

Floating Voters and Floating Activists

Political Change and Information

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Many studies document positive relationships between political information and campaign participation, but none investigates the relationship between information and interelection *change* in campaign participation. While studies of “floating voters” document negative relationships between information and floating, the author notes that activists are better informed than voters and investigates the relationship between knowledge and change in participation, comparing the process among voters and activists. The author shows *low*-information citizens enter and exit the electorate, while *high*-information citizens enter and exit the activist pool. The author concludes with an optimistic assessment of democratic change based on the theory that well-informed activists influence floating voters.

Keywords: *floating voters; democratic change; political information; citizen capacity; political knowledge; interelection change; longitudinal change; campaign activities*

Where others move slowly and predictably over time, gradually adjusting to a changing political environment but resisting sudden movements, the activists move, at least relatively, with lightning speed.

—Carmines and Stimson (1989, 110)

While the cross-sectional relationship between political knowledge, variously called interest, capacity, awareness, or information, and campaign participation has been well documented (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995), a dearth of research explores the effect of political knowledge on *longitudinal change* in campaign participation. The relationship between knowledge and change among activists assumes theoretical importance if changing activists guide democratic sentiment and choice (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Rapoport and Stone 1994). Even if most of the mass public lacks important information about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), activists tend to be well informed. Thus, the *cross-sectional* relationship between activism and information appears reassuring vis-à-vis a theory of activist change and enlightened democratic guidance. Activists tend to be well informed, and therefore they seem likely to be well informed agents of change. However, while activists fare considerably better on tests of political knowledge than citizens who do not get involved in electoral campaigns, many activists fall short of the democratic

ideal of fully informed citizens. Furthermore, to the extent change among activists occurs primarily through new mobilizations and demobilizations, rather than through conversions (Herrera 1995; Rapoport and Stone 1994; Wolbrecht 2002), it is quite plausible that the very individuals who contribute to change among activists are drawn from a population whose informational shortcomings are well documented in cross-sectional studies (e.g., new mobilizations involve the previously inactive). In short, it would be a mistake to infer a positive relationship between knowledge and *longitudinal change* among activists from the positive cross-sectional relationship between knowledge and campaign activism.

Framed thusly, my research problem resembles that of the floating voter hypothesis, which posits that those voters who float between the parties from one election to the next, in terms of the party they support with their vote, tend to be among the least-informed members of the electorate (see Converse 1962/1966). In fact, the cross-sectional relationship between voting and information is similar to the cross-sectional relationship between campaign participation and information, and scholars studying the relationship between longitudinal change in vote choice and

Author's Note: The author appreciates advice and assistance from Ben Highton, Walt Stone, Bob Huckfeldt, and Brian Sala. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2005 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 7-10.

knowledge continue to debate whether floating voters are drawn disproportionately from the low end of the information scale. Since voting, like campaign activism, is a form of political participation, I take up both questions in this article.

Substantively, I discuss the electoral implications of the way information shapes change among activists and voters, respectively. The floating voter hypothesis is generally motivated by concern that random behavior among uninformed floating voters (e.g., randomly voting for different parties from election to election) renders electoral change meaningless. I argue change among activists precipitates change among voters and highlight the possibility that well-reasoned change among activists guides floating voters and mitigates random behavior, lack of information among floating voters notwithstanding. Thus, evidence of a positive relationship between information and floating activism may explain why electorates composed of many rationally uninformed citizens rationally reward and punish governments for policy successes and failures (see Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). As described below, the empirical evidence on the floating voter hypothesis is mixed. As described above, I am aware of no prior study into what I designate the floating activist hypothesis. Using the National Election Studies' (NES') 1956 to 1960, 1972 to 1976, and 1992 to 1996 panels, I model individual-level, longitudinal change in voting and five forms of campaign participation as a function of political knowledge.

To preview my results, I find robustly *negative* relationships between changed voting and knowledge, and I find robustly *positive* relationships between changed campaign participation and knowledge. However, I find these relationships only describe certain types of interelection change. Comparing behavior over the course of two elections (as I do in the NES panels), interelection change comes in two flavors (relative to those standpatters who do the same thing in both elections): (1) Some individuals participate in the first but not the second, and others participate in the second but not the first, thus contributing interelection change in the form of mobilizations and demobilizations, respectively. (2) Some individuals participate in both elections but support opposite parties, thus contributing interelection change in the form of conversions. Because I distinguish between change by mobilization/demobilization and change by conversion and model the effect of knowledge on each type of change (relative to standpatters) using multinomial logit estimators, I am able demonstrate that the relationships described above hold only for change by mobilization/demobilization. Conversion, whether among voters or

campaign activists, is not systematically related to political knowledge. I conclude by discussing how my findings about floating voters explain why evidence on the floating voter hypothesis has been mixed in the past as well as by discussing both the floating activist and the floating voter findings in the context of citizen capacity and democratic change.

