The Case of the Stolen Initiative: Were the Voters Framed?

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Abstract:

Can elected officials and powerful interest groups “steal the initiative” by shaping the language of the official titles and summaries of ballot measures to favor their preferred policy outcomes? We use a unique survey experiment based on three actual ballot measures that have appeared in several states to explore this question. We find that ballot framing does indeed have the potential to influence outcomes in direct democracy elections. We also show, however, that the effect of framing is far from absolute. Exposure to campaign information — in particular, endorsements from prominent interest groups — attenuates the effect of a framed ballot measure, helping voters cast reasoned votes. The results suggest that, in a realistic campaign environment where voters are bombarded by millions of dollars in advertising and direct appeals from political parties and other elites, ballot measure framing is unlikely to change election outcomes.


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Introduction

In politics, it is not always what you say but rather how you say it. In recent years, political observers, activists, and government reformers have expressed a growing concern about political elites’ authority to strategically shape the language used to describe policy proposals (e.g. Lakoff 1995, 2002). The fear is that these actors will use misleading language to befuddle the electorate, leading to the adoption of policies that diverge from the preferences of voters. Such worries have been especially acute in the context of direct democracy elections. In particular, critics claim that strategic politicians and interest groups often used the institutional tools at their disposal to tailor confusing or outright misleading ballot titles and summaries (e.g. Egelko 2008; Harmon 2010; Rogers 2010). They believe that the way an issue is presented to voters can determine the outcome of an election. The official ballot titles and summaries in initiative and referendum elections are of particular importance to politicians and interest groups because these are likely 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. For many voters, the official title and summary represent the “first and only exposure to the issue” (Harmon 2010). A sample title and summary can be seen in Figure 1 below.
Consider Exhibit A. In November 2008, Proposition 8 asked California voters whether the state constitution should be amended to define marriage as a union between one man and one woman. Several months prior to the election, California’s Supreme Court struck down as unconstitutional a California law prohibiting official recognition of same-sex marriage. 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. With Proposition 8 already qualified for the ballot — its supporters had collected the necessary signatures long before the Supreme Court had issued its ruling — the decision changed the status quo in California politics. Same-sex marriage was now a protected right.

Pointing to the new Supreme Court decision, Attorney General Jerry Brown — who had already expressed public support for same-sex marriage and was actively seeking the Democratic nomination for governor — revised Proposition 8’s ballot title and summary. His

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1 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.
language now 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 summary had said. Proponents of Proposition 8 objected to the new description. They claimed that Brown’s new wording was argumentative and designed to curry favor with the Democratic Party’s base. The proponents feared that Brown’s revised title and summary would shift voter sentiment against Proposition 8 and result in the defeat of the measure (Harmon 2010). Although they challenged the new ballot title and summary in court, proponents did not succeed in reversing Brown’s decision. With the reworded measure lagging in the polls, the concerns of Proposition 8 supporters seemed warranted. Yet, on Election Day, California voters approved the measure, amending the state constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage and thus nullifying the state Supreme Court decision.

Consider Exhibit B. In 1988, Colorado voters had an opportunity to reverse a state constitutional ban on public funding for abortions, which had been approved by the narrowest margins just four years earlier. The ballot title and summary for Amendment 7, written by the measure’s proponents, did not even mention 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 opponents of the amendment claimed that the wording was confusing and outright misleading (Fulcher 1988). Two polls conducted by the Denver Post reinforced their concerns. The first used the official ballot title and summary, and found the measure in the lead. The second survey, which described the measure as a repeal of the prohibition on public

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2 In fact, as Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins (2010) point out, California courts will often defer to the Attorney General’s wording unless the judge finds the text to be misleading and grossly biased.
funding for abortion, found it well behind in the polls. On Election Day, Colorado voters defeated Amendment 7, retaining the funding prohibition in the state constitution.

While California’s Proposition 8 and Colorado’s Amendment 7 represent some of the most high-profile controversies over the wording of ballot summaries, the two measures are hardly alone. In each of the 24 states where voters can use initiatives or referenda to bypass the legislative process and weigh in directly on the content of laws, the responsibility for writing the title and summary that voters see on the ballot must be vested in somebody. In many states, as Table 1 shows, this power is delegated to elected officials or to the proponents of the ballot measures. These political elites may hold policy preferences that are in conflict with those of the electorate. Still, most states grant these actors formal powers that they could use in an attempt to thwart the democratic process.

