

All or Nothing: Voting on Multiple Provision Ballot Measures*

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March 3, 2026

Abstract

Ballot propositions provide a unique instance of direct democracy in which voters have a say in a state's legislative process. However, voters vary in how they understand and evaluate these measures, many of which can be relatively complicated and comprised of multiple provisions. When multiple provisions exist within a single proposition, how do voters aggregate their potentially varying support across the provisions in their calculus of overall support for the proposition? Are all provisions weighted equally or do some matter more? To examine these questions, we construct novel survey questions on three real ballot measures under consideration during the 2022 midterm election cycle. By randomly assigning how we ask respondents for their support of a given ballot proposition, we garner insight into how voters approach voting on ballot measures and their greater decision-making process. We find evidence of a provision-based negativity bias, which is strongest on the most complex and least polarized issue.

Word count: 3,805

*The authors' names are listed alphabetically. We would like to thank Michael Martinez, Taylor Carlson and Betsy Sinclair for helpful discussions and the Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy for support. An early version of this paper was presented at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association in St. Pete Beach, FL.

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Ballot measures or propositions provide citizens with a rare opportunity to directly vote on policies. Progressive reformers since the late nineteenth century argued that this act of direct democracy would not only give the public a voice in politics, but also curtail the power of special interests and other political elites (Smith and Tolbert 2004). Recent scholarship has corroborated their high hopes on occasion, including finding that ballot measures can increase efficacy (Bowler and Donovan 2002; Gilens, Glaser, and Mendelberg 2001; Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000), knowledge (Smith 2002) and turnout (Smith 2001; Tolbert, Grummel, and Smith 2001; Parry, Smith, and Henry 2012). Others, have found less reason to be optimistic, noting the limited and conditional nature of any positive externalities (e.g., Everson 1981; Magleby 1984; Dyck and Seabrook 2010; Biggers 2014; Barth, Burnett, and Parry 2020)—and potential for negative ones as well (Dyck and Lascher 2019). In any case, externalities assume a public informed enough to engage with this feature of democracy.

If political science has a consistent finding over several decades of survey research, it has been the American public’s political ignorance, at least on factual questions asked in a quiz-like manner (see, e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Luskin 1987). Political sophistication is a long-running concern in studies of voting behavior and political participation generally (e.g., Kuklinski, Metlay, and Kay 1982; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Popkin 1991), but should be even moreso on ballot measures, which can be complicated, detailed and long. It is unsurprising then that studies of ballot measures have grappled with the public’s capacity for direct democracy. The high cognitive burden in this context has meant the debate over ballot measures has hinged on their relative complexity, as well as voter awareness and competence (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Cronin 1989; Gerber and Lupia 1995; Lupia 1994; Magleby 1984; Nicholson 2003). Are voters educated, informed—ultimately, competent enough to make *direct* decisions on legislation of varying complexity?

We explore one aspect of the complexity of ballot measures: multiple provisions—i.e., multiple components within a single ballot proposition. Like the multiple provisions in a congressional bill, a ballot measure is rarely restricted to a single proposed change. Instead, the proposition is usually written as a package of a set of related, or, at times, unrelated components. Consider Missouri’s marijuana ballot measure in 2022, *Amendment 3*, which not only legalized marijuana, but also set a tax rate for marijuana sale and allowed non-violent marijuana convicts to petition for release. Or Florida’s *Amendment 9* in 2018, which included provisions to prohibit both offshore oil and gas drilling, as well as indoor vaping all within the same ballot proposition. Whether related or not, the result of these additional provisions is to add complexity to an already challenging task of evaluating a policy proposal. Furthermore, voters are ultimately asked to vote only on the full proposition, not its individual provisions.

