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Familiar Choices: Reconsidering the Institutional Effects of the Direct Initiative

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Abstract

Empirical evidence suggests that voters in states with direct democracy feel better prepared to cast competent votes and that they do so at a greater rate than voters elsewhere. What causal mechanism explains why the presence of direct democracy leads to better civic citizenship and differences in political behavior? We use a survey experiment in which we randomly vary the text used to describe the policy proposals to consider one possible pathway that explains higher levels of political competence among voters in initiative states. In contrast to the focus on campaign mobilization in the existing literature, we rely on insights from consumer decision theory to derive testable hypotheses about voter behavior. We find evidence that voters in initiative states approach political campaigns in a fundamentally different way than voters in noninitiative states. In particular, we show that individuals in initiative states are less susceptible to framing effects—in our experiment, strategic efforts to craft a ballot measure's title and summary.

Keywords

campaigns, direct democracy, elections, survey experiment, voting behavior

Introduction

Direct democracy allows voters to effect policy change without using an elected representative as an intermediary. Experience with direct democracy, in turn, has the potential to influence how voters approach political decisions. Empirical evidence

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suggests that the average voter who resides in an initiative state is different than voters elsewhere. As M. A. Smith (2001; 2002) and D. A. Smith and Tolbert (2004) document, voters in initiative states are both more knowledgeable about politics and turnout at a greater rate when compared with their counterparts living in noninitiative states. These researchers demonstrate that the Progressive reformers who championed direct democracy may have indeed been correct: Direct democracy appears to inspire individuals to be better citizens by sparking their interest, mobilizing them to go to the polls, and encouraging them to play a more active role in the political process.

How does the presence of the direct initiative create more attentive and active voters? D. A. Smith and Tolbert (2004; see also Tolbert, Bowen, and Donovan 2009) suggest that increased campaign activity and mobilization associated with contests where both candidates and policy proposals appear on the ballot give rise to voters who are more interested in elections, learn more about politics, and turnout at a greater rate. Given what we know about campaign effects (in particular, their modest magnitude), the current literature falls short of providing a convincing causal mechanism that can explain why we should expect long-term differences to emerge among voters in initiative states. We are not suggesting that campaign effects do not exist; in fact, we view campaigns as an important mechanism behind short-term mobilization. Rather, we argue that scholars lack a satisfying cognitive and psychological understanding for why voters in initiative states *systematically* act and appear different than voters in noninitiative states.

Below, we take a step toward understanding how direct democracy as an institution affects voter behavior. We expect that direct democracy will produce distinct long-term cognitive differences among voters. Here, we offer a theoretical bridge connecting the short-term nature of campaigns to these long-term cognitive effects. In particular, we view the electoral decision-making process as analogous to purchasing everyday consumer products. Similar to political choices, most individuals spend very little time and effort researching products and making purchases. As consumers, we become accustomed to making product choices. As we become experienced consumers, we improve our ability to sift through information, identify facts that are important, and incorporate new information into our final assessment. We argue that repeated decisions also alter the cognitive processes that voters use to evaluate ballot measures. In particular, we expect that residents of initiative states, who are asked to vote on a greater number of issues, make more policy decisions and thus get better at making them.

Because voters in initiative states become accustomed to making these choices over time, we argue that their process of cognition will evolve in the same manner as consumers making repeated decisions. That is, voters in initiative states will be more capable at sorting through and understanding new information and incorporating this information into their voting calculus. In contrast to transient campaign influences, we seek to explain the long-term differences that result from the regular use of the direct initiative. Using a survey experiment, we test the hypothesis that voters in states with the direct initiative—because they are more familiar with dissecting information from

a ballot measure's brief title and summary—will be less susceptible to framing effects when compared with voters in noninitiative states. The results of our survey experiment support our hypothesis: Voters who live in initiative states are less susceptible to framing effects and are more skilled in thwarting elite manipulation strategies designed to shift election outcomes away from the preferences of the median voter.

The Educative Effects of Direct Democracy

The initiative offers citizens the opportunity to bring about policy change directly. Whereas electing representatives requires citizens to select agents who will create policy in their stead, initiatives ask voters to make their own assessments of complex policy proposals vis-à-vis the status quo. Progressive reformers argued that experience with direct lawmaking would lead to more engaged and thoughtful citizens (see, for example, D. A. Smith and Tolbert 2004, Chapter 1).

