**Use of Cues in Low-Information Elections**

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**Abstract**

How do voters make decisions in local elections when they have minimal information about the candidates? Past research has demonstrated that voters use cues to compensate for a lack of detailed knowledge but there has been inadequate study of which cues voters depend upon in the local electoral context. This paper examines how voters use and weigh cues, drawing from recent California survey data. Based on their own accounts, we find that voters seek cues with politically relevant information, such as candidate policy positions and organizational endorsements. Cue use varies by partisanship and political interest, although some cues, such as recommendations from acquaintances and endorsements by other elected officials, are rarely used by any voters. The survey results suggest at least minimal competence; however, the likely presence of social desirability bias prevent us from concluding that voters demonstrate more than minimal competence.

**Introduction**

Many individuals choose to go to the polls because they want to vote in the top-of-the-ticket races for President, governor, US Senator, or perhaps high-profile ballot initiatives. Such voters may not be aware that an election for city council or county supervisor is even on the ballot. What do they do when faced with decisions on these races?

Political scientists have made considerable progress in answering the above question, focusing on simple cues and heuristics, including information that is present on the ballot itself such as party identification, gender, and ethnicity (Bonneau and Cann 2015; Crowder-Meyer et al. 2020; Lim and Snyder 2015; Matson and Fine 2006; Miller and Krosnick 1998; Schaffner et al. 2001). Our own recent research has shown how knowledge about candidates’ stated occupation may influence choices (Adams, Lascher, and Martin 2021). Such cues can be used without extensive political knowledge, which is significant since much research confirms that ordinary citizens generally lack detailed political information.

Nevertheless, we lack detailed knowledge about which currently available cues voters themselves view as most useful, and why. We know still less about what information voters might *like* to have but is currently lacking, or about how voters *weigh* different sorts of cues. For example, do they think that information about candidate occupation is more or less helpful than endorsements? If they use information about candidate occupation, is it because of what it suggests about expertise or something else? Do voters wish they knew candidates’ political party identification if such information is not available on the ballot itself? Our analysis aims to address such questions.

We find that voters claim to be good democratic citizens. They say they do additional research when they know little about local candidates and identify politically-relevant cues as the primary sources of information. There is some variation across party lines, with Democrats more likely to read candidate statements and seek out newspaper endorsements. Voters with less political interest were less likely to do additional research. Incumbency tended to disadvantage candidates, with more voters claiming that it is a negative rather positive characteristic. Voters used occupational cues to infer both partisanship and candidate personal characteristics such integrity and management skills. Even though occupation (which appears on the California ballot) was not the most commonly-used cue, voters who used it inferred a lot of information from it. Overall the findings paint an optimistic picture of voters’ decision-making processes, as they seek out and use politically-relevant cues even in low-information elections. But, as we discuss further below, we have reasons to question the self-reported behavior of our respondents.

**Data**

Our analysis is based on responses to ten survey questions on the April 2021 CALSPEAKS Statewide Panel. We were able to add these questions to the survey by securing a fellowship award from the California State University Social Science Research & Instructional Center (SSRIC). Our survey questions pertained to making decisions about city council and county supervisorial races; the survey also included a variety of questions about unrelated topics as well as background questions that we used (e.g., respondent party identification). CALSPEAKS is an online survey panel that uses probability-based sampling and consists of a representative sample of adult Californians who have previously completed a questionnaire on demographics and other characteristics. The CALSPEAKS survey is administered by Sacramento State’s Institute for Social Research. Our sample size is 704 respondents. The data include weight variables to account for differing sampling frames and compensate for lack of sample representation in particular groups. The survey weight accounts for gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and income. All results presented here include the survey weight.

A survey of Californians is ideal to answer our research questions for several reasons. First, local races in California are officially nonpartisan. Without party affiliation on the ballot, there is more opportunity to understand which other types of cues voters use to make electoral choices. Second, California is unique in allowing candidates to list an occupation on the ballot, and most candidates do so. Our prior research (Adams, Lascher, and Martin 2021) demonstrated the potential importance of such cues but the new data allow us to go farther, assessing the influence of candidate occupation in relation to other cues in a context where California voters do not think it is unusual to see candidates’ occupations on the ballot. Finally, a California sample is diverse in many respects, which provides an opportunity to examine multiple types of voters.

