Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Commonwealth’s “Information for Voters” Booklet

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Each election, the Secretary of the Commonwealth mails out a pamphlet, called the “Information for Voters” booklet, which contains essential information voters need to know in order to vote. Besides informing citizens on how to register to vote and clearing up points of confusion about the process of voting, the booklets contain detailed information and viewpoints about each ballot initiative proposed during that election. These booklets are meant to inform voters about the initiatives they will face at the polls on Election Day, and prepare them to make an informed decision by providing necessary facts and potential pros and cons of each initiative. The provision of this information is important since most research indicates that citizens generally lack sufficient information on ballot issues they are asked to vote on in American elections.

In 2010, we conducted an exit poll that surveyed 846 voters throughout the state of Massachusetts. Using this survey, we examine (1) the extent to which voters reported receiving and reading the “Information for Voters” booklet and (2) whether voters who read the booklet knew more about the ballot initiatives.

The main findings:

1) 55% of voters reported that they read the booklet, 25% said they did not read the booklet, and 20% said that they did not receive the booklet.

2) Reading the booklet was associated with increased knowledge of the ballot initiatives. Voters who said that they received the booklet were about twice as likely to know that other states also had both an excise and sales tax on alcohol (information related to Question 1). They were also more likely to know how much revenue the state would likely lose by reducing the sales tax to 3% (information related to Question 3), though this effect was smaller.

3) Minority voters were either less likely to receive the booklet or less aware that they had received it. 32% of African Americans and 51% of Hispanics reported that they did not receive the booklet (compared to just 18% of whites). Even after controlling for education, income, age, and gender, whites were 10 percentage points more likely to report receiving the booklet than non-whites.
I. Who Received and Who Read the Booklet

The exit poll question on the poll read as follows: “Did you read the ‘Information for Voters’ booklet sent by the state before the election?” Voters responding to the survey could choose from three options:

- I read the booklet.
- I did not read the booklet.
- I did not receive the booklet.

As the chart below indicates, a majority of voters said that they did read the booklet. However, it is also important to note that one-in-five voters claimed that they had not even received the booklet.

![Pie chart showing percentages of voters who read the booklet, did not read the booklet, and did not receive the booklet.]

Note: Percentages are calculated using sampling weights.

The table below presents information on how different demographic groups compared on this question. There were no major differences in the percentage of men and women who read the book, nor did education play a role.

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1 It is important to note that questions like this one tend to be subject to social desirability bias, which may lead some individuals to say that they read the booklet when they did not.
There were some age differences, as older Massachusetts voters were much more likely to have received and to have read the booklet compared to younger voters. There were smaller differences across income categories, with those in the bottom two income categories being less likely to report that they read the booklet.

There were significant differences with regard to race and ethnicity. While 57% of white Massachusetts voters said that they read the booklet, the figure was just 40% of African Americans and 21% for Hispanics. Minority voters were, instead, more likely to say that they did not receive the booklet. It is important to note that, combined, African Americans and Hispanics comprised just 11% of the total sample of voters in our study. However, non-whites were still less likely to report having received the booklet even after controlling statistically for other characteristics like gender, age, education, and income.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Read booklet</th>
<th>Did not read</th>
<th>Did not receive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29 years old</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-49 years old</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 or older</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $20k</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20k - $39,999</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
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<td>$40k - $59,999</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
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<td>28%</td>
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<td>$75k - $100k</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $100k</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages are calculated using sampling weights.
II. How Reading the Booklet Affects Knowledge

Respondents to our exit poll randomly received one of two different questions about one of the statewide ballot questions appearing on the ballot in that election. The first question asked for specific information provided in the booklets about Question 3, which involved the amount of money the state of Massachusetts would lose in revenue if the sales tax was reduced from 6.25% to 3%. On page 7 of the Information for Voters booklet it is stated that “This proposal would take away $2.5 billion in state revenue.” On the exit poll, we asked voters: “To the best of your knowledge, approximately how much money might Mass. communities lose if the sales tax is reduced to 3%?” Voters were given five choices to answer the question. They were listed as follows:

- $1 billion
- $2.5 billion
- $7 billion
- $12 billion
- Not Sure

The other version of the questionnaire asked voters a factual question about Question 1. On page 4 of the Information for Voters booklet, it is stated that “Nearly every state has a sales tax on alcohol in addition to excise taxes.” On the exit poll, we asked voters: “To the best of your knowledge, do other states have a ‘double tax’ (sales tax and excise tax) on alcohol like Massachusetts currently does?” Voters were presented with the following answer choices:

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

The chart below compares the percentage of correct answers among voters who did read the booklet to the percentage of correct answers among those who did not read it. In both cases, reading the booklet was associated with more information about the ballot questions. The largest effect was for the question about whether other states also have both a sales and excise tax on alcohol. In this case, voters who read the booklet were twice as likely to know the correct answer as those who did not read it. The difference in correct information was smaller for the lost revenue from sales tax question, and we cannot be 95% confident that this difference would exist among the population of voters.

