

Educative Effects of Direct Democracy: Evidence from the US States

Daniel A. Smith, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of Political Science

University of Florida

1. In examining arguments for and against the expansion of referendums (and possibly initiatives) in the UK, I would urge the Constitution Committee to take into consideration some of the ameliorative “educative effects” of ballot measures (Smith and Tolbert 2004). Recent research on the potential impact of ballot measures (initiatives and referendums)—irrespective of their instrumental policy outcomes—has found that citizen lawmaking can enhance civic engagement and political participation. Because it offers citizens an opportunity to directly participate in policymaking as a citizen-lawmaker, the plebiscitary process can substantively alter the political attitudes and behavior of individuals (Bowler, Donovan, and Tolbert 1998). Scholars studying the educative effects of ballot measures in the American states and other contexts, have found that individuals desire more direct democracy (Bowler, Donovan, Karp 2007; Donovan and Karp 2006). More importantly, citizens are more likely to engage in political activity when they are exposed to ballot measures, as they understand that their participation in the electoral process has real policy implications. Specifically, as I will outline below, scholars have found that ballot measures can increase political interest, political knowledge, and voter turnout.

2. Scholars conducting research on the American states, 24 of which permit citizens to place initiatives on the ballot (Smith and Fridkin 2008), have shown that the mere exposure to policy questions on the ballot can increase political interest among the electorate. The logic is relatively simple. Ballot issues—be they questions concerning tax limitations, term limits, affirmative action, gay marriage, abortion rights, immigration, the minimum wage, the environment, or in the case of Britain, membership in the European Economic Community—generate considerable media attention, position-taking by the parties, and reflection and commentary by political elites. In a sense, ballot measures can create “state-specific issue publics,” as the rich information environment that results from the plebiscitary process elevates some policy issues, making them more salient in the minds of voters. Faced with being a lawmaker for a day, most voters take their responsibility seriously, engaging in discussion and deliberation about the policy questions on the ballot. In 2006, for example, six American states had statewide ballot measures raising the minimum wage on their ballots. Drawing on national survey data from across the 50 states, Smith and Tolbert (2010) show that those voters who were directly exposed to the ballot initiative campaigns were not only more likely to support hiking the minimum wage, but were more likely to say that the economy was the most important issue in the election. The minimum wage issues, they find, were the source of considerable discussion during the election. Scholars also have demonstrated that ballot measures can prime voters to consider the issue at hand when assessing candidates running for office (Nicholson 2005; Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2008). In 2004, for example, the American presidential campaign was influenced by the presence of same-sex marriage measures placed on 13 statewide ballots, which raised the import of moral values in the consideration of the candidates (Smith, DeSantis, and Kassel 2006; Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2008).

3. Scholars working in the U.S. and elsewhere have found that citizens' political knowledge is enhanced when they are exposed to ballot questions. In particular, scholars have shown that exposure to salient ballot propositions can increase a citizen's political knowledge (Smith 2002; Tolbert, McNeal, and Smith 2003). These studies, which draw on 50-state data from the American states, are bolstered by findings from Switzerland which show that citizens are better informed when they reside in cantons with more opportunities for direct political participation (Benz and Stutzer 2004). In addition, research on a 1992 national referendum in Canada shows that exposure to the referenda in the provinces led to increased citizen interest in politics as well as knowledge (Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000). Others have shown that being exposed to ballot measures has a broad knowledge effect, as the increase in political knowledge extends to those with low levels of formal education (Tolbert and Bowen 2008).

4. One of the most important and robust educative effects of direct democracy is increased voter turnout (Smith and Tolbert 2001; Smith and Tolbert 2005; Smith 2001; (Schlozman and Yohai 2008). Recent research has found that the presence of ballot measures increases turnout in low profile, midterm elections, as well as in higher profile presidential elections. Using the number of initiatives on state ballots to measure campaign effects over a twenty-five year period (1980–2004), Tolbert and Smith (2005) found that, on average, each initiative boosted a state's turnout by almost one percent in presidential elections and almost two percent in midterm elections, all other factors held constant. For example, a state with four initiatives on the ballot is expected to have four percent higher turnout in a presidential election than a similar state with no initiatives on the ballot. Using an experimental design, Lassen (2005) found that citizens permitted to vote on referenda in Switzerland had increased levels of participation. Individual-level survey data provide evidence that voters exposed to initiative contests (or residing in states with salient propositions on the ballot) are more likely to vote, controlling for other known predictors of turnout, including age and education (Tolbert, Smith, and McNeal 2003; Lacey 2005). Using national opinion data from the 2004 and 2006 U.S. elections, Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith (2009) find that independents (relative to partisans) had greater awareness of and interest in ballot measures in the midterm election, but not in the presidential election, where peripheral voters are already likely to be mobilized by the stimulus of the presidential race (Smith and Tolbert 2001). Without measures on the ballot, it appears that many episodic voters without partisan affiliations may not be engaged by candidate races alone. Perhaps more than any other "educative effect," then, turnout effects of ballot propositions are well established both in the United States and cross-nationally.

