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0521848598 - How Voters Decide: Information Processing during Election Campaigns

Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk

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HOW VOTERS DECIDE

Information Processing during Election Campaigns

This book attempts to redirect the field of voting behavior research by proposing a paradigm-shifting framework for studying voter decision making. An innovative experimental methodology is presented for getting “inside the heads” of citizens as they confront the overwhelming rush of information from modern presidential election campaigns. Four broad theoretically defined types of decision strategies that voters employ to help decide which candidate to support are described and operationally defined. Individual and campaign-related factors that lead voters to adopt one or another of these strategies are examined. Most importantly, this research proposes a new normative focus for the scientific study of voting behavior: We should care about not just which candidate received the most votes, but also how many citizens voted *correctly* – that is, in accordance with their own fully informed preferences. Since its inception the field of voting behavior has focused on what leads some citizens to vote Democratic and others to vote Republican; it is now time to ask what leads some citizens to vote correctly and others to vote incorrectly.

Richard R. Lau is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Walt Whitman Center for the Study of Democracy in the Political Science Department at Rutgers University. His research has been supported by the National Institute of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation. He has published in all of the major journals in political science and social psychology and recently wrote (with Gerald Promper) *Negative Campaigning: An Analysis of U.S. Senate Elections* (2004).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521848596

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First published 2006

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Lau, Richard R.

How voters decide : information processing during election campaigns /

Richard R. Lau, David P. Redlawsk.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in public opinion and political psychology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-84859-8 (hardback) – ISBN 0-521-61306-X (pbk.)

1. Voting research – United States. 2. Elections – United States.

I. Redlawsk, David P. II. Title. III. Series.

JK1967.L38 2006

324.973-dc22 2005021892

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84859-6 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84859-8 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-61306-4 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-61306-X paperback

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To Karen, who has meant so much to me that – even if you only consider what I have come to take for granted, or what she *thinks* I take for granted but do not and in fact appreciate daily, or just the relatively little that I manage to convey that she knows I appreciate – would easily constitute the most important decision of *my* life. I am so glad, in so many different ways, that I met you.
(RRL)

To Aletia, Andrew, and Greg, who put up with a husband and father who often couldn't seem to make up his mind exactly what to do in life, and whose support, encouragement, and sometimes even frustration helped me find the direction I needed. And to my father, who has continued to get smarter as I have gotten older!
(DPR)

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In his reflective moments even the most experienced politician senses a nagging curiosity about why people vote as they do. His power and his position depend upon the outcome of the mysterious rites we perform as opposing candidates harangue the multitudes who finally march to the polls to prolong the rule of their champion, to thrust him, ungratefully, back into the void of private life, or to raise to eminence a new tribune of the people. . . .

Scholars, though they have less at stake than do politicians, also have an abiding curiosity about why voters act as they do.

V. O. Key (1966, p. 1)

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Acknowledgments

Any project that has gone on for as long as this one will accrue debts (both intellectual and personal) too numerous to mention in the space normally allotted to such a task. With apologies to those we will inevitably overlook, in more or less chronological order, we thank Peter Bentler, Thad Brown, Barry Collins, Bob Jervis, Hal Kelley, John Petrocik, Bernie Weiner, and especially David Sears, as well as all graduate school teachers of the first author, without whose knowledge, training, and subsequent friendship all of this would have been impossible. We also thank Gerry Pomper, whose guidance helped the second author decide to pursue his Ph.D. (for better or for worse) after many years in the “real” world, and Milt Heumann, who, although not exactly in our field, gave great Hanukkah parties we always looked forward to, and whose advice and support were crucial to the second author during those initial disorienting days of graduate school and beyond. Thanks also go to Alan Kornberg, who, as the second author’s mentor during his undergraduate years at Duke, helped him develop an excitement and appreciation for the joys of academe and research.

John Herstein graciously shared his stimulus materials with the first author at a very early stage in the development of this research; Herstein’s dissertation (or at least the 1981 published version of it) was the first time we had seen a decision board in action. Dana Dunn then used those stimulus materials as the basis for a senior honors project at Carnegie Mellon University, which became the infamous “Rick’s study” that none of Lau’s future students could ever figure out exactly what to do with. Ralph Erber got further than anyone else and helped point the way to a new way of thinking about this type of data.

The National Science Foundation provided the crucial financial support necessary for the development of the dynamic process-tracing methodology described herein, with awards to both authors (SBR 93-21236 and SBR-9411162). Eric Johnson, one of the original developers of the decision

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board methodology, provided invaluable advice on using a decision board at an early stage in our development process. The Foundation's reluctance to fund subsequent projects has kept us more or less focused on this one. Rutgers University and later the University of Iowa provided the laboratory facilities and countless other relatively minor resources necessary for any research project, which of course cumulatively far outweigh any formal grant award. The second author in particular thanks the Obermann Center for Advanced Study at the University of Iowa; its Director, Jay Semel; and administrative assistant, Lorna Olsen, for space and resources provided during a particularly intense period of manuscript revision.

Racheal Ankrah, Jennifer Holt, Jill Locke, John Manyo, Grace Ann Mumoli, and Jeff Schnug worked as experimenters at various stages in this project. Licia DeVivo was an experimenter who also coded much of the open-ended data. Gail Shirazi, Elizabeth Williams, and Rachelle Brooks worked diligently coding the data that led to our initial conception of the on-line evaluation counter. Jason Humphrey, Andrew Civettini, and Kimberly Briskey all played key roles as research assistants as portions of the project moved to Iowa. At Rutgers, Paul Babbitt and Liz Felter served in the multiple roles of expert judges, project managers, experimenters, and readers of early papers from this research and thus deserve particular thanks.

One of the most interesting tasks early on was the creation of campaign ads, using technology that seemed quite advanced at the time. We would like to thank all those who lent their voices to us to narrate the ads, but we especially thank George Bruce Morgan, the second author's father-in-law and a retired radio announcer.

Larry Bartels and the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics at Princeton University provided a home away from home for the first author and offered the most valuable resources of all, time to think and write, when the book manuscript was beginning to take shape. Numerous colleagues at Columbia, Duke, Iowa, North Carolina, Ohio State, Princeton, Rutgers, Stony Brook, UCLA, UCSD, and Vanderbilt and at the New York Area Political Psychology meeting, have listened to and provided valuable feedback on various aspects of this research. Bartels, Adam Berinsky, John Geer, Jane Junn, Tali Mendelberg, Steve Nicholson, Gerry Pomper, and David Sears have all read and provided feedback on early drafts of several different chapters of the book, as did graduate students in the second author's Experimental Methods and Political Decision Making seminars. Several anonymous readers and Cambridge editors Dennis Chong and James Kuklinski have each read the whole damn thing twice and have provided trenchant criticisms, valuable

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Acknowledgments

suggestions, and unflagging encouragement throughout the publication process.

And finally we want to thank Mo's grandmother, who unbeknownst to her (and as far as we know, her grandson) symbolically at least inspired this entire research project.

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