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Ballot Initiatives and the Democratic Citizen

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Citizens' political attitudes are critically shaped by government institutions. Initiatives and referenda are one such institutional arrangement that may encourage the development of dispositions and skills that make for better citizens. Building upon tenets of participatory democratic theory, I hypothesize that voters who make choices on ballot measures will gain in civic abilities, but non-voters in the same states will see no increases. Moreover, the gains for voters should occur over multiple years rather than during any single election. Using the 1992 Senate Election Study, which contains samples of approximately equal size from each state, I estimate the relationship between initiative use and political knowledge. The findings indicate that voters from states that heavily use initiatives show an increased capacity over the long term to correctly answer factual questions about politics.

The attitudes and abilities of citizens, although often treated as exogenous for analytical purposes, are nurtured and molded by democratic institutions (Smith and Ingram 1993; Soss 1999). In the American context, most formal institutions are highly similar across the country. All states elect an independent governor and currently choose legislators from single-member districts with first-past-the-post decision rules, and all but Nebraska use a bicameral legislature. Against this background of similarities, varying provisions among states in whether they allow and how often they use initiatives and referenda stand out as perhaps the most important institutional difference. The presence or absence of ballot initiatives directly structures how people participate in politics: in some states citizens regularly vote on issues as well as candidates, while in others their choices are limited to candidates.

These differences among states may affect citizens' capabilities, one central component of which involves how much people know about politics. Democratic principles rest upon an understanding of politics by citizens, for a poorly informed population would face difficulties in participating effectively in the political process. The original advocates of initiatives and referenda during the Progressive era claimed that ballot measures could stimulate the public's political knowledge. If people gained a real voice in legislation by voting directly on issues, the argument ran, they would develop greater interest in and knowledge of politics that would carry beyond the specific measures voted upon.

One writer proclaimed that its ability to promote political learning made direct legislation “The People’s University” (Parsons 1900, 101); another contended that direct legislation “not only encourages the development of each individual, but tends to elevate the entire electorate to the place of those who are most advanced” (Bourne 1912, 126). Contemporary advocates, as well, believe that initiatives lead people to acquire more of the dispositions and abilities that democratic ideals require (Schmidt 1989; Tallian 1977).

These hypothesized positive consequences of initiatives dovetail with the school of thought often called “participatory democracy” that stresses, among other benefits, the educative effects of participation. Both Rousseau and J. S. Mill saw participation as a means to spark the awareness and consciousness of citizens. Learning about politics and the capacity to engage political questions, in this view, follows from rather than precedes participating in politics. In the words of Pateman (1970, 25) “the more the individual citizen participates the better able he is to do so” (see also Barber 1984; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995).

Research has examined the effects of political participation through voting for candidates (Finkel 1985), working on campaigns (Freie 1997), and belonging to social movements or interest groups (Leighley 1996; McAdam 1988; Meyer and Whittier 1994). The claims of participatory democratic theory, however, have been applied only infrequently to voting on initiatives (but see Bowler and Donovan 1999; Frey 1997; Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000). In expecting voter participation through initiatives to facilitate gains in political knowledge, the implicit basis of comparison is the candidate elections that otherwise would define the choices available to voters. While certainly falling short of the face-to-face deliberation and intensive decision making desired by such writers as Pateman (1970) and Barber (1984), ballot initiatives clearly invite a stronger citizen role than do other kinds of elections. Moreover, the rhetoric that surrounds their usage, which voters in states that allow them are regularly exposed to, emphasizes themes of empowering citizens, making government more responsive to the will of the people, and seizing control of policy making from the hands of parties, special interests, and insulated legislators. Whether initiatives actually accomplish those goals is a matter of dispute (Cronin 1989; Magleby 1984), but the critical point here is that these supportive messages complement any observations people make of the policy-making role they might gain through initiatives.