**Voter Use of Cues Based on Our Survey Data**

*What Cues Voters Claim to Use, and How Frequently*

Voters claim that they seek and use relevant information when casting a ballot in low-information elections. We asked voters what they do in the following situation:

"When you have been faced with a city council or county supervisorial race in which you did not know anything about the candidates, what has been your most common response? (choose up to three)"

Results are presented in Figure 1. Voters indicate that their most likely response is to either do additional research or read the candidate statements in the voter pamphlet. Some rely on occupation as a cue, but few voters rely on their social networks or skip the race completely. There is remarkably little variation by voter partisanship or interest in politics; overall voters of all partisan shades report making decisions in a similar way when they know little about the candidates. However, a statistically significant higher percentage of Democrats report reading the candidate statements in the voter pamphlet (p = 0.006). There also is a divide between partisans and non-partisans when it comes to additional research: a statistically higher percentage of partisans (Democrats and Republicans) report doing additional research online or elsewhere, relative to independents (p = 0.064). This is consistent with prior research showing that in general, independents in California are less engaged in politics than partisans (Lascher and Korey 2011). In terms of political interest, those who report higher levels of political interest also are more likely to report doing additional research online or elsewhere (p = 0.000).

Figure 1: How voters make decisions in low-information contests

Yet it is unclear precisely what “doing additional research” entails. This could be limited to a 30-second search on one candidate or skimming websites for keywords; it could also entail a more systematic search on each candidate. Additionally, it is unclear whether “reading” the candidate statement involves a 5-second glance to identify relevant keywords or a thorough reading. Putting aside the time and effort put into it, these responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, as doing additional research is the normatively correct action for a voter lacking information about candidates. Voters claim to take the time to inform themselves of down-ballot races, although whether they actually do so, and the time they dedicate to the task, are still uncertain.

We also asked our respondents what information they most frequently use when deciding how to vote in city council and county supervisorial races, and a follow-up question about what information they would most like to have. Respondents were allowed to choose up to three pieces of information for each question. These questions were designed to identify which cues voters prioritize and rely on when voting. Results are in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Information voters use and want in local elections

Respondents said they both use (orange bars) and want (black bars) candidate policy positions when voting in local elections. It is hardly surprising that candidates want to know about policy positions, given that they were allowed to choose up to three pieces of information and most voters want to know what candidates stand for. More surprising is that respondents seem to indicate that they often do know and use candidate policy positions, which goes against common understandings of voter knowledge of local politics (see for example Crowder-Meyer et al. 2020). The second most frequent cue voters report using were endorsements from “organizations you support.” These endorsements matter significantly more than other types of endorsements from elected officials, newspapers, or political parties. This is consistent with recent research illustrating the importance of endorsements in local politics (Benjamin 2017; Benjamin and Miller 2019).

*Party Endorsements and Political Experience*

It is notable that political party endorsements were not as frequently used as organizational ones, although respondents acknowledged using them more than various other cues such as newspaper endorsements or preferences of friends and family. In California all local elections are formally nonpartisan, so party labels do not appear on the ballot. Accordingly, party endorsements or candidate self-disclosure are the primary ways voters learn about party affiliation. We expected that party endorsements would be a preferred cue among voters, but it seems that they value the opinions of other organizations more than the party organization. However, parties may not make endorsements in many local races and voters could be using organizational endorsements as a cue for partisanship. Later we will return to the idea that ostensibly nonpartisan information may in fact be used as cues for partisanship.

Voters also indicated they would like information about past political experience. Yet this was the only cue for which preference was much higher than actual use. This may suggest that voters do not know enough about how to determine candidates’ political experience, or the political experience information readily available to voters may not be the political experience information about which they want to know.

*Incumbency Status*

What about incumbency status—is this something voters find useful? There is reason to think so. Many local contests include one or more incumbents running for reelection. Voters could use incumbency status as either a positive (“My councilor is doing a great job!”) or negative cue (“Throw the bums out!”). Given the enormous literature on “incumbency advantage” at different levels of American politics, the more positive reaction to incumbents initially seemed more likely.

Nevertheless, about half of all survey respondents indicated that incumbency status made no difference to them in choosing candidates for local office. Additionally, a greater portion of respondents (25%) indicated they would be *less* likely to vote for an incumbent than indicated they would be more likely to do so (15%). This general pattern held when we divided the sample by political party identification, education, political interest, and knowledge of politics. Any way we sliced it, incumbency did not emerge as a factor that respondents tended to acknowledge as motivating them to vote for a candidate.

