**A New Theory of the Secondary Effects of Ballot Initiatives**

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**Abstract**

About ten years ago political scientists began to focus on the secondary effects of the American state ballot initiative process on citizenship, unrelated to specific policy aims. A flurry of research indicated that the process tends to educate members of the public and enhance their civic engagement. More recent scholarship has challenged the participatory theory that lay behind these arguments and undermined most of the empirical claims, such as the notion that direct democracy increases political efficacy. Yet a couple findings have endured, most notably those suggesting that at least under some circumstances the presence of ballot measures raises voter turnout. There is a need for a new theory that might account for the divergent results.

This paper moves us in that direction. It explains more precisely why the existing participatory democracy theory is problematic, explicating the implicit causal claims along the way. It then offers a new theory focusing on how the initiative process expands the scope of conflict. The paper ends by discussing some empirical findings that support the plausibility of the new theory. Our ongoing research will further explore this evidence.

1. **Introduction**

In the last 15 years, attention to the American state ballot initiative process has increasingly turned to whether it has beneficial *spillover* or *secondary* effects (we will use these terms interchangeably). That is, scholars have been interested in whether separate from any direct or indirect influence on public policy, the very presence or extent of use of ballot propositions might change the way citizens engage with government. Many wished to test the notion that the ballot initiative process promotes civic engagement. Arguments of this type date back to the Progressive Era, when processes allowing citizens to directly decide policy questions were established in about half of the states. Such contentions received further support from late 20th Century participatory democracy theorists such as Benjamin Barber, who contended (1984) that a governmental process that provided much greater popular involvement than traditional representative democracy would encourage significantly increased engagement in the polity.

Yet into the 1990s there was little empirical research about secondary effects. Then political scientists began to systematically examine whether the state ballot initiative process had such spillover consequences. The most notable effort of this kind was *Educated by Initiative* (2004) by Daniel Smith and Caroline Tolbert. This influential work provided context and theoretical underpinnings as well as an empirical examination of the impact of the ballot initiative in a variety of areas. Smith and Tolbert, as well as some others, concluded that the initiative process generally had a positive impact on civic engagement: it tended to increase voter turnout, improve general political knowledge, enhance voters’ sense of efficacy, and increase trust (see also Bowler and Donovan 2002; Smith, Mark, 2002; Tolbert, McNeal, and Smith 2003). Progressive thinkers emerged as prescient and participatory theory as relevant to the actual practice of democracy in the American states.

Some were skeptical, us included. We found reasons to believe that the participatory democracy theory underlying the claims about secondary benefits was at best simplistic and at worst mistaken. It ignored lines of argument and evidence indicating that people might become more distrustful if they were forced to be involved in decisions they thought politicians should make, that political participation in general might be distasteful, that members of the public commonly *liked* decisions made by experts at least if such experts did not have an axe to grind, that confrontation over ballot choices with people with whom they disagreed might be unpleasant, and that an excessive number of political choices (like excessive choices in other areas) could be demobilizing (Dyck 2009; Dyck and Lascher 2009; Seabrook, Dyck, and Lascher 2014; see also Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). We conducted our own empirical analysis of many topics in this area and generally found our skepticism upheld. We tended to conclude that the evidence for the positive spillover effects of ballot initiatives tended to evaporate upon closer examination. Some others came to similar conclusions (notably Schlozman and Yohai 2008).

But there were two notable exceptions. First, the turnout effect appeared to survive the second wave of studies that undermined other claims about the secondary benefits of the ballot initiative. That is, rigorous comparisons of different jurisdictions tended to show that the presence of ballot measures increased the number of people who showed up to vote. Some research qualified this finding, indicating that it only applied for highly salient issues, in certain types of campaigns, and in other restricted circumstances (Biggers 2011; Childers and Binder 2012). Yet the evidence for at least conditional impact on turnout did not go away. Second, there remained strong evidence that the ballot initiative process increased the number of interest groups relative to what was the case in places where the process was absent (Boehmke 2002).

This left us with a puzzle. Consistent with our own expectations (if not those of others), the ballot initiative process did not appear to have many of the secondary benefits often claimed. It did not make people feel more efficacious, inclined to believe they can influence the political process. It did not make them more trusting of government; if anything, both our theorizing and our empirical results indicated it made them less so. It did not prompt citizens to be more knowledgeable about politics in general. Yet at least in some circumstances it got them to show up at the polls and increased the number of interest groups participating in the political arena. What might explain both sets of results?

The present paper reflects our initial effort to offer and justify a theory that could account for such disparate findings, and provide at least some initial empirical support for its plausibility. That is, we wish to find something that could explain *both* the evidence that the ballot initiative process fails to provide the civic benefits commonly claimed for it *and* the evidence that it increases turnout and interest group involvement. Participatory democracy theory cannot achieve this. We need a new theory capable of doing so, and we find it not in the work of theorists such as Barber but in that of the influential mid-20th Century political scientist E.E. Schattschneider, and his work on expanding the scope of conflict.