Floating Voters

The floating voter hypothesis originated with Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet's (1944) observation that Erie County citizens who "wavered" during the 1940 campaign were uniquely uninformed about politics. In its original form, the floating voter hypothesis bears on intraelection change. Based on their observation that the citizens who were most susceptible to persuasion during election campaigns were the least informed members of the electorate, they inferred that the citizens who contributed to interelection change in the two-party vote for president were the same poorly informed citizens. But the implications of the intraelection relationship between changes in candidate preferences and political information need not be the same in the context of interelection change. While Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet and Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) were willing to conjecture that those who wavered during election campaigns were also more likely to switch in their vote choice from election year to election year, Converse (1962/1966) investigated the interelection relationship between changes in which party one supports in the voting booth and political information more explicitly. Using the NES 1956 to 1960 panel, Converse concluded stable partisans know considerably more about politics than floating voters (pp. 581).

But Converse's (1962/1966) conclusions about the relationship between political knowledge and interelection change in partisan voting were not the final word, and in fact empirical evidence on the subject remains mixed. Converse, Butler and Stokes (1969), Dreyer (1971-1972), and Zaller (2004) all reported findings consistent with the floating voter hypothesis (e.g., less information is associated with more floating). On the other hand, Key (1966), Dobson and St. Angelo (1975), Boyd (1986), and Shively (1992) all reported findings that reflect positively on political acumen of floating voters.

Many of the divergent findings derive from reliance on tabular data analysis and drawing conclusions based on the way information shapes a particular type of behavior (see Boyd 1986, 233). Focusing on stability,

as defined by voting for the same party in two elections, reveals that the well informed are disproportionately represented among stable partisans (see Dobson and St. Angelo 1975, 488, Table 6). Converse (1962/1966), Butler and Stokes (1969), and Dreyer (1971-1972) focused on the "Voted twice for same party" column and concluded changes in party control of the White House originate among citizens who demonstrate lower levels of interest and knowledge. Meanwhile, Dobson and St. Angelo (1975) focused on the "Switched vote" column, noted that "switchers" appear to be uniformly distributed across levels of information, and concluded by rejecting the floating voter hypothesis. But there are two additional columns, "Did not vote in one election" and "Did not vote in either election," and evaluating the data as a whole requires estimating a summary of the relationship between information and change.

To estimate the relationship between individuals' contributions to overall change and their knowledge of politics, each type of behavior (each of the four columns listed above) needs to be operationalized in terms of overall change. Considering each column, those in the "Did not vote in one election" and those in the "Switched vote" columns clearly contribute to change. However, citizens in the "Voted twice for same party" and citizens in the "Did not vote in either election" columns do not contribute to change. While it may be interesting to differentiate standpatters and stay-at-homers descriptively, the practice undermines the effort to capture and model the relationship between information and change. To be sure, the behaviors (voting versus not voting) are different. Indeed, the turnout literature ranks among political science's most developed; however, models of turnout are conceptually different from models of vote choice and do not distinguish between voting for the Democrat and voting for the Republican. Similarly, a model of democratic change is conceptually different from a model of turnout and must operationalize consistent voting and consistent nonvoting as equivalent contributions to capture the quantity of interest, change, faithfully. Doing so will enable me to reconcile divergent findings and provide a more complete picture of how political knowledge shapes change among voters and potential voters.

Floating Activists

Disagreement about the general relationship between information and interelection change among voters notwithstanding, all the studies cited in the

previous section agree that many (though they disagree on whether most) floating voters lack basic information about politics. To the extent informational shortcomings prevent floating voters from holding political parties accountable in the voting booth, uninformed floating voters pose problems in democratic societies. Random changes in electoral sentiment undermine the usefulness of elections as democratic mechanisms for communicating the public's preferences to its government. However, changes in the electorate pose less of a problem, from the perspective of normative democratic theory, if floating voters are guided in some way by well-informed citizens: the floating activists. If well-informed citizens shape changes in the relative strength of the parties' election efforts (as indicated by the number of doorbells rung and the number of households phoned), and activists influence voters (by talking with them on their doorsteps and phone lines), then the prospect that less informed individuals shape changes in the vote is less problematic. In the aggregate, by becoming active, becoming inactive, or switching sides, interelection change among activists in the mass public may provide a powerful signal about how *well-informed citizens* feel about the incumbent party's record and the opposition party's prospects. Activists influence some voters directly by calling them at home, knocking on their doors, and discussing politics with them. But activists also influence voters indirectly. Even individuals who eschew the news see candidates' bumper stickers on expensive cars, on old cars, on cars with Greenpeace stickers, and on cars with National Rifle Association stickers; and they learn something about candidates by observing the type of people who support them (Carmines and Stimson 1989). In short, campaign activities influence, both directly and indirectly, the very floating voters in need of a signal.