The promise of direct democracy—and the initiative in particular—appears to be real. Scholars have shown that voters who reside in states with the direct initiative are more likely to turn out to vote (e.g., Biggers 2011; Childers and Binder n.d.; M. A. Schlozman and Yohai 2008; Smith 2001; D. A. Smith and Tolbert 2004; Tolbert and Smith 2005; see also Lacey 2005, who examines issue salience) and learn more about politics (M. A. Smith 2002; Tolbert, McNeal, and Smith 2003; D. A. Smith and Tolbert 2004) when compared with voters who live in states without the direct initiative. Moreover, voters in initiative states also feel more comfortable (efficacious) making political decisions (e.g., Bowler and Donovan 2002; Hero and Tolbert 2004; D. A. Smith and Tolbert 2004).

The preponderance of the research suggests that voters who live in initiative states are different. Why? The accepted explanation is that initiative campaigns mobilize voters to pay attention to politics and turnout on Election Day (see, for example, Tolbert, Bowen, and Donovan 2009), especially in midterm and off-year elections (e.g., Childers and Binder n.d.; Schlozman and Yohai 2008). Initiative campaigns appear to motivate citizens not only to follow the election but also to participate in it—especially if the race is close and the initiative is controversial—and learn more about politics (including simple civics). Yet, only a few studies have used actual campaign spending data to examine campaign effects in direct democracy (e.g., Stratmann 2005; 2006; Tolbert, Bowen, and Donovan 2009).

The transitory nature of campaign effects, however, suggests that campaigns may not be entirely responsible for the educative effects of initiatives. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), for example, demonstrate that campaign effects are fleeting, with the impact of advertising lasting little beyond 30 sec. Furthermore, Gerber et al. (2011) show that even the effects of expensive television campaigns last no more than a week or so. Concerning direct democracy, Dyck and Seabrook (2010) find that voters who moved to California from an initiative state vote at similar rates when compared with native Californians. By contrast, they also show that voters who move from a noninitiative state vote at a significantly lower rate when compared with both native

Californians and recent immigrants from an initiative state. By holding campaign effects constant, Dyck and Seabrook convincingly show that campaigns cannot be solely responsible for increased turnout among voters who reside in states with direct democracy.

In sum, we view campaigns as an important source of short-term mobilization. In particular, campaigns may influence turnout (e.g., Barabas, Barrilleaux, and Scheller 2010; Tolbert, Bowen, and Donovan 2009), ballot measure awareness (e.g., Bowler and Donovan 1998; Nicholson 2003), or potentially some election outcomes (Iyengar, Lowenstein, and Masket 2001; Stratmann 2005; 2006) in direct democracy. Previous research, however, has largely neglected the potential long-term effects of direct democracy that can better account for other long-run behavioral differences between voters in initiative and noninitiative states.¹

Insights From Consumer Decision Theory

We begin with the premise that *familiarity matters*. As we become more familiar with certain tasks, we become better at doing them. When familiarity increases, the cognitive demands required to process new information and incorporate that new information into a decision decrease. Improved information processing also allows performance to improve. In their seminal study, Chase and Simon (1973; see also de Groot 1965) use chess positions to test the effect of familiarity on recall. They find that when an individual was more familiar with chess strategies, she was quicker to recall the positions of the chess pieces. That is, our task completion performance increases as our familiarity with the task parameters increases.

This familiarity axiom holds true in consumer decision making. Summarizing years of consumer research, Alba and Hutchinson (1987, 411) conclude that “In general, increased product familiarity results in consumer expertise” (see also Hoyer 1984). Familiarity, however, produces a number of nuanced effects on individuals. First, an individual’s familiarity with a product leads to an increase in knowledge. Research shows that individuals learn more when they receive repeated messages about a product or make a consumer choice routinely (e.g., Alba and Hutchinson 1987, 412; Hawkins and Hoch 1992). As Johnson and Russo (1984, 543) note, “Familiar consumers can pay attention to relevant information and ignore irrelevant information . . . [allowing them to] perform a more selective search of available information.” Familiarity, then, reduces the amount of cognitive effort required to make a decision and makes individuals better at screening out irrelevant details. As a result, familiar consumers make better decisions, expend less cognitive effort, and make decisions quicker when compared with novice consumers.

Second, consumers who are more familiar with a product are better able to substitute their prior knowledge when they face a decision with a highly uncertain outcome or one for which they have limited information. As Bettman, Johnson, and Payne (1991, 70) argue, when consumers are uncertain of a particular attribute concerning a good, “he or she may infer that attribute’s value from other available information.”

Their conclusion, based on the work of Meyer (1981), suggests that individuals who are more familiar with a particular product are better able to account for their information deficiencies than are individuals who are less familiar with a product.

Third, familiarity mitigates framing effects. When individuals are familiar with a particular product, they understand and know the criteria necessary to make a decision (Bettman and Sujan 1987). As a result, an increase in familiarity allows individuals to resist framing (Bettman and Sujan 1987; Sun 2010). One recent study shows that as individuals become more aware of a product, they also become less susceptible to price presentation (Sun 2010). This finding builds on Kahneman and Tversky's (1979; 1984) research showing how price framing can affect consumer behavior. Expertise and sophistication, as is the case with politics (e.g., Zaller 1992), dampens the effects of framing.

