



## Political knowledge, the decision calculus, and proximity voting



Shane P. Singh <sup>a,\*</sup>, Jason Roy <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of International Affairs, University of Georgia, 303 Candler Hall, Athens, GA 30602, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Political Science, Wilfrid Laurier University Room 4-132, Dr. Alvin Woods Building, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, Canada

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 21 February 2012

Received in revised form 14 November 2013

Accepted 19 November 2013

#### Keywords:

Proximity voting

Spatial voting

Voting simulations

Vote decision calculus

Political knowledge

Political sophistication

### ABSTRACT

This paper employs an online voting simulation to examine how the vote decision process affects the vote choice. We focus on proximity voting, an empirically powerful but informationally demanding model of voter behavior. Holding contextual factors constant, we find that more politically knowledgeable individuals engage in a deeper and broader decision process prior to casting their ballot, and, in turn, a more detailed decision process boosts the likelihood that one will vote proximately. In addition, we find that detailed decision processes have a stronger link with proximity voting among the most knowledgeable individuals, who are able to skillfully engage with new information.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

As demonstrated in several recent papers appearing in *Electoral Studies*, the likelihood that one will vote for the ideologically closest candidate varies and according to both context and individual-level factors (e.g. Baldassarria and Schadee, 2006; Boatright, 2008; Fazekas and Méder, 2013; Kedar, 2006; Lachat, 2008; Lacy and Paolino, 2010; Simas, 2013; Singh, 2010; Weßels and Schmitt, 2008). While these studies provide useful insight into the correlates of proximity voting, we seek to further examine *how* individuals arrive at a proximity vote. To do so, we employ election simulations that allow us to study the processes by which individuals determine their vote choices.

When the knowledgeable and unknowledgeable are presented with new information and stimuli, differences in the character of decisions reached across the two groups will stem from the manner in which they engage with new information and their ability to make sense of it. Thus, because new information is constantly provided to voters

at election time, the link between political knowledge and the character of the vote is often contingent on how the voter engages information. Our contention is that politically knowledgeable individuals undertake a deeper and broader decision making process, which works strongly to shape the character of the vote. Ultimately, we expect a more detailed decision process to correlate with choices that better reflect one's preferences—proximate choices. Thus, we posit that the positive relationship between political knowledge and proximity voting exists largely because knowledgeable voters better engage and employ available information during an election campaign.

Our online design allows us to test our expectations by examining how the decision process and the character of the vote differ among politically knowledgeable and unknowledgeable individuals. Furthermore, our design allows us to dissect the vote decision process, which provides insight into how knowledge shapes the vote decision calculus. Finally, we are able to control the institutional rules of our online elections and isolate the issue preferences of our respondents and our candidates, allowing us to create a measure of proximity voting devoid of external noise and

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 706 542 8422; fax: +1 706 583 8266.  
E-mail addresses: [singh@uga.edu](mailto:singh@uga.edu) (S.P. Singh), [jroy@wlu.ca](mailto:jroy@wlu.ca) (J. Roy).

unaffected by individuals' previous experiences with candidates (on this, see [Williams, 1994](#)). Because parties and candidates are fictional, pre-existing differences in political knowledge, party attachments, or ideological leanings are unlikely to shape the character of our participants' votes. The simulation is designed to preclude the use of prior information.

Our findings indicate that more knowledgeable individuals incorporate a higher quantity of information and more meaningful information into the vote decision process, which, in turn, leads to ideologically proximate votes. Further, the most politically knowledgeable are most adept at translating a deeper and broader decision process into a proximate vote. Political knowledge increases and enhances the effort put forth in one's vote decision process, and the combination of political knowledge and a more detailed information search yields ballot choices that better reflect individual preferences.