1. **The Existing Theory and its Discontents**

Good social science commonly starts with a theory. A theory is a logically connected, consistent story of the way the world works that helps us to explain an interesting or puzzling set of agreed upon facts. Theories are useful and powerful because they allow us to generalize about the world, and anticipate specific findings. Appropriately, empirical social scientists often proceed by attempting to construct tests of the real world implications of an existing theory.

Participatory democratic theory provides the large story that has dominated research on the spillover effects of ballot initiatives in the American states. It has roots in both some recent political thought and the views of many involved in the Progressive Movement, which led to the establishment of direct democracy mechanisms at the subnational level in the first place; for this paper we will concentrate on the former. We believe this participatory theory is simple, clear… and wrong. It needs to be replaced by an alternative that is more plausible and can account for the disparate findings mentioned previously.

Empirical political scientists commonly draw from participatory democratic theorists such as Barber and Carole Pateman (for example, Barber is referenced multiple times in *Educated by Initiative*). The works of these scholars provide credibility for the notion that directly participating in policy making will tend to make people more involved, more concerned citizens. Indeed, in a lengthy discussion of mechanisms to help advance “strong democracy,” Barber writes favorably about direct democracy as it has evolved in the American states, and even urges adoption of a national initiative and referendum process. He states (1984, p. 284): “[T]he initiative and referendum can increase popular participation in and responsibility for government, provide a permanent instrument of civic education, and give popular talk the reality and discipline that it needs to be effective.”

Barber argues that activities such as voting directly on policy matters are inherently more enriching than participating in traditional representative politics, such as selecting among candidates for a particular office. In traditional representative democracy, “Citizens become subject to laws they did not truly participate in making; they become the passive constituents of representatives who, far from reconstituting the citizens’ aims and interests, usurp their civic functions and deflect their civic energies.” Part of this difference has to do with relinquishing control over the agenda. Barber claims (1984, ch. 8) that because citizens are not directly involved in setting the policy agenda in traditional representative institutions, they become alienated from politics and find their general ability to deliberate over politics subverted. What is needed is “unmediated self-government.”

According to Barber, the results of adopting strong democracy, including a vigorous referendum and initiative process, will be a citizenry that is much more engaged. He explicitly rejects the notion that voters would be uninterested in such involvement because other aspects of their life are more important. He states (p. 272) that under the present system of “weak democracy” people “are apathetic because they are powerless.”

It is striking that while empirical researchers have drawn inspiration from modern participatory theorists, the work of the latter often seems uninformed by findings from behavioral political science. This is notably the case with Barber’s work. *Strong Democracy* is lacking in any systematic empirical evidence (e.g., survey data) about what Americans actually *want* from a political system, or the amount of participation they prefer. Nor is there any systematic evidence to suggest that people are less alienated and more engaged in a polity that better approaches the characteristics of a strong democracy. We are asked to accept his claims based on many unsupported assertions about political attitudes and behavior in the mass public.

Participatory theory also generally leaves unclear exactly *how* exposure to direct democracy leads to positive secondary benefits. Nevertheless, the basic structure of this argument is that having issue oriented elections activates citizen attention in ways that representative government does not. Individuals who become used to taking a more active role in direct policymaking come to realize that (1) they are willing and capable of taking that role, (2) their neighbors are capable of taking on that role, (3) the policy process works better/is more responsive to public input and (4) the value of participating in democracy is greater than it was under representative government.

Figure 1 outlines the causal process implied by the participatory theory. The logic is that expanded opportunities for meaningful participation first lead to increased feelings that they are capable of taking on the role, and that government is willing and able to listen. If citizens engage in long-term learning and perceived government performance improves, participatory theory then suggests that we should observe increased participation.

[Figure 1 about here]

The structure offered above implies not simply a series of findings, but of interconnected findings. Therefore, the various observable implications of the theory must be held under the microscope if we are to argue that it is educative effects (and not something else) that leads to the acquisition of certain opinions, attitudes and behaviors. So, what should direct democracy lead to under educative theory?

1. Citizens must be willing and capable of taking on the role given to them. This implies that citizens must feel capable of assuming greater responsibility in democracy. The three most common ways to measure this would be by testing individuals baseline knowledge of politics (often called “political awareness”), their view of their own capabilities as a democratic citizen to understand and decipher politics (what political scientists call “internal political efficacy”), and their level of engagement and/or interest in politics.

2. Citizens must also view their neighbors as capable of making good decisions. This implies both high values of generalized trust, or trust that individuals espouse in strangers, and of belief in the competence of others. .

3. Citizen input into government should make government work better. This means that individuals should feel as though they control government, making perceptive governmental responsiveness higher; this is what political scientists call “external political efficacy.” As politicians are forced to fall in line with the wishes of their constituents, the trust that they espouse in government and government officials should also increase.

