

Chapter 5

0.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to discover the extent to which habitual voting may create cognitive advantages in an individual, which may in turn operate to mitigate the effects of framing in the language of ballot measures. The foregoing analysis provided no confirmation that such mitigation took place. Though it is possible that a different research design might produce alternative results, at present we can only conclude that no evidence is available which supports the theory. If previous studies that found a correlation between high-volume referendum states and reduced ballot framing effects are correct, and I believe that they are, then it is reasonable to conclude that some other mechanism is at work in such environments.

One possibility is that campaign intensity is generally higher in states with more frequent referendum elections. It has been shown through previous research that framing effects may be different for elections with increased campaign activity (see Burnett and Kogan 2015). If indeed states which maintain a robust system of direct democracy tend to generate high salience electioneering, then the variable of interest may be news attentiveness, rather than the experience level or sophistication of the voter. Also, political cultures do differ across states, and a measure of such might provide an important explanation as to why certain frames are more effective

than others. For instance, the level of political activism in a given state, as determined by citizen engagement in party meetings, interest groups, community organizing, and civic groups, might be a good indicator of future campaign intensity, which may in turn affect whether the language of ballot measures is more or less important in that particular state.

Along the same lines, a second important finding is that generally speaking, ballot language does matter in certain cases. If there has been one result that has remained consistent throughout the current crop of referendum election studies, this would seem to be it. In our present case, the *taxation* frame was powerful enough to reverse the outcome of a hypothetical vote. The *religious charity* frame in the second treatment did not appear to affect support, but it did lower the level of self-identified activism tendencies among the participants. A lack of salience could have an indirect effect on the outcome of a referendum, by removing sources of information to the electorate that might otherwise mitigate framing effects, as some studies have found (see Binder, Childers, and Johnson 2015). It remains incumbent upon those continuing this line of inquiry to fashion future studies that might help to provide guidance to academics and policymakers in discerning when a given policy proposal might be more subject to the effects noted herein. As a general matter, state institutions that are responsible for writing ballot questions, as well as the courts that hear challenges thereto, must remain mindful of the potential for nefarious manipulation of the process.

There is no small disagreement among scholars regarding the place of

normative value judgments in an empirical project such as this. To ask the question of whether, given the potential for shenanigans noted herein, direct democracy is even a desirable element of state government and policy at all, may be to enter too far into the realm of political philosophy. Certainly, for purposes of amending state constitutions, the public referendum in some form would seem to be at least a necessary evil, as the equivalent of the ratification process for the national Constitution. Yet if the placing of ballot measures before the electorate, as a procedure, lacks sufficient safeguards of its integrity, states may wish to consider alternatives to the referendum election. One could envision a system of representation by county, perhaps, where voters could elect a few of their fellow citizens to attend a statewide convention or other form of ratification vote. In this way, the size of the electorate could be diminished to a small number, who would then take it upon themselves to become well informed regarding the details of any proposed statewide initiative or constitutional amendment. In such a context, the language of the proposal in its entirety, rather than a framed summary, would become central to the people's decision. The ability of interested parties to affect the wording that voters see, and therefore potentially the outcome, could be virtually eliminated.

Finally, the findings contained in the foregoing analysis should provide fruitful avenues for future research. A replication of this experiment in a different setting is desirable, as is one where the treatments address different policy areas. Regional variations in voting systems may operate to alter framing effects; studies which account for location and other alternate

demographics, or which include differences in state law, might produce additional insights. Regardless of which direction we go from here, the drive to maintain the integrity of direct democracy, and mitigate its alleged dangers, should continue.