

Information and Turnout in U.S. Elections - Adam Bonica, Kyle Dropp, and Jonathan Rodden

Overview

A common complaint among academics, journalists and pundits alike is that in the U.S. Congress and state legislatures, tiny primary electorates choose extremist candidates who then face one another in the general election, ultimately producing a polarized and dysfunctional legislature.

One claim is that with the dizzying array of local races and candidates on the ballot in a U.S. primary election, the vast majority of voters choose to abstain, especially those with moderate or relatively inchoate political preferences. This may be particularly acute in races where informational shortcuts such as party labels (e.g., Republican, Democrat) are not available, such as in primaries, non-partisan general elections or in general elections where two candidates of the same party face each other.

We propose experimental research designed to assess these claims. Beginning with an experiment embedded in a survey and culminating in a field experiment, we will provide individuals with non-partisan information in visual form about candidates' ideological positions based primarily on their fundraising activities, and examine whether this information treatment has an impact on ballot roll-off, the fraction of down-ballot races left blank, political participation, measured by voter turnout, and incumbency bias. We have administered statewide surveys in Florida and California that examine the impact of providing candidate ideological information on ballot roll-off and voter interest and have found that these visual information cues reduce ballot roll-off. We are in the process of implementing statewide field experiments for U.S. Congress and other statewide contests that examine the impact, if any, of providing candidate ideological information on ballot roll-off, incumbency bias and voter turnout.

Our goal in this research is to understand how providing voters with non-partisan, visual information about candidates' positions might impact how much information voters have about candidates and whether this information affects the likelihood that voters leave their lower ballot races blank.

Experimental Approach

Our approach is to use estimated candidate positions using a statistical model applied to campaign finance records. We propose an interlocking survey experiment and a field experiment built around the use of visual spatial cues. Preliminary testing using Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing Internet marketplace, and/or small samples with the survey company Survey Sampling

International, Inc. (SSI), will examine how respondents interact with and take in information from visual cues. We have also conducted two survey experiments using online interactive visual cues about candidates (see the figure below) in California and Florida, two large states with primary elections in June 2014 and August 2014, respectively. Then, we will conduct a randomized field experiment involving the mailing of voter guides in the states of New Hampshire, Montana and California in contests where party identification does not provide a meaningful cue. These contests include a statewide contest for Supreme Court, a statewide contest for Superintendent of Public Instruction and two Congressional races in California where two Republicans are facing each other.