

# **Gaming Direct Democracy: How Voters' Views of Job Performance Interact with Elite Endorsements of Ballot Measures\***

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## **Abstract:**

Voters are thought to use cues in helping them make decisions. The use of cues is especially important in direct democracy, where ballot measures rarely have partisan endorsements. One oft-mentioned type of cue is elite endorsement. Using an exit survey, we look at California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's endorsement of four Indian gaming measures on the ballot during the presidential primary election of 2008. We find that voters who had knowledge of the elite cue differed little from those who did not. We find, however, that Schwarzenegger's endorsement was conditionally related to voting, depending on whether or not voters approved of Schwarzenegger's job performance as governor, with voters who approved of Schwarzenegger's job performance being more likely to vote in favor of the measures compared with voters who disapproved of his job performance. Our results suggest that it is not just the knowledge of a cue that matters but also the assessment by a voter of the endorser that determines its effectiveness.

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## **Introduction**

In presidential and congressional elections, there are strong theoretical and empirical reasons for scholars to assume that voters routinely use cues as an information shortcut to help them make welfare-improving decisions. For direct democracy, however, assuming that voters often use cues to make decisions on initiatives and referendums is troublesome: Elite endorsements do not appear on the ballot next to initiatives and referendums in the way that party labels are often included next to the names of political candidates.

There is limited empirical support suggesting that endorsements help voters make decisions on ballot measures. On one hand, scholars have shown that voters can use elite endorsements to approximate a fully informed vote. On the other, new research questions the assumption that voters' use of elite endorsements is commonplace. If widespread usage of elite endorsements is essential for voters to make reasoned choices on initiatives and referendums — which is the implicit assumption of much of the scholarship on voters in direct democracy — we first need to understand when and how often voters use cues when making decisions in direct democracy.

We provide new evidence to assess how often and to what end voters use elite endorsements to make decisions on ballot measures. Using an election survey from California's presidential primary in February 2008, we evaluate the effectiveness of then-Governor Schwarzenegger's endorsement of four popular referendums on the ballot. Our results suggest that voters who were aware of the cue used the endorsement conditionally. That is, voters used the cue to guide their decisions based on whether they approved or disapproved of Governor Schwarzenegger's performance in office. In particular, voters who had a positive view of the governor and knew his endorsement were more likely to support the referendums; the opposite

was true for voters who disapproved of his job performance and knew his endorsement. Our results add to the literature on elite endorsements, showing that governors can be persuasive cue-givers.

## **Background**

The earliest research on voting behavior and opinion formation paints an unflattering picture of the American voter (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). Such findings question the ability of the average voter to make reasoned democratic decisions, a fear that additional research has supported by highlighting the limited nature of political knowledge among the electorate (for a summary, see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

As Lupia (2006) argues, however, academic elitism has clouded our thinking about what we should expect voters to know about politics. Political facts, while they can help voters make more informed and perhaps better decisions (e.g., Bartels 1996), may not be critical for democratic decision-making. Voters require “operative knowledge” that is relevant to the decision at hand (e.g., Johnson 2009; Lupia 2006). Indeed, Downs (1957) argues that — as long as political parties offer a relatively stable set of policy positions in their platforms — ideology and party labels can act as cheap and easy information shortcuts. Other research confirms that voters can rely on knowledgeable and trustworthy sources of information as a substitute for extensive knowledge to make an informed decision (e.g., Druckman 2001; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009; Druckman et al. 2010; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1994).

Lupia’s (1994) seminal article sets the baseline for scholarly understanding of how voters use information shortcuts. Surveying voters about five initiatives in California’s 1988 general election, Lupia shows that individuals who were aware of key elite endorsements made decisions that were similar to voters who had extensive “encyclopedic” knowledge of the measures. Based

on Lupia's evidence, the conventional wisdom in political science has become that voters routinely use information shortcuts to make political decisions (Lupia and Matsusaka 2004).

