Experimental Evidence about Occupational Designations in Local Elections

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Introduction

In August, 2018, three individuals filed a lawsuit against U.S. Representative Devin Nunes (R-Clovis) alleging that he could not legitimately call himself a “farmer” on the ballot during his re-election campaign (Appleton 2018). Nunes’s family owns a dairy business, but the lawsuit claims Nunes himself has not had a connected to the family business for many years and that his only occupation is that of a U.S. Representative (Nunes won the case and the farmer designation stayed). For many non-Californians, the most surprising aspect of this case was that candidate occupations are listed on ballots along with name and party affiliation. California is unique among states in that almost all federal, state, and local candidates have the option of listing an occupation, officially called a ballot designation, on the ballot itself.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This paper explores what effect ballot designations have on vote choice. Specifically, we explore whether candidates who list variants of “businessperson” do better at the polls than those who provide other occupational descriptions. The paper builds on our ongoing research on the impact of occupational ballot designations that two of us presented at prior Western Political Science Association conferences (Adams and Lascher 2017, 2018). Our previous studies indicated that even though the “businessperson” designation was strikingly popular in California business candidates were not notably more successful than others, and suggested that voters might actually prefer candidates with a public service background. These findings motivated us to continue the study with additional data and adding an experimental component.

Conventional wisdom suggests that a business designation contributes to successful candidacies; political consultants, and pundits generally believe that voters want elected officials who have a background in business because they view them as more competent. Yet like so much conventional wisdom about what determines election outcomes, this assumption may be incorrect. To determine if this is so, we analyze a dataset of mayoral and city council races in California, as well as an experiment examining how voters use occupational cues, to determine whether and how ballot designations affect electoral outcomes. We find that business candidates generally do not do well when they run for local office. They do marginally better than the average candidate, but do decidedly worse that non-incumbents who list an elective office as their ballot designation (such as school board members running for city council). Our experimental results indicate that voters prefer candidates with a political background over those with a business one, although that dynamic changes if the candidate identifies as an owner of a small business. Voters do use a business occupational label as a cue for managerial competence and as being a political outsider, as respondents who preferred the business candidate frequently cited these traits as a reason for their choice. But they get lower marks on traits such as integrity and strength as a public servant. Thus, voters do not have a uniformly positive assessment of business candidates, explaining why a business label is not necessarily an electoral asset.

After reviewing existing literature on the effects of occupation on vote choice, we probe our dataset of California municipal election results to assess the success of business candidates. We then present the findings from our experiment, which complement the previous analysis by further explaining why business candidate do not do well at the polls and expanding the logic of how voters use occupational cues. We conclude by discussing the implications of this research for our understanding of vote choice in local elections.

Occupation as a Ballot Cue

A large body of literature demonstrates that voters typically lack detailed information about candidate policy views and qualifications and rely on simple cues such as endorsements, name recognition, incumbency status, party affiliation, or visible demographic characteristics to make their choices (e.g., Lupia 2015). This tendency is especially evident at the local level where elections tend to be low information affairs, leading some voters to distinguish among candidate using gender or ethnic identification (Matson and Fine 2006). In elections where party labels do not appear on the ballot (such as California local elections), voters appear less likely to use party as a cue to determine vote choices even if it is possible to find candidate party preferences (Lim and Snyder 2015; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; but see Bonneau and Cann 2015). Absent of any substantive cue, voters may rely on an arbitrary one, such as ballot position (e.g., Miller and Krosnick 1998).

The research on occupation as a cue is relatively thin, although the studies that have been conducted have largely found that occupation is a relevant cue for many voters. For example, Byrne and Pueschel (1974), examining various cues that could affect voting decisions for Democratic and Republican Party county central committees between 1948 and 1970, found that candidates who listed their occupation as “professor,” “engineer,” or “lawyer” were likely to win, while those who listed their occupation as “housewife,” “salesman,” or “real estate broker” were not. McDermott (2005), using a 1994 *Los Angeles Times* poll, concluded that when there were sharp differences between candidates with respect to having experience relevant to particular offices, voters were more likely to choose the candidate whose listed experience better aligned with the elective position. The importance of occupational cues has also been documented in studies in other countries, such as Germany (Mechtel 2014), Great Britain (Campbell and Cowley 2014), and New Zealand (Coffė and Theiss-Morse 2016)

