



Electoral effects of candidate valence[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Ideological proximity is not the sole determinant of electoral choices. Voters frequently select candidates whose policy profiles do not exhibit the closest match with their own policy preferences. Instead, non-spatial factors can govern the vote. The empirical literature has struggled to assess the effect of candidate valence on electoral outcomes due to the challenge of estimating a comprehensive indicator of candidate valence. This paper investigates the effect of non-spatial factors on candidates' electoral results by estimating candidate valences from a vote advice application. A conservative estimate based on an analysis of the two-tiered German federal election system suggests a surplus of several percentage points for high-valence candidates over low-valence competitors – even for competitors from minor parties.

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Vote choices are not fully determined by the ideological proximity between voters and candidates. The valence theory of voting holds that there are various *non-spatial* factors that can trump policy considerations and lead voters to select a competitor that does not promote the most compelling policy profile. Among the various non-policy factors are greater perceived integrity or competence, but even name recognition and familiarity with the candidate can produce deviations from a pure spatial vote. A high valence advantage is thus essential for candidates to win electoral races.

The empirical literature has long been interested in quantifying the effect of valence on vote choices (Andersen and Kibler, 1978; Buttice and Stone, 2012; Clark, 2009; Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Clarke and Whitten, 2013; Clarke et al., 2011; Degan, 2007; Johns et al., 2009). The principal challenge for investigating the effects of candidate valence on electoral outcomes is generating a comprehensive measure of valence. It is difficult to separate the policy and non-policy factors of individual vote choices from survey evidence as responses are subject to distortions and rationalizations (Conover and Feldman, 1986; Granberg and Brown, 1992; Merrill et al., 2001). Apart from partisan bias, these imprecisions

are due to a limited awareness of the respondents regarding the candidates' policy profiles. Previous research has frequently circumvented the difficulty of generating comprehensive valence estimates by relying on shorthand measures, most importantly the candidates' incumbency status (Berry et al., 2000; Burden, 2004; Cox and Katz, 1996; Hogan, 2008; Stone et al., 2010). Although this factor has consistently been shown to be strongly and positively associated with electoral outcomes, it disregards various other non-spatial determinants of vote choices. What is more, it does not allow for variation in candidate valence among the group of incumbents and non-incumbents.

In this contribution, candidate valence is captured by eliciting the policy preferences of voters and comparing them with the policy profiles of candidates. This allows familiarizing voters with the available alternatives and making explicit vote recommendations. Voters that continue to prefer a different candidate after being informed about the correct vote from a spatial perspective (cf. Lau et al., 2008; Lau and Redlawsk, 1997) are likely to base their selection on non-spatial factors. The resulting evidence can be applied to estimate a comprehensive indicator of candidate valence by controlling for the spatial component of the vote. This indicator, in turn, permits an estimation of the effect of valence on electoral outcomes.

The case study relies on evidence from a vote advice application of nominal candidates during the 2013 German federal election campaign. The German case allows for a conservative test of the electoral effects of candidate valence due to the two-tiered electoral system (Saalfeld, 2009). German voters cast two votes – one

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for the nominal candidate in the electoral district and one for the state-level party list. The mixed electoral law can be used to estimate the effect of candidate valence on the outcome on the nominal tier while controlling for the outcome on the party-list tier, thus taking party effects out of the equation. As high-valence candidates are known to cause above-average electoral outcomes even for the party list due to contamination (Ferrara et al., 2005; Hainmueller and Kern, 2008), the estimated effects provide a lower bound for the impact of valence on the candidates' electoral performance.

The remainder of the contribution begins by briefly outlining the concept of candidate valence and how it relates to electoral outcomes. Section 3 elaborates the alternative valence measure based on explicit vote recommendations and the underlying data and model for the empirical analysis. The electoral effects of valence are the subject of Section 4. Section 5 concludes.

1. Candidate valence and electoral choices

Candidates for political office are more than just walking and talking policy profiles. They are personalities with character traits, both good and bad. Candidates can be sympathetic or unsociable, they can be appealing or unattractive, they can be smart or dull, they can even vary in their level of persuasiveness – regardless of the specific policy profile that they propose. The common theme to all of these traits is that they are orthogonal to the policy dimension, yet they are known to influence individual vote choices as voters tend to select candidates that score well on these scales (Chen et al., 2012; Patterson et al., 1992; Rosar and Klein, 2005, 2013).