These results are curious given the common findings that incumbents tend to win reelection at high rates in American local elections. Moreover, the most rigorous available political science research suggests this is not merely a consequence of incumbents being more skilled and capable even before seeking office, but also a result of incumbents gaining support from voters by virtue of having served (Trounstine 2011). We note however that our questions were phrased in the abstract, without respect to particular candidates running in specific races. Americans tend to look down on politicians generally, but not necessarily their own representatives. Indeed, there is a long tradition of political scientists finding that voters are highly supportive of their own representatives even as they are critical of incumbents generally (cf. Fenno 1978).

*Occupational Background*

Given our prior research (Adams, Lascher, and Martin 2021) we were especially interested in occupation as a voting cue. The data presented in Figure 3 indicate that respondents highly valued this cue, as expected. But the new data allowed us to go further by exploring what characteristics votes infer from candidate occupation. We asked survey participants to “Imagine a candidate with each of the following occupations is running for city council or county supervisor. Do you think candidates with these occupations are likely to have developed the following characteristics?” The four occupations presented were corporate executive, small business owner, attorney, and educator, which were chosen because our prior study indicated they were common ballot designations. The characteristics were management skills or expertise, budgetary skills, integrity, ability to find solutions to problems, responsive to local community, and understanding of issues important to local community. Response options were on a five-point scale anchored at “Likely” and “Unlikely” and including a “Not sure” option. Figure 3 presents the weighted percent of respondents who reported it was “likely” (selected either four or five on the five-point scale) that candidates of each occupation have developed each characteristic.

Figure 3: Likelihood candidates have characteristics, by occupation

Looking first at corporate executives (purple bars) and small business owners (yellow bars), high percentages (74-83%) of respondents report it is likely that both groups have management skills or expertise, budgetary skills, and ability to find solutions to problems. However, they are evaluated differently on integrity, responsiveness to local community, and understanding of issues important to local community. Higher percentages of respondents report that small business owners have integrity, are responsive to the community, and are understanding of issues important to local community, while rating executives very poorly on these characteristics.

A fairly low percentage of respondents believe attorneys (green bars) have developed any of these characteristics, except 73.3% who believe attorneys have the ability to find solutions to problems. Educators (red bars) are rated favorably overall with high percentages of respondents thinking educators have integrity, ability to find solutions to problems, responsive to local community, and understanding of issues important to the local community. However, only 36.6% of respondents think educators have budgetary skills, and they score lower than business owners and executives on management skills.

We also asked respondents: “How likely do you think it is that a candidate with the following occupational backgrounds identifies as a Democrat, Independent, or Republican?” The results are striking: a great many people infer partisanship from occupational background alone. Figure 4 presents the weighted percent of respondents who reported that candidates with each occupational background are likely to be Democrats (blue bars), independents (purple bars), Republicans (red bars), as well as the proportion who are “not sure” (gray bars). A majority assumed corporate executives are Republicans (64.9%) and educators are Democrats (74.2%). The picture is less clear for small business owners, and especially unclear for attorneys. Approximately one-third of respondents (35.2%) believed small business owners tend to be Republicans, but a similar percentage (29.1%) reported they are not sure of small business owners’ partisanship. Respondents were most unsure about the partisanship of candidates who are attorneys: 40.8% were not sure the likely party identification of attorneys.

Figure 4: Perceived partisanship of candidates, by occupation

Respondent inferences about the partisan leanings of people in different professions have a basis in reality. A nationwide survey of K-12 teachers showed that many more identified as Democrats than as Republicans (Klein 2017). Studies have consistently shown that the Democratic lean is even stronger among college and university faculty (e.g., National Communication Association 2017). Meantime, a 2020 Nationwide Small Business Association survey indicated members skewed toward identifying as Republicans (NSBA 2020). And at least in terms of campaign contributions, CEOs lean heavily toward favoring Republicans (Cohen et al. 2019).

**Differences in Use of Cues by Party Identification and Political Interest**

There are significant differences by party affiliation when it comes to which cues respondents report using when they lack information about the candidates (Figure 5). Party affiliation is measured on a three-point scale corresponding to Democrats, Republicans, and Independent/unaffiliated/decline to state. Respondents who indicated their party affiliation was “something else” were excluded from this analysis. Comparing across party affiliation, we find higher percentages of Republicans report using occupational background of the candidate (p = .045). Conversely, a higher percentage of Democrats report using endorsements by elected officials (p = .018) and newspaper endorsements (p = .0002). Relative to Republicans, higher percentages of both Democrats and independents report using candidate demographics as cues (p = .001). Given Democrats’ generally higher trust of media (Gottfried and Liedke 2021) and government (Goldstein and Wiedemann 2021) and embrace of identity politics (McCall and Orloff 2017), it is not surprising that Democrats are more likely to use these cues. Partisans (Democrats and Republicans) are more likely to use party endorsements (p = 0.000) and organization endorsements (p = .001). It is not surprising that partisans use party cues. Since partisans are more likely to be politically involved and active (Lascher and Korey 2011), it seems reasonable that partisans have organizations they look to for endorsements.