There are only a handful of studies that directly assess whether voters prefer candidates with a business background. Coffė and Theiss-Morse (2016) used student experimental evidence from New Zealand and the United States to examine how occupational designation influence perceptions of competence and electoral support, drawing on earlier research indicating that many Americans prefer government to be “run like a business” and consequently preferred business candidates (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Controlling for other variables, they found that the business label contributed to perceptions of competence in some areas but was associated with perceptions of less competence in others. Furthermore, the business designation did not increase electoral support among the American students (and actually eroded support among the New Zealand students). Carnes and Lupo (2016) analyzed the possibility of voter bias against “working class” candidates by using a series of candidate choice experiments in Argentina, Great Britain, and the United States. Contrary to the prevalent assumption that “business owner” candidates would be advantaged over “factory workers,” they found that the average respondent in Argentina and Britain was essentially indifferent to whether the candidate had the “factory worker” or “business owner” designation, while the average respondent in the United States slightly favored the “factory worker.” Even self-identifying Republicans among American respondents did not favor business owner candidates over factory workers.

One analysis missing from previous literature is a direct test of whether voters prefer candidates with business experience instead of political experience. The high re-election rates for incumbents might suggest that voters value political experience. Even though this is usually attributed to the financial and name-recognition advantages that they enjoy, it is also possible that voters value candidates with political experience and use incumbency as a proxy. We also note the long line of research (cf. Fenno 1975; Parker and Davidson 1979) indicating that voters commonly appreciate and are inclined to support their individual elected representatives (e.g., specific Members of Congress) even if they disparage the institutions in which they serve (Congress itself). On the other hand, the belief that government should be run like a business is strong (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), and as a result voters may prefer business candidates. We expect the former belief to be dominant; despite all the anti-politician rhetoric and criticism of government, voters will still prefer individuals with political experience over businesspersons. Thus, our first hypothesis:

H1: Voters are less likely to support business candidates because they prefer candidates with prior political experience (such as holding other political office).

One reason voters may prefer candidates with a business background is that they use it as a cue for managerial competence. McDermott’s (2005) study suggests that voters do pay attention to how prior work experience prepares candidates for the office they are seeking, and voters may see running a business as being an indication that a person has the capabilities to be an effective city councilor or mayor. Additionally, voters may use a business ballot designation as a cue that the candidate is political outsider. This is not a particularly accurate cue, as many businesspersons are heavily involved in politics. However, many voters may ascribe to a dichotomy between the public and private sectors, and assume that businesspersons are outside of the political establishment.

H2: Voters are more likely to support business candidates because they use a business ballot designation as cue for managerial competence or as a cue for being a political outsider.

None of the previous studies on occupational cues attempt to disaggregate different types of business candidates, but given the breadth of the “business” label it is reasonable to expect that voters would make such distinctions. In the context of city council and mayoral elections, we expect that voters will prefer candidates who own local businesses, or more generally small business owners, as opposed to corporate executives of multinational corporations. Many voters respect small businesspersons as individuals who are contributing to local economic growth, and appreciate the hard work and dedication required to run a business. Popular perceptions of corporate executives are more mixed; they may be seen as smart and competent, but also as lacking in ethical standards and out of touch with average voters. We thus expect that not all business candidates will be viewed the same by voters:

H3: Voters are more likely to support small business owners than corporate executives of larger companies.

Study 1: Aggregate Analysis of California Election Data

*Data and Methods*

We employ two approaches to understanding the effects of ballot designations on vote choice. First, we use an aggregate dataset of mayoral and city council elections to assess how well businesspersons do at the ballot box. The dataset includes all city council and mayoral elections in California between 2008 and 2015, over 11,000 candidates running in over 400 cities.[[2]](#footnote-2) Our main source of data was the California Elections Data Archive (CEDA), maintained by the Institute of Social Research at California State University, Sacramento. This is a unique statewide database that collects, tabulates and reports candidate and ballot measure results for all local elections. Reports from CEDA include all candidates, their ballot designations, incumbency status, and vote totals. To this information we added variables for gender, election type, and competitiveness.

