



Ballot position and election results: Evidence from a natural experiment



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ABSTRACT

Candidates listed first on the ballot paper regularly receive more votes than other candidates, but what role does ballot layout play in this connection? Experimental studies from first-past-the-post systems show that the ballot position effect is causal as the order of names functions as a cue to voters. Does this also hold for PR systems where voters may vote for a party instead of a specific candidate? We identify a natural experiment in Danish local and regional elections involving more than 10,000 candidates on 103 different ballot papers using ballot layout to study ballot position effects. We find indeed, the ballot position/layout has a causal effect on election results in PR systems. Our findings indicate that the empirical domain of ballot position and layout effects is much wider than suggested by previous research.

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The question of whether a top position on the ballot paper affords a candidate an advantage over other candidates in an election has a long history, both in political science and in practical politics. Woodrow Wilson made the following observation in the beginning of the twentieth century, and it remains valid to this day:

I have seen a ballot ... which contained seven hundred names. It was bigger than the page of a newspaper and was printed in close columns as a newspaper would be. Of course no voter who is not a trained politician, who has not watched the whole process of nomination carefully, who does not know a great deal about the derivation and character and association of every nominee it contains, can vote a ticket like that with intelligence. In nine cases out of ten, as it has turned out, he will simply mark the first name under each office (Wilson, 1912: 593).

Since then, a considerable body of political science research has been devoted to identifying more exactly the effect of being listed first on the ballot. Many studies find positive effects, but many studies also find that the contingent effects suggested by Wilson – publicity, engagement, educated voters and many other factors – may modify or even nullify ballot position effects (e.g. Chen et al., 2014; Ho and Imai, 2008; Kim et al., 2015; Koppell and Steen,

2004; Meredith and Salant, 2013).

In practical politics, ballot position effects have figured prominently. Losers have often contested election results arguing that winners were unfairly favored by their position on the ballot. Cases have been taken before courts, which have often acknowledged ballot position effects and sometimes even annulled election results for this very reason (Alvarez et al., 2006; see also Miller and Krosnick, 1998).

However, identifying ballot position effects with some accuracy is challenging. The reason is that political parties and candidates are likely to anticipate them and act strategically to harvest them. If being listed first really brings electoral advantages, parties and candidates are likely to actively seek this position on the ballot.

Strategic positioning is, of course, a widespread phenomenon. Candidates often fight to be placed at the top of the ballot, and political parties place their top candidates first. To the researcher, however, this poses a challenge: How to disentangle the effect of the ballot position from the effect of the characteristics of the individual candidate who has successfully fought to obtain this position? To the researcher, tricky technical issues of selection effects and reverse causality are involved.

This methodological problem is now broadly acknowledged in the literature, and the preferred solution is to turn to experimental methods in which the assignment of candidates to ballot positions is somehow randomized. However, the discipline of experimental investigation of ballot position effects is still in its infancy and overwhelmingly based on natural experiments in the USA where

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random rotation of candidate names is used in a number of states (e.g. Darcy, 1986; Chen et al., 2014; Krosnick et al., 2004). Very little experimental evidence exists on ballot position effects – not to speak of ballot layout effects – in other systems. Ballot layout effects refer to the effects on candidates' votes which can be attributed to the ballot layout as such, i.e. it is a subcategory of ballot position effects (Geys and Heyndels, 2003).

It is especially unfortunate that there is so little evidence from proportional representation (PR) systems, which is the most common type of electoral system worldwide (Reynolds et al., 2005: 31). We are primarily interested in list PR systems where voters may vote for a specific candidate or simply vote for a party and thus avoid the challenge of having to select a specific candidate. It is therefore far from clear that ballot position effects will be found in these systems.

The purpose of this paper is to study list PR systems to determine the degree to which they belong to the empirical domain of ballot position effects. Danish local and regional elections offer a unique opportunity to do this. First, these elections are conducted as pure (open or semi-open) list PR systems with no formal electoral threshold. Each municipality and each region constitutes one election district, and each voter has one vote to cast for the municipal council and one for the regional council. Second, the printing of the candidates' names in columns (i.e., the ballot layout) represents a natural experiment in which some candidates are as-if randomly assigned to top positions. Third, factors normally found to mitigate ballot position effects – partisan elections, media attention, educated voters – are all present in the Danish context. This makes Denmark a least-likely case for identification of ballot position and ballot layout effects, even among countries using list PR systems. In sum, if such effects are found in Danish local and regional elections, this would hold important empirical lessons for PR systems generally and theoretical lessons for the literature on ballot design.