4. Finally, given that individuals feel more capable, are trusting of their neighbors and believe in their competence, and feel as though the process works better, they should also be more willing to participate in the process. This means we should see higher levels of voter turnout and higher levels of citizen involvement in the political process, best measured by the propensity to join interest groups and other organizations (often termed “social capital”).

Table 1 summarizes the current state of empirical findings on the secondary effects of direct legislation in an attempt to provide a comprehensive account of these ideas. Looking at the complete set of findings uncovers a data-theory mismatch. Indeed many of the findings have small marginal effects, are null, or run counter to expectations, suggesting that much of the evidence is not consistent with educative/participatory democratic theory. *Some* of the findings are consistent with the theory and others are not. Additionally, for many of the findings that do exist, strong plausible rival theoretical explanations have not been sufficiently eliminated. Consider the secondary effect findings following the logic of Figure 1.

[Table 1 about here]

*Voters’ Views of Their Own Inclinations and Capabilities*

Participatory democratic theory would argue that if given increased opportunities for meaningful participation, citizens will rise to the occasion. That is, voter disengagement and apathy is best explained by the lack of real representation offered by the forced dichotomous choice in a two-party system. Furthermore, when citizens fear that their legislators are corrupt, choosing any candidate to represent them in government may seem pointless. Hence, by expanding real choice through the adoption and usage of the ballot initiative, citizens are empowered to be better democratic citizens. With this power comes greater responsibility. The first stage in the education of citizens via more democratic institutions is to affect a citizen’s interest in politics, which in turn should increase their objective knowledge of politics and their subjective evaluation of their own capabilities to participate meaningfully.

Yet there are also theoretical grounds for questioning whether having more choices would be empowering (Dyck and Lascher 2009). There is a psychological literature to suggest that having too many choices, and too many decisions to make, may in fact be intimidating and demobilizing (see for example Iyengar and Lepper 2000). This may especially be the case in the political arena, which ordinary citizens often find unpleasant under any circumstances. At minimum, it is naïve to simply assume that having more choices is empowering.

Additionally, there is significant literature challenging the notion that people *want* to take on more responsibility for governance. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) point out Americans’ preference for a *Stealth Democracy*, that is, a democracy that functions well without much citizen input. In principle, they argue, citizens prefer to have as little involvement as possible in democratic politics, wishing not to discuss politics with others or be aware of the issues of the day. American citizens find the cornerstone attributes of American democracy – checks and balances, separation of powers, federalism – to be distasteful when they come to terms with the implications of gridlock, conflict, and lack of clarity in overlapping governance. Citizens would prefer to be governed by empathetic non-self-interested decision makers, something akin to an apparition in politics. Therefore, they begrudgingly accept a wider role in democratic society, but only because they view the process as broken. The Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argument is not universally accepted, but it implies at least a lack of consensus about what ordinary citizens want—and certainly no cause for simply adopting Barber’s assumptions without further rationale.

The extant empirical literature does not offer strong support for the idea that citizen’s objective or subjective capabilities are increased in response to greater usage of the ballot initiative in the American states. On the question of political interest, the evidence is at best mixed. Daniel Smith and Tolbert (2004) demonstrate some marginally significant evidence of ballot initiatives impacting political interest, showing data for three years (1996, 1998, 2000); in two of the years, the p-value on “number of ballot initiatives” is less than .10 and does not reach p<.05 in any of the three years.

The findings are also at best mixed with regard to the impact of ballot initiatives on political knowledge. Perhaps the strongest finding in support come from Mark Smith (2002) who argues, using the 1988-1990-1992 Senate Election Study, that voters who are exposed to greater levels of direct democracy are more knowledgeable based on a multivariate model. Yet Seabrook, Dyck, and Lascher (2014) note that Smith’s operationalization of Initiative Usage over 20 years biases the results in favor of finding a positive relationship.[[1]](#footnote-1) With the exception of Mark Smith’s article, much of the empirical evidence presented is less than compelling. Despite reported conditional effects, results from Tolbert, McNeal and Daniel Smith (2003) as well as Daniel Smith and Tolbert (2004) only show a significant effect on knowledge in 1996, but not 1998 or 2000; even so, the effect is small and barely significant in 1996. Furthermore Schlozman and Yohai (2008), replicating the above models and extending them to more years, find that initiative usage almost never leads to increased levels of political knowledge. Finally, two other findings suggest that some initiative contexts may even retard certain types of knowledge. Nicholson (2003) demonstrates that voters tend to know less about the content of ballot measures when that measure is the part of a longer ballot than if only one or two initiatives appear. Further, Seabrook, Dyck, and Lascher (2014) show using matching and multilevel modeling that the initiative is not related to general levels of political knowledge in either the 2006 CCES or the 2004 NAES.

