



# Campaign civility under preferential and plurality voting



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 29 July 2014

Received in revised form

11 February 2016

Accepted 11 February 2016

Available online 27 February 2016

### Keywords:

Preferential voting

Campaigns

Electoral systems

Alternative Vote

Ranked choice voting

Negative campaigns

## ABSTRACT

We present reasons to expect that campaigns are less negative under preferential voting. We then examine if preferential voting systems affect how people perceive the conduct of elections. This paper reports results from surveys designed to measure voters' perceptions of candidates' campaigns, comparing places with plurality elections to those that used preferential voting rules. Our surveys of voters indicate that people in cities using preferential voting were significantly more satisfied with the conduct of local campaigns than people in similar cities with plurality elections. People in cities with preferential voting were also less likely to view campaigns as negative, and less likely to respond that candidates were frequently criticizing each other. Results are consistent across a series of robustness checks.

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This paper examines if electoral systems affect how people perceive campaigns and elections. We test if the type of electoral system affects levels of negativity in election campaigns by isolating, at least partially, the effects of plurality versus preferential voting. Elections in nearly all US cities are conducted under some variant of plurality, winner-take-all rules, where each voter has the capacity to express a preference for a single candidate. However, a handful of US cities have adopted preferential voting, where voters may rank their preferences for multiple candidates. We propose that the latter system may affect rival candidates' incentives to engage in negative campaigns, thus affecting voter perceptions. The American case, then, provides a unique opportunity for systematic, empirical tests of this intuition.

## 1. Campaigns under preferential versus plurality voting

Most local elections in the US are conducted with plurality voting. However, in the past decade a number of US cities adopted the Alternative Vote, a form of preferential voting that is commonly referred to as Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) in the United States. Both election systems are used to elect a single candidate to a single

office (e.g. a single-member districted city council position, a single city-wide city council position, the office of mayor, etc.). In standard plurality elections a voter can cast one vote for a candidate seeking a position, and that vote is non transferable. Preferential voting systems such as RCV in contrast, allow voters to express ranked preferences for multiple candidates seeking a single office.<sup>1</sup>

We propose that there are reasons to expect that these electoral systems affect incentives candidates have to engage in negative campaigns and that this affects voter perceptions of campaign tone. Consider the incentives that Candidate X might face campaigning against Candidate Y under different electoral systems. At the very least, plurality voting offers Candidate X rather weak incentives to make positive appeals to voters who are probable supporters of Candidate Y (or other candidates in the race). Candidate Y's supporters generally have but one preference to cast, and that preference is always non transferable. Furthermore, the plurality context may make it more likely that campaigns are conducted in a winner-take-all, zero-sum context. Under such conditions (and possibly contingent on the number of candidates, see *Skarperdas and Grofman (1995)*), Candidate X may have relatively strong incentives to criticize and attack Candidate Y and maximize (or

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<sup>1</sup> The Alternative Vote is the most common form of preferential voting adopted in the US recently. The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is used in Cambridge MA to fill multiple seats.

exaggerate) differences between the candidates in order to attract a voter's single non transferable preference. Candidate X's negative campaign under plurality voting may alienate the probable supporters of Candidate Y, but there is a limited cost of going negative to Candidate X if we assume that Candidate Y's supporters were going to vote for Candidate Y anyway. Candidate Y's voters thus have little to offer Candidate X.

Preferential systems such as the Single Transferable Vote (in multi-member districts) and RCV (in single-member districts), in contrast, may reduce Candidate X's incentive to engage in negative campaigns because they allow (if not require) voters to express multiple, transferable preferences. Under these conditions, Candidate X might hope that Candidate Y's probable supporters would cast their first preference for Candidate Y, while also casting their second, third, or other preference for Candidate X. Candidate Y's voters thus offer Candidate X the possibility of additional support.<sup>2</sup> That incentive, combined with some amount of uncertainty about how voters might rank multiple candidates, may limit Candidate X's incentives to attack Candidate Y so as to avoid alienating Y's supporters. Under preferential systems candidates do not just rely on support from their core supporters; they may also benefit from lower-ordered preferences cast by supporters of their rivals.