Assuming that voters often use cues to make decisions in all types of elections is problematic. Indeed, voters use party labels extensively in national candidate elections, where voters select candidates that represent their own partisan attachment more than 90 percent of the time. Moreover, party labels are extraordinarily accessible cues for voters to use *as they are on the ballot itself*. By contrast, cues are not available on the ballot for initiatives and referendums. Yet, both Lupia (1994) and Karp (1998) show that elite endorsements do help guide voter behavior on ballot measures. Recent empirical enquiries (Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins 2010; Burnett and Parry 2012), however, suggest voters' use of cues in direct democracy is not universal. In Burnett, Garrett, and McCubbins (2010), they find that, after controlling for policy preference, voters who knew a cue did not vote differently than uninformed voters. In Burnett and Parry's (2012) experiments involving Arkansas residents, they show that a gubernatorial endorsement had only a modest — and sometimes nonexistent — effect on support for ballot measures.

In other words, the limited research on voter behavior in ballot measure elections produces conflicting results concerning voters' propensity to use endorsements. Furthermore, the ability of governors to provide a persuasive endorsement for voters in direct democracy elections remains an under-examined empirical question. Below, we begin to remedy this oversight while adding to the literature that assesses whether and how often voters use elite endorsements to arrive at a decision.

## Hypothesis and Data

We base our research on work of Lupia (1994), Lupia and McCubbins (1998) and Karp (1998) who argue that voters can learn from cue-givers when the voters perceive the cue-giver to be trustworthy and knowledgeable. Specifically, we look to see if voting on ballot measures is related to elite endorsements and, moreover, to whether or not voters approve of the elite giving the endorsement. We use data from an election survey we conducted during the California presidential primary on February 5, 2008. During this election, we had student volunteers ask San Diego voters exiting their polling places to answer questions about the election. We surveyed eight polling locations (which covered 10 precincts) across the city.<sup>2</sup> Our volunteers gathered 615 interviews and received 467 refusals for a cooperation rate of 56.8 percent. While estimating of the relationship between voting and the governor’s endorsement does not require random sampling so long as we have random assignment<sup>3</sup> across the two conditions (whether the voter recalled that Schwarzenegger supported the measures), to enhance our external validity, we decided to randomize our sample, instructing our volunteers to ask every other exiting voter for

<sup>2</sup> To ensure we drew a reasonable sample with our election survey, we compare the demographics for our sample to the 2005-2009 American Community Survey (ACS) demographics. In our sample, respondents are more educated and disproportionately Caucasian. The remaining demographics are similar to the 2005-09 ACS demographics, suggesting we gathered a reasonable sample of San Diego voters.

	<b>Survey</b>	<b>2005-2009 ACS Data for San Diego</b>
<b>Age</b>	Median between 36-45; 11.6% > 65 yrs.	Median age 33.6; 10.7% > 65 yrs.
<b>Household Income</b>	Median between \$50-100,000	\$61,962
<b>HS Diploma (Age &gt; 25)</b>	99%	86.3%
<b>College Degree (Age &gt; 25)</b>	73.5%	40.6%
<b>Female</b>	50.2%	49.7%
<b>Asian or Pacific Islander</b>	5%	15.3%
<b>Black</b>	1.8%	6.8%
<b>Latino</b>	7%	27.3%
<b>Caucasian</b>	76.8%	66.7%

<sup>3</sup> Unlike our previous research (Burnett and McCubbins 2012) we cannot match respondents across our treatment conditions because matching makes little sense when, as we note below, almost 90 percent of our sample received the treatment. Furthermore, we cannot construct a true test of our theory because we are using an endogenous trait — voters’ self-reported assessment of the governor’s job performance — as a conditioning variable to interact with our treatment. These two confounds significantly limit the econometric tools we can use to analyze our data.

an interview. Our survey focused on, among other things, Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97. All four measures authorized certain Native American gaming outfits to expand their operations. We provide the official voter guide's description of each measure in Appendix A.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger endorsed all four propositions. Indeed, he was the best-known cue-giver and thus his stance in favor provided voters with a visible and valuable information shortcut for the propositions. On television advertisements, Governor Schwarzenegger hailed the legislation as a "historic bipartisan agreement" and urged voters to "vote yes for billions of dollars for California families."<sup>4</sup> Governor Schwarzenegger provided an information shortcut that satisfied both of Lupia and McCubbins' (1998) conditions for persuasion (the endorser must be perceived to be knowledgeable and trustworthy). That is, many California voters shared a common interest with Governor Schwarzenegger (he had just easily won reelection), and he was presumably knowledgeable about the state's budget.