We argue that familiarity with the direct initiative will change how individuals go about making voting decisions. Just as repeated decision-making leads to familiarity and expertise among consumers, we argue that frequent voting on policy proposals will result in similar cognitive effects among voters. The key link between the insights from the research on consumer behavior and direct democracy is that individuals become more familiar with the cognitive demands of making policy choices by residing in a state that has adopted the direct initiative.

But do voters in initiative states make more decisions? According to data from the National Conference of State Legislatures,² the average initiative state has seen 155 ballot measures (including both initiatives and referendums) from 1960 to 2008 (approximately 3.2 measures a year). The average noninitiative state saw only 37.5 measures during the same time period (approximately 0.78 measures a year). From 1990 to 2008, the average initiative state had 73 measures (about 4.1 a year) on the ballot while the average noninitiative state saw only 33 measures (about 1.8 a year) on the ballot.³ Of the 4.1 measures on the ballot in initiative states per year, about 1.75 of those measures were initiatives (Waters 2003, 455). These data suggest that voters who reside in initiative states are asked to evaluate complicated policy proposals substantially more often when compared with voters who reside in noninitiative states.

When individuals are asked to weigh in on policy proposals frequently, they become more familiar with the process of making this type of decision. While a single purchase does not make you more familiar about other products, the act of purchasing a product does increase a consumer's familiarity with *the process of making a consumer decision*. As an individual becomes more familiar with consumer choices, they become accustomed to evaluating the relevant aspects of the available options. For instance, the consumer learns how to evaluate the actual price of a product regardless of how the price is framed. We argue that the same logic applies to politics: Casting a vote for a single ballot measure does not make the voter an expert on other ballot measures but *does increase her familiarity with the process of making decisions on ballot measures*. Thus, voting on ballot measures will lead individuals who reside in states with the initiative to develop cognitive tools that will be present and utilized to a smaller extent among individuals who reside in a state without the direct initiative.

The acquisition of these cognitive tools among voters in initiative states leads to testable behavior implications. In this article, we test one such implication, hypothesizing that ballot language and framing will produce different behavior among voters depending on their previous experience with initiatives. Just as experienced consumers have been shown to be less susceptible to product framing, we hypothesize that individuals from initiative states will be less affected by the language used to describe policy proposals. Specifically, we hypothesize the following:

H1: The framing of a ballot measure will influence individuals who reside in initiative states *less* than individuals who reside in noninitiative states.

We expect that individuals who reside in initiative states will be less susceptible to framing effects because they are more familiar with the rhetoric of campaigns—in particular, campaigns focused on policy rather than candidates. During the course of their adult lives, these voters are exposed to campaign information on both sides of a variety of issues. For the measures that pass, voters can assess—albeit imperfectly—whether the campaign rhetoric served as an accurate predictor of future policy outcomes. Although we do not believe that voters are perfect Bayesian automatons, we expect that, over time, they incorporate the lessons from their experiences and become more adept at evaluating campaign rhetoric, including the text appearing on the ballot, allowing these voters to adjust their behavior in future elections.

Our argument is similar to, but distinct in important ways from, the canonical “Receive-Accept-Sample” (RAS) model of public opinion that Zaller (1991; 1992) has proposed. As is the case in the RAS model, we argue that the effects of framing depend on an individual’s propensity to accept new information and to incorporate it into her decision calculus. While Zaller focuses on individual political sophistication and awareness to explain differential “resistance” to new messages, including frames, we argue that previous experience—rather than strong prior policy beliefs or partisan attachments—helps determine the degree to which voters take campaign information at face value. Empirically, we show that previous experience leads to behavioral differences *among* highly informed and attentive voters. This finding suggests that prior experience leads to a type of expertise that is distinct from general political sophistication and can help to account for variation that is left unexplained by the Zaller model.

Research Design

To test our hypothesis, we use data from an online survey experiment conducted by Knowledge Networks from late June to early July 2010. The total sample size of our survey is 6,101 respondents.⁴ For each experimental condition, Knowledge Networks gathered a nationally representative sample of adults based on important demographic characteristics.⁵ While random assignment did not occur between residents in initiative and noninitiative states, we found little evidence of individual-level differences between participants in initiative and noninitiative states, with only slight

demographic differences among respondents who live in initiative states and those who reside in other parts of the country.⁶

In our survey, participants were presented with a ballot title and summary of two ballot measures that were based on real initiatives that have appeared on state ballots in previous elections. We chose same-sex marriage and abortion as our two issues because both had competing frames that have been used in actual elections and because both issues have appeared on the ballot in many states across the country. Even in states without direct democracy, legislatures have frequently referred constitutional amendments designed to limit access to marriage among same-sex couples and to restrict public funding for abortion to the electorate in recent decades (e.g., Roh and Haider-Markel 2003; D. A. Smith, DeSantis, and Kassel 2006), helping ensure that the task participants were asked to carry out in the experiment was realistic, regardless of their state of residence. After they considered each title and summary, the survey asked respondents to indicate how they would vote on each measure if it were on the ballot in the next election.