The paper is structured as follows: We begin by reviewing the existing empirical literature in order to evaluate the present knowledge of ballot position effects, to identify lacunae in the literature, and to argue for the value added by our study. Second, we introduce the Danish local and regional electoral system and its merits as a natural experiment to identify ballot position effects. Third, we explain our data and our analytical approach. Fourth, we present the results of our empirical analyses, which show that the ballot position of a candidate in the Danish list PR system indeed has a causal effect on election results. Finally, we conclude and discuss the broader implications of the study.

1. What we already know about ballot position and ballot layout effects

Ballot position effects are created by psychological mechanisms (Krosnick et al., 2004; Darcy and McAllister, 1990; Brockington, 2003; Kim et al., 2015). It may be a temporal phenomenon, i.e., cognitive fatigue builds as the voter considers candidate after candidate on a long vertical or horizontal list. This creates a primacy effect, which is a systematic bias in favor of candidates listed (and seen) first. It may also be a spatial phenomenon, i.e., voters unconsciously associate physical top positions with qualities of the candidate (Kim et al., 2015; see also Tourangeau et al., 2013). Ballot order effects are expected to be generally relevant but most important when other cues are missing, or when voters face multiple choices or complex voting systems.

Given the potential impact on the outcome of elections, it is not surprising that the potential effects of the candidates' position on the ballot paper have attracted considerable scholarly attention. The topic is almost as old as the political science discipline itself

(Bagley, 1966; Brooks, 1921; Dana, 1912; Gold, 1952; Mackerras, 1968; Mueller, 1969; White, 1950; Wilson, 1912), but scientific interest only really took hold in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Bakker and Lijphart, 1980; Bowler et al., 1992; Brook and Upton, 1974; Byrne and Pueschel, 1974; Darcy, 1986; Darcy and McAllister, 1990; Hughes, 1970; Kelley and McAllister, 1984; Lijphart and Pintor, 1988; Miller and Krosnick, 1998; Robson and Walsh, 1974; Scott, 1977; Taebel, 1975; Volcansek, 1981) and it has not lost momentum after the turn of the millennium (Alvarez et al., 2006; Brockington, 2003; Chen et al., 2014; Faas and Schoen, 2006; Geys and Heyndels, 2003; Ho and Imai, 2008; Johnson and Miles, 2011; Kim et al., 2015; King and Leigh, 2009; Koppell and Steen, 2004; Krosnick et al., 2004; Lutz, 2010; Matson and Fine, 2006; Meredith and Salant, 2013; Villodres and de la Puerta, 2006).

When evaluating this literature it is important to keep in mind the methodological problem mentioned in the introduction. Political parties may anticipate name order effects and therefore place top candidates first. Likewise, individual candidates may fight to gain a top position to increase their chances of election. Studies that do not deal with this problem are likely to overestimate name order effects. However, as noted in Krosnick et al. (2004); see also (Darcy and McAllister, 1990) review of the early literature, most studies do not address this problem, but simply measure whether candidates in different positions on average do better or worse. These studies should therefore be read with caution. To unambiguously identify a name order effect, one must focus on situations where the assignment of candidates to top positions is randomized.

The more recent literature recognizes the problem and turns to experimental methods to deal with it. In the following we focus on such studies – which also include some early contributions – in order to assess the current knowledge of name order effects, to identify lacunae in the literature and to argue for the added value of our study.

A list of experimental studies of ballot position effects is provided in Table 1. We cannot guarantee that it includes all relevant studies, but we have done our best to make it as comprehensive as possible. At first sight, Table 1 indicates that there is solid evidence in favor of ballot position effects. Almost all studies find a positive effect of being listed first on the ballot. However, on closer inspection the evidence is less persuasive. Kim et al.'s survey experiment (2015) is a fine demonstration of the pure name order effect, but its external validity is questionable as it cannot estimate the extent to which this effect is strong enough to matter in real-world elections. The majority of studies of real-world elections are natural experiments from the USA, which mostly use random rotation of candidate names. Almost all these studies find positive ballot position effects. However, it is not clear how well these findings travel beyond the peculiarities of the US election system and political context.

From a non-US perspective it would be desirable to identify ballot position effects in other election systems, especially the PR systems used in so many other countries. However, of the few non-US experimental studies only the German study by Faas and Schoen (2006) and the Belgian study by Geys and Heyndels (2003) are set in PR systems (the Australian study by King and Leigh (2009) is set in a majoritarian system, the Alternative Vote).

Furthermore, the study by Faas & Schoen based on the Bavarian state elections of 2003 is a most-likely case for finding ballot position effects since voters *must* select individual candidates as is also the case with a more recent (but non-experimental) study by Marcinkiewicz (2014) on the 2007 Sejm elections in Poland. A comparative study on the differences between ballot position effects under compulsory and optional preferential list-PR systems demonstrate convincingly that the former (Poland, 2011), as

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