Of course, it is difficult to know whether voters become more informed from reading the booklet, or if it is simply the case that more informed voters are more likely to read the booklet in the first place. However, two tests we conducted provide support for the notion that voters are gaining information from the booklet. First, we found that reading the booklet was still associated with being more informed even when we controlled for how much education the respondent had. Second, our survey asked another informational question about an issue that was not addressed in the booklet. Specifically, the question asked, “To the best of your knowledge, does the health care reform law establish a government panel that can withhold treatment from senior citizens?” (The correct answer is that it does not). Notably, 51% of those who did not read the information booklet answered this question correctly compared to 49% correct among those who did read the booklet. Thus, voters who read the booklet were more informed about issues
addressed in the booklet, but not necessarily about other issues. In other words, voters appear to be getting additional information from the booklets, regardless of how informed they are in the first place.

III. Conclusion

To summarize our findings:

1) A majority of Massachusetts voters said that they read the Information for Voters booklet.

2) Reading the booklet was associated with increased knowledge of the ballot initiatives, particularly with regard to the ballot question concerning the sales tax on alcohol.

3) Minority voters were either less likely to receive the booklet or less aware that they had received it.

Overall, the Information for Voters booklet appears to be successful at informing voters and a significant proportion of the electorate makes use of the document. Our findings suggest that the program could only be made more effective by ensuring that all Massachusetts citizens are aware of the booklet and have access to it.
Methodology: Massachusetts Exit Poll

The exit poll survey included 846 completed interviews with voters at 18 precincts throughout the state of Massachusetts. The sample for the exit poll was selected in three stages. First, a probability sample of towns/cities within Massachusetts was selected using stratification to ensure that different geographic areas and racial/ethnic groups would be represented in the sample. The four regional strata used were Western Massachusetts, Suffolk County, Central Massachusetts, and the North/South Shore Areas. Two towns were selected within each strata, and two additional towns were selected to ensure that Hispanics and rural voters were represented in the sample. Within each strata, towns/cities were selected with a probability proportional to the town/city’s turnout in recent elections.

The second stage involved selecting precincts within the selected towns/cities. Precincts were randomly selected, with a probability of selection proportionate to the number of voters in the precinct. While we ultimately selected 10 precincts across the state, some precincts we selected vote at the same location as other precincts, which means we ultimately interviewed voters from 18 precincts across the state.

Third, at each precinct, voters were randomly sampled throughout the day as they left the polling place. Interviewers selected each Nth voter to be interviewed; therefore, each voter at a precinct had an equal probability of being selected for an interview. The value of N was determined by previous turnout at the precinct to ensure that approximately 200 voters would be selected at each location.

Sampling weights were generated to account for the stratified sampling approach and these weights are used in all analyses conducted in this report. After weighting, the sample estimated that Patrick received 52% of the vote, Baker received 41%, Cahill 5%, and Green Party Candidate Jill Stein received 2%. Each estimate was within the margin of error of the actual percentage of the vote received by the candidates. Though the survey did over-estimate Patrick support by 5 percentage points and under-estimate Cahill support by 3 percentage points. In fact, the exit poll produced accurate estimates of the vote for each statewide office polled (Governor, Attorney General, and Secretary of State) as well as one of the two statewide propositions respondents were asked about. The survey over-estimated opposition to Question 3.

Since no other organization conducted an exit poll survey in Massachusetts in 2010, we do not have a baseline for comparing our respondents on other measures. However, estimates produced by a statewide exit poll conducted by the National Election Pool in 2006 provide one point of comparison. While the surveys did not differ significantly in their estimates of the age of the electorate, the 2010 poll did appear to interview a higher percentage of wealthy voters. While the 2006 poll estimated that 52% of Massachusetts voters earned less than $75,000, the 2010 survey estimated that figure to be 38%; the 2006 exit survey estimated that 28% of voters earned over $100,000 per year, compared to 35% in the 2010 poll.