

BOOK REVIEW

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***Voting the Agenda: Candidates, Elections, and Ballot Propositions.* By Stephen P.**

Nicholson. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. Pp. 208. \$35.00.)

Democracy in the 21st century is hard to understand without taking into account initiatives and referendums. In American states, the number of ballot propositions is a historical high and initiatives drive the policy agenda in many states; in Europe, referendum votes in France and the Netherlands sank the European Union Constitution; and in Asia, Taiwan's recently adopted referendum process is seen as a prelude to a vote on independence from mainland China. With the growth of direct democracy has come a realization that the influence of ballot propositions extends beyond the laws that voters approve at the ballot box. Legislatures adopt different policies when initiatives and referendums are available in order to forestall initiative campaigns and because of new information that is revealed when citizens vote on measures (Matsusaka and McCarty, 2001). Nicholson's *Voting the Agenda* calls attention to another reason ballot propositions matter: they can change the way voters evaluate candidates for office, possibly swinging an election from one candidate to another. The idea that ballot propositions can influence candidate elections is not new, but Nicholson crystallizes the argument and for the first time provides much-needed empirical foundations.

The book begins by sketching a theory of how ballot propositions can spill over onto candidate elections (Ch. 2). Issue campaigns bring to light new information that

causes citizens to revise how important they consider a particular issue (e.g. a criminal sentencing initiative might introduce statistics suggesting that crime is worse than previously believed) and also can force candidates to take positions on issues they would rather avoid. If citizens view candidates as bundles of issues, the new information might make one bundle look more attractive than it had before, and cause voters to switch their support to that candidate. The theory is developed in terms of subconscious “priming” (say, of racial biases) and other psychological concepts but could just as well be cast in terms of Bayesian updating.

The core of the book is chapters 4-6 that provide statistical evidence, and this is where its main contribution lies. Broadly speaking, Nicholson attempts to establish two facts: (1) ballot propositions change the issues that voters consider important when voting for candidates – what he calls “setting the agenda”, and (2) this reweighting of issues causes voters to change their decisions in the voting booth. On the first point, regressions using survey data from the 1980s and 1990s show that citizens were more likely to identify a congressional candidate’s position on abortion, the environment, taxes, and the nuclear freeze as being important to their vote in states that had a ballot proposition on these topics than states without a proposition (Ch. 4). On the second point, regressions show that nuclear freeze supporters were more likely to support Democratic candidates in U.S. House, U.S. Senate, and gubernatorial elections when there was a nuclear freeze measure on the ballot (Ch. 5), and that Californians who supported civil rights measures promoted by conservative groups were more likely to vote for Republican gubernatorial, U.S. Senate, and presidential candidates (Ch. 6).

Altogether, the book builds a plausible case for the idea that ballot propositions influence candidate races, but the evidence leaves room for alternative interpretations. For example, Ch. 6 finds that supporters of Prop. 187 (a measure to deny government services to illegal aliens) were more likely to vote Republican. This could mean, as Nicholson argues, that Prop. 187 *caused* them to favor Republican candidates, but it could also mean simply that Prop. 187 supporters were inclined toward the GOP to begin with. More research will be needed to determine if the book's frequent jumps from correlation to causality are justified. (As an aside, the book is commendably even-handed in its treatment of the ideologically loaded measures it studies, except when it concludes (p. 129) that racial biases were "partly, if not mostly, responsible for why" two California civil rights measures resonated with the voters – almost dismissing offhand the alternative explanation that many voters considered it unfair for the taxpayers to provide services to people who were in the country illegally (Prop. 187) or for the government to treat to citizens differently depending on their race (Prop. 209).)

The book's contribution to our understanding of direct democracy is obvious, but it also aims to reshape the study of candidate elections more generally, arguing that traditional analyses of elections that focus on factors specific to a given race are missing a big part of the story ("spillover effects happen more often than students of elections typically realize" (p. 43), etc.) I suspect it will take quite a bit more evidence to make this argument convincing. While the evidence suggests that ballot propositions spill over, it does not demonstrate the phenomenon is common or that the effects are large enough to actually swing the elections. Moreover, because the estimates include few (often no) race-specific factors such as campaign spending, candidate issue positions, and

incumbency, they don't allow side-by-side comparisons of the spillover theory and traditional approaches.

These concerns notwithstanding, the book's statistical and anecdotal evidence is fairly convincing that ballot proposition cast a shadow over candidate races. Nicholson suggests this is bad for democracy (Ch. 7) because initiatives are dominated by groups with significant financial resources. "Since final agenda control by the people is an essential feature of representative democracy" (p. 137) it would be better not to have initiatives and referendums and leave the agenda in the hands of "the people." The problem with this argument is the assumption that "the people" control the agenda in the absence of initiatives and referendums. In fact, without initiatives and referendums, the agenda is dominated by the media and candidate campaigns not the general public. The initiative empowers groups that are otherwise shut out of the agenda formation process, creating a more competitive environment over the public agenda, even if it is still not perfectly representative of the general public. As I have argued elsewhere, increasing competition in the political sphere is generally a good thing and, indeed, a growing body of evidence shows that direct democracy does in fact make government more responsive to public opinion (Gerber, 1999; Matsusaka, 2004).

Regardless of how we come down on these normative questions, it is clear that initiatives and referendums are not going away any time soon. Nicholson's book is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of these increasingly important democratic processes.

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References

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