Initiatives may instigate several processes that culminate in people learning more about politics. For starters, initiatives may boost perceptions that one can participate meaningfully in politics and that government responds to ordinary citizens—the dimensions of internal and external political efficacy, respectively. People might come to believe that initiatives actually do, as their supporters claim, give the public a stronger voice in policy decisions than would occur solely through the institutions of representative government. Engaging the specific questions on the ballot likewise can stimulate people’s general in-

terest in politics. When elections permit people to make choices on substantive issues, politics might seem more relevant to their lives, and their interest in it could be piqued. These attitudinal changes in turn should lead people to better understand and interpret the facts and arguments about politics they come upon in their daily lives. If people sense that their opinions and voting choices directly influence what government does, they will gain both the inclination and the incentives to absorb the politically relevant information they encounter from the mass media and from their informal discussions with family, friends, and coworkers. Hence efficacy and political interest represent intervening variables that connect ballot initiatives on the front end to citizens learning more about politics on the back end.

These processes, it should be recognized, are likely to unfold only over the long term. A single election that includes initiatives on the ballot probably would not make much difference, but their accumulation over time should create both individual-level changes and the complementary discourse from the political environment that leads to an observable result, which can be called

Hypothesis 1: Heavy initiative use in a state over a long period leads to increases in political knowledge, but few effects can be attributed to any one election.

Not all citizens should gain equally, however, for the chain of effects hinges upon people actually voting on initiatives. Participatory democratic theory implies that it is participation—in this case, voting—that triggers the causal sequence rather than the mere presence of initiatives on a state's ballot. This leads to

Hypothesis 2: Voters in states using initiatives increase their levels of political knowledge but non-voters in those same states do not.

Because the beneficial results should apply only to people that actually vote, separate analyses will be conducted later for voters and nonvoters.

Note that the process of political learning should go well beyond the details of the specific initiatives appearing on the ballot. One would not be surprised if, as a consequence of voting on an initiative dealing with property taxes, people become more familiar with current policy in that area than they would have been without such an initiative. By contrast, if voting on initiatives creates a series of reactions ultimately leading people to learn political information such as how the federal Congress is structured—something inherently unrelated to the content of any statewide initiative—that would constitute a more powerful and systematic effect. It is this latter kind of effect that will be examined here.

Measuring Political Knowledge and Initiative Use

Some practical problems make it difficult to test whether a voter's political knowledge depends upon the usage of initiatives in his or her state. Because of

the immense cost involved, few surveys use a state-based sampling frame to allow generalizations beyond the largest states that invariably provide most of the respondents in a national survey. Moreover, the sampling frames within national surveys are designed to create random samples within the nation rather than within each state, making an analysis of the kind desired here problematic. However, the Senate Election Study, conducted in 1988, 1990, and 1992 with approximately equal numbers of respondents from each state, provides an ideal solution because the surveys were undertaken to allow analysis of the state-level political context. Although the 1988 and 1990 surveys asked very few factual questions about politics, the 1992 survey contains several questions that can be used to construct an index of political knowledge.

Political knowledge is measured here as an index created from the seven factual questions appearing in the 1992 Senate Election Study. Four questions ask people to name the job or political office held by Dan Quayle, Al Gore, Thomas Foley, and William Rehnquist. The fifth question asks people which party is more likely to raise taxes, while the final two questions are constructed from respondents' placements of political leaders and parties on a liberal-conservative scale. The comparisons involve placing Bill Clinton as more liberal than George H. W. Bush and the Democratic party as more liberal than the Republican party. For each of these seven questions, respondents scored one point for each question correctly answered. The index, which will become the dependent variable in the analysis to follow, is calculated as the number of questions the respondent answered correctly divided by the number of questions asked.

The constructed scale yields a Cronbach's alpha score of .61, indicating that the items hang together reasonably well. It should be noted that the constituent questions focus upon federal rather than state politics. Thus, the correct answers could only rarely be learned directly from the campaigns to pass or defeat initiatives. If voters in high-use initiatives states show a greater capacity to answer the questions correctly, that would demonstrate that initiatives spark a process of learning that goes well beyond the content of the actual initiatives voted upon.