The complications arising from multiple provision ballot measures has not escaped oversight. Thirty-two state constitutions require separate ballot questions for any proposed constitutional amendments, be they citizen initiated or legislative referrals. Moreover, sixteen states currently attempt to prevent constitutional ballot initiatives from containing more than one subject, issue or topic with “single-subject” rules. Just such a rule was recently referenced against Missouri’s

Amendment 3 in 2024, which, if passed, would enshrine in the state constitution the right to an abortion up to fetal viability. The pro-life law firm, the Thomas More Society, argued that *Amendment 3* did not focus on a single issue, thereby violating the state’s single-subject rule (Rosenzweig-Ziff 2024).¹

Critically, these questions come at a time when ballot measures and direct democracy face increased restrictions from state legislators. Seemingly motivated by the loss of control over law-making to ballot measures, Republican legislative leaders in Utah recently attempted but failed to place on the ballot an amendment to allow legislators to repeal or rewrite voter-approved ballot measures (Schoenbaum 2024). However, Arizona’s Proposition 132, which requires a higher 60% majority for initiatives, has already passed. Similar laws in Missouri, Ohio, and North Dakota are slated for votes some time in the next year.²

In what follows, we ask how the public’s calculation of support for ballot measures takes into account the multiple components that generally make them up. First, does the public take different positions on the components of a ballot measure? And if so, how do the different components enter their calculus of overall support for the proposition? Finally, are these behaviors consistent across different policy issues? Using text from real ballot proposals conducted around the 2022 Missouri Primary Election we randomly assign survey respondents to evaluations of the full ballots versus components of the ballots, which show substantial variance across the provisions of each proposition. In addition, voters display a negativity bias in their evaluations where they disproportionately weight down their overall evaluations based on their least favorable component. The results are directionally consistent across the three ballot initiatives, and substantively meaningful and statistically significant for the most complex and least polarized issue.

Ballot Measures, Complexity & Cognitive Biases

We aim to expand the ballot proposition literature’s engagement with complexity. Specifically, we explore how individuals evaluate multiple provisions within a single ballot proposition, and how those component evaluations translate into the overall support for the proposition. Prior works have considered complexity in terms of the number of ballot measures a voter considers in an election (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Selb 2008; Stadelmann and Torgler 2013), the counts of words or lines within a measure (Nicholson 2003), as well as the complexity of the language within the ballot (Reilly and Richey 2011). We shift the question of complexity to the dimensions of policy content in a single proposition and offer an alternative mechanism in this context.

Our perspective stems from a broad and deep literature on the structure of electoral processes (e.g., Schattschneider 1942; Dahl 1961; Riker 1986), where substantial attention has been directed to the consequences of variation in ballot features (e.g., Walker 1966; Taebel 1975; Hamilton and

1. The petition for the ballot measure was signed by over 380,000 Missourians, but rejected as invalid by a county circuit judge before being overturned by the state Supreme Court. Voters approved the measure in November 2024 with 51.6% support.

2. In the Appendix we further discuss the current state of legislative control of ballot measures.

Ladd 1996; Miller and Krosnick 1998; Reynolds and Steenbergen 2006; Engstrom and Roberts 2020). In an important study in this context Glaser (2002) finds less support among Mississippians in 1999 for an omnibus proposal on school district improvements than for some of the features in it. He posits that the mechanism is the additional precision in expressing preferences on interlinked features (Lacy 2001) and the corresponding feelings of greater control, which allow individuals—particularly whites on this historically racially charged issue—to change their minds. In this vein the format in which individuals make decisions affect the decisions themselves.

Previous works examining ballot measures have found that when voters evaluate ballot measures, they tend to engage in some form of cognitive bias against their passage. However, the underlying mechanism of this bias is still debated. Most notably, voters have been shown to be susceptible to a status quo bias in opposition to the measure—i.e., a natural opposition to the measure absent additional information (Bowler and Donovan 2002). This bias is especially prevalent when multiple measures are on the ballot (Augenblick and Nicholson 2016), measures are complex (Hessami and Resnjanskij, n.d.), or voters are largely uninformed regarding the contents of the measure (Barber et al. 2017). Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz (2019) further that status quo bias in this context stems from negativity bias in response to media framing. By assigning voters to brief summary arguments of ballot propositions, their survey experiment finds that voters are swayed more by opposing than supporting frames. Of course, not all ballot issues can be boiled down to a single issue, nor do all voters enter the polls with clear signals (from the media or otherwise) on the pros and cons of every ballot proposition, let alone each provision within each ballot proposition.