But the prospect that activists provide *well-informed* guidance depends on the role of information shaping interelection change among activists. If *well-informed* activists fail to vary their participation while *poorly informed* activists drive changes among activists by floating in and out of the activist pool, then the informational quality of the activists' signal is just as dubious as the informational quality of change wrought by floating voters. While previous scholarship has not explored the relationship between political knowledge and interelection change in party support among activists, several studies have noted that opinion change among activists preceded major realignments in American public opinion about several issues. Carmines and Stimson's (1989) process of

Issue Evolution places a changing activist cadre at the forefront of partisan realignment around issues of racial equality. The importance of changing activist sentiment is again central to Carmines and Woods's (2002) account of another partisan realignment around the issue of abortion. But in neither work did the authors investigate the individual-level process driving change among activists. Until recently, even basic questions, such as whether change among activists occurs primarily through conversions or through replacement and mobilization, were unanswered. Previous scholars noted, "With the exception of Miller and Jennings' (1986) study of national convention delegates, there is almost no research that compares newly mobilized with disengaged party activists" (Rapoport and Stone 1994, 510).

Extending the work of Miller and Jennings (1986) on activist circulation, Rapoport and Stone (1994) pioneered a method for disaggregating total change into change due to conversion, mobilization, and replacement, and applied the method to a study of change among Iowa caucus attendees from 1984 to 1988. They reported that mobilization and demobilization effects dominate as sources of changing sentiment among caucus attendees (p. 524). Rapoport and Stone's work has led to a number of other studies investigating the processes behind longitudinal changes in activists' opinions on a variety of issues. Their model has been deployed more broadly to disaggregate ideological change among national nomination delegates (Herrera 1995) and changing opinion among delegates on issues such as abortion (Carsey and Layman 1999) and women's rights (Wolbrecht 2002). Thanks to this line of research, we now know that change associated with a new issue is characterized initially by a large mobilization effect but that conversion (following the initial mobilization effect) is essential for a long-term polarization (Carsey and Layman 1999, 33). Evidence that the composition of the activist universe changes in important ways from election to election reinforces the importance of investigating the role of political knowledge in the process of floating activism. Indeed, since, by definition, newly mobilized activists are drawn from previously inactive citizens, it seems plausible that the relationship between individual-level, longitudinal change among activists and political knowledge differs from the cross-sectional relationship between activism and political knowledge.

Ultimately, whether the well informed shape inter-election changes in the activist pool is an empirical question, and in the next section, I describe an empirical

test designed to identify which citizens change their campaign involvement from election to election and how much they know about politics. The empirical test of the floating activist hypothesis is an exact analog of the test of the floating voter hypothesis. I revisit the floating voter hypothesis, bringing a new approach to modeling the relationship, and I provide analogous estimates of the relationship between individual-level change among activists and political knowledge.

Data and Method

The NES panels (1956-1960, 1972-1976, and 1992-1996) provide ample data for tests of the floating voter hypothesis and the floating activist hypothesis. Each panel spans two presidential elections and contains data about respondents' political knowledge and a range of participatory acts engaged in by citizens: voting, attempting to influence others, attending campaign meetings, volunteering with a political campaign, wearing a button or sticker, or contributing money to a political campaign (for model development these *acts* are designated A_1 through A_6). Naturally, the voting data include information on which party citizens supported with their vote. The campaign participation items lack this sort of partisan information, but they are easily modified to reflect the very plausible assumption that citizens assisted the party they supported with their vote by multiplying each participatory act (coded 0 or 1) by the citizen's vote choice (coded -1 for Republican votes, +1 for Democratic votes, and 0 for all others).

Over the course of two elections, some citizens stand pat in both elections and contribute no change.¹ Other citizens contribute to change by conversion in their partisan preference, either voting for opposing parties in each election or supporting opposing parties with their campaign activities in each election. Still other citizens contribute to change as mobilizations and demobilizations participating in only one of the two elections.