Selecting same-sex marriage and abortion as our issues may bias our results against finding significant differences, and thus bias our results toward the null hypothesis. These two subjects are quintessentially “easy issues” as defined by Carmines and Stimson (1980). Both are issues that are symbolic and not technical, focus on the ends rather than the means, and are permanent or semipermanent fixtures on the political agenda. Such issues, Carmines and Stimson argue, are both easier for voters to process and develop well-defined opinions. When asked about an easy issue, individuals are able to offer a “gut reaction” that is reflective of their opinion. For these types of issues, the expectation is that voters will be less susceptible to persuasion.

The first measure was based on California’s Proposition 8 (2008), which asked voters to consider a constitutional amendment limiting marriage to be between one man and one woman. In fact, both versions of the measure used in the experiment were taken from official state materials for Proposition 8. One was the official title and summary used for the Proposition 8 circulation petitions and the second was the official title and summary that appeared on the November 2008 ballot. During the summer of 2008, after Proposition 8 had qualified for the ballot, the California Supreme Court invalidated an earlier statutory initiative (Proposition 22) passed by voters in 2000 that limited marriage to be between one man and one woman. After the decision, then-Attorney General Jerry Brown rewrote the official ballot title and summary for Proposition 8, a move that critics suggested Brown made to endear himself to liberal voters ahead of his upcoming campaign for governor. Before the state Supreme Court decision, the official circulation title used during the signature-gathering phase was “LIMIT ON MARRIAGE. CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT.” The original summary emphasized that the measure would make it so California law only recognized a marriage between a man and a woman as being valid. The second title and summary we used—the controversial text that appeared on the ballot—stated that the measure “ELIMINATES RIGHT OF SAME-SEX COUPLE TO MARRY. CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT.” This version of the summary made it clear that the measure would

change the constitution to eliminate rights for same-sex couples.⁷ Supporters of Proposition 8 feared that the new language would persuade voters to defeat the measure (Harmon 2010) and unsuccessfully challenged the new ballot text in court. California voters eventually passed Proposition 8.

The second initiative was based on Colorado's Amendment 7 (1988), which asked voters to consider repealing the ban on public funding for abortions, and Washington's 1984 law that prohibited funding for abortions. The first ballot title and summary (based on Colorado's amendment) was titled "PUBLIC HEALTH FUNDING AND PREGNANCY TERMINATION." The measure's summary stated that it would make it illegal for state agencies to deny medical treatment to any woman based on "her choice of whether or not to continue her pregnancy." Some observers, especially the opponents of the measure, considered the measure's summary deceptive because it never mentioned the word "abortion." In two polls before the election, the *Denver Post* asked voters to evaluate the measure as written and a second version that included the word abortion. When the *Denver Post* presented voters the actual title and summary (without the word abortion), a majority of survey respondents supported the measure. When the survey used the word abortion, a majority of respondents opposed the measure. Based on the polls, opponents of the measure publicly denounced the amendment as confusing and misleading (Fulcher 1988). Amendment 7, however, was defeated at the polls. Although an alternative version of the measure is not available, we created the second title and summary based on Washington's Initiative 471 (1984). Our second frame asked voters if they wanted to "REPEAL THE PROHIBITION OF PUBLIC FUNDING FOR ABORTION" and was clear about the measure's policy consequences. A full description of our ballot titles and summaries is available in Appendix A.

Each respondent in the study was randomly assigned to see one of the two versions of each ballot measure. To increase the generalizability and external validity of our results, we designed our survey instrument using language from real ballot titles and summaries from actual initiatives that had appeared on the ballot.⁸ After reading the title and summary, respondents were asked how they would vote on each proposal if it appeared on their ballot.⁹

By using state constitutional amendments, rather than statutory proposals, the experiment ensured that the decision facing survey participants was not a foreign one, including respondents living in noninitiative states. Although voters in these states cannot propose laws directly, they do sometimes vote on constitutional amendments referred to them by the state legislature. Indeed, in every state but one, changes to state constitutions require a vote of the people (Kogan 2011). Such legislative referendums explain why ballot measures, although more numerous and frequent in initiative states, also appear on the ballot with some regularity in states that lack the direct initiative. By asking subjects about issues which have appeared on the ballot in recent years in both types of states, our experiment also stacks the deck in favor of the null hypothesis—making it more difficult to find meaningful differences across initiative and noninitiative states.