The CEDA data includes the text of each candidate’s ballot designation. The state’s Election Code (Section 13107) gives candidates a great deal of discretion as to how they describe their occupation, containing only broad guidelines as to what’s allowable. Candidates can use no more than three words to describe their current “professions, vocations, or occupations” or can indicate any current elective office they hold. Candidates are prohibited from using adjectives that suggest an evaluation such as “outstanding” or “eminent” and may not list a profession they no longer practice or office they no longer hold. They also cannot list a hobby, honorary titles (such as “honorary professor”) or generic status such as “taxpayer” or “concerned citizen,” although the last requirement tends not to be enforced strictly. Despite these limitations, there is a lot of room for choice of wording. For example, someone who runs a small land use consulting business and also teaches a land use course at the local college might reasonably describe herself as a “small business owner,” “land use consultant,” “businesswoman and educator,” “college instructor,” or use any number of similar terms.

Candidate ballot designations, which appear as text in the CEDA database, were coded with dummy variables for five occupational groups. Regarding our primary focus, candidates who ran as “businesspersons,” we opted for a conservative definition, limiting that coding category to candidates whose designation included a derivative of “business” or using a term that is closely associated with business such as “executive” or “CEO,” and excluding other seemingly less directly related terms such as “consultant” and “entrepreneur.” We also coded candidates as “businesspeople” if they included a business designation along with an unrelated designation, e.g., “Businesswoman/planning commissioner,” regardless of the order in which the occupations were listed. Table 1 provides examples of terms that did and did not meet our definition.

**Table 1: “Businessperson” and Non-Businessperson Classifications**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Examples of Designations in Our Dataset Classified as “Businessperson”* | *Examples of Designations Not Classified as “Businessperson”* |
| Business owner | Consultant |
| Businesswoman | Property manager |
| Businessman | Entrepreneur |
| Business manager | Start-up founder |
| CEO | Property manager |
| Factory owner | Property administrator |
| Corporate vice president | Financial manager |
| Grantwriter/Business Owner | Engineer/financial analyst |

We followed similar rules for the four other occupational dummies. We created an “elected officials” category for candidates who held an elective office other than the one they were seeking (for example, a city council member running for mayor or a school board member running for city council) to distinguish them from incumbents. The remaining three categories were attorneys, educators (both K-12 and higher education), and retirees.

*Findings Regarding the Success of Business Candidates*

Table 2 provides an overview of how candidates identified their occupation on the ballot. Even with a relatively restrictive coding system for identifying someone as a “businessperson,” nearly one out of every four candidates fit the “businessperson” classification, far exceeding the percentage of candidates choosing to identify as an attorney or educator. Only 4% of candidates self-identify as an attorney, which is surprising given that the stereotypical candidate often is assumed to have a legal background.[[3]](#footnote-3) There are, however, a large number of retirees that run for office, which is likely a function of the fact that most council and mayoral positions in California are part time, creating challenges for individuals who work full-time jobs.[[4]](#footnote-4) The majority of elected officials who are not incumbents were either city councilmembers running for mayor or school board members.

Table 2: Ballot designations, all candidates

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number | Percent\* |
| Incumbent | 3,404 | 29.4 |
| Business | 2,669 | 23.0 |
| Retired | 1,126 | 9.7 |
| Educator | 721 | 6.2 |
| Elected Officials (not incumbent) | 482 | 4.2 |
| Attorney | 453 | 3.9 |
|  |  |  |
| None of the above | 3,848 | 33.2 |
|  |  |  |
| Total | 11,597 |  |

*\* Percentages do not add up to 100% because candidates may identify more than one occupation in their ballot designation.*

Despite their prevalence, businesspersons are not very successful at the polls, as indicated in Table 3. For this analysis we focused on non-incumbents, as we expect the power of incumbency to overshadow any effect of ballot designations, and only included contested elections (races where the number of candidates exceeded the number of seats up for election). Elected officials (those who held an office other than the one they were running for) were the most successful, with almost half either winning or advancing to a runoff.[[5]](#footnote-5) About 30% of businesspersons, attorneys, retirees, and educators either won or advanced to a runoff. Business candidates did better than candidates with occupations other than the ones listed, of whom only 24% either won or advanced to a runoff. But they did worse than elected officials and about the same as attorney, educators, and retirees.