We asked respondents three questions about the referendums and Governor Schwarzenegger. We asked the following questions (in order):

1) True or False: Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97 do not require complete adherence to the California Environmental Quality Act. (The correct answer is "true," coded as "1" for correct and "0" for incorrect and "don't know" responses)

2) How many more slot machines would Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97 allow if they all succeed? 25,000; 17,000; 11,000; or, 4,000. (The correct answer is "17,000," coded as "1" for correct and "0" for incorrect and "don't know" responses)

3) Do you know if Arnold Schwarzenegger supported, opposed or took no position on the Indian Gaming referendums (Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97)? (The correct answer is "supported," coded as "1" for correct, and "0" for incorrect and "don't know" responses)

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<sup>4</sup> Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueUMHseWauM>

In addition to the three questions above, we asked respondents to report their assessment of how Arnold Schwarzenegger was handling his job as governor. Subjects could indicate that they approved (coded as “1”) or disapproved (coded as “0”) of the governor. Similar to Karp (1998; see also Mondak 1993; Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989), we asked voters to evaluate Governor Schwarzenegger to add a “direction” to his endorsement. We expect that voters who approve of how the governor was handling his job will view his endorsement positively, thereby encouraging those voters to support the measures. By contrast, voters who disapproved of how the governor was handling his job would be expected to view his endorsement negatively, leading them to vote against the measures. We also asked respondents how they voted on the four propositions in question, which serves as our dependent variables.

We use logistic regression to estimate whether voters’ knowledge of Governor Schwarzenegger’s endorsement appeared to be related to their decisions concerning Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97. Our first independent variable is a dummy variable indicating whether or not a voter approved of Schwarzenegger’s job performance. Our next two variables divided the value of knowing the governor’s endorsement by interacting that variable with two dummy variables, the first of which took on the value of one if the voter approved of Governor Schwarzenegger’s job performance and zero otherwise, and a second dummy variable that took on a value of one if the voter disapproved of the governor’s job performance and zero otherwise. From these three variables and the constant term we could calculate the main relationships between job approval, endorsement and the vote, as well as the four possible interactions of these two dummy variables (which we provide in Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> We also enter the two other knowledge

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<sup>5</sup> We can recover the main relationship between a voter’s knowledge of endorsement and their approval of the governor, plus the interaction of these two variables, from our results. As we are interested in plotting the

variables outlined above (numbered one and two), as they should be related to a voter’s support of the gaming measures. Lastly, we include two dichotomous measures of party identification (Democrat and Republican, with Independents as the excluded group).

**Results**

We present the descriptive statistics regarding voter knowledge for Propositions 94, 95, 96 and 97 in Table 1. We can draw two conclusions from Table 1. First, not surprisingly, our sample did not appear to know much about the specifics of these four referendums, as only 17.1 percent of the respondents knew that these referendums would allow for an additional 17,000 new slot machines. Moreover, only 30.6 percent knew that these referendums did not require full compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Second, our sample appeared to know, quite overwhelmingly, that Governor Schwarzenegger (the main cue-giver that took a position on these propositions) supported these referendums (with 87.6% answering our question correctly).

**Table 1 – Knowledge About Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97**

	Correct	Incorrect	Don’t Know
Proposition 94-97 Would Approve 17,000 Additional Slot Machines	17.1%	27.2%	55.6%
Proposition 94-97 Included Exemptions from CEQA	30.6%	19.4%	50.0%
Governor Schwarzenegger Supported Propositions 94-97	87.6%	4.2%	8.2%

It is probable that Governor Schwarzenegger was a persuasive cue-giver. First, knowledge of Governor Schwarzenegger’s position may be helpful for voters because, as governor, he is presumably an expert on the California budget. Second, voters could have used

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relationship of the interactions between these two variables with voting, we present the main and interactive relationships in Table 2 in a way that makes the most sense in constructing Figure 1.

