



When Does Ballot Language Influence Voter Choices? Evidence from a Survey Experiment

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Under what conditions can political elites influence elections to favor their preferred policy outcomes by strategically crafting the language printed on the ballot? Drawing on psychological and political theories of voter cognition, we design a survey experiment to assess the degree to which ballot text can influence voter behavior in direct democracy elections and identify factors that may moderate such effects. We show that the language used to describe a ballot measure does indeed have the potential to affect election outcomes, including measures dealing with contentious social issues affecting individual rights. We also find, however, that exposing individuals to basic campaign information—in our case, endorsements from prominent interest groups—greatly attenuates the framing effects of ballot text. Our results suggest that the extent to which ballot text matters depends on the vibrancy of the campaign environment and other information available to voters.

Keywords direct democracy, ballot wording, political framing, cues, voter competency, Proposition 8

Direct democracy offers citizens the ability to shape public policy without having elected representatives act as an intermediary. Yet, whether the policies enacted through the initiative process accurately reflect voter preferences or are instead captured by narrow special interests remains a topic of some debate (e.g., Gerber, 1996; Matsusaka, 2004). In this study, we focus on an important but largely overlooked question at the heart of direct democracy: Can political elites use misleading language to befuddle the electorate, leading to the adoption of policies that diverge from those that voters actually prefer (e.g., Lakoff, 1995, 2002)? This concern is particularly pressing in the context of direct democracy elections, featuring short summaries describing policy proposals printed directly on the ballot that may be open to direct manipulation by political elites (e.g., Gafke & Leuthold, 1979). Indeed, observers routinely claim that politicians and interest groups use the institutional tools at their disposal to tailor confusing or outright misleading ballot text to describe initiatives and referendums that voters see on their ballots (e.g., Chapin, 2012; Egelko, 2008; Harmon, 2010; Rogers, 2010). Such complaints frequently give rise to legal disputes. During the 2012 election cycle alone, debates over contentious ballot wording resulted in nearly two dozen lawsuits in 10 separate states.¹

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<p>JUDGE, COURT OF SPECIAL APPEALS AT LARGE Robert A. Zarnoch Vote Yes or No For Continuance in Office</p> <p><input type="radio"/> YES <input type="radio"/> NO</p>	<p>QUESTION 1 Constitutional Amendment Early Voting; Polling Places; Absentee Ballots</p> <p>Authorizes the General Assembly to enact legislation to allow qualified voters to vote at polling places inside or outside of their election districts or wards and to vote up to two weeks before an election. This amendment also authorizes the General Assembly to enact legislation to allow absentee voting by qualified voters who choose to vote by absentee ballot, in addition to voters who are absent at the time of the election or who are unable to vote personally.</p> <p>(Amends Article I, §§1 and 3 of the Maryland Constitution)</p> <p><input type="radio"/> For the Constitutional Amendment <input type="radio"/> Against the Constitutional Amendment</p>
<p>BOARD OF EDUCATION AT LARGE Vote for One</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Mark Cascia <input type="radio"/> Faye C. Lister <input type="radio"/> Write-in _____</p>	
<p>BOARD OF EDUCATION</p>	

Figure 1. Sample title and summary for a ballot measure.

The argument that litigants make in such cases is that the wording used to present an issue to voters—who usually lack a deep understanding of policy—can affect how they evaluate the proposed policy and may prove pivotal in determining the outcome of an election. Concerns about misleading language are particularly relevant for official ballot titles and summaries in initiative and referendum elections because these represent the only pieces of text that *every* voter is guaranteed to see and are the last bits of information voters encounter before casting their ballots. While some voters may be impervious to these persuasion efforts, for many, the official title and summary printed on their ballot (see Figure 1 for an example) represent the “first and only exposure to the issue” (Harmon, 2010).

There are, however, reasons to doubt that the text printed on the ballot always fairly and accurately summarizes the underlying policy proposals. In each of the 24 states where voters can use initiatives to bypass the legislative process and weigh in on the content of laws directly, the responsibility for writing the text that voters see on the ballot is assigned to political actors who may have their own political agendas.² Although these political elites may hold policy goals that are in conflict with the majority of the electorate, most states grant these actors formal authority that they could potentially use to influence the democratic process.

In this article, we apply two conceptual tools from the research on voter cognition—framing and low-information cues—to identify the conditions under which elite distortion of ballot text poses a democratic problem. In particular, we examine the degree to which biased text can mislead voters and whether such effects are moderated or reduced in realistic campaign contexts. Using a survey experiment, we examine how the use of alternative ballot titles and summaries changes the level of voter support for two different ballot measures that cover topics at the heart of morality politics today: abortion and same-sex marriage. Consistent with existing literature on framing, we find strong evidence that ballot wording has the potential to shift public opinion—and likely voting behavior—significantly. We also find, however, that an active election environment, in which voters confront new information and learn over the course of the campaign, can substantially mitigate the effects of ballot framing. Our results show that providing voters with a single pair of endorsements from prominent interest groups can cut the framing effects of a ballot measure’s description by about half, a result that is consistent with the general findings of Druckman (2001b) and Druckman, Hennessy, St. Charles, and Webber (2010). In low-information elections where

there is no meaningful electioneering or when the campaigning is one-sided, however, our experiment suggests that ballot text may influence the behavior of voters, and, in some cases, swing the outcome of a close election. Our findings provide important lessons for scholars, legal observers, and political reformers whose goal is to ensure that democratic elections work as intended and provide voters with the opportunity to choose their most preferred policies accurately.

