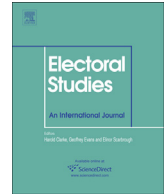




ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Electoral Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud

Information availability and information use in ballot proposition contests: Are voters over-burdened? ☆



Shaun Bowler

Department of Political Science, UC Riverside, Riverside, CA 92521, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 17 March 2015

Keywords:

Direct democracy
 Voter competence
 Information
 Referendum
 Initiative

ABSTRACT

Whether- and how-voters are able to cope with the information demands of direct democracy are long-standing questions of interest within the literature on direct democracy. Critics of direct democracy argue that voters are often over-welcomed by the decisions they are asked to make and – in consequence – dislike the process itself. Using evidence from the ‘hard’ case of California, we show that critics over-state these difficulties. Most voters are able to understand most issues and are able to offer reasons for their choices, even without the use of cue-taking. What we also show, however, is that a share of the population has little interest in politics of all kinds and that critics often pick up on this group and muddle this group’s disaffection from politics with problems attributable to the information demands of direct democracy.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Direct democracy in general, and the initiative process in particular, provides a distinct decision-making environment for voters. It is an environment in which voters are asked to make a decision without the usual guiding cues of incumbency and party label to help them make sense of the choice they are being asked to make. California provides an extreme case for information demands placed upon voters. Between 1912 and January 2013 Californians saw 360 initiative proposals qualified for the ballot. A further 1307 failed to qualify but made at least some progress towards the ballot. The topics of these proposals were very wide-ranging. November 2012, for example, saw Californians decide on ten initiatives and a referendum including measures on taxation, union dues, car insurance, the death penalty, labelling of GM foods and redistricting. With so many proposals to be voted on, and on so many different topics, a live question becomes whether voters are informed enough to be able to make choices on ballot proposals.

Several scholars of direct democracy have raised serious doubts about the capability of voters to make decisions in this context (see e.g. [Baldassare et al., 2013](#); [Broder, 2000](#); [Schrag, 2004](#)). One of the points of concern is – as the LeDuc contribution to this special issue notes – that political campaigns in general and direct democracy campaigns specifically offer little scope for deliberation. Furthermore, to the extent that voters are indeed over-burdened then this has consequences for the process as a whole. It is likely not just that voters find the information demands burdensome but that excessive information demands will, in turn, decrease support for the very process of direct democracy. That is, information over-load is such that it leads voters to dislike the very process of direct democracy.

Responses to those who doubt voter capabilities have emphasized voter rationality and the use of heuristics by voters to sort through the information demands (see LeDuc, in this issue; [Elkink and Sinnot, in this issue](#); also [Lupia, 1994](#); [Bowler and Donovan, 2000](#)). These responses, however, seem to have failed to satisfy those who doubt voter abilities.

In this paper we take as our starting point the idea that information demands upon voters will indeed undermine popular support for direct democracy, and we provide some empirical evidence to substantiate that argument. But we then go on to show that such evidence is, at best,

☆ Thanks are due to the attendees and organizers of the Dublin conference and to the referees for their many helpful comments and suggestions. Remaining errors are the responsibility of the author.

E-mail address: Shaun.bowler@ucr.edu.

over-stated and, at worst, misleading. What we see is that the more vocal critics of the process among the electorate are citizens who are not likely to participate in politics anyway. Consequently, we argue that concerns about information demands are thus quite misleading. Moreover, using the 'hard' case of California with its frequent use of the process we are able to provide some evidence to show that voters are able to advance opinions even on relatively 'hard' (Carmines and Stimson, 1989) ballot issues. That is, we are able to directly rebut criticisms of direct democracy relating to voter competence and information over-load.

The narrow conclusion of the article is that concerns about voter decision-making are over-stated in two respects. First, voters are able arrive at choices on ballot proposals and, second, they do not always need cues in order to do so. Many voters are indeed up to the demands of direct democracy. This finding has broader implications for the study of campaign effects and for some normative assumptions of democratic citizenship.