Table 1. Who Writes the Official Ballot Title and Summary?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proponents (Approved by Elected Official)</th>
<th>Elected Official</th>
<th>Commission</th>
<th>Mixture of Proponents and Elected Officials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of States</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of States with Initiative</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this paper, we consider the extent to which strategic politicians and interest groups can indeed use ballot framing to “steal the initiative” — that is, to skew public policy outcomes away from preferences of the median voter (Gerber, Lupia, and McCubbins 2004; Gerber, Lupia, McCubbins and Kiewiet 2001). Using a unique survey experiment, we examine how the use of alternative ballot titles and summaries changes the level of voter support for three different ballot measures. Just as proponents of Proposition 8 and opponents of Amendment 7 have argued, we

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3 Table 1 is a simplified version of Waters (2003, p. 17).
find strong evidence that ballot wording has the potential to significantly shift public opinion. We also find, however, that a realistic election environment — where voters are exposed to new information and learn over the course of the campaign — will mitigate ballot framing effects. Indeed, we show that by providing voters with endorsements from prominent interest groups, the effects of framing can be cut by more than half. Our results provide one likely explanation for why opponents of Proposition 8 and supporters of Amendments 7 did not succeed in “framing” their way to victory.

**Background**

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 (e.g., Lupia et al. 2009) and to motivate the legislature to create policies that are closer to the preferences of the median voter (see Gerber 1996; Matsusaka 2004; but see Lascher, Hagen, and Rochlin 1996). Once adopted, however, initiatives do not implement themselves. Gerber, Lupia, McCubbins, and Kiewiet (2001) examine several initiatives with different policy goals and conclude that many politicians either avoid implementing the policy altogether, or they pursue a strategy of partial implementation (see also Bali 2003; Gerber, Lupia, and McCubbins 2004). Politicians, they surmise, can “steal the initiative” by refusing to implement and enforce the policies adopted by voters.

Most of the research on how politicians interact with initiatives has focused on implementation. We call the failure to implement initiatives passed by voters *ex post* theft. Research thus far, however, has not considered how politicians and interest groups might influence the initiative process *ex ante, before a measure appears on the ballot* (e.g., Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins 2010). Indeed, the ability to craft the language that appears on the
ballot is a unique opportunity for politicians and interest groups to shape the outcome of the election: Every voter is exposed to the ballot, and it is the last thing voters see before marking their choices. By strategically crafting the official text that appears on the ballot, these actors can steal the initiative long before voters enter the voting booth.

Politicians and interest groups have two opportunities to construct a favorable (or inauspicious) frame for a ballot measure. The first opportunity occurs when the ballot measure is in circulation gathering signatures. In fact, 5 of the 24 states that have the direct initiative allow the measures’ proponents to craft the ballot titles and summaries for signature circulation; an additional 3 states allow proponents to write the ballot title and summary with the approval of a government entity; and 10 states delegate the responsibility to an elected official (Waters 2003, p. 16). Thus, a large majority of states (75 percent) allow either the proponents of a potential ballot measure or an elected official to draft the circulation title and summary. Proponents and sympathetic government officials may use this power to highlight the benefits of their proposal, and underemphasize its costs. Likewise, elected officials who oppose a ballot measure may craft a title and summary that emphasizes the costs, and underplays the expected benefits.

The second opportunity politicians and interest groups have to steal the initiative is during the drafting of the official statement that appears next to each measure on the ballot and in the official guide sent to voters. In 15 of the 24 states with the direct initiative, an elected official — usually the state Attorneys General — writes the official ballot title and summary (Waters 2003, p. 17). An additional 5 states require the proponents of the measure to write the ballot title and summary, under the condition that an elected official must approve the language.

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4 Four of the remaining states do not have circulation titles and summaries, Massachusetts uses a mix of elected officials and proponents, and Colorado uses a non-elected commission.
5 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.
In all, 20 of the 24 states with the direct initiative require the proponents, an elected official, or some combination of the two to draft the official ballot title and summary for each ballot measure. Because the preferences of elected officials and ballot measure proponents may differ from those of the statewide electorate, these actors may attempt to use the ballot titles and summaries to systematically shift policy away from outcomes preferred by voters. In some instances, as was the case with Proposition 8, the elected official and the proponents of the measure may have conflicting preferences.