Why Ballot Text Matters

The main promise of direct democracy is that it allows voters to circumvent the legislative process to effect policy change. This helps voters enact policies that the legislature may be reluctant to consider and to motivate the legislature to create policies that are closer to the preferences of the median voter (see Gerber, 1996; Lupia, Krupnikov, Levine, Piston, & Von Hagen-Jamar, 2010; Matsusaka, 2004). Yet, most voters know very little about the preponderance of measures they must consider, meaning that many turn to the brief summaries printed on the ballot as they make their decision (Burnett, 2013; Matsusaka, 2005). The ability to craft the ballot text thus provides elected officials and political elites an opportunity to potentially thwart the will of the electorate.

In 15 of the 24 states with the direct initiative, an elected official—usually the state attorney general—writes the official ballot title and summary (Waters, 2003, p. 17).³ An additional five states require the proponents of the measure to write the ballot title and summary, with the proviso that an elected official approve the language.⁴ For legislative referendums, the ballot text is often drafted directly by the legislature. Because the preferences of elected officials and ballot measure proponents may differ substantially from those of the statewide electorate, these actors may use the ballot text to influence voters and shift policy away from outcomes the majority of voters prefer.

The possibility that ballot text might influence voter behavior is not an idle threat. Research by political scientists, communications scholars, and psychologists has documented how elite actors can craft political messages to influence the expressed opinions of voters without changing their underlying attitudes or values (e.g., Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, & Krosnick, 1984; Jacoby, 2000; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Zaller, 1992). Of particular relevance to the controversies dealing with ballot wording is the mechanism known as framing, which builds on the idea that logically equivalent but subtly different presentations of an issue can produce radically divergent responses (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Individual attitudes and opinions about even the most trivial political issues usually reflect an aggregation of a number of separate, and sometimes conflicting, considerations. By emphasizing some of these concerns while downplaying others, framing can lead individuals to express different opinions by making certain considerations more accessible in their mind (Chong, 1993; Iyengar, 1991) or causing them to place greater weight on these aspects of the issue (Druckman, 2001a; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997).⁵

A recent example highlights the similarity between the theoretical conception of framing and the real-world controversy involving ballot wording. In April 2012, the Minnesota Legislature voted to put a state constitutional amendment on the November ballot by a close, party-line vote. The amendment would have required voters to present photographic identification prior to casting their ballots. Although the measure was brief—the law's full text was only 1 paragraph long, containing fewer than 105 words—it made a number of related changes to the state's election law, including absentee voting. The state's Democratic secretary of state argued that the amendment's new requirement for

“eligibility verification prior to a ballot being cast or counted” would effectively end the state’s practice of allowing Election Day voter registration (Ritchie, 2012). Although the amendment promised to affect the voting experience in several disparate ways, each representing a potential consideration that might affect a voter’s evaluation of the proposal, the ballot title and summary the legislature drafted focused only on the voter identification requirement, the most politically popular part of the proposal: “Shall the Minnesota Constitution be amended to require all voters to present valid photo identification to vote and to require the state to provide free identification to eligible voters, effective July 1, 2013?”⁶ By encouraging voters to focus on this aspect of the proposal, while leaving out other relevant implications including the law’s impact on Election Day registration, the ballot text appeared to advantage the measure at the polls.

While most framing studies focus on messages embedded in the news media and campaigns, ballot text provides a particularly effective avenue through which political elites may attempt to influence public attitudes and election outcomes. Unlike voter exposure to campaign messages, which varies with voter attentiveness (Zaller, 1992), every voter reads the ballot at the critical point of decision making. This temporal proximity is particularly important, given evidence that framing effects fade quickly over time (Druckman & Nelson, 2003). The first part of our experiment thus tests the hypothesis that ballot language influences individuals’ vote choices on specific ballot measures, extending the existing research on framing to consider ballot text.

