NEW AMERICA

Ranked-Choice Voting is No Refuge for Extreme Candidates

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This brief is part of a series by the [Electoral Reform Research Group](), a collaboration between New America, Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Unite America Institute. To find the full report of the study summarized below, click [here]().

Overview

This brief reports the results of a survey experiment assessing voters' responses to ideologically extreme candidates in plurality and ranked-choice elections. Respondents were randomly assigned to two different sets of information about a hypothetical candidate running in an upcoming election: 1) the candidate's ideology and ideological extremity; and 2) whether the candidate would be running under plurality or ranked-choice voting rules. Respondents were asked to report their own ideology and their views on the candidate's electability and representativeness.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

• Do ideologically extreme candidates appear as more electable in elections that use ranked-choice voting?

• Do voters change their own identification in response to exposure to extreme candidates?

• Do liberals and conservatives differ in their views on electability?

KEY FINDINGS

• Ideologically extreme candidates were not viewed as more electable under ranked-choice voting, compared to plurality voting.

• Moderate and extreme candidates, regardless of ideology, were viewed as similarly electable in elections that use ranked-choice voting and plurality voting.

• Liberals viewed moderate liberal candidates as more electable than extreme liberal candidates, regardless of the election type. Conservatives did not view moderate conservative candidates as more electable than extreme conservative candidates.

Background and Research Design

When evaluating a voting system, it is important to understand the ways in which the system's rules may help or hurt ideologically extreme candidates. This factor is even more critical in highly polarized political climate like the one we are in currently, which seems to reward candidates who are more extreme than their own voter bases.

As ranked-choice voting (RCV) continues to spread across the United States, replacing single-vote plurality rules, I sought to understand more about voters' decision-making processes when faced with extreme candidates under the two systems. Specifically, in RCV and plurality elections, how does an ideologically extreme candidate impact the way voters view their own ideology, the ideological composition of the electorate, and the candidate's chances at winning an election?

RCV presents voters with an opportunity to consider candidates differently than they would in a plurality election. By asking voters to build a preference list instead of just picking a single preferred candidate, RCV prompts voters to compare candidates in a deeper, more meaningful way, with candidate characteristics becoming more salient in a voter's consideration. For example, when a candidate is especially ideologically extreme compared to other candidates in an RCV election, their extremity will likely be more noticeable because voters need to pay closer attention to candidate characteristics. This should be especially true for in-party voters, who tend to be more sensitive to coalitional cues from their party. If voters are influenced in some way by this extremity, this may impact how a candidate and/or party runs a campaign, and how we interpret voter behavior in a ranked-choice election.

Social Comparison Theory (SCT) can help us understand how an extreme candidate may influence voters in a ranked-choice election. SCT posits that individuals inform their self-concept based on a relational comparison of themselves to others. As people make these comparisons, they may adjust their attitudes and traits in order to be more similar to an optimal social standard (assimilation effect) and/or less similar to a suboptimal social standard (contrast effect). For example, according to SCT, when faced with a suboptimal social standard such as political extremity, individuals should adjust accordingly to distance themselves from that extremity by identifying as more moderate.

In a single-winner plurality setting (in which the candidate with the most votes wins), voters typically have two candidate options and a clear middle ground to gravitate toward in response to extremity. Under RCV, by contrast, voters are more likely to face a handful of candidates representing different places on the ideological spectrum. In this setting, it is likely less clear to a voter in which direction to move ideologically in response to an ideologically extreme candidate. Therefore, it is more difficult for voters to understand what moderating themselves in response to extremity will look like, which direction is moderation when the election includes more than two candidates to evaluate, and what is the optimal ideological trait they should seek to adopt.

Applying SCT to political ideology, political extremity may be considered a suboptimal trait and cause voters to moderate themselves to get some distance from extremity. To evaluate this premise, I tested the following hypotheses: H1) when faced with an extreme candidate, voters will report themselves as being more moderate than they would if they were not faced with an extreme candidate; H2) relatedly, because of the cognitive complexity of elections that use RCV, extreme candidates will be viewed as more representative of the electorate in RCV than plurality elections; H3) finally, extreme candidates will be viewed as more electable in ranked-choice elections compared to plurality elections. This is because people can be less strategic (i.e. do not need to choose a single electable candidate) when they can indicate their preference for more than one candidate.

I tested these hypotheses using a survey experiment about a hypothetical political candidate running in a hypothetical upcoming election. Within the experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to two different sets of information: 1) the candidate's ideology (liberal or conservative) and ideological extremity (moderate or extreme), and 2) the type of voting system (plurality or RCV) being used in the upcoming election. Respondents were asked to report their own ideology on a 100 point scale after first reading about the candidate, and were later asked questions on how the candidate would perform in the election (electability) and if the candidate was representative of the electorate (representativeness). Finally, respondents were asked demographic questions including about their political ideology to understand any differences in perceptions between respondents of different ideologies.

Findings and Implications

In partial support of the first hypothesis, I found that liberals, but not conservatives, identified as more ideologically extreme when exposed to an ideologically extreme in-group candidate.

In line with my second hypothesis, extreme candidates were viewed as more representative of the electorate under RCV than plurality. However, this also applied to moderate candidates, and regardless of ideology. In other words, candidates overall were viewed as more representative of the electorate in RCV elections as opposed to plurality elections.

