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Eyes on the ballot: Priming effects and ethnic voting in the developing world

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ABSTRACT

Many countries include candidate photographs on ballots to facilitate autonomous, correct voting. However, the possible unintended consequences of these aspects of ballot design have not been sufficiently considered. We argue that photographs have the potential to increase ethnic voting, particularly by priming individuals to consider identity when making their electoral decisions. We conducted an experiment days prior to the 2011 Ugandan elections, in which subjects marked mock ballots including, or excluding, candidate photographs. We find that photographs increased ethnic voting, and our evidence indicates a priming effect, while ruling out learning as a likely alternate explanation. Subtle stimuli at the end of a campaign can affect ethnic voting in developing countries by altering identity salience.
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1. Introduction

While most countries hold elections, there is significant diversity in how citizens vote. Electoral institutions determine whether voters choose between parties or individuals, and whether they make one or multiple choices per office. Voters also interact with ballots in different ways; they might use pens, styluses, inked fingers, or touch screens.

Yet another source of variation is the manner in which the choices are displayed. More-limited ballot designs include only text indicating candidates' names or parties. In other instances, there is more textual information, such as candidates' mailing addresses or occupations. And visual features, such as party symbols and candidate images, are prominent on many ballots, especially in the developing world (Reynolds and Steenbergen, 2006). Advocates maintain that images facilitate voting by those with limited literacy, access to information, or previous voting experience (Smith et al. 2009). When images are present, such thinking goes, voters simply need to remember their favored candidate's face or party's symbol.

While designing voting technologies that accurately record preferences is important,[1] it is also necessary to consider that certain information and images on ballots could have (presumably) unintended consequences. Namely, these elements might affect voting, not only by helping voters locate preferred choices, but also by shaping those preferences. For example, parties' symbols could provoke certain emotions or prime certain considerations (Conroy-Krutz et al., 2015). There is also substantial research to suggest that photographs on ballots might affect voter preferences. For example, candidates' appearance might affect outcomes, with those perceived to be more attractive performing better (Banducci et al. 2008; Buckley et al. 2007; Johns and Shephard, 2011).

Another way that ballot photographs could affect electoral outcomes—and one that has,0 to our knowledge, not been studied—is by influencing rates of ethnic voting. We expect that such photographs will increase the likelihood that individuals vote for coethnics, when such candidates are available and in contexts in which ethnicity is politically relevant. Further, these effects can occur because photographs prime identity-based considerations.

This expectation stems from the fact that ballot photographs contain a critical feature: eyes. A growing body of literature suggests

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[1] For research, see Ansolabehere and Stewart 2005; Carman et al. 2008; Herrnson et al. 2012; Herron and Wand 2007; Reynolds and Steenbergen 2006; and Wand et al. 2001.

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that individuals' behavior can be affected by images of eyes "observing" them, even when it is clear that no actual humans can see their actions (Bateson et al. 2013; Burnham and Hare, 2007). This "watching eyes" effect operates in consistent ways, with subjects exhibiting more pro-social behavior or actions in compliance with prevalent norms (Nettle et al. 2012), such as making larger donations in behavioral games (Burnham, 2003; Burnham and Hare, 2007; Haley and Fessler, 2005; Nettle et al. 2012) or to actual charities (Ekström, 2011; Powell et al. 2012) when in the presence of images of eyes. In settings where support for ascriptive groups is rewarded and expected, "watching eyes" could stimulate in-group loyalty. In other words, ballot photographs can prime individuals to weight identity-based considerations more heavily in their electoral decision-making, resulting in higher rates of coethnic voting.

We conducted an experiment to test the effects of ballot photographs on ethnic voting in Uganda, just days prior to 2011 elections. Subjects marked different types of randomly assigned mock ballots featuring actual candidates for two offices—Member of Parliament (MP) and local district chairperson—with some ballots including candidate photographs.[2]

We find that photographs did significantly affect ethnic-voting rates: subjects who received ballots containing candidate photographs voted for 27.0% more coethnics than those whose ballots lacked them. Further, our results suggest that these effects occurred because photographs primed ethnic considerations, as subjects in photograph treatments were more likely to stress their ethnic identity over their Ugandan one. We find no evidence that photographs increased ethnic voting because they helped subjects learn who was a coethnic; subjects in photograph treatments were no better at identifying candidates' ethnicities. While we do not claim from the basis of these tests that ballot photographs can never provide ethnic information—indeed, there were *a priori* reasons to expect that learning would not occur in our study—we can rule out learning as an alternate explanation, providing further evidence of ballot photographs' potential to affect ethnic voting by priming identity.