Building on the theoretical insights and empirical findings in the literature, we posit that negativity bias may be endemic in evaluations of ballot propositions—i.e., not solely a product of their coverage or frames for or against a ballot proposal, but a function of the multiple provisions frequently detailed in its text. Thus, we move from considerations of the information environment around ballots to their exact text, from simplifications of ballots’ main features to their full set of provisions, from complexity as an overall measure of cognitive burden to complexity as aggregating multiple evaluations. In short, our theoretical perspective and research design consider the possibility for negativity bias to arise from a different source than previously offered. In line with the aforementioned literature we expect a negativity bias, but posit a different mechanism for it: the aggregation of evaluations on multiple provisions within a single ballot proposal.

Negativity bias is the well-developed phenomenon that negative information has a greater influence on a host of evaluations than positive information (Kanouse and Hanson 1987; Kahneman and Tversky 1979). Particularly relevant for our work, studies of impression formation have noted that the negative traits of evaluated individuals are weighted more heavily than their positive ones (Birnbaum 1972; Feldman 1966; Fiske 1980). For example, Anderson (1965) finds that positive trait evaluations are virtually averaged in the overall evaluation of the individual, while the overall evaluation from an individual with negative traits are more negative than their average (see also Ito et al. 1998).

Because most modern ballot propositions contain multiple provisions, there is more than one

evaluation to conduct for each proposition—not unlike traits within an individual. We expect voters to weigh the provisions with negative evaluations more heavily than those with positive ones in the construction of their overall support for a ballot measure. Thus, when looking at the overall support for a ballot measure with multiple provisions, we expect them to be negatively biased simply by virtue of the multiple components. Provided, of course, they view one or more components negatively, individuals should weight their overall score of a proposition downward in accordance with their least favored provision within it. In addition, we expect the provision-driven negativity bias to be strongest on the most complex and least polarized ballot propositions. In the following section we describe the the research design we created to test these hypotheses.

Data & Design

To test our hypotheses, we conducted survey of likely voters within the state of Missouri.³ Overall, our survey included a sample of 1,107 respondents, largely representative of Missouri’s general population.⁴ We randomly assigned each respondent to either a treatment or control condition with different levels of provisional focus. We first presented the entire ballot text for three potential ballot measures in both conditions. The prompts for each measure included the components of the multi-provisional ballot laid out in a bullet point format, as well as the projected cost of the measure to the state. Figure 1 presents an example prompt for one of the measures used in our research design. We used this standardized format to mimic how the measures were expected to appear on the November ballot and avoid additional ballot wording complexity. While most proposed ballot measures in Missouri follow this bulleted format, we slightly altered the text to improve clarity and better group components.

Immediately following each ballot measure text, we asked respondents randomly assigned to our control group how much they supported the measure on a 4-point Likert scale. We recorded their response as an *Overall* score. For respondents randomly assigned to our treatment group, we instead asked them to rate each component of the measure on the same 4-point Likert scale. To generate a comparable score between our treatment and control, we created a *Composite* score for these individuals by taking the average of the components. By calculating our composite score in this manner, we can test whether individuals’ overall support for a ballot measure is a simple aggregation across the multiple provisions or whether they use alternative methods to formulate their overall support.⁵ Additionally, we can examine the correlation of support for each provision with the others. To avoid question ordering effects, we randomized the order in which the components were presented in the question. The assignment of treatment was kept consistent across all three measures—i.e., individuals were not asked for their general knowledge for one issue

3. See Section A.1 of the Appendix for details of our survey and how it was administered.

4. Given the larger survey’s focus on likely voters, our sample experienced slight oversampling in terms of the age (18-34), gender (women) and education (college or above) of participants. See Section A.2 of the Appendix for further details on our sample.

5. To avoid potential priming effects from the provision evaluations, respondents in our treatment group were not asked for their overall support of each measure.

Figure 1: Sample Ballot Measure Prompt

A potential ballot measure asks:

" Do you want to amend the Missouri Constitution to:

- require votes to be counted by hand not by machines;
- require all ballots to be paper ballots;
- require a state-issued ID or driver license to vote;
- permit early voting no more than fourteen days prior to election;
- allow observers inside and outside polling stations to take pictures;
- allow the state General Assembly to adjust or void any vote totals it determines appropriate in presidential elections; and
- create the crime of treason against persons for voter fraud, failure to report results timely and certain poll worker actions?