Table 3: Success of non-incumbents by occupation

Contested elections only

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | % won | % advanced to runoff | % lost |
| Elected Officials (not incumbent) | 37.7 | 6.2 | 56.1 |
| Attorney | 32.0 | 1.4 | 66.7 |
| Educator | 26.9 | 3.7 | 69.4 |
| Business | 28.1 | 2.3 | 69.6 |
| Retired | 29.2 | 0.5 | 70.3 |
|  |  |  |  |
| None of the above | 21.6 | 1.3 | 77.3 |

Table 4 presents regression models to further explore the effect of ballot designations on electoral success. The dependent variable is the percent of votes a candidate received, with controls for incumbency status, the number of candidates, and gender. The five occupational categories are also included as dummy variables (with “none of the above” as the excluded category). There are separate models for mayoral elections, single-member district council elections, and multi-member council elections, with only contested elections included. Note that many of the people who fit in the “none of the above” category might be expected to be weak candidates. For example, it would include candidates who listed their occupation as “student.” Accordingly, we might expect that fitting into *any* of the categories identified with our dummy variables would stronger than those in the excluded category.

As expected and shown in Table 4, incumbency status and the number of candidates have a substantial impact on vote share. Women candidates do slightly better in multi-member districts but gender has no significant impact in single-member districts or mayoral elections. Turning to the ballot designation variables, a business designation has a small but statistically significant impact in council races, but no impact in mayoral elections. Being an attorney tends to have a larger impact than a business designation, and being an elected official (non-incumbent) has the largest impact of the ballot designation variables. This suggests that businesspersons may do slightly better than a typical candidate but that the effects of a business designation pale in comparison to past political experience cues. The analysis is limited because we do not have good control variables for candidate quality, but it does provide compelling evidence to support H1: voters seem to prefer candidates with political experience, not only incumbents but also non-incumbents who have held other political offices.

Even though in the aggregate a business ballot designation only has a marginally positive impact on electoral success relative to “none of the above” candidates, it is possible that in certain circumstances it will make a bigger difference. One possibility is that voters prefer business candidates for executive positions like mayor, but do not have a preference for council positions. Following the logic of H2, if voters are using business experience as a cue for managerial competence, that cue should be weighted more heavily when voting for an executive position. Table 4, however, undermines that argument, as a business ballot designation had less of an impact on mayoral elections. A second possibility is that voters in larger cities may prefer business candidates but those in small cities do not. In large cities voters may feel managerial competence is a more important criteria than in small, less complex cities, and use business experience as a proxy for managerial ability. Yet, in cities of less than 100,000 residents business candidates actually did better, with 33.5% either winning their races or advancing to a runoff. In larger cities, only 23.5% of business candidates did so.

Table 4: OLS Regressions Predicting Vote Share

Contested elections only

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Multi-member council districts | Single-member council districts | Mayoral elections |
| Incumbent | .067 (.002)\*\*\* | .226 (.010)\*\*\* | .297 (.012)\*\*\* |
| # of Candidates | -.020 (.000)\*\*\* | -.031 (.001)\*\*\* | -.030 (.001)\*\*\* |
| Gender (woman = 1) | .011 (.002)\*\*\* | .016 (.008) | -.005 (.011) |
| *Ballot designations* |  |  |  |
| Business | .016 (.002)\*\*\* | .022 (.009)\* | .021 (.011) |
| Attorney | .021 (.004)\*\*\* | .056 (.017)\*\* | .071 (.026)\*\* |
| Educator | .011 (.004)\*\* | .010 (.014) | .013 (.018) |
| Retired | .012 (.003)\*\*\* | .013 (.016) | .037 (.016)\* |
| Elected official (not incumbent) | .052 (.007)\*\*\* | .112 (.018)\*\*\* | .156 (.011)\*\*\* |
|  |  |  |  |
| Adj. r-squared | .474 | .478 | .582 |
| N | 8334 | 1657 | 1096 |

Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses

\* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

Overall, the picture that emerges from this analysis of California elections is that having a business background may give candidates a modest advantage over the typical candidate but voter seem to prefer candidates with political experience. Thus there is evidence to support H1 (voters prefer candidates with political experience to candidates without such experience but who are businesspeople) and little evidence to support H2 (voters use the businessperson label as a cue for managerial competence).