The second part of our experiment departs from much of the existing framing research and considers whether framing effects are robust in the face of other types of stimuli and information that voters are likely to confront during the course of a realistic campaign. Although few voters care enough about politics to spend a substantial amount of time researching the measures on the ballot, most can and do turn to simple heuristics, cues, and rules of thumb made accessible through their day-to-day lives (among many others, see Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Carmines & Kuklinski, 1990; Chaiken, 1980, 1987; Lupia, 1994; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). We focus in particular on endorsements from prominent interest groups, a salient cue that has been studied extensively in the context of direct democracy. Lupia (1994; see also Karp, 1998) has shown that knowledge of endorsements from trustworthy political elites can help voters make reasoned choices over competing, complex policies.⁷ Bowler and Donovan (2002) find that voters in direct democracy elections often seek out such cues to help them make decisions on ballot measures by turning to the official voter guide and campaign media to learn about the positions that prominent officials and interest groups have taken on the issues (see also Bowler & Donovan, 1998). The second part of our experiment examines whether interest group endorsements moderate frames embedded in ballot language, approximating the information environment and campaign context in which individual voters frequently make decisions. Our second hypothesis is that individuals will be able to use these relevant cues to anchor their reasoning, reducing the effect of the language used to describe ballot measure on their reported vote choice.

Research Design

Our study investigates whether the wording of ballot measure titles and summaries can influence voter behavior in the presence of contested political campaigns. We report the results from a survey experiment that allows us to control and vary individuals’ exposure to campaign information—in the form of interest-group endorsements—and the wording of the ballot measures that they see. The experiment was embedded in an online survey of

6,101 voting-age adults conducted by Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS) in late June through early July 2010.⁸ The pool of subjects and all experiment subgroups were representative of the national electorate in terms of basic demographics (a full description of the sample's characteristics is available in the supplemental appendix).

During the course of the survey, each subject was presented with a ballot title and summary for two ballot measures. After reading this text, the subjects were asked how they would vote if each measure appeared on their ballot in the next election. One of the measures asked about same-sex marriage and the second measure asked about public funding for abortion. As we discuss next, the wording used in the experiment was motivated by actual ballot measures—and related high-profile controversies over their wording—that have appeared on the ballot in some states in previous elections. By modeling our stimuli on real-world ballot text, we intended to not only make our experiment realistic but also ensure that the frames respondents saw mimicked the type of language that appears on the ballot, an important consideration given evidence that the “strength” of frames can limit their effectiveness (see Druckman, 2010).

The first measure was based on Proposition 8, an initiative that sought to amend the California state constitution to define marriage as a union between one man and one woman. The measure appeared on the ballot in November 2008. Shortly before the election, California's Supreme Court declared an existing California statute prohibiting official recognition of same-sex marriage unconstitutional.⁹ The court concluded that the state constitution protected the right of same-sex couples to marry, ordering state and local officials to issue marriage licenses regardless of sexual orientation.

Months before the Supreme Court issued its ruling, however, supporters of a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage had collected and submitted the necessary signatures to qualify the measure for the ballot as Proposition 8 and received the official ballot description for the initiative. Pointing to the new Supreme Court decision, Attorney General Jerry Brown—who had previously expressed his support for same-sex marriage and was actively seeking the Democratic nomination for governor—soon announced that he would revise Proposition 8's official description. The new language stated that Proposition 8 would “eliminate” the right of same-sex couples to marry, rather than simply “limiting” marriage to one man and one woman, as the original ballot text had said. Proponents of Proposition 8 objected to the new description. They claimed that Brown's new wording was designed to shift voter sentiment against the measure to improve his standing among liberal activists in preparation for the upcoming Democratic Party primary (Harmon, 2010). Although the proponents of Proposition 8 challenged the new ballot title and summary, the court deferred to Brown, upholding his decision to rewrite the text. With the reworded measure lagging in the polls, the concerns of Proposition 8 supporters seemed warranted. Yet California voters approved the measure on Election Day, amending the state constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage and thus nullifying the state Supreme Court decision.

The second measure was modeled on an initiative that appeared on the Colorado ballot in 1988. That year, Colorado voters had an opportunity to reverse a state constitutional ban on public funding for abortions, which had been adopted by the narrowest electoral margins just four years earlier. The ballot summary for Amendment 7, written by the measure's proponents, did not include the word abortion, however. Instead, the constitutional amendment proposed to outlaw discrimination by state agencies in the provision of medical treatment to any woman regardless of “her choice of whether or not to continue her pregnancy.” Outraged, the anti-abortion activists claimed that the wording was confusing

and outright misleading (Fulcher, 1988). Two polls conducted by *The Denver Post* provided some support for their concerns. The first survey used the official ballot title and summary and found the measure in the lead. The second survey, which used more straightforward language and described the measure simply as a repeal of the previously enacted prohibition on public funding for abortion, found it well behind in the polls. Colorado voters defeated Amendment 7 on Election Day, retaining the funding ban in the state constitution.