Our findings have significant theoretical and practical implications. First, we extend research on the "watching eyes" effect to political outcomes, where it has not yet been studied. Second, we contribute to studies of ethnic voting in the developing world by highlighting the priming potential of cues. Despite significant research in the United States (Berinsky and Mendelberg, 2005; Brader et al. 2008; Huber and Lapinski, 2006; Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005; McConnaughy et al. 2010; Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino et al. 2002; White, 2007), priming has not been integrated into studies of electoral decision-making more broadly.[3] Further, our conclusions regarding priming are strengthened by the fact that our tests rule out learning as an alternate explanation; most studies of cue effects do not attempt to do so, meaning that many scholars mislabel learning effects as priming (Lenz, 2009).

Practically, this paper contributes to a growing literature on ballot design, some of which finds that ostensibly well-intentioned innovations can have unforeseen consequences. The relationship between ballot photographs and ethnic voting might be especially important, given these visuals are most often used in developing settings (Reynolds and Steenbergen, 2006), which also tend to have higher potential for inter-ethnic tensions. In fact, countries that include photographs on ballots have significantly higher ethnolinguistic fractionalization scores and more-fragile states than those not using photographs.[4] Policy makers including photographs on ballots with aims of increasing autonomous, correct voting might inadvertently be increasing the salience of ethnicity in these potentially volatile settings.

2. Last-minute cues: how ballot imagery can affect electoral choices

Casting a ballot correctly requires that citizens be able to locate their favored choice on the paper—or, increasingly, screen—and know how to register their choice. However, citizens often face barriers, such as illiteracy and lack of political knowledge, that make correct voting difficult. Some countries allow voters to cast ballots with the help of another individual, but such "assisted voting" is prone to abuse. In the 2013 Zimbabwean election, for example, in which President Robert Mugabe won an unexpectedly easy victory, hundreds of thousands of voters, many of whom were reportedly literate and pressured into accepting "assistance," brought someone with them to cast a ballot (Solidarity Peace Trust, 2013).

An alternate strategy for facilitating correct voting, which does not threaten privacy or enable intimidation, is providing visual cues on ballots. Graphics can illustrate how to fill out and cast ballots, while symbols and photographs can represent each candidate, party, or referendum option. An illiterate voter can then find a preferred party by locating its symbol, or a preferred candidate by recognizing his or her face. In systems using such images, campaign paraphernalia often prominently display candidates' faces and parties' symbols, and rallies and advertisements exhort supporters to place their mark next to a particular symbol.

Democracy-promotion organizations therefore often recommend including visual elements on ballots, especially in contexts with widespread illiteracy (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2011). According to data collected by Reynolds and Steenbergen (2006), some 29% of sampled countries ($N = 102$) use ballot photographs, while 62% use symbols. Indeed, they find that countries that use either type of visual have significantly lower literacy rates than those that do not.

However, while ballot cues can act as heuristics, they also have the potential to affect citizen preferences directly, often in seemingly unintended ways (Reynolds and Steenbergen, 2006; Smith et al. 2009). First, citizens might respond positively or negatively to symbols, thereby affecting assessments of the options those images represent. For example, person-on-the-street interviews conducted during Uganda's 2005 referendum on the return to multipartyism suggested some voters were making choices based on their feelings towards options' symbols. "You need a tree [representing multipartyism] to build a house [representing retention of the no-party system], so I chose the tree," one voter said. "[A]ll foods come from the tree … The house can easily collapse while a tree will be there forever." "I ticked the house because it looked good," another said. "I do not understand what it means" (Nyakairu and Glauser, 2005).[5] Others have found that ballot colorations can affect vote choice (Garrett and Brooks, 1987).

[2] Subjects also marked ballots for president and district women's MP, but those races are not analyzed here because the contests had no coethnics of subjects (the former) or no ethnic variation among candidates (the latter). Subjects were assigned to the same condition (i.e., photographs vs. no photographs) for all races in which they "voted".

[3] For an exception, see Adida (2015).

[4] Comparisons made with ballot data from Reynolds and Steenbergen (2006). Fractionalization comparison significant at $p = .03$ (.413 vs. .546) (data from Fearon (2003)). Fragility comparison significant at $p = .00$ (5.80 vs. 10.03, with higher scores indicating more-fragile states) (data from Marshall and Cole (2014)). Photograph-using countries are also more likely to have experienced significant intrastate violence in the last twenty years (40.0% versus 27.8%), although the difference is not statistically significant ($p = .23$) (data from Pettersson and Wallensteen, 2015).

[5] For a discussion of how symbol assignment to candidates in Tanzania affected electoral outcomes, see Molnos (1965).

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