State and local governments estimate ongoing costs of at least \$24 million per election, but the total cost is unknown. Local governments estimate savings of at least \$80,000 annually and at least \$42,000 for each general election in a presidential election year. State governmental entities estimate no savings. "

and the component for another or any such combination. As part of the larger survey in which our design was embedded, we also asked respondents a series of pretreatment demographic questions, which we use later in our multivariate analysis.

To enhance the external validity of our study, we leveraged the fair ballot text from three Missouri ballot measures in the process of gathering signatures in the spring of 2022. The first measure, *Election Security*, proposed a series of changes to the election process, including requiring identification to vote, poll watchers, and, notably, allowing the legislature to adjust vote totals. The second measure, *Marijuana*, proposed the legalization and recreational use and sale of marijuana. The final measure, *Election Reform*, proposed reforms to the state’s primary and general elections through open primaries and ranked-choice voting. Of the three measures, the marijuana legalization and election reform measures made it to the signature gathering stage, but only the former made it onto the November ballot.⁶

Beyond increasing our study’s external validity, our choice of ballot measures allows us to leverage the inherent policy differences between each measure. Specifically, our three measures vary regarding their policy complexity, saliency in news coverage, and partisan association. These features may make it easier or harder for individuals to conceptualize the specific policies and influence how they evaluate the ballots (Magleby 1984; Lupia 1994; Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2019). In terms of complexity, both the marijuana and election security measure prescribe traditionally straightforward policy changes (e.g., the legalization of a substance, the implementation of additional requirements, etc.). However, policy changes such as ranked-choice voting or open primaries—two major provisions of the election reform measure—are likely far more abstract for

6. Within Section B.1 of the Appendix, we examine how support for each measure compared to the November election results.

voters. Similar differences exist in terms of each measure’s news coverage and interest, with both the election security and marijuana measures receiving more consistent policy coverage as compared to the election reform measure.⁷ Finally, all three measures vary in terms of their partisan associations, with both the marijuana and election security measures having established—yet opposite—partisan signals and our election reform measure lacking a similar cue (Kimball et al. 2021).

Composite Versus Overall Measures of Support

To test our hypothesis on provisional complexity we compare the generated *Composite* scores to the *Overall* scores. If the scores are indistinguishable, it suggests that individuals’ overall score is a particular aggregation of their support for each component of a multi-provisional ballot—specifically, likely voters evaluate ballots by averaging across the multiple provisions within them. If, however, the scores are different, it suggests that they engage in an alternative weighting of components when calculating their overall support for a ballot proposal.

