



The impact of candidate name order on election outcomes in North Dakota



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ABSTRACT

A number of studies have explored the possibility that the ordering of candidates' names on the ballot might influence how those candidates perform on election day. Strong evidence of an order effect comes from investigations of election returns in states that implemented quasi-random assignment of candidate name orders to voters. Although most such studies have identified benefits for earlier-listed candidates, much of the evidence comes from a limited set of elections in only a handful of states. This paper expands our understanding of order effects to 31 general elections held in North Dakota between 2000 and 2006; these include all state-wide races involving 2 candidates. A primacy effect appeared in 80% of the contests. The first ballot position reaped the largest benefits in non-partisan contests and in presidential election years. These findings are consistent with earlier studies from other states and provide evidence in line with proposals that a lack of information and ambivalence underlie candidate name order effects.

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1. Introduction

After the controversial presidential election of 2000, serious questions were raised about the importance of ballot formats (Herrnson et al., 2008). In particular, the design of the so-called butterfly ballot in Palm Beach, Florida fueled a lively scholarly and policy debate about the possibility that the arrangement of candidate names on the ballot could give some candidates an unfair advantage (see Wand et al., 2001). Although recently-recognized idiosyncrasies such as the butterfly ballot are surely

important, another more general issue regarding ballot format has been of interest to political scientists for decades: the ordering of candidate names.

Much of the literature that has accumulated on this topic suggests that candidates gain a greater share of the vote when they are listed first than when they are listed later. Interestingly, as dictated by law, George W. Bush's name was listed first on every Florida ballot during the 2000 presidential election (see Krosnick et al., 2004).¹ Hence, if name order effects do indeed occur regularly in general election voting, a seemingly trivial aspect of ballot design may have had tremendous political consequences for the U.S. and the world in an election won by the slimmest of margins.

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¹ In Florida, the first candidate on the ballot is the nominee of the Governor's party.

Table 1

Existing ballot order studies on U.S. elections.

Study	Location	Election type	Year	Number of races	Significant name order effects ...
Alvarez et al. (2006)	CA	All statewide races	1998	8	Not observed
Darcy (1986)	CO	All statewide races	1984	22	Not observed
Ho and Imai (2006)	CA	Gubernatorial race	2003	1	Observed for minor candidates
Ho and Imai (2008)	CA	All statewide races	1978–2002	80	Observed for minor candidates and in primaries
Koppell and Steen (2004)	NYC	All statewide Democratic primaries	1998	79	Observed
Krosnick et al. (2004)	OH	All statewide races	2000	192	Observed
Krosnick et al. (2004)	ND	All statewide races	2000	14	Observed
Krosnick et al. (2004)	CA	President and Senate	2000	2	Observed
Meredith and Salant (2013)	CA	Local elections	1995–2008	7846	Observed
Miller and Krosnick (1998)	OH	All statewide and countywide races	1992	118	Observed
Pasek et al. (2014)	CA	All statewide races	1976–2006	76	Observed

Note: We omit studies that analyzed elections that involved races with only one name order per race and studies that did not report proper statistical significance tests. For a review of those studies, see Miller and Krosnick (1998).

The current study expands our understanding of candidate name order effects by complementing earlier studies of general elections in California and Ohio using a novel electoral context, that of North Dakota. This study is also the first to use multilevel modeling to explore name order effects, a technique that allows us to more effectively leverage variations in name ordering both across precincts and between contests. To accomplish these goals, we start by discussing the theoretical and empirical bases for expecting a first-position advantage and identifying a set of variables that might influence the size of an order effect. We then describe the data collected to test these possibilities, results of analyses examining the prevalence of order effects and the conditions that are associated with very large effects, and how these results compare with earlier findings.

1.1. Existing research on ballot order effects

Candidate name order may influence voters who are unable to select a candidate on substantive grounds. This could happen if a voter lacks information needed for the choice (Brockington, 2003; Miller and Krosnick, 1998) or feels deeply conflicted about a set of competing candidates, seeing advantages and disadvantages to each of them (Pasek et al., 2014). Paralyzed by lack of or abundance of information about candidates, voters might make their choices on the basis of heuristic cues. In such situations, evidence from psychology indicates that people often select the first option among a set of alternatives (see Krosnick and Presser, 2010 for a review of literature on the effects of order of choice alternatives).² On a ballot, this tendency might yield an advantage for candidates listed first (see Pasek et al., 2014).

Many studies of natural experiments and quasi-experiments have documented an advantage for candidates listed first (for a list of studies in U.S. elections, see Table 1). Krosnick et al. (2004), Miller and Krosnick (1998), and Pasek et al. (2014) found statistically significant

primacy effects in many types of general election races, primarily in Ohio and California. Koppell and Steen (2004) reached similar conclusions about Democratic primaries in New York City. And Meredith and Salant (2013) reached the same conclusion regarding local elections in California.³

Some studies have explored what types of contests, candidates, and voters are the most prone to order effects. Candidate name order appears to be more consequential in contests that receive less media attention – local races and primaries – and when ballots do not list candidates' party affiliations (Ho and Imai, 2006; Miller and Krosnick, 1998; Pasek et al., 2014). Order effects also tend to be larger in election years with higher turnout (e.g., in Presidential election years), perhaps because they attract voters who are interested in only a subset of the contests (Pasek et al., 2014). Contests for open seats have also demonstrated larger order effects than those with incumbents (Miller and Krosnick, 1998).

Some recent studies have produced different results. For example, Ho and Imai (2008) identified name order effects for all candidates in primary elections and for minor party candidates in general elections but did not find evidence of statistically significant primacy effects for major party candidates in general elections. Alvarez et al. (2006) also found no evidence of significant name order effects in general elections. However, Pasek et al. (2014) demonstrated that these conclusions are most likely type 2 errors due to limited statistical power.

1.2. The need for replication

Thus, examined at a distance, it might seem that the existing literature on name order effects documents a robust finding that is well understood in terms of moderators and the underlying psychological processes. But in fact, this may be too optimistic of a conclusion. Most importantly, the majority of general election data analyzed in recent years comes from a narrow slice of time (the late

² Another possible explanation is that voters could believe that candidates listed at the top of the ballot are of higher quality (Kim, Krosnick, and Casasanto, 2014).

³ Outside of the U.S., King and Leigh (2009) found significant name order effects in Australian elections, Faas and Schoen (2006) found such effects in Bavarian state elections, and Geys and Heyndels (2003) found them in municipal elections in Brussels. Marcinkiewicz (2014) found similar effects in Polish parliamentary elections.

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