This is not just an idle threat. Extensive research by political scientists has documented how strategic elites can craft political messages that influence the expressed opinions of voters without changing their underlying attitudes or values (e.g., Iyengar et al. 1984; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Zaller 1992). By changing the “considerations” individual voters use to evaluate policy proposals and the saliency of costs and benefits, elite actors can influence mass public opinion through framing, priming, and agenda setting (Zaller 1992). Though much of the framing literature focuses on political messages delivered through the media or by political campaigns, we believe that the text on the ballot provides one of the most effective avenues through which political elites may attempt to influence public opinion, and thus election outcomes. Unlike voter exposure to campaign messages, which varies with voter attentiveness (Zaller 1992), the ballot is read by every voter at the critical point of decision-making. The ballot, then, can be a powerful state-sanctioned source of “considerations” that may influence voter behavior.

The degree to which elected officials and special interests can steal the initiative by incorporating frames into the official ballot title and summary remains an open empirical question, however. Much of the research on framing effects has exposed individual subjects to
experimental treatments in an isolated laboratory environment. Although laboratory experiments may indeed find that word choice has a significant influence on individual question response, it is unclear the extent to which this influence persists after subjects leave the laboratory and are exposed to other sources of stimuli. That is, experimental research does not often recreate a real-world campaign environment, where individual voters are bombarded by millions of dollars worth of campaign advertising and direct appeals by political parties, trade unions, voluntary associations, and other political elites. Significant research has shown that these campaigns do in fact matter, providing voters with new sources of information and facilitating learning about the most important issues of the day (e.g., Alvarez 1997; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1994; Shaw 2006; Vavreck 2009; Zaller 1992). Additional work has demonstrated that that political messages delivered to voters during the course of a campaign can attenuate the effects of framing (see, e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b; Druckman 2001; 2004).

In contrast to presidential and congressional elections, very little research examines the effects of campaigns and advertising in direct democracy. Indeed, the preponderance of research on campaign effects in direct democracy has focused on ballot measure awareness (e.g., Bowler and Donovan 1994, 1998, 2002; Nicholson 2003; Pelika 2008). Other work on campaign effects in direct democracy has found that slate mailers influence vote choice on obscure ballot measures (Iyengar, Lowenstein, and Masket 2001). Lupia (1994) has also shown that knowledge of endorsements from trustworthy political elites can help voters make reasoned choices, though recent research has questioned the frequency with which voters actually use their knowledge of endorsements to cast their ballots (Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins 2010; Burnett and McCubbins 2010). Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins (2010) have argued that — when compared to candidate contests — direct democracy elections rely heavily on political campaigns to deliver
crucial information to voters. Unlike candidate elections, ballot measures do not provide
information shortcuts such as party labels to help voters reduce the cognitive costs required to
make a decision.

**Research Design**

In this paper, we investigate whether the wording of ballot measure titles and summaries
influence voter behavior in the presence of contested political campaigns. To explore this
question, we have designed a unique survey experiment that allows us to directly vary voter
exposure to campaign information and the wording of the ballot measures that they see. The
experiment was embedded in an online survey of approximately 6,000 voting-age adults carried
out by Knowledge Networks in late June 2010. The pool of subjects and all experiment
subgroups are representative of the national electorate in terms of basic demographics.

During the course of the survey, each subject was presented with a ballot title and
summary for three 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. Two of the measures
asked about same-sex marriage and public funding for abortion, and were based on California’s
Proposition 8 and Colorado’s Amendment 7. The third measure asked respondents if they would
support a bond measure that would fund facility improvements at local schools.

At the start of the experiment, the subjects were randomly divided into two groups. The
first group of subjects saw only the ballot title and summary before being asked if they would
support the measures. We provided the second group of subjects — in addition to the titles and
summaries — information about the official positions that two prominent interest groups had
taken on each measure. The interest groups were chosen so that each measure had at least one
“yes” and one “no” endorsement from a prominent organization. In addition, we chose interest
groups that 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. 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 both ballot titles and summaries and the endorsements for all three ballot measures.

In addition, we prepared two versions for each of the three measures, emphasizing different frames embedded in the ballot title and summary; each subject was randomly assigned to see one of these two versions for each ballot measure. The randomization was independent for each measure, so a subject’s assignment to see one frame for the first ballot measure did not determine which versions of the other measures she would see as the survey progressed.