On the question of individuals’ subjective interpretations of their own democratic capabilities, one single-year study finds that frequency of initiative usage increases internal efficacy in 1992 (Bowler and Donovan 2002). However, replications by Schlozman and Yohai (2008) as well as Dyck and Lascher (2009) show that, at best, the finding occurs only in one year; at worst, initiative usage has little if any general effect on internal efficacy. Furthermore, Dyck and Lascher (2009) show that initiative usage might even dampen the internal efficacy of low resource democratic citizens (non-voters and those with already low levels of political knowledge).

To sum up, there is very little evidence to suggest that usage of the ballot initiative increases objective (knowledge) or subjective (internal efficacy) evaluations of citizen capabilities to participate in more complicated and onerous elections by voting directly on policy issues. Voters may be more interested in politics because of a contentious ballot initiative campaign, but this does not appear to increase their knowledge of politics or increase their own confidence in their abilities to participate meaningfully. For some low resource individuals, increased usage of the ballot initiative makes them more likely to question their own capabilities as democratic citizens.

*The Capabilities of Others*

Under participatory democratic theory one would expect that those exposed to a more vibrant democratic government via the initiative process would be more likely to view their fellow citizens as competent. Furthermore, they should engage in political discussions with others. The result of discussions with fellow citizens and the open deliberation of politics (as opposed to the back room and corrupt dealings of representatives) presumably is a dialogue that brings people closer together and produces better policy outcomes, hence strengthening the bonds between individuals in society.

The political psychology literature provides little reason to have confidence in the above claims. The claim about encouraging political discussions is especially suspect. Mutz (2005) has argued and provided empirical evidence indicating that encountering people with differing views does not tend to encourage greater participation; instead, it tends to encourage withdrawal from political activity as people view conflict as unpleasant and unnecessary. Mutz provides evidence that people are most likely to participate when they can do so with like-minded folks. Following Mutz, the prospect of interacting with people who vehemently disagree about an initiative measure would not appear likely to attract most American adults to engage in political discussions.

There is very little empirical research related directly to this particular set of claims about the ballot initiative process. However, what evidenced that exists provides little reason for confidence in participatory democracy claims. Drawing on California survey data, Hagen and Lascher (2005) found voters were commonly skeptical about the competence of fellow citizens to make decisions about ballot measures. Some evidence suggests that ballot initiatives have the potential to heighten political discussion, but this is not generally realized in practice. Models of ANES data from 1996, 1998 and 2000 show that only in 1996 does the effect of number of ballot initiatives positively impact an individual’s reported levels of political discussion. The effect of ballot measures on social trust, generally, suggests a positive relationship, consistent with participatory theory (Dyck 2012). However, this effect is mitigated by the presence of more racially and ethnically diverse places. Dyck’s (2012) findings indicate that trust may be higher than typical in relatively homogenous states that heavily use the ballot initiative process, but lower than typical in ethnically diverse states that make heavy use of ballot measures.

*Views on Government*

One of the more important claims in support of participatory theory has been that direct legislation increases voters’ levels of perceived responsiveness and the trust they espouse in government. This claim is crucial to the participatory theory argument as a whole because it validates the idea that individuals claim meaningful effects from repeated participation in ballot measure elections.

Yet while early secondary effects studies supported the claim, it has not held up well with subsequent research. Bowler and Donovan (2002) and Smith and Tolbert (2004) provide evidence that increased usage of the ballot initiative increases perceptive governmental responsiveness, also termed efficacy. Both also connect their interest in studying efficacy with political trust, although neither explicitly model trust in government. Bowler and Donovan present evidence from the 1992 American National Election Study, while Smith and Tolbert (2004) present a combined model from 1988-1998. However, in replicating and extending these studies, Schlozman and Yohai (2008) as well as Dyck and Lascher (2009) come to sharply different conclusions. Schlozman and Yohai (2008) take the strategy of offering year by year results and disaggregating the measure of external efficacy to its component questions; they find universally null results from 1988-2004, with the exception of one question in 1992. Dyck and Lascher (2009) also note that the 1992 Bowler and Donovan finding is replicable under certain model specifications, but that appears to be the only year where direct legislation actually leads to increases in external efficacy. Dyck and Lascher (2009) are unable to replicate the finding of Smith and Tolbert (2004). Furthermore, when they extend the data collection, as well as include other datasets, they find a common story: there is no relationship between usage of the ballot initiative and external political efficacy.

In addition, Dyck (2009) proposes an alternative theoretic perspective to participatory theory, arguing from an organizational theory perspective that mechanisms like the ballot initiative, which institutionalize trust, lead to a decay in the evolution of trust. The basic idea is that establishing trust requires opportunities for trust to develop. Having ballot initiatives regularly undermines the ability for that trust to develop between citizen and government. Furthermore, in voting on any number of issues, voters are cued to the idea that representative government is not doing its job--otherwise, so many initiatives would not be necessary. Dyck’s models demonstrate that ballot initiative usage leads to lower levels of reported trust and confidence in state government officials.

