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Extra, Extra, (Don't) Roll-Off About It! Newspaper Endorsements for Ballot Measures

January 3, 2017

Abstract

Voters often have difficulty making choices on the myriad state constitutional amendments they vote on each year. Without partisan cues, they turn to other sources for these low-salience, high complexity measures. One such source is newspaper endorsements. In this article we look at newspaper endorsements of ballot measures in Florida over 20 years both on “no” votes and roll-off. We argue that endorsements’ effect on “no” votes and roll-off differs in ways not previously appreciated. Newspaper endorsements have a positive impact on no votes, as expected from the information theory of voter participation. Endorsements have little impact on roll-off which we posit is because roll-off voters are not likely to seek information from newspapers. Thus newspaper endorsements serve to persuade, but not entice voters to vote for ballot measures.

Like most voters, Floridians face choices to amend their state constitution when they head to the polls. Ballot measures can be placed on the ballot by the citizens through the initiative process, by the legislature through legislative referral or in Florida by special commissions designated to recommend constitutional changes (a Constitution Revision Commission and a Tax and Budget Reform Commission). The amendments vary in their simplicity (establishing an Everglades Trust Fund in 49 words) and complexity (295 words, essentially prohibiting the state from participating in the national Affordable Care Act, replete with technical health care terminology and double negatives). What they have in common is that they are at the bottom of the ballot and are often not easily understood. For every medical marijuana provision (on the ballot in Florida in 2014 and 2016), there are seemingly obscure issues such as changes in the prospective appointment of certain judicial vacancies (also on the 2014 ballot).

While scholars have examined direct democracy from many angles, the research tends to focus primarily on initiatives - and often salient initiatives that draw campaign dollars and much media attention. But we want to examine all the measures - salient and not salient - particularly in light of how and whether voters decide to vote on these measures. We hypothesize that voters will look for cues on how to vote from experts and in the case of state constitutional amendments will rely heavily on an easily accessed source of information - newspaper endorsements. We hypothesize that newspaper endorsements have an effect on the percentage of no votes on constitutional amendments which tend to be low information and low salience. We think these effects are especially evident in constitutional proposals that are put on the ballot by the legislature or constitutional commission and those that are complex and seemingly difficult for voters to understand. We test the hypotheses using county-level election data on all constitutional amendments on the Florida ballot since 1994. We also look at roll-off, which we think is substantively different from voting “no” on ballot measures.

This article builds on the information theory of voter participation, that argues that voters rely on information to vote and if they don’t feel comfortable, they won’t vote or will vote “no” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Matsusaka 1995; Wattenburg et al.

2000; Lupia and Matsusaka 2004). Non-biased, credible information on ballot measures is easily obtained from newspaper endorsements that in turn affect the willingness of voters to cast a yes or no vote. We believe the strength of these endorsements varies by types of ballot measures and is conditional on factors including salience, complexity and whether it is a presidential election year. In the following section, we discuss the information theory of voter participation, endorsements, and ballot measure characteristics. We lay out and test hypotheses concerning “no” votes and roll-off votes. We then discuss the results and their importance to understanding voter participation in ballot measures.

Information and Voting

Matsusaka (1995) defines information theory of voting in two parts: 1) most citizens are predisposed to vote but 2) abstain because they are unable to evaluate the candidates. This approach to understanding voting has particular relevance when citizens are in the voting booth and choose not to vote on a given issue or race, defined as roll-off. Rather than cast an ignorant vote, citizens choose not to vote. This emphasis on information raises the issue of how they get the information to be able to cast an informed vote.

For well over sixty years, political scientists have recognized that voters rely on credible advisers including opinion leaders and political parties to overcome lack of information (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Downs 1957, Karp 1998, Lupia and Matsusaka 2004). If voters can use these reliable advisors, then they can vote competently without knowing many details about their choice (Lupia and Matsusaka 2004). Voters can turn to a long list of possibilities for information including campaign information (Lodge, Steenbergen and Brau 1995); people who have similar interests (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991), and interest group endorsements (Lupia 1994).

The role of the press in setting the agenda and affecting public opinion is well known (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar 1993). According to Dalton et al. (1998), the most regularly used information source is the news media, especially television and the press. Zaller (1996) finds that media content

can affect policy preferences and candidate evaluations. Jerit, Barabas and Bolsen (2006) and Barabas and Jerit (2009) have demonstrated the importance of media coverage in increasing policy-specific knowledge. This should be especially important for citizens voting in low-salience campaigns. But they looked at media coverage - not endorsements.

We expect newspaper endorsements to be especially important in constitutional amendments or ballot measures where it is often difficult for voters to determine how a measure will enhance or hinder their own interests. Political party cues are not helpful; interest groups may serve to aid voters (Lupia 1994) but on many ballot choices interest groups do not play a large role. (They are particularly important in initiatives and salient issues). On less salient choices, voters are often on their own when deciding how to vote. Seib (2008) put it this way, “We would expect ordinary voters to be deeply uncertain about how ballot measures relate to their own preferences and interests and thus of which vote to cast on a proposition” (322).

Endorsements as Information

Endorsements might best be understood as one message models as defined by Zaller (1992) and others where the message is easily understood with clearly articulated rationalization. In contrast, two message models are more complex and force receivers to search for cues about which messages to believe. Dalton et al. (1998) find that newspaper reporting best fits the two message model. Interest groups can provide information about ballot measures (Lupia 1994, Gerber 1999, Stratmann 2006). Political parties could provide information on ballot measures but generally do not, leaving media endorsements as the predominant shortcut for voters.