Table 1. Framing Effects

	Noninitiative States			Initiative States			Difference in Differences
	Limiting Marriage	Eliminating Right	Difference	Limiting Marriage	Eliminating Right	Difference	
A. Same-sex marriage							
Yes	56.8% (1,578)	49.7% (1,562)	-7.1%***	54.3% (1,418)	49.4% (1,463)	-5.0%***	2.1%
	Noninitiative States			Initiative States			Difference in Differences
	Discrimination	Repeal of Ban	Difference	Discrimination	Repeal of Ban	Difference	
B. Funding for abortion							
Yes	46.2% (1,519)	37.8% (1,604)	-8.4%***	47.1% (1,388)	43.7% (1,468)	-3.3%**	5.1%**

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Results

We examine differences across groups and between residents of initiative and non-initiative states. We use a difference in proportions test to estimate whether our treatment was effective and examine the difference-in-differences to assess whether the observed effect was smaller depending on the political institutions of each respondent's state of residence. To test our hypothesis, we compare the average treatment effect of our frames for respondents in initiative states to respondents in noninitiative states. Our hypothesis predicts that respondents who reside in initiative states should be less susceptible to framing effects when compared with their counterparts in non-initiative states. In terms of our experiment, we predict that the difference in reported vote intention will be smaller across our two frames for individuals in initiative states relative to individuals in noninitiative states. We report the results of this analysis in Table 1.¹⁰ We present the number of participants in each group in parentheses for each cell.

Framing effects are prevalent among all subgroups. That is, the way a ballot title and summary frames an issue matters *whether an individual is familiar with the initiative process or not*. Table 1 also demonstrates that the framing effects are muted when an individual is a resident of an initiative state. In these states, the difference in frames produces only a 5 percentage point change in vote choice for same-sex marriage (compared with a 7.1 percentage point change in noninitiative states) and a 3.3 percentage point change in vote choice for abortion (compared with an 8.4 percentage point change). While the differences in differences estimate is significant for the abortion measure, it falls short of significance for the same-sex marriage proposal ($p = .20$). We contend, however, that the overall differences in the magnitude of the effects are due to the fact that residents of initiative states are more familiar with the initiative process and are therefore less susceptible to common strategies political elites often use to try

Table 2. Comparison of Consistent Voting

	Same-Sex Marriage	Funding for Abortion
Noninitiative states	78% (1,285)	73.3% (1,285)
Initiative states	81.5% (1,249)	75.4% (1,249)
Difference	3.5% ^{**}	2.1%

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

to influence election outcomes. Overall, the results provide suggestive support for our hypothesis.

Additional Tests

Our theory is that repeated decision making tempers framing effects. Although our focus is on differences between individual behaviors that arise from variation in the political institutions across respondents' state of residence, the theory, if correct, has several other observable implications. One such implication is that survey respondents from initiative states should cast ballots that are consistent with their underlying political ideologies at a higher rate when compared with voters in noninitiative states. In states without the direct initiative, by contrast, we predict that individuals will be more likely to change their behavior due to framing, thus shifting away from their ideological predispositions and casting ballots that are incongruent with their general political ideology more frequently. Ideology is a rough measure of an individual's policy preference, and we predict that voters in initiative states will be more capable of translating their preferences into a consistent vote in the face of deceptive framing. For our same-sex marriage measures, regardless of frame, we expect that liberals and strong liberals should vote against the measures while conservatives and strong conservatives should support them. For our abortion measures, we anticipate that liberals and strong liberals should support the measures while conservatives and strong conservatives should oppose them.

In Table 2, we compare the percentage of "consistent votes"—defined as voting behavior that matches these predictions—in both initiative and noninitiative states for both measures. Our data generally provide support for the hypothesis, with residents in initiative states voting consistently with their ideological predispositions at a greater rate than residents in noninitiative states for both measures. Specifically, voters in initiative states cast a consistent vote on same-sex marriage 81.5% of the time while voters in noninitiative states cast a consistent vote 78% of the time, a difference of 3.5 percentage points. For the abortion measures, voters in initiative states cast a consistent vote 75.4% of the time and voters in noninitiative states cast a consistent vote 73.3% of the time, a difference of 2.1 percentage points ($p = .11$).