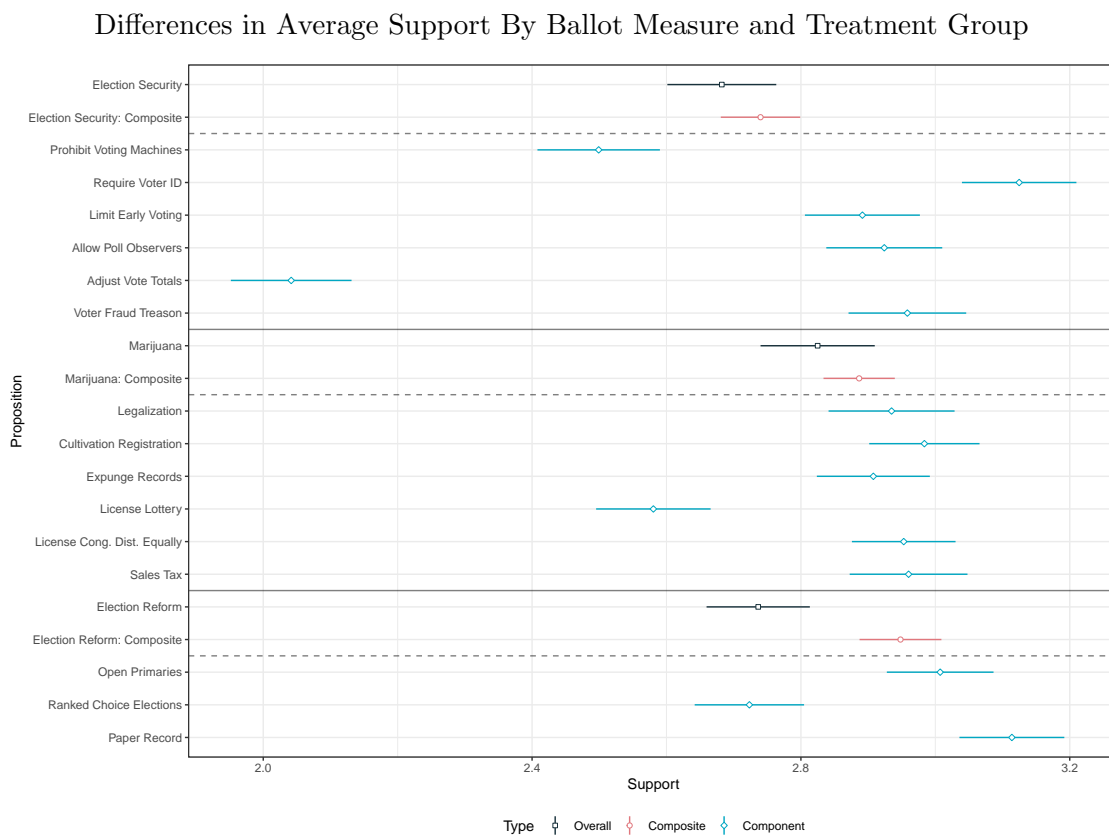


Figure 2: Results include 95% Bonferroni corrected confidence intervals. Composite support scores are the average of a measure’s component support scores.

7. In Section B.7 of the Appendix, we provide evidence of these differences for the state of Missouri using popular newspaper coverage.

Figure 2 presents the average overall, composite, and component scores for each ballot measure, along with their 95% Bonferroni corrected confidence intervals.⁸ Importantly, across all issues individuals appear to weigh each component differently, with some components rated significantly more/less favorably than others, which suggests that voters may be sufficiently competent to evaluate even complex multi-provisional ballots in a manner consistent with their policy beliefs. However, across the issues we also find differences.

For both our election security and marijuana measures, the composites are more supportive than the overall scores, though the difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.25$ and $p = 0.21$, respectively). For these measures individuals' overall assessments resemble the averages of their support across the components.⁹ However, for the election reform measure the overall and composite scores are statistically different and substantively large. Here the overall score is 0.21 points lower than the average of the provisions. Respondents' overall scores for election reform is not a simple average of their support for each component. Instead, the overall score is best correlated with the most negatively rated component, ranked-choice voting. Indeed, a respondent's overall support appears closest to effectively weighing their least-preferred provision three times as much as all other components.¹⁰

Overall, we find that down-weighting exists across all three ballot measures, though it is only significant and substantively large on the election reform issue. When faced with a multi-provisional ballot, individuals may not always weigh their opinion equally between the components. When they do vary in this context, respondents appear to weigh negatively viewed components more heavily than those they view positively.¹¹

Issue-Specific Heterogeneity

The striking result from the analysis above is the difference between the overall and composite support scores, and particularly so for the election reform measure. Respondents' overall scores are more correlated with their most negatively rated component than the composite score. Notably, this negativity bias, while present for all propositions, only manifests in a significant difference in support for the election reform measure. What makes the election reform measure different? While our design precludes an explicit test for the various factors that lead to different composite and overall evaluations (for the same individual), we can exploit the correlates of support to gain some leverage on the different natures of the policies.

8. The use of Bonferroni adjusted standard errors is a conservative approach in this context, increasing the risk of Type II error (failing to reject a false null).

9. Providing individuals with the full ballot measure prior to evaluating the components independently may reduce the extremity of responses for each individual component by anchoring them to the overall evaluation. This could lead to a Type II error (failing to reject a false null), suggesting conservative estimates of the true effect.