While the panels are representative of standpatters, converters, and dropouts, they undersample (by omission) potential newcomers. Following the practice of Rapoport and Stone (1994), I include respondents from the cross-section in which each second-election panel is embedded who report nonparticipation in the previous presidential election to allow for the possibility of electorate expansion. Having made this adjustment, the panels conform quite nicely to the historic

record of electorate expansion. In my adjusted panel, 90 percent of turnout in 1960 was accounted for by turnout in 1956. Historically, 90 percent of turnout in 1960 was accounted for by turnout in 1956 (about 62 million voted in 1956 and about 69 million voted in 1960). In my adjusted panel, 91 percent of turnout in 1976 was accounted for by turnout in 1972. Historically, 95 percent of turnout in 1976 was accounted for by turnout in 1972. In my adjusted panel, 87 percent of turnout in 1996 was accounted for by turnout in 1992. Historically, 108 percent of turnout in 1996 was accounted for by turnout in 1992. Thus, only in the 1992 to 1996 panel does the procedure lead to a major deviation from the historic record (without the supplementary newcomers, 104 percent of turnout in 1996 was accounted for by turnout in 1992). However, given the importance of mobilization/demobilization as a process of interelection change, I maintain the gain in the two earlier panels from allowing the data to capture newcomers outweighs the potential problem in the 1992 to 1996 panel.²

Considering each form of participation separately, interelection change is the difference between individual i 's behavior in the second election and his or her behavior in the first election (for each form of participation A_1 through A_6 , $\Delta A_i = A_{it} - A_{it-1}$). This quantity captures both the direction and the amount of change contributed by each individual; but neither the floating voter hypothesis nor the floating activist hypothesis bears on the direction of change. Rather, both hypotheses deal with the relationship between political knowledge and *amount* of change. To isolate amount of change, I take the absolute value of the difference, $\Delta A_i = |A_{it} - A_{it-1}|$.

This final quantity, the absolute value of each differenced participatory act (ΔA_i), captures the amount of interelection change. While there is an argument to be made for treating this quantity as a three-category, ordinal variable ranging from standpatters (0), to dropouts/newcomers (1), to converters (2), I take the route of caution and treat these three outcomes as nominal *types* of change. According to Long (1997, 149), "If a dependent variable is ordinal and a model for nominal variables is used, there is a loss of efficiency . . . when a method for ordinal variables is applied to a nominal dependent variable, the resulting estimates are biased or even nonsensical." Thus, the use of a multinomial logit estimator constitutes a difficult test for the hypotheses, but also provides a measure of protection against bias. Most notably, the model allows the relationship between political knowledge and change to differ depending on type of

change. This may prove to be important since the mixed findings cited above on the floating voter hypothesis indicate that distinguishing between type of change can affect the inferences one draws. Hence, the multinomial logit estimator provides robustness, and the estimates might reveal why scholars investigating the same question in the same panel arrive at different conclusions.

Interelection change for each form of participation (voting, influencing, donating, and so on), ΔA_i , is regressed on political information separately to generate multinomial logit estimates of the effect of information on each type of interelection change (stand pat, mobilize/demobilize, convert). In the 1972 to 1976 and the 1992 to 1996 panels, level of political information is measured using 5-point interviewer ratings of each respondent's knowledge of politics and public affairs. Unfortunately, interviewer ratings are not available in the 1956 to 1960 panel. Instead I create, for each respondent, an additive scale consisting of questions about the presidential candidates and ability to name which party is more conservative. Respondents were asked where Kennedy came from, where Nixon came from, and to identify their respective ages and religions. To these six, I added an item asking respondents to identify which party is more conservative. All of the information scales were then rescaled to range from 0 to 1. While it is possible the measure in the 1956 to 1960 panel captures a different dimension of political information, previous research demonstrates that interviewer ratings are strongly related to factual information scales and compare favorably in terms of reliability to scales constructed from multiple items (Zaller 1985).

Results

Tables 1 through 3 report the results of regressing change in each of the six forms of political participation (voting, attempting to influence others, attending campaign meetings, volunteering with a political campaign, wearing a button or sticker, or contributing money to a political campaign) on political information. Each table has been organized to highlight contrast in the way information shapes changed voting behavior and changed campaign participation. Each row is a separate model, with the dependent variable identified in the first column. The first row in each table reports the results of estimating the relationship between political information and interelection vote choice change, and the subsequent five rows report

Table 1
Multinomial Logit Estimates of the Effect of Information on Interelection Change, 1956-1960

Dependent Variable	Effect of Information		Number of Observations
	Partial Change	Complete Change	
Vote choice	-1.43*** (0.31)	-0.13 (0.32)	1,148
Influence others	1.33*** (0.26)	0.57 (0.86)	1,148
Attend meetings	2.16*** (0.39)	1.38 (2.76)	1,145
Volunteer	2.20*** (0.50)	NA	1,144
Button or sticker	1.16*** (0.28)	0.86 (1.36)	1,144
Donate money	2.89*** (0.39)	-2.99 (3.10)	1,145

Note: Each row contains multinomial logit estimates from a separate model regressing the dependent (row) variable on information. The columns are the information coefficients for each possible dependent variable outcome, partial change or complete change, relative to the effect of information on the baseline outcome, no change. There is no coefficient for complete change in the volunteer model because there were no individuals who volunteered to work for different parties in this panel. Standard errors appear in parentheses.