The rationale concerning the importance of endorsements is straight-forward. In low-salience races especially, endorsements provide information needed for voters to make their decisions. Lupia and McCubbins (1998) note that persuasion requires a listener to perceive a speaker as both knowledgeable and trustworthy. Newspaper endorsements fit both characteristics. Erikson (1976) notes that voters generally regard newspapers as credible sources of information. As McCombs (1967) states, in low-salience elections (he

looked at state and local elections), the information and opinion input of the editorial endorsement may be a major - and often only - source of orientation for the voter (545).

Interestingly, there has been little recent research on newspaper endorsements on ballot measures. Gregg (1965) noted that California state ballot measures that “receive little or no discussion by the mass media of communication” pose several alternatives to a citizen not extremely diligent in searching out information. He may abstain from voting, he could vote no if he is in doubt or he may use newspaper endorsements as a source of information. Gregg found that 39 percent of a sample of readers of the Santa Barbara News-Press said in a survey that they “always” or “occasionally” take the sample ballot with newspaper endorsements to the polls.

Gregg found that editorial endorsements have a greater influence on the outcome on local elections than on state or national elections and that state and local ballot measure endorsements are more influential than candidate endorsement. McCombs (1967) looked at the effect of newspaper endorsements on state and local elections and found that for ballot measures the editorial impact was greater than that of other races. Bowler and Donovan (1994) found that California voters were more likely to cite newspaper editorials as a source more frequently than TV ads or friends and neighbors on ballot measures. Even nonreaders may receive voting cues from others who read the newspaper endorsements (Erikson 1976).

In summary, previous research has suggested that voters use credible experts such as newspapers for guidance in how to vote, especially when there are no partisan cues. But these studies have generally addressed a limited number of ballot issues and recent work has largely ignored newspaper endorsement.

Informational Problems with Ballot Measures

Not all ballot measures are equal in terms of salience and content. For every salient issue like medical marijuana there are many measures on property taxes, judicial procedures, and ports, that are rarely discussed over dinner tables and are not buttressed by advertising campaigns. Clearly higher salience issues garner more interest group at-

tention and media coverage. A ballot measure on marijuana engenders both, one on tax breaks for disabled veterans may well garner neither. Nicholson (2003) and Biggers (2011) find that social issues which tend to be salient are better known and increase turnout. Ballot measures on civil liberties and morality are more likely to gain citizen awareness than other measures (Nicholson 2003). Biggers (2011) finds that social issues had the lowest roll-off, followed by environmental and tax measures which had the same roll-off. Gubernatorial endorsements in a controlled experiment had an impact on ballot measure support on a highly salient initiative but not on two lower profile measures - which seems counter to expectations (Burnett & Parry 2014).

Constitutional amendments are also generally complex and difficult to understand. Cronin (1989) found that the mean grade number of years required to read and fully understand ballot measure from 1997 to 2007 was 17.1 Magleby (1984) concluded that referendums confront ordinary voters with choices they are not competent enough to make. Reilly and Richey (2011) found that increased complexity leads to more roll-off.

Ballot measures also differ in how they come to the ballot. Initiatives are often salient and timely, put on the ballot by interest groups who may not be able to achieve their policy desires through the legislative process (Gerber 1999). In contrast, legislative referrals that typically make up most ballot measures across the states, are often less salient, more complex measures enshrining in the constitution rights, structural changes or tax provisions that are more fundamental or more far-lasting than statutes. Measures crafted by a constitutional commission made up of citizens will likely fall between the two other types: they may be less salient than initiatives but less legally technical than legislative referrals. In one of the few studies to compare the impacts of different types of ballot measures, Magleby (1984) found that measures placed on the ballot by the legislature generally have higher rates of roll-off than citizen-sponsored initiatives.

Ballot length is also a problem, especially for low-interest voters. Bowler and Donovan (1998) found a significant decrease in the number of yes votes per additional proposition in California and lengthy ballots may cause higher levels of voter roll-off. Seib (2008) in a study of Swiss referendums found that increasing ballot length raised the inconsistency

of vote choices. The author argues that increasing ballot length interferes with the voters ability to translate their political preferences into consistent policy choices. Thus voter fatigue may stimulate voters to reject (or fail to support) propositions regardless of their own preferences and interests (Bowler and Donovan 1998). Low-salience amendments exacerbate these problems.¹

Ballot position is important - ballot measures earlier in the list are less likely to have roll-off. Propositions further down the ballot are likely to suffer from roll-off due to voter fatigue (Reilly and Richey 2011). Presidential years have higher roll-off as voters may only vote for the top election on the ballot (Reilly and Richey 2011). Nicholson (2003) finds that midterm elections increase familiarity with ballot propositions by about 14 percentage points. Without the hoopla of a presidential race, issues at the state level, particularly ballot measures, may be better known in midterm elections. There are also effects on turnout; Scholzman and Yohai (2008) found initiatives had a moderate effect in midterm elections but limited effects in turnout in presidential elections.

Finally, presidential elections are substantially different from non-presidential elections in their turnout. Presidential years have higher roll-off as voters may only cast a ballot for the top items on the ballot (Reilly and Richey 2011). There are also effects on turnout; Scholzman and Yohai (2008) found initiatives had a moderate effects in midterm elections but limited effects in turnout in presidential elections.

Persuasion vs. Enticement to Vote

As the review of the literature has indicated, both voting “no” and roll-off have been used as indications of lack of support for ballot measures. We think that theoretically there are differences between the two. Information from newspaper endorsements will be particularly important to persuade readers how to vote on proposals but will be less likely to discourage rolling off.