The treatments used in our experiment were closely based on the text seen by voters who considered California's Proposition 8 and Colorado's Amendment 7. At the start of the experiment, the subjects were randomly divided into two groups. The first group saw only the ballot title and summary before being asked if they would support the measures. We provided the second group of subjects information about the official positions that two prominent interest groups had taken on each measure in addition to the titles and summaries. The interest groups were chosen so that each measure had one "yes" and one "no" endorsement from a prominent organization. After an extensive review of actual campaigns surrounding similar ballot measures, we identified interest groups that we expected voters would believe were knowledgeable about the policies at the heart of the ballot measures and had obvious and identifiable preferences over these policies. In other words, the endorsements satisfied the two conditions that Lupia and McCubbins (1998) argue are necessary to help voters learn from third-party communications.¹⁰

We assigned respondents to view one of two versions of the title and summary for each ballot measure.¹¹ We limited the available information to the titles and summaries of the measures and did not give subjects the opportunity to review the actual text of the underlying law that the ballot measures addressed. This design decision was intended to create a realistic deliberative environment for voters, reflecting the current state of knowledge on voter behavior in direct democracy elections. Scholars have documented that voters only rarely go beyond the official voter guide and other campaign materials to read the technical language of the measures on which they cast ballots (Matusaka, 2005, p. 198).¹² As one court has noted in the context of a challenge to official ballot wording, "voters cannot leave their voting booth to read the full text of the proposed amendment and then return to cast their vote" (*State ex rel. Voters First v. Ohio Ballot Bd.*, Slip Opinion No. 2012-Ohio-4149).¹³ By using language used in actual measures in previous elections, we are able to maximize the external validity of our experiment and ensure that the estimated treatment effects match the type of elite intervention the reformers have previously pointed to as giving rise to voter deception and the kinds of manipulations that have been the focus of legal disputes.¹⁴

Our experimental design does not include a control group, in the traditional sense of the term, because such a treatment condition would presumably consist of "unbiased" ballot text. The problem with attempting to design such text is that the nature of bias is often in the eye of beholder. Critics of the ballot language used to describe California's Proposition 8 or Colorado's Amendment 7 did not argue that these descriptions were factually inaccurate. Rather, they claimed that the titles and summaries did not highlight the optimal mix of costs and benefits of these measures. We are certain that any description, no matter how fair or accurate from the point of view of its author, has the potential to alter the analytic lens through which an individual voter might evaluate a proposal.

The supplemental appendix provides the full text of the ballot titles and summaries used in the experiment, and the endorsements presented to half of the subjects. In this section, we briefly summarize why we chose each measure and how we formulated the ballot titles and summaries used in the experiments.

Same-Sex Marriage

The first ballot measure asked respondents to consider a constitutional amendment to prohibit same-sex marriage in their state. The hypothetical measure was based on California's Proposition 8. In fact, both versions of the language presented to our subjects were taken from actual summary text authored by then-Attorney General Jerry Brown. The first version carried the title "LIMIT ON MARRIAGE. CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT" and was published by Brown in 2007 for circulation on signature petitions. The summary described the measure as an amendment that would "provide that only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in this state." The second version carried the title "ELIMINATES RIGHT OF SAME-SEX COUPLES TO MARRY. CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT" and said the measure "changes [the] state constitution to eliminate the right of same-sex couples to marry." This version appeared on the California ballot in 2008.¹⁵ For the endorsement treatment condition, half of the respondents learned that the American Civil Liberties Union had urged voters to vote "no," while the Christian Coalition of American had urged a "yes" vote. Echoing the concerns reported in the news articles that support for the measure would decline with the word "eliminate" present, we expect that our subjects will be more likely to support a ban on same-sex marriage if they saw the first description when compared with those who read the second one. Indeed, the backers of Proposition 8 claimed that using the phrase "eliminates rights" would be "inherently argumentative and highly likely to create prejudice" against the constitutional amendment (Egelko, 2008).

Public Funding of Abortion

The second ballot measure asked voters to evaluate a state constitutional amendment to allow public funding for abortions. One version of the measure was titled "PUBLIC HEALTH FUNDING AND PREGNANCY TERMINATION" and was taken almost verbatim from Colorado's Amendment 7. It stated that the amendment would "provide that the state and its agencies, institutions, and political subdivisions shall not prohibit the use of public funds for medical services for a woman solely because of her choice of whether or not to continue her pregnancy." We designed the second version to mirror a much simpler language used in a constitutional amendment on the ballot in Washington in 1984 that eliminated public funding for abortion.¹⁶ The title in this version read "REPEAL THE PROHIBITION OF PUBLIC FUNDING FOR ABORTION" and asked, "Shall the state Constitution be amended to repeal the prohibition of public funding for abortions?" Half of the respondents were told that the Christian Coalition of America had urged voters to cast a ballot against the measure (which would keep a ban on public funds being used for abortions in place), while the Planned Parenthood Federation of America had urged them to vote "yes," thereby overturning an existing ban on using public funds for abortion.¹⁷ We expect the first description to be more favorable toward the measure than the second ballot text, and we predict that our subjects will be more likely to support the measure pitched as outlawing discrimination against certain women than one explicitly opening the door to public funding for abortions, even though the resulting policy outcome is the same in both cases (Fulcher, 1988).

