

Can public events improve voter knowledge? Evidence from a 2016 ballot explainer event

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Abstract: Direct democracy skeptics question the wisdom of asking voters to decide on complex ballot initiatives, particularly given many voters' lack of interest and expertise. We address whether and how voters can learn initiative-specific information and feel more confident in their vote choices using data collected during a unique event prior to the 2016 election, when Californians were asked to vote on 17 initiatives. We administered a survey experiment pre and post a 2016 Ballot Explainer Event open to the public. Experts from the California Legislative Analyst's Office presented facts for each initiative and event organizers presented endorsement and spending information. Comparing survey responses before and after the event, we found participants were more knowledgeable and felt more prepared to cast informed votes after the event. Attendees prompted to think about specific knowledge questions prior to the event scored slightly higher on two post-event knowledge questions than those given no such prompt. These results point to possible learning opportunities for voters. Although open to the public, event attendees consisted primarily of more politically interested, educated, white, registered voters. The question of how to convey information to a broader audience remains open. Looking to the 2018 elections, we plan to host a similar event and conduct a follow-up survey. We discuss future survey additions and experiment designs for a similar 2018 ballot initiative explainer event.

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Direct democracy imposes a significant informational burden on voters. In states like California that heavily use initiatives, voters may be asked to weigh in on more than a dozen policy decisions on Election Day. Civic organizations such as the League of Women Voters, colleges and universities, and other voter education-minded groups often step in to help educate voters about their options, sometimes with an informational presentation or workshop. But can a one or two hour workshop effectively inform voters and leave them with a sense of confidence in their own choices? Though it seems like a topic worthy of investigation, we find little evidence that such work has been done.

Here we test whether participants at a ballot explainer event become more knowledgeable regarding initiatives on the ballot, and whether participants feel more confident in their choices on each measure. We administered a survey experiment pre and post a 2016 California ballot explainer forum, expecting participants primed to think of their initiative knowledge will be more knowledgeable after the event than participants not primed to think of their initiative knowledge. Comparing survey responses before and after the event, we find participants were more knowledgeable and felt more prepared to cast informed votes after the event. Attendees prompted to think about specific knowledge questions prior to the event scored slightly higher on only two post-event knowledge questions than those given no such prompt, yet overall results do not show those primed to think about their initiative knowledge were much more informed than others. These results point to possible learning opportunities for voters, and increases in feelings of preparedness and confidence may also boost turnout on Election Day.

Ballot Measure Learning

Understanding how voters learn about ballot measures has been explored, especially in the California context where campaigns are intense and well-funded. Many scholars essentially take it as a given that detailed learning about ballot measures tends to be rare, voters do not have high levels of knowledge about them (Reedy and Wells 2009), and voters may even be misinformed (Nalder 2010).

What voters do learn about ballot measures sometimes comes from sources such as the ballot text itself (Matsusaka 2005) or voter guides. Official government provided information is most useful in informing voters (Faas 2015), and official voter information guides are especially useful (Bowler and Donovan 2002, Burnett 2013). Another source of information could be an informational presentation or forum, which is the information source we study here. This forum event likely comes closest to official voter guide information because the authors of the official California voter pamphlet (the Legislative Analyst's Office) presented the ballot measure explanations and summaries at the event. Thus, we expect information attendees receive at the event is as useful as official government provided information, and perhaps even more useful because there was opportunity for Q&A with experts from the Legislative Analyst's Office.

Voters also may learn from ballot initiative campaigns themselves. Yet ballot initiative campaigns may offer contradictory or very limited useful information for decision making (Branton 2003), though campaign spending does influence what voters learn about ballot measures (Bowler and Donovan 1994 and 1998, Nicholson 2003) and going online to learn about ballot measures leads to better understanding (Reedy and Wells 2009). Some argue that even without full information, shortcuts such as endorsements may be effective (Lupia 1994). Using heuristics voters may learn some substance of initiatives and therefore have enough information

to decide on ballot measures (Bowler 2015). The “educative effect” of ballot measures in the literature refers not to the learning about the measures, but the positive side effects of such measures on voter turnout (see Smith and Tolbert 2004). Perhaps forums such as the one we analyze also have that secondary effect.