The central independent variable of interest is measured as the number of propositions that reached the ballot through citizen petitions, thus including both initiatives and popular referenda. To distinguish between short-term and long-term effects, I will estimate models including the number of measures appearing on the ballot in both the current election and over the 20 years preceding the election. I expect the latter variable to show a stronger relationship with political knowledge. The 20-year period for which to examine long-term effects was chosen to equal roughly one generation, and all initiatives and popular referenda voted upon during that period—including primaries, odd-year elections, and special elections in addition to general elections—are counted in the measure. In order to capture individual-level exposure to the initiative and referendum process, the indicator subtracts any ballot measures appearing before the respondent either turned 18 or resided in the state.

Model Specification

The theoretical discussion above points to efficacy and political interest as intervening variables, ones that rise as a consequence of ballot measures and subsequently cause voters to become more likely both to seek out political information and to retain that which they encounter. Unfortunately, these intervening linkages in the sequence of causality cannot be tested because, due to cost considerations, the Senate Election Study excluded many of the standard questions that appear on the National Election Study, including those on efficacy and political interest. However, much of the theoretical argument motivating the paper, such as its emphasis on the long- rather than short-run consequences of initiatives, can and will be tested in this study.

Undertaking those tests requires first controlling for other plausible determinants of political knowledge. My choices of the other independent variables to include match as closely as possible those examined by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). Given the decade of attention they gave to theory, measurement, and research design, building upon their model specification in choosing control variables is appropriate. Delli Carpini and Keeter in turn borrow from Luskin (1990) and others in proposing three central factors affecting how much people learn about politics: their ability, motivation, and opportunity. Ability refers to the cognitive and intellectual skills people have that make it easier for them to learn; motivation indicates whether people feel inclined to pay attention to politics; and opportunity captures how much information is available to be engaged and absorbed. While there is no one-to-one correspondence between specific indicators and the theoretical concepts of ability, motivation, and opportunity, the variables Delli Carpini and Keeter examine capture one or more of them. The variables investigated include the demographic characteristics of race, gender, and age; the socioeconomic indicators of education, income, and occupation; and political attitudes and behaviors like attention to the news media.

Each of those variables will be included as controls in the model specification. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) examine some other variables as well, such as trust in government and frequency of discussing politics with peers. The Senate Election Study did not include questions for those variables, however, so they cannot be included in the analysis. As Delli Carpini and Keeter (209–11) acknowledge, for the most part their analysis does not account for the political environments that may structure learning about politics. Beyond differences among states in their usage of initiatives and popular referenda, I take into account two other differences in the political environments of states that might provide contexts that either stimulate or inhibit learning about politics. The presence of divided government has often been asserted to blur accountability for government actions and increase the level of partisan conflict (Sundquist 1988). Potentially a long period of divided government might alienate citizens sufficiently to lead them to pay less attention to politics and, hence, learn less of the factual information that political judgments rest upon. The

lack of electoral competition also has been asserted to create negative implications for how people learn about politics. When one party controls government over a long period, there are fewer injections of new policy ideas, less incentive for the dominant party to respond to public opinion, and less of a need for it to mobilize new citizens into politics (Key 1949). The result could be a disaffected citizenry that, in paying less attention to politics, learns less about it.

A full list of the included variables and how they were constructed is provided in the Appendix. To make interpretation of the results easier, all independent variables—including the two for ballot measures—were either constructed initially or rescaled through a linear transformation to fit a 0–1 range. For each independent variable, the lowest observed point is always scored as 0 and the highest observed point is scored as 1. Thus, the coefficients of a regression model can be interpreted as what happens to political knowledge as each independent variable moves across the range of observed experience. Coding the variables in this way facilitates comparisons of their effect sizes. The education variable, for example, is scored as 1 for those with the most formal schooling in the sample and 0 for those with the least. The variables for ballot measures are scored as 0 for the states with the lowest number—those that do not allow initiatives or popular referenda—and 1 for the state with the highest, which is California for the 1973–1992 period and Colorado for the 1992 election.

