
New Electorate Study

Vote Centers and Public Perceptions: The Effects of Political Parties and Policy Arguments

Cheryl Boudreau, Benjamin Highton, and David Bracken – UC Davis

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do different types of political information affect citizens' perceptions of the California Voter's Choice Act?

METHODS

To address this question, we conducted a survey of over 5,000 Californians that asked them to read a brief description of the California Voter's Choice Act and then express their views about it. Specifically, respondents were asked to express their level of support for the Act, as well as their perceptions of how easy or difficult it will be for Californians to vote under the new voting system.

Within the survey, we embedded an experiment that randomly assigned respondents to receive different types of information about the new voting system. Some respondents read only the brief description of the California Voter's Choice Act before expressing their views (the control group). Other respondents receive additional information before expressing their views (the treatment groups). Specifically, respondents assigned to the party cues treatment group also receive information about the political parties' positions on the new voting system—namely, that virtually all Democrats in the California state legislature voted in favor of this new system, while virtually all Republicans voted against it. Other respondents receive policy arguments commonly made in support of or opposition to the new voting system. Those assigned to the pro-argument treatment group are given a policy argument in support of the California Voter's Choice Act (i.e., that it will make voting more convenient and reduce the costs of conducting elections in California). In contrast, those assigned to the con-argument treatment group are given a policy argument against the new voting system (i.e., that it will make voting more impersonal and inconvenient).

Finally, respondents assigned to the conflicting information treatment group receive their own political party's position on the California Voter's Choice Act, as well as the policy argument that conflicts with their own party's position. Thus, Democrats receive information about their own party's support of the new voting system together with the con-argument. Republicans receive information about their own party's opposition to the new voting system together with the pro-argument.

The party cues and policy arguments used in our study were truthful information. The policy arguments were drawn from actual coverage of the California Voter's Choice Act. Specifically, the arguments in favor of and in opposition to the new voting system were provided in newspapers like the Sacramento Bee. The arguments in favor of the new voting system were also included in materials circulated to voters by groups like the League of Women Voters and even on the Secretary of State's website.

By varying these different types of political information and by including a control group of respondents that does not receive them, we are able to assess whether and how information shapes citizens' views about California's new voting system.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

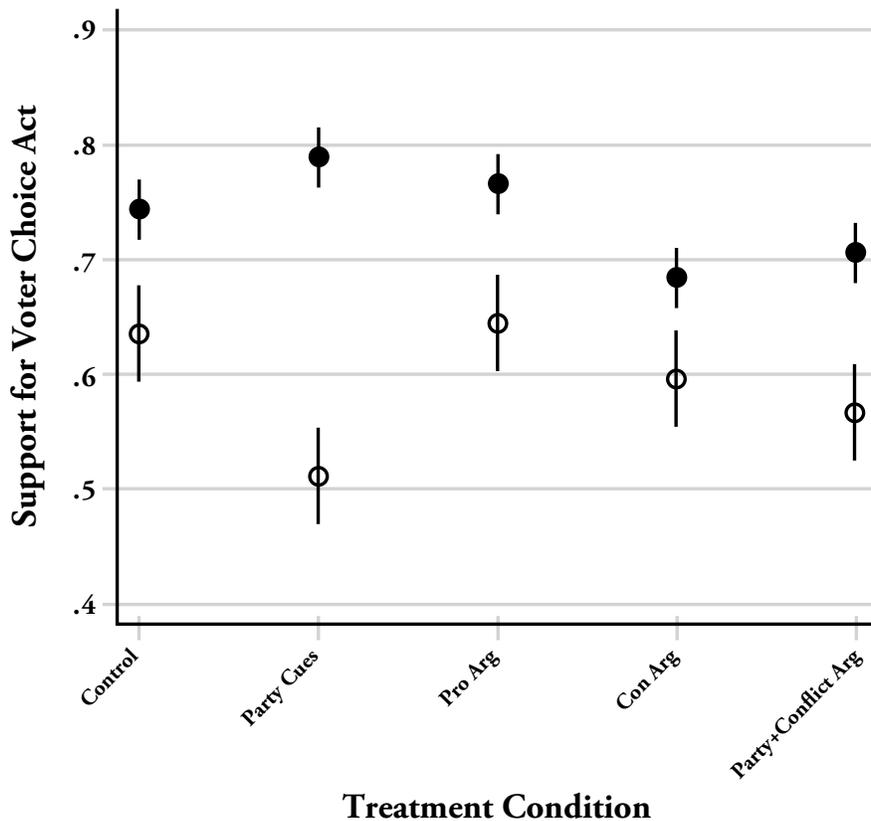
Across all the experimental conditions and among both Democrats and Republicans, respondents were generally supportive of the California Voter's Choice Act. Those who felt positively about the new voting system always outnumbered those who felt negatively. And those who felt that the California Voter's Choice Act would make voting easier always outnumbered those who thought it would make voting more difficult.

Nonetheless, the results of our experiment show that citizens' views about the California Voter's Choice Act and its effects are shaped by the information that they receive about it. As shown in Figure 1, information about the political parties' positions (i.e., party cues) further polarizes Democrats' and Republicans' support for the new voting system. That is, Democrats have higher levels of support for the California Voter's Choice Act than Republicans in the control group, and these differences become even more pronounced when they receive information about the parties' positions on the new voting system. This indicates that citizens are to some degree following their party's lead when forming opinions about the new voting system.