In sum, the most conservative way of summarizing the current empirical literature on how direct legislation affects views on government is it does not. To the extent that there is an effect it appears the ballot initiative decreases external efficacy amongst low resource citizens and also decreases trust in government. Contra the promise of participatory theory, there is little support for the notion that direct legislation leads to enhanced citizen views about the vitality and effectiveness of their government.

*Participation*

The most promising and well-studied area of research about the secondary effects of direct legislation literature pertains to the relationship between ballot measures and political participation (and especially voter turnout). Since increasing participation is at the end of the causal process outlined in Figure 1 this is not all that surprising. However, the causal effects are also complex. Most of the literature argues that ballot initiatives are more likely to affect turnout in midterm elections, when peripheral voters have not already been mobilized by campaigns. Three recent high quality studies (Childers and Binder 2012; Biggers 2011, 2014) demonstrate convincingly that ballot initiatives increase turnout when issues are salient and/or measures are competitive. This means that voters are mobilized to turn out mostly because of campaign specific factors like competitiveness, issue salience, and campaign spending and not by long term exposure to a process that teaches them to become better democratic citizens. Additionally, we also see that citizens are more likely to participate in an active interest group environment in initiative than non-initiative states (Boehmke and Bowen 2010).

Per Figure 2, the puzzle we are left with is that the effect of direct democracy on turnout is much stronger than the effects of direct democracy on anything else. However, participatory theory argues that the mechanisms connecting processes like the ballot initiative to turnout do so through effects on citizens’ views of their own capabilities, of the capabilities of others, and of their trust and confidence in government. Why does the ballot initiative appear to increase turnout without also increasing the attitudes thought to be antecedent to turnout gains? Might it be because gains in participation have more to do with factors such as group mobilization? And what theory would explain this phenomenon?

[Figure 2 about here]

1. **A Different Theory: Expanding the Scope of Conflict**

Political scientist E.E. Schattschneider famously argued that conflict was at the heart of democratic politics. Conflict, he argued, was the great motivator of people to action in society. The organization of the conflict system is the two-party system, a system which allows for a clear and readily understandable interpretation of politics in society. Responsible parties outline distinct and diametric policy platforms, and the minority party vehemently disagrees with the majority party and waits for their falter. Party organization and the constitutionally mandated institutionalization of conflict allows the average American, who may be bereft of basic knowledge of politics (see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1995), to have a clear understanding of the fundamental differences in the choices they face. Choice, then, becomes the central defining aspect of democracy (Schattschneider 1957). The public is not sufficiently informed to make specific choices, but with an easily understood dichotomy, they retain their sovereignty (or *semi-sovereignty*) by guiding the country in one direction or another at each election (Schattschneider 1957).

This brings us back to the state ballot initiative process. While many have argued that “healthy debate” occurs in the ballot initiative process, what appears far more prominent is information dissemination through the political campaign. This information typically comes in a form that does *not* encourage discussion among those who disagree. Rather, we see mass based communications (attack ads) aimed at planting doubt in uninformed voters or individual communications from trusted elites (parties and interest groups). Indeed, the literature on the primary effects of direct legislation have clearly demonstrated that the information environment is full of heuristics that make it easy for voters, most of whom have meaningful partisan attachments, to find the “correct” side on an issue (Lupia 1994) without expanding much energy or engaging in discussions. Furthermore, party identification strongly constrains voting behavior on ballot initiatives, (Branton 2003; Dyck 2010).

The logical implication of this finding is that parties and interest groups use the ballot initiative process to expand the scope of conflict. Hard fought campaigns that clarify the world in strictly dichotomous terms, argued Schattschneider, have a lot of value for democracy; the value is in creating readily understandable information for voters that amount to real choices. However, the type of conflict that breeds participation rests on cries of urgency: that the world will affect the voter negatively if the opposition wins. This type of democratic environment, a conflictual environment, may be useful for mobilizing voters, but it should not be expected to create the types of spillover effects commonly ascribed to direct legislation.

Therefore, if the presence of ballot initiatives expands the amount of conflict in democratic society, we would expect that it would do so by amplifying the campaign environment: through advertisements, direct mail, phone banking, and door-to-door canvassing. Issues on which more money is spent, issues that are competitive, and issues that are salient would be expected to create the largest participatory effects. However, we would not expect these effects to increase diverse political discussion and therefore would not necessarily expect that individuals would come to a greater understanding of one another, increasing desirable democratic attributes like social trust and efficacy. Furthermore, the amplification of conflict should feed into “us vs. them” politics, generating more partisan politics in the electorate.

