



# Behavioural primes in the voting booth: Further evidence of priming effects in popular votes and elections<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Why do electoral laws prohibit political advertisement right where voters cast their ballots? Apparently, it is assumed that the deliberate and intentional decision of voters can be swayed at the last minute, thereby compromising free and fair elections. While traditional approaches to electoral behaviour typically fail to recognise such influences, evidence from behavioural psychology suggests that subtle primes can indeed automatically trigger individual action. This paper therefore argues that voting, too, is subject to unsuspected primes. In particular, we analyse whether the innocuous environmental setting of the polling place can influence vote choice. Whether priming effects extend to political behaviour presents a puzzle that is yet not sufficiently investigated. On the one hand, two recent studies do show such behavioural priming effects for the USA. On the other hand, however, there is a serious debate about behavioural priming in general questioning the replicability of earlier studies. Against this background, our paper presents the first replication outside the USA of previous findings, and furthermore extends behavioural priming to other instances. Specifically, we address three questions. First, can behavioural priming of vote choice be replicated or are findings specific to the context of the USA? Second, does behavioural priming of vote choice also occur in elections in multi-party systems? And third, how do ambiguous primes affect decisions in votes, in which the prime does not correspond directly to favouring one choice over another? Using precinct level data from two federal city-states of Germany, Hamburg and Berlin, we find that results of popular votes and elections do, in fact, differ depending on the polling place being situated in a school. Our findings are not only relevant to the theoretical conception of vote choice and contribute to psychological accounts of political behaviour, but they also have practical implications for the design of electoral institutions.

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## 1. Introduction

Why do electoral laws usually prohibit campaign activity and political advertisement right where voters cast their ballots? Apparently, it is assumed that the deliberate and intentional decision of voters can be swayed at the last minute compromising free and fair elections. Theoretical approaches to voting behaviour,

however, typically fail to recognise such influences. Instead, they conceive the act of voting as result of a thorough (and, to varying degrees, rational) process of information processing and preference articulation (Bartels, 2010). Yet, evidence from behavioural psychology has demonstrated for some time that, indeed, subtle primes can automatically trigger individual actions (e.g., Bargh et al., 1996; Berkowitz and LePage, 1967; McCall and Belmont, 1996; Turner and Goldsmith, 1976).

This paper therefore argues that electoral behaviour, too, is subject to unsuspected subtle primes. In particular, we analyse whether the innocuous environmental setting of the polling place can influence the vote choice. Whether priming effects extend to political behaviour presents a puzzle that is yet not sufficiently investigated. On the one hand, two recent studies show such behavioural priming effects for the USA. Berger et al. (2008) find that support for education spending increases if voters are primed

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by the context of schools. According to [Rutchick \(2010\)](#) voters are more likely to support conservative positions if they primed by the context of churches.

On the other hand, however, behavioural priming in general is heavily questioned since recently. Doubts and concerns are voiced regarding the replicability of earlier studies ([Doyen et al., 2012](#)). Joining the debate in *Nature and Science* ([Bower, 2012](#); [Yong, 2012](#)), [Kahneman \(2012\)](#) calls for systematic efforts to replicate behavioural priming effects and fostering their robustness. Against this backdrop, our paper presents the first replication outside the USA of previous findings, and furthermore extends behavioural priming to other instances. Specifically, we address three questions. First, can behavioural priming of vote choice be replicated or are findings specific to the context of the USA? Second, does behavioural priming of vote choice also occur in elections in multi-party systems? And third, how do ambiguous primes affect decisions in votes, in which the prime does not correspond directly to favouring one choice over another?

Using precinct level data from two federal city-states of Germany, Hamburg and Berlin, we analyse whether results of popular votes and elections differ depending on the polling place being situated in a school. The cases prove particularly useful as they are structurally rather homogenous. While fully constituting federal political entities, city-states exhibit far less within variation in socio-structural terms (than large states with sharp urban-rural divides), which suggests similar probabilities of being assigned to vote in schools. Moreover, this setup has certain advantages over lab or field experiments in terms of validity and potential experimenter effects.

Results indicate behavioural priming by the contextual setting: For the first time, the effect can be replicated outside the USA; it also appears in multi-party elections; and diverging effects can be found if the prime is ambiguously related to the options on the ballot. Although, generally, such effects are not huge in size, they entail important political, legal and normative implications. Our findings contribute both to the literature on political behaviour as well as on psychological accounts of decision-making. They constitute the first evidence of behavioural priming effects on voting in Europe, and challenge the static conception of vote choice in most theoretical approaches to electoral behaviour. At the same time, the results foster the robustness of behavioural priming in general, and present meaningful extensions, showcasing that priming can be studied in some unexpected instances.