Table 3. Comparison of High Versus Low Usage States

	Low-Use Initiative States			High-Use Initiative States			Difference in Differences
	Limiting Marriage	Eliminating Right	Difference	Limiting Marriage	Eliminating Right	Difference	
A. Same-sex marriage							
Yes	65.3% (278)	56.2% (243)	9.2% ^{**}	49.9% (458)	44.3% (483)	-5.7% ^{**}	3.5%
	Low-Use Initiative States			High-Use Initiative States			Difference in Differences
	Discrimination	Repeal of Ban	Difference	Discrimination	Repeal of Ban	Difference	
B. Funding for abortion							
Yes	45.6% (262)	35.5% (255)	-10.1% ^{***}	53.7% (431)	48.3% (500)	-5.4% ^{**}	4.6%

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Although we focus on dichotomous differences in institutions, we also expect to see meaningful differences among initiative states depending on the frequency with which voters in these states weigh in on ballot measures. Our theory predicts that framing effects should be smaller among initiative states that have a high rate of usage of the initiative process and larger effects in initiative states that have a low rate of usage. Our theory predicts that increased usage of the initiative process causes voters in high-use states to make more decisions, and thus become better at making them.¹¹ Once again, the data provide support for our expectations. As Table 3 shows, for same-sex marriage, framing produced a 5.7 percentage point difference in reported vote intention for voters in high-use states, compared with a 9.2 percentage point framing effect for low-use states, for a difference-in-differences of 3.5 percentage points. For abortion, there was a 5.4 percentage point difference across frames for voters in high-use initiative states compared with a 10.1 percentage point framing effect for voters in low-use initiative states, yielding a 4.6 smaller effect for voters in high-use initiative states. Due to smaller sample sizes, however, these differences were not statistically significant.¹²

Alternative Explanations?

A potential alternative explanation for differences in voter susceptibility to framing is that short-term campaign effects are responsible. The argument is that it is recent exposure to campaigns on ballot measures specifically dealing with same-sex marriage or public funding for abortion, rather than previous general experience with voting on ballot measures, that makes voters less sensitive to the precise words used to describe the proposals. One might assume that such exposure is more likely to occur in states where voters can put these measures on the ballot themselves. As an empirical matter, this explanation is unpersuasive. Of the 12 states that considered

Table 4. Effect of Recent Same-Sex Marriage Amendments

	Not Recent SSM State			Recent SSM State			Difference in Differences
	Limiting Marriage	Eliminating Right	Difference	Limiting Marriage	Eliminating Right	Difference	
Yes	56.9% (2,442)	50.7% (2,419)	6.3%***	50.5% (554)	45.1% (606)	-5.5%***	0.8%

Note: SSM = same-sex marriage.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

banning same-sex marriage with a ballot measure since 2006, 5 were states without the initiative process, suggesting that recent exposure does not serve as a source of bias for the results reported above. Because most constitutional amendments dealing with public funding for abortion took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the respondents in our sample would not have been recently exposed to campaigns related to this issue.

If campaign effects are responsible for blunting for susceptibility to framing, then voters who have seen a same-sex marriage measure recently should exhibit substantially different voting behavior when compared with voters in other states.¹³ Over the last two national election cycles, voters in California (2008), Florida (2008), Arizona (2008), and Maine (2009) have considered ballot measures to define marriage to be between one man and one woman. Our data demonstrate that respondents who reside in these four states behaved no differently in the experiment when compared with residents of other states. We present these results in Table 4. Framing produced a 5.5 percentage point difference in voting intention for voters in these states, compared with a 6.3 percentage point difference in states that have not seen a same-sex marriage measure recently. The difference-in-differences is a meager 0.8 percentage points, suggesting that these two sets of voters are very similar.

Sophistication or Familiarity?

Finally, we provide evidence that it is familiarity with voting on ballot measures, rather than general political sophistication as has been argued by Zaller (1991; 1992), that can best account for the differences among voters in our analysis. Although our survey instrument did not include questions about political awareness or political knowledge, we use the respondents' levels of education and the strength of their political ideology to identify political sophisticates. Previous research has found that formal education is highly correlated with general political knowledge (see Galston 2001 for a summary; see also Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Scholars also argue that strong ideologues should be less susceptible to framing, due both to perceptual screens that make them unreceptive to conflicting information and to the fact that it is easier to move those "on the fence" compared with respondents with established and

Table 5. Comparison of Sophisticates in Initiative and Noninitiative States

		Noninitiative States			Initiative States			Difference in Differences
		Limiting Marriage	Eliminating Right	Difference	Limiting Marriage	Eliminating Right	Difference	
A. Same-sex marriage								
Yes	52.9% (269)	44.6% (241)	-8.3%**	49.5% (247)	45.6% (266)	-3.9%	4.4%	
		Noninitiative states			Initiative States			Difference in Differences
		Discrimination	Repeal of Ban	Difference	Discrimination	Repeal of Ban	Difference	
B. Funding for abortion								
Yes	56.3% (244)	39.7% (265)	-16.6%***	53.2% (243)	41.3% (264)	-11.9%***	4.7%	

