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In the Voting Booth, Bias Starts at the Top

By JON A. KROSNICK NOV. 4, 2006

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PEOPLE who are first in line at a movie know they have the best chance of getting the seats they want. When students answer multiple-choice questions incorrectly, they usually choose one of the first options offered. When people taste-test four brands of beer, they tend to prefer the one they try first.

And so it is with voting. Candidates listed first on the ballot get about two percentage points more votes on average than they would have if they had been listed later (flipping a 49 to 51 defeat into a 51 to 49 victory). In fact, in about half the races I have studied, the advantage of first place is even bigger — certainly big enough to win some elections these days.

When do voters gravitate to the first name they see? Based on the more than 100 elections in Ohio that a colleague and I studied, it's when voters know little or nothing about the candidates, or when the candidates' party affiliations are not listed on the ballot, or when the incumbent (whom voters typically know at least somewhat) is not running for re-election. Thus, some voters apparently feel an obligation or desire to vote even when they have no basis for choosing a candidate and are drawn to the first name they read.

But even in well-publicized major national races, being listed first can help. Some people walk into the voting booth feeling ambivalent, and in the end just grab

the name on top so they can get out of the booth.

How do we know this? Well, consider this: In California's 80 Assembly districts, candidate name order is randomly assigned. In 1996, Bill Clinton's vote tally was 4 percentage points higher in the Assembly districts where he was listed first than in the ones where he was listed last — a difference that persisted even after we took into account pre-existing Democratic registration levels in the districts.

In 2000, George W. Bush's vote tally was 9 percentage points higher in the districts where he was listed first than in the districts where he was listed last — again, persisting with registration taken into account.

Of course, these issues are not confined to California. My research team spent a year reading statutes and contacting secretaries of state and county boards of elections to learn about their naming procedures. We found an array of idiosyncratic — and disturbing — rules governing the placement of names on the ballot.

In Florida, for instance, candidates from the governor's party get top billing, which is why in 2000 and 2004 George W. Bush was listed first on every ballot. (His brother, Jeb, was governor.) In Delaware and Tennessee, by contrast, Democrats always come first.

Some states — like Alabama and North Carolina — list candidates alphabetically by party (meaning that Democrats always precede Republicans); others, like Hawaii and Vermont, list candidates alphabetically by name. Massachusetts always puts incumbents first; others simply allow elections officials to list names in whatever order they please. (Surprise: research by Robert Darcy of Oklahoma State University shows that when given the choice, election officials tend to list their own party's candidates first.)

Perhaps the most endearing procedure is in Minnesota, where candidates from the party that received the fewest votes in the most recent election are listed first.

Thankfully, the question of bias and name placement on ballots is finally beginning to get the attention it deserves. In August, the Supreme Court of New Hampshire declared unconstitutional the state's procedure for listing first the names

of candidates whose party had received the most votes in the preceding state general election.

Other states should solve this problem — particularly because an effective technique for name placement exists.

Ohio uses a system that is the model of fairness and accountability. Candidate names are rotated from precinct to precinct, so every candidate is listed first an equal number of times, and observers can inspect ballots on Election Day to be sure the rotation was done properly. Idaho, North Dakota, Wyoming and a few other states use versions of this system.

That's not to say that Ohio executes this system perfectly. For example, in 2004, with the permission of Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, a Republican, many Ohio counties ignored the rotation law and listed John Kerry last twice as often as the law allowed. And also with Mr. Blackwell's approval, Mahoning County's touch-screen voting machines supposedly rotated candidate name order from voter to voter.

For too long, the placement of names on ballots has been in the shadows. In fact, the government commissions formed since 2000 to improve election procedures barely mention candidate name order. And while it's too late to do anything about name placement for Tuesday's elections, we can eliminate this brand of bias in the 2008 elections.

We should acknowledge the wisdom of the New Hampshire Supreme Court and adopt the rotating name-ordering procedures throughout the country. When it comes to our ballots, and our elections, integrity has to come first on the list.

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