Other Considerations

There are, of course, numerous ways to describe a ballot measure. Some readers may consider the titles and summaries we have chosen to be subtle or weak, and thus conclude

that our treatments underestimate the actual framing effects of ballot text observed in real elections. On the other hand, the measures we chose for our experiment may represent the “worst-case scenario.” Unlike the vast majority of ballot measures, the controversies over the wording of California’s Proposition 8 and Colorado’s Amendment 7 were significant enough to attract substantial public debate and attention from major media organizations. Although the wording of both measures survived intact, it is unclear if even more blatant tinkering with ballot text would survive judicial scrutiny. Our design focuses on some of the most high-profile disputes over ballot wording, but we suspect that the typical ballot text manipulations are more subtle for most initiatives and referendums that reach the ballot. This context should be kept in mind by the reader when interpreting the results.

Among subjects who were exposed to cues from interest groups, each measure included one endorsement supporting and one opposing each measure. While this design increased the realism of the experiment by simulating a traditional campaign in which voters become exposed to advocacy from both sides, it also limits our ability to make inferences about the individual effect of each endorsement. We must interpret the observed differences in voting intention between subjects who saw only the ballot titles and summaries and those who were also exposed to cues as the *combined* effect of both the pro and the con endorsements. The design does not allow us to estimate the individual effect of an individual interest group endorsement. Because our primary quantity of interest is the *interaction* between the ballot measures’ descriptions and cues, rather than the persuasive effect of individual endorsements, this limitation does not affect the central conclusion from the study.

Results

In reporting our results, we begin by estimating the average effect of our framing treatment, examining differences in support for each initiative across both versions of the ballot text. This allows us to measure how different descriptions affected the subjects’ self-reported vote intentions for each issue. Second, we calculate the conditional effects, estimating whether the endorsements we provided to our subjects attenuated, heightened, or had no effect on the magnitude of the ballot wording on vote choice. This result embodies the focus of our study in that we are estimating whether campaign information has an effect on the persuasion effects of ballot text.

To estimate the framing effect, we calculate the differences in self-reported vote intentions between subjects who saw alternate versions of the same measures, pooling together those who saw only the measures with those who also saw the endorsements. As each subsample is nationally representative and balanced on other relevant factors through random assignment, we can interpret the difference in the reported level of support between these two subsamples causally as the average framing effect. Our first hypothesis predicts that the language used in ballot titles and summaries should matter. In all cases, our hypothesis predicts that support for the measure should be higher with the first description when compared with the second version of the ballot text. We summarize these results in Tables 1 and 2. In parentheses, we also report the number of subjects in each treatment condition.

As Table 1 shows, the wording used to describe each measure had a substantial impact on the level of support expressed by the respondents. For the same-sex-marriage measure, support for the constitutional amendment declined by 6 percentage points ($z = 4.64$) when the ballot title and summary indicated that the measure would “eliminate the right to marry.” Not only was this difference large enough to change the election result among the voters in our sample, but the 6 percentage-point swing is likely to change the outcome in many

Table 1
Estimated framing effects: Same-sex marriage

	Limiting marriage	Eliminating right	Difference
Yes	55.6% (3,006)	49.6% (2,975)	-6.0%***

Note. Total number of respondents in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.001$, one-tailed.

Table 2
Estimated framing effects: Abortion

	Discrimination	Repeal of ban	Difference
Yes	46.6% (2,903)	40.7% (3,051)	-5.9%***

Note. Total number of respondents in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.001$, one-tailed.

states where the election is close. In [Table 2](#), support for the abortion measure declined by 5.9 percentage points ($z = 4.60$) when the proposal stated in plain language that it would repeal the ban on public funding of abortions. Although both versions of the measure fell short of the 50% threshold in our sample, it is likely that in some states the difference produced by the two descriptions would be large enough to change the outcome of the election, or, at the least, make the results much more competitive. Together, these results provide strong evidence that a carefully worded ballot summary can significantly reduce or increase voter support for a ballot measure, which could have electoral ramifications under certain conditions.

The next step in our analysis, and the primary focus of this study, is to examine the interaction between our two treatments to estimate the effect of ballot text conditional on the level of respondents' exposure to campaign information.¹⁸ Our second hypothesis predicts that the presence of cues should limit the effect of ballot wording. [Table 3](#) presents the results from all four subgroups for the same-sex-marriage ban. Among the subgroup that saw no endorsement, we estimated that altering the ballot measure's description led to

Table 3
Interaction of descriptions and endorsements: Same-sex marriage

	No endorsements			Endorsements			Difference in differences
	Limiting marriage	Eliminating right	Difference	Limiting marriage	Eliminating right	Difference	
Yes	56.5% (1,472)	48.1% (1,483)	-8.4%***	54.7% (1,503)	51.0% (1,572)	-3.7%*	4.7%*

Note. Total number of respondents in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.001$, one-tailed test.

Table 4
Interaction of descriptions and endorsements: Public funding for abortion

	No endorsements			Endorsements			Difference in differences
	Discrimination	Repeal of ban	Difference	Discrimination	Repeal of ban	Difference	
Yes	44.9% (1,426)	36.9% (1,516)	-8.0%***	48.3% (1,477)	44.4% (1,535)	-4.2%*	3.8%†

Note. Total number of respondents in parentheses.