A central part of the analysis will involve testing the impacts of ballot initiatives on the political knowledge of both voters and nonvoters, for it is only within the former group that large effects are expected. While a standard question asked by the Senate Election Study can be used to separate voters from nonvoters, the well-known tendency for survey respondents to overreport voting potentially could complicate the analysis. Given that the people who reported voting will include some respondents who misrepresented their behavior, that group's differences on political knowledge with those reporting abstention will be somewhat reduced. That reality, however, will make it harder—not easier—for the analysis conducted here to show that ballot initiatives produce greater effects on voters than nonvoters. Because the differences on the dependent variable between the measured groups will be somewhat smaller than the differences between the actual groups, any variable differentially affecting voters and nonvoters will likely be underestimated for the former population.

Another potential problem arises from the fact that the Senate Election Study asks respondents whether or not they voted but does not ask people whether they specifically voted on any initiatives. One can determine the probable consequences for the analysis at hand of using the more general voting question by calculating the amount of rolloff, the number of voters who skip the initiative section of the ballot. Aggregate turnout is typically measured as the number of votes cast for the highest office on the ballot, normally president, governor, or senator. As it turns out, while there is some rolloff from the top of the ballot to the initiatives, the amount is less than has been sometimes assumed based upon a limited number of states and elections. During general elections from the

period under study (1973–1992), the number of votes cast for the highest initiative in a state on average was 95% of the number of votes cast for the highest candidate race in the state. That is, when we use the state-year as the unit of analysis (including all state-year combinations with at least one initiative or popular referendum on the ballot) and calculate the rolloff from the most prominent candidate office to the initiative attracting the greatest number of votes, we see a difference of only 5%. In other words, very few respondents to the Senate Election Study who live in initiative states and reported voting would have reported that they did not vote on any initiatives. To the extent that the voting group identified through surveys is slightly diluted because it includes a few people who did not vote on any initiatives, this would again make it harder to find the predicted differences in effects between voters and nonvoters.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the findings, with estimates for voters appearing in columns 1 and 2 and estimates for nonvoters appearing in columns 3 and 4. Because the central variable under investigation involves the state political context, the observations for the first two columns are weighted by the inverse of the number of voters in each state, while the third and fourth columns use weights based upon the inverse of the number of nonvoters in each state. With these adjustments, weighted least squares ensure that all states contribute equally to the analyses.

Taking first the models for voters, we see that with a couple of exceptions the control variables perform as the prior analysis of Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) would predict. Among voters a wide range of variables emerge as statistically significant predictors of political knowledge, including education, income, race, gender, length of residence, and attention to political campaigns. Some of these variables capture the social and economic characteristics of citizens that shape the processes leading to political knowledge. Other variables tap the political attitudes and behaviors that give people reasons to pay attention to the political world and hence learn factual information about it.

My primary interest, of course, surrounds each state's institutional context. The coefficients for divided government and electoral competitiveness do not reach statistical significance. For the central variables under study—the number of ballot measures during both the current election and over the previous twenty years—the results provide support for Hypothesis 1. In the models for voters, the variable for long-term impacts has the anticipated positive sign and reaches statistical significance, but the variable for short-term effects is smaller in size and is not statistically significant. Based upon these results, we would infer that initiatives and referenda do create more knowledgeable citizens but only through processes that require some time to materialize. Because this result is based upon using the unique features of the Senate Election Study that include samples from each state, it generalizes across all states rather than only

