



The first one wins: Distilling the primacy effect



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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that in proportional, flexible list systems, ballot list position influences electoral success. In this paper we investigate to what extent this is due to the primacy effect, a psychological bias towards the first option in a list. We also examine alternative explanations such as the electoral beneficial traits these candidates share and extra media coverage they receive. Using data from the 2014 Belgian elections, we find that candidates with higher ballot list positions indeed score better because they have more political experience and receive more media attention. We also find strong evidence for the primacy effect which is caused by a confirmation bias as well as ballot list position being the easiest heuristic for voters.

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1. Introduction

When people are presented a list with ordered items, they will disproportionately select the first option. This bias towards the first object considered in a set, which is also known as the primacy effect, has been identified in marketing research studies (Drèze et al., 1994), in multiple-choice knowledge tests (Cronbach, 1950; Mathews, 1927) and in surveys (Dillman et al., 2009). Evidence also suggests that the primacy effect influences the outcome of elections (Bain and Hecock, 1957; Brockington, 2003; Koppell and Steen, 2004; Lijphart and Pintor, 1988; Miller and Krosnick, 1998). During elections, a name-order effect takes place, meaning that the first candidate on the ballot list disproportionately benefits from this position, especially when voters have limited information about individual candidates. However, this electoral primacy effect has mainly been studied in single-member districts (Brockington, 2003; Koppell and Steen, 2004).

Recently, a number of studies have questioned whether a primacy effect might also be found in the intra-party electoral competition that exists in many proportional systems in Western Europe (Faas and Schoen, 2006; Lutz, 2010; Marcinkiewicz, 2013). In many Western European countries, voters must cast a vote for a

political party, but in a second step have the choice or are obliged to cast a vote for a specific candidate within that party (i.e. an intra-party preferential vote). These preferential votes are important as they play a role in determining which candidates get elected and therefore influence the composition of parliament (Katz, 2003). Moreover, preferential votes can be seen as a resource which may help individual politicians to obtain more visual legislative or executive mandates, get a better ballot list position in subsequent elections or gain a more central position in the next campaign (André et al., 2016; De Winter 1988). Research has shown that a candidate's position on the ballot list is one of the most important factors explaining individual success. The higher a candidate's position, the more preferential votes a candidate receives (Geys and Heyndels, 2003; Miller and Krosnick, 1998). However, while it has been proven that ballot list position matters, the mechanisms behind this effect remain unclear. On the one hand, voters may be inclined to vote for higher positioned candidates because they often have the most political experience, the greatest means to invest in their campaign and get the most media coverage. In these cases, voters rationally evaluate candidates and actually vote for the candidate they prefer. However, it may also be due to the primacy effect. Citizens may be biased towards the first position on the list, just because it is the first position, and therefore vote for the highest rank politician irrespective of his or her qualities.

This study focuses on the Belgian elections of 2014 and examines the extent to which the electoral success of high positioned candidates was due to their internal and external characteristics

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and to what extent it was due to the primacy effect. Thus, we aim to complement previous studies that have also examined the primacy effect in proportional systems but have not always been sufficiently able to separate this primacy effect from other alternative explanations. Furthermore, many studies have used the primacy effect too much as a container concept, both theoretically and empirically. While they have found evidence that candidates at the top of the list win more votes, regardless of other characteristics, the cognitive decisions and mechanisms behind this bias have remained undertheorized and understudied. The bias could exist because voters use a cost-reducing strategy and therefore opt for the first option as the simplest heuristic. Alternatively, voters may start at the top of the list when evaluating candidates, which benefits those with a higher rank.

Studying the primacy effect is important from a democratic point of view. In an age of self-responsibility, where individual politicians hold themselves more or less exclusively responsible for their electoral success, the primacy effect may create a false notion of democratic legitimacy. It may also set in motion a self-fulfilling presidentialization logic to the extent that the individual self-responsibility claims are endorsed by the party by giving electorally successful politicians more visibility and budget in future campaigns. Consequently, it is the first on the list who becomes president and not the other way around.