As Nicholson (2005) argues, conflictual ballot measures can be a campaign strategy, meant to prime voters to choose the candidate associated with their issue. Donovan, Smith and Tolbert (2008) demonstrated that this can also be used to mobilize voters. In either case, the underlying motivation of placing the initiative on the ballot is to cleave populations. To the extent that heterogeneity exists in the population, we would expect greater conflict to play out via the initiative. That is, ballot initiatives give agenda access to a wider array of individuals. When those individuals place initiatives that are targeted at minority groups on the ballot, the information environment can work as a contextualizing force, marrying experiential observation of differences in society with the content of the measure (see Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2012).

1. **Observable Implications of the Theory of Conflict**

Having explicated the theory of conflict and how it applies to ballot initiatives and democratic attitudes, we now turn to the evidence. The power of theory is in its simplicity, elegance, and ultimately in its explanatory power. With social theories, where we lack absolute truths and instead make probabilistic inferences, the best theories are supported not only by a single test, but by the consideration of multiple observable implications.

*Capabilities and Effectiveness*

As previously discussed, participatory theories posit that democratic citizens become more welcoming, approving and connected to democratic society by being more involved. Thus, the universal application of the hypothesis is that increased exposure to ballot initiatives 🡪 increases in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_, where you can fill in the blank with every normatively positive attribute of a good democratic citizen: political interest, objective political knowledge, internal efficacy, social trust, political discussion, external political efficacy and trust in government. This universal hypothesis is not well supported in the literature. The evidence is weak that ballot initiatives increase objective knowledge, interest and discussion, conditional for internal efficacy, external efficacy and social trust, and negative for political trust. The extant results in the literature are *far more consistent with the theory of conflict*.

The prevalence of null results points either to the fact that there is simply no relationship between direct democracy and citizen capabilities and effectiveness, or that the story is complicated by heterogeneous social contexts. The theory of conflict would predict that acquisition of positive democratic citizenship characteristics (capabilities and effectiveness) would be more likely to occur in places that are more homogeneous. Racial and ethnic politics serves as the primary intervening variable of interest, but other plausible candidates exist, notably income inequality and geographic heterogeneity and intrastate regionalism.

*Political Participation*

The strongest finding in the secondary effects literature is that ballot initiatives, in some manner and under some conditions, lead to increases in political participation. Many studies have taken the form of examining the frequency of initiative usage and examining either the individual decision to turn out to vote or aggregate turnout statistics. In almost every case, the evidence is fairly strong that ballot initiatives induce turnout behavior in midterm elections; the evidence is more mixed in presidential elections.

The theory of conflict predicts that ballot initiatives will induce greater political participation, consistent with participatory theory. However, the underlying mechanism is what is of greatest interest. If conflict leads to greater political participation, then it is because competitive campaign environments exist where proponents and opponents of initiatives expend considerable resources in attempting to mobilize potential voters. The active campaign environment increases turnout. Therefore, we should expect that *salient* and *competitive* measures are the ones that actually mobilize voters; indeed, the total number of initiatives should only increase turnout insofar as more initiatives implies a higher probability of having a particularly competitive or interesting measure on the ballot. Note that this also provides a strong theoretical basis for the idea that citizens become more likely to join interest groups as they respond to the heightened conflict in democratic societies (see work by Boehmke and Bowen 2009).

Current literature is strongly consistent with the theory of ballot initiative conflict and mobilization. Childers and Binder (2010) demonstrate that rather than sheer number of initiatives, it is the competitiveness of ballot measures that predicts whether turnout was higher or not. They can therefore use post-election measures of competitiveness as indicative of salient and meaningful political campaigns. To be sure, Biggers (2011) looks at a measure of initiative salience, and demonstrates that salient social issue ballot initiatives (and not sheer number of initiatives) drives turnout. This insight makes great theoretic sense as we would be hard pressed to equate the perceptive import among the mass public of a salient social issues like gay marriage or abortion with a more complicated and technical initiative on regulatory policy or eminent domain. Dyck and Seabrook (2010) argue that high turnout ballot initiative elections tend to be made up largely of partisan mobilized voters. Hence, mobilization occurs either through parties or interest groups, most of whom operate towards the polar ends of the ideological scale. The impact is party driven mobilization. Dyck and Seabrook (2010) distinguish between long term learning effects and short term mobilization effects. They find that a .9 percentage point increase in turnout can be attributed to the baseline differences between those from initiative and non-initiative states.

*Effects on Ideology*

A final observable implication relates to the impact of ballot measures on citizen ideology. As ballot initiatives expand the scope of conflict, expand participation through partisan mobilization, and create more “us” vs. “them” dichotomies in society, then citizens ought to come to see the political system in more ideological terms. That is, the relationship between partisan identity and ideology ought to become stronger. The reason for this is straightforward. If legislatures routinely table the most conflictual concerns in society, by placing these concerns on the agenda ballot initiatives expand opportunities for citizens to organize and categorize information. In this sense, initiatives and initiative campaigns become clarifying and informational campaigns in how the two-party system is organized along ideological lines.