Workshops work

Research regarding civic learning often focuses on engaging or educating youth about politics and policy (Andolina et al. 2003, Bennett, Wells and Rank 2009). Much less attention has been paid to content-specific learning for adults. One exception is the case of deliberative forums, which tend to be formalized with instruction about policy and formal debate and discussion. Such policy-oriented forums can increase civic learning (Gastil 2004) and can create motivated learning (Tetlock, Skitka and Boettger 1989). Furthermore, in general, discussion of politics and current events increases engagement with politics (Klofstad 2007 and 2015).

The public information event we studied involved providing participants with very concrete information about ballot measures, including a synopsis of the intent and impact of the measure, groups issuing endorsements, and groups and individuals funding the pro and con campaigns for each measure (all possible shortcuts). Though learning at precisely this sort of event has not previously been studied, there is evidence that short workshops can produce lasting knowledge in teacher professional development (Lydon and King 2009) and in clinical psychologist training (Miller and Mount 2001) contexts. As such, it seems likely that such learning is likely to occur at a ballot measure explainer forum as well.

2016 Ballot Explainer Event and Experimental Design

In November 2016, California voters were tasked with voting on 17 ballot initiatives on subjects ranging from a plastic bag ban, marijuana legalization, tobacco taxes, the death penalty, campaign finance, and education. In addition to the large number of ballot initiatives, the task for voters was especially complex because there were multiple conflicting ballot initiatives on two topics: the death penalty and plastic bag ban. Given this difficult decision-making context, a ballot explainer event was especially important for voters.

We administered a survey experiment at an initiative explainer event at the Downtown Sacramento Public Library. The event was hosted by the California State University Sacramento (CSUS) Project for an Informed Electorate (PIE) and the Sacramento Public Library on September 28, 2016, approximately six weeks before the 2016 general election. At the event experts from the California Legislative Analyst's Office presented facts for each initiative and event organizers presented endorsement and spending information. There was time for questions from the audience after each ballot initiative presentation. Participants were recruited to attend the event through PIE, the CSUS campus, local media outlets, and the Public Library. When participants arrived at the event they were asked to complete the survey before and after the event presentation. Any adult over the age of 18 years was eligible to participate, and there was no incentive offered for participating in the survey. Participants completed the pre-event survey before the presentation began, and then returned the post-event survey as they left the venue.

Our survey consisted of a pre- and post-event survey. Each survey had a unique number so that we could connect the pre- and post-presentation survey responses. In the pre-event presentation survey, participants were asked demographic information such as age, political interest, education, sex, ethnicity, ideology, and partisanship. We also asked participants how

confident they were in making an informed vote, asking: “Thinking about how much you have learned about the 2016 California general election ballot measures, how prepared and informed are you *currently* for making an informed vote on all of them?” Participants were presented a scale ranging from 0% labeled “Not at all ready or informed” to 100% labeled “Completely informed and ready to vote.” Participants were asked to write a percentage. We asked this question both pre- and post-event of all participants.

We used an experimental design to manipulate whether or not participants were asked knowledge questions in the pre-event survey. Participants were randomized into one of two groups: No knowledge questions in the pre-event survey (control group) and knowledge questions asked in the pre-event survey (treatment group). Whether participants received a control group or treatment group survey was randomized – an equal number of each experimental group survey was printed, and then shuffled before distribution (see appendix table A1 for information on characteristics of participants by experimental group). After the presentation, all participants answered the same initiative knowledge questions. The post-event survey was identical for all participants, regardless of experimental group, including the vote confidence question (identical to the confidence question asked in the pre-event survey) and five knowledge questions.

The knowledge questions asked of the treatment group in the pre- and post-event surveys were identical, and the post-event knowledge questions asked of all participants were the same. We asked five knowledge questions, assessing participants’ knowledge of the 2016 initiatives specifically (number of initiatives on the ballot, topics of initiatives in 2016, endorsements, and campaign spending) and more general institutional knowledge (a question on what happens if

two ballot measures on the same topic both pass). The appendix includes question wording for all five knowledge questions.

Our pre- and post-event experimental design allows for two key comparisons: (1) between the control and treatment groups, and (2) pre- and post- the initiative explainer event. First, we expect participants asked knowledge questions in the pre-event survey (treatment group) will be primed to notice and remember answers to those questions when they hear them during the event presentation. Thus, in comparing the control and treatment groups, we expect the treatment group will perform better on the post-event knowledge questions than the control group. Second, comparing treatment group participants' knowledge pre- and post-event, we expect participants will be more knowledgeable after the event presentation. When comparing all participants' responses pre- and post-event, we expect all participants will become more confident in how prepared and informed they are to vote on the ballot initiatives. We conduct difference-in-means t-tests to compare across experimental groups and pre- versus post-event responses.