TABLE 1
Determinants of Political Knowledge

	Voters		Nonvoters	
	Long term	Short term	Long term	Short term
Constant	0.289** (0.035)	0.293** (0.035)	0.099** (0.060)	0.096** (0.060)
State's Institutional Context				
Initiative Usage (over 20 years)	0.062* (0.027)		-0.019 (0.069)	
Initiative Usage (current election)		0.025 (0.023)		0.013 (0.042)
Divided Government	-0.015 (0.020)	-0.014 (0.020)	0.061 (0.038)	0.057 (0.038)
Electoral Competitiveness	-0.025 (0.036)	-0.032 (0.036)	0.080 (0.068)	0.083 (0.068)
Demographics				
Age	0.034 (0.038)	0.033 (0.038)	-0.069 (0.074)	-0.068 (0.074)
Education	0.212** (0.021)	0.211** (0.021)	0.238** (0.043)	0.237** (0.043)
Income	0.102** (0.019)	0.105** (0.019)	0.144** (0.037)	0.144** (0.037)
Race	-0.117** (0.020)	-0.117** (0.020)	-0.087** (0.032)	-0.087** (0.032)
Gender	0.044** (0.010)	0.044** (0.010)	0.015 (0.018)	0.015 (0.018)
Length of residence	-0.141** (0.035)	-0.132** (0.035)	0.011 (0.074)	0.008 (0.073)
Political Attitudes/Behaviors				
Strength of Partisanship	0.022 (0.015)	0.020 (0.015)	0.066* (0.029)	0.066* (0.029)
News Media Use	0.030 (0.019)	0.030 (0.019)	0.026 (0.032)	0.027 (0.032)
Attention to Campaigns	0.128** (0.017)	0.128** (0.017)	0.103** (0.026)	0.104** (0.026)
Adjusted R ²	0.22	0.22	0.17	0.17
N	1790	1790	480	480

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. Weighted least squares are used to estimate parameters, with weights based upon the inverse of the number of usable observations per state.

the largest ones. The evidence here thus supports the longstanding claim that ballot initiatives create more knowledgeable citizens.

The size of the coefficient on ballot measures indicates that moving across the range of observed experience—from the lowest state to the highest one—leads to a .06 increase in political knowledge. Given that political knowledge

among voters varies from 0 to 1 with a mean of .55 and a standard deviation of .23, an effect of that size is noticeable but not overwhelming. Judging by the other coefficients, the largest effects in the model are attributable to education, where going from the lowest value in the sample to the highest creates a .21 change in political knowledge. Length of residence ($-.14$), attention to campaigns (.13), race ($-.12$), and income (.10) also create large effects. Calculated according to the effects of going from lowest to highest in the sample, ballot measures—with a coefficient of .06—are slightly larger than those resulting from gender (.04) and strength of partisanship (.02).

In the third and fourth columns of Table 1, which show the results for nonvoters, an interesting pattern emerges.¹ With the exception of gender, length of residence, and the variables for ballot measures, all of the variables that were statistically significant for voters also emerge as statistically significant in explaining the political knowledge of nonvoters. More remarkably, most of the coefficients show similar magnitudes across the two groups. For example, the coefficient on education is .24 for nonvoters, paralleling the coefficient of .21 seen for voters. Attention to campaigns (.10 and .13), income (.14 and .10), and race ($-.09$ and $-.12$) all have magnitudes for nonvoters similar to those seen for voters. This is an interesting finding by itself, for it shows that most of the processes determining political knowledge do not hinge upon whether or not someone votes. These core variables demonstrate highly similar effects on the political knowledge of both voters and nonvoters.

On the usage of ballot measures, however, the results clearly diverge. Among nonvoters, initiative usage—both during the current election and over the previous 20 years—has no statistically significant relationship with political knowledge. The results thus provide evidence supporting Hypothesis 2, for nonvoters in states that heavily use initiatives have no greater political knowledge than do nonvoters in states with low use of initiatives. This finding indicates that it is voting on initiatives, rather than merely living in a state that allows them, that creates the increases in political knowledge. Such a finding conforms well to the claims of democratic theorists such as Pateman (1970), who stress how political participation—extended here to include voting for initiatives—leads to stronger political capabilities.