This hypothesis is especially interesting and provocative because it stands completely at odds with what proponents of the initiative, and particularly the Progressives, saw as the greatest virtue of the initiative. Direct democracy, they argued, allows citizens to shed their partisan identity and offer more nuanced views of the political world. It would be another irony of the initiative process if the effect was precisely the opposite.

We have no definitive results to present regarding this connection between ballot measures and ideology. However, we aim to explore this relationship further in our ongoing research.

1. **Conclusion**

For too long the study of the secondary effects of ballot measures has been dominated by a theoretical model that is not well grounded in the political psychology literature. While earlier empirical studies supported at least some of the model’s claims, more recent studies have undermined them. We believe it is time to abandon participatory theory as a guide to explaining the real world impact of direct democracy in the United States. Instead, we think it far more promising to focus on how the ballot initiative process expands the scope of conflict. This paper has provided our initial effort to move in that direction.

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**Figure 1 – Causal Processes Proposed by Participatory Democratic Theory**

**Increasing Views of Own Capabilities**

**Higher Levels of Participation**

**Increasing Views of Others’ Capabilities**

**Increasing Views on Government Effectiveness**

**Ballot Measures**

**Figure 2 – A Puzzle: Empirical Relationships of Participatory Democratic Theory**

~~Increasing Views of Own Capabilities~~

**Higher Levels of Participation**

~~Increasing Views of Others’ Capabilities~~

~~Increasing Views on Government Effectiveness~~

**Ballot Measures**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 1 Empirical Results of Spillover Effects of Ballot Initiatives** | | | |
| Author (year) | Findings | Supportive of Educative Effects | Data |
| *Political Interest* |  |  |  |
| D. Smith and Tolbert (2004) | Number of Initiatives tentatively increases political interest in 1996 (p<.100) and 1998 (p<.054), but not in 2000 (p<.277) | Inconclusive (2/3 tests get to p<.10, 0/3 get to p<.05) |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Political Awareness* |  |  |  |
| M. Smith (2002) | Usage of direct democracy increases knowledge among voters who have lived in the state longer | Yes | 1988-1992 Senate Election Study |
| Tolbert, McNeal and D. Smith (2003) | Number of Initiatives on ballot marginally (p<.066) increased knowledge in 1996, but not 1998 or 2000 | Inconclusive | 1996, 1998, 2000 American National Election Studies |
| Nicholson (2003) | Increases in ballot length associated with more ballot measures decreases voter awareness of other measures on the ballot | No | California Field Polls 1956-2000 |
| D. Smith and Tolbert (2004) | Number of Initiatives on Ballot increases knowledge in 1996, but not 1998 or 2000 | Inconclusive | 1996, 1998, 2000 American National Election Studies |
| Schlozman and Yohai (2008) | Neither number of initiatives on ballot or average over 20 years produces consistent increases in voter knowledge from 1988-2004. 1994 appears to be a single outlier case. | No | 1988-2004 American National Election Studies |
| Dyck, Lascher and Seabrook (2013) | Number of Initiatives is unrelated to general political knowledge using Multilevel models and a matching design with the 2004 Annenberg Election Survey and the 2006 CCES. | No | 2004 Annenberg; 2006 CCES |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Internal Political Efficacy* |  |  |  |
| Bowler and Donovan (2002) | Frequency of Initiative Usage increases Internal Political Efficacy. | Yes | 1992 American National Election Study |
| Schlozman and Yohai (2008) | Initiative Usage has no effect on Internal Efficacy 1988-2002 (null results). | No | 1988-2002 American National Election Studies |
| Dyck and Lascher (2009) | Frequency of Initiative Usage increases Internal Efficacy among Whites in 1992, but not among non-white respondents. In multi-year specifications (88-00), Initiative Usage had no effect white respondents, and negative effects on non-white respondents. Initiative Usage has no effect on Internal Efficacy in the 1996 General Social Survey. Interactive models also reveal that non-voters and low knowledge respondents become less internally efficacious in the face of more ballot initiatives. | No | 1988-2000 American National Election Studies; 1996 General Social Survey |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Political Discussion* |  |  |  |
| D. Smith and Tolbert (2004) | Number of Initiatives on ballot (p<.017) increased discussion in 1996, but not 1998 or 2000. | Inconclusive | 1996, 1998, 2000 American National Election Studies |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Generalized Trust* |  |  |  |
| Dyck (2012) | Number of Initiatives increases social trust for those living in less racially/ethnically diverse states and decreases social trust for those living in more racially/ethnically diverse states. | Conditional | 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2004 American National Election Studies |
|  |  |  |  |
| *External Efficacy* |  |  |  |
| Bowler and Donovan 2002 | Frequency of Initiative Use increases external political efficacy in 1992. | Yes | 1992 American National Election Study |
| Tolbert and Hero 2004 | Number of Initiatives on Ballot increases external political efficacy 1988-1998 (combined model with year dummies) | Yes |  |
| D. Smith and Tolbert 2004 | Number of Initiatives on Ballot increases external political efficacy 1988-1998 (combined model with year dummies). | Yes | 1988-1998 American National Election Studies |