Sample characteristics

Two hundred event attendees completed our survey. Although open to the general public, event attendees (and thus our sample population) consisted primarily of more politically interested, educated, white, registered voters. The mode and median interest in politics and public affairs (four-point scale ranging from Very Interested to Not Interested at All) was Very Interested, with 52.7% of participants reporting being very interested in politics and public affairs – not surprising given participants voluntarily attended an event related to politics and public affairs on a Wednesday evening.

An overwhelming percent of our sample (95.6%) report being registered to vote, and 45.7% of the sample reported participating in a political activity within the last year. The majority of the sample was liberal and affiliated with the Democratic Party: 65.9% liberal and 64.4% Democratic. The liberal and Democratic affiliation skew of our sample reflects the general partisan and ideological landscape in California. The mode and median level of education is a Bachelor's degree (32.6%), and the mode ethnicity is white (65.9%). The mean age of participants was 48.5 years old, and 66.5% of participants were female. Although the sample may not be representative of California's diverse population, we achieved balance across the control and treatment groups (see appendix table A1) so we can be confident any differences we see between the control and treatment groups is due to the treatment itself.

Results

First, we compare control and treatment group participants' knowledge in the post-event survey. Since treatment group participants were asked the same knowledge questions in the pre-event survey – thus primed to note discussions of those question topics during the event presentation – we expect treatment group participants will perform better on the post-event knowledge questions than control group participants. The first row of Table 1 presents the mean number of knowledge questions correctly answered, with a possible maximum of five questions correctly answered. The bottom rows present the percent of participants who correctly answered each of the five knowledge questions. As seen in Table 1, there is no statistically significant difference in the mean number of questions control and treatment group participants correctly answer. Both the control and treatment group appear quite knowledgeable after the event presentation: control

group participants correctly answered an average of 3.9 questions and treatment group participants correctly answered 4.0 questions.

Examining each knowledge question individually, again, there are no significant differences between the control and treatment groups for three of the knowledge questions (number of ballot measures, competing ballot measures, and subject of ballot measures). For two knowledge questions, a significantly higher percent of treatment group participants answered correctly: one-sided campaign spending question ($p = 0.09$, one-tailed test) and both major parties agree on ballot measure question ($p = 0.05$, one-tailed test). Overall, however, differences between control and treatment groups are not statistically significant. Seeing the knowledge prime before the presentation (treatment group) does not significantly help participants correctly answer knowledge questions post-presentation compared to those without a knowledge prime (control group).

Table 1: Control and Treatment Group Post-Presentation Knowledge

Question (post-presentation only)	Control group Mean correct	Treatment group Mean correct
Total ballot measure knowledge questions answered correctly	3.9 (90)	4.0 (99)
	Control group Percent correct	Treatment group Percent correct
Number of ballot measures	74.4 (90)	75.8 (99)
Same topic (competing) ballot measures	81.6 (76)	84.3 (83)
Subject of ballot measures in 2016	98.7 (79)	100.0 (86)
One-sided campaign spending	88.8 (80)	94.4 * (89)
Both major parties agree on measure	88.8 (80)	95.5 ** (89)

Notes: Sample size in parentheses. Total ballot measure knowledge questions correctly answered ranges from 0 questions correct to 5 questions correct. **: significant at $p < .05$; *: significant at $p < .10$

Although we see little support for our experimental design expectations, we see significant improvement when comparing pre-presentation and post-presentation knowledge and confidence in making an informed vote. Table 2 presents the mean preparedness and mean number of knowledge questions correctly answered pre- and post-presentation. While the pre-presentation mean level of self-reported preparedness is only 27.9% (on 0% to 100% scale), self-reported preparedness increases to 76.8% post-presentation ($p = 0.00$ for one tailed test). Participants feel much more confident and prepared in making an informed vote on the ballot initiatives after the initiative explainer presentation. Examining pre-presentation and post-presentation knowledge among treatment group participants, the mean correct responses post-presentation is 4.0 out of 5, compared to only 1.7 out of 5 before the presentation ($p = 0.00$ for one tailed test). Compared to when they arrived at the event, participants correctly answer more questions after viewing the initiative explainer event. Participants' knowledge and preparedness improve thanks to the information provided during the event – heartening findings for educational events aiming to inform voters.