Governor Schwarzenegger as a focal point to derive their own opinions about how to vote on the propositions because he is a prominent political figure. Those who disagree with Governor Schwarzenegger's fiscal policies might have inferred from his position that they should vote against the propositions since agreement with the cue-giver is not a necessary condition for persuasion. In fact, an endorsement from a cue-giver you disagree with may be more persuasive.

While voters could identify Governor Schwarzenegger's position, does the relationship between their knowledge of the endorsement and how they feel about the endorser seem related to how they voted? Table 2 presents the regression results for all four referendums. Three interesting findings emerge from the regression analysis. First, respondents who were aware that the referendums provided exceptions from CEQA were significantly less likely to report that they voted for the measures. These voters may have learned about the CEQA exemptions by being informed individuals (e.g., they read the voter information guide carefully) or they could have learned this fact from a third-party (e.g., The Sierra Club). Second, each regression indicates that voters who both knew that Governor Schwarzenegger supported the measures and gave Governor Schwarzenegger a positive job approval were significantly more likely to vote for the measures. Finally, voters who knew the governor's position and disapproved of his job performance were significantly less likely to support the measures. Overall, Table 2 shows that voters' use of Governor Schwarzenegger's endorsement was conditional on their evaluation of his job performance. The table also demonstrates that the value of his endorsement was independent of voters' perceptions of his job performance as job performance alone is not a significant predictor of vote choice.

**Table 2 – Logit Results for Referendums to Authorize Additional Slot Machines**

	Prop. 94	Prop. 95	Prop. 96	Prop. 97
Approved of Governor’s Performance	-0.57 (0.61)	-0.57 (0.61)	-0.68 (0.61)	-0.58 (0.61)
Knew Endorsement	-1.20* (0.52)	-1.19* (0.52)	-1.15* (0.53)	-1.20* (0.52)
Approved of Gov.*Knew Endorsement	1.85** (0.66)	1.87** (0.66)	1.83** (0.66)	1.95** (0.66)
R Knows Exceptions to CEQA	-0.54* (0.23)	-0.56* (0.23)	-0.64** (0.23)	-0.56* (0.24)
R Knows Number of Increased Slots	0.26 (0.29)	0.23 (0.29)	0.21 (0.28)	0.18 (0.29)
Democrat	-0.15 (0.37)	-0.14 (0.37)	-0.08 (0.36)	-0.11 (0.37)
Republican	-0.11 (0.39)	-0.08 (0.39)	-0.13 (0.38)	0.01 (0.39)
Constant	0.92 (0.59)	0.91 (0.59)	0.89 (0.59)	0.88 (0.59)
Pseudo- $R^2$	.07	.08	.07	.08
N	408	407	407	405

Logit Regression of Vote Choice (0 = Vote Against Proposition, 1 = Vote For Proposition)

Standard errors are in parentheses. Excluded category: voters who disapproved of the governor’s job performance.

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01

The next step in our analysis is to compute the possible marginal relationship of knowing the governor’s endorsement on vote choice. To help interpret the logit coefficients presented in the previous table, we calculated voting probabilities for Propositions 94-97 using Tomz, Wittenberg, and King’s (2001) *CLARIFY* program for Stata (see also King, Tomz and Wittenberg 2000). We generated these probabilities by changing the respondent’s knowledge of Governor Schwarzenegger’s endorsement holding all of the covariates at their median value. Figure 1 presents these calculations with 95 percent confidence intervals.

Figure 1 shows that voters’ knowledge of a cue interacted with their assessment of Governor Schwarzenegger has a strong relationship to their probability of supporting the four referendums. In fact, there is about a 30 percentage point discrepancy in support for the measures when we vary a voter’s assessment of Governor Schwarzenegger while holding

constant knowledge of his endorsement. Additionally, Figure 1 shows that this relationship holds for all four measures. Indeed, the point estimates and error bars are remarkably similar.