Study 2: Experimental Analysis of Support for Local Candidates

*Data and Methods*

We used an experimental design to manipulate the ballot designations of hypothetical candidates running in a non-partisan city council race in an effort to understand how voters use occupation as a cue. Each of three experimental groups were presented information on three candidates: a realtor (picked because it is a profession that tends to rate right in the middle of the distribution in terms of occupational prestige), an elected school board member, and a business candidate. The specific designation of the business candidates varied across the groups, identifying either a “business person” (group 1), an “executive at a large corporation” (group 2), or a “small business owner” (group 3). Participants were asked to rank the candidates they prefer, evaluate their preferred candidate on personal characteristics, and answer questions related to their background and demographic information.

Our sample consisted of 309 adults recruited on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) between October 4, 2018 and October 10, 2018. The average time to complete the survey experiment was 6 minutes 18 seconds. We requested all MTurk participants be California residents so it was comparable to our analysis of election results, but our sample includes four participants from other states. The Appendix table details the characteristics for each group. The key point is that the randomization produced approximate balance across the three groups. More specially, for all groups the average or most common characteristics of respondents included (among other characteristics) being in the mid-thirties, being female, reporting obtaining a baccalaureate degree, identifying with the Democratic Party, identifying as being slightly liberal, and expressing somewhat of an interest in politics and public affairs.

*Experimental Findings*

We begin by comparing respondents’ evaluation of a hypothetical business candidate versus a hypothetical candidate with experience as an elected local school board member.   
Across all groups 57.8% of respondents preferred the elected school board member but only 34.7% preferred the business person; the difference is statistically as well as substantively significant. This is consistent with our first research hypothesis.

However, the results are more complex when we divide the respondents by experimental group. As shown in Table 5, when the comparison was between either a generic “business person” or an “executive at a large corporation” and an elected school board member, as was the case for Groups 1 and 2 respectively, respondents decisively preferred the latter (in all cases, realtors are the least preferred candidate). Yet when the comparison was between a “small business owner” and elected school board member as was the case for Group 3, respondents preferred the former by a margin of 51.9% to 42.5%. This suggests that voters are more favorably inclined to small business owners versus business persons in general, consistent with hypothesis #3.

Table 5: Experimental Group Ratings of Top Hypothetical Candidate

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Candidate Ballot Designation | Percent Ranked as #1 Choice  (sample size) |
| *Group 1* | |
| Business person | 34.7 (95) |
| Realtor | 7.4 (95) |
| Elected school board member | 57.9 (95) |
| *Group 2* | |
| Executive at a large corporation | 17.8 (107) |
| Realtor | 10.2 (108) |
| Elected school board member | 72.9 (107) |
| *Group 3* | |
| Small business owner | 51.9 (104) |
| Realtor | 6.5 (107) |
| Elected school board member | 42.5 (106) |

For those voters who preferred a business candidate, did they do so because they view a business background as a cue for management experience, a cue for being a desirable “outsider,” or both? Table 6 provides the reasons respondents offered for why they preferred a business candidate. The majority of respondents identified “budget management skills or expertise,” “management skills,” and/or “understands the economy” as a reason for their preference, regardless of experimental group. For those who prefer business candidates, they clearly see them as being capable and knowledgeable managers. Respondents assumed business candidates had little political experience, as few identified that as the reason they supported them. There were many respondents who identified being a political outsider or bringing new ideas to government (which implies they are not currently involved in government) as a reason to support business candidates; these choices were less frequent than the managerial competence options but were still common. The only exception to this pattern is that few respondents identified the generic businessperson (group 1) as being political outsiders. In general, respondents who favored business candidates, irrespective of whether they were corporate executives or small businesspersons, viewed them as being both skilled managers and political outsiders.