Table 2: Mean Pre-Presentation and Post-Presentation Preparedness and Overall Knowledge

Question	Mean Pre-presentation	Mean Post-presentation
How prepared and informed are you currently for making an informed vote?	27.9 (181)	76.8 *** (173)
Total ballot measure knowledge questions answered correctly (treatment group only)	1.7 (99)	4.0 *** (99)

Notes: Mean value represented in each cell, with sample size in parentheses. For the preparedness question, participants could write any value between 0% (not at all ready or prepared) to 100% (completely informed and ready to vote). Total ballot measure knowledge questions correctly answered ranges from 0 questions correct to 5 questions correct. Pre-presentation and post-presentation mean total ballot measure knowledge question answered correct is a comparison within the treatment group only.

*** : significant at $p < .01$

Next we compare the percent of participants who correctly answered each of the five knowledge questions pre- and post-presentation (Table 3). These comparisons are limited to the treatment group because only the treatment group was asked the knowledge questions both before and after the presentation. Looking at each ballot measure knowledge question separately, we again see a pattern of knowledge improvement: a higher percentage of participants correctly answer the knowledge question post-presentation compared to pre-presentation. These differences pre- and post-presentation are significant ($p = 0.00$ for one tailed test) for all five knowledge questions. The lowest percentage of correct responses among the post-presentation questions (75.8%) is identifying the number of ballot measures, which is the only fill-in-the-blank question (rather than multiple choice or yes/no response options) and arguably the most difficult question.

Table 3: Individual Knowledge Questions Pre-Presentation and Post-Presentation for Treatment Group Participants

Question	Percent correct pre-presentation	Percent correct post-presentation
Number of ballot measures	38.4 (99)	75.8 ^{***} (99)
Same topic (competing) ballot measures	28.9 (90)	84.3 ^{***} (83)
Subject of ballot measures in 2016	55.1 (89)	100.0 ^{***} (86)
One-sided campaign spending	30.9 (97)	94.4 ^{***} (89)
Both major parties agree on measure	27.8 (97)	95.5 ^{***} (85)

Notes: Sample size in parentheses. Treatment group participants only. ^{***}: significant at $p < .01$

To test whether individual characteristics predict ballot initiative knowledge or feelings of preparedness, we conducted regression analysis including interest in politics and public affairs, education, age, sex, ideology, and partisanship. We employed three dependent variables

for three separate models: level of preparedness pre-presentation and post-presentation, and number of correctly answered knowledge questions post-presentation. Generally speaking, individual characteristics are not significant in predicting pre- or post-presentation feelings of preparedness or number of correct knowledge questions post-presentation. One notable exception: partisanship significantly predicts pre-presentation self-rating of preparedness to make an informed vote. Democrats rate their pre-presentation preparedness 16.7 percentage points lower, on average, than Republicans ($p = 0.07$). However, there are only ten Republicans in our sample, so we cannot make much of this result. Overall, once we include individual characteristics in our models, we have fairly small sample sizes and we cannot conclude that individual characteristics predict ballot initiative knowledge or feelings of preparedness.

Discussion

This study sheds some light on the utility of public information events intended to inform citizens about complex policy decisions they are asked to make. Our results show that, at least in the short-term, participants make significant knowledge gains and also emerge feeling much more confident in their ability to “vote correctly” on ballot measures. This is in line with previous research showing the effectiveness of short events in spurring learning.

What we cannot measure with this experiment is the persistence of this learning. Though many of the participants were likely able to fill out their mail-in ballots within a very short time of this event, some would have waited another six weeks to cast a vote. This event was likely still effective in informing voters, as participants seemed conscientious and many took notes on the ballot pamphlets that organizers provided for the event. But absent such aids, did they retain the information and recall it on Election Day? We cannot surmise.