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.

entrenched preferences. Thus, we define political sophisticates as individuals who possess a college degree and self-identify as ideologues.¹⁴

Table 5 compares the framing effects among sophisticates in initiative states to similar respondents in states without the direct initiative. Even among this elite group, we find sharp differences between respondents depending on their institutional context. Compared with all respondents, we find that sophisticates in our experiment were somewhat *more* affected by issue framing.¹⁵ Nevertheless, framing produced a far smaller effect among sophisticates from initiative states—8.3 percentage points versus 3.9 percentage points for the same-sex marriage measures; 16.6 percentage points versus 11.9 percentage points for the abortion measure. Again, due to the dearth of sophisticates and thus smaller sample sizes, these differences did not reach statistical significances at conventional levels. These results, however, provide suggestive evidence that familiarity, rather than political sophistication, serves as the primary causal mechanism that determines individual susceptibility to issue frames.

Discussion

Our central argument is that voting is a skill that, similar to most other skills, improves with practice. This claim is hardly novel. Scholars have long noted significant differences in the frequency of voting, apparent voter competency, and other important political behavior between individuals depending on their existing endowment of abilities. Much of this literature, however, focuses on formal education and knowledge of obscure, and largely extraneous, political facts to categorize voters as those who are skilled and, depending on the benevolence of the scholar, those who are inexpert or incompetent. While education and encyclopedic knowledge certainly matter, we argue that previous experience can substitute for both. Familiarity, in our view, can help transform voters into intelligent citizens. We show that, because residents in

initiative states have more experience making complicated policy choices via ballot measures, they are better at avoiding common pitfalls and deceptions inherent in political contests. Our argument is similar to Lupia (2006) who opines that traditional measures of sophistication may not accurately capture the kind of knowledge that voters need to make competent choices.

Our argument, and the empirical results presented here, also provides new insights into evidence that the initiative process leads to greater congruence between public policy and voter preferences (see, for example, Matsusaka 2010). Scholars have explained this finding by arguing that the initiative process, regardless of the frequency of its actual use, provides voters with a “gun behind the door,” reducing the ability of public officials to enact policies that diverge from the desires of their constituents. An alternative explanation is that more extensive previous experience makes voters in initiative states better prepared to participate in all aspects of the democratic process, including candidate elections, and thus improves their ability to translate personal policy preferences into votes.

Broadly, the results offer some support for a new theoretical framework that can help us better understand the cognitive effects associated with the institution of the direct initiative. Our theory is a departure from the campaign effects model that argues the initiative process influences voter behavior primarily through campaigns. We argue, however, that individuals also learn and improve their ability to handle the tasks associated with the direct initiative through repeated decision making. Living in a state with the direct initiative, making decisions on ballot measures, and coming into contact with campaign material helps voters learn how to make political decisions. We recognize, however, that the empirical evidence we present above is modest and is by no means definitive.

Although we test just one empirical implication derived from the insights of consumer decision theory in this article, the general model yields other testable propositions. In particular, we plan to examine whether voters who reside in initiative states process new information—such as additional facts about the policy in question—more quickly and more accurately when compared with voters who do not reside in initiative states. We also intend to measure whether voters in initiative states report making decisions with more confidence when compared with other voters. Finally, we intend to test whether familiarity will lead to a reduction in time required to make a decision. Testing these hypotheses in future research will allow us to examine, further, the similarities between making consumer choices and voting.

Appendix A

Q1A. A ballot summary of one hypothetical state constitutional amendment is provided below. While reading this summary, imagine that residents of your state will vote on this measure in the next election.

ELIMINATES RIGHT OF SAME-SEX COUPLES TO MARRY. CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

Changes state constitution to eliminate the right of same-sex couples to marry. Provides that only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in this state.

Fiscal Impact: The measure would have no fiscal effect on state or local governments.

If today were Election Day and this measure was on the ballot, how would you vote?

I would vote "Yes" 1
I would vote "No" 2

Q1B. A ballot summary of one hypothetical state constitutional amendment is provided below. While reading this summary, imagine that residents of your state will vote on this measure in the next election.

LIMIT ON MARRIAGE. CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

Amends the state constitution to provide that only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in this state.

Fiscal Impact: The measure would have no fiscal effect on state or local governments.

If today were Election Day and this measure was on the ballot, how would you vote?

I would vote "Yes" 1
I would vote "No" 2

Q3A. A ballot summary of one hypothetical state constitutional amendment is provided below. While reading this summary, imagine that residents of your state will vote on this measure in the next election.