Table 6: Reasons for Choosing a Business Person as the Best Candidate

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Candidate ballot designation | Business person  (Group 1) | Executive at a large corporation  (Group 2) | Small business owner  (Group 3) |
| *Managerial competence* |  |  |  |
| Management skills | 69.7 | 68.4 | 50.0 |
| Understands the economy | 63.6 | 63.2 | 61.1 |
| Budget management skills or expertise | 57.6 | 73.7 | 66.7 |
| *Political Experience* |  |  |  |
| Political Experience | 6.1 | 10.5 | 1.9  (54) |
| A political outsider | 21.2 | 57.9 | 42.6 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Bringing new ideas to government | 48.5 | 52.6 | 51.9 |
| Other | 3.0 | 0.0 | 9.3 |
| N | 33 | 19 | 54 |

*Note: Cell entries are percent who selected the characteristic, of those who ranked the candidate as their first preference.*

For those respondents who selected the school board member as their first choice candidate, their reasons were a bit peculiar. The most common reason, identified by almost half of respondents, was bringing new ideas to government, which is strange given that elected school board members are currently within government. Political experience and being a political outsider were roughly equally chosen by 26% and 28% of respondents, respectively. 34% of respondents identified management skills as a reason for choosing a school board member, with 29% focusing on budgeting expertise. Also worthy of note is that respondents who ranked a school board member first offered fewer reasons on average as to why they made their choice than those who supported business candidates. Thus, our data supports the conclusion that respondents who chose businesspersons did so because of managerial competence, but we do not know whether respondents who preferred a school board member did so because they value governmental experience.

Respondents were also asked to rate their preferred candidate on nine personal traits using a 3-point scale (weak=1, fair=2, strong=3). As indicated on table 7, respondents who chose one of the businesspersons tended to rate that candidate higher on traits such as intelligence, competence, and ability to find solutions, all of which speak to managerial competence. They received lower marks for integrity and trustworthiness, indicating that the preference for business candidates is driven by a perception that businesspersons acquire skills that can be transferred to the political realm not by a belief that they are more ethical or responsive. School board members’ valance rating did not vary as much, with their strongest ratings on “ability to work with others” and “overall strength as a public servant.” This suggests that respondents who chose a school board member did so because they felt that such a candidate would be better able to operate in a political environment rather than any specific belief that they are smarter and more competent.

Table 7: Preferred Candidate’s Valance Ratings

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristic | Business person  (Group 1) | Executive at a large corporation  (Group 2) | Small business owner  (Group 3) | Elected school board member (All groups) |
| Intelligence | 2.7 | 2.7 | 2.2 | 2.3 |
| Personal integrity | 1.9 | 2.0 | 2.1 | 2.2 |
| Likeability | 1.9 | 1.9 | 2.1 | 2.2 |
| Competence | 2.7 | 2.5 | 2.4 | 2.3 |
| Qualifications to hold office | 2.2 | 2.3 | 1.9 | 2.2 |
| Trustworthiness | 1.8 | 2.3 | 2.1 | 2.3 |
| Ability to find solutions to problems | 2.8 | 2.6 | 2.7 | 2.3 |
| Ability to work well with others | 2.5 | 2.2 | 2.4 | 2.6 |
| Overall strength as a public servant | 1.9 | 1.9 | 2.0 | 2.5 |
| N | 33 | 19 | 54 | 172 |

Conclusion

Taken together, where do the two studies leave us? We begin by reiterating one broad, overall point that runs across the results from our current studies and is consistent with our prior papers presented at previous WPSA Annual Meetings: there is little reason to think that business people are notably strong candidates for local office. The idea that one gains a competitive advantage simply by listing one’s occupation as “businessperson” appears to belong to the realm of mythology, if quite common mythology.