Figure 5: Cues voters *use* in local elections, by party affiliation

There are partisan differences regarding which cues voters want when they have little information about the candidates, as seen in Figure 6. Higher percentages of Republicans report wanting candidates’ occupational background information (p =.013). Higher percentages of Democrats report wanting organization endorsements (p = .002). Relative to independents, partisans (both Democrats and Republicans) report wanting information on candidates’ past political experience (p = .005) and party endorsements (p = .014). Again, it is not surprising that independents do not prioritize party endorsement cues. Higher percentages of both Democrats and Independents, relative to Republicans, report wanting newspaper endorsements (p =.005), which aligns with Republicans’ general mistrust of media.

Figure 6: Cues voters *want* in local elections, by party

In addition to partisanship, there are differences in which cues voters use based on their level of political interest. Political interest was measured as how many days in the past week respondents reported talking about politics with family or friends (in person or by text or online), and ranges from zero (“I don’t really discuss politics”) to seven days per week. As seen in Figure 7, those who are more interested in politics (or at least discuss politics more frequently) are significantly more likely to use (black bars) political party endorsements (p = .007), organization endorsements (p = .029), newspaper endorsements (p = .007), and candidates’ policy priorities (p = 0.000).

Figure 7: Cues voters use in local elections, by political interest

**The Big Picture: Are Local Citizens Competent Voters?**

Political pundits often question whether voters have sufficient information to cast informed voters in local elections, as anecdotal evidence about voters’ lack of understanding of local politics abounds. This raises the question of what it means to be a “competent” voter. A minimal threshold is that voters use politically-relevant cues instead of irrelevant cues (e.g., order of placement on the ballot) or guessing. So, voters that use organizational endorsements as a basis for voting are competent even if they know little else about the candidates, since those endorsements contain relevant political information. Yet this is a relatively low bar for assessing competence and can lead voters astray because sometimes organizations endorse candidates that do not share policy views for strategic political reasons. An intermediate threshold is that voters use the best cues available. A candidate’s occupation may provide some politically-relevant information, but as a cue it can be misleading and superficial; relying on a cue such as party endorsements or stated policy positions would more likely lead to a vote consistent with one’s policy preferences. To meet this threshold, competent voters will sort through the cues at their disposal and focus on the ones that provide the best and most accurate information. An even higher threshold for competence would be that voters do more than just rely on cues: they learn detailed information about the candidates and make an informed judgement based on such information.

We know from decades of public opinion research that few voters in the United States reach the high threshold for competence (see for example Carpini and Keeter 1996). However, it is an open question whether voters meet either the minimal or intermediate thresholds, especially in local elections. According to our survey data, voters in California local elections easily clear the minimum threshold, as they indicate they use politically-relevant cues. Based only on what voters claim to do, we could also make a case that they clear the intermediate threshold as well, focusing on cues such as organizational endorsements, policy positions, and candidate ballot statements that contain extensive political information. Even though some voters use cues that contained less politically explicit information such as occupation, candidate demographics, and recommendations from friends and family, they do so much less frequently. Respondents claimed they focus on informative and relevant cues, and seek out these cues when not immediately available.

Even though they may not reach the highest standards of competence, if we take these survey responses at face value, the conclusion to draw is that California voters are good democratic citizens, making relatively careful decisions about individual candidates in local races. They use cues with substantial policy content to make decisions and when they lack information they seek out relevant cues. Even if they might draw incorrect inferences, they at least seek out politically relevant information about candidates to help them choose. This goes against common understandings of local elections and voter knowledge about candidates.

There are, however, two caveats to these findings. First, as discussed above, social desirability bias may inflate the number of voters who say they seek out and use valuable political cues. We have no way to conclusively determine the extent that social desirability influences responses from our survey respondents, although answers to some of the other questions in the survey indicate that it is at work. 75.7% of respondents claimed they “always vote” or “vote most of the time” (58.3% report always voting and 17.4% report voting most of the time) which is close the 68.5% turnout in California during the November 2020 presidential election. But only 37% voted in the 2020 presidential primary, and 49% voted in the 2018 California gubernatorial election ([http://www.electproject.org/](about:blank) ). So the actual number of Californians who “always vote” is probably closer to 40% than 60%. Similarly, 25% of survey respondents said they “attended a rally or campaign event” in the past two years and 28% said they “attended a local government meeting” during the same time period; both figures are highly implausible given typical attendance at rallies and government meetings. Additionally, other research using validated votes confirm that turnout findings based on self-reports alone tend to overstate the portion of the electorate casting ballots (see for example Silver et al. 1986). Thus, even though our survey was based on a random sample of Californians, it appears that respondents inflated their participatory activities, suggesting that similar embellishments of information gathering around voting is likely.