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 2
Multinomial Logit Estimates of the Effect of Information on Interelection Change, 1972-1976

Dependent Variable	Effect of Information		Number of Observations
	Partial Change	Complete Change	
Vote choice	-0.60* (0.27)	0.22 (0.32)	1,293
Influence others	0.92*** (0.26)	1.86** (0.71)	1,292
Attend meetings	2.83*** (0.41)	0.38 (2.08)	1,291
Volunteer	2.86*** (0.47)	-0.74 (2.85)	1,289
Button or sticker	2.34*** (0.35)	0.43 (2.09)	1,287
Donate money	2.69*** (0.41)	3.99 (3.36)	1,286

Note: Each row contains multinomial logit estimates from a separate model regressing the dependent (row) variable on information. The columns are the information coefficients for each possible dependent variable outcome, partial change or complete change, relative to the effect of information on the baseline outcome, no change. Standard errors in appear parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

Table 3
Multinomial Logit Estimates of the Effect of Information on Interelection Change, 1992-1996

Dependent Variable	Effect of Information		Number of Observations
	Partial Change	Complete Change	
Vote choice	-0.98** (0.34)	0.20 (0.67)	627
Influence others	1.36*** (0.36)	1.50 (2.05)	627
Attend meetings	2.64*** (0.66)	2.44 (4.41)	627
Volunteer	3.08** (1.06)	NA	627
Button or sticker	1.17* (0.50)	2.36 (-7.92)	627
Donate money	2.84** (0.83)	2.37 (4.40)	627

Note: Each row contains multinomial logit estimates from a separate model regressing the dependent (row) variable on information. The columns are the information coefficients for each possible dependent variable outcome, partial change or complete change, relative to the effect of information on the baseline outcome, no change. There is no coefficient for complete change in the volunteer model because there were no individuals who volunteered to work for different parties in this panel. Standard errors appear in parentheses.

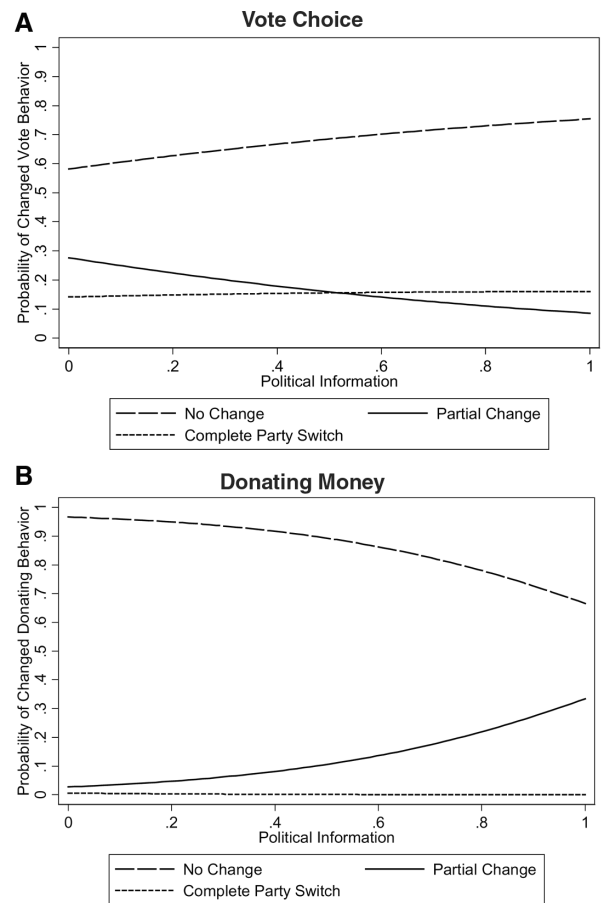
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

the analogous estimates for each of the five types of campaign participation. For each panel, the coefficients in the Partial Change column identify the effect of information on the likelihood of being a newcomer or a dropout rather than a standpatter. Likewise, the coefficients in the Complete Change column identify the effect of information on the likelihood of supporting a different party in each election rather than being a standpatter.