Table 2 summarizes the general setup of the experiment. For each ballot measure, the experiment produced four treatment groups. Groups 1 and 2, in addition to the ballot titles and summaries, received cues from prominent interest groups; however, members of each group saw different versions of the measure. Groups 3 and 4 saw the ballot titles and summaries only. Our primary quantities of interest are the voters’ self-reported voting intentions for each measure, and how these differed across the four groups.
Appendix A 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 each measure was chosen and how we formulated the frames used the experiments.

**Same-Sex Marriage**

The first ballot measure asked respondents to weigh 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 measure presented to our subjects were based on actual ballot titles and summaries prepared by Attorney General Jerry Brown. The first version carried the title “LIMIT ON MARRIAGE. CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT.” and was prepared 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 was the version that appeared on the California ballot in 2008.\(^6\) To satisfy our endorsement treatment, half of the respondents were told that the American Civil Liberties Union had urged voters to vote “no,” while the Christian Coalition of American had urged them to vote “yes.”

**Public Funding of Abortion**

The second ballot measure asked voters to weigh a state constitutional amendment to repeal the prohibition of public funding for abortion. One version of the measure was titled “PUBLIC HEALTH FUNDING AND PREGNANCY TERMINATION” and was based on 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 based the second version on an amendment approved by Washington voters in 1984 that eliminated public funding for abortion. The amendment’s title 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, while the Planned Parenthood Federation of America had urged them to vote “yes.”

**School Bond**

Unlike the first two initiatives, which were both amendments to state constitutions, the final measure was a local school bond and was based on a bond approved by voters in the San Diego Unified School District in November 2008. Many local observers were surprised by the

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\(^6\) The two versions of the actual 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 isolate the impact of framing, both versions of our measure said there would be no fiscal impact from the amendment.
passage of the measure, given San Diego voters’ reputation for fiscal conservatism (Erie, Kogan, and MacKenzie 2010). Indeed, despite two sets of wildfires that devastated the city and destroyed thousands of homes in 2003 and 2007, San Diego voters had thrice voted down increases in the local transient-occupancy and sales taxes to that promised to bring additional funding for local fire protection agencies. Because local school bonds are repaid through increases in property taxes, we asked the consultant hired by San Diego Unified to run the bond campaign to explain his success in such an inhospitable political environment. In response, the consultant pointed to the wording of the ballot language, which was drafted by the school board:

We’ve done better than transient-occupancy taxes (TOT), but let me just tell you, one reason that it’s hard to pass TOT is in the name. What does TOT stand for? TAX. You got the “t”-word right there on the ballot. When you’re playing for three to five points in an election, you just lost five. You haven’t lost 50, but you lost around the margins.

A bond, that’s something else. A bond is like a mortgage. Now, that’s bullshit. You pass a bond, you raise taxes, it goes right on your property tax bill. That’s why you try never to have a bond election near when the property tax bills come out (Interview conducted by the authors, 2009).

To explore the consultant’s intuition, we prepared two versions of the local bond measure. The first was titled “SCHOOL REPAIR AND SAFETY BOND MEASURE” and promised to “To improve every neighborhood school by; repairing outdated student restrooms, deteriorated plumbing and roofs; upgrading career/vocational classrooms and labs; providing up-to-date classroom technology; improving school safety/security; replacing dilapidated portable classrooms; upgrading fire alarms; and removing hazardous substance; shall the school district issue $2,100,000,000 in general obligation bonds at legal interest rates, requiring independent citizen oversight, annual audits, NO money for administrators.” The second version was titled the “SCHOOL REPAIR AND SAFETY PROPERTY TAX MEASURE” (emphasis added) and
noted that local property taxes would go up by $20 per year for every $100,000 of assessed valuation to repay the bonds. Half of the subjects were told that the local County Taxpayers’ Association had urged them to defeat the bond measure, while the Parent and Teacher Association (PTA) had issued a “yes” endorsement.

**Results**

In reporting the results, we begin by estimating the “main effect” of each treatment. First, we show differences in support for each initiative for both versions of the ballot title and summary seen by the subjects. This allows us to measure how much differences in framing affected the subjects self-reported vote intention for each issue. Second, we estimate the effect of exposure to campaign information. That is, we assess whether providing endorsements to our subjects influenced how they intended to vote on the measures. Finally, we calculate the conditional effects, estimating whether the endorsements we provided to our subjects attenuated, heightened, or did not change the magnitude of the framing effect.

