statewide propositions in both years as expected.

The results in tables 1 and 2 are consistent with our application of Campbell's (1966) surge and decline thesis. In presidential election years, peripheral voters exhibit less awareness of or interest in ballot measures than regular voters because peripheral voters might have been engaged and mobilized by the larger stimulus of the presidential election. In the midterm, peripheral voters exhibit greater levels of awareness of and interest in ballot issues compared to

16. The pseudo R^2 for the model predicting interest in ballot measures improved from a .11 in the presidential election to .18 in the midterm election. There was a difference of -2 log likelihoods between the models in table 1, column 3, and table 2, column 3, with k degrees of freedom, where k = the difference in parameters in the model is 9. With 1 degree of freedom, the chi-square test is statistically significant with a p -value of .005 (chi square = 9, $df = 1$, $p < .005$). This indicates that the 2006 model predicting interest in ballot measures is a statistically better fit of these data than the 2004 model.

regular voters, we suspect, because ballot measures were a primary stimulus that engaged and mobilized peripheral voters in the absence of a presidential contest. Without salient issue questions on their state's ballots, fewer of these peripheral voters might have been engaged enough to appear in a sample of likely voters drawn at a midterm election. In contrast, partisans are more likely to vote in on- and off-year elections and are more likely to be engaged by congressional and subnational candidate races. Independents, absent strong party ties, may be more mobilized by policy issues than partisans in nonpresidential elections.

Absent from these analyses are variables that speak about national-level factors that account for turnout during midterm election years. The 2006 midterm election has been characterized as a referendum on Bush's job performance and the Iraq war in particular. If surge and decline is correct, many of Bush's soft supporters (i.e., peripheral voters) who voted for him in 2004 could have stayed home in 2006 and not been engaged in politics. Replications of the models in table 2 are reported in the online appendix controlling for Bush's job approval (please see the supplementary data online). The substantive results are unchanged in terms of nonpartisan engagement in issue elections.¹⁷

Control variables reported in table 2 are in the expected direction and consistent with previous research on civic engagement, particularly in the midterm election. We find that individuals consuming more election news were more likely to be aware of ballot measures and more interested in ballot questions. Similarly, individuals who were generally more interested in politics tended to be more interested in the issues on the ballot and more aware at the midterm election. Individuals more knowledgeable about politics in the midterm election in states using ballot measures were also more interested in the ballot measures. Individuals contacted by political campaigns were more aware of initiatives and referendums. The strength of these relationships provides additional confidence in our findings; holding these important factors constant, independents, compared to partisans, were more engaged in politics by direct democracy in the midterm election. When these control variables are dropped from the model, the findings regarding independents are unchanged.

Our analysis of the 2006 survey data supports the peripheral voter hypothesis. We find that nonpartisans or independents were more likely to be interested in and aware of ballot measures. Statewide ballot measures and their associated media campaigns may engage infrequent voters in midterm elections, providing a stimulus for them to become engaged. This may explain why aggregate studies find a stronger effect of ballot measures on turnout in off-year elections. The election context appears to affect who is engaged in politics when initiatives or referendums appear on statewide ballots.

17. Presidential approval was not asked in the mid-October 2004 Pew survey. See online appendix B for 2006 Pew presidential approval question wording, coding, and results of the statistical tests (please see the supplementary data online).

Discussion

Most existing research on direct democracy has utilized aggregate data to assess if ballot questions increase voter turnout and find the turnout effect more pronounced in midterm elections. We have used individual-level data to examine how direct democracy may shape who participates, paying special attention to the variation in high- and low-stimulus election settings. We find that different types of citizens report being engaged by ballot propositions in low-versus high-information elections. In the presidential election, partisans were the most aware of and interested in ballot measures. In the lower information 2006 midterm elections, it was independents and the lesser educated who were more likely to report being aware of and interested in ballot measures. Ballot measures appear to be more likely to engage peripheral voters than partisans in midterm elections but not in presidential elections.

This research is the first to illustrate how ballot measures may mobilize and engage infrequent voters in an election. We suggest that the engagement of peripheral voters in midterm elections by ballot measures reflects the general potential that media attention to politics and campaign activity have to mobilize infrequent voters. Campbell (1966) suggests that many peripheral voters are mobilized by the stimulus of a presidential campaign but then withdraw when that stimulus is gone. Our analysis finds that public votes on salient policy questions may act as a stimulus that engages the interest and attention of some peripheral voters when the stimulus of a presidential campaign is absent. Absent salient ballot measures, episodic independent voters may not be engaged in politics in midterm elections and may not turn out to vote. In high-stimulus presidential elections, peripheral voters do not exhibit greater awareness of and interest in ballot measures, we suspect, because the stimulus of the presidential election crowds out the effect of ballot measures on peripheral voter interest.

Recent advances in social science have established that electoral institutions structure aggregate levels of voter turnout (Blais and Carty 1990). When electoral institutions are changed, the size of the participating electorate can change. Indeed, the effects of relatively modest changes in electoral rules may alter the size of the electorate and the composition of who participates. For instance, voting by mail as opposed to at precinct locations may increase turnout while also producing a slight change in the mix of who participates (Karp and Banducci 2000; Southwell and Burchett 2000). Modifications of how votes are cast in at-large local elections can change how candidates and parties contact voters and increase participation in local elections (Bowler, Donovan, and Brockington 2003).

Little is known, however, about how changes in electoral context play out at the level of the individual citizen. Researchers are only beginning to answer questions about who, exactly, is engaged in politics or motivated to vote when institutional settings change. It seems clear that the effects of changes in electoral rules on turnout are not always neutral. Different groups of people

may be activated or mobilized (or even demobilized) when institutions alter the electoral context. We suggest that the presence of ballot measures has a contextual effect on turnout analogous to a shift in an electoral institution. Although previous research has found that ballot measures increase turnout, until now we have not understood who is engaged in politics and mobilized to vote when initiatives or referendums appear on statewide ballots.

When electoral institutions such as voting procedures, electoral formula, or district boundaries are altered, the change in electoral context is stable and enduring, so the mix of the electorate may be permanently altered. This makes it relatively easy for us to reach conclusions about how the composition of the electorate may be affected by some institutional rules. Direct democracy is used differently in each election, however, with the substance of ballot questions quite unique in each state at any point in time. Although the content of statewide ballot measures is fluid, the surge and decline explanation offered here may explain why the effect of direct democracy on turnout is generally greater in midterm elections.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available online at <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/>

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