Two patterns of results emerge from the tables. First, information is significantly related to partial change, but information is not significantly related to complete change. The coefficients in the Partial Change columns all more than twice exceed their standard errors, while only one of the eighteen coefficients in the Complete Change columns attains statistical respectability. This is hardly surprising for the fifteen campaign participation models. Predicted probability plots (Figures 1 through 3, to be described shortly) reveal that supporting opposite parties in contiguous elections is quite rare; indeed, there were no volunteers (e.g., one of the five campaign activities, volunteering) who supported opposite parties in the 1956 to 1960 and 1992 to 1996 panels. However, the null finding is more surprising in the vote choice models. Evidence that party switchers are drawn disproportionately from the poorly informed segment of the public has long been the core of the floating voter hypothesis and central to normative concern about voter ignorance and apathy. My estimates indicate a need to reevaluate this core belief about floating voters. I find that the way one identifies the electorate affects what one finds about the relationship between information and floating. My sample is designed to represent the entire eligible population, and twice nonvoters contribute a considerable amount of stability, low information notwithstanding. Excluding twice nonvoters leads to overestimates of the negative relationship between floating and information by underestimating low-information contributions to stability by consistent abstention. In fact, exclusion of twice nonvoters yields information coefficients for complete vote choice change in 1956 to 1960 and 1972 to 1976 that are negative and statistically significant. But the exclusion of twice nonvoters erroneously omits an important group of standpatters and miss-specifies both the quantity of interest, change, and the relevant population, the entire *eligible* electorate.

The second pattern that emerges from Tables 1 through 3 is a stark contrast between the first negative coefficient in the Partial Change column of each table and the last five positive coefficients. In terms of partial

Figure 1
Predicted Probability Plots of Interelection Change by Information, 1956-1960



change, the traditional floating voter hypothesis is confirmed. The more information individuals have about politics, the *less* likely they are to be among newly mobilized and demobilized voters. With respect to my interest in the relationship between interelection campaign participation change and information, however, the evidence is quite different. The more information individuals have about politics, the *more* likely they are to be among newly mobilized and demobilized activists.

To better convey the substantive meaning of the results reported in the tables, I also present predicted probability plots in Figures 1 through 3. Using the coefficient estimates from the vote choice models in Tables 1 through 3, the top panels in Figures 1 through 3 plot the predicted probabilities for each type of vote choice change across the range of political information. Using the coefficient estimates from the donate

Figure 2
Predicted Probability Plots of Interelection
Change by Information, 1972-1976

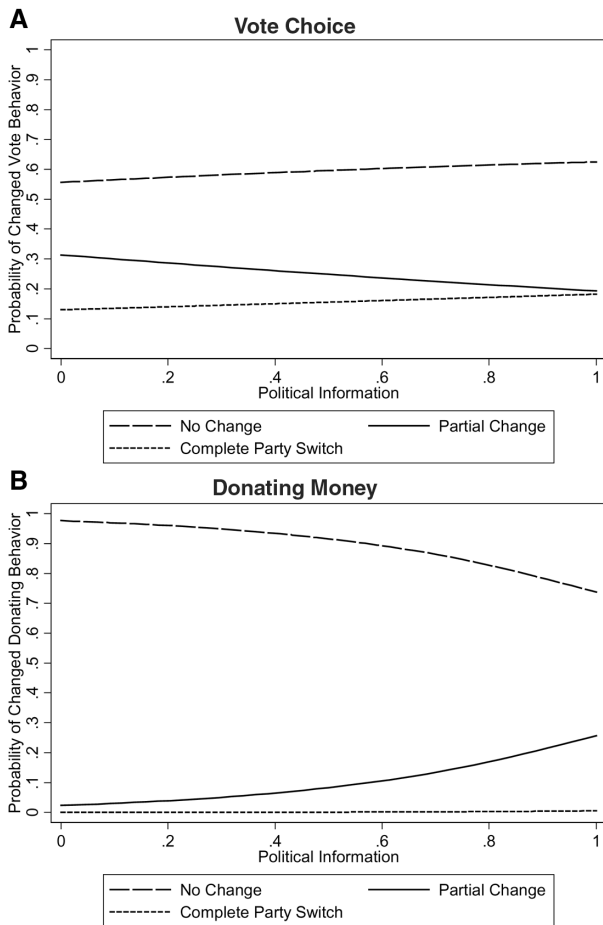
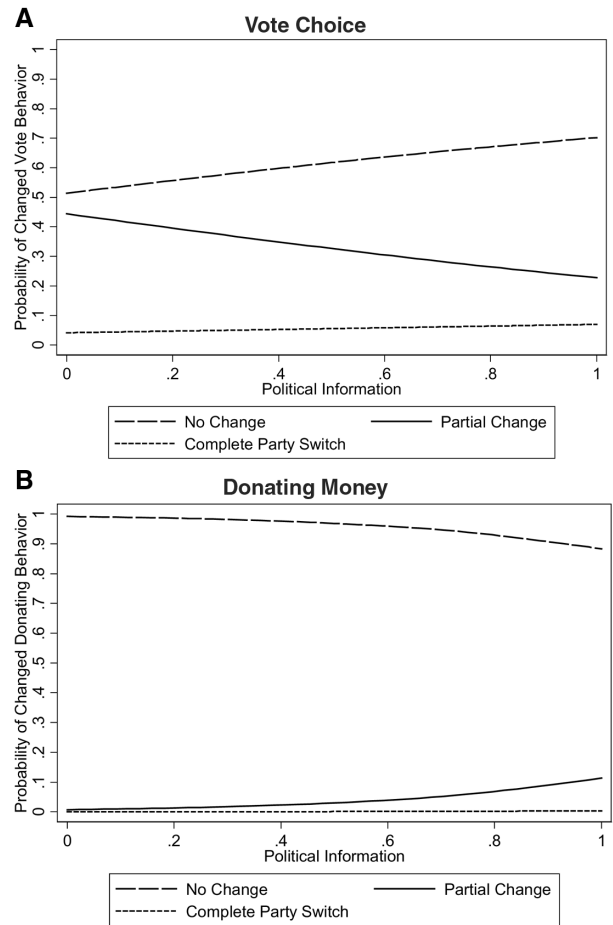