The primacy effect is especially challenging in contexts where there is a trend of (proposed) electoral reforms to give more weight to preferential votes. For example Bulgaria introduced preferential voting in 2011, while Belgium gave more weight to preferential votes in the composition of parliament (Wauters et al., 2012). Also, in the Netherlands, a large citizen forum advised electoral reforms by abolishing the threshold for individual candidates to give voters more influence on which candidates are elected. These reforms are done under the assumption that citizens attach importance to showing their preference for politicians within a party. Yet if we find that many voters are guided by a primacy effect, we have to rethink these assumptions. The existence of a pure primacy effect indicates that many citizens are guided by non-substantial factors when casting a preferential vote. This implies that a large part of the preferential votes are non-preferential just as Converse (1964) claimed that for many citizens political attitudes are non-attitudes. It also suggests that political parties still have the most leverage over who gets elected, as they determine the order of the ballot list. It is therefore important to distil the primacy effect to find out which part of the bonus of higher positioned candidates is substantial and which part is unsubstantial.

2. The primacy effect

There are a number of reasons why a high position on a ballot list may increase a candidate's electoral success. To some extent, this is related to specific characteristics of the candidates at the top of the list, as parties are inclined to give higher positions to contenders who are likely to attract many votes (Lutz, 2010), a point we return to later. However, standing at the top of a list might also have an influence in itself due to the primacy effect. When casting a vote, citizens use different heuristics to reach a decision. For example, when voting for a political party, or when voting for a candidate in 'first past the post' systems, many citizens base their decision on a party or candidate's ideology. However, ideology becomes less important when one has to choose between candidates on the same list in a multi-party system. Of course, candidates differ somewhat in their ideological stances, but this variation is limited in comparison to the more outspoken differences between parties. Consequently, citizens have to rely on other cues. Ideally, they would base their vote on the evaluation of

a candidate's competence and/or expertise. However, to evaluate candidates on the basis of objective criteria is cognitively demanding and requires information and resources. Therefore, it can be expected that many citizens rely on easier shortcuts. The most straightforward piece of information available to voters is a candidate's position on the ballot list. Some citizens may vote for the first candidate on the list simply because he or she occupies the first position, without making a rational evaluation of any other attributes. Thus, in its purest form, we can define the primacy effect as a cost-reducing strategy by citizens casting a vote for the first candidate on the ballot list simply because this candidate occupies the first position, without taking into account any other of the candidate's attributes, which would not have been given to this candidate if he or she had occupied a lower position on the ballot list.

However, while voting for the first candidate, as a cost-reducing strategy, could be one possible mechanism behind the primacy effect, it assumes that there is an inherent bias towards the first option, without any rational evaluation of it. Yet, this does not always hold true, especially when the order of the list is not randomly determined, as is the case in many countries. When political parties determine the order of a ballot list, citizens may be confident that parties position the most competent candidates first. While in this case the decision to cast a vote for higher-ranked candidates is not based on a direct rational evaluation of the actual or perceived competence of each candidate, it is based on the heuristic that if a candidate gets a good position from the party, this candidate must be qualified and competent. In other words, the primacy effect may occur because people believe that the best options are ranked highest. However, even in this case, it holds that the voter would not have selected the candidate on the first position if he or she had occupied a different position. Thus, in its purest form, we can define the primacy effect as follows: *A cost-reducing strategy by citizens to cast a vote for the first candidate(s) on a ballot list simply because this candidate occupies the first position, which would not have been given to this candidate if he or she had occupied a lower position on this ballot list.* Based on this definition, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a. *Regardless of other attributes, the first candidate on a list will disproportionately receive more votes than lower ranked candidates (pure primacy effect).*

The abovementioned mechanisms explain why the first candidate on a list benefits from the primacy effect. Yet, we can also distinguish a different mechanism, which not only accounts for the success of the first candidate on the list, but impacts all high positioned candidates. According to Miller and Krosnick (1998) 'people tend to evaluate objects with a confirmation bias' (p. 293). When evaluating a list of options, or political candidates (in the context of elections), voters tend to look for reasons to vote for a candidate rather than for reasons not to vote for a candidate (Koriat et al., 1980). As citizens often start evaluating a list from the top, the confirmation bias, together with fatigue in the case of long lists, prevents citizens from evaluating all options, biasing voters towards the first options presented (Miller and Krosnick, 1998). Whereas the previous mechanism explains mainly why the first candidate on the list receives more votes, this confirmation bias would also benefit other highly ranked candidates. Thus, it also gives the second-listed candidate an advantage over the third-listed candidate, who then has an advantage over the fourth-listed candidate, etc. We formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b. *Regardless of individual attributes, the higher the position of a candidate on a ballot list, the more votes this candidate will receive (confirmation bias).*

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