We posit that newspaper endorsements reduce the number of “no” votes by educating readers and those who communicate with readers (and indirectly their friends and family) on the content of the ballot measures and how it might affect them. In short, like political

parties in partisan races provide a voting cue, newspaper endorsements provide a cue for non-partisan ballot measures. Informed voters have a higher average propensity to cast a yes vote than uninformed voters (Kriesi 2005) and inform voters on ballot measures. The mechanism is then simple; voters use newspaper endorsements as a cue to vote “yes” on ballot measures. Thus they serve to persuade voters.

We argue that roll-off operates differently. Voters who do not seek information from newspaper endorsements (or other means) will have no guide as to how to vote when they reach the bottom of the ballot and will roll-off. While at first glance, one might imagine that newspaper endorsements will then reduce roll-off, the linkage is weak since these disaffected citizens may not come in contact with newspapers or talk to people who do. We will test the effect of newspaper endorsements on both votes cast and those rolled off but expect different results.

In short, we do not think that newspaper endorsements will be an enticement to vote or reduce the roll-off. They are information seekers and can be persuaded by media sources. In contrast, voters who are not seeking information from newspapers (or other sources) are more likely to roll-off or abstain from voting. In support of this distinction between roll-off and “no” votes, the correlation between the percentage voting “no” and roll-off on constitutional amendments was only 0.04 in Florida elections.

Hypotheses

Without partisan cues, voters must turn to other credible sources for guidance as to how to vote for constitutional amendments. Newspaper endorsements provide just such guidance. They are trusted by the public and as one message models, they provide a clear and powerful form of persuasion. We expect that newspaper endorsements will reduce the percentage of “no” votes when voters are unsure of the intent of the measure but will not affect roll-off. Specifically:

H1a: Endorsements in local newspapers will lead to a lower percentage of “no” votes on ballot measures in a given county.

H1b: Endorsements in local newspapers will not lead to a lower percentage of roll-off on

ballot measures in a given county.

Most of the research on ballot measures does not differentiate between the types of amendments - i.e. initiatives or legislative referral. In the case of Florida, there is a third approach - a constitutional commission. We think endorsements will help inform voters on legislative referrals and commission referrals which are often not well understood. However, the task might be tough since in one of the few studies looking at different types of ballot measures, Magleby (1984) found that measures placed on the ballot by the legislature generally have higher rates of roll-off than citizen-sponsored initiatives. Nevertheless, we optimistically posit that:

H2a: Newspaper endorsements for legislative referrals and commissions will lead to a lower percentage of “no” votes than endorsements for initiatives.

H2b: Newspaper endorsements for legislative referrals and commissions will not lead to a lower percentage of roll-off than endorsements for initiatives.

Guidance from newspaper endorsements is especially useful for issues that are not well-known to the voters. Salient issues are likely to be the subject of press coverage, advertisements and discussion among family and friends. In contrast, non-salient issues often operate below the radar screen of media, ads and discussion. Thus voters may be more influenced by newspaper endorsements of non-salient ballot measures. Additionally:

H3a: Newspaper endorsements for salient issues will lead to a higher percentage of “no” votes than newspaper endorsements for non-salient issues.

H3b: Newspaper endorsements for salient issues will not lead to a higher percentage of “no” votes than newspaper endorsements for non-salient issues.

Data & Research Design

The state of Florida provides citizens and lawmakers with multiple avenues for using direct democracy to amend the state constitution. Citizens may obtain signatures and place amendments directly on the ballot, the legislature may propose amendments for the ballot, and amendments are proposed every twenty years by a constitutional reform

committee. Thus Florida provides sufficient numbers of constitutional amendments over time for analysis. We collected county-level data including votes on every constitutional amendment between 1994 and 2014. Our unit of analysis is the county-amendment; Florida has 67 counties and we analyze 79 unique amendments from 1994-2014, for a total of 5,293 observations.

Our first dependent variable is the percentage of “no” votes for each ballot measure. Higher values indicate increased share of “no” votes for each amendment. Our second dependent variable accounts for roll-off on each ballot amendment by measuring the votes cast for the amendments as a proportion of the votes cast for the race at the top of the ticket (either president or governor). Higher values indicate increased roll-off on the amendment. These two dependent variables comprise the two facets of electoral outcomes: persuasion and inducement to vote. These data are available through the Florida Division of Elections website concerning general election outcomes from 1978-2014.

Our primary independent variable is endorsement of amendments by the largest Florida-based print newspaper in each of the state’s ten media markets. Endorsement data were collected from the major, highest daily circulation papers. Data were only available in a majority of media markets from 1994 to the present. Incomplete data exist for all ten newspapers in hard-copy archives with each newspaper before 1994. Endorsement counts were collected 1994-2014 for the Gainesville, Miami-Ft. Lauderdale, Orlando-Daytona Beach, Tampa-St. Petersburg, Tallahassee, and West Palm Beach Ft. Pierce media markets. Counts were collected 1996 through 2014 in the Ft. Myers-Naples and Jacksonville media markets. Endorsements in the Pensacola media market were collected 2004-2010 and 2014. Endorsement data for the Panama City media market’s major paper, the *News Herald*, are unavailable. Endorsements were coded as a dichotomous variable: a 1 indicates that the county’s flagship paper recommended voting in favor of the amendment; a 0 indicates the newspaper recommended voters in the county reject the amendment. After removal of omitted observations, 3,857 observations remain. Figure 1 illustrates the ten media markets in Florida.

[Figure 1 about here.]