| Schlozman and Yohai 2008 | Initiative (0,1) has no effect on external efficacy 1988-2004 (individual year models). | No | 1988-2004 American National Election Studies |
| Dyck and Lascher 2009 | Frequency of Initiative Use has no effect on external efficacy in a series of replications and extensions of ANES data; null effects are also found using the 1996 General Social Survey and the 1997 PEW Trust in Government Survey. Interactions suggest that low-information voters become less efficacious as they are exposed to more direct democracy. | No | 1988-2004 American National Election Studies; 1996 General Social Survey |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Trust in Government* |  |  |  |
| Kelleher and Wolak (2007) | Dummy variable for initiative state predicts lower confidence in state government officials. | No | ??? |
| Dyck (2009) | Number of initiatives in a state predicts lower levels of trust in state government and confidence in state government officials | No | 2004 Annenberg National Election Survey; 1997 PEW Trust in Government Study. |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Voter Turnout* |  |  |  |
| M. Smith (2001) | Salient measures increase voter turnout ~4 percentage points in midterm elections, but not Presidential elections. | Mixed | 50 state pooled cross-sectional time series model from 1972-1996. (includes original data collection on initiative salience) |
| Tolbert, Grummel and D. Smith (2001) | Number of initiatives increases turnout in midterm and presidential elections; voter fatigue present in midterm elections. | Yes | 50 state pooled cross-sectional time series model from 1970-1994. |
| Tolbert, McNeal and D. Smith (2003) | Number of initiatives increases the probability of voters turning out in 1998. Marginal results (p<.099) presented for 1996; null results for 2000. | Inconclusive | 1996, 1998, 2000 American National Election Studies. |
| Tolbert and D. Smith (2004) | Number of initiatives increases turnout in midterm and presidential elections; voter fatigue present is present in both elections. Number of initiatives increases the probability of voters turning out in 1998. Marginal results (p<.099) presented for 1996; null results for 2000. | Mixed | 50 state pooled cross-sectional time series model from 1972-2000. 1996, 1998, 2000 American National Election Studies. |
| Tolbert and D. Smith (2005) | Number of initiatives increases voting eligible population turnout in midterm and presidential elections (effect is larger in midterms). Voter fatigue is present in both kinds of elections (decreasing marginal effect of initiatives eventually turns to a negative effect). | Yes | 50 state pooled cross-sectional time series model from 1980-2002. |
| Lacey (2005) | Initiative salience increases the probability of turning out to vote in midterm election (1990 and 1994) but not in Presidential elections (1992 and 1996). | Mixed | 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996 American National Election Studies. |
| Schlozman and Yohai (2008) | Individual turnout examined from 1978-2004 with both Current Population Survey and ANES data. Inconsistent results, but positive effects for various ballot measure exposure/salience measures on turnout in 1990, 1994 and 1998; null for most other years. No statistically significant effects for Presidential years. | No | 1978-2004 Current Population Survey and American National Election Studies. |
| Dyck and Seabrook (2010) | Residents of California who moved from another initiative state are 1 percentage point more likely to turn out to vote than those who moved from a non-initiative state. Most of turnout effects are due to partisan mobilization. | Mixed | Voter list data from 2005 California special election and a series of Oregon special elections. |
| Childers and Binder (2012) | Turnout effects in ballot measure elections are explained through campaign mobilization as competitive elections are more likely to see increases in turnout. | No | 50 state pooled cross sectional time series data from 1878-2008. |
| Biggers (2011) | Frequency of initiatives and historical initiative usage do not increase turnout; the presence of salient social issue ballot measures do. | No | 1992-2006 Current Population Survey; 2006 and 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. |
| *Other Participation* |  |  |  |
| Smith and Tolbert (2004) | States with more frequent usage of ballot initiatives have higher levels of social capital. | Yes | 50 state data using the Putnam’s social capital index for the 1990s. |
| Boehmke and Bowen (2010) | Citizens in states with the ballot initiative are more likely to join interest groups. | Yes | General Social Survey (????) |

1. Smith measures exposure to direct democracy based on a 20 year context of initiative usage, but corrects the exposure variable for a respondent’s age and length of residence within the state. This means that at zero, initiative context is simply all respondents not in an initiative state. However, at low values on the 20 year average is not just those who live in states with fewer ballot initiatives, but also young and transient voters. Ex ante, younger voters and migrants tend to have less political awareness. Hence, the independent variable is conflated with age; nowhere is the inherent bias in the models more evident than the fact that age fails to reach statistical significance in the model. If one runs the most conservative test and compares only those in states with and without direct democracy measured as a dummy variable, there is no effect of ballot measures on knowledge. The same is also true if a simple average of initiative per year is used instead. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)