While our simulation is useful in that it allows us to control the electoral environment and track each participant's information search, we acknowledge that its artificial nature also hampers our ability to generalize to real world elections. For example, as part of our effort to preclude the use of preexisting information, we did not use party labels in our election simulation. Thus, participants were unable to rely on partisan attachments or evaluations when formulating their votes, which is rarely the case in real elections. Further, we held factors such as age, race, and gender constant across the competing candidates, meaning shortcuts based on such factors were unavailable to voters, which is not reflective of real world elections. We further discuss the limitations of our study in the context of our findings in the final section of this paper.

## 1. Political knowledge, heuristics, and the vote

Interest in political knowledge is evident in the voting behavior literature from the first Columbia studies. In their seminal work, Berelson and colleagues offer a normative interpretation of why political knowledge should matter, along with a troubling empirical reality:

[t]he democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are. By such standards the voter falls short ([Berelson et al., 1954](#), p. 308).

The low levels of political knowledge observed in the U.S. in the 1940s have improved little ([Althaus, 2003, 1998](#); [Bartels, 1996](#); [Bennett, 2003](#); [Lau and Redlawsk, 2006](#); [Sniderman et al., 1991](#)). Does knowledge remain an important factor to the vote choice, or can the less knowledgeable adopt strategies to overcome their relative lack of political competency?

Many studies focused on political knowledge have shifted from identifying information shortfalls to explaining how individuals with limited knowledge and interest might still cast meaningful ballots. One of the more developed, although certainly challenged, theories contends that the use of voting heuristics or cues, such as a

candidate's social background or party affiliation, may allow voters to arrive at the same choice they would have had they been fully informed (see [Lupia, 1994](#); [Lupia and McCubbins, 1998](#); [Popkin, 1994](#); [Sniderman et al., 1991](#)). According to [Lupia \(1994\)](#), individuals need not be "political encyclopedias," but rather can make meaningful choices with only low levels of information by relying upon political "shortcuts." However, there is disagreement as to the usefulness of such shortcuts.

[Kuklinski and Quirk \(2000\)](#) argue that these "cost-saving" mechanisms are not necessarily effective alternatives to full information. Inherent biases associated with political heuristics use may prompt voters to make decisions that do not reflect their actual preferences: "[r]esearch has shown that people use arbitrary starting points to anchor estimates, use accessibility in memory to estimate frequency; use a source's attractiveness to judge her credibility; and draw inferences from predetermined scripts and stereotypes" (p. 166). In combination, these inherent biases and false starting points bring into question the accuracy of the conclusions drawn from these decision mechanisms, challenging the more positive role heuristics are often accorded.

A number of empirical studies further challenge the effectiveness of political heuristics. For example, drawing upon data from the 1972–2000 American National Election Studies, [Lau and Redlawsk \(2006\)](#) conclude that had all individuals employed a more detailed decision calculus, akin to that of their most informed colleagues, the vote choice of nearly 30 percent of the voting population would have changed. According to their findings:

...heuristics are definitely not the saving grace for the apathetic American voter. They have no broad, across-the-board ameliorative effect on the quality of the vote decision. Heuristics often improve the decision quality of experts – who are otherwise interested and engaged in political affairs anyway – but do little to improve (and occasionally hurt) the decision making of novices (p. 252).

These conclusions are echoed by others, such as [Althaus \(1998\)](#), [Alvarez \(1997\)](#), [Bartels \(1996\)](#), [Cutler \(2002\)](#), and [Johnston et al. \(1996\)](#), whose findings dispute the effectiveness of political heuristics as a means of "leveling the playing field." Perhaps Cutler offers the most succinct summary, concluding that, "...low-information rationality is not the great equalizer for the expression of preferences in democracies" (2002, p. 484). Extant work clarifies that political knowledge is inexorably linked to the nature of the vote and that heuristics are not necessarily an equalizer. How then, does knowledge shape the character of the vote?

## 2. Proximity voting and political knowledge

The proximity theory of voting, as articulated by [Downs \(1957\)](#), puts forth that voters derive the greatest utility from the election of the party closest to them on some ideological or issue continuum. Assuming linear loss and unidimensional ideological space, the utility of voter  $i$  for party  $j$  is given as:

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7464421>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7464421>

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