Candidate selections that reward non-policy factors seem to call for a modification of the Downsian model of vote choices (Downs, 1957) as candidate selections are not fully determined by the policy proximity between voters and candidates. In an early critique of the proximity model, Stokes (1963) argues that political competition is not exhaustively described by candidate position-taking. Instead, there are various campaign issues on which there is no serious disagreement regarding the desired political outcomes. Examples include economic prosperity or levels of corruption. Absent any disagreement on the desired outcomes on such *valence-issues* (Stokes, 1963, 1992), competition shifts to public perceptions of competence or actual quality differentials (Aragones and Palfrey, 2004; Buttice and Stone, 2012).

Following Stokes, an extensive body of research has investigated the valence component of vote choices. Valence voting is typically treated as a set of non-spatial candidate characteristics that are independent of candidates' policy position on an ideological scale. Consequently, most formal contributions on the subject conceive of policy voting and valence voting as two distinct and comprehensive factors in individual vote choices (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2009; Serra, 2010). But what does candidate valence entail? A recent contribution by Stones and Simas (2010) distinguishes between two dimensions of candidate valence – *campaign valence* and *character valence* (cf. Adams et al., 2011). *Campaign valence* refers to those non-spatial candidate advantages that are brought about by the campaign context. Principal among them is the incumbency status of candidates. Incumbency is associated with a number of benefits such as better name recognition, additional campaign staff and funds, as well as more media attention. *Character valence*, on the other hand, refers to quality surpluses that are more strictly tied to character traits. This comprises a number of factors such as greater perceived candidate intelligence, competence, or physical attractiveness.

There is an extensive literature on the behavioral consequences of candidates' valence advantages (e.g., Ansolabehere and Snyder,

2000; Aragones, 2002; Bruter et al., 2010; Groseclose, 2001; Hummel, 2010; Zakharov, 2009), but the very interest in candidate valence is inherently linked to the question of how quality traits are related to candidates' electoral fate (Buttice and Stone, 2012; Clark, 2009; Clarke and Whitten, 2013; Clarke et al., 2011; Degan, 2007; Johns et al., 2009). In fact, the various behavioral contributions on the subject investigate how valence advantages influence candidate position-taking by assuming that high valence grants a degree of electoral insulation with a set of observable behavioral implications.

The literature has made some advances in estimating the effect of candidate quality on electoral outcomes. *Campaign valence* factors have been shown to be highly influential in structuring vote choices. The most important – and most heavily researched – element of campaign valence is the incumbency status which is strongly and positively associated with candidates' electoral fortunes (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2002; Carey et al., 2000; Cox and Katz, 1996; Erikson, 1971). A highly effective campaign can also bring about a higher campaign valence that may or may not be related to the candidates' policy profile.¹ There is a plethora of evidence on the electoral effects of campaign efforts (Gerber, 1998; Green and Krasno, 1988; Jacobson, 1978; Levitt, 1994). Conversely, *character valence* is comparatively less influential for candidates' electoral fortunes. Nevertheless, one element that is generally associated with electoral results is candidate attractiveness (Banducci et al., 2008; Rosar and Klein, 2005; Sigelmann et al., 1990). Moreover, perceptions of competence are also positively related to electoral outcomes, although not independent of candidate appearance as voters might apply visual cues to make judgments on candidate competence (Mattes et al., 2010; Todorov et al., 2005).

One final set of non-spatial factors that has consistently been shown to influence vote choices is the sociodemographic status of candidates. For example, gender or race can be important low-information cues for electoral decisions (Cutler, 2002; Greenwald et al., 2009; McDermott, 1997; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). However, even though the sociodemographic status is independent of candidates' policy profiles,² it should not be considered part of candidates' comprehensive valence advantages as it does not have a definitive effect on vote choices, i.e. candidate gender or race does not suggest an inherent quality differential, but rather a quality that is dependent on the spectator: A specific sociodemographic marker might be considered advantageous by one voter while being a deterrent for another. Compare this with candidate competence. Although perceptions of competence might not be related to actual candidate competence, the underlying dimension does suggest an unambiguous quality differential, not an arbitrary grouping variable.

To summarize, the literature has provided ample evidence that a variety of non-spatial factors structure individual vote choices above and beyond ideological proximity. Previous research has mostly analyzed single factors, while the comprehensive effect of candidate valence on electoral outcomes remains elusive. This lack of evidence can be traced back to the difficulty of separating policy and non-policy factors of individual vote choices from survey evidence. For one, there are well-known distortions and

¹ While campaign efforts can clearly be differentiated from policy determinants of individual vote choices, they take a middle ground between *campaign valence* and *character valence* in the sense of Stones and Simas (2010) as effective campaign efforts are likely to showcase aspects of the candidates' personality and thus alter public perceptions of candidates' character valence.

² While the sociodemographic status of candidates does not necessitate a specific policy profile, voters might well apply sociodemographic cues to make inferences on the candidates' policy ideals (Koch, 2002).

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