Still, views on representativeness differed by respondent ideology. When considering candidate ideological extremity, liberals saw an extreme liberal as less representative of the electorate than a moderate liberal, regardless of the voting system. Conservatives, meanwhile, showed no difference in perception of representativeness based on extremity in either voting system. These results hold true regardless of the political interest level of the respondents, meaning a person does not necessarily need to have a lot of interest in politics in order to have this perception.

Results also show that moderate liberals and moderate conservatives were viewed as the most electable in both plurality and RCV settings. This is consistent with the conventional wisdom that moderates are perceived as more electable. Meanwhile, perceptions of extreme candidate electability were more complex. Overall, extreme conservatives were viewed as slightly more electable in elections that used plurality voting than they were in elections that used RCV. One way to interpret this finding is that candidates who are extreme conservatives may have a better chance of being elected under plurality rules than under RCV.

Similar to representativeness, views on electability varied by respondent ideology. Among liberals, extreme liberals were seen as less electable regardless of the voting system. Among conservatives, there was no effect of candidate extremity on electability for conservative candidates.

My third hypothesis, that extreme candidates would be viewed as more electable in elections that use RCV, was not supported. These results were consistent regardless of the level of political interest in respondents, indicating that these perceptions are not just isolated to people who are especially interested in politics.

Figure 1. Effects of Candidate Extremity on Views of Electability (RCV)
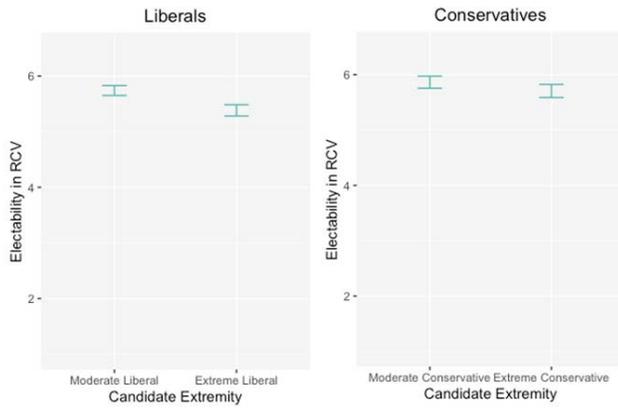
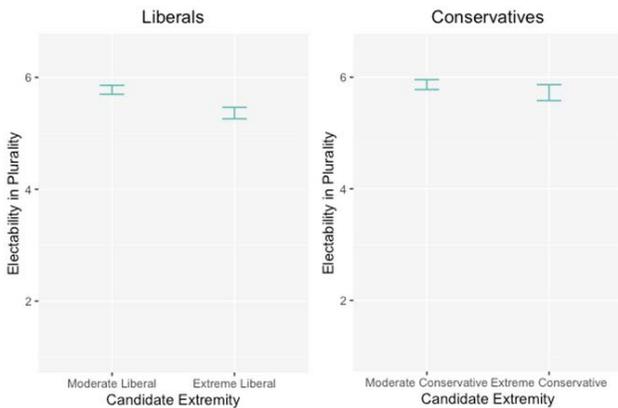**Figure 2. Effects of Candidate Extremity on Views of Electability (Plurality)**

Figure 1 represents results for an election using ranked-choice voting and is broken down by ideology, showing liberal respondents on the left panel and conservative respondents on the right panel. For liberals (left), electability scores are higher for moderate liberal candidates than extreme liberal candidates. For conservatives (right), there is no significant difference in electability between moderate candidates and extreme candidates.

Figure 2 represents results for an election using plurality voting and is broken down by ideology the same way as Figure 1. For liberals, moderate candidates were again seen as more electable than extreme candidates. For conservatives, there was again no significant difference in electability between moderate and extreme candidates.

Conclusion

This research advances our understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved in voting in a ranked-choice voting election, and informs how American voters, accustomed to the national norm of plurality voting, operate in a different information environment. Despite mixed results that RCV alters the way in which voters process and evaluate ideologically extreme candidates, the reform does not appear to create a unique opportunity for more extreme candidates to be elected.

I found that candidates, regardless of ideology or ideological extremity, were seen as more representative of the electorate in elections that used RCV as opposed to plurality voting. However, extreme conservative candidates were seen as slightly more electable in elections that used plurality voting compared to RCV. Liberal respondents viewed extreme liberal candidates as less electable regardless in both plurality and RCV elections, but this effect was especially pronounced in plurality elections. This result suggests that extreme liberal candidates may be slightly less likely to be punished for ideological extremity by liberals in ranked-choice elections. Given that most of the places adopting RCV in the United States skew liberal, one potential implication of these findings is that as RCV continues to spread, ideologically extreme liberal candidates and elected officials may become more common.

Liberals appear to be more sensitive to ideological extremity in that liberals reported as more extreme in their own ideological self-placement in response to extreme liberal candidates. Relatedly, and somewhat counterintuitively, my findings suggest that liberals also see an extreme liberal candidate as being less electable. It is possible that liberals view these extreme in-group candidates as less electable because they view moderation more favorably than conservatives.

Future research should address the ideological asymmetries found in this study. One potential direction is examining why it is that liberals change their perceptions about in-group candidates based on the candidate's extremity but conservatives do not. Future work should also investigate why voters perceive candidates as more representative in elections that use RCV as compared to plurality voting. Social Comparison Theory does not explain this result, and researchers should dig deeper into the cognitive complexity and other considerations voters face in evaluating candidates within different electoral contexts.

View and download the full report **here**.