10. In the Appendix we explore alternative weighting schema for ballot support.

11. In the Appendix we show that the provision-driven effect is substantively larger among white voters than black voters. These findings echo those in Glaser (2002), except that the issues here are not explicitly race-based. In addition, we caution taking these results as evidence of a true difference between whites and blacks on these issues given the small subset of blacks in our sample, 127 (11%).

The election reform measure sits in a potentially unique situation compared to the other measures in our study. First, despite their prevalence within political science, ranked choice voting and open primary elections—two core components of the measure—received far less national or local news coverage than the other measures, and voters may be less informed regarding their meaning and details (Chapp and Aehl 2021; Fahey, Weissert, and Uttermark 2018).¹² Second, unlike either the election security or marijuana measures, the election reform does not benefit from pre-existing partisan signals regarding the policy changes (Kimball et al. 2021). Without these signals, voters cannot lean on their partisan identities when forming an opinion like the other two measures. Thus, being uninformed regarding a complex topic and unable to rely on their political identity, the literature suggests that respondents’ evaluations may reflect a cognitive bias.¹³ In the multi-provisional context we expect the public to disproportionately weight down their overall evaluations based on their least favorable component(s), or exhibit negativity bias, particularly when the issue is complex and lacks salience and partisan cues.¹⁴

Motivated by these expectations, we construct an ordered logistic regression model for each measure’s overall support score. We test for correlation with an individual’s politics through party identification, ideology, and self-reported importance of partisan identity. To examine issue complexity and saliency, we also test for correlation with media consumption, political sophistication and education. While these sets of correlations pertain only to respondents’ support for each measure, they aid us in contextualizing the previous results on the different degrees of negativity bias across the issues.

The results presented in Figure 3 largely corroborate the issue-specific expectations. Foremost, an individual’s partisan identity appears to influence evaluations of only the election security and marijuana measures, but not evaluations for the more complex and less politicized election reform measure. Similarly, neither party identification importance nor ideology correlate with support for election reform. While the sophistication relationship is consistently negative across the measures, education has a uniquely positive relationship with support for election reform, suggesting a higher level of complexity on this issue. Finally, media consumption is related to support for both marijuana and election security, but not election reform. The lack of an effect is likely due to the relatively sparse media coverage surrounding the election reform measure and its policies.¹⁵ Overall, these correlations provide preliminary support for our expectations that individuals are more likely to engage in provision-based negativity bias—disproportionately weighting down their overall evaluations based on their least favorable components—when the ballot measures are complex, non-salient and without clear partisan cues.

12. The election reform measure may also be less likely to mobilize interest groups that could inform voters (Damore and Nicholson 2014), compounding the information deficit.

13. Similarly, Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz (2019) expect framing effects to be stronger on less salient issues than salient ones, which they relate to “easy” and “hard” issues a la Carmines and Stimson (1980).

14. Since we do not ask respondents about their ballot measure vote choice or preference for maintaining the current policy, a pure test of status quo bias is beyond our design.