Figure 3
Predicted Probability Plots of Interelection
Change by Information, 1992-1996



money models in Tables 1 through 3, the bottom panels in Figures 1 through 3 plot the predicted probabilities for each type of campaign donation change across the range of political information. Assessing the probability of vote choice change across the range of information, “no change” is the most likely outcome for all levels of information with a weakly higher probability among the better informed. Complete party switching is the least likely outcome, though the likelihood of switching was a bit higher in the 1956 to 1960 and 1972 to 1976 panels relative to 1992 to 1996. But the relationship between complete party switching and information is even weaker than the relationship between no change and information. Finally, partial change is negatively related to information in all three panels. In the 1956 to 1960 and 1992 to 1996 panels, the probability of partial change among the fully informed (information equals one)

was about .2 lower than among the uninformed. In 1972 to 1976, the probability of partial change among the fully informed was about .12 lower than among the uninformed.

Turning to changed donation behavior (panel B of each figure), I observe the contrast highlighted earlier. Beginning with the predicted probability of partial change, the probability of partial change among fully informed campaign donors was about .3 higher than among uninformed campaign donors in the 1956 to 1960 panel, about .24 higher in the 1972 to 1976 panel, and about .1 higher in the 1992 to 1996 panel. Furthermore, the overall likelihood of no change and complete change reveal information about changing activism that is unobservable in Tables 1 through 3. Among donors (and the donor plots are representative of plots for each of the other forms of campaign participation), complete party switching almost never

occurs, regardless of level of information. In short, longitudinal change in the composition of campaign activists occurs almost exclusively through the process of mobilization and demobilization, not through conversion, and better-informed citizens are more likely to change their campaign participation behavior longitudinally.

Conclusion

This article poses and answers questions about the relationship between information and longitudinal change in political participation. In terms of voting, party switchers do not appear to differ significantly in their levels of information when compared to the standpatters. Partial changers, on the other hand, do differ significantly in their levels of information when compared to the standpatters. My estimates of the different effects of information for different types of change, and comparisons to estimates omitting twice nonvoters reveal the same patterns I identified as leading to disagreement among previous scholars. Omission of twice nonvoters purges the sample of the least active citizens and makes it appear that all types of interelection change are negatively related to information. However, omission of twice nonvoters renders the sample unrepresentative of the voting-eligible population. Given American rates of turnout, the altered sample seriously underrepresents inactives, and statistical models based on the altered sample do a rather poor job of capturing overall stability and change. On the other hand, including twice abstainers and operationalizing their contribution as zero, interelection change weakens the negative information effect on party switchers. Likewise, focusing on party switchers, some previous studies identified a null relationship between party switchers and information and concluded that the floating voter hypothesis could be rejected. But null information effect for party switchers notwithstanding, my estimate of the negative effect of information on the partial changers suggests rejection of the floating voter hypothesis would also be imprudent. The uninformed do not entirely dominate the process of change among voters, but they make disproportionate contributions to interelection change as new mobilizations and dropouts.

In terms of campaign participation (e.g., donating money, volunteering, and so on), I extend what is known about the cross-sectional effect of information by testing the relationship between information and longitudinal change among campaign activists.