The paper continues as follows: The next section gives a brief overview of the theoretical background of voting behaviour on the one hand and priming effects on the other. The following sections present three empirical studies of behavioural priming effects in various instances. The last section concludes with some summarising remarks.

## 2. Theoretical background

The study of how people vote is not only at the very centre of political behaviour research, it occupies a prominent place in the discipline of political science as a whole ([Dalton and Klingemann, 2007: 10](#)). In this regard, [Achen \(1992: 195\)](#) writes, that “quantitative researchers enjoyed their first and most enduring success in voting studies. After the invention of survey research, empirical generalizations poured forth: in no other field do we have so many hard facts with which to discipline our thinking.” As different as the prevalent approaches in electoral research may be, they share a conception of vote choice as deliberate, intentional and conscious act.

Such conception becomes particularly apparent in rational

choice minded approaches of electoral behaviour. In a Downsian tradition, voters supposedly assess the candidates' policy positions, and rationally choose the option, which they believe to minimise the distance to their preferred option, thus maximising their expected utility.<sup>1</sup> The assessment can be based either on the evaluation of past performances, as does the literature on retrospective voting ([Fiorina, 1981](#)), or on expectations about future returns, which is what [Downs \(1957: 39\)](#) initially suggested. How issues and candidates are perceived plays also a major role in the social-psychological approach of the Michigan school. Orientations toward issues and candidates mediate the influence of the main variable: stable and long-term party identification ([Campbell et al., 1960](#)). Questioning the significance and stability of party identification, revisionists advocated an even stronger focus on voters' attitudes regarding specific issues, which again laid the ground for current spatial models of issue voting ([Bartels, 2010](#)). Evidently, all these approaches assume that when voters enter the voting booth they have already made a conscious and reasoned choice for whom to cast their ballot.

Yet, not only are voters' decisions less stable as they used to be or as theory still assumes, but made increasingly closer to election day (e.g. [Fournier et al., 2004](#)). Also, we know all too well that human decision-making in general is not as deliberate as one might hope, but plagued by our cognitive limitations to information processing. And decisions on political matters are, of course, no exception. Political attitudes and perceptions are not merely the result of thorough consideration of all alternatives; they are also triggered automatically depending on which information is activated ([Burdein et al., 2006](#)). Such incidental activation by environmental stimuli is precisely what is commonly referred to as priming. Thanks to growing interest and recent efforts, there is a substantial body of evidence of priming effects on political attitudes: Subtle primes can, for instance, increase the endorsement of a political party ([Carter et al., 2011](#)), bias policy positions and voting intentions ([Hassin et al., 2007](#)), affect evaluation of government performance ([Healy et al., 2010](#)), shift ideological agreement with parties ([Oppenheimer and Trail, 2010](#)), steer support for war ([Althaus and Coe, 2011](#)), and favour the assessment of attractive candidates ([Verhulst et al., 2010](#)).

As social psychologists have suggested quite early, however, effects are not limited to priming attitudes by activating certain concepts, but also extend to manipulating behaviour. Already the seminal experiment on the “weapons effect” by [Berkowitz and LePage \(1967\)](#) demonstrates how to elicit aggressive behaviour in the presence of aggression related stimuli. Although this result was not always replicated successfully (e.g., [Ellis et al., 1971](#)), other studies suggest similar responses by triggering automatically specific (anti-)social behaviour with subtly presented primes in the subjects' environment ([Bargh et al., 1996](#); [McCall and Belmont, 1996](#); [Turner and Goldsmith, 1976](#)).

The explanation behind this prime-to-behaviour effect draws on the long-known principle of ideomotor action ([James, 1890: 526](#)): merely thinking about behaviour increases the likelihood to execute it ([Bargh et al., 1996: 231](#)). So, exposure to a stimulus “activates a concept, which in turn influences a subsequent behavioural response without awareness of the links among these elements. Put another way, priming can create a readiness to respond in particular ways without intention or awareness by the prime recipient” ([Wheeler et al., 2014: 109](#)). Broadly speaking, the mechanisms of concept activation underlying attitudinal and

<sup>1</sup> The heavy assumption of voters being capable of strict and correct cost–benefit calculations did not go by without criticism of course (e.g. [Green and Shapiro, 1994](#)).

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