Another benefit of studying the effect of endorsements in Florida is the diversity of its media markets. Diversity of ideology, ethnicity, and wealth between each media market ensures that the state’s newspapers are not a monolithic bloc in favor of a particular political viewpoint. For example, the Jacksonville, Pensacola, and Fort Myers media markets are overwhelmingly dominated by wealthier conservatives, while Miami, Tallahassee, Gainesville, and West Palm Beach are decidedly more liberal, more educated, and nonwhite. Tampa and Orlando’s media markets are moderate and somewhat diverse.

If a local newspaper produces a persuasive effect, we expect to see the share of “no” votes to decline when the newspaper endorses the amendment, and to increase when the newspaper opposes the amendment. If the newspaper has a vote-inducing effect, we would expect less roll-off for the amendment.

We measure amendment salience by coding whether or not the amendment was reported in the New York Times the morning after Election Day. This is a variant of Smith’s 2001 measure of salience as prominence of post-election coverage of the ballot measures. New York Times coverage provides a true measure of salience since the news space for coverage of Florida newspapers will be limited and only the most newsworthy and thus widely interesting measures will be covered. Only eight amendments from this time period made the New York Times and thus are coded as salient.²

Complexity is measured by the number of words in the constitutional amendment voted on by the public.³ While not a perfect measure - since the amendments could be long but easily understood - we think it provides a useful gauge of the scope of the amendment. The range of amendment word length is from 12 to 5,000 words. The median word count is 475. The distribution is skewed with a mean of 882 words and a standard deviation of 1,072. We expect that the share of “no” votes and roll-off will increase as word count increases - citizens are less likely to have fully-formed opinions on complex amendments and will opt in favor of the status quo or to abstain.

Ballot order is numbered in the order of the measure on the ballot - i.e. the first one on the ballot is numbered 1. The length of the ballot reflects the total number of amendments on the ballot. We opted not to scale each amendment’s ballot ranking by

the number of amendments on that year’s ballot because we measure the total number of amendments on the ballot as a separate control variable. We expect roll-off to increase as an amendment’s ballot order increases - voters become exhausted with the remaining initiatives and abstain.

We measure county-level education as the proportion of college-educated citizens in the county. We include a control of turnout in the county (percent voting for the top office/registered voters) in models with “no” votes. We also include a time counter to address concerns that the electorate is becoming more polarized. In all models, robust standard errors are clustered by media market.

We coded amendment sponsorship type into one of three categories: 1) a legislative referral (46.7% of observations), 2) put on the ballot by the 2008 Tax & Budget or 1998 Constitution Revision Commissions (17.3%), or 3) an initiative (36.0%). In the analysis initiatives are the excluded reference group. Table 1 provides a breakdown of constitutional amendment votes in Florida by type of measure.

Table 1 provides summary statistics for all variables used in analyses. When the variable was dichotomous, we placed the modal category as the median value.

[Table 1 about here.]

Mean roll-off is 0.157, indicating that about 15% of the electorate opts not to vote on any given initiative. Mean “no” vote is 42.7%, indicating that the average initiative receives majority support but not sufficient support to reach the 60% threshold for amendment passage adopted in 2006.⁴ The number of endorsements is only 3,942.⁵ Means for our covariates indicate that only a handful of amendments are mentioned in the New York Times. Moreover, there are a large number (8.4) of amendments in a given election, suggesting the potential for newspapers to educate voters, many of whom may be overwhelmed by the sheer number of proposals.

Results

Newspaper endorsements should have two effects: to induce voters to keep voting down-ballot after making decisions on party-line votes, and to persuade them to vote “yea” or “nay” on any given amendment. Variables measuring turnout and vote choice may be correlated, but more certainly have correlated errors (Zellner 1962). Correlated errors lead to bias estimates. To overcome this problem, we estimate coefficients using seemingly-unrelated regression (SUR) with identical regressors (Greene 2003; Zellner 1962). By accounting for the correlation of errors between our two dependent variables, we can obtain more precise estimates and standard errors.⁶ We report SUR estimates for both dependent variables in Table 2, and OLS equivalents in the Appendix.

[Table 2 about here.]

These results show a statistically-significant relationship between endorsements and vote share, indicating a persuasion effect. “No” votes decrease by 3.6% when there is a positive newspaper endorsement. This effect is substantively significant as well. The average amendment received 58% of the vote. Thus newspaper endorsements can push an amendment over the 60% threshold necessary for passage in Florida.

There is no evidence of newspaper endorsements inducing voters to keep voting on any given ballot initiative. The effect is a statistically-insignificant 0.2% decline in roll-off when a newspaper endorses. While local newspapers do inform voters to make choices regarding how to cast their ballots, there is no evidence to support the notion that they deter rolloff. The evidence supports Hypothesis 1.

The persuasive effect of local newspapers is not a relic of the pre-digital past. We interacted our measure of endorsements with a dichotomous measure of time that compares pre-2000 election years to 2000 and after, when print media began to compete seriously with the Internet. We find no evidence that endorsements lose their persuasive power; quite the opposite, before 2000 endorsements *increased* the share of the “no” vote by 1.5%, but after 2000, endorsements *decreased* “no” vote share by 6.6%. No similar time-trend effect was found for roll-off.⁷ The persuasive effect increases after newspapers

enter the digital age, even as newspaper circulation has stagnated.

Next, we interacted newspaper endorsements with covariates of interest: amendment salience and amendment sponsor type. Only eight amendments are coded as “salient” in that they were reported on by the New York Times. We use Legislative and Commission-based sponsorship can be considered as alternative proxy measures of salience, in that the Constitutional Revision Commission and the state Legislature invest less effort than third-party initiative backers and opponents in advertising their amendments. In Table 3, we report estimated coefficients from six models that interact our measures of salience with a variable of newspaper endorsements. The coefficients shows that salience conditions the effect of both persuasion and inducement to vote.