To estimate the framing effect, we calculated the differences in self-reported vote intentions between subjects who saw alternate versions of the same measures. As each subsample is nationally representative and the assignment of the frame was random, we can interpret the difference in the reported level of support between these two subsamples to be a result of the framing treatment. We summarize these results in Table 3.
As Table 3 shows, the effect of our frames varied from large to negligible. For the same-sex marriage measure, 5.9 percent fewer respondents supported the constitutional amendment when the ballot title and summary indicated that the measure would “eliminate the right to marry.” This difference was significant well beyond the 95 percent confidence interval. Still, the difference was not large enough to change the likely election result among the voters in our sample. By contrast, there was no statistically distinguishable difference in support (0.1 percent) for the school bond measure, regardless of whether it was described as a “bond” or a “property tax.” This result contradicts the intuition of the consultant that we noted above; in fact, the measure passed by a wide margin regardless of the frame. Similar to our same-sex marriage amendment, however, 5.2 percent fewer respondents supported the abortion measure when the proposal stated in plain language that it would repeal the ban on public funding for abortion. This difference is significant above the 95 percent confidence interval. The measure failed under both frames. Overall, changing the ballot language produced significant differences in vote choice for two of our three measures in the experiment. In both cases, the result was not only statistically significant but also substantively large — though not large enough to alter the
outcome of an election for these particular measures — providing strong evidence for the framing effect.

We turn now to examine the effects of campaign learning. We estimate campaign learning effects by calculating the differences in reported vote intention between subjects who saw only the ballot title and summary and those who also saw endorsements from prominent interest groups. We present these results in Table 4.

Table 4. Estimated Campaign Learning Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No Endorsements</th>
<th>Endorsements</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>4(a). Same-Sex Marriage</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>-0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4(b). School Bond</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
<td>-3.5%**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4(c). Abortion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>4.1%***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at p<0.95; **p<0.99; *** p<0.999

For same-sex marriage, the inclusion of endorsements with the ballot title and summary appeared to have no discernable effect (a difference of -0.9 percent) on the intended vote choice. That is, the supporting endorsement by the Christian Coalition of America and the opposing endorsement of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) did not appear to sway the voters in our experiment. For school bonds, however, the endorsements by the County Taxpayer’s Association in opposition and the Parent and Teacher Association in support of the measure led to 3.5 percent fewer subjects supporting the proposal. This difference, while not enough to change the election outcome among our sample, is significant at the 95 percent confidence level. Finally, the positive endorsement by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the
negative endorsement by the Christian Coalition of America resulted in a 4.1 percent increase in support for our abortion measure. Again, this difference, while significant at the 95 percent confidence interval, would not have produced a different election outcome.

The final step in our analysis is to examine the interaction between our two treatments to estimate the size of the framing effect conditional on the level the respondents’ exposure to campaign information. Table 5 presents the results from all four subgroups for the same-sex marriage ban. Among the “no endorsement” subgroup, we estimated the magnitude of the framing effect to be 8.5 percent. 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 8.5 percent. This shift is large enough to push support for the measure below 50 percent, thus leading to a different election outcome. When we provided endorsements, however, the framing effect was attenuated significantly, with the ballot wording producing a decrease in support of 3.3 percent. By calculating the difference in differences, we show that providing cues to voters reduced the size of the framing effect by 5.2 percentage points for the same-sex marriage measure. All of the differences are significant at the 95 percent confidence level or higher.

Table 5. Same-Sex Marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No Endorsements</th>
<th>Endorsements</th>
<th>Difference in Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limiting Marriage</td>
<td>Eliminating Right</td>
<td>Limiting Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td><strong>8.5%</strong>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at p<0.95; **p<0.99; *** p<0.999

Table 6 presents the level of support among the four subgroups for the school bond measure. Similar to the aggregate numbers presented in Tables 3, there is little evidence that framing had a significant effect on our respondents’ voting intentions, regardless of their exposure to endorsements. Support for the measure declined by 0.4 percent when we used the term “bond” and there were no endorsements present. When we provided endorsements, support
for the measure increased by 0.7 percent when we used the word “bond.” Overall, this produced a 1.1% increase in support when we provided cues to voters. Our results therefore suggest that the verbiage of a spending measure was likely not important, and the proposition passed in all scenarios. As we point out above, however, the endorsements did appear to have an independent effect on voter support for the bond.