PUBLIC HEALTH FUNDING AND PREGNANCY TERMINATION

Shall there be an amendment to the state Constitution to 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?

If today were Election Day and this measure was on the ballot, how would you vote?

- I would vote "Yes" 1
- I would vote "No" 2

Q3B. A ballot summary of one hypothetical state constitutional amendment is provided below. While reading this summary, imagine that residents of your state will vote on this measure in the next election.

REPEAL THE PROHIBITION OF PUBLIC FUNDING FOR ABORTION

Shall the state Constitution be amended to repeal the prohibition of public funding for abortions?

If today were Election Day and this measure was on the ballot, how would you vote?

- I would vote "Yes" 1
- I would vote "No" 2

Appendix B

Demographics

	Noninitiative states (%)	Initiative states (%)
Age		
18–24	10.5	12
25–34	18.2	17.5
35–44	19	18.9
45–54	17.5	17.7
55–64	18.6	17.1
65–74	11	11.1
75+	5.2	5.8
Education		
Less than high school diploma	13.1	13.0
High school diploma	30.4	26.6
Some college	21.4	23
Associate degree	6.7	8.2
Bachelors degree	17.4	18.2
Masters degree	7.9	8.1
Professional or doctorate	3.1	2.9
Party identification		
Strong republican	12.9	12.6
Not strong republican	9.9	9.4

(continued)

Appendix B. (continued)

	Noninitiative states (%)	Initiative states (%)
Leans republican	18.5	17.7
Independent	3.2	3.7
Leans democratic	18.5	22.5
Not strong democrat	16.3	16.1
Strong democratic	20.7	17.9
Ideology		
Extremely liberal	3.2	4.1
Liberal	13.7	15.2
Slightly liberal	9.2	11
Moderate	38.8	35.4
Slightly conservative	12.9	12.1
Conservative	18.2	18.5
Extremely conservative	4.0	3.6
Race/Ethnicity		
White	68.7	68.4
Black	13.5	9.0
Other	4.8	6.2
Hispanic/Latino	12	15.2
Two or more Races	1.0	1.2
Gender		
Female	53.7	49.3

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Notes

1. Dyck and Seabrook (2010) are a notable exception. They consider the potential differences between short-term and long-term effects of direct democracy but do not explore those differences in detail.
2. The National Conference of State Legislatures' Ballot Measures Database is available at <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16580>
3. While the data are limited with regard to local-level ballot measures, Matsusaka (2009) shows that municipal governments in initiative states are more likely to allow local initiatives. This finding suggests that voters in initiative states will also see more local ballot measures when compared with noninitiative states.
4. Knowledge Networks asked 9,213 participants to complete the survey of which 6,101 complied, a response rate of 66.2%.
5. We use a weight variable provided by Knowledge Networks to ensure that each subgroup is a nationally representative sample.
6. Appendix B examines the differences between voters in initiative and noninitiative states in detail.
7. As noted above, the difference between the two summaries for Proposition 8 reflected a change in the status quo for same-sex marriage. Proponents of Proposition 8 claimed that the second title would cause voters to reject the measure because it emphasized "eliminating rights." We are trying to capitalize on this difference in framing. Substantively, however, both titles and summaries resulted in limiting marriage to be between one man and one woman.
8. We did not provide access to the full text of the ballot measure. By doing so, we not only streamlined the experiment but we also mirrored what happens in most elections. That is, most voters will enter the voting booth having given most ballot measures little or no thought (see Matsusaka 2005, 198; see also Magleby 1984).
9. Respondents did not have the option to respond "don't know" or abstain.
10. For all tables we present, subgroup percentages may not precisely add up to the difference estimates due to rounding.
11. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the highest using initiative states for 1990-2008 are California (248 measures), Oregon (192 measures), Maine (140 measures), and Arizona (120 measures). The lowest using initiative states for 1990-2008 are Illinois (7 measures), Mississippi (8 measures), Idaho (33 measures), Wyoming (36 measures), and Michigan (36 measures).
12. We have repeated this analysis using a continuous—rather than dichotomous—measure of frequency of usage. The results were substantively similar. In both cases, the framing effect among respondents was smaller in states more frequent in use of direct democracy, although the effect was statistically significant only for the same-sex marriage measure.
13. While abortion has appeared on the ballot in recent elections (e.g., parental notification laws), public funding for abortion has not been on the ballot since the 1980s and 1990s, precluding us from testing campaign effects for this measure.
14. As above, we measure an ideologue as a person who identifies herself as a strong liberal, a liberal, a conservative, or strong conservative.

15. Although this finding appears to conflict with the predictions of the Zaller model, it is consistent with results reported by Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) and Slothuus (2005). See also Miller and Krosnick (2000).

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