Conclusion

While it has often been suspected that citizens' orientations toward politics represent not only inputs into governmental decision making but central out-

¹ While one potentially could estimate a single equation with a dummy variable for individual-level turnout and a multiplicative term to capture differences in effects across voters and nonvoters, problems would arise if ballot initiatives lead to increases in voter turnout (Smith 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith n.d.). A multiplicative term composed of two variables, one of which *causes* the other rather than merely varying in effects according to the other's presence, would be difficult to interpret.

puts as well, only recently has research turned to elucidating the means by which those outputs arise. Comparative research has shown how citizens' partisan identifications and views on the quality of the political system result from a nation's party and electoral structures (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Uslander 1989). Within the domain of political knowledge, comparative work has shown it to vary across countries according to their institutional arrangements (Gordon and Segura 1997). In the American context, one of the most prominent institutional differences at the state level involves the usage of initiatives and referenda. The results presented above indicate that those differences affect how much political knowledge a state's citizens acquire and retain.

The evidence presented here illuminates one aspect of the debate over the desirability of allowing initiatives and popular referenda onto the ballot. According to these findings, the original backers of ballot measures in the Progressive era were correct in expecting that direct legislation would help educate the citizenry. Of course, one would be ill-advised to evaluate the initiative process based solely upon its consequences for political knowledge. Such an evaluation should also consider questions such as whether initiatives undermine minority rights (Gamble 1997), whether they strengthen the responsiveness of policies to public opinion (Gerber 1996; Lascher, Hagen, and Rochlin 1996), and whether voters make informed decisions on initiatives (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Magleby 1984, chaps. 7–9). As part of this larger debate, however, the findings of this study can help citizens, scholars, and policy makers come to a more informed conclusion about the consequences of initiatives and popular referenda.

Appendix

The variables included in the analysis are measured as follows:

Political Knowledge: A scale constructed from queries about the political offices held by Dan Quayle [v0593], Al Gore [v0594], Thomas Foley [v0595], and William Rehnquist [v0596], the party more likely to raise taxes [v0221], and the ideological placement of the major parties [constructed from v0569 and v0570] and George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton [constructed from v0553 and v0551]. The scale is calculated as the number of correct responses divided by the number asked.

Initiative Usage (over 20 years): Number of initiatives and popular referenda appearing on the state's ballot during the preceding 20 years, minus the number appearing when the respondent either was under 18 or not living in the state. The quantity is divided by the number voted upon in the state with the highest number (80, for California) to yield a range of 0–1.

Initiative Usage (current election): Number of initiatives and popular referenda appearing on the ballot during the 1992 general election, divided by the number voted upon in the state with the highest number (10, for Colorado) to yield a range of 0–1.

Divided Government: Proportion of the preceding 20 years when neither party held the governorship and at least 50% of the seats in each legislative chamber.

Electoral Competitiveness: Average differences in vote percentage over the preceding 20 years in the state's contests for governor, the lower legislative chamber, the upper legislative chamber, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House of Representatives. That figure is divided by the highest average margins in the sample to create a 0–1 scale.

Age: Age of the respondent [v0604] divided by the highest age (97) in the survey.

Education: Highest level of formal education of the respondent [v0608], with the seven ordinal categories equally dispersed across a 0–1 scale.

Income: Respondent's family income before taxes [v0629], with the seven ordinal categories equally dispersed across a 0–1 scale.

Race: Coded as 1 for blacks and 0 otherwise [v0631].

Gender: Coded as 1 for males and 0 for females [v0636].

Length of residence: Number of years the respondent has lived in the state since turning 18 [constructed from v0633], divided by the highest number in the sample.

Strength of Partisanship: Strong Democrats and Republicans coded as 1, weak Democrats and Republicans coded as 0.67, independents who lean Democratic or Republican coded as 0.33, and independents and others coded as 0 [constructed from v0497].

News Media Use: Average of the proportion of days in the past week watching television news and proportion of days in the past week reading a daily newspaper [constructed from v0032 and v0033].

Attention to Campaigns: Attention paid to political campaigns, with "very much interested" coded as 1, "somewhat interested" coded as 0.5, and "not much interested" coded as 0 [constructed from v0031].

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