A second caveat is that voters may not maximize the benefits cues provide. Having good cues does not necessarily translate into making reasonable inferences from those cues. For example, one could use occupation to make both correct and incorrect inferences about a candidate’s qualifications. Voters also could use cues only to infer candidate party identification (which as we indicated previously, they seem to do reasonably well) and ignore other relevant pieces of information. One of the most striking findings in our survey is that the majority of respondents (and overwhelmingly majority of partisans) want party labels to appear on the local ballot—even though this has never been the case in their lifetimes. As shown in Table 1, this is true of Republicans, Democrats, and independents alike. Moreover, as indicated previously, voters (in a strikingly consistent way) infer candidate party identification based on their stated occupational background. The California Constitution aims to keep partisanship out of local races but California voters would seem to prefer having candidate party identification as a guidepost.

Table 1: Support for Adding Candidate Partisan Labels by Party Identification

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Republicans | Independents | Democrats |
| Support | 78.9 | 50.9 | 84.8 |
| Oppose | 9.9 | 27.3 | 7.2 |
| Unsure/No Opinion | 11.2 | 21.8 | 8.1 |

Using cues to infer partisanship is not necessarily problematic. However ignoring other relevant information and focusing just on partisanship can be, especially in local races where party labels may not convey much information about a candidate’s stance on local issues. This is especially the case when, as is frequently true in California, candidates from one political party dominate local races so that party identification does not allow voters to draw meaningful distinctions. Further, voters may inappropriately use partisanship as a cue for other candidate attributes. For example, they may assume candidates from one party are more ethical, intelligent, or knowledgeable than those from another party. Voters who do this would still be competent using a minimalist threshold for competence, since they are using politically-relevant cues, but it would be hard to classify them as being more than minimally-competent.

In short, our survey suggests voters are at least minimally competent in local elections. However, we are not ready to conclude that in general they exceed such minimal competence.

**Paths for Future Research**

Above, we questioned our respondents’ claim that they focus primarily on policy positions as the main determinant of voting. Even though we cannot directly assess whether voters seek and acquire policy information about the candidates, scholars can conduct further experiments to examine whether other types of cues are given greater weight. Experiments that have nonpolicy cues (such as gender, race, party endorsement, or unethical behavior) can ascertain whether voters are willing to cast ballots against candidates with whom they share policy positions.

More generally, further research should explore the relative strength of various cues not included in our study. Some scholars have already examined whether partisanship can drown out other cues (Coffe and von Schoultz 2021; Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood 2021; Peterson 2017), although additional research is needed to develop a more complete picture of these dynamics. It would be valuable to determine whether personal characteristics such as integrity and responsiveness to the community can prompt voters to oppose co-partisan candidates. Also valuable would be research to examine the strength of the inferences voters draw from occupation. Do they stick with their assumptions about corporate executives, for example, in the face of contradictory evidence?

Another line of inquiry would be to look at whether voters’ decision-making processes differ in local elections as opposed to national ones. For example, is partisanship a weaker cue in local elections? We found that organizational endorsements are frequently used as cues in local elections–is the same true for national elections? Having less information for local contests will inevitably lead to voters relying more heavily on cues, but will it also lead them to rely on different types of cues?

Our survey respondents said they focus heavily on policy issues, but many voters also say that they care about competence, morality, and ethics as well. Do local voters primarily focus on policy or competence if they have cues related to both? Will they vote for candidates they feel are competent even if they disagree with their policy views? Will they vote for incompetent candidates that they happen to agree with? If so, how strong do the incompetence cues have to be for this to occur? Is there variation in the relative weight of policy and competence across partisan or demographic groups?

Finally, do voters use party cues to just infer policy, or do they also use party to infer other character traits such as integrity, competitive, or management skills? Party labels are a very useful cue when it comes to policy–for example, knowing that a candidate is a Democratic tells you something but what that person believes. But these cues are not as useful in inferring other candidate traits such as integrity. Do voters use them this way nonetheless? Is party used to make an overall judgement about the worth of a candidate (i.e., people in my party are good and others are evil)? There is fertile ground for addressing such questions with additional study.

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