Table 6. School Bond

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No Endorsements</th>
<th>Endorsements</th>
<th>Difference in Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Property Tax</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Bond</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at p<0.95; **p<0.99; *** p<0.999

Finally, we present the results for the abortion measure in Table 7. When the subjects did not receive endorsements, seeing the straightforward summary that used the word “abortion,” reduced support for the measure by 6.3 percent. When we introduce endorsements, however, the framing effect declined to 4.2 percent. Thus, introducing campaign information decreased the size of the framing effect by 2.1 percentage points. In other words, among respondents who were exposed to both the ballot title and summary and to interest group endorsements, support for the measure was 2.1 percent higher when the actual wording from Colorado’s Proposition 7 was used. These results are all statistically significant, but the measure was defeated in every scenario.

Table 7. Public Funding for Abortion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No Endorsements</th>
<th>Endorsements</th>
<th>Difference in Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeal of Ban</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-6.3%***</td>
<td>-4.2%***</td>
<td>2.1%**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at p<0.95; **p<0.99; *** p<0.999
Discussion

Do the passage of California’s Proposition 8 and the defeat of Colorado’s Amendment 7 mean that the official descriptions of ballot measures have little noticeable effect 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. On the other, the experiment also demonstrates that the framing effects observed in a laboratory environment — or in a simple poll — are greatly attenuated in the context of a realistic election environment. As voters are exposed to new information, whether campaign media or direct appeals and conversations with their friends, the importance of the official titles and summaries diminishes. In our experiment, exposing subjects to just one piece of campaign information, the endorsements from two interest groups, was sufficient to reduce the size of the framing effect in half.

Not every voter pays attention to the information disseminated by the political campaign or news media, however. Indeed, Zaller (1992) demonstrates that the least informed voters are more susceptible to political persuasion — including framing effects — because they are also the least likely to pay attention to campaigns. A lack of basic information and interest in politics renders the least informed voters more likely to accept new, and perhaps biased, information. In addition, other research has shown that most voters know very little about the average initiative and referendum, including the identity and views of prominent endorsers (e.g., Burnett 2010; Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins 2010; Burnett and McCubbins 2010; Lupia 1994). Because the potential effect of embedding frames in ballot titles and summaries is significant, and many

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7 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.
voters remain unaware of the basic political facts and interest group endorsements, the concerns of political reformers about the *ex ante* theft of the initiative are indeed justified.

The results of our experiment, however, suggest that the focus of reformers and policymakers interested in limiting the effects of ballot frames should be on providing additional and more accessible information to voters. The most accessible location to provide such information, as Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins (2010) have argued, is on the ballot itself. Just as partisan labels help voters cast their votes in candidate contests, our research confirms that cues from prominent interest groups are useful to voters in direct democracy elections. It makes sense, therefore, to take steps toward incorporating this information on the ballot, perhaps in the form of endorsements from major political parties that can appear on the ballot alongside the official ballot titles and summaries.\(^8\)

In addition, our findings raise new questions about the conditions under which framing effects are likely to shift voter sentiment. Contrary to the conventional wisdom in the existing literature on issue voting, we found that ballot wording had a significant effect on intended voting behavior for measures dealing with abortion and same-sex marriage, two quintessentially “easy issues” (Carmines and Stimson 1980) for which most voters should have a simple gut response.\(^9\) By contrast, we found little evidence of ballot framing for a proposed school bond and property tax increase. A school bond, unlike same-sex marriage and abortion, is a more complicated measure and an issue for which the policy means, as well as the ends, are likely to

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8 There are, however, complications to including additional information on the ballot. As Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins (2010) point out, deciding which endorsements to include may be difficult, as some funding sources and interest groups take concerted steps to hide their support. Furthermore, deciding which endorsements to include will always be a political decision. Another complication is that ballot production requires significant lead time, and strategic political actors may take advantage of the timing to ensure that their name does not become attached to a measure. We agree with Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins (2010) that reassigning the responsibility of drafting the ballot titles and summaries to a nonpartisan or bipartisan commission may help remove some of the politics from the process.