We intend to repeat this experiment at a 2018 version of this event, and we are considering three possible tweaks to the survey and experiment. The first tweak may involve more systematically categorizing the knowledge questions asked of participants. Similar to political sophistication measures that ask both institutional and current political knowledge questions, we plan to categorize the knowledge questions as those that apply to every ballot initiative election (institutional knowledge questions) and those specific to the current election (current knowledge questions). In our current experiment, four of the questions (number of ballot measures, topic of ballot measures, one-sided spending, and party endorsements) are specific to the 2016 election, and one question (competing ballot measures) applies to every ballot initiative election. In the future we want to intentionally ask questions concerning relevant institutional knowledge, such as what happens if two initiatives on the same topic both pass, in hopes that this knowledge applies to multiple elections. For the current election questions, we aim to focus specifically on knowledge questions useful for making an informed vote choice. Rather than ephemeral trivia like number of ballot measures, we want to ask questions relevant for vote choices, such as interest group backing, newspaper endorsements, or campaign spending. A focus on practical knowledge questions fits with our aim to help voters make informed choices.

Second, our survey experiments could include varying information or cues in the pre-event survey, such as party endorsement cues, campaign spending cues, or interest group backing cues. We could test whether receiving varying information – either as reinforcement of information included in the event presentation or additional information not included in the event presentation – changes feelings of preparedness, knowledge, and/or vote intention. Might we find expressive voting, even on ballot measures? Given the relatively small sample of 2016 event participants, we need to be careful not to have too many experimental groups, which would limit

the number of participants within each group. We will need to weigh the costs and benefits of replicating our 2016 knowledge prime experiment versus testing new experimental expectations regarding informational cues.

Finally, we may want to ask participants how they plan to vote on ballot initiatives. Seventeen initiatives on the ballot in 2016 made vote choice questions on every ballot measure logistically unfeasible, but we could have asked about a few prominent initiatives. Depending on the number of initiatives on the ballot in 2018, we could ask how participants plan to vote on all – or a few – of the initiatives. We could ask vote intention questions pre- and post-event to see if vote intentions change with information provided in the presentation. We could test whether those who feel more prepared and are more knowledgeable about current ballot measures are less likely to change vote intentions thanks to the presentation.

Regardless of the content of our survey experiment for a 2018 ballot initiative event, it is clear from our 2016 event that audience members appreciate the information provided at such an event. Multiple 2016 event participants wrote “Thank you” and compliments on their post-event survey. For example, one participant wrote,

“Thank you for providing the opportunity to learn more about these initiatives. Civic engagement is vital to an informed electorate. The LAO reps. were impressive – knowledgeable and non-partisan. We are fortunate to have Dr. Nalder and the Sac State PIE working on these issues. Thank you!”

Vote choice decisions on ballot initiatives in California often are difficult, and many voters seek resources to help with their choices. We will continue our aim to aid voters with these difficult choices through public information and civic engagement events in the 2018 electoral season. Whether a voter attends in person or watches an event video posted online after an event, our ballot initiative events can be important resources for voter knowledge and confidence on Election Day.

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Appendix

Ballot knowledge questions

1. To the best of your knowledge, how many initiatives are on the November 8 ballot in California?

Write a number here: _____

2. To the best of your knowledge, what happens in California if two ballot measures on the same topic both pass?
 - a. The courts determine which one becomes law
 - b. They cancel each other out and neither becomes law
 - c. The one with the most votes becomes law
 - d. Only one measure on each topic is allowed on the ballot in any given year
 - e. Not sure
3. Which *one* of the following is NOT the subject of a 2016 California general election ballot measure?
 - a. Recreational marijuana
 - b. Native American Gaming compact
 - c. Cigarette Tax
 - d. Death Penalty
 - e. Condoms in adult films

4. To the best of your knowledge, are there any ballot measures on the current ballot which have so far had campaign spending on only one side of the issue?

Yes

No

Not sure

5. To the best of your knowledge, are there any ballot measures on the current ballot for which both the CA Republican Party and the CA Democratic Party either endorse or oppose (both parties agree)?

Yes

No

Not sure

Table A1: Characteristics of Experimental Participants by Group

Characteristic	Control Group	Treatment Group
Number of participants	90	99
Percent registered to vote	96.5%	94.9%
Mean age	48.6	48.2
Median interest in politics and public affairs	Somewhat interested	Very interested
Mode of interest in politics and public affairs	Very interested	Very interested
Mode of media source	Public Radio	Newspaper
Median and mode of education	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree
Mode of sex	Female	Female
Mode of ethnicity	White	White
Median ideology	Slightly Liberal	Liberal
Mode of ideology	Liberal	Liberal
Mode of party identification	Democrat	Democrat
Percent participated in any political activity in last year	40.2%	50.5%