[Table 3 about here.]

Regarding hypothesis 2, we did find differing effects of newspaper endorsements on legislative referrals or constitutional commission measures compared to initiatives. Legislative and commission-based sponsorship can be considered an alternative type of salience, in that the Constitutional Revision Commission and the state Legislature invest less effort than third-party initiative backers and opponents in advertising their amendments.

Endorsements for legislative referrals reduce the “no” vote compared to third-party initiatives, as expected. However, endorsements of commission measures increase the percentage of “no” votes, compared to initiatives. The interactions have opposite effects on roll-off, with endorsement of legislative referrals increasing roll-off and endorsement of commission measures reducing roll-off. Legislature-sponsored amendments that receive newspaper endorsements see a decrease in “no” vote share of 3.3 percentage points, while commission amendments receive a dissuasive effect. One explanation is that commission-sponsored measures tend to be more sweeping than legislative referrals. For example, commission proposals included gender equality, cabinet restructuring, and merit selection of trial judges. These measures might have led to some skepticism from the public which may be cautious about major changes in the constitution. In contrast, legislative proposals typically are more limited and often highly technical. Newspaper endorsements

of these measures may sway readers who then are less likely to vote “no” than for initiatives. In contrast, voters are more likely to roll-off on legislative sponsored measures than for initiatives even for newspaper endorsed measures and are less likely to roll-off for commission-sponsored measures with newspaper endorsements. We think these differences are intriguing and worthy of future study.

The impact of endorsement conditional of salience was also unexpected. Endorsements of salient issues increases, rather than decreased “no” votes but did negatively affect roll-off. While these results appear to contradict our main finding, in reality they reinforce the finding. An amendment proposal that is covered in the New York Times is sufficiently salient to provide cues and information to citizens who may not need information provided by newspapers. Salient issues are also more likely to garner more opposition, as evidenced by the fact that salient issues increase “no” votes as shown in Table 2.

Newspaper endorsements in non-salient elections, and endorsements in elections predominantly comprised of third-party initiatives, reduce the “no” vote by 4% or 2%. Yet when newspapers make an endorsement on a salient amendment, newspapers paradoxically *dissuade* voters. Newspaper endorsements have a persuasive effect (3.3 percentage points) when the initiative is sponsored by the state Legislature, but a dissuasive effect (2.4 percentage points) when the initiative is sponsored by the state’s Constitutional Revision Commission.⁸

While these results appear to contradict our main finding, in reality they reinforce the finding. An amendment proposal that finds its way into the New York Times is sufficiently salient to provide cues and information to citizens. However, when a newspaper endorses a salient amendment, roll-off declines.

Finally, we report results from a model that examines the newspaper’s “like-mindedness” to the counties in its media market. We generate a measure of like-mindedness by measuring whether the newspaper endorsed the top-ticket executive that the county ended up voting for that election - if the newspaper endorsed the Democratic nominee in a particular year for Governor or President, for example, in a county with a majority that voted for the Democratic candidate for Governor or President. Like-minded newspapers

and electorates are coded as a 1; incongruent papers and electorates coded as a 0. If the newspaper’s top-ticket endorsement matches the electorate’s preferences, we would expect the constituents to be more accepting towards the newspaper’s amendment endorsements. The results of four models are reported in Table 4. Models 2 & 4 include interaction terms between like-mindedness and newspaper endorsements.

[Table 4 about here.]

The inclusion of the like-mindedness variable shows that individuals are more susceptible to endorsements when they share the partisan affiliation of the newspaper. Including like-mindedness as a control variable reduces the effect of persuasion to one percentage point - a newspaper endorsement decreases “no” votes by a smaller amount than the original model. Controlling for like-mindedness, endorsements appear to induce some voters to not vote for ballot initiatives, increasing roll-off by 1.7%.

Re-running these models with an interaction term reveals how like-mindedness influences the persuasive and inducement effects of newspapers. When a newspaper writes an opinion on a ballot initiative and does *not* share the partisan preferences of the county, there is no persuasive effect. Moreover, there is a small, disincentivizing effect as roll-off increases by 1.6 percentage points. By contrast, when the newspaper makes an endorsement and the county shares the paper’s partisan preferences, the share of “no” votes decreases by 2 percentage points and there is no noticeable roll-off. Even controlling for like-mindedness, our results indicate that citizens take informational cues from newspapers, although they are more receptive of newspapers that share partisan affinity.

Discussion

Recent scholarship has largely ignored the impact of newspaper endorsements on voting for ballot measures. We think this is an oversight and hope this work will encourage others to further examine this linkage. We expected that newspaper endorsements would be particularly important in persuading voters how to vote - i.e. through fewer “no” votes - and not necessarily in persuading votes to vote . We found just such a relationship.

Voters who seek information on ballot measures can find it in newspaper endorsements; inattentive voters don't seek this information and are not likely to be persuaded to vote by endorsements they don't read or hear about. Even when voters disagree with the partisan politics of their local newspaper, they are no less likely to eschew the information the newspaper provides concerning nonpartisan ballot initiatives.

We also think this analysis breaks new ground in studying all types of ballot measures. Typically research has focused on initiatives or other salient measures. We find that there are important differences in the effect of endorsement on different types of measures and on salient vs. non-salient measures. However, this aspect of our research needs more analysis, perhaps from other states. It makes sense that newspaper endorsements for initiatives, legislative referrals and constitutional commission measures would have differing effects on the electorate but the mechanisms for this effect are not yet fully evident. Similarly, the effect of newspaper endorsement on salient ballot measures is not clear from this study and needs further work. Measurement of salience of ballot measures has varied in past research. Our measure was one that set a high standard for salience that may have diluted the effect of non-salience.