† $p < 0.1$. * $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.001$, one-tailed test.

an 8.4 percentage point ($z = 4.59$) decline in support. That is, when the ballot title and summary indicated that the measure “eliminated” the right of same-sex couples to marry, support for the measure dropped by 8.4 percentage points. This shift is large enough to push support for the measure below 50%. When respondents saw the endorsements, however, this effect was attenuated significantly, with the ballot wording producing a decrease in support of 3.7 percentage points ($z = 2.02$). By calculating the difference across these two experimental conditions, we find that providing cues to voters reduced the size of the framing effect by 4.7 percentage points ($z = 1.82$) for the same-sex marriage measure. This result supports our second hypothesis.

We also present the results for the abortion measure in Table 4. When the subjects did not receive endorsements, seeing the straightforward summary that used the word “abortion” reduced support for the measure by 8 percentage points ($z = 4.42$). When we introduce endorsements, however, the framing effect declined to 4.2 percentage points ($z = 2.14$). Thus, the introduction of campaign information decreased the size of the effect by 3.8 percentage points ($z = 1.60$), falling just short of statistical significance ($p = 0.054$). In all scenarios, the public funding for abortion measure garnered less than 50% support among our nationally representative sample. The results for the abortion measure provide additional support for our second hypothesis, again showing that the introduction of elite endorsements substantially reduces the importance of ballot wording.

Subgroup Effects

Although the findings in Tables 3 and 4 provide evidence that the introduction of minimal campaign information—in our experiment, two interest group endorsements—limits the framing potential of ballot text, existing studies show tremendous heterogeneity among voters in the degree to which they pay attention to campaigns. This is also true in the context of direct democracy, with researchers finding that many voters do not know the positions that high-profile groups and elected officials take on the issues appearing on the ballot. Indeed, the political behavior of individuals who are well informed about politics often diverges, sometimes substantially, from the behavior of individuals who have only passing interest in politics. For this reason, it is important to examine potential differences among subgroups of the population.

Although our survey did not include specific questions to gauge respondents’ level of political knowledge, we use available information about respondents’ educational attainment and ideology to split the sample into two.¹⁹ The first group includes all respondents

with at least a college degree who chose to classify themselves as either liberal or conservative. We refer to this group as “political sophisticates,” following existing research on the importance of both education and ideological attachment in influencing a number of important political behaviors.²⁰ A number of studies have found both factors to be highly correlated with interest in politics and general political knowledge (see, e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Zaller, 1992).²¹

Existing empirical research points to conflicting expectations about how political sophistication should affect one’s vulnerability to framing via ballot text. Some scholars have argued that less knowledgeable individuals are more susceptible to framing because they hold fewer prior opinions and thus can be easily swayed through carefully crafted messages (e.g., Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Zaller, 1992). Others, however, argue that framing should be more effective among the most knowledgeable voters, who are more likely to notice and comprehend subtle differences in the presentation of an issue (e.g., Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). Our expectations thus remain agnostic on this point.

We expect, however, that the introduction of elite endorsement should be most effective in limiting framing among the better-informed subjects. Politically knowledgeable voters are much more likely to be familiar with the positions that an interest group regularly takes on a particular issue and can thus use the group’s endorsements to anchor their own opinions. By contrast, voters who cannot identify an interest group’s position or are unfamiliar with its ideological reputation on an issue discern little new information from its endorsement (see Lupia & McCubbins, 1998).

Table 5 summarizes differences in the treatment effects for each subgroup in our sample. Consistent with Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997), we find that knowledge appears to exacerbate rather than inoculate individual susceptibility to framing effects. In the absence of cues, political sophisticates were substantially more likely to shift their opinion in the face of different ballot wording on both the same-sex marriage initiative (15.8% versus 7.4%) and the abortion measure (20.8% versus 6.1%). Consistent with our hypothesis, however, the sophisticates were also most responsive to the introduction of interest group endorsements. The endorsements eliminated the substantial framing effects of ballot wording for the same-sex-marriage measure while reducing it nearly in half for the abortion proposal. Although the introduction of cues also somewhat reduced the magnitude of framing due to ballot text for less knowledgeable respondents, this reduction fell short of statistical significance and was substantially smaller than among the sophisticates.

Discussion and Conclusion

Do the passage of California’s Proposition 8 and the defeat of Colorado’s Amendment 7 mean that official ballot descriptions have few significant effects on the behavior of voters? The answer, our experiment suggests, is both yes and no. On one hand, the results show that ballot word choice matters, particularly in a close race where just a few percentage points can swing the outcome of the election.²² If an initiative or referendum lacks a substantial campaign, as many ballot measures do, the opportunity for strategic political actors to exploit deceptive wording to shift vote choice is substantial.