15. See Figure B.7 in the Appendix.

Individual-Level Support for the Overall Ballot

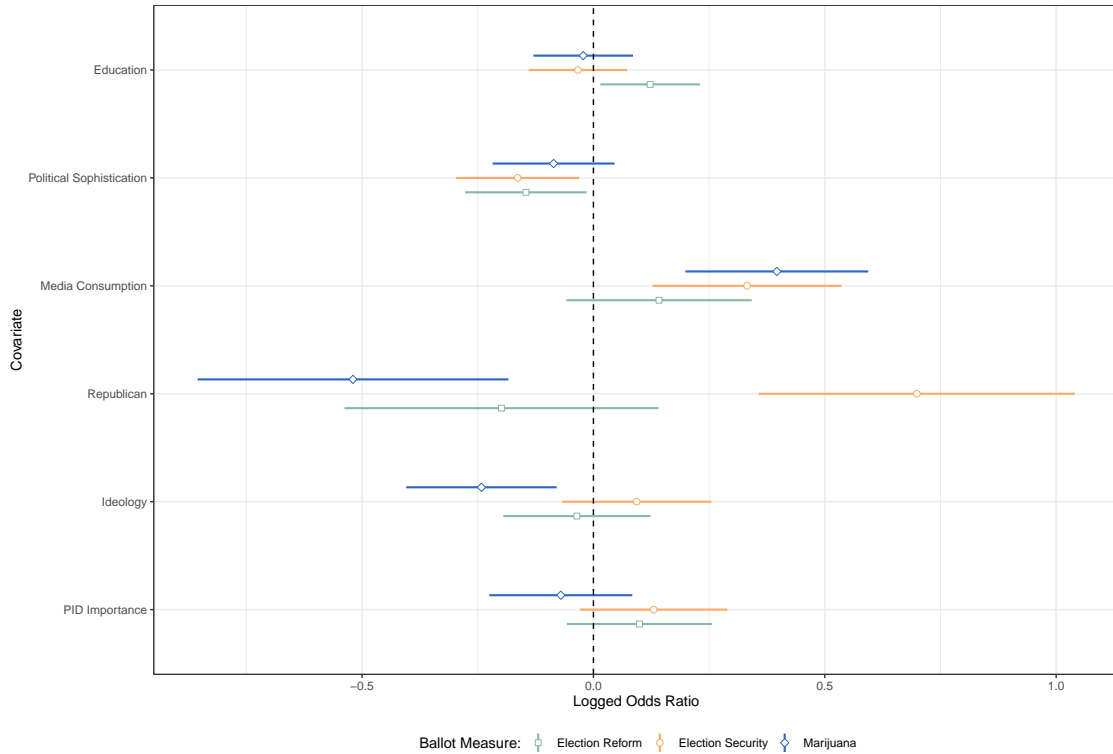


Figure 3: The plot presents the change in logged odds from individual ordered logistic regressions with 95% Bonferroni corrected confidence intervals. Full regression results and complimentary composite score regressions are in the Appendix

Discussion

Ballot measures provide voters a direct opportunity to decide on salient policy issues. As these measures grow in policy complexity through the inclusion of multiple provisions, it is vital to understand whether and how voters can evaluate these measures effectively. Our analysis takes an important step in examining how voters calculate their support for three real-life measures each containing multiple provisions.

Across our ballot measures we find that voters exhibit a negativity bias, disproportionately weighting down their overall evaluations based on their least favorable provision. However, the decrease is statistically insignificant for two of the three measures in our study. Only for the election reform measure do voters exhibit a substantively large and statistically significant drop. Extant literature and the secondary analyses here suggest that the issue-specific heterogeneity may have to do with a few key features of the measures. Provision-based negativity bias appears less likely (smaller) on politically salient issues with clear partisan messaging, and more likely (larger) on measures covering complex issues that lack clear partisan cues. Further research is needed into

the issue-specific heterogeneity across these measures, not to mention the many other issues under consideration as ballot measures. Overall, however, the negativity bias in aggregating multiple provisions suggests that the uphill battle to generate support for ballot measures is even steeper than previously acknowledged.

Our results bring mixed normative implications for direct democracy. On a positive note, voters appear capable of processing complex multi-provisional ballot measures and evaluating them in line with their policy preferences. This finding is a potential relief, as critical and often complex issues such as abortion access, voting rights, and criminal justice reform have recently been left for voters to decide on directly—and have frequently contained multiple provisions. However, this may be the only silver lining for democracy.

Our results also suggest that voters’ ability to evaluate consistently appears limited to salient or familiar policy issues. Asking voters to decide on new or innovative policies may produce undo resistance or hesitancy. Moreover, voters appear heavily reliant on partisan cues when evaluating each measure. Without such cues voters engage in a cognitive bias, docking their overall support for the measure, pinning them to their least supported provision. The findings suggest that political actors pursuing legislative change via ballot measures can play into partisan polarization to strategically build support, while those who favor the status quo would benefit from complex, multi-provision measures that have yet to be sorted along partisan lines. Attempts to win over bases with so-called “candy” provisions may actually reduce overall support if they choose controversial policies. Ultimately, the least preferred provision of a ballot measure does more harm than the most preferred provision does good.

Competing Interests:

The author(s) declare none.

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