Finally, we think this research is beneficial in that it highlights the difference between "no" votes and roll-off. The literature has often conflated the two and we think this is misleading. Those seeking information will respond to information provided by newspapers as one of the only (if not the only) source of guidance on ballot measures. This is particularly evident in mid-term elections where casual voters often stay home. These findings will hopefully encourage researchers to deconstruct the differences between the two in future research.

Future research needs to explore how this persuasive effect occurs. Do newspapers directly persuade readers, or do they induce their readership - who already have like-minded views - to persuade their social networks? Analysis of the microfoundations of newspaper endorsements will provide tentative answers to these questions. Most importantly we must understand, in an age of balkanized and post-fact news, the extent to which citizens turn to traditional sources of news to receive information.

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Notes

¹All ballot measures do not garner the same amount of public attention. For every salient issue like medical marijuana there are many measures on property taxes, judicial procedures, and ports that are rarely discussed over dinner tables and are not buttressed by advertising campaigns. In addition, constitutional amendments - since they become part of the state's fundamental law - are typically written by lawyers (and perhaps for lawyers) in language and tone difficult for many voters to understand. And they are at the end of a ballot - which can be quite long. These characteristics also play a role in voters' reactions and responses.

²The New York Times is the only national newspaper that reported on state ballot initiatives over the time period analyzed. We considered other measures of salience, including advertising dollars spent by proponents and opponents of any given amendment. However, the only public records of advertising dollars are those by groups supporting initiatives which would drastically reduce the size of our sample. Another measure of salience could come from public opinion polls, but there is sadly very little data on state constitutional amendments.

³We also considered the word count as appears on the ballot - however, there are several constraints placed on ballot word counts by local Supervisors of Elections and state officials. A ballot-based measure of complexity truncates word counts and eliminates useful information.

⁴After the passage of the state's infamous "pregnant pigs" amendment, Floridians adopted language that amended the state constitution to require a 60% supermajority to pass any new constitutional amendments.

⁵Panama City's newspaper, the *News Herald*, does not endorse ballot initiatives, and requests to speak to members of the newspaper were not returned. Thus we omit those observations, due to the absence of any record of endorsement/opposition to amendments out of the Panama City media market

⁶We are not interested in the correlation between roll-off and voter choice in and of itself, but in their correlated errors not accounted for by covariates. For reference, the correlation between our two dependent variables is 0.047, a very weak correlation indeed.

⁷Using OLS results, we find the same pattern - newspapers are more persuasive after 2000, contrary to popular notions of their declining relevance in political discussion, while there is no time-based interactive effect between endorsements and roll-off. We report both the SUR estimates and OLS estimates that account for time in the Appendix.

⁸There is an element of selection at work here - legislators are unlikely to propose unpopular amendments due to their own incentives as single-minded seekers of re-election. The commissions are not as focused on electoral support when proposing legislation.

Appendix

The following table reports coefficients from models using OLS instead of SUR.

[Table 5 about here.]

The following table includes models where we interact newspaper endorsements with dichotomous year variables, and models where we include a post-2000 dichotomous variable.

[Table 6 about here.]

The following table reports the estimated coefficients of the models reported in Table 2, consisting of only midterm elections. Presidential years bring more interest to the election, but also draw out less-informed voters. Midterms bring out fewer, but possibly more-informed, voters. Surprisingly, in midterm-only years, newspaper endorsements have a larger persuasive effect and smaller inducement effect.

[Table 7 about here.]

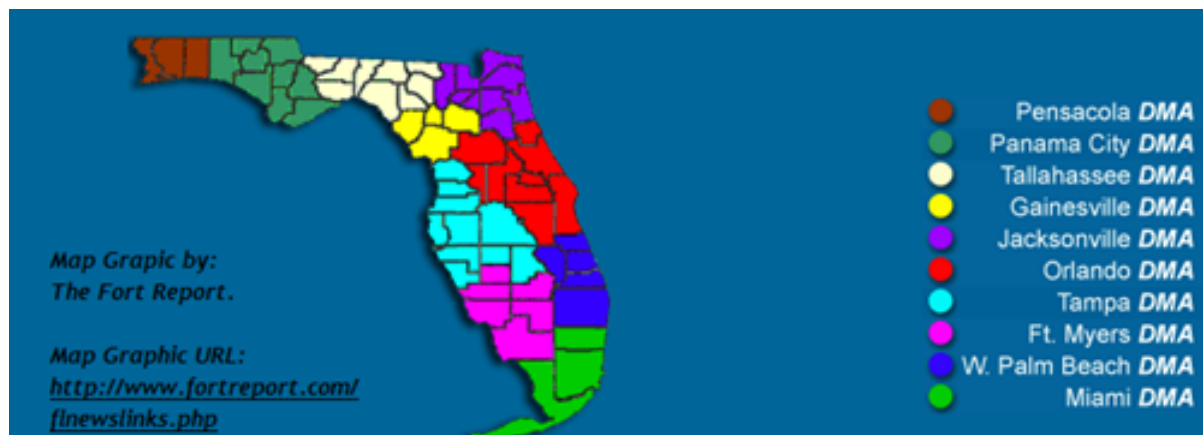


Table 1: Newspaper Endorsements on Nonpartisan Constitutional Amendments: Summary Statistics, Florida Constitutional Amendments, 1994-2014