Figure 1 also shows that the policy argument against the new voting system had stronger effects on both Democrats and Republicans than did the policy argument in support of the new voting system. Indeed, while the pro-argument had minimal effects, both Democrats' and Republicans' support for the California Voter's Choice Act decreased in response to the argument that emphasized the impersonal feel and inconvenience of Vote Centers.

Importantly, we also find that the policy arguments counteract the polarization that we observe in response to party cues when they conflict with respondents' own party's position. Among Democrats, the con-argument dampens the positive effect of the Democratic Party's support for the California Voter's Choice Act when both are provided together. Among Republicans, the pro-argument counteracts the strong negative effect of the Republican Party's opposition to the new voting system when both are provided together. In this way, our results indicate that both Democrats and Republicans respond to policy arguments even when they are at odds with their own political party's position. This suggests that substantive information about the new voting system can have an effect even in partisan environments and potentially reduce partisan polarization in public opinion about the new voting system.

Figure 1. Support for the Voter's Choice Act by Experimental Condition

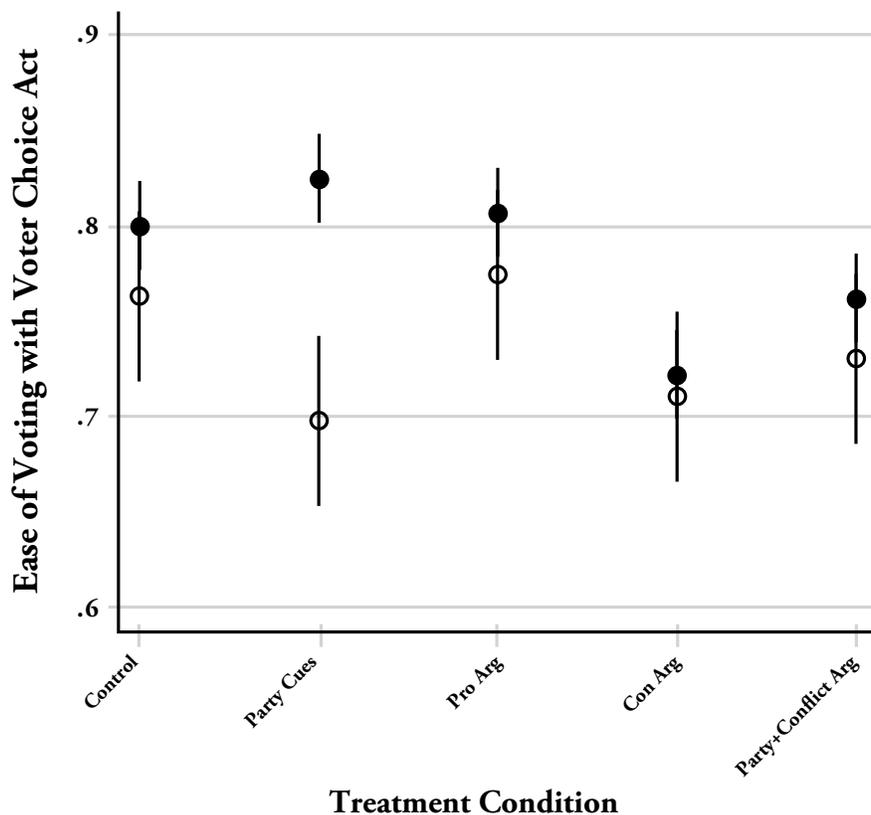


Notes: Figure shows means by treatment condition for Democratic (•) and Republican (o) partisans with vertical lines indicating 95% confidence intervals.

We observe a similar pattern of results for an outcome that may affect citizens' willingness to vote under the new system: their perceptions of how easy or difficult voting will be under the California Voter's Choice Act. As before (and as shown in Figure 2), we observe differences in Democrats' and Republicans' perceptions even in the control group, with Democrats believing that voting will be easier under the new system than Republicans, though the partisan differences cannot confidently be distinguished from zero. Figure 2 also shows that these differences in Democrats' and Republicans' perceptions again become more pronounced when they receive information about the parties' positions on the new voting system. Surprisingly, the pro-argument emphasizing the convenience of voting under the new system did little to change Democrats' or Republicans' perceptions of how easy it would be to vote under the new system. In contrast, the con-argument emphasizing the impersonal feel and inconvenience of Vote Centers altered both Democrats' and Republicans' perceptions, making them believe that voting would be more difficult under the new voting system.

We also again find that the policy arguments counteract the polarizing effects of the party cues among both Democrats and Republicans when they conflict with respondents' own party's position. As shown in Figure 2, the con-argument reduces the positive effect that the Democratic Party's position has on Democrats' beliefs about the ease of voting under the new system. Among Republicans, the pro-argument somewhat counteracts the negative effect that the Republican Party's position has on Republicans' beliefs. Thus, we once again find that substantive policy arguments can shape Democrats' and Republicans' perceptions even when they are communicated in polarized partisan environments, or put simply, that citizens do not blindly follow their party when also provided with substantive information about policies.

Figure 2. Beliefs about Voting Ease with the Voter's Choice Act by Experimental Condition



Notes: Figure shows means by treatment condition for Democratic (•) and Republican (o) partisans with vertical lines indicating 95% confidence intervals.