9 Carmines and Stimson argue that easy issues are characterized by three properties: (1) they are symbolic rather than technical; (2) they deal with policy ends rather than means; (3) and they are issues long on the political agenda.
matter to most voters. One explanation is that technical, rather than symbolic, issues are likely to encourage more careful deliberation and a deeper level of thinking among voters, limiting the influence of ballot word choice. Easy issues may not trigger the same amount of conscious analysis, leaving voter susceptible to framing and priming. Regardless, this is an interesting finding and deserves further study.

Although the results presented in this paper focused on the impact of ballot wording on aggregate public opinion, we are also interested in identifying which voters are most susceptible to framing effects. In future research, we plan to examine whether or not residing in an initiative state — where voters are more familiar with ballot measures — attenuates framing effects. We also anticipate that a number of individual-level factors may have an effect on the whether a voter is susceptible to framing. In particular, we expect that political sophistication, strength of partisanship and ideology, and education will affect our framing and campaign information treatments.

In this paper, we tested the hypothesis that strategic politicians and interest groups can influence the result of an election by framing the ballot title and summary to favor their preferred outcome. We find that framing the ballot title and summary can have significant and large effects on voters’ decisions. We also showed, however, that campaign information can attenuate these framing effects significantly. Our conclusion is that savvy political actors can indeed steal the initiative before voters ever see the measure in the voting booth, but the existence of vigorously contested and well-funded campaigns and the type of issues that appear on the ballot greatly limit the frequency with which this type of theft actually occurs.
References


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.

[SHOW IF IN CUE GROUP]
Several prominent groups have expressed an opinion on this measure.

The American Civil Liberties Union has urged voters to vote NO.
The Christian Coalition of America has urged voters to vote YES.

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.

[SHOW IF IN CUE GROUP]
Several prominent groups have expressed an opinion on this measure.

The American Civil Liberties Union has urged voters to vote NO.
The Christian Coalition of America has urged voters to vote YES.

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
Q2A. The ballot title and summary of a hypothetical local ballot measure is provided below. While reading this summary, imagine that residents of your city will vote on this measure in the next election.

**SCHOOL REPAIR AND SAFETY PROPERTY TAX MEASURE**

To improve every neighborhood school by; repairing outdated student restrooms, deteriorated plumbing and roofs; upgrading career/vocational classrooms and labs; providing up-to-date classroom technology; improving school safety/security; replacing dilapidated portable classrooms; upgrading fire alarms; and removing hazardous substance; shall the school district raise local property taxes by $20 per year for every $100,000 of assessed valuation to issue $2,100,000,000 in bonds at legal interest rates, requiring independent citizen oversight, annual audits, and NO money for administrators?

[SHOW IF IN CUE GROUP]
Several prominent groups have expressed an opinion on this measure.

The local **County Taxpayers’ Association** has urged voters to vote **NO**.  
The local **Parent and Teacher Association (PTA)** has urged voters to vote **YES**.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would vote “Yes”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would vote “No”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q2B. The ballot title and summary of a hypothetical local ballot measure is provided below. While reading this summary, imagine that residents of your city will vote on this measure in the next election.

**SCHOOL REPAIR AND SAFETY BOND MEASURE**

To improve every neighborhood school by; repairing outdated student restrooms, deteriorated plumbing and roofs; upgrading career/vocational classrooms and labs; providing up-to-date classroom technology; improving school safety/security; replacing dilapidated portable classrooms; upgrading fire alarms; and removing hazardous substance; shall the school district issue $2,100,000,000 in general obligation bonds at legal interest rates, requiring independent citizen oversight, annual audits, NO money for administrators?

[SHOW IF IN CUE GROUP]
Several prominent groups have expressed an opinion on this measure.

The local **County Taxpayers’ Association** has urged voters to vote **NO**.  
The local **Parent and Teacher Association (PTA)** has urged voters to vote **YES**.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would vote “Yes”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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?

[SHOW IF IN CUE GROUP]
Several prominent groups have expressed an opinion on this measure.

The Christian Coalition of America has urged voters to vote NO.
The Planned Parenthood Federation of America has urged voters to vote YES.

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?

[SHOW IF IN CUE GROUP]
Several prominent groups have expressed an opinion on this measure.

The Christian Coalition of America has urged voters to vote NO.
The Planned Parenthood Federation of America has urged voters to vote YES.

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