	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Obs
Rolloff (un-transformed)	0.15740	0.09471	0.18773	5228
% "No" Vote	0.4280	0.4152	0.14462	5228
Endorsement	0.42770	0	0.49481	3942
Legislature Referral	0.53913	1	0.49850	5228
Commission Sponsor	0.18741	0	0.39026	5228
Salience	0.10954	0	0.31235	4893
Word Count (100s)	8.8288	4.7500	10.72204	5025
Ballot Position	4.8777	4.0000	3.0716	5228
Num. Amendments/Year	8.3846	8.0000	3.0521	5226
Percent College-Educated	17.4531	16.2000	8.4137	5228
County Turnout	95830.8	39715	149423	5228

Table 2: Seemingly-Unrelated Regression: Predictors of Voter Persuasion and Inducement to Vote on Constitutional Amendment Ballot Initiatives, 1994-2014

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	%No Vote on Amendment	Amendment Roll-off
	(1)	(2)
%No Vote on Amendment		-0.033 (0.024)
Amendment Roll-off	-0.014	(0.010)
Newspaper Endorsement	-0.036*** (0.004)	-0.002 (0.007)
Salience	0.032** (0.007)	-0.010 (0.003)
Amendment Word Count	0.003*** (0.000)	0.001* (0.011)
Amendment Ballot Position	0.005*** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Total Amendments on Ballot	0.002* (0.001)	-0.001 (0.003)
County %College	-0.001* (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)
County %Turnout	0.075*** (0.018)	-0.127** (0.028)
Legislative Sponsor	-0.006 (0.005)	0.027** (0.008)
Commission Sponsor	-0.006 (0.007)	0.053*** (0.011)
Intercept	0.491*** (0.024)	0.102*** (0.025)
Midterm Election	-0.050** (0.008)	-0.033** (0.012)
Observations	3,858	3,858
Adjusted R ²	0.112	0.016

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 3: Seemingly-Unrelated Regression: Predictors of Voter Persuasion and Inducement to Vote on Constitutional Amendment Ballot Initiatives, 1994-2014

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	% No Vote			Amendment Roll-off		
%No Vote on Amendment				-0.025 (0.025)	-0.024 (0.025)	-0.027 (0.025)
Amendment Roll-off	-0.010 (0.010)	-0.010 (0.010)	-0.011 (0.010)			
Newspaper Endorsement	-0.042*** (0.005)	-0.021*** (0.006)	-0.040*** (0.005)	0.003 (0.007)	-0.019** (0.009)	0.008 (0.007)
Salience	0.014* (0.008)	0.034*** (0.007)	0.031*** (0.007)	0.005 (0.013)	-0.013 (0.011)	-0.008 (0.011)
Amendment Word Count	0.003*** (0.000)	0.003*** (0.000)	0.003*** (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)
Amendment Ballot Position	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Total Amendments on Ballot	0.001 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
County %College	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)
County %Turnout	-0.123*** (0.031)	-0.127*** (0.032)	-0.126*** (0.032)	-0.125** (0.049)	-0.121** (0.049)	-0.118** (0.049)
Legislative Sponsor	-0.006 (0.005)	0.007 (0.006)	-0.007 (0.005)	0.023*** (0.008)	0.008 (0.010)	0.024** (0.008)
Commission Sponsor	-0.003 (0.007)	-0.008 (0.007)	-0.022** (0.011)	0.046*** (0.012)	0.050*** (0.011)	0.087*** (0.016)
Midterm Election	-0.051*** (0.014)	-0.051*** (0.008)	-0.050*** (0.008)	0.032*** (0.012)	0.032*** (0.012)	-0.034*** (0.012)
Endorsement x Salience	0.057*** (0.014)			-0.049** (0.022)		
Endorsement x Leg. Sponsor		-0.033*** (0.009)			0.036*** (0.013)	
Endorsement x Cmsn. Sponsor			0.024** (0.011)			-0.058*** (0.018)
Intercept	0.498*** (0.024)	0.487*** (0.024)	0.494*** (0.024)	0.200*** (0.039)	0.200*** (0.039)	0.189*** (0.039)
Observations	3,858	3,858	3,858	3,858	3,858	3,858
Adjusted R ²	0.116	0.116	0.113	0.017	0.018	0.019

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 4: Like-Mindedness, Seemingly-Unrelated Regression: Predictors of Voter Persuasion and Inducement to Vote on Constitutional Amendment Ballot Initiatives, 1994-2014

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	% No Vote On Initiative		Amendment Rolloff	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
%No Vote on Amendment			0.158*** (0.023)	0.158*** (0.027)
Amendment Rolloff	0.077*** (0.011)	0.077*** (0.011)		
Newspaper Endorsement	-0.010*** (0.005)	-0.001 (0.007)	0.017** (0.007)	0.016* (0.010)
Like Mindedness	0.006 (0.005)	0.014** (0.006)	0.034*** (0.007)	0.034*** (0.009)
Salience	-0.004 (0.008)	-0.004 (0.008)	0.002 (0.012)	0.002 (0.012)
Amendment Word Count	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Amendment Ballot Position	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Total Amendments on Ballot	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
County Pct. College	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)
County Pct. Turnout	-0.051** (0.021)	-0.052*** (0.021)	0.019 (0.030)	0.019 (0.030)
Legislative Sponsor	-0.008 (0.006)	-0.008 (0.006)	-0.009 (0.009)	-0.009 (0.009)
Commission Sponsor	-0.007 (0.008)	-0.005 (0.008)	0.001 (0.012)	0.001 (0.012)
Newspaper Endorsement:Like Mindedness		-0.018** (0.009)		0.001 (0.013)
Intercept	0.470*** (0.017)	0.467*** (0.018)	-0.002 (0.027)	-0.002 (0.027)
Observations	3,858	3,858	3,858	3,858
Adjusted R ²	0.004	0.005	0.008	0.008