1.1. *The information burden and voter dislike of the direct democracy process*

Critics of direct democracy are often concerned about the information demands the process makes upon voters. Often these concerns are underpinned by concerns over whether voters have sufficient information to be able make sensible choices among the policy alternatives on offer. These policy alternatives may be unfamiliar in themselves – often appearing for the first time as an issue to be voted on – but will also appear without the usual information shortcuts of party label or incumbency that help orient voting during general elections. A variant of this argument is that voters may have too much, or at least too much biased/poor, information from well-heeled campaigns, to be able to make appropriate choices (see e.g. Broder, 2000; Schrag, 2004). Voters, in short, may be easily fooled by slick TV ads into voting for bad or foolish policy proposals. The hidden assumption in many discussions of spending that are critical of the process is that spending essentially leads people to vote against their own interests or their own preferences.¹

It is entirely reasonable to think that ballot proposition elections create a mismatch between the kinds of information levels demanded of voters and the amount of information they voters are likely to have available. After all, a generation of scholarship on political behaviour showed that voters have, at best, a part-time or intermittent attention to politics even when it comes to high information contexts of general elections where voters may have a baseline level of familiarity with the parties, party leaders and issues at stake (Harrop and Miller, 1987:101). Essentially, the question becomes whether voters are up to the task of dealing with direct democracy given that we are not always confident in voter information processing capability

¹ A subtler kind of campaign effect is seen in the work of Dyck who sees one consequence of campaigns as not so much in the one-off mobilization of voters to vote or conversion of voters from YES to NO or vice versa but in the cumulative effect of campaigns: a succession of direct democracy campaigns that are critical of politicians drive lower trust and regard for politicians (Dyck, 2009).

in general elections, and there exists a large literature on this topic (see LeDuc, in this issue for a longer review of the literature). To the extent that voters are indeed over-burdened in direct democracy elections then they may simply disengage from the process. Voters may simply not vote because they are unable to make a choice given the information demands placed upon them. More troubling than this disengagement, over-burdening voters in this way may undermine the legitimacy of the process as a whole by generating voter frustration with, and disaffection from, the process. In short, over-burdened voters may not only disengage from the process they will also grow to dislike the process of direct democracy itself. Put another way, dislike of the process itself may be seen as evidence of the information over-load of direct democracy elections.

A body of work challenges that critique by arguing that voters do indeed have information short cuts available to them to help navigate the choices on offer. Voters may use cues and heuristics to enable them to make appropriate decisions in the face of this information (see e.g. Lupia, 1994; Binder et al., 2011). In candidate elections voters use the cues of party label and incumbency to orient vote choice. An example of similar cues in ballot proposition elections would be the endorsement of a proposal from well-known political figures. Such cues would allow voters to orient their own choice. Another variant of cue taking is for voters to rely on whether propositions target or benefit a particular group (Nicholson, 2011). While the use of heuristics such as endorsements or group benefits seems a sensible approach to making decisions in a direct democracy contest it is not always clear just how many voters actually rely on such cues. While it is clear that cue-taking may be used as a coping strategy it is not clear just how many voters do rely on cue-taking. It may be that cue-taking is indeed a strategy but it is simply not used by many people or used all that often if other strategies are available.² Nor is it clear whether voter response to direct democracy as a process is conditioned upon the information demands made upon them. That is, it is not always clear just how hard a time voters have making a decision on ballot propositions and, consequently, just how much their view of the process is coloured by how difficult they find the process to navigate. What we do know is that voters as a whole quite like direct democracy and there exists a literature on what voters do and do not like about the system (see e.g. Donovan and Karp, 2006). There is, however, little understanding of the connection between the demands of the system upon voters and voter evaluations of the system. Yet, as we noted earlier, the system may place demands on voters that they are unwilling or unable to navigate. We begin, then, with a fairly straightforward hypothesis: difficulties associated with making a decision

² To be sure, one of the points often over-looked in these debates is that there are times when both critics of direct democracy and – for want of a better term – supporters agree. That is, there are sometimes 'easy' issues on the ballot (Carmines and Stimson, 1989), issues such as abortion or gay rights. Not only are such issues relatively immune to the effects of cues voters simply do not need cues in order to make a choice, they will have standing opinions on these issues. Still, these issues are not the ones critics have in mind as causing problems of information demands. Nor are they the most common ones appearing on the ballot.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1051727>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1051727>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)