Framed as an interest in interelection change in party support among activists, I find activists rarely convert in terms of the party they support. Change in party support among activists occurs when new activists mobilize and existing activists drop out of activity. The robust, positive coefficients in the bottom five rows of Tables 1 through 3, in the Partial Change columns, indicate those who drop in and drop out of campaigns are better informed than those who do not contribute to change in the activist pool. Comparing the process of interelection change in voting to that of campaign participation reveals that information fashions changes among voters and changes among activists differently.

Why are the uninformed able to pass in and out of the electorate when they appear unable to pass in and out of the activists pool? Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) pointed out that voting is unique among political acts for the vast state-sponsored apparatus that makes elections possible. The information costs of voting are, in effect, subsidized by secretaries of state who send voters informational pamphlets, advertise polling places, and design easy-to-follow voting procedures. Because voting is a low-cost form of political participation, nearly everyone, regardless of political knowledge, votes at one time or another. More to the point, the uninformed can easily pass in and out of the electorate. More costly forms of participation, on the other hand, are almost exclusively the domain of citizens who have already invested in becoming knowledgeable about politics. As such, the well informed have already paid some of the informational costs associated with campaign participation. When political junkies get a call on behalf of a candidate, they already know something about the race, whom they support (important if asked to display a sign or write a check), and some of the pertinent information for door-to-door canvassing or staffing a phone bank. Hence, the well informed are in a position to engage in demanding forms of participation or not engage in demanding forms of participation (e.g., in a position to contribute partial change). The poorly informed, on the other hand, are generally not equipped (or at least are not as well equipped) for demanding forms of participation. Put another way, in contrast to voting, campaign participation requires so much information about politics that the uninformed find it difficult to pass into, let alone out of, the activist pool. In contrast, well-informed floating activists determine when to expend time and resources by making nuanced distinctions between their party's candidates (e.g., Clinton and Gore, Dole and Bush) and drawing lessons from the political environment that would be lost on the less attentive.

While I show information shapes change among activists and voters differently and theorize that activists could provide well-informed guidance to floating voters, the linkages between activists and voters have so far been theoretical. While exploring those linkages thoroughly is beyond the scope of this project, I can identify empirical evidence from the extant campaign effects literature that is consistent with activists guiding floating voters. Theoretically, I link changes among activists to changes among voters. More concretely, though still hypothetically, if the number of activists who “attempt to influence others” for one of the parties declines precipitously, a theory of activist guided elections predicts a decline in support for that party in the polls. Empirically, partisans are more likely to support their party’s candidate if their social network uniformly supports their party’s candidate and the likelihood of support declines as network heterogeneity increases (Beck 2002; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). Again, hypothetically, if the number of activists who “donate money” to one of the parties declines precipitously, a theory of activist-guided elections predicts a decline in support for that party in the polls. Empirically, congressional challengers and incumbents increase their vote share if they can increase the amount of money they spend during the campaign (Jacobson 2006). Finally, although in theory activists could guide floating voters and enhance the democratic process without actually educating voters, activist-inspired change among voters could certainly be characterized as “enlightened change” if activists influenced voters by informing them about politics. Empirically, there is some evidence political enthusiasts (and surely activists qualify) actually communicate expertise to their fellow citizens (Huckfeldt 2001). Not only do activists wield influence over voters, they do so by communicating their knowledge about the election. To be sure, activists probably fail to inspire chronic awareness in most citizens they encounter, but they succeed in passing along bits of information relevant to the upcoming election to the minimally attentive.

All together then, the poorly informed appear to dominate, though they do not monopolize, interelection change in voting. But the well informed dominate interelection change in the activist pool. My findings and the extant literature indicate activists can and do influence and even inform voters in ways that are consistent with an activist hand in shaping democratic change, but closing the circle on whether change among activists shapes change among voters will require additional study. At a minimum, this study

identifies a form of interelection change fashioned primarily by well-informed citizens. More optimistically, in theory, activists are in a position to enlighten floating voters rendering the floating voter hypothesis benign even if the characterization of floating voters as chronically uninformed proves unassailable.

Notes

1. As explained above, I include twice nonparticipants. Thus, I assess change among voters and campaign activists in the mass public. Twice nonparticipants, whether inactive as voters or campaign activists, actually contribute interelection stability in much the same way other standpatters contribute stability. In short, mathematically, twice nonparticipants are equal partners with other standpatters in their contributions to interelection change. Namely, everyone who does the same thing in both elections contributes zero change. To demonstrate the importance of how one treats twice nonparticipants and illuminate why previous findings on the floating voter hypothesis are mixed, I also report the results of omitting them.

2. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, I have estimated the models without supplementing the panels, and the results are robust.

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