On the other hand, the experiment also demonstrates that, in an evenly matched and active campaign environment, contentious—and potentially misleading—ballot text matters much less than observers might claim. Fortunately, the vibrancy and volume of campaigns are likely to be endogenous to the closeness of the election in a way that helps

Table 5
Framing effects for subgroups across treatment conditions

	Same-sex marriage			Public funding for abortion		
	Framing effect (no endorsements)	Framing effect (endorsements present)	Difference	Framing effect (no endorsements)	Framing effect (endorsements present)	Difference
Sophisticates	15.8% ^{**}	-2.5%	18.2% [*]	20.8% ^{**}	8.5% [*]	12.3% ^{**}
Non-sophisticates	7.4% ^{***}	4.7% ^{**}	2.7%	6.1% ^{***}	3.1% [†]	3.0%

† $p < 0.1$. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$, one-tailed test.

guard against ballot framing. Measures on the cusp of passage or failure, for which small framing effects create the most serious threat, are likely to attract the greatest amount of spending and campaign outreach. Interest groups and other advocates have strong incentives to invest scarce political resources in such close races, because their investment is most likely to influence the outcome of the election in these contests.²³

In our experiment, exposing subjects to just one powerful piece of campaign information, the endorsements from two interest groups, was sufficient to reduce the size of the framing effect significantly. When an initiative or referendum has an active and well-financed campaign on both sides, we suspect that as voters encounter additional and new information—from campaign media, direct appeals, or conversations with friends—the importance of how an official title and summary is worded will decline further, although it is likely that each piece of new information will produce diminishing marginal effects.²⁴ The degree to which the amount of campaign messaging influences the framing effect of ballot text—as well as other factors, such as the degree of issue difficulty (Carmines & Stimson, 1980)—is a fruitful avenue of future research.

Although clearly not every voter pays attention to the information disseminated by the political campaign or news media, the results from our subgroup analysis point to a heartening conclusion: The voters who are most vulnerable to potentially deceptive ballot text are also ones who are most likely to learn about the positions that prominent groups and individuals have taken on the issues appearing on the ballot and to use this information in structuring their own voting behavior. For these knowledgeable voters, elite endorsements are thus likely to limit the threat of ballot framing. By contrast, less knowledgeable and politically astute individuals, who may not know where political elites stand on the issues, are also less likely to comprehend subtle changes in the text used to describe measures on the ballot and to respond to the different presentation of the issue by shifting their voting behavior.

Our findings also have two important implications for the legal and academic communities. First, the findings indicate that the appropriate level of judicial scrutiny in overseeing the formulation ballot text should vary depending on the election. Since ballot wording matters most in low-profile elections that attract little campaign advertising and outreach, judges should be particularly concerned about an inadequate or biased ballot description in these contexts. Second, our research adds to scholarly understanding of how the strategic choice of language and endorsements interact in the context of campaigns, an important avenue of research that has received little attention. Druckman and colleagues (2010) note “the reality that citizens typically receive a mix of cues and frames” is rarely incorporated into empirical research, which tends to study the effect of each in isolation (p. 137; see also Druckman, 2001b). Our results show that cues can act as powerful anchors for opinion, significantly decreasing the effects of potentially deceptive language used to describe political issues to voters.

One important question left unanswered by our study is the duration of the effects we document. If the influence of endorsements decays quickly, as is true in the case of television advertisements (Gerber, Gimpel, Green, & Shaw, 2011; Hill, Lo, Vavreck, & Zaller, 2013), exposure to campaign information long before voters enter the voting booth is likely to produce smaller attenuation than found in our study. Future research should explore this possibility to try to better match experimental designs with the dynamics of campaigns and emulate how voters process information in real direct democracy elections.

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Notes

1. See http://ballotpedia.org/wiki/index.php/List_of_ballot_measure_lawsuits_in_2012#tab=By_topic (accessed October 26, 2012).

2. It is worth noting that every state except Delaware requires the state legislature to receive voter approval via a statewide referendum to pass a constitutional amendment. In these scenarios, the legislature is usually responsible for creating the ballot title and summary.

3. In some states, the political actors responsible for writing a title and summary may delegate this responsibility to civil servants. The ultimate power of assigning a title and summary, however, remains with the constitutionally assigned party. While political actors may not use their influence to craft the description of every ballot measure to favor their preferred outcome, we expect that they will intervene when they care about the policy and when the stakes are particularly high.

4. Three of the remaining states (Colorado, Michigan, and South Dakota) use a commission and only Arizona splits the responsibilities between the proponents and elected officials.

5. Our conception of framing is based on the expectancy model of individual attitudes: $Attitude = \sum^{v_i} *w_i$, where v_i represents a respondent's evaluation of the issue on attribute i , and w_i is the weight that the respondent puts on that attribute. The expressed opinion is thus a weighed sum of the attributes. Framing may influence opinions by affecting both the set of attributes (v_i) that voters consider in making their decisions, and how much weight they place on already accessible attributes (w_i). See Chong and Druckman (2007), and Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997).