5. To be sure, direct democracy in the form of referendums or initiatives, is no panacea for political participation and civic engagement, as there are many potential pitfalls of ballot measures, including the domination of vested economic interests (Smith 1998; Garrett and Smith 2004; Smith 2004; Smith 2010). But the plebiscitary process—if properly implemented and regulated—can give a greater voice to ordinary citizens, and by doing so, enhance their political interest, political knowledge, and likelihood to turnout in elections.

References

- Benz, Matthias and Alois Stutzer. 2004. "Are Voters Better Informed When They have a Larger Say In Politics?" *Public Choice* 119: 21–59.
- Bowler, Shaun, and Todd Donovan. 2002. "Democracy, Institutions and Attitudes about Citizen Influence on Government," *British Journal of Political Science* 32: 371-390.
- Bowler, Shaun, Todd Donovan and Caroline Tolbert. 1998. *Citizens as Legislators: Direct Democracy in the American States*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Bowler, Shaun, Todd Donovan, and Jeffrey Karp. 2007. "Enraged or Engaged? Preferences for Direct Citizen Participation in Affluent Democracies," *Political Research Quarterly* 60(3):351-62.
- Donovan, Todd and Jeffrey Karp. 2006. "Popular Support for Direct Democracy," *Party Politics* 12: 671-688.
- Donovan, Todd, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Daniel A. Smith. 2009. "Political Engagement, Mobilization, and Direct Democracy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73: 98-118.
- Donovan, Todd, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Daniel A. Smith. 2008. "Priming Presidential Votes by Direct Democracy," *Journal of Politics* 70: 1217-31.
- Garrett, Elisabeth, and Daniel A. Smith. 2005. "Veiled Political Actors and Campaign Disclosure Laws in Direct Democracy." *Election Law Journal* 4 (4) 295-328.
- Lacey, Robert. 2005. "The Electoral Allure of Direct Democracy: The Effect of Initiative Salience on Voting, 1990–1996," *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 5: 168–81.
- Lassen, David. 2005. "The Effect of Information on Voter Turnout: Evidence From a Natural Experiment," *American Journal of Political Science* 49: 103-18.
- Mendelsohn, Matthew, and Fred Cutler. 2000. "The Effect of Referenda on Democratic Citizens: Information, Politicization, Efficacy and Tolerance," *British Journal of Political Science* 30: 669–98.
- Nicholson, Stephen. 2005. *Voting the Agenda: Candidates Elections and Ballot Propositions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Schlozman, Daniel, and I. Yohai. 2008. "How Initiatives Don't Always Make Citizens: Ballot Initiatives in the American States, 1978–2004," *Political Behavior* 30: 469-89.
- Smith, Daniel A. 2010. "Financing Ballot Measures in the U.S.," in Karin Gilland-Lutz and Simon Hug, eds., *Financing Referendum Campaigns*. New York: Palgrave.
- Smith, Daniel A. 2004. "Peeling Away the Populist Rhetoric: Toward a Taxonomy of Anti-Tax Ballot Initiatives." *Journal of Public Budgeting and Finance* 24 (4): 88-110.
- Smith, Daniel A. 1998. *Tax Crusaders and the Politics of Direct Democracy*. NY: Routledge.
- Smith, Daniel A., Matthew DeSantis, and Jason Kassel. 2006. "Same-Sex Marriage Ballot Measures and the 2004 Presidential Election," *State and Local Government Review* 38: 78-91.
- Smith, Daniel A. and Dustin Fridkin. 2008. "Delegating Direct Democracy: Interparty Legislative Competition and the Adoption of the Initiative in the American States," *American Political Science Review* 102: 333-50.
- Smith, Daniel A., and Caroline J. Tolbert. 2010. "Direct Democracy, Opinion Formation, and Candidate Choice," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (forthcoming).
- Smith, Daniel A., and Caroline J. Tolbert. 2004. *Educated by Initiative: The Effects of Direct Democracy on Citizens and Political Organizations in the American States*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Smith, Daniel A., and Caroline Tolbert. 2001. "The Initiative to Party: Partisanship and Ballot Initiatives in California," *Party Politics* 7: 738-757.
- Smith, Mark. 2002. "Ballot initiatives and the democratic citizen," *Journal of Politics* 64: 892–903.
- Smith, Mark. 2001. "The contingent effects of ballot initiatives and candidate races on turnout," *American Journal of Political Science* 45: 700–6.
- Tolbert, Caroline J., and Daniel Bowen. 2008. "Direct Democracy, Engagement and Voter Turnout." In Bruce Cain, Todd Donovan, and Caroline J. Tolbert (eds.), *Democracy in the States: Experiments in Election Reform*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Tolbert, Caroline J., Ramona McNeal, and Daniel A. Smith. 2003. "Enhancing Civic Engagement: The Effect Of Direct Democracy On Political Participation And Knowledge," *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 3: 23–41.
- Tolbert, Caroline, John Grummel, and Daniel A. Smith. 2001. "The Effects of Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout In The American States," *American Politics Research* 29: 625–48.
- Tolbert, Caroline J., and Daniel A. Smith. 2005. "The Educative Effects of Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout." *American Politics Research* 33 (2): 283-309.