Others have attributed similar consensual qualities to preferential voting systems. Horowitz (1985, 1991) suggests that by allowing voters to cast multiple preferences, preferential voting encourages bargaining, reciprocity and accommodation among rival elites. Reilly (1997, 2001; 2004:263) notes that preferential voting changes elections from a zero sum situation to something more of a positive sum context. Preferential systems have received attention as a potential mechanism for mitigating ethnic group conflict and reducing tension in divided societies (Reilly, 2001, 2002). Guinier (1994) proposes that cumulative voting could produce a "mutually beneficial system of cooperation" in the context of racially polarized voting because, by allowing voters to support multiple candidates, it would encourage candidates to make appeals to voters that cut across racial lines.<sup>3</sup>

Case study evidence also suggests that preferential voting may have a moderating effect on electoral politics in Australia (Reilly, 2001, 2002). Yet we know little about how (or if) preferential voting may affect campaigning in advanced, established democracies. There are few, if any, systematic, cross jurisdictional studies that examine how people experience campaigns under preferential versus plurality voting. There is, however, some evidence that candidates campaign differently under preferential rules, and there is some evidence that preferential voting is associated with a form of politics that citizens value. A study comparing US elections conducted under plurality and cumulative voting found candidates in the latter system were more likely to work to mobilize voters (Bowler et al., 2003). A cross-national study of public opinion (Farrell and McAllister, 2006) concluded that, other things equal, voters were more satisfied with how democracy worked in nations where people voted for candidates with preferential voting.

From this literature, we assume that preferential voting may correspond with less negativity in campaigns. In this study we investigate if voters perceived less negative campaigning where elections were conducted under preferential voting rules. Measuring

actual campaign tone and candidate behavior is a separate study. Many bemoan negativity in politics, yet social science paints a more nuanced picture about the potential ills of civil versus negative campaigns (e.g. Brooks and Geer, 2007; Geer, 2008; Mattes and Redlawsk, 2014). A negative campaign, or campaigns with candidates criticizing each other, may not mean that the campaign is uninformative (Sides et al., 2010). However, there is evidence that negative campaigns may have corrosive effects on the public's mood. For example, cynicism about the US Congress may be linked to the public's aversion to negative campaigns (Bowler and Donovan, 2015), and negative campaigns may correspond with voters being less satisfied with the candidates who competed for their support (Bowler and Donovan, 2011). A meta-analytic assessment of literature on negative campaigning (Lau et al., 2007: 1184) also found that negative campaigns were associated with lower feelings of political efficacy, less trust in government, and that negative campaigning erodes satisfaction with government. It is important then, to examine if different election systems can affect whether or not people perceive campaigns as being negative.

## 2. Perceptions of campaigns across different electoral systems: a comparative method

Our study takes advantage of natural variation in election rules at the local level in the US by conducting surveys that measured voter perceptions of campaign negativity. We identified multiple control cases (plurality cities) that were approximate demographic matches of cities using preferential voting in order to provide comparative leverage for assessing potential effects of the different electoral systems. This process was constrained somewhat by the limited number of jurisdictions with competitive mayoral elections or other competitive local elections in 2013. Preferential voting cities were matched with plurality cities based on other electoral traits that all cities shared (off-year elections, the presence of open seats, and competitive mayoral or city council races). In addition, preferential voting cities were matched with plurality cities in terms of city size, demographics, socioeconomic conditions, region and political attributes. The research design brings us some way toward isolating the potential effects of preferential voting on voters' perceptions of campaigns.

Voters' perceptions of campaigns were measured in preferential voting jurisdictions having competitive local elections, and in a mix of plurality jurisdictions having competitive elections that were identified as (approximate) demographic matches for the preferential voting communities.<sup>4</sup> This design allows us to compare mass perceptions of campaigns across different electoral systems. Methods of the survey are presented in more detail in the next section of this paper. The major assumption behind this matching method is that the composite of these plurality jurisdictions form a comparative context that is similar enough to the preferential voting places, so that difference in voters' perceptions of campaigns across preferential and non-preferential places can be attributed to the electoral system.

We assume that there were no major idiosyncrasies associated with any of these places that would make cross-jurisdictional comparisons problematic. The likelihood of violating this assumption is reduced by the fact that we had three jurisdictions with competitive elections that were using preferential voting in 2013, and by the fact that each of these cities was matched with multiple plurality cities. We suggest this multiple case comparative method has advantages over the standard cross-sectional, cross-national statistical analyses

<sup>2</sup> Voters in the RCV communities we studied did rank multiple candidates. Nearly 80% ranked multiple mayoral candidates, and about two-thirds ranked multiple city council candidates.

<sup>3</sup> Cumulative voting has an ordinal mechanism similar to preferential systems. But rather than ranking multiple candidates, voters can support multiple candidates by distributing multiple votes.

<sup>4</sup> See appendix for details.

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