6. Opponents of the measure, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the secretary of state, sued over the ballot wording but did not succeed in their efforts to change the language.

7. In a series of experiments, Lupia and McCubbins (1998) demonstrated that knowledge of endorsement enables individuals to make reasoned choices at least as often as individuals who possess expert-level knowledge.

8. TESS surveys are fielded using Knowledge Networks' (now GfK) online panel. The data were collected from June 23, 2010, through July 7, 2010. Knowledge Networks asked 9,213 respondents to complete the survey and 6,101 complied, yielding a completion rate of 66.2%. It is important to

note that Knowledge Networks relies on a probability-based online panel. While there exists a significant debate about the representativeness of online panels—and nonprobability samples in particular (see, e.g., AAPOR, 2010; Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2014; Chang & Krosnick, 2009; Malhotra & Krosnick, 2007; Yeager et al., 2010)—one potentially relevant question is whether online respondents are more interested in politics than respondents that complete surveys using other models. As Chang and Krosnick (2009, pp. 660–661) find, Knowledge Network’s online panel is statistically indistinguishable from random digit dialing samples across most politically relevant covariates, except political knowledge (Knowledge Network’s respondents are more knowledgeable).

9. The law, Proposition 22, was itself passed by voters via initiative in 2000. Unlike Proposition 8, however, Proposition 22 was a statutory rather than a constitutional initiative.

10. The subjects’ assignment into the cue and no-cue groups did not change during the course of the experiment. If subjects were assigned into the cue group, they saw the endorsements for both ballot measures. As a check on Knowledge Network’s random assignment mechanism, we ran a multinomial logit where the dependent variable was the group assignment and the independent variables were important demographic variables (party identification, ideology, age, education, income, and state of residence). The multinomial logit results (available from the authors) show that Knowledge Networks achieved successful random assignment, with balance on all covariates.

11. The randomization was independent for each measure, so a subject’s assignment to see one description for the first ballot measure did not determine which version of the other measure she would see as the survey progressed.

12. While voters reading different ballot summaries of the same measure may, erroneously, conclude that these represent two different policies, this is precisely the type of deception we wish to measure and the type of confusion strategic elites may try to sow.

13. The growing use of absentee voting makes this type of deliberation much more feasible. We know of no empirical research showing that voters who fill out their ballots in the comfort and privacy of their own home invest substantially more time into the task or read the full text of proposed measures at greater rates than those who vote in person, however. A study that investigates such a research question would be a valuable extension of the existing literature.

14. In a second smaller survey experiment carried out in 2012, we presented a national sample of respondents with identical questions but also provided a link allowing them to read the full text of the actual measure before their consideration rather than only supplying the short title and summary that appears on the ballot. Although we placed this link immediately below the ballot summary and we highlighted the link in a separate font to make it clearly visible and distinguishable, only 6% of subjects chose to click on the link to see the full text, confirming the observation made by Matusaka (2005) and Magleby (1984) that voters rarely go beyond the ballot text to read the full legal language of the measures they consider.

15. The two versions of the measure also differed in their projected fiscal impact. While the original version estimated no fiscal impact on state or local governments, the 2008 version predicted costs for local governments from the elimination of the tourism business from out-of-state same-sex couples who were coming to California to marry. To make the measures as comparable as possible, both of our versions stated there would be no fiscal impact from the amendment.

16. The Washington measure asked, “Shall public funding of abortions be prohibited except to prevent the death of the pregnant woman or her unborn child?” Since our measure sought to *overturn* such a ban, we tweaked the Washington language slightly in our application.

17. More than two-thirds of states currently limit public funding to cases where the woman’s life is in danger or in the case of rape and incest. The rest generally provide public funding only for medically necessary abortions. The status quo thus ensures that our measure is one that might reasonably appear on the ballot for the vast majority of survey respondents.

18. Note that the inclusion of a simple interaction term between the frame and cue variables in a regression simultaneously tests two hypotheses: that the presence of cues affects the magnitude of the framing effects *and* that the effect of the cues varies across different wording used to describe of the same measure. We have little theoretical basis for the latter, so we instead use difference-in-proportions tests to examine more precisely our second hypothesis.

19. As with all TESS studies, inclusion of additional survey elements requires a substantial reduction in subjects. As such, we chose to focus on garnering a larger sample to test our two hypotheses.

20. About one out of every seven respondents of our sample was classified as sophisticates under this definition.

21. Wood and Oliver (2012) focus in particular on the interaction between education and self-reported ideology.

22. It is also important to note that the electorate in our sample differed significantly from the electorate that voted on Proposition 8 and Amendment 7. While our sample of respondents includes voters from across the country, only voters in California and Colorado actually voted on those two measures, respectively.

23. This logic is confirmed empirically in de Figueiredo, Ji, and Kousser (2011).

24. Similarly, Iyengar, Lowenstein, and Masket (2001), who examine slate mailers, have found strong campaign effects for just a single piece of information.

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