More specifically, we find some support for all three of the hypotheses offered at the beginning of the paper, though sometimes in refined form. Per Hypothesis 1, both the aggregate data analysis and experimental evidence indicate that in general, faced with a choice between a generic business candidate and a candidate with experience in elective office, voters will tend to prefer the one with elective experience. However, the experimental data suggest this may be less true if the business candidate is designated as a “small business owner.” Experimental respondent were more likely to support a business candidate if so designated, and this is in fact consistent with Hypothesis 3 that voters prefer small business candidates to corporate leaders. Finally, consistent with Hypothesis 2 we offer some experimental evidence indicating that voters may take the business designation as a cue to budgetary and management competence. However, it is less clear that people who prefer business candidates do so because of their outsider status (only one of three experimental groups exhibited this pattern).

More work on the impact of ballot designation on voter choice is needed, especially because common intuitions about the role of the business person label appear to be incorrect. First, a more detailed examination of how voters incorporate past political and business experience into their choices would help explain the patterns documented in this paper. Second, exploring how and why voters differentiate between corporate executives and small business owners would also be valuable. This research highlights that voters do make distinctions between different types of businesspersons, and understanding why they make those distinctions would advance our knowledge of how voters treat a “businessperson” label. Finally, conventional wisdom postulates that being an outsider is beneficial, and for good reason given how many individuals have won high political office without any prior experience. But our findings suggest the reality is more complex than voters simply wanting outsiders to represent them in government. The preference for a political outsider may interact with a range of other factors that play into vote choice, and exploring those interactions is an important future step for researchers.

Appendix: Characteristics Across Experimental Groups

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Group 1  N = 95 | Group 2  N = 108 | Group 3  N = 107 |
| Party Identification  Percent Democrat  Percent Independent  Percent Republican  No preference | 50.0  28.7  12.8  6.4 | 50.5  26.7  14.3  6.7 | 42.3  27.9  20.2  7.7 |
| Median Ideology | Slightly liberal | Slightly liberal | Slightly liberal |
| Median Interest in Politics and Public Affairs | Somewhat interested | Somewhat interested | Somewhat interested |
| Mean Age | 34.4 years | 37.8 years | 35.0 years |
| Sex  Percent Male  Percent Female | 46.8  52.1 | 38.1  61.9 | 47.6  52.4 |
| Median Highest Education Level Completed | Bachelor’s degree | Bachelor’s degree | Bachelor’s degree |
| Median familiarity with local government activities and responsibilities | Moderately familiar | Moderately familiar | Moderately familiar |
| Percent who have attended at least one local government meeting | 48.9 | 50.5 | 56.9 |
| Median how often can trust federal government in Washington DC to do what is right | Some of the time | Some of the time | Some of the time |
| Median how often can trust state government to do what is right | Some of the time | Some of the time | Some of the time |
| Median how often can trust local government to do what is right | About half the time | About half the time | About half the time |
| Median how many 2018 candidates are corrupt | About half | About half | About half |
| Percent registered to vote | 83.0 | 85.7 | 87.6 |
| Percent planning to vote in 2018 midterm election | 74.5 | 78.1 | 82.9 |
| Percent voted in local elections before | 73.4 | 75.2 | 82.9 |
| Race  Percent American Indian  Percent Asian  Percent Black or African American  Percent Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish  Percent Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander  Percent White  Percent Other | 3.2  28.4  4.2  17.9  1.1  47.4  4.2 | 1.9  21.3  3.7  13.9  0.0  58.3  2.8 | 1.9  24.3  6.5  15.9  1.9  57.9  0.0 |
| Mean number of political activities | 1.9 | 1.9 | 1.9 |

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1. A few states allow for some candidates (typically in judicial contests) to list an occupation, but in no other state is the practice widespread. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. California has one combined City/County, San Francisco, which was included in the analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Candidates are more likely to be attorneys in larger cities; in cities of over 250,000 residents, approximately 7% of candidates self-identify as an attorney. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In cities with full-time councils we do see fewer retirees run. There are six cities (Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, Fresno, Oakland, and San Francisco) where average council pay exceeds $75,000 a year. In these cities, only 2.3% of candidates were retirees. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The majority of elections in California do not have runoffs, either because it is a multi-member district that doesn’t require a runoff or because it is a single-member district where a candidate won outright in the primary. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)