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5: OLS Regression With Fixed Effects: Predictors of Voter Persuasion and Inducement to Vote on Constitutional Amendment Ballot Initiatives, 1994-2014

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	pctno	rolloff
	(1)	(2)
Newspaper Endorsements	−0.035*** (0.004)	0.009*** (0.002)
Salience	−0.026*** (0.006)	0.032*** (0.003)
Amendment Word Count	−0.0002 (0.011)	0.048*** (0.004)
Amendment Position	0.013 (0.008)	−0.029*** (0.003)
Total Amendments	0.013*** (0.002)	0.003*** (0.001)
County Pct. College	0.006*** (0.001)	−0.00004 (0.0003)
County Pct. Turnout	0.012** (0.005)	0.015*** (0.002)
Legislative Sponsor	0.003* (0.002)	0.0005 (0.001)
Commission Sponsor	−0.160*** (0.054)	0.230*** (0.032)
Intercept	0.340*** (0.090)	−0.160*** (0.030)
Fixed Effects	Y	Y
Observations	3,858	3,858
Adjusted R ²	0.280	0.950
F Statistic (df = 74; 3783)	21.000***	940.000***
<i>Note:</i> *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

Table 6: Measuring The Impact of Time: OLS Models, Predictors of Voter Persuasion and Inducement to Vote on Constitutional Ballot Initiatives, 1994-2014

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	pctno		rolloff	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
endorsement	0.013 (0.015)	-0.035*** (0.004)	0.019*** (0.007)	0.009*** (0.002)
legspens	-0.042*** (0.006)	-0.019*** (0.006)	0.030*** (0.003)	0.037*** (0.002)
cmsnspons	-0.036*** (0.010)	-0.003 (0.007)	0.048*** (0.004)	0.051*** (0.003)
nytmention	0.022*** (0.008)	0.035*** (0.008)	-0.030*** (0.003)	-0.008*** (0.003)
wordcountballot	0.015*** (0.002)	0.020*** (0.002)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
racecode	0.006*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.001)	-0.0002 (0.0003)	0.0002 (0.0003)
totamends	-0.015** (0.006)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.010*** (0.003)	-0.003*** (0.0004)
pctcollege	0.003 (0.002)	0.017*** (0.001)	0.0003 (0.001)	-0.004*** (0.001)
pctturnout	-0.150*** (0.051)	0.120*** (0.021)	0.230*** (0.032)	0.082*** (0.008)
as.factor(year)1998	0.077 (0.055)		-0.076*** (0.026)	
as.factor(year)2000	0.018 (0.016)		0.069*** (0.011)	
as.factor(year)2002	0.018 (0.036)		-0.035** (0.017)	
as.factor(year)2004	-0.055*** (0.021)		-0.085*** (0.010)	
as.factor(year)2006	-0.099*** (0.018)		-0.003 (0.011)	
as.factor(year)2008	-0.056** (0.022)		-0.043*** (0.008)	
as.factor(year)2010	0.120*** (0.024)		-0.044*** (0.011)	
as.factor(year)2012	0.160*** (0.041)		-0.120*** (0.019)	
as.factor(year)2014				
post2000		-0.057*** (0.007)		-0.026*** (0.003)
endorsement:as.factor(year)1998	-0.006 (0.016)		0.001 (0.008)	
endorsement:as.factor(year)2000				
endorsement:as.factor(year)2002	-0.062*** (0.018)		-0.021** (0.008)	
endorsement:as.factor(year)2004	-0.025 (0.018)		-0.011 (0.008)	
endorsement:as.factor(year)2006	-0.057*** (0.020)		-0.013 (0.009)	
endorsement:as.factor(year)2008	0.110*** (0.025)		-0.018** (0.009)	
endorsement:as.factor(year)2010	-0.190*** (0.021)		-0.010 (0.009)	
endorsement:as.factor(year)2012	-0.099 (0.020)		-0.012 (0.008)	
endorsement:as.factor(year)2014	-0.170 (0.021)		-0.027** (0.011)	
Constant	0.480*** (0.088)	-0.360*** (0.061)	-0.140*** (0.032)	0.210*** (0.023)
Observations	3,858	3,858	3,858	3,858
Adjusted R ²	0.330	0.170	0.950	0.940
F Statistic	25.000***	13.000***	854.000***	919.000***

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 7: Midterm Elections: OLS Models, Predictors of Voter Persuasion and Inducement to Vote on Constitutional Amendment Ballot Initiatives, 1994-2014

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	pctno	rolloff
	(1)	(2)
Newspaper Endorsements	−0.072*** (0.005)	0.007*** (0.002)
Salience	−0.087*** (0.007)	0.027*** (0.003)
Amendment Word Count	−0.026** (0.011)	0.043*** (0.004)
Amendment Position	−0.023*** (0.007)	−0.025*** (0.003)
Total Amendments	−0.012*** (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)
County Pct. College	0.003*** (0.001)	−0.0004 (0.0004)
County Pct. Turnout	−0.002 (0.002)	0.004*** (0.001)
Legislative Sponsor	0.002 (0.002)	−0.001 (0.001)
Commission Sponsor	−0.270*** (0.067)	0.250*** (0.047)
Intercept	0.580*** (0.110)	−0.064 (0.039)
Observations	2,095	2,095
Adjusted R ²	